

DEFINING INTERNET MEMES

A core problem of memetics, maybe *the* core quandary, is the exact meaning of the term “meme.” As mentioned above, Dawkins’s initial definition was quite ambiguous: he referred to a meme as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.” His set of meme examples spanned ideas (God), texts (nursery rhymes and jokes), and practices (Christian rituals). Ever since, the study of memes has been subject to disputes centering on the mind-body or genotype-phenotype dichotomy, yielding three positions regarding the nature of memes: mentalist driven, behavior driven, and inclusive.

Mentalist-driven memetics, advocated by leading scholars in the field such as Dawkins himself (in his 1982 clarification of the theory), Daniel Dennett, and Aaron Lynch, is based on the differentiation between memes and meme vehicles. According to this school of thought, memes are ideas or pieces of information that reside in the

brain. They are not simple ideas such as *red*, *round*, or *cold*, but complex ones such as ideas of the alphabet, chess, or impressionism.¹ In order to be passed along from one person to another, memes are “loaded” on various vehicles: images, texts, artifacts, or rituals. According to this view, those observable meme vehicles are equivalent to phenotypes—the visible manifestation of genes. In other words, memes are idea complexes and meme vehicles are their tangible expressions.

By contrast, *behavior-driven* memetics sees memes as behaviors and artifacts rather than ideas.² In the behaviorist model, the meme vehicle and the meme itself are inseparable: the meme has no existence outside the events, practices, and texts in which it appears; that is, it is always experienced as encoded information. Moreover, this approach claims that if memes were indeed only abstract units of information, it would be impossible to disassociate them from their manifestation in the outside world. Defining memes as concrete units enables their evolution and diffusion to be studied empirically. This brand of memetics is closely related to the scholarly approach known as “diffusion studies.” Many studies in this rich tradition focus on the diffusion of “innovations,” occasionally adopting the term “meme” and the general memetic framework. However, diffusion studies tend to cling to narrow definitions of memes, thus overlooking the concept’s complexity and richness. In particular, this tradition tends to look at

the diffused units as stable, well-defined entities with clear boundaries.

Whereas members of the mentalist- and behavior-driven schools see memes as either ideas or practices, what I tag as the *inclusive memetic approach*, represented by Susan Blackmore in *The Meme Machine*, uses the term "indiscriminately to refer to memetic information in any of its many forms; including ideas, the brain structures that initiate those ideas, the behaviors these brain structures produce, and their versions in books, recipes, maps and written music" (p. 66); that is, any type of information that can be copied by imitation should be called a meme. But this inclusive approach may lack analytical power, as it assembles very different elements under its large conceptual tent.

Reassessing these standpoints, I suggest a different approach to defining memes. This suggestion is based on two rather simple principles: (a) looking at diffused units as incorporating several *memetic dimensions*—namely, several aspects that people may imitate; and (b) understanding memes not as single entities that propagate well, but as *groups of content units* with common characteristics. I will soon demonstrate how these two principles produce a workable definition of Internet memes.

Going back to Dawkins's original idea—that memes are units of imitation—I find it useful to isolate three dimensions of cultural items that people can potentially

imitate: content, form, and stance.³ The first dimension relates mainly to the *content* of a specific text, referencing to both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it. The second dimension relates to *form*: this is the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses. It includes both visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts and the more complex genre-related patterns organizing them (such as lipsynch or animation). While ideas and their expression have been widely discussed in relation to memes the third dimension is presented here for the first time. This dimension—which relates to the information memes convey about their own communication—is labeled here as *stance*. I use “stance” to depict the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers. As with form and content, stance is potentially memetic; when re-creating a text, users can decide to imitate a certain position that they find appealing or use an utterly different discursive orientation.

Since I use stance in this context as a very broad category, I wish to clarify it by breaking it into three subdimensions, drawing on concepts from discourse and media studies: (1) *participation structures*—which delineate who is entitled to participate and how, as described by Susan Phillips; (2) *keying*—the tone and style of communication, as conceptualized by Erving Goffman and further developed by Shoshanna Blum-Kulka and her colleagues; and

(3) *communicative functions*, used according to the typology suggested by Roman Jakobson. Jakobson identified six fundamental functions of human communication: (a) referential communication, which is oriented toward the context, or the “outside world”; (b) emotive, oriented toward the addresser and his or her emotions; (c) conative, oriented toward the addressee and available paths of actions (e.g., imperatives); (d) phatic, which serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication; (e) metalingual, which is used to establish mutual agreement on the code (for example, a definition); and (f) poetic, focusing on the aesthetic or artistic beauty of the construction of the message itself.⁴

In addition to this three-dimensional breakdown, I suggest that for *Internet* memes—which are often based on an extensive and swift mutation rate—it may be useful to turn Dawkins’s definition on its head by looking at memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagate well, but as *groups* of content items. Combining these two principles, I define an *Internet* meme as:

- (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
- (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c)
- were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

This revised definition may help us in providing more nuanced accounts of the meanings and possible implications of Internet memes. To demonstrate its applicability and utility, I will now take a closer look at three memes: "Leave Britney Alone," "It Gets Better," and the "Pepper-Spraying Cop."

