**Online Virality**

# Studies in Digital History and Hermeneutics

Edited by
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and Gerben Zaagsma

## Volume 9

# Online Virality

Spread and Influence

Edited by
Valérie Schafer and Fred Pailler

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Valérie Schafer and Fred Pailler

# A Multi-Layered and Interdisciplinary Approach to Online Virality and its Temporalities

This book explores the many ways we can think about online virality and analyse the circulation, reception and evolution of viral digital content. Virality and content sharing always intertwine material, infrastructural, visual, and discursive elements. This involves various platforms, stakeholders, intermediaries, social groups and communities that are constantly (re)defining themselves. Regulation, curation, and content moderation politics, as well as affects and emotions are also at the core of online virality.

With a deliberate intention to unravel the complexity of a multi-layered phenomenon, the authors explore virality at various levels, through micro and macro scales, close and distant readings, international phenomena like the Harlem Shake and more local or precise case studies (history memes, memes based on telenovelas, political memes related to precise events in Chile, France, and Northern Ireland).

Crucially, the book's subtitle, "Spread and Influence", introduces key dimensions – exploring the intricate interplay of influence, infrastructures, curation, socio-technical arrangements, and the role of intermediaries. This approach extends to the examination of the relationship with other media, recognising digital virality is a part of a broader media system. The reintegration of virality within a systemic framework is a central goal of this book.

This volume is organised around three main topics: Expression and Genres; Mobilisation and Engagement; Circulation and Infrastructures. The first part explores the semiotics of virality, some creative forms of expression, specific genres, and their relation to other media. The second part focuses on the political dimension of memes and viral content and their use in the context of controversies, "communities of practices", and political and ideological opposition. Finally, the third part delves into the often understudied but essential side of virality, by examining the role of platforms and their curation, methods to grasp virality and circulation of content, and in short, the infrastructural dimension of virality. These three parts allow us to question fundamental notions linked to virality: influence, reception, economy of attention, instrumentalisation, affects, etc.

The chapters offer an interdisciplinary overview on online virality by including various methodological approaches (including scalable reading, visual studies, discourse analysis, etc.), and historical and socio-technical analysis. One of the


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book's strengths is that it brings together authors from various disciplines, including semiotics, history, information and communication sciences, digital humanities, media studies, computer science, etc. In addition, the contributors approach the question via case studies that allow for a perspective that is not exclusively US and European-centred. Two chapters explore virality in Brazil and Chile. The book also investigates a wide variety of platforms (YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, video game platforms, etc.).

The book emerged from the Hivi project[1], while embracing a diverse array of contributors, part of them being tied to the Viral seminar[2] we organised for two years and the conference on Virality, Platforms and Influence that took place at the University of Luxembourg on March 2023[3]. Certainly, it does not aim for exhaustiveness, but more for comprehensiveness, and we hope it may be a valuable complement to other existing approaches, through its concern for exploring online virality in a broad sense, and notably the interplay of infrastructures and intermediaries, as well as emotions and affects. Last but not least, it addresses media entanglement and multi-layered temporalities at stake, which we believe constitutes a contribution to the current state of the art.

## 1 Virality Beyond Memes

Significant interest in memes, particularly within the field of semiotics, has emerged in the last decades. Works by Shifman (2012, 2013), Milner (2016), Denisova (2019), Wagener (2022), and others, as well as the *Critical Meme Reader* (2022), have clearly paved the way for a better understanding of memes. They have become prominent in the digital landscape, being of particular interest for researchers as "sociosemiotic objects", as highlighted in Marino's chapter on the Harlem Shake, an Internet phenomenon that he describes as the "perfect sociosemiotic object, self-reflexive and metadiscursive, as it speaks about itself and the world it belongs to: it tells the story, schematic and complex, of every phenomenon we have learned to call viral".

Studying memes requires considering the interweaving of three elements that have become practically inseparable over the past three decades:

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**1** HIVI (A History of Online Virality) is a project running from 2021 to 2024, which is supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (C20/SC/14758148). https://hivi.uni.lu.

**2** https://hivi.uni.lu/2021/09/15/the-viral-seminar/ and https://hivi.uni.lu/2022/09/02/the-viral-seminar-season-2/.

**3** https://hivi.uni.lu/2023/01/09/conference-virality-platforms-and-influence/.

- The concept of "meme", and by extension, memetics, derived from Richard Dawkins' Darwinian approach to culture, that developed well before the web. It takes as its starting point the idea that cultural elements, such as words or gestures, will propagate and spread according to a genetic model of persistence (see Dawkins 1976);
- The appropriation of this concept by the pioneers of the internet at a time when any metaphor capable of shaping the changes at work was worth trying (Mike Godwin for instance defined his law as a counter-meme[4]). In the same period, marketing appropriated the previously negative metaphor of viral circulation (Rushkoff, 1996) to find formulas to make this phenomenon commercially exploitable through the promotion of new services and communicative uses;
- The development of an "internet culture" in the following decade and the heritagisation of "viral" and/or "memetic" elements, whether linguistic (LOL-speak, etc.), related to digital practices (selfies, etc.), or audiovisual objects (animated gifs, etc.). This grassroots heritagisation is carried out for the purpose of creative celebration by fans, as well as appropriated by media companies.

These three trends do not fall under the same dimensions of media experience and do not necessarily have conceptual coherence. They have competed to the point that Jenkins (2009) speaks of "definitional fuzziness" to describe the various biological metaphors of circulation and how they can be confusing. One example can be found in the catch-all metaphor of "infodemic". Simon and Camargo (2023) note that its use related to the wide spreading of false information about the coronavirus pandemic implicitly conveys the idea that information is, as if by default, itself infectious for journalists and media professionals.

However, not every viral phenomenon is a meme, and not every meme is viral. While memes hold a significant place in several chapters, for instance in those by Wagener, Marino, Göke, and Lundqvist[5], other forms of virality are also illuminated, such as comments on YouTube videos related to Dieudonné, in

**4** Godwin's law notes that as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison to Nazis or Hitler approaches 100 percent. Godwin (1994) suggests that his law can act as a "counter-meme" by countering the memetic nature of the comparison to Nazism.

**5** We draw the reader's attention to the fact that in these chapters, as in many others, numerous visual references are used. However, reproducing memes proves to be highly complex, as the author's rights to this content are as multi-layered and intricate as their analysis itself. We naturally encourage the reader to go online to get an idea of the cited content, regretting that we could not include more reproductions in this book.

Quemener's chapter, and hashtags and pictures as seen in the case of Julliard and Pailler's study. Images of all kinds can become viral, whether they are photographs by reporters (such as the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi in 2015), images captured by non-professionals (like the millions of duckface selfies online), amateur videos (the success of Numa Numa Guy's lip-synced performance in 2004), or people filming themselves during a challenge (such as the Cinnamon Challenge or Ice Bucket Challenge). Texts, expressions, or words, especially in the form of hashtags (Stassin 2022), can also go viral. These include formulas ("Sex is good but have you ever tried . . ."), laws like Godwin's law or Rume's law ("If it exists, or can be imagined, there is Internet porn of it"), and even strings of absurd characters like the famous "covfefe" from President Donald Trump in 2017 in a tweet. It is important not to narrow down virality to memes, although they are crucial, and to consider diffusion, circulation, without exclusively focusing on content, genres, or forms (and even though memes exhibit diverse forms, ranging from image-macros to dance performances). This approach entails exploring a concept that, while admittedly vague (what are the criteria for virality in terms of audience reach?) is central. One of our goals is therefore to extend the approach beyond the key realm of memes, delving into various forms of virality and also introducing the key issue of content circulation, as exemplified for instance by Vétel's exploration of video games or Grison's chapter on shadowbanning. These final two chapters focus more on obstacles to spread, as well as users' strategies and adaptation than on virality itself, but they indirectly prompt us to consider the latter, by contemplating brakes on diffusion, intermediaries, and agents of change as well.

## 2 Spread and Influence

While arguing against the biological metaphor of circulation that animates the notion of meme and that we mentioned earlier, the famous media scholar Henry Jenkins refrained from treating virality as an almost intrinsic property of content, and instead strongly considers the creativity and agency of internet users. As suggested by the title of his blog post series, "If it doesn't spread, it's dead" (2009), the value of content lies in its dissemination within active and creative communities. Subsequent works by Jean Burgess further emphasise the agency of audiences and content production practices, on YouTube for example. She and her co-author Joshua Green consider that YouTube was "co-created by YouTube Inc., now owned by Google, the users who upload content to the website, and the audiences who engage around that content" (Burgess and Green 2018, 8), and that this combination and entanglement created "a dynamic cultural system". The circulation of content relies

on a platform, and on various stakeholders, encompassing users and professionals in commerce, media and communication. In addition, several studies have highlighted the role and mechanisms of the platform economy, of algorithmic and human recommendations, of intermediaries (moderation providers, troll farms), and the many strategies to capture and influence audiences. For instance, the cultural industries have significantly adapted to the digital environment, not without trial and error. They had to define strategies in the face of the massive circulation of content outside the distribution channels they were used to controlling (whether through user sharing or third-party exploitation), to consider new forms of recommendation (by "non-professional" actors and by algorithms), and to address potential negative buzz that could occur. In our book, influence is therefore mostly not considered at the individual and micro-social levels but more on the meso-social and macro-social scales (Courbet 2015). Internet phenomena and viral content involve the construction of collective meaning, while studying the circulation of media themes includes a focus on social influence.

## 2.1 Infrastructures and Intermediaries as a Common Thread

Some of the key influencers in the last 20 years have been the platforms themselves, both as services generating substantial profits (Mishra and Tripathi 2020), and as infrastructures facilitating and shaping content circulation and users' social networking. Studying these infrastructures goes far beyond considering their sole technical architectures and the role of user generated content. It also encompasses the data market and the invisible work of maintenance, moderation and animation that is required. The platforms have developed environments aimed directly at amplifying data production. As noted by Anne Helmond (2015) in her study of the platformisation of the web, the circulation and virality of content have undergone significant transformation between the mid-2000s (the birth of Facebook and YouTube, for example) and the early 2010s. As noted by Payne (2012), content that previously seemed to become viral by accident now circulates easily and on a much larger scale, particularly thanks to standard features aimed at sharing content or making them "platform-ready". Among the well-known features the platforms have developed, we can mention "likes" and "retweets" as well as links from a blog post or video embedded in messages. As demonstrated by Tommaso Venturini (2019), a standardised market of online audiences, armies of bots, the quantification of engagement through metrics established by platforms, intermediaries, deep learning algorithms and various other factors actively contribute to the circulation of content and the generation of profits from it. The wealth generated by giant platforms cannot be attributed solely to content circulation, given that these services are usu-

ally free to users. Instead, their business model relies on content analysis and the aggregation of personal data (Casilli 2019) that are sold on two-sided or three-sided markets, while Facebook and Alphabet make most of their money through advertising (Mishra and Tripathi 2020). Beyond the design and business models of platforms, one must also consider their infrastructure, governance, and the individuals working to make these platforms productive and profitable, and notably through content moderation. Content is either allowed to circulate by default, with moderation occurring only upon notification, or it is systematically moderated by a team, often employed by an outsourcing company located offshore. Content moderation involves assessing the legitimacy of content to circulate, and determining what is legal, appropriate and profitable. It is also noteworthy that smaller but highly active platforms have built their popularity on not being truly or only very lightly moderated, at least initially: 4chan and Reddit have contributed to the production of many memes and viral phenomena.

Several chapters analyse the crucial role of intermediaries and digital infrastructures in the circulation of content. As Vétel raises questions about "digital migrations", the role of platforms and underlying commercial issues is key. He defines online gaming platforms as a dynamic assemblage influenced by its client-server network architecture and the sociotechnical features of the characters played, and he shows how much active users can develop businesses and services to bypass as much as to balance platforms' affordances. Grison demonstrates coercive aspects of platforms moderation strategies (shadowbanning) as well as user strategies to circumvent them. Pégny revisits the strategies of major players when discussing the use cases of Machine Learning (ML). Platforms, like Facebook, extensively utilise predictive ML to estimate the probability of clicking and sharing, models that play a pivotal role in their strategy of maximising engagement. While delving into platforms is crucial to understanding how circulation and sharing fuel circulation and viral phenomena, content production itself also adds complexity, with countless ways of assembling texts, images, signs within messages, memes, GIFs and videos. In her chapter, Simon builds on this by leveraging the distinction between "replication" and "variation" proposed by Bonenfant (2014). As Pégny notes, with messages undergoing constant reformulation, reshaping, commenting and insertion into larger messages within informal, horizontal communications, the issue of virality is multi-layered.

## 2.2 "Affective Communities" and Emotions

There are many reasons why the image of a teenager like the "Star Wars kid" or "Disaster Girl" circulates globally, whether for mockery, empathy, humour, ha-

tred, etc. A phenomenon becomes globally viral thanks to specific properties that allow it to circulate across diverse linguistic and cultural communities – properties that make it easily appropriable and transformable (to the point that its meaning can be very different from one community to another, as seen with Pepe the Frog [Pettis 2022]). Most of the time, it happens because content is sufficiently anecdotal or consensual (e.g., the Ice Bucket Challenge or Rickroll), or on the contrary because of tensions and antagonism between specific communities, increased through trolling, denunciation, or complaints. Sometimes, content also goes viral because people want to raise awareness and warn others about it. Around 2010, moral panics about online discussions held by individuals suffering from eating disorders made the terms "proana" and "promia" well-known worldwide (Tubaro and Mounier 2013).

The intricate interplay of emotions and the concept of "affective communities" are a lens to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of interactions and circulations. Indeed, the complexity of sign arrangements and content, as well as the multiple ways of sharing them, also rely on the fact that the production and circulation of online content primarily occur within affective communities. Networks of individuals produce, share and discuss content together, maintaining an "affective economy" specific to them (Ahmed 2004). Ahmed raised the question in her 2004 analysis of the Aryan Nation website: "How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against others? How do emotions move between bodies?". She demonstrated how fear served to unite a community defined by its "whiteness", a territory it claimed, and a nation it asserted against hypothetical "Others" that would threaten it. She conducted this analysis at a time when researchers were more focused on the emergence of blogs and social networks, the transformation of the music and film industries in the face of piracy, or the rapid rise of digital actors like Amazon. However, 15 years later, Ryan Milner and Whitney Philips (2021) describe the ideological antagonisms tearing the United States apart and they reveal the same logics that have colonised all media spaces in the meantime, indicating how platforms and their business models have contributed to the polarisation of exchanges.

Lundqvist delves into the concept of resilience, shedding light on the ways in which users navigate and adapt to events related to political violence in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Humour, as a powerful catalyst, takes centre stage in his work as well as in da Rosa Amaral and Santos Vieira's and Wagener's analysis. The later analyses how memes play a role in political activism by conveying political concepts through humour, or provocative content grounded in cultural and ideological viewpoints. Through a pragmatic discourse analysis, his chapter delves into memes that amplify messages through the fusion of language and visuals, aiming to unveil the mechanics of political engagement. Emotions are also further

emphasised by Arce-Pradenas, whose inquiry reveals shared features among the "Celebrities of the Unrest", figures who gained fame by going viral during the 2019 Chilean upheaval and subsequently transitioned into political careers, showcasing a distinctive leadership style that blends elements of activism, microcelebrity and traditional political activities. Additionally, he analyses social media network data from Twitter and conducts sentiment analysis of YouTube comments to gain deeper insights into this phenomenon. Quemener's chapter offers a nuanced understanding of how individuals form connections based on shared experiences, interests, and emotions. She adopts an approach rooted in affect theories and the "affective turn" within Cultural Studies (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Semiotic complexity is particularly central in the circulation of affect, while relying on mechanisms of resignification and reappropriation within communities, to implicitly formalise a relationship and belonging.

## 2.3 Methodological Challenges and Approaches

The chapters present a diverse range of methods for grasping the phenomenon of online virality. All are grounded in data collections conducted by the researchers themselves, employing various strategies. Julliard et al., for instance, collected massive corpora through Twitter's API, while Grison opted for more artisanal practices. Simon's work delves into the challenges of cross-platform analysis, and relies on discourse analysis, while Quemener reveals the complexity and hybrid nature of methods for studying online videos and comments. The book also acknowledges visual and sound studies, with Marino shedding light on the Harlem Shake and Grison contributing insights to sound studies. Alongside qualitative and semiotic approaches, there are those leaning towards distant reading, as exemplified by Arce-Pradenas' chapter. His hybrid analysis combines qualitative and quantitative elements, drawing on press clippings, interviews, blog articles, online forums and social media posts, while conducting sentiment analysis, examining over 4,962 user comments on Facebook, 14,338 on YouTube and 24,955 tweets. Quemener too focuses on comments, studying a sample of 343 videos published between August 2014 and December 2017, along with the associated 150,504 comments from 39,395 accounts. The hybridisation of methods is also obvious in the case of Vétel whose research relies on empirical investigations within the MMOG Dofus (2010–2016), involving semi-structured interviews with players and Ankama Company employees in Roubaix, along with quantitative data from gaming servers. As a complementary inquiry, he extends his analysis to the League of Legends from 2022 to 2023 and online observations on platforms such as Discord and Reddit. The hybridisation of methods is echoed in the intersection of plat-

forms, as demonstrated in Simon's analysis, and emphasised by Julliard et al., who highlight the challenges of processing multisemiotic corpora.

Research approaches using typologies through several chapters are not surprising, aiming to simplify and make both the content, as seen in Wagener's analysis, and the practices, as seen in Grison's analysis, more understandable. In their analysis of images, Julliard et al. distinguish four possible ways of linking images to study the development of visual regimes. Indeed, viral content and memes demonstrate several levels of complexity and elaboration. In their respective analysis of memes, Göke and Wagener propose comprehensive frameworks that involve distinguishing various key elements, providing a nuanced understanding of the intricate layers contributing to the meaning and impact of memes. Several chapters also question the role of media in constructing social and political reality, while infrastructures and platforms are also explored to better understand viral spread and influence, notably in the third part of the book.

## 3 Time and Temporalities

The issue of time and temporalities also cuts across the entire book. Temporalities are an indispensable complement to community considerations, when seeking to comprehend the digital landscape in its evolving state.

Pégny for instance analyses phenomena that originated in the pre-digital era. As Gustavo Gomez-Mejia (2022) demonstrated thanks to a French corpus of press articles, the term "buzz" entered the vocabulary of both specialised marketing and mainstream press as early as 1999. Concurrently, the concept of e-reputation emerged (Alloing 2017). In the 2000s, the marketing world developed the concept of "viral marketing" (Ferguson 2008). This strategy was theorised and discussed throughout the 2000s, with the term "virality" entering common language to describe the widespread and rapid dissemination of online content through sharing infrastructures, using the biological metaphor. However, significant media phenomena unfolded before online virality, as highlighted by Pégny, who refers to works on rumours by Froissart (2002), and the book *Fake news et viralité avant Internet. Les lapins du Père-Lachaise et autres légendes médiatiques* [Fake News and Virality before the Internet: The Rabbits of Père-Lachaise and Other Media Legends] (2020). The metaphor of social contagion found its roots in the writings of Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) and Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904), while Harold Lasswell (1902–1978) introduced the metaphor of injecting ideas through a hypodermic syringe (Marino 2022). For sure, virality has now reached another scale of immediacy, globalisation and mass impact. However, even in the late 1990s the

web acknowledged this phenomenon, through the success of the Dancing Baby (1996) or the Hampster Dance (1998), well before BuzzFeed's inception in 2006.

Over the past three decades, content has significantly evolved based on various platforms, on available tools (including meme and GIF generators), network speeds and, since the 1990s, one can distinguish:

- An initial period, where text prevailed, even though a few scanned images from photos or magazines circulated in fora;
- An era of expert multimedia. Everything became possible for those with expertise and appropriate professional software. Images could be edited for instance with a pirated version of Photoshop, or one could code their own website with animated GIFs;
- The advent of the online pop remix. Skills are increasingly acquired more easily, and both audio and video editing become easier, especially with platforms like YouTube, Myspace and Tumblr;
- The ubiquity of mobile creation (Allard et al. 2014, Goggin 2008). Smartphones now enable everyone to post photos, share audio and video, take screenshots, add comments to images, create elaborate compositions and share them almost instantly.

The historical dimension is obvious in several chapters. It is apparent when Simon explores the memetic circulation of #Chadolf #Kitler on online social media. It is also explicit when Göke seeks to analyse the peculiar genre of history memes and investigates how they function as connectors between the past and the present through reinterpretation. Her approach enables a better understanding of mediation between then and now through emotion, an issue that Barclay and Downing (2023) have already explored for historical art memes. Diachronic analyses, such as the examination of three periods of debate on gender and "Mariage pour Tous" in France by Julliard et al., emphasise the complexity of retrieving virality, circulations and intermediaries through time. As they point out, while for a given event it is quite easy to map exchanges in a single graph, the task is trickier when it comes to following the circulation of images over the course of several events. Arce-Pradenas revisits the case of Chile in 2019, while Quemener starts from the early 2000s to examine Dieudonné and the intensification of media attention towards him. Marino, on the other hand, delves into a phenomenon from 2012 to 2013 and its legacy in challenges for instance. His chapter analyses the historical evolution of the renowned Harlem Shake meme, examining how today's media landscape has been shaped by such cultural phenomenon. In a time marked by the swift consumption of images, videos and semiotic texts, revisiting the Harlem Shake, which acted as the catalyst for a novel approach to textuality as a practice, can in his view enhance our comprehension of contemporary trends.

This case study also allows him to recall its popularity on Vine, a now dead platform, and to reflect on the transition and development of TikTok, establishing complex genealogies, while also contextualising the Harlem Shake and discussing other phenomena of the time, like Crank That by Soulja Boy and, of course, Gangnam Style by Psy.

Emphasising time and temporality also leads to a consideration of media entanglement. Indeed, in the realm of media dynamics, it is crucial to recognise that virality, often deemed a digital phenomenon, encompasses a broader spectrum extending beyond the digital realm. Pégny stresses that the virality of a message should not be solely attributed to its digital lifecycle. Arce-Pradenas further illustrates this idea by intertwining online strategies and on-ground political actions of viral celebrities in the Chilean context. He underscores the pivotal role played by mainstream media in amplifying the virality of a message. Notably, media giants such as centre-right Canal 13 and Radio Bio Bio, along with the satirical leftist magazine, *The Clinic*, played a significant role in shaping and disseminating content. The mainstream media's involvement in this process, particularly through widely followed official accounts, propelled the messages into a national conversation. Examining the case of Dieudonné, Quemener also highlights the intricate relationship between public attention and media influence. Pégny stresses the importance of acknowledging both peer-to-peer dynamics and vertical communication in media and digital interactions. Intermediations, alongside vertical components, contribute significantly to the overall media landscape. A study by Sharad Goel et al. (2015) revealed that virality on Twitter results from a combination of horizontal and vertical diffusion. This is echoed in the analysis of the Harlem Shake phenomenon we conducted (Pailler and Schafer 2023), which demonstrates that the amplification of user-generated content is complemented by robust media coverage across regional, national and international press as well as platforms. Turning to the relationship between Telenovelas and the digital sphere, Santos Vieira and da Rosa Amaral exemplify the enduring connection between mediums. This relationship can be understood within the broader framework of globalisation and convergence culture. When analysing the global circulation of memes featuring the Brazilian telenovela character "Nazaré Confusa" or "Confused Blonde Lady" and examining the intersection of Social TV, Telenovelas, and internet humour, Santos Vieira and da Rosa Amaral delve into the mechanisms that drive a meme to achieve virality within a transcultural framework, beginning with an emphasis on audiovisual centrality and the pivotal role of internet memes as key mediators between mass and post-mass media.

Most chapters in the book address temporal challenges in their analyses, an aspect that often takes a back seat in scholarly inquiries. A comprehensive examination of temporalities poses specific methodological challenges. First, when com-

bining qualitative and quantitative approaches diachronically, the seemingly homogeneous accessible data may be highly heterogeneous due to evolving data collection methods over time (i.e., evolution of web archiving). Cross-referencing or comparing data available on online platforms with data from web archives and historical forums spanning over two decades presents a genuine technical, analytical and narrative challenge. This complexity can introduce biases, notably in distant reading approaches, necessitating a digital hermeneutic and a precise critical evaluation of digital sources attentive to the conditions of data collection. Second, conducting cross-platform and cross-technology analyses requires accounting for the context and history of these platforms while most of them are not yet historically documented. One must also consider the frequent disappearance of platforms (as seen with Vine in the context of the Harlem Shake; see also McCammon and Lingel 2022), and changes in audiences, users' profiles and moderation rules (as exemplified by the recent transformation of Twitter into X).

Finally, consideration must be given to shifting technological contexts and the representation of technologies, which may not evolve at the same pace as the technologies themselves. This discrepancy arises because commercial discourses often emphasise novelty or render fundamental technological or cultural transformations on the contrary invisible. There is not always a direct relationship between how a company envisions the use of a feature on its developed platform, the diverse meanings users attribute to that feature, and how the media reports it. Examples abound, such as the role of hyperlinks in content circulation, transitioning from a visible emblem of the web to an omnipresent but not always apparent component of mobile social applications (see Rogers 2017). We hope to demonstrate in this book how a diachronic and/or historical approach has the potential to reconcile these various temporalities at play and to help us understand phenomena that may seem ephemeral, often brief, and spectacular, by revealing their genealogies, continuities, patterns and contributions to a short yet rich history of digital cultures and a longer history of media and communication.

In exploring the rich landscape of online viral phenomena, readers will encounter a plethora of memories. From iconic figures like "The Confused Blonde Lady", to the examination of cats in viral content (and their enduring presence, as seen in Emily Griffin's chronology within the Hivi project[6]), through viral political content during US elections (see Wagner's chapter), as well as Kilroy or the Harlem Shake, well-known phenomena are continually reinterpreted. The question is therefore the lasting impact of these viral moments, already marked by

**6** https://hivi.uni.lu/2023/01/28/a-timeline-on-viral-cats/.

the establishment of a meme museum in Hong Kong in 2021[7]. What will come of memes for instance? Historically, it is crucial to incorporate these massive, vernacular and often enjoyable phenomena into the narrative of the web and socio-digital networks, as they are an integral part of our digital and visual culture (see Pailler and Schafer 2022; 2023). Despite predictions of transformative shifts in virality influenced by AI and tools like Midjourney, generating rapid images (and deepfakes) and transforming our visual cultures and uses, virality will change but persist as long as online social platforms and their models endure. The archiving of these viral phenomena also poses significant challenges (see Schafer and Pailler 2024), but there are stimulating initiatives in progress, like the one taken by the Library of Congress (LoC), which archived both Know Your Memes and Meme generators[8], when creating a particular collection in 2017 "Remix, Slang and Memes: A New Collection Documents Web Culture". This curation specifically oriented towards internet phenomena embeds a documentary dimension (in addition to the preservation approach) that also helps to retrieve part of the context of production and circulation of these complex phenomena. However, the heritagisation of viral phenomena reflects the ongoing efforts and tensions between institutional preservation, conservation by platforms themselves and dedicated for-profit initiatives like Know Your Meme[9] (see Pettis 2022). Notably, KYM, initially acquired by Cheezburger Network in 2011[10] and later by Literally Media in 2016, exemplifies the economic potential embedded in the heritagisation of seemingly simple content. As the most famous memes venture into the realm of NFTs[11], these vernacular forms as well as their heritagisation reveal powerful aesthetics, cultural, infrastructural, economic and political aspects beneath their playful surfaces.

**7** https://www.lifestyleasia.com/hk/entertainment/meme-museum-9gag/#:~:text=MEME%20Museum%20is%20located%20at,art%20space%2C%20B2%2FF.

**8** https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/06/remix-slang-and-memes-a-new-collection-documents-web-culture/?loclr=twloc and https://loc.gov/collections/web-cultures-web-archive/?loclr=blogloc.

**9** https://knowyourmeme.com.

**10** Cheezburger network is a collection of popular websites that host user-generated content, particularly memes. It includes, for instance, I Can Has Cheezburger, which is known for making LoL Cats famous.

**11** In 2021, Chris Torres auctioned off his rainbow pop-tart cat, Nyan Cat, followed then by Grumpy Cat, Bad Luck Brian, and Disaster Girl.

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# Part 1: **Expression and Genres**

Maël Pégny

# Is Virality a Digital Concept?

**Abstract:** Even though virality has been widely debated in recent years, its exact relation to the digital medium is rarely explicitly discussed: Is virality just a digital version of word-of-mouth, or is it a concept of its own, necessary to understand new social phenomena induced by digital media? We try to answer this question with a particular focus on Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality in *Going Viral* (2013). First, we try to understand viral messages among other forms of horizontal communication and their relations with cognitive techniques enabling their recording. We then move on to a detailed examination of Nahon and Hemsley's definition, trying to uncover its implicit relations to the digital medium, especially the relations with communicational costs and virality metrics. Finally, I endeavour to update their definition with an account of phenomena non-existent at the time of their publication, such as the automation of content moderation and recommendation through Machine Learning (ML). All the analysis supports the thesis that virality should be distinguished from "analogue" word-of-mouth and understood as a proper digital phenomenon, justifying a new periodisation of the history of media.

**Keywords:** virality, definition, digital media, periodisation, machine learning, content moderation, recommendation, ranking

It cannot be assumed that our problem, as stated in the title, is self-explanatory, so let us start by giving the reasons for this particular question. The notion of virality is part of the history of digital marketing: From its early days on[1], the concept was meant to refer to a successful digital marketing campaign, the canonical example being the Hotmail campaign. In this example, a message signalling the possibility of a free Hotmail account was attached at the bottom of each mail sent from a Hotmail account, leading to an explosion of subscriptions. It would thus seem obvious that virality is meant to describe a property of the diffusion of a given digital message.

However, many of the various definitions of this property make absolutely no reference to the digital nature of the message. In particular, the most famous and most sophisticated definition, which will be used and analysed throughout

1 The first mentions of the concept or its affiliates, such as "viral marketing", appear in the late 1990s to early 2000s on Google Scholar (see Wilson 2000, 232).


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this article, i.e., that of Nahon and Hemsley (2013) in their book *Going viral*, makes no explicit reference to the digital medium where the viral message is supposed to spread.

This creates a hermeneutic ambiguity: Is the notion of virality supposed to be applied strictly to digital media, as it would describe a specifically digital phenomenon? Or is it just a synonym for the older "word-of-mouth", which marketers, politicians and intelligence services have tried to exploit long before any digital medium existed? Independently of the intentions of this or that author, or a particular terminological choice, our fundamental question is theoretical: Can we understand the viral propagation of online messages as a new phenomenon enabled by digital means of communication?

To answer this question, we start with a closer examination of the position of our problem and its methodological challenges, before discussing Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality, its implicit relations with digital media, and the interest of complementing it with a more explicit consideration of communicational costs and virality metrics. Finally, we explain the need to update this definition to understand the impact of Machine Learning fuelled moderation and recommendation on the phenomenon of virality.

# 1 A Better View of our Problem: Virality among Horizontal Forms of Communication

## 1.1 Horizontal Forms of Communication

Let us call "peer-to-peer communication" a form of communication between individuals not acting on behalf of an institution. This form of communication is sometimes described as "horizontal" as opposed to the "vertical" communication between an institution and an individual or the masses. Let us state very clearly that we do not wish to separate vertical and horizontal communications as two genres without any overlap. It is well-known that many viral messages find their origin in influential media or institutional communication[2]. Furthermore, even when it does not derive its origins in a vertical form of communication, viral propagation can be reverberated and amplified by institutional comment, including when that comment takes

2 This point is already stated clearly by Nahon and Hemsley themselves in *Going viral* (2013).

the form of debunking[3]. Here again, many case studies have shown that the debunking of a viral rumour by an institution or mass media is often a major vector, if not the major vector of the propagation of some viral messages[4]. This paradox of debunking is made more significant by the fact that, as well-shown in Froissart (2002), some social studies of horizontal communication, such as social studies of "rumours", have been locked in an ideological denial of the role of mass media in spreading such messages. For instance, some case studies insist on classifying a given rumour as a pure form of horizontal propagation even when the role of mass media is obvious and well-documented, such as the famous case of the Orléans rumour in France, or with American World War Two rumours going back to the proliferation of German propaganda.

The same lack of demarcation is also true for the online/offline distinction. Many viral messages on social networks or other digital platforms also have an analogue life in paper publication (see Pailler and Schafer 2023) or oral conversations. When we talk of horizontal communication or digital communication in general, or viral communication in particular, we never imply that the message is spread exclusively by horizontal and/or digital means, only that those means have played a major role in the large-scale diffusion of the message.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish virality as a form of horizontal communication or propagation of a message from another major phenomenon of modern mass media, i.e., the reproduction, sometimes verbatim or quasi-verbatim, of the same message (paragraph, short news, or whole article) by multiple media outlets, sometimes in multiple countries and in multiple languages (see the introduction by Pinker 2020). This phenomenon has already been well-documented for British media in the eighteenth century by Will Slauter (2012) and has been a massive practice of modern media ever since, so much so that many old jokes and anecdotes present copy-and-pasting as a major journalistic practice. There is indeed in this case the massive propagation of a well-identified message, and this propagation could be seen as horizontal as the story jumps from newspaper to newspaper without a single source of authority being reproduced by all media outlets, as can be the case with the reproduction of institutional communication. However, it is relevant to the study of our phenomenon to maintain a distinction between this

**3** This phenomenon is commented on several times regarding the concept of "rumour" in Pascal Froissart (2002). Different examples are also analysed there.

**4** Camille Alloing and Nicolas Vanderbiest (2018) give a nice example of this in their analysis of the Twitter rumour of another terror attack in a restaurant after the Nice terror attack on July 14, 2016. They demonstrate that most re-tweets are actually critical of the rumour. Re-tweets without a conditional form or a source represent less than 10 percent of re-tweets of the rumour, which was initially spread by professional journalists.

mimetic behaviour between institutions with a horizontal communication between individuals *qua* individuals. The famous historian Marc Bloch (1999) would already complain in his short book on wartime rumours that social research should not mix up rumours spreading among soldiers and civilians and the rumours spread by the press, as those follow very different paths and constraints. This is especially true when so-called "journalistic errors" are actually a calculated decision to alter journalistic treatment to follow government propaganda or to augment the probability of achieving some sensationalist attraction of readership. When it comes to the study of communication and beliefs, it is always better by default to separate institutional and informal phenomena, and hence not to use the concept of virality to denote the propagation of a news item through "copy-and-paste" journalism. The confusion is made even more regrettable by the possibility, examined as a hypothesis by Bloch, that the interest for oral rumours was also an effect of the lack of legitimacy of the press among soldiers, as it was seen as propagating government propaganda.

With all those precautions in mind, our fundamental theoretical question can then be rephrased in the following fashion: How different are viral digital messages from older forms of peer-to-peer diffusion of a message? What are the effects of the digital medium on this form of communication? Such a question is relevant to historians who wish to describe the various forms of horizontal communication and their possible manipulations as a *longue durée* phenomenon. From a historical point of view, this may be seen as a question of periodisation: Does the irruption of the digital medium open a new era of peer-to-peer communication, or is the assumption of radical change introduced by the digital largely overblown and unwarranted? In denser terms, is virality just a digital form of word-of-mouth, or should it be considered an altogether different phenomenon, justifying the introduction of a new term? The question should be relevant at the very least for the history of politics, media, marketing (and other forms of business models based on the diffusion of a message) and the anthropology of cognitive techniques. In particular, this question should be further relevant to the long history of the institutional manipulation of peer-to-peer communication, as new forms of media may offer new technological affordances to exert influence on peer-to-peer communication. We shall see that the existence of new affordances for such influence is actually one of the main arguments for understanding virality as a new phenomenon distinct from word-of-mouth (see section 3).

Our question faces a significant risk of degenerating into byzantine quarrels: Historians are familiar with the endless bickering that frequently accompany the characterisation of a historical phenomenon as a rupture or a historical continuity. If such quarrels cannot be completely avoided, I would happily limit them to the bare minimum by following a simple methodological principle, namely, that the in-

troduction of a new concept and/or historical period should be justified by the risk that, in the absence of such a distinction between concept and/or historical periods, the observer might be blinded to the phenomena of interest. Our question about the digital nature of virality may be rephrased as such: Did digital media influence horizontal forms of communication in a manner dramatic enough to justify the delimitation of a new period in the history of those forms of communication and the use of a new term[5]? "Virality" is just a candidate term for such distinctions and the particular fate of this terminological item is not our core issue here. What matters most is the theoretical understanding of horizontal communication in digital times.

## 1.2 Virality in the Eye of the Beholder

I wish to address here the formidable difficulties raised by the relations between horizontal communications and the cognitive techniques used both to enable such communication, to study and influence it. To begin, it should be noted that one form of communication that is particularly favoured by digital media is the literal repetition of a content, especially through "one-click re-sharing" buttons. As is well-known concerning the anthropology of cognitive technique since at least the founding works of Jack Goody (see Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1977; 1986), literality is typical of the world of writing. Literal word-for-word or even letter-for-letter repetition of a message is not only made easier by writing, but it only becomes something of value for a civilisation of writing. Oral societies, contrary to a persistent cliché, do not put a lot of value on literal repetition, do not learn a lot of linguistic messages by rote, and can easily consider identical two performances of a same narrative even if they vary widely from a literal perspective.

Technological affordances such as "one-click-share" buttons have made the massive literal copy and diffusion of a message an easy and virtually cost-free endeavour for many individuals. This remarkable new technological affordance allows for the literal spread of a message in peer-to-peer communication without the notorious deformation created by oral communication or re-writing. This is a considerable difference from traditional word-of-mouth that could easily be overlooked. This phenomenon obviously depends on the environment created by the digital cognitive technique. As a side note, it should also be noted that the literal repetition of the message makes the identification of a given content as viral much easier, compared to the multiple modifications of a message which can

5 For a recent and sophisticated proposition for periodisation relevant for digital media studies, see Boullier (2023).

grow so large as to make the initial message unidentifiable, something that has consequences for social sciences studying the phenomenon, but also for digital actors trying to trigger, detect and manipulate said phenomenon. This is even more important as "literal repetition" is no longer reduced, as the etymology would suggest, to the written word, but can now also include information in audio and video formats, multiplying the potential channels through which a message can be spread[6].

All those remarks plead for a deep influence of the digital medium on horizontal forms of communication. However, theoretical discussions of the definition of horizontal forms of communication, and their dependencies to a given medium, faces a formidable challenge well explained by Pascal Froissart. In his work on rumour (see reference above), he explains how "rumourality" may exist only in the eyes of the theoretical beholder. The first reason for this is ideological. As the term "rumour" can be used to destroy the legitimacy of a given message, the mere "description" of a phenomenon as a rumour may be an ideological move aimed at justifying authoritarian and elitist forms of control over information. The fight against rumours have been instrumentalised many times in history to justify government communication and censorship, as well as to support the authority of media outlets, sometimes with the further support of friendly scholars. This leads to the ideological blind spot mentioned above, when the very important role of official media in spreading rumours is systematically forgotten and the media is conveniently portrayed as a corporation of rational and professional "debunkers" and "fact-checkers" engaged in a heroic fight against the falsehoods spread by ignorant, impulsive and irrational masses.

The second bias is the well-known methodological one of scientific work, whereby some phenomenon or aspects of a phenomenon are privileged not because they are necessarily more important, but because they are easier to study. The study of horizontal forms of communication face at least three major difficulties. The first is their size, which obviously makes detailed study cumbersome. The second, especially relevant for some forms of communication such as oral rumours and interpersonal written messages, the difficulties of record collection

**6** However, it should be stressed that the possibility of tracing every single communication act on digital social networks is largely a theoretical possibility. In practice, as exemplified and explained by Pailler and Schafer (2023) some viral phenomena left virtually no trace (such as email chains), social networks have various archiving policy (one of them being, no archive at all), different platforms collect different data, making cross-platform comparison very difficult, and the various and recent forms of internet archives need to make tough sampling decisions. In simple terms, viral phenomena face formidable archive collection, organisation and analysis challenges, and one should not give in to a mythology of digital platforms as a virality panopticon.

or the mere absence of record. The third is methodological, and concerns the definition of the object of diffusion, namely, what exactly is spreading when we say that a rumour, gossips, viral messages, etc., are being propagated? It is extremely common to remark that messages are constantly being reformulated, reshaped, commented and inserted in larger messages in informal, horizontal communications. That remains true even with "one-click share buttons", where the literal repetition of the original message is just a subpart of a larger message with various intents. Identifying the object of the propagation may thus be a major challenge, as the literal repetition of the exact same message is far too strict a criterium, and in the absence of an identification criterium the object of diffusion becomes utterly dissolved. This methodological challenge was implicitly present in the first experimental protocols to study rumour propagation proposed by Stern and then made famous by Kirkpatrick and Bartlett[7]. In this protocol and its variants, a subject is asked to repeat *verbatim* a text read to her by the experimenter. This attempt at repetition is written down and read to a second subject, and the experiment is thus iterated many times. The importance of text deformation, and the loss of many details, is a classic result of such experimental protocols. However, the relevance of such protocols to the study of horizontal forms of communication is dubious at best. In real life, one rarely listens to a long monologue without interruption, and one almost never attempts to learn the narrative of another person verbatim. Assimilation and reformulation of a message are just the norm in those forms of communication, and systematically favouring the literal repetition by rote reduce the propagators to intellectually passive transmitters[8]. The repetition of a written message by rote just makes the identification of

7 This example is analysed in Froissart (2002). It should be noted that writing is an essential part of the experimental protocol allowing the mere identification of the phenomenon. This could be analysed in parallel with the importance of audio recording instruments in Jack Goody's work on recitation of myths among the Camerounese LoDaaga. By Goody's admission in *The domestication of the savage mind* (1977), those instruments were decisive in the realisation that two recitations of the "same myth" according to the local people could actually diverge widely, and had nothing to do with the repetition of a message by rote. Oral messages have the particularity that they need the use of another medium to become an object of scientific study, which raises a systematic problem of distortion of the perception and conceptualisation of said message by the use of that medium.

8 Froissart makes many other relevant critical remarks, such as his criticism of the intersubstitutability of subjects in this protocol, which does not reflect the importance of social status, interpersonal relations and authority in the propagation of a message. He also insists on the fact that many rumours actually become richer in detail as they propagate instead of the impoverishment of detail that is often seen as a major characteristic of experimental protocols (see Froissart [2022, 111]). However, we only wish to insist here on the effects due to the written medium.

the object of propagation and its recording easier for the experimenter, but it does diminish the relevance of the protocol to the study of the phenomenon of interest, which takes a shape typical of oral, not written, forms of communication. In the study of horizontal forms of communication, there is thus a considerable risk that the influence of the medium is introduced by the researcher's methodological biases rather than a true part of the phenomenon itself. Thus, one can ask, how are we to avoid those pitfalls in our understanding of virality?

Virality has the first advantage of being less susceptible to an ideological instrumentalisation than the concept of "rumour". It is more descriptive than normative, and as such is not immediately incorporated in discourses aiming at legitimising or de-legitimising a given message. This does not mean that it is completely immune from such an instrumentalisation. Media outlets often caricature the internet as a communicational Wild West where misinformation spreads virally, while the heroic media fight to maintain rationality and factuality. This type of discourse is part of a legitimation effort to defend media and government communication from a potential competitor on the market of ideas and should be treated with suspicion. However, those forms of instrumentalisation did not make it into the very definition of the concept. "Viral" is employed to describe the diffusion of official government messages as well as Qanon conspiracy theories and is thus not ideologically dubious by nature.

The second and third form of biases are more relevant to the study of virality. One of the main advantages of digital messages is a spectacular increase in the faculty of recording and collecting messages. This new technological ability is a major methodological turning point in the study of horizontal forms of communications. What is more, the "one-click-share button" makes the literal repetition of messages more frequent than it would be in oral communication, making the identification of the object of propagation much easier. However, discussions about the concept of virality should remain aware that this ease in identification and collection of a text does not imply an ease in the identification of semantic items such as "information", "news", "ideas", "beliefs", "stories", "details", and so on and so forth. Here again, the study of the social science concept of "rumour" by Froissart comes with many valuable lessons for virality scholars. One of the other major drawbacks of experimental protocols over rumour propagation was (and still is) the identification of such semantic items. When one speaks of "loss of details" as a structural trend in rumour propagation, how does one delimitate a detail? How does one assess whether a detail was forgotten or considered irrelevant by some transmitter? What are the textual units of interest whose variation must be studied: exact spelling of words, words, grammatical groups of words, entire clauses? Furthermore, how does one go from the study of spelling and textual variations to more abstract, semantic items? This last problem is made even

more difficult by the ambiguity of the act of sharing a story when it comes to infer the intentions and doxastic attitudes of the story transmitter. Sharing does not imply believing in a story[9]. As we have seen above, debunking can be a major vector in the propagation of a viral story. Recording the propagation of a message is thus not the same as recording the propagation of a belief. What is more, the transmission of a story can be a subpart of many other communication acts. Questions, irony, connection with other debates and stories, commenting, interpreting, etc., are all extremely common communication acts, which cannot be guessed simply through the mere transmission of a message. This remains true in the favourable case where this transmission is literal. In the digital world, the same technological evolutions have favoured both the literal transmission of a story and the addition of comments, images, videos, sound, the insertion of a document in another document or its outright manipulation and modification. If digital media have eased the identification of the propagation of a given (literal or quasi-literal) message, it has not eased in the least the formidable hermeneutic challenges raised by the semantics of horizontal communication and its relations with doxastic attitudes.

What is more, as already mentioned in subsection 1.1, the lifecycles of messages are by no means restricted to the digital world. A message can have part of its lifecycle in the offline world, be it in paper publication, private written correspondences, posters, physical oral conversations or phone calls, public speeches, TV, radio shows and many other forms. The ease of study in the propagation of the digital forms of a message should not be confused with an ease of study of the whole lifecycle of a given message. In many cases, part of that lifecycle might be just as hard to study as it was before the advent of digital media. The danger of overestimating digital communication because it is easier to study, especially on a large scale, is still very relevant for viral messages. In any case, if virality is considered a digital phenomenon, it should never be assumed that the entire lifecycle of a viral message is digital. Virality would be by default a property of a subpart of the lifecycle of a message, and the message itself will often be a subpart of several more complex messages.

All those methodological precautions have consequences for our initial questions of conceptualisation and historical periodization. From the point of view of historiographic methodology, it is obvious that digital media represents a major turning point, because they modify the technique of source collection, especially at scale. It is standard historiographic practice to delimitate new periods not nec-

**9** Conversely, not sharing does not imply not believing: the act of sharing is not a reflection of belief.

essarily because they correspond to radical social changes, but because they correspond to a period where a new type of source or methods becomes available for historiographic study. After all, the mere idea that "history begins with the invention of writing" is one such periodisation. However, it is also well-known that such a practice comes with dangers, such as the classic confusion between an evolution of the historiographic tools with a radical evolution of the underlying society, i.e., the old prejudice that societies without writing have no history (meaning "no social evolution", which is provably false) or that writing would necessarily represent a radical rupture in a given society (which has to be discussed with caution). When we wonder if viral messages belong to a new historical period, we wonder whether the underlying social phenomena of horizontal communication have been modified, not if the tools for its study have been modified.

Here we meet a classical challenge in the anthropology of writing and other cognitive techniques, which is the huge dissymmetry in sources between a social group having the cognitive technique and the one not having it. We have much more written sources on horizontal communication since we have digital means of collection, but this makes the comparison with other less easily recorded forms of horizontal communication very difficult. Such dissymmetry in sources may easily lead to an under- or overestimation of the distinctions between media and the distinctions between periods delimitated by the introduction of those media.

The final methodological challenge is the interpretation of the relation between technological affordances and actual social practices. This reflection must constantly face the double peril of technological determinism, where the social use of technology is univocally determined by the technological affordances, and a "nothing new under the social sun" position, considering the technological medium as a transparent vessel for social practices of communication. When we will single out the drop in communicational costs (see next section) as a new feature of digital media such as social networks or email accounts, we do not mean to imply that such a drop immediately determines a modification of communicational practices. It just makes it a reasonable heuristic hypothesis to assume such modification exists and to look for it. When we do insist on the new affordances for influence and manipulation of horizontal communication offered by those media, we will not mean to imply that such forms of influence and manipulation are brought into existence only by those affordances, just that the understanding of new forms of manipulation, if they exist, must consider those affordances.

The analysis of the relation between technological affordances and social practices is made even more formidable by the concomitance of other social evolutions with the apparition of new communication technology. To paraphrase Pinker (2020) in the conclusion of their book, the evolutions of norms surround-

ing "privacy" and "intimacy" might have well caused digital communicational practices as much as they have been caused by the new technologies. In so many words, the complexity of the relations between technological affordances and social practices compels us to present all our arguments in favour of virality as a new phenomenon as heuristic hypotheses, waiting for a more complete story which will most probably include other factors to account for actual practices.

To conclude, virality is a descriptive concept, capturing the shape of the diffusion of a message identified by its form. It should not pretend to capture the complex propagation of semantic items, just to be a small step in a long analysis. It should also not pretend to even capture the whole story of propagation, as messages live through several media, and scholars should not give in to the temptation to believe that the most interesting part of a phenomenon is that which is easier to record and study. Finally, studying the dependence of virality to its digital medium is not giving in to technological determinism, as technological affordances are assumed to be a strict subpart of the story of social practices. Now that we have cleared the air of possible methodological confusions, let us go back to formulate conjectures on the novelty of viral messages in the history of horizontal communication.

# 2 The Definitions of Virality and their Relations to Digital Media

## 2.1 The Implicit Relations

Let us start by quoting extensively from a couple attempts at defining the concept of "virality". Juvertson and Draper suggest that it is

> a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message (Juvertson and Draper 1997 in Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 16)[10].

**10** This article is credited by Nahon and Hemsley (2013) for the coining of the term "viral marketing". It should be noted that Steve Jurvetson is neither a scholar nor a marketer or a journalist, but a venture capitalist. "Viral marketing" as a phrase does not originate from scientific analysis, but is part of the self-description of their activities by business people: as such it is an actor's category.

Denisova (2020) adds that it is "an allegory of rapid diffusion of information and ideas", while Nahon and Hemsley note the following:

> Virality is a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message. Therefore, identifying and measuring virality is made on the bases of (i) the human and social aspects of information sharing from one to another; (ii) the speed of spread; (iii) the reach in terms of the number of people exposed to the content; and (iv) the reach in terms of the distance the information travels by bridging multiple networks[11]. (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 16)

As we mentioned above, those definitions, although extremely different from one another, share a negative attribute, whereby they do not mention explicitly the digital nature of the media. There may be an implicit reference to the digital medium in Nahon and Hemsley's work, but its existence can only be established if an ambiguity of the text is solved, and one asks, are the "multiple networks" mentioned in their definition "digital networks" or a more general notion of "social network"? At face value, it seems that the phenomenon of virality, even though it may have been introduced and is still utilised massively for digital phenomena, could equally describe communication phenomena in the analogue world, and even before the advent of the modern computer.

Let me elaborate on the most famous and most sophisticate definition, that of Nahon and Hemsley. First, their definition does not rely on a single numeric value for diffusion speed or number of views, whereby a message is not viral because it reaches $x$ users in $dt$ amount of time[12]. By contrast, it is defined by global properties of the phenomenon. The virality is defined by the global form of the curve describing the number of individuals seeing the information through time, which should be a sigmoid, corresponding to a slow-fast-slow rhythm of diffusion. It is also defined by the power law of rate of decay.

Another important component of Nahon and Hemsley's work is their use of clusters in social networks. Clusters of social networks denote places in the network with a strong network overlap, with many individuals sharing many common acquaintances with other members of the cluster. From the viewpoint of the

**11** The reader might notice that the epidemiological metaphor at the origin of the concept has virtually disappeared from Nahon and Hemsley's definition. The modalities of "contagion" from one subject to another became inessential, as the phenomenon is defined in terms of global parameters.

**12** This avoids some of the objections formulated by Froissart against some mathematical modelisations of "rumour", that were dependent on an arbitrary numeric threshold.

sociology of ideas, it is frequently a place of belief overlap. They distinguish between clusters of strong ties (friends and family, people we see in our everyday life) and clusters of weak ties (indirect knowledge, someone you lost contact with). They make two fundamental assertions: i) social networks augment the number of weak ties that a person may have, and ii) new knowledge comes from weak ties. Viral content typically saturates a local cluster before jumping to another cluster through a weak tie.

Here again, the interpretation of Nahon and Hemsley's work is plagued by a slight ambiguity. Even if it has become common practice to use the phrase "social networks" to denote only "digital social networks", this could be made more explicit. However, if we make the not so bold assumption that this is also the case here, then Nahon and Hemsley's definition of virality contains an implicit reference to the digital nature of the medium. Even more noteworthy, they argue that digital social networks had the effects of augmenting the number of weak ties individuals may have. This clearly seems to be a new effect of the digital medium, and it is relevant for the understanding of virality. If social networks augment the number of weak ties, and if messages become viral by jumping from one local cluster of strong ties to another via weak ties, this would mean that the digital medium has created new opportunities for messages to turn viral. This points to the possibility that, even though they did not make it perfectly explicit, Nahon and Hemsley were actually trying to understand the specific impact of the digital medium on the phenomenon of virality.

As argued by Nahon and Hemsley, this definition has the advantage of offering a clear-cut distinction from other forms of peer-to-peer diffusion of a message, which are all familiar to digital media scholars, such as popular messages, memes, cascades, or word-of-mouth[13]. A popular message does not need a sigmoid curve, as some messages remain seen by a large number of individuals for a long time, sometimes plateauing at a given interval of values for years. The concept of "meme" is not meant to capture a single information event and the modalities of its spread. Researchers in memetics, to quote Nahon and Hemsley, "are typically more focused on understanding the transition from the original content to its derivatives, comparing memes, or looking for common elements" (2013, 43). Memes are thus a more abstract unit of culture than a viral message. As for information cascades, they are, to quote Nahon and Hemsley again, "a concept used to explain why people imitate other people's behaviours". Information cascades are supposed to be part of herd

**13** One of the main explicit motivations of Nahon and Hemsley's definition is to enable a distinction with other forms of "information flows". They explicitly regret the assimilation of virality to a simple "digital word-of-mouth" by a subpart of the literature (2013, 43).

behaviour, when an individual imitates another individual's behaviour on their authority or assuming that they have a good reason to behave as they do, such as people going to a restaurant because it is popular, or joining a line supposing the individuals in line must be waiting for something interesting. Unlike virality, this phenomenon does not need to reach a great number of individuals or to unfold quickly. What is more, there is no need to assume that messages go viral only when people share a message because other people are sharing this message. This would be a rather simplistic hypothesis, ignoring the literature indicative of selection in sharing decisions and the great variety of reasons for sharing (see Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 45). Word-of-mouth does not presuppose the speed, reach-by-numbers and reach-by-networks which are key elements of the definition of virality. What is more, word-of-mouth presupposes that individuals engage in physical conversations, while "virality must employ the many-to-many, mass-personal communication we described above". This last passage, added to the mention that virality is a "network phenomenon" as opposed to word-of-mouth, may be the clearest indication that despite very slight ambiguities in their phrasing, Nahon and Hemsley fully understand virality as a digital phenomenon necessitating the use of digital networks.

## 2.2 The Importance of Communicational Costs and System Piggybacking

If some features of digital communication can easily be read in Nahon and Hemsley's definition with only a slight dose of intellectual charity, some other features of digital communication remain entirely implicit, even though they may actually contribute to Nahon and Hemsley's theoretical effort:

1. The first is that digital media such as e-mail accounts and digital networks are prodigious enablers of one-to-many communication. Circumstances such as public speeches and sending a copy of a letter to multiple recipients exist in the analogue world, but they are few and far between, demand considerable effort and are submitted to strong constraints of time, space, and costs. The presence on a digital network, on the contrary, makes the communication of a message to hundreds if not thousands of individuals, sometimes spread through many different countries, an effortless endeavour. This greatly facilitates the exponential diffusion of a message.
2. The relative speed of diffusion and fast decay that is characteristic of viral messages can be seen as a consequence of three more fundamental features. The first is the exponential diffusion facilitated by the digital medium that we just commented on. The other two are features of communications that

are not directly dictated by the digital medium, but are rather descriptive properties of their common use. The second property is the short time-interval of resharing. When a viral message is spread, it is typically in an interval going from a couple seconds after reception to a couple days (see Nahon and Hemsley 2013). This implies that if an exponential diffusion is to happen, it is to happen in a short interval of time, hence the relative speed of diffusion of viral messages. The third and final feature is the low frequency of re-sharing. Users of digital media typically share a viral information once, not several times (see Pailler and Schafer 2023). This implies that viral messages are bound to have a fast decay of their number of viewers-resharers. As the exponential function has the decisive property to quickly outrun the world population, without resharing by the same individuals the propagation of a viral message is bound to decay rapidly.

3. Finally, it can be said that digital social networks and other forms of digital media augment the reach of the message, understood both as the number of viewers and the geographical area in which it will be spread. The absence of any mention of the physical space may be revealing of the implicit reference to digital media in Nahon and Hemsley's work. Communication through large distances has become so easy to be considered unproblematic, and Nahon and Hemsley use purely informational metrics to characterize virality. This is not to say that long-range diffusion of a given message is a new phenomenon. As noted by Froissart (2002b), the diffusion of images through very long distances is an old phenomenon. However, the gentle reader may be too young to remember that there used to be a time where chatting online with an individual in the Philippines while living in Europe was considered amazing, and where a long-distance phone call was a very costly endeavour that had to be kept exceedingly short and infrequent. It is a testament to the transformation of communication by digital media that those operations now seem to be effortless and almost costless.

The reader may have noticed that consideration of communicational costs is essential to all the remarks just made. I use here a notion of cost that is not purely financial but denotes all relevant resources that may be spent in communication, such as time, energy, the cognitive effort of learning necessary skills and conceiving the message and its diffusion. When analysing the history of media, it is not sufficient to consider whether a given form of communication exists, but how costly it is. A radical drop in costs may similarly alter the frequency of that form of communication, the population that uses it, the type of content that can be spread through that mode of communication, the business models developing around it, and so many other social phenomena of interest. What may be the

most impactful in the digital medium is not necessarily the creation of completely new forms of communication, but a radical decrease in costs for some of those forms[14].

Another singularity of virality as opposed to word-of-mouth from the viewpoint of communicational costs was noted very early by Ralph F. Wilson. Virality supposes to piggyback the resources offered by the digital platform. A content spreading massively and rapidly through email accounts or on a digital social network consumes a significant amount of resources in terms of computing power, memory on the company's servers or bandwidth. A government, marketing agency or activist trying to launch a viral message is effectively piggybacking on another actor's resources, thus transferring the costs of message reproduction and diffusion that they should otherwise have assumed on their own. This modifies the economy of peer-to-peer message diffusion. It also implies that the institution running the digital forum must have an interest in being the place where at least some viral messages are spread, because otherwise it would see a significant share of its resources instrumentalised by other actors without reaping any reward. From a strategic perspective, virality on modern digital fora depend on a tacit confluence of interests between actors having an advantage in promoting some viral messages and digital fora having an interest in being the place where virality happens. This implicit two-player economic game was absent when an intelligence service or marketing agency was trying to launch and manipulate a rumour.

