Meme Templates as Expressive Repertoires in a Globalizing World: A Cross-Linguistic Study

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This study uses meme templates as a lens for exploring cultural globalization. By conceptualizing such templates as expressive repertoires that simultaneously enable and limit expression, we examined global and local dimensions of mainstream meme culture. We traced the top 100 templates in meme generators in English, German, Spanish, and Chinese, using 10 examples to typify each (n = 4000). Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, we examined the forms, social identities, and emotions embedded in these templates. Our findings demonstrated that whereas meme templates are dominated by American/Western pop culture, local templates are also evident, especially in Chinese. Overall, memes are socially conservative yet emotionally disruptive; while they align with hegemonic representation patterns, their emotional palette tilts toward the negative, with anger as a major anchor and happiness expressed ironically. Finally, our findings suggested an individualism–collectivism puzzle, wherein emotions in memes seem to contradict the existing literature on cultural values.

Keywords: Internet Memes, Digital Culture, Globalization, Localization, Meme Generators, Emotions.

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The significance of Internet memes is rooted, to a certain extent, in their apparent lack of significance. As small pieces of content that are mundanely passed around by Internet users, memes do much more then entertain; indeed, a growing body of research has demonstrated that they are used for an array of purposes such as emotional expression, community building, and political protest (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013). While memes have been filling such roles in an expanding list of locales (Ekdale & Tully, 2013; Mina, 2014; Pearce, 2015; Wiggins, 2016), to date their modes of appearance across the world have not been examined comparatively.

This article is based on the premise that such a comparative account of how memes are used in different places will shed light on fundamental questions about cultural globalization in the digital age. Since memes both represent and construct social perceptions, and, technologically at least, their diffusion across national borders is easier than ever, they may facilitate the creation of *global digital cultures*. Memes may also be used to construct *local digital cultures*, in which attributes specific to a

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certain cultural setting are highlighted and maintained. This study aimed to systematically trace, for the first time, these global and local dimensions of meme cultures.

But culture is a fuzzy concept. Our attempt to break it down into tangible manifestations builds on literature about Internet memes as unique forms of communication, characterized by a twofold duality between *individuality/collectivity* and *content/stance*. The first dyad relates to memes' articulation as both creations of groups and spaces for personal expression (Milner, 2016). This is epitomized in memes' structures, in which a shared base functions as a template that directs the creation of unique instances (Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero, & Shifman, 2015). As such, meme templates constitute a repertoire that both enables and limits expression. The second duality relates to content and stance. Shifman (2013) defined three dimensions that can be either imitated or altered in the course of memetic diffusion: form (layout and physical components), content (ideas and ideologies), and stance (the positioning of the author in relation to the message). The boundaries between the two latter dimensions blur in meme templates. While such templates convey information about the world (i.e., content), they also invite individuals to position themselves in relation to this content (i.e., stance). We examine two realms in which this content/stance duality is particularly manifest and are relevant to cultures around the world: social identities and emotional expression.

We open by presenting our conceptual framework—the perception of Internet memes as individual and collective expressive repertoires in global digital cultures, which are used for both representation and stance building toward social identities and emotions. We then describe the main methods used to explore these dimensions: a comparative analysis of a corpus of 400 meme templates (and 4000 meme instances) in English, German, Spanish, and Chinese. The analysis focused on the formats, social identities, and emotional expressions found in memetic repertoires, revealing both global communalities and enclaves of cultural uniqueness. In conclusion we present three overarching tensions manifest in the global flows of memetic content.

Literature review

Meme templates as glocal expressive repertoires

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) as a cultural parallel to genes. According to his conception, a meme is a cultural unit that is spread from one person to another through copying and imitation. Recently, the term has been adopted to mark the more specific phenomenon of *Internet* memes: groups of digital items sharing common characteristics, created with awareness of each other (Shifman, 2013). An Internet meme is thus comprised of multiple related instances; its creators take an item (text, image, or video) and change parts of it to input their own ideas, while keeping a consistent resemblance to the memetic group (Milner, 2016; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014).

This dynamic locates Internet memes between individual and collective creation. Memetic templates are essentially collective, as they are formulated among members of communities or groups with common cultural knowledge and affinities (Burgess, 2008). In fact, the ability to understand a meme instance often requires knowledge of cultural conventions, and those who do not follow its template in a satisfactory manner are likely to be ignored or punished (Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Yet, individual input is required to create different instances of a meme and authors use the memetic template to express personal experiences or identities (Phillips & Milner, 2017). In short, memes allow the individual to use a collectively created template to deliver a personalized message.

