MEMEING AND MEANING:

AN EXAMINATION OF INTERNET MEMES

AS LINGUISTIC UNITS

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Abstract

Internet memes have become a common communicative tool, blending images, text, and humour into complex multimodal units. Despite their prevalence, memes have been the subject of comparatively little linguistic study. In this thesis, I have undertaken an analysis of image macro memes from a linguistic perspective, drawing from a framework based on iconicity and metaphor. My approach was also informed by data from a review of 30 prevalent memes, an online survey of the Reddit forum r/memes, and focus groups of meme users. Combining established linguistic conventions with the findings from my data collection, I have created a theoretical model to document meme construction and evolution, the Life Cycle model of internet memes. This model consists of three stages—creation, conventionalization, and abstraction—which are each defined by six criteria: engagement, relation to origin, locus of meaning, continuity of form, continuity of meaning, and intuitability. In Stage One, a meme is a largely structural unit used by a limited group which relies on a fixed form and meaning. In Stage Two, these characteristics begin to erode, with the meme used in a larger network with fewer restrictions of form and meaning. In Stage Three, a meme moves beyond its physical limits into the conceptual sphere, emerging as a widely used point of reference with highly fluid or branching forms and meanings. Together, the stages of my Life Cycle model describe the entire progression of a meme from a novel pairing of media with text through to becoming an entrenched part of internet culture.

Chapter 1: Introduction

September 28, 1991, saw the release of "Darmok," an episode of the classic science fiction show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Now considered to be a seminal entry of the series, "Darmok" features Captain Jean-Luc Picard and his crew faced with an alien species whose language cannot be understood. Although the words themselves can be translated, their meanings are still unclear. This is due to the aliens speaking almost entirely via references to their own history and mythology—including phrases such as "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra," from which the episode derives its title.[1] It is only after being trapped on a dangerous world with the alien captain that Picard is able to understand the meaning of "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra" as an allusion to a past event—a meeting of two opposing warriors who become allies—that parallels their current diplomatic mission. Thus, Picard finally understands the crux of the aliens' form of communication. Rather than simply stating they are sad, the aliens say "Shaka, when the walls fell," to observe the saddening event. To express the giving of a gift, they say "Temba, his arms wide." The list continues from there, and the meeting of Picard and the alien captain is enshrined in the language as a new allusion at the end of the episode.

The idea of speaking entirely via such allusions, through metaphor and allegory, is intriguing to general viewers as well as to those who study language and communication. Extant languages do not operate in such a manner and attempting to reconcile these limits with the necessary specificity of everyday language use leads to a host of problems. Nevertheless, the concept itself is notable, not only as a thought experiment regarding one aspect of communication, but also for considering how elements of language *do* behave in such a manner. While modern languages do not function exclusively through the use of metaphor and external reference, there is an emergent form of communication that does rely on these processes: internet memes.[2]

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[1] Phelim O'Neill, "Six to Watch: Star Trek Episodes," *The Guardian*, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/may/09/six-star-trek-episodes.

[2] Kristina Šekrst, "Darmok and Jalad on the Internet: The Importance of Metaphors in Natural Languages and Natural Language Processing," in *Star Trek: Analytical Essays*, ed. Emily Strand and Amy H. Sturgisi (Vernon Press, 2022), forthcoming.

1.1 The Prevalence of Internet Memes

Memes are everywhere. As innocuous, annoying, or ephemeral as they may seem, they nevertheless have come to pervade popular culture and popular discourse. Social media and online communication are full of memes being shared between friends and acquaintances and complete strangers. Some memes have become so prevalent that they have garnered significant media attention. The death of the gorilla Harambe in 2016 was the genesis of several related memes, which were discussed in outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.[3] While memes are typically used for humour, they can create massive trends, uplifting local events (such as the death of Harambe) into global ones. Memes have become increasingly political, targeting various governments or ideologies.[4] These snippets of internet communication can carry great discursive power, fostering widespread communication and social movements.[5] As such, it is important to recognise the importance of internet memes and what kind of information they transmit. However, in order to understand how internet memes are used and what they mean, one must analyse how they are constructed and the specifics of the forms they take.

1.1.1 Why memes?

Memes may not be a language unto themselves, but they exhibit many linguistic qualities. They are used to communicate, to convey information, and that alone makes them a point of interest to linguistics. To the unfamiliar, memes can be inscrutable and indecipherable, either providing a small hidden meaning or lacking meaning altogether. However, as with the alien allegory of "Darmok," the simple form of memes belies the complex communicative processes that underpins their creation, transmission, and comprehension. Memes sit at the intersection of many foundational aspects of language, including the nature of signs, the evolution of symbol systems, the formation of grammar, linguistic innovation, the social dimensions of language, and more. Though not a full

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[3] See Katie Rogers, "The Complicated Appeal of the Harambe Meme," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2016; Adam Gabbatt, "Harambe Homages and Biden's Antics: Memes That Made 2016 More Bearable," *The Guardian*, December 26, 2016.

[4] See Yenni Kwok, "Where Memes Could Kill: Indonesia's Worsening Problem of Fake News," *Time*, January 2017; Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love, and Gemma Killen, "Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humor on Social Media," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 10 (2018): 3898–3916.

[5] See Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, "'It Gets Better': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity," *New Media & Society*, no. January 2015 (2015): 1698–1714.

language, memes seem to behave and change similarly to language, and thus can provide insights into the fundamentals of language formation and evolution. Critically, they can serve as a case study into such fundamentals in a new environment that is connected to, but distinct from, modern languages with their own practices and peculiarities. This is not to say that memes are wholly separate from the languages spoken by their users, but there is nevertheless only months or years of context built into the use of a given meme, rather than the potential centuries or more of history and change that is entrenched in established languages.

The opportunities for linguistic study of memes are many, though there are a number of obstacles. As a recent and emergent form of communication, there has been comparatively little academic study of memes, especially within the field of linguistics. Memes also present several challenges to conventional linguistic studies. They are digital by nature and combine elements of different media, most typically text and images presented together. This runs counter to the majority of established linguistic theory regarding symbol systems, though there is a technological element at play that is unprecedented in traditional studies of symbol systems. There is also no recognised authority that determines the use and meaning of memes, though in many ways this puts memes in the same position as modern languages, in which change is driven not necessarily by enforced restrictions, but by everyday use. Yet this fluidity can also be a problem, as memes tend to change—in form, meaning, and popularity—with surprising speed. Unlike the ebb and flow of words and phrases, for which changes can take years, memes can emerge, rise, fall, and become obsolete in months if not weeks. However, not all memes are so short-lived, and this rapidly changing landscape is in its own ways an advantage, as the case study of memes can present language change in miniature, the typically years-long process condensed into a fraction of that time.

1.2 The Study of Memes

So, then what precisely are memes, if they are not merely funny pictures on the internet, yet also not a language? An exact definition of memes, particularly from a linguistic perspective, is difficult to construct. Despite a shared concept and understanding, there is significant debate over a precise definition, inclusive of the vast variety of memes with countless fringe cases and exceptions. However, this parallels many of the foundational aspects of language, in which the creation of a satisfactory definition is difficult if not

impossible. Even common, crucial linguistic components chafe against rigid definitions, such as the word 'word,' which seems simple to define until the task is attempted.[6]

This issue of nomenclature runs through the heart of my research and has been a problem I have grappled with from the start. The term *internet meme* or simply *meme*, is defined by Davison as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission".[7] However this term is an appropriation and narrowing of an existing term coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 work, *The Selfish Gene*. The word itself is a Greek-based construction, *mimeme*, shortened to meme to parallel the word 'gene' (as well as connect to the word "memory"). Dawkins created the term to describe a single unit of culture, spread from one person to another through imitation—a conceptual gene. A meme can therefore refer to any singular idea or behaviour that is held in the mind of an individual and can replicate into the mind of another. Such cultural units can include anything from the wheel to a style of clothing.[8] This idea of a spreadable unit was adapted by internet users to describe elements of digital culture, but has since evolved into a narrower—and yet more nebulous—definition. My research has endeavoured to create a more robust and clear definition of internet memes from a linguistic standpoint. To begin, the above definition by Davison will suffice, as the foremost trait of internet memes is that they are specific to an internet context, as opposed to the wide-ranging anthropological scope of Dawkins' meme.

Figure 1.1: An example of an image macro meme, featuring a main image with overlaid text

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[6] Carol Genetti and Allison Adelman, eds., *How Languages Work: An Introduction to Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 72-75.
[7] Patrick Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 122.
[8] See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniv (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189-201.

My research primarily focused on a specific and arguably the most prevalent type of meme, the *image macro*, which makes use of a combination of words and images in set configurations,[9] as can be seen in Figure 1.1. These humorous multimodal units are used for a variety of discursive purposes, ranging from self-deprecating humour to political commentary. They also appear in a variety of different forms which can be altered along with their textual elements. Image macros often appear in a similar manner to Figure 1.1, including upper and lower captions in white Impact font.[10] However, while these are common features, they are not required, and other memes make use of floating captions overlaid as labels on different figures or wholly separate captions placed alongside the image. Others utilise multiple images in sequence or panels, akin to a comic strip. A key aspect of memes is their flexibility, allowing users to craft new versions of existing templates that are tailored to their specific needs, in both text and format. This complicates the endeavour of recognising and interpreting memes, as they are so readily editable and evolve through continued use. Each individual meme has its own history and communally developed norms, which can make them inscrutable at first glance. This can be especially true when a meme has reached a level of common knowledge among those familiar with the meme that it hardly resembles its origin.

To demonstrate, consider the example of *Drakeposting*, which features in Figures 1.2 through 1.7 on the following pages. This meme originated on the online forum platform 4chan, utilising stills from the music video of the song "Hotline Bling" by the artist Drake. These stills, especially the one featured in Figure 1.2, were used as an emotive reaction, indicating dislike, disapproval, or other negative responses. However, what began as a simple graphical response using a photo with recognisable gestural and expressive cues—a hand held up to something, closed eyes, leaning away—became gradually more sophisticated. The process of iteration began with basic recreations of the image featuring different characters in the same pose, as seen in Figure 1.3. This was followed by the pairing the image with another still, this one featuring Drake smiling and pointing, alongside captions, as seen in Figure 1.4.

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[9] Marta Dynel, "'I Has Seen Image Macros!' Advice Animal Memes as Visual-Verbal Jokes," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 663.
[10] See Kate Brideau and Charles Berret, "A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font,'" *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 307–13.

Figure 1.2: A still image from the music video for the song "Hotline Bling" by Drake, featuring the artist making a specific dismissive gesture, which served as the basis for subsequent "Drakeposting" memes.

Figure 1.3: An early modified example of the "Drakeposting" meme, which features a recreated version of the above music video still in Figure 1.2. This iteration features a character from the video game series Dark Souls, *which fully replaces the original image of Drake, while retaining Drake's posture and gesture.*

Figure 1.4: Two examples of later Drakeposting memes made up of four panels featuring two stills from the Hotline Bling video with captions. The upper image retains the dismissive or negative gesture, while the lower image (which occurs a few seconds before the first in the video) provides a more positive expression and gesture. The images paired with captions are associated with rejection and acceptance, respectively.

Figure 1.5: Two further examples of Drakeposting that have omitted text in favour of images. Both maintain the same overall structure as the examples in Figure 1.4 above, however the second replaces Drake's face with a cat's, creating a visual break from the others.
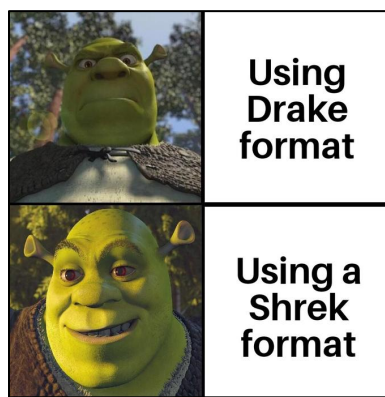
Figure 1.6: Another example of the four-panel Drakeposting meme in which both images have been entirely replaced, in this case with the title character of the movie Shrek *(2001). This iteration maintains the same semantic structure of the upper panels representing a negative response and the lower panels representing a positive response. These emotions are echoed in the expressions of the Shrek character, despite a lack of direct visual continuity (in contrast to the example in Figure 1.3). This iteration also demonstrates self-referential humour with regards to the format of the Drakeposting meme itself.*

Figure 1.7: A variant of the four-panel meme featuring nested, alternative versions of the Drakeposting format, the original of which appears in the upper middle of the image. Each pairing demonstrates the same semantic structure of negative and positive response, and the juxtaposition of the variants provides metatextual humour, similar to Figure 1.6.

In this four-panel structure, featuring the two images of Drake paired with captions, the textual items were linked with the respective negative and positive emotions of the graphics.[11] This format is a simple enough indicator of binary preference, a meaning that is maintained even with minor alterations to the format, as seen in Figure 1.5. As the meme continued to circulate, these gradual changes accumulate to the point where the entire format could be recreated using new images, as seen in the example in Figure 1.6. This variant form of the meme also demonstrates a level of metatextual humour, with its captions relating not to preference regarding something unrelated, but about variants of the meme format itself. This is taken to its extreme in Figure 1.7, which features a recursive format combining a large number of variants into a single image.

This example of Drakeposting illustrates the difficulty in parsing, quantifying, and otherwise defining memes. When presented in a sequence such as the preceding figures, the continuities between the different iterations are more readily apparent. However, if only presented with the initial reaction image of Figure 1.2 and the latter versions in Figure 1.6 or Figure 1.7, the connections are far less obvious. Viewing Figure 1.3 in isolation without knowledge of the Drakeposting meme and the pictured character or associated video game would be similarly confusing. Nevertheless, all of the previous examples can be collected under the single meme of Drakeposting, a branching and broad, yet unified, category. I suggest that memes such as these form radial categories as defined by Lakoff, in which members of a category are defined by their relationships to other members rather than only similarity to a central model or prototype. Radial categories can therefore feature extended relational chains within a category, allowing for membership of items that are only related to prototypical members through degrees of separation.[12] Although memes still present a central model with their basic templates, their continued iteration can create examples that still fall within a category, while seemingly disconnected from their template/central node.

Furthermore, similar issues arise with use of the word "meme" itself. The term is used to describe the behaviour of memes as a whole, and at the categorical level. Drakeposting, as presented above, is a meme. However, the individual units that make up the members of this category, as with the examples in Figures 1.2 through 1.7, can be individually referred to as

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[11] James Blunt [username], "Drakeposting," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting.
[12] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 91-114.

memes. For the sake of clarity throughout the rest of this paper, I will use the term *meme* to describe the category, the name of a meme. I will use the term *iteration* to refer to a specific version of a given meme, featuring distinctive graphical or textual features. The above figures are therefore each a different *iteration* of the same *meme*. I will use the term *instance* to refer to the presence of a specific iteration in a given time and place. An iteration can appear in multiple settings at different times, but provided that it is not edited, merely shared, then it is still the same iteration, merely different instances. If the iteration has been changed, then it is a new iteration. Given this overlap of meaning around the word meme itself, in terms of scale and fluidity, I further contend that memes are a radial category unto themselves. What qualifies as a meme and the features they contain can vary wildly from example to example. Yet even the fringe cases can still be reconciled with the more prototypical features when viewed as a broad radial category.

This research is therefore an attempt to provide a definitional structure for internet memes as a category, one strongly grounded in linguistic principles, so that this form of communication can be better understood and studied. I contend that memes are an important linguistic phenomenon worthy of analysis, both for their own sake and the sake of broader linguistic understanding. As a mode of communication, memes are both a specific mechanism for transmitting information and a complex, interconnected system of symbols— a web of metaphor and allegory akin to the one presented in "Darmok." To help untangle this web, I have undertaken an extensive study of memes, analysing their forms and meanings, culminating in a theoretical framework of meme evolution that I have called the Life Cycle model of memes.

My model consists of three stages and six characteristics that chart the progress of memes across their development. Each stage is marked by particular features of each of these six aspects: engagement, relation to origin, locus of meaning, continuity of form, continuity of meaning, and intuitability. Stage One, creation, occurs in the early period of a meme's introduction, featuring simpler forms and meanings which can be more easily understood due to a lack of established context (e.g., Figure 1.4). Stage Two, conventionalisation, occurs after the meme has gained wider recognition by online communities, gaining context, associations, and norms. This context allows for greater alterations to both form and meaning, which makes them less straightforward to understand (e.g., Figure 1.5). Stage Three, abstraction, features the erosion of many of the previously held characteristics of a meme, as the meme has become a shared concept entrenched in digital culture, and thus can be edited

in more extreme and metatextual ways. The forms and meanings of these memes are altered radically compared to their earlier iterations, making them very difficult to parse without knowledge of their history and context (e.g., Figure 1.6). The example iterations of Drakeposting above represent a rough trajectory of my Life Cycle model, beginning with more basic forms before increasing in complexity and ultimately arriving at drastically changed iterations which bear little resemblance to what has come before. I previously stated that viewing Figure 1.7 in isolation, or reconciling Figure 1.2 with Figure 1.6, is difficult without additional information. My model serves as a rubric by which to examine a given instance of a meme and place it within the spectrum of its evolution.

My Life Cycle model is the result of several avenues of research. The first was consultation with a variety of academic sources, including communications and media studies, sociology, and, of course, linguistics. I engaged with materials that discussed memes and digital interaction, as well as theoretical linguistic works that could be applied to this new form of communication. Based on these approaches and theories, I created an initial definitional structure and categorisation of memes. The second avenue consisted of investigating memes as they exist in online discourse, including research via the web resource *Know Your Meme* and the selection of 30 memes that served as case studies for my theoretical considerations. I utilised these to further refine my definitional structure and theoretical approach. Thirdly, to engage more deeply with the experience of meme users, I conducted an online survey and several focus groups, further utilising my pool of 30 memes. My survey was taken by members of the meme-focused community r/memes on the platform Reddit, while my focus groups were attended by students at the University of Stirling. The feedback from my participants was used to ultimately expand and revise my earlier assumptions and approach, culminating in my three-stage Life Cycle model.

1.3 Thesis Structure

The rest of this thesis will describe this process by which I created my Life Cycle model, including all of the aforementioned influences. Chapter 2 focuses on the first avenue, serving as my literature review. The chapter begins with an examination of the existing literature on internet memes across several disciplines, including memetics, communications and media, other social sciences and humanities, internet studies, semiotics, and linguistics. I then discuss the important linguistic sources that, although not related to memes directly,

present theoretical tools and insights that informed my subsequent analysis of internet memes.

Chapter 3 presents my initial interrogation of these literary sources and my starting theoretical approaches. I present the different strands of communications theory, sociology, and linguistic methods that contributed to my first model and later Life Cycle stages. These include Dawkins' work with memetics, social network theory, linguistic approaches to communities of practice by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, Scott-Phillips's model of ostensive-inferential communication, Keller's direct and indirect iconicity, the experiments of Garrod and Fay with regards to the evolution of symbol systems, cumulative cultural evolution, and linguistic metaphor—including work by Lakoff, as well as his work with radial categories. I then discuss how I synthesised these different approaches into the theoretical underpinnings of how internet memes create meaning and convey information. I provide my early definitional structures for memes as well as my starting research questions, which laid the groundwork for my data collection.

Chapter 4 outlines this process of data collection. It begins with an overview on the challenges in collecting data on memes and how this influenced my own methodology. This is followed by a summary of the ethical considerations of my research. I then describe the process by which I gathered the pool of 30 memes which served as case studies and topics for my survey and focus groups. Next, I present the research design and implementation of the survey and focus groups, and the initial results of each. I then broadly describe my methods of data analysis, coding, and interpretation.

Chapter 5 moves into the analysis of my data itself and my creation of the three-stage Life Cycle model. I reflect on the results of my survey and focus groups and how the gathered data confirmed elements of my initial theoretical structures and challenged others. I discuss the limitations of my preliminary model and its expansion into my three-stage Life Cycle model. I then outline the structure of my model, defining its stages and the six criteria by which the stages are demarcated.

The succeeding chapters provide a detailed examination of the model. Chapters 6 presents the six criteria as they appear in Stage One, featuring six different example memes from my pool and analysis of the data collected for them. Chapter 7 presents the six criteria as they appear in Stage Two, featuring six additional examples. Chapter 8 then presents the six criteria in Stage Three, along with analysis of six further example memes.

Chapter 9 serves as a capstone for my discussion of the model, reviewing the stages by presenting two memes as case studies for the model as a whole. Firstly, I discuss the meme *Expanding Brain*, documenting its developmental cycle through Stages One, Two, and Three and how it displays the six criteria across these stages. Secondly, I provide a parallel analysis of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme using the same Stages and criteria, providing a second example that illustrates the similarities and differences of individual memes as they progress through their Life Cycle.

Lastly, Chapter 10 reviews the features of my model and my theoretical conclusions. It also expands upon the bounds and purposes of my model, and how it could be iterated on in light of the continued evolution of memes. I discuss the trajectory of meme progression, its implications for the medium and for linguistics, and present areas of further study. Together, these chapters represent my work over the last several years, and I hope a worthy contribution to the field of linguistics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

As outlined in the previous chapter, my research seeks to provide a linguistically based definition for internet memes—and by doing so, come to better understand how meaning is created by memes, how these meanings evolve, and what they can illustrate about broader themes of communication and language. Although memes present an emergent and intriguing area of study in the field of linguistics, there has been relatively little research on the subject so far. More is being produced every year, though even less had been published when I began my research in 2017. As such, my aim was for my own linguistic treatment to help fill this void. In order to develop my own theoretical foundations, I turned to two separate strains of literature.

Firstly, I looked to other academic fields, as memes were and are increasingly appearing as a subject of study throughout academia. Due to their multimodality, their ubiquity, and their digital nature, memes are now being studied via a number of different perspectives across a variety of subjects. Communications, media studies, and other social sciences all provided crucial insights into internet memes, allowing me to create a basis for examining these digital artifacts, beyond the scope of traditional linguistics.

Secondly, I looked to established linguistic theory about foundational aspects of language change and symbol systems. Sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics both provided several approaches that I was able to apply to the subject of internet memes, including community of practice, relevance theory, iconicity, cumulative cultural evolution, and metaphor.

The rest of this chapter will give an overview of these two halves of my research and the literature in these fields. The most influential of these works and their associated theories will then be examined with regard to my theoretical approach to memes in Chapter 3.

2.1 Meme Research

Firstly, I will discuss studies of internet memes, predominantly from outside the field of linguistics. This will both provide a review of existing research on memes, serve as a record of the trajectory of my research, and introduce several key concepts that informed my later theoretical work.

2.1.1 Memetics

The natural starting point for discussing memes is their ultimate origin, the field of memetics. However, despite their shared name, there has been very little study within memetics about internet memes.[13] Individual image macros and other internet trends could be considered individual memes in Dawkins' original conception as transferable units of culture. The format of an image macro itself, and the blended meaning it uses, could also be viewed as a traditional meme of its own. Still, the focus of memetics today is on other forms of memes, of more prominent cultural units—fashions, technologies, and more—that are disseminating among different peoples.[14] Current studies, such as those by Rusu, da Rocha, et al., and Beck-Fernandez, et al., take differing approaches to analysing how the internet is shaping the spread of traditional memes, which includes the proliferations of internet memes in all their varied forms.[15]

There has also been limited intersection between memetics and linguistics in general. From a memetics standpoint, languages are particularly robust memes, given how much they are shared among people and how widely they can be spread. Even individual words, phrases, or discursive practices can be considered language-based memes in their own right, and the introduction of a novel word or meaning disseminating among a population can be viewed from a memetics standpoint. However, the two fields have remained largely separate, with only occasional works analysing linguistics topics from a memetics framework, such as in a translation context.[16] Memetics has therefore had a comparatively limited influence on my ultimate theoretical framework. However, several of Dawkins' ideas regarding the qualities of memes and their replication were crucial in developing my linguistic models. Primary among these were the notions of fidelity and mutation in iteration, paired with biologically inspired concepts of spread and transmission, discussed more in Chapters 3 and 5.

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[13] See Peter Lunenfeld, "Barking at Memetics: The Rant That Wasn't," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 253–56.

[14] See Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[15] See Alexandra-Andreea Rusu, "The Life of Memes: Traditional Technologies and the Transmission of Knowledge," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 92 (2013): 820–25; Armando Freitas da Rocha et al., "A Neurobiologically Inspired Model of Social Cognition: Memes Spreading in the Internet," *Biologically Inspired Cognitive Architectures*, 2015, 86–96; Héctor Beck-Fernandez et al., "A System for Extracting and Comparing Memes in Online Forums," *Expert Systems with Applications* 82 (2017): 231–51.

[16] Andrew Chesterman, *Memes in Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997).

Communications and Media is the dominant field in the current study of internet memes. As memes are a new medium of communication, this association is understandable. Nevertheless, the main thrust of meme research within communications and media (henceforth C&M) has been into the use and effect of memes, as part of broader research into digital communication. There has been little analysis of the form of memes from a more linguistic-based perspective, and how meanings are constructed through these devices.

A significant aspect of memes which has been widely discussed in C&M is the capacity for memes, among other media, to 'go viral.' Given the interconnected state of internet users, particularly through social media, an item can be produced and shared with a large group of individuals in a very short timeframe. As individuals come into contact with the item—whether an image, video, or other form of media—through any number of venues, they can each in turn share the item with their own online contacts, further spreading the item within the digital environment in which it was found (e.g., sharing a Facebook post on one's own Facebook page) or introducing it to a new platform (e.g., linking a YouTube video to a Reddit thread). Such proliferation can occur at high speeds, with the item multiplying with each successive sharing. As such, this spread is reminiscent of a virus, with the continuous replication of the item in lieu of cells. Viral media does not bear the negative effects of a virus, but a piece of media can seemingly 'infect' the online community (or sections of it), with the same or similar versions recurring repeatedly. Such a dynamic can have great communicative power, with the ability to rapidly spread information along multiple avenues, and as such the nature of viral content has been widespread in C&M research—what exactly viral media is, why it is spread, and how it can be produced. Memes have become an area of interest in this field, as memes are one such category of "spreadable media" that can readily go viral. Jenkins, Ford, and Green have examined the proliferation of memes around the internet, documenting the rapid spreading of memes and the potential impact these trends may have on marketing and business.[17] Other angles for tackling the organisation of memes

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

in cyberspace include Valaskivi and Sumiala's use of circulation models[18] as well as Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, and Dobusch's examination of memes using game theory.[19]

In addition to examining the viral nature of memes, many communication studies have looked into how memes are used in discourse. An early study of the communicative nature of memes was done by Davison in 2012—the source of basic definition of memes cited in Chapter 1. This work viewed memes as something akin to a language, able to be analysed using the same themes and methods, as memes are used in a similar fashion.[20] Wiggins and Bowers built upon the framework of Jenkins et al, denoting memes as a distinct "genre" of communication, separate from other forms of spreadable media. Memes have established their own norms and standards, allowing them to be more readily created and spread. Wiggins and Bowers further propose that memes are a type of artifact of digital culture, the product of an entirely new sociocultural group of individuals that has emerged online. This new culture uses memes as a primary form of establishing their own unique identity.[21] Vickery, in a study of the *Confession Bear* meme, has taken these ideas to a smaller scale, using a single meme as a case study.[22] Schonig has taken a different approach, examining the role of "liking" memes and other digital artifacts. He contends that the act of liking an item is not merely a passive state, but an active one that examines and cultivates discussions about aesthetics and aesthetic values.[23]

There have also been specific studies that focus on individual internet platforms as well as social media as a whole. Chen has investigated the forum platform 4chan, which served as the origin point for many subsequently popular memes before their spread to other sites.[24] This has been followed up by Nissenbaum and Shifman (see more of her work below), with specific focus on the controversial "/b/" message board.[25] Literat and van den

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[18] Katja Valaskivi and Johanna Sumiala, "Circulating Social Imaginaries: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2014): 229–43.

[19] Jens Seiffert-Brockmann, Trevor Diehl, and Leonhard Dobusch, "Memes as Games: The Evolution of a Digital Discourse Online," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 8 (2018): 2862–79.

[20] Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes."

[21] Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (2014): 1886–1906.

[22] Jacqueline Vickery, "The Curious Case of Confession Bear: The Reappropriation of Online Macro-Image Memes," *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 3 (2014): 301–25.

[23] Jordan Schonig, "'Liking' as Creating: On Aesthetic Category Memes," *New Media and Society* 22, no. 1 (2020): 26–48.

[24] Carl Chen, "The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction," *Habitus* 3 (2012): 6–17.

[25] Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, "Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital : The Case of 4chan's /b/ Board," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 4 (2017): 483–501.

Berg have taken a similar focused approach, looking at a specialised forum on the site Reddit, the 'subreddit' r/MemeEconomy. This subreddit serves as a space to share and spread memes, but it also has developed its own internal culture, adopting the vernacular and structures of economics and the stock market. This study examines the nature of this community, providing a new perspective on the value placed on memes and the networks in which they spread.[26] A similar study was carried out by Eschler and Menking on the subreddit r/StarterPacks, which focuses on a particular style of memes built around certain fashions, identities, and stereotypes.[27] Xu, et al., have done a parallel examination of meme origin and spread on the video site YouTube.[28] Du Preez and Lombard have analysed how memes are used on the social media site Facebook in order to construct new identities.[29] Miller and Sinanan's *Visualising Facebook* is a full monograph on the Facebook platform, which includes a discussion on memes, particularly about how they are used within that domain.[30] One of the most comprehensive works on social media and memes is Graham Meikle's *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*. Meikle devotes multiple chapters to discussing the nature, structure, and usage of memes, as well as how they are "remixed" by users into different iterations using graphical and textual changes. He further offers a novel definition of memes themselves as distillations of internet culture.[31] This definition served as one of the launch points for my own efforts to define memes, as discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The majority of C&M research into memes has focused on their effects. Memes often deal with contentious political or social themes: rallying movements, prompting action, or providing satire. Memes are predominantly humorous, even when dealing with serious topics. Shifman, along with Levy and Thelwall, suggest that these jokes, despite their light nature, are nevertheless a significant avenue of globalisation.[32] Such globalised citizens often turn

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[26] Ioana Literat and Sarah van den Berg, "Buy Memes Low, Sell Memes High: Vernacular Criticism and Collective Negotiations of Value on Reddit's MemeEconomy," *Information Communication and Society* 4462 (2017): 1–18.

[27] Jordan Eschler and Amanda Menking, "'No Prejudice Here': Examining Social Identity Work in Starter Pack Memes," *Social Media and Society* 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–13.

[28] Weiai Wayne Xu et al., "Networked Cultural Diffusion and Creation on YouTube: An Analysis of YouTube Memes," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 60, no. 1 (2016): 104–22.

[29] Amanda du Preez and Elanie Lombard, "The Role of Memes in the Construction of Facebook Personae," *Communicatio* 40, no. 3 (2014): 253–70.

[30] See Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan, *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective* (London: University College London Press, 2017).

[31] Graham Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[32] Limor Shifman, Hadar Levy, and Mike Thelwall, "Internet Jokes: The Secret Agents of Globalization?," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19, no. 4 (2014): 727–43.

their attention to social causes, such as debate surrounding *Kony2012*. This short film, which was designed to bring to light the activities of Ugandan war criminal Joseph Kony, sparked discussion and controversy in the digital sphere. Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson examined this discourse as an example of such social engagement online, and how the digital infrastructure of social media platforms could be used to both begin a dialogue around such social problems. Furthermore, they also highlighted the secondary dialogue that was prompted about *how* individuals and groups engage in digital activism, adding a further social dimension to the identity politics of other studies.[33] Gal, Shifman, and Kampf built on this intersection of internet and identity, deconstructing the memes related to the "It Gets Better" movement, which supports the LGBT+ community.[34] Flashpoint events and crises have also been the subject of meme studies, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks[35] and the lockdown of the city of Brussels in 2015.[36] Additional studies have been undertaken that examine memes used by protesting groups, such as environmental activists,[37] the Occupy Wall Street movement,[38] alt-right groups,[39] and even military personnel.[40] The *Pepper Spray Cop* meme has been the focus of multiple studies, as this meme has highlighted American civil unrest and political strife in light of recent racial and ideological tensions. Bayerl and Stoynov have highlighted this meme as an avenue of discussion about these sensitive topics,[41] while Huntington has taken a more structural approach. Many of the works discussed in this section have only cursory explanations of the development of the memes they describe, to provide context for the political and social ramifications of their use. As such, there is little structural analysis of how meme meanings are constructed. Huntington's examination of *Pepper Spray*

[33] Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Kjerstin Thorson, "Good Citizenship as a Frame Contest: Kony2012, Memes, and Critiques of the Networked Citizen," *New Media and Society* 18, no. 9 (2016): 1993–2011.

[34] Gal, Shifman, and Kampf, "'It Gets Better': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity."

[35] Lisa Silvestri, "Memeingful Memories and the Art of Resistance," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 3997–4016.

[36] Minna S. Jensen, Christina Neumayer, and Luca Rossi, "'Brussels Will Land on Its Feet like a Cat': Motivations for Memefying #Brusselslockdown," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 1 (2020): 59–75.

[37] Corey B Davis, Mark Glantz, and David R Novak, "'You Can't Run Your SUV on Cute. Let's Go!': Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse," *Environmental Communication* 10, no. 1 (2016): 62–83; Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, "Internet Memes, Media Frames, and the Conflicting Logics of Climate Change Discourse," *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 7 (2019): 975–94.

[38] Ryan M. Milner, "Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357–90.

[39] Julia R. DeCook, "Memes and Symbolic Violence: #proudboys and the Use of Memes for Propaganda and the Construction of Collective Identity," *Learning, Media and Technology* 43, no. 4 (2018): 485–504.

[40] Lisa Silvestri, "Mortars and Memes: Participating in Pop Culture from a War Zone," *Media, War and Conflict* 9, no. 1 (2015): 27–42.

[41] Petra Saskia Bayerl and Lachezar Stoynov, "Revenge by Photoshop: Memefying Police Acts in the Public Dialogue about Injustice," *New Media and Society* 18, no. 6 (2014): 1006–26.

Cop is a prominent counterexample, as Huntington ties memes to metaphor, even given their visual nature (a connection which is also picked up by Piata, below).[42] This link was also very influential in my own theoretical development.

Huntington has done further research into the effect of memes on political discourse on a wider scale,[43] one of a number of studies involving memes about politicians, political parties, and governmental bodies. Multiple studies have tackled political resentment in the American 2016 election, analysing a number of memes that targeted and demeaned various candidates and voters in that election.[44] Several studies have been undertaken analysing the use of memes in African politics, both in Kenya[45] and Nigeria,[46] in which memes have been found to be significant tools in discourse about both specific elections and national identity. Memes have also been tied to further discussions of national values, politics, and culture in Turkey,[47] Oman,[48] India,[49] Sri Lanka,[50] and Germany.[51] Mina has examined a group of memes that have fostered criticism of online censorship by the Chinese government,[52] while Szablewicz has looked at the use of memes among Chinese youth.[53] Another study of memes in China by Yang is notable for being a study of cross-linguistic memes, specifically English-language memes that spread into the Chinese-speaking online community.[54] A further study

[42] Heidi E. Huntington, "Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric," *Communication Studies* 67, no. 1 (2015): 77–93.

[43] Heidi E. Huntington, "The Affect and Effect of Internet Memes: Assessing Perceptions and Influence of Online User-Generated Political Discourse as Media" (Colorado State, 2017).

[44] See Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, "Digital Cultures of Political Participation: Internet Memes and the Discursive Delegitimization of the 2016 U.S Presidential Candidates," *Discourse, Context & Media* 16 (2017): 1–11; Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love, and Gemma Killen, "Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humor on Social Media," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 10 (2018): 3898–3916,

[45] Brian Ekdale and Melissa Tully, "Makmende Amerudi: Kenya's Collective Reimagining as a Meme of Aspiration," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 283–98.

[46] Adeyemi Adegoju and Oluwabunmi Oyebode, "Humour as Discursive Practice in Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election Online Campaign Discourse," *Discourse Studies* 17, no. 6 (2015): 643–62.

[47] Şeyda Barlaş Boskuş, "Pop Polyvocality and Internet Memes: As a Reflection of Socio-Political Discourse of Turkish Youth in Social Media," *Global Media Journal Turkish Edition* 6, no. 12 (2016): 44–75.

[48] Najma Al Zidjaly, "Memes as Reasonably Hostile Laments: A Discourse Analysis of Political Dissent in Oman," *Discourse and Society* 28, no. 6 (2017): 573–94.

[49] Sangeet Kumar, "Contagious Memes, Viral Videos and Subversive Parody: The Grammar of Contention on the Indian Web," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 232–47.

[50] Sasanka Perera, "Humour, Criticality and the Performance of Anonymous Power: Internet Memes as Political Commentaries in Sinhala Society," in *Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia*, ed. Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak (London: Routledge India, 2022), 105–37.

[51] Lars Guenther et al., "Strategic Framing and Social Media Engagement: Analyzing Memes Posted by the German Identitarian Movement on Facebook," *Social Media and Society* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1–13.

[52] An Xiao Mina, "Batman, Pandaman and the Blind Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 359–75.

[53] Marcella Szablewicz, "The 'Losers' of China's Internet: Memes as 'structures of Feeling'' for Disillusioned Young Netizens,'" *China Information* 28, no. 2 (2014).

[54] Siyue Yang, "An Analysis of Factors Influencing Transmission of Internet Memes of English-Speaking Origin in Chinese Online Communities," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 8, no. 5 (2017): 969–77.

by Ding has investigated the use of memes by Asians and Asian Americans in constructing their identities, tying back to the aforementioned studies about both identity construction and globalisation.[55] Particular attention has been paid to the cross section of political humour with internet memes, including as a method of satire[56] and an avenue of youth engagement.[57] Another political theme is analysed in Smith's examination of "fake news" memes, which he views through the lens of propaganda and weaponised ideology.[58] Overall, these studies approach the political ramifications of memes, of how they are utilised by individuals, communities, and political groups to further specific agendas. Memes represent a new form of social engagement, a new method of political rhetoric, which makes the study of their forms and structures all the more important.

Such themes of politics, truth, and conspiracy are also present in various health-related and pandemic-focused studies. Marcus and Singer examined pandemic-themed memes on 4chan in relation to the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2015.[59] Harvey, et al. discussed pro-vaccination and anti-vaccination discourse using memes in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic began.[60] The Covid-19 pandemic, as a global event, was the source of many memes describing aspects of individuals' experiences and their feelings towards governments and other institutions who were monitoring the crisis. Studies about this period are still emerging and Covid will no doubt be a topic of research for many years to come. Some current works on the subject include the work of de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, and Literat regarding the narratives built around the coronavirus,[61] the work of Norstrom and Sarna regarding the memetic reaction of the Polish populace in the wake of the pandemic,[62] and the

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[55] Zhao Ding, "The Internet Meme as a Rhetoric Discourse: Investigating Asian/Asian Americans' Identity Negotiation" (Bowling Green, 2015).

[56] Anushka Kulkarni, "Internet Meme and Political Discourse: A Study on the Impact of Internet Meme as a Tool in Communicating Political Satire," *Journal of Content, Community and Communication* 6 (2017): 13–17.

[57] Joel Penney, "'It's So Hard Not to Be Funny in This Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression," *Television and New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791–806.

[58] Christopher A. Smith, "Weaponized Iconoclasm in Internet Memes Featuring the Expression 'Fake News,'" *Discourse and Communication* 13, no. 3 (2019): 303–19.

[59] Olivia Rose Marcus and Merrill Singer, "Loving Ebola-Chan: Internet Memes in an Epidemic," *Media, Culture and Society* 39, no. 3 (2017): 341–56.

[60] Amanda M. Harvey et al., "Fear and Derision: A Quantitative Content Analysis of Provaccine and Antivaccine Internet Memes," *Health Education and Behavior* 46, no. 6 (2019): 1012–23.

[61] Constance de Saint Laurent, Vlad P. Glăveanu, and Ioana Literat, "Internet Memes as Partial Stories: Identifying Political Narratives in Coronavirus Memes," *Social Media and Society* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1–13.

[62] Roza Norstrom and Pawel Sarna, "Internet Memes in Covid-19 Lockdown Times in Poland," *Comunicar* 29, no. 67 (2021): 1–10.

work of Wasike discussing the credibility of memes regarding the coronavirus and the pandemic.[63]

In parallel to politics and world events, memes have been linked with identity construction through a number of demographic factors, across the world. Pineiro-Otero has researched the hashtag #ViajoSolo, a pro-women meme in the Spanish-speaking world.[64] Coates Nee and De Maio also tackle gender along with politics, discussing the gendered framing of the 2016 U.S. presidential election through the lens of internet memes.[65] The work of Harlow, Rowlett, and Huse analyses feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric within political and LGBTQ discourse, examining memes regarding Kim Davies, a controversial American clerk who was jailed due to her refusal to issue gay marriage licenses.[66] Dickerson's research into sports-related memes takes a different angle, deconstructing masculinity among American athletes, while also incorporating questions about race.[67] The work of Tuters and Hagen looks into anti-Semitic attitudes of different 4chan boards,[68] while Al-Natour focuses on racist memes and internet discourse aimed at Aboriginal peoples in Australia,[69] both highlighting the darker side of meme use. These themes of prejudice are expanded upon by Kanai, who suggests that memes can introduce and reinforce a variety of norms and prejudices regarding gender and race, as well as class.[70] This examination of class and memes was continued by Dobson, who investigated memes about welfare and poverty, and the normalisation of

[63] Ben Wasike, "Memes, Memes, Everywhere, nor Any Meme to Trust: Examining the Credibility and Persuasiveness of COVID-19-Related Memes," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 27, no. 2 (2022): 1–30.

[64] Teresa Piñeiro-Otero and Xabier Martínez-Rolán, "Memes in the Internet Feminist Activism: #ViajoSola as an Example of Transnational Mobilization," *Cuadernos.Info* 39 (2016): 17–37.

[65] Rebecca Coates Nee and Mariana De Maio, "A 'Presidential Look'? An Analysis of Gender Framing in 2016 Persuasive Memes of Hillary Clinton," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 63, no. 2 (2019): 304–21.

[66] Summer Harlow, Jerrica Ty Rowlett, and Laura-Kate Huse, "'Kim Davis Be like …': A Feminist Critique of Gender Humor in Online Political Memes," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 7 (2020): 1057–73.

[67] Nikolas Dickerson, "Constructing the Digitalized Sporting Body: Black and White Masculinity in NBA/NHL Internet Memes," *Communications & Sport* 4, no. 3 (2016).

[68] Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, "(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan," *New Media and Society* 22, no. 12 (2020): 2218–37.

[69] Ryan Al-Natour, "The Digital Racist Fellowship behind the Anti-Aboriginal Internet Memes," *Journal of Sociology* 57, no. 4 (2021): 780–805.

[70] Akane Kanai, "Sociality and Classification: Reading Gender, Race, and Class in a Humorous Meme," *Social Media and Society* 2, no. 4 (2016).

prejudice against the poor.[71] Beyond these aspects of gender, race, and class, studies have also been done regarding other aspects of identity, such as religion[72] and fandom.[73]

Despite a general focus on result rather than development and construction, there has been other communication research into classifying types of memes and examining their structural elements. The *Journal of Visual Culture* released an issue in 2014 that was entirely dedicated to memes.[74] The instalment included several of notable articles, such as an examination of the Impact font found in many memes[75] and the "ugly" aesthetic of memes.[76] This issue helped to establish memes as a significant area of study, as well as provided another working definition of memes that inspired my own efforts (see Chapter 3). Further studies on the visual elements of memes include an examination by Davison of MS Paint, the program used to create many early memes,[77] and the repurposing of historical pictures as the subjects of memes by Sandrine, Frosh, and Cohen.[78] Dynel's research into image macros was also a significant work, proposing a model of memes similar to Huntington's comparison to metaphor, in which the text and visuals work together to create a combined joke.[79] Further research in this area can be found in the study by Segev, et al., which draws from many sources, including a biological parallel similar to memetics, in order to discuss the development of memes as they relate to each other. Memes can lead to other memes, which in turn parody or emulate their "parent." As such, this quantitative study sought to build connections between memes to form networks or "families" and examine how individual memes and networks of memes interact. In particular, the research team sought to distinguish the particular markers of a given meme family and the overarching "generic" features of

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[71] Kathy Dobson and Irena Knezevic, "'Liking and Sharing' the Stigmatization of Poverty and Social Welfare: Representations of Poverty and Welfare through Internet Memes on Social Media," *TripleC* 15, no. 2 (2017): 777–95.

[72] Gabrielle K Aguilar et al., "Communicating Mixed Messages about Religion through Internet Memes," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 10 (2017): 1498–1520; Herivelton Regiani and Viviane Borelli, "Memetizing and Mediatizing: Memes as an Evangelical Discursive Strategy," *ESSACHESS* 10, no. 2 (2017): 9–31.

[73] Michelle Markey Butler, "The Wisdom of the Crowd: Internet Memes and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*," in *The Hobbit and Tolkien's Mythology: Essays on Revisions and Influences*, ed. Bradford Lee Eden (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 222–32.

[74] Laine Nooney and Laura Portwood-Stacer, "One Does Not Simply: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Internet Memes," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 248–52.

[75] Brideau and Berret, "A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font.'"

[76] Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 314–39.

[77] Patrick Davison, "Because of the Pixels: On the History, Form, and Influence of MS Paint," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 275–97.

[78] Sandrine Boudana, Paul Frosh, and Akiba A. Cohen, "Reviving Icons to Death: When Historic Photographs Become Digital Memes," *Media, Culture and Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1210–30.

[79] Dynel, "'I Has Seen Image Macros!' Advice Animal Memes as Visual-Verbal Jokes."

memes as a medium. In order to establish these relationships, they divided their analysis between a singular "instance" of a meme (similar to my use of the term, as described in Section 1.2 above), a family of meme instances that shared prominent characteristics, and the "memetic network" of multiple meme families connected by less prominent characteristics.[80] This hierarchical relational structure was an important inspiration for my own analysis of the interconnectivity of memes, as well as my emphasis on clear nomenclature.

One of the members of this research team was Limor Shifman, who is a primary researcher in the field of memes (and has been a co-author of a number of previously mentioned papers). Shifman's work in particular has sought to explain how memes make sense from a cultural perspective, and to connect the spread of memes to other aspects of human interaction. In one of her works, Shifman connects the idea of memetic memes to internet memes, charting the rise and fall of a video meme as it disseminated across the internet.[81] Shifman further analysed the cultural roots of memes—specifically image macros—in her article that appeared in the 2014 issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture*. In this piece, Shifman highlights the importance of the visual side of image macros, with the central image containing the core of meaning, and argues that the continued use of an image primes further use of the image in the same context.[82] All of this research culminated in *Memes in Digital Culture*, a book in which Shifman incorparates the myriad perspectives on memes within C&M into a cohesive whole. In this work, Shifman analyses how internet memes follow a path similar to Dawkins' memes, the unique digital nature of memes, and the struggle to precisely define memes. She compares memes to other spreadable media and examines how some memes go viral. In addition, Shifman dedicates several sections to documenting different genres and types of memes, including politically themed memes and their impact. Notably, this is one of the only current monographs entirely devoted to digital memes.[83]

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[80] Elad Segev et al., "Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship Between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 4 (2015): 417–33.

[81] Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362–77.

[82] Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 340–58.

[83] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MS: MIT Press, 2014). For another monograph on memes, see the more recently published Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2019).

2.1.3 Social Sciences and Humanities

Beyond C&M, memes have been the focus of research in several other fields. As the comprehension of memes requires sophisticated cognitive processes (see the sections on cognition and relevance below), memes have been researched by psychologists. One such work by Mauricio and Díaz tackles the problem of defining memes as an entity.[84] Studies such as those by Guadagno, et al., tie into the aforementioned research into viral online content, addressing the emotional component to memes and how this added element contributes to their spread.[85] Rieger and Klimmt discuss the impact of positive and hopeful memes on an individual's outlook and its potential benefits,[86] while Akram, et al. provide a cognitive study regarding the impact of neutral and depressive memes on individuals with depression.[87] Geniole, et al. link psychology to the issues surrounding the global Covid-19 pandemic, analysing how the intent to receive a Covid vaccine is affected by consuming vaccine-related memes.[88] The work of Williams, et al., examines issues of race and microaggressions in online interactions, linking psychology and sociology with digital studies.[89] As an artifact of digital culture, studies of memes have arisen in cultural studies,[90] and even folklore studies,[91] along with gender studies. A study by Miltner analyses the dual roles of gender and group identity in the use and understanding of memes.[92] Further studies that examine memes from a gender studies perspective are an analysis of the 'yesallwomen'

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[84] Carlos Mauricio and Castaño Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," *CES Psicología* 6, no. 1 (2013): 82–104.

[85] Rosanna E. Guadagno et al., "What Makes a Video Go Viral? An Analysis of Emotional Contagion and Internet Memes," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 6 (2013): 2312–19.

[86] Diana Rieger and Christoph Klimmt, "The Daily Dose of Digital Inspiration 2: Themes and Affective User Responses to Meaningful Memes in Social Media," *New Media and Society* 21, no. 10 (2019): 2201–21.

[87] Umair Akram et al., "Eye Tracking and Attentional Bias for Depressive Internet Memes in Depression," *Experimental Brain Research* 239 (2021): 575–81.

[88] Shawn N. Geniole et al., "Preliminary Evidence That Brief Exposure to Vaccination-Related Internet Memes May Influence Intentions to Vaccinate against COVID-19," *Computers in Human Behavior* 131 (2022): 1–10.

[89] Amanda Williams et al., "Racial Microaggressions and Perceptions of Internet Memes," *Computers in Human Behavior* 63 (2016): 424–32.

[90] Junhua Wang and Hua Wang, "From a Marketplace to a Cultural Space: Online Meme as an Operational Unit of Cultural Transmission," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 45, no. 3 (2015): 261–74; Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon and Axel Pérez Trujillo Diniz, "Colonizing Pepe: Internet Memes as Cyberplaces," *Space and Culture* 24, no. 1 (2021): 4–18; Hollis Griffin, "Living Through It: Anger, Laughter, and Internet Memes in Dark Times," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 381–97.

[91] Lynne McNeill, "LOL and the World LOLs with You: Memes as Modern Folklore," *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 97, no. 4 (2017): 18–21.

[92] Kate M. Miltner, "'There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats': The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme," *First Monday* 19, no. 8 (2014): online.

event by Thrift,[93] a deconstruction of the *Binders Full of Women* meme by Rentschler and Thrift,[94] an investigation into the connection between the *Slender Man* meme and online gender perceptions by Maddox,[95] and an analysis of the role of sexism in memes by Drakett.[96]

Further disciplines that have begun to incorporate memes into their studies include history (analysing the historical origins of memes),[97] education[98] and library studies[99] (discussing memes as an educational and critical thinking tool), innovation studies,[100] and even art. A study by Pavlović approaches memes with an artistic eye, deconstructing how memes are used to express identity and defy norms, linking to previous studies regarding identity construction and political discourse.[101] De la Rosa-Carrillo's dissertation draws on an art history framework and proposes that memes form a kind of language, one that is almost entirely visual in nature.[102] This focus on art is echoed by the work of Kantar, who presented work on rhetorical analysis of the art used in memes.[103]

Other fields which have had several meme-related entries are law, public relations, finance, and politics. Memes utilise a variety of media, are shared across networks, and can have controversial messages, all of which provide potential legal challenges. As such, legal analyses have been proposed examining an array of topics including how memes relate to

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[93] Samantha C. Thrift, "Yesallwomen as Feminist Meme Event," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 6 (2014): 1090–92.

[94] Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift, "Doing Feminism in the Network: Networked Laughter and the 'Binders Full of Women' Meme," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (2015): 329–59.

[95] Jessica Maddox, "Of Internet Born: Idolatry, the Slender Man Meme, and the Feminization of Digital Spaces," *Feminist Media Studies*, 2017, 1–14.

[96] Jessica Drakett et al., "Old Jokes, New Media – Online Sexism and Constructions of Gender in Internet Memes," *Feminism & Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2018): 109–27.

[97] Karen Bourrier, "Victorian Memes," *Victorian Studies* 58, no. 2 (2016): 272.

[98] Dominic D. Wells, "You All Made Dank Memes: Using Internet Memes to Promote Critical Thinking," *Journal of Political Science Education* 14, no. 2 (2018): 240–48; Lisa M. Kath et al., "Getting Psyched About Memes in the Psychology Classroom," *Teaching of Psychology*, 2022, 1–20; Sely-Ann Headley et al., "Using Memes to Increase Health Literacy in Vulnerable Populations," *American Journal of Health Education* 53, no. 1 (2022): 11–15.

[99] Ciro Scardina, "Through the Lens of Popular Culture," *Teacher Librarian* 45, no. 2 (2017): 13–16; Karryl Kim A Sagun, "Internet Memes as an Information Dissemination Tool for Libraries: The Ateneo de Manila University Experience," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 103 (2013): 542–50.

[100] Mickael Benaim, "From Symbolic Values to Symbolic Innovation: Internet-Memes and Innovation," *Research Policy* 47, no. 5 (2018): 901–10.

[101] Lidija Marinkov Pavlović, "Internet Memes as a Field of Discursive Construction of Identity and Space of Resistance," trans. Ana Stevanović, *Art + Media*, no. 10 (2016): 97–106.

[102] Ernesto Leon De la Rosa-Carrillo, "On the Language of Internet Memes" (University of Arizona, 2015).

[103] Nalan Kantar, "Rhetorical Analysis of the Use of Art in Internet Memes," in *GKA Arts 2022 Conference Proceedings, 3rd International Conference on Arts and Cultures* (Madrid: Global Knowledge Academics, 2022), 31–35.

copyright,[104] fair use,[105] monetisation,[106] and slander/libel.[107] The interfacing of memes with marketing, advertising, and organisational representation has been explored in several studies, including those by Brubaker, et al.[108] and Yang.[109] The work of Jung and Jeong takes this association a step further, analysing the use of memes in parallel with stock market activity.[110] In spite of the political ramifications of memes, as discussed above, there has been relatively little work within the sphere of political science itself, as discussed by Dean, who suggests that memes offer a new and significant element of political discourse.[111]

Additionally, a further sociological model has been useful to my research: social network theory. This framework, as defined by Kadushin and others, outlines the connections between individuals, groups, and broader networks, as well as discusses different kinds of networks based on size, relationships, rules, and complexity.[112] Although not directly tied to internet memes, this framework has been an asset in the development of my theoretical model as discussed in the sections regarding audience networks in Chapters 3 and 5.

2.1.4 Computer Science and Internet Studies

Due to the digital nature of memes, there has been much interest in the area of computer science. An analysis by Howley of the "I Have a Drone" meme, a politically charged meme of Barack Obama, parallels similar studies mentioned above that examine politicised memes. Howley further approaches this topic by analysing how individuals use digtial spaces in political discourse, drawing on computer science and internet studies

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[104] Stacey M. Lantagne, "Famous on the Internet: The Spectrum of Internet Memes and the Legal Challenge of Evolving Methods of Communication," *University of Richmond Law Review* 52, no. 2 (2018): 387–424.
[105] Ronak Patel, "First World Problems: A Fair Use Analysis of Internet Memes," *UCLA Entertainment Law Review* 20, no. 2 (2013): 235–56.
[106] Michael Soha and Zachary J. McDowell, "Monetizing a Meme: YouTube, Content ID, and the Harlem Shake," *Social Media and Society* 2, no. 1 (2016).
[107] Jessica A. Magaldi and Wade Davis, "Trolling Twitter: Defamation in an Online World," *Journal of Critical Incidents* 10 (2017): 106–8.
[108] Pamela Jo Brubaker et al., "One Does Not Simply Meme about Organizations: Exploring the Content Creation Strategies of User-Generated Memes on Imgur," *Public Relations Review* 44, no. 5 (2018): 741–51.
[109] Guolan Yang, "Using Funny Memes for Social Media Marketing: The Moderating Role of Bandwagon Cues," *Journal of Promotion Management* forthcomin (2022): 1–17.
[110] Sang Hoon Jung and Yong Jin Jeong, "Examining Stock Markets and Societal Mood Using Internet Memes," *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Finance* 32 (2021): 1–16.
[111] Jonathan Dean, "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics," *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255–66.
[112] Charles Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

frameworks.[113] A broader theme runs through the research of Coscia, who has produced several studies on meme popularity. His first paper in 2013 was an analysis of quickmeme.com, a meme generating site, interrogating how memes compete for attention and sharing among internet users, and what distinguishes popular memes from less popular ones. This question of popularity and competition is continued in Coscia's 2014 and 2018 works that further propose that originality and divergence are critical components to successful memes—that memes that are too similar to previous iterations falter in popularity, while memes with novel meanings or that expand established definitions rise to the top.[114] While not linguistically focused, this perspective on meaning construction and change has been an important influence on my research.

Another avenue of meme research among the computer science community involves the tracking of memes. As described in Chapter 4, tracing the spread of individual memes can be difficult if not impossible by conventional means. However, several research teams across the globe are attempting to establish computerised methods to track memes. The work of JafariAsbagh, et al., introduced using the clustering of textual memes (e.g., hashtags) in Twitter posts and proposed a system to better group and track these memes.[115] Similar work was continued by Zannettou, et al., who processed a massive amount of data from Twitter, Reddit, and two fringe online communities to gauge meme popularity and spread across the internet using hashing and clustering techniques. This team also established a list of the most popular memes on these sites for their research period (2016-2017), which was used as a source for the creation of my research's pool of popular memes (see Chapter 4).[116] These analytical frameworks were taken a step further by Dubey, et al. with their "MemeSequencer," a computer algorithm based on sparse matching and deep learning. This algorithm is able to parse large amounts of data, breaking down image macros into their constituent parts—including template, overlays, and text—and then situating individual

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[113] Kevin Howley, "'I Have a Drone': Internet Memes and the Politics of Culture," *Interactions* 7, no. 2 (2016): 155–75.

[114] Michele Coscia, "Competition and Success in the Meme Pool: A Case Study on Quickmeme.Com," *International Conference of Weblogs and Social Media*, 2013, 1–11; Michele Coscia, "Average Is Boring: How Similarity Kills a Meme's Success," *Scientific Reports* 4 (2014): 1–7; Michele Coscia, "Popularity Spikes Hurt Future Chances for Viral Propagation of Protomemes," *Communications of the ACM* 61, no. 1 (2018): 70–77.

[115] Mohsen JafariAsbagh et al., "Clustering Memes in Social Media Streams," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 4, no. 1 (2014): 1–13.

[116] Savvas Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities," *ACM Internet Measurement Conference 2018*, 2018, 1–23.

memes in relationship to other analysed memes.[117] A parallel approach was taken by Beskow, Kumar, and Carley with their "Meme-Hunter," a "a multi-modal deep learning model", which can also be used to identify and track memes online.[118] Such tools could dramatically improve the ability of researchers across disciplines to understand and explore meme meanings and usage in the future. However, these resources are still limited in their reach and different stages of iteration. Priyadarshini and Cotton contend that effectively interpreting memes is beyond the scope of current forms computerised intelligence, particularly in terms of comprehending facial emotions.[119]

A final computer science study of note is the work of Lin, Huang, and Hsu, who connect computing and linguistics. Their research recognises the difficulty of understanding memes for the unitiated, and that their meanings are both constructed and inferential. Lin, Huang, and Hsu propose a new method of explaining memes, which relies on semantics and pragmatics alongside crowdsourcing and internet literacy.[120] This is a welcome attempt to connect established linguistic theory with meme meanings, despite its computer science focus. Nevertheless, it was an important influence of my own research in two ways. Firstly, the examination of the difficulty in understanding unfamiliar memes influenced my later theoretical approach (see Section 5.2.2.6). Secondly, their approach to crowdsourcing the meaning of memes encouraged my own data collection efforts, which engaged with meme users in an effort to establish the baseline and iterated meaning of specific memes.

2.1.5 Semiotics and Linguistics

All of the above research has helped to further our undestanding of memes, but, with a few notable exceptions, these studies analyse the origin of memes, their rise and fall, their sudden spread, or their social effects. There have only been rare examinations of the form of memes and how this connects their meaning, and very few have deeply interrogated the semantic and pragmatic qualities of memes in the way a linguistic analysis would provide.

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[117] Abhimanyu Dubey et al., "MemeSequencer: Sparse Matching for Embedding Image Macros," in *WWW 2018: The 2018 Web Conference* (Lyon, 2018), 1–11.

[118] David M. Beskow, Sumeet Kumar, and Kathleen M. Carley, "The Evolution of Political Memes: Detecting and Characterizing Internet Memes with Multi-Modal Deep Learning," *Information Processing and Management* 57, no. 2 (2020): 1–13.

[119] Ishaani Priyadarshini and Chase Cotton, "AI Cannot Understand Memes: Experiments with OCR and Facial Emotions," *Computers, Materials and Continua* 70, no. 1 (2021): 781–800.

[120] Chi-chin Lin, Yi-ching Huang, and Jane Yung-jen Hsu, "Crowdsourced Explanations for Humorous Internet Memes Based on Linguistic Theories," in *Proceedings of the Second AAAI Conference on Human Computation and Crowdsourcing*, vol. HCOMP 2014, 2014, 143–50.

In order to examine memes with this focus on the connection between form and meaning, one must look to semiotics and linguistics, two intertwined fields that have done promising, although limited, research into memes.[121] Semiotics has begun to tackle the challenge of interpreting digital communications, such as the works of Niall, as well as O'Neill; both have provided semiotic frameworks for analysing symbols in the light of virality and digital culture. However, both of these works predate the majority of internet memes as we know them today.[122]

There have been some studies on topics adjacent to memes, such as the work by Gretchen McCulloch on emojis. These small images are used to punctuate and abbreviate digital text, often representing a human face (though they continue to become more sophisticated and varied in format). The primary purpose of emojis is to convey emotion, adding a layer of expression to make up for the limited form of textual communication. Memes can sometimes be used in such a way, as an emotional reaction or a tonal marker. However, image macro memes are not usually used purely to facilitate ordinary communication. While they may be used to punctuate a certain point in a conversation, image macros are instead a form of communication in their own right—as opposed to emojis, which accompany textual discourse without replacing it entirely.[123]

Nevertheless, there is an area of overlap. Although distinct from emojis in both form and usage, there is still a similar emotional component in memes. Just as emojis elicit emotion in the mind of a viewer through pictoral resemblence to the referenced object or emotion, memes also connect with viewers on an emotional, psychological level. Eric S. Jenkins has examined this emotional connection and has developed a subsequent framework for analysing the rhetorical structure of memes. He suggests that individual memes, and

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[121] Given the graphical nature of many memes, semiotics can here serve to bridge this topic to linguistics. While semiotics provides some insight into the symbolic nature of memes, it is linguistics that provides the other side of this coin, allowing for deeper analysis of the construction of meaning, the process of communication, and the textual components of memes. As such, works which synthesize both semiotics and linguistics are of great help in establishing my framework for analysing memes. A primary example of these are the studies in Paul Cobley, ed., *The Routldege Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[122] Lucy Niall, *Beyond Semiotics: Text, Culture, and Technology* (London: Continuum International, 2001); Shaleph O'Neill, *Interactive Media: The Semiotics of Embodied Interaction* (London: Springer, 2008).

[123] See Gretchen McCulloch, "Will We All Speak Emoji Language in a Couple Of Years?," Mental Floss, 2015, http://mentalfloss.com/uk/language/28365/will-we-all-speak-emoji-language-in-a-couple-of-years; Gretchen McCulloch, "A Linguist Explains Emoji and What Language Death Actually Looks Like," The Toast, 2016, http://the-toast.net/2016/06/29/a-linguist-explains-emoji-and-what-language-death-actually-looks-like/. In the period since my research began, McCulloch has continued her research into emojis and internet discourse more general. For more of her work, see Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (New York: Riverhead, 2019).

memes as a whole, serve as rhetorical modes for ongoing communication. Memes present ideas, emotions, and ideologies that form a cohesive whole beyond their independent context, instead drawing on larger shared context. In particular, Jenkins examines the *Fail/Win* meme, a style of image macro, which he proposes taps into greater themes beyond the content of the specific memes, such as oppression and hope.[124]

Ondřej Procházka has examined how people understand memes with the particular angle of literacy. Similarly to Jenkins, Procházka suggests that memes draw on larger context in order to create meaning. He describes the multimodal nature of memes and touches upon their potential to be rapidly shared and go viral. Furthermore, he proposes that memes present a new type of literacy, part of the emergent literacy of internet users in recognising the continously developing language of computer-mediated communication. To illustrate his points, Procházka examines the *Joseph Ducreux* meme, which largely relies on viewer knowledge to provide humor, as it parodies modern song lyrics.[125] His subsequent work on Facebook groups furthers also borrows from literary theory, analysing how the spatial and temporal situation of memes promotes digital identities from a chronotopic perspective.[126]

Anna Piata takes the topic in a different direction with her study of meme humor and metaphor. Similarly to many of the aforementioned communication articles, she examines politically charged memes and how they tie to other methods of political discourse. Piata connects memes to the concept of lingustic metaphor, the novel use of an existing form in a different context to elicit a specific meaning (see also the work of Huntington, above). This work is notable for addressing memes with an approach deeply anchored in established linguistic theory.[127] Metaphor is a significant force in language change, one which I suggest is also a primary component of meaning construction in memes—although on a more visual than textual level.

On the semiotic front, the work of Sara Cannizzaro tackles the difficulty in defining memes. Cannizzaro breaks down several of the competing definitions of memes, from both academia and the general public. She finds all of these definitions lacking—being either too

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[124] Eric S. Jenkins, "The Modes of Visual Rhetoric: Circulating Memes as Expressions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 4 (2014): 442–66.

[125] Ondřej Procházka, "Internet Memes - A New Literacy?," *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 6, no. 1 (2014): 53–74.

[126] Ondřej Procházka, "A Chronotopic Approach to Identity Performance in a Facebook Meme Page," *Discourse, Context and Media* 25 (2018): 78–87.

[127] Anna Piata, "When Metaphor Becomes a Joke: Metaphor Journeys from Political Ads to Internet Memes," *Journal of Pragmatics* 106 (December 2016): 39–56.

vague or too limited to be practical—as well as often being contradictory to one another. Cannizzaro instead proposes memes be viewed in terms of Peircian semotics, with the meme not as a discrete particle in the view of traditional memetics or communication studies, but instead as an interconnected system of signs. Individual memes are themselves a relational system which rely on translation (as opposed to the "remixing" of Meikle) of information rather than direct transmission.[128]

Lezandra Grundlingh also pushes memes forward in the semiotics field, equating memes with speech acts. She contends that image macros are internalised by both the meme creator and their audience of other internet users. Utilising iconic elements in the chosen meme, and then adding text, the creator builds and then disseminates a speech act that is interpreted by others who view the meme. Grundlingh further offers a limited classification scheme for image-based memes based on their format, as well as an additional scheme which classifies memes by function.[129]

Dancygier and Vandelanotte take these ideas a step further, this time from a linguistic perspective. Their work builds on previous discussions of the multimodal nature of memes, and adds an analysis of and their incorporation of frames and modes. The pair also touch on several important topics to this research, including: the call-and-response text format of image macros, iconicity, and drawing upon context. Furthermore, Dancygier and Vandelanotte propose that the form of image macros has a grammatical component, with the images serving as subjects for the associated textual phrases.[130]

The work of Zenner and Geeraerts is of particular interest, as they approach the category of image macro memes directly utilising linguistic theory. Drawing from prototype theory and construction grammer, they present a cognitive linguistic discussion of the format and interpretation of internet memes in a method which mirrors many aspects of my own approach.[131]

By building upon the established linguistic literature, these last two papers represent a continued and growing linguistic interest in memes, one which I have attempted to progress

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[128] Sara Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Culture," *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 562–86.

[129] L. Grundlingh, "Memes as Speech Acts," *Social Semiotics* 28, no. 2 (2018): 147–68.

[130] Barbara Dancygier and Lieven Vandelanotte, "Internet Memes as Multimodal Constructions," *Cognitive Linguistics* 28, no. 3 (2017): 565–98.

[131] Eline Zenner and Dirk Geeraerts, "One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions," in *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, 2018, 167–93.

in my own research, pulling aspects of linguistic theory to explain this emergent form of communication.

2.2 Wider Linguistic Theory

This second section of my discussion of literature shifts away from memes directly and engages with broader linguistic theory and established conventions of language and communication. I will cover both linguistic studies that involve digital communication in other capacities as well as more foundational elements of language. The final subsection will introduce several threads of linguistic theory that have been pivotal to the construction of my own linguistic models, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 3.

2.2.1 Linguistic Approaches to Digital Communication

A significant amount of linguistic research has already been done on various aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC), though this area continues to evolve and develop. However, most of this research has been on the textual aspects of online communication, often referred to as *netspeak*.[132] There is some overlap of netspeak with memes, as the textual half of image macros can sometimes include the shortenings, acronyms, and particular slang which netspeak is known for.[133] Memes can also be used alongside netspeak texts in order to punctuate or colour online conversations. Still, the two are distinct in both form and usage. Both netspeak and memes ultimately derive from the technical limits of online communication—including the lack of audible tone, gesture, etc. Netspeak is a derivation of existing language, with changes that are lexical and orthographic, driven by a need to communicate quickly and with limited characters (e.g., the common abbreviation of *lol* for *laugh out loud*). Memes are visual representations of abstract concepts or characterisations which are then paired with textual language to create a layered message. Netspeak is therefore essentially a coded message, one that can be deconstructed into ordinary speech with understanding of the rules and trends of the system (e.g., *u* meaning *you*, *ur* meaning *your*). Memes are altogether different, presenting an image with a complex

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[132] For a general introduction netspeak and the academic study of this phenomenon, see Jannis Androutsopoulos, "Introduction: Sociolinguistics and Computer-Mediated Communication," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 10, no. 4 (2006): 419–38.

[133] See Sali A. Tagliamonte, "So Sick or so Cool? The Language of Youth on the Internet," *Language in Society* 45, no. 1 (2016): 1–32.

associated meaning that has been constructed by users *en masse*, relying on the sociocultural knowledge and expectations of both the producer and the receiver. Netspeak is also used to communicate generally, to provide facts and opinions. Memes can also relate such facts and opinions, but are normally used to demonstrate certain emotional reactions or to present a specific conceptualisation, typically in a humorous manner.[134] The meme is used for a narrower range of set meanings, rather than as a generalised means of communication. Nevertheless, wider linguistic research into CMC provides important insights that can be useful to the study of memes. A further focus of linguistic research has been on the social dimension of digital communication and the use of specific language by online communities. The work of Wach focuses on online forums, particularly those with an emphasis on video games. This intersects elements of digital culture and gaming culture with sociolinguistics, examining the social dynamics of this forum environment.[135]

2.2.2 Linguistic Approaches to Non-Digital Communication

As memes can rapidly change their forms and meanings—and themselves present a change in language as a whole—established theories on language change will be referenced, such as the work of Aitchison and McMahon. Such concepts include semantic narrowing and broadening, polysemy, and reduction.[136] Of particular interest is the emergence of contronymy, the character of word that maintains both a primary meaning and its opposite.[137] Memes derive meaning from both their forms as well as their context, drawing not only on (relatively) standard structures and images, but also on shared cultural expectations. As such, inspiration was also drawn from existing theories of semantics and pragmatics, such as the works of Cruse, Leech, and Levinson.[138] Another crucial foundational aspect of language is conventionalisation, the process by which new words, phrases, symbols, or other

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[134] See Lauren Squires, "Enregistering Internet Language," *Language in Society* 39, no. 4 (2010): 457–92.
[135] Szymon Wach, "Language Practices on Internet Game Fora," *Styles of Communication* 6, no. 1 (2014): 191–204.
[136] Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); April M.S. McMahon, *Understanding Language Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[137] Elizabeth Jackson, "Words of Many Meanings: Public Perception of Contranyms," *Schwa: Language and Lingusitics*, no. 18 (2018): 1–11.
[138] D. Alan Cruse, *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); D. Alan Cruse, *Lexical Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Geoffrey Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* (London: Longman, 1995); Stephen Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

communicative devices become standardised and normalised.[139] This process is of particular importance to my model of meme evolution, as memes must undergo a process of conventionalisation as they spread amongst a community. The second stage of my Life Cycle model is named after this process (see Chapter 7).

2.2.3 Primary Linguistic Approaches Adapted to Study Memes

Although all of the aforementioned research has aided me in developing my theoretical framework, the following works in particular have informed the different characteristics of said framework. Chapter 3 will elaborate on each of these concepts in turn and further explain how they influenced my theoretical approach, but first I will introduce these works and situate them in the wider literature. My linguistic analysis of memes has been two-pronged, including elements of both sociolinguistics and cognitive linguistics.

The social dimension has been greatly influenced by the community of practice (CofP) approach to sociolinguistics. This model was developed by Lave and Wenger in the education field, analysing groups of people not based on personal identity, but on a shared enterprise—a common activity, goal, or interest.[140] This approach was subsequently adapted by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet for use in linguistic contexts. The overall principle is the same, organising social networks based on shared activity rather than demographic criteria or other language-based characteristics.[141] CofP has become a prominent sociolinguistic approach used by many authors and allows for a different perspective and type of analysis than traditional speech community models, with greater focus on characteristics such as gender, identity, and more.[142] The work of Bucholtz, for example, examines the sociolinguistic elements of a group of "nerd girls," allowing for a deeper level of analysis.[143] CofP has proved to be an effective approach for analysing irregular communities, which led

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[139] Elke Teich et al., "Less Is More/More Diverse: On The Communicative Utility of Linguistic Conventionalization," *Frontiers in Communication* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1–17.

[140] Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Particpation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[141] Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Communities of Practice: Where Language, Gender, and Power All Live," in *Language and Gender: A Reader*, ed. Jennifer Coates (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 484–94; Penelope Eckert, *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[142] Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, "The Community of Practice: Theories and Methodologies in Language and Gender," *Language in Society* 28, no. 2 (1999): 173–83; Bethan Davies, "Communities of Practice: Legitimacy Not Choice," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 9, no. 4 (2005): 557–82.

[143] Mary Bucholtz, "'Why Be Normal?': Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls," *Language in Society* 28 (2017): 203–23.

me to adopt elements of this model into my own discussion of online communities, which regularly cross geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

The cognitive side of my analysis incorporates several themes including relevance, iconicity, cumulative cultural evolution, and metaphor. The meaning construction of memes is multi-faceted and multimodal, and as such I have drawn on cognitive theories of meaning found within the works of Jackendoff, as well as the idea of conceptual blending, as discussed by Fauconnier and Turner.[144] Gricean theory has also helped to ground my analysis, particulary the *maxim of relation*, the expectation that communication should be relevant to the ongoing discourse.[145] This was further supported by the work of Sperber and Wilson regarding relevance theory, which was highly applicable to the memes.[146] Of particular assistance to my theoretical analysis was the work of Scott-Phillips concerning ostension and inference. His discussion of this model of communication was a major inspiration for my work and will be discussed more in Section 3.1.3.[147]

Furthermore, I suggest that the visual half of image macros makes use of iconic elements, specifically indirect iconicity, as outlined by Rudi Keller in *A Theory of Linguistic Signs*. Memes can also be seen as conforming to Keller's definitions of signs: that signs are defined not by the intention of the producer, but by the inference of the receiver. Signs do not "stand for" something, and retain meaning even when not in use. Meaning is therefore not embedded within the sign, but constructed by the one interpreting it. This interpretation is also the key division between Keller's three types of signs: symptoms, icons, and symbols. The division between these three types is fluid, and the categories themselves not mutually exclusive.[148] The iconic nature of memes is at odds with traditional theories about arbitrariness,[149] though further works about iconic efficacy and change have proven insightful. The work of Roberts, Lewandowski, and Galantucci on iconicity and

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[144] See Ray Jackendoff, *A User's Guide to Though and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Perseus, 2003); William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[145] Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 1st Paperb (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1991), 28.

[146] See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[147] Thomas Scott-Phillips, Speaking Our Minds: Why Human Communication Is Different, and How Language Evolved to Make It Special (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [Add others]

[148] Rudi Keller, *A Theory of Linguistic Signs*, ed. Kimberley Duenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For more on iconicity, see Masoud Yazdani and Philip Barker, eds., *Iconic Communication* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2001).

[149] For more on arbitrariness, see David Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, Systems, and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

combinatorality examines the limits of iconicity and how it can change as communicative systems develop over time.[150] The work of Dingemanse, et al., provides further analysis of how iconicity interacts with arbitrariness and the distinction between form and meaning.[151] Together, these studies helped me to reconcile the iconic and arbitrary elements of image macros.

Building on this basis of iconicity and language change, my research examined memes within the context of symbol systems and cumulative cultural evolution (CCE). I contest that memes behave in a similar manner to many historical symbol systems that have undergone CCE.[152] The works of Caldwell and Millen—along with Kirby, Cornish, and Smith—demonstrate how CCE contributes to the change in the form of symbols and their role within symbol systems. Symbols, which are introduced with one form—often iconic in nature—can gradually change in form and become less iconic over time.[153] Several prominent studies of this evolution of symbols are the works of Garrod and Fay (and their respective research teams), which demonstrated in experimental settings how symbols become more arbitrary over time. Although symbols produced in these studies began with higher levels of iconicity, this tie to the referent diminished over time and repetition in order to be easier to produce, and due to shared history and understanding.[154] A thorough discussion of Garrod and Fay's experiments, their results, and their relation to memes can be found in Section 3.1.3. A further aspect of language change and CCE is grammaticalisation, the process in which an element of language experiences a loss of semantic power, instead becoming a functional (grammatical) element. This is often accompanied by phonetic or

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[150] Gareth Roberts, Jirka Lewandowski, and Bruno Galantucci, "How Communication Changes When We Cannot Mime the World: Experimental Evidence for the Effect of Iconicity on Combinatoriality," *Cognition* 141 (2015): 52–66.

[151] Mark Dingemanse et al., "Arbitrariness, Iconicity, and Systematicity in Language," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19, no. 10 (2015): 603–15.

[152] For more on symbol systems, see Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); John Mountford, "A Functional Classification," in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 627–32; Florian Coulmas, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Peter T. Daniels, "The Study of Writing Systems," in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–18.

[153] Christine A. Caldwell and Ailsa E. Millen, "Experimental Models for Testing Hypotheses about Cumulative Cultural Evolution," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 29 (2008): 165–71; Simon Kirby, Hannah Cornish, and Kenny Smith, "Cumulative Cultural Evolution in the Laboratory: An Experimental Approach to the Origins of Structure in Human Language," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 105, no. 31 (2008): 10681–86.

[154] Simon Garrod et al., "Foundations of Representation: Where Might Graphical Symbol Systems Come From?," *Cognitive Sciences* 31 (2007): 961–87; Nicolas Fay et al., "The Interactive Evolution of Human Communication Systems," *Cognitive Sciences* 34 (2010): 351–86. See also Roberts, Lewandowski, and Galantucci, "How Communication Changes When We Cannot Mime the World: Experimental Evidence for the Effect of Iconicity on Combinatoriality."

morphological reduction as the word or phrase undergoes iteration as part of CCE. I believe that memes can undergo a similar process of reduction and functionalisation, and the works of Smith and Hoefler have provided a number of insights into grammaticalisation.[155]

Lastly, my analysis of meme structure also draws heavily on the concept of linguistic metaphor. As mentioned above, metaphor is a significant linguistic process, one which I contend (along with Dynel, Huntington, and Piata) is a critical cognitive component of meaning construction for internet memes. Therefore, I have looked to a variety of works on linguistic metaphor, primarily the works of Kövecses, as well as Lakoff and Johnson. Kövecses provides an overview of metaphor and its abilities to innovate and communicate new ideas with familiar linguistic elements.[156] Lakoff and Johnson offer further support to this discussion, as well as introducing conceptual metaphors—conventionalised metaphorical assocations that extend beyond single phrases, instead relating entire concepts to one another.[157] Additonally, Lakoff's work in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (as referenced in Chapter 1) takes this discussion a step further, examining how metaphors can be crucial to creating overarching cognitive categories and how metaphorical usage can result in radial categories and divergening networks of meaning.[158] Taken together, these analyses of metaphor greatly informed my subsequent theoretical work, forming the core of my proposed lingustic model for understanding internet memes. This link between Lakoff and Johnson's work with metaphor and memes has also been drawn by Šekrst in their analysis of the alien language of "Darmok," as discussed in Chapter 1.[159]

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[155] Andrew D. M. Smith and Stefan Hoefler, "From Metaphor to Symbols and Grammar: The Cumulative Cultural Evolution of Language," in *Human Origins: Contributions from Social Anthropology*, ed. Camilla Power, Morna Finnegan, and Hilary Callan (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 153–79; Andrew D. M. Smith, "Grammaticalization and Language Evolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization*, ed. Heiko Narrog and Bernd Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 142–52.

[156] Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Structure of Concepts* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986); Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Zoltán Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); See also Richard Trim, *Metaphor and the Historical Evolution of Conceptual Mapping* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[157] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

[158] Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*.

[159] Šekrst, "Darmok and Jalad on the Internet: The Importance of Metaphors in Natural Languages and Natural Language Processing."

2.3 Conclusion

Although a comparatively small amount of research has been done about the inner workings of memes, academic investigation of the overall subject of internet memes continues to grow, both within linguistics and without. The discussion of my own theoretical framework, which will begin in the next chapter, seeks to bridge the existing literature about internet memes with established linguistic principles. By pairing these two strands of research and resources together, I hope to create a piece of work that situates linguistic analysis of memes within the wider academic community.

Chapter 3: Towards a New Theoretical Framework

This chapter will provide an explanation of my preliminary theoretical considerations based on my review of the literature in the previous chapter. Having consulted this range of studies as part of my early research, I endeavoured to operationalise and synthesise the theories and perspectives I had encountered. As mentioned above, the relative scarcity of linguistic treatments on the subject of memes made the search for a definitive categorisation ineffective. Therefore, I turned to other disciplines for definitions that I could emulate. However, among the fields of communications, media studies, sociology, and beyond, there was little consensus of how precisely memes should be defined. As such, I approached the problem from a different angle—I consulted broader linguistic approaches of non-literal communication, meaning construction, and symbolism that provided parallels to the behaviour of memes. These theories, reinterpreted to the new context of internet memes, allowed me to build a new definition—or more properly, *definitions*—with a primarily linguistic basis. I was aware that such an initial definition or definitions based on my readings and observations would be tentative, but this working prototype definition, one that could be iterated on and improved based on subsequent analysis, provided a place to start. I therefore created a pair of definitions to describe the different behaviours of memes: *Structural Memes*, which rely on the combination of text and image to convey a given message, and *Conceptual Memes*, which exist as a shared point of reference among a community, an allusion to a commonly held experience or motif which can be recalled with limited context. These two definitions will be discussed more below. With these preliminary definitions established, I was able to craft my methods of data collection to specifically grapple with the details (and flaws) of these interpretations. To this end, I generated a preliminary theoretical framework in support of these definitions that will be discussed in the rest of this chapter. Firstly, I will provide a more in-depth examination of the literature utilised to form this framework. Then, I will provide an overview of this initial theoretical model, including my preliminary work on defining memes and the research questions I crafted to guide my data collection.

3.1 Theoretical Influences

I hypothesise that memes begin as structural units that, through conventionalisation over time, transform into conceptual units that surpass their original structures as they erode.

These conclusions were drawn after a broad examination of literature, which included examinations of memes from a variety of fields, primarily memetics, the social sciences (especially communications), and of course linguistics, which provided the overarching backbone of the model.

3.1.1 Memetics

The first influence was memetics itself—the origin of the word meme, as coined by Richard Dawkins, to discuss a singular unit of cultural transmission that is imitated and passed from person to person.[160] The term was co-opted by internet users to describe this novel form of communicative unit, and although much of the original meaning of 'meme' has been removed or reinterpreted, several of Dawkins' fundaments are still integral to how internet memes function. In particular, Dawkins posits three aspects of memes to describe their success: fidelity, the extent to which the idea of the meme is maintained across imitations; fecundity, the quick and constant creation of new imitations of a meme; and longevity, the continued replication of a meme over longer spans of time.[161] While internet memes operate under different conditions than Dawkins' original conceit, these three characteristics are still of great utility in describing their evolution. Furthermore, proponents of memetics, including Dawkins himself, have iterated on the concept of the "meme," largely shifting from the comparison of genetics to virology. Dawkins' original parallel was between memes and genes, transmitted vertically through a population over the course of generations. However, Dawkins' subsequent writings along with those of Sperber, Blackmore, and others instead compare memes to a virus, which spread horizontally among a population (or populations) in a relatively short amount of time. Additionally, later definitions of meme have added more emphasis on not just the ability of memes to change—"mutating" like a virus—but that successful memes are highly likely to do so.[162] The comparison of digital media with epidemiology is far from limited to memetics, as with the discussions of spreadable media in the previous chapter, with concepts being described as "viral."[163] The key component here is the description of information spreading, often in branching, varied

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[160] See Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 189-201; Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*.
[161] Procházka, "Internet Memes - A New Literacy?," 55.
[162] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme."
[163] See, for example, Guadagno et al., "What Makes a Video Go Viral? An Analysis of Emotional Contagion and Internet Memes."

forms, across groups and communities in a similar fashion to a virus. This epidemiological terminology has been helpful in describing how internet memes and shared between individuals, groups, and networks, distinguishing between *endemic*, *epidemic*, and *pandemic* spread.[164]

3.1.2 Social Sciences

The second branch of literature that informed my model included communications and media studies, sociology, and computing and internet studies. Primary authors among this group include Davison, Shifman, and Meikle. Davison's work helped to bridge the terminology and theory behind Dawkins' meme and the internet meme currently in use. He offers a definition of an internet meme as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission"[165]—a broad definition, but a springboard for further refinement. Shifman, one of the foremost authors in the field of internet memes, further shifts Dawkins' memetics into the internet sphere. Her approach to the fundamentals of memes is to analyse three specific aspects: *content*, the central idea or message of the meme; *form*, the perceivable, "physical" meme; and *stance*, the connection between the meme creator and the meme itself, which can be mimicked or altered by subsequent meme users.[166] This tripartite structure incorporates aspects of both meme form and function, though the focus is largely towards the form and initial creation, rather than the subsequent evolution of a given meme. Meikle takes a different approach to defining memes, instead focusing on this idea of memetic mutation and the relational structures between users rather than the form of the meme itself. He defines memes as "shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted but also adapted by others."[167] This highlights the role of memes in communication though does not delve as deeply into the mechanical process of how memes create meaning. Nevertheless, his approach was critical to my research (see Section 3.2.1 below).

