

Platforms, Memes, and Everyday Politics: Identity Performance on Social Media

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We, the undersigned committee members, approve of this exam as fulfillment of the second Area Exam requirement for the City, Culture, and Community Ph.D. program.

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Introduction

A set of February 2020 tweets from @sternbergh reads:

*the only good thing about twitter is that it burns out memes in days if not hours
the thing the youth don't understand is that before twitter catchphrases lasted forever
people where [sic] recorded saying 'whazzzup' for fully eight years in the wild*

*'Where's the beef' persisted through most of my formative years, whereas I'm already nostalgic
for the heyday of the now long passé Baby Nut meme*

At its core, this exam's focus is on answering the implicit question posed by New York Times columnist Adam Sternbergh here: what does it mean that the pace of memetic iterations continues to increase over time? He references historically famous Super Bowl commercials from Anheuser-Busch and Wendy's to draw a humorous contrast with a phenomenon that was less than a day old at the time and had apparently already fallen from awareness. As an individual, how could it be possible to keep up? What does it mean for someone to attempt to do so? As a user, what does successfully leveraging memetic genres and densely layered intertextual references signify? More specifically – from a sociological perspective, what might this tell us about how people think about and express their own identities?

Take the collection of memetic texts in Appendix 1 for reference. The first image is a Twitter screenshot that reads as a nonsensical typo at first glance. However, it reveals its message if the reader recognizes that it was posted when then-President Trump was hospitalized for COVID-19 and is a reference to a niche Simpsons joke from 1993 that *itself* relies on knowing that 'die' in German means 'the'. The second and third images rely on other sorts of niche cultural knowledge – in the one case, familiarity with Jean Baudrillard's four stages of simulation and a sarcastic posture toward autumn-related kitsch and in the other case, recognition that tinned fish have recently developed a new positive reputation in some American cultural

imaginations. The latter four images come as a set (and may seem more inscrutable because of the volume of texts concerning such a micro-phenomenon) and require the readers to unravel threads related to Keith Haring's work and the significance of capitalistic appropriation of art, among other things.

The specific content of these images is ultimately irrelevant; the purpose here is to illustrate just how complicated and specific memetic texts have become since the commercials referenced in Sternbergh's tweet. There is no indication that the pace of the iterative meme cycle will slow; if anything, the pace continues to increase while users' experience processing these multimodal memetic texts has become increasingly splintered in the move toward algorithmic feed-driven platforms. Not only are memetic texts as our "Super Bowl commercials" getting more complicated, we are not often not even watching the same commercials anymore.

From a sociological perspective, these changes prompt us to question the social significance of these cultural and technological shifts. The increasing complexity of these cultural texts, along with the fragmentation that comes with changes to social media platforms, means that memetic participation has taken on new social significance; consuming, sharing, and remixing memes become acts of cultural literacy that have potential to build, express, and affirm an individual's identity.

Exam Overview

In the three main sections that follow, I take memetic practices and texts like these seriously as one type of "normal, everyday social media use" (Brabham 2015:1). However, I approach them from a sociological perspective rather than that of communications or media studies, meaning that I am concerned with how broader social structures and cultural forces

shape the contextual conditions that give rise to specific instances of memetic participation. In the course of doing this, I have centered my analysis around two core questions:

- 1. How do social media platforms and participatory cultures shape identity performance through memes and humor?**
- 2. How does everyday political discourse emerge from and shape identity performance through iterative memetic participation?**

It is important to define a few key terms at the outset. Although some of these terms have contested or complex definitions, I offer a straightforward operational definition here and will more fully contextualize these definitions and cite relevant scholarship as they arise:

<i>Platforms</i>	Digital spaces governed by tech firms that enable and constrain certain activities through policies, design, and incentives.
<i>Platform Logics</i>	The norms, strategies, mechanisms, and priorities that shape how platforms are designed, governed, and used.
<i>Platformization</i>	The process of platform logics and features spreading to shape social media environments more broadly.
<i>Memes</i>	Iterative and multimodal cultural artifacts that propagate meanings and identities through continual recreation and often understood as groups of content.
<i>Memetic Logics</i>	Underlying principles like remixing and spreadability that persist across evolving meme formats.
<i>Memetic Practices</i>	Participatory habits and rituals around creating, sharing, and interpreting memes.
<i>Affordances</i>	The functional possibilities and relational interactions that platforms allow through interface design and technical architecture.
<i>Intertextuality</i>	The shaping of texts' meanings by references to other texts. It involves texts building on, incorporating, or reusing content from other sources in ways that depend on readers sharing cultural knowledge
<i>Participatory Culture</i>	Social environments with low barriers that enable creative participation and collaborative meaning-making.
<i>Identity</i>	Individuals' internal sense of self and external presentations of self within different social contexts.
<i>Everyday Politics</i>	Informal political discourse emerging fluidly from mundane personal contexts and experiences and based in the inherently intertwined personal and political in social media contexts.
<i>Boundary Work</i>	Strategies used to assert distinctions between group insiders and outsiders.

In the first section, I focus on **platforms** and **platformization**, arguing that platforms actively construct discursive spaces through governance models, design choices, and business incentives within their networked environment. These platforms enact certain logics that privilege some behaviors over others, both directly and indirectly shaping social practices. Platforms present themselves as neutral conduits, but their logics extend beyond their sites.

Next, the exam's longest section leverages a wide swath of interdisciplinary **Internet meme** and **online humor** scholarship to sketch an overview of the concept's development before laying out a typology for three theoretical lenses that help us understand their operation. I make the case for how identity practices function in a memetic context and offer some methodological directions for an approach to the sociological study of memes and identity.

The exam's third (and briefest) section discusses **everyday politics** as both a context for and a result of these identity performances through memes and humor. Taking a cue from Boyte (2005) and Highfield (2016), this section defines everyday political discourse as the sort of political activity that happens outside the visible work of elections and organizing. In a social media context, this looks like the inherently intertwined and overlapping nature of the personal and the political. It argues this mundane political talk emerges from identity enactment via memes while also dynamically shaping future identity performances. Memetic participation politicizes the personal through the continual negotiation of cultural meanings.

Across these three sections, I aim to make the following arguments clear:

1. Platforms shape discourse and identity performance through their governance choices, design affordances, and business models. They present themselves as neutral but actively construct discursive spaces.

2. Memes are multimodal, intertextual artifacts that resonate with cultural assumptions and insider knowledge. They propagate social logics and collective identities through continual recreation and remixing.
3. Identity is performed by displaying cultural literacy and politicizing lived experience through memetic participation. This blends the personal and political.
4. Studying online identity requires examining platforms, multimodal artifacts, and generative participatory practices together.
5. Everyday political discourse emerges from and shapes identity performance through vernacular memetic expressions. Mundane activities become political.
6. Memes transform lived realities into political vehicles through humor, resonance, and collective participation. They politicize the personal.
7. There is a two-way, cyclical relationship between everyday politics and identity performance via memes. Memes shape political discourse, which shapes future identity expressions.

I treat this exam's three main sections as complementary perspectives for understanding these identity practices: platforms as the **infrastructure** where these practices are situated and shaped, memes as the **instrument** through which individuals negotiate and enact their identities, and everyday politics as the **context for interaction** that is both the site for and result of these identity practices.

Understanding Platforms and Platformization

When we use a platform's name like 'TikTok' or 'Instagram', we are actually invoking them as a synecdoche that stands in for the large sociotechnical assemblage (Bijker 1995) which represents the technology firm, the user-facing app or service, the underlying technical architecture, and the surrounding economic and cultural context. These firms typically opt for 'platform' as their preferred metaphor, an ostensibly simple term but actually a complex and strategic discursive move that contains computational, architectural, figurative, and political meanings (Gillespie 2010). 'Platformization' as a term comes from Helmond (2015) to describe

how the social web is structured around the economic and infrastructural priorities of these social media sites. This platformization continually shapes entire social sectors (van Dijck et al. 2018) toward the platform's ends as its "norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies" (van Dijck and Poell 2013:2) affect social relationships and cultural products through the ways that they orchestrate certain types of interaction and participation through design and incentives (Gillespie 2017). We can consider platforms through both a structural and a sociocultural lens; they are both technological infrastructure and the spaces where networked publics form (boyd 2010), offering unique affordances and constraints that shape social interactions that in turn shape platforms.

Platforms as a Structural Phenomenon

We can consider platforms as a structural phenomenon via technical, legal, and economic lenses. Early definitions of a platform were strictly technical – per Marc Andreessen's (2007) famous definition, "If you can program it, it's a platform. If you can't, it's not." In its contemporary usage, platform is a metaphor employed by technology firms and media to describe a type of user-facing digital media intermediary like TikTok or Instagram. Gillespie (2010) highlights how this metaphor is used in the strictly computational sense (infrastructure that other things are built upon) as well as in more figurative ways, suggesting that these intermediaries are neutral conduits that support and allow for whatever users elect to do. Platform affordances such as video editing tools and modalities for engagement allow for and constrain certain user behaviors (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Plantin et al. 2018) and their 'logics' eventually extend to the rest of the web via platformization.

