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Into the meme stream: The value and spectacle of Internet memes

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Abstract

This article 'tracks' memes, forms of networked, pictorial/caption humour and social commentary – as well as cultural labour, through a process of value change: the 'meme stream'. This is a process of incorporation of cultural resistance and labour into, and by, the dominant forces of capital that facilitate them: social media networks and their advertisers. We use Marcuse's *Repressive Tolerance* alongside Debord's *Spectacle* to argue that as memes move, increasing their audience as they go, they lose resonance with a dedicated audience but gain exposure with a more diffuse audience, which is detrimental to the expression of political, countercultural or socially provocative positions. We use Doge as our explanatory structural example. Our contribution is to demonstrate that the systems that allow for the flow and movement of memes reduce their expressive content, shifting them towards a template that is impotent for cultural, social or political critique.

Keywords

Capital, labour, memes, repressive tolerance, spectacle

Introduction

Memes are forms of collective, networked, pictorial, and caption humour and social commentary, as well as cultural labour. They are similar to other forms of subcultural production in that they begin by generating interest within their subcultural group, before

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transcending these barriers by resonating with other groups or ideologies. Importantly, some memes are not designed to escape their subcultural groups and go viral, memes produced within fringe groups, such as QAnon or hate or terroristic organizations, are not designed for external consumption. Though they may express their messages within a popular meme template, they do so with the intention of communicating only to their in-group. A meme that attempts to go beyond its subcultural confines can die off or continue to grow until it becomes quite large, big enough to be recognizable, independent of its previous cultural associations. At this stage, it could be seen as a marketing device. It may be featured in advertisements or branded products may seek to be associated with it due to its value as a recognizable cultural commodity – we focus on these stages of being. While we use the example of the 'Doge meme' throughout this, it is there as a structural example. Our point is that the stages provided can be used to understand memes in general, as well as how their evolution through the stages can increase their public presence but diminish the specificity of their meaning. These stages may be more applicable to some memes more than others. Most memes will not start the process at the beginning and work through to the end – the process is permeable – and most applicable to memes which have been ideologically aligned at some point in their journey, not necessarily at the start.

Throughout these stages, cultural producers are reimagining the meme in terms of its pervious status and value, and its newly developed meaning – adding commentary and value of their own. These multiple meanings and values are always influencing the meme's interpretation, with the more paid-attention-to commentaries adjusting the meaning of the meme as a whole. As these memes move from being small subcultural commentaries up to marketing devices or advertising components, they are gaining audience but losing their exclusivity and subcultural resonance. Ultimately, this process causes the meme to either languish in a particular stage, die off somewhere along the line or be almost entirely emptied of meaning and cultural resonance, along with its value as a marketing device. Thus, a cycle or flow that must continually renew itself emerges, because by the time a meme has reached the advertisement stage, it is at the zenith of its popularity and recognizability, but the nadir of its resonance with any particular cultural group. This is a cycle of movement through stages, as associated with value, the sort of which has been 'tracked' before by scholars such as Lash and Lury (2007).

The recurring example that we track to illustrate this cycle is 'Doge'. The term 'doge' can be traced back to a June 24, 2005 episode of the comedy web series Homestar Runner (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). On February 13, 2010, the term began its association with the image of a Shiba Inu posing with a side-eye glare, previously posted by its owner Atsuko Sato, that would begin its journey through the meme stream. Users then found additional images of Shiba Inus, added comic sans script representing commentary or something akin to the 'doge's' thoughts.

The 'meme stream' begins with 'creation', where subcultural (sometimes resistive) labour is invested in the creation of a meme. We argue this is a form of 'venture labour' (Neff, 2012). It then moves through 'cultural arbitration', where 'affinity groups' (Gee, 2005) adjudicate its value based upon often moveable reference values within the subculture. After this, a meme goes through 'debut', where it is shared outside of affinity groups, into broader Internet culture, often without the permission and acknowledgement of its

creator. Successful memes move then into 'co-optation', where they are continuously adjusted, distorted and manipulated towards the promotion of new or alternate value systems. Finally, a meme reaches 'transcendence', where it leaves behind most of the cultural value that it created to become allied with signifiers of profit-generating (usually small) marketing schemes or brands or to become a marketing scheme itself.

This is a process of incorporation of cultural resistance and cultural labour into, and by, the dominant forces of capital that facilitate and use them: social media networks and their respective advertisers. Our argument is built by combining Marcuse's (1969) *Repressive Tolerance* alongside Debord's ([1967] 1984) *Spectacle* to synthesize the ways in which the systems that facilitate memes have an absorptive relationship with their cultural creators and meanings. Our contribution is to show that as memes become more popular and familiar, they diminish in their ability to provide provocative or critical critique; social, political or otherwise. What may have begun as a meme providing a thoughtful and critical piece of social commentary will have that critical component stripped from it in the process of it increasing in popularity and familiarity. It becomes a template for meme production and has its critical capability removed.

