

This Has to Meme Something: Social Polarization and Internet Memes

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by
Adrianna Candor

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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“I have learned alot about politics from memes...pictures supplementing words”

-Charles

“People in power want to disregard the language and literature of the people who aren't in power, from that lens I see memes as comedic literature that works to spread awareness about certain issues.”

-Austin

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Abstract

In this study, I aim to analyze the ways in which memes function on social media, as a reflection of culture. Do memes fulfill a role of expression for people's identities and cultures in society? If so, how do they fulfill that role for various groups of peoples, and what are the implications?

Throughout the study, I will be focusing on memes circulating in mainstream media - specifically memes which feature politically relevant information - to discuss how the information contained in the memes expresses the subculture of the memes' audience. I will argue that memes polarize society, through social processes of boundary-drawing, in which sub-groups consume memes which have already been distilled into an aligned expression of their current political stance. For example, I will be talking about memes referencing external and social forces such as Coronavirus and Black Lives Matter; I will address the ways these memes are perceived by people within various subcultures. I will be thinking closely with Michele Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries, in reference to the ways in which memes act as symbolic boundaries, creating subcultures based on which memes people like and share, thus creating a strong collective identity and contributing to polarization.

This study will be focusing on a small liberal arts school, Marx College, specifically, ten students from Marx College. I will analyze the culture of Marx College through the answers the students give about their experiences and perceptions of memes. Since Marx College is known for its cohesive liberal culture, the results of this study will only apply to the subcultures found at Marx. I include a content analysis of Instagram memes, in order to learn more about the ways in which people outside of Marx students interact with memes.

Section 1: Introduction & Methodology

Introduction to the Meme World

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, ethologist, and author. Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, addressing the ways in which genes in relation to evolution could explain how behaviors like altruism could be adaptive (Dawkins, 2016). He argued that natural selection extends beyond biological replication, positing that ideas, like genes, replicate by means of cultural transmission. Dawkins states: “*Memes* (discrete units of knowledge, gossip, jokes and so on) are to culture what genes are to life” (Dawkins, 2016, 198). By this Dawkins means that ideas, norms, and folklore in groups represent culture in the same way genes, transferring from one person to the next, determine the characteristics of their offspring. And so, Dawkins labeled this cultural analog as the word meme, or units of explanation. Moreover, he said just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, in the same way, memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 2016).

Dawkins applies his knowledge of biological evolution to contemplate the replication of genes, explaining how culture and society replicate and evolve through social memes. In his analysis of social memes, instead of biologically evolving, he substitutes the word gene and uses memes to explain how we socially evolve. We socially evolve using music, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, and fashions. In the same way, internet memes are a physical (online) image that convey symbolic meaning that gets transferred from one mind to the next.

Dawkins is not a sociologist; however, I believe that his genetic conceptualization can be useful in approaching the cultural dimension of internet memes. He is setting us up for looking at

memes and culture as “symbolic boundaries”, which is one way that contemporary sociologists conceptualize culture (Lamont & Small, 2008).

Prominent among such sociologists, Michele Lamont is interested in culture and identity, more specifically, the constitution of personal and collective identity concerning the ways in which two or more things or people connect. She does this analysis by studying something she calls symbolic boundaries and how they work - such as, how people see “us” versus “them”, regarding race, class, and nations. For Lamont, boundaries are distinguished between those who are “worthy and those who are less so” (Lamont & Small, 2008, 76). She is thinking in terms of morality, economic success, cultural sophistication, and so forth, in analyzing the ways in which people are categorized based on their levels of “worthiness” in society. She is specifically speaking to social boundaries manifested in spatial segregation, labor market segregation, and patterns of intermarriage. For Lamont, these boundaries reveal how people implicitly and explicitly characterize people based on various classes, and more specifically, how they view characteristics and flaws in groups of people.

I really liked the example she used to demonstrate symbolic boundaries. Lamont says that Americans self-define stress, hard work, responsibility, and self sufficiency as a strong moral value (Lamont & Small, 2008, 77). Americans tend to draw boundaries against the poor, whom we deem lazy and as people who are taking advantage of the system, therefore, not worthy of support from the system. Conversely, in France they understand the poor to be mere workers displaced by the world of capitalism, and thus worthy of support.

Inequality is at the core of her research in thinking about how people are or become connected or separated. However, I am more interested when Lamont explains her interest in how identity is built by the constructions of cultural repertoires. She is thinking about the

“meaning-making” processes — things or phenomena that construct cultural repertoires. This is interesting to think about when analyzing the identity and culture that memes create. This is because, in a sense, memes are a kind of *meaning-making* product of mass media. Memes make meaning out of social facts, using comical images, that in the end represent culture in society, and help in identifying subcultures.

In summary, for Lamont boundary work (separation of us and them) is critical in group making, or in creating a collective identity. That is, people differentiate themselves from each other by looking for common traits, experiences, and a sense of belonging in people and groups. She says, in order for a group to be successful they must be recognizable to outsiders as distinct. Once groups become distinct they will constantly be aware of their opposing groups so that they can maintain distinctness. This way of differentiation aims to “maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group” (Tanjfoll and Turner, 1985).

The categorizing of people based on common traits and experiences in order to create and maintain a collective identity is also present in the ways in which memes on social media are essentially categorizing people into groups based on preferred interests. Also, like Lamont's theory of the ways in which people separate themselves and maintain distinctiveness, people on social media are constantly creating new and more comically advanced memes to maintain uniqueness against opposing memes groups. Along with this, these meme subcultures aim to create a sense of belonging so that people will like and share to continue their group's growth.

For this study, instead of using Lamont's language of “groups” I will be using the language “subcultures” in explaining the ways in which people might have become separated or sorted into subcultures based on memes they like and share. Keeping in mind Lamont's theory of

culture, for this project I want to focus on whether memes polarize Marx College students into social media subcultures based on which memes they like, follow, and share.

As I will discuss in my empirical study, I found in my interviews, and in my content analysis, that people were divided into subcultures based on the memes that they liked and shared most frequently. Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries correlates with the dimensions of memes I will be exploring when thinking about how people have essentially sorted themselves into groups/subcultures they deem fit. Evidently, when people affirm their ideologies daily, by liking and sharing memes, they are ultimately making their social media subcultures stronger, similarly, to what Lamont is saying when she is talking about how groups will try and maintain uniqueness and superiority over other groups.

Methodology

For this study I interviewed ten Marx College students: seven of the interviewees appeared male and three appeared female. For the interviews I asked semi-structured open ended questions (for the interview questions, see appendix A). The interviews were conducted using the Facetime application on my Iphone. They were no longer than forty five minutes.

The goal of the interviews was to converse on the subject of memes so I could learn how people connect and communicate through them, and to get closer to answering my question - Does social media possibly separate people into subcultures based on the memes they like and share? With that said, I was quite excited to ask people how they interact with memes in a scientific study because I suspected people only thought about memes in a humorous way.

Lastly, for the interviews I showed the meme in figure one in order to learn what students might be thinking about in relation to their own lives and the world around them. I selected this

meme because it told the story of the American life during 2020, something we can all relate to. This was also a very popular meme with over 50,000 likes, so I knew this meme would not be difficult to understand and would make people engage in discussion surrounding its meaning.

I also did a content analysis of memes on Instagram to get a closer look at meme subcultures on social media. I chose the most popular and current memes on Instagram so that I could have a large sample to work with and I chose memes that correlated with my interviewees' viewpoints. After I chose a meme from Instagram I selected 50-100 users based on likes and comments featured on the memes. I spent time scrolling through the comments on the memes so that I could observe what people had said in relation to the content of the meme so I could assess whether or not people were connected or disconnected to certain memes subcultures. After this, I went to people's biographies on their accounts to observe what they said about their preferred interests, and to possibly see what meme accounts they followed.

Moreover, because there is an influx of political and controversial memes, I chose ones that mirrored what was happening in society at the time, for example, the election, gender politics, and politics; and because my interviewees found themselves most interested in socio-political memes.

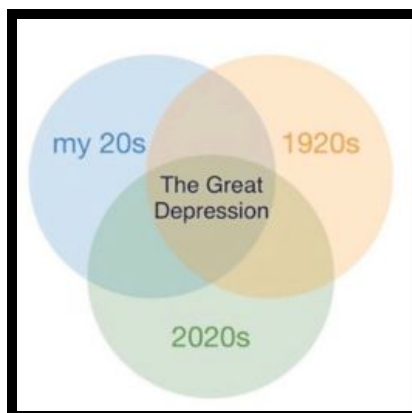


Figure 1. This is a meme from an Instagram account called grapejuiceboys (3.9 million followers).

My Meme Journey

When I originally set out to undertake this study I planned on interviewing people about levels of hope in their futures, in regards to the memes they liked and shared. However, during the process of my interviews I found that memes were far more effective in creating subcultures of meaning, rather than simply creating a sense of lightheartedness during difficult times. I found in my interviews that memes have a different function, that is, to define distinct subcultures based on what users liked and shared on their social media feeds. I found that memes were separating people based on their likes and perceptions of politics, inherently creating social media subcultures. On top of this, I found that memes inherently oversaturate and dilute important topics in society; this is something I will address in greater depth later on during the empirical study.

In addition to the interviews, I was also interested in defining meme characteristics and giving examples of memes through content analysis of Instagram. Instagram is at the center of my study into the ways in which memes play a role in creating social media subcultures. The content analysis was a great way to see what other people outside Marx college were interested in, and how they reacted to the memes they looked at, in the comment sections.