An additional difficulty with analysing memes is their social component. My primary approach relies on the community of practice (CofP) model, discussed below. However, to

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[164] See Lin Wang and Brendan C. Wood, "An Epidemiological Approach to Model the Viral Propagation of Memes," *Applied Mathematical Modelling,* 35, no. 11 (2011): 5442–47; da Rocha et al., "A Neurobiologically Inspired Model of Social Cognition: Memes Spreading in the Internet."

[165] Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," 122.

[166] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

[167] Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, 55.

aid my approach of defining communities and audiences, particularly social media platforms and their larger, more nebulous online communities that regularly use memes, I have looked to social network theory. This sociological model views communities as series of associative links between nodes that form a network of relationships between these nodes. The nodes themselves can consist of individuals as well as groups or institutions, and relate to one another on varying scales, with nodes of the same type having connections as well as between nodes of different scales. In particular, social network theory is useful for recognising that networks can exist within other networks and within specific nodes, in the case of nodes made up of multiple actors.[168] Kadushin defines three types of social networks: "ego-centric," which are built around a single, central node; "socio-centric," which lack a central node but consist of a closed series of relationships; and "open-system," which have neither a central node nor set relational boundaries.[169] These definitions have been beneficial to my research into memes as the fluid nature of online communities can be difficult to quantify.[170]

3.1.3 Linguistics

Beyond social sciences, linguistics served as the basis for most of the theoretical framework I have operated under, with several interconnected themes. As mentioned above, my first theme of communities and networks, ties back to the previous discussion of sociology. Traditionally, linguistics has focused on "speech communities," groups who are linked by sharing a common language or dialect. However, there are numerous limitations to this approach, and it often overlooks notable details within a given community, such as divergences between gender, age, or other social characteristics. This has led to several other sociolinguistic approaches, such as the aforementioned community of practice.[171] CofP—adapted by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet to use in linguistics—looks at social connections between individuals, specifically groups that are united by a common goal or activity, in lieu

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[168] See Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*. See also Emmanuel Lazega and Tom A.B. Snijders, eds., *Multilevel Network Analysis for the Social Sciences: Theory, Methods and Applications* (Cham: Springer, 2016). and Lilla Vicsek, Gábor Király, and Hanna Kónya, "Networks in the Social Sciences: Comparing Actor-Network Theory and Social Network Analysis," *Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 77–102. for further discussion of social network theory in wider discourse of sociological frameworks.

[169] Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*, 17.

[170] For example, see Tabitha Hart, "Understanding Communicative Conduct in an Online Community," *SAGE Research Methods Cases* 1 (2014): 1–14.

[171] Ben Rampton, "Speech Community and Beyond," in *The New Sociolinguistics Reader*, ed. Nikolas Coupland and Adam Jaworski (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 694–701.

of static language barriers. In this case, the shared activity acts as the focus of the community and provides a space to talk about linguistic variation, specialised terminology, hierarchy, group identity, and more.[172] This approach is useful in discussions of fluid, diverse groups that are otherwise difficult to define, as is the case with many online communities.[173] By viewing meme users as a CofP with the use of memes themselves as a shared focal point, and subsequent smaller groups as their own CofPs nested within this broader network, I am better able to focus on the sociolinguistic themes of variation and stratification at play.

My second linguistic theme was cognition, drawing upon relevance theory and ostensive-inferential communication, particularly the works of Sperber and Wilson alongside Scott-Phillips. Relevance is an important theme for my research as interpreting visual cues play a predominant role in meaning construction for memes early in their development, and as these elements become less discrete, the communication is done largely through ostension and inference. This communicative model relies on cooperation and shared context between the communicator and the receiver, in which the communicator makes a distinct but arbitrary sign—a vocalisation, gesture, or even eye movement—with the purpose of projecting a specific mental state towards the recipient. This deliberate, intentional act of ostension is then matched by the inference of the receiver, who, based on shared context, attempts to mirror the mental state projected by the communicator.[174] This form of communication extends beyond ritualisation, as the signs are typically arbitrary, and beyond association, as there is deliberate intent to communicate not just information but a specific abstraction or mental construction within a set context. This reliance on common ground, context, and understanding of mental states is what Scott-Phillips refers to as "mindreading," with both the communicator and the receiver attempting to conceptualise both their own knowledge and experiences along with those of their partner, and then trying to align them.[175] I contend that memes are understood via a similar process, as they are distinct signs meant to project a specific mental construct and are intentionally communicative units that draw on shared context. Crucially, this makes them a notable example of human communication that relies on these systems, as ostension

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[172] Holmes and Meyerhoff, "The Community of Practice: Theories and Methodologies in Language and Gender"; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "Communities of Practice: Where Language, Gender, and Power All Live"; Eckert, *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*; Davies, "Communities of Practice: Legitimacy Not Choice."

[173] Bucholtz, "'Why Be Normal?': Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls."

[174] Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 46–54, 174–75.

[175] Scott-Phillips, *Speaking Our Minds: Why Human Communication Is Different, and How Language Evolved to Make It Special*, 63–75.

and inference are theorised to be exclusively human facets of communication, separating them from the communicative acts of other animals.[176]

Due to the visual core of image macro memes, iconicity was a major aspect of my analysis and my third linguistic theme. I primarily drew on the works of Keller, along with studies by Roberts, Dingemanse, and Garrod and Fay. Keller's work was crucial to my research in providing the framing structure of iconicity and the proper language to describe this process of meaning construction and transmission. Icons—a sign with a physical form that emulates what it refers to—are an intuitive and widely used form of sign. However, as Keller points out, such imitations are inherently limited; an icon is never a perfect representation of its referent, with variance in *strength* and *directness*. For example, Keller cites the stylised representation of *man* and *woman* used to denote their respective bathrooms. These signs are iconic in that they have an understood association between their own form and the physical form of the thing they represent: the sexes. However, this graphical connection is relatively *weak* (in Keller's terminology), relying on only a basic similarity in anatomical form, supplemented by the cultural conventions of gendered clothing. Significantly, these icons are also *indirect* in their reference, as, while the signs themselves signify toilets, the icon is not an imitation of a toilet, but rather the associated gender. It is this indirect association that is key to my analysis of memes, as most memes draw on visual cues that serve as abstractions for concepts which cannot normally be represented graphically, such as emotions. Rather than portraying icons of the emotion itself, the memes rely on indirectly iconic elements such as facial expressions or shared cultural concepts, such as the association of clothing with gender above.[177] Roberts, et al., and Dingemanse, et al., each discuss the efficacy of icons as communicative units, both their benefits—the intuitiveness and ease of understanding—and their disadvantages—inflexibility and inefficiency of production. While icons were historically favoured in many languages, much of this iconicity has been stripped away during conventionalisation (see Figure 3.1). These processes reduce the need for symbols to be easily intuited and arbitrary symbols are usually simpler and faster to produce, both of which reduce the necessity of using icons.[178]

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[176] See Thomas Scott-Phillips, "The Evolution of Communication: Humans May Be Exceptional," *Interaction Studies* 11, no. 1 (2010): 78–99; Thomas Scott-Phillips, "Nonhuman Primate Communication, Pragmatics, and the Origins of Language," *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 1 (2015): 56–80.

[177] Keller, *A Theory of Linguistic Signs*, 108–10.

[178] See Roberts, Lewandowski, and Galantucci, "How Communication Changes When We Cannot Mime the World: Experimental Evidence for the Effect of Iconicity on Combinatoriality"; Dingemanse et al., "Arbitrariness, Iconicity, and Systematicity in Language."

Figure 3.1 The evolution of a Chinese character for "gate" over time. Note the simplification and overall loss of iconicity

This further leads into the works of Garrod and Fay, in particular a pair of studies in 2007 and 2010, which analysed social factors on the development of symbols and symbol systems. Garrod and Fay both tested groups of people who played experimental games involving drawing pictures of common words or phrases.[179] The participants would take turns drawing images based on the prompts, repeated over multiple rounds, in a number of different situations: a person drawing alone without feedback, in pairs, and in larger rotating groups. The crucial factor that these two studies isolated was the importance of feedback. In situations where the participant would work alone, their drawings would become more complex in an effort to increase the iconicity of the symbol and therefore increase comprehension (see Figure 3.2). Yet in pairs and groups that allowed for feedback between rounds, the drawings underwent the opposite process— they became simpler. With each subsequent round, the drawings became more streamlined, both faster to produce and faster to recognise for the partner (see Figure 3.3). These streamlined symbols sometimes retained a level of iconicity. The simple arc for 'computer monitor' in Figure 3.4 can be clearly identified as a simplification of the desktop computer column, but only with the benefit of seeing the intervening stages. Without knowing where the symbol originated, there is hardly any iconicity at all. What remains is direct but very weak. The drawings for 'cartoon' in Figure 3.5 are less directly iconic, with the sketch depicting Bugs Bunny, a famous cartoon character. However, this iconicity becomes less pronounced and more indirect with each successive round. Some of the symbols lost their iconicity completely, as with the symbol developed by one pair for 'Clint Eastwood' (Figure 3.6). After initial attempts to draw the actor, the pair instead chose to play off the actor's name, drawing a directional arrow ("east") and a tree ("wood"). This abstraction was then simplified in subsequent rounds until only a right-pointing arrow, a completely arbitrary symbol, remained.[180]

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[179] A number of authors contributed to both papers. However, Fay was the second author of Garrod's 2007 study, while Garrod was the second author of Fay's in 2010, as cited in the following footnote. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will collectively refer to this research as "Garrod and Fay."

[180] Garrod et al., "Foundations of Representation: Where Might Graphical Symbol Systems Come From?"; Fay et al., "The Interactive Evolution of Human Communication Systems." Figures 3.1-3.5 are drawn from these two works.
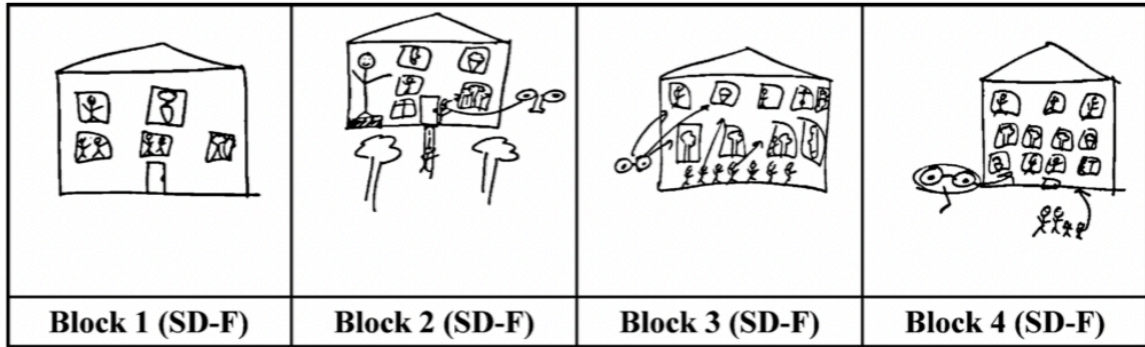
Figure 3.2: Four rounds of drawings for "art gallery" in the 2007 study, done by a single participant without feedback. Note the limited change in form and the gradual addition of detail.
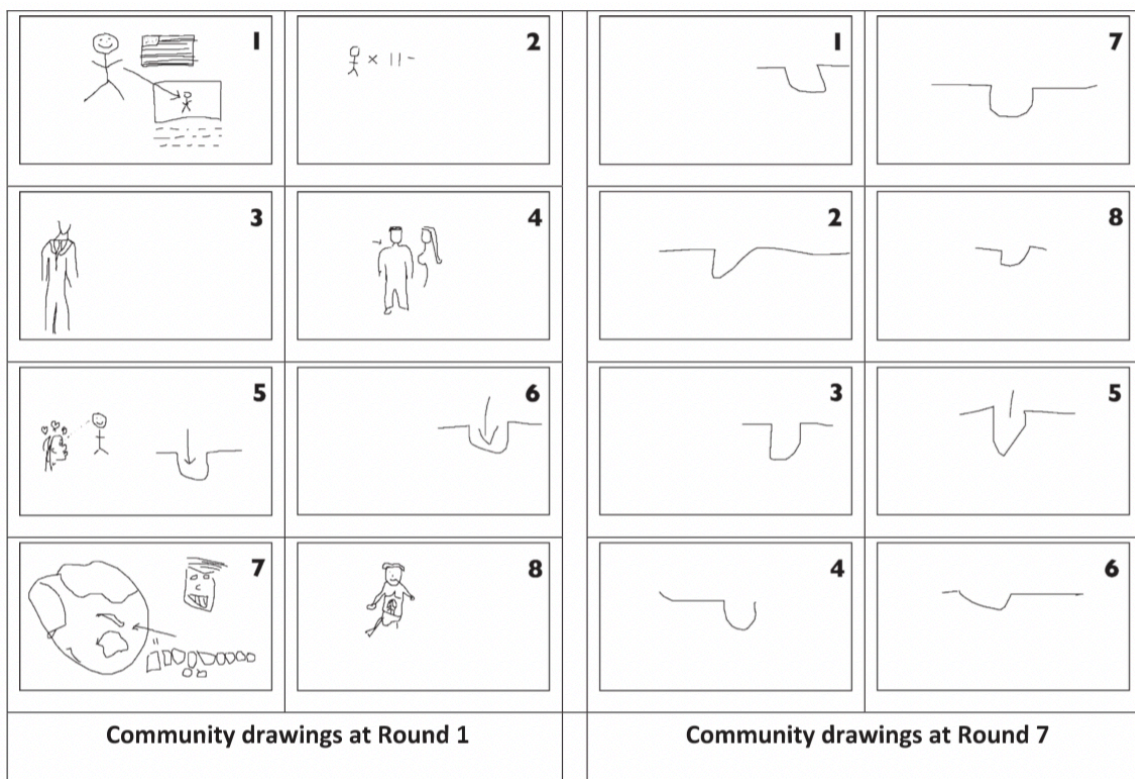
Figure 3.3: A series of drawings for "Brad Pitt" from a communal group of eight participants in the 2010 study. The first and second columns were drawn at the first round, while the third and fourth columns were drawn at the seventh. The drawings were done in pairs, with the partners changing between each round. Note the similarity of the drawing across all eight individuals after several rounds of feedback, as well as the arbitrary form of this emergent symbol.
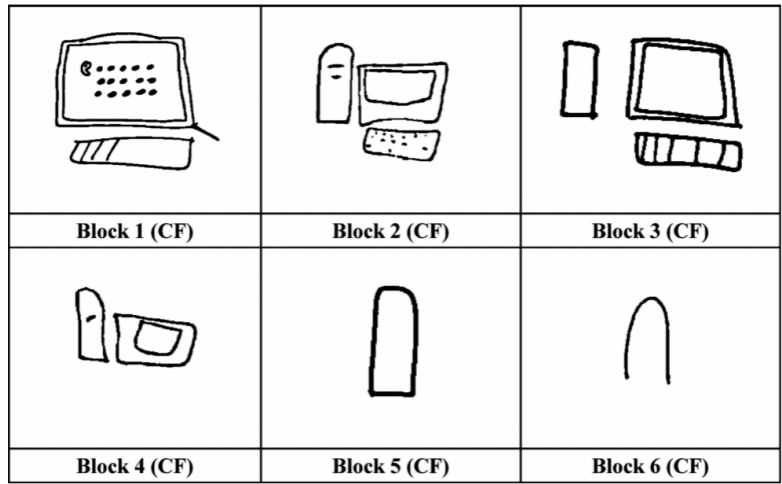
Figure 3.4: Six rounds of drawings for "computer monitor" among a pair in the 2007 study.
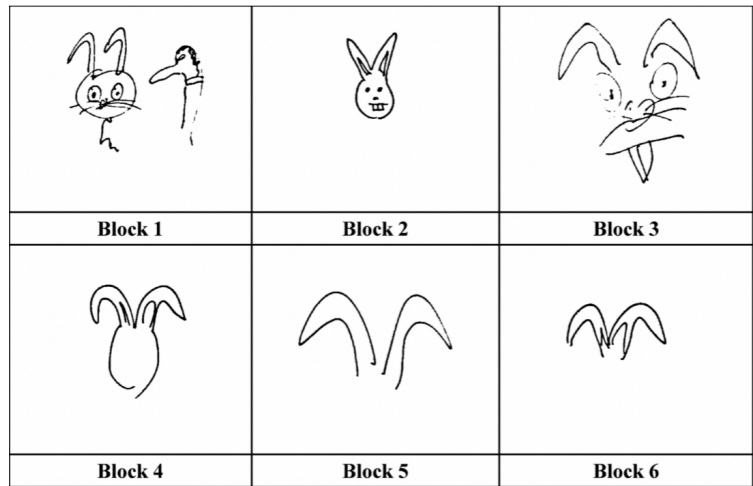
Figure 3.5: Six rounds of drawings for "cartoon" among a pair in the 2007 study.
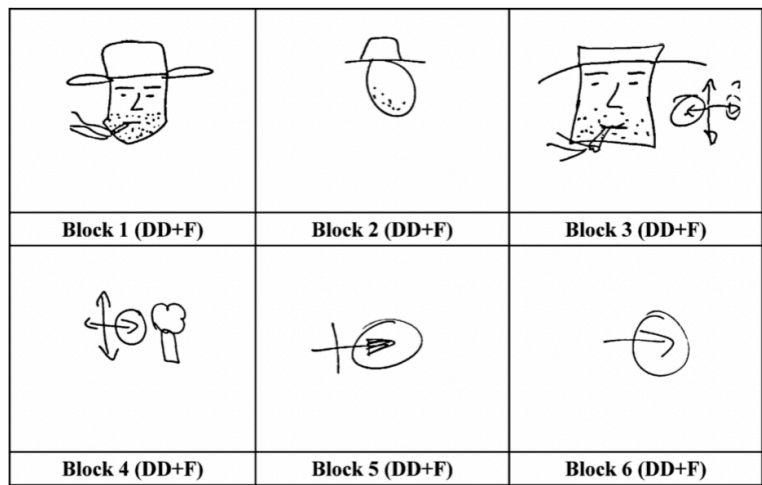
Figure 3.6: Six rounds of drawings for "Clint Eastwood" among a pair in the 2007 study.

The results of the Garrod and Fay studies are highly relevant to memes, which are rapidly shaped and reshaped through constant feedback from large groups. However, I suggest that the process of meaning and form change is fundamentally different for memes than the pictographs of these two studies—and of symbols in general. In situations with feedback, Garrod and Fay found that the symbols would readily become more consistent and then more simplified as time went on. With the establishment of common ground, the iconic signs could become more arbitrary; the direct link in form was not necessary to maintain comprehension. Furthermore, the iconic drawings took more time and effort to create (e.g., drawing a distinctive person's face) than the later arbitrary symbols (e.g., drawing an arrow). This experimental format can be applied to symbol changes in general, and it aligns with the development of symbol systems throughout history. Yet, there is a second crucial aspect of this process beyond feedback: consistency of meaning. In the case of Garrod and Fay, the participants were drawing pictures of items from a set list. Over repeated rounds and games, the forms changed but the meaning could not. Having a constant meaning allowed for the easier establishment of common ground and facilitated the change in form. Since the target referent never changed, it was easier for the participants to track the change in form.

Memes, on the other hand, undergo a largely opposite process. Given the ambiguous meaning of meme images to start with, there is not a constant referent for communicators to fall back on. While feedback can be readily supplied, the overall communication is less clear. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the forms of memes do not have to change. Given their digital nature and the ability to 'copy and paste' (or more typically, use an online generator that supplies the images), there is a drastic reduction of pressure for speed and ease in production of a given form. Garrod and Fay's participants had limited time and effort to create their drawings, necessitating the simplification of form over time. Meme creators are able to readily replicate exact copies of their graphics with only a click or a tap. This leads to an initial tendency to retain a higher level of visual fidelity—and thus the possibility of sustained iconicity—than the drawings from Garrod and Fay's studies.

However, while memes are able to retain higher levels of iconicity, this is not always the case. While meme templates can remain fairly consistent across iterations, their forms can also be edited, sometimes drastically. The graphical core of memes can be obscured by added visual elements, combined with other meme formats, or be recreated entirely using different base images, as discussed in the Chapter 1 (see Figures 1.2 to 1.7). Such graphical changes are no longer strictly necessary due to pressures of efficacy and ease, yet memes appear to

undergo a parallel process of visual erosion nonetheless. This is particularly the case for memes further along in their development, with gradual changes accumulating across iterations. Once meaning has become more conventionalised, the form of the meme can begin to change more freely, thus bringing meme in line with the shift away from iconicity as illustrated by Garrod and Fay. Thus, while there is less drive for efficiency of production, there is a comparable drive for innovation and creativity which yields analogous results Further discussion of this visual continuity—or lack thereof—can be found in my analysis chapters (see Section 5.2.2.4).

To this end, my next linguistic theme centres on cumulative cultural evolution (CCE) and grammaticalisation, drawn from the works of Kirby et al., Caldwell et al, and Smith and Hoefler. Language itself is the product of CCE by generations of transmission between speakers and continues to grow and change through this iterative process.[181] A particularly linguistic aspect of CCE is grammaticalisation, the process by which semantic signs are converted into functional units that represent aspects of grammar. Such semantic shifts are often accompanied by phonetic or orthographic erosion; for example, the phrase 'going to [location]' has shifted to 'gonna [verb]' and exchanged its connotation of motion for an ad hoc tense marker representing a future activity.[182] Grammaticalisation and CCE also link with other linguistics processes, such as iconicity, as themes of iteration and change can be seen in the works of Garrod and Fay above. CCE and grammaticalisation provide further structure for my discussion of memes, particularly their iterative nature, as memes undergo rapid replication and revision as they are shared by users across the internet.

My last linguistic theme was metaphor. Metaphor has a number of definitions, though I have specifically drawn on the work of Kövecses and Lakoff, as well as Huntington and Piata, who each have adapted the metaphorical framework for discussing memes. Linguistic metaphor, as defined by Kövecses, involves the use of an existing sign to represent something novel. In other words, it is using a familiar form to describe something unfamiliar, utilising a degree of semantic overlap.[183] Much like ostension, metaphor is a crucial process in the

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[181] See Kirby, Cornish, and Smith, "Cumulative Cultural Evolution in the Laboratory: An Experimental Approach to the Origins of Structure in Human Language"; Caldwell and Millen, "Experimental Models for Testing Hypotheses about Cumulative Cultural Evolution."

[182] See Stefan Hoefler and Andrew D. M. Smith, "The Pre-Linguistic Basis of Grammaticalisation: A Unified Approach to Metaphor and Reanalysis," *Studies in Language* 33, no. 4 (2009): 886–909; see also Smith, "Grammaticalization and Language Evolution"; Smith and Hoefler, "From Metaphor to Symbols and Grammar: The Cumulative Cultural Evolution of Language."

[183] See Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*; Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*..

formation and innovation of language, as it allows for established forms to take on new meanings, leading to nuance, semantic broadening, and more. Such metaphorical processes can also become conventionalised over time, with overarching metaphors becoming embedded into a language, either conceptually or categorically. Lakoff (along with Johnson) examines a number of conceptual metaphors that have become entrenched in English, such as TIME IS MONEY, in which temporal matters are referenced using the familiar terminology of finance, such as SAVING and SPENDING. In other works, Lakoff takes this process a step further, examining how metaphorical connections can influence the construction of categories within language, including linguistic genders and grammar.[184] In their articles, Huntington and Piata each draw connections between metaphor and internet memes. Huntington points to memes as displaying elements of metaphor and synecdoche in their meaning construction, tying in elements of political and social movements into contained images and image macros.[185] Piata similarly links memes with metaphor via political themes, further tying in memes to the history of humour, which has historically served as a use for metaphor.[186]

    As evidenced by the overview above, my theoretical approach incorporates many influences. However, by combining these different linguistic strands and linking them with related concepts in memetics, communications, and sociology, I was able to begin to design a theoretical approach to memes and begin my own research in earnest.

3.2 A Preliminary Theoretical Approach

    The underlying linguistic framework I have used to understand memes in terms of established theory is as follows. The original meme image is ascribed a meaning based on an iconic component within the image. This meaning can be an obvious connection, Keller's *direct* iconicity. However, it is often a visual reference that is a step removed from its referent, such as a facial expression or gesture representing an associated emotion—Keller's *indirect* iconicity. The meme creator uses the iconic core to create a generalised meaning, with an overriding emotional and/or spatial relationship. Text is then added that uses the accompanying image to provide emphasis, drawing on the iconic core. The juxtaposition of

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[184] See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*.
[185] Huntington, "Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric," 77–93.
[186] See Anna Piata, "When Metaphor Becomes a Joke: Metaphor Journeys from Political Ads to Internet Memes," *Journal of Pragmatics* 106 (2016): 39–56.

the image with the text is an ostensive cue, indicating deliberate communication and a semantically relevant connection between text and image. The extra visual context beyond the core emotion or relationship is ignored for the purposes of the meme's meaning, in a process similar to linguistic metaphor—a process I call *visual metaphor* (see Figure 3.7 below). The original image is then shared and recontextualised by other internet users, a process of cumulative cultural evolution, which ultimately conventionalises the metaphorical meaning and associates this meaning purely with the picture, without text being necessary to drive the meaning. During this process, the meaning itself can change, if there is a concerted effort to do so, or a fringe variant of the meme becomes popular. While relying on iconicity and metaphor to drive meaning, it is nevertheless a non-literal means of communication open to significant interpretation. With each new iteration, and each new viewer or recreator (or group thereof) the meme's meaning and form can shift, often becoming simpler and more functional than discursive, leading to a process similar to grammaticalisation. While a particular community—often a CofP—will usually consolidate meaning around a central theme, the internet is full of myriad subcommunities, each of which can potentially adopt different interpretations of the same meme. Thus, the type of social network at play impacts a meme's development, with different networks prompting developments in various ways.

3.2.1 Preliminary Definitions of Memes

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, I created two parallel definitions for memes, Structural and Conceptual, based on my observations regarding the above theoretical approaches drawn from linguistic and non-linguistic approaches. The literature presented a number of competing definitions, which were wide-ranging and often contradictory. Some focused on the 'physical' aspects of internet memes, their visual forms and styles. Others instead focused on the genesis of these communicative units, how they function in conversation and their cultural capital. This first camp included many of the earlier and more generalised works on internet culture and communication. One of the most concise and apt descriptions was put forward by Nooney and Portwood-Stacer in their introduction to the special issue of the Journal of Visual Culture dedicated to memes, as described in Chapter 2.

Figure 3.7: The process of visual metaphor

1. The process begins with an image lacking text. Whatever the subject(s) of the image, they must be recognisable and familiar, so as to be easily understood. In this example, the arrangement of people and their expressions are easily recognisable via inference and cultural knowledge (common ground).

2. The various elements are analysed for iconic cues and a preliminary meaning is formed. In this case, the facial expressions, posture, and positioning of the three figures are understood sympathetically and culturally. The implied relationships between the individuals and their actions are clear: a man whistling at another woman while walking with his partner.

3. With this base meaning established, an analogous situation is alluded to by textual elements, literally and figuratively overlaid on the image. The image meaning is compared with the textual meaning and overlap is sought. Where it is found, a streamlined meaning emerges which is common to both the text and the image, and extraneous context is ignored, as occurs with linguistic metaphor. In the example, the basic meaning of wandering eyes is compared to a parallel situation of longing, with a resultant shared meaning of temptation.

They refer to internet memes as "digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from."[187] This definition included many crucial elements, including the significance of visual cues, iteration, and reinterpretation, and its foregrounding in the journal issue connected the definition to all the subsequent works in the issue. As such, I have used it as a primary representative of definitions that focus on form over function. Conversely, there were many authors who took a different approach to defining memes, especially among the more focused works on memes. A particularly well-put and more abstract definition of internet memes is offered by Meikle in his work *Social Media*: "shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted but also adapted by others."[188] Contrary to the Nooney and Portwood-Stacer definition, Meikle focuses entirely on the functional aspect of memes, how they relate to one another and connect individuals. Rather than being an object or a unit, memes are instead a relational structure.

This tension between form and function was the primary obstacle in my early attempts to define memes linguistically. Ultimately, it became clear that any new definition would be required to encompass too many disparate characteristics discussed in the literature—and thus a single definition would not suffice. The schism between these competing approaches of form and function could not be bridged, as they were effectively defining two different things. The term 'meme' is itself ambiguous, as discussed in Chapter 1, and can refer to various interlinked but distinct levels of communication. I therefore created my provisional two-part definition of memes, which split the concept into those two halves of form versus function. I named these two competing definitions *Structural Memes* and *Conceptual Memes*.

> **Structural Meme:** A graphical and/or textual element that is used by internet users to frame or emphasise a situation or statement in an evocative way.

> **Conceptual Meme:** A shared point of reference that may be recalled by internet users using specific graphical or textual cues.

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[187] Nooney and Portwood-Stacer, "One Does Not Simply: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Internet Memes," 249.
[188] Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, 55.

I intended for there to be an amount of overlap between these two definitions, though I nevertheless viewed them as discrete entities. Structural Memes are a process, a vehicle to enhance the communicator's message, indicated by specific cues and features. Conceptual Memes, on the other hand, exist as part of the common ground as self-contained ideas, which communicators may reference in a variety of ways beyond the form-based limits of a structural meme. I hypothesised that memes began as structural units, which can consolidate into shared allusions with repeated use. These allusions—through conventionalisation, iteration, and time—transform into conceptual units that surpass their original structure and context, as both are stripped away. The allusion, without the benefit of familiar form or context, becomes akin to an idiom: specifically meaningful for the familiar but likely unintelligible to the uninitiated.

The end point of such transformation was unclear at this time. What would come after this shift into the conceptual sphere? I had established a binary, but even at this point I wondered about how to expand my model to be more comprehensive—about how this would map onto the memes I had begun to analyse, including many oddities and fringe cases. There were further themes, such as reflexivity, that I needed to reconcile with the emergent themes and patterns. However, as mentioned above, these definitions were a work in progress. They were a place to start, and along with the aforementioned definitions from the wider literature, I was able to organise my data collection. Along with the two definitions drawn from the literature, I could present these definitions to meme users via my survey and focus groups, and gain feedback to better refine my own definitional scheme. It was always my plan to come back to these working definitions after I had collected and analysed my participant data, to ensure they provided the most accurate and comprehensive representation of memes possible. This process of reflection and refinement is discussed in Chapter 5. At this point in my research, I focused on crafting my research questions and assembling my tools of data collection, in order to test and further develop my definitions.

3.2.2 Research Questions

The aim of my research is to examine internet memes from a linguistic perspective, identifying their constituent communicative components and analysing how these different facets combine to construct complex, specific meanings. To this end, I began with the following research questions:

1. What is the linguistic definition of an internet meme?
2. How are the meanings of memes constructed?
    a. Are the meanings of memes constructed by individuals on an ad hoc basis?
    b. Are their meanings conditioned over multiple iterations by users as a group?
3. Is meaning embedded in the form of the meme or its use in practice?
    a. How does the meaning of a meme extend beyond the "physical" meme?
    b. What is the role of conventionalisation in meme meaning construction?
    c. Is there a shift from the more iconic to the more symbolic?

Although my research has evolved as it has progressed through its various stages, these questions have remained the underlying guidelines of all of my work—my reading, research design, data collection, analysis, and conclusions. Question 1 is the overarching thrust of my research, and its answer was initially to bifurcate the definition of memes into Structural and Conceptual. This division was ultimately revised and expanded into my Life Cycle model, which will be discussed in Chapter 5 and subsequent analysis chapters. Question 2 was initially engaged with using the theoretical framework laid out in this chapter, relying on ostension, iconicity, and visual metaphor. However, this primarily applies to Question 2a, to memes on a more mechanical level, which is most relevant early in their development. Further discussion of the creation and early iteration of memes, which draw on these processes, will be discussed in Chapter 6. Question 2b introduces the more social and iterative side of memes, which further contributes to their meanings. The process of conventionalisation is the focus of Chapter 7, followed by the further process of abstraction in Chapter 8. The themes of Question 3 were foundational topics in the construction of my Life Cycle model, as outlined in Chapter 5 and summarised in Chapter 9.

3.3 Conclusion

With an initial theoretical framework for analysing memes, I was able to move towards providing a new definition for internet memes. By drawing upon different fields and linguistic approaches, I was able to craft not one, but two working definitions for memes and to better understand how to approach further analysis of the subject. Although I was able to establish some linguistic answers about internet memes, I had only uncovered more questions. As such, I moved towards data collection to build a better picture of the linguistic nature of internet memes.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology and Data Collection

As discussed in the previous chapter, I established a preliminary linguistic framework to describe how memes are created and used, with a parallel pair of definitions—Structural and Conceptual Memes. Operating under this framework, I tested my theoretical assumptions and this definitional structure by engaging with meme users and memes themselves. My data collection involved mixed methods, utilising quantitative methods paired with qualitative ones. The approach was three-pronged, featuring the gathering of a pool of memes to further research and analyse, an online survey of members of the Reddit forum r/memes, and a series of in-person focus groups among students from the University of Stirling. These three methods were used to ascertain the extant meaning of popular internet memes, the perceptions of memes as units of communication, and how such units are used.

4.1 Challenges to Data Collection

Although primary data is desirable for analysis alongside secondary data, the gathering of unfettered data on meme usage is difficult to accomplish. Memes are created, shared, and modified with such speed that it is almost impossible to track even a single iteration of a meme, let alone a category, reliably over any great length of time. Their origins can sometimes be traced back to their inception, but a great deal of meme use is anonymous or so widely distributed as to veil those who are responsible for proposing what a given meme means. Any internet user could create a new iteration of a specific meme and may label it (through explicit naming or "tagging"), thus allowing it to be discovered by anyone looking for that particular meme. However, such labelling is in no way required; internet culture tends to eschew formal protocols, and users often have little regard for attribution or intellectual property rights. Memes are not viewed as being owned, but meant to be shared, and a single iteration of a meme can be distributed—and potentially altered into a new iteration—by a single user across multiple networks (private messages, social media, internet forums, etc.) with little to no digital 'paper trail' to follow. The numerous types of memes and plethora of platforms in which they are shared makes sufficiently documenting their rise and fall an insurmountable task, at least within the scope of this research. In lieu of a comprehensive tracking of memes, I instead relied on pre-existing classifications of memes and their popularity via established authorities on memes, as discussed below.

Furthermore, the constituent parts of memes can be revised, remixed, and combined in difficult-to-track ways. As previewed with the examples of *Drakeposting* in Chapter 1, the graphical elements of image macros can be recoloured, redrawn, or edited together in numerous ways. One prominent meme, the *Scumbag Hat*, has come to be used almost exclusively as an additive to other images or memes and does not normally appear in isolation (see Figure 4.1). Assorted visual details can also be added to memes in order to associate the meme more strongly with the target of its message, such as putting a distinctive hairstyle or piece of clothing onto the character of the meme (see Figure 4.2). Sometimes the visual motif or art style of a meme is copied in a new context, usually for comedic effect (see Figure 4.3). Such visual parody is often accompanied by the usual text associated with the meme, though sometimes these textual elements can also be altered in a similar fashion. There have been recent attempts by different scholars to cohesively track memes despite these alterations, such as the work of Dubey et al., Zannettou, et al., and Beskow, Kumar, and Carley (see Section 2.1.4 above). Utilising computer algorithms and machine learning, these teams have worked to automate this process to an extent.[189] Their work shows great promise, but is not yet widely available, and the designing of an analogous system is beyond the scope of this research.

(a)   *(b)*

Figure 4.1: Scumbag Fly

This meme (a) is modelled on the Scumbag Steve meme (b) which features a character wearing a distinctive hat. Here, the hat has been transferred onto a non-meme image, bringing elements of Steve's character with it. Due to this process, the Scumbag Hat has become a meme unto itself.

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[189] Dubey et al., "MemeSequencer: Sparse Matching for Embedding Image Macros"; Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities"; Beskow, Kumar, and Carley, "The Evolution of Political Memes: Detecting and Characterizing Internet Memes with Multi-Modal Deep Learning."

(a) *(b)* *(c)*
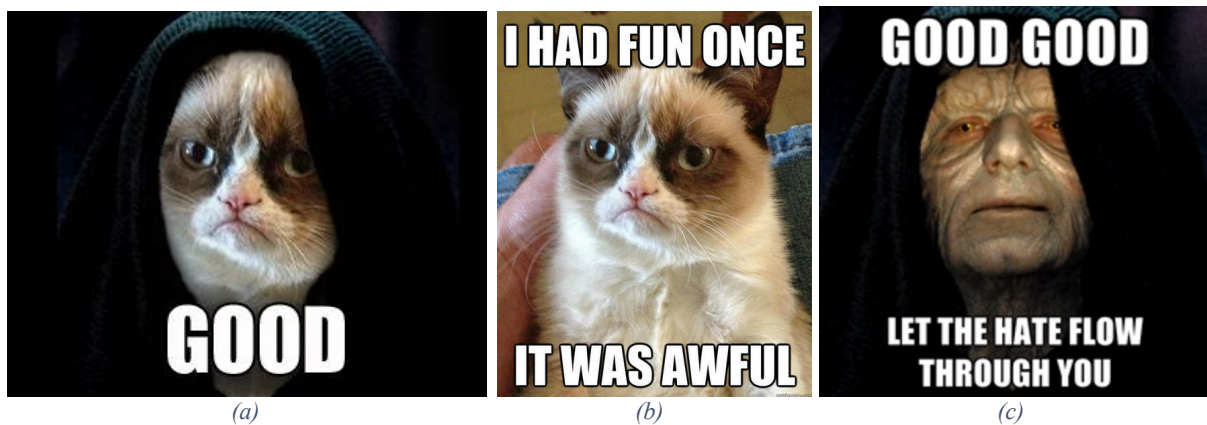
Figure 4.2: Emperor Grumpy Cat

This meme (a) is a modified version of the Grumpy Cat meme, such as the example marked (b). This meme uses the face of the familiar character wearing the hood of Emperor Palpatine from Star Wars, a meme of which can be seen at (c).

(a) *(b)*

Figure 4.3: One Does Not Simply Hawk

This meme (a) features a hawk whose posture is reminiscent of the character featured in the One Does Not Simply meme (Boromir from The Lord of the Rings), such as the example marked (b). Given the visual similarity, the text accompanying the hawk has been modelled off the parent meme.

Nevertheless, one can still establish the general popularity of individual memes—if not their usage—through several existing online resources. The website Know Your Meme (www.knowyourmeme.com, often abbreviated as KYM) is a curated, wiki-based website that documents internet memes. Know Your Meme is crowdsourced, as opposed to a peer-reviewed academic publication. However, given the nature of memes—their rapid creation, spread, and decline—Know Your Meme is the most comprehensive source available for information on the often-obscure origins of memes and their subsequent usage. KYM uses

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the parameter of "Search Interest," via logs of Google Search results, as a general indicator of a memes inception and popularity over time. KYM also organises all their entries by several criteria including year of meme creation, age of submission, and number of views. This last category is of particular interest, as it serves as another rough benchmark of meme popularity. Meme generators—such as memegenerator.net and imgflip.com—have programs that allow users to create their own memes, providing the base images onto which text can be typed. The exact statistics provided by these sites are difficult to verify, but nevertheless provide a starting point for identifying popular and recognisable memes. Many meme generators also have repositories of created memes, providing examples of pre-existing memes and a level of insight into the established meanings of memes. Therefore, KYM and other meme generators and aggregators were my first source of information about the meaning and use of memes, informing the creation of my meme pool.

Furthermore, documenting memes in use would provide insights into their meaning and the construction thereof. Memes are used on different social platforms with high frequency, adding a new element to digital discourse, though such use of memes is spontaneous. It is therefore highly difficult to organically capture memes in normal use among internet users. Archived conversations and threads can be analysed, but this can yield only limited results, due to the constraints on tracking meme usage discussed above. Use of such logs also poses potential issues regarding privacy, anonymity, and informed consent. Even if such logs are considered to be in the public domain or within terms of fair use, it nevertheless presents a legal grey area. Furthermore, focus on a specific, publicly available data set can also potentially skew analysis by over-emphasising aspects of that particular setting. Alternatively, one could attempt to provoke meme usage, but this requires the researcher to create an artificial communication environment and insert themselves (or at least their own ideas) into it. This could drastically alter the ensuing conversation and meme usage, disrupting the desired organic process. By interacting with internet users directly—e.g. through survey and interview—the researcher can directly address users and interrogate their perceived meaning of memes. While this is intrinsically artificial, it is a more concentrated approach and produces results with more focus and applicability to the usage of memes, as opposed to extrapolation from only a snapshot of meme usage in a limited number of circumstances.

Therefore, it was determined that trying to fully track memes *in situ* was not feasible for my project and that my research would be better served by these more direct approaches

for data collection. My focus on meme construction also made these methods appealing, allowing me to interact directly with potential meme creators and curators. I was also inspired by the work of Lin, Huang, and Hsu, who consulted with groups of internet users to determine meme meanings and uses.[190] Although I did not intend to fully crowdsource my definitional work, I nevertheless saw the value that such primary source data could provide. I could gain insights directly from meme users, and with a sufficient number of responses, I could establish corroboration and triangulation. Though the scope would be narrowed by the limiting factors discussed above, when paired with the 'authoritative' sources such as KYM, I could gain a clearer picture of meme use.

To establish baselines for meme forms and meanings, and to provide materials for further data collection, I first created a pool of memes with established popularity, drawn from a number of sources. In order to reach a wide audience of meme users and gather a larger pool of data with relative depth, I then chose to undertake an online survey. To complement this data, and to gather information with more depth and feedback, I also chose to undertake focus group interviews. The rest of this chapter will discuss the design, implementation, and results of these three data collection processes in detail.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

Before explaining more about the specifics of my data collection, firstly ethical considerations must be discussed. All research has logistical and ethical considerations. I as the researcher complied fully with all ethical guidelines as outlined by General University Ethics Panel (GUEP). In preparation for beginning fieldwork in 2019, I submitted my research design to GUEP; my application was approved without changes on the 26th of October, 2018. Below is an overview of how I approached ethical issues in this research.

4.2.1 Informed Consent

Survey participants were able to view an informational sheet providing details about the project, including: the style of survey and type of questioning, the information collected from participants, and how such information will be used, stored, and disseminated. Contact

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[190] Lin, Huang, and Hsu, "Crowdsourced Explanations for Humorous Internet Memes Based on Linguistic Theories."

details for the researcher and his supervisors were also available for participants to ask questions. This sheet (see Appendix I: Recruitment Materials) appeared on the online forum posting that announced the survey, with a link to the survey itself at the bottom of the page, following the information sheet. If participants wished to proceed with the survey, they then needed to read and agree to a consent sheet that appeared as the first page of the survey. Upon agreeing to the terms outlined in the Informed Consent Sheet (by ticking a box which had to be manually selected to continue), participants were then allowed to complete the survey. On the penultimate page of the survey, there was a message to remind the participants that once they submitted their data, it would be anonymised, and therefore unable to be recalled by the researcher. Upon completion, the final screen of the survey (after submission of answers) thanked the participants for their contribution and reminded them of the terms of their consent, along with once again providing contact information for the researcher if they had further questions.

For the focus group participants, information sheets were provided when volunteers first expressed interest in the study, which included details about the project, including what was expected of the participants, the voluntary nature of their participation, and how their information would be used, stored, and disseminated (see Appendix I: Recruitment Materials). If participants wished to proceed, upon arrival at the focus group meeting place, there was further discussion their involvement along with a printed consent form. I orally reviewed this information with the participants before proceeding and participants were then asked to sign the Consent Sheet, which was subsequently securely stored. Upon completion of the focus group, I thanked the participants for their contributions and remind them of the terms of their consent and the contact information for the researcher if they wished to withdraw their data in the future (no such retractions have occurred).

4.2.2 Confidentiality

No research participants were ever referred to by name in transcripts and analysis. When necessary, they were given pseudonyms. Participant identities (where known) have always been stored separately from the individuals' data, and this separation carried over into reporting and publication. All files pertaining the research have been held on a password protected computer; the key linking participants to their pseudonyms are kept in a password protected folder in a separate digital location to the rest of the data. Real names of

participants have been and will be omitted from this thesis, subsequent publications, and presentations/teaching. The University of Stirling is identified as the location of research, but no further details have or will be included about participants other than their enrolment at Stirling. The sub-forum of Reddit, r/memes (https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/), is identified as the location of the survey, but no personally identifiable information of the participants information was retained.

Survey participation was completely anonymous. Basic demographic data (gender and age range) was requested, but the Reddit users who took part in the survey did not provide any further personal details and could choose to omit the demographic information if they preferred not to say. While individual submissions were unique, and the researcher could assign participants pseudonyms, survey participants are therefore not personally identifiable, even by the researcher. Every effort has and will be made to reduce the likelihood that participants from the survey and focus groups will be identifiable in research publications. However, I made it clear to all participants that complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

4.2.3 Participation and Participant Safety

Research participants were entirely volunteers; no incentive was offered to either the participants of the survey or focus groups. Survey participants had the right to withdraw from the survey at any time while completing the survey, by closing the page or by not clicking submit. Although incomplete entries were still logged in the survey system, these were not accessed and excluded from my data set. All analysis of survey data was undertaken solely on completed submissions whose authors had fully indicated their consent. Focus group participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, including during the focus group. If they wished to withdraw prior to any publication or completion of this study, then their data would be removed in its entirety, provided they indicated this withdrawal within 1 year of the data collection.

Furthermore, the welfare of the participants was given the highest priority. There is a potential for mild emotional distress or offense when discussing any research topic. However, I made every effort to avoid any discomfort or insensitivity. I managed the dynamic of the focus groups to ensure the discussion did not get out of hand or singled out an individual. Furthermore, great care was taken in the selection of the materials presented to the participants. While there is always the potential for a participant to take offence or be

distressed by a given meme, the likelihood is low and was minimised by the exclusion of memes which are focused on aspects of race, religion, or other sensitive subjects (see the discussion in Section 4.3.1 below).

4.3 Data Collection

Having outlined my ethical approval and measures taken to ensure ethical research, I will now provide a comprehensive breakdown of my data collection. To examine the form and function of memes, across qualitative and quantitative methods, I curated a selection of established memes which could be used both to compare with my proposed framework and serve as examples for my survey and focus group participants to interact with. As such, I will first review how this meme pool was established, followed by sections dedicated to my survey and focus groups.

4.3.1 Meme Pool

The material at the core of my survey and focus groups is a pool of memes, which I selected based on their popularity. The pool was split into two complementary groups of popular memes. The first contained memes that have a (comparatively) long history and have remained popular after years of use. For the sake of ease and distinction, I referred to these as 'All Time' popular memes. The second consisted of memes that became prevalent in the years around the beginning of my research, which have demonstrated broad appeal and recognition despite the lack of a lengthy lifespan. I referred to these as 'Current' popular memes. These two categories were established to ensure that the pool was diverse and included memes that would be readily recognisable across meme-literate individuals. Having this contrast between 'classic' and more emergent memes also allowed for a comparison of the data from these two sets, to identify trends and possible changes between older and newer memes.

To populate these two categories of the meme pool, I turned to several different sources. As mentioned above, obtaining hard statistical data on meme popularity is highly difficult. There is no central compendium of memes or distribution of their popularity, but I was able to utilise a combination of existing academic literature, Know Your Meme, several meme generators, and popular journalism to create a wide pool of popular memes, which could then be narrowed down.

Zannettou, et al. focused on a data-intensive analysis of memes across several platforms, namely Reddit, Twitter, and a sub-forum of 4chan. The data analysed was in the period of mid-2016 to mid-2017, providing examples that would fit perfectly in the 'Current' category. I focused on the data from Twitter and Reddit, as these were more general and popular platforms, as opposed to the others analysed by the Zannettou team, as these were smaller, fringe communities with strong political leanings. While the contrasts between these other platforms and Reddit/Twitter provided an intriguing contrast for the data of the Zannettou team, I chose to omit these sources in order to not skew my pool with the influence of a comparatively small group. Furthermore, the memes that were more frequent among the fringe communities were more inclined to be strongly political and inflammatory; this could complicate the ethical implications of the research, as well as potentially derail the data collection process and obscure the information I was trying to ascertain. The Zannettou, et al. paper provided a list of the ten most prevalent memes for the 2016/2017 period for both Reddit and Twitter, and these approximately 20 memes (there was a small area of overlap between the platforms), formed the initial basis of the Current category.[191]

Know Your Meme provided a large collection of data. Using the sorting filters described above, I first examined the "confirmed" memes[192] as listed by number of views. This served as an approximation of overall popularity. To cast a wide enough net, I documented the 45 most popular memes. This served as the initial pool for the All-Time category. The Know Your Meme confirmed entries were then resorted by the "newest added—as of the start of August 2018 when this examination was taking place. This database includes several thousand entries, which I recorded the first 20 entries; this cut-off was chosen for logistical reasons (to prevent an overflow of memes) as well as to provide as similar number of candidates with the Zannettou, et al. article. These 20 memes were then put into a matrix with the other selected candidates for the Current pool.

With a base pool established for both All-Time and Current memes, I broadened my search to other sources in the effort to corroborate the popularity of these memes. I searched journalistic sources with focuses on the internet or social media, such as Mashable, for recognised meme generators.[193] The generators found in these articles were then

[191] Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."
[192] Submissions either made by the editorial staff of KYM, or user-submitted entries which have been reviewed and verified by the editorial staff.
[193] Max Knoblauch, "The 6 Best Tools for Making Memes," Mashable, 2013, https://mashable.com/2013/09/25/making-memes; Elise Moreau, "10 Popular Meme Generator Tools,"

backreferenced on KYM (where possible) and then examined to see if they had lists of their most popular meme templates, either over their history or in recent months/years. Generators that were software-based (as opposed to online programs) were excluded, as were sites that were no longer in service or had no such records of popular memes. Six generators emerged as relatively reliable sites that referenced popular memes.

The first three—Meme Generator, Quick Meme, and Meme Dad[194]—had lists of their all-time most popular memes. Meme Generator had a listing of their most popular memes over the site's history, and the top 30 templates (the first two pages of the list) were recorded, which were narrowed down to 25 due to overlapping of similar/same memes (such as different Rage comic characters). Quick Meme had a similar list of popular templates, of which the top 40 were documented and 35 retained. A larger number of memes were examined due to a high amount of repetition and overlap. Meme Dad had a massive list of their popular templates similar to Quick Meme; the top 30 were recorded.

Imgflip and Meme Creator[195] were two further meme generators that I consulted, although these had lists of currently popular templates, as opposed to archival lists. A record was made of the first 40 memes on Imgflip (the first page of popular memes as of August 2018), of which 38 were retained. Meme Creator had a smaller list of popular memes, but nevertheless had 24 memes to document, 23 of which were retained (one instance of overlap).

The sixth meme generator, Meme Maker,[196] had lists of *both* historically and currently popular memes. There was a brief list of all-time popular memes, consisting of 13 entries, 12 of which were retained (one instance of overlap). There was a more expansive list of currently popular memes, though this was filled with more repetition and one-off/atypical memes than other sites. The first five pages of memes were documented, but only 19 of these 40 memes were retained. While this final generator was not as wide-reaching as the others, its combination of both historical and current memes was beneficial to determining suitable candidates for both groups.

Lifewire, 2018, https://www.lifewire.com/popular-meme-generator-tools-3486457; Kaya Ismail, "Top 5 Meme Generators to Help You Create the Perfect Meme," TechNorms, 2013, https://www.technorms.com/33719/top-5-meme-generators.

[194] "Meme Generator," Meme Generator, 2009, https://memegenerator.net; "Quick Meme - Generator," Quick Meme, 2011, http://www.quickmeme.com; "Meme Dad - Generator," Meme Dad, 2013, http://memedad.com/.

[195] Dylan Wenzlau, "Imgflip," Imgflip LLC, 2008, https://imgflip.com; "Meme Creator - Generator," Meme Creator, 2020, https://www.memecreator.org.

[196] "Meme Maker - Generator," Meme Maker, 2017, https://www.mememaker.net.

At this point, there were five points of reference for memes, for both categories. Trends were apparent among the All Time category, but not as much among the Current memes. There also seemed to be an understandable bias among the Current-documenting generators towards memes that had been very recently popular (within months), as opposed to the wider scope of the Zannettou study (over the course of a year or more). As such, I decided to seek out lists of popular memes by year, to provide a more retrospective view and allow for a wider variety of memes to enter into the Current pool. Although not necessarily backed by hard data, these lists were collated by individuals who professionally report on popular culture, and many such online outlets can serve as gatekeepers for the online community. Mashable (https://mashable.com) had already been established as a journalistic source with an interest in memes, and I therefore consulted its lists for the "best memes" of 2017 and 2018.[197] These lists presented 54 memes (35 from 2017 and 19 from 2018), of which 37 were added to the matrix; similar or related memes were again grouped together as necessary, and 'memes' that were more properly news events or figures from popular culture were excluded as appropriate.

Thrillist (https://www.thrillist.com), an entertainment-based online magazine, also produced similar "best" lists for both 2017 and 2018,[198] which were reviewed as a counterpart to the Mashable articles. These lists presented a larger swath of candidates, with 115 memes included (50 for 2017 and 65 for 2018). However, as with the Mashable articles, many of these 'memes' were more accurately events or viral content as opposed to 'standard' image macro memes, and only 65 were added the matrix. Another similar list was found on the website The Daily Dot, a well-known site that reports on the internet and internet culture. This list documented popular memes of 2018 (through the month of June). Of the 35 listed, 25 were retained. While these lists had a lower rate of retention than the generators, the popular articles presented a broader spectrum of memes for a more focused span of time. Together, these lists provided a snapshot of meme usage over this period.

With the two matrices full of potential candidates, I then needed to whittle down to two manageable sets—the All Time list had 84 candidates while the Current list had 142. The

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[197] Brian Koerber, "35 Good Memes That Got Us through a Bad Year," Mashable, 2017, https://mashable.com/article/best-memes-of-2017; Morgan Sung, "The Best Memes of 2018 so Far," Mashable, 2018, https://mashable.com/article/2018-best-memes.

[198] Sean Fitz-Gerald, "The 50 Best Memes of 2017," Thrillist, 2017, https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/best-memes-2017; Thrillist Entertainment, "The 108 Best Memes of 2018," Thrillist, 2018, https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/best-memes-2018.

frequency of each meme was examined across the aforementioned sources. The All Time pool was fairly straightforward. Five sources were reviewed, Know Your Meme and four meme generators. Sorting the memes by frequency, I isolated memes that appeared across all five sources, then four sources, and finally three sources. This reduced list consisted of 17 memes, which were then ranked by whether they also appeared on the list of Current pool candidates and their frequency there. Of the 17 selected memes, only two did not appear in the Current list; this was taken as an indication that the memes had lost a level of recognisability and as such were removed. This resulted in a final collection of 15 memes—a manageable size—which appeared across the majority (at least three) of the sources while also appearing in the Current list, and thus should still be recognisable.

Organising the Current pool was more complex. Eight sources were consulted to establish the initial pool: the Zannettou article, KYM, three generators, and three online magazines (the two Mashable articles were treated as one source, as were the two Thrillist articles, as due to their dates of creation, their lists were mutually exclusive). As with the All Time list, the Current candidate memes were organised by frequency. However, with the often limited lifespan of memes, the temporal component of several of the sources, and the even number of sources, frequency based on a simple majority was not high. Of the initial 141 memes, only six memes were present in a majority of sources (one appeared in six sources, while five appeared in five sources), and only nine appeared across half (three memes appeared in four of the sources). By expanding the frequency to three appearances, the pool grew to 22, with the addition of 13 more memes. Of those 13 memes, four were also present on the final All Time pool, and as such were excluded, so as not to repeat memes. Two further of the 3-frequency memes were also excluded due to their borderline status as memes—more events of internet culture than the image macro style of meme being researched. Finally, one 3-frequency meme, *Tide Pods*, was excluded from the data set. As this meme involved themes related to suicide, this meme was deemed potentially inappropriate on ethical grounds. This also resulted in a Current pool of 15 memes.

Thus, I arrived at a combined pool of 30 memes, 15 'historically' popular and 15 'currently' popular. A full listing of my meme pool examples can be seen in Appendix II: Meme Pool. With this basis of example memes, I was able to then design the parameters of my survey and focus group interviews.

4.3.2 Online Survey

As mentioned above, my data collection consisted of two additional methods beyond the gathering and analysis of the meme pool. The first avenue was an online survey of members of the meme-focused community r/memes, a specialized forum (a "subreddit") of the website Reddit. Participants were asked about the definition and use of memes, as well as their perceptions and understanding of memes from my All Time and Current groups. This data was collected to provide insights from actual meme users to compare and contrast with those found in the literature—a 'boots on the ground' perspective that, while limited in scope of individual knowledge and biases, nevertheless offered a more personal and hands-on standpoint. Especially in linguistics, there can be a disparity between language in the abstract and language in practice, between standards and vernaculars. By drawing on the practical and lived experiences of meme-aware individuals, I was able to deepen my understanding beyond the abstract—to compare the 'canonical' features of memes posited on Know Your Meme and other authorities with the opinions of 'native speakers,' i.e., meme users. Additionally, I was able to gain feedback on my preliminary Structural and Conceptual definitions, vis-à-vis the perceptions of my participants who interact with memes first-hand. This allowed me to gauge the reception of my definitional work and theoretical approaches, whether they were acceptable to meme users or clashed with their experiences. Though they would not necessarily overturn my overall approach, they could nevertheless support, challenge, or expand upon my framework in order for me to better refine them. By combining academic theory-crafting drawn from the literature and the practical experiences of internet users, I was then able to better evaluate my assumptions and observations, which ultimately informed the revision of my two-part definition of memes into my three-stage Life Cycle model.

4.3.2.1 Survey Design

In order to elicit the desired information from my participants, I chose to structure my survey around several exemplar memes, with an established bank of questions about meaning and meaning construction accompanying each one. This core of the survey was the pool of 30 archetypal memes as outlined in the previous section. Of note, the cut-off date for adding memes into the Current pool was August 2018, due to the logistics of planning the survey and submitting the draft form for ethical approval; once approval was granted, the meme pool was not changed.

With my working definitions of memes and two complementary meme pools created, I set about building the survey itself. Consulting the work of Callegaro, Lozar Manfreda, and Vehovar, I made a number of design choices at the outset in order to have the most effective survey which respondents would be the most willing and able to complete.[199] The decision to have an online survey was a natural choice given the digital nature of the subject matter. Meme users are already regular internet users; presenting memes in an online environment was a logical extension of their normal use and the digital format facilitated the multimedia and visual elements of the meme pool itself. An online survey would also allow me to reach a wider audience with minimal cost (financially and ecologically) and logistical hurdles, as opposed to the more limited scope of a paper-based survey. The data collected would then also be in a digital format, which could then be more easily catalogued and analysed.[200]

The meme pool and its associated questions were created first, with additional preliminary questions developed afterwards. However, for the sake of clarity, I will discuss the survey in order, as a participant would complete it.

The survey began—following a description of my research and a request for consent—with a set of preliminary questions before the meme pool. This was in order to gather broad observations from my participants and establish some baseline information about meme perceptions and usage. The first of these questions, as can be seen in Figure 4.4 below, asked about the participants own definition of memes, with options including specific definitions from the literature—Nooney and Portwood-Stacer's form-centric definition and Meikle's function-centric definition were offered—along with my two definitions for Structural and Conceptual Memes, a blanket statement of "anything shared on the internet," and an open text field for users to provide their personal definition.

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[199] Mario Callegaro, Katja Lozar Manfreda, and Vasja Vehovar, *Web Survey Methodology* (London: SAGE Publications, 2015).
[200] Ibid, 18-23.

Figure 4.4: A screenshot of my online survey, featuring the first major question about the definition of memes

The following questions asked about what forms of media participants thought memes could take, their frequency of meme usage, the venues in which they normally use memes, and the purposes for which they use memes. This question about purposes featured a set list of answers that I had developed during my first year of research into meme forms and definitions. I had classified memes into ten categories based on my analysis of the literature—particularly the work of Grundlingh, who related the use of memes to different types of speech acts[201]—and the documenting of meme popularity used to build the meme pool. The ten categories were as follows:

- Make a joke
- Share an activity (to prompt a physical act, such as a dance)
- React to something
- Emphasize a point
- Make an observation about something
- Parody something
- Provoke a response (such as tricking someone)
- Share a humorous story or anecdote
- Make a social or political statement
- Identify as a member of a community or demonstrate your knowledge of something

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[201] Grundlingh, "Memes as Speech Acts," 10–20.

Every attempt was made to make this list as inclusive and flexible as possible. Users were allowed to select as many answers to this question as they wished, with the hope that it would provide supplementary insights into why memes are used as well as their construction. These choices were then used again with each example from the meme pool, so that participants could select the most prominent function of each meme with regards to this list.

These questions were placed at the beginning of the survey, before participants would begin analysing the meme pool. This decision was made for several reasons. Although they were not meant to capture the core of the desired data on meaning construction, they have provided crucial context to my overall data set. If placed at the end of the survey, there was a higher likelihood that these questions would not be completed or would be less thoroughly answered. Furthermore, I was concerned that if the questions about meme definitions were placed after respondents had already analysed the meme pool, it might bias them towards the more format-focused definitions without considering context and function. Placing them at the start instead allowed participants to ease into the topic with more general questions before moving on to analysing specific memes. This also allowed me to introduce the selection of meme purpose categories, which were re-used in the subsequent meme pool section.

While there was a concern that this could contribute to leading the participants, I continued with this order for three reasons. Firstly, while I did not want to lead participants, I did want them to begin thinking more critically about memes before diving into the meme pool. Secondly, the meme pool questions, while critical to my research, are a more repetitive and longer series of questions as opposed to the preliminary questions. I wanted participants to be freshest when completing the preliminary questions, rather than being fatigued by rounds of meme analysis before answering crucial questions about definitions. Thirdly, I was concerned that my meme pool, entirely made up of image macro memes (images with text), would lead the respondents significantly more than the reverse.

After the preliminary question section, the survey moved into analysis of the meme pool, including selections from both the All Time and Current groups. The format of this section was relatively standard, with each meme presented—with only the template image and no text added—along with a set list of questions following:

- What would you call this meme?
- Please describe what this meme means to you (e.g., what it represents, adjectives or emotions it describes, etc.)
- What about this image gives it the meaning you described above?

- What would you use this meme for?

The first three questions were open-ended, with text fields for the participant to provide as much or as little detail as possible. The text field was set to the length of one line, so as to not overwhelm the participant or suggest that they needed to write an exorbitant amount. These three questions were designed to walk users back through the meaning construction process. Firstly, they were asked to name the meme, which in turn would prompt the participant to think about the meaning of the meme in order to describe it, as well as supply a conventionalised name where one exists/is known, but otherwise providing insight into its meaning if not. Secondly, the participant would need to elaborate on the precise meaning of the meme, the answers to which could then be compared to other respondents, to determine the relative agreement or disagreement as to the conventionalised meaning of each meme. This cohesion, or lack thereof, served as a critical component to my analysis. The third question takes the process a step further, asking about the salient details of the meme template, to attempt to isolate the iconic core of the image. For more conventionalised memes, tying to the iconic core is not a conscious process but a learned association, and this question allowed me to ascertain how respondents would deconstruct the elements of the meme when prompted. With the more in-depth question answered, I directed the participant to take a step back and examine how they use each meme. This fourth question, about the purpose of the meme, contained a pre-set field with a drop-down menu, from which participant could select from a predetermined set of answers. These options were the same as the meme purpose preliminary question, as discussed above.

The decision was made to feature only the template image, rather than a 'complete' iteration of the meme featuring a textual caption. Although this did potentially limit the discussion from the participants, the lack of captions was deemed the best course of action for several reasons. Firstly, the intent of the questions was to elicit the participants to engage with the image first and foremost. The template, while only part of the semantic materials, is where the overarching relationship of the meme is encoded. In the previously discussed process of visual metaphor, the image constitutes the known context or relationship by which the novel situation of the textual caption is judged and understood. The goal was to isolate how the image functions in this metaphorical context, to isolate the most semantically important and salient details—the iconic and inferential cues which allow the metaphor the function. As such, the image is the strongest constant between iterations of the meme, and is where the meaning of the meme coalesces as it becomes conventionalised (as will be
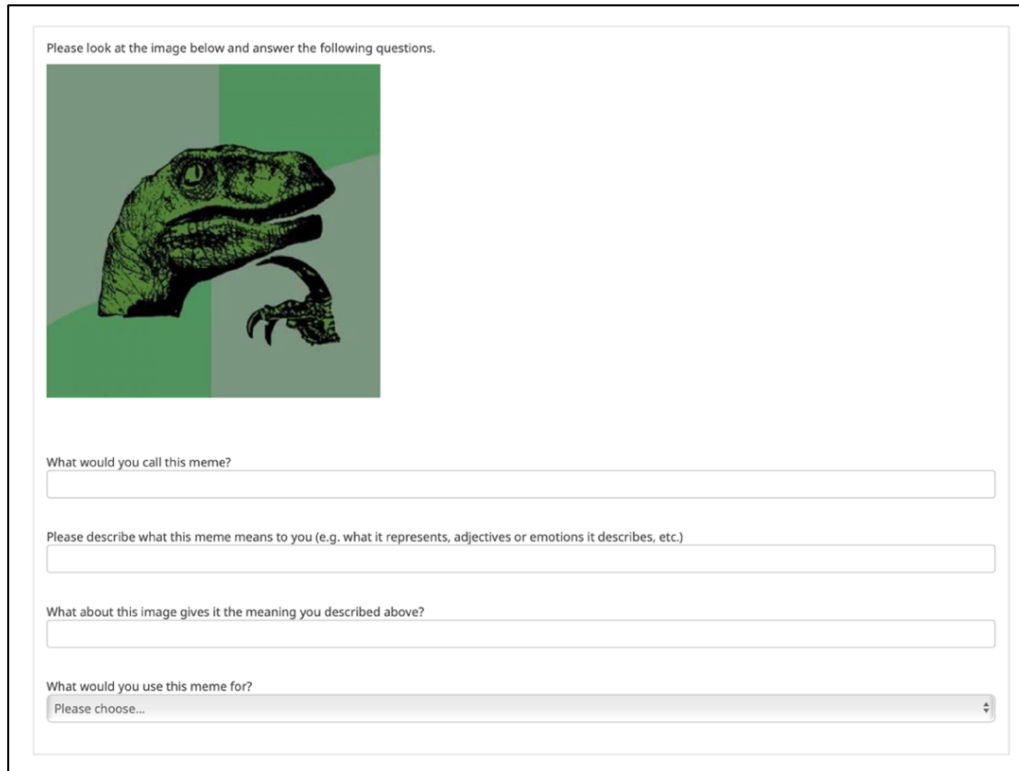
discussed more thoroughly in my analysis chapters). By removing the distraction of captions, the participants had only the image—and their own experience—to discern meaning from.

Furthermore, I did not want to lead the respondents along a specific narrative or semantic trajectory. While the overarching meaning of the meme is primarily driven by the image, the text conveys the specific context of a given situation, and thus provides more precise details than the general relationship of the meme as a whole. Having an example which featured a caption focused on a particular subject or displaying a clear and narrow emotional reaction would potentially limit or hinder the interpretation by the participants. The intent was to elicit their honest understanding of the meme as a whole, rather than any individual iteration. Even if a specific iteration was to be used, this presented additional problems. Such an example would need to be representative of the breadth of use for the given meme, which in most cases would be difficult if not impossible. I was interested in conflicting use and branching in meaning, and by providing a single example, this could skew the feedback gained from the participants, as they conformed to the restrictions of the example presented to them. In addition, as with the selection of the meme pool, an example would need to be screened to ensure it was not offensive, inflammatory, or upsetting to participants, both on ethical and logistical grounds. Thus, as the focus was meant to be on the image itself, and selecting a captioned example which was appropriate and comprehensive proved problematic, I moved forward using the templates exclusively.

The decision was made to have one meme per page/screen, with all four questions presented together, as seen in Figure 4.5. This was chosen as a balance between discrete pages per question versus all the questions on a single page, through which the participant would have to scroll. Both scrolling and individual paging have benefits and drawbacks. Scrolling can allow the participant to take in the scope of the full survey and to more accurately track their progress as they proceed, though presenting the entirety of the survey can be intimidating for participants and can cause them to lose focus on the specific questions. Individual paging can provide this focus on questions and allow the participant to process the information in more manageable pieces, though over-pagination can result in fatigue as they click through screen after screen with little sense of progress.[202] Thus, I compromised by putting each of the 30 memes on individual pages, for the sake of focus, but with all four sub-questions present on a single screen, to prevent fatigue. A progress bar at the

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[202] Callegaro, Lozar Manfreda, and Vehovar, *Web Survey Methodology*, 87-98.

top of the page also allowed participants to see how many questions remained to be answered. The standardisation of the questions was also meant to provide a sense of continuity and flow, to keep participants engaged and on-task.[203]

Figure 4.5: A screenshot of my online survey, featuring questions about a specific meme from my pool—in this case "Philosoraptor"

In a similar vein to the preliminary questions, a few demographic questions—asking for participant age range and gender—were added to the end of the survey in order to capture additional information about the participant pool itself. These questions were left optional for the comfort of the participants, though the vast majority answered them. Given their optional status and lesser significance for my research purposes, I decided that leaving them to the end of the survey, as a brief capstone, was a better placement than cluttering the preliminary questions at the start of the survey. Nevertheless, for the sake of thoroughness and replicability, I wanted to capture a snapshot of this demographic data. Along with these few questions, I added a final text field for participants to share any final thoughts or insights,[204]

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[203] Ibid, 98-102.
[204] Ibid 68-70.

as well as a parting message thanking participants and providing contact information, as described in the Ethics section above.

With the question format and sections established, I began to build survey itself using the program Jisc Survey. I constructed the draft form of the survey, including all 30 memes from the two meme pools, and submitted it along with my research design for ethical approval. After receiving approval and making minor adjustments, I conducted an informal pilot of the survey with my supervisors and a few colleagues. The feedback led to more fine-tuning as well as the most important critique: the survey was too long. Analysing 30 memes in quick succession was a taxing prospect and one that my testers worried would be prohibitive to many of my intended participants. I too had held this concern, but after whittling down the meme pools from over 200 potential candidates to 30, I was hesitant to restrict the pool much further, particularly as I felt that my pool of 30 had established a serviceable cross section of different formats of memes. To this end, I introduced an element of randomisation into the survey design, with each participant presented with a selection of ten memes, five from each of the All Time and Current sub-sets, chosen at random from the pool. With enough participants, I believed that I would get sufficient coverage of each of the 30 memes to be able assess the cohesiveness of their meanings among respondents, but no participant would have to assess all 30 memes.

As Jisc had no such randomisation features, I rebuilt my survey using LimeSurvey, an open source, free-to-use survey program with robust controls. Unlike many corporate survey systems, which provide hosting and other services, LimeSurvey is exclusively software—the program is installed on the user's system and runs entirely independently. Working in conjunction with the IT department of the University, I was able to get an instance of LimeSurvey installed on a partition of the University systems, which ensured that all the data I received, processed, and stored are solely within the University's infrastructure; no data was or is stored on the servers of any third party. LimeSurvey, with a few custom additions, allowed me to set up the randomisation process as I had envisioned. I ran the new form of the survey though another informal pilot, which confirmed that the randomisation was working as intended, and my testers confirmed that the reduced meme count made the survey much more manageable. With some final fine-tuning of the questions, I was now ready to implement my survey.

The development process for the survey design was ongoing throughout the spring of 2019. In February, as my initial Jisc survey was coming together, I reached out to the head moderator of r/memes on the social forum website Reddit, which has been in operation for over a decade. I had several exchanges with the moderator (also known as an "admin"), wherein I outlined the nature of my research, provided some of my promotional materials (as per my ethics application), and asked for approval to post the survey to the subreddit. The admin was eager to help and was happy to see research being done in this field. He was willing to share my survey, and after conferring with the other moderators for the forum, I was granted their approval. Once I undertook the rebuilding of the survey and it was finalised with LimeSurvey, I coordinated with the admins to launch the survey.

We waited to post the survey at the start of a weekend, as per the suggestion of the head admin, who was familiar with the ebb and flow of traffic to the subreddit and believed I would get the highest number of responses during that period. Using his authority as an admin, he was able to "pin" the message with my survey information and link to the top of the r/memes page. Reddit operates by users creating an initial post which others subsequently comment on. There are a number of organising filters, but the prevailing method is that the posts with the most comments and positive votes from users will rise to the top of the page. By pinning the post about my survey, it was fixed at the top of the page regardless of the views, votes, and comments. It was thus all but guaranteed that anyone visiting the page would see the post about my survey first and would thus be more likely to click to find out more information, without my post having to compete with the other ongoing posts to the forum. This was a significant advantage for my survey.

The survey launched on the morning of Saturday, 27 April 2019, with a post written by myself and posted with the permission of the moderators. This post included a link to my approved information sheet for potential participants, which discussed issues such as data protection and privacy, along with a link to the survey URL. I stated that the survey was for native English speakers aged 18 or over. The age parameter was largely for legal and ethical reasons—although there are sizeable populations that use memes that are younger than 18, I chose not to engage with children as this would add further logistical problems. The English requirement was added in an effort to ensure participants could easily complete the survey and to narrow the scope of my examination. Internet memes are a worldwide phenomenon, but I wanted to focus my research on English-speaking memes and their use among native

speakers. There were a few comments on my post that lamented their ineligibility, particularly due to age, but I nevertheless felt—and still feel—that these limits were necessary.

Largely due to the pin, there was near-immediate traffic to the survey webpage upon posting, and submissions began to come in at a rapid rate. Within the first day, I had over 100 completed submissions, and by the end of the weekend I had over 600. The pin was removed on the following Monday, the 29th, at which point my rate of response fell sharply. However, I left the survey active for some time to allow respondents the opportunity to complete partial surveys and hopefully gain a few more submissions. I received a handful more over the following week, with responses then tapering off significantly until the final full submission on the 7th of May. There were more submissions after this point, though none of them were complete. As there was no cost in allowing the survey to remain open, and with potential participants still finding the survey if not completing it, I left the survey open throughout the month of May, finally shutting it down on the 1st of June. The final (incomplete) submission was on the 30th of May, indicating the survey was still gaining potential participants even after several weeks. In total, the survey received 2,971 responses, of which 647 were complete. While this retention rate was rather low, the nevertheless high number of complete responses provided me with a large pool of data to analyse.

4.3.3 Focus Groups

My final method of data collection consisted of three focus groups. This approach was chosen primarily to allow more qualitative analysis than my survey, providing more detailed analysis of the central question of how to define memes and the perceptions of the examples collected in my meme pool. The data gathered through these focus groups were utilised, as with my survey responses, to provide another perspective on the nature, meaning, and use of memes—to garner greater insights and contrasts with the definitional work I had done so far. The information I received here was also instrumental in the shift from my initial Structural/Conceptual definitions to my Life Cycle model.

4.3.3.1 Focus Group Design

The structure of my focus groups was drawn from the works of Greenbaum, Liamputtong, and Puchta and Potter. I chose to move forward with smaller pools of

participants, what Greenbaum describes as a "minigroup."[205] With groups of fewer participants, one is better able to manage the flow of the conversation and ensure all members are given sufficient opportunity to engage with the ongoing dialogue. There is a risk of gaining less workable data overall, but conversely it can allow for more data from each individual participant which could be lost or obscured in a larger group.[206] I chose to proceed with focus groups of three to six members, which I would hold two to three times depending on number of participants.

The participants were students at the University of Stirling. The populace of the university was a natural fit for this research, given the average age of students and that of meme users. As with the survey above, participants were required to be 18 or over and native English speakers. The age requirement was again for legal and ethical permissions and the focus on English was to limit the confounding influence of cross-linguistic differences on my analysis. Logistically, Stirling students were also the most feasible pool of potential participants to find, contact, and arrange meetings with. For more on recruitment, see the following Implementation section.

My focus groups were semi-structured, allowing for prompting and continuity of conversation while still allowing room for improvisation and organic discussion.[207] Since the intent was to look at the same topics and themes as my survey, much of the design was carried over from one to the other, including definitions and my meme pool. However, a number of changes were made for the differing format.

The focus group structure retained the main flow of the survey, with questions presented on PowerPoint slides as opposed to browser pages.[208] Participants were asked about meme definitions, then meme format and use—mirroring the order of the survey preliminary questions—and were then shown a series of memes and their variants, drawn from my two meme pools, first from All Time and then from Current. The focus group opened (after discussion of participants' rights and signing of informed consent sheets) with the question "What is a meme?" This allowed the participants to jump right into the conversation and allowed me to get some initial insight into the participants' experiences and

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[205] Thomas L. Greenbaum, *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 2. See also Pranee Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 42-44.

[206] Greenbaum, *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*, 2–3.

[207] Claudia Puchta and Johnathan Potter, *Focus Group Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 47.

[208] Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*, 64-67.

perspectives. After some initial dialogue, the group moved onto discussing each of the aforementioned definitions—broad, Nooney/Portwood-Stacer, Meikle, Structural, and Conceptual. Then, the question "What is a meme?" was brought up again to close out the conversation on that topic and allow for any further thoughts from the participants about this core theme. The return to this question also allowed for a retroactive examination of the different definitions and to compare and contrast them.[209]

Next, participants went through a series of questions on meme format ("What kind of media can memes be?"), use ("How often do you use memes?), purpose ("Why do you use memes?"), and context ("Where do you use memes?"). These four questions paralleled the preliminary questions in the survey, though in this case participants were provided only with the question; no list of predetermined answers was given. This allowed the participants to have a more open and dynamic conversation rather than be limited by options that had been provided to them.[210] I, as the facilitator of the focus group, still possessed those answers, which I was able to then give as verbal prompts to keep the conversation moving.[211] Overall, these questions allowed for participants to elaborate on their experiences with memes and often led back to themes of definition and meaning.

With this first half completed, the group moved on to discussing individual memes. The use of the meme pool, much as in the survey, was to provide context and specificity to participants' thoughts and opinions, allowing them to build upon the previous, more abstract conversation with more concrete examples. However, as with the survey, 30 memes would have been too much for the focus group from a logistical standpoint. Going through all of the memes in the two pools would take an exorbitant amount of time, even more so than in the case of the survey, which could be stopped and started, as opposed to a focus group which happens continuously within a singular location.[212] As such, I again pared down the pool from 30 memes to ten, though rather than using randomisation, I selected specific memes in order to cover a range of different categories. Memes come in many different types and genres and so the ten memes chosen for the focus groups all relate to one or more themes that I wanted to interrogate. Five were chosen from each of the All Time and Current pools.[213]

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[209] This was drawn from the strategies of asking elaborate questions from Puchta and Potter, *Focus Group Practice*, 52-55.
[210] Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*, 32-34.
[211] See Puchta and Potter, *Focus Group Practice*, 48-49.
[212] Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*, 46.
[213] In addition to being reviewed in this chapter, the ten memes chosen as topics for my focus groups are specifically demarcated in Appendix II: Meme Pool.

Most of the All Time memes are of the Advice Animal type, which features the conventionalised format of call-and-response text along the top and bottom of the image. As such, I selected memes that broke from this mould or had other interesting features. The first, *One Does Not Simply*, features a character and tagline from a popular movie (*The Lord of the Rings*); the core image here is therefore more referential than emotionally iconic, as discussed in Section 3.2 . This meme was shown along with a variant that copied its style, as shown in Figure 4.3.[214] The second, *First World Problems*, has multiple prominent variants featuring different images, allowing for discussion of the differences between these variants. Two prevalent variants were displayed in turn and then compared to each other.[215] The third, *Grumpy Cat*, follows a standard Advice Animal format, but has gained significant popularity as a figure beyond its originating image macros, allowing for discussion of the boundaries of what a meme can encompass (and what moves beyond being a meme). The original meme was shown followed by a variant for contrast (one example can be seen in Figure 4.2).[216] The fourth, *Success Kid*, underwent a significant change during its development, evolving from an earlier meme, *I Hate Sandcastles*, which had an entirely different meaning. The primary meme was shown, followed by its progenitor, and then the two were shown alongside each other for contrast.[217] The fifth, *Scumbag Steve*, is noteworthy for generating a simplified, unbound meme featuring the character's hat. The original meme, along with examples of the *Scumbag Hat* and other variants were discussed in sequence (examples of which can be seen in Figure 4.1).[218]

The Current memes covered a wider range of styles. The first, *Roll Safe*, can follow the Advice Animal format but also appears in other, less standardised formats. Examples of this meme in both Advice Animal and variant formats were presented to compare.[219] The second, *Distracted Boyfriend*, makes use of spatial and emotional relationships rather than the typical Advice Animal format (as seen in Figure 3.7 in Chapter 3). This highly popular meme has also had many variants and parodies, of which several examples were shown, to foster conversation on a number of themes.[220] The third, *Expanding Brain*, is a multi-image format known as an 'exploitable' which is used differently from Advice Animal memes. A blank

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[214] *One Does Simply* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, Section 7.4.
[215] *First World Problems* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.6.
[216] *Grumpy Cat* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.1.
[217] *Success Kid* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, Section 6.5.
[218] *Scumbag Steve* and the derived *Scumbag Hat* are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.4.
[219] *Roll Safe* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, Section 8.5.
[220] *Distracted Boyfriend* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, Section 9.2.

version of the meme, along with several related variants, were presented in sequence.[221] The fourth, *Is This A Pigeon*, is a spatial-based meme in the same vein as *Distracted Boyfriend*. Using this meme allowed for further discussion of this divergence, as well as providing additional data for this particular meme, which received comparatively less coverage from the survey.[222] The final meme, known variably as *Disintegration Effect* and *I Don't Feel So Good*, has a number of interesting characteristics. The meme itself parodies a scene from a popular movie (*Avengers: Infinity War*) and again provided a more referential than iconic meme, along with one whose purpose is more for parody or provocation than emotional conveyance or storytelling. Furthermore, the meme has no set template, but instead makes use of a recurring artistic motif (and sometimes a textual cue), further differentiating it from other memes in my selections.[223] Altogether, I found that these memes provided a sufficient basis to work from and keyed into many different themes. The limited number also was more manageable within my approximately two-hour timeframe per focus group.

4.3.3.2 Focus Group Implementation

The first step in enacting my focus groups was participant recruitment. As outlined above, volunteers were sought who were students at Stirling, over the age of 17, and native English speakers. My recruitment process consisted of two channels, utilising posters and online announcements. I created a draft recruitment poster as part of my ethics application in my first year, following the guidelines from the University Ethics Panel. These posters provided a brief overview of my research, the eligibility criteria, and my contact information. The poster also featured tear-off strips along the bottom edge containing my email address for potential participants to take with them. Furthermore, to attract interest, the poster included a custom-made meme humorously encouraging the reader to participate in my research. Three different versions of the posters were made, each featuring a different meme and slightly different formatting (e.g., text placement on the page); copies of these three variants were then placed in high-traffic areas around campus. Regular checks of the posters showed almost all had tear-off sheets taken from them. My second avenue of recruitment was placing an announcement on the University Portal system in the News banner at the top of the homepage. The information here was more streamlined and lacked any visual aids, but did

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[221] *Expanding Brain* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, Section 9.1.
[222] *Is This A Pigeon* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, Section 7.2.
[223] *I Don't Feel So Good* is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, Section 6.1.

provide a direct link to my email address. Overall, I had 25 notes of interest from Stirling students, though several withdrew as they were not native English speakers. Based on the emails I received, there was an approximately equal split between those who saw one of my posters versus those who saw my announcement on the Portal.[224] Several also were referred by friends or classmates who had seen either a poster or the online announcement.

All focus groups were conducted in a group study space in the university library, allowing for a secure and neutral meeting place that was easily accessible by Stirling students and had a full audio-visual setup for my PowerPoint presentation.[225] The focus groups were video recorded using two cameras facing in opposite directions to capture all participants in the room. Video recording was the optimal method of capturing this data as the audio recording allowed for a complete record of participant comments (as opposed to only field notes) and the visual element prevented confusion over the identity of speakers—as well as preserving their expressions and gestures, which could be significant to their commentary. The dual camera angles allowed the recording of all participants clearly, further allowing for non-verbal reactions of the other participants to the speaking participant's comments. The video recording also allowed me to have a discrete link between the recorded dialogue and the prompt being presented at any given time.

I completed my first focus group in November 2019 with three participants, which ran for over 90 minutes. My second focus group was conducted in January 2020, again with three participants, which ran for over 125 minutes. My third focus group (which had to be rescheduled multiple times due to participant schedules) was held in March 2020 with three participants once more, and ran for over 105 minutes of discussion. In each case, there were additional participants scheduled to attend who did not arrive at the given date and time. Nevertheless, all three focus groups were successful, with a positive atmosphere and forthcoming participants.

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[224] Recruitment was through established networks, as influenced by Liamputtong, *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practice*, 37–41.
[225] Ibid, 57-60.

4.4 Reflections on Data Collection

Overall, my three avenues of data collection were fruitful and provided me with a wealth of data to analyse. I will next provide a brief explanation of ending my period of data collection and some of the preliminary data points that I collected.