Drawing on the aforementioned literature and the collective/individual interdependence it describes, we argue that Internet memes ultimately present a limited range of expressive options at

any given time and place. Although the memetic sphere is continuously evolving and changing so that memes can be applied to communicate a diverse array of ideas, being template-based, they are still limited and thus limit those using them. In this sense, we suggest viewing Internet memes as an *expressive repertoire*, which is collectively authored and developed as a means of communication. In a broad metaphorical sense, Internet memes are akin to De Saussure's (1959) foundational structural ideas concerning language. Meme *templates* can be seen as a parallel to *langue*; socially constructed and systematic, they create a binding structure for expression, while directing its range of possibilities. Meme *instances*—specific items created and shared on the web—are thus the *parole*, an individual expression of a personal message that relies on social constructs and their structures. Building on this idea, our comparative analysis of memetic templates aims to reveal such repertoires and the cultural choices and power relations that compose them.

While memetic culture's historical foundations are by and large American or Western (Milner, 2016), this phenomenon has now reached many other parts of the globe and its impact has been studied in countries as far flung as China, Chile, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Kenya (Ekdale & Tully, 2013; Miller et al., 2016; Mina, 2014; Pearce, 2015). Memes can thus be analyzed as potential agents in processes of globalization. A simple account of this contested concept would depict globalization as "transplanetary process(es) involving increasing liquidity and growing multi-directional flows as well as the structures they encounter and create" (Ritzer, 2011, p. 2). At the same time, however, globalization is marked by inequality and favors the dominant and powerful West (Pieterse, 2009). In the cultural sphere, the notion of globalization has been challenged by concepts such as "glocalization," which argues that the global does not replace the local but rather interacts and intertwines with it (Robertson, 1995). These cross-national flows and ensuing interconnections have been enhanced in the digital era, which facilitates new forms of user generated globalization and localization (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2016).

Thus far, studies on memes' global attributes and dynamics have been limited to specific locations and have not taken on the fully comparative view needed to investigate their dynamic at a global level. The nearest parallels are cross-cultural studies about jokes (Davies, 1990; Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014), but these refer only to verbal content and exclude the multimodality prevalent in current digital spheres. The implementation of such an analysis requires specific traceable components that align with those typifying memetic spread: form, content, and stance (Shifman, 2013). While form is fairly simple to assess, content and stance are broader and thus required a more concrete formulation. As detailed below, we used two categories as our analytical focuses: social identities and emotional expression.

Memes and social identities

Representation of social identities has been widely discussed as a pivotal aspect of cultural products. Studies have shown that non-dominant groups (such as women and ethnic or sexual minorities) are commonly under-represented, marginalized, or presented through narrow stereotypes in popular culture (Gross, 2002; Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015). These hegemonic patterns of representation persist throughout various media, cultures, and eras.

Despite the early expectation from digital culture, multiple studies demonstrated the marginalization of women and ethnic minorities in these spheres (Herring, 2003; Marwick, 2013; Nakamura, 2013). While spaces that constitute an alternative to this conservative regime are available and are often celebrated, dominant groups still keep their positions in the mainstream of digital culture. Internet memes are an interesting venue in which to explore these issues, since the ways people consume and produce memes often reflect how they relate to categories such as race, gender and class (Miltner, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017), and have been found to take part in the construction of such

identities (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). Studies of memes in English have detected patterns similar to those shown in the aforementioned studies of traditional and digital media. Milner (2016) noted that the principal population behind the creation and dissemination of Internet memes are young, Caucasian, middle-class men, a tendency that has been reaffirmed quantitatively by Segev et al. (2015).

This study aims to broaden our understanding of the ways in which social categories are constructed by Internet memes in two senses. First, while previous studies observed primarily Western cultural products, the question of representation has not been answered in regard to memes in other cultures. Second, by focusing on meme templates we aimed to look not only at issues that relate to representation (content) but also at questions pertaining to the positions (stances) invoked when portraying certain identities. The intersection between our analysis of representation and position is also tied to the fundamental tension between individualism and collectivism in meme creation, and we ask which representations allow individual identification and which portray groups as the collective "other."

Memes and the expression of emotion

Emotions are central to the operation of memes. As Milner (2016) noted, part of what makes a meme propagate is its ability to resonate with individuals on both the personal and societal levels. Similarly, Miltner (2014) claimed that participants perform emotion through memetic formats and use them to add context to their messages, especially when the content is negative or difficult. In addition to memes being emotional conduits for individuals, their communal expression impacts collectives. Civic participation in digital culture often revolves around "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015) who engage in societal affairs through emotional involvement. Emotional properties of memes are, therefore, meaningful for both individuals and for collectives, as they facilitate communal arenas of affect-based discourse.

When examined in a global context, this individual/collective co-construction of emotions in memes may be analyzed against broader bodies of cross-cultural literature, in particular studies exploring the individualistic and collectivistic values underscoring nations (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). Focusing on the expression of emotions, it was found that individualistic cultures were more emotionally expressive and more positive in their emotions (Matsumoto et al., 2008). However, this prominent research trajectory has been contested. Ascribing values to entire nations or groups of nations (such as "Eastern" vs. "Western") has been criticized as overly inclusive and reductive (McSweeney, 2002; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Our study takes a middle ground approach toward this body of work: on the one hand, comparative studies about culture-based values aided us in our case selection; on the other hand, taking the aforementioned criticisms into account, we used these studies as a general starting point for our detailed (and open-minded) exploration of texts.

