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Multimodality on the Internet:
Recent Meme Genres as Tools for Online Communication

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Abstract

The study of memes and their role in communication is a growing field; however, many scholars tend to focus on older meme types, creating a gap in the literature regarding the newer and more complex meme genres. The present study offers an overview of some of the newer multimodal meme genres, their construction and their use in online conversations. To do so, a corpus of memes was collected on the microblogging and social networking website Tumblr in order to gain an idea about the most frequently used types of multimodal memes currently in circulation. Four genres emerged from the corpus: Object Labelling, Blank Filling, Text Changing and Deconstructed memes. These genres were then examined qualitatively, informed by multimodality and critical discourse theory. The four types show greater complexity than older memes genres with regard to the relationship between text and image, signifying an evolution. Furthermore, these new types of memes allow internet users to create memes more specific to their current communication setting. The findings align themselves with the most recent studies of memes with regard to the importance of the context of creation and the necessity of meme literacy in order to fully understand these complex meme constructions.

1 Introduction

Since its creation, the World Wide Web has been in constant evolution and has carved a place for itself in our everyday lives. Computer Mediated Communication (shortened to CMC), from its beginning in emails and text messaging to today's complex networks of social media, has evolved to constitute an important part of the 21st century, forming these tapestries of conversation. Just as the internet has progressed from the original Web to what is now referred to as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly & Battelle 2009), the tools made available to internet users in order to navigate this digital world have also changed. Internet citizens, also referred to as netizens, are now more than passive recipients of content in cyberspace; they are the ones bringing it to life, participating in its creation and functioning. Web 2.0 cemented the idea of a participatory culture in which the line between content-creators and content-consumers is blurred (Blank & Reisdorf 2012: 537). Within this Web 2.0, tools like text, image and video editing software have become increasingly accessible to internet users, broadening netizens' access to modes of communication which were previously only accessible by professionals. With the democratisation of these tools, new ways of sharing messages and information have emerged. Created by netizens themselves to better fit the new spaces available to them such as blogs and social media, these communication resources often merge the visual with the textual.

One prominent way of communicating in Web 2.0 is the use of internet memes. At first overlooked by linguists and other scholars as just "funny pictures/videos" circulated for amusement, internet memes are now considered an important part of online communication. They provide insights into new means of communication specifically adapted to CMC by netizens. Memes are used in both very niche fandom[1]-specific contexts and broad mainstream conversations, allowing netizens to share their opinions in quick and often humorous ways. Multimodal memes in particular are regularly employed by netizens in order to share messages, condensed within a picture associated with text. Multimodal memes have existed on the internet for a long time, with famous Image Macros examples like *LOLcats* (pictures of cats superimposed with broken English text) emerging around 2006. However, memes, being based on the concept of remixes and transformations, have consistently evolved since then and newer, more complex image-text combinations are now in circulation. It is these multimodal memes that interest me for this mémoire.

The present study came to be from a personal observation with regard to multimodal memes. While scholarly work on memes has become more and more common, many of these

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[1] Fandoms are communities of fans who share a similar interest.

studies focus on older meme formats such as the classic Top Text/Image/Bottom Text Image Macros and the like (Davison 2012, Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017, Zenner and Geeraerts 2018, Grundlingh 2018). Such formats are certainly important in the history of internet memes; however, newer and more complex image-text relationships have emerged in recent years and are steadily replacing older formats in online conversations. The focus on older meme formats, while interesting, leaves a gap in the literature regarding the rapid evolution of memes and the preference for the newer formats by users. I can assert from personal experience that these newer types of memes express different relationships between text and images and allow meme users to convey more complex messages. This study addresses these recent meme developments and begins to fill this gap in the literature.

My aim is to provide a qualitative study of four of the more recent types of multimodal memes, explain their functioning and showcasing the ways in which they are used by netizens to share complex and context-specific messages in online conversations. To do so, I will collect instances of multimodal memes on the social media platform Tumblr to create a corpus to help me understand which are some of the commonly circulated memes on Tumblr at the time of data collection and the ways and contexts in which they are used. Specific examples will then be selected from the data and discussed with regard to their format, the way they are created and the contexts in which netizens use them. This will be followed by a discussion of a case study, which will allow me to showcase the use of these different types within a specific discourse.

This mémoire is structured as follows: the following subsection introduces the notion of meme more precisely, as well as the beginnings of the field of memetic studies. The second section will provide a theoretical framework for this study, starting with recent studies of memes in relation to linguistics, before presenting the theory which will inform my analysis, namely multimodality. Section 3 will present my method, giving information about Tumblr as a platform and its specificities, the reasons why I chose to gather my data there and the way in which my data was collected. The fourth section will be divided in two subsections. The first will present the four different types of memes that have emerged from my data collection and give precise descriptions of the function of each type. The second will provide the case study in order to showcase the use of these different meme types in a specific conversational context before offering a discussion of the memes examined in this mémoire with regard to the previous literature. Section 5 offers a conclusion and points to potential further research.

1.1 What is a meme? A quick historical look

Before going any further, a fundamental question has to be asked: what *is* a meme? This might seem like a rather straightforward question but a closer look reveals that it is not. The vast majority of the scholars who have worked on this subject agree that the very definition of what constitutes a meme is rather difficult to pin down. This is in great part due to the always evolving nature of the phenomenon, as well as the theoretical shift its study underwent. It is important to understand this evolution in order to understand the relevance of the study of memes. The next two short sections will provide a brief overview of the development of the definition given to the term 'meme' through time, as well as the early studies of the phenomenon.

1.1.1 The Gene of Culture

The term 'meme' was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins was looking for a cultural counterpart to the gene and put forward the idea of *meme*, a word shortened from the Greek *mimeme* ('something which is imitated') (Shifman 2014a: 10). According to his definition, memes are perceived as cultural units, such as songs, slogans, or even religions, transmitted like genes. Dawkins' goal was to formulate an explanation for the spread of cultural information by likening it to evolution and viral spread. In his own terms:

> [j]ust as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins 1976: 192, qtd in Wiggins 2019: 1)

Dawkins argued that, for a meme to spread via imitation, it needed to fulfil three conditions: longevity, fecundity and fidelity. Longevity refers to how long a meme lasts, fecundity is how far a meme spreads and fidelity corresponds to how true a meme stays in regard to its origins (Milner 2016: 64). These three conditions are crucial to memetic success for Dawkins.

Building on this theory, a field of research for memetic studies (also called memetics) developed in the 1990s and was described as "the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes" (Heylighen and Klaas 2009, qtd in Shifman 2014a: 10). Memeticians used biological and epidemiological analogies to account for cultural phenomena and the spread of cultural information. One notable contributor to the field is Douglas Hofstadter, who pushed the likening of genes and memes beyond the metaphor and underlined the competition existing between memes:

> Memes, like genes, are susceptible to variation or distortion – the analogue of mutation. Various mutations of a meme will have to compete with one another, as well as with other memes, for attention, that is, for brain resources in terms of both space and time devoted to that meme. (Hofstadter 1983: 18, qtd in Wiggins 2019: 3)

Hofstadter departed slightly from Dawkins as he pointed out that variation is a key aspect of memes. For Dawkins, meme spread and replication was more akin to genetic transmission and, while slight variation was accepted, the meme had to resemble its original in order to be successful. Dawkins argued that, for a meme to achieve longevity and fecundity, and thus be successful, it needed a copy-fidelity to its original: the meme was transmitted from brain to brain by imitation (Cannizzaro 2016: 567-568). Hofstadter contrasted the importance Dawkins placed on imitation and fidelity by underlining the necessity of innovation in order for a meme to have more longevity. Since several memes would be competing for "brain space", innovation is an advantage in catching an individual's attention and thus occupying the brain longer.

Another influential contribution to the memetics field was Blackmore's (1999) book *The Meme Machine* (Shifman 2014a: 11). Blackmore argued that individuals were only vehicles serving the propagation of information, who had no agency over it, and who were perhaps even controlled by the memes living within them (Shifman 2014a: 12). This view of individuals as almost machines, simply governed by ideas put in their heads and spreading them randomly, is certainly one of the most extreme interpretations of this movement and is quite indicative of the strong attachment of early memetic scholars to Darwin's evolution theory and to biology in general.

The field of memetics was, however, rapidly criticised. One of the most problematic aspects of Dawkins' definition and the subsequent field of memetics was that they held a deterministic view and did not account for individual agency. Indeed, as pointed out by Jenkins (2009), understanding memes as viruses "leaping from brain to brain" implies that individuals are passively influenced by cultural information and have no control over what is replicated and spread (Wiggins 2019: 4). Positions of authors like Blackmore were deemed too extreme; such a strong position was criticised for its total dismissal of human agency and intention, as well as its oversimplification of complex cultural processes. Theoretical shortcomings such as those presented above can explain why the field of memetics as it first developed was progressively abandoned. The democratisation of the internet and computer mediated communication accentuated these issues. Memetics as it was in the 1990s progressively shifted its methods to

address these theoretical issues. Different frameworks accounting for individual agency are now favoured and will be addressed in the next section.

1.1.2   More than a unit

The shift in methods and frameworks to study memes was in part motivated by the shift in what is understood as a meme. Dawkins used the term to refer to *any* cultural unit encompassing very broad concepts like religion. However, the memes that we know today in the age of the internet are quite different. As pointed out by Dawkins himself,

> [T]he very idea of the meme, has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed – not random – with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating. (Dawkins 2013, qtd. in Wiggins 2019: 8)

A distinction is thus necessary between 'meme' as understood in the original Dawkinsian sense and 'internet meme', the more recent evolution of the term which interests me for the present study. As Dawkins acknowledged, internet memes are by definition altered by human agency. The term 'meme' as it is used nowadays is, in a way, much narrower in meaning than its Dawkinsian predecessor. Whereas Dawkins and memeticians applied 'meme' to any piece of cultural information, an internet meme is the product of human-computer interaction, a component of Web 2.0 participatory culture and online discourse, consciously created and modified in order to communicate. It is also important to mention that internet users themselves have appropriated the word 'meme', using it as a vernacular term. McCulloch (2019) recalled the way the term meme was introduced to public discourse by Mike Godwin, who coined 'Godwin's Law' – the maxim that the longer an online discussion continues, the more likely it is that a comparison will be made to Hitler – and seeded it through Usenet threads in 1990. When discussing his idea in a 1994 *Wired* interview, Godwin described this effort as a "counter-meme", introducing the general population to Dawkins' term (McCulloch 2019: 239). Readers adopted the term to refer to specifically online phenomena and thus helped shift the definition of the word. This transition and vernacular reappropriation of the concept of the meme pushed researchers to use new frameworks in order to understand the phenomenon.

Shifman (2014a: 15) tells us that "Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends". Her understanding of the internet meme as constitutive of contemporary online discourse space is, in my opinion, one of the clearest and most succinct.

Thus, for this mémoire, I will use her definition of memes: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (Shifman 2014a: 41). This definition is relatively simple and can certainly be further developed but it still contains the principal features of internet memes that are relevant to the present study and is a good basis to stand on.

2 Theoretical Framework

This second chapter aims to provide the theoretical background on which the present study stands. While early memeticians' vision has been discussed in the introduction, it is necessary to showcase the direction that meme studies have undertaken in recent years. Thus, this section will start with an overview of these diverse studies before explaining the different theoretical tools that I judge relevant for this mémoire.

2.1 Different approaches to internet memes

Cannizzaro (2016) is one of the more recent authors who criticised the original approaches to memetic studies and Dawkins' overly broad definition. She pointed out that viewing memes as cultural units is problematic as it implies that culture is a sum of different units. This was a very structuralist way of understanding cultural information and she indicated that such a view had already been rejected as early as the 1960s by the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics. She instead proposed viewing memes within a systemic-semiotics framework. Cannizzaro referred to Lotman's (1967) idea of the "semiosphere", which is defined as "an evolving system of signs that is more than the sum of its parts" (Lotman 1967: n.p., qtd. in Cannizzaro 2016: 571), in order to show that cultural information such as memes are not discrete entities and cannot be studied independently from their context. For her, memes understood within the semiosphere, and thus seen as relational rather than discrete information, should be considered constitutive elements of this system and thus cannot be studied in isolation: parts of such a system should always be studied in relation to the other parts and their wider cultural context (Cannizzaro 2016: 572). Furthermore, she asserted that cultural information is constructed rather than simply shared through imitation from person to person as the memeticians contended. She argued that memes could be considered "systems of signs that are subject to translation" (Cannizzaro 2016: 574), an idea that accounts for internet memes' spread and "remixing" tendencies. Cannizzaro also underlined two important ideas with regard to the ways in which internet memes spread and evolve. The first one is that the different versions of a meme
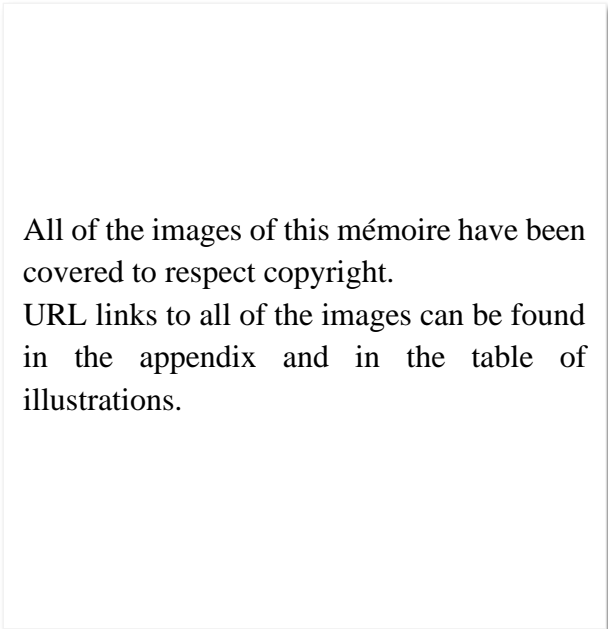
(translations or remixes) are not created randomly and instead follow meaning paths based on — or constrained by —internet users' expectations (Cannizzaro 2016: 578). It is important to underscore that these meaning paths are potential and not certain. The second one is the idea of habit or 'habituescence', borrowed from Peirce. She indicated that "habit for Peirce 'is not something fixed once for all, but, on the contrary, a flexible rule of procedure'" (Gorlée 2004: 63, cited in Cannizzaro 2016: 576). Thus, for Cannizzaro, internet memes are a system of signs with translational tendencies that follow potential meaning paths, constrained by the netizens' expectations and by flexible rules.

This understanding of internet memes through the lens of semiotics is supported by other authors, such as Varis and Blommaert (2015, qtd in Wiggins 2019) and Grundlingh (2018). Varis and Blommaert aligned themselves with Cannizzaro, also considering memes to be semiotic signs. They understood memes as signs produced and used to convey meaning in social discourse, seeing meaning as a function (Wiggins 2019: 31).

Grundlingh (2018: 152), taking a more pragmatic approach, argued that memes can be understood as speech acts, and more precisely illocutionary acts; memes and speech acts need similar conditions in order to be understood successfully. She argued that, "because memes are multimodal artefacts that can be also interpreted through the theory of semiotics, it is possible for them to be a message that is more complex than just a simple image being sent from one individual to another" (Grundlingh 2018: 152). Multimodality has become a key aspect of many memes; the intertwining of image and text certainly complexifies the understanding of such artefacts. In the case of image-based memes, "the photo itself provides either the non-verbal aspect of the context, or the background information needed in order to interpret the meme correctly" (Grundlingh 2018: 154), making the meme a much more complex item than a simple image or piece of text; the picture adds a layer of referentiality and meaning to the construction. Following this, she underlined the strong importance of intention and inference in the process of understanding memes, or any utterance: if the intention behind an utterance or a meme cannot be understood by the hearer, then the communication act will fail. Thus, the process of inference must be based on "mutual contextual beliefs" (a concept borrowed from Bach and Harnish (1980: xi)) assumed to be held by all participants of the communication (Grundlingh 2018: 153). This once more demonstrates memetics' problematic understanding of memes as units of information. The context of an utterance, or creation/remixing in the case of a meme, is essential for communication to be successful. Furthermore, in the case of image-based memes, the image carries important referential information that cannot be accounted for if the meme is seen simply as a unit standing on its own. Memes, especially multimodal ones, need to be anchored
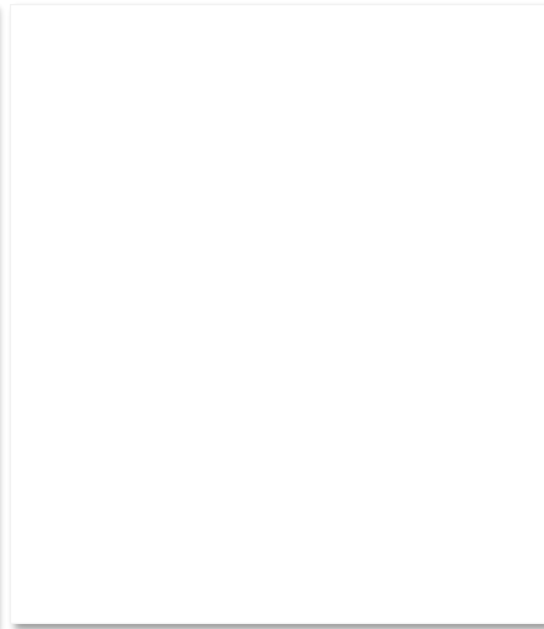
in their context of creation and spread (such as specific time frames or specific online groups) in order for the whole intended meaning to be understood by recipients.

Other authors have chosen different frameworks in order to study internet memes. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017), for example, applied construction grammar in order to understand multimodal constructions. Their study focused on image-based memes and underlined the fact that the visual structures of memes are as important as their linguistic structures. They argued that, oftentimes, photo-based memes possess a clear visual frame that viewers can easily recognise and understand (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 592). They also developed the concept of the discourse viewpoint space, which is similar to the mutual contextual beliefs proposed by Grundlingh (2018). Since memes are used as a tool for online conversation, understanding the public to which they are addressed and their beliefs is very important. A significant degree of intersubjectivity between participants is assumed when memes are circulated; memes "rely […] on pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, and shift […] or manipulate [… a] viewpoint to achieve a new viewpoint construal, often an ironic one" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 568). This idea of intersubjectivity does not stop at the beliefs or stereotypes used in the first iteration of the meme; it is also assumed in the later iterations as memes "tend to form chains of successive responses and refashionings, recycling initial combinations to refer to new developments, current events, fashions, fads, and the like" (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 568). Memes thus reference real world events but also previous memes, forming complex networks of referentiality which demand a certain degree of intertextual knowledge to be correctly understood. Dancygier and Vandelanotte discussed one aspect of memes which exemplifies this complexity rather well: memes, especially photo-based memes, possess a metonymic quality, allowing them to go from multimodal to monomodal while still retaining their meaning. Thus, a single element of a meme can be used to refer to the whole construction in later iterations (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 580). The authors mentioned the example of *Scumbag Steve*, whose hat has been used on its own in later iterations while maintaining the "scumbag" implication (two examples are provided in figures 1 and 2 below).

Figure 1: Example of Scumbag Steve   *Figure 2: Example of Scumbag Hat*

Such a metonymic pattern is only possible due to the shared beliefs and recognisable frames and features used by meme creators. Construction grammar granted the authors an understanding of memes as

> not just sharing but co-creating of economically expressed, clever cultural artifacts, relying on ideas and emotions assumed to be shared or at least known by peers within a given discourse community, and they are shared precisely to elicit responses (likes, tags, comments) and further iterations, in a creative cycle both creating and sustaining the discourse community. (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017: 594)

Thus, the authors underlined the importance of understanding memes in their broader cultural context and the reasons why internet users are prone to use them in their conversations.

The contrast with older memetic approaches is quite clear as both the cultural context and individual agency are put at the forefront of more recent meme studies. In addition, the importance of intersubjectivity between the different participants of the online discourse has been highlighted. Successful memes, whether they are mono- or multimodal, evolve within a shared knowledge sphere where individuals can easily align themselves with, or at least understand, the messages being conveyed. This assumed common ground is essential for the spread and longevity of memes. It will be harder for a meme with very niche referentiality to spread to a broader audience, whereas memes referring to widely known world events, pop culture artefacts or stereotypes will be part of many people's shared knowledge or beliefs and will thus spread more easily.

Zenner and Geeraerts (2018) also applied construction grammar and cognitive pragmatics to the study of memes. An important idea coming out of their work is 'meme literacy'. As they mentioned, "many memes only make sense when the recipient has sufficient experience with Internet memes" (Zenner & Geeraerts 2018: 172). This idea is tied to Cannizzaro's (2016) meaning paths and Grundlingh's (2018) mutual contextual beliefs; the contextualisation of a meme is essential to its understanding and its understanding is tied to its "respect" of the constraints formed by netizens' expectations. Furthermore, as pointed out by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017), memes have become more and more prevalent in online discourse, and they build on each other, asking netizens to be aware of previous iterations in order to successfully understand newer ones. A certain level of meme literacy is thus imperative in order to understand and participate in memetic conversations.

Authors such as Shifman (2014b), Milner (2016) and Wiggins (2019) have pushed the analysis a bit further and considered memes genres rather than signs. Shifman (2014b: 342) proposed that "if memes are collections of texts, meme *genres* are collections of collections". Her explanation of memes as collections of texts comes from the fact that a meme's very nature is to have several iterations, birthed through remixes. Thus, iterations of an Image Macro like *Success Kid*, such as those in Figures 3 and 4, for example, constitute the collection of texts that form the *Success Kid* meme, and the collection that is the S*uccess Kid* meme is itself part of the collection of what is called the Image Macro genre.
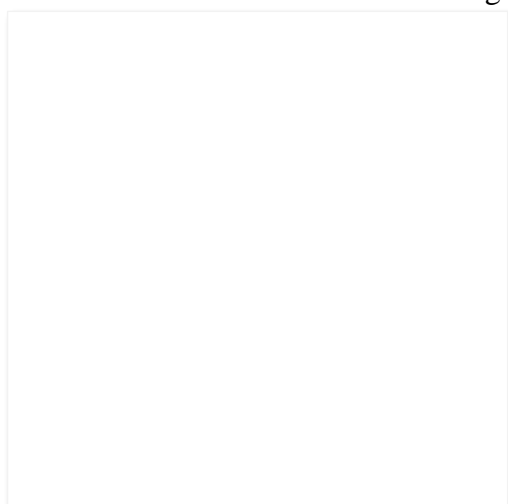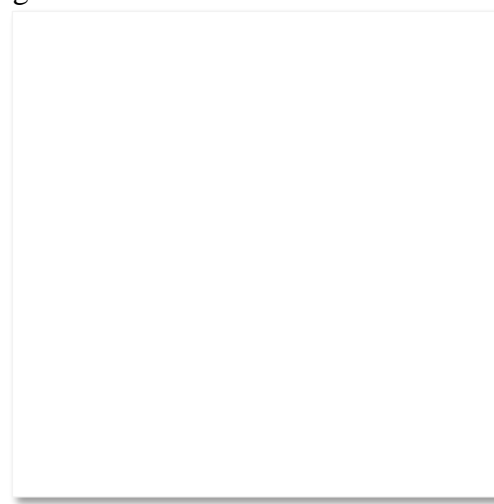
Figure 3: Example of Success Kid

Figure 4: Other example of Success Kid

Shifman (2014b: 355) continued her argument by saying that:

> Memes' invitation to further action is intrinsically reflexive, or hypersignificant: in order to create a new instance of a meme [...], one must acknowledge the textual category in which s/he operates, and must also publicly signify this acknowledgment by adhering to specific generic rules [...]. Since the process of

imitation relates to a coded template - and not only to semantic meanings - the code
is always there, foregrounded.