4.4.1 External Factors

My final focus group was completed in the second week of March 2020. Two weeks later the United Kingdom went into lockdown as a result of the emergent coronavirus pandemic, and my data collection therefore came to a sudden halt. My original research plan included an additional focus group and several follow-up interviews with participants, but given the situation, I was forced to review my plans. I consulted with my supervisors, we agreed that I could end my data collection and focus on the significant material I had already gathered from my focus groups—as well as the large number of responses to my online survey. I had no major outstanding questions to follow up with individual participants, so the one-on-one interviews were no longer necessary, and had always been intended as a supplement to the other avenues if I needed more data. Given the data I had collected at that point, I felt confident that I had obtained enough to proceed into analysis.

4.4.2 Overall Results

In-depth analysis of my research data will be provided in my subsequent chapters. However, prior to that, I have provided the following overview of my results with some initial insights.

In total, I held three focus groups, with nine participants and over 320 minutes of recorded footage. The focus groups provided insight into many important themes, including discussion of the definition of what memes are, the limits of memes, their purpose, the importance of context, and more. As mentioned above, my online survey was answered by almost 3,000 participants, of which 647 were completed and submitted in their full form. The vast majority of my respondents answered my optional demographic questions about age and gender, and the results are much as expected. The breakdown of the age of the survey participants can be seen in Figure 4.6. Memes—at least in their current online form—are a relatively recent phenomenon. The vast majority of respondents falling under the age of 30 is

not surprising. Furthermore, the participants are members of a specialized subreddit and as such are also likely to be towards the younger end of my age ranges.[226] It is of interest that there were no participants between 41 and 50, yet there were 11 who marked their age as over 51. However, I believe most (if not all) of these indications are erroneous. Having examined the individual answers of these 11 replies, I believe all of them to be purposely fraudulent in their reporting of their age. Many of their other answers were crude, derogatory, or irrelevant; in short, I believe this subset of respondents did not partake in the survey in good faith, instead opting to "troll"[227] the project. Such activities are common among online communities, and it was expected that I would receive a number of such junk responses. After my comprehensive review of the data, I ultimately excluded most of the data from these "troll" responses; they were coded as "Junk" answers, which can be seen as a category in charts throughout Chapters 5-9, indicating non sequitur or other nonsense responses.

Survey: Participant Age

- 18-20: 452   - 21-25: 94   - 26-30: 28   - 31-35: 15   - 36-40: 8
- 41-45: 0   - 46-50: 0   - 51+: 11   - Undisclosed: 38
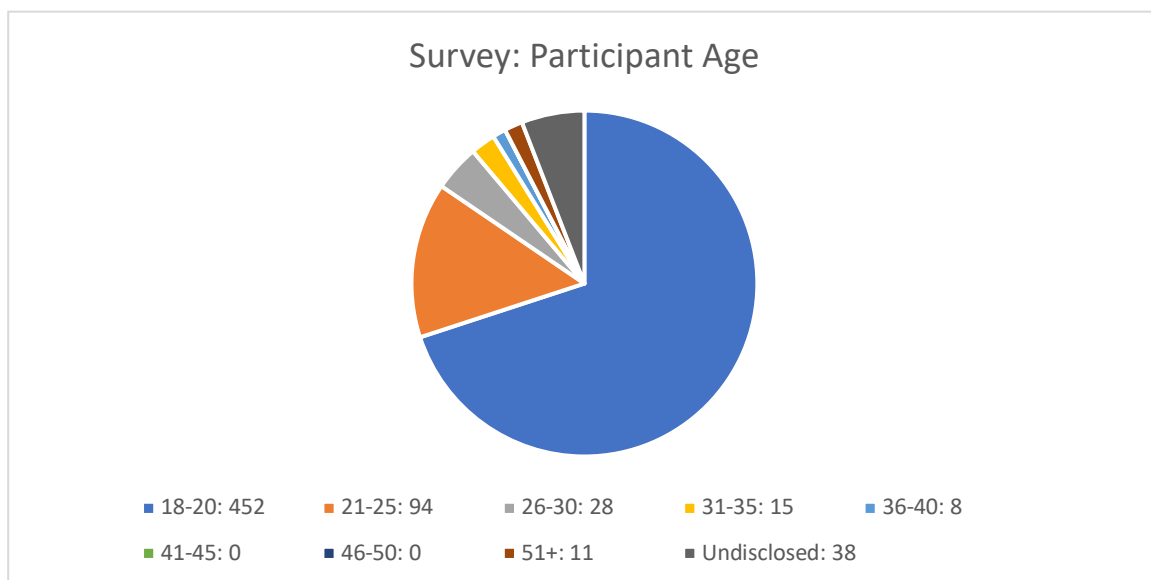
Figure 4.6: Survey participant age breakdown

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[226] See Michael Barthel et al., "Nearly Eight-in-Ten Reddit Users Get News on the Site," *Pew Research Center Report,* 2016, particularly Section 1: "Reddit news users more likely to be male, young and digital in their news preferences."

[227] "Trolling" meaning to act in a purposefully malicious manner online. See Jonathan Bishop, "Representations of 'Trolls' in Mass Media Communication: A Review of Media-Texts and Moral Panics Relating to 'Internet Trolling,'" *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 10, no. 1 (2014): 7–24; Magaldi and Davis, "Trolling Twitter: Defamation in an Online World."
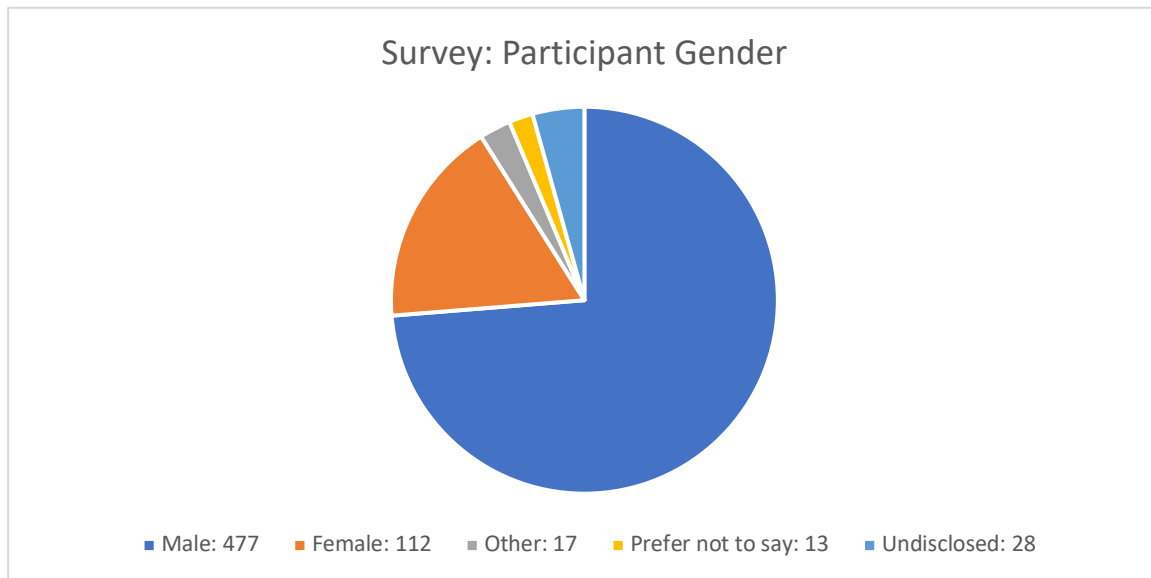
Figure 4.7: Survey participant gender breakdown

Similarly, the gender breakdown of my respondents, as seen in Figure 4.7, was more or less expected. The majority of members on Reddit as a whole are male[228] and r/memes is no exception. The number of non-male participants is actually above what I had anticipated; I am glad to have had a marginally more inclusive participant pool than I had thought.

Beyond the matter of definitions, which will be discussed more in my analysis chapters, I was able to get some interesting pieces of data from my preliminary questions including: frequency of meme use, types of meme media, meme purpose, and locations of meme use. Please see the charts below for a breakdown of these different aspects. Firstly, the participants were asked about how frequently they make use of memes, as seen in Figure 4.8. Due to the participants being members of an online forum focused on memes, it is not surprising that the vast majority respondents use memes with a high frequency. However, the degree to which this is true is still noteworthy. Also of note, there was a single respondent who declared that they "never" use memes, though this appears to be another instance of trolling (the same respondent was also one who marked their age as 51+).

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[228] See again Barthel et al., "Nearly Eight-in-Ten Reddit Users Get News on the Site" and the commentary in Footnote 35.
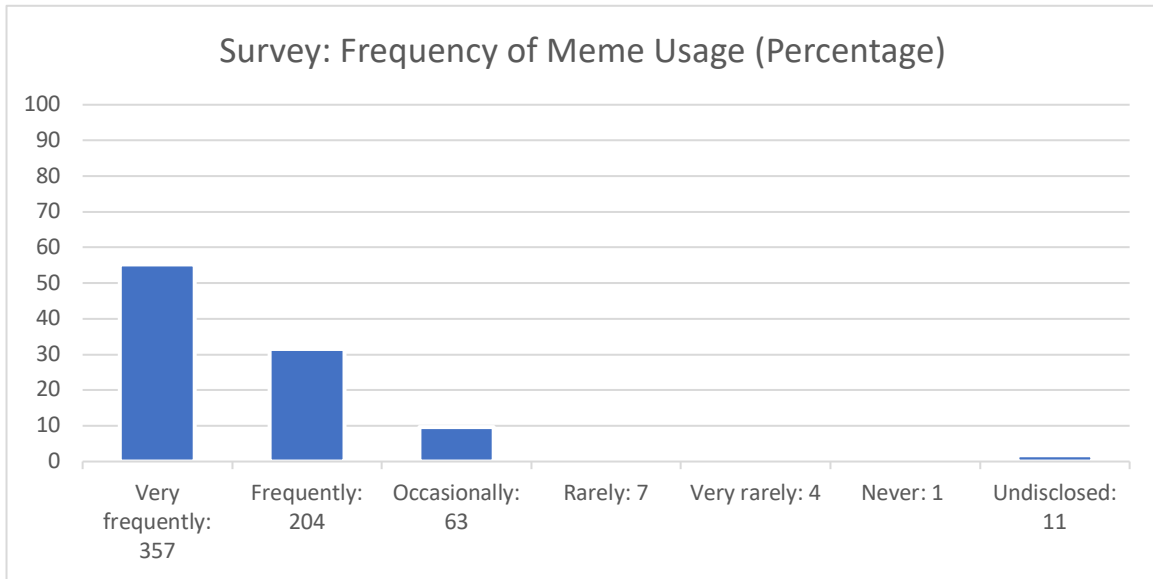
Figure 4.8: Survey participant responses regarding how frequently they make use of memes
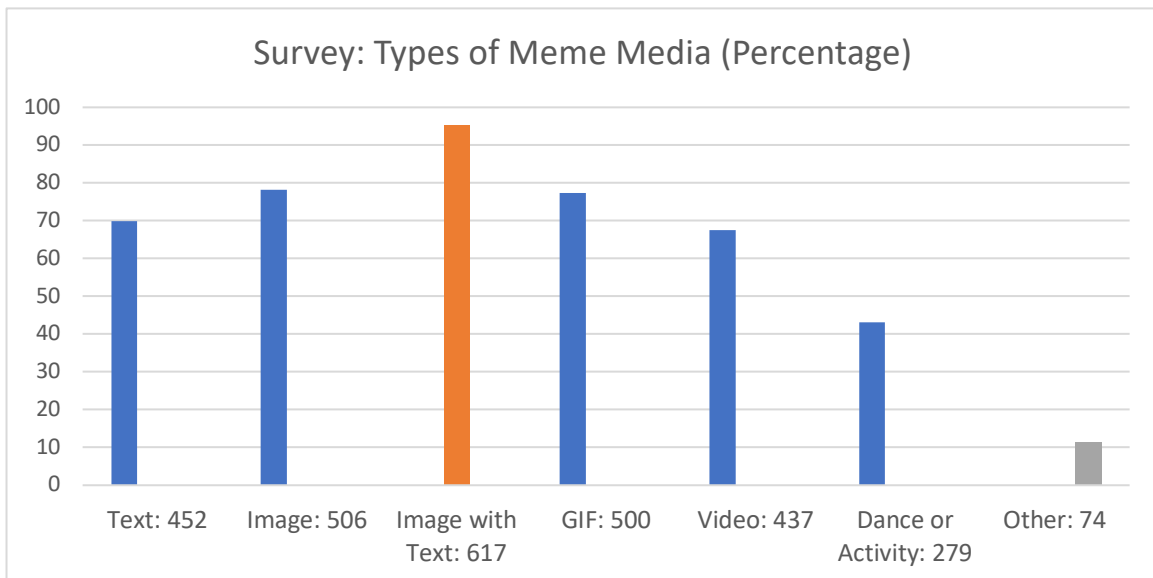
Figure 4.9: Survey participant responses regarding the media used by memes

Next, respondents were asked about the different forms that memes can take, specifically which types of media can be made into memes. As can be seen in Figure 4.9, the majority of media types were supported by 70% or more, with all but the physical activities gaining a majority of positive responses. Of note, "Image with Text" (highlighted in orange) received support from 95% of participants, which supported my choice to focus on such image macro memes in my research. However, the wide spread of answers is also noteworthy as this lack of a definitive medium does inhibit the ability of people—both academics and internet users—to articulate the precise nature of memes.

After these questions, respondents were then asked about the purpose of memes, the reasoning behind their use of this form of communication. They were able to indicate any number of purposes from the ten options provided in the list (see Section 4.3.2.1). Then, they were asked which of these ten purposes was the most prevalent in their personal use. As can be seen in Figure 4.10, "making a joke" (highlighted in orange) was the category with the most responses, with 614 selections, nearly 95% of respondents. It also received the majority of votes for "most frequent purpose" with 453 selections, or 75.5% of participants. No other purpose had more than 50 (less than 10%). These results do reinforce the fact that memes are largely meant as a source of humour. However, the other answers all found some level of support when not limited to a single choice, with all but one gaining votes from over 30% of participants. Several categories that serve important discursive purposes—reaction, emphasis, parody, and storytelling—received votes from the majority of participants.
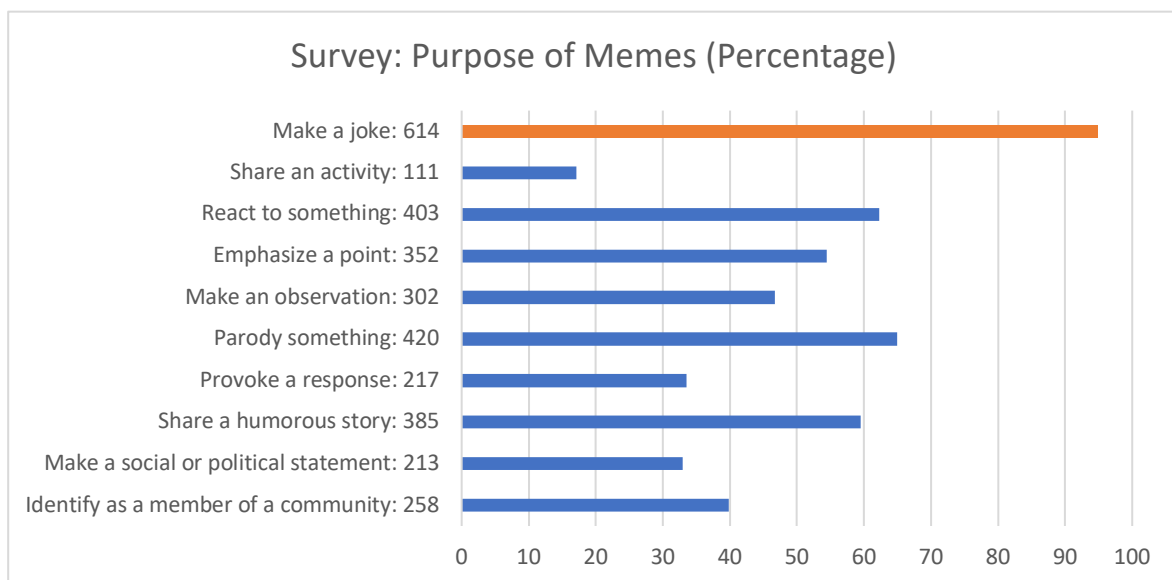
Figure 4.10: Survey participant responses regarding the purpose of memes when used

The last preliminary question centred on *where* respondents make use of memes, which produced some interesting results. The participants were provided with four different options that they could select, along with the fifth "Other" field in which they could provide their own answer. As with the aforementioned question about purpose, they were also asked to choose from among the choices which was their most frequent location of use.
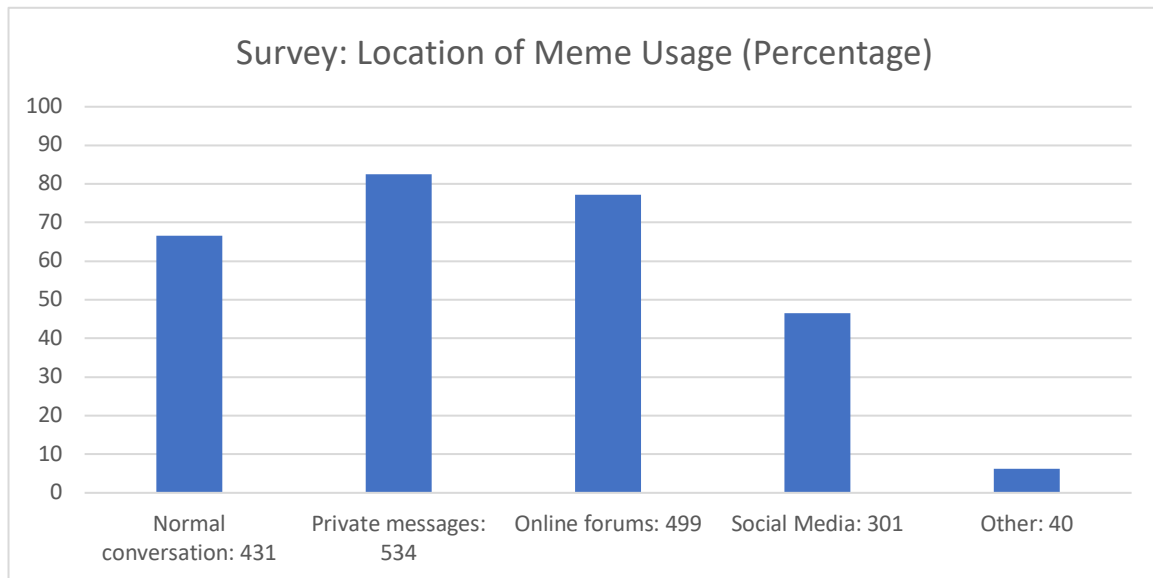
Figure 4.11: Survey participant responses regarding the primary location in which they make use of memes

As can be seen in Figure 4.11, all four categories received a large number of positive responses, with the first three all being accepted by the majority or participants, 60% of participants or more, while the fourth received over 45%, approaching a majority. Of interest, there was more support for the use of memes in everyday conversation and direct messages than on social media. Private messages was also the most popular answer, indicating that perhaps memes are most densely used in more casual or intimate settings, despite their broad reach (a topic discussed in Section 6.1).

The remainder of the survey, dealing with the meme pool discussed above, will be examined in detail beginning in Chapter 5. Of note, however, is that each meme received a significant amount of data, and the responses were relatively balanced across the pool, as can be seen in Figure 4.12. Each of the memes received between 135 and 204 responses, most falling between 165 and 185 (average 174). As such, I consider the randomisation process to have been a success, providing me with a data pool that had both breadth and depth.
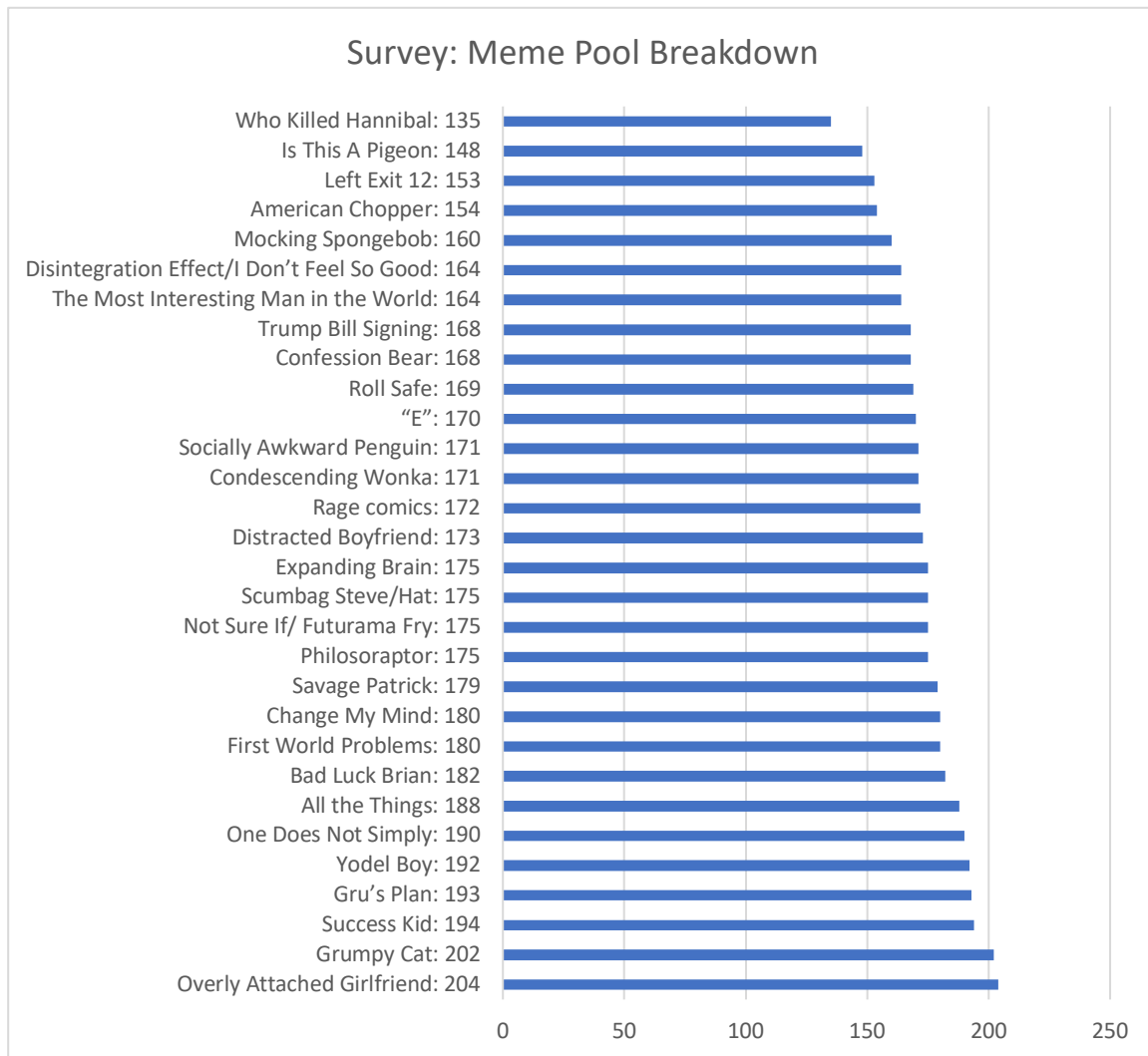
Figure 4.12: Number of survey participants who answered questions regarding each of the memes in the two meme pools

4.5 Data Analysis

With my data collected, I then moved forward into analysis. This was a multi-step, iterative process, utilising a number of tools.

4.5.1 Survey Analysis

Given the much higher volume of survey responses than anticipated, I looked for tools that could help me get my data into a more manageable form. I was able to import my data into the coding program NVivo, which allowed me to clearly sort through the answers by question and by participant. The former was especially important, as I was then able to compare answers for any given question and compile a list of all submitted responses.

For each preliminary question, I used NVivo to provide numerical breakdowns, as presented in the charts above. This was helpful for overarching comparisons between answers, especially since they featured predominantly choice-based answers rather than open fields. The data from these questions was compared to my expectations, my own findings, and to each other, especially with regards to the question about the definition of 'meme.'

For the meme pool answers, the respondents had been given a blank meme template (the image with no text) and provided with several sub-questions. They were asked to name the meme, to describe the meme's meaning, and to isolate the source of said meaning, which I referred to as "name," "meaning," and "salience" (as will be referenced in the following analysis chapters). For each meme, I collated the results for each sub-question in a spreadsheet and reviewed the answers one at a time (a total of three spreadsheets per meme, with between 135 and 204 responses, as discussed in the previous section). From these answers I coded first based on the information gleaned from KYM and studies which featured specific memes. My primary focus, however, was to isolate emergent codes from the data in addition to these initial suppositions. Such emergent codes were grouped into categories by similarity, e.g., comparing all the provided names for a meme and grouping together related titles into an overarching category. This coding process was also iterative by design, with categorisation and coding occurring both during the initial review of the data as well as during subsequent analysis. Once each of the three questions had been initially coded, the emergent categories were examined for robustness, relevance, and cohesiveness. When several small, similar categories were discovered, they were combined into a more appropriate code if there was sufficient thematic commonality. If a code grew too broad or became too diluted, it was re-examined and broken down into smaller, more consistent codes. In addition to productive codes that were directly useful to my analysis, this process also isolated answers that were not directly useful, such as the aforementioned trolling answers. These were provided with their own codes, including one that marked the meme as old or obsolete; while not directly useful to my analysis, this assessment nevertheless provided insight into the currency of the meme discussed. Each sub-question, and by extension each of the 30 memes, underwent at least three rounds of review, coding, and re-coding before the data was examined further.

Each sub-question—name, meaning, and salience—provided particular insights that informed my subsequent analysis. The name of the meme was used as an initial benchmark for recognition, and how closely this aligned with the titles used by KYM and other meme

authorities served to establish how well the meme was associated with its origin. The offered meaning of the meme was used to further cement whether a participant was aware of and understood the meme, and how similar their interpretation of the meme was KYM. This provided insight on how individuals can reshape the meaning of a meme and push it in new directions, tying into themes of meaning change, such as semantic broadening or polysemy. The question of salience offered feedback about where meaning is encoded in the meme template, providing insight into the iconic and metaphorical processes that I suggest take place when parsing a meme. The answers to this question also linked to the context built up around the meme beyond these encoded features, tying into the process of conventionalisation.

   To demonstrate this coding process, I will provide an example from my pool, the *American Chopper Argument* (see Figure 4.13 for the template). This meme features a dramatized argument using clips from the television show *American Chopper*, with a user's provided argument overlaid as text on top of the two parties,[229] as can be seen in Figure 4.14. When coding the name, I began with the 'canon' title as used by KYM and other aggregators, "American Chopper Argument." This name, while relatively straightforward, directly links to the source material from which the images are taken, an association not necessarily known by meme users. This proved to be the case among my survey participants, as only 19 of the 151 respondents used this title. There were several answers that misidentified the source television show, suggesting WWE, Pawn Stars, or similar reality television shows as the source of the picture—indicating a distance between the source material and the meme itself. I initially coded these as individual entries, though each only had a few occurrences, and as such I merged the codes into a single category, totalling 20 entries. Conversely, when coding the answers regarding the meme's meaning, 141 of the 152 answers suggested that the meaning related to some manner of argument, and no other notable codes emerged. As such, I broke down this category, ranging from a more generic code of "argument" to "heated argument," "argument over small things," "escalating argument," and "satirical argument." While this level of detail was not necessary for every code, in cases such as this one, the specificity was crucial to examining the answers, particularly to discuss nuance and difference, as with the last code relating to satire.

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[229] Adam [No surname given], "American Chopper Argument," Know Your Meme, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/american-chopper-argument.

Figure 4.13: The template for the "American Chopper Argument" meme, as presented in the online survey
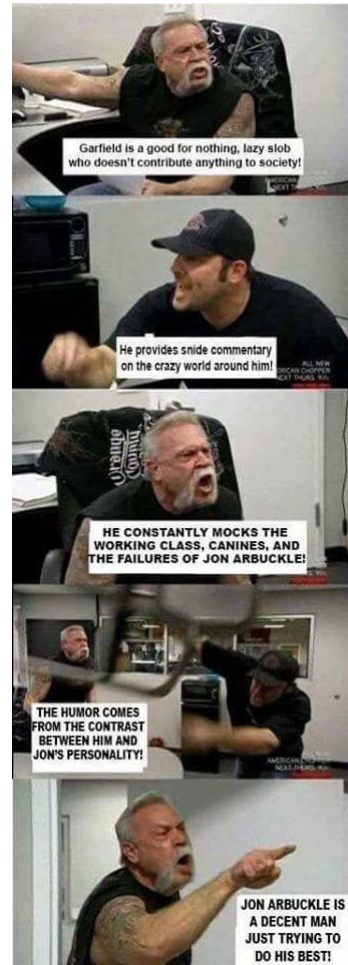
Figure 4.14: An example of the "American Chopper Argument" meme, parodying a discussion about the comic Garfield

4.5.2 Focus Group Analysis

The analysis for my focus group data went through a somewhat different process. As mentioned above, the focus groups were video recorded by two cameras faced at opposing angles, so that all participants, the researcher, and the presentation screen were visible. The positioning of the two cameras also allowed for ease of audio recording, to ensure all the voices were successfully captured in duplicate. This helped to protect against data loss both from audio disruption (crosstalk, etc.) as well as equipment failure. The video files from the cameras were downloaded and compiled, and I merged the dual recordings into a single file. The primary angle facing the majority of participants was taken first, and then the second angle, including the researcher and presentation, was overlaid in the top corner at a reduced size. The two videos were synchronised both by visual and audio alignment, resulting in a

single, unified video recording that included all audio and both camera angles. This process was carried out for all three focus group videos.

Using this combined video format, I then reviewed the recordings. I watched each a minimum of three times in their entirety, taking notes during each viewing. The overall structure of the interview allowed for some preliminary coding of each focus group, with codes on the definition of memes, meme formats, the selected example memes from my pool, and more. While reviewing each video, I organised responses and flagged points of interest that emerged organically from the conversation. From this initial coding and processing, I was left with three parallel groups of notes, which I then cross-examined. By grouping the responses to specific questions, I was able to compare the answers of the three focus groups side by side. I also grouped similar themes which appeared in different parts of the focus groups, regardless of the current prompt. This again allowed for better comparison of the data. Also, as part of this process, I noted particularly insightful comments and performed limited transcription for use in my subsequent writing. As a full discourse analysis of the focus groups was not the intent of my data collection, a full transcript of the focus groups was not produced. Furthermore, as the video files were retained in my files, any quotes or other references could be easily backchecked.

The insights gleaned from the focus groups were pivotal in the creation of Life Cycle model. As discussed in detail in the next chapter, the answers the participants provided around the definition of memes challenged my own assumptions and the consulted literature. Questions of meme format and use were also helpful in expanding my perspective about the nature of memes and led to the extension of my two-part definitional structure into a three-stage progression. The feedback on the selection of example memes from my pool were also helpful in situating many of the themes brought up by my survey participants, interrogating how the meanings of these memes have changed over time, the impact of changes to their form, recognition, conventionalisation, and how users construct the meaning of memes.

4.6 Conclusion

With my data collection complete and initial analysis undertaken, I proceeded to review the host of insights and feedback gained from my meme pool examination, survey, and focus group responses. This led to a review of my previous expectations, definitions, and

conclusions, which prompted the reconstruction of my theoretical framework of Structural and Conceptual Memes into a new model, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The Creation of the Life Cycle Model of Internet Memes

My gathered data, as outlined in the previous chapter, provided a host of interesting insights into my research questions, but also brought forth more questions, allowing me to re-examine some of my starting principles around the definition of memes. During my analysis, with each question and meme I coded and cross-examined, I was better able to refine my initial conceptualisations and overarching theoretical framework. Although my Structural and Conceptual definitions had both been adequate for my data collection efforts, my intent had always been to refine them based on my analysis of the data from my meme pool, survey, and focus groups. In this chapter, I will discuss this process of revision and refinement, as influenced by my data analysis—by the trajectory and history of the memes included in my pool and the reactions of my research participants to the different definitions and memes offered to them. Firstly, I will review the issues around meme definition and nomenclature, articulating how these themes were encountered in my gathered data. I will discuss each of the four definitions put forth in my survey and focus groups, as well as broader themes around the conceptualisation of internet memes. I will then discuss the evolution of my theoretical approach to better address the scope and scale of memes, as described by academic literature, the history of the examples in my meme pool, *and* the feedback of my research participants. By incorporating theoretical, historical, and practical perspectives, I intend to create a more comprehensive framework with which to linguistically engage with internet memes. To this end, I expanded upon the previous binary, constructing a tripartite theoretical structure which I call the Life Cycle model of internet memes. This model reinterprets the Structural and Conceptual definitions as two different stages in a progression, with an added stage that explores the transition from the former to the latter. I will outline my rationale for revising my two created definitions into a three-stage system before elaborating upon these stages—their qualities and their characteristics—in detail in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

5.1 The Definition of Memes, Revisited

The precise definition of memes has been a core aspect of my research from its inception. Therefore, as discussed in Chapter 3, I was confronted with many diverse definitions and undertook the endeavour to create my own, more comprehensive ones. The definitions from the literature on memes are often all-encompassing and non-specific. The

word 'meme' itself can be problematic, as it is not only an appropriated term that has been recontextualised in a new environment (thus leading to ambiguity as to how much of its original meaning is still relevant), but the meaning itself can so broad as to be counterproductive for analytical purposes. My own distinction between *instance* and *iteration*, as described in Chapter 1, was a necessary division in order to address this breadth. Despite using the word 'meme' throughout my previous chapters, it can describe several distinct categories. "Grumpy Cat" is a meme, but Grumpy Cat is not a singular entity; a particular instance of Grumpy Cat, an image of their likeness with text, is an example of the meme as a concept, but this singular artefact is also referred to by the same term. Not only does 'meme' describe the category of all units that are tied to the character of Grumpy Cat, but each of those units are themselves also referred to as memes. So 'meme' can refer to both the singular items and the connective tissue between them, which is what drove me to my original hypothetical definitions of Structural and Conceptual Memes, to describe the individual units and their shared context.

The conceptions of 'meme' which I encountered in the literature—and subsequently echoed in my data—often suggested that this dual and somewhat paradoxical nature is integral to 'meme-ness.' But can a meme exist beyond such limits? What of an individual meme that lacks such shared context—would that not also be a meme, despite being only half of this semantic and pragmatic pair? Or, on the other hand, what about a shared idea that no longer needs distinct visual or textual elements and fully entered the common ground? After all, "Grumpy Cat" as an idea is no longer merely a collection of captioned images—the meme has spawned merchandise, comics, and even a film (as discussed in Section 8.1). While there is a great deal of overlap, and the lines between such distinctions is blurry, it is evident that there are a host of separate items with differing criteria and scope, all of which are referred to by a single term: meme.

One of my focus group participants summarised the problem in this way:

> Because it is on the internet, and like so many things on the internet nowadays, it evolves so quickly and takes on new meaning every day, it's almost impossible to put down a specific thing; you can have a generalised outline of what a meme is, but you can't say the essence of what a meme is because it becomes something new every day.

In order to gain further insight on these differing definitions, I presented four different definitions to my research participants, to gain feedback from individuals familiar with memes from their own life experience, rather than in the abstract. The support (or lack thereof) of my participants was not meant to be a purely binary indicator of success or failure. Rather, I took their commentary as a new perspective, with commendations as indications of positive features that aligned with their personal knowledge, and critiques pointing to potential weaknesses or gaps in their coverage. I did not consider any of the definitions as inherently wrong, merely incomplete, and looked to my participants to use their own experience to identify such shortcomings—particularly with regard to the definitions that I had created myself. In the following sections, I will present an overview of the information and opinions gleaned from my data related to the definition of memes, including feedback on the definitions I sampled from the literature, my original dual definitions, and their own ideas about the true definition of "meme."

5.1.1 Nooney and Portwood-Stacer Definition

> *"digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from."*[230]

This definition—as with all four definitions—was met with a mixed reaction among my participants. In the online survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed that the given definition successfully described the word 'meme.' For the Nooney and Portwood-Stacer definition, 240 participants selected that it was an acceptable, while 407 indicated the opposite. So, while there was a reasonably sized cohort who agreed with it, it did not find overwhelming acceptance among my survey participants.

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[230] Nooney and Portwood-Stacer, "One Does Not Simply: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Internet Memes," 249.
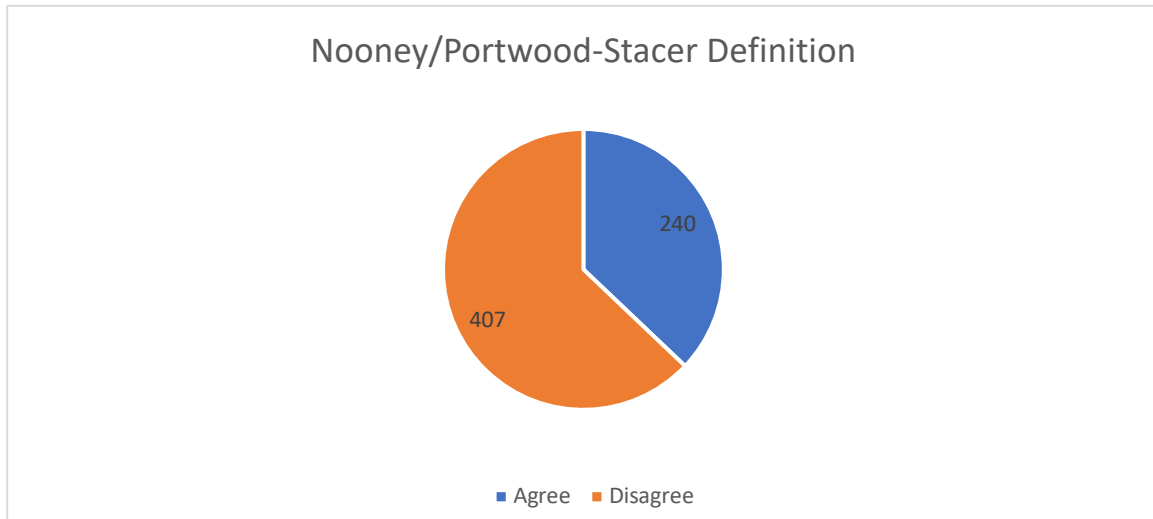
Figure 5.1: Survey responses on the acceptability of the Nooney/Portwood-Stacer definition of memes

My focus group participants were a bit more accepting, one even stating outright that it was a relatively accurate description and another calling it "satisfying." In particular, the participants agreed that the ongoing process of recycling content leading to "a long string of modifications" and "modifications of modifications" was well-represented here. Several participants also positively noted inclusivity of medium used here, with textual, visual, *and* auditory elements all recognised as part of memes. Given that my focus had been primarily on image macros, which are exclusively built of text and images, this led to some very interesting discourse about the role of audio-based memes, including music and other sound-based elements; these can even interplay with other mediums, such as with *rickrolling*.[231]

However, while the focus was largely positive, they also had reservations about this approach. For this definition, as well as some of the others, many participants felt that it was too rigid to encapsulate the ongoing evolution of memes, in use, context, and format. One stated that "the overarching definition of the meme is branching out to different sectors" and that "you've got the originals which very much follow that [Nooney and Portwood-Stacer] definition, but then you've got subcategories which maybe do not." Also, while this definition does point to existing "internet infrastructures," it does not elaborate on the context and community elements that many of the participants suggested are core aspects of what makes memes what they are.

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[231] This refers to the practice of tricking internet users into clicking a seemingly pertinent link that instead sends them to a video of the Rick Astley song "Never Gonna Give You Up." Such action is done as a form of online prank. See Jamie Dubs, "Rickroll," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rickroll.

Overall, this definition highlights many important aspects of memes, including their multimedia and multimodal forms, as well as their adaptability and chain of modifications. However, this emphasis on the structure of memes does not incorporate the more social and contextual elements of memes, which is why I believe it was not totally well-received. As such, I wanted to ensure that my subsequent revisions to my own definitional structure included similar elements of mutability, modification, and diverse media, while not omitting the broader social elements at play.

5.1.2 Meikle Definition

"shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted but also adapted by others."[232]

This definition was the least popular of all the definitions I used in my data collection. Of the survey respondents, 226 found it acceptable, while 421 did not—a similar percentage to the previous definition, but with even fewer positive responses. Even so, while the majority of survey participants rejected it as a definition, there was nevertheless a sizeable percentage that agreed with it, indicating there was some appeal, just not as widespread.
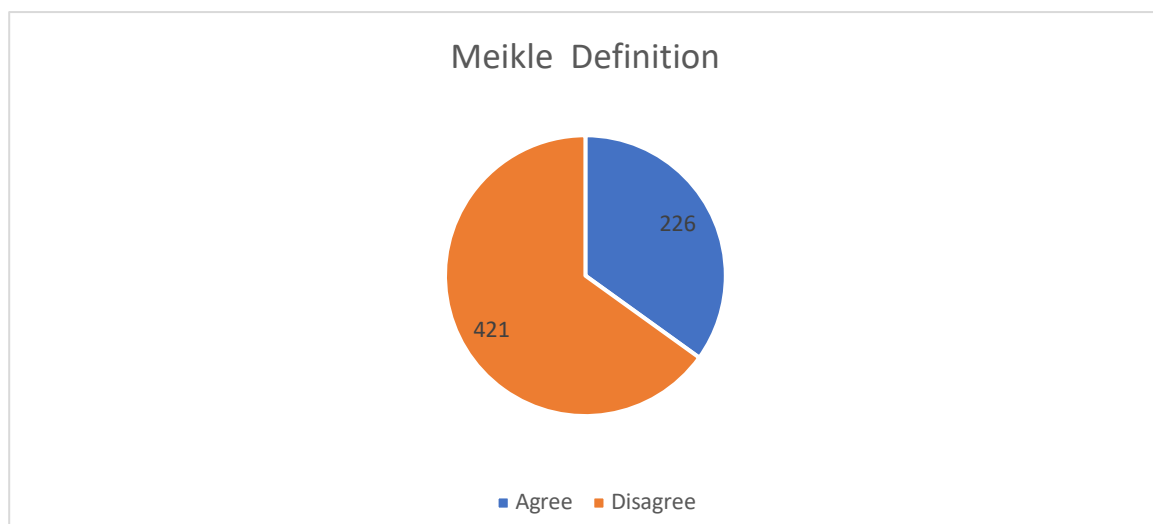
Figure 5.2: Survey responses on the acceptability of the Meikle definition of memes

A primary point of contention for this definition among many of the focus group participants was around the term "rule-based"—there was debate about what exactly this

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[232] Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, 55.

entailed and how it applied to memes in general. Some participants insisted that memes have no rules that limit their use, while others offered that while individual memes were governed by certain rules—similar to "rules of language," markedly close to grammatical principles—memes as a general concept did not have unifying rules governing their form and function. "You can't apply rules to something that is super malleable," one participant stated. Nevertheless, others suggested that there were some guidelines for meme formation and usage, but that they were "unspoken rules." Thus, I believe a large part of the debate misinterpreted Meikle's original intention, as such rules do not necessarily need to be formalised, explicitly mandated by a recognised authority. Rather, these rules need only be conventionalised, accepted as a given principle through repeated use and group adoption. Even without direct and rigid rules, such 'unspoken' limits and guidance can allow cohesive norms to become accepted by a community, as is the case with many aspects of vernacular change, such as slang, neologisms, and semantic broadening. It is primarily such silent understandings that Meikle cites as the underlying context of meme production.

Overall, this definition points to several key facets of memes, such as the diffusion and modification of memes, in a similar vein to Nooney and Portwood-Stacer. Meikle's proposal that memes are encoded "representations", which speak to larger contexts and relationships is also important, and strikes deeper at the intricate network of memes than the previous definition. However, though the definition offers these insights into what memes become, it does not address their 'physical' qualities or where they begin—before such "rules" can come into place. Furthermore, the tension between Meikle's wording and the experience of my participants prompted my own efforts to ensure that my definitional structure was more readily understood, especially when removed from its broader context. As such, Meikle's definition highlighted the more social and conceptual side of memes, which I wanted to preserve in my own approach. This focus needed to not come at the expense of a discussion of the multimodal and structural aspects of memes, however.

5.1.3 "Structural" Definition

A graphical or textual element which is used by internet users to frame or emphasize a situation or statement in an evocative way

This is the first of the two definitions which I created prior to my data collection, synthesising elements from across the literature as well as incorporating my own ideas on

meme form and function (see Section 3.2.1). I modelled this definition on those highlighting the importance of form over function, emphasising the 'physical' aspects of internet memes. The Nooney and Portwood-Stacer definition was one such influence. I sought to focus here primarily on meme structure, citing the pairing of media with conversation, as with Nooney and Portwood-Stacer. However, I wanted to highlight that it was not necessarily their "digital object" that was the sole focus, but the pairing of such an element with a connected narrative or discourse that ultimately provided meaning.

My Structural definition was the most popular of the four presented. On the survey, this definition received 355 'yes' and 292 'no' responses, making it the only definition to have a majority positive response. Though not an overwhelming margin, the results were encouraging, indicating that with revision, this definition could become more effective.

Structural Definition

292   355

■ Agree ■ Disagree

Figure 5.3: Survey responses on the acceptability of my Structural definition of memes

My focus group participants were broadly receptive to this definition, with several comments such as "Seems about right," and "I would agree with that." There was relative consensus in two of the three groups that this definition was serviceable, particularly for more "traditional" or "classical" type memes: image macros and the like, which were the focus of my research. However, some members of the groups suggested that other media was also critical to the ongoing evolution of memes. There were a few staunch advocates that memes were exclusively the domain of images and text, with such 'purists' making the case that other forms of media, such as gifs and video did not qualify, but were something else entirely. In contrast, others felt strongly that sounds, music, and moving images were all significant elements to memes, especially in the context of new platforms and content

creation tools. While the 'classical' image macro was the default on forums, message boards, and even social media such as Facebook, new platforms such as Vine and TikTok have broadened the capabilities of memes to include increasingly varied types of media. Based on my experiences and the focus group discussions as a whole, I am inclined to agree that such new forms of media are in fact memes; they are a natural development of the form in line with the technology available to meme users and creators. However, the full breadth of this debate is beyond the scope of my research—although a trajectory for subsequent research— as I focused almost exclusively on the more 'traditional' image macro meme.

My first definition was also not without problems. In addition to its limited forms of media—image and text—it was also limited in its overall scope. Even within the terms of graphical and textual elements, this definition missed some crucial elements. According to one participant, memes are "evolving so much that…it's almost another language form. You can communicate…just by referencing a specific meme, or referencing even the text on the meme without the picture." My Structural definition did not dive into those deeper themes of memes, issues of community and communication, which Meikle touched upon. This was intentional, as I meant for the Structural and Conceptual definitions to complement one another. The Structural definition served to document memes earlier in their development, which relied on such structural elements as static captions and images, while my Conceptual definition was meant to integrate the ideas the participant mentioned, of memes that can be understood without their original context and cues.

Nevertheless, I had not incorporated any of the themes of modification and adaptability, as with the two definitions from the literature. As such, while this definition had some important qualities, it lacked a few key elements, even when considered as one half of the binary I was creating between Structural and Conceptual Memes.

5.1.4 "Conceptual" Definition

*A shared point of reference which may be recalled by internet users using
specific graphical or textual cues*

This was the second of my constructed definitions. It was inspired by Meikle's definition and other literature that focused on meme function over form. I therefore looked at the meme as less of a discrete unit and more of an abstraction. As discussed above, my goal for this definition was as a complement to my Structural definition, to illustrate memes that

had become conventionalised to such a degree that their original context and form were no longer necessary to be understood. In lieu of Meikle's terminology of "representations" and "interactions," I opted to utilise terms relating to reference and context.

My Conceptual Meme definition was not as well received as my first. With 269 "yes" responses and 378 "no" responses on my survey, my Conceptual definition was the second most popular of the four. However, unlike my Structural definition, it failed to garner majority support. Its ratio was more similar to the two literature-sourced definitions, though overall skewed more favourably than either of them.
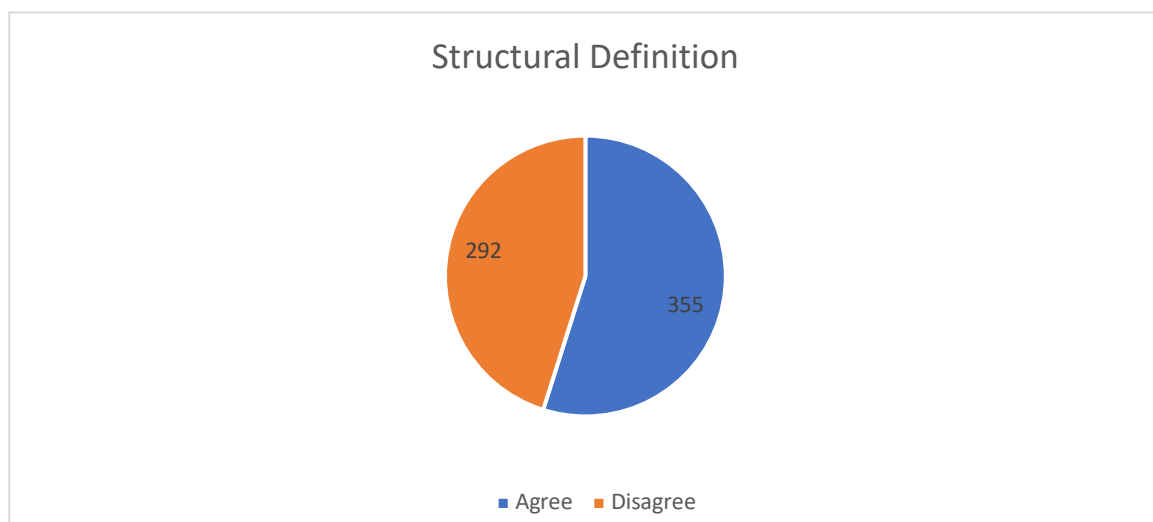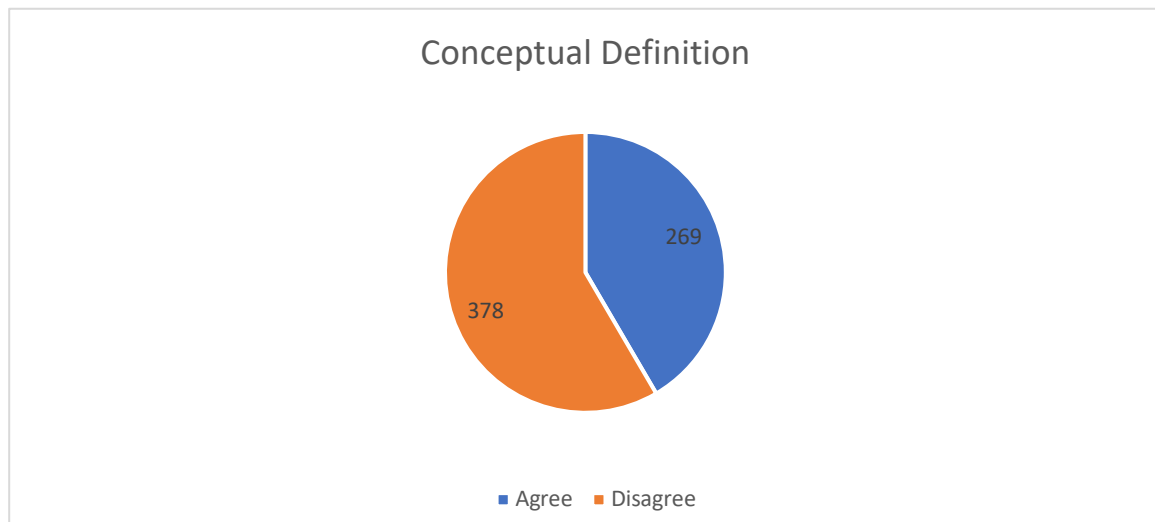

Figure 5.4: Survey responses on the acceptability of my Conceptual definition of memes

Many of my focus group participants were receptive of this definition, with one even stating "I like that one" after viewing this definition following the other three. Several participants noted the ties to broader internet culture and appreciated that as an incorporated element—though they did note that this perhaps needed a caveat to limit 'internet culture' to a more specific group, such as English-speaking or Western internet culture. This topic also raised questions about the size and scope of "internet users," and whether memes need broad appeal and recognition in order to be proper memes. A couple of participants also pointed positively to the terminology of a shared point of reference, a fixed part of internet culture, as memes "always come back"—even as memes lose popularity, they still remain part of the collective cultural consciousness and often resurface again after their popularity has initially waned. This persistence of older memes is also important as, according to one participant, "once you get a meaning [for a meme], it's never going to lose that." With sufficient conventionalisation, a meme can become engrained, even fossilised, within online discourse.

Yet, there were several detractors for this definition. One participant noted that it felt "vague" while another stated "I don't get it." There were some reservations about the term "point of reference" and whether this made the definition too broad, or even possibly too narrow. The exclusion of audio and other forms of media was seen as a flaw by some of the participants, as with the previous definition. The same 'purists' who thought my Structural definition was too all-encompassing had the same remarks here, questioning whether such stripped-down cues still constituted memes, or something different. All in all, I do not think this form of the definition effectively conveyed my idea of a meme that had moved beyond its 'physical' origins and entered into the common ground. Again, the critiques from my participants were not taken to mean the definition was a failure, but that it needed revision in order to be better understood and to better encapsulate its meaning.

I personally struggled to formulate this definition in a way that captured the meaning I intended; the abstracted nature of memes once they have been stripped of their structural elements was difficult to describe in a clear and concise manner. Although terminology relating to referents allowed me to formulate this initial Conceptual definition, I had planned from the beginning of my data collection to revise my working definitions based on further analysis. Given the feedback from the survey and the focus groups, it was clear that this definition in particular needed more work. This revision process would ultimately lead me to rethink my overall model, as the Conceptual definition was too open-ended and the division between Structural and Conceptual was insufficiently explored.

5.1.5 Definition Through Medium?

The responses from my participants, both within the survey and the focus groups, were far from cohesive. Even the issue of medium—something which might have served as a clearer point of delineation of what memes are, of what is or is not a meme—was contentious, echoing the variety of opinions found in the literature. In my survey and focus groups, I had also offered an additional definition of *"anything shared on the internet"* as a kind of placebo definition. This was done under the assumption that it would not be a popular definition, but an easy generalisation for respondents to either fall back on if they disagreed with all the definitions, or to use as a baseline to contrast with the more detailed definitions. As expected, this option was broadly rejected, with only 35 agreements versus 612 rejections on the survey and little to no support from my focus groups. In fact, this was one of the few

issues which was constant across all three focus groups, that memes were more than just digital shareable media, even though within and between groups there was a lack of consensus about what exactly memes are and what forms they can take.

So, while there was agreement that memes took on specific forms, there was debate about what forms those were. The survey results were more conclusive, if broader in scope. As seen in Figure 5.5, most types of media found good traction, with all but the physical activities gaining a majority of positive responses. Of note, "Image with Text" (in orange) received almost unanimous support from the survey participants, with 617 of 647 affirmative responses. My focus group participants were similarly in favour of the combination of image and text as a primary medium of memes. Together, this supports my choice to focus on such image macro memes in my research. However, the wide spread of answers is also noteworthy as this lack of a definitive medium provides fewer bounds for the definition of memes.
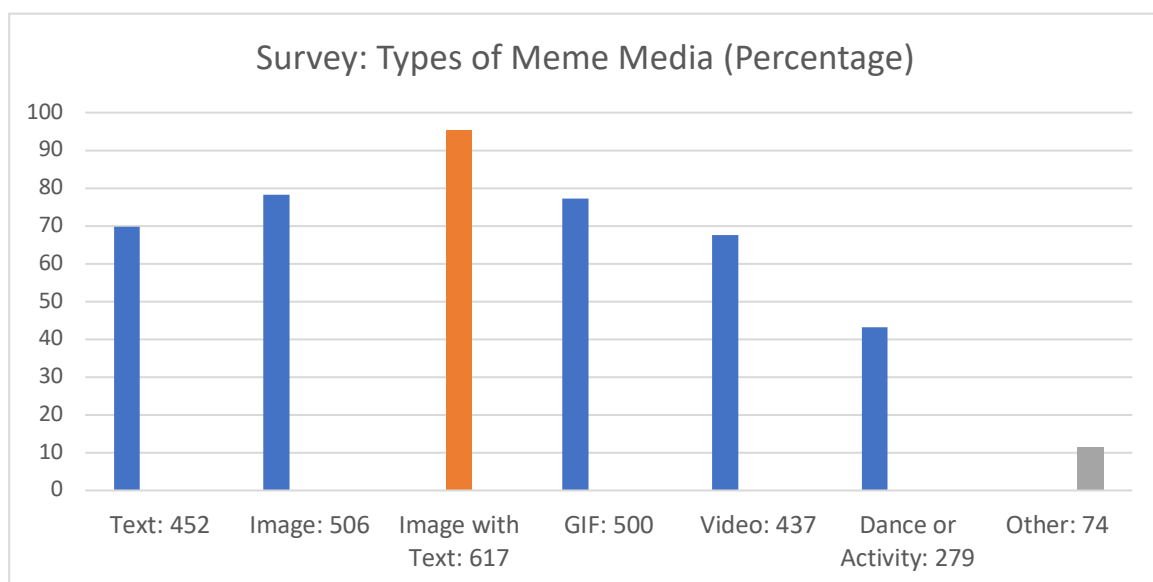
Figure 5.5: Survey responses about the different types of media which can constitute as memes. Participants were allowed to select as many media as they felt were relevant to memes.

As mentioned above, my focus group participants were split amongst those who viewed memes as only being images combined with text and those who lobbied to include additional media within the sphere of memes. There was support from most of the participants to include video-based items and gifs into the scope of memes, as well as the aforementioned urging to include auditory elements. The more hard-line stance was taken only by a few participants, though even those who were less restrictive noted that such sentiments do exist in certain parts of the internet community. My 'purists' may have had a

more limited view of memes which does not align with most of my findings, but even then had many useful insights. They admitted that memes as a whole are very difficult to define, discussed the iterative elements of memes, and had an intriguing debate as to whether text-only memes existed (which failed to reach a consensus). Furthermore, a few of the participants discussed how the meme templates—the image half of the image macro without any text, which I used in the prompting slides for the focus group—do not have a meaning of their own, or at least only have a small amount of inherent meaning, which is further elaborated on through the additional text. This proved to be an important distinction that helped lead me to some aspects of my new model, particularly the notion of locus of meaning (see Section 5.2.2.3). Broader interpretations of memes from other participants were also influential, such as the statement that "The beauty of the meme itself is that it can be anything." This was echoed by another participant who defined memes as "really fast-paced, ever-changing, super fluid, relatable stuff…And I say stuff because there's no one thing that's a meme." Such a sentiment further demonstrated the need for a theoretical model that encompassed not only the mechanical features of memes in their early or late development, but addressed memes across their evolution and iterations. As such, I wanted to ensure that as I revised my model, it was applicable to this "ever-changing, super fluid" nature.

5.1.6 Definition Through Purpose?

As outlined in the previous section, a definition based on the parameters of media, and therefore form, seemed to be untenable. The breadth of potential media provided few bounds or essential criteria with which to construct an effective definition. Therefore, I looked next to the matter of function in search for such limits. In both my survey and focus groups, participants were asked about the purpose of memes, and I received a variety of answers. In the build-up to my data collection, I developed a list of ten meme categories based on purpose. These were drawn from existing literature and discourse around memes, developed in tandem with the meme pool as described in Section 4.3.2.1 . The list was meant to be broad, but not exhaustive, an intermediate iteration to gather feedback, much like my Structural and Conceptual definitions, which I knew would require re-evaluation after my data collection. The ten primary purposes to use memes with accompanying responses from my survey can be seen in Figure 5.6. Of note, respondents were able to indicate any number

of options from the list and subsequently asked which of these purposes was the most prevalent in their use.
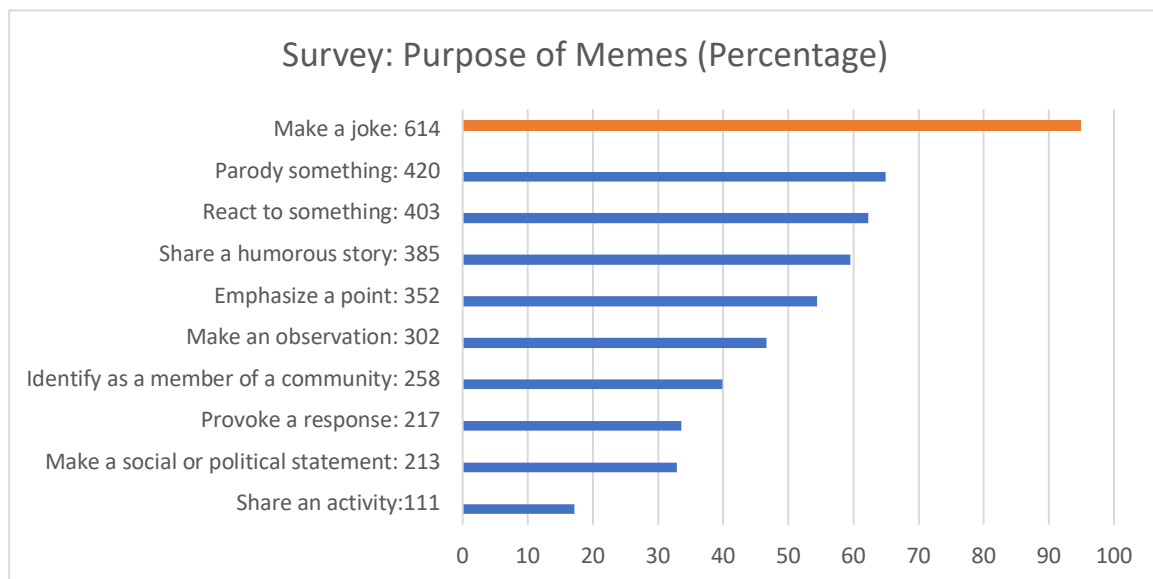
Figure 5.6: Survey responses about the different purposes for meme use. Participants were allowed to select as many purposes as they felt were relevant to memes, as well as which purpose was the most frequent in their experience, as shown in orange.

Making a joke was the category with the most responses, with 614 selections. It also received the majority of votes for "most frequent purpose" with 453 selections, while no other purpose has more than 50 endorsements. These results do reinforce the fact that memes are largely meant as a source of humour. However, the other answers all found some level of support, and several—such as *reaction*, *emphasis*, and *storytelling*—serve important and distinctive discursive purposes beyond purely humour. Furthermore, while *socio-political statement* was less popular than many of the others, it still found support among approximately a third of participants and was a sentiment echoed by much of the literature (see examples throughout Chapter 2) as well as many of my focus group participants.

My focus group data further corroborated my findings on purpose. Humour was constantly highlighted as an important aspect of memes. One respondent offered that "any meme that makes someone laugh is a good meme," to which another added: "Or pisses someone off." This simple exchange illustrates the nuance of meme use, in that while humour is a central element it is not necessarily always the sole or core purpose behind their use. It also highlighted the purpose of *provocation* as discussed below. There were many participants who discussed memes being used to express more complex and even negative emotions, ranging from political frustrations to personal struggles. Memes were seen by some

as a way of being able to cope with such negative emotions, to recontextualise them into a more positive form—to "take the edge off"—or at least find empathy and solidarity among the internet community.[233] There were also strong themes of relatability and solidarity throughout the focus group discussions, with many participants elaborating on memes being used as a means of sharing not just for the sake of sharing, but to relate important experiences, express parts of their identity, and to connect with members of a wider community. The extent of this community could vary significantly from meme to meme, with some meant only for niche communities (such as a specific friend group or fandom), while others had broader appeal (such as a larger subculture or age group).

There is a subset of memes that was picked up across multiple sessions, which are designed to *provoke* or antagonise (to a degree), such as *rickrolling*. These memes are an intriguing case as they seem to carry little information themselves, unlike 'typical' memes, which I suggest are defined by carrying a distinct message. Instead, these memes are used much like an in-joke—seemingly meaningless to a casual observer, but readily understood by the initiated. As such, while these provocative memes do not follow the normal structure or purpose of memes, I believe they highlight this shared sense of community. Only those who understand the joke are able to parse the meme, to catch the reference, and therefore these prank memes serve to identify invested members of the community versus newcomers. Memes, in their broadest sense, seem to bind internet users together. In the words of one participant, memes "unite our generation" and are "the closest we'll ever be to world peace." This atypical type of meme then, represents an offshoot of the more conventionalised forms, a variant as with Lakoff's radial categories.[234] Such prank-type memes do not convey explicit information like other memes, but serve the same community-building purpose.

As such, while memes serve an important community networking function, I propose that their primary purpose is expressive. This was a constantly recurring theme across all of my focus groups, that memes can be used to communicate something—information, experience, and particularly emotion—in a more effective way. Communication is inherently incomplete and inferential, but verbal and in-person modes of communication have the added benefits of various paralinguistic signs, such as tone, pace, facial expressions, gestures, and

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[233] This echoes the themes of several studies which connect memes with emotional health and negative feelings, such as Rieger and Klimmt, "The Daily Dose of Digital Inspiration 2: Themes and Affective User Responses to Meaningful Memes in Social Media"; Akram et al., "Eye Tracking and Attentional Bias for Depressive Internet Memes in Depression"; Griffin, "Living Through It: Anger, Laughter, and Internet Memes in Dark Times."
[234] Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, 91-114..

more to provide additional layers of meaning.[235] Textual digital communication does not have any of these advantages, and as such internet users have had to create methods to better convey their meaning. This has taken subtler forms, as with the use of novel words and phrases, and formatting such as bolding or capitals. However, "sometimes words just don't cut it" according to one participant; another explained, "I can't type my anger," and as such "I get really annoyed because capital letters aren't big enough, so I'll send a gif." Memes allow individuals to both better portray the intensity of a given emotion, as well as give form to feelings they cannot fully articulate. They convey "stuff you can't put into words" (a statement accompanied by a grasping gesture), serving as an "easier way to express yourself," and the result is "more accurate to what I'm actually trying to express." This unspeakable quality was brought up repeatedly, though not always purposely, sometimes weaving into the overall discussion and its subtext. However, sometimes the statement was quite overt: "There is a meaning, and everyone gets what I'm trying to get to, but…if you explain it, it just doesn't sound right. But put it in a meme, and you're like 'I get it, I get that.'" I contend that this effectiveness at expressing difficult to articulate ideas is due to memes' iconic and metaphorical elements, as discussed in previous chapters (see Section 3.1.3). The iconic features allow for easier representation of emotion, even if the representation is indirect. Complementing this iconicity is metaphor, which is used even in normal language to encapsulate something new using familiar terms.

Yet efficacy is not the only benefit of memes in trying to articulate complex concepts. As a singular unit which can be transmitted rapidly in its whole form, memes are easier to produce and to share. There is greater communicative efficiency, as, according to a participant, one "can have a whole paragraph of context and meaning in a single meme." Despite the intricacies of what one wants to say, "you can get your whole point across easily" with "one picture, one clip, one post." Another participant even went so far as to jokingly claim that "memes have surpassed language at this point," given that they can encode so much information into a comparatively small unit. Though hyperbolic, this does represent the depth and complexity that memes can possess. A third participant compared memes to certain compound words and expressions found in other languages, such as German, which denote a very specific and detailed emotion or mental state (e.g., *Torschlusspanik*).

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[235] D. Alan Cruse, *Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 124.

While the analogy is apt, this discourse led me to a parallel conclusion—that the linguistic feature memes most closely resemble is figurative language. Memes take use of existing text and media in a novel way, presenting an unorthodox or impossible situation that conveys the spirit of the intended meaning in a non-literal manner, and do so with flair. Much as figurative language is used to emphasise and enhance normal speech and text, memes are similarly used to capture emotions and experiences in a more visceral and imaginative way. In particular, the connection between memes and metaphor has already been described in the previous chapters, and will be discussed in the context of my new model in Section 5.2.1 below.

To summarise, one participant stated that "you get a lot of things out of memes; it's such a versatile tool for communication, for self-expression, for creativity." As such, much like with the proposition of a definition via medium, I was left without a concise definitional structure though purpose. As both form and function—the two essential approaches derived from the literature—had been unsuccessful at providing a comprehensive definition for memes, I was left to reflect on this tension. Along with the other questions raised by my participant feedback, I set about to re-evaluate my own created definitions and produce something more definitive.

5.1.7 A New Approach to Definition

I had arrived at the conclusion that a single, concise definition encompassing the scale and scope of memes would be misleading or counterproductive before I began my fieldwork, as evidenced by my dual definitions of Structural and Conceptual Memes. After my data analysis was complete, and with the feedback of the above sections in mind, I felt that this binary definitional structure was underdeveloped. The Structural-Conceptual division was useful as a starting point, in organising my data collection and eliciting useful information from my participants. However, I was never wholly satisfied with this theoretical model, as it only encapsulates part of what memes can be. It allows for discussion of the mechanics of the Structural Memes with linguistic theory—namely iconicity and metaphor—but it does not engage as deeply with the Conceptual side. With the exception of a few pragmatic connections (i.e., assumed common ground), my Conceptual definition was left very open, a theoretical cliff-hanger. My proposed dichotomy also engaged less deeply with the social and semantic themes that emerged from my analysis, such as variance and stratification. This

dichotomy was also not intended to be a true division, but more of a spectrum, with the two complementary definitions serving as bookends for the linguistic processes I sought to describe. Structural Memes could ultimately become Conceptual Memes given time and community effort, and Conceptual Memes were predominantly formed through this process, as an evolution of more rigid units. I therefore wanted to better describe my definitional approach as two halves of a whole, a continuous process rather than a stark division.

To this end, I considered what several of my participants referred to as the "life cycle" of memes—their progression from "the original all the way to the completely obscured." As one participant suggested, "There is the like, 'food chain' of memes now…Where like, a meme's life will start on Reddit, and then once it hits kinda like puberty, it'll jump over to like Twitter, and from Twitter it will end up on Facebook. And once it hits Instagram, it's dead." There was acknowledgement from many focus group participants that such a form of transition existed, beginning with a smaller-scale meme used in a fringe community before reaching a wider audience and taking on new forms or meanings, shifting from an isolated in-joke to a conventionalised, recognisable symbol. This mapped very closely to my original Structural and Conceptual definitions, though the area of overlap between them—where conventionalisation and change primarily occurred—was underexplored. This prompted the addition of a third definition, of a stage *between* Structural and Conceptual, and thus the emergence of a three-part system in lieu of a simple binary. The concept of stages, rather than rigid statuses, furthered the sense of progression that I wanted to convey. This revision of my approach therefore shifted two competing definitions into a theoretical model consisting of three complementary stages, viewed as an evolving progression from one type of meme to the next. Although a broader, tripartite structure, this conceptualisation was more unified than my previous two-part definition, as it viewed memes as a singular entity undergoing a series of changes which could be divided into three phases, rather than one type of unit fully transforming into another.

This shift in my approach carried over the majority of the theoretical foundations that I had built my initial framework upon. The themes of community, cognition, iconicity, and metaphor were all relevant and at the forefront of this new model, which allowed me to explore them more fully, as there were now three stages to examine rather than two. Critically, the second stage serving as a middle ground between 'beginning' and 'end' gave space for a more rigorous analysis of the linguistic qualities of memes, allowing for nuance and gradual change rather than binary delineation. To this end, I consulted the literature, the

historical progression of the memes in my research pool, and the feedback about those memes from my survey and focus group participants, and isolated several key features that defined the progression of memes from their early, more structured forms to their later, more conceptual ones. These elements will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.2 The Life Cycle Model of Internet Memes

With a revised three-part structure, defined by characteristics that changed as the stages progressed, I had the format of a new theoretical approach: the Life Cycle model of internet memes. The first stage is an expansion on my Structural definition, focusing on the mechanical aspect of memes which is paramount early in their development. During this stage, elements of iconicity and metaphor are at the forefront and meaning is formed by these processes. The third stage is a revision of my Conceptual definition, focusing on the abstract qualities of conventionalised memes. During this stage, the aforementioned linguistic processes of iconicity and metaphor give way to other facets of language change, such as polysemy and social variance, as the conventionalised meme has moved beyond its static form. The new second stage draws on elements of both previous definitions, describing the transitionary period between the structural and conceptual, the mechanical and the abstract. During this stage, memes undergo the process of conventionalisation itself, but it has not fully run its course; thus, memes rely on a combination of linguistic processes to derive meaning, sitting between parsing and full abstraction.

The main theme I had focused on early in my analysis was form versus function, paired with iconicity, metaphor, and meaning change. My Life Cycle model reconciles the clash of form versus function, because rather than being at odds, I present these aspects as intertwined and interdependent. One cannot truly separate the form of the meme from its function, nor its function from the form it takes. In the different stages of meme evolution, I believe form and function are emphasised to different degrees but remain important and interconnected. I had touched upon issues of identity, social function, and the overall purpose of memes in my data collection, and with my revised approach I was able to integrate these themes more strongly than in my two draft definitions. To this end, I have arrived at an overall structure that I believe allows for the linguistic categorisation of memes, both in terms of usage and mechanics, which touches upon cognitive, evolutionary, *and* sociolinguistic themes. As with my previous split definition across two related terms, this three-part system

provides a Lakoff-inspired category that allows for branching and variance, while still having clear unifying features that demarcate membership with the category of 'meme.' I will present more information about the stages of my model and the criteria used to define them in the sections below.

5.2.1 The Three Stages of the Life Cycle

I have divided the Life Cycle of memes into three successive stages, from creation to conventionalisation to abstraction. My original spectrum of Structural/Conceptual Memes was intended to cover memes at any point in their development, though only captured the start and end of this process. Furthermore, a meme did not have to advance from Structural to Conceptual. Similarly, for my Life Cycle Model, I contend that a meme is not required to advance through all three stages, and it can be difficult to determine precisely if and when a meme has completely left the previous stage to enter the next. Nevertheless, I believe there is a clear progression which mirrors my original split between Structural and Conceptual Memes with Stage One and Stage Three, with the added intermediate phase of Stage Two, which provides much greater flexibility and nuance. The intent of this progression-based model is to be flexible, given the range of meme formats and uses. I do not contend that every meme will map perfectly upon my model—the diverse, fluid, and constantly changing nature of memes makes such a claim unreasonable. However, the stages of my model and their multiple criteria should allow for easier and deeper understanding of memes and their development. Even if a meme does not seamlessly align with all of the criteria, I believe that my model will still be useful in plotting its progression along these various axes, allowing for greater insight into its development. The next three subsections provide an overview of the stages in turn, followed by a breakdown of the criteria I have identified to characterise each stage.

5.2.1.1 Stage One: Creation

The first stage is the 'birth' of a meme, taking an image and overlaying it with text. At this point, the linguistic focus is on the juxtaposition of the image with the text. The 'meme' at this point is a matter of format—making use of the pairing in order to imply connection and thus a greater meaning than the separate pieces. As such, form is most important in this phase since there is no other outside context to imply the item is a meme. Iconicity and visual metaphor are at the forefront here, allowing the novel pairing of image and text to have an

intended meaning. However, this meaning must be intuited, and a successful meme will have a specific intended meaning—though without conventionalisation there will still be ambiguity and thus the novel meme will be open to wider interpretation. This is also the origin of the meme, meaning there is still a concrete connection between the novel item and its original context, be that a stock image, viral content, or reference to popular culture (e.g., a movie or television show). The first instance of the meme can then be replicated, altered, and shared, though there is still recognition of the origin by the early generation of imitators. Typically, the meme is spread within a limited network, such as a friend group or message board. The meme does not need to develop much beyond this point, and some never do; I would contest these are still memes, just of a simpler type, since they function mechanically the same way as other memes.

5.2.1.2 Stage Two: Conventionalisation

With continued use and increased popularity, a meme can break out into the next stage. At this point the meme is paradoxically the most stable and the most in transition. With repeated and more widespread use—and reinterpretation—the meme begins to take on a more defined, conventionalised form and meaning. The mechanical process of visual metaphor is still relied upon to an extent, especially for those less familiar with the origin of the meme. However, the need for a rigid form begins to erode, and the meme can appear in more altered or combined forms without loss of meaning. This ties in with my previous parallels to meaning change and grammaticalisation. The digital nature of the meme does not require it to be streamlined in terms of form and also makes it easier to manipulate the image in more complex ways. The form itself is also familiar enough (at least to the knowledgeable audience within the network of early adopters) that alterations to its form do not disrupt recognition. The meme therefore sits in between needing its rigid form and needing context, with enough of either or a combination of the two providing enough semantic information to glean meaning. Some users will rely on shared context while others can still intuit the meaning. The meaning is also fixed at this point, conventionalised by this second generation of users, though this meaning is broad enough that it can be interpreted in slightly different ways. Thus, the meme can begin to take on minor permutations (e.g., Grumpy Cat coalescing around negative emotions, but including grumpiness, cynicism, and more). At this point, the meme itself has begun to move beyond its origin point, with the first generations of memes as the base for this second, conventionalised generation. The audience for the meme has grown

out of its creator's group, such as spreading beyond a specialised community to a different social media platform. Crucially, the meme cannot regress—it has gained enough of a foothold in the online community that it is now recognisable, not novel. It can progress further but does not have to.

5.2.1.3 Stage Three: Abstraction

As seen by the majority of examples within my meme pool, most memes that break out of the first stage usually progress through the second stage and move towards the third, wherein the meme as a concept becomes a shared point of reference. While the original form of the meme can still be present, it is often heavily altered if not reconstructed or parodied entirely. It is the idea of the meme itself that is focused on, mostly referential in nature. This ties into the themes of social stratification as well as Lakoff's chained categories. The meaning of such memes cannot usually be intuited fully, requiring some amount of learning or contextual knowledge to interpret properly. Thus, context and shared understanding have supplanted most of the mechanics of the Stage One meme—iconicity and metaphor—highlighting the social and communal aspect of memes. At this point, the meme has spread widely enough that divergence can occur in its meaning among different groups, with the same meme having multiple (even contradictory) meanings among parallel communities. These competing interpretations are enabled by the distance between this third generation of the meme from its origin, with the new instances being built on reinterpretations of Stage Two iterations rather than the earlier incarnations in Stage One. The reach of the meme has also grown to include the aforementioned different groups, across various platforms and social strata, far from the community the meme originated in. As such, the meme can only regress so far back towards its original form or meaning since it has now been claimed by disparate parties who have a variety of forms at their disposal.

5.2.2 The Division Between Stages

The precise borders between the different phases can be blurry, but I have assembled six criteria by which a given meme can be placed along this progression across stages. While a specific meme may not have all the hallmarks of a given phase, I propose that once it has a majority of the indicators of said phase, it has reached that stage of its development. Therefore, a meme can be plotted along the spectrum of the stages even if it is not a 'perfect' fit. My criteria are meant as guidelines, and as such this structure permits flexibility when

examining specific memes, allowing for outliers or exceptions to overarching trends. The six criteria are as follows:

1. *Engagement* – how wide is the reach of the meme among internet users?
2. *Relation to origin* – how closely tied is the meme with its first use?
3. *Locus of meaning* – where is meaning primarily encoded in the meme?
4. *Continuity of form* – how rigid or mutable is the 'physical' form of the meme?
5. *Continuity of meaning* – how consistent is the overall meaning of the meme?
6. *Intuitability* – is the meme intelligible via inference or does it require prior knowledge or exposure to the meme?

These elements tackle different aspects of form, function, and purpose from different angles, and bridge sociolinguistic, cognitive, and evolutionary concepts. Together they make up the backbone of my Life Cycle Model, each of which will be outlined in the following subsections (5.2.1.1 to 5.2.1.6). A summary of the six criteria across the three stages of my model can be seen in Figure 5.7 below. Each criterion will also be examined in detail with examples across the three stages in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 respectively.

These six characteristics have a certain amount of overlap, although they describe discrete features which can be approached independently. The diversification of these criteria was specifically chosen to allow my analysis of memes to be as agile and flexible as possible; notably fewer criteria would result in more limited engagement and less overall applicability to the memes being discussed. Although several of these characteristics are highly correlated, such as locus of meaning and continuity of meaning, by interacting with each of these criteria individually, and in concert with the others, a clearer understanding of a given meme can be discerned. More on this interconnectivity between the criteria will also be discussed in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9.

As my revised model is an expansion of my previous Structural/Conceptual system, it draws on the same underlying theoretical frameworks, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.1 and 3.2), which I will refer back to in the following review.

5.2.2.1 Engagement

The first criterion analyses the breadth and depth of internet users' engagement with a meme—how a meme is shared and iterated, and by whom. This engagement emerged as a significant theme during my analysis of my meme pool members, my reading of meme-

related literature, and my focus group and survey feedback. When reviewing the historical development of the 30 memes included in my study, I noted how the majority began in relative obscurity, within a smaller, more contained community, before breaking out in wider and wider levels of use. This was echoed by many works in the literature, such as the Zannettou, et al. paper, which contrasted the use of memes in two fringe online communities with the use on the more mainstream outlets of Reddit and Twitter, these latter two being distinctive unto themselves. Thus, the literature outlined a progression from small communities to larger ones—paralleling the broader discussions of viral content, as well as the different forms of networks proposed by social network theory. Discussion in my focus groups included the topic of 'niche' memes, used in small communities for limited, specialised contexts, as well as the importance of memes being used in close-knit group communication, such as friend groups. This sentiment of memes used on smaller scales was further supported by my survey participants, with the use of memes in private messages and direct communication rating even higher than use on forums or social media platforms (see Figure 4.11 in the previous chapter). Furthermore, the previously quoted comment about a meme "food chain" that progressed from Reddit to Twitter to Facebook to Instagram was also a source of inspiration, as it aligned with the KYM records and encompassed the social development of memes across platforms.

In order to capture this critical progression in a social dimension, this criterion was created, drawing upon my existing theoretical approaches. In particular, this aspect ties back to Dawkins' *fecundity*—a meme's capacity for rapid duplication—as some memes are widely spread in a variety of forms while others are shared among small groups and exist in relatively few forms. In Stage One (see Section 6.1), memes move through contained, specialised audiences, such as friend groups. This use by smaller groups, often tied to a shared interest or piece of media, parallels most strongly with the use of specialised language by communities of practice in pursuit of their shared enterprise.[236] This central focus also parallels ego-centric networks of social network theory, which are built around a single, central node. Drawing on the 'viral' terminology of memetics, I would suggest that in Stage One, an individual meme is *endemic* to a particular CofP, such as specific message thread, e.g., a specific 4chan board. In Stage Two (see Section 7.1), the meme begins to reach a broader audience than in its original usage. The meme will still have ties to a particular CofP,

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[236] Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "Communities of Practice: Where Language, Gender, and Power All Live."

though it is now being interacted with in other, related communities, who engage with the meme in their own ways. With the instigating use of the meme no longer as the focal point, the social network has shifted from ego-centric to socio-centric, with a more diffused reach, but with set relational boundaries. During Stage Two, a meme becomes *epidemic* across multiple, related CofPs, such as different message boards on a shared site, e.g., multiple connected subreddits across the website Reddit. In Stage Three (see Section 8.1), a given meme is used by multiple distinct communities simultaneously. As such, the central enterprise of the community has largely eroded compared to the previous stages. However, while the focus of a shared enterprise has lessened, each of the disparate communities could be considered CofPs unto themselves, with their own relationship with a given meme that is different from that of other audiences. Alternately, these branched groups could be viewed collectively as an open-system network, lacking a central node as well as clear network limits. I suggest that in Stage Three, a meme becomes *pandemic*, spreading to a variety of communities across different online platforms that lack a specialised purpose, e.g., simultaneous use on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The engagement of a meme can thus be understood by the relative strength of an associated CofP, type of social network being utilised, and the 'viral' status of the meme within or across communities.

5.2.2.2 Relation to Origin

This criterion surveys the relationship of a given meme to its first usage. This aspect emerged from my meme pool as well as the literature. Again, my analysis of the 30 examples of my pool presented many situations in which later iterations of the meme were drastically different in not only form and meaning, but overall frame of reference. Though not in every case, there were multiple examples of memes that underwent a full reinvention of their discursive use in the early or middle stages of their development Although in some cases the overall changes to the meme are relatively small, in others the transformation was quite dramatic. Paired with the above shift in engagement among broadening communities, I noted that memes could iterate in rough generations, echoing the process of cumulative cultural evolution and the graphical changes presented by Garrod and Fay's experiments (see Figures 3.4 to 3.6 in Chapter 3). This approach of generations was echoed in Segev's work with meme "families." In that paper, "child" variants were traced to "parent" memes and discussed

in similar terms of generations.[237] In addition, this iteration across generations related to traditional memetics and Dawkins' own principles of fecundity, fidelity, and longevity. In order to connect to these memetic and linguistic principles, I created this criterion to exemplify how memes iterate over 'generations' of use. Relation to origin relates to *fecundity*, as above, as the rapid spread of memes is crucial to the process of iteration—more spread allows greater opportunities to innovate. Conversely, this also relates to *fidelity*, faithful reproduction of a meme. In some cases, fidelity remains high across generations; however, as internet memes are unusually most successful when they continue to develop and change (as outlined by Coscia), this criterion further draws on discussions of mutation and variance. The relationship between a meme and its original usage is often predominantly a factor of the passage of time and relates most to Dawkins' memetic *longevity*, the measure of a meme's continued presence over time.

Stage One memes are made during the period after a meme's inception, and thus are closely tied to the origin point of its first usage (see Section 6.2). Even if early iterations are wildly different from the original usage, they are still defined by comparison to that first extant example. In Stage Two (see Section 7.2), new iterations are made off the template of Stage One memes, so there is still a connection to the origin, but it is indirect. By Stage Three (see Section 8.2), new iterations are replicated primarily from Stage Two memes and thus even more removed. Combined with more fluid forms and divergent meanings as discussed below (5.2.2.3/4), there can be increasingly little if any connection to the meme's first usage. Despite these changes through iteration, cumulative cultural evolution, and the passage of time, memes which ultimately reach Stage Three nevertheless exemplify longevity, while many Stage One memes are abandoned soon after their creation.