Another axis underlying the analysis of emotions in memes relates to the differentiation between mainstream and subcultural digital spheres, which can be associated with positive and negative emotions respectively. Since memes are propagated on various forms of social media, they have become integral parts of the "culture of connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013). The mainstream trend of posting to platforms like Facebook and Instagram has an underlying bias (nurtured by business models) toward making and maintaining connections and thus usually reflects positivity and success or calls for warmth and empathy (Leung, 2009; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Of course, this does not mean that all user-generated content is emotionally positive; the mainstream and common norms may have a positive bias, but many examples of negativity are available. Internet memes and the communities that devised much of the logic governing current meme use are themselves such an example. As Milner (2016) discovered, memes often deal with social success and failure. In this, they follow the "logic of lulz," which exonerates any form of negativity as long as it is entertaining (Milner, 2013). Phillips (2015)

associated meme creation with subcultures devoted to trolling and harassment, in which causing grief is a goal, while we have previously demonstrated that memes are often a source of contention and argument within such subcultures (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). It should be noted, however, that these subcultural roots of memetic culture, although fundamental in the inception of memes and still influential, are not necessarily the face of meme use as a whole. As memes gain wider audiences, they are transformed in an attempt to appeal to the general population and may shed some, or all, of their original context (Literat & van den Berg, 2017; Milner, 2016).

These notions about emotions and affect inform our examination of cross-cultural memes in two ways, corresponding with the dualities that guide our analysis. First, with regards to the content/stance duality, we look into both the representation of emotions and the stances taken towards them, in light of the literature on mainstream and subcultural digital spheres. Second, we examine the intersection between individualism and collectivism in emotional expression, particularly how emotions in memes relate to private/public spheres.

By combining the aforementioned bodies of literature, we sought to address three questions: (a) what are the main forms incorporated in mainstreamed meme templates and to what extent do they vary culturally?, (b) which types of gender and ethnic identities are represented in mainstreamed meme templates around the world and which stances are meme creators invited to take toward them?, and (c) which emotions are represented in mainstreamed meme templates around the world and which stances are meme creators invited to take toward them?

Methods

Sites of analysis

In order to discuss local cultures and their global aspects, we compared Internet meme templates in four languages: English, Chinese, Spanish, and German. These languages were chosen since they are among the most popular languages online[1] and represent diverse cultures. An additional aspect of these languages is their association with ostensibly individualistic and collectivistic cultures. When observing the countries with the largest population of web users for each language, English (US) and German (Germany) were reported as linked with individualistic cultures, while Spanish (Mexico) and Chinese (China) were associated mainly with collectivistic ones (Hofstede, 2001; Matsumoto et al., 2008).[2] The parallel of language to culture is, of course, limited and overly inclusive, but it was made while considering the users' perspective. Since most users do not and cannot differentiate between the geopolitical origins of web content (Rogers, 2013), language becomes an obvious anchor for content consumption and thus constructs borders between audiences. While this approach is probably the most feasible for cross-cultural studies of digital content, it limits our ability to draw conclusions about specific cultures, as discussed in the concluding section.

We focused on a specific format—image macros—for the discussion of Internet memes. Image macros were chosen due to their simple, accessible, and concrete templates, which consist of a repeating image overlaid with text and usually deal with a specific topic or situation. Moreover, many studies on memes have used image macros as primary examples (see Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014), and thus, while focusing on this format may not encompass the full extent of meme types, it is central enough to constitute a representational basis for an exploratory study of this field.

Sampling

In order to gather a corpus representing these languages and their relevant image macros, we looked at a confined and mainstreamed space for meme creation: meme generators. These are websites or

applications that facilitate user-friendly mechanisms for the creation of image macros by overlaying text on an uploaded image, offering a selection of featured meme templates that appear in the forefront of the interface. While they do not cover the full extent of memetic expressions, meme generators' approachability makes them an influential curator of creativity in a largely decentralized field, and, as such, they constitute a highly suitable arena for outlining central components of a memetic repertoire (Wen et al., 2015).

The study was facilitated by a team comprised of undergraduate and graduate students who are both native speakers of the studied languages and versed in local meme cultures.[3] By using systematic Google searches and Alexa's ranking index, they identified the two most popular meme generator websites for each language (except in the case of Chinese, for which one major generator was found). We then used internal metrics from the generators (mainly the number of uses and views) to locate the 100 most popular meme templates in each of the four languages ($n = 400$). These templates were the basic units of analysis, but in order to understand what a template includes, we sampled 10 random examples for each one. The rationale for random sampling of meme instances was connected to our aim to look at the overarching patterns shared by most users of these popular templates. Accordingly, the coding process was based on the 10 sampled examples but only counted features that appeared in seven or more. For a template to be coded as expressing sadness, for example, at least seven of its examples had to exhibit the emotion.