Legally, platforms strategically adopt the 'platform' label to frame themselves as neutral conduits (Gillespie 2010). However, they have significant legal considerations and economic

pressures that require them to actively manage, moderate, and govern – they do not just allow communication, they are active participants (Langlois and Elmer 2013). They face competitive and regulatory pressures that shape their decisions as they operate in a complex multi-sided market (Nieborg and Poell 2018), mediating transactions and steering interactions through their Terms of Service and interfaces (Poell et al. 2019). Their business models depend on continuous user data extraction and analysis and so platforms are fueled by the commodification of user data and governed by asymmetrical user agreements that favor the platform (van Dijck et al. 2018). Understanding platforms thus requires examining how their technical architecture intersects with economic incentives and legal obligations, but platform theory pushes us to consider the sociocultural lens as equally significant (Plantin et al. 2018).

Platforms as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

Beyond their structural role, platforms are deeply entangled with their sociocultural context. Gillespie's (2010) notion that the term 'platform' is itself a cultural signifier extends to how users engage with these sites, implicitly framing them as neutral stages for user-generated content. However, this ostensible neutrality is misleading in the sociocultural sense as well. The platforms implement specific logics like programmability and datafication, steering user behavior (van Dijck and Poell 2013). For instance, TikTok's algorithmic curation influences how memetic trends emerge and spread, affecting how social capital is distributed within the network

This relationship is bidirectional; cultural practices and cultural production in turn shape the platforms (Duffy et al 2019); they impose new forms of labor and creativity, shaping the very content they host. Instagram, for example, adapted to the influencer economy by introducing features that enable more seamless brand partnerships. These shifts are more than mere

adaptations; they reconfigure the platform's very architecture and how it extends beyond the platform to the broader web (Helmond 2015).

As these platforms evolve, they become social infrastructures whose influences we begin to take for granted, meaning that their influence on expectations and cultural production becomes more tacit or invisible (Markham and Tiidenberg 2020). This symbiotic relationship between platforms and society is also mediated by how these platforms present themselves and are presented by media as this relationship co-creates sociocultural understandings of how platforms both actually and should function (van Dijck 2013).

In short, platforms are involved in ongoing, complex, and multi-directional relationships with their structural and sociocultural contexts. These contexts coalesce into a networked environment, a complex web where platforms not only derive their unique features but also actively contribute to the ecosystem's dynamic. This recognition becomes crucial as we turn to the next section, where we explore the platform's existence as nodes in a larger sociotechnical network, carving out unique identities shaped by their environments even as they exert influence on other entities in the system.

Platforms and their Networked Environment

Platforms are part of broader sociotechnical systems (Bijker et al. 1987), and their unique features or affordances are inextricably tied to these complex systems. Continuing to take TikTok and Instagram as examples, TikTok's "For You" algorithm, which relies heavily on user engagement metrics, reflects not just societal trends but also market-driven objectives and evolving governance requirements concerning young people. Conversely, Instagram Reels (a subset of Instagram) was launched in a landscape already shaped by TikTok and comes with its own set of affordances and limitations. These include the feature's integration into the existing

Instagram ecosystem, drawing on Instagram's historically established economic relationships with influencers and advertisers, as well as navigating a set of privacy regulations that may differ from TikTok due to its parent company Meta's headquarters and primary political influence being in different jurisdictions. As a result, Reels carves out a space within the same overarching system but does so by engaging different structural and legal affordances, reflecting its unique operational milieu within the broader digital ecosystem. The choices that these individual platforms make in turn shape the broader environment, thereby influencing other platforms in turn.

We can consider this dynamic in two ways. The first focuses on the broader sociotechnical environment, which encompasses not only societal and technological elements but also regulatory policies, economic incentives, and cultural norms (Pinch and Bijker 1984; Winner 1980). These factors together create a structural landscape that influences platform design and user behavior. For instance, economic policies and regulations can either promote or inhibit platform monopolies, while cultural norms around privacy could influence the platform's data-sharing policies. The second lens narrows our perspective to 'platform ecologies,' a more specific focus that considers a platform's relationships with other platforms and an array of stakeholders, including users, developers, and advertisers (Gillespie 2010; Helmond 2015; van Dijck and Poell 2018). Within these ecologies, platforms might collaborate through API sharing, compete for user attention through distinct affordances, or coexist within specialized niches that cater to different user or market needs. An ecological perspective on platforms also recognizes how they are actually used and experienced from the user's point of view.

In this networked environment, platforms carve out unique operational identities through specificities (Kaye et al. 2021) – be they governance structures, business models, technological

architecture, or the particular user base they cater to. Instagram's governance structure, for example, emphasizes tighter content moderation in line with its parent company Meta's broader policies. In contrast, TikTok often foregrounds user-generated trends, possibly reflecting its origins and the varied governance landscape it navigates globally. These specificities are rarely static attributes; they are shaped and reshaped by multiple forces, such as user practices and regulatory constraints (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Mahl et al. 2021).

While specificities such as business models and governance structures lay the groundwork for a platform's distinct identity, affordances are the functional and relational aspects that facilitate or limit interactions on that platform (Gibson 1979; Gillespie 2010; Norman 1988). For instance, Instagram's ability to share content directly to Facebook and TikTok's video embedding capability across the open web serve as more than just individual functionalities. These affordances can function as embedded technological scripts (Akrich 1992), subtly channeling user behavior in specific directions. They are pivotal components within each platform's strategic decisions and market positioning. What renders each platform distinct is its nuanced integration and interaction within this complex sociotechnical landscape. A platform's unique identity is revealed only when we consider how its specificities and affordances interact with and are shaped by the broader environment in which it operates.

Platforms actively construct discursive spaces by implementing particular governance models, incentives, and affordances that privilege certain cultural practices. In doing so, they provide the infrastructure for identity performances to unfold through memetic participation. Memes function as multimodal, intertextual artifacts that resonate with cultural assumptions and propagate social logics and identities through continual recreation in these environments. In the next section, I'll explore memetics more deeply, tracing the concept's origins and making the

case for how memes enable identity performance by displaying cultural literacy and politicizing lived experience. This will set the stage for discussing everyday politics as both emerging from and shaping identity via memetic practices.

Memes and Memetic Practices

“They remind us of the ways in which even the most frivolous forms of wasting time on the Internet are anything but mindless...such activities can feel, and indeed be, epistemologically and socially generative...” (Schonig 2020:44).

In the previous section, we have seen how social media platforms actively shape practices and content. In this way, they serve as the anything-but-neutral *infrastructure* or *sites* for identity enactment on social media. In keeping with this exam’s approach, I am proceeding from the most general to the most specific – this section turns to memetics and humor as *instruments* for identity enactment on these platforms before the final section, which will focus on everyday politics as the *issues* or *topics* where identity is enacted. Of course, this is just one site for identity enactment, but is fitting with my broader research agenda to understand how seemingly silly, frivolous, or unimportant social media practices are rich sites for social scientific study.

In this longest section of the exam, I discuss memetics and humor as instruments for identity performance in four stages. First, I trace their development and explore what they are conceptually and practically. Next, I discuss how they work to build and communicate meaning. Third, I leverage the foundation of these first two stages to explore how they work as sites for identity-related practices specifically. The final section looks to methods – given what we know about what they are and how they function, how can we thoughtfully analyze them?

Origins and Conceptual Development

Every account of memetics begins with Richard Dawkins (1976), primarily a biologist, who coined the term ‘meme’ as a clever linkage between the biological and the cultural, arguing

that memes were the cultural analogue to biological genes that spread through replication and imitation and compete for survival. For Dawkins, these small units of cultural transmission – such as religious symbols, simple melodies, or folktales – spread from person to person like a virus and are characterized by their fidelity, fecundity, and longevity¹. In the nearly 50 years since his introduction, the concept has evolved to reach its current form. Hofstadter (1985), Blackmore (2000), and Aunger (2002) retained but evolved this gene-oriented view and added a fairly literal approach to virality that used evolutionary frameworks like transmission, variation through transmission errors, and selection. Eventually, this view was critiqued for seeing humans as little more than vectors for this transmission, ignoring their agency and social context. This framework was largely overturned with the advent of the social Internet (O’Reilly 2005), but Blackmore planted a conceptual seed that allowed for this – humans are vectors, yes, but our brains are uniquely fertile sites for the evolution and development of memes and these memes can work together as conceptual or thematic sets, or ‘memeplexes’ that influence culture.

Memetics used a concept that predated the Internet to advance the field. Henry Jenkins (1992) studied television fans and rejected the idea that they were passive consumers, instead describing how they actively participate in their fandom by producing and manipulating meaning and content. He called this ‘participatory cultures’ and Internet meme theorists adopted this concept to describe how memetics functions on the social Internet. Jenkins continued to evolve this concept and integrated it into a digital media framework, arguing that these new technologies allow for transmedia spread² (2008) and greater user empowerment because of more robust media creation and editing tools and more free-flowing grassroots transmission of ‘spreadable’ media where cultural value is generated by how much something circulates (Jenkins et al. 2013).

¹ Their ability to be copied and transmitted without alteration (fidelity) at a high rate (fecundity) and survive in a spreading process (longevity).

² Participatory user-generated content arising, evolving, and flowing across various sites both offline and online.

These concepts – participatory cultures and spreadable media – set the stage for Limor Shifman, whose work is recognized among Internet researchers as authoritative in defining Internet meme theory and describing its characteristics.

Shifman moves away from Dawkins’ gene-oriented ‘fidelity, fecundity, longevity’ framing and reorients her definition of Internet memes around three different traits. Her canonical definition holds that Internet memes are “groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of **content**, **form**, and/or **stance**, which were created with awareness of each other and were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users.” (2013:41). Like most Internet researchers, I adopt Shifman’s definition – but for this exam add that they often tend to be jokes (Davison 2012) and groups of memes usually share a topical focus or formal features (Burgess 2008; Mina 2019).

