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Decker-Maurer, Heidi E. *I Can Has Rhetoric? How Image Macros Address Social Issues in an age of Participatory Culture*

Abstract

The internet is becoming an increasingly important tool in people's lives. It can be used to both inform and entertain. Image macros, which are user-generated online texts that include a photo and a caption, are one such form of "entertainment." Typically these photo/caption combinations are created as jokes to amuse viewers. However, many of these jokes deliberately use rhetorical humor to make a point or persuade audiences about social or political issues. This study examines rhetorical messages embedded within these humorous texts, and analyzes them on several levels to ascertain their true meaning. The study's purpose is to enable readers to critically analyze image macros they encounter in the future.

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Chapter I: Introduction

These days, more and more people are relying on the internet as a source of both entertainment and information. People are increasingly using social media as platforms for personal social communication and for sharing ideas globally. The internet is moving so quickly that, in its short years of existence, it has undergone a paradigm shift from a broadcast medium – like television – to an interactive intellectual playground where anyone can contribute and subsequently have their ideas shared with people all over the world.

What is being communicated over the internet should be of growing importance to everyone as the internet penetrates ever deeper into people's lives. Examining phenomena being formulated and shared on the internet will give insight into ways that users are leveraging readily available tools and platforms to broadcast their views on social issues.

On the internet, image macros are among the most popular forms of expression. Image macros are a genre of internet phenomena that consist of photographs or artwork with captions superimposed over the image in order to make a joke or a point. Originating within some of the most entrenched online user communities, these seemingly simple images can both amuse and effectively represent rhetorical positions.

Image macros are not stand-alone messages, like posters. If they reach any level of popularity, they can become internet memes. These phenomena race across the internet and allow others to transform the original message by either building on the previous iteration or creating entirely new images. They are also a medium for expressing persuasive rhetorical commentary.

Image macros are some of the easiest ways to participate in internet culture. Many websites, like *www.memegenerator.net*, *www.quickmeme.com*, *www.zipmeme.com*, as well as several sites on the Cheezburger Network, feature “meme generators” which provide users with

photos to choose, an editing function that allows users to add a caption, and the ability to publish the creation on the spot. These websites are getting free, user-generated content that they feature on their sites. They are able to generate revenue by also selling advertising space on their sites – to a dedicated audience whose tastes they understand and whose activities they enable and encourage. In addition, many of the image macros being propagated over the internet are being ranked by viewers, documented, examined, and measured for popularity by websites such as *KnowYourMeme*, *Buzzfeed*, *Reddit*, and the websites comprising the Cheezburger Network. Image macros are shared on these sites and viewers can typically rank them, or leave comments about them. Because of this interactive element, it is possible to gauge the response to these messages.

Statement of the Problem

The central issue to be investigated in this thesis is the area of image macros as a means of persuasion. This issue is an important one for technical communicators to explore because social commentary is being created and propagated over the internet using these messages. The image macros themselves can often carry a powerful message, but the addition of captions to these images can either reinforce the point of the image, or can employ humor to change the rhetorical framework through which the image or issue is viewed.

When watching a political debate or looking at advertisement, people know that someone is trying to persuade them. They have come to expect being bombarded with messages trying to change their minds on an issue or sway them to make a purchasing decision. With image macros, however, the issue of persuasion isn't as clear cut. Cloaked in humor, the rhetorical bias within these messages may not be as apparent. It is important that people understand that what they are seeing is another form of persuasion – embedded within their entertainment.

Purpose of the Study

Since the internet is becoming a larger part of people's lives, it is important for them to be aware that not all the messages they are consuming are for amusement only. Because they are conveyed through humor, the purpose of internet messages is often veiled. This research project intends to call attention to rhetorical aspects of these image macros so they can be critically evaluated for the underlying messages embedded within them. The research question to be investigated is: How are humorous image macros being used to convey rhetorical messages about societal issues?

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumes that readers are familiar with the computers and the internet. It also assumes that readers are somewhat familiar with the rise of internet culture and with the concept of humor on the internet.

It should be noted that the term *image macro* is the correct term for photos with captions superimposed over them. Image macros become *memes* when they begin to pass from person to person, and begin to be altered in the process. However, within the literature even academics do not distinguish between the terms *image macro* and *meme*; therefore, this study will use the terms interchangeably.

Definition of Terms

4Chan. An online message board site originally intended for fans of Japanese animation. Since users are anonymous and can say or post anything, it has become a repository for – among other things – sexist, racist, and homophobic crude humor, but is also fertile ground for generating memes.

Buzzfeed. A website that aggregates image macros, news content, or viral videos, and allows viewers to vote on the images using different voting categories.

Cheezburger Network. A website conglomeration with several subject-specific sub-sites that feature image macros and viral video.

Exploitable. A popular image on the internet that is visually prepared in such a way as to make it easy for others to transform.

Geeks. A subculture that includes intelligent outcasts who have interests that lay outside mainstream culture.

Image Macro. An internet image that features a photo or piece of artwork, over which is superimposed a caption.

Internet Meme. Images or video – typically funny – that have been shared on the internet and are able to be transformed by the viewer.

LOL. Internet argot that stands for Laugh Out Loud.

Meme. A piece of cultural information that is transmitted from person to person, both replicating and mutating along the way.

Meme Generator. A website that includes web platform functionality for users to create image macros.

Memesphere. A term used to describe the sphere of influence of memes. All memes and other related jokes and phenomenon are a part of the memesphere.

Producers. A combinatory term used in participatory culture situations to describe someone who is both a “prod”ucer of content and also a “user” of content.

Reddit. A content aggregator that allows users to upload photos, videos, image macros, ask questions, request interviews, and interact with others. Each entry is able to be either upvoted or downvoted, which affects each item's ranking and visibility on the site

ROFL. An acronym that stands for "Roll On the Floor Laughing." This is a common sentiment posted in the comments section of a meme, if the meme is considered really funny.

ROFLcon. A bi-annual convention where meme enthusiasts gathered to share their unique hobby, meet internet celebrities, watch panel discussions, and socialize.

Tumblr. An image-hosting website, from which some photos are appropriated in order to make image macros.

Methodology

This study is intended to provide a framework for image macros on the internet by answering the research question "How are humorous image macros being used to convey rhetorical messages about societal issues?" In order to do this, the paper will begin with a history of image macros/memes. The study will then set forth some of the purposes for these image macros. Next, the paper will introduce the concepts of rhetorical humor, and how it applies to images online. Finally, the paper will analyze rhetorical image macros for social issue, humor type, intentionality, enthymeme, and intertextuality.

The fact that meme popularity is being documented on *KnowYourMeme.com* using Google analytics means that there is rich, raw quantitative data from which to explore the phenomenon and draw inferences about their reach and impact.

Since memes propagate so quickly, it was difficult to pin down a sample for review. For the purposes of this paper, memes were chosen from five different websites that featured end-of-year "best of" lists for the year 2011. Two out of twenty-two memes were selected for study due

to their appearance on all five websites, as well as their rhetorical stance. The examples selected for review are “First World Problems,” a meme featuring the inconsequential troubles of privileged people, and “Pepper Spraying Cop,” a viral meme that came out of the Occupy Wall Street movement and depicts a police officer pepper-spraying protestors. These memes both use rhetorical humor to address larger societal issues.

In order to understand the context of “First World Problems,” “Pepper Spraying Cop” and image macros as a whole, it is important to understand how they came about. The next section will explore image macro origins in Web 2.0 and their foundations and role in participatory culture.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Prior to the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001, the internet could be characterized as a broadcast. Like television before it, the internet presented users with sites, like online encyclopedias and personal websites, which broadcast information outward to audiences. Businesses treated the internet like another broadcast channel, similar to television, and used them to promote their companies. According to O'Reilly, when the dot-com bubble burst, many felt that "the web was overhyped, when in fact bubbles and consequent shakeouts appear to be a common feature of all technological revolutions" (2005).

