Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape

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What is This?

Memes as genre: A structurational analysis of the memescape

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Abstract
A tenable genre development of Internet memes is introduced in three categories to describe memetic transformation: spreadable media, emergent meme, and meme. We argue that memes are remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation. We understand that memes develop from emergent memes, which we define as altered or remixed spreadable media. We have adapted and modified Jenkins' term "spreadable media" to refer to original or non-parodied messages. Our analysis benefits from the inclusion of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to aid in understanding how memes as artifacts of participatory digital culture are created. Our genre development of memes demonstrates the generative capacity for continued memetic transformation and for participation among members of digital culture. We use structuration to position these dynamic components as the core of a duality of structure for Internet memes.

Introduction

In 1735, French artist Joseph Ducreux was born. Known for his portraits, Ducreux was made a baron and appointed first painter to Queen Marie Antoinette. In 1793, Ducreux

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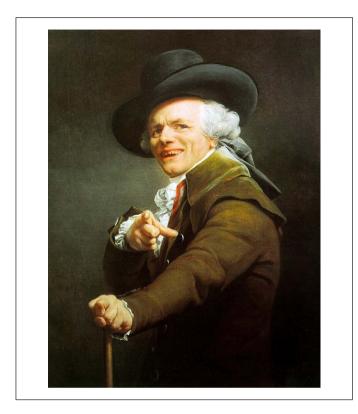Email: bradley.wiggins@uafs.edu

Figure 1. Self-portrait, ca. 1793 Joseph Ducreux.[1]

finished his self-portrait *Portrait de l'artiste sous les traits d'un moqueur* (*Self-portrait of the artist in the guise of a mockingbird*). The portrait shows Ducreux, a French aristocrat dressed in a brown coat and black hat, smugly grinning, and pointing at the viewer (as shown in Figure 1).

Fast forward nearly 300 years to find Ducreux's painting on Reddit and Facebook pages as an image macro with one major alteration (an *image macro* is understood within popular culture as an image with captioned text). The portrait now included popular rap lyrics—lyrics which were altered to fit a more archaic form of speech. For instance, overlaid on top of the portrait are the words, "Gentlemen, I inquire who hath released the hounds?" which is a transformation of the popular lyrics, "Who let the dogs out?" Since its first appearance as an image macro in 2009 (Knowyourmeme.com, 2013a), hundreds of these transformations have occurred and have been distributed through social media (see Figure 2 for an example). Moreover, since its original occurrence, it has further mutated. In 2011, the Ducreux portrait now included a variation with actor Steve Buscemi's face added into the portrait (see Figure 3), with archaic interpretations of movie lines from *The Big Lebowski*, a film in which Buscemi acted.

The Ducreux image macro epitomizes the complex emergence, development, and transformation of memes. Fundamental to the meme's evolution is its movement from a
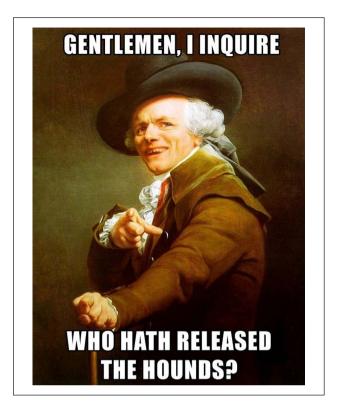
Figure 2. Image macro meme of Ducreux's self-portrait.[1]

simple stand-alone artifact to that of a full-fledged genre, a genre with its own set of rules and conventions and a genre whose production is a product of postmodern conceptions of representation and replication (Baudrillard, 1994) and the obfuscation of the consumer/producer binary which is manifest in the practices of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2007).

In what follows, we trace the emergence of the meme as a genre. Our aim is to describe that the transformation of a singular iteration of an artifact can emerge as a full-fledged genre. Using Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, we analyze two memes—*Numa Numa* and *The Most Interesting Man in the World*—by placing them into the current media landscape and tracing their development as a genre. Before we discuss the two cases, we begin this essay, first, by offering a review of current scholarship—sketching a history of the meme as a concept in the context of the current media landscape. We then review structuration theory and later apply it to two case studies.

A brief history of the meme

A socio-historical account of the term "meme" reveals a term that has mutated and been appropriated and repurposed since its beginning. First conceived and coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene*, the meme was Dawkins' response to the gene-centric focus of evolution. By describing evolution as a
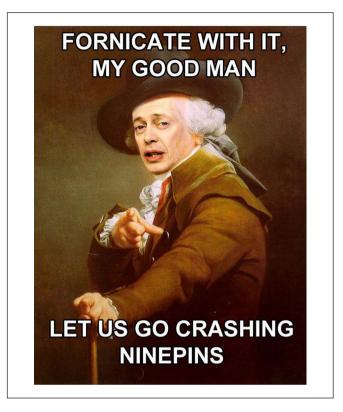
Figure 3. Remixed further with addition of Steve Buscemi's face and an archaic rephrasing of a quote from the film *The Big Lebowski*.[1]

cultural phenomenon—not a biological phenomenon—Burman (2012) suggests Dawkins' purpose was to "[redefine] the fundamental unit of selection in evolutionary biology" (p. 77). For Dawkins, the meme served as a catalyst for cultural jumps in human evolution, much like a gene served to further biological evolution. Memes are the mediators of cultural evolution.