Section 2: Theory & Literature Review

Durkheimian Theories of Culture, as Applied to Internet Memes

Sociological theories of culture often trace their roots to the classical sociological and anthropological work of Emile Durkheim. *Durkheim and the Social Anthropology of Culture* (1981), by anthropologist James L. Peacock, speaks about Emile Durkheim's three kinds of cultural relationships within society: logical, functional and historical. Durkheim's logical theory of culture refers to the ways in which social institutions, such as religion, have power over individuals. For example, the institution of religion has power over the way people think about sin, and since they offer the actions to relinquish their sins, such as prayer, they have power over the way people act out in their daily lives. His functional theory refers to the people's belief in something, often myths, that creates social order. Society, in turn, sustains culture through the shared experience, and by providing an observational opportunity after which these representations are replicated. That being said, the more people believe, the stronger social order will be. Lastly, his historical theory refers to the evolution of ideas over time that have created systems of thought and culture (Peacock, 1981).

Durkheim was curious as to how societies were created and what held them together. To satisfy his curiosities he introduced a theory of social institutions that govern behavior over a set of individuals. These institutions have a social purpose with rules that structure social interactions; he calls them social facts. Family, religion, and what I am interested in, mass media (in thinking about memes), are examples of social institutions that create a collective consciousness among people in society. According to this Durkheimian logic, the institution of social media creates social facts, which imbue memes with meaning, making communities stronger with every meme they share of their same ideology. Relating back to Lamont's theory

of collective identity, memes become a tool for people to maintain their social distinctions, and to further separate their subcultures, including their ideological subcultures.

Connecting Durkheim's theory of culture back to memes, it is evident that Durkheim's logical thinking of culture correlates with the conception of memes, and how they are reproduced and imitated. Thinking about memes as a part of a social institution, I argue they have power over individuals, in the sense of having influence on the ways in which people interrupt social phenomena in our society. When people view memes, and act in society based on the context of the meme, which can be as simple as referencing a meme when discussing and/or arguing political preferences, they are under the influence of that meme. Along with this, memes have power over the way people subconsciously feel, for example the sense of alienation when a person feels they are missing out on something from viewing a meme about a social trend they weren't a part of. This is the same way religion has power over the way people act in society by controlling their actions by offering prayer as a solution for sin.

The same goes for Durkheim's functional theory of culture, that is, memes can be thought of as creating social order, communities, and/or subcultures. This would be based on the information the memes create and distribute within the institution. I believe this information network and the communities that memes build give people a sense of solidarity. This solidarity is sustained through the replication of memes and ideas portrayed in memes.

Lastly, we can also observe Durkheim's historical cultural relationship in correlation with memes, in that memes represent an evolution of ideas that have created systems of thought and culture. By this I mean that that, as memes become increasingly replicated, liked and shared, they slowly change and adapt to how they are integrated into society. Memes as a source of satirical information have been evolving systems of thought and culture for hundreds of years,

such as political cartoons. Looking forward, when memes on the internet started becoming popular back in the 2000s, the memes being produced mainly centered around funny animals and babies. Memes, in the beginning of the digital age, were not necessarily speaking to political happenings; they were more outlets for people to simply laugh. This meme in figure two, for example was created in 2000, simply made to entertain users by showing a cute cat in a cut out of a ceiling. There are no previously contemplated ideas from pop culture needed in order to understand what the meme is conveying; it is simply a cat in the ceiling. Now memes can be understood as more advanced than the cat in the ceiling meme, and even more so than political cartoons. This is because memes have evolved to hold and share more information about a culture or society, more than what the cat might mean to people, in the ceiling (Shifman, 2014).



Figure 2. A meme on Instagram from the account skyisdreamin (67.9K Followers)

In the beginning memes were not as popular as they are now. However, as these memes started to get more attention, by utilization of cute animals and babies, more and more people began to like and share them allowing for a bigger audience for meme consumers, making it so memes could be specified to certain groups. Therefore, people began making increasingly complex memes that required references to pop culture, and this made memes more funny and relatable, creating what we have now, which are in my opinion advanced memes that takes a level of understanding to interpret and understand (Limor Shifman will speak more about this in the literature review). For example, this meme in figure three is a 2020 meme, a current meme

that has evolved into a different kind of meme language where knowledge of how memes work is necessary in order to truly understand its meaning. It is also interesting that it relays no significant information, it simply illustrates the ways in which people understand memes.



Figure 3. A meme from an Instagram account belikeb.o.b (2.9K followers)

Further, for Durkheim, collective consciousness is important for society because it produces a set of values, norms, and beliefs that results in social integration (Durkheim, 1981). There is social integration created through social media, due to the unification of attitudes and behaviors that determine society. Memes integrated in the social institution of mass media are prime examples of the ways in which communities come together (online) to create a collective consciousness that, in a way, can define people's subcultures, beliefs, and ideologies. I believe Durkheim would say that memes contribute to culture.

There are inevitably powerful emotions attached to the culture surrounding memes and powerful emotions connected to every aspect of social institutions, as that is what makes them legitimate or have purpose. With that said, memes depicting anxiety, for example, create a culture of acceptance and collectivism, making people feel a part of something bigger and important, as stated through my interviews. This sense of relatability makes people feel like they

aren't the only ones struggling with anxiety. This is because they are seeing memes that express common social phenomena, and issues, that make people anxious. Therefore, when people see and share the memes that generate this sense of relatability people become filled with hopefulness, and then suddenly people feel connected to one another. This feeling comes from the likes and shares people see on the memes. When they see others who are feeling the same way as them, there is a sense of connectedness.

Drawing on the Durkheimian tradition, sociologist Liah Greenfeld nonetheless takes a more contemporary approach to culture in her book *Mind Modernity and Madness* (2006), which addresses the ways in which an unchained (freedom to choose your life course) culture can have a negative effect on society and the individual. She is looking specifically at biological diseases such as depression and schizophrenia, arguing they are culturally caused, and products of culture.

In the first part of her introduction she argues culture is at the center of human existence and that it defines the human experience (Greenfield, 2006). More specifically, she is interested in the ways modern culture shapes the mind. Greenfeld examines culture as an ideational, symbolic, nonmaterial phenomenon. Keeping this in mind, Greenfeld is informed by sociologist Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in thinking about the human path to modernity. The path to modernity represents the characteristics of modern institutions, which for her argument, are the reasons for the fallacies in people's identity. She is speaking explicitly about the modern institution of nationalism — a form of consciousness endorsed by the notions of equality forming the cultural framework of modern society — and connects that to psychiatric diseases. Simply put, she argues nationalism is the culture for which people suffer from psychiatric diseases.

In the first chapter, *The Emergence of the Mind*, she is essentially explaining the ways in which the mind has evolved from interpreting signs to articulating symbols. She argues that, like life, the symbolic process occurs simultaneously on the collective and individual levels, that is, as mind and as culture (Greenfield, 2006). She begins her study by talking through the ways our minds have biologically evolved. For Greenfield, taking apart how the mind was generated is essential in her analysis because it explains how we have evolved into the complex thinking people we are now. She wants to take the mind apart but confesses how impossible it is to reconstruct the mind, that is why she goes into how the mind biologically emerged by looking at *Homo Sapiens*.

In her study she posits the larynx muscle, that creates sound, has ultimately led to the emergence of the mind. Because of the biological construction of our species vocal signs were able to be made, thus, creating the opportunity for the species to flirt with the signs. Eventually, this led to intent to articulate and create meaningful symbols. Symbols then became the most important social phenomenon; the meaning was given by the context in which a symbol was used, and progressively the context became the context of other symbols. Unlike signs, which were limited to the referents in the environment, symbols were continuously expanding (Greenfield, 2006).

This leads us to Greenfield's *Symbolic Reality* section. She says there has come a new symbolic reality that has emerged from the three important parts of the human, the brain, larynx, and the use of signs. Greenfield explains how our symbolic reality was created by material by-products, and left material side effects, stating that there were no material aspects to its creation.

Greenfield was thinking about the emergence of our mind, which she puts 30,000-years-ago. However, looking at memes, can we understand them as material by-products of the emergence of the mind, as symbols. Greenfield argues the brain has created an endless chain of symbolic reactions, transforming a singular event into an emergent reality. This means the use of all the symbols, acknowledging its significance, the act of imitation and replication reflect what she calls the mental practice. All of this is important because it describes the ways in which humans have evolved to think the way we do about ourselves and society. We started off with meaningless signs but because of the brain, and larynxes, now we have the mind, and it has evolved into being able to create symbols, culture and meaning (Greenfield, 2006).

She is setting us up for her next section, *Mind and Culture*. For the purpose of Greenfield's study we needed to know the biological formation and evolution process so that we could understand and contemplate culture. Greenfield uses the phrase *symbolic commonwealth* to evoke a theoretical conception of a "collective mind," similar to Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness. A symbolic commonwealth, essentially collective consciousness, for Greenfield, is the mind, in the combination with other minds, creating what we know and what we call culture. She goes further, as mentioned earlier, by saying the mind can be thought of as "culture of the brain" or "individualized culture", they are not both a part of the same symbolic and mental reality but one of the same process occurring on different levels — the individual and the collective. Symbols are only symbols in the mind. The mind constantly borrows symbols from culture but only culture can be processed. The symbols essentially store themselves in the mind (Greenfield, 2006).

Further, Greenfield argues that, although we humans have utilized our minds and made culture, this doesn't mean we are separate from other animals, in the animal kingdom. Yet, it

does separate us from other species. She says “Dependent on the organic laws, but autonomous, humanity functions in accordance with the symbolic and historical laws instead, to the extent of modifying organic laws on many occasions.” (Greenfield, 2006, 45). This is a fascinating sentence meaning that humanity functions based on historical and symbolic laws, while evolving. Overall, Greenfeld’s assessment of symbols ties in nicely with a lot of the authors I will talk about throughout the review, who thought of symbols as culture, and recognized their connection with culture.