The different iterations of a meme can be successful as long as the creator knows which meme they are appropriating and what the tacit rules of its remixing are. This must also be clear to the viewer of the meme so that the inference process can be successful. In this sense, creative paths and meme genres are somewhat the same (Shifman 2014a: 99). In the case of classic Image Macro memes such as *Success Kid*, the rules and structures are quite straightforward. In order to make a new iteration of *Success Kid*, the internet user must keep the child's picture (*Success Kid* himself), the background and the top-text bottom-text layout. The text must also follow the two-fold principle of a 'bad' situation ending in a favourable outcome. These are the elements necessary to recognise a *Success Kid* iteration. Image Macros as a whole need the same kind of elements: a picture on a background and a two-fold storyline often with a twist and a punchline.

With regard to the replication and circulation of memes, Shifman underlined the idea that people can replicate different aspects of a meme. She names three: content (the ideas and ideologies conveyed by a text), form (the physical manifestation of the message, what we perceive with our senses) and stance (the information memes convey about the position of the creator towards the text, the linguistics codes used and the recipients of the meme) (Shifman 2014a: 40). In the case of Image Macros, with the example of *Success Kid*, the content can refer to the two-fold idea of a bad situation ending in a favourable outcome; the form is the combination of the coloured background, the child's picture and the top-text/bottom-text; and the stance is the position the creator adopts towards the situation. (More specifically, the creator conveys what they see as favourable or unfavourable situations through the meme, and assumes recipients of the meme will agree). It is worth mentioning that this classic Image Macro structure, while still around, is now quite outdated. Much more complex multimodal constructions, such as Object Labelling, are now favoured by internet users. However, no matter the complexity of the construction, some generic rules still underlie the making of most meme genres. This is an aspect which will be developed in greater detail later in section 4 of this study.

Milner (2016) focused on memes as broader social practices, rather than the memes themselves as artefacts. For him, "an individual tweet or image or mashup or video isn't in and of itself a *meme*, though it may be *memetic* in its connection to other tweet, images, mashups and videos, and it may *memetically* spread along others of its kind" (Milner 2016: 3). While he defined 'meme' as a genre and broke it down into loose subgenres (memetic phrases, memetic videos, memetic performances and memetic images), he also took the importance of individual

agency into consideration, as well as "the ways participants memetically make their world through their mediated creations, circulations, and transformations, even as typologies, genres, and individual texts flux and flow" (Milner 2016: 18). According to Milner, even within this flux and flow, memetic participation follows five fundamental logics: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism and spread. All of these fundamentals are neither new nor specific to memetic participation. However, it is their interrelationship that blends the textual and social together that is interesting. Milner proposed viewing memes as an online lingua franca, explaining that "memetic logics and grammar underscore a lingua franca—a shared social vernacular prevalent within and across participatory media collectives" (Milner 2016: 84). Building on the idea of memes as social practices, he suggested that memes are "a participatory means of 'making do', of cultural participants poaching from the texts and conversations around them for their own expression" (Milner 2016: 40). Furthermore, "they are exemplary of a media ecology that blurs vernacular conversation and creative production" (Milner 2016: 41).

Both Milner and Shifman linked memes with Burgess' (2007) idea of vernacular creativity, which refers to everyday innovative and artistic practices that can be carried out by simple production means (Shifman 2014a: 99). Although Shifman saw vernacular creativity as paths of creations for further iterations of memes and Milner linked it with his idea of memetic media as a lingua franca online, both authors agree that meme production and reproduction are excellent examples of the vernacular creativity used in online conversations. Netizens are most likely fluent in aspects of this online vernacular and can use memetic media to contribute to online (and sometimes offline) conversations. Memes have become a "language" commonly used by internet users to discuss worldly events, pop culture and so on in a humorous and efficient manner, specific to the particularities and affordances of the online world.

Wiggins (2019) showed a more ambivalent perception of memes; he found it useful to see memes as digital culture artefacts but does not deny memes as a genre of communication. He gave three reasons as to why seeing memes as artefacts is useful for their understanding and study: (1) they have a virtual physicality (meaning that they exist both in the human mind and in the digital space), (2) they have social and cultural roles in the current media landscape as "they are produced, reproduced, and transformed to reconstitute the social system" and (3) they are purposefully produced and consumed by the members of participatory digital culture (Wiggins 2019: 40). These three elements are good starting points in the study of memes and their role in our current social landscape. However, seeing memes as artefacts does not block the idea of them being used as a genre of communication. Wiggins based his definition of

memes as genre on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, arguing that a process has to be undergone for a single iteration of a digital artefact to become an internet meme. Giddens' theory is useful because he understood agency and structure to be closely related, stating that "social action is linked directly to the creation of rules and practices which recursively constitute the structure wherein social action takes place" (Wiggins 2019: 42). Wiggins (2019: 40) posited that "a meme, viewed as a genre, is not simply a formula followed by humans to communicate, but represents a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication", thus explaining that genres are central to the understanding of culture as they denote the cultural context in which communication takes place. Individuals are not just motivated by the act of communication but by the broader socio-cultural context in which a given conversation takes place. Thus, individual engagement and participation in digital culture both create and maintain the rules of such a system. With regard to meme creation, this means that "memes are enacted by agents participating in normalized social practices which recursively reconstitute the structure. This in turn makes it possible for further memetic creation as long as the practices are needed" (Wiggins 2019: 43). This ties back to Cannizzaro (2016) and Shifman's (2014) ideas of meaning and the creative paths followed by creators in order to ensure the spread of memes. By respecting previous iterations, creators cement the rules which new remixes must follow in order for the memetic communication to be successful. Additionally, Wiggins proposed a refinement of Shifman's (2014a) idea of stance, discussed previously. He argued that her definition of stance relied heavily on speech as she worked mainly on videos and that a more nuanced definition might be useful for image-based memes. He underlined that, in image-based memes, content and stance are merged as "the conveyance of ideas and ideologies occurs within deliberate semiotic and intertextual construction, especially with the absence of human speech" (Wiggins 2019: 15). Thus, content and stance are less distinct in image-based memes.

Wiggins (2019: 43) argued that genre development occurs in three phases: maintenance, elaboration and modification. These three stages have their own characteristics. The maintenance stage is equivalent to spreadable media (a term borrowed from Jenkins (2009)), which is digital media that can be spread as is, if the netizen so desires, while also being available for remixing. The next stage, elaboration, corresponds to what Wiggins calls emergent memes. Emergent memes are "altered spreadable media yet are not iterated and remixed further as separate contributions" (Wiggins 2019: 45), meaning they are the first remixes of spreadable media and have not yet been used as a means of further communication. The last stage in this process, modification, is what we understand as internet memes, following Shifman's (2014a)

definition. This stage is reached when the emergent meme has been widely spread and has received countless remixes, parodies, imitations, etc. Not all memes follow this evolution but many do. This conception of meme development provides an interesting frame for the study of internet memes. This will be useful for my analysis, as it provides a basis on which I can explain the development of certain memes.

This section has offered an overview of the study of memes. As shown, the original definition of the term is now obsolete and the field studying the phenomena has undergone quite a drastic change in its methods. These newer studies of memes tend to approach the subject through the lens of semiotics and have highlighted the necessity to understand memes within the broad cultural context in which they are created. Memes are not units of culture which can be studied in isolation, but rather part of a complex network of remixes and reappropriation. Concepts such as meme literacy, intention and inference, and vernacular creativity will be key for this study. For the sake of clarity, I reiterate that, when I refer to a 'meme' in this work, I will be using the modern conception of an internet meme, based on the definition given by Shifman (2014a). In the following part, I will be describing which method I will use for the present study.

2.2 Multimodality

This section presents the methodology that will be used in the present work as well as its link with internet memes. For this study, I have chosen to focus mainly on multimodality theory. Multimodality is a fundamental aspect of internet memes and it has become even more relevant with the development and complexification of recent memes. Multimodal theory is the best way to approach the question of internet memes as it accounts for the relationships between media, modes and the socio-cultural context in which communication takes place, all elements central to Web 2.0 participation and memetic creation.

2.2.1 A brief history of multimodality

The desire to account for the potential meaning of modes other than language can be traced back to before the internet, to the 1930s-40s when the Prague School decided to extend linguistics into the visual arts and theatre. The Paris School followed in the 1960s, applying structuralist semiotic linguistics to modes other than language, namely popular culture and mass media. One of the most notable works to come out of this idea was Barthes' (1977) work on visual images and fashion. Barthes argued that "contemporary imagery, [...] has established a 'veritable lexicon' of objects that function as 'inducers of accepted ideas'" (Barthes 1977: 23,

qtd in van Leeuwen 2015: 448). In this same work, he defined three possible relationships between text and image: (1) anchors (the text anchors the image), (2) illustration (the image illustrates the text) and (3) relay (image and text complement each other) (van Leeuwen 2015: 448). These three relationships are still used nowadays.

At approximately the same time as Barthes, the Sydney School, inspired by the work of Michael Halliday, proposed that "'grammars' for non-linguistic semiotic modes assume that meanings belong to culture rather than to specific modes, and that any given communicative function or meaning can in principle be realized in any semiotic mode, albeit by different signifiers" (van Leeuwen 2015: 449). Halliday's (1978) book *Language as Social Semiotics* proposed a theory of language based on the idea of meaning as choice, strengthening the idea that the meaning ascribed to different modes is culturally constructed and that language is influenced by the way people use it. Building on this idea, Kress (1997) introduced the idea of the 'motivated sign', underlining the importance of the social aspect of meaning (Jewitt 2013: 252). Multimodality puts a lot of emphasis on the context of utterance, regardless of the modes studied, precisely because the context will influence the choices people make regarding the modes they have access to and select in order to communicate (Jewitt 2013: 252).

Jewitt (2013) provided a good overview of some of the fundamental concepts used in multimodality. All of these concepts are still relevant to this day. First is 'mode'. Modes are "a set of socially and culturally shaped resources for making meaning" (Jewitt 2013: 253). A mode is recognized as such when it becomes a known and usable means of communication in a community. For example, language (written or spoken) is recognized as a mode in most communities. Additionally, modes are "created through social processes, fluid and subject to change - not autonomous and fixed" (Jewitt 2013: 253), which means that new modes can emerge while others are progressively abandoned. Well-established modes are, for example, language, images, sounds, gestures, music and so on, they are all used in our societies to make and convey meaning.

In contrast, semiotic resources are "a means of meaning making that is simultaneously a material, social and cultural resource" (Jewitt 2013: 253). Semiotic resources are what we use to communicate, be they physiological elements like the vocal apparatus or gestures, or technological tools like pens, ink or computer software. In addition, different semiotic resources have different "meaning potentials" depending on their previous uses (van Leeuwen 2005, qtd. in Jewitt 2013: 253). These resources are constantly evolving as they are tied to their actual use in contextualised communication. As an example, the vocal apparatus can be used to speak or to sing, two different modes of communication.

The term 'materiality' refers to "how modes are taken to be the product of the work of social agents shaping material, physical 'stuff' into cultural semiotic resources" (Jewitt 2013: 254). Materiality refers to the in-world, physical realisation of the modes. For example, a song is the physical realisation of the mode of singing, using the vocal apparatus as a semiotic resource.

Another important concept is the modal affordance. This term was originally coined by James Gibson (1979), who defined affordance as "the 'action possibilities' latent in an environment" (Jewitt 2013: 254). Kress adapted the term for multimodality, defining it as the possible meanings brought up by a mode, based on the previous (social, historical, etc.) uses of the mode and following the logics of the mode (sequentiality in speech, for example). Thus, the mode of singing is accompanied by the notion, the meaning, of emotionality.

A combination of modes to convey a message can be called a multimodal ensemble. While several modes can be used together, each mode might not carry the same amount of meaning. Thus, "multimodal ensembles can therefore be seen as a material outcome or trace of the social context, available modes and modal affordances, the technology available and the agency of an individual" (Jewitt 2013: 255). The choice of the combination of modes will depend on the context and on the message an individual wishes to convey, as well as the semiotic resources available at the time of communication. This is particularly relevant for the multimodal memes I aim to analyse. They are a very good example of multimodal ensemble as they generally use a combination of text and image to convey meaning.

Finally, as mentioned previously, multimodality is based on the idea of meaning as function or social action, and how individuals choose and arrange resources to convey their messages. These choices are motivated by three types of meaning choices, or meta-functions:

1. 'Ideational meaning' refers to choices related to how people realise content meaning and which resource(s) they choose.
2. 'Interpersonal meaning' deals with choices related to how people represent their social relationship with others.
3. 'Textual or organisational meaning' corresponds to the choices of resources like space, layout and rhythm used to organise their texts or iterations.

These meta-functions coexist; these meaning choices are often made simultaneously in communication (Jewitt 2013: 255-256). All of these elements are essential in order to understand a multimodal artefact. However, while these elements are core to any multimodal artefact study, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) have described overarching logics which rule over multimodality more broadly.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) provided a very complete and detailed description of the fundamental concepts of multimodality. They based themselves on Halliday's (1978, 1985) four strata of functional linguistics — discourse, design, production and distribution — but abandon the idea of these strata being hierarchical. Kress and van Leeuwen described 'discourse' as forms of knowledge about reality (who, what, where and when an event takes place) that are socially situated, as well as related sets of evaluations, purposes, interpretations and legitimations about the events constituting this reality. People have access to several discourses with regard to different aspects of reality and they use the one they deem most appropriate for the situation in which they are (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 20-21). 'Designs' are the abstract ideas of the form of semiotic products and events. This encompasses three things: "(1) a formulation of a discourse or a combination of discourses, (2) a particular interaction in which the discourse is embedded and (3) a particular way of combining semiotic modes" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21). It is not yet the tangible actualisation of these discourses and semiotic modes; rather, it is the blueprint. 'Production' is the actualisation of designs. It gives meaning to the designs through their physical articulation and through the physicality of the modes and materials selected to enact the designs. For example, meaning in production can come from the choice of colour and format used by a painter or from the gestures involved in speech production (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21). Finally, the last stratum is 'distribution'. Distribution is linked to modern technologies as it "refers to the technical 're-coding' of semiotic products and events, for purpose of recording (e.g. tape recording, digital recording) and/or distribution (e.g. radio and television transmission, telephony)" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21). One may think that distribution does not involve the production of meaning; however, certain distribution technologies may acquire semiotic potential with time, as is the case with, for example, the discoloration of old photographs or the scratching sound of vinyl (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 21). All of these strata, while not hierarchical, are still somewhat sequential. It is indeed difficult for production to take place without a design and for distribution to exist without production.

Kress and van Leeuwen also insisted on the distinction between mode and medium. For them, 'mode' corresponds to the content side of communication while 'medium' is on the expression side. It means that modes are "semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter) action", while media "are the material resources used in the production of the semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used (e.g. the musical instrument and air; the chisel and the block of wood)" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 22). Media become modes once their process of semiosis becomes more

abstract and they lose their attachment to a specific material realisation, gaining instead grammars and broader rules.

All of these different elements are pertinent to the study of internet memes as they establish a foundation and give directions through which different instances of memetic discourse can be studied. Aspects such as production are of particular interest as netizens' choice of possible media to actualise their discourse is generally very broad. My work, which focuses on multimodal memes, mostly image-based memes, will draw from these different aspects in order to understand the choices made by internet users, a framework utilized by authors like Salway and Martinec (2005) and Yus (2019), who have applied multimodality specifically to the interactions between text and image.

Salway and Martinec (2005) highlighted the importance in understanding the relationship between text and image in the context of multimedia communication which is particularly prevalent in the 21st century. While using notions from Barthes (1977) and Halliday (1994), the authors also proposed two specific image-text relationships: status relations and logico-semantic relations. They described status relations as "the relative importance of the text and the image, or the dependence of one to the other" and explained that this relationship can be equal (i.e. both the image and the text are equally necessary or both the image and the text can be understood independently) or unequal (i.e. either the image or the text can be understood individually; if one needs the other, it is subordinate) (Salway & Martinec 2005: sec 3.2). Logico-semantic relations were described as "the functions that images and texts serve for one another" (Salway & Martinec 2005: sec 3.2). These logico-semantic relations can have three functions: elaboration (a photo can elaborate a text, i.e. it can give details not mentioned in the text such as the appearance of people, etc., or vice-versa), extension (a text extends the meaning of a picture, or vice-versa, by adding new information) and enhancement (a text can enhance the meaning of an image, or vice-versa, qualifying it by referring to time, place or cause/effect) (Salway & Martinec 2005: sec 3.2.1). These image-text relations come as additions to the typology first formulated by Halliday (1994) and Barthes (1977). This study of the different relations between text and image was proposed mostly with regard to news articles; however, the logic of it can be applied to memetic discourse since it also uses different types of relationships between text and image.

Yus (2019) applied the logics of multimodality and cognitive pragmatics, informed by Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) relevance theory, to image-based memes, specifically to account for what he calls 'meme processing strategies'. He stated that "multimodality is becoming increasingly important nowadays due to the pervasiveness of discourses on the

internet that combine different modes of communication (text, pictures, audio, video, etc.)" (Yus 2019: 106). And indeed, as memes have become core constituents of online discourse on many platforms, the use of multimodality seems unavoidable. This highlights the interest of using relevance theory in the study of memes as the underlying hypothesis of this theory, which posits "that interpreting a stimuli (verbal or nonverbal communicative acts) is subject to an inherently human search for relevance in the information that we process, an aspect that is rooted in human psychology" (Yus 2011: 3) is relevant in the case of multimodal memes. Yus explained that, just as we have explicit and implicit interpretations (explicature or implicature) when encountering verbal utterances, we can also make inferential hypotheses regarding the role of the image in a meme (Yus 2019: 107-108). As such, the picture in a meme can be a visual explicature in which the image has a denotative quality (i.e. the user does not have to infer anything from the picture) or it can be a visual implicature, in which case the image will have a connotative quality (i.e. the user will need to take the context in which this image is used into account to understand the whole construction) (Yus 2019: 107). This ties in with Grundlingh's (2018) mention of the importance of intention and inference. Yus explained that "interpreting a meme entails a 'division of labor' between the processing of the text, the processing of the picture, and the identification of possible connotative meanings for text, picture, and text-picture combinations" (Yus 2019: 108); once the initial processing of the different elements has been achieved, it is possible, even common, that inferential backtracking and reinterpretation are needed in order to fully understand the complete meaning. He also highlighted that the understanding of the text, image and their combined meaning "entails a kind of iconic literacy" (Yus 2019: 109). This 'iconic literacy' can be linked with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) idea of a visual literacy and Zenner and Geeraerts' (2018) idea of meme literacy. The crux of such concepts is that the more knowledgeable a user is about established visual conventions and patterns (and/or meme frames), the easier it will be for them to understand and, in the case of memes, to reproduce and transform these multimodal compositions.

In addition to this iconic literacy, knowledge of context is also extremely important. Numerous memes are born from pop culture, news reports, current world events, etc., which means that in order to fully and "correctly" process a meme, an individual must have strong background knowledge of the events happening at the time of its creation (Yus 2019: 109). In addition to the cultural background and identification of an image's referent, the processing of a meme is also conditioned by the reading paths created by its composition. Yus referred to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) use of the idea of salience, noting that "reading paths are

mainly created by differences in *salience* and depend on the textual or visual element that attract the reader's or viewer's attention over and above other elements" (Yus 2019: 110, citing Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 218). Thus, while a lot of memes follow the top-bottom paths of reading common in older Image Macro memes, this can be disrupted by visual elements like the size of the objects depicted, colors, fonts, etc. Many possible image-text relationships exist in memes and while common types such as classic Image Macros exist, the development of memes, as well as tools to create them, continue to complexify these relationships to this day.

This brief overview of the main concepts of multimodality has highlighted why it is a fundamental method for understanding internet memes. This theory accounts for the relationships between text and image, which is a central aspect of the newer meme genres. Furthermore, multimodality understands semiotic signs as motivated, created for specific communicational contexts and, as we will see, it is a key principle of memetic conversations. This aspect, in turn, explains the need to understand the process of inference taking place in the creation and circulation of memes.

Additionally, multimodality allows researchers to draw from different fields in order to propose relevant insights; I will thus liberally use theories and methods that seem compatible with my aims. As the study of memes is still a relatively young field, focused on an ever-changing object, it is, in my opinion, necessary to remain flexible with regard to the methodologies used during analysis.

3 Method

This section presents my data collection process, as well as the subsequent division of the data set into categories for analysis. I start with a brief introduction to Tumblr, the platform on which my data was collected. Then, I explain the data collection process and its logics before finally classifying my data in order to facilitate the analysis.

3.1 What is Tumblr and why look there?

While memes are now present on and across most online platforms, my work will focus on Tumblr. I have chosen this platform since it is the social network I am most familiar with; as explained previously, possessing contextual knowledge is crucial in order to understand memes and their circulation. Thus, focusing on a platform which is familiar to me seems like the judicious choice. It allows me to have an in-group member approach to data collection and analysis. Furthermore, Tumblr is often mentioned as being a hub for meme creation and circulation (Shifman 2014: 13; Milner 2016: 8).

Tumblr is a microblogging and social networking platform that was created in 2007 by David Karp. It is available as both a website and an application. Tumblr allows its users to post texts, images, videos and audio in short blog-type posts. Users can follow others and in turn be followed, or have the possibility to make their blog private. One can access most of Tumblr's features from the dashboard, presented below.
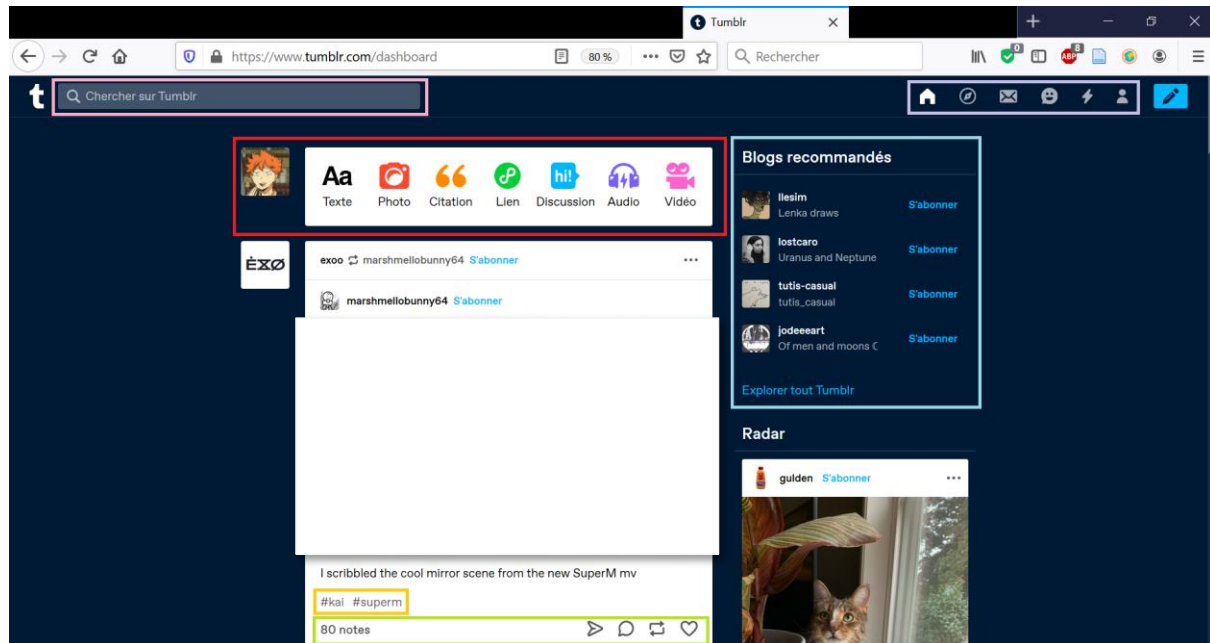

Figure 5: Screenshot of my dashboard.