Leave Britney (and the Pepper-Spraying Cop?) Alone, It Doesn't Get Better

On September 10, 2007, a young gay blogger and actor named Chris Crocker uploaded a YouTube video in which he reacted to the harsh criticism that followed pop star Britney Spears's lackluster performance on the MTV Music Video Awards. Crying and shouting throughout most of the clip, Crocker implored his viewers to "Leave Britney Alone":

And how fucking dare anyone out there make fun of Britney, after all she's been through! She lost her aunt, she went through a divorce, she had two fucking kids, her husband turned out to be a user, a cheater, and now she's going through a custody battle. All you people care about is readers and making money off of her. SHE'S A HUMAN! [...] Her song is called "give me more" for a reason because all you people want is MORE, MORE, MORE, MORE,

MORE! LEAVE HER ALONE! You're lucky she even performed for you BASTARDS! LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE! [...] Leave Britney Spears alone right NOW!

The video gained over two million views within twenty-four hours, and many more in the following days and months. The Crocker sensation was reported on various mainstream media platforms and generated worldwide attention. The video soon spawned a stream of derivatives: mimcry-based clips (in which known actors and ordinary users impersonated Crocker) as well as remix-based clips (in which music, graphic elements, or dubbing were re-edited with the original).

In exploring "Leave Britney Alone" as a meme, we need to examine the distribution of the original video, but perhaps more importantly, we should investigate the structure and meaning of this video's *new variations*. People may *share* a certain video with others for many different reasons (which I will explore in chapter 6), but when they create their *own versions* of it, they inevitably reveal their personal interpretations. Thinking of Internet memes as trinities of content, form, and stance requires that we determine whether the imitator embraces or rejects each of these memetic dimensions. In what follows, I will implement this strategy to evaluate the ways in which Crocker's video was transformed in the course of its memetic diffusion.

Crocker's 2007 video is a complex amalgam of ideas, textual practices, and communicative strategies. Our starting point is the video's content, namely, the ideas and ideologies that it conveys. The text includes, among other things, facts about Britney Spears's life (for example, her two children) and the castigation of people criticizing fallen celebrities. More broadly, in this and other videos, Crocker wishes to convey the message that being gay and effeminate is a legitimate practice. In terms of form, or textual construction, the video's layout features one talking head, filmed in close-up and in one-shot and situated in front of a white cloth. It further features repetitions of certain phrases, raised voice pitch, tears, and distraught hair-hand gestures. The most complex dimension in Crocker's video relates to stance. Regarding the subdimension of *participation structure*, the video, by virtue of its existence, reminds the viewer that a gay, overtly effeminate individual is openly expressing his opinion in the public sphere. Keying, as noted above, is the tone, or modality, of the internal framing of discursive events as formed by their participants. People can key their communication as funny, ironic, mocking, pretend, or serious. In the case of "Leave Britney Alone," Crocker keys his utterances as extremely serious and as ultra-emotional—sometimes so serious that, at a remove, it can even appear comical and ambiguously parodic. While some commentators questioned the sincerity of the video, Crocker insisted it was utterly genuine. In

relation to the communication functions defined by Jakobson, of the six described above, the most prominent are the referential (Crocker provides us with facts about Britney's life); the conative (viewers are implored to change their behavior); and above all, the emotive, as this video is all about the addresser and his emotional state. In addition, a contextual examination of this video may lead to the identification of a certain phatic function to it. "Leave Britney Alone" is one of a stream of videos uploaded by Crocker on his YouTube channel. Through these frequent feeds, Crocker aspires to maintain the communicative path between himself, his budding acting career, and his faithful YouTube (and MySpace) viewers.⁵

So far, I have charted the memetic dimensions embedded in Crocker's initial video. The question to be addressed now is: Which of these dimensions was imitated with accuracy by Internet users in their derivatives, and which were altered? In other words, which of these dimensions succeeded in the competitive meme selection process? Since it is virtually impossible to track and examine all of this meme's versions, I compiled a sample of twenty highly viewed derivative videos. To create the sample, two queries were used in YouTube's internal search engine: the string "Leave Britney Alone," and the words "leave," "alone," and "Crocker." I then sorted the results according to their view count, and selected the twenty most-viewed videos (above 100,000) in which people imitate Crocker. Analyzing them

qualitatively, I aimed at identifying patterns of memetic uptake.

Among the three memetic dimensions, the one that viewers imitated with a high level of accuracy is the video's form. The *mise-en-scène* of one person in front of a white cloth filmed in one-shot was evident in virtually all texts. Men were featured in sixteen videos out of twenty, often bearing feminine markers similar to Crocker's (such as a wig or eyeliner). In addition, the composition style of Crocker's sentences was repeated throughout the sample, as were key phrases such as "leave X alone" and "she/he is a human."

In contrast to the relative accuracy in the imitation of the videos' form, radical changes take place on both the content and stance dimensions. These alternations are related, to a large extent, to the construction of *all* the videos in the sample as parodies. A major feature of parody is its critical stance vis-à-vis the source text that it mimics. While all parody includes some kind of imitation, it is important to note that not all imitations are parodies. Many YouTube videos are emulated without mocking their protagonists. For instance, the "Evolution of Dance" hit—itself capturing an openly self-parodying event—has spawned numerous imitations in which people copy the performer's dance movements in various contexts, without lampooning him. This is distinctly not the case in "Leave Britney Alone," where the parodic intentions of the original are at best ambiguous and highly exploitable. As I demonstrate below, parody

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targets both the ideological and communicative aspects of the original meme.