Conceptually, the meme, as described by Dawkins, is different than its Internet counterpart. Specifically, he envisioned the meme as a cultural unit (or idea) that sought replication for the purpose of its own survival. Ideas (or memes), for Dawkins, are inherently selfish and virulent, competing to infect individual minds and use those minds as vehicles for replication. Dawkins' meme was generally conceived, including such examples as slogans, catch phrases, fashion, learned skills, and so on. Like genes, which are ubiquitous and essential to evolution, Dawkins saw the gene as a metaphor for the meme.

Within the next decade, the gene ceased being simply a metaphor for meme. Gene and meme became synonymous. Hofstadter took Dawkins' metaphor and imagined it more literally:

> Memes, like genes, are susceptible to variation or distortion—the analogue of mutation. Various mutations of a meme will have to compete with one another, as well as with other memes, for attention, that is, for brain resources in terms of both space and time devoted to that meme. (Hofstadter, 1983: 18)

Moreover, Hofstadter notes further competition for memes because of aural and visual transmission, suggesting that memes unlike genes will compete "for radio and television time, billboard space, newspaper and magazine column-inches and library shelf-space."

By 1995, Burman (2012) writes, "the meme had become active and non-metaphorical" (p. 89). The meme became a given, shaping language and thought. In a sense, a meme became a prime example of what a meme is or does, in the tradition of Dawkins, infecting language and thought, replicating itself within the minds and language of individuals. Although the meme has a long history of usage tied to linguistics, psychology, and philosophy, the contemporary meaning of meme is much different. Its current meaning describes a genre, not a unit of cultural transmission. "Memes" historically, as Weng et al. (2012) suggest, rely on an "epidemiological model" (p. 6); a model (or metaphor) that confines the memetic model to the biological and evolutionary. This model serves as a false analogy for the digital understanding and usage of meme.

Recently, the meme has been occupying an increasingly common position in its usage outside of academic circles. Throughout Internet culture, social networks distribute Internet memes without cessation every moment of every day. Most Facebook users likely encounter a meme and/or distribute a meme daily. *Condescending Wonka* and *Philosophical Raptor* are representative of image macro memes which do not infect people with "word viruses," as Dawkins would describe them, but rather are something mundane that act as catalysts for cultural developments. Internet memes have become a focus of scholarship because of their import as both an activity and genre in social networks. Numerous scholars study memes in order to understand digital culture (see Burgess, 2008; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2012, 2013). However, the memes central to their analyses vastly differ from those described and studied by Dawkins and Hofstadter. Shifman (2012) notes that the meme is used "as a prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture" (p. 190). Indeed, it is the intent of this article to explain that memes as genre develop through a process which can be understood through the prism of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory.

The meme used by scholars of digital and Internet culture shares some similarities, however, with the meme of evolutionary biologists while also having specific characteristics that make it distinct from the work of evolutionary biologists. Digital scholars utilize meme, much as it was intended by Dawkins—as a metaphor. Meme in digital scholarship—though describing a textual genre—hinges upon the notion of virality that is quintessential to memetic examination. Burgess (2008), Knobel and Lankshear (2007), Milner (2012), and Shifman (2012, 2013, 2014) link their notion of meme to the spread, distribution, replication, and propagation of memes in digital networks. Shifman (2012) argues that "human agency is an integral part of our conceptualization of memes' and describes them as dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural, and social choices made by people" (p. 190).

Our conception of the internet meme is best explicated by a recent presentation by Richard Dawkins (Dawkins & Marshmallow Laser Feast, 2013). Dawkins claims:

"[T]he very idea of the meme, has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed—not random—with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating."

The ideas of mutation and hijacking central to Dawkins' claim, highlights the social and cultural elements necessary to our notion and our use of the term meme.