Before we come back to this topic in detail in section 3, it is essential to understand some major political phenomenon such as the difficulty of obtaining from private companies any moderation of nefarious viral messages, or even simply to get them to stop recommending such content. It is easy to manipulate a system encouraging virality even without detailed knowledge of moderation systems. A coordinated surge of sharing created by fake accounts and bots is a well-known and widely used strategy. If digital actors can manage to detect such attempt at viral manipulation, they may also show some obvious ill will for doing so, as virality is part of their own business model. For instance, Facebook's ill will towards moderate political and medical misinformation has become blatant and infamous (Frenkel and Kang 2021), and even Pre-Musk Twitter was criticised for its slow reaction to some misinformation and its maintenance of the easily hackable Trends (see Ohlheiser 2022). Obtaining moderation of viral misinformation from digital companies profiting from virality has thus turned into a major political problem.

**14** This importance of costs is well seen by Roy Pinker (2020) in the conclusion of their book.

Understanding the exact problems raised by this incorporation of virality in business models is a great analytical challenge beyond the scope of this chapter. After all, spreading misinformation for profit is a problem as old as the for-profit mass media, and the term "yellow journalism" was created for some of the first newspaper business empires in the US in the late nineteenth century, especially under William Randolph Hearst, as some media outlets became infamous for their desire to spread dubious information and outright falsehoods in their cynical quest for the next buzz. It is thus slightly unnerving to hear journalists discuss "fake news" and "misinformation" as if this was a brand-new phenomenon created by "the internet" or "social networks". If such superficial analysis can trigger a healthy sceptical reaction before claims of radical novelty[15], it should not blind us to the possibility of novelty introduced by virality in the economics of for-profit media. As has been noted many times, the click-bait-industry is based on the monetisation of an attention span of a couple of seconds, a feat inaccessible to previous media industries (Venturini 2019). In that ultra short attention span, actions such as following a link or re-sharing a message, typical of viral propagation, are major targets of monetisation. As we will see below, the expansion of Machine Learning, especially predictive models of click-and-share, gives through customization greater exposure to information favouring virality.

## 2.3 Virality Metrics, or the Measure of the Phenomenon as Part of the Phenomenon

Before we move on to more advanced technological features such as the use of ML, other technical features typical of the digital medium should be mentioned as part and parcel of the virality phenomenon. One of them is the computation and display on user interfaces of virality metrics. With virality, it is not an exaggeration to say the measure of the phenomenon is part of the phenomenon itself, as virality metrics are essential to the platforms and researchers' perception and reaction to viral phenomena and have a self-confirmatory effect.

Those metrics are both used by the managers of digital fora to monitor activity and by the users and content creators, encouraging re-sharing and guiding the strategic creation of content. This again depends on digital technological affordances, such as the ability to quantify and measure activity at scale and in real time. Hashtags could also be analysed as a form of self-identification of the viral message as such, which could be a completely new practice. A new system of so-

**15** An example of this healthy scepticism can be found in Pinker (2020).

cial norms creates new attempts at "hacking" those norms, namely to instrumentalise and manipulate the norms. New forms of hacking on digital media are thus a good indicator that those media are modifying the norms of communication. Some practices explicitly target the underlying mechanism quantifying and promoting virality, such as "trend piggybacking", when a user adds a popular hashtag to a video which may not have a direct relation to this hashtag in order to increase its chances of going viral. Other users go as far as using fake accounts to boost the number of re-shares of a given post (see Elmas et al. 2023).

It should be noted that such forms of "virality hacking" – and also research – are made harder by the secrecy surrounding some virality metrics. For instance, until very recently, Twitter did not publicly share its virality metrics even on the API dedicated to researchers (see Ling et al. 2022). This constrains researchers to using indirect metrics of virality such as number of likes or number of views (for the latter, only when videos do not start automatically, as it corrupts this metric as an indicator of virality). Virality is thus part and parcel of a wider phenomenon of digital media, namely the privatisation and opacification of norms governing public speech (see references to "shadowbanning" below and in Grison's chapter).

## 3 Updating Nahon and Hemsley's Definition: The Importance of Machine Learning in Virality and its Control

There is another factor in need of consideration in Nahon and Hemsley's work, namely, its age. The book containing the full exposition of their theory was published in 2013. For all their brilliance, they could not see into the future. I will argue that what has happened since then in communication technology is of great relevance to the analysis of viral phenomena and should be used to update their definition and deepen our reflection on the role of digital medium.

The most remarkable development for virality since the publication of *Going viral* is probably the advent of ML as a technology to control the flow of information on social networks and other platforms. For instance, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) started to use ML on a massive scale for content recommendation and ranking from 2016 on (see Hao 2021b), and many other players have followed suit, making recommendation and ranking one of the great industrial use cases of modern ML (see Portugal et al. 2018; Sharda and Josan 2021; Da'U and Salim

2020[16]). This cannot be without an effect on the phenomenon of virality, as it implies a centralised control of the information to which the user is exposed. It can thus be stated that ML created new, automated modalities of control over the phenomenon of virality.

Furthermore, recommendation and ranking are not the only use cases of ML that are relevant to the phenomenon of virality. Major players such as Meta-Facebook widely use predictive ML to estimate the probability of clicking and sharing, and those models play a major role in their strategy of engagement maximisation[17]. Finally, content moderation has also been hugely automated in the last couple of years with ML models[18]. While recommendation and ranking help promote content and thus increase its chance of becoming viral, content moderation may suppress a content altogether or reduce its visibility to other users in a variety of ways, diminishing its likelihood of going viral or effectively reducing it to zero. The means at the disposal of digital platform managers range from account, message, search result or recommendation suppression to flagging a message or account as suspicious, creating frictions of sharing such as asking you to read before you share[19], or surreptitiously reducing the number of contacts in a network who can see the message ("shadowbanning")[20].

**16** For an example of the type of research conducted to maximize engagement with social media marketing, see Lee et al. (2018).

**17** Meta publishes guidelines for content creator on how to maximise engagement for their content, for instance this 2022 publication: Meta, A creator's guide to growth: how to get your content seen on Facebook, September 20, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/creators/how-to-get-your-content-seen-on-facebook. For examples of Machine Learning research on this topic, see Zhao et al. (2018); Zou et al. (2019).

**18** For a recent review of the Machine Learning literature on content detection and moderation, with an optimistic take on automation, see Gongane et al. (2022); Androcec (2020). For an introduction to algorithmic moderation with a discussion of its ethical and political challenges, see Gorwa et al. (2020).

**19** As remarked by Frances Haugen in her Senatorial testimony (see Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen testifies before Congress. CBS News, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juZEkeTjTRY, min. 1'08), it is known that a measure as simple as asking users to click on a link before they share can significantly slow the spread of misinformation.

**20** This point is explicitly made in the very title of Gillepsie (2022). The exact definition of shadowbanning is a controversial point, and this controversy itself illustrates the complexity of moderation practices. For instance, does shadowbanning mean that your content is absolutely invisible to all other users, or that you are no longer accessible by the search function? Several platforms have unsurprisingly vehemently denied the very existence of shadowbanning. For these questions, see Savolainen (2022). The paper also makes the intriguing point that beyond the mere existence of such and such a moderation practice, the deep opacity of the rules that public discourse is submitted to on digital platforms, and the impossibility for users to even guess them in a consistent fashion are disturbing problems of platform governance.

It may be beneficial not only to stop conceiving recommendation and moderation as all-or-nothing businesses, but also to stop opposing recommendation and moderation in a dichotomy to conceive of them as two poles in a spectrum of content propagation control. If one theoretical pole is the complete and definitive suppression of a message before it can be seen by anyone, then the other would be the immediate, uncommented and literal sharing with the entire digital platform. Recommendation and moderation effectively move between those two poles to modulate the exposure of a given message. ML has thus provided managers of digital platforms with powerful and radically new affordances to control the phenomenon of virality using a variety of means, with a precision and power unknown to the various forms of control related to word-of-mouth.

Before we elaborate on this last point, it is important to not give in to a fantasy of absolute information control through ML. Recommendation and moderation are challenging tasks with a substantial error rate, and unexpected behaviours of systems sometimes thwart the efforts of digital platforms to control information propagation while respecting current legislation, their own Terms of Use and their business and brand strategies. For instance, during her testimony as a Facebook whistle-blower before a Senate committee[21] on October 2021, Frances Haugen insisted on the various difficulties met by the moderation systems of the tech giant, especially for non-English languages, and the tremendous complexity created by the interaction of many ML models on the platform[22]. Those mistakes hark back to the infamous opacity of those large ML systems, the behaviour of which remains to this day hard to understand and control in all its details.

However, those limitations of ML information control should not be used to deny the novelty of the phenomena unfolding in front of our eyes. First, the occasional lack of success of a form of control does not necessarily diminish its nov-

**21** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnpVQnv5Cw.

**22** See Hao (2021a). Haugen's public senate testimony is a document well-worth consulting on its own. It touches many topics, including Meta's negative impact on children's mental health, its amplification of divisive political content and misinformation, its lack of reaction against its instrumentalisation during the massacres in Myanmar, but for our topic, it is worthwhile to hear her explain that "anger-driven virality" is a conscious design decision, and need not be the price to pay of sharing some pictures with your friends. The overallocation of "integrity spendings" to English-speaking users is mentioned at the end of minute 57'-beginning of min. 58'. This is not only due to the availability of English language data, but also to the market importance of the language. One may also mention the lack of training on mixed language data, such as "Hinglish" or the mixture of English and Hindi commonly found on Indian social networks. The withdrawal of some virality-induced features during the American elections because of their known dangers to the public sphere, and their re-instalment for growth purposes after that, is mentioned at min. 1'01.

elty, and second, it is enough that those systems are able to impact information propagation at scale to constitute a new phenomenon of the greatest importance, even if this impact does not take the exact form wished by the system's designers. It should also be underlined that according to Haugen the use of ML is not always motivated by a belief in its impeccable efficiency and safety, but by a belief that is automation potential will help scalability and hence company growth.

When we consider the effects of ML systems on virality, it becomes apparent that we are talking about a digitally native phenomenon. There is no automated recommendation system or content moderation system in the analogue world[23]. This makes virality a digital phenomenon not only because it takes place on digital platforms, but because those digital platforms use digital means to control this phenomenon[24]. This constitutes an historically important feature, as it radically distinguishes virality from word-of-mouth. No government and no marketing agency ever had the power to control every peer-to-peer interaction in the street to favour or suppress a given message. The new situation on digital fora would be analogous to a central power being able not only to record what every individual is saying in real time, but also to mute an individual or to limit the number of persons who can hear her when she spreads a message disapproved of by the central power, while also being able, at least in principle, to augment the audience and exposure of all, and not just some, individuals spreading an approved message.

Such a gigantic power could only be enhanced by its surreptitious character. If our imaginary power could control peer-to-peer communication without the knowledge of individuals, this would certainly reduce the probability of protest and resistance. This again is the case on modern digital fora, as both recommendation and moderation remain largely invisible to individual actors. If more and more tech savvy actors are definitely aware of this phenomenon and try to circumvent it in their favour, thus creating a new phenomenon of interest in the process (see examples below), many individuals remain ignorant either of the phenomenon itself or of its exact modalities. I have already insisted elsewhere on the necessity of taking into account this surreptitious character of digital information control as one of its most distinctive features (see Pégny 2024). The ability to exert influence on information propagation at scale while maintaining relative

**23** For more on this topic, see for instance Krafft and Donovan (2020).

**24** This use of digital forms of control is not exclusive, as platforms still use an army of human moderators. The study of virality cannot be complete without an analysis of the guidelines given to those moderators and their concrete work conditions, as can be found in Roberts (2019). However, we do not aim at such a complete study here, only to explore what makes it typically digital.

secrecy is definitely an original phenomenon dependent on digital means. It would have been hard to imagine police officers intervening in every street conversation to control word-of-mouth messaging while pretending to maintain the operation in secret. Such a combination of detailed control at scale and relative discretion is dependent on the technological affordances offered by digital fora, and ML recommendation and moderation are part of those affordances.

The definition of content moderation as a technical task has in itself many normative effects. First, it is crucial to underline the ill-defined and intrinsically complex nature of content moderation. This cannot be a well-defined task, not only because "appropriate content" is a value-laden, culture-dependent, and controversial issue but because it concatenates under the same name different concepts with vastly different identification and demarcation issues for both the law and computer science: harassment, abusive language, threats, offensive language, slandering, misinformation, etc. All those different forms of undesirable content only share the negative property that they are undesirable on a given platform. What is more, the property of being undesirable can also be platform dependent. A dance video might be inappropriate on a professional network platform, but perfectly appropriate elsewhere (see Gongane et al. 2022). Finally, each of those issues is notoriously difficult in itself, and it is not to be excluded that their simultaneous implementation on the same platform could create a complex interaction between issues. What is to be done, for instance, if a social media post can be seen both as misinformation and a threat of violence, and those two problems are identified by two different subsystems subjugated to different rules? The pretence of obtaining a technical solution to "the problem of content moderation" is thus in itself a major source of conceptual confusion, as it hides the plurality of problems at hand.

Before concluding on this, I would like to add a couple more specific issues created by the use of ML techniques for automated content moderation[25]. The problems of this "unification through technologization" of several moderation challenges are compounded by the banalisation of naïve quantification of social phenomena. For instance, the review paper by Gongane et al. referenced above quotes quantities and percentages of "detrimental content" and "hate speech"

**25** The reader may have noticed that I have not, and will not, try to apply the same analysis to recommendation and ranking, even though this would be absolutely necessary for a complete analysis of the effect of digitalisation on virality. This is only due to editorial limitations in space, and in intrinsic limitations in scope of this chapter. I am here just trying to convince the reader of the relevance of taking into consideration the properly digital nature of virality by examining the impact of the automated means of virality control: I am not trying to give a complete description of the effects of those means on virality, which would be so much more ambitious.

without any definition or methodology, as if the measures of such phenomena were not controversial and fraught with methodological issues. The authors go on to make very strange affirmations, such as the rarity of uncertain cases of hate speech, or a classification of satirical news as fake news, without any comment or methodological precaution. Such a naïve approach to delicate social issues creates a high risk of "phenomenon creation" as well as maintaining ignorance about the real phenomena of abuse. If there is nothing intrinsically wrong with applying ML techniques to moderation tasks, the risks of such naïve use of those techniques are very real.

Be that as it may, the training of ML systems for the identification of inappropriate content supposes the conception of a training dataset by a group of data labellers. Only a vast amount of examples labelled as appropriate or inappropriate will enable the system to pick up statistical features enabling successful identification. This entails that the group of data labellers must be given a definition of what inappropriate content is, and a set of instructions to decide on the multitude of cases they will have to face. Even if we set aside the considerable difficulties of definition that we just mentioned, the use of a large group of data labellers creates its own difficulties of consistency and quality control caused by the notoriously murky and controversial application of rules to cases of content moderation[26]. This new modality of identification induced by the choice of ML methodology both inherits classical issues of man-made moderation and adds its own peculiarities.

For instance, a new issue introduced into content moderation is due to a current particularity of NLP (Natural Language Processing) models, that is their inability to handle emojis, GIFs and other visual symbols. Those models are trained on a normalised language where those symbols are simply suppressed, which may cause issues when those symbols have a crucial modifier role in the whole message. This situation may evolve quickly as models become more and more multi-modal, but it is for the time being a feature worth knowing about among social scientists studying communication practices on digital media.

What is more, it is unclear in the current state of the art whether ML systems trained to identify "inappropriate content" are learning robust features of the underlying phenomena – for instance, what makes a threat out of a given statement – or if they are learning proxy signals commonly associated with (what a given group of people think according to a given set of definitions and instructions is) inappropriate content. This is a generic problem of current ML, as it

**26** See Gongane et al. (2022) for some details on technical quality control measures. For more on the extreme complexity of human moderation, see the book by Roberts mentioned above. *The MIT Tech Review* has also published extensively on the topic in the last years.

lacks any intrinsic methodological warranty that the features identified are robust (for a short, entry-level introduction to this gigantic issue, see Wang 2023).

The automation of content moderation on vast platforms with an international user base also raises deep issues of cultural sensitivity and pluralism. The technical system may lead to a uniform application of norms throughout the platform, if only to simplify the issues at hand, which may be conceived of as a surreptitious imposition of cultural norms on certain countries. Users of Facebook have sometimes complained about the imposition of the American taboo against female breast nudity on the platform (see, for instance, Demopoulos 2023).

To recap, content moderation is deeply influenced by its position as a technical problem, and its particular solution through ML systems. Such an influence is naturally transmitted to virality. However, another relation between virality and content moderation can be found in Frances Haugen's testimony. She has insisted on the deep tensions between content moderation, its possible automation, and the will to promote viral content. Meta-Facebook promised that AI systems would be able to detect and eliminate toxic content that would be promoted by their engagement-based ranking systems (see min. 1′07′ in the reference above). As a matter of fact, they experimented with such a strategy, and internally reached the conclusion that the detection of toxic content was performing too poorly to amount to a satisfying solution. Haugen herself defends the position that making the platform less viral is the only way to diminish its toxicity. especially when she has defended the position that only a less viral network could be well moderated. This would mean that the commercial quest of virality and content moderation are in structural tension, and automated content moderation is just a *pis-aller* after the management of the platform sacrificed the genuine moderation of their content on the altar of virality (and profit). This is a very interesting idea in its own right, but its examination is beyond the scope of this work.

In simple terms, digital technological affordances enable an extreme centralisation of control on the peer-to-peer diffusion of messages at an unprecedented level of detail, and it constitutes without any shadow of a doubt a new historical situation that no political analysis of modern media can afford to ignore. If the central manipulation of seemingly horizontal, peer-to-peer communication is by no means a new phenomenon, digital media offer new means of manipulation that warrant an autonomous account, including understanding its failures and unforeseen effects. To wrap it up in a provocative formula: Virality is a new form of peer-to-peer propagation because it can be influenced in new (digital) ways.

## Conclusion

We have pleaded for a heuristic understanding of virality as a new form of horizontal communication well-distinguished from word-of-mouth. Methodological precautions should wrap this assertion in a fair amount of humility. Virality is a descriptive concept which does not pretend to model the propagation of ideas or beliefs. It can only constitute part of a story of propagation going through multiple channels and should not be given an exaggerated importance because it is easier to study than oral communication. Finally, its dependence on the digital medium does not imply that the whole story of social practices surrounding virality should be reduced to a technological determination.

However, we have seen that digital media present significant technological affordances for horizontal communication which should not be downplayed. Digital media have caused a radical drop in the cost of some forms of communication, especially the one-to-many, literal, fast and long-distance propagation of a message. Virality metrics are also a feature typical of the digital world, absent from analogue word-of-mouth, which create a self-confirmatory feedback loop. The measure of the phenomenon, and its manipulation, is part of the phenomenon.

Through ML recommendation and moderation, new opportunities of centralised control of peer-to-peer communication, even if their exact effects may be hard to master, have arisen, which is a new phenomenon from a technological and media perspective. What is more, virality has created a new economy of piggybacking where content creators and propagators aiming at virality harness the communicational resources offered, oftentimes for free, by another actor, who must consequently develop a business interest in being the place where virality happens. Furthermore, those actors must develop an understanding of the automated means of influence on information propagation to circumvent or instrumentalise them to their advantage.

ML-based content recommendation and moderation blurs the distinction between horizontal and vertical communication in novel ways. Older forms of institutional manipulation, such as rumour propagation or astroturfing, arguably aimed at blurring such a distinction by creating or harnessing a seemingly horizontal phenomenon submitted to centralised design and manipulation. However, recommendation and moderation enable a new form of confusion of genres, as every step of content propagation can be controlled by recommendation and moderation algorithms, a level of granularity never achievable before. This is arguably one of the reasons why the responsibility of a platform for content is so hard to define legally, as modern platforms enable deep propagation control without actual content creation.

All of this pleads for an understanding of virality not as a simple "digital word-of-mouth", but as a new form of horizontal communication, starting in the late 1990s and taking an important development and turn in the mid-2010s with the advent of ML-fuelled content propagation control. This should be read as a heuristic statement: A lot more work needs to be done to better understand the interplay of media and communicational practices in the three last decades and compare it with similar studies of other periods and media.

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Gabriele Marino

# The Biggest Meme. *Harlem Shake* Ten Years After

**Abstract:** This chapter reconstructs the history of the biggest meme in history, Harlem Shake, ten years after its viral explosion, and proposes a semiotic analysis of it. Today's hyper- and post-social (as well as hyper- and post-memetic) media world is the result of phenomena of this kind. Challenges, parodies, dances and lip-syncs that emerged in the viral content cultures and spread beyond all expectations thanks to the ecologies of social media have given rise to a whole new platform, TikTok, which embodies the affirmation of a new paradigm in communication and content production. In an era of increasingly rapid consumption of images, videos and more generally what semiotics defines as texts, to go back to Harlem Shake, the Big Bang of a new way of conceiving textuality as practice can help us better understand fragments of the present and anticipate where we are heading in the near future.

**Keywords:** viral phenomenon, internet challenge, internet meme, Harlem Shake, semiotics

I started looking into what we now simply call memes exactly ten years ago, in 2013. It was the year of the Harlem Shake, and perhaps not much more needs to be added to explain the reason for this interest that arose then and continues to this day[1].

Presently, ten years later, the scenario we live in is the result of phenomena like the Harlem Shake, and yet at the same time it is incredibly different simply because there were no cases like the Harlem Shake before. Ten years ago, this was not foreseeable. Today it even seems banal to say: We live in a post-meme era. In a double sense, this age is inconceivable without the existence of something like memes and it is also an age in which memes, that are everywhere and everything (since everything can be made into a meme), have paradoxically dissolved, faded and thus technically disappeared. Memes are dead, long live the memes. They have exploded, and their dust, like space dust, forms much of the building material of what we create online today. Memes, their logic, their style, constitute the wallpaper of our digital environments. We are so deeply immersed

1 For a recent, concise summary of my semiotic approach to online virality and internet memes, see Marino (2022). For a different and complementary take on *Harlem Shake*, involving a wider methodological reflection on meme research (historiography, textual analysis, quantitative vs. quality approach, etc.), see Pailler and Schafer (2023).


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in them, and have been for so long, that we no longer notice them. This phenomenon of semantic slabbering (the "everything is a meme", but also "nothing is a meme anymore") has its origins in a phase that can be dated to the peak of mainstream social media like Facebook, roughly between 2007 and 2017. In 2007, the classic format of the top-bottom text or image macro was born, thanks to Advice Animals like the Advice Dog. In 2017, however, the "label" format of memes was established, thanks to the success of Distracted Boyfriend and similar images. Memes would always maintain a template, they would always thrive on the ability of users to appropriate them by personalising a more general allegory, but at the same time they became increasingly free and elastic. The following year, 2018, saw the emergence of TikTok, a platform that embraces the formats and trends (challenges, parodies, lip-syncing, etc.) popularised thanks to cases like the Harlem Shake. TikTok is the epitome of a new media universe and media model that we can confidently call post-social media, as it is hyper-social media[2]. In an age of ever-growing fast-paced consumption of images, videos and, more generally, what semiotics defines as texts, a look back at Harlem Shake, heralding the Big Bang of a new way of conceiving textuality as practice (rather than a static object)[3], can help us better understand fragments of the present and anticipate where we are heading in the near future.

## 1 A Song Without Music Video

2 February 2012

The young New York electronic musician Baauer (real name Harry Bauer Rodrigues, born 1989) uploaded a track entitled "Harlem Shake" to his Soundcloud channel. In April of the same year, the track was included by Rustie (Russell Whyte, producer from Glasgow, born 1983, signed to the renowned Warp Records label and head of the Lucky Me label) into a mix for the BBC Radio One programme and reached the ears of Diplo (Thomas Wesley Pentz, a producer from Los Angeles, born 1978, and one of the most influential figures in the electronic scene of the last 20 years, moving between underground and mainstream), who decided in May to release the song on the Soundcloud page of Jeffree's (a subsidiary of his main label Mad Decent). "Harlem Shake" is the first Baauer-produced track to be released in digital format in the official discography. In June, the track was made available for purchase on major online music stores (iTunes, Beatport). In August, it was up-

2 See the first Italian book on TikTok, Marino and Surace (2023).

3 For the semiotic notion of "text", see Marrone (2014).

loaded on Mad Decent's YouTube channel in the form of an audio track with a still image. The music video was commissioned to Belgian director Maxime Quoilin (trusted by many Black and urban artists and the author of some of Baauer's publicity photos). It was shot later that June (according to some behind-the-scenes images posted on Instagram)[4] but was discarded by the record label and never officially released (the video was eventually uploaded on YouTube, by accounts not affiliated with either the musician or the record company, in 2013)[5]. There are three protagonists in this video (and occasionally Baauer himself appears): A girl and a little boy (wearing a T-shirt with a photo of the rapper Puff Daddy) who first dance separately and then together on the streets of Harlem, and a motorcyclist performing daredevil stunts in traffic on a big motorbike. The footage is rich in slow-motion and acceleration effects; the images are synchronised with the progression of the song (at one point, for example, a roar can be heard – I will return to this detail – and the images show a man opening and closing his mouth). "Harlem Shake" received positive reviews, e.g., from Pitchfork, the website that rode and steered the Anglophone hipster taste of the 2000s (indie, folktronica, hip hop, etc.).

Harlem Shake lasts three minutes and 16 seconds and belongs to the subgenre of electro and bass music called trap: A very different trap from the one that would be very popular in the next few years and would become a real media and cultural phenomenon, as is the case for example in Italy. Trap emerged in the early 2000s as a subgenre of one of the stylistic offshoots of Southern hip hop (crunk) and was characterised by a hard and dark timbre, by an edgy, mechanical rhythm provided by a drum machine (usually the historic Roland TR-808), the use of sub-basses, synthesiser layers and electronic effects (sirens, video game samples, voices with strong ethnic connotation, etc.), and combinations of complex hi-hat figurations. Harmonically and melodically, the song is elementary. It is a series of 14 notes occupying two bars in a loop; they are all F, with an E-flat in the twelfth and an E in the thirteenth position. A complete riff loop is exhausted after four repetitions of the series, i.e., after eight bars. The structure is modular, with the three sections Intro (A, 8 bars), Riff (B, 16 bars, i.e. two riff cycles) and Intermezzo (C, 16 bars) according to the scheme A-B-$A_1$-B-C-A-B-$A_1$-B; where $A_1$ is to be understood as a reprise of the intro with variation (the 14 notes are all F) and C as an "empty section" divided into two subsections (in the first the 14-note loop does not appear; in the second the notes appear as in $A_1$, but with a less pronounced rhythmic pattern). Rhythmically, timbrally, and sonically, however, the track is very rich. This is thanks to the hi-hat figurations (triplets typical of trap) and snare drum passages

**4** Post dated 27 June 2012, from Quoilin's account: https://www.instagram.com/p/MXAlWhop_P/.
**5** https://youtu.be/j-ToIS-LOGY and https://youtu.be/vuuLm78eTqA.

(borrowed from ragga), the variety of vocal ("Con los terroristas!" taken from *Los Terroristas* by Héctor "El Father", 2006[6], and "Do the harlem shake!", taken from *Miller Time* by Plastic Little, 2003) and other kinds of samples (a roar), as well as the use of spatialisation effects (approaching and receding, layering, stereo distribution, echo).

"Harlem Shake" begins with a sample that shouts "Con los terroristas!" from afar, announcing the intro (A), which is characterised by a driving rhythm. This is followed by the drop, which introduces the main riff with the sample "Do the harlem shake!" (B)[7]. The motif (the 14 notes), expounded by a synth line reminiscent of the Dutch house sound, is simultaneously robotic and playful, a kind of lullaby, giving the impression of someone "pressing the same button", in a "rubbery", "greasy", "sticky" way; listeners describe it as "hypnotic" and "addictive". The riff exposition closes with the roar of a lion (modified to sound like a burp). The song's intro and first riff cycle are the foundation upon which the Harlem Shake meme develops.

## 2 Perfecting the Format

30 January 2013
Youtuber Filthy_Frank (then with 13,000 subscribers to the DizastaMusic channel; today the channel has more than a million subscribers) uploaded one of his mini-shows of crazy and extreme comedy sketches filmed in student flats and on the streets of New York. *Filthy Compilation #6 – Smell My Fingers* begins with a scene in which four dressed-up and masked people dance merrily to the notes of "Harlem Shake"[8]. It lasts 18 seconds. In terms of YouTube's video genres, we can speak of both a fan video and a reaction video. The Youtuber uses a song written by others and films himself reacting to hearing it (one of the four characters is himself, also known as Pink Guy because of his jumpsuit). This is the first, primitive version of the Harlem Shake meme. On 2 February, at the request of many users, the Youtuber uploaded a longer version of this first video segment, the "full version" ("Do the Harlem Shake", duration 35 seconds)[9]. In this longer video, while the song's intro plays (not in the environment, but cut as an audio track over the

**6** In truth, the sample in Baauer's *Harlem Shake* comes from Philadelphyinz's *Moombahton Loops and Samples* (2011), who in turn had sampled the same vocal fragment from the 2006 track.
**7** The drop is a form of stop-and-go codified in dance music: A pause that concludes an introductory section at the peak of its crescendo and introduces the subsequent exposition of the hook or leading riff, characterised by a prominent bass line (it is also referred to as a bass drop).
**8** https://youtu.be/GeO3yCpLt0Q.
**9** https://youtu.be/8vJiSSAMNWw.

images), the four characters, following the beat, replicate what is known in internet lingo as the "Stormtrooper dance" (a pelvic gesture representing a mechanical enactment of a sexual act), derived from a *Star Wars* animated GIF which went viral around 2004. After the drop with the chant "Do the harlem shake!", the characters wildly wiggle their arms and shoulders in an octopus-like manner (this is perhaps a mockery of the movements of the original Harlem Shake, a hip hop dance popular in the 1980s). Then, separated by four jump cuts (abrupt montage cuts), the four scenes that follow are presented: The protagonists do the Stormtrooper move again, three of them do a lap dance around Pink Guy (this action is repeated for two scenes), and then they all start shaking again. The video ends abruptly, shortly after the start of the second round of the riff.

The Youtuber community is very active, cohesive, and attentive. Soon remakes, imitations, parodies and videos inspired by Filthy_Frank were uploaded. One of them, The Harlem Shake v1, was already being uploaded on the channel of Australian youtubers TheSunnyCoast-Skate on 2 February[10]; the video shows some important variations compared to the original, which are systematically taken up by all subsequent videos and thus become a model. This is the case with the video by PHL_On_ NAN (now Jackson Foltz) entitled "The Harlem Shake v2"[11], uploaded on 3 February and explicitly indebted to its predecessor (not only for the title, which refers to a "version one", but also for the final inscription, which reads "Thank you TSCS [TheSunnyCoast-Skate] fo' tha idea"). This video reached 300,000 views in 24 hours and is the definitive catalyst for Harlem Shake as a viral phenomenon.

In both v1 and v2, which both last 30 seconds, we see a setting not too different from Filthy_Frank's (a messy room inhabited by young students), but with completely different directorial solutions. Both v1 and v2 are shot in high definition and with a wide angle, while Filthy_Frank proposes a poorly filmed claustrophobic cowboy shot. Let us focus on v2. During the intro of "Harlem Shake", a character fully clad in a helmet shakes himself in sync with the music, while the other five guys lie there indifferent and motionless, minding their own business on their mobile phones, computers, video games and electric guitars. When the drop comes, a jump cut – the only one in the video – shows all the characters going wild (three of them are now shirtless and two of them are simulating sexual acts), standing still in their positions and each repeating a single action. The video ends with a very short slow motion that corresponds to the roar/burp sample that closes the first shot of the riff.

**10** http://youtu.be/384IUU43bfQ.
**11** http://youtu.be/W52rnrwG9p0.

In the Australian video, v1, the formula is still imperfect, there are still some mistakes: One of the guys giggles; the slow motion is not at the end of the video and overlaps with the roar, but is overlaid by a simple snare drum passage; the dance of the character with the helmet is still the pelvic movement of the Stormtrooper (while in v2 this connection to *Star Wars* and its fandom is lost to make way for a less connoted, freer and also less vulgar dance). We find a strange residue of diegetic sound (recorded live as ambient noise) that serves as a kind of micro-intro and gives the video an interesting reality effect. At the beginning of the action, the masked character holds an iPhone in his hand and drops it on the desk (we see and hear this gesture). However, this frame is immediately contradicted. When the music kicks in, it is not the sound coming from the device but the "Harlem Shake" song synchronised with the images.

Only a few days after v2 was uploaded, YouTube was already full of videos showing the format in action not only at home in front of the webcam, but also in workplaces and public places invaded by flash mobs (sudden gatherings organised by a group of people without the passers-by or those who are normally in these spaces noticing). The "office version" uploaded on 6 February as "Harlem Shake v3" and filmed in a large open space is very famous[12]. Making a Harlem Shake video was quick to become a contagious trend, joined by ordinary people and celebrities of all kinds, as well as artists, politicians, media, brands and institutions.

Harlem Shake became contagious thanks to the endorsement from influencers (Ashton 2013): first of all, the insiders (the "internet" or "web personalities") and the public figures who talk about it and engage with it; in our case, an extremely heterogeneous list that includes, among others, TV host Jimmy Fallon, the animated series *The Simpsons*, the TV series *Glee*, the Miami Heat basketball team, a Norwegian army squadron, fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni (her version is wacky), and so on. In February, about 4,000 videos were uploaded per day, by 15 February the total reached more than 40,000, and by 24 March they generated a total of one billion views. At the same time, the music track "Harlem Shake" climbed the charts in the US and UK. Unexpectedly, this fad helped to give the Arab Spring movement a voice in the West and reach a wide audience that otherwise might not have been reached so quickly and effectively: "Young people in countries like Egypt and Tunisia are turning the 'Harlem Shake' into a political tool and dancing *en masse* to protest against their governments" (Williams 2013).

**12** The video, which addressed the original Filhty_Frank's and *v1* and *v2* versions, has been deleted (this was the original link: http://youtu.be/0IJoKuTlvuM) and the channel it was uploaded to (named hiirawn) has been stripped of all content. One can find the "office version" of *Harlem Shake* on other YouTube channels.

## 3 From Song to Video

The introduction of "Harlem Shake" has the function of an opening curtain, revealing the stage for what will be the beating heart of the musical text. The vocal sample "Con los terroristas!" introduces the first section where, what we will later discover to be the hook or riff, is offered to us as bait, only audible below the rhythm, which beats dry and woody in 4/4 time at 140 bpm[13]. This riff is like a layer that announces itself beat by beat, rising more and more, gaining definition, increasing in volume, losing the initial echo that made it seem distant and gaining spatial proximity. Accompanying this march, this emergence, is a whirlwind of effects (like "centrifuges") that give the impression of increasing speed (thanks also to the use of a snare drum that draws the ghost notes of a breakbeat, the broken rhythm of English electronic music), in a euphoric crescendo that, likewise to the moment of leaping into a dive, creates a point of maximum tension that requires a suspension, an apnoea, a hiccup. It is the breakdown of the drop ("Do the harlem shake!") that turns on the bullseye light on the track's stage and explodes its main theme.

The intro is a contrivance in the sense that it contrives, sets the listener's expectations, and suggests to them that something is going to happen, that they should prepare for something. Through the intro, the music provides the listener with a programme from which they would derive a series of possible actions, starting from the "sensorimotor synchronisation (of the 'model dancer') with the rhythm of the unity of the song under consideration" (Marconi 2007, 105).

The music invites the listener to dance, it invites the listener to reach the goal, to overcome moments of waiting and abrupt interruptions to enjoy the theme in its full development. The piece invites the listener to create a plastic rhyme between its own tonal forms and their own movements[14]: The music wants to be staged, enacted, embodied. The intro is also a contrivance which sets the agogic components, creates a tension whose result can only be the release of the drop and which the listener cannot help but want to reach. The memes of Harlem Shake focus precisely on this part of the song, so rich in somatic, motor and spatial cues, and take them over, try to dub them, make them not soundtracks but "visual tracks", in a process of mickey mousing[15]. The music

**13** For the narratological concept of "bait", I refer to Genette (1972).

**14** For the concept of "plastic rhyme", I refer to Floch (1986) and Groupe μ (1992).

**15** "Mickey mousing" is an audiovisual technique, pioneered by Disney studios at the time of the first sound cartoons (hence the name), in which the images would "dub" the music, i.e., in which the images, made after the music, would follow the course of the soundtrack.

> is like the screenplay to a movie, and is completed by 'the cast' – the crowd on the dance-floor. Styles like jungle and trance are full of behavioural cues encoded in the music – breakdowns, drum builds, bass drops, climaxes – all of which trigger certain mass responses: ritualised gestures of abandon, like hands shooting up in the air at the entrance of a certain kind of riff or noise. The music sounds diminished in the absence of such tableaux of crowd frenzy (Reynolds 2011, 325; the text is dated 2001).

The music of Harlem Shake is the soundtrack to what we see when we watch the video. But it is not understood as background and atmospheric filler, rather as a homologue in another expressive substance, another manifestation of the same form. The music calls to be translated, moving from pure sound to movement and image. It is an intersemiotic translation, transmutation or transduction that is possible because it is based on a "meta" level that allows "the same thing" to be said in different languages[16].

The memes of the Harlem Shake participate in the modularity of the song by adapting a formula of certain fixed elements and other free elements that must be completed for the text to make sense. The construction model of the Harlem Shake videos teases the listener's agency and challenges their skills in a competition to create a version that stays within the boundaries of the formula but stretches it as far as possible, resulting in the funniest, most extravagant, most spectacular, most exaggerated version. It should be noted that some participants in Harlem Shake flash mobs have faced the legal consequences of their actions (e.g., breaking into museums, invading private property, etc.).

The two post-Filthy_Frank videos, and especially the third one mentioned, v2, propose an audiovisually much better designed and above all structurally sharper model. We can discern a proper "formulaic breakdown" that is scrupulously followed by all Harlem Shake memes (see also Fig. 1):

> [14 seconds of (build-up music) played as (one person passively dances while others linger around them motionless)] then an instant video cut to [14 seconds of (bombastic dance music) played as (many people dance aggressively)] then [2 seconds of (a slurring sound) and (slow-motion video of the aggressive dancing)] (Constine 2013).

The formula is so effective that smartphone apps were created to allow the semi-automatic recording and editing of Harlem Shake memes.

The Harlem Shake model, perfected version after version and still the largest memetic phenomenon to spread spontaneously and at grassroots level, outlines a

**16** For the concept of "intersemiotic translation", I refer to Jakobson (1959). Post-Greimassian semiotics would define such "meta" levels as "figural" (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 91–93; entry written by Zilberberg); Danesi and Sebeok [2000, 196] would speak of "metaform".

story, albeit schematic, and identifies precise, if abstract, roles. There is a Subject, anonymised by a kind of mask, who initially dances alone during the intro, a kind of avant-gardist, like the *Dickbauchtanzer* who opened the processions of Bacchus (or the insidious Trickster of mythology). Ignored at first by those around them, this Hero manages to infect everyone else, convincing them to follow the dance, to share the same experience together, if only for a moment, each in their own idiosyncratic way. The Harlem Shake meme is a perfect sociosemiotic object, self-reflexive and metadiscursive, as it speaks about itself and the world it belongs to: It tells the story, schematic and complex, of every phenomenon we have learned to call viral.

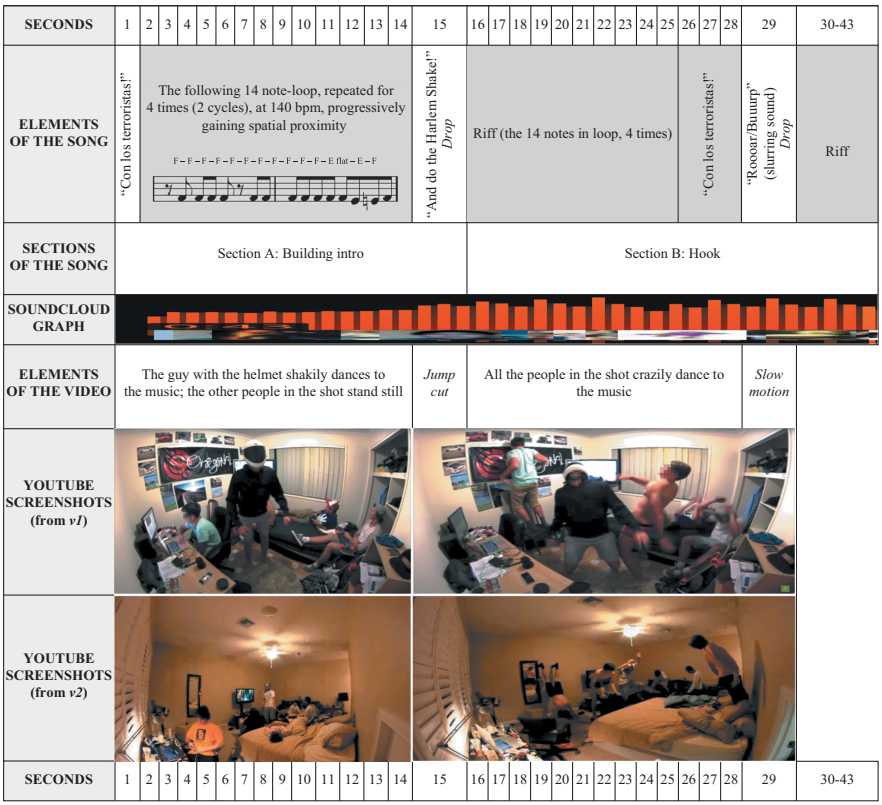


**Fig. 1:** The Harlem Shake meme formula; visualisation by the author.

## 4 Before and After Harlem Shake

The success of Harlem Shake is anticipated by some notable precedents of memetic remakes of a musical text. Notably, these include *Crank That* by Soulja Boy and, of course, *Gangnam Style* by Psy. The difference is that compared to Harlem Shake, these two are examples of semiotic texts that have been constructed to become memes. Soulja Boy is an internet personality, i.e., an artist who has made a name for himself thanks to the success he has achieved through content shared online. His *Crank That*, which has been shared on various off and online channels since spring 2007, is not just a music video, but a proper tutorial on how to dance the signature "Soulja Boy Dance" shown in it (the expression "crank dat", i.e., "move that thing [the butt] around", is a slang request to dance that went viral in the online hip hop community in 2006). In the video, groups of children, elderly people (hanging out on park benches) and a beefy record company executive all watch spellbound as the dance moves on computer or mobile phone screens. Shortly after it was published online, hundreds of videos manipulating, parodying or in some way imitating the original were uploaded. Wikipedia reports the opinion of some music journalists that *Crank That* was the biggest dance craze since *Macarena* (1996).

The video of *Gangnam Style*, which was released on 15 July 2012, after Harlem Shake, but actually became a meme much earlier in August of the same year, is a masterpiece of what I would call "textual marketing", where all the elements contribute to the creation of a memorable product. The portrayal of the character Psy is so distinct and caricatured that he resembles a cartoon character rather than a real singer (the video itself thematises this idea by inserting a screen at the end reminiscent of arcade games). *Gangnam Style* creates a microcosm of memes of various kinds (captioned images, animated GIFs, videos) and becomes a fragment of common media culture, a part of our encyclopaedia. The phrase that the singer says over and over again to mark the end of the verses and introduce the hook or riff ("Oppa Gangnam Style") becomes the basis for an infinite number of remakes (along the lines of "Oppa X Style", which echoes the snowclone par excellence, "Keep Calm and X")[17]. Those who do not know *Gangnam Style* probably do not read newspapers, watch TV or have a Facebook account. On 21 December 2012, *Gangnam Style* became the first YouTube video to reach a billion views. Harlem

**17** The phrase, addressed to a "sexy lady", means "Your boyfriend [*Oppa* literally means "brother", but in slang it means "boyfriend"] has the typical style of Gangnam [one of Seoul's wealthiest neighbourhoods]". Linguists call "snowclone" a formula that can be resemantised *ad libitum*, from the trope (based upon a wrong cliché): "If Eskimos have 50 words for 'snow', X must have N words for Y".

Shake took less time, but also had to rely on a critical mass consisting of a swarm of aggregated content.

Unlike *Crank That* and *Gangnam Style*, Harlem Shake (the meme) was created from scratch, both as a self-produced and released music track and as a video released as a simple reaction to other content. With *Crank That* and *Gangnam Style*, "Harlem Shake" (the song) shares a similar position in the phylogenetic development of the genre to which it belongs, i.e., they all emerged at a particularly opportune moment for their eventual reception as an element within the genre. A moment of increasing popularisation of what social discourse defines as emergent phenomena, a popularisation that the tracks participate in and catalyse, eventually embodying for a long time the manifestations par excellence of their respective contexts.

In particular, *Crank* fits the model of success of internet hip hop (among a growing audience that is not just African-American), *Gangnam* fits the emerging Korean wave driven by K-pop, and Harlem fits the dubstep-brostep-trap continuum. In the latter case, it should be noted that, in those years, dubstep was being embraced as a fad or zeitgeist (if there is a difference between these two things) by musicians as diverse as Britney Spears, Rihanna, Madonna, Justin Bieber, Korn, Muse, Wu Tang Clan and Cypress Hill that have nothing to do with the culture in which dubstep was born and to which it would relate. In 2011, Nokia's official ringtone, chosen through a competition and produced by Italian Alessandro Sizzi, was a remix of the company's traditional theme in a brostep key, i.e., in the American dubstep "with muscles in plain sight" fashion. Trap slowly nibbles away at dubstep, which dissolves, frays or becomes something else (singer-songwriter James Blake came out of this background) until it essentially replaces it as the reference genre at the centre of the semiophere of electronic music.

Pink Guy had already released videos in which he danced in his own way to *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* by brostep posterboy Skrillex (DANCING TO SKRILLEX, 13 May 2012) and to *Gangnam Style* (GANGNAM STYLE – PINK GUY, 6 September 2012, here the horse dance merges with the Stormtrooper move), and in which he explained to New Yorkers HOW TO DUBSTEP (23 January 2013) to the notes of *Kill Humans* by Dubsidia (2011). In 2017, he released his only album, *Pink Season*, an anthology of songs created over the years, featuring the manifesto *Meme Machine* ("I am a fucking meme machine"), which circulated from 2015. In 2017, George Miller, Filthy_Frank/Pink Guy's real name, a Japanese born in 1992 who moved in the United States in 2011, stopped being a YouTuber and began pursuing the career of "serious" electronic pop musician under the name Joji.

The brevity of the Harlem Shake video meme made it particularly popular on Vine, an app developed in 2013 (before it was even launched, it was bought by Twitter) based on creating very short videos, lasting only six seconds, with a tight edit-

ing style particularly suited to conveying comedic content. Vine closed in 2017 and in 2019 was dismantled once and for all. Meanwhile, in 2018, building on the experiences of Snapchat as well as Vine, TikTok was born from the fusion of Douyin and Musical.ly, with a strong initial focus on lip-syncing and choreographed dancing video challenges. At the ten-year mark (2013–2023), a handover seems to be taking place: If the celebration videos posted on YouTube do not exceed hundreds of views, the Harlem Shake videos on TikTok reach hundreds of thousands. At the same time, a "new Harlem Shake" seems to have emerged in the Summer of 2023: *Benjamin's Deli* by JRitt. The producer seems to have produced only this track, which is commonly referred to as a "TikTok remix" and is more specifically a mashup between Puff Daddy's 1997 *It's All About The Benjamins* (itself a hip-hop track, featuring Lil' Kim, sampling Love Unlimited's *I Did It for Love* [1976], and The Jackson 5's *It's Great to Be Here* [1971]) and Ice Spice's *Deli* (2023). The track almost certainly appeared as a TikTok soundtrack in August 2023 and was uploaded to Spotify in December. While the versions available on the audio streaming platform last a couple of minutes, the excerpt that went viral on the social media app lasts only about eight seconds and is used in video snippets that show the exact same before-and-after dynamic of the original Harlem Shake, including a contrast between a solitary and a collective action, or between two different dance configurations[18].

## 5 Internet Challenges

Memes are constitutively challenging. The point of appropriating a template and recreating a meme is to adapt it to a context that is different from the original one, to make it talk about oneself and one's community, to interpret it as freely as possible while still respecting its grids and rules. Harlem Shake flash mobs are not proper challenges, but the point of participating in them is precisely the implicit challenge to remake that specific audio-visual narrative in a creative fashion. We may consider online communities committed in the creation of memes to be part of a category proposed by sociolinguists: "community of practice", a community based not on geographical nor sociodemographic affinities, but rather on "stylistic practices", the proficient mastering of which is the aim of the very community.

**18** A notable example is this cut uploaded on the torbahead TikTok account on 22 November 2023: https://www.tiktok.com/@torbahead/videoVideo/7304282677706902790?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7187160956525397510. The Spotify page of artist JRitt is: https://open.spotify.com/intl-it/artist/4qwxLDyAkymBMn2QfQn3ZV.

Internet challenges are based on the idea of performing a difficult action (often because it is a dangerous action) with the aim of filming it and sharing it online. They have shaped the content shared on social networks such as YouTube and Facebook, particularly between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s. The oldest ones seem to date back to 2005, namely, the Cinnamon Challenge which involved eating a spoonful of powdered cinnamon (the risk was to choke) and the Happy Slap Challenge which consisted of slapping complete strangers in the street. Both resulted in injuries and even deaths (so much so that a specific law was approved in France in 2007 against the latter). In 2010, it was the turn of planking (lying face down motionless at the most inappropriate times and places), a challenge for which Banks (2011) proposed the category of "performative internet meme", and in 2014 it was the turn of the sellotape (wrapping one's own face with duct tape, as Jim Carrey does in a scene from the 2008 film *Yes Man*). We may also go back to a time before social media, and even before the internet as a domestic mass medium. In 1996, an Associated Press article (Walker 1996) celebrated the competitive nature of American football player Payton Manning addressing the Saltine Challenge (eating six crackers in one minute).

Apart from their collective efficacy and viral appeal, challenges are interesting to the semiotician for the way in which they construct the sense of the practice, even when it is misrepresented or misunderstood. Let us think of the famous Ice Bucket Challenge from 2014, which involved pouring a bucket of iced water over oneself to promote the research on ALS: It was misunderstood by many as a simple insane action to be filmed, with no activistic nor ethical implication. Other interesting cases are the digital urban legends, such as the Blue Whale Challenge from 2016 (a 50-day path that is supposed to end in the suicide of those who carry it out; a truly dark parody of the very concept of challenge), the Tide Pod Challenge from 2018 (for which one has to ingest a detergent capsule) or the Boat Jumping Challenge from 2023 (for which one has to throw themselves off a boat at high speed), which have been unexpectedly disseminated, discussed, and disapproved of to the point of moral panic by the general media, which have always been unprepared to handle the rhetorics of the internet, with the risk of creating a copycat trend of phenomena that basically did not exist (except in the form of textual narratives, as is the case with creepypasta, i.e., digital horror stories).

Challenges are increasingly discussed, as they are taken to extremes by many content creators who have launched ever elaborate or risky challenges (this is the case with Italian Youtubers TheBorderline and New York-based Kai Cenat, who made headlines in June and August 2023, respectively). At the same time, they are one of the most important macrogenres of the memetic world. On the one hand, they testify to the definitive transfer of the textual and visual logic of memes (especially the idea of imitation with personalisation) to the audio-visual domain

and, upstream, IRL-In Real Life (with all this entails in terms of the representation of the body, the involvement in situated space, the performance of identity, etc.). On the other hand, they form the bridge between traditional "boomer" social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) and TikTok, an environment that we may define as hyper-social, if not post-social, based on – as suggested by Zulli and Zulli (2020) – the extension of the logic of memes to the level of the platform infrastructure and the creation of "imitation publics": A group of people whose digital connection is constituted by the shared ritual of imitation and replication of content.

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Julia Göke

# History Makes Memes. Memes Make History

**Abstract:** This chapter explores the complex nature of history memes, examining their role in bridging past and present through reinterpretation. Categorized through four dimensions – productional, communicative, receptive, and historical – it delves into their creation, circulation, reception and impact. Furthermore, as versatile sources, history memes offer insights into everyday culture, shape contemporary discourse and play a crucial role in community building. However, using memes as historical sources presents challenges, requiring new approaches.

**Keywords:** history memes, digital history, social media history, digital communication, internet memes

The French advertisement of Liebig's Extract of Meat Company depicts the arrival of Louis IX of France before Damietta (Fig. 1). Jokingly, Olivier Varlan added the phrase "Au début l'eau est froide mais une fois dedans, elle est vraiment bonne![1]" and suddenly, the historic advertisement became an internet meme.

The creator of this meme, Olivier Varlan, has a PhD in History and posts many memes about history. Without a doubt, history is often entertaining, and it seems that historians are also funny, or at least think they are. Kim Wilkins (2014) published an article about this phenomenon, "Valhallolz: Medievalist humor on the Internet", which is one of the earliest scientific papers on history memes, or historical memes. Still, it was only in the late 2010s that the research on history in social media gained traction and with it, research on memes. Meanwhile, since around the mid-2000s, memes have already been an intensively discussed topic in other disciplines, like political sciences or media studies.

Memes and history have a rather polyvalent relationship. On the one hand, memes have a history of their own. Since the word "Meme" is a rather elusive term, it is difficult to identify the first internet meme. Generally, they evolved alongside the World Wide Web and the corresponding internet culture. Since the history of social media differs, for example, in China and Japan (see McLelland, Goggin and Yu 2017), the history of memes differs there and in other non-English-speaking internet cultures (Miltner 2017, 415–420).

1 "In the beginning, the water is cold, but once you are in, it feels really good!" (our translation).


https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111311371-004


**Fig. 1:** Tweet by Olivier Varlan 25 June 2023. Accessed 25 June 2023. https://twitter.com/VarlanOlivier/status/1672947543020568577?s=20.

Richard Dawkins famously coined the word in the late 1970s in his book *The Selfish Gene*. How exactly the transfer of the meme concept to the internet came about is not known. However, it may be traced back to Mike Godwin (see Godwin 1994; Milner 2016, 17) or, more generally, to the growing public interest in the concept during the late 1980s to 1990s (see Burman 2012, 97–98). In 1990, Godwin noticed the frequency of Hitler and Nazi comparisons in online discussions, which he called the "Nazi-comparison meme". He reacted to it by developing "Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies" (or for short "Godwin's Law"), which states: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one" (Godwin 1994). As noted above, this is an early example of the connection of the meme concept to an internet phenomenon. This "Nazi-comparison meme" might even be the first viral history meme, a kind of meme specifically linked to history, like the post by Olivier Varlan.

This chapter aims to provide a formal definition of history memes through an extensive typology that introduces methodological frameworks to use them as sources. The first part focuses on historical memes as a reinterpretation or appropriation

of historical images or narratives. As researchers, "perceiving the precise nature of these appropriations is vital not only for understanding how iconic photographs [and history] create meanings over time around shared values but also for distinguishing between memes that enhance democratic public debate and those which degrade it" (Boudana 2017, 1228). The second part then provides some perspectives on the questions historians may ask themselves when working with this genre of sources.

## 1 History Makes Memes

It is not easy to clearly define a history meme since it evokes the fundamental question of what history is and where it starts – the political meme of today is the history meme of tomorrow. It is becoming even more complex, since history memes are more about modern views of history than substantiated historical narratives. Mykola Makhortykh proposed an initial definition of the type:

> Both political and historical memes are constituted by groups of digital content units, which share common features (e.g. content or form) and used for communicating group identities [sic]; yet, unlike political memes, historical memes are explicitly related to a particular historical event or a personality and often refer to existing memory practices by satirising, strengthening or propagating them online. (2015, 64)

While this definition is certainly not wrong, I would like to broaden i: History memes refer to historical events, personalities, or imagery. As such, they appropriate history from a modern perspective and often shape, reaffirm, or play on existing historical tropes. Therefore, they have no claim to historicity; instead, they mirror current mindsets and experiences (see Makhortykh 2015, 88; Göke 2020).

History memes are often categorised by the time period they are supposed to depict, for example, Medieval Memes (Razzor and Williams 2015; Göke 2020), Ancient History (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 413–414), or World War Two (Makhortykh 2015). Sometimes, they are also sorted by type, like the Bayeux Tapestry Memes (Wilkins 2014), or in the case of Juan Manuel González-Aguilar's and Makhortykh's study about Anne Frank Memes (2022). Another approach is to classify them by their topic, such as, Military History Memes (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 414–415), Soviet Leaders Memes (Borenstein 2022, 25–32), or, more generally, Totalitarianism Memes (Di Legge, Mantovani and Meloni 2022, 415–416). History memes as a whole can be classified using the following dimensions Tab. 1:

**Tab. 1:** Classification of History memes.

| **Productional Dimension** | |
|---|---|
| creator | popularity; profile |
| modality | print/digital; audio/macro picture/video/text |
| complexity/ elaboration | changes from the emergent meme, number of layers, the relation between layers |
| purpose | Social commentary purposes, absurdist humour purposes, fan purposes, hoax purposes |
| **Communicative Dimension** | |
| exclusivity/ accessibility | publicity of the meme (private forum/small forum/big forum, hashtags/ keywords); use of codes/references (general know codes/references, exclusive codes/references) |
| **Receptive Dimension** | |
| participation | interaction with the meme (viral reach, affective evaluation, message deliberation) |
| circulation | spread across platforms |
| longevity | duration of interaction, reuse |
| **Historical Dimension** | |
| media | use of historical imagery (historical material – reimagination of historical material), use of contemporary memes |
| content | use of history as a topic (historical narratives – fake history), modern phenomena transferred to a "historical" backdrop. |

The productional dimension focuses on how a meme is produced. The creator of a meme is an important factor. Like an author, their profile "serves to classify and group together separate works, much in the same way tags and keywords allow distributed digital media to be searched and sorted" (Davison 2012, 132). While meme creator profiles can act like an author, it is important to note that memes have no author per se. Rather, "they are [. . .] frequently incorporated into systems and among practices that actively prevent and dismantle attribution" (132). Furthermore, most profiles stay anonymous, which "enables a type of freedom" (132). Still, the creator, or the person who posts the meme, is a key factor in the virality of a meme. Under the aspect of "positioning", Limor Shifman describes this aspect as follows: "There are two types of preferred users for seeding: 'hubs' – people with a high number of connections to others; and 'bridges' – people who connect between otherwise unconnected parts of the network. Sending the initial message to these highly con-

nected individuals has proved to be much more effective than sending it to 'regular' users" (Shifman 2014, 71).

Furthermore, memes are not a single medium but a genre that appears in various media (see Shifman 2014, 99–118; Wiggins 2019, 40–54). However, not all internet memes stay digital. Books like Rob Ward's *Classic Art Memes* from 2018 show that there is also a demand for internet memes as prints.