Crocker's message about the legitimacy of being an overtly effeminate homosexual is lampooned in many of the videos. For instance, the comedian Seth Green, in a heavily viewed parody, shouts and "implores" the audience to leave Chris Crocker alone, pausing occasionally to fix his black eyeliner: "You have not spent a mile walking in his sneakers, or, platform pumps ... I don't know what he wears ... BUT I BET IT'S STYLISH!" Other clips mock a battery of pop stars and celebrities. In videos such as "Leave Justin Bieber Alone" or "Leave Rebecca Black Alone," the presenters mock Crocker's outcry to pity celebrities by publicly bashing them. Such clips represent a radical alteration of the original video's stance, particularly its *keying* (the tone and style of communication). User-generated derivatives abandon Crocker's overtly emotional performance in favor of a cynical and ironic one. No one says what he or she means in these videos. When a speaker pleads with his audiences to "leave Michael Jackson alone" because he "loves his monkey," it is quite clear that the words spoken are not those meant. Curiously enough, the vast majority of the sampled videos employ common ironic keying: these videos are more similar to *each other* than to Crocker's original.

My analysis so far yields a complex web of imitations and memetic dimensions. While users emulate the forms

manifested in Crocker's video, they imitate the other imitators to construct opposing memes at the content and stance dimensions. In other words, the process of imitation combines overt copying and reversing aspects of the original event. It may be that the most powerful communication-oriented meme spread by users in this process is ironic communication: communication that veers from a definite commitment to one's uttered words, using language in a playful and non-obliging way.

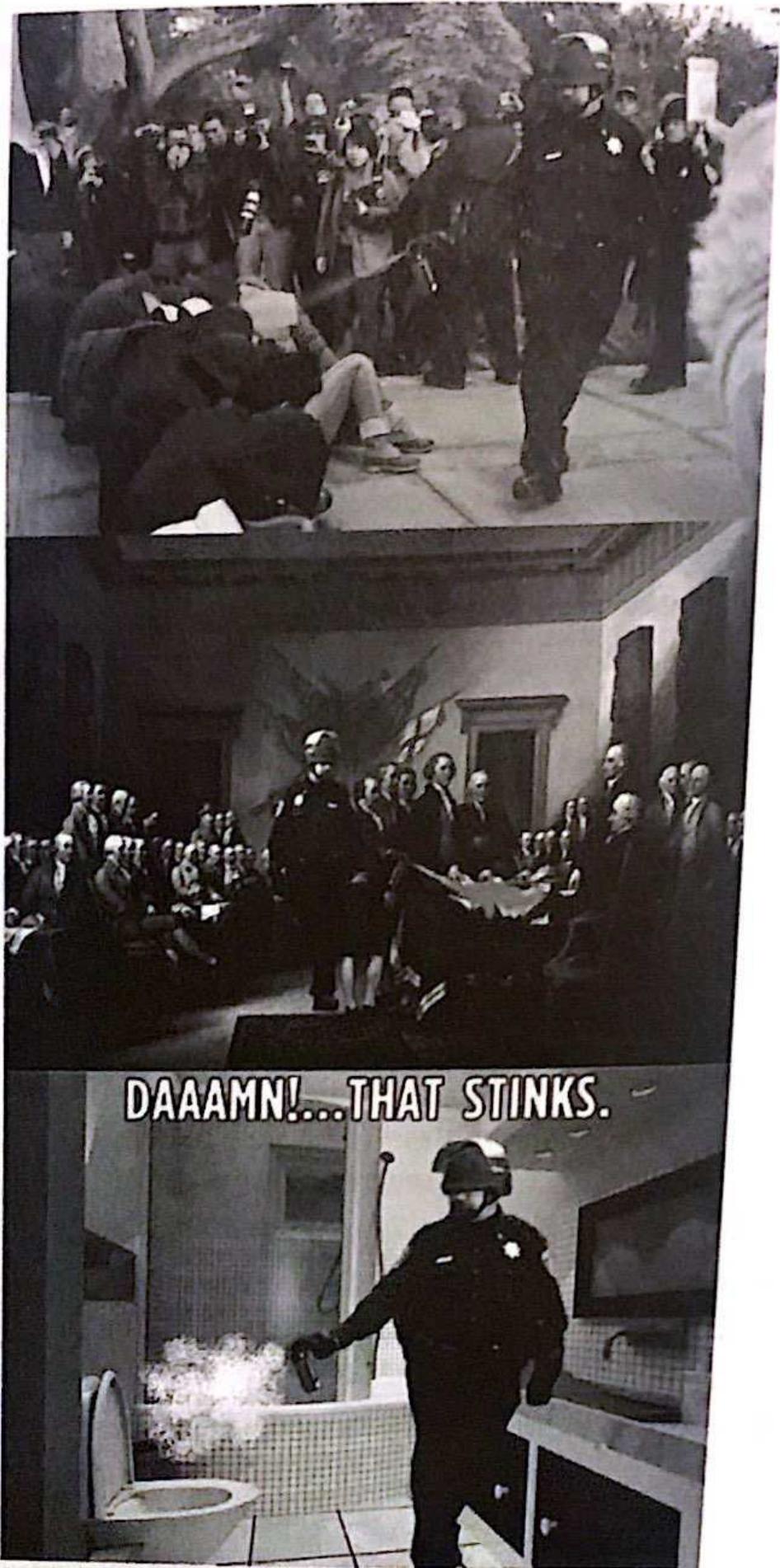
In a recent work using the three-dimensional meme model, Noam Gal examined the role of memetic practices in Internet-based collective identity formation.⁶ She focused on a participatory YouTube campaign entitled "It Gets Better," produced as a response to vast media coverage of gay teen suicide in the United States as a result of homophobic bullying. Gal analyzed this stream of videos as a meme; people create new versions in response to the former ones, preserving and altering various aspects. Through this practice of partial citation, a distinct discursive arena is constituted, shaped by an ongoing negotiation over its norms and conventions. To investigate the construction of identity through the aggregation of sporadic acts of imitation and deviation, Gal analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively 200 campaign videos. In terms of content, she found that campaign videos tend to describe both the problems of gay teens and their solutions as associated with the private domain. In relation to stance, she found