Internet memes as artifacts of participatory digital culture

Internet memes exist as artifacts of *participatory digital culture*. Our definition retains much of Jenkins' concept with the addition of *digital*. Jenkins (2009a) explains that

> [a] participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. (p. 3)

Viewing memes as artifacts is helpful for three reasons. First, memes as artifacts possess *virtual physicality*, which we offer as a term that describes memes as cognitive as well as digital artifacts. Virtual physicality is a seemingly contradictory term, yet it reveals that memes as artifacts exist in the human mind as well as in the digital environment. The recursive production, consumption, and reproduction of memes evince their importance and underscore their virtual physicality in participatory digital culture. Second, memes as artifacts highlight their social and cultural role on the new media landscape. Whereas a cultural artifact offers information about the culture that creates and uses it (Watts, 1981), a social artifact informs us about the social behavior of those individuals or groups which produce it (Wartofsky, 1979). Memes as artifacts possess both cultural and social attributes as they are produced, reproduced, and transformed to reconstitute the social system. In practical terms, the memetic social system is reconstituted when members of participatory digital culture use rules and resources of meme creation in the reproduction of further iterations of a given meme. In other words, the social system knows how to create a meme and that the creation or reproduction of memes may motivate the continued production of a given meme for an unknown period of time. Third, seeing memes as artifacts underscores the purposeful production and consumption among members of participatory digital culture. These three reasons (virtual physicality, social and cultural connection, and purposeful production and consumption) accentuate the meme as artifact but also relate directly to the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) which implies an interaction between agent and social system. Our discussion of two specific memes, namely *Numa Numa* and *The Most Interesting Man in the World*, emphasizes the interactive relationship between agent and social system. Before entering that discussion, it is prudent to differentiate between the memetic and the viral as they relate to the rapid spread of online content.

Memes and viral media

Media virality, or the capacity for media to spread rapidly through online spaces, differs from Internet memes. We define Internet memes as spreadable media that have been remixed or parodied as emergent memes which are then iterated and spread online as memes. Viral media can be viewed as a form of spreadable media, yet one which has enjoyed massive popularity over a distinct period of time, such as Psy's *Gangnam Style* which has nearly 2 billion views since it was uploaded to YouTube on 12 July 2012. Although immensely popular for a short time, viral media like the original Gangnam Style video tend to wane and ultimately cease viral spread. Internet memes, however, persist due to the dynamic interaction among members of participatory digital culture. While video memes tend to experience a similar rapid and massive popularity prior to an eventual decline in remixes and iterations of remixes, image macro memes seem to possess greater endurance. Their staying power is likely due to the ease by which members of participatory digital culture can remix and spread image macro memes. Evidence of the staying power of image macro memes is demonstrated by the website http://www.memegenerator.net, which allows users to edit and save image macros. The site's *Memes* page features image macro memes exclusively.

Internet memes progress from spreadable media which have been remixed or parodied as emergent memes. In that form they are then iterated and spread online as memes. We explore the terms, spreadable media, emergent meme, and meme in greater detail in a subsequent section.

Previous attempts to define or explain memes adhere rigidly to Dawkins' (1976) sense of meme as a cultural complement to gene (Burgess, 2008; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2012, 2013). Burgess (2008) suggests that non-meme viral videos spread due to "textual hooks or key signifiers, which cannot be identified in advance … but only after the fact" while meme viral videos "rely on inside jokes that are spoiled by going mainstream" (pp. 5–8). Milner (2012) states that a meme is an artifact constructed largely by amateurs who rely on remixing and social media networks to propagate the meme, ostensibly for future iterations. Indeed, Milner (2012: 20) asserts that without the capacity for replication, no remix can occur. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) view a meme as an item rapidly spread by Internet users which encompasses a "particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move', or some other unit of cultural 'stuff'" (p. 202). Shifman (2012, 2013) acknowledges that memes must be imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused, a perspective we share but carry further and modify. While these efforts contribute to research on Internet memes, they also lack the perspective that memes are a *developing* genre of communication enacted by participatory digital culture.

We argue the perspective that Internet memes are messages transmitted by consumers–producers for discursive purposes. Specifically, the term "discursive" asserts repetition of subject or thematic matter from within an established meme. As an allusion to our genre description of memes, a successful Internet meme implies a modified narrative. For video memes, the discursive aspect relates to impetus behind the remix. This is a claim which we will seek to examine with further research. For image macro memes, the discursive follows from the textual message. Incidentally, for image macro memes, the

message often contains phrases that are kept in further iterations of the meme (as in the *Condescending Wonka, Captain Picard WTF, One Does Not Simply, Philosophical Raptor, Success Kid*, or *Ancient Aliens Guy* memes). The virality of memes is merely a symptom of the recursive process of memetic reproduction through agential action—this will be discussed in further detail in the section on structuration theory. The generative capacity of image macro memes is limited only by the syntax rules assigned by the initial meme (see our discussion of *The Most Interesting Man in the World* for more details).

Memes as genre

Bazerman and Russell (2003) suggest that genres are

> a set of related approaches that view human phenomena as dynamic. Human-produced artifacts such as utterances or texts, or shovels or symphonies, are not to be understood as objects themselves, but within the activities that give rise and use to them. (p. 1)

Unlike the traditional conception of genre, as a text (or utterance) of repeated forms and literary moves, genres are activities that guide and alter the dynamics of human culture. In this sense, the meme, viewed as a genre, is not simply a formula followed by humans to communicate, but is a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication. Genres, therefore, are central to understanding culture.