The 300 non-English templates (10 for examples each) were translated and annotated by the research assistants before further coding. Altogether, 3,000 meme instances were translated as part of this project—an effort necessary for the comparative, qualitative analysis depicted below. The translators were instructed to convey the meaning in each example as fully as possible, including extensive notes explaining contexts or allusions.

Coding and analysis

Quantitative content analysis

Using the literature mentioned above, as well as an initial qualitative evaluation of the corpora, we traced three domains across the 400 templates: form, social identities, and emotional expression. Analysis of identities focused on gender and ethnicity, realms that are key to works on representation in digital spheres (Herring, 2003; Nakamura, 2013). With regards to emotions, our initial categories were based on literature about basic, globally-recognized emotions (Ekman, 1992; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989). An initial review of the corpus, alongside preliminary inter-coder reliability tests, indicated that three of the emotions identified in the literature—anger, sadness, and happiness—are the most pertinent and can be detected and measured in texts. We therefore decided to focus on these three emotions. In order to operationalize them within our codebook, we included general definitions based on analyses of basic emotions, their compositions, and the vocabulary used to describe them (Turner, 2007). For instance, anger was defined in our codebook as "a strong feeling of displeasure or belligerence aroused by a wrong or an offense (…) expressed in an external and extroverted way," along with pertinent examples for possible anger invoking cues. Coders were instructed to regard any relevant aspect, i.e., the emotions that may be ascribed to the meme creator and/or to characters within the meme.

This quantitative analysis was performed on the memes in their original languages by the team of research assistants. Since all memes were translated to English, all members of the team were able to discuss the work with the principal investigators. The coders used a codebook in English, and the categories were revised by the whole team in order to clarify the values for variables such as "ethnicity" and "gender." To ensure that the codebook was culturally sensitive, inter-coder reliability tests were performed separately for each language. We thus ensured that coding for Latino or Caucasian

ethnicities, for example, was robust and sensitive to emic perceptions of these identities, in accordance to what we might expect from those consuming such memes. Additionally, coders were instructed to focus only on what was explicitly exhibited by the content; when emotions or identities were liminal or unclear, they were not considered.

The development of categories included several pilot reliability tests (with two coders per language), during which the codebook was modified several times. The coding aimed to detect the repeating features of each template (as described above). In order to test the reliability of our codebook, inter-coder reliability scores were calculated for 30 memes in each language ($n = 120$), based on the work of two native speaker coders for each language. The agreement rate was measured using Krippendorff's test, with variable scores ranging from 1 to the cutoff point at .66, as recommended by Krippendorff (2004) for exploratory studies. To further ensure the validity of this process, the coding of the whole corpus by the main coder was reevaluated by a second coder (a culturally literate native speaker), and any conflicts were reviewed and resolved by the team to ensure a highly sensitive process.

Qualitative analysis

Based on the findings of the quantitative analysis, we went on to conduct a qualitative analysis on the dimensions of form, social categories, and emotions. The analysis was performed by the principal investigators with the assistance of culturally literate research assistants in each language, who were consulted to ensure clarity and to validate and comment on the main interpretations. While the quantitative analysis enabled us to address questions related to *content* (*who* is represented in meme templates and *which emotions* appear in them), the qualitative analysis allowed us to analyse the *stance* that meme creators are invited to take on identities and emotions. The detection of these various positions entailed by memes followed the principles of the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), according to which categories emerge from the data itself in a process of constant comparison. However, due to recent modifications of this approach (Kelle, 2007), the interpretative process also considered the aforementioned literature on social identities, emotions, and cultural values. This literature led us to analyze both social identities and emotions according to categories emerging from our corpus. For the former, this included tracing the roles ascribed to particular groups, including the reliance on stereotypes and the differentiation between the identities of those observing through memes and of those who are being observed through them. For the latter, two dimensions relating to emotions emerged: their aim (namely, whether the emotions are directed toward the self, the other, or the collective) and their discursive function (namely, the role they may play in conversation).

Findings

Our findings are divided into three parts: form-related and visual aspects of the memes; their participation and representation patterns; and the emotion-related features of memetic repertoires.

