Visual Humor through Internet Memes. Iconicity, Irony, and Virality in the Digital Age (I)

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As contemporary instances of visual and iconic discourse, memes represent the most accessible form of entertainment as of today. Their huge online success goes back to a few characteristics of their content, such as humor, intertextuality, quick reception, and others, mostly related to their free and fully accessible circulation, with an ever-present potential of going viral. The memes' discursive nature can be exploited in interdisciplinary studies with a view to the pragmatics of complementary languages (visual and verbal), the meta-languages, as well as to the perlocutionary effects of a social and cultural nature, that are quantifiable nowadays in the digital medium. This article contains a theoretical and a practical part, the latter consisting in exemplification by analyzing a meme on a subject of transgenderism, whereas the interpretation activates two sides: (1) humor generated by the iconic discourse, and (2) the memes' potential of stigmatizing.

Keywords: meme, Internet, virality, iconicity, visual discourse, digital humor.

Memes as Discourse: The Nearest Kind and the Specific Difference

Originating in the Greek word *mimema* (imitation), the term meme was used for the first time in 1976 by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Here, he explores, from a Darwinist perspective, the nature of any biological unit that either dies or lives, as a result of a natural selection process. The name Dawkins chose for this unit is *gene*. He then continues to analyze it from the point of view of its attributes, but also its capacity to transmit genetic information. However, there is an entire chapter dedicated not to genetic, but to cultural transmission.[1] He discovers an analogical relation between the evolution of genes and that of cultures, therefore he identifies a need to create a new unit, similar to genes, that could perform a similar function in the cultural field. This new unit's purpose was to replicate cultural material, unlike genes, who were replicating genetic material. Therefore, the word *meme*

appeared on grounds of this analogy between meme and gene. One other reason for choosing the term was the meaning of the Greek word *mimeme*, one that is being imitated. Examples of memes suggested by Dawkins include musical tunes, ideas, fashion trends.[2]

Upon looking at this new concept from a perspective of the meaning given by ancient Greeks, one can notice that imitation is a starting point in the creation of memes. Seen as "forms of visual argument"[3] in their discursive complexity, memes initiate a double hypostasis: on the one hand, there is the ironic version of a pastiche, when the meme's mimetism refers to behaviors, attitudes, conventions, etc., that it attempts to blast by use of laughable imitation, and on the other hand there is the iconic version of parody, in which a famous scene (book, film, press) becomes contemporary, with new characters or a new context, still meant to stir laughter. In both versions, memes can and usually do have a punitive undertext. Being social and cultural products by excellence, made for public consumption, memes contain in a nutshell the idea of public sanctioning and the desire to ridicule. In other words, in many situations the memes' humor becomes an instrument of criticism, a way to deride and punish behaviors considered to be deviant.

The dictionary definition of memes reveals their imitative character, as well as their association with the gene transmission process: „A cultural or behavioral element, whose transmission and consistent presence in a population that is considered analogous to the inheritance of a gene, although through non-genetic means (imitation)".[4] Therefore, the multiplication of memes can be described by help of the same analogy between the two: while genes multiply by being handed down from one being to another, in the same way cultural memes are transmitted from individual to individual and generation to generation in the collective mind, by imitation and replication.

In 2005, Distin was publishing *„The Selfish Meme,"* as a continuation to Dawkins' chapter, with a title very telling from an analogy. Its author describes memes as „units of cultural information," whose very content works like DNA. In his attempt to discover the concrete forms of memetic DNA, Distin reaches the conclusion that language alone is insufficient, since it rather serves to memes' DNA as a means of expression. On referring to other possible forms, the author takes into consideration musical notes, mathematical formulas or cryptography, however reaching the conclusion that these aren't enough to cover the entire array either. Finally, the author concludes that the memetic equivalent of DNA could only be a concoction of cultural systems of representation.[5]

Placing the discussion in the field of Internet, Limor *Shifman* proposes to look at the phenomenon of memes "from a communication-oriented perspective."[6] *Shifman*'s approach is a step forward in to understanding the digital culture in which memes have to be investigated both in the academic and economic areas. One of the first observations of the author refers to the intertextuality of memes as a fundamental attribute: "memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways."[7] *Shifman* considers Dawkins' definition of memes as restrictive and simplifying, which is why he proposes a more complex, three-dimensional conceptualization of memes: " (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."[8] Likewise, Wiggins notes the limits of an analogy between the meaning Dawkins attaches to memes and the new sense acquired in the digital age. This analogy, says the author, is problematic because "it ignores the discursive aspect of internet memes" and "fails to relate to the complex and multifaceted ways in which content is created, spread, etc. online."[9]

The Digital Medium and the New Memes' Success

Talking about the cultural medium as a living organism, whose genes are the memes, it was to be expected that its evolution would bring about some major changes in the way in which memes appear, are transmitted and received. Along with the appearance and skyrocketing evolution of Internet and its culture, users have adapted and modified the term in order to adapt it semantically to the new digital context. The scientific approach most at hand comes from the direction of semiotics and pragmatics, and the phenomenological/processual understanding of this kind of culture's creation and dissemination can be seen from a Periceian perspective of habitualness: "Hence, the internet memes' processual nature could be understood in light of habituality, or what Peirce called 'habituescence', the "consciousness of taking a habit.(...) The definition of internet memes in fact could be further pushed so as to encompass systems of signs that are subject to translation in habituescence, or, systems of signs with the tendency to take translational habits. But in this light, one can see how the development of internet memes is perhaps not that different from the growth of any other instance of culture."[10] Memes can be found in various forms, ranging from text to image and video with script; there are also variations of audio forms, yet all these have two elements in common, humor and virality.