Literature review

Memes have been considered through their Darwinian tendency to undergo natural selection – often compared with genes and studied with a natural sciences lens (see Atran, 2001) – or their existence as communicative artefacts or community cohesion (see Zannettou et al., 2018). More cultural approaches also began with the way memes reproduce themselves, with comparisons made to myths and urban legends (Heath et al., 2001). In this way, digital scholars have primarily studied the meme as a way to consider viral spread, metamorphosis, duplication and replication of digital culture (see Burgess, 2008; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012). There have been studies in law focusing on existing copyright legislation that falls short when approaching unique qualities of memes – such as unknown origin and authorship – or intangibility. This can go some way to helping us understand their potential disruption to existing systems of capital – but these works (see Cotter, 2005; Wiggins, 2019) are frequently rooted in specific jurisdictions, which memes transgress, and in their scope stop short of a root and branch cultural critique. Our work sits at the intersection of these approaches – presenting a life course that memes follow, as they are culturally selected – and considering the implications that this has on their value, both economic and as cultural icons. We look less at attributes and more at stages of being.

The breaking down of a meme into pieces for the purpose of analysis has been done before – notably Shifman's (2011) anatomy of a YouTube meme – noticing themes of a critique of masculinity and whimsy, and a satirical mimicking of contemporary popular culture, which could in themselves be interpreted as a critique of capital systems. Where we move on from this work is to break down memes into their stages of development rather than their critical components as a mode of tracking their transformation as they are moulded by the spaces in which they are consumed. In a similar vein, Wiggins and Bowes (2015) dismantled memes into 'structurational' categories as they metamorphosize. These are 'spreadable media', 'emergent meme' and 'meme' – which loosely map

onto two of our stages of 'creation' (emergent meme) and 'cultural arbitration' (meme). Where we further this contribution is by making the addition of 'co-optation' and 'transcendence', to illustrate the ways in which the capital systems that memers (meme producers) seek to critique reabsorb those grass roots cultural artefacts. This contribution is important as it advances a framework for memes in stages, and adds a critique of how those stages function to manipulate, mute or suppress culturally or politically subversive messaging that is a foundational quality of memes. Such a framework can explain memes in the fullness of their scope – from grassroots cultural artefact to post-meme, or brand, advertisement and commercial product.

Literat and van den Berg (2019) have demonstrated that memes have the tendency to rapidly expand their value, to be co-opted, manipulated, used by others, and for the credit or lineage back to their original creator to be lost along the way. This understanding is not lost on the memers themselves. Users address this characteristic in meme format – making light of the allegorical relationship between the often-duplicitous worlds of memes as cultural artefacts and the stock market, through the Reddit [online forum] 'Meme Economy'. This is where 'meme traders appropriate stock market terminology to discuss and appraise memes' (Literat and van den Berg, 2019: 232), making predictions about new memes' future trajectory through the various stages of cultural arbitration. Users position themselves as the authoritative cultural arbiters – something which we will revisit in the subsection of the same name. This arbitration is described as taking place in a 'playful social context' (p. 233), in itself this critical discourse is a meme of self-awareness. Although Literat and van der Berg (2019) make the claim that this economic language is impotent, because 'the "traded" memes do not translate into any actual economic capital' (p. 244) – the authors equate this to what Bourdieu ([1984] 2010) calls an 'investment strategy' in cultural capital which we develop. Although they rarely translate to economic capital for those who made them, or those who pass value judgements, memes can progress beyond this point to become very lucrative.

Nowak (2016) theorizes memes as occupying both horizontal and vertical modalities – essentially adding peer reproduction to the hierarchical model that we associate with Adorno and Horkheimer's ([1947] 1979) Marxist 'culture industry' – a thread that has been well continued in Brown and Bristow's (2019) collection, *Seizing the Memes of Production*. However, political messaging intended in many memes and meme cultures is transient and often co-opted. Memes are intertwined with the platforms in which they exist, and the communities that they are posted in (Kasimov et al., 2023) – which often make impotent attempts at action. Where collective action has been tried in meme form, for example the attempt at a 'short squeeze' on Wall Street by users on Reddit's r/wallstreetbets, the boundaries that exist in the platforms and structures which memes are shared can diminish or thwart attempts at change (Vaughan et al., 2023).