Form

While all meme generators were based on image macros—a repeating image annotated by users—some languages were found to be closer to each other in their memetic formats, as exemplified by Figure 1. The English sample shared about half of its templates with both German and Spanish (49 and 42 respectively), while German and Spanish shared 36 templates. A further qualitative analysis, however, revealed that much of the German templates drew on U.S. culture and none had obvious sources in German culture; many individual instances refer to German issues or situations, but the collectively authored templates remain either nondescript or with roots in American culture. In

Figure 1 Similarities and differences in meme templates.

contrast, almost one fifth of the Spanish templates originated in Hispanic-American content, mostly from Mexican television shows. In other cases, American sources were incorporated into memes that are unique to the Spanish sample. For example, Kermit the Frog, who appears in a few English memes, has a much wider use in Spanish with distinct versions that are not common elsewhere. Thus, both the German and Spanish samples appear to draw a substantial amount of the material forming their meme templates from the United States. This includes both reliance on pop culture and on memetic culture. However, tracing the use of ostensibly U.S.-based templates revealed that they were nevertheless ascribed with local meaning. For example, the "First World Problems" meme in English, which expresses the petty complaints of the privileged, looks exactly the same in Spanish, but the latter version is referred to as just "Problems" and loses the connotation of pettiness or privilege, retaining a more general discussion of annoyances.

The Chinese sample stood out in terms of its formats; only one of the templates (featuring Barack Obama) had parallels in other languages. Moreover, though Chinese memes maintained the basic dynamic of a changing text over a fixed image, their style was notably different. Other languages base their meme templates mostly on photographic images or drawings, but Chinese memes were mostly based on simplified cartoons supplemented with photographic facial features of well-known celebrities, primarily from East Asian cultures, captured in highly expressive moments. The results thus suggest the existence of a barrier (or, perhaps, firewall) between China and the other countries with regards to the shape that memes take. However, more similarities became evident when we examined the types of social identities represented.

Social identities

The analysis of social identities presented in meme templates portraying humans (i.e., excluding templates featuring only objects or animals) revealed a homogenous pattern; most of the content across all samples incorporated a hegemonic participation structure, giving prominence to groups that are considered dominant. Consequently, findings previously reported in the context of the English-speaking world (Milner, 2016; Segev et al., 2015) were established as applying to other linguistic settings as well. In terms of memetic content, all of the samples featured mostly men (86% overall). There was little variance, with women appearing in 17%, 19%, and 21% of meme templates in Chinese, English, and Spanish respectively and in only 9% of German templates. A similar pattern was found with regards to ethnicity: most meme templates in the English (76%) and German (73%) samples featured only Caucasians; likewise, in the Chinese sample, 78% showed only Asian ethnicity. The Spanish sample alone showed some variety with 25% Latin or Hispanic characters but nevertheless featuring Caucasians more frequently (48%). While these results are limited as they are based only on

the visually clear representation of gender and ethnicity, they coincide with what casual meme makers and consumers see, namely, an overt orientation toward the dominant groups.

Our analysis of the representation of social groups also revealed the stance evident in these templates: meme templates across the world consistently define women and ethnic minorities as "others" and cast them mostly within the realm of stereotypes ascribed to their identities (see Figure 2), as documented in other contexts (Nakamura, 2013). For women, this means being portrayed as overly sensitive, emotional, or romantically desirable/undesirable. The "First World Problems" template, for example, features a woman crying over trivial matters such as not getting enough Likes on Facebook. The Chinese meme "I'll Save My Light for You" depicts a woman who is deemed unattractive as dating or having been with the addressee as a way of mocking him. Ethnic minorities are mostly represented using framings of poverty or aggressiveness. For example, "Provincial Man" is a man of color professing his very modest (and cheap) way of living, while "Pulp Fiction" draws on the violent African American character from the eponymous movie to express threats or aggression.

In contrast, the portrayal of majority-group males spans a wide range of positions, expressions, and roles across all languages: they can be lowlifes ("Scumbag Steve") or heroes ("One Does Not Simply"), introverts with social difficulties ("Bad Luck Brian") or cynical and arrogant ("Condescending Wonka"). As with other cultural forms such as movies, whiteness and masculinity are constructed as transparent (Dyer, 1988); identity categories in meme templates are not explicit issues when it comes to majority groups, unlike minority identities which are often defined by their affiliation to these categories. The stance emerging from this pattern of identity representation defines the dominant group as "us" or even "me"; individuals are invited to voice their own emotions and concerns through templates featuring white males. Minority groups, on the other hand, are usually portrayed as collectives that are emotionally removed from the posting individual; they are featured as "they," namely, those who meme creators describe or comment on rather than identify with. Social identity representation in global memetic culture is therefore one of standardization and orthodoxy, favoring stereotypical representations of marginalized groups while portraying ethnically dominant males as the standard bearers.

