MEME ARTISTS STANDING AT THE INTERSECTION OF DIGITAL ART, ACTIVISM AND TROLLING

"HOW DO YOU DO, FELLOW WORKING CLASS-ERS?"

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Undergraduate Dissertation

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"Man suffers only because he takes seriously what the gods made for fun."

- Alan Wilson Watts, 1995

'Yes, I'm looking at a lot of internet jokes... and taking the fun (out) of them entirely!'

- Hannah Barton 2017

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Introduction

Re-thinking the digital image and internet memes studies in the 21ˢᵗ century

"Surprise that something so seemingly trivial, so literally immaterial, as internet memes could warrant scholarly attention. I am by no means the first person to research internet memes, with the path-breaking work of Limor Shifman, Ryan Milner, et al., tackling the subject in terms both elucidating and inspiring. Nor am I the first to tackle the foundational principle of memetics, which, though described in different terms, has been addressed by media scholars and folklorists alike for generations. Yet, *internet* memetics remains an emergent discipline. So, to study internet memes, those silly little jokes, somehow seemed like 'overkill'; a delightful whimsy to some, an absurd pursuit to others."

(Barton, 2017 : 2)

Internet memes have become the centre of academic attention in recent years, they have motivated many studies attempting to understand and re-define political propaganda (Bradshaw, 2017) online identity, public conversation (Milner, 2016) and revolutionary digital design (Metahaven, 2013). They have been at times ridiculed by academia or made into the idealized carrier of revolutionary messages and participatory democracy.

They originated on esoteric message boards such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit, before proliferating in mainstream media and spreading to all corners of the internet. Since they have become part of mainstream media in 2014 (Barton, 2017) (fig. 4) they have endlessly evolved and established themselves as an essential component of culture in the 21ˢᵗ century.

This research on Meme artists standing at the intersection of digital art, activism and trolling is motivated by the desire to expand the understanding and exploration of memes. It echoes the words of Limor Shifman (2014) in their concluding chapter on 'Future directions for internet meme research':

> "Understanding the individuals who participate in the process of generating and diffusing Internet memes and finding out how their participation patterns relate to race, ethnicity, gender and power is a worthwhile endeavour. (…) Further work, spanning a wider range of case studies, would help us discover to what extent Internet memes do indeed serve as alternative routes of expression for marginalized

groups, and to what extent they reflect well-entrenched power structures" (Shifman, 2014 : 172)

The interviews conducted for the purpose of this research have uncovered a deep-rooted discourse of marginalization and discursive resistance. Each meme artist enriched the discussion with their personal experience of power, counter power and marginalization. As suggested by Shifman, the concept of alternative expression is in fact a driving factor in their creation processes. Exploring the views of these artists can therefore serve a double purpose of giving recognition to the struggle and the voice of those who use memes as a form of communication; whilst contemporaneously encouraging the legitimization of memes, meme artists and their messages. Further ignoring the expression of those behind digital art has for far too long contributed to the silencing of alternative artists and marginalized groups of society. It comforted traditional art in its right to exert its supremacy over all, in the glory of its privileged hierarchy and ever-growing elitism. It participates in the everyday process of forced conformity for the sake of a seemingly fair society where alternative voices are cast out.

As a result, this paper might offer very little satisfaction for the academics in search of generalizing truths or universal knowledge. *A contrario*, the aim of researching specific case studies with interpersonal interviews is to appreciate the value of what is not the majority and has no pretence to ever represent a global reality. It shines a light in the personal work of artists and offers a framework for understanding meme art in its emotional, personal and communicative nature.

This paper follows a fourfold structure allowing for the exploration of concepts of communication power, legitimacy and representation, enriched with the words of the meme artists who proudly stand at the intersection of art, activism and trolling. (see Table 2) The detailed structure is as follows: the first chapter 'Re-Defining Memes' will introduce the legacy and work of previous scholars and propose a different approach to memes. The second Chapter 'Not Sure If Art, a case for Digital Meme Art' will focus on the concept of digital art and demonstrate the artistic value inherent to the crafting of memes, and its evolution from a functional unit of communication to an artistic form. The third chapter titled 'Meme Art & Activism' will explore the way memes are used as units of communication to disperse messages of counter-power against restrictive social structures and promote radical political thoughts. The fourth chapter named 'Trolling the other for debate and the self for solidarity' will explore the instrumentalization of trolling in memes as a way of

provoking change and debate, express existential thoughts and bring audience solidarity in the rapport with the self.

The following section, titled Re-Defining Memes, will explore the origin of the term and the relevant literature on the subject of memetics. It will be argued that a new framework must be added onto old representations of memes to allow for an artistic discussion to take place.
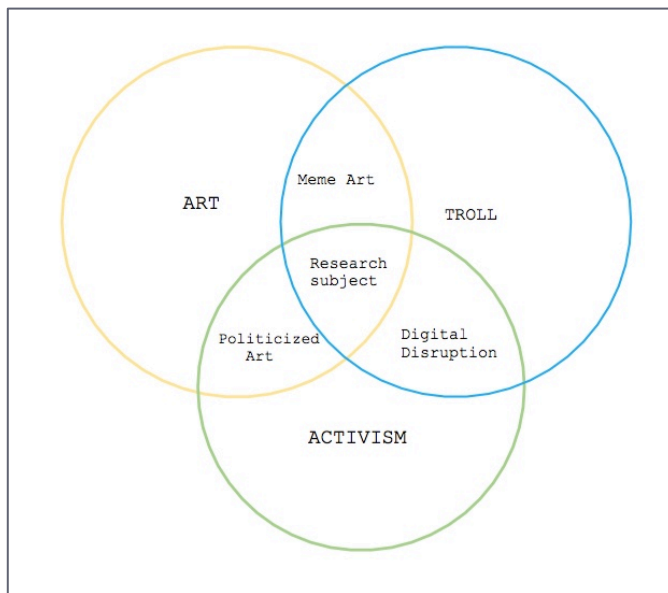

TABLE 2 - Illustrating the research gap

Chapter 1. Re-Defining Memes

From the legacy of Richard Dawkins to the Internet 'pandememeon'

The term 'meme' was originally coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins, in their book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins describes memes as small units of culture that spread from an individual to another by copying or imitation mechanisms. In this definition, they are self-replicating elements of culture, behaviors or patterns. When Dawkins first conceptualized memes, they[1] intended to create a cultural equivalent of the gene. In doing so, they attributed characteristics of genetics to cultural units. Although the definition has since evolved with the advent and propagation of internet memes, some of the attributes defined by Dawkins still serve as a basis to understand how they spread in the digital sphere.

The main characteristics can be instrumentalized for the purpose of this research, they are subdivided into three categories: *replication and imitation, inheritance and evolution, life and decay.*

They can be explained as follows:

1. *Replication and imitation* refer to the way memes are shared amongst the population: they can spread by a copying mechanism that does not substantially alter the original meme.

2. *Inheritance and evolution* refer to the genetic rules of Lamarckism, namely the transmission of new acquired characteristics that are incorporated into a meme and passed on.

3. *Life and decay* refer to the conceptualization of memes as living organisms. They are subject to a form of natural selection according to their likelihood of being reproduced and multiplied. (Colman, 2015)

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[1] In respect to the meme artists interviewed who requested gender-neutral pronouns for themselves, and in support of genderless semantic in academic studies, this paper will make use of they/them pronouns.

Internet memes are typically described as multimodal text associated with a visual element such as an image or a short video. They behave following the aforementioned characteristics: they are usually sent from a user to another via computer mediated communication, they can be modified, re-interpreted, and spread at a viral rate before disappearing as fast as they appeared. During their lifespan they often spark "user created derivatives articulated as parodies, remixes or mashups" (Shifman, 2014 : 2). This propensity to modify and re-appropriate a meme is illustrated with meme covers from different meme artists as shown in Figure 1, 2 and 3. In reference to the 'I Love Meme' #memecover that spread amongst meme artists on Instagram, this paper will adopt the same term in reference to rewriting and re-invention of similar memes. (see fig. 1, 2, 3)

FIGURE 1 "Meme Covers vol.18" source: https://www.instagram.com/p/b7e73o4f7he/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

The constant production of meme covers feeds the endless expansion of *memeplexes*. Also originating in Dawkins' theory, they were called 'co-adaptive meme complexes' [2] described as a series of cultural units that form a collection of mutually adapted memes which constitute greater concepts such as a religion, political affiliation or ideology (Colman, 2015). Hans-Cees Spell later shortened the term to "memeplex". However, the definition of a memeplex can be modernized to become instrumental to internet memetic theory. The notion of 'intertextuality' presented by Limor Shifman (2017) refers to the complex interweaving of memes that make up the participatory nature of memes and the contemporary digital environment. However, Shifman posits that the definition of "meme" must change to include the following characteristics :

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[2] From Shifman's original phrasing 'groups of co-adaptive memes that tend to be replicated together – strengthening each other in the process' (2014 : 7).
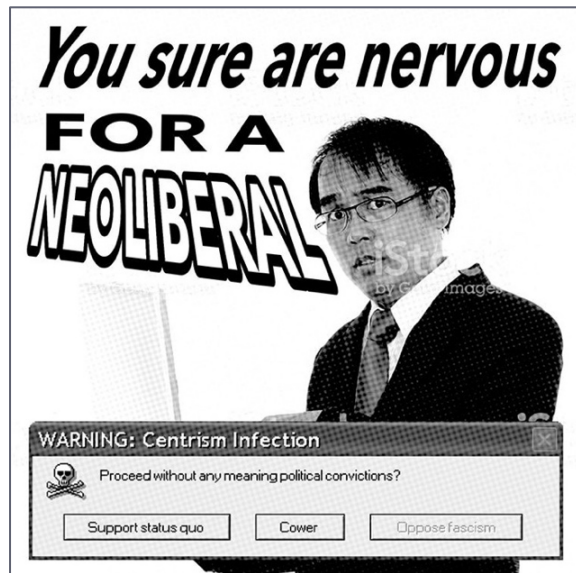
FIGURE 2 "Meme Covers vol.18" source: https://www.instagram.com/p/b7e73o4f7he/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
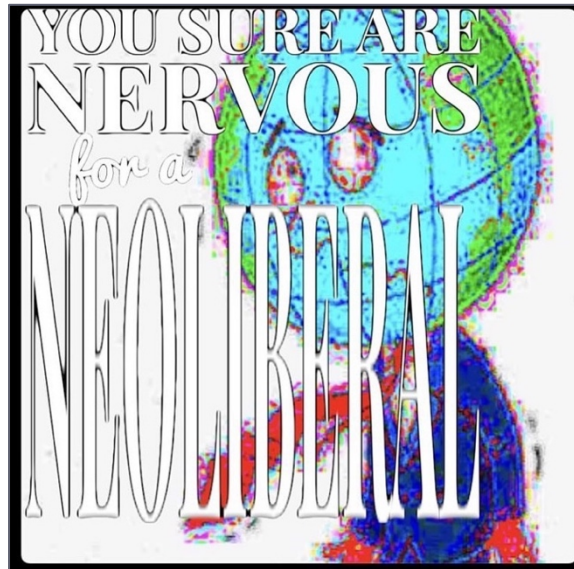
FIGURE 3 "Meme Covers vol.18" source: https://www.instagram.com/p/b7e73o4f7he/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

"(a) a *group of*[3] digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance (b) that were created with awareness of each other (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users." (Shifman, 2014 : 8)

Similarly, Milner (2016) refers to memetics rather than memes to emphasize the intertextuality of memes. Thus, integrating the participatory process of its creation onto the definition itself as to assert the prevalence of the process and context over the digital image. Milner contends that a meme comes into being through the memetic process of participation by re-appropriation.