Since the business world lost confidence in their ability to make money from the web, the dot-com disaster ushered in a new wave of user-driven platforms, software, and content that encouraged participation. In defining the term that he popularized, O'Reilly characterized Web 2.0 with a comparison chart. Here is a sample:

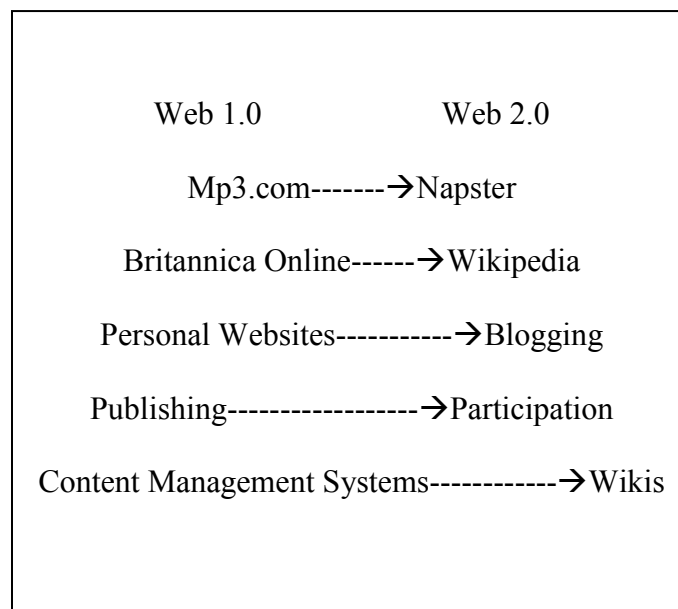


Figure 1. Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 Comparison, O'Reilly, 2005

The key component in each of the above-mentioned Web 2.0 manifestations is collaboration. Rather than pushing products or messages one way, people began sharing, whether it was music, or ideas and expertise.

Another characteristic unique to Web 2.0 is the deconstruction of boundaries. In the example “Publishing→Participation” (O’Reilly, 2005), easy-to-use Web 2.0 applications have made it simple for anyone to become published – as in the case of blogs, mashups, remixes, and image macros. The sense of collaboration and freedom provided by these media has converted the internet from a monologue to a conversation: from a soap box to a coffee house. People are able to create and collaborate in ways never before possible.

What is Participatory Culture and why is it Important?

Although the tools and technology exist, people are mostly learning new media literacies not in schools, but in their homes, on their computers, with the help of other people. Oftentimes, these producer/users called “produsers” are ensconced within a group that shares the same interests as they do. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) state that,

...a...conception of new Literacies recognizes that everyday life is amplified through the participation of and interaction with people one may never meet and, moreover, that in online spaces this interaction and participation may occur in ways never before possible (p. 221).

The Web 2.0 shift has caused people to learn new media literacy skills which are often learned in participatory culture situations. According to Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (2006) these include:

- Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning
- Changed attitudes toward intellectual property

- Diversification of cultural expression
- Development of skills valued in the modern workplace
- More empowered conception of citizenship
- Cultural competencies that young people need in the new media landscape (p. 3).

People in these spaces feel free to experiment with new ideas, share them with others, and build upon them: creating things from the wondrous to the mundane. Since these online spaces are low-pressure and are populated by people like themselves, “producers” feel more comfortable taking risks than they would, for instance, in a classroom, where there is pressure to conform and a high social premium on performing well. Image macro meme generators offer just such a platform.

How do Memes fit Into Participatory Culture?

Memes are an excellent outlet for those engaged in participatory culture. They regularly involve use of modern digital media and utilize digital literacy skills. Often built from existing templates – and then added to, remixed, intertextualized, and layered – these creations, spinoffs, and remixes are excellent ways for participants to practice creativity using what Jenkins et al., (2006) calls “scaffolding” (p. 31) which is a way that burgeoning makers can learn to be creative by building on an already-existing work. Some of the most popular sites hosting memes make creating them simple by providing easy-to-use “meme generators.” A few clicks, a witty caption, and a creator is ready to publish.

Even though image macros are a great source of participatory culture fun, Knobel and Lankshear (2008) warn us not to “...miss the potential fruitfulness for understanding mindsets, new forms of power and social processes, new forms of social participation and activism and new distribution networks of communication and relationships” (p. 201). Building image macros

that turn into memes requires awareness of social mores (if only to break them), knowledge of current events or trends, and the analytical skills required to juxtapose these environmental elements into something absurd, funny, or even persuasive.

What are Memes and Where did They Come From?

Memes are actually not a new phenomenon. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2008), “Occasional talk of “memes” as contagious or inheritable units of cultural information first appeared more than 90 years ago in biological studies of memory persistence in organisms” (p. 200). More recently the idea was resurrected by geneticist Richard Dawkins. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) tell us, “His definition of ‘memes’ posited actual biological changes in brain neurons when minds become infected with memes” (p. 200).

In his article on the 2008 “ROFLcon” – an event that focuses on meme culture – Walker (2010) reports that digital archivist and documentarian Jason Scott gave a presentation that spotlighted memes of the past. He states that “interesting people have been doing curious, quirky, playful or offensive things with technology, outside the mainstream, since well before the phrase ‘the Internet changes everything’ was coined” (Walker, 2010). He went on to enumerate the other communication fads throughout the last century and a half, including catchphrases, Xeroxed visual jokes, Teletype art, bulletin board slang, and other ways to amuse using technology (Walker, 2010).

According to Stryker (2011) the origins of internet memes themselves are difficult to identify. The shifting sands of internet culture and the participatory nature of the web obscure exactly when the first funny picture, video, or animation started making the rounds of the web, or even what that image was.

Although the term “meme” itself dates to Dawkins 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, its application to phenomena on the internet was not in common use until Mike Godwin, writing for *Wired* magazine stated,

A meme, of course, is an idea that functions in a mind the same way a gene or virus functions in the body. And an infectious idea (call it a “viral meme”) may leap from mind to mind, much as viruses leap from body to body. When a meme catches on, it may crystallize whole schools of thought (Goodwin in Conger, 2011).

The term ‘meme’ continued to gain traction in reference to the internet right before the turn of the millennium. According to Stryker, a website called *Memepool* was established in 1998 to share viral content found on the web. As media outlets picked up on the site’s popularity, they began to call the output “memes.” As the popularity of this phenomenon grew, and it began to be studied by the Contagious Media research group, the term “meme” became the “go-to term used to describe viral content” (Cheese in Stryker, 2011, p. 22).

In her doctoral dissertation, Murray Husted succinctly sums up the study and definition of memes as follows:

Memetics, the study and exploration of memes, seeks to apply an evolutionary metaphor to cultural information transfer. Under Memetics, the path of a single unit of information (a meme) is compared to the replicating and mutating behavior of a gene. A meme is cultural object such as a song, a religion, a word, or an idea that replicates through a population. Cultural information transfer occurs when memes are passed from one group to another group (2012, p. iii).

Internet memes have risen to a previously unthinkable level of popularity. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) say that “The concept of a meme itself has become something of a meme

online. Among internet insiders, “meme” is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language “move,” or some other unit of cultural “stuff” (p. 202). These internet texts are moving through internet culture at lightning speed, and are winding up in the mainstream culture as well. Because of their rapid spread and penetration into everyday culture, it is of benefit to find out more about them.

This section has explored the meaning and origins of internet memes and described “what” they are. In the next section, this paper will explore the “why,” examining some of the reasons people create memes.

The Purposes of Memes: Group Identity Markers - Geeks

At the 2012 “ROFLcon” – a convention dedicated to celebrating memes – keynote speaker Jonathan Zittrain called meme enthusiasts as “ROFL people.” In his presentation, he showed a slide of a person getting “stuffed” into a locker to make the point that there exists an “us versus them” scenario, in which “ROFL people” are geeks. Zittrain went on to describe the fact that oftentimes memes touch a collective geek nerve, in that they are usually “base, authentic, unguarded” (2012) moments that are captured and that create a sense of pathos within the viewer. Geeks identify with memes: enough so that they have even created conventions to celebrate them.

Geek culture is in some ways difficult to define, since there is no universal agreement about the definition of geek. For the purposes of this analysis, geeks will be defined as a subculture that includes intelligent outcasts who have interests that lay outside mainstream culture.

As suggested by Jonathan Zittrain, geeks feel a sense of ownership when it comes to memes. Since they were likely the early propagators of this form of internet culture, it is natural

that they should feel this way. At ROFLcon 2012, a multimedia presentation by the group MemeFactory asserted that once a meme hits the mainstream, it's no fun anymore (Bruckart, Davison, & Rugnetta, 2012). According to Burgess (2008), "...internet 'meme'-based viral videos rely on inside jokes that are spoiled by going mainstream, and therefore quickly reach a tipping point and tend to have relatively short shelf lives" (p. 8).