Another point in which memes are widely different from traditional media is their level of complexity or elaboration. From a semiotic perspective, a meme is a sign that operates on different multimodal elements. These elements together construct the meaning of the meme. These elements must be identified and their interaction analysed to be understood (see Nowotny and Reidy 2022; Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017, 567). However, before a piece of digital content becomes a meme, it undergoes a certain transformation, which will be illustrated using the Pepe the Frog meme below (Fig. 2). In the beginning, there is a piece of "spreadable media" that is consumed without any alteration (Collins 2015). At first, Pepe the Frog was a character from a comic called "Boy's Club" by Matt Furie on MySpace. Later, this character was taken out of that context and slightly altered, through which it became what is known as an "emergent meme". By further altering and reusing it, it then becomes an "internet meme" (Wiggins 2019, 43–47).

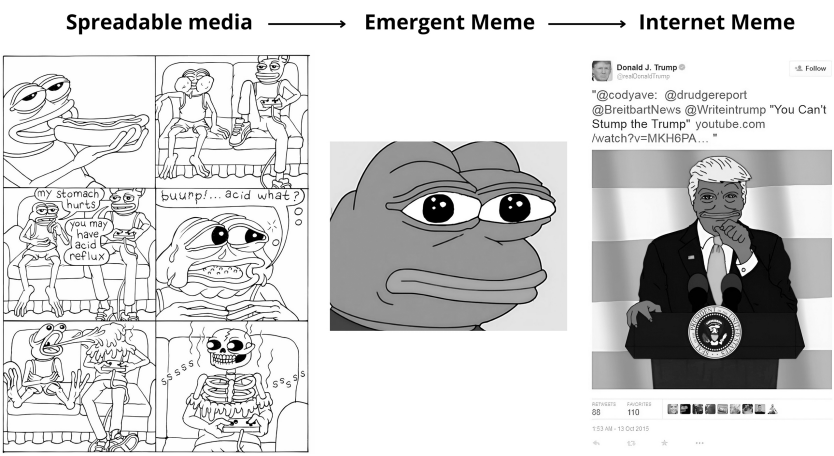


**Fig. 2:** Transformation of a Meme. Spreadable medium: Accessed 19 April 2023. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/937797-pepe-the-frog. Emergent Meme: Accessed 19 April 2023. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/95218-feels-good-man. Internet Meme: Accessed 19 April 2023. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1028964-donald-trump.

These elements of alteration are the layers that make a meme more elaborate or less so. They can underline or alter the original meaning of the meme (see Davi-

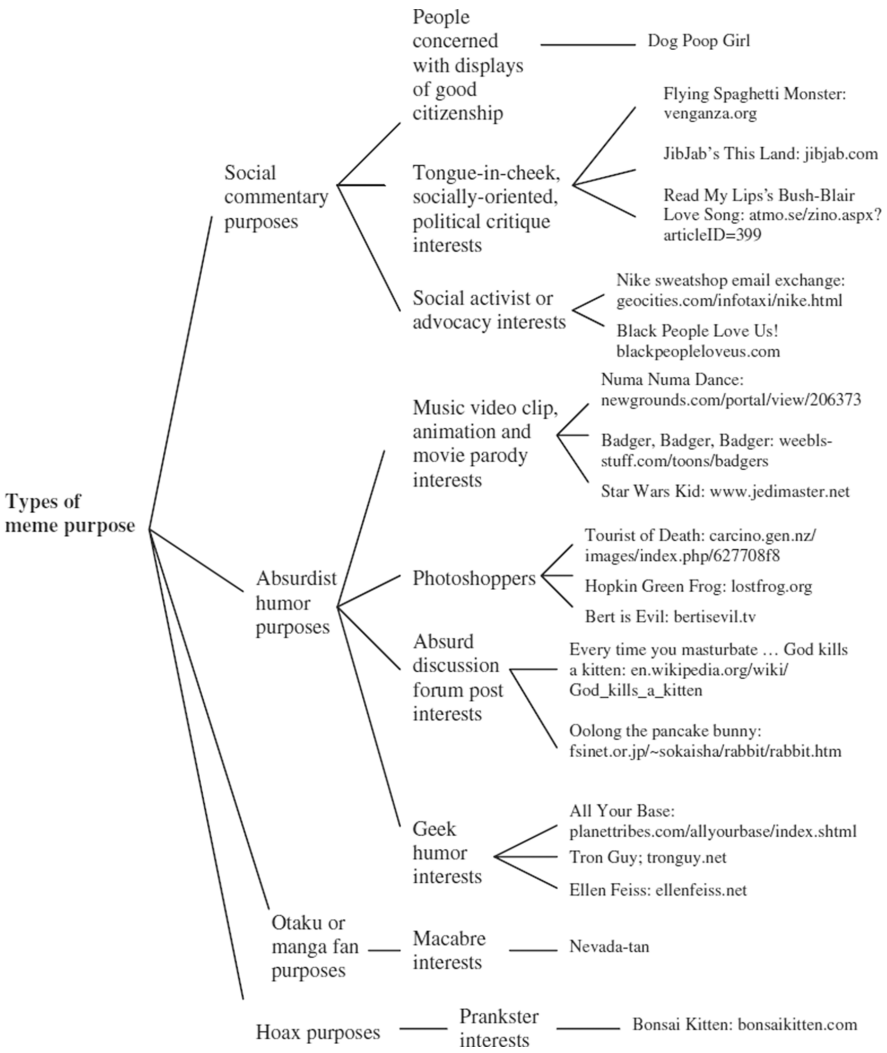


**Fig. 3:** Typology of different meme purposes (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 218).

son 2012, 127). In the case of memes about former Soviet leaders, Eliot Borenstein compares memes to "politically themed matryoshka dolls" (2022, 28).

Memes are not objective and are primarily for entertainment and humourous purposes (see Shifman 2014; Milner 2016). However, Lankshear and Knobel propose that there are way more purposes that are conveyed through memes (2007, 217–219):

The typology Lankshear, Colin and Knobel provide (Fig. 3) is provisional, but it offers a good overview. However, I would like to broaden the category of "Otaku or manga fan purposes" to the more general "Fan purposes", although the line between "Fan purposes" and "Social commentary purposes" can be blurred, as in the example of Pepe the Frog. Benecchi et al. (2020) observed that "people who transformed Pepe into a 'Nazi Trump supporter and Alt-Right symbol' are labelled as 'fans' of white supremacy and political figures perceived as an incarnation of radical and extremist ideas, such as Donald Trump" (344).

As Makhortykh suggested in his definition, history memes are also often used to convey their creators' ideology (see 2015, 64). In that way, they are a memorial practice that not only communicates group identities but also builds them, as often seen in Holocaust and World War Two memes as well as Alt-Right memes (see Makhortykh 2015; Schmitt, Harles and Rieger 2020; González-Aguilar and Makhortykh 2022; Strick 2022).

The communicative dimension is mainly defined by the exclusivity or accessibility of the meme. A big part is how much public access the meme. While creators and users seed a meme, their positioning on social media is important as well (see Pailler and Schafer 2023, 126). Some memes circulate in small private groups, while others are on social media sites like Reddit, X (formerly Twitter), etc. The bigger the platform a meme is being posted on, the bigger its outreach. This can also be determined through its views or the click-through rate (see Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1318). Also, many memes use hashtags or keywords to direct their audience and classify themselves. Nevertheless, there is also another aspect to it: Memes are highly intertextual (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 213–215; Wiggins 2019, 34 on.). To fully understand them, they require knowledge of the codes and references they are using. The creator of a meme has to imagine a target audience while creating the meme, who are able to read the subcultural codes and, depending on the audience, make their meme more or less accessible (see Grundlingh 2018, 150; Shifman 2014, 115).

The receptive dimension is a mirror of public opinion about a meme. When discussing what determines a successful meme, we talk about its virality (see Shifman 2014, 65). Of course, virality in itself is complex and there are many theories and approaches to the topic (see Arjona-Martín, Méndiz-Noguero and Victoria-Mas 2020, 3–5). One way to define virality is through interaction with a meme, which can be seen through three determinants: First, the "viral reach", which is comparable to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and "refers to the volume of message sharing and forwarding by internet users" (Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1319); second, the "affective evaluation" describes the affirmative or disapproving reaction to a piece of content, as expressed through likes or dislikes. Lastly, "message deliberation", in which reactions are expressed through the comments section of the meme (Alhabash and McAlister 2015, 1318–1319). But these points mostly focus on the re-

ception of a single internet meme on one platform. It is also important to trace the spread of a meme over different platforms and especially to trace its transformations across them to, therefore, get a better grasp of a meme's history (see Pailler and Schafer 2023, 123–125). While longevity is also often perceived as a characteristic of a meme's success (see Lankshear and Knobel 2007, 202; Pailler and Schafer 2023, 121–123), I would argue that it is a determination of the long-term influence of a meme. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) describe its importance as follows: "[T]he longer a meme survives, the more it can be copied and passed on to fresh minds, thereby ensuring its ongoing transmission" (202).

It is important to note that history memes in general mostly have the same functionality as every other meme, but they do not entirely function the same way (see Makhortykh 2015, 88). So, while the first three dimensions are not exclusive to history memes, the fourth one is: Unlike every other kind of meme, history memes use their visual, auditive and content levels across a spectrum of "History" and "Contemporary." (Fig. 4).

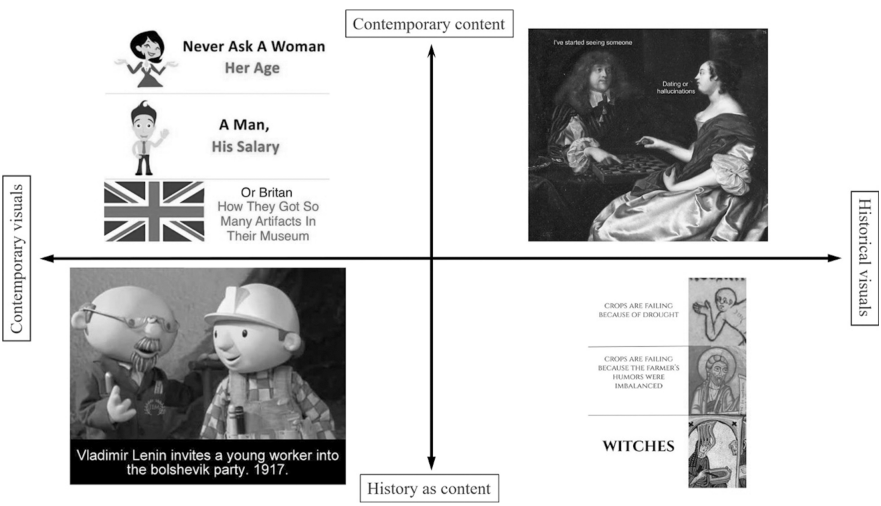


**Fig. 4:** Spectrum of history memes. Upper right: Accessed 30. August 2023. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2648331-classical-art-memes. Lower right: Accessed 25. April 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/medievalMemes/comments/ddgy73/ily_st_hildegard/. Upper left: Accessed 25. April 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/HistoryMemes/comments/ee3ka9/black_panther_flashbacks/. Lower left: Accessed 25. April 2023. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1207951-fake-history.

On one side, historical imagery is used as the visual base for the memes and which can be taken from historical photography or paintings. A category in that field is the so-called Classical Art Meme, which "draw [. . .] their images from what can be broadly conceived as 'classical art'" (Piata 2019, 196). However, it is not necessary that a meme's imagery is really historical – as long as it seems historical, it will be seen as historical. For example, new pseudo-historical material is created where historical sources are lacking or do not exist. This can be best seen through the "aural turn" of memes and the rise of "Bardcore" – a genre of music that reimagines popular modern songs in a medieval-sounding aesthetic. This blending of historical and modern elements can tie into the concept of image substitution, which Ekatherina Zhukova (2019) defines as "an image of one historical event of a particular time or place that is used to represent a historical occurrence of a different time or geographical location" (5). In the case of famous historical pictures used, it is notable that "the more an iconic photo is circulated, the more it is recognized as iconic, yet the more it may become devoid of the significance that made it iconic in the first place" (Boudana 2017, 1227). Thus, memes not only play with historical imagery but also contribute to the complex landscape of historical representation.

Content-wise, these memes put the historical pictures into a contemporary context or present a historical narrative associated with the era depicted in the images (see Göke 2020, 16–23). They connect this historical imagery with our modern times and forge connections that resonate with contempary audiences (see Barclay and Downing 2023, 62). However, they can also play into the concept of visual fake history, which "implies a mixture of truth, misinformation, and disinformation created through aesthetic qualities of image substitutes and accompanying narratives" (Zhukova 2019, 5). This is even more evident when the creators use meme templates to illustrate historical narratives as the base of their memes. In this case, history memes display a great deal of ambiguity, with some presupposing a certain level of historical knowledge among their audience, while others opt for a more simplistic or even factually inaccurate approach (see Göke 2020, 16). Sometimes, these modern memes do not use historical narratives but play on historical connections to our modern times. What is interesting is how these modern memes often engage in playful exploration by drawing connections to historical events or figures in the context of contemporary culture. These memes effectively transpose elements of the present into the past, creating a bridge between eras and building a connection to the past. However, this can open the door to reflexive fascism, a concept that refers to the phenomenon that "contemporary neo-fascist actors remake, revise, and warp the very conceptions of post-war history and historical scholarship" (Strick 2022, 335).

## 2 Memes Make History

In the past decades, the relationship between memes and history has evolved into a new dimension and memes are now gradually becoming sources that provide unique glimpses into everyday culture due to their ability to adapt to various contexts. They represent inclusive and collaborative discourses and contribute to the narratives of shared history (see Nolasco-Silva, da Conceição Silva Soares and Lo Bianco 2019, 114, 127–128). For example, in the case of the "video essay" "BLACK MEME", the artist Legacy Russell uses memes to explore a cultural history of Black visual culture (see Externalpages 2020; Heyward-Rotimi 2022). The artist asks the question "What is a black meme" (Externalpages 2020) and answers it in a "non-hierarchical approach to engaging with varied forms of Black cultural output" (Heyward-Rotimi 2022). According to her:

> Memes are not neutral. The labor enacted through black meme culture raises questions about subjectivity, personhood, and the ever-complicated fault lines of race, class, and gender performed both on- and offline. I want to talk about the economy and engine of this and perhaps push further a discussion about how we can hold ourselves accountable to how this material is produced and circulated (Externalpages 2020).

This examination demonstrates the cultural capital of memes and recognises certain examples of them as part of Black cultural heritage, as Valérie Schafer and Fred Pailler (2024) show: "Situated at the intersection of communities of practice, cultural and digital history, vernacular and sometimes folkloric trends, memes stand out as very good contenders for heritagisation". Furthermore, the explicit political connotation of "BLACK MEME" demonstrates that memes wield an undeniable discursive power. In this digital age, they are a dynamic force shaping contemporary discourse and how we connect, share and engage online. In particular, political memes not only mirror the technological prowess of the internet by spreading swiftly across borders, but also provide a platform for expressing a diverse array of political opinions. According to Wiggins (2019), a political meme is, in the broadest sense, a meme that "addresses some aspect of political philosophy and ideology" (65). These memes offer a channel for inclusive and empowered interaction and communication, particularly for marginalised groups. Therefore, they play a pivotal role in community building (58).

However, it would be false to paint political memes merely as quasi-egalitarian ways of expressing political opinions, as memes can also be used to manipulate the public. Since the mid-2010s, internet memes have been discussed as a means of warfare or at least political influence (see Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 52–55). In a 2018 report for the Center for Naval Analyses, Vera Zakem, Megan K. McBride and Kate Hammerberg identified three different ways to influence campaigns with memes (Tab. 2):

**Tab. 2:** Use of Memes in campaigns [USG= US Goverment]. (See Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018).

| | **Inoculate** | **Infect** | **Treat** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Purpose | Prevent or minimize the effect of adversary messaging | Transmit messages in support of USG interests | Contain the effect of adversary messaging |
| Distribution | *Preventative*<br>Anticipatory | *Offensive*<br>Stand Alone Effort | *Defensive*<br>Reactive |
| Message Disposition | Adversary | USG | Adversary |

To use memes in a way to "inoculate" campaigns means "to use a meme in an effort to protect against a threat or anticipated attack. Using memes to preemptively address – with an emphasis on delegitimizing or undermining – a message or attack expected from another actor" (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 17). For example, when the IS demanded ransom for two Japanese hostages in a video from 20 January 2015, Japanese citizens mocked the IS through numerous memes "in part to inoculate the Japanese public against the expected horror of the hostages being executed" (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 18).

When talking about how memes can "infect" campaigns, Zakem et al. mean "to use a meme to spread a specific message. To use memes to articulate a message – either positive (e.g., defending a value) or negative (i.e., disparaging an institution) – that aligns with broader mission objectives" (2018, 24). In 2016, there were two instances in which Russian troll farms were accused of influencing foreign votes in the interests of the Russian government. Mostly via Twitter and Facebook, but also on other social media channels like Pokémon Go, they spread pro-Brexit and pro-Trump/anti-Clinton content (Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg 2018, 27–30). Jeff Giesea (2016), who has a rather radical approach to memetic warfare, writes in his paper for NATO, that "[t]rolling [. . .] is the social media equivalent of guerrilla warfare, and memes are its currency of propaganda" (68). However, not all trolls are part of a bigger operation because "there is far too much variation within the behavioural category of trolling (even within the same raiding party) to affix any singular, unified purpose to constituent trolls' actions" (Phillips 2016, 20). Generally, the aims of trolls "are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (Hardacker 2010, 237).

The last way to influence a campaign through memes can also be a reaction to the previous practices since it means "to use a meme to treat an already circulating message. To respond memetically – by mocking, disproving, or otherwise countering – to a message that has been spread by another actor" (Zakem, McBride and

Hammerberg 2018, 34). In 2016, Italian and Iranian citizens used memes to ridicule the decision of the Italian government to conceal certain nude statues during the visit of Hassan Rouhani, who was the president of Iran at that time (39–41). According to the report, these memetic interventions were successful on tactical and strategic levels. Although they are mostly short-lived and culturally specific, they resonate emotionally and transcend "individual cultures and languages" (43). Generally, they are far-reaching and "not limited to counter-radicalization efforts" (43), while, furthermore, a wide variety of actors are involved, ranging from normal citizens to NGOs, non-state actors, and governments.

An awareness of the manipulative use of memes is important since "[h]istories and historical events exist as memories, images, or imaginings to be remembered, revitalized, sparked" (Hristova 2013, 93). Images, and therefore memes, are essential in the public perception of history (see Hristova 2013), and they can even be used to construct history that never existed in the first place, like in the case of the Bowling Green Massacre. When Kellyanne Conway, a counsellor to President Trump, spread news in 2017 of a non-existent massacre in Bowling Green, the internet reacted immediately. Memes created in response to this news memorialised the event as if it had truly occurred, thus elevating it to the status of "one of the most significant events in recent years" in Bowling Green (Evans 2018, 469).

It must be noted that working with memes as primary sources presents its own set of challenges. First and foremost, the sheer volume of memes circulating online can be overwhelming, leading researchers to grapple with questions of how to manage and analyse this vast and ever-expanding dataset effectively. Much like the broader field of social media history, meme studies requires approaches that combine traditional close reading methods with distant reading techniques (see Clavert 2021, 179–186). Historians can draw inspiration from works researching political memes, such as those by David M. Beskow, Sumeet Kumar and Kathleen M. Carley (2020).

Preservation is another critical concern when working with memes. Given their digital nature and often fleeting existence, questions arise about ensuring the long-term accessibility and preservation of these artifacts. As memes evolve rapidly and platforms change, archiving and documenting them become crucial endeavours. Furthermore, questions regarding copyright (see Mead 2022) and how to adequately preserve the complex nature of memes complicate the attempts (see Schafer and Pailler 2024). Archival researchers increasingly explore strategies to capture and archive memes, acknowledging their significance as contemporary cultural and historical artifacts (see Mead 2022). Given the previously mentioned cultural significance of memes, more actors, ranging from museums and mainstream media to web archives, as well as both commercial (e.g., Know Your Meme) and non-profit (e.g., Wi-

kipedia) websites, actively participate in the archival and or heritagisation efforts of memes (see Schafer and Pailler 2024).

In sum, memes have huge potential to become a new kind of historical source. However, the challenges of working with memes as primary sources necessitate interdisciplinary and innovative approaches that adapt to the ever-changing landscape of digital culture.

## Conclusion

Defining history memes is complex, as they blur the line between past and present. They encompass a broader range, including historical events, figures and imagery. Furthermore, they reinterpret history from a modern perspective, reflecting and sometimes humorously manipulating established historical themes. It is important to understand they often do not claim historical accuracy but mirror contemporary cultural viewpoints and interpretations. Memes are often sorted by their eras, type, or content. However, they can be classified more effectively using four dimensions: Productional – Communicative – Receptive – Historical.

The productional dimension of memes considers how they are created and shared. The role of the meme creator is crucial and is akin to an author whose profile helps classify and group different works. However, memes do not have traditional authors, as they often exist in systems that prevent attribution and many creators remain anonymous. Nevertheless, the creator's role is significant in determining a meme's virality, with highly connected individuals playing key roles in seeding them. Memes are a diverse genre appearing across various media, not limited to digital formats. This genre's complexity and elaboration vary, with memes often consisting of multimodal elements that construct their meaning. Analysing these elements and their interactions is thus crucial for understanding a meme. Memes undergo transformations, which started as spreadable media before being altered and reused to become an internet meme. These alterations add layers to a meme, influencing and sometimes changing its meaning. Memes can also be created for different purposes, like social commentary, absurdist humour, for fans, or as hoaxes. However, some memes can serve multiple purposes and are sometimes used to convey their creator's ideology.

The communicative dimension of memes considers their accessibility and reach. Memes vary in terms of public access, from circulating in small private groups to appearing on widely used social media platforms like Reddit and X (formerly Twitter). The platform, the positioning of a meme's creator, and the hashtags they are using are crucial factors that influence outreach. Additionally, memes are

highly intertextual, requiring an understanding of the codes and references they employ, making them more or less accessible depending on the target audience.

The receptive dimension reflects public opinion about a meme's success and, in the broadest sense, its virality. This is determined by factors such as viral reach, affective evaluation (likes and dislikes), and message deliberation (comments). Longevity also plays a role in a meme's influence over time.

History memes share functionality with other memes but have unique characteristics in terms of their visual, auditory and content levels. They blend historical imagery with modern elements, often using historical visuals as a basis, whether from actual historical sources or pseudo-historical material. These memes contribute to the complex landscape of historical representations. Some history memes use modern meme templates to illustrate historical narratives, showing a range of ambiguity. While some presuppose historical knowledge, others take a more simplistic or factually inaccurate approach. These modern memes playfully explore historical connections in contemporary culture, bridging the gap between eras and connecting with the past. However, this can also open the door to manipulating historical narratives as well.

Moreover, memes can also be considered sources that offer unique insights into everyday culture. They are versatile and adaptive, contributing to inclusive and collaborative discourses and enhancing narratives of shared history. Furthermore, they wield significant discursive power, shaping contemporary discourse and providing a platform for diverse political opinions. They have been shown to play a crucial role in community building, particularly for marginalised groups. However, political memes are not just egalitarian expressions of political views. They can also be used for manipulation and influence by inoculate, infect, or treat campaigns, often achieved through the use of trolls. Therefore, memes are effective tools for propaganda and disruption, but they also have the power to shape public perceptions of history.

These digital artifacts have become essential in shaping public historical consciousness and are a rich source of study for historians. However, working with memes as primary sources presents challenges, including managing the vast volume of online memes, preserving them for future study and navigating copyright issues. Scholars must thus adopt interdisciplinary and innovative approaches to harness the potential of memes as new kinds of historical sources in our digital age.

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Eloy Santos Vieira and Adriana da Rosa Amaral

# From “Nazaré Confusa” to the “Confused Blonde Lady”: The Role of Brazilian “Zuera” as a Post-Mass Media Genre in Digital Culture

**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on how a meme becomes viral in a transcultural context, starting from the audiovisual centrality and the internet memes’ role as major articulators between mass and post-mass media. We discuss the circulation of memes of the Brazilian telenovela character Nazaré Tedesco (aka., “Nazaré Confusa” or “Confused Blonde Lady”) which circulated internationally. Our discussion focuses on Social TV, Telenovelas, and internet humour through these memes in an attempt to define some characteristics of their role as a genre in digital culture.

**Keywords:** digital culture, memes, telenovelas, media genres, social TV

Brazilians are well known for their quintessential online humour (see Monteiro Lunardi and Burgess 2020). This makes for a favourable context in which many things can easily become popular memes online. Whether it’s a carnival costume or a gaffe committed on a TV show, everything has the potential to become raw material for remixes and other forms of images that circulate widely on social media or are shared via instant messaging platforms. There are many explanations for this phenomenon.

The articulation between media, technology and culture was fundamental in this process. This scenario, which has been taking shape since the middle of the twentieth century, has gained more and more in strength since the end of the 1990s and has extended even further thanks to the exponential digitalisation process currently underway. In this chapter, we aim to discuss this phenomenon by looking into the circulation of memes of the telenovela[1] character Nazaré Tedesco. The im-

1 The telenovela can be considered the most popular form of adaptation of melodrama into television language, especially in Latin America. It differs from soap opera – a popular genre in the United States – because it is generally broadcast at night and aimed at a wider audience and has a pre-determined run (generally between six and 10 months) meanwhile a soap opera is aimed at a younger audience in the afternoon slot and has an indefinite duration.


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portance of this meme is related to its transcultural circulation and appropriation, but we will describe it in further details throughout the chapter.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first is dedicated to an explanation of the main concepts, such as Social TV and social media with more insight provided by the literature on Brazilian telenovelas. This allows us to investigate how this audio-visual genre is related to the production of images that are the templates used for online memes and how social TV, telenovelas, and audiences are related to one another. This section is essential to contextualise our case study. In our second section, we present and discuss the example of the meme *"Nazaré Confusa"* or "Confused Blonde Lady". This meme comes from a scene from the telenovela "Senhora do Destino"[2] written by Aguinaldo Silva[3] that aired in 2004 and was rerun in 2017. In the show, the character Nazaré Tedesco, played by Renata Sorrah, is trapped in a cell and recalls some events that led to that moment. The meme was known by both names, in Brazil and in the US, respectively – and it had an international impact after it first started to circulate in Brazil.

In our last section, we discuss the central feature of Brazilian internet humour – known as "zuera", a slang expression that comes from the verb "zoar" that means "mocking", "kidding" or "making fun of" as explained by Lunardi (2018). It is important to state that, according to cultural norms, the correct spelling would be "zoeira", but we opted for the spelling that best translates the current vernacular language on the internet and, therefore, the one which is the most consistent with the original meaning and aesthetics of humour in digital environments in Brazil. Keeping that in mind, we attempt to define some characteristics of its role as a post-mass media genre in digital culture.

## 1 From TV to the Internet: Social TV in Brazil

A brief introduction focusing on cultural and social aspects is first necessary to establish what is meant by the concept of Social TV and how this phenomenon is connected to the Brazilian media scene. This is especially important due to the centrality of the telenovela as the main audiovisual media in Brazilian culture.

**2** The most-watched telenovela in Brazil during the 2000s. More information about it is available at: https://memoriaglobo.globo.com/entretenimento/novelas/senhora-do-destino/.

**3** He is a Brazilian Emmy-winning telenovela writer active since the 1980s and is responsible for works that were very successful both in Brazil and Portugal, where he lives nowadays. His personal blog is available at: http://aguinaldosilva.com.br/blog/.

The term Social TV was first mentioned in Anglo-Saxon literature and was linked to the commercial meaning of the term as well as being used by large telecommunications corporations in their marketing strategies. Nowadays, we have a much more diverse debate as “television neither won nor was defeated by the internet. Far from extinction, it has reinforced the characteristics that make it a unique vehicle and is moving towards the construction of a more interactive and complex experience for the audience” (Finger and Souza 2012, 374).

Regarding the emergence of the term Social TV and its definition in Américo and Santos (2013), the authors express a direct concern in establishing a definition for the concept of Social TV as an “experience obtained by the user through convergence between television and the internet, which enables a television experience that can be shared locally or remotely in any technological medium” (87).

Still according to the same authors, other features that need to be considered are the content flow on a screen, the use of technology to access audiovisual material, the integration with social networking sites, the communication and active interaction between users both synchronously and asynchronously as well as portability and sharing. Santos’ work (2014) –which focused on the contributions of computer science – may complement what Américo and Santos (2013) pointed out previously. In his opinion the enthusiasm to allow TV viewers to interact with the content shown on TV has existed for some time. However, the limits that may exist in this interaction are known and explained as follows:

> The characteristics of interaction between TV and the Internet meet different requirements and therefore adapting one model to another may not be effective (Pagani and Mirabello 2011). On the Internet, content is dispersed and it is up to the user to search for information. In television environments, the content is directed and presented directly to the viewer, who needs to perform little interaction to find what he needs, generally pressing a button or performing a sequence of commands. Internet content is also more dynamic and allows for different forms of consumption and interaction, while interactive television content, even with advances in interaction devices, is limited and differs in terms of form and quantity of interactions. (15)

For Matos (2013), inspired by Montpetit’s (2009) statement, the rise of the Social TV phenomenon could be explained by the combination of the passive entertainment experience with the active interaction promoted by online interactions. In this sense, we can say that the internet provides users with the possibility to communicate with each other on a worldwide scale has opened a channel for real-time, as well as asynchronous, interactions with TV content:

> With its connected devices and ease of use, in addition to mobility, the internet sometimes makes the vehicle capable of transporting the television signal to the viewer, as well as being the response channel for broadcasters, creating a second way, or hand double in the commu-

> nication process. It is through the possibility of use provided by the internet that the viewer is no longer passive and starts to act with television programming. For broadcasters, this new channel can also serve as an audience and viewer satisfaction meter. (Bernardini 2015, 72)

In the communication research field, it is essential to highlight the centrality of networked sociability. For Silva (2014), social media platforms have become a fruitful environment for sharing television content because they allow a great reach and a high number of views based on the creation of a network of people interested in the consumption and enjoyment of similar cultural products. He also adds that "this form of content dissemination leads to more interactions between viewers and also generates more discussions on shared subjects, adding knowledge and increasing the number of data and information that can be useful for improving the interactive content" (25–26).

Thinking about this perspective, Silva also argues that the phenomenon of Social TV rests on three pillars:

- Socialization around television programming: a large audience watching "together" and commenting on programs on the second screen, accomplishing an inherent human need;
- Search for extra content: search for information about the displayed content, whether about the show itself, an actor, character or presenter, some aspect of the narrative, or some information provided by the program;
- Interaction with content: affective involvement that strengthens the formation of communities, typical of fans. (43–44)

Despite efforts, there is still no consensus on the concept of Social TV. Cavalcanti (2016) – who has analysed 43 articles published in various journals around the world between 2007 and 2014 – concluded that it is possible to obtain at least 31 different definitions of this concept. According to her, the term, as it can be quite a broad idea, can also be considered empty, since "television has always given us something to talk about and television has always been talked about as part of our own experience with the media".

Even though she points this out, in the face of the divergences, the concepts can be divided into two possible currents based on the standards and similarities of the concept: the technological system and the online conversation. The first concentrated almost two-thirds of the amount and primarily cites the initial concept coined by Harboe (2009) while the second prioritises a more sociological look with emphasis on interaction and social ties within the perspective of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC).

With that in mind, Cavalcanti (2016) proposes a synthesis so we may understand what is being called Social TV today because "The 'Social TV' phenomenon

is necessarily associated with the adoption of certain productive strategies by communication companies (content or technology producers (application producers), generally for commercial purposes and articulated with television programming” (54).

This synthesis may actually be a third current. According to Cavalcanti, this one is the most appropriate to understand the phenomenon today because, even though it recognises the role of technology, it also manages to encompass the role of interaction. Therefore, this synthetic proposal combines four inseparable factors: conversation, interactive technology, strategy and television content. Further, as she argues: “the removal of any of these basic factors causes the concept to cease to characterize a specific and well-defined phenomenon within countless manifestations of participatory culture” (55–56).

In fact, Social TV has been used by media companies to enhance the effect of the presence of a collective experience around television content. This is achieved by reinforcing and renewing the importance of television programs with the clear intention of maintaining its importance in the centre of the media convergence process and because there is a productive possibility to create data, especially qualitative, based on the behaviour of its audiences (see Cavalcanti 2016).

Despite Cavalcanti’s advances in the theoretical discussion, it still does not satisfactorily clarify the complex effects at play. According to Orozco and Miller (2018), to understand these technological movements, it is first necessary to intertwine an anthropological and a micro-sociological perspective. This is especially necessary in parts of the world such as Latin America where inequality, including in terms of technology, is still evident and deeply rooted in their history.

## 1.1 The Telenovela Beyond the Screens

The discussion about the interface between communication, culture, and technology in Latin America will be based in this study on telenovelas due to the symbiotic relationship between the genre and the media history in the region. As shown by Martín-Barbero (2013), melodrama is the most popular genre in Latin America, while Orozco and Miller (2018) add to this argument as they recall the popularity that, in the beginning, was achieved from mass media such as radio which, still to this day, remains as important as television and the internet:

> From the revolutionary Cuban radio soap opera and its expansion throughout Latin America, *telenovelas* became opportunities to invent stories, imagine lives, seek liberation, punish the bad, participate in reinterpretations, encourage personal encounters, and seek new forms of communication. Without knowing it and without trying to leave a television or audiovisual record, the Latin American public has been constantly creating transmedia exten-

> sions [. . .]. What happens on television becomes cultural, if not legal, property of the audiences, as they process information, relate it to their own lives, and give new meaning to what is seen (Orozco and Miller 2018, 65).

To advance in the central discussion, it is necessary to remember the process of convergence in which television, despite being the centre of the telenovela's narrative, is no longer solely responsible for its circulation. The reach and impact of television content goes beyond the limits of TV, not only from the production instances but, above all, from the audiences and their online presence. Estevão (2013) deals with exactly this issue when he discusses how the Brazilian telenovela has been dialoguing with the possibilities of intervention and influence by fan participation on the official websites related to the telenovela.

For the author, in addition to recognising the telenovel*a* as an evolution of melodrama, we must note that it has also transformed itself as a format into a television fictional genre[4]. As Gomes (2011) reminds us throughout the Barberian[5] standpoint adopted, the television genre is a form of mediation itself because "genre is not a property of texts, but something that runs through texts; it is not a strategy for the production of texts, but a strategy that links the production and consumption of media texts, which links writing and reading strategies" (123).

Furthermore, regarding the relationship between Brazil and telenovela, it is impossible to ignore the important role of Rede Globo in the construction of the genre. In addition to the production strategies, Estevão (2013) points out that the technical-aesthetic standard, the establishment of the timetable, and the accessibility of the language of their telenovelas were fundamental for this two-way relationship between production and consumption instances in which the telenovela assumes the role of a "repertoire of references shared by Brazilians" (Lopes 2009, 25) from "sharing habits, behaviours, facts of reality and bringing them to the family environment, the *telenovela*, easily, becomes an agenda of conversations, becoming part of the daily lives of viewers" (Estevão 2013, 41).

Still, according to Estevão (2013), the telenovela has always had a leading role in Rede Globo, the Brazil's most important TV broadcaster that reaches 99.5 percent of the population (Negócios Globo, 2015). In the 1960s, founded at the beginning of the military dictatorship, fixed schedules were a major milestone for TV in Brazil, and because of this, in the following decades, telenovelas became the flagship of audience ratings, even gaining specific themes. However, it was only in the 1980s that

**4** It is possible to recognise at least a few more fictional television genres in Brazil besides the *telenovela*: specials (e.g., Christmas and New Year's Eve), mini series/micro series, TV shows and soap opera (see Pallotini 2012).

**5** With reference to Martín-Barbero.

the genre became consolidated in the country, and in the world, by combining popular characteristics with the typical mass media of a medium like TV which was gaining more and more traction on a national scale in Brazil.

Lopes (2002) points out the contribution of telenovelas had in the conception of a supposed national identity:

> [T]he *telenovela* in Brazil gained public recognition as an artistic and cultural product and gained visibility as a central agent in the debate on Brazilian culture and the country's identity. It can also be considered one of the most representative phenomena of Brazilian modernity, for combining the archaic and the modern, for merging anachronistic narrative devices and modern imaginaries, and for having its history strongly marked by the nationalization-mass mediation dialectic. (1)

She also adds that the popularity of the genre was also important due to its similarity to Brazilian daily life:

> [T]he *telenovela* is an example of a narrative that extrapolated the dimensions of leisure, which permeates the nation's daily routine, building mechanisms of interactivity and a dialectic between the lived time and the narrated time, which configures itself as an experience, cultural, aesthetic and social at the same time. As a sociability experience, it triggers conversation, sharing, and imaginary participation mechanisms. The *telenovela* became a form of narrative about the nation and a way of participating in this imagined nation. Viewers feel like participants in soap operas and mobilize information that circulates around them in their daily lives. (16)

These elements were presented in the early 2000s, when the digitization process and the participatory culture were beginning. Now, we can see an acceleration and a consolidation of both processes and, because of it, the rise of Social TV not only as a concept but as a practice directly linked to the relationship between audience participation and producers' strategies.

## 1.2 Social TV, Telenovelas, and Audiences

The change telenovelas had to go through to adapt to an everchanging social context and to remain one of the strongest cultural elements still present in Latin America are notorious. The most important features are new narrative elements as well as audience monitoring. In 2002, when digital culture began to be a topic in Brazil, Lopes (2002) reported these adaptation trends observed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

She had already pointed out a central issue that permeates the relationship between telenovelas and the internet until today. According to her, commenting was as important as the ritual of watching a telenovela (16). For this reason, de-

spite being incipient, it was a sign that the internet was about to become a very favourable environment for people who wanted to engage with the content from the TV melodramatic genre. The author reminds readers that in the "debate forum [internet] capillary diffuse, complex and diversified, people synthesize public and private experiences, express divergences and convergences of opinion about actions of characters and developments of stories" (18).

In more recent studies, we can contextualise and better understand this audience's behaviour concerning the current configurations. According to Huertas Bailén (2015), in the history of Brazil, humour has been used as an outlet for Brazilians to express their feelings and opinions about the country's political and social problems, and as a tool to define their cultural identity. Thus, *Zoeira* presents itself as an extension of Brazilian humour that already existed before the time of online ambivalence (see Phillips and Milner 2017). In this context, the internet works as a medium through which humour is communicated with a liberating laugh that allows Brazilians to discuss controversial issues – such as cultural tensions between social classes – and to define Brazilian cultural identity, both as a nation and as an online community. The fluency of messages between different media and the hybridization of interpersonal and media communication would not be possible without this "new habitat for reception". Orozco and Miller (2018), who recognize the vast transformations that TV has undergone, reinforce this argument when they state that "being an audience means connecting with others and with others mediated by screens" (70).

Despite these screen decentralisation processes, it is practically a consensus that the main screen, at least in Latin America, remains television. Still, according to Orozco and Miller (2018, 62), Latin Americans watch more TV than ever. Data from Millward Brown (2014) indicate that Peru is the record holder in average TV consumption/day, at nine hours. Brazil comes next with eight hours and Mexico in third with seven hours.

According to the authors, intrinsic aspects such as melodrama, orality, sociability, connectivity and inequality are essential to understand what they call the "reinvention of Latin American television". They also explain that the imbrication of fiction with everyday life, an emblematic characteristic of melodrama, is the cultural difference that represents the deep mixture of culture, language and suffering of Latin American peoples.

These aspects are shown in different manifestations and reappropriations of fictional elements by the audiences such as online memes. In addition to being a way to continue consuming audiovisual content, they can also extrapolate the original narrative. This type of phenomenon, according to Nunes (2016) is due to the relationship between affections and memory formation because "the memory generated by the media as a process in which affections are reproduced in the form of words,

images, and gestures that, as replicators, become memes subject to longevity, stability, fecundity, mutation, selection, reproduction, and transmission!” (152).

Nowadays telenovelas and memes are both present in Brazilians’ everyday lives. In addition to being among the countries that consume the most television in the region, Brazilians are also among the largest producers of telenovelas. After Mexico (Televisa), Brazil is the world’s second-largest producer. Together, Televisa and Rede Globo have produced more than 1,000 telenovelas since 1951 and currently have the highest sales records: Maria do Bairro (Televisa) was sold to 182 countries and Avenida Brasil (Rede Globo) reached 130 (Correio Braziliense 2018).

It is important to mention that, currently, there is still an audience that, on one hand, is affected by high rates of historical social inequality, but, on the other hand, is one of the most active on social media sites. According to the latest available edition of the Brazilian Media Survey, which interviewed 15,050 people throughout the national territory between March and April 2016, 63 percent of respondents cited TV as the most used means of communication, while the internet appears next with 28 percent. However, the survey also reveals that about two-thirds of respondents access the internet, and at least 79 percent of them do so primarily from their homes during weekdays.

Another interesting fact is that the relationship between the two media is also present in the survey because, amongst the people who answered that they watch TV, 28 percent said they use their cell phones, and 17 percent that they use the internet at the same time, and, of the ones who access the internet, almost 20 percent watch TV simultaneously (see Brasil 2016).

These numbers reveal a behaviour typical of convergence culture (see Jenkins 2009). For Ribeiro et al (2015, 239), “consumers are using digital devices that allow an effective participation in media culture, transforming their appropriations and resignifications into media narratives that are often shared in forums, blogs, groups and profiles on social networks”. Thus, consumption and resignification of media products, as well as their production and distribution, permeate not only digital devices but also “new media”. One of the best examples of this process are the memes produced from *telenovelas*. Studying these as a subject matter means going deep into audiences’ behaviour toward TV media content.

## 2 When the Memes Meet the Telenovela: From “*Nazaré Confusa*” to the “Confused Blonde Lady”

The “*Nazaré Confusa*” meme is taken from a scene from the telenovela “*Senhora do Destino*”, and, according to an entry in the Meme Museum: “The close-up of her

confused face became a gif in mid-2016 and was shared by several internet users, who used the scene to create other memes, which became popular between September and October 2016" (Belo Gil 2016).

This means that, even before the telenovela was rerun in 2017, memes based on this scene had already begun to circulate on Twitter and later on Facebook. At the same time, the meme began to circulate among foreign users, especially from the USA, even though they did not know where the scene originated from. It explains the fact that many of them thought it was a scene with Julia Roberts, as Renata Sorrah looks a lot like her. It became so popular that it was even featured during the presidential campaign of the same year. The meme later ended up being known as "Confused Blonde Lady" or "Confused Math Lady" – after another remix of this image together with a quadratic formula – among other subvariants.

Those nicknames given in the US generated a backlash among many Brazilians due to the supposed appropriation of a meme of Brazilian origin (see Belo Gil 2016). Another assumption made by the same author is that, although there is no official confirmation, it is believed that the *telenovela* was repeated precisely because of the repercussions of this meme. The announcement of the alleged return of the soap opera was made on Twitter by its own author and confirmed by the broadcaster a few moments later.

It is worth mentioning that the author uses a less famous meme to talk about the announcement of the second rerun of the telenovela[6]. Another curiosity surrounding the repercussions of this meme is that the actress recorded a teaser for the premiere of "Murder on the Orient Express"[7], which premiered at the end of November 2017, alluding to the same scene of her character that became the meme.

The repercussion of the memes was so emblematic that the actress continued to be questioned about the character. On his personal blog, the author Aguinaldo Silva reports about it when Renata Sorrah was called by the audience the "mulher dos memes" ("woman of memes") as she affirmed during an event in 2017[8].

It is easy to visualise (Fig. 1) the moment when the meme was trending in and outside Brazil (Figs. 2 and 3). According to Google Trends data, Brazil (blue) led interests, but only after it was brought up abroad, especially by USA users (red)[9].

**6** Tweet available at: https://twitter.com/aguinaldaosilva/status/795252458129936384.

**7** The video is available on the official page of 20th Century Fox in Brazil on Facebook at: https://web.facebook.com/FoxFilmDoBrasil/videos/1408627422601386/. Accessed 9 February 2018.

**8** Available at: https://natelinha.uol.com.br/celebridades/2018/01/05/renata-sorrah-diz-trabalhei-a-vida-toda-pra-virar-a-mulher-dos-memes-113351.php.

**9** We used the term "Math Lady" for comparison because it was the one most mentioned in English on the platform.

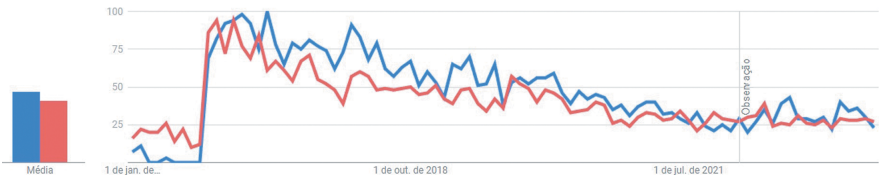


**Fig. 1:** Comparison between “Nazaré Confusa” and “Math Lady” interests on Google Trends. Accessed 12 May 2023. https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2016-01-01%202023-05-12&q=%2Fg%2F11jv2mpk6t,confused%20lady.

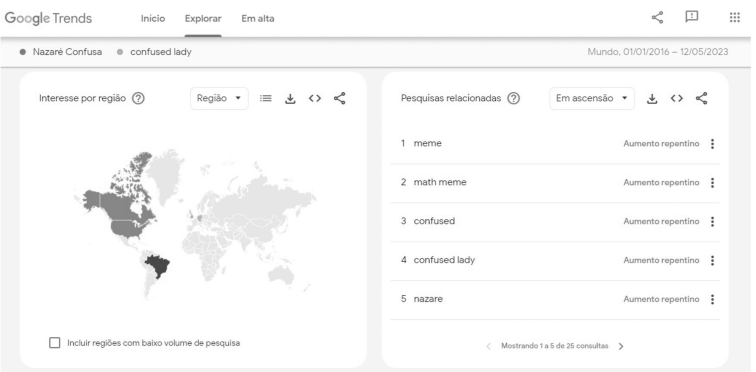


**Fig. 2:** Main distribution of interests about “Nazaré Confusa” on Google Trends. Accessed 12 May 2023. https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2016-01-01%202023-05-12&q=%2Fg%2F11jv2mpk6t,confused%20lady.

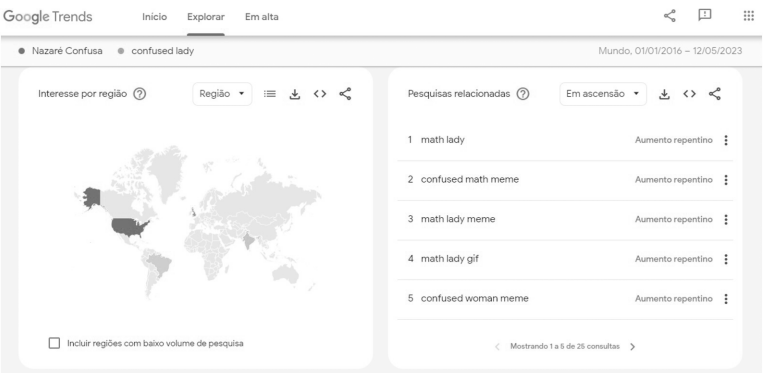


**Fig. 3:** Main distribution of interests about “Math Lady” on Google Trends. Accessed 12 May 2023. https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2016-01-01%202023-05-12&q=%2Fg%2F11jv2mpk6t,confused%20lady.

According to Know Your Meme[10], it was first featured as a gif in Buzzfeed Portugal[11] and then spread out to 9 Gag[12] and Reddit[13], where it was already shown alongside the math equations.

After that, it was possible to visualise many other examples with and without equations. In addition to this, attempts by Brazilians to become leaders in the discussions about the meme's origins highlighted to what extent the telenovela character became a focal point in its online presence on main social media platforms like Facebook[14], YouTube[15] and Twitter[16].

These examples of Nazaré Tedesco are thought provoking regarding our contemporary media landscape. They concatenate evident aspects of the convergence and participatory culture as well as the phenomenon of Social TV which is directly intertwined with popular culture and audiovisual media (soap opera). For Inocêncio (2016, 1) these memes need to emerge as hybridised, intertextual and multifaceted because they can carry hereditary traits and cultural repertoires.

In the case of Brazil, it is fundamental to draw attention mainly to the interfaces with audiovisual production in the country. As argued by Chagas (2018), Brazil has increasingly stood out regarding the format of memes and to issues related to intellectual property:

> Around here, the success of social networking sites led internet users to adapt internet memes to these platforms, developing their own languages and creating transmedia characters and products, such as memes of soap opera protagonists (Félix Bicha Má, Carminha Perturbada, etc.). These creations also highlight the authorial character of internet memes, something normally little discussed in international literature – since the vast majority of foreign memes are anonymous creations – and also little noticed by national literature. (Chagas 2018, 369)

**10** Available at: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/math-lady-confused-lady.

**11** Available at: https://buzzfeed.com.br/post/13-historias-que-mostram-a-capacidade-infantil-de-fazer-bosta-em-toda-sua-gloria.

**12** Available at: https://9gag.com/gag/a25ZDYw.

**13** Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/55gik3/where_is_this_meme_confused_woman_with_math/.

**14** Nazaré Amarga is one of the main parody pages on Facebook. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/NazareAmarga/videos/1854931971422443.

**15** The first video posted on YouTube in 2016 has more the one million views so far. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7QA0ogagEc.

**16** Tweet published by a Brazilian influencer in 2016 about the repercussion of the meme in the USA. Some users also commented about a possible "meme war" between Brazil and USA. Available at: https://twitter.com/Itspedrito/status/785204765907124224.

In addition, it is also crucial to highlight the symbiotic relationship between memes and humour:

> Created from detours, clippings, rereadings, appropriations and free creations of texts and audiovisual works, these artifacts of digital culture also reveal themselves as a repository of countless cultural repertoires and behavioral traits in the fertile ground of various groups and communities on social networking sites. Memes can thus provide clues about how everyday themes and public debates can intertwine with entertainment products and mobilize millions of people, functioning as collaborative micronarratives marked by innovation in format, by the articulation of signs, with a high power of synthesis (dense in content and simple in format) and by exercising the transposition of the comic. (Inocêncio 2016, 1)

This link between Brazilian culture and humour does not just appear on the internet. On the contrary, it also manifests itself in digital environments because of historical materiality. According to Mário da Silva Brito (1963), when he uttered an anecdotal reply to a question about the skills a comedian should have: “What does it take to be a comedian in Brazil? Simple: take everything seriously” (36).

According to Saliba (2017), Brito’s speech would be closer to reality than an anecdote. Because, according to him, humour is so present in our daily lives that it doesn’t provoke any contrast and ends up going unnoticed. Thinking about this omnipresence of humour in Brazilian culture, and bringing this discussion back to our research topic, in *Zuera* we have a materialisation of this phenomenon during contemporary cultural manifestations, especially those based on processes of convergence and digitisation.

Moreover, she has recently developed this argument by describing the relationship between self-irony and Brazilian idiosyncrasy, already described at other times by other researchers:

> Humor is an essential part of Brazilian popular culture and functions as a hallmark of this online community, which is so different from the “global” internet. Brazilians make fun of themselves, laughing at their problems as a nation and as a virtual community that lives on the margins of an internet dominated by North American culture. While Brazil is one of the countries with the most online presence (Danno 2018), non-Brazilians do not seem to understand Brazilian irony, often considering Brazilian behaviour on the internet as bizarre and peculiar (Bevins 2016; Heim 2012; Ruvolo 2014), or even irritating or aggressive (Fragoso 2015) (Lunardi and Burgess 2020, 428–429).

As a result of their research, Lunardi and Burgess (2020) also add the following:

> In the history of Brazil, humour has been used as an escapism resource for Brazilians to express their feelings and opinions about the country’s political and social problems, and as a device to define their cultural identity. Thus, Zoeira presents itself as an extension of the Brazilian humour that already existed before an ambivalent internet (Phillips; Milner, 2017). It works, in this context, as a liberating laugh that allows Brazilians to discuss controversial is-

> sues – such as political problems and economic and cultural tensions between social classes – and to define Brazilian cultural identity, both as a nation and as an online community. (451)

Therefore, we understand *Zuera* here as a contemporary media genre that is a tangle of cultural matrices that go back to the very construction of local society, but, at the same time, also carries global values of digital culture, such as the typical libertarian values of the internet and still intertwines them with the material characteristics of the network. Due to these intersections, it also follows the logic of the Barberian palimpsest (see Martín-Barbero and Rey 2001).

## 3 The Role of Brazilian *Zuera* as a Post-Mass Media Genre in Digital Culture

To understand the role of the *Zuera* in our media landscape, we will investigate Martín-Barbero's mediation theory. Gomes (2011) points out a clear and pertinent argument based on this theory. According to her, placing the media genre at the centre of the map of mediations is a good clue for building an analysis model that articulates the relationships between communication, culture, politics and society, thus allowing the conceptualisation of a global and complex vision of the communicative process (see Gomes 2011, 127).

With that in mind, we intend to make a parallel between the *Zuera* and melodrama. If, on one hand, melodrama is a typical media genre of mass culture, on the other hand, the *Zuera* would be a typical media genre of digital culture. Below, we can see how the proposal by Martín-Barbero (2006) of media genres works as "articulators" (Fig. 4).

The central argument of Gomes (2011) is that the genre would first articulate the two axes (synchronic and diachronic). From the perspective of sociality, it is possible to connect the cultural matrices with reception skills, articulating the collective uses of communication, the everyday relationships that people establish with the media, with genres and media formats (see Gomes 2011). Thus, the mediation of sociality implies analysing communicative processes not only from the point of view of determinations and structures, but from the point of view of practice and the daily-basis non-hegemonic processes of meaning.

One can thus visualise the articulation between genre, logics of production and industrial formats through technicity, which serves today as the scenario of globalisation and convergence culture (Gomes 2011, 120). Therefore, it interfaces with a rituality, that bridges industrial formats with audience reception skills. Thus, the basic cycle proposed by the author places television genres at the centre

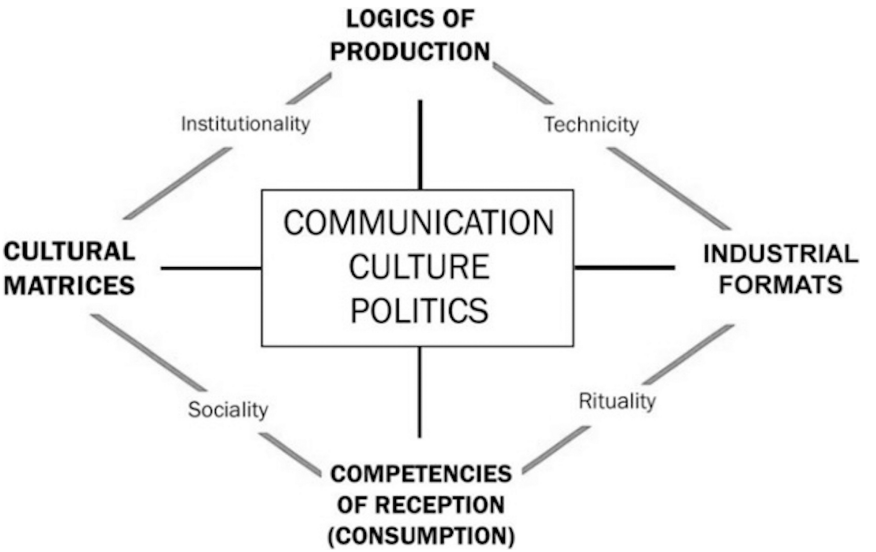


**Fig. 4:** Map of mediations according to the Barberian proposal. (Lopes da Silva 2020, 5).

of the map, finally allowing the recognition of the popular within the mass media system and vice versa.

Genres trigger the mechanisms of perception and recognition of the popular; they are not just a feature in texts and narratives but a mechanism that works as a device for reading, for producing meaning, and for “reencountering the world” (Martín-Barbero 2006, 204). In this way they become the anchor point of the media industry in the perceptual apparatus of the masses.

Grohmann (2009), also inspired by the Barberian proposal, reinforces this when he affirms that audiences can find the “key” to the genre by identifying a media product, such as drama or comedy, based on the elements presented in it. These genres, according to the author, can be defined by internal architecture or even by their place in the middle of the programming schedule (in the case of TV). In this way, in addition to being a communication stratagem rooted in different cultures it is simultaneously, “a reading strategy, because people do not understand what is happening in the story if they do not find the “key” of the genre” (Grohmann 2009, 6).

Therefore, we are proposing a movement similar to the Barberian proposal, by putting the *Zuera* at the centre of the map in order to comprehend the mediations in the logic of the Brazilian Digital Culture scenario where *Zuera* is conceived as a post-mass media genre and articulated via the humour-timing-polyvocality tripod.

Most “Nazaré Confusa” memes were based on the original telenovela scenes to express what is known as “reaction memes”, that is, memes that are used to

express the users' reactions beyond the usually text-based online content. Therefore, it is possible to highlight the relation between users' everyday lives, their subjectivities (e.g., to express confusion) and media literacy skills (e.g., remixing videos and static images) in this kind of user generated content (UGC). Following the Barberian logic, it is plausible to affirm that rituality and society can be directly articulated using the model combining industrial formats, competences of reception and cultural matrices throughout with humour as a central element.

Although melodrama (as a typical mass media genre) still plays an important role in the meme's generation, the *Zuera* becomes crucial to understand the logic of digital culture, where melodrama is transformed by users through memes that presents, at the same time, mass media (melodrama) and post-mass media (*Zuera*) elements.

Then when we put the *Zuera* at the centre, it is reasonable to point to three possible mediations that are essential: humour, timing, and polyvocality, as illustrated below (Fig. 5):

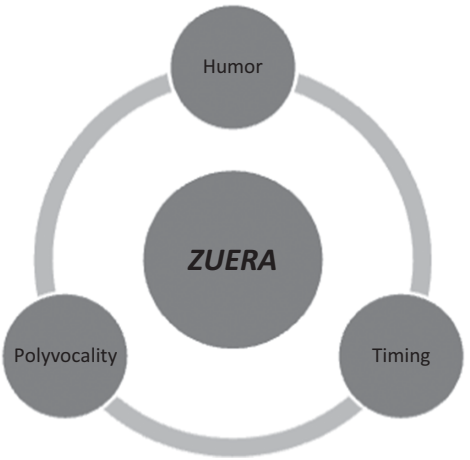


**Fig. 5:** *Zuera*'s Map Proposal (Vieira 2021, 192, translated).

Based on this map, we can think of *Zuera* as a post-mass genre capable of articulating elements from inside and outside digital culture. As a result, sociocultural elements such as Brazilian humour – strongly based on superiority, self-irony, and identity – would be the first element that, together with timing, makes the content of digital culture more fluid and capable of being "spread out". Moreover, there are also elements of convergence culture such as the polyvocality of pop culture which, while allowing people to access content from the parameters of mass culture, help to solicit more reflections and criticism and thus resume the

initial cycle without breaking the logic of ontological humour based on the inequalities that constitute our society.