that the majority of protagonists are white, young, able-bodied American men, constituting a typical hegemonic structure of participation, despite the relative absence of formal gatekeepers from the medium. With regard to form, she found that one *mise-en-scène*—of a protagonist(s) seated in front of a camera—dominates the corpus. This differentiation between content, form, and stance allowed Gal to identify various modes of compliance and subversion in this campaign: whereas in some videos the rather conservative content was paired with a subversive stance (as in the case of a Puerto Rican woman praising Jesus), in others, radical assertions were packed in professional formats that “blocked” further participation.

So far I have demonstrated the utility of the threefold meme typology through video-based examples. I wish to further illustrate its applicability to other formats, such as image and text. To this end, I’ll briefly look into the recent example of the “Pepper-Spraying Cop” meme. On November 18, 2011, students from the University of California, Davis, gathered as part of the Occupy Wall Street protest. When they refused police orders to evacuate the area, two officers reacted by pepper-spraying a row of still-sitting students directly in their faces. Shortly after the incident, videos documenting it were uploaded to YouTube, generating uproar against the excessive use of force by American police officers. A photograph in which one of the officers, John Pike, was shown spraying the students quickly

evolved into an Internet meme. Users Photoshopped the "Pepper-Spraying Cop" into an endless array of contexts, spanning historical, artistic, and pop-culture-oriented backgrounds.

The plethora of images constituting the "Pepper-Spraying Cop" meme can be analyzed through the model of content, form, and stance. Such an exercise reveals that while most versions share a similar Photoshop-based form, they vary greatly in terms of content. Content-wise, I identified two main groups of meme versions. The first focuses on political contexts: Pike is shown pepper-spraying iconic American symbols such as George Washington crossing the Delaware, the former US presidents on Mount Rushmore, and the Constitution itself, as well as freedom fighters across the globe (in Tiananmen Square, for example). These political versions share a clear idea, namely that the officer brutally violated the basic values of justice and freedom as represented by the protestors. A second group of user-generated images is pop-culture-oriented. In these versions, Pike is pepper-spraying icons such as Snoopy and Marilyn Monroe, as well as a battery of stars identified with other Internet memes, such as "Little Baby Panda" and "Keyboard Cat." Such pop-culture-oriented meme versions are often open to multiple interpretations. In one case, in which Pike is portrayed as spraying Rebecca Black—a widely scorned teen singer and Internet phenomenon—the original meaning of the photo as criticism of Pike



seems to be almost reversed. This differentiation between two types of memetic content can be further associated with stance alternations. For example, the utterly serious keying of the original photograph has been transformed in the process of memetic uptake, which involves explicit playfulness. However, if the keying of politically oriented versions is mainly sardonic, the predominant tone in the pop-culture-oriented ones is amused and humorous.

The analysis of the "Pepper-Spraying Cop" meme according to the three memetic dimensions reveals that, in contrast to the unified uptake pattern characterizing "Leave Britney Alone," other memes might encompass a more divergent mode of diffusion and evolution. Tracing the ways in which they diffuse may prove that the ostensibly chaotic World Wide Web may in fact follow more organized cultural trajectories than meet the eye.

The differentiation between memetic dimensions may also advance our ability to draw borders between Internet memes. If we think of Internet memes as groups of interconnected content units that share common characteristics, we may further posit that such shared features may include content, form, and stance, and various combinations thereof. Therefore, the definition of a certain meme's scope may rely on the dimension through which

Figure 6 The "Pepper-Spraying Cop" meme. Sources: (top) <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/louise+macabitas> (photo credit: Louise Macabitas); (middle and lower) <http://www.uproxx.com/webculture/>.

it is examined. For instance, if our prism is that of content, or ideas, we may argue that the same content can be expressed in a video, a text, or a Photoshop image. In this case, what we define as a particular “Internet meme” will incorporate different forms. Alternatively, we may identify memetic formats, such as image macros or lip sync, that are used for conveying various ideas. I will return to this distinction in the seventh chapter, in which I will define *genres of Internet memes* as intersections between specific themes and formats.

MEME GENRES

In theory, all Internet users are free spirits, individuals who take their unique path to the hall of digital fame. In practice, they tend to follow the same beaten tracks of meme creation. These paths can be thought of as *meme genres*. Defined as "socially recognized types of communicative action,"¹ genres share not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences. The study of genres encompasses both top-down cultural artifacts such as drama, film, and television, and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions such as "best man" speeches and application letters. Recently, Internet meme genres have been added to the long list of genres that we encounter on a daily basis.