Walker (2010) confirms this belief. At a panel discussion called "Mainstreaming the Web" featuring the superstars of memedom – Ben Huh, current owner of *www.icanhascheezburger.com* and Christopher Poole, creator of *www.4chan.com* – the discussion included, "...audience feedback making the inevitable suggestion that mainstream attention is ruining awesome meme making. Mostly there was consensus" (Walker, 2010). He also states that, "Internet memes are basically an endless series of in-jokes, a few of which occasionally cross over into the mainstream (where their origins are rarely known and probably a matter of indifference)...each bit of apparent idiocy is an in-group/out-group marker" (Walker, 2010).

Attitudes, however, seem to be shifting. During his panel discussion at ROFLcon 2012, Christopher Poole mused about whether the surging popularity of these memes meant the "mainstreaming of the internet, or the internetting of the mainstream" (Poole, 2012). During a question and answer period, the quandary again arose about whether "mainstreaming" and lower barriers for engagement were making the internet less fun and funny. One of the audience members pointed out that there is now – and always has been – a lot of substandard content on the internet. These days there is more poorly done, unfunny content than ever, but there is also more creative content, and as a result, there is more competition to be really good or really funny (Poole, 2012).

Whether geeks like it or not, memes are an affinity bridge that has been built between them and the mainstream, and humor is one of the universal bonds that can help identify commonalities between human beings, whether they are trying their best to fit into status quo culture or are marching to the beat of a different drummer.

If memes are creeping into mainstream consciousness, what's the draw? Why are they so popular with people outside the geek in-group?

Group Identity Marker: LOLcats, Emotional Outlets, and Sharing

One scholar in particular has examined why people like a certain type of meme on the internet. Kate Miltner, from the London School of Economics, wrote her master's thesis on the subject of LOLCats, a particular genre of meme. Some of the most enduring memes on the web, these image macros feature a graphic of a cat with a caption superimposed over the picture.

One of the unique features of the LOLCat memes is their use of LOLspeak, a type of vocabulary that consists of incorrectly spelled words and extremely poor grammar. This form of internet speech has attracted enough attention to have been studied also by linguist Jordan Leffler, who determined it to be an "internet or artificial dialect" (Leffler, 2011, p. 23). An iconic representation of the LOLCat genre features photo of a Russian blue cat with a seemingly surprised look on its face. The caption reads, "I Can Has Cheezburger?" which in LOLspeak means, "Can I have a cheeseburger?"

In Miltner's study, she conducted focus groups to determine why people like LOLCats so much. In her initial hypothesis she set out to determine whether the textual and social concepts of genre and humor were part of the appeal. While her findings confirmed her initial thoughts, she found that there was much more to LOLCat appeal than just those two concepts. Her results revealed four separate findings about their appeal.

First, she found that different types of users engaged with LOLCats on various levels ranging from deeply entrenched fans to casual users. Next, she confirmed her hypothesis that genre was a part of the appeal. These image macros are constructed a certain way and include the following common elements:

- Font
- Placement of Text
- Subject of Image
- Syntax
- Characterization of animal
- Intertextuality (Miltner, 2011, p. 27)

When properly used, the genre's conventions marked creators as members of an in-group. Being a part of a group who understands how the jokes "work" is part of the appeal. The works gain intertextuality by reusing the genre's conventions with different ideas, and building upon jokes that have come before. This intertextuality can include previous iterations of an image, or can refer to internet cultural markers in general, but the appeal remains the same: understanding the jokes as part of a larger in-joke.

Miltner also confirmed her hypothesis that humor was one of the reasons that people enjoyed LOLCats. In the images, cats are being anthropomorphized and are often characterized as being caught in situations that might have emotional repercussions for a person in the same situation. The anthropomorphization gives the readers a sense of emotional distance, so they can laugh at misfortune without guilt (Miltner, 2011). Seeing a cat endure something that would be humiliating to a person gives viewers permission to laugh and not seem cruel (Miltner, 2011).

Finally, Miltner found that group members also saw LOLCats as a way to connect and share with friends. Many of those who engage in the culture use the creation of these image macros as a form of emotional expression, which they then share with others in the in-group, or with close friends and family. She also found that sharing and creation of these memes was, for her focus groups at least, altruistic in nature. She found that people created and shared the images to give others pleasure, rather than, “recognition which is widely suggested in the literature” (Miltner, 2011, p. 34).

While Miltner’s study of the LOLCat memes phenomenon shows one of the more positive aspects of memes and why they are appealing, that is not their only purpose. As we have seen from an exploration participatory culture, geek culture, and the LOLCat phenomenon, much of the appeal of online jokes is their inclusivity. Being a part of a group is an important way for people to connect and feel affinity for one another. As shown, these formed connections can have altruistic connotations, but these images don’t always portray cute kittens in odd situations. They also serve the purpose of reflecting back at us our Western culture and society. Whatever the issue, there is a meme for it. Where there are social issues, there are opinions, and the internet has made it easier than ever for people to express them.

Persuasion and Social Issues

Although they are presented in a humorous framework, many memes provide social commentary of the sort that is often easier to accept when cloaked in humor. They may be jokes, but they’re often not meaningless. Part of their humorous appeal resides in the fact that there is some truth behind the humor.

This hypothesis is backed up in research. In an experiment they conducted about internet memes and their meaning, Knobel and Lankshear (2008) identified the fact that of the nineteen

memes that they reviewed, "...five of the memes examined in this study put humor to use in generating biting social commentary" (p. 211). They cite the website *Black People Love Us* as one of the examples of this type of meme. Knobel and Lankshear say, "What matters most about this meme is the challenge it poses to liberal attitudes that are patronizing and that reduce historical and social inequities to superficial differences concerning, for example, skin colour, music preferences and language use" (p. 222). Memes like this force us to examine our own biases and perhaps-unrealized prejudices. Couching them in humor is less threatening, but it still makes us examine our ethics.

Because of its low cost, ease of use, and lightning-fast distribution speed, the internet is rife with opportunity for rhetoric. Whether it is a political campaign trying to solicit votes, an advertiser urging a buying decision, or just someone with a point of view on a social issue, the internet provides a platform for the distribution of persuasion. The next section will go into detail about some of the unique aspects of internet rhetoric, as well as some of the ways that older rhetorical forms have been appropriated and transformed to suit the affordances of the medium.

Rhetoric Online

In her book on the subject, Barbara Warnick tells us that rhetoric abounds on the internet as much as it thrives in other communicative environments. Due to its low cost, accessibility, the horizontal communication it supports, the multimedia used to present it, and its networking ability, nearly everyone who wants to persuade someone on the internet can attempt to do so (Warnick, 2007). But what exactly is rhetoric? Although definitions vary, for the purposes of this study, the Burkean view of rhetoric makes the most sense. According to Burke, rhetoric is "...the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human

agents...” (in Warnick, 2007, p. 13). He further clarifies that it is “...the persuasive aspects of language, the function of language as addressed, as direct or roundabout appeal to real or ideal audiences without or within” (Burke in Warnick, 2007, p. 13). It is from this base that this section will explore some of the unique aspects of online rhetoric including its participatory nature, interactivity, intertextuality, and exclusivity.

Participatory Nature

Several factors set online rhetoric apart from its paper text and oral traditions, due in part to the affordances of the online medium. The first is the participatory nature of the internet. When rhetorical arguments are presented in paper-written format or orally, they are constrained by both time and linearity. That is not the case online. As readers make their way through online texts, they are confronted with hyperlinks, which enable them to exit the narrative to look at something else. With this option, readers end up making their way through the text in a less linear fashion. With the older formats, readers didn't have a choice, and would read messages in the author's predetermined order (Warnick, 2007).

With new media, readers are participants in that they are “making microdecisions” (Warnick, 2007, p. 30) during the reading experience – following links or reading straight through. These decisions mean that readers are making their own meaning because the way they navigate through the texts is individualized; “...hypertext makes author, text, and reader into joint participants” (Allen in Warnick, 2007, p. 103). The readers themselves put together the meaning of the text depending on the path they take through the work.

Interactivity

A related facet of online discourse is interactivity, which is defined as “communication that includes some form of reciprocal message exchange involving mediation and occurring

between a group and users, between users and the site texts or between users and other users” (Warnick, 2007, p. 75). Although boundaries cross, the previously mentioned concept of participation could be said to focus on the way that readers formulate their own meaning because of their activity when reading the text. The act of interactivity could be distinguished because readers actually engage with a site or with others online. This could include commenting on a blog post, taking an online quiz, or engaging in a chat session. In the past, the audience was considered a “passive object” (Castillas in Warnick, 2007, p. 88), but now the audience can interface with the text by answering online calls to action or freely contributing.

