THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Creative Digital Labour of Meme Making

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

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2023

Abstract

Up until recently, internet memes were regarded as anonymous bits of humorous digital culture by scholars and the public alike. Today, it is possible to follow the work of meme makers who create their own cohesive artistic and authorial styles, like we would the oeuvre of painters, writers, or musicians. Internet meme creators can break through anonymity and obscurity with the help of a variety of digital platforms, showcase their work to tens of thousands of followers online, and as a result start making an income as meme creators. This changes the position of certain meme creators from the stereotypical "anon" user-generator into a "platform-dependent cultural worker" (Poell et al., 2022). As a result, meme creators enter a precarious working relationship digital platforms, similar to other cultural workers such as YouTubers, Twitch streamers and TikTok creators (Abidin, 2016a; Bishop, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). This new development in the world internet memes leads us to ask the question "what does the work of meme creation even look like?"

I approached this research question through a qualitative perspective and conducted a digital visual ethnography of a niche meme community centrally based on Instagram. For this study, I interviewed 15 meme creators, curators, artists, and production staff and analysed the internet memes that my interviewees have made through three main themes: *work*, *art* and *community*. I found that the *digital creative labour* these meme creators and artists engage in is precarious in nature, artistic in motivation, and ultimately a community-driven effort. Therefore this study aims to highlight platform-dependent cultural work through a case study of meme making on digital platforms. While complementing the existent research on platform work, it also seeks to inform cultural workers, such as internet meme creators, with an overview of existent interventions against platform-captivity.

Lay Summary

Internet memes are internet posts which humorously combine images and text. Many people make and share internet memes with their friends and family, as well as the wider public. They have become an important part of our social lives today. These internet memes are now so artistic, layered, and creative that we can follow the work of meme creators as we would the works of a musician, painter, or writer. Meme creators can now be considered artists in their own right. However they often experience difficulties making money from their art, despite the fact that the companies which own the websites and applications on which we share internet memes make great revenues on the back of online posts like internet memes. Meme creators are among others who experience this challenge, such as YouTubers and social media influencers. This study examines the role of such companies in the exploitation of meme makers and tracks how meme makers resist these companies by interviewing the meme makers in question, collecting relevant internet memes and public communications from the companies. It ultimately seeks to show the risks of these platforms' increasing power on art, culture, and creative work.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or processional qualification except as specified.

Part of this work have been published in the edited volume *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, published by the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, 2021.

İdil Galip

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my grandfather Salahaddin Galip (1929-2008) who was the first writer I knew.

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Introduction

1.1 Prologue

> "We as content creators want to have worker protections. Even if you're producing funny pictures of Shrek, that should not determine whether you're taken seriously as a creator or your livelihood is imperiled at the drop of a hat ... We are a meme union; the whole point of it is to work for protections for other content creators."

These are the words of Paul Praindo, a representative of the organising committee of an Instagram *memers' union*, aptly named *IG Meme Union Local 69-420*. The union was formed by meme enthusiasts and creators in 2019 to negotiate for workers' rights with the social media platform Instagram. Their demands included "more open and transparent appeals process for account bans; a direct line of support with Instagram, or a dedicated liaison to the meme community; and a better way to ensure that original content isn't monetized by someone else" (Lorenz, 2019a). They also asked that a list of removed meme accounts be reinstated by Instagram.

Included in that list of removed meme accounts was *@saqmemes*, an Instagram page maintained by artist Omnia. In our virtual Zoom interview in 2021, she explained to me that despite their ironic name, the memers' union in question, did succeed in getting her Instagram account back. On this Instagram meme page, *@saqmemes*, Omnia had cultivated tens of thousands of followers posting *OC*, short for "original collage"[1] Omnia's OC memes explores topics such as capitalism, economic exploitation, neoliberal propaganda, and racial inequalities through a satirical lens. However, she also tells lighter tales in her memes, for instance focusing on the absurd minutiae of everyday struggles, like losing friends and romantic interests after they see you "drinking your coffee with a spoon (like soup)" (@saqmemes, 2020).

In our interview, Omnia surmised that her account was probably removed by Instagram, not because of the lighter jokes, but most likely because she was posting political memes, which content moderators might have found to be divisive. She argued that when she posts a critical internet meme on her Instagram page, discussing racism against Black communities in the US for instance, she may also be risking the sudden

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[1]In internet meme subcultures *OC* is usually an acronym of *original content*. Meme creators on Instagram include it in their profile bios to signal that all of the memes they post unless specifically stated otherwise, are their original creations. This means that they do not take screenshots and *re-post* anonymous memes or memes created by another meme creator. This gives the meme creator an artistic and authorial voice.

deletion of her entire page. This state of anxiety as a result of platform-opacity was shared by the other internet meme creators that I interviewed. These meme creators, who at least partly depend on Instagram for online visibility and subsequently financial opportunities, all found that Instagram's opaque platform rules of deletion, curation, and the reinstating of removed accounts were harmful to their financial well-being.

Omnia's account was released back to her by Instagram after the memers' union pressured the platform into doing so. Omnia was surprised that her meme page @saqmemes was "randomly" back up on Instagram, and how Instagram subsequently reached out to her through their "meme department", a new development that she thought was an attempt at "keeping meme creators happy". This encounter did not change the fact that she was still in the dark about why her account was removed in the first place, and if this might happen to her again.

Omnia's worries and anxieties regarding her working relationship with Instagram are shared by many other platform-dependent cultural producers such as lifestyle influencers, YouTubers, Twitch streamers, and TikTok creators (Abidin, 2016b; Bishop, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Instagram is an image-centric social media platform owned by Meta, the platform company formerly known as Facebook. Similar to other platform companies, such as Beijing-based ByteDance which owns social video platforms Tiktok and Douyin, Instagram has a financial incentive "keep the boundary between unremunerated end-users and paid professionals vague" (Poell et al., 2022). This is because such digital platforms make part of their revenue by collecting, analysing, and selling "user-generated data", which turns every "user" on their platforms into a so-called "free labourer" (Terranova, 2000). Each user spends hours clicking, scrolling, liking, sharing, and posting "content" on the platform, and the platform company collects and analyses all of this activity so that it can sell it to other companies. Instagram, the main digital platform that Omnia uses to post her work, is one of the most invasive digital platforms, sharing 79% of the data it collects from the people who use it with other companies (Dimitrov, 2021).

Artists, cultural producers, and "ideological intermediaries" (Arnesson, 2022) with online followings like Omnia, create value for Instagram not only as "free-labouring" individuals (Terranova, 2000) but also as professional cultural workers. Omnia's meme page *@saqmemes* has over 20,000 followers today and acts as a cultural attraction and a community hub. The presence of active meme pages like *@saqmemes* invites increased engagement to the platform, leading to more user data, and therefore more value beyond her role as an individual user. As a result, meme creators such as Omnia not only have a personal but also a professional working relationship with Instagram, and are ultimately precarious platform workers. This study seeks to unpick these precarious and tense relationships within such platform-dependent cultural work. It does so by focusing on a small group of cultural workers (n=15) within a subcultural meme community on Instagram, specifically meme creators, curators, artists, and production staff. The research project is built on digital and visual ethnographic methods, pulling together various digital ephemera such as blog posts, screenshots, autoethnographic reflections, and the participants' internet memes to capture a sociological snapshot of cultural work in the era of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

1.2   Background

One of the results of the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has been "a surge in the use of digital technologies" worldwide (De' et al., 2020). In 2021, the OECD noted that better digital infrastructure and increased digital connectedness may mitigate the negative effects of crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic. In the same report, they recommended various policies to strengthen "countries' digital preparedness" (*The role of online platforms in weathering the COVID-19 shock*, 2021). Today, our social lives, politics, cultural interests, and work are already enmeshed with digital technologies. However, with global pressure on countries to be more "digitally prepared" after the COVID-19 shock, we can expect that individuals, societies, states, and workers will be increasingly dependent on digital platforms, and vice-versa. As sociologists, we should be alert to people's deepening relationship with digital platforms, as this relationship will also become a site of socio-political and economic struggle if it has not become so already.

According to data published in June 2022, 58.4% of the global population actively uses social media platforms, which amounts to a total of 4.6 billion global active social media users. Among these platforms, Instagram is the fourth most used social media platform in the world with 2 billion monthly users, after Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, respectively (Dixon, 2022). The results of an online survey conducted in April 2022 among 5,747 weekly Instagram users between the ages 16 to 64, showed that 51% of the respondents logged onto Instagram to see "funny content" (Ceci, 2022). Such "funny content", like internet memes, is part of what scholars and companies describe as "user-generated content". This term, which has been replaced by the snappier *content* in everyday language, refers to the online media that *users* or "active internet contributors" (van Dijck, 2009, 41) create via digital platforms. User-generated content (UGC) and the online activity that it encourages is the foundation of how digital platforms generate revenue. Meta, the platform company formerly known as Facebook, owns three of the most popular social media platforms in the world [2] and generates the bulk of its revenue by systematically gathering and processing "user data, which they selectively feed or sell to complementors or other platforms" (Poell et al., 2022). This data is produced by the people who use and engage with the platforms, by scrolling, sharing, liking, creating, and discussing so-called *user-generated content*, which includes internet memes among other forms of media.

The casual internet contributor may see her Instagram use as an enjoyable leisure activity or as a tool that gives her the benefit of social connections. She may not be aware that digital platforms such as Instagram utilise her sustained attention to their platform, and her "leisure time" as unpaid work. This sort of value-generating activity has been described as a mode of "free labour" by Marxist scholars (Fuchs, 2012; Terranova, 2000). Through this lens, people are transformed into unpaid workers every time they interact with digital platforms. Here, an individual can clock in by "logging on" where every person and entity is assigned the role of "user-generator" upon entry to the platform. The nature of this mode of labour is that at its core it is highly enjoyable. In exchange for their sustained attention and continuous use, the platform affords the average "user" the possibility of social connection, emotional support, cultural novelty, and political involvement. It enters the person into a "public" (boyd danah, 2008), connecting them with other "user-generators". This is the case for casual internet contributors, but how

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[2]Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

does the "professional user-generator" contend with the digital platform?

Professional internet contributors create culture and share it through digital platforms as part of their work, and have been described as "content creators". The content creator class is made up of people who professionally or semi-professionally create and monetise online media such as YouTube and TikTok videos, Twitch livestreams, Instagram posts, and so on. Many such people are embedded within online communities and have dedicated followings, so much so that their mere presence on platforms implies value potential. The content creator class is more dependent on digital platforms than the casual internet contributor, because of this reason. This does not change the fact that even people who see themselves as professional *content creators* may feel that their main motivations in "creating content" are closely enmeshed with leisure activities such as enjoyment and socialisation rather than income or career prestige (Törhönen et al., 2019). This collapse between work, leisure, and mundane socialisation has been dubbed "playbour" by sociologists of work (Scholz, 2013) and is one of the aspects of cultural production online that binds platform-dependent cultural workers or *content creators* to exploitative digital platforms.

This thesis is therefore concerned with providing a sociological account of the current state of platform-dependent cultural work. However, it also details the tactics that cultural workers use to understand and intervene against platform-dependency. It builds on a specific case study of meme creators within a subcultural community on Instagram to disentangle the working relationship between people who create art and culture online and the digital platforms that they use to do this work. To do so it describes the social, cultural, political, and technological conditions with which meme communities and creators contend. Certain meme creators on Instagram, like the ones I interviewed for this study, represent the recent shift of the meme creator as a stereotypical antagonistic "anon" user-generator into *platform-dependent cultural worker*(Poell et al., 2022). As a result, certain meme creators have entered a precarious working relationship with digital platforms, akin to other platform-dependent cultural workers such as YouTubers, Twitch streamers, TikTok creators, and Instagram lifestyle influencers. In my research, I found that meme-making, within a professional context, is precarious in nature, artistic in motivation, and ultimately community-driven. Meme creators are not included in discussions of platform-dependent cultural work, and this study makes a case that they should also be positioned within the literature.

1.3 Internet memes in contemporary digital culture

Internet memes can generally be described as shareable cultural templates which originate on the internet. Creators of internet memes combine visual media, text, and/or audio usually in a humorous, satirical, or ironic way, by using digital production tools such as mobile photo-editing applications, browser-based meme generators, and raster graphics editors such as Adobe Photoshop. For the resulting collage to become a fully-formed internet meme, it needs to leave the privacy of the creator's archive and be shared with others on the internet. The internet is teeming with memes about everything and anything, and they have become a ubiquitous part of digital everyday life. From audio bites used in TikTok videos to stock images juxtaposed with one-liners on Facebook, internet memes are digital tools with which people understand and interpret reality. Internet memes have been analysed as modes of warfare, propaganda, culture, critique, folklore, speech, capital, marketing, and even magic, by researchers (Milner,

2016; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Shifman et al., 2014). Accessing and playing with "content" like internet memes takes up a significant portion of people's leisure time online. Moreover, internet memes are multitextual and multipurpose. Coupled with their ubiquity, they have variable and significant top-down and bottom-up effects on culture, politics, and sociality.

Up until recently[3], internet memes were regarded as anonymous, unsigned bits of shareable digital culture by scholars and the public alike. Today, it is possible to follow the work of meme makers who create their own cohesive artistic and authorial styles, like we would the oeuvre of painters, writers, or musicians. Internet meme creators can break through online anonymity and cultural obscurity by using a variety of digital platforms, such as Instagram, Patreon, Twitter, Facebook, Discord, YouTube, and more. By engaging with these platforms in an entrepreneurial way, meme creators can showcase their artistic and creative work, including but not limited to internet memes, to grow online audiences. They can enter and support existent online communities and help build new ones centred around their work. Members of online communities can in turn support internet meme creators by becoming their patrons, commissioning artwork, donating to them directly, buying their merchandise, using their affiliate codes when purchasing specific products, watching their videos, going to their shows, gigs, and exhibitions, etc.

To *build a following* and a dedicated community, however, meme creators must maintain an active daily presence on more than one of these platforms. Being active on a platform for meme creators means posting new memes daily, interacting with their followers, and engaging with the ongoing online discourse through their posts, stories, comments, captions, and memes, all while navigating seemingly mercurial platform policies and algorithmic recommendation systems.

1.4 Internet meme creation as a form of platform-dependent cultural work

Algorithmic recommendation systems on digital platforms colloquially referred to as "algorithms", sort and present media that is "of interest" to its users (Burke et al., 2011). Naturally, different people find different media interesting, so algorithms cater specific kinds of media to specific groups of people. As people's interests and attachments change, so do the algorithms. However, the machinations of recommendation algorithms are intentionally obscured from the people on the platform so that the companies that own these platforms can keep a competitive edge while discouraging people from "gaming the system" (Bishop, 2020). These algorithms are so hidden from the public that they are called "black boxes" by critical researchers (Bonini and Gandini, 2020; K. Cotter, 2021; Seaver, 2017). Furthermore, because they are trained with data from people "who have already been exposed to algorithmic recommendations", they end up creating "pernicious feedback loops" homogenising culture and behaviours on the digital platforms they operate within (Chaney et al., 2018, p. 224). Thus, cultural producers, such as internet meme creators, end up in environments governed by covert rules and systems which firstly, make for precarious working conditions, and secondly, keep their

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[3]Particularly after the middle of the 2010s, when Instagram started to become more than just a photo-sharing application and into a place where people could build their "personal brands" through aesthetic narratives and cultural entrepreneurialism (Abidin, 2016b; Bishop, 2019; Duffy and Chan, 2019; Leaver et al., 2020).

work hidden from people who the algorithm deems to be "uninterested".

Clandestine platform systems and policies corral people into algorithmic clusters, and show them the "stuff that they already like". This makes it difficult for independent artists to achieve wider online visibility outside of the online subcultures that they are already connected to. For artists on the margins of institutions, such as meme creators, online visibility on digital platforms is a key component of achieving even a modicum of "commercial success".[4] Many meme creators, as well as other cultural producers, are aware of these platform limitations and harms. As a result, they have tense, antagonistic, dependent, precarious relationships with digital platforms. This relationship between *them*, as independent artists and platform workers, and *the platform*, as an unpredictable workplace and exploitative employer, informs their content and nature of their work and art. They employ "under-the-radar" tactics as part of today's refracted publics (Abidin, 2021) to understand and intervene in platform systems and policies kept purposefully hidden from them. Sometimes they may even attempt to escape the offending platform, *if* they manage to build and maintain a dedicated community that will follow them to other online spaces.

1.5   The research aims and potential uses of this study

This new development in the world of internet meme creation and platform work should lead scholars of internet memes to ask "what does the work of meme creation on digital platforms look like?". Additionally, in our studies we should start speaking to and engaging with the people who make, share, and monetise internet memes, and who know this work better than anyone. We must understand internet memes as artefacts onto themselves, which exhibit communal narratives and reflections of today's society. However, we should be wary of solely fixating on digital artefacts, and ignoring the experiences, intentions, and practices of the people who create them in the first place. Moreover, we should approach meme creators as *people* embedded in specific socio-economic contexts, rather than transitory, anonymous, "users", "user-generators", "prosumers", or "content creators" that only exist as extensions of a digital platform. Here, we can learn from the established methodological and theoretical sociological traditions concerned with critically analysing labour and power. As critical sociologists, we must refuse to follow capitalistic platform ideologies which turn *people* into *users*, and subsequently *generators* of platform content and revenue.

To reiterate, the main research question of this study is "what does the work of meme creation on digital platforms look like?". The main discursive standpoint of the thesis is that meme creators can be regarded as platform-dependent workers who produce culture rather than "user-generators" or "content creators". To respond to this research question I conducted a qualitative study into an Instagram internet meme community focusing specifically on the experiences of internet meme creators and several associated cultural workers of creative work on platforms (n=15). I interviewed them using a semi-structured and in-depth approach and used the themes that emerged from these interviews to select a variety of internet memes that they had made, from their Instagram meme pages. I then utilised critical discourse analysis to analyse these internet memes and placed them in

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[4]Needless to say that commercial success for independent artists is not comparable to the standards of commercial success for mainstream artists. Financial opportunities such as paid collaborations and commissions are important sources of income for independent artists like meme creators.

conjunction with the stories and quotes that appeared in the interviews to tell a complete sociological story of the work that goes into making, disseminating, and monetising internet memes. I supplemented these stories with "platform heteroglossia" (Seaver, 2017) or official communications, like blogs, interviews, and updates, disseminated by the platforms themselves.

There is a distinct lack of sociological perspectives on the creative digital labour of internet memes. Creators of internet memes are not usually taken as research participants in scientific studies, with researchers focusing on analysing internet memes as objects (Cannizzaro, 2016; Dynel, 2016; Lovink and Tuters, 2018; Wiggins, 2020; Wiggins and Bowers, 2015), modelling how internet memes spread (Jenkins, 2014; Xu et al., 2016), or using internet memes as research tools to study other social phenomena (Leaver, 2013). In the rare case that internet meme creators are taken as the primary informants of a research study, the spotlight is often on deviant young white men who use internet memes as a trolling mechanism seeking to perpetuate ironic or genuine far-right narratives. This means that a significant group of internet meme creators remain relatively unseen by academic research[5]. Subsequently, our understanding of people who make internet memes is skewed towards a specific characterisation, one which favours antagonistic and anonymous personalities. This study seeks to complement the existent research methodologies by turning the focus on a group of left-leaning queer people who make internet memes a part of their artistic practice, rather than internet creators as trolls and perpetrators of harmful narratives.

In conclusion, internet memes are abundant on digital platforms and help shape many people's understanding of the world and their place in it. They are mundane digital artefacts that appear in our everyday lives online, so mundane in fact that most people do not even think about the deceptively large amount of internet memes they are exposed to on the internet. Therefore, observing the way that people make, share, and monetise mundane internet memes can provide rich insights into the current state of culture, sociality, politics, and work. Furthermore, studies such as these can help cultural workers such as internet meme creators place themselves within wider conditions of cultural production and economic exploitation and find ways to intervene in the platformisation of work, leisure, art, and culture. Before we can do that, however, we need to understand how this study approaches internet memes, meme creators, and meme communities.

1.6   Operational definitions of terms

This thesis builds on existent sociological literatures on creativity, art, work, and methods. It prioritises critical perspectives on digital platforms and labour and takes inspiration from media studies as well as art history in interpreting internet memes as digital artefacts and as works of net.art. Overall, it is an interdisciplinary undertaking but falls under the general disciplinary umbrella of *digital sociology*. However, the theoretical boundaries of these disciplines, which are already porous, bleed into one another in this thesis. The way that I approach the topic at hand, namely the sociology of work of entrepreneurial meme creators on digital platforms, is informed by the growing scholarly community around meme studies. This is a burgeoning research area that is coming to terms

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[5]Important exceptions to this include Caitlin Breheny's master's thesis on feminist niche meme creators on Instagram (Breheny, 2017), Adrienne Massanari's study of feminist trolling on Reddit (Massanari, 2019), and Eileen Holowka's theorisation of the affective labour of niche meme creators engage with on Instagram (Holowka, 2018).

with the changing nature of digital culture and is largely dominated by engineers using computational and quantitative methods, media and communication scholars utilising digital methods, and linguists employing cognitive science approaches to study memes. The goal of this study is to provide a sociological and qualitative perspective on the work of internet meme creation and complement the existing scientific understanding of how people interact with internet memes.

The thesis defines *memes* as shareable cultural templates which help people understand and interpret reality. Memes existed long before the advent of the internet, in the form of jokes, ideas, songs, caricatures, drawings, propaganda, and collages. Before the internet, memes were shared and copied via existent technologies like oral storytelling, graffiti, books, magazines, telephones, televisions, photocopiers, and even fax machines (Barton, 2015; Dawkins, 1989; Phillips and Milner, 2017; Shifman et al., 2014). Therefore, there is a clear semantic difference between the terms *meme* and *internet meme*. However, nowadays when we say "that is a meme", we usually mean "that is an internet meme". The history of memetics as a scientific discipline is relatively obscure and will be unknown to most people who like and share internet memes. In my research, I make an effort to delineate between the terms however the reasoning behind my choice will be irrelevant to the general public. From a scholarly point of view, we should not use the words internet meme and meme interchangeably, as they technically refer to two different things. In essence, *not all memes are internet memes*.

An internet meme community on the other hand is a group of people connected to each other via shareable visual media[6] through a variety of digital platforms. Often, there is a central platform where the bulk of the meaning-making work and image-sharing happens. In my case study, that central platform was Instagram. In addition to the central platform, there are peripheral digital platforms that meme creators and communities use to share and discuss media, however, these are of secondary importance to the main platform. In the thesis, I often refer to this community as a *niche meme community*, and the meme creators as *niche meme creators* to underline the niche content of the memes that they make and the niche genre-logic of images that this community gathers around.

1.6.1 The politics of definitions and the cautionary case of Know Your Meme

There are a variety of terms to describe such people who make and share internet memes, however, there is no rigorous categorisation of what these exactly mean in academic literature. A wiki-style resource that researchers can consult about meme templates, history, and terminology is the online meme encyclopedia *knowyourmeme.com*, described in more detail as "a curated collection of user-submitted meme instances and partially crowdsourced definitions" by scholar Ben T. Pettis (Pettis, 2021, p. 16-7). This platform also publishes a magazine called *Meme Insider* which analyses digital culture. While both are useful resources, the field of *meme studies* would benefit from researchers providing scholarly definitions and histories of memes and the people who make them, as the *Know Your Meme* database contributes to the homogenisation of web history (Pettis, 2021).

Due to its wiki-style structure, anyone with an account can submit an entry to *knowyourmeme.com*, however, the website differentiates between confirmed and submit-

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[6]Said visual media includes but is not limited to internet memes. Photographs, selfies, and moodboard collages also have a strong impact on establishing a shared identity in meme communities.

ted entries. Researchers can see whether or not an entry is confirmed in the information box at the top of the entry page. This does not mean that all confirmed entries are accurate, and researchers should use discretion when citing *Know Your Meme* entries as references, especially when the meme, person, or subculture in question originates from outside of the Anglophone world. This is because Anglophone users appropriate images from the non-Anglophone world, ascribe their own cultural perspectives to them, and chronicle their own interpretations as the legitimate, otherwise "confirmed", history of the meme.

It could be argued that Anglophone re-appropriations of memes originating in other languages are just as legitimate as the original. This is not the main issue here. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that *Know Your Meme* is a legitimising institution, and Anglophone interpretations take precedence as the authentic and valid histories over others, regardless of origin. An example of a "confirmed" meme entry on the website which is factually and culturally inaccurate is the so-called "Got Your Nose Kid", also referred to as "Yotube" by Anglophone users. Originating on Turkish Facebook, images of a serious-looking young boy doing a hand gesture to the camera went viral in various global meme communities. The gesture he was doing got interpreted as the "Got Your Nose" gesture by Anglophone people and chronicled as such on the *Know Your Meme* database. By the time the Anglophone meme world got a hold of the images, the Turkish-speaking internet had already been using the meme in instances to denote an intentionally silly mixture of self-confident seriousness and childlike vulgarity. The "I've got your nose" children's game does not exist in Turkey, the hand gesture associated with the game is culturally akin to a middle finger in the Western world. This shows that there are two very different cultural uses of the same meme, however, one use takes precedence as the primary, confirmed, and legitimate history on the website. This is a resource often used by scholars to support their operational and theoretical definitions, and should therefore be approached with more discretion [7].

1.6.2 Preliminary materials for a theory of the meme creator

Meme creators are multimedia artists and describe themselves as such. In popular culture they are placed within a wider category of platform-based cultural workers popularly identified as "content creators". However the term "content creator" obscures the platform entanglements that come with being a digital culture producer. This term as an occupational classification empowers the platforms instead of the workers. "Content creator" sounds more pleasant than "platform worker" as it does not indicate that any kind of work is taking place, only that "content"[8], a vague representation of online media, is being created. A core theoretical contribution of this thesis is based on this particular semantic complication, following the question: "how can we describe people

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[7] This discussion should not put off scholars from looking for descriptions of memes and memetic phenomena outside of academic publications. There are ongoing projects that chronicle and describe memes from non-Anglophone perspectives that bring nuance and context to the field. One such example, which can be useful for Portuguese speakers, is the "memeal archeology" project *#MUSEUdeMEMES* hosted on *museudememes.com.br* and led by researchers based at the Fluminense Federal University in Brazil. Another helpful resource is the book *The Detective Wall Guide* by the new media art collective *Clusterduck* which tracks genres of memes through various themes and contexts.

[8] Instagram defines "content" as "your photo, video, or audio content on Instagram, including but not limited to feed posts, stories, Reels, IGTV videos or other formats specified by us that are posted on an Instagram account controlled or operated by you or by your representative or agent" (Meta, 2022).

who make create and share culture on platforms?" Subsequently, the thesis also explores the political implications of how we describe such workers. In the rest of the thesis, I approach this contention through the perspective of internet meme creators and address theoretical discussions around "content creation", cultural production, platform work, and digital labour. My conclusion is that internet meme creators engage in creative digital labour on platforms and that they can be categorised as platform-dependent cultural workers, creatives, and artists.

Another aspect of this kind of work is that it is dispersed across multiple digital platforms. Instagram is the productive centre of this internet meme community, as this is where the central body of their work is disseminated and where it finds lasting and dedicated audiences. Internet meme creators can then divert these audiences towards digital patronage platforms such as Patreon, community chatting hubs such as Discord, or even independent platforms that the creators set up themselves. Many of the creators also use e-commerce platforms such as BigCartel, Threadless, and Depop to sell their merchandise. All of these e-commerce platforms are also popular among independent and DIY arts communities engaging in platform-dependent cultural labour. Therefore, the results of this study could be used to glean insight into other entrepreneurial platformised communities and their relationships with platforms, work, culture, and community.

1.6.3 Differentiating between "meme creators, meme makers, meme pages, meme admins" and "memers"

A person who creates and/or shares internet memes can be called a meme creator, meme maker, meme *page*, meme admin, and memer. While in colloquial internet vernacular, they are used interchangeably, semantically they refer to slightly different contexts and contain certain subtexts about the person or persons making and sharing internet memes. For instance, a *meme creator* or *meme maker* is a person who creates and shares original internet memes. For something to be an internet meme, it should be seen by at least someone other than the creator. As a result, for a person to be a meme creator, they must also share the memes that they make with others, who through their spectatorship transform an image or collage into a meme, otherwise *a shareable cultural template*. This internalised assumption in everyday internet language lets us know that a meme creator is also a *sharer*.

A meme *admin* on the other hand, is short for "meme administrator" with "administrator" being a person who is in charge of something. A common role in computer-based occupations and subcultures, *admins* can be in charge of maintaining computers, websites, blogs, pages, accounts, and groups on social media platforms. If someone is a meme admin, they administer the sharing, and most likely making, of internet memes on a page on a social media platform like Facebook or Instagram. However the term "meme admin" does not necessarily indicate that the person in question creates and shares OC or original content/collage/creations. It may be that they find, screenshot, and save memes created by others to later share on their *meme page*.

This takes us to the last term: *meme page*. This term technically refers to a static web address, a place on a digital platform where someone can look at internet memes. In everyday digital culture, it denotes an entity that posts internet memes, rather than a single person. It can be used when discussing a collaborative "project" rather than a person or a group of people. However, this term is also used interchangeably with "meme creator".

In this study, I use "meme creator" and "meme maker" interchangeably. When describing the main web address where meme creators share their internet memes, I use the term "meme page". Overall, I try to avoid using terminology that collapses the person as a human being with their digital presence on a platform. I do this to make a deliberate point about the pervasiveness of platform ideologies in everyday language, and how these narrative ideologies dehumanise people by describing as "value-generators", "users", "accounts", and "pages". Language is a site of social and political struggle, and as critical scholars of society and the internet we should try and move language "beyond the boundaries of domination", after all, "our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance" (hooks bell, 2015, p. 146).

1.7 Stepping into the memeplex: Searching for feminist laughter on the internet

As a teenager, I spent a lot of time connecting with people on the internet over shared cultural interests, especially music, literature, and the visual arts. This period, roughly between 2005 and 2016, corresponded to the rise of user-generated media on the internet. As a "user-generator", who not only read but also created media online, I was writing ill-fated blogs that I often abandoned, reblogging thousands of moody posts on Tumblr, sharing my digital collages on DeviantArt, and sending FarmVille requests to unsuspecting people on Facebook. This research project, therefore, emerged from my subcultural embeddedness online, my fascination with visual internet subcultures, and the intense dedication that goes into maintaining an artistic presence online. The position I inhabit as a scholar of digital culture, therefore, intersects with my role as a fan, creator, and member of various internet subcultures. As a result, in this sociological study, I also make use of autoethnographic vignettes and reflections in addition to data I gleaned from interviews and visual media. The autoethnography is a purposeful methodological choice that contextualises the way I produce knowledge about the topic at hand and helps bring a degree of research transparency that is necessary when doing ethical research. I have both personal and scholarly ties to the community that I write about, I explore some of those ties in the autoethnographic reflections included in the findings.

By the time I made it to Instagram in 2013, I had already been making and sharing memes on "Weird Facebook" as an amateur poster. Looking for like-minded people who were excited about the possibility of critiquing political systems through new media, I stumbled upon a very active niche internet meme community on Instagram which was populated by young feminists interested in critical political and social theory. These cyberfeminists were making and sharing layered English-language internet memes discussing colonialism, capitalism, gender, race, and popular culture in a satirical and highly intellectualised manner that appealed to my political interests as well as my pretentious leanings. Many of these meme creators had a similar digital trajectory as I did, having posted their way from Tumblr and Weird Facebook and onto Instagram. Today, in 2022, people post internet memes, infographics, videos or "reels", fundraising initiatives, disappearing posts or "stories" and other diverse forms of media. However, at its inception in 2010, Instagram was a place largely reserved for sharing photographs from your everyday life. In the years following, especially between 2014-2017, Instagram slowly became a place for creative exploration beyond photographs. Internet meme creators were at the

forefront of this contextual expansion. The group of people that I interviewed, niche meme creators, were part of this repurposing of the platform. This sort of work is an example of platform-dependant cultural labour (Poell et al., 2022, p. 113), and the people who do this work are intimately connected to digital platforms.

The niche meme creators in question were also deviating from the popular meme style of the day which revolved around creating internet memes through browser-based meme generators. Instead of using ready-made viral images and joke templates, they were making purposeful memetic collages on Adobe Photoshop and photo editing applications. These new avant-garde internet memes were composed of found images, political and social critiques, poetic confessions, and selfies, all built on a base foundation of cynical humour and irony. The left-leaning social and political critique, as well as the satire, found in these niche memes, came from the personal experiences and political reflections of the people who made them. While their audience seemed to come from all around the world, the creators in this particular Instagram meme community were largely based in the United States. Many of the creators I spoke to and met both during and beyond this research project were women and/or queer folk who belonged to minoritised ethnic and social groups in the United States. The age range of participants was between 20 - 35 at the beginning of the study in 2019. The creators I spoke to had multiple jobs, a mixture of service work, and roles in cultural organisations that made it possible for them to create and pursue art independently. Few were in higher education at the time of our interviews, some having dropped out of university, and some contemplating further education. All of them maintained their digital presence on a variety of platforms, namely Instagram, Patreon, Facebook, Twitter, Discord, and YouTube, and had anywhere between 5000 and 75,000 followers on Instagram.

When recruiting participants I reached out to creators who I had been following for several years, as I had come upon their work during my exposure to internet meme subcultures on Instagram. They were all well-known creators within the left-leaning, feminist, queer, critical meme community on Instagram which initially grew around a handful of Anglophone meme creators, such as @gothshakira for instance (Holowka, 2018), around the years 2014-2017. My participants were people who were actively making and posting original internet memes, sometimes several times a day, collaborating with other meme creators and multimedia artists, putting up art shows in independent galleries, making and selling merchandise based on their own creations, captions, and internet memes, running group chats and moderating Discord servers, and all around maintaining an entrepreneurial artistic presence on Instagram. However, since our interviews, some of them have stopped making internet memes and disengaged from this Instagram community, or have pivoted fully to other forms of art or media production. These pivots show that maintaining a popular internet meme page is often only one part of meme creators' creative work, and can be a jumping-off point towards other artistic avenues. This conclusion is one facet of the results of my study, the rest of my findings are presented in the three discussion chapters titled *Work*, *Art*, and *Community*.

1.8   Thesis roadmap

This thesis is made up of seven chapters in total. This chapter has so far introduced the main research question of the study: "what does the work of meme creation on digital platforms look like", as well as the main argument that meme creators are precarious platform-dependant cultural workers. It gave a brief insight into the major themes

explored in the rest of the thesis, such as creative digital labour, platform precarity, and contemporary meme culture. In it, I also presented how I used digital visual ethnography to produce a sociological case study about the creators and community in question.

The following chapter, *Methods*, dives deeper into my methodological approach and aims to present various ethnographic and visual methods that can be used in other qualitative studies of internet memes, communities, and creators. It discusses how I used thematic analysis to code the in-depth interviews I conducted and utilised the resulting codes to select relevant internet memes from my participants' Instagram meme pages. It also discusses the usefulness of critical discourse analysis in analysing individual internet memes. Additionally, it extends other methodological reflections such as understanding screenshots as a mode of digital ethnographic image-making, the importance of autoethnographic transparency in insider research, and the digital ethnographer as a "scavenger".

The literature review chapter, helpfully titled *Literature Review* for the reader, follows *Methods*. In it, I argue that internet memes should be understood within their specific contexts due to their multitextual and multipurpose nature. The chapter builds on existent sociological literatures on work, art, culture, and humour. It prioritises critical perspectives on digital platforms and labour and takes inspiration from media studies as well as art history in interpreting internet memes as digital artefacts and as works of net.art. Overall, it is an interdisciplinary undertaking but falls under the general disciplinary umbrella of *digital sociology*. This review of the literature is followed by the discussion chapter, sectioned into three chapters each taking on a wider theme in the thesis and connecting it to specific findings.

The first of the discussion chapters is the fourth overall chapter, and is titled *Work*. It explores the working lives of the meme creators, curators, and other cultural workers involved in this particular subcultural community. It focuses on the meme creators' relationship with the digital platforms that they use to share their work and make money, and their experiences with platform-dependence. It makes the case that meme creators are platform-dependent cultural workers and should therefore be provided transparent and equitable working conditions by the platforms in question.

This chapter is followed by *Chapter 5: Art*, which discusses the "art" of meme making by underlining the artistic standpoints that niche meme creators inhabit and how we can use these to understand their anxieties and tensions with regard to digital platforms, digital life and internet memes in general. This chapter includes a previously published article on "the grotesque in Instagram memes".

Chapter 6: Creative Community is the final discussion chapter and it emphasises the political and social ideals that the niche meme community and creators engage within their work. It posits that this creative community adopts and forwards principles of resource distribution within online worlds. It also provides examples of community interventions into the world of internet memes and digital platforms, such as *Bottom Text collective* and *virtualgoodsdealer*.

Finally, *Chapter 7: Conclusion* reiterates the research aims and findings, and detail how these findings speak to existent literatures. It also discusses the limitations of the study and provides future avenues of research for scholars studying online memetic communities, processes of meme-making, and cultural production as digital labour.

Chapter 2

Methods

2.1 Research philosophy

The development of meme creators from "anon" user-generators into entrepreneurial multi-platform workers leads us to ask the question "what does the work of meme creation look like?". This is the main research question that this sociological study of meme creation seeks to answer. In my fieldwork, I found that the most straightforward and nuanced way to understand the working lives of internet meme creators was through in-depth qualitative interviews with the creators themselves. I decided to also interview curators, artists, patrons, and production staff (n=7) who were involved in this sub-cultural space through their work. Since the creators whom I interviewed (n=8) often make internet memes and engaged in other artistic interventions about platform work, I also asked for their consent to include internet memes from their Instagram pages in this thesis. As a result, a collection of internet memes that my interviewees have made have formed the visual component of this study. Studies of internet meme creators, subcultures, and communities must include visual data to accurately reflect the field, as internet memes are *visual* above all else.

My *field* as a digital ethnographer was the "internet", in the same way that an ethnographer's field is the *the world*. The vastness of the internet defies generalisation, and this is why I emphasise the "niche-ness" of the community I was conducting research in. I completed my fieldwork online, particularly within a memetic subculture that is governed by creators, audiences, images, text, algorithmic recommendation systems, community guidelines, platform affordances, engagement analytics, and a ceaseless "interdiscursivity" (Wodak 2008, 3). As a result, I opted to analyse my participant's memes through a critical discourse analysis perspective by focusing on how they interpreted the power relations between them and digital platforms in their internet memes. I used thematic analysis for my in-depth interviews and used four parent codes of *work, art, politics and community, memes*. I chose to look at *politics and community* as a single unit with further sub-categories as this subcultural community's existence is inseparably tied to its left-leaning politics.

To contextualise this qualitative and visual data, I *scavenged* (Seaver, 2017, p. 8) generously from internet archives and digital platforms. I collected anonymous memes that illustrate the history of meme cultures, bits of "platform heteroglossia" (Seaver, 2017) which show platform companies' narratives, and screenshots of browser-based media. The challenge I faced in this process of digital visual ethnography was that memetic cultures, online discourse and digital platforms change rapidly and have an

amorphous quality. Future studies into multi-platform work and online subcultures would benefit from supplementing qualitative data with quantitative insights to cope with the internet's inherent slipperiness.

Finally, due to my position as a creator, fan, and researcher of internet memes, I also decided to include autoethnographic reflections about my experiences with memetic subcultures and multi-platform creative work. The principle of establishing professional, scientific, otherwise *serious* ethnographic distance between the researcher and the researched developed from a kind of empirical research rooted in studying "the Other" and being a "man on the spot" (Clifford, 1983). However, autoethnography, when done *ethically*, can offer the readers of the work a critical analysis of power relations between the researcher and the *researched*.

2.2   Reflecting on the beginnings of the project

I started writing up this project's proposal and other preliminary ideas in 2016. My initial fascination with memes and how they are used in digital spaces began during the Gezi Protests in Turkey. The politically charged nature of Turkish digital spaces and memes during the protests had, to a degree, shaped my understanding of what a meme is. What this meant for my doctoral project was that I was dedicating most of my ethnographic concentration on the "political" functions that memes fulfil online.

I had the initial hypothesis that the memes I came across in Instagram's feminist niche meme space were made, published and consumed to educate audiences about global and regional political debates. The political potential of memes would be the focal point of the project. Having developed this understanding in a period following regional uprisings, one of them which I had to navigate at the time, I could see how memes could act as political signifiers, objects of dissent and performances of civil disobedience. However, once I started my ethnographic journey and began conducting interviews, my focus shifted towards memes as objects of art, and as facilitators of new markets, mutual aid-based communities and online public intellectualism. The position of meme creators as creative workers became my main point of inquiry, and I started paying more attention to issues of digital and creative labour.

My first point of contact with the niche meme community came about around 2014-2015. As an avid Instagram user, I started to come across memes that did not fit the usual viral, image-macro format that I was used to seeing on websites such as 9gag, Imgur and Reddit. These Instagram memes were visually uncanny, abject and grotesque and textually dense and highly referential. The visuals were evocative of Dadaism and Absurdism, whereas the texts were more akin to a type of humorous language used in DIY zines and leftist manifestos. After sending these memes to some of my friends and not receiving the enthusiastic response I had imagined, I concluded that these memes were made to speak to a group of people who had similar subcultural and niche interests. They were not made with a viral internet logic of infinite shareability in mind, and instead were facilitating the creation of a small online community that shared a sense of cynical humour and leftist values. This was the start of my digital ethnography of the niche meme community on Instagram.