Political sentiments, while most regularly subversive (as in, anticapitalistic, anti-establishment), are not always leftist – (Colley and Moore, 2022; Farhart et al., 2023; Tuters and Hagen, 2020). However, studies have also found that memes, when used positively (to foster a sense of community) can generate a sense of togetherness and compassion towards political opponents (Masullo, 2023). Despite this potential for positive intervention, organically, memes are more likely to maintain 'partisan scenes' by reinforcing political echo chambers among in-groups (McKelvey et al., 2021), facilitated by

complicit platforms. In addition, prominent politicians have utilized or set up 'meme factories' – 'entities whose primary function is to produce or aggregate content such as images, videos or texts with the aim of it being circulated, replicated, or transformed by Internet users' (Lee and Hoh, 2021: 2) to 'appropriate Internet cultural forms' (Baluch et al., 2023: 2), and imitate mass movements among people. Here we reveal the ways in which these modalities interplay, with hierarchies that memers often seek to dismantle invariably fortified in this dynamic.

Theoretical underpinning: Debord and Marcuse

Guy Debord's ([1967] 1984) work *The Society of the Spectacle* explains that, as a thing becomes increasingly publicly visible or popular, that thing begins to possess the qualities of the spectacle. The spectacle is something that has generated enough attention for itself that that attention bestows actual exchange value onto the thing being paid attention to. The attention paid to that thing has exchange value because the attention becomes a commodity itself, enabling what garners the notice and recognition to sell its audience to someone dealing a commodity, a political idea or something else. However, importantly, Debord ([1967] 1984) explains that the attention and value given to the spectacle aids in the reification of the capitalist status quo. He claims that the spectacle further alienates one from oneself and from others while also concealing and distorting the relations between classes and individuals. He calls this 'separation perfected' (Debord, [1967] 1984: 1), explaining that the spectacle serves to pacify the masses so that the politics of bourgeois capitalism can continue unabated. We argue that, as memes become spectacles, they do just this. They distract audiences (if just momentarily) from issues that should be relevant, or important to them. Even when memes are a commentary on a pertinent issue, they serve to pacify audiences by reducing the nuance of that issue to that which can fit within the template of the meme form and joke being made in it. Thus, facilitating a kind of indifference or paralysis to working for change towards the issues concerned.

Memes are forms of networked, pictorial/caption humour and social commentary – as well as cultural labour, and in this article, we refer specifically to memes which have at some point had a political message attached to them. Memes become spectacles the same way any other spectacle does, by garnering enough attention for that meme and its attention to become valuable. Successful meme spectacles emerge, develop and spread very rapidly. They become self-referential, increasingly esoteric and more attuned to a particular subcultural perspective to the point that only those who specifically pay attention to them can follow them and understand their evolution and trajectory. Equally, they expand in ways that incorporate new references and cultural commentaries. However, these memes, too, require knowledge of their evolution to fully appreciate or understand. Understanding this is necessary to be an informed consumer of memes, as well as a competent producer. Possessing this specific knowledge grants one a type of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) that can be utilized to increase the number of social media followers one has, increase the number of meme accounts that share one's work and even generate traditional forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, [1984] 2010) by having capitalist enterprises pay attention to the meme producer and offer to pay them to lend their

cultural credibility to an advertisement that the business interest wants the meme producer to present to their audience. Marcuse (1969) refers to this sort of dynamic as repressive tolerance – the idea that capitalistic structures will allow for forms of critique or rebellion against them as long as they can borrow and incorporate the popular rebellious aesthetics and audiences (while abandoning the social and political agenda) into their larger structural discourse.

This is the foundation of the argument we make here. Memes, and the social media sites that act as their hubs of distribution, serve as a form of pacification and distraction against active political and/or social involvement. Furthermore, they diminish, distort, conceal or intentionally disregard the truth or facts of the topic they refer to (especially when they deal with newsworthy and/or political topics). This diminishment happens most severely to ideologically-aligned grassroots memes as they move through these categories. This is often necessary due to the constraints of the meme form, but it is also often done to create humour, or outrage, or some other reaction. The ability of memes to generate an emotional reaction helps account for their rapid spread through a population. Coincidentally, memes' ability to distort and distract becomes a crucial location from where their value as a spectacle emerges. Ultimately, this positions memes in a place where they are potentially provocative and profitable, but always politically impotent in terms of informed socially-critical or revolutionary messaging. Here, we unpack how this exchange of values works in stages of movement.

