

Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric

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Abstract

The study proposes that internet memes are a form of representational discourse that subverts dominant media messages to create new meaning. Using constructionist approaches to representation, the study makes a comparison of theoretical approaches to the study of memes, including semiotics and discourse. Based on the literature, the paper then proposes that the theory of visual rhetoric—not known to have been previously applied to the study of memes—is an appropriate theoretical and methodological lens for research on internet memes as a form of public discourse.

Keywords

Memes; visual rhetoric; representation; participatory media culture; public discourse

Intertextuality of Memes

While the internet meme remains a relatively understudied phenomenon, a growing field of literature indicates that in democratic societies, memes have implications for identity building, public discourse, and commentary in a participatory media environment (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2011; Burgess, 2008; Kuipers, 2002). Indeed, in countries that lack opportunity for democratic process, the use of memes to express dissent is akin to a public protest assembly (Mina, 2012, para. 8).

Scholars of popular culture have long held that “the relationship between producer, text, and audience is a complex mixture of acceptance and resistance” (Williams, 2012, p. 21). Based on the literature, we can see that internet memes—remixed images and videos circulated online, inviting participation through creation of derivatives—may be viewed as a form of subversive communication in a participatory media culture. Subversive communication responds to dominant communication structures in unexpected ways (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 287; de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii). Moulthrop (2003) suggests that a secondary literacy making use of “deconstruction, parody and pastiche” (p. 703) may be useful for this purpose. Memes may function as just such a practice.

In early research on memes, Kuipers (2005) describes a “new genre” of “cut-and-paste” jokes (p. 70) that emerged in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. Memes are embedded in visual media culture, “parodying, mimicking, and recycling” elements from it (Kuipers, 2005, p. 80). The literature indicates that these memes rely on heavy intertextuality (Burgess, 2008); this reliance on multiple referents, along with humor “and/or anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 209) is of particular importance to memes’ spread. Part of memes’ appeal, then, is their subversive nature. Through the appropriation and transformation of cultural texts, meme creators can use “the pop as a launching point to the political” (Milner, 2012, p. 305).

Memes are not the first genre of visual communication to juxtapose images and phrases to create meaning; cartoons also use the technique (Kuipers, 2002, p. 462). Abraham’s (2009) examination of editorial cartoons argues their humor derives from the ability to deconstruct complex ideas through the use of symbolic images, the highest form of wit (p. 121). To understand cartoons, one must “be familiar with conventional meaning of the cultural sources of the symbol” (Abraham, 2009, p. 156). By drawing

parallels to traditional media and by considering memes as a form of subversive communication, scholars have a platform by which to elevate the study of internet memes within a participatory media culture.

Constructionist Approaches to Representation

Milner (2012) writes: “transformation [of memes] requires an understanding of representational conventions associated with specific groups or individuals” (p. 90). Hall (1997) notes that in the constructionist view of representation, people assemble meaning through the use of concepts and signs relevant to their culture (p. 25). There are two theoretical approaches within this view of representation: The semiotic approach and the discursive approach (Hall, 1997, p. 15). Both approaches have previously been applied to the fledgling study of internet memes.

The underlying presumption of **semiotics** is that cultural objects convey meaning, and can be decoded as a text (Hall, 1997, p. 35). Signs combine to work on both a denotative and connotative level (p. 38). Barthes believed that by examining the interplay of the denotative and connotative in the context of popular culture, scholars might examine cultural artifacts as signifiers of “myths” about a particular culture (Hall, 1997, p. 39, 41). Peirce adds the concept of “interpretant” to semiotics (Moriarty, 2002, p. 21). Moriarty argues that Peirce’s understanding of semiotics may aid in understanding visual forms of communication as capable of carrying a proposition, something that “can be proven or disproven using logical means” (p. 23). Brubaker’s (2008) examination of the similarities between LOLcat captions (a genre of meme focused on cat pictures) and silent film titles applied a semiotic approach by looking at the interaction of the phrases and the images to both expand and frame the image’s meaning (p. 119).