Warnick uses the backdrop of political or social action to illustrate how people can engage in interactive ‘user-to’ scenarios in different ways. In McMillan’s model, she calls the different modes of interaction “user-to-system, user-to-user and user-to-document” (in Warnick, 2007, p. 75). In user-to-system situations, they can use a technical capacity and the system responds. An example would be clicking on a hyperlink and then immediately being able to see the information from that link. The person is engaging with the site and the site is responding, but there is no human interaction. According to McMillan, in user-to-document, people can contribute content either through submission mechanisms or through responses as on a blog. Finally in user-to-user situations, people can interact with each other. An example would be message boards or instant messaging chat. They can also use online mediation to set up meetings that occur offline (McMillan in Warnick, 2007).

By making users a part of the process, “online interactivity as a means of activating user response and as a mode of address can itself be rhetorical in its effects” (Warnick, 2007, p. 71). If people feel involved in the process, they have a tendency to identify with those with whom

they are engaging. Part of this identification is linked to the concept of intertextuality which will be explored in the next section.

Intertextuality

Although not a new concept, intertextuality has taken on a life of its own within the realm of the internet. Intertextuality occurs when a text relies on something outside itself to create a deeper meaning than the surface meaning. According to Warnick (2007), there are four types of intertextuality: archetypal allegory, cross-reference to popular culture, parody, and satire.

Archetypal allegory has to do with culturally-dependent tropes that signify meaning within a society as a whole, usually reflecting mores relating to “morality, religion or politics (Warnick, 2007, p. 98). Her example includes a discussion of two photographs of mothers with their children which reflect both the caring and dependent symbolism of that relationship, as well as the Christian tradition venerating the mother and child connection (Warnick, 2007). These are deeply embedded within cultural consciousness and are drawn upon as part of a person’s frame of reference.

The three remaining types of intertextuality have to do with 1.) having an understanding of popular culture, 2.) parody and, 3.) satire. These areas relate to memes because they draw upon a group’s cultural markers, and reflect them back, and then build more layers of that culture with references to other cultural markers. In terms of references to popular culture, Warnick uses the example of the 1984 Apple commercial which relied upon people’s supposed knowledge of Orwell’s *1984*, the film *Metropolis*, and even the movie *Blade Runner*. The more background they have in popular culture, the more people “get” out of these types of messages. For parody, she defines it as a “discursive activity that intentionally copies the style, organization

or other features of a text or situation, making its features more noticeable by way of humorous imitation” (Warnick, 2007, p. 99). Satire is the third facet of intertextuality and has to do with ridiculing someone or something. The following meme exemplifies all three of these facets of intertextuality: popular culture, parody, and satire.

Memes typically rely on people’s knowledge of culture to understand the layers of the joke. One 2012 meme, called “Botched Ecce Homo Painting,” uses a recent news story to create a meme that draws on art and popular culture to make a joke. According to a story in the *New York Times* from August 2012, it was found that an elderly woman in Spain attempted to restore a painting of Jesus in her local church because she was upset that her favorite image had begun to flake. The “restoration” resulted in a blurry, misshapen mess that looked nothing like the original and is said to have a “monkeylike appearance” (Minder, 2012). The story was picked up by the internet, and the image exemplified parody by being taken out of its original context and superimposed into many different situations – or the image remained in its original context and was altered in a humorous way. The meme is also an example of satire in that it ridicules the woman’s attempt at restoring the painting.

The website *KnowYourMeme.com* has collected and tracked the images and has a gallery that shows many of the iterations of the meme. Some of the first known images included one in which the “restored” head of Jesus was superimposed onto the face of the subject of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Another image depicted Homer Simpson’s head superimposed into the context of the restored painting, replacing the monkeylike head (“Botched Ecce Homo,” n.d.). In terms of intertextuality: in order to get the most out of the joke, viewers would need to know about Munch’s work, and would need to know who Homer Simpson is. These are cultural

examples accessible to a vast number of people in Western culture. Not all of them are that straightforward.

Yet another image shows the restored painting with the caption “Is This Real Life” superimposed over the image (“Botched Ecce Homo,” n.d.). In order to “get” this joke, a viewer would need to be familiar with an earlier meme, a viral video called “David After the Dentist,” which showed a little boy who had been taken to the dentist and was recovering from anesthesia. In his altered state, David asked his father, “is this real life?” If the viewer knew about the video, he or she would understand that the blurry image was an imagining of what David might have been seeing while recovering from his anesthesia. If a viewer did not know about that video, that iteration of the meme probably wouldn’t be very funny. It is a joke “for” people who are into internet culture – an in-group marker – and a way to feel belonging with that niche group. That leads to the remaining theme in Warnick’s book relevant to this paper.

Exclusivity

In her text, Warnick goes on to elaborate that persuasion involves identification between people to the exclusion of others. “Identification is promoted through division; that is, people come to identify with common interest by separating from opposing groups or interests” (Warnick, 2007, p. 70). She again references Burke who claims that “Belonging in this sense is rhetorical” (in Warnick, 2007, p. 70). This idea harkens back to the earlier discussions of geeks and their proprietary interest in memes. By having their creations go “mainstream,” their sense of belonging to a special club is jeopardized. This was reinforced in Jonathan Zittrain’s keynote speech during his discussion of the pathos felt by “ROFLpeople.” He stated that in these groups, “it’s them. They’re crazy, we’re normal. They’re bad, we’re good” (Zittrain, 2012). This idea of exclusivity is also expressed in Miltner’s work, with an understanding of LOLCats being an

in-marker for a group that has formed a sense of belonging around that specific genre of image macro. In a sense, that makes both geek culture and LOLCat culture rhetorical due to their inclusion in a specific group. Identifying and understanding intertextual references is a vital component in getting the most out of an online rhetorical argument; however, one of the desired effects of intertextuality is to make people laugh. Although it's been an inextricable part of the discussion so far, the next section will focus more sharply on the relationship between humor and rhetoric.

Rhetoric and Humor

Throughout the ages, the study of rhetorical humor has traveled on a parallel track with the study of rhetoric itself. According to Craig R. Smith (2009) in *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness*, Cicero presented concrete rules about the use of humor during rhetorical arguments in book II of *De Oratore* (p. 117). It has been recognized as a potent tool to both entertain and persuade audiences and it has no less power now than it did in antiquity. These days, rhetorical arguments are presented to us by the thousands every day. Many of these arguments are presented to us online – and many of them involve the use of humor.

What is interesting about this topic is the realization that humor is so often used as a rhetorical tool. Whether it is a jibe one candidate throws at another, a humorous ad, or a funny photo on the internet, there is a constant push to persuade: and humor is one of the most common ways to do that. The ubiquity of rhetorical humor forces us to assess our exposure to it and reflect on consumption of these types of messages in everyday net surfing.

Since rhetorical humor has been of importance from antiquity through to the present day, it is a worthwhile topic for examination. This section will investigate the relationship between rhetoric and humor in various contexts. To do that, this section of the paper will give a general

overview of humor as a rhetorical tool by examining the historical treatment of the subject, and analyzing current rhetorical humor research.

A study of the history of humor in rhetoric yields findings that are uncannily parallel to one another. Michael Phillips-Anderson's dissertation, *A Theory of Rhetorical Humor in American Political Discourse*, highlights ideas about the use of humor in rhetorical arguments. He states that, "There has been a long tradition of examining the relationship between rhetoric and humor in both ancient rhetorical works and in contemporary rhetorical theory" (2008, p. 18).

Phillips-Anderson's examination explores the views expressed by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* and in *Poetics*, in which Aristotle provides examples of the uses of humor to show how speakers can effectively engage their audiences. He traces references to the use of humor through medieval times when orators were instructed to use humor to make an opponent look ridiculous during a debate. This approach is a manifestation of the earlier discussed form of satire. Phillips-Anderson's exploration of the Renaissance showed examples of humor being used to aid in the delivery of a rhetorical message by keeping parishioners awake in church (2008).

Phillips-Anderson continues by examining contemporary times, in which Kenneth Burke makes a study of humor in rhetoric within the context of the comic frame – a part of his dramatic model. This structure calls for an actor to determine the lens through which he or she is going to view and accept the world. Adopting a comic framework means an actor's "relation to the historical situation can take the form of a comic approach that involves the use of humor to understand the world" (2008, p. 33).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are shown by Phillips-Anderson to have explored humor in *The New Republic*. Although they didn't feel that humor was germane to their main study, Phillips-Anderson quotes them as stating, "...humor is a very important factor in winning over

the audience, or more generally, in establishing a communion between the speaker and his hearers, in reducing value, in particular making fun of the opponent, and making convenient diversions” (in Phillips-Anderson 2008, p. 38). Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca went on to write a book on humor in rhetoric titled *Le comique du discours* and Warnick, in her review of that work claimed, “the book is an extension of the work undertaken in *The New Rhetoric*” (in Phillips-Anderson, 2008 p. 38).