Approach

Memes are a product of networks, the qualities which we highlight below show their movement through networks, which splinter and are splintering, repeat, circle back and interweave. Since there is no one unifying journey through a network, a repeatable or formulaic 'method' of assessing cultural, political and capital value through stages is fugacious. Instead, we have opted for a tactic influenced by Lash and Lury's (2007) 'sociology of the [media] object'. They use an approach of 'tracking and tracing' cultural artefacts as they develop, in media and online networks, through their consumption, characteristics, sale and, importantly, their changing representations through movement. In this way, media objects are not stationary, but active networked and animated sets of relations in motion (Lash and Lury, 2007) – lending itself well to the following of memes.

We follow this ethnographic approach focusing on representations, but the actual process of 'tracking and tracing' in the work is presented as a lens for seeing and mapping movement, cultural landscapes and changes in value where all data, especially that which is highly visible, should be considered as important. This process of observatory online 'looking' has previously been described as 'lurking' (Berry, 2004).

Similarly, Hagen (2022: 2) endorses an approach of 'tracing' when researching memes, since the anonymity afforded by the Internet renders enquiry focused on the individual a challenge. They suggest in the selection of case studies that 'panoramic' memes, ones which 'present or evoke totalising views on a collective' can lead to 'important narratives on their imagined essence'. This is to avoid looking at specific instances of memes in closed setting, but rather, to consider their movement as 'nodal points', which can 'trace further associations'.

Lash and Lury (2007) track multiple case-study-like examples in their work – our approach here has been to follow one continuous cultural artefact to illustrate broader stages of movement, which is 'panoramic' in its wideness of reach and breadth of utilization, coloured with examples of other occurrences. A crucial point to bear in mind here is that the meme stream is not linear – what we present here is a set of stages of value change, which skip, circle back and interweave. A meme may move through all stages, though not linearly, skip stages, repeat them or cycle through them in any number of ways. In addition, a meme may garner an ideological meaning or association later in its life and circle back to 'creation'.

Presenting the meme stream

Creation

This is the point at which a creative producer applies their interest, experience and creative talent to the production of a sometimes-humorous pictorial commentary that in some way captures a portion of the cultural zeitgeist and facilitates the sharing of the image and thus the ability for it to become a meme (as opposed to an in-joke shared exclusively between a small affinity group) (Gee, 2005). The creation of a meme, in this way, is similar to all pictorial humour or 'caption comedy' – a genre which has been popular, mostly in political satire and newspaper media, for a long time. As such, a meme can be created by taking familiar imagery and/or commentary and recontextualizing it, creating a 'memetic lingua Franca' (Milner, 2012), thus allowing wider engagement with the meme produced. The majority of these cultural artefacts (though not all) contain some form of deliberately contentious or contrarian sentiment – that may offend the dominant morality but appeal to those in the group that it is intended to be shared with. These are often referred to as 'image macro memes' (Wiggins and Bowes, 2015), which 'develop from television and movies, TV commercials, art, or the abundance of prosumer images online' (p. 1987) – drawing on the recognizable schema attached to already popular forms of meme in order to deliver counternarratives with momentum, remixing the known form and benefitting from its familiarity.

In the case of the Doge meme, this is where, in 2010, a user posted the image of the side-eye Shiba Inu to reddit [online forum], using the title of their post to identify the image as a 'doge' [deliberate misspelling of 'dog'], which triggered the process of alteration and remixing that comes to define a meme as a media format. These creations are rarely 'new' or unique parodies or interpretations – a key quality of a meme is that it is self-referential, drawing upon a longitudinal joke that's groundwork was laid several iterations ago – with memers positioned in a race to create the latest, and most humorous addition, often by recontextualization, on a long-standing joke. As Wiggins and Bowes (2015: 1987) put it – 'when spreadable media are altered, remixed, parodied, and so on, they become the emergent meme'. 'Alteration', 'remixing' and 'parody' are perpetual – with popular formats becoming known as 'templates'.

Because of this self-referentiality, it is important for consumers of the meme to understand its lineage in order to fully benefit from its value as a piece of pictorial commentary – giving importance to 'affinity groups' (Gee, 2005) in the movement of a meme to the next level.

Cultural arbitration

This is where a creator releases a meme they have created to an affinity group (Gee, 2005), or when an affinity group is formed, most often via a form of social media, around it. The creator may release it to their own followers, or a small or closed group, who then judge it. This group is in some way valued or respected by the creator. At this point, the group evaluates the quality of the meme and makes judgements about its humour or social commentary – an example being what Literat and van den Berg (2019) refer to in their work on negotiations of value in Reddit's *Meme Economy*. These judgements become reflections of the kind of 'value' that the meme has – the belief that the meme will be enjoyed by a group larger than those evaluating it. This could be for comedic reasons, trolling reasons (putting forward divisive or offensive positions knowing that they will elicit a reaction) or commentary on politics, sports, society, media and so on. In this stage, most memes die off, and few are deemed worthy, or have politically appropriate platforms available, for wider release – which we call 'debut'. Memes which do not break out at this stage can become 'echo chambers' of cyclical reinforcement and pseudo-debate among fringe communities (Grusauskaite et al., 2023).