Moreover, Greenfeld’s theory of symbols, mind, and culture, in conversation with the thoughts surrounding memes, makes the questions I pose for my thesis stimulating. If we think about memes as symbols that occur simultaneously on the collective and on the individual levels, then we can understand them to be a part of creating meaning through images and polarizing people into subcultures based on meaning. Breaking it down, we absorb memes as signs that we have converted into symbols, and are able to distinguish culture from them. In the same ways *Homo Sapiens* tangled with signs and symbols in the beginning to create meaning we are doing the same with the signs memes have created to make meaning and culture.

Thinking about memes as a part of our new symbiotic reality makes sense. Memes can be seen as a part of our new symbolic reality because we have evolved out of the boundaries of the organic reality. Greenfeld explains the organic reality as the combining structures, processes, and functions of life. They are products of biological evolution through natural selection. However, we have sustained a self sufficient human consciousness that is not tied to the constraints of survival or natural selection. It is freeing in a sense, and what Greenfeld argues, leads to mental disease. Moreover, memes being a part of symbolic reality means the experience of creating meaning out of signs and symbols is unchained, open for interpretation (Greenfield, 2006).

Further, the ways in which our symbolic reality has created material by-products, for which I argued, memes are a part of this evolution, is prevalent when thinking about how memes were created in the first place. Material by-products have created an endless symbolic chain reaction. Therefore, it makes sense for memes to have created such an influential effect on society and led to this echochamber of information being produced by people who already agree with themselves. This is because they have become a part of this chain reaction, an evolution of transforming ideas, in which they make meaning out of symbols and create an emergent reality. This emergent reality could be regarded as the ways in which people are able to create a reality out of the memes they consume, and share them based on their beliefs and understandings of the world.

Lastly, collective consciousness correlates with how memes have been consumed and thought of. Memes as symbols operate together, creating a symbolic commonwealth for which there is a consensus on meaning. There is a direct goal in how memes use and combine symbols. Consequently, culture is created through the use and understanding of these symbols. We have developed a mental capacity for these symbols. In the same way we have evolved from using our larynx to create sounds we have evolved the meaning of symbols to create culture.

Additional Scholarship Relevant to Internet Memes

Communication/Conversation, Imitation and Culture

Authors Limor Shifman (2014), James W. Carey (2008), Susan Blackmore (2000), Henry Plotkin (2000) and Bradley E Wiggins (2015) all discuss contemporary cultural transmission by means of the communication and imitation of memes through the media. These five authors also agree that the defining characteristics of memes are symbolism and relatability. In other words,

memes are symbols generated to explain reality, and its meaning is meant to be reliable - memes are reliable in the sense that more will be produced in the same manner. Moreover, the topic of imitation is apparent in all articles, inspired by Dawkins' theory of cultural transmission through social memes as a way of thinking. For instance, Shifman creates three dimensions of imitation when thinking about memes: content, form, and stance, in his book *Memes in Digital Culture*.

In Shifman's language, the first aspect of imitation relates mainly to the content of a specific idea, referencing both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it (Shifman, 2003). Meaning, when people act in imitating meme content, it is to take the idea of the meme and replicate it, even more so, attempting to make it even more relatable and/or funny. Yet, in some cases, after a while of circulation memes can become distorted, in the sense that they have gone too far 'down the rabbit hole', ultimately in the end losing its original value and meme meaning. There is actually a whole subcategory of memes that are dedicated to this kind of distortion, the category is called *Deep Fried Memes*. *Deep Fried Memes* are still reliable, because they duplicate and people can relate to their underlying meaning, however, they are very outlandish and don't really have anything to do with reflecting social phenomena in an effort to bring awareness to an issue. Instead, these memes reflect the culture surrounding a generation's humor, or simply, what people find funny, this meme in figure four states: "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade and then pour it into your eyes...That's why i'm crying". This kind of humor is complicated to put in words, as the memes themselves translate the distorted "meaning" more accurately. Simply put, *Deep Fried Memes* function to entertain those who are searching for absurdity, found in our culture of what we find funny. Ultimately, like any other meme, they are meant to reflect the culture surrounding certain niche populations of internet users, that is, subcultures that pursue a certain level of comical relief.



Figure 4. A meme on Instagram from the account daquan (14.2 million followers)

Keeping in mind different categories of memes, Shifman posits it takes a certain level of literacy when it comes to understanding a meme. Some memes on the surface level can be understood and created by any person, while other memes need extensive knowledge about a digital meme subculture.

I will go into this more, during the empirical study section; however diving in now, some meme categories that need prior knowledge are: *#HistoricalMemes*, *#RelatableMemes*, *#BlackLivesMatterMemes*, *#FeministMemes* and the list goes on. Each category has its own subculture of knowledge. This creates a sense of community and acceptance of the ideology being produced by these memes. In the case of my study, these subcultures, as I mention later on in the paper, are creating feedback loops because those who share in those hashtags are only speaking to those who see and use the same hashtags.

Further, the second dimension refers to the *physical* aspects of imitation. Everytime someone is creating a meme they are imitating the physical aspects of this sort of ambiguous form of communication, ultimately, imitating the form that is most successful. More often than not, meme imitation is based on previous memes that have been made, and are circulating on

social media. This is where Shifman's notion of reliability really shines through. Memes all share the same form - an image and a piece of text. A successful meme would have been imitated over and over, creating a 'name for itself' in the meme world. Its reliability makes it so that it becomes popular and reproduced, therefore, successful as a means of communicating and transferring information from one person to the next. For example, this meme in figure 5 of Sponge Bob Squarepants, one of the most successful memes in my opinion, physical aspects: "Ight imma head out" and the picture of Sponge Bob Square Pants slowly getting out of his chair, has been imitated hundreds of thousands of times. Its physical aspects as a meme stays the same, however, the context increasingly changes as the meme has now generated a lot of popularity. Conversely, if the meme does not become a part of the cycle of imitation, the information or social phenomenon the meme conveys ultimately ceases to exist, leaving the meme absent from the transmission or culture and information.



Figure 5. This is a meme on Instagram from the account epicfunnypage (17.2 million followers)

The third dimension Shiftman is pointing us to is *stance*. This dimension is similar to the second aspect Shiftman is talking about. This dimension speaks to the ways in which people can imitate styles, language, and themes. For example, this is apparent when people take big themes

like *#RelatableMemes* and interpret various ways of expressing, through symbols, a certain idea that is relatable to a large audience, such as the feeling of anxiety, happiness, love or the ways in which we interpret friendships. Thereafter, because people absorb these memes the conversation and cultural transmission of ideas keeps moving forward and relays information (Shifman, 2013).

Now that we have an understanding from Shifman as to how memes are produced and what they mean in different subcultures, the second piece of literature, *Communication As Culture*, by James W. Carey, dives into the topic of conversation through media and the community it produces. Conversation in relation to memes is of particular interest to Carey. He specializes in thinking about mass communication functioning as a means of social and political control. This is very apparent in all forms of social media today. Conversation and discourse came up a lot in the interviews. A lot of individuals said, they learn and are influenced by conversations about memes and memes within themselves when it comes down to political and social control, ideology, and information gathering.

Further, Carey also posits his definition of culture, he says culture is the link between conversation and community because it is the drawing together of people. They take part in conversations about political, social and relatable (relatable in the sense of having a connection with someone about a topic or thing you thought you only thought about) phenomena because they are being consumed, interpreted, and relayed back out into the community. Overall, what Carey is getting at in his essay is examining the *content* of communication, the significance of symbols that help understand culture (Carey, 2008).

Lastly for Carey, he is thinking about the evolution of modern communication. He concludes the normal sense of being alive, ordinary structures of interest and feeling, for instance

when you would meet someone you would say “call me”, are shifting as modernity takes place. In other words, through the media our sense of communication has changed. For example, on Instagram or Twitter there is this sense of validation you feel when people like the pictures you post. Carely would say, rarely do you find people going up to each other and saying “nice fit” anymore because of the sense of validation we are receiving from social media. In the same way our ideas and ideologies, through memes, are being constantly validated through the production and sharing of memes, about issues that match what people believe and understand. Hence, reinforcing what people believe in, ultimately, for Carey, creating a different, modern sense of communication.

Further, for Carey, we have altered our sense of authentication. He believes we no longer feel alive when we don't post on Instagram, our life in a sense feels less authentic if we don't post something about it. This leads to this sense of alienation. For instance, when you are not up to date on the latest memes or when you lack an actual Facebook or Instagram account you might feel ill informed or like you are missing out on new information. Because of this, the altered experience of having social relationships are drastically changing and shifting. This is not surprising, as I hope to provide more thoughts about this later in the study. It is evident people are becoming bewildered in this heavily influenced media facade. For my study in particular, I believe people are becoming alienated from certain important political ideologies. Because of social media's inherent echo chamber effect, as I have mentioned, people are being fed desensitizing information, ultimately lacking true diversity in their mean making process.

Additionally, the third piece of literature, *The Power of Memes* by psychologist Susan Blackmore speaks about the influence of memes and imitation on society. She argues imitation is at the heart of spreading culture and information. Blackmore also believes memes hold cultural

power, having an influence on the way information is spread. She says imitation overall is the most important part of a meme. Also inspired by Dawkins, Blackmore says “behaviors and ideas copied from person to person by imitation—memes—may have forced human genes to make us what we are today” (Blackmore, 2000).

Blackmore utilizes animals to illustrate imitation for her argument on imitations influence. She gives the example the telling of a story, and what that means for imitation and the success of memes. When you tell a story your best version imitates every aspect of the action or words, but the gist of the story has been copied from one person to you and then on to someone else. She postulates this is the same with memes, in the sense that in order for a meme to be successful and impressionable people or society need to be imitated. She concludes her essay with the strong notion that imitation is the most important part of connecting, because for conversation and culture to survive there needs to be imitation so that people can learn from one another about each other (Blackmore, 2000). However, we understand the discrepancies of this.