In order to understand the way in which a meme or a series of memes becomes viral, we must understand the nature of humor, generated by the new communication technologies, or what this nature consists of. Insisting on the persuasive nature of Internet memes, whose function is "to posit an argument, visually, in order to

start, extend, counter, or influence a discourse," Wiggins considers humor only a pretext or "surface-level" for penetrating to a deeper level where ideological practice can be observed. Wiggins' perspective interconnects ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality in the elaboration of a social approach of meme analysis, starting with Schifman's model.[11] The new memes, revealed as specific discourse of the digital culture, are perceived by Wiggins as "visual arguments, and that the etymological root of internet meme (which) should not be the Dawkinsian mimema but rather enthymeme."[12]

Internet memes have been defined by Davison as „a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission".[13] The most common composing elements are image and text. Images or templates are usually cut out from movies, news, sketches or art. As a matter of fact, any pre-existing discourse, originating and original, sufficiently known to a very broad and heterogeneous public, or to a niche of public, has a potential of successful pastiche or parody. We can therefore say that we are dealing with a hybrid media product, combining both original ideas, and elements that are already owned by other media. In time, memes have reached a certain stage of standardization, in which the image quality or certain details such as the text font become of lesser importance. This standardization is proliferated by other sites appeared with the dedicated purpose of sharing memes, having their own virtual library of *templates* and other instruments necessary for text overwriting, but also with links by which the newly finished meme is propelled with one single click to the main social networks. Its becoming viral then depends on the users' creativity, their vision, the type and quality of humor involved.

What is specific to digital memes and also extremely relevant for the way in which they are created, is their collaborative nature. In many cases we are dealing with intelligence and collective humor, which emphasizes their nature as social and cultural discourse, susceptible of also being analyzed from a perspective of studies on mentalities. For example, users always have the possibility not only to create memes, but also to intervene graphically, to reconstitute, to update the already existing memes known to broad audiences, and eventually to redistribute a new version that they consider to be improved or adapted to a new context.

On citing several theoretical sources (Davison, 2012; Knobel and Lankshear,2007; Lunenfeld, 2014), Sara Cannizzaro concludes that "these commentators have not merely observed a single media text (a discrete unit), but a collection of objects and the way these objects have triggered one another and related to one another through time. So, if Internet memes can only be studied in relation to their numerous adaptations and versions across a period of time, it can be concluded that an Internet meme cannot be defined as a single image or video or catchphrase (as per the ill-defined conceptions outlined above) or, in other words, as isolated information; instead, internet memes must be defined at the very least as systems."[14]

One essential aspect in the understanding of the digital memes' phenomenon is their viraliation. And this is what actually spells success. Being specific forms of digital communication (of a "many to many" type, Castells[15]) one condition to their success is the threshold of comprehension. The Internet users, as active participants in decoding the message must be able to grasp the intertext (the inter-iconicity), or the original element that spawned the current artefact instantaneously, thus participating actively in the deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings. "The successful memes involve the presentation of a puzzle or problem brought on by incongruities in an image; the obviously "photoshopped" appearance of the image is almost a cue for participation and, thus, proliferation of the meme."[16] The massive online distribution is mostly connected to certain political and social contexts, to major events, or tense situations, or to notorious and controversial public figures, all these being triggers to this type of digital communication. „In Internet culture, it is normally understood that in order to turn into an actual internet meme, a cultural object has to "go viral" first. Yet in digital media theory, critical attempts have been made to understand Internet memes' processual nature beyond the virus metaphor."[17]

Concerning the phenomenon of memes' viralization, in the case of certain social networks such as *Facebook*, digitalization enables their sharing to be deliberate (by help of the share button), as well as involuntary, by reactions to postings with one of the available options, because postings that people have reacted to are automatically displayed in a typical user's Newsfeed. Memes often refer to current events, engaging people in some different sort of public dialog around political themes, as they are sometimes, unlike written materials, able to arrest users' attention with the catch of humor.[18]

Nowadays, there is increasing concern to exploit the memes' discursive nature. For example, researchers like Heidi E. Huntington from Colorado State University have been referring to online memes since 2013, using instruments of visual rhetoric; from a constructivist perspective of representation, the researcher justifiably considers them a current form of public discourse. Therefore, as an object of study in the realm of *Language sciences*, of *Communication* or in that of *Psychological - Social Sciences*, Internet memes can successfully be applied a semiotic and/or pragmatic filter in analysis and interpretation. Extremely generous today for researchers, *Internet memes* can be studied as collective cultural products, with multiple significances and echoes in the public space and in various communities (political, ethnic, religious, gender, etc.) since they are

not simply artefacts with a touch of humor, but even (multi)media products aimed at certain categories of public, that can obviously communicate in an insidious and/or representative manner, thus receiving the brand signs of public discourse with a persuasive bend.[19]