It is undeniable that the memetic intertextuality – as not only the replication of text, but of any other visual marker – is fundamental in understanding how memes became memes, and how they are perceived as part of a broader culture. However, the indiscriminate grouping of memes as inherently part of a whole can be theorized without disengaging from artistic individuality. The context in which memes are born, evolve and die is in itself of a participatory nature. Digital media convergence and ever-growing hyper-connectivity have resulted in a generalized situation in which meaning is built and reshaped by collective forces. Since memes have become mainstream, they are now, more than ever, an ethereal concept. They have replaced the term 'joke' in the digital sphere by absorbing traditional text-based humour into the wider category of online humor, aka. Memes. As observed in table 2, the use of the word 'joke(s)' on the Google

[3] Emphasis added

search engine has inversely decreased when the word 'meme(s)' increased in popularity.[4] Although not an extensive statistical study, this comparison may shine a light on the way meme have slowly become a cannibalistic concept constantly expanding to absorb all digital images at its reach.[5]
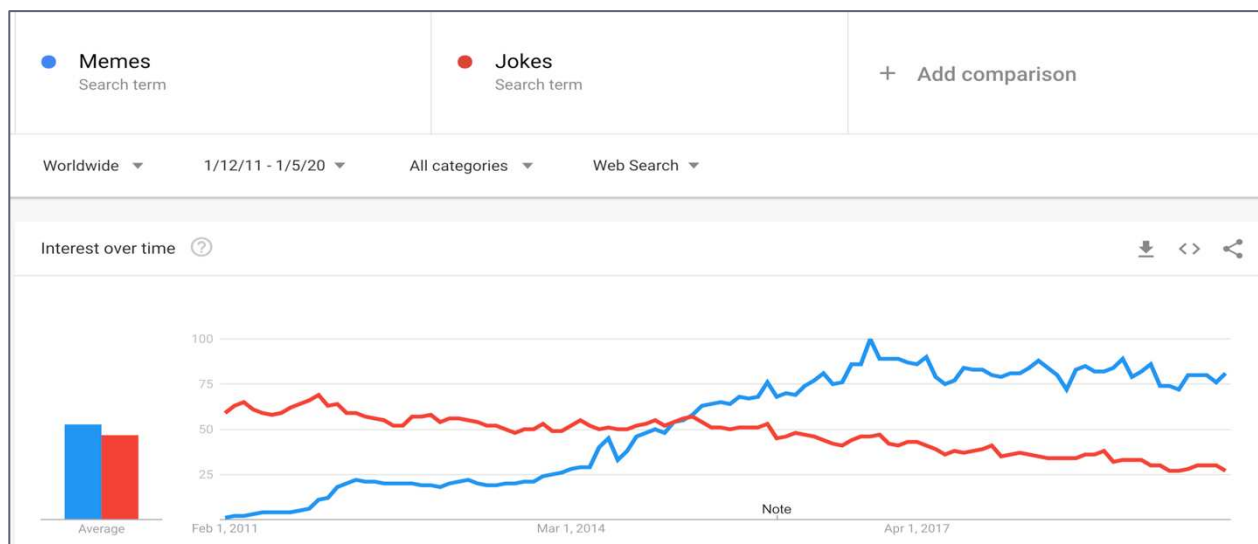
TABLE 2 – Google trend analysis tool. Source : https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2011-01-12%202020-01-05&geo=US&q=memes,jokes

It seems therefore necessary to formulate a definition of memes that incorporates the legacy of Shifman and Milner, while taking into account the evolution of the concept over time and within digital culture. This research attempts to define new conceptual tools to understand memes within the environment of media convergence and artistic creation. Groups of memes that follow the characteristics stipulated by Shifman - point a, b and c presented above- will be labelled memeplexes. This term allows for the acknowledgement of wider cultural influences while maintaining the possibility of spontaneous creation. A definition of memes and memetic media that revolves around its mimetic potential seems to restrict the possibility of a meme ever being posted online without being re-interpreted. While they are in fact individual units part of a whole, the communicative perspective requires that they validate their relevance by matter of number. The more replication and mimicking takes place, the more recognizable and memetic it is.

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[4] Data from January 2011 to May 2020[4].

[5] Here the use of the word 'cannibalistic refers to the way the concept of memes has expanded and 'fed its expansion' by absorbing other concepts such as 'online joke' and 'digital image'.

However, it can be demonstrated that integrating memes within an artistic framework can allow for new openings in their definition and understanding.

Consider the additional characteristic as follows:

1) They are created, shared and mimicked units of cultural communication that belong to the artistic realm. Artists can influence each other, show affiliation with specific branches of meme art or create their own niche branch. This allows meme artists to create a style and an aesthetic without quantifying its success based on mimetic proliferations.

2) As such, art is in the eyes of the beholder and memes in the feed of the user. The concept of memes expands beyond communication to become a concept attributed by the audience or the producer. The potential for a digital image to be labelled as such resides in whether or not it will be produced and seen in a context that allows it to be categorized as a meme.

3) This new lens allows the audience of digital media users to attribute meme qualities to any digital image whether or not it was produced or re-produced with this intention.

Here, the definition reaches a breaking point from prior research. These added characteristics to the traditional theory of memes are by no means in opposition with previous literature. They create a better foundation for this research, which attempts to understand the implications of the digital image and its endless replications as part of a new artistic world. The new wave of art presented here stands at the intersection of memetic logic and digital design, where naturally, replication and ownership become blurred concepts. Although they did in fact originate in the traditional 'text and image humoristic remix' format, this thesis presents memes outside of a purely communicative perspective: as performance of digital art and craft. The meme artists and their creations presented throughout this paper are part of wider memeplexes, but these have shrunk to include single authors/artists who replicate their own style in digital galleries, and participatory meme covers within niche meme branches.

These modifications made to the previously existing definitions of memes are necessary to understand a type of meme that has strayed away from mainstream hyper-shareable content to become its own genre. They are instrumental in exploring their content and understanding their form. The discussion that follows in Chapter 2 will make a case for the emergence of memes in the artistic realm, the offline effort to integrate internet art to the current artistic landscape, and their evolution in format over the years.

Chapter 2. 'Not sure If Art': a case for Digital Meme Art

2.1. "Wow, this is a culture in a real sense," he recalls thinking. "It's not just people fooling around online."[6]

FIGURE 4 "Not Sure If Art" by Aled Lewis source: https://nineteeneightyeight.com/collections/memes

The impact of memes in our society has been continuously evolving. They have acquired new interpretative layers and artistic values due not only to the increasing use of design software in the creation of original memes, but also offline initiatives. The perception of memes has shifted, and a number of establishments and artists have attempted to present them as an emerging school of postmodern art (Schimkowitz, 2018). To name a few, the biennial Internet culture convention ROFLCon (Walker, 2010) was held at MIT and featured internet celebrities. Since its inauguration in 2008 the convention has presented memes as well as meme artists. In the United States the interweaving of analogue art and memes continued, such as the Internet Cat Video festival, a yearly held celebration of online cat videos which drew a crowd of 10,000 people in 2013 (Walker Art Centre, 2014). In LA, Gallery1988 offers meme print for sales, one of them aptly titled "Not Sure if Art" by Aled Lewis (see Fig. 4). Other galleries such as the UCLA New Wight Gallery presented a "Rare Meme exhibition" displaying analogue interpretation created by students of the Design/Media arts Master of Fine art. One student interviewed by the Daily Bruin was quoted saying:

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[6] Tim Hwang as quoted in Walker, 2010. Tim Hwang is currently a researcher at the Berkman center and founded ROFLCon during his years as a student.

"Our work has ideas that could be shared and mutated and spread around, possibly through the internet (…) At the same time we know that our objects are unique in their nature, an interesting contradiction." (Aiyar, 2015).

The quotation reveals the delicate position in which meme art finds itself: reaching for acknowledgement of its validity of form and yet bringing a novel concept of ephemeral uniqueness and collective participation. Leaving artists to feel as though the art produced could never remain in their ownership alone and yet encapsulates their personal and unique expression of creativity and craft. Much like traditional offline art, memes can assert their independence from purpose and meaning to become expression. In recent years, they have evolved outside of their mimetic function into Late Stage memes. They have gone beyond the communicative level, to become an expression of absurdity, with hints of surrealism.

However, before delving into the complexities of Late Stage memes, the following section will present a possible history of their becoming.

FIGURE 5 Surreal meme "You either die or live long enough to become" source: https-//me.me/i/you-either-die-or-live-long-enough-to-surrealmemes-src-8e0cb672dfd84bebb124dd84a56c9cb1

2.2. Through the Ages of meme, from function to form.

Their format and purpose over the years have evolved at a fast and erratic pace since they first entered mainstream culture. To resituate them into a broader 'historical' framework shines a light on the process of emancipation from early memetic formats into Late Stage surrealist memes. This account starts in 2006, memes from an earlier period were individual instances of viral success or remained within the context of specialised sites and obscure message boards. Mainstream memes represent the 'easily consumable and consumed goods', they are ad friendly, mom-friendly and SFW[7]. It is the light-hearted, easily understood and exclusively humoristic branch of what originated in an internet sub-culture.

However, it must be written here that like every piece of information excavated from the depth of a subreddit, this proposed history of memology has no pretence to be universally truthful, comprehensive or reliable.

FIGURE 6 "advice dog" source : https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/advice-dog

The first memes of the mainstream wave are part of the early golden age. They were composed of a pinwheel background, with a usually white font text added above or below a central image. The large amount of pet photos readily available on the internet was reflected in the emergence of Advice Dogs (see fig. 6). (Börzsei , 2013) These memes were originally light hearted and used specific photos with identifiable memetic meanings.

The Late Golden age is a variation of the original advice animals but are now composed of an image and impact text. LOLCats are some of their most notorious examples (see fig. 7)

FIGURE 7 'lolcat' source : http://acidcow.com/pics/23496-funniest-lolcats-ever-15-pics.html

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[7] Online slang indicating that the material presented is Safe For Work.