Author Henry Plotkin disagrees, countering Blackmore’s argument — culture is nothing but a collection of memes, and imitation is how culture spreads — he argues that using the word imitation is too vague. Especially in trying to explain how people interact and learn from each other. Rather, Plotkin says “human culture is about the sharing of knowledge, beliefs and ideas. Imitation, properly defined, does not come into it.” (Plotkin, 2000). For Plotkin, social constructions, such as conversations, formal teaching, reading books and/or watching films make more sense, instead of Blackmores argument.

My last piece of literature, *Memes as Genre: A Structural Analysis of the Memescape*, by Bradly E. Wiggins, also speaks about memes as being a part of this ongoing conversation through imitation (Wiggins, 2014). He agrees with Dawkins, stating memes are an

important part of cultural transmission because people can relate and create more memes that inherently define society. He is looking at memes as artifacts because they highlight their social and cultural role in the new media landscape.

Wiggins argues a social artifact informs us about the social behavior of those individuals or groups which produce it. He gives an example, in figure six, to back his argument by showing a meme of *Ducreux self-portrait, Portrait de l'artiste sous les traits d'un moqueur*, a 300-year-old painting that went on to influence and cultivate culture by becoming a meme. The portrait has text over it saying “Gentlemen, I inquire who hath released the hounds?” which is a translation from the popular lyrics, “Who let the dogs out?” written by Baha men. This shows the cultural analog of pop culture along with social media depicting how we find humor in the ancient ways humans used to speak. This is a cultural analog because of the ways in which people have reacted to this popular song.

Further, in looking at other memes and meme genres, what kinds of social happenings can we perceive from them? For instance, it is obvious in the digital conversation today how much young people are suffering from the anxieties of integrating into society, expressed through memes that rest heavily on suicide and depression. Given Wiggins assessments, while studying memes, we could actually get an idea of what our society looks like and what it might look like in the future.



Figure 6. This is a meme from Wiggins article on memes as artifacts.

Emotional Dimensions

Moreover, in looking at how memes represent the individual, social scientist, political scientist, media studies and author Kathleen P. J. Brennan in her book *Meme Life*, addresses the ways in which memes are cultural and give influence. In contrast to the previous authors and themes who spoke about memes as a part of community, Brennan wrote on the roles of emotions in memes on the individual and how these emotions roll over into society. She posits that the way we act in public is determined by what we are consuming through the media. She goes on to explain how memes make an impression on the brain and maintain its effectiveness overtime. She did not emphasize exactly how they maintain their effectiveness. However, I did get a sense from her thoughts that it is maintained through cultural acceptance of memes as valuable content. It has been ingrained into our consciousness by social media and our peers that memes do speak a certain amount of truth. In other words, memes are easy to consume, and we remember them because they pertain to a certain level of morals and values we hold and we believe them to be true.

Historical Precedents to Modern Memes

An historical equivalent to modern memes might be political cartoons. Besides the key differences in how they are distributed, they function the same, representing current social issues with a funny image and text. According to Ronda Walker (2003), a writer for Canadian Parliamentary Review, political cartoons have in the past contributed to graphic satire that could be used as an instrument of suppression, oppression or even emancipation in societies. In the sixteenth century, Leonardo De Vinci was experimenting with caricature paintings, said to have

made critical impacts on the way people viewed beauty. He would exaggerate the facial features in a humorous effect said to have brought out the subject's "inner nature." (Gamson, Stuart, 1992) In the same way, I would argue, the modern internet meme exaggerates the prominent features of social phenomena.

This exaggeration of social phenomena can be a dangerous characteristic of both political cartoons and memes. For example, once editorial political cartoons became popular there was a good deal of speculation to the publishing of these seemingly foolish abstractions of information. Some argued editorial political cartoons were a form of visual news discourse; others claimed they simply offered an absurd account of current social or political conditions. In relation to the absurdity of some political cartoons, the exaggeration of social issues in memes can cause viewers to lose track of real world social issues (Gamson, Stuart, 1992).

Since it is a characteristic of memes to be desensitizing, people can become desensitized to exaggerations of social issues to the point of believing the characterized features of the social and political climate represented in memes. An example of this is when large groups of people believed Obama was a Muslim, when large amount of politically charged memes portrayed him to be one, despite the lack of real world evidence. Since memes are characters of the political climate, yet also have the ability to persuade people's opinions due to people getting a large amount of their information from them, there is a danger of memes consistently exaggerating people's own political and cultural ideologies on a large scale.

Moreover, memes are based on pop culture events but are perceived by people who have their own biases and are a part of their own subcultures, therefore even memes that attempt to be general or broad, are perceived in such a way that supports people's current beliefs. This perpetuates an echo chamber, the effect social media has on the ways in which people maintain

the information they are receiving from memes, of exaggerated information, forcing people to stay in their lanes of interpretation and understanding of the memes on their feed.

If Dawkins is correct about the ways in which ideas replicate and transmit from one person to the next via cultural transmission, from mind to mind, then his way of thinking can be applied to the way memes are spread throughout the internet. However, there are important distinctions. When ideas transmit from mind to mind physically the key variable that decides which two people will undergo this transmission is physical distance, ie location. When ideas transmit from mind to mind digitally through memes, the key variable is not location, but instead a series of unknown ones and zeroes used by social media algorithms to connect people based on common interests. Therefore, unlike physical transmission, the digital transmission of memes on large scales is manipulated such that the transmission of conflicting ideas are uncommon. Hence, reading politics in a diverse swing state such as Pennsylvania, where people of opposing ideologies could be neighbors and undergo the physical transmission of such ideologies, in the digital realm, people will rarely consume a meme posted by someone they don't already follow and agree with. So, as long as internet memes apply to Dawkins theory and his own use of the word meme, “discrete units of knowledge, gossip, jokes and so on”, then the way memes spread on the internet, via social algorithms, must influence our social genetic information differently than ever before. Since internet memes are most likely seen by someone with similar existing beliefs or theories to the creator of the meme, due to the algorithm, a significant difference between Dawkins’ memes and internet memes must be a larger confirmation bias, which is the tendency to interpret new information as confirmation of one's current beliefs or theories. Due to the larger confirmation bias presented during the interpretation of a meme on the internet, people

are fed over and over again, the same information they already agree with, creating an echo chamber of cultural and political polarization.

Section 3: My Empirical Study

My Journey into the Dynamics of Polarization

Introduction and Dynamics of Polarization

Throughout this discussion, I have been focusing on what sociologists and other respected authors outside of sociology have studied on the topic of memes and social media. Now, for my empirical research, I am solely writing from the perspective of my interviewees, interrogating their relationship with memes, and learning about their perceptions of memes.

This next section will not only highlight what my interviewees said about memes, it will also provide a content analysis that will spotlight the most prominent meme characteristics my interviewees called attention to. The content analysis allows us to examine how people interact and think about memes and meme content, outside of what Marx college students think about memes.

My initial interest in interviewing Marx students peaked when I found the Marx meme page; I wanted to explore how people felt towards Marx College, given the memes that were being produced. I was curious about how much memes might impact someone's perception of an institution, idea, or social phenomenon. Given how outlandish the memes were I could only imagine that people who liked and shared the memes on the account, *marxcollegememes*, were not in agreement with how the institution is run. However, not all of the memes were making fun of Marx as an institution. There are a lot of memes that simply expressed the culture of Marx students that, in the end, created a shared experience.

When I would hear someone bring up a meme to prove a point or to use as evidence I would get the chills. This was because during my junior year at Marx I read a book for a class, Literature in the Digital Age, called *The Feed*, by M.T. Anderson. This book was about the

future, more specifically exploring what the future might look like once we have these “feeds” imported into our minds, such as the Instagram feed we have now on our phones. In the book people were no longer communicating in the same way we do now, that is, by looking at each other and conversing based on previous information we have learned. Instead, in the book, people would open their feeds that were planted in their minds, and use this information found on their feeds to engage in conversation, not face to face, even if they were sitting side by side. The novel focused on aspects of consumerism, information technology, data mining, and environmental decay, with a sometimes sardonic, sometimes somber tone.

This book inspired me to explore our growing relationship with memes, how we utilize memes as a form of communication to engage with each other, how these memes might polarize our understanding of important issues, as well as explore how memes might be polarizing people based on their subcultures. It made me think about how our societies might be thinking and operating in the next 100 years. If our perceptions are being influenced and over saturated by the information found in memes, how will that affect how the new generation, people born in 2000, when making societal decisions?

My ten interviewees were all wonderful and interesting people, also coming from diverse backgrounds. Some were energetic and others were less helpful during the process; at times I had a sense that several of them were not really interested in answering my questions, as they were straying away from the topic at hand, memes. Lacy was one of my most interesting and invigorating interviewees. The way she spoke about memes was invigorating because she went into great detail about how memes have helped her share content that needs to be shared, that is, political content produced in order to teach people “the reality” of what is going on. She talked about how their “outrages nature” made it easy to explain overly complicated social phenomena.

However, she also emphasized how this outrageous nature memes have ultimately led to their downfall as serious content, or pieces of information. She said, “because they become too distorted and exaggerated to the point where people can no longer understand, unless you have been following certain memes accounts for a long period of time”.

Alex was also another one of my favorite interviewees, he was very introspective when it came to talking about memes as “a form of literature”. He was a delight to talk with, and one of my longer interviews. Along with political and Black Lives Matter memes, Alex really liked talking about Mortal Kombat memes and memes that have to do with fitness. At this point, he relayed to me people who like Mortal Kombat would only follow the pages that have to do with the game and that it wouldn't make sense to essentially step outside someone's comfort zone or familiarity, when it came to meme content, because meme content is really personal and creates a sense of collectiveness.

In regards to the rest of my interviewees, Robert, Chris, Charles, Erika, Edgar, Austin, Sam, and Sansa I discover they also found themselves focused on memes that related to their subcultures of interest. I could tell Robert, Chris, Sneha and Edgar were really interested in the topic, and really excited to answer and be a part of this study. On the other hand, Erika, Austin and Charels were a little more challenging , in that, I got short answers and did most of the talking.