The fact that all of these important figures studied the use of humor provides evidence that this subject is important enough to be thought worthy of study by many of history’s best thinkers.

Although an overview of some of the history of rhetorical humor is important, to study the use of humor in rhetoric it is necessary to have an understanding of current research regarding the subject of humor in order to understand its impact on current rhetorical messages and arguments.

According to Natalie M. Guinsler (2008) in her dissertation *Rhetorical Humor Framework: A Communicative Approach to the Study of Humor*, “...humor activates areas in the brain associated with reward processing. In other words, humor makes us feel good” (p. 1). She goes on to state that, due to our curious nature, human beings have studied humor since classical times and have approached its study from anthropological, psychological, linguistic, and communication perspectives, among others (Guinsler, 2008). These assertions mirror the historical overview given by Phillips-Anderson.

For the purposes of rhetorical study, Phillips-Anderson (2008) posited the following definition of humor: “...a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the audience” (p. 52). His dissertation

explains that there are three philosophical theories that have been used to study humor: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Superiority theory explores the use of humor to make the subject of the joke look worse than the presenter. Relief theory states that humor is used to alleviate tensions, whether internal or external. Incongruity theory delves into the structure of jokes in which the set-up leads the listener down a particular thought path, and then swerves from the thought target down a different path. Phillips-Andersen (2008) states that these different theories have been advocated by different theorists throughout history: "...Plato, Hobbes favored the superiority theory. The relief theory was put forward by Shaftesbury, Bergson, Spencer and Freud. Aristotle was an early proponent of incongruity, while the theory was extended by Kant and Schopenhauer" (p. 45).

Another aspect of humor that Phillips-Anderson (2008) explores in his study of humor as a rhetorical tool is the level of intentionality within a humorous episode. These three levels are comprised of the risibility, humor, and rhetorical humor. The risibility, "includes all those instances of unintentional audience amusement, where something occurs that arouses amusement, but without the intention of the speaker that the laughter should arise..." (p. 52). The second category, humor, arises when the speaker tries to make the audience laugh – as when someone tells a joke. The third category, rhetorical humor, is "a linguistic act on the part of a speaker that carries with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the auditor for the purpose of bringing about a change in attitude or belief" (p. 52).

Enthymeme is another rhetorical aspect to be considered when analyzing a humorous rhetorical statement. According to Ryan Meehan (2006) in his master's thesis exploring the topic, "The enthymeme is a lot like a syllogism, except its major premise is not absolute and its ability to persuade hinges on probability and commonly held assumptions of the audience" (p. 4).

Many jokes rely on ‘commonly held assumptions’ in order for them to work. The assertions that blondes are dumb, lawyers are cheats, and politicians are crooked may or may not be true depending on the individual blonde, lawyer or politician, but these broad categorizations are the assumptive premises on which many jokes are built. According to Meehan (2006), one can recognize enthymemic reasoning through its “exclusion of certain premises, the presence of assumed truths and the importance of an authoritative voice” (p. 28). These criteria will be used to judge the logical stability of some of the rhetorical humor featured later in this paper.

Another previously discussed element that plays an important part in humor and rhetoric is intertextuality, wherein people draw upon other mediated experiences to extrapolate meaning from a text. According to Warnick (2007),

...intertextuality depends on other texts, be they comprised of the cultural matrix of the reader’s experience and general knowledge, embedded hyperlinks supporting the intertextual reference, salient current events known to the public, allegorical references, the intratextual environment in which the reference is located, extratextual events the reader might research or humorous forms such as parody and satire (p. 92).

So far, this section has examined the rhetoric within both historical and scholarly contexts. It has explained some of the mechanisms of humor, including philosophical model, intentionality of the humor, enthymeme and intertextuality. In order to analyze the jokes put forward on the internet it is useful to examine current memes through these lenses. The next section will discuss the texts that were selected for examination.

Chapter III: Methodology

Subject Selection and Description

Due to the variable nature of the internet, choosing which memes to investigate is more of a challenge than one might think. Many websites allow their users to vote on memes, or designate them as favorites. This would yield rich data, but for the facts that 1.) the voting typically doesn't end; and 2.) the "memesphere" is always expanding with new memes supplanting old memes on a daily basis. These phenomena are such a fast-moving target that pinning down a sample is more than a little difficult. What's "most liked" or "favorite" at breakfast can be passé by lunchtime.

To detour around this inconstancy, it was decided that the most logical way to collect a sample would be to use a static representative sample from a particular date. A search for "Best Memes of 2011" using the search engine Google as of September 22, 2012, provided a mostly stable representation of recently popular memes as published by several websites. Five of the first six search results yielded "Best of 2011" lists from known internet or popular media websites.



Figure 2. Google search results for “Best of” Memes, Google, 2012

The remaining result (smoosh.com) was a person’s personal website, and will not be included in the study. The popular websites that featured these lists were, in order of Google ranking: *Buzzfeed*, *Know Your Meme*, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *Washington Post*, and *The Huffington Post*.

The samples contained varying numbers of memes showcased; however, *Know Your Meme* and *Rolling Stone* each featured ten-item lists. *The Washington Post* site, admittedly inspired by the *Know Your Meme* site, weighed in with only five “best of” memes; *The Huffington Post* featured eleven memes; while *Buzzfeed* featured a top 40 memes for 2011. It was decided that the top ten of each list would be included because four of the five lists had ten or more items. *The Washington Post* was the only exception, with only five list items, but was also included, because of the relevance of the data. A compilation of the memes from these lists yielded 22 separate memes, featured in the table below, which were color-coded for meme

appearance frequency. The green items appeared in all five lists. Blue items were found in four of the five lists. Yellow items occurred in three of five lists. Orange items showed up in two of five lists. Uncolored fields denoted items only showing up on one list.

Buzzfeed	Know Your Meme	Rolling Stone	Washington Post	Huffington Post
<i>Numbered List</i>	<i>Un-numbered List</i>	<i>Numbered List</i>	<i>Numbered List</i>	<i>Rated List</i>
Scumbag Steve	Rebecca Black's Friday	Rebecca Black's Friday	Rebecca Black's Friday	Pepper Spraying Cop
First World Problems	First World Problems	Pepper Spray Cop	Planking	Chemistry Cat
Rebecca Black	Occupy Wall Street	Feminist Ryan Gosling	Occupy Wall Street (Pepper Spray Cop, Hipster Cop, etc.)	Hipster Ariel
Futurama Fry	Planking	Planking and Fridging	First World Problems	First World Problems
Pepper Spraying Cop	Scumbag Steve	Hipster Ariel	Scumbag Steve	Paula Deen Riding Things
College Freshman	X all the Y	Michele Bachmann Eyes	-----	Scumbag Steve
Business Cat	Nope! Chuck Testa	Paula Deen Riding Things	-----	Ryan Gosling
Chuck Testa	Nyan Cat	The Situation Room	-----	Chicks With Steven Buscemeyes
Good Guy Greg	60s Spider-Man	First World Problems	-----	Planking
Dating Site Murderer	My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic	Charlie Sheen's Tiger Blood	-----	Nope! Chuck Testa

Of the 22 memes, five of them could be said to have a rhetorical slant:

- First World Problem – critiquing classism and poverty
- Occupy Wall Street/Pepper Spraying Cop – commenting on a political movement
- Feminist Ryan Gosling – promoting feminism
- Michele Bachmann Eyes – making observations about a political candidate
- The Situation Room – commenting on a political situation

“First World Problems” and “Occupy Wall Street”/“Pepper Spray Cop” are the only two memes of all 22 that showed up on all five lists, and they both happen to be rhetorical in nature.

The “Pepper Spraying Cop” variant has been chosen over the more general Occupy Wall Street

memes because the image of Lieutenant Pike pepper-spraying protestors has been the most meme-like in its transmutation and transmission, making its way around the internet and even into the mainstream. *KnowYourMeme.com* tells us, “Over the next month [November], Pepper Spray Cop images were shared and discussed on *CBS News*, *CNet*, *The Week* and *Scientific American*” (2012).