5.2.2.3 Locus of Meaning

This criterion looks to where meaning is encoded in the meme. This element emerged from my early linguistic analysis of image macros (as described in Chapter 3) and survey feedback regarding the salient qualities of the memes presented in my pool. My preliminary theoretical approach relied on ostensive and iconic elements interplaying into a process of visual metaphor. This is the case for structural framework of image macros, but such a process is not necessary for those already familiar with a given meme template. As such,

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[237] Segev et al., "Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship Between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness."

while meaning resides more in the text and image during the earlier period of a meme's development, as it becomes conventionalised, this semantic process of parsing the meme and interpreting a new meaning becomes less and less necessary. My survey participants pointed to iconic cues as being the primary source of meaning for the vast majority of memes in my pool (which will be presented in more detail in Chapters 6-9). Most participants isolated the emotive core of the template images offered to them, though in more advanced and more highly edited iterations of memes, such ostensive and iconic cues are obscured if not entirely replaced. Despite such erosion of this semantic process, meaning persists in these altered iterations, requiring a shift in where meaning is held and understood. As such, locus of meaning provides a method for discussing this shift of meaning being encoded into different elements of a meme.

Stage One (see Section 6.5) is the 'birth' of a meme, taking an image and overlaying it with text. At this point, the linguistic focus is on the juxtaposition of the image with the text. Iconicity and visual metaphor are strongest here, allowing the novel pairing of image and text to have a clear intended meaning. The text is the primary driver of meaning in Stage One, as the image is open to broad interpretation without established context. However, during Stage Two (see Section 7.5), the meme undergoes conventionalisation, establishing sufficient context so that this range of interpretation narrows. Therefore, the locus of meaning shifts to the image as the meme enters Stage Two. With the image driving meaning, metaphor and iconicity are still integral to meaning formation. In Stage Three (see Section 8.5), the meme has been fully conventionalised and subsequently reached a level of abstraction—the concept of the meme now exists in the common ground, no longer needing text or image to anchor the meaning. Thus, the meme's locus of meaning relies in this shared context, in the concept of the meme itself.

5.2.2.4 Continuity of Form

This criterion is concerned with the static nature of the visual elements of memes. This element emerged from the literature, my analysis of the meme pool, and insights provided by my focus groups. The first influence was again the work of Garrod and Fay, with their documentation of the evolution of signs across iterations. Although my initial approach to memes indicated that they did not undergo the same pressures, and thus the same simplification, as other icons, my further analysis of memes later in their development often aligned with their overall findings. In my investigation of the 30 memes in my pool, I

observed both subtle and radical changes to the templates of these image macros. The base image would sometime change from its source to its meme usage, such as the removal of background imagery. In other cases, later iterations would alter the image beyond recognition, adding further graphical features or even replacing the template image entirely. However, many iterations I encountered cleaved more closely to the established template image, sometimes with minor variations but often preserving the template in its entirety. This consistency, or lack thereof, once again connects to Dawkins' *fidelity* and *mutation*, as well as Shifman's element of meme *form*. My focus group participants, partaking in more drawn-out conversations, discussed how memes could change in form while remaining recognisable. The cases of *Scumbag Steve*, which featured the isolation of a single item within the template image, *First World Problems*, which spawned several graphically distinct variants, and others prompted feedback on the limits of graphical change. Thus, drawing these observations, themes, and feedback together, I set the level of continuity of form as an important distinction between stages.

In Stage One (see Section 6.3), the 'physical' meme is necessarily more rigid, in order to foster familiarity—and thus comprehension—across iterations. While faithful reproduction is helpful during this initial period, iconicity is a less efficient method of sign production when compared to arbitrariness, as discussed in Chapter 3. In Stage Two (see Section 7.3), the image has gained a level of recognition, allowing more liberty to be taken with its form. The changes cannot be too extreme, so as not to fully disrupt recognisability, though the static form begins to erode, similarly to the process seen in Garrod and Fay's experimental setting. In Stage Three (see Section 8.3), the form is now fluid and open to intensive changes, ultimately arriving at arbitrary signs, like the end-states of Garrod and Fay's drawings, which were no longer recognisable compared to their earlier forms. Additionally, visual elements of different memes can be combined to create new, joint memes, a process that begins in Stage Two and becomes prevalent in Stage Three.

5.2.2.5 Continuity of Meaning

This criterion examines the stability of the meaning of a meme across iterations. This characteristic emerged in parallel to continuity of form, though was inspired by different sources. My background research into the members of my meme pool presented me with established, recorded meanings for those memes—from as close to a definitive authority as is possible. However, there were multiple cases in which the meaning of a meme changed at

some point it is development, often during its earlier stages. The meanings offered by Know Your Meme were also usually presented as static, but meaning is never truly fixed, even among normal language. Many of the iterations used by KYM presented varying meanings within a looser narrative framework than the one described. Coscia's work on popularity validated this broadening of meaning, with new iterations needing to push the semantic boundaries of the meme in order for it to remain popular. Yet beyond this, I was presented by a number of conflicting examples in my survey data (and to a lesser extent, my focus groups). The feedback from my respondents with regard to the meaning of the different memes presented to them were expectedly diverse. However, on several occasions, the meaning presented by large portions of respondents conflicted with the 'authoritative' definitions of Know Your Meme. There were multiple cases (which will be examined in subsequent chapters) where it appeared the meme had become polysemous, or had even come to mean its own opposite. As such, it seemed that such semantic broadening of a meme eventually led to a breaking point. Consistency is nevertheless important with regards to meaning, as with Shifman's approach to meme *content*. To this end, I incorporated continuity of meaning as a further indicator for a meme's development.

In Stage One (see Section 6.4), the first usage of a particular meme has a very specific meaning, even if it is difficult to articulate, as discussed above. Subsequent iterations typically express very similar meanings, again like Dawkins' *fidelity*. Without an established meaning within a community, the meme can produce variants with notably different meanings, but in order to progress further, a single overarching meaning must prevail over the others. In Stage Two (see Section 7.4), the meaning of a meme will broaden, though still within a clear overall theme. Shifting from the directly metaphorical meaning of Stage One memes, Stage Two memes move into the realm of Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor, with a given image relaying a particular premise or emotional state, rather than a hyper-specific situation. In Stage Three (see Section 8.4), the meme's meaning can shift again, with multiple parallel meanings being used among different groups. This emergent polysemy is often due to small changes over time, similar to the changes that can occur due to grammaticalisation, and can be traced to the previous semantic broadening in Stage Two.

5.2.2.6 Intuitability

This final criterion focuses on whether the meme can be parsed by those unfamiliar with the format or whether it must be learned through experience. This characteristic emerged

primarily from my own observations of examples memes encountered on meme-related sites and within the wider literature of memes, with additional support from my three modes of collected data. This was one of the first criteria I settled upon, as it was initially a clear point of division: a meme can be intuited, or it cannot. This is not a universal for all memes and all individuals, due to their individual knowledge and experience. However, in the aggregate, a meme that presents a readily understandable caption paired strongly with the ostensive and iconic cues of template image that has little to no graphical edits can be parsed much more easily than a highly edited image with obscured cues and little to no captioning (or what text is provided relies on slang, jargon, or specific references). Even in more simple forms, the meaning of memes is not always clear, requiring explanation and exposure to be completely understood, as discussed by Lin, Huang, and Hsu.[238] Across my meme pool, I encountered many examples that could be more easily parsed than others, while further, abstracted examples had been so heavily distorted that I could not recognise them as an iteration of a known meme category. My survey participants, as members of a meme-focused forum, were ostensibly meme literate. My focus group participants claimed broad familiarity with memes as well. In both cases, there were examples that were unfamiliar to my participants, and I was able to witness their attempts to infer meaning. For my survey respondents, this process was not always clear, but there were many instances of individuals stating that they were unfamiliar with the pictured meme but attempted to guess the meaning anyway. In my focus groups, when such unfamiliarity occurred, I was able to discuss with the individual directly about their process of meaning construction. There was an awareness that a new meme is not always easily comprehensible, "unless you've…been on that subreddit for the full time that meme's been around—if you take like, a six week break and you come back, you're gonna be like: 'what does any of this mean?'," as put by one participant. Memes can sometimes require such familiarity and learned cultural knowledge to appreciate fully, yet by their underlying structural nature they are meant to be understood. It is only through repeated iteration, conventionalisation, and eventual abstraction (what would occur in such a "six week" period) that their meanings become more opaque, and thus I created this criterion of intuitability to gauge the difficulty of a meme to be understood, and by proxy indicate how iterated and abstracted the meme has become.

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[238] Lin, Huang, and Hsu, "Crowdsourced Explanations for Humorous Internet Memes Based on Linguistic Theories."

In Stage One (see Section 6.6), the 'meme' is a matter of format—making use of the pairing of text and image in order to imply connection and thus a greater meaning than the separate pieces, since there is no other outside context to imply the item is a meme. Even in cases where the image is derived from popular culture (e.g., a still from a film), the external knowledge is not necessarily needed to deconstruct and understand the meme. Thus, Stage One memes must be intuitable, otherwise they cannot be effectively communicated. This ostensive process does erode with conventionalisation, however, as in Stage Two (see Section 7.6), memes can become less inherently intuitable if their forms are altered or the meaning expanded. However, with greater exposure and broader iterations, memes become familiar as established memes within their networks and no longer need to be as easily parsed by the unfamiliar. By Stage Three (see Section 8.6), memes have become entirely conventionalised and can thus be edited to the point they are no longer recognisable compared to their original incarnation. Only minimal visual or textual cues are necessary to elicit recognition. At this point, the meme relies on shared knowledge of the specific memes and an advanced form of "mindreading" to convey meaning.[239]

5.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of my revised theoretical framework, building upon the theories and themes discussed in Chapter 3. This Life Cycle model was constructed based on the results of my data collection and analysis, pairing my observations and the feedback of my participants with the information provided by academic literature and online meme authorities. The following chapters will provide in-depth discussions of my meme pool, survey, and focus group data and the intricacies of my model. Stage One will be examined in Chapter 6, Stage Two in Chapter 7, and Stage Three in Chapter 8. Each of the six criteria will be discussed alongside example memes from my pool. Chapter 9 will then give a summary and review of the Life Cycle, chronicling the progression of two memes from creation through conventionalisation and onto abstraction.

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[239] See Scott-Phillips, *Speaking Our Minds*.

	Stage One	Stage Two	Stage Three
Engagement	Meme is used by a small, specialised group	Meme is used by multiple groups within a closed network	Meme is used in parallel by multiple online communities across different platforms
Relation to Origin	New iterations mimic original usage or early imitators; direct tie to origin point	New iterations mimic later Stage One instances; indirect tie to origin point	New iterations mimic Stage Two instances; tie to origin point is weak/lost
Locus of Meaning	Locus of meaning is text	Locus of meaning is image	Locus of meaning is shared concept
Continuity of Form	Physical form of meme is largely static	Physical form of meme is editable but retains salient details	Physical form of meme is fluid and readily changeable
Continuity of Meaning	Meaning of meme is unified and specific (possible variations abandoned)	Meaning of meme is broad but focused on overarching theme	Meaning of meme has branched into multiple meanings among different groups
Intuitability	Must be intuited	Can be intuited or learned from exposure	Cannot be intuited and must be learned from experience

Figure 5.7: Six characteristics of memes across the stages of the Life Cycle Model

Chapter 6: Stage One of the Life Cycle - Creation

Stage One is where all memes begin. There can be ambiguity about when precisely a digital artefact becomes a meme. Again, this is sometimes an issue of nomenclature, as internet users can sometimes be quick to label such items as a meme, even if they lack the popularity or established contexts that are typically associated with memes. As noted in Section 5.1.5 , my participants broadly rejected the idea that memes are simply any such digital item shared on the internet; they agreed that there is more to 'meme-ness' than simply being shared online content. So then, if one is confronted with an item that has some of the hallmarks of a meme, but lacks the recognition of its meme status, is the artefact a meme? Provided that it makes use of the aforementioned process of visual metaphor, utilising iconic cues in a novel context, I contend that the answer is yes. Such items are memes, regardless of their popularity; they are merely at an earlier stage in their development. After all, every popular meme has to begin somewhere, with an initial use of a novel format that was then received, reinterpreted, and reproduced by others. Defining such a threshold of popularity can be tenuous—must a meme be popular to be successful, and if so, how popular is popular enough? Such an exclusion based on recognition overlooks the communicative and metaphorical processes at work, as well as social factors, given that many kinds of memes are meant for niche audiences rather than the internet (or society) at large. While memes should be relatable—engaging shared experience and emotions, as discussed in Section 5.1.6 —the audience they are relatable to need not be so broad. To incorporate the birth of widespread memes as well as the variety of smaller-scale examples, I have developed this first stage of the life cycle to document memes at their earliest stages, from inception through blossoming popularity. Stage One, Creation, is marked by six criteria, each of which will be examined in detail in the rest of this chapter.

6.1 Stage One Engagement

The first of my six criteria relates to the intended audience of a given meme, the communities who ultimately use the meme, and the level of investment these community members have with the meme. The reach of a meme in its first and earliest iterations can be comparatively modest, such as a meme created by an individual to be seen by only one other person or a small in-group. However, given the wide variety of online platforms at any given

user's disposal, a single instance of a meme can be viewed by hundreds or thousands of individuals, even when confined to a specific community before branching out to others. During Stage One, early memes are intended for a narrow and highly specific community, though the size of this group can range widely. What is crucial in Stage One is that the community is bound together by a uniting feature, whether that be a friend group or message board dedicated to a particular topic. This central activity closely mirrors the shared enterprise of a community of practice.[240] The joint activity and the production of the meme within this closed community also parallels the central organising node of an ego-centric network of social network theory.[241] Taken together, the meme is introduced to a small group with clear boundaries and a common goal, and then spreads among the members of this group, but not necessarily farther. A prototypical example of such a community would be a specific message board on 4chan or the Something Awful forums, which are relatively insular, subject-specific groups whose practices can eventually spread to other communities while remaining inwardly focused. The sourcing of many later prominent memes to such peripheral online communities has been documented by many studies, such as those by Chen, Nissenbaum and Shifman, and Zannettou, et al.[242] This use of memes in a closed environment was further supported by my survey and focus group data. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, my survey participants pointed to private messages as being the foremost area of meme usage, followed by online forums, both of which ranked above social media (see Figure 4.11). Furthermore, as discussed below, several of my focus group participants shared their own experiences of using memes with focused or "niche"[243] audiences. To borrow the epidemiological terminology of memetics, I contend that a Stage One meme becomes *endemic* to a specific CofP or ego-centric network, replicating amongst the community members, but staying within this unified, bounded group.[244] Such an endemic definition of engagement allows room for memes that would normally fail to qualify as memes if

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[240] Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "Communities of Practice: Where Language, Gender, and Power All Live"; Bucholtz, "'Why Be Normal?': Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls"; Holmes and Meyerhoff, "The Community of Practice: Theories and Methodologies in Language and Gender."

[241] Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*, 17.

[242] See Chen, "The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction"; Nissenbaum and Shifman, "Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital : The Case of 4chan's /b/ Board"; Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."

[243] This term was used to describe such specialised memes by several members of my focus groups, and I have adopted it for this same purpose.

[244] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme"; Wang and Wood, "An Epidemiological Approach to Model the Viral Propagation of Memes."

popularity or widespread recognition are deemed crucial. As previewed in the introduction to this chapter, such an outlook excludes two notable types of memes that still make use of the same processes underlying more popular examples.

The first type of meme is those that may be meant for widespread appeal, but do not gain sufficient traction to form community consensus around them. These memes do not go on to have many new iterations and recontextualisations, instead having a single form and caption, which is shared but not altered. Such 'singleton' memes (my term) have all the other qualifying markers of memes (e.g., an image with text, visual metaphor) that could develop further, but for any number of reasons they are not bolstered by the community to progress into subsequent stages. In addition to minimal breadth of engagement, there is also minimal depth; the early community members interact with the meme passively, spreading instances of the meme without iterating on it. Such a lack of iteration only further hinders continued popularity and spread out of the initial network, as Coscia's work documenting memes on Reddit suggests that memes that recycle the same meaning and forms across iterations, or do not iterate at all, fail to maintain popularity over time.[245] However, I suggest that all memes begin here, during their own Stage One, before advancing to further stages via iteration due to greater input from an active online community. With sufficient interest and engagement, a meme can continue to develop—though even if they do not, they still qualify as memes, merely ones that remain in this nascent phase.

Figure 6.1: 'The Scribe,' meme early in its development

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[245] Coscia, "Average Is Boring: How Similarity Kills a Meme's Success," 1–7.

An example of such a singleton meme can be seen in Figure 6.1, which I will refer to as 'The Scribe.' The piece of art used as the base image has not been used so widely and repeatedly to be a 'proper' meme by standards of popularity and conventionalisation, according to my research across meme generators, aggregators, and outlets.[246] There is no established context built up around the image, and the artwork alone does not convey a specific message—nor is it broadly recognisable to the typical internet user and thus does not provide additional cultural context (as opposed to, say, the *Mona Lisa* or *Starry Night*). The Scribe nevertheless demonstrates the 'physical' qualities of a meme, as with Shifman's *form*: an image paired with a caption, relying on iconic cues and metaphorical interpretation to relate the image and the text to one another, creating a combined meaning enhanced and emphasised beyond what either would be on their own (see Section 3.2 and Figure 3.7). It is possible that the image has been used beyond this single iteration, though as far as my research has uncovered, this is the primary extant form of the meme. It has not been so widely used as to be become associated with a particular meaning, as with more developed memes. As such, the engagement of this meme has been limited, failing to reach the heights of popularity of other memes. Furthermore, the level of engagement has been minimal due to a lack of reinterpretation and iteration. Users have instead been largely passive, sharing the meme without edits. Yet, the meme has had some spread, as it was encountered on Facebook with numerous shares, which indicates that the meme is understandable, relatable, and poignant enough to be engaged with in the same manner as other memes.

The second type of meme accounted for by reducing focus on popularity is "niche" memes tailored to a specific group or subculture, such as a fandom, hobbyists, or residents of a certain place.[247] Much as in-jokes used by members of a group cannot be readily understood by outsiders, so too can memes be used that are unintelligible to those outside of the intended community. For example, fans of a video game may make memes using imagery from said game in new contexts or use unrelated meme templates that refer to the specific context of the game. As such, these memes would be difficult to parse for those unfamiliar with the game, but readily understood by other fans (recall Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1). A similar situation can occur for any community, as highlighted by my focus group participants, who pointed to

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[246] This template has no entry on Know Your Meme and does not appear on the other meme-related sites used during my meme pool creation, as discussed in Chapter 4.

[247] For examples of such subcultures, see Literat and van den Berg, "Buy Memes Low, Sell Memes High: Vernacular Criticism and Collective Negotiations of Value on Reddit's MemeEconomy"; Bucholtz, "'Why Be Normal?': Language and Identity Practices in a Community of Nerd Girls."

memes centred on certain interests or activities, such as gym membership or geology. These memes have the capacity to grow and change beyond their restrictive audience and media origin (see "Condescending Wonka" in Section 6.6 below), but do not have to. If they stay within their original sphere, they remain as Stage One memes—though this is not inherently 'failure,' merely the end of their development. As many niche memes are intended for a very narrow usage or audience, further engagement, and thus development and evolution, is unnecessary.

To further illustrate this concept of niche memes, consider the following meme from my data set. Known by a variety of names including "Disintegration Effect," for clarity I will refer to it by the meme's typical caption of "I Don't Feel So Good" (henceforth IDFSG). This meme was based on a scene from the 2018 movie *Avengers: Infinity War,* which featured the character of Peter Parker stating "Mr. Stark, I don't feel so good," before crumbling to dust (see Figure 6.2). In the wake of the film's release, internet users began recreating the tragic scene featuring other characters from popular media, digitally editing images with a triangular particle effect, several of examples of which can be seen in Figure 6.3.[248]

Figure 6.2: A still from Avengers: Infinity War of Peter Parker as he disappears

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[248] Matt [No surname given], "Disintegration Effect / I Don't Feel So Good," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/disintegration-effect-i-dont-feel-so-good.

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 6.3: A selection of memes using the same 'disintegration' motif to parody the scene from Avengers: Infinity War *while utilizing characters from other franchises.*

IDFSG occupies an unusual space in my data pool. The popularity of this meme surged following the movie's release in April 2018, which coincided with the creation of my meme pool (as discussed in Chapter 4). Tied up with its connection to this temporally linked event, IDFSG failed to develop in form or meaning beyond its early iterations, and I contend it did not move past Stage One. Still, this meme is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it does not have as contiguous of a form as most other templates, instead relying on the disintegration motif to connect individual iterations, rather than a fixed template image. Nevertheless, this motif was enough to establish a strong connection, as evidenced by its prevalence in my data regarding salience, as seen in Figure 6.4 (see third column in blue).
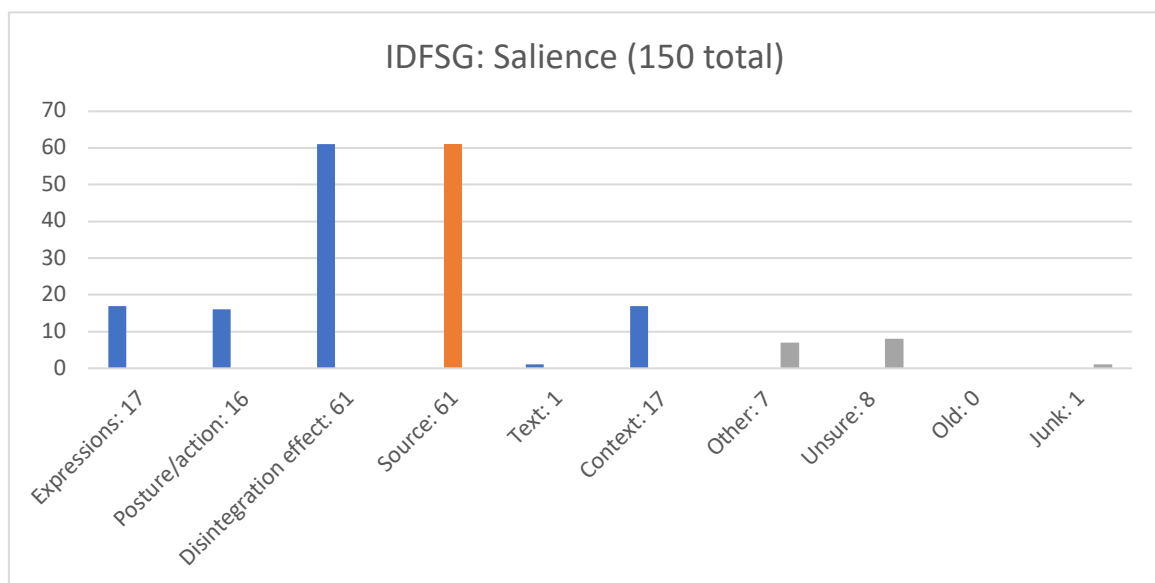

Figure 6.4: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the I Don't Feel So Good meme

This data point also ties in with my next criterion of relation to origin (see Section 6.2 below), as this meme is highly tied to its first usage and never left it behind, further indicating this meme did not advance past Stage One. Over 40% of my respondents to this question indicated that meaning was derived from the meme's cultural source, i.e., the *Avengers* film, as highlighted in orange (as opposed to learned online 'context,' shown in blue). This connection to the source material is further corroborated by my data about the meme's title (see Figure 6.5). Despite making use of a single iteration of the meme in my survey and focus group (image (a) in Figure 6.3, featuring the character SpongeBob SquarePants), my participants overwhelmingly identified the meme with its *Infinity War* source—"Thanos," "Snap," and "Dusting" (highlighted in orange) are all terms tied to the movie's nomenclature.
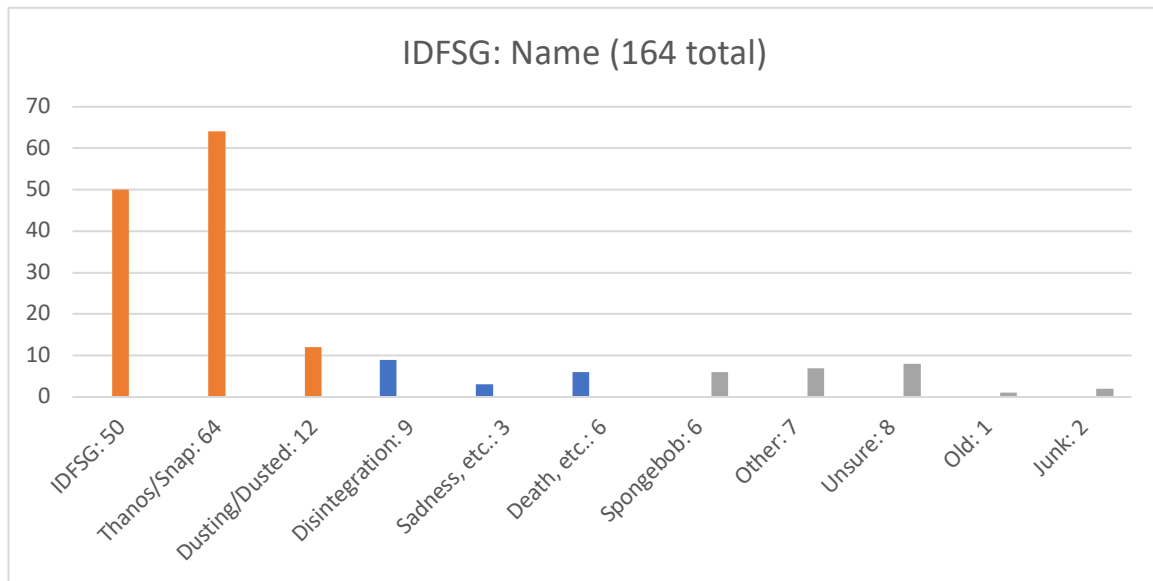
Figure 6.5: Survey responses about the name of the I Don't Feel So Good meme
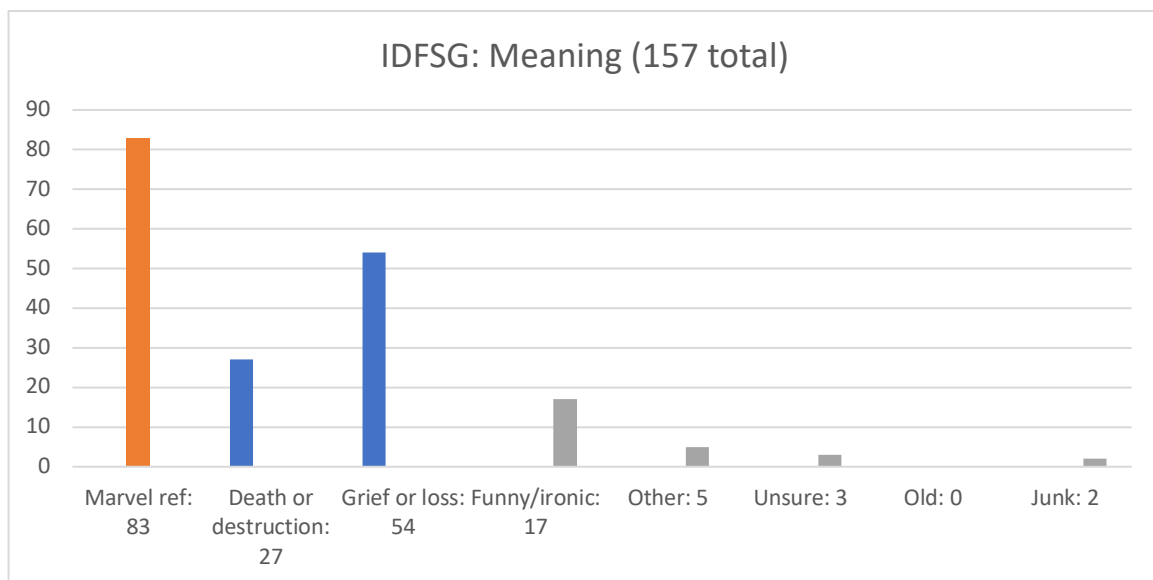

Figure 6.6: Survey responses about the meaning of the I Don't Feel So Good meme

This link recurs in my data about the meme's meaning, as seen in Figure 6.6. The majority of my survey participants indicated that the meme was purely referential to the *Avengers* movie (highlighted in orange), a sentiment echoed by several of my focus group participants. One stated that the meme was merely a parody, as "memes low-key parody everything." However, another focus group member suggested that the original scene was "emotionally scarring" and that the memes were a way of making light of the situation, using humour to combat negative emotions (as discussed in Section 5.1.6). My survey participants also suggested that the meme could potentially build into a more comprehensive meaning,

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representing some manner of destruction or as a representation of loss or grief (highlighted in blue). In the period since my survey, no such meaning has developed, with one focus group member saying that by 2020 "there's not any meaning to these [IDFSG memes] anymore." Its spike in popularity has since waned and a full meaning has failed to materialise. This represents that although some internet users sought to engage with this meme on a deeper level, the majority interacted it with it a passive, rather than innovative, way. Nevertheless, it is apparent that my participants have tried to discern a more profound, more metaphorical meaning in the meme, and one could have been constructed by the community if they had chosen to—if they had engaged more strongly—indicating how powerful the drive to develop memes into meaningful units can be.

However, the most significant aspect of this meme is how it displays the importance of reach and audience with regards to engagement. The original movie scene occurs at the end of the film and would constitute a notable spoiler for those who had not seen the movie. (In fact, one of my focus group members had the ending spoiled via such memes.) Therefore, the viewing of the film created a divide amongst members of the internet community: those who had seen the movie and those who had not. As such, only those who had seen the movie would be able to recognise the parody taking place within the IDFSG memes. The meme served as a way of differentiating individuals as belonging to one of the two groups, with only a very specific audience being able to interpret the memes properly. This initially smaller group of those who had seen the movie served as a type of community of practice, with the knowledge of the movie's ending as their shared enterprise. Engagement therefore constituted a major restriction for the meme, which ultimately solidified IDFSG in Stage One. Once the reach broadened enough, with more and more people having seen the film or learned of its plot, the meme lost its significance as a shared joke with a limited audience. Another of my focus group members had not seen *Infinity War* at the time, but even they recognised and understood my example IDFSG meme, as the meme had run its course. Therefore, IDFSG demonstrates both facets of engagement, as it is a meme that never advanced into a more conventionalised and metaphorical context, while also serving a limited community. Furthermore, it is a prime example of a meme that remains at Stage One, yet is still deserving of the title of meme.

6.2 Stage One Relation to Origin

Every meme format has an original source, whether that is a stock photo, a still of a video, or some other form of media. These images may have some level of context encoded within them, either via its source in popular media or pre-existing cultural associations. These connotations alone are not enough to provide a clear meaning, though they can still impact the development of the meme. As opposed to this source, there is also the first instance of the item used as an artefact of digital culture, a 'meme to be.' This is typically the first usage of the image macro that sets the template from which subsequent iterations take inspiration— either to emulate or to recontextualise. Given how rapidly memes grow and change, and the variety of platforms they travel across, often simultaneously, it can be difficult to pin down this point of inception. Nevertheless, this first usage, this 'origin point,' is most crucial during Stage One, before the meme can grow beyond its influence. In Stage One, new iterations of the meme are replicated based on this first instance of the meme or the first generation based on that origin point.[249] Whereas memes in subsequent Stages are modelled on the existing pool of iterations, with little or no tie to its origin point, the connection remains clear in Stage One. This theme again links to Dawkins' *fidelity*, as it relates to how alike subsequent iterations of memes are to the 'original.' Also prominent here is Dawkins' *longevity*, as the distance from a meme's first usage to its current usage is both a discursive and temporal measurement of the replication. This can additionally be viewed in terms of Lakoff's radial categories, in which a defined category is not purely bound by specific criteria, but by links and chains of development, so that peripheral examples can remain within a category, despite having little in common with the foundational and prototypical members. In this case, the origin would serve as the prototype by which subsequent members of the category are judged, and Stage One iterations would cleave very closely to this prototype.

To illustrate this concept of relation to origin, I will examine the "Walmart Yodel Boy" meme. This particular meme is another anomaly in my data, which was produced as a result of my research design and the ephemeral nature of memes. Yodel Boy derives from a viral video of a young boy singing in a Wal-Mart store, which was released in the spring of 2018 and rapidly became a meme circulating during that time (see Figure 6.7). It was during this period that I was creating my meme pools (see Chapter 4), and due to its appearance

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[249] Coscia, "Popularity Spikes Hurt Future Chances for Viral Propagation of Protomemes."

across several of the meme collections I was consulting, I included Yodel Boy in my 'Current' Pool of memes. Now several years later, I am able to assess the trajectories of the memes I selected for this pool, as they have been in circulation for a longer period of time. The majority of the memes I selected for my Current pool have maintained currency, with several reaching esteem similar to many of my 'All Time' memes (e.g., "Distracted Boyfriend" or "Expanding Brain" as discussed in Chapter 9). However, a few of the memes, including IDFSG and Yodel Boy, were not among them. Yodel Boy quickly fell out of use following its surge of popularity and has not had the staying power of many of its cohort in the Current Pool. The meme was still recognised by many of the participants of my survey, which was held the following spring, though their insights made it clear that even by that point, within a year, the meme had fallen out of favour. As such, this meme provides a unique insight among my data pool, as it is a meme in a state of collapse, having never established continuity of form, meaning, or metaphorical narrative. It is a meme that I suggest never developed beyond Stage One and potentially falls beyond the scope of my definition of memes entirely.

Figure 6.7: A still from the "Yodel Boy" video, and example of a meme parodying the Yodel Boy character.

Part of Yodel Boy's lack of longevity was due to a lack of consistent meaning. Most early iterations of the meme (such as the second image in Figure 6.7) played on the 'physical' form of the meme, featuring the child and/or referencing his song—or a version of the song itself, in the case of audio sampling or remixes in multimedia memes. Thus, these iterations were predominantly referential, rather than discursive. As seen in Figure 6.8, my survey participants could not agree on a coherent narrative of the meme itself, despite being over a

year old. There were some attempts to prescribe a more general, metaphorical meaning—humour, randomness, or awe—but none of these found wide support. There was a secondary strain of discourse that centred around the nature of talent and the phenomenon of modern online fame, verging on a broader conceptual metaphor or metonymy, but neither of these dialogues reached a consensus or are a discrete meaning. The use of Yodel Boy as a stand-in, as a representative of broader themes of internet culture, was intriguing. With sustained discourse, the emblematic use of Yodel Boy could venture into more metaphorical or symbol territory. However, such dialogue has not coalesced around Yodel Boy and although he experienced a period of fame, his image has not become a symbol in its own right.[250]
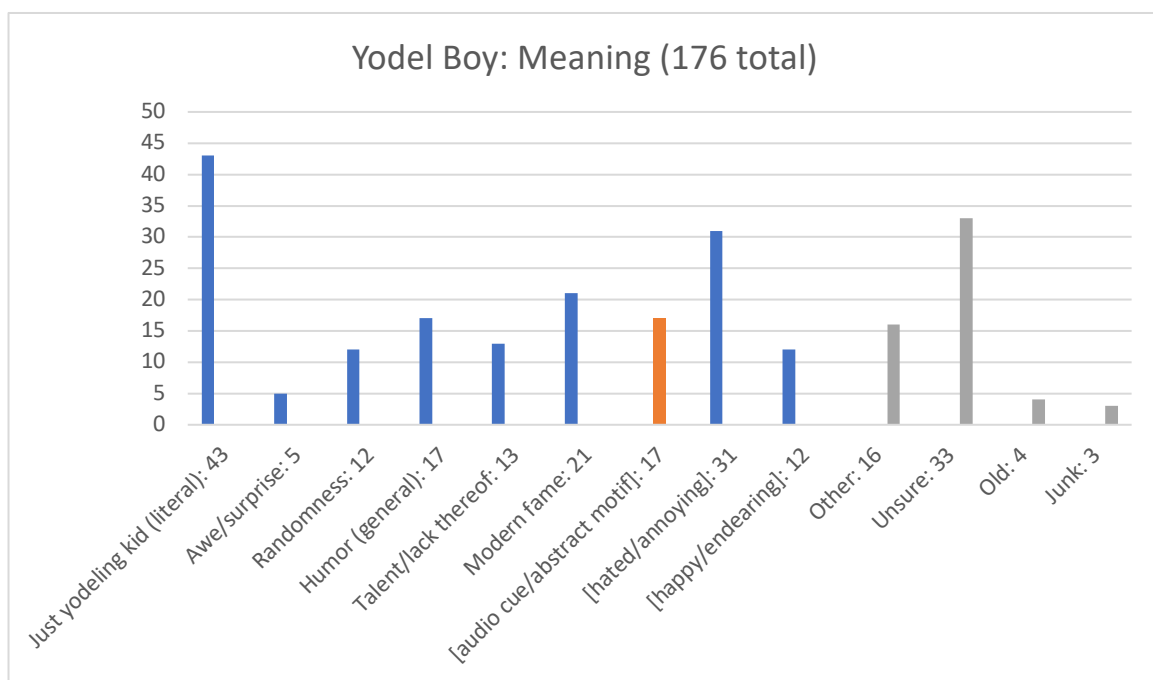

Figure 6.8: Survey responses about the meaning of the Yodel Boy meme

There was also a small but notable category that discussed the importance of the associated yodelling sound (highlighted in orange), with several participants claiming they could "hear" the image itself—an insight that suggests memes are continuing to evolve in form, moving into new types of media, particularly auditory (as discussed in the previous chapter, see Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.4). The final two categories of note did not describe meaning so much as the emotion elicited by the meme, and they were clearly opposed: one

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[250] Adam [No surname given], "Walmart Yodel Boy," Know Your Meme, 2022, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/walmart-yodel-boy.

found the child angering and annoying while the other found him cute and endearing. This could again be interpreted as an attempt at metaphor, though the responses themselves were more reactionary than illustrative—they suggest that Yodel Boy elicited these emotions, rather than embodied or represented them. In the words of one survey respondent: "I hate this one. It is a viral video that is cringy to reference. It isn't much of a joke, only something that can be referenced. It is also difficult to use and dead." The Unsure category was very high, indicating a possible lack of recognition and/or a lack of iconic elements for viewers to attach meaning to beyond the aforementioned 'sound' of the meme. The largest segment, though only by a relatively small margin, merely describes the literal meaning of a boy singing— picking up on the iconic element, but without any strong metaphorical meaning.

While the meme was unable to coalesce in terms of meaning, many of these categories tie directly to its origin point. The literal interpretation, musings on talent and fame, recalling the associated sound, and even the vehement emotional reactions to the meme all lead directly back to the source of the original viral video and its first meme iterations, rather than subsequent development away from its origin. This theme continues among my other data points for this meme—its title and salient features, as seen in Figure 6.9 and Figure 6.10 respectively. The data for the meme's name was one of the more consistent among my meme pools, with 120 of the 192 responses referring to the meme as "Walmart Yodel Boy," "Yodel Boy," "Walmart Boy," or some other variant involving yodelling. All these titles trace back to the meme's first use, rather than anything present in the image or subsequent development among the community. A handful of answers, highlighted in orange, provided merely angry responses aimed at the meme, rather than describing the source of meaning.

My data for salient elements was intriguingly muddled as opposed to the meme's name. The largest category points to more iconic elements of the boy's face and stance, in much the same way as most other memes across my survey data. However, the percentage here is much lower—only 30 percent—compared to most of the pool, while the number of responses relating the meme to its video source ("Source") is much higher than average. Taken along with the responses focused on the (non-present) sound of the meme, its associated context among the online community, and further emotional backlash, the number of participants who drew meaning from the meme's viral origin (see orange columns in Figure 6.10) outweighs those attempting to make use of iconic cues (the blue columns in Figure 6.10) to develop meaning.
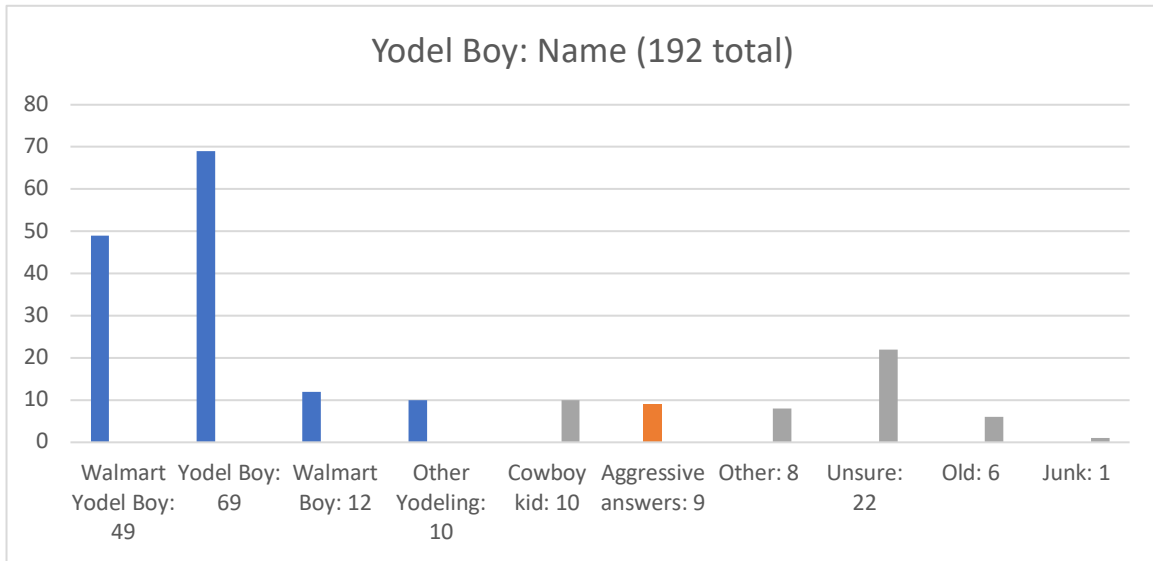
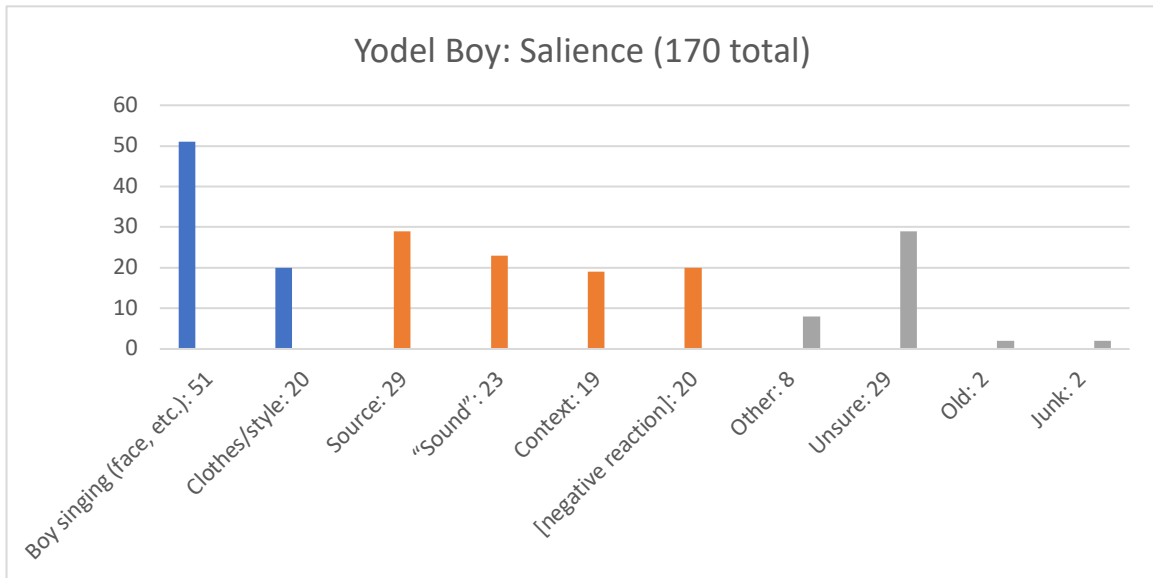*Figure 6.9: Survey responses about the name of the Yodel Boy meme*

Figure 6.10: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the Yodel Boy meme

6.3 Stage One Locus of Meaning

The next of my six criteria, *locus of meaning*, is one of the most crucial in delineating my stages. While it can become more difficult to pin down later in the life cycle, during the Creation stage the primary driver of meaning is clear: the text. A meme is first created by pairing a textual message with a chosen picture. The addition of text adds an ostensive quality to the overall communicative unit, marking the image as more than merely what it portrays. The text is read and interpreted as it is presented. The receiver of the meme then parses the

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aspects of the image to determine the intended meaning. This is done by isolating an iconic element (or elements) that relates in some way with the textual message, though such an iconic cue can be weak or indirect, as described by Keller. These iconic element or elements are metaphorically analysed, in which the meaning of the image and text are compared in the search for shared meaning between them—visual metaphor, as described in Section 3.2 and Figure 3.7. A similar metaphorical process is common in normal language use, in which the familiar and the novel are contrasted, with the semantic overlap taken as the intended meaning, with additional context ignored. In this case of memes, visual metaphor adds emphasis, humour, or relatability to the text, but it is the text that allows the image to provide these extra layers of meaning. To continue the parallel with standard linguistic metaphor, the text is source, the familiar idea from which attributes are borrowed, and the image is the target, the novel item that is ascribed these borrowed attributes.[251] Without text, the image itself is ambiguous, open to a wide range of interpretations via its iconic cues. It is only when paired with text that metaphor comes into play, allowing the image to be parsed and a narrower, more defined meaning to be communicated.

Figure 6.11: 'The Scribe,' a meme early in its development

Consider again the 'Scribe' meme, reproduced in Figure 6.11. As discussed in Section 6.1 above, the piece of artwork that serves as the template for this meme has not become conventionalised as a recognisable meme, nor does the art itself carry connotations from

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[251] Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*; Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*.

popular culture. Nevertheless, it has the same structure and formatting as a more defined meme and makes use of the same linguistic processes—visual metaphor—to convey meaning. However, at this point of early development, the meme must rely most on the attached text to define its meaning. The text alone would not constitute a meme, merely a statement. As such, the image is still critical to the meme format, conveying the intended emotion behind the meme—a feeling of righteousness, diligence, or sternness when about to retort. However, the image alone lacks the semantic encoding or communally agreed context to present a clear meaning on its own. Even though the image resonates emotionally, via the iconic elements of the man's appearance and activity, pinning down the exact emotion is difficult as the image is open to different interpretations without text. His expression could be anger, focus, or some combination thereof. His attire denotes an association with professionalism, but could also be construed as archaic or obtuse. His action of sharpening a quill indicates patience as well as preparation—potentially paralleling the concept of sharpening a weapon for battle. The merging of the text and image narrows these possible interpretations and creates the full message: that the author of this meme is about to respond to the 'someone' of the caption, and the response will be long, thorough, and thought out. The semantic scope of the meme is established and other interpretations are abandoned, a process that parallels traditional linguistic metaphor. In this example, the archaic associations based on the man's clothing, among other elements, are ignored in favour the quill-sharpening—the readying of a response—which is pulled directly from the caption. The primary locus of meaning therefore resides in the text, as the meme would be emotive, but aimless, without its caption. For this reason, as well as the limited engagement discussed in Section 6.1, I would classify this meme as being firmly in Stage One.
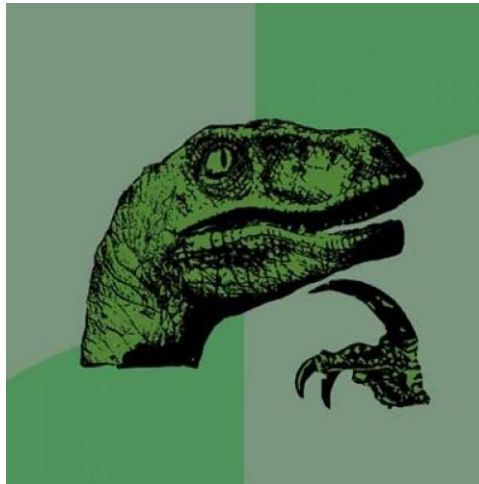
Figure 6.12: The template for the "Philosoraptor" meme

To provide another example, consider the *Philosoraptor* meme, whose template can be seen in Figure 6.12. I contend that this meme has moved beyond Stage One—it ranks in the later stages across most of my six criteria—but its format can still be illustrative of the mechanics of this early stage. Given that the memes present in my data pool are established to a notable degree, most have developed past the Creation phase. However, I will make use of these more developed memes in this chapter to provide additional examples beyond minor cases such as the early Scribe meme, and to illustrate how they can advance beyond this stage. *Philosoraptor* makes significant use of indirect iconicity in its meaning creation. The posture of the dinosaur is meant to mimic that of a thinking human (compare with *The Thinker* sculpture, as seen in Figure 6.13). Thinking, as an abstract concept, cannot be easily represented visually, though shorthand such as gestures can serve as indirect icons for this action, as proposed by Keller. Such gestures also rely on ostension, with a deliberate action meant to invoke both a specific meaning and the attempt to communicate this meaning, as discussed by Scott-Phillips. In my survey, of the 168 answers regarding the most salient detail of the image (see Figure 6.15), 82 pointed to the gesture as indicative of thought, 9 of which even referenced *The Thinker* specifically. Thirty-seven respondents suggested that the expression was most salient, with an expression indicative of pensiveness or wonder. A further 13 attributed the character being a dinosaur as an additional source of humour, indicating the parallel importance of multiple iconic features.
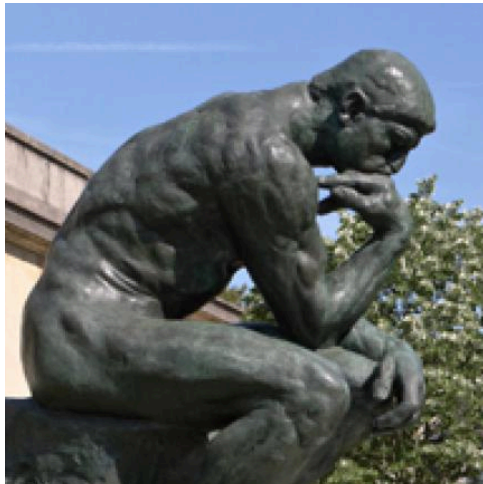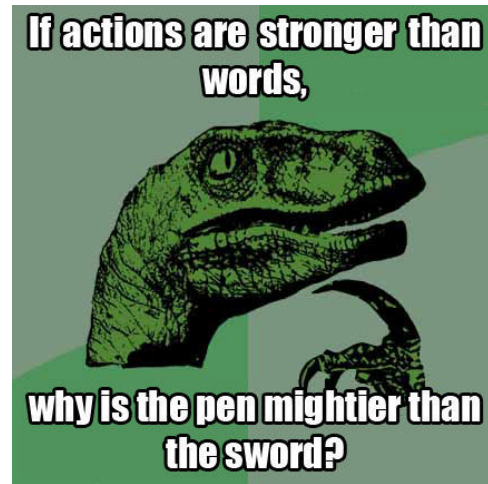
Figure 6.13: The Thinker, by Auguste Rodin

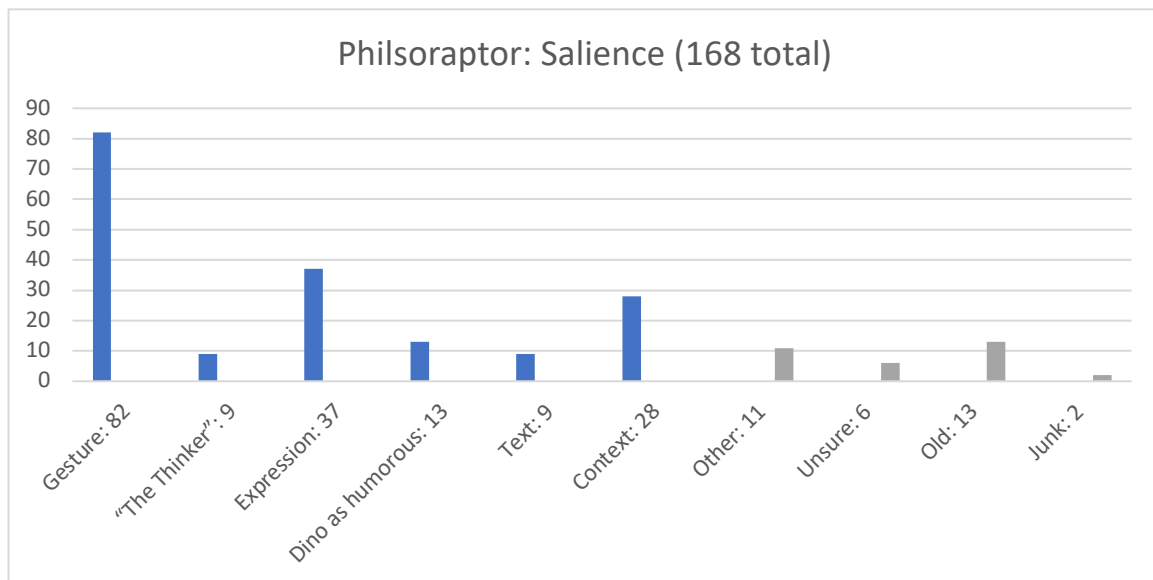*Figure 6.14: An example of the Philosoraptor meme*

Figure 6.15: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the Philosoraptor meme

The iconic cues would predominantly indicate that the meme relates to thinking of some kind, which would be partially correct. However, with added text, the specific meaning of this meme becomes clearer, as demonstrated by the example meme in Figure 6.14. Philosoraptor is typically used for humorous philosophical questions, logical quandaries, or comically 'profound' realisations.[252] These were the clear frontrunners among my survey participants, as seen in blue in the chart below (Figure 6.16). The data shows a clear clustering of the meaning around cognitive processes. It does show some divergence of

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[252] Sabrina Tibbetts, "Philosoraptor," Know Your Meme, 2017, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/philosoraptor.

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meaning—indicative of a later-stage meme, which will be discussed in Section 8.5 . Nevertheless, there is a clear majority of agreement around a meaning that is much more nuanced than simple thought. Instead, with the associated text, the iconic core of the meme is metaphorically used to indicate some kind of deeper thought, and paired with absurdity of the dinosaur, more properly represents something which may humorously seem profound or paradoxical, but in reality is not. The fact that my participants were also presented with a purely graphical meme is also of note here. As described in Section 4.3.2.1 , I chose to provide only the template image, without specific textual captions, in order to elicit such breadth of interpretation with regard to meaning. Yet, as Philosoraptor has moved beyond Stage One, text is no longer necessary to derive meaning from this meme.
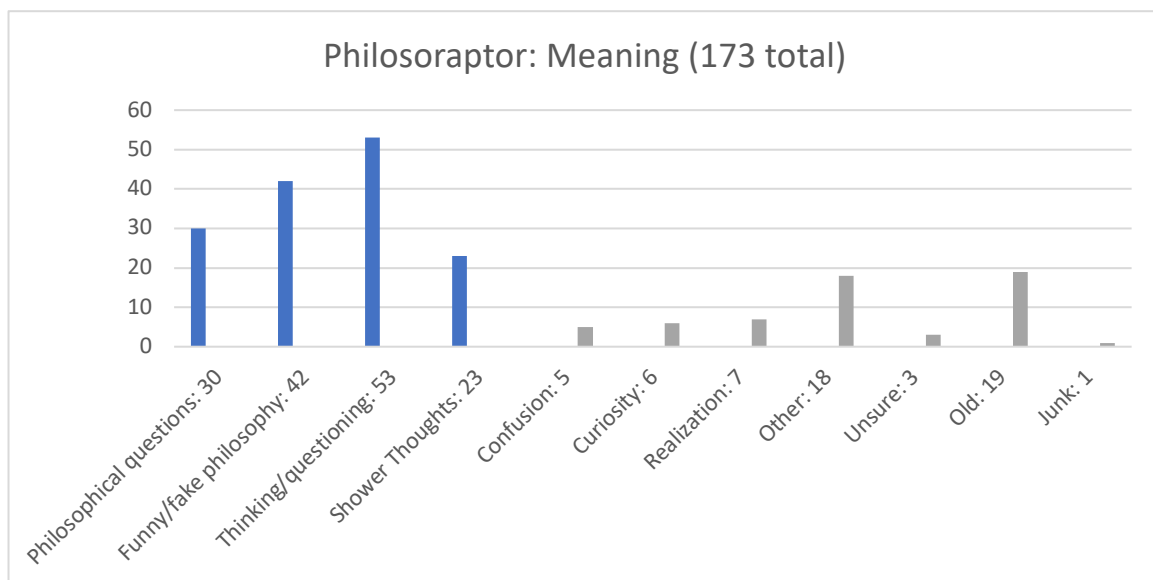

Figure 6.16: Survey responses about the meaning of the Philosoraptor meme

6.4 Stage One Continuity of Form

My fourth criterion describes how static the 'physical' form of the meme (as described by Shifman) remains across iterations. With each new iteration of a meme, the text is amended or replaced completely by a new user. The image itself is normally more or less constant, a critical element of continuity allowing other meme users to recognise further branches of the same overarching meme they have come across before. The persistence of the image also allows for the preservation of iconic elements, counter to the simplification of symbols as demonstrated in the work of Garrod and Fay. However, this fixed form can (and

often does) erode as the meme becomes more popular and developed, introducing new elements or features onto the established image, such as superimposing a new face onto the character(s) in the meme template. This process, which better aligns with Garrod and Fay's work, will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters. However, for the purposes of Stage One, the form of the meme template is relatively fixed, perhaps the clearest example of Dawkins' original memetic trait of *fidelity*. Minor variations can occur, but they must not obscure the crucial details of the image.

In Stage One, the image half of meme is in infancy and thus lacks context beyond what the image itself conveys. In the case of memes whose templates are drawn from popular culture, the image may have additional external context, but the ostensive nature of memes implies shared context based on the current situation. In the case of niche memes, such a limited shared context may be desired (as the case with IDFSG above), but in the case of memes meant for broader appeal, such background context may not be known to new viewers. Therefore, even when deriving from an established piece of media, such external context may be ignored or discarded as it is not shared between communicators. Instead, the image relies on its emotive, iconic elements (direct or indirect) in conjunction with its associated text, to produce meaning. This is similar to the focus on particular aspects of a source when applied to a new target in the process of linguistic metaphor, while overlooking any irrelevant aspects of the source. In the case of memes with templates drawn from sources with obscure or less-established contexts, such as stock photos, such exclusion of context is the default.

Since context cannot serve as a primary method of recognition and semantic encoding, the form of the image itself must remain essentially static, so that viewers, the majority of whom will not be familiar with the meme or its image yet, are able to parse the meme intuitively. A clear, repeated image allows viewers to see the iconic elements and pair them with the associated captions, utilising the process of visual metaphor. Text is the therefore the primary source of meaning at this stage, as discussed in Section 6.3 above, but the image is important for establishing the full tone and intent of the meme—and the image will become the source of meaning as the meme develops into Stage Two (see Section 7.3). Therefore, major changes to a meme's form would result in muddying the intended meaning of the creator, obscuring the iconic elements, and hampering recognition while the engagement of the meme is still limited. Also, as discussed above, unfamiliar users cannot rely on established context of the meme's usage, due to its recency, nor any additional

context from the source of the image (i.e., the piece of media the image is drawn from), as users may be unaware of the image's history. Taken together, the meme's form must therefore retain its physical fidelity, remaining predominantly, if not completely, static until sufficient understanding and familiarity is established among its users.

Figure 6.17: The template for the "Who Killed Hannibal" meme

As an example, consider the meme "Who Killed Hannibal," (see Figure 6.17). This meme is used to present a situation in which someone or something is deflecting blame, often for a problem they have themselves created (see Figure 6.18 for an example and Figure 6.19 for more data). Whether this is purposeful or due to a lack of foresight can vary across iterations. The source of these images is *The Eric Andre Show* and parodies the events of the pictured sketch, in which Eric Andre (in the foreground) shoots Hannibal Buress (in the background), and then asks the camera, "Who killed Hannibal?" with a baffled expression.[253] Though the meme does recreate the overarching situation present in the original media, this background is not necessary for an individual to parse and understand this meme—another example of ostension and inference at work within memes. On its own, the image features the direct iconic cue of Andre shooting Buress, along with the indirect cue of Andre's confused expression. Together, these create a tension between the images, of an act that then leads to uncertainty.

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[253] Adam [No surname given], "Who Killed Hannibal?," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/who-killed-hannibal.
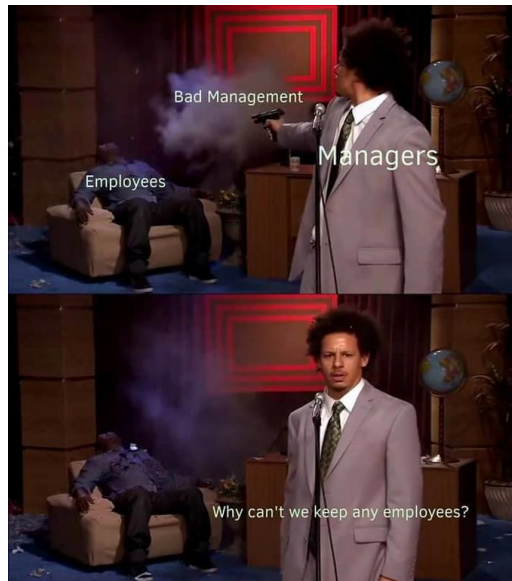
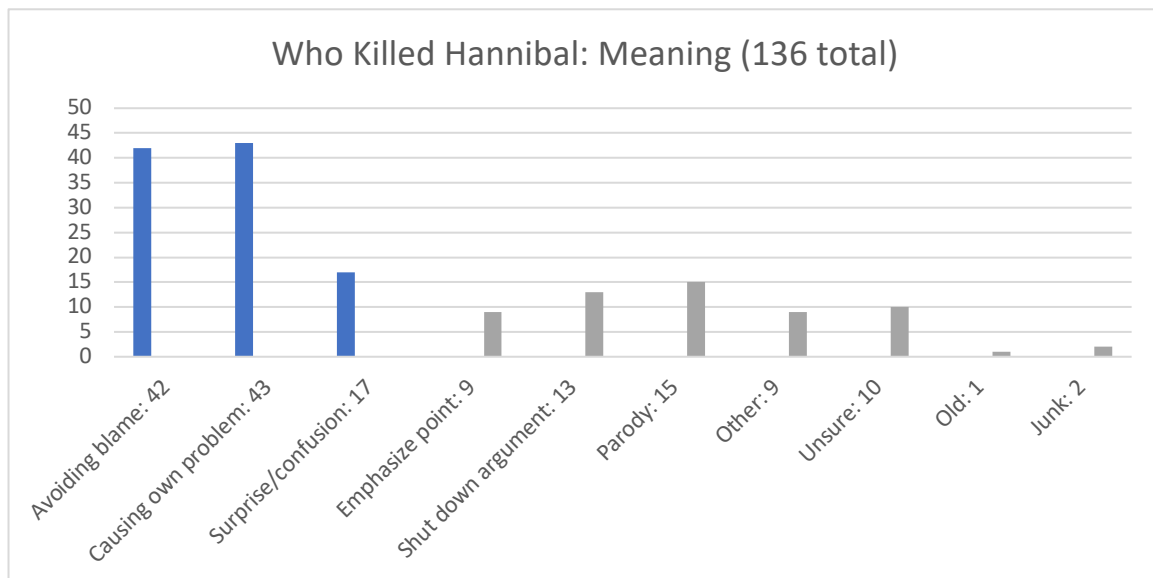*Figure 6.18: An example of Who Killed Hannibal with text*

Figure 6.19 Survey responses about the meaning of the Who Killed Hannibal meme

Although a more precise meaning cannot be intuited from the image alone, this basic framework can be parsed without any familiarity with the source material. With the addition of text to narrow the semantic scope, the full meaning can be intuited even by the uninitiated, provided that the form itself is clear and not altered beyond recognition. As illustrated in my data on the salient features of this meme in Figure 6.20, the most prominent features were the visual elements of Andre shooting and his subsequent expression—the iconic cues. Several participants pointed to the two-panel structure, indicating the significance of the meme's format, which relies on relevance and ostension to associate the two images together. The

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attached text and learned context were also prominent responses, much more so than recognition of the televised origin of the template images ("Source" in the chart, highlighted in orange).
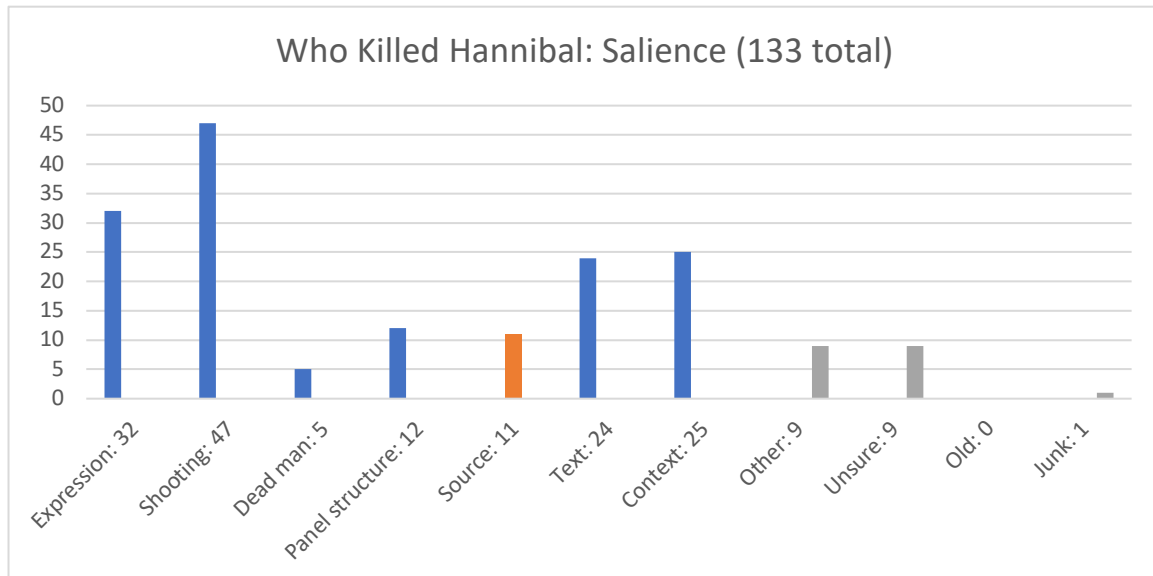

Figure 6.20: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the Who Killed Hannibal meme

Furthermore, although the common name for this meme, Who Killed Hannibal, relates directly to the source context, such name recognition was not particularly high among my participants, as seen in Figure 6.21. The nomenclature here was fairly disparate, though the largest group labelled the meme as "Why would [blank] do this?", which is one of the common captions used in lieu of the original "Who shot Hannibal?", as Hannibal is no longer the direct target of the meme in the new iterations, but whatever he is labelled as (e.g. "employees" in Figure 6.18). There were two sub-groups who used the conventionalised title or cited Eric Andre specifically, though they had similar numbers to more basic labels—names related to shooting or to the meaning of self-delusion—and the Unsure category. This does not directly point to a lack of familiarity with the meme itself, but together with the data for salience, it nevertheless indicates the reduced importance of the original connection to the *Eric Andre Show* compared to the emergent context of the meme, which is based on the template's inherent visual cues. While further graphical elements could be added as the meme develops, in order to sustain clarity of meaning in Stage One, the form must maintain its visual fidelity and not obscure the iconic elements that allow for metaphor and inference.
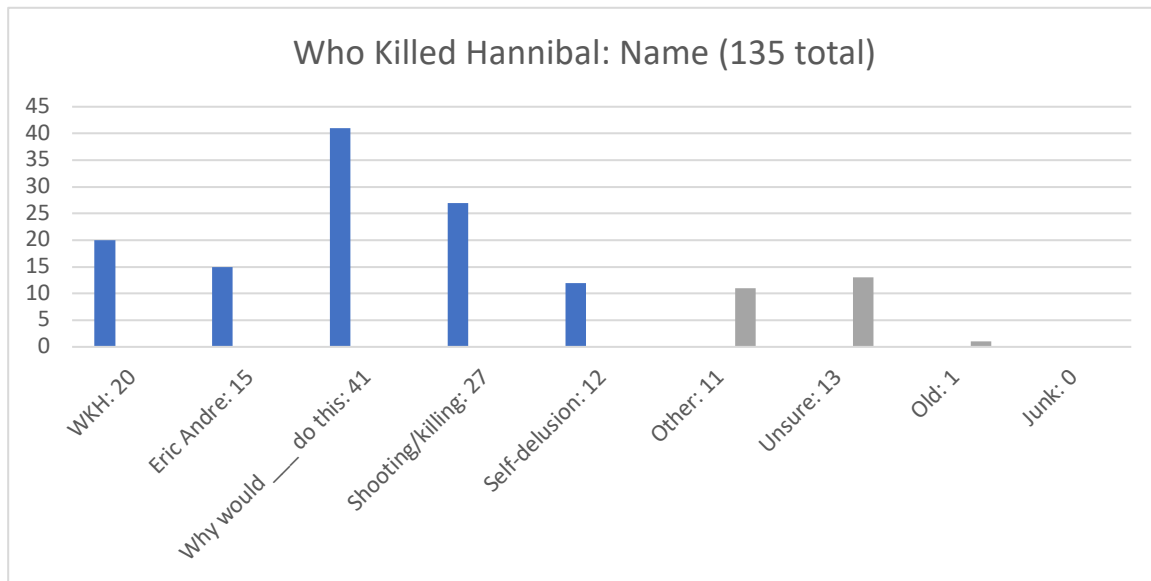
Figure 6.21: Survey responses about the name of the Who Killed Hannibal meme

6.5 Stage One Continuity of Meaning

Just as a consistent form is essential for fostering the early development of a meme, it is important that the meaning of an emergent meme is also relatively fixed. The key here is *relatively* fixed—like the matter of form, the meaning does not need to remain entirely identical across iterations. In fact, studies such as those by Coscia have found that iterations of the same meme need a level of novelty with regard to their meanings in order to remain popular. New versions that cleave too closely to previous ones are less popular, which can lead to users abandoning the meme, and thus a lack of engagement. This is a paradox, but a necessary one. The addition of new text to the same image will inherently change the specific meaning of the meme, as merely reproducing the same image with the same text would be akin to reusing the original—essentially just "sharing" the same instance of the meme. While this is clear representation of Dawkins' memetic fidelity, for an *internet* meme to progress, it must iterate with new captions, as discussed with the Scribe example in Section 6.1. This necessary iteration also parallels subsequent memetic discourse, including Dawkins' later treatments of memes, which liken them more to rapidly mutating viruses than less variable genes.[254] Creating a new iteration requires a novel caption for the image and thus a different

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[254] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 87-88.

meaning, but it is only through these changes that the meme can continue to develop and gain a broader meaning in Stage Two.

In Stage One, however, the meme does not have the necessary context associated with the template image in order to drive meaning. The image itself can be open to a number of different interpretations based on its iconic cues, especially in cases where said iconicity is weak or indirect. Thus, the text is still the primary driver of meaning as discussed above; yet, if new captions suggest meanings that are *too* divergent from previous iterations, then users cannot reach a consensus on what the template itself is meant to represent separate from the text, and therefore cannot effectively craft new, fitting captions for subsequent iterations of their own. For a meme to evolve, new captions must be novel enough to draw interest and not merely repeat previous iterations, yet must be similar enough to earlier iterations so as not to obstruct the shared associations that are being built into the image, and thus prevent the meme from developing past Stage One. Some memes do not overcome this barrier, with a lack of engagement, creativity, or salient details hampering the construction of new iterations—either too few new captions are applied to the same template image, or the new captions are too scattered to form a cohesive narrative around the image. Many such nascent memes (e.g., the Scribe) could be considered dead or failed memes by gatekeepers (i.e., *Know Your Meme*) or by individuals, but I would contend that even if they do not develop further, the linguistic forces at play—iconicity and metaphor working between the image and text—are identical to more popular and more developed memes.

As such, within Stage One, the meme must have a fairly rigid meaning. It must be one with enough semantic opportunities to innovate semantically, but not so much as to lack a clear narrative. During this incubating phase, memes can potentially go through multiple interpretations before the online community unites around a single frontrunner. Further branching in meaning can occur later, as this is a feature of further advanced memes, which will be discussed in Chapter 8. However, for such an embryonic meme to progress past this early stage, only a single, primary meaning can 'survive' amongst the competing interpretations. Thus, a Stage One meme will typically exhibit Dawkins' memetic fidelity in form as well as meaning, before having reduced fidelity in later stages.
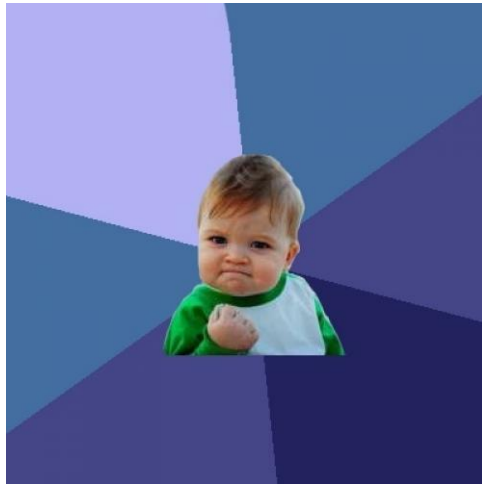
Figure 6.22: The template image of the "Success Kid" meme

Consider the meme "Success Kid," pictured in Figure 6.22. Though much further along in its development, its history illustrates this issue of competing definitions and the need for a clear unifying narrative. The meme was built around a personal photo shared online (Figure 6.23) which was then edited and captioned in a number of ways.[255] The child's gesture and expression were the focus of these early efforts—and continue to be so, as corroborated by my focus group responses and my survey data, as seen in Figure 6.24. The child's expression and gesture are evocative—and ostensive—but uncertain in terms of their encoded meaning. Both are iconic, but indirectly and weakly iconic enough as to make the meaning ambiguous.
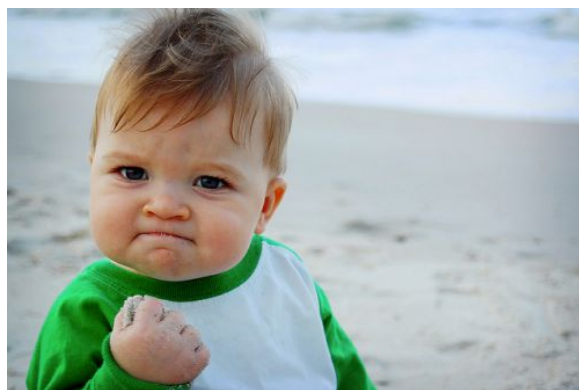

Figure 6.23: The original photo that the "Success Kid" meme was developed from

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[255] Greg McCoral, "WoSuccess Kid / I Hate Sandcastles," Know Your Meme, 2021, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/success-kid-i-hate-sandcastles.
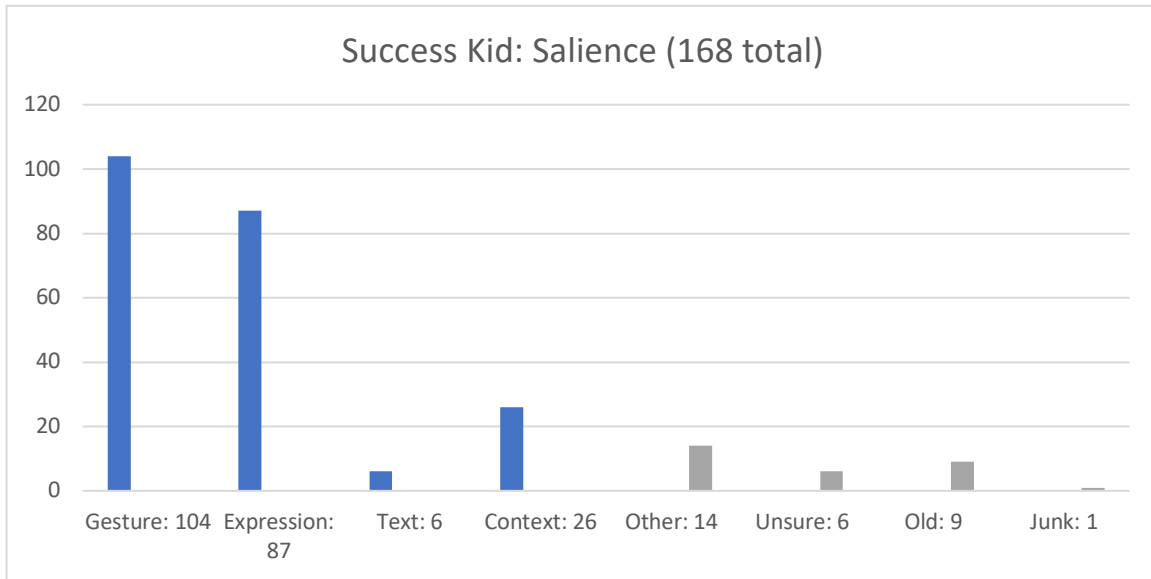
Figure 6.24: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the Success Kid meme

One of the first interpretations was of anger, that the child's expression was a grimace and their gesture a clenched fist of rage. With some digital editing of the original, a variant was created called "I Hate Sandcastles" (see Figure 6.25). There were a few permutations of this meme, but it was soon supplanted by a different variant that reinterpreted the infant's expression as one of resolve and his gesture as one of victory (see Figure 6.26). Each had the potential to continue to develop, but the community coalesced around the version that focused on success, and the earlier 'angry' meaning was all but abandoned.[256]

Figure 6.25: The modified photo in its earlier incarnation as "I Hate Sandcastles"
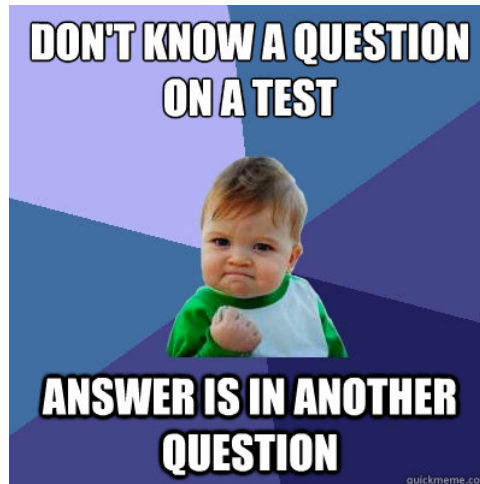
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[256] Ibid.

Figure 6.26: An example of the developed Success Kid meme

Both interpretations are theoretically viable, as both have clear (if indirect) iconic cues and potential for semantic expansion. "I Hate Sandcastles" could have branched out into 'hating' other things, though its permutations failed to push this boundary. It was noted by a few focus group participants that the 'angry at sandcastles' version did not have as much room to grow, and this narrative dead-end helped to shift focus to the success-focused definition, which was able to solidify into the meme's eventual meaning of small victories. Crucially, in order for the meme to progress past this early stage, it could not handle multiple divergent meanings existing simultaneously. It was only by discarding the 'angry' interpretation that the other was able to thrive—an issue further supported by my research data. There was broad recognition of the meme as "Success Kid" among my focus groups, though only a couple recognised the earlier iteration. Furthermore, of the nearly two hundred survey participants who analysed this meme, only one named the meme as "Sandcastle Kid" and cited the meaning as anger (highlighted in orange in Figure 6.27 and Figure 6.28 below). Thus, "Success Kid" provides a clear illustration of how a meme's meaning—while intuitive given iconicity, ostension, and inference—can still be interpreted in different ways.
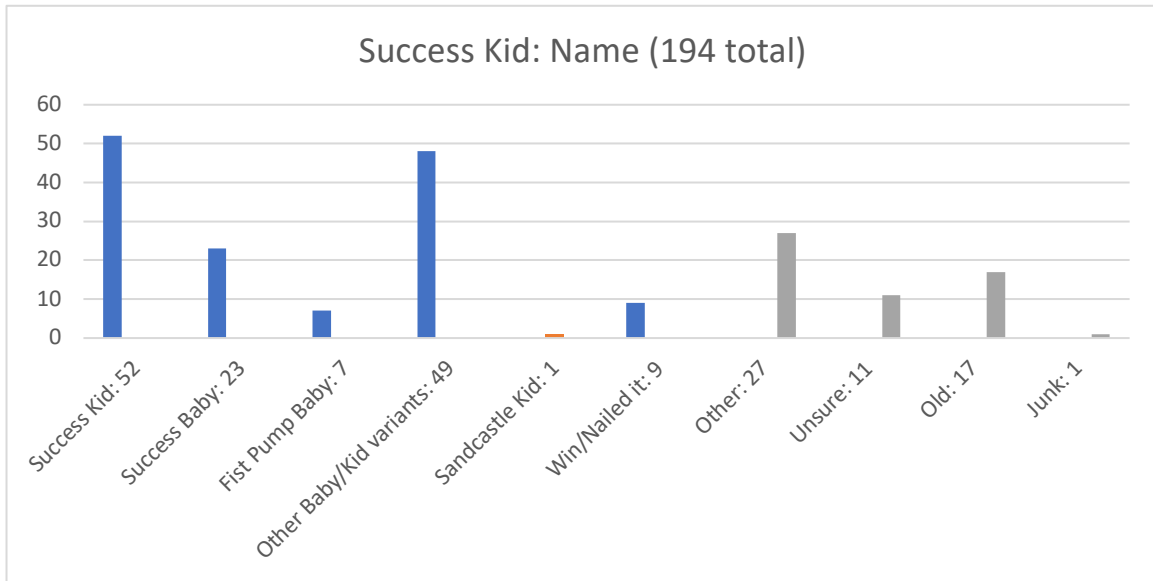
Figure 6.27: Survey responses about the name of the Success Kid meme
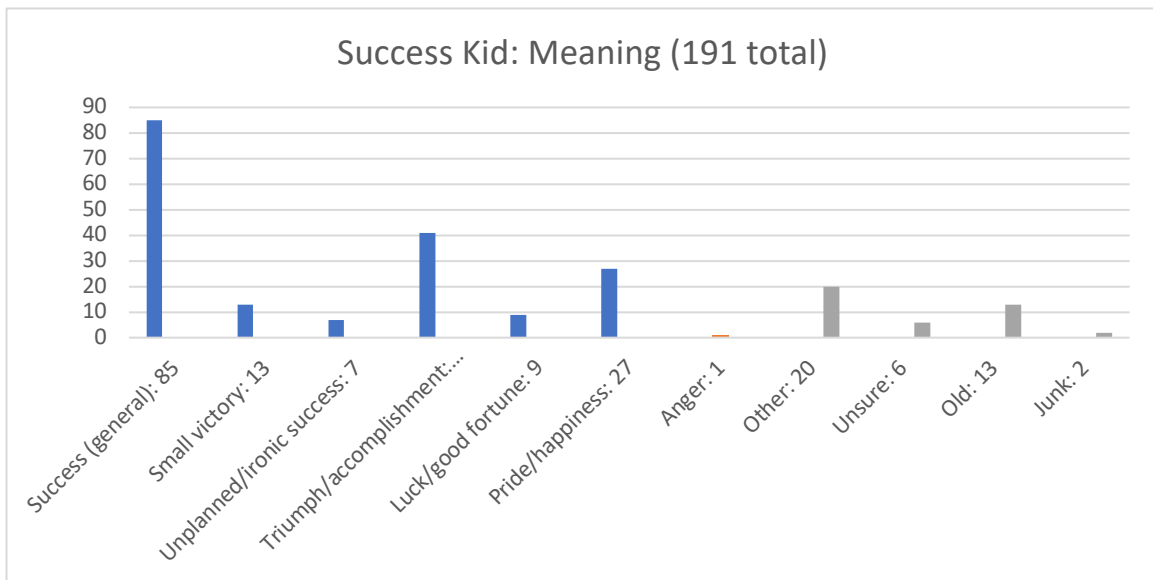
Figure 6.28: Survey responses about the meaning of the Success Kid meme

6.6 Stage One Intuitability

The last of my criteria concerns the ability of the meme to be intuited by someone unfamiliar with the meme. Though closely tied with continuity of meaning and several of my other criteria, this characteristic is distinct in that the ability to be readily comprehended is an innate quality unto itself, beyond the mutability of form and meaning. Intuitability also shifts in different ways than other criteria as a meme develops. During the earliest phase of a

meme's progression, when there is little to no established context, the meme *must* be intuited. Without additional learned context, an individual must rely on a combination of the meme's requisite parts in order to glean the intended meaning. This connects with the criterion of locus of meaning, as the text serves as the primary source of meaning. However, the text is only half of the full meme, and the associated image must be parsed as well in order to fully understand it. An individual must therefore make full use of the previously explained processes of iconicity and visual metaphor to interpret the meme completely and accurately.

Figure 6.29: 'The Scribe,' a meme early in its development

Returning to the example of the Scribe a final time (pictured again in Figure 6.29), this meme must be parsed intuitively to be understood. As opposed to the characters, formats, and motifs that can be found, and thus recognised, in more popular memes, there is likely to be no pre-existing knowledge of this image when an individual first comes across it. One could potentially recognise the stylistic markers of a meme, such as the use of the white Impact font text or the call-and-response style of text often used by image macro memes,[257] as can be seen in some of the examples in this chapter (e.g., Figure 6.26), though the Scribe lacks even these signifiers. Therefore, one must examine the picture alongside the text, determine the salient iconic feature(s), and metaphorically derive a meaning where the text and iconic cues overlap. The man's expression, careful preparation of the quill, his scholarly attire, and more are all details that could feature in its interpretation. Taken individually or together, they could lead to an understanding of sternness, professionalism, or even the

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[257] Brideau and Berret, "A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font,'" 311.

anticipation of a large amount of text. This variety of cues, paired with its textual caption, allow for the meme to be parsed for meaning, even though the figure is still unfamiliar to the typical viewer. However, what about when the meme makes use of well-recognised outside cultural knowledge?