Content, form, and stance are the core of this definition. This is how Shifman proposes that researchers analyze groups of memes, but it is also useful for expanding on her definition. She indicates that memes need to be considered as groups created with awareness of each other, which means that their **content** can best be understood as a ‘diffuse text’³ (Brummett 1994). Although memes could hypothetically be analyzed as discrete texts, they are not experienced as such – individuals encounter them across platforms and contexts and alongside other texts that they see online and offline. Because of this, these individual instances as fragments work together to build up and communicate meaning (Stassen and Bates 2020). They are also intertextual (Shifman 2014) as they draw on broad content for repurposing and remixing (Milner 2013) and in doing so have the potential for building and communicating ideas and identities – even if these initially may be incoherent and ideologically chaotic (Burton 2019).

³ A collection of dispersed cultural artifacts and messages that can be analyzed together to reveal insights about ideological commitments, public discourse, and meaning.

In the popular imagination, memes are often understood as image macros⁴ – likely because of the early popularity flowing from their templatability (Rintel 2013) and lack of required technical expertise for creation (Milner 2016). However, contemporary internet memes should be understood as multimodal discourses that are saturated with cultural meanings and assumptions. Thus, their **form** encompasses the visual as well as audio and metadata like captions, best understood as combinations of these elements. This allows them to be flexible vehicles for ideological arguments, identity performance, and social meaning-making (Jenkins 2009; Milner 2016; Shifman 2013).

Finally, their **stance** is illustrated by memetic logics⁵ which allow for broader practices than any individual memetic text or group of texts (Miltner 2014). It is crucial to differentiate between 'memes' as textual entities and 'memetic participation' as a dynamic cultural practice (Gal et al. 2016; Milner 2016). Memetic participation and its logics reflect our cultural values, shaping and being shaped by their social contexts. The stance of memes is how practices persist despite their forms fading over time (e.g. image macros) (Miltner 2018) or their content changing depending on broader social trends. Because of this, memetics has staying power as a concept and a field – their stance creates and holds cultural capital because of these logics.

In short, memes are multimodal digital phenomena rooted in cultural and communicative contexts. The concept has historical origins but has evolved with the progression of internet culture, is deeply entwined with social contexts, and can be understood as more than content – they represent participative processes. They are cultural artifacts that propagate broader logics, multimodal texts that blur boundaries, and social practices that persist beyond discrete replicable

⁴ “A set of stylistic rules for adding text to images. Some image macros involve adding the same text to various images, and others involve adding different text to a common image” (Davison 2012:138).

⁵ Memetic logics refer to the underlying principles and recurring patterns of creation, sharing, and interpretation that shape memetic participation. These logics arise from the cultural values and social dynamics of online communities. While specific meme formats and genres may come and go, these logics persist over time and reflect the core aspects of memetic culture.

units. In the following section, I explore how these characteristics create conditions wherein memes build group belonging and identity by requiring insider knowledge to participate in memetic practices and decode and interpret ambiguous memetic meanings.

Across all of the central scholars in Internet meme studies, there is a recurring emphasis on the importance of nuance, context, and specificity in studying memes and memetic practices. This emphasis comes in response to critics who claim that memes as a conceptual category rely on reductionist definitions (Kull 2000); it is possible to be caught in endless theorizing and meta-theorizing about the concept, but I turn to the next section in pursuit of empirical utility. Despite these critiques, we have a practical vocabulary and framework for what memes are and will use this as the next section turns to explore how they operate.

Operation and Interpretation

I will use three angles to build a theoretical understanding of how memes operate. First, through **semiotic frameworks and ideological constructs**. This looks at memes by understanding how they make meaning, what underlying ideologies drive them, and how the forms and stances as genres support this. Next, through **identity, participation, and social constructs**. From this perspective, we look to understand memes and their models for expressing identity through participation and briefly point to the everyday politics that will inform the exam's final section. The third section explores memetic participation in more depth as a critique of traditional notions of memes in favor of a view that uses **cultural practices as the unit for analysis**. This view will inform the remainder of the exam.

Semiotics and ideology.

Like any text, memes are created and interpreted as signs within linguistic and cultural systems of codes and meanings that are required for interpretation (Wiggins 2020). They draw on

external content to “add complexity and ambiguity” (Shifman 2013:150). This intertextuality allows memes to reference and juxtapose incongruous texts in ways that are fundamental to their humor (Shifman 2013; Miltner 2014) and capacity to make and reflect meaning – making them richer texts whose interpretation requires higher fluency. This intertextuality is a key element of meme and remix culture and is often a source of humor – a humor that relies on facility with language and diverse cultural references (Williams 2012).

Semiotic resources are understood as the elements that we need to communicate and be understood (van Leeuwen 2005). In this context, creating and analyzing memes requires us to consider their cultural contexts and ideological implications. They often look like quick jokes or use truncated forms of expression, but these are effectively semiotic shorthand for these underlying contexts. Their potency increases proportionally with the level of simplified context packed within (Wiggins 2020); this carries a risk of distorting serious issues but also enables us to better understand the ways that ideology, community, and identity are built, expressed, and experienced on social media in practice. From a semiotic perspective, memes can be arguments.

Stemming from this, we might say that memes are discursive practices that contain ideologies – “a body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people” (Storey 2006:2). Memes convey these ideologies through choices – whether deliberate or unintentional – that speak to particular cultural audiences because of either communicative choices, topical references, or both. Consuming and transmitting memes as discourses or texts does not require fully understanding every piece of context, but a deeper understanding of references and context builds intellectual and affective resonance (Scott 2014). Creating and interpreting a meme at any level is a mark of meme literacy or cultural fluency (Wiggins 2020). However, as memes are remixed and iterated on cyclically, interpreting them can become a marker indicating identity or

membership in certain groups (Yus 2018). This is one way that memes operate as boundary objects (Lamont and Molnár 2002) that tag people as in or out.

We have seen that memes rely on semiotic codes to communicate meaning and rest on ideological foundations – these work as a foundation for memes to build up categories and genres through practices. Meme genres are created in stages through a process best understood via Giddens’ theory of structuration (1983), which refers to how human agency and social structure are mutually influencing; individuals shape and are shaped by societal structures in a dialectical process. Meme genres emerge via structuration via the recursive actions of individuals reproducing memes by using available structures or resources (Wiggins and Bowers 2015). This dynamic reproduces both memes and the structures that enable meme creation. This happens in three stages: first, spreadable media (Jenkins et al. 2013) emerge – messages that can spread rapidly online. Next, we see emergent memes as spreadable media that have been remixed or altered in some way. Finally, established meme genres are emergent memes that have been widely imitated, iterated, and spread online. As a brief example, consider the Vince McMahon Reaction meme format⁶ (Know Your Meme 2014). It originated from still images of a video of the professional wrestling CEO reacting with increasing excitement to something off-frame. These images were spreadable media, which were then remixed into a four-panel template showing this increasing excitement – this emergent meme took these original images and created a reusable format. This format was widely used in iterations of this meme with different captions added for different contexts. Structuration theory suggests the meme demonstrates the duality of agency and structure. Agents drew on available structures (the four-panel format, norms of remixing reaction images) to recreate the meme. This reuse recursively reproduced the meme structure, enabling the ongoing perpetuation of the meme as agents continued to create new

⁶ See Appendix 2 for two examples.

iterations. The two examples in Appendix 2 show how this iterative process has continued, adding additional frames in one case and layering in another memetic resource – glowing red eyes (Know Your Meme 2017) – in another.

Semiotic codes, ideological foundations, and this approach to building genres via structuration work together as one theoretical lens for understanding meme operation. They tie back to Shifman's theoretical offering (content, form, and stance) and look forward to give us analytic tools. Semiotic codes and intertextuality are aligned with Shifman's idea of 'content', genre theory and the conventions and expectations of memes are closely tied to Shifman's 'form', and discourse analysis and ideological foundations are related to Shifman's 'stance' insofar as they relate to the positions and attitudes expressed in memes. This theoretical lens maps to Shifman's canonical definition and gives researchers more granular analytic tools for considering memes specifically as texts with substantive content.

Identity, participation, and everyday politics.

Although this exam focuses on how identity is holistically enacted and received in these platform contexts and this is discussed at further length in the final section, I want to take a moment here to frame how identity functions in memes. In the preceding sections, the framing has largely implied propositional forms of communication (Recanati 2007) – the use of language for conveying specific content or information. However, this ignores non-propositional communication, which concerns things like emotions or intentions – more intangible and unfalsifiable. This is not a pedantic distinction; identity operates in memes in different ways across this divide and both of them occur in and support participatory cultures. While the prior theoretical lens was concerned with how memes carry meaning, this lens is also concerned with affect and is interested in how meaning and affect – propositional and non-propositional

communication – work in memes to enact identity through these cultures. This framing takes Milner’s (2016) argument that memes are primarily communicative tools (for identity and more) and extends it. If memes are indeed about more than imitation and replication and are sites of meaning-making (Shifman 2013), this is a core site where meaning is negotiated socially.