In an environment characterized by democracy, freedom of speech, creativity, collaboration and free access to most resources, such as the Internet, the creation and distribution of memes seems to be more than a phenomenon to speak for the social health of the very support or organism, but also a desirable way to sanction certain excesses through humor. Only the phenomenon in itself is developing its own flaws, and the discourse of memes can sometimes reach to dire situations. The ease and speed with which they can be shared on the Internet not rarely leads to fast proliferation of false information or opinions prone to degenerate into hate speech. It is well-known that the *hate speech* phenomenon, extremely amplified by the new media, particularly in tense moments, represents discriminatory manifestations with different nuances, from soft comments and sarcasm, to the verbalization of radical, extremist, violence instigating attitudes, the hate discourse makes use of language (also iconic) marked by cynicism, brutality, foul language, that is targeting persons or rather groups or categories of persons adhering to a bunch of common values. These people or groups are targeted for race, religion, ethnic or national origin, gender or gender identity.[20] The hate-instigating discourse is indeed more subtle and allusive, yet can contain a generating element of loathing, discrimination, marginalization of a person or entire community in a nutshell. This study has an application in the analysis of memes about transgender persons, in order to highlight discourse markers as well as possible effects in a psychological and social plane.

Preoccupations to Classify Memes

There have been recent preoccupations to classify memes, both from a science point of view, and from the position of users and creators. One of the online meme creators is Leyshla M. Acevedo-Sanchez, who, while giving an answer to a question on the *Quora* site, offers a typology of memes that translates the webspace reality very well. According to this taxonomy, popular memes can be classified by a criterion of accessibility, in the categories of *dank* and *normie*. One other classification by the kind of generated emotions and their intensity, as well as the message content, divides them into *edgy* and *wholesome*.[21]

Therefore, *Dank Memes* (containing cynical, bizarre, unconventional humour) represent those memes that are deliberately weird. Users see dank memes as superior, their humour being less direct, and the message decoding mor challenging. In order to understand the meaning of a dank meme, a deeper deciphering is needed, which reduces their audience to those who have the required background to understand them. To the other end of the spectrum are *normie memes,* created and understood by a broader public, that does not necessarily have a connection to the so-called meme culture. These can be found in marketing or other associated domains, where they are employed because they can be understood by most users. Normies are considered to be of lower quality, containing light humour. For this reason, some users consider them rather dead, since their comic substance is used out or even missing. These can have their origin in the dank memes, once they become ubiquitous, but there are also many memes originally created as normies.

Whether *dank* or *normies,* memes can be at the same time *edgy* (extremist and discriminating humour) or *wholesome* (empathic, emotionally and morally convenient). This other classification uses a criterion of emotional intensity. In other words, the dank/normie classification is made by accessibility, whereas the second takes the emotional dimension of humour into consideration. An *edgy* defies social norms, exploiting dark humour, morbidity and cynicism, with an explicit intention to stir laughter. *Edgies* are known for their clear intention to shock, scandalize and attract attention with their gloom. *Wholesome* memes, on the other hand, are promoting a healthy soul and mind. This category of memes builds on positivity, compassion, love and understanding. It therefore excludes sarcasm, cynicism and negative emotions, giving value to empathy, solidarity with a cause, as well as a whole range of positive thoughts and emotions.

Upon analysing 1,000 memes on Facebook, V. Taecharungroj and P. Nueangjamnong have also identified in these predominantly iconic constructs a particular typology and style of humour. The main sources of humour have proven to be exaggeration, comparison, personification, sarcasm, puns, silliness and surprise. As for styles, there are the infatuate, the self-enhancing, aggressive, affiliative and the self-defeating styles identified.[22] However, the style and language of memes cannot be regarded as stand-alone aspects in a media participatory culture of unprecedented dynamism. Sometimes the degree of ambiguity of the message of some memetic series is directly proportional to the degree of hermeticization of a virtual community. Although memes are seen as "form and practice of storytelling" or as "*fast-food media* and *political mindbombs*"[23], they can only be decoded by those who know the context in which they were created. In other words, the comprehensibility level of the memetic discourse is conditioned by the understanding of the contextual reality that generated the respective meme(s). "From the sociological perspective, memes function

as "performative acts": each person decides whether to ratify or oppose a specific way of interpreting the situation – and he or she adjusts a meme accordingly."[24]

In recent years, the interest of researchers in the academic area for the interdisciplinary study of memes has increased, as the recent volume of Anastasia Denisova (quoted above) also demonstrates. Cultural and identity studies, communication sciences, language philosophy, (political) discourse analysis, anthropology are just some of the areas of interference today in the study of memetic discourse, that will remain open and challenging.

Notes:

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