Agency and structure on the memescape

Viewed through the prism of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, memes begin to reveal a dynamic interaction between agency and structure involving the use of rules and resources for content creation and genre development. Miller (1984) notes that genres "must involve situation and motive, because human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through attributing of motives" (p. 152). Memes are viewed, shared, imitated, remixed, iterated, and distributed as a response to their appearance on the *memescape*, a portmanteau of meme and landscape to imply the virtual, mental, and physical realms that produce, reproduce, and consume Internet memes. A detailed discussion of Giddens' structuration theory precedes the introduction of the genre development of memes.

Toward a genre development of memes: structuration theory

Giddens' structuration theory has been used to analyze group communication (Poole et al., 1996; Waldeck et al., 2002), e-commerce (Pavlou and Majchrzak, 2002), public relations (Falkheimer, 2009), and technology (Orlikowski, 1992, 2000). It was modified into *adaptive* structuration theory by DeSanctis and Poole (1994). It has also received criticism by Archer (1995) who regarded Giddens' insistence that agency and structure exist as a duality as objectionable. Stones (2005) sought to reconfigure core structuration concepts such as agency and structure.

Structuration theory is built on the theoretical foundation of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffmann, and other sociological theorists such as Durkheim (Giddens, 1979, 1984). It was a critical response to the sociology of Talcott Parsons' (1951) actor-system theory outlined in *The Social System* which argued that norms generate structure and limit or constrain the ability of agency for change. Giddens' structuration also draws on Wittgenstein's formulation of language to construct his treatment of agency and structure to state that rules are not fixed unlike Saussure's abstract langue which informs social life externally. Giddens, as Goffmann (1956) before him, views language as a "self-enclosed reality [in which] meaning is bound up with practical activity in the real world" (Tucker, 1998: 79). Giddens argues that social action is linked directly to the creation of rules and practices which recursively constitute the structure wherein social action takes place. For Giddens, emphasis is on the duality of agency and structure rather than the Parsonian emphasis on the constraining and determinative aspect of system in which the individual agent merely acts according to established rules. In structuration, agency and structure are separate only in terms of an analytical divide but are closer than the two-sided coin metaphor. Giddens views these as an interactive recursive relationship which involves rules, resources, social practices, and systems (Giddens, 1984).

Structures and systems

Structuration theory seeks to understand interactions between individuals and the social structures in which they are active (Giddens, 1984: 3–27; Orlikowski, 2000). For Giddens, *structures* are rules, resources, tasks, and norms. Rules and resources embed memory traces into systemic forms (such as organizational and group culture, knowledge, and skills). Webster (2011) modifies the definition of structures as "macrolevel constructs such as language, routines of work and leisure, technologies, and institutions" (p. 47). We use language and new media as resources to repackage spreadable media as memes in participatory digital culture. Giddens defines *system* as normalized social practices resulting from recursively reproduced actions between agents. As individuals continually interact within participatory digital culture, structuration informs us of their recursive relationship with the resources they use for meme creation. The relationship is recursive primarily because memes as genre are akin to a continued conversation between and among members of participatory digital culture. System and structure coalesce as *structuration*: a process by which a *system* is maintained through the use or application of *structures*. As noted, Giddens' reconfiguring of agency came as a response to Parsons' position of the agent as serving out actions according to external norms and values. In structuration, agency is characterized by an innate ability to imagine different outcomes. This highlights an agent who is active and engaged in the accumulation of "shared cultural stocks of knowledge that are also used in the reproduction of their actions" (Tucker, 1998: 80).

Yet in connection to memes, agents should have reasons for their actions. If we are to accept structuration, then we must ask about the reasons individuals have for their participation. Giddens states that agency possesses three levels, discursive and practical consciousness as first and second levels, and unconsciousness in the Freudian tradition as the third level (Tucker, 1998: 81). Discursive consciousness describes the conscious reasons people give to their actions. Related to memes, the discursive level envisages the creation and spread of memes due to participation in humorous or socially critical

behavior as part of a perceived continued conversation. Bourdieu's (1990) social capital and Berger's (2013) reformulation of social currency both tap into the discursive realm to say that people create memes as part of a larger albeit idealized conversation where their contribution might be noticed and remixed further. Practical consciousness refers to the unstated reasons for a person's actions. Members of participatory digital culture *want* their revisions of memetic content to be remixed, iterated, and distributed further as memes.

Structuration tells us that memes are the product of social actions performed by participatory digital culture. Contrary to this view, Jenkins (2009b) asserts that memes are "driven to self-create." He personifies memes as actor, agent, and doer, and believes that memes have an innate will which seeks to persevere thereby ensuring a greater likelihood of being copied. However, his argument emphasizes a pseudo-biogenetic characteristic in memes and treats them as if they possess sentience. While we must not discard Dawkins' influence on Jenkins' position, we must also attempt larger explanations which appreciate the *interaction* inherent in meme creation. The continued production and reproduction of memes recursively constitutes the memescape signified by the duality of structure and agency.