On the propositional side, memes can certainly be used to intentionally convey identity characteristics or affiliations through their literal content. Memes might explicitly advocate for social or political positions or signal group belonging and allow remixing to showcase individual perspectives. However, identity is also constructed and enacted through more subtle, non-propositional effects tied to participatory meme sharing itself. Constructing one’s own sense of identity is an inherently social and interpersonal act (du Preez and Lombard 2014) and every stage of meme development, dissemination, and reception is tied to building, communicating, and affirming identity in some way (Yus 2017). The act of decoding memes creates feelings of collective solidarity and digital literacy. Repackaging and spreading memes generates awareness of cultural mutuality with others. Through mastery of insider references and remix practices, memetic participation marks fluency in the codes and norms of online communities. These ambient identity effects operate beyond conscious intent through the sociality of memes - how they necessitate collaborative meaning-making and propagate cultural knowledge emblematic of participatory cultures. In these non-propositional ways, memes recursively shape user identities over time by demanding insider knowledge, enabling creativity, and reinforcing group values (Kanai 2016) - bonding individuals to broader communities (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017).

One of the most salient features of memes is their frequent association with humor, which is occasionally in the format of jokes with setups and punchlines (like traditional image macro formats) but increasingly uses ‘interactional’ or ‘conversational’ humor with a *joking* stance – a

catch-all term referring to amusing, responsive, and sometimes spontaneous exchanges (Dynel 2016). While setup-punchline jokes are better suited for propositional communication and identity-related discourse (for example a ‘Scumbag Steve’ or ‘Hipster Kitty’ that mocks certain traits or behaviors [Denisova 2019]), interactional humor tends toward non-propositional communication and affective identity communication. Often, this sort of humor in memes transcends laughter and becomes a mechanism for shared recognition, cultural validation, and communal bonding. This humor—whether it elicits laughter, sympathy, or a sense of belonging—is crucial in fostering group identity (Terrion and Ashforth 2002) as it works as a ‘social lubricant’ (Meyer 2000). While memes can indeed make jokes, they more potently speak to genuine experiences or even things like sadness or frustration with a tinge of humor (Vickery 2014). The act of liking or sharing such memes can represent solidarity or mutual understanding as much as entertainment (Ask and Abidin 2018). Additionally, meme-related humor generates a spectrum of non-propositional effects, ranging from enhanced group belonging to heightened awareness of mutual understanding among interlocutors (Yus 2018). As participants navigate the intertextual terrain of meme culture, engaging with familiar genres and shared cultural texts, they’re not just exchanging jokes. They’re actively partaking in a dynamic dialogue that, through humor, constructs and reinforces shared identities in digital spaces. This humor-driven identity building is a testament to the depth and complexity of meme culture, affirming its status as a cornerstone of modern participatory digital communities.

All of this identity communication is anchored in the principles of participatory cultures and is enabled by a context where the personal and the political are inherently intertwined in what Highfield (2016) calls ‘everyday politics’. Participatory cultures are defined by the collective generative practices of recombining and re-appropriating existing cultural artifacts

(Jenkins 2009; Shifman 2013), making users co-producers and critics of media. Not only do these cultures produce memes, but they are also engaged in critiquing them, shaping both the structure and collective identity of the communities (Gal et al. 2016; Milner 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). This iterative creation and evaluation of user-generated content form the very pillars of the participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2013; Shifman 2013). Memes epitomize these cultures through their formulaic, iterative nature that links individual expression to group meaning-making (Milner 2016). Crucially, identity construction through memes is also politicized on social media as personal expression is inextricably tied to political expression (Highfield 2016) as participation subverts traditional power relations (Rintel 2013). Individuals can transform ideas by “copy[ing] the instructions, not the product” (Burgess 2008:8) even as the creative practices themselves are nothing new. The shift toward a participatory culture model signifies a public active in shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content (Jenkins et al. 2013). This obliterates boundaries between "online" and "offline" experiences, integrating both into a seamless continuum of public debate (Phillips and Milner 2017). The difference is where the power for creation and critique lies – by enabling this sort of identity communication, the principles of participatory cultures provide the conditions for memes to function as vehicles for expressing identity and political perspectives through continual iterative remixing.

Mememes as a cultural practice.

We have seen how internet studies scholarship advocates for seeing the stance of memes through the lens of memetic practices driven by certain logics rather than as discrete texts or even sets of texts. Given this exam’s goal – to understand how social and platform forces shape performances of identity via memetics and humor and how these performances are a context for and result of everyday politics – I opt for this framing as my primary lens for understanding

memes. This frame encompasses three main points: (1) seeing memetic practices as a type of expression that spans different mediums, genres, and topics, (2) understanding evolution and longevity via pointing to underlying memetic logics that reflect and evolve with cultural values, and (3) focusing on process rather than texts (Milner 2016).

First, memes are not restricted to just images or phrases. They're a diverse form of expression that cuts across various mediums like visuals, text, and sound. Further, a strand of memetic practices can cut across multiple modalities – take the example of ‘deep frying’⁷ (Know Your Meme 2015). In this style, texts are run through filters and compression again and again to achieve an intentionally degraded style. Memetic media are aggregate texts, unified by logics that balance the familiar with the foreign, intertwining new iterations with established ideas (Milner 2016). As an aggregate text, deep frying began with images only but later began being used on videos and audio to achieve an equivalent effect in those formats. In the second screenshot, we see one of these deep-fried images being used to mock the genre itself in a meta-remix; it includes various stock characters and cartoons and the bottom of the image reads ‘BOTTOM TEXT’ in a nod to the classic image macro format. As forms of expression, these practices span memetic genres (Wiggins and Bower 2015) and topics and are flexible to adapt to events, feelings, and ideas as well as new media modalities. The specific texts change, but the cultural practices of collectively creating, transforming, and spreading multimodal content persist.

These cultural practices are driven by certain memetic logics like multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread (Phillips and Milner 2017). These fundamental logics persist even as individual meme genres fade away. Importantly, these memetic logics have stood the test of time, reflecting the constant evolution of the meme space

⁷ See Appendix 3.

from its early days (Miltner 2018; Phillips 2012). For instance, even the critique ‘memes are dead’ has itself become a meme by continually mocking outdated formats – demonstrating how memetic logics outlive specific texts. Memes involve remixing cultural materials into new content, propagating social values through iterative recreation (Milner 2016). As cultural values evolve, meme manifestations shift, but the underlying logics driving participation remain constant.

These underlying logics are what give researchers tools to understand memes primarily as a cultural practice or process. We have seen that they build up concepts and ideas as ‘diffuse texts’ (Brummett 1994; Stassen and Bates 2020); we read identity enactment in memes as part of a collective and embedded practice rather than something to be interpreted via one-off texts. This perspective argues that individual texts are not memes in themselves, but become memetic through connections, remixes, and spread with other similar content (Milner 2016). Analyzing meme-sharing subcultures provides insight into motivations driving participation. Ultimately, this process-oriented perspective enables nuanced analysis of how memetic logics shape identities and discourses through continual negotiation of meaning.

In these previous sections, I have unpacked three theoretical lenses for understanding how memes operate: through semiotics and ideology, identity and participatory cultures, and via process rather than texts. Having established a foundation for how memes operate, this next section turns to their interpretation as ambiguous and ambivalent.

Memetic practices and texts as sites of ambiguity and ambivalence.

Mememes have flexible meanings that depend on context, intentions, and beliefs. That is – memes and the memetic processes behind them do have meanings, but these meanings are flexible and polysemic⁸ and so are well-suited to be used as communicative tools for identity

⁸ Capable of having multiple related meanings.

enactment. As the social role of memetic participation has evolved to recognize their capacity for complex cultural communication rather than inert replication, internet users and researchers have become more aware of their capacity for simplifying complexity for the sake of communication but holding rich ideological assumptions and communicative capacity.

Much of this flexibility can be explained by the formal characteristics and stance of memes that suggest they be interpreted in sets rather than as individual texts. They are often composed of remixed content (Katz and Shifman 2017) or intertextual references (Silvestri 2018) that lead to dense symbolic complexity. Combining disparate media sources and referencing distinct texts asks the reader to do heavy interpretive work and accommodates the reader's potential desire to interpret a meme in a way that supports their pre-existing preferences around collective identity or personal affiliation. Their polysemy and interpretive flexibility is partially explained by their ambivalence, which Phillips and Milner (2017) describe extensively; "online expressions [often] don't fit into any discernible category...show a different face from every angle...and are as likely to elicit a furrowed brow as an uncontrollable giggle...[they] are extremely difficult to pin down." (p. 202)

Interpreting these ambiguous and ambivalent texts can be understood via symbolic interactionist principles. This means making meaning via classifying objects and experiences based on an individual's internal cultural code(s) (Milner 2016). Because of this, meaning is a moving target and relies on the collective negotiation of values and recognizing and unpacking cultural references (Denisova 2019). This complicates the interpretation of memetic texts or practices as propositional communication but helps us understand how they function as non-propositional communication with affective interpretations that are specific to individuals and groups. Both types of communication are further complicated by the fact that memetic texts

are often not primarily textual or even textual at all. Although humans have developed the ability to “quickly and implicitly read visual grammar” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006:60), this visual grammar is situated within cultural codes – yet another layer that allows memes to be flexible tools for enacting identity and creating affiliation.