Consequently, these two memes are to be the focus of analysis for the experiment portion of this research project. Both “First World Problems” and “Pepper Spray Cop” will be examined in two ways. First, each will be analyzed as a whole for their social issues, humor type, rhetorical intentionality and enthymeme. The experiment will then review six specific representative examples of each meme for intertextuality. A total of twelve representative examples will be examined. Three examples of each meme will have been culled from the static initial entry page on the website *KnowYourMeme.com*, and the other three will have been chosen at random from the *KnowYourMeme.com* database of images.

Chapter IV: Results

Data Analysis

The previous section showed how the data were collected for the project. This section will describe the analysis of the data. Each of the two memes will be examined as a whole to determine the background of the meme, the social issue being presented, the philosophical model or models of humor (superiority, relief, incongruity) being used, the intentionality of each meme, and any stereotypical enthymemic assumptions needed to “get” the joke. Later, the representative examples will be analyzed for their intertextuality.

“First World Problems” – Background Information

As it relates to the memesphere, the phrase “first world problems” first appeared in a 1995 alt-pop song called “Omissions of the Omen” by Matthew Good’s Band. In the memesphere, the first sighting of the term occurred in 2008 on a *Tumblr* blog called “First World Problems.” In November, 2010, blogger Jessica Hegy made and posted the following Venn diagram:

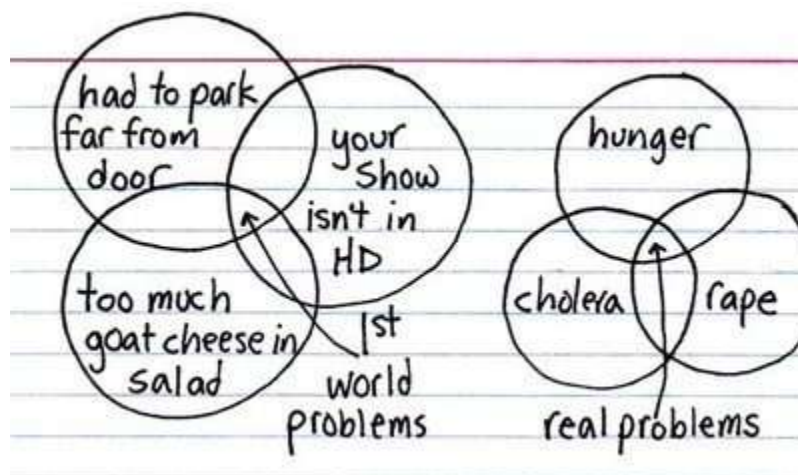


Figure 3. Poor Things, Indexed, November 5, 2010.

In the following year on March 23rd, several iterations of the meme began to appear on *Buzzfeed*. On the site *Meme Generator*, there were 235 submissions of the “teenage boy” (an emo-looking boy slumped against a wall) version of the meme, and 1435 submissions of the more popular “crying woman” (a tearful white woman with her hand raised to her temple) version of the meme as of November 7th, 2011 (“First World Problems,” n.d.).

This *KnowYourMeme.com* graph, powered by Google Analytics, shows the spike in activity in search interest for the topic:

Search Interest

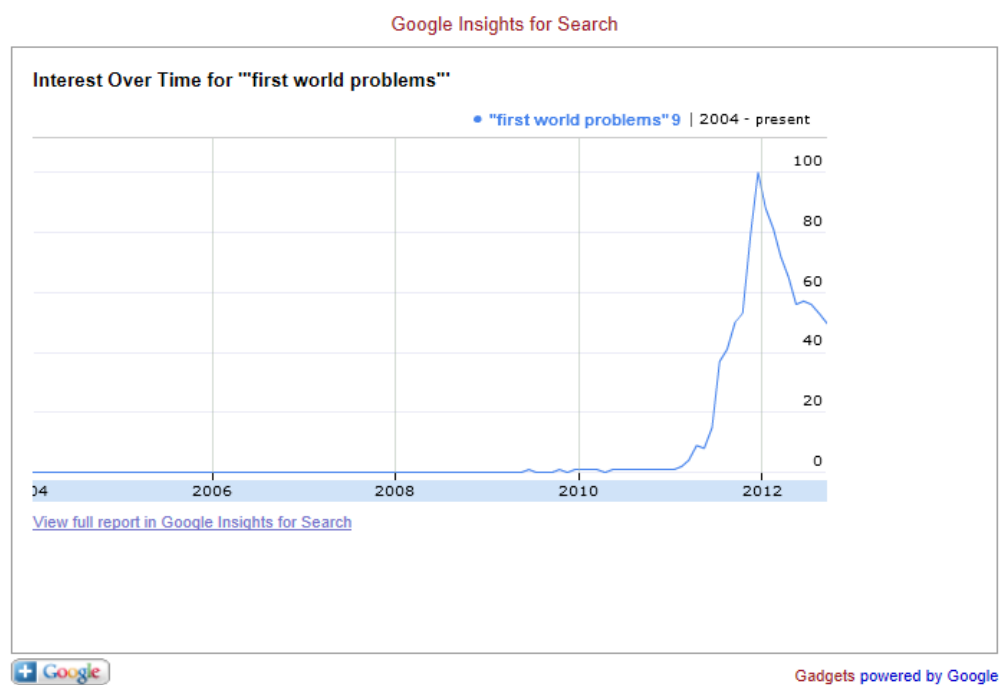


Figure 4. Interest Over Time for “first world problems,” “First World Problems,” n.d.

Before we look at representative examples, it should be noted that this particular meme series follows a certain format: a selection of a few static stock photos, with a caption that changes from joke to joke. The changing humor of the meme, then, is based mostly on the caption rather than the image itself. For the purposes of this study, selections were chosen using

the “crying woman” photograph version of the meme which is – as explained previously – the most popular of the “First World Problems” static images.

Social Issue and Humor Type

The “First World Problems” meme addresses the social question of poverty versus privilege. The joke displays all three humor types (superiority, relief, and incongruity). It displays superiority theory because as privileged people, first-world dwellers have economic and social advantages over people in less well-off countries. The meme’s tone also conveys a certain amount of that flip-side of superiority: self-deprecation or self-mockery. The tone of the meme does not condone the attitudes, but pokes fun at those who unthinkingly engage in behaviors that could be considered petty or ungrateful.



Figure 5. On the beach is too hot, "First World Problems," n.d.

"First World Problem" jokes could also be said to employ the relief theory of humor in that they discuss a situation that is uncomfortable for many people: the fact that there are many who enjoy privilege due to luck of birth, and yet there are millions of people suffering around the globe who deal daily with the “rape, hunger, cholera” trifecta mentioned in the Venn diagram. The windup of the joke is the discomfort and guilt felt at the realization that a privileged first-world existence is being taken for granted. The “pitch” of the joke is the self-actualization and

subsequent self-mockery embedded in these observations. In addition, incongruity adds to the relief by revealing the absurdism of the first-worlder's predicament.



Figure 6. It's 12:30 in the morning, "First World Problems," n.d.

Intentionality

In an earlier section of this paper, the level of rhetorical intention was covered by Phillips-Anderson. He posited that there are three levels of rhetorical intentionality in humor: risibility – or unintended amusement; humor – when the speaker tries to make the audience laugh; and rhetorical humor – when the humor shared is intended to change somebody's thoughts or attitudes.

In these "First World Problems" memes, there is, as Jonathan Zittrain mentioned in his keynote speech at ROFLcon, that brief spark of pathos involved. For many readers who are in the group of privilege – whether they are white women or not – there is a spark of self-recognition in the First World person: who hasn't complained about something banal and inconsequential? There is also a brief imagining of what it would be like to suffer in the way that many fellow human beings do. The intentionality of these memes is to change attitudes to those of gratitude for the privileges most readers enjoy, and to invoke empathy for those who don't.



Figure 7. I'm so hungry, "First World Problems," n.d.

Enthymeme

In the "First World Problems" image macros, the enthymeme – or filling in the commonly-held assumptions that makes a joke funny – involves thinking about the privileges that First World dwellers have, as well as imagining privileges of those who may have slightly more social standing or economic advantage. Filling in these blanks adds a humor dimension because it implies the commonly held assumption that people in First World countries are self-involved, shallow, and are insensitive to the plight of others.

Intertextuality

In the previous section, these memes were analyzed as a whole for their social issues, humor type, rhetorical intentionality and enthymeme. This next section will take representative examples of these memes and will examine each for intertextuality – ways that they relate to other jokes, culture, general knowledge and references to other media.