2.3   The niche meme community

There are a plethora of niche subcultures with hyperspecific memes on the internet. While the specificities of this particular community will be unique to itself, its general organisation is similar to that of other internet subcultures. An internet meme community, in essence, is a group of people connected to each other via online visual media[1] through a variety of digital platforms. Often, there is a central platform where the bulk of the meaning-making work happens. For instance, 4chan, especially in the mid-2010s was a central platform in US alt-right meme communities, as the platform's affordances made it possible to post antagonistically, anonymously and fleetingly (Peeters et al., 2021). Telegram, for instance, continues to be a central place for congregation and dissemination of conspiracy theories (Willaert et al., 2022). In the case of the community I was engaging with, this central platform was Instagram. Some of the creators, like Hell and Jenson, told me that they were initially on "Weird Facebook" but had slowly shifted to mostly using Instagram.

Name	Role	Age	Location	Main platform	Followers
Cindie	Meme creator	24	Atlanta, USA	Instagram	59.2k
Hubert	Meme creator	24	Atlanta, USA	Instagram	5770
Hell	Meme creator	Late 20s	Baltimore, USA	Instagram	21.5k
Jenson	Meme creator	Late 20s	New York, USA	Instagram	27.1k
Paul	Meme creator	43	Virginia, USA	Instagram	99k
Jillian	Meme creator	26	New York City, USA	Instagram	12.2k
Omnia	Meme creator	35	Omaha, Nebraska	Instagram	18k
Crab	Meme creator	Late 20s	Spain	N/A	N/A
Fran	Artist	28	Berlin, Germany	N/A	N/A
Harley	Artist	27	Berlin, Germany	N/A	N/A
Georgie	Curator	20s	New York, USA	N/A	N/A
Ekrem	Curator	30s	New York, USA	N/A	N/A
Magdalena	Curator	29	Berlin, Germany	N/A	N/A
Rebecca	Video producer	26	Atlanta, USA	N/A	N/A
Christina	Meme patron	Early 20s	UK	N/A	N/A

Table 2.1: Interviewees

The first group of people that I reached out to for an in-depth interview was the Berlin-based queer art collective *COVEN Berlin*[2]. I came across their work through the Instagram posts of meme creators that I was following on Instagram, who were involved in a group exhibition that COVEN Berlin was organising called in May 2019 called "NeoDaddyism 100".[3] COVEN Berlin, in their own words,

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[1]Said visual media includes but is not limited to internet memes. Photographs, selfies, and mood-board collages also have a strong impact on establishing a shared identity in meme communities.

[2]In this study I use the preferred names of the participants, with their consent. This is because their work and art are public, and many of them can be considered public figures. This study does not reveal any information that is not already readily available online and does not include sensitive material that can harm the participants.

[3]This exhibition was part of the fifth and last exhibition of an exhibition series called *Accessibility Note* curated by Magdalena Härtelova. On websites and platforms which support emojis, COVEN Berlin depict the "100" in "NeoDaddyism 100" as the *hundred points emoji*. This emoji is internet vernacular for "keeping it one hundred" and expresses approval and support. Unfortunately, I cannot

"is a queer art collective focused on feminism, love, gender, and sexuality. Founded in 2013, it blossomed when some queers answered a Craigslist ad. Current members are Harley Aussoleil, Frances Breden, Lorena Juan, Judy Landkammer, Kiona Hagen Niehaus, and Louise Trueheart. As a group, COVEN BERLIN wants to create an open sphere to defy systemic violence and inequality and is devoted to emotional processing, collective healing, political reassessment, paying fairly, and supportive time management strategies. The collective nurtures cultural work, in Berlin and online, in the form of embodied affective research and digital hybrid curatorial approaches, always with a breath of humor" (2022).

This exhibition that COVEN Berlin was organising featured memes from 10 internationally renowned meme artists, these memes were printed out and affixed on huge "scroll"s that emulated the digital infinite scrolls that we often encounter in the wild. The exhibition also included an analogue-meme-making workshop led by artist Crab who researches and writes about far-right meme cultures. He used the workshop to delve into the pull of memetic irony which can lead people towards antagonistic, far-right paths. The exhibition, discussions and workshop were facilitated by COVEN Berlin as part of the Accessibility Note exhibition series which Magdalena Härtelova curated. I sent an interview request to Magdalena as well, and we discussed her position as a feminist curator who was helping exhibit internet memes in a physical, as well as institutional, space. I was interested in how the connections between the international Anglophone meme artists, COVEN Berlin art collective, Magdalena the curator and the fine arts institute where the exhibitions were taking place, came to be. The leftist politics and intentionally grotesque aesthetics of the giant printed internet memes were rubbing up against the politics of the fine arts institute itself and had created a sense of tension.

Figure 2.1: A meme by Hell, which was featured in the NeoDaddyism exhibition.

include the emoji itself on this document due to software restrictions and will refer to the exhibition as NeoDaddyism or as NeoDaddyism100. "NeoDaddyism" itself is a play on the early-20th century avant-garde art movement *Dadaism*, as the exhibition engaged with internet memes as neo-dadaist materials.

Figure 2.1 is an example of a meme created by one of the meme artists whose work was exhibited in the NeoDaddyism exhibition, named Hell. She is a multimedia artist and programming director who does food service and retail work by day. She is active on multiple digital platforms creating art, memes, music, and working for social justice causes and organising mutual aid. In our interview, Hell describes herself:

> "I currently do food service and retail work by day. I'm also the programming director of a trans-run and focused nonprofit group called Gender Museum. I do freelance graphic design on the side as well as booking, branding and music production as *Lil Perc the Thot God* on the label I started with my friend Tariq, *Sigil Records*. I'm really into art and music, I have been getting increasingly into spirituality and self-care through spiritual and esoteric practices."

I contacted her on Facebook and mentioned that I wanted to interview her about art, creative work, politics, platforms, and community within a memetic subculture. We conducted a brief interview over e-mail about the potentials, limitations and risks of being an artist working with internet memes. I asked for her consent to include her internet memes in my thesis and we had subsequent interactions on Instagram after the interview as well.

After my e-mail interview with Hell, I contacted Jenson Leonard, a meme creator, artist, and poet, for an e-mail interview. I had read various interviews he had done with journalists and theorists about the intersection of memes and poetry and had seen other meme creators such as Hell sharing Jenson's internet memes on their Instagram stories. We started exchanging e-mails amid the COVID-19 pandemic and discussed various topics ranging from the function of internet memes as cheap and easy-to-use artistic tools, big meme pages that steal content, to his occupation as a meme creator and poet as well as his role as an "essential worker" in a warehouse. In 2021, Jenson and curator Georgie Payne introduced Jenson's solo exhibition titled *Yacht Metaphor: The Collected Works of @CoryInTheAbyss*[4]. This exhibition is a retrospective that presented the idea that certain meme creators are authors and artists to be taken seriously, rather than trolls, or antagonistic and anonymous users chasing mainstream virality. Jenson's memes were exhibited alongside bits of text and references that explained the layers of irony and critical theory existent in his memes. After seeing the exhibition, I sent the curator Georgie Payne an Instagram message for an interview, to ask her about the working process of putting a browser-based exhibition together and what institutional pressures she and Jenson felt while preparing the exhibition. The rest of the interviews happened in true snowball fashion, with some creators accepting my interview requests, and some *ghosting* me. Overall, the community I engaged with was artistic in their motivations, precarious in their working conditions, and community-oriented in their politics. The structure of the thesis, therefore, follows these three themes.

2.4 Methodological provocations

Memes are highly intertextual and can contain many layers of hidden meanings. They are also created, consumed and disseminated over a variety of media. This makes them challenging to study as permanent objects, which is why I try to use a variety of methods

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[4]@CoryInTheAbyss is the username that Jenson Leonard goes by on Instagram and Facebook.

to capture the often nebulous form of the niche meme. The ephemerality of such digital content does not have to be a hindrance to studying this kind of media because qualitative methods can account for this idiosyncrasy. The transient and fast-moving nature of memes can be taken as an opportunity for researchers to engage with the people who create and share memes. Viewing memes as unauthored fragments of media obscure the sociality and intent that encircle and characterise memetic communities. A well-rounded sociological study of memes should therefore include an examination of not only the memes themselves, but also the people who make and appreciate them, and the platforms which house them. An appropriate way of doing this is through an ethnography of memetic communities. The ethnographic account must acknowledge the centrality of the platforms and those objects which help bring the community together. In the case of memetic communities, memes act as nodes that connect people and digital platforms facilitate these connections. My project is concerned with the work that goes into these connections and seeks to shed light on the various transactional efforts that underpin these communities.

The specific community that I engaged with in my research is made up meme creators with strong aesthetic perspectives and conceptual concentrations who interact with audiences that support and follow their work closely. The intimate connections they can build with their audiences are a result of these memes' authored nature, and the fact that the authors are implicated in the messages and dissemination of the memes. The creators who I interviewed and followed make memetic pieces that reflect an artistic sensibility and exist outside of the pursuit of simple memetic virality. This is not to say that viral ideas, templates and visuals do not appear in niche memes, they undeniably do, as viral templates become cultural touchstones for many who spend time online.

Virality is often discussed in conjunction with internet memes, especially within mainstream culture. The assumption is that internet memes are valuable objects of research if they become viral, as this implies that many people have seen and been influenced by the viral memes in question. I take umbrage with the assumption that for internet memes to be important, they need to be seen by millions of people. Instead, my methodological approach is based on the idea that niche memes, those which appeal to a smaller group of people from the get-go, are just as important in our pursuit to understand the social implications of internet memes. This is because memes which appeal to a smaller set of people can help create tighter bonds between said people, and help foster generative and inter-referential communities. These niche memes are often *authored*, which means that the identity of the creator is known to the audience. This can help engender relationships that have a stronger component of social trust between the creator and the audience, as their identity, in some way, is known to others. In contrast to anonymous forums and boards in which posters[5] are "masked" (Zeeuw, 2019) and where the tone of interactions are characterised and stereotyped as antagonistic (Tuters and Hagen, 2020), authored niche memes can create relatively more collegial communities, especially on Instagram.

I use "collegiality" as a way to describe the sense of accountability, trust and positive community practices that I witnessed within my ethnographic observations during the project. As with all groups of people that pursue a form of co-existence, whether this be online, offline, or both, discord and interpersonal clashes happen in these spaces. However, when compared to more publicised memetic subcultures so often associated with *deviant young men* and rituals of trolling, the people I interviewed within the niche

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[5]The term "poster" here refers to people who publish "posts", or people who "post" media on the internet.

meme community on Instagram felt that there was an effort to keep their particular community as safe as possible. Although it is crucial to underline that there are multiple subcultural clusters within this wider community, the people who I engaged with belong to a cluster that can be typified as left-leaning and largely queer. This naturally influences the way they structure their practices online and the way that they interact with other users that they are connected to.

The focus of this study is therefore a memetic community which can be generalised as subcultural, artistic, collegial, left-leaning, and queer. The challenge that such a community cannot represent the entirety of memetic subcultures online or those who make a living from making memes is irrelevant to the goal of this study. This is because the internet is made up of refracted publics (Abidin, 2021) that are diverse in their tactics and practices. Moreover, for too long studies which have focused on antagonistic memetic spaces inhabited by a subset of white, deviant, young men have been misrepresented as the end-all-be-all of memetic communities. One of the reasons why this project deliberately puts a group of artsy leftists in its centre is because it seeks to provide a more complete picture of the kinds of people who make memes. While this study cannot be used as a way to understand every facet of memetic subcultures, the methodological approach I detail in this chapter can be replicated to study other communities. In fact, more qualitative studies that openly interact with the people behind the memes are needed to unfurl the complex sociological implications of so-called "content creation", or platform-dependent cultural work.

2.5   Digital ethnography: Dispatches from the field

An ethnographer's immersion into their research setting is paramount to providing a consistent narrative of said setting. This immersion usually entails physically being at the field site and physically observing participants. The same logic of being present applies to the online field site, however, the researcher has to make certain adjustments to suit this virtual space. For instance, the ethnographer's presentation of their online identity should be well thought-out, as it is important to consider what their profile picture, social media bio and posts communicate to their participants. As there will almost always be a power imbalance between the researched and the researcher, the latter must be aware of their online demeanour as much as they would of their offline behaviour (Hine, 2015, p. 71).

This becomes tricky to accomplish with the multiplicity of digital platforms many people now use, and wrangling one's various online identities to present a coherent presentation of the self is an increasingly difficult task. How can we separate our public and private personas online as researchers when our participants can easily Google our name and gain access to almost archival knowledge of our online behaviour? Should we endeavour to remain unsearchable, unknowable and faceless on the internet? While this is an important question to ponder and be aware of when doing digital ethnography, a contrasting question is "does it matter that my participants can see an array of the Facebook profile pictures I have used in their Google search about me?" The answer, based on my experience, is a resounding no. The private self seeping into the public self should not be a concern unless the researcher has been dishonest about their background and intentions with their participants. Moreover, I wonder how an interviewee participant may feel if they search for the researcher's name online and the search shows no results. People are so digitally connected today that finding out that the person who wants to

interview you does not have a digital footprint may be a seriously uncanny experience. In a highly networked world, our expectations of how a researcher should conduct their private selves online must account for the fact that visible digital traces of the self are no longer considered to be inappropriate. These traces are an inevitability and can be used as a way to legitimise the researcher as a *real* person in the interviewees' eyes.

Niche meme creators are diversified workers and they usually employ more than 5 digital platforms to create, disseminate and monetise their art. As each platform has its own affordances and peculiarities, the creators' content and art also take different forms and reflect different facets of the niche meme as an object of study and the niche meme community as a space. To capture the niche meme, how it behaves through various platforms and how the artists use it, I had to familiarise myself with not only Instagram, Facebook and Twitter but also with Patreon, OnlyFans, Koji, Kofi, Twitch, Discord and Adult Swim, which are all platforms that niche meme creators use simultaneously. This came naturally to me, primarily because I grew up on the internet and have spent a lot of time "lurking".

An important practice for any digital ethnographer is the act of lurking, or "digital people-watching" (McNeil, 2019, p. 120). Here participant observation takes a more invisible form, where the researcher spends time following users, reading their posts and getting a feel for the culture of a community through lurking on pages, forums, websites and profiles (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017, p. 56). Building cultural competence is key, as it is in offline spaces. When an ethnographer researches a community or a subculture, oftentimes they will have to gain access through interacting with gatekeepers and building trust among the members of the community. For instance, if a researcher is studying a music scene, they might attend gigs and other events and observe the setting and the people. If they are following a reflexive and ethical practice, then the people that they are observing will know that there is an ethnographer in their midst. This might influence the way that they interact around the researcher and but it also might help counteract the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched.

The same applies to online spaces and communities. When in a chatroom, private social media group or private profile, the ethical researcher must ask for consent from all members after explaining the scope of their ethnography and respect their wishes if they do not want to be observed. However, for public websites with anonymous and viral images, pinpointing the author or owner of the content and asking for consent can be difficult. In these cases, the rule to follow would be to collect and analyse the content as is, since it is by nature viral, anonymous and infinitely reproduced. The niche meme community occupies a space between the private and the public, and therefore the ethics of data collection need to be reflexive but also open to adaptation.

Niche meme creators operate as public Instagram "pages" and while their permanent posts are largely meant for public consumption and free dissemination, their Instagram stories can often be more personal. These ephemeral stories stay up for no more than 24 hours, and unless archived on the profile, disappear into the digital ether. Instagram stories become sites of free-formed and spontaneous bursts of thought and opinions, with the creator often showing their face and their surroundings, and these surroundings especially in the age of COVID-19 are usually their bedrooms. In my ethnographic practice, I decided to not use any material, whether this be quotes or images, from the creators' Instagram stories. After lurking and developing a sense for the community for so long, I recognise that Instagram Stories are a place for personal musings and private thoughts, even though they are technically public. They are communicated to

the audience through a private sphere and are made with the knowledge that they are by nature impermanent. Making them permanent on a word document and potentially publishing them, even with consent does not correspond to my attempt at a cohesive digital ethics. I did however watch and follow the creators' Instagram stories as well as their posts to further my knowledge of the community itself, for analytic purposes, and to understand how the various functions of Instagram are used by the community. Instead of focusing on ephemeral data, I chose to collect and analyse more permanent objects such as memes but also the texts and links that creators provide in their profile bios. I try to remain reflexive and vigilant by regularly checking if the memes that I have saved up are still up on the creators' pages, and if they have been deleted, I endeavour to also delete them to respect their right to be forgotten.

I had been lurking within the niche meme community before starting my PhD project. This practice emerged out of a place of personal interest, but later informed my desire to pursue a doctoral project examining how communities organise around memetic subcultures. As a result of spending many hours on the internet, looking at and making memes on Instagram, I cultivated an intimate knowledge of online subcultures, especially those centred around internet memes. I was logging on to the fieldsite several times throughout the day before I even started my doctoral fieldwork. I was in tune with the norms of the culture and had witnessed it morph from one iteration of itself to another. My closeness to the fieldsite however made it difficult for me to be able to articulate my reflections about it. This meant that I had to reset and reposition myself as an ethnographer, and less of a lurker.

I went to work on sketching out an ethnographic agenda, by piecing qualitative ethnographic methods with more experimental, creative, and "natively digital" ways of research. It was a messy process, where I pursued entry points which made sense to me as a culturally knowledgeable researcher. I did not know what would come of them, and some turned out to be duds. There were not many academic studies about memetic online communities, even though there was a strong and ever-growing literature around digitally ethnographic practices. On the one hand, I was burdened by the qualitative freedom that this project implied. On the other, this was an exciting opportunity, as I could develop a set of ethnographic methods to study small meme communities, which could potentially be repurposed and re-used by other qualitative meme researchers. The following section chronicles the various ethnographic methods that I used to capture a sociological snapshot of this online community.

2.5.1   Platforms and corporate heteroglossia

Online communities do not only include people, or "users". Communities which congregate and interact over digital platforms are also constructed through people's engagement with the platforms in question. The platforms, as spatial apparatuses and as ideological constructions, become important actors in how a community operates and how it views itself. For methodological reasons, understanding the platform as it presents itself to its users and the wider public became an important focus in my interviews as well as my ethnographic journey.

I dedicated most of my ethnographic attention to Instagram and Patreon, as both were sites for creative and entrepreneurial endeavours of the interviewees and the wider community. I asked my participants about their relationship with these platforms and how they navigated them in my interviews. I was also interested in how these platforms talked

about themselves and wished to connect my interviewees' responses and memes to how these platforms presented themselves in their self-produced communications and media. As a result, I started collecting what Nick Seaver (2017) calls "corporate heteroglossia" (Seaver, 2017, p. 8). These are communications that the platforms themselves produce, either as the "platform itself" or as spoken through the mouth of a corporate executive. Working with linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology (1982), "heteroglossia" in this instance refers to "the quality of a text that speaks with many voices at once" (Seaver, 2017, p. 8). Corporate heteroglossia is then the communications that emerge out of a corporation that seems to speak in various tones, points of view, ideological stances, and marketing goals. Seaver (2017) mentions that when studying platforms, ethnographers will surely come across such texts. His warning, however, is that ethnographers should not take these texts as stable pieces of evidence that show some platform's unchanging position and intentions. He underlines that incoherence between and within these texts is to be expected and that the ethnographer should have an ongoing understanding of the changing conditions and the fact that various, and shifting, actors have a say within a corporation. Oversimplification is a real risk when using corporate heteroglossia, and these communications must be treated with care.

To collect these platform texts, I explored Instagram and Patreon's websites and took screenshots of the material which I found to be valuable for this project. The overarching aim of this was to understand how platforms view and present themselves, and how they discuss themes such as creativity, community, audiences, entrepreneurship, digital culture and in particular internet memes. These were the same themes that I also looked for in my interviews, and other facets of my ethnographic process. I went back every few months to look for new materials and see if I needed to update my data or if there were new communication initiatives that the platforms launched. Instagram's corporate website was useful in collecting such data because the platform also runs its own blog with various seasonal and thematic issues. I took a similar approach with the digital patronage platform Patreon as well, looking into the company's official communications, namely blogs and interviews. As "a scavenging ethnographer" (Seaver 2017, 8) these texts were crucial in situating the different actors, pressures, and ideologies that niche meme communities interact with. The nature of these interactions may not exactly be obvious, or the impacts of such corporate communications may not be explicit to the community itself, but they show some of the workings of the platforms that these communities use. Following the corporate heteroglossia into narrower sites, we now arrive at the Instagram page and "bio" as an ethnographic object.

2.5.2 The Instagram page as an ethnographic site

As Instagram was the creative centre of this community, I paid close attention to my interviewees' Instagram pages. This meant that I would look through the memes that they had posted, as well as the information they listed on their Instagram "bio"s. The "bio" in this case refers to the snippet of personal information that a user sees as soon as they click on someone's Instagram page. The "bio" is similar or equivalent to a "profile" and is the "gateway to accessing participants and the compelling data that [digital ethnographers] seek" (Cousineau et al., 2019, p. 105).

I also used Instagram pages as a way to understand how audiences may engage with meme creators' works and connect with the subject material presented in them. This allowed me to understand some of the patterns of interactions between niche memes and

audiences. However, I rarely include these comments directly in the project unless they offer a highly necessary layer of analysis, as the ethics of pulling quotes from unsuspecting users is not ethically sound. When I do include these comments, I change the sentence structure and terminology used in them, to protect the identity of the person who wrote the original comment. This side of my ethnography helped me get acquainted with the tone of audience interactions on Instagram, and was less of a priority in my overall data collection process due to these ethical challenges.

An essential part of using the Instagram page as an ethnographic site for this project was the collection of internet memes. Instagram's policy about copyrighted material, such as memes and photographs, follows the fair use principle in the United Kingdom in the United States, which states that copyrighted content may be used for not-for-profit educational purposes. As all the memes concerned are made and disseminated in the United States, and I am a resident and researcher in the UK, the fair use principle would technically apply to the meme-collection process for my thesis. However, I concluded that the most ethical way of including copyrighted memes in my research would be to ask for direct consent before the interview. Therefore, all of the authored memes[6] that I analyse in this project, except for Figures 5.11, 5.7, 5.10, were made and published by my interviewees on their main Instagram pages. I chose which memes to include and which ones to leave out from the project by combing through each creator's page, and saving memes which spoke about platforms, work, art, meme-making, and ideological issues.

I made use of the "save" function on Instagram, which allows every user to save posts within private folders. By using this function I could save the memes that I would use in my project, additionally, I could digitally record the trends, themes and hot topics that niche meme communities were engaged with at the time. The save function is also handy if the creator decides to delete their post or their account, then their posts are also taken off my "saved" collection on Instagram. This meme-diary was part of my daily data collection routine and was embedded within my leisure time. This way I was able to track the changes and the rifts within the community and the makers' creative processes by keeping this "mundane" practice.

Overall, collecting a small sample of internet memes can be seen by big data scientists and digital methods enthusiasts as a tedious and inefficient task. While this may be true for researchers interested in capturing virality within a large segment of society, my aim in this project was to understand how a memetic online subculture navigates issues of cultural and artistic production on platforms. I still argue that this study can be used to understand the issues around cultural production on platforms and the future of multi-media art and cultural platform labour. By paying close attention to the sociologically dense interactions within small yet intimate communities, we can uncover nuanced knowledge that tells us "the how and why" of internet meme creation.

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[6]"Authored meme" here refers to internet memes created by a single, identifiable creator. I selectively use viral and anonymous memes in my project to explain internet meme cultures generally. I provide the platform on which I came across the memes, alongside the username of the person that posted it on the platform. However, finding the original creator or poster of these memes is very challenging. I do my due diligence by looking through search engines to find the first iteration or the original poster of these memes, but most times this is not possible.

2.6   In-depth interviews and sampling

When approaching the interview stage of my data collection, I chose to follow a semi-structured and in-depth interviewing technique. The interviews add a much-needed first-person account of what it is like to be a niche meme maker. Conducting 15 in-depth interviews with 8 niche meme makers, 1 video producer, 3 curators, 1 meme patron and 2 artists from an artist collective helped me bring an ethnographic depth that I would not have been able to emulate through secondary data. 10 out of the 15 interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours and were conducted over Zoom, whereas 3 of the interviews were conducted over email. I asked for written consent not just to use the interview data but also for the use of their memes.

My first point of contact was the members of COVEN Berlin art collective. I had been on the lookout for meme-themed art exhibitions and installations and found out that they were holding a meme exhibition and workshop called "NeoDaddyism" at the Prague Institute of Fine Arts in 2019, curated by Magdalena Härtelova. I appreciated how they brought the works of some of the most popular niche meme artists together at this exhibition and supplemented the exhibition with an "analogue meme-making workshop" run by, then Berlin-based, artist Crab. I contacted and conducted interviews with some of the members who were involved in organising the exhibition, as well as the curator. From there, I approached some of the meme creators who COVEN and Magdalena had included in their show and set up interviews with them. I then followed some of these meme creators' collaborative connections to recruit more creators, as in the case of Bottom Text Collective.

I contacted my interviewees through Instagram, Facebook, and Discord and contacted them through Instagram Direct Messages, Facebook Chat, Discord chat and e-mail. The curator and artist collectives' institutional affiliations made it so that they preferred communicating via e-mail, and followed professional netiquette and language in their emails. Whereas the meme makers, the meme patron and the video producer opted to use instant and direct messaging for a more relaxed manner of communication. I initially interviewed 2 creators over e-mail and decided to start conducting the interviews in real-time over Zoom after finding that setting a dedicated time and date for an interview was more efficient both for me and for the interviewees.

Gatekeeping was almost non-existent as the community prides itself on having an accepting culture and gatekeeping is discouraged to a degree by self-policing. The fact that I am a woman made it easier for me to gain and maintain trust, as many of my interviewees were women and the niche meme community is run largely by queer folk and women. However, by the end of my doctoral studies, I felt that I had a much closer relationship with my participants that I did not have when I conducted my interviews.

When it comes to the content of the interviews, the questions I prepared for the interviewees followed the same theme but were personalised for each of their occupations and their connection to the niche meme community. The questions took three forms:

"(1) oral history, which is a recounting of a social historical moment reflected in the life or lives of individuals who remember them and/or experienced them; (2) personal narrative, which is an individual perspective and expression of an event, experience, or point of view; and (3) topical interview, the point of view given to a particular subject, such as a program, an issue, or a process" (Madison, 2005, p. 25).

I managed to ask all of the questions I had prepared, even though the interviews were participant-led and semi-structured. Oftentimes, the participants would provide answers

to the questions I had not asked yet, which made the interviews more conversational. Here are the questions I directed to an artist from COVEN Berlin art collective:

1. Could you please introduce yourself (name, where you're from, age, occupation and so on)?

2. Could you explain what "Art Collective" is and does? What are its guiding principles, aims, its critical stance?

3. Could you talk about how the X exhibition came to be? The conception of the idea itself?

4. Could you talk about the connection between Dada and X exhibition?

5. How did you connect with the meme artists whose work you exhibited? Had you known them before, as friends, fans of their work and/or collaborators?

6. What was the process of working with the memes the meme artists' like? What were their initial responses and how did they feel about their work being printed out and transplanted into a fine arts institution?

7. What was your goal in taking memes, which are inherently digital, and putting them up for exhibition in a traditional fine arts space?

8. Could you talk about the meme workshop? How did it come to be? What were some of your guiding aims and principles?

9. How did you end up choosing to do an analogue meme session instead of a digital one? Was this connected to the choice of printing out memes for the exhibition as well?

10. What does 'community' mean to you with regard to the art world?

11. Do you have an online presence?

12. How do you use digital platforms?

13. What do memes mean to you?

2.6.1 "Screenshotting" as a digital ethnographic tool

Screenshotting was an essential tool in my digital ethnography. We can understand screenshotting as a method of image-making on the field (Rose, 2007, p. 6), which in this case was the "internet". I used screenshots as field notes and sometimes utilised them as visual data, as evidenced by the "Platform Heteroglossia" subsection in this chapter. They functioned like photographic and textual snippets from the field and allowed me to capture a specific moment in time or a particular kind of feeling [7] when I was online watching livestreams, lurking on meme pages and browsing platforms.

Screenshotting is a particularly useful way of saving certain moments and parts of the internet for digital ethnographers, as pages, interactions, websites, and platforms may die and disappear "almost as quickly as they are formed" (Kneese, 2021, p. 42). For

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[7]Some may call this affective atmosphere the *the vibe*.

instance, in March 2022 *bobiler.org*, a website which formed the foundations of online remix culture in Turkey and popularised the meme format called "monte", announced that it would shut down due to the rising costs of hosting the site. The website made a call on Twitter and asked all of its users and fans to archive whatever they could from the website as the site would be unreachable after March 26, 2022. As a website that hosted myriads of memes for 15 years, bobiler.org is no more aside from the "monte"s that previous users could salvage before its death.

While I do not use bobiler.org as a source for data for this project, two of my fieldsites either partly disappeared or face potential "platform death" (Mackinnon, 2022; McCammon and Lingel, 2022). As I was doing research to investigate how meme makers organise against platforms in 2020, I came across @unionizedmemes, "an Instagram memers union" which one of my participants had joined. I took screenshots of their Instagram page, as well as the union membership application that they had linked in their page bio. The application form was an important document to save as the membership criteria could tell give context clues about who the union was interested in recruiting and the political values it espoused. When I returned to it in 2022, I noticed that the application form had been removed from their page. The union currently seems to be either defunct or dormant. It was successful in the various requests it raised against Instagram in 2020 for its members, and is not pursuing any union action as of 2022.

Figure 2.2: Screenshot of the membership application for "IG Meme Union Local 69-420", @unionizedmemes on Instagram, 2020

On the other hand, when I first started my PhD, I was an avid fan of the "Bottom

Text Show", which was a livestreamed meme show aired by Adult Swim [8]. I had started taking screenshots of various parts of the shows and episode descriptions and was storing them in a folder called "Bottom Text screenshots". However, in 2020, AT&T, which owns Adult Swim, announced that it would cancel all of the Adult Swim livestreams, and the last episode of an Adult Swim livestream was aired on November 25, 2020. While the episodes of Bottom Text and other livestreamed shows are still available on their website, it is difficult to predict for how long Adult Swim will continue to host these videos. These videos are therefore in danger of being lost to Adult Swim's impending platform death.

I did not download every single Bottom Text video, or screenshot every second of every Bottom Text episode. I captured specific moments that I thought were important, useful, or evocative of the kind of culture and practices that I have been trying to document and analyse. Therefore, the collection of Bottom Text screenshots that my computer houses is a reflection of my perspective and justifications. Tamara Kneese (2021) describes the "autonomous archival" property of screenshots and states that "screenshots also carry the mark of their creator. They preserve our attention to particular moments in time and communicate our experiences to others when we share them" (p. 150). She also underlines that "screenshots do the work of preservation that many platforms and systems fail to do" (Kneese, 2021, p. 155). In the case of bobiler.org, platforms can even call on their former users to engage in archival work and preserve their platform before it ceases to exist.

One of my goals starting with this project was preserving the art and work of a group of meme creators who straddle the boundaries between art and digital culture. This scene is ephemeral by design, as it mainly exists on platforms that change and morph at a dizzying speed, and where people can scroll endlessly. Meme creators who use Instagram as their main productive space can lose access to their accounts indefinitely for various reasons, they may be hacked by malicious parties, or simply be kicked off the platform for repeated "community guidelines violations". They may lose hundreds of memes as well as followers, comments, stories and conversations when something like this happens. While they may have copies of the memes on their phones or computers, this is not always a given. In such a case, screenshots may act as "material traces of unretrievable moments" (Kneese, 2021, p. 152). Moreover, screenshots in addition to interviews and other forms of ethnographic insights can allow us to preserve a snippet of ever-changing digital scenes and spaces. They can help safeguard a certain kind of computing history.

Screenshots can also assist in creating archives and collections outside of platforms' terms and conditions (Kneese, 2021, p. 152). For instance, I previously mentioned that I used the "save" function of Instagram to make sure that the memes I would include in my thesis had not been deleted by the creator. However, I used this function more as a vetting mechanism rather than an archival method, as for me to be able to include the memes in my "saved" folder on Instagram I would still have to screenshot them. To have a meme archive outside of platforms is important for me as a digital ethnographer and as a chronicler of memes, as I retain access to this material through my own devices

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[8]"Bottom Text" was led by 3 meme makers when I entered the field, 2 of which I have conducted interviews with. The show would usually last for 1.5 hours and comprise a discussion of that week's meme trends, a visual, thematic walkthrough of the memes that the creators had come across, and a 5-minute meme-making challenge. The discussion of each meme trend was followed by this meme challenge where the creators make a meme about the discussed topic.

that are not governed by corporate bodies. This point brings us to the topic of storing and tending to screenshots.

Screenshots "degrade over time and even at their best capture only partial information. They are messy, incomplete, and contain various kinds of noise ... They must be catalogued, renamed, and archived to be of future use, or else they become clutter on a computer desktop" (Kneese, 2021, p. 153). The problem is that screenshots must be tended to on a weekly or monthly basis, because if they are left to accumulate within a folder they are bound to become unintelligible, and untethered from the wider project. During my fieldwork, I would scan my screenshots folder on my desktop and isolate screenshots that I captured for my doctoral project. I would then organise them into data folders that also acted as codes. This made things easier for me but required a constant flow of attention. Organising and re-organising folders helped me categorise certain topics, spaces, interactions, and people that were important to the project and formed part of how I saw the community structure. The main issue I have faced using screenshots within my thesis has been the file size that I must abide by when submitting my thesis document. The abundance of screenshots that need to be included in my thesis results in the thesis document having a large file size. This means that when I submit my thesis, I need to reduce the file size which in turn lowers the quality of the screenshots included in the document. Therefore, by the time you read this thesis, you will be seeing degraded, perhaps ugly, screenshots. This glitch, or breakdown, is an opportunity for us to reflect on the institutional limitations that academic submissions need to abide by, and how the use of screenshots by digital ethnographers is structured around mundane external pressures, such as document submission formats.

2.7   Autoethnography

"In autoethnography two different meanings of the term subject come together: the researcher is the subject of the research, and also the subjective voice in the narration" (Chaplin, 2011, p. 4). By journaling their process, the author can give insight into the rich and layered nature of the mundane, everydayness of conducting research. This can in turn bring up certain, significant elements of the research process that might have stayed hidden in a more conventionally structured project. Engaging in autoethnographic methods can also be used as a playful literary and/or visual tool within a piece of social research, oftentimes blurring the lines between social science and art. Especially for projects that focus on visual data, visual arts and qualitative methods, making use of this autoethnographic intersection of arts and science can help illustrate arguments to their full literary and visual extent.

By connecting the "personal to the cultural" (Holt, 2003, p. 18), the researcher acknowledges that they are immersing themselves in the culture that they are studying, journaling the extent of this immersion and analysing its influence on their own, subjective social world. Reed-Danahay (2017) uses the term "critical autoethnography" to describe a type of autoethnography that is used to understand the positionality of the researcher, the power structures their work is embedded in and to challenge these structures (Reed-Danahay, 2017) . This understanding of the autoethnography intersects with certain elements of critical theory (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014, p. 20), and is meant to pull the method away from an assumed self-centredness or narcissism into what is deemed the "analytic autoethnography" camp (Chaplin, 2011, p. 6-7). Reed-Danahay (2017) for instance, incorporates Bourdieu's ideas on "reflexive sociology" into her practice and def-

inition of a critical, analytic autoethnography (p. 145). She traces Bourdieu's rejection of the concept of autobiographical examination and narrative through his works, but also uncovers particular points in his career where he did engage in "critical autoethnography", especially in his book *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (Bourdieu, 2008). Reed-Danahay champions analytic autoethnography and argues that this method can be a tool to understand the institutional and structural power structures the researcher is surrounded by, taking the focus away from the personal and the self and into the political and the social (p. 152). Although more experimental and "evocative" autoethnographers argue that autoethnographies do not always have to produce theory but can be used to express an environment, a feeling or a social situation in a unique narrative way to the reader (Chaplin, 2011, p. 7).

Criticism concerning both of these autoethnographic methods, in general, does exist, as they fall on the methodological margins of social science. The personal focus of the autoethnography could be seen as narcissistic rather than scientific (Holt, 2003). This criticism traditionally conforms with the principles of positivistic research, where the use of first-hand accounts and subjective narratives are discouraged. Although, in the same vein, the over-emphasis on the supposed impartial ethnographer has also been critiqued by the "postmodern research movement" (Holt, 2003, p. 18). My research project does not follow a positivistic methodological route, instead, I am interested in exploring and documenting a specific digital subculture. I am cognisant of the perceived shortcomings of autoethnography (Campbell, 2017), however, recording the intentional and unintentional entanglements with the culture that I am studying has helped me remain ethically vigilant and reflexive. This record has acted as a layered account in which I have been able to detail the simultaneous process of data extraction and analysis, entering "into the 'emergent experience' of doing and writing research" (Boylorn and Orbe, 2014). As the subculture I am exploring is digital and visual in nature, I have a creative practice which I couple with an autoethnographic journal.

In terms of visual autoethnographies, I have found Elizabeth Chaplin's photo diary method to be applicable to the digital world. Chaplin (2011) highlights that within social science texts "the aesthetic force cannot be allowed to overwhelm the social argument" (p. 6). To do this, she turned her visual diary into an autoethnography by adding captions to the photographs she took while doing her research. Her method adopts both the evocative nature and analytic potential of autoethnography, making this method a tool of constant reflexivity. She states that the "dailyness of the diary allows detail to be recorded and preserved" (Chaplin, 2011, p. 9), which is what I have been trying to do with my own photographic and meme diaries.

In addition to this meme diary, I have also been maintaining a creative practice. I create memes, zines, and multimedia art and link them to captions, brief texts and relevant literature. I post these in a journal on my personal website which I have called "The Ethnographic Gallery". This practice does not feed explicitly into my thesis but has had an important influence on how I perceive my data collection, ethnography and analysis. It has also helped me explore the practical aspects of creativity, and make sense of my PhD process. Overall, autoethnographic explorations do not make up the bulk of my data but are useful in situating the experiences of my participants through my own dalliances online, which have been both creative as well as extractive.

2.8 Analysis of data

Throughout this process, I used critical digital discourse analysis to make sense of my data. My small sample size of interviewees would not be able to produce any findings of statistical significance, however, the depth and the variety of data that I was using, namely interviews, platform heteroglossia, and internet memes, could provide a more holistic picture of the subject at hand. This is because "digital discourse analysis derives its value precisely from its ability to get at the parts of the internet that are hard to reach or hard to understand with automated text mining tools and other computer-assisted techniques" (Recuber, 2017, p. 50). While the results were not generalisable due to the small sample size and particular subcultural conditions, they were transferable to other platform-dependent cultural work, especially that of a niche, DIY, and independent kind.

This transferability is dependent on how well the researcher can provide contextual cues and paint an ethnographic picture of the "local" conditions. I sought to achieve this by including digital, visual and qualitative data and expanding on ethnographic and autoethnographic reflections. I particularly paid attention to how ideology, power, and shared norms manifested in the memetic language and visual forms that meme creators and cultural workers used. I combined this data from my participants with platform heteroglossia to follow how platforms framed their relationship with creators and "content". My methodological choices here follow the three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis proposed by Norman Fairclough (1995), which maps "three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). I used internet memes and platform heteroglossia as language texts, while also analysing some of the processes of meme-making, sharing and platform-dependent cultural work as discourse practice. Screenshots of various online instances could be analysed as discursive events and could demonstrate how platforms understood themselves, and how meme creators used ideological language to resist platforms, for instance. Critical discourse analysis helped me situate the ideological tensions between platforms and creators, especially when I applied it to visual data. The process of analysis for the interviews was more straightforward and followed the identification of shared themes.

2.8.1 Analysis of interview data

As I would complete my interviews and transcribe them, I would read through the transcripts casually and make notes about which quotes and stories I found to be relevant to the project. In addition to these notes, I also endeavoured to write short autoethnographic reflections before and after my interviews, so I could have more context as I was coding the interviews. These were useful to situate the interviews within and between particular public events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd protests. These public events were often reflected in meme culture and were a significant part of the political lives of my interviewees.

After I finished transcribing all of my interviews, I used a mind-mapping tool called "Miro" to think through the entanglements of the initial themes that had emerged from the interviews, which then helped me locate common points between the interviews. I then used the task-management software "Evernote" to create a table of codes and went back to the 15 transcripts and coded them according to the over-arching parent codes

and more specific sub-categories. These parent codes were *labour/work, art, politics and community* and *memes*. The sub-categories were more detailed and ended up forming the chapter themes, names, and organisations, these categories can be viewed in Figure 2.3. I then went back to "Miro" to display the data, move it around, and re-adjust quotes and stories around to establish an initial narrative for the emerging findings. I would be lying if I said that I only did this once or twice. In fact, much of my data analysis was spent making mind maps online and on big pieces of paper on the floor of my living room and reconciling the various iterations of the analyses over and over again. It was a challenging process, which was complicated by the experimental approach I used to code my interviewees' internet memes. Although, I was only able to arrive at a bigger picture story with this use of relevant internet memes and screenshots of platform heteroglossia. It was a messy process overall but resulted in what I thought to be a truthful reflection of the dynamism of meme communities.