Mememes represent an extension of Poe’s Law (Ellis 2017), which posits that absent a clear indication from an online author, it becomes challenging to differentiate between genuine extremism and its sarcastic or parodic portrayal. Translating this to the realm of memetics, it suggests that online contexts often fail to provide ample cues to discern whether a meme is shared in jest or earnestness (Phillips and Milner 2017). Yet, even if adequate context were available, the inherent ambivalence of memes empowers users to reshape and adapt content to align with their identity-driven objectives. Further, specific meme categories like ironic or post-ironic memes intentionally obfuscate their own meanings. These memes adopt a “less direct” approach, cloaking their intentions and becoming near-impenetrable for those unfamiliar with the meme’s broader cultural or subcultural narratives. Such obfuscation results in what’s termed “digital memetic nonsense”⁹ (Katz and Shifman 2017). This inscrutability not only protects the meme’s intent but also fortifies community boundaries, distinguishing those ‘in the know’ from outsiders—a phenomenon well-documented across various meme subcultures (Miltner 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023).

Finally, aesthetics native to social media amplify these ambiguous interpretive dynamics. Douglas (2014) describes ‘Internet Ugly’¹⁰ as “the imposition of messy humanity upon an online world of smooth gradients, blemish-correcting Photoshop, and AutoCorrect. It exploits tools

⁹ “Clusters of seemingly meaningless digital texts imitated and circulated by many participants...analyzed as a generative source of ‘affective meaning’ that marks the formation of social connections preceding cognitive understanding” (Katz and Shifman 2017:1).

¹⁰ See Appendix 4, which shows an example of this aesthetic remixing an earlier memetic practice (rage faces).

meant to smooth and beautify, using them to muss and distort.” (p. 315) While earlier memetic practices were constrained technologically into noticeably simple or sloppy aesthetic choices, using modern image, video, and audio editing tools to create ironic and absurdly poor-looking content is another technique users have available (Phillips and Milner 2017) to strategically use ambiguity to achieve their identity-related purpose. This creates unclear – but ultimately flexible and empowering – interpretive dynamics (Seiffert-Brockmann et al. 2017) that are made more effective by their deadpan delivery (Attardo et al. 2003).

Memetic Practices and Identity

Having established what memes are and how they operate, this section discusses one of the exam’s two core questions: **how do memes function as a site for enacting identity on social media platforms?** Following the approach that the exam takes generally and proceeding from broad to specific, this discussion serves as a foundation for the exam’s final section, which looks at how ‘everyday politics’ are a site for and result of these memetic identity practices.

Identity operates within memetic practices in three key ways: (1) through performative identity play, (2) through generative folk culture, and (3) through everyday political discourse. For each of these approaches, I offer some theoretical framing and illustrative practical examples – all of which are pictured in **Appendix 5** and mentioned by letter for reference. Given my previous discussion of eschewing individual memetic texts in favor of practices, I want to note that these examples are intended as examples of patterns or practices as seen in the genre, so only the format is shown rather than any specific iteration. Additionally, I opt for static visual examples here because they are easier to refer to in a written exam.

Memes as performative identity play.

Memes allow for strategic identity presentation and boundary work within groups. This involves identity performance through practices like impression management (Goffman 1959), drawing on in-group humor, and displays of digital literacy that distinguish group belonging. This first way of understanding identity enactment through memes connects back to the earlier discussion of multimodal discourses with ideological underpinnings. The identity play enabled by memes stems from their capacity to convey cultural assumptions and meanings through textual, visual, and other semiotic elements.

Given that “selfhood and identity are a project, authenticity is an ongoing accomplishment, and successfully managing one’s impressions requires virtuosic skill and reflexivity” (Turvy 2023:1), memes provide a platform for individuals who have this skill and literacy to shape and present their identities (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) through conscious acts of representation. Memes have the potential to “form and signify communal belonging” (p. 485) and users who skillfully create user-generated memetic content do so to address themselves to a targeted crowd (Burgess 2008) toward a targeted identity goal. A simple example here is the ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ meme (Appendix 5A), which allows individuals to strategically frame their preferences in a very direct and straightforward way by indicating their priorities and subtly criticizing alternatives.

Next, we see memes as sites for in-group humor and boundary work that signifies group belonging. Boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002) refers to the processes through which social groups create, assert, maintain, and negotiate social boundaries that demarcate who is inside and outside of a particular group. These boundaries can be understood in terms of demographic categories like race, class, and gender or as affiliations like sports or music fandom. Individuals can negotiate these boundaries toward strategic affiliation and membership goals via

memetic humor that signifies group belonging both propositionally and affectively. Humor fosters a sense of closeness and belonging (Miltner 2014), so something like the “two buttons” meme (Appendix 5B) that depicts someone dealing with stress as they decide between two difficult options is an opportunity to indicate an understanding of the shared internal conflicts or dilemmas within the group.

Finally, individuals possess multiple identities across their various roles and groups (Burke and Stets 2023) within a modern context where they have an expanding set of opportunities to be many things to many people across many contexts (Gergen 1991). Because of this, digital literacy is a simple way to bolster a sense of group belonging for one’s various identities that may not be enacted more actively. Recognizing and understanding a meme signifies more than just digital awareness. It becomes a mark of belonging to a certain group, as those familiar with meme vernacular can distinguish themselves from others, particularly in the case of memes like “stonks” (Appendix 5C) wherein this image detached from its context seems nonsensical to outsiders but memetically literate readers quickly recognize its original context and its contextual repurposing to indicate any unexpected profit or gain.

Memes as generative folk culture.

Like traditional folk culture, memes are a collective and participatory form of cultural expression. However, instead of being passed down through oral tradition or physical rituals, memes propagate through digital channels and are shaped by the collaborative input of countless internet users. They act as modern digital folklore, representing shared experiences, values, jokes, or sentiments within online communities. This communal and participatory nature of memes makes them a vibrant form of today’s folk culture, but one that is uniquely shaped by the affordances and dynamics of digital technology. Jean Burgess (2007) calls this phenomenon

‘vernacular creativity’ – the blending of folk cultures with contemporary media practices, worth studying specifically because of its “everyday-ness” (p. 30).

Vernacular creativity has found a new home in memes. Rooted in shared cultural logics and values, memes perpetually evolve through recreation and remixing, becoming a symbol of collective identity. They embody a contemporary digital iteration of folk culture, driven by shared emotions and collective creativity. As vernacular folk content, memes build collective identities by enabling communal creativity driven by shared affect.

We can understand this generative folk culture by considering the previous discussion of memetic participation and practices. Memes build collective identities by propagating certain cultural logics and values through ongoing recreation and remixing as vernacular content. This involves practices like collective authorship, humor and resonance that create group belonging, and remixing content in ways that affirm shared identities.

As diffuse texts made up of many discrete parts, memes are inherently built on collective authorship. Even at the level of individual memetic texts, they tend to resist authorship because they encourage and facilitate anonymity both practically (as in the case of sites like 4chan) and culturally (Ross and Rivers 2017; Vickery 2014). Further, they thrive on communal participation and authorship that builds up possibilities for individuals to join in processes of collective creativity and shared emotions to build and communicate affiliation and identity – as in the example of the “This is Fine” dog (Appendix 5D) which repurposes an image originally taken from a single comic frame and has been collectively adapted and reinterpreted by participants online to convey various sentiments about accepting chaotic circumstances.

As we have seen, the non-propositional (and often affective) communication in memes leads to their emotional appeal and fosters group identity. This is frequently done through humor

or other sentiment, which amplifies group belonging by accentuating the shared experiences of that community. Whether humorous or not, emotional resonance is an avenue for building the strength of one's affiliation to a group identity – this happens on both sides of communication as individuals attempt to be recognized as authentically affiliated with a given group in their communication or find emotional resonance in a group-related meme and so feel their personal affiliation deepen. One site for this is the “is this a pigeon?” meme (Appendix 5E), which is often used to highlight and humorously critique misinterpretations or misunderstandings that are emotionally resonant with those who have encountered such situations as a result of their identity.

Finally, remixing is a form of memetic participation that has an influence underlying the media that it creates. The practice itself serves as a sort of affirmation, allowing users to reclaim and affirm shared identities and make them resonate even more with the community. Remix and reappropriation are some of the most explicit ways that individuals can use memes to push back against entrenched stereotypes and “[forms] of cultural codes, rules, and in-group cues” (Sobande 2019:3). When individuals remix memes, they actively participate in a process of cultural negotiation. By altering, adjusting, or entirely flipping the original message or context of a meme, remixers not only add their voice to the collective digital discourse but also challenge or reinforce cultural narratives. This is particularly powerful when individuals from marginalized communities use remixing to challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes, reclaiming agency over how their identities are represented in digital spaces. This practice is seen in the case of “recontextualized Disney princesses” (Appendix 5F) wherein these images are remixed and so are recontextualized for interpretation by considering them as different ethnicities or body types.

Mememes as everyday political discourse.

While the exam's final section explores everyday politics as a site for and result of memetic identity practices, I want to briefly explore here how identity operates in memes through everyday politics at a high level – taking an instrumental view. Memes are fluid, adapting and molding to the needs of the context that they are shared in and functioning as tools for personalized political expression. Taking Highfield's (2016) notion of the personal and political being inextricably tied together on social media, memetic identity practices are inherently political because they are tied to identity – regardless of their substantive focus. This involves practices like politicizing aspects of popular culture, facilitating grassroots political voice, and challenging elite discourses and norms. Given their inherent connection to identity, memes function as tools for political expression and engagement in everyday contexts online. Their ambiguity and ambivalence allow them to be continuously reinterpreted and adapted to voice diverse perspectives.