That being said, my initial thoughts after the interview process were not as expected. To my surprise Erika, Austin and Charles were reluctant to answer some of my questions concerning memes reflecting society and the overall use of social media altogether. One possible explanation for this is, overall people might have felt embarrassed about how often they found themselves on social media for hours out of the day. Second, I felt overall people were possibly

ashamed of how we have evolved to communicate through memes, and were reluctant to talk about the ways in which they see social media as a way of being up to date with political jargon. Nevertheless, my interviews were really interesting, and I learned a lot about the students at Marx, and their subcultures.

This next section will now dive into the themes I derived from my interviews. My interviewees highlighted these significant themes: Scrolling on Instagram for hours at a time, the "echo chamber effect" of social media, desensitization and its effect on their social consciousness, and high versus low culture - thinking about the ways in which people understand memes as reliable or worthy content.

Subpart 1: Interviews

Infinite Scrolling

As the literature would lead us to expect, and as I have found from my interviews and content analysis, people are polarized into subcultures based on the memes they like and share; infinite scrolling also plays a role in this. Erika, from my study, hesitantly specified that she spends up to three to four hours on social media a day. Interestingly, during the interviews people were extremely hesitant to talk about how much time they spent on social media. When I asked the interviewees "How often do you find yourself on social media?" It was as if I told a bad joke. Many of the interviewees laughed in a reluctant and/or awkward way, and in some cases shared negative feelings toward how much time they were scrolling through their feeds. However, interviewees Austin and Charles responded in a casual way saying they spend all day on social media, and that they appreciate the accessibility Instagram lends itself when staying up to date on current events.

College students spending hours at a time on social media is no surprise to research analyst, Andrew Perrin, who specializes in studying the internet and technology at Pew Research Center. Andrew documented in great detail how the rise of social media use, up from 7% when Pew Research Center began systematically tracking social media usage in 2005, has affected such things as work, politics and political deliberation, communications patterns around the globe, as well as the way people get and share information about health, civic life, news consumption, communities, teenage life, parenting, dating and even people's level of stress (Perrin, 2015).

On top of social media affecting the ways we communicate, users are scrolling endlessly down their feed on their smartphones with no end to the content being loaded on the screen. Whether it is loading more posts, images, comments, or videos, the infinite scroll never reaches the bottom of the page. Because of this 'infinite scrolling', people often lose track of time. Designing the platforms with an endless scrolling gesture in mind, was a tactic specifically deployed to capture users' attention and keep them on the app. Therefore, there is no wonder why my interviewees spend hours scrolling through the bottomless pit of media information. That being said, I was eager to hear how people felt scrolling through social media for hours at a time, to learn that those who were ashamed of how much time they spent on social media expressed they were wasting valuable time because "life is passing by".

This speaks to the severity of the polarization issue, because the more time people spend looking at memes, the more they become influenced. Infinite scrolling means people are exposed to the vast and compacted amount of oversaturated information, coming at the user without end. Each meme on Instagram gets about 2-3 seconds of attention, if people wake up and spend half

of their day looking at memes that affirm their ideologies then they will be influenced by the memes and can become polarized.

For example, Charles said he often found himself looking at memes depicting anxiety and depression, but in a lighthearted way. When I asked him “When was the last time you commented on a meme? What was it about? Can you remember what you were thinking about?” He said he commented on a meme expressing anxiety, he commented, “Facts”. He could not comment on what he was thinking about at the time, but he did acknowledge that he liked and commented because the meme was relatable. That being said, Chris says more often than not he finds himself scrolling through memes that depict depression and anxiety, therefore, because he is spending so much time on Instagram he is at risk for becoming polarized into a subculture that heavily influences anxiety and depression, in turn, possibly making Chris anxious and depressed.

Social Media Echo Chambers

Most social media platforms, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which were the most used platforms by my interviewees, provide a social service for people to instantly connect and share thoughts and ideas. With memes being one of the most common ways my interviewees communicate with each other, most spend their time scrolling through Instagram to view and share memes. Every person I interviewed, stated they spend three to four hours every day on social media, with Instagram taking up the majority of their time. Because of this, it is important to analyze how Instagram functions as a means of communication.

Instagram is semi unique as a social media, because unlike other platforms, image is the center of attention. Users post and share images to their followers, and can even broadcast their posts to specific subgroups of users using a tool known as a hashtag. When users post without

hashtags, their posts end up on the screens of everyone who follows them, giving users a good amount of control for who they are sharing information with. On the contrary, when users post with hashtags, they don't decide the specific people they share to, but instead, specific groups of people determined by a label which defines a common interest or arbitrary subject users are looking for. Since users must search for a hashtag to view an image posted with one, this limits the people who view the post to people who are interested in that subject or label. So, hashtag or not, Instagram posts are only seen by groups of people who are likely to be interested in seeing the photo.

Most of my interviewees even stated they do not post or share images publicly, but only to groups of people they know will agree with or like the post. On top of all of this, Instagram offers a sophisticated algorithm which uses information about what posts users like to highlight more posts they will probably like in the future. This all means that people rarely see posts that go against any sensitive political or cultural views they have.

Instagram as a platform seems to impose unidirectional feedback, feeding people more of what they want to see like some sort of digital echo chamber. All but one of my interviewees discussed issues they had with sharing posts publicly, some of these issues regarded privacy, mostly having to do with a fear of exposing their political action in a world of cancel culture. One interviewee on the other hand, Lacy, excitedly stated she often posted politically vibrant memes with an agenda to persuade the public in an attempt of activism. This sounds like a very opportune way to use social media, where the access to instant connection with people all over the world can be used to persuade people with harmful ideologies to a place of better understanding and acceptance of people around them.

As a proponent of women's rights, racial justice, and mental health awareness, Lacy has potential to make a difference. However, this would only be the case if her message got out to people who felt otherwise, so there was a chance for them to have a change of heart. Something important Lacy eagerly discussed with me however, was about someone she claimed to have done something hurtful to others, and how they were being handled on social media. She discussed in a strict manner how it was important for people to unfollow and block this person, and generally that it was important to engage in a culture of cancelling those who disrespect humanity through harmful behavior. As much as it sounds like justice to socially punish these people, it causes people like Lacy's follower lists to only include people who they deem to act by their social and moral code.

Therefore, not only are people like Lacy and one of my other interviewees, who expressed similar behaviour, failing to reach their intended audience on Instagram, but they are actively choosing to minimize their outreach. On top of this, they saturate the feeds of people who already agree with them, hence the echo chamber. This labeling of others as unworthy is an example of people separating themselves from others who think differently than them and aligns with Nabeel Gillani, Ann Yuan, Martin Saveski, Soroush Vosoughi, and Deb Roy's ways of thinking (2018) about how Americans are sorting themselves according to their ideological stances on political issues. They discuss how "echo chambers" in online settings — where individuals with similar political views assemble to discuss particular issues — can enable mutually-reinforcing opinions to shift individual perspectives towards poles of greater extremity".

Desensitization in Memes

Memes about current events are created and spread rapidly, making fun of, or making light of social situations. Although this might sound like a good thing, this creates serious implications surrounding our perceptions of reality outside of the meme. Because these topics are becoming memeified, and recognized as a joke, they begin to lack severity when thinking about what is really going on in society. More than half of my interviewees talked about this implication, specifically memes surrounding civil rights, murder, and overall discussions surrounding our politics. Sansa, Chris and Edgar specifically spoke about having to take time away from social media all together because of the memes that they saw conveying sensitive topics, such as the violent protests. They were afraid they would become desensitized to violence through the consumption of certain memes. Chris stated: “I have to be conscious about what I am seeing on Instagram, some of the memes go too far.” Here, Chris is talking about normalization of violence. As a person of color, Chris said, in a somber manner, he felt memes in the media were normalizing police violence and the murdering of black bodies, making him feel as if murdering people of color was a natural phenomenon, he was afraid he would become numb.

In a research study done by, Carnagey et al., (2007), analyzing the link between violent media and physiological desensitization, they found that after exposure to violent media, participants showed reduction in skin conductance, and heart, when encountering succeeding depictions of real violence (Carnagey et al., 2007). Normally, when people are exposed to violence, according to Carnagey, individuals have an “automatic aversive emotional response” —such as changes in heart rate and “skin conductance”. That said, the reason Sansa, Chris and Edgar have to take time away from social media is so that they can protect the integrity of their social consciousness from political oversaturation.

Since this desensitization effect normalizes the radical ideologies that memes express, and because of the algorithm which potentiates peoples own ideologies, people then become normalized to their own ideological feedback loop. For instance, interviewee Erika started out viewing memes as an activist for women's rights, but due to the radicalization of her subculture, because of memes, she currently finds herself viewing anti-men memes. Her progression went from a moderate belief in equal rights to a more radical view of unequal rights, with women deserving more than men as “men are trash”. Her whole response to these underlying social issues of gender inequality was spoken in a humorous manner where she laughed during most of her discussion of inequality. This is a great example of meme humor dilutes people's perception of how racial the memes they view are.

High and Low Culture

Thinking about the ways in which culture is perceived, in what cultural sociologist Paul Dimaggio sees as a dichotomy between high culture - what goes on in museums, opera houses, symphony halls and theaters - and low culture, synonymous with popular culture - memes, reality TV, and mainstream media - is there a possibility that memes cause further distinctions between more types of culture than just high and low (Dimaggio, 1982)? It was evident in my interviews that there were some who took memes seriously as tangible meaningful pieces of culture while others thought it to be ludicrous and “low” in relation to elite forms of culture and meaning.