Emotional expression

As detailed above, three basic emotions—anger, sadness, and happiness—were traced in all four samples. In the memetic content of the corpus as a whole, anger was the most common emotion (17%), followed by happiness (13%) and sadness (9%), thus presenting an overall negative skew. These three emotions appeared in 39% of the corpus; the rest of the templates either did not clearly express emotion or contained emotions beyond those we were focusing on. The English sample exhibited a relatively balanced range of emotions, with anger only slightly higher (41%) than sadness and happiness (29% and 30% respectively). In German, the balance seemed to be between happiness (43%) and anger (38%) with sadness less present (19%). The Spanish sample was more skewed, with the highest rate of happiness (52%) and the lowest rates for both sadness (15%) and anger (33%). The Chinese sample, on the other hand, included almost no happy meme templates (6%), the highest rate of anger (67%), and 27% featuring sadness. The dependency between language and emotions was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 18.75$, df = 6, p-value = .0046). A *post hoc* pairwise test showed that only Chinese is distinctively different from the other languages with regards to the distribution of emotions (adjusted p values: Chinese vs. English = .022; Chinese vs. Spanish = .0016; Chinese vs. German = .0031, Fisher's exact test corrected for multiple testing using FDR). This distinctiveness mirrors the split depicted above between the Chinese memetic sphere and the others. However, as detailed below, more similarities were found when each emotion was further analyzed.

Figure 2 Gender and ethnicity stereotypes.

In order to shed light on the quantitative findings, we conducted a qualitative analysis in which we assessed both the targets of these emotions and the stance taken toward them. We found that emotions were expressed through consistent frames across the corpora with some variance. As detailed below, anger was expressed directly, while happiness and sadness were mostly expressed in a mitigated, sometimes even ironic, manner.

Anger

Meme templates expressing anger were notably plain and direct, demonstrating exaggeratedly aggressive reactions to people, situations, and issues. While this directness was shared across samples, we found cultural differences in its aim (i.e., at whom the anger is directed), which ranged from self-directed to societal. As demonstrated in Figure 3, Spanish is the only language in which anger was aimed at the self, i.e., the author's own actions, circumstances, or unmet expectations. Nevertheless, angry memes in Spanish, as well as in German and Chinese, were primarily interpersonal, that is, they express ire toward a specific recipient and are written in the second person. In Chinese, this focus on the interpersonal came with an avoidance of the social issues that were found in the other samples. While many forms of political discussion are censored on the Chinese web (Mina, 2014), even the more palatable possibilities of angrily discussing public life, such as commenting on annoying trends or referencing stereotypes, were almost totally absent from the Chinese sample. In contrast, the English sample was exceptional in its refrain from expressions of interpersonal anger, directing anger mostly at broad social/political issues and groups.

Figure 3 illustrates these differing manifestations of anger in Chinese and American memes. The Chinese meme positions the faces of two well-known East Asian celebrities (common in other templates as well) on cartoonish bodies, as the character with a serious expression strikes the laughing character with enough force to push him forward. The caption seems to come from the hitter, who takes a position of authority ("have I allowed you") and criticizes the behavior of the victim (pretending "to be cool"). Thus, the template directs users to apply it within a clear, interpersonal dynamic: anger in such a situation requires two specific people to take the different roles depicted. More broadly, the accusation of pretending to be cool, successful, or desirable is common in the Chinese memes, but despite this frequency, it is never made in reference to generalized or collective crowds, only specific individuals. A contrasting stance toward anger can be found in the English example, which is aimed at criticizing society in general. The text's familiar criticism of over-sensitivity and/or political correctness is overtly aimed not at a person (as is common in the Chinese memes) but at a collective type of behavior ascribed to "people" in general. In this case (and others) the template itself

Figure 3 Differing aims of anger.

does not require social commentary, and indeed, templates aimed at society in English are at times used interpersonally in other languages.

Sadness

Memetic templates expressing sadness were less direct than those expressing anger, focusing on minor examples or even ridiculing overemotional responses. They displayed three overarching modes (see Figure 4): (a) *pathetic loss*, in which sadness is felt over minor, trivial, or mundane inconveniences (e.g., in "Crying Peter Parker" sadness is associated with a minor gaming experience), (b) *sarcastic pity*, in which sadness is used to berate others by portraying pity over their failures or deficiencies (e.g., in "Please Guy", as detailed below), and (c) *earnest fail*, in which memes depict social embarrassment or failure. These cases are the most direct examples of sadness and usually describe the author's own experiences (e.g., in "Baby Feeling Sad" sadness is caused by an unsuccessful romantic experience).

When examining the expression of sadness cross-linguistically, some distinctions emerged. Chinese offered the prime examples in which sadness was displayed directly and toward the self (similar to the expression of anger in Spanish); the emotion was presented in an unmitigated fashion and toward realistically sad situations which were seldom presented elsewhere. In all other samples, sadness was generally expressed in a mitigated way, but there were differences in the extent to which the emotion was distanced. While Spanish did include some examples of direct emoting, in both English and German sadness was most often detached from the authors and their own sentiments, usually through the sarcastic expression of sadness which was actually used to mock the others. The German example in Figure 4 ("Please Guy") illustrates this distancing stance. The image used in the meme seems earnest and elicits sadness quite straightforwardly. The same can be said for the first part of the text, a cliché raising the expectation of encouragement for emotional hardship. However, this is clearly inversed by the second part of the text, which epitomizes the German expression *Schadenfreude*, self-satisfaction derived by witnessing the misfortune of another. Thus, while seemingly approaching an actual acknowledgement of sadness, the meme steers toward a cynical stance, framing the option of personal expression of this emotion as unwanted or illegitimate.