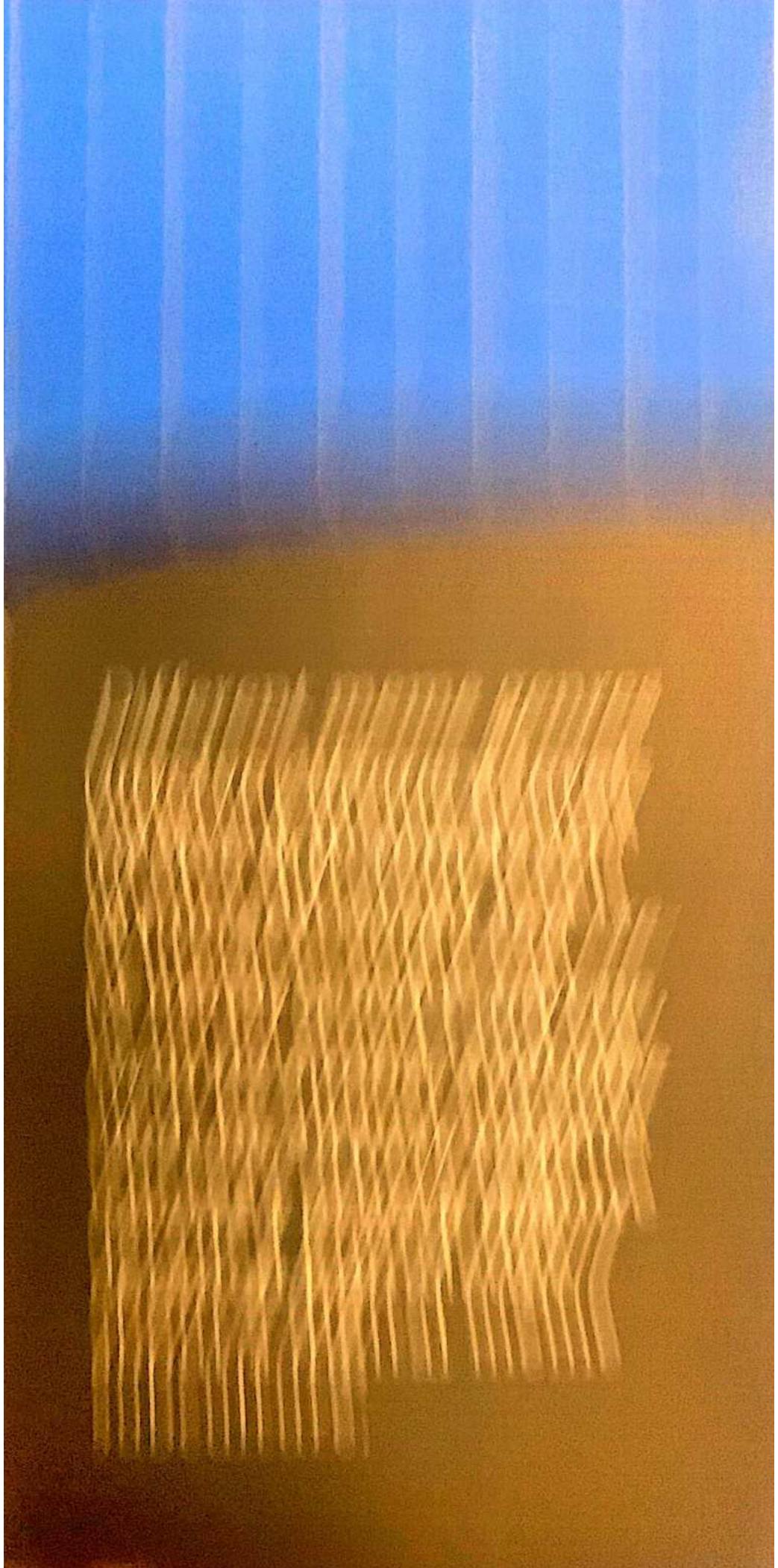
Internet meme genres are based on what Jean Burgess describes as "vernacular creativity":² everyday innovative and artistic practices that can be carried out by simple production means. Although vernacular creativity predates

digital culture, Burgess suggests that new media have reshaped it by turning hidden and mundane practices (such as singing in front of the mirror) into highly visible public culture. As public discourse, meme genres play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries. Ryan Milner shows that while technically meme creation is becoming increasingly easy—specialized websites offer templates that even a six-year-old can operate—creating and understanding memes requires sophisticated “meme literacy.”³ In what follows, I assert that different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood (and created) by almost anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture.

My selected list of nine meme genres is far from comprehensive, yet it surveys some of the central formats that have emerged in the past decade. It is written mainly as an introduction for those who are less immersed into digital culture. In other words: if you are a regular on 4chan, Tumblr, or Reddit, you may want to skip ahead to the next chapter.

Reaction Photoshops

Editing software in general and Adobe Photoshop in particular have been an inseparable part of Internet humor



Scanned with CamScanner

since the early 2000s.⁴ The genre that I'm calling "reaction Photoshop" is composed of the images created in response to *memetic photos*, defined in chapter 6 as photographs that provoke extensive creative reactions. One of the earliest examples of a reaction Photoshop was the "Tourist Guy" meme. Shortly after 9/11, a photograph of a young man with sunglasses and a backpack standing on the World Trade Center observation deck, with a plane heading toward him, was widely circulated over the Internet. It soon became apparent that the photo was a hoax: a young Hungarian named Peter Guzli had edited a photo of himself—taken in 1997—and sent it to a couple of friends as a private joke. Once the hoax was exposed, the Internet was flooded by reaction Photoshop, showing the "tourist guy" in various settings and historical periods, spanning the sinking of the *Titanic*, the film *The Matrix*, and a Ku Klux Klan rally. Since reaction Photoshop are so prevalent, I discuss them at length in various parts of this book—particularly in chapters 6 and 8.