Alex, one of my more introspective interviewees, specifically talked about memes as a form of “literature”, a way for people to have the freedom to express whatever they believe to be true relative to their own mind, without the constraints of bureaucracy. Essentially, Alex believes

that memes break the boundaries between high and low culture. Conversely, Sam, when thinking about levels of seriousness in analyzing memes, believed memes should not to be taken seriously in a way that would cause critical discourse. In the interviews Sam specified he only sought out memes, and followed pages that had to do with celebrities and TV drama, such as Keeping up with the Kardashians, that beings said, he didn't believe the memes he was viewing had any real purpose, besides making fun of people. He was talking about the conversations he was having in the comment sections. He said “people need to relax in the comments, people are taking memes too seriously”. Alex on the other hand, specified he mainly sought out, and followed, pages that had to do with politics, such as Black Lives Matter, and believed the discourse in the comments were really important because it exposed how people really felt about controversial topics. He said memes could be used as tools to show how corrupt America is.

Other interviewees, Charles and Austin also spoke positively about memes in the sense of learning and engaging in meaningful discourse. During the interview Charles said: “I have learned alot about politics from memes...pictures supplementing words”. Austin said: “People in power want to disregard the language and literature of the people who aren't in power, from that lens I see memes as comedic literature that works to spread awareness about certain issues.” This is similar to Alex's thinking, the ways in which memes can work as meaningful tools for the people.

That being said, Dimaggio highlighted the key distinction between high and low culture, that is, high culture is determined by class, while low culture is everything below. This dichotomy arose in the 1850-1900 created by urban elites to build an organizational form in an effort to isolate high culture and to differentiate it from low culture. These urban elites were acting as what Dimaggio defined as ‘cultural capitalists’, which are people who exercise

capitalism to gain cultural capital, which is knowledge and familiarity with styles and genres that are socially valued, and that confer prestige upon those who have mastered them (Dimaggio, 1983). In the modern world, memes are increasingly becoming a cultural currency, being traded and mentally hoarded and recited as a form of cultural capital. There is a clear prestige people chase in their attempt to master meme imitation. In this way, memes not only are becoming, but have become mainstream cultural capital.

Dimaggio spoke about three tools created by cultural capitalists, who were the individuals who founded the museums and symphony orchestras that embodied the high cultural ideal. These capitalists invested profits in the foundation and maintenance of these distinctive cultural enterprises, and used these tools to categorize and own certain forms of culture, by labeling it as high, and therefore out of reach to the lower class. The first tool that embedded the schism between high and low culture was *entrepreneurship*, the creation of a company in which the elite are able to control and govern organizational groups. The second tool was *classification*, being the erection of strong and clearly defined boundaries between art and entertainment, the defining of a high art by the elites, and segments of the middle class, as their own cultural property, and the acknowledgement of this classifications legitimacy by other classes. The third tool, *framing*, is the development of new etiquette of appropriation, where a strict way of engaging with high art is the new cultural norm (Dimaggio, 1982).

We can think of the implementation of Dimaggio's tools as creating a set of guidelines for how to engage with each form of culture; high culture has high class etiquette, while low culture is unrefined and oafish. People who run meme accounts, and publish their cultural capital, use these tools to not only own and aestheticize their capital, but further divide

subcultures into various ways of engaging with their cultural capital via the aesthetic they attempt to achieve.

For example, a creator of an Instagram profile, @bitch, who posts memes mainly involving white american women and various animals, utilizes *entrepreneurship* through the incorporation of an account which runs like a capitalist business. This creator profits off of aestheticized advertisements hidden in memes, as well as through external forms of engagement with the audience the memes drew in. According to the creator in an interview by Heather Leighton in Forbes, the creator teamed up with a licencing and publishing company Collab to help push and monetize content. The creator said, “once we partnered up we decided to go the route of actually doing all the clearances and licenses in order to give video owners more than just their 15 seconds of Internet fame and legitimizing @bitch as a brand and not just another page in a sea of memers.”

Another creator @sarcasm_only utilizes *classification* by clearly defining the boundaries of their social capital, through defining the pages ‘aesthetic’ through content specifically pertaining to relatable humor of typical problems women face. This creator clearly classifies her audience through the depiction of a single relatable aesthetic, regarding a young, adventurous, and mentally unstable girl who is surrounded by drama only to respond with sarcasm. Through the classification of her audience, she is staging her profile in a way to control who comes and who stays away.

This same creator also utilizes *framing* by cultivating an etiquette for how to engage with the memes in the comments. With the memes either asking questions or provoking responses in the comments through the phrase ‘when you’, the audience is prompted to comment and engage in a specified manner (figure seven). Analyzing the comments section of this meme under

@sarcasm_only's account, it is clear that nearly all comments either post a laughing emoji, or tag another user along with a 'me' or a 'you lol' type of response. Since the majority of this accounts posts are questions or 'when you' memes, and the majority of the comments for many of the posts are tags and people expressing relatability, it is evident that the creator of the account has successfully cultivated an etiquette for how to engage with their type of content.



Figure 7. This is a meme from the Instagram account sarcasm_only (14.5 million followers)

Through the use of these three tools, the creators of these meme pages have just defined and claimed appropriative ownership over new subcultures. Similarly to how Dimaggio's culture capitalists segregated culture for their benefit at the detriment of society, internet based culture capitalists who deal with the market trading and publication of memes ultimately further segregate society into subcultures, and provide an avenue for the segregated people to engage with their culture without interference between cultures.

Meme subcultures are inherently governed and controlled by the creators who have invested their time and money into the creation and maintenance of these subcultures. The creators are publishing memes that influence people's conceptualization of social phenomena, in a targeted way defined by the aesthetic of their collected cultural capital. Therefore, meme based cultural capitalists create boundaries between different subcultures on social media. Along with

this, the distinctiveness between different meme pages is recognized by each of the meme subcultures, creating a sense of legitimacy, only further dividing themselves.

Subpart 2: Characteristics of Memes

Reinforcing Subcultures & Ideologies

In today's modern society, one of the most common ways people stay up to date with the world is through memes. Whether people are hearing about pop culture or politics, memes act as instruments of communication. According to my study, people said they did not necessarily seek out memes as their source of news, but did get informed about the world through memes due to how quickly they respond to current events.

Evidently, there is something to Dawkins' theory of memes, as applied to the internet: they do act in ways that look like Dawkins' social genes, in that they propagate critical social information which ultimately influences culture. This is also similar to Durkheim's functional cultural theory, where memes act as a common way to communicate and connect with people, where his functional theory refers to the ways in which people have beliefs in something that creates social order, in other words memes creating a sense of social order.

As I learned from my interviewees, memes represent a variety of different people in different cultures. For example, people who are fascinated by Star Wars tend to share memes about Star Wars with each other, while people fascinated by cats send each other cat memes. Hence memes can be used as a tool to categorize people by their subcultures, in that, people who identify with certain lifestyles view and share corresponding memes.

For example, discussions came up in my interviews about two different subcultures involved in memes having to do with Trump. On the one hand there are people who support

Trump see and share memes which idolize and glorify him, while on the other hand, people who are anti-Trump see and share memes that scrutinize him. This is an example of how memes filter topics of pop culture, such as the icon Trump himself, into subcultures in a way which each subculture receives a confirmation of their ideology, reference chart 1. To summarize, people who are pro-Trump see pro-Trump memes, while people who are anti-Trump see anti-Trump memes. Therefore, we can see it is a characteristic of memes to positively reinforce subcultures ideologies.

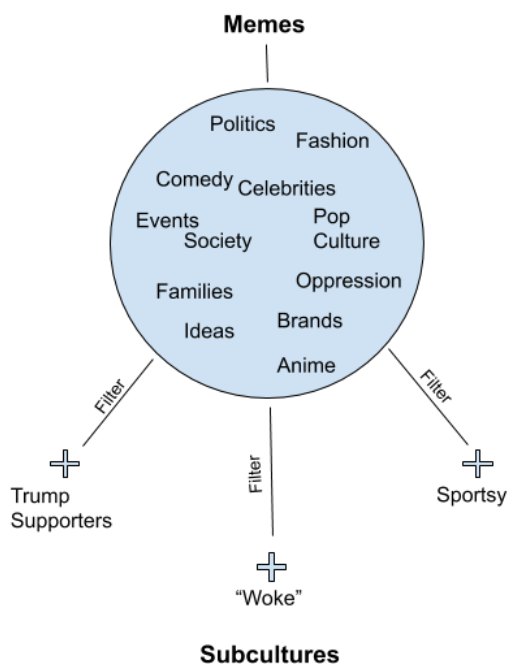


Figure 8. Memes are categorized into subcultures, for this example, Trump supporters, “woke” and sportsy, and are interrupted through a filter which coincides with the ideology of their subculture. Then there occurs a feedback loop, strengthening (+) and affirming what people are known to be true, relative to their own mind.

Another way memes influence culture is through their humor. Memes are popular because they relay current events or topics in pop culture in a relatable manner which people find

amusing. The comical relief makes light of relevant social phenomena, bringing people of similar interests together. The memes are generally speaking to serious relevant social phenomena but in a comical way that creates a sense of light heartedness, especially when there are memes about the Coronavirus, making it so people can connect with each other about a moment that, in reality is scary, in a comical lighthearted way.

Memes are often funny, but they risk desensitizing people to serious events in our history. For example, it was evident in my study that memes addressing political protest were desensitizing people to current events; because of this some people said they had to stop looking at memes so they could focus on issues that the memes were desensitizing them to. This suggests that it is a characteristic of memes to desensitize the population to critical issues at hand.

Subpart 3: Content Analysis and Current Examples of Memes

Now that we have an understanding of the ways that college students use and experience memes, I want to dive deeper into the polarization of subcultures, by showing examples of memes. The memes that I will discuss here have been drawn selectively from Instagram. I have focused on the context of each meme's posting, by looking into the account description for each original posting, as well as the people who have liked or commented. As mentioned above in the methodology section I did this by choosing culturally relevant memes and memes that gained a lot of attention and memes that my interviewees highlighted. I chose 50-100 users to observe how people described their relationship with the meme they liked and/or commented on.