Transitional Memes are screenshots and photos taken from Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. They include reactions from other users to encourage the desired meaning transmission (see fig.8)

Silver Age Memes are inspired from the design of transitional memes but do not need to source their content in other social media platforms anymore. The text acquired more importance and the image became secondary in providing meaning. (see fig. 9)

New Age memes mark a breakthrough in memetic meanings. At this stage, photos and symbolic markers have acquired more importance and the text is either non-existent or reduced to a secondary indication of contextual meaning. Memetic definitional and situational expression have made the images self-explanatory. (see fig.10)
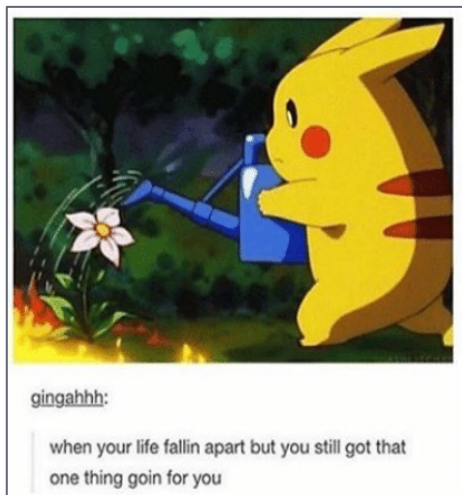

figure 8 Tumblr meme "when your life falling apart"
https://pics.me.me/gingahhh-when-your-life-fallin-apart-but-you-still-got-12059113.png

figure 9. Silver Age Meme. "2020 graduation on the Sims" source:
https://www.facebook.com/royalmemeoway/photos/a.1685715008407271/2472138899764874/?type=3&theater

figure 10. New Age Meme. source:
https://www.facebook.com/royalmemeoway/photos/a.168571500840727
1/1701823020129803/?type=3&theater

Finally, Late Stage memes emerge of this slow process of distancing form text and memetic meaning. Their text might aim at confusing the audience to create a less easily understood or relatable meme. Including other sub-categories such as surreal memes, nuked memes or deep-fried memes (see fig. 11, 12, 12*,13), they present themselves as devoid of coherent meaning or usual indicators of humorous content. The joke has become absurd, and absurdity became a series of "loops of self-referential quips" at which only millennials seem to laugh (Bruenig, 2017).

figure 11. Surreal Meme. source: surreal-memes-are-
like-tesseracts-they-have-multiple-dimensions-src-
35319602.png

2.3. Late Stage SURREAL [8]: Nonsensical Memes for Disillusioned Teens

A key feature of Late stage memes is the distinct separation from what is considered 'normie content' - namely mainstream, easily consumed memes. They assert their own independence - and to some extent, subjective superiority – over older meme genres and formats.

On r/surrealmemes the admin introduces them as follows:

> "Surreal memes are supposed to be hard to comprehend, BUT are supposed to have some sort of relatable, hidden meaning behind them. (…)
>
> 1. Does your meme make you and possibly others question reality?
>
> 2. Does your meme make memes on r/me_irl and r/dankmemes look like they were made by normies?
>
> 3. Does your meme have some sort of hidden meaning behind it?"
>
> (u/typicallydankdankmemes, s.d.)

Users and creators are requested to play with the existential themes and esoteric aesthetic of surrealism while striking a balance of relatability. Instead of attempting to restore a sense of meaning, they play with the uncertainty of the reality that surrounds them. Interviewed for Motherboard, Ryan Milner commented:

> "This is a group of people that are finding their humor in pushing to absurdity the common tropes of internet memes (Milner cited in Matsakis, 2017)

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[8] A trademark of surrealist memes, the unintelligible font composed of symbols is often seen on r/surrealmemes (Reddit)

These concepts are not without connections to the late 20th century genres of absurd and surreal art, Dadaism and Pop Art. Before the digital image, the copy-and-paste tools existed in their analogous equivalent, allowing to 'misplace' everyday items in a new artistic context reminiscent of Marchel Duchamp's urinal, ironically called *Fountain* (Jones, 2009). Milner stated that they aim to "break the mold of what people are expecting to the point of shocking them into alertness (…) There is a Salvador Dali vibe to it" (Matsakis, 2017). Playing with the expectation of the audience, they contend that their meme art does not need to make sense if offline reality does not either. At their earlier stage these memeplexes were criticized for their lack of clear messages (The Perspective , 2018). This tendency represents a desire to valorise style over content. Early work in meme absurdism therefore lacked an important and fundamental aspect of art : that beyond the surprise - which quickly fades, art should make us feel and think differently about reality. Linda Weindtraub writes "If art doesn't sensitize us to something in the world, clarify our perceptions, make us aware of the decisions we have made, it's entertainment." (Weindtraub cited in Wallach, 1997) In their process of becoming art, these memes repudiated every semblance of immediate purpose and utility to establish the dominance of aesthetics over purpose. This was undeniably a necessary step in the process of detaching memes from a communicative, humoritic, utility-based function, and onto the realm of artistic form for its own sake. However, art that *is*, but does not remain relevant is doomed to become extinguished. When its only meaning reflects a meaningless reality, it lacks the necessary political component or social dimension to remain relevant beyond its purely aesthetic value.

Figures 12 & 12* 'Surreal Meme' source: https///www.reddit.com/r/wholesomesurrealmemes/comments/dvsblr/the_legs_on_the_bus_go/

The following chapter explores the reconciliation of Late Stage memes with their communicative purpose expressed in online activism. It explores the work of the artists that continued the legacy of early surreal, deep-fried or nuked memes, and imbued it with messages. Developing the aesthetic and texts to both let their voices

be heard, and continue depicting the sometimes humoristic, sometimes bleak absurdity of the society around them.

Figure 13 'Deep Fried Meme' source: https://www.reddit.com/r/deepfriedmemes/comments/gl6wid/she_is_straight_up_gone/

Chapter 3. Meme art & Activism:

On the desire to make the complex simple, the threatening palatable and the under-represented seen.

"Instead we see online the emergence of a new kind of anti-establishment sensibility expressing itself in the kind of DIY culture of memes and user-generated content that cyberutopian true believers have evangelized about for many years, but had not imagined taking on this particular political form"

- Angela Nagle, Kill all Normies, 2017

3.1. Expressing dissent in form, content and stance

Memes have strongly positioned themselves in the cultural and digital landscape of our time as both piece of art and units of communication. They are the native language of social media, and as such have made themselves the vector of political and social opinions. Methahaven described memes as the "resistance of today, just as political posters were yesterday – the embodiment of shared ideas in a community" (Metahaven, 2013). Furthermore, in protest the heavy use of cardboard signs echoing well-known memes with a political twist reinforces the place of political memes in communicating activist ideas offline and online. It has become the norm to see protest related memes spread on the internet every time a movement or event gained the attention of the public eye. Occupy Wallstreet saw the spread of memes supporting their movement but also criticizing it. One of the most notorious one being the *Pepper-Spraying Cop* (see fig. 14) The example chosen on figure 14, reminiscent of LOLcats and loltalk [9] can be understood following

Figure 14 "Pepper-Spraying Cop"
https:///thesocietypages.org/socimages/files/2011/11
/power1.jpeg

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[9] A voluntarily incorrect sentencing and spelling that emerged with LOLcats. A notorious example of this is the meme representing a grey cat with the sentence "I can haz cheezburger" and the endless variations it sparked online.

Shifman's research. Shifman (2014) proposes to analyse three dimensions of a meme: *content, form* and *stance.*

They can be explained as follows:

1) *Content* refers to textual elements: their meaning and the ideas or ideologies conveyed.

2) *Form* refers to visual – and sometimes audible - indicators of style, format and artistic choice.

3) *Stance* refers to the information conveyed by the memes in rapport to its communication as well as political, social or cultural positioning.

The three dimensions prove instrumental in understanding the visual and textual nature - content and form - as well emphasizing the ideology and positioning towards the subject of a specific meme - stance. Using figure 14 as an example, here the content is composed of a two-word humoristic semantic (Loltalk) as a way to ridicule the claim that the "kittyz" shown are "Bad". The form voluntarily opposes kittens to the Pepper-Spraying Cop in a simple photoshop collage. Both content and form point to the absurdity of the situation by presenting a symbolically innocent victim – the 'kittyz' – and the 'Pepper Spraying Cop' as the unfair aggressor. It ridicules the situation by emphasizing the disproportionate reaction of the aggressor on the innocent victim. Adding a humoristic dimension to the image, the meme light-heartedly draws a parallel between the innocent protester and the unfairness of police brutality, clarifying that it stands against it. Its stance reveals itself in the form and content, here the author of the meme position themselves against 'Pepper-Spraying Cop' and in support of the protesters symbolized by the 'kittyz'.

Humour is the trojan horse of political propagation, it follows similar principles to Zuckerman's *Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism* (2008). The theory posits that wherever people share pictures of 'cute cats' – the term is used to include any popular online content - is also an excellent platform for political activism. If the platform was to be censored, the audience-users would protest it to access their 'cute cat' content. (Zuckerman, 2008) Humour in memes becomes the 'cute cat' as well as the activist

message, thus it functions has both a protector of the message and a factor in its dispersion.

The simplicity of the meme associated with the humorous undertone and its potential for dispersion make it a perfect vehicle for the expression of dissent. As stated by Shifman (2014: 173) "Memes constitute a shared sphere of cultural knowledge; they allow us to convey complex ideas within a short phrase or image". Memetic meanings can be instrumentalized to communicate complex ideas hand in hand with visual indicators of form.

The interview with four meme artists further explores the interplay of humour and politico-social messages. Throughout the discussions, all four artists have talked about their desire to make the complex simple, the threatening palatable and the under-represented seen. Their testimony and personal experiences shine a light on the process of creation and expression they undergo when posting memes on Instagram.

3.2. Interview findings: Palatability, Accessibility and Representation

The four artists interviewed live in the United States, are between the age of 20 to 30 years old and use Instagram as a digital platform for the propagation of their art or curation of their digital gallery. They were asked to reflect on the concept of memes as a digital art form, the potential for activism in meming and the interplay of humour in trolling as a controversial form of online activism. The semi-structured interview allowed for different themes to emerge. The censoring of their content as well as their role as an artist-user-moderator on the platform was discussed. The cathartic nature of their memes and the personal dimension to their activist expression was a recurrent feeling shared amongst all four artists. Personal factors such as: being women or non-binary in a male dominated culture, living as an ethnic minority in the US, as well as their personal experiences of structural and inter-personal marginalization were discussed.
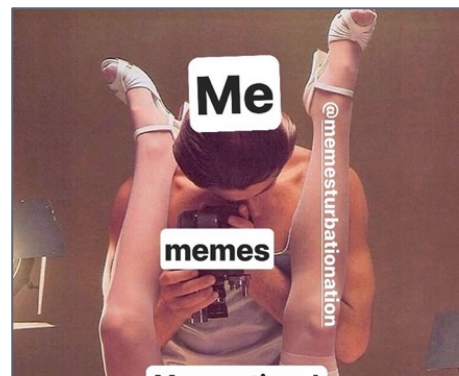

figure 15
"i know y'all don't like the meta ones but i'm not here to do what you like"
source:
https://www.instagram.com/p/cajm12in rom/

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In regard to activism, the concepts that most appeared throughout the interviews were *palatability* and *accessibility*. When asked about art, memes and activism, all answers returned to the question of 'how to give access to this political information and how to increase representation and dispersion?'.

The aforementioned concepts can be explained as follows:

1) *Palatability* has to be understood as the semantic and humoristic effort to make complex political ideas easy to understand as well as attractive to the audience. Humoristic elements increase the palatability by engaging with the audience in a non-threatening way.

2) *Accessibility* on a semantic level can refer to linguistic accessibility, which here falls under the umbrella of *palatability*. However, the interviews uncovered two more social dimensions which will be the focus of the concept of *accessibility* in this research:

   a. *Inclusivity* as the voluntary representation of marginalized groups as a form of protest to oppressive super-structures that under-represents them.

   b. *Equal Digital opportunities* as the possibility to access resources that would not be accessible for reasons relating to race, gender, disability, mental strain, education and wealth.

These concepts are interconnected. To identify them separately does not account for their relation to each other. Hence, the definition (1; 2 a, b) serve to provide the necessary ground to simultaneously understand them in their individuality and interconnectivity. The words of the artist can best explain the importance of these concepts and how they interact with them through their meme accounts.

> T.C   "Palatability is really important especially when it comes to politics. (…) Nobody is going to be open to hearing them (the messages) if we use non-accessible language. (…) The revolutionary semantic can feel scary to someone that hasn't been exposed to it before.