Figure 5 is a screenshot from my personal dashboard with all of its features. At the very top left, outlined in pink, is the search bar, which allows users to look for blogs, posts and keywords within Tumblr. On the top right, framed in lilac, are the basic tools for one's blog. The house leads to the dashboard, the compass takes the user to an 'explore' page, the envelope manages messages and 'asks' a user can receive from others, the little speech bubble is the chat interface, the lightning bolt signals to the users when their posts gain notes (likes or reblogs from other users) and the little bust encompasses the basic settings for one's personal blog and eventual side-blogs. In red are the tools available for the creation of a new post. Under these tools is a post reblogged by a user (exoo), who I follow. The original poster (marshmellobunny64) chose to post an illustration accompanied by a line of text that serves as a caption. The tags assigned to this post by the user who reblogged it (in this case, exoo) are outlined in yellow. Each time a user reblogs a post, they have the possibility to add their own tags or leave the section blank. The green box highlights the number of notes the post has received and the different actions available to users in regard to this post. In order, the arrow allows users to share this post on other platforms, the speech bubble allows them to leave a comment, the is the reblog button

which allows users to put the post on their blog and make it visible to their followers on their dashboards, and lastly the heart is the 'like' function. Posts can be liked without being reblogged to one's blog and vice-versa; the difference is that a reblogged post will be spread further. In addition, Tumblr recommends blogs based on one's activity, here seen framed in blue. Thus, Tumblr offers a wide array of possible actions to their users, facilitating the circulations of items ranging from text posts to illustrations and videos.

While the site had over 500 million visitors at the beginning of 2016, this number significantly decreased after December 2018. As of August 2020, Tumblr registers fewer than 320 million visitors (https://www.similarweb.com/website/tumblr.com/, accessed September 2020). December 2018 marked a turning point for the platform as its then-parent company Verizon decided to ban all adult content in an effort to purge porn bots and eradicate the presence of child pornography, which had caused the app to be banned from the AppStore (Romano 2019: para. 9). The algorithm used to detect what was considered "adult content" was, and still is, however, overzealous, targeting completely innocent posts. As artists' entire blogs were flagged as inappropriate, many users chose to move away and the platform lost about 30% of its user base in the following months (Romano 2019: para. 9). What is sometimes referred to as "the Purge" by users was overall unsuccessful; Tumblr does not bustle with activity as it once did while porn bots still clutter the site. This "purging" of the site was mainly motivated by Verizon's need for profit; however, it is worth noting that Tumblr has never been profitable for any of its owners (Yahoo!, who bought it from Karp in 2013, Oath from 2017 to 2019, Verizon Media in 2019, and finally Automattic as of 2019) as each of these companies has tried and, so far, failed at making a profitable website out of the platform. This lack of profitability is probably due to the fact that Tumblr users' primary interest lies in the enjoyment of "Internet culture" and the user base is relatively young (Feldman 2018). It is this centrality of Internet culture that makes Tumblr a perfect source of data for the present study.

Several of Tumblr's affordances, while non-efficient for profit-making, set it apart from other social media or microblogging platforms and encourage the proliferation of internet culture items such as multimodal memes. Firstly, Tumblr allows users to be fully anonymous; only an email address and a password are needed to create a blog. Tumblr also does not publicly display the number of followers an account has; only the person in charge of the blog can access this information. This means that Tumblr does not foreground individuals but rather the content they post on the website. This means that it can be hard for a person to gain extreme popularity or massive following in the manner of influencers found on other platforms such as Instagram or Twitter. Furthermore, contrary to other platforms like Twitter, for example, the visual

distinction between an original post and a reblog is slight, which reinforces the participatory and community-oriented nature of the platform.

Secondly, Tumblr features an 'explore' page, as well as a search bar. The search bar can be used to look up specific keywords or tags and it will open a page containing associated tags, recommended blogs and posts tagged with the keyword searched. Users can then search for new blogs to follow or simply posts that might not show up on their dashboard but are still related to their interests.
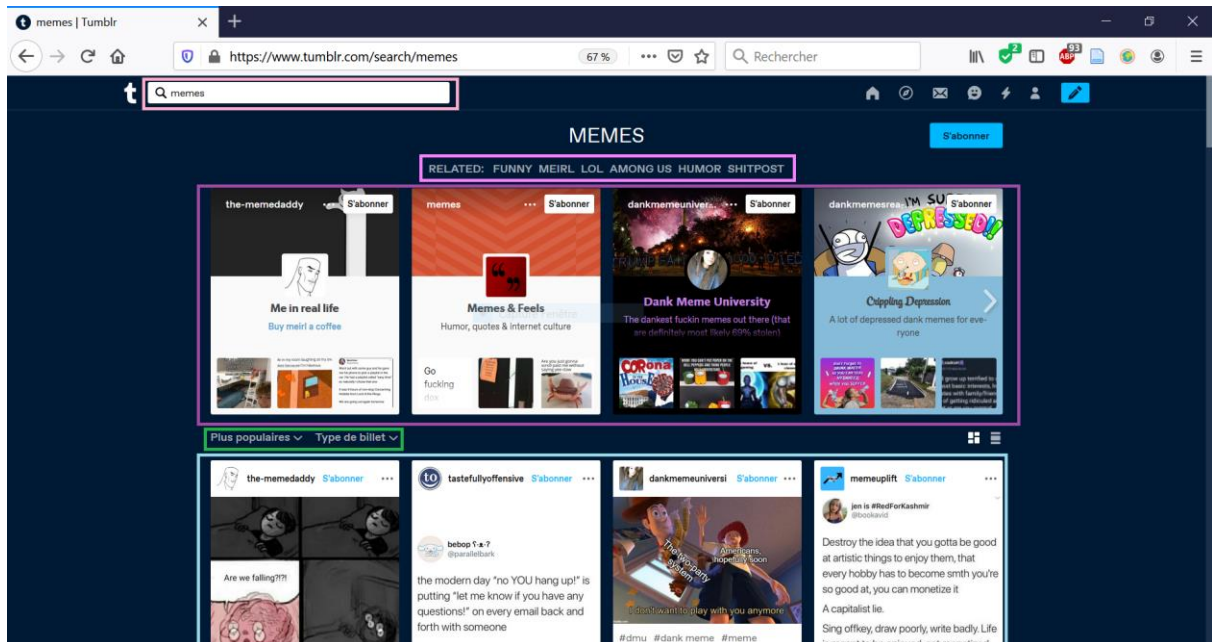
Figure 6: Screenshot of the search page.

Above is an example of the search page showing up when typing the keyword "memes" in the search bar (here framed in light pink). Tumblr proposes related keywords, framed in hot pink, relevant blogs (i.e. blogs posting a lot of posts tagged with the keyword "memes") framed in purple and various posts tagged with "memes", framed in light blue. Users are able to refine their search with the tools framed in green. They can choose to see the most popular posts or the more recent ones and they can filter the results by types of posts (text, image, video, etc.). This search page offers the possibility for Tumblr users to find content that may not appear on their dashboard and thus boosts content sharing.

A third Tumblr feature that plays a crucial role in its prominence as a hub for internet culture is the chronological timeline. Unlike other social media that use algorithmic timelines, generally showing the most popular posts first, Tumblr keeps posts in order of creation. This is an important feature as it allows users to observe the birth and development of discourse, memes, commentary, etc. One of the main features of Tumblr, the 'reblog', allows users to contribute to other bloggers' posts by adding their responses, be it textually or with images,

GIFs, videos, etc. Thus, it grants users the possibility to build full conversations while using multimodal resources. This aspect is very interesting for me as it allows me to see memes used in conversations and how the different modes available are used to share messages.

3.2 Data

This section of my thesis is divided into two parts. In the first subsection, I present my data collection process. In the second subsection, I describe how I divided my data into different categories in order to facilitate the analysis.

3.2.1 Data collection

My data was collected from my personal dashboard as well as from the search page over the span of two months, starting from July 22, 2020 and ending on September 22, 2020. All data was reblogged to the dedicated side-blog (https://datacollectionforuni.tumblr.com/) where it can easily be accessed. I am interested in multimodal constructions, more specifically in text-image combinations. Thus, I have focused my data collection on posts which consist of instances of image-based memes. I decided to, as much as possible, ignore memes that were screenshotted from other websites and posted without modification. This choice was made because this work aims to see how Tumblr users use different modes to create and remix memes in order to participate in online discourse. While these screenshots can certainly be discussed in the broad context of memes' circulation and conversation, I have elected to not focus on them in the present study as they do not represent Tumblr users' active engagement. Posts that were taken into account were reblogged to the side blog and organised with tags. Each post collected was tagged with the date, the mention #outofdash if the meme was collected outside of my dashboard through the search page, the source of the image (random/stock photos, movie/anime/TV show screenshots and video (such as YouTube videos, Vines, etc.) and the type of meme (Object Labelling, subtitle change, Blank Filling, Redraw and Deconstructed). It is important to note that these "types" of memes are not strict categories and often overlap. They will be defined and refined in the following sections of this work.

I approached my data collection as an in-group member. No particular ethical measures were taken because, as mentioned previously, Tumblr users are fully anonymous as long as they want to be and meme authorship is rarely relevant. It is very important to underline that my data is strongly biased towards my own interests as it is the very nature of Tumblr and the data was collected from the blogs I follow. I deem it an acceptable facet in regard to the scope of the present study. I am indeed aiming for a qualitative study, interested in the format of the

memes and how they are used in communication. Thus, collecting data within my realm of interests allows me to be confident in the analysis of the memes collected, their referentiality and their meaning in context.

It may also be worth mentioning that 2020 was not a good year for memes. While the beginning of the year saw its fair share of World War III (resulting from the tensions between Donald Trump and Iran, shown in Figure 7), coronavirus (when confinement and quarantine around the world were just starting, shown in Figure 8) and "nature is healing" memes (mocking the headlines pointing out how wildlife returned to urban areas and their use by ecofascists to say that "humans are the virus", shown in Figure 9), memetic production slowed down as people were faced with more serious socio-political situations.

Figure 7: Example of WW3 meme.
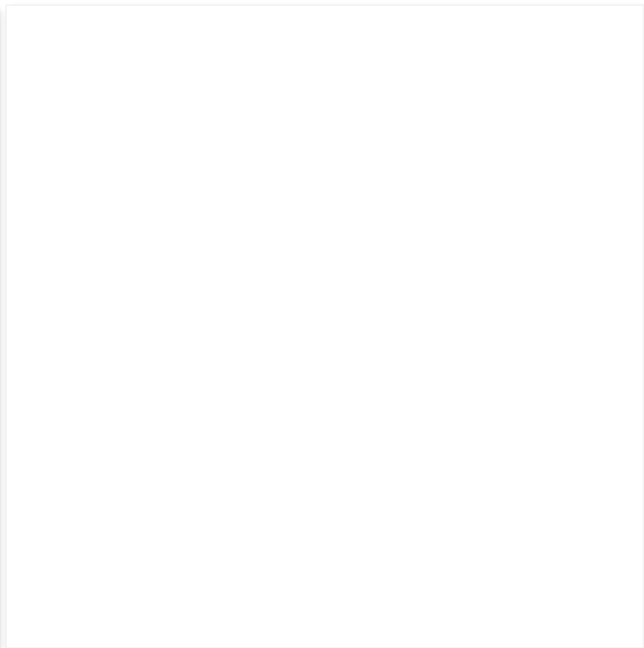
Figure 8: Example of COVID meme.
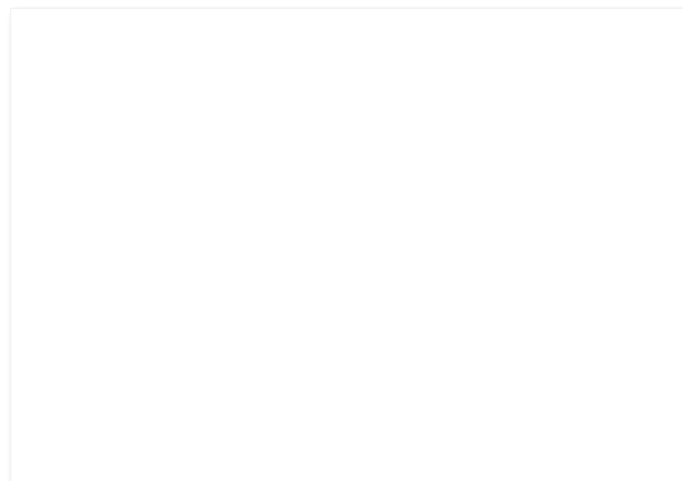
Figure 9: Example of "nature is healing" meme.

The Black Lives Matter movement, which boomed following the murder of George Floyd in May, marked an interesting shift in the online discourse. Energy that was generally "spent" on making memes seemingly shifted to the spread of valuable information (anti-racist literature and audio-visual resources, protest etiquette, bail funds links, etc.). Additionally, the tag #BlackLivesMatter had been trending at number one on Tumblr since May, and was still ongoing as of October 2020. These offline events had an impact of how memes were developed and circulated during the data collection period: memes did not completely disappear but their production and spread clearly decreased.

Tumblr was a good example of this slowing down. In a "typical" year, Tumblr has at least one, and sometimes several, monthly memes: memes which rise in popularity and spread massively throughout the website and across other networks before fading and giving rise to the next one. (It is not uncommon to see screenshots of Tumblr posts circulating on Instagram and Twitter.) In 2020, however, popular memes were rare if not non-existent for most of the late spring and summer. If I were to propose a hypothesis as to why, I would say that popular memes are based on world events, globally popular blockbusters or TV shows and such. The world events of 2020 were numerous and of such gravity that they were not easily "memeable". Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic blocked access to cinemas and halted the production of movies, reducing the availability of the more "memable" content of past years (as with the Marvel movies, for example). Memes were thus mostly found in smaller fandom spaces, and were created in relation to specific media (TV shows, anime, movies, etc.), in more restricted communities. This explains why a significant portion of the data has been labelled #outofdash: in order to find instances of memes, I had to look for them in specific networks, for the most part unrelated to global socio-political events.

For this study, I will not analyse each meme collected in detail. Instead, I will provide an overview of the data set and then choose posts representative of the different types of multimodal memes often encountered on Tumblr for in-depth analysis. The data collection process was conducted as a way to gain insight into the different types of visual memes currently in circulation. While the content of the memes and their contextual meaning might target precise subjects or events, I will argue that the formats or genres of memes are present across the internet. Thus, while my data is biased, it can still give an idea of the popular meme formats present at the moment. It is worth mentioning that data collection for meme studies is rather tricky as they are such a fluid phenomenon and move rapidly across multiple platforms. The replicability of the data collection process for memes is jeopardised by the constant modification of online spaces and social media. Oftentimes, articles dealing with memes will

omit a description of their data collection process or will simply pick and choose specific memes they deem interesting. My work follows this trend; while I have a corpus, only specific examples will be discussed in detail.

3.2.2 Data categorisation

As mentioned previously, while collecting my data, I organised it according to different visual sources and the different types or genres of meme formed from these sources. In order to provide a coherent analysis, I have divided the data into four types of visual memes. Another possibility would have been to classify them with regard to their sources (random/stock pictures, movies/anime/TV show, videos, etc.); however, as I am interested in the modifications of these sources, it is more useful to approach my data according to the way users build on these images to create their own meanings. Ergo, there are four types which are presented below: (1) Object Labelling, (2) Blank Filling, (3) Text Changing and (4) Deconstructed memes. As of now, only Object Labelling has received scholarly attention. To my knowledge, the other three genres have not been studied yet and their names are my personal suggestion.

The first three types can be considered newer sub-genres of Image Macros as they consist in the addition of text or images to a template. Diagram 1, below, describes Object Labelling, Blank Filling and Text Changing.
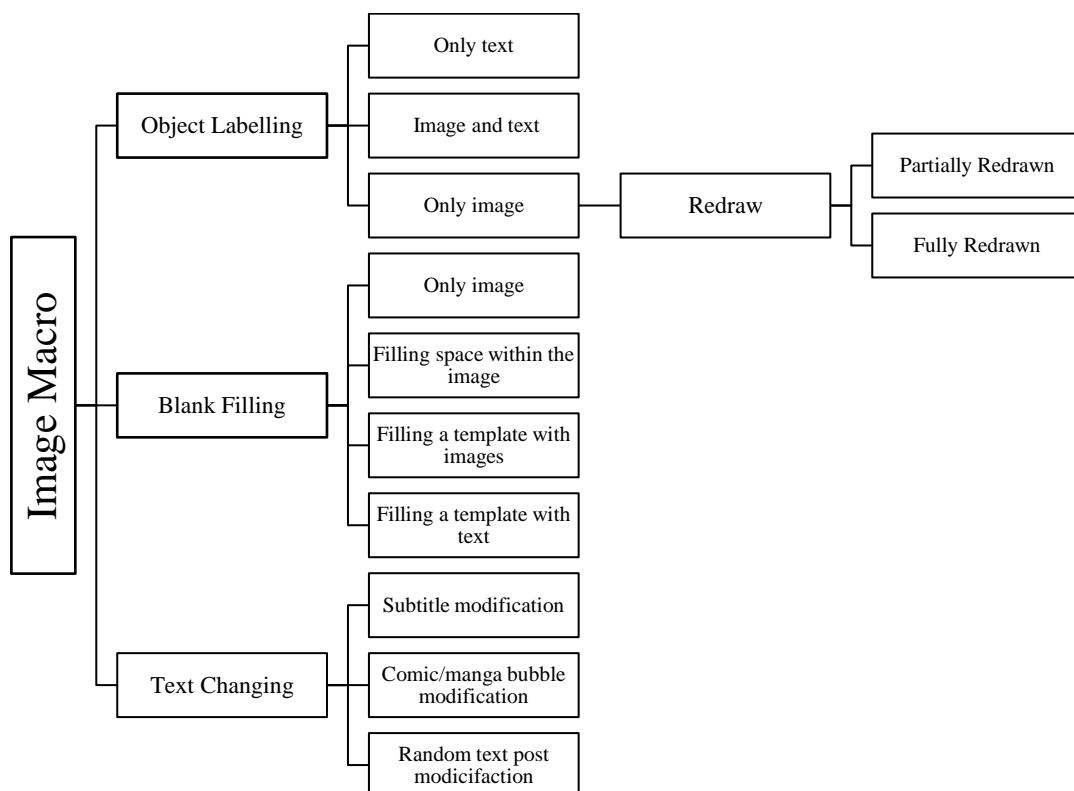
Diagram 1: Object Labelling, Blank Filling and Text Changing.

The first two types, (1) Object Labelling and (2) Blank Filling, are closely related in my eyes. Object Labelling is, as its name indicates, a meme genre based on the labelling of different "objects" (people, animals, objects, etc.) within a picture or GIF. This genre is said to have originated in 2012 with the Console War that occurred at the year's E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) where Xbox, PlayStation and Nintendo vied for the public's attention.[2] Internet users circulated animated GIFs labelled with the names of the companies, representing the ongoing "fight".
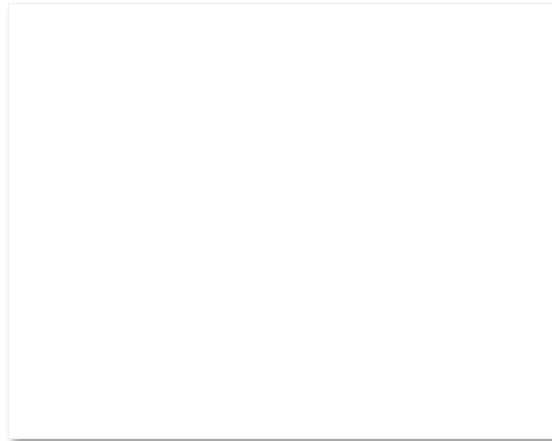
Figure 10: An example of Object Labelling from the Console War.

The genre gained popularity in the late 2010s with several "sub-genre" iterations like *Respecting Women*[3] (Figure 11) and, more recently, the well-known *Distracted Boyfriend*[4] (Figure 12).
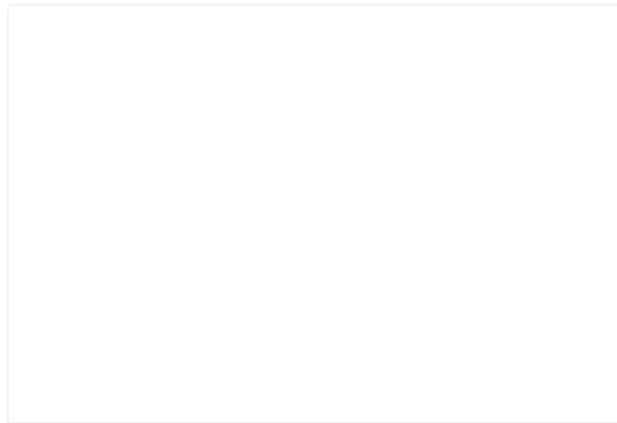
Figure 11:Respecting women (Object Labelling).

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[2] Object Labelling, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2012, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/object-labeling
[3] Respecting women, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2016 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/respect-women
[4] Distracted Boyfriend, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2017 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend
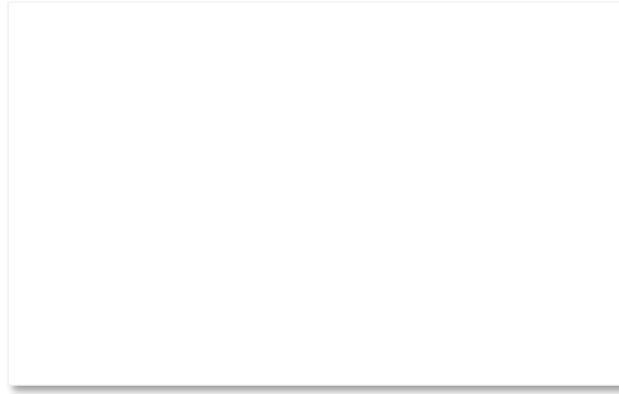
Figure 12: Distracted boyfriend (Object Labelling).

Distracted Boyfriend in particular became a standard[5] template for Object Labelling and is still being circulated, just not to the same degree as it first was. Object Labelling has also further evolved into a sub-category that I am calling "Redraw". As its name indicates, rather than pasting images on the pictures they wish to label, art-savvy users have decided to redraw parts of the meme in order to label it.