The memes the content analysis introduces are highly influenced by what my interviewees said, that is, they mostly follow memes that are political and/or controversial, and follow memes accounts that associate with their beliefs. I chose to pick memes I knew my

interviewees liked and knew because I was interested in learning how people outside of Marx thought about these controversial topics, as well. Therefore, for the analysis I chose political and controversial memes from Instagram.

I learned that the people outside of Marx also seemed to only follow accounts that correlated with their beliefs, therefore essentially isolating their beliefs into an oversaturated understanding about whatever the memes are conveying. For example, I found that people who followed feminist accounts were typically found to be feminist or at least aligned with what the meme pages values meant. I discovered this correlation by observing what people had commented on the meme, and what their bios said in regards to their beliefs. The accounts who did align with the feminists pages values commented in agreement with the memes. If I found they didn't comment, I went to their bios to observe what kinds of emojis or hashtags they utilized to express themselves. People who were in disagreement with the meme, either didn't like or comment and/or left a message that was in opposition to what the memes were conveying.

Because of social media's inherent functionality of producing memes about current events, there has been a tsunami of memes illustrating the recent and ongoing spread of the Coronavirus. In the news, and in memes, we learn about how the novel virus has split the country in two, making people who wear masks seem liberal, or left leaning politically and in their views on left leaning views, while people who refuse to wear masks seem republican, or right leaning politically.

According to David Abrams, a professor of social and behavioral sciences at NYU School of Global Public Health (2020), people tend to long for a sense of belonging in a time of uncertainty, and this sense of collective applies to people on both sides of the political spectrum. People who don't wear masks may see it as a sign of solidarity, as if they are together making a

stand against authority, while those who do wear masks likely see it "as an act of altruism and a way of helping each other out," Abrams said (Abrams, 2020).

In memes we can observe this divide with some memes making fun of those who believe the virus should be taken seriously, and those who believe it to be a hoax. For example, in figure nine this meme is attempting to illustrate how Trump supporters emotionally responded to the Coronavirus when thinking about two-hundred-thousand people dying, versus the emotion Trump Supporters feel when people joke about Trump getting infected. This meme is essentially showing a 'lack of humanity' in Trump supporters in a satirical way. However, the account that posted the meme, *wehatefuckingdonladtrump*, is reinforcing an already contemplated idea. Essentially this meme account is making their own community stronger, without having a significant effect on people who don't already agree with the meme, in order for them to engage in a meaningful discussion about how Trump supporters are when it comes to the seriousness of the virus. On the other side of this social phenomenon, memes making fun of people who do take the virus seriously, are looking to exaggerate how people keep each other safe during the virus by wearing masks.

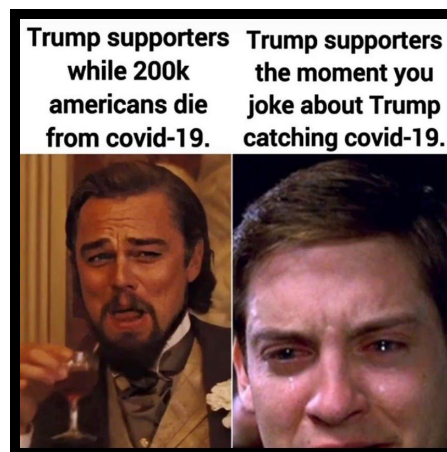


Figure 9. This is a meme from the account *wehatefuckingdonaldtrump* (623K followers)

Conversely, the meme in figure ten is showing how some people associate those who participate in keeping each other safe during the virus, as people who are involved in some sort of cult. Both memes are illustrating how people on different opinionated sides think about one another when it comes to the ways in which people think about the coronavirus. Evidently, in creating these memes they have contributed to their own polarized ideological thinking, not really branching out and effectively transmitting information to the opposite party in order to influence change in their current perception of the virus. Simply put, both memes are polarized in their subcultures because they are producing memes that ultimately feed what they already know. More often than not people on these meme pages are following the pages because of the kinds of satirical information the memes express. In this case there were over 100,000 followers in both meme examples with people who agree and relate to the memes they are perceiving.



Figure 10. This is a meme from the Instagram account liberalsarethesickness (896K followers)

When I sampled 50 people in the comment section for the first meme depicting attitudes towards Trump getting covid, I found that 90% were liberal¹ and agreed with the meme they commented on. This is based on what people had said in response to the meme and what their Instagram bios said about their political preference.

For example, here are some of the liberal comments that spoke negatively about Trump: “you can do it covid I believe in you” (in reference to Trump getting the virus) and “he should be willing to sacrifice his life to restart the economy”. I also found this comment noteworthy because it led to ongoing discourse in the comment section about Trump's overall presidency:

“I never actually wished covid on anyone but you know what...I have no sympathy for this man who directly contributed to the suffering of minorities of all kinds, got it. I am only deeply afraid that he's going to downplay the virus even more and give his radical supporters more false information to spew and become even more violent and pigheaded”.

This was an interesting comment because it shows how people react to memes and what kinds of things people take away from the content of memes. The meme allowed for discussion on the ways in which people view Trump, and how he's responded to the virus. In response to this comment the other 10% that I selected argued in rage about the ways in which liberals are too “sensitive” and “evil” because “liberals are taking away our freedom to breathe, shop, and go out”.

Evidently, this meme created an abundance of discourse in relation to how people view and treat the Coronavirus, and the ways people view and treat each other based on the subcultures they are a part of and agree with. Along with this, this meme is a good example of

¹ I was able to identify 90% of the people as liberal because of what they indicated in their Instagram bios and because of what they expressed in comments.

showing how people react, communicate, and think about current issues. It becomes a vessel for discussion and a way for people to comment their true, unfiltered, feelings, perceptions. As a result people are inherently expressing their subcultures, their beliefs, and what they hold to be true.

When I sampled 50 people for the second meme, based on likes, I found that 100% were Trump supporters. This was also based on the comments in response to the meme and their bios stating their political preference. Overall, most of the comments talked about the ways in which people are upset about the fact that they have to wear masks, and how the Coronavirus is a hoax to control the American economy and its people.

Additionally, police violence is a current, and ongoing conversation found throughout social media, and in the physical world. Because of the recent protests surrounding Black Lives Matter movement there have been a flood of memes arguing to defund the police. However, there have also been memes fighting for police rights and justice because of rioters.

For example, in the meme to the left (figure 11), there is a relation between the murder of a black citizen and a black police officer. The people behind this meme are bringing up inconsistencies in the way the world reacts to black murders. For this meme in particular, 2,000 people have liked it and have therefore become desensitized to the memes' content, the killing of people of color. These people are likely seeing memes like this over and over again, hence desensitizing the idea of murdering people of color as just a normal occurrence; not even thinking about the fact that black people are dying, they are only focusing on the ways in which people talk about black people dying. On the opposite side of the police brutality debate, this meme to the right is highlighting the lack of good cops on the police force. This meme to the right (figure twelve) is making a joke about the lack of 'good cops' on the police force saying

ultimately there are no good cops on the police force. This meme is also only really seen by people who believe there aren't any good cops on the police force.

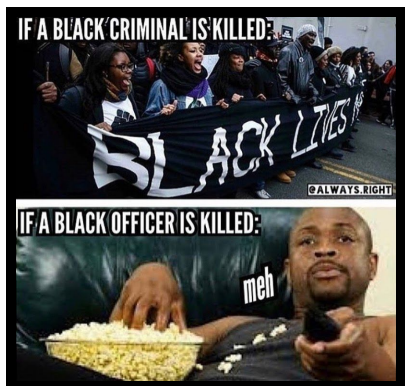


Figure 11. This is a meme from the Instagram account [right.wing.memes](#) (763K followers)



Figure 12. This is a meme from the Instagram account [thefatjew](#) (11 million followers)

When I sampled 50 people in the comment section for this meme I found that 90% were left wing and followed left winged meme pages, while the other 10% argued in defense of the police. For the 10%, people would comment how the police should be thought of, 'as a symbol of peace'. However, since 90% of people who liked and commented on the post followed exclusively left wing content, it is evident that this meme helps create a feedback loop of information within this subculture, making people feel like they are making a difference, when in fact they are pushing their own agenda onto themselves, exactly like the previous meme.

Lastly, another ongoing social political phenomenon involves the rights to individuality and freedom of expression, that is gender/sexuality. This social political phenomenon is a major issue in our country, and has been for centuries, dating back to the 8th century BC (Alcoff and Mendieta, 2003). Unfortunately, not only is this transphobia and homophobia still expressed today in public, it is also mainstream on social media in memes.

In this meme example, (figure thirteen) below, it is evident people are deeming individuals who are transgender as people living in a world of imagination. Nevertheless, while there are memes that expose transphobia there are also memes that try and enlighten and advocate for people who choose to express themselves freely. For example, this meme to the left (figure fourteen) is coming from an account, *feminist*, dedicated to advocating for men and women's rights. In each blank space, reads a response fighting against transphobic expectationstowards transgender people. They are addressing the meaning behind masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and passing as a man or woman. Looking through the femnivist account you will find an abundance of information in regards to how people of any gender should be treated. It is an insightful page that attempts to spread awareness for the overall LGBTQ+ community, however when I sampled 50 people for this meme I found that 100% of the commenters and likes were feminist, hence when trying to spread awareness they are only reaching those who already agree with them.