Figure 6.30: The template for the "Condescending Wonka" (and earlier "Creepy Wonka") meme

While memes can be drawn from all manner of media, ranging from stock photos to line art, they are often taken from popular media, such as film, television, or the news. One such example from my data set was the *Condescending Wonka* meme, as shown in Figure 6.30. The use of a recognised person or character can introduce additional context—as well as serve as an ostensive cue—even if the meme itself is unfamiliar. Yet, this does not necessarily translate into a clear sense of meaning. Due to the metaphorical process the image goes through, only a small amount of the information encoded into the image is relevant to the intended meaning, just as additional semantic information is set aside when a familiar word is used metaphorically. Therefore, most if not all of the additional cultural background is not essential to the meaning of the meme and can thus confound the intended message if taken as the primary source of meaning. In the case of Condescending Wonka, for example, the meaning of the meme also has started to spread beyond its original meaning, i.e., a condescending statement as seen in Figure 6.31, given that it is further along in its development. The meaning has spread from just condescension as seen in Figure 6.32 (compare with Philosoraptor in Figure 6.16 above), though it does retain a similar theme, incorporating broader elements of sarcasm and superiority. Notably, the meme also had connotations of creepiness in its earlier iterations, with an initial title for the meme recorded

as "Creepy Wonka" on Know Your Meme in lieu of "Condescending Wonka" (a secondary title that remains on their record of the meme).[258] This alternative meaning has since fallen out of use, a narrowing of meaning much like Success Kid in the previous section. This semantic shift is further supported by my data, as creepiness was not a meaning suggested by my participants. Nevertheless, the early split in meaning and variety of survey answers illustrates that a singular image, even with a specific cultural connection, does not guarantee a clear meaning, especially when no associated text is present. This was the case for my survey participants, as my survey made use of the blank templates (as discussed in Chapter 4).
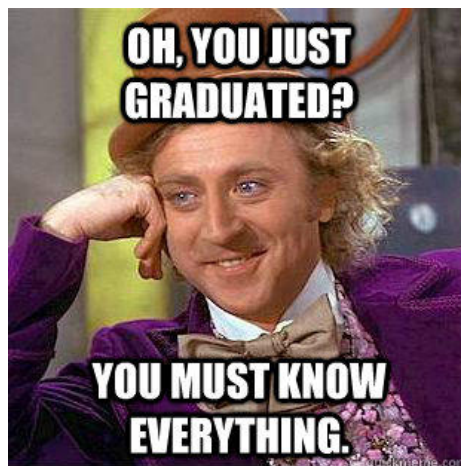

Figure 6.31: An example of the Condescending Wonka meme
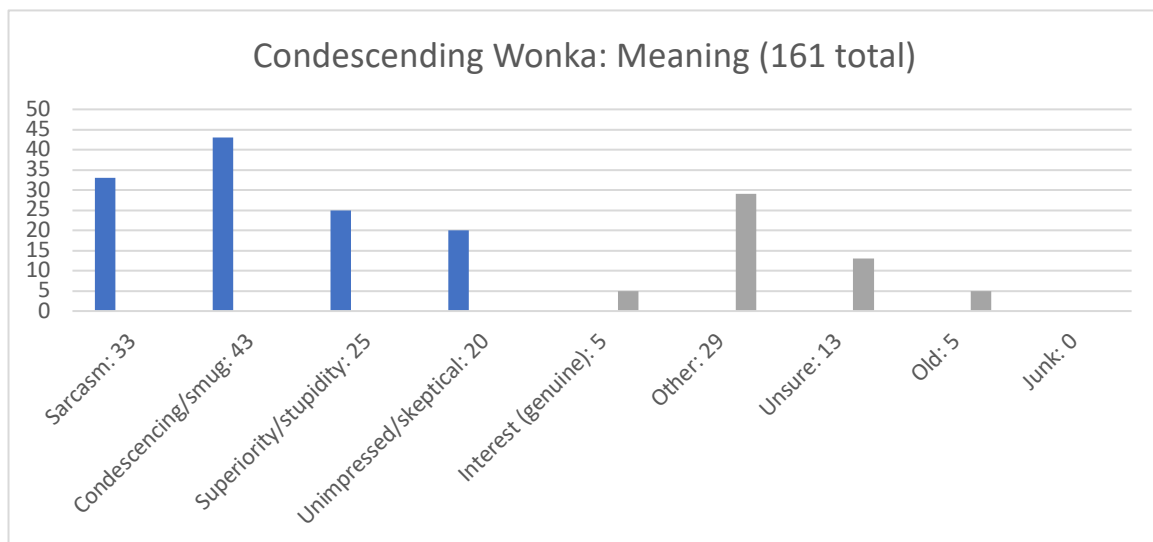

Figure 6.32: Survey responses about the meaning of the Condescending Wonka meme

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[258] Don [No surname given], "Condescending Wonka / Creepy Wonka," Know Your Meme, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/condescending-wonka-creepy-wonka.

This does however contrast to the data gathered about the most prominent aspect of the meme image. When asked about the source of meaning within the image, the majority pointed to the physicality of the Wonka character, particularly his expression and posture (see Figure 6.33). Even for a meme much later in its development, the iconic elements of this meme are still very much present, even if weak and/or indirect. Thus, in its earlier development, the Wonka meme would have relied even more on its iconic elements to help establish meaning. The character's grin while he leans on his hand could be interpreted in several ways, but paired with a caption such as the one featured in Figure 6.31 allows a viewer to narrow down these possible meanings. The combination of the text and iconic elements allows viewers to intuit the condescending tone of the overall message, utilising metaphor and Scott-Phillips' "mindreading," even without context other than recognising the character. An individual entirely unfamiliar with the Wonka character could intuit the same meaning using the same metaphorical and inferential processes. Context can then be built over repeated use and exposure to the meme, reducing the need to go through the entire iconic-metaphorical process in order to intuit meaning, a shortcut that can allow faster comprehension. Many of my survey participants stated that the meaning was learned via such context, represented in the blue 'Context' section of Figure 6.33. Notably, those who attributed the meaning to the character's role in its source film were comparatively very low—the 'Source' section highlighted in orange.
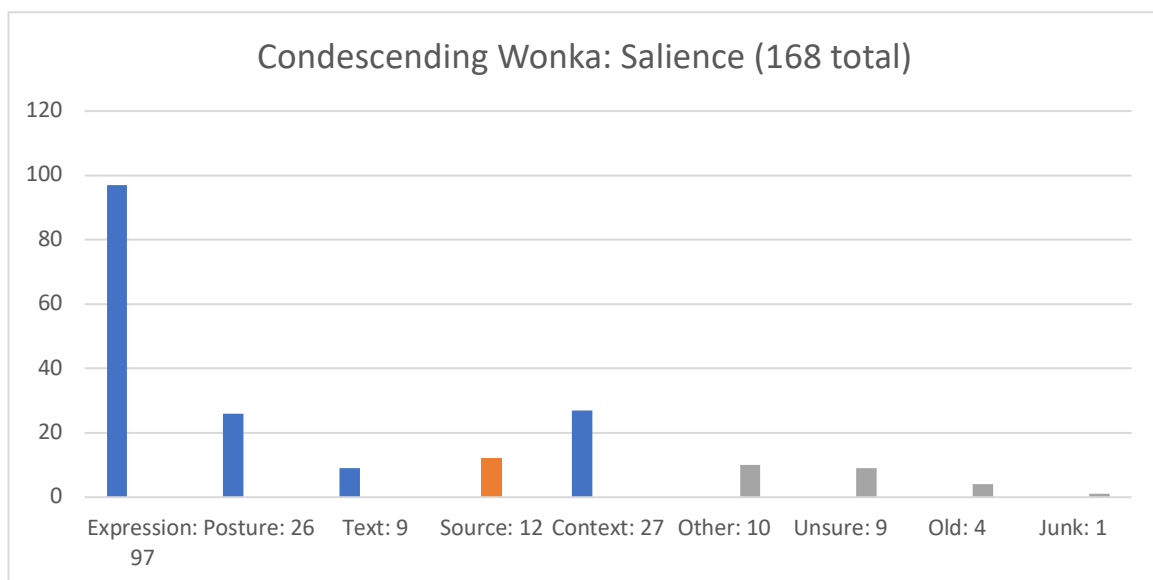

Figure 6.33: Survey responses about the source of meaning in the Condescending Wonka meme

6.7 Stage One Overview

To summarise, Stage One is marked by a number of features across my six criteria. Stage One memes are engaged with by a small or limited group based on a shared enterprise. Iterations of Stage One memes can be traced directly to the original novel use of the image template or to iterations closely related to its origin, as there are relatively few iterations that have been created. These memes draw their meaning predominantly from the text of the meme, with the image providing emotion and emphasis but not yet serving as the primary driver of meaning. Their forms are relatively rigid, in order to allow for greater recognisability and thus better shared meaning construction. This meaning is also relatively fixed, as while there can be competing meanings in this early stage, one must be focused on in order for the meme to gain coherency. Lastly, they are inherently and necessarily intuitable via iconicity and metaphor, as they have little to no external context with which to establish meaning. Together, these features describe a communicative unit of relatively small scale but technical significance that can develop into more complex forms as it advances into Stage Two and beyond.

Chapter 7: Stage Two of the Life Cycle, Conventionalisation

Stage Two is a period of transition for memes. It is a middle phase, during which many of the earlier characteristics of Stage One memes begin to break down or evolve, but have not reached the full abstraction of Stage Three, which will be discussed in the next chapter. During this period, the meme moves away from its insular and specific beginnings, broadening in its format, meaning, and reach, though still within certain constraints. By this point, an individual meme is no longer the product of a single group, though is still within the often-opaque sphere of 'internet culture,' beyond the mainstream. This stage represents a bit of a grey area in my developmental structure, though this is a deliberate design choice on my part: such an intermediary stage between creation and abstraction allows for analysis of the transition itself, rather than merely the origin of a meme or its ultimate outcome. To provide clarity, the same six criteria are used, each of which have advanced or changed in some way that marks them as distinct from both Stage One and Stage Three. This distinction from Stage One is largely a by-product of conventionalisation. Repeated use and iteration allow the meme to become recognisable and known to users, and thus dependency on continuities and semantic parsing are relaxed in favour of learned associations. I propose that the majority of memes ultimately fall somewhere within Stage Two—if not wholly by nature of their elements all conforming to Stage Two standards, then due to a combination of some Stage One features and some Stage Three features, with the remainder aligning with Stage Two criteria. Detailed analysis of the Life Cycle criteria for this phase will be undertaken below.

7.1 Stage Two Engagement

In Stage One, the engagement of a given meme was described as relatively narrow, shallow, and insular—comparatively small if not numerically so, given the massive number of internet users. Early memes operate well within the context of a community of practice framework, with the different members of the community brought together by a shared enterprise, such as an interest or hobby. In Stage Two, this CofP framework still applies, though the broadened reach means that the rigidity of this framework—like many of the other elements of Stage Two memes—has undergone erosion. The audience of a Stage Two meme has spread beyond the initial community of practice into related communities. There is still an element of shared enterprise around the sharing of the meme itself, but the original focus

of the instigating CofP has been reduced. This results in a structure less like an ego-centric social network with a singular unifying node and more like a socio-centric social network, which operates without a central node but within set limits. The more insular communities that fostered the creation of the meme are still included in this network, but the spread to other, linked communities results in a reduced or diffused central node, but nonetheless remaining within the boundaries of these shared communities.[259] A prototypical example of such a network would be the spread of a meme to multiple forums across the website Reddit, or circulation within multiple specialised networks, such as digital outlets focused on internet culture, e.g. Buzzfeed and Mashable. Although these would constitute more than a single CofP, they are still clearly networked by their linkages across the internet landscape and their focus on curating digital culture. In epidemiological-memetic terms, whereas Stage One featured a meme being *endemic* to a single community, I suggest that in Stage Two the meme becomes *endemic* within multiple, related communities of practice—thus *epidemic* across several communities.[260] During this phase, memes exist in perhaps their most 'normal' state under the vernacular usage of the term, in which the format and meaning of a given meme has spread to the point of recognition by a sizeable online population and thus undergone a level of conventionalisation, though its reach is not so far as to have entered mainstream usage by those who are not as 'meme-literate.'[261]

Figure 7.1: The template for "Overly Attached Girlfriend"

[259] Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*, 17.
[260] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 85; see also Wang and Wood, "An Epidemiological Approach to Model the Viral Propagation of Memes."
[261] Procházka, "Internet Memes - A New Literacy?"

To demonstrate this engagement of a meme that has spread beyond its original community, consider the meme *Overly Attached Girlfriend* (see Figure 7.1). This meme had one of the largest data sets in my survey, with approximately 200 respondents providing answers about this meme (a product of chance, as discussed in Chapter 4). Although there is some variance in naming, as can be seen in Figure 7.2, the vast majority of the data falls into a common theme. The character is sometimes referred to as an ex-girlfriend rather than a current one, and with a variety of adjectives beyond 'overly attached,' though again along a consistent tone: obsessive, clingy, creepy, crazy, stalker. The data on the meaning of the meme was similar, as can be seen in Figure.7.3. While some proposed the meaning to be more obsessive than possessive, or more frightening than creepy, there is still a solid semantic through-line: a girlfriend acting in an overbearing, jealous, and intense manner towards her partner. Two examples can be seen in Figure 7.4, demonstrating some of the variation within this meme. However, much like the discussion of *Not Sure If* in Section 7.5 below, the diversity in meaning is contained within an overarching semantic structure, a connective change of meaning that is consistent with Lakoff's model of radial categories.[262]
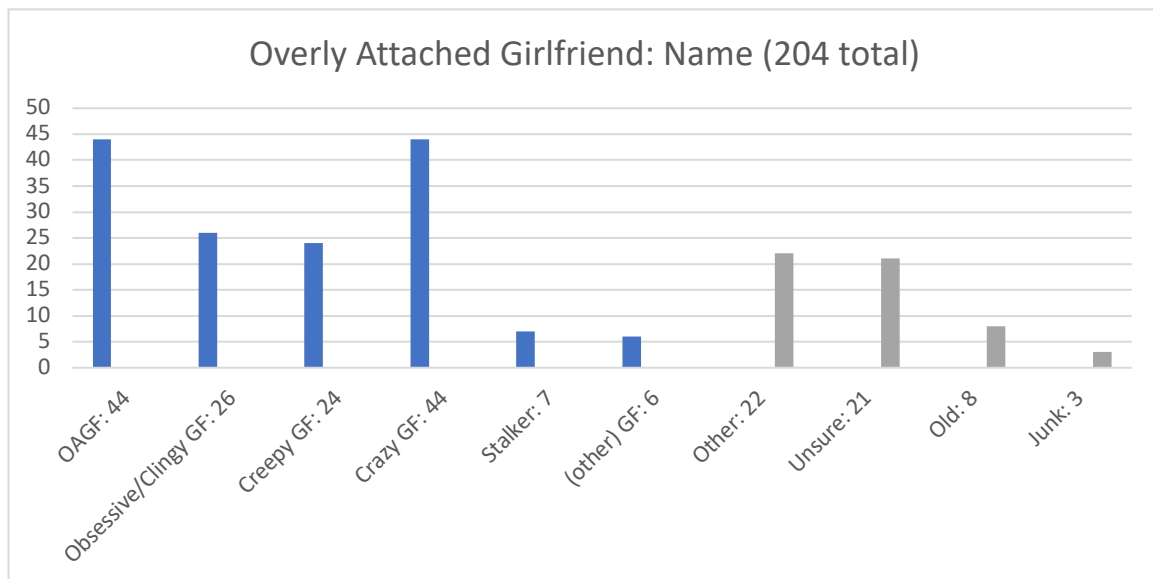

Figure 7.2: Survey responses about the name of the Overly Attached Girlfriend meme

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[262] Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, 91–114.
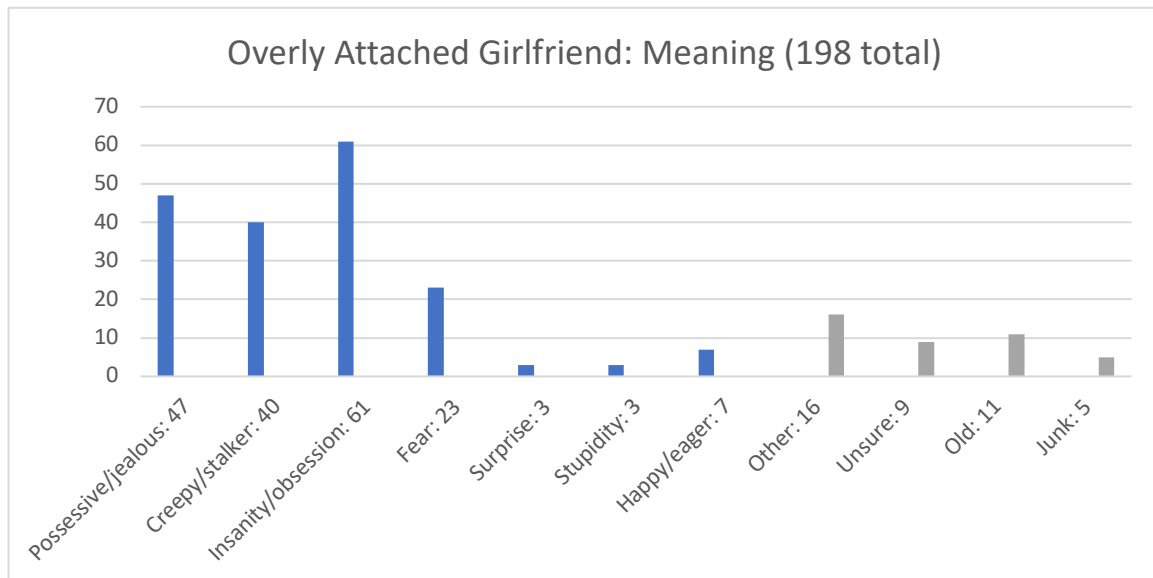
Figure.7.3: Survey responses about the meaning of the Overly Attached Girlfriend meme
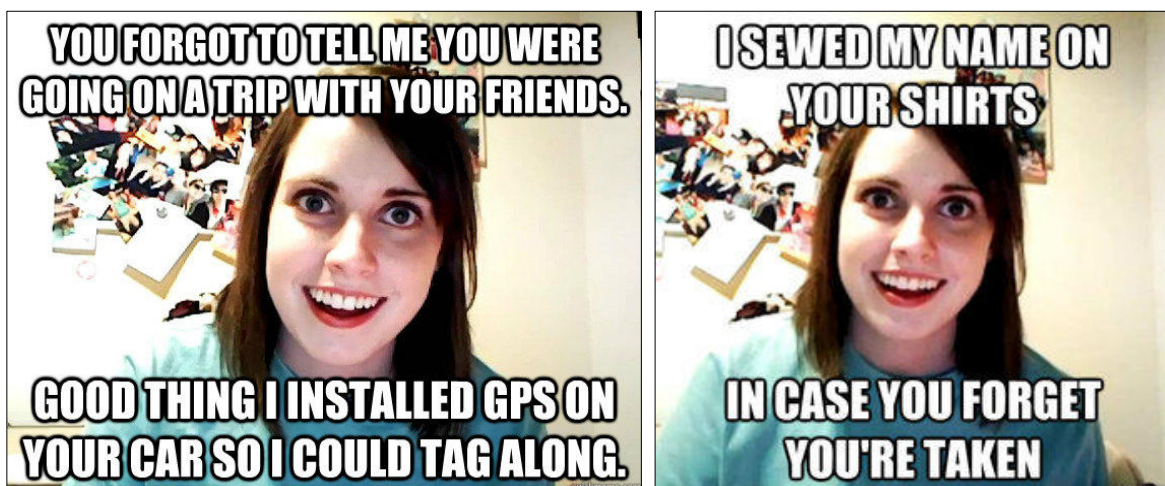
Figure 7.4: Two examples of the Overly Attached Girlfriend meme, featuring obsessive and jealous behaviour

The spread of this meme began in 2012, after the release of a YouTube video in which the pictured woman performs a parody song demonstrating many of the obsessive behaviours described above. A screenshot from the beginning of the video served as the template for the budding meme, which was spread through Reddit and Quickmeme, a contemporarily popular meme creator website. The meme also spread via YouTube, where the original video had been uploaded. Soon thereafter, the meme began to be shared by several internet culture sites, such as Buzzfeed and The Daily Dot. From there the meme spread to and across the blogging site Tumblr, eventually jumping to Facebook and

Twitter.[263] This trajectory mirrors the "food chain" of meme spread suggested in one of my focus groups. The surge in engagement was largely facilitated by Reddit, along with online curators such as Buzzfeed and Tumblr. Each of these platforms have their own communities, though there are numerous connections and areas of overlap between them. They are all part of the more widespread sphere of internet culture, as opposed to more insular communities such as 4chan.[264] The reach of this meme as it exists today is more akin to Stage Three, but its process of spreading to a wider audience nevertheless exemplifies the branching out from an originating community that occurs in Stage Two. Interestingly, Overly Attached Girlfriend supplanted a similar meme that had preceded it. *Crazy Girlfriend Praying Mantis* (see Figure 7.5) is an advice animal template featuring a praying mantis along with obsessive captions in a manner almost (or in some cases exactly) identical to Overly Attached Girlfriend. This meme, while less iconic, played on the consumption of male praying mantises by females after mating. This meme originated in 2011—a year before the video that launched Overly Attached Girlfriend—and spread across parts of Reddit before being picked up by a few smaller meme-curating sites and then reaching Tumblr. Past this point, the meme did not have much more engagement, instead remaining confined to a much smaller audience before all but falling out of use in favour of Overly Attached Girlfriend.[265] This more restrained engagement, along with its less relatable and less emotive iconic elements, demonstrates the limits of a meme that remains in Stage One. On the other hand, Overly Attached Girlfriend serves as a clear example of a meme truly breaking out into a broader group of communities, with increased engagement that marks a shift into Stage Two.

[263] Sabrina Tibbetts, "Overly Attached Girlfriend," Know Your Meme, 2017, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/overly-attached-girlfriend.

[264] Chen, "The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction."

[265] Dane [No surname given], "Crazy Girlfriend Praying Mantis," Know Your Meme, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/crazy-girlfriend-praying-mantis.

Figure 7.5: An example of Overly Attached Girlfriend alongside an example of the "Crazy Girlfriend Praying Mantis" meme which features the same caption

7.2 Stage Two Relation to Origin

As described in the last chapter, each meme has a first usage as a piece of online content, an initial sharing of a piece of media, which is subsequently edited, re-edited, and re-shared by other internet users as it undergoes semantic and graphical conventionalisation. This process can result in later meme iterations being drastically different than that first digital artefact, both in terms of form and meaning (e.g., Success Kid in Section 6.5). This is a product of the parallel memetic characteristics of *fidelity*—the faithful reproduction of a meme—and *longevity*—the continued replication of a meme over time.[266] Each successive iteration of a meme is an imitation but also alteration of the iterations that have come before it; however, it is not an imitation of *all* previous iterations, but only a limited selection of those that the creator of a new iteration has seen. In the period shortly following the origin instance, there is a very limited pool of new iterations, which are largely based on that origin point or the iterations formed soon thereafter. As a meme proliferates, especially as it is engaged with across a wider network, the population of iterations for internet users to interact with becomes larger, growing exponentially, as a form of viral content.[267] Furthermore, as previously discussed, there is a drive for novelty and semantic broadening that occurs as part

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[266] Procházka, "Internet Memes - A New Literacy?", 55; Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 86.

[267] See Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 87; see also Dubey et al., "MemeSequencer: Sparse Matching for Embedding Image Macros"; Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."

of this meme proliferation, with new iterations not only needing to be poignant or humorous in their own right, but also forge new discursive territory.[268] Therefore, in order to achieve longevity, memes must forgo a level of fidelity, allowing themselves to evolve so as to stay relevant and popular. This competition between fidelity and longevity was recognised by Dawkins in his later works, cited as an element of mutation and adaptation in order for memes to 'survive.'[269] This is very much the case for internet memes, with continued production of new iterations resulting in a form of cumulative cultural evolution. However, this evolution is not necessarily built on all previous iterations. With the viral growth of a meme, a broader pool of variants exists that can serve as models for new iterations, and this expanded population is now subdivided amongst different online communities, as discussed in the previous section. Thus, a viewer of a meme has a wider array of possible iterations that they may come into contact with, but likely within their own community or communities, which may not be the original community the meme was developed in. Also, with the sorting patterns of many platforms, such as Quickmeme or Reddit, newer iterations are more likely to be seen by users, while older examples are buried under more recent ones.[270] Thus, meme production typically occurs in rough generations that align with the engagement of a meme across different communities. As the reach of the meme branches and more iterations are created, the link between new iterations and the origin point of the meme becomes thinner with each successive generation.[271] While very strong in Stage One, this link ultimately diminishes to the point of all but disappearing by Stage Three. In Stage Two, however, this link is still present, if muted. As with many of my criteria, Stage Two represents a period of transition, where the relation of a meme to its origin is *eroding* but not yet gone. Stage Two memes consist of a second 'generation' of iterations, which are modelled on the later first generation produced soon after the meme's debut as a piece of viral media.

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[268] Coscia, "Popularity Spikes Hurt Future Chances for Viral Propagation of Protomemes."

[269] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 87.

[270] Coscia, "Competition and Success in the Meme Pool: A Case Study on Quickmeme.Com"; Coscia, "Average Is Boring: How Similarity Kills a Meme's Success"; Coscia, "Popularity Spikes Hurt Future Chances for Viral Propagation of Protomemes."

[271] For more on the process of CCE across generations, see Kirby, Cornish, and Smith, "Cumulative Cultural Evolution in the Laboratory: An Experimental Approach to the Origins of Structure in Human Language."

Figure 7.6: The template for "Is This A Pigeon"

The meme Is This a Pigeon provides an example of this process. The source of the meme (see the blank template in Figure 7.6) is a still from the anime The Brave Fighter Of Sun Fighbird, which features a character regarding an approaching butterfly and asking out of genuine ignorance "Is this a pigeon?" This caption is what provides the meme with its name, with the full quote or an abbreviated form of it receiving overwhelming support from my data, as seen in Figure 7.7. Although the question was an earnest misunderstanding in the source material, the image first rose to prominence in the early 2010s, shared online as a humorous example of what was assumed to be a mistranslation of the original Japanese into English. The image went viral due to this assumption, with some adding captions pointing to its ridiculousness, one of the first documented of which can be seen in Figure 7.8. This association of the meme with an element of confusion and mistranslation persisted for several years, until a resurgence of the meme in 2018 brought about a shift in meaning.[272]

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[272] Miluk [No surname given], "Is This A Pigeon?," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon.
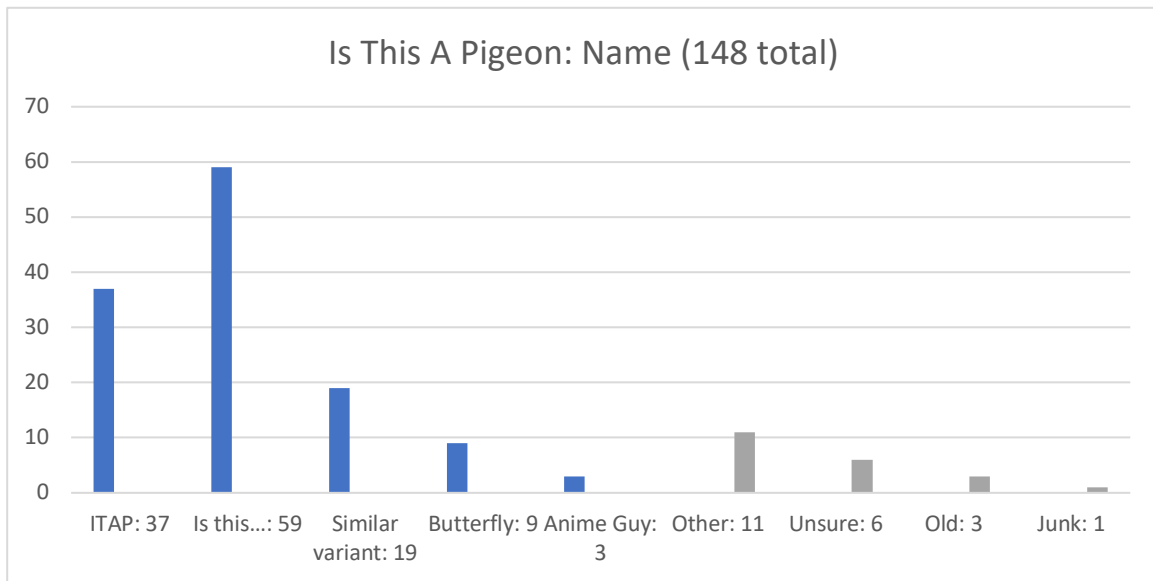
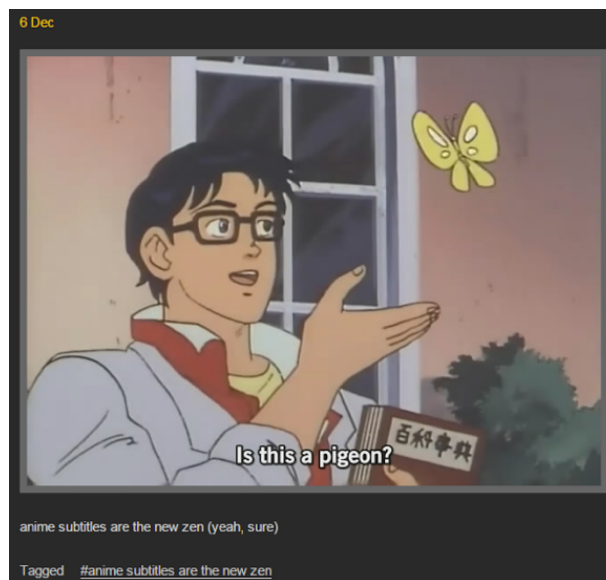Figure 7.7: Survey responses about the name of the Is This A Pigeon meme

Figure 7.8: One of the first uses of the template image, in which the caption has been misidentified as a translation error

With this resurgence in popularity came a second wave of new iterations of the meme, this time with a clearer narrative. This new generation had turned to labelling the man and the butterfly, as well as amending the proposed identity of the 'pigeon.' Thus, the meme relates a situation "when someone does not recognise obvious things," in the words of one of my survey respondents. Or, as one of my focus group participants put it, the pigeon question is reframed as "Is this something that it clearly isn't?" In the source material, the question itself is made genuinely, due to a basic lack of knowledge on the part of the character. This can often be the case with the meme, where it can represent simple confusion or "innocent

ignorance of a topic," as put by one respondent. However, in a manner much like *Who Killed Hannibal* (Section 6.4), this meme can also represent a situation "demonstrating willful [sic] ignorance," according to another participant, wherein the conflation of the two named items is anything but innocent. A breakdown of the data on the meaning of this meme can be seen in Figure 7.9, along with a pair of example memes that portray different aspects of this meme can be seen in Figure 7.10.

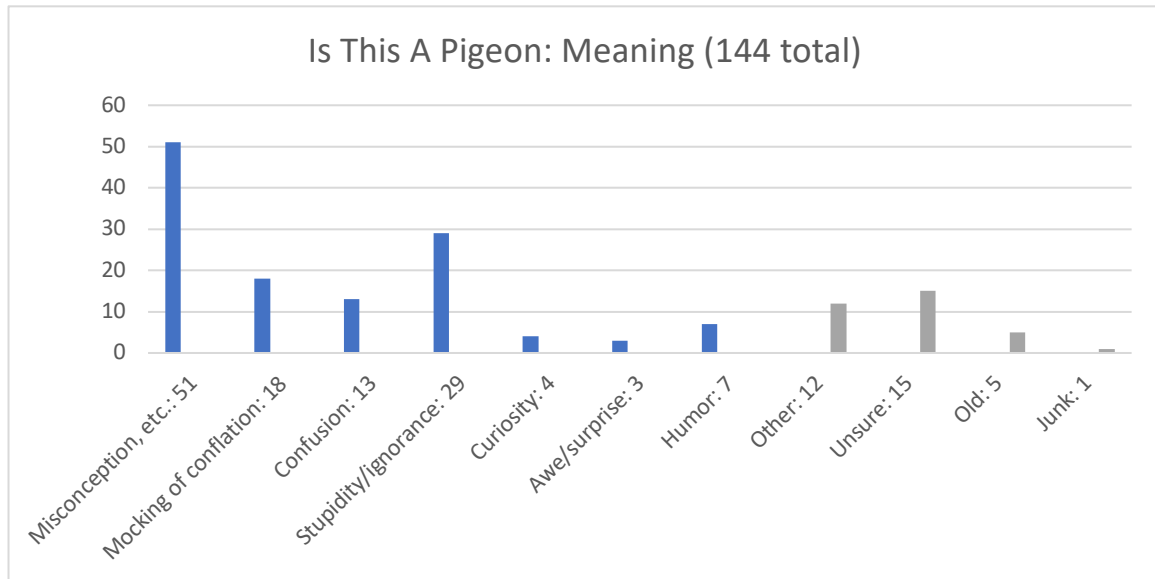*Figure 7.9: Survey responses about the meaning of the Is This A Pigeon meme*

Figure 7.10: Two examples of Is This a Pigeon; the left features a self-deprecating tone while the right has a mocking tone

Is This a Pigeon has a clear overarching theme of conflation and confusion, though has undergone sufficient semantic broadening as to include both simple misconception and

false equivalency. With an origin based in misunderstanding, the current state of the meme is not entirely removed from where it began. However, the shift away from miscommunication to conflation demonstrates an evolution of the meme that occurred as a result of a second generation of iterations based not on the original artefact, but the subsequent imitators and editors of that origin point.

7.3 Stage Two Locus of Meaning

Previously, I stated that locus of meaning is one of the clearest criteria in delineating the stages of the Life Cycle Model. Stage Two, despite its transitory nature, has a very distinct frame for this criterion. Rather than the text driving the meaning, in Stage Two, the meme's locus of meaning is found in the image itself. This is not to say that the text does not contribute to the meaning of the meme; the text still provides the context that shapes the meaning of a specific iteration of the meme. However, given that conventionalisation has occurred with expanded use and widened viewership[273] (see the preceding Engagement and Origin sections), the text is now providing context and focus for the image, which has gained semantic power on its own. The image has now established bounds to its meaning based on previous iterations, and the text serves to narrow this meaning to a specific example. The elements of iconicity, metaphor, and ostension are still critical to the process of meaning creation, though the balance has shifted from focusing on the text to focusing on the image. The image template as such can stand on its own—while not complete without a caption to provide that extra context, the image itself provides a clearer cue independently. As opposed to the broad range of iconic interpretations discussed in the last chapter, conventionalisation has narrowed the possibilities down to a select few that are more strongly associated with the template image. Text is then added to this established template, matching a suitable caption appropriate to the image rather than a would-be template being added to existing text.

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[273] Elke Teich et al., "Less Is More/More Diverse: On The Communicative Utility of Linguistic Conventionalization," *Frontiers in Communication* 5, no. 1 (2021): 1–17.

Figure.7.11: The template for "Gru's Plan"

Consider the meme *Gru's Plan*, the template of which can be seen in Figure.7.11. The meme originates from the movie *Despicable Me* (2010), which features the character of Gru presenting a plan using a flip chart, only to come across an unexpected sheet. The scene was then formatted into a four-panel structure wherein users could put in their own text (or other media, such as images) onto the pages of the flip chart. According to one of my survey participants, the meaning can be seen summarised as: "The four panels each represent a stage in a plan. The final two feature the same text, usually the point of failure in the plan." As such, the last panel features the same text as the third panel, as opposed to changing like the previous panels, with only the character's expression altered. Another survey participant pointed out how this structure was important to the meaning and intended humour, as "using the last sentence twice…emphas[ises] the joke." In particular, the meme is used to describe a plan failing or backfiring, due to coincidence or lack of foresight, not unlike *Who Killed Hannibal* (Section 6.4). For a further breakdown of the meaning of this meme, see Figure 7.12, along with an example of the meme in use in Figure 7.13.
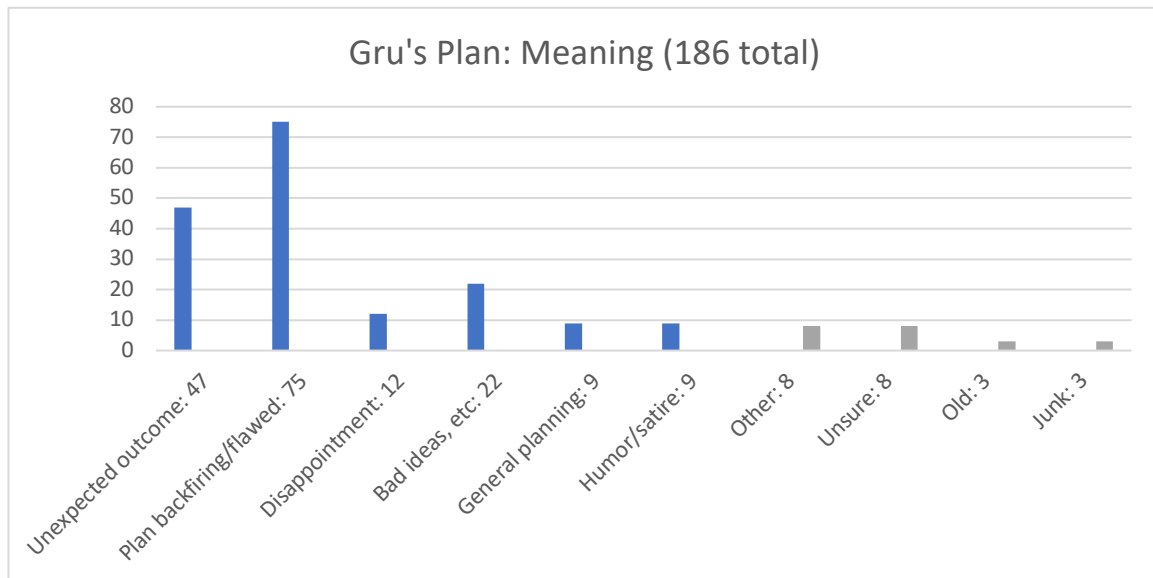
Gru's Plan: Meaning (186 total)

Categories: Unexpected outcome: 47, Plan backfiring/flawed: 75, Disappointment: 12, Bad ideas, etc: 22, General planning: 9, Humor/satire: 9, Other: 8, Unsure: 8, Old: 3, Junk: 3

Figure 7.12: Survey responses about the meaning of the Gru's Plan meme

Figure 7.13: An example of the Gru's Plan meme, related to Despicable Me *from which the meme originates*

My survey data was relatively unified in terms of the meme's meaning and aligned with the meaning put forth by KYM.[274] Although there was variation as to the cause of the plan ultimately failing, the unforeseen turn of events was consistent across my respondents. Of note here is that the structure is driven by the image, both in terms of its four-panel format and the iconic cues of Gru's expressions and gestures across said panels. The ostensive nature of the image is evident in its consecutive layout, relying on shared conventions of sequencing (i.e., reading left to right, top to bottom). This structure is paired with the iconic cues of Gru's gestures and expressions to convey excitement and eagerness turning to confusion and worry.

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[274] YF [username], "Gru's Plan," Know Your Meme, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grus-plan.

Together, a conventionalised framework is created, in which any suitable text can be substituted on the pages and be readily understood. As opposed to several of the examples in the last chapter, which needed text to provide semantic bounds for the iconic interpretation of the image, Gru's Plan can be understood, at least in a broad sense, without text. The iconic cues and ostensive structure were the predominately salient features of the meme according to my respondents, as seen in Figure 7.14 below. Although "Text" (in orange) was a salient detail for a few individuals, the overwhelming majority pointed to the graphical elements of body language and the panel structure as being the primary forces of meaning construction. The visual driving the meaning is all the more apparent when considering that, as described above, the third and fourth panels use the same text. The different expression in the final panel is therefore what provides the shift in meaning. In the words of one respondent, the "repeated 4th frame with [the] change of emotion sends the punchline home." As such, this is one example of how the image itself is the primary locus of meaning, rather than the text.
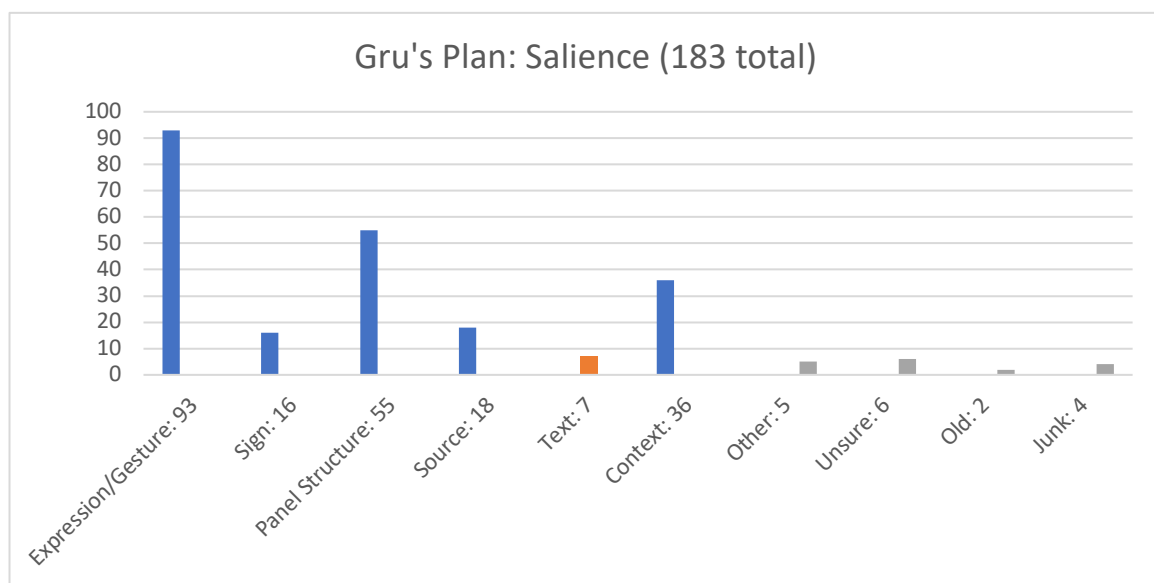
Figure 7.14: Survey responses about the source of meaning of the Gru's Plan meme

7.4 Stage Two Continuity of Form

In the previous chapter, it was established that having a strict continuity of form across iterations of a meme was important for its early development, as this consistency allowed for recognition by early users and aided in the emergence of a clear meaning. In Stage Two, since a conventionalised form and meaning have been established, there is less

need for strict continuity. Stage Two memes can continue to use the same form, unchanged, making full use of the iconic and metaphorical elements. As stated in the previous section, the image has now become the locus of meaning and as such having a clear visual connection between the current iteration and those that have come before it is critical. However, the image itself is undergoing a process of cumulative cultural evolution as a new generation of iterations are created, though this is restrained by a need for a moderate level of visual continuity. While iconicity and metaphor can still be utilised, they are not necessary to parse the meme—or the full scope of the meme may be conventionalised beyond the need for iconicity and metaphor. As such, the visual elements of the meme are more open to change alongside the novel caption with each iteration. These alterations cannot be too drastic; a moderate level of visual continuity should still be present, though the intensity of this connection decreases during Stage Two before falling off in Stage Three.

Figure 7.15: The template for "One Does Not Simply"

To demonstrate this process, consider the meme *One Does Not Simply*, the template of which can be seen in Figure 7.15. This meme originates from a scene in the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), in which the character Boromir states, "One does not simply walk into Mordor." The template actually features a still from the movie a short time after the utterance of this line, but the distinctive hand gesture became associated with the phrase, and thus the constant caption of "One does not simply [something]" typically serves as the text for the above image.[275] Of note, this meme was one of the most recognisable by name among my meme pools, with almost 85% recognising the

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[275] Philipp [No surname given], "One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor," Know Your Meme, 2021.

meme by its established title, as seen in Figure 7.16. My focus group participants also largely recognised this meme by name. This speaks to the meme's widespread popularity, though the strong association of the movie quotation is likely a factor, as well as the straightforward nature of the name being the most common upper caption for the image.
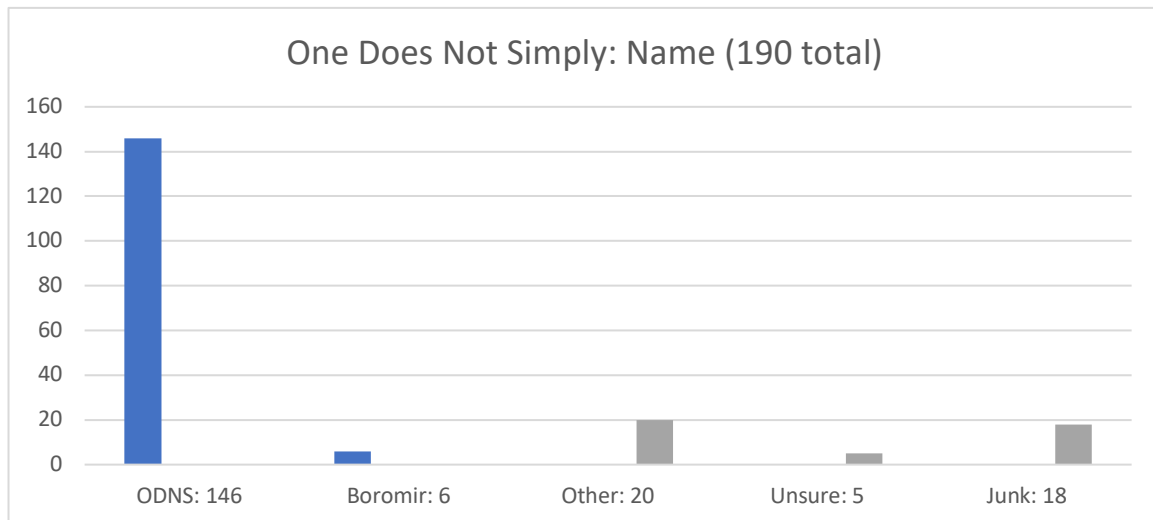

Figure 7.16: Survey responses about the name of the One Does Not Simply meme

This high level of recognition is important, as it allows for the meme image to be manipulated to a greater degree without a loss of understanding. The meaning of the meme centres around difficulty, though whether the hardship is real or ironic varies by iteration (another example of branching meaning, as discussed in Chapter 8). Some iterations of the meme can be very literal, with the image and caption serving primarily as emphasis. Others feature a statement of difficulty meant to imply a more humorous intent, of something that should not be challenging under normal circumstances but is nevertheless a struggle. The full data of my survey responses for can be seen in Figure 7.17, while Figure 7.18 and Figure 7.19 exemplify a more literal and a more comedic iteration, respectively. The variety of answers in regard to meaning was more varied than expected, though as stated before, there is a clear focus on difficulty, including permutations of mundane difficulty, ironic challenges, confusion over a problem, criticising others for struggling, or, in the case of a few respondents, actually overcoming such difficulties. A different subgroup stripped the meaning of the meme down almost entirely, with only its purpose to emphasise or make a joke being reported as its meaning. This minor branching around a theme is common for memes as they continue to develop and will be discussed more in the next section on

continuity of meaning. Regardless, the main theme of overcoming or struggling with difficulty is present throughout the data.
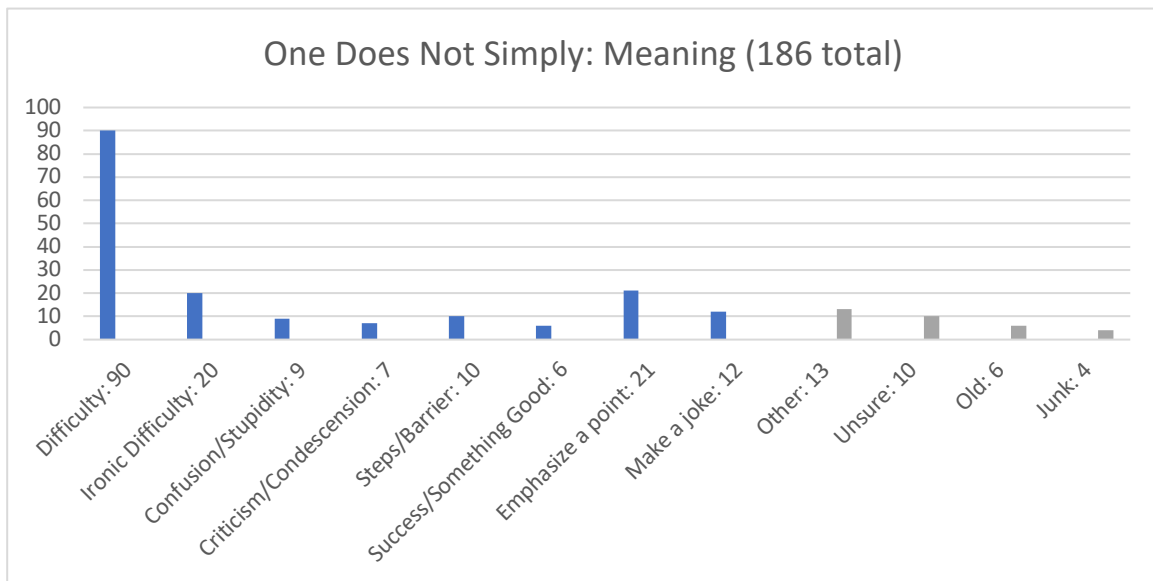

Figure 7.17: Survey responses about the meaning of the One Does Not Simply meme
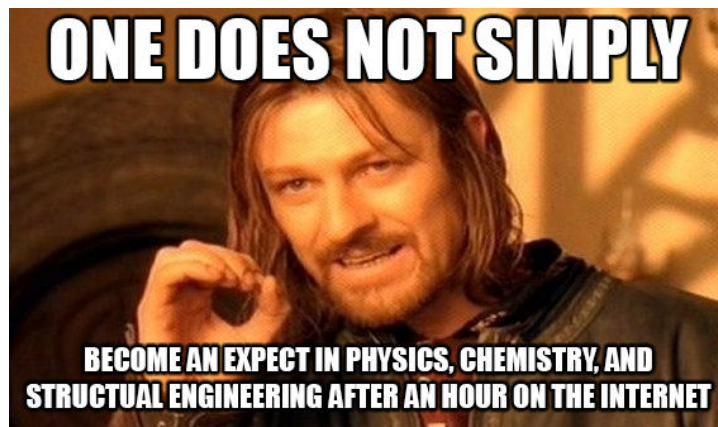

Figure 7.18: An example of the One Does Not Simply meme with a more literal tone

Figure 7.19: An example of the One Does Not Simply meme with a more comedic/ironic tone

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The data on salience is also interesting, as displayed in Figure 7.20. The connection between this meme and its cinematic source is still very strong ("Source," in orange), though the context that has been built up around the meme itself also received a large degree of support ("Context," also in orange), more so than any individual iconic element. The captioning of the meme, despite being rather constant and conventionalised across iterations, was the least popular of the notable categories ("Text"). It should be noted, however, that the iconic elements ("Gesture" and "Expression") were still a large presence, though in this case they were less popular than the direct connection to the meme's source material and its memetic associations built up through online discourse. These sentiments were echoed by my focus group members, all of whom recognised the meme, including some who had never seen the film from which the image originates. Although the relative importance of the gesture and other graphical elements were not deemed to be as important for meaning, several focus group participants in particular pointed to the gesture as being the primary point of reference for the meme, allowing them to recognise it with ease. As such, even if the iconic element had reduced semantic importance, with the gesture itself being weak and indirect, the ostensive act of the gesture was still highly significant—the visual of the hand signal served as a visual prompt for the broader context of the conventionalised meme.
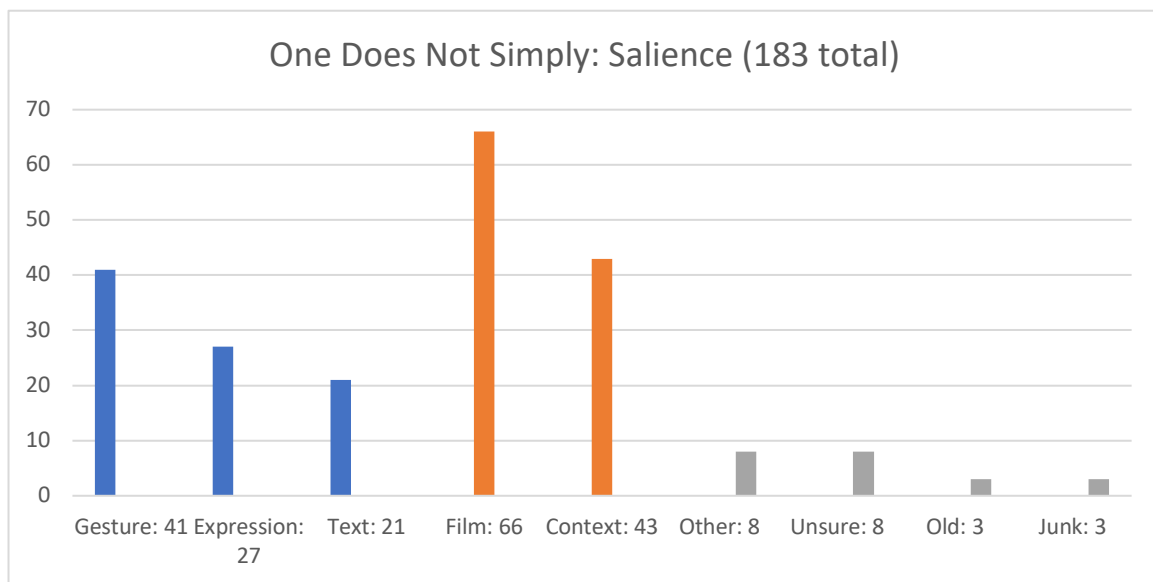

Figure 7.20: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the One Does Not Simply meme

The focus on the gesture in particular is significant for describing the continuity of form for this meme. While the graphical elements of the meme can be edited and remixed, maintaining the clear visual link of the character's gesture allows for ready comprehension

despite the change in overall visual form. Such remixing is common among memes once they have reached a threshold of engagement and conventionalisation, an example of which can be seen in Figure 7.21. This meme makes use of the One Does Not Simply template, though it overlays the face of Overly Attached Girlfriend (see Section 7.1 above) onto the original character. The gesture here is still intact, however, as is the background of the image and its signature phrase. This is a relatively light alteration, although even such a basic change obscures some of the iconic elements of the template image. Were this meme to still be early in its development, it would be difficult to parse. However, given its conventionalised nature, it is still easily understandable without relying on iconicity and metaphor. Such visual alterations can go much further, as seen with Figure 7.22. This meme abandons the original meme template entirely—moving closer to the abstraction of form seen in Stage Three—though the posture of the hawk has a high degree of visual continuity with original character. Paired with the caption, it is clear that this is still an iteration of the One Does Not Simply meme. Despite the more drastic changes, the strong visual parallel of the gesture remains, allowing continuity of form to maintain the meme's link to its previous iterations.

Figure 7.21: A meme combining One Does Not Simply with Overly Attached Girlfriend

Figure 7.22: A version of One Does Not Simply that has undergone full graphical replacement

7.5 Stage Two Continuity of Meaning

In Stage One, a meme's meaning is established during its early permutations, with a single, overarching meaning rising to prominence. This allows the meaning to be conventionalised, enabling the image to become the primary source of meaning in Stage Two (see Section 7.3 above). Also during this second phase, the conventionalised meaning begins to broaden into a generalised theme. Stage One memes typically encapsulate a certain emotional reaction and Stage Two memes continue this trend, but the scale increases, encompassing multiple facets of said emotion. This is encouraged by the proliferation of new iterations in Stage Two, fostered by wider engagement and the emergence of a second generation of iterations (see Section 7.1 and Section 7.2), and this increased reach and broader pool of examples in turn prompt yet more production of new iterations. A cycle forms wherein new iterations and interpretations of the meme widen the scope of the meme's meaning, and this is turns allows continually more situations to be described using the same template, beginning the process again. As discussed previously, Coscia's work in particular examines this trend, as meme popularity is sustained by pushing the envelope of the meme's meaning. If new iterations cleave too closely to previous ones, then its popularity and relevancy will wane. Conversely, creating iterations far beyond the scope of the meme also fail to gain traction, as they clash with the conventionalised meaning known to other users. Therefore, new iterations have to carve out new semantic territory, but at the borders of what has already been established. Iterations that push against the semantic boundaries without breaking them completely are shown to be the most successful and popular.[276] This cyclical process of semantic broadening, which perpetuates more broadening, ultimately leads to branching and polysemy in Stage Three, though within this stage of transition, the conventionalised meaning is continually expanded without reinterpreting the meaning of the meme too strongly.

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[276] Coscia, "Average Is Boring: How Similarity Kills a Meme's Success."

Figure 7.23: The template for "Not Sure If" also known as "Futurama Fry"

To exemplify this process, consider the meme *Futurama Fry*, also known as *Not Sure If*, the template of which can be seen in Figure 7.23. The primary title refers to the character of Fry from the television show *Futurama*, who has narrowed his eyes at something offscreen, while the second title refers to the normal caption of the image: 'Not sure if [something]' on the top followed by 'or [something else]' on the bottom.[277] More details of my survey data regarding the name of the meme can be seen in Figure 7.24, though for simplicity the meme will subsequently be referred to as *Not Sure If*. This follows the naming convention of the previous example (*One Does Not Simply*) as well as avoids the variety of alternative titles featuring the character's name, as seen in the '[other] Fry' column. "Unsure Fry," "Confused Fry," and "Skeptical Fry" were all variants present in small numbers, alongside the slightly more numerous "Suspicious Fry." Smaller subsets answered with basic descriptions while omitting the character's name, labelling the meme as just "suspicious" or "skeptical." All of these titles feed directly into the meaning of the meme, which portrays an instance of doubt. However, the exact nature of this doubt is open to interpretation, as seen in the chart in Figure 7.25. As with the data for the name of the meme, elements of skepticism and suspicion were among the predominant answers given, but other, related meanings also emerged, including more generalised confusion, uncertainty, or simple comparison. These categories parallel the different titles offered for the meme itself, ranging within a similar theme but in different variations.

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[277] Don [No surname given], "Futurama Fry / Not Sure If," Know Your Meme, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/futurama-fry-not-sure-if.
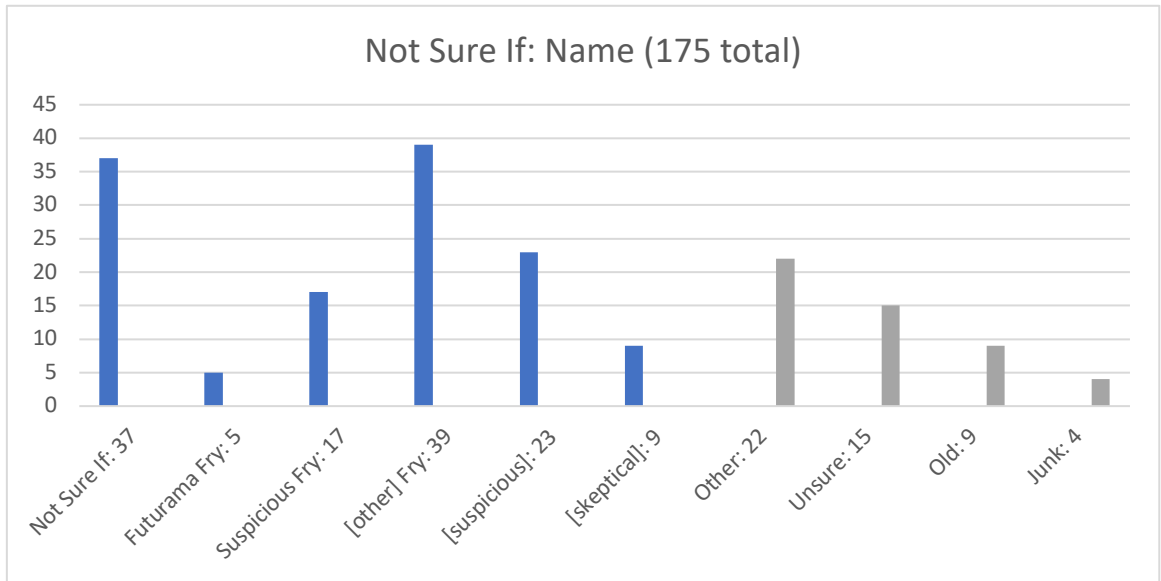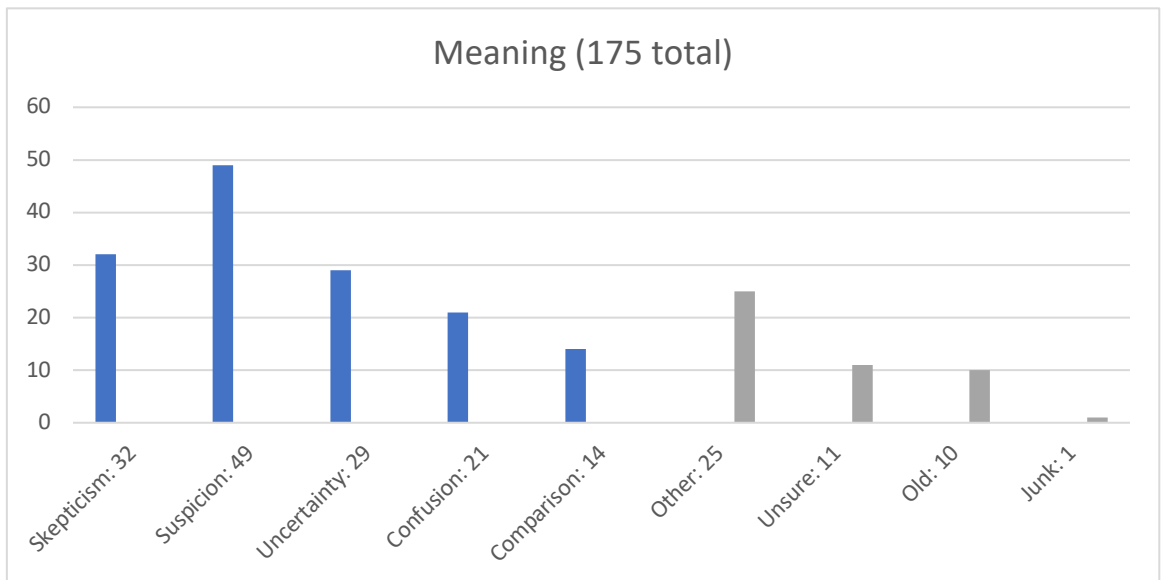
Figure 7.24: Survey responses about the name of the Not Sure If meme

Figure 7.25: Survey responses about the meaning of the Not Sure If meme
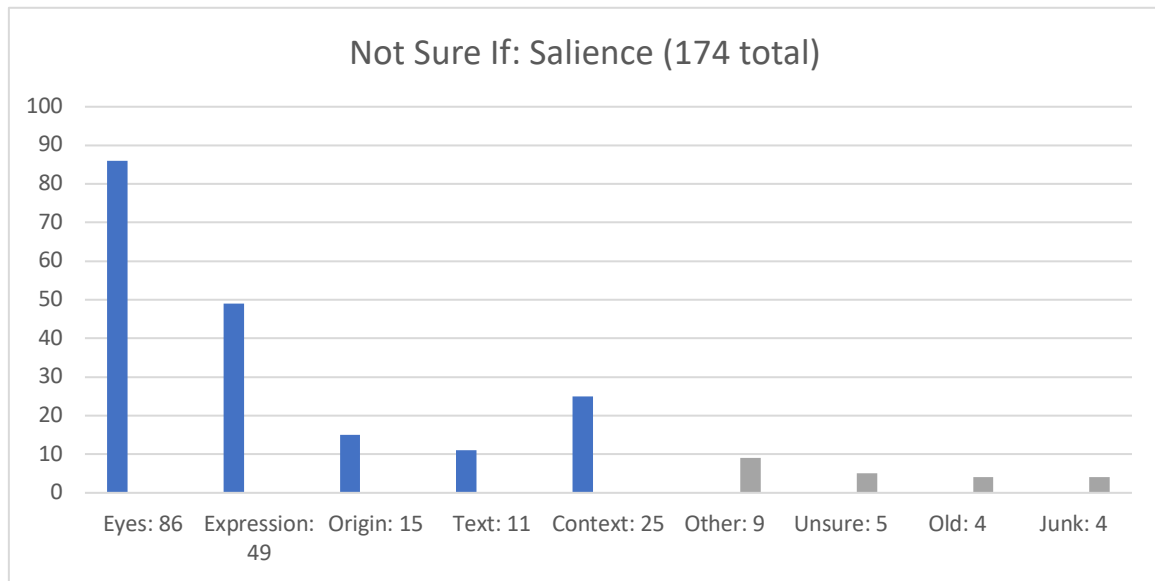
Not Sure If: Salience (174 total)

Figure 7.26: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the Not Sure If meme

This spread of titles and meaning ties to the level of ambiguity of the iconic elements present (see Figure 7.26). The standard caption of "Not sure if" indexes an element of uncertainty, but the text was not highlighted by the majority of my survey respondents as being the main source of meaning. Rather, the primary salient feature is the character's narrowed eyes—an iconic representation of uncertainty—though the cause and reaction to that uncertainty is unclear from the image alone. The character's lack of eyebrows further confounds this process, as without the full emotive features of a human face, the tenor of this reaction is particularly vague. As such, the original meaning of doubt became more diversified as the meme developed. This expansion from doubt into further divisions of suspicion, skepticism, confusion, and more was a natural broadening of the meaning of the meme when it was earlier in its development. There is still a unifying theme, with each of these facets retaining semantic connection with one another. My coding here was more detailed than in some previous examples, as while these different interpretations are on the surface very similar, the nuance here makes them distinct, particularly given the quantity of responses for each category. My coding was also influenced, as mentioned above, by the different names of the memes presented by my participants. Furthermore, unlike some of the other memes in my pools, Not Sure If was markedly unified in the responses regarding meaning, if examined from a macro level. When broken down into more detailed categories, this emergence of semantic branching can be seen. This process is not too far along, as these meanings, while discrete, have a great deal of semantic overlap. As such, these parallel

meanings can coexist, each pushing the semantic boundaries of the meme in a new direction while still maintaining its generalised, conventionalised meaning.
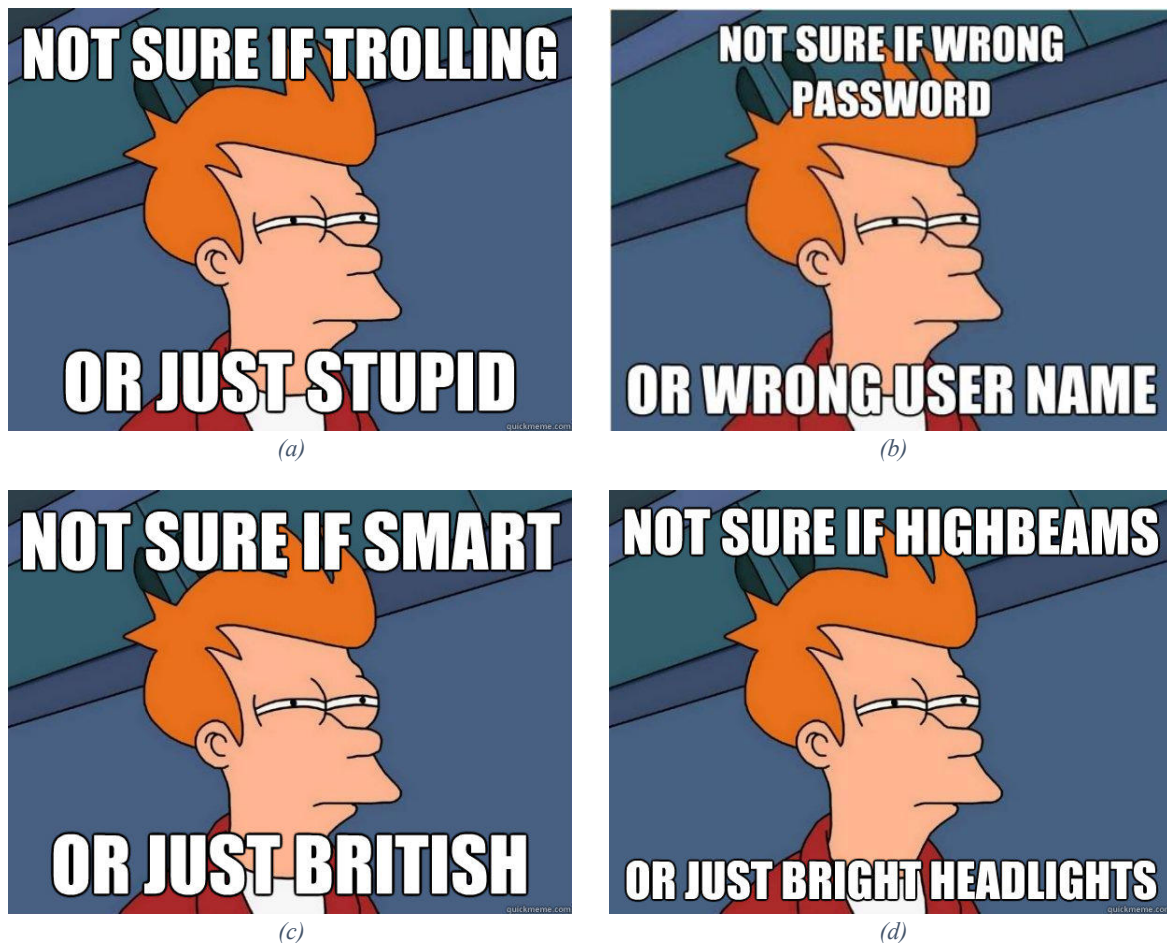

Figure 7.27: Several examples of the Not Sure If meme, demonstrating the meme's broad but overlapping semantic range

A series of example memes can be seen in Figure 7.27, each of which features a different tone or approach to the meme's meaning. All four examples present a meaning of relative uncertainty. However, (a) leans into the suspicious elements of the meme, indicating doubt as to the genuineness of the person the meme is reacting to. The example (b) relates more general doubt that is directed at the self. Next, (c) presents a more skeptical approach, questioning the intelligence of the target. Lastly, (d) indicates a general sense of confusion, with an added visual joke of the squint serving as a reaction to bright light—a further indication of the ambiguity of this iconic cue. Despite these differences in nuance, the examples are all still readily understandable and can be understood as variations of the same meme, indicating semantic broadening that has not yet reached true polysemy.

7.6 Stage Two Intuitabilty

In Stage One, it was necessary for a meme to be intuitable, especially for an unfamiliar instance to be easily parsed by an individual. In the final stage, a meme can no longer be intuited, but must be understood based on previous experience with other iterations of the same meme. However, in this stage of transition, the intuitability of a meme is in flux, with a meme still normally being comprehensible without learned context, though this ease of comprehension can be reduced. Furthermore, with the increased usage and spread of a meme, its recognisability and the process of conventionalisation can allow an individual to understand the meme's meaning without having to parse its whole structure. A Stage Two meme remains as an ostensive communicative item, with its pairing of an image with text (as well as the possible trappings of 'typical' meme formatting such as the Impact font). The iconic elements of the image are typically still present, providing a clear core of meaning. Yet with the aforementioned conventionalisation of meaning (Section 7.5 above), the iconic elements serve more as a through-line to previous iterations of the meme than as fodder for semantic interpretation (compare with the gesture of One Does Not Simply in Section 7.4). Although these features are still able to be used alongside visual metaphor by the viewer to create meaning, this entire process is no longer always necessary. While a viewer who has never seen the meme before can parse it, other viewers who are familiar with the meme template can use those core visual elements to recognise a new iteration of a known meme.

Figure 7.28: The template for "Left Exit 12 Off Ramp"

As an example, consider the meme pictured in Figure 7.28, the somewhat prosaically named *Left Exit 12 Off Ramp* (henceforth *Exit 12*). The name of this meme is less distinct

than many of the other examples and was similarly less represented in my survey data about the name of this meme, as seen is Figure 7.29. Most of the names provided for this meme were rather literal, merely describing an exit ramp or the turning car. Another group referred more directly to the meaning of the meme, naming it as 'choice' or similar. Another subset referred to the meme by a combination of these factors, such as "Car of questionable choices" or "speeding to conclusions" ("Car of choice" in the graph). These later descriptions tie into the meaning of this meme, as documented by Know Your Meme: "On the highway sign, the meme's author photoshops something the author disapproves of and something they would prefer. The car swerves toward the preference."[278]
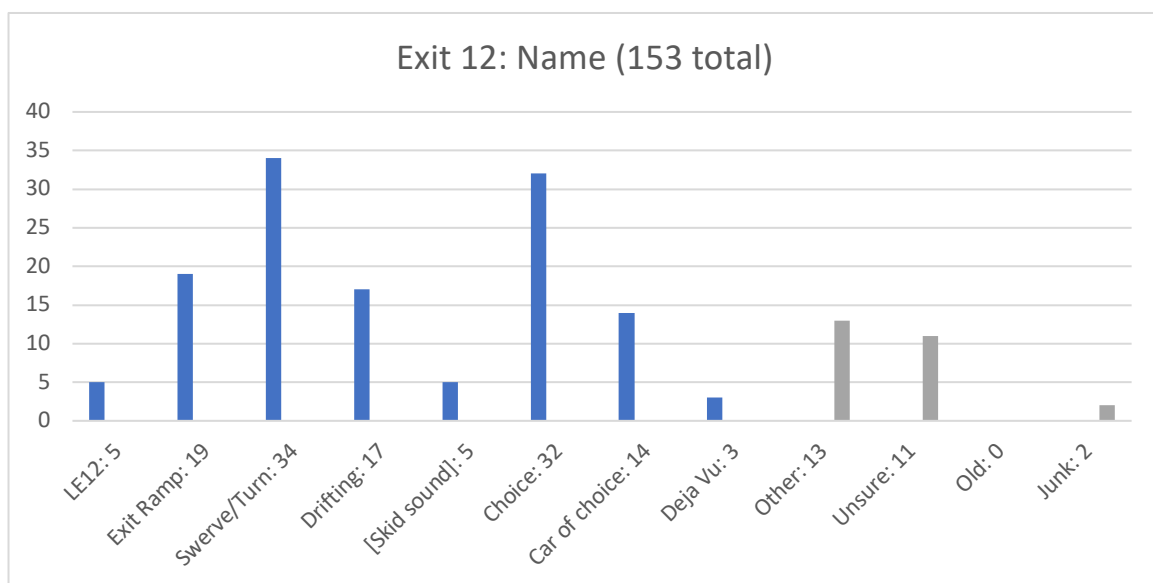

Figure 7.29: Survey responses about the name of the Exit 12 meme

Although the distribution of names was more diverse in my survey data, responses about its overall meaning were more straightforward—though it presented a wider interpretation than the one offered by KYM. My survey participants suggested that the meaning of the meme revolves around making a choice—typically a poor one. The exact nature of the choice is up for interpretation, as well as its suddenness or advisability. According to my survey respondents, the meme usually represents when "[o]ne good choice is not taken in favour of a worse but easier choice, often in terms of procrastinating, bad coping skills, etc.", or "[p]icking a worse but more comfortable choice over an obviously

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[278] Matt [No surname given], "Left Exit 12 Off Ramp," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/left-exit-12-off-ramp.

more productive one", as can be seen in the example in Figure 7.30. This format for demonstrating preference or inclination, especially with a comedic or self-deprecating element, makes Exit 12 similar to several other memes, such as the *Drakeposting* meme (see Chapter 1) and *Distracted Boyfriend* (see Chapter 9), a comparison cited by some internet users (see Figure 7.31) and a few of my respondents. One survey participant described the meaning of the meme as "someone or something making one of two choices. This is often used to humorous effect, much like the distracted boyfriend, because of the illogical or harmful nature of the decision".

Figure 7.30: An example of the Exit 12 meme

(a)

(b)

Figure 7.31: Two combined memes, featuring elements of the Exit 12 format and comparing its semantic function with the similar Drakeposting meme and Distracted Boyfriend meme

The consensus of the meaning of this meme seems to be choice, particularly a humorous or poor choice—as seen in the full breakdown of survey answers in Figure 7.32. The source of this meaning is predominantly the iconic elements of image, as seen in my salience data in Figure 7.33. The framing of an exit ramp, paired with the car skidding, creates a straightforward analogy for choice made at speed or at the last moment. A small group even cited this concept of choice being the central source of meaning. The iconic elements allow for the metaphorical meaning regarding choice, and as such this meme should be relatively simple for an individual unfamiliar with the meme to intuit. As with the Drakeposting meme, the iconic elements of Exit 12 retain much of the semantic power (as with the discussion of locus of meaning in Section 7.3 above). However, there is nuance to this meaning of choice beyond mere preference. Exit 12 presents a particular type of choice being made—it "represents one going in a bad, yet tempting [direction] rather than taking the good and successful path," as put by a survey respondent. This element of self-deprecation or self-destruction indicates more than a simple inclination. Crucially, this semantic layer is not represented graphically, but must be learned by users through exposure to other iterations of the meme. As such, Exit 12 can potentially be intuited, at least on a surface level. However, to understand the full depth and nuance of the meme, one must be familiar with its conventionalised associations, relying on external context rather than purely intuition.
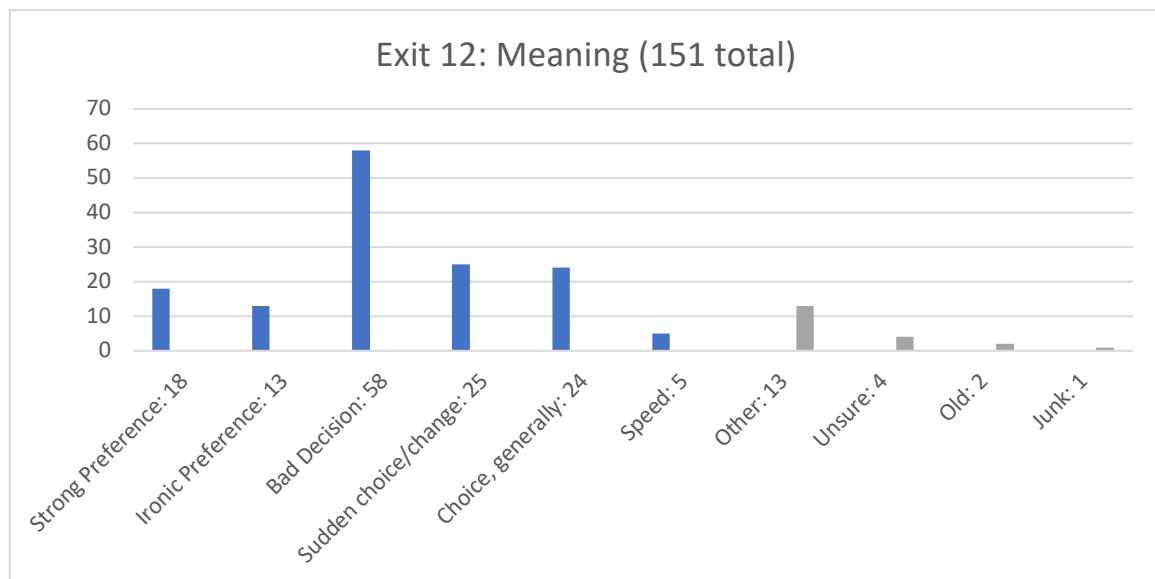

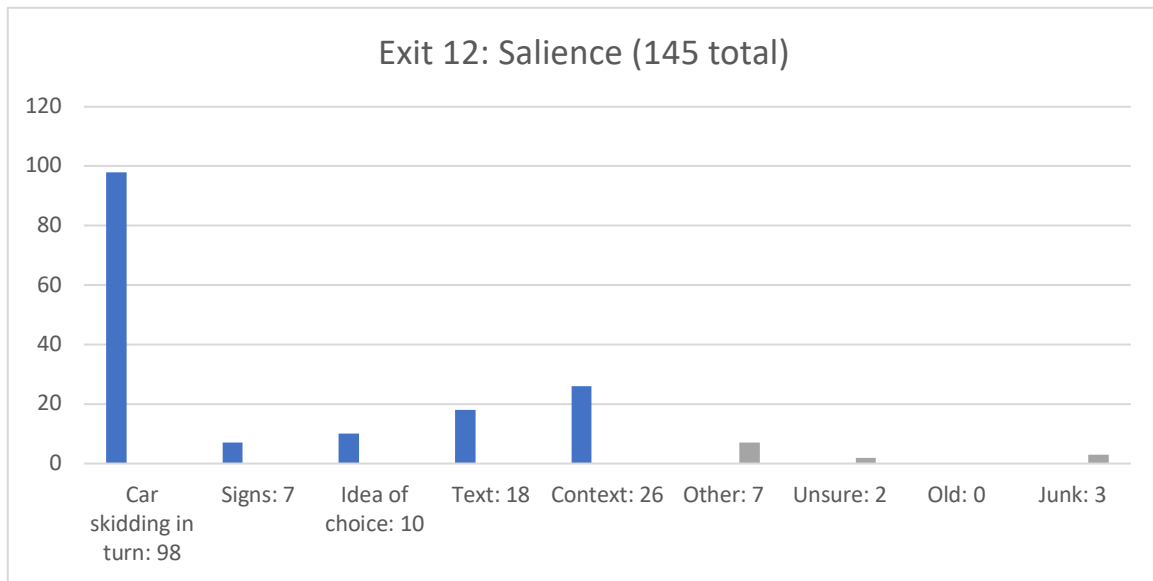*Figure 7.32: Survey responses about the meaning of the Exit 12 meme*

Figure 7.33: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the Exit 12 meme

7.7 Stage Two Overview

To review, Stage Two is largely characterised by the transition between Stages One and Three, with the elements of my six criteria in flux or undergoing erosion. Firstly, the engagement of Stage Two is wider and deeper than Stage One, extending well beyond the community of origin into other, networked communities, though still within set limits. New iterations of the meme form a second generation which imitate their Stage One precursors, and as such have only an indirect tie to the first use of the meme. Stage Two memes draw their meaning predominantly from the image of the meme template. The text serves as a narrowing factor and focus, though the main semantic power resides in the conventionalised meaning associated with the image. These graphical forms are no longer as rigid, though key graphical cues must be maintained in order to facilitate recognition and not obscure meaning. The meaning of a Stage Two meme has been fully conventionalised, with a central overarching theme that is continuously broadened by new iterations which push its semantic boundaries. They are usually still intuitable using iconic and metaphorical processes, though with a meaning having been established, parsing the meaning using such processes is often no longer necessary, and the subtleties of the meaning may require learning associations that are not readily apparent. Overall, these elements describe a communicative unit in transition, of shifted semantic potential, conventionalised meaning, and ever-expanding forms and reach which will only continue to evolve in Stage Three.

Chapter 8: Stage Three of the Life Cycle, Abstraction

Stage Three is a phase of great change for a meme, though many memes under my model fall out of use before reaching this Stage. For those that do, however, it is also not so much an end as a new beginning. In Stage Three, many previously established conventions of meme structure break down, continuing the erosion begun in Stage Two. By this final stage, a meme often becomes unrecognisable compared to its origin, having undergone a number of dramatic changes and countless iterations to arrive at something altogether different from where it began. Its form, meaning, and place of usage will have all shifted, so that much like Garrod and Fay's experiments (see Section 3.1.3), the end result is a full reinvention, completely unrecognisable without the intervening stages to link them. With these changes, however, come new opportunities. While most memes fade into relative obscurity, those that reach Stage Three tend to leave a more lasting impact. Even those that have ultimately lost their cultural currency still remain in the ethos of online communities, artefacts of past digital culture that are still remembered and known, even if sparsely used. There was a repeated notion among my focus groups and survey respondents that a meme reaches a point where it falls out of popular use but can nevertheless resurface or continue to be recognised as part of its overarching 'life cycle.' As previously quoted in Chapter 5, one participant stated that memes "always come back" and that once a meme's meaning is established, "it's never going to lose that." This recognition, even reverence, for older, more developed memes was echoed by many of my survey respondents with regard to several of my meme pool members, as discussed below (e.g., *The Most Interesting Man in the World* in Section 8.3). The breakdown of limits—social, visual, and semantic—also allow memes in this stage to grow and evolve in unprecedented ways. Though there are several noted exceptions (particularly those noted in Chapter 6), I contend that many of the memes in my meme pools have reached Stage Three or demonstrate predominantly Stage Three traits. I will provide further examples of these characteristics in relation to my six criteria below, as in the previous two chapters, before providing a complete overview of the model and its stages in Chapter 9.