All of the six memes presented could be said to rely on some form of intertextuality, whether it was from another text, general knowledge, or common experience.



Figure 8. I just used my last Pandora skip, "First World Problems," n.d.

The first selected meme references the music genome project website Pandora, which allows listeners to create stations based around songs or artists. Furthermore, users are able to up- or down-vote songs, and the service's algorithms will find similar songs based on preferences. Users are allowed to down-vote or skip a specified number of undesirable songs an hour, and then are forced to wait before they are able to skip again. A person must be familiar with the Pandora music service, have a computer to play the music on, and be in a home or workplace environment where he or she can listen to music, to get the joke.



Figure 9. I'm so tired of eating, "First World Problems," n.d.

The second image refers to the First World indulgence of habitually going out for lunch instead of bringing a packed lunch, or – indeed – having food to eat at all. It also implies that the

worker either has transportation to drive to a lunch location, or works in a safe, accessible area that has affordable food options. In addition it implies that the person has a well-paying job that provides disposable income to afford eating out regularly.



Figure 10. Someone on the internet, "First World Problems," n.d.

The third panel deals with an aspect of internet culture wherein a comment made by a user can usually be countered by someone else inhabiting the same space on the internet. A person would need to frequent the internet and understand the combative attitude of some net dwellers to understand the reference to that joke.



Figure 11. I dropped my Macbook, "First World Problems," n.d.

The fourth panel references the popular laptop computer made by Apple corporation. To understand the joke, a viewer would need to be familiar not only with the concept of the laptop technology, but also the somewhat cultish obsession most Mac users have with their computers

and related technology. The image implies that those who are Mac followers would be devastated at the destruction of just one piece of technology, let alone two. It also shows the indulgence of first-world people who can afford not only one, but two laptop computers.



Figure 12. The cleaning lady is vacuuming, "First World Problems," n.d.

Like the second panel, the fifth panel refers to another First World indulgence: having a cleaning person. The joke borrows from the ubiquitous Western cultural practice of watching television as a leisure activity. It is topped with a lack of appreciation for having someone else take care of household tasks while the complainer indulges in leisure activity.



Figure 13. The movie I want to watch, "First World Problems," n.d.

The sixth panel borrows its intertextuality from another technological service: Netflix. The movie and video rental service has several options for customers. They can pay a monthly fee for full service which includes their mail-order DVDs and also streaming video. Customers can also pay for a type of service that only allows for streaming video. The choices of content for streaming video are much fewer than for those opting for the DVD + streaming service. Viewers must be familiar with the service's policies in order for the joke to work.

The previous section has analyzed the "First World Problems" meme for social issue and humor type, humorous and rhetorical intentionality, enthymeme, and intertextuality. The next section will turn the same focus on the "Pepper Spraying Cop" meme that emerged from the Occupy Wall Street movement.

"Pepper Spray Cop"

The website *KnowYourMeme.com* documents the background of this particular meme (which it calls "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop") as follows:

On November 18th, 2011, a group of students at the University of California Davis gathered on campus for an Occupy protest, during which they formed a human chain by linking their arms together. When they refused to comply with the police request to leave, UC Davis Police officer Lieutenant John Pike and another officer walked across the group, administering orange pepper spray straight down the line of unmoving students. A photo of Lieutenant John Pike pepper spraying seated students at the UC Davis protest was taken by Louise Macabitas and posted to Reddit on November 19th, 2011 ("Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.).

The image was powerful – and easily exploitable. *KnowYourMeme.com* goes on to report that memes created from the image started as soon as November, 20, 2011 – one day after the original photo went up on the internet. Although the first documented image featured a picture

of Leonardo DiCaprio superimposed over the image of Lieutenant Pike, other images soon followed: many of which featured famous works of art. The meme spread rapidly, as evidenced by the Google Analytics graph below:

Search Interest

Search for "pepper spray cop" began in September 2011, coinciding with Occupy protests:

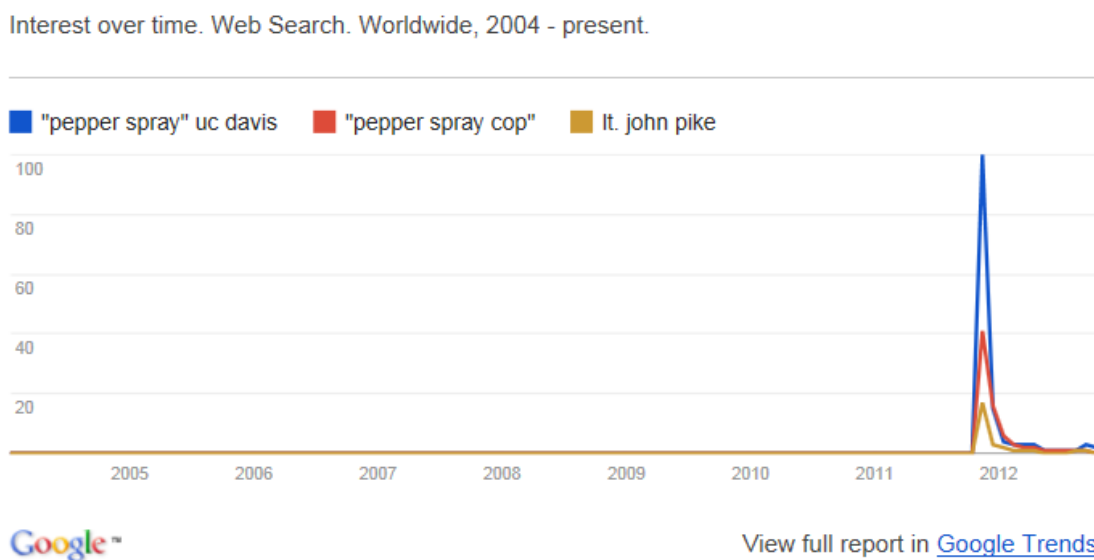


Figure 14. Interest over time. Web Search. Worldwide, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

The "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop" meme has used many different methods of meme "construction" to convey the joke. As with the "First World Problems" meme, static photos of Lieutenant Pike pepper-spraying people were superimposed with captions. In another construction, Lieutenant Pike is removed from his original context and placed into different backgrounds. Yet another construction has Lieutenant Pike replaced in the photo by other figures. These different formats contribute to the humorous aspect of the photos.

Social Issues and Humor Type

There are several social issues that are represented, if not overtly depicted, in the images. The most easily identified issue is the casual use of violence by a police officer on seemingly non-threatening subjects. Larger issues, however, are at play. The act of violence is a result of the Occupy UC Davis movement which was part of the world-wide “Occupy” movement which was first manifested as “Occupy Wall Street” in New York. According to the *New York Times*:

The Occupy Movement began on Sept. 17, 2011, when a diffuse group of activists began a loosely organized protest called Occupy Wall Street, encamping in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned park in New York’s financial district. The protest was a stand against corporate greed, social inequality and the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process (*New York Times*, 2012).

The movement used social media to mobilize, and spread to cities around the world.

Again the meme uses the three different types of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity, but employs them in different ways than the “First World Problems” meme. Since the format changes, the type of humor can change with each iteration of the meme. Superiority theory is in evidence in the subject matter of most of the photos: the depiction of casual violence against the protestors or other subjects. Pithy captions like, “Don’t Mind Me, Just Watering My Hippies” (“Casually Pepper Spray,” n.d.) show the contemptuous use of force.



Figure 15. Don’t mind me, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

Relief humor can be said to be used when Lieutenant Pike is removed from his original environment and placed in a different one. Seeing the use of force on unarmed protestors is an uncomfortable reminder of human vulnerability to power. When removed from the original context, no longer is the audience exposed to the Lieutenant hurting real people: he is instead shown spraying fictional subjects of paintings, or inanimate objects. Incongruity comes into play with images such as the one in which the Lieutenant's spray can shoots out butterflies instead of pepper spray. The absurdity underpins the violence of the original by showing one of nature's peaceful creatures coming out of the can instead of the painful pepper spray of the original.



Figure 16. Lieutenant Pike dispensing butterflies, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

Intentionality

As mentioned in the "First World Problems" section, rhetorical and humorous intention was used to determine what the image achieved: unintentional laughter (risibility); intentional laughter (humor) or laughter with the intention of changing thoughts and attitudes (rhetorical humor). The "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop" is another example of rhetorical humor. The theme changes, however, depending on the example chosen.