Sub categories	Meaning
Labour/Work	Discussions of work life, stress, balancing
Algorithms	algorithmic gossip, experiences
Platforms	platform pressures
Creativity	the creative labour of meme making
Money	money pressures, earning, service jobs
Art	Discussions of memes as artistic concepts
Institutions	the meaning of institutions in the meme world
Exhibitions	point of, organising, translating the digital to the physical
Memes	Discussions of memes
Meme making	meme making
Meme scene	subcultural scenes
Politics and community	Discussions of politics
Mutual aid	projects
Community organising	support, community, togetherness, online to offline translation
Identity	queerness, immigrant background, alienation, finding community
Ideals and principles	leftist politics, change, redistribution of resources
Healing	in reference to humour
Nihilism	in reference to internet culture

Figure 2.3: A screenshot of the interview codes

2.8.2   Analysis of internet memes

I used two kinds of internet memes in this project. The first group were the internet memes that my interviewees, who are all *professional* meme creators, had made. Having asked for their permission to look through their Instagram page and pull internet memes to include in this thesis, I theoretically had access to thousands of images. However, the practical reality was that I would have to download every internet meme onto my

computer and code them according to the interview coding guide, and then decide which ones to include in the thesis. This was impossible due to time constraints and the limited storage capabilities of my old laptop. This is why after transcribing an interview with a meme creator, I would look through their meme page and screenshot any memes that echoed the sentiments that they had shared with me in the interview. I would then name these meme files based on their contents and significance, for instance, "algorithmicpower", "mao", "bernie", "trump.platform" and so on.

I had a folder system on my computer which not only helped me keep the thesis organised but also aided me in data analysis. The folder names within the system were closed and did not change, whereas the contents and the size of the folders fluctuated throughout my fieldwork. I had set folders for each chapter of the thesis, named after the parent codes which emerged from the interview analysis. I would place the related internet memes within these larger folders and change their location within the parent folder according to how the narrative was coming together. By the time I was ready to write up, I had coded the internet memes using this exploratory method and had connected them to various thematic chapters.

On the other hand, I did not code the anonymous internet memes and jokes that I found online and instead used them to demonstrate particular theoretical points and historical developments in digital culture. I used my participants' internet memes to supplement my findings and bring visual context to the results, while the anonymous memes were used as a heuristic device for the benefit of the reader.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

3.1 Conceptual framework

This thesis builds on existent sociological literatures on work, art, culture, and humour. It prioritises critical perspectives on digital platforms and labour and takes inspiration from media studies as well as art history in interpreting internet memes as digital artefacts. Overall, it is an interdisciplinary undertaking but falls under the general disciplinary umbrella of *digital sociology*. However, the theoretical boundaries of these disciplines, which are already porous, bleed into one another in this thesis. The way that I approach the topic at hand, namely the sociology of work of entrepreneurial meme creators on digital platforms, is informed by the growing scholarly community around meme studies. This is a burgeoning research area that is coming to terms with the changing nature of digital culture and is largely dominated by engineers using computational and quantitative methods, media and communication scholars utilising digital methods, and linguists employing cognitive science approaches to study memes. This chapter seeks to complement these studies by connecting internet meme creation with the sociology of work.

This literature review is divided into three sections: internet memes, online communities, and creative digital labour. In the first section titled *Internet Memes* I will briefly outline the history of *memes* and how they have been analysed in previous research. In the second section *Online Communities* I will explore the ways that internet memes are used in online communities by focusing on language, aesthetics, and politics. The final section *Creative Digital Labour* will elucidate the link between internet memes, creativity, and contemporary conceptions of digital labour. The main purpose of this chapter is to bring sociological analyses of work together with a nuanced history of memes, community, creativity, and art. It also problematises the role that digital platforms have played in transforming people into *users* and *content creators*, and the unique position of internet meme creators as "users" and "producers".

3.2 Internet memes

3.2.1 Memes before the internet

When I tell people that I research internet memes, after their initial surprise I usually get asked the question "was there a first meme"? While this is an unanswerable question, it is nevertheless a good provocation for a dive into the history of memes.

Take for instance, this piece of Anti-Confederacy propaganda from Civil War era United States (3.1, "Anti-Confederacy cartoon showing Southerner's reaction to Lincoln's determination", 1861). The cartoon itself was printed on a commercial envelope produced by a business called D. Murphy's Son, and is now part of various historical iconography collections in the US. It is a patriotic cartoon possibly created in 1863 to further the Northern cause and Abraham Lincoln. It depicts an initially gleeful supporter of the Confederacy who learns about Abraham Lincoln's call for funds and soldiers and becomes horrified by the South's potential defeat. This depiction of a person at two emotional extremes may be familiar to the reader from the memetic "before and after" template often used in internet memes today. This is a well-established way of interpreting and communicating a complex situation through a process of aesthetic simplification.

Figure 3.1: Anti-Confederacy cartoon showing Southerner's reaction to Lincoln's determination. 1861. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2002723206/

In the following collage of before and after templates taken from a meme generator, 3.2, you can see that even after 150 years, the same affective device is being used to communicate information. The continuity in how we humorously categorise and interpret mundane experiences is key in understanding internet memes, as internet memes are not separate from cartoons, caricatures, or collages, and are overall a natural part of the thread and development of humorous visual culture.

Another drawing that exemplifies this continuity is this comic strip, 3.3 published in 1921 in an American satirical magazine called *Judge*. A similarly dichotomous difference is made between the first and the second panel in this cartoon. The first panel shows the character envisaging themselves as a dapper fellow as they pose for a photograph, or *flashlight*. However, the camera takes no prisoners: our self-image and the photographic renders of it rarely match up. Today, the plethora of face-tuning applications available on mobile application stores is a testament to this age-old truth. We can take solace in the fact that people who lived 100 years ago also felt the dysmorphic effects of the camera and made self-deprecating jokes about it. Stories have been told, jokes made, and propaganda disseminated all through simple cartoonish depictions of dualistic realities for ages. The stamina of memetic templates is nothing to baulk at. After all, they have been here, as long as we could narrate ourselves. Although if we cannot tell them apart from cultural templates, caricatures and cartoons, does this mean that *a meme is simply*

Figure 3.2: Collage made by the researcher depicting various "before and after" meme templates scavenged from browser-based meme generator *imgflip.com*

a joke? I respond to this question in the following section by detailing the different theoretical approaches to internet memes.

How you think you look
WHEN A FLASHLIGHT IS TAKEN.

How you really look.

Figure 3.3: Cartoon taken from US satirical periodical "Judge". 1921. Public Domain.

3.2.2 Memes online

An overwhelming majority of articles and books that take internet memes as their primary subject will start with an obligatory reference to Richard Dawkins and a popular science book he wrote in the late 1970s titled The Selfish Gene. The text will read something along the lines of "in his 1976 book Richard Dawkins defined 'memes' as

Figure 3.4: Internet meme posted on KnowYourMeme.com by user "Random Man", 2011.

units of cultural knowledge that replicate and mutate through cultural transmission, the word "meme" comes from the Greek word 'mimeisthai' meaning 'to imitate'" (Dawkins, 1989). There is nothing particularly imprecise or incorrect in framing the origin of the word "meme" through referencing Dawkins, as it is undeniable that he proposed "meme" as an altogether new word and also provided his justification in chapter 11 of The Selfish Gene. Pointing towards the idea that culture imitates itself, an almost universal truth and maxim of any creative industry, Dawkins poses that there should be a specific term that signifies the unit of culture which is imitated and replicated. The reason why he wants to find a suitable term for this concept is directly related to his desire to account for human culture through an evolutionary biology perspective. Many social scientists in the 21st century understand the problems that these kinds of "hard science" or even positivistic explanations of culture can cause, which I am not going to go into detail about in this text. However, this does not mean that scholars of digital culture or internet memes should ignore Dawkins or purposefully write him out of their accounts.

The term *meme* is a neologism that Richard Dawkins formulated. In chapter 11[1] of *The Selfish Gene* he explains how he distilled "meme" from the ancient Greek root "mimeme", thinking they resembled the words "gene" and "même"[2]. His conceptualisations of the term are still influential in how many academics and the public approach the study of internet memes. For instance, internet memes that are viewed and engaged by millions of users are considered "viral". They have "succeeded" and "survived" amongst human beings, the way a virus might, infecting the minds of all who see it, urging

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[1] Titled "Memes: The new replicators" (1976). Dawkins notes that the word "meme" should be pronounced to rhyme with "cream" (Dawkins, 1989, p. 249).

[2] Translated as "same" or "even" in French.

them to replicate it through various forms of cultural transmission. This analogy of viral success, when discussing the popularity of certain units of culture, is directly linked to Dawkins's explanation of how memes propagate themselves in what he calls "the meme pool" within which memes leap "from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins, 1989, p. 249). About viral, or successful, memes, English neuropsychologist Nicholas Keynes Humphrey declares "when you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell".

"High survival value among memes" (Dawkins, 1989, p. 251), or virality in memes, is then understood through biological metaphors and themes like fertility, and symbiosis in Dawkinsian memetics. In her popular book *Memes in Digital Culture* Limor Shifman extends this framework to include internet memes (Shifman, 2014, p. 17):

> "online meme transmission has higher copy fidelity (that is, accuracy) than communication through other media since digitization allows lossless information transfer. Fecundity (the number of copies made in a time unit) is also greatly increased – the Internet facilitates the swift diffusion of any given message to numerous nodes. Longevity may potentially increase, as well, because information can be stored indefinitely in numerous archives".

Shifman's proposal is a response to Dawkins and the memeticists that followed him. In contrast to mentalist-driven and behaviour-driven memetics, Shifman's work arises from the eye of the Web 2.0 storm and is concerned with language use, culture, and sociality in digital daily life. Initially written between the late 2000s and early 2010s, Shifman's early work argues that there is a large gap in knowledge between academia and internet users when it comes to the topic of memes. Bearing the shameful mark of being labelled as a pseudo-science in the late 90s, the fraught field of memetics is inadequate to sufficiently explain the bursting subcultural and memetic diversity of the internet. The field is mired in epistemological controversy and is off-putting to mainstream academia as a result. Shifman astutely recognises this canonical tension just as well as the need for more serious and nuanced discussions about internet memes. She underlines that "internet users are on to something, and researchers should follow" (Shifman, 2014, p. 4) when describing the growing chasm of knowledge between the Ivory Tower and digital culture. Shifman explicitly urges researchers to focus on a sociocultural examination of internet memes, rather than the outdated and problematic biological perspective (Shifman, 2014, p. 12). Citing the lack of attention provided to human agency within the concept of "memetic transmission" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 12) which treats humans as unknowing hosts and memes as viruses that transmit themselves, she instead emphasises the importance of creators, audiences and something which she calls "hypermemetic logic" (Shifman, 2014, p. 32-3). Her central argument, which still holds, is that "we live in an era driven by a hypermemetic logic, in which almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (Shifman, 2014, p. 4).

Therefore, even though Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme* itself, Shifman is the primary and central theorist of internet meme research so far. Her conceptualisation of internet memes as groups of texts that have content, form and a rhetorical stance, and her case against Dawkinsian and bio-centric approaches have been a foundational jumping point for almost all academic research about internet memes. As a result, most, if not all, of the literature mentioned in this chapter is built on Limor Shifman's

indispensable work. It is important to note that while she provides a critique of memetics, her conceptualisation of the chief features of memes, namely longevity, fecundity and copy-fidelity, is still heavily reliant on Dawkins. She rejects what she considers to be the lack of attention given to human agency, but retains the central characteristics of Dawkins's theorisation of the meme. The contribution that this thesis seeks to make within the literature, therefore, follows Shifman's concentration on human agency within digital culture and particularly as it relates to internet memes. In my framing of internet memes, however, I place the meme creator as a key informant and qualitatively engage with the people in question rather than solely focusing on their internet memes. I also add to this literature by underlining internet meme creators' agency as workers within the wider *platformisation* of culture, otherwise described as "the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 4275).

3.2.3 Internet memes as part of the cultural turn in intellectual inquiry

Digital technologies of cultural production and dissemination have had an insurmountable effect on memes as objects, but also on the way we understand and interact with them. For instance, "remixing" is still key in understanding how images are made and reinterpreted on the internet today. Remixing, in essence, is part of the communicative logic of digital culture (Waysdorf, 2021). Simply put, remixing is the act of using preexisting materials to create something new. It has a long history across many societies, but often when we refer to a "remix" the first thing we will think of is a remixed song, where segments of an original track are reinterpreted and rearranged to create a new work. Many Western resources about the history of remixing will point towards disco records and the development of sample-heavy hip hop in African American communities as the originators of our current understanding of remixing (Bolter, 2019; Navas et al., 2017). However existent oral cultures, anonymous folk stories, urban legends, superstitions, and even food recipes across time and space are clear forms of remixed culture. Here new works are stitched together often without attribution to the "original creator", if there is even such a thing in the first place. We may also see these modes of culture as communal narratives that appear from polyvocality, or many-voiced-ness: a collectively authored text that shows ghostly remnants of authors and ideas past (Phillips and Milner, 2017).

In 1967, in his influential essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes proclaimed that all texts were, in essence, polyvocal. Revealing the impending postmodern shift in art, culture, and politics, he wrote that the text is a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). Television, the ultimate "democratiser", was making its way into the homes of the wealthy West and breaking previously held habits, and beliefs and changing the state of cultural production as well as consumption. Theorists and artists were engaging with the idea that the meaning-making was happening not within the mind of a single creator, but rather between a polyphony of previous contributors, the work itself, the audience's experience of the work, and the medium[3]. This growing analytical emphasis on the relationships between images, texts, and discursive communities follows the "cultural turn" in the social sciences which is said to have happened in the early 1970s. This intel-

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[3]See: The works of *The Pictures Generation*, John Baldessari, the Frankfurt School, Jean Baudrillard, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie etc.

lectual and artistic turn towards visual media corresponds to the rise in the production and consumption of images in daily Western life. Today, if we consider the effects of the growing global availability of television sets, cameras, and digital technologies such as the smartphone, we can observe that this has resulted in the increased centrality of images and spectatorship in everyday cultures. Images have become more important simply because there are more of them in circulation. As a result, we are inclined to interpret, relate to, and understand ourselves and the world around us through visual experiences (Mirzoeff, 2013; Rose, 2007), of which internet memes are a particularly ubiquitous example.

Internet memes have become the "lingua franca" of the internet. As shareable, polyvocal, cultural templates, they help us make sense of public events (Shifman, 2014), politics, sociality, and emotions. Making, sharing, and looking at internet memes is a central *visual experience* of the digitally connected person. The idea that we make and share internet memes to understand ourselves and others fits within the postmodern narrative that we now inhabit an "ocularcentric" existence (Jay, 1988). While this is a convincing insight, this line of inquiry does not lead us towards a sociological analysis of the production and consumption of visual media in the era of platform capitalism. Especially when researching internet memes we should be wary of fetishising the meme-image as a reflection of a universal human condition, instead paying attention to the institutions and practices of production which differ across geographies.

3.2.4 Making funny pictures

The photocopy machine "has been the most frequently used device for the unofficial circulation of humour, and it has accordingly had the dominant effect on that tradition" (Preston, 1994, p. 147). The introduction of a machine that could make instantaneous copies of documents and could be operated by an "amateur", into workplaces not only changed work itself, but also the leisure time and practices of the workers. Such an example comes from the United States and has been dubbed "xeroxlore" or "faxlore" (Barton, 2015). Faxlore refers to the culture of photocopied humour and folklore that emerged out of bored office workers' copy-and-paste collages about the joys of life in the cubicle, see Figure 3.5.

Scholars point out that the communicative and aesthetic elements of faxlore (Barton, 2015, Phillips and Milner, 2017) can also be found in meme culture today. When we dig deeper into who was allowed to make faxlore, we start seeing the power structures behind who can and cannot use technologies for creative purposes at work. Preston remarks that the politics of "pilfering of company supplies" (Preston, 1994, p. 149), like making and spreading faxlore at work, was dependant on one's hierarchical position at the workplace, which naturally reflects societal hierarchies as well. He points out that the freedom to use the company paper, electricity and machines to make and share obscene or transgressive jokes, without being fired or reprimanded, is granted to those who already enjoy power due to their class, race, gender, and age. There is a direct correlation between what Preston discusses and an investigation that the Wall Street Journal conducted on a Facebook content moderation program called *XCheck*, in 2021. The investigation claims that the *XCheck* programme filters content posted by influential users into a system not governed by the same content moderation tools that are applied to "normal users" (Horwitz, 2021). This means that there are separate rules of cultural production and dissemination applied to such "whitelisted users" like
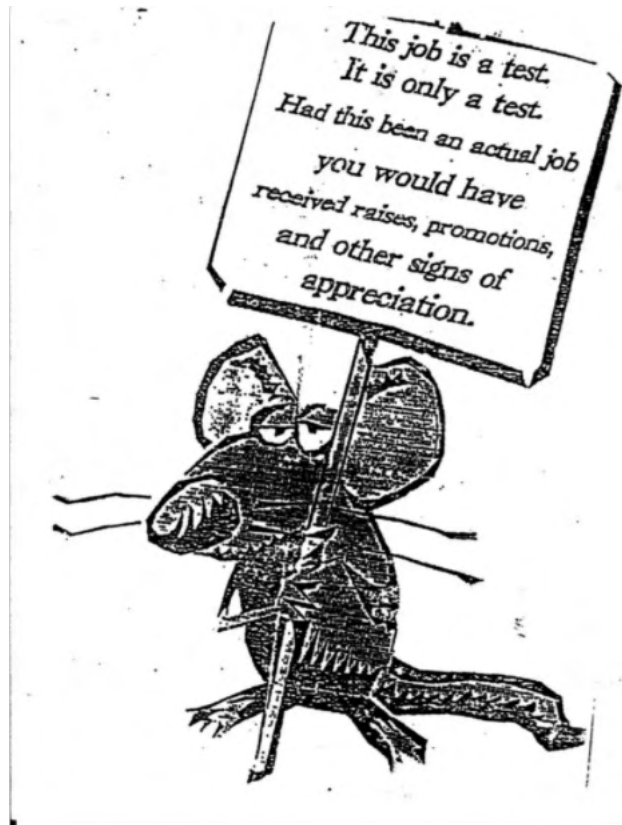
Figure 3.5: Example of "xeroxlore", taken from the website spacestudios.org.uk

the famous footballer Neymar, who can theoretically post media that goes against the community guidelines. Therefore, while there are continuities in how people put together funny pictures and share them with others, we must also pay attention to how power disparities manifest in even the most mundane of practices, like in the case of faxlore and Facebook. This theme is echoed within the findings of this study and is a focus of the thesis as well, especially as it relates to content moderation and monetisation practices on Instagram.

3.3 Online communities

There has been a steady rise in online and networked communities since the 1990s, and memes have played an important role in forging community belonging and forming these community identities. Sociological conceptualisations of social and cultural capital can be applied to understand how online communities use memes as a way to forge bonds and create an in-group/out-group dynamic. We can think of it like so: being able to understand and comment on an internet meme requires memetic fluency or literacy, which when done "correctly" can show that someone has spent time "lurking" and learning the norms and values of the community to an instinctual level. In this case, the person commenting on a niche internet meme does not need to be explained why and how something is funny, because they have become an insider and have subcultural affinity with the online memetic community.

The themes of digital storytelling and narrative imagination are particularly important in understanding online communities and memetic subcultures. Internet memes can be a

way to make sense of increasingly complicated material realities, however within smaller and more tightly defined boundaries they can also provide subcultural cues to community narration and imagination. Some of this is due to homophily (Tarbush and Teytelboym, 2012), the assumption that like-minded people listen to each other, and find and stick to their niches online. However, the power of community belonging and the co-creation of a community narrative is also a significant factor in how networks of internet meme creators and audiences come together.

3.3.1 The social use of language in platform-dependent meme communities: 4-chan and Instagram

In addition to shared aesthetic tastes and political leanings, shared linguistic norms in meme communities can help forge community identity. The skeleton of an internet meme is made up of form, content and stance (Shifman, 2014). Cultural adeptness or subcultural literacy can be displayed through these three elements. Choosing to create an internet meme around a particular aesthetic form can demonstrate that a user is in touch not only with the community's common aesthetic references but also with the overwhelming ironic stance of much of meme culture today. Linguistic features within an internet meme can help indicate stance and, once again, community belonging. Proficiency in the chosen internet vernacular is shown through spelling choices, the use of hashtags, repetition, and specific semantic templates such as copy-pasta. What might look like a spelling error can be a reference to an original error that is now a part of canonical humour for an online community, or it can also demonstrate an ideological stance. Cultural references on the other hand can form the crux of cultural capital within a memetic subculture. Online meme communities are in large forged by following shared conventions of language and engagement in "vernacular language games" (Peeters et al., 2021). Peeters et al. underline the importance of irony and antagonism in these games and argue that "playing ironic and irresponsible games with language is also a longstanding feature of vernacular Internet communities, who imagine themselves as inhabiting regions of the web that exist outside of normal, real life" (2021, p. 1).

Platform affordances also influence the kind of vernacular that develops in meme communities, and this concept can help us understand the conditions of connection, production, and consumption on platforms. An affordance of a technology is not the features of the technology. Instead, affordances are how the features of a technology, otherwise its technical specifications, affect that technology's functions. Affordances refer to how a technology enables or constrains, or what we get out of it. For instance, the *living discourse* (Peeters et al., 2021) on 4-chan is underlined by a "chaotic, fast-paced experience" afforded by the platform's affordances of anonymity and ephemerality (Bernstein et al., 2021, p. 1). The "random" forum, or *board*, on 4-chan, is an extreme case where posts are not archived and instead deleted to make place for newer content, and all posters are anonymous. This "complete anonymity and content deletion" makes for a specific experience for people using it, making "traditional reputation systems unworkable" (Bernstein et al., 2021, p. 1). Such reputation systems work on the basis that "information about individuals, brands, businesses and a variety of entities is publicly accessible and available and becomes the object of evaluation, calculation and measurement" (Gandini, 2016, p. 30). 4-chan does not allow for this, unlike Instagram.

Instagram, the central platform of the meme community I was engaging within this project, is seen as a platform where people can build and market their personal brands

and dedicated followings (van Driel and Dumitrica, 2021). It is a place where people can find and interact with *personalities*, visual identities, influencers, and brands, in addition to their immediate social circles. Its technical features as well as its social and cultural position within wider platform ecologies affords and rewards self-disclosure, in contrast to 4-chan which is "successful" as a result of the anonymity of its users and the ephemerality of the content that they share. These affordances of Instagram create a sense of imagined surveillance on the people who use the platform. A testament to the fact that platform affordances are relational and dynamic, *Finstas*, short for Fake Insta's, are pseudonymous Instagram pages that people use to attempt to escape this "imagined surveillance" on the platform, as part of a desire for authenticity without express self-disclosure (Duffy and Chan, 2019).

However, it is also vital to highlight that "users are not confined to humans such as end-users and developers, but to nonhumans alike" (Bucher and Helmond, 2017, p. 14). The version of Instagram we use in 2022 affords a sense of ephemerality through disappearing Instagram stories and an algorithmic recommendation system that can offer a constantly changing deck of media to its users (Leaver et al., 2020). Therefore, it is useful to consider the various kinds of affordances Instagram extends when researching platform-dependent meme communities. 4-chan meme communities create shared norms and signifiers by employing "ironic and irresponsible language games" (Peeters et al., 2021) while meme communities on Instagram maintain visual narrative devices to connect over. The juxtaposition of images and text in an artful and ironic manner is particularly important for niche meme subcultures.

3.3.2 Literacy, proficiency, and fluency in internet memes

While "content creators" work for platforms, they also make platforms work for them. They have a nuanced, or what is sometimes described as *native*, understanding of digital culture and of the platforms that facilitate the dissemination of said culture. A convincing argument for the creation of such native knowledge of the internet has been theorised through the perspective of generational differences and age. When Prensky coined the term *digital native* to conceptualise his students' intuitive digital fluency and skills, he decided to juxtapose older people such as himself and his peers as *digital immigrants*. Prensky put forth the argument that people who did not grow up using computers have "immigrant accents" when writing emails, which *digital natives* can easily detect. Following the narrative that immigrants must assimilate to their adopted lands, Prensky argued that digital immigrants must adapt to the digital natives' *twitch-speed learning* or they would be left behind and othered. This is one argument for increased digital literacy and connectedness among people (Prensky, 2001).

Digital literacy and fluency are often discussed in relation to subcultural capital (Thornton, 2013) in meme research (Aharoni, 2019; Leaver, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Shifman, 2014; Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Wiggins, 2020), as well as research about online communities (Hodkinson, 2007). The ability to understand a joke, comment on it and reproduce it through creative production requires a specific literacy and cultural knowledge, something which we can call meme literacy. Meme literacy, which can be defined as a skill whereby the person can not only read but also reproduce memes, is cultivated by amassing subcultural capital in online communities, through continuously consuming, sharing and creating memetic media. While Milner (2017) describes this skill as a form of vernacular creativity, Tuters and Hagen (2019) use the terms memetic grammar and

memetic literacy to explain the ability to be able to understand the intertextual references within memes. On the other hand, Harvey and Palese (2018) put forth the concept of critical memetic literacy as an amalgamation of critical media and memetic literacy. Critical memetic literacy according to Harvey and Palese is "the ability to engage with and question all parts of the meme (re)production and consumption cycle" (Harvey and Palese, 2018, p. 260). While all of these terms point towards a common definition, the ability to understand, produce and share memes, in this study I mainly use the concept of meme literacy.

Fluency in reading is described as a process whereby the reader can maintain their attention without effort and automatically decode visual cues into semantic systems. If they encounter words that they do not recognise, they can make educated guesses based on what the words sound and look like. The reader can reach a level of fluency through repeated exposure to and repetition of letters, words and texts (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974, p. 313-6). Reading fluency is a "vehicle for reading comprehension" (J. Cotter, 2012, p. 3) and does not only imply reading speed. Literacy, on the other hand, implies comprehension which "calls upon the reader to draw inferences connecting textual elements and background knowledge required to fill out the unexplicated aspects of text (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974, p. 9). Freebody and Luke (1990) lay out the role of the reader as a code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst, which together indicate literacy. This same schema can be used for reading, comprehending, creating and critiquing memes. When a literate person reads a novel, they follow semiotic cues and understand how they come together to express a sentiment, and also connect these sentiments to the wider theme of the novel and their own cultural experiences. Literacy is dependent on comprehension which is, in turn, dependent on how societies construct meaning and culture, as literacy is "not a solitary, individual act or process, but rather [. . .] a set of social practices undertaken with others" (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974, p. 12).

For meme literacy the same is true. Having meme literacy means that the reader of the meme can decode the textual and visual references within the meme, connect these references to a wider meme canon and cultural Zeitgeist, and analyse them through their own experiences and position on the internet. It implies that the reader can not only read and comprehend a singular meme but can place it within a meaningful meme-space, which interacts with other memes, texts and people. Creating memes, however, does not fit within the bounds of this definition of meme literacy as it also requires technical ability and creative vision, the details of which I discuss in the next few sections of this chapter. Overall, the ability to create funny memes is what distinguishes meme readers from meme creators, and what is regarded to be a funny, or a good, meme depends on the cultural context. Meme space extends over many corners of the internet, and the vastness of digital culture makes it so that there are many meme subcultures online. A meme made by a member of a niche meme subculture on Instagram might not be funny or even decipherable to academics on Twitter, whereas most mainstream memes will be considered to be ironically funny within these subcultures.

Community members and creators may use their memetic literacy and publicly demonstrate their memetic proficiency to the wider subculture. This is mostly done by users liking, commenting on and sharing memes (Paßmann and Schubert, 2021), setting up meme accounts which revolve around a niche topic, creating original content about such topics, and can even extend into unusual depths such as curating exhibitions and writing doctoral dissertations about memetic subcultures. This internal engine of meme

consumption and creation in such spaces can help "reinforce community identity" (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017, p. 486). Just as fashion can signify subcultural alliances (Hebdige, 1991) so can internet memes. Phillips and Milner (2017) for instance, call these "subcultural bat signals" (p. 112). Tuters and Hagen (2019) on the other hand underline how vernacular fluency, as shown through internet memes, can be used to exhibit in-group belonging. Their analysis is particularly interesting as it relates to anonymous online spaces where reputational capital cannot be accrued, such as 4chan.

Overall, internet memes can be utilised to "articulate, affirm or police a shared identity" (Eschler and Menking, 2018, p. 1). Failing to successfully use subcultural references when creating internet memes can result in the person being othered in a variety of ways. One manifestation of this is being called out, or publicly declared an outsider. "Noob"[4] was one such label given to inexperienced newcomers (Miltner, 2014). Interestingly, today the word itself might elicit a cynical chuckle from digital culture savants and can be considered a historical artefact capturing a specific era in digital culture. "Noob" has lost its bite and has become outdated. Things have come full circle – as uttering "noob" as an earnest insult online will inevitably reveal that you are, indeed, the noob in question. It is important to note that such insults are platform and context-specific. While "noob" is often associated with mid-2000s gaming cultures, the word "normie", which is used to indicate outsiders or normal people, emerges out of the anonymous message board and memetic bog that is 4chan (Tuters and Hagen, 2020). Similarly, the phrase "local" plays the same role on stan-Twitter[5]. The "local" label helps formulate boundaries between the "small-time", geographically specific, Twitter users who are interested in local discussions and the wider, globalised, fan cultures which are active on Twitter, who see themselves as worldlier, funnier and more connected. Beyond personal insults, the nostalgic internet exclamation "LURK MOAR!" is used in general instances where a user shows their subcultural illiteracy by asking for clarification or explanation of a joke or meme online. The *noob*, *normie*, or *local* can build up memetic proficiency (Zeeuw, 2019) by "lurking" around in the shadows of a forum or a group and observing how the in-group communicates.

Othering is one way how societies build a cohesive identity, and online communities are no exception to this general truth. This othering may take different forms on different platforms. For instance, Massanari (Massanari, 2019) argues that "othering" is the foundational feature of Reddit subcultures. She, like Eschler and Menking (2018), highlights that the primary target of othering are marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTQ+ people and racialised minorities (Eschler and Menking, 2018; Massanari, 2019). This sustained exclusion, Massanari states, is one of the reasons why the dominant culture on Reddit is white, heterosexual, and male: falling squarely within the realm of "toxic geek masculinity" (Salter and Blodgett, 2017). A particularly violent example is the anti-Semitic triple-parentheses meme which Tuters and Hagen (2019) analyse as a form of memetic antagonism. (((triple-parentheses))), which is a dog whistle, has been used by anti-Semites and alt-right trolls on Twitter to indicate that a user, most often a journalist, is Jewish. The meme attempts to textually imitate the echo sound effect that a particular anti-Semitic podcast used whenever they referred to a Jewish person on air (Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Weisman, 2018). Tuters and Hagen (2019) conceptualise this use of a racist meme as "nebulous othering" (p. 15) and contrast it to optimistic

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[4]Sometimes stylised as "n00b".

[5]"Stan" refers to "fan" especially as it relates to musical subcultures and fandoms on Twitter (Malik and Haidar, 2020)

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evaluations of the emancipatory political potential of internet memes.

Bourdieu (1977) discusses the value and power of speech and theorises that language is used as symbolic capital (p. 646) and thus as an instrument of power (p. 648). Beyond explicitly aggressive forms of speech which seek to eliminate and/or alienate certain individuals or groups from discourse, such as the triple-parentheses meme, memetic communication is also steeped in petty-bourgeois anxiety about linguistic correctness. This might seem like a contradiction, as internet memes often make use of grammatically incorrect forms of expression. However, these registers of "incorrect" speech and language use often turn into established subcultural norms within online communities, and they become remoulded into conventions that must be followed by all members. Those who do not conform, risk public ridicule or exclusion from the group. This "anxious vigilance" (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 667), may seem inconsistent with the logic of internet memes but is in line with the framing of subcultural memetic communication as a mode of symbolic capital. The illegitimate or vernacular linguistic market (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 654) of digital culture is also governed by mores of conformity we encounter in mainstream linguistic markets. Competence in memetic forms becomes valuable in establishing oneself in social hierarchies or signalling cultural literacy, and as a result, becomes subject to control by gatekeepers. However, it can also act as a value-generating activity on digital platforms. This kind of creative digital labour can be understood through sociological accounts of creativity and platform work, which the final section of the literature review delves into.

3.3.3 Meme subcultures, deviance and theorisations of community belonging

Being able to replicate, remix and reproduce memes requires technical and practical skill, vernacular creativity (Milner, 2016) and meme literacy. Meme literacy in turn is cultivated through an accumulation of subcultural capital. Meme capital as a form of subcultural capital is crucial in being able to decode memes (Tuters and Hagen, 2020). Therefore, the topic of subcultural capital is critical in understanding how exactly one becomes meme-literate. Meme cultures online can be considered to be subcultures, as *social worlds* (Unruh, 1980) or even reference worlds (Shibutani, 1955), as they can provide a reference for cultural meanings, beliefs, values and ideological belonging to their members. By engaging with these social worlds, users can build subcultural capital.

Subcultural capital is a contemporary adjustment that Sarah Thornton (1995) made to Bourdieu's influential categorisation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), to bring light to how members of subcultures recognise and determine what "hipness" or "being in the know" exactly are (Thornton, 1997, p. 186). In her research about club cultures in Great Britain and the US (1997) she has argued that to understand how subcultural capital is built, researchers must explore how it is disseminated via media, as "within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another good or marker of distinction . . . but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge" (p. 203). One of Thornton's important assertions was also that media does not simply reflect the behaviour of subcultural communities but informs their construction in the first place. This conceptualisation of subcultural capital as a form of knowledge that people can build by interacting with, consuming and creating media is extremely pertinent to discussions about online communities.

Thornton's other critiques of the Birmingham School, or the research about youth
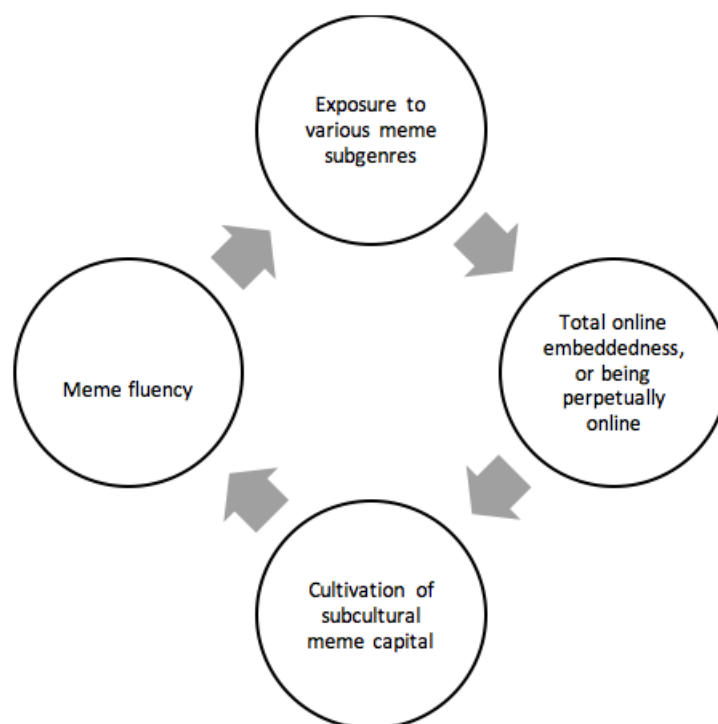
Figure 3.6: A diagram showing how memetic literacy is developed and maintained, created by the researcher.

subcultures undertaken at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, follow that of Angela McRobbie, who was critiquing the CCCS "from the inside" during the 70s and 80s, producing work about women and girls and their relationships to mainstream and sub-cultures. Both McRobbie and Thornton have written about CCCS's limited focus on girls' and young women's subcultural participation, tastes and behaviours. Even though the Birmingham school was focused on researching working-class subcultures, this largely meant working-class white men, such as hippies and punks for instance (Hebdige, 1991; Young, 1971) with women being seen as transitory side-characters, as fans, groupies or girlfriends. In addition to criticisms about the exclusion of non-white, non-male subcultures from subcultures research, scholars of "post-subcultures", such as Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003), have deemed the Birmingham School as too politically romantic and prescriptive(Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). They, among others, have argued that the framing of subcultures at the CCCS was too intensely focused on the perceived semiotic and ritual resistance element of youth cultures, mythologizing a heroic cultural dissidence against hegemonic forces. This "fetishism of resistance" (Kellner, 2001) in much CCCS research paints all subcultural activities with the same brush and produces a sociological analysis that sees subcultures as politically motivated rebellions and deviance against the mainstream.

These three main points taken from previous research about subcultures: the importance of media in the construction of the subcultural self, the over-representation of male-centred subcultures in academic studies and the academic fetishism of resistance, can be applied to current research about meme culture and communities. Thornton's subcultural capital becomes vernacular creativity in Milner's (2016) conceptualisation of

memes, contested capital in Nissenbaum and Shifman's (2017) study of 4chan's /b/ board and memetic literacy in Tuters and Hagen's (2019) exploration of alt-right meme spaces. Similar to earlier subculture studies, a great deal of academic attention is also given to deviant humour and trolling online in hyper-masculine online communities on sites such as Reddit and 4chan. "Deviant" men online, Incels, Doomers, and Chads, and their surrounding subcultures are a popular topic in "meme research". This popularity and overrepresentation can be connected to the reasoning that these users' deviance can have violent consequences compared to well-behaving subcultures which operate squarely within the framework of acceptable behaviour online.

Studies focusing on the risks of subcultural "meme" scenes have helped create awareness of the perils of radicalisation online, and how exactly this radicalisation happens. However, it has also played into and amplified the public imaginary of internet subcultures as "naughty", risky and dark spaces inhabited by deviant young men. The focus on men, masculinities and right-wing radicalism in meme research and the resulting public fascination with these deviant spaces has also perpetuated ideas that "memes" only serve to spread disinformation, that they radicalise young men into doing bad things, and thanks to these deviant men who make memes, the right has been able to appropriate transgressive, countercultural language originally created by leftist movements to shock conservatives (Nagle, 2017). Research on the relationship between radicalisation and memes is crucial to understand violent political activity, disillusionment, class, masculinity and race, and can potentially help prevent so-called "Incel violence", and its varieties, which we have seen in the West. However, artists, activists and scholars should be mindful that leftist activism, mutual aid and community building, alongside transgressive countercultural language and art, do exist within meme subcultures. These meme subcultures are largely maintained by anti-racist queer folk with leftist politics and an interest in community organising. The large majority of the members and creators within these meme subcultures are women and their art, labour and politics are widely ignored within the literature in favour of studies that centre the so-called alt-right and its perpetrators. This is not a problem that is unique to meme research, as this focus on deviant men has also plagued subcultural studies for decades.

Over 40 years ago, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1977) asked why girls and women were not represented or acknowledged in how they participate in and create subcultures in their seminal article "Girls and Subcultures"(Thornton, 1997). They state "the popular press and media concentrated on the sensational incidents associated with each subculture... one direct consequence of the fact that it is always the violent aspects of a phenomenon which qualify as newsworthy is that these are precisely the areas of subcultural activity from which women have tended to be excluded" (p. 114). This echoes the current research attitude seen in meme studies. While there is now more research about women, girls and subcultures than ever (Abidin, 2016a; Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018; Connell, 2020; Schwartz, 2020; Weller, 2006) much of meme research is still centred around men because of the same reasons that McRobbie and Garber identified in the quote above. There are of course several notable exceptions to the over-representation of deviant men in meme research. Some important contemporary examples are Caitlin Breheny's MA dissertation about intersectional politics and feminist memes on Instagram (Breheny, 2017), Ringrose and Lawrence's exploration of feminist humour on Tumblr (Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018) and Adrienne Massanari's study of troll identity and feminist humour on the subreddit r/TrollXChromosomes (Massanari, 2019).

Deviance, especially from mainstream labour relations and moral expectations of middle-class society, has been taken as the foundational characteristic of subcultures, from Cressey's 1932 study of taxi-dancers (lap-dancers) to Albert K. Cohen's book *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1956), to Dick Hebdige's seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) (A. K. Cohen, 1971; Cressey, 2008; Hebdige, 1991). Deviance can be seen as a threat to a functioning society by academics, scientists, politicians, and members of the public (Grattet, 2011). However deviant aesthetics and the adoption of consumable, transgressive "objects" by members of various subcultures have also been theorised as part of semiotic or ritual resistance by the Birmingham school (Clarke et al., 2006). Similarly, internet memes have often been framed as performances or artefacts of semiotic resistance, especially those of a political nature (Denisova, 2020; Pavlović, 2016; Soh, 2020). The "fetishism of resistance" found in subcultural studies (Kellner, 2001) is comparable to how memes are viewed as objects of covert resistance by scholars who have a sense of meme literacy. However, by centring the argument of resistance in analysing memes and meme subcultures, we tend to ignore or forego the parts of meme creation and dissemination that are mundane and fickle, which are qualities inherent within digital life (Markham, 2020). In the next sections, I will introduce the conceptual umbrella of what I present as *creative digital labour*, informed by these sociological studies of subculture, creativity, language and platforms. This conceptualisation brings processes of subcultural production to the front and connects it to meme-making on digital platforms.

3.4   Creative digital labour

Through making, sharing, and commenting on internet memes, users can help construct a pantheon of oft-referenced characters and as a result, an in-house folklore which can be utilised to signal camaraderie, commitment to the culture and subcultural literacy. Sometimes, however, internet memes can translate to monetary value for the meme creator. If a user is skilled enough at crafting and disseminating internet memes within a community they can use them to grow their personal brands or businesses (Teng et al., 2021) beyond internet memes and into other creative endeavours and businesses. Theoretically, this may result in an audience, customer base, income and further earning opportunities. While internet memes have cultural and social power within insular online communities, they can also generate monetary value in varying degrees. During this process, meme creators end up engaging in platform-dependent digital labour that is creative in method and artistic in motivation.