8.1 Stage Three Engagement

Engagement, like most of the criteria in Stage Three, undergoes a notable transformation in this final stage, breaking down most of the previously established limits. In

Stage One, a meme was bound within its creator's community of practice, and the meme's relationship to the group's shared enterprise created a social network that was ego-centric in design. In Stage Two, the meme spread to adjacent CofPs, forming a larger, socio-centric network that taken together could be considered a larger CofP, with a broader but present shared interest. In Stage Three, the meme has reached a high level of saturation across online communities. This does not mean that it must be popular across the whole of the internet—if such a thing could even be claimed to be feasible—but it has nevertheless attained a level of relevancy and familiarity across a range of different, unlinked communities. The structure of a CofP is strongest in Stage One, and while this was weakened in Stage Two, the framework was still present. By Stage Three, the confines of a community of practice no longer apply on a macro level. The individual communities that share the meme can still be seen as CofPs, but the multitude of groups, each interacting with the meme in parallel, exists beyond the structure of a CofP in its own right. This simultaneous exposure via multiple channels is a natural by-product of a meme's "viral" spread and helps drive many of the above changes, particular the movement towards polysemy as discussed in Section 8.5 below. This virality can lead to exponential growth in terms of exposure and the breakdown of clearly defined community structures leads to a diffuse and branching network without central organisation of set boundaries. The tangle of different communities thus takes on the form of an open-system social network, with connections between nodes still present, but linkages often branching considerably at each node and peripheral nodes having relatively fewer connections with each other compared to more central ones.[279] A prototypical example of this kind of dispersion would be the spread of a meme from 4chan, across Reddit, and then branching across large social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These more popular platforms have much wider and deeper pools of members and more interactivity among the platforms, as opposed to more insular groups such as 4chan.[280] Previously, I suggested that, in epidemiological/memetic terms, a meme becomes *endemic* to a specific community in Stage One, before becoming *epidemic* across multiple, related communities in Stage Two. In Stage Three, memes become *pandemic* across a wide swath of internet discourse, becoming endemic within a number of divergent and distinct communities

[279] Kadushin, *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings*, 17.
[280] Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."

of practice which are unrelated to one another in terms of their shared enterprise, and are instead linked only due to degrees of separation from a commonly shared community.[281]

Once a meme has crossed this threshold and sees engagement on larger platforms, the meme is considered to have become more "mainstream," paralleling the idea of a pandemic spread. This transition can be viewed negatively by the originators and early adopters of the meme on more fringe communities, labelling the meme as "dead" or for "normies." However, despite the terms of derision, I contend that such memes are not dead, merely evolving into a different form for a different audience. This struggle for ownership and emotional attachment to memes parallels the similar issues of identity and ownership common within the field of sociolinguistics. Groups and cultures lay claim to various linguistic features and use by those outside of the speech community can be seen as appropriating aspects of language that do not belong to them.[282] Yet, just as a word, phrase, or other linguistic feature can spread beyond a speech community into widespread vernacular use, so too can memes, and just as a language cannot truly be owned or controlled by any one group, memes will continue to spread and change regardless of a sense of authority or control by any one group.
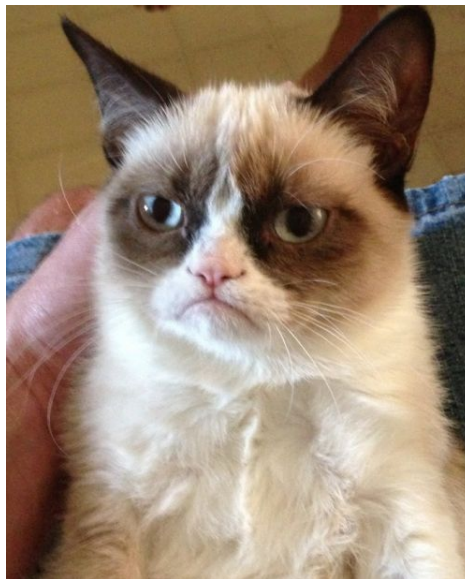

Figure 8.1: The template for the "Grumpy Cat" meme

To demonstrate the full reach of a Stage Three meme, consider the internet celebrity and meme *Grumpy Cat*. The cat Tardar Sauce (pictured in Figure 8.1) rose to internet fame in

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[281] Mauricio and Díaz, "Defining and Characterizing the Concept of Internet Meme," 86.
[282] Rampton, "Speech Community and Beyond."

2012 after images of her were shared on Reddit. The meme-ing of cats has a long history on the internet, and pictures of cats in humorous circumstances had served as the basis for many short-lived and perennial memes. There was even a different cat that had been given the label of "grumpy cat" before Tardar Sauce, as pictured in Figure 8.2. This format was however supplanted by a rush of memes that were built around the photos of Tardar Sauce. The popularity of Grumpy Cat stems largely from her very expressive face, the result of feline dwarfism, which left the cat with in a seemingly dour expression.[283] This expression is the key element to the meme's meaning, as supported by the focus group and survey respondents, as seen with the salience data in Figure 8.3. Grumpy Cat had one of the largest pools of survey responses, with approximately 200 participants answering questions about the meme. It also proved to be one of the most recognisable, as seen in the name data in Figure 8.4. The first image macros of Grumpy Cat were created on Reddit, before the meme was picked up by Buzzfeed and other online outlets and spread further to other meme-related sites, such as image host Imgur and the meme generator Quickmeme. The meme soon reached Facebook and Twitter, with not only new iterations, but official accounts for Grumpy Cat—as a character—appearing on both platforms.

Figure 8.2: A previous image given the title of "Grumpy Cat" before Tardar Sauce

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[283] Brad Kim and Don Caldwell, "Grumpy Cat," Know Your Meme, 2016, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grumpy-cat.
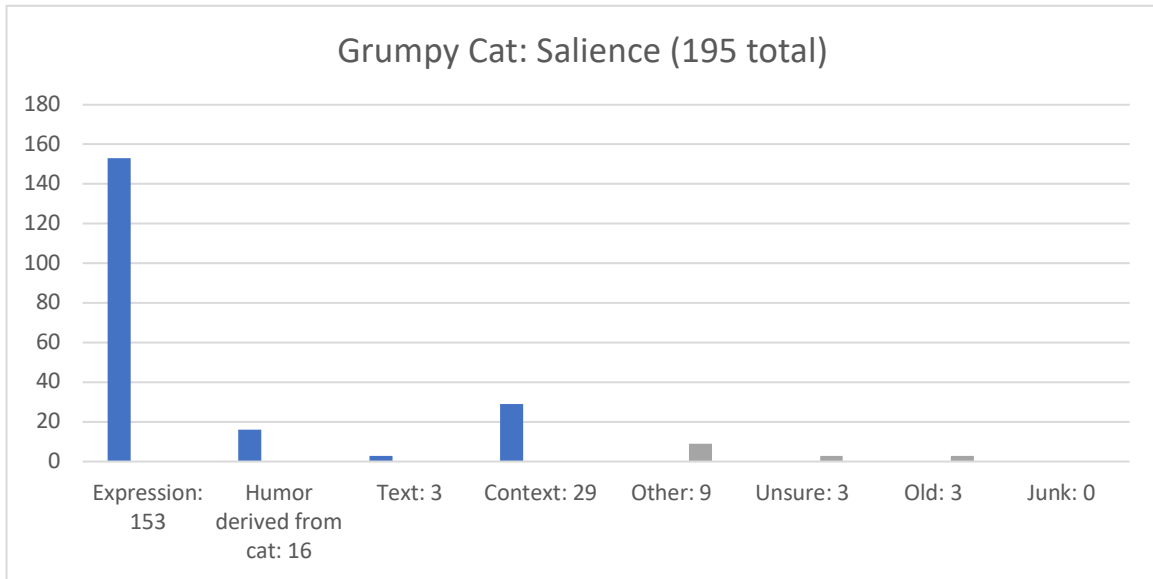
Figure 8.3: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the Grumpy Cat meme
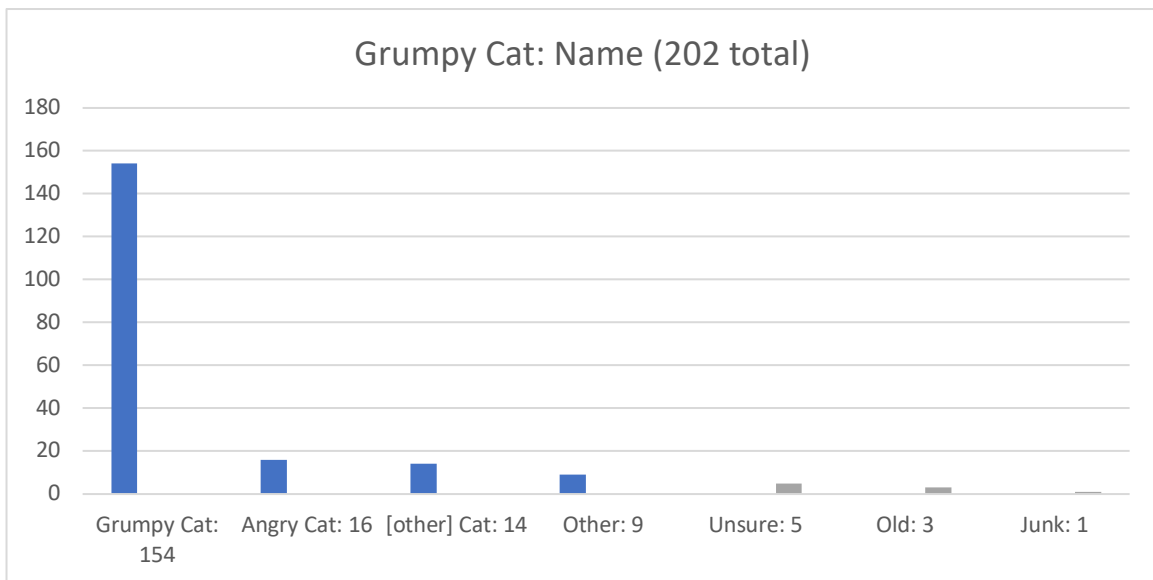

Figure 8.4: Survey responses about the name of the Grumpy Cat meme

Although the surge of popularity of the meme format was rapid, the most crucial aspect was its spread into several distinct communities in this short span of time. The jump from Reddit to Buzzfeed to Facebook and Twitter once again demonstrates what one focus group called the "food chain" of spreading reach experienced by many memes of this type. However, Grumpy Cat did not stop upon branching out into broader social media platforms. Instead, the meme entrenched itself into online discourse and beyond, becoming part of the shared common ground of popular culture. This was paralleled by a proliferation of iterations and a diversification of the meme's format (as seen in Figure 8.5). Though not as drastic as

some other examples in this chapter, the form of the meme nevertheless became much more fluid. Furthermore, although the meaning of Grumpy Cat never strayed too far from its earlier iterations—the character is still *grumpy* even later in its progression—I contend that it exhibits a broadening of meaning beyond a simple emotional theme. Grumpy Cat became character in her own right, a known figure with merchandise, endorsements, and more. Grumpy Cat was featured in her own comic book series (see Figure 8.6) and Tardar Sauce herself appeared as Grumpy Cat in a made-for-television movie. As such, Grumpy Cat is a more extreme case compared to most memes, few of which reach such levels of celebrity. This shift from emotional reaction to media persona, while semantically very similar, is a further iteration away from its origin and clearly denotes the concept of the character itself as the source of meaning, beyond textual or graphical cues. Most significantly, Grumpy Cat demonstrates the breadth of engagement a meme can have, spreading from image macros on a single subreddit, to an internet sensation across many platforms, to a figure of popular culture. It also demonstrates the potential depth of engagement, as the meme moved beyond simple image macros, incorporating branding, media personalities on different platforms, and other forms of mass media. Grumpy Cat therefore exists in a number of forms both within the digital sphere and in the physical world, having come to encompass a persona upon which an entire brand has been built.
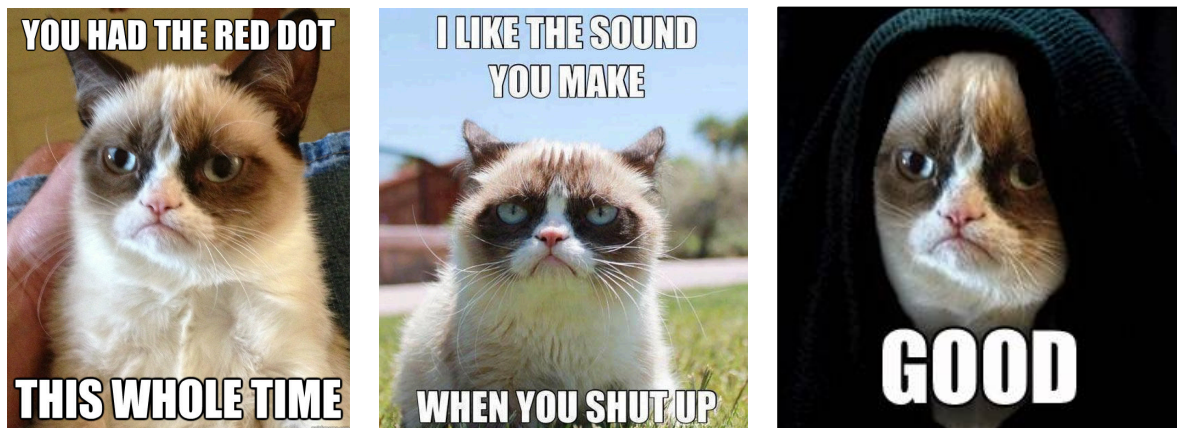

Figure 8.5: A standard example of a Grumpy Cat meme (left) along with two variant formats, one featuring a different picture of Tardar Sauce and another that combines the original template with an image of the Emperor from Star Wars

Figure 8.6: Examples of Grumpy Cat being featured in merchandising and other media

8.2 Stage Three Relation to Origin

As discussed in the previous chapters, memes are produced in waves or generations stemming from an initial usage of a piece of digital media. From this origin point, memes in Stage One are created based on the example of the original usage and its earliest imitators. In Stage Two, with the commencement of conventionalisation and the spread of the meme beyond its first community, a new generation of meme iterations are produced, this time modelled on later Stage One memes. The link to the origin point is thus still present, but a step removed. In Stage Three, however, a meme has continued to evolve, and it has spread to a wide-reaching and non-contiguous network of online communities (see Section 8.1 above). As such, this third generation of memes is created by a much broader range of individuals across a number of different groups, all of whom are looking to different instances from the second generation to serve as the template for their own novel iterations. Thus, in Stage Three, new iterations predominantly imitate the characteristics of later Stage Two memes, and their link to their origin is now thirdhand. Stage Three for this criterion embodies the ultimate shift between memetic fidelity and longevity. Fidelity is strongest and most significant in Stage One, in order to allow the meme to form a cohesive structure and meaning. Longevity becomes gradually more prominent during the transitionary period of Stage Two, as the meme needs change in order to remain in circulation. Its continued spread has reached far enough that a direct link to the first usage becomes less clear. In Stage Three,

longevity supersedes fidelity and the link between the origin of the meme and its current iterations is at its weakest. This is not to say that fidelity ceases to be important; the faithful reproduction of a meme is still significant for recognition and shared meaning. However, the fidelity is between the new iterations and subsequent generations of the meme, rather than a direct, unbroken link to its original usage.
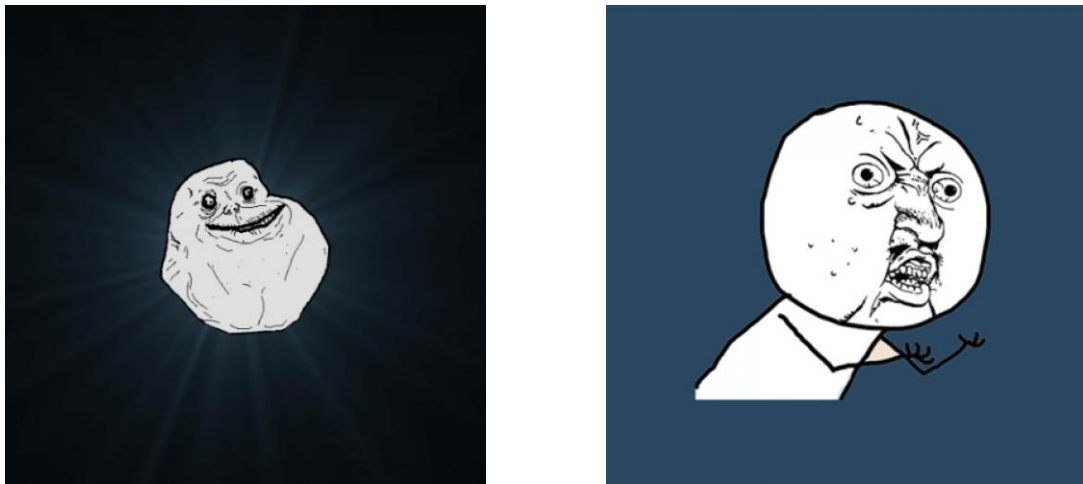

Figure 8.7: The template images for "Forever Alone" and "Y U No," two memes based on Rage comic characters

To demonstrate this principle, I will analyse a subset of memes collectively known as *Rage* comics. The two of particular focus are *Forever Alone* and *Y U No*, a pair of the most prominent characters, which I featured in my survey as examples (see Figure 8.7). The name of these memes traces back to "Rageguy," a stock character typically used in a panelled comic format (see Figure 8.8). The character and comic were used by members of 4chan to convey personal experiences which caused the creator frustration or anger. Different faces were then created by users to express different emotions and serve as various stock characters or expressive faces of the same person. Despite the variety of such characters and contexts, they were labelled as "rage comics" after the first of these characters, Rageguy. [284] This legacy is still present, as can be seen in my survey data on the name of these memes in Figure 8.9. There was a high number of responses labelling the two memes by their proper titles as well as collectively labelling them as "Rage." A notable contingent of answers decried the memes as being old (highlighted in orange in Figure 8.9); this was a regular occurrence for many of the older memes in my All Time data set, but this instance had a larger number of

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[284] Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," 317–18.

such responses. Nevertheless, this points to the distance between the meme's origin and its present usage, and indicator of Dawkins' concept of longevity.
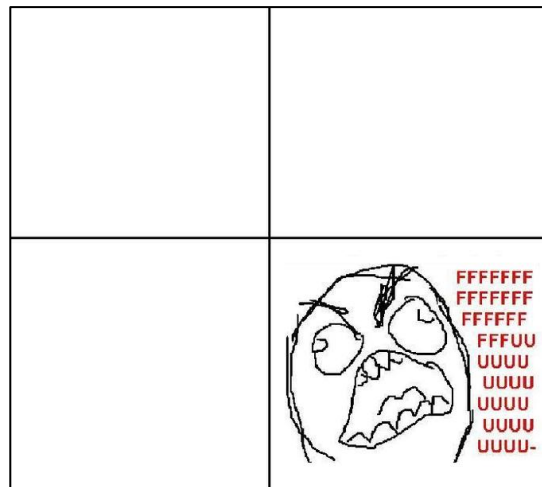
Figure 8.8: A template for a basic Rage comic, featuring the Rageguy face
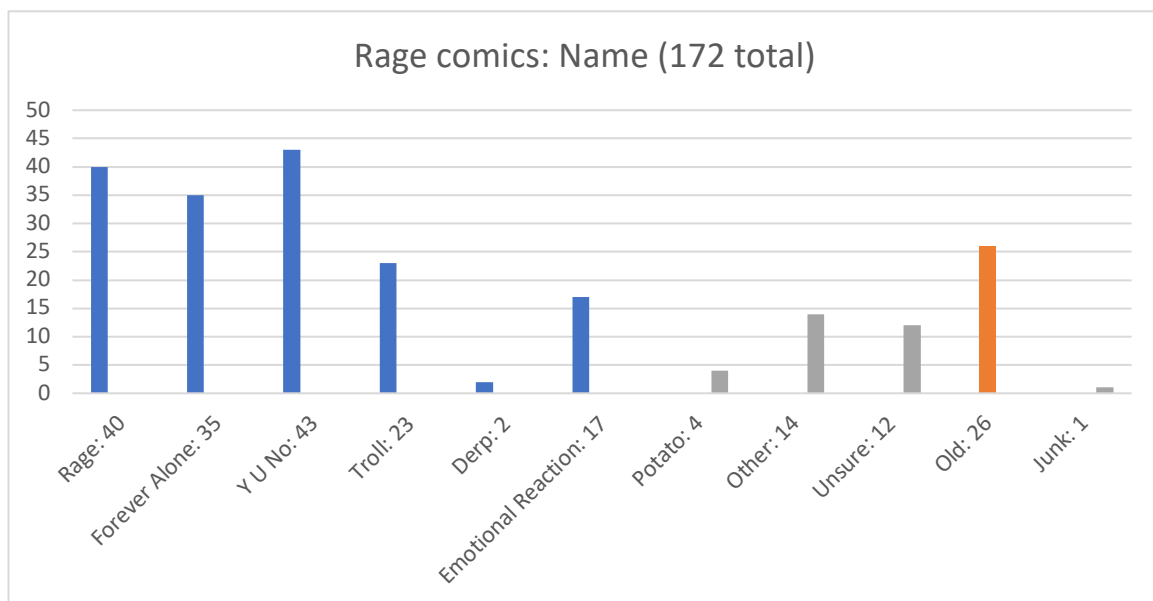
Figure 8.9: Survey responses about the name of the Rage comics memes (Forever Alone and Y U No)

With Rageguy firmly established, new characters continued to be created staying within the original's aesthetic, and the relatable panelled format provided more than adequate narrative space for innovation. As Douglas writes: "The style is easily reproducible: stick figures, crudely drawn faces, cut-and-paste characters that anyone can slap a story onto, maybe with some original freehand sketches."[285] The format proved very popular and spread

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[285] Ibid, 317.

from specific forums within 4chan to the site as a whole, before stretching out into the internet at large. To again quote Douglas:

> The appeal is obvious: Everyone likes to tell personal stories (especially frustrations), comics are an engaging format for these stories, and the always-growing range of stock faces makes it increasingly unnecessary for the user to draw a single figure himself. The major faces form a pantheon of emotional archetypes.[286]

This "pantheon" continued to gain more recognition as the meme spread and iterated, with the individual characters taking on more meaning in their own right. These "emotional archetypes" were used more and more beyond the panelled comic format, instead used as reaction images rather than stock characters, in a manner similar to emojis. The number of Rage faces continued to expand, creating a wide cast of characters which pushed beyond the narrative structure of basic emotions, examples of which can be seen in Figure 8.10 and Figure 8.11. Thus, the characters within the Rage comics "canon" became increasingly associated with their own meanings and formats. What had begun as a collection of interchangeable pieces could no longer be exchanged due to each having its own significance. This shift reached its apex—and thus Stage Three—with the emergence of several Rage faces as image macro templates. Rather than a stock character in a comic or an emotional reaction, the images had become memes of their own, with all the characteristics of a meme that lacked such an origin. In a way this has 'reset' such memes back to secondary Stage One, from which they have developed further. Forever Alone and Y U No are two of the more popular Rage faces that became their own image macros (see Figure 8.12), though many of the "pantheon" were able to reach this benchmark. Although there is still a link from these memes back to their original usage in Rage comics, their format, meaning, and function—particularly in reference to each other—are all significantly removed from where they began. Such transformation marks these Rage-related memes as being firmly within Stage Three.

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[286] Ibid.

Figure 8.10: A selection of "Rage faces" expressing different emotions (and featuring overly dramatic labels); note the version of Rageguy in the bottom right corner
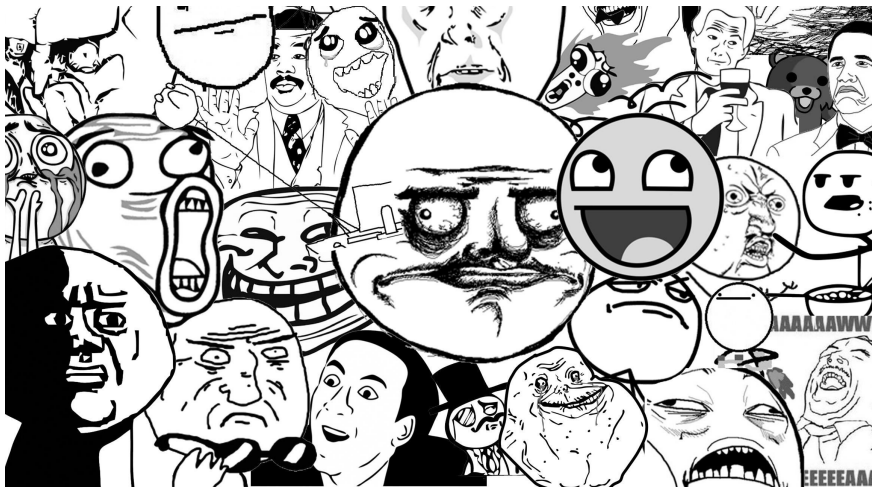

Figure 8.11: A collage of different Rage comic characters, including Forever Alone (near bottom centre) and Y U No (middle right)
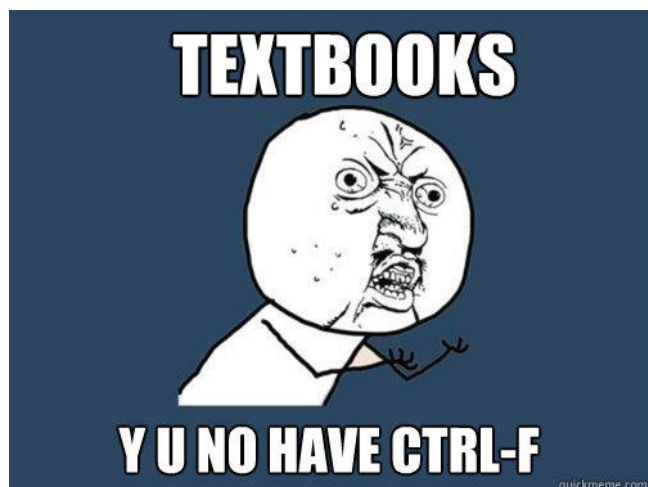

Figure 8.12: Examples of Forever Alone and Y U No memes that are standalone image macros

8.3 Stage Three Locus of Meaning

In Stage One, the locus of meaning was the text added to the image, with the image serving as an additional narrative filter for the text. In Stage Two, the roles were reversed, with the now recognisable, conventionalised image serving as the semantic core, with the text (some of which may also be conventionalised as part of the image) as an additional semantic focus of the overall meaning. In Stage Three, the relationship changes once more, with the concept of the meme itself—its general format, spatial relationships, most salient graphical features, or overarching aesthetic—forming the locus of meaning for the meme. Both the image and the text still provide layers and specificity to any given iteration, but the meme itself has become so ingrained in the communal knowledge of the online community (or more properly *communities*, as discussed in Section 8.1 above), that neither is wholly necessary. Some visual element usually remains, though it can be greatly altered, distorted, or obscured—so much so that it could not be recognised as the same image unless an individual is familiar with the source image (this topic will be discussed further in Sections 8.4 and 8.6 on Continuity of Form and Intuitability below). This flexibility also extends to the text associated with the image. While many memes have a signature tagline or lead-in text (e.g., *One Does Not Simply*, *Not Sure If*), in Stage Three these captions can vary more widely, playing on the established form by mixing up the text, replacing it with different text, or omitting the text in part or entirely.

Figure 8.13: The template image for "The Most Interesting Man in the World" meme

The Most Interesting Man in the World (MIMITW) is a prime example of this process, the template for which can be seen in Figure 8.13. The character originated in a

series of advertisements that began in 2007 in which the pictured man—named as "the most interesting man in the world" and presented as a paragon of suaveness—claims "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I drink Dos Equis" (the brand of beer being marketed, as pictured in the bottom righthand corner). This framework was then turned into a meme template in 2009, which featured the character describing a situation in the same terms but with the specific action exchanged for something else—"I don't always [action], but when I do…".[287] One such example can be seen in Figure 8.14, which features a humorous caption, rather than one that portrays suaveness or overt masculinity. As such, there are some divisions about the nature of these 'always' statements, as can be seen in the data in Figure 8.15. There was a lack of consensus among my survey participants as to a singular meaning for this meme. Many of the proposed meanings overlap, with varying interpretations of the titular character as either confident, rebellious, or suave—in a similar fashion to the semantic overlap in meaning of *Not Sure If* in Section 7.5. It also speaks to the Stage Three move towards branching meaning and polysemy as discussed in terms of Continuity of Meaning in Section 8.5 below.

Figure 8.14: A basic example of the MIMITW meme

There is a further split between the meme being treated in a more serious, straightforward manner and being used in a more flippant, ironic, or self-effacing manner. In the words of one of my survey respondents:

> The Dos Equis guy is classy and sensual, and this particular bit, in context, is about a cultured lack of fanaticism (he does not ALWAYS drink beer, because

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[287] Brad [No surname given], "The Most Interesting Man in the World," Know Your Meme, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-most-interesting-man-in-the-world.

beer is not always appropriate); instead, a refined sense of taste. How it's generally used, however, is in a self deprecating and satirical sense, often about mundane and easily relatable minutae [sic] - "I don't always eat spaghetti, but when I do, I spill it all over my shirt".

This split between the genuinely sophisticated and the mockingly cool reached similar levels in my survey responses as seen in Figure 8.15 below. The columns highlighted in blue represent responses that focused on matters of confidence, suaveness, and other enviable or cool characteristics, which totalled 54 responses. The columns highlighted in orange represent responses favouring the opposite interpretation, including aspects of irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, awkwardness, and more, which also totalled 54 responses. Thus, each of these more polarised views accounted for approximately a third of the total responses and neither has a clear lead over the other. Whether the meaning is ironic or not, the overarching theme and textual framing of the meme are nevertheless evident. Much as with the case of Stage Two memes, the 'standard' format can be readily edited and remixed with other media and even other memes, as pictured in Figure 8.16. This remixing can go further, pushing the graphical boundaries of Stage Two and into Stage Three (see Section 8.4 below), with the image replaced in its entirety, with only basic visual similarities of posture and accompanying text to provide a bridge from the original to these new iterations. Figure 8.17 features an entirely different image, in this case a small boy, though this still retains several of the visual features of the original, such as posture and fancy dress, and similar meme format characteristics in general, such as the top-bottom text in the Impact font.
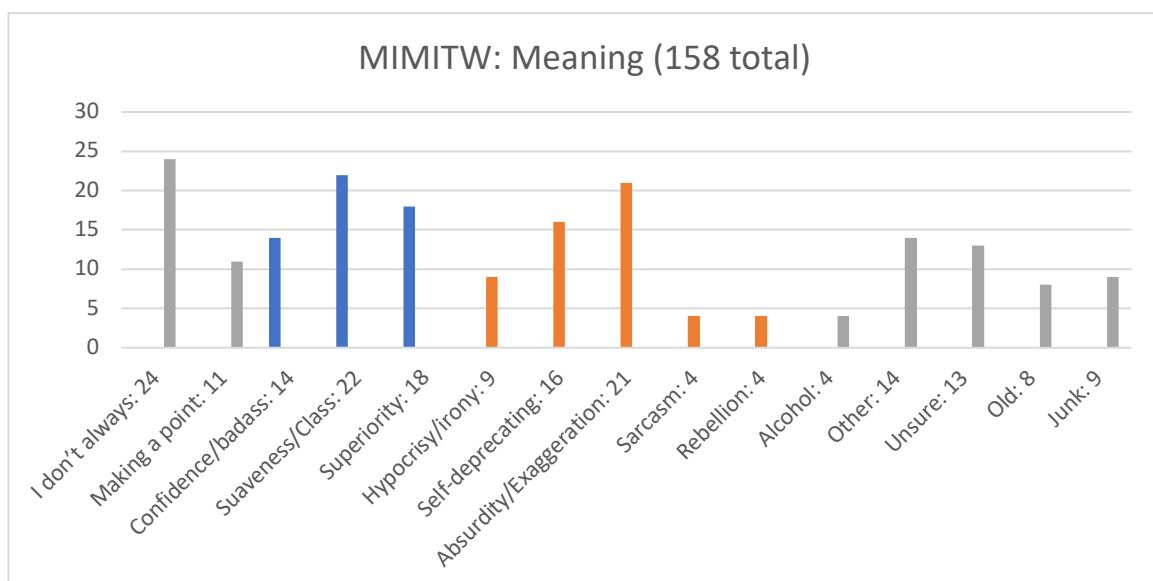
Figure 8.15: Survey responses about the meaning of the MIMITW meme

Figure 8.16: Examples of remixed versions of the MIMITW meme. (a) and (b) feature characters from pop culture, while (c) features the face and partial catchphrase of a different internet meme

Figure 8.17: A version of the MIMITW meme that does not use the normal template image

Figure 8.18: Two versions of the MIMITW meme that also use non-standard images and non-standard text.

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Further examples, however, move even farther away from these familiar characteristics. The two images in Figure 8.18 are both variants of the MIMITW meme. Both eschew the graphical conventions of most image macros. Figure 8.18a appears to be an advertisement its own right for a radio station, drawing a parallel with the cat's posture to provide a humorous connection to the meme. The personified cat in 8.18b similarly mimics the posture of the original character, yet this is further step removed from typical meme discourse as the image has been produced by hand on a sign, rather than the digital manipulation of 8.18a. Thus, the meme has moved beyond even the 'physical' limits of its original digital template and into the real world.

The textual limits of this meme have been challenged as well, as seen in the examples in Figure 8.19. Each of these iterations features a caption that eschews the top-bottom text format, as well as plays with the conventionalised caption of "I don't always." The left iteration moves the upper caption to the bottom and suggests an anti-meme meaning—though denying the status of this iteration as a meme can only be done due to the conventionalised status of the meme as a format. The middle iteration subverts the grandiose expectations of the character, replacing them with the mundane challenge of caring for a pet that cannot effectively communicate, and omits the traditional punchline that would be found at the bottom of the meme. The rightmost iteration takes the opposite approach, relying fully on the conventionalised upper text, but omitting it from the image altogether. "I don't always" is completely absent, but is nevertheless implied, specifically suggesting a caption of 'I don't always leave out the upper text.' However, this omission leaves the top half of the template unobstructed, and thus, as the bottom text relates, the character's hair is more clearly visible. The textual (and graphical) changes here are relatively simple and do not cloud the ability to read the iconic or referential cues present. However, each of them do subvert the conventionalised associations of the meme's format. Furthermore, in isolation these instances provide unclear semantic information or humour. Without a pre-existing understanding of the meme format, its traditional caption, and its cultural associations, these three iterations are relatively meaningless. The left example lacks context, the middle example lacks a clear joke, and the right example lacks half of its implied text. Therefore, it is only through a reference to the meme as a *concept*—the conventionalised associations of the character as a meme, with an air of sophistication and standardised caption—that these iterations are able to provide meaning and a proper punchline. They rely on a meta-narrative about the meme

itself, the concept of *The Most Interesting Man in the World*, in order to be understood fully, rather than the image or the text as they are presented.

Figure 8.19: Variants of MIMITW with non-standard captions

To quote a different survey participant about this meme:

> Oldschool [sic] and very popular meme of a seemingly 'sophisticated gentleman' exclaiming "I don't always [specific action], but when I do [reaction]", with the reaction typically being a humorous or unexpected twist. Whilst also being quite oldschool [sic], this meme has a greater diversity of creative applications, and has been used in far more ways than simply the same image with some different text.

This statement also draws attention to the meme's age. By the period of my survey in 2019, this meme was had circulated for almost a decade but had fallen out of mainstream popularity. However, it was the highest frequency meme during the establishment of my All Time meme pool, appearing across all five of the sources that informed the pool (see Section 4.3.1). A few participants criticised its age, with one labelling the meme as "Normie trash / Facebook teir [sic] meme." Such condemnation relates the aforementioned perceptions of ownership of memes and their relation to specific platforms. In this case, the engagement of MIMITW reached far enough to be popular on Facebook, one of the broader platforms as opposed to the more insular, meme-producing sites such as 4chan.[288] However, despite such "trash" status, others pointed to its importance in the development of memes, saying: "This is also an earlier meme from the same era of the 2010's. This was one of the largest templates

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[288] See Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities."

first derived from a TV commercial." Another stated that MIMITW "represents some of the first memes to gain popularity." Therefore, while the meme itself is no longer as popular, its legacy remains, and this persistent concept of the meme itself has been enshrined in internet culture in a way that allows it to be recalled and used in many different ways. In the words of another survey participant:

> This is a classic internet meme format. Being one of the first and most famous meme formats, it is very respected and can sometimes be humorous. Although many memes "die" after week or so (meaning they are no longer relevant or funny), this one is immortalized because it is a classic. Like classical music, this meme is not relevant anymore and is hardly ever used, but it has become immortalized in the sense that referencing it has itself become a meme, almost like a tribute.

8.4 Stage Three Continuity of Form

In Stage Three, the continuity of form for memes continues to break down. This process of graphical erosion began in Stage Two, with the introduction of minor edits and remixing. By this final stage, changes to the base form of a meme can become more extreme. With enough established context and shared understanding among an online community or communities, the meme itself can become arbitrary, no longer needing iconic elements, indirect or otherwise. This lack of iconicity removes the need utilise metaphor in order to create meaning. Instead, the meme's visuals have become a shared concept, as discussed in Section 8.3. This base form of the meme, as a conceptual construct, becomes an element of assumed common ground, allowing even an image with a vague likeness to be linked to this shared knowledge.[289] As such, the graphical fidelity of the meme is reduced in subsequent iterations. This opens up a wider range of semantic possibilities, with these new iterations taking advantage of novel combinations of memes and further pushing the boundaries of the meme's meaning (see more in Section 8.5, below). Along with intuitability, discussed in Section 8.6, this process of graphical erosion mirrors established linguistic research, such as the changes to symbols in the work of Garrod and Fay, as discussed in Chapter 3. Garrod and Fay's experiments demonstrated how the drive for efficiency in production could result in simplification of symbols and a distancing from iconicity as new iterations are produced. Although memes do not have the same push for expediency of manual recreation, parallels

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[289] Grundlingh, "Memes as Speech Acts," 7-8.

are nevertheless evident when comparing the changes to the experimental drawings and the diffuse forms of developed memes. I contend, however, that the drive for these graphical shifts is not efficiency, but innovation. Linking back to the work of Coscia and the need for memes to continuously expand their semantic boundaries, it appears that memes expand their graphical boundaries as well, particularly as they move into later stages of abstraction. The loss of visual continuity aids in allowing the meme's meaning to grow and diversify along new avenues of discourse. Therefore, while the underlying pressures are different than in traditional semiotics, an analogous process still occurs, producing a similar result.

Furthermore, these changes parallel other non-graphical linguistic processes, such as reduction, lenition, and deletion. Words and phrases undergo these phonological changes for a number of reasons (e.g., ease of articulation), though it is largely the result of repetition and the accumulation of gradual changes, as can be seen with successive generations of meme iterations (see Section 8.2 above). The specific process of grammaticalisation sees a word or phrase altered both phonologically and semantically, with the word or phrase becoming both reduced and more functional. As an example, the English phrase "going to" is often reduced to "gonna," though beyond the reduction in sound for ease of production, the meaning of this phrase has predominantly shifted from an indication of movement to a statement of intent, an ad hoc future tense. "Gonna" has become a grammaticalised phrase when used for such a syntactic purpose rather than a purely semantic one. Thus, an utterance such as "I'm gonna go," which might preliminarily seem redundant in doubled use of the same verb, instead has a clear meaning due to the two instances of the verb having distinct grammatical roles.[290] I contend that the overall erosion of the meme's form in Stage Three—with the combined shift of the locus of meaning away from the image and reduced reliance on continuity of form— frees the image to take on yet more significant visual changes for the sake of novelty. However, this easing of restrictions on the visual form also allows for even greater mixing of meme visuals and templates together. This mixing and remixing of combined memes, each only partially represented visually, allows such 'graphically reduced' memes to serve a comparatively *grammatical* purpose, in lieu of a metaphorical or iconic one.

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[290] Hoefler and Smith, "The Pre-Linguistic Basis of Grammaticalisation: A Unified Approach to Metaphor and Reanalysis"; Smith, "Grammaticalization and Language Evolution."

Figure 8.20: The template for the "Scumbag Steve" meme

One of the best examples of this grammaticalising process is the meme *Scumbag Steve*, the template of which can be seen in Figure 8.20. The image itself features a young man dressed in a fur-lined jacket and a large hat. The iconicity here is highly indirect and metonymic, with the man's choice of clothing meant to indicate his personality. In this case, his style is associated with the 'gangster' or street thug aesthetic, and thus the character is used as a stand-in for generally poor and unscrupulous behaviour. The meme furthers plays with stereotypes and cultural expectations, with the character described as being a 'douche,' a drunkard, or—as indicated by the meme's title—a scumbag.[291] In the words of one survey participant, the character is a "[g]uy who looks like he makes bad decisions". The survey data for this meme's name (see Figure 8.21) was a bit scattered, with reasonable recognition of the 'canon' name, though even among the alternatives suggested, the vast majority were anything but complementary. (A very small subgroup indicated that the character was a more upstanding individual, though this plays more into Continuity of Meaning, as discussed in the next section.) These sentiments were echoed when describing the meme's meaning (see Figure 8.22), ranging from arrogance to stupidity to rudeness, though the majority fell within a generalised "douchey" quality that can be difficult to elucidate. This speaks again to the ability for memes to express something that would be otherwise difficult or verbose to say in words. One participant stated that the meme is "[u]sed to illustrate that some[one] is 'that type of person' - an untrustworthy / scummy / scamming / manipulative / dishonest person." Thus, the meme can describe a broad range of actions, though they all fall under a pointedly negative umbrella. A somewhat tame example can be seen in Figure 8.23.

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[291] Brad Kim, "Scumbag Steve," Know Your Meme, 2015, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/scumbag-steve.
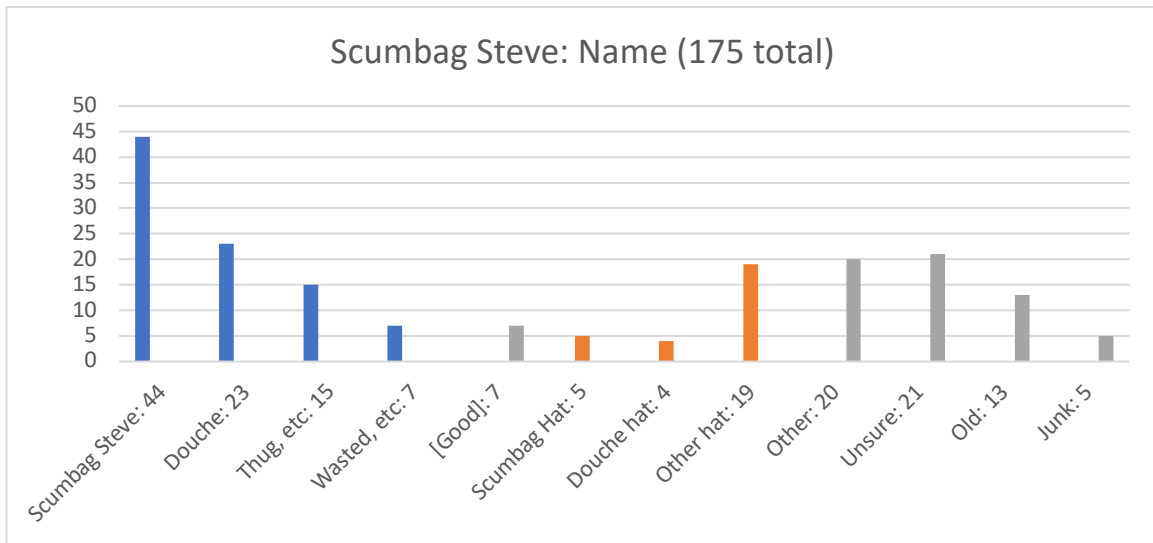
Figure 8.21: Survey responses about the name of the Scumbag Steve meme
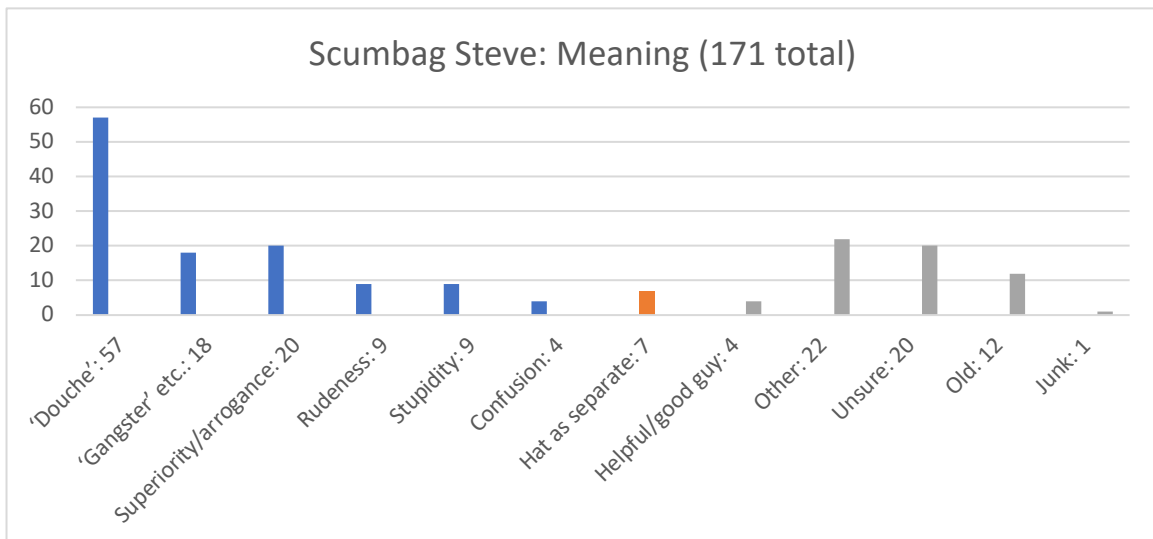

Figure 8.22: Survey responses about the meaning of the Scumbag Steve meme

Figure 8.23: An example of the "Scumbag Steve" meme

This meme prompted potent reactions from many of my respondents, seemingly echoing the wider internet community which branded this character as a degenerate 'scumbag.' Of particular note is the character's hat, which featured in my data for naming and meaning as seen in Figure 8.21 and Figure 8.22 above, indicated by the orange columns. The hat featured very prominently in my data for salience as well, as seen in Figure 8.24, again highlighted in orange. Even to those unfamiliar with the meme, this feature was a focal point, as stated by one survey respondent: "I have never seen this meme before, and am unaware of any meaning it may have. It looks like it may be trying to make fun of his hat". The hat on its own (see Figure 8.25) has become a meme in its own right, *Scumbag Hat*. As another participant put it, "The very appearance of the guy looks like he's a complete failure at everything. And because it was a popular meme for a long time, the mere appearance of the hat is enough to convey the same message as the whole picture." The hat therefore serves as a concentrated embodiment of 'scumbag-ness' and can be attached to other media.[292] This cropped image therefore acts much like a bound morpheme, particularly similar to a negative marker, added onto other pictures or established memes in order to alter their meaning. The images in Figure 8.26 provide several examples of the Scumbag Hat in different contexts, though in all of them the Hat serves the same purpose: conveying that the object or figure wearing the hat is displaying similar 'scummy' behaviour to that of Scumbag Steve himself.
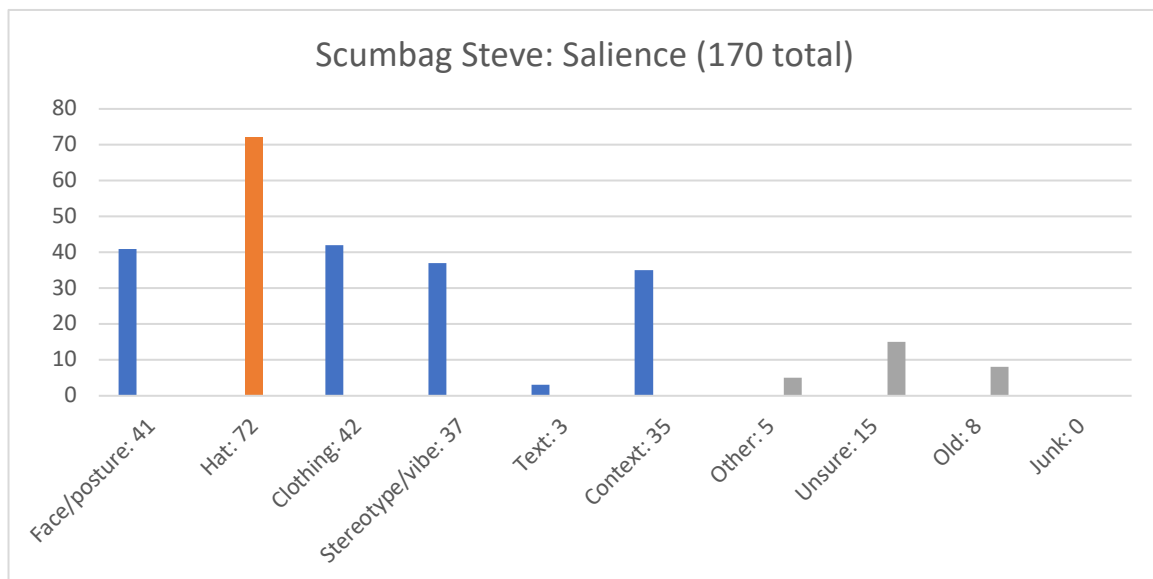

Figure 8.24: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the Scumbag Steve meme

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[292]James Wu, "Scumbag Hat," Know Your Meme, 2014, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/scumbag-hat.

Figure 8.25: The "Scumbag Hat," isolated from the original Scumbag Steve template
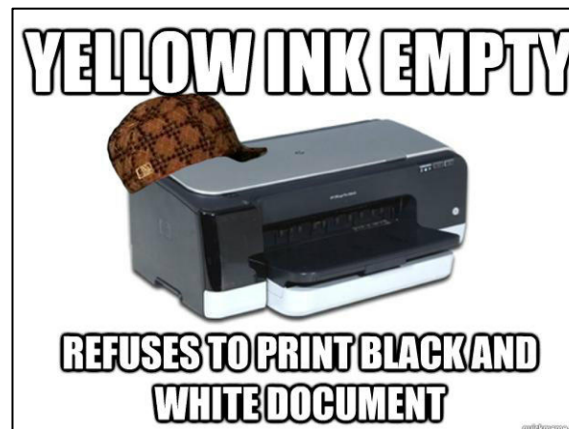

Figure 8.26: Examples of the Scumbag Hat applied to other images and memes. Note that the first example also features Steve's jacket as well as his hat, which is uncommon given the relative difficulty of formatting the respective images. See also the self-referential meme in Figure 8.27 below.

As such, the Hat is an example of a process similar to grammaticalisation, having been reduced graphically, rather than phonologically, and now serves a more functional than discursive purpose. Although the Hat itself represents a distillation of the original meme and its associated 'scumbaggery,' it now portrays this negative quality in relation to other narrative spaces. The Hat is rarely used on its own; instead, as seen by one participant, "the

hat is often digitally edited onto other things (people, logos, etc.) to indicate that the person or associated company is doing ill-natured things." Its function is therefore to change the tone and meaning of an existing image, rather than make a statement of its own. In the few instances when the hat appears in isolation, it is typically self-referential or meta-textual, as seen in Figure 8.27. Such meta humour is similar to the self-referencing examples of MIMITW in Section 8.3 which relied on the concept of the meme and its history in order to facilitate humour. The examples in Figure 8.27 echo this same type of humour, especially the second instance that stacks the hat on top of itself. This second iteration in particular exemplifies the parallel between the Scumbag Hat and a linguistic negative marker, as the Hat appearing on top of the Hat appears to cancel out the distasteful association of the object, akin to a double negative. The caption implies the potential innocence of the Hat, which serves as a scapegoat due to its association with the Scumbag Steve character. Such grammaticalised and meta-textual forms of the isolated hat therefore serve as examples of a meme that has truly reached Stage Three in terms of continuity of form, as this meme has moved past its original template image, graphically eroded down to its most salient feature, and then been transposed onto other images. Thus, the form of the meme has undergone drastic graphical changes on its own and in respect to the overall image macro format; it has superseded existing in a single image and is now a freely moving motif which can exist across templates.

Figure 8.27: Examples of the Scumbag Hat used in memes on its own

8.5 Stage Three Continuity of Meaning

As with so many of the criteria in Stage Three, continuity of meaning in this phase consists of a breakdown of the previously established boundaries and conventions. In Stage One, a meme narrowed its focus from a variety of interpretations based on iconic cues present in the image, with a single, unified meaning emerging from early variation. In Stage Two, to allow the meme to proliferate and remain engaging, the meaning of the meme broadened to a generalised theme, one which could encompass an increasing range of emotions and situations, while maintaining a semantic through-line. In Stage Three, the meme continues this process of semantic broadening to the point of fracturing and branching. By this point in its development, the meme has moved far past its origin and spread to multiple distinct communities (as discussed in Sections 8.2 and 8.1 above), and thus the number of iterations and diversity of individuals across networks results in polysemy, much as can occur with normal words and phrases.[293] Memes therefore once again act in a parallel manner to other elements of language, demonstrating similar process of semantic broadening and change. Such branching of meaning often occurs based on gradual changes in tone or nuance, which is an organic by-product of repetition and accumulated changes across iterations, much like cumulative cultural evolution. However, the important distinction in Stage Three is that, given the established and entrenched status of the meme, competing and divergent definitions can exist simultaneously, even within a community or by the same individual. Interestingly, in many cases, the meme can come to mean both its 'canon' meaning and its opposite, due to degradation of irony or nuance. This embodies the notion of a *contronym*, as defined by Karaman: "a form of polysemy where at least two senses of a lexically simple expression are in opposition." An example of this phenomenon in English would be the verb 'dust,' which can mean both to remove particles from a surface or to add them.[294]

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[293] Sara Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Culture," *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 562–86; Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres."

[294] Burcu Ilkay Karaman, "On Contronymy," *International Journal of Lexicography* 21, no. 2 (2008): 174–75. There is not a singular term that has been accepted by the linguistic community to describe this phenomenon, with multiple competing terms, including contranym, Janus word, self-antonym, and many more. Karaman proposes "contronym" as a standard term, which I am borrowing here for the sake of clarity and consistency.

Figure 8.28: The template image for the "Roll Safe" meme

To exemplify this phenomenon, consider the meme *Roll Safe* (template in Figure 8.28), which was the first entry in my Current pool of memes based on its frequency across the sources from which I drew my example memes. The name of the meme derives from the character in the picture, nicknamed "Roll Safe," who appeared in a web-series. During a particular scene, he makes a joke about "brains" and gestures to his head, as seen in the template image.[295] Although this name was not well-recognised by my participants in both my survey (see Figure 8.29, with the standard title highlighted in orange) and my focus groups, many of the labels they applied to it related to the meaning of the meme, focusing on intelligence and thought processes. One of the first instances of the meme, seen in Figure 8.30, set the tone for subsequent iterations, featuring an ostensibly clever idea that realistically would cause more problems than solutions. This meaning broadened to encompass a variety of such insights, which seem rational and follow a certain internal logic, but ultimately are impractical or inane. As put by one of my survey respondents, Roll Safe "describes a sense of genius that can only be achieved when the stupidest ideas work."

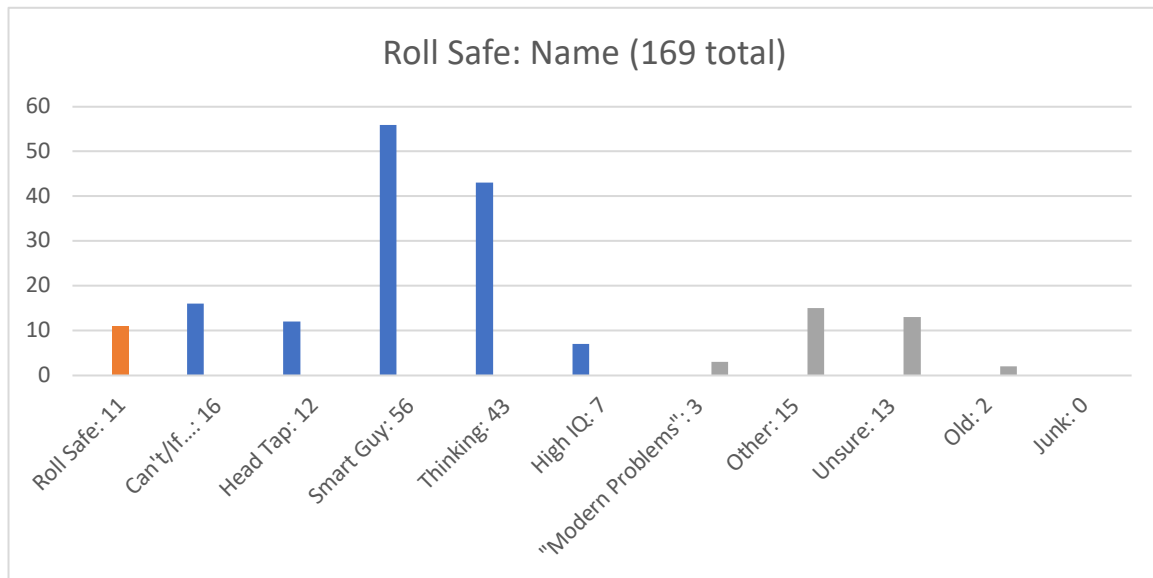[295] Don [No surname given], "Roll Safe," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/roll-safe.

Figure 8.29: Survey responses about the name of the Roll Safe meme

When you piss her off on purpose, so she can say goodnight at 6pm and you can just play FIFA for the rest of the day in peace.
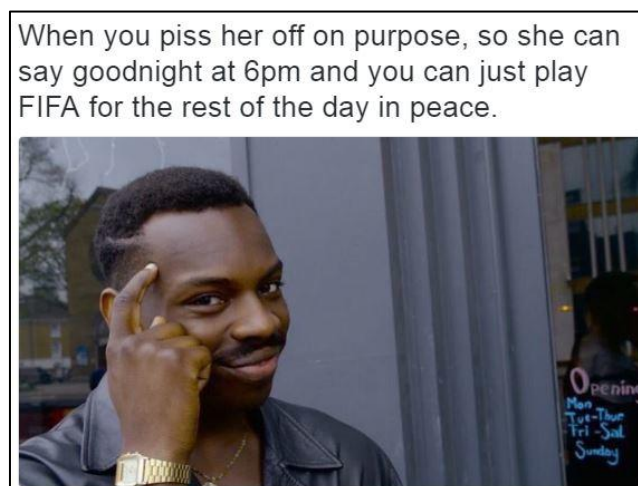
Figure 8.30: One of the first examples of the Roll Safe meme

However, the development of the meme's meaning did not stop there. While the primary meaning of the meme incorporated a level of irony and flawed logic, with subsequent generations and new iterations of the meme, this meaning became diluted to the point where many individuals use the meme to represent *genuine* intellect. As seen in my survey data in Figure 8.31, the highest number of responses—a near majority—indicated that the meme represented cleverness or intelligence (the blue column). Conversely, a sizeable group suggested the meaning of the meme was more along the lines the aforementioned ironic intelligence, as well as subgroups that put forth definitions of sarcasm—similar to irony—and overreaction or overcorrection, such as the example in Figure 8.30. Taken

together (the orange columns), these almost equal the responses for straightforward intelligence. This divergence of opinion extended to my focus groups as well, with different participants alternately suggesting that the meme represents either flawed logic or actually being clever. A handful of my survey respondents also indicated that the meme has both of these definitions simultaneously, exhibiting full contronymy:

- "Outsmarting someone or ironically outsmarting someone"
- "Indicates cleverness or an ironic lack of cleverness"
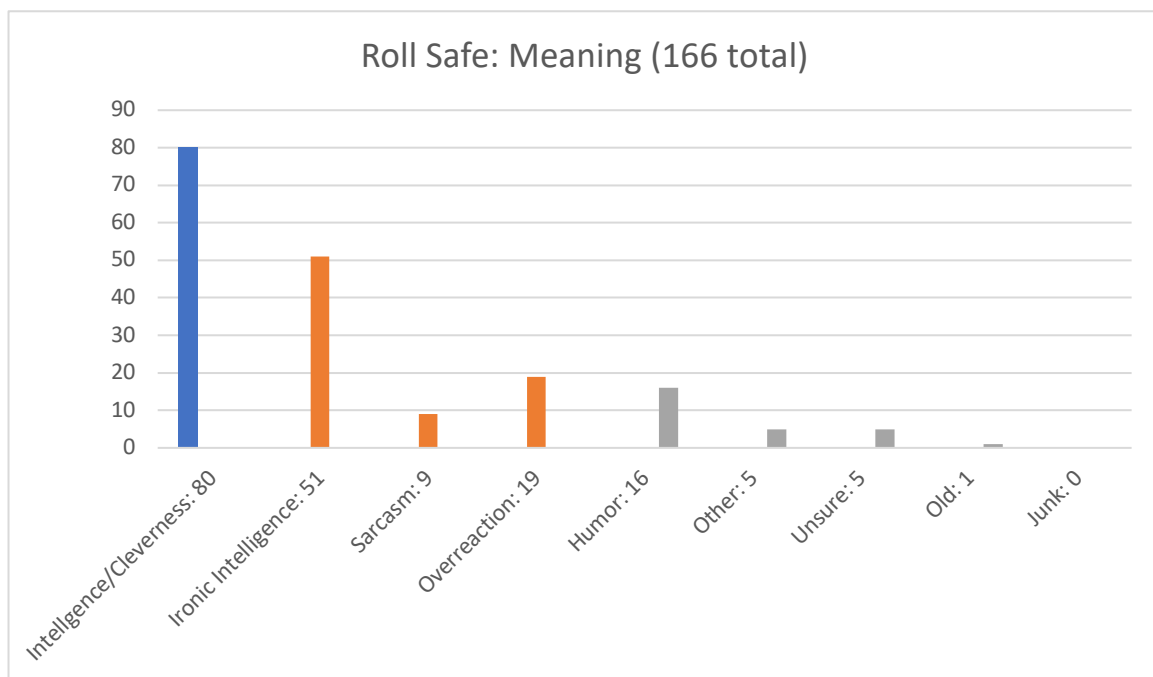- "Typically used to satirize unhelpful lifehacks…or to present actually useful lifehacks"

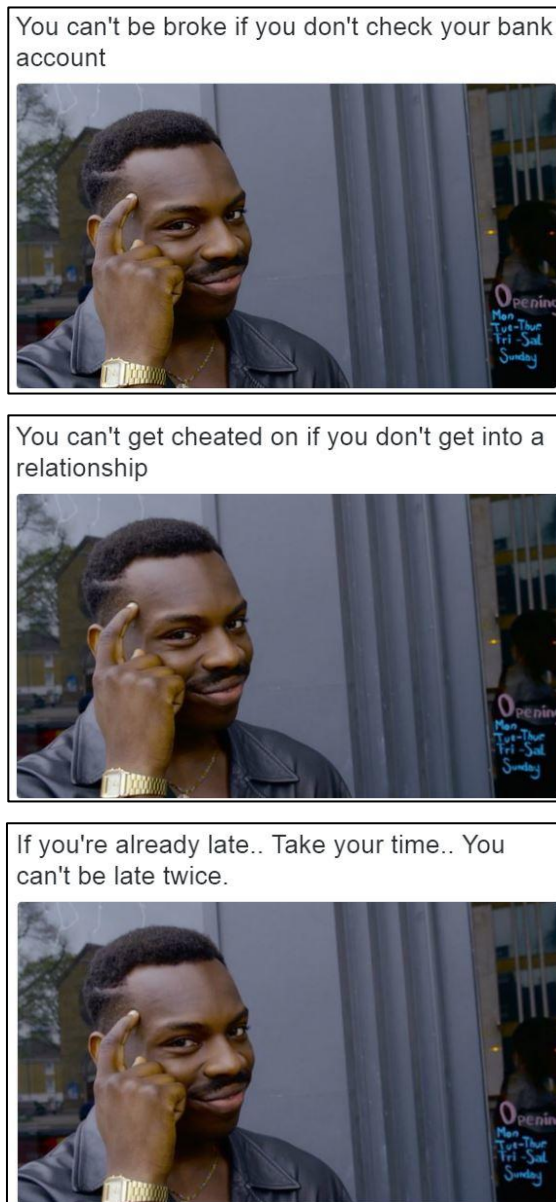*Figure 8.31: Survey responses about the meaning of the Roll Safe meme*

Figure 8.32: Assorted examples of the Roll Safe meme, demonstrating the spectrum of potential branched meanings, ranging from ironic to insightful

As such, Roll Safe is a notable example of a Stage Three meme in this regard, as its continuity of meaning has broadened to the point of fracturing. Not only is it polysemous, with differing definitions for different individuals or groups, but many internet users now use the meme to mean the opposite of its original meaning (see Figure 8.32 for more examples). Although a meme does not need to exhibit contronymy to be considered Stage Three, this more than demonstrates the amount of branching that has occurred, marking its development to be well past Stage Two. This same branching and potential contronymy is exhibited by many of memes in my pool, such as Philosoraptor in Section 6.3, which features a similar split between mockingly deep observations and authentic philosophical questions. Again, the

originally more nuanced meaning—involving irony, sarcasm, or absurdism—has been replaced, at least in part, by a simplified meaning lacking the meme's former nuance. This loss of nuance is possibly due to the lack of iconic connection to the image, with elements of irony or sarcasm drawn from the conventionalised associations of the meme. Such subtextual associations are easier to maintain within a comparatively smaller, more contained group. However, as the meme spreads to new communities, members of these new groups may be unfamiliar with the history and norms of the meme within earlier networks. They will instead rely on the examples they have seen and more intuitable iconic elements. The simpler, more straightforward meaning is easier to parse, and thus layers of tone and nuance can be lost.

8.6 Stage Three Intuitability

The characteristic of intuitability is one of the criteria that truly erodes in Stage Three. In Stage One, a meme was necessarily intuitable given the lack of established context. In Stage Two, this characteristic was reduced to varying degrees, with the potential to still be intuitable but no longer requiring the meme to be so. Here in Stage Three, the meme becomes significantly if not entirely unintuitable without knowledge of earlier iterations and their subsequent development. As quoted previously, one focus group member suggested the hypothetical situation of "if you take like, a six week break and you come back, you're gonna be like: 'what does any of this mean?'." Thus, the relationship between meaning and form has become arbitrary. These memes are therefore markedly different from those in the earlier stages as the process of iconicity and metaphor cannot be utilised. Although there may still be some potentially iconic elements, they are no longer driving the meaning of the meme, as the locus of meaning has shifted to the concept of the meme itself. Without such iconic backing, the process of visual metaphor does not take place, rendering it useless for determining meaning. This is especially true for meme iterations that have undergone drastic graphical or textual edits. Continuity of form, as discussed in Section 8.4, begins as a staple of early memes before beginning to degrade in Stage Two. With its full degradation in Stage Three, the 'physical' meme can become all but unrecognisable. Such non-iconic forms lose the benefit of intuitability, demonstrating the same principles of simplifying symbol systems as demonstrated by Garrod and Fay. This further parallels the process of reduction obscuring the source of meaning for words within a language. An example would be the English word *goodbye*, which originates from the phrases *God be with you* or *God buy you* (alternatively or

in conjunction with one another). With speed and repetition, the distinct words were blended together, and emphasis of certain sounds was lost, resulting in a number of compounded forms such as *godb'w'e* and *godbuy'ye* before ultimately settling in the modern form of *goodbye*.[296] Although this word still retains the pragmatic function of farewell as the original phrase, it is no longer clear that it is a contraction of a longer phrase, nor one invoking divine protection. While memes are created and recreated under novel circumstances, and as such do not follow all of the conventions of linguistic theory, they nevertheless appear to be governed by similar forces of language change. The shift in continuity of meaning, discussed in Section 8.5 above, also contributes to this degradation of intuitability. The emergence of polysemy (and potentially contronymy) complicates the effort to intuit memes when they have reached Stage Three, as their meaning has broadened to such a degree that they may not be readily understood. In particular, elements of nuance or irony may be difficult to parse, as the meme may be used to represent both genuine and sarcastic sentiments of a similar kind.
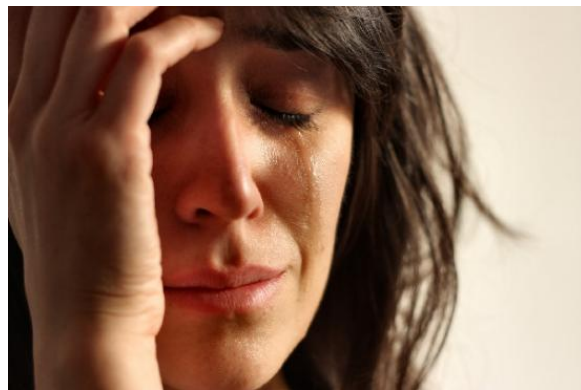

Figure 8.33: The template image for the "First World Problems" meme

To illustrate this shift in intuitability, consider the variants of the *First World Problems* meme, the primary template of which can be seen in Figure 8.33. This meme derives from internet discourse in the late 2000s that produced the term "First World problems" that, according to one survey participant, "refer to the relatively minor problems which face the inhabitants of the developed world". In the words of another:

> The idea of people who don't have real, significant problems in life such as hunger or violence, who are nonetheless complaining about the inconveniences they do experience, particularly an inconvenience directly related to a luxury or status symbol. "Got pizza delivered. The pepperoni isn't organic grass-fed cruelty free"

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[296] "Goodbye, n., Int., and Adj," OED Online, 2022, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79929.

This concept of inconvenience blown out of proportion found traction on Tumblr and the Something Awful forums before spreading to Twitter and other platforms at the end of 2008 into 2009. A subreddit dedicated to First World problems was established in 2011 and in the same year became the subject of a variety of image macro formats. Although there were multiple potential template images (see Figure 8.34), one emerged as the most popular, a stock photo of a crying woman as seen in Figure 8.33.[297] The image was paired with captions that perpetuated the idea of First World problems, of "[b]eing sad about a…trivial event or minor inconvenience" or "devastated over something that doesn't merit devastation," according to two further survey respondents. Further examples can be seen in Figure 8.35.

Figure 8.34: An early iteration of the First World Problems meme featuring a different template image
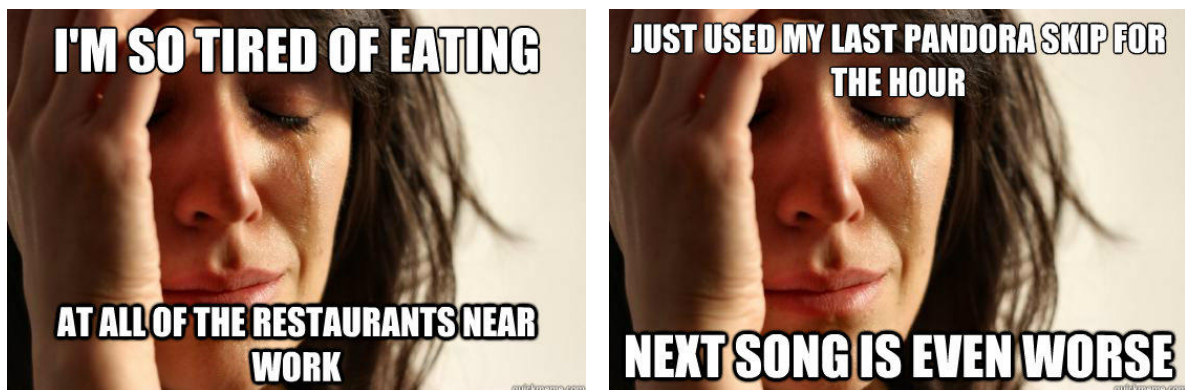

Figure 8.35: Two examples of the First World Problems meme with its primary template image, each featuring minor inconveniences of modern, privileged life

This early consolidation of the meme with a primary image is another example of strict continuity of form, as discussed in Section 6.4 . Its meaning centred on "complaining

[297] Don [No surname given], "First World Problems," Know Your Meme, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/first-world-problems.

about a problem which is strikingly petty, shallow, or insignificant, especially when compared to the gravity of graver issues - a simple parody on the seemingly meaningless problems met with in the western world," as put by one research volunteer, remaining stable across its early iterations, an example of a focused continuity of meaning. However, the meme did not remain in this state—it evolved, broadening in form and meaning, eventually splitting into a variety of related memes that parody or echo the original in some way. This imitation of imitation with diminishing fidelity further speaks to breakdown of the meme's relation to its origin, as discussed in Section 8.2. Three prominent offshoots include *First World Cat Problems*, *Over-Educated Problems*, and *1990s First World Problems*. The first replaced the template image with that of a cat and shifted the point of view of complaint accordingly, with seemingly dire feline-related issues that are trivial from a human perspective. As can be seen in the examples in Figure 8.36, the meme maintains a similar semantic framework, but the visual continuity has been lost. The second variant also utilised a new template image, this time a man leaning against a rainy window. A similar semantic structure of privilege and hardship is used, but as seen in the examples in Figure 8.37, the focus has shifted from luxury to inconvenience due to extensive education or knowledge. The meaning has become further removed, narrowing in a specific facet of the typical First World problem trope. The visual continuity to the original image has been obscured with the change in template, although it still relies on iconic, if different, elements of facial expression and posture to convey meaning.[298]
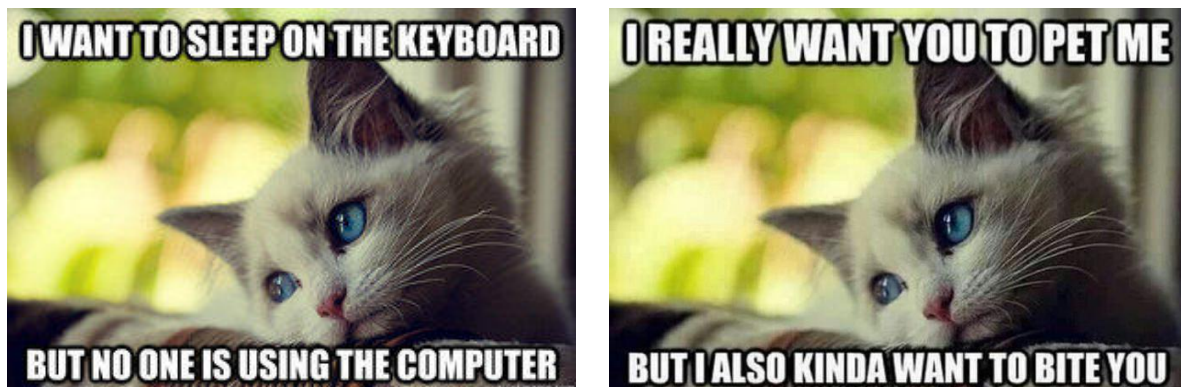

Figure 8.36: Two examples of the "First World Cat Problems" variant of the First World Problems meme

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[298] Ibid.

Figure 8.37: Two examples of the "Over-Educated Problems" variant of the First World Problems meme
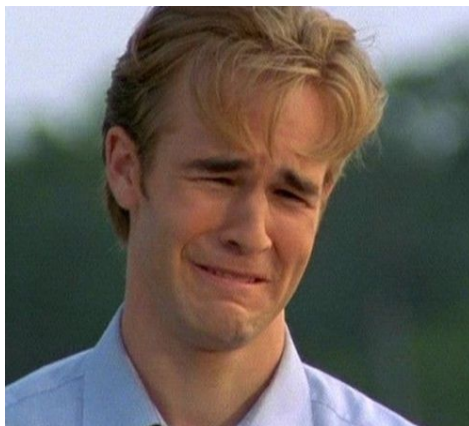

Figure 8.38: The template image for the "1990s First World Problems" variant of the First World Problems meme, featuring the character of Dawson from Dawson's Creek

The third variant was 1990s First World Problems, which features yet another template image, this time depicting the crying face of the title character from the television show *Dawson's Creek*, as seen in Figure 8.38. The show, which began airing in the 1990s, was used to situate the idea of First World problems into that temporal context. As such, this variant focused on the inconveniences of life in the American 1990s, particularly in regard to technological limitations which have been alleviated in the ensuing decades.[299] Two such examples can be seen in Figure 8.39, describing situations that would have been problematic, if only minorly so, in the 1990s. This variant, more so than the previous two, demonstrated a clear link to the original version of the meme. Semantically, the focus was the same, of an overreaction to a minor inconvenience, merely transposed into a historical setting. While an obvious distinction from the mainline examples, it cleaves much closer to the original meaning of the meme than the previous two variants. Visually, the 1990s version is distinct from the original stock photo, as it is another full template replacement. However, the

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[299] Ibid.

Dawson face is again much closer to the original template; while direct visual fidelity has been lost, one crying face has been exchanged with another, leaving more continuity than the other variants. As this was a more closely linked variant than the others, I chose to focus on the 1990s variant and included it in my survey and focus group discussion.

Figure 8.39: Two examples of the 1990s First World Problem variant meme

The data collected on this meme, both in its original and 1990s variant, presented conflicting information. Name recognition of the meme was low—in my three focus groups, only one participant recognised the original template image as being called "First World Problems," and the results of my survey were similar, as can be seen in Figure 8.40. Only 12 of the 181 participants who reviewed this meme were able to refer to it by name, and only a further 4 recognised the Dawson version as a 1990s-themed variant. Nevertheless, even if the exact terminology of 'First World problems' was less present, recognition of the meaning of the meme was more widespread. Despite most not knowing the title, the majority of my focus group participants were aware of the meme's meaning, citing overdramatised inconvenience. One gave the example of "when you run out of hummus before you run out of crisps." Although there was overall agreement in my focus groups as to the meme's meaning, there was a larger divide among my survey takers. As seen in Figure 8.41, there was a noticeable split between those who understood the meme's meaning to represent the exaggerated sadness of minor problems (in blue) and those who interpreted it as representing genuine sadness or regret (in orange). There were seven individuals who specifically used the term of "First World problems" in their responses, along with a sizeable proportion that elaborated on that same theme, such as: "Privileged people expressing sadness over something generally considered trivial." Some provided a more generalised view, such as, "These are often used in response for a non serious [sic] but still disappointing situation such as 'My doctor said no

more alcohol!'" However, a majority suggested that the meme describes actual, if dramatic, feelings of sadness and disappointment. As put by another survey taker, "the meme represent[s] an emotion rarely anyone can capture. it's the feeling of sadness, despair, hopeless, etc."—a stark contrast to the previous quotes about this meme, and once again pointing to the ability of memes to portray difficult to express sentiments. Interestingly, the meme seems to have reached such a level of semantic broadening that polysemy, even contronymy, has developed. Much like the case with Rolls Safe discussed in Section 8.5 above, there were multiple instances of survey participants describing both the exaggerated and sincere interpretations, such as the following:

- "Sorrow, sadness (however, these are mostly used to parody a situation that is not really sad, for example: 'When I realize that not everything is about me')"
- "Moments of tragedy (either genuine or satrical [sic]) that illicit genuine/mock sadness"
- "Being unironically/ironically sad about something"

Such branching of meaning, particularly the emergent contronymy, makes the meme difficult to parse, especially for those unfamiliar with the meme. This seems to be particularly the case for the 1990s variant, as while it was recognised by a handful of survey participants with regards to its name, only one of them elaborated on this temporally variant meaning among the answers shown in Figure 8.41.
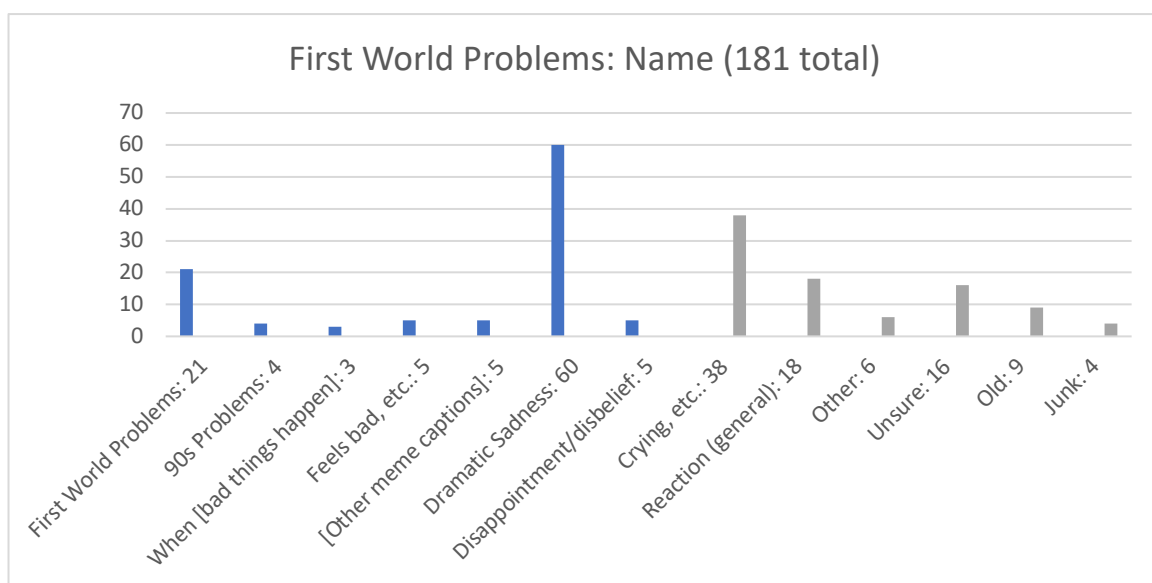

Figure 8.40: Survey responses about the name of the First World Problems meme
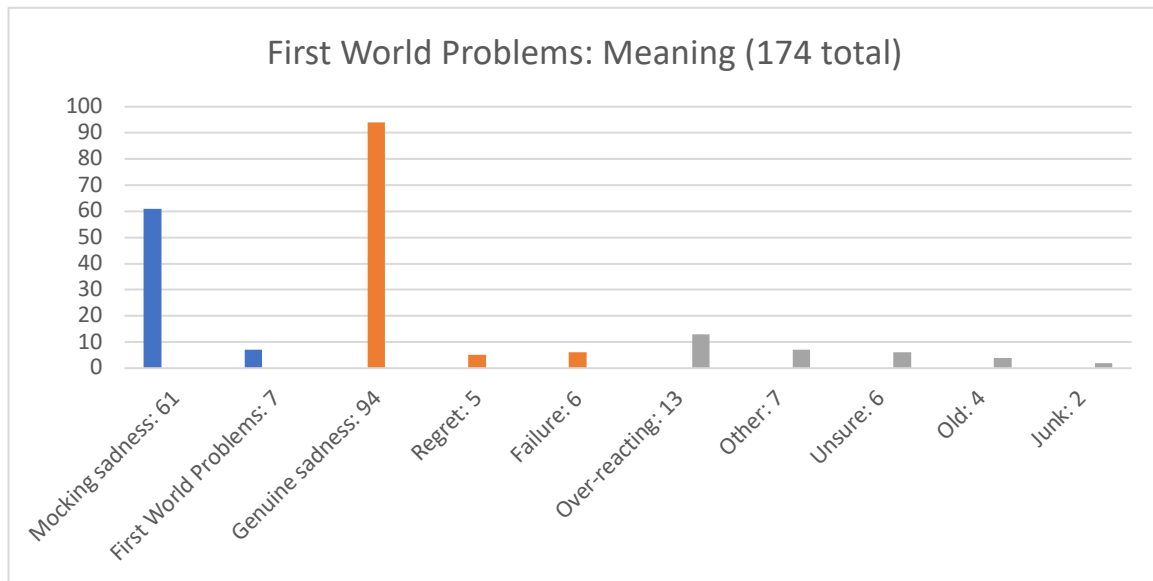
Figure 8.41: Survey responses about the meaning of the First World Problems meme

With regards to the salience of the meme, which is particularly significant in terms of intuitability, my survey data was rather unified. As seen in Figure 8.42, a sizeable majority of respondents pointed to the graphical, iconic elements as the source of meaning, particularly the sad expression of the faces along with tears. This falls in line with many of the other examples discussed over the last three chapters, with iconic elements being cited as a primary contributor of meaning, along with learned experience of seeing the meme in use—labelled as "Context" in the chart. Although the majority of respondents provided basic answers regarding the tearful expressions of the images, a few did delve a bit deeper. One in particular took issue with expressions, feeling that they were not genuine: "Both people don't appear to be actually sad about something, but they look like they're trying to act sad". Such an observation plays into the developed meaning of the meme as relating to problems that are not truly problems. There was a minority of respondents who pointed to such exaggeration, as seen in the second column of Figure 8.42. However, most of the survey participants did not explicitly engage with this line of thinking, instead offering a more surface-level evaluation. This ties in with the discussion of Roll Safe and nuance at the end of the last section—the iconic cues here tie most strongly with the emotion, sadness, but do not inherently index the more complex, sarcastic narrative of the meme in its conventionalised iterations. Rather, this simpler, more literal meaning emerge based more on the iconic elements rather than the meme's established conventions.
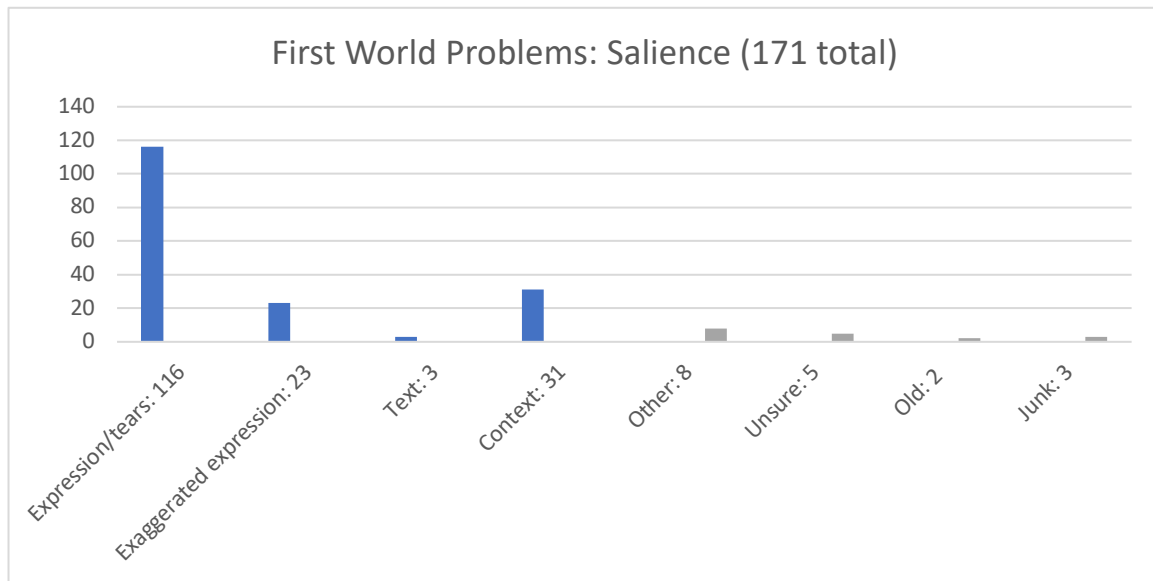
Figure 8.42: Survey responses about the source of meaning for the First World problems meme

There was a notable sub-group which pointed to this learned context as being the primary source of meaning—a reflection of the meme's locus of meaning having shifted from the graphical to the conceptual. A few respondents linked the iconic to the experiential, one stating that "The fact they are crying communicates the sadness part, and the way [I] have seen it used the irony", which indicates that the more nuanced meaning relating to exaggerated inconvenience is learned, not intuited. Another survey response focused entirely on this learned context: "It's a mutually understood reference that the internet has made far more widely understood. In effect, the internet collectively decided to assign these images that meaning." This 'collective decision,' although initially influenced by aspects of iconicity and relevance, has reached a point where the meme is no longer intelligible. This is especially true for the 1990s variant of the meme. Even if provided with appropriate 1990s-themed text, the meaning of the meme is not necessarily clear. Consider the examples in Figure 8.43. The former, using the original template, is relatively intuitable: the text provides an inconvenient situation, one which could be dramatised and exaggerated, but could also be interpreted more literally, as sincere distress, by someone unfamiliar with the meme. Though perhaps not likely, as the juxtaposition of the image with the text implies a deeper meaning—using the ostensive and metaphorical process repeatedly described in past chapters—if a viewer lacks the established context of the meme's intended irony, it could be construed literally. This would mark that the meme was difficult to effectively intuit, if not entirely unintuitable. The second example of Figure 8.43, however, features the 1990s variant. Although this has similar iconic elements which could help an unfamiliar viewer try to parse the meaning, the

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caption does not match as effectively as the other example. The situation described is no longer common, the meme intended as anachronistic humour. Knowing the history of the meme, its source as a parodical offshoot of an earlier meme, or having been exposed repeatedly to other examples, could provide context and better situate the caption in relation to the picture. Identifying the character in the photo as from a 1990s television show would also contribute to comprehension, as it is thematically appropriate to the situation described. However, all of these aspects are external knowledge—crucial elements of context—and a new viewer of the meme could lack any or all of them, thus greatly hampering their ability to intuit the meaning of this meme. Viewed in isolation, the 1990s version of First World Problems may not be impossible to comprehend, but it is highly difficult to intuit its complete meaning without any familiarity with this variant meme, its source, or other cultural context.
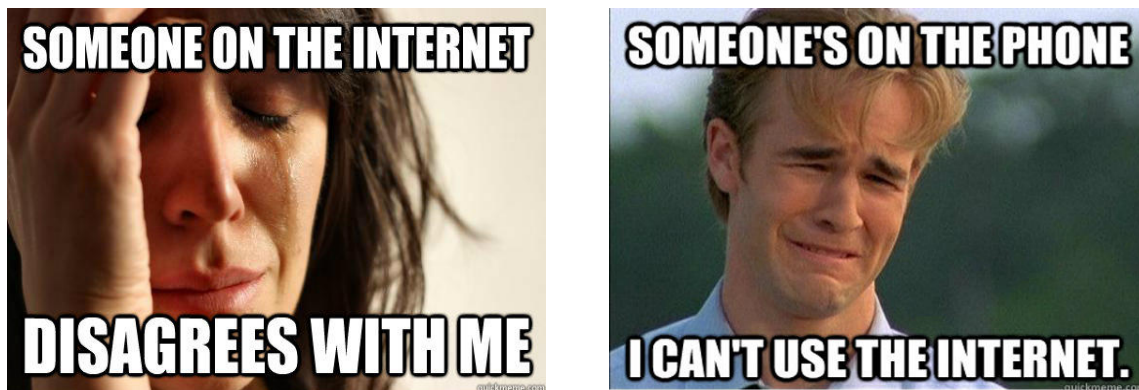

Figure 8.43: Further examples of the First World Problems memes. The left example features the primary template and relatively inconveniencing caption. The right features the 1990s variant template and a suitably 1990s-themed inconvenience.