Photo Fads

The photo fad genre (as described by "Know Your Meme") includes staged photos of people who imitate specific positions or actions in various settings, usually with the purpose of posting the picture on the Web. Specific photo

fad memes include, for instance, the ones described above as planking (lying face down with arms to the side in unusual settings) and "Heads in Freezers" (which is just what it sounds like), as well as "Put Shoe on Head" (ditto) and "owling" (sitting in a perched position and looking into the distance to imitate an owl). I provided a brief analysis of this genre in chapter 3. In many ways, it resembles the next genre on which I will elaborate.

Flash Mob

The flash mob is a phenomenon in which a group of strangers gather in a public space, suddenly and simultaneously perform a particular act, and after that just leave the scene, quick as a flash. The public act can assume many forms: frivolous dancing and freezing in place, zombie walks, and sudden disrobing. The gathering is coordinated through the Internet and mobile phones, and then photographed and uploaded to YouTube.

Flash mobs emerged as an Internet phenomenon in 2003, when over one hundred people flooded the home furnishings department of Macy's in Manhattan. They told the sales assistants they were members of a commune living in a warehouse in Williamsburg and were looking to buy a "love rug" for the price of \$10,000 "to play on." Bill Wasik, then a senior editor of *Harper's Magazine*, was

credited with organizing this prank and consequently with the invention of the flash mob genre, which quickly spread outside New York City and the United States.

Virág Molnár traces the roots of the genre to twentieth-century avant-garde movements, such as the Dadaists, who wanted to shock the conformist “bourgeois” middle classes by using surprise and guerilla tactics.⁵ For instance, the US-based Yippies (members of the Youth International Party), an amalgam of apolitical hippies and radical New Left activists, engaged in politically oriented pranks. In one of them, a group of Yippies took a tour of the New York Stock Exchange and started throwing dollar bills onto the trading floor. Trade was stopped as elegantly dressed brokers stumbled over each other to get to the money.

According to Molnár’s typology, contemporary flash mobs include several subtypes. While some of these are apolitical, others have an embedded anticonsumerist element: they want to “reclaim” public space that has been overtaken by commercial use and interests in order to generate consumption-free enjoyment. Yet, somewhat ironically, from an early stage the genre was capitalized on for marketing purposes. For instance, the cellular company T-Mobile coordinated a flash mob dance of three hundred people at a London train station, resulting in an extremely popular YouTube advertisement. This commercial use has been criticized as subverting the basic principles of the genre: democracy, anticommercialism, and spontaneity.

Lipsynch

Lipsynch (or lipdub) videos are clips in which an individual or group is seen matching their lip movements to a popular song. Before the 1970s, lipsynch was used widely as a technical—yet concealed—procedure in popular music performance and cinema: the audience was not supposed to see any disconnection between voice and body. Even now, exposure of lipsynching elicits mockery and accusations of lack of authenticity. The origins of lipdub as a performative genre, in which the split between voice and body is manifest and played upon, can be traced to Dennis Potter's TV series *Pennies from Heaven* (1978). The series featured a 1930s salesman who avoided the agonies of his life by escaping, through lipsynch, to the magical world of music. In Potter's later productions—*The Singing Detective*, *Lipstick on Your Collar*, and *Karaoke*—lipsynching was further developed as a technique through which the ideas and emotions of the characters were exposed.⁶

The Internet, and especially the introduction of personal webcams and, later on, simple editing software, has enabled the quick popularization of the genre. Indeed, lipsynching has become extremely prevalent across the globe. It currently embeds two main subgenres: bedroom lipdubs and collective lipdubs. As I outline below, the first subgenre is linked to private households and the second to public activities and organizations.

Bedroom lipsynchs feature a small number of participants, usually in front of their webcams. One of the first notable examples of this genre was the "Numa Numa" dance, performed by Gari Broolsma in 2004. Broolsma, a nineteen-year-old student from New Jersey, just wanted to entertain his friends with a personal version of the Romanian hit "Dragostea Din Tei." But apparently the video amused other people as well: within a short period, it had been viewed by millions, evoking numerous memetic responses, in the form of both flattering homage and derogatory mockery. Another notable example is the "Back-Dorm Boys," two Chinese art students from Guangdong Province who, in 2005, uploaded a lipsynched version of the Backstreet Boys hit "I Want It That Way." Their overwhelming popularity resulted in a subsequent series of videos and vast mainstream media attention. Such success stories encouraged many others, resulting in numerous bedroom lipsynchs covering almost every imaginable pop hit. The memetic appeal of this genre can be explained in light of the principles discussed in chapter 3. Bedroom lipdubs are very easy to produce, and they relate strongly to today's era of networked individualism. They highlight the presence and talents of a specific individual, and also signal that this person is part of a larger digital pop culture.

In contrast to the individualistic aura of bedroom lipsynchs, public sphere lipsynchs are multiparticipant

collective productions. They are often created as an organizational effort, featured in spaces such as university campuses, offices, or army bases, and filmed in one continuous camera shot. This subgenre has also been labeled lipdub, a term coined in 2006 by Jakob Lodwick, the founder of Vimeo (a video-sharing venture that allows only user-generated material). Lodwick explains: "It's kind of the bridge between amateur video and actual music videos."⁷ Collective lipdubs are often used for public relations. They signify to the world that a certain university or firm is "cool," vigorous, and frivolous—the kind of place you would like to be.