The Doge meme experiences arbitration in 2012 when the blog 'Your Daily Doge' was established, posting frequent interpretations of the image. By the summer of 2012, users on 4chan and Tumblr [online forums] began to post versions of the image wearing different outfits. Specific affinity groups (Gee, 2005) emerged on Tumblr [online forum] devoted to 'Polite Doge' and 'Shiba Confessions' later the same year.

An indicator of whether a meme is appreciated and ready for its debut is whether it is remixed by the affinity group. Alongside Doge, an example of a template which has been repeatedly parodied is the famous 'like/dislike' dichotomy depicting the Canadian musical artist, Drake, in a receptive and non-receptive pose – used by memers to make humorous comparisons between things that they wish to portray as 'good' against 'bad' [2015]. Since then, the object (Drake) has been replaced with everyone from a cat (to make comments about their furtive nature), to Donald Trump (to make derogatory comment about his choices as President of the United States). This was further remixed in a recent [2021] tweet where a lady going by the name of 'Sharon' appeared to blame the producer of a pie [Marie Callender's] that she had purchased for the fact that she had left it too long in the oven and it burnt – which yielded an array of ridiculing meme responses drawing on the word 'Sharon', or the image of a burnt pie, for which the consumer would need to have knowledge of the original tweet to understand. For example, a popular iteration of this meme featured people documenting any inconvenience they brought upon themselves as being the fault of Marie Callender. Another was American politician Bernie Sanders covering the only non-blackened spot of the pie – a political commentary that requires the affinity group's knowledge, shared understanding and judgement [that Mr. Sanders is the only palatable politician].

Debut

This is the point at which a meme, deemed valuable through cultural arbitration, is exhibited in social media spaces with higher, more diverse followings. It is when a meme is

presented to a group beyond those who share a specific or esoteric cultural interest. If the meme is appreciated, it is liked and shared. If it is not appreciated, it gets buried in the flow of the social media feed and is quickly forgotten about. The debut occurs through social sharing mechanisms, and the successful examples are usually picked up by professional unveilers, who, with their social media clout, are adorning their selected memes with increased audience and spectacle and adding new forms of cultural capital to them. Memes are not yet altered, but are 'platformed' or 'endorsed' by heavyweight posters who act as second-tier arbiters, with a significant role in 'curating' the cultural memeatic landscape.

An example is the Instagram account/marketing firm @fuckjerry, with 16.8 million followers at the time of writing – the owner of which has been sued for content theft (Lecher, 2019). This is the first stage at which memes are usually monetised, not for the benefit of their creator – and it raises questions of ownership discussed in the literature review, around whether these works were 'stolen', or simply given away. At this stage, 'the meme [has] become active and non-metaphorical' (Burman, 2012: 89). It is utilized by enterprise for monetary capital via the cultural and social capitals it earned in arbitration, a social media account uses it as content to drive engagement with their account, which is monetizable. A meme that is used in this way is a piece of cultural work which *works* for the benefit of a select few arbiters, not creators.

For Doge, the precise point of debut is challenging to pin down, with several points in its history representing break-out moments in terms of visibility. This could be in January of 2013 when the reddit [online forum] 'r/Doge' was created, bringing the meme to the front page of the Internet experience of tens of millions of users. Or, when YouTube applied a function that would switch the text of its search results to multicoloured comic sans – mimicking the meme's text style – in results of the search 'doge meme'.

Debuting a meme successfully and it being appreciated comes with further issues for its creator. The largest of which is to lose control of the meme and its intended meaning. This happens when a meme becomes popular enough that the imagery of it is instantly recognizable. This is the beginning point when a meme moves from being a particular commentary or joke to a kind of template to be reused with the imagery being remixed with new message content. It is where the meme, by expanding in popularity and recognizability, begins to cease being associated with one perspective. Other creators remix the meme because of the increased spectacle it has achieved, hoping to reflect some of the attention onto their repurposing of the meme. When that same recognizable imagery is used to make a different statement or convey a different message, the meme has been co-opted, and the original creator loses the control they once had over it.