8.7 Stage Three Overview

To summarise, Stage Three features many of the boundaries established in previous phases breaking down. Although many of these characteristics had begun to diminish or weaken in Stage Two, this final stage sees them collapse. This final stage marks the engagement of a meme beyond insular or networked communities into wider, branching networks which use the meme in parallel. Stage Three memes are produced on the model of Stage Two memes, leading this later generation to have a very tenuous connection to its origin point if any at all. As opposed to drawing meaning from the text or the image of a meme, Stage Three memes derive meaning from their shared conception within the common ground of internet users. The form of the meme has now become highly fluid, with only the

most salient details remaining to provide a small amount of graphical continuity. The meaning of the meme also becomes more fluid in Stage Three, as its continued semantic expansion paired with its adoption by divergent communities results in polysemy, even contronymy. Furthermore, as the meme no longer relies on a fixed form, text is often highly edited or omitted, and greater semantic power is held by the concept of the meme external to the unit itself, Stage Three memes are typically no longer intuitable and require a knowledge of the meme's development and context in order to be understood. Together, these elements describe a communicative unit that has reached a point of abstraction beyond most of its preliminary limits, on social, graphical, semantic, and cognitive levels. Furthermore, while this is the last stage of my model, it is in many ways a new beginning, an open-ended environment in which a meme can grow and change in myriad new ways.

Chapter 9: The Life Cycle in Review

The previous four chapters outlined and elaborated on the Life Cycle model. Each phase was broken down and analysed in terms of my six criteria: engagement, relation to origin, locus of meaning, continuity of form, continuity of meaning, and intuitability. Together, the chapters presented a detailed structure for my model, with examples for each criterion from my meme pool along with support from survey and focus group data. However, to further elaborate on the phases of my model and to illustrate it in its entirety, this chapter will describe the development of memes from their beginning forward through all three phases. For the sake of thoroughness and to better represent the broad range of types of memes, I will track this developmental process for two different memes from my Current pool: *Expanding Brain* and *Distracted Boyfriend*. These two memes were chosen for a number of reasons. They were among the highest frequency items during my indexing of memes for my meme pool (as described in Section 4.3.1), being the fourth and second most present 'Current' examples across my analysed sites. Their membership in the Current pool also establishes them as being closer to ongoing developments of internet culture, as opposed to some of the older members of the All Time pool, many of which are a decade old if not older. However, these two memes were chosen particularly for the memetic features they possess, as well as their contrasting forms and evolution. *Expanding Brain* is an exploitable-type image macro featuring a series of textual messages accompanying a series of images (compare *Drakeposting* in Section 1.2 and *Gru's Plan* in Section 7.3). *Distracted Boyfriend*, on the other hand, is a more standard image macro, though it features the relatively newer style of captioning that relies on spatial relationships (compare *Is This A Pigeon*, Section 7.2), rather than the older format of top and bottom text. As such, these two memes have distinct and divergent forms, yet each follows a similar trajectory as it moves through the phases of my Life Cycle model. For both memes, I will provide examples across each of the three stages, as well as examples that illustrate the transition between these stages.

9.1 The *Expanding Brain* Meme

Figure 9.1: Template for the "Expanding Brain" meme

Expanding Brain, also known as *Galaxy Brain*, originated as a meme in 2017. This "exploitable" template features a series of images arranged vertically, each of which has a space provided to left to add a caption (thus the format can be easily 'exploited' to create new iterations). The images themselves depict an assortment of brains, arranged in order of increasing size, complexity, and illumination. The template image can be seen in Figure 9.1. These caricatures of brains imply a scale of intelligence and sophistication, which is juxtaposed with the adjoining captions. Therefore, the meaning of the meme can denote a series of items that metaphorically require the pictured mental power in order to comprehend or create. However, the meme was originally intended ironically, with the scale of intelligence depicted by the images contrasted by texts which reverse this progression, demonstrating less intelligence.[300] With the evolution of this meme, both the ironic and unironic meanings are accepted and extant, as corroborated by my survey data, which can be seen in Figure 9.2. The first column in blue represents the more literal interpretation of increasing intelligence, while the orange columns represent the more sarcastic or satirical interpretation. Such polysemy is similar to the divide in meaning of the *Roll Safe* meme (see

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[300] TheYolocast [username], "Galaxy Brain," Know Your Meme, 2021,
https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/galaxy-brain.

Section 8.5) and features a similar aspect of seeming intelligence, which is not actually smart. The progression of this polysemy and other changes to the meme's form and use will be analysed in detail below.
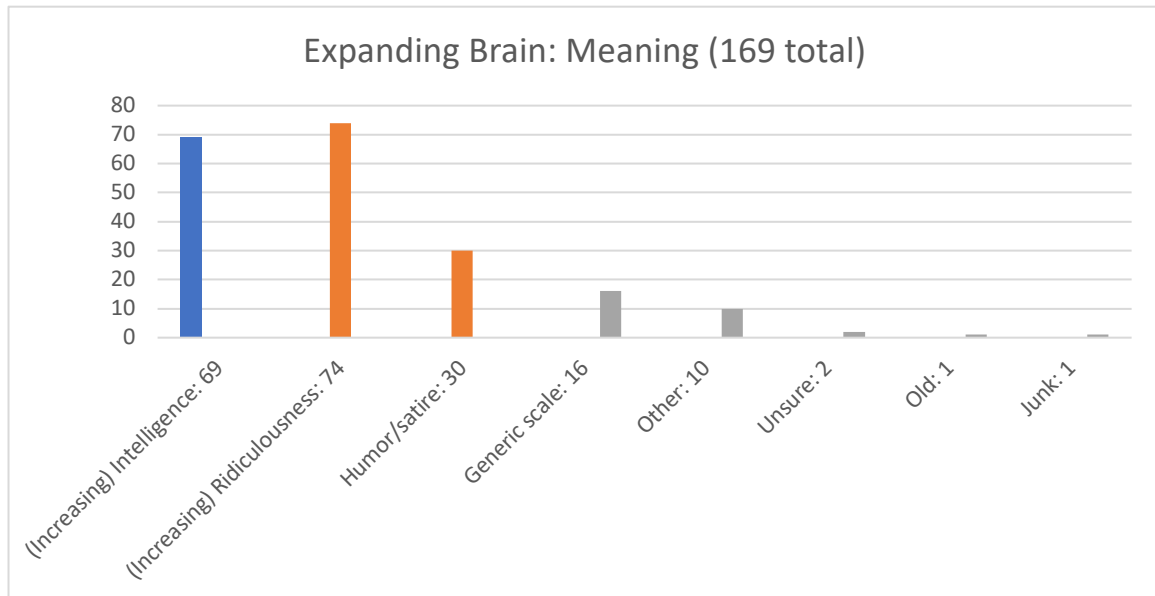

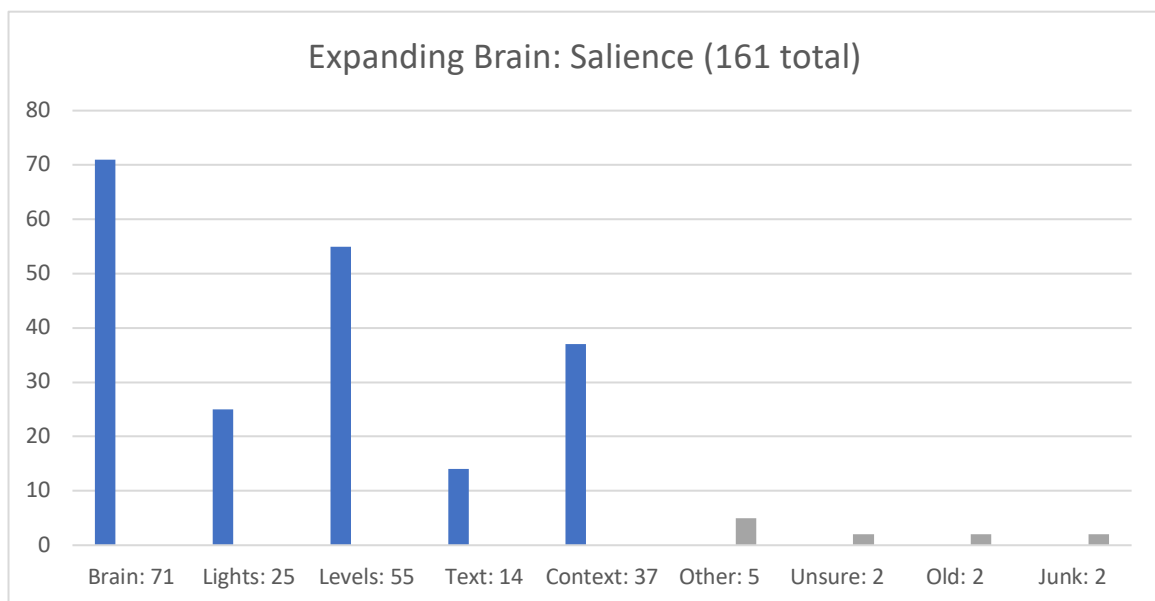*Figure 9.2: Survey data for the meaning of Expanding Brain*

Figure 9.3: Survey responses about the source of meaning for Expanding Brain

Figure 9.4: An early example of the Expanding Brain meme

The example of Expanding Brain seen in Figure 9.4 is among the earliest iterations of the meme. At that point in time, the meme was in its incubatory phase, with its engagement isolated to a few subreddits. The meme began as an offshoot of an online joke relating to the nonsense word "whomst," intended as a more sophisticated elaboration of *who* and *whom*. The increasing scale of the brain images was therefore correlated with the changes to the word *who*, with each stage reaching more complex—and more ridiculous—degrees. The above example is therefore closely tied to the origin point of the meme, with subsequent instances modelling off of the same format and meaning. Although the sequence of brain images helps to ground the semantics of the meme, the text is still the locus of meaning. At the point of this iteration's creation, there were only a few other examples of the meme, and thus a conventionalised meaning was still being formed. Yet in this example it is also clear that the text is a primary driver of meaning, as it is the key semantic clue indicating the ironic and nonsensical bend to the meaning of the meme. The comical representations of mental power lend further weight to the ridiculousness of the intended message, but it is the text that most clearly conveys that the scale of increasing 'intelligence' is one of increasing complexity, but also increasing inanity. In later stages, the form of the meme becomes more flexible, yet at this point, the meme was closely tied to the four-panel structure, as seen in the

blank template in Figure 9.1. A stable format here allowed for subsequent recognition and then conventionalisation, as well as providing a launching point for graphical innovation in later phases. The meaning of the meme was also firmly established at this point, with each level being an increase in supposed sophistication and yet also becoming more ludicrous. As explained by one of my focus group participants, the meme is "used in the opposite way you think it's used," in that the "smartest solution is the first one" of the provided options. Nevertheless, the combination of text and image in this instance creates a meme that is relatively easy to parse, even without an established understanding of the format. In spite of the dissonance between the increasing 'intelligence' of the brains and the increasing ridiculousness of the captions, the initial progression of *who* to *whom* sets the framework for an initially logical progression, which devolves into the ensuing absurdism. The visual progression of the brain images paired with the evolution of the captions means the meme is intuitable.

9.1.2 *Expanding Brain* in transition to Stage Two

Figure 9.5: An elaborated and expanded example of Expanding Brain

Figure 9.5 features an instance of Expanding Brain which demonstrates a shift towards Stage Two. Although the full engagement of this instance is uncertain, it was found on *Know Your Meme* indicating a spread beyond Reddit. The meme has changes to its form, distancing it from its origin point, although it still strongly resembles the iteration from Figure 9.4 and is modelled on the same format, both in form and meaning. The meaning is still tightly tied to the text, especially as this instance makes use of additional panels to draw out its point. As opposed to the example in Figure 9.4, which begins with an initial caption followed by a single logical progression and then two steps of ridiculous development, the example in Figure 9.5 provides a similar set up, but then differs. The starting caption proceeds into a second caption, which debatably is an improvement, but then proceeds to devolve across four subsequent captions, each more ridiculous than the one before it. The final caption is somewhat self-referential and brings the meme to an absurdist conclusion. While the graphical panels on the right side make the progression more evocative and humorous, it is ultimately the text that provides the majority of the discursive power. The increasingly silly captions, especially with the addition of extra narrative levels with the bonus panels, serve as the primary driver of meaning for this iteration. The most notable change to the meme is the graphical addition of extra panels, indicating a looser adherence to the meme template, indicative of Stage Two. However, the added panels, while an obvious deviation from the template, serve to elaborate the consistent meaning of the meme, rather than upend it. This expansion is an organic extension to the base meme and the entirety of the base template image is present and unobscured. As such, the type of graphical change is indicative of Stage Two, rather than the strict continuity of form in Stage One. The meaning of the meme is however highly consistent with Stage One, again offering a seemingly increasing scale of sophistication while ultimately presenting the opposite. Therefore, the meme leans more towards Stage One in terms of continuity of meaning. In terms of intuitability, the meme is still relatively easy to parse with minimal background knowledge, remaining consistent with Stages One and Two. Much as with the example in Figure 9.4, the progression of captions can be understood as relevant to one another, and being presented alongside the images implies they are connected to the text as well. Perhaps even more so that the previous example, this expanded version is easier to intuit as there is more of a build up to the absurdism, rather than a shift in only the latter half of the meme.

9.1.3 *Expanding Brain* in Stage Two

Figure 9.6: A truncated version of Expanding Brain featuring a more literal interpretation of the meme's meaning

The example in Figure 9.6 demonstrates an iteration of Expanding Brain that has distinctly left Stage One. The engagement of this specific instance is unknown, but its content—discussing the classic work *Frankenstein*—appeals to a wider audience than a niche meme. However, the appeal is still limited by those familiar with the work. This instance is more distant from the origin, with both alterations to the template and a broader interpretation of the meme's meaning beyond absurdism. The locus of meaning has shifted, with the image driving meaning as per the standard for Stage Two. A viewer of this instance is forced to rely on the images and tiered format to derive meaning, as the first and third captions are identical and therefore at a surface reading are unable to be distinguished. The addition of the images allows the viewer to re-examine the captions and thus distinguish the subtext that divides them. The continuity of form has reduced, with this instance making use of only three panels. However, while there are visual changes, they are limited and thus still easily associated with the original template image. The truncated version also does not fundamentally alter the intended function of the meme; similarly to the expanded form in Figure 9.5, this abbreviated version performs the same sequential association, but with only three levels instead of four (or more). The disruption of continuity of meaning is what critically marks this instance as having transitioned into Stage Two. The meaning of the meme examines the popular conception of the name "Frankenstein." The first level represents the common association of the name with the 'monster' of the story constructed by Victor Frankenstein, the second represents the understanding that the name refers to the creator rather than his creation, and the third represents the realisation that Victor himself can be considered the true monster of

the story. As such, the meaning of the meme has been altered. The sequence of increased complexity is intact but the actual analysis at each stage is more insightful, rather than more ridiculous. However, while this instance is more literal than ludicrous, it is still a tongue-in-cheek play on the associations of the name Frankenstein—and the meaning of "monster"—and relies on the same framework. The impact of the meme is stronger given the normally ridiculous connotation of the meme format. Nevertheless, this is an example of the broadening of meaning in Stage Two, and specifically the beginning of semantic divergence, which can ultimately lead to polysemy. Despite these alterations to form and meaning, the meme is still intuitable and can be parsed by someone who is unfamiliar with the meme—although they would likely need to be familiar with *Frankenstein*. The image and text can still be understood without a great deal of background knowledge but is less readily intuitable than previous examples, given the repeated caption, subtextual analysis of the work in question, and the double meaning of the name "Frankenstein."

9.1.4 *Expanding Brain* in transition to Stage Three

Figure 9.7: A recreated version of Expanding Brain featuring substantive alterations to the template image

The iteration of Expanding Brain seen in Figure 9.7 represents the continued evolution of the meme, at the threshold between Stage Two and Stage Three. The full audience of this meme is unknown, but its parodical nature indicates a level of familiarity and conventionalisation beyond the emergent forms of Stage One. In terms of meaning, the instance adheres fairly closely to its earlier iterations, and thus closer to its origin, which marks the meme as more Stage Two than Stage Three. The locus of meaning has shifted here, with the concept of the Expanding Brain meme itself as the basis for semantic encoding. It is the idea of the meme, held in the common ground, that allows this recreated iteration to be understood, as its text alone is unclear, the images individually are nonspecific, and the overall format, while similar to the template, is distinct from it. The graphical revisions to the format are pronounced enough to distinguish it from Stage One and early Stage Two iterations. The complete replacement of the base template marks this instance as being on the verge of Stage Three if not in that Stage entirely, though the overall visual similarity of the recreated images to the originals makes the distinction less clear. Nevertheless, the number of changes to the form distances this instance from earlier versions, situating it in later Stage Two or early Stage Three. In terms of continuity of meaning, this instance demonstrates a different interpretation than previous examples. The tiered structure is intact, but the nature of the sequence itself sits between the previous examples. The ratcheting absurdism of each level is present, as it was in 'learning English' example in Figure 9.5, with each example featuring a more obtuse or difficult method of meme creation. However, the amount of skill needed to accomplish the task does realistically increase with each level, presenting a ranking that is more practical or nuanced, as with the 'Frankenstein' example from Figure 9.6. As such, this particular example blends the absurd with the literal, allowing for both readings and furthering the potential for polysemy. To this end, the meme could possibly be intuited, but is much less straightforward than earlier examples. The juxtaposition of the sequence of captions and sequence of images is intact, but its atypical formatting does obscure the more standardised style seen in previous examples. The potential dual interpretations could also contribute to a lack of comprehension if the viewer has not seen other versions of this meme. However, if one is familiar with the concept of Expanding Brain to begin with, it is readily understood. This ambiguous level of intuitability thus places the meme in either late Stage Two or early Stage Three.

Figure 9.8: A modified example of Expanding Brain that relies on omission of key graphical and textual features

The example of the meme seen in Figure 9.8 is firmly within Stage Three of my Life Cycle model. While the full engagement of this iteration of the meme is unclear, the meme was first encountered on the image sharing site Pinterest, a social media platform removed from Reddit and other common meme-sharing platforms. The variety of textual and graphical changes illustrate the distance between this instance and its origin, and its meaning is more similar to the previous Stage Two and Three examples than those for Stage One. The incomplete nature of the meme indicates that the locus of meaning has fully shifted to the concept of the meme itself, as only half of the normal text and images are present. This iteration is referencing the normal, full version of the meme, deriving meaning from that shared concept of the whole, while providing only part. The overall format of this meme is fairly consistent with the base template, but large sections have been deliberately left blank, creating an incomplete image. Only two of the normally four images and captions are present, further distinguishing it from more complete examples, such as those in Figure 9.5 and Figure 9.6. The meaning of this iteration represents the further divergence and polysemy of the meme. Although gradual reduction of discursive elements, culminating in two blank squares, could be considered an increase in absurdism, it is more clearly a sequence of increased complexity and requires more thought to be understood. This comprehension is also aided by

pre-existing exposure to the meme or knowledge of its historical progression. Rather than the ridiculousness of the early iteration from Figure 9.4, this version is more literal, with each level relating an actual progression in intelligence and complexity. As such, the meaning of the meme has come full circle, with both the ironic and unironic meanings existing simultaneously—even potentially within the same iteration. The incompleteness of this iteration also links to the intuitability of the meme. The omissions, paired with conventionalised knowledge of the meme format, leads a viewer through a series of inferences, allowing the final blank level to be understood. The levels echo in a way my concept of locus of meaning, as the first layer describes the basic understanding as relying on both text and image, then next level as relying on text (as in my Stage One), the third as relying only on the image (as in my Stage Two), and the final level as needing neither image nor text (as in my Stage Three). This inferential process means that a viewer *must* intuit the meaning this instance, as it is not spelled out for them; however, since the inference requires an understanding of the meme format to begin with, someone unfamiliar with the meme format would find the meme highly challenging if not impossible to parse, unable to fill in the blank spaces in the same way someone well-versed with the meme would.

9.2 The *Distracted Boyfriend* Meme

Figure 9.9: The template image for the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme

The second example meme which will be analysed at each stage of the Life Cycle model is *Distracted Boyfriend*, the template image of which can be seen in Figure 9.9. The meme was derived from a stock photo originally taken by Antonio Guillem. The earliest examples of the meme came from private Facebook groups in early 2017, before later

spreading to Reddit, Twitter, and other platforms in the summer and autumn of that year. The original stock image shows a man (the eponymous "boyfriend") walking down a street holding hands with a woman, presumably his romantic partner ("girlfriend"). A different woman passes them, and the man turns to stare and whistle at the passing woman, to which the first woman reacts negatively. Subsequent memes began labelling the three parties—the boyfriend, girlfriend, and other woman—representing an analogous relationship. The exact nature of this relationship can vary, but there is a constant meaning of preference, choice, temptation, or dissatisfaction.[301] These meanings were echoed by both my focus group members and my survey participants, and further details of the latter can be seen in Figure 9.10. Often the meme references wanting the ultimately worse or less responsible of two options, or dismissing what one already has for something else, comparable in many ways with the usage of "Left Exit 12" as discussed in Section 7.6 .
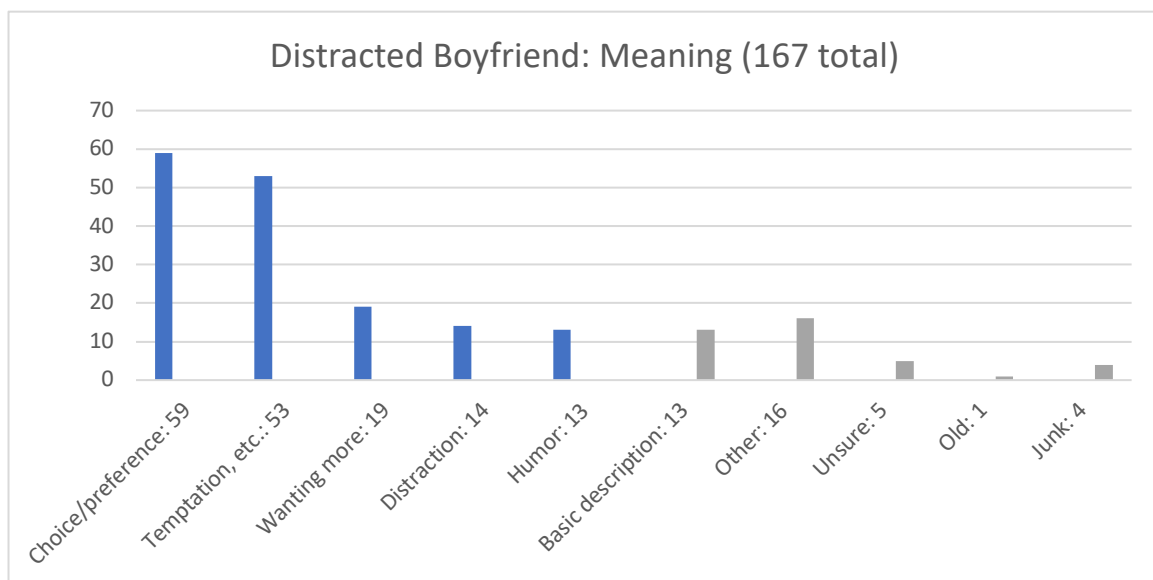

Figure 9.10: Survey data for the meaning of Distracted Boyfriend

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[301] Don [No surname given], "Distracted Boyfriend," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend.
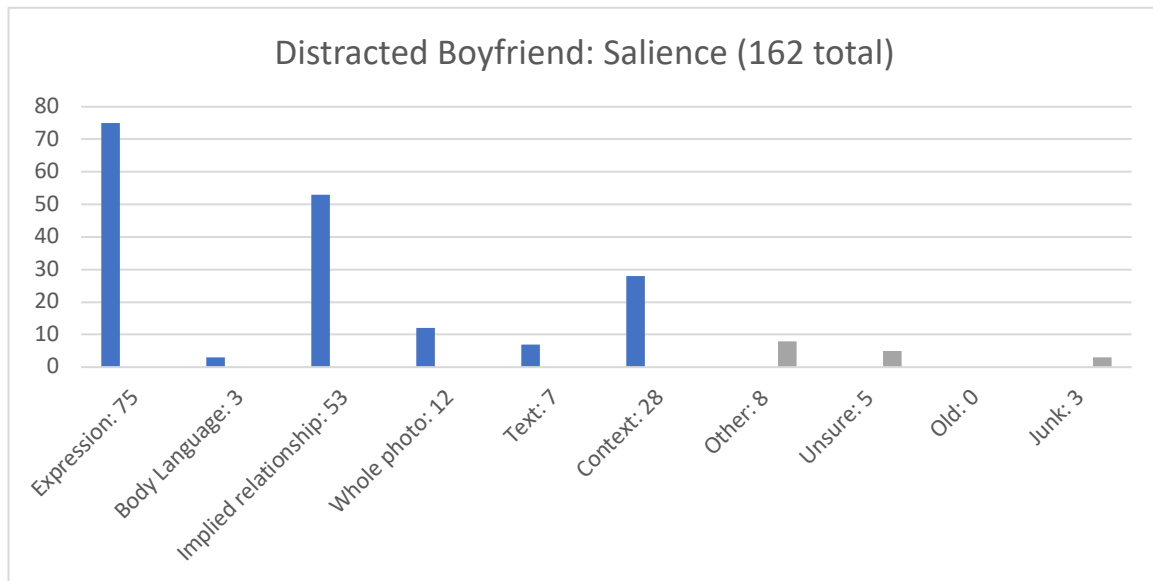
Figure 9.11: Survey responses about the source of meaning for Distracted Boyfriend
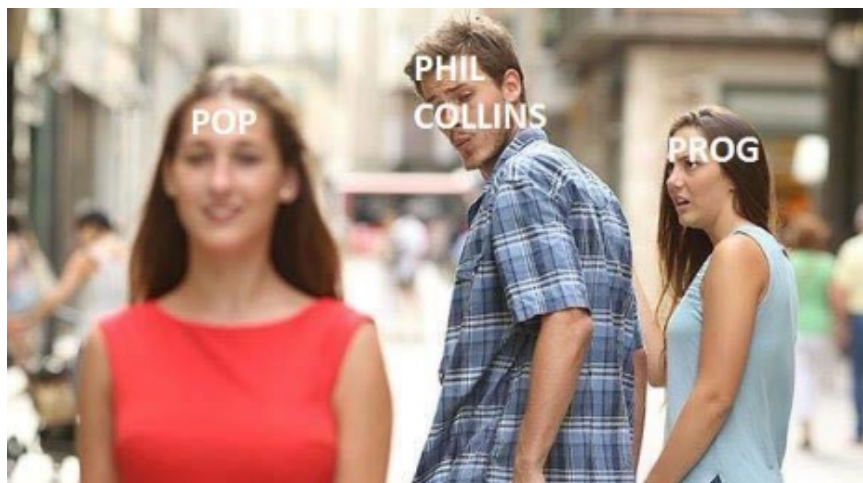
9.2.1 *Distracted Boyfriend* in Stage One

Figure 9.12: An early example of the Distracted Boyfriend meme

The example of *Distracted Boyfriend* featured in Figure 9.12 is one of the first iterations of the meme. In early 2017, this version of the meme was shared among a Turkish private Facebook group dedicated to fans of the progressive rock genre of music. The meme describes the shift in style of the musician Phil Collins away from his more progressive beginnings towards a mainstream pop sound.[302] The Facebook group itself is an insular community of practice, having both a strong central focus and a relatively limited network of members, fitting well within Stage One. As one of the earliest examples of the meme, this

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[302] Ibid.

iteration is highly tied to the origin—the creator was inspired by usage of the image by similar groups and emulated their style with a high level of fidelity. Since at this point the image had received very little usage outside of a few Facebook groups, the locus of meaning remained with the text, allowing the early adopters to tailor the evocative elements of the image to a specific meaning suited to their community of practice. This early usage also cemented the format of the image macro itself, utilising the stock photo in full, with textual additions overlaid on the three characters. The meaning here, denoting the evolution of a musician's preferred genre, demonstrates the semantic elements of preference, temptation, and neglecting what one has for something new. Although some knowledge of the identity and history of Phil Collins would be helpful in appreciating the full message of the meme, the general message is relatively clear from the meme itself and is readily intuitable. Furthermore, since the image had yet to receive much use at the time of this iteration's creation, viewers would have had to parse the meme to understand its meaning.

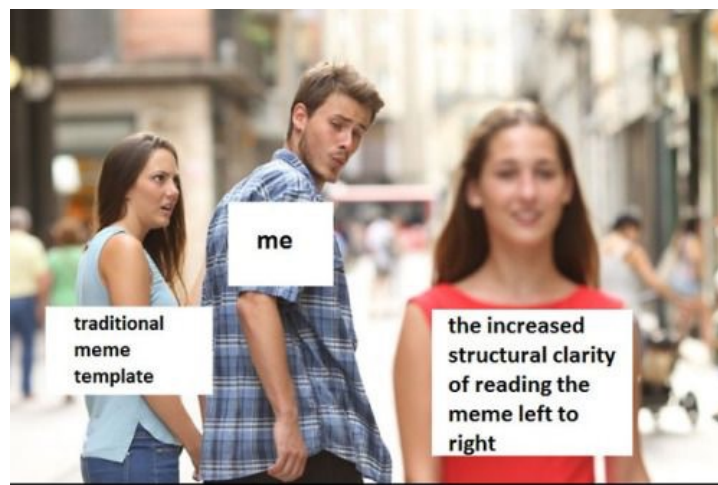### 9.2.2 *Distracted Boyfriend* in transition to Stage Two

Figure 9.13: A version of Distracted Boyfriend with minimal graphical alterations

Use of the stock photo spread out from the private Facebook groups over the first months of 2017, with a few postings on Instagram and other sites. However, the meme did not become viral until the end of the summer when its popularity resurged, spreading across Reddit and other platforms. During this interim period, the meme began to conventionalise its meaning and form. The example in Figure 9.13 challenges some of these conventions, although it is still closely tied to the origin point of the meme. Its parody of the typical format is a graphical change that directly references the source image and its early usage. The locus

of meaning remains with the text, as while the alterations to the image are important to create the full effect of the meme, the captions are what solidifies and most clearly expresses the meaning conveyed by the mirrored image. Without the text, the change to the image would be noticeable but semantically unclear. It is only with the additional text, which directly addresses this mirroring of the image, that the full message becomes clear. Although the image has been altered by this mirroring process, the edit is relatively minor and does not obstruct or alter the iconic and salient elements of the photo. As such, it pushes but does not break the strict continuity of form found in Stage One, leaning towards Stage Two. The meaning is highly contiguous however, emulating the same message of preference and temptation as the previous example in Figure 9.12. A level of familiarity with this meme format is helpful for understanding the meme; being entirely unfamiliar could lead to confusion, as one would be unaware that the image is normally presented in the other direction. Nevertheless, the meme is still straightforward to intuit, and the more explicit message conveyed in the captions allows one to infer that the image has been flipped and therefore would normally be presented in a different format.

9.2.3 *Distracted Boyfriend* in Stage Two

Figure 9.14: A version of Distracted Boyfriend with more extensive graphical alterations

In August 2017, the meme had fully spread to Reddit, particularly the forum r/MemeEconomy. Though instances had appeared on other platforms, the majority of new iterations were clustered in this particular subreddit. As the primary focus of this subreddit is the sharing of memes, the framework of a CofP still applies, though it has broadened from the earlier private groups with a narrow focus to a larger audience with the shared enterprise of

exchanging memes more generally. This concentration of activity led to numerous new iterations created by members of r/MemeEconomy, each building on previous examples.[303] As such, subsequent iterations in the vein of the example in Figure 9.14 mimicked the form and meaning of those that had preceded them on that subreddit. Though these iterations were nevertheless still similar to the earliest examples of the meme found on the private Facebook groups, the link to the meme's origin had become second-hand. This degree of separation allowed for greater innovation in form and meaning. The locus of meaning for this iteration is a clear example of Stage Two, with the encoding of meaning shifting from the text to the image. The transition is particularly apparent in this example, as the meme lacks any text, instead opting to 'label' the three parties in the template with superimposed images. With only graphical elements remaining, meaning must reside within them (or external knowledge, as in Stage Three) as there is no explicit textual elements to fall back on. Despite the layering of additional images onto the base template in lieu of text, this iteration still features the same template image without any major graphical changes. The background image is still largely visible, and thus most of the iconic elements remain intact, such as the face of the girlfriend and the held hands. Notably, the face of the boyfriend has been entirely obscured by the cropped image of a cat's head. The boyfriend's very salient expression is one of the key indicators of meaning (see Figure 9.11), though in this case the feline face provides some surrogate expressiveness that can be interpreted in lieu of the boyfriend's evocative expression. The overall graphical changes are much more significant than the previous examples, clearly demarcating this as beyond Stage One in terms of continuity of form, though as most of the image is intact, it suggests Stage Two rather than the abstraction of Stage Three. While the graphical changes are more dramatic, the semantic shifts are more subtle. The meme suggests that the cat cropped into the image is more interested in a simple cardboard box than an elaborate system of platforms such as the one superimposed on the girlfriend. This continues the same theme of preference and choosing a potentially less appropriate option. However, this presents a broader, more generalised meaning than the specific meanings of earlier examples. Rather than attributing the decision maker as a specific person (Figure 9.12) or the creator of the iteration (Figure 9.13), the fulcrum of the meme is instead an unidentified cat. Furthermore, the cat is not indicated to be a specific cat, but any cat, a metonymic stand-in for cats as a collective. This more far-reaching application of the

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[303] Ibid.

meme is a subtle, but important, indication of the semantic broadening of Stage Two. The graphical additions and absence of text have further effects on the intuitability of the meme. The aforementioned obstruction of some of the iconic elements makes the meme potentially more difficult to parse, though the majority of the image is still visible and the added elements provide iconic features themselves. Without any prior knowledge the meme, one would perhaps struggle to immediately intuit the meaning of this iteration, though enough semantic elements are provided, which along with shared cultural knowledge (i.e., awareness of cats and their fondness for boxes) provides sufficient cues to allow an unfamiliar viewer to comprehend this meme. With even a small level of familiarity with the Distracted Boyfriend meme, it becomes readily understandable, as most of the elements of the template image are intact and the overall meaning is consistent with the conventionalised scope of the meme. This move away from easy comprehension towards learned familiarity while still retaining a level of intuitability is highly representative of memes in Stage Two.

9.2.4 *Distracted Boyfriend* in transition to Stage Three

Figure 9.15: A version of Distracted Boyfriend featuring an entirely different template image

In the latter half of 2017 and into 2018, *Distracted Boyfriend* became more popular and prolific. The meme not only reached across multiple platforms, but entered into more mainstream discourse and engagement. There were multiple other images that were found to bear similarity to the meme's template, such as a still from the 1922 Charlie Chaplin film *Pay Day*. Originally appearing on r/pics on Reddit, the image spread to Twitter and other social

media sites before being picked up by news outlets such as the BBC.[304] Iterations of the meme featuring the still from *Pay Day* were shared and collected across a range of sites, including the example seen in Figure 9.15. This new generation of iterations based off of the Charlie Chaplin image retained some visual similarity to the previous template image, but it was nevertheless wholly replaced, and new iterations were based on this new template image rather than the original one. As such, the link to the meme's origin, while present, was now several degrees removed, with the source of emulation as the early Chaplin iterations, rather than the Stage One or Stage Two iterations featuring the original stock photo. Such distance from the earlier forms moves this example steadily towards Stage Three. While the broad meaning has not changed significantly, the locus of meaning has once again started to shift. Both the image and the text are significant factors in providing meaning in this example. The image has some iconic elements, which mirror its stock photo progenitor, and the text makes the self-referential nature of the meme more distinct. However, the meaning ultimately derives from the original image and its conventionalised form as seen in the previous examples—an image that is entirely absent. As such, this example sits at the crossroads between the locus of meaning as image and locus of meaning as concept. This change to the source of meaning being a concept exterior to the iteration itself is the final phase of semantic encoding found in Stage Three, and its transition is evident here. To return again to the example of *goodbye* in the previous chapter, the parallel is again present. Just as *goodbye* was phonetically and subsequently semantically reduced, this meme has been graphically altered and its meaning subsequently narrowed to metatext. The constituent parts that link to the original form are still present, but the form itself has become different enough, distinct enough, that it is approaching the point where it is no longer recognisable as the same meme. This graphical overhaul of the template is also indicative of Stage Three. The entire template image has been replaced, as opposed to smaller edits or additions seen in Figure 9.13 and Figure 9.14. There are distinct spatial and gestural parallels between the stock photo and the movie still, which provides a small amount of visual connection, but the form itself has very little overall continuity. Furthermore, while the arrangement of the figures in the picture is particularly reminiscent of the stock photo, the Chaplin image lacks the highly salient expressiveness of the original figures that is crucial to the meaning of the meme. This meaning, however, has remained largely intact. Despite the shift towards Stage Three, this

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[304] Tom Gerken, "Charlie Chaplin: The Original Distracted Boyfriend," BBC News, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-44451519.

meme has retained much of its semantic stability. Although the meme has become more generalised, it has not undergone the polysemy of *Expanding Brain* as seen in the first half of this chapter. The example here indicates a shift in preference as before, with a choice for something new versus something one already has, though it leans more into the absurdism of the meme's format. The transition to Stage Three intuitability is also present here, as the iteration could potentially be parsed by someone unfamiliar with the meme, with some comprehension of a tension between modern and older memes. However, to fully appreciate and understand the message conveyed, one must be familiar with the fact that this image is not the original template, as well as the format of said template, which served as the inspiration (compare the 1990s version of First World Problems as seen in Section 8.6). Both require outside knowledge or previous familiarity and thus make this iteration of the meme difficult, if not impossible, to intuit based on an isolated viewing alone.
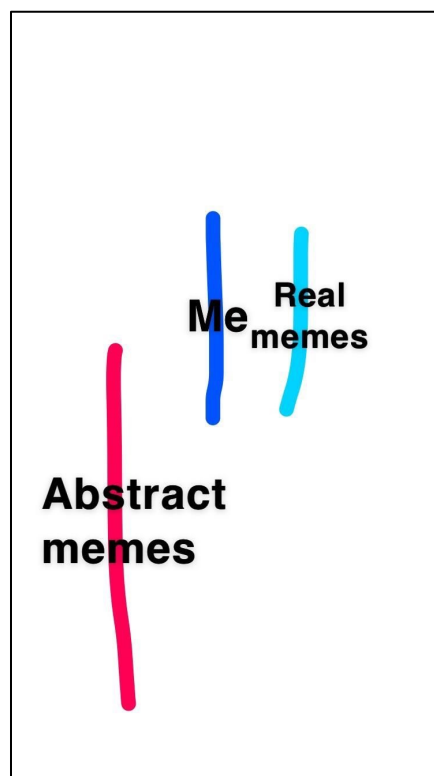
9.2.5 *Distracted Boyfriend* in Stage Three

Figure 9.16: A wholly abstracted version of the Distracted Boyfriend meme

The *Distracted Boyfriend* meme maintained popularity and currency well into 2018. The meme was the subject of a piece by the online magazine *Slate* in 2018, which pointed to this meme as one of the foremost examples of the "object labelling" type of memes that

emerged in the later 2010s as opposed to the previously prominent top and bottom captions.[305] Its popularity has been particularly enduring compared to many of its contemporaries, with only one of my survey respondents in 2019 suggesting that the meme was old or obsolete (see Figure 9.10). The meme was also readily recognised by almost all of my focus group participants; though one suggested that the meme had been overused and "done to death," it still retained a level of relevance and currency in early 2020, years after its inception. By that point, the engagement of the meme had fully progressed into Stage Three, with iterations of the meme spread across various social media networks and news outlets, as illustrated by the *Slate* article. The example above in Figure 9.16 was discovered on the image-sharing site Pinterest. The exact provenance could not be identified, as the source linked to Pinterest post had been deleted. However, its reach to this tertiary social media site is indicative of its spread beyond isolated groups or meme-sharing forums. *Distracted Boyfriend* has reached a high level of online saturation—and by extent has entrenched itself as a prominent part of digital culture. This particular example is another one that omits the original template image. While it takes visual inspiration from the stock photo, it was created in the same vein as the Chaplin variant above, being an extra degree removed from the earliest examples of the meme. The locus of meaning has now certainly shifted away from the image to the concept of the meme itself. Text captions are still present, though taken in isolation they provide very little semantic information in relationship to one another or the image. The image itself lacks iconic elements, having stripped the original image down to its barest form. The lines and colours recall the original image but do not supply the same information. As such, it is the *idea* of the original image that holds the semantic power for this meme, rather than the image itself. The locus of meaning has therefore fully shifted from the graphical to the conceptual, cementing this meme as being in Stage Three. This complete replacement of the photo represents a lack of continuity of form, as with the Chaplin variant. However, this abstract form goes a step further: rather than substituting the original photo with a visually similar one, this iteration uses a simple drawing of three coloured lines with no additional details (comparable to the graphically reduced symbols produced at the end of Garrod and Fay's experiments). Although the spatial relationship and basic colour scheme have been preserved, providing a thread of continuity, this iteration lacks any iconic elements, or even any visual indication that the lines are meant to represent people. The

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[305] Heather Schwedel, "The Distracted Boyfriend Was Onto Something," Slate, 2018.

meaning is still relatively contiguous, presenting a matter of preference or choice, though this iteration leans fully into the more abstract, absurdist interpretations of the meme, even more so than the Chaplin variant. Its self-referential nature echoes the example in Figure 9.13, though again escalated to a higher degree, making a generalisation about memes themselves. Lastly, as described, the meme presents little semantic information within the instance itself. The image provides little to no iconic information and the text provides only basic descriptions that establishes nothing about the relationship between the captions or the captions and the image. Therefore, this meme is all but impossible to be understood by someone unfamiliar with the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme. Some of my focus group participants were able to immediately recognise this example as an iteration of *Distracted Boyfriend*, although many of them struggled to parse it, even though they were familiar with the meme and the abstract form was presented directly after a series of other iterations of the same meme using the standard and Chaplin images. Thus, this meme is not intuitable by those unfamiliar with the previous iterations of the meme, and as such represents the ultimate evolution of a meme in Stage Three.

9.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided two examples of memes that have gone through all three stages of my proposed Life Cycle model. *Expanding Brain* and *Distracted Boyfriend* are different types of memes, and each had different paths through the three Stages of their life cycle. Nevertheless, they both represent how memes can travel from their creation through conventionalisation and ultimately abstraction. They also each represent different aspects of how memes can change from Stage to Stage, such as *Expanding Brain* reaching a state of polysemy in Stage Three, while *Distracted Boyfriend* remained more semantically consistent throughout. The relative stability of *Distracted Boyfriend*'s meaning also exemplifies how a meme can proceed through the Stages and ultimately arrive at Stage Three, even if it does not develop maximally along all six criteria. Critically, their development and the provided examples demonstrate the fluidity of meme evolution. Although my model is meant to help qualify and quantify the overall progression of memes, not all memes—if any—perfectly conform to it. Instead, my model is meant to aid the examination and classification of memes along a spectrum, rather than a strict taxonomy. My Stages and their criteria allow for easier understanding of memes as they develop, but the above examples serve to demonstrate that

the delineations of Stages are an aide and that memes can move across some or all of these boundaries. However, given this great fluidity of form, meaning, and progression, I believe my model helps to better explain how memes develop. It allows others to compare earlier, simpler versions of memes to the later, more complex counterparts, and see how one has led to the other. As with the evolution of symbol systems, or Garrod and Fay's experiments, my life cycle model allows for the recognition of memes not as static symbols, or solitary artifacts at any given point, but a continuum—an item in constant iteration and development. And it is in this way that I believe memes are truly akin to language. They have elements of morphology, syntax, and semantics that, just as with other forms of communication, are constantly being reused, remixed, and reimagined.

Chapter 10: Conclusions and Looking Forward

The preceding chapters have documented the process of my doctoral research. Over the past several years, I have sought to define internet memes from a linguistic perspective, and I believe that my Life Cycle model is a substantive step forward in that regard. This chapter will review the influences and outcomes of my model, as well as elaborate on some avenues of iteration and expansion. In addition to such possibilities for further refining my model, I will also discuss adjacent avenues of research regarding memes and linguistics. Lastly, I will reflect on my course of research, consider the future of memes, and draw this thesis to a close.

10.1 The Future of the Life Cycle Model

Overall, I am very satisfied with my model of meme development. Although all research is inherently limited in scope, the Life Cycle model was designed with this in mind. As discussed previously, my model is not intended to be an all-encompassing construct that will perfectly dictate the evolution of every internet meme. Rather, I have put forward a framework drawing on established theory and my collected data that documents memes within the scope laid out by my research design. It incorporates a broad range of characteristics and can be easily expanded and amended as necessary.

10.1.1 Benefits of the Life Cycle

Memes are malleable, capable of both stagnation and innovation, just as words, phrases, and even languages are. In the words of one of my focus group members, "the beast cannot be tamed." This flexibility of memes is one of their foremost traits, and I sought to emulate this quality in my model. The three-phase, six-criterion structure of is much more cohesive and applicable than a single definition, either rigid or vague. All of the characteristics described and even the stages themselves serve as a spectrum of development, rather than immutable barriers. Memes can move between stages but are not required to. A given meme can exemplify certain qualities that are more developed than others, but this does not derail its progression, merely indicate its situation along different scales. After all, linguistic study is meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and I believe my model embodies this idea. I have created a framework that is meant to be agile and adaptable, which

represents the prototypical progression of memes as observed in lieu of a strictly enforced rubric. Rather than the binary progression that I developed early on in my research, the Life Cycle consists of three stages, ranging from early iteration to later abstraction, with allocated space to examine the transition between beginning and 'end.'

The six criteria that delineate each stage are also inherently flexible. Although each element serves as a benchmark for progression, the changes that each undergoes are their own continuum, which have been abstracted into separate stages. As demonstrated in Chapter 9, these different traits can exist in a state of flux or a state of transition. Taken together, the six criteria also engage with a meme holistically. Though a prototypical meme will undergo the changes of the three stages in tandem, the multi-criteria design is intended to allow for progression along some elements while lacking development in others, or development occurring for different characteristics at different times. As demonstrated by several of my examples, a meme can exhibit overall qualities of a given stage, aligned with the majority of characteristics but not necessarily all of them. Thus, a meme such as Grumpy Cat can exhibit highly advanced engagement and locus of meaning, while remaining less developed in terms of continuity of meaning or relation to origin. Distracted Boyfriend, one of the memes in my pool that has undergone drastic levels of abstraction along most criteria (as exemplified in Figure 9.16), never experienced the prominent polysemy or contronymy of other Stage Three memes. However, despite this one element that has lagged behind the others, my model still allows it to be clearly classified as Stage Three given its overall development. Therefore, while my model is not a perfect match for all memes, I believe that its flexibility allows it to interact productively with most cases.

Furthermore, my Life Cycle model serves as an example of a successful analysis of internet memes from a linguistic perspective. As discussed throughout this paper, particularly in Chapter 2, there is a relatively small pool of linguistic studies on the topic. I have therefore drawn on a variety of sources, both linguistic and non-linguistic, in order to create an effective framework. I believe that this interdisciplinarity has strengthened my approach, allowing for the linguistic elements to apply more efficiently in new contexts. Additionally, I hope that my paper will serve as another example in the growing study of memes, proof that linguistic conventions and theories can and should be applied to the analysis of internet memes. Rather than view my model as an end point, I suggest that it is more aptly a starting point. I hope that other linguists, and academics in other fields, will be able to utilise my model and its theoretical underpinnings to aid their own research. I look forward to other

researchers testing the bounds of my model and applying it in new contexts. I also hope that the linguistic connections to memes that I have outlined throughout this work—communities of practice, ostension, iconicity, and metaphor—can be utilised as a jumping off point for further linguistic studies of this topic.

10.1.2 Expansions to the Life Cycle

Although I am proud of my model as it stands, I am aware of its limitations, and that of my overall research design. Any research is bound by certain limitations of scope and scale. In particular, I will address three main limits of my research, ones which I hope to address in the future and use to expand the applicability of my model. These three areas are: the number of analysed memes, the emphasis on discursive memes, and the focus on image macros.

My research had necessary limits of scope, particularly when it came to the selection of memes that I engaged with. Memes come in a multitude of forms, formats, and functions, and although I wanted my model to be as inclusive as possible, it was inevitable that it would not be able to address every meme, or even every type of meme. As of this writing, Know Your Meme has over 4,800 'confirmed' entries, all of which have been verified by its editors. The total number of submissions to the site exceeds 30,000.[306] As such, my pool of 30 memes is only a cross section, and I have still been able to engage with memes beyond my main pool, such as Drakeposting and the Scribe. This smaller sample covers a broad spectrum of memes, in terms of history, development, and style, and given the selection methods outlined in Chapter 4, it represents some of the most prevalent and influential memes available at the time. I believe that these 30 memes provided a great deal of insight into the overarching nature of internet memes, but I am still eager to see my model applied to a wider pool of examples. The constant production of new memes also provides even more fodder for analysis. There are several memes that have emerged in the period since I established my meme pool that I believe would provide excellent data for supporting and expanding my model, such as *Woman Yelling at a Cat* and *Me Explaining to My Mom*. The former (Figure 10.1 and Figure 10.2) features the combination of two memes early in their development in

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[306] "Meme Database," Know Your Meme, 2022, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes.

use by smaller groups that were merged and became a new meme unto itself on Twitter.[307] The latter (Figure 10.3) also featured the fusion of two different pieces of media, though the meme itself began and largely remained on Twitter.[308] Repetition of my research process or a similar approach featuring different and more recent memes could provide new insights into memes and their peculiarities.

Figure 10.1: The template for the "Woman Yelling at a Cat" meme which gained popularity in 2019. The meme was created by combining two existing reaction images, the left from a still of a 2011 episode of The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, *and the right from a photo of a cat next to a salad used on Tumblr in 2018.*
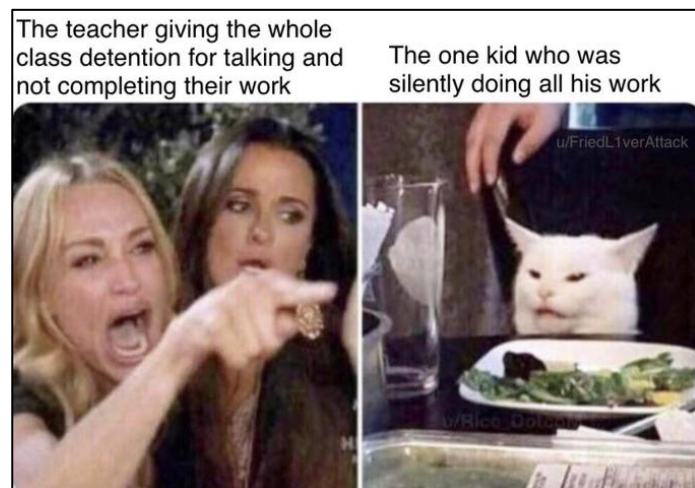
Figure 10.2: An example of the "Woman Yelling at a Cat" meme, featuring its theme of conflict or contradicting opinions

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[307] Philipp [No surname given], "Woman Yelling at a Cat," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat.

[308] Matt [No surname given], "Me Explaining to My Mom," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/me-explaining-to-my-mom.

One such peculiar type of meme was touched upon briefly in my research, those that lack a direct meaning, such as those designed to provoke (see Section 5.1.6). Although I recognised the existence of such units, they stood largely outside of my intended scope. I contend that memes, as I have defined them, are primarily discursive units. Even when increasingly abstract or metatextual, there is still text, or at least subtext, to be interpreted. Memes convey a message of some sort, beyond the literal interpretation of the image and/or text, that distinguishes them from other online media. Whereas other units such as emojis can convey very basic emotional states, memes as I have described them embody more complex or nuanced information, relating a story, experience, or relationship. There are other digital units, sometimes called memes, which do not convey such intricate messages. These convey little to no meaning on their own, but merely exist to elicit some manner of reaction. They may ultimately relate an emotional state onto the viewer, but it is not a discursive message sent from the creator.

A primary example of this is *rickrolling*, the act of tricking another internet user into clicking a seemingly innocuous or relevant link, only for them to be redirected to the music video of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up". This practice has since come to display a number of memetic qualities, with graphical elements from the music video or lyrics from the song featuring in more traditional image macros (see Figure 10.4).[309] The concept of "Never Gonna Give You Up" as a prank to be played on others has become conventionalised

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[309] Dubs, "Rickroll," *Know Your Meme*.

and thus can interact with other memes in a similar manner as many Stage Three memes. However, the video and song, while established as the medium of this prank, does not *itself* contain the intended humour or semantic information. It is the bait and switch, the unexpected turn of events, that provided the original meaning, and now the learned cultural context perpetuates this meaning. Yet, as opposed to the ostensive and iconic origins of image macros described throughout this paper, the Rick Astley song has no inherent tie to the ritualised 'meme.' Is then rickrolling a meme? Not as I have defined the word, though it has been well documented by KYM and originates from the 4chan practices that gave rise to many prominent memes (such as Rage characters). As stated above, the shared *concept* of the practice meets many of the criteria I have outlined, in particular Stage Three locus of meaning, but it does not behave in the discursive manner that underpins how I have described memes and the mode of meaning construction. Further work needs to be done to reconcile such a meme with my model. This further level of abstraction, featuring self-reference, reflexivity, and meta-narrative, can also appear in more 'standard' memes that have evolved well into Stage Three. In continuing my research into this area, I can continue to iterate my model, expanding or redefining aspects of the Abstraction phase (even perhaps introducing an additional stage) which encompasses these topics.
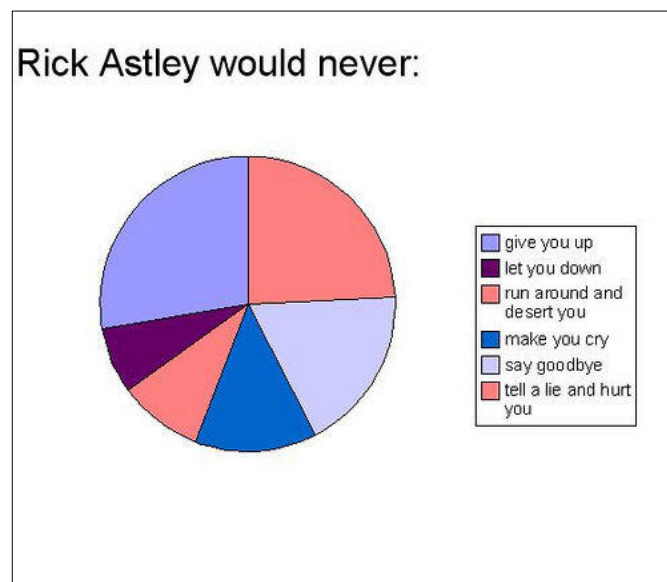

Figure 10.4: An example of the lyrics of "Never Gonna Give You Up" being used in an image macro format. The humour relies on the shared association of the song with the practice of rickrolling, rather than iconic or ostensive cues.

These issues were not entirely beyond my research, however. There exists a related subset of memes called "surreal memes," which purposely subvert conventions of both

mainstream memes and normal communication. These memes feature nonstandard images and text, often heavily edited, in order to produce an absurdist piece.[310] While these memes undermine many of my previously established meme characteristics, they do so in direct opposition to these conventions—in other words, they can only exist due to the more standardised nature of other memes. Such 'anti-memes' speak to an almost post-structuralist level of discourse. They do not make use of iconic and metaphorical processes, though this is by deliberate design. The abandonment of intuitability alongside strict continuities of form and meaning allows for this subgroup of memes to be more readily defined.

Figure 10.5: The "E" meme

Surreal memes were not the focus of my research, but are nevertheless an intriguing branch of meme development. One such meme, *Lord Marquaad E*—or more simply *"E"*, as it will be referred to moving forward—was included in my Current meme pool. Although I considered excluding the meme due to its absurdist nature, I retained it in the pool for the sake of diversity in meme styles and in the hopes that it would provide interesting data. The meme is pictured in Figure 10.5 in its complete form; it does not usually have alternate captions, only a large letter E. The image itself is also unusual for a number of reasons, including that it is an edited fusion of three different pictures. One of my survey participants called this meme the "Ultimate crossover," while another explained more specifically:

> The image itself references a number of pop culture references, often already associated with memes, namely: the famous Youtuber Markiplier, the hair of

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[310] Adam [No surname given], "Surreal Memes," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/surreal-memes.

Lord Farquaad from Shrek (Shrek being essentially a 'meme god'), and a scene from the legal trials of Mark Zuckerberg. The grainy but otherwise well edited image, is brought together by the large bold E, who's purpose seems impossible to determine but somehow is still significant.
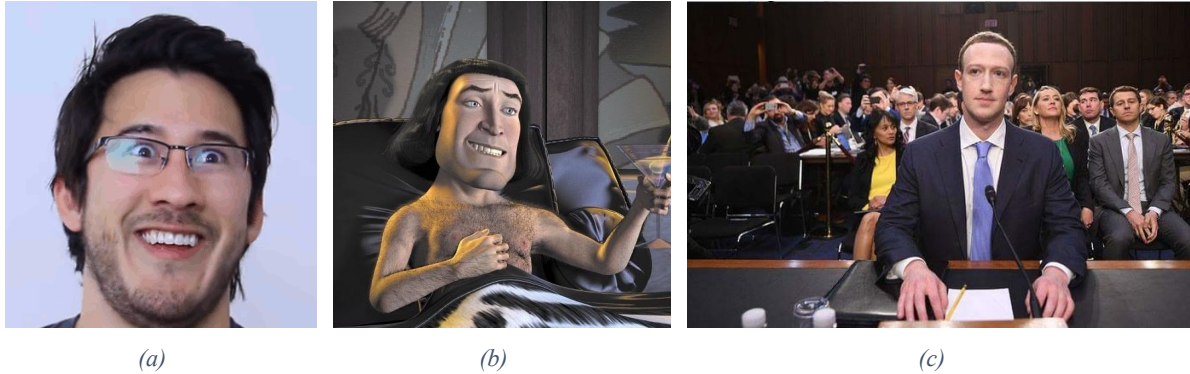

Figure 10.6: Elements that contributed towards the final "E" meme—(a) the YouTube personality Markiplier, (b) the Shrek *character Lord Farquaad, and (c) Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg testifying before the US Congress*

The figures described in the quotation can be seen in Figure 10.6. The first step in the meme's development was the editing of Markiplier's face onto Farquaad's body, as seen in Figure 10.7a. This image was then put through a "deep fried" visual filter and the letter E was added, as seen in Figure 10.7b. Later iterations transplanted the combined head, letter, and visual filter onto the Zuckerberg photo.[311]

Figure 10.7: Formative stages of the "E" meme

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[311] Adam [No surname given], "Lord Marquaad E," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lord-marquaad-e.

In both its earlier and later forms, the meme served as a representation of absurdist humour. What exactly did the meme itself mean? The chart in Figure 10.8 provides an overview, but the following quotes from my respondents provide a number of views on the meme:

- "This is an odd one - but certainly a meme. It doesn't mean anything, there is no meaning of the letter 'E', or even the picture. It is absurd in a humorous way"
- "This meme well describes the abstract nature of modern memes, being literally a parody in itself on absurd humour behind these new generations of memes."
- "An abstract form of comedy used simply for dumb humor"
- "It's a pointless meme to prove memes can be pointless."
- "It exist[s] to poke fun about 'Millennial Humor' and the very nature of memes themselves."
- "One of the later stages memes that doesn't really represent anything but stands as some sort of 'inside joke' in meme culture"
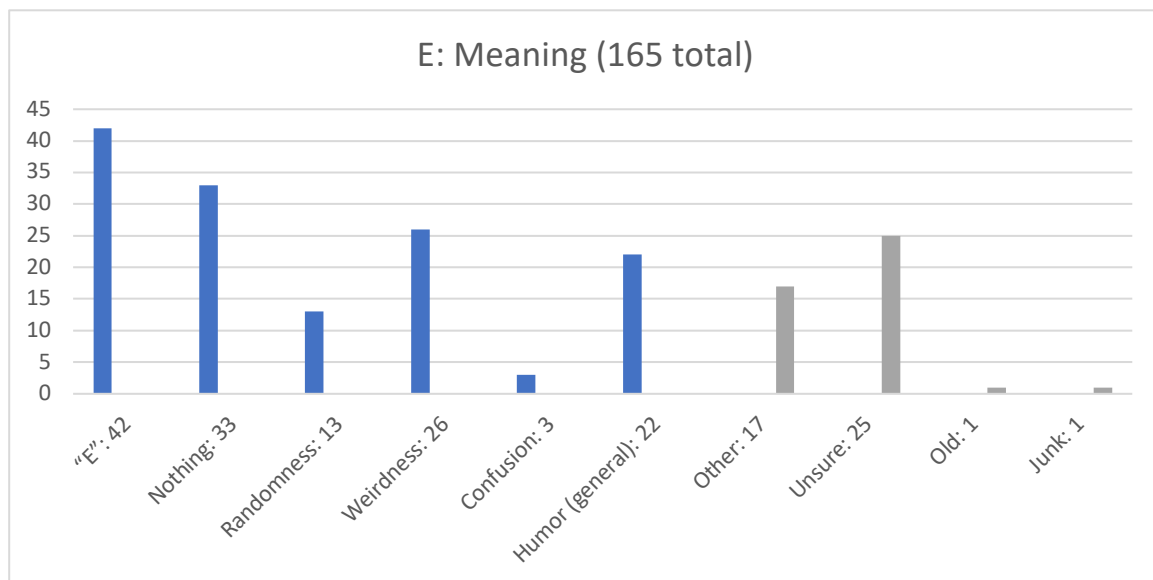
Figure 10.8: Survey data for the meaning of "E"

Thus, it would seem that "E" is a meme without a meaning, though that in itself *is* its meaning. This meme was even mixed with other memes to demonstrate its absurdity, as seen

in Figure 10.9. Among my respondents, there was a full spectrum of reactions to this meme, ranging from laudatory to inflammatory.

- "It was used to show how weird modern memes are and it's great"
- "It simply means nothing and that is what makes it funny"
- "I have no idea, it's one of the most cryptic and pointless memes of the past three years"
- "I don't know, this one is the worst type of meme."
- "NOOOO I HATE THIS"

So, if the meme itself has such an opaque meaning, how is it understood? The 'Unsure' category was notably high for the answers to the meaning of this meme, presumably owing to its lack of intuitability. According to one respondent, "I have never seen this before in my life and it seems weird and scary to me". It is a shared understanding, beyond inference, that allows the meme to function. One respondent stated, "It's all context and you need to understand where it comes from to be funny," while another claimed, "It doesn't make sense if you didn't experience it when it happened". Such a meme apparently without meaning—but paradoxically meaningful due to this lack—presents further challenges to my theoretical model. However, as stated above, the fact that this meme exists purely in opposition to the discursive processes I have described demonstrates the validity of my model, at least for the majority of cases.

Figure 10.9: Two self-referential memes which mock the "E" meme

Despite their post-structuralist leanings, surreal memes are largely based on standard image macro conventions. Image macros are one of the most common types of memes and

feature the core elements of what I contend make memes what they are—the process of juxtaposition, ostension, metaphor—and that is why I chose to focus on them in my research. However, memes are not bound purely within this framework. The pairing of graphical and textual allows for more complex messages and thus greater analysis. Yet there are memes, especially developed iterations, which do not rely on any text, or rely on the *absence* text (see Figure 9.8 in the previous chapter). Conversely, there was a point of contention in my focus groups about whether memes could be entirely textual, whether words and phrases derived from online discourse could be counted as memes themselves. There was no consensus on this point, though it does provide a potential avenue for future research, one with a distinctly linguistic focus. At that point, however, the division between memes and netspeak becomes increasingly thin.

Beyond images and text, there are a variety of other mediums that can engage with internet memes. Another insight from my focus groups and continued research was the emergence of audio- and video-based memes. This is not entirely new, as exemplified by rickrolling discussed above (though this again raises the issue of whether this practice truly qualifies as a meme). Nevertheless, such new formats are becoming more prevalent, and can even be paired together to create new discursive combinations. This has been enabled by changes in technology and online platforms, which has always shaped how memes were created and shared. The earliest memes of 4chan were moulded by the technical limitations of its forum-based format, leading to the simpler or indirect methods of creation, such as Rage comics. The later proliferation of meme generators and image editing programs allowed for the more 'standard' image macro format featuring the Impact font and top-and-bottom captions. Although not replaced entirely, this has been largely overtaken by the use of upper captions, easily accomplished using Facebook or Twitter (e.g., Figure 10.3). This change in technology was noted by my focus group members, which has become especially prevalent with TikTok. This video-sharing platform has become the source of many new memes, often ones that use specific video or audio cues, and sometimes both together. Although utilising entirely different media than the image macros I have documented in this research, they nevertheless appear to operate using similar principles of iconicity, metaphor, ostension, and conventionalisation. They are also not entirely disconnected from other forms of memes, as elements from TikTok memes can subsequently appear in other mediums, such as image macros.

Figure 10.10: An image of the pallbearers from the "Coffin Dance" meme before they begin the funeral procession.

Figure 10.11: An example of the "Coffin Dance" meme merged into an image macro format. Note the use of the same images in the first panel as seen in Figure 10.10 above.

Figure 10.12: A further example of the "Coffin Dance" meme reinterpreted in an image macro format. This iteration features a more straightforward upper caption and paired picture. As opposed to Figure 10.11, this version completely replaces the original image, recreating the characters in a medieval art style, tied to the caption which references the Black Death. Despite the complete recreation of the graphical elements, there are still clear visual similarities in the figures' clothing and posture. Such graphical recreation is similar to that seen in other examples, such as the Chaplin version of the Distracted Boyfriend discussed in Section 9.2.4.

One such example is the *Coffin Dance* meme, which featured a group of Ghanaian pallbearers (see Figure 10.10) dancing at a funeral service paired with a separate electronic dance song. These combined features are appended onto the end of videos featuring stupid or dangerous behaviour, which results in assumed injury or death. Before this is shown, the video cuts to the coffin being carried, implying a continuity between the two videos. The music begins during the original video before reaching its crescendo at the transition to the funeral procession, serving as a further link between the two videos and providing a tangible clue during the first video that it will culminate in the added video of the pallbearers.[312] This juxtaposition of different video clips with added audio cues is thus rather distinct from the image macros described in my research. However, this meme does demonstrate a number of similar properties, including continuities of form and meaning and a similar iconic and metaphoric process. In this case, it seems that the video of the pallbearers is akin to the macro's image template, providing the shared discursive elements, while the paired lead-in video operates similarly to the text of a macro, narrowing its focus to a given context. Also, as with rickrolling, the visual elements of the video have been utilised in non-video formats, appearing in more traditional image macros (see Figures Figure 10.11 and Figure 10.12). As such, I believe that video and audio memes could be adapted to my model, despite not being included at present. They do not represent an entirely new unit of communication, merely a further evolution of the same principles. However, additional research will need to be done to accommodate these newer formats, and literature which deals specifically with different mediums will need to be consulted. Drawing in further sources from broader academic perspectives should also aid in refining my model and making it more rigorous.

The image macro has somewhat reduced prominence in communities such as TikTok that focus on video-based content, and its format may be shifting given the increased importance of more 'mainstream' platforms such as Twitter. Nevertheless, it is still present and active, as demonstrated by the examples above. I believe that its simple and accessible construction, along with its mutual compatibility with other mediums, will allow the image macro to persist as a meme format.

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[312] JustOrdinaryMan [username], "Coffin Dance," Know Your Meme, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/coffin-dance-dancing-pallbearers.

10.2 The Future of Linguistic Meme Research

As mentioned in the previous section, I hope that my research will serve as a launching point for further work on the subject of internet memes. I intend to use this basis as groundwork for my own future linguistic studies and am excited to see further linguistic and non-linguistic research that build upon it. In this section, I will review several potential areas of academic interest that I plan to pursue or hope others will investigate.

10.2.1 Revising the Life Cycle Model

Firstly, I plan to iterate and expand upon my model, as previewed in the last section. Much like memes themselves, I believe that my model can benefit from iteration. Although I engaged with a wide variety of sources as part of my research, there are still a number of excellent sources, and even academic fields, that could help improve my model. Integrating further literature from media studies, sociology, and other social sciences could add new dimensions to my model, with analyses of communicative acts, language regulation, and social capital becoming new tools to aid in my own work. I intend to further test and refine my model, engaging with new memes and new meme formats. Repeating a similar process to the one outlined in this paper, but with memes from more recent years, would no doubt provide many fascinating insights that could make my model more robust. A detailed analysis of memes such as *Woman Yelling at a Cat* could help ensure that my model remains up to date regarding image macro formats. Engaging with non-discursive memes could also be a great benefit, allowing me to reconcile memes such as *"E"* with the framework of meaning construction I have laid out. The theme of such metatextual meanings emerged in my research, as discussed primarily in Chapter 8. However, further pursuing this element may assist in bringing more 'meaningless' or provocative memes into line with my theoretical approach. Furthermore, I am eager to investigate broader meme formats, particularly video and audio memes such as those found on TikTok. Having come to prominence in the years since my research began, I look forward to engaging with this new platform, its emergent formats and differing conventionalisation process—and ultimately determining just how different this process is (or is not) in comparison. I am sure there are even newer formats and newer media that are being developed as this is being written, which will need to be analysed and examined in turn.

10.2.2 Other Approaches to Memes

Though beyond my own expertise, I am also excited by the possibilities of academic approaches from other disciplines that have less connection with my own work. Of particular interest is the ongoing efforts to use algorithms, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other automated methods to collate, parse, and categorise memes as they are used online. Once tools of this nature are improved and made widely available, I am confident that they will be a boon to researchers such as myself, opening up new methods and thus new avenues of research into the topic of internet memes.

Furthermore, after reviewing my research and the creation of my model, I have become interested in situating memes within the broader contexts of language and meaning construction. Internet memes as they exist today are a novel communicative unit, a by-product of a digital ecosystem which could not exist without the internet. However, I believe that memes are ultimately the newest form of an ongoing communicative apparatus.

There were shared cultural touchstones before the internet age. Though lacking the graphical cues and abstraction of developed image macros, English has seen numerous allusions and cultural references which have become entrenched in the language. Classical writings, the Bible, and even the works of Shakespeare have served as shared points of reference, weaving names and phrases into both the vernacular and more academic contexts. Terms such as *herculean* or *draconian* may not have the multimodality of an internet meme, but they share many similar characteristics when analysed in terms of engagement, relation to origin, continuity of meaning, and intuitability.

In an increasingly connected and commodified culture, shared points of reference became more diffuse and more varied in forms. Historical imagery has been imitated by contemporaries as well as those that came later. A prominent example are World War I recruitment posters, as seen in Figure 10.13. The left example is the more widely recognised image of "Uncle Sam" from American propaganda efforts. This was however an imitation of the right image, featuring Lord Kitchener, which was used by the British.[313] These posters are a familiar sight to many, and the copying of their aesthetic in novel contexts is markedly similar to my own analysis of continuity of form and continuity of meaning, as seen in Figure 10.14. The remixing of visual elements and aesthetics here is highly reminiscent of memes,

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[313] Kelly Knauer, "I Want You: The Story Behind the Iconic Recruitment Poster," Time, 2017, https://time.com/4725856/uncle-sam-poster-history/.

along with the pairing of an image with text. These three modern examples also demonstrate differing levels of fidelity to the original. The left keeps the face and hand of Uncle Sam while replacing his clothes. The middle is a more thorough recreation rather than an edit, but maintains the colour scheme and overall aesthetic of the original. The right is a full recreation utilising imagery from the referenced movie, with continuity only in the pointing gesture of the figure and the attached catchphrase. To further establish the parallel with internet memes, under the umbrella of *Uncle Sam's "I Want You" Poster*, this precursor to the meme even has an entry *on* the Know Your Meme website.[314]
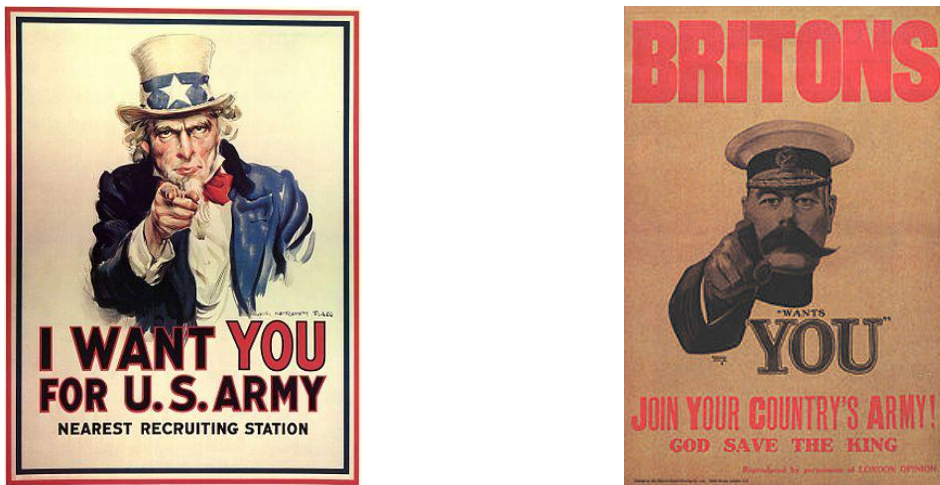
Figure 10.13: Two recruitment posters from WWI featuring similar iconic elements
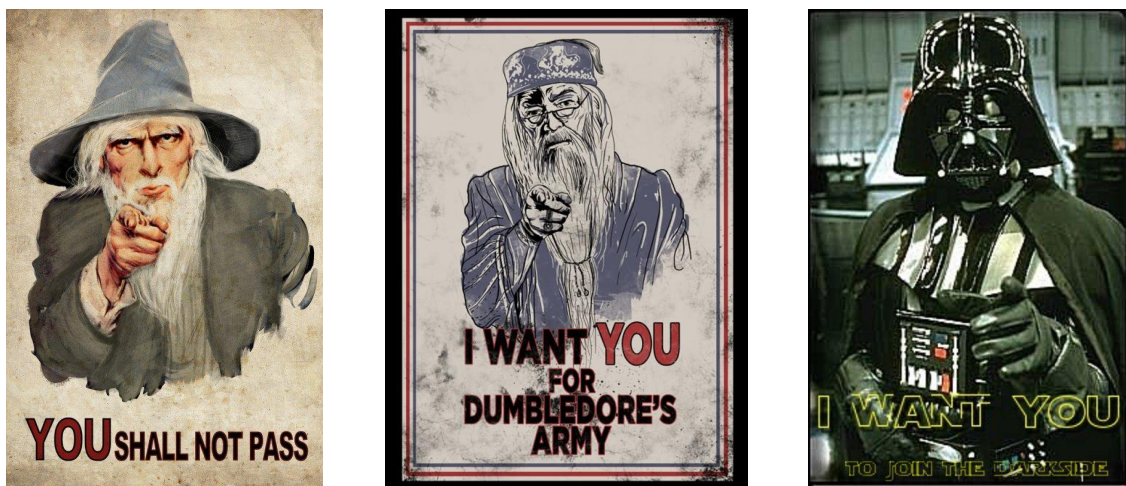
Figure 10.14: Three more modern recreations of the "I Want You" design, featuring characters from The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, *and* Star Wars, *respectively*

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[314] Shabbyjazz [username], "Uncle Sam's 'I Want You' Poster," Know Your Meme, 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/uncle-sams-i-want-you-poster.

Such enshrining of meaning is not limited to visuals, but also appears in music. Similarly to the audio-focused memes discussed above, I would contend that several musical stings have developed meme-like qualities with their repeated use and shared cultural association. "The Murder," the score to the infamous shower scene in the movie *Psycho* (1960), features a repeated shrill screech of violins. This "inventive use of strings became a cliche for cinematic horror,"[315] and by extension popular culture as a whole. Another such example is the main theme of *Jaws* (1975). Its steadily building, two-note structure has become widely recognisable and often parodied, a "sonic cultural shorthand to signal danger or menace."[316]

Such shared cultural artefacts, reminiscent in some ways of Dawkins' original conception of the meme, seem to be the forerunners of internet memes. They rely on similar processes of widespread engagement, iteration, and conventionalisation. However, while the technological and social limits of the past led to a smaller pool of such artefacts rising to prominence, the internet has provided an environment for rapid outreach and networking. Thus, internet memes represent a distilled and accelerated version of this process. This link between broader cultural associations and the emergence of internet memes is fascinating, and a subject that I hope to pursue in future work. Such research could not only better ground memes within wider theories of human social life and communication, but also shed additional light on the discursive processes of these earlier meme-like artefacts. Of particular interest is that while these predecessors to the modern internet meme are comparatively few in number, the most prominent have endured across decades, whereas the lifespan of some internet memes can run mere weeks or months. The exact nature of this tension between the fecundity and longevity of these units can only be speculated upon, but it does prompt questions about the ultimate longevity of individual memes, and the internet meme as an entity unto itself.

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[315] Robert Siegel, "Bernard Herrmann's Score to 'Psycho,'" NPR, 2000, https://www.npr.org/2000/10/30/1113215/bernard-herrmanns-score-to-psycho?t=1651081168953.
[316] Robbie MacKay, "45 Years on, the 'Jaws' Theme Manipulates Our Emotions to Inspire Terror," The Conversation, 2020, https://theconversation.com/45-years-on-the-jaws-theme-manipulates-our-emotions-to-inspire-terror-136462.

10.3 Final Conclusions

This paper began with "Darmok," a television episode that told a story within a story—or more accurately, told of a people who relate to the world by reference to their own stories. Despite being a science fiction show set in a distant time and place, it demonstrated the importance of culture, history, and mythology in shaping language. The episode represented how the way we communicate can be both incredibly simple and yet incredibly complex, how language presents not only what we want, but who we are and where we have been.

In a much nearer time and place, internet memes represent the communicative nature of today. My Life Cycle model draws together aspects of memetics, communications, and linguistics to present a framework by which memes can be readily understood and defined, in spite of their fluid and editable nature. Yet perhaps those qualities tie into the spirit of those who create and use memes, and the new digital environments they populate with said memes. Furthermore, such adaptability and flexibility are central aspects of language itself. Communication between individuals is not truly mindreading—it is inherently imprecise and incomplete, but the use of shared knowledge and conventions allows us to narrow that gap of comprehension between speakers. Just as the language of "Darmok" provided emotional resonance for its people via allusion and metaphor, so too are memes used to emphasise and relate layered thoughts and feelings that cannot be simply conveyed through text. I am not certain if any of the internet memes I have described in this paper will last beyond a generation, but they nevertheless speak to something older, to the drive to give meaning to ancient stories of heroes and monsters.

Memes may not be modern myths, but they can carry similar discursive weight—or even aesthetic, as seen in Figure 10.15. This art, shared on Twitter, was created by an internet user as a parody of memes, utilising the language and style of translating ancient symbols. In a manner reminiscent of the fully abstracted version of Distracted Boyfriend in Figure 9.16, this art features stylised reductions of nine meme templates into "glyphs" along with esoteric-sounding versions of their titles. (A reference table with the original meme templates can be found in Figure 10.16.) The fact that such a piece of art can be understood demonstrates that memes utilise the same methods of allusion and metaphor as such ancient symbols, providing meaning out of disparate pieces that coalesce into an intelligible whole.
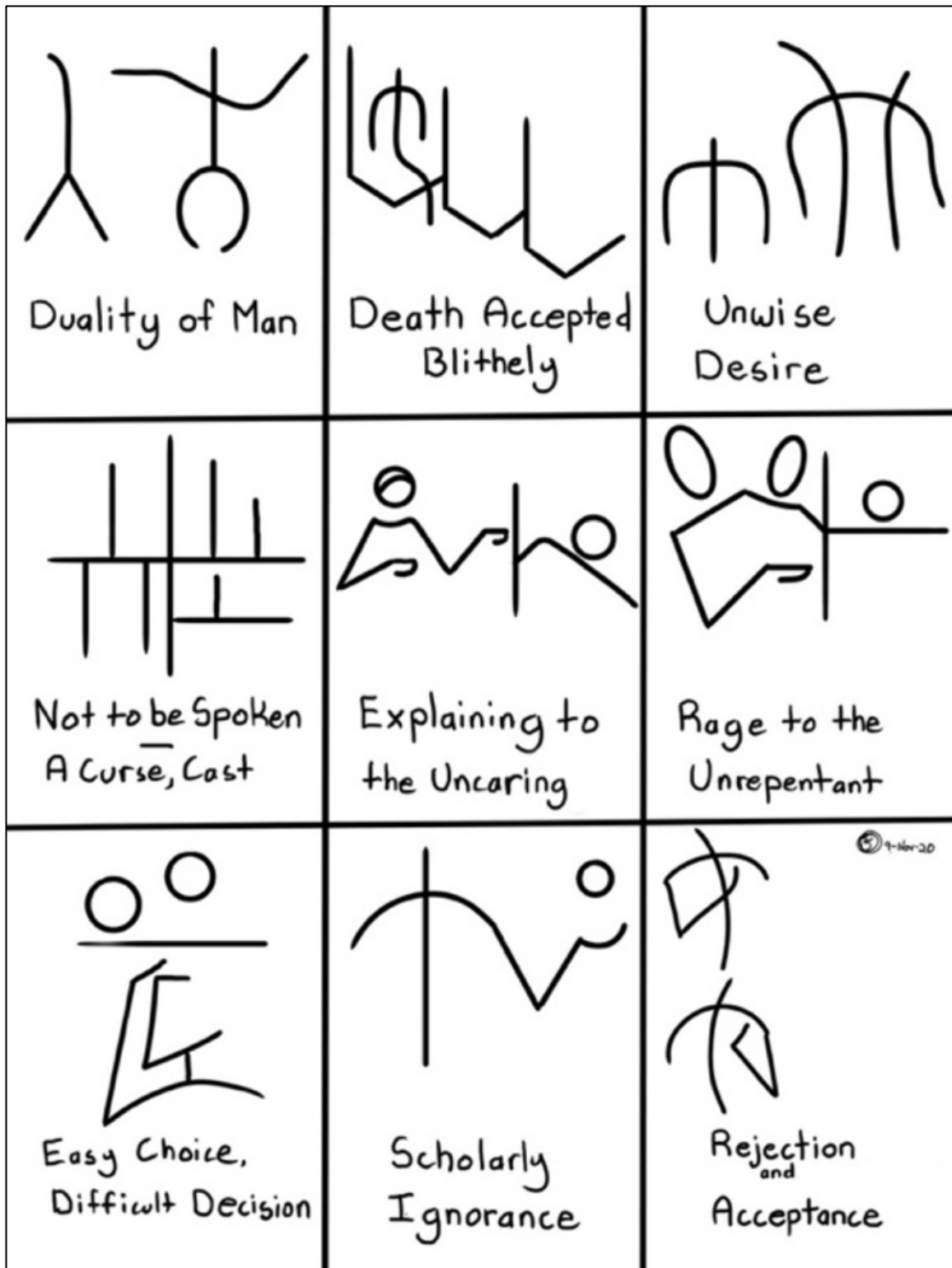
Figure 10.15: A piece of artwork described as "A collection of common glyphs of the poorly understood Memeorite civilization of the Second Silicon Age. Memeorite glyphs possess multiple conflicting interpretations and a complexity of meaning impossible to capture in a few short words. These are rough translations only."[317]

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[317] Beachfox [username], "A Collection of Common Glyphs of the Poorly Understood Memeorite Civilization of the Second Silicon Age," Twitter, 2020, https://twitter.com/beach_fox/status/1325668490431246336?s=20.