The second type of meme that I will discuss is the Blank Filling type. It is a name that I have formulated myself while collecting my data, unlike Object Labelling, which is already an established name. Several types of images fit under this label, as presented in diagram 1 above. However, a common principle is present in all of them: there is a blank, either within the original image or created by a template, and it is up to users to fill in this blank according to the message they wish to convey, following the tacit rules of the chosen blank to fill. Quite often, the templates and images to be "filled" become standard and easily recognisable by internet users, exemplified in Figure 13.
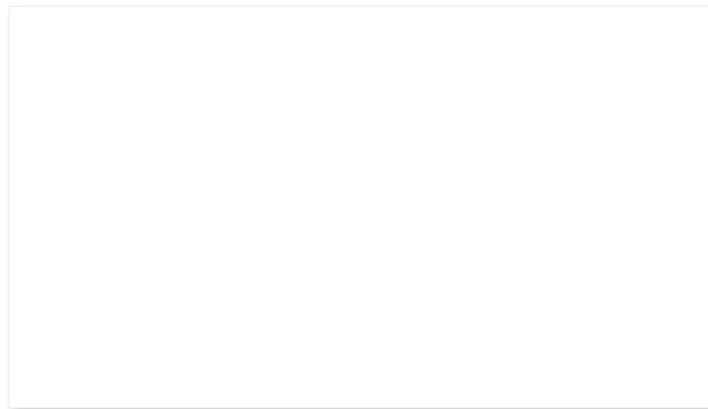
Figure 13: Example of Blank Filling.

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[5] Standard here is to be understood in the way Grundlingh (2018) discussed it. As she explained, "a standard meme refers to a meme that becomes well known and is frequently used by the internet community as a whole" (Grundlingh 2018: 154).

I understand the Blank Filling type as separate but a closely related to the Object Labelling type. Both formats function by following the principle that elements of an image must be labelled or filled in order to complete a message. However, the templates upon which each of these two types are built are different, which prompts me to discuss them in separate sections.

The third type of meme that I define is what I call the Text Changing genre. This type was at first called the subtitles changing type as I was aware that netizens were using screenshots of subtitled frames and modifying them. However, as the data will show, several types of texts can undergo modifications for memetic and communicative purposes.

The idea with a Text Changing meme is that users take a picture or screenshot that includes text and change some of said text in order to modify the message and bend it to their liking. Examples can be seen in Figures 14 and 15.
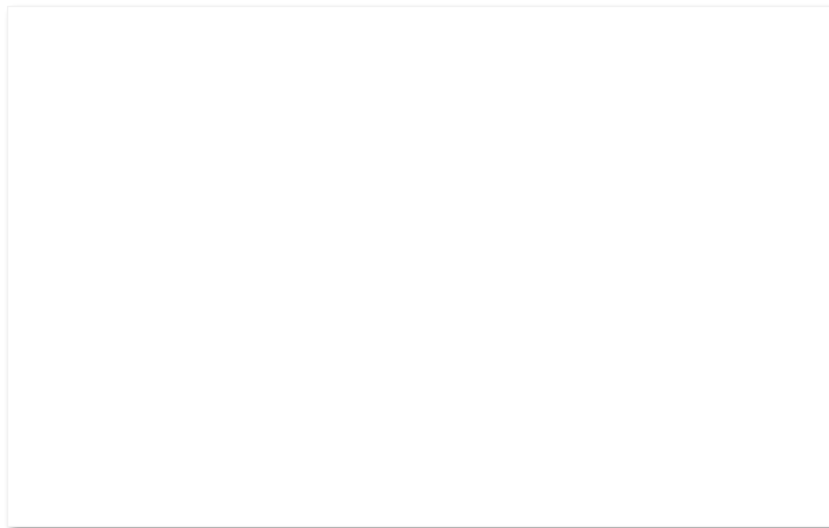
Figure 14: Example of subtitles change.
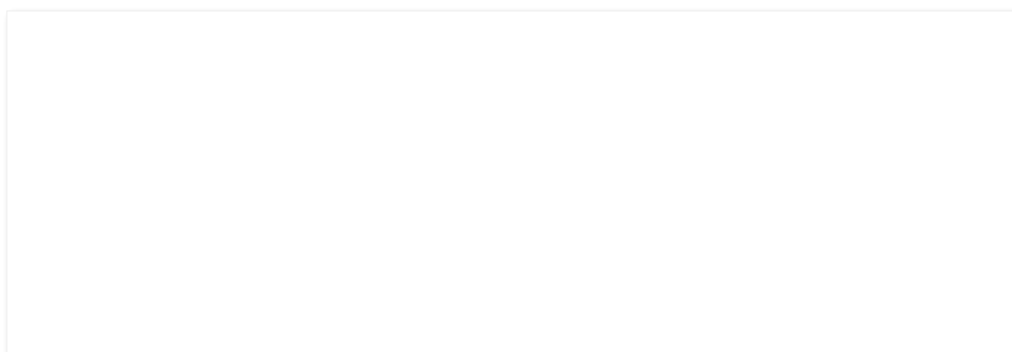
Figure 15: Example of text change.

While this genre may have started with the modification of subtitles and comic panels, it has now broadened to the modification of popular texts posts, ads, and any other textual source (as shown in Figure 15).

The fourth and last type that will be discussed in this work is what I call Deconstructed memes. These memes are tricky to find and require a high level of memetic literacy to be

spotted. Indeed, Deconstructed memes are related to what Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) described as the metonymic potential of memes. They regroup parts of memes, either textual or visual, that have been separated from their original and whole iterations. The different types of Deconstructed memes are illustrated in Diagram 2.
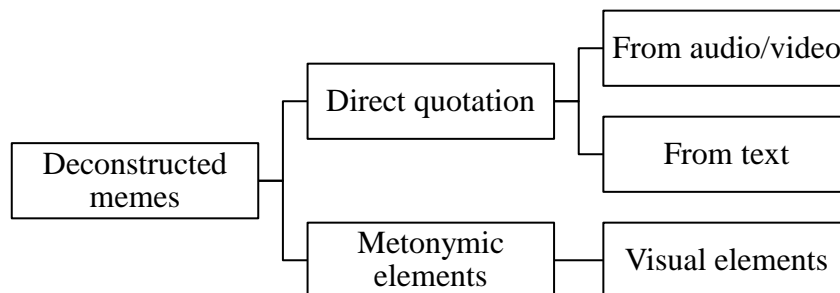
Diagram 2: Deconstructed memes.

I use the term 'deconstructed' because I do not want to use 'simplified'. Simplification can imply the loss of the cultural meaning or information found in the original iteration, which is not the case. 'Deconstructed' memes retain (for the most part) their full connotation. They are simply reduced to key elements which, through metonymy, refer to the whole of the original meme.
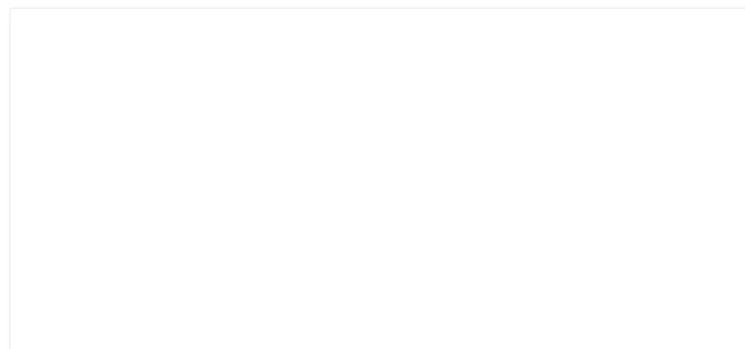
Figure 16: Example of a decomposed meme.
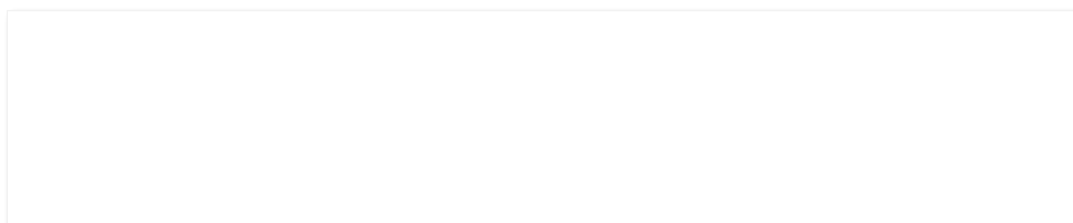
Figure 17: Companion post of figure 16.

Both Figures 16 and 17 were posted close together (in this order) on thebootydiaries and can seem nonsensical at first glance. However, for internet users who are familiar with Vines, these posts are immediately recognisable as a typographical representation of the "You got eczema?"

Vine.[6] In Figure 16, only the text — which was previously oral — is kept and represented. It is a direct quotation of the Vine. The typography retains the funny part of the video, namely the small voice in which the young boy asks the question and his non-standard pronunciation of the word eczema. Figure 17 plays with the assumption that a viewer of the post will get the reference simply with the typography. Furthermore, both posts being posted separately but close in terms of timing to one another can help get the point of the second one across. As previously mentioned, these decomposed memes are difficult to understand for internet users that do not possess extensive meme literacy. I do not have many occurrences of such memes in my data; however, I feel like it is important to analyse them as they are still relatively frequent and show the importance of intertextuality and literacy when studying memes.

This section presented the way my data was collected and how it was divided for further analysis. Memes are complex entities and it should be made clear that the types/genres presented above overlap more often than not and should not be considered as rigid categories. Additionally, only the Object Labelling genre has an "accepted" name both in the scholarly literature and within the online community. The three other types were named by myself and are not (yet) widely recognised in the way Object Labelling is. Although my data is biased towards mostly my interests (namely the anime, TV shows and movies that I watch, the podcasts I listen to, the comics and manga I read, etc.), insider knowledge is crucial to understanding the intertextuality and evolution of memes. With this in mind, I will thus be able to provide clear and concise explanations of the sources and targets of the memes analysed in order for them to be understood by most.

The next section will provide more detailed analysis of each of the four types of memes I have presented above.

4 Results and discussion

This fourth chapter is organised in two main sections. Section 4.1 will present the four types of memes identified during the data collection in more detail. Section 4.2 will present a case study, aiming to showcase the use of the different meme types within a specific discourse. Afterwards, Section 4.3 will offer a brief summary of my findings, combining observations from sections 4.1 and 4.2.

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[6] "You got eczema???", YouTube, uploaded by Fun Master, 03 October 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usTeInQEbV0. Since the Vine app has been closed, most Vines can now be found on YouTube, either in compilations or as stand-alone videos.

4.1 The different types of memes

In this section, I present each of the previously mentioned categories of memes in more detail. I describe the specific features of each type as well as explain their sub-types and how these memes are formed. Note that if memes were incorporated in a text post or discourse, a screenshot of the whole text post will be provided. If the meme was posted on its own, it will be presented and analysed as such. Furthermore, when available, originals of the memes discussed can be found in the Appendix.

4.1.1 Object Labelling

Object Labelling memes constitute the biggest part of my data. It is a broad genre, often used by internet users. I will argue that it has given rise to several sub-genres.

Object Labelling memes can be considered descendants of the classic Image Macro memes. The basis logic[7] is similar: adding text to an image to add or further the meaning of said image. A precursor of Object Labelling memes can be found in interior monologue captioning[8] memes, the premise of which is to place text randomly around the subject of a picture to represent their imagined thoughts. The genre became immensely popular around 2013 with *Doge* (Figure 18) but was already present online years before this.
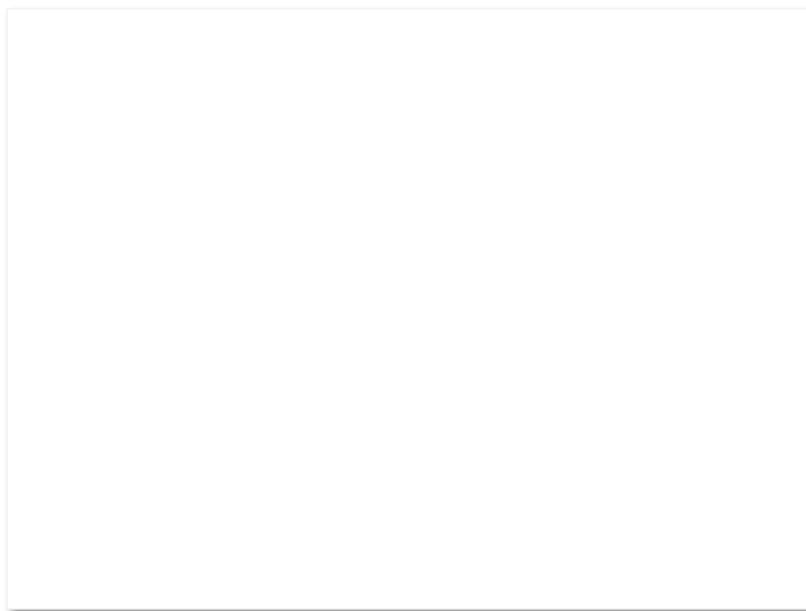
Figure 18: Example of Doge.

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[7] In the context of the different meme genres, the term 'logic' refers to the principles used by netizens to create the different memes, for example, the labelling of objects in an image. I use it similarly to how Milner (2016: 62) uses the term 'grammar'.

[8] Interior Monologue Captioning, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2011 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/interior-monologue-captioning

Doge, along with other interior monologue captioning memes, departs from the rigid frame of previous Image Macros like *Success Kid*, discussed previously. The text is not confined to the top and bottoms of the image anymore, the font has changed from Impact to Comic Sans and, perhaps most importantly, the text and the image subject are more closely related to one another. Rather than a set up/punchline narrative where the image mostly serves as a tone indicator, interior monologue captioning denotes a stronger relationship between the subject of the image and the text being added, as said text is implied to be a representation of the inner thoughts of the subject.

Formats such as the current Object Labelling approach, discussed in more detail in this chapter, are possible because netizens have become accustomed to seeing the shift from traditional Image Macros to more "free" forms of labelling like interior monologue captioning. Image captioning is not a new phenomenon; *LOLcats* have played with the addition of non-standard English to pictures of cats since the mid-2000s[9] and the Console War, mentioned previously, happened in 2012. Milner (2016: 62) also references the annotation of artist Donn Kenn's Post-it monsters, which arose around the same time as the Console War on 4chan[10], as evidence of the progressive popularisation of this genre. While this sub-genre of Image Macros has existed for years now, it has undergone some evolution over the years.

In the present work, I wish to exhibit ways in which Object Labelling memes are created and used by Tumblr users nowadays. I distinguish between three ways in which an image serving as a template can be labelled by the meme creator:

(1) only with text

(2) with a combination of text and image

(3) only with images

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a fourth way, the Redraw, will be added to this triad and discussed later on. I do not include the Redraw type above because I consider it to be a sub-genre of the image-only labelling type. Furthermore, it is still a relatively niche way of labelling and it demands more skill, making it less accessible to a mainstream audience.

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[9] LOLcats, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2006, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lolcats
[10] 4chan describes itself as a "simple image-based bulletin board here anyone can post comments and share images" (https://www.4chan.org). Launched in 2003, it is an anonymous fringe space online where "anything goes" and posts are ephemeral, making it a site where memes are frequently produced (Tuters & Hagen 2019, citing Bernstein et al. 2011: 56).

4.1.1.1 Text only labelling

The first version of this type of meme, an image modified with text only, is the oldest and most straightforward way to form an Object Labelling meme. It is with this format that the genre gained popularity back in 2012 and it is still very frequently used.
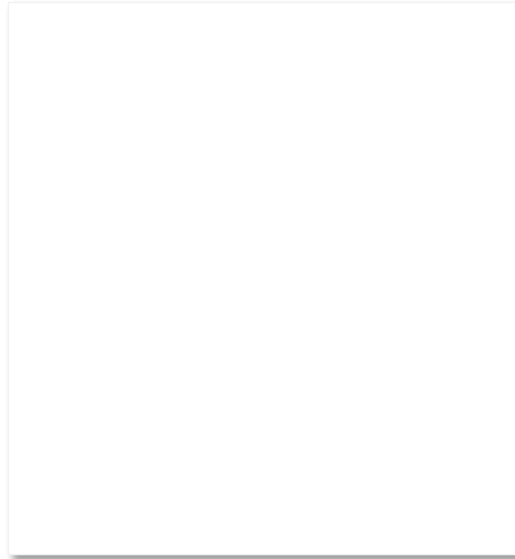

Figure 19: SpongeBob screenshot.

Figure 19, above, is a simple example of an Object Labelling meme. The source is a screenshot of the children's TV show *SpongeBob SquarePants*, known worldwide, showing the character Mr. Krabs about to put boots in a pot of boiling oil, a crazy look on his face. Each of the objects present in the image (the boots, Mr. Krabs and the pot) has been labelled with text. In this case, the labelling refers to YouTube advertisements playing before videos. It is not difficult to understand the meaning of the meme, even without having seen the episode. Indeed, the incongruity of the boots about to be dipped in boiling liquid and Mr. Krabs' expression are enough visual indication to convey the stance[11] of the meme creator. Translated into a sentence, this meme can signify "YouTube is crazily/mischievously putting two unskippable ads before any video". YouTube being represented by Mr. Krabs indicates that the meme creator and their intended public find the addition of unskippable advertisements unwelcome. Thus, the meaning is conveyed through the interpretation of each element of the image correlated with the label that was given to it. Milner (2016: 62) explained that the "implicit dimensions of the images - ones that resonated with the annotator - become explicit through their annotation" in image captioning. In the case of Figure 19, the creator found that the configuration of the visual elements (Mr. Krabs, the boots and the oil) was ideal for expressing their opinion about the

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[11] Term used by Shifman (2014a: 40) "to depict the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers."

YouTube advertisements. The added captions make it so that other users can understand this opinion and possibly align themselves with it.

Other templates of Object Labelling have become standard and are easily recognisable to any knowledgeable netizen. These standard templates tend to be taken from wide-spread media texts like movies and TV shows, stock photos or even previous memes. However, the logic of Object Labelling has evolved beyond the standard template and can now be used on random pictures. As an example, Figure 20 is a picture that was posted online and gained enough attention that it became easily recognisable (even if it is not yet standard), known by the caption "twink boutta pounce" (in reference to the young man on the floor looking lovingly at the other man) with which it was first posted on Twitter in 2016.[12]
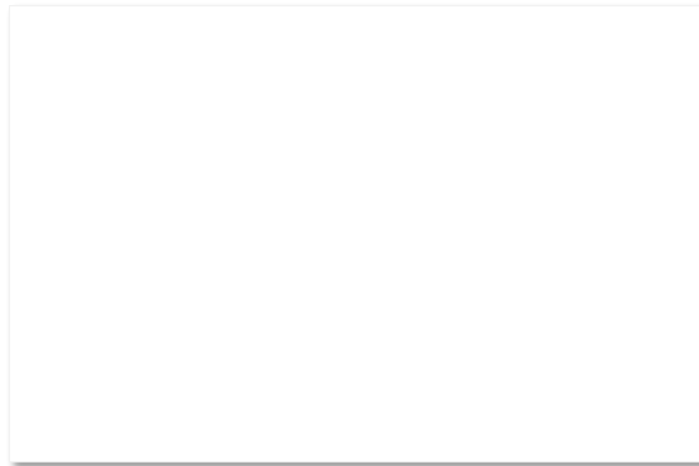
Figure 20: Example of "twink boutta pounce".

This picture is frequently found as an Object Labelling meme, used to express someone's affection towards someone or something else. The young man on the floor is generally equated to either the creator of the meme or, more broadly, the person doing the loving and the man in the foreground as the object of affection. Object Labelling memes can be used alone, as in the case of Figure 20, or in response to something, as is the case in Figure 21.

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[12]   @chaserojo   "twink   boutta   pounce"   Twitter,   19   May   2016, https://twitter.com/chaserojo/status/733138750151249920.
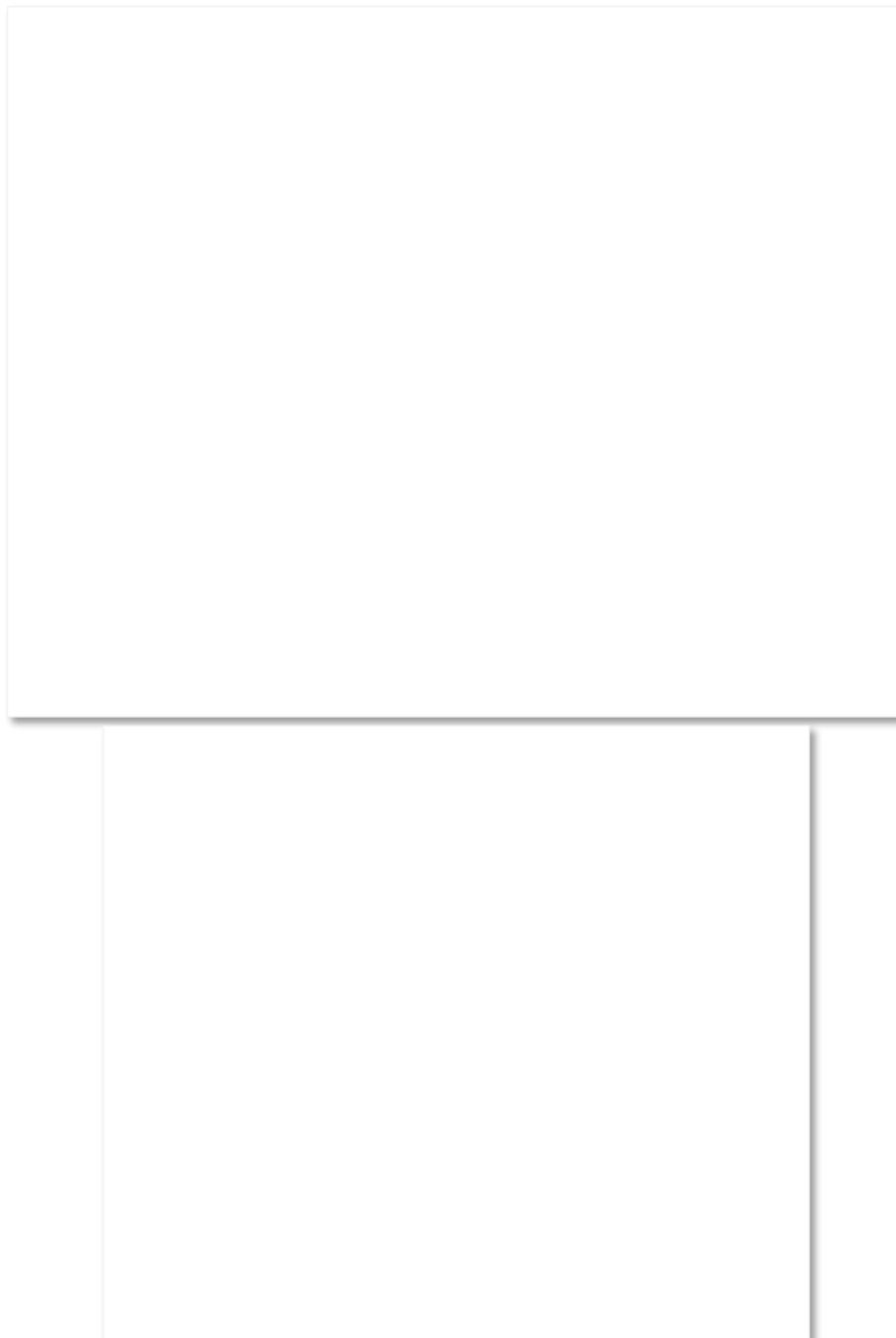
Figure 21: Other example of "twink boutta pounce" labelling.