The captioned photos of the lieutenant pepper-spraying students rely on Jonathan Zittrain's (2012) aforementioned spark of pathos. Viewers of the meme may not be able to

directly identify with the students' pain at being sprayed, but can probably empathize with the fact that the students are seemingly being treated extremely unfairly. Everyone has been treated unfairly at some point in their lives, and this portrayal of Lieutenant Pike is meant to invoke a sympathetic response. Not only can he be said to embody the misuse of power, he also could be said to represent the targets of the Occupy Movement (the 1%), who are allegedly abusing power to attain wealth. Representations of these abuses are intended to make viewers angry about this misuse of power and to make people want to do something about it.

Enthymeme

In the images of Lieutenant Pike, the enthymemic assumption is that those who are in power can very easily choose to abuse it. Whether he is spraying the protestors or another symbol of United States' democracy, Pike is using his power in a way that can only be construed negatively.

Intertextuality

The previous section has reviewed the "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop" meme for social issue, humor type, intentionality, and enthymemic assumption. This section will show three examples chosen from the main static "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop" entry page on *KnowYourMeme.com*, and three from their database archives. This section describes the intertextuality that informs the joke. The six are as follows:



Figure 17. Lieutenant Pike spraying the constitution, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

The first image shows Lieutenant Pike – rather than pepper-spraying someone – spray painting over top of the United States Constitution. The viewer would need to be familiar with the document, and the rights it grants, in order to understand the intertextuality. The fact that Pike is shown spraying ovetop the constitution, identified with the Bill of Rights guaranteeing freedom of speech, is ironic in the extreme.



Figure 18. Lieutenant Pike spraying Mt. Rushmore, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

The second image draws more on subtext. Rather than blatantly spraying right onto the constitution, Lieutenant Pike is shown spraying at the iconic Mount Rushmore monument, whose depiction of four of the presidents of the United States represents the freedoms hard won during their presidencies. A viewer would need to be familiar with the monument, and the presidents in it, in order to understand the image.



Figure 19. Lieutenant Pike spraying *Declaration of Independence*, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

The third image shows a depiction of Lieutenant Pike pepper-spraying the creators of the constitution as portrayed in the painting *Declaration of Independence* by John Trumball ("Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.) Viewers would have to know or infer that the painting depicted the framers of the constitution, and would further have to know – as with the first image – that the constitution's amendments guarantee freedom of speech.



Figure 20. Lieutenant Pike spraying *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

In the fourth image, Lieutenant Pike's placement in this context could be understood merely as a picture of a police officer pepper-spraying people at a picnic. Or, for those who are more familiar with French impressionist art it could be amusing to see him in a piece they recognize, Georges Seurat's painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. ("Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.)



Figure 21. Lieutenant Pike spraying the soldiers at Iwo Jima, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

Like the second image, the fifth is more iconic. A viewer would have to know that the photo represented soldiers from World War II raising the U.S. flag over Iwo Jima. The fighters represent the United States as the victors of the war, who were ostensibly fighting for freedom from Axis forces. A knowledge of World War II and the iconic photograph of Iwo Jima is required for this image to make sense.



Figure 22. Lieutenant Pike spraying God in *Creation*, "Casually Pepper Spray," n.d.

The sixth image shows Lieutenant Pike replacing the figure of Adam in Michelangelo's *Creation* painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. A viewer would need to understand the painting's context – God giving life to Adam – to understand the subtle joke of man repaying God for the spark of life by pepper-spraying him in the face.

This section has reviewed selected memes for social issue, humor type, intentionality, enthymeme, and intertextuality. In doing so, the section has reinforced the idea that these memes are not merely jokes put on the internet for entertainment purposes. They can also be conduits for social commentary as well as a medium for rhetorical discourse. By examining them critically we, as viewers, can make informed decisions about meme consumption, being mindful of the messages that are being conveyed.

Chapter V: Discussion

Limitations

One of the most challenging aspects of the study was the rate at which the internet “turns over.” There are new memes being created every day and choosing just a few to study is a constantly moving target. What might be interesting and relevant one day may be stale and outdated the next.

Another limitation is the lack of solid scholarly sources tracking the evolution and history of these texts. *KnowYourMeme.com* is one of the only sites comprehensively tracking this data. Although it has permanent staff and is part of a larger meme conglomeration, the entries are user generated content: essentially a wiki of information contributed by enthusiasts of the genre. According to their “About Us” section,

Know Your Meme is a site that researches and documents Internet memes and viral phenomena. Founded in December of 2008, Know Your Meme's research is handled by an independent professional editorial and research staff and community members. In three years of its existence, the site grew to reach more than 9.5 million people every month and is considered the most authoritative source on news, history and origins of viral phenomena and Internet memes (*KnowYourMeme.com*, 2012).

Since memes are often considered entertainment, with the exception of a few studies like Miltner’s LOLCat study and Leffler’s LOLspeak paper, little scholarly material exists regarding them. They are, however, gaining more and more traction in mainstream pop culture: the television network Bravo! just began airing a series called *LOLwork*, which showcases the daily doings of the staff of *ICanHasCheezburger.com* (Patterson, 2012).

In addition, the memes investigated were limited to those appealing to a Western audience of English speakers. At ROFLcon 2012, one of the panels discussed how memes are used in different parts of the world. From the subtle political dissidence in China to the free-for-all fun of Brazilian memes (Granja, B., Mina, A. X., Qtiesh, A., & Zuckerman, E.), there is a literal world of unaddressed meme usage that is far different from what we find within the confines of the North American memesphere.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to answer the question, “How are humorous image macros being used to convey rhetorical messages about societal issues?” The question is both simple and complicated.

On the surface, it is easy to identify the fact that an image macro is more than just an amusement and is addressing a social issue. However, as can be seen by the “First World Problem,” and “Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop” memes, these messages can dig deep into important issues – hitting several layers of meaning – to make a point and try to persuade. Digging deeply enough to strike at issues as fundamental as our relative wealth and privilege, or as foundational as our identity as a country, these texts should not be underestimated.

The memes represented are just two examples of the myriad memes that are being produced every day. The ease of production and low barriers to engagement give anyone with a computer, and internet connection and an opinion a platform in the wider world of public discourse. Image macros make it easy to be a part of the conversation. The medium in this case both amplifies and makes accessible the message.

The fact that these opinions are cloaked in humor does nothing to diminish their power. Using the same rhetorical humor techniques that ancient Greek philosophers used is just as

relevant today as it was two millennia ago. Humor is a powerful – yet subtle – tool: one that can make a previously unthinkable position palatable. Since most of these memes are featured on websites that invite feedback, it would be possible to gauge the effectiveness of these texts by examining responses to the memes within each text’s comment sections.

Why does any of this matter? Partially because the internet is still a “wild frontier” where anything goes. The lack of regulation gives unparalleled freedom of speech and access to a global audience. With that freedom comes a responsibility: that of the consumer. As responsible internet citizens, users must realize that the messages they see are not the carefully vetted, censored content coming out of mainstream media. They are deliberate, unfiltered constructs, and their creators’ intentions aren’t always just to amuse. Users must be prepared to think critically for themselves when consuming these messages and understand the implications that are really being conveyed.

It is also important because these memes can have a real impact on discourse in the public sphere. The “First World Problems” meme became a popular hashtag that Twitter users adopted when complaining about something trivial. When the charity Water Is Life used the meme to create an ad featuring impoverished Haitians reading first world problems to a camera, there was mixed reaction. Some argued that the ironic “First World Problems” joke was being taken too seriously, while others argued that people in third world countries often have first world problems too. No matter what people thought of the ad, it sparked dialogue and brought attention to the charity (Edwards, 2012).

As the internet becomes a bigger part of people’s lives, it is our responsibility as scholars to investigate these messages to understand their implications for us as communicators and for society as a whole.

Recommendations

Since there is such a dearth of scholarship in the area of internet memes, there is much yet to be learned. In conjunction with this study, further investigation could be conducted into the interactive nature of these messages. Not only can users create and publish image macros, many sites also give the ability for others to comment on these creations. Investigating the commentary given on these texts would be an excellent way to get a pulse on societal attitudes about the social topic in question. As with meme selection itself, isolating the methodology for choosing and analyzing these comments would be a challenge, but not without reward.

Another area of scholarship that could be pursued is a more in-depth look at the semiotics involved in image macros. Deciphering the relationships involved in these complicated messages would be an interesting area of study.

As mentioned before, international memes have a much different meaning than those created and propagated within North America. Studying the infiltration of North American memes into the wider world, or investigating the meanings and uses of memes in other countries, would both make rich, meaningful areas of study.

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