## Conclusion

When considering the Brazilian digital cultural landscape, we agree with Inocêncio’s (2016) standpoint that Brazil is a major player when it comes to the production and circulation of memes. In addition to this, we can think of identity markers that differentiate it from other countries due to historical processes. That is why it is important that Brazilian researchers investigate this subfield of research and deal with the specificities and complexities that it demands. This theoretical approach is also a political one that can reiterate as much as it shows the specificity of humour in social media in the context of the Global South, as the South African author Shepherd Mpfou (2021) has argued.

Furthermore, we have tried to bring clarity to some of the characteristics of digital culture generated by the articulation of mass and post-mass logics through the use of the genre of melodrama and the *Zuera* meme present in the case of the “Confused Blonde Lady”. We were able to see how users rearticulated the melodrama through *Zuera* and, to a certain degree, transform it into a meme. The “Confused Blonde Lady” meme epitomises the idea of polyvocality, timing and humour that is contained in *Zueira*’s map. These three characteristics can be thought of as the central element of the production, circulation and audience of memes and it is also an example that highlights how the combination of television studies, humour studies and internet studies should be addressed more often as a valid approach to understanding the place of memes in the digital culture context as much as the role of Brazilian *Zuera* as a post-mass media genre.

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# Part 2: **Mobilisation and Engagement**

Albin Wagener

# Memes, Emotional Engagement and Politics

**Abstract:** This chapter highlights the increasing importance of memes in our postdigital society. Memes, blending visual and linguistic elements, have emerged as a distinct form of communication rooted in popular culture. They exert a significant influence, including in politics, transcending digital and non-digital boundaries; they also succinctly reinterpret complex emotions, ideas and cultures, acting as a new mode of expression. Moreover, memes contribute to political activism by presenting political ideas through various means, including humour, puzzles, or provocative content based on cultural and ideological perspectives. This chapter delves into pragmatic discourse analysis, examining memes that convey amplified messages through a fusion of language and visuals, with the aim of shedding light on the mechanics of political engagement.

**Keywords:** memes, emotion, culture, postdigital, parody

During the recent years, memes have gained popularity as a form of language, combining visual and linguistic elements in a condensed format while drawing on popular cultural references. They represent a typical product of our postdigital society, blurring the boundaries between the digital and non-digital, and spreading quickly while having an impact on society, notably on a political level. In this chapter, we will explore memes as complex objects in the postdigital era.

Memes play a role in the reinterpretation of complex emotions, ideas and cultures in a concise, transactional way; they represent a new form of sign. However, memes can also contribute to activism and engagement in public discourse, by presenting political representations in funny, puzzling, or offensive ways, through language and visual signs based on popular culture, ideological stances and actual controversies.

Their unique features, such as their simplicity, visual impact and shareability make them powerful tools for spreading information and influencing public opinion (see Milner 2016). In the context of politics, memes can serve as a means of expressing dissent, critique, or support for candidates or policies. Through their use of humour and irony, they can also serve as a form of political satire or parody, critiquing the status quo and offering alternative perspectives.


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The following chapter thus aims to study the pragmatic/linguistic structure of memes, as it possesses properties that play a role in the ideological polarisation of the contemporary world, not mechanically and directly (memes do not inherently polarise), but by fuelling practices of identity reinforcement and ideological alignment among groups of users, both on and off platforms.

This pragmatic discourse analysis focuses on a corpus of memes that convey excessive messages through a unique blend of linguistic and visual elements. Through the semiotic analysis of these memes, we aim to shed light on the mechanics of political engagement in public discourse, specifically using hypernarrative forms and emotional engagement as a pretext and an argumentative form.

This chapter thus proposes a theory of memes, followed by a methodology of analysis; both of which will be applied to the hypernarrative nature of memes using two case studies.

## 1 A Theory of Memes

The emergence of the "web 2.0" and the rise of social media platforms have caused memes to experience a surge in popularity (see Cormode 2008). However, it is important to state that the core structure of memes, which involves combining images with text, has been used for many years in various mediums like newspapers and posters. Nevertheless, the present-day manifestation of memes in their pure digital context can be traced back to much earlier instances. For example, the *Kilroy was here* graffiti (Fig. 1) from 1944 or even a drawing[1] published in *The Judge*, a student journal from the University of Iowa in 1921, can be considered precursors to the contemporary format of memes.

These examples serve to illustrate that memes are not necessarily reliant on digital tools for their creation. This, in turn, has shaped our perspective on memes, which is heavily influenced by postdigital theory, a theoretical framework that has gained prominence since the advent of the web 2.0 era (see Herring 2013) and centres on the collaborative creation of digital content and social interactions. In line with this, Florian Cramer (2015, 19) proposes a definition of postdigitality that shows the messy state of diverse topics and fields (media, arts, design, politics, etc.) after their digitisation, and how this digitisation in turn shapes their "non-digital" version.

**1** See the comic strip at: https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbxkwy/meme-1921-expectation-vs-reality-judge-magazine-comic-twitter.

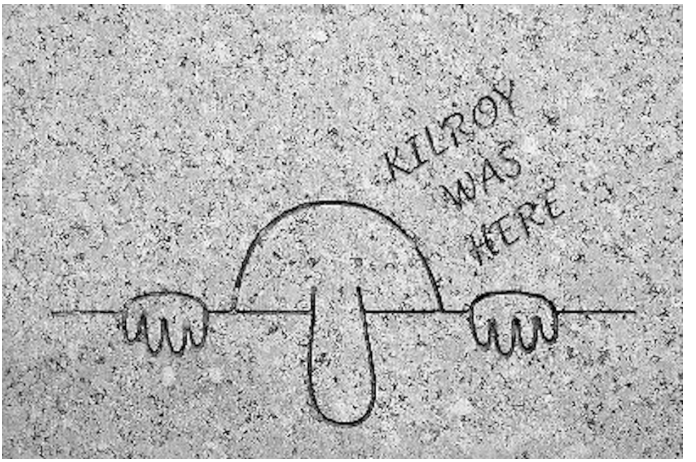


**Fig. 1:** Kilroy was here (France, 1944), CC 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kilroy_Was_Here_-_Washington_DC_WWII_Memorial.jpg.

Undoubtedly, social media has been instrumental in revealing the importance of the postdigital phenomenon. However, it is fundamental not to overlook the role of formerly underground platforms (or boards) such as 4chan, Reddit, or 9gag in understanding social controversy and postdigital creativity (see Massanari 2015). Moreover, memes draw upon what Tim Barker has dubbed the aesthetics of error, or glitch aesthetics (Barker 201, 43).

The postdigital environment creates rich opportunities through the introduction of new devices and their unique functionalities and affordances (see Ghliss, Perea and Ruchon 2019). This dynamic setting gives rise to a fresh method of storytelling known as hypernarrativity, which has been thoroughly studied by Ellen Rose (2012):

> The web in its entirety offers an experience of information that has no beginning, middle, or end, and that is always unfinished and unfinishable, as social networking sites and video games, tweets and web pages ceaselessly flow into each other to create a ubiquitous information surround through which we journey, blithely leaping from one disconnected information nugget to another. (99)

Postdigitality also means that we are collectively interconnected in narrative networks (see Benhabib 2002) and that we can choose to create and weave out of depending on the social context. It is evident that memes conform to the same underlying principles and have gained prominence as a result of the concepts of virality (see Zanette, Blikstein and Visconti 2019) and seriality (see Oltean 1993).

To define memes, I choose to draw on Christian Bauckhage's all-encompassing definition that encapsulates the essence of memes as well as their social significance (Bauckhage 2011, 42), as it highlights the social aspect of memes. Nonetheless, it is evident that internet users propagate memes by engaging in memetic behaviour (see Shifman 2013) and by adhering to specific rules that imply that memes follow a specific grammar and convey particular technodiscourses (see Paveau 2019). The use of a grammatical metaphor is significant since it emphasises that, like any language, memes possess their own way of constructing and conveying meaning and that it requires a specific kind of literacy to comprehend, generate and communicate memes effectively.

## 2 Analysing Memes

Generating memes has been made easy by the availability of various tools (smartphone apps, websites, or databases) such as Memegenerator[2] and Knowyourmeme[3], which provide a variety of resources for users to create their own memes or use existing templates. The process of creating a meme typically involves three steps: choosing a template in a database or importing a picture; adding a text above the picture or on it; saving or sharing the meme on various social platforms, such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), messaging apps (Telegram, Whatsapp, etc.) or boards (9gag, Reddit, etc.).

Other productions, such as gifs (which could be defined as a subcategory of memes), have already made their way onto Facebook Messenger, Whatsapp or even Telegram – which may raise the puzzling question of the absence of integrated meme generators on such apps.

The composition of a meme consists of three separate components, which when combined, form the memetic metasign, as suggested by Wagener (2022, 62–63):

- the pragmasign: The meme itself and what it represents;
- the pragmadesign: It is the way text and image are placed to form the meme, the font used, the way the message is formulated, colours, etc.;
- the pragmacontext: The context and environment in which a meme is transmitted and received, such as a Facebook group or a WhatsApp conversation, and the way it is presented in the media, whether as an opening statement or a response, which are crucial factors that contribute to its overall impact.

2 https://imgflip.com/memegenerator.
3 https://knowyourmeme.com/.

Furthermore, the pragmasign is based on two dimensions:

- the refereme: Cultural and social references that are visually represented or used within a meme, such as elements from popular culture, TV shows, political events, video games, and so on;
- the topeme: The topic or subject matter, which refers to what the meme is addressing, such as everyday life, politics, or the economy.


**Fig. 2:** Example of a memetic analysis: Description of a meme based on the US TV series *The Office*, with actor Steve Carell. Accessed 1 March 2024. https://www.facebook.com/DunderMifflinMeme/photos/a.362528484572849/870933320399027/?type=3.

By conducting a memetic analysis, it is possible to isolate topemes and referemes, as illustrated in the previous example (Fig. 2). It is important to note, however, that memes can also serve as both conversation starters and answers.

Memes are highly multidimensional and can be used in various ways in online conversations. This complexity requires a sophisticated approach to analyse their pragmatic implications. Memes involve visual and textual elements, cultural references and contextual communication, making them difficult to study using only traditional methods or conventional models. To address this issue, I refer to a methodological proposition called the systemic grid for memetic analysis (Tab. 1) (Wagener 2022, 99). This method is intended to be used to study different aspects of a meme, including:

- the refereme (the cultural references used in the meme, both in text and image);
- the topeme (the topic of the meme itself, both in text and image);
- the pragmasign (the sign itself, meaning the combination of refereme and topeme);
- the pragmadesign (graphic and visual elements used to format the meme);

- various elements of the pragmacontext:
  - Enunciation: Who publishes the meme and in what context?
  - Multimodality: What is the number of texts and images used and what are they made of?
  - Intertextuality: What does the meme display and how does it play around specific references?
  - Interdiscursivity: What types of discourse and representation does the meme trigger?
- The semantic nodes used in the meme to convey specific meaning. For example: How are the references connected, how are text and image connected, how are topemes connected with social representations, etc.

**Tab. 1:** Systemic grid for meme analysis (Wagener 2022, 99).

| | **Pragmasign** | **Pragmadesign** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Refereme | | | Text |
| | | | Image |
| Topeme | | | Text |
| | | | Image |
| | | **Pragmacontext** | |
| Enunciation | Multimodality | Intertextuality | Interdiscursivity |

This proposal, I posit, could prove helpful for analysing instances of memes that propagate political content, especially in the context of democratic elections, social tensions, or extremist propaganda. However, it is crucial to provide clear definitions of the terms used as descriptive criteria, as proposed earlier. Doing so enables the analyst to take note of the various attributes of a meme and gain a deeper understanding of its multifaceted, multimodal and interdiscursive character.

One of the fundamental characteristics of memes is their multimodality, as highlighted by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017). This means that creators often merge textual and visual elements to construct a coherent and meaningful image. Multimodality is a critical aspect of memes, as it enhances their communicative potential in terms of both cognitive and emotional impact (see Schlaile et al. 2018). Intertextuality is another vital component of memes, as it strengthens their multimodal nature; intertextuality involves the use of multiple layers of meaning and references, drawn from various sources such as popular culture, news, politics, and real-life events. Bradley E. Wiggins (2019, 35) has elaborated on this, explaining how memes rely on intertwined references to create their meaning.

Intertextuality is only one aspect that highlights the multireferential nature of memes, which partly explains their widespread use for entertainment purposes – including the political area. However, interdiscursivity serves to emphasise that intertextuality alone cannot fully account for the persuasive impact of memes. The circulation of discourses through memes conveys social representations and political ideologies, and reflects multiple narratives that are never neutral, but always conveying something about society or the world we inhabit from the creator's or sharer's perspective. Therefore, interdiscursivity becomes a critical component in understanding the social and political nature of memes, and the role of both senders and receivers in shaping their meaning (see Garric and Capdevielle-Mougnibas 2009, 108).

The discursive nature of memes highlights their potential to function as a new form of language that can communicate social representations through a combination of textual and visual elements, often referencing popular culture or current events. This multimodal structure allows memes to convey powerful messages that can participate in shaping public discourse and opinion. However, it is important to note that funny memes are not neutral in their messaging and can also be used to propagate political messages as well as harmful ideologies such as racism or antifeminism. As such, it is crucial to consider the political implications of memes in a democratic society, where the circulation of information and the freedom of expression are highly valued.

## 3 The Hypernarrativity of Emotional Engagement and Politics in Memes

Internet memes have emerged as a powerful tool for the dissemination of political messages due to their ability to communicate ideas and emotions rapidly and effectively in an appealing and shareable format (see Wagener 2022). Political messages can be implemented through memes by integrating text or images that support a specific political viewpoint or position. For instance, memes may employ a popular image or character to convey a political message or quote that advances a political agenda. Memes can also employ humour or satire to critique or ridicule political figures or policies. Such memes aim to highlight inconsistencies, contradictions, or other negative attributes of a political position or party, often utilising irony or sarcasm to articulate their point; their goal is to make us react and engage with the discourse they convey. Additionally, memes can endorse or promote a specific political candidate or party by utilising images or slogans that evoke positive emotions or associations with the candidate or party.

The virality of memes enables them to spread rapidly and widely through social media and other online platforms, presenting an effective strategy for reaching a large audience and shaping public opinion. However, it is critical to recognise that memes can also be employed to disseminate misinformation and propaganda (see Mina 2019). Hence, it is crucial to evaluate the source and accuracy of any political memes encountered online. To comprehend the circulation of political messages through memes, I propose to study three samples of memes using the systemic grid of memetic analysis: a) general political memes, b) memes targeting conservative movements and c) memes targeting progressist movements.

These three datasets contain messages that overstep boundaries related to stereotyped representations, cultural narratives and discrimination towards targeted political groups or figures. Indeed, they illustrate how memes can be employed to propagate political messages or produce comments regarding the life of democracies, the impacts of economic systems, or the ideologies of political adversaries. This also highlights the potential use of memes to propagate political messages within the public and digital spheres. It underscores the importance of upholding ethical standards in political discourse and the potentially crucial role of memes in undermining or stimulating the democratic process. The use of case studies to analyse memes in a more nuanced and contextualised manner could contribute to a better understanding of the role of memes in contemporary politics and their impact on democratic discourse.

As previously indicated, memes possess both linguistic and visual attributes that facilitate their dissemination of political messages. The political potential of memes, I contend, is heightened by their reliance on visually impactful content that enables easy association with the message. This political aspect assumes significant importance since offensive or extreme interpretations of memes reveal prevalent social representations within society. In this regard, the guise of humour provides a useful cover for transmitting messages that expose systems of domination.

Memes are a product of a process known as resignification, which involves combining disparate elements to produce a novel meaning that can attain widespread popularity and, in turn, be reinterpreted or transformed into new memes. As Paveau (2019) notes, this resignification process is integral to the construction of memes, enabling them to become carriers of ideas and emotions in a way that is both accessible and relatable to their audience. Moreover, the grammar of memes is characterised by the use of specific references, templates and patterns that aid in the creation and interpretation of memes – including in political spheres. These references may include popular culture icons, historical events, or political figures that are recognisable to the intended audience. The use of tem-

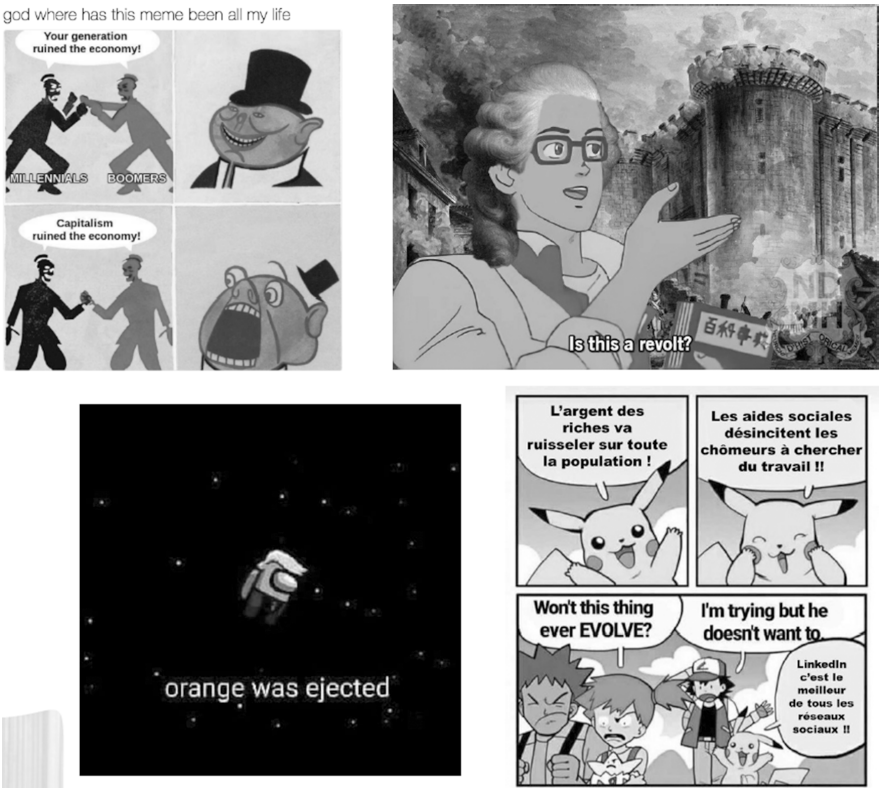


**Fig. 3:** Examples of general political memes (from left to right starting from top: https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeTemplatesOfficial/comments/13g9qwu/shocked_capitalist_template_request/; from the French closed Facebook group "Neurchi d'Histoire," only open to members; https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/jpv8ll/orange_was_ejected/; from the French closed Facebook group "Neurchi de flexibilisation du marché du travail," only open to members. All accessed 2 March 2024).

plates and patterns further contributes to the grammatical structure of memes, providing a framework for the creation of new memes and ensuring their easy recognition and comprehension.

Memes are inherently connected to the nature of the web 2.0 era, which accentuates their postdigital dimension and their capacity to create hypernarratives. Memes are an effective means of conveying messages in a concise and efficient manner, allowing complex arguments and elements to be communicated in a compressed format. In this sense, they can be thought of as *messages.rar/.zip* that contain a wealth of information (see Wagener 2020). However, memes have a broader significance beyond their utilitarian value. They also enable individuals to creatively comment on contemporary social issues and events, offering a

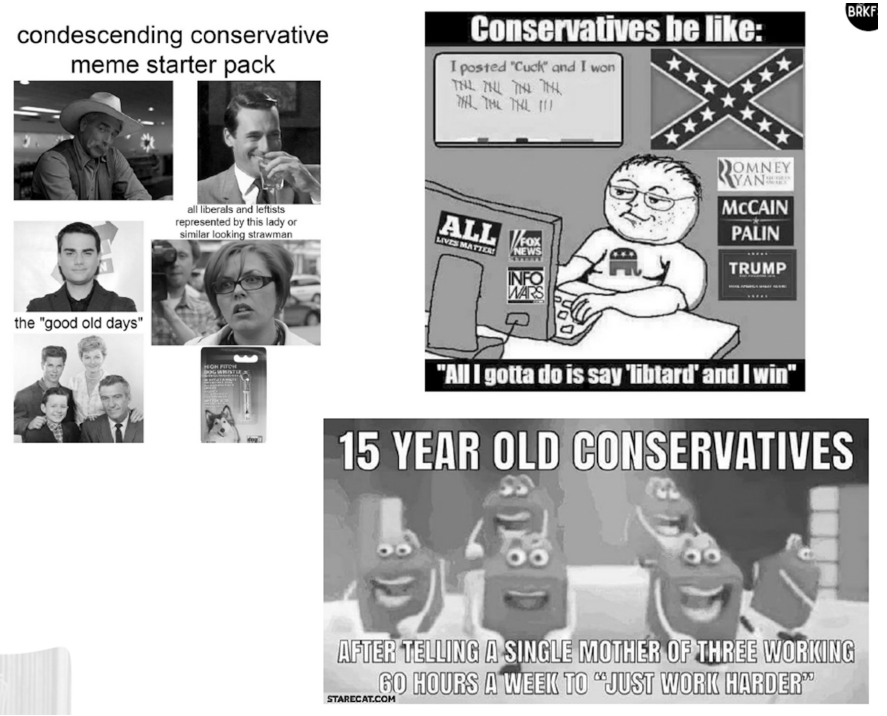


**Fig. 4:** Examples of political memes targeting conservative movements or right-wing parties (from left to right starting from top: https://www.reddit.com/r/starterpacks/comments/98evfn/the_condescending_conservative_meme_starter_pack/; https://cheezburger.com/8796849408/conservatives-be-like; https://imgflip.com/m/politics3/tag/15+year+old+conservatives. All accessed 2 March 2024).

unique form of expression that is grounded in popular culture and accessible to a broad audience (Fig. 4). By combining humour, irony and satire, memes can highlight the absurdities and contradictions of contemporary society and current politics, contributing to a critical reflection on social norms and values.

The postdigital dimension of memes is also significant, as it underscores the blurring of boundaries between the digital and physical worlds. Memes exist within a larger ecosystem of online platforms and networks that enable their creation, dissemination and interpretation. They are characterised by their fluidity and malleability, capable of evolving and transforming as they circulate through online communities.


**Fig. 5:** Examples of political memes targeting progressist movements or left-wing parties (from left to right starting from top: ttps://imgflip.com/i/5yv39; anonymised screenshot of a Twitter post; https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRightCantMeme/comments/feeisu/the_left_cant_meme_immediately_posts_2010_pepe/; https://br.ifunny.co/picture/things-that-make-liberals-cry-1-guns-2-flags-3-XPUdwkS98. All accessed 2 March 2024).

Memes possess a unique strength: They can be shared amongst individuals to reinforce a sense of belonging to a particular community (see Durieux 2010, 70). In some cases, memes can even serve as identifying markers of specific communities, as exemplified by the notorious Pepe the Frog meme. This particular example has been widely used in alt-right forums, symbolising white pride and conservatism, as noted by Pelletier-Gagnon and Pérez Trujillo Diniz (2021). Despite its association with the alt-right, Pepe the Frog has also been subject to a process of resignification, serving as an interesting case study of the transformative power of memes. For instance, protesters in Hong Kong appropriated the image of Pepe and reinterpreted it as a symbol of peaceful democracy, thereby giving it new meaning and significance.

# 4 A Politics of Memes: Two Case Studies

The following case studies aim to examine how memes are utilised to convey political messages and how these viral images express political discourse. It is important to note that memes are part of a larger narrative concept known as "hypertales" (see Wagener 2021b), which are rooted in hypernarrativity. These hypertales are constructed by drawing on smaller stories and combining various platforms to create a more comprehensive narrative, as analysed by Laura West (2013):

> This type of narrative-telling through small stories deserves researcher's attention due to its prevalence in social media, which itself is now a prevalent form of interaction in many parts of the world; in the social media framework, texts are preserved and stacked (blogs, twitter, myspace, etc.), creating a history. (12)

The emergence of hypertales in postdigital communication is closely linked to a significant degree of intertextuality (see Laineste and Voolaid 2016), which implies that despite the "Internet ugly" (Douglas 2014, 315) or "high-tech trash" (Kane 2019) aesthetic often associated with memes, they convey social representations that are inherently meaningful and never neutral.

The first meme I propose to study, "Things that make liberals cry[4]" (Fig. 5) proposes an antiliberal or antiprogressist topeme (with a list of items), as well as a referemic image depicting a crying man with glasses and a light beard.

The methodology used to analyse this meme is the systemic grid for meme analysis (Tab. 1). I follow the path of the grid by giving details for every item:

- Refereme: Depiction of a stereotype of a liberal man, crying;
  - Text: the origin of the meme is noted, with a small image inscribed in the meme, showing the US flag and the Southern US flag, with the mention "Conservative DAD memes".
  - Image: A photograph of a lightly bearded man with glasses, crying.
- Topeme: A list of nine items that are supposed to upset liberal or progressive people and make them cry;
  - Text: A list of items that trigger or upset liberals, according to conservatives, namely guns, flags, names of football teams, leader criticism, Christianity (but not Islam, as mentioned in the meme), hunting for food, Fox News, the Constitution and patriotism.

**4** See an example of this meme at: https://br.ifunny.co/picture/things-that-make-liberals-cry-1-guns-2-flags-3-XPUdwkS98?s=cl.

  - Image: For the sake of the topeme, the stereotype associated with liberals is a crying man with glasses, a light beard, and a red bowtie, which illustrates the list of items and ridicules the image of liberal/progressist citizens (Democrats).
- Enunciation: This publication was posted on Memedroid, in May 2021, with the title "*the Libtard removal kit*"[5] ("libtard" being a lexical contraction of "liberal" and "retard");
- Multimodality: One text in two parts created for the meme (the first one centred on top, the other one being a list of terms on the right) and one set of two images (the stereotypical representation of a liberal, and the label showing the origin of the meme);
- Intertextuality: Two main references are intertwined, namely important items valued by conservatives (as they represent themselves), which may in return reveal what is not appreciated by liberals;
- Interdiscursivity: Conservative patriotism seems to be one of the key features that distinguish conservatives from liberals, but also other topics such as sports, guns, religion, pro-life stances or hunting. This bucket list intends to draw a line between two political conceptions of the United States of America, thus showing two different discursive sets of values.

The first case study demonstrates how ideological references and particular visions of society are employed to satirise and criticise political adversaries (in this case, conservatives versus liberals) by leveraging values, traditions and hobbies. This meme's primary narrative draws on a political war between conservatives and liberals, with the former's values being attacked by the latter. The meme humorously portrays liberals as fragile beings who are easily triggered by various topics and only capable of reacting emotionally to what conservatives consider central to their definition of the USA. In contrast, conservatives are subliminally depicted as possessing strength and stability, with their values being reinforced by this imagined fortitude. Through this lens, the meme presents a favourable depiction of conservative values, while simultaneously portraying liberals as exaggerated and vulnerable individuals who are repulsed by traditional national items like the Constitution or Christianity.

The second meme I use as a case study, which is available on KnowYourMeme under the title "Porky- Capitalism ruined the Economy[6]" (Fig. 3), proposes an anti-capitalist topeme, as well as an old *Porky* comic playing the role of the

**5** https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3354735/The-Libtard-removal-toolkit.
**6** https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1264000-porky.

refereme; obviously, this meme follows a pattern that is different than the previous meme, insofar as it criticises social injustice, economic downfall and capitalism from the perspective of the union of workers.

The systemic grid for meme analysis informs us about the structure of the meme, using the following criteria:

- Refereme: A four thumbnail picture based on an old *Porky* comic, showing two fighting workers while a boss is smiling, which then changes as both workers unite while the boss opens his mouth in shock.
  - Text: No text directly linked to the visual referemes is used.
  - Image: Four images are used, namely a) the image of two workers fighting (a black one and a red one); b) the drawing of a smiling boss, represented with a pig-like face; c) the image of both workers shaking hands and uniting; and d) the drawing of the same boss, but gasping in shock while watching both workers unite.
- Topeme: The topeme of this meme involves a pointed critique of capitalism and its role in the economic crisis. Additionally, the meme employs a satirical portrayal of a stereotypical boss from the early twentieth century (coming from a Soviet agitprop poster published in 1920)[7], characterised by a pig-like face, a round head, and a ruddy complexion. Simultaneously, the meme portrays workers as less healthy individuals who are struggling to survive, further reinforcing the message of the meme's underlying criticism of capitalism;
  - Text: Text only appears in the thumbnails that represent workers, namely a) the text which shows who is represented (millennials vs. boomers), b) the text that shows the reason why workers fight ("your generation ruined the economy"), and c) the text of reconciliation, based on the identification of a common cause for economic downfall ("capitalism ruined the economy").
  - Image: The two workers depicted in the meme embody the recurring conflict often seen in online debates, pitting millennials against boomers, both of whom work and live in a capitalist economy. On the other hand, the cartoonish image of the wealthy capitalist boss suggests that his wealth is derived from exploiting workers and the ongoing struggle to identify the root cause of the economic crisis. These four thumbnails thus wish to critique the exploitative nature of capitalism and how it creates an unequal power dynamic between the ruling elite and the working class.

7 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/porky.

- Enunciation: The origin of the meme itself is unknown, but it is mentioned on Knowyourmeme in two versions, meaning that it has been posted online on different social platforms;
- Multimodality: Four textual utterances are created for the meme: Two speech bubbles to show the messages exchanged by millennial and boomer workers, and two lines to describe who represents millennials and boomers in the thumbnails;
- Intertextuality: By using an old comic, this meme brings attention to the long-standing nature of the issues associated with capitalism, particularly its negative and unfair aspects. It also references the current economic crisis and highlights the continuing relevance of these issues. Overall, the meme suggests that the problems associated with capitalism are not new, and have been present for at least a century;
- Interdiscursivity: The meme draws on the well-known generational conflict between millennials and boomers, which is often portrayed in the media and political discourse. However, rather than addressing the root cause of social inequalities, this conflict is depicted as a mere distraction. The meme argues that both generations are affected by the same system, which perpetuates these inequalities, and suggests that uniting across generations is necessary to challenge this system. By critiquing the tendency to pit generations against each other, the meme highlights the need for solidarity and collective action in the face of systemic injustice.

This meme presents a critical view of the capitalist system and its effects on both millennials and boomers, who are portrayed as victims of an unfair ruling elite. The meme highlights the futility of generational conflict and the need for unity to address the real issue of social inequality. Notably, it also employs an old cartoon from the Soviet Union to emphasise the persistence of capitalist injustice over time. This serves to caution against overgeneralising generational divisions, which tend to mask deeper social class divisions that remain relevant in the present. Furthermore, this meme underscores the continued relevance of social class as a means of analysing the ways in which economic factors create social inequality and power struggles within society, given that the capitalist system that created these classes remains firmly entrenched – an interesting example of memetic strategy and the digital tactics used by political movements – or "memetic tacticality" (see Arkenbout and Scherz 2022).

## Conclusion: Accelerating Political Engagement

Memes demonstrate how seemingly "fun" or "harmless" digital productions can significantly accelerate political engagement (see Mina 2019) by relying on entertainment (see Mortensen and Neumayer 2017), revitalising communication methods (see Kulkarni 2017), and creative content (see Chagas et al. 2019). As such, they draw on what Robin Nelson refers to as a new affective order, which emphasizes the role of emotions in shaping consciousness towards information in the digital realm (Nelson 2000):

> [T]he new affective order involves a consciousness informed by: short, but intense, sound-vision bytes; non-linearity (in contrast with linear narrative); an information overload; constellatory access to diverse materials; bricolage as its principle of composition; reception- (as much as production-) driven aesthetic; polysemy, in respect of meanings; diversity, in respect of pleasures. (112)

This concept of a new affective order is highly insightful as it provides crucial insights into the widespread prevalence of conspiracy theories and fake news on the web 2.0. Memes can contribute to this phenomenon as they rely on the same emotional framing that may fuel the dissemination of misinformation. This is particularly worrisome in the political sphere, where the proliferation of post-truth atmospheres and alternative facts actively undermines democratic health (see Sengul 2019).

Memes can thus be seen as capsules of cognitive and affective expression (see Wagener 2020) relying on the following elements:

- The ability to mobilise cultural references (especially tied to popular culture);
- Intertextuality and interdiscursivity;
- Pragmatic relevance which may transform them into viral objects;
- Versatility and adaptability, especially insofar as memes can play with the constraints of digital communication;
- High values of socialisation and cultural sharing;
- Creativity as the main playful dynamics;
- A strong bond between the linguistic (textual), the visual (non-textual) and the expression and reception of the meme based on cognitive and emotional perception;
- The compression of different semantic nodes in a plurisemiotic agglomerate

While memes can be used to convey effective political messages by re-creating oppositions and mobilising citizens to reconstruct political imaginaries, their effectiveness is amplified by their nature in the context of open democracies, where the public and mediatic sphere represent a battleground, especially with

the rise of social media. Thus, memes are not inherently good or bad, and their use in political discourse can contribute to democratic vitality or democratic erosion (see Galipeau 2022). However, the use of memes in political discourse can be particularly effective due to their reliance on popular culture, entertaining content, active ideologies, stereotypical antagonisms and viral engagement (see Denisova 2019). In this sense, the discriminatory properties (identifying groups and opposing them) of memes resonate with the public sphere conceived as a battleground, with increased effectiveness due to their anchoring of the discourses they carry in a popular frame of reference.

However, the use of memes in political discourse is not without risks. They can perpetuate misinformation or stereotypes, reinforce partisan divides and contribute to a post-truth atmosphere in which facts are increasingly contested (see Zidani and Moran 2021). As such, the impact of memes on democratic health is a topic of ongoing debate, since they do not necessary foster dialogue although they offer a new way of mobilising citizens and reshaping political imaginaries. While their use can contribute to democratic vitality in a creative and playful way, it is important to remain vigilant concerning their limitations, and to critically evaluate their impact on democratic discourse. In fact, memes and the discourse they carry underlines the fact that digital culture itself is changing the way we look at democracy and politics; it is something that needs to be thoroughly studied, since it may change the collective political future of our democratic societies.

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# Virality of #Chadolf #Kitler: Ambivalence in Chiaroscuro

**Abstract:** In the dual dynamic of digital communication studies and digital discourse analysis, the aim of this chapter is to understand the ambivalence of the memetic circulation of #Chadolf #Kitler on online social media. A corpus of 447 publications, sometimes ambiguously associating cat images with Nazi symbols, was extracted from Twitter, Instagram and TikTok to analyse these forms of anthropomorphism. The essay provides insights into the diverse ways in which such imagery has been reappropriated to serve distinct ideological positions.

**Keywords:** online social media, Nazism, viral images, participatory culture, memes

The cat has been an integral part of geek culture since the 1990s as a symbol of alternative expression. Cats have also become an effective "click factory" and are now seen as representative of the viral circulation of cute content. As part of the broader phenomenon of virality via online social media, the thread that guides this research is the circulation of images of #ChatonsMignons ("cute cats" – this is the name of the research project investigating the viral nature of images) (see Simon 2024a). The cat is considered a "trivial object" – in the meaning used by Yves Jeanneret (2014), "trivium" meaning "crossroads" – since it stands at the crossroads of a variety of different social media uses. It is an icon of a digital culture that is constantly being reinvented. Cats play a central role in various political communication strategies (see Jakubowicz 2021) and are also a central figure in memetic social experiences – the process of reproducing and sharing memes – within online communities. This can be referred to as "remixed cat culture", in reference to work on participatory culture (Bourdaa 2021; Jenkins 2013 [2006]) and remix culture (Allard 2016; Le Crosnier 2020). The image of the cat plays a key role in the construction of "digital identities" (see Cardon 2008; Georges 2009). Finally, the virality of #ChatonsMignons can be explained by their affective dimension – they can represent fun, desire, empathy –, which is a key ingredient in the attention- and emotion-seeking capitalist model of online platforms (see Alloing and Pierre 2017; Maddox 2022).

The viral phenomenon of #Chadolf #Kitler is a somewhat unique case study within this research project. A corpus (not exhaustive and not statistically representative) of 447 publications ambiguously associating cat images with Nazi symbols was compiled from Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The images shared represent cats with a small black moustache and/or with right foreleg raised, alluding to


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Adolf Hitler. The corpus includes publications from January 2012 to March 2022 – 2012 being the oldest result possible from the advanced search on Twitter and Instagram (see Tab. 1: Corpus overview). The following keywords were used for the searches: Chadolf, Catolf, Kitler, Kittler, Kittler cat, Kittler kitty, Führer cat, Hitler cat, Cat Hitler, Fascist cat, Gato nazi, Chat nazi, Nazi cat. Various types of content are represented in this corpus, including still images, iconotexts or more elaborate remixed forms (mashups on TikTok). The assimilation of the figure of Adolf Hitler, the Nazi salute and Nazism is achieved through different memetic reappropriations, revealing distinct positions.

#Chadolf #Kitler imagery became popular as a result of the website "Cats that look like Hitler", founded by two Dutch journalists Koos Plegt and Paul Neve in 2006. The phenomenon was then widely publicised in Europe, Australia, and North America (on radio, television and even cinema: It was also referred to in the film *The Social Network*)[1]. Looking at Google search trends on the subject, we can see that virality peaked in 2006[2]. But interest in #Chadolf #Kitler is still very strong today – as evidenced by the proliferation of publications linking cats with the Hitler on 4chan, Reddit, Facebook and YouTube, as well as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The virality of #Chadolf #Kitler – which is just one in a long line of online phenomena – can be explained by both the horizontality of exchanges (variations and peer-to-peer sharing) and the verticality of circulation. This verticality plays out at different levels, since it is driven by social media devices[3], by the media – which play an amplifying role (see Pailler and Schafer, 2022; Schafer and Pailler, 2022) –, and by heritagization platforms such as Know Your Meme.

To gain a better understanding of this viral phenomenon, this chapter brings to light various semio-discursive features specific to #Chadolf #Kitler publications, which we believe contribute to an understanding of memetic virality – the third level of virality proposed by Shifman (2014), explained below. It also sheds light on several levels of ideological commitment, both in agreement and in opposition to Nazi dogma – #Chadolf #Kitler can be intended as a light-hearted piece of fun or can actually serve to promote a neo-Nazi movement.

**1** See the summary presented on the Know Your Meme website: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/kitler.

**2** Searches for "kitler", "cats like hitler" or "hitler cat" peaked in 2006: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=kitler,cats%20like%20hitler,cat%20hitler.

**3** On the importance of the role of techno-discursive affordances, technical discourses and algorithms, see boyd (2010); Ghliss, Perea and Ruchon (2019); Paveau (2017); Wagener (2022, 22).

# 1 Virality and Memetics of #Chadolf #Kitler

## 1.1 Deviations from the Participatory Turn

Defined as early as the 1990s by Jenkins (2013 [2006]), participatory culture refers to the reappropriation of "works" from mainstream mass culture by creative communities to create their own culture. Remix culture is seen as a particular form of participatory culture characterised by its playful, transgressive dimension (see Allard 2016; Le Crosnier 2020). It can be described as a playful and/or transgressive shared creative experience exploring different processes of transformation: image hijacking, viral circulation of memes,[4] composition of mashups and production of music covers. Sarcasm and irony, creativity and one-upmanship are all drivers of this remix culture. Its transgressive dimension also encourages a culture of pseudonymity.

Participatory culture (including remix culture) is one of the ethical foundations of digital culture, initiated by web creators. It encourages emancipatory participatory actions that open up the world, encouraging civic engagement, digital sociability, freedom of expression and creativity. But this creative utopia also has a flip side: The participatory turn is now also characterised by limits and dangers. This paradox has been highlighted by several researchers interested in how online social media can go wrong[5]. Forms of political or ideological fanaticism, obvious or disguised hate discourse and circulation of fake news are all well and truly present within online social spaces. These practices are also unfolding in a context where the power of influence of Big Tech is growing, and where the data collected by these web giants can be used for strategic purposes in the interest of states: stigmatising humour, viral circulation of racist, sexist, or homophobic memes, harnessing participatory momentum for electoral purposes, etc. Sarcasm and irony, creativity and one-upmanship are therefore also drivers of more strategic forms of participation.

Hate discourse used with discriminatory motives often exploits a semantic blurring, taking advantage of collusion and complicity to make content more viral. Several studies have focused on the analysis of humour in a political and/or ideological context (see Charaudeau 2015; Quemener 2018). As Patrick Charaudeau (2006) explains, humour is an act of discourse that is established in a specific com-

**4** The meme, as a *technographisme* (Paveau 2017), is a more or less playful and/or transgressive born-digital multisemiotic production. Its semiotic process is based on a combination of various multisemiotic components: verbal – oral or written –, visual – still or animated –, and sound – sound effects or music.

**5** See Badouard (2017); Bauer (2023); Cardon (2010); Casilli (2010); Coleman (2022); Escande-Gauquié and Naivin (2018); Mercier (2018a, 2019); Simon (2019).

munication situation, where the contract established with the target audience varies depending on the existing relationship of complicity. Humorous discourse mobilises discursive procedures that have a "social value", i.e., they depend on the communication situation (identity of interlocutors, relationship of complicity, affective disposition that can vary according to state of mind, etc.). This aspect of complicity with the audience is not always clearly identifiable: Is it black humour with a simply playful dimension, or with a polemical, critical, or cynical aim? While, in the context of the virality of publications, the question of complicity or connivance is much more blurred because it cannot always be controlled: A simple joke can be reused as a tool for criticism and vice versa.

The research question explored in this study is in line with reflections on the ambiguity of humour and, more specifically, the ambivalence of memes in this context[6]. In the case of #ChatonsMignons memes, the ambiguity is all the stronger because they are not intended to be taken at face value. The incongruity of the connection between cats and Hitler is inherent in the discourse (on this inherent ambivalence, see Philips and Milner 2017).

What are the dynamics built into the memetic reappropriations of #Chadolf #Kitler on social media, and how does the incongruous anthropomorphism that arises from the surprising association of two seemingly "incompatible" elements – cats and Hitler – serve different ideological positions? These central questions underpin this semio-discursive and "argumentative analysis".

## 1.2 Replication and Variation of the #Chadolf #Kitler

Limor Shifman (2014) differentiates three levels of "success", or virality, of images: viral success, memetic success, and viral and memetic success. Not all images or videos that enjoy great popularity are constructed as memes. They are just successful images shared in a powerful way (images of anonymous cats with atypical expressions or postures, for example). Memes also benefit from different forms of success: Ultra-famous memes are scattered across the web without being adapted (as in the case of faithful reproductions of photographs of cat-celebrities, such as Grumpy Cat). These are taken up and repeated iteratively, without any strong reappropriation on the part of the user. On the other hand, some memes are the object of strong creative reappropriation.

**6** See Askanius and Keller (2021); Billig (2001); Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg (2022); Marcoccia (2022); Ridley (2020); Wagener (2013); Yoon (2016).

Meme generators play a central role in the transformation process. A number of cat images can be used to create an infinite number of image macros: Crying Cat, Cute Cat, Vibing Cat, Smudgelord Cat, and so on. The virality of #Chadolf #Kitler is achieved through two of these levels of "success": replication (linked to memetic success) and variation (linked to viral and memetic success). The distinction between "replication" and "variation" was proposed by Maude Bonenfant (2014).

Replication relays the viral meme almost identically. It is a simple copy, a duplicate that is faithful to the original meme. On social media, this way of relaying memes relatively faithfully is characteristic of accounts that republish content. They replicate successful memes, with or without credits for shared images. They thus play the role of an "infomediary". The various #Chadolf #Kitler images presented in Tab. 2 are representative of this replication without strong intervention.

Memes created by variation meet the definition of memetics in a restricted sense, as a playful and/or transgressive shared creative experience exploring different processes of transformation (diversions, mashups, covers, etc.). With variation, users intervene directly on shared content and reappropriate it to a greater or lesser extent, with varying degrees of alteration, creative approaches and subjectivation.

As the result of a process of variation, #Chadolf #Kitler is part of a series of creative (to differing degrees) reappropriations which have proven more or less successful in terms of audience. Virality is therefore defined not only in terms of quantity (the number of publications) but also in terms of the variety of variations. The dynamics of virality are more closely linked to the reasons that drive users to act collectively in adapting memes. Virality can also be linked to the "cognitive-emotional" dimension proposed by Albin Wagener (2022, 60), considered the driving force behind the memetic process. The feeling of belonging to a community is decisive in this dynamic since it encourages users to participate while seeking recognition and self-worth.

## 1.3 Variations on #Chadolf #Kitler Memes

A number of methods of adaptation can be observed within the #Chadolf #Kitler memes created by variation, and these can also intersect: variation of set formulas, routinised at text level (enunciative, semantic, multilingual markers, etc. – examples include the use of a "me" to introduce an image of a #Chadolf #Kitler), variation in the images inserted (still images or videos annotated, retouched, compiled) and variation in the sounds and music inserted (cut, slowed down, compiled).

Hypernarrativity, characterised by the breakdown of stories within the hypertextual device[7], is then exploited in different ways in these forms of variation. It is present through anthropomorphism (see Goudet 2016; Goudet, Paveau and Ruchon 2020) as a process for creating a narrative in which the cat becomes the main protagonist. Prosopopoeia makes it possible to portray a #Chadolf #Kitler expressing himself through verbal language (speech bubble, as in Fig. 1) or non-verbal language (mimics and the Nazi salute). Anthropomorphism is also used to distance the ideological dimension. Selfies taken with Hitler-like cats create personal narratives of self-staging. Hypernarrativity is again seen in the process of citing existing narrative "works". References to fictional narratives often serve to soften or exaggerate a reality, with the overall aim of creating complicity.

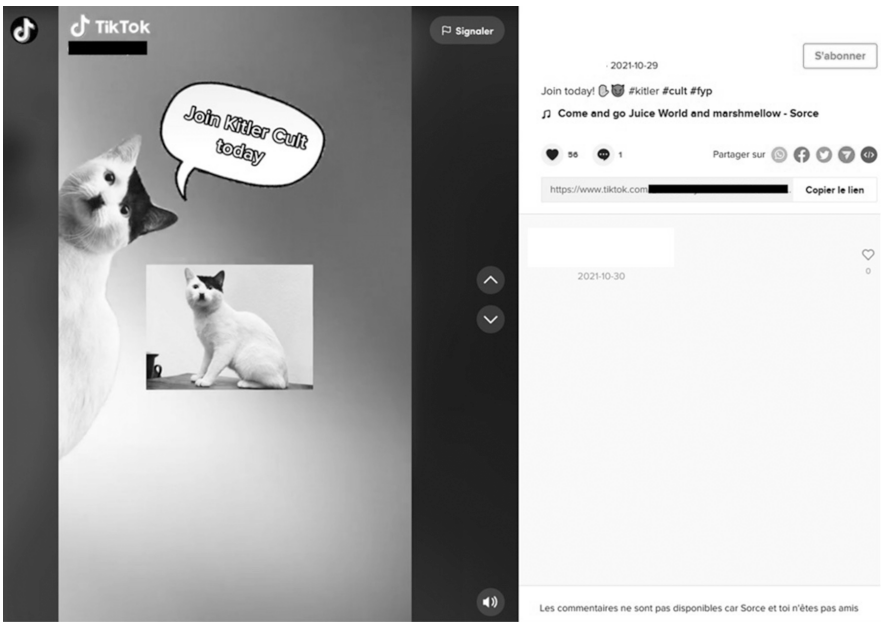



**Fig. 1:** Anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia: anonymised screenshot of a TikTok publication.

#Chadolf #Kitler memes constitute yet another mosaic of other quoted, transformed discourses, whether text, image, or music. Interdiscursivity (see Simon 2020; 2021) means making use of elements that have already been said, seen or heard. Abnormal juxtapositions, known as incongruities, are often made from an

7 See Boursier (2021); Lejano, Ingram and Ingram (2013); Wagener (2022); Simon (2022).

interdiscursive perspective. The success of #Chadolf #Kitler memes lies in this incongruity.

In terms of images, #Chadolf #Kitler publications can refer to existing offline content (series, films, literary works, etc.) or online content (video games, images of ordinary cats that have become famous, cat-lebrities, etc.). An example of an offline reference is the addition of the character Alf – the cat-eating alien – to the foreground of a photograph of a #Chadolf #Kitler lying on a barbecue (Twitter, 2020–06–03). A TikTok publication uses excerpts of a cult scene from Episode VII of the *Star Wars* saga featuring the power-drunk villain General Hux assembling an army. The character is depicted in a serious, severe and authoritarian tone. The mashup uses several still images of #Chadolf #Kitler, and the text is very incisive. It performatively invites TikTokers to join the "Kitler" cult (TikTok, 2022–03–17). In these two cases, the way in which the text is quoted does not have the same argumentative impact: The reference to Alf creates a form of playful complicity, whereas the *Star Wars* cult scene serves a more serious persuasive purpose.

Among the online references, we note a visual comparison that is made between a #Chadolf #Kitler and the hijacking of this #Chadolf #Kitler, with the addition of the pixelated image of Minecraft glasses (see Fig. 2). This comparative meme is accompanied by the text "Classy cat // Chadolf" (Twitter, 2020–10–06).


**Fig. 2:** Visual comparison of #Chadolf #Kitler: anonymised screenshot of a Twitter publication.

Other references are made in the spirit of the web, with cats depicted with laser beams invading the planet; laser beams are in fact very present, although a specific reference cannot be identified. The Instagram publication depicts the "catpocalypse" in a caption inserted alongside the image, together with the hashtag #nazicat (2017–08–11). In Elyse J. White's book (2020), two types of memes are identified, relating to two distinct periods: Typical cat memes that became well-known between 1995 and 2004 (Happy Cat, Serious Cat, Crying Cat, Long Cat, Sad Cat, etc.) and cat-lebrities from 2012 to the present day (Grumpy Cat, Lil Bub, Hamilton The Hipster Cat, etc.). In the first category, the identity of the cat that actually existed is of little importance. The majority of images used in #Chadolf #Kitler memes fall into this first category. Five images based on this principle can be found extensively in our corpus. Names have been given to these images of cats, which have been widely adopted, such as "villain Chadolf" or "long-haired Chadolf" (see Tab. 2). Two of the web's best-known cats – Grumpy Cat and Nyan Cat, a meme created by Chris Torres in 2011 – are also reproduced or hijacked (see Fig. 3). A single image macro – part of the memory of cat fan communities – is used to construct a #Chadolf #Kitler meme. This is the Woman Yelling at a Cat macro, in which Smudgelord Cat is replaced by #Chadolf #Kitler.


**Fig. 3:** Variation on the Nyan Cat meme: anonymised screenshot of an Instagram post.

In line with various works on discourse analysis (see Genette 1982; Lugrin 2006; Jost 2022), we can distinguish different types of reappropriations by variation. First, the original discourse can be explicitly "visible" – this is variation with preservation of the original discourse. It is modified (cropped, increased) but clearly recognisable. Second, the variation may be an extensive transformation of the original discourse, which is no longer recognisable (forms of imitation or homemade allusive realisations[8]). These categories are not entirely separate; some creations merge these two types of transformation.

In the examples cited above, textual elements preserve the original discourse. But there are also reappropriations that depart strongly from the original discourse, which are interesting to analyse in connection with the argumentative dimension of publications. On TikTok, many publications share videos of cats stretching their right forepaw up (see Fig. 4). In our view, two images inspired this trend: the "long-haired Chadolf" and, more directly, the "Chadolf video". The assimilation to the Nazi salute is created by variation in a participatory chain, with many people filming their own #Chadolf #Kitler stretching. This strong reappropriation is subjective in the sense that it corresponds to a very personalised vision of the initial meme. The user's domestic cat is photographed in an intimate environment. The initial #Chadolf #Kitler is not immediately recognisable. This strategy of misappropriation, which may go unnoticed, discreetly serves the Nazi ideology. A TikTok publication amplifies this allusive dimension with a video of a cat with a ginger coat, which therefore does not have the physical characteristics of the #Chadolf #Kitler. The allusion to the Nazi salute is central here and the accompanying text guides the interpretation: "#chat #hitler #nazi".

Finally, musical interdiscursivity offers analytical perspectives, especially in the case of TikTok mashups. Interdiscursivity can be used to create an offbeat nostalgia (comic effect linked to the "cheesy" side of the song used), it can participate in the creation of narrative tension, and it can also be used to promote an ideology. In our analysis of #Chadolf #Kitler, intermusicality plays an important role. *Erika*, a marching song used by the Nazi army – which was spotted 24 times in our corpus – is widely used on the TikTok platform. Various techniques are used to transform the sound (cutting and/or editing the musical extract, slowing down the speed or singing the melody), leading to new "original sounds" (this is the term used by the platform). These are then renamed and circulated. As far as

**8** We propose the notion of a "homemade" meme as referring to a variation the aim of which is far removed from the original meme (see Simon 2024b). Homemade memes are the result of a process of reappropriation and are an extreme example of the process of variation, owing to a high degree of subjectivity and creative originality. Homemade memes are usually based on images of original cats (pet cats photographed or filmed in private).

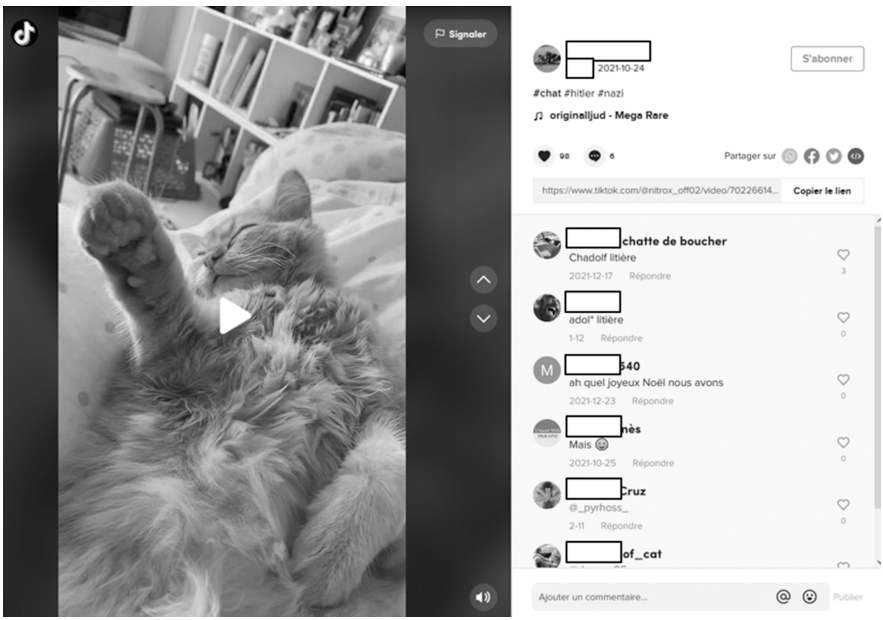



**Fig. 4:** Homemade #Chadolf #Kitler meme: anonymised screenshot of a TikTok post.

*Erika* is concerned, this is viral music. And the variations are manifold. In one mashup in particular, *Erika* is associated with cute music widely used to represent cats. An intermusical comparison is made memetically: cute music resonating with a cute kitten video vs. military music accompanying #Chadolf #Kitler (2022–08–23).

To conclude this section on intermusicality, we also wish to mention the musical hijacking of Nyan Cat's music. We did not come across it directly in our corpus, but it corresponds to the hijacked GIF (see Fig. 3) shared as a still image. A voiceover is added to the soundtrack, hammering out "Nein, Nein, Nein" over and over again. The video behind the gif was created in 2012 and has since generated 1.3 million views on YouTube[9] alone.

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKNtaM_J_Cg.

## 2 Argumentative Positioning of #Chadolf #Kitler Publications

Reappropriations of #Chadolf #Kitler are wide-ranging within the social networks studied and can shed light on the "argumentative dimension" of discourses in a context of viral sharing.

In the book by Ruth Amossy (2000), the emphasis is on discourse with an "argumentative dimension", whose aim is not explicitly to persuade. This point of view, which broadens the definition of argumentation, sees discourse as fundamentally oriented, in that it aims to share a vision of things, an attitude, a questioning. Discourses with no explicit argumentative aim – such as academic discourse, for example – are fundamentally bearers of a vision and values that we seek to share. Based on this line of reasoning, it follows that the very choice to share images that refer to Nazism upholds values (for or against Nazi ideology), even if the persuasive aim is not explicit.

What is more, this trend is taking place against a backdrop of strong reappropriation by a multitude of players on an international scale. The participatory movement is therefore not neutral. #Chadolf #Kitler is situated in a discursive space that is "saturated" – in the Bakhtinian sense – with previous positions and stimulated by value systems that are constantly being reappropriated.

In this section, we summarise the categories uncovered in an article on "shocking images" (Simon 2023), for which accompanying texts (*discours d'escorte*) play a key role. The image/accompanying text combination constitutes what Marie-Anne Paveau calls the "technodiscursive unit" (Paveau 2017). For this study, a number of markers were identified as significant from the point of view of the argumentative positioning of digital discourse. However, in many cases (12% for Twitter, 25% for Instagram and 11% for TikTok), we did not have enough information to be able to give a clear interpretation of the orientation of the publications, even after looking at the user's biography or publication feed. As for the rest of the publications, the argumentative positioning varies from case to case (see Tab. 3). In around a third of publications, we can speak of a pro-Nazi argumentative stance (category *a.* corresponding to hate discourse, where TikTok is over-represented with 65% of publications) and in another third, we can say that the discourse assumes a point of view close to Nazi ideology, but that the discursive means used are diverted (category *b.* Concealed hate discourse, where Twitter publications are more strongly represented: 50%). The other three categories are as follows: *c.* Neutral positioning (neither pro-Nazi nor anti-Nazi, where Instagram has a strong presence with 34% of publications), *d.* Weak denunciation of forms of violence close to Nazi ideology (only 3.5% of publications in total),

*e.* Strong stance against Nazism or a related extremist ideology (4.5% of the total corpus, with Twitter strongly represented).

## 2.1 #Chadolf #Kitler as Fuelling Hate Discourse

The analysis reveals that around 16 percent of the publications studied and shared on Twitter genuinely assume an antisemitic and pro-Nazi point of view. Indications of this are both textual (use of the untransformed words "Adolf Hitler", "Jew", "jew", etc.) and image-based (archive imagery depicting Hitler or other Nazis in uniform; image hijacking with a collage of the Nazi armband on the cat's paw explicitly showing the swastika). The intention is openly assumed by anonymous accounts that sometimes include the word "Nazi" in their pseudonyms or exploit the nationalist symbolism of the French flag (in a nationalist French context). Nyan Cat is turned into #Nyanzi, with a swastika and skull and crossbones in the background (see Fig. 3).

The depiction of so-called "Nazi cats" is also a means of supporting certain political figures, such as Éric Zemmour, leader of a French far-right party. The publication "Cats with Zemmour" (2021–11–04) uses the image of the cat we called "villain" (see Tab. 2) in a participatory reply thread, where everyone contributes their own image referring to the Nazi regime. Publications shared via this thread all use offbeat images to defend the French future presidential candidate (a building seen from the sky in the shape of a swastika, for example). Scathing humour is exploited to foster participatory complicity in a militant context.