Co-optation

This loss of control is what we call co-optation and enables the signature characteristic of memes (that they evolve with facilitation from the communities in which they exist) connected with the forms of capital that they are and that they contain, via their movement through tiers. This is the point at which the meme is popular enough to be repeatedly reused, reimagined and recontextualized into that beyond the tastes of the original affinity group. Two things are happening here:

In the first instance, the lifecycle of a meme loops back to the stages of creation, cultural arbitration and debut – but memes may not move through every stage, and not always in a linear order. The potential for a meme to die off by not finding an audience, or to dwindle into obscurity due to disinterest is possible at any stage, though more likely in the first three. A lot of the work of creation (the inception of a new concept, 'template' or joke) has been achieved in the meme's original form. In cultural arbitration, a co-opted meme has its own symbolic language – it is a known quantity, calling back to a past shared cultural moment. For the large debuters, familiar meme templates are a less risky economic proposition for their brand. For these reasons, its second trip through the process can be expedited.

Second, while this can happen with the template of a meme, it can also happen with the messaging of it. If an idea (often a joke) receives enough cultural resonance it can be repackaged through different imagery and presented as an original meme. There is very often reconstruction of the idea or new visual interpretations of it, but the foundation of these memes is one that has been appropriated from a previous version. In this way, the creation and co-development of a meme is a kind of original intellectual and artistic contribution, as such the derivative memes that follow should then largely be considered hack work (Becker, 1982). That is work that is technically proficient within the confines of the meme form, but uninspired and produced to generate attention for itself, as opposed to being an original artistic contribution or social commentary. The reuse of a meme template, or the remixing of a message or joke from one meme onto another template could all be considered hack work. The point of this is not to contribute new thoughtful or critical commentary, but rather to capitalize on the popularity of a meme by reflecting some of the spectacle onto the created meme to generate attention and cultural capital for it.

An example resonant with Doge can be an incident in late summer 2013 known as the 'raid', when users from 4chan [online forum] chose to infiltrate a rival forum, the American themed subreddit 'r/Murica', posting versions of the Shiba Inu wearing stereotypically American outfits, or in cliched Americana settings, or engaging in typecast, often derogatory American activities. Here the meme was moved away from its original messaging (that of cute dog thoughts) to a more aggressive positioning, being used to aggravate reddit users by flooding message boards with Doge content to the point where moderators had to remove it.

While co-opted hack-work memes can be used to pester others, meme hack work is more often done to encourage co-optation of memes by parties interested in branding and advertising. When a meme leaves the exclusive domain of social media and is used in some capacity in advertising, re-created with embedded corporate messaging or consumer ideology, there is an even further emptying of the meme of subcultural resonance and meaning. At this point, it is replaced by mass market recognition, which can be utilized in marketing terms to increase spectacle and borrow the cultural capital of the creators and arbiters. By then (like most marketing images), the meme has lost its capacity to provide any critical, reflective or revolutionary commentary.

Transcendence

As memes become more prominent and successful, the audiences who are aware of them and use them for their own purpose grow. The various perspectives, humour sensibilities,

intended meanings and audiences and goals of new authors who reuse a meme force that meme go through a kind of evolution that adds additional layers of meaning and referential interpretation to it. Simply, as a meme is used more and more by wider audiences its cultural associations and what it can refer to expands, but its original meaning, and the resonance it had with the cultures that produced it becomes increasingly diluted.

The effects of this are generally that the community that was originally invested in the meme can become frustrated or indifferent with a piece of community identity co-opted and rebranded in ways that the originally invested community did not agree to. At this stage, the meme itself has become so layered with connotations, history and interpretations that it becomes emptied of meaning and is primarily valuable for its spectacle and recognizability. At this point the meme may not even be able to be used ironically. It is mostly valueless in terms of meaning and humour, but it has value and utility because of how well-known it is. Its spectacle can be a useful marketing tool – marketing companies use memes because the audience already has a familiarity with the form and characters and thus has an implied relationship with them. This makes marketing messages easier to convey and saves marketing firms considerable work. As Sumita Gangwani of No Good Marketing Agency writes, 'As a content type, memes originate from the idea of something that is socially accepted and understood. . . . with an extensive backlog of memes accessible out there on the internet and new ones being created every day, there is plenty of existing material to easily launch meme ads at any point' (Gangwani, n.d.).

Doge had evolved far beyond its original meme context. As it gained popularity, it was reconceptualized, expanded in terms of what it referred to and eventually made into a kind of marketing image that capitalized on 'doge's' Internet fame – the best example of which is Doge coin and the trademarking of the doge image by American company 'Ultra Pro' in the summer of 2014. On December 6, 2013, it was used as the logo for the cryptocurrency Dogecoin. Ultra Pro, who own the trademark, grant Dogecoin free use of the image. Now that 'doge' has transcended to become associated with a financial product the 'doge' image was successfully copyrighted and trademarked.