(…) If you slowly open the door and draw people in, they're more likely to listen to the message

> Y.N   "For me, a meme is the most concise way to convey super high complex analogies and ideas.[10] (…) Memes are more people friendly. Like my mom would sooner be able to enjoy a meme than something in a gallery. (…) (Because) it's an amalgamation of things we've already seen."

> T.W   "I find a lot of my memes do represent the mindset of anarcho- communism in smaller forms. I take individual pieces of it and I try to address it, because as a whole it's hard to do. (…) I try to put my thoughts into a palatable format (…) not to make anything too complicated because I know academic wordings can be confusing. I didn't go to college. A lot of my peers didn't go to college either. So, I just try to make the wording as accessible as possible (…) if I can spark this interest in people to go out and learn a little bit more, I'm achieving my goal"

The meme format is inherently disposed to present an idea in simpler terms by marrying textual information and visual symbolism. Its communicative characteristics as presented by Dawkins and Shifman[11] as well as its visual and artistic form can express complex concepts in a more palatable way. Its 'visual display allows greater integration between politics and pop culture' (Shifman, 2014) and their heavy reliance on cultural elements, and memetic meaning make them more intuitive and accessible form of activist art.

> M.A.C   "I feel like humor is the best way to make people be open to new ideas, because, it's presented in a way that is not threatening or accusatory. It's just making you laugh, making a joke can help people become more open-minded."

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[10] as explored in Chapter 1

T.W   "It's kind of introduced in a different manner than if it was a very important like scary topic. Instead 'here's a funny joke that kind of involves important messages, let's think about it!"

T.C   "I gained knowledge of politics through memes (…) It was more like 'ahah isn't it funny that we are all exploited by capitalism?' and I thought: 'Yeah, I guess I agree with that'. (…) The sarcasm and the irony engage people"

Humour has a crucial function in increasing the palatability of the messages. It makes sense of painful phenomena and experiences of alienation. It soothes the edges of the political opinions shared and allows them to become enjoyable, amusing and entertaining whilst simultaneously raising awareness of these issues and engaging with the audience. In addition, jokes have the limitless potential to increase dispersion of the meme and its message, thus re-enforcing its socio-political impact.

Y.N   "Memes are not inaccessible, the way painting can be inaccessible to certain people who don't want to go to museums, or can't do that (…) memes can reach those people. (…) Especially now dealing with this pandemic[12], I have friends who've been talking about, inclusivity in terms of activism for a long time and the idea that people who are disabled, people who have depression, people who are agoraphobic, can't leave their house. They can't physically be at a protest; how can they be politically active?"

T.W   "A lot of people don't see online activism as real activism. They think that you have to be going to protests in real life. As someone who struggles with agoraphobia and bad social anxiety. I'm personally not able to show up in the world the way I want to as an activist. This is how I personally express my activist nature, just because I can't show up the way that more abled people are. I feel like it's a lot easier for my art to get recognition online since it's very easy to share it (…) it will get like a lot more views than if I were to make art

and get it to be in a gallery. (…) I can make it on my phone, upload it on my phone and everyone can view it on their phone."

        T.C   "The difference *(between digital and analogue art)* is how widely it can be transmitted online and the immediacy of it. It's extremely low cost, that's the beauty of it."

Accessibility is greatly improved by the low-resources necessary to both produce and consume memes. Galleries become digital galleries on Instagram where an access to the internet is the only necessary condition to visit or curate them. It creates the possibility to access digital spaces of artistic and activist expression anywhere the internet connection goes. It has been instrumental in allowing usually under-represented demographics and populations in the artistic and societal realm of western societies to raise their voice with new digital opportunities.

        Y. C   "The internet helps that, it moves ten times faster. That's why people go to art school, but I can't do that, I don't want to do that. Meme was a way to cheat the system, because I don't need the system to validate my thoughts."

        T.C   "Memes are a kind of platform where you don't have to have an arts degree. You don't have to have any degree, you could have dropped out of high school, you know, you don't need to have a publisher, you don't need a gallerist, nothing like that. So, it really evens out the field (…) It also means that a certain language comes (…) into the memes and certain themes that might not otherwise be seen in a gallery setting or a "highbrow" setting. (…) I hate art so much. I have my bachelor's in fine arts, and I have my Master's in fine art, and I fucking hate art. I hate the politi-text of it. I hate the socio-political hierarchies. I hate the notions of taste involved. And I hate the fact that it's so inaccessible. It's created for certain people (…) no one can afford it. Whereas memes, are something more of the people, and I think because of that it's more valuable. I don't know if I have the power to empower others. I only use woman of colour in my memes *(because)* we need more people of colour in our feeds, what the hell! The lack of representation can make us feel like we can't stand up politically."

M.A.C   A lot of the people that came out making meme account 'just for fun' are women of color, trans, non-binary, people that live in poverty and they're doing this as a genuine outlet (…) it's presenting marginalized voices. Before the internet and social media, when you wanted to have you voice heard or your opinion on the issue known it was so hard to reach a wider audience. On Instagram if you make the content everybody can pretty much blow up, I think that's the most influential thing to come out of this whole culture : previously marginalized voices are having a platform, if you are a marginalized person, even just talking about your day or what you had for breakfast to an extent is political. You're introducing a narrative that is not mainstream, even if it's not specifically about an issue. I identify as non-binary and that affects me a lot. It became really clear that only white women were getting elevated in that (*feminist meme)* culture and they were only allowed to talk about certain issues, like complaining about skaters ghosting them. Women of color weren't being heard as much, they face so many more challenges in society and receive different privileges.[13] You can't speak for other; you can only try to elevate their voices (…) I'm just trying to speak my mind but because of conditions my mind is controversial. I want to say something that I am connected to. Almost like I am writing a poem and then fuck It up with a picture

Inclusivity and representation acquire a revolutionary function when used against the unevenly distributed public representation. Milner pointed out that inequality in mediated participation continue to manifest 'around age old identity categories like class, race, gender, sexuality and ability' (2016: 117). However, it follows that memetic logic can facilitate the participation of *counterpublic[14]* in finding like-minded

[13] M.A.C continued to discuss the issue of representation and censorship, future research indications encourage the study of this phenomenon "The Instagram algorithm, it seems, like it's getting rid of women of color or queer people and only elevating ad friendly white women. (…)" see Appendix 1

[14] "The term *subaltern counterpublic* was conceptualized by Nancy Fraser (1997) as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 81). Emanating from a critique of Jurgen Habermas' articulation of a common public sphere predicated on consensus and the bracketing of difference (Laubach Wright, 2012), Fraser argued that in the "real world conditions of massive *in*equality " (Fraser, 2009, p. 83,)Habermas' call for subjugation of difference in service to the mythical common good perpetuates systems of domination and discrimination. The creation of subaltern counterpublics offers subordinated social groups a means of support and collective resistance." (Qualitative Counterpublics in Higher Education , 2012)

communities of support and challenge 'dominant antagonisms'. Without representation, oppressive beliefs can expand to become a 'constructed centrality' (Jackson, et al., 2000). Exploring whiteness online, Jackson et al., contend that when unmarked, whiteness spreads throughout social spaces to become a 'universal insider'. Namely the implicit acknowledgement of whiteness as the standard of all. Similarly, we see online the hyper-masculinization of all social spaces. Rule 30 of the Internet states "There are no girls on the internet"[15] (Internet Archive , s.d.). Without representative resistance, the internet becomes nothing more than an echo of analogue structures of power: very white and very male. Memes allow for a polyvocal expression in which multiple ideas and identities are negotiated and represented. (Milner, 2016)

In conclusion, this chapter explored the disruptive function of meme art in their capacity to express dissent against dominant structures. The four meme artists interviewed demonstrated the power of palatability and accessibility as a tool to disperse political and social ideas and raise awareness. Their role in representing their identity and community as opposed to the 'constructed centrality' of dominant representation has proved to be necessary in bringing forth the marginalized voices of western society.

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[15] preceded by "all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents" and followed by "TITS or GTFO" (Internet Archive , s.d.)

Chapter 4. Trolling the other for debate and the self for solidarity

4.1. *"Troll needs counter-troll"*[16]

Activism and counterpublic contestation can take on multitude of forms, and representative resistance can be applied to trolling. Although the term is often used to discuss alt-right, intolerant, violent and aggressive users, Milner makes a case for the use of trolling as a re-affirmation of the voices that could be excluded from the conversation because of the trolling that antagonises them. They state that "the danger is when those communicative norms further silence marginalized perspectives" (2016 :149). Demonstrating that exclusion is far worse than not having the possibility to debate. Milner (2014) refers to Phillips' quotation: "I too am reluctant to wholeheartedly claim for the feminist cause a rhetorical mode so thoroughly steeped in male domination. On the other hand, then, are means, however problematic, retroactively justified?" (2015:168) Both Phillips and Milner demonstrate the potential for debate in trolling to facilitate healthy 'adversarial engagement'.

The meme artists have voiced a similar desire to spark debate with their 'troll content', some have embraced the playfully oppositional dynamic of trolling, and others describe the difficulty of facing other trolls.

> T.W Whenever I post anything about fat phobia or fat positivity (…)I have had to turn off the comments in the past because it's turned into a garbage fire of miseducation, stigmas and blatant hate. [17] It's not trying to debate anything, it's just straight up hateful. (…) it does get a little overwhelming. I've started staggering out my fatphobia

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[16] Milner, 2016 :149

[17] Although not discussed in this research paper, the rest of T.W's interview presents a support for future research on the subject of moderation and censorship: "It gets overwhelming for me as a moderator. Sometimes I don't know if I should keep the comment section open to just let people express what they need to express or if I should be censoring and moderating. It gets confusing as someone who (…) didn't expect to have this platform. (…) Usually it depends on the severity of the messages and how violent or mis-directed they are. Blatant insult is definitely where I draw a line (…)" see Appendix 1

posts because like I get so much backlash every single time, I post anything about it.

Y.N   I know people who had to stop because they couldn't handle it, they started receiving death threats. I used to as well, when I used to make more feminist posts, because the internet is full of little boy trolls (…)

In some cases, the backlash from the audience impacts the artists capacity to propagate their message and art. In the following segment on trolling, they show how trolling can be instrumentalized to spark debate. The artists have explicitly employed 'the aggressive adversarial humour that characterizes (…) trolling in order to push against the white, male centrality prevalent in participatory media collectives" (Milner, 2016:138). Meme culture integrates this aspect of playful provocation in its humour. In turn it can be utilized to actively raise awareness and discuss.

Y.N   I am actively trolling. That is the tool that I am using to spread (mis)information. While still being funny and not aggressive, just look at our president Trump.

T.C   The discussion and conflict can lead to education, conflict is good. If you don't have it no one is gonna grow. (…) Sometimes it's fun.

T.W   Even if I'm not like directly educating (…) At least in my comment section it sparks debate. In a way I could definitely be a troll, but a troll to the right wing, left trolling the right, some centrist, or some apolitical. (…) I'm kind of just trolling and putting out a message at the same time. (…) you really got to make sure your message is clear.

Trolling has allowed them to create debates in the comment sections of their meme posts. It created a situation of agonistic adversarial pluralism, namely the antagonism of opposing perspective with an equal right to debate. (Mouffe in Milner 2014:139). Troll-generated debates raise the interest, awareness and engagement of the audience with the message at hand. The next section explores the trolling of the self that allows artists to connect with the audience and create a community.