In Figure 21, the original post[13] is a GIFset of actor Henry Cavill holding a sword from the video "Henry Cavill Explains Everything You Need To Know About The Witcher's Swords" from Netflix's YouTube channel. In response to the GIFset, user restin-peaches posted an iteration of the "twink boutta pounce" image. The user likened themselves to the fond-looking young man on the floor while the man in the foreground is labelled as being Henry Cavill from

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[13] The post was originally formatted vertically, with one image on top of the other. For the sake of saving space, I have rearranged the images as presented in Figure 21.

the video. Thus, rather than simply writing a textual response expressing their fondness for Henry Cavill explaining the Witcher's sword, restin-peaches opted for a multimodal response.

The use of a well-known template is not random. The weight of the textual versus the visual here is slightly different. If restin-peaches had written their response textually (i.e. "I love listening to Henry Cavill explaining the Witcher's sword"), other users would most likely not be able to appropriate it, because 'I' would be associated with just restin-peaches. By using the meme however, the 'me' is less strongly related to the specific user restin-peaches and can be appropriated by other users, who can then align themselves with the message conveyed by the meme. In the case of Figure 21, the referent is not hard to understand as the meme was posted in direct response to the GIFset, which comes with a link to the original video in the original Tumblr post. Thus, even without having seen the original video, a potential viewer of the meme can still understand and align themselves (or not) with the stance expressed by restin-peaches. The GIFs of Henry Cavill, who is generally regarded by the public as particularly handsome, suffice to contextualise the meme. Furthermore, the template chosen by restin-peaches, while being a random picture, is well-known by Tumblr users and simple enough to be understood even by someone not familiar with the "twink boutta pounce" caption.

While some random pictures have gained standard status by being circulated enough, some others remain a one-time Object Labelling. Non-standard templates, particularly those based on random pictures, which are less fixed and thus less well-known, require slightly more time in order to be understood. However, as Milner (2016: 62) mentioned, "understanding reappropriation —just like understanding the multimodal dimensions of memetic grammar— allows participants to read other people's contributions to a conversation and to write their own", meaning that if a creator respects the unspoken constraints of the genre, any picture can be labelled and convey new meaning.

The general tacit rules of Object Labelling are as follows: the picture must have clear objects to be labelled. Interaction or explicit non-interaction between the objects is generally preferred and some incongruity in the image is often sought after. Figure 22 and Figure 23, shown below, are good examples of this. In Figure 22, two objects are labelled: the volcano erupting with lighting in the background and the two men posing in the foreground. While the picture is not known in the way "twink boutta pounce" or some stock photos might be, the format of the image makes it a perfect template for Object Labelling. The incongruity of the relationship (or lack thereof) between the background and foreground elements allows the labeller to convey a specific feeling. In this example, the image is labelled with the volcano being likened to "The main quest line" and the two men to "Me getting married to my favourite

NPC [non-player character]", referring to a video game experience that many can share. This type of situation is not rare in open-world games where the player is free to either complete the main quest or wander around the game world. The humorous nature of this situation is quite well represented by the picture, as the main quest line in video games is generally dramatic, with the fate of the world at stake and the player embodying the hero who saves the day. The player's choice to ignore this main quest is thus akin to the two men standing for a picture while ignoring the seemingly cataclysmic events of the background.

Figure 22: Example of random image labelling.
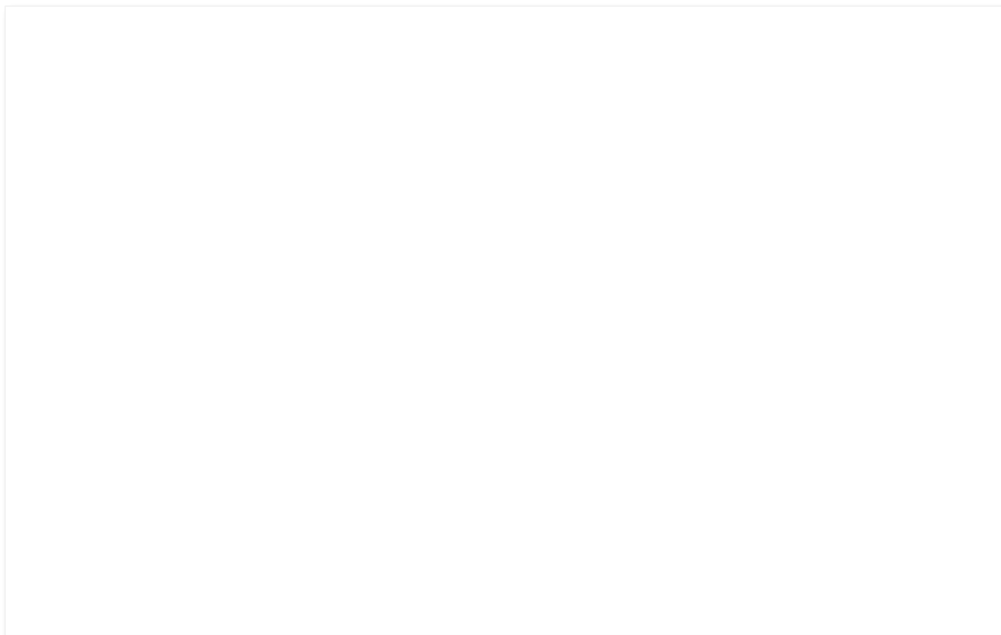
Figure 23: Other example of random image labelling.

Figure 23 also fits the random picture template style. It is an old illustration, reinforcing that any image can be "poached" (see Milner 2016: 40) in order to create a meme. Here again,

three objects are clearly defined – the stork, the baby and the woman – and each of the objects has been labelled. An added layer of humour is conveyed by the original caption of the image, present at the bottom, reading "And The Villain Still Pursues Her". This picture has to be understood as "Tumblr is bringing the discourse to me and I don't want it". The image is a reflection on what can be called "Tumblr's discourse culture", with discourse being understood here as the calling out of potentially problematic behaviour or content (whatever it might be). Tumblr users have a long history of being very aggressive in their call outs and being inclined to find most things and people problematic without exercising a lot of critical thinking, a bad habit that has become annoying for many users. Thus, the woman brandishing her umbrella against "Tumblr" and the "discourse" it brings can be an avatar for the numerous users who are annoyed with the call out culture present on the platform. Here again, the user preferred a multimodal commentary rather than a solely textual one, adding humour to their opinion and making it accessible to others. To note, however, that while the full meaning of this iteration is easily understood by Tumblr users, it is more opaque for netizens unfamiliar with the site and the practices of its community members.

Figure 22 and Figure 23 show that the rules of Object Labelling are quite well anchored in netizens' minds. Indeed, constructions over non-standard templates would not be possible without the keys to understanding Object Labelling constructions. Just as netizens gained understanding of the way to read traditional Image Macros and inner monologue captioning, they have also internalised the rules of Object Labelling. As Milner (2016: 62) explained, "to say that such bricolage is grammatical is to say that it provides an implicit and flexible guide for social participation, just like written grammar's foundational role in language". The tacit constraints of Object Labelling, i.e. its grammar, are quite straightforward: the image serving as a base must contain objects (in relation to each other or not) and said objects must be labelled to convey meaning. This grammar has been present from the very beginning of Object Labelling memes and is thus well anchored. The genre's simplicity can certainly explain its popularity with netizens. As it has gained popularity and spread more widely, new and more complex constructions of such memes have become possible.

4.1.1.2 Image and text labelling

The second way an Object Labelling meme can be formed is with the combination of both text and image. The basis logic stays the same as with the classic text-only labelling. However, the viewer of the meme would need to have wider (pop-)cultural knowledge and would also have to make a greater effort to decode the meme. While textual annotations can be understood

literally and can be looked up if needed, it is much harder to understand an image for which one does not know the referent or source. Labellings using images tend to occur over standard templates rather than random ones; this is probably to allay the greater difficulty in decoding such iterations. The two examples presented below (Figure 24 and Figure 25) are based on well-known meme templates.

Figure 24 is a reference to the anime *Case Closed*, also known as *Detective Conan*. In this case, the showcased meme is based on the template that is easily recognisable to netizens: *Is this a pigeon?*.[14] In this example, the labelling is much trickier than in the previous examples in that it appeals to a specific fanbase.
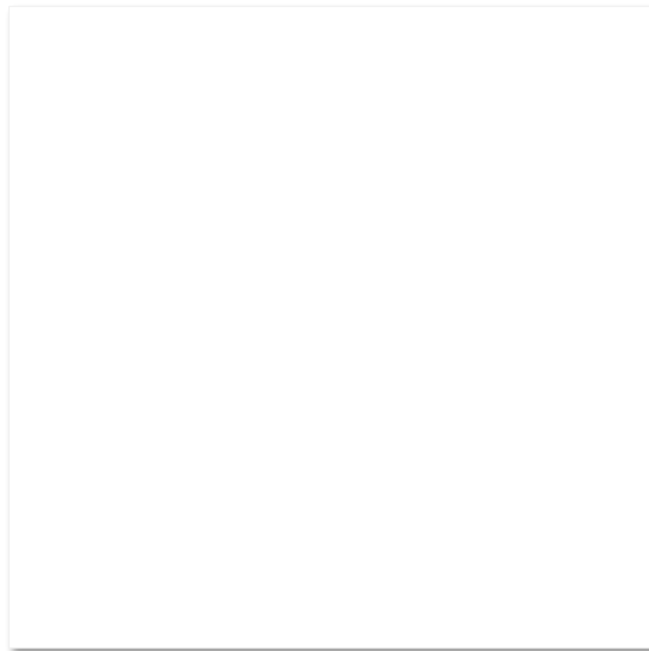
Figure 24: Example of text and image labelling over the Is This a Pidgeon? Template.

More specifically, the addition of protagonist Kogoro Mouri's face and the annotations "murder" and "suicide" make sense for a viewer of the anime (or reader of the manga): Kogoro Mouri, a private detective, has the tendency to rule murders as suicide before the case can be investigated. Thus, the use of the *Is this a pigeon?* template is perfect as the general meaning of this standard template is "someone mistaking something for something else". In this case, the meme ends up meaning "Kogoro is mistaking what is clearly a murder for a suicide". However, this meaning is only available to a viewer who understands the meme template and who has enough knowledge about *Case Closed* to infer such a meaning.

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[14] This is the official name of this template/meme. This further supports my claim that this is indeed a standard meme, as non-standard memes do not have well-known, official names (see Zenner & Geeraerts 2018:177).
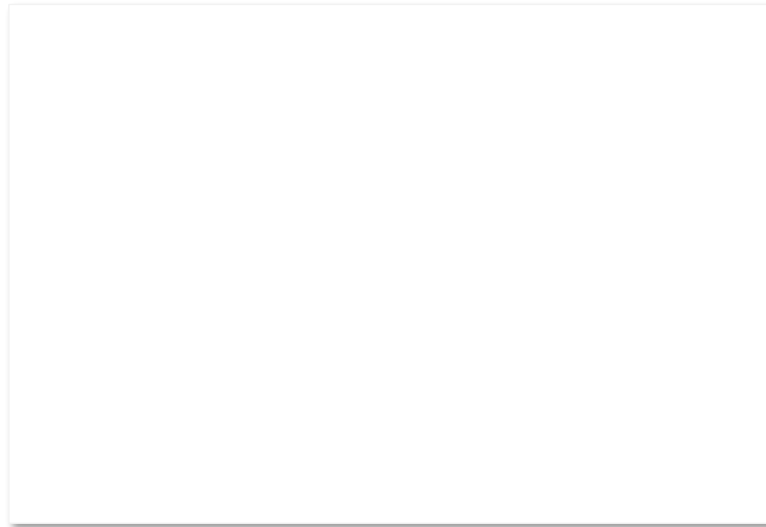
Figure 25:Other example of text and image labelling.

The second iteration, Figure 25, builds off of a different standard template, this time referring to the Netflix series *The Umbrella Academy*. It was posted by user mayhemghost along with the caption "This is how that scene went down right?", addressing the potential viewers of the meme. The meme refers to a particular scene in episode nine of the second season of the show; only people who have seen it would be able to understand (and evaluate) this iteration. In the scene, two versions of the character Five (Number Five and Older Five) face off in order to get a briefcase while their brother Luther watches and unsuccessfully tries to intervene. The *Spiderman pointing at Spiderman* template is generally used to ironically put together elements that heavily resemble each other, in appearance or content. In this case, the labelling puts the two versions of Five face to face with each other, with the addition of the coveted briefcase, paralleling the scene in the show. The character Luther is represented with the *Mom said it's my turn to play the Xbox* bear, which is a judicious choice as Luther is a rather childish character whose body has been modified with gorilla serum. The memetic rendition of the scene by mayhemghost would be considered accurate by anyone able to correctly understand all the layers of this iteration. All of this information is only available to the viewer if they have seen the scene in question and if their meme literacy is great enough to understand each layer and referent of the present iteration. As pointed out by Yus (2019: 109),

> the reader's background knowledge on current affairs, newsworthy events, political issues, and so on (his/her literacy) is crucial to understanding the meme properly, to the extent that, very often, the meme makes little sense if it is separated from the specific time frame and pieces of news that justified its publication.

While this quotation refers to political events and news, the examples presented above highlight that contextual knowledge is also necessary when memes refer to popular culture such as anime

and TV shows. Thus, Object Labelling that includes images in their labelling gains a level of complexity with regard to their interpretation as they most likely refer to precise contexts. Even in the case where the meaning of such an iteration can be less fandom-specific and thus more far reaching, the presence of images as labels demands additional decoding effort. The grammar of the Object Labelling remains the same, however, as the objects in the template are still being labelled in order to convey new messages, only now in a different mode.

4.1.1.3 Image only labelling

The third way netizens can form Object Labelling memes is by using only images as labels. This can be considered to be the most complex of the three types of Object Labelling discussed here. As already highlighted in the text and image labelling section, annotating templates with images requires a high degree of memetic and pop-cultural literacy from both the creator and the potential viewer of the meme. Image-only labelling is quite rare, most likely due to the even more considerable effort required to understand them. Memes are most often used as quick communication devices, packing a lot of information in a narrow space (just one image, a punchline, a catchphrase, etc.) and must be understood by multiple people. Thus, memes demanding longer, more intense reflection are not preferred by users. Figure 26 below is the only example of this type present in my data.
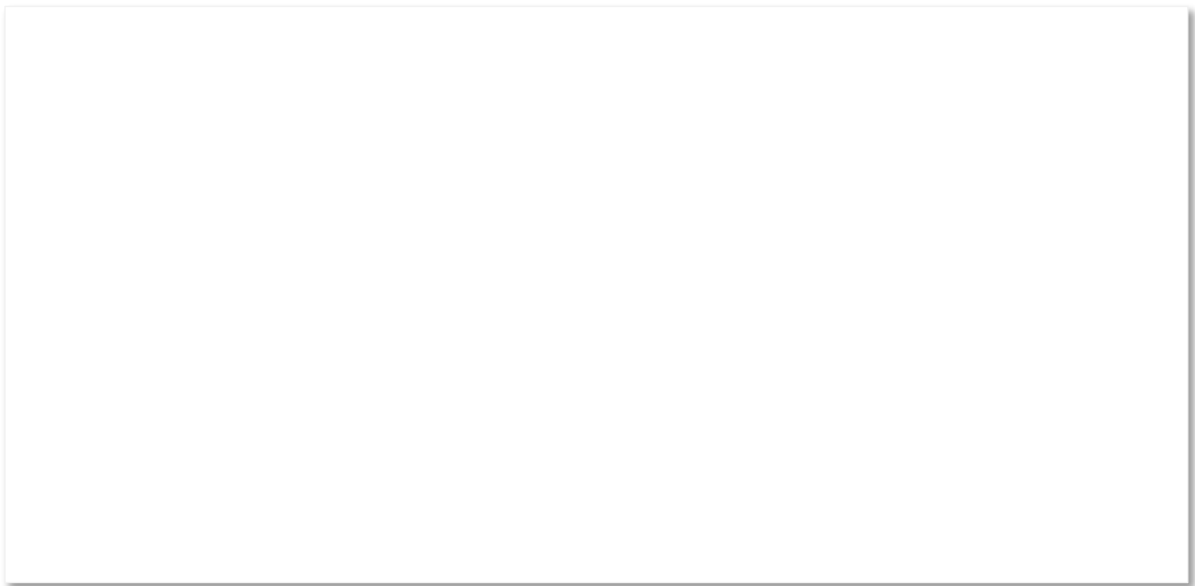
Figure 26: Example of only image labelling.

Figure 26 was added by user snirts in response to artistsanimals' post showcasing a traditional Japanese painting of two monkeys. The image added is taken from a viral video from 2017 of a young monkey getting a haircut, which sprouted a meme consisting of adding the screenshot to any picture including hands. There is no clear message being conveyed by such an iteration

and it falls more in the "meme for the sake of the meme" category. Such memes highlight the community orientation of meme creation and circulation and, as mentioned by McCulloch (2019: 244), "the appeal of memes is the appeal of belonging to a community of fellow insiders". Those who "get the joke", in this case those are able to recognise the added monkey's referent, are "in" while others are left out. For the most part, Object Labelling memes with only images fall in this category, as conveying complex messages using only images is relatively hard. It should be mentioned, however, that iterations such as Figure 25 can be found without textual labelling and would still be understood by their target audience (except, perhaps, for Luther/the bear). A user's choice to employ only images as labels can be interpreted as the desire to keep the meme within a restricted community, as only a select few would be able to understand the collage of images without textual cues.

4.1.1.4 Redraw

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, a fourth way Object Labelling memes can be created is by Redraw. I understand Redraw as a potential sub-genre of image labelling. It should not be confused with another meme with the same name, consisting of artists redrawing their own pieces a few years later to showcase their progress. The Redraws analysed here are more closely related to Object Labelling. Instead of adding textual annotations or photoshopping existing pictures or illustrations, the creator of the meme takes the time to redraw parts of the template used to fit their message.

This sub-genre started with the *#RedrawReigen* trend on Twitter (introduced by user @Doonadraws in September 2016)[15] before spreading to Tumblr. *#RedrawReigen* consists of redrawing the character Arataka Reigen from the *Mob Psycho 100* manga and anime into or as well-known stock photos or meme templates, as exemplified in Figure 27, below, where Reigen has been redrawn as popular reaction pictures.

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[15]   #RedrawReigen,   *Know   Your   Meme*,   Literally   Media,   20   Sept.   2016, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/redrawreigen

Figure 27: Examples of #RedrawReigen.[16]

It is difficult to explain why Reigen in particular was chosen as the first character to be redrawn. In the manga and anime, Arataka Reigen, a man in his late 20s, pretends to have psychic powers, cons his way through life and serves as a flawed mentor for the protagonist Mob. The character is well liked by the fandom and many fans like poking fun at him for diverse reasons such as being a con artist, pretending to be the self-proclaimed "Greatest Psychic of the 21st century" and befriending teenagers like Mob rather than people his age, as well as for having an extravagant and somewhat awkward personality. It seems that Reigen's overall personality lends itself well to playful mockery and Redraws allow for visual jest. While fanart is very common in fandom spaces, Twitter user @Doonadraws introduced a new way to incorporate humour in fanart; *#RedrawReigen* launched a new wave of memetic creation as the idea of redrawing characters (often from anime or video games) over stock photographs and known meme templates spread beyond the *Mob Psycho 100* fandom.

The Redraw type of Object Labelling differs from the others as it is less accessible. While Redraws are not intended to be fully completed fanart and are often relatively simple and bare (flat colours, lack of shading, sketch-style look, etc.), they still, for the most part, have a more polished look than *Rage Comics*[17], for example. Redraws are often realised in one of

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[16] The original pictures can be found in figure 27 in the Appendix.
[17] *Rage Comics* are a series of comics relating real life experiences created by using characters known as *rage faces*, crude drawings of stick figures made on MS Paint. *Rage Comics* were mostly popular in the early 2010s and they are a staple internet meme genre. Rage Comics, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2008, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics

two ways: either the user will redraw the entirety of the stock photo or meme of their choice (as in the top left image of Figure 27), or they will simply redraw the character over the original image, to avoid the trouble of redrawing the whole background (like in the bottom left of Figure 27). Whereas it is nowadays easy to add text and existing images to another image using basic software or even pre-made meme generators, Redraws require actual artistic software and skill. In the case of stock photo redrawing, the goal is generally the humour of seeing a particular character in an incongruous situation rather than conveying a more complex message. In cases where redrawing is based off of a well-known meme template, thus carrying the meaning that was attributed to it during its 'memeification' process, users generally try to liken the characters they redraw to the subjects of the templates. This likening is thus used to say something about the character being redrawn. As examples, Figures 28 and 29 follow this idea, using the redrawing of a character to embody the subject of the template, which in turn says something about the character.

Figure 28: Example of a Redraw of a well-known meme template.

Like with Figure 24 and 25 presented previously, the meaning of Figures 28 and 29 is only available to people from a particular community, in this case those who have seen or read *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Figures 28 and 29 play on the fact that Edward Elric, the main character of the manga, hates milk and is often berated by other characters for it. This dynamic is

represented in Figure 28 by the redrawing of the *Woman yelling at a cat* meme (provided under the Redraw by the creator). Edward is redrawn over the disgruntled cat while his best friend Winry has taken on the role of the yelling woman and his brother Alphonse (in armour) stands in the background. The meme creator has thus taken advantage of the *Woman yelling at a cat* meme dynamic, finding it an apt comparison with the dynamic present in *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

Figure 29: Second example of a meme template redrawing.

Figure 29 conveys the same idea but, this time, Edward has been redrawn over the *Draw 25* meme. The *Draw 25* meme consists of two pictures, the first presenting an Uno card annotated with "[something] or draw 25" and a second picture in which a character has their hand full of uno cards, implicitly showing they have chosen to draw the cards. In figure 29, the first picture has been redrawn and annotated with "drink you goddamn milk or draw 25" and the second picture features Edward with a handful of cards. Once again, such an iteration is only funny for people who understand the reference, specifically Edward's hatred of milk and the subsequent jokes made about it in the original manga.

While Figures 27, 28 and 29 are notable for their niche nature, the Redraw meme can have broader reach. Figure 30, presented below, refers to the video game *Among Us*[18], which became very popular among Twitch streamers and the general public in 2020.

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[18] *Among Us* is an online multiplayer game first published in 2018 by Innersloth. The players, a number of which are "impostors", are stranded in a spaceship/base setting and have to find the impostors before they can kill the crewmates. The game's principal mechanic is a debate function in which the players can make a case on who they think are the impostors.

Figure 30: Among Us Redraw.

User pam-pers redraws a well-known random picture in order to convey the feeling of what playing the game with their friends is like. The main point of the game – that the players must all be suspicious of each other in order to eradicate the impostors – is conveyed by the template in which all of the subjects are holding each other at (fake) gunpoint. The Redraw, using the visuals of the game characters, thus expresses pam-pers' (and other players') experience in a fun and visually appealing way. Furthermore, as was the case with Figure 21, the use of a meme to convey a personal experience makes it, in fact, less personal and allows strangers on the internet to align themselves with the stance offered by the meme. While Figure 30 can be considered to be more broadly accessible as *Among Us* has recently gained a significant amount of traction on the internet), it still remains in a particular circle (that of gaming) and is not as "universal" as a political meme would have been.