From an instrumental perspective, memes do this in three ways. First, they politicize the mundane by seamlessly blending political commentary with pop culture and everyday situations. For instance, the 'Bernie Sanders' Mittens' meme took a mundane moment from the 2021 Presidential Inauguration and infused political significance through collective participation (Appendix 5G). Second, they provide a platform for marginalized identities and grassroots movements to voice opinions outside of mainstream media narratives such as in the case of the 'Storm Area 51' memes that emerged as a joke but became a humorous but potent critique about the lack of governmental transparency (Appendix 5H). Finally, the appropriation and remixing of political imagery in memes also allow individuals to challenge elite discourses and dominant narratives (Penney 2020) from the bottom up. Memes simplify and condense complex ideologies through everyday cultural texts, circulating counter-narratives or micro-affirmations (Fichman

and Sanfilippo 2016) that evade top-down control such as in the 'They Live Sunglasses' which is flexible for portraying and criticizing perceived societal manipulation (Appendix 5I).

While this brief discussion has considered everyday politics as a way that identity is enacted memetically, it has done so by considering memes conceptually as instruments for identity performances. It has focused on analyzing the nature and function of memes themselves as fluid digital artifacts that blur boundaries between personal and political. The exam's final section will build on this instrumental perspective to instead consider the contextual issues of everyday politics conceptually. It will explore the broader contexts, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape and reveal the role of mundane political activities and memetic identity practices when situated concretely within social media environments. While this section took an instrumental look at memes themselves, the next will provide a contextual analysis of the platforms and everyday political issues intertwined with these memetic practices. The goal is to move from conceptualizing memes as tools to contextualizing the messy realities surrounding on-the-ground social media practices.

In short, memes have powerful potential to be used for identity performance practices, both individual and collective. We have seen how they facilitate individual identity performances by allowing users to "wear" various masks reflecting affiliations, cater to in-group humor and do boundary work based on digital literacies, and capture shared experiences and emotions through folk vernaculars. Further, we have seen how personal and political expression are intertwined in a way that allows for resonant identity enactment. Next, I turn to a brief discussion of methods to connect this theoretical framing to tools that enable the empirical study of memetic identity practices.

Methodological approaches to memes and identity.

In the previous three sections, I have unpacked what memes are and how the concept has developed along with the evolving social internet, sketched a typology for three theoretical lenses for understanding their operation, and argued that we should understand memes as meaningful sites for understanding identity performance and reception. Here, I want to briefly make the case for how social scientists can analyze memes in context. This is not the exam's core focus, but it is relevant because this work is not an idle exercise and will inform my own dissertation methodology.

Over time, researchers have made an increasingly strong case for the relevance of Internet memes as a site for sociological and interdisciplinary study (boyd 2014; Burgess 2008; Milner 2013; Miltner 2014; Mina 2019; Phillips and Milner 2017; Shifman 2013).¹¹ Giorgi (2022) has recently published a thorough piece suggesting future methodological directions for the study of memes. In this section, I do not intend to disagree with her arguments but rather extend them for this particular identity-related site of inquiry.

Given this exam's focus on broader memetic processes and logics rather than particular collections of texts, I take a different approach than some of the more specifically situated empirical work focusing on subcultural identity formation and expression (Denisova 2019; Gal et al. 2016; Ross and Rivers 2019). Giorgi (2022) criticizes this work as using "cherry-picked samples" (p. 627). Zooming out from these very specifically situated analyses, other researchers have attempted to make a broader argument for how memes operate from the perspective of top-down platform analysis (Burgess 2008; Milner 2013; Shifman 2012) or offer theoretical models for how memes function as shared codes built from specific case studies (Gal et al. 2016; Milner 2016; Nagle 2017; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Phillips 2015; Zittrain 2014).

¹¹This captures some of the most important works, but is not intended as a comprehensive list.

From the perspective of looking forward to my dissertation work, I want to argue that studying memes from an identity-oriented perspective requires a mixed-methods approach. In this exam's first section, I argued that we need to understand top-down platform forces for context around how policy and governance, UI/UX design and decisions, and affordances are in a co-constructive relationship with users and their practices - memetic and otherwise. In this section, I have described how researchers need to closely examine *situated memetic practices* (rather than discrete memetic texts) to interpret them as diffuse texts that individuals use for enacting their various identities. Further, we should aim toward cross-platform analysis of memetic practices because trends and practices are not sandboxed within any particular platform; users engage in platform promiscuity and practices are used across different contexts that influence one another. Cross-platform analysis is perhaps the most difficult approach given logistical and other methodological difficulties, but there have been attempts to describe a useful approach that can be further developed (Pearce et al. 2020).

Further, this exam's specific focus is on situated identity practices within the *infrastructure* of platforms, via the *instrument* of memetics and humor, and concerning *issues* of everyday politics. Because of this, a mixed-methods approach is appropriate because I am concerned with these issues from a sociological perspective (that considers both agency and structure) rather than using a communications or media studies lens.

Some researchers have attempted to understand memetic practices holistically by developing typologies for memetic forms (Chagas et al. 2019; Milner 2012; Giorgi 2022) or even communicative purposes (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). Given the rapid iterative cycle of memetic practices on contemporary social media platforms, I contend that researchers aiming for

a typology of forms will always lag behind practices and be chasing trends – particularly given publication turnaround times.

Rather, we can pull from Shifman's (2013) typology of memetic dimensions (content, form, and stance) and Davison's (2012) description of the components of each memetic text (manifestation, behavior, and ideal) while using Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) guiding prompt questions for memetic discourse analysis (ideational system, contextual system, and ideological system). This combination approximates what I envision as most useful - developing a typology based on common participation practices, habits, rituals, or other terms for the actions that individuals take when engaging memetically that eventually crystallize into certain forms or genres over time.

This approach links memetic logics to situated enactment, enabling researchers to understand how broader patterns of participation and meaning-making connect to the iterative development of specific meme genres. Further, it centers the analysis on human practices and processes rather than just texts. Examining participation habits provides insight into the collective rituals and habits that shape how identities develop and are performed through memetic participation within certain cultural and ideological systems. While seemingly a minor shift in focus, centering participation practices rather than end products of participation has the potential to enrich our understanding of the identity work unfolding through memes.

In the following pages, I turn briefly to humor – both an overview of foundational theory and a discussion of online humor practices. This is necessary given how often humor is involved in memetic communication (Dyrel 2016; Milner 2013; Penney 2020; Shifman 2014; Yus 2018) and how laughter specifically supports identity work (Ask and Abidin 2018). This discussion sets the context for the exam's final section, which explores everyday politics and brings the pieces

together for how identity functions in this situated context. After establishing this foundation, the exam will synthesize these theoretical threads - platforms, memetics and humor, and everyday politics - to holistically examine identity enactments in online spaces.

Humor Theory and Online Humor Practices in Political Communication

A thorough discussion of foundational humor theory is far outside the scope of this exam. Rather, this section narrowly focuses on humor theory as it relates to internet memes and political communication, briefly tracing evolving views of humor and political communication to understand how humor in memes amplifies the convergence of personal and political identities. This convergence ultimately reshapes how we understand and engage in 'everyday political' discourse on social media platforms.

Foundationally, there is a tradition of humor theorists exploring the intellectual and persuasive nature of humor as a discursive tool. Bergson (1911) famously wrote that “a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (p. 30); as a baseline definition, this throws light on the mechanism by which memes allow readers to bring in their own understanding and context to interpret the text. However, he built on this definition by highlighting the essentially intellectual nature of humor – jokes have the power of suggestion and can be more effective than straight arguments; “laughter pursues a utilitarian aim” (p. 12) and often throws light via its appeal to intelligence. Echoing this, Freud (1928) understood humor as a release of pent-up emotions, often voicing suppressed or controversial sentiments—much in the same vein as memes do today. Critchley later built on this in a more modern environment, pointing to feelings of superiority and incongruity between reality and expectations (both intellectual and emotional) as the basis of true humor (2002). This makes a

more direct connection to the nature of political humor as both persuasive and cathartic – even a mechanism to challenge established norms and conventions, presenting a subtle form of resistance (Morreall 1983). However, others make this rhetorical argument more direct: for Speier (1998), jokes are political weapons in the sense that they represent a power struggle and are “the [true] instruments of politics” (p. 1354). This remains relevant whether talking about politics in the sense of traditionally-understood political discourse or not.

However, these foundational theories fall short of explaining the complex interplay of internet culture and shared digital experiences within the rapid iterative cycle of memes. As memes often incorporate layers of meta-humor, irony, and referential content, their analysis requires an updated theoretical approach that considers the unique digital environment in which they are produced and consumed.

For instance, the idea central to Bergson's humor theory, where humor arises from situations embodying dual meanings, finds its reflection in many modern memes. These memes often present juxtaposed elements that derive humor from the disparity between an image's original context and its new memetic overlay. However, evolving memetic practices and genres push this further as intertextual references become denser and the iterative memetic cycle becomes quicker. Understanding these dual meanings requires untangling layers of context that require topical and communicative literacy.