When Dogecoin became a trademarked, traded financial product all the previous Doge memes became a referent to the cryptocurrency. The doge memes still have a cultural value independent of Dogecoin, but every iteration of a doge meme is, in a way, free publicity for Dogecoin – the commercial association is now embedded in the meme itself. Furthermore, the community of unpaid meme producers and consumers create additional promotional value for those products and services when they create a new meme using the imagery. They also expand consumer awareness by increasing the audience that is exposed to the meme imagery. Because of Dogecoin, the doge meme can never just be the doge meme again.

Discussion and conclusion

We argue that as memes move through these stages, they lose subcultural resonance while their meanings, messages and audiences are expanded. We further argue that as this happens, the ability of a meme to present critical or subversive social commentary diminishes. This is not a coincidence. Rather, as meme templates become increasingly successful, the structural confines of social media and the ideological confines of

capitalism, substantially limit a meme's ability to be socially or politically subversive, critical or defiant.

Memes begin as a kind of personal creative production (creation) that gets shared among a group of friends, or like-minded individuals who interact with each other around a particular set of themes or ideas (cultural arbitration). These groups can be thought of as affinity groups (Gee, 2005), and one of the implications for producing memes and distributing them among these affinity groups is to increase one's subcultural position within them. This helps explain how most memes are produced, why there are so many of them and how they get produced for free; the producers can express themselves, and be appreciated by their peer groups for their ideas, sense of humour, design ability and so on. In terms of Doge, this was how it began. Memers engaged in playful expression through the Doge format, expressing 'Doge's' thoughts on a topic. Most were simply fun, some were political in their commentary and some were subversive – by 2012, Doge had broken out across the Internet (debut).

In the 2013 run up to the US midterm elections, Doge had experienced a meteoric rise in popularity online. The year 2013 saw Doge co-opted by mainstream politicians to capitalize on its spectacle and pander to the more youthful online contingency of voters. This brought Doge firmly into mainstream culture, placing it under social and technological scrutiny. While this expanded the reach and familiarity of Doge, it also positioned the meme's expressive potential more securely within centrist politics. Memers interested in using the Doge template for more creative, critical or subversive forms of expression began to fade. After the 2014 midterm elections, Doge, having served its political utility, was no longer used as a political cudgel – it was still an immensely popular meme but had lost its ability to present critical perspective (co-optation). Its shifting and expanded use in the public sphere caused it to go through a process somewhere between the natural diminishment of meaning that Mazzoleni (2015) describes and the inversion of news into trivia or infotainment that Postman (2010) describes. Its value was now its familiarity; its spectacle.

Because of this discursive shift in positioning of Doge into moderate political positions, any subversive, revolutionary or even truly critical messages presented through the Doge template would be read as disingenuous or intentionally ironic jokes – Doge lost its ability to provide any real commentary at all: by 2017, it was being almost exclusively used ironically or surreally (knowyourmeme.com, n.d.). This was largely what Doge was until it transcended even this ironic usage by being turned into a commodity and marketing image of itself. This was in 2021, when Doge became an non-fungible token (NFT) and when the popularity of Dogecoin skyrocketed. The cycle for Doge was now complete. It had lost all capacity to provide any legitimate critique or criticism, it was no longer even useful ironically, now it was simply a marketing strategy being used to generate additional value for those commodities that bore its image (transcendence). Doge illustrates that a meme's value is changed by its movement through our stages and by becoming more present or a bigger spectacle (Debord, [1967] 1984) – the audience it reaches is the main value for advertisers.

Memes move almost exclusively in digital spaces, predominantly social media – platforms that reflect the dominant western cultural values of middle-class, politically-centric masculine patriarchy. These values are never explicitly stated, instead, enforced and

made apparent through algorithms and practices that censor and promote posts. The accounts of frequent offenders can be suspended, accounts that are sometimes offenders and deemed unsavoury may get 'shadow banned', meaning the account does not appear in searches and followers do not see new posts but the account is not suspended or completely 'deplatformed'. Accounts that are popular and follow guidelines have their posts appear to their followers and increase the chances of those followers sharing, remixing or plagiarizing their memes. Accounts may even be 'whitelisted', meaning they are ignored by censorship algorithms and only reviewed by social media employees if those accounts are legitimately reported by users, rendering them immune to the rules other accounts must play by. This process is heavily criticized and deemed arbitrary and unfair by many users and content creators (Aytac, 2022; Riemer and Peter, 2021).