Overall, the Redraws requires a similar level of meme and pop-culture literacy as image labelling. These genres are usually used in more niche internet communities, referring to more specific aspects of a given media. Furthermore, the Redraw type is more easily created with reference to cartoons, anime, comics, and videogames as these media are already drawn and fictional character designs are generally recognisable even when simplified. It is thus easier for

netizens to redraw a character model than to create one for a live-action character or actor, even if such examples exist. The main difference between classic Object Labellings and Redraws is the set of skills needed in order to make new iterations.

The Redraws are interesting as they showcase another important aspect of memes: the community. As McCulloch (2019: 252) pointed out, "[m]emes periodically shift away from one of their founder populations" and evolve beyond their first iterations. Redraws seem like a nice example of this as they use the logic of Object Labellings while being, in a way, quite different. This "re-complexification" of the meme-making process is interesting as it may tie in with the tension between internet (niche) culture and mainstream culture. This tension has been present since the early days of internet meme creation:

> [T]he early wave of meme creators felt that there was a link between knowing the technical tools required to make memes and understanding the subcultures in which they fit. They worried that if meme-making became too easy, the culture itself would get diluted. (McCulloch 2019: 241)

Thus, redrawings s are perhaps a way for specific fandoms to reappropriate memes that have entered the mainstream and bring them back to more niche communities. In the case of *Mob Psycho 100,* redrawing Reigen over stock photographs and meme templates has become a recurring joke in the fandom and it is brought back every time new *Mob Psycho 100* content comes out. *#RedrawReigen* is thus a community practice within a specific group. In this way, the memes are appropriated "more deeply" than if they were simply labelled. Perhaps the Redraw memes are a way to make some memes "less straightforward" or less mainstream, or perhaps they are simply the next step in the evolution of the Object Labelling genre. As mentioned previously, this type of meme is still relatively new and it will be interesting to see if the Redraw will become more widely adopted, if it will stay within restricted communities or if it will fade completely over the next few years.

As we have seen in this section, the Object Labelling type of meme is very diverse and dynamic. I would argue that these four ways of labelling form a complexification scale and that time and numerous iterations have permitted the birth of image-only labellings and Redraws. The logic and grammar of Object Labelling is now well anchored in netizens' minds and the use of such memes has progressively replaced the more traditional Image Macros. The genre of Object Labelling illustrates well why classifications such as Salway and Martinec's (2005: sec. 3.2) status and logico-semantic relationships are needed in order to understand multimodal memes. While older Image Macros were based on a set up/punchline principle with the image serving mostly as a tone indicator, newer types, such as Object Labelling, build a variety of

relationships between text and image in order to convey a message. It is important for viewers to be able to identify the relationship presented in order to understand the meaning of the meme they are faced with. The circulation of well-known templates has allowed netizens to become accustomed to reading such memes and has opened the possibility for random images to serve as the basis for further memes.

4.1.2 Blank Filling

Blank Filling is relatively similar to Object Labelling and could be considered as a subgenre of it, like the Redraw. I have, however, decided to separate the two as the logic differs slightly. While Object Labelling invites netizens to put text/images on people, animals, buildings, etc., the Blank Filling sub-genre guides the placement of the labelling. Blank Filling templates have blank spaces within them that are perfect for annotation and, more specifically, spaces in which text is expected. It is this aspect which prompted me to consider Blank Filling as a separate type than Object Labelling.

Like Object Labelling, Blank Filling can be realised with text only, a combination of text and images or images only. For the sake of length, I will not describe each potential labelling as I have already detailed them in the previous section. I will instead focus on the two main ways in which Blank Filling memes are constructed. The first one consists of using space within an image that is already blank (or made blank) as in Figures 31, 32 and 33. The second one involves more manipulation and consists of the creation of a new template, often with an assemblage of several images, as exemplified by Figures 34, 35 and 36 later in this section.

Figure 31: Example of drift meme.

Figure 31 is a typical example of Blank Filling where a blank space is already present in the image, or it was made blank by the erasing of the original road signs by the original meme creator. This meme is generally known as *Left exit 12 off ramp* or simply *drift meme*. The general meaning of it is that two choices are proposed on the traffic sign (generally with a reasonable option on the left and an unreasonable one on the right) and the car represents the viewer making an unreasonable choice. In the case of Figure 31, "Try something new from the menu" is presented as the reasonable choice on the left and "Order the same thing over and over again" is on the right, thus implying it to be a less reasonable choice. The drifting car has not been labelled in this case, but it can be inferred that it represents the creator of the meme and the stance is projected onto the recipients of the meme. The target audience of this meme can be considered large as it refers to the common activity of going to the restaurant.
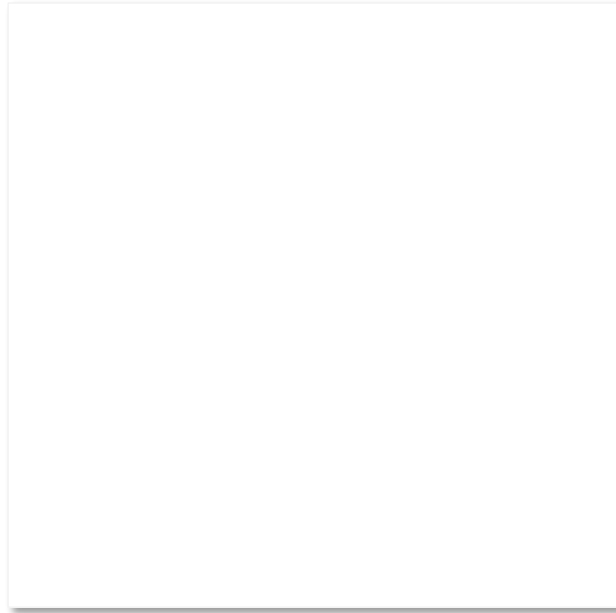
Figure 32: A more niche example of drift meme.

Figure 32 provides a good example of a more niche iteration of image and text Blank Filling. The template is the same as for Figure 31 and is thus easily recognisable and understandable by netizens. It was created after the airing of episode 4 of the *Fugou Keiji: Balance Unlimited* anime, in which Daisuke Kambe, one of the protagonists, was shown in casual clothes and with his hair unstyled for the first time. Figure 32 is challenging with regard to its referentiality. Indeed, unlike the previously discussed *Case Closed* anime, which has been ongoing since the mid-1990s —1994 for the manga, 1996 for the anime— and has been broadcasted internationally, *Fugou Keiji: Balance Unlimited*'s (FKBU) anime adaptation came out in 2020. It is an adaptation of the novel *The Millionaire Detective* by Yasutaka Tsutsui, published in 1978 and never translated to English. Thus, Figure 32 would speak only to people who have seen the anime as it aired in 2020. The episode in question caused a small uproar in the fandom as Daisuke had only ever been seen in a formal suit and with his hair perfectly styled up to this point. The contrast with his more casual appearance in episode 4 was seen as a surprise, which is why it is on the right. This ties in with the FKBU fandom (represented by the car in Figure 32) shifting their interest towards his new appearance.[19] Explaining this shift of interest textually would be quite cumbersome and boring. By using a meme, the creator is able to convey the feelings of a large part of the fandom in a humorous and concise way. These two examples using the same template highlight how a template can be appropriated to convey

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[19] This change of look was brought up by Daisuke being, for once, not in complete control of the situation (as he did not have access to his fortune, which generally solves all his problems) and having to rely on his work partner. As a lot of the show is based on the building of trust between Daisuke and his partner, the situation presented in episode 4 was of particular interest for the fans.

both broad and niche messages. *Left exit 12 off ramp*'s straightforward format makes it available to a large audience and can be used to adequately communicate a wide variety of information.

Blank Filling takes advantage of space already present in images and can use pretty much anything as a template, ranging from random images to film screenshots or even political campaign pictures. Figure 33 below shows the use of a picture of former US President Barack Obama holding what was originally a placard encouraging Americans to enrol in Obamacare. The sign has been altered to be blank and, in this instance, filled with the text "anime is illegal later nerds".
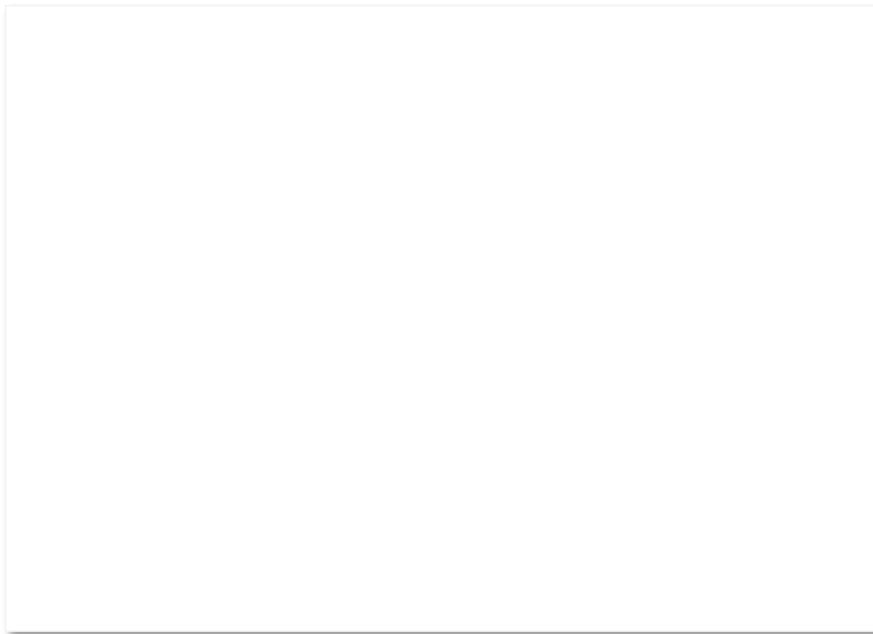
Figure 33: Example of the use of a political image as a template.

The original image guides the text placement and, additionally, the subject of the picture can have an influence on the text, in this case giving it an authoritative weight. This iteration in particular takes advantage of the political status of Obama, who was President of the USA at the time the original picture was taken, to proclaim the illegality of anime. This proclamation is obviously humorous as anime is not, in fact, illegal. The phrasing "later nerds" and the font (Comic Sans) add to the humorous tone as it contrasts with the formality of Obama's status. This image fits in the (sometimes playful, sometimes not) teasing of anime fans online, as a sort of wishful thinking about an authority figure declaring anime illegal. This exemplifies what Grundlingh (2018: 154) highlighted by mentioning that "the photo itself provides either the non-verbal aspect of the context, or the background information needed in order to interpret the meme correctly." The choice of a template image is not completely random and users will

consciously choose the image which best correspond to what they wish to say, taking advantage of the figures present in their chosen image to give weight to their messages.

The second way Blank Filling memes can occur is with the creation of a new template. A staple of the genre is the *Galaxy Brain* meme, exemplified below by Figure 34 and Figure 35. *Galaxy Brain* is a well-established meme template and is easily recognizable by netizens.

Figure 34: Canonical example of Galaxy Brain.
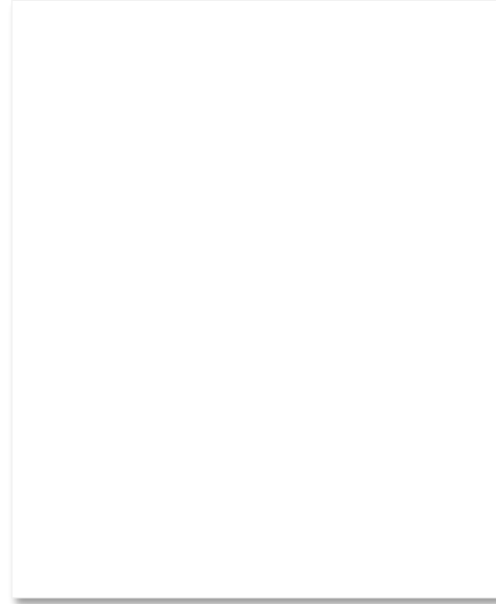
Figure 35: More innovative example of Galaxy Brain.

The *Galaxy Brain* meme is an example of how a template can be created from the combination of several pictures and blank spaces. The way the meme is created is by having a "gradient" of brain images on the right (or on the left in some iterations) representing a progression towards some kind of enlightenment. The text generally plays on being progressively more stupid or incongruous, as in the case of Figure 34, a basic example of the meme, where "twoteen" is presented as better and more enlightened than the usual "twelve". Here, the filling is completely constrained to the spaces left expressly blank and the text is expected to follow the general progression depicted by the images.

The *Galaxy Brain* iteration presented in Figure 35 twists the rules. This iteration shows the evolution a meme can undergo. Recall that, in order for a meme to not lose relevance and disappear, meme creators have to twist and use them in new ways to keep them interesting. This connects to Cannizzaro's (2016: 576) idea of memes having flexible translational tendencies. Figure 35 is a good example of an original use of the template. Netizens, while expecting to see a succession of three elements, as in Figure 34, are faced instead with simple descriptions of the images on the right. This constitutes a subversion of expectations; it is not

uncommon for well-established meme formats to be brought back and used in a different way than their original iterations.

Figure 36 below is another example of a further evolution of *Galaxy Brain*, keeping the original progression idea but filling the blanks with combinations of images and text.
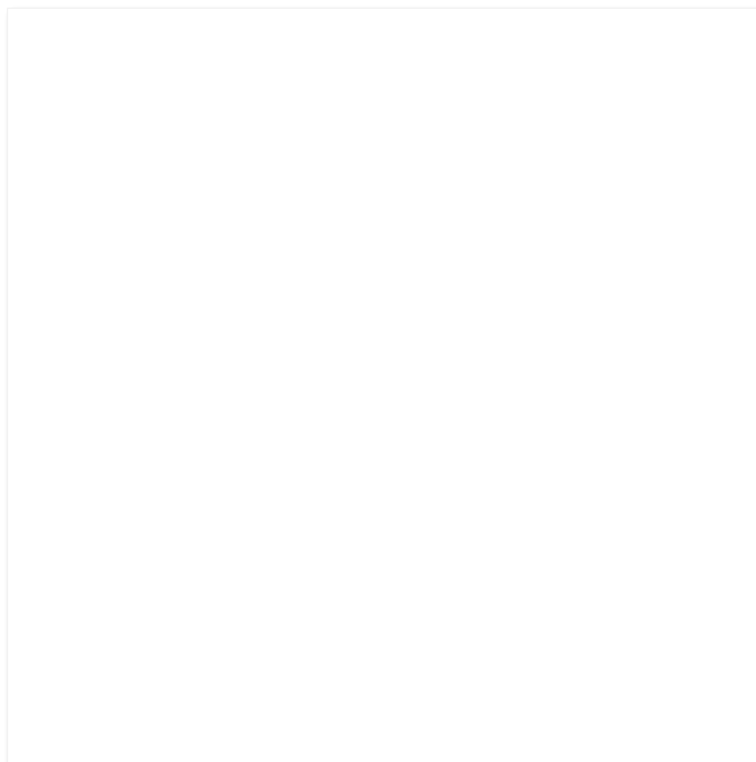
Figure 36: Example of Galaxy Brain with image and text annotations.

On the right is the classic progression of the *Galaxy Brain* meme, which has been linked to quotes and pictures of great thinkers of history and Britney Spears on the left. While the quotations are presented in chronological/historical order which would not necessarily work with the general meaning of *Galaxy Brain* meme, the presence of Britney Spears makes it work. Indeed, the lyrics to the song "Work Bitch" by the pop star are presented as the most recent philosophical take on work ethics and also as the most "enlightened" take, adding the humour characteristic of many memes, as Britney Spears is not generally regarded as a philosopher.

Just like Object Labelling, Blank Filling memes have become commonplace; they are a good way to present a message or idea in a humorous way. Blank Filling memes might also be seen as more straightforward than other labelling memes. Indeed, Object Labelling annotations are spread over an image and the order in which one has to understand these annotations can be tricky at times. The viewers of such memes must follow the lines and vectors (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) created by the objects within the image in order to understand the way in which it must be read. In the case of Blank Filling, the recipient is guided by the template and thus the effort required in order to read the meme correctly is reduced. Both standard Object

Labelling templates and Blank Filling more broadly exemplify Dancygier and Vandelanotte's (2017: 592) argument that "the visual structure of a meme is as important as its linguistic structure, so that there is typically a clear visual frame that linguistic material fit into". In the examples presented in this mémoire, images can also take the place of the linguistic material fit into the frames. Object Labelling and Blank Filling memes are of the most commonly seen online nowadays and they represent the greater part of my data. Their similar logic explains netizens' use and appreciation of them; this is observable from their widespread use across most social media. Furthermore, meme generators (providing blank standard templates) render their creations accessible even for users with no skills in photo editing. As such, anyone with the required meme literacy and pop cultural knowledge can create a meme that might be found humorous by their target audience.

4.1.3   Text Changing

This third genre differs from the first two with regard to the element being modified. Here, text is central; there needs to be an original text in order for it to be remixed, as users overlay some of original text on an image, with their own annotations, for humorous effect. This genre appears to have started with the modification of subtitles, already present in some other memes like Object Labelling. For example, Figure 24, discussed previously on page 44 shows that the subtitle present in the *Is this a pigeon?* meme is modified to fit the desired message: the word *pigeon* is replaced. Text Changing memes, however, manipulate only the text and generally do not add labelling. It might be good to remind here that (object) labelling refers to the addition of text (or image) where it was not present before, as seen in section 4.1.1. Conversely, Text Changing modifies text that is already present on the template used. While the most frequent format is the modification of subtitles of movies or TV shows, other texts like comics or manga panels and random text posts can be used, following the same logic. As with other formats, some images have become standard and are often circulated, as is the case with Figure 37 and Figure 38, below.

Figure 37: Example of a Gayle Text Changing meme.

Figure 37 is a screenshot taken from episode 34 of the YouTube series *Gayle* (2012-2015) by humourist Chris Flemming, who plays the titular role of Gayle Waters-Waters. The meme caption does not correspond exactly to the original line, which was, "Was anyone planning on telling me that a walrus can suck off the skin out of a seal or was I supposed to read that in *National Geographic* myself?", highlighting that someone probably wrote the caption from memory. It does not matter much as the general feeling of the line still remains and allows users to modify the caption to convey their own message. Figure 37 shows the structure of the meme as every iteration keeps parts of the original caption ("Was anybody planning to tell me" and "or was I just supposed to … myself?"), indicating a general tone of disbelief or outrage, and fills in the gaps to convey a new message, namely filling in what one is in disbelief about. In the present case, the subtitles were modified to a more existential question, a broad question that might resonate with many people. This template can be used to express outrage about very niche subjects as well; as long as the main idea stays the same, the meme lives on.

Figure 38: Example of Text Changing used within a conversation.

Figure 38 is a screenshot from the web series *The Gay & Wondrous Life of Caleb Gallo* (2016), featuring one of the most famous line from the character Freckle (played by Jason Greene). The original line, "Sometimes… things that are expensive are... worse."[20], in and of itself became a memetic catchphrase. The screenshot with the added subtitle has been circulated as a reaction shot and netizens were quick to modify these subtitles and use it as a new reaction image for various situations. As with Figure 37, the memes formed from the screenshot keep most of the original caption; only the adjective "expensive" is generally modified to convey a new meaning. In Figure 38, the screenshot is modified by user ziraseal to provide a response to a conversation about grammaticality in writing, weighing arguments of correctness versus flow of prose. An additional layer of irony is brought up by the fact that ziraseal chose to use the noun "grammar" rather than the adjective "grammatical", rendering the sentence effectively non-grammatical, as if to further prove the point. Figures 37 and 38 exemplify the idea that "participants' individual expression are memetic when they transform an existing premise" (Milner 2016: 86) as each individual keeps part of the original quote and transform some other aspect of it in order to convey their new message.

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[20] Greene, Jason. "Sometimes things that are expensive are worse." YouTube, uploaded by Jason Greene, 01 September 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbhcRKsRwFM

While most of the standard templates for Text Changing memes are screenshots of movies and TV shows, the genre appears to have branched out to other templates. Figure 39 shows the modification of what was originally a comment posted on DeviantArt, which read "god i wish that were me", conveying an idea of desperate envy. The original screenshot is often used as a reaction picture and is relatively well known among netizens as it is found on other platforms as well.
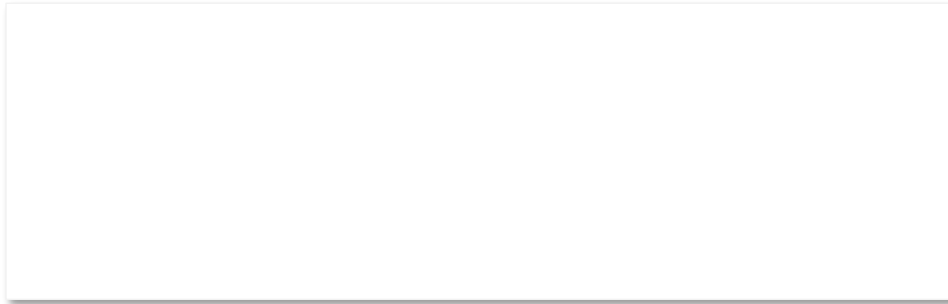
Figure 39: Example of Text Changing in a random text post.

Figure 39 is an altered iteration of the original screenshot. While this iteration could be relevant at any given time, it gains a new level of relevancy as it was created in 2020, the year when social interaction became minimal and physical contact was discouraged due to the pandemic. Here, just as in Figures 37 and 38, the text has been modified but the main idea is still being conveyed as most of the original quotation is still present.
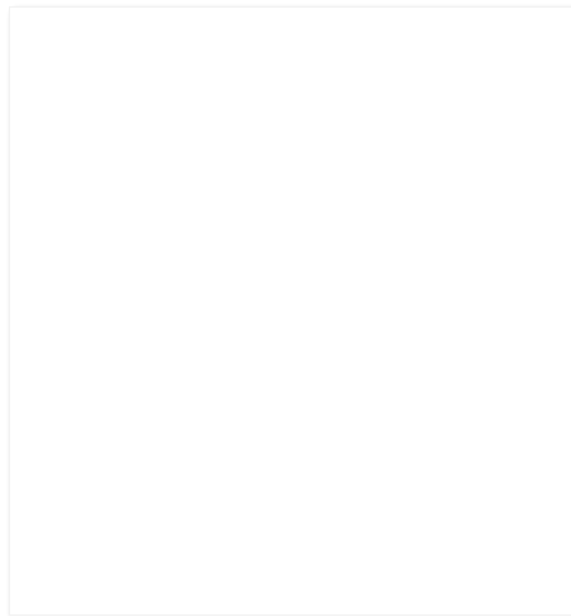
Figure 40: Example of Text Changing of a comic bubble.

Figure 40 is an example of a comic panel serving as a template. The original panel comes from the ninth issue of Archie Sonic Comics, published in 1994. The specific panel used in Figure 40 is already an edit of the 1994 original but it is the version that, since late 2012, is most circulated online. The original text of the edited panel reads "Alone on a Friday night?

God, you're pathetic."[21] and it was generally used to tease or shame single or introverted people. In Figure 40, the panel has been modified to convey a kinder, more comprehensive message than the original disdainful one. The modification of comic panels is not rare, especially webcomic panels as they are easily saved on one's hard drive to be modified later. The text change of Figure 40 follows the same pattern as the previous examples, keeping some of the original text and replacing other parts in order to create a new message.