Both types of lipdub embody a blend of fame and anonymity that characterize participatory culture. Lipdubs are based on the reappropriation of mass-mediated hits, originally performed by professional singers, by small, local communities of amateurs. While this may be seen as a positive, democratizing turn, a more critical reading claims that lipdub also draws a line between amateur and professional art: most lipsynchers remain anonymous, and even if they do become famous, they are labeled as class B YouTube stars who are never equivalent to "real" film or television stars. Moreover, as Graham Turner suggests, success in digital media is still measured through one's ability to be incorporated into traditional mass media.⁸ Thus, genres such as lipsynch do not create a real alternative to the conventional media industries.

Misheard Lyrics

Phonetic translation or misheard-lyrics videos are based on amusing mistranslations of spoken sounds to written words. These are done by transcribing what the words sound like (that is, their phonetics), regardless of their true meaning. Phonetic translations were molded into a distinct meme genre following a popular 2001 animation that Neil Cicerega created to the Japanese song “Hyaku-gojuuichi.” At a certain point, subtitles such as “Give my sweater back or I will play the guitar” popped on the screen, reflecting what the Japanese words would sound like to an average English speaker. In subsequent years, many similar clips (tagged as “animutations”) emerged on the Internet.⁹

At a later stage, another phonetic translation subgenre emerged based on an even simpler user-generated manipulation: the insertion of subtitles into an existing video clip, usually one that originated in South or East Asia. This subversion is sometimes called “buffalax,” referring to the nickname of the YouTuber who in 2007 posted the staple video of this subgenre, “Benny Lava.” His phonetic translation of the song “Kalluri Vaanil” by Tamil artists Prabhu Deva and Jaya Sheel opens with the unforgettable line: “My loony bun is fine, Benny Lava!,” followed by such gems as “Have you been high today? I see the nuns are gay.” The genre quickly globalized, with numerous linguistic dyads

emerging, including, for example, Malayalam subtitles to a Russian folksong. English language songs, heard (but not always understood) the world over, have also become popular targets. For instance the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" is phonetically translated into Japanese as "Stupid public urination," and "I've Got the Power" becomes in German "Agathe Bauer."¹⁰

Recut Trailers

A recut trailer is a user-generated "fake" movie trailer based on the re-editing or remixing of film footage. In many cases, it displaces the original film's genre with an utterly different one, creating "new" movies such as *Brokeback to the Future* (an amalgam between *Brokeback Mountain* and *Back to the Future*) and *Scary Mary Poppins*. The genre was popularized in 2005, with the launch of the trailer for *The Shining*, which presented the famous horror film as a delightful family comedy featuring a story of father-son bonding.

Kathleen Williams unpacks some of the paradoxes underpinning recut trailers. While their very existence clearly indicates that people are familiar with (and even enjoy) movie trailers, these clips are also saturated with criticism of the trailers' blunt marketing strategies. Specifically, recut trailers mock the formula-based and mechanistic ways

in which marketers try to press audience's emotional buttons. For instance, a recut trailer that presents the horror film *Jaws* as a romantic comedy uses the narration, "In a world that does not understand ... in a place where there is no hope at all ... love comes to the surface." The incongruity between these motivational words and what we know about the film parodies the original trailers' overly optimistic scripts of overcoming adversaries. Moreover, recut trailers reflect the ambivalent nature of audiences' relationship with pop culture in the Web 2.0 era.¹¹ While professional trailers are released and consumed according to industry-dictated timing, recut trailers reflect the new power claimed by Internet users who play with cinema without actually needing "to go to cinema at all."¹² Yet although these parodied trailers seemingly promote nothing, they actually do promote something: the image of their creators as talented, creative, and digitally literate people.

LOLCats

LOLCats are pictures of cats accompanied by systematically misspelled captions, which typically refer to the situation shown in the photo. The genre's name is a composite of the Internet acronym "LOL" (laughing out loud) and the word "cat." It was the first prominent manifestation of "image

macros": a more general form of pictures with overlaid text. The spike in this genre's popularity is associated with the image-posting board I Can Has Cheezburger? (<http://icanhas.cheezburger.com>), launched in 2007. Motivated by the urge to understand "Why in the name of Ceiling Cat are LOLCats so popular," Kate Miltner investigated the appeal of the genre by interviewing LOLCat lovers.¹³ She found that the LOLCat audience actually comprises three separate groups: CheezFrenz (who like LOLCats because they love cats), MemeGeeks (who love LOLCats because they acknowledge the genre's place in the grand history of Internet memes), and casual users (all the rest, mostly composed of the "bored at work" population).

Miltner found that beyond these differences, LOLCats are used to construct and maintain social boundaries. Creating—and enjoying—LOLCats requires familiarity with the genre and the special language underpinning it, "LOLspeak." This is a complex, nonstandard, childlike (or catlike) English Internet dialect, which is celebrated by its users as "teh furst language born of teh intertubes." Enjoying the genre involves the sweet scent of an inside joke, understood by those who are immersed in the digital cultural landscape. In addition, in many cases LOLCats are created or shared for the purpose of interpersonal communication: they serve as indirect ways to convey a wide array of feelings and states of mind. Thus, although LOLCats are often dismissed as emblems of a silly and whimsical

culture, Miltner shows that they actually fulfill diverse and complex social roles.