Further, approaches to humor within these developing memetic genres continue to evolve. Outside the memetic genres explored in the previous section, there is also a subgenre of memes that is often called “post-irony”, signifying a style that is two layers removed from the image macro memes of the early 21st Century. This style is characterized by the use of

anti-humor¹² and a deeply self-conscious and often inscrutable formats for outsiders. Some have argued that this form and aesthetic is the inheritor of the Dada tradition (Merjian and Rugnetta 2020) and that this absurd approach is indeed deeply political in the sense that it effectively reframes political discourse via counterculture and subversive ideology (Bowen 2020). However, this is couched within an online milieu also characterized by ‘shitposting’, an intentional aesthetic approach designed to change the framing of a conversation or simply derail it (Cavanaugh 2021) but could be more positively framed as “the ostracized [exerting] control” (Biggs 2016). The format, internal logic, and content of the form are complicated and beyond the scope of this paper, but it is sufficient to say that new memetic modalities are evolving and shaping what political discourse consists of as they do.

Zooming out a bit from the social media context, we can briefly consider how humorous political discourse (in the traditional sense – i.e. conversations and debates about politics) has evolved in the 21st Century. Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972) lays the groundwork for this conversation; briefly, it holds that mass media (at the time television, radio, and print) sets the topic and framing for political discourse, effectively shaping our political reality. In the early 2000s during the second Bush presidency, political comedy and satire television took on a new place of not only prominence but also influence and there is evidence that its viewers were deeply knowledgeable about the current political environment (Annenberg 2004). Further, satire and comedy may be a more effective form of political education than traditional news, especially for complicated and often popularly uninteresting topics like campaign finance reform (Jones et al. 2012). In the post-Bush and post-Obama years, these shows still existed but their influence had arguably waned. This opened space for an evolution

¹² Intentionally not funny in the typical sense, anti-humor “exploits the possibilities of humor while at the same time introducing a new element that seems to subvert those possibilities.” (Nachman 1982:133-134). In this case, that element tends to be space to insert traditionally-understood political discourse or elements of identity performance.

toward a more participatory engagement with media (Anderson and Revers 2018; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013) that often happens on social media and consists of articles, response takes, and image or text memes spread virally. This is a decentralizing and democratizing change.

Bowen has documented the ways that “[seemingly] meaningless Internet drivel” is actually much more politically serious (2020), Shifman has described how memes have played an “integral part in...defining events of [the] century” (2014), and Deng et al. have argued that social media texts are broadly the largest source of public opinion (2016). In short, something serious and politically meaningful is happening here that aligns with Manovich’s claim that “changes in media technologies are correlated with social change” (2001).

Internet memes offer distinctive benefits that enhance their role as potent tools of political communication. They tend to resonate with audiences' pre-existing beliefs, bolstering group identity and introducing concepts that resist countering or rebuttal (Journell 2019). The very act of sharing these memes reinforces group identity, propelling them into viral cycles of distribution. The prevailing remix culture on digital platforms amplifies memes' cultural clout (Burton 2019). By engaging in this remixing process, users partake in iterative cycles where original messages transform – they are enriched, challenged, and adapted, driving further sharing and distribution, an extension of Jenkins’ (2009) participatory practices into what Anderson and Rever (2018) call ‘participatory epistemology’. These practices have revolutionized political communication, ushering in a new era where the lines between creators, consumers, and distributors of political content are continually blurred.

However, explicit political communication on social media - advocacy, debates, organizing - represents just a sliver of the political landscape. Far more pervasive are expressions of 'everyday' politics, where casual memes seamlessly interweave humor and indirect political

commentary drawn from lived experience. As explored in previous sections, humor forges group identities and resonance. Memes strategically harness humor, making implicit identity claims that signal belonging. These expressions are inherently personal yet politically potent. On social media, even commonplace experiences become material for political engagement. The mundane moments, frustrations, celebrations, and shared experiences that make up our daily lives are frequently the subjects of these memes. While they may not always explicitly read as ‘political’ in the sense of traditionally understood political discourse, they speak to power dynamics, societal norms, cultural shifts, and implicit biases. Moreover, the relatability of these everyday memes (Ask and Abidin 2018) makes them all the more potent (Burton 2019). While memes directly commenting on political figures or events might appeal to a more niche audience, ‘everyday’ memes resonate widely, subtly shaping public opinion on a grassroots level. They create a shared understanding and build a collective consciousness, often without the audience even recognizing the meme’s political undertones. In the process, memes become what Speier (1998) would term “political instruments”. Rather than overt persuasion, everyday political memes represent identity performance emerging from the mundane. They transform lived realities into political vehicles through collective participation.

Everyday Politics

Although it has been involved fairly tangentially in the previous two sections, this final portion of the exam turns to everyday politics in earnest, addressing the exam’s second core question, which concerns **how everyday politics emerges from and shapes identity performance through memetic practices**. Originally coined by Boyte (2005) to describe the political activity that happens outside the visible work of elections and organizing, Highfield (2016) takes this concept up to describe how social mediation shapes the way that the personal

and the political are tied together and both emerge from and bleed into each other. My use of this concept leans most heavily on Highfield's work but situates it by analyzing how it relates to the exam's conceptual through-line around identity and memetics. The exam's first portion considered **platforms as the infrastructures** where identities are navigated and enacted, influential in their design and affordances. The second portion argued that **memes and humor are instruments** for enacting identity that allows for expression, negotiation, and play. This section considers **everyday politics as the issues or topics** where identity is enacted. This section describes everyday politics as situated within these broader layers – platforms and memetics. It proceeds in three main sections.

“To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task'...individualization is a fate, not a choice.” (Bauman 1999:33-34)

In Bauman's view, the task of identity happens in the context of a 'liquid' modern society wherein structures and reference points are constantly shifting, melting, and reforming. I want to position everyday politics as political discourse understood and experienced in the liquid setting of social media platforms and cultures. More specifically, platform structures and memetic practices on these platforms push us to update our understanding of political discourse. **First**, everyday politics does not refer to formal political forms like elections or practices like organizing. It sits outside of these and manifests in highly personalized forms that are inextricably linked with daily experience, making politics not just a discussion about public figures or issues but also a commentary on personal life experiences. **Second**, political topics may not be the primary focus for many social media users, but they do recur within the larger context of personal sharing and activity online. Political discourse is not a separate category but becomes part of a broader set of online interactions. **Finally**, everyday politics is best understood

as a form of informal discourse that emerges fluidly from mundane activities and contexts. It calls for a reconceptualization of what constitutes the 'political,' recognizing that political discussions can be fleeting yet recurring, part of a more extensive array of shared online activities. These three points frame the remainder of this section, wherein I explore Highfield's (2016) view that everyday politics manifests on social media through informal personal frames (rather than institutions or formal participation) as an integrated part of social media activity - not a separate sphere. Bringing the second-wave feminist slogan to social media – yes, the personal is political – but also, the political becomes deeply personal.

When people complain about “talking politics on social media,” they often mean debating about elections, politicians, or thorny social issues. But everyday politics is distinct from formal political participation like elections or traditionally understood political action like organizing or coalition building. As Highfield describes, it transcends the “machinery of the political establishment” (2016). Everyday politics does not consist of impassioned ‘political junkies’ focused on analyzing and debating current events as their primary subject (Coleman 2006). Rather, it manifests tangentially as more loosely connected individuals (Boyte 2005) relate political issues to personal contexts in an informal manner. For instance, consciousness-raising around menstrual health emerges not from formal organizing or strategic communication but from individuals documenting experiences (Gaybor 2022; Pruchniewska 2019). Through this “personalized politics” (Papacharissi 2010), everyday issues like health can subtly shape informal “collective sense-making” on societal topics (Highfield 2016). In these ways, everyday political talk on social media is not in the realm of intentional and visible civic engagement, but instead emerges more fluidly from mundane lived realities. This is mediated by

platform structures and logics as well as by memes as instruments for this sort of political communication; I will turn to this in more detail in the conclusion.

The discussion so far has established what everyday politics is not: it is neither the traditional, formal political processes nor the overt political debates that usually capture our attention. This section aims to articulate a more nuanced understanding of everyday politics, one that hinges on two intertwined yet distinct layers—content and structure.

Firstly, on the level of content, everyday politics in social media extends the well-understood notion that 'the personal is political' (Highfield 2016). The design and affordances of online platforms facilitate this as individuals discuss issues through personal frames and lived experiences (Papacharissi 2010). Personal experiences and individual traits, once shared online, inevitably acquire political dimensions. A selfie, usually perceived as an act of individual expression, is a case in point. While a selfie taken at a protest is explicitly political, a seemingly trivial 'Outfit of the Day' selfie can also evoke public and social reactions that steer it into political territory, prompting discussions around issues like body politics or even becoming a subject of tangential political debates (Abidin 2016; culturetwo 2013; Senft and Baym 2015).

Secondly, and perhaps more subtly, is the structural layer where these personal interactions occur. It's not merely that 'the personal is political,' but also that the platforms themselves serve as scaffolds that almost inevitably facilitate (or even actively shape [Gillespie 2017]) political meaning-making. The architecture of these platforms and their affordances are so woven into the fabric of daily life that they magnify the political aspects of even the most mundane personal interactions.

Everyday politics in the social media context is a form of democratized, bottom-up collective sense-making that erupts from mundane experiences and contexts. Unlike traditional politics, it doesn't separate itself from daily life; rather, it thrives on the intertwining of the personal with the societal, fuelled by the affordances and cultures of platforms. This is not a reactive process but a generative one (Milner 2013), taking what appears non-political — be it selfies, casual conversations, or memes — and instilling it with political meaning. In doing so, it continually renegotiates what we understand to be 'political' in the first place (Miltner 2018).