An interesting visual aspect of Text Changing memes is the difference of font between the original text and the added/modified text. Very often, such memes are realised with basic tools, and not much care is put into having a polished presentation (discreetly masking the original text, matching the font, etc.). Rather, it seems that the noticeability of the changes is a desired aspect of Text Changing memes. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the added text to be either significantly longer or shorter than the original, adding to this noticeable aspect of the remix. This has been referred to by Nick Douglas (2014) as the "Internet Ugly" aesthetic, which Milner (2016: 82) summarises as "a large swath of everyday memetic media content [that] is 'supposed to look like shit' because it's more about quick and easy conversational play than formal expression". Meme creators are typically not professional editors or illustrators; even if they were, the goal of a meme is never to look good. Redraws, discussed previously in section 4.1.1.4, would also be categorised as "Internet Ugly"; while being more elaborate than stick figures, they are not created with beauty in mind. The point of a meme is first and foremost communication, the rapid sharing of ideas and opinions. Thus, the quality of the visuals does not matter as long as the desired message is conveyed, which in turn makes meme-making accessible to most, even people with no skill or talent.

4.1.4   Deconstructed memes

Deconstructed memes are certainly one of the most difficult genres to tackle. They are the embodiment of the memetic literacy needed to navigate today's cyberspace because they refer to other memes or virals; one needs to recognise and know the previous iterations in order to grasp what is referred to in the deconstructed version. From a theoretical perspective, they could be considered a further phase to the three proposed by Wiggins (2019: 43); deconstruction could be added after maintenance, elaboration and modification as a new phase in the development of memes.

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[21] "Alone on a Friday night? God you're pathetic." *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2015, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/alone-on-a-friday-night-god-youre-pathetic

I distinguish between two types of Deconstructed memes: quotations and metonymic (visual) elements. Quotations, whether direct or paraphrased, refer to memes that are evoked by their text. Excellent examples of this are all the Vine quotations, such as the one presented in the Method section. Figure 41, below, is another example of such quotation.
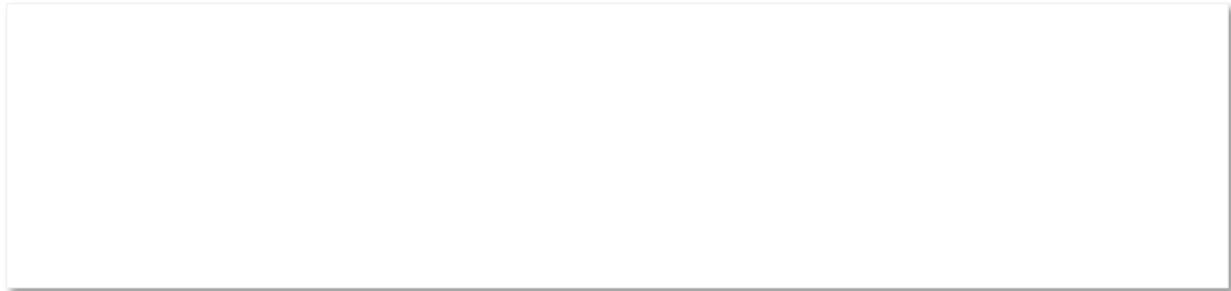
Figure 41: Example of the quotation of a well-known Vine.

Figure 41 is, in fact, two memes in one. The first part, posted by user supremesaudi, is the beginning of a popular Tumblr copypasta[22], a textual meme to which people generally respond with song lyrics. This time however, user i-hold-the-snitch replied with a paraphrased quote from the "What up, I'm Jared, I'm 19, and I never f*cking learned how to read" Vine. Only netizens with previous Vine knowledge would be able to understand why replying by saying a name and an age is relevant in this context. Indeed, without knowing the full Vine in which Jared, nineteen, tells the viewer he never learned how to read, i-hold-the-snitch's reply seems like a *non sequitur*. However, responding with this paraphrased quotation works well with supremesaudi's proposition as the "His name was jarred hes nineteen" can be interpreted as the same "he" as in the first "he couldn't read.", since Jared's only known characteristic is that he is illiterate. Here, the original quotation has been separated from its video and paraphrased; however, the full meaning of the original Vine is retained and invoked in order to offer a witty response. It is interesting to see that user i-hold-the-snitch assumes that the viewers of this post would understand this response without more context. This assumption showcases that Vines have circulated enough that they have become easily recognisable, even in a deconstructed state. This further reinforces the idea that memes are becoming more and more complex with the passing of time as they tend to layer, merge, or become deconstructed. As pointed out by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017: 568), "memes tend to form chains of successive responses and refashionings, recycling initial combinations to refer to new developments, current events, fashions, fads and the like". Deconstructed memes are a perfect example of this. In the case of Figure 41, a deconstructed meme is used as a response to another meme, showing this idea of

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[22] She Was Poetry But He Couldn't Read, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 21 May 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/she-was-poetry-but-he-couldnt-read

chains. Previous experience of the internet, its culture and its productions thus become indispensable in order to fully navigate memetic discourse.

Quotation is not the only form of Deconstructed memes. Figure 42 provides an example of a different deconstruction: a visual metonymic meme. The post refers to a scene in the movie *Venom* (2019) in which actor Tom Hardy sits in a lobster tank, a scene he improvised. In order to denote the surprising and fun aspect of this improvisation, user brennnessel imagines an interaction between the production design team of the movie and the actor. However, rather than using written language to convey Tom Hardy's response (which could have been something along the lines of "I will proceed to sit in this lobster tank"), brennnessel chose to use an image. The image in question is a cropped screenshot of the *It's free real estate* meme (provided in Figure 43), which originated from a 2009 *Tim & Eric* sketch.[23] The *It's free real estate* meme is interesting as it shows the progressive deconstruction of a meme quite well. The sketch was first shared as a video before becoming a GIF and then a still image used as a reaction picture. More recently, cropped instances like the one seen in Figure 42 have been circulating. This goes to show that an item that has been circulated online for enough time can be reduced while still retaining its meaning. The image is generally shared to denote that something or someone is somewhere they are not allowed to be, but are acting as if they are perfectly allowed to.
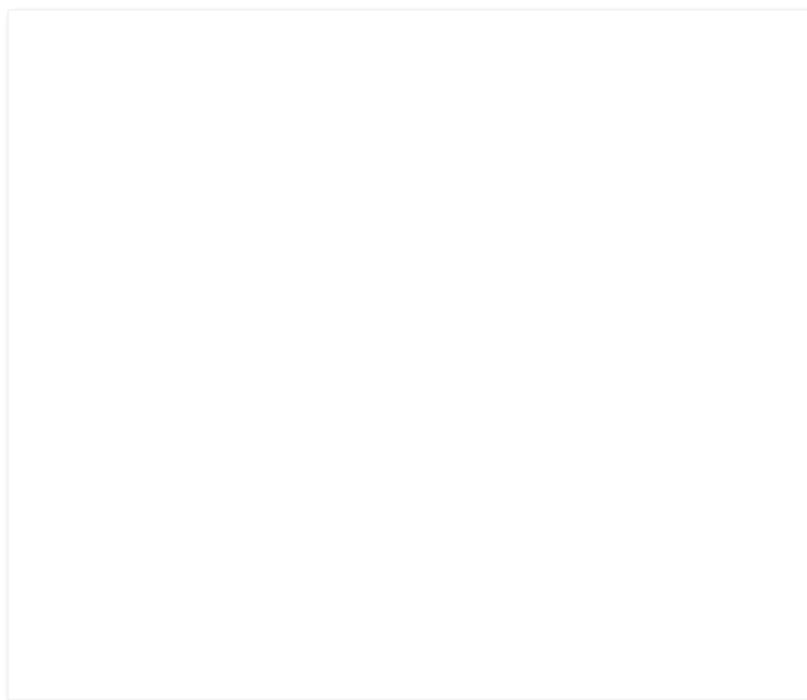
Figure 42: Example of a cropped iteration of the it's free real estate meme.

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[23] It's Free Real Estate, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 15 Sept. 2016, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/its-free-real-estate
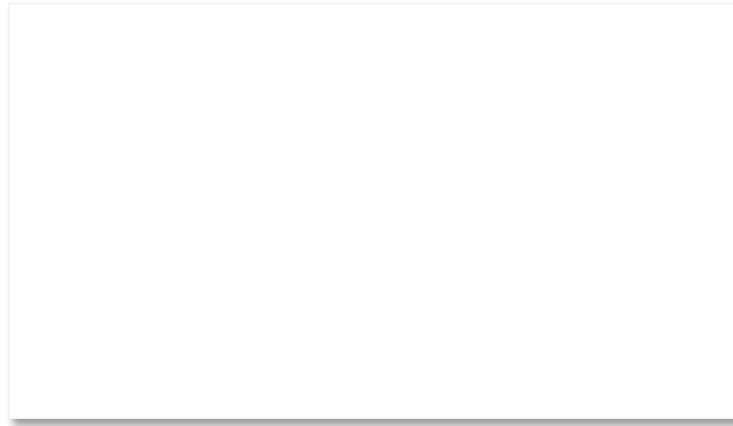
Figure 43: Original it's free real estate image.

In the case of Figure 42, only the smug expression of Tim Heidecker remains. Any netizen with meme literacy would immediately recognize the face and know that the linked catchphrase is "it's free real estate", thus understanding the implication that Tom Hardy is planning to go in the lobster tank. The viewer would also need to have seen *Venom* and know that Tom Hardy played the protagonist in order to understand which movie and which scene is referred to with this meme. Here, too, the full meaning of the meme is invoked by only one element, visual in this case. An entire thought process and scene is illustrated simply with the name of an actor and a well-known and deconstructed meme. Tom Hardy's unexpected improvisation is thus humouristically depicted in a very condensed post, showcasing a meme's ability to share quite complex messages with limited space and minimal elements. Deconstructed memes thus sit at the top of the complexification scale of the meme types presented this far. Such iterations are a testimony to the wide-spread nature of memes on the internet and their metonymic nature highlights the now imperative need for meme literacy in order to correctly navigate cyberspace.

This section has showcased some of the different types of multimodal memes that are currently in circulation on Tumblr and, more broadly, on the internet. A clear conclusion that ensues from these findings is that memes are becoming more and more complex. Indeed, a few years back, Image Macros like S*uccess Kid* and *LOLcats* were the most widespread forms of memes. Today, as the data show, a wider variety of memes is in circulation and more complex constructions are used by netizens in order to convey messages. The presence of standard and non-standard templates highlights Dancygier and Vandelanotte's (2017: 592) idea that "multimodal constructions show prototype structure too, with core examples that are more characteristic and recognizable and more peripheral examples deviating from the prototypes in some respect". Meme literacy has become essential to fully grasping many of the current memes as they often use and re-use previous iterations. Some newer types like the Redraw

require more specific skills in order to be realised and appreciated, hinting at the ever-present tension between niche communities and the mainstream. Furthermore, as memes have evolved to the point where any image can serve as a template, the choice of such images can be considered to be motivated by the message the users wish to convey. I come back to this idea in the next section of this mémoire, which focuses on the use netizens make of these different types of multimodal memes in a specific communication context.

4.2   Case study: Marx Psycho 100

So far, this study has explained the different types of multimodal memes that are in circulation nowadays as individual iterations. The way the different types of memes have been presented up to this point may make it seem that they exist separately; however, this is not the case. All of these formats coexist in cyberspace; they are different semiotic resources available to netizens who pick and choose the meme which best conveys their message. In this section, I present a case study to showcase how the different types of memes discussed up to this point are used in a specific communication context, as well as their ties to previous literature. While the example presented in the case study relate to a specific situation, the trends being discussed are quite common in memetic conversations online.

As mentioned previously, 2020 was a strange year for memes. Few new memes were actually produced and circulated during my data collection period. However, a particular tweet (provided in Figure 44) started a surge of memetic responses on the 8th of September 2020, near the end of my data collection period.
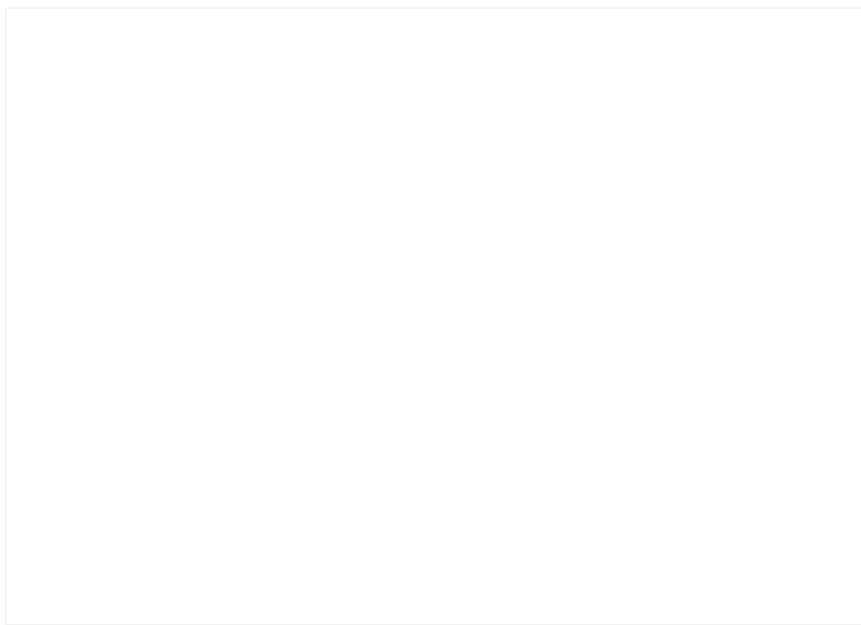
Figure 44: Eric Trump's tweet: @EricTrump, "Mob", Twitter, 08 September 2020
https://twitter.com/erictrump/status/1303288007357796353?lang=en

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests in America, Eric Trump, then President Donald Trump's second son, posted a tweet claiming that Google was manipulating Americans after his search for "mob" brought up results he was not expecting. Indeed, instead of pictures of crowds, Eric Trump's search returned screenshots and official art of Shigeo "Mob" Kageyama, the protagonist of the *Mob Psycho 100* anime and manga.

Netizens' reactions to this tweet were immediate. Eric Trump's claim that it was a conspiracy, denoted by the opening sentence of the tweet, "Google is once again trying to manipulate Americans", was a source of much mockery and derision. Netizens rapidly made fun of his failing to understand that Google is the most frequently used search engine in the world and that the term might apply to things other than pictures of crowds. The *Mob Psycho 100* (abbreviated as *MP100* from now on) fandom responded with a flood of memetic content. Additionally, what was first tweeted as a conspiracy from Google was rapidly exaggerated to "it's a leftist scheme" and "it's communist propaganda" by internet users in order to highlight the absurdity they perceived in Eric Trump's tweet.

In the discussion that follows, I focus on how Tumblr users responded to this tweet. All of the examples in this section are taken from Tumblr on the days following the tweet and are not representative of the entirety of the discourse. All of these memes position their creators against Eric Trump and, while there were certainly pro-Trump responses to the tweet, I did not encounter any during the collection of reactions on Tumblr. This shows a clear bias in the data, but it can be attributed to Tumblr's most vocal population, which is generally pro-social justice and liberally inclined. Nevertheless, while this case study only examines responses that mock Eric Trump, this bias does not undermine the memetic conversation that happened; in fact, this shared stance is key to the understanding and evolution of the memes that make up this discourse.

Part of the irony and amusement for the *MP100* fandom came from the incongruity of thinking that *MP100* could be used as propaganda. To give a brief synopsis of *Mob Psycho 100*, the story follows Kageyama Shigeo (a.k.a "Mob", nicknamed like this from the wasei eigo, モブ, *Mobu*, for "background character" as he lacks presence), a shy and socially awkward 14-year-old boy with strong psychic powers, as he tries to live a normal life. He generally refrains from using his powers in his daily life for fear of losing control over them, and instead tries to better himself through normal means, like joining school clubs. In order to learn how to control his powers, Mob works as a part-time assistant and disciple for Arataka Reigen (previously discussed in section 4.1.1.4) in his Spirit and Such Consultation Office. The

general plot revolves around Mob's efforts to learn how to be less shy and live like a normal teenager while he is being thrown into strange situations due to his powers. The main themes of the story are kindness and acceptance as various characters wander their way through life and relationships with each other and learn that, regardless of your abilities, being kind to others will always be the right solution.

With that in mind, the idea that *MP100* might be used as a plot by leftists resonated in two possible ways with netizens. Firstly, the idea that a manga and anime from Japan would be used by a big Western capitalist corporation like Google as propaganda for socialism is so outlandish that it is easy to mock. Furthermore, the fact that the tweet originated from a member of the Trump family certainly exacerbated the need for mockery for their opposants, who are found in great number on Tumblr. Opinions on Donald Trump's presidency diverge greatly, causing different and often virulent reactions to his, or his family's, comments and social media posts. As Eric Trump worked closely with his father during his presidency, he was quickly associated with his father's (conspiracy) theories and opinions. This tweet implicitly reveals Eric Trump's hostility towards the Black Lives Matter protests. It is not so surprising to see that he was looking for 'mob', a negatively connoted word, in the midst of this time period, as he had previously made remarks antagonising the movement.[24] Such an attitude does not make him sympathetic to the online community, especially not the Tumblr community, who claims to be progressive (see Milner 2016: 135). Thus, netizens, being presented with an opportunity to ridicule a Trump, did not hold back. Secondly, and it is an interpretation on my part, the broad themes of *MP100* –kindness, acceptance and solidarity– are often promoted as values close to leftist ideology, which amused the fans and pushed them to lean into the idea of Mob being a symbol for this ideology, as we will see with the following examples in this section.

Some of the first memes used as responses quite directly mock Eric Trump, like Figure 45, published on the 8th of September, where a netizen used the *Hmm Today I will*[25] meme to provide an imagined reconstitution of Trump's experience.

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[24] As an example of this hostility, he called the BLM protesters "animals" during a speech for his father's rally on June 20th 2020 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. @atrupar, "Eric Trump refers to #BlackLiveMatter protesters as "animals"", Twitter, 21 September 2020 https://twitter.com/atrupar/status/1274482141636759552.

[25] Hmm Today I Will, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2010, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hmm-today-i-will
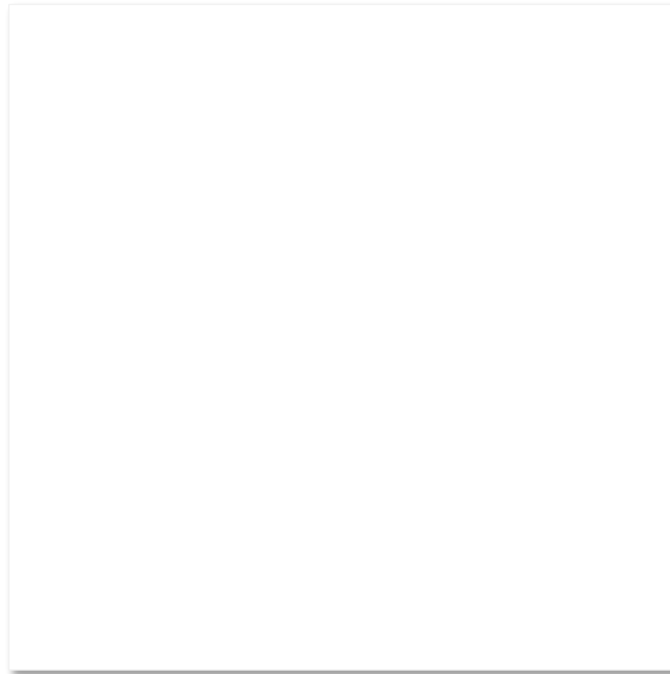
Figure 45: Hmm Today I Will, posted on the 8th.

Figure 45 uses text and images to fill in the meme template, in this case a derivative of *Rage Comics*. For netizens aware of the tweet and its content, the stick figure obviously represents Eric Trump and the four panels the events that potentially led to his tweet. The creator's stance is expressed quite clearly through the first panel's textual annotation (to be understood as Eric Trump's own thoughts) which reads, "hmm today i will make fascist propaganda about the mass protests". The use of the negatively connotated term "fascist propaganda" to denote what Eric Trump was about to do clearly positions the meme creator against the businessman and clarifies the tone of the meme (that of antagonism toward and mockery of Trump). This expression of stance was addressed by Wiggins when he refined Shifman's (2014) ideas of content and stance for non-video memes, explaining that, "[c]ontent is the information, the data which the meme conveys. Stance is the deliberation on how that content should be (ideally) understood and which (imagined) audiences are addressed and which are ignored, marginalized, etc." (Wiggins 2019: 17). In this case, the very first panel informs the audience about the position taken by the creator (antagonising Eric Trump) and to whom the meme is addressed (people who align themselves with the creator). This stance is reinforced by the content of the whole comic, which mocks Trump. The second panel shows the projected Eric Trump cluelessly approaching (as indicated by an arrow and the word "clueless") a computer that has been annotated with an image of the Google logo. The last two panels use two *rage faces* to express Eric Trump's reaction upon seeing the result of his search, namely pictures of Mob, here pasted on the computer screen. In the last panel, the image of Mob has been overlaid

with an image of the hammer and sickle, the well-known symbol of the proletariat, linked to communist ideology. This last panel hints at the direction in which memes related to this event evolved, namely the link with the idea of *MP100* being left-wing, and even communist, propaganda. Figure 45 thus showcases one of the creative ways in which netizens take part in discourse, as different visual and textual elements are put together in order to create a small comic that conveys a significant amount of information. It humouristically reconstitutes the steps that Eric Trump might have gone through before posting his tweet, while also mocking the businessman's overreaction to the results of his Google search and clearly expressing the opinion of the creator, as well as the projected audience.

As the news of the tweet spread, other memes, less directly related to Eric Trump, started circulating. Some templates appeared repeatedly as they fit the message well, such as the *You are not immune to propaganda*[26] meme (provided in Figure 46): Figures 47, 48 and 49 are three examples of Redraws made over this meme featuring the character of Mob instead of Garfield.
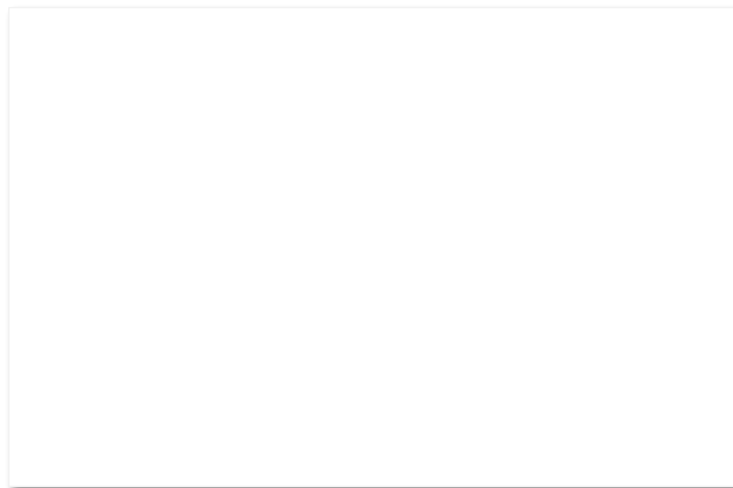
Figure 46: Original "You are not immune to propaganda".