For instance, more recently, we have seen the financialisation of internet memes through the proliferation of memetic non-fungible tokens (NFTs) (Patrickson, 2021, p. 587), their use as marketing tools, and as physical merchandise. Almost all of my interviewees have made use of one or all of these forms of income generation through internet memes. Meme accounts that aggregate viral and universally appealing content benefit from this financialization the most through relatively lucrative brand collaborations and marketing deals. On the other hand, smaller original content creators are drawn towards a more DIY approach and self-marketing. Viral meme aggregators extract value from other people's memes. In our interview, niche meme creator Omnia lamented how aggregators pick and choose the most successful original memes to repost on their pages. She highlighted how original content creators have to craft a multitude of less successful memes through trial and error before they craft one that resonates and receives a high

level of engagement online. By collecting, or stealing, the most successful memes from a variety of creators, meme aggregation pages can showcase a tried-and-tested portfolio of memes, which results in higher follower counts, engagement and monetisation opportunities.

The question of copyright has been a topic of contention within meme communities, among scholars of copyright law (Kleinman, 2019; Lantagne, 2018; Marciszewski, 2020; Matalon, 2019; Mielczarek and Hopkins, 2021; Patel, 2013) as well as researchers who study internet memes and have to contend with printing physical reproductions of them (Arkenbout et al., 2021). The direct and explicit intersection of money and internet memes is a relatively new topic in generalised discourse, and its appearance can mostly be connected to the public's rising interest in the monetisation of social media content as well as blockchain technology, and as a result, NFTs. There are relatively few scholarly articles about the financialization and marketisation of internet memes, compared to literature that looks at memes as a mode of cultural and social capital. Most of this research comes from marketing and business journals and is largely focused on investigating how businesses can utilise online communities for innovation and value creation (Benaim, 2018). Articles and opinion pieces that specifically take the monetisation of internet memes as their primary focus appear in art and culture magazines or newspapers, and are relatively rare in academic publications. For instance, digital culture journalist Taylor Lorenz has written a short account of the complexities that come with monetising memes through e-commerce businesses (Lorenz, 2018). In it, she provides a look into the short life spans of viral memes and the problems that meme creators and businesses that sell meme-merchandise encounter as a result. Lorenz also briefly touches upon the distinctions between monetising viral versus niche memes, which is a topic my thesis takes up as well. In the same vein, Kam Dhillon (2016) examined meme marketing campaigns in two *High Snobiety* articles. In them, Dhillon focused on the #TFWGucci meme campaign which recruited many meme creators to produce memes about Gucci's new collection of luxury watches and asked whether this heralded the "grizzly death of meme culture" (Dhillon, 2017).

Looking back on 2017, we can definitively say that #TFWGucci did not liquidate meme culture. In an article that appeared in the left-wing magazine *Jacobin* Pegolo and Carpenter, fittingly, declared that memes would never be monetised (2021). In line with what Lorenz's interviewees said about the short expiration dates of viral memes and the unmarketability of niche ones, Pegolo and Carpenter asserted that "memes' resistance to monetization is grounded in their unmanageable digital evolution cycle: the speed and originality with which memes are transformed online is not comparable to most traditional media. Because of this, memes have remained impervious to exploitation by the marketing industry"(Pegolo and Carpenter, 2021). While it is true that the kinds of profit margins that digital marketers seek cannot be extracted from meme advertisement campaigns, Pegolo and Carpenter may be ignoring the fact that memes have already been marketized, monetised, sold and bought in a variety of different ways.

The large canon of scholarly writing about fan cultures, online communities and value creation, should be a testament to the fact that no matter how esoteric a digital artefact is, it can become a commodified cultural product. Similarly, academic work about the "attention economy" is also helpful to understand that marketisation does not occur solely within traditional markets but also within more affective interactions and as "relational labour" (Baym, 2015). Overall, studies about influencer and platform economies provide the most precise and applicable conceptualisation of how online cre-

ation and work intersect (Abidin, 2016b; Bishop, 2021; Duffy et al., 2019; Glatt, 2022; Holowka, 2018) as it relates to meme making. I delve into this field in *Chapter 4: Work* where I discuss the labour that goes into the creation, dissemination and monetisation of internet memes. I will endeavour to propose a framework for this concept in the findings chapters, and contribute to a widening of our understanding of what internet memes do within subcultural economies.

3.4.1 Creativity

In folkloric examinations of memetic media, vernacular creativity is used to highlight the highly "participatory" and "amateur" logics of internet meme creation and dissemination (Burgess, 2006; Milner, 2016; Phillips and Milner, 2017; Shifman et al., 2014). The word vernacular comes from the Latin "native", and in modern English usage, signifies things which are considered to be common, low, vulgar or mundane. Anthropologist Margaret Lantis is credited with the use of the word "vernacular" as it relates to folklore and especially the tension between high versus low culture (Lantis, 1960; Seta, 2018). For instance, when we say that someone "speaks the vernacular language" we mean that they speak dialect, the kind of spoken language that someone might hear on the street, rather than in the academy. Or when we appreciate the "vernacular architecture" of Balkan villages, we are appreciating the indigenous materials used and the creative construction practices of the inhabitants, rather than the tightly controlled work of architecture firms and registered tradespeople within a metropolis.

Vernacular creativity, the kind of creativity that occurs on an everyday level, "possesses the power to transform space and the everyday lives of ordinary people to reveal and illuminate the mundane as a site of assurance, resistance, affect and potentialities" (Edensor et al., 2015, p. 10). Jean Burgess, who has written extensively about vernacular creativity, posits that the amalgamation of consumer practices and older forms of cultural production have widened cultural participation and self-representation in media (2006). When applied to the digital realm, the concept of vernacular creativity becomes a useful theoretical perspective in understanding not only the diversity of "user-generated content", but also in gauging the functions and wide-reaching effects of this kind of media on politics, sociality, and culture. Burgess's examination of vernacular creativity builds on the idea that cultural production has been democratised through the internet and highlights the role of the creative consumer in digital culture (2006). She explains how the ubiquity of the internet made previously unattainable tools of cultural creation and dissemination available to the average participant. As a result, amateurs, or "normal folk", were bestowed with the opportunity to develop and showcase their vernacular creativity.

In studies that take on the idea of vernacular creativity to explain participatory digital culture, a much-beloved phrase is cultural logic (Applegate and Cohen, 2017; Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Shifman describes the hypermemetic logic that underscores the way we make sense of public events online (Shifman, 2012) as well as the "cultural logos of participation" (Shifman and Lemish, 2011) in internet memes, while Phillips and Milner (2017) outline five logics that participants use when creating, circulating and transforming media on the internet. The influence of Fredric Jameson's authoritative work *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989), in which Jameson critiques the ahistorical and consumption-oriented tendencies of postmodernity, is evident in this literature. In his observations, Jameson stresses

the breakdown between high and low culture and reflects on the relentless aesthetic populism of postmodernity which he sees to be depthless. Calling attention to the texts that emerge out of the grafting of high and low forms of cultural production, he declares "the postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance" (Jameson, 1992, p. 2).

When we go back to the idea of vernacular creativity in memetic media, in light of Jameson's characterisation of postmodern pastiche, we can see that two popular and deterministic arguments are made about internet memes by academics and the public alike. Namely, that internet memes are either everyday practices of self-representation, and vernacular creativity, or that they are deformed, depthless, easily consumable, neoliberal artefacts of late capitalism. In the first depiction, we are allowed to hope for democratised, civic expression through internet memes, and in the second, we are forced to reckon with the political impotence of constant self-reflexivity and irony that is observed in internet memes.

The latter is taken on as a provocation in studies that attempt to understand whether or not making and sharing memetic media has a concrete political impact on the issues which it criticises. This has been a hot topic in what is called "diffusion studies" (Johann and Bülow, 2019; Shifman, 2014; Xu et al., 2016) as well as within public consciousness, and is often discussed in relation to "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" (Christensen, 2011; C. Jones, 2015; Kwak et al., 2018). These discussions centre on trying to measure whether or not sharing political memetic media online has a "tangible effect" on the political cause it aims to amplify, or whether it simply is an affective activity that enhances "the feel-good factor for participants" (Christensen, 2011). In such considerations, the focus is on the provable effects and functional aspects of memetic media, rather than the more libidinal and ambiguous affects it might have on participants. The existential question which lies in the heart of the matter here is: should memes be allowed to exist as ambivalent utterances online (Phillips and Milner, 2017), or must they also serve a political purpose while doing so? The answer to this demand is difficult to answer as any response to it will necessarily arise from an ideological standpoint, of which there are many, as a scroll through academic Twitter will show you.

When we view internet memes as performances of vernacular creativity, we highlight how the participatory culture of the internet has democratised cultural production, for better or for worse. The fact that anyone can pick up a device that connects to the internet, add some text to an image and send it to their friends or followers is exciting and frightening at the same time. The possibilities of what can be said and disseminated are theoretically endless. Ultimately, anyone who has a degree of digital literacy has access to an online microphone with unpredictable levels of volume. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the urgency with which we discussed the potentialities, risks and limits of memetic media, especially as it related to vaccine-related misinformation, crowdfunding for highly online social movements and the emptying of political nuance through the Canva-fication of political engagement [6]. As I write this chapter, there is a

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[6] *Canva* is a popular graphic design tool optimised for content creation and social media platforms. The platform has 75 million monthly users (Canva, 2021 and "features fonts, graphics, vectors, and templates, and in 2019, the company purchased free stock photo sites Pixabay and Pexels, giving users access to a diverse array of free photos in the program itself. The website also offers photo filters,

war happening in Ukraine, which has engendered an immense amount of citizen media and state-sponsored propaganda on social media platforms (Brown, 2022).

Internet users are placed within a networked arena of ceaseless cultural production, where they may be socially or culturally pressured into creating and disseminating their own "war content" as a way of showing public support or even capitalising on virality (Lorenz, 2022). Canva, the photo editing platform partly responsible for the aesthetic uniformity of the Instagram infographic post genre [7], now has a special Instagram post template section titled "Peace Instagram Post" showing a variety of minimal and Ukrainian flag-themed templates for users to create their own solidarity posts. This is a timely example of the growing platformisation of vernacular creativity. It is also useful in understanding the tapering of the gap between so-called amateurs and professionals, as a result of this platformisation.
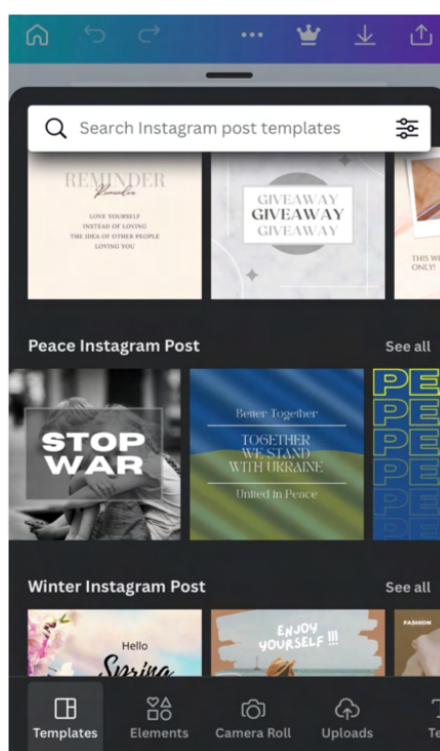
Figure 3.7: Screenshot from the photo-editing application Canva, taken in March 2022.

The professional-looking templates and infinite customisation opportunities that platforms and applications such as Canva provide make it harder for us to distinguish between professional graphic designers and amateur, vernacular, creators. This is a transformation which has occurred relatively recently, which can be attributed to better smartphone capabilities, lower costs of owning such devices, increased digital literacy as well as the growth of online businesses that need to maintain an active social media presence. Researchers in the early 2000s might have called such people professional-amateurs, or Pro-Ams, (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), a term which can be viewed as the precursor to the content creator (Blank, 2013). When Jean Burgess was theorising about vernacular creativity in the late 2000s, who we call "content creators" today were seen more

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millions of images, free icons and shapes, and hundreds of fonts" (Gehred, 2020)

[7]These are posts which bring together ideological narratives and data visualisations. As a genre, "Instagram infographics expedite and expand information dissemination by reducing physical, financial, and geographical restrictions" (Kaviani and Salehi, 2022)

so as amateurs rather than fully-formed cultural producers. The increased interactions of participatory culture with the growing market of online advertising have created a new field of work, and markets that cannot be defined through the lens of amateurism or professionalism. Successful influencers can now pay their rent through ad revenue on social media platforms, brand collaborations, merchandise sales and patron subscriptions through their Patreon or OnlyFans accounts. Social media platforms today, such as YouTube or Instagram, have detailed advertisement policies and have incorporated both creators and audiences into their money-making operations (Poell et al., 2022). This does not imply that there are not any amateur content creators, or that all producers of culture online are professionalised influencers. Rather, by framing the logic of amateurism as the engine which drives vernacular creativity online we run the risk of overlooking the ambivalent nature of labour on social media platforms. In fact, "the boundary between industrial and vernacular forms of cultural production is often fluid and difficult to draw on platforms" (Poell et al., 2022, p. 9).

3.4.2   Digital Labour

The words "work" and "labour" are both used when describing the activity of producing something of value. In the Marxist tradition, the word labour has been associated with alienated and exploited work, as a historical category, as opposed to work, an anthropological category, quintessential to the human species (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013). For instance, in the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels characterise work as a conscious productive activity that transforms and organises nature so that humans "produce their means of subsistence", and so work is an activity undertaken to satisfy human needs (Marx and Engels, 1932). This idea of work is shared by all human societies and is almost an anthropological category. Labour, on the other hand, could be defined as a term which we might associate with the field of political economy. It is characterised as the organisation of work in class-based societies, which usually presents the idea that labour is a process of productive consumption, of consuming materials and labour power to create products rather than human necessities in the anthropological sense. So from a Marxist perspective, labour is alienated work and it is a politically significant term.

In particular, I found that there were four general conceptualisations of labour maintained on or through digital technologies. The first and most general term is "platform work", which is used as an umbrella term to encompass a wide variety of such work. The second conceptualisation is the use of digital labour as a specific descriptor (Mark Graham 2017). The third, is digital labour as a position, one which is both theoretical and Marxist in its conception (Fuchs, 2012; Terranova, 2000). The fourth approach to digital labour is a polemical presentation of the way the term "digital labour" has been used in communication and media studies research, which Gandini argues has delinked the term from its original Marxist conceptualisation (Gandini, 2020).

There are layered discussions about what the term "platform" means, but this study understands digital platforms as intermediaries which connect consumers to services, products and producers, employees to employers, and audiences to creators (Gillespie 2010). Therefore, platform work can more specifically be described as a transaction mediated by an application which connects customers and clients algorithmically. Oftentimes, as evidenced by an International Labour Organisation working paper by De Stefano et al, "platform work" can be an umbrella term used to refer to the multiplicity of platforms and their interaction with the world of work (De Stefano et al., 2021).

This is quite an open-ended and intentionally vague description of the term. On the other hand, Graham and Anwar (2018) use the term "digital labour" as a descriptor to refer to "income generating and digitally-intensive work" rather than any work that is "delivered over digital networks" (Graham and Anwar, 2018, p. 2). Within academic literature, many studies that take on this particular terminology usually examine the working conditions of digitally intensive work such as data entry, surveys, tagging, and microwork, generally. This term does not include unpaid labour extracted by social media platforms, or cultural production on digital platforms. In contrast, Marxist theorists use "digital labour" as a term that communicates an inherent political point, which is that digital labour refers to alienated, unpaid work done through mundane online activity and exploited by digital platforms. The argument is that through everyday online activities, such as maintaining a presence on Instagram, uploading TikTok videos, messaging friends on Facebook, and bookmarking articles on Twitter, companies that own the platforms on which these activities are performed, generate and sell vast hordes of user data. Theorists Fuchs, Terranova, Scholz and Gandini take umbrage with the surplus value extracted from users' everyday interactions.

While Fuchs describes productive consumers, or prosumers, as producers of value, other scholars such as Rigi and Prey (2015) critique this approach, and argue that digital users create and maintain a commons which is used to extract rent from advertisers (Rigi and Prey, 2015). A further provocation comes from Gandini (2020) who posits that *digital labour* as a term has become an "empty signifier" in wider academic research as a result of researchers framing paid work with a digital component to it as "digital labour". Regarding the indiscriminate use of the term in contemporary academic research, Gandini has two concerns (p. 3):

> On the one hand, the popularization of the expression 'digital labour' as a generic term significantly weakens the critical dimension originally assigned to its Marxist position, irrespective of its (in fact, highly contested) validity (see Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Fuchs, 2010; Kaplan, 2019; Rigi and Prey, 2015). On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, a blanket use of the expression 'digital labour' signals a new phase in the evolution of the relationship between labour and digital technology, whereby the two terms – digital and labour – are increasingly inseparable.

Internet meme creators occupy an interesting position within discussions of digital labour. They are professional *users* who maintain an active presence on social media platforms. They not only interact with existent media but also create and share new platform *content* that ultimately attracts the engagement of more platform users. Moreover, they may use their platform pages to find paid commissions from companies and individuals, and establish precarious *affiliate* ties with the platform companies [8]. Furthermore, they establish close social ties with various online communities through shared political, social, and cultural interests complicating their relationship with leisure and work. Their position within platform ecologies is thus part and parcel of this "new phase in the evolution of the relationship between labour and digital technology" as Gandini argues (2020, p. 3).

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[8]An example is the "IG Creator Incentive Programs" which refer to any Instagram "program through which Creators are eligible to earn rewards from Facebook for taking certain actions with respect to their Content and/or achieving certain performance targets for that Content" (Meta, 2022).

Another relevant conceptualisation of digital labour comes from Kuehn and Corrigan (2013). In their work, they use the neologism "hope labour" to describe voluntary online social production, un-compensated or under-compensated work. This is the type of labour certain consumers and producers engage in, to garner "exposure". This sort of labour is especially prominent in platform-dependent influencer markets (Poell et al., 2022). Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) also emphasise how neoliberal ideologies motivate people into taking up such work: "hope labor is yet another means of valorizing leisure spaces that captures digital 'workers' in relations not unlike those defined by traditional labor arrangements" (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013, p. 10).

"Being paid in exposure" instead of *actual* money, otherwise unpaid labour, is an endemic part of cultural and creative work" (Brook et al., 2020). The problems that arise out of the introduction of digital technologies into inherently precarious creative work, especially the kind that people with less economic and social capital engage in, make creative digital labour a critical concentration of this thesis. It also takes cultural work as a site of struggle (N. S. Cohen, 2012, p. 141) through the under-researched case of meme-making as creative digital labour. In the following discussion chapters, I will discuss what this creative digital labour looks like in meme-making communities and present the interventions that meme creators have employed as a reaction against platform-captivity.

Chapter 4

Work

4.1 Introduction

> "These platforms are selling our data whilst we incentivize using them, so we may as well make the money we are owed."

> -Jenson, poet and meme creator.

The ambiguous condition of the platform-dependent cultural worker is neatly summarised by this statement by Jenson. Jenson Leonard is an artist who has had a solo exhibition and held residencies at different institutions. Despite his popular success as an internet satirist, artist, meme creator, and poet, monetising his work on Instagram is still difficult. He mentions that brands do not approach him for "brand partnerships" that more mainstream meme pages [1] often get to do. He suspects that this is because of the critical issues that he explores in his work and memes, such as racial inequalities in the US, which Instagram content monetisation policies regard as a "debated social issue". Monetisation opportunities for content that engages with "debated social issues" in a "polarizing or inflammatory manner" on Instagram are either reduced or completely disabled by Meta. These issues include "race, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, and immigration" (Meta 2022). Meta does not differentiate between critique, discussion, or analysis of these issues, and restricts any monetisation opportunity outright. This introduces additional precarity to cultural workers' lives, especially for those who wish to engage with political and social issues. The platform's ideology rewards creators who only engage with light topics and restricts others, deepening existent patterns of marginalisation within cultural and creative industries.

Instagram is a social media platform which hosts a diverse catalogue of creators who churn out posts, reels, livestreams and other forms of freely accessible yet infinitely monetisable online media for the platform. Some artists sell their paintings and handmade crafts, lifestyle gurus promote e-books which promise users a more "fulfilled", "healthy" or "instagrammable" life through bite-sized tips. While "Influencers" make money using affiliate programs for companies big and small by captioning their posts with the classic template: "use my code for 10% off on product XYZ".

Within this group of content creators on Instagram, there are niche meme creators who sell and promote everything from more tangible products and services such as meme merchandise, personalised memes, tarot and birth chart readings, music production for

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[1]Especially aggregator meme pages that collect and repost "successful" memes.

aspiring singers and rappers, and more intangible forms of digital intimacy and vulnerability that come in various forms of "digital access". While most of the promotion of these goods and services occurs on Instagram, the mediation between the meme maker and the customer occurs on a wide variety of e-commerce platforms, such as AliExpress, eBay, Depop, Threadless, BigCartel, and others. Some niche-meme creators focus their energies on one "hustle" whereas some dabble in all of the ones listed above, and more. A growing number of these creators are now also active on patronage platforms like Patreon, on which they can offer a variety of services for a monthly subscription fee, or Only Fans where they can find paying patrons for NSFW (Not Safe for Work) or adult content. On the whole, meme makers who use their meme pages as a source of income interact with a multitude of platforms, actors and communities. This chapter aims to sketch out these actors, or meme page ecologies, by focusing on the digital labour and creative labour that goes into making, maintaining and monetising a meme page. I do this to provide a more substantial map of the work of a meme maker.

In addition to mapping the conditions of cultural production on these platforms, this chapter also concludes that meme creators, like other cultural producers online, are exploited by digital platforms on two levels, personally and professionally. Firstly, like all individuals who use digital platforms, they are "free labourers" (Terranova, 2000 who create value for platforms by sharing posts, clicking ads, scrolling infinitely, writing captions, and otherwise spending time and being active on them. Secondly, their professional pages [2] are like digital cultural attractions. Their active presence on the platform invites increased engagement with the platform itself, but the platform does not pay these creators directly for attracting activity to their page. Instead, to monetise their work they must either find sponsors or convince their audiences to buy products using their affiliate codes and links, from which they can make a commission. The meme creators I interviewed expressed that they felt stuck on Instagram and found it challenging to fully disengage from the platform, even though felt exploited by it. The theme of "hope labour" (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013), of doing unpaid digital work in the hopes of potentially gaining more followers and financial opportunities, is a useful way to understand some of the logic behind platform-dependence (Poell et al., 2022) or in this case *platform-captivity*.

4.2   The work of meme creation

The particularities of the creative and digital labour of meme creation, lie in the artistic, affective and digital aspects of this work. While being a lifestyle influencer can potentially be a self-sustaining occupation, meme-making most often exists in conjunction with people's ongoing careers. It forms a part of their creative identity and their artistic output but is often not lucrative enough to become a profession in itself. Making and disseminating memes helps meme makers develop their various kinds of skills, and they might see it as an entrepreneurial opportunity to build a more diversified income stream and expand their creative portfolios. A way to imagine the work that goes into maintaining and monetising a meme page can be by looking at the making and dissemination of internet memes from a creative and digital labour lens. For this chapter, I will be focusing on the dissemination of internet memes and the meaning of digital

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[2]*Professional* page here denotes the page which the meme creator is working on maintaining and developing as a creative portfolio, showcasing their original internet memes and other artistic endeavours.
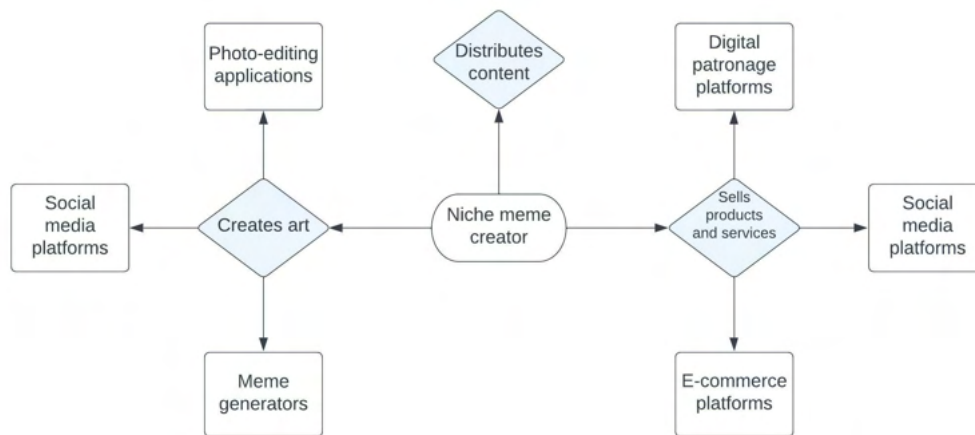
Figure 4.1: A diagram outlining the work of a niche meme creator, created by the researcher

labour for meme creators. As a consequence, this means that platforms have taken a central role in my research and writing for this chapter.

Platforms have been described as "data infrastructures that facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers" (Poell et al., 2022, p. 5). In the past 20 years, there has been a flurry of academic research around the concept of platformisation and about platforms as actors within social, political, economic, and cultural spheres (Duffy et al., 2019; Gawer, 2014; Gillespie, 2010; Langlois, 2013; Petre et al., 2019; Poell et al., 2022; Rochet and Tirole, 2003; Scholz, 2013; Srnicek, 2017; Terranova, 2000). Within this literature, political economy, business studies and software studies, which focus on issues of platform governance and wider societal behaviours with regard to platforms, are over-represented. While my approach within this chapter builds on this set of pioneering literature, it does that through a focus on online visual media creation.

Writing about so-called *content* or online media, especially in an era of platformisation is a daunting task. The enmeshed nature of platforms, culture, politics, money and social relations makes it challenging to discuss any of it in isolation. The overwhelming amount of online media produced today makes any observation about it seem outdated almost immediately. How can digital researchers detach themselves from the platforms they inhabit, and see their object of focus, in this case, internet memes, in their truest form? The answer lies in the fact that theorising a general truth about the particularities of internet memes and meme communities is difficult. The abundance of internet memes and global meme cultures defies such a task. Coming to this realisation is a sort of salvation for me and this thesis, in that I can comfortably affirm that this study is a snapshot of a specific group of people online, within a specific period of sociotechnical reality. The chapter traces the transactions, monetary or otherwise, that make this community what it is. Its conclusions can be generalised and used to reflect on the working conditions of content creators, but they cannot encompass the specificities of every internet community or meme culture.

Based on my fieldwork there are three kinds of platforms that meme creators use to share internet memes and build a creative portfolio:

1. Social media platforms, where internet memes can be accessed as "free" online content,

2. digital patronage platforms, which connect creators with individual patrons and offer access to digital intimacy and community,

3. e-commerce platforms which offer consumable products inspired by internet memes.

The following sections will focus on detailing how meme creators use social media and digital patronage platforms as part of their working lives. I will briefly note how some meme creators have used e-commerce platforms in the subsequent "Art" chapter however I will not discuss it in depth, as their e-commerce use is relatively straightforward and proceeds as expected. Whereas their relationships with social media and digital platforms are more nuanced and significant within their work, e-commerce on the other hand plays a larger role in influencer marketing and sales (Hung et al., 2022).

4.3   Social media platforms

On Instagram's company blog, there is a post titled "Instagram Year in Review: How Memes Were the Mood of 2020", published on December 10, 2020, which references popular viral meme templates, as well as creators and aggregators.

This blog post foreshadowed a more important development in Instagram's treatment of memes and meme creators. On February 22, 2022, in another blog post, they announced that painter Alim Smith would be Instagram's "Featured Meme Artist" for Black History Month. This post consisted of an interview between the anonymous interviewer, who plays the role of Instagram as the corporation, and Alim Smith, the artist. This position of the anonymous interviewer who speaks as if they are the corporation, representing Instagram, is a pertinent example of corporate heteroglossia. These blog posts do not reveal who the author is, instead the reader is expected to identify the words and ideas with the corporation of Instagram itself. The tone of language that is used in the texts changes according to the topic presented in them, and in this case, Instagram as the interviewer is familiar with meme culture as well as the formative role of Black culture and virality within digital culture. The interviewer in this blog post is anthropomorphic and is used by the corporation to signal its cultural literacy and political awareness.

In its *platform heteroglossia* (Seaver, 2017), Instagram adopts the language and logos of meme subcultures. For instance, it refers to its "Instagram Insider" magazine as a "zine". "Zine" is a shorthand for "self-published magazine", a literary tradition which arose from decades-long subcultural and DIY publishing practices seeking to "critique for-profit mass production" (Kunin, 2019). The "incoherence" that Nick Seaver (2017) refers to with regard to corporate heteroglossia is explicitly at play here. While punishing already marginalised creators with their content moderation and monetisation policies, Instagram readily co-opts amateur technologies of cultural production. This DIY-washing Instagram does in its official communications shows us that as a platform company, they understand that the platform's success is partly due to the proliferation of niche and subcultural communities that make internet memes. If this is the case, then why do niche internet meme creators exist in a precarious and anxious state on Instagram? This chapter seeks to delve into the ideological tensions and working conditions of platform-dependent cultural creators, namely meme creators on Instagram.

Figure 4.2: Screenshot of an Instagram Blog Post, December 10, 2020

4.3.1 Meme-work on Instagram

The digital labour of meme creation, dissemination and monetisation is built on digital skills, the maintenance of affective connections and being "perpetually online". The numeric success of a meme page is more or less calculated through follower count, engagement metrics of likes and shares and algorithmic visibility. Hell, a meme creator and artist with 21k followers on Instagram, affirms that the numbers and analytics create a competitive environment for meme creators. She states:

> "some people genuinely just love making stuff and would do it whether it got 10 likes or 10000, but I have also directly known of people that like to race other people to certain follower count milestones and stuff. It's all kind of silly to me I mean I don't actively compete with anyone because being an artist is hard enough on its own".

To achieve popularity, even if within a niche or subcultural context, the meme creator must use a combination of marketing acumen, algorithmic and meme literacy, and a persistent degree of online-ness. For instance, meme creators will make use of a Linktree

Figure 4.3: Screenshot of an Instagram Blog Post, February 24, 2022

link [3] in their Instagram bios. The bio, or the profile, is a partial reflection of what people would like others to know about them. It can show the parts of themselves that they wish to present to other platform users. Bios will have a different tone to them depending on the kind of page that the person is running. If a person has a private account, where users have to request permission to follow them, their bios might be short and discreet. Whereas a person who runs a public page, where anyone can follow them without requesting permission, may have a longer and more intricate bio. Most of my interviewees, as well as other creators within niche meme communities, often use these bios as a way to showcase their work, contact information, and their mottos or ideological principles. I used my observations of their Instagram bios to pinpoint the practical and political concerns of my participants and as a way to understand the community ethos. A typical bio of a niche meme creator would therefore look similar to Figure 4.5.

The construction of an appropriate, authentic and up-to-date bio is one part of the work that comes with being a cultural worker on digital platforms. However, this requires a *continuous onlineness*. This refers to being as online as possible on the platform, observing and engaging with audiences as well as other creators, and posting several times a day. Posting multiple memes a day becomes creatively and emotionally draining if the meme maker creates *original content*, often shortened to "OC" in meme-

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[3]Linktree is a platform that enables people to share multiple links from their social media bios, and it is used as a landing page by creators, especially on Instagram. It also has an analytics component that creators can utilise.

Figure 4.4: Screenshot of "Instagram Insider", Summer 2021 issue

speak. The creative labour that needs to be harnessed to produce memes intersects with the feeling of having to be constantly, chronically, and perpetually online. Having to persistently pay attention to the platform throughout the day, usually as part of creators' leisure and work time, is difficult to sustain.

4.3.2 The weight of being perpetually online

The internet runs deep. It's embedded within both our public and private lives and is a central node of sustained digital culture production. Our access to information is inevitably dictated by objects and systems of internet technology, whether this be platforms, spaces, infrastructures, or networks. So even if a piece of art is not conceived and executed solely by digital technologies, the creative process of many artists in the Global North will undoubtedly involve some sort of information exchange via the internet. An artist may be working on a physical, "offline" installation using physical materials, but the conception of the idea of this particular installation might have come from a late-night Wikipedia deep dive, or maybe as the result of several hours of "doom scrolling" on Twitter. Even if they create physical pieces of art, their work will most likely be marketed through online channels. And now more than ever, especially in a "post-pandemic" reality, a large part of their audience will interact with their work through online platforms. Therefore it is safe to say that the majority of relationships within the contemporary art world are mediated and shaped by the internet and other digital technologies. However, some artists, like niche meme creators, have an immediate and urgent relationship with the internet from the get-go. This creative, economic, cultural and political intimacy between the niche-meme creator and platforms stems from what
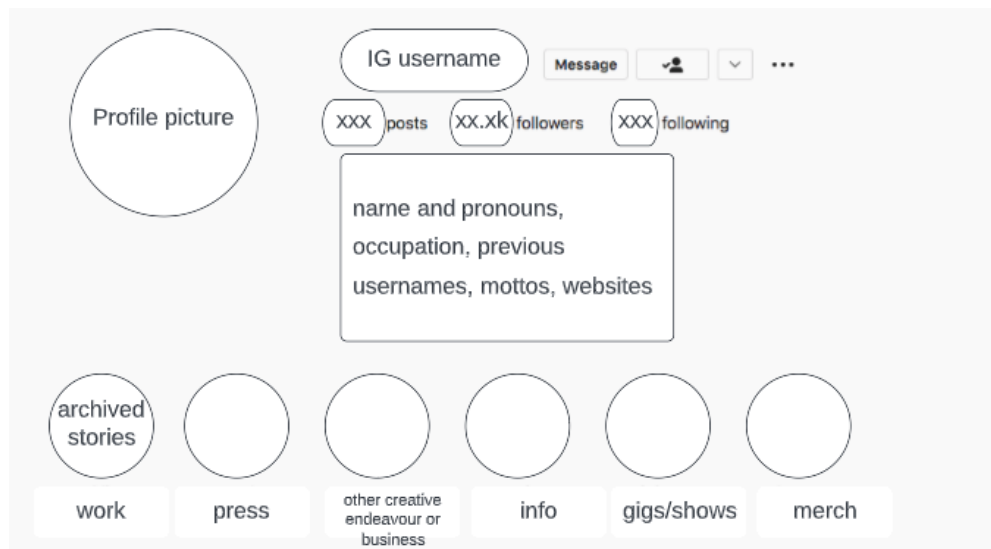
Figure 4.5: An archetypal niche meme creator Instagram bio, created by the researcher

we can call "total online embeddedness".

The everyday interactions of people like meme creators go beyond what may be considered to be ordinary online behaviour. The best way to describe the project's participants would be to use the lightly cynical, slightly self-deprecating phrase "perpetually online". The social, economic and political facets of these people's lives are deeply entrenched within online platforms. Conducting their public and private lives mostly through their smartphones, they have practical, theoretical and creative knowledge of digital culture. These users are members of the digital avant-garde, producing digital culture as they consume it.

There is a spectrum of being online, and it is dictated by many variables, such as age, location, gender, class and a multiplicity of other elements. On one end of this spectrum, some treat the internet with aloof engagement, using it to perform utilitarian tasks, such as using social media to catch up with friends, downloading news apps to stay up to date, buying products online, sending work emails and so on. On the other end of this spectrum are those of us who are 'perpetually online', individuals who have an intense, all-consuming relationship with the internet through their digital labour, as well as social and intimate connections.

All of the meme creators that I have interviewed for my thesis could be described as "perpetually online". While this categorisation, or the phrase itself, is popular on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it has no "scholarly" description or explanation in academic literature. However, it reflects the essence of what makes meme communities. A search for the term on Twitter will yield a myriad of results of users describing their lives as continuously and inextricably digital. One such user, Francesca Harrall, explores the implications of being perpetually online on her creativity in a short piece on the writing platform Medium (Harrall, 2019):

> "My phone sits silently on my desk, regularly flashing its little light to admonish me for not walking enough this hour, or alerting me to yet another newsletter in my email inbox — things that don't deserve my attention but get it anyway. Trusty pen and paper used to have a hold over me, and they're still a handy tool when I need to translate my erratic concepts into

actual words I can do something with. But they frequently take second place to the trivial news feeds and snippets of useless information that I could do without but choose not to."

Harrall muses about the attention economy in the piece, and to her, this is a material concern, a matter of self-discipline in a surprisingly spiritual way. Many others, such as niche meme creators, share the feeling of admonishment and shame over not being able to control oneself around one's smartphone or computer. The sense of personal responsibility in resisting the "evils of technology", and the individualisation of solutions in response to structural problems are often espoused by mainstream actors in technology. For instance, in the notorious Netflix documentary, The Social Dilemma designers urge the audience to simply turn off their notifications, to reclaim their attention and dignity from the perilous systems that they have created. Facebook and other tech giants give users control over their privacy settings so opting out of electoral fraud now become the responsibility of the user. The anxiety of feeling personal responsibility over one's technological behaviour and habits when coupled with the theoretical knowledge of algorithmic bias and designed inequalities situates the user in a particularly anxious plane of being. From Harrall's piece, we can extrapolate that her online-ness is a combination of two things: audiovisual reminders that she is "missing out" and a comforting/discomforting connection to her device. She frames the act of receiving a digital notification as a forceful interruption to her workflow but also hints at how she intentionally interrupts her own workflow by reaching out to her device and going online. This affective need to be in the loop, or perpetually online, becomes a point of self-development, a pathology to be fixed through disciplining one's technological behaviour. The momentary comfort she feels of going online is juxtaposed with the discomfort of interruption.

Beyond the perceived shame of total online embeddedness, being terminally/perpetually online also entails a sense of meme literacy, of being able to decode and understand digital culture deep-cuts. A meme shared by user *yuritopiaposadism* on the subreddit r/completeanarchy, titled "I'm terminally online" follows the "inside you, there are two wolves" meme format. The joke relies on the fact that both statements, "one is laughing at MAGA cope" and "one is annoyed at liberal cringe", are emblematic of internet-speak and refer to typical political discourse online. Users reach such a state of digital being through a hyper-awareness of and hyper-embeddedness in digital culture. At this stage of digital cultural immersion, a natural by-product of being perpetually online is meme literacy. Meme creators are therefore almost always perpetually online, and form their own class of internet users.

4.3.3 "Stockholm Syndrome": Platform-work and platform-captivity

Jillian, who runs a popular page on Instagram called @ada.wrong as well as an independent multi-media platform called *virtualgoodsdealer*, describes the experience of meme-making-burnout on Instagram:

"Instagram was my first large audience, outside of people I knew in real life. I started my account in 2016 and was serious about it. This is dramatic but I spent so much time and effort on it, I probably posted like three times a day and then I guess I just gave up mentally. I was like "fuck this like I'm never using Instagram again in a way that I like really care". So now I just post for fun and I don't really put any like emotional value to it. But

Figure 4.6: "I'm Terminally Online" posted by user @yuritopiaposadism on Reddit, 2021

> it is kind of like Stockholm Syndrome because I have to use it to promote *virtualgoodsdealer* and my other store [personal online shop]".

Stockholm syndrome is a fitting way to describe a sentiment that many meme makers and audiences share, which is the feeling of being "trapped within Instagram". This experience of wanting to cut ties with certain platforms, or social media in general, has been discussed widely in academic as well as self-help literature. Some reasons why users do not feel like they can completely disentangle themselves from platforms such as Instagram can be a result of work requirements, maintaining personal relationships and maintaining an awareness of popular culture. Another reason why creators might feel trapped within Instagram is that it is populous – as of 2021 over 1 billion people use Instagram monthly (McLachlan, 2022). To escape from this platform and establish a digital presence elsewhere on the internet, a creator also has to redirect their existing audience outside of Instagram. Jillian mentions that together with the other two creators who co-run *virtualgoodsdealer* they use their Instagram presence to try and get Instagram audiences to look at their own multimedia platform:

> "...we post on Instagram to meet the algorithm so our posts get more traction, but that's just because we're trying really hard to use these existing platforms to get people to look at our site. We try to maintain the balance of not spending that much work using Instagram but still trying to get people to see our posts if that makes sense".

Jillian adds that while she has decreased her use of Instagram as it relates to her meme page, she thinks that the digital and marketing skills she has developed as a result of her meme page and that these skills help her promote her new entrepreneurial and artistic ventures online:

> "I guess, I like, use the same skills that I did when I made memes to do social media promotion for this [virtualgoodsdealer] and I also run my own online store for accessories, so I use what I learned from that to do this better".

Throughout my fieldwork, I found out that what is meant by "skills" when it comes to developing an engaged audience on Instagram is largely built on what we could describe as an awareness of the platform algorithm or "continuous algorithmic learning" (Duffy and Sawey, 2021, p. 142). Platform algorithms can be understood as "experience technologies" (Blank and Dutton, 2012; Dutton and Shepherd, 2006), which are technologies "understood through use" (K. Cotter and Reisdorf, 2020, p. 745). The assumption is that the more creators use Instagram, posting memes and tracking metrics and engagement, the better they understand the algorithm. The success of a page on Instagram, and other social media platforms where recommendation systems dictate visibility, is thus understood as being dependent on the perpetual or chronic onlineness of the creator. Of course, due to the perceived ambiguity of the platform algorithms, there is a sense that how algorithms truly work is unknowable, and users seem to be stuck in an algorithmic limbo. Cotter (2020) introduces the concept of "black box gaslighting" to explain this unknowability. Building upon the power asymmetries that exist between users and themselves, platforms leverage "perceptions of their epistemic authority to undermine users' confidence in what they believed to be true" and communicate conflicting information that contradicts users' experiences (K. Cotter and Reisdorf, 2020, p.5), gaslighting their users. The psychoanalytical themes and undercurrents in the relationship between platforms and users are undeniable. Jillian's feeling of being stuck in a "Stockholm syndrome" situation on Instagram becomes even more poignant when understood as a natural consequence of an abusive platform/creator relationship.