Some content may have been created out of pure antisemitic provocation (e.g., a photograph of a live cat resting on a barbecue called a "Jewish cat", [2020–06–03]), while other content expresses forms of violence, particularly in the conflictual context of Russia's attack on Ukraine (e.g., the sharing of a photograph of a cat being grilled on a barbecue, [2022–02–24]).

Nine percent of Instagram posts are argumentative. We find archival images of Nazi soldiers photographed alongside a cat (2017–11–14). Cats are personified as Nazis with the addition of swastika armbands or scarves (2017–09–07).

Most of the publications in our corpus that were shared on TikTok are pro-Nazi propaganda (65%). Some convey explicit and performative hate messages, based on a clear desire to harm a third party (example of a text sung and displayed on the screen: "*You're gonna die* [image of the Israeli flag]. *I'm gonna kill you* [image of a #Chadolf and photo of Hitler as a child]", [2021–11–09]).

On all three networks, hashtags not only play an indexing role; they also serve as a means of affective expression and position-taking[10], as in the case of the distorted hashtags #meinkrampft, #natzi or even #hxtler, which constitute forms of "crypto-language" to escape censorship (Saemmer 2019, 129).

## 2.2 #Chadolf #Kitler as Concealed Hate Discourse

On Twitter, half the publications in our corpus can be considered concealed hate discourse[11]. Not all of them are humorous. Concealed hate discourse is often characterised by the use of short formats and a laconic style. In the study of accompanying text, it is important to consider the enunciative postures of tweeters, who often more or less discreetly express agreement or disagreement. The French pun "Adolf Litter" (extended to an image game), for example, is widely circulated. Marking reactions as humorous is a way of defusing the serious dimension and removing responsibility. The hashtags #meme, #lol, #haha and #funny create distance. The memetic formula "Gets me everytime" was used by a tweeter introducing the hashtag #cathitler above a visual comparison depicting a cat with a black moustache on the left and a portrait photograph of Adolf Hitler on the right (2012–12–10).

On Instagram (29.5%), the image of the cat associated with the Nazi regime is also strongly represented in an indirect way. A photo montage on Instagram depicts a photo of a Nazi figure looking at a black *maneki neko* (literally "inviting cat": A Japanese symbol of a lucky cat with its right arm raised) (2013–04–23). Another photograph shows an aggressive-looking black and white cat. The text "Der Nyan Führer" is added to the image, and the accompanying text reads "Meanwhile, not far from Germany" (2013–09–18). In a final, seemingly humorous example of implicit ideological commitment, we see a photograph of a cat watching TV. The cat stretches out in front of the screen showing Hitler performing a Nazi salute. The text reads "Never leave your cat alone/Adolf Hitler 1939 #heil, #nazicat #nazi #nazimemes #adolfhitlermemes #adolfhitler #adolf #hitler #castofinstagram #cats" (2017–12–04). Several Instagram publications showcase Nazi cat figurines (see Fig. 5). The personified cat wears a collar adorned with an iron cross, a military cap with the golden eagle, a cane sporting a skull and crossbones, or a Ger-

**10** On the use of hashtags, see Cervulle and Pailler (2014) or Mercier (2018b).

**11** Fabienne Baider and Maria Constantinou (2019) offer a good explanation of the methodological difficulties that can be encountered in studies of concealed hate discourse, insofar as it is not explicitly discriminatory, but is a "discursive or semiotic manifestation that can implicitly or covertly incite hatred, violence and/or exclusion of the other" (12).


**Fig. 5:** Pop objects by #Chadolf #Kitler: anonymised screenshot of an Instagram post.

man army semi-automatic pistol. The hashtags #ToyLover #Kitler accompany these photographs, suggesting that there are communities of fans who make and exchange pop objects in reference to the German Reich.

Humour is also used extensively on TikTok (17%) to disguise ideological positioning. In one post, a cat is filmed with a voiceover speaking in different languages: "Kitty kitty kitty" [on-screen text "In American: kitty kitty kitty", the cat sleeps], "not working", "tsits tsits tsits" ["In Hungarian: tsits tsits tsits"], "no" ["no + interrogative *emoji*"], "Stardenburdenhardenbart" [German expression used to attract the attention of animals – highly intensified voice, exaggerated German accent; on-screen text: "In German: Stardenburdenhardenbut!" and in the image, the cat stands up], "yea, German always works". The accompanying text is "catolf" (2021–10–27).

## 2.3 Neutral Positioning

Only 4 percent of the Twitter posts in our corpus are neutral. These come from informational accounts and present news in a disengaged way. On TikTok, neutral publications are rare (3.5%), but on Instagram, different ways of talking

about one's cat (and above all about oneself) can be found, which in a way sideline the pro- or anti-Nazi debate (34%). These are forms of de-ideologisation (see Jereczek-Lipińska 2009; Noël 2020), often achieved through the representation of the self in its intimacy. Selfie photography with a cat named "kitler" has become widespread, without any strong commitment. The preferred register is a form of self-enhancement for the purposes of sociability with other owners of cats of this type.

## 2.4 Weak Denunciation of Forms of Violence Reminiscent of Nazi Ideology

Twitter (6%) and TikTok (3.5%) offer examples of weak denunciation of forms of violence comparable to Nazism. Narrative is a mode of writing specific to this category. We find publications that deplore the violence that may have been inflicted on cats in a way that is both committed and anecdotal. We are no longer in a playful, funny register. The emotions highlighted are more dramatic. For example, one tweeter uses the reference to Nazi cats persecuting Jewish mice in Art Spiegelman's work to take offence at the presence of a #Chadolf in his garden (2015–04–23). A TikTok publication also creates a form of dramatic narrative in this way by filming a cat located behind the windows of a house from a distance. The zoom in on the cat accompanied by music is worthy of a horror film ("Scary Halloween Sound Effects") and creates a sense of stupefaction, reinforced by the hashtags used: #flippant #flippantquandmeme ("freaky", "really freaky") (2021–10–04).

## 2.5 Strong Stance Against Nazism or a Related Extremist Ideology

It was mainly on Twitter that publications opposing rhetoric related to Nazi ideology were spotted (12%). Most examples of the criticism encountered need to be seen in the French political context as expressions of opposition to the far-right parties in that country (the Rassemblement National [RN] and the Reconquête! party led by Éric Zemmour). On 23 October 2021, a Twitter account published a photo of a #Chadolf #Kitler accompanied by the following ironic rant: "Urgent: Éric Zemmour has lost his cat, it answers to the sweet name of Adolf. Hysterical, megalomaniac and schizophrenic, he doesn't have an easy-going personality!!!! @BFMTV". The response is the device favoured by Twitter users, as it enables them to create a form of counter-discourse. Adding a mention enables direct interaction with the targeted

tweeter using criticism or mockery. Another publication again uses the interactive device of the Twitter response to denounce Russian propaganda with irony. Letweet shows cats in Russia with the hashtag #RussianCats, surrounded by red heart emojis. The image inserted in the reply shows a cat lying on a 140x200 comforter cover printed with a swastika motif ("wow cute cat!!", [2022–03–05]).

## Conclusion

The various transformations observed in the #Chadolf #Kitler memes demonstrate a surge in creativity within a participatory culture the communicative purpose of which can be highly ambiguous. This incongruity can be found at textual, hypertextual (with hashtags), visual and musical levels (with remixed versions of the *Erika* song, for example). An argumentative analysis of discourses representing a #Chadolf #Kitler has revealed different forms of argumentative positioning in relation to the question of Nazi ideology, but these can be difficult to interpret.

Users with racist, antisemitic, misogynistic, homophobic, etc., tendencies are constantly creating and reinventing hateful content. The choice of words and images is not left to chance (like with the meme Pepe the Frog [Pettis 2018], which in several countries has been appropriated by the alt-right), and mobilisation is all the more effective in a participatory context. A simple publication of a cat looking like Hitler can be considered in isolation as a joke in bad taste. But if repeated and spread virally, it can become an ideological battleground[12]. The sheer number of reappropriations leads us to believe that #Chadolf #Kitler constitutes, at the very least, a joke, and more probably a form of trivialised violence. Participation is also driven by the tenderness and playfulness of the animal. The strategic use of "cuteness" serves the "banality of evil" (an expression borrowed from the work by Hannah Arendt and central to the analysis by Vincent Lavoie [2020]).

The #Chadolf #Kitler is thus reclaimed as a new paradigm for trivialising violence. The pathos that is created in this form of participatory culture based on anthropomorphism turns very much to LULZ practices (the altered plural of LOL meaning "laughter at the expense of others"; see Allard 2019; Coleman 2022) by

**12** The mere creation of the word #Kitler brings into existence a reality that, before it was given a name, did not exist. And the display of black and white cats gives an ideological connotation to an ordinary reality that may not previously have had any particular importance. Nelly Quemener (2009) analyses this performativity of humour in relation to talk-show sketches. In line with the thinking of John L. Austin and Judith Butler, she insists that if something or someone is not named, it does not exist. The performativity of #Chadolf #Kitler's humour must thus be analysed by considering the strength of the sociodiscursive context of participatory culture.

exploiting often very negative emotions (hatred, anger, etc.). This transgressive nature is representative of the collective "fun" that characterises LULZ culture, which originated in alternative networks (4chan, 9gag, Tumblr or Reddit). Transgressive games aim to challenge an established order, whatever the ideological objective. LULZ practices in this case are used to convey racist, antisemitic, homophobic discrimination and violence.

The memetic virality of #Chadolf #Kitler not only serves pro-Nazi ideology, as a good number of publications also exploit ambiguity because it is not always clear whether they are meant to be taken at face value or not. From the vantage point of the person receiving the message, humour is not always detectable, as it depends on a relationship of complicity that is not always established. We would emphasise that all the publications analysed were shared in public mode. The analysis would not have been the same in a restricted or private publication context.

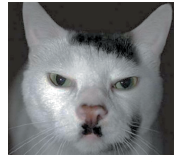
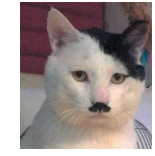
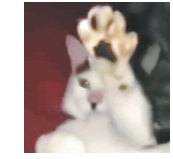
We believe that the virality of #Chadolf #Kitler still has a long life ahead of it. The incongruous analogy created from cats and Nazi ideology is a driver of virality. The question is: To what end?

# Appendices

**Tab. 1:** General quantitative view of the corpus of social media publications (in numbers).

| | Date of first publication | Date of last publication | Total publications collected (447) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Twitter | January 16, 2012 | March 25, 2022 | 176 |
| Instagram | January 23, 2012 | March 27, 2022 | 176 |
| TikTok | August 29, 2020 | March 18, 2022 | 95 |

**Tab. 2:** Representativeness of images included in #Chadolf #Kitler memes (in %).

| |  **“Villain Chadolf”** |  **“Litter Chadolf”** |  **“Long-haired Chadolf”** |  **“Big white Chadolf”** |  **“Video Chadolf”** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Twitter | 8.5 | 17 | 2 | 4.5 | 2 |
| Instagram | 4 | 8.5 | 0.5 | 5 | 2 |
| TikTok | 22 | 12.5 | 4 | 8.5 | 12.5 |
| Total | 11.5 | 12.5 | 2 | 6 | 5.5 |

**Tab. 3:** Summary of argumentative positions (in %).

| | ***a.*** **Pro-Nazi argumentative aim: hate discourse** | ***b.*** **Pro-Nazi argumentative dimension: concealed hate discourse** | ***c.*** **Neutral positioning (neither pro- nor anti-Nazi)** | ***d.*** **Weak denunciation of forms of violence reminiscent of Nazi ideology** | ***e.*** **Strong stance against Nazism or a related extremist ideology** | **Difficult to interpret** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Twitter | 16 | 50 | 4 | 6 | 12 | 12 |
| Instagram | 9 | 29.5 | 34 | 1 | 1.5 | 25 |
| TikTok | 65 | 17 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 0 | 11 |
| Total | 30 | 32 | 14 | 3.5 | 4.5 | 16 |

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Gastón Arce-Pradenas

# Unexpected Politicians: The Viral Celebrities of Unrest

**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on the so-called "Celebrities of the Unrest", a series of people who rose to fame after becoming viral during the Chilean outburst of 2019, moving on to develop political careers. Widely popularised in social media and by media outlets, these figures expressed their protest messages through performative acts, such as using costumes in demonstrations or developing complex alter egos. After becoming heroes and popular icons, they started a process of converting their symbolic capital into a political one, successfully running for the Chilean Constitutional Convention in 2021. In doing so, they left the streets and become representatives in the most important institution in the country's recent history. This was achieved despite their having no political background or connections. This research was conducted by tracing their respective individual social and political careers to understanding the different stages in the building of their characters, as well as the transformation process from mere demonstrators to influential politicians. Secondly, we collected and analysed social media network data from Twitter and conducted a sentiment analysis of YouTube comments for a better comprehension of the phenomenon. The results of this inquiry demonstrate the existence of shared features among the five cases, as they developed a particular style of leadership, combining traits from activism, microcelebrities and more traditional political activities.

**Keywords:** virality, celebrity politics, Chilean social outburst, pop politics

The Social Outbreak of October 2019 was a process that deeply shook the institutions of Chilean democracy and the ways in which citizens feel represented. For six uninterrupted months, both the streets and social media platforms became a field of political dispute and experimentation for new repertoires of social protest and political struggle.

One of these new ways of doing politics was that of the Celebrities of the Unrest, ordinary citizens who acquired viral fame, the status of icons and heroes and then managed to build an unprecedented symbolic and political capital.

Given their unexpected electoral success and the probable role that viral dynamics of communications may have played in their rise, it is worth asking how it is possible that people with no previous recognition, funding or political experience were elected to the Constitutional Convention, then considered the most im-


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portant institution in the country's history. Furthermore, once they became part of the institution, do these viral mechanics continue to prevail in the response of the audiences to them?

To retrace their political paths, we conducted a meticulous review of press clippings (214) and other sources of information (156), such as interviews or blog articles, public transparency platforms, online forums and social media posts. Based on this information, it was possible to identify significant episodes of virality that were important to their rise to fame, plus others that emerged in real time while the first phase of the study was being conducted. To "catch" these viral episodes, we scraped data from Facebook and YouTube users' comments using RStudio Cloud's Tuber package, as well as Twitter data which was imported using NodeXL.

For the sentiment analysis, we adjusted the time frame of the sample, tokenised the text and filtered it with lexicon dictionaries, identifying eight basic emotional categories. Twitter interaction data and sentiment information were also visualised through sociograms, bar graphs and word clouds to facilitate analysis. In total, we analysed more than 4,962 user comments on Facebook, 14,338 on YouTube and 24,955 tweets.

This chapter is structured in three distinct sections. First, we describe the political and media context in which these people obtained viral fame. Second, we outline their personal and political trajectories and describe how they became viral personalities. Also, each subsection presents a viral episode involving each character, tracing the reaction of the audiences. The last section identifies a series of common traits that distinguish these figures, as well as proposing a discussion on the positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon regarding the quality of democracy in Chile.

# 1 A Moving Media and Political Context

## 1.1 New Informative Dynamics

In the last ten years, Chile has experienced several social, political and cultural changes that have transformed collective practices, and the way information and entertainment content is produced and consumed. Although large media conglomerates continue to operate in a centralised and vertical manner, social media has brought about new ways in which people, organisations, citizen journalists and social movements relate to each other.

The use of these new media for receiving information and news has increased rapidly, especially among young Chileans. According to a 2009 study by Feedback-UDP, free-to-air television was the most consumed and trusted source of information, with 56 percent of first-mentions and 85 percent of the total answers. In its 2021 report, the same survey found that television is now the least trusted media, with a 60 percent rejection rate. In contrast, social media went from being one of the least consumed and trusted media, with an average use of 1.6 hours a day and 12 percent trust, to an average daily consumption of 3.5 hours and 29 percent trust. In lower income segments, this level of confidence rises to 37 percent (Feedback Research 2021).

In addition to their massiveness and reach, Bolter (2019) argues that social media networks have become the ideal platform for the expression of new creative vanguards, new narratives, as well as voices and topics previously relegated to the status of the underground.

In terms of potential, these technologies have shown their capacity to produce significant effects on political activity and public opinion, either within the institutional system or from outside it. Some of the most important effects include changes in turnout levels, political polarization, the spread of hate speech and fake news, as well as modifications in the behaviour of influential public sphere stakeholders (see Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2020). On the contrary, studies have proposed that these new forms of communication have reduced the costs of accessing information, brought new accountability relations and a sense of closeness between different sectors of society, such as politicians and citizens (Negrine 2008, Ceron 2017).

Although there is no consensus on the balance of benefits and disadvantages, the authors Falck, Gold and Heblich (2014) and Gavazza, Nardotto and Valleti (2019) have noted how the massive increase in access to internet and social networks has shifted much of the media offer towards entertainment, at the expense of opinion-forming content and political news. This shift is attributed, in part, to the increasing overlap between politics, especially elections and the commercial dynamics of digital marketing (see Street, Inthorn and Scott 2016). By applying strategies from the advertising world (widely familiar to those operating in the cultural industries), such as the collection and monitoring large amounts of behavioural patterns and data, campaign teams have been able to maximise reach and influence over public opinion (see Rogers and Nickerson 2014). Supported by a growing arsenal of data analytics tools, effective targeting and the viral-oriented environment provided by social media, politicians and activists can deploy messages that spread very quickly (see Rogers and Nickerson 2014).

## 1.2 The 2011 Protests

While there had been student demonstrations since the mid-2000s, Chile's mobilised sectors barely had a presence on the internet, at a time when the service had not yet become massive in the country. It was not until the student protests of 2011 that social networks were really "discovered" by social movements as a space for political dispute (see Solá-Morales and Rivera Gallardo 2016).

With a generation of high school students, who grew up with new technologies, as the main protagonists, the Student Movement found in social media a key tool for calling for demonstrations, sharing news and counter-information. Open communities on Facebook and the accounts of Student Federations and their leaders on Twitter managed to effectively push a series of slogans, messages and ideas into the public debate. These messages, most of them specially designed to go viral, served a dual function: While students were encouraged to maintain and radicalise their actions, government and Congress were challenged to meet their demands (see Solá-Morales and Rivera Gallardo 2016).

On the part of the mass media, most of the attention was given to movement's leaders, Camila Vallejo[1], Giorgio Jackson[2] and Gabriel Boric[3], focusing on frivolous aspects such as their physical appearance, their personal hobbies or infantilising them. Despite the nature of their exposure being close to entertainment content, these leaders were able to take advantage of this for the benefit of the movement, which achieved, according to surveys, a high level of public approval (see Flores Leiva 2012). However, this construction of public image and celebrisation of these leaders led to strong criticism related to the manipulation of the movement and political opportunism, especially after the assumption that these leaders would run for office in the subsequent elections, as they actually did. Although after a few months the student movement declined, it represented a high point in the use of social media for the expression of unrest, which continued growing until 2019, constantly questioning the state of the political system.

## 1.3 The Social Outburst

The precarious balance in which the legitimacy of Chilean democracy found itself, 30 years after an incomplete transition from dictatorship and ten years since the

**1** Former MP, current Ministry General Secretariat of Government of Chile since March 2022.
**2** Former MP and Minister of the Presidency, Parliamentary Affairs and Social Development (2022–2023).
**3** Former MP and current President of the Republic of Chile since March 2022.

student's movement, was shattered by the so-called Chilean Social Outburst of 2019, a cycle of protests unparalleled in the country's history. Though the announcement of the $30 pesos (equivalent to 0.03 euros) increase in Santiago transport fares is considered the immediate trigger (see Mayol 2019, Martuccelli 2019), for some the popular revolt had been incubating for a long time and for a variety of reasons. Among the causes that explain its magnitude are the persistence of high inequality as a result of neoliberal policies (see Elizalde 2020, Landerretche 2021), urban and educational segregation (see Poduje 2020), the unmet expectations of an educated but materially precarious generation (see Peña 2020), political parties funding and corporate scandals (see Matamala 2021), to mention a few.

Added to this is the influence of trends at a more global level, such as a resurgence of the "springs" of 2011 (see Sanhueza Huenupi 2021), the global crisis of representation and distrust in democracy (see Mella 2020) and the influence of the fourth wave of feminism and the *gilets jaunes* protests in France in 2018 (see Martuccelli 2019). Finally, at the domestic level there would be a strong generational gap in Chile, expressed through a deep ideological and cultural distance between the youth and the generation that regained democracy in 1990 and lived through the Concertación governments (see Angelcos, Roca and Cuadros 2020, Alé Tapia, Duarte and Miranda 2021).

The situation reached its peak on 18 October, when most Metro stations were placed under heavy police guard. Although for a few hours the situation seemed to be under control, at midday there was a new widespread spate of fare-dodging that happened at different points of the network. During the afternoon, video footage that showed *Carabineros* (police force) injuring demonstrators and passers-by went viral and worsened the mood of crowds, who set the entrances of some stations on fire, as well as buses in the city centre. C*acerolazos* (pot banging), barricades and demonstrations became more intense, sometimes turning into looting or property damage. Therefore, a State of Emergency was announced, authorising the Chilean Armed Forces to deploy on the streets for the first time since the end of the military dictatorship (see Cavieres Figueroa 2020).

Weeks later, Human Rights NGOs issued reports denouncing the indiscriminate use of violence including arbitrary arrests, improper use of weapons, torture and sexual abuse by policemen. In total, 34 people died between October 2019 and March 2020 for various reasons, seven of them as a result of direct actions by police or military forces. It is also estimated that more than 400 people suffered eye injuries, partially or totally losing their vision because of rubber or steel bullets (see Vallejos Muñoz, Retamal and Concha 2021).

The protests epicenter was Plaza Italia in Santiago, historically considered the boundary between the city's working class and upper-middle class neighbourhoods (see Matamala 2021). Renamed by the protesters as *Plaza de la Dignidad*

(Dignity Square) the area hosted public rallies every day for several months. Its surroundings faced destruction, violent clashes for control of the roundabout central island and the appearance of "characters" dressed in costumes or other performative elements. The height of the October events was on Saturday 25th with the so-called Million March. This historic demonstration, the largest in the country's history, drew an estimated 1.2 million people just in Santiago, as well as a million of people mobilised in the regions. A political agreement was achieved on 15 November, with the compromise of a Referendum for a New Constitution to be opened. For some, this represented a political closure of the crisis, as protests started to demobilise. A year after, this proposal was approved with more than 78 percent of the votes, so new elections were called to decide who would draft it. This period was of great importance for the consolidation of the iconic characters, who would begin to prepare their political journey.

Although the demonstrations continued until the start of the COVID-19 quarantines, the agreement on the New Constitution was reached on 15 November. At the same time, a slow demobilisation took place, with the focus shifting towards sanitary and economic issues (see Heiss 2020).

The Social Outburst immediately became a political, social and cultural phenomenon whose images spread across the world, having a notorious and immediate parallel in digital spaces. Social media served as a meeting point, a place for organisation, catharsis or just expressing anger. But unlike previous movements of discontent, the communications about the 2019 demonstrations had a notable element of virality (see De Requená-Farré 2020). This would be conditioned by the high level of internet access, widespread use of smartphones and social media among the Chilean population. The events of October, as observed by García (2020) were the most recorded, transmitted, and mediatised event in the country's history.

The demonstrations had a strong anti-party character, were opposed to any agreement or concession with the government and lacked visible leadership. In this context, a series of individuals far from traditional politics, who came from the streets but went viral on social networks, became the symbols of the movement. These people, who also received circumstantial media exposure, quickly became iconic and heroic figures, becoming an important element of the movement's symbolic and aesthetic repertoire.

A brief profile of each of these Unrest Celebrities – Rodrigo Rojas, Giovanna Grandón, Bessy Gallardo, Alejandra Pérez and Cristóbal Andrade – is presented in the following sections.

# 2 A Brief Overview of the Celebrities of Unrest

## 2.1 Bessy Gallardo

Bessy Gallardo is a 38-year-old lawyer and former Constitutional Convention member for Santiago's 8th district. A widow, mother of three, she had worked for several as a cashier while studying law at the Universidad de las Américas, considered one of the least selective universities in Chile.

Bessy rose to fame on the morning of 18 October 2019, after participating in a street reporting on Canal 13's morning show. Although the segment aimed to convey brief opinions from passers-by, due to Gallardo's eloquence her intervention ended up being extended for more than ten minutes, in which time she also interacted with the show's hosts in the studio. Her level of sharpness and argumentation led the hosts to invite her to the studio as a "citizen panelist" the following day, which she immediately accepted[4].

Minutes later, excerpts of her participation were published[5] on social media by Canal 13 and other popular accounts, such as TV blogger @Televisivamente[6], receiving millions of views, thousands of reactions and comments on Facebook and around 9,400 retweets in the first 48 hours, becoming a national trending topic on Twitter for days, and as high as number 3 on 18 October 2019.

If until then the protests seemed to be motivated solely by the fare increase, Gallardo described a much broader pool of causes that justified the protests, including demands for better healthcare, education, pensions and other aspects. From then on, the show slightly modified the pattern of its dispatches, dropping the discussion around the price of fares and began to interview other passers-by on various other topics of the national social agenda.

During the following weeks, Gallardo participated as a guest on more morning shows and interviews, where she debated on equal terms with politicians, academics and television personalities. Although the protests were mostly self-organised, non-organic and lacked formal leadership, Bessy Gallardo became a sort of spokesperson for the Social Outburst. On YouTube, videos of her first speech and other opinions she gave on morning shows also went viral, with more

**4** Valenzuela, Pepa. "Bessy Gallardo: 'Cuando violentas a los Carabineros cometes un grave error porque antes de ser paco, el paco es persona, gana tan poco como tú y tiene tu misma clase social'". The Clinic. 20 October 2019. Available at: https://www.theclinic.cl/2019/10/20/bessy-gallardo-dejo-mudos-panelistas-matinal-13-cuando-violentas-carabineros-cometes-grave-error-antes-de-ser-paco-es-persona-gana-tan/.

**5** Tu Día (Canal 13), Facebook, 18 October 2019, 2:41. Available at: https://fb.watch/ny_VNUqvMd/.

**6** Televisivamente. Facebook, 18 October 2019, 2:43. Available at: https://fb.watch/ny-QRzMuxJ/.

than a million views and thousands of comments in the following days. By analysing data from 5,211 YouTube comments captured during this rise and peak of her popularity, it is possible to understand how users perceived and empathised with her social unrest narrative. For instance, the enthusiasm for her interviews was such that even heroic and combative traits were attributed to her, as well as early requests for her to run for elected office, as mayor or congresswoman (See Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1:** Most liked comments on YouTube videos featuring Bessy Gallardo (our translation) (October 18, 2019 to October 28, 2019) ten videos selected, total views: 1,260,317 Total comments: 5,188.

| Most liked comments on YouTube videos featuring Bessy Gallardo | Like count | Polarity |
|---|---|---|
| "The young woman was much better informed than every f— pundit and hosts there. Nobody dared to speak because they had no arguments" | 2132 | Positive |
| "The best of the segment was the girl, please take out every other pannelist and let her talk for the entire rest of the day" | 1277 | Positive |
| "How people can't understand how we are sick and tired of being robbed! The prices and everything is going up except for salaries and the quality of life is like s—. The authorities pretend to be blind and say they will improve the safety! What the f—?, this is such a s— country!" | 1019 | Negative |
| "We really need people like her in Goverment. Down to earth, focused on the important things and can look beyond their own pockets" | 536 | Positive |
| This girl is brilliant. Now there's nothing except protesting, because this f — guys in Goverment live for free and it's us who day to day go to work to survive" | 437 | Positive |

In addition to this positive reaction and recognition of her potential as a spokeswoman, people also made comments expressing their anger at the government and the political situation, sometimes perceiving Bessy as an important agent who could help to overcome the crisis. In fact, the most common word pairs used by YouTube users were "people's advocate", "people's spokeswoman", "love her", "she's great", "future congresswoman" and "Bessy (for) President"[7]. In comparison, there are far fewer negative comments aimed at her, with some accusing her of being "resentful", "communist" or referring to her self-identification as a femi-

7 My translation; original: "abogada del pueblo", "vocera del pueblo", "la amo", "seca la mina" "futura diputada" o "Bessy Presidenta".

nist. Others, meanwhile, questioned the assumed spontaneity of the interview that went viral.

After this initial viral stage and taking advantage of her recognition and respect amongst the protest's supporters, Gallardo began to shape her next steps in activism and politics. From mid-2020 she participated in the so-called "Tren del Apruebo", organised by those who would later found the People's List, even taking on the role of spokesperson[8]. Despite speculation that she would be a candidate for the antisystem People's List, internal disputes and controversial transphobic remarks on a podcast impeded her nomination.

With little chance of being part of an independent list, she joined the Progressive Party list, but without being an official member, with the aim of running for the Constitutional Assembly. By this time, this viral fame remained as her main asset. In an interview with CNN[9], she acknowledged her popularity as an icon of the protests as a key factor in her being proposed as candidate by the PRO.

After her election, which was attributed to her recognition as an internet phenomenon, Gallardo surprisingly shifted to the political centre, joining a caucus associated with the Christian Democrats. In August 2020, she turned again to the centre-left, returning to the Progressive Party and endorsed the fourth presidential bid of perennial candidate Enríquez-Ominami, who broke with his coalition to run on his own.

At the Convention, Gallardo was a member of the Economy and Environment commission, whose resolutions were repeatedly rejected by the Convention plenary. She later got involved in several controversies, both for her remarks on the floor and in the press, and on one occasion for her use of vulgar language during a livestream[10]. She also had internal disputes with other members of her caucus, whom she even called "rats", "sexists" and "misogynists". Adducing ideological differences, Gallardo resigned from her political group, joining Chile Digno, an antiglobalisation left-wing alliance[11]. After the rejection of the proposed new Constitution, she dedicated herself to completing her degree and advising trade unions. In October 2022, she joined the Chilean Communist Party.

**8** La Zona Cero. 6 September 2020. Available at: https://lazonacero.cl/noticias/subete-al-tren-del-apruebo-es-la-nueva-campana-de-klankiltro/.

**9** CNN Chile. 12 May 2021. Bessy Gallardo: "Siempre esperé que hubiera una revuelta, por fin Chile pudo decir 'estoy harto'". Available at: https://www.cnnchile.com/elecciones2021/bessy-gallardo-siempre-espere-una-revuelta-distrito-8_20210512/.

**10** Radio Agricultura. Facebook, 23 June 2022, 13:05. Available at: https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=506772741225917.

**11** Camila Higuera. Guía práctica: Los distintos bloques políticos de la Convención a seis meses de instalado el poder constituyente. 5 January 2022. Available at: https://interferencia.cl/articulos/guia-practica-los-distintos-bloques-politicos-de-la-convencion-seis-meses-de-instalado-el.

## 2.2 Rodrigo Rojas "*Pelao*" Vade

Rodrigo Rojas Vade is a 39-year-old former politician and activist who was a member and Vice-President of Chile's Constitutional Convention for Santiago's 13th District. After it was revealed that he had lied about a health condition, a key element in the narrative on which he built his popularity, Rojas resigned from office and retired from public life.

Seven years before becoming famous, Rojas Vade told his family and friends that, after undergoing a series of tests, he had been diagnosed with a rare type of leukaemia, which had a high mortality rate. Rojas then underwent treatment in private clinics in Santiago and Barcelona, Spain. Although there is no record of him being treated in the public healthcare system, Rojas argued that he was offered only palliative care and was required to pay 600,000 dollars for his treatment[12]. Through a blog called "Cancer, unfiltered reality", Rojas described her experiences and shared photographs showing the decline of his body. Several times, in poetic terms, he announced to his followers the imminent conclusion of his life due to illness[13].

After returning from Barcelona, where his body had supposedly rejected chemotherapy, Rojas Vade took the decision to quit his treatment, devoting what were supposed to be his last days to activism[14]. On 22 October he approached Plaza Italia with a sign referring to the high cost of his treatment, instantly attracting the attention of other protesters. The action was captured in dozens of pictures uploaded to Twitter and Instagram, immediately becoming viral.

After a few days his protest became more performative, adding patches on his body with slogans, wearing catheters and shaving off his eyebrows[15]. He claimed to be protesting with his body, the only thing that the system had left him. Commentators, artists and influencers echoed this story, immediately making him one of the most iconic characters and spokespersons of the movement, occasionally involving traits of a personality cult. This led to the publication of

**12** Pepa Valenzuela. "Pelao Vade: 'Este sistema de salud está hecho para que te mueras'." The Clinic. 14 January 2020. Available at: https://www.theclinic.cl/2020/01/14/pelao-vade-este-sistema-de-salud-esta-hecho-para-que-te-mueras/.

**13** Paz Radovic and Andrew Chernin. "Rojas Vade admite que no tiene cáncer: 'Siento que me tengo que retirar de la Convención'." La Tercera. 4 September 2021. Available at: https://www.litoralpress.cl/sitio/Prensa_Texto?LPKey=J6R2OHNTBSEPIIVB77VD6VDZECRORZ6H67GWTWT5ALKWWXEV4VIQ.

**14** Roka Valbuena. "Capítulo 12: Rodrigo Rojas Vade antes de la verdad | El Giornalista." Canal 13C. YouTube, 13 January 2022. Available at: https://youtu.be/MNN6hD-MIoY?si=nbTEoDU_xPEWIFr1.

**15** Diana Lozano. "Rojas Vade: la teatral puesta en escena que lo convirtió en ídolo." El Líbero. 11 September 2021. Available at: https://ellibero.cl/actualidad/rojas-vade-la-teatral-puesta-en-escena-que-lo-convirtio-en-idolo/.

fan art pieces, tribute songs, museum exhibitions and videos on social media, all of them portraying him as a hero or a leader of the resistance.

A few examples of these viral images include an illustration featuring Rojas being beaten by a policeman with the caption: "[S]ome heroes are fighting on multiple fronts [referring to his alleged cancer treatment], nothing will make them fall"[16]; a comic issue dedicated to Rojas and other "characters" of the protests[17]; a "Draw My Life" style video published by the renowned weekly magazine *The Clinic*[18] and an action figure of Rojas made by a fan[19].

Despite having no previous political ties and having declared himself "neither left nor right", he was one of the founders of the anti-neoliberal, anti-establishment People's List, of which he was likely to run as a candidate for the Convention. The activist was central to the platform's campaign, appearing as protagonist in most of its TV spots[20] and social media posts. These ads featured images of Rojas at the clinic and at protests, bragging about being able to participate in the protests without being expelled from Plaza Italia, like other mainstream politicians.

Days after being elected, Rojas Vade was arrested by the police as he was taking part in a violent demonstration. Although he was released a few hours later without charge, the incident caused a media stir which further reinforced his heroic status. When the Convention was installed, Rojas Vade was one of those who actively tried to stop the inaugural session from starting, in solidarity with protesters gathering outside. A founding member of the People's List, Rojas was the group's natural candidate for the Convention's leadership. With 45 endorsements, Rojas was nominated as one of the Vice-Presidents, taking the oath of office barefoot, covering one of his eyes in solidarity with those injured by the police in demonstrations, while shouting protest messages.

Taking advantage of his new position and the respect he had gained within the leftist movement, Rojas Vade was a leading promoter of the move for the People's List to have its own presidential nominee, endorsing Diego Ancalao's bid. Although Ancalao managed to register his candidacy, on 26 August the Electoral Service announced his disqualification due to the discovery of over 23,000 fraudulent citizen endorsements, as well as the filing for a criminal investigation. After revelations that Ancalao and his team (including Rojas) had paid nearly $3 million to a criminal

**16** https://web.facebook.com/Gambachilenoticias/photos/a.286808365162425/733862203790370.

**17** https://www.reddit.com/r/chile/comments/x5651g/comic_que_la_lista_del_pueblo_le_dedicó_al_pelao/.

**18** https://youtu.be/bDQJZ3epda8?si=Oj25uzHA5sh23Zk5.

**19** https://www.instagram.com/p/B7EBHbIJie3.

**20** La Lista del Pueblo – "Rodrigo 'Pelao Vade' Rojas – Candidato La Lista del Pueblo" [video] YouTube, 9 November 2020. Available at: https://youtu.be/ZGthBivRayw?si=_scCKVOhGawL7Lpg.

gang leader, who faked the signatures on behalf of a deceased notary, the People's List declared itself "in indefinite recess".

On 4 September 2021, *La Tercera* published an article exposing how Rojas had lied to the public and his own family about his illness and he admitted that he had no cancer[21]. Later that night, through a video posted on his social media, he confessed to lying about his illness and announced his resignation from his seat and from the vice-presidency, which he submitted on the following day, but due to legal gaps this wasn't official until it was authorised by Congress in March 2022.

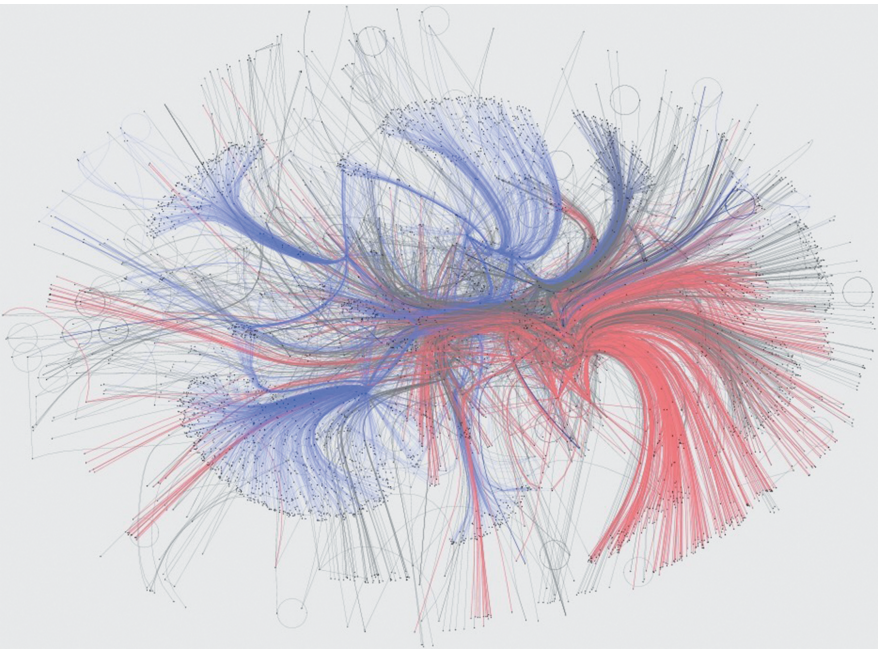

**Fig. 1:** Interaction map of tweets mentioning Rojas Vade fake illness scandal. In red, replies and quotes to media outlets official accounts on Twitter. In blue, clusters related to popular right-wing accounts, all of them anonymous. Data collected 4 September 2021. Visualisation in NodeXL. Source: Created with NodeXL Pro (http://nodexl.codeplex.com) from the Social Media Research Foundation (http://www.smrfoundation.org).

**21** Paz Radovic and Andrew Chernin. "Rojas Vade admite que no tiene cáncer: 'Siento que me tengo que retirar de la Convención'". La Tercera. 4 September 2021. Available at: https://www.latercera.com/la-tercera-domingo/noticia/rojas-vade-admite-que-no-tiene-cancer-siento-que-me-tengo-que-retirar-de-la-convencion/6M4MJHN6KZGGLKLJMMTDUBDAJY/.

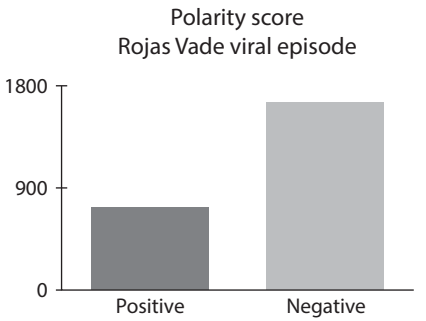


**Fig. 2:** Sentiments net polarity, Rojas Vade fake illness scandal (Positive/Negative). Data collected 4 September 2021. Visualisation in RStudio.

By mapping users' interactions referring to this event, mainstream media played a leading role in making it viral, once they published on their official accounts, which are among the most followed in Chile (See Fig. 1). The most important conversation generators included centre-right Canal 13 and Radio Bio Bio, which reported these revelations as a news flash of national interest, as well as *The Clinic*, a satirical leftist magazine.

From the analysis of 23,036 tweets data collected in the four hours following the news, it was noted that the polarity of these messages was trending extraordinarily towards negative emotions (Fig. 2). This reaction is consistent with the widespread outrage and indignation caused by the disclosure of his deception, along with speculation that, despite resigning, he would continue receiving compensation as a Convention member. This was in clear contrast to the positive reputation of his character until then, considered an icon of heroism and honesty, which was key to his political rise. Pieces of fan art also reflected this change in his public image, being re-published for ironic or comedic reasons. An illustration representing Rojas as an anime character, a giant or a titan fighting the police that originally received more than 1,800 likes on Instagram[22], was slightly modified as an ironic meme and through "shitposting" accounts, increasing its reach and engagement, gathering more than 18,700 likes and hundreds of comments[23].

Finally, after being subpoenaed to testify by the Chilean Investigation Police, he confessed to having used fake catheters and scars to appear as if he had undergone medical treatment. At the beginning of 2023, he was sentenced to 61 days in prison and fined for the crime of fraud, since he had made fundraising efforts to pay for his supposed medical treatment. Since then, he has remained away from public life.

**22** https://www.instagram.com/p/B8u6A5XJ8FE/.
**23** https://www.instagram.com/p/Cak7pMVplTA.

## 2.3 Giovanna Grandón, *Tía Pikachu*

Grandón is a 43-year-old school bus driver, who served as a member of the Chilean Constitutional Convention representing the 12th District of Santiago. Her rise to fame came on 25 October 2019, in the context of the so-called Million March. Dressed in a mistakenly purchased inflatable costume of the popular character Pikachu, Grandón wore it to do "something different" and "to dance" at the demonstration. The image of her dancing around and after stumbling, falling to the ground received millions of views[24] on social media, as well as prompting the creation of various memes, parodies and fanart. Due to the comical atmosphere of the video, which contrasted with the violence on previous protest days, the video was an absolute hit, even receiving foreign media attention (see Caminos 2021).

The popularity of the video led the media to quickly seek out the person behind the costume, which was achieved four days later through stories that ran on Canal 13 and Mega. The story was reproduced in other media outlets, and she began to be interviewed on different digital platforms and even had an appearance in a music video, "Esto no prendió", which trended at number one on YouTube. Other examples of her popularity include illustrations dedicated to her[25] a ceramic plate (Fig. 4), keychain figurines and other souvenirs for sale (See Fig. 3), as well as the announcement of a "southern tour", where she appeared at demonstrations and danced in the squares of 14 cities[26]. On the other hand, while Grandón became known for dancing at demonstrations, often getting caught up in clashes between protesters and riot police, she sought to become a symbol of working-class women and struggling families. Now known as *Tía* (Aunt) *Pikachu*, she began silent social and political activity, starting official accounts for her and her husband on social media, and participating in political and charity events in Santiago and in the regions. The idea of getting to know first-hand the sufferings of ordinary people continued to be a key theme in her campaign build-up for the Constitutional Convention (Collao López 2020).

**24** Canal 13 – "Es madre y abuela. Tiene 44 años y ha llamado la atención por la forma en que ha salido a protestar: vestida de Pikachu". [video] Facebook, 29 October 2019. Available at: https://web.facebook.com/teletrece/videos/255290247474517l/; Grandón, Giovanna (@bailapikachu.oficial) – "Por los que preguntan por mi caída! Estoy bien, solo un poco adolorida y cansada de tanto bailar en las marchas" Instagram, 28 October 2019. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B4Lla8dFWID/.

**25** https://www.instagram.com/p/B4IMd0SlwTl.

**26** https://www.instagram.com/p/B8G0hVFlEIk.


**Fig. 3:** A keychain figurine for sale featuring Tía Pikachu. Facebook Post 3 November 2020. Accessed 4 March 2024. https://www.facebook.com/Crofem/.


**Fig. 4:** A ceramic plate for sale with Grandón's character on it, by then already a pop icon. Reproduction. Accessed 1 March 2024. https://www.enriquetarobinson.com/products/acc_co.

Taking advantage of the possibility of organising lists of independent candidates, Grandón was one of the first to join the People's List (LDP), the anti-establishment electoral platform set up in the heat of the demonstrations. With around 4,000 online sponsorships and the required 500 constituents' signatures, Grandón secured her candidacy in the 12th District, the largest in the country. Also, the *Tía Pikachu* phenomenon received the attention of experts in political communication. In addition to the volunteers in the field, her team consisted of several political scientists, a historian, an illustrator, a journalist and a lawyer, as well as the People's List leadership, some of whom had experience in election campaigning.

Another focus of her campaign was to emphasise her role as a citizen far removed from the political elites and her status as an independent, "apolitical" and anti-party candidate. This, on the other hand, led to many attacks on social media, mostly ironising her notable lack of rhetorical skills and constitutional knowledge. Despite this, she was elected as one of the most voted for candidates in her constituency (see Lankes 2021). Once elected, Grandón began "intense preparation" to best fulfil her role as a member of the Convention, receiving crash courses on constitutional theory and the Chilean institutional system, as she declared in an interview.

On the Convention's inauguration day, while protests were taking place around the old National Congress building, Grandón went out to talk to the demonstrators trying to appease them. After a brief altercation, which included verbal aggression, she told the press that it was just a small group of anarchists "who don't understand anything". This sudden distancing from those who minutes earlier had accompanied her to the taking of the oath was seen as a betrayal and a sign that, as she had become part of the establishment she would end her relationship with the street.

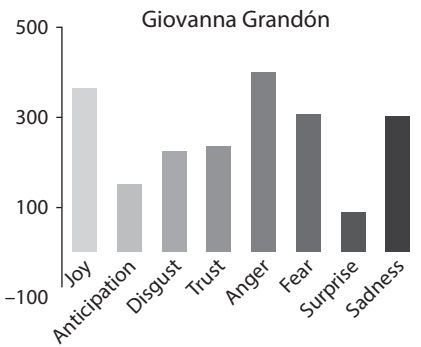


**Fig. 5:** Sentiment analysis of comments on YouTube videos related to the assault on Grandón. Data collected 8 October 2021 to 18 October 2021) Total views: 400,795. Total comments: 3,694.

On 8 October 2020, a few days before the second anniversary of the Social Outburst, Grandón and her fellow assembly member Eric Chinga went to the Plaza Italia (aka Dignity Square), still the protests epicenter. Although she was not dressed in her characteristic costume, a group of people recognised and confronted her. The situation quickly escalated, with people assaulting, shouting and throwing projectiles at her on the spot. Two years after becoming one of the main figures to emerge from the protests in Plaza Italia, *Tía Pikachu* was kicked out of the square.

The footage of the incident was quickly spread on social media, most notably on Twitter, on which "Tia Pikachu" stayed in the top three trending topics for 16 hours in a row, with 50,724 posts during that period. Of these, the most viral accounts were again right-wing, most of whom made fun of the situation, in some cases including gross insults and even threats. Some of these spreaders were @ciudadanolevi1, @tere_marinovic, @realvozzfire and @FORTALEZAC1, among other anonymous accounts.

The incident was also reported on the nightly newscasts of major TV channels, as well as in news segments posted on their official accounts. Some of these videos were also published on YouTube, while at that time there had already been videos uploaded of other users discussing the event, most of them in a celebratory manner (Tab. 2).

An analysis of the YouTube user comments (3,694) using NRC lexicon dictionaries shows a tendency towards feelings of joy, anger and fear in the audience's responses (See Fig. 5). In particular, the "joy" emotion appears to be distributed across both sides of the political landscape. While far-right accounts mocked the downfall of an *Octubrist* icon, others identified with the hard core of the demonstrations[27] also argued that she had "sold out her soul" to the corrupt political system.

At the political level, the situation was condemned all across the board by the government, most of her Convention colleagues, as well as by all the then presidential candidates. In an interview, Grandón declared herself to be "emotionally shaken", as the fight should not be "between those who were fighting for dignity" but said she would continue to be on the streets, where she belonged[28].

**27** Also known as Primera Línea or Frontline, a more heavily equipped version of the Black bloc groups, who contested territorial control of Plaza Italia with the police up until the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantines.

**28** Soledad Reyes, "Condena total: constituyentes y mundo político repudiaron las agresiones a la 'Tía Pikachu' en Plaza Baquedano." ADN Radio. 8 October 2021. Available at: https://www.adnradio.cl/nacional/2021/10/08/condena-total-constituyentes-y-mundo-politico-repudiaron-las-agresiones-a-la-tia-pikachu-en-plaza-baquedano.html.

**Tab. 2:** Most liked comments on YouTube videos related to the aggression episode against Giovanna Grandón (*Tía Pikachu*) in Plaza Italia-Dignity Square (Translation) Data collected 8 October 2021 to 18 October 2021. Total views: 400,795. Total comments: 3,694.

| Most liked comments on YouTube videos related to the aggression episode against Grandón | Like count | Polarity |
|---|---|---|
| They burnt half the country for this . . . this is embarrassing | 753 | Negative |
| Don't worry Tía Pikachu, the Carabineros you hate so much will help you out of there. Life's strange twists and turns, isn't it? | 740 | Negative |
| Just like in the French revolution, those who raised up the masses were sooner or later victims of them. | 572 | Negative |
| It makes me sad and nostalgic to think that not so long ago on friday afternoons people used to go there to listen to the Chilean Philharmonic. All these f— people killed the soul of this country. | 507 | Negative |
| Raise crows and they'll pluck out your eyes . . . a proverb 2000 years old. You f— up, Tía Pikachu, you've passed to a better life. | 503 | Negative |

Months after this episode, she was involved in other scandals, such as wearing the *Pikachu* costume on the Convention floor, as well as it being revealed that she received state subsidies despite having a salary as an elected authority. Having become an independent candidate for the rest of her tenure, after the New Constitution project was rejected in a referendum, she withdrew from public life, resuming her work as a school bus driver and flea market trader.

## 2.4 Cristóbal Andrade "*Dino Azulado*"

Cristóbal Andrade is a 34-year-old activist who represented the 6th district of the Valparaíso at the Constitutional Convention. Born in Quilpué, Andrade is an auto mechanic and a pastor of the Evangelical Christian Pentecostal religion. He has defined himself as a social and community leader, "protector" of the environment and of "traditional indigenous" languages[29].

Although he had never been involved in social movements before, his political awareness came at the start of the Estallido Social of 2019, when hundreds of people came out to demonstrate in the streets of his city. Due to the general dis-

**29** Paz Radovic and Rosario Mendía. "Zoom a los 27: las principales causas de la sorpresiva Lista del Pueblo." La Tercera. 22 May 2021. Available at: https://www.latercera.com/la-tercera-domingo/noticia/zoom-a-los-27-las-principales-causas-de-la-sorpresiva-lista-del-pueblo/U6B5Q5HWLFEBXLIHYHEO6VPJ2E/

trust of the media, many activists in the area decided to open their own social media accounts to share information. One of them was "Somos el Pueblo Quilpué", created by Andrade and some friends of his, which posted calls for demonstrations and videos denouncing police violence. In addition to this content, it uploaded videos of people dancing in costume, which quickly spread as comedic content, especially among TikTok and Instagram users of the Valparaiso area.

At the end of October, following the invitation of other protesters wearing inflatable dinosaur costumes[30], Andrade acquired his own, naming it *Dino Azulado* (Blue Dino). In his words, his motivation was to "cheer up" and revitalise the protests in Quilpué, which at the time were beginning to decline in terms of attendance (see García Soto 2021).

By August 2020, however, much of his attention was focused on promoting the *Apruebo* (I approve) in the first constitutional referendum, running in parallel a kind of personal pre-campaign. Days after the vote, he began to make public his intention to be an independent candidate for the Constituent Assembly. By then *Dino Azulado* left the anonymity of his character and began to appear as Cristóbal Andrade, coordinator of "Somos el Pueblo Quilpué" and "Cordón Solidario Quilpué", both astroturfing organisations. Against all odds, considering the limited resources with which they campaigned, the People's List became the second most voted for in District 6 with 16.5 percent of the vote, winning two seats out of eight. Three weeks after taking office, *Dino Azulado* entered the floor of the Convention in his dinosaur costume, immediately drawing the attention of the rest of his colleagues and the press. What began as a hallway joke, he said, ended with him and Giovanna Grandón (*Tia Pikachu*) taking to the podium in costume, where they danced and were photographed (see García Soto 2021).

At first, some accredited journalists tweeted some clips from their personal accounts, probably merely as something funny or anecdotal that had happened on a working day at the Convention. These videos, however, quickly spread on Twitter, leading to their own media outlets and to other users publishing it on their websites and other social media platforms, making it viral.

The fierce response from users as well as other politicians who commented on this performative eccentricity, caused mentions of Andrade's account (@DinoazuladoO) to skyrocket by more than 2,700 percent in six hours. Criticism from the right mostly pointed to the lack of seriousness, while some on the left argued that this type of extravagance would only damage the image of the institution.

**30** Characters such as corre Dinosaurio, Dino Albino, Dino Horacio and Dino Osorno became well-known in their own cities and even had their own accounts on social media.

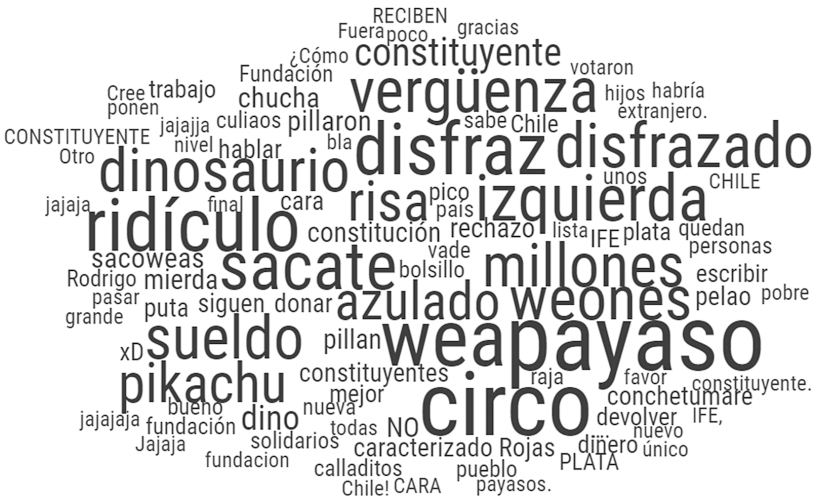


**Fig. 6:** Word cloud with the most frequently used words referring to the *Dino Azulado* costume incident (29 July 2021 to 6 August 2021). Total comments: 1,418.

At the same time on Facebook, users responded to these publications with thousands of comments, most of them expressing indignation or making fun of not only the costumed constituent, but the whole institution. Among the most used terms were "payaso" (clown), "circo" (circus), "sácate" (take it off), "vergüenza" (shame), "risa" (laugh), as well as other curse words and insults (See Fig. 6). The incident ended with Andrade and Grandón conceding they had made a mistake but justified it saying they did it during lunchtime and not during the sessions. For the rest of the Constitutional Process, at least, neither of them wore their costumes again.

After the dissolution of the People's List due to mentioned scandals, Andrade remained an independent and did not join any other Convention caucus. In late 2021, after the new constitution been rejected in a referendum, *Dino Azulado* declared that he was uncertain about what to do, but that he would probably try to run for Congress in the future. In June 2022, in a news report showing what former constituents were doing a year after, Andrade described how difficult it had been to find work as a mechanic again, and that he had even thought of leaving the country to start from scratch somewhere else. He also said he was still active in politics, especially after starting a news account on Instagram called *Prensa Política*.

## 2.5 Alejandra Pérez

Alejandra Pérez Espina is a 45-year-old social activist who was a delegate to Chile's Constitutional Convention for Santiago's 9th District. Raised in a leftist family in the working-class neighbourhood of Quinta Normal, she participated in demonstrations against the dictatorship during her childhood. This political impetus, however, did not carry on into her youth and, until the Social Outburst of October 2019, Pérez had not been involved as a community, social or trade union leader. After marrying an automotive company executive, she devoted herself mainly to domestic duties and parenting, as well as to a small business selling flowers online.

In 2017, after several rounds of cancer treatment, Alejandra underwent a total double mastectomy surgery. Although her treatment was carried out in Chile's private healthcare system, she said this situation helped her to better understand the deficiencies of public healthcare, as she heard of cases of people who died because of a lack of adequate treatment.

From 18 October 2019 onwards, she began to regularly attend demonstrations in the Plaza Italia area. Later, she started to do so without a top, displaying different messages written with marker pen on her naked chest, showing off her scars. Sometimes it was the demonstrators themselves who wrote on her body sentences referring to the demands of the movement, calling for better public healthcare, or denouncing police violence (see González Contreras 2021). Her performance received strong support both in the streets and on social media (Fig. 7), where images of her published by photojournalists were circulating especially on Instagram. Within days of the beginning of this kind of performative demonstration, Pérez became an iconic protester at Plaza Italia, just as *Tía Pikachu* and Rojas Vade had, both of whom she used to appear and be photographed with.

This status as an iconic street demonstrator not only positioned her in terms of recognition and media exposure, but also gave her a strong symbolic capital. Pérez and Rojas Vade were, for some, the perfect embodiment of the system's flaws, especially for those without adequate healthcare coverage. The respect she gained within what would become the People's List paved the way for her candidacy in District 9, even though she was not a constituent of that district.

Her campaign was heavily shaped by her personal history, her street performances, and the slogans of the more radical groups of protesters. Her provocative image was reinforced with a juvenile, rebel, or in her words "insolent" tone, complemented by cowboy boots, wide-framed sunglasses and brightly coloured hair (see González Contreras 2021). In total, Pérez claimed in an interview to have spent only around 500 EUR on her campaign, "plus a small contribution from her fans", although she officially declared expenses of nearly 11,000 EUR. In the May 2021


**Fig. 7:** A fanart caricature featuring Alejandra Pérez as a superhero. At demonstrations, she constantly interacted with the "Chilean Avengers", a group of characters and cosplayers dressed as superheroes, who received a great deal of media attention. Reproduction. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Xhretp1fP.

polls, she gained the third largest majority in the district and was officially elected. After her victory, Pérez appeared again in Plaza Italia, the epicenter of the protests, in an event where she was presented as "People's Constitutional Delegate" and pledged to faithfully represent the causes of the Social Outburst.

After taking office, in October 2021 she made her first speech, half-naked and showing the scars caused by her illness, as she did in Plaza Italia. This action immediately drew attention from the media and the viewing audience that followed the sessions via streaming, and quickly published news and comments on the event on social platforms.


**Fig. 8:** Word cloud with the most frequently used words referring to Alejandra Pérez's speech. (22 October 2021 to 28 October 2021). Total comments: 1,446.

Clips of her five-minute speech, where she told her story as a cancer patient, sparked very different reactions from the audience. On one hand, posts and tweets by @cnnchile, @chvnoticias, @theclinicl and @elcomercio from Peru, all of which emphasised her resilience as a cancer survivor, received a positive reaction from users with most of them applauding her courage.