The effect of algorithmic censorship and the meme producers knowing how it works amounts to repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1969). Repressive tolerance is the idea that authoritative structures allow for forms of protest and rebellion against them if they can incorporate them into their larger structural discourse. The result is that protests and rebellions are neutralized in their revolutionary capacity and are limited further by having a potentially revolutionary idea constrained by being brought into the discursive confines of what the authoritative structure can tolerate. The idea then appears as merely a provocative or controversial glimmer within the authoritative structure, instead of one that provokes revolution against that structure. An example of this is the way capitalist political structures allow for rebellious political movements, so long as their aesthetics and identities can be turned into a fashion or fad (a further way to extract surplus value from labour) and thus be depleted of their political revolutionary capacity. Think here of how politically charged movements, like the 1960s counterculture movement or the anti-capitalist 1980s punk rock movement, were tolerated, incorporated into the existing authoritative discourses and systematically reduced to being little more than aesthetic choices with only vague impotent reference to their former revolutionary messages. For Doge, this occurred when US politicians began using the meme form to promote their own policies and lambast their political rivals.

The tension between free speech, expression and authoritative control within a polite liberal democratic society is resolved by allowing revolting or revolutionary expressions, images and messages to persist, but systematically semiotically reconstructing their meaning to fit in with the narrowly defined discursive window of capitalistically beholden democratic expressions. This is happening with memes, where this subcultural labour is being exploited for the benefit of the dominant culture via the process of incorporation that we have demonstrated, by driving interactions with popular social media meme accounts and/or by being utilized within the marketing world. Memes' critical capacity is reduced and limited in two important ways: (1) by the existing forms of surveillance and algorithmic censorship that remove inflammatory or truly provocative content and (2) through the memers being aware of this and adjusting their content to fit into the boundaries that will still allow it to be seen by their followers. Either way, any potentially revolutionary teeth are filed off the beast of memes. What remains may snarl, but the powerful structures have no fear of being bitten by them.

To a large extent, memes of all varieties reflect what Debord ([1967] 1984) meant with the concept of *The Spectacle.* Simply, they are another form of mass-mediated

communication seeking primarily to generate attention for themself (because attention is valuable in and of itself) with more concern for the audience generated by the meme, than the content of it. However, it is in the 'debut' stage where memes see the spectacle and repressive tolerance collide. In the 'cultural arbitration' stage, a meme was produced to be exhibited to an affinity group who have shared interests, a similar sense of humour, recreations or hobbies or world view. The creator of the meme attempted to make it a point of cultural resonance for them. In 'debut' the audience becomes much more diverse and diffuse. The potential for the intended meaning, especially if it is controversial or provocative, of the meme to be watered down or lost is high. Equally, the potential for members of this new audience to expropriate the meme and reproduce it with a new message is also high. Here Debord ([1967] 1984) becomes relevant again. *Society of the Spectacle* describes how cultural figures, moments or ideas (and in our case, memes) that succeed at self-promotion to the level of the spectacle are also then subject to plagiarism. Indeed, Debord ([1967] 1984) in thesis 207 writes that plagiarism is necessary for the advancement of the idea and the culture associated with or reflected from it.

However, the 'plagiarize-ability' of that which achieves the status of a spectacle (again, memes) means that a great deal, if not all, of the meme's original social critique or critical content is muted, recontextualized or erased through how the derivative memes juxtapose themselves with the original in the minds of the viewer. As Debord ([1967] 1984) makes clear in thesis 208, 'diversion is the opposite of quotation' (p. 208). As such, the plagiarized, derivative memes rob the original of its ability to have an as-effective social critique or perspective by casting their vulgar shadow over it. The derivatives of a popular meme reduce the ability of the original meme to have the same degree of intended impact. The reproductions also reduce its ability to be any kind of provocative social critique. Understood in line with our Marcusean critique, popular memes amount to little more than recognizable images or jokes, much more akin to spokes-characters or marketing devices, where the outcome is to expand that meme until it has the widest audience possible and the narrowest possible meaning, which is simply an association with the product in the mind of the viewer. In the final stages, 'co-optation' and 'transcendence', the meaning successful memes possess is little more than the collective associations the meme has.

Understanding this progression of memes through these stages, and the important addition of co-optation and transcendence, allows for insight into how a meme can lose both its meaning and resonance as it progresses. The value in this contribution is to consider the fullness of memes – from grass roots critique or commentary to brand, advertisement or commercial product – outside of the scope of social communities and into the world of branding. Doing so allows us to acknowledge in our framework that memes need be understood inside of the systems, platforms and structures that they are shared, funded and utilized. Considering memes as potential advertisement, currency and brand once they have left the exclusive domain of creators, arbiters and sharers, demonstrates why and how systemic critique through memes is allowed on capitalist platforms in the first instance, and how their value as a spectacle can manipulate, mute or suppress culturally or politically subversive messaging.

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