Happiness

Like sadness, meme templates expressed happiness in moderated ways, and the emotion was rarely realized fully or unequivocally. The three main types of happiness presented in the templates (see Figure 5) somewhat resemble those regarding sadness. As with *pathetic loss*, the category of *little victories* turns happy moments into ludicrous interactions by presenting them as too small or unworthy. Templates portray joy over bad situations that turn out better than expected, or trivial success stories,

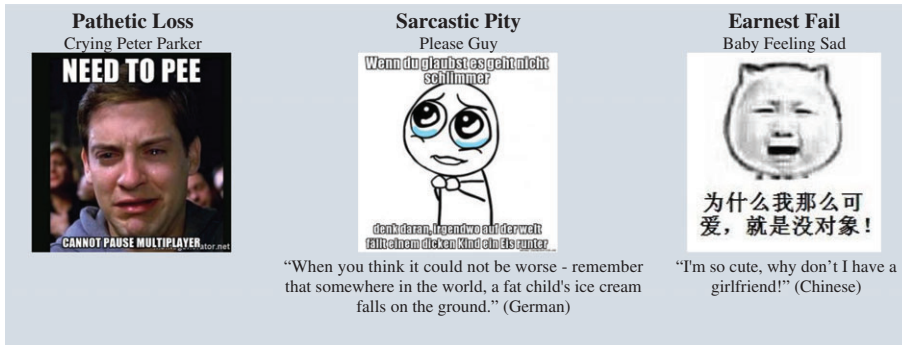

Figure 4 Modes of sadness expressions.

Figure 5 Modes of happiness expression.

like the "Van Damme" character's joy over something as prosaic as hearing a favorite song. A second type of happy meme templates emerges from *gloating mockery*—similarly to *sarcastic pity*, memes depicting enjoyment over the misfortune or inadequacies of others. A third form of happiness can be seen in templates featuring *oblivious happiness*, in which the character's happiness stems from their ignorance of their own pathetic status, as in "10 Guy" who presents a smiling demeanor while offering stories of extreme foolishness or detachment from reality. It should be noted that while anger was expressed in a direct manner and sadness had some instances of earnest feeling, happiness was almost never depicted in full and remained diminished by circumstances and context. This does not mean that none of the memetic templates in the corpus were used to display actual happiness, but these instances were few and far between, further establishing the negative skew of memetic emotional expression.

A cross-linguistic comparison echoed our findings about sadness, as happiness was similarly distanced from the authors in most, but not all, cases. In Spanish, while most meme templates were used to convey ironic happiness, we did find some examples that expressed happiness directly, mixed with self-embellishment and bravado. Several memes were also used to create what we dub "discursive gifts"—blessings, congratulations, or wishes delivered like greeting cards, usually ignoring the template's conventional use. German and English meme templates did not have parallels to "discursive gift" forms, and their invoking of happiness was consistently ironic. English memes tended to use ironic happy framings also as sarcastic commentary on social behaviors, displaying encouragement toward what they consider positive behavior, while implying that most people act differently. One

such meme instance uses the "Congratulations" template seen in Figure 5 that reads: "To all my bretheren who don't give a f**k about football." Thus, Leonardo DiCaprio's smiling face conveys happiness, while the text infers that there are at least some who do not participate in a social trend (such as football) deemed annoying or unintelligent. The phrasing of the message inserts a complaint into the expression of happiness, thus condemning society at large, save for a selected few.

Conclusion

This article presented a cross-lingual study of Internet memes in order to trace global and local expressive repertoires. Our analysis yielded a complex web of unique and shared dimensions, demonstrating the glocal positioning of memes as discursive repertoires that facilitate certain kinds of expressions. By way of conclusion, we present three overarching suppositions about the cross-cultural use of Internet memes as revealed in our analysis.

First, memes templates constantly alternate their *bottom-up* and *top-down* articulation. Like other forms of user-generated content, Internet memes are often bottom-up cultural creations, moving from individuals to wider crowds. However, once memes achieve a certain level of popularity and become part of meme generators, they transform into top-down repertoires in two senses. They first dictate certain expressive uses, for example, the unwritten rule spread across all samples is that happiness should be expressed in an ironic way. In addition, these top-down templates echo the process of banal Americanization (Shifman et al., 2014) in a mitigated way: while meme templates are dominated by the spread of American meme and pop culture, these references are often used merely as wallpapers, backgrounds for local happenings. Those local settings determine the more meaningful content and stance dimensions that meme templates convey. Moreover, we found that Chinese memes are not based on these global/American templates but rather use local resources almost exclusively.