4.2. Trolling of the self to spark solidarity

The discourse of individuality, intimacy and derision was consistent throughout the interviews conducted. The artists discussed the cathartic nature of their meme art, noting that self- derision of their own intimate problems online had created and maintained a supportive community around them. Not only did this respond to their desire to express themselves and be understood, but it allowed other users to feel connected to their art and messages by relating on an emotional level.

> T.C   It's introspection as to what my own behavioural patterns are. And sometimes it's, you know, catharsis. A lot of times it (*the meme*) comes out of anger or seeing people behaving a certain way. I love playing. I usually flip it on its head so I don't point the finger at other people, I make it about me. It's funnier that way, if I'm making fun of myself rather than berating other people. Also we're all hypocrites, so it probably applies to me anyway (…) I see that other people relate and that I'm not that crazy. Having a voice is important to me. When I was growing up, my voice was stifled a lot. Now I have a place where I go and I can say whatever the fuck I want and it's all mine. I guess I'm looking for some catharsis and validation, that I'm not the only person that thinks this way (…) I always struggled with self-worth for a lot of different reasons, like being a woman of color, or being the daughter of an immigrant father with crazy gender roles ideas. So, I try to put some of these positive self-worth themes out there. It's a coping mechanism but I also have hopes that maybe someone will find some help through it. They might recognize their own thinking or behavioural patterns through it

> T.W.   My meme page started off as a personal page, I never intended it to be strictly a meme page. (…) Sometimes a post gets a boom of likes, it feels validating. I'm glad that other people feel similarly, I'm not alone in my experience (…) I find that it's very cathartic. It's definitely a very productive way of dealing with my emotions when I

don't have anywhere else to go. I get like half of the catharsis making the meme and then the rest of it comes once I actually post it.

Y.N   Social media is like my diary (…) I feel like it needs to be said. I feel like other people aren't saying it and I have the tools and the platform to say it. People told me it helps them. If not, I would just delete it. (…) If you want to make art that reaches people, you really have to bear yourself naked.

This chapter attempted to expose two fundamental aspect of trolling in meme culture: its activist-communicative function, and as a tool for self-derision and humour. The meme artists interviewed instrumentalize trolling as a humoristic tool to actively engage with the audience and raise awareness of their activist messages. In their personal process or art creation, it has allowed them to openly discuss their struggles and emotions under the safe cover of humour. Their trolling of the self and online self-derision allowed the audience to connect and relate with their emotions and ultimately create a sense of community.

Methodology

This research was carried out with the collaboration of meme artists. It used live web interview transcripts to make sense of the meme phenomenon as lived and expressed by the artists chosen.

Criteria for selecting the subjects were as follows:

- They must use the social media Instagram to promote and share their memes.

- They must create original memes, re-interpret existing ones or curate online meme galleries.

- They must engage with notions of activism and trolling in their meme creation and sharing.

- They must have a defined aesthetic that sets them apart from mainstream meme accounts.

- They must have agreed to a recorded interview for the purposes of this researcher.

These criteria allowed to reduce the scope of this research to the artists that engage with activism and trolling; but also demonstrated a capacity to either curate or create a coherent artistic style throughout their account feed. Their accounts were evaluated as digital gallerias, and as such had to present particular characteristics of style and form. The accounts chosen are diverse and engage with a wide range of contents as well as aesthetics.

At the time of the interviews their account were called @Males_are_cancelled (M.A.C), @Yung_nihilist (Y.N), @Th0t_catalog (T.C) and @Titty.Wrangler (T.W)

The interview method was chosen for its capacity to gather data that would accurately reflect the artists honest opinions on their art and creation. The aim of the interview is to highlight the personal and emotional work of these artists

without researching an overarching theory of absolutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and time for free discussion was made available. They lasted approximately 80mins each. Semi-structured interviews allowed for discussions and evolutions of the thesis with the subjects; although the results cannot be generalized, they bring in-depth knowledge into the subject of the thesis. The meme artists were asked to reflect on the concept of art and digital memes, the elements of activism in their artistic practice and the interplay of humour as a trolling of the self with the audience.

The answers were transcribed, analysed, and gathered in this research as major factors in the development of the thesis and explorations of the subject.

Limitations and Future Research

The interview process is time and resource demanding; therefore, this research could not be extended to a wider number of participants under the current circumstances of COVID-19 and unfunded research.

 The information gathered allows for the in-depth understanding of the individual perception of the artists. However, the data is not suited to generalizations and cannot account for all meme artists. A wider effort to systematically interview the artists of our time could uncover very important results on the following subjects:

- the societal and cultural power dynamics of the digital era,

- re-define concepts of ownership, creation and the impact of direct contact with the audience on the artists,

- the impact of platform censoring on public debate and digital art as well as the complexities of the role of the user-artist in moderating, censoring and allowing debate on their account.

Future research in the matter would prove essential in requesting accountability from online platforms, as well as further understanding the future of collective expression and digital art.

Conclusion

A lot of what we do is silly, or goofy, it's a lot of having fun. It's activism but, I'm thinking far ahead, in order to have a revolution you need a community first. What we are doing as part of activism is building a community. And in order to build it and make it appealing, we make it fun. Instead of preaching ideals, we try to foster conversation. It's really targeted at younger generations and it's a lot of things that I wish I had seen when I was a teenager.

- Interview with @Males_are_cancelled (M.A.C)

This research paper explored three fundamental concepts of meme culture and their interplays. It posited that the study of internet memes must make use of Dawkins' legacy with precaution and move on to stand as its own research subject. The communicative perspective is useful in understanding information transmission and mimetic, however this paper has shown the benefits of understanding memes in a wider framework of artistic expression and activism. Much excellent work has been done on the subject of memes and the approach here wish to demonstrate the value of interpersonal interviews to gather data. It uncovered unexpected results and I hope this paper encourages the legitimization of digital meme artists and their opinions. As the outlet of the people for the people, and as an incredibly successful tool for socio-political messages and community formation, memes and their creators cannot be overlooked in the study of 21st century culture.

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Appendix 1: Interview Transcripts

1. *Interview with* **Males-are-Cancelled**

   On meme culture, marginalization, community and activism

I think I definitely see that the meme community that I am a part of is very far left, a lot of people are communists. I see a lot of people coming out in support of Bernie, but it's more because of circumstantial occurrence. I'd say that overall, the way that memes fit into the political climate and the concept of activism is more related to social issues, and I feel like a lot of social issues are the kind of things that people can change their mind about. I feel like humor is the best way to make people be open to new ideas, because you know, it's presented in a way that is not threatening or accusatory. It' just making you laugh (2:21), making a joke, that can help people become more open-minded.

But I don't think most people start meme accounts to be activists, they start by wanting to have fun. A lot of the people that start by having an activist account, when a lot of these are white men who don't know oppression, it becomes an aesthetic. Whereas, a lot of the people that came out making meme account 'oh you know just for fun' are women of color, trans, non-binary, people that live in poverty and they're doing this as a genuine outlet, I'd say this is where genuine content comes from. Within that content, if you are looking for political satire and activism you might have to filter through a lot. You might have a lot of jokes about pooping and cum mixed in there. But I feel like it's a more genuine, it's presenting marginalized voices. Before the internet and social media, when you wanted to have your voice heard or your opinion on the issue known it was so hard to reach a wider audience. On Instagram if you make the content everybody can pretty much blow up, I think that's the most influential thing to come out of this whole culture : previously marginalized voices are having a platform, if you are a marginalized person, even just talking about your day or what you had for breakfast to an extent is political. You're introducing a narrative that is not mainstream, even if it's not specifically about an issue. And that's very important: giving people exposure to it will help people gain a deeper understanding of how different people live in society

I started my page in 2017 and in 2017-18 I felt like there was a feminist community and after that I felt a split between white women and woc. I identify as non-binary and that affects me a lot. It became really clear that only white women were getting elevated in that culture and they were only allowed to talk about certain issues, like complaining about skaters ghosting them. Women of color weren't being heard as much, they face so many more challenges in society and receive different privileges.

The Instagram algorithm, it seems, like it's getting rid of women of color or queer people and only elevating ad friendly white women.

I am permanently banned from the explore page, I think they flag entire accounts if you ever made an inappropriate post. The explore page is to make the app more ad friendly but the user experience is worse. Shadow ban have different levels, some account if you type their name in the search bar, unless you follow them you won't find them, @Djin_Kazama/@yung-nihilist, I think that's the deeper level of the Shadow Ban. And It's all people of color getting censored, the white people aren't shadow banned. You can see that in the stats and insights, so you can see that you can see the "from explore page" metric, that's how I know that I'm not on the explore page anymore. This only happens for people that are shadow banned, other users still have it

I'm Chinese and I spent time in china when I was growing up, but in China everybody knows about censorship. In America people don't think that there is censorship, because instead of being controlled by the government its big corporation, that censor, and also control the government.

Twitter is better if you just want to be a comedian, but if you want to like, I want to be able to make people laugh but before I made memes, I was really into fashion design and graphic design. The design component of making images is kind of what I am personally more passionate about, activism is something that for me feels like it was born out of necessity. I'm just trying to speak my mind (22:15) but because of conditions my mind is controversial. I want to say something that I am connected to. Almost like I am writing a poem and then fuck It up with a picture. That's what I enjoy doing. I want it to be visual. We do things that are more creative now, but all meme creators still honor that original format of an image with a text.

I think for me I have to stay true to myself, even within activism if I am not staying true what am I doing? You can't speak for other; you can only try to elevate their voices. There is a lot of colorism in America, I try to raise awareness within my community about that.

I feel like feminism now implies white feminism, that is why I've distanced myself from that word, but I would never come out as not a feminist. All we want is equality.

Our movement is very non-binary, our perspective is inclusive, even the way some of us express femininity is unusual and unconventional. Instead of other feminist movements that used to It's really, like, a community, people disagree, people will get called out and cancelled. The drama really distracts from real issues

promote empowerments in ways that don't work for our generation.

A lot of what we do is silly, or goofy, it's a lot of having fun. It's activism but, I'm thinking far ahead, in order to have a revolution you need a community first. What we are doing as part of activism is building a community. And in order to build it and

make it appealing, we make it fun. Instead of preaching ideals, we try to foster conversation. It's really targeted at younger generations, it's a lot of things that I wish I had seen when I was a teenager.

2. Interview with **Yung_Nihilist**

I'm exploring the interaction between like arts activism, and trolling, I'm going to be asking you questions about those three subjects and how you relate to them. First of all, I'd like to know how you define the meme.

Yung_Nihilist
For me, a meme is like the most concise way to convey like, super high complex, like analogies and ideas. Together that image with the text on top, or either, like, literally overlaid on top of the image or, like classically, format where it's like Twitter meme format, where's the text on top and then the image on the bottom? Yeah, it's the easiest way of conveying like, a really high complex idea.

Um, how do you define art?

Yung_Nihilist
I mean kind of the same idea as names, except of course art hasbroader set of mediums like obviously the meme is just kind of stuck in the screen. But art can be you know, performance. It can be conceptual it can be art is a little more flexible in terms of medium I would say. Okay. Although memes can be really high concept, I feel like they're stuck on the screen. Which is why when people try to bring art into the gallery, it's always kind of awkward to me. Okay, you painted a meme and you put it on the wall like cool.

It's almost alien to their nature to be on a painting instead of being on the screen

Yung_Nihilist
 It's devolving it's not evolving. We're going backwards instead of forwards

Do you see memes of as art?