Stock Character Macros

The stock character macros meme genre originated from one meme, labeled “Advice Dog.” The initial meme, featuring a photo of a puppy’s face positioned on a multicolored rainbow background, was launched on a 2006 discussion board on which a boy asked for romantic advice about kissing a girl. The photo of the dog advising “Just do it” spurred a stream of derivatives on 4chan, featuring the dog offering further pieces of bad advice. This then prompted a profusion of related “advice animal” memes, such as “Socially Awkward Penguin,” the aggressive “Courage Wolf,” and “Bachelor Frog.”¹⁴

While the genre is commonly labeled “advice animals,” it does not always include advice, and, over time, many human protagonists have been added to the initial animal-based arsenal. Yet memes belonging to this family do share two features: they use image macros, and they build on a set of stock characters that represent stereotypical behaviors. A very partial list of macro characters includes “Scumbag Steve” (who always acts in unethical, irresponsible, and asocial ways) and his antithesis, “Good Guy Greg” (who always tries to help, even if it brings him

harm); “Naive College Freshman” (who is overenthusiastic about his new status as a student and clueless about the norms of social behavior in college); “Annoying Facebook Girl” (who is overenthusiastic and overanxious about Facebook and its significance to her social life); “Female College Liberal” (also known as “Bad Argument Hippie,” who is both naive and a hypocrite); “Success Kid” (a baby with a self-satisfied grin, accompanied by a caption describing a situation that works better than expected); and “Successful Black Man” (a black man who comically subverts racist assumptions about him by acting like a middle class bourgeois). This array of stock character macros provides a glimpse into the drama of morality of the First World of the twenty-first century: it is a conceptual map of types that represent exaggerated forms of behavior. As detailed below, these extreme forms tend to focus on success and failure in the social life of a particular group.

Rage Comics

Rage comics are amateur-looking comics featuring “rage faces”—a set of expressive characters, each associated with a typical behavior. The genre embarked on 4chan in 2008 with a stream of four-panel comics dedicated to the tales of a character named the Rage Guy, who was often caught in situations that led him to scream in anger

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START TELLING JOKE

FORGET PUNCHLINE

(FFFFFFFFFF). Following the success of this initial rage face, a series of neighboring characters shortly emerged, among them Forever Alone (a sad, lonely chap with no friends); Me Gusta ("I like" in Spanish, a character who expresses enjoyment); Troll Face (who enjoys annoying and harming people); and Poker Face (who tries to conceal his embarrassment in awkward situations). Since then, rage comics have migrated from 4chan into other communities, expanding the range of faces in the repertoire. The means for creating rage comics were also popularized, with the introduction of "Rage Makers" websites, on which users can create rage comics easily by reappropriating ready-made characters. Yet, as Ryan Milner observes, digital literacy is not enough in order to participate in the rage discourse. It also requires subcultural literacy: knowledge of the codes and norms developed in this meme-based subculture. Thus, one needs to have a considerable amount of knowledge about a large number of characters and the socially appropriate ways to use them in order to create an ostensibly simple four-panel comic.

Although rage comics and image macros differ in format, they deal with similar themes. According to Ryan Milner's illuminating analysis, these meme genres tend to focus on a small core of subjects associated with winners

Figure 10 Stock character macros: "Scumbag Steve," "Success Kid," and "Socially Awkward Penguin." Source: <http://www.quickmeme.com/>.



Figure 11 Rage comics. Source: <http://fuckyeahchallengeacceptedguy.tumblr.com/>.

and losers in social life. He tags them as “Fail,” “What the fuck,” and “Win” memes. “Fail” marks moments of social incompetence, embarrassment, and misfortune and is incarnated in specific characters (such as “Forever Alone” and “Socially Awkward Penguin”), as well as in the narrative structure of many rage comics that end with a moment of personal failure. In numerous cases, failure has to do with geeky or awkward young men’s lack of romantic success, often associated with Net subcultures. Posters often accompany these memes with commentary such as “This happened to me today,” thus using the memes as a “way to share geeky failure in a collective way.”¹⁵ “What the fuck” (or WTF) memes relate to those instances in which failure is not associated with the self, but with others, leaving the protagonist with the eternal question, WTF? The “others” in such memes are framed as the out-group. They lack intelligence, discernment, and literacy—particularly digital literacy. Finally, “Win” memes deal with successful social interactions and small daily victories that help the protagonist avoid “a Forever Alone fate.”¹⁶

In this chapter, I have presented nine major Internet meme genres, as a first step in mapping a complex universe of user-generated content. As evident from this survey, some of these genres have already been studied in depth, while others have attracted less scholarly attention. Yet to obtain a fuller understanding of the memesphere, an integrative and comparative analysis of these genres is

required. An initial observation stemming from this survey is that meme genres can be divided into three groups: (1) Genres that are based on the *documentation of “real-life” moments* (photo fads, flash mobs). These genres are always anchored in a concrete and nondigital space. (2) Genres that are based on *explicit manipulation* of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated content (reaction Photoshops, lipdubs, misheard lyrics, recut trailers). These genres—which may be grouped as “remix” memes—often reappropriate news and popular culture items. Such transformative works reveal multifaceted attitudes of enchantment and criticism toward contemporary pop-culture. (3) Genres that evolved around *a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content* (LOLCats, rage comics, and stock character macros). These genres, emerging mainly after 2007, embody the development of a complex grid of signs that only those “in the know” can decipher. Thus, in order to produce and understand LOLCats, users need to master LOLspeak; to create a rage comic, the user requires familiarity with a broad range of new symbols. These genres are thus strongly associated with what Ryan Milner describes as the meme subculture, which flourishes on specific sites such as 4chan, Tumblr, and Reddit. Yet since all nine genres that I have surveyed in this chapter are still alive and kicking, users who are not part of this subculture still have a wide spectrum of options for creating and consuming Internet memes.