Still, platform labourers like Jillian put in, or feel obligated to put in, varying amounts of work into trying to understand and expand their audiences, engagement and content's spread across platforms. For instance, in one of our interviews, Omnia, who runs virtualgoodsdealer alongside Jillian as well as a personal meme page @saqmemes with 18.8k followers on Instagram, discusses "Instagram engagement groups", also known as engagement pods, which are meant to "beat the algorithm".

> "The big meme accounts, they used to be in what they call engagement groups. Instagram adapts to that very quickly. So how that works is that they have like seven, eight people in the group chat. And whenever somebody posts something, they send it into the group chat, and then everybody in that group likes and comments on it immediately, like within the first five minutes or so that being posted. And I mean... I think it was a good way to, you know, try to beat the algorithm. But at the same time as an artist, like if you're in those engagement groups, you're not going to know when you're improving. Because when everybody likes everything all the time, you're really not going to know whether your work is good or not, and it's going to hinder your creativity, I think. But at the same time, you know, a lot of people do need the followers, they need the engagement, to you know, sell products or to do whatever".

These Instagram engagement pods are groups of Instagram creators who come together to boost each other's content through likes, shares, saves and follows (Duffy and Sawey, 2021, p. 143). These pods usually operate between creators who post similar

content, and as private group chats on instant messaging applications such as Telegram or other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit or Discord. Whenever someone posts something new, everyone in the group engages with the post by liking it, sharing it and so on. Instagram engagement pods seem to have become increasingly popular since Instagram changed its algorithm in 2016 and made it so that the posts which garnered the most engagement would be sent to the top of users' timelines. Previously Instagram would show posts in chronological order, and this change had more of an impact on creators and brands who wanted to grow their audiences rather than individuals with personal pages, instead of public-facing ones, who wanted to use the platform to keep in touch with friends and family. There are reports and anecdotal evidence that the ordering of posts on Instagram has been revised in different ways so that these engagement groups do not increase posts' visibility as they used to after the 2016 change. Since Instagram does not exactly divulge the changes they make to their algorithmic recommendation systems beyond larger platform shifts (Pasquale, 2015) users often try to "piece the story together" by tracking their posts' analytics, sharing their findings with other users and following news and reports about possible platform changes.

Social media platforms, like Instagram, engage in what is described as "visibility management" (Flyverbom, 2016) packaged as transparency. Users are provided with various kinds of dashboards and analytical tools, such as the ones that content creators like my interviewees use, which can help them manage and control their data (Flyverbom, 2016, p. 117). Platforms have "been able to frame these dashboards and user controls as forms of privacy protection" (Flyverbom, 2016, p. 118), but growingly they are also being repackaged, expanded and presented as engagement tools for creators and businesses. In the case of meme creators who primarily depend on Instagram for visibility, Instagram's in-built analytical dashboard Insights proves to be an important source of information. Facebook (rebranded as Meta in 2021), describes Insights as a way to "learn more about overall trends across your followers and your content's performance with your audience" (Instagram 2021). This dashboard allows users to see how specific posts are doing by providing a breakdown of insights such as the number of accounts reached, the number of saves, and demographic data based on the users that have interacted with the post. The screenshot shown in Figure 4.7.

Naturally, having access to this dashboard does not automatically mean that a creator knows what their posts do or how they travel through the platform, or more importantly how they can grow their popularity within their chosen online niche. If the creator is interested in building a strategy to disseminate their content as far and wide as possible, and have other users engage with their content, they will have to study and synthesise the information that Instagram Insights presents to them. This means that creators need to place this particular data into a wider narrative that includes details about previous reflections of how their content "normally" performs, changes to the platform, rumoured algorithmic adjustments, fellow creators' or peers' Insights data and performance reports, and trending or hot topics online. Thus, the work that goes into the dissemination of internet memes does not start or end with the act of posting the meme on a platform. Many creators have a specific plan and strategy that they devise and follow when posting. This plan usually requires the creator to do prior research into what the best times to post are, for their own niche, location and chosen platform. For instance, Hell, known by her username @lilperc666 on Instagram mentions that she "used to be super specific about post times and stuff, and even schedule them in advance". She follows this admission
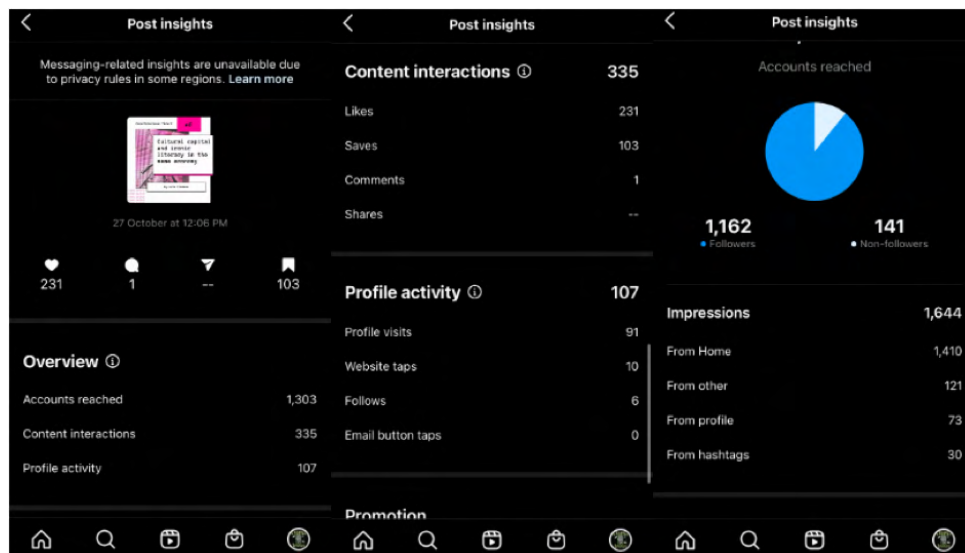
Figure 4.7: Screenshots of a post shared on the Meme Studies Research Network's Instagram page, which the researcher runs. This dashboard can only be reached through a creator or business account, on November 21, 2021.

in our interview with a "lol" and adds "but now I mostly keep it loose and space out my posts an adequate amount for whatever platforms I'm sharing to".

Even though Hell has switched her strategy of posting in advance and during specific "rush hours" on the platform, she still has a posting plan. She endeavours to spread out her posts and is mindful of how she disseminates them on different platforms. This conversation with Hell brings us to the role that the platform plays in her creative life. Her experiences of each platform could be understood through a "platform affordance" perspective, however, her insights also provide a counter to the assumption that online spaces are "emancipatory" by design. Hell states:

> "Despite how accessible online art spaces are, they can still be pretty capital-driven, everything is. If you have more money or privilege and access to resources, you have a better chance of success. Also, social media platforms tend to cater to certain groups of people that experience extreme privilege in everyday life, and sort of like shit on marginalized people and voices. Facebook, for example, requires people to upload IDs to use business tools, like promos and stuff. If you aren't using your government name on their site and your government ID, they'll flag you for fraud and block your ability to purchase ads. Instagram is notorious for shadow banning people, limiting their reach in Discovery/Explore and in turn killing their reach".

In this example, Hell is describing platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as online art spaces. This is a point of view that is shared by other meme creators and artists. The platform as an online art space can be used as a helpful paradigm to understand artistic online content and the curation of original niche-memes. When we conceptualise these platforms as places of art creation, curation, dissemination and monetisation in themselves, we can tease out the seemingly "invisible" online inequalities that are present within them. This becomes especially important when discussing the experiences of minoritised and racialised persons online. Here, Hell is detailing how online

inequalities intersect with offline ones and have a direct impact on occupational precarity. The experience she is describing here shows that for minoritised creators, platforms can act as extensions and mirrors of offline institutions.

Furthermore, for minoritised artists receiving online visibility can often come with strings attached. A fellow Black meme creator, Jenson, went through such an experience in 2020 for instance. In my interview with curator Georgie[4], she mentioned that Jenson's aim when creating memes is for them to be *evergreen* and to be understood through the lens of contemporary art, not simply as viral digital media. It is important to highlight here that his search for the evergreen meme[5] stems from his experiences around the increased platform visibility he received following social mobilisation against racial injustices in the US during 2020. Jenson states (Payne, 2021):

> Last summer, in the thick of the uprisings, there was a week I gained over 2000 followers after a spat of bigger (read: white) meme pages thought it timely to share my work. The morbidity of it all disturbed me on several levels: that memes I made about police brutality as far back as 2016 were being dug up as an opportunistic cause célèbre for bigger pages, that the memes themselves are evergreen and still apply to the functioning of the state apparatus, and that my page's growth is now intrinsically tied to the circulation of images of Black death.

The fact that these memes about police brutality are still relevant and can be shared in a moment of heightened platform activity shows that the nature of the evergreen meme is not by default liberatory. The co-optation of Black creators' work such as Jenson towards non-Black creators' goals is not uncommon. These works are often discarded in place of another frenzied platform moment, where users vow to support Black Lives Matter, stop Asian hate, stand up for women's rights, fight climate change, stop forest fires and other such causes. As Jenson says though, the visibility that Black creators may receive in such frenetic circumstances has consequences of varying degrees for the creators. Such images are utilised by incensed users in a moment of digital catharsis, with digital platforms' built-in affordances aiding their momentous exaltation and subsequent disposal.

In the case of Jenson's work being boosted in white meme audiences, his memes become linked to pain, suffering, and death in the Black community within the US. The platform, while being somewhat of a respite from institutional art curation, nevertheless plays an important role in taking away the agency of people who create and share their work on it. The merging and expansion of wider audiences are not always a benefit for creators. Creators with larger audiences can share other people's works to make a point about their own virtues and political commitments. He comments on this problem, and speaks of how he has considered stopping making memes as a result: "I have lots of memes that aren't focused on the fucked up overdetermination of death in Black people's lives, but to see only that part of my work embraced by pages that otherwise don't fuck with me was enough to make me seriously consider hanging it up" (Payne, 2021). This shows viral audiences hold a lot of power in shaping the work of a meme creator and are ultimately fickle[6].

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[4]Georgie curated an exhibition showcasing Jenson's collected works titled *Yacht Metaphor*.

[5]Otherwise, a meme that does not just appeal to the platform zeitgeist and common denominator jokes.

[6]Nguyen et al.'s 2020 study examining "whether killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and

Overall, some of the complexities of meme-making as an artistic endeavour is closely linked to the digital platforms that make meme communities possible. This becomes clear in my interview with Jenson. At the same time however, the so-called "democratic nature" of meme-making clearly facilitates a sort of artistic practice that is much more accessible and visible than other, more traditional, art practices.

When I ask Jenson about the supposed "democratic nature" of meme-making, he explains the relationship between material constraints, economic inequalities and the pull of meme-creation eloquently:

> "Yes, the democratic nature of the medium is part of the appeal, but there is a materialist analysis to account for the explosion of meme makers online. You really only need a smartphone and internet to participate in meme production...if necessary software may be easily pirated. You don't need a terminal degree to do it. In order for your work to be seen, it doesn't have to go through the vetting systems that exist in conventional fields of art. No committee or jury or editorial boards. You don't need a particular kind of pedigree...to have attended the same handful of prestigious institutions and residencies in order to command attention."

Commanding attention with limited means within the art world becomes easier with digital technologies. The institutional prejudices which govern (Kolbe et al., 2020) patronage and dissemination of art do not hold the same power over Instagram or Facebook. Software is either cheap, free or easily pirated as Jenson mentions, and artists are free to make and share as they want to, unburdened by patrons' expectations. Although, this does not mean that meme creators work in a transparent and democratic environment. Attaining online visibility and commanding attention is naturally dependent on whether or not a creator's work is engaging for their chosen audience.

Jenson echoes Hell's[7] sentiments when discussing the obstacles he has faced in monetisation opportunities. When I ask him what he thinks about monetising internet memes he asks "monetising memes is fine but whose pockets are being filled when it happens?" His question is a direct reference to the growth of meme marketing firms such as Jerry Media, which describes itself as a "multi-platform comedy entertainment brand, distributed across major social network and digital media properties, with both original programming and curated content" (Linkedin, 2017). Jerry Media is most famous for its association with @fuckjerry, one of Instagram's most popular meme aggregators, and for having created content for Mike Bloomberg's US presidential campaign in 2020 (Lorenz, 2019b; Statt, 2019).

Jerry Media was created by Elliot Tebele in 2015 to capitalise on the popularity of his meme aggregation page @fuckjerry, which as of January 2022 boasts over 16 million followers on Instagram. The marketing agency now manages a network of other popular Instagram meme aggregators such as the more "feminine" @beigecardigan run by Jessica Tebele, Elliot Tebele's partner, which has 3.7 million followers as of January 2022, and other Instagram pages such as @Kanyedoingthings, @SaintKardashianWest,

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Breonna Taylor by current or former law enforcement officers in 2020 were followed by shifts in public sentiment toward Black people" (Nguyen et al., 2020) affirms this conclusion. The researchers employed semantic analysis on a set of data from Twitter and found that the sharp increase in digital public consciousness about police brutality and structural racism in the United States "returned to baseline after a few weeks" (Nguyen et al., 2020).

[7]One of the meme makers mentioned earlier in this chapter.

@Pizza, @Vibes, @TheLightweights and more (Linkedin, 2017). Today, just the Instagram accounts mentioned above have close to 22 million followers, collectively. Other ventures of Jerry Media include the What Do You Meme? card game, which is structurally similar to Cards Against Humanity, a Fuck Jerry clothing line, a podcast, a book and other forms of media. They have also worked with brands such as Burger King, Hallmark, Funny or Die, and MTV. Their most fraught collaboration, even in the face of the Mike Bloomberg meme campaign, has been with the doomed Fyre Festival. Fyre Festival was the fraudulent music festival founded by Fyre Media CEO Billy McFarland who scammed festival goers and investors out of $26 million while receiving celebrity endorsements (Huddleston, 2019). Jerry Media were hired to be the event's social media strategist and created branded content advertising the festival (Statt, 2019) . In 2016, it was reported that @fuckjerry was charging $30,000 per sponsored post (Johnson, 2017), a rate which would have increased with the page's following.

Most recently, Jerry Media came under attack by various journalists, comedians and meme creators who were exasperated with how its pages were aggregating memes and jokes without permission or credit, and making thousands of dollars using other creators' material (Statt, 2019). Many social media users, including famous comedians such as Tim Heidecker, of the popular show Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!, and Patton Oswalt, actor and screenwriter, urged their followers to unfollow @fuckjerry using their social media platforms which resulted in @fuckjerry losing over 160,000 followers (Carman, 2019). This ongoing controversy initiated a conversation around the dubious ethical standards of social media marketing practices and aggregators.

Firms such as Jerry Media, and the pages that they manage, operate within a paradigm of virality and content aggregation. There is a capitalistic logic inherent in this sort of memetic dealing, as the capital generated from the content they circulate is built almost exclusively on the art, comedy and ingenuity of more niche creators. The labour relations that arise from such practices have an effect on what we can consider to be ethical content curation. Meme creators depend on different sources of income, which include Patreon and OnlyFans subscriptions, merchandise, bespoke art and literature that they advertise on their pages. However, the success and longevity of these sources of income depend on how far and wide their memes are circulated. The traffic that their most popular memes attract to their pages is a source of potential income, and this makes the issue of meme reposting, curation and aggregation complex and fraught. When meme creators' original memes are reposted by aggregators such as @fuckjerry, especially without permission or due credit, this splits the attention that the original meme would have gotten on the original creator's page.

In our conversation about the politics of posting and branding, Jenson remarks:

> "as the Mike Bloomberg campaign revealed, the big meme pages who have 250k to several million followers, are mostly run under the parent companies of Jerry Media or Brandfire. This is a monopoly. These pages can repost your meme and raise their followship by the thousands".

Jenson goes on to explain that big meme pages' reposting and aggregation of original work has "material ramifications" for more niche creators. As an artist who memes about popular culture as well as mainstream political dogma, white supremacy, US imperialism, socialism, and globalisation, Jenson has suspicions about the reasons why he has not had monetisation opportunities. With the number of followers, he has over 27k, and the articulate aesthetic style he uses in his work he surmises that he should have had more opportunities to work with brands. He explains:

"I get zero branding opportunities, companies don't reach out to me, I've even been recommended by other memers and sent out requisite emails, but talks always seem to falter. I would love to make money doing what I do for brands if the "synergy" is right, but I think for better or worse there is something mercurial, critical: Black, about my page that makes it difficult to recuperate into corporate branding".

The experiences and reflections of artists such as Jenson and Hell show that independent artists who are encouraged to establish and maintain audiences on social media platforms often go through similar tensions, limitations and restrictions that they might face within institutional settings. Artists at the margins of institutions gravitate towards digital platforms to build their portfolios and find audiences and opportunities. However, the logics that propel arts institutions, namely exclusionary and capital-driven ones, are also at play online. In response, some artists with secure followings may seek to reposition their most committed audiences from algorithmically governed social media platforms into what we can call "digital patronage" platforms. This may be done to achieve some financial stability through monthly patron contributions, and also to build closer and more intimate relationships with their followers. The next section, therefore, details how the concept of artistic patronage works within platformised art worlds, especially for niche meme creators.

4.4 Digital patronage platforms

4.4.1 The history of patronage

Traditionally, arts patrons have been wealthy individuals, institutions and firms, like the Medici family (Hope, 1981, p.296-7), the United States government (Scott-Smith, 2002, p. 4378) and even Nike (Culp, 2018). While private patronage of the arts is still largely maintained by wealthy funders, digital patronage platforms offer a more low-stakes model of patronage to the masses. Platforms, such as Patreon and OnlyFans, become intermediaries connecting the patron to the content creator by way of a system built on monthly subscriptions and tips. If a fan wants to support a freelance creative, they can sign up for a digital patronage platform where they contribute a set amount of money to the creator's monthly income, and in response receive access to exclusive content from the creator in question. The creator base of these digital patronage platforms is incredibly diverse. The platforms host a range of creative and knowledge workers from podcasters to curators, educators, musicians, adult film stars and even meme makers offering their services to their patrons. While we might have an innate understanding of what kind of exclusive content a musician or podcaster might be able to offer their fans, we might not exactly know what a meme maker can offer to a private patron. If memes are user-generated content (Brubaker et al., 2018), then they must also be free and abundant on the internet, so why pay for one?

4.4.2 Meme creators as social entrepreneurs

The answer to this question is nebulous but not incomprehensible. Countercultural niche-meme creators who are active on digital patronage sites organise around specific moral, ethical and political ideals. Concepts of mutual-aid and equal resource distribution

are paramount to how they use their digital platforms. For instance, while examining popular niche-meme creators' Instagram pages, I noted that initial set of accounts which I had analysed had published posts, stories and links about mutual-aid projects. Beyond sharing links and volunteering, 6 of them had established their own mutual-aid projects, whether this is a rent reduction union, queer-friendly self-defence training, or prison abolition and harm reduction initiatives. As these creators' work and online presence can often have a strong political tone, they, therefore, attract an audience who generally share their political and moral views. When asked about why they support meme makers on Patreon, a meme patron who I interviewed remarks

> "it makes me happy to know that I'm supporting them in some way, and it's a good way to show gratitude to a creator that showcases most of their content for free. The benefits are getting more content from an artist you appreciate, as well as feeling you have served a moral obligation by supporting them."

Niche-meme creators utilise strong elements of social entrepreneurship, by pursuing "more ethical forms of business" (Gandini et al., 2017, p. 16). They build social capital in the form of online reputation to expand their network of funders and uphold a certain moral standing within their communities. For instance, creators with large followings will engage in temporary account takeovers and even account transfers to artists, community and political organisers who may have small followings and may be perceived to be maligned and censored by Instagram's algorithm, which is also referred to as being "shadowbanned" (Myers West, 2018). Account takeovers and transfers aren't uncommon digital practices, and can be seen on more commercial pages, where an influencer will take over a company's Instagram page for a few days and expose their following to said company. Niche-meme creators, on the other hand, use this practice to highlight social issues and permanently or temporarily redistribute their most valuable resource, which is online visibility.

However, the relationship between niche-meme creators, entrepreneurialism and platforms is fraught. As individuals who generally embrace anti-capitalist politics, practice and a countercultural outlook, they often see their active involvement in and engagement with "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) to be paradoxical. Therefore, the discrepancy between their personal politics and dependence on platforms to make money and promote their work becomes a point of contention, resistance and dialogue. The individualisation of responsibility for such discrepancies and paradoxes is bolstered by a neoliberal perspective of accountability, where individuals are held up to unattainable standards of ethical business practices whereas large corporations, such as Instagram, are given a pass. The burden of having to surrender part of your ethical principles for the sake of survival is put on the shoulders of precarious workers, creating an increasingly confusing and anxious existence.

Countercultural niche-meme creators are diversified workers (Gandini, 2016, p. 18) who use multiple platforms and income streams to make a living. As diversified workers, they have a diverse portfolio and offer a wide range of art, products, and services. Based on the Patreon accounts I have analysed, niche-meme creators provide products and services that go beyond personalised memes. They might offer their patrons literature, such as essays, poetry, and zines, physical artwork such as prints, stickers and jewellery or digital intimacy which might take the form of advice and emotional support through email, being added to their Instagram close friends lists and Discord servers, shout-outs

on their Instagram stories, and so on. The list is highly varied and spread across multiple platforms. Creators sell products, merchandise and physical artworks for instance, over e-commerce websites and platforms such as Threadless, Big Cartel, eBay, Etsy and even AliExpress. This is more straightforward and the kind of monetisation that users might be more familiar with. In contrast, creators tend to offer more intangible services such as advice and digital intimacy over digital patronage platforms, like Patreon and OnlyFans.

To attract creators, digital patronage platforms use the promise of creative independence, not only from institutions, and the perils of freelance work but also from algorithmic chance and control. On Patreon's "For Creators" section, a visual artist is told that they should not "rely on algorithms and chance" or "on unpredictable revenue streams" and instead "change the way art is valued" (Patreon, 2020a, 2020b). However, the independence and control that this platform argues that it provides to creators are unequally distributed and dependent on their three pricing plans called Lite, Pro and Premium. Patreon takes a commission from the creator's monthly Patreon earnings, and the percentage varies depending on which pricing plan the creator is on. The higher the percentage of your monthly income you relinquish to the platform, the more control you have over analytics and platform features. Therefore, if you choose to keep 95 percent of your monthly earnings, you still end up having to rely on "algorithms & chance" (Patreon, 2020a).

4.4.3 Digital labour and patronage relationships

These digital patronage platforms bring a new dimension to definitions of digital labour and free labour (Gandini, 2020; Terranova, 2000). In the case of countercultural niche-meme creators, digital patronage platforms facilitate a market where so-called "prosumers" find willing patrons for their "user-generated content". This signifies an attempt on the prosumers' part to monetise their digital labour. Here, the relationship between the user and the platform is not clear-cut. These niche meme-makers are hyperaware of the value of the memes, engagement and overall online presence on various platforms and seek to somehow remedy this loss. Their attention is turned inward towards their communities and through inward politics, they attempt to resist algorithms, chance and platforms. Instead of chasing a pipe dream of being remunerated by Instagram for their user-generated content, they rely on their community's ethical principles, political affinities and financial support in the form of digital patronage. However, the monetisation of their free content still requires the creation of additional, special content and potentially more unpaid hours. Their success is based on the shaky and incessantly fluctuating social grounds of being relevant, ethical and productive. Digital patronage platforms offer some revenue for precarious workers and a chance to monetise existing content. For the most part, however, these platforms still require consistent attention and new content creation. They tease their customers with the possibility of freelance success through the use of their omniscient analytics, provided their customers promise them a cut of their meagre earnings. Finally, the process of redefining "the way art is valued" (Patreon, 2020b)is arbitrated by a middleman in the form of a digital platform and through a monthly subscription. Among the World Economic Forum's eight predictions for the world in 2030, one was that "all products will have become services" (Parker, 2016). It can be argued that digital patronage platforms will further accelerate this transition by connecting borrower-patrons and lender-creators.

Overall, digital patronage platforms can be described as platforms which mediate the

transactional relationship between a creator and their patrons. They provide a digital space for the creator to present their work to paying customers. As mentioned, these platforms work on a subscription basis, and usually offer a tier-based rewards system. The way that the system is structured depends on the creator. For instance, the meme creator @ghosted1996 has structured her subscription system in a way where there are multiple tiers but a set group of rewards to which all patrons get access.
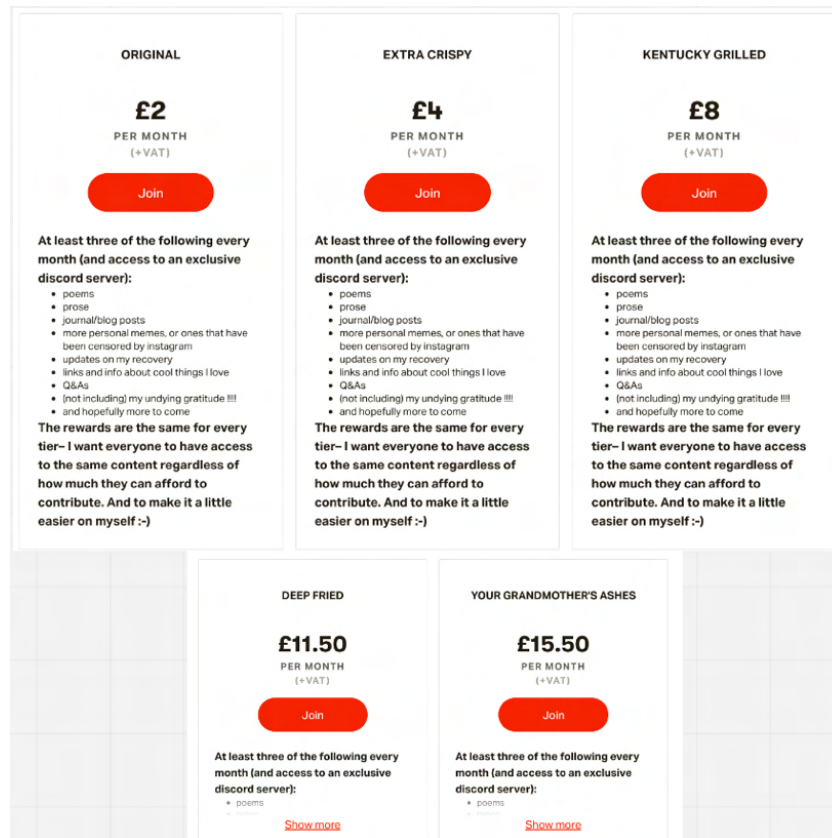
Figure 4.8: A screenshot of meme creator ghosted1996's Patreon tiers, 2021.

A creator's political beliefs and cultural interests can be reflected in the way that they structure their tiers on Patreon. @ghosted1996 has made a deliberate decision to arrange the tiers in an equitable way, similar to a "pay-what-you-can" business model associated with the so-called gift economy. Under every post, she explicitly states:

> "The rewards are the same for every tier– I want everyone to have access to the same content regardless of how much they can afford to contribute. And to make it a little easier on myself :-)"

Several niche-meme creators on Instagram have set up their own Patreon profiles which they advertise on their Instagram profiles, such as @ghosted1996, @ripannani-colesmith, @sighswoon, @blackpowerbottomtext @ghosted1996. Kristen (@ripannani-colesmith) a PhD student and the administrator of a niche-meme account with 67.9 followers, creates "curated reading lists, cultural criticism, and self-help lit" for her "Meme Medici" s [8]. At the time of research, she had patrons, or Meme Medici's and

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[8]Cochrane is referring to the Medici family, who famously patronised many Florentine artists during the renaissance. Examples include Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Michelangelo Buonarroti.

provided every tier with a bi-weekly newsletter "containing at least three items", these being an academic article or piece of reading, a non-academic essay or article, a video or film recommendation. She provided commentaries and critiques on her newsletter about the material as well, and remarked that her patrons can think of her newsletter as an academic course she leads but where "you don't have to write assignments". The names of the patronage tiers all refer to psychoanalytic terms, for instance, the most expensive rate is $200 a month, named the *Oedipus Rex* tier where in addition to the bi-weekly newsletter, Cochrane provides the patron with another newsletter, a shoutout on her Instagram story and a shoutout on a caption on one of her Instagram posts. I recently became a $5 a month patron[9], and have been reading her previous newsletters which as a patron you get access to (Cochrane 2020).

In her biography she details why she has chosen to set up a Patreon profile and remarks that she would like for her patrons to support her work for its quality and rigour:

> "in addition to the very real notion that rigorous and carefully executed research related to social and cultural histories of gender and sexuality is a marginalized area. Even though there is a proliferation of discourse on sex (like what Foucault said!), the articles we see on Girl Power Dot Com and their contemporaries are often driven out of a neoliberal drive for sexual confessions—the analysis feels thin, and even though the editors sometimes message me, tempting me to sell out for my trauma porn, I would rather pursue historical research that can help us make sense of our culture(s), each other, and ourselves."

This is an important point to highlight. Several of the creators are particularly vocal about neoliberal forms of content creation and how they aim to stand up against neoliberalism by making and distributing their work on their own terms. Some meme creators that have Patreon accounts may post screenshots of personal conversations, reflections about mental health and recovery processes, as well as internet memes. Some ask for support or advice directly from their followers. If they write prose and/or poetry, they may show a "sneak peak" of their intentions, and thoughts regarding their writing on their Patreon. Through their emotive and affective use of her Instagram and Patreon accounts, their followers and patrons may be given access to their personal life.

However, this intrusiveness reads as consensual. Most memes posted on Patreon are honest, self-deprecating and vulnerable, and add another layer of personal connection for followers that watch their Instagram stories and engage with their posts on other platforms. Through their membership on Patreon, audiences may receive a variety of perks, for instance, being added to a patrons-only Discord server [10] where they can chat with other followers and supporters of the creator, and the creator themselves. A patron of @ghosted1996 states:

> "it makes me happy to know that I'm supporting them in some way, and it's a good way to show gratitude to a creator that showcases most of their content for free."

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[9]A tier she has named "The Symbolic"

[10]A messaging application.

The problem of free content, of free labour (Terranova, 2000), is apparent to the audience as well as the creators. However, this problem is usually made visible by how creators market and publicise their Patreon or other digital patronage accounts. Creators appeal to their most devoted, politically sensitive and financially stable followers by reminding them that they do not make any money from the majority of the content they post on social media platforms. They provide a space for laughter and communion through their memes and entertain thousands of people online. The idea is that if you follow and respect their work, and are financially able, you should be materially supporting them, and this way they can continue to make more content.

Maura Church, the data science manager for Patreon remarked that they were "seeing new creators flock to Patreon faster than ever to create a sustainable salary for their art" although this, depends completely on what is meant by "sustainable salary for their art". Even though it sounds like Patreon offers an alternative and grassroots method of providing artworks to a paying audience, a sustainable salary for one's art does not necessarily mean a sustainable salary for the artist herself. To make a living purely off one's Patreon showcase only seems viable if the artist has a huge group of patrons, which should be more than 1000 followers at the very least. Again, if the artist has a large following then this also usually means that they have alternative sources of income in addition to their Patreon profile. So when Patreon argues that creators can make a living by showcasing their work on Patreon, they do not mention that the income they are referring to is a mishmash of different endeavours over different platforms. For instance, a niche-meme creator can have a Patreon profile coupled with a merchandise website, usually hosted by BigCartel, a Depop profile[11], art shows, gigs, exhibitions, commissioned work, and affiliate codes for popular companies or brands who have an "influencer or affiliate program" and still be struggling for a decent income.
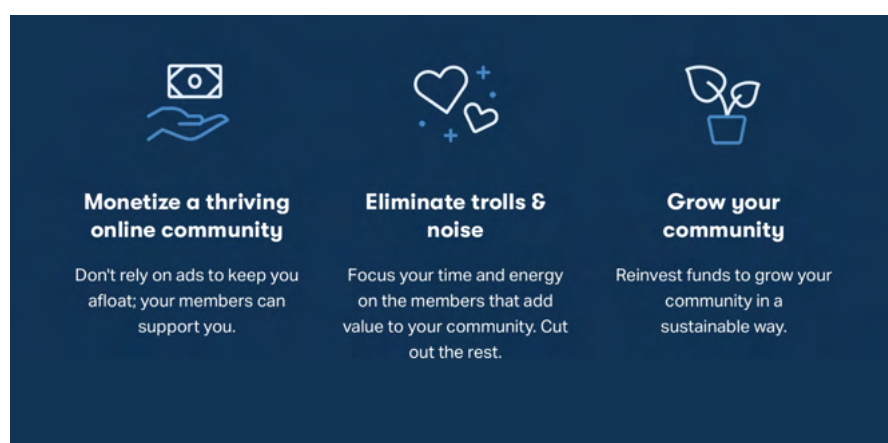
Figure 4.9: A screenshot of Patreon heteroglossia, 2021.

However, one affordance that Patreon extends to creators is its lack of recommendation, discovery, and moderation algorithms. This is an important drawing point for many creators like Hell. She explains her decision to open a Patreon account:

"I decided to use it because Instagram kept removing my posts for violating their terms of service so I thought it would be cool to have a space where

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[11]An online marketplace platform that most people use to find second-hand clothing informed by online aesthetic trends, moods, and subcultures.

I can post whatever I wanted and if people want to support me then I let them see my band work as sort of a treat and also get a sneak peek at other projects that I'm working on before anyone else does."

On their official blog, Patreon published a blog post commemorating International Transgender Day of Visibility, discussing how the company supports trans creators. This text referred specifically to the fact that Patreon does not use recommendation algorithms "for discovery or moderation" (Patreon, 2020b), in response to a quote about algorithmic fairness. Patreon's presentation of itself as a fair platform which does not utilise algorithms for discovery or moderation can be connected to the notoriety of Instagram's fabled Algorithm, which is a component of the platform that appeared in many of the interviews that I conducted. These posts show that Patreon is offering itself as a fairer companion to, if not a direct counterpart of, other algorithmically governed platforms, such as Instagram. Corporate blog posts such as this one, also show that the "algorithm discussion" is at the forefront of creator culture, so much so that the lack of a recommendation algorithm can be used as a selling point for platforms.

- **Tech Needs To Step Up to Protect Trans Voices**

Visibility matters. However, not every trans person has the support or safety to be seen. Tech companies have not always had a good reputation when monitoring bullying, hate speech or any other ways in which trans people are made unwelcome or unsafe online.

> *"There needs to be algorithm fairness. Artificial intelligence is based off of the racism and ableism baked into our language." –Kayley Whalen*

Trans people should be protected on platforms by policies and terms of use. We recently clarified the hate speech section of Patreon's Community Guidelines. To reiterate our stance: Anti-trans rhetoric or people that seek to segregate, bully or harm trans people are not allowed on Patreon. We also don't use algorithms for discovery or moderation, but rather participate in advocacy that works for creators. However, we always want to hear ways that we can do even more to keep our communities safe.

Figure 4.10: Screenshot of a Patreon blog post titled "3 ways we're working to better support trans creators"

Many creators believe that Instagram's algorithmic recommendation system, which governs the *Explore* page on the platform, rewards users who post light content that does not engage with "debated social issues". These issues include socioeconomic class, gender, race, disability, religion and other subjects. As a result, content which explores such issues generally cannot be monetised according to Instagram's content monetisation policies (Meta, 2022). This makes it difficult for people like Hell to make an income from their work on Instagram, because she, like many of the other participants of this study, critically analyses topics such as social inequalities from intersectional and emancipatory angles. Regardless of her framing and standpoint, her work is subject to the rules around "debated social issues", which not only has an effect on her as an individual and professional cultural worker but also on the future of digital culture. These rules

further punish already marginalised artists and cultural workers who wish to explore these topics within their work, making it difficult for them to find monetary support within spaces managed by digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and so on. These monetisation policies and the related algorithmic rewards for lighthearted content make it so that only certain people and certain kinds of culture dominate these spaces, which have become "publics" in their own right. This issue should be taken seriously by researchers and the public alike, as it deepens existent inequalities within the cultural and creative industries today.

Furthermore, *The Algorithm* is such an unsettling presence in creators' lives that they will seek out platforms which do not rely on algorithmic recommendation systems for content curation, such as Patreon, as a way to evade the almost "malevolent spectre" that is the algorithm. For instance, following the passing of an influence niche meme creator and part of the Bottom Text meme collective Addy, also known as *@GayVapeShark*, fellow meme creator Jenson Leonard penned a commemorative piece about Addy's work and included this line:

> "Addy possessed a preternatural ability to manipulate the invisible and everchanging algorithms of Facebook and Instagram to her favour, amassing engagement and page growth not through the machinations of a market firm, or a corporate sponsorship, but through her transcendent force of will."

Even in the elegiac reflections of a departed meme creator, *the Algorithm* finds its place as an obstacle, an impediment, a stubborn and unrelenting foe to be defeated. It is an important part of understanding the anxieties and working conditions of platform-dependent cultural workers. The next section will explore this issue in further detail.

4.5   Working conditions: Algorithmic anxieties

> "I just finished 60 days in shadowban on Instagram. I seem to have been let out of my cage which is vastly preferable to reaching one percent of my audience [...] I'm not going to bore you with all the details but I was reaching approximately 1 percent of my audience for a period of sixty days. On March 1st [...] the first day I tweeted in my entire adult life, also the day that Brad Troemel made a discord, we both mysteriously got out of shadowban like immediately. Like midnight on March 1st my story views went from 300 to 2000 something like that. Really really sizeable. Almost an order of magnitude. So it was really noticeable. I was very financially stressed for a while because I earn my living through my visibility on social media. And my understanding of this is that essentially my wages were docked from Instagram because I work for Instagram, I think that is undeniable, for misbehaving on the job. I think that that is an accurate description of what happened. Almost immediately after that, my traffic on my page dropped really really rapidly... Opening a solo show in shadowban and launching a book, I certainly noticed the decrease in traffic. Having to spend a year of creative labour on these projects and then nobody can hear about it... So hopefully, hopefully, I don't have to go back underground."

This is how Joshua Citarella, artist, researcher, podcaster, streamer, meme creator and curator, opens the 13th episode of his podcast *Memes as Politics*. This is not the

first time he has discussed "numbers", as he refers to them, in fact, part of his practice as a researcher is focused on trying to understand the politics of Instagram's algorithms. He shares his insights with his audience not only through his podcast, but also his Twitch stream *Monday Night Memes*, which his podcast is mostly based on, as well as his Patron-only Discord channel, Instagram and Patreon. Citarella represents a kind of artist/researcher that is becoming more common within the larger meme community. He has existing relationships with galleries and the Art World but, alongside Brad Troemel, seeks to critique the "Art World" from the inside/near-periphery by producing easily accessible, Patreon and patron-supported work. Through his Patreon, Twitch streams, Discord server and podcast he can reach his immediate audience, and can keep them engaged with a multitude of platforms and a variety of content that span art, criticism, politics, and digital culture. These can be best understood as digital gigs. Citarella, like many other "content creators", is a platform-dependent cultural worker. Cultural workers within meme communities are partly in the dark about how platform algorithms work. Logging, archiving and reflecting on one's experiences on the platform becomes the only way of knowing what the algorithm "likes" or what makes it "angry". The entire process is a sort of reverse-engineering done on both a personal and a communal level. Creators exchange information and "hunches" about the algorithm with other creators and their audience to find out how they can maximise their visibility online, which almost always means maximising their income. This sensemaking strategy is not unique to content creators online, it is also shared by other platform workers. For instance, a similar form of algorithm anxiety is described by this Deliveroo rider in Karen Gregory's article "'My Life Is More Valuable Than This': Understanding Risk among On-Demand Food Couriers in Edinburgh" (Gregory, 2021):

> "Tye recounts: On multiple occasions people are, like, 'I think the algorithm's changed' and with no real proof. I'm not very inclined to believe it when they do say it. Then yes, if I see anyone, I'm like, 'Have you noticed you're getting less orders or less double orders, or you're getting shorter distances?'. There's a lot of speculation on the algorithm" (Gregory, 2021, p. 327).