Duality of structure

The interaction between agent and structure represents a reciprocally constitutive duality. Structuration suggests that human agents (agency) perpetually produce, reproduce, and transform social institutions (structures) (Cho and Lee, 2008; Giddens, 1979; Orlikowski, 2000). Likewise, participatory *digital* culture recursively produces memes which "mutually reproduce the social world" (Webster, 2011: 45) precisely because the rules and resources available for remix, iteration, and rapid diffusion are unique to the new media landscape.

Within the duality of structure, a confluence of social and individual existence is co-constructed on the memescape as artifacts of participatory digital culture. Social structures initiate social action; concurrently, social action leads to social structures. Given the Ducreux meme, members of participatory digital culture view further iterations with enjoyment and are simultaneously cognizant of how to create another iteration; thus, the cycle continues (refer to Figures 1 to 3 for examples). Persistence in the generation of memes is a symptom of the reciprocally constitutive duality. In Dawkins' treatment of memes, he characterized their dissemination as "leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins, 1982: 192). However, persistence on the memescape suggests that memes represent a part of the discursive process which constitutes the generative capacity of participatory digital culture to continue the memetic conversation. According to Wiggins (2011), "[w]hat we refer to as language is the generative ability … to create new combinations of linguistic elements that become distinct units of larger systems of communication and meaning-making" (p. 33). As similarly noted by Giroux et al. (1998), "[t]he spreading of a meme is thus not a 'leap' but is inevitably mediated by practice." It is in the recursive action that helps to reconstitute the duality of structure that memes are propagated. Memes are enacted by agents participating in normalized social practices which recursively reconstitute the

structure. This in turn makes it possible for further memetic creation as long as the practices are needed. In structuration, rules are a component of structures but are not fixed (Giddens, 1979: 104). Accordingly, we may see memes, as we have come to know them, appear in magazines, video games, children's books, and films. In other words, where we enact memes or why it is done is susceptible to transformation.

Introducing a genre development of memes

Barley and Tolbert (1988) propose "three modes of enacting already-established social institutions—maintenance, elaboration, and modification—which can be used to understand the production and reproduction of genres" (p. 9) (in Yates and Orlikowski, 1992: 306). When individuals engage in communication, an array of tools, or media, are available from which to choose to encode a message, transmit it, and possibly wait for a response. Yates and Orlikowski (1992: 305) state that genres are social institutions which are produced, reproduced, and/or transformed when individuals communicate. From a structurational perspective, we see memes as messages which "exist within social structures made up of micro-level discourses" (Milner, 2012: 26).

Memes follow a genre development featuring stages of maintenance, elaboration, and modification. In structurational terms, *maintenance* of existing genres occurs when we adhere to the rules for creating the genre without altering the genre (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992: 306). Furthermore, when new circumstances emerge that demand a slight adjustment of genre rules, to reflect those same circumstances individuals can *elaborate* the existing genre rules. Finally, when new circumstances emerge that demand a substantial and consistent departure from existing genre rules, individuals may choose to *modify* the genre. For memes, a similar development occurs following this pattern.

Genre development of memes

Memes are a genre, not a medium, of online communication and are artifacts of participatory digital culture characterized specifically by an agency of consumption-production. As noted by Bakhtin and Medvedev (1985), "[e]ach genre possesses definite principles of selection, definite forms for seeing and conceptualizing reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration" (p. 131). Kamberlis (1999: 404) furthers this point by acknowledging that *texts* of various kinds are produced, reproduced, distributed, and received according to their genre. As Milner (2012) notes, "memes are pop culture artifacts [and as such] they can provide insight into how 'everyday' media texts intertwine with public discourses" (p. 9).

Internet memes start in the maintenance mode as spreadable media. Without spreadable media the meme cannot exist as a genre of communication. Meme as genre is dependent on spreadable media. This term is adapted from Jenkins (2009b). He coined it as a preferable term to *meme*, ostensibly to illustrate dissatisfaction with the biological metaphor. As Carter and Arroyo (2011) explained, *spreadable media* imply permeation through social networks. Once agents in the participatory digital culture alter spreadable media, the genre develops further into what we call an *emergent meme*. Finally, after remix and imitation (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2012), and rapid diffusion (Shifman, 2013)

across social networks or other online spaces for quotidian expression, the *emergent meme* becomes a *meme*, in the current parlance of online communication.