Second, we found that mainstreamed meme templates *are representationally conservative yet emotionally disruptive.* Memes in all four languages maintained hegemonic patterns where men and members of dominant ethnicities are forefronted while women and ethnic minorities are marginalized. This conservative tendency was built through an alignment of content and stance: the latter groups were not only presented in low percentages, their stereotypical representation also positioned them as "others," summoning distanced and dismissive stances toward them. Since these templates are the most mainstreamed forms of memes, available to anyone who wants to create a meme without specific knowledge of the subculture, this narrow repertoire of templates may severely limit ways of talking (and thinking) about identity.

At the same time, meme templates are emotionally disruptive. Here too, the disruptive tendency was built through an alignment of content and stance: not only do meme templates represent more negative than positive emotions, but the negative emotion of anger is consistently framed as a sincere and even required stance, while the positive emotion of happiness is diminished and mocked. The pivotal role of anger in templates across the globe is intriguing, given the literature about the complex attitudes toward this emotion in many societies. In America, for example, there is a long history of treating anger as a disruptive force that must be controlled in order to ensure stability, particularly in the context of a service-oriented and customer-pleasing culture (Stearns, 1987). As detailed above, meme cultures allow for the expression of anger and other disruptive emotions, in contrast to the norms of support and positivity found in many social media platforms. Here we have demonstrated that mainstreamed meme templates follow the route paved by their subculture predecessors.

Finally, our analysis led to the identification of what we have labeled *the individualism–collectivism puzzle*. An integrative evaluation demonstrated that emotions were ascribed to the personal or public

arenas in a way that contradicts individualistic or collectivistic cultural tendencies as reported in the existing literature. As mentioned above, collectivistic values have been ascribed to Chinese (China) and Spanish (Mexico) speakers, and individualistic values were ascribed to English (United States) and German (Germany) speakers (Matsumoto et al., 2008). However, the memetic repertoire of these countries does not seem to conform to those alleged tendencies. The emotional expression of German and English memes was doubly distanced from the individual: first, since the internal emotions of happiness and sadness are distanced through cynicism, and second, since the memes focus on the public sphere or on stereotypical characters that are removed from the author. Conversely, there appeared to be a double embracing of individual emotionality in Chinese and Spanish meme templates: first, in the availability of templates conveying sincere expressions of sadness (Chinese) and happiness (Spanish), and second, in the prominence of templates in which emotions are self- rather than other-directed (anger in Spanish and sadness in Chinese).

The apparent contradiction between individualism and collectivism found in our data in comparison to previous studies creates an interpretative puzzle which may be explained in three completely different ways. First, if we embrace the aforementioned existing literature on individualism and collectivism, what we see here can be regarded as a certain individualistic–collectivistic barter. In other words, memes tend to compensate for forms of expression that may be missing in other contexts. However, an alternative framing might suggest that our results challenge the generalizations found in the literature and call for other ways to measure values, particularly in digital spheres. While most existing value studies are based on self-reports, studying expressive artifacts such as memes may lead to new understandings of values. Finally, some of our findings may be ascribed to external circumstances. In the case of China, for example, it is reasonable to assume that the strict avoidance of any public issue in memetic templates also relates to the regime's censorship of political content.

Limitations and future research

While our findings shed light on the workings of globalization and localization in meme-oriented spheres, they are limited in several ways. First, since our analysis relied on language differences as proxies to culture, we were not able to indicate specific dynamics relating to local contexts and identities. Thus, we cannot make any claims about Chinese or German Internet users as a whole, nor can we capture nuanced subcultural trends within these vast groups. Moreover, as detailed above, our findings about these cultures can be interpreted in several ways, and these can only be verified by future research. Another limitation is our focus on popular image-macros and meme generators to establish and compare repertoires. Whereas this concentration is necessary in order to portray the broad picture in such an exploratory foray, it prevents us from accounting for the variation found in the implementation of these templates. In addition, for reasons explained above, we accounted only for three major emotions. Finally, we emphasized the memetic "mainstream," i.e., popular templates featured in easily accessible formats. Memes are, however, often used in more specific communal contexts that may have different properties from those we have outlined here.

While we believe that the methodological decisions we took were necessary in a study aimed at providing a general overview of an unexplored terrain, we trust that future studies will expand and deepen the scope of this study. This can be done by exploring a larger set of languages, looking into subcultural settings, and uncovering the everyday pragmatics of implementing memetic repertoires. Such studies will hopefully build on the insights generated by this research with regards to the shared and unique expressions of memes across the globe. This project has demonstrated in particular that a comparative analysis of memes' content, form, and stance may yield nuanced results, revealing a rich map of cross-cultural similarities and differences in the ways emotions and social boundaries are shaped through these communicative forms.

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Notes

1 According to http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm; http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_language/all (Last accessed December 2017).
2 Other large Spanish-speaking countries, with the exception of Spain and Argentina, are similarly reported in the literature as associated with collectivism.
3 The coders came from the countries with the largest population of web users for each language: the United States, China, Mexico, and Germany.

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