Similarly, in her study of beauty vloggers on YouTube, Sophie Bishop (2020) points out that the algorithmic imaginaries, gossip and theories all inform how beauty vloggers create content for YouTube, as they use these strategies to maximise their algorithmic, or online, visibility (p. 2600-2). She argues that this algorithmic anxiety has an effect on what kind of content creators choose to produce. On the other hand, Paul, who is a meme creator with over 99k followers on Instagram, thinks that the best way to deal with the algorithm is to not think about it too hard, as he believes the rules are constantly changed "and selectively applied". When I asked about his relationship with the Instagram algorithm he stated:

> "yeah if you make content for any amount of time, you start to get some sort of a relationship with the algorithm. I think this is particularly intense when you are a smaller page, though there's plenty of big pages who are super concerned with it. I've certainly felt the highs and lows of the algorithm, from having a post go on to the explore page (this was a bigger deal two years ago, though it's still helpful) and getting lots of new traffic on my page, to having my engagement go way down with no explanation or being shadowbanned or having posts removed. The algorithm is weird because

it seems like the more you think about, the more it influences what you create and how you post it but the algorithm remains this esoteric almost unknowable factor because the rules are being periodically updated. At this point I try not to think directly about the algorithm or look at my stats but just post when I feel like it."
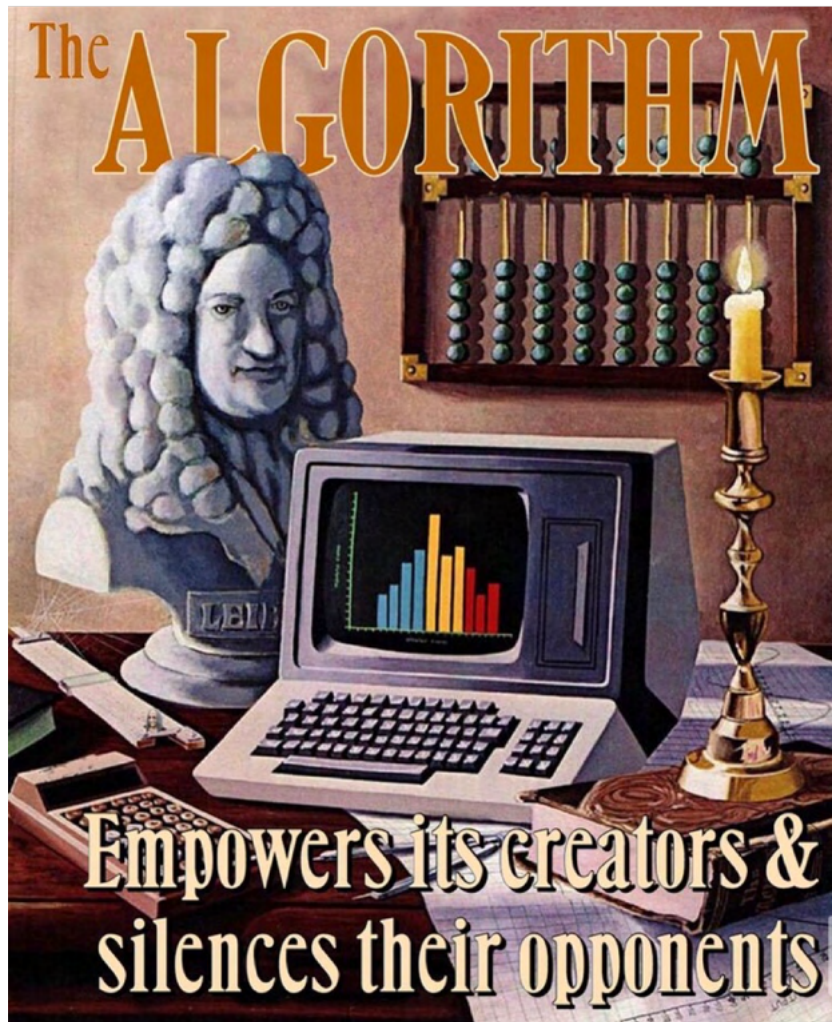
Figure 4.11: Meme made by Paul

Meme creators must develop an in-depth knowledge of the platforms that they have to operate on. Topics such as algorithmic control and bias, content moderation and censorship, changes in tech policies or digital inequalities are crucial for meme creators to understand and keep on top of, as their livelihoods depend on mastering a variety of platforms. This includes having a personal, practical and theoretical awareness of how online visibility is managed by platforms' algorithms. For instance, creators seek to understand how posts are recommended to users, the effect notifications have on their audience engagement, whether or not their followers see their content on a reliable basis, and what elements of their content the algorithm "likes" or "punishes". The resulting collection of knowledge is mostly based on individual experience, collective discourse, following tech news and staying on top of digital culture.

Another way of understanding, or reverse-engineering, the algorithm is by "testing" its limits of it through trial and error. This is usually done by posting content that the

creator knows will somehow "anger" the algorithm and see how it "reacts". However, this method can make it even more difficult to gauge what the perimeters of the algorithm currently are. If creators' content is unpredictably managed by the algorithm, especially if that content is artistic or meant to be judged subjectively, the ensuing confusion creates hostile, unpredictable and ultimately precarious working conditions for content creators. When a seemingly "well-behaving" post is taken down, while a more provocative post remains untouched, the creator will be inclined to believe that the algorithm is biased, confused, or malicious, that the logic by which their workplace, the platform, is governed is not to be trusted. These tests and reverse-engineering processes do not come without their risks, as many creators believe that algorithm, or rather the platform holds grudges and expect that they will be punished for repeatedly antagonising the algorithm. Paul, who memes about the algorithm often, describes his experiences with shadowbans in our interview:

> "Yes I've had three posts removed by IG, all resulting in shadowbans that severely limited my growth at the time. There was never an appeal when I had them taken down so they've just remained off the page. Initially I was a little startled but not too shocked when I had posts taken down because I was deliberately seeing what I could get away with. The third however still remains a mystery- it was a simple drawing of a werewolf standing back in fear while a woman in her bedroom points a shotgun at it. The werewolf was labelled "men" and the gun was labelled "therapy". So it was very absurd and I was shocked when it was taken down for hate speech. For this one I posted a second version that said like "not all men just some of them ok please don't take this down ok" on the werewolf and that has managed to stay up so it's a head-scratcher. Overall I think the IG guidelines are not only poorly written but also very selectively applied".

Content creators need platform algorithms to work in their favour, to make a living. However, the inner workings of algorithms are intentionally obscured by platforms to retain a competitive edge and to make sure users do not take advantage of their systems (Bishop 2019). The opaqueness of "the algorithm", which can mean different things for different people, makes for a confusing and anxious experience of work. For instance, Joshua Citarella mentions that he thinks he was "punished for misbehaving on the job" as he is basically employed by Instagram. In this case, the platform itself is his workplace and his boss, an unknowable assemblage. This is a kind of work where expectations are set by constantly mutating rules and are intentionally concealed from its workers. This is a similar situation to the pressures felt by platform workers. However, Gandini (2020) argues that content creators' digital labour and gig workers' platform labour differ in several ways, for instance in the kind of work they provide (p. 7). Content creators provide "content media on social media platforms" whereas "platform workers provide contentless media on digital work platforms" (2020, p. 7). Furthermore, about the customer–provider relationship he highlights "that digital work platforms produce supply and demand of work as groups of social actors made of 'quasi-strangers' who engage in ephemeral and interest-driven social exchanges, constituted by a temporary bond on the basis of a shared interest – the successful completion of the task or 'gig' – which actually dissolves once this is completed" (p. 8).

This categorisation of digital and platform labour can help us understand how trans-actions occur between people on social media and digital work platforms, however, it

also constitutes a problem for my characterisation of meme creators. Beyond pointing out the shared algorithmic anxieties between digital labour and platform work providers, how can we categorise people who work across multiple social media and work platforms? These cultural workers might be considered "influencers" or "niche internet celebrities" by marketing studies, "content creators" and "users" by social media platforms, "meme creators" by their social media audiences, and "multimedia artists" by their larger art networks. However, the one central theme is that their work is ultimately platform-dependent. This occupational categorisation of "platform-dependent cultural worker" can be a useful term for meme creators, as it can help underline that they have a working relationship with digital platforms and are entitled to certain conditions.

4.6 Autoethnographic vignette: A lesson in virality and inter-platform reposting

I have always been perturbed by the emotive discrepancies between the gusto with which academics announce their most recent publication on Twitter and the seriousness of the topic that the publication in question is often about. Generally, I keep any snide comments about the peculiarities of academia to myself, however on November 17, 2021, I decided that I would share my observation with my following on Twitter. I remember constructing this tweet with particular precision, I paid special attention to the placement of the emojis, the space between the set-up and the punchline, the punctuation and my grammar - academic Twitter, unlike memetic Instagram, likes good grammar and punctuation. I wanted this tweet to be successful and felt that I had a funny observation in my hands that could also function as a critique of the performativity of academia. I was also worried that this was not an original thought, that maybe I had stolen it from someone without noticing it. I had heard that this happens to songwriters. I suppressed my concerns, constructed the tweet, and released it into the whirling maelstrom of Twitter. In less than an hour, the tweet had gone "semi-viral" on the platform. There were too many quote-tweets, replies and likes for me to respond to. I became overwhelmed and muted the tweet. I soon realised that this tweet's viral success could be of use to my thesis, and started taking screenshots of the "analytics", showing the number of times it had been seen and engaged with. Below is the first screenshot I took of the tweet in question, on November 18, 2021, and a screenshot of the tweet analytics that Twitter provides a day after I posted the tweet, on November 19, 2021. These screenshots help to show how quickly the tweet started circulating.

On November 18, 2021, I started getting messages from my friends on my Instagram account. They were sending the same post from an account that I did not recognise called *@diversityinacademia* with close to 100,000 followers on Instagram. The messages I received ranged from "you're famous!", to "is this you?", to "did you post this?". When I looked at the post, I saw that it was a screenshot of my tweet and it had gotten over 15,000 likes. I was not tagged in the post and had not been asked for permission prior to the account posting my tweet. Looking at this Instagram account, I saw that it was one of these "aggregator" accounts that my interviewees had mentioned. In meme spaces, accounts that find successful or viral memes and repost them, or "aggregate them", without tagging or acknowledging the original account are sometimes called "shitposters". By poaching already successful memes, they do not have to make their own content and can be sure that the memes they post will receive engagement, as

Figure 4.12: A screenshot of the tweet on November 18, 2021. A day after the tweet was originally posted.

these memes are already tried and tested. This means that they can also post multiple memes a day without having to worry about thinking of jokes, constructing memes and writing captions. Content creators, including but not limited to meme makers, believe that the platform rewards people who post every day. The idea is that the more online you are, and the more you post, the higher your visibility will be, either through genuine engagement or through the platform boosting your posts by putting them on the "explore page" where more people can come in contact with your page. @diversityinacademia was one of these aggregator accounts. The entirety of the page is reposts of successful tweets about academia.

I decided to leave a comment underneath the post that they had reposted and in it, I mentioned to the *@diversityinacademia* Instagram page that I was the person who had originally posted the tweet that they had posted in the public comment box, they tagged me in their caption. While I did not mind that my tweet had been reposted by a person that I did not know and who did not ask for my permission, this experience made me reflect on how I may have felt if I was a meme maker like my interviewees, and my meme was poached in this way. Would I be happy that my meme reached a different audience through the repost, or would I be upset that I was not tagged and the 15,000 likes that my "original content" received was not really *mine*?

These sorts of questions and concerns become significant when the creator whose posts have been reposted by others relies on their online visibility to generate income. Intra-platform reposting becomes an issue as well. For instance, a creator who has posted an original meme on their Instagram page may be able to counter the "aggregator" by requesting that the aggregator share the original post on their Instagram story. By doing this, the original meme creator can reach the audience of the aggregator and potentially receive likes and engagement on their own original post. If their meme is "stolen" and reposted as a permanent post on the aggregator's Instagram page, then the likes that the permanent repost receives have no substantial effect on the original meme creator's visibility. Although, this becomes impossible if the aggregator "lives" on a different platform. In the case of my viral tweet, @diversityinacademia did not have the option to share my original post on their Instagram story, as my original post was

Figure 4.13: A screenshot of the tweet analytics, taken on November 19, 2021.

not on Instagram, but rather on Twitter. For them, the only way to share my tweet was to screenshot it and publish it as a permanent Instagram post on their Instagram page. These inter-platform reposts have no effect on my work life, but this is because I use Instagram in a personal capacity. Whereas a creator may use Instagram as part of their work, as a creative portfolio, as a networking tool or as a place to attract potential commissions. As a result, when aggregators poach and repost creators' original work they introduce an added source of precarity into the lives of platform-dependent cultural workers. There are complex and ambiguous relationships between platforms, original content creators, and aggregators. The repercussions of screenshot aggregation may seem frivolous, however, when put into a wider context, we can see how precariously placed cultural workers and creators are on digital platforms. To further explore this issue, the next section will discuss the changing production processes of internet memes, and how creative labour can be understood as it relates to so-called "content".

Figure 4.14: A screenshot of the @diversityinacademia Instagram page reposting my original tweet on November 18, 2021.

4.7 Production of internet memes: Content, creativity, and politics

"A meme/memers success isn't hinged on acquiring Hans Ulrich Olbrist favor. And the material costs are next to none...no studio and supplies to account for. The bar for entry is relatively low. There is a saying i am about to butcher about how an artist must "have a voice without saying anything at all". This aphorism, to me, speaks to the schism between visual and textual art. Memes are shaking this up because they are marrying text and visuals in new ways. You can get the didactics of a Barbara Kruger and the pop culture reproduction dysphoria of Warhol in the same compressed image. The tonality of memes, or the internet write large, of irony and cynicism I think is a product of a broader generational malaise. Millennials

are burnouts, the heirs of the diminished financial opportunities in the wake of Boomer Prosperity and Gen X's "whatever man" ethos. Memes merely amplify that disaffection." - Jenson

As Jenson remarks, producing internet memes does not require much financial investment, all one needs is a smartphone and an internet connection, and creativity. At the same time, their form, content and significance are also subject to changes in technology and production processes, like other forms of creative expression. For instance, the current look and feel of internet memes have changed considerably since the 2000s when most people started using their smartphones to edit photos rather than their computers. With the popularisation of photo editing applications, people now have a wider variety of design tools available to them. Ten to fifteen years ago, most internet memes were made with the use of templates that were provided by meme generator websites. Now there is a more diverse variety of memes because they can be made free-form using found images on the internet. This requires a level of digital literacy and skills that the average internet user does not have, but that all meme creators have to varying degrees.

Figure 4.15: Screenshot from a browser-based meme generator showing "Bad Luck Brian" template, July 2022.

In the 2000s, Anglophone internet memes were mostly made on browser-based meme generators. These generators, which you can still access in various modes today, would

affix two captions on the top and the bottom of an image selected by the user from the generator's image archive. The user would provide the top text, which acted as the set-up of the joke, as well as the bottom text, which would act as the punchline. The condensed, bold, sans-serif font "Impact" would be used for the top and bottom text in the resulting meme (Brideau and Berret, 2014). These browser-generated memes were also dubbed *Image Macros*, which refers to the computer science term macro ("macroinstruction") referring to "a single instruction that expands automatically into a set of instructions to perform a particular task" (Lexico, 2022). Overall, creating an average image macro at this time was a pretty automated process: a user would feed a program a bit of text and would select a pre-curated image, and end up with an Image Macro, like a personalised memetic jukebox.

The set images that were offered by these generators were associated with specific genres of jokes, *Advice Animals, Bad Luck Brian, Psycho Girlfriend, Douchebag Steve* and other such permanent characters were part of the relatively contained and automated spectacle of memetic image-making. Each character had been pigeonholed according to joke type: Bad Luck Brian would joke about having bad luck, Advice Animals would give you unhelpful yet funny advice, Psycho Girlfriend was the epitome of a stereotypical "toxic" partner, whereas Douchebag Steve would always do or say something expectedly unpleasant. Not only were the image macros arranged in a predictable way, of top and bottom text in *Impact* font, but the jokes would also follow a predetermined sequence and theme. Image macros were produced through browser-based meme generators and therefore followed a certain memetic logic and rigidity. The production process was simple and unyielding. Today, this is no longer the case, as a result of increased accessibility of high-speed internet and data plans, smartphones and mobile photo editing applications.

Internet memes are now made through a variety of creative methods, from Adobe Photoshop to in-built production tools on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and as such, the diversity of memetic digital culture reflects the diversity of its production processes. Memes can be made anywhere and at any time, and the spontaneity that mobile phones offer has also had an effect on what internet memes are used for as well. Remixing is also socially encouraged on these platforms between peers and creators, with "Duet Me" for instance being one of the most popular genres of participatory TikTok content. For instance, one of my interviewees Hubert, who was a meme creator, recounted in our interview that they were in a group chat on Instagram with other meme creators and that every week they would "cover" each other's memes. Like a musician covers someone else's original song, these meme creators were emulating each other's aesthetic styles while using their own style of humour, covering and therefore remixing others' memes with their consent.

Paul, a meme creator that I interviewed points out this connection between remix culture and internet memes further by underlining the influence of DIY hiphop cultures and Black Twitter:

> "As far as the nuts and bolts of it, it reminds me of the DIY music scene, specifically hip hop. Hip hop was a sea change in accessibility in that you didn't need to buy an entire drum set to make a beat, you could just use a recording of drums and this naturally brought a huge amount of new unheard mostly Black voices into the forefront. Memes of course owe themselves to Black Twitter and are as accessible as acquiring a phone and your desire to learn how to make things, so I think the parallels are very much there."

4.7.1 "Everything is content"

Much of the *content* we see on digital platforms, which is largely online memetic material, is remixed. This may be connected to the fact remixing something has never been easier than it is in 2022. Today to make an internet meme, which has been theorised as a primary example of remix culture, someone can look through a huge array of remixable original material like cartoons, photographs, or movie stills through search engines, as well as purpose-fit visual platforms such as *Pinterest*. Pinterest, originally a moodboarding platform, is like a remnant of internets-past: a place where authors are irrelevant, and copyright is just a word. It's a free-for-all for image hunters worldwide, a place that arranges itself purely on visual cues. On this platform, images are abundant and free-floating, unfettered by authorial complexities. It is a collage maker's utopia. I often hypothesise about what the Dadaists would think about this fountain of endless images.

Finding images to make memes with is easy, especially in spaces like Pinterest. Putting those found images together to create a meme is also made more seamless with in-built production tools and free photo editing applications available to anyone with a smartphone. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, are one-stop shops where people can make and share an internet meme all in one stroke. These in-built production tools make it possible for people to arrange, embellish and manipulate their found images, and pair them with text, but also afford them with social and hybrid properties. If someone is creating a meme on Instagram stories for example, they can pair it with a hyperlink to a website or tag a friend's account when they decide to share it. This turns the internet meme, or whatever media they are sharing, into a truly multimodal and dynamic piece of information that communicates information and directs the reader outwards towards other forms of *content*.

Content is shorthand for user-generated content (UGC), a term that, starting from the mid-2000s, became a popular way to describe images, videos, text, and audio shared by people on online platforms, like forums, wikis, personal websites, blogs, social media and so on (McKenzie et al., 2012). Today, the relatively unwieldy term "user-generated content" has left its place to the snappier "content". A Google search of the word "content" will result in a slew of blog posts about how *everything is content*. There is even a popular TikTok sound of an exasperated woman singing "everything is content, don't forget to film it" which small business owners and creative entrepreneurs use as background audio for videos in which they show a mundane activity, like packing customer orders. The demands of content creation today are that cultural creators are perpetually aware that anything they do or see in their daily life could potentially be packaged into digital content and presented in an appealing way for their followers. One such example is the "come pack an order with me" videos on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, where small business owners show how they pack their customers' orders. This may seem like it is one of the most boring parts of being a small business owner, however, the memetic virality of the genre itself shows that content is not only everything but that it is also a process in which an image or a video is turned into something that befits digital platforms and their audiences.

The cult of the "hustle economy" (Cottom, 2020), the part-time gig, and the overwhelming existential pressures of continuous content creation shape the kind of culture that is being produced online today. We are now at a point in 2022, where we can trace how the conditions of content generation or cultural production have changed since the first bubblings of the participatory Web 2.0, where bloggers and vloggers became a distinct class of cultural producers. With what hardware and software afford us today, such
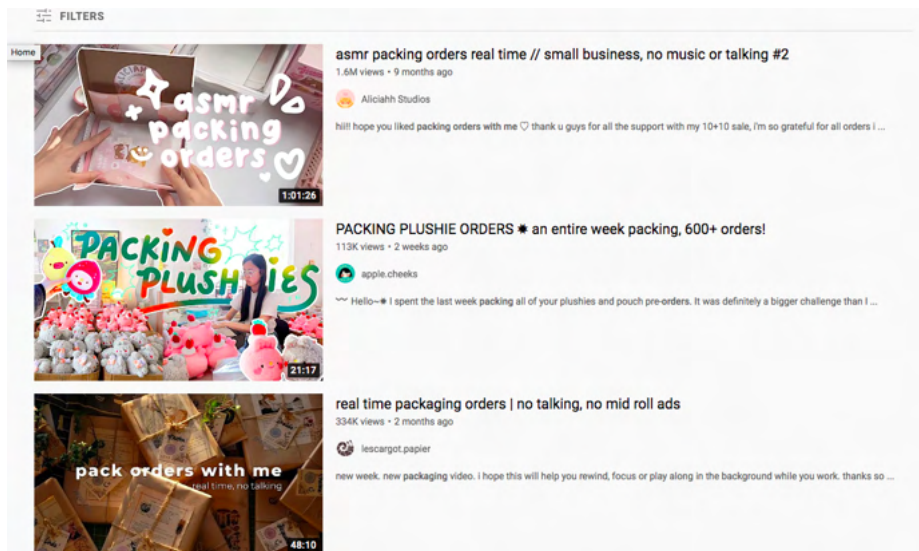
Figure 4.16: Screenshot of YouTube search results for "pack an order with me", 2022.

as better camera quality as well as infinite scrolling ability, content has become more visual and more abundant than the user-generated content we were talking about in the 2000s. In September 2021, TikTok announced that it now had 1 billion active users. This of course does not mean that every person who uses TikTok is a cultural producer, however, what is clear is that the caveat of "everything is content" can also be taken as "anyone can be a content creator". Therefore, the social conditions are also ripe today to make oneself, work, business, private life and political beliefs visible and visual as a content creator. In particular, visual platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, play a big role in how this happens and how people are shaped into content creators or cultural producers.

4.7.2 Politics and the creative process of meme making

There is a dynamic discussion around what platforms are and what their role is within social, cultural and political spheres, with theorists extending differing opinions and critiques across the political spectrum. Overall, platforms are infrastructures which afford connection between interested parties, such as Peers to Peers, Producers to Consumers, Employees to Employers or Audiences to Creators. While doing so they also survey their users and extract information about their tastes and beliefs by tracking how they use the platforms. According to critical scholars such as Nick Srnicek platforms are otherwise businesses that exploit their users' various activities, with relatively little productive input on their part (Srnicek, 2017). Instagram is popular not because of the memes or videos Instagram, the company, prepares and posts, but because its users fill the space up with their own "content". The service is the space, not the content. We know this because Instagram, like its parent company Meta, makes the bulk of its revenue from advertising. The platform, here, is a churning vortex of digital billboards.

However, if we were to look at digital platforms as, what Tarleton Gillespie calls, "primary keepers of cultural discussion" (Gillespie, 2010, p. 348), then these are also places where a kind of remixed culture is produced, critiqued, promoted, shared, marketed and gleaned data from. As previously mentioned, Instagram allows people to use their in-built production tools to create, promote, market, and share content with a wider

audience, whether this is an infographic, a meme, a sponsored ad, a brand review, a video, an Instagram reel, or selfie. This sort of seemingly multipurpose platform can turn anyone with some digital literacy into a content creator and in turn attract and extract more engagement data from its users. As a result, imagistic creation online exists on a high-speed plane, and across a multitude of actors with various financial and political aims. To be able to understand the production processes of internet memes, and memetic content more widely, we need to take all of these actors into account. Beyond the creator as the collage-maker, and the platform as the extractive marketplace, politics is also a foundational part of why and how internet memes are made.

The possibility of subversion, for instance, is a vital part of the pull of creating and consuming internet memes. For several years, academic researchers and journalists painted internet memes as discursive tools that subvert dominant media messages (Contreras, 2021; Flamenbaum, 2022; Frazer and Carlson, 2017; Makombe, 2021; Mielczarek, 2020; Winkler and Seiffert-Brockmann, 2019). Academic studies of subcultures have often focused on the production and consumption of the "subculture as resistance" thesis, and internet memes have also been given the "as resistance" treatment by scholarly studies. The assumption here can be that internet memes came from below, from the people, and are therefore inherently democratic. The assumed subversiveness of internet memes was also linked to their intertextual nature: internet memes subvert the image akin to Dadaist photomontage, which sought to topple the idea of "the photograph as truth".

A recent example of the subversion of mainstream expectations and reporting through memetic formats has been the TikTok videos that some Ukrainian citizens have been posting through the Ukraine – Russia conflict. Making use of the popular TikTok meme template "things that just make sense in enter place name" Ukrainian TikTok user @Valerissh created a video in which she did a tongue-in-cheek tour of the bomb shelter that she and her family have been in living in. Similarly, Alina Volik, posted a TikTok video titled "POV: you live in Ukraine" utilising another popular meme template showing the peculiarities of living in a sieged city. Another TikTok user @pokrovskiy_klop documents his daily walks from his home to the bomb shelter, joking about how air raid sirens are the new alarm clock in Ukraine. These interventions are memetic in composition however they also act as a form of citizen journalism from the ground, pushing back against the narrative that state media in Russia has been peddling about the extent of the conflict. Made to be consumed and shared quickly, TikTok has been a medium that Ukranian social media users have employed (Stokel-Walker, 2022). Beyond confronting Russian state media, these videos also subvert some Western expectations of what "it must be like" to live through a war. For individuals who may not have been around active conflict, the idea that morbid humour makes an appearance may be hard to believe. However, solace in humour during such dire circumstances is not uncommon at all. In fact, historically marginalised peoples, such as the Jewish community or the Black diaspora who have faced continuous existential insecurity often have a great diversity of self-deprecating and morbid jokes in their folklores.

However, if we are to follow the argument that internet memes are subversive rhetorical interventions, we must also point out that mainstream figures also subvert the supposed subversive nature of internet memes. The memetic cycle does not end at the point of bottom-up rejection, instead, it reverts back to propaganda from above. The ridiculing of political figures is countered by the same political figures utilising memetic templates to show their "hipness" and to vie for support from online subcultures. While

some are in the vein of the Steve Buscemi "how do you do, fellow kids?" meme (see Pentagon's Soviet bear meme), some are more successful in appearing genuine. Nayib Bukele, the current president of El Salvador, is a prominent example of a politician who seems to have a degree of meme literacy, which he uses as a marketing tool for his various, mostly crypto-centric, causes. Calling himself the "coolest dictator" he defiantly leans into the oppositional narratives about himself as an unpredictable "crypto-bro". He is known for using Reddit lingo and viral meme templates to solidify his internet clout, and regularly changes his official Twitter profile picture into meme edits of himself. Again, on Twitter, Bukele has responded to older crypto-sceptical US Senators with "OK boomers" and said that El Salvador "DGAF" (meaning Don't Give A F**k) that Moody's had downgraded its sovereign debt due to its Bitcoin trades. The crypto community online seem to enjoy and support his devil-may-care attitude, as he weaponizes the presumed anarchic character of meme culture.

Bukele is a cult internet figure who is similar to Elon Musk, the patron saint of crypto-memers. Musk has previously declared that "a picture says 1000 words, and maybe a meme says 10,000 words". Aside from the interesting mathematical calculations, he may be right. Musk's influence on internet culture, and the fanbase that he has garnered as a result of his memetic dealings, is an indicator that big-tech figures have been persuaded by the political and financial potential of internet memes. Therefore, internet memes cannot be seen as purely top-down or bottom-up technologies. The idea that internet memes are "everyday talk of everyday people", as well as the assumption that certain political memes become successful as a result of relentless troll armies is both misleading. If we can pin down some of the social logic of internet memes, which dictates that they are more than just humorous expressions, we can better understand how they function within different contexts.

Internet memes are unassumingly complex, they are explicitly intertextual as they carry not only the motive and viewpoint of their creators but also information about the prevalent cultural, political, and technological relations within society. Prevalence here does not imply conventionality though, as memes can embody both dominant perspectives and peripheral subcultures. As they become contested public spaces where discussions happen over multiple iterations of the same template and caption, they become fluid, ambivalent, and hard to define. One thing is for certain though, and that is that internet memes have become the building blocks of digital culture. This means that culture and politics will become ever-increasingly memetic, and as a result building memetic literacy will play a key part in being informed. Approaching memes as texts to be read and investigated, rather than as tools of either democracy or autocracy, may save many from misinformation and digital naïveté.

Chapter 5

Art

5.1 Introduction

"One frequent topic of discussion I remember clearly, was that net.art had finally freed the artist from the tyranny of the museums and galleries. The artist was free! They now had direct online access to their audience with no middleman! Victory!! The history of art would be forever changed!"

- Cory Arcangel (Arcangel, 2009, 7).

Instagram the platform was a place where people could post photographs showing their daily lives in earnest, and clumsy ways. It beckoned the aesthetically minded and the amateur photographer into uploading periodic snapshots from their everyday lives.

The "user-generation" logic behind Web 2.0 social media platforms like Instagram can be seen as an outgrowth of certain socio-political narratives. Since the mid-20th century Western public discourse has increasingly focused on the importance of the individual. Margaret Thatcher's infamous, remark that "there is no such thing as a society" arrived at a time characterised by liberal atomism, and "the individualism of self-seeking consumers" (Gibson 2015, 41). Academic researchers and techies started using terms such as professional-amateurs, user-generators, and consumers to refer to "individuals" who viewed and created media on the internet. Web 2.0 structures became "channels of self promotion and networking" for artists who were operating within a Post-Fordist reality of cultural production, driven by undulating pressures of scarcity, dispossession and entrepreneurship (Mylonas 2012). The slow incorporation of precarious artists into online vendors of cultural goods started with this ideological push and the popularisation of Web 2.0 platforms. Today the independent artist is more akin to a micro-influencer, and a jack-of-all-trades. When Howard Becker wrote his sociological analysis of the production of art, he refuted the fantasy of the individual genius-artist by outlining how different guilds of artists, craftspeople, knowledge workers, and vendors work together to make art possible[1]. Today, independent artists take on most of these roles themselves. One of my participants Jillian, for instance, is a meme creator, but also she makes and sells art, clothes and jewelry, develops websites, produces podcasts, YouTube vlogs, does

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[1]See: "Imagine, as one extreme case, a situation in which one person did everything: made everything, invented everything, had all the ideas, performed or executed the work, experienced and appreciated it, all without the assistance or help of anyone else. We can hardly imagine such a thing, because all the arts we know, like all the human activities we know, involve the cooperation of others" Becker, 2008, p. 7)

marketing, curates digital exhibitions, and writes essays. She is a cultural entrepreneur who co-runs a platform called *virtualgoodsdealer* with 2 other meme creators. She, like many other young independent artists, has developed a diverse portfolio of skills and competencies in order to create and promote her artistic endeavours. If we were to follow the distribution of labour within the art worlds that Becker was writing about in the early 1980s, then Jillian would be doing the work of eight people. Jillian's work life in this case is not the exception, but the rule in these online art worlds.

The online community that I worked with for this project is an online art world or an online "network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for" (Becker, 2008, p. xxiv). It is important to acknowledge that Becker's conceptualisation of art worlds does not exactly reflect contemporary art worlds, firstly because art worlds are increasingly more decentralised and "democratised", and secondly because it seems as if the unimaginable has happened, where the artist has "all the ideas, perform[s] or execute[s] the work, experience[s] and appreciate[s] it without the assistance or help of anyone else" (Becker, 2008, p. 7). The *content creator* and *user-generator* as the artist can access swathes of information about creating, disseminating, marketing and financing their art and can become their own agent, distributor, patron, and producer via the internet. They can be a part of a decentralised, DIY, "global" art world as both the artist and the audience through their engagement in online communities. In the case of niche-memes, the community is maintained by a network of creators, artists, curators, producers, patrons, platforms, participants, activists and audience members, and often one person can embody all of these identities and occupations. A creator can be an artist, activist, patron, participant and curator all at once. Therefore, this thesis takes Becker's theorisation and expands it to include the "unthinkable" breakdown of the division of labour in art worlds. How can we consider certain online communities as art worlds in their own right? What changes when the artist becomes responsible to bear the burden of an entire network of art workers? What are the wider repercussions of this breakdown? The entirety of this thesis, including this chapter, attempts to answer these questions by starting "small" and providing an ethnography of an online art world, then theorising about the implications of such communities on contemporary creative and digital labour relations.

5.2 "What if we kissed at the intersection of art and technology?": Memes as digitally informed products

Internet memes are entry points for creating and promoting digitally informed art. They do not only come in the form of online content, like text templates, digital images, audio clips, videos or GIFs, but they can also be found as consumable goods, as pieces of art, as literature and as affective experiences. What these online and offline modes of internet memes have in common is that they all reference internet meme culture and are mediated in some way through digital platforms. To explain how an internet meme can develop and morph throughout its lifespan, let us take the example of a genre of fanfiction or fan-lore template called "Imagine".

An "imagine" can be best described as a prompt that gets the fan to imagine themselves in a situation where they interact with a character from a show, book, or film

of interest, a celebrity or a member of a band they are fan of. A stereotypical "Imagine" may be something along the lines of "Imagine you and *enter celebrity name* are hanging out, they lean and whisper in your ear "let's run away together"". The prompt, which can sometimes be as long as a short story, or a part of a *fanfiction* series, is used as a way to help the reader imagine how they would react or what they would do within an ideal and controlled dream-world environment. The "Imagine" genre of fan lore is romantic and sincere, and is therefore easily *memeable*. Within internet memes, sincerity often becomes a point of departure for the construction of the central joke. One such meme is a phrasal template that builds on the "Imagine" genre and is called the "what if we kissed at..." When the phrase "what if we kissed at" is used sincerely, it is followed by suggestions such as "your room/the school's cafeteria/at the club/in your car" and offer an imaginary romantic scenario to the reader.
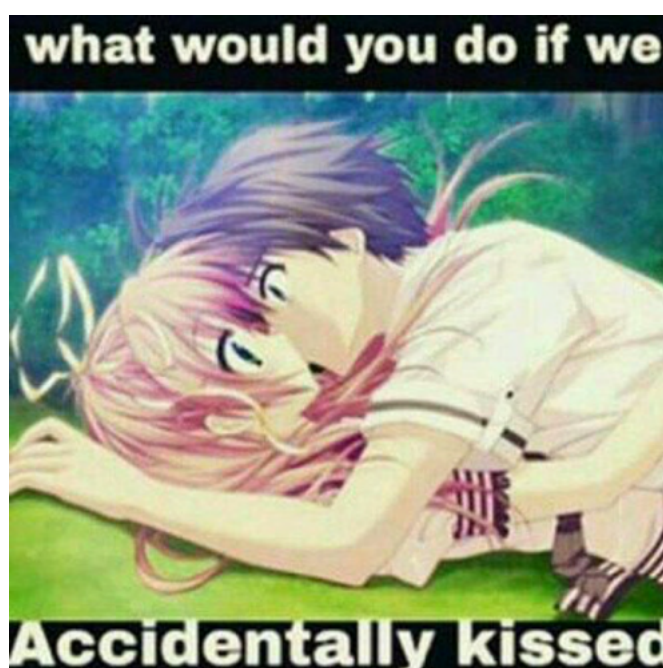

Figure 5.1: The archetypal "What if we kissed" meme template.

The memefied version of this phrase takes the suggestion of a "make believe" romantic scenario and filters it through an ironic sieve. The irony is usually expressed by introducing an uncanny or surreal location as in Figure (5.2), which makes use of the popular film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and changes the tone of the original romantic template into a surreal joke. The low image quality is a purposeful aesthetic choice in Figure 5.2 and is an ironic reference to low-resolution images. This style of internet meme is called "deep fried", a term used to indicate that the image quality is low or "fried", or "internet ugly" (Douglas, 2014). All in all, the naive tone of the childlike question is subverted and made into an abject proposition, that can act as a some form of subversive humour or as a form of site-specific critique.

An example of how this meme can be turned into a critical artifact which makes the transition from the world of internet memes, into the *Art World*, and the mundane universe of consumable goods is this iteration created by one of my interviewees, artist, designer, and entrepreneur, Jillian. Jillian's "what if" meme started its life as simply, an internet meme. However, its journey into niche-virality within several art-world-adjacent subcultures transformed its form, and made use of internet memes' inherent multimodal

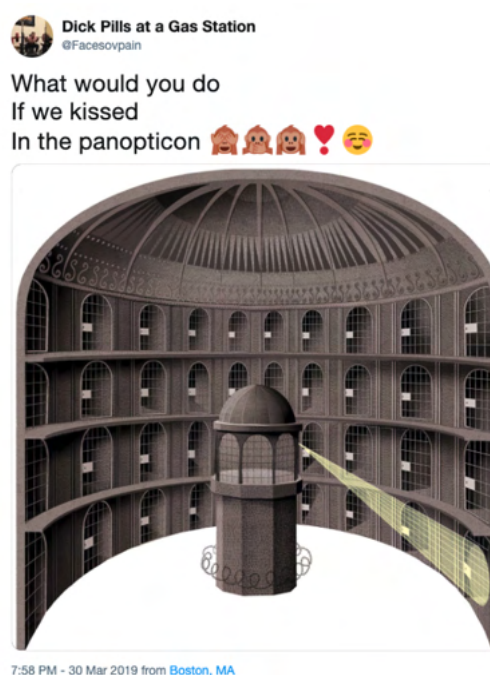Figure 5.2: Ironic reimagining of the "What if we kissed" template.

Figure 5.3: Ironic reimagining of the "What if we kissed" template from Twitter.

potentialities. In her meme, Jillian asks the audience to imagine what it would be like to "to kiss at the intersection of art and technology". The background image of the meme is a simulacrum of a virtual reality world. It depicts a kind of new media exhibition in which the audience walk around in virtual reality headsets, blindly feeling around a white cube while virtually reaching out to a flowing waterfall of pixels. At the forefront of the meme are two people holding each other, closing in on what could be a kiss, with their individual VR headsets touch.

After the meme made its rounds in art-adjacent subcultures online, it became an NFT, or non-fungible token in 2021. The NFT of Jillian's "imagine" meme was minted by FELT Zine which is "an experimental internet art platform and artist collective" whose "IRL and URL experiences examine digital activism, hip hop culture, race, gender, and class" (FELT Zine, 2022). The NFT was sold for 1.50 ETH, Ethereum's native cryptocurrency.

As part of FELT Zine's marketing of their minting of Jillian's meme, FELT Zine shared

Figure 5.4: Screenshot of Jillian's "imagine" meme as posted on her Instagram page, 2019.
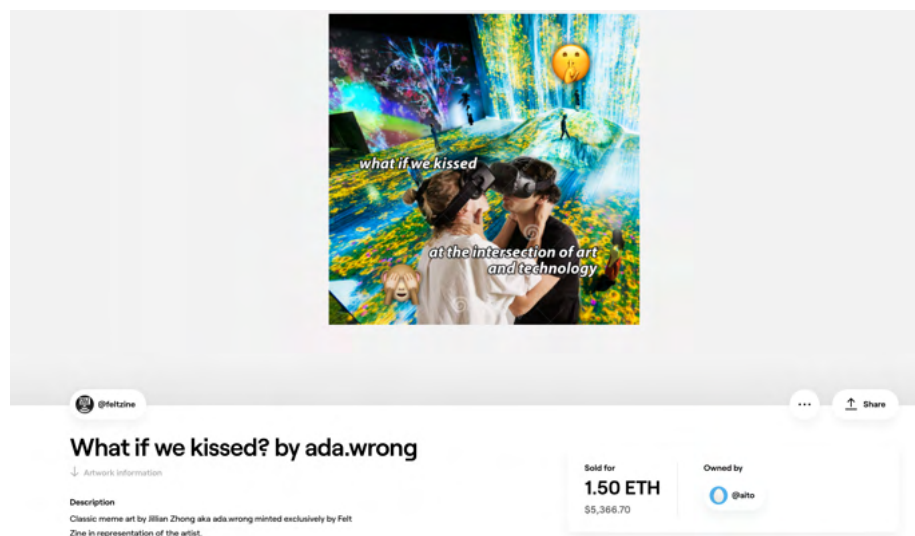

Figure 5.5: Screenshot of Jillian's "imagine" meme on sale as an NFT on foundation.app, a platform which auctions digital art and NFTs.

a post of the original meme on their Instagram page, explaining that anyone could bid on it and buy it. A while after the NFT was sold, Jillian also produced stickers with the meme on them, and made them available for purchase on the online platform she co-runs with Omnia and Cindie, *virtualgoodsdealer*. Today, this meme exists as an Instagram meme, an NFT, and a physical sticker, and all of its formats produced and shared by independent artists and collectives. Other meme creators have followed similar routes in monetising their memes outside of the content moderation policies and algorithmic recommendation system of Instagram. One such creator is Gabi, a creator who maintains the Instagram page *@sighswoon* and creates clothing and other merchandise with her original memetic captions printed on them.

Beyond individual creators, groups of meme creators have also come together to set up brands which entirely rely on niche memetic subcultures. An example is *i-need-god.com*, a webstore that is directly connected to the Instagram page *@ineedgodinev-erymomentofmylife* which the store owners help maintain. The Instagram page con-

sists entirely of ironic and seemingly earnest memetic media about Christianity. Their merchandise shows that memetic cultural sensibility is making inroads into popular consciousness through not only digital but explicitly material culture as well. The messages and visual cues of the memes mainly speak to those who have the memetic literacy to uncode them. The store's Frequently-Asked-Questions section states that the store is "100% serious". However, visiting the "I NEED GOD" webstore as a "chronically online" customer, the seriousness and earnestness reads as a post-ironic stance, something that is so ironic that it becomes meta-ironic, masking itself as an earnest statement. These ironic games, in this case, can be related to the incongruity between the DIY ethics of meme creators, the unruliness of memes themselves, and the capitalistic platform ideologies they have to navigate. This sense of ideological ambiguity within left-leaning meme subcultures does not only manifest itself in the work of meme creators, but also within the way that they approach meme creation artistically.

The next section will focus on these ethical and political discrepancies by analysing how meme creators in this community use the literary and aesthetic genre of the *the grotesque* to explore feelings of platform-captivity, precarity, and ambiguity. This section was included in the edited collection *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* edited by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw and published in 2021 by the *Institute of Network Cultures* based at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The spelling, figure numbers and citations in this section have been modified to fit the reference styles used throughout the thesis.