Yung_Nihilist
Yeah, I would say they have the ability to exist in that world, but they they're just kind of in their own lane. Because they're not bogged down by the things that like painting is. Memes are not inaccessible, the way painting can be inaccessible to certain people, who either just don't want to go to museums, they're not the kind of people who want or can to do that. You know, memes can reach those people. Which painting can't.

So do you mean accessibility as a bodily function?

Yung_Nihilist
Yeah, and from an intellectual standpoint like. Mmes are more people-friendly. Like my mom would sooner be able to enjoy a meme than then omething in a gallery

Do you think there was an element of the learning process that can be more intuitive with memes?

Yung_Nihilist
For sure, definitely. I think it's an amalgamation of things we've already seen. So like a sponge bob meme: there's like an endless amount of SpongeBob memes, because we know SpongeBob.

As an art form it is memes have to be accessible and relatable. Traditional artists had strayed so faraway from this need to be relatable. Traditional arts has given value to making itself incomprehensible, to everyone else that doesn't have the necessary culture and education to understand it. Where in a completely opposite way, memes are getting credit from being, in a way niche and branched out, but they still need to be relatable as a survival mechanism. Otherwise, they're not understood, we can't praise a meme for being completely mysterious.

Yung_Nihilist
I think that what makes them more powerful and useful, as a societal tool and the means of spreading information. I don't think art as it exists right now has the power to do that. It's kind of obsolete. In terms of connecting with people.Which is to its detriment. Which is why like there, there are a lot of this conversation about memes as art. People just don't want to look at art anymore in the traditional sense.

What is your process, to choose the memes that you post ?

Yung_Nihilist
In the beginning, I used to make a lot of stuff myself, original content, as they say. But that becomes very taxing. Especially when you're not being paid to do these things. And I just felt like I hit a wall with Photoshop. It's really hard to teach yourself how to use software. If you want to expand and like create weirder stuff it helps to know these tools. From being online so much, the people that I was following that I thought were actually funny weren't making original content. They're just like, black brown gay teens reposting content with these really funny, absurd captions. It would just be like, a random meme that can't be even traced back to its original. This is all under the umbrella of shitposting and trolling. So I found that trolling was much more fun than like, trying to make it myself. It's just funnier to me to have likethose like wild emojis with like boobs and it's just like a crazy caption.

Yung_Nihilist
I'm more of a curator in that sense. I have 18,000 pictures on my phone. Every once in a while. I will post something that's not that untraceable. And someone will be like 'Hey, this is mine. You tagged me ' and I do and it's fine.

Do you feel like the sense of ownership of a meme is important?

Yung_Nihilist
I used to champion that a bit more probably because I was making my mems and like watermarking things. Now, I don't care as much. That's the nature of a meme. Like it's supposed to, belong to the people in a very communist way. But definitely, if you can tag someone like do it! People who don't tag on purpose. To me. It's weird, especially if you have a following and could redirect people to that person. That's weird to me.

What is your relationship then with your audience?

Yung_Nihilist
My audience, It's weird. We have like a more chill relationship if I'm just like 'I hate myself' they're like 'no we love you' there is more of that dynamic. Um, obviously a lot of girls follow me, so there's a lot of them asking me for advice, like a big sister kind of thing. They think I know what I'm doing somehow. When I'm literally saying, I don't know what I'm doing.

How do you feel about that aspect of having a platform on Instagram?

Yung_Nihilist
I mean, it's part of being in the public eye, like, I've always leaned towards that, like always leaned towards like entertaining as a, as a coping mechanism as a possible career. So I feel like I'm already groomed for that.But it's stressful. Like it's always going to be stressful. They really make you feel like you have an impact. And it's like, Damn, I guess I do if you say I do, then I guess I'm impactful.

Do you feel like an activist?

Yung_Nihilist
Um, no, I think I tried to feel like one because I was doing all the things that they do. And then I realised like, I don't fit into that world. Exactly. And that showed me that I don't fit in there. I have a lot of activist friends and like I'm involved with the movement .But I'm like peripheral, you know.

That makes you an activist! Do you feel like you're proactive in trying to share messages that can be good to a greater cause?

Yung_Nihilist
 Of course. I don't know... it just kind of became cringe to me, the digital activist thing. And I didn't want to associate myself with those people. Yeah. So I didn't just like I wouldn't call myself that. But that is something I do and that I participate in and I try my best to share resources.

So could we say that it's something you do, but it's not something you would call yourself.

Yung_Nihilist
Period. Yes, right. Yes.

may ask for more details about why you don't want to be labelled as an activist?

Yung_Nihilist
Actual activists like that's their job. People living from that they work for actual non-profits or you know, that's what they do. When I look at myself, and I look at them, I was like, I'm not that.

Do you still feel like online activism can in any way be as relevant as traditional activism?

Yung_Nihilist
I mean, it has to be. I think, especially now dealing with this pandemic, I have friends who've been talking about, inclusivity in terms of activism for a long time and the idea that people who are disabled people, who have depression, people who are agoraphobic, can't leave their house. They can't physically be at a protest, how can they be politically active? And I feel like that's becoming more normalised now. And the sheer nature of the situation because we all have to be online. So we're forced to figure out a different method of achieving the same kind of effort.

Do you feel like you share specific messages in your posts?

Yung_Nihilist
Like do I have an agenda? Actually? Yes. an agenda a brand whatever you want to call it. Um yeah it definitely evolved. I'm not as man hating as I used to be, it's not revolutionary to just like, you know, deem an ntire half of the species as not worthy of intervention and that they just can't learn like.That's ridiculous. So I'm much more into like being inclusive. But obviously always with the emphasis on femininity and women's experience because that's what I know. My social media is just like my diary, so it's just changing as I'm changing. So I talk more about transcending the

stuff about being a woman that I don't like anymore. I'm tired of being depressed about it.

Yung_Nihilist
I think sometimes even uncomfortably so. At least for me, it can get kind of cringe, thinking of the things that are literally exposed about myself. My personal thoughts...

Why do you do it?

Yung_Nihilist
Part of it is a compulsion. And another part of it is because it feels like it needs to be said, Hmm. I feel like other people aren't saying it and I have the tools and the platform to say it.

How does it feel for you to mention things that might be very personal?

Yung_Nihilist
There's different layers. There's initially, a rush because you're just like literally word vomit. And you're just like, waiting to see like, the reactions come in. And obviously after there's like the cringe factor of like 'Damn, I really just told it like, 40,000 people about my deep trauma about my dad.' And then that kind of falls away and then you're just saying, okay, that informations out there. And I don't care anymore. And if it helps people then good! Because people told me it helps them. If not, I would just delete it.

Do you feel like there is an element of catharsis for you?

Yung_Nihilist
Yeah, for sure. I mean, that's just being an artist. That's what I identify as in general. Whether it's like memes or painting or music. That's the compulsion: to create in us by personal experiences material.

if you had to explain what you called your agenda and I called the messages you want to share. In few words, how would it be?

Yung_Nihilist
 Empowerment of all people, but specifically women, specifically black and brown peoples, specifically marginalised people, you know, people on the gender spectrum, people whose agenda aren't usually predominant in our culture, which is changing now obviously. Our culture is changing every day, especially in America and we're

starting to see the whole representation bait and switch, honestly, because I on't buy into the whole representation thing.

Yung_Nihilist
 Since I'm already engaged like in my activism in real life, social media just helps me to like share stuff with people, simple things like when people want to share GoFundMe, for people are in need. So that more people can see it. Or sharing, important political texts that have helped me grow, helped me learn. Sharing that with people who might not might not see it, or hear about it if it weren't for me. Or it would just take them longer to get to it. There's so much stuff that I'm like, if I had read this in high school, like I wouldn't have wasted all that energy, like, beating myself up over this or that. Or blaming myself for things are literally, capitalism's fault. Also I feel like yeah, I use it like a diary. So I have I'm like exercising my own structural analysis in real time. A lot of, you know French nihilist theory and like feminist theory and stuff, and it helps me reading that heavy stuff then I can go online and like basically, just like I'm doing writing prompts, that's what I'm doing.

How do you feel about the impact those messages have on the audience ?

Yung_Nihilist
I'm hoping its good. That people are getting radicalized and learning things they didn't know. I know that because people tell me. Yeah. I'm just trying to radicalize the youth.

How do you define a troll ?

 Yung_Nihilist
Never expect a straightforward answer from, if I can make a joke I'm going to do that. It's a hall of mirror kind of thing in order to disarm people. That's kind of what comedians do. Nothing that be taken seriously, as an artist I need to keep people at arms lenght even if I'm sharing all these very personal things

I know people who had to stop because they couldn't handle it, they started receiving death threat. I used to as well, when I used to make more feminist posts, because the internet is full of little boy trolls

How do you feel like the reactions from the audience impact what you share ?

Yung_Nihilist
If anything I went harder, I was entertained by then. But I was scared my account would get deleted, I was scared multiple times.

Do you think that Trolling is a form of activism for you ? A form of expression?

Yung_Nihilist
I guess I am actively trolling. That is the tool that I am using to spread information. And I can still switch tone. It's still more attractive to receive information from someone that you don't feel is preaching down to you.

Is it a form of art and craft ?

Yung_Nihilist
Of course, you have to be witty. You have to turn a straight question on its head to make it into a joke and you have to be on defence 24/7. While still being funny and not aggressive, just look at our president Trump. He's the best troll I've ever seen.

What are the values of trolling ?

Yung_Nihilist
It can make you president.

What is the best about your meming?

Yung_Nihilist
I've met so many friends, I've been able to participate in collective projects and community organizing and arts. The internets helps that, it moves ten times faster. Connective with creatives has been the best thing about it. That's why people go to art school, but I can't do that, I don't want to do that. Meme was a way to cheat the system, because I don't need the system to validate my thoughts.

What's the worst?

Yung_Nihilist
The sheer nauseating experience of being perceived. If you want to make art that reaches people, you really have to bear yourself naked. And it's humiliating, some people will tell you that you are trash, that your art is trash and that you should stop. That's definitely the worst about it. But all artists have to learn how to deal with that.

Presentation :
I am Bianca, I am a 26 years old Dominican New-Yorker. Writer and Digital creator

*3. Interview with **Th0t_catalog***

Memes are kind of a platform where you don't have to have an arts degree. You don't have any degree you could have dropped out of high school, you know, you don't need to have a publisher, you don't need a a gallerist, nothing like that. So it really like, evens out the fields. Ideally it evens out the field, and as a result of that a lot of people whose voices would be otherwise marginalized have ability to gain a platform So as a result of that, of course, it also means that a certain language is going to come into the images, into the means and like certain themes that might not otherwise be seen in a gallery setting or a "highbrow" setting

Th0t_catalog
Ashley Kirea Wahba

I am an artist, a jeweller and activists; sometimes a writer. And, I am also unfortunately a "meme creator" and I run a page under the name th0t_catalogue. This is this is where I come to like, let go of anger, to vent to call myself out, to embarrass myself. I'm a metal worker, then my profession is in jeweller and that's by training. And yeah, and I'm building a small business right now. An the activists stuff is sometimesrelates to my jewellery, sometimes stuff relates to community organising..

Th0t_catalog
Okay, so, I've written an embarrassing amount about meme, so I'll just say, Richard Dawkins. Which is the person that created the term memes and mimetics. He kinda looked at it as a cultural phenomenon that replicates itself like a virus. It'll be passed between people. And and then it'll also evolve over time. In terms of internet, memes, they're just, you know, images and texts and concepts and jokes and ideas that are widely circulated passed from person to person. Over time, they're ripped on they evolve, the images themselves change and deteriorate like JPEG artefacts. It's something that we share, something usually humorous that millennials and Zoomers share with one another to show affection.