Spreadable media

Multimedia messages consumed without alteration are spreadable media and are not restricted to online spaces but possess the capacity for broad distribution. As a specific example of spreadable media, consider a film trailer such as *Man of Steel*. In this example, we use the trailer which Warner Bros. Pictures uploaded to its YouTube page on 11 December 2012. We do not refer to a specific television appearance of the trailer as spreadable media imply the ability of the viewer to share or distribute the message further. As an example of spreadable media, the *Man of Steel* trailer is maintained through consumption characterized by views and shares. No alteration takes place; it remains spreadable media. As of this writing, the trailer has been viewed nearly 37 million times (Warner Bros Pictures, 2012). Once spreadable media are altered, they become emergent in the elaboration mode.

Video memes develop from broadcast news (*Sweet Brown, Antoine Dodson—Bed Intruder*), user-generated videos (*Leave Britney Alone*), and uploads to sites such as YouTube (*Double Rainbow, Numa Numa*). The *Numa Numa* meme originated as spreadable media in the form of a music single released by a Moldovan boy band in 2003 entitled *Dragostea Din Tei*.

Image macro memes develop from television and movies (*One Does not Simply, Captain Picard WTF*), TV commercials (*The Most Interesting Man in the World*), art (*Ducreux*), or the abundance of prosumer images online (prosumer is the portmanteau of producer and consumer). The *Dos Equis* commercials are the spreadable media, which, after remix, iteration, and distribution, became *The Most Interesting Man in the World* meme.

Emergent meme

When spreadable media are altered, remixed, parodied, and so on, they become the emergent meme. Its characteristics include viral spread and a degree of popularity among members of participatory digital culture. However, emergent memes differ from what is commonly referred to as Internet memes. Emergent memes are altered spreadable media yet are not iterated and remixed further as separate contributions. A remix or alteration becomes a separate contribution when awareness, distribution, and modification reach a critical mass (though ambiguous, this should be understood as a theoretical explanation for an ongoing phenomenon). Gary Brolsma parodied O-Zone's song in his lip-synched performance, as shown in the screenshot of his video in Figure 4. As an emergent meme, it quickly spread online prompting further iterations and remix.

Some spreadable media which are altered may remain stationary as emergent memes. Examples may include Bad Lip Reading (BLR), Rage Comics, and http://www.ytmnd. com (you'r the man now, dog). Still some emergent memes are remixed, iterated, and distributed further thus becoming memes. Burgess (2008), Knobel and Lankshear (2007), Milner (2012), and Shifman (2012, 2013) have discussed memes which are largely

Figure 4. Gary Brolsma's initial *Numa Numa*, a remix of O-Zone's Dragostea Din Tei.[2]

humorous or non-critical of politics or society in general. However, our term "emergent meme" also includes subversive and/or countercultural elaborations of spreadable media.

Countercultural and socially critical messages from subvertising and culture jamming are emergent memes. The rationale for their inclusion is based on our definition of emergent memes as being altered spreadable media representing the elaboration mode in the genre development of Internet memes. Culture jamming is a remix or repurposing of a known image such as a corporate logo and infuses critical perspectives on mainstream trademarks and logos. Subvertising, a portmanteau of subversion and advertising, is a related concept which seeks to evoke cognitive dissonance through the purposeful subversion of an advertisement by adding politically motivated criticism or satire but maintaining the most recognizable elements. Historically both terms are variations of *détournement*, which was a strategy espoused by the Situationist International and a concept attributed to Guy Debord (1967). Indeed, the emergent meme is the ideal vehicle for culture jamming and similar forms of détournement given the emphasis on condensed visualization of the object or idea that is under scrutiny.

What separates culture jamming from other emergent memes such as Rage Comics, http://www.ytmnd.com (you're the man now dog), or BLR, is the explicit socially and/or politically conscious network behind the alteration. We become duped by the culture jam emergent memes. We see the hijacked Tommy Hilfiger or Obsession for Women ads from Adbusters.org, and we know its form as an advertisement yet we are simultaneously made aware of a remixing of the ad into a subversive or countercultural, socially critical message. The culture jammed emergent meme differs from BLR in that BLR is a stationary parody defined by a one-time alteration of a specific movie trailer, political speech, and so on and no further alterations or remixes of BLR videos take place. Ron English's attempts to professionalize culture jamming through his work in "popaganda" are similar to BLR in the one-time alteration of well-known products or corporate logos. His mash-ups of high and low culture equally dupe its audience as in the examples from Adbusters.

Arguably other, perhaps more popular emergent memes that do not use culture jamming as a central message are distinguished by levity and humor in most if not all instances. It is unwise to characterize all emergent memes as being humorous, but an element in remixing spreadable media seems to be a desire for levity.

Central to the emergent meme is alteration which is warranted due to a participatory quality in spreadable media that invites members of digital culture to alter spreadable media into emergent memes. Emergent memes exist as a direct consequence of agency within the digital culture. This progression from spreadable media to memes is a symptom of the dynamic interaction between agency and structure, central to structuration theory.