However, given the viral behaviour of these images among influential right-wing accounts, the negative sentiment prevailed (See Fig. 8). Terms such as "show" or "spectacle", "circo" (circus), "rechazo" (I reject) and "vergüenza" (shame) were the most frequently used by those accounts. As for feelings, "hate", "fear" and especially "aversion" stand out, being the only one of our five cases where this emotion ranked highest. In fact, when analysing a sociogram, a pattern is again noticeable with, in the periphery of the intermediations, many hate messages referring to her and the rest of the constituents.

In the Convention, Pérez was assigned to the Political System commission, considered the most important, although she was unable to stand out. After the People's List collapsed, she became a member of *Pueblo Constituyente*, an *Octubrist* far-left caucus, which split again and so she then became part of the *Coordi-*

*nadora Plurinacional*, a pro-indigenous, Trotskyist group[31]. After her friend and colleague Rojas Vade's fake cancer was revealed, she was the only convention member to defend the now resigned Rojas Vade, accusing the media of orchestrating a defamation campaign.

In January 2021, Pérez reported that she had again been diagnosed with metastasis and announced her intention to undergo treatment, but without abandoning her work as a Constituent Delegate. Once the work of the Convention had been completed, Pérez joined *Transformar Chile*, a breakaway anti-neoliberal movement created by Valparaíso mayor Jorge Sharp. Since late 2022 she has been a staff member of the Valparaíso City Council.

# 3 Possible Perspectives on the Celebrities of Unrest

## 3.1 Common Traits

From these personal and public trajectories, it is possible to establish that this type of activist-turned-politician presents some distinctive traits compared to more classical definitions of activists, politicians and celebrities. These viral celebrity protesters were subjected to accelerated processes of mediatisation and celebrification that turned them into popular culture icons and respected spokespersons for citizens' causes. Combining the impact of viral communication logics, a new approach to anti-systemic political narratives and the role of performance as a tool for expressing discontent, they managed to capitalize on the respect and visibility gained in the street and on social networks, turning them into votes.

They are essentially people from working-class backgrounds. Coming from marginalised areas, these five characters have a clear awareness of their social background and the limits that this has caused in their life trajectories. The hardships of everyday life are an important part of their narrative and the idea of portraying themselves as common citizens is key to connecting with their audiences.

They have neither the political experience nor the technical or ideological formation of their competitors. In all cases, the 18 October demonstration was a wake-up call for social and political causes. Compared with the rest of the candi-

**31** Camila Higuera, "Guía práctica: Los distintos bloques políticos de la Convención a seis meses de instalado el poder constituyente" Interferencia. 15 January 2022. Available at: https://interferencia.cl/articulos/guia-practica-los-distintos-bloques-politicos-de-la-convencion-seis-meses-de-instalado-el.

dates for the Convention, these Celebrities of Unrest possess much less knowledge of constitutional matters, even ignoring basic concepts.

Unlike other political leaders, whose career path is usually linked to sustained party involvement or prominence in the academy or media, the legitimisation of these figures is obtained from their presence in spaces where unrest is expressed. Having emerged from the street, their proximity to the rest of the demonstrators, who are able to see, talk or take pictures with them, is their main mechanism of validation.

Their rhetoric incorporates populist or anti-systemic ideological concepts. These figures distinguished themselves by their anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation stances and their scepticism towards liberal democracy, with a strong anti-party component. Other causes advocated were the disbandment of the police and armed forces, the expropriation of large companies, the secession of indigenous territories, the legalisation of drugs, among others. However, when they stepped into the institutional system, this challenging and moralising rhetoric faded behind more moderate stances.

Through their personal struggles, they inspire a strong sense of empathy from their audiences and voters, appealing to their common sense. In the case of Pérez and Rojas, their narrative focuses on the need for better healthcare, based on their own experience as patients. Grandón sought to represent working women and small entrepreneurs, Gallardo did the same with students and sexual dissidents, and Andrade with communities affected by drought and polluting industries. From these hardships, a position of moral superiority and immunity from criticism was established, giving them a protective shell against criticism during their time as demonstrators and candidates, but it faded away as they got into institutional politics.

Their characters may be based partly or entirely on fake or exaggerated claims. A review of their trajectories revealed both inconsistencies in their biographies as well as a glorification of small actions or gestures. The distortion is such that from an old tweet or a photograph in a certain place, for example, they could claim to have a record of activism on certain topics.

As a result of their performative acts, they were turned into popular heroes, being the subject of a variety of homages and tributes. Their life stories and characters were depicted in murals, songs, memes, statues and so on. These celebratory actions further enhanced their fame and validation, effectively helping them become political influencers. Once inside the Convention, they continued to do some performative acts, such as using costumes or breaching protocols to attract the attention of the press and social media users. After the revelation of Rojas' fake cancer, these histrionic or theatrical expressions began to be avoided, representing, in a way, the end of symbolic *Octubrism.*

In terms of how they switched from the street to the political world, due to their popularity they could easily bypass the candidate selection process for their political platforms. This is the case of Grandón, Rojas and Pérez, who had a guaranteed place as candidates on the People's List from its formation, not being subject to selection requirements established by the list, such as the collection of a certain number of endorsements from citizens and social organisations.

Once they entered formal political institutions, it was their own shortcomings and limitations that lead to problems of various kinds, often unintentionally. Most of these moments, some of them almost trivial, were quickly covered by the press, placing them under heavy media pressure. As noted in the sentiment analysis, their theatricality seems to have had a direct correlation with the audiences' negative response on social media. These episodes had a major and damaging impact, not only on their image, but also on the rest of the Convention, for which levels of approval dropped significantly.

Apart from this, the analysis of social networks and sentiment found that celebrities of unrest become primary targets of criticism and defamation campaigns by those who opposed the Convention as a whole. Whether because of the scandals they were involved in or because of their performative character, thousands of accounts, especially of right-wing activists, delivered hate speech not only aimed at them, but also at the institution they were part of.

On this basis, it is possible to draw two visions and interpretations of the phenomenon and its possible projections, in accordance with the contrasting perspectives of cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism.

## 3.2 From a Cyberoptimism Perspective

The electoral success of these characters became a demonstration of how the internet, social media and their potential new communication dynamics could be beneficial for democracy and a better form of political representation. In this sense, the Celebrities of Unrest would perfectly embody the idea of popular democracy in action, in which citizens, regardless of their social, educational, political background or resources could contest the highest positions of power.

These cases would demonstrate, in line with those who argue that social networks favour democratisation, that they could be a tool for effective political transformation, not only by decentralising informative flows and influencing public discussions, but also by mobilising large masses of votes towards platforms that seek to break the status quo.

On the contrary, if instead of anti-systemic rhetoric these political platforms choose a reformist approach, the protest cycles instead of just pointing out the

problems of that power, could be channelled in such a way that their disruptive energy could be converted institutionally into a means of relieving the unrest, thus stabilising the system.

Nevertheless, the dominance of these communicational tools – managing virality, celebrity and delivering messages through performative acts – might allow both individuals and social movements to emerge as relevant actors, pushing their specific agendas. This could challenge the classical definition of social movements, which once they achieve their goals, either dissolve or reformulate themselves. Political and social platforms would not only be relegated to the role of making demands to institutions but would also be able to infiltrate and intervene directly in them.

The rise of these Celebrities of Unrest would be another indication of the beginning of a change in the directionality of politics, as common citizens had the potential to become their representatives, even if they resisted classical power relations. For them, inexperience or lack of preparation would not be an obstacle, since their main values were precisely their closeness in all respects to their constituents, including their weaknesses.

## 3.3 From a Cyberpessimism Perspective

From this perspective, the analysed phenomenon would be a step against efforts to improve democracy and the quality of public discussion. In the light of the outcome, providing favourable conditions for the Celebrities of Unrest, as unprepared and seemingly unmerited people, with a tendency for scandal, could result in various negative effects on the levels of representation and trust in institutions.

If this repertoire proves to be effective, it might lead the rest of the agents to engage in similar electioneering and demagogic practices, shifting the political discussion into the field of spectacle-politics. In this new scenario, the advantage would be for those who have more popularity or are willing to carry out actions that increase it, such as performative activism.

The case of the People's List is further evidence of the difficulty of such platforms to sustain themselves over time. After a successful campaign that sought to repeat the viral and performative success of its emblems, the Celebrities of Unrest, the list was a surprise gaining one million votes and 27 seats in the 2021 Constitutional Delegates Election. Presuming that its questioning attitude and street legitimacy were a guarantee of electoral success, the group attempted to broaden its impact by running candidates for the Presidency and Congress later that year. However, the political and social scenario was not the same and it failed to collect the necessary endorsements to run a single parliamentary candidate. This, com-

bined with allegations against its presidential candidate over counterfeit signatures, led to the dissolution of the group, which by then had become a *de facto* political party.

Finally, the Celebrities of Unrest can be understood as part of the widespread advance of populism on an international level in recent years. This new expression would be based on performativity, the creation of a rhetoric of identity versus otherness and the elaboration of false narratives. These elements have also been recognised as favourable conditions for the emergence of *caudillos* (political leaders), who, in the face of increasingly totalising and desperate demands, offer an illusion of solutions to society's afflictions. However, once inside the institutional framework, they are unable to fulfil these promises and their validation is exhausted, affecting the legitimacy of the entire system.

We believe that further research could be carried out taking into consideration the proposed category when analysing subsequent electoral processes in Chile or other countries. This could be especially useful where there are cycles of social mobilisation or protests, leadership renewal or when there is evidence of the persistence of this viral, performative and populist political style. Another interesting approach could be to conduct research on the true levels of spontaneity behind these figures' exposure, or to contrast their features with those of more traditional celebrities who become politicians, especially when fame, entertainment and politics seem to be, more than ever, more closely connected.

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# Memetic Social Resilience? Analysing Memes about Political Violence in Present-Day Belfast, Northern Ireland

**Abstract:** This study is concerned with how contemporary Belfast riots are represented in digital culture, with a specific focus on how social resilience is discursively cultivated (or hindered) through memes about said political violence. While a substantial amount has already been written about everyday practices in post-conflict Belfast, less is known about how digital narratives represent and make sense of the recent outbursts of sectarian violence there, and what the implications of these narratives are for the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the city. This is problematic as it is increasingly acknowledged by social resilience scholars that digital practices may be both a driver of disinformation and polarisation, as well as a tool for building more socially resilient societies. Furthermore, given that memes are one of the dominant digital communication practices of the day it is urgent that we explore social resilience from this analytical perspective. The findings demonstrate that memes about political violence may be both destructive and productive of the discursive cultivation of social resilience in Belfast.

**Keywords:** memes, social resilience, riots, political violence, Belfast

The indie band "Casual Riots" hails from Belfast, Northern Ireland. They make guitar-heavy pop songs primarily about the usual themes of love and heartache: nothing out of the ordinary, that is. Their name, however, stands out and firmly anchors them in contemporary Belfast, where the notion of "recreational rioting" has become a part of everyday vernacular. As such, the city has experienced many lengthy and destructive episodes of rioting during its post-conflict phase, most recently in 2021 when tensions triggered by Brexit and the so-called "Northern Ireland Protocol" escalated into ten days of intense rioting, resulting in clashes between police and unionist youth, the setting ablaze of a public bus in the Shankill neighbourhood of West Belfast, and Molotov cocktails being thrown at (and over) a peace wall in West Belfast. These riots were a response to the Northern Ireland Protocol, which was part of the Brexit agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The protocol was a contentious issue for many people (primarily unionists) in Northern Ireland, as it had implications for trade and the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of


https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111311371-009

the United Kingdom and, on a symbolic level, it unsettled Northern Ireland's status as a part of the UK (*The Spectator* 2021).

Another major episode of rioting in Belfast took place in 2012 to 2013 and is commonly known as "the flag protests". These protests (which at times escalated into full-blown rioting) lasted for roughly three months and were provoked by the decision to take down the Union Jack from Belfast city hall: Or rather, to only fly it on certain holidays throughout the year (see Reilly 2021). Prior to this decision, the flag was flown all year round. The decision triggered parts of the unionist community in Belfast, who felt that their symbolic connection to the UK was being imposed upon, and thus they took to the streets to voice their discontent. These lengthy riots were fiercely debated on social media platforms such as Reddit, Twitter and Facebook (see Reilly 2021). In these often-heated debates, arguments were not only verbal, but also visual and humorous. In fact, the flag protests have given rise to one of the most widespread memes from Belfast, namely the Belfast Bigot meme (see Know Your Meme). This meme references a video clip from a riot at Belfast City Hall where a unionist woman peers through a broken window at the building and shrieks with a high-pitched voice "No Surrender". This high-pitched shriek has become frivolously remixed, and it appears, *inter alia*, in memes which build upon original video footage from classic movies such as *The Shining*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Jaws*.

This study is concerned with how the previously mentioned 2021 and 2012 to 2013 Belfast riots are represented in digital culture, with a specific focus on how social resilience is discursively cultivated (or hindered) through memes about said political violence. While a substantial amount has already been written about everyday practices in post-conflict Belfast (e.g., McAtackney 2011; Marijan 2017) less is known about how digital narratives represent and make sense of the recent outbursts of sectarian violence there and what the implications of these narratives are for the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the city. This is problematic as it is increasingly acknowledged by social resilience scholars that digital practices may be both a driver of disinformation and polarisation, as well as a tool for building more socially resilient societies (see Dulić and Kostić 2021, 32; Buzzanell 2010). Furthermore, given that memes are one of the dominant digital communication practices of the day (see Wiggins 2019; Moretensen and Neumayer 2021) it is urgent that we explore social resilience from this analytical perspective. The present study addresses these lacunae through an in-depth exploration of how the recent Belfast riots are represented in memes. In essence, the study seeks to answer the following research question: How are memes about political violence discursively situated vis-à-vis the cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, Northern Ireland? After presenting the theoretical framework of this study, which stands on two legs, namely memes and social resilience, I give a

brief account of the political context of Northern Ireland, situating it in its post-conflict predicament. I then outline the methods for collecting and analysing the data of this study. Finally, I present the analysis and findings of the study, exploring the discursive relationship between memes about political violence and social resilience.

# 1 Theoretical Framework: Memes and/as Social Resilience

## 1.1 Memes

While representing a relatively recent digital phenomenon, the study of memes has increased rapidly in disciplines ranging from media studies, digital sociology, to cultural studies and political science. In this study, I treat memes primarily as digital communication practices which make social or political points, often through a humorous framing. This is an analytical point of view which has been firmly established in media and communication studies, where Shifman's (2013) book *Memes in Digital Culture* serves as one of the strongest proponents for this angle. Her work has been extensively built upon in media and communication studies and it is today widely regarded as canonical in the field. Shifman (2013) notes that a distinctive hallmark of the meme is its political messages which are commonly steeped in layers of humor: representing a form of "playful politics" (Mortensen and Neumeyer 2021). Memes commonly rely on popular culture references, such as images or sound from tv-shows, video games, music videos, and movies. Shifman (2013) stresses that these popular culture references establish distinct meme templates, by which other users can easily make their own versions of the same meme, thus adding further remixes to the corpus of memes (51–53). It is, furthermore, important to note that memes may be read as a digital embodiment of satire – often conveyed through irony and parody – which "combines play with social or political critique, using wit to attack particular ideas or conventions" (Day 2018, 120). In fact, such satirical "attacks" via memes may serve to build emotional support amongst digital communities, especially in times of crisis, as noted by Murru and Vicari (2021). They argue that memetic satire is particularly relevant in times of adversity "since it allows a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format" (2425–2426). The creative and participatory nature of memes (facilitated by their malleable templates) grants users a certain agency in the aftermath of crisis and adversity, as it allows them to remember the event in their preferred way, and

to "broadcast" it as such to selected digital publics via social media platforms (see Silvestri 2018). Thus, on the one hand, memetic memorialisation may help users find closure with a traumatic event, by giving them the ability to voice their own narrative of it. On the other hand, considering that memes frequently "travel" across digital contexts and may linger online for a long period of time it may entail that one unwillingly comes across a meme which re-ignites traumatic experiences of crises. Hence, the meme is a double-edged sword in this regard, one that can help people cope with trauma and crisis, while at the same time potentially prolonging said experiences (see Silvestri 2018).

## 1.2 Social Resilience

From the above discussion on crisis and trauma, the leap to resilience is short. Resilience is commonly defined as a system's ability "to deal with adverse changes and shocks" (Béné et al. 2012, 11). Shocks may be natural disasters, but can also include human-made disasters such as "economic shocks, political crises, terrorism, [and] war" (Fahlberg et al. 2020, 2). Social resilience, then, is the ability for individuals and communities to cope with, and "bounce back" from, such external shocks (see Sherrieb et al. 2010; Adger 2000). As such, social resilience highlights the creative adaptability of humans in the face of crises and our ability to "make do" under the adverse circumstances at hand. Previous studies of social resilience have suggested that this can occur, *inter alia*, through building inclusive communities in times of external stress, where co-production, the collective voicing of dissent, and collaborative governance provide means to deal with the present shock and to prepare for future ones (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Elmqvist et al. 2019; Kim and Lim 2016). While the idea of social resilience appears normatively desirable in much of the literature, we should also keep a critical eye on the concept, as it can serve to perpetuate social inequality. Indeed, it is often the marginalised communities who are expected to be resilient, rather than the privileged (see Cretney 2014). In this regard – as aptly noted by Berry (2022, 946) – there is a risk that "to become resilient is to continue standing in the face of violent, unjust, systems". Part of the crux here is the notion of "bouncing back" (as discussed above) which has been integral to the concept of social resilience, and which presupposes a return to normalcy (i.e., the status quo) following an external shock. This entails that cultivating resilience may act as a conservative force in society, barring any progressive social change that could improve the condition of marginalised communities (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Cretney 2014).

At this point it is necessary to unpack the relationship between social resilience and resistance. Previous studies have tended to treat these as distinct: Social resilience has meant being 'adaptive' in the face of external shocks but not seeking to change the underlying systems which cause the shocks, whereas resistance has meant a commitment to changing the unjust systems in questions (see Scott 1984). Scholars have, however, recently begun to argue that we need to radicalise the concept of social resilience so that it also entails "resistance to a politics of dominion" (Berry 2022, 1). Berry also notes how solidarity with others who have experienced crises and/or violence is an important part in understanding how social resilience is cultivated (7). In a similar vein, Yue (2022) sees social resilience as inherently forward-looking. It is not just a passive adaption to the adverse circumstances at hand and returning afterwards to the status quo, but she instead treats resilience as "emergent (not emergency), iterative (not rebound) and transformative (not back to normal)" (362). Other scholars term this transformative potential "bouncing ahead" (Qamar 2023, 1). Thus, in these accounts we find that social resilience is indeed compatible with political agency and even resistance and that it is not merely about passive adaptation and a return to normalcy after crisis.

## 1.3 Social Resilience as a Communication Process

Even though memes have not previously been explored from the analytical vantage point of social resilience, there is a burgeoning body of work which treats the latter as a communication process. Here, scholars argue that social resilience may be cultivated through communication practices, thus distancing themselves from the idea that social resilience is an internal property of an individual or a community and instead stressing that it is "developed, sustained, and grown through discourse, interaction and material considerations" (Buzzanell 2010, 1). Figuring most prominently is Buzanell's (2010) *Communication Theory of Resilience*, which highlights how people cope with disruptive events through five interrelated communication practices: (a) crafting normalcy; (b) affirming identity anchors; (c) maintaining and using communication networks; (d) putting alternative logics to work, and (e) legitimising negative feelings while foregrounding productive action. "Crafting normalcy" entails upholding the normality of everyday life in the face of crisis, mostly through "normalcy discourse and performance" (Buzzanell 2010, 3) by which people "insisted that their lives were normal" (4). While looking in from the outside upon such a crisis might lead one to conclude that things are far from normal, from the inside, there is often significant communication work going on to ensure that a normality discourse is kept in place (4).

"Affirming identity anchors" refers to the kind of identity work that often follows in the wake of crisis, as those affected by it tend to re-affirm their identity in order to anchor themselves emotionally. Importantly, this may entail a problematic hardening of "primordial" identities (e.g., gender, tribal, racial, or otherwise) – especially when said identity is under threat by the crisis in question. But it may also mean crafting an identity anew, which draws upon "discourses of renewal" rather than on some notion of a primordial past (6).

"Maintaining and using communication networks" is rather self-explanatory, as Buzzanell (2010) notes the importance of creating and utilizing social networks during crisis, to be able to cope with it. "Putting alternative logics to work" is the communication practice of recognising that a specific system is broken to find alternative ways of operating within the given system. As such, one may build social resilience by first "recognizing the craziness" (7) of the situation, and then seek "creative responses to deal with the craziness of it all" (7). Finally, "legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action" means "reframing the situation linguistically and metaphorically to one of constrained hopefulness" (9). It involves the emotional labour of recognising that one has a right to be angry about the situation, but that ultimately backgrounding such emotions is more productive to one's long-term goals (9).

In this study, I draw on the theoretical notions discussed above when exploring whether digital communication practices (i.e., memes) about crises (i.e., riots) in Belfast contribute to discourses that are productive (or destructive) of social resilience. I employ Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience as the theoretical starting point for the study, but I also incorporate the broader meme and social resilience literature in the analysis.

## 2 Context: "The Troubles" and Post-Conflict Northern Ireland

Between 1968 and 1998 Northern Ireland went through a protracted armed conflict. The conflict primarily involved the IRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) and the British Government (informally aided by Protestant paramilitary groups) and was rooted in the contentious issue of Northern Ireland's political status. The three decades of "The Troubles" were marred by sectarian violence across Northern Ireland, resulting in approximately 3,500 deaths and 47,000 injured (see Ulster University). In a crucial turning point, 1998 saw the historic signing of the Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement, heralding an end to the conflict (see UCDP). Even though "The Troubles" formally ended in 1998, the Belfast of today

is, to some extent, still a divided city shaped by its violent past. This is aptly captured by Goulding and McCroy (2021), who note that the city is "divided by walls, divided by ethnicity, and even divided by the river Lagan" (539). Sectarian identifications proliferate in present-day Belfast, which is evident, among other things, in the fact that the two most popular political parties are Sinn Féin (Irish nationalist) and DUP (unionist) – both stanchly sectarian in their politics (see Hansson and Roulston 2021, 733). Non- (or less-) sectarian political alternatives do exist; however, they are still lagging far behind their sectarian counterparts in the polls.

Having said that, much has certainly improved in Northern Ireland since the peace agreement of 1998 – perhaps most notably the level of direct violence is markedly lowered, as are the activities of paramilitary groups (see Cunningham and Gregory 2014, 64). Moreover, Belfast has a thriving city-centre which is decidedly inclusive and relatively free from sectarian divisions. Here, the creative industries are currently booming, with the "biggest set in the world" (Ramsey et al. 2019) – Game of Thrones – having been shot primarily in Northern Ireland. This meant that a "small but significant number of screen production workers based permanently in NI have benefitted from a boom of opportunities to work on international productions" (Ramsey et al. 2019, 857). In this context, the critically acclaimed Netflix series *Derry Girls* has also become a global hit. The series is a humorous retelling of "The Troubles" seen through the eyes of a group of teenagers in the city Derry/Londonderry, and thus, it is an indication that many residents of Northern Ireland are indeed ready to laugh at their somewhat dark history. Still, there appears also to be a limit to such laughter, with recent events like the "Bikinis and Balaclavas" debacle[1] serving as a stark reminder that "The Troubles" remains a sensitive issue in contemporary Northern Ireland. As such it is a source of much "embarrassment" for its citizens, many of whom prefer to avoid it as a conversation matter altogether (see Mannheimer et al. 2022, 560).

## 3 Methods: Digital Archival Work and Analysis

This study begun with the collection of memes which address political violence in contemporary Belfast. As such, I focused on the memetic representation of the Belfast riots of 2012 to 2013 and 2021. The collection of these memes took place in

**1** This refers to the social media outrage which followed when a resort in Ballymoney started offering Bikinis and Balaclavas (the latter being a visual symbol of paramilitary violence during "The Troubles") spa packages in early 2023. For more information, please see the *Guardian* (2023).

2022, i.e., after the events in question had occurred. Thus, rather than digital ethnography which entails following real-time conversations and being in direct mediated contact with digital participants (see Pink et al. 2016), the method for collecting memes in this study is more akin to digital archiving (see Beer and Burrows 2013), in that the memes were collected after the riots in question took place and I did not follow the online discussions that took place at the time of these events. I collected memes on different social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and Facebook, as they appeared there in various groups, discussion forums and pages. When looking for relevant memes, I searched the hashtag #Belfastriots on the social media platforms mentioned above. I furthermore put the phrases "Belfast Riots" and "Belfast Memes" into Google search and Reddit. Finally, I searched using the terms "Belfast" and "Northern Ireland" on web pages dedicated specifically to memes, including Know Your Meme, Memedroid, and Meme Generator. The rationale for this method of collection was to find as many relevant memes as possible, which meant exploring several different social media platforms, web pages and search engines.

Through these methods I gathered 47 memes which were deemed relevant for this study's aims, that is, memes which directly address political violence in contemporary Belfast. Once identified, the memes were stored digitally as images, and I also kept a detailed written log of the context in which they appeared online. Here, I took notes of where and when the memes were posted (i.e., which websites they appeared on and what date they were posted), how they were received (i.e., the amount of likes/upvotes/downvotes they received as well as any salient comments that were made about them), and whether – and if so how – they were subsequently remixed. Once stored, I begun the process of analysing the memes. The analytical process entailed that I went back and forth between the theoretical framework and the empirical data (i.e., the memes) when developing the findings.

## 4 Findings: Cultivating Social Resilience through Memetic Humour and the Normalisation of Violence?

In this section I discuss memes about Belfast riots, exploring them from the analytical vantage point of social resilience and answering the research question:

How are memes about political violence discursively situated vis-à-vis the cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, Northern Ireland?[2]

## 4.1 Theme One: Making Fun of the Riots

Many of the memes that were collected for this study make fun of the political violence which is depicted in them. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023), by poking fun at the rioting they in a sense "dethrone" the political struggles depicted in the memes, making them laughable, rather than worthy of serious deliberation. Thus, the memes in this category do what memes do best. They perform a kind of "playful politics" (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021) which is at the same time humorous and ideologically potent (see Shifman 2013). This is evident in the first meme of this study[3] in which we see Father Dougal McGuire from the British sitcom *Father Ted* exclaim: "Ted, you're not going to believe it! There's riots in Belfast because of a massive infringement of human right . . . Oh wait, it's just a flag". This meme references the flag protests of 2012 to 2013, as it expresses bewilderment at how much unrest the act of removing a flag from Belfast City Hall provoked. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023), at the heart of the meme, then, lies a critique of the "banal nationalism" (Billig 2010) inherent in the strong emotional attachment to the Union Jack so common in contemporary Belfast and Northern Ireland. The meme may thus be read as laying bare the "craziness" (Buzzanell 2010, 7) of the political system in Northern Ireland and implicitly calling for alternative political logics to be put to work. As such, this meme appears to be productive of socially resilient discourse in Northern Ireland – following Buzzanell's (2010) theorisation.

The second meme of this study also makes fun of the Belfast flag protests of 2012 to 2013.[4] In this one we are presented with a creative remix of the movie poster for the Hollywood blockbuster *Taken 3* – starring actor Liam Neeson. In the fictitious poster, we see Neeson's character and his daughter in the foreground, and a photo of a "flag-less" Belfast City Hall photoshopped into the back-

**2** The analytical themes discussed in this study – as well as several of the specific memes – also appear in Gusic and Lundqvist (2023). However, there they are analysed from a peace and conflict point of view, whereas in this chapter they are probed from the theoretical perspective of social resilience.

**3** The meme can be viewed here: https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/000/516/164/6cf.jpg.

**4** The meme can be viewed here: https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/masonry/000/514/190/d1d.png.

ground. The film has also been given a new subtitle in the remixed poster: "They Took the Fleg". This meme was widely circulated during and after the flag protests of 2012 to 2013, and as such it is featured on the Know Your Meme entry dedicated to the events (Northern Ireland Flag Protests 2012–2013). It, moreover, made rounds on the webpage Ireland Before You Die in the article "10 Things You'll Only Understand If You Are a Northerner" and on the Facebook page titled Northern Ireland Banter. The meme is similar to the Father Ted meme discussed above in its political argument, albeit with one important difference, namely, the spelling of the word "flag" as "fleg" in the subtitle of the movie. As noted by Reilly (2021) in his book on digital practices during episodes of political contention in Northern Ireland, the word "fleg" carries with it problematic, classist connotations. Supposedly, "fleg" is how Protestant working-class communities in Belfast would pronounce the word "flag". Rather than just being an innocent joke, Reilly stresses that this is a condescending imitation of how working-class Protestants (the main protagonists of the flag protests) speak, which positions them as inferior and unsophisticated (see Reilly 2021, 79–80). Hence, as argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023, 6323), this meme expresses a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the protagonists of the flag protests. It may therefore be understood as a strategy for "affirming identity anchors" (Buzzanell 2010, 6). While this may sometimes be a resilient communication strategy in the face of crisis as noted by Buzanell (2010), it is in this case also decidedly of the problematic kind, as such discourse arguably works to harden sectarian identities in Belfast. This is unlikely to help resolve the underlying issues that provoked the rioting in the first place – rather the opposite. Thus, here the meme appears antagonistic to the discursive cultivation of social resilience in Belfast, given that it pits different groups of people against one other rather than forging solidarity alliances in the face of crisis (see Berry 2022, 7).

## 4.2 Theme Two: Normalising the Violence

In addition to making fun of the violence, another prominent theme amongst the collected memes was the normalisation of violence. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023) rather than mocking the violence, the memes in this theme position rioting as "business as usual" in Belfast (6324). As an illustrative example, the third meme of this study[5] jokes about how the Baltimore riots of 2015 were seen as

5 The meme can be viewed here: https://images7.memedroid.com/images/UPLOADED118/5542943bcfb6d.jpeg.

"unimpressive" from the point of view of Belfast residents. This meme thus puts it out there that Belfast citizen have come to expect more "spectacular" riots than what they saw in Baltimore, given their own background as residents of a decidedly "riot-y" city. This meme was first made in 2015 and posted onto the website Memedroid, where it currently (November 2023) has an 85 percent positive rating based on 1,833 individual votes. Interestingly, the meme has subsequently been further remixed and updated in 2021 in the aftermath of the Washington DC riots, when protestors attempted to storm Capitol. In this updated iteration with the title "Belfast people judging the 'riot' in Washington"[6], the judges from Belfast are even less impressed by the riots – as evidenced by the lower scores and the use of quotation marks on the word "riot" – and thus, the notion that Belfast residents are the ultimate connoisseurs of what constitutes "a good riot" is (again) imprinted upon the reader. This remix was uploaded onto Memedroid on 8 January 2021, and at the time of writing (November 2023) it has a 72 percent approval rate based on 505 individual votes.

Another example of a meme that normalises violence in Belfast can be found in the fifth meme of this study – "Welcome to Belfast"[7]. Here we are presented with a "starter pack" about life in the city, which includes images of armed paramilitaries, a march by the Orange Order[8], a contentious unionist mural, riot police, and rioting. As argued by Gusic and Lundqvist (2023) many of the starter packs about Belfast refer to rioting, thus in a sense reinforcing the stereotype about the city as a place where political violence is part of the normal state of affairs. This resonates with Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience, which emphasises "crafting normalcy" as an important part in the discursive cultivation of social resilience. Individuals and communities who experience crisis tend to communicate that their situation is normal, even when it clearly is not: as a coping mechanism. Arguably, the memetic normalisation of rioting in Belfast serves this very purpose, of normalising what is not normal in order to cope with the situation. It is quite unexpected, though, that what is normalised through these memes is the crisis/riot itself. In Buzzanell's discussion of this mechanism, she instead highlights how people communicate their maintenance of daily routines (albeit often modified) despite the crisis. What happens, then, when it is the crisis itself that is discursively rendered normal through memes? On the one hand, it may provide a sense of relief, as people feel that the crisis is nothing out

**6** The meme can be viewed here: https://images7.memedroid.com/images/UPLOADED501/5ff813922392b.jpeg.

**7** The meme can be viewed here: https://i.imgur.com/VcFrl7v.jpg.

**8** The Orange Order is a polarising and traditionally rooted institution that stands in opposition to Irish nationalism while vigorously advocating Protestant culture.

of the ordinary – nothing to worry about. On the other hand, it may instil upon its audiences that violence is inevitable. It is conceivable that the latter notion may bar people from trying to change matters in the future, and thus such memes arguably display social resilience's conservative potential by helping people cope with the present, but at the (potential) cost of producing discourse which is defeatist in the face of crises (see Fahlberg et al. 2020; Elmqvist et al. 2019; Kim and Lim 2016). These notions are, however, merely a hypothesis at this point, as this study does not explore how people in Belfast receive these memes.

While this study does not explore audiences' reception of memes, we should note that the "Welcome to Belfast" starter pack (and several other memes in the larger corpus) contain violent imagery. In this specific instance, the meme shows armed paramilitaries from "The Troubles" as well as riot police in front of a burning building in what appears to be present-day Belfast. We can assume that seeing this imagery in their social media feeds will be traumatic for people who were afflicted by the violence in question, and as such the meme may cause communities in present-day Belfast to re-live the crisis of the past. This could contribute to a hardening of sectarian identities – or what Buzzanell (2010) calls "affirming identity anchors" (7). Still, the violent imagery may also be appropriated by users affected by the violence who can create their own memetic take on what happened, thus giving them agency to cope with (and possibly overcome) the trauma. For, as argued by Murru and Vicari (2021) memes allow for "a collective narration of challenging events through an already experienced and familiar format" (2425–2426). This is the inherent duality of memetic remembrance of violence: on the one hand possibly re-traumatising affected individuals and communities, and on the other hand possibly offering a way for them to "own" the violent narrative and come to a closure (see Silvestri 2018). The latter would appear to be conducive to the discursive cultivation of social resilience, as it involves 'bouncing ahead' (Qamar 2023, 1) of the crisis.

## Conclusions: Memetic Social Resilience? "It's complicated"

This chapter set out to study whether – and if so how – memes may contribute to the discursive cultivation of social resilience in the face of riots in Belfast, Northern Ireland. To this end, I analysed a corpus of memes which address political violence in present-Belfast, guided by a theoretical framework which incorporates both meme studies literature and social resilience literature. The memes which make fun of the violence in Belfast may – from a meme studies perspec-

tive – not be too surprising, as one of the defining characteristics of a meme is to be humorous (see Shifman 2013). Still, probing at this quality from a social resilience point of view yielded some interesting results. Here, I found that what matters for the discursive cultivation of social resilience is how the meme in question makes fun of violence. On the one hand, I discussed memes which appear to discursively criticise the underlying causes of the crisis – or in other words "recognizing the craziness" (Buzzanell 2010, 7) of the political system in Northern Ireland – thus aligning neatly with the cultivation of social resilience. On the other hand, I analysed memes which make fun of the rioters in a sectarian manner; hence barring solidarity with "the other" community in Belfast, and as such discursively working against the cultivation of social resilience.

The memes that normalise Belfast rioting may be read as a way of "crafting normalcy" (Buzzanell 2010, 3) in the face of the highly disruptive political violence. What is interesting here, though, is that what is rendered normal through these memes is the violence itself, rather than the mundane routines and practices of which Buzzanell (2010) speaks. Thus, I asked the question of what happens when memes discursively normalise political violence: Does it lead to a defeatist resignation to rioting, or is it instead a resilient coping mechanism? Ultimately, this cannot be answered solely through studying discourse, but it must also include an audience perspective. Essentially: What meaning do audiences in Belfast make out of the kinds of memes discussed in this study, and what actions and emotions (if any) do they provoke? In particular, we need to know more about whether audiences take the memes at face value or if they are more prone to reading them as satire (see Day 2018, 120). This could be elucidated through an interview-based study in Belfast, where audiences are asked for their take on these memes.

Furthermore, I analysed memes which contain violent imagery from Northern Ireland's troubled past. I noted that such memes may on the one hand contribute to a hardening of (sectarian) identities in present-day Belfast, while on the other hand they may allow people to produce their own take on the violence of the past, and thus, in a sense, come to terms with it. This, again, illustrates how memes about political violence may be both destructive and productive of the discursive cultivation of social resilience. In essence, then: "it's complicated".

Finally, this chapter has indicated that the "radicalization" (Berry 2022) of the social resilience concept makes it adept at capturing social practices which aim at the transformation of society, rather than merely the perpetuation of the status quo. This was illustrated by the analysis of memes which challenged (or failed to challenge) the lingering sectarian identities in post-conflict Belfast. Still, this widening of the social resilience concept also comes with its own challenges, namely the risk that it loses its analytical purchase by turning into a catch-all concept

which accommodates resistance as well as passive adaptation. This crux, I argue, needs to be critically considered when/if moving forward with social resilience as an analytical lens.

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# Part 3: **Circulation and Infrastructures**

Nelly Quemener

# Reactive Communities and Affective Intensities. A Methodological Proposal to Seize the Formation and Circulation of "Anti-System" Assertions on a YouTube Channel

**Abstract:** Based on a research project on "reactions to Dieudonné" – named after a controversial comedian repeatedly condemned for antisemitic speech –, this chapter examines the constitutive dynamic of the collective phenomenon drawn by the comments of Dieudonné's YouTube channel. It develops the idea of a reactive community, that takes shape in reaction to an "enemy" or the so-called "system", and that is characterised by a propensity for internal conflicts. It shows how reactive community might offer a relevant analytical grid for understanding the proliferation of antisemitic, homophobic and sexist statements.

**Keywords:** YouTube channel, antisemitic, polemic, affects, reactions

Based on a research project on "affective intensities and reactions to Dieudonné" (Quemener 2022) – named after a controversial comedian coming from the world of "café-théâtre" (French theatre comedy), repeatedly accused of and condemned for antisemitic speech –, this chapter examines the constitutive dynamic of the collective phenomenon drawn from the comments of Dieudonné's YouTube channel. dieudonné is a Black comedian, whose career as a stand-up performer started in the 1990s in a famous duet with a Jewish partner Elie Semoun, before they split at the end of the decade. Soon after he started a solo career, some of his public statements on Jews and the memory of Jewish genocide during the Second World War started to draw attention from the media. The wave of reactions Dieudonné provoked rapidly turned into repeated polemics and a strong public reprobation of his statements and persona, leading to his banishment from mainstream media in France. From the 2010s, parts of the controversies became displaced online. The series of websites and more blatantly the YouTube channel created by Dieudonné and his production company Les Éditions de la plume in 2014, thus became a privileged space for "counter-publics" (Fraser 2001) and for a self-identified "anti-system" phenomenon.

To better grasp the dynamics of discussion involving Dieudonné, our research has drawn an innovative approach from affect theories and, what we call in Cultural Studies, the "affective turn" (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Alloing


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and Pierre 2020). Such an approach appears relevant considering both the historical depth of the polemics and controversies[1] that punctuate Dieudonné's career and the intensity of the online phenomenon that we analyse in this chapter. It allows us to emphasise not only on the signification processes but also the intensification dynamics constitutive of the different polemics. More specifically, considering the highly conflictual and oppositional dimensions of these exchanges, this chapter defends the idea of a reactive community. This community takes shape "against" or in reaction to what is labelled as an "enemy", often described as the "system". It is also characterised by a strong propensity for internal conflicts and by the valorisation of the fact of reacting to any kind of topic or intervention, that are known to be polemical and/or that are constituted as polemical by the reactions they engender. In this chapter, we argue that reactive communities offer a relevant analytical grid for understanding the ways in which disqualifying discourses, especially antisemitic, homophobic and sexist statements, and conspiracy-inspired ideas are collectively recognised and erected as a mark of an "anti-system" posture and as a token gesture to becoming a respectable "anti-system" subject.

## 1 A Polemical Context

Since the beginning of the 2000s in the public debate, the name Dieudonné has regularly been associated with antisemitic views and with polemics and controversies, nourished by expressions of indignation and vivid condemnation. In mainstream media, more specifically in the daily national press, these polemics have materialised into peaks of media coverage. They show a progressive involvement of several public personalities coming from the world of comedy and the arts, as well as from non-profit organisations fighting against anti-Semitism and racism. They expanded in 2003 after a controversial performance on 1st December on the TV show *On ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde* broadcast on the public channel France 3 in which Dieudonné ironically invited young people from suburban areas to "join the axis of good, the American-Zionist axis". Perceived as an-

**1** Based on a discussion of the definitions given by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1991), Ruth Amossy (2014) and Juliette Rennes (2016), we make a distinction – that does not exclude overlapping – between the two communicational phenomena, considering the emotional expressions and verbal violence of the polemic and the confrontation of arguments and points of view of the controversy. Later in this chapter, we substitute this rather reductive dichotomy with the term "phenomenon made of chain reactions".

tisemitic, this performance marked a turning point in the mediatisation of the affairs concerning Dieudonné, with the implication and public condemnation of politicians and important government figures.

Two other episodes punctuated media coverage and signalled an intensification of media attention towards Dieudonné. The first one concerns the 2009 meeting of Dieudonné with the leader of the alt right party *Le Front National*, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who notoriously became the godfather of one of his daughters. This meeting took place soon after the invitation on stage of Robert Faurrison, a historian known for his negationist theories. Staged as acts of provocation, intended to catch public attention, this new proximity changed the way media looked at the so-called "slippages" ("dérapages") of Dieudonné and introduced the potentiality of an ideological conviction and project, serving the alt right, consisting of anti-Semitism and negationist views. Later, even though Dieudonné never clearly asserted his support for the alt right, he did not remove the doubt surrounding his potential ideological acquaintances (see Charaudeau 2015). Following those events, his name has been associated with a potential for polemics and extreme right ideas.

The second moment of intensification lies in the "Valls/Dieudonné affair", that in 2013 to 2014 saw the former minister of Domestic Affairs and former Prime minister Manuel Valls opposing Dieudonné. After the broadcast of an explicit antisemitic excerpt from Dieudonné's show *Le Mur*, Manuel Valls, who was at the time in charge of Domestic Affairs, decided to ban the show using the legal argument of preventing the risk of "troubles to public order". The mediatisation of the affair reached unprecedented heights, with almost 700 articles in a month in the national daily press and, at its peak, ten articles a day in some major newspapers. It drew upon two dynamics of intensification, one made of a polemical string, nourished by expressions of indignation and rejection, depicting Dieudonné as a repulsive person, the other made of a controversial string, with the exchange of legal arguments and a debate about the legitimacy of banning the show *Le Mur* in the name of "troubles to public order".

In these successive incidents of intense public attention, the media played a driving role. Yet, it would be presumptuous not to consider the essential implication of Dieudonné himself who built his notoriety on a discourse of victimisation and a denunciation of what he never stopped describing as unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism. This assertive image of victimhood, both on stage and in his online productions, relies on a posture of counterattack and systematic responses to public statements about his persona. It legitimises and nourishes a presumption of racism in the media, among the public and political elites, as well as, more generally, a paranoid representation of media and politics from the perspective of which the consensus about his banishment is considered dubious. It is also an economical force for Dieudonné's production company, which takes ad-

vantage of the adoption of an "anti-system" position. In this logic, the stage has first established itself as the most important space for the development of this distrustful discourse and of responses to accusations of anti-Semitism. In his shows, Dieudonné clearly promotes a discourse of competing memories, opposing the treatment of the Holocaust and that of colonialism in France, and a stereotypical representation of the so-called "Jewish lobby", which presumes domination by "Israel"[2].

The other major space of expression for Dieudonné is the web. Since the 2000s, Dieudonné has developed multiple websites. The early ones presented themselves as being animated by fans – the mobilisation of fans appearing as a strategy to mediate the voice of Dieudonné without assuming responsibility for the consequences of it. Despite some suggestions of anti-Semitism, they mainly deployed an Afrocentric discourse and created an impression of networking, staging their support to supposed allies – whether those were, or not, willing, or indeed real allies. Afterwards, Dieudonné and his production company, *les Éditions de la plume*, built a real online ecosystem made of: 1) an official, commercial site, dieudosphere.com, that sells DVDs of Dieudonné as well as tickets for his shows and that appears as the respectable showcase of his productions; 2) a more controversial website, Quenel+, presented by a convicted murderer, Germain Gaiffe-Cohen, and supplied with conspiracist and negationist articles from "reinformation" websites; 3) a YouTube channel, banned twice by the platform for "non-compliance with YouTube community rules".

The YouTube channel which caught most of our attention for this research creates a space "in-between", as proven by the editorial line of the videos, that hails the "dissidence" (a specific branch of the alt right movement), supporters of both alt right and alt left parties, fans or former fans of Dieudonné, as well as ordinary YouTube users, who might stumble by accident – thanks to the algorithm used by YouTube – upon a video of Dieudonné. Considering these different interpellations, videos of news and political comments mostly contain potentialities for polemics and the perspective of vivid debates – a perspective that the exploration of the comments confirms. The exchanges on YouTube appear as very conflictual and draw a strong opposition between supporters and detractors of Dieudonné. In this sense, the activity of the YouTube channel can be considered a pole of reactivity, co-constitutive of a triangle dynamic with the two other poles – the mediatisation and Dieudonné's productions. The whole question is how users appropriate and inhabit this space that is deemed, by mainstream media and by

2 We use quotes to insist on the fantasised and repulsive images of Israel in Dieudonné's productions.

Dieudonné himself, as "anti-system", and how to qualify the phenomenon they constitute regarding its conflictual dimensions.

## 2 Theorical Challenges

To seize the conflictual dynamic on the YouTube channel, this research had to face many theoretical and methodological challenges. Coming from representation and discourse analysis, we first tried to develop a discursive approach of the phenomenon with limited outcomes. A quick look at the online exchanges enlightens our theoretical dilemmas. Indeed, the collective phenomenon constituted by the YouTube comments appears to be very conflictual and highly "reactive". It shows chains of reactions, especially in the threads, that accelerate or decelerate, intensify, or weaken, designing specific temporal and relational dynamics[3]. Second, the conflictual dynamic of the YouTube comments proves to be changeable. Far from drawing a single line of conflict, it translates into multiple discourses, points of view, opinions and into several threads of opposition, that intermingle, overlap and subsume one another. Articulated with the previous point, it appears that the dynamics of intensification rely on entangled and co-constitutive logics of opposition. Eventually, despite the apparent dispersion of comments and exchanges, the collective phenomenon seems to embrace a common "anti-system" positioning, that intertwines with antisemitic views, opening a pathway to explore the way this "anti-system" and "antisemitic" dynamic materialises.

Considering the characteristics of the phenomenon, we realised that it was better to draw on its contradictory, "reactive" and sometimes tortuous features than look for "rational" conflicts of arguments and ideological unity. In other words, instead of highlighting the signification systems of the online exchanges and searching for a clear ideological line, we focused on the propensity of the phenomenon for intensification and its dynamic of chain reactions. We thus developed an approach that we referred to, after Lawrence Grossberg's work (1992a and b), as based on "affective intensities", and privileged the understanding of the affective dimensions of the phenomenon. In this approach, affects are considered as a force of encounter between texts, images and people, drawing distinct arrangements on different scales (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Puar 2005, 2012; Pailler and Vörös 2017). The aim of the study is to make sense of the relational and agential dynamic designed by online exchanges and comments and reflect upon their ideological ef-

**3** Suh affective dimensions of online practices are part of recent works: Marwick and boyd, 2010; Rogers, 2020.

fects and the power relationships they constitute and nourish. The focus is on comments as effects and on the effects of comments – that is to say, on comments as reactions and the reactions they create.

To make such an approach operational, we distinguished between two scales of analysis. The first scale is the macro-level that might correspond to, as we would call it, a macro assemblage (see Grossberg 2010; 2015). This level of analysis implies understanding the spatial distribution of comments on the YouTube channel by considering their specific timelines and chronologies or, at least, their (dis-)continuities. At this level, comments stand as traces of investments – they say something about the way the commentators get involved with the channel – but, more prominently, they participate in the importance and the value of the topics they are attached to. In other words, they take part in the valuation of certain topics by designating them as worthy of discussion and involvement as well as by shaping attention around them. Consequently, as Grossberg (1992a) suggests in his writings, looking at the macro-assemblage allows us to understand and design a "mattering map", meaning the topics and fields that are constituted as mattering and worthy of attention. In this process and dynamic, things that matter come with sensitive expectations – pleasure, disgust, hatred, love – that legitimise the involvement and the valuations that constitute them.

The second level of analysis is the micro-scale. It comes with a strong consideration given to digital devices, as both permitting and constraining practices, as well as favouring, in some ways, the intensification of exchanges. This level of analysis requires specifying what we mean by considering comments not only as text or images that produce significations but as reactions responding and leading to other reactions. Despite the insistence on the dynamic dimension, the notion of reaction implies a focus on the semiotisation of emotions in digital devices (see Ahmed 2004a and b; Julliard 2018). Whether they refer to explicit or implicit expressions of emotions, comments as reactions interest us as indicators of the accepted and acceptable, authorised and valued forms of the expression of sensitive feeling at a given time and in a given context. They reveal the way feelings might be expressed and which expressions might have value in this specific context. They "perform" feelings and sensibility through an ethos, that is to say they produce behaviours, attitudes, ways of taking part in a conversation through writing, vocabulary and speed of response. They display what is permitted in this space as well as what is designated and imposes itself as respectable (see Skeggs 2015, 2010, 2018; Skeggs and Wood 2012). They thus draw the valorised behaviours of this specific community and constitute regimes of value and respectability.

According to this approach, the macro- and micro-levels are co-constitutive even though they have an autonomy, do not necessarily match with one another and might not intermingle. To make sense of intensification processes, we thus

mainly examined the sequences and chains of reactions and responses drawn by comments, especially in threads but also outside specific threads and the dynamic they contribute to that are created at the macro-level. This understanding of such a dynamic allows us to grab the "configuration of attention", equivalent to the "mattering map" developed by Grossberg (1992a), constitutive of a specific space – here the YouTube Channel –, and the regime of values that come with it. Which topics, which issues, are given attention? How does this "configuration of attention" overlap ideological effects, by putting on the agenda certain questions instead of others? What does it tell us about the issues and topics that are instituted as worthy of attention and involvement?

In this perspective, this configuration/mattering map is also considered as a potential site of conflicts and resistances that might lead to re-assemblage. Such conflicts can lie in a relational positioning, sometimes opposition, to other spaces, such as the mainstream media (see Dalibert, Lamy and Quemener 2016). They can also happen at the micro-level and translate into negotiations and vivid discussions in comments and threads. The understanding of the micro-level thus gives us keys to identify how conflicts take shape as much in terms of views, opinions, definitions, as in terms of ethos, behaviours and value issues. It allows us to draw the line, in permanent actualisation, between "good" and "bad" subjects and seize emotional orientations to specific objects and identify figures of taste and disgust, love and hate (on Dieudonné's channel such examples are "the Jews", "Israel", "the system") which reflect the ideology of the community.

## 3 Methodological Challenges

The two levels of analysis we identified in theory have given birth to a distinguished "methodology tinkering" (Lécossais and Quemener 2018). To avoid strong bias in the selection of comments, we first decided to study the channel as a whole. Beside the analysis of a sample of the 343 videos published between August 2014 and December 2017 and of the editorial line they design, we collected all the comments associated with them, that is to say 150,504 comments corresponding to 39,395 accounts, and created a few quantitative indicators using a range of Excel functions: 1) the "conversational performance" of each video (see Pailler and Cervulle 2014, 2015); 2) the length of each comment in number of characters; 3) the place of the comment in the conversational dynamic ("single comments", "triggering comments", "comments in threads"); 4) the thread length, based on the number of replies; 5) the date and the distance between the publication of the video and comments. The main purpose of such a collection and codification was to map com-

ments using triangulations, pivots tables, correspondence of variables, and to grab peaks of activity and intensification of exchanges without ignoring the low activity spaces that condition them. It was also to create the conditions for zooms into the corpus and to understand the phenomenon at a local scale.

Despite the possible decontextualising effects of the Excel table, we paid attention to the mapping of comments as the effect of algorithms on the layout of practices (see Rieder, Matamoros-Fernandez and Coromina 2018) that materialise for instance in the circulation of videos or the highlighting of certain comments and threads. Moreover, we created an indicator that soon became structural allowing us to make sense of the distribution of comments and the intensification dynamics that we called "profiles of activity" based on the number of comments per account on the whole channel, weighted by the tendency to concentrate or spread comments out across different videos. These profiles of activity are a way of describing the activity and a kind of involvement on the channel considering that these are constituted and shaped by the comments in our corpus. They allowed us to make a correlation with the level of activity and length of the discussion threads and to examine the different assemblages of profiles that might lead to intensification dynamics.

Moreover, this last indicator seemed relevant in distancing oneself from a view of digital activity as expressions of identity (see Allard 2007; Allard and Blondeau 2007; Georges 2009) or designs of visibility (Cardon 2008). Even though comments refer to and produce identity marks, these appear so diverse and dispersed that they do not impose themselves as the most heuristic way to grasp the collective phenomenon on the channel. The indicator "profiles of activity" marks our refusal to fix accounts into specific identities or to think of digital activity as the inscription of pre-exiting (offline) practices. Instead, it apprehends each account as being defined and constituted by a modality of intervention and the involvement that it makes and draws, and to examine the effect of such activity, in relation, in specific videos or threads, to opinions, ideas and predilection topics. Thus, one major issue was to identify the activity of these different profiles within the channel, the topics, expressions, vocabulary and opinions they may bring and initiate while they circulate across time and space – here across different videos – and their role in the intensification processes.

To complete this general understanding of the arrangements on a macro-level, we developed a micro-scale research through a targeted study of certain parts of the corpus. This study aimed to understand dynamics of discussion on the local scale by looking at the specific sequences of comments, repetition processes, use of emotional expressions and argumentation. Attention was given to the correspondence between "styles" of writing, topics, opinions and emotional display and the different profiles of activity and even, identified commentators.

On this scale, some evidence became significant, for instance the message form including length, internal organisation, punctuation, typography, or the use of emojis. Another interesting point was to earnestly consider the (sometimes tortuous) argumentative logics, the development of demonstrations and their tone. All these elements contribute to design-accepted behaviours, ways of interacting and relating to Dieudonné and to other commentators, and thus to create the ethos of the channel.

## 4 The Assemblage of Diverse Profiles

The indicator "profiles of activity" led us to distinguish between three major profiles. The "passers-by" include accounts with very low activity – fewer than five comments on the whole channel – that nevertheless nourish all kinds of comment spaces, whether they are characterised by low, average or intense activity. They cover the vast majority (88.3%) of the 39,385 accounts for 37.7 percent of the comments. Materialising the ordinary course of the channel, their activity consists in commenting on few videos – most of the time even a single video – and making do with short, ephemeral interventions. They form the highest proportion of comments in the hours following the broadcast of the video and a large proportion of the comments triggering discussion threads. They make up a significant part in medium and long discussion threads. The "regulars" refer to middle-range commentators – between six and 50 comments on the whole channel. They form 12.1 percent of the accounts for 40.9 percent of comments in our corpus. They take part in local processes of intensification, either by feeding the ordinary course of exchanges through practices of dissemination of single comments on the channel or, for a minority of profiles, by concentrating their comments on a limited number of videos and/or on one or more discussion threads, showing an involvement in specific topics.

Finally, the "very active profiles" refers to an important activity, in the long run or in a short period of time. They form a visible part of the channel's population, despite their modest number – 0.6 percent of the accounts for 21.5 percent of the corpus. They distinguish themselves as major drivers of intensification dynamics in two different ways. Some "very active profiles" play a big part in disseminating topics, opinions and positions within a large number of videos (up to 50) and nourishing discussion threads on those topics. Some others tend to concentrate their comments on a limited range of videos. They may then get highly involved on a local scale, by producing up to 300 comments on a single video or even in a single thread. For most of those profiles, comments are generally long

and located in the discussion threads they feed into. They often assert opinions, positions and points of views, sometimes relying on conspiracy and alternative theories. Though they might appear very disparate and contradict one another, they share a common ethos, performing a refusal to give up and leave the last word to another commentator without a victory.

All these profiles form an unstable and living phenomenon. Identifying them provides tools to draw the dynamics of intensification in the different spaces corresponding to the videos of our corpus. The advent of spaces with little sustained activity and low-intensity phenomena is based on the assemblage of "passers-by" and, to a lesser extent, of "regulars", especially those with a strong tendency to disseminate comments on several videos. These two categories of profiles are characterised by short and punctual interventions, with a limited propensity for long and extended exchanges. Mainly located in the single comments, they tend to bounce off the video itself through a set of critical or laudatory comments. The exchanges in which they are involved are similar to chatter, often ephemeral, without a strong guideline and above all without a driving force. The study of the spaces with little sustained activity does, however, make it possible to identify some of the drivers of the intensification phenomena. On the one hand, the interventions of "passers-by" and "regulars" with dispersed activity participate, by accumulation, in the activity of the whole channel and can even, in a few rare cases, constitute their own intensification dynamic. On the other hand, the presence of commentators with a more systematic response practice is necessary to trigger discussion threads. The exchanges that increase in intensity are by consequence proportionally limited.

The advent of spaces with moderately sustained activity and phenomena of medium intensity is based on the most balanced combination of profiles. Within the latter are "passers-by", "regulars" and "very active profiles" with dispersed activity, who produce a set of one-off interventions and provide the basis for short or medium-sized discussion threads, particularly through their triggering comments. The presence of a reasonable proportion (over 20%) of "regulars" with average (meaning neither too dispersed nor too concentrated) and concentrated activity points to more sustained local investments, marked by a logic of insistence and replies within discussion threads that are consequently lengthened. Even though these logics are not intended to last forever, they give rise to a series of comments which may attract the attention of new commentators and lead to a diversification of profiles. Finally, within these spaces, a few "very active profiles" stand out in the longest threads and impose themselves as local sources of intensification alongside the "regulars" with average or concentrated activity.

The advent of spaces with very sustained activity and high intensity phenomena is based on a significant reversal in the composition of the profiles. The profiles

with dispersed activity, whether they are "regulars" or "very active", gradually give way to profiles with average and concentrated activity. The mix that emerges is somewhat complex. First, the "passers-by" and the "regulars" with dispersed activity continue to feed the single comments and the short and medium-sized discussion threads, which they help to trigger. They are joined by "very active profiles" with dispersed activity that play a big role in triggering discussions in different spaces. All these profiles support the dynamics of intensification through occasional interventions in the longer threads that feed either rallying or oppositional practices. Second, the "regulars" with an average and concentrated activity pursue their intensification role on the local scale with targeted interventions and a logic of strong involvement on specific topics. Lastly, the "very active profiles" with average and concentrated activity play the main role in the intensification of exchanges. Their action is predominantly located within the discussion threads, imposing itself as the real driving force behind their lengthening. It consists of an insistent practice, made up of a set of bounces and relaunches, the effects of which can be felt several days after the video's publication.