The second constructionist approach to the work of representation is the **discursive** approach. Discourse is “the production of knowledge through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 44). For Foucault, knowledge is power, and discourse provides the only way of “talking about ... a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (p. 44). The discursive approach is concerned with the entire system from which a work of representation arises. Discourse provides structure for the social world; it both represents and influences social practices (Milner, 2012, p. 19). Milner takes a micro-level discursive approach to the analysis of memes as a method of understanding themes at play in larger, cultural-level discourses (p. 19). Other scholars of memes echo an understanding of memes as tools to understand a culture at large (Burgess, 2008; Miltner, 2011); the idea of memes as a form of discourse appears to permeate work that frames memes as a literacy practice (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Knobel, 2006; Lewis, 2012).

Memes as Visual Rhetoric

The visual rhetoric approach combines elements of the semiotic and discursive approaches to analyze the persuasive elements of visual texts. Visual rhetoric understands visual texts as created to construct meaning (Foss, 2004, p. 304). Rhetoric is also considered to be persuasive. Blair (2004) notes that visual arguments have a unique ability to draw viewers into the argument’s construction via the viewer’s cognitive role in completing “visual enthymemes” to fill in the unstated premise (p. 59). Rhetoric relies heavily on stylistic devices—such as metaphor—for persuasive purposes (Kenney, 2002, p. 57). Edwards (2004) examines the manner in which iconic images become a type of metaphor for national sentiment; these images can be recontextualized for “symbolic association ... by metaphor or allegory” (p. 189). By considering memes as discourse and analyzing the semiotic elements in memes, researchers can examine how memes operate as rhetoric. A comparison of the semiotic, discursive and rhetorical approaches can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of theoretical approaches to the study of internet memes as representational/visual texts.

Approach	Argument	Inquiry	Interest in Meme	Sample Study
Semiotic	Representations produce meaning as signs; can be interpreted as cultural “myths”	Relationships between signs and codes, signifiers and signified to create meaning	Stylistic conventions; relationship between text and visual for meaning	Comparison of silent film intertitles and LOLcats captions. (Brubaker, 2008)
Discursive	The production of knowledge by language is mediated by history and the culture in which it occurs	Relationships of power and knowledge; Historical context in production of meaning important	How people construct meaning relevant to cultural contexts, and reclaim power from dominant media	Memes as a form of public discourse and identity in participatory media culture. (Milner, 2012)
Visual Rhetoric	Communication through symbolic processes; visual symbols have persuasive effects on viewers	Nature, function and evaluation of the artifact’s elements to discover persuasive appeals	Meaning-making via rhetorical elements. Effects on viewers and description of artifact of interest	Examination of iconic images in editorial cartoons for metaphor, other persuasive factors. (Abraham, 2009)

As can be seen in the table, analysis of visual rhetoric draws on both the semiotic and discursive approaches for a comprehensive critique of the text. Foss (2004) developed a framework for visual rhetoric study—nature, function and evaluation (p. 307). Nature is primarily concerned with explication of the presented and suggested elements of the text (p. 307). This approach carries shades of Barthes’ semiotic approach to representation. Scholars of visual rhetoric might also explore the function of the artifact, which Foss notes is not synonymous with purpose: Rather, it acknowledges that the creator’s intentions do not determine the correct interpretation of a work (p. 309). This is reminiscent of discursive approaches to representation, in which the viewer’s understanding is key to creation of meaning (Hall, 1997). Finally, scholars might evaluate the artifact against its apparent accomplishment of its function (Foss, 2004, p. 309).

Conclusion

Memes are more than internet humor; research shows them to function by appropriation and resistance to dominant media messages. By examining how memes can operate in subversive and representational ways, this paper offers scholars a framework for the study of memes as symbolic, persuasive texts. Just as the application of visual rhetoric expands general rhetorical theory by acknowledging “the role of the visual in our world” (Foss, 2004, p. 310), examining memes as a form of rhetoric can expand understanding of the way memes function in a participatory media culture.

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