Figure 10.16: A matrix presenting the source memes depicted as 'glyphs' in Figure 10.15, several of which have featured in this chapter or elsewhere in this paper. They include, in order:

"Virgin vs Chad," "Ralph in Danger," "Distracted Boyfriend,"
"Loss," "Me Explaining to My Mom," "Woman Yelling at a Cat,"
"Daily Struggle/Two Buttons," "Is This A Pigeon," and "Drakeposting"

The glyph-style drawings preserve important visual elements of the original images, while the titles play on the names of the memes and their conventionalised associations.

Memes are an important method of communication, one worthy of further linguistic study. They are not a language unto themselves, but they exemplify key aspects of language, as I have demonstrated throughout this paper. My Life Cycle model provides a linguistic structure by which to define and examine memes, as well as demonstrates the ways in which memes challenge established linguistic conventions. Memes are an emergent phenomenon, but one which draws on pre-existing fundamentals of communication. They provide an opportunity to study these fundamentals in a different environment, one which is in some ways isolated and accelerated compared to normal languages. This speed, however, ensures that memes are continuously changing, as ultimately all languages do. Elusive, emotive, and evocative, these seemingly basic snippets of digital humour hide surprising discursive depths. Will memes endure? I cannot say if the likes of Grumpy Cat, Scumbag Steve, or the Distracted Boyfriend will live on in internet language or fade into obscurity. I am confident, though, that memes—perhaps with new forms, or under new names—are not going anywhere.

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Appendix I: Recruitment Materials

Please see the below materials I used to recruit research participants for my survey and focus groups, as well as the information and consent sheets, as per my ethical approval.

Survey Materials

Reddit Post:

Survey Information Sheet (linked from Reddit post):

UNIVERSITY *of* STIRLING
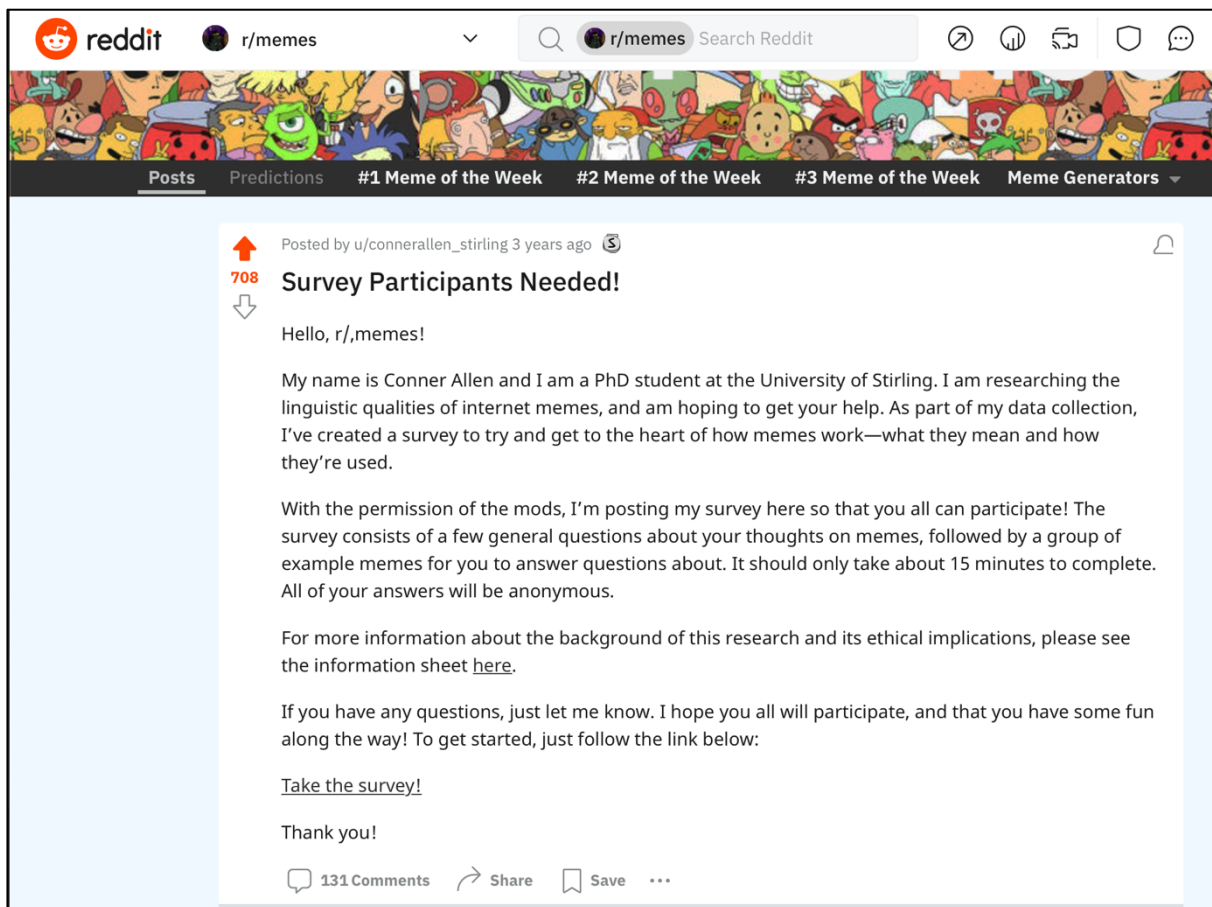
Survey Participant Information Sheet

1. **Research Project Title**

   Memeing and Meaning: An Examination of Internet Memes as Linguistic Units

2. **Background, aims of project**

   We would like to invite you to take part in a survey about internet memes. This will be a crucial part of the research undertaken by Conner Allen as part of his PhD. This researcher is examining the structure and meaning of internet memes, and is seeking participants to provide insight into this new field. The objective of this study is to better understand the structure and usage of internet memes, and to establish whether they behave similarly to language.

3. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

   You have been invited to participate because, as a member of r/memes, you are someone who is knowledgeable or at least interested in memes. All participants will need to be 18 years or older and native English speakers.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

   No, you do not have to take part, and there will be no negative repercussions if you do not participate. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time prior to submitting your results, which be anonymized.

   A full consent form will precede the survey. You will be asked to electronically indicate your consent, and may print the consent page for your records.

5. **What will happen if I take part?**

   You will be presented with some initial questions about your thoughts on memes and how they are used. Then, you will be presented with a series of memes and asked about their meaning and

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usage. The survey should take about 30-60 minutes to complete, depending on how much detail you would like to provide.

6. **Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

There are no foreseeable risks in taking part in this research.

7. **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you from taking part in this research. However, you will be providing crucial data to the researcher—and hopefully will have a bit of fun along the way!

8. **Legal basis for processing personal data**

As part of the project we will be recording personal data relating to you. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest/the official authority of the University.

9. **What happens to the data I provide?**

No personal or contact information will be collected. You will have the option to indicate your age and gender. As such, your data will be entirely anonymous. The answers you provide will be used as part of a pool of data to analyse the meanings and uses of memes, and inform the researcher's conclusions. Only the researcher and his supervisors will have access to the anonymized data.

If any specific reference is made to your data, you will be referred to by a pseudonym, as a member of r/memes.

The survey data will be kept for 10 years and then will be securely destroyed or archived as per University of Stirling guidelines.

Note: confidentiality will only be breached where required by law, as in cases of child protection, abuse, criminality, etc.

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10. Will the research be published?

The research will be published in the University of Stirling Library, and may be subsequently published in academic journals. You will not be identifiable in any reports or publications.

The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publically accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

11. Who has reviewed this research project?

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Stirling [General University Ethics Panel.

12. Your rights

You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time without giving reasons and without consequences to you. You also have the right to object to us processing relevant personal data however, please note that once the data are being analysed and/or results published it may not be possible to remove your data from the study.

13. Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?

If you would like to discuss the research with someone, please contact the researcher and/or his supervisors:

Conner Allen, postgraduate researcher, c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk

or

Andrew Smith, Lecturer, andrew.smith@stir.ac.uk

Bethan Benwell, Senior Lecturer, b.m.benwell@stir.ac.uk

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Survey Welcome Screen:

The check box next to "I give my consent" was required to be manually selected before the "Next" button became usable. This was used in lieu of a physical consent form. The "Read More" button expanded the description, reiterating many details from the Information Sheet.

When "Read More" was selected:

Recruitment Poster:

Memeing and Meaning:
An Examination of Internet Memes as Linguistic Units

I DON'T ALWAYS PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

BUT WHEN I DO, IT'S ABOUT MEMES

memegenerator.net

This research is analyzing how the meanings of internet memes are constructed and change through use. Do you like memes? Would you be willing share your thoughts? Are you over 18 and a native English speaker?

This study is looking to recruit participants in Spring 2019.

You will participate in a small focus group where you will discuss a variety of different internet memes, what they mean to you, how you use them, and what you think about memes in general. The focus group will take approximately 2 hours, with the possibility of an additional, one-on-one interview if you are interested. There is no payment for taking part, but we should have a fun discussion!

If you are interested in participating or have any additional questions, please contact

Conner Allen, PhD Researcher in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, at
c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk

(Supervisors: Andrew Smith, andrew.smith@stir.ac.uk, and Bethan Benwell, b.m.benwell@stir.ac.uk)

This project has been ethically approved through the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel.
Ethics Approval Reference: [insert].

Meme Research needs you!
Contact Conner Allen at
c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk to help!

Meme Research needs you!
Contact Conner Allen at
c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk to help!

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c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk to help!

FG Information Sheet:

This was provided by email to individuals who contacted me about participating.

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Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

1. **Research Project Title**

   Memeing and Meaning: An Examination of Internet Memes as Linguistic Units

2. **Background and aims of project**

   We would like to invite you to take part in a focus group discussion about internet memes. This will be a crucial part of the research undertaken by Conner Allen as part of his PhD. This researcher is examining the structure and meaning of internet memes, and is seeking participants to provide insight into this new field. The objective of this study is to better understand the structure and usage of internet memes, and to establish whether they behave similarly to language.

3. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

   You have been invited because you are a student at the University of Stirling and are in the right age group for this research. All participants will need to be 18 years or older and native English speakers. No specific knowledge of memes is necessary, but any familiarity that you do have will be helpful.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

   No, you do not have to take part, and there will be no negative repercussions if you do not participate. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw your participation at any time without needing to explain and without penalty by advising the researchers of this decision. You can also withdraw your data within 1 year of the focus group.

   You will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

5. **What will happen if I take part?**

   You will be presented with some initial questions about your thoughts on memes and how they are used. Then, you will be presented with a series of memes and asked about their meaning and

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usage. You will be a part of a small group (four or five people in addition to the researcher) and will participate in an open discussion about these memes. The focus group will last approximately 2 hours and will take place in a classroom or study space on campus.

If you would like to contribute further, the researcher may ask for a follow-up interview after the focus group. This would be individual conversation about the material discussed in the focus group.

6. **Are there any potential risks in taking part?**

There are no foreseeable risks in taking part in this research.

7. **Are there any benefits in taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you from taking part in this research. However, you will be providing crucial data to the researcher—and hopefully will have a bit of fun along the way!

8. **Legal basis for processing personal data**

As part of the project we will be recording personal data relating to you. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest/the official authority of the University.

9. **What happens to the data I provide?**

Real names of participants will be omitted from the final report, subsequent publications, or presentations/teaching. The University of Stirling will be identified as the location of research, but no further detail will be included about participants other than their enrolment at Stirling.

All efforts will be made to have quotes or other data be as non-identifiable as possible. Direct quotations may be used in publications or presentations but will only be associated with a pseudonym. You may request a copy of any transcripts that are created in which you are quoted. Only the researcher and his supervisors will have access to your data.

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Your personal data will be kept for 10 years and then will be securely destroyed as per University of Stirling guidelines.

Note: confidentiality will only be breached where required by law, as in cases of child protection, abuse, criminality, etc.

10. Recorded media

The focus groups and interviews will be video recorded, so the researcher has the best and most complete record of the provided data. directions to capture all participants in the room. However, these videos will only be used to as a source of data for the researcher. The videos themselves will not be used in any publications or presentations, and will only be accessed by the researcher or his supervisors.

11. Will the research be published?

The research will be published in the University of Stirling Library, and may be subsequently published in academic journals. You will not be identifiable in any reports or publications.

The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publically accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

12. Who has reviewed this research project?

This project has been ethically approved via The University of Stirling [General University Ethics Panel.

13. Your rights

You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

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You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time without giving reasons and without

consequences to you. You also have the right to object to us processing relevant personal data

however, please note that once the data are being analysed and/or results published it may not

be possible to remove your data from the study.

14. **Who do I contact if I have concerns about this study or I wish to complain?**

If you would like to discuss the research with someone, please contact the researcher and/or his

supervisors:

Conner Allen, postgraduate researcher, c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk

or

Andrew Smith, Lecturer, andrew.smith@stir.ac.uk

Bethan Benwell, Senior Lecturer, b.m.benwell@stir.ac.uk

You have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues

with the Information Commissioner's Office (https://ico.org.uk/concerns/).

The University's Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any

questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to data.protection@stir.ac.uk in the

first instance.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

Thank you for your participation!

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FG Debrief and Consent Sheets:

These documents were provided to participants on the day of the focus group, and were reviewed and signed prior to the beginning of recording.

Version 1, October 2018

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Focus Group and Interview Consent Sheet (1 of 2)

Thank you for participating in this research project!

1. **Research Project Title**

   Memeing and Meaning: An Examination of Internet Memes as Linguistic Units

2. **Background, aims of project**

   The objective of this study is to better understand the structure and usage of internet memes, and to establish whether they behave similarly to language. Despite their novel means of production and rapid shifts in form and meaning, the researcher believes that memes nevertheless are governed by established processes of semantics and pragmatics. Memes represent a new field of semiotic and linguistic study, and the researcher hopes to illustrate the merit of such research and the great potential therein.

3. **Legal basis for processing personal data**

   As part of the project we collected personal data relating to you. This will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Under GDPR the legal basis for processing your personal data will be public interest/the official authority of the University.

4. **What happens to the data I provided?**

   All research participants will be given a pseudonym in transcripts and analysis. Participant identities will always be stored separately from the individuals' data, and this separation will carry over into reporting and publication. All files pertaining the research will be held on a password protected computer; the key linking participants to their pseudonyms will be kept in password protected folder in a separate digital location to the rest of the data. Real names of participants will be omitted from the final report, subsequent publications, or presentations/teaching. The

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University of Stirling will be identified as the location of research, but no further detail will be included about participants other than their enrolment at Stirling.

Every effort will be made to reduce the likelihood that participants will be identifiable in research publications. However, given the group setting of the focus groups, it is possible that other members of the same focus group will be able to recognize their fellow members. Also, given the constrained community of the University of Stirling, it is possible that other students or staff who are highly familiar with the participants may be able to identify them. Nevertheless, all efforts will be made to have quotes or other data be as non-identifiable as possible. Direct quotations may be used in publications or presentations but will only be associated with a pseudonym.

You may request a copy of any transcripts that are created in which you are quoted.

Your personal data will be kept for 10 years and then will be securely destroyed as per University of Stirling guidelines.

Note: confidentiality will only be breached where required by law, as in cases of child protection, abuse, criminality, etc.

5. **Will the research be published?**

   The research will be published in the University of Stirling Library, and may be subsequently published in academic journals. You will not be identifiable in any reports or publications.

   The University of Stirling is committed to making the outputs of research publically accessible and supports this commitment through our online open access repository STORRE. Unless funder/publisher requirements prevent us, this research will be publicly disseminated through our open access repository.

6. **Your rights**

   You have the right to request to see a copy of the information we hold about you and to request corrections or deletions of the information that is no longer required.

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You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time, including during the focus group or interview. If a request to withdraw is made within 1 year, your data will be removed from the research as much as possible. After this period, it may not be possible to remove your data from the study. While your data will not be used in any subsequent research or publications, if the report has been submitted or any publications have already been made, your data will not be able to be excluded.

7. **Contact Details**

Once again, I would like to thank you for your participation and remind you that if you have any questions about the research or any queries you wish to raise, please feel free to contact Conner Allen at email c.m.allen@stir.ac.uk / telephone 07414 711311.

You have the right to lodge a complaint against the University regarding data protection issues with the Information Commissioner's Office (https://ico.org.uk/concerns/).

The University's Data Protection Officer is Joanna Morrow, Deputy Secretary. If you have any questions relating to data protection these can be addressed to data.protection@stir.ac.uk in the first instance.

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Focus Group and Interview Consent Sheet (2 of 2)

Research Project Title: *Memeing and Meaning: An Examination of Internet Memes as Linguistic Units*

	Please initial box
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated [01/10/2018] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study and withdraw my data without giving a reason, and without any penalty, within 1 year. I understand that once results are published, it may not be possible to remove my data from the study.	
I understand that my responses will be anonymized (via a pseudonym) and I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my un-anonymised responses.	
I consent to being video recorded for the purposes of this research.	
I understand how this video will be used in research outputs. I am aware that I will not be named in any research outputs but I could be identified by people I know through the stories I tell.	
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication, referred to by a pseudonym.	
I agree that the researcher may contact me about a follow-up, individual interview about the topics discussed in the focus group. If I choose to participate, this sheet shall also serve as my consent.	
I agree for my personal data to be kept in a secure database so I can be contacted about future studies or use of my data.	
I agree to take part in this study.	

Name of Participant   **Signature:**

Date: Click here to enter a date

Name of Researcher   **Signature:**

Date: Click here to enter a date

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Appendix II: Meme Pool

Please find below the 30 memes that I featured in my data collection. All 30 were included in my survey, with each participant given a random selection of ten—five from each of the two subsets. Full charts for the three data points of name, meaning, and salience have also been included. Ten specific memes, again split evenly between the two subsets, were selected to feature in my focus group interviews; these are indicated by a dagger (†).
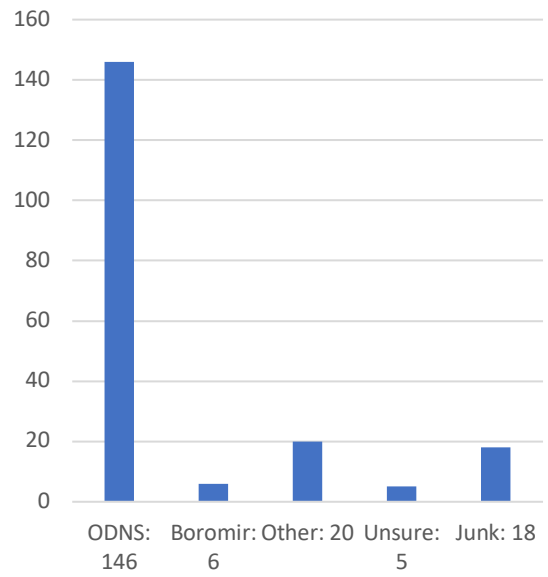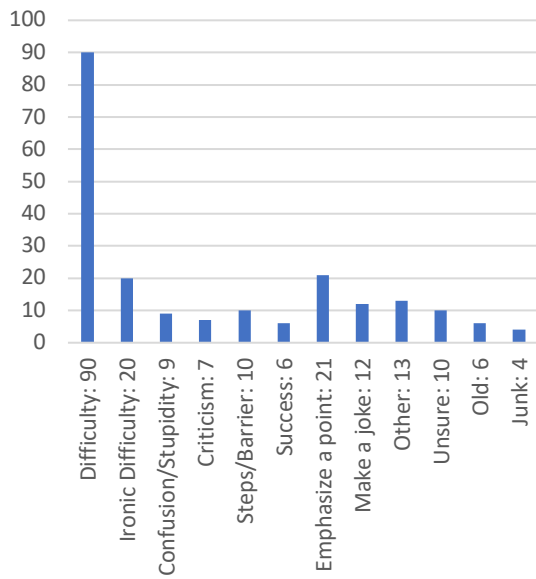
All Time popular pool

The Most Interesting Man in the World

Name (164 total)

MIMITW: 36, I don't always: 44, Dos Exxis: 24, Old Man: 17, Other: 11, Unsure: 21, Old: 9, Junk: 5

Meaning (158 total)

I don't always: 24, Confidence/badass: 14, Suaveness/Class: 22, Superiority: 18, Rebellion: 4, Making a point: 11, Hypocrisy/irony: 9, Self-deprecating: 16, Exaggeration: 21, Sarcasm: 4, Alcohol: 4, Other: 14, Unsure: 13, Old: 8, Junk: 9

Salience (156 total)

Posture: 27, Expression: 35, Style: 19, Text: 12, Source: 40, Context: 23, Whole image: 4, Other: 8, Unsure: 13, Old: 4, Junk: 6

One Does Not Simply[†]

Name (190 total)

Category	Value
ODNS: 146	146
Boromir: 6	6
Other: 20	20
Unsure: 5	5
Junk: 18	18

Meaning (186 total)

Category	Value
Difficulty: 90	90
Ironic Difficulty: 20	20
Confusion/Stupidity: 9	9
Criticism: 7	7
Steps/Barrier: 10	10
Success: 6	6
Emphasize a point: 21	21
Make a joke: 12	12
Other: 13	13
Unsure: 10	10
Old: 6	6
Junk: 4	4

Salience (183 total)

Category	Value
Gesture: 41	41
Expression: 27	27
Text: 21	21
Film: 66	66
Context: 43	43
Other: 8	8
Unsure: 8	8
Old: 3	3
Junk: 3	3
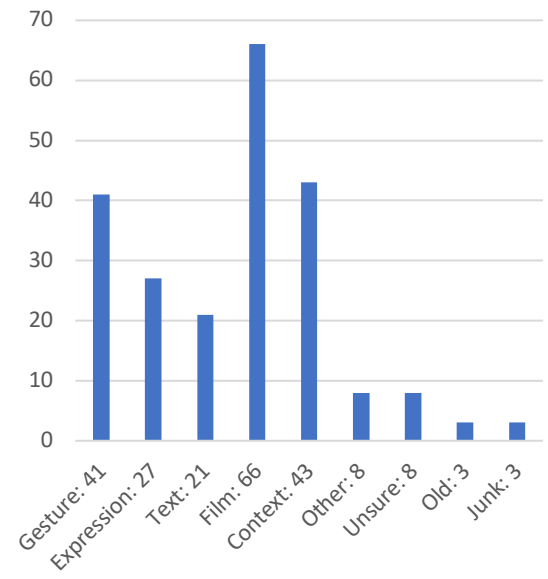
Bad Luck Brian

Name (182 total)

BL Brian: 106, BL [name]: 14, Nerd/Weirdo: 9, Yearbook: 4, Other: 20, Unsure: 13, Old: 14, Junk: 4

Meaning (174 total)

Misfortune: 100, Irony: 17, Loser status: 16, Dorkiness: 12, Cringe: 5, Inner Pain: 5, Good outcome: 6, Other: 17, Unsure: 5, Old: 13, Junk: 6

Salience (169 total)

Expression: 67, Style/nerd: 36, School photo: 9, Text: 6, Context: 43, Other: 15, Unsure: 8, Old: 7, Junk: 7
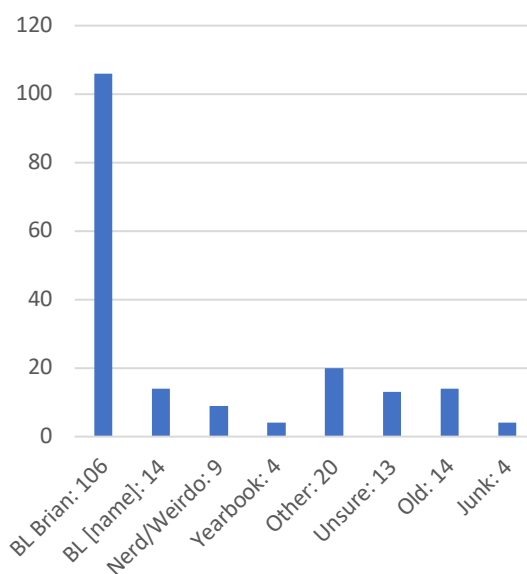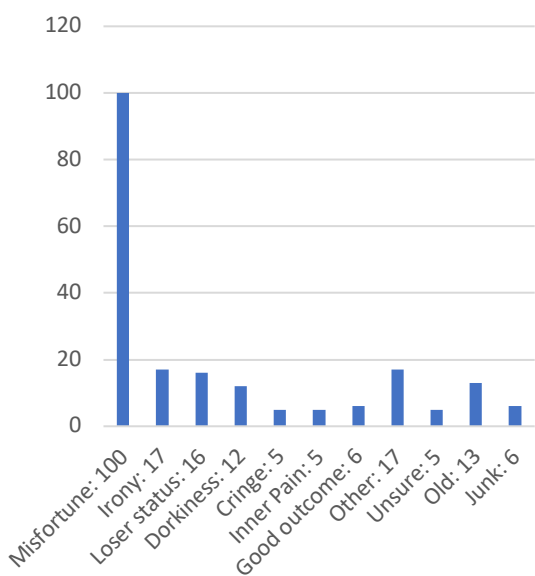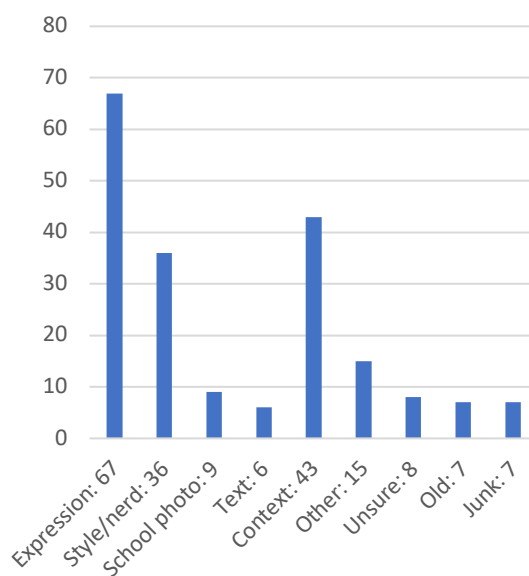
Rage Comics (Forever Alone & Y U No)

Name (172 total)

Rage: 40, Forever Alone: 35, Y U No: 43, Troll: 23, Derp: 2, Emotional Reaction: 17, Potato: 4, Other: 14, Unsure: 12, Old: 26, Junk: 1

Meaning (168 total)

Relatable/reactions: 41, Nostalgia: 23, Trolling: 9, Sadness: 35, Loneliness: 27, Rejection: 12, Frustration/anger: 72, Bafflement: 25, Stupidity: 7, Other: 8, Unsure: 5, Old: 8, Junk: 3

Salience (166 total)

Expression: 84, Gesture: 13, Art style: 25, Text: 4, Context: 59, Relatability: 3, Other: 5, Unsure: 3, Old: 2, Junk: 4
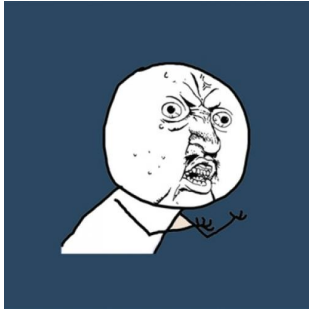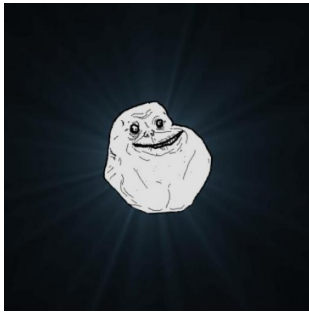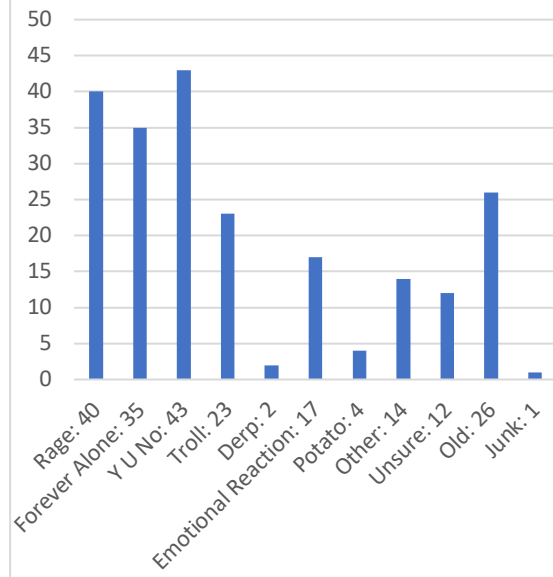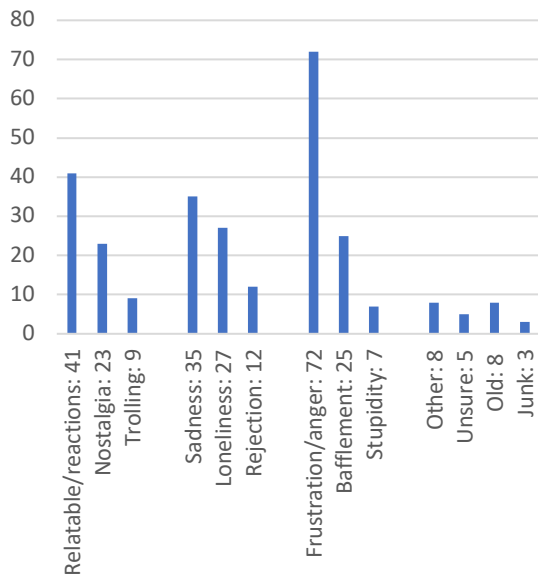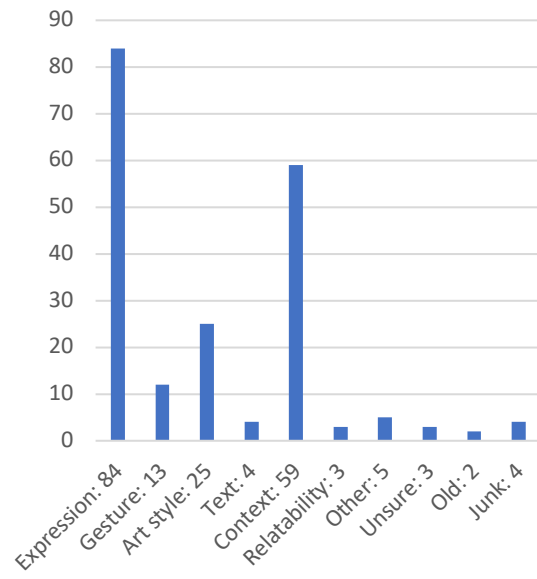
First World Problems†

Name (181 total)

First World Problems: 21
90s Problems: 4
Bad things happen: 3
Feels bad, etc.: 5
[Other memes]: 5
Dramatic Sadness: 60
Disappointment: 5
Crying, etc.: 38
Reaction (general): 18
Other: 6
Unsure: 16
Old: 9
Junk: 4

Meaning (174 total)

Mocking sadness: 61
First World Problems: 7
Genuine sadness: 94
Regret: 5
Failure: 6
Over-reacting: 13
Other: 7
Unsure: 6
Old: 4
Junk: 2

Salience (171 total)

Expression/tears: 116
Exaggerated expression: 23
Text: 3
Context: 31
Other: 8
Unsure: 5
Old: 2
Junk: 3

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Philosoraptor

Name (175 total)

Philosoraptor: 50
Minor variant: 6
Major variant: 50
Fringe variant: 31
Advice Animal: 3
Other: 13
Unsure: 13
Old: 20
Junk: 1

Meaning (173 total)

Philosophical: 30
Fake philosophy: 42
Thinking/questioning: 53
Shower Thoughts: 23
Confusion: 5
Curiosity: 6
Realization: 7
Other: 18
Unsure: 3
Old: 19
Junk: 1

Salience (168 total)

Gesture: 82
"The Thinker": 9
Expression: 37
Dino as humorous: 13
Text: 9
Context: 28
Other: 11
Unsure: 6
Old: 13
Junk: 2

Grumpy Cat[†]

Name (202 total)

Grumpy Cat: 154 | Angry Cat: 16 | [other] Cat: 14 | Other: 9 | Unsure: 5 | Old: 3 | Junk: 1

Meaning (196 total)

Annoyed/bored: 21 | Displeased: 50 | Pessimism: 33 | Angry/grumpy: 97 | Mockery/sarcasm: 15 | "No.": 7 | Other: 16 | Unsure: 3 | Old: 6 | Junk: 1

Salience (195 total)

Expression: 153 | Humor from cat: 16 | Text: 3 | Context: 29 | Other: 9 | Unsure: 3 | Old: 3 | Junk: 0
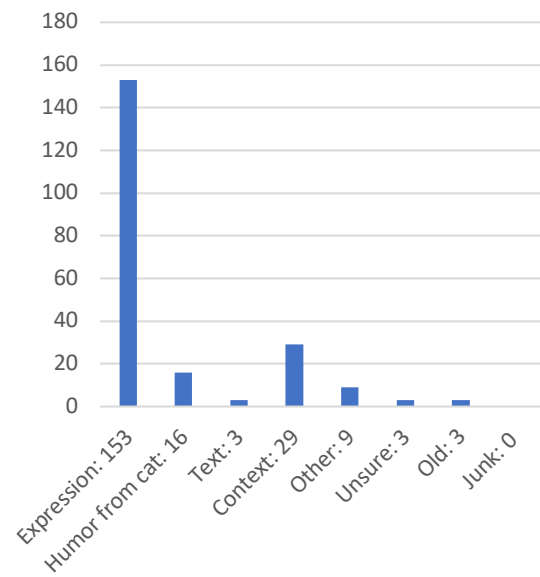
Condescending Wonka

Name (171 total)

Normal title: 19, Creepy Wonka: 4, (other) Wonka: 72, Oh really: 13, So you think: 7, Tell me more: 15, Other: 23, Unsure: 15, Old: 9, Junk: 1

Meaning (161 total)

Sarcasm: 33, Condescencing: 43, Superiority/stupidity: 25, Unimpressed/skeptical: 20, Interest (genuine): 5, Other: 29, Unsure: 13, Old: 5, Junk: 0

Salience (168 total)

Expression: 97, Posture: 26, Text: 9, Origin: 12, Context: 27, Other: 10, Unsure: 9, Old: 4, Junk: 1
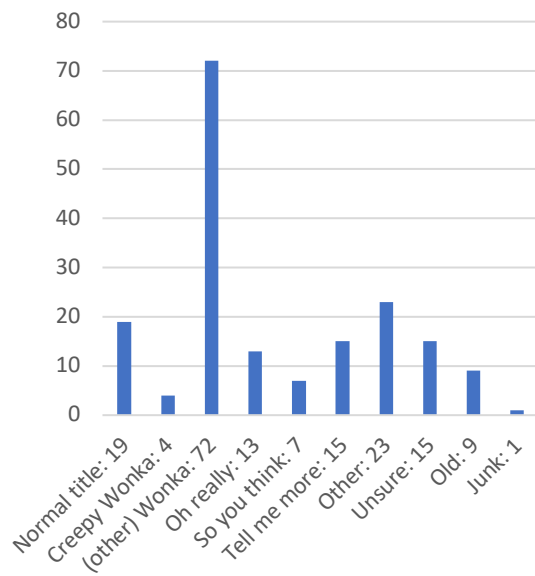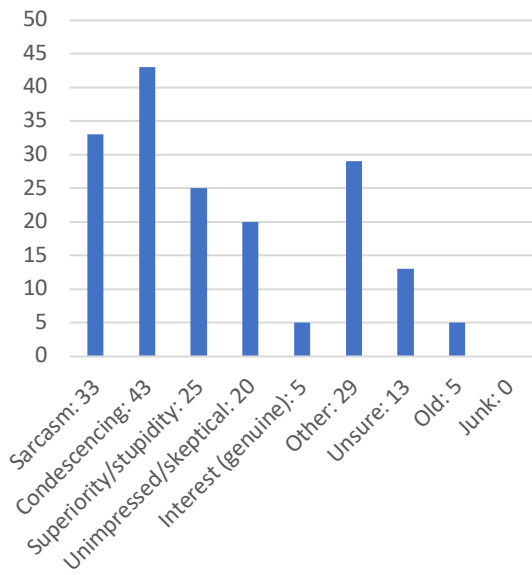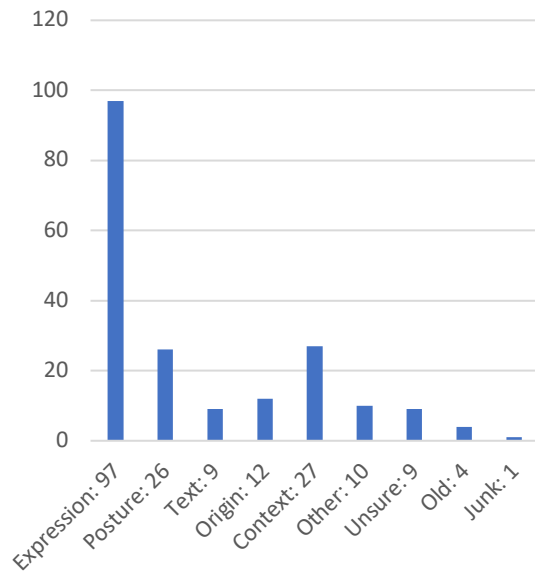
Not Sure If / Futurama Fry

Name (175 total)

Bar chart with y-axis from 0 to 45 (increments of 5):
- NSI: 37
- Futurama Fry: 5
- Suspicious Fry: 17
- (other) Fry: 39
- [suspicious]: 23
- [skeptical]: 9
- Other: 22
- Unsure: 15
- Old: 9
- Junk: 4

Meaning (175 total)

Bar chart with y-axis from 0 to 60 (increments of 10):
- Skepticism: 32
- Suspicion: 49
- Uncertainty: 29
- Confusion: 21
- Comparison: 14
- Other: 25
- Unsure: 11
- Old: 10
- Junk: 1

Salience (174 total)

Bar chart with y-axis from 0 to 100 (increments of 10):
- Eyes: 86
- Expression: 49
- Origin: 15
- Text: 11
- Context: 25
- Other: 9
- Unsure: 5
- Old: 4
- Junk: 4

Success Kid†

Name (194 total)

Success Kid: 52
Success Baby: 23
Fist Pump Baby: 7
Other Baby/Kid variants: 49
Win/Nailed it: 9
Other: 27
Unsure: 11
Old: 17
Junk: 1

Meaning (191 total)

Success (general): 85
Small victory: 13
Unplanned success: 7
Triumph: 41
Luck/good fortune: 9
Pride/happiness: 27
Other: 20
Unsure: 6
Old: 13
Junk: 2

Salience (168 total)

Gesture: 104
Expression: 87
Text: 6
Context: 26
Other: 14
Unsure: 6
Old: 9
Junk: 1

Confession Bear

Name (168 total)

Confession Bear: 24
Sad/Depressed Bear: 68
Disappointed Bear: 11
[other] bear: 21
Other: 19
Unsure: 22
Old: 3
Junk: 2

Meaning (162 total)

Confession/regret: 28
Sad/depressed: 72
Disappointment: 24
Disapproval/annoyance: 12
Loneliness: 5
Other: 17
Unsure: 10
Old: 6
Junk: 3

Salience (162 total)

Expression: 123
Posture: 7
Text: 5
Context: 20
Other: 5
Unsure: 6
Old: 3
Junk: 4
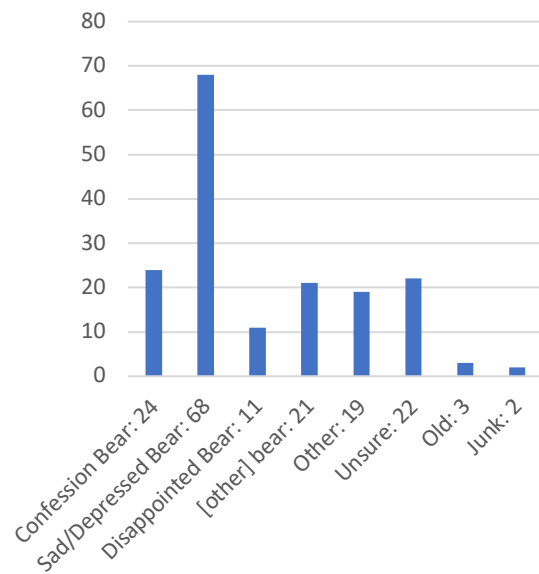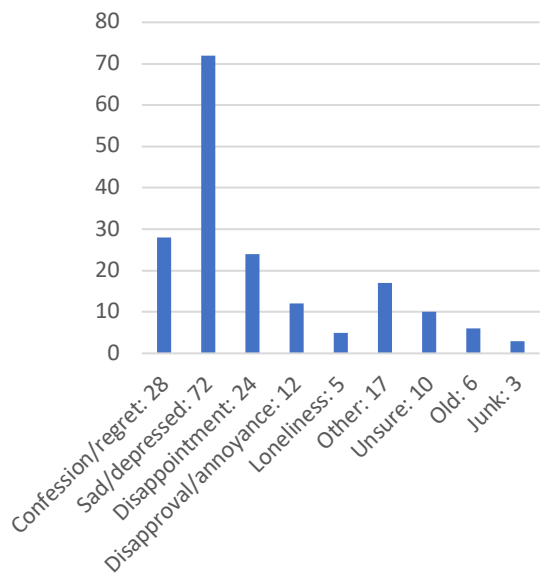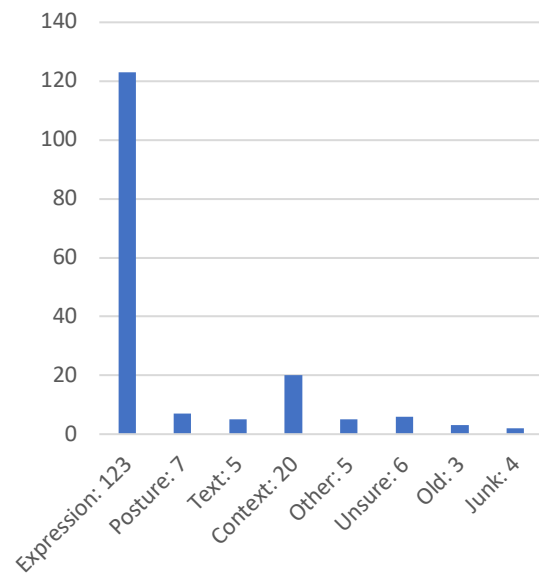
Socially Awkward Penguin

Name (171 total)

Awkward Penguin: 38
Awesome Penguin: 5
[Good] Penguin: 31
[Bad] Penguin: 13
Just Penguin: 28
Other: 11
Unsure: 29
Old: 20
Junk: 1

Meaning (166 total)

Social Awkwardness: 46
Social Success: 22
Stupidity: 8
Confusion: 6
Paradox/plot twist: 6
Penguin: 8
Other: 21
Unsure: 31
Old: 18
Junk: 2

Salience (160 total)

Penguin's posture: 59
Background/red version: 19
Text: 5
Context: 33
Other: 7
Unsure: 31
Old: 11
Junk: 3
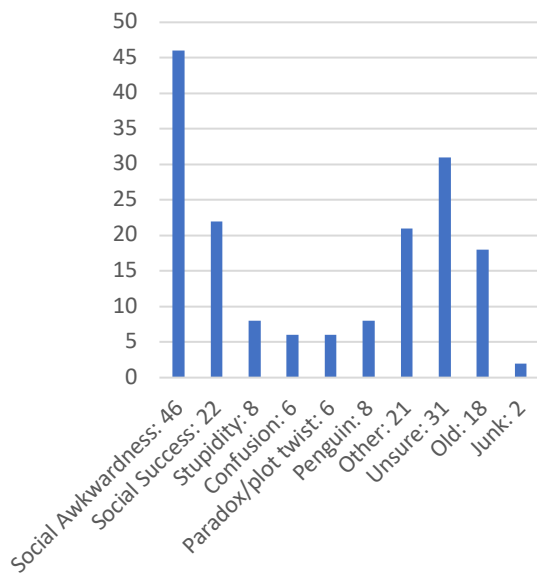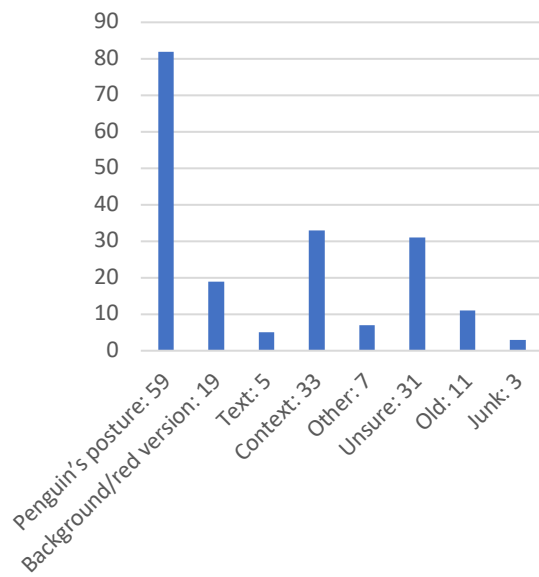
Scumbag Steve / Scumbag Hat†

Name (175 total)

Category	Value
Scumbag Steve	44
Douche	23
Thug, etc	15
Wasted, etc	7
[Good]	7
Scumbag Hat	5
Douche hat	4
Other hat	19
Other	20
Unsure	21
Old	13
Junk	5

Meaning (171 total)

Category	Value
'Douche'	57
'Gangster' etc.	18
Arrogance	20
Rudeness	9
Stupidity	9
Confusion	4
Hat as separate	7
Helpful/good guy	4
Other	22
Unsure	20
Old	12
Junk	1

Salience (170 total)

Category	Value
Face/posture	41
Hat	72
Clothing	42
Stereotype/vibe	37
Text	3
Context	35
Other	5
Unsure	15
Old	8
Junk	0
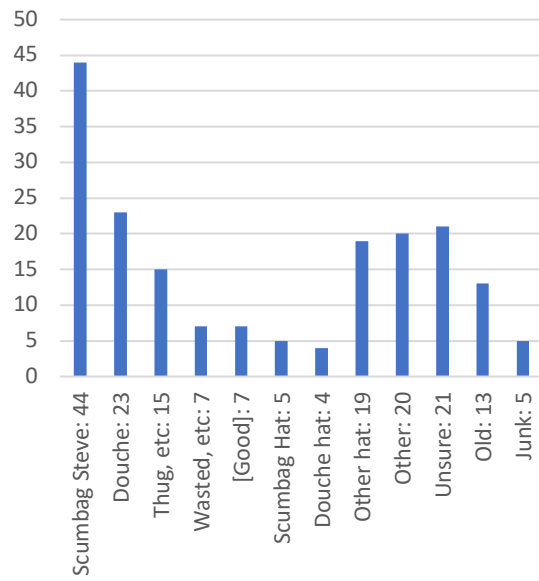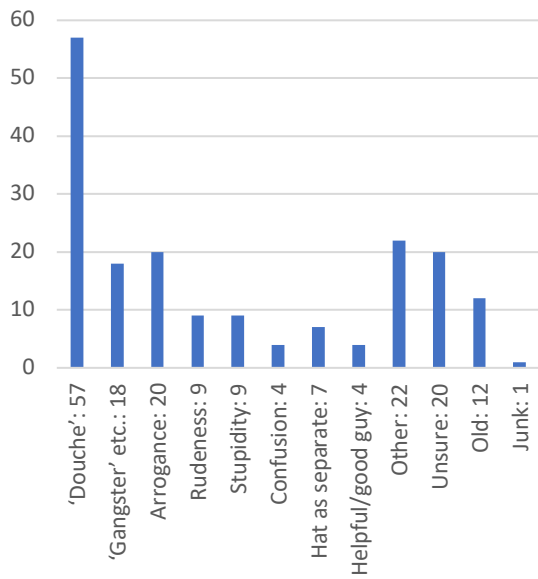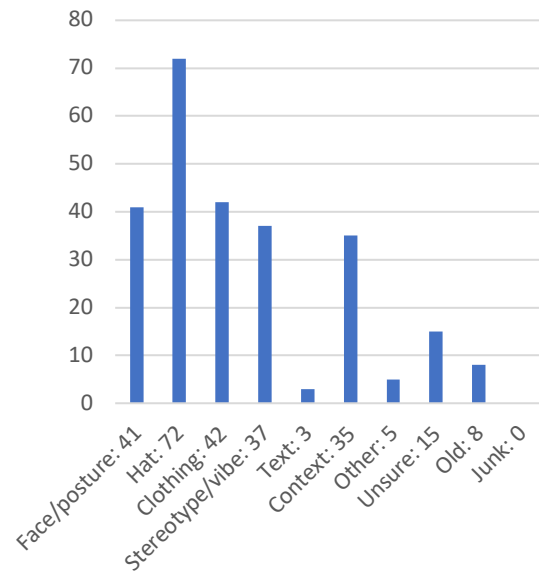
Overly Attached Girlfriend

Name (204 total)

Categories: OAGF: 44, Obsessive GF: 26, Creepy GF: 24, Crazy GF: 44, Stalker: 7, (other) GF: 6, Other: 22, Unsure: 21, Old: 8, Junk: 3

Meaning (198 total)

Categories: Possessive/jealous: 47, Creepy/stalker: 40, Insanity/obsession: 61, Fear: 23, Surprise: 3, Stupidity: 3, Happy/eager: 7, Other: 16, Unsure: 9, Old: 11, Junk: 5

Salience (197 total)

Categories: Expression: 78, Smile: 30, Eyes: 52, Lighting/background: 10, Origin: 12, Text: 7, Context: 33, Other: 4, Unsure: 10, Old: 11, Junk: 4

322
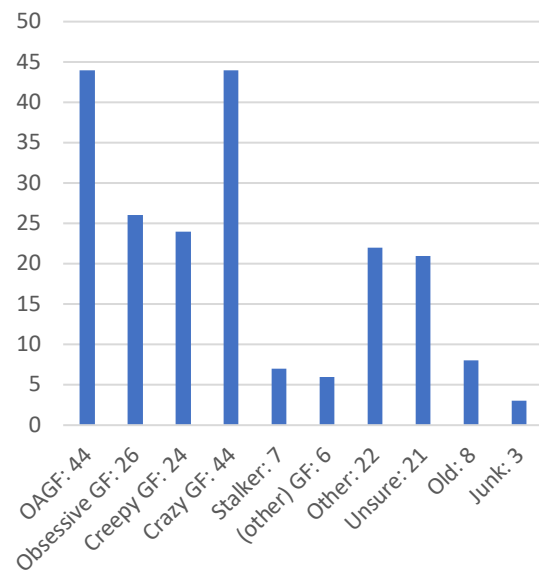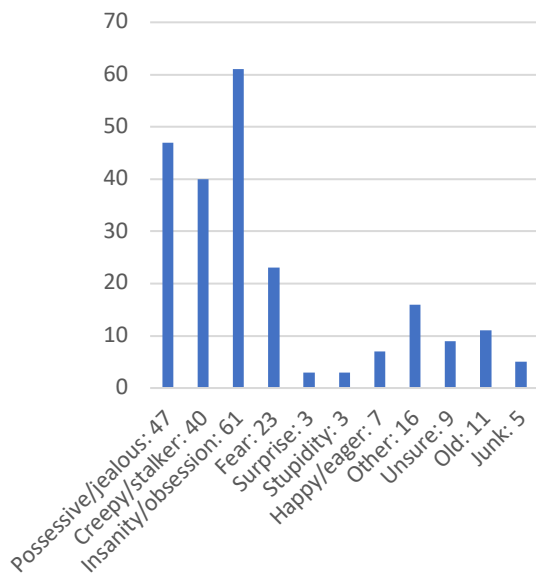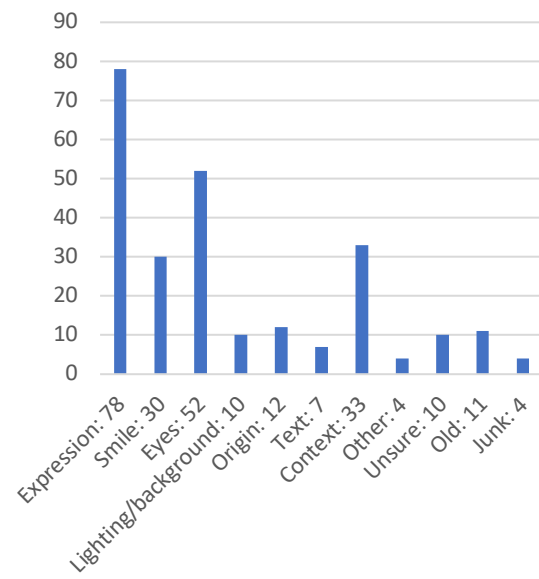
All The Things

Name (188 total)

X all the Y: 9
All the things: 33
What do we want: 23
Win/victory: 22
Happy/excited: 27
Broom Guy/Girl: 6
Other: 28
Unsure: 19
Old: 18
Junk: 3

Meaning (186 total)

Call to action: 35
Excitement: 51
Success: 50
Happiness: 29
Revolt, etc.: 15
Stupidity: 5
Other: 14
Unsure: 13
Old: 10
Junk: 3
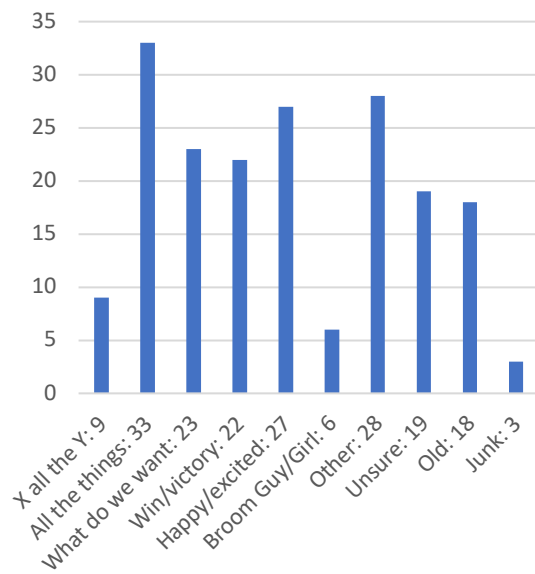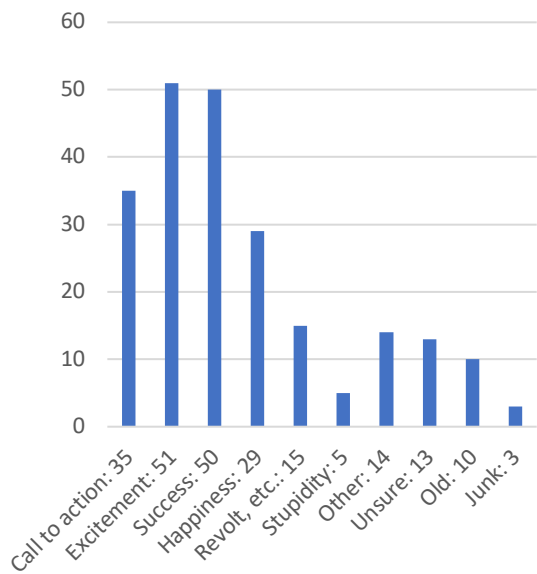
Salience (187 total)

Face: 71
Gesture: 56
Style/background: 49
Origin: 10
Text: 9
Context: 41
Other: 2
Unsure: 7
Old: 11
Junk: 6
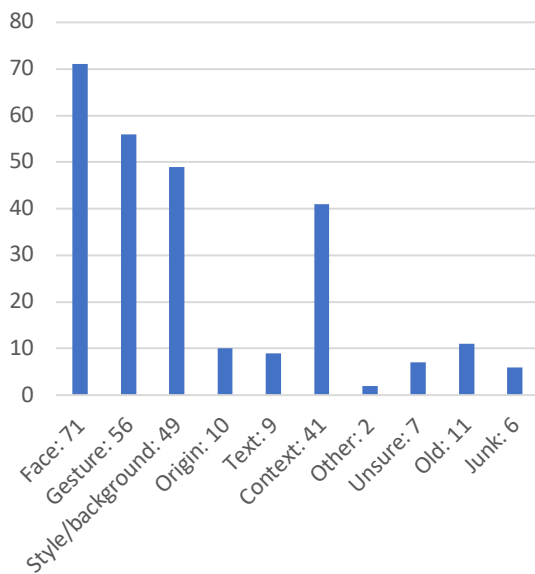
Current popular pool

Roll Safe[†]	
	### Name (169 total)
### Meaning (166 total) 	### Salience (162 total)
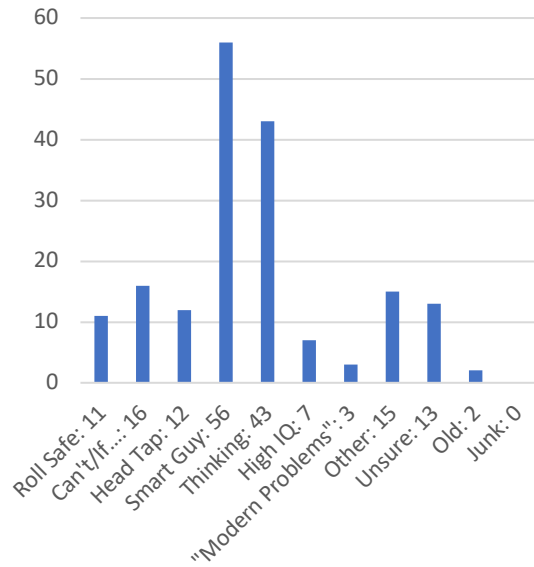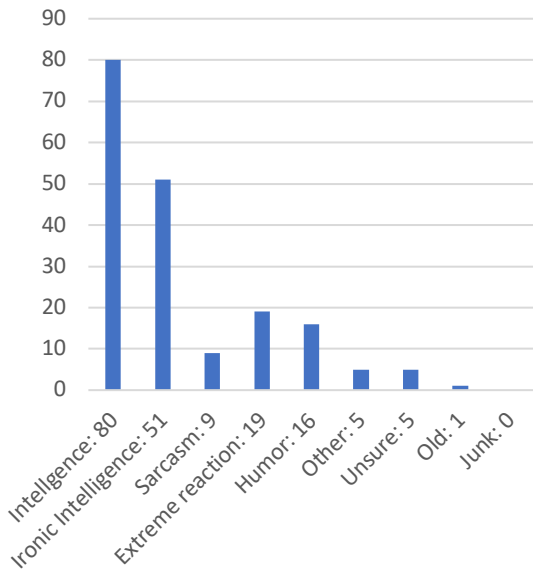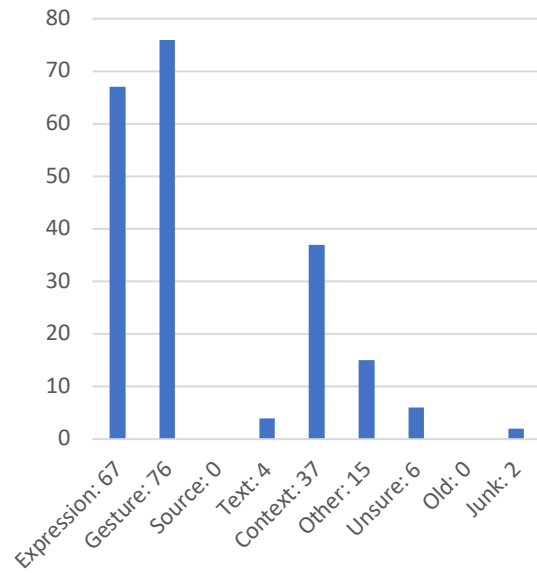
Distracted Boyfriend†

Name (173 total)

Distracted BF: 48 | BF variants: 28 | GF variants: 7 | Other Girl variants: 13 | [Description]: 22 | Cheating, etc.: 14 | Choice: 13 | Other: 14 | Unsure: 12 | Old: 2 | Junk: 2

Meaning (167 total)

Choice/preference: 59 | Temptation, etc.: 53 | Distraction: 14 | Wanting more: 19 | Humor: 13 | Basic description: 13 | Other: 16 | Unsure: 5 | Old: 1 | Junk: 4

Salience (162 total)

Expression: 75 | Body Language: 3 | Implied relationship: 53 | Whole photo: 12 | Text: 7 | Context: 28 | Other: 8 | Unsure: 5 | Old: 0 | Junk: 3
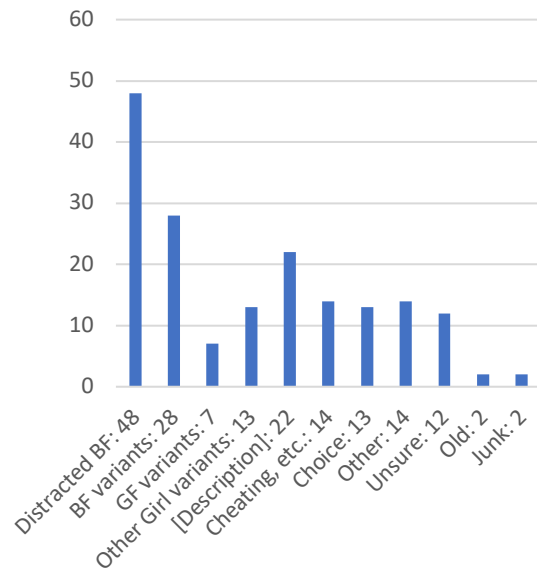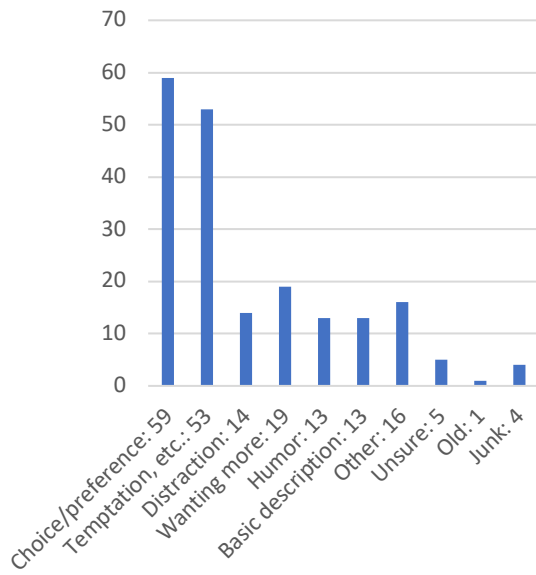
Mocking Spongebob

Name (160 total)

Mocking Spongebob: 46 | 'Bird' Bob: 13 | Other SB: 62 | Mocking, etc.: 6 | aLtErNaTe LeTtErS: 47 | (MoCkInG) sPoNgEbOb: 30 | WhAt wOUID yOu CaLl...: 6 | Other: 9 | Unsure: 7 | Old: 2 | Junk: 3

Meaning (155 total)

Mockery: 79 | Mimicking: 14 | pLeAsE dEsCrIbE wHaT...: 3 | Sarcasm: 12 | Stupidity: 35 | Disagreement: 6 | Humor: 11 | Other: 14 | Unsure: 6 | Old: 3 | Junk: 3

Salience (149 total)

Face: 56 | Pose: 34 | Whole image: 26 | Source: 8 | Text (and font): 13 | Context: 25 | Other: 3 | Unsure: 6 | Old: 5 | Junk: 2
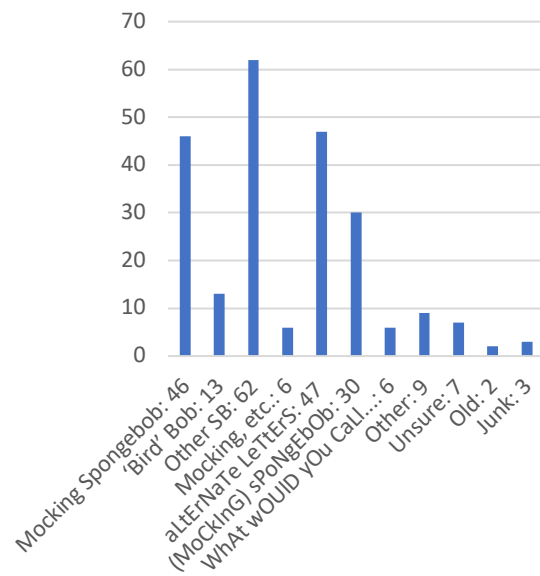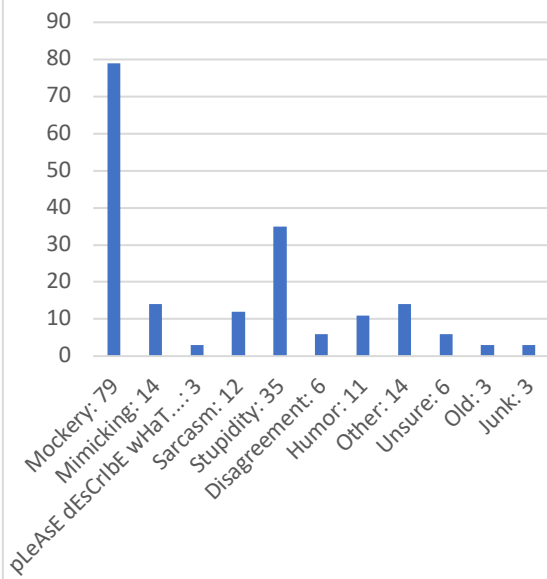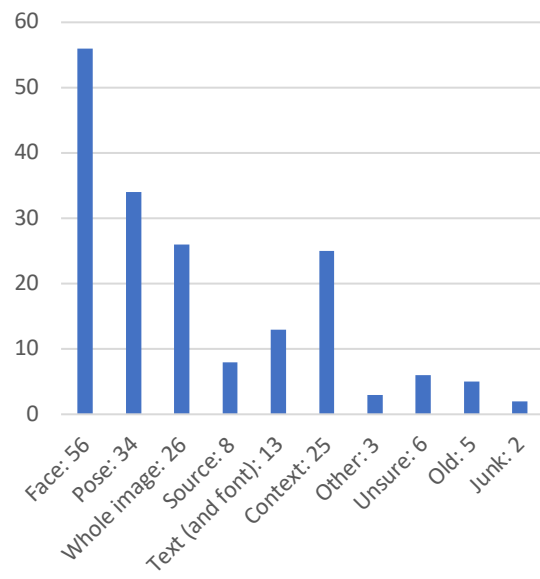
Expanding Brain†

Name (175 total)

Expanding Brain: 64
Galaxy Brain: 3
Big Brain: 9
[Other] Brain: 39
[intellect]: 34
[progression/levels]: 23
Other: 9
Unsure: 3
Old: 1
Junk: 2

Meaning (169 total)

Intelligence (increasing): 69
Ridiculousness (increasing): 74
Generic scale: 16
Humor/satire: 30
Other: 10
Unsure: 2
Old: 1
Junk: 1

Salience (161 total)

Brain: 71
Lights: 25
Levels: 55
Text: 14
Context: 37
Other: 5
Unsure: 2
Old: 2
Junk: 2
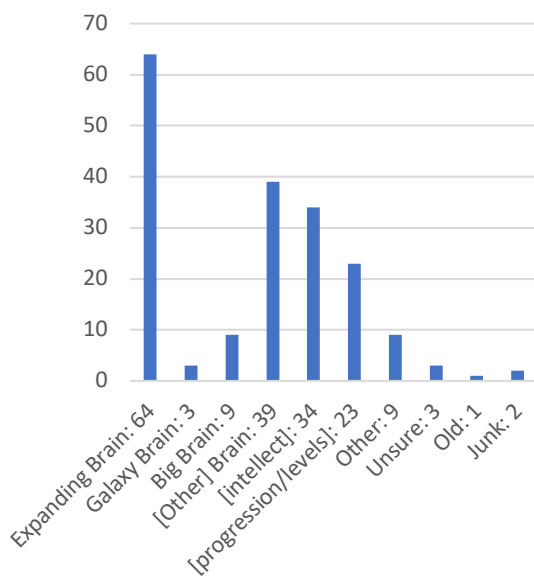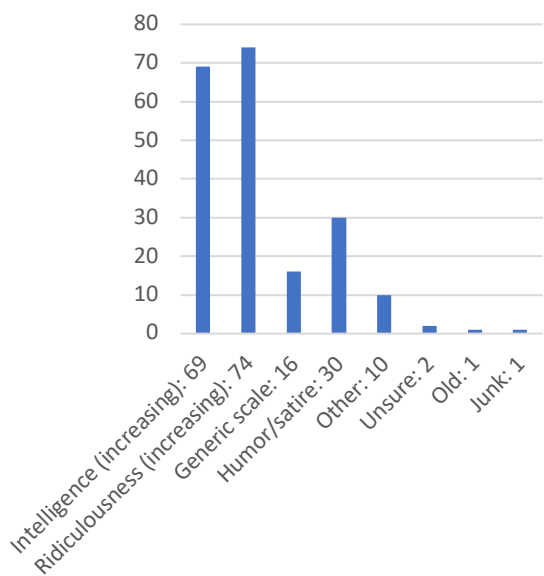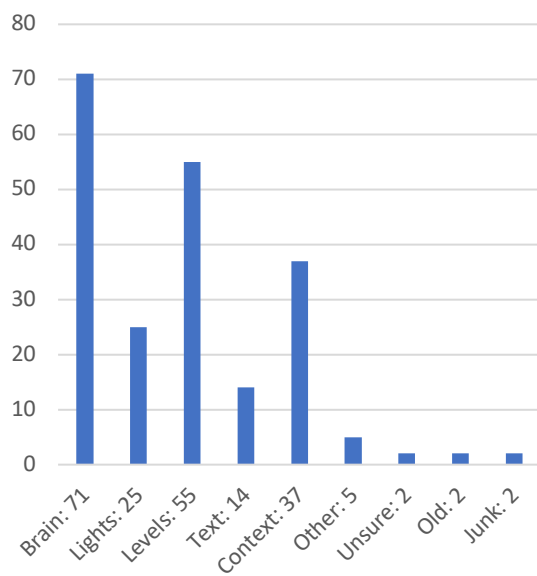
Is This A Pigeon†

Name (148 total)

ITAP: 37 | Is this...: 59 | Similar variant: 19 | Butterfly: 9 | Anime Guy: 3 | Other: 11 | Unsure: 6 | Old: 3 | Junk: 1

Meaning (144 total)

Misconception, etc.: 51 | Mocking of conflation: 18 | Confusion: 13 | Stupidity/ignorance: 29 | Curiosity: 4 | Awe/surprise: 3 | Humor: 7 | Other: 12 | Unsure: 15 | Old: 5 | Junk: 1

Salience (141 total)

Expression: 29 | Gesture: 18 | Butterfly: 30 | Source: 14 | Text: 42 | Context: 33 | Other: 7 | Unsure: 8 | Old: 1 | Junk: 2
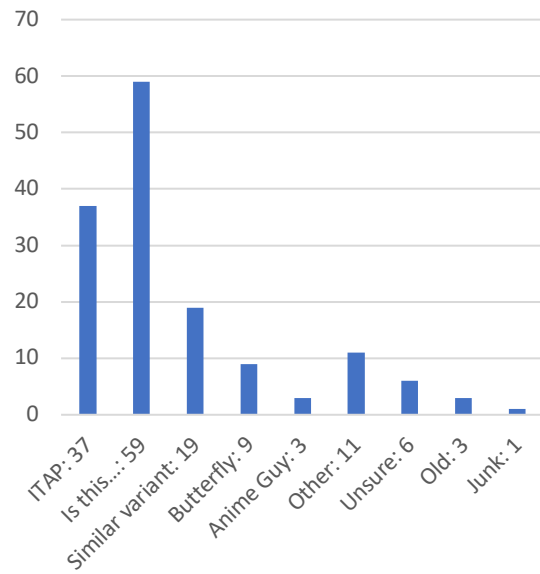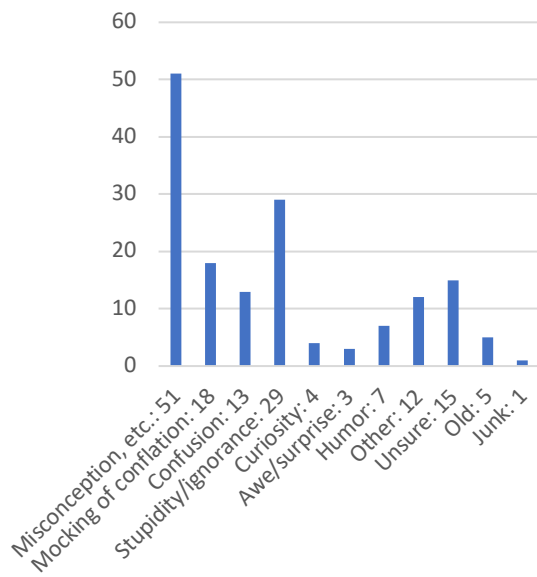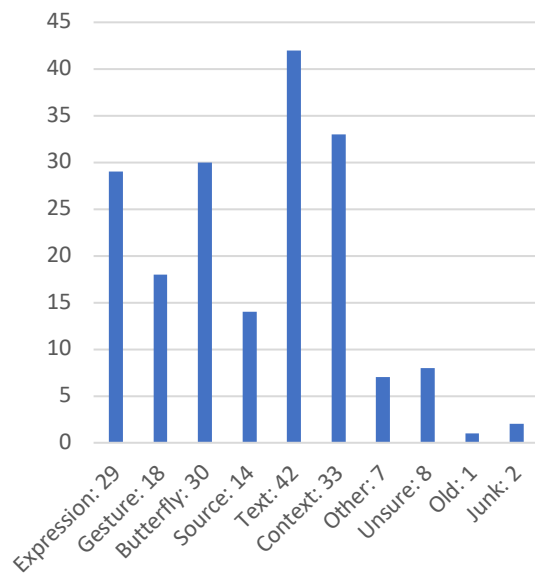
Trump Bill Signing

Name (168 total)

Category	Value
Trump bill/sign/EO	42
Trump Approves	5
First Order of Business	3
Other Trump	61
Executive Order	6
Now Legal/Illegal	10
Look at This	4
[Insert Text]	4
Other	16
Unsure	11
Old	5
Junk	4

Meaning (170 total)

Category	Value
Parody	16
Parody Trump	50
Opinion/Statement	32
Ridiculous	15
'Legality'	30
Fill in text/humor	49
Other	9
Unsure	12
Old	7
Junk	5

Salience (166 total)

Category	Value
Expression/posture	25
Blank paper/signature	42
Source (Trump)	57
Text (added in)	20
Context (online)	39
Other	3
Unsure	12
Old	2
Junk	6

American Chopper Argument

Name (151 total)

American Chopper: 19, Other Shows: 20, Family argument: 10, Other Argument: 64, Chair Throw: 6, Other: 11, Unsure: 24, Old: 2, Junk: 1

Meaning (152 total)

Argument/frustration: 75, Heated/pointless argument: 24, Exaggerated argument: 14, Escalating argument: 9, Satirical/parody argument: 19, Other: 10, Unsure: 11, Old: 0, Junk: 1

Salience (149 total)

Expressions: 56, Body Language: 40, Escalation/layout: 43, Source: 10, Text: 10, Context: 25, Other: 3, Unsure: 11, Old: 2, Junk: 3

Change My Mind Sign

Name (180 total)

Change My Mind: 156 | Crowder: 4 | Other: 11 | Unsure: 6 | Old: 4 | Junk: 2

Meaning (173 total)

Strong Opinion: 74 | Controversial: 37 | Sarcastic: 14 | Ridiculous: 16 | Defiance: 11 | Challenge: 36 | Other: 14 | Unsure: 4 | Old: 4 | Junk: 1

Salience (171 total)

Expression: 29 | Body language: 30 | Sign: 77 | Source: 24 | Text: 11 | Context: 34 | Others: 4 | Unsure: 6 | Old: 2 | Junk: 1

Gru's Plan

Name (193 total)

Gru Plan: 53
Gru Presentation: 17
Other Gru: 75
Bad Plan, etc.: 18
Panels, etc.: 7
Other: 9
Unsure: 12
Old: 1
Junk: 1

Meaning (186 total)

Unexpected outcome: 47
Plan backfiring/flawed: 75
Disappointment: 12
Bad ideas, etc: 22
General planning: 9
Humor/satire: 9
Other: 8
Unsure: 8
Old: 3
Junk: 3

Salience (183 total)

Expression/Gesture: 93
Sign: 16
Panel Structure: 55
Source: 18
Text: 7
Context: 36
Other: 5
Unsure: 6
Old: 2
Junk: 4

Savage Patrick

Name (179 total)

Savage Patrick: 11, Evil Patrick: 62, Angry/Mean Patrick: 6, Creepy Patrick: 18, [Other] Patrick: 51, Evil (general): 8, Other: 9, Unsure: 11, Old: 3, Junk: 3

Meaning (171 total)

Evil/sadism: 84, Insanity/bad ideas: 9, Rage/savagery: 12, Creepiness/predatory: 30, Funny meanness: 19, Holding advantage: 12, Other: 10, Unsure: 10, Old: 3, Junk: 2

Salience (167 total)

Expression: 112, Posture: 14, "Vibe": 23, Source: 16, Text: 3, Context: 22, Other: 5, Unsure: 4, Old: 1, Junk: 2
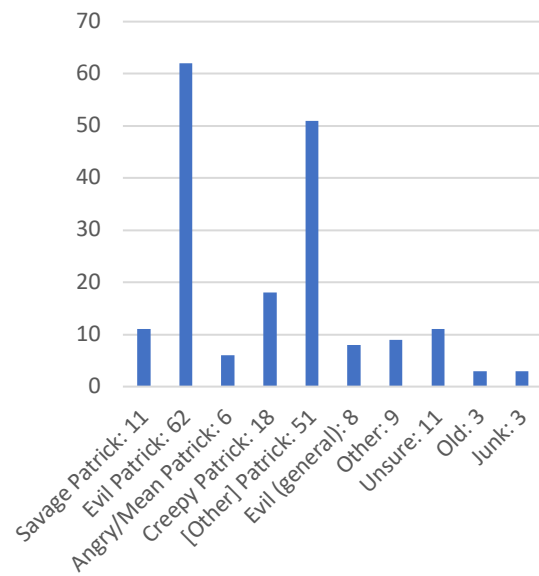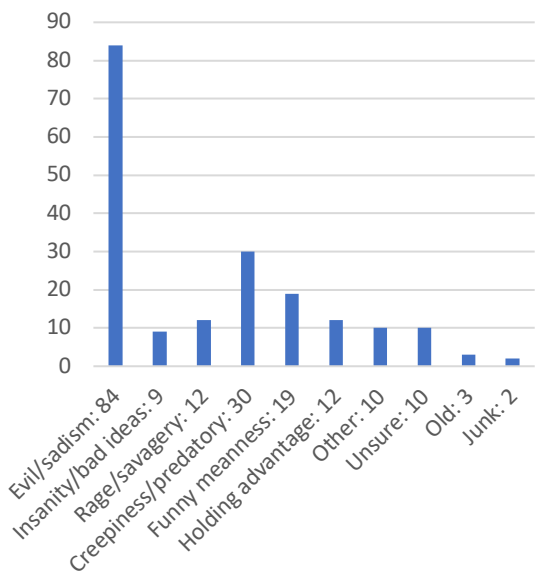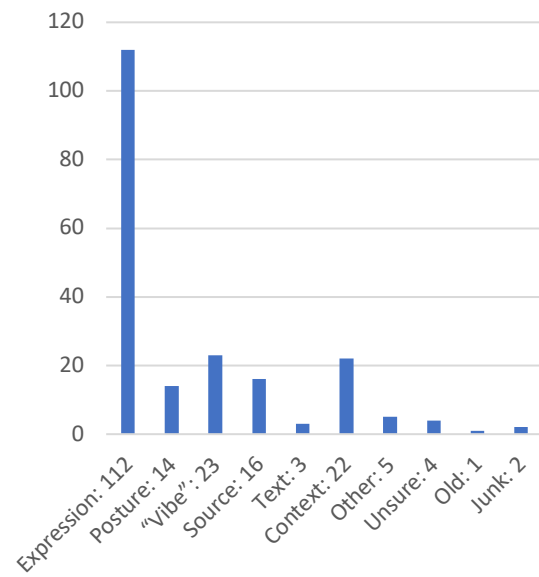
Left Exit 12 Off Ramp

Name (153 total)

Category	Value
LE12	5
Exit Ramp	19
Swerve/Turn	34
Drifting	17
[Skid sound]	5
Choice	32
Car of choice	14
Deja Vu	3
Other	13
Unsure	11
Old	0
Junk	2

Meaning (151 total)

Category	Value
Strong Preference	18
Ironic Preference	13
Bad Decision	58
Sudden choice/change	25
Choice, generally	24
Speed	5
Other	13
Unsure	4
Old	2
Junk	1

Salience (145 total)

Category	Value
Car skidding	98
Signs	7
Idea of choice	10
Text	18
Context	26
Other	7
Unsure	2
Old	0
Junk	3

Who Killed Hannibal

Name (135 total)

WKH: 20 · Eric Andre: 15 · Why would...: 41 · Shooting/killing: 27 · Self-delusion: 12 · Other: 11 · Unsure: 13 · Old: 1 · Junk: 0

Meaning (136 total)

Avoiding blame: 42 · Causing own problem: 43 · Surprise/confusion: 17 · Emphasize point: 9 · Shut down argument: 13 · Parody: 15 · Other: 9 · Unsure: 10 · Old: 1 · Junk: 2

Salience (133 total)

Expression: 32 · Shooting: 47 · Dead man: 5 · Panel structure: 12 · Source: 11 · Text: 24 · Context: 25 · Other: 9 · Unsure: 9 · Old: 0 · Junk: 1
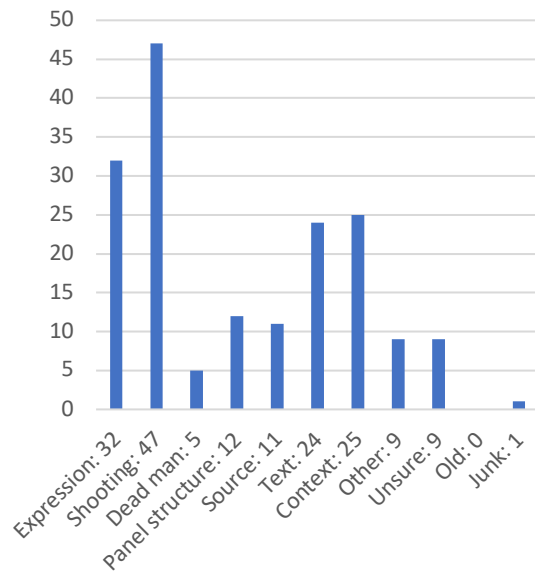
Walmart Yodel Boy

Name (192 total)

Walmart Yodel Boy: 49, Yodel Boy: 69, Walmart Boy: 12, Other Yodeling: 10, Cowboy kid: 10, Aggressive answers: 9, Other: 8, Unsure: 22, Old: 6, Junk: 1

Meaning (176 total)

Just yodeling kid: 43, Awe/surprise: 5, Randomness: 12, Humor (general): 17, Talent/lack thereof: 13, Modern fame: 21, [audio cue]: 17, [hated/annoying]: 31, [happy/endearing]: 12, Other: 16, Unsure: 33, Old: 4, Junk: 3

Salience (170 total)

Boy singing: 51, Clothes/style: 20, Source: 29, "Sound": 23, Context: 19, [negative reaction]: 20, Other: 8, Unsure: 29, Old: 2, Junk: 2

I Don't Feel So Good[†]

Name (164 total)

IDFSG: 50, Thanos/Snap: 64, Dusting/Dusted: 12, Disintegration: 9, Sadness, etc.: 3, Death, etc.: 6, Spongebob: 6, Other: 7, Unsure: 8, Old: 1, Junk: 2

Meaning (157 total)

Marvel ref: 83, Death or destruction: 27, Grief or loss: 54, Funny/ironic: 17, Other: 5, Unsure: 3, Old: 0, Junk: 2

Salience (150 total)

Expressions: 17, Posture/action: 16, Disintegration effect: 61, Source: 61, Text: 1, Context: 17, Other: 7, Unsure: 8, Old: 0, Junk: 1

"E"

Name (170 total)

E: 117
Markiplier: 25
Farquaad: 18
Zuckerberg: 4
"Deep Fried" /absurdist: 8
Other: 6
Unsure: 25
Old: 2
Junk: 1

Meaning (165 total)

"E": 42
Nothing: 33
Randomness: 13
Weirdness: 26
Confusion: 3
Humor (general): 22
Other: 17
Unsure: 25
Old: 1
Junk: 1

Salience (162 total)

"E": 68
Expression: 15
Art style (deep fried): 14
Absurdity: 30
Source (photo elements): 17
Context: 15
Other: 1
Unsure: 28
Old: 0
Junk: 2

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