To summarise the general assemblage of the channel, we can say that it is partly inhabited by occasional contributors and their dotted presence, that feed exchanges on a local scale and guarantee the appearance of comments in the most discrete corners of the channel through the accumulation of small actions. It is also nourished by the sustained and intense involvement of the "very active profiles" and certain "regulars", consisting of systematic reactive invective or the defence of a point of view or a cause that is identifiable because of its repetitive dimension.

## 5 A Reactive Community

Beside the understanding of the role of each profile, another way to make sense of the online phenomena around Dieudonné implies examining it at a more micro-scale. The latter allows us to argue for the advent of what we call a reactive community. As we will see in this part, the notion of reactive community is a way for us to describe a collective phenomenon that does not present a discursive unity or an obvious ideological coherence but is instead constituted by an aggregate of contradictory practices that come together in a dynamic of opposition. One major characteristic of the reactive community, as we could design it based on this specific research, is that it is formed "against" or in reaction to what is instituted as an enemy. Another characteristic is its propensity for internal conflict and heated exchanges in which the simple fact of reacting is valued as reaction and for reaction's

sake. Displaying oneself, publicly taking part in the exchanges, interacting, even though it is violent, is held up by the collective dynamic as a condition for a respectable subject.

The "reactive" dimension of the examined collective phenomenon takes shape in, and is constitutive of, two dynamics of intensification. It first resides in the accumulation of single comments, affixed directly under the video, notably through the activity of "low active profiles" and "regulars" (especially with a tendency to disperse their comments). These single comments are mostly very short. They use a lot of emojis, punctuation marks and capital letters. They consist in expressive forms that materialise the relationship to Dieudonné or to the "system", developing both logics of acclamation and of insults and invective. At first sight, they establish a climate of favourable inclinations towards Dieudonné and an impression of massive support. Yet, they are also the field of explicit oppositions to targeted personalities, among which is Dieudonné himself, mostly associated with the "system" and possibly with the so-called "Jewish lobby". They then resort to expressions of disgust, revulsion and rejection, and to verbal violence as a way to disqualify targeted personalities or entities, to designate and produce them as "enemies".

Such a use of invective and disqualifying procedures scattered in single comments has productive effects on the feature of this specific reactive community. It leads to a trivialisation of verbal violence, whether racist, antisemitic, homophobic or sexist, and institutes it as part of the ethos of the channel. If some commentators' criticise and react to blatant racism or antisemitic speech for instance, they mainly do so by resorting to verbal violence themselves and feed a general dynamic of vivid reactions and offensiveness. Verbal violence, invective and insults, thus become a fully-fledged mode of intervention on the channel, a modality of exchange among others. They value "virile", violent, fearless behaviour and contribute to the promotion of a defensive posture and a "manly" masculinity as a response to the "system". They condition the advent of longer comments consisting of the articulation of antisemitism and conspiracy theories.

The "reactive" dimension of the examined collective phenomenon also relies on the lengthening of the discussion threads, by means of practices of relaunching and bouncing, carried by profiles that are occasionally or permanently involved. These threads that can reach, at their highest, 500 comments, distinguish themselves by a succession of long, affirmative comments that design peremptory assertion logics. They are the privileged field for the assertion of strong opinions and points of view, expressed and repeated with a confident tone despite their potential conspiracist inspirations, until the conversation vanishes. Rather than a dialogue of contradictory arguments aiming to convince interlocutors, they institute a crystallisation of positions and contribute to the promotion of the defence, whatever the cost and the sources, of one's own "truth", whether the latter deals

with religion, gender relationships, colonial history, international politics or domestic affairs and scandals (for example, the one following anti-burkini local laws or the legal actions after the accusations of rape against the controversial academic specialist on Islam, Tariq Ramadan). Each opinion acquires legitimacy from opposition to other opinions as well as from the implicit valorisation of assertive behaviour and of the refusal to give up in the confrontation.

The discussion threads, through the promotion of assertiveness, appear as an extension of the practices and the ethos identified in the single comments. They tend to establish "vigorous" opinions as guarantees of an "anti-system" position and contribute to the "manly" dimension of the interactions and the whole phenomenon. This latter comes with, and translates into, the banalisation of a virulent and condescending tone in the exchanges, that may be used against the so-called "enemies" (especially the personalities targeted by the videos and the commentators) as much as against other commentators, who are often set up as ignorant adversaries. Combined with insults and invectives, it makes aggression and defensiveness a shared mode of reaction and interaction, which creates both distance though disqualification and complicity through common behaviour. Moreover, it becomes a mark of the refusal to adopt the dominant point of view and to be fooled by the "system". It thus creates an environment favourable to the expression and spread of alarmist views of the world, using convoluted reasoning, and sharp opinions. In other words, the accumulation of comments through assertive repetition, the "vigour" and the strength of the intervention and the speech impose themselves as proof and modes of existence of regimes of counter-truthiness.

Both dynamics allow us to grab the spectrum of authorised and valued reactions of this reactive community. They draw an "anti-system" ethos: violent and aggressive behaviour, assertive ways of presenting oneself, vivid interactions that impose themselves as they challenge and refuse the propriety associated with the "system". Such an ethos, that is inscribed in the writing itself and in the relations and effects such writing produce, is a way that the "reactive" dimension of the collective phenomenon materialises. By refusing the righteousness of what is institutes as mainstream behaviour, it forges this community in reaction to what is established as an external enemy, in this case the "system". By allowing and implicitly encouraging aggression, defensiveness, by valorising the reaction whatever this reaction defends, it creates the conditions for the permanent actualisation of internal conflicts and for the legitimation of any argument, opinion and point of view, as long as the latter fulfils a logic of refusal of the "system".

## Conclusion: An Ephemerous Phenomenon?

The approach based on "affective intensities" that we deployed and presented in this chapter stems from a reflection on the status of discursive material and the need to go beyond the analysis of definitional quarrels to understand this highly polemical material and field. The aim was to understand YouTube comments as reactions producing reactions, and to place them in a dynamic of practices with constitutive effects, marked by processes of intensification and deceleration of exchanges. The methodology was elaborated to observe the way in which comments affect each other, and how they are distributed on a temporal and spatial scale and play a part in the collective development of the value and importance attached to certain topics. It led us to suggest a new way of understanding the collective phenomenon appearing online, through the notion of reactive communities.

This latter enlightens the processes by which disqualifying discourses, particularly antisemitic, homophobic and sexist discourses, are collectively authorized as a mark and token of new forms of respectability, in this case the "anti-system". It has thus proven in this research to be an interesting tool to describe collective phenomena without an apparent discursive unity. Yet it does not erase the relevance of looking at ideological processes. In our corpus, the "reactive" dimension of the community makes the antisemitic imaginary of a conspiracy, a Jewish "mafia" or the "lobby" possible, acceptable and even respectable. Antisemitism then appears as one of the shared elements of the community and as one of the preferred forms of the "anti-system". Even though it is subjected to debates on the channel, it finds a privileged field for expansion and is established as a view worthy of debate.

This last remark leads us to open a new set of reflections on the contours of reactive communities and to examine their role and place in the ideological processes. The elusive, labile and conflictual characteristic of reactive communities does not forsake the possibility of political instrumentalisation. It even creates a fertile ground for political and ideological involvements, serving electoral purposes and concrete objectives. More generally, the notion of a reactive community sheds a light on ideological effects of a polemical mode of existence in public debate nowadays. By reducing, if not excluding complexity, by favouring doubts, questions but also opinions on expert topics, by erecting defensiveness as a token of the "respectable subject", this polemical mode creates the conditions for the most extreme ideas to impose themselves and acquire legitimacy as part of an oppositional process.

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# The Womb, the Banknote and the Trolley. Elements of French Anti-Gender Visual Culture

**Abstract:** This chapter explores the development of visual vernaculars embedded in tweets that have been published by the French anti-gender movement. The latter took shape during the three following events: the law legalising same-sex marriage in France (2013); the moral panic about the concept of gender (2014–2018); the law opening assisted reproductive technology to women in same-sex couples and single women (2021). After the presentation of the growth of the anti-gender movement as a new political force in France over the past decade, this chapter addresses the key methodological issue of counting and identifying images by proposing a typology of their similarities and variations. In the last section, we consider an iconic pattern associating visual elements related to babies, wombs and money or trading, and show how it became persistent over time and increasingly fuelled the visual material on which the anti-gender movement has built its communication campaigns against the "commodification of living beings".

**Keywords:** visual vernacular, anti-gender movement, Twitter, content circulation, images similarities

The controlled communication surrounding the French movement *La Manif pour tous* (Protest for All), along with that of other associations established in connection with the movement against same-sex marriage (SSM) in France (2012–2013), was highlighted in both the media and academic literature. Protestors could find a list of demonstration gear (a "protestor's kit"[1]), "key expressions" to be repeated in off-the-cuff interviews and advice on how to react to "signs of provocation" at demonstrations (such as "kiss-ins" aiming to make same-sex couples visible)[2], hashtags to be used (see Cervulle and Pailler 2014), and an online self-staging glossary (see Raschini 2016). The production of discourse objects and collective texts

**1** "Je prends note du kit du manifestant" (I take note of the protestor's kit), *La Manif pour tous* 63: https://web.archive.org/web/20240219210533/http://lamanifpourtous63.weebly.com/je-prends-note-du-kit-du-manifestant.html.

**2** "Manif pour tous, une démonstration de force trop millimétrée," *FranceTV Info* : https ://blog.francetvinfo.fr/mariage-adoption-gay/2013/01/14/manif-pour-tous-une-demonstration-de-force-trop-millimetree.html.


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(such as manifestos), the use of specific expressions (e.g., "gender theory"), various grammars of protest (die-ins borrowed from events held to raise awareness of AIDS), as well as the appropriation and resignification of texts, images and songs have all contributed to the formation and structuring of political communities (see Kunert 2012). Multiple studies have shown that the use of images is one of the strategies employed by the far right to spread their ideology[3], much like internet memes that combine popular culture, humour and hate speech, and help trivialise extremist views on the web (see Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Askanius 2021). The use of internet memes to build political communities on online forums, such as 4chan, has been demonstrated (see Tuters and Hagen 2020). Political communities are thus also semiotic communities sharing repertoires of signs, types of expression and writing practices (see Julliard 2022).

In recent years, studies have argued in favour of a qualitative and quantitative approach to the analysis of born-digital corpora to shed light on the breadth of the social and cultural phenomena (e.g., debates, cultural identity, etc.) that they open up, while also producing precise scientific knowledge on the meaning of these phenomena (see Venturini et al. 2014). However, such methodological innovations are only really useful for text-based content, given the technical difficulties of collecting and processing multisemiotic corpora. It appears that new scaled-up mixed-method approaches using computer technology are unable to cope with all the semiotic registers through which these phenomena are expressed (see Courtois and Frissen 2023). As a result, research into online movements in France has generally failed to address the question of how the production and dissemination of images has contributed to the development of political communities (e.g., Bouté 2021). Yet the question is crucial, considering: 1) the increasing use of images in social media posts because of their high visibility (see Gunthert 2018; Chen and Dredze 2018), 2) the role played by images in spreading political ideas on the web, 3) the importance of images given the limited number of signs imposed by Twitter and 4) the role of the industrialisation and exploitation of images in the business model of digital cultural industries (see Alloing and Pierre 2017). For this reason, since 2017 we have been developing tools and methods to enable the systematic collection, exploration and processing of multisemiotic corpora (see Bottini and Julliard 2017).

Following Philips and Milner about the gradual polarisation of discourses in opposing movements (2021), we hypothesise that this "dichotomic semiotisation" is also communicated through a visual repertoire. In our view, "visual vernaculars," identified by the literature as being specific to each social media platform

**3** Images "appeal to the masses, build affective bonds, package and sell political agendas and transform ideology into a marketable object of consumption" (Askanius and Keller 2021, 3).

(see Pearce et al. 2020, 162), also vary according to the positioning in a debate and contribute to its polarisation.

This chapter explores the development of visual vernaculars specific to the anti-gender movement on Twitter and what it reveals about how the movement was organised. In addition, we address what kind of images were circulating in the anti-gender camp on Twitter over the course of the adoption of the law legalising SSM in France (2013), the debates around the spreading of "gender ideology" in society (and especially French schools) (2014–2018) and the attacks on the concept of gender, and the debates on the law opening up assisted reproductive technology (ART) to women in same-sex couples and single women (2021), which was presented by the anti-gender movement as the continuation of LGBT-friendly policies. One of the most frequently recurring topics across the various debates is the concept of the commodification of life.

In this chapter, we first present three specific debates that took place in France and the growth of the anti-gender movement as a new political force in the country over the past ten years. We then address the key issue of how to count, identify and track images in corpora of tweets, mainly by proposing a typology of similarities and variations characterising these images. Finally, in the last section, we consider the example of the iconic pattern associating semiotic elements related to babies, wombs and money or trading, and show how it became persistent over time and increasingly fuelled the visual material on which the anti-gender movement has built its communication campaigns in the past decade.

## 1 "Same-sex Marriage," "Gender Theory" and "Assisted Reproductive Technology for All" on Twitter: Three Corpora Over Ten Years

The research strands we present in this chapter are based on three separate studies, each of which followed one of the events that marked the decade 2010 to 2020 in France in terms of debates over gender and sexuality. An initial study focused on the use of hashtags during the debates on SSM in 2013, and documented the emergence of the reactionary movement, *La Manif pour tous* (Protest for all), on the French media scene. This study did not specifically explore the question of images, but it laid the methodological and theoretical foundations for a socio-technical approach to the formation of online communities of practice, particularly using the concept of "affect" as the overall framework for observing power

relationships in the digital sphere (see Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015). A second study addressed the controversy over "gender ideology" in France (especially in schools), between 2014 and 2017. This study developed a technical framework to analyse the definition of the aspects under debate in the text and images contained in the collected tweets (e.g., the meaning attributed to "gender differences" [*différence des sexes*] and the extent to which gender studies is an ideological issue). The study laid the methodological foundations for a technical-semiotic approach to the formation of online communities. Using the concepts of "affect" and "grab" (see Senft 2008), the practice of writing online could be understood as the manipulation of signs (e.g., the creation of images) to create an emotional involvement in the subject under debate. The texts and images produced in this way created a link between anti-gender communities and far-right communities. A third study, involving all the previous researchers, proposed an analysis of the visual imagery specific to the assisted reproductive technology (ART) debate in France between 2019 and 2021.

These three debates are linked by their subject matter, the actors involved and the types of stance taken: Twitter accounts directly or indirectly related to the new French reactionary right – which combines traditionalist Catholicism with an "unabashed" and commonplace far right – use modified, commented, remixed and resignified images to construct a fully-fledged semiotic universe. Moreover, the three debates can all be viewed as reopening the controversy on the definition of "gender difference", as they question the epistemic regime of gender and are a means of reiterating and thereby reinstating binary categorisation (see Cervulle and Julliard 2018).

Yet the three debates under consideration do not share the same characteristics in terms of the way in which the events played out. The first and third were confined to parliamentary debates, whereas the second mainly took place in the media following various government announcements or public speeches. Because of these differences and the different contexts in which the material was collected, this chapter is concerned less with comparing the three debates themselves and more with tracing the genealogy of the anti-gender movement on Twitter over the past ten years.

## 1.1 The ART Debate and Collection of Related Tweets

On 24 July 2019, the bioethics bill was presented to the French Council of Ministers and then to the National Assembly. The bill would make it possible for single women and women in same-sex relationships to access ART. As the text was being debated in the National Assembly, a first demonstration against the bioethics bill

was held on 6 October 2019, but failed to sway the Assembly's decision to adopt the law at the first reading on 15 October 15. Nonetheless it took almost two years for the National Assembly to pass the law on 29 June 2021, by 60 votes to 37 with four abstentions. In the meantime, the usual to-ing and fro-ing between the National Assembly and the Senate was particularly drawn out because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns in spring 2020, then 2021, which led to the debates being rescheduled several times. Both passages before each of the two houses gave rise to a demonstration and peaks in online exchanges: Opponents to the adoption of the bioethics bill took to the streets on 10 October 2020, 31 January and 8 June 2021. Interestingly, the joint committee formed to negotiate an agreement between the two houses failed in its task, whereupon the National Assembly passed the law, as it has the final word in this type of situation. As a last attempt to block the law, 60 opposition members of the Assembly sought the intervention of the Constitutional Council to have the law annulled. This was to no avail, as the Council examined the appeal at the end of July and promulgated the law shortly thereafter. As a result, ART is now authorised for single women and women in same-sex couples, but is not reimbursed by the French social security system. Moreover, the self-preservation of gametes, the creation of chimeric embryos and registration of two fathers for a child born through surrogacy abroad are prohibited.

A collection of tweets was organised after the bioethics bill had arrived at the National Assembly. Based on Twitter's streaming API with help from DMI-TCAT software (see Borra and Rieder 2014), it covered the period from 28 August 2019 to 31 August 2021, inclusive. For data capture using the streaming API, we chose a large number of keywords linked to the focal points of the debate, drawing on press articles from summer 2019 to identify them and determine the lexicon, the actors involved, their slogans and the dates of demonstrations. The following keywords – and some variations including common mistakes – were used: "LaManifPourTous" (Protest for All), "parents d'intention" (intended parents), "6octobre" (6 October), "bioéthique" (bioethics), "directAN" (National Assembly live), "directsenat" (Senate live), "GPA" (gestational surrogacy), "paternité" (paternity), "PMA" (medically assisted reproduction; [ART in English]), "PMAsanspere" (ART without a father), "procréation" (procreation); "taubira"[4], "eugénisme" (eugenics), etc. Nearly 12 million tweets were initially collected, most of which were not relevant[5]. We therefore decided to narrow the filter and built a corpus of tweets writ-

**4** Christiane Taubira, the French Minister of Justice between May 2012 and January 2016 was in charge of defending the bill opening up marriage to same-sex couples in the National Assembly. At the time, she was violently taken to task.

**5** "GPA" (gestational surrogacy), for example, also means "grade point average" in various education systems.

ten in French and containing the following keywords: “PMA”, “GPA”, “bioéthique” and “procréation”. We kept 1,116,557 tweets.

The images were collected in a second stage (2021). We looked for tweets with one or more links to images in Twitter’s search API based on their IDs recovered during the first collection and, when the tweets were still available, we recovered the images. Because of this time lag[6], it was impossible to collect some of the tweets –they had either been deleted or the accounts that had posted them had been suspended. In our corpus, there were 142,960 links to images still available from 120,774 tweets. A unique signature, SHA-1[7], was calculated for each of the 142,960 downloaded images. This signature enabled us to identify images that were exactly identical from a technical point of view (for example in the case of retweets). As a result, there are more mentions of images in the tweets than there are unique images (which may have been retweeted several times). This technique allowed us to identify 16,302 unique images in the ART corpus.

## 1.2 The Debate on Same-Sex Marriage and the Collection of Different Tweets

We should nonetheless mention that, in France, the ART debate did not begin with the introduction of the bioethics bill in the National Assembly. Back in 2012, when the bill on SSM was introduced, questions surrounding ART and surrogacy were publicly discussed, even though they were not on the agenda of the debate. When the text was presented to the National Assembly in November 2012, the parliamentary debate should have been a mere formality as both houses were held by government majority. However, over winter and spring 2012, the debate proved extremely intense and polarised, finding its way into mainstream and social media. At that time, the reactionary, largely Catholic right-wing movement calling itself “*La Manif pour tous*” (Protest for All) surfaced in the media, leading to a series of demonstrations and television coverage. The movement chose its name in response to the label that the government communication team had given to the bill: “*le mariage pour tous*” (marriage for all). While live television coverage of parliamentary debates is not new in France, in 2013 it was closely followed on the web, particularly on Twitter. The hashtags #directAN (National Assembly live) and #directSenat

**6** For material reasons (delays in hiring an IT engineer, the effect of the pandemic on work organisation, etc.), we were unable to shorten the interval between collecting the tweets via the Twitter streaming API and identifying the images in the tweets in the corpus using Twitter’s search API.

**7** Secure Hash Algorithm.

(Senate live)[8], which are normally only used for restrained commentaries on broadcasts, were combined with the much more verbose #mariagepourtous (marriage for all) and #manifpourtous (protest for all). It is significant that, at the time, the opposition to SSM was directly targeting the government and French President François Hollande rather than the French LGBTQI+ movement, which found itself mainly in the role of spectator rather than actor in the debates (see Cervulle and Pailler 2014). A tweet collection was organised during this period[9], not so much to follow all the debates as to monitor the development of *La Manif pour tous* in the media. The collection began in late January 2013 in the run-up to the National Assembly's first-reading of the text and was completed after the law was adopted in June 2013. We used the streaming API to collect tweets that included one of the following keywords: "manifpourtous" (protest for all), "mariagepourtous" (marriage for all), "#Taubira", "directAN" (National Assembly live), "directSenat" (Senate live), "mariagehomo" (gay marriage), "manifdelahonte" (demonstration of shame). To follow the development of the *Printemps français* (French spring) – a huge movement opposed to marriage reform and uniting traditional Catholics, identitarians and far-right activists –, other keywords related to their lexicon were added during the collection process: "printempsfrancais" (French spring), "francaisenrevolte" (French in revolt) and "veilleurs" (watchmen). A corpus of 964,087 tweets was thus compiled.

The images were collected eight years after the initial corpus was compiled (2021). Once again, we looked for tweets containing one or more mentions of images in Twitter's search API, based on their unique identifiers recovered during the first collection (tweet ID). When tweets were still available, we recovered their images with the same script as that written for the ART debate. The time lag meant that it was impossible to collect a very large number of images, either because they had been deleted or because the accounts that had posted them had closed or been suspended. There are 3,716 links to images, spread over 3,711 still available tweets. Again, a SHA-1 was calculated for each of the 3,716 downloaded images, enabling the identification of 1,547 unique images. Although the images collected are not representative, this corpus is nonetheless useful for studying the genealogy of the visual regime specific to the anti-gender and anti-ART movements that characterised opposition to SSM in 2012 to 2013.

**8** #directan, directAN and #directsenat generally refer to threads about ongoing debates at the National Assembly or the Senate.

**9** The tweets were collected using the /140dev framework developed by Adam Green in PHP/mySQL in the early 2010s.

https://web.archive.org/web/20130117025238/http:/140dev.com/free-twitter-api-source-code-library/twitter-database-server/.

## 1.3 The Debate on Gender Theory and the Collection of Related Tweets

The debates around gender theory (GT) stem from the Catholic Church's concern that a certain feminist and gendered vision of society could become internationally institutionalised over the course of the 1990s (see Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017). One of the Vatican's reactions to this institutionalisation (one of the expressions of which was SSM) was to work on the feminist lexicon to redefine the meaning of "abortion", "gender" and "gender studies". In 2005, the Pontifical Council for the Family produced the *Lexicon of Ambiguous and Controversial Terms on Family, Life and Ethical Issues*, in which the expression "gender theory" was proposed to bring to light the "secret aim" of gender studies: to "do away with sexual differentiation" and, beyond that, to "promote homosexuality". In one sense, the production of a new lexicon can be seen as a way of redefining a phenomenon. The expression "gender theory" was gradually gaining visibility in France, first, because of the introduction in 2011 of a distinction between "sex" and "gender" in some natural and life sciences textbooks for high school students, then in the debates on SSM in 2012 to 2013 and finally in the roll-out of the Basics of Equality teaching program in French schools[10] in 2013 and 2014. Initially taken up by the media and French political figures, the term "gender theory" came to replace "gender" or "gender studies", especially in the debates on SSM, and was used above all to imply opposition to gender studies and the political actions it inspired. The wider use of the expression "gender theory" also contributed to the organised build-up of this opposition. The history of how the expression "gender theory" was imposed to denote gender studies in France between 2011 and 2013 also signals that controlling the lexicon is crucial in imposing a viewpoint on a subject of debate, or at the very least in controlling the dynamic of the debate.

The tweet collection began in late summer 2014, following the reaction to the Basics of Equality scheme. Carried out using Twitter's streaming API along with the TOAST[11] tool, the collection spanned the period from 5 October 2014 to 17 July 2017. We chose keywords linked to the focal points of the debate, its lexicon, the actors involved and the dates of demonstrations, including: "theoriedugenre" (gender theory), "#genre" (gender), "manifpourtous" (protest for all) and "#5octobre" (5 October). Almost two million tweets containing one of these keywords were retrieved

**10** The "*ABCD de l'égalité*," an educational scheme aimed at promoting equality between boys and girls by deconstructing stereotypes in terms of professions, leisure activities, etc.

**11** TOAST: Outils pour l'Analyse Sémiotique de Twitter (tools for the semiotic analysis of Twitter) (see Bottini and Julliard 2017).

using the Twitter streaming API, with considerable noise[12], and a corpus of 107,209 tweets was compiled. As TOAST can be used for image collection, the collection was carried out almost concurrently[13]. In this corpus, 15,330 tweets contain 17,016 mentions of images, 15,734 of which contain links that were still accessible during the image collection. These links connect to 1,854 different images.

Our analysis of the formation of the anti-gender movement on Twitter based on practices of online content creation (particularly including text and images) therefore makes use of three corpora that are summarised in the table below (see Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1:** Corpora collected in the three studies on gender controversies on Twitter (2013–2021).

| Field | Date of collection 1 (text + metadata) | Number of tweets (total) | Date of collection 2 (images) | Number of tweets with images | Number of image URLs | Number of unique images |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SSM** | Jan.–June 2013 | 964,087 | Dec. 2021 | 3,711 | 3,716 | 1,547 |
| **GT** | Oct. 5, 2014–July 17, 2017 | 107,209 | Oct. 5, 2014–July 17, 2017 | 15,330 | 15,734 | 1,854 |
| **ART** | Aug. 28, 2019–Aug. 31, 2021 | 1,116,557 | June–Dec. 2021 | 120,774 | 142,960 | 16,302 |
| **Total** | | 2,187,853 | | 139,815 | 162,410 | 19,703 |

We began by carrying out simple counts to find our bearings in the corpus. In particular, we counted the accounts that had posted tweets and we identified the 2,683 accounts that had posted during all three debates. We also compared the images that we had managed to recover to identify those that had passed from one debate to another.

**12** The term “genre” appears in numerous tweets written in English, referring to a musical genre.

**13** With a delay ranging from a few hours to a few days.

# 2 A Visual Regime of the Anti-Gender Movement that Built Up Over Time

## 2.1 Four Types of Similarities Between Embedded Images

A semiotic analysis of unique images in the corpus relating to the "gender theory" debate revealed that in addition to technically identical images, there were several images that were identical from a semiotic viewpoint even if they were technically different and had unique signatures when computed by a SHA-1 algorithm. This showed that the same image could be published by several accounts without apparent links (e.g., retweets or subscriptions) and led to the hypothesis that the accounts had the same external source of inspiration.

We therefore propose four possible ways of linking images to each other to study the development of visual regimes:

1. images that are technically and semiotically identical;
2. images that are semiotically but not technically identical;
3. images that are clearly derived from the same original image (which are more or less easy to link together depending on the extent of the editing. This type includes combined or cropped images and also memes like image-macros with different texts, etc.);
4. images expressing the same iconic pattern[14], not materially derived from one another but thematically similar.

The corpus we present here includes a total of 19,703 unique images and 139,815 tweets containing images that were extracted from the three debates. The phenomenon of circulation, as we have just shown, applies to different types of (re)posting, whether or not the image is retweeted, used in an identical manner or edited. However, apart from identifying and counting retweets, which was done by the platform and its API, developing a method to automatically identify some

**14** We call "iconic pattern" the assembly of iconic signs whose circulation ends up reducing the effects of meaning.

This syntagm results from the association between the concept of "motif", used in musical analysis "to identify a modifiable harmonic, rhythmic, or melodic figure over time (repetition, variation, development, etc.)" (André 2007, 17–66; our translation), and the qualifier "iconic", to anchor this concept in the analysis of images. The multiplicity of variations of each assembled iconic sign, always together, ends up freezing, under certain socio-technical conditions and interpretative possibilities. In this way, we distinguish ours from approaches that focus on the analysis of works and their intrinsic meaning (which more often use "pictorial motif" or "visual motif").

types of image circulation was a much greater challenge[15]. How could this process be simplified?

Once we had familiarised ourselves with the context of the 139,815 tweets containing images, we began by using the "average hash" algorithm from the Python ImageHash library, which calculates an approximate signature for an image and thus automatically identifies variations of the same image (reframed, resized, text added). As the results were not entirely robust (some similarities were not identified without our understanding why, some variations were too significant for the images to be linked), "average hash" was primarily used to identify the most obvious similarities. Each image was assigned one or several tags regarding the debate(s) in which it appeared so that we could identify recurrences from one debate to another. Everything was then double-checked with the naked eye.

The images were thematically labelled so that they could be grouped, but the very purpose of this meticulous labelling was to identify variations and the persistence of a picture or an iconic pattern between different contexts several years apart. The groupings were far from straightforward, and we were required to go through the corpus several times to compare the interpretations of the different authors and select the most relevant category based on the context of the tweet, the corpus, the debate, or contemporary events, and sometimes also the origin of the image and the identification of cultural and political spaces in which it was circulating.

## 2.2 The Persistence of a Visual Regime in the Anti-Gender Movement

In 2018, we had hypothesised that crisis is the epistemological regime of gender (see Cervulle and Julliard 2018). In the French field, this was confirmed by the conflicts we observed around the definition of "gender difference" that have been playing out in several debates in the public sphere since the 1999 adoption of the civil solidarity pact, which enabled same-sex couples to enter into a civil union, parity in politics[16] and the opening of ART to women in same-sex couples and single

**15** The themes evoked in the images might not be mentioned in the body of the accompanying text, which makes it impossible to account for all the potential representations of a theme (especially in images) with a keyword search.

**16** In France, the adoption of parity in politics was justified, among other arguments, by the idea that men and women are different (the "difference between the sexes" being either naturalised or presented as the result of socialisation). The contributions of men and women to public decision making were therefore considered to be different.

women, for example. This may well explain the thematic coherence that we observed in the dataset of 19,703 unique images in the complete corpus under study, even though we did not choose the same keywords to collate tweets for each collection. Several themes also reappeared in the three debates: the fear of seeing "gender difference", "heterosexuality", "western masculinity" and the "father figure" being undermined, criticism of the "commodification of living beings" (more specifically wombs and babies), and the "hypersexualization of children".

Eighteen images featured in at least two of the three debates confirm this thematic continuity and the existence of visual regimes in the movements on social media, with some images reappearing after an eight-year interval. These images were shared 45 times during the SSM debate, 281 times during the GT debate and 88 times during the ART debate. Although sharing one of 18 images 414 times may not appear much compared to the 139,815 tweets in the entire corpus containing an image (0.29%), this figure does not fully convey the scale of the dissemination. First, we identified 81 deleted retweets that initially contained one of these 18 images in the ART sub-corpus. Second, we observed that four of the 18 images circulated as variations, resulting in 11 new images (one occurrence of each). The 18 images are not all related to the core visual regime of the anti-gender movement. For example, three of the 18 images directly mock one of the movement's leaders, who collapsed during a gathering, and another image pointed to the hypocrisy of the movement by remixing its logo. But most of the other images were used by the anti-gender movement to support its position, whether by criticising queer people (for example a picture of Thomas Beatie, a trans man who has given birth to three children), using cartoons or photomontages to speak out against paedophilia or the "sale of babies", or posting a photograph from Stephanie Sinclair showing pregnant bodies dressed in shimmering saris. Four other images present famous French scientists or columnists who aligned themselves with the positions of the anti-gender movement. Finally, two images are composed of slogans from *La Manif pour tous*, which also featured on placards during demonstrations.

It was not only topics and images that continued to reappear over the years. Throughout the three debates 2,683 accounts used the collected hashtags, sometimes frequently. Three of these accounts posted one or more of the 18 images that played a central role in perpetuating the visual regime of the anti-gender movement over a period of at least eight years. One of these accounts, which was created in April 2013 and immediately expressed support for *La Manif pour tous*, had accumulated over 13,400 followers by 2021. It shared eight of the 18 recurring images in 15 tweets posted between 2014 and 2021 and sometimes shared the same image twice during the debates on gender theory and ART. We also identified 41 retweets by other accounts of images posted by this account. In other words, 56 occurrences of the images in our corpora are linked in some way to

this account. Finally, the illustrated tweets that this account posted during the ART debate all included the same text ("*#ART without a father #Gestational surrogacy: NO, NO and NO!! MACRON GET OUT!*"), regardless of the attached image.

We can therefore begin to build a visual memory of the anti-gender debates that helped to link the various movements (against SSM and ART, educational initiatives to promote gender equality, etc.), reiterated arguments in support of a position and sent a signal to potential supporters of new movements. Technically duplicated or semiotically equivalent pictures cannot be the only elements to support such a visual memory, so the two last types of potential similarity that we identified, namely edited images and images expressing the same iconic patterns must also be considered here. Materially speaking, an iconic pattern may appear in different images that are not necessarily variations of each other but are linked thematically (identifying such similarities relies heavily on effective labelling).

## 2.3 The "Commodification of Living Beings", a Circulating Iconic Pattern

We would like to focus on a picture which illustrates the circulation of the iconic pattern expressing the "commodification of living beings". The photograph showing pregnant bodies dressed in shimmering saris that we mentioned above was taken in 2008 by Stephanie Sinclair from VII Network for a report on gestational surrogacy in India. The photographer, known for her feminism and her efforts to fight against the exploitation of women in Global South countries, has published 33 of her photographs on her website[17]. Since 2008, one of the photos in particular has been used by the mainstream press to illustrate articles on surrogacy, often through the prism of the exploitation of women[18]. The photo has also been used to illustrate the anti-surrogacy discourse of pro-life websites such as that of the European Institute of Bioethics[19]. It features in the GT sub-corpus (one occurrence) and the ART sub-corpus (14 occurrences including four deleted). In addition, a black and white variant of this picture appears in the ART corpus (one occurrence). On this version of Sinclair's photograph, a text in French has been added, which can be translated as follows: "Sarah is Indian. She rents her womb for €45,000 to a French homosexual couple. Is this what they call progress?".

**17** See the photographer's website: https://stephaniesinclair.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Wombs-for-Rent/G00009BTG8ME9BWw/I00001Cpw_.hOmJA.

**18** See Amelia Gentleman, "India Nurtures Business of Surrogate Motherhood", *New York Times*, 10 March 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/world/asia/10surrogate.html.

**19** https://www.ieb-eib.org/en/.

These reiterations contribute to the debate by integrating signs of money or trading directly in the picture. The risk of the commodification of living beings has frequently been held up by the Catholic Church in response to questions raised by bioethics since the end of the twentieth century, and this combination of pregnant bellies and trading symbols as a visual idea was repeated throughout the three debates.

The iconic pattern takes the form of an image-based oxymoron, combining an element symbolising human procreation (a pregnant belly, a baby) and an element symbolising trading (shopping trolleys, bar codes, currency symbols such as dollars or euros). A few examples of this pattern were found in the SSM debate and the variety increased in the ART debate. It is one of the most prominent examples of iconic patterns to feature in at least two of the three debates. The final debate alone gave rise to 214 unique images depicting the same pattern, and these images were embedded in 2,061 different tweets. Unsurprisingly, the increasing presence of this pattern reflects not only the ability of Twitter users to remix pictures but also various campaigns involving visual material and the staging of happenings in the public space.

During the GT debate, for example, the VigiGender association distributed a brochure in schools containing illustrations that circulated widely on social media and Twitter in particular. The brochure seeks to reveal what it sees as the hidden aims behind various measures adopted by the French government (SSM, the "Basics of Equality" program), namely to promote "sexual undifferentiation" and homosexuality and to "hypersexualize young children". VigiGender was concerned that the law on marriage and adoption for same-sex couples would "prepare minds for the commodification of human beings and the 'modern' slavery of gestational surrogacy"[20]. To illustrate its concerns, VigiGender used various visual representations in the brochure, including one of a black silhouette of a pregnant belly bearing a euro bank note.

Later, during the ART debate, the pattern was reused, but this time there was no need to edit pre-existing pictures. Instead, the "*Marchons enfants*" collective organised happenings in the public space in various French cities on 8 March 2020. The collective thus provided images showing young women dressed as Marianne, the symbolic figure of the French Republic (Phrygian cap, tricolour cockade), pushing trolleys in which plastic baby dolls were seated on fake money bearing the image of French President Emmanuel Macron. In Paris, the event was staged in a very elaborate way (tents were set up for women to put on make-up and costumes,

**20** See VigiGender, "Le genre en images. Quelle société voulons-nous pour nos enfants?", http://www.vigi-gender.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Livret-genre-%C3%A9dition-2-site-1.pdf.

dozens of trolleys were placed in front of the National Assembly, the women arrived on stage and a speech was given by the president of *La Manif pour tous*, while placards with various slogans were waved at key moments in the speech and smoke bombs were set off)[21]. The set of unique images that were published and embedded in tweets after this happening represent more than half of the occurrences (1,366) of the iconic pattern for the category "the commodification of living beings".

## Conclusion

By presenting a panorama of recurrent anti-gender visual material produced by the far right and conservative right in France, we have demonstrated that a visual vernacular has built up over the past ten years, based on patterns reproduced or derived from previous images. Although the images were posted by Twitter users, some of them had a long history in the mainstream media while other pictures were part of campaigns targeting social media platforms more or less directly: Some pictures in the VigiGender campaign were never designed to target social media, but the pictures of "Mariannes" pushing babies and bank notes in their trolleys were always intended to go viral. A decade of anti-gender movements has witnessed the progressive appropriation of visual remixes by French conservatives, both regular users and communication agencies working for the Catholic Church. The ability to produce visual content and let users share it online might be the sign of a very well-structured movement. The kind of structure at stake should be further explored. Such an investigation had been, for example, conducted by Jen Schradie during the 2016 election in the USA (see Schradie 2019). The sociologist demonstrated that users' behaviours on social media were not spontaneously aligned with their camp. To avoid the discursive dispersion of their grassroots activists, both alt-right and religious movements established a very hierarchical communication strategy by producing material that could be reposted by their members on social and stimulate algorithms accordingly.

Our chapter aimed to examine the temporality of content circulation. Most studies that focus on content circulation at the platform level rely on some event coherence and chronological unity: The number of "viral" hashtags often corresponds to a relatively short period, sometimes just a few hours, with a clear be-

**21** Photos of the "*Marchons enfants*" event on 8 March can be seen on the *La Manif pour tous* website: https://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/mobilisations/retour-sur-les-actions-marchons-enfants-du-8-mars.

ginning and end. It's a homogeneous event, and the time of this event coincides with the chronological time that the study can reconstruct from the collected dataset. In contrast, our study focuses on three distinct events, each with distinct hashtags, actors who may renew or sometimes change their names (such as "La Manif Pour Tous" becoming "Le Syndicat de la Famille", etc.), and several months separating these events over almost ten years, etc. However, these events share a political coherence: The reopening of debates attracts previously mobilised users who engage with entirely new actors, images resurface, are remixed and adopted by these new actors, etc.

This raises questions about how one can observe circulations across the three events, as the multiple traces of usage distributed over time are too distinct to be approached as a single and homogeneous event. Nevertheless, they are sufficiently interconnected to suggest a long-term political and cultural transformation (which is particularly relevant in digital media usage related to social protest [see Riboni 2023]). This composite object unfolding over time also has specific methodological requirements. Indeed, for a single event on a platform, content circulations are typically represented by studying variations in the number of messages or images within an indistinct mass of users, or by illustrating the circulation of content through the social graph of users. In both cases, whether through content statistics or user network mapping, the analysis tends to flatten the chronology. In the case of our study, the chronological perspective reveals what has survived from one event to another, prompting consideration of content or individuals that may be less important in other types of approaches but are more structuring from a semiotic standpoint.

This invites to move from an approach considering images as quantifiable units to viewing images as a semiotic variety. This chronological approach to content circulation by serialising distinct events leads us to a new perspective. In recent years, software[22] has provided the opportunity to represent the temporality of content publication by zooming in and out of a chronological timeline. Zooming in allows the individual examination of messages or images, while zooming out enables the consideration of daily, monthly, or annual content trends. Our approach employs a precisely opposite mechanism: The more we focus on a single event, the more we approach it by exploring data through this mass. As we begin to zoom out over the entire study period, we shift attention to users or images notable for their persistence across different events.

22 See for example, the software developed in javascript by the knightlab: https://timeline.knightlab.com/.

Most of the time, the figures that make virality visible primarily account for most of the content published during an event. In the case of images, these are often retweeted images (thus technically identical) or semiotically very similar ones that are given preference. Conversely, when expanding the scope of observation to the entire chronology, it is the variations in images that become more apparent. The development of a visual regime becomes perceptible, persisting from one peak of virality to another. Additionally, one discovers "intermediate" images that may not have been reposted or remixed extensively and may not have appeared in the most viewed images. Observing the dissemination of semiotic elements then partly diverges from solely observing the circulation of messages or images, aiming to demonstrate their relationships and complementarities over time.

Once this "genealogy" of images becomes perceptible and is separated from the mass of initial data, some of the content producers, whether individuals or professionals, also come to the forefront. Indeed, certain approaches to virality or memes tend to minimise the context of production or reduce this context to the platform where the content emerges. However, while platforms play a concrete role in content circulation, certain types of actors entirely external to them work on remixing and ensuring the longevity of specific textual or visual content by adapting and republishing them. For instance, prescriptive actors (such as Catholic associations) construct a public communication campaign based on an already existing visual regime (the iconic motif of the belly and bills), which is then promoted by media intermediaries: conservative press, other associations and their online accounts. These prescriptive actors take advantage of the centrality of their position and are subsequently validated by the followers of these prominent accounts, who in turn engage in hashtag indexing and retweets. All these actors and their role in the circulation of textual and visual content deserve particular attention.

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Bruno Vétel

# On the Move: Played Characters Circulations through Online Landscapes and Infrastructures

**Abstract:** This chapter addresses a complex issue: The reconnection of player mobility to the circulation of their in-game characters. Within the context of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), players often develop deep emotional attachments to their in-game characters over time. These attachments, cultivated year after year, anchor players to specific gaming territories and in-game relationships. Our study investigates the intricate socio-technical relationships between players and their in-game characters, a phenomenon we term the player-character "assemblage". At the level of each gaming server's infrastructure, commonly referred to as a "shard", these assemblages exert profound influences on the broader gaming dynamics, giving rise to distinct social contexts. Our research draws upon empirical investigations conducted within the MMOG Dofus (2010–2016), encompassing 40 semi-structured interviews with players and employees of Ankama Company in Roubaix, complemented by quantitative data collected from gaming servers. As a supplementary investigation, we also extend our scrutiny to League of Legends (Riot Games 2009) during the years 2022 to 2023, utilising online observations on platforms like Discord and Reddit to provide a comprehensive examination of these sociotechnical dynamics.

**Keywords:** migration, mobility, circulation, infrastructure, assemblage, video game

After the recent acquisition announcement for $44 billion of Twitter by Elon Musk on 26 October 2022, the "Migration of users" from an online service to another comparable challenger became both, a hot topic and a common language analogy. Customer choice instability was reinforced by dramatic changes Musk made to the design of Twitter, the acceleration of its monetisation and a degradation of its moderation quality.

During the following month, the "migration issue" had become viral, with online media promoting a Twitter alternative called Mastodon, a non-commercial open-source social network, based on less centralised network architectures.


https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111311371-012

Seven new hashtags[1] aggregated most of the discussions about "migration opportunities", while dozens of online media published tutorials to help users move from Twitter to Mastodon, even issuing a "Movetodon" service to help them.

During this month period, researchers (Zia et al. 2023) conducted statistics analysis showing a steep rise of Mastodon subscriptions coming from Twitter users, with more than 136,000 accounts' "migration". Reinforcing the migratory analogy, they gave it the title "Flocking to Mastodon: tracking the great Twitter migration".

This media effervescence created a scale change in the number of Mastodon users but didn't do much harm to Twitter's user base of hundreds of millions. Whereas during 2023, other more commercial alternatives like Thread, Bluesky, Hive, Cohost, or Post tried to take advantage of this "migration trend", starting to attract a significant number of users[2], those 10 months of ongoing "migration" media coverage shed light on a central strategic issue for these companies proposing online services relying on massive social "network effects" (Hendler and Golbeck 2008): How to retain users to monetise their attention and their digital content productions? It also naturalised the migratory terminology, when addressing highly political issues regarding weaknesses of State regulation to guarantee ethical equilibrium between protection of users' private lives, content moderation and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, the issue addressed by the media is not really dealing with "migration" of refugees and border polices, but rather with customers subscribing and unsubscribing to online services, presumably without moving from their couch.

It is trickier to figure out geographical migrations' issues "inside an online service". A service based on a digital geographical space would be a prerequisite. Cartographic online services like OpenStreetMap or Google Map meet this requirement, but most of them are not embedding complex online social interactions of users that could legitimate the use of the concept of migration. The most complex geographical online services are to be found elsewhere, among those being crossed mostly by teenagers or adults that are still fans of Fantasy, Manga, or Science Fiction. Those huge geographical digital spaces, densely crossed by online users, are Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOGs).

Our proposed scope of research defines online gaming platforms as a dynamic assemblage influenced by its Client-Server network architecture and the sociotechnical features of played characters. It is therefore essential to consider the Sciences and Technologies Studies (STS) perspective of online video games

1 #Mastodon, #MastodonMigration, #ByeByeTwitter, #GoodByeTwitter, #TwitterMigration, #MastodonSocial and #RIPTwitter.

2 https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/07/tech/meta-social-media-dominance-threads/index.html.

and played characters, taking into account social effects of infrastructures (see Bowker et al. 2010), for instance the effects of "infrastructure inversions" (Bowker 1994), in our case blurring the intelligibility of circulations of played characters among gaming servers and naturalising infrastructural constraints.

In this current chapter we answer the following question: If we consider gaming servers and video gamer characters as a software infrastructure, what does it imply for the analysis of the circulation of characters within a game itself? And what are their notable effects on players' sociability? To provide an initial answer, we show how gaming servers and played characters are "infrastructuring" (see Pipek and Wulf 2009) specific sociotechnical relations to online social neighbourhoods – i.e., creating infrastructural alignment and navigation.

As for the literature review, investigations of the circulation of characters encompass two primary areas of study, namely, video game and online platform studies. The former deals with MMORPGs, encompassing ethnographic investigations (see Auray 2003; Lofgren and Fefferman 2007; Pearce and Artemisa 2009; Piéron 2019) and surveys of online gamers' community platforms (see Hou et al. 2011; Bergstrom and Poor 2021). These studies focus on forms and dynamics of players' sociability while their in-game environment is changing. The latter takes advantage of various non-ethnographic methodologies to emphasise motivations for user online accounts creations on multiple platforms and its subsequent uses, non uses, or deletion (see Brubaker et al. 2014; Fiesler and Dym 2020; Rogers 2020; Edwards and Boellstorff 2021).

The methodology is based on the investigation of two Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)[3]. The first game is Dofus (Ankama Games 2004) which was studied between 2010 and 2016 by mean of 40 interviews of players and employees, supplemented by technical data retrieved from gaming servers. The second game, League of Legends (Riot Games 2009), was studied in 2022 and 2023 and investigated thanks to online observations conducted on Discord and Reddit[4].

The first part of the chapter presents a literature review. The second part exposes a layered infrastructure model of gaming servers called "shards" and

**3** The game design of these two MMOGs differs mainly on the following points. Dofus is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), which proposes a real time geographical exploration where inter-players sociabilities are focused on informal chats and trading of digital assets useful for their character. From time to time, the game can switch to turn-by-turn combat sessions, like a chess game. League of Legends is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game, where the player embodies a "Summoner" who is leading an army. This is a real-time game, where players must defend their individual base and destroy that of the opponent's.

**4** The main subreddit investigated was named *r/leagueoflegends*. The three Discord channels targeted were "League of Legends", "League of Legends FR" and "r/leagueoflegends".

played characters, which are used in the rest of the essay to analyse the different constraints imposed to player's social dynamics. The third part describes our results as a typology of player's character circulations.

# 1 Literature Review

Our literature review can be divided in two primary sections. First, studies related to online video games, and second, those focused on online platforms centred on textual, image and video sharing.

## 1.1 Online Game Studies

Regarding studies on online video game character circulation, they can be classified into two categories: Four ethnographic research works and two data scraping analyses from video gamer bulletin boards or public channels on Discord. These studies exclusively concentrated on MMORPGs.

The circulation of played characters within a single online geographical environment has been discussed by two epidemiologists (see Lofgren and Fefferman 2007). They briefly examined a specific migration phenomenon within the realm of online gaming, exemplified by a virtual pandemic in World of Warcraft (WoW) in 2005. During a special event raid, players faced the challenge of combating the demon Hakkar the Soulflayer. However, an unintended computer code leak caused Hakkar's spell named "Corrupted Blood" to spread beyond the instance of the raid, repeatedly affecting and killing players' characters across the game world. The two epidemiologists discuss the WoW Pandemic as an alternative to computer simulations, as they qualified it as an *in vitro* social experiment, resembling a "Petri Dish". In contrast, for most social science researchers, circulations described by the WoW Pandemic were represented by *in vivo* research settings, as player behaviours were influenced by both in-game and many other kinds of social constraints.

Another study deals with ingame played characters' mobility, inside one game but also outside of it. The anthropologist Celia Pearce conducted a detailed study on the coordinated circulation of played characters both within a game and between multiple online games, akin to narrating an "epic exile" (see Pearce and Artemisa 2009). Tens of thousands of players of the beta version of *Uru: Age beyond Myst* (Cyan World, 2003) were forced to exit the game after the shutdown of the gaming servers by the company. A leading part of the group worked to maintain a strong Ururian identity, even though it moved from game to game.

A bulletin board named "Koalanet" provided an intermediate space of cultural sharing and maintenance. It was also used to organise the quest for a new game to settle the community. This communication device is not analysed further by Pearce, but it is worth underlining that it is not a game, but an asynchronous textual communication platform, used in alternation, or simultaneously, with gaming sessions.

After 18 months of investigation, hundreds of players established themselves on Second Life (see Linden Lab 2003) and There.com (Makena Technologies 2003), forming what could be described as a "multigaming guild". Tensions arose with existing players on these platforms as the latter were anxious about the Uru's collective being in There.com, and afraid that the strange cultural traits they consolidated and their strong cohesion as a community could cause destabilisation of There.com social equilibriums. All this led to the harassment of Ururians who tried to negotiate with Makena Technologies to move to more secured and distant places inside the game which was an isolated island[5]. This very detailed study underpins the importance of the shared and also the conflicting dimensions of the culture of collective gaming, as factors influencing the circulation of played characters, in-game and between different online games. Following Pearce, we adopt an *in vivo* perspective to interpret our data about played characters circulations.

Two French-speaking researchers, Auray (2003) and Piéron (2019) presented ethnographic accounts of played character circulations in MMORPGs. Auray primarily explored individual inter-game migration histories as an incentive for preferential homogamous friendly ties in Anarchy Online (Funcom 2001), while Piéron focused on describing player circulations between guild structures within a game in Albion Online (Sandbox Interactive 2017) and Black Desert Online (Pearl Abyss 2015)[6].

Circulations of players between different online video games are investigated by two other research works using quantitative methodologies. The migration of gamers outside of World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) was examined by Hou et al. (2011) using a survey conducted on Taiwanese videogame fan websites. They applied the migratory push-pull-mooring (PPM) model to investi-

**5** In 2004, hackers managed to reverse engineer the original Uru game and then negotiate with Cyan World for the right to reopen their own Uru servers under the name "Until Uru". The Ururians "assimilated" on There.com refused to go back, and "Until Uru" became a place for newcomers and a memorial for ancient players, but not a place of collective immigration.

**6** This researcher has spent time in two guilds as a participant ethnographer. She focuses its analysis on guilds structures and their instability as observed in a multigaming guild, the community bulletin board of a guild and inter-guilds circulation in Albion Online.

gate player incentives for switching to new video games[7]. This model states that the migration is a consequence of the interaction between the incentives pushing away from the place of origin and those pulling at the destination, and mooring factors that generate inertia in the migration decisions, like lifestyle, cultural and spatial factors. Two authors in the field of Information Systems Studies (see Gerhart and Koohikamali 2019) explain why in the context of switches between information technologies like video games, migrations framework are more adapted than classical adoption ones. The adoption refers to the use of a brand-new system, whereas migration modelises particular cases where the user is adopting a system that fills relatively similar needs.

Hou et al. (2011) collected 167 responses of players with no information provided on the destination video games and their specificities. Thus, methodological biases make the validation of the hypothesis difficult to generalise. The transposition of the PPM model to an online gaming context is stimulating, but nonetheless it relies on a problematic analogy that is not discussed in depth by the authors. The PPM model is developed as a conceptual framework to describe physical movement of people, whereas Hou et al. state it is applied to customer's gaming switches, without spatial constraints. Their proposed model remains consistent with the investigated object: Based on a PPM model highly focused on social incentives for making coordinated choices, it analyses switches between video games, themselves relying on socially intense dynamics.

A study of Reddit based on web scraping of 10 million posts investigates communications within gamer communities centred on the Fallout, Elderscroll, and Civilization franchises. It was conducted by Bergstrom and Poor (2021)[8] who focused on the communication characteristics of gamers who engaged with multiple games within a franchise, sometimes choosing to disengage from their former preferred game.

Notably, these studies share several common biases, including, first, a lack of consideration for infrastructure constraints on played character circulations, as among all the gaming servers' structure is often not mentioned. Second, the use of the term "player" instead of "player's character", generates a blurry comprehension of the interaction between the social dimension of the game and software infrastructures, thus keeping research questions away from those analysing the player-character assemblage. Third, these studies are reluctant to distinguish the specific and similar aspects of online games from other online platforms.

7 In the realm of online services, the PPM model was formerly used to investigate Chinese and Singaporean students uses of Social Network Sites (C. Zengyan et al. 2009).

8 Another paper investigates the same subreddits but focuses on the comment structure (length and frequency) of fans faithful to the old game and the other gamers (see Bergstrom and Poor 2022).

### 1.2 Online Platform Studies

Online platforms literature deals with all kinds of online services. Fiesler and Dym (2020) conducted 28 in-depth interviews and 1,886 survey responses from transformative fandom participants of the Archive Of Our Own (AO3), a website for fans of cultural remixes. They defined "online migration" as the shift from one online platform to another without deleting the previous account. Even if the practice depicted as an "online migration" is absolutely valuable as well as an empirically dominant one, the terminology is a bit confusing. Hence, "online migration" does not specify explicitly any link between the switching of an online service and the decision to preserve its account on a former service.

We would rather follow Edwards and Boellstorff's (2021) alternative, who propose a "digital exodus" analytical framework, observing three major forms of non-use on Tumblr following a pornography ban initiated by the platform itself: breaking of patterns of use, logging out as social protest, and archiving and deleting one's blog. The non-use has the particularity to be a technologically disincentivised action of protest. It is also a removal without replacement, while comparatively migration always has a destination which creates a continuity of existence. Migrations are defined by the fact of leaving a platform (see Brubaker et al. 2014) or being left behind by the platform (see Pearce and Artemisa 2009). This last modality is investigated by Richard Rogers (2020) as a "deplatformization" which entails the specific case of the imposed deletion of a user account for the sake of applying content moderation rules. It describes a suppression of an account, which only implicitly infers that there will be a subsequent transfer of the account to another platform. Its methodology aims at tracking the circulation of "deplatformed" users, based on ethnographic investigations, crossed with the scraping of a massive amount of data originating from several social networks, with a special emphasis on Telegram, a social network of destination for far-right influencers.

## 2 Digital Assets Circulations Modelled by Infrastructure Constraints

Players' behaviour has a significant role in shaping an online circulation system that operates at the convergence of two distinct dimensions. The first one pertains to the flow of players' digital assets (DAs), encompassing their in-game characters as well as valuable assets such as skins, consumables and equipment. The second dimension centres on the underlying computer infrastructures: These circulations

occur both within gaming servers called “shards”[9] (intra-shard) and across shards (inter-shards), occasionally facilitated by outlaw third-party platforms that offer paid services enabling players to transfer their assets within a designated shard. For our inquiry, we concentrate on a specific digital asset with notable inter-shard circulation prevalent in most of the MMOGs: the played character.

We conceptualise an online video game as a three layer infrastructure inspired by the Open Systems Interconnection model (OSI) of Hubert Zimmerman, now widely used in computer network engineering (see Schafer 2009). The figure below (Fig. 1) illustrates the two external strata within the gaming infrastructure.

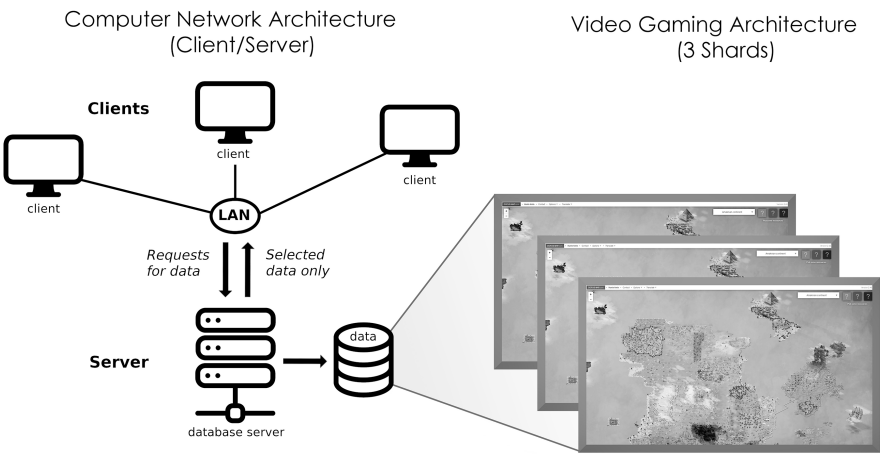


**Fig. 1:** A scheme of the two outer layers infrastructure of our model, the Computer Network and the Video Gaming Shards.

Our foremost layer is denoted as the “Computer Network Infrastructure”, as these games are often rooted in a Client/Server architecture. This organisational framework delineates data and software stored on the gaming company computers – the server – from those stored on the gamers’ computers – the clients.

The subsequent layer, termed the “Video Gaming Infrastructure”, is anchored by gaming servers – finite digital geographical space where a player’s character operates. Gaming servers are hosted in the computer server. Notably, a single physical computer server can host multiple parallel gaming servers for the same video game

9 Similar to software’s’ “forks” analogy designating a software derivation from an original version, shards refer to subproducts which follow their own independent operating life cycles aften having been wildly extracted from a bulk material, namely an online platform infrastructure.

environment, which has led game designers to alleviate the ambiguity by commonly calling these autonomous environments “shards”. For players, shards are embodied as the software instantiation of a game. Each shard effectively represents a distinct geographical gaming environment, which has persistence: Its evolution is continuously maintained, even when a given played character is disconnected.

The third and most abstract layer refers to the character infrastructure, which is integrated within each shard and encapsulates most of the game digital assets as characters’ belongings. When a player creates a character, an exclusive shard is allocated to it until the player opts to delete it. Consequently, distinct shards accommodate separate group of players who engage via their individual characters. Hence, each shard would evolve independently according to the interaction sequence of characters simultaneously connected.