In short, everyday politics is the process by which individuals collectively construct political meaning from daily experiences (Shifman 2013), facilitated by social media and enmeshed within the fabric of mundane daily life (Highfield 2016). This form of politics appropriates the mundane and banal, transforming everyday cultural practices and behaviors into political engagement and meaning-making (Couldry 2012)

In this section, I have aimed to make a few nuanced conceptual points about everyday politics as situated on social media. Scholarship has explored how it is expressed in memes variously as playful (Mortenson and Neumayer 2021), strategic (Gusic and Lundqvist 2023), and haphazard (Murru and Vicari 2021). Across each of these, memes function as 'mapping tools' (Zidani 2021) through which individuals perform their own identity and try to position themselves in relation to other people and topics in their pursuit of authenticity (Brekhus 2020). As I close this narrow discussion about everyday politics and zoom out in the conclusion to suggest how this exam's three sections should be synthesized, I want to emphasize a few salient points as conceptual pivots to help frame this synthesis.

First, that everyday politics is not an isolated phenomenon but is fundamentally intertwined with other key topics of this exam—platforms and memetics. These are the

components in an ecosystem where everyday politics finds its expression and impact in identity. Second, that the ‘everyday politics’ lens asks us to rethink what we define as ‘political talk’, particularly as experienced on social media. Third, that the nature of everyday politics is inherently democratic, emphasizing collective sense-making over top-down political discourse¹³. In everyday politics, individual experiences and daily interactions serve as both the medium and the message for broader political discourse while serving as sites for meaningful identity expression.

Conclusion

To close this exam, I want to come back to the two questions that have guided this work:

- 1. How do social media platforms and participatory cultures shape identity performance through memes and humor?**
- 2. How does everyday political discourse emerge from and shape identity performance through iterative memetic participation?**

In the preceding pages, I have brought together three areas of scholarship – platforms, memetics, and everyday politics – in order to synthesize generative insights that speak to these questions. It is important to frame these as insights rather than answers; these questions guide our thinking about how memes operate in identity performance, but the intended outcome for the exam’s conclusions is to suggest useful theoretical and conceptual lenses for empirical study. As I begin dissertation work that is concerned with situated memetic practices and aims at understanding characteristics that influence their spread within and across platforms, these conclusions will be useful for framing research questions and eventually for interpreting the data that I collect.

¹³ This last point is not unique in and of itself – many forms of political participation and social movements are collective, informal, and democratic.

Toward the first question, looking at *platforms and participatory cultures together* provides critical insights into how they *jointly enable identity performance through memetic humor and participation*. Platforms actively construct discursive spaces by implementing particular governance models, incentives, and affordances that privilege certain cultural practices over others. For example, TikTok's algorithmic curation influences meme format selection based on engagement, indirectly shaping identity expression by determining which content gains visibility. This happens in the context of platform governance that prioritizes TikTok's strategic needs and so constrains the nature of acceptable identity performance to reflect this.

At the same time, participatory cultures propagate memetic logics that demand continual displays of insider knowledge, remixing skills, and digital literacy (Jenkins 2009; Shifman 2013). For example, dense intertextual references in iterative meme formats require cultural fluency to interpret, distinguishing group belonging. Through likes, shares, and circulation of resonant content, memes tighten communal bonds (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) and validate shared emotional experiences.

Ultimately, analyzing platforms and participatory cultures in tandem provides critical insights that neither sphere alone would reveal. Together, their symbiotic relationship enables fluid identity enactment through insider cultural references, boundary work, and incentivizing memetic participation. However, platforms' structural imperatives also constrain the range of acceptable identity performance based on strategic interests. Participatory cultures propagate certain cultural logics and digital literacies that distinguish group belonging, but platforms privilege certain manifestations of these based on engagement optimization and governance models. Examining these spheres together illuminates how they dynamically co-construct discursive spaces that both empower and limit identity expression through which memetic

content gains visibility. This reveals non-obvious synergies and tensions that shape the contours of identity performance.

The second guiding question is interested in how memetic participation leads to everyday political discourse emerging from and shaping identity performances. To the first part of this question, memetic participation politicizes mundane personal experiences by transforming lived realities into shareable content. Creating and circulating memes based on everyday frustrations, celebrations, and emotions imbues those experiences with political meaning upon sharing. Through resonance and collective participation, memes take the raw materials of daily life and shape them into political commentary and assertion. Additionally, the act of engaging in memetic participation represents political engagement in itself. Sharing, remixing, and propagating memes is an act of collective meaning-making that binds individuals into temporary publics united by a stance. While fleeting, these publics generated through meme sharing represent political participation on an everyday level.

Everyday politics shapes identity performance because as diffuse texts, memes propagate cultural assumptions and ideologies through continual recreation and remixing over time. Their iterative spread shapes collective consciousness and social norms in subtle ways. For example, meme genres that critique issues like housing costs or education debts can gradually shift public attitudes by framing these as shared generational struggles. Furthermore, the political dimensions embedded within mundane memetic texts recursively shape identity expression over time. As certain memetic logics become widespread, participating in them signals group belonging and cultural literacy. In this way, everyday political discourse propagated through memes shapes acceptable forms of identity performance by determining parameters of resonance and cultural fluency. Looking at memetics and everyday politics together reveals their cyclical and even

recursive relationship. Personal experiences provide fodder for memes, which politicize those experiences upon sharing. Meanwhile, memetic participation shapes political discourses which in turn influence future identity expression. This interplay highlights the fluid blending of the personal and political that unfolds through diffuse memetic texts.

Looking Ahead to Dissertation Analysis

In this exam, I have assembled a set of conceptual insights that will guide my dissertation work and inform my methodological choices. The next stage of the dissertation process is completing and defending my proposal; as I do this, I am left with two main insights and one methodological consideration.

First, the symbiotic relationship between platforms and participatory cultures in shaping identity performance. This perspective enables a nuanced approach to my dissertation, which focuses on the cultural flows between TikTok and Instagram. Given their overlapping yet distinct structures, affordances, and governance models, exploring this symbiosis will offer a robust understanding of youth sociality through memetic practices on these platforms. I add an additional layer in my dissertation plans by considering these platforms ecologically, meaning that we also consider the influence of other platforms and the platformization of their logics in analyzing memetic practices.

Second, memes as both tools and products of communal meaning-making. This understanding will inform my analyses of how memes serve as both vehicles for and outcomes of identity work, adding depth to my exploration of how youth practices manifest and circulate within and across platforms.

Finally, the insights I have reached here underscore the importance of a carefully considered mixed methods approach to my dissertation questions. I have described the project as

three sites of inquiry that circle around one core question concerning the spread of youth memetic practices on TikTok and Instagram. Given the multi-sited nature of my proposed research — from platform-level policies to user-generated content to cross-platform flow — this exam has underscored the need to very carefully consider how I can identify the most appropriate data and how I can analyze it in the context of its relationship to all of the forces surrounding it.

Appendix 1: Densely referential and intertextual memes




The Trump, the.


Stage One:
Initially, the sign (image or representation) is a reflection of basic reality.



Stage Two:
The sign masks a basic reality. The image becomes a distortion of reality.




Stage Three:
The sign marks the *absence* of basic reality. The image calls into question what the reality is and if it even exists.



Stage Four:
The sign bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.





not@west_mcm_wholesale Squidton United Los Angeles

not@west_mcm_wholesale Who are bringing may fish the realness?

not@west_mcm_wholesale eating tinned fish is italiancooked Nordic people eat that

okwell isn't tinned fish just poverty?

evolution_of_Jubilee Number 7 is amazing!!! it's funny how the dust of elderly shut ins is the new cool!

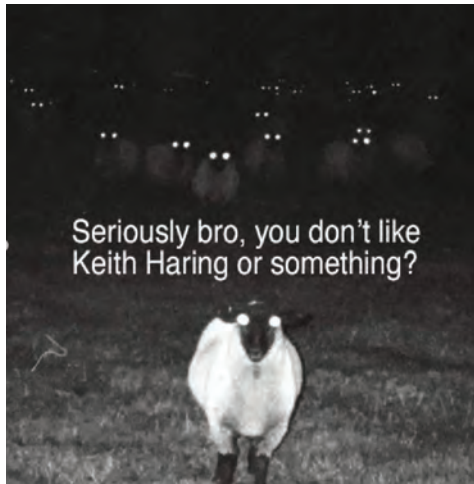
jamiesonsteel Let me eat my hot girl geronimo sandwich

stresstomodden Is this actually a thing

mooseandmakeover Where do smoked oysters fall on the spectrum?

catfish Cottage cheese is taking over. Cottage cheese ice cream probiotic root beer floats will be offered at \$50s for the next

Liked by taylorlorenz and 23,157 others



Chinese sweatshop workers after getting an order for 2000 Keith Haring Big Love t-shirts



WARNING!

RIGHT WING EXTREMISTS ARE NOW WEARING THIS SHIRT TO IDENTIFY EACH OTHER



If you see someone in your community wearing a limited edition Keith Haring for Uniqlo T-shirt, please call the police immediately!

@nerthwest_mcm_wholesale

Appendix 2: Vince McMahon Reaction Meme



Appendix 3: Deep-fried images





Appendix 4: 'Internet Ugly' aesthetic (Douglas 2014)



Figure 5 Many other popular rage faces have been similarly corrupted. URL: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/coaxed-into-a-snafu>

Appendix 5: Memetic Identity Practices



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