Figure 13. This a meme from the account notasin (345K followers)

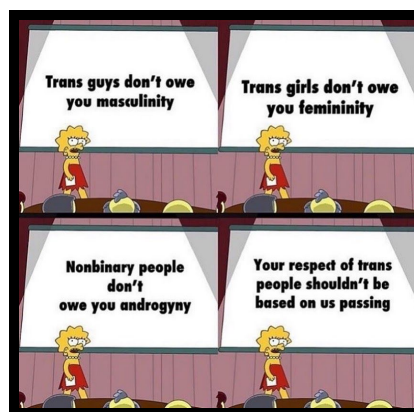


Figure 14. This is a meme from the account feminist (6.5 million followers)

For the first meme, when I sampled 50 people in the comment section I found that 60% were transphobic², and/or confused their feelings towards notions of freedom and gender sexuality, based on what they were commenting. To my surprise there were also a lot of people commenting on the hatred towards transgender people in an attempt to encourage change. However, a majority of the commenters were agreeing with the content of the meme.

Although there is a high volume of political and controversial memes speaking to current social phenomena, there is still a mass circulation of memes reference pop culture in relation to TV shows, music, or art, that still create a sense of collectivism online. Nevertheless, these memes still create, and maintain, subcultures based on people's preferred interests and ideologies. For instance, the meme below, figure fifteen, references Zelda, the most popular video game in the world. It speaks to Zelda lovers all over the country portraying information only Zelda players would know. Conversely, if you were not a Zelda fan you would have no interest or knowledge of the meme, and the meme would not show up on your feed. When I sampled 100 people based on likes and comments I found that 100% were Zelda fans or at least knew about the game enough to understand the meme. Therefore, the ways in which memes create and maintain subcultures is true for non-political memes as well as for political memes, as we have seen in the previous examples.

² Transphobic for my study means having or showing a dislike of or prejudice against transsexual or transgender people. In this case the criteria for transphobia is based on a comment that is transphobic towards the meme content, deliberately commenting hurtful words to silence freedom.

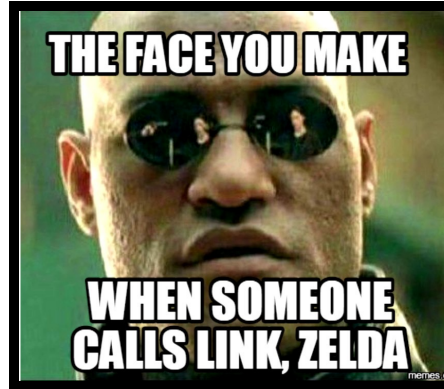


Figure 15. This is a meme from gamersdothings (1.4 million followers)

Thinking in terms of Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries, since nearly all of the people who posted, commented, and liked these memes related with the meme, and shared a similar preconceived notion about the topic of the meme, these memes have effectively spread exaggerated satirical information to people in the same subculture, further influencing members of that subculture to believe more strongly the collective ideology. The symbolic boundaries lie in the ways in which people have formed social groups based on the memes they have liked and shared. Symbolic boundary is conceptual notion, those who don't agree with or support a certain meme group will not be a part of the meme group, and will most likely fight against the group to maintain uniqueness. Along with this, when people then share more memes about the same issues, there becomes a back and forth of further and further exaggerated ideologies, polarizing each ideology from one another. Hence, making these subcultures stronger, ultimately creating the sense of collective identity.

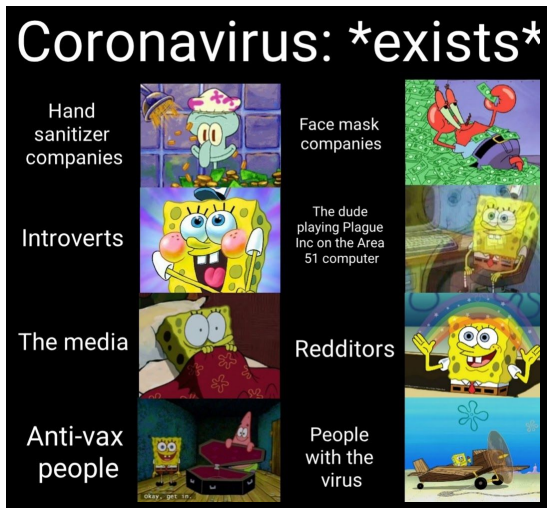


Figure 16. Honorable mentions. Left, SpongeBob meme depicting different peoples perspectives of the coronavirus. Center, police meme talking about the police being a private military. Right, Family Guy meme talking about the ways in which people have judged the outcome of protests by race.

Conclusion

In this project, I wanted to learn more about how influential memes are and how they reflect people's subcultures. In order to understand how memes might have been polarizing people into subcultures, based on their preferred interests, my first step was to clarify where the word meme originated and I learned that it came from the biologist Richard Dawkins. Digging more into the social dynamics, I wanted to understand the cultural framework for ways that we might function on social media and I also wanted to learn about how other scholars have studied meme communication. In this project I have asked about the characteristics of social media and about how people personally connect to memes.

There are four key themes my interviewees highlighted when discussing memes on Instagram: dynamics of social media (the "echo chamber effect"), desensitization, scrolling that is, how much time they spent on social media, and high versus low culture. Learning about how students used memes as a way of spreading awareness of social issues, as well as how long students scrolled through Instagram and how they interpreted memes, was important in understanding how social media polarizes people into subcultures.

What I discovered was how influential and hegemonic memes are in the minds of the people who consume them. It is evident from the interviews, content analysis of Instagram, and the previous literature on social media, that people are polarized into subcultures and this continues to grow with the subcultures they operate in. This is because their feeds are curated based on the memes they like and share. Because of this, social media has an intense echo chamber effect. Evidently, the polarization of meme subcultures leads to the oversaturation of controversial topics such as Black Lives Matter, feminism, Trump supporters, sexuality, and more, turning already radical ideologies into an even more radical form, creating distance from

what is truly important. This can be dangerous for society because as Americans we believe we are always striving for freedom and equality, yet, through the oversaturated ideologies and understanding of controversial topics, through the production of memes, we are halting our progress towards kindness and equality. People are becoming distilled into bad ideas about what freedom is and where we are going as a society.

I learned a lot about the subcultures at Marx College through the discussion of cancel culture, desensitization, and high versus low culture. Efforts to communicate values of social justice were overwhelmed by the dynamics of oversaturation, along with students' tendencies to cancel those they see as not upholding their moral values. I learned that students canceled people in the real world, but could literally delete them from their feed, therefore erasing the opportunity to influence change in those they have canceled. Students are also afraid of becoming desensitized from important issues such as the murdering of black people, and overall violence. Students were also faced with the challenges of deciphering important information and distinguishing insignificant information.

Nevertheless, there are several topics this research did not highlight or expand upon, that further research could look into further. The first is private Instagram accounts. Not all of Instagram is open to viewers; there are private accounts created to keep those whom the users do not agree with out. Because of this I was unable to reach a lot of meme accounts because I am not a part of that subculture.

During the content analysis of Instagram meme posts, I looked into the comments section of the posts to analyse the audience of the meme. My analysis was limited because I was not able to view the private accounts that commented. An example of this limitation is that there could possibly be a correlation between people having private accounts and their position of support

for the meme. When I analyzed a meme about one topic, and concluded the audience was in support of that topic, the private accounts I could not analyze might not have supported the meme, and that would cause conflicts with my conclusion. On top of this, some accounts posting memes are private, meaning their audience only consists of members they invite, forcing their audience to already fit into some category which makes the confirmation bias even more extreme.

The second topic that can be expanded in further research is internet bots. An Internet bot, web robot, robot or simply bot, is a software application that runs automated tasks (scripts) over the Internet. Typically, bots perform tasks that are simple and repetitive, much faster than a person could. The most extensive use of bots is for web crawling, in which an automated script fetches, analyzes and files information from web servers. According to a 2016 bot trafficking report, more than half of all web traffic is generated by bots (Zeifman, 2016). For this study I assumed that all the accounts and memes I was researching came from real people who made them. If I had time to do further research I would look into the possibility that bots are being used as agents.

In this research I wanted to honor the voices of my interviewees the best way I could. All of my interviewees were extremely helpful in enabling me to understand how memes are influencing their lives and perceptions of the world. A majority of the interviewees favored memes as a way of expressing their identities accurately, while a few believed the memes they viewed only expressed part of their identities. Scrolling on Instagram was something almost all of my interviewees talked about, emphasizing how they want to slow down and be more present in real life. Taking breaks away from Instagram was popular among my interviewees, due to their concerns about desensitization and wanting to not be in the echo chamber it creates.

Although Instagram has an addictive trait, I had a sense from my interviewees it was addicting in a way they enjoyed.

Although there are challenges when it comes to, desensitization, polarization and oversaturation of important topics on Instagram and social media, Instagram is a great tool for business growth and development, blogging, connecting with friends and family, and overall connection with one another. Although I went into some of the biggest downsides of meme culture and social media as a whole, this remains only part of the story, and there is much more to memes than this.

With all this being said, this has to meme something!



Figure 17. This is a meme coming from the bardcollegememe page (3,576 followers)

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Appendix A

1. What is your name?
2. Are you involved in the use of social media? If so, in what ways?
3. Do you use the applications Instagram, Twitter and/or Facebook?
4. How often do you find yourself on social media?
5. Do you like memes?
6. What do you think people like or dislike about memes?
7. When was the last time you commented on a meme? What was it about? Can you remember what you were thinking about?
8. In general do you think memes reflect society?
9. Do you think this meme reflects aspects of culture in society? If so, how?
10. How many people do you think share this view?
11. How do you think this meme might affect you socially?
12. Would you discuss this meme with friends?
13. Are there certain memes you talk about with certain people? If so, explain?
14. Do you think memes are biased?
15. Do you think memes overall have an effect on the consciousness of people?
16. Do you think memes could be seen as functioning as speech?
17. Overall what kinds of discourses do you see people having about the content of memes?
18. Overall do you think memes play a role in explaining society? If so, what do you think?