Meme

The emergent becomes the meme after participatory digital culture has produced imitations, remixes, and further iterations of the emergent meme. Memes are rapidly diffused online especially via online social networks.

As Jenkins (2009c) succinctly states, "if you don't spread, you are dead"; the imitated meme is iterated to create new memes continuing the cycle of genre development. The distance between elaboration and modification is scant but is nearly impenetrable without transgression through *intentional* imitation, iteration, and rapid diffusion.

Progression from spreadable media to meme

It is advisable to demonstrate the progression from spreadable media, emergent meme, and finally to meme by providing case studies on two specific memes, namely, the *Numa Numa* meme and *The Most Interesting Man in the World* meme. The first choice is a video meme, whereas the second is an image macro meme. The progression is succinctly presented in Table 1.

Numa Numa

On 6 December 2004, amateur videographer Gary Brolsma uploaded a lip-synched performance of the song "Dragostea din tei" by the Moldovan boy band O-Zone. The video's first appearance on the entertainment, social media website, and flash hosting service Newgrounds.com precipitated 15.8 million views and over 2000 pages of comments. YouTube user xloserkidx uploaded a copy of the video on 14 August 2006 and has gained over 52 million views as of 25 October 2013 (Knowyourmeme.com, 2013c). Incidentally, the YouTube clip shows over 321,000 likes and over 24,000 thumbs-down. As noted on the meme documentation website Knowyourmeme.com (2013c),

> "Dragostea din tei" (roughly translated as "Love in the Linden Tree") is a 2003 dance single by the Moldovan pop trio O-Zone. Its nickname "Numa Numa" comes from the song's Romanian lyrics "nu mă, nu mă iei" which translates to "you don't want, don't want to take me."

Table 1. Progression of meme as genre.

	Spreadable media	Emergent meme	Meme
Video	Original music video *Dragostea Din Tei* by Moldovan boy band O-Zone appears (2003)	Gary Brolsma's lip-synching video, in which he uniquely performs O-Zone's song, is uploaded (2004)	Subsequent remixes and iterations of Brolsma's video or the style that characterizes his video lead to the *Numa Numa* meme (2004 onward)
Image macro	Television commercial advertising Dos Equis beer features Jonathan Goldsmith as *The Most Interesting Man in the World* (2006)	Image macros appear online and include the phrasal template *I don't always X, but when I do, I Y* (2007–2009)	*The Most Interesting Man in the World* meme continues to have the phrasal template but includes other images such as the *Ancient Aliens Guy* and *Ducreux* memes (2010 onward)

Numerous iterations and remixes of Brolsma's video emerged as a result of the popularity surrounding his original remix of O-Zone's song. In fact, in 2009, Brolsma partnered with Geico Insurance to make another *Numa Numa* video which featured the Geico gecko dancing under a lamp in the background. Various YouTube remixes of Brolsma's video as well as remixes of O-Zone's song have appeared on the video sharing site in subsequent years.

In terms of our discussion on the genre development of a meme, Brolsma's version of the O-Zone song (by lip synching and throwing his arms up in the air in tune with the "nu mă, nu mă iei" refrain) altered the song and video's status as spreadable media to emergent meme. Further iterations retained the name he gave the remix, *Numa Numa.* It is not difficult to find numerous recreations and remixes of Brolsma's original remix of the O-Zone song. The emergent became a meme as understood in the common parlance with the further remixes and parodies rapidly distributed online.

The Most Interesting Man in the World

"He is the most interesting man in the world" or so he was introduced as part of a successful and innovative advertising campaign in 2006 by Euro RSCG Worldwide, a global marketing firm (Knowyourmeme.com, 2013b). American actor Jonathan Goldsmith portrayed "the most interesting man" who popularized the self-aggrandizing commercials during which Goldsmith's character makes a statement that was later remixed by participatory digital culture ("I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis—Stay thirsty, my friends"). At some point between 2007 and 2009, the first image macro memes appeared featuring Goldsmith's character (see Figure 5 for an example). The catchphrase omitted the appeal to purchase Dos Equis beer but kept the self-referentiality. The transgression from broadcast television to image macro meme suggests that the TV commercial campaign as spreadable media evoked a

Figure 5. The phrasal template *"I don't always* X, *but when I do, I* Y*"* is central to the meme.[3]

response from participatory digital culture. This is an example of development from spreadable media to emergent meme with nearly immediate development into meme. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when the spreadable media became emergent. It is, however, likely that it was easier for participatory digital culture to remix the TV commercial as an image macro. With an image macro meme, members of participatory digital culture are able to quickly re-visit the ongoing conversation and contribute to it with more, related image macro memes.