5.3   The "Grotesque" in Instagram Memes

The grotto is damp. It is cavernous and dark, existing between life outside and the molten core of the underground. The serpentine foliage on the walls represents an abject reality, animals, plants, bodies, symbols melding together *crypt*ically. The images are so comedic and inescapably wretched that it makes you want to weep with anguish, and at the same time produces frenzied laughter from deep within your belly that echoes incessantly in the crypt. The grotto is bizarre, and so is your laughter — it is an uncanny feeling that can only be described as *grotto-esque*.

If the Emperor Nero knew that *Domus Aurea*, the golden palace he built in Rome, was initially thought to be a mere grotto, a mysterious devotional cave, he would have probably set fire to Rome a second time. This once extravagant palace had been built over by Nero's successors and was only accidentally rediscovered in the 15th century when a young man fell through a crevice in one of the seven hills of Rome, upon the *Oppius* spur. It was a bizarre, cavernous world, stripped of its jewels and luxury, left only with a perplexing array of murals depicting flora, fauna, and viscera. The story is that following the rediscovery of the palace during the Renaissance, these images prompted the coining of the term *grotesque*, meaning 'grotto-like', to describe "frivolously" pagan and uncanny aesthetics. This, of course, does not imply that the grotesque did not exist prior to and outside of the Renaissance, the Domus Aurea, the Roman Empire or 'the West'. In fact, the grotesque appears throughout human culture, from *Topeng* dance in Indonesia, the *Haka* in Maori culture, to the mania of *Hacivat and Karagoz* in Turkish shadow play, as well as in modes of expression and experience in contemporary digital culture (Kan, 2020). While the term might have been inspired by this accidental discovery and the vestiges of a Roman past, the aesthetic form itself is monstrously human.

Figure 5.6: Photograph captioned "A tari topeng mask, on its dancer" Creative Commons Chris Woodrich Crisco 1492 2014. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

5.3.1   A digital carnival

Beyond the story of the golden palace and its curious murals, the grotesque and in particular the literary trope of *grotesque realism* is also closely associated with the carnival and *carnivalesque folk humour*. Mikhail Bakhtin's 1965 book *Rabelais and His World* details the subtext of grotesque realism not only through literature but within the "structure of life" that encompasses culture, art, everyday politics, economic relations and mundane sociality. These carnivals Bakhtin refers to are those that are firmly rooted in medieval Europe. They are part of a season of feverish festivities that precede the solemn suffering of Lent, and give ordinary people a final chance to revel in debauchery and parody before they are engulfed by the ordeal of penance. The rituals, performances, jokes and laughter of the carnival stand in active opposition to ecclesiastical piety and aristocratic etiquette, and they belong to a world that firmly rejects conventional civility. During the carnival, social hierarchies are toppled and replaced by a mode of expression that favours marginalised and traditionally silenced voices (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 15). In this upside-down domain, those with the least economic, political and social power enjoy attention and prominence. Holquist (2009) exclaims that carnival has revolutionary potential (Holquist, 2009, p. xviii). As it seems to offer a glimpse into a mutinous reality where norms are debased with the utmost fervour, and where civilians get to first wear and then desecrate the costume of the rich and powerful. As with the grotesque, it is important to underline that even though Bakhtin puts the carnival in a mainly medieval European context, where the season of the carnival is sanctioned by the Church, the spirit of the carnivalesque derives "from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing

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carnival" (Holquist, 2009, p. xviii). The carnival is, then, a set of festivities created and enjoyed by ordinary folk. It is a set of festivities that take place within the larger economic and political structures set forth by the ruling class. It is, in its core, a response to these structures, a reaction bursting with merriment, anger, fear, anticipation, hope, satire and irony. Within these parameters, civilians are allowed to parody their misery and to make money off it. The economic element of the carnival, coupled with performance, sociality and the all-consuming affective atmosphere, makes it so that the carnival becomes more than a mere spectacle and a complete experience, as it is not only "seen by the people" but "they live in it" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 7). If the carnival is more than a holiday, a period in the calendar dictated by the Church, then it is a mood, a reaction, and a liminal space between reality and its reproduction. The concept of the carnival can be taken out of its Bakhtinian context, abstracted and applied elsewhere.

On the internet, for instance, an incessant carnival rages on, unstoppable and full to the brim with vulgar marketplace language, grotesque performances, bodily debasement, political parody, and laughter for laughter's sake. The forms of folk culture that emerge from the carnival, "ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 5) are all represented to their full extremes online. Within the constraints of digital infrastructures controlled by powerful tech corporations and maintained by low-paid casualised workers[2], ordinary folk are allowed to feel a simulacrum of symbolic power. Through various carnivalesque performances, such as public pranks and outrageous "story-time" videos on YouTube, elaborate choreographies on TikTok, Twitter "dunks", and grotesque memes on Instagram, civilians can engage and entertain other ordinary folk. The carnivalesque is inextricably tied to the concept of ambivalent, all-encompassing festive laughter and the crude language of the marketplace, or billingsgate[3]. Festive laughter, Bakhtin muses, "is not an individual reaction to a single "comic" event", but is "universal in its scope" and "ambivalent" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 11). Online, internet memes evoke festive laughter because they build on not only one comic event or themselves in solitude, but on a myriad of texts, references and online "discourse". The more intertextually layered the meme becomes, the more it asks of its viewer. The viewer must be embedded and fluent in deep internet lore to find enjoyment in the meme, and to be able to set some ironic distance between herself and her position on the internet. The proximity between herself and digital culture is funny, spending time on the internet is funny, and being so fluent in the internet that she can understand even the most non-figurative meme is funny. The meme-maker is also hyperaware of the relationship between her audience and her meme, and creates a communion of laughter that involves those who understand and excludes those who cannot. As with festive laughter, meme-laughter is also ambivalent, laughing with and at itself: after all, she "who is laughing also belongs to it" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 12). Digital festive laughter multiplies ceaselessly instead of being limited to the temporal confines of the physical carnival. While digital markets, where virality, engagement and online visibility is both the currency and the object of transaction, generate a boundless and rhizomatic digital marketplace talk. Grotesque memes are borne of this digital billingsgate and never-ending festive laughter.

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[2]See: Julian Posada, "The Future of Work Is Here: Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Artificial Intelligence and Labour," Ethics in Context, no. 56 (Posada, 2020)

[3]Billingsgate is now a synonym for "foul language" but took its name from the famous London fish market known for its foul-mouthed vendors (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, 2021)

5.3.2 Grotesque Memes

In The Female Grotesque, Mary Russo makes a distinction between two forms of the grotesque, the comic grotesque which she associates with the work of Bakhtin and the grotesque as uncanny which she mainly links to Freud's discussion of feelings of unease and fear in his essay "The Uncanny", and Wolfgang Kayser's book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Russo, 1995, p. 7-8). She posits that while Bakhtin is interested in the social body in his discussion of the comic grotesque, the grotesque as uncanny "is related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as a cultural projection of the inner state" (Russo, 1995, p. 9).

Figure 5.7: Meme captioned "you were merely sent to horny jail, I was born in it - molded by it" (todaywasmybirthday, 2020b). Reproduced by permission of @todaywas-mybirthday.

Within my digital ethnography of a community of meme artists on Instagram, I encountered expressions of both comic and uncanny grotesque. This grotesque as a meme response could be connected to many meme makers' experience of precarity. For instance, almost all of the meme makers I interviewed during my fieldwork could be described as precarious workers in some sense. At the time of our interviews, many were working multiple jobs, often as freelancers, creative consultants, service, hospitality and manual workers, in order to survive. The job precarity they experienced was two-fold, firstly due to an inconsistent revenue stream from their creative work and secondly because of the possibility of physical risk, as a result of physically laborious work. During an interview, one participant, a meme artist with a large following, relayed to me that he had sustained a workplace injury during his work as a package loader for a major delivery and logistics company. In addition to his injury, which came as a result of having to lift up to thirty to sixty kilograms at a time, he was also being harassed and intimidated by management. He later filed a grievance with his union and kept his work doing "light duty", as he had no other alternative, especially during a pandemic. His experiences as a working artist, meme creator and a blue-collar worker is not an exception, as many

I talked to in this community were employed in multiple sectors with a varying but ever-present degree of precarity.

Beyond this sense of platform-captivity made worse by precarity, a theme of in-betweenness is found in these meme makers' relationship to platform capital. The meme makers who I interviewed, as creators of subversive and grotesque memes, occupy an in-between state of platform productivity and platform resistance. They are productive users on Instagram, as they perpetuate the creation of capital for the platform. They actively create and post memes, and use platform functions that amplify, circulate and monetize content. At the same time, they push back against the platform by "deliberately seeing what [they] can get away with" as one of my participants puts it. This resistance, the pushing of platform norms towards an insular "carnivalesque collectivity" (Zeeuw, 2019, p. 126) through grotesque language [4] and aesthetics comes at the risk of complete page bans and "algorithmic punishment" like the much-speculated shadowban. The policing of this performance of the grotesque is ultimately at odds with the Bakhtinian conception of the carnival, which is theorised as a period of time where the subversion of the political and economic status-quo is tolerated by those in power. While there is a discernible element of the grotesque within this meme community, their carnivalesque collectivity and grotesque media is subject to institutional, or platform, punishment. This, alongside the exploitation of play as "serious business", complicates the conceptualization of these spaces as digital carnivals. However, the connection between digital marketplace-talk and the appearance of the grotesque as a meme response is still pertinent as to how festive and grotesque laughter as well as vulgar language can be understood within memes.

Marketplaces, especially those which are casual, non-compliant and informal such as this one, as well as others in the wider meme economy, are by their nature vulgar spaces. To that end, they produce their own vulgar and crude mode of communication which also feeds into and from the festive laughter of the continuous carnival, constantly bubbling away on the internet. This community's memes exhibit a self-confessed and intentional garishness which stands in opposition to the aspirational aesthetics of main-stream social media influencers, but they coexist on the same platform and utilise a similar entrepreneurial logic. They laugh at this aspirational spirit, but also laugh at themselves for contributing to it too, in true carnivalesque fashion (as seen in Figure 5.8). In its core, meme-laughter engendered by the grotesque body and the vulgar text is "not simply parod[y]; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 80)

The comedy, tragedy and seriousness of the grotesque which Kristeva presents can be seen in Figure 5.8 created by artist @lilperc666. There are many meme creators who are minoritised, and many have developed a sense of left-leaning, radical politics as a result, which they try to practice in both their digital and offline lives. However, their radical politics clash unambiguously with Instagram's aspirational and idealised aesthetics. While being hyper-aware of the incompatibility of their politics and their 'digital workplace', they are still too precarious to completely withdraw their content, and therefore labour, from said platform. This sense of platform-captivity is implied in Figure 5.8, alongside Trump's famously grotesque visage (Zeeuw, 2020).

Figure 5.7, on the other hand, is a meme created by artist @todaywasmybirthday on Instagram. It shows a crying baby doll with a clown-like upturned smile, prominent

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[4] A meme @djinnkazama posted on Instagram reads "kill the cop in your head, the capitalist in your heart and the homophobe in your butthole" (2021). @djinnkazama's memes and posts are sporadically taken down and "hidden" by Instagram for violating "community guidelines".
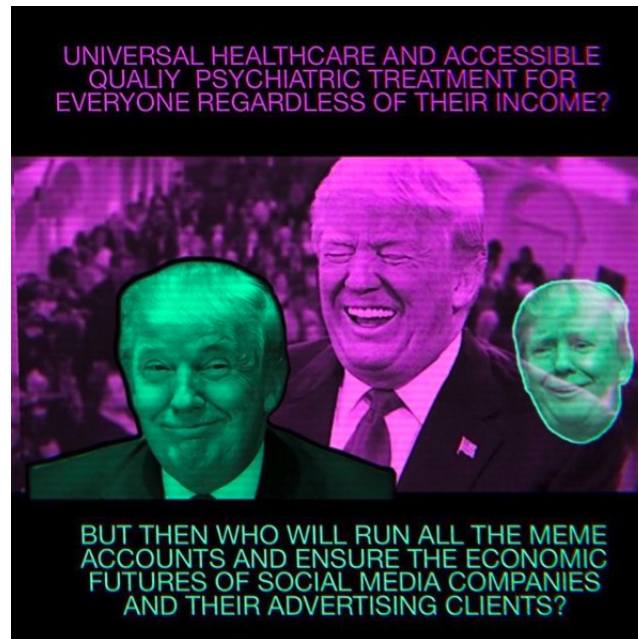
Figure 5.8: Meme captioned "this meme brought to you by THIS FUCKIN GUY AAA??! GET A LOaD of HIM" (lilperc666, 2020).Reproduced by permission of of @lilperc666.

bottom teeth and lips painted bright red. The tears streaming down the doll's beady blue eyes have a gelatinous, plastic quality. The bib and its clothes are an innocuous pastel shade, overshadowed by the bizarre detail of a sloth-like creature with watery eyes gnawing on the doll's earlobe. The doll has an unmistakable quality of uncanniness, and of abjection. It is recognisable as an object but foreign within this composition. In its most basic form, a doll is a toy for a child and the associations we have with baby dolls are therefore of childhood and innocence. This is why a broken doll, a doll with missing limbs, or an abandoned doll strike a sense of despair in us. We imagine dolls coming alive with malicious intent and revel in the horror at the idea when watching *Annabelle*, Chucky in *Child's Play*, and the evil clown in *The Poltergeist*. The doll is also a "double", an inanimate and foreign reflection of the self, and ultimately a representation of uncanny grotesque (Freud, 1919).

The doll, with its abject smile and its symbolism of innocence as well as horror, is juxtaposed against a text-based joke about an artifact of internet vernacular (Phillips and Milner, 2017; Seta, 2019). The "go to horny jail" meme[5] originally shows *Doge*[6] hitting a slightly deformed double of itself with a baseball bat while telling it to "go to horny jail", and is used online as a response to someone posting or replying to sexual content. The set up in Figure 5.7 builds on this meme culture reference but imposes more than its basic premise on the viewer. *Doge* is absent and so is the physical violence of the baseball bat. Instead, the doll-jester stares at the viewer bleary eyed, with a sloth dangling from its ear like an earring, whispering "you cannot send me to horny jail, I already live in a prison of my desires". This prison of desires metaphor should be a familiar one to anyone who has engaged with popular interpretations of Buddhist philosophy[7], the Dutch symphonic metal band After Forever's debut album *Prison of*

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[5]See: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/go-to-horny-jail.

[6]A much meme-d Shiba Inu breed dog.

[7]See: Ananda Baltrunas. "A Prison of Desire," Tricycle, Spring 2004,

Desire (2001), or Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Plato provides a "vivid description of what it means for reason to be enslaved by the lower parts of the soul" (Kahn, 1987, p. 99).
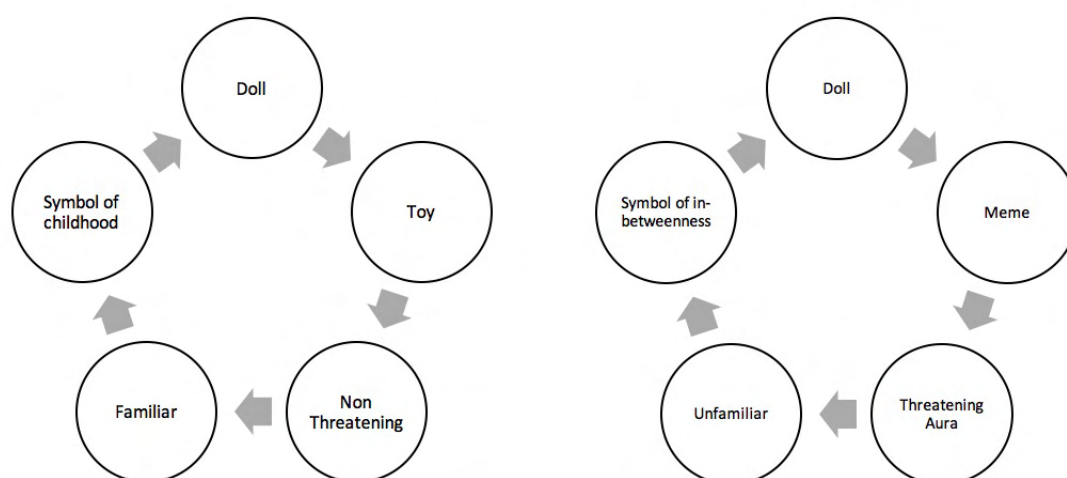

Figure 5.9: The cycles of meaning of the doll as a toy and the doll as a meme, created by the researcher.

Within grotesque memes, the use of strange language, a combination of metaphors, rhymes, references, fuses with the strange image—absurd, scary, foreign, abject—to defamiliarise mundane and inescapable parts of human existence, but also viral meme formats. Defamiliarization works by disrupting the ordinary and interrupts our habitual perception of familiar forms. For instance, the doll in Figure 5.7 is visually manipulated into a something outside of a child's toy into a memetic jester. It is then paired with a seemingly familiar meme format where the viewer recognises the 'horny jail' reference. The meme delivers on the main sentiment of the original format, of the inability to control sexual desires. However, the expression of the sentiment in Figure 2 is external to the physical comedy of Doge. 'The prison of one's desires' refers to the psychic torment of having sexual desires in the first place, not of being unable to control them. In its totality, the doll as part of the grotesque meme symbolizes in-betweenness: between childhood and adulthood, innocence and guilt, and action and inertia (as seen in Figure 5.9).

The logic of the grotesque meme works not by adding a clearly different meaning to the original reference. Memes cannot be "permanent referent[s] for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through [them"', therefore the purpose of the grotesque meme "is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object - it creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it" (Shklovsky, 1998, p. 9). The disruption of the viewer's expectations in grotesque memes defamiliarises the viral meme format, introducing a different vision of the meme. Through abjection, a rejection of social reason, the grotesque meme interrupts understandable, palatable, viral meme logic and creates an affective communion between its viewer, its creator and the incessant digital carnival.

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https://tricycle.org/magazine/ prison-desire/.

5.3.3 Digital Life and Grotesque Realism

Digital life is life lived in-between, and therefore also partly in a grotesque manner. Our various taps, scrolls, swishes and sounds make it bodily (Markham, 2020), but it is by no means an unconditionally embodied experience. It can be physically lonely and virtually communal. This in-betweenness is defined by its immediate proximity to and distance from the physical. Beyond its gargantuan, pollutant infrastructure (N. Jones, 2018), everyday interaction within digital life is maintained mainly by the digits of the dominant hand, the eyes, the mind. Digital life is undoubtedly real, but it exists in a liminal space between virtuality and physicality. The trope of the *user-generator*, the *prosumer*, the *content creator* also builds on this inherent in-betweenness. Just like the carnival participant, users become "both actor and spectator [...] [passing] through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and [splitting] into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 78). In line with customary festive laughter, the meme maker makes fun of herself, her viewer and the meme itself. The grotesque meme is thus the object, the subject and the spectacle in one.

Figure 5.10: Meme captioned "Dam you felt proud to start w?? Sounds like a personal problem" (todaywasmybirthday, 2020a). Reproduced by permission of @todaywasmybirthday

Grotesque memes are concerned with the cyclical biological processes, such as sex, birth, death, eating, drinking, defecating, like grotesque ritual in the context of carnival and grotesque realism and body in literature. Even if the textual or the visual composition does not refer to such processes outright, their affect is of an existential kind that confronts the in-betweenness inherent to both the carnival and digital life. The jester in Figure 5.10 has a far-away look in its eyes and a droopy mouth. It is dissociated from reality either because of an overstimulated mind, a stark realisation of the human condition, or simply because it is just not "alive" anymore. The jester cannot feel shame as it occupies a role of unashamed performance and debauchery by its nature, but also because it is duly aware that the truth of the human body allows no space for "dignity". Figure 5.11 speaks of "herniating" the brain and "squeezing out" thoughts through an

image of a dog dressed up in a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* costume, wearing a Leonardo mask frozen in a grimace. The grotesque body and the oft-parodied act of defecation is now used to express something beyond the pure biological act (Zeeuw, 2019, p. 93). The meme works with the principle element of grotesque realism, degradation, which is "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 19-20)

By likening thoughts to excrement, the abstract and idealised undertaking of introspection is brought down to a visceral level. The fact that the meme creator does this by using the medium of the meme, a maligned mode of communication sometimes seen as trivial, mundane, base or unimportant by 'serious thinkers', adds a further layer of grotesqueness. It also reminds us that carnivalesque laughter is serious as much as it is comedic and tragic (Kristeva, 1980, p. 80).

The mask donned by the image of the dog in Figure 5.11 is yet another reflection of the grotesque folk culture which emerges from the digital carnival. Bakhtin has a reverence for the mask, as to him it symbolizes the "most complex theme in folk culture" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 39). He notes that "the mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames [...] it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image [...] it reveals the essence of the grotesque" (Bakhtin, 2009, p. 40). The Leonardo mask is a replica of the face of a giant anthropomorphic turtle, and is worn by another non-human actor, the obscured dog in the meme. Beady, bloodshot eyes are added to the mask in the final collage and the image of the costumed and masked animal is placed against a glitchy, static background. The resulting visual composite is of a grotesque body, and emblematic of grotesque realism in memes.

Figure 5.11: Meme captioned "I have brain ibs: either the thoughts won't come out at all or they wanna come out TOO OFTEN but both ways it feels bad" (todaywasmybirthday, 2021). Reproduced by permission of @todaywasmybirthday.

5.3.4 Conclusion

In contrast to the medieval carnival, digital life is continuous and its existence is uninterrupted by religious calendars and seasons. On the internet, performance and spectacle multiply endlessly, as they are available for consumption, spectatorship and participation around-the-clock. Digital marketplaces are open 24/7, where marketplace vulgarity and its associated mode of language swells and billows, tirelessly feeding into and from digital carnivals. In these corners of the internet, digital carnivals rattle and grow, in forums, online communities, chatrooms, as well as in social media, e-commerce, digital patronage and video-sharing platforms, creating their own grotesque artefacts and affects. The resulting forms, modes, moods and objects of these carnivals, past and present, are linked together by an experience of in-betweenness. Digital life exists between embodiment and virtuality, and the medieval carnival between penance and festivity, and they therefore share an affective nucleus of liminality. True to their in-betweenness, both create ambivalent laughter which encompasses the object, subject and spectacle. Grotesque memes are a part of digital folklore and emerge out of carnivalesque alcoves online where the grotesque meme is an element of a wider communion of ambivalent laughter [8]. In this communion, the meme as the object is not the only "joke": instead it implicates subjects such as the creator, the solitary viewer, and the larger audience, as well as the subjects' proximity to and position within digital culture. The way it achieves this is through the strange image of the grotesque body and the strange language of the digital marketplace. The *uncanny grotesque*(Freud, 1919) is expressed via the horror and discomfort of the grotesque body, whereas the digital billingsgate textually conveys the comic grotesque (Bakhtin, 2009; Russo, 1995). Ultimately, grotesque memes familiarise viral meme formats and offer us an opportunity to think about memes beyond virality, image-macros, trends and as digital oddities.

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[8]See: Gabriele de Seta, "Digital Folklore," in Second *International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew M. Allen (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2019).

Chapter 6

Creative Community

6.1   Introduction

Internet meme communities emerge around shareable visual media. People with similar interests can create a sense of community identity through active repetition and co-creation of imagistic symbols, jokes, narratives, and norms. The two key aspects of community identity is how distinctive, or niche, a community's interests are relative to other communities, and how dynamic, or volatile, these interests are over time. Furthermore, "communities with distinctive and highly dynamic identities are more likely to retain their users. However, such niche communities also exhibit much larger acculturation gaps between existing users and newcomers, which potentially hinder the integration of the latter" (Zhang et al., 2017).

Beyond internet memes, photographs, selfies, and moodboard collages also have a strong impact on establishing a shared identity in meme communities through a variety of digital platforms. Often, there is a central platform where the bulk of the meaning making work and image sharing happens. In my case study, that central platform was Instagram. In addition to the central platform, there are peripheral digital platforms which meme creators and communities use to share and discuss media, however these are of secondary importance to the main platform. The themes of digital storytelling and the narrative imagination is particularly important to understand memetic subcultures. Internet memes can be a way to make sense of increasingly complicated material realities. However, within smaller and more tightly defined boundaries they can also provide subcultural cues to community narration and imagination. Some of this, is due to homophily, the assumption that like minded people listen to each other, find and stick to their niches online. However, the power of community belonging and co-creation of a community narrative is also a significant factor in how networks of internet meme creators and audiences come together. This chapter discusses how the participants of the study understand their online community as cultural workers. The chapter underlines how these understandings coincide with creative processes of meme making, and explores the ideological motivations behind community creation and artistic work online. The sense of creativity, community, and politics are inseparably linked due to internet memes' DIY and subcultural logic.

Niche-memes are often times used to discuss political issues such as gender equality, class inequalities, colonialism, immigration, mutual aid and community support. They can be used to signal boost fundraisers, protests and community initiatives. They generate discussion and community belonging online, but can also be used as organisational,

educational and political tools. The cultural workers that I interviewed for this project have organised meme making workshops, seminars and talks about the potentials and dangers of radical politics of meme subcultures, and have utilised them to organise and publicise small mutual aid projects.

A meme creator can use niche memes' intertextuality to communicate theoretical ideas about platforms, mutual aid, anarchism, neoliberalism and anti-capitalism in more accessible and quicker ways through the juxtaposition of text and image. Memetic narrative expressions saves space and time, as they can communicate the essence of a political argument without too many words, which is efficient yet risky due to issues around misinformation and fact-checking. Furthermore, aesthetically grotesque imagery can be used to augment the affective facets of the political issue at hand, or present a sense of dystopian hyperreality. Niche internet memes can also be made in series and can have a signature style and/or have a watermark that connects the meme to the meme creator. This establishes a sense of intent and accountability on the creators' part, and can help them attract a following as a public intellectual.

The rhetorical denseness of niche internet memes can therefore offer a humorous gateway to political and theoretical debates for people. Niche meme creators and researchers often organise seminars, exhibitions, zines, reading lists, syllabi and articles. These events and materials are circulated on Instagram meme pages and attended by meme audiences, who might not have had the chance to attend such events prior to their introduction to the niche-meme community. These materials, events and recordings of events are made available online so access to them are easier. Many are free, and the rest are priced at a sliding-scale or are "pay what you can" events and materials. This opens up the opportunity for audiences to engage in global political debates.

Niche meme creators can speak to and critique other internet memes as well as other creators and themselves, this sort of meta-reflection is maintained through constant dissemination and re-iteration of internet memes. This means that to engage in such debates, people have to be present on the central digital platforms. Meme communities depend on the continuous online presence and engagement of creators and audiences, which can add on to the sense of digital burnout discussed in the "Work" chapter of the thesis. However, the niche meme community, despite its nihilistic tendencies and grotesque aesthetics, has certain political ideologies and moral principles that it favours and organises itself around.

The role of collective and creative interventions organised by the cultural workers in this community should be highlighted. These collectives are creative experiments in platform-critique, and can help us understand how platform-dependent cultural workers intervene in and speak about their working conditions. Some examples include *the Bottom Text Collective*, *virtualgoodsdealer*, and *COVEN BERLIN*. This chapter will detail some of these interventions and place them within discussions around internet meme communities, including politics, language, and institutions.

6.2   Creative community interventions

6.2.1   Bottom Text Collective

> Someone told me that they think of memes as graffiti on the internet. Original meme culture was kind of like graffiti culture, because people didn't do it hoping it to be credited. In fact, graffiti artists hope that they don't
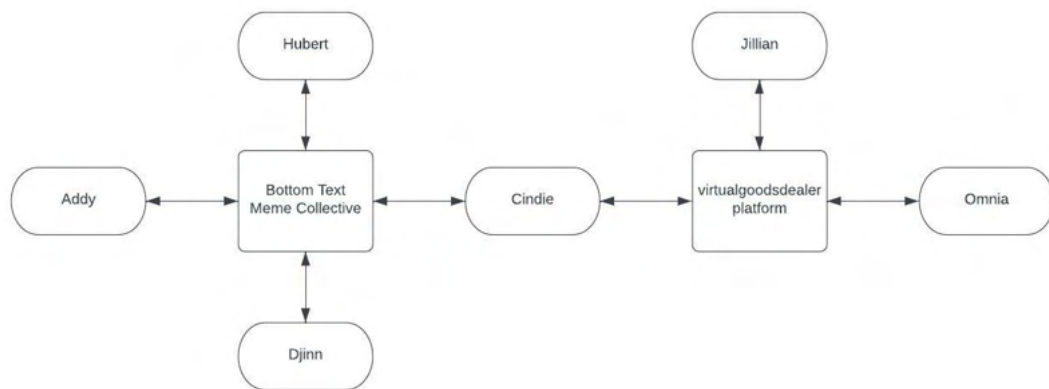
Figure 6.1: Social network diagram of Bottom Text Collective and virtualgoodsdealer co-founders and meme creators

> get caught while they're doing it. Instead of thinking about what you're going to get out of producing the art, you think about the people needing to hear the message. Every social circle creates opportunities for people to be performative for personal gain, the meme community is still driven by people who have genuine beliefs and want to make a strong and aggressive statement.
>
> - Hubert, artist and meme creator

Bottom Text, the show, started streaming in 2019 on Adult Swim, Cartoon Network's night-time programming block. The show was an hour-long livestreamed experiment in meme critique, the hosts and guests would discuss the most recent meme trends and topics, and also engage in meme-making challenges. By the time that Adult Swim had cancelled all of its livestreams in 2020, the Bottom Text show had been hosted by various different meme artists. When I approached them for interviews in early 2020, the show was being hosted by Cindie, Hubert, and Djinn. Addie, their fourth host, had recently passed away and there had been multiple tributes to Addie's influence on internet meme culture, who was also known and referred to by her username *@GayVapeShark*. I managed to interview Cindie and Hubert, and sadly about a year after our interview, Hubert also passed away. I heard of their passing on Instagram, which was also where I had initially contacted them. Sitting in my room in Edinburgh, I felt a sense of melancholy, having missed my chance to show them this chapter that I had written about Bottom Text, their art, and their musings about internet culture, and memes. As a result of the pandemic and travel restrictions, Hubert's funeral service was livestreamed so that their family, friends and fans could attend in virtuality. I watched the service on my iPhone, and reflected on the unexpected and sombre re-emergence of the *livestream* in this chapter. In the interview and in our interactions online, Hubert was exceptionally kind. I hope that I can do their legacy justice, and represent them in an authentic way. In the rest of the section, I will be referring to Bottom Text as a "collective" within the bounds of their Adult Swim show and will be discussing their work through screenshots, snippets from their conversations on the livestream, and my interviews with Cindie and Hubert. I will firstly introduce Cindie and Hubert as meme creators and then move

onto Bottom Text, as a collective intervention into platform-based meme making and memetic critique.

Cindie and Hubert

> "Cindie, 23, I'm Chinese. We're both working on Bottom Text on Adult Swim. I do social media management and consultancy on a contract basis on the side. I have a tech background. I went to school for computer science but I hate that shit so I'm never doing it again."

Figure 6.2: Meme made by Cindie and reproduced by FELT zine, representative of the "niche meme" style.

Cindie[1], a 24 year old niche-meme creator who has over 60k Instagram followers, puts it bluntly during an interview with FELT zine: "I was born on the internet" (feltzineweb, 2019). Explaining how they don't remember ever being properly introduced to the internet, they highlight having grown up in a household where digital technologies were readily available. Discussing how they first got into making memes in the "niche meme" style that we associate with them today, they state:

> I got really into memes around 2015-2016, when artists like @bunnymemes and @gothshakira were blowing up on Instagram with relatable long-form memes combined with "girly" imagery and pop culture references. I was an avid consumer, and looking back I think I felt so strongly because consuming "niche memes" on Instagram was the first time I was able to process the

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[1]As of 2022, Cindie has been focusing on their music career and has been regularly performing in live shows.

sexual violence I had experienced in my life. I connected with those memes because they were supportive without being patronizing, and they made me realize that my experiences were far more universal than I'd thought.

2015-2016 is an important time period for internet memes on Instagram, as this is when an aesthetic style that can be characterised by artistic intention and critical captions developed within meme culture. The reasons as to why this happened is not something that I can confidently pinpoint, however what is clear is that this "niche meme" movement fed into an artistic appreciation of internet memes. This in turn created space for increased intermingling between internet meme creators, fans and "Art". Cindie describes these memes as "long-form", and references @gothshakira, an illustrative instance is the caption of one of @gothshakira's[2] internet memes which reads:

> when u realize that although some may consider ur content to be 'good' u have at least in some way received major media attention for it over others who are just as (if not more) deserving of the same recognition because u r white-passing and/or run in mostly white middle-class to upper-middleclass social circles rendering some descriptions of ur personal experiences relatable and appealing to the same people who run those major media outlets in a masturbatory cycle of eurocentrism.

The reason why we may call a meme that incorporates such a caption "niche" and "long-form", lies in the specificity of the experience described, the academic critique of the experience itself, and the author's vulnerable and self-reflective confession that is inherent within the academic critique. Race, ethnicity, gender, class, consumerism, and art are topics that often surface in niche memes captions, like they might in a university humanities course. These are also important themes that signals that the niche meme creator and the people who like their memes have a sense of left-leaning political consciousness. The demonstration of this consciousness brings like-minded people together and creates a "living discourse" (Peeters et al., 2021). Within this particular meme community, the people that I interviewed were interested in critiquing capitalism through internet memes and sought to organise and support various modes of grassroots resource distribution both locally, globally, and even *virtually*. This meant that the living discourse of the community generally converged around a shared objection towards capitalistic modes of production and the resulting socioeconomic inequalities.

In our interview, Cindie referred to this discourse and attitude as the "social norms of the community", and continued, "when I say meme community, there isn't a tangible community. We have to act like we all believe in communism, even if we don't. It's like the social norms, we're supposed to help each other and share stuff. It's anti-liberal".

On the same topic, Hubert noted that there is such a thing as a meme community, and put it emphatically:

> being nice to each other brings us together. When we send all these progressive messages to each other, we also know that not everyone might know everything and we're ready to educate each other. What builds a community is when we trust that people are listening to each other. Whenever people are mean, that's a red flag.

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[2]It is important to highlight that @gothshakira has largely stopped her meme-making activities and has minimised her social media presence since I began my work on this project in 2018.

A moral code of sharing opportunities and resisting competition, comes before political coherence and political homogeneity within this community. The creators and fans gravitate towards each other not because they share a set of dogmatic political views[3], but because the people are "nice and friendly" and "opportunities aren't horded". These beliefs fit well within a left-leaning view of a social contract, and therefore the community can be described as such. Such principles are adhered to on a basis of good-faith and because people want to come together to create art. The politics follow art within this group, and not the other way around. Niche memes are used to extend political critique, but their primary function is not to politicise or radicalise. The focus of niche memes falls primarily on their artistic content, critique, and *narrative vulnerability*.

Narrative vulnerability can be concisely described as "telling an affective story through emotional openness", as in the case of @gothshakira's caption, and exemplified in many of the other niche memes included in this thesis. This kind of narrative vulnerability in internet memes follows previous traditions of queer, feminist, and women's art. For instance, one such artist who engages with such vulnerability is Jo Spence. Spence created a vast body of work photographing her journey as a cancer patient, a working-class woman and an artist in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK. She regularly wrote about her anxieties surrounding her position as a working-class woman in traditional art spaces, dealing with impostor syndrome and the nervousness she felt about "self-identifying" as an artist. While @gothshakira and Cindie's memes take on these ideas in a decidedly 21st century way by also taking on issues of race and ethnicity, the core concepts of reflexivity, vulnerability, and storytelling are threads that run through both Spence's photographs and niche memes. Another useful concept that can be applied to niche memes is the idea of "phototherapy", which Jo Spence characterises as a process of visual, exploratory auto-narration. Spence and Rose Martin write that "the process of phototherapy is essentially collaborative, something which is not done to you or for you". Martin and Spence also particularly highlight the theme of self exploration through "serious play" that runs through practices of phototherapy, which is mirrored in the way that humour is juxtaposed with theoretical and discursive considerations in niche memes.

Through their internet memes, Cindie often discusses the intricate and layered politics of being Chinese in the West, and of coming from an immigrant family. Their Chinese heritage is an important part of how they define themselves, through their words, their art and aesthetic choices. Similar to how Jo Spence juxtaposes her working class identity, in Figure 6.4 as well as Figure 6.5 Cindie tackles issues of politicisation, class ideologies and immigrant narratives. In Figure 6.4, they refer to their parents' idealisation of the American dream and their subsequent "romanticization of the free market and the myth of self-determination", as something which is connected to their experiences under communist politics and communitarian ethics. Whereas Figure 6.5 depicts a sort of ideological inheritance between Cindie and their parents, a connection between two generations. Together these two memes tell a story of political disillusionment through images that are used by mainstream Western media to underscore supposed ideological differences between Western and Chinese politics, and ways of life. The story told between these memes is deeply personal with the creator bearing themselves to their audience in a highly vulnerable way. Despite the personal nature of the story, the experience of generational continuity and breakages is one that many people can relate to and therefore connect with. These kinds of confessional memes are common within niche meme cultures, as they bring the creator and audience closer while acting as a form

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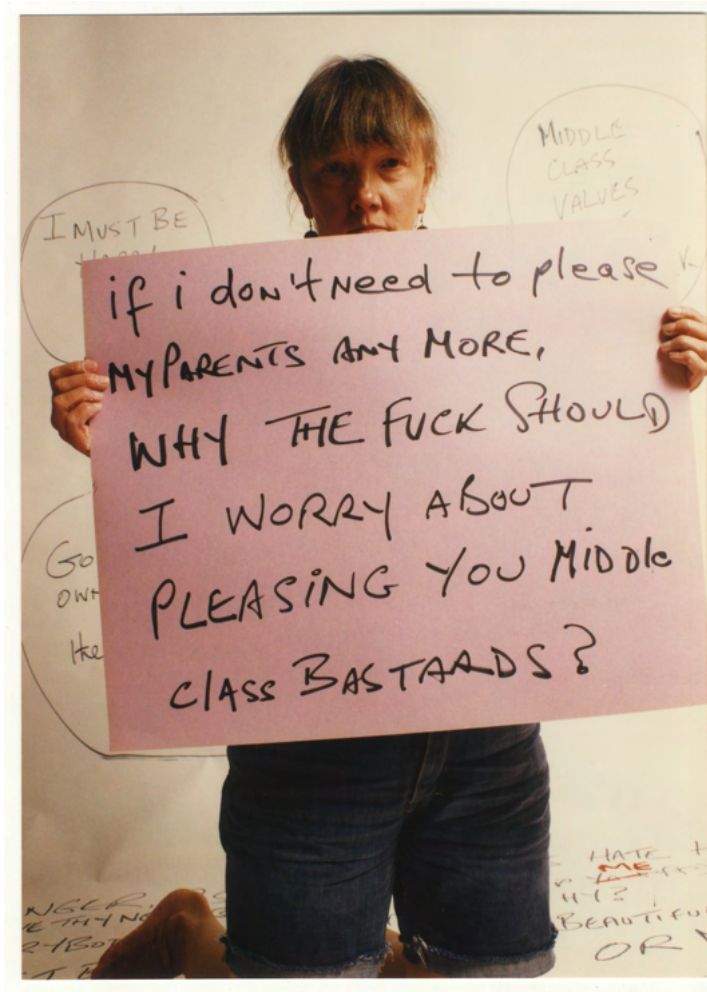[3]This is in contrast to political memetic subcultures (Citarella, 2021).

Figure 6.3: "Middle Class Values Make Me Sick (collaboration with David Roberts)" by Jo Spence, 1986-1988 (Kane, 2014)

of *phototherapy*. Consequently, the narrative vulnerability is a key affective condition within niche meme communities.

Cindie's memes, like many other niche meme creators' memes, employ *ironic distance* act as a critical narrative device, and engage in a form of digital storytelling. Niche meme creators compose these stories are by wrangling images, text, audio, from online and offline sources. The resulting amalgamation is then made part of their overall online presence, and become part of their personal memetic storyline. The internet memes make sense within the personality of the creator, the *vibe* of their online presence, their Instagram stories and livestreams, and the references they regularly use. Thus, niche memes make sense in context and in affect. This requires the "meme researcher", to not only regard memes as digital objects but also as a networked mode of *being online*. Memes must then be understood not as solitary objects but as facilitators of a digital existence. Cindie for instance, describes both their iPhone and their Instagram pages as "extensions of themselves" and state that if they do stop posting on some of those pages, they would be shedding those parts of themselves. In 2022, Cindie's meme pages are largely dormant, and as they hinted in our interview in 2020, certain parts of themselves which they narrated through those pages are now not as important as they were to them when they started in 2015-2016. Cindie is now focusing on composing and performing
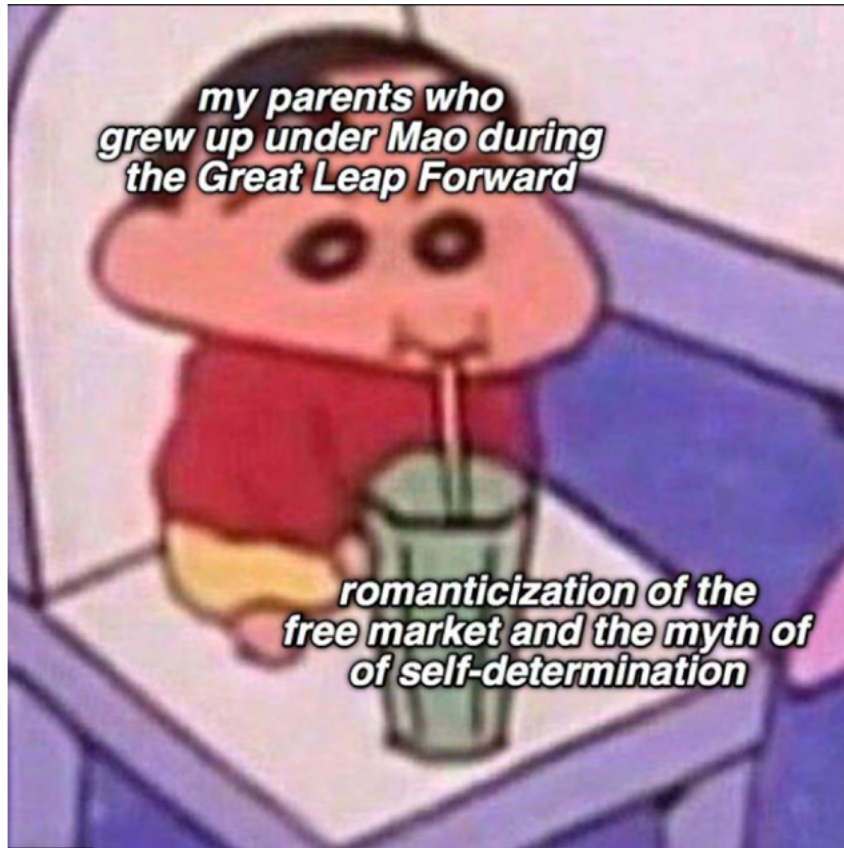
126

Figure 6.4: Meme made by Cindie

original music, however the posters and artwork they use to promote their music show the aesthetic style, irony and humour that they used in their memes. Their natural progression from internet memes into a different art form is not an exception, as many niche meme creators oscillate between creating memes and other kinds of art through their careers.