Digital assets (DAs) possess the capacity to transition between different players on the same shard, thereby grounding the foundation of an autonomous online community within each shard, supported by a small digital economy. Although shard databases are separately stored by the gaming company, sometimes digital assets attached to one player might circulate between different shards. Often, this capability results from an unintended creative bricolage created by players, or paid services. In the ensuing section, we present a non-exclusive categorisation of character circulations organised around distinct types of major incentives.

# 3 The Circulation of a Player’s Character between Shards

This section is divided into three subparts. The first describes the technical modalities of player characters’ shard circulations. The second gives in-depth details on the main social contexts encountered for these circulations. The third makes use of the classical push-pull migratory model to sketch common patterns of characters’ circulations.

## 3.1 The Modalities of Player Character Circulation

The circulation of player characters within the realm of MMOGs is underpinned by three binding rules, which appeared progressively in MMOGs and continue to serve as a fundamental design principle today. The initial and secondary rules adopt a player-centric perspective, wherein the player gains access to a character on a new shard.

Initially, a player is granted the ability to create a limited number of characters on alternate shards. This allows players to venture onto new shards while retaining access to their former shard along with their pre-existing character. While this procedure is often free, it requires a time-consuming restart from the outset of the game. The second and third binding rules deal with character transfer between players and shards respectively, as represented in the following table (Tab. 1):

**Tab. 1:** The second and third character circulation modalities.

| | **Player Y** | **Player Z** |
|---|---|---|
| **Shard A** | Character | ⇨ *Player Transfer (2)* |
| **Shard B** | ⇦ *Shard Transfer (3)* | ⇘ *Shard & Player Transfer (2+3)* |

The second binding rule defined by a character ownership transfer is performed through the sale or the gift of a character. This time-saving procedure involves one player acquiring an already-developed character from another player. A paid version of this service is often proposed by outlaw third party companies, whereby individuals can purchase or lease customer accounts situated on disparate shards. For instance, this happens in cases where non-resident players seek access to Chinese shards, as Chinese governmental mandates compel gaming companies to relinquish control of domestic shards to national companies, necessitating official national Chinese ID registration for player access.

Given the historical inadequacy of customer needs in regard to online game official services, outlaw websites have exploited vulnerabilities in customer authentication procedures to propose to order gaming accounts on their website for real currency oftentimes facilitated through services such as PayPal. Upon receipt of payment, an email is sent to the player containing login credentials for the purchased account. After nearly three decades of operation, those services based on outlaw bricolage are still popular among players. An illustration of these services is shown on the upper banner of the following screenshot.

Those outlaw companies serve as intermediaries, focusing on various digital assets selling services (Fig. 2a and 2b). Among them, three specifically target player characters. First, there's the sale of game accounts (illustrated below on Fig. 2 a & b with a Dofus Character Selling), where former players directly resell their characters – those who want to give up the game, or instances of petty theft through phishing, targeting players who would have liked to continue the game. Second, there are boosting services, such as power levelling which involves the temporary "babysitting" of players' characters to advance their in-game progress during the

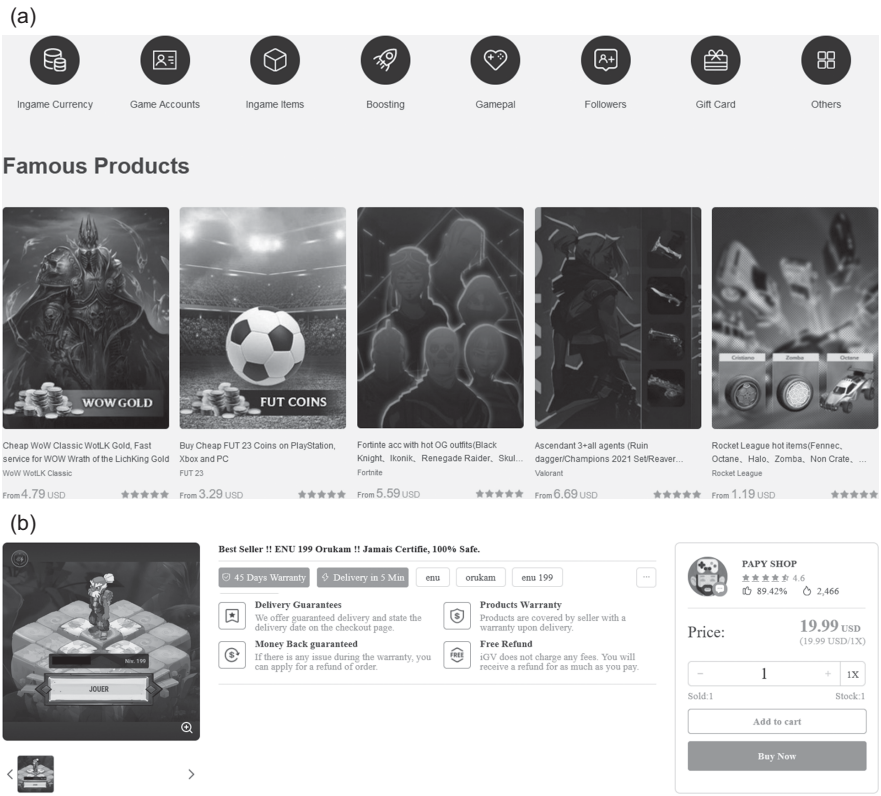


**Fig. 2a and 2b:** Screenshot of a third-party outlaw web site specialising in virtual assets for-profit services. Accessed 4 March 2024. www.igv.com.

owners' absence. Lastly, gamepal services, entail renting gaming companions, bridging the gap for players who lack social connections within their shard.

These profit-driven services heavily rely on the labour of extractivist players primarily motivated by real money gains. These players, referred as "goldfarmers" are focused on massive production of in-game digital assets. They engage in long term highly effectives and scripted in-game tasks to generate valuable digital assets that they subsequently sell on outlaw websites. To ensure widespread accessibility of their service, the goldfarmers create characters distributed across all the game shards. They tend to focus their efforts on the most populated shards with a higher demand. Often, programmed character's scripts called "bots" (see De Paoli and Kerr 2010, 2012) fulfil an automated pilot function for their character to lighten their burden. This type of players is primarily motivated by the economic profit derived from their in-game endeavours.

Such services require a highly social commitment from third-party companies. While an official secondary market could be established by gaming companies, in order to pull the rug out from under these outlaw servers, it would come at a substantial cost requiring considerable economic expertise and specific resources to organise a massive surveillance of the identity of buyers, sellers and to control the nature, quantities and prices of their exchanges. Additionally, precise logging of exchange trajectories is crucial for addressing potential scam issues. Consequently, gaming companies have been reluctant to implement monetising services, like reselling characters or renting gaming partners, all of which are offered by third-party companies.

This predicament has led gaming companies to promote a third technical binding rule in the form of a legitimate paying service for so-called "character transfer", whereby players pay the gaming company to modify their databases, resulting in the character's removal from the origin shard and its emergence on the designated target shard. This process constitutes a legal inter-shard "character transfer", offered as a paid service in euros or an intermediate digital currency, as exemplified in Fig. 3 for the game Dofus.

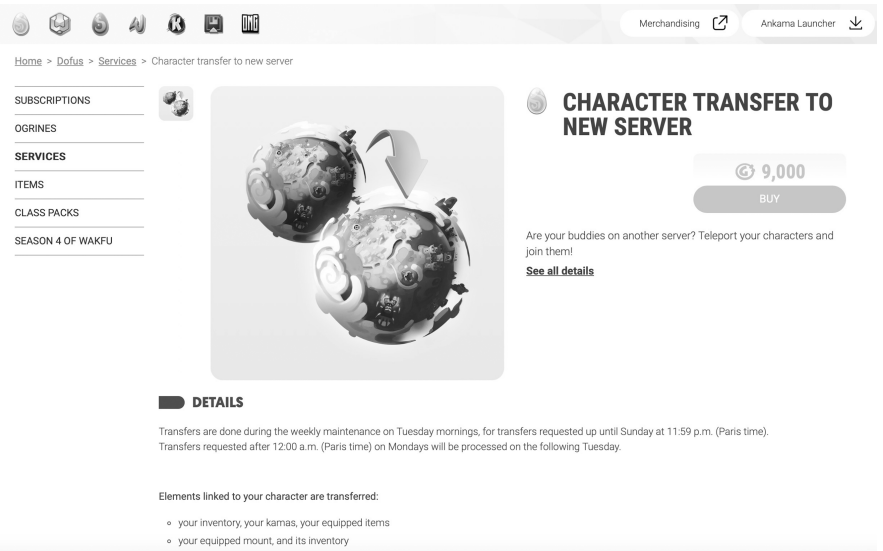


**Fig. 3:** Screenshot of Dofus graphical interfaces showing the legally paid inter-shard "character transfer" and the associated commercial interface. Accessed 4 March 2024. https://store.ankama.com/en/729-dofus/797-services/a-15144-character-transfer-to-new-server.

In the case of Dofus, the character transfer costs are 9,000 Ogrines, a currency that is pre-purchased for a nominal amount of euros. As with other similar games, this lawful transfer of characters is often subject to restrictive quotas, strategically limiting the number of character circulations between shards. This quota system is implemented to minimise any potential unbalancing to the in-game economy of each shard.

In summary, each of the three binding rules has its own advantages. Informal inter-player character gifting or temporary lending operates on a foundation of trust and is cost-free, although it provides access to a limited pool of characters confined to a select number of shards. Third party services, while addressing a broader spectrum of needs such as offering characters on every shard, face legal and moral issues, particularly concerning the provenance of possibly stolen characters. Additionally, these services offer hieratic customer services, suffering an overall unfavourable reputation. On the other hand, official paying character migrations offer simplicity, reliability, but come at significant expense. Unlike other binding rules, official migration does not allow multiplication of characters on different shards. Instead, they compel players to make the decision to leave one shard to gain access to a new one.

## 3.2 The Player's Character Circulation as a Sociotechnical Interaction

The mechanisms of character circulations having been well circumscribed, it is time to focus our analysis on the social contexts of those circulations. In the realm of player character circulation, we can propose a typology for the circulation of characters with six different roles assumed by player involvements summed up as follows (Tab. 2):

**Tab. 2:** Typology of player circulation.

| Player Involvement | Type of Character Circulation | Main Service Provider |
|---|---|---|
| **Digital Asset Fence Customer** | Character ownership change | Third Party Website |
| **Challenger seeker** | Character ownership change | Third Party Website |
| **Purchasing Power Optimizer** | Character ownership change<br>OR<br>Character creation on a new shard | Independent Migration OR<br>Third Party Website |

**Tab. 2** (continued)

| Player Involvement | Type of Character Circulation | Main Service Provider |
|---|---|---|
| **Country Migrant** | Character inter-shard migration | Gaming Company |
| **Socializer & Explorer** | Character creation on a new shard OR Character inter-shard migration | Independent Migration OR Gaming Company |
| **Victim of Discrimination** | Character creation on a new shard OR Character inter-shard migration | Independent Migration OR Gaming Company |

The "Digital Asset Fence Customer" takes advantage of a third-party website to buy a cheap and interesting character, which could be located on a different shard. He engages in fence activities relying on account theft, based on phishing strategies: Fake gaming websites are advertised on the web or directly on populated shards using dedicated bots (see Vétel 2020). These activities are profit oriented and stolen properties are sold on third-party websites like those mentioned in the previous part of this chapter. Their customers are players looking for a cheap but experienced and well-equipped character. In this context, the shard location of the stolen character can be tolerated more than actively sought.

The "Challenger Seeker", also called "Power Gamer" (see Taylor 2006; Nardi 2010), is often confronted with a progressive depletion of valuable competitors on his shard. For games with an e-sport level of popularity like League of Legends, a player can even be told that other nationalities are training hard on their own shards to become e-sport players. The need for a stable and responsive connection to the game shard is an absolute necessity as competitive gameplay relies on fast in-game reactions as in League of Legends (see Hoang et al. 2017).

It represents players looking for an opportunity to move to a shard with more competitive players to train with. The Reddit post below depicts the usual incentives for shard switches of players from League of Legends looking for optimal competitive game experience.

> I also noticed that because SEA [South East Asia] isn't one big server and PH [Philippine] is region locked to PH players only or TW [Taiwan] to TW [players]; the competitive level of teams in different countries stagnate and when they compete in the PCS [Pacific Championship Series] the power level of the different countries are clearly different and some cannot compete. If the SEA server were like the one in Valorant [another online game with easier character's migration] the competitive landscape would allow players and teams from different countries to learn better and practice against each other rather than being in one bubble and it can help queue times on higher ranks as well. (author: Dapper-Two8223, subreddit: r/leagueoflegends)

The South East Asia (SEA) Region, regroup shards managed by the independent Singaporean GArena company, which locked the players based on their country of residency. Consequently, the players in Philippines are locked to the PH shard, whereas the Taiwanese are confined to the TW shard. The mechanism creates training discrepancies by country. Competitive players are often trying to enter semi-professional leagues of E-Sport. In the quote above, the player discusses the possibility of training on other shards at a higher level to give him more chance to participate to the Pacific Championship Series (PCS), one of the main League of Legends E-Sport competitions in Asia. Finding difficult challenges and maintaining gaming performance are the two main purposes of those players. In this context, the impossibility of transferring its character on another shard of course fuels the parallel market for selling outlaw characters.

The "Purchasing Power Optimizer" looks for a better cost effectiveness for its gaming fees on an alternative shard. It takes advantage of in-game economic asymmetries: on different shards the in-game market shows price discrepancies due to the variations in the supply and demand of digital assets, which are influenced by the character's population daily economics activities. These players are focused on economic strategies and profit making. The table below (Tab. 3) summarises prices for League of Legends in different national currencies of "Riot Points", an intermediate currency comparable to casino tokens.

**Tab. 3:** Comparison of the exchange rate of Riot Points in different national currencies.

| **Europe West (EUW)** | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Euro** | €4.99 | €10.99 | €21.99 | €34.99 | €49.99 | €99.99 |
| **Riot Points** | 575 | 1380 | 2800 | 4500 | 6500 | 13500 |
| **North America (NA)** | | | | | | |
| **US Dollar** | US$4.99 | US$10.99 | US$21.99 | US$34.99 | US$49.99 | US$99.99 |
| **Riot Points** | 575 | 1380 | 2800 | 4500 | 6500 | 13500 |
| **Philippines (PH)** | | | | | | |
| **Philippine Peso** | ₱49 | ₱149 | ₱349 | ₱649 | ₱999 | ₱2090 |
| **Riot Points** | 200 | 625 | 1525 | 2900 | 4600 | 10000 |

The current exchange rate for one euro is 60.8 Philippine pesos and 1.09 US dollars, and the price of a player's character transfer is 2,600 Riot Points for every-

body[10]. Therefore, the price of a transfer of a player's character is linked to the purchasing power of the country assigned to the player's account.

The "Country Migrant" is moving to another country, seeking out a new local gaming shard with improved connection responsiveness. Players who are migrating relocate or move their character in proximity to their new place, hoping to improve their network performances and to lower the Client/Server ping latency. The following student describes how he maintained the quality of its gaming service:

> I've been playing League for three years now. It's my hobby and it doesn't matter if I suck at the game, playing LOL is my way of relaxing and having fun (yes, before you ask: I only play w/ friends and muteall). I've recently moved to EUW [Western European Union] and started making some friends in my class who also play LoL. I knew that at some point, I had to change regions [for its character] (I can't play with the 200 [milliseconds] ping that I get from in my original [server's] region) [. . .] Currently, my options are: 2375 RP [Riot Points] at 19.3 euro, 4175 RP at 35 euro [. . .] this is around 5% of my monthly income. I know that' it might not mean a lot to some of you, but trust with the current inflation + rent + taxes + incoming winter, 35 euros is a LOT of money. With 35 euro I can have food for 2 weeks. 35 euros is half of the money I spent monthly visiting my girlfriend who lives 2.5 hours from me. 35 euros is heat + TV taxes each month. 35 euros is half of the money I need to buy shoes before the winter starts. Why is it so expensive? I could understand that you're doing to prevent high elo[11] smurfs[12] cheat on their MMR[13]. But for low elo players who are mostly students . . . is a bit abusive (Gabpinto, League of Legends player, r/leagueoflegends).

Here the motivation to move a character to a shard located in another country is not profit motivated but often driven by the quest for a good quality of service, in the hopes of maintaining the in-game competitive level, or to play with foreign friends. Ironically, the cost of a shard transfer to a new region is not always favourable to the player's purchasing power and can unfortunately lead to game churn.

**10** Riot Game has an elaborate inter-server transfer policy for its game League of Legends. The company manages every game server, except the Chinese servers delegated to Tencent and hosted in China, and the South East Asian servers delegated to GArena and hosted in Singapore until early 2023 when Riot Game decided to take them back. Furthermore, three regions prohibit character transfer between them (Turkey, Russia and Latin America but without restriction regarding other destinations: Source: https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Servers).

**11** The Elo system was invented by Arpad Elo as an improved chess rating system and is now adapted to many other games, including video games. High Elo's are experimented players of League of Legends (Source: https://leagueoflegends.fandom.com/wiki/Elo_rating_system).

**12** Smurfing consists of creating multi-accounts on the same server to gain advantage in certain gaming contexts. It is considered cheating in most of the MMORPGs the moment the accounts are played simultaneously during the same game session.

**13** The MMR stands for Match Making Rating. It is a number used in League of Legends to represent a player's skill level and to determine a fair competitor with a similar MMR.

"Socializer & Explorer" are players who are hopping between shards, because they are frequently interested in making new friends or exploring new gaming environments. When, explorers are driven by their curiosity for new in-game dynamics (see Auray and Vétel 2013), socialisers are seeking to contribute to social bonds and collective dynamics (see Auray 2003; Taylor 2006), as explained by this Japanese interviewee:

> I play every 2 days averaging 3 hours of playtime. It will be longer if I'm with friends. LoL is more fun with friends than playing alone. I never stopped playing LoL but I did stop playing ranked. I lost motivation to climb for higher rank. I will play this season because I have a friend. [. . .] I didn't fear language barrier. Part of the reason for the transfer [from the Japanese (JP) to the North American (NA) server] is I want to communicate with people from around the world. Most people use English and I can speak English too. (Asuka, League of Legends player, 22 years old).

Despite the eventual ping latency, Asuka underlines the importance of social bonds to sustain commitment to playing, its enjoyment and to extend playing through friendships that carry on for the rest of one's life. Their language proficiencies and those of their close friends greatly determine their choice of shards. Social incentives to circulate between shards can also be found in coordinated hops by guild members who organise themselves using external digital communications like bulletin boards or discord channels (see Piéron 2019).

Finally, the "Victim of Discrimination" is a player who plans to change its shard to flee diverse kinds of repeat discrimination. He often claims to be victim of toxic behaviour by other gamers within the game environment (see Kwak et al. 2015; Brookey and Ecenbarger 2016). This category encompasses instances of sexism or racism, where players feel the need to migrate in order to escape negative and discriminatory experiences. The lack of adapted regulation can foster inter-shard migrations to escape the worse regulated shards. The following Reddit comment advises a player who moved to China for several weeks:

> You do need a VPN in order to connect to Japanese sever from China and there is still a latency about 100 ms. Unfortunately, the players in Chinese server are known for toxicity, but it is the best choice if you want a smooth game experience and staying in China for a longer period. Leveling from 1–30 may take you a couple of months. Also if you are creating an account on Chinese server, remember to check and choose a one that has healthy population. (author: Mist_ball, subreddit:r/leagueoflegends, 2017)

For instance, the League of Legends South East shards (SOE) knew of regulation issues under the supervision of the GArena company that led to massive migration towards shards administered by Riot Games and later in 2023 the returning of LoL GArena activities to Riot Games.

## 3.3 The Player's Character Circulation as a "Push-Pull" Incentive Pattern

As a character's circulation is mainly due to game design and marketing incentives, but also "real world" migratory ones, social dynamics appears in all those cases to remain at the centre. Therefore, below we make use of a "Push-Pull model" (Hou et al. 2011) to sketch patterns of circulations. The Mooring dimensions specific to online games is not explored further, as it is similar to those analysed by Hou et al (2011) and mainly caused by switching costs, the risk of inter-players losing social bonds, and also by the amount of time or money invested in the first main player character.

If we adopt a simple "push-pull" model used to analyse population migrations (see Lee 1966), we can propose patterns that structure the incentives explaining the player's character circulations. Hence, our typology can be refined as follows (Tab. 4):

**Tab. 4:** A Push-Pull model describing a player's character circulation, distinguishing incentives endogenous to the game (END) from those exogenous to the game (EX).

| Player Involvement | Pushing incentive | Pulling incentive |
|---|---|---|
| **Digital Asset Fence Customer** | Boredom due to progression issues (**END**) | Experienced character equipped with original gears (END) |
| **Challenger Seeker** | Lack of experienced competitive opponents (**END**) | Plenty of experienced competitive opponents, Low Latency (END) |
| **Purchasing Power Optimiser** | Low purchasing power (*EX*) | Cheap Shard Digital Assets (END) |
| **Country Migrant** | Career or family (*EX*) | Better Latency, Ingame Progress Preservation (END) |
| **Socialiser & Explorer** | Exhaustion of in-game relationships or lack of in-game novelty (**END**) | Renewal of strictly ingame relationships<br>And renewal of relationships extended beyond<br>the game (END and EX)<br>New in-game socioeconomical dynamics to discover (END and EX) |
| **Victim of Discrimination** | Bullying because of gender, racial, linguistic or cultural identity (*EX*) | Tolerance reputation of players on another shard (END) |

Three patterns of incentives are exhibited by the following players' involvements: First, Digital Asset Fence Customer and Challenger Seeker exhibit incentives endogenous to the game. Second, Socialiser & Explorer constitute a pattern with endogenous pulling incentives and a distinct mix of endogenous and exogenous pulling incentives. Those two patterns share a content depletion issue concerning the original shard. But they are distinguished by the pulling incentives of Socialiser & Explorer which exceed the strict in-game dynamics.

Finally, Purchasing Power Optimiser, Country Migrant and Victim of Discrimination constitute a third pattern which differs mainly by its pushing incentives which are exogenous to the game. Most often, this last pattern is qualified by the players as a "migration", while t is not explicitly referring to as a cause of geographical displacement, but an exogenous cause for a change of social neighbourhood. Thus, the geographical migration is not involved in online platform circulations, even if users talk of "migration"; it only qualifies a change of social surrounding in their online platform environments.

## 4 Discussions: Digital Circulations in Media Platforms Versus In Video Gaming

In addition to the played character circulation patterns that we established above, the rest of our analysis has delineated the principal technical mechanisms governing the migration of players' characters across shards, referred to as player transfer and shard transfer. These migrations occur within distinct social contexts and delineate six non-exclusive player's involvement, each characterised by varying degrees of dependence on gaming companies. These types include the Digital Asset Fence Customer, the Challenger Seeker, the Purchasing Power Optimiser, the Country Migrant, the Socialiser and Explorer, and the Victim of Discrimination.

At a broader level, when discussing the circulation of digital assets within shards, the user's actions pertain to their played characters, whereas at the game level, the user interacts with their customer account. Historically, shards were designed in response to limited computer network capacities, serving to restrict the size of the online world inhabited by real-time interacting characters. Today, they are explicitly integrated into game design by companies or non-authorised organisations, serving as elements of gameplay and monetisation. Inter-shard character transfers and multi-shard character creation have become standard features in contemporary MMOGs. The infrastructure of shards in an online game is therefore tightly aligned with the played characters' infrastructure that conditions the sociotechnical relations to online social neighbourhoods.

The phenomenon of inter-shard migration is a distinctive feature within the domain of online games and has no equivalent in other prominent online platforms, such as popular dating applications or social networks. To illustrate it, let us consider the platform Discord, where chat channels seemed to liken themselves to gaming shards. In both instances, a single user account allow participation in each of these isolated communication environments. However, in contrast to Discord channels, online game shards firmly associate distinct played characters with each of these social spaces, thus functioning as a concentrator for social investments. They effectively structure more compact and interconnected social networks.

In contrast, the scale of inter-game migrations is analogous to migrations between distinct platforms, such as Twitter or Telegram. In the absence of agreements between companies, transferring user accounts becomes unfeasible. Consequently, migration options are limited to creating a new user account and facing a mooring effect because it entails the partial loss of accumulated values from the previous platform and the investment cost of developing a fully functional profile on the new platform. At this level of observation, the user account assumes a central role in the infrastructuring (see Pipek and Wulf 2009) of specific sociotechnical relations to online social neighbourhoods.

This can manifest as migration to a similar platform or the adoption of a slightly different one, with ensuing dynamics of non-use. The phenomenon often referred to as the "emergent platformisation" of video games may be construed as a novel transition in which the emphasis shifts from the played character to the customer account. This shift is facilitated by the gradual obsolescence of the need for game shard clustering, a change attributable to the significant advancements in computer performance. Consequently, it leads to the expansion of the geographical dimensions within the gaming environment.

However, the insights from Pearce's (2009) account of Uru's community suggest the potential for cohesive player communities to reintroduce clustered spaces, primarily driven by gameplay and sociocultural motivations. They may advocate for the restoration of segmented shards or platforms within the gaming landscape. This phenomenon finds a concrete manifestation in the persistence of "private servers", a trend that has endured for decades (see Debeauvais and Nardi 2010; Vétel 2013, 2017, 2022). These outlaw gaming platforms, managed independently of gaming companies, breathe new life into forgotten versions of games abandoned by the parent company. Furthermore, they explore previously unreleased variations of the original game.

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Thibault Grison

# Playing Hide and Seek with Algorithms in the "Gay TikTok": From Shadowbanning to Platform Affordances

**Abstract:** This chapter investigates algorithmic bypass strategies that sexual and gendered communities set up on TikTok to post sexual content on the platform. Focusing on the gay community, the chapter proposes a typology of platform affordances through sound, text and image. The analysis draws on a digital ethnography method consisting of "growing a niche algorithm" to study content recommendation and invisibilisation on social media. Based on an epistemology of the closet, the chapter concludes with a discussion on online visibility and virality as matters of adjustment and negotiation.

**Keywords:** platform affordances, TikTok, LGBT, sex, content moderation

A great deal of queer and feminist research has pointed out how difficult it is for sexual and gendered communities to make themselves visible both offline and online. While the use of social networks to build one's sexual and gender identity and to exchange around these issues has been widely documented – through objects of study such as online activism, for example (see Jouët 2022; Despontin Lefevre 2022; Armangau and Figeac 2023, etc.), other work is also emerging on the technical conditions of their invisibilisation (see Monea 2022; Gillespie 2018). This chapter focuses on the practices put in place by LGBT communities to avoid censorship of their sexual content on TikTok. Inspired by approaches relating to the epistemology of the closet (see Sedgwick 1990), I'm interested in the misappropriated uses of the application's functionalities by queer internet users. In other words, I study how platform affordances imagined by subaltern communities (see Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020) shed light on the opaque workings of platform moderation *dispositifs*.

The virality of content posted online is primarily conditioned by the moderation, censorship and recommendation rules and mechanisms that govern platforms (see Gillespie et al. 2020). These systems and rules evolve over time (see Chan, Su and Shore 2023) vary from one language and country to another, and above all, diverge from one social networking site (SNS) to another (see Badouard 2021). This moderation work manifests itself in different forms, ranging from the deletion of a post or content to its dereferencing on recommendation feeds. For example, since


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around 2019, and on TikTok in particular, many internet users and journalists have been denouncing "shadowbanning" phenomena. Shadowbanning is a form of moderation that consists of making content or a user profile invisible, without the creator of the content being aware of it or being informed of it, meaning that this content has been de-referenced from users' feeds (see Gillespie 2018). I would argue that shadowbanning can be considered a form of "insidious censorship" (Fergus et al. 2020) because it allows companies to moderate content without being seen doing it. This form of censorship impacts the circulation of content by making it invisible, without making it disappear. Due to TikTok's relatively strict moderation policies prior to 2021 regarding so-called "political", "sexual" or "violent" content, various activist communities widely denounced the censorship they were experiencing. In France, this movement took off during the LGBT mobilisations against the French AVIA law and led to the circulation of a range of algorithmic circumvention strategies or denunciation campaigns against censorship (see Grison and Julliard, 2021). While these practices are primarily aimed at spreading content from LGBT communities across the platform, the issue of visibility is also subject to self-moderation tactics (see Seering 2020) to fly under the radar of algorithmic tracking or to avoid waves of homophobic harassment. As too much visibility could lead to their account being banned or to a violent raid, internet users play a form of hide-and-seek with algorithmic moderation processes, switching between a desire for visibility and self-preservation.

The chapter is therefore based less on a general analysis of shadowbanning and the discourses about it that circulate online, but rather on the specific tactics implemented by individuals who experience discrimination and silencing dynamics in their everyday life both in and offline. These practices are to be considered as the *savoir-faire* of epistemic and situated communities (see Dell'Omodarme 2014) or "savoirs-d'expérience", depending on the context. In this essay, I analysed them using techno-semiotical approaches and in regard with the notion of "platform affordance" as defined by Tiidenberg and van der Nagel (2020)[1]. My argument is that by starting from these queer tactics of circumventing algorithmic censorship, social sciences scholars may approach content moderation beyond its opacity, but rather as a process of distribution of negotiated regimes of visuality.

This chapter is based on a digital ethnography investigation initiated in February 2021 on TikTok. I draw on the last part of a corpus I collected on the app since the beginning of my PhD thesis, which investigates the impact of content

1 As ways in which features are twisted, circumvented and re-appropriated by internet users.

moderation policies on sexual and gendered communities. This corpus features around 100 videos collected since 2021 and related to online gay sexuality[2].

First, I look back at the links between sex and content moderation; then I outline the method of collecting and analysing the video content I work on, being careful to explain the methodological challenges involved when investigating the invisibilisation of online content; finally, presenting a typology of platform affordances, I discuss how these tactics turn into collective practices designed to make sexual and gendered communities' content strategically (in)visible online.

# 1 Sex, Content Moderation, Algorithms and Social Media

## 1.1 "Porn made the Internet"

Porn studies have played a major role in highlighting the responsibility of digital devices in crystallising and reproducing gender stereotypes online. The pornography industry, for example, plays a part in the eroticisation and naturalisation of specific social relations, the invisibilisation of gender violence and the reinforcement of a large number of gender, race and class stereotypes that structure our society (see Jahjah 2022; Benjamin 2019). Thus, pornography is still today a privileged object of study for the construction of sexual scripts (see Gagnon 1999) and sexual and gendered identities (see Damian-Gaillard 2014). It is therefore interesting to observe how porn studies researchers have been led to seize on the study of algorithmic technologies to enrich their work. Computer vision-based pornography filtering algorithms (CVPF) are thought to be primarily responsible for crystallising discriminatory representations of sexual and gender relations online. A critical review of the scientific literature (see Robert Gehl, Lucas Moyer-Horner and Sara Yeo 2017) on these technologies shows how the implementation of cisgender men's cognitive biases is indeed at the heart of the design of these machines insofar as the design teams are essentially made up of white cisgender heterosexual men (see Noble 2018; Jean 2019). The result is a heterocentric and phallocentric vision of pornography and therefore of the internet. These technologies are also widely used for the ("good") functioning of other recommendation

2 By sexual content, we mean any content that refers in any way to sexuality, including pornography, erotic images, nudity, sexual narratives, sex education, political content and so on. On the difficulty of defining sexuality online, see Tiidenberg and van der Nagel (2020); Paasonen, Jarrett and Light (2020).

systems (news feeds, trending topics, etc.), whatever the field. These reuses go hand in hand with the implementation of biases and can therefore have a significant effect on freedom of speech and online visibility (see Are 2020).

In fact, the gradual prohibition of sexually explicit content from SNSs – enabled by the rollout of such technologies – also has consequences for sexual and gendered communities, in particular sex workers who rely on these platforms to carry out their business, generate income or verify the identity of, and engage with, potential clients (see Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020). In fact, since 2018 with the banning of content classified as NSFW by Tumblr, the status of sexuality on SNSs has become a crucial stake for these platforms: "This use of the NSFW category participates in a definition of nudity, sex and sexuality as problematic realities to be excluded from social media" (Paasonen et al. 2020, 167).

## 1.2 The Risk of Censorship for Sexual and Gendered Communities on SNSs

One of the main sources of algorithmic bias towards LGBT people online lies in the assimilation of sexual identity with stereotypes related to sexual practices and preferences. In the context of online content moderation, Tarleton Gillespie (2018) explains, in his chapter "To remove or to filter", how Tumblr's recommendation algorithms blocked "#gay" search results to combat the proliferation of pornographic content. The moderation logic was as follows: Insofar as a lot of sexually explicit content is indexed under the term "gay", this term is made invisible to inhibit the amount of pornographic content on the platform. This (de)referencing then leads to the censoring of non-pornographic gay content posted by homosexual users, who are *de facto* automatically assimilated to sexually explicit content (see Grison and Julliard 2021).

While the LGBT community is often assimilated to sex and marked by stereotyped sexual practices, it's worth remembering that LGBT communities have also structured their activism around sexual liberation discourses. Beyond activism, sexual culture is very present in discussions and interactions within gay communities (see Vörös 2020). The result is a "queer world" impossible to map or restrict to delimited communities and spaces other than through the recognition of practices, discourses and investments of self in subaltern sexual affects and cultures (see Berlant and Warner 2018). SNSs are also spaces in which we exchange and interact according to a semio-discursive repertoire in which the question of sex is everywhere present (see Berlant and Warner 2018). These can range from sharing experiences to encoded humouristic content or a whole set of explicit sexual visuals. In particular, SNSs like Tumblr (until 2018) or Twitter are heavily invested in

by so-called subaltern communities to consume amateur "for adults" content (see Cao 2021). On TikTok, such content would be considered illegal and would be systematically moderated[3]. However, since an update in March 2023, TikTok has clarified its community rules on sexuality, explaining that sex education content is authorised, and that body exposure with little clothing is tolerated but will not appear on users' For You Page (FYP)[4]. Finally, it should be noted that TikTok is used massively by homosexual sex workers to redirect users to dedicated platforms such as OnlyFans to view sexually explicit content, or even Twitter, whose moderation rules are less strict (see van der Nagel 2021). The result is an initial discrepancy between what is *a priori* visible and permitted on the platform and what is actually published and seen by others.

## 1.3 Being Gay Online: A New "Digital Closet"

The epistemology of the closet (Sedgwick 1990) examines power systems, social norms and individual consequences associated with the concealment of one's queer identity. It is a conceptual framework widely used in queer studies to analyse both the conditions of assignment of these communities and their agency potential. Unlike vernacular discourses about "coming out [of the closet]" stories, queer theory considers that the closet is made of a set of practices to adjust to what extent one queer individual can live as gay, lesbian, trans, bi, queer, etc. in public spaces. Thus, considering social media as a "digital closet" (see Monea 2022) implies having a closer look at how LGBT individuals "are forced to digitally segregate that aspect of themselves from their everyday online existence. To not have your account banned, to not have your content censored, to not find yourself demonetized, or, in short, to participate in this new internet-mediated world of ours, you must relegate a certain part of your identity to a digital closet" (Monea 2022, 181). The quest for virality is not always desired and desirable regarding the risk of exposure – synonymous with being harassed, reported, or censored – for LGBT individuals and activists online. In his article "Outed by the Machine", Alexander Cho (2017) explains how the design of social media like Facebook does not necessarily allow queer internet users to live their sexual and gender identity as they see fit. To put it differently, marginalised communities overall are caught in a vice between forced overexposure and invisibility of their voices and representations. Therefore, rely-

**3** https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/fr-fr/sensitive-mature-themes/.

**4** The FYP is the first thing the user sees when he opens the TikTok app. It is a personalised feed of videos based on interests and engagement, which is algorithmically curated. https://support.tiktok.com/en/getting-started/for-you#.

ing on queer epistemology, these practices can also be studied as "algorithmic passing" strategies.

Passing refers to a person's ability to be considered a member of a hegemonic social group other than their own. Based on Sedgwick's work, Emmanuel Beaubatie (2019) considers passing as a strategy of adjustment for trans people in certain straight and cisgender spaces. This strategy, he says, is composite, unequal and shaped by subjective trajectories determined by sex, class and race. On social media, LGBT internet users wield a whole set of TikTok-compatible digital writings to stage themselves on the platform and become visible in a space that invisibilises them. To put it differently, writing oneself as gay online in a way requires passing the test of algorithmic recognition. Having these thoughts in mind, one can easily understand how heuristic it is to focus on a marginalised group to study how content circulates online and how content moderation works. It is because LGBT individuals are used to renegotiate their right to (in)visibility that content moderation policies and designs are heuristic for the study of sexual and gendered identities, and vice versa. Sexual and gendered identities challenge the way content moderation must be thought. Consequently, for this chapter – shedding light on the various tactics employed by LGBT tiktokers to bypass algorithms on social media – I intend to discuss to what extent looking at platform affordances can become a way to study digital infrastructures and online (in)virality.

# 2 Working on the Invisibilisation of Content: Suggested Method and Corpus

## 2.1 Access to Deleted Data and Black Box: Methodological Obstacles

While a great deal of papers in the social sciences have focused on finding the best way to address the virality of content published online, few have studied invisibilisation due to methodological issues. On the latter, many reports concerning content moderation and the use of AI systems have underlined the algorithmic black box as a hindrance to academic research (see Zuiderveen Borgesius 2018; Fergus et al. 2020; Défenseur des droits, CNIL 2020). Without access to data, how can we build up a corpus? How can we find evidence of content that no longer exists on the platforms under study? Finally, without knowledge of the computer code or criteria, how can we understand algorithmic moderation designs? This part addresses the methodological issues of collecting deleted data from social media and how one can build up a corpus when working on algorithms' impact on users.

With the opening of Twitter's API to researchers until May 2023[5], many studies on content moderation have been conducted based on quantitative-qualitative methods, using machine learning or automated language processing. Although the terms of use of the Twitter API do not allow us to collect content deleted from the platform, or to have access to the conditions of their deletion, I have developed, with Virginie Julliard and the CERES team[6], a computerised collection method to study the phenomena of online content invisibilisation. This survey, carried out in 2022, was based on an analysis of several tens of thousands of tweets collected over four months, and enabled us to put forward hypotheses on the causes of abusive censorship or the algorithmic and human modalities that were engaged in Twitter's moderation processes (see Grison et al. 2023). This method was made possible by the opening of the API and the possibility of carrying out keyword searches, *a priori* independently from the platform's recommendation outputs. This research also provided an opportunity to investigate the effectiveness of keyword moderation and, by extension, concluded on the relative effectiveness of collecting a corpus of content using keywords, as a means of studying content moderation.

On TikTok, as on other SNSs, massive data collection bypassing algorithmic recommendation was not possible until summer 2023[7]. Although scrapping and crawling methods did exist (see Zelle 2023) to come as close as possible to searches focusing on Twitter, they seemed even more complex to adapt when working on the designs themselves. My encounter with Taina Bucher's work on algorithmic imaginaries and her investigative methods reinforced my belief that technological opacity was no obstacle to understanding algorithms, whatever the platform under study. In the spirit of reverse-engineering, Bucher asks the following question when working on algorithms: "When confronted with the seemingly obscure and hidden, what are our methodological options?" (2016, 82). For her, it's less a question of gaining access to what might be inside the "black box" (see Pasquale 2015) but rather to consider them as machines that do, that make people do or even make people talk and therefore return to what they do. Fred Pailler (2019), in his

**5** When writing this chapter in summer 2023, Elon Musk had already announced the closing of Twitter's (now called "X") API to the public. European researchers are now waiting for the DSA (Digital Services Act) to become effective. According to article 40, researchers working on platforms' "systemic risks" will have the capacity to make an access request to big platforms' data. On this topic, see Julien Rossi's articles online: https://www.openedition.org/35318?lang=en.

**6** https://ceres.sorbonne-universite.fr.

**7** In anticipation of the DSA, ByteDance (the company owning TikTok) opened the API to researchers to access public and anonymous data. The corpus of data I am dealing with and the methodology I propose in this chapter are antecedent to this announcement.

PhD thesis on sexual cultures and computing devices, carried out an ethnographic survey of the web infrastructures as well. Interestingly, in the two studies cited above, to gather insights on the technical functioning of infrastructures and the way they impact users, both authors adopt particular, subjective and subjectivising positions and postures. In Bucher's case, this takes the form of interviews or collections of online discourse from internet users who talk about their (failed, strange, unexpected) interactions with algorithms, which Sophie Bishop (2019) calls "algorithmic gossip". In his work, Pailler explains how he created and animated various fake profiles for his investigation and how his approach was also nourished by multiple interactional resources with sex workers, by their sexual knowledge and savoir-faire, and in particular by an approach based on affects.

All in all, I see three key points that are particularly heuristic for the study of algorithmic designs and processes of online invisibilisation: First, the study of the technical functioning of a digital infrastructure does not necessarily require massive data collection and privileged access to the platforms; secondly, the study of how these devices work can be carried out from subjective postures (what I will call later, "savoirs d'expérience"); lastly, the study of how these platforms work also requires taking into account a few hijacked, unplanned or even botched uses. This is what I will later refer to as "platform affordances" (see Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020). Indeed, on this last point, it's worth looking at how both Bucher and Pailler study digital devices at the "frontier" between uses, knowledge, discourses, affects, representations and software. Specifically, Bucher builds knowledge about algorithms using the discourses and strategies of internet users to thwart the algorithmic recommendation they find "weird" (Bucher 2017). Thus, algorithmic opacity and platform non-planned uses are less obstacles than opportunities to think about hijacked postures of investigation.

## 2.2 A Situated Method Built on Experience-Based Knowledge to Study Invisibilisation

While confronted with the opacity of content moderation, I asked myself "what are [my] methodological options?" (by reference to Bucher 2016). Having no access to the content once it had been deleted, nor to the rules by which the algorithms operated, I did however have access to people's testimonies explaining that their content had been moderated. In other words, I had access to an entire pool of "savoirs d'expérience" about censorship online. It is this experience-based knowledge that forms the basis of my entire methodological protocol. It has been gathered over the past three years through exploratory interviews, press articles, a digital ethnography and collection of online testimonials, discussions with those close to me who

are affected. In short, my position has always been to start from the experience of censorship and the practices that stem from it and work backwards to develop hypotheses on the technical functioning of digital infrastructures.

In particular, as part of this investigation on TikTok, I drew inspiration from the walkthrough method as proposed by Light, Burgess and Duguay (2018). This approach provides a means for investigating TikTok's seemingly opaque algorithmic curation and understanding how the app interfaces with identity performances (see Duguay 2023). This is a situated approach of immersion in the application. It requires taking time, adopting a reflexive posture as one consults and collecting the data of interest. It also allows me to question the uses and representations that underpin the platform I'm studying. What's more, drawing on queer methodology, it's important to emphasise how these methodological protocols for digital inquiry and ethnography are also motivated by one's personal experience. In my case, the investment of my homosexual relatives is the mean by which I was able to access certain content (as they sent me content encountered on their respective FYPs before it was subject to algorithmic moderation).

## 2.3 Growing a Niche Algorithm to Study Content Recommendation and Invisibilisation

Since 2021, I have been working on "training" my TikTok recommendation algorithm: By spending time watching certain videos, conducting several keyword searches in the built-in search engine or by "liking" and "following", I've let TikTok's recommendation algorithm select the content that might be of interest to me regarding my topic of work. In the hours I spent using the app, I was able to collect several hundred videos by screen recording before storing them in albums in my phone gallery. At the same time, my gay friends and colleagues also sent me any gay sexual content they came across on their FYP. These dispatches were often the subject of collective discussions, astonishment and collaborative preanalyses, which I will attempt to document later. This method was therefore tested and fine-tuned over a long period of time (two years of digital fieldwork). The situated approach to corpus collection I developed is somewhat at odds with conventional approaches that study online virality using computational and informatics tools. Here, I've found it more effective to move away from the traditional diffusionist approaches to the study of virality and focus instead on the practices, attempts and strategies of "going viral" with invisibilised content, from situated and even marginalised trajectories and profiles.

However, it seems important to recall that this corpus is the last in a trilogy of corpora housed on Twitter and TikTok and collected with the aim of studying the impact of moderation devices on the digital writings of LGBT people and the way they incorporate algorithmic devices. The first was collected via computational collection methods on Twitter in the course of 2022. The second was collected using keywords via the search engines built into the TikTok and Twitter platforms. And the last corpus is the one I'm focusing on today, on the issue of sexuality.

The selected corpus is made of thousands of videos posted in French, English and Spanish by various tiktokers on the app. Insofar as many of the videos are similar, and with the need to delimit a stable corpus of videos for the purposes of techno-semiotic analysis, I stored 87 screen-recorded videos, each representing a single algorithmic bypassing practice. What these videos have in common is that they are of a sexual nature, either through the expression of some form of nudity, or because they contain sex education content, or because they are pornographic or intended to arouse sexual desire. I will now present the results of my analyses through the lens of platform affordances.

## 3 From Platform Affordances to Algorithmic Bypass Practices

The corpus I detailed above enabled me to identify the algorithmic circumvention practices that gay content creators put in place to disseminate sexual content on TikTok and, by extension, to formulate hypotheses on algorithmic intervention in moderation. I will focus more precisely on three key aspects: circumvention practices through text, image and sound.

The bypassing practices I'm going to present are to be considered through the prism of platform affordance theory. In computer language, affordances designate the uses preconceived by the designers of a software. In other words, what the technology offers and how it is used by internet users, for example. But this definition is both very broad and lacks precision in that it does not consider the way in which these affordances are co-constructed by the users and designers of these platforms. For example, the birth of the hashtag on Twitter resulted from the use of the hash word by internet users. This practice was then incorporated into the design of the application and became the referencing tag we know today. Tiidenberg and van der Nagel in *Sex & Social Media* (2020), and more broadly, other works in porn studies (i.e., Cao 2021), study affordances as negotiations between what is offered by platforms – the features – and the actual (mis)uses (hijacked or

"at the margins" of preconfigurations by design). In this context, platform affordances make it possible to study the gap between the technical possibilities offered and permitted to users by companies, and the actual ways in which they are used. In other words, affordances allow researchers to identify the gap between what platforms are designed for and how they are used for/as. In short, taking affordances into account represents a heuristic approach for studying (opaque) digital infrastructures.

## 3.1 Text Affordances

Within my corpus, several videos feature text that has been modified and/or altered by the content creators prior to publication. This alteration is carried out in different ways. One way is not to publish the text in the video's description bar but rather in the video's image and accompanied by emojis that mask certain characters of the hidden word. The assumption made by internet users is that algorithmic spotting is less obvious or systematic in the video image than in the description text. In one of the videos I collected, for example, the word "titties" is covered by a heart emoji. It can be assumed that this masking process makes it impossible to scan the image for algorithmic identification: only the human eye is able to identify the word chosen by the user. This means that content moderation algorithms would be unable to distinguish whether the focus of the video was the breasts of a cisgender woman. This process is reminiscent of the blurring and masking effects of the tabloid press, known for editorialising photos by concealing the identity of the persons photographed or areas of sex and violence. Thus, the content creator plays with the technical possibilities offered by the creative studio integrated into the TikTok software to transform her text into an image, and then this text-image into a mask.

Another way of hiding a keyword has become widely popular on TikTok since 2021. It's called algospeak[8]. This tactic consists in inventing neologisms to use keywords recognised as "hateful" or "illicit" by the algorithms, but in a roundabout way. Here are just a few examples from our corpus: The word gay becomes "g4y"; the term "faggot" becomes "f🥖"[9]; "dyke" becomes "dyk3"; "porn" is spelled "p0rn"; and "sex" becomes sometimes "seggs", sometimes "S3x", and so on. The possibilities are so infinite that it would be futile for the moderators to attempt to list them all – especially as they differ from one language to another. However

**8** https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/08/algospeak-tiktok-le-dollar-bean/.

**9** "f🥖" understood as "f-baguette" (to mimic the sound of the word "fag-got").

diverse they may be, they have the particularity of using the codes of "text message language", playing semiotically between spoken and written language and alternating the use of different keyboards – letters, numbers and emojis being used as if they belonged to the same linguistic code. This crypto language is not exclusive to TikTok and to sexual and gendered communities. In her work on activist crypto language on SNS, Alexandra Saemmer (2019) identified, for example, how these play with words operated as strategies of "in-communication with the machine" (2019, 129) in order to avoid the digital tracking of *Gilets Jaunes* on Facebook. In her paper on algorithmic control tactics, Emily van der Nagel (2018), inspired by the *Harry Potter* saga, refers to the strategy of "voldemorting" which she defines as follows: "The spell functions much like an online keyword search: web pages containing particular words or phrases are returned when someone enters them into a search engine. Voldemorting has become a key tactic of making things invisible while discussing them online" (van der Nagel 2018, 87). To extend van der Nagel's point, I think it's important to emphasise how corpus building through keyword entries is often not enough when working with content that is likely to be moderated. On the contrary, a situated collection will make it possible to identify content that anticipates censorship even before it is published, whereas a keyword-based collection would not have given me access to the corpus I am focusing on here. Let's also acknowledge the fact that this strategy of renaming things through neologisms is broadly used by hateful communities online, for toxic chat purposes and other far-right communities (see Kim, Wohn and Cha 2022; Weimann and Masri 2020).

## 3.2 Image Affordances

In the same article from 2018, van der Nagel discusses another tactic that users put in place to hijack the algorithmic functioning. Basically, she presents the way in which screenshots are a backdoor means of publishing content without promoting them. Indeed, some users publish screenshots of posts rather than retweeting or quoting them, to avoid generating traffic or engagement. In my corpus, screenshots are often a clever way of republishing content that has already been moderated. Often using TikTok's "green screen" feature, creators place themselves in front of the camera and before the screenshot of the deleted content (which forms the green screen) and thus put back into circulation content that had previously been deleted from the platform. In this way, they circumvent algorithmic censorship by republishing content in a new format.

There are a multitude of tactics for influencing algorithmic referencing or slipping through the cracks of moderation. Within my corpus of sexual videos, I

was able to classify them in nine different types of strategies. Nonetheless, this typology remains non-exhaustive as new ones are appearing every day, due to the evolution of cultures, digital languages and content moderation rules and designs' adjustments. The following table[10] summarises the typology of tactics imagined by LGBT users to expose sexual content on TikTok (see Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1:** Tactics imagined by LGBT users to expose sexual content on TikTok.

| Tactic | Explanation |
|---|---|
| Screenshot | Usually, the repost of a content that has already been deleted from the platform. It is usually framed in the bigger picture. |
| Green screen | Sometimes associated with the screenshot: the content creator appears in front of the screen with a screenshot behind him. The person in front of the camera also partially hides the image behind. |
| Hinting | The sexual act is suggested off-camera or simply gestured. |
| Blurring | The sexually explicit area is hidden by blurring or by adding a mask (which may take the form of an emoji or a banner). |
| Flashing | From slang "to flash someone". It consists in showing very quickly one's naked (part of the) body and then hide it again. On TikTok, it usually appears as a nude that is shown for only half a second in the middle of a slower video or slideshow. The appearance of the photo is so fleeting that the sexual nature of the photo does not seem to be identified by the machine or the moderator. |
| Shadowing | The sexual act is shown through shadows or body shapes. |
| Isotopia | The sexual nature of the TikTok video is signified by the reference to the accumulation of sexual symbols and fetishes (socks, hoods, leather harness, milk etc.) |
| Metonymy | The sexual nature of the video is suggested or shown by a sexual object or symbol other than a naked body part. For instance, I found in the corpus a lot of photographs of semen deposited on a surface) |
| "Use this filter" | The naked part of the image is transformed by AI to appear in a cartoon or another shape, using TikTok filters. |

These circumvention strategies lead to several hypotheses about how sexuality is moderated online, and whether or not moderation algorithms prove to be effective. First, these practices seem to confirm that sex is moderated by the presence of nudity in the image. Moreover, this nudity seems to be identified by the algo-

**10** Due to copyright and permission to reproduce images, the screenshots have been removed from the table.

rithms through pixels of skin or the recognition of sexual attributes (penis, breast, vagina, etc.) (see Gehl et al. 2017). A video filming semen is therefore not necessarily moderated when the phallus is absent from the frame. Indeed, in the example labelled "metonymy", the photo of sperm appears after an image of a milk brick and where the viewer might understand the shift towards sexual content, the machine only considers sperm as a simple liquid and does not acknowledge the sexual nature of the video. Finally, beyond the visual object that triggers moderation, the practice of "flashing" is extremely valuable to consider. In this video, the sexual image is quite explicit in that it shows the bodies of internet users or porn stars naked, during a sexual act or in suggestive positions. If the content creators disseminating this image had wanted to publish the video without the flashing tactic, the image recognition algorithm would have deleted it before it was even disseminated. So, the only explanation I can see to justify its online circulation is the display time of the pornographic image: Indeed, the image in question is only visible in the blink of an eye. Does this mean that the pornographic image recognition algorithms employed by TikTok require a certain amount of time to identify the pixels of nudity? If so, here's an interesting example of how thinking from users' "savoirs d'expérience" and tactics can shed light on how opaque *dispositifs* technically work.

Funnily enough, it is also worth highlighting how these algorithmic bypassing tactics can become a guarantee for making content go viral. Take flashing videos, for example: I wondered why flashing videos were so popular in my corpus (indeed they cumulated lots of views and likes for each video collected). In fact, it's because this content need to be watched several times to spot the nudity image that appears very briefly in the video. Also, internet users who want to "screen" the image in question to watch it for longer are often forced to watch the video several times before spotting the right moment. These repeated viewings, the unexpected nature of the video, the screenshots or even the sharing of this content with one's relatives promote engagement with the video and therefore boost their ranking and recommendation among other internet users. As it has become a trend like any other, these flashing videos have ended up becoming popular content, even though they are contrary to the community guidelines of the platform and even though content moderation systems are supposed to prevent their massive circulation. Note that several studies have also pointed out the hypocrisy of the recommendation systems of other SNS such as Instagram, where swimsuit photos are heavily pushed by the algorithm even though the company advocates a puritanical vision of sexuality. This is particularly the case for the exposure of women's bodies, which are, for instance, both censored and sexualised on Instagram (see Lesage 2022).

## 3.3 Sound Affordances

At first, TikTok was supposed to be an extension of Musical.ly, a singing and dancing platform aimed at teenagers. Now, among other things, TikTok has become a digital space for musical artists to create new content and collaborate directly other creators using unique platform features (see Kaye et al. 2021; 2022). In this context, TikTok has also been considered a transmedia platform that enables new digital activism approaches using music. This means that users have initiated a phenomenon that consists in the appropriation of an audio meme to express their emotions, their beliefs and fights (see Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded 2022). In my field, sound is indeed used to denounce the censorship that certain communities are victims of and to inveigh against the platform (see Grison and Julliard 2024)[11].

This dissemination is obviously encouraged by what the platform's features allow and encourage: TikTok indeed offers the possibility to extract the sound from a video to be able to recreate content with the same soundtrack, making its diffusion easier. The use of certain "trending" sounds is often a guarantee of visibility for one's video. It should also be noted that beyond this feature, which encourages the creation of content, sound acts as a hashtag on TikTok. It is therefore a referential that allows all content that use it to be classified and listed in the same place. Indeed, on TikTok, users can consult all the content posted using a specific sound when clicking on the link below a video. This feature is therefore used as a library of content using the same sound by users.

For this chapter, I have especially worked on how music and sound are also used on TikTok to give a sexual character to a video or to reference content with a sexual or erotic character. While the dissemination of video excerpts from pornography sites is prohibited on TikTok, the use of a sexual sound is not – or, at least it does not seem easily detectable by algorithms. Thus, a certain number of videos whose image does not *a priori* present any mention of sexuality are sexualised by the addition of a soundtrack. For example, one of my gay relatives sent me a video of Tom Holland, an English actor, taken from one of his interviews with the celebrity press. The sound in question, since removed by the platform, is an excerpt from a pornographic scene in which individuals can be heard moaning in pleasure and having sex. The sound thus participates in a semiotisation of the sexual act by giving a sexual character to the video and to the actor, whose image was initially devoid of it.

**11** For example, https://www.tiktok.com/music/Dear-TikTok-Spoken-Word-6949993320974207750?lang=fr&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1.

However, another use of sound can be in the referencing of sexually explicit content. When the same sound is used by several internet users to disseminate sexual videos, they are in fact listed in the same place. These sounds then become niche libraries of sexual content on a social network. Internet users therefore play with the platforms' features to create usages at the margins of what is authorised or thought of by the developers. These usages then transform into community practices that influence the way these applications are used.

It is interesting to note how these languages (such as algospeak) or these tactics are constitutive of new online writing practices (see Souchier et al. 2019), which are themselves constitutive of semiotic and political communities (see Julliard and Saemmer 2022)[12]. In fact, in three years of work in this field, I have observed how neologisms, sound semiotisations, image alterations, etc. have gradually become vernacularised within online sexual and gendered communities. In a sense, this echoes hypotheses that in SNSs, communities generally do not pre-exist their writing practices and publications (see Julliard 2022). Here, a semiotic community is structured around the contestation of mechanisms of invisibilisation of LGBT content or illicit content publishing practices on the platforms. These practices, considered as platform affordances, capable of juggling with the limits of usage preconceived by designers, allow for an exploration of the possibilities of writing oneself, expressing oneself and being seen in and through the digital writing devices that are SNSs.

## Conclusion

This case study focused on the shadowbanning of LGBT content on TikTok and aimed to examine how marginalised communities navigate and bypass censorship on online platforms. The study proposed a new approach to investigating online dereferencing or censorship by not only collecting the content itself, but also analysing the practices used to circumvent censorship. Ultimately, the research revealed the tactics used by individuals and sexual and gendered communities to overcome algorithmic censorship and shed light on the way LGBT users negotiate their visibility online.

I would like to conclude on the idea of virality as negotiation, which runs throughout this chapter. I propose to discuss how content can "go viral" or how content are "being censored" through the lens of negotiation at two different lev-

**12** For example, algospeak has become a means of identifying oneself as belonging to "Gay TikTok" rather than a means of avoiding censorship today, insofar as the use of keywords like "gay" is no longer punished as much as it was before 2022 on TikTok.

els and in regard with content moderation *dispositifs*. First, I believe that virality consists in a negotiation between the intentions and digital writing skills of internet users, as well as with the technical features offered and constrained by the platforms' designs. Additionally, I believe that virality can be studied as a cultural negotiation between the normative editorial frameworks of generalist websites (such as the SNSs like TikTok) and the cultural specificities of subaltern or hegemonic communities. These negotiations occur repeatedly and often in a conflictual manner, influenced by the rules set by platforms, the technologies used and the communities involved.

Virality of content as negotiation naturally has an impact on the way we write about ourselves as queers, dykes, trans, Blacks, Arabs, feminists and so on. Thus, it plays as much a part in their sudden (hyper)visibility as in their segregation or in their cultural transformation throughout time (through the birth of digital crypto languages, for example). In many ways, these negotiations are central to understanding how content is made (in)visible online and to what extent some communities are more impacted than others by content moderation designs.

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