Discussion: structuration in the context of memes

Recalling Giddens, systems emerge as normalized social practices enacted through recursively reproduced agential actions. Agents recursively reproduce their actions in the consumption and production of memes as if involved in a conversation between members of participatory digital culture. Internet memes exist in a large part because agents are involved in the recursive production and reproduction of memes but also because the structures enacted by the agential creation of memes lead to the further reproduction of memes. Memes continue to be created as long as agential practical consciousness is defined by a desire for memetic content to be remixed, iterated, and distributed further. It is not a system bound by immutable rules, however. Memetic systems are defined by the presence of an emergent meme (an altered form of spreadable media) that is

recursively reproduced in a process in which agents adhere to an unstated but known structure. Giddens uses the term "memory traces" to describe structure (Giddens, 1984). In memetic terms, memory traces (or structures) are the procedures of designing specific memetic content in such a way to be recognized as memes in order to promote a recursive reconstitution of related memes. In the case of Brolsma's video, memory traces allow members of digital culture to know what to do in order to participate; that is, to recognize a particular message as a meme and, if desired, to reproduce similar memetic content in the hopes of a repeated process of recognition and reproduction. Seen as a conversation between members of participatory digital culture, both *Numa Numa* and *The Most Interesting Man in the World* contain the rules and resources necessary for further remix. Memory traces (or structures) may be active or dormant and therefore are drawn upon when members of participatory digital culture wish to further the conversation. In the case of *The Most Interesting Man in the World*, the generative power of the phrasal template is limited only by the creativity of participatory digital culture. In the case of *Numa Numa* structures, refer to the emphasis on the "nu mă, nu mă iei" refrain as well as the arm flailing featured in the first video by Brolsma.

Memes require the abstraction inherent in Giddens' structuration theory in order for researchers to make sense of the apparent randomness by which they are produced and reproduced by participatory digital culture. Giddens notes that "[s]ociety only has form, and that form only has effects on people, insofar as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do" (Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 77). Similarly, agents draw upon structures (memory traces) when they are needed.

Memetic transformation is the origin of structuration's relevance to memes. As in the case of the popular Ducreux meme mentioned at the beginning of the article, agential action recursively produces memes and reproduces the means by which it should be reconstituted.

Structuration offers an internal view of memetic creation. The presence of a meme implies that agents actively draw on structures recursively and that structures are a factor that regulates such action, hence the duality of structure (and agency). Agential action on the memescape implies not only the creation of memes but of structures associated with memes which then recursively constitute the structure in which the agential action takes place. Once spreadable media become emergent, and further, once the emergent gains the attention needed in order to become remixed and iterated, a meme is realized.

Future studies

Future studies may consider applying our genre development to their analysis of memes. Alternatively, future studies might seek to explore if the meme from our genre description will develop further into other modes or whether memetic regression is possible (movement from meme to an earlier development stage). Future studies may also compare the use or purpose of memes across languages and cultures. Wikipedia contains several entries about Internet memes, and these reveal variations on the theme when compared to the English-language versions.

Several previous studies on memes have employed an empirical approach to the understanding of memetic diffusion in the era of big data. Weng et al. (2012) used an

agent-based model to examine how popular memes compete with fleeting attention spans. Future empirical studies may explore potential similarities and differences comparatively in the lifespans of spreadable media, emergent memes, and memes—such lifespans that may not be limited to the time and space of memes, but how one singular meme also serves as impetus for future evolutions and revolutions of new memes.

Furthermore, Giddens' structuration theory can serve as a model to analyze the spread and development of memes. Possible research questions include the following: How do online communities develop and legitimize genre conventions for memes? How are memes used in different cultures with differing social and political contexts? What are the main forces shaping the genre of memes?

Conclusion

Memes as artifacts of participatory digital culture illustrate the duality of structure in that they possess the instructions on how to remix and reproduce themselves while they simultaneously evince the agential activity needed for their reproduction. The literature on Internet memes lacks a theoretical framework. Our contribution establishes a few steps forward in that direction. We provide a tenable genre development of Internet memes by introducing three categories to describe memetic transformation: spreadable media, emergent meme, and meme. Our analysis argues that memes are remixed and iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture. We understand that memes develop from emergent memes, which we define as altered or remixed spreadable media. We have adapted and modified Jenkins' (2009b) term "spreadable media" to refer to original messages (such as movie trailers, political speeches, interviews, motivational posters, etc.), which are not parodied or remixed versions of earlier messages.

Our analysis benefits from the inclusion of Giddens' structuration theory as it aides in understanding how memes are created and how the process of genre development demonstrates the generative capacity both for continued memetic transformation and participation from members of digital culture. Structuration positions these dynamic components as the core of a duality of structure and agency for Internet memes. Furthermore, Gidden's structuration theory can serve as a model to further analyze the spread and development of memes, answering such questions as how online communities develop and legitimize genre conventions for memes, how memes are used in different cultures with differing social and political contexts, and to identify the main forces shaping the genre of new and emergent memes.

Notes

1. Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/joseph-ducreux-archaic-rap
2. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60og9gwKh1o
3. Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-most-interesting-man-in-the-world

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