Niche memes are "collaborative" in essence, even if the meme is *technically* made by one person. The references that the meme creator will insert into the meme will have been built on multiple iterations of discussion through other memes, interactions and discussions, and will eventually be posted online for an audience. The audience may then take the meme on to share and discuss with others, and project their own interpretations and references onto it. Beyond the audience, niche meme creators may also interact with each others' memes and aesthetic styles in collaborative ways. For instance, Hubert, the other member of the Bottom Text collective whom I talked to mentioned doing covers of other meme creators' memes. This followed a question I had asked about whether or not they felt they were part of a "meme community". When I asked Cindie this question, they did not feel like they were part of a *true* community, stating:

> I don't really feel like I'm part of a community online, but I feel like there's a lot of things that like communities *do* do online... I think I'm part of a creative community online. But I feel like in a real community, you would get real benefits, like comfort... If that makes sense.

Whereas Hubert felt that they got a lot of comfort from this meme community, and

Figure 6.5: Meme made by Cindie

remarked:

> I know a lot of rich people from school, but not through memes even though I met a lot of people through memes. They helped me out a lot, they engaged with me and we would message each other back and forth, it felt really mutual. For instance, we made meme covers. We were just a bunch of random memers in a group chat, and we would all randomly pair up with each other to do covers of each other's memes. Yeah, it was nice but also a lot of work for everyone who was in the group chat to keep up with. But I feel like we kept it up, because we had a sense of community.

Group chats are a foundational tool within creative online communities like this one, and not only facilitate interpersonal and group communication, but also aid a sense of *creative communion*. The so-called "democratic nature" of memes make activities like "meme covers" smoother and quicker than other creative endeavours, such as crafts, fine arts, sculpture, or music. As such, the theme of "serious play" that comprises part of the niche meme logic, as well as "phototherapy", is visible through creative undertakings like meme covers. This theme appears in Hubert's memes as well, as their main area of interest is the video game *Sonic the Hedgehog*. For instance, the beginning of our interview, Hubert (24) introduces themselves and underlines the importance of creativity in his life:

> "My name is Hubert, I'm a first generation Nigerian American, from the state of Georgia. I am a multi media creator working on Bottom Text. I

guess my whole life I kept feeling out of place feeling like creativity was my only outlet, tackling creative stuff has helped me…"

Figure 6.6: Meme made by Hubert

Hubert runs seven Instagram pages in total and explains that they were drawn to the internet because they could find like minded individuals more easily than "in real life":

> I have ADHD and I'm really artsy, so I have seven pages on Instagram. I have one where I just post the art that I draw. I have one that I post art that's NSFW. Then one where I post memes that are not Sonic related… But it all stems for my need of stimulus. I really love anime. I love the idea of like, constructing your own universe and being able to break it… I like how much it can stimulate my brain. I pretty much base my art on all that stimulus, and Sonic the Hedgehog.

While Hubert sought out the internet and became fluent in it, Cindie was initiated into it at age 6 by their older tech savvy brother, who already had access to a computer and an internet connection. Even though these two participants are from the same generation, the way they were introduced to the internet was different. The wide availability of digital technologies and high speed internet connection in the Global North means that there are more opportunities for people to engage with said technologies (Poushter, 2016, p. 7-9). However, this is not the end all be all of digital literacy and fluency. Users may be surrounded by digital potentialities yet they do not become fluent in the language and culture of digital spaces simply because they are young or old. Their social interests, class background and political attitudes shape their immersion, or the lack thereof, into the

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internet. Therefore, the members of this niche meme community on Instagram cannot simply be described as "digital natives", as they are brought together not merely by generational similarities but through a search for creative outlets, a subcultural interest in niche memes, and a desire for community. All of this, however, is underscored by shared markers of identity and experiences of institutional marginalisation. When I ask about the importance of community in our interview, Cindie highlights that sharing resources and opportunities is a guiding principle of their community:

> I feel like I formed a community with like-minded people that I met online, and Bottom Text feels like a community. And it's not just limited to us, we're all friends in real life and also live near each other. So it went from an online community, into a real life community and because of that I feel like our bond is stronger. It's also not just the three of us, it's our friends online and our entire online presence. And because of that online presence, we can resource opportunities for other people around us. And that is our goal, that's why we do this.

6.2.2   virtualgoodsdealer: Sharing online visibility

While Cindie participates in and shapes meme culture on Instagram, through their engagement with memes they have been able to create networks for not only themselves but other marginalised artists and creatives online. For instance, at the time of our interview, Cindie and Hubert were part of the Bottom Text Collective, in addition to this collective, but Cindie also helps run "a collaborative virtual space and e-commerce portal" called *virtualgoodsdealer* with fellow digital artists Jillian and Omnia (pages.virtualgoodsdealer.com). They use this space, hosted on a website, to showcase independent artists, writers and multimedia practitioners. Using their website and Instagram's Shopping features they offer a variety of products from artists' collections, such as posters, stickers, sculptures, jewellery and clothing items. The cultural workers that they feature on *virtualgoodsdealer* are largely people from minoritised and marginalised communities.

Cindie has also done "account takeovers", a common practice among Instagram users and the niche meme community, where an Instagram page owner gives temporary ownership of their account to another person. The person who takes over the account can make use of the Instagram page's audience and reach, and in this way, meme creators can share the most valuable resource they have, *online visibility*. In March 2021, *virtualgoodsdealer* published a call for submissions for people looking to take over Cindie's account for 72 hours. The details of this call for submissions demonstrate some of the political standpoints and ethical ideals of this niche meme community:

Following this call, Cindie gave control of their most followed Instagram page to an Asian American activist and advocate who shared "abolitionist resources on Asian American advocacy", poetry, educational TikToks and think pieces for a period of four days. This way, the activist who took over the account could, theoretically, speak to close to 60,000 people online and share a variety of educational and critical resources on the origins of Sinophobia, racial stereotypes, anti-Asian violence and other related social justice topics.

Themes such as "sharing opportunities" and "institutional marginalisation" appeared in all of my interviews in some form. My participants had a tense and ambivalent relationship with these terms, and often reflected on whether or not platform-fuelled

Figure 6.7: Screenshot of the post for submissions on pages.virtualgoodsdealer.com, 2021.

entrepreneurial activities could be reconciled with the DIY ethics associated with meme culture, and if this was a question marginalised people had to even account for. Cindie, in their FELT Zine interview (feltzineweb 2019), expands on this idea highlighting the idea of the internet as a place for marginalised people to create support networks:

> "modern meme culture comes from women, trans, and non-binary people of color — digital content has always been pioneered by marginalized people who turn to the internet to build communities"

The social potential of the internet is more pronounced for marginalised people, as for them, the internet is a place to form new bonds and build community rather than a space used to reinforce existing relationships (Gonzales, 2017). The niche meme community therefore uses the internet and various digital technologies to create a sense of "mutual support, shared language, shared norms, social trust, and a sense of mutual obligation" (Mesch, 2012, p.321). A shared belief between some internet communities and researchers is that memes are the "everyday talk of everyday people" (Phillips, 2019), however this argument has been proven to be not so clear-cut by the more recent top-down weaponisation of internet memes in political campaigns and state propaganda. These top-down uses of internet memes nevertheless try to emulate the subcultural tone expressed in meme culture, in order to communicate a sense of authenticity and subversion. During Mike Bloomberg's US presidential campaign in 2020, Bloomberg's team mobilised various large viral meme pages, such as those run by Jerry Media, to

propagate and release memes in support of Bloomberg. These attempts were almost immediately seen by other meme pages as insincere, as the Bloomberg memes seemed too spontaneous and out-of-character for them to be authentic posts. Hubert connects this memetic inauthenticity with the fact that "rich people can't buy their way into memes", adding:

> Mike Bloomberg couldn't buy his way into memes, he thought he could. Elon Musk on the other hand, kind of did. This is not because he was rich though, it's because he had a personality backing it too. It's true that you can be an opposing voice and finesse your way into being respected in the meme community. What's valued is that this base line understanding of humour and reality. You have to have a nihilistic view on life. If you're outed as not being nihilistic, we'll all think you're corny. But Elon Musk wants to be more like people who don't have money. He wants to simulate broke behaviour, but that is something that he can't buy.

What Hubert is mentioning here is revealing of how meme culture is understood to be, between meme creators as well as audiences. It is something most often practised by *broke people* as a creative release valve, something which also creates social bonds between those who get the "vibe", or feel a sense of nihilism as well. A meme making friend once said to me, about another meme creator: "why would they be making memes if they weren't broke?". The nihilism exhibited in some meme cultures, especially that of niche memes, could be connected to economic frustrations and inequalities that younger people in the West are experiencing in contrast to previous generations. For instance, Pew Research Centre found that millennials in the US have higher educational attainment yet have "slightly less" accumulated wealth than previous generations. There was a large income gap between millennials who hold a bachelor's degree and those who don't. Furthermore, they are more likely to live with their parents and are slower in "forming their own households" (Bialik and Fry, 2019). Making niche memes does not make people money, this is why meme creators have to work multiple jobs or have a variety of creative "side-hustles" and gigs. Niche meme creators do not start making memes with the expectation that they will make money, and often do it in a self-confessed "manic" way[4]. The utilisation of abjection, nihilism, and intentional ugliness in the aesthetic and textual content of internet memes creates a tone and feeling of a kind of ironic communion between creators and audiences. This feeling is predicated on the assumption that "if someone else is also enjoying a nihilistic meme that I've made, it means that they are also going through it[5], like I am".

In her seminal essay[6] "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), Hito Steyerl underlines that

> The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original,"

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[4] A notable exception to the "manic" meme creation practice here is Jenson Leonard's "evergreen" memes

[5] "Going through it" is a way of saying that someone is experiencing hardship.

[6] This essay is often cited in meme research.

but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools... The circulation of poor images thus creates "visual bonds," as Dziga Vertov once called them. This "visual bond" was, according to Vertov, supposed to link the workers of the world with each other. He imagined a sort of communist, visual, Adamic language that could not only inform or entertain, but also organize its viewers. In a sense, his dream has come true, if mostly under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety. (Steyerl, 2009)

The internet meme is the poor image, literally and metaphorically. It is anti-institutional and collaborative in its core, however when it becomes professionalised certain tensions start to emerge, which the meme creators are grapple with through their working conditions and their connection to their creative and subcultural communities. Echoes of the tension between the anti-institutional understanding of meme culture and the professionalisation of meme making are seen within the creators' memes as well[7].

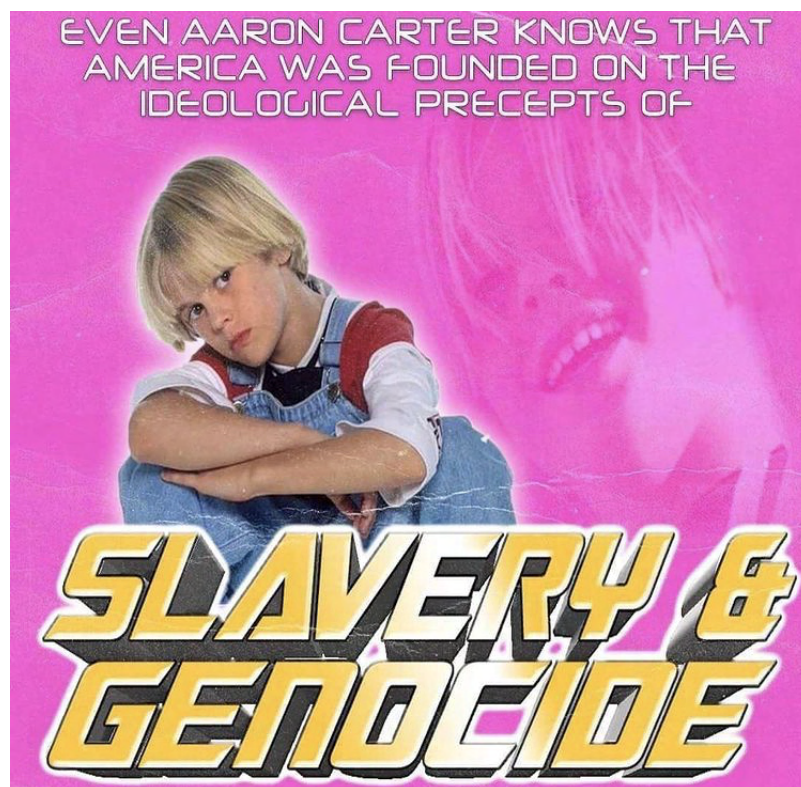## 6.3   Institutional tensions and internet memes

Figure 6.8: "Oh Aaron" by Jenson, 2017

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[7]See: Figure 5.8

Jenson is an artist, an MFA, a poet, a warehouse worker, a meme creator, an artisan, who has a large following on Instagram. According to Georgie Payne, curator of one of Jenson's exhibitions, he is a "prolific poster of ornate and heavily parodic original content (OC) which pits American visual culture against itself through pastiche and satire" (2021). The themes he explores in his work range from complex topics such as digital Blackface, white masculinity, genocide, colonialism, and the various manifestations of capitalistic ideology in everyday life, to seemingly lighter ones like the ethics of reposting memes without credit, Mark Zuckerberg, Soylent, chicken burgers, and the clothing design company Arc'teryx. Jenson has cultivated an instantly recognisable style of memes, underscored by a kind of high-definition irony that often references and builds on Black American cultures and language. In the catalogue essay of Jenson's 2021 exhibition "Yacht Metaphor", his friend and collaborator, poet manual arturo abreu states that Jenson describes his aesthetic perspective and artistic practice as "boughetto". abreu (Abreu, 2021, p. 3) continues about how Jenson:

> [labors] over most of his works to create a digital baroque aesthetic..., drawing on cultural references that express some of the paradoxes of the digital moment: feeling dead inside but also feeling too much constantly; dealing with information overload while also freely canceling everyone and everything that yucks our yum; hermeneutic of suspicion toward the other without realizing this partly causes our deep isolation; and on and on.

The catalogue essay, alongside Jenson's conversations with fellow critics like abreu, shows the depth of popular, subcultural, political, philosophical and critical references that Jenson plays with in his memes. Within the multiple emails we exchanged emails over a few months, we discussed some of these references, as well as his personal experiences during the pandemic. While I was interested in his art, I also was curious about what it means for someone like Jenson, whose work is beloved by many people, to make a living. Feeling the loneliness and financial pressures of the lockdown, holed up in our damp and mouse-infested flat owned by the university, I remember typing up an email to him to ask him how he was faring during the pandemic, which lead us to a discussion about capitalism and "essential" work as sacrificial labour. He remarked

> A lot of theory and art seems trivial at the moment, or at least, now seems like a time to take inventory of what is really important in these times. I work at UPS as a package loader. My job hasn't been affected, but most of the labor force is comprised of poor people, poor black people. We aren't getting hazard pay or anything like that, its fucked. This crisis is highlighting how underpaid "essential labor" is. I don't really have faith in an american left to broadly collectivize at a moment like this, even though conditions couldn't be more primo.

Jenson relayed to me that he had sustained a workplace injury during his work as a package loader for a delivery and logistics company. In addition to his injury, which came as a result of having to lift up to 30 to 60 kilograms at a time, he was also being harassed and intimated by management. He later filed a grievance with his union and kept his work doing "light duty", as he had no other alternative. I later saw this meme titled "Remote Control" that he had made, exhibited in "Yacht Metaphor" (2021), and annotated with the following reflections and texts:

1. UAV Predator (First Class Simulations).

2. So much of American technological innovation starts with a DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) grant. Not unfounded to say that all these "work from home" telecommunication apps have their genesis in the state department. Working remotely has always been the norm for drone pilots. Naturally, there are tons of drone simulator video games. Gamers, rise up to the recruiting booth!

3. Thinking about the violence of working from home. In the advent of remote-operated drone warfare, homeland security becomes a borderless, supraterritorial endeavor.

4. See: "Confessions of a Drone Warrior" by Matthew Power.

5. See: Kris Paulsen's Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface—Drawing connections between early video art through current "drone vision" works.

6. See: "Not Everybody Can Work from Home: Black and Hispanic Workers Are Much Less Likely to Be Able to Telework" by Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz.
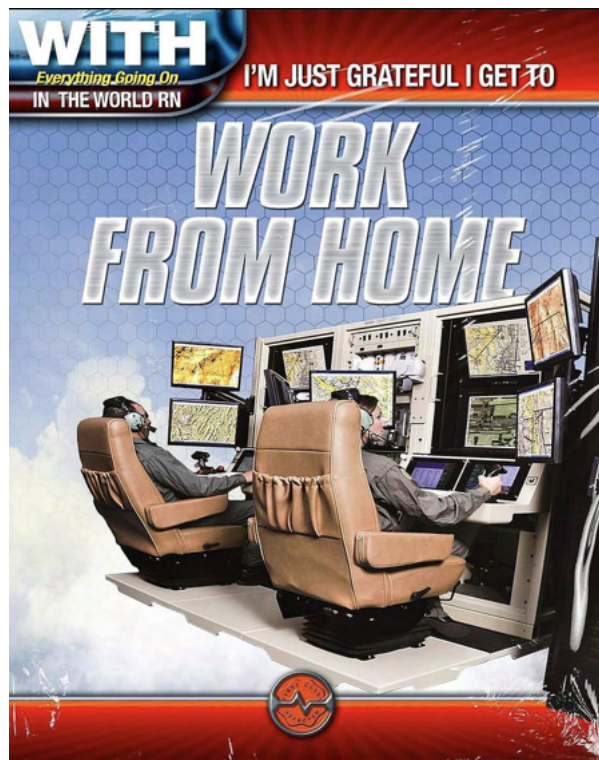
Figure 6.9: "Remote Control" by Jenson, 2021

His experiences as an artist and a precarious worker is not an exception, as many people in this community have to hold multiple jobs at once to varying degrees. This means that they often critique and discuss digital, physical, artistic, and knowledge work in their memes. In his 2021 interview with Yacht Metaphor curator Georgie Payne for *Rhizome*, Jenson describes himself as *work-liminal*, or "unemployed, but I'd teach at your art school if you'd have me" (Payne, 2021). In an artist talk, Jenson mentions his

MFA in Creative Writing, his poetry and current employment and says "I haven't been poeticising much since I got my MFA, I've been mostly throwing boxes around". In our email exchanges, he explains his background in poetry and his turn towards memes in the mid 2010s:

> My first publication appeared in an APA newsletter called *Philosophy and The Black Experience*. It's called "Bojangles(A Forlorn Caricature)". It's not a technically great poem lol, but insightful. I basically *LARP* Amiri Baraka. Fast forward a few years, and i'm in the real world, using my english degree to run food and polish cutlery. In my down time i'd write and send poems off for rejection. All the while, Facebook was generating these amazing image macros full of wit and poetic play. Like, motherfuckers were evolving the literary protocols of modernist/post modern poetry on my facebook feed. Gertrude Stein candyflipping. There was a voice to these memes that i felt was missing in the poetry world. This voice is a voice that isn't mediated by an MFA workshop, or a literary market...its rawdogging and libidinal and honest. Not fake pastoral. There isn't much poetry that excites me. The memes (at least circa 2015-2017) were doing that. When i saw pages like Lettuce Dog and Gangster Popeye it had a huge effect on me and what poetry could be after the internet. So i started making memes.

Jenson's influences are deeply tied to Black critical theory, and his works communicate a sense of academic rigour that is not found in viral, common-denominator style memes. His memes as well as other art works represent an avantgarde turn in net art, and cannot be lumped in with the homogenising genre of "digital content". As a poet who has operated within academic and arts institutions he speaks the language of academia, and understands the underlying expectations that institutions have. He is also ideologically at odds with these institutions. His attraction towards memes, as he mentions in the previous quote, comes from the ideological and linguistic potentialities that they offer. "Poetry after the internet" can be found within internet memes, and their popular appeal is something that alienates academia. They may be seen as frivolous, low-effort, ugly, and "of the people", and are therefore ripe to be branded as *unserious* by *serious* gallerists, academics, curators, collectors, writers. Unsurprisingly, this is also why memes are powerful, because they can evade the hand of the *institution* by simply being offensively common. Jenson revels in this, by labouring over the details of the memes that he makes, packing them full of academic and popular references, that are only visible to those who are willing to look beyond the polarising genre of the internet meme. Jenson and Georgie Payne, who curated Yacht Metaphor (2021), show this referential denseness by providing companion annotations for every meme that they included in the exhibition. This in a way shows the out-group, AKA "those who don't get it", the richness of each meme. Take the meme titled "Remote Control" included in this section for instance, here Jenson has integrated a base line of six references into one image. Being able to fashion these references into a collage takes a great deal of poeticising, literary and aesthetic craftsmanship, as well as humour.

Therefore, niche memes within this wider community can often have a strong artistic point-of-view and a political statement, when they are not about mundane silliness or everyday humour. This attracts curators such as Georgie and Ekrem who have exhibited Jenson's works, but also people like Magdalena who worked with COVEN Berlin at the "NeoDaddyism" exhibiton. Magdalena, as a curator, has one foot in the institutional

and one foot in the DIY world. She is someone who operates as a connection between DIY forms of art, such as digital memes, analogue memes and zines, and traditional fine arts institutions. In our interview, she expressed that she was concerned with the redistribution of institutional visibility among artists on the margins. Overall, her curative practices lie within principles of care, accountability, critique and a search for equitable representation. She admits that she "likes Instagram because she is a curator" but states that digital platforms and culture don't occupy a thematic role in her research. This also differentiates her from meme artists, as most of them highlight that they have grown up on the internet, that internet communities and subcultures have been safe havens for them.
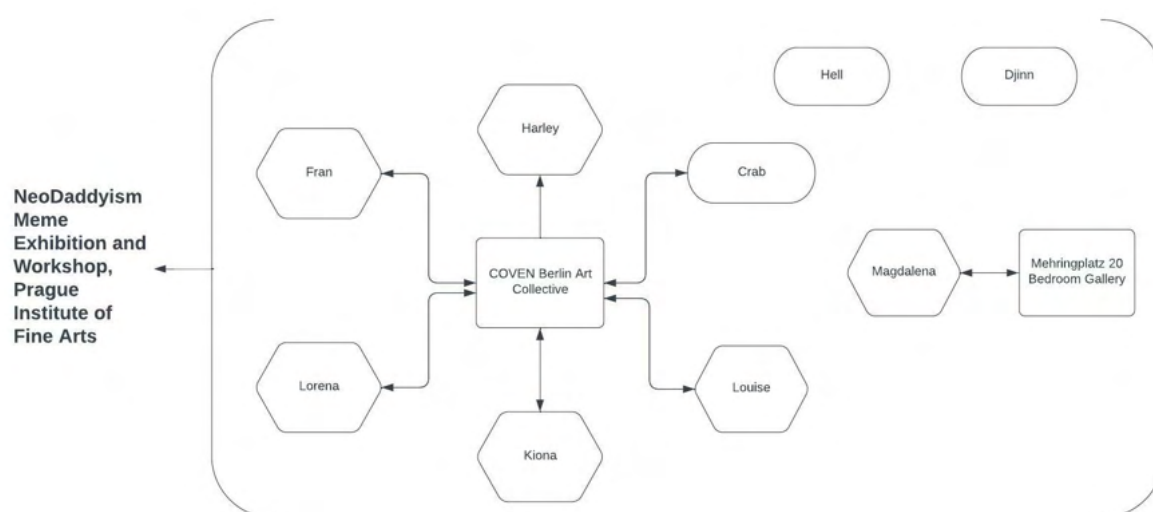

Figure 6.10: Social network diagram showing the connections between COVEN Berlin, meme creators, the meme exhibition curator and Bottom Text video producer

Magdalena, and Rebecca, the producer of the "Bottom Text" show on Adult Swim, share a similar distance to memes and the online meme community. Rebecca used to help produce the live-streamed meme show that Cindie, Hubert and Djinn appeared on, and both her and Magdalena state they do not engage in internet meme culture very much. However, both people have political and aesthetic commonalities with the niche meme community, and therefore inhabit a critical role in the production and dissemination of niche-memes outside of social media platforms. Magdalena facilitates the exhibition and diffusion of niche-memes beyond their insular online communities by taking highly subcultural digital artifacts and transplanting them to "offline" fine arts institutions. Whereas Rebecca helps translate the meme creators' ideas into a streamable reality that fits within the vision of the large media company that she works for.

Magdalena runs a bedroom gallery, and organises monthly exhibitions. She tells me that sees this bedroom, a traditionally private space, as a place for community exchange. The gallery also operates as a music tool library which her musician partner maintains, as well as a library which her visitors can borrow books from. In our interview, she mentions that a Marxist reading group runs out of her bedroom as well. Her interests obviously lie in the community organising side of activism, and I can observe this just by

following the trail of the books that she recommends in the interview, which are mostly about curation, community organising and the ethics of care.

When I ask her if DIY holds a way out from institutional curation and patronage of the arts and how this is often unpaid. She states that there is money for everyone to be paid, if the wage system was equitable. She argues that the idea that "members of DIY cultures cannot be paid due to a lack of resources" is a way for institutions to hold on to their reputational capital.

> "This lack of resources is fake, it's pretense for the institutions to be relevant. I think communities can generate much more resources, it might not be immediately money, but different things like space, attention, different kinds of relationships, interdependence that are even more valuable and offer more to the imagination."

Within her work and community organising, Magdalena critiques the reputation economy and ideas of entrepreneurialism. This ideological framework is apparent in how she made space for COVEN Berlin to organise a meme installation and workshop titled "Neo-Daddyism". Rebecca on the other hand helps amplify the voices of these avant-garde artists as an intermediary between the large comedy network that hosted Bottom Text show and the meme creators that appeared on the show. The show itself has a strong DIY feel, it is highly experimental and semi-structured which intersects well with Rebecca's interests, like puppets and stick and poke tattooing, as well as her professional training as an animator.

This DIY feel of the community is echoed by another meme creator that I interviewed, Paul. Paul is a meme creator, artist and chef. He describes himself as a "kind of homebody in general" and remarks that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, he "enjoyed going to see live music and used to play in bands, tour etc." When I ask about how he got into making memes, he pulls direct links between the DIY music scenes and the shared logic of subcultural expression of memes and DIY art:

> my whole life I've been a fan of satire and mashup as well as visual humor (The Far Side by Gary Larson being a very early influence), so I was instantly a fan of memes when they first started blowing up everywhere, I certainly remember them becoming popular in kitchens. When I first got a smartphone one of the first things I did was find a free photo editing app and start putting my face on record covers, mostly just to make my friends laugh. After a while I had some free time and taught myself how to make some stuff: Choose Your Own Adventure and Dungeons and Dragons covers with the titles changed, some Twitter style memes, and mashups similar to the record covers. At this same time I was becoming aware of some really amazing voices that had established themselves in the meme scene early on: Cory in the Abyss, GayVapeShark, LilPerc, Femme4Memes,[8] and so on. So between seeing the parallels between this and the DIY music scene, and with the encouragement of some friends, I started the Baba Page in July 2017.

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[8]Cory in the Abyss is the name that Jenson makes his memes and art under, while GayVapeShark was part of the original Bottom Text collective, which included Cindie, Hubert and Djinn, Lilperc now goes by Hell, who I have also interviewed for this project.

Like Jenson, Paul is also of the mind that the low entry barrier to meme-making is what makes it a readily available form of creative expression. On what makes the meme community, Paul highlights that for him

> "the meme community is very eclectic but united by a shared passion for creating things. There are a lot of big thinkers and idealists in the community, so there is naturally competition which is sometimes fun and sometimes not, unsurprisingly sometimes accounts will get in big arguments with each other, but overall I'd say the meme community is generally a very welcoming place that tries to keep itself as safe as possible"

Overall, the meme creators I interviewed all underlined the importance of creativity, community, and political ideals in the niche meme community. Many of our conversations would revolve around art and culture as they relate to internet memes, whereas discussions of the work of meme making would inevitably come up as soon as digital platforms were mentioned. This demonstrates that existing as a creative community on digital platforms is truly "ambivalent", as it is liberatory and as well as oppressive. However, we can observe that increasingly, digital platforms such as Instagram are co-opting and adopting the language of DIY creativity while extracting capital from the work of the creators who inhabit subcultural memetic communities. As a result, the ideological incongruity between memetic creativity, platform surveillance and value extraction may be pushing creators towards establishing community initiative and community-driven platforms.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1   Epilogue

> "We want to survive as creators and influencers. Our livelihoods really do
> depend on it. Having the income that I make through having my platform is
> what keeps me afloat and gives me the potential to be an autonomous artist
> who isn't stuck in corporate hell. People ask why I don't just leave Instagram
> and it's because at the moment there's no alternative place to post what I
> do. But the second there is, I'm absolutely going to leave the stupid app.
> They better start making the platform better for creators because we're the
> ones who keep it alive." (Weekman 2022)

At the tail end of my writing up period for this thesis, I started coming across In-
stagram posts about an "Anti-Zuck Instarrection" on my Instagram timeline. These
posts were being shared by many of the niche meme creators that I was following and
had interviewed for this study, and were originating from an Instagram account called
"antizuckprotest". By reading through this account's posts I saw that the "Anti-Zuck
Instarrection" was a protest, organised by a coalition of niche meme creators, to be held
in July 23, 2022 in front of Instagram's headquarters in New York City. The posts showed
that the protest was being organised and supported by a group of smaller meme creators
who were arguing that their accounts are banned and restricted without transparent rea-
sons by Instagram while more mainstream meme creators and aggregators are promoted
and boosted by the same platform. The quote included above this paragraph are the
words of one of the organisers who spoke to reporter Kelsey Weekman at Buzzfeed News,
as well as other reporters from traditional media outlets, such as NBC, Mashable, Tech
Crunch, The Washington Post, Dazed, and Business Insider. The creators in question
were protesting what they call " Meta's harmful and unjust moderation system", and
demanding that the platform provide: transparent community guidelines, more human
content moderators, a thorough reviewing process for restricted and banned accounts,
an end to the censoring of information of a political nature as well as an end to the
disputed practice of "shadowbanning", an equitable moderation system that does not
reward more powerful users, and finally, support structures for creators, artists and ac-
tivists which monetise their content using Instagram, maintained by human moderators
rather than algorithms.

This movement's demands and the subsequent mobilisation of smaller and niche
meme creators as platform-dependent cultural workers seemed to echo the findings of
my research project. Namely that niche meme creators experience precarious conditions

of work on digital platforms, particularly on platforms organised through recommendation algorithms, and that they feel captive to these platforms. Moreover, it exemplifies the argument that there is a political need for meme creators to understand themselves as workers, so that they can demand better working conditions from platform companies which extract value from meme creators' work as well as meme communities' participation on the platform. My hope is that meme creators and other platform-dependent cultural workers can use this thesis as a document to complement their demands for more transparency and support from digital platforms. Ultimately, this study sought to explain the working conditions of meme creators on digital platforms and their relationships with their art and online community, not only for the benefit of digital social research but also for the workers themselves. It aimed to capture an ethnographic view of a particular moment in digital culture and cultural work, which are becoming increasingly inseparable.

7.2 Contributions to the field

This study aimed to contribute to existent critical research about cultural work on digital platforms (Abidin, 2016b; Bishop, 2021; Duffy et al., 2019; Gandini, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022) by framing internet meme creators as cultural workers, and analysing their working conditions. It also aims to complement the burgeoning literature of meme studies (Dawkins, 1989; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Mina, 2019; Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Phillips and Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2014; Sobande, 2019; Wiggins and Bowers, 2015) by proposing a theoretical framing that centres the people who make memes as part of their artistic practice and work, while also acknowledging the analytical importance of the internet memes themselves. In particular, the study highlights the importance of considering the impact of not only the central platform of an online community in digital culture and platform research but also the peripheral platforms. Researching these peripheral platforms, for instance digital patronage platforms like Patreon, can help scholars understand how creators and online communities evaluate the central digital platform.

Methodologically, this study was a visual and digital ethnographic survey of a niche meme community centrally located on Instagram and dispersed among other digital platforms. In order to capture some of the vital aspects of the creators' working lives and their online subcultural community, I collected data from in-depth interviews, internet memes, platform heteroglossia, and supplemented this data with information I gleaned from archives, newspapers, magazines and blogs. I analysed this data by employing critical digital discourse analysis which rejects that technology exists outside of the social realm (Brock, p. 1015), and by focusing on the themes of work, art, creativity, and community that emerged from the data. This study's research design can be useful for researchers interested in exploring online communities as not just social spaces, but also technocultural contexts. Furthermore, meme researchers can adopt this research design for qualitative enquiries about meme creators, as it combines visual and digital ethnography with in-depth interviews and makes use of memes made by the interviewees prior to the interviews. This project can be understood as an ethnographic dispatch which shows the deepening interconnections between digital platforms, work and culture by focusing on an often-ignored and rarely-studied class of cultural workers online. The thesis provides the reader the opportunity to seriously engage with the risks of the platformisation of culture through a case study of niche meme creators, instead of accentuating the

seeming novelty and humorousness of internet memes as a research topic.

Theoretically, the thesis synthesised a variety of literatures especially building on the sociology of work and art and digital culture studies in order propose that meme research should resist adopting capitalistic platform ideologies which turn *people* into *users*, and subsequently *generators* of platform content and revenue. Instead, it pursued a theory of internet memes that centred itself around the experiences of people who create digital culture, rather than the artefacts of digital culture itself. However, it also incorporated a formal evaluation of the internet memes that this niche meme community created, demonstrating that the literary and artistic forms of the *carnivalesque* and the *grotesque* appear heavily within niche memes as a result of the creators' experiences of platform-captivity and anxiety. This study's final assertion was that despite the apparent lack of power that niche meme creators hold over digital platforms, they still found ways of intervening in their platform-dependency through community initiatives that aim to uplift marginalised creators and distribute online visibility.

The primary research question that I started out with was "what does the work of meme making look like", and my findings show that the work of meme making is creative, community-driven, digitally laborious, and precariously contingent on digital platforms. The findings of this project affirm existent critical research that show the precarious relationships between digital platforms and cultural workers, and extend the literature with a previously unexplored case of internet meme creators as platform-dependent cultural workers. This study also contributes to meme research by taking marginalised meme creators as primary informants, which is relatively rare as *deviant young men* are more often the central group that meme studies spotlight, as a result of the social risks and harms that they may impose. The project seeks to assist the balancing of the skewed characterisation of internet meme creators as antagonistic, anonymous trolls by prioritising the voices and experiences of minoritised and marginalised artists.

As a result of this study, I was able to produce a variety of academic and public-facing research outputs. For instance, the article "'The Grotesque' in Instagram Memes", which is included in the "Art" chapter, was published in 2021 in the edited volume *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* by the Institute of Network Cultures located at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. I also contributed an essay on visual methodologies for meme research titled "Wojak and the Digital Factory" (2021) for the first edition of *Content: A memetics journal* published by Inpatient Press, and Bard Meme Lab located at Bard College. I have written various other essays, articles, and blog posts about the results of my research, and some of them have been translated to other languages, such as Italian and German. Having outlined some of my contributions and outputs from my research project, I would now like to discuss the limitations of this study.

7.3   Limitations of the study

The pace with which online discourse shifts, transforms and splinters makes it difficult to conduct, write up and publish research about digital culture and online communities. This is because by the time that the study is published, it may already be out-of-date or irrelevant. Another problem that a researcher may come across especially in ethnographic research is that communities can change swiftly, and sometimes even disappear all-together, owing to platform-death for instance. In my research project, the politics of the people I had started interviewing was in a state of transformation and deliber-

ation, due to several public events. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existent socioeconomic inequalities within societies all around the world. The pandemic and its effects on the most economically disadvantaged became much more visible, and discussions around working conditions, class inequalities, and even "vaccine apartheid"s (Bajaj et al., 2022) became more prominent in online public debates. The deepening socioeconomic inequalities following the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in civil unrest across many countries (Strohecker, 2021), and the George Floyd protests in the United States had a significant effect on how digitally connected people from Anglophone countries viewed structural racism (Nguyen et al., 2020). I believe that these public events had a significant impact on the online community that I was conducting the ethnography on, and shifted their ideological and political perspectives.

When I first started the ethnography in 2019, intersectional feminism and gender politics were at the forefront of the content of the internet memes that emerged from this online community. As a result, the literatures that I was focusing on were centred around feminist and postfeminist critiques of gender, humour, culture and work. However, within a year, the content, attitude and activities of community started to visibly shift, I started seeing more discussions and memes about income inequality and structural racism. It is important to highlight that Black creators within the community had already been discussing these issues within their work. However, on the whole, post-2020 there were more creators focusing on contributing to community initiatives, mutual aid projects, and civil mobilisation especially for Black and Brown communities. The people in this meme community had renegotiated their political commitments as a result of public debates, which meant that I also had to pivot my focus according to the transformations in community ideologies. I decided to pull back the focus on feminist critique because the community did so as well, as they had a reckoning with the problems that appeared within mainstream understandings of intersectional feminism and ideals of liberal progressiveness.

Therefore, I had to acquaint myself with different strands of literature and research in order to reflect the community identity and ideologies in the most truthful way that I could. This meant that I had less time to frame the project in a more precise manner, and the thesis's integrity suffered as a result of this re-framing. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the various subsequent restrictions took its toll on my research plan, as well as my mental health. It was challenging to continue to study such a dynamic context in pandemic conditions, and I felt reluctant to reach out to more interviewees, feeling that my request were frivolous during such uncertain times. This resulted in a small sample size of 15 people, which is an important limitation of this study.

Furthermore, I selected and approached the interviewees myself which means that this study is applicable to the working conditions of Anglophone niche meme creators on Instagram, and not viral, mainstream aggregator meme pages. While the findings are not generalisable for more mainstream meme creators, they are transferable and indicative of niche, independent original content (OC) meme creators, and can be applied within more DIY contexts when it comes to platform-dependent cultural work. This comes with the territory when doing deep ethnographic research into subcultures, and cannot be readily compared to the aims and goals of quantitative research about internet memes (Galdas, 2017). This takes me to the next section of the conclusion, which expands on my suggestions for future directions for meme research, including the proposition that there is a need for more quali-quanti studies (Peeters et al., 2021).

7.4 Recommendations for future research

Computational analyses of big data in memetic communities can produce more generalisable results when it comes to how memes are shared online. However, due to how quickly the discourse in these communities can shift and change, a qualitative perspective, specifically an ethnographic one, is needed. Digital ethnographers can provide contextual depth to computational studies, and maintain presence within the community to observe changes in social ties, hierarchies, and the "living discourse" (Peeters et al., 2021). On the other hand, visual data or images from the field are just as important for context for the study of such imagistic online communities as memetic subcultures. Digital ethnographers can engage in image-making on the field by "screenshotting" which allows them to a capture a space and condition as well as part of themselves. A combination of computational, qualitative and visual research can therefore provide researchers with a deep understanding of meme communities.

Beyond mixed methodologies, there is a further need for more general theorisations of meme creators and communities which go beyond case studies of specific subcultures. There is a public and scholarly necessity to understand meme-making as part of cultural work, due to the growing power of digital platforms within social, political, and cultural life as well as modes of work. It is therefore important that as researchers we should be focusing on understanding the different ways in which platforms extract value from people, a group of workers and *users* which include meme creators, as well as freelance writers and bicycle couriers and many other kinds of workers.

Particularly, there is a relative lack of research in digital patronage platforms and the role they play in cultural and creative work. Patreon has become a significant source of income for podcasters, YouTubers, Instagram meme creators, and even writers. The ability to directly support an artist and the lack of an algorithmic recommendation system places such platforms in an interesting position within platform ecologies for both the cultural worker and the patrons/audience. How do the affordances of Patreon impact cultural work? Is Patreon an answer to platform-precarity, or is it part of the wider platformisation of culture? What are the limits of Patreon for niche creators? There are various research questions we can direct towards the role of Patreon and other digital patronage platforms, which can be particularly useful within a global and comparative context. Conducting multiple studies across different global majority/minority and global south/north contexts can produce more meaningful results, especially for the cultivation of a less Western-centric understanding of digital culture and digital platforms.

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