I hate art. I hate art so much. I have my bachelor's in fine arts, and I have my Master's in fine art, and I fucking hate art. I hate the politi-text of it. I hate the socio-political hierarchies. I hate the notions of taste involved. And I hate the fact that it's so inaccessible. They're created for certain people that it's so formulaic. You know, no

one can afford it. Wheareas memes, iare something more of the people, and I think because of that it's more valuable. In order to be in an art gallery say the current understanding is that you have to have a master's degree in fine arts and obviously that's limited to like very few privileged people. And even then like the the risks are high like you're probably not going to make it solely surviving on your artwork. I feel like we would have to redefine the word art to encompass what memes are effectively, but I think I would consider it like absolutely a creative outlet and because of like the socio-political implications of the gatekeeping in the art world, it's tricky.

Well, considering memes within their context in which they are free digitally, and you are free to produce them and recreate your own galleries. What is it that makes it artistic?

Th0t_catalog
Because it's a form of creative expression. It's a craft as well. Just like everything is political. Everything can be art when done a certain way we talk about like the art of cooking, you know, the are like whatever it is.

Art doesn't have to exist in certain contexts, and can survive definitely in a context that is not the same as the one we've been seeing before. About like the craft behind it, have you thought about your creation process ?

Th0t_catalog
Oh, okay, so I feel there are few different ways I go about it, but usually I'll either have an idea for text and when I type it in or note to my phone, I have tonnes of notes. And that are just different concepts and stuff like that, like the one I did on "why bored when you can be in a toxic relationship." It had slipping over my head and like trying to get the wording right, it was in my notes it was there because it was something that keeps coming up in therapy. So sometimes it's a wayof like introspection as to what my own behavioural patterns are. And sometimes it's, you know, catharsis. A lot of times it comes out of anger or seing people behaving a certain way. If its anger I just get my computer out immediatly and start typing. I love playing. I usually flip it on its head so I don't point the finger at other people, I make it about me. It's funnier that way, if I'm making fun of myself rather than berrating other people. Also we're all hypocrites, so it likes probably applies to me anyway.

 I usually start with a text and then I, I get my inspiration from others, anger, or generally going through something. or I'll like catch myself having a really like, stupid thought like andI just get it out there, call myself out for it. In that way it's also nice because I see that other people relate and that I'm not that crazy. And pictures, the pictures that I use are all from Google Image searches. And I use pictures from IMVY, which is actually a platform I've never used before and I've never been on it. I'm afraid if I go on it it's gonna take the magic away. Yeah. I'm just like so I'm like so obsessed with these characters for a few different reasons. One is that

like, this is how teenage girls and preteen girls are choosing to put themselves out there like this is who they see themselves embodying and this is like what there's this aspirational situation which is really interesting to me. Um, one of the reasons why I got into using those is because in some ways I feel that its unethical to like attribute my fucked up thoughts real people. Like actual real people's faces will go viral because of memes, and then they're associated with a certain thing and it might be negative. I would never want that to happen to me. It's a decision based on ethics to not use actual human faces/ To think of it, it also has to do with like mimetic transition because someone else is creating these characters and I'm appropriating them and it's evolving from there, giving them a new form of life

What else matters for you in your aesthetic style?

Th0t_catalog
Colours are really important to me, really important in my life as well. The defining aesthetic features of my content is the font that I use, because it's the world's most hated font: Comic Sans. So I guess that's also trolling, right? I knew how much everyone else hated it. It's actually a font that was created for people who are dyslexix, it's really easy font to read. They characters, the way that they're designed are made to like be very distinct from one another.

What is most important for you, what matters for you content wise?

Well, ownerships really important to me. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I've always had a creative practice so it makes sense for me to have a collection of my own work. Having a voice important to me. And I was. I think like when I was growing up, my voice was stifled a lot. So like now I have a place where I go and I can say whatever the fuck I want and and it's all mine. I guess I'm looking for some catharsis and looking for some validation, that I'm not the only person that thinks this way

How do you relate with your audience?

Th0t_catalog
 When I started, the answer would be a resounding 'no'. But as my page grew, I definitely found myself catering more to the people that were following me based on their responses. And it's so embarrassing, and like please if you say any of those be like, she's humiliated to say this out loud; And I hate it because a lot of my work now is about narcissistic personality traits, and shit like that, that's only a small portion of who I am. The other day, I brought politics back in, and I was getting a lot of hate. It actually took a lot of energy for me to have to respond to these things or think about them. That's also really difficult because I am an extremely political person, and it's really hard to have a conversation with me for more than 10 minutes and not have me bring out something about race or class. So it's weird to me, that my followers are

sometimes surprised when I post omething that's overtly political I don't think I limit myself or concepts I try to put out there, but I do try to phrase it in a way that will resonate more with those that follow me.

I do think there's some level of palatability or tolerability. I used to make a lot of rap memes and memes about being a recovering addict. But maybe, subconsciously and psychologically, I know that that people will respond more to other things.

Well, I guess it's being in the public eye, because of having an audience you receive reactions from them. Instagram just makes it more direct because you can post and you seeimmediatly what you have received.

Th0t_catalog
That's very accurate. The concept of like the public eye. Because it wasn't until I got, like, I can't like 10 k followers that I started becoming more aware of it. Like I didn't feel like I was limiting myself, but basically I saw my scope getting smaller.Yeah, i I saw my own creative scope, lshrinking and having a main focal point. I don't know this is a really tough thing to break down, it's really tough because I don't I'm still gonna say what I want to say but I can't act like my audience doesn't have some sort of impact on what I put up there, and the quality.

How do you react particularly to haters, to people that will just be mean. How is it to create constantly, and receive direct insults on your digital gallery.

Th0t_catalog
I think that's probably one of the reasons why I honed in on a smaller set of themes because I couldn't handle emotionally some of the responses. But one thing that I always say to everyone who makes memes to do, is to limit the comments only to account who follow you. Otherwise they'll get the craziest comments of people commenting to be mean for the sake of being mean. Beyond that, it's nice because I have a following that will come for someone before I even have the time to come for them. You know, and that's really nice to say that's, that's a huge relief. The audience can support you in that sense. But other times, obviously, I do get involved and argue with people because it's my space and I feel like the owner of that space. Sometimes it's not worth getting into an argument with someone like a troll. It can still be frustrating regardless, so a lot of people that make meme have group chats with other people that make memes.

But Sometimes it's fun. Sometimes I like getting a rise out of people like that's the point but other times I can't deal with this today.

It's good that you guys can support each other in just like communal experience. How do you feel about using a digital platform? Do you recommend it?

Th0t_catalog

I don't recommend it. Well, not like this, It's hell. I really love it, but it's hell. It feels like I have to deal with people commenting on my posts, some people will feel guilt or shame if they are not posting regularly. Really figure out what you are getting yourself into if you are gonna start making content on Instagram. I actually started posting on Facebook and then migrated to Instagram.

How different is it to be a digital artist rather than a traditional offline artist?

Th0t_catalog

Well I'm both, they used to be separate, but I see them merging together now. The difference is how widely it can be transmitted online and the immediacy of it. It's extremely low cost, the beauty of it. It's accessible. And I made a lot of friends online, and sometimes these friendships have carried over. Some of these people are my closest friends. One of the really nice thing is how many different people you meet online, from all around the world with so many different backgrounds

Do you feel like an activist?

Outside of my meme page yeah. My activism comes out in my meme page but there is a distinct difference between real life activism. But I definitely see a role for the transmission of political ideas online. A lot of my leftist political education happened through memes. It's memes that can of made me aware of things I hadn't be aware of before. My content isn't as overtly political as before, but everything is inherently political. But there is a lot of capitalist critique. If it makes people more conscious of the nature of capitalism and its exploitative nature that's good, maybe it'll send them in a rabbit hole.

What are the messages that you want to share?

I always struggled with self-worth for a lot of different reasons, like being a woman of color, or being the daughter of an immigrant father with crazy gender roles ideas. So I try to put some of these positive self-worth themes out there. It's a coping mechanism but I also have hopes that maybe someone will find some help through it. They might recognize their own thinking or behavioral patterns through it. I feel like I've grown into this page and I'm discovering more of my self-worth. I don't know if I have the power to empower others... I only use woman of colors in my memes, we need more people of color in our feeds what the hell! A lot of it has to do about self-improvement and that is political for me. That's activism. Lack of self-worth weakens people's capacity to raise their voice politically. The lack of representation can make them feel like they can stand up politically.

Would you call yourself a troll? As making fun of yourself and others?

Yeah, I am troll!

Do you think it's a form of activism?

I don't know about that. The discussion and conflict can lead to education, conflict is good. If you don't have it no one is gonna grow.

What is the craft behind trolling?
Palatability is really important to me especially when it comes to politics. If you slowly open the door and draw people in, their more likely to listen to the message. Nobody is going to open to hearing them if we use non-accessible language. I see that in offline revolutionary language in the movements I'm a part of. The revolutionary semantic can feel scary to someone that hasn't been exposed to it before. I gained knowledge of politics through memes because it wasn't aggressive. It was more like 'ahah isn't funny that we are all exploited by capitalism?' and I thought: 'Why not, I guess I agree with that'. People shut down if the message is too strong or if you use the wrong semantics.

What are the values of trolling, why do you troll?

The sarcasm and the irony engage people and it's a way to turn things on their head.

What's the best about your memes?

I get validation from being dumb and realize I'm not the only one.

What's the worst?

Too many people to engage with becomes too much.

4. Interview with **Titty Wrangler**

For a start I'd like to talk about digital arts and meme art. How do you define a meme?

TW.   um, I guess, like, I would define a meme as like, anything that you kind of make with, some graphic design tools. And usually it's posted online, but not always. Like, I feel like a meme is like, it's very loosely defined. And it's like, a meme I doesn't feel like it doesn't have to be funny. Just has to really convey a message. And it's like the message doesn't even have to be serious. You know, like, I find it's just like an accessible form of art to like, get messages like across.
I mean, the thing is like, not all mediums have to have words so like I wouldn't even say if it was just like, I guess maybe if it was just like a piece of like, abstract art that like someone like made in real life like, but I guess even that could be considered a meme to some people. Like I've heard I've heard like, even in like my own personal like friend group. I've heard like so many different definitions and like what a meme is, but I feel like as long as it's like, you make it like you intend, like, as long as you're making something and like you intend it to be a meme, and it's like, you know what I mean? It's lhas like a message.

I don't think anything is not a meme anymore. To be honest. I'm asking because I don't have the answer.

TW   Yeah, it's like, that's a very complicated question. And it's like, I've thought about it a lot. Because like, I've had people tell me like, Oh, you don't make memes you just make stupid like pictures with words on it. How is that not a meme?
Most of the time, I'm just like 'Who am I to define what a meme is?' It sounds like a personal thing, some people don't see my memes as memes. But for me, as long as it's a form of art it could definitely be meme

I find that the more you look at memes, the more things become memes as well.

TW   Yeah, exactly like I find even in my interpersonal life, I end up just seeing memes. Like I'll walk down the street and I see a flyer saying " 5G's gonna kill your babies." And its like 'Oh cool a real-life meme!" Even if it's not meant to be funny, well that's a meme.

How do you define art, your personal interpretation of what art is?

TW   Yeah, I guess art is really anything that anyone creates, I see an art as a very abstract thing, I do a lot of cooking. And I definitely see that as an art, it's a culinary art. I think art is extremely abstract and sometimes the way that people move could be like seen as art, you know?

TW   Sometimes I joke that I'm an artist, but I personally have that imposter syndrome so I'm just like 'how could I consider this art but I guess you know, like it is at the end of the day it is art.

TW   Yeah, I definitely I would say it's art. I mean, it's definitely graphic design. I had to learn skills in order to make the memes and so, you know it's a self-taught art form. Even though I definitely did have friends along the way that did help me pick up certain skills and give me like certain tips.

TW   Um, so it's like it's very specific usually like It starts with like, like a phrase that like, and I really want to make a meme with it. It always starts with the words. I don't usually see an image or one of those sexy 3D images that I use. Usually I just like slap one on there and yep this works this is good but I'm usually cooking, thinking about something, about the world or something that's pretty annoying. I could probably make a meme about this. It's something that's enraging me most of the time. Sometimes it's a way of venting, a lot of the time I'm going through emotional turmoil and I don't really know how to cope in any other way in that moment, other than making a meme and it helps me get my words out, my emotions out in a way that I feel is productive.

TW   Yeah, yeah, definitely, it feels validating. Sometimes it gets a boom of likes when I post it. And I'm like "oh cool, I'm glad that other people feel similarly I'm not alone in my experience.
I don't identify with a lot with the political mindset of people around me. And it's much easier to find like-minded individuals online and through the meming community. Because, in a way it is a bubble. It's a bubble, where you feel safe. I feel safe expressing what I feel and I feel a lot of people are there to support and that's something that I don't necessarily have in real life, but that I appreciate online.

TW   Um, I think what's most important is the messages I put out. I try not to put any irresponsible messages out, no matter how I'm feeling. A lot of the times I see my memes as propaganda in a way. I just l want to keep sending out massively consistent messages, I don't want to start like shitposting, posting ironic stuff that's edgy for no reason. I prefer being on topic with my morals and stuff. That's what I like to put in my meme: morals and ethics, and messages. That's what I stick with.

How would you describe the aesthetic of your meme?

TW   I'm very perfectionist in a way. So every meme has to be similar to a point : the pink or blue background and the font that I use in every single meme. And I have one artist that I use for her 3D images who I love. I'm very painstaking with my process. I make sure like all my memes, kind of look the same, like a continuation. I experimented with other styles in the past and I think this is what I feel most comfortable with.

How do you feel about your audience?

TW   My audience is very left wing. And I have I've made like a good amount of friends with my followers, I interact with my them and I really appreciate like any feedback they give me as long as it's not like blatant trolling.

Do you have problems with haters?

TW   Oh, yeah. Literally whenever I post anything about fat phobia or fat positivity or anything about that, I have had to turn off the comments in the past just because it's turned into like a garbage fire of miseducation, stigmas and blatant hate, and it gets overwhelming. For me as a moderator. Sometimes I don't know if I should keep the comment section open to just   let people express what they need to express or if I should be censoring and moderating. It gets confusing as someone who kind of didn't expect to have this platform. Now I kind of have to deal with like people hating on me for having expressed myself.

Do you want to censor and moderate? What's the process for you to decide whether or not you should?

TW   Usually it depends on the severity of the messages and how violent or misdirected they are. You know, there have been some messages that are just like: 'Oh, this is stupid, fatphobia isn't real'. I keep it there because I don't find that too inflammatory, but then there are comments like 'fat people are disgusting, they smell bad.' 'Why would anyone want to date a fat person?' I'm thinking 'okay, yeah, it's time to turn off the comments!' Blatant insult is definitely where I draw a line, it has malintent behind it. It's not trying to debate anything, it's just straight up hateful.

It seems really hard to be a user, an artist, and a moderator at the same time. This feels like a full-time job with a lot of responsibilities!

TW   It really is! I've, I've started posting less because of it, it does get a little overwhelming. I've started staggering out my fat phobia posts because like I get so much backlash every single time I post anything about it. It's very obviously my followers 'least favorite thing for me to post about'. I don't think many other memers are too vocal about it either, so you know people might follow me thinking I'm just another meme account and then I post something about fat phobia and it catches them off-guard and they're like 'I don't understand this I'm gonna unfollow'

People are not vocal enough about it. It's great that you are.

 TW   I'm definitely gonna keep posting you know, it's something that's personally important to me. I am never gonna stop having feelings about it and I'm always gonna express them online. No matter how much hate I get, I guess I just have to deal with it.

So you get hate, but also find friends on Instagram, but at the bottom of it, why did you choose to use Instagram?

TW   Well I started on Instagram because I was influenced by other memers on Instagram and I thought 'I might as well try it myself and see how it works out'. I've never really considered posting on any other platform because I find that there's a certain group of like-minded individuals that I can very easily fit in with on Instagram and identify with. There's more of a camaraderie on Instagram.

So the community kind of brought you there?

TW   Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Do you sometimes regret using Instagram as a platform?

TW   I don't think so. Um, there's a lot thing with Instagram, lots of censorship. But I've only had one or two of my memes taken down and that was like very early on in my days when I wasn't saying anything important. So, I don't really mind Instagram.

How do you feel it has impacted you to be a digital artist rather than a more traditional, offline artist?

TW   I feel like it's a lot easier for my art to get recognition online since it's very easy to share it, people can just post it on their story and it will get like a lot more views than if I were to make art and get it to be in a gallery. It's very accessible to have it online, you don't have to go out of your way to look at art and make it. I think I think

I really like the accessibility of it. I don't have to go anywhere to make my art, I can make it on my phone, upload it on my phone and everyone can view it on their phone.

It makes it accessible for the audience and the artist?

TW   Yeah, exactly

We talked about it a little bit already, how do you feel about the digital meme community?

TW   I have found lots of friends. I'm definitely not like disregarding the entire meme community but I found that some people are very performative. I make memes from the bottom of my heart, from straight passion.

Would you say that the truthfulness and authenticity of the message matters for you?

Yes, exactly, I don't see myself as performative. Everything I talk about in my memes, I practice in real life, I know I don't see myself as like a preachy person, but if someone's asking to be educated then I'll gladly help them and give them the resources that they need to educate themselves. I'm not gonna force information on people, but I'm more than happy share resources.

Do you feel like an activist?

TW   That's tricky. Online activism is tricky, because a lot of people don't see online activism as real activism. They think that you have to be going to protests in real life. And as someone who struggles with agoraphobia and bad social anxiety. I'm personally not able to show up In the world way I want to as an activist. This is how I personally express my activist nature, just because I can't show up the way that more abled people are. So yeah, I would say I personally do see myself as an activist, even if other people don't. I've had people tell me like, you're not doing any real work, and I'm just like 'Okay, I'm sorry.'

You do your part! To sum up, what are your messages?

TW   My messages are anti fascism, anti-white supremacy, against anything that ends up marginalizing, oppressing people. I'm very against ableism, racism, xenophobia. I'm very left wing, I identify as an anarcho communist.

Do you talk about you anarcho-communism in your memes as well?

TW   Not really, I find that lot of people get very confused about anarcho-communism. Personally, I take individual concepts inside of it and I focus on that. I find a lot of my memes do represent the mindset of anarcho- communism in smaller

forms. I take individual pieces of it and I try to address it, because as a whole it's hard to do.

How do you engage with social and political issues through your memes?

TW   I just I try to put my thoughts into a palatable format. I try not to make anything too complicated because I know a lot of the times academic wordings can be confusing. I didn't go to college. I know a lot of my peers didn't go to college either. So, I just try to make the wording as accessible as possible. I really try to make these complex thoughts palatable and easier to understand because at the end of the day, a lot of these issues are extremely complex. I only begin to touch on them, but if I can spark this interest in people to go out and learn a little bit more that's great, I'm achieving my goal

What kind of impact do you think they have on your audience?

TW   Even if I'm not like directly educating people it can get people thinking about these subjects. At least in my comment section it sparks debate. I'm glad that I can at least get people thinking about these things, even if they don't agree. Just putting the idea out there is all I can ask for.

 Would you call yourself a troll?

TW   I think in a way I could definitely be a troll but a troll to the right wing. Like left trolling the right. And not just the right sometimes I troll centrist, or some people who are apolitical. I've made a meme about 'if you voted for Obama, you can't be racist' and that's probably my number one troll meme.

Do you find that this form of trolling is part of your activism?

TW   I don't really make many troll memes anymore. I try to be as straightforward as possible because at the end of the day, I want to be taken seriously. I'm struggling to find a medium between being funny and making an impactful messages, it's a fine line, if you're trying way too hard to be funny the messages end up getting confusing. It's definitely a difficult thing to accomplish being funny and having an impactful message in the same meme.
 My meme page started off as a personal page, I never intended it to be strictly a meme page. Because I'm more multifaceted than just a memer. I find that the more I remind people that I'm a person too, the more people unfollow me. It's very funny to see how I post my face and I have 10 people unfollow me or I'll post a full body picture and I'll have 20 people unfollow. Okay, I see you only value me as a meme page and not a person. But it's okay, I have other platforms where it's the opposite!

There must there must be a certain exigence, almost, from your audience on Instagram?

TW   Exactly. I always assumed that's the thing, that people are just like 'well, I followed for memes, why are you posting anything other than memes?' And I'm just like 'I'm sorry.'

Going back to trolling, when you were doing it did you feel like it was there was an art and a craft to it?

TW   Yeah, definitely. I mean, I feel like it definitely requires a sense of irony, a sense of sarcasm. I know that my most recent troll meme was making fun of reactionaries and it got a lot of backlash. But I'm kind of just trolling and putting out a message at the same time. I think that's the hardest thing: people not really understanding your message while you're like trolling. It's a science of fine lines. Like I was saying before, you really got to make sure your message is clear. If you are going to make a trolling post, I always find that making like a caption always helps.

When you were doing it what was the reasons behind it? What are the values of trolling for you?

TW   Um, I find that sometimes when you address a complicated topic in a more lighthearted way, it becomes a less scary topic. And it becomes easier to approach and easier to understand. It's kind of introduced in a different manner than if it was like ' this is a very important like scary topic. Like let's get down to business.' But instead I can go 'here's a funny joke that kind of involves important messages, let's think about it."

 It goes back to like, a different way to transmit a message that would be too heavy otherwise.

TW   Yeah, exactly.

What is the best thing about meming for you?

TW   I find that it's very cathartic. Mm hmm, it's definitely a very productive way of dealing with my emotions when I don't have anywhere else to.

Is it the expression that helps you deal with your emotions? the fact of posting it somewhere or to write it?

TW   Yeah, I feel like I get like half of the catharsis making the meme and then the rest of it comes once I actually post it.

It's interesting that with meme making you can integrate the audience in your process and that the feeling of catharsis also comes from the interaction with it. Traditional art was a lot about the process and then detached from the rest.

TW   I know! It's so different because you can actually see in front of you: the analytics of how people see this meme, how many people like it. At the end of the day, it does alter your psyche in a way where you don't depend on the likes but it's validating.

I imagine that especially for messages relating to mental health it can be very validating

Yeah, definitely!

Can you tell me more about the meme union?

TW   I am not in it anymore but sure. It was a bunch of memers coming together as a sort of solidarity group. When something unfair would happen, someone would get censored or their account deleted. We would mass report it to Instagram and try to raise awareness of it. It was the represent memers and that we are a valid form of art and expression and shouldn't get censored (@unionizedmemes)