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[26]You Are Not Immune To Propaganda, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/you-are-not-immune-to-propaganda
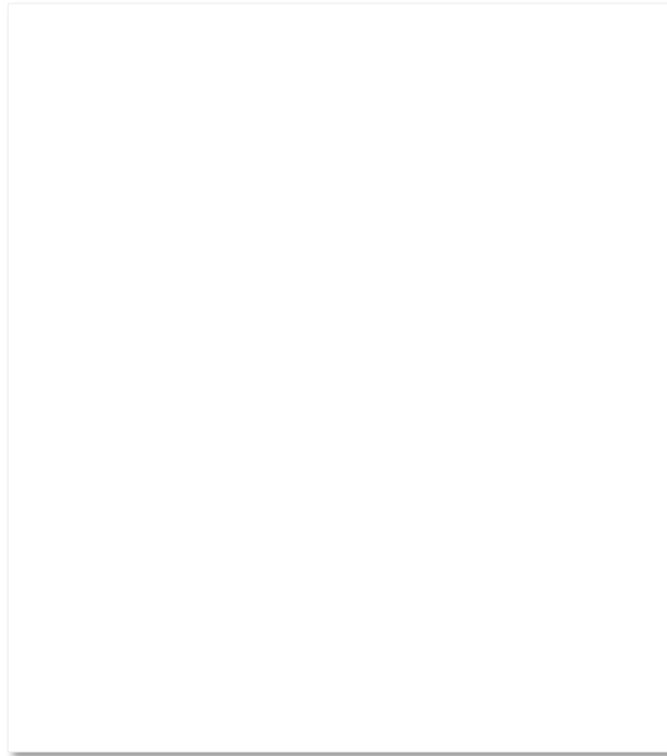
Figure 47: A first example of Redraw over the "You are not immune to propaganda" template, posted on the 8th.
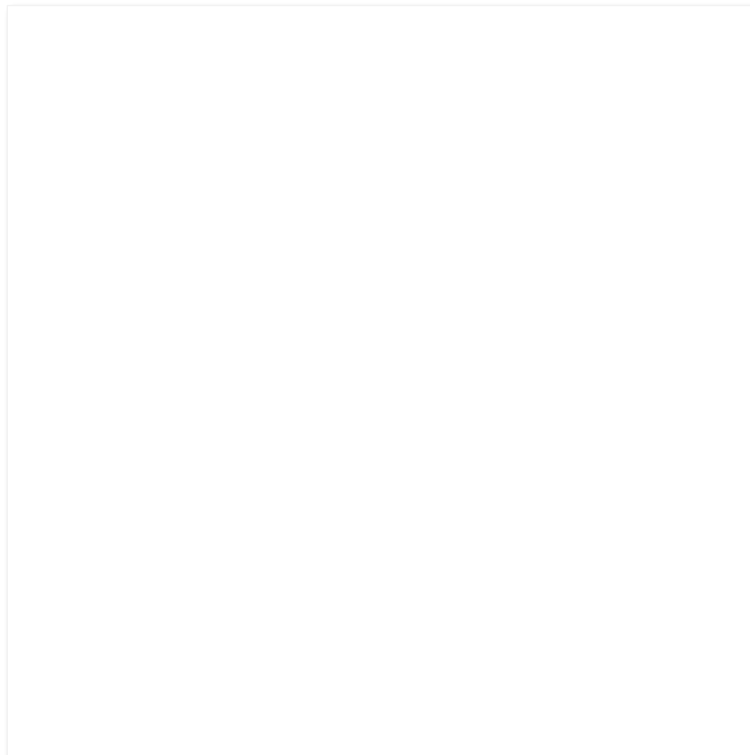
Figure 48: A second Redraw over the "You are not immune to propaganda" template, posted on the 9th .
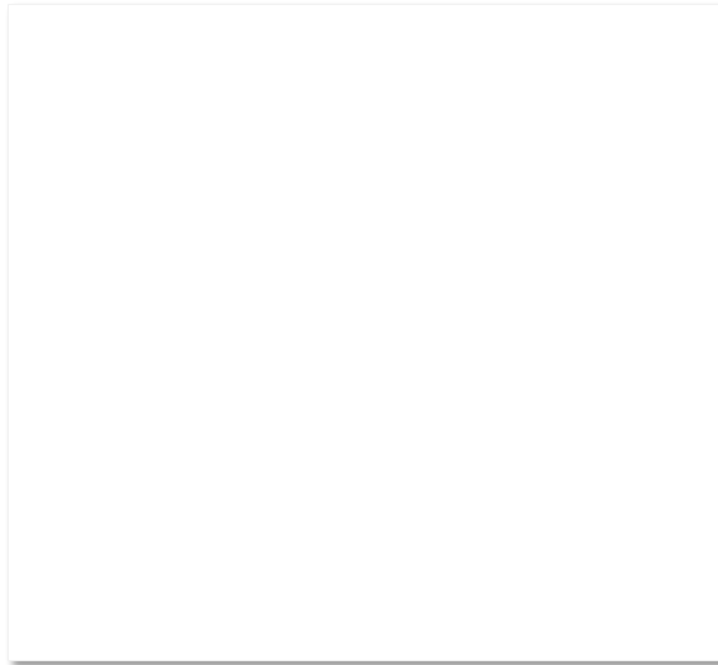
Figure 49: A third Redraw example, posted on the 10th.

As netizens latched onto the implicit idea put forward by the *Hmm Today I Will* meme – that Google is part of a broad leftist conspiracy – the *You are not immune to propaganda* meme became as an obvious template to use. The original image is well-known by Tumblr users and was initially used as a reaction picture in discourses about corporate brands and their activity online.[27] More precisely, it was, and still is, used as a response to gullible netizens who do not fully grasp the notion that a brand appearing to be friendly and relatable online is part of their marketing strategy. What makes this meme really appropriate as a reaction to Eric Trump's tweet, however, is its catchphrase: "You are not immune to propaganda". Building on the idea that Google used *MP100* as a means of propaganda for leftist politics, the combination of the redrawn face of Mob and the catchphrase works well.

The ironic tone of these iterations, indicated by the association of Mob's face with the meme's text, is supported by the captions with which they were posted in the cases of Figure 48 and 49. Using Barthes' terminology, the captions of these instances take the role of anchorage, guiding the viewer's reading and interpretation of the images (Barthes 1964: 44). Figure 48, depicting Mob with a neutral face (with round, soft line shapes, brownish hues instead of stark blacks and little lines signifying blushing), is accompanied with the caption "Danger to the American people". The discrepancy between the drawing, the catchphrase and the caption serves to highlight the absurdity of seeing Mob as a threat. A similar idea is evoked

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[27] You Are Not Immune To Propaganda, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/you-are-not-immune-to-propaganda.

in Figure 49, where a Redraw of Mob (with a stronger colour scheme but still very much depicting a teenager with a bowl cut) is linked with the poster's caption saying, "oh to be a citizen brainwashed by google's leftist propaganda". The caption's phrasing makes it sound pensive and wishful, adding to the absurdity. It is important to note that the "Oh to be …" phrasing, while being common in the English language, gained memetic weight in 2011 and is now used in conjunction with images to express the desire to be someone or something else.[28] This additional reference showcases the layering trend, which is a quite common feature of memes nowadays.

Redraws were not only found over the *You are not immune to propaganda* template. Figure 50, below, makes use of another well-known meme, *Disaster Girl*[29], to convey the chaos supposedly brought up by Mob, but actually by Eric Trump's tweet. *Disaster Girl* is an old meme, originating in 2007, and is well-known by netizens as she has been photoshopped in dozens of disastrous pictures over the years. In this Redraw, Mob has taken the place of the little girl looking smugly at the camera while in front of a house on fire. The image's caption, "his world now", further indicates the irony of the situation, playing on the idea of *MP100* being used as a propaganda campaign and of Mob being on the path to world domination.
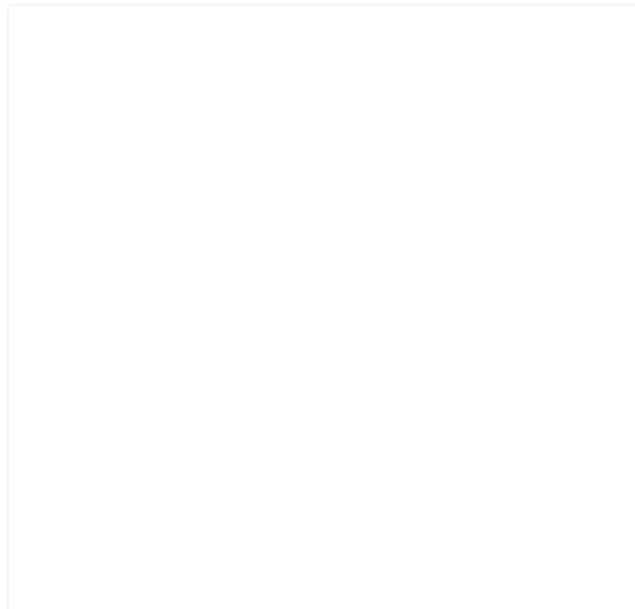
Figure 50: Mob redrawn over Disaster Girl, posted on the 8th.

While Redraws were to be expected from the fandom that popularised the genre, other previously-discussed meme formats were also used in this discourse. Object Labelling iterations were heavily used, reflecting their current popularity and relative ease of execution.

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28 Oh to be…, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2011, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/oh-to-be
29 Disaster Girl, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2007, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/disaster-girl

Figure 51 and 52 use the standard *Is this a pigeon?* template in order to convey how Eric Trump has mistaken *MP100* for leftist or communist propaganda. Both iterations are used in the same way to convey the same message; however, users have different ways of labelling the template. This is a good illustration of how individuals choose the modes that are available to them and that best convey their message in a given context (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Jewitt 2013). Both users have access to the same modes (visual and textual annotations) and wish to convey the same message; however, their individuality and creativity shine through the choices they make in the labelling of the template.
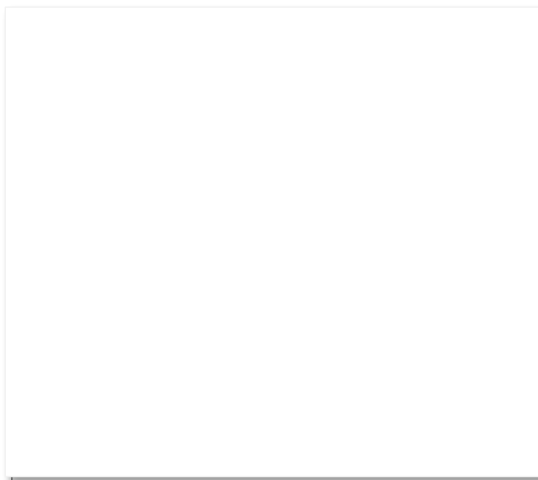
Figure 51: A first example of Is This a Pidgeon? Labelling, posted on the 9th.
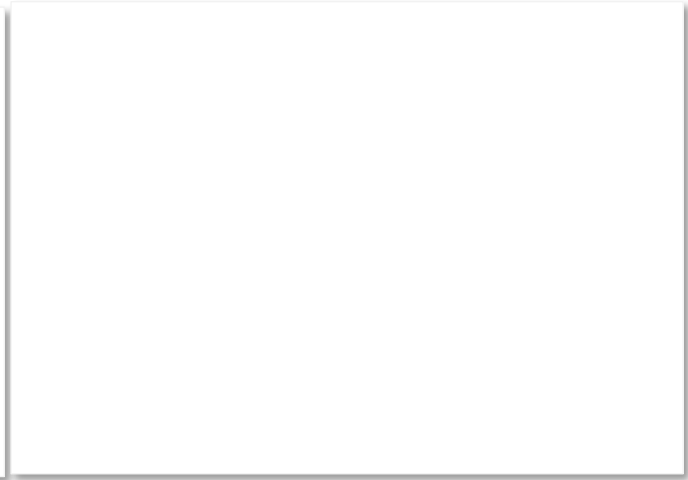
Figure 52: A different labelling of Is This a Pidgeon? Posted on the 9th.

In Figure 51, user chaoticgaymess has chosen to use a photo of Eric Trump to label Katori (the character in the original screenshot) and a cute screenshot of Mob to replace the butterfly. The creator of Figure 52 opted for a textual labelling reading "Eric Trump" over Katori's face and a promotional image of Mob, looking more intense, over the butterfly. Both iterations textually modified the subtitles: Figure 51 keeps the beginning of the original subtitle whereas the whole text has been rewritten in Figure 52. Figure 52 expresses the message more strongly than Figure 51, using a more intimidating depiction of Mob and choosing the term "communist propaganda", in contrast to the more moderate "left wing propaganda" used in Figure 51, in the subtitle change. In isolation, Figure 51 requires slightly more cultural knowledge, as the viewer must recognise Eric Trump in the picture; however, as this meme was posted alongside thousands of others on the same subject, even someone not familiar with Eric Trump's appearance can understand that it is him via contextual clues. Finally, the caption accompanying Figure 51 is interesting. In it, chaoticgaymess acknowledges the fact that similar iterations (like in Figure 52) have already been created, saying, "someone's definitely done this already by now but have mine", and yet has still decided to post their own version. This

highlights the community orientation of meme creation: chaoticgaymess is not looking for originality with their meme, but for participation in the conversation. They want to participate in the discourse and choose the well-known *Is this a pigeon?* template to do so, offering commentary on the situation and ensuring that a large audience would be able to understand said commentary as it is a well-known template, easy to read for knowledgeable netizens.

As memes continued to be created and circulated, some users pushed the "communist propaganda" even further, referencing Karl Marx and *The Communist Manifesto* directly. This is the case in Figure 53 and Figure 54. Figure 53, below, is an example of image-only labelling. In this case, a well-known photograph of Karl Marx's head has been photoshopped over a promotional image for the *MP100* anime, replacing Mob's. The incongruity of an historical figure such as Karl Marx being photoshopped over an anime poster highlights the absurdity of the whole situation. The image is accompanied with the caption "Marx Psycho 100", a fun blend of "Karl Marx" and *Mob Psycho 100*, which also helps the interpretation of the image, in case people did not recognize the philosopher's face. Taken out of its context of creation, this iteration would be thoroughly confusing; however, within the discourse, this is a clever pun, visually well executed.
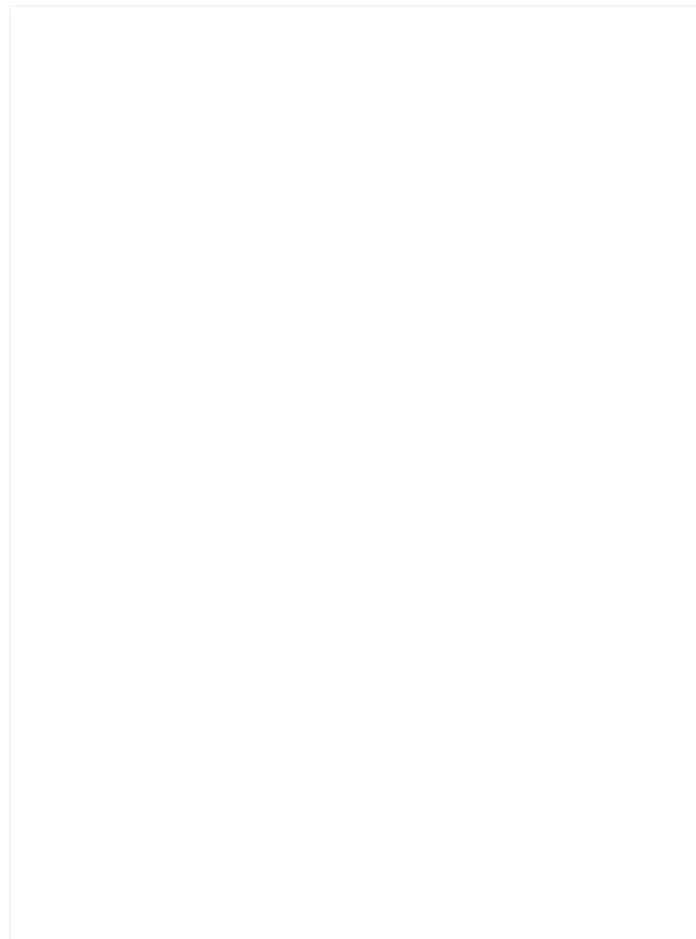
Figure 53: Photoshopping of Marx's face over Mob, posted on the 8th.

Figure 54, below, shows an inverse strategy, pasting images of Mob and Reigen onto one version of the cover of *The Communist Manifesto*, replacing Marx and Engels. Figure 54 is, in fact, a combination of Object Labelling and Text Changing, as the title of the manifesto has been modified to the "Communist Mobifesto" and the names of the authors have been changed from the original Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx to Kageyama Shigeo (Mob) and Reigen Arataka. This demonstrates an observation from earlier, that meme sub-genres are not discrete and tend to overlap. Additionally, the image is accompanied with a caption reading, "A spectre is haunting the World—the spectre of *communism*", a slightly modified version of the famous opening line of the manifesto's introduction. Furthermore, user levitee, who posted the image, took advantage of Tumblr's caption formatting options, putting the word "communism" in italics and in red, a colour that is often associated with the communist ideology. The insistence on the ideology, strengthened by this font manipulation, highlights the strategies used by netizens in order to mock Eric Trump.
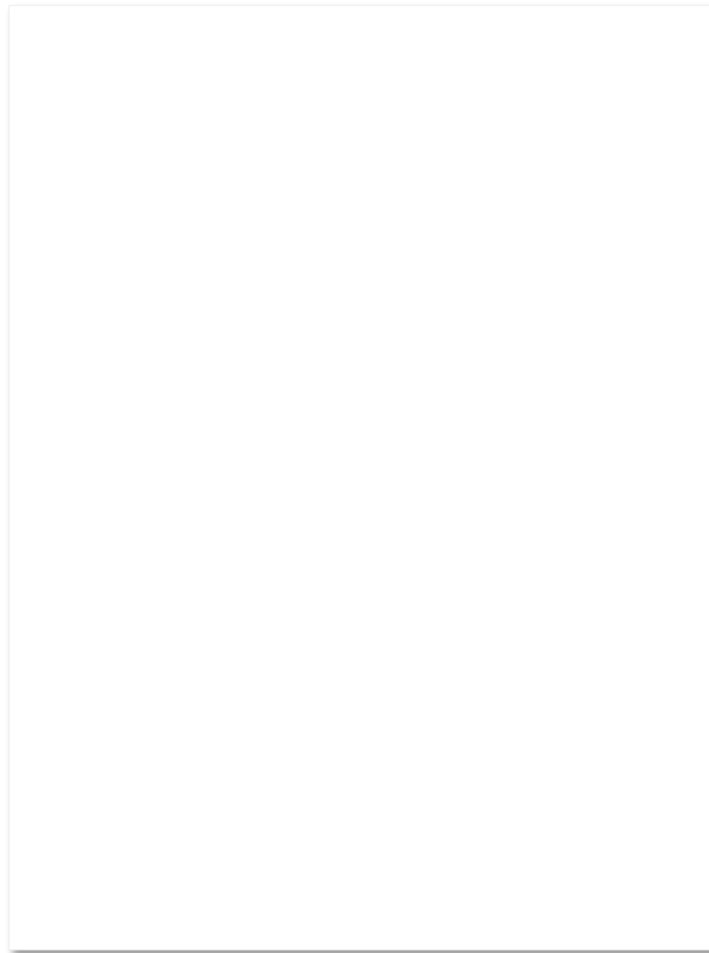
Figure 54: Modified cover of the Communist manifesto, posted on the 9th.

While Eric Trump's tweet does not explicitly mention communism or even left-wing politics, the perceived subtext was strong enough for internet users to identify and expand upon.

Their hyperbolic linking of *MP100* with left-wing ideologies only highlights the absurdity of Eric Trump's tweet. Such instances also underline the strong intertextuality present in memes, and the necessity of broad cultural knowledge to grasp the full meaning of memes. That background knowledge is needed to understand memes is a feature upon which recent publications such as Shifman (2014), Cannizzaro (2016), Grundlingh (2018), Yus (2019) and Wiggins (2019), strongly insist. While an assumed previous knowledge of *MP100* seems obvious in the context of this discourse, viewers' assumed knowledge of the face of Karl Marx and the tenets of communism can be surprising. This shows that memetic conversations make use of the very broad cultural contexts in which they blossom and that a certain level of socio-cultural literacy is assumed by the participants. It also highlights that no text or media is "safe" from the poaching of meme makers (see Milner 2016: 26), as even an influential text like *The Communist Manifesto* can be used to produce memes.

Using a classic top/bottom impact font text, iterations like Figure 55 (posted below without a caption) play with the juxtaposition of the ideology of communism and the innocent face of Mob, here even more exaggerated as the screenshot used is one of Mob as a child, looking up expectantly. Figure 55 corresponds to what Yus (2019: 120-121) qualified as an interdependent image-text relationship; the meaning of the whole cannot be understood from just the text or just the image. He mentioned that "the most frequent text-picture interaction in this category of memes is that in which the information from the picture invalidates, to a greater or lesser extent, the information provided by the text" (Yus 2019: 121). Figure 55 is thus a strong example as Mob's boyish innocence "invalidates" the interpretation as the face of communism. This clash between image and text is resolved by the broad context in which this meme came to be, namely Eric Trump's tweet and the subsequent responses that led to the link between *MP100* and communism. Without this overarching context, the link between pictures of Mob and communism would remain nonsensical. However, these memetic iterations take place within a specific discourse, in which participants, at least those presented in this case study, all share a broader viewpoint (that of mocking Eric Trump by linking *MP100* and communism), which allows iterations such as Figure 55 to exist and be understood by the participants.
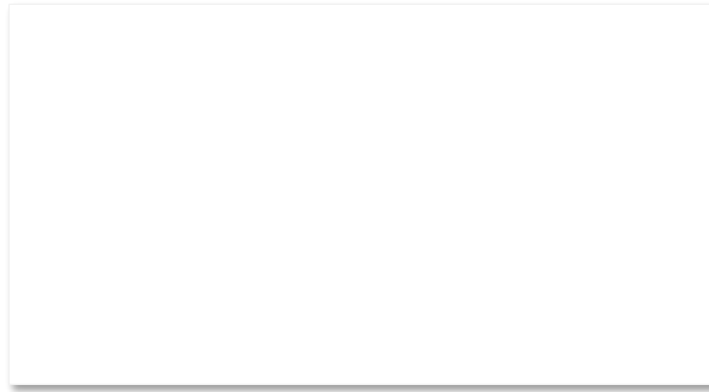
Figure 55: Classic Top/Bottom annotation over Mob, posted on the 8th.

Other netizens opted for text-only labellings, as is the case in Figure 56, below, whose only link with *MP100* is in its textual annotation, unlike the previous examples which used visuals from the anime. Figure 56 uses the *Domino Effect*[30] template, illustrating the well-known theory of how a seemingly unimportant event can cause major consequences. The image here is used to make an amusing causality correlation between the creation of *MP100* and the projected dismantlement of the American government. This iteration could be seen as a parallel to Eric Trump's overreaction and interpretation of the situation as he equated an unexpected Google search result, a seemingly unimportant event, to a conspiracy. The caption reading "is this how it goes?" once again furthers the ridiculousness of the situation, presenting a dramatic interpretation of events with the meme and accompanying it with a genuine-sounding question. The question is, of course, ironic as this is an improbable outcome; a correlation between the release of a manga and the dismantlement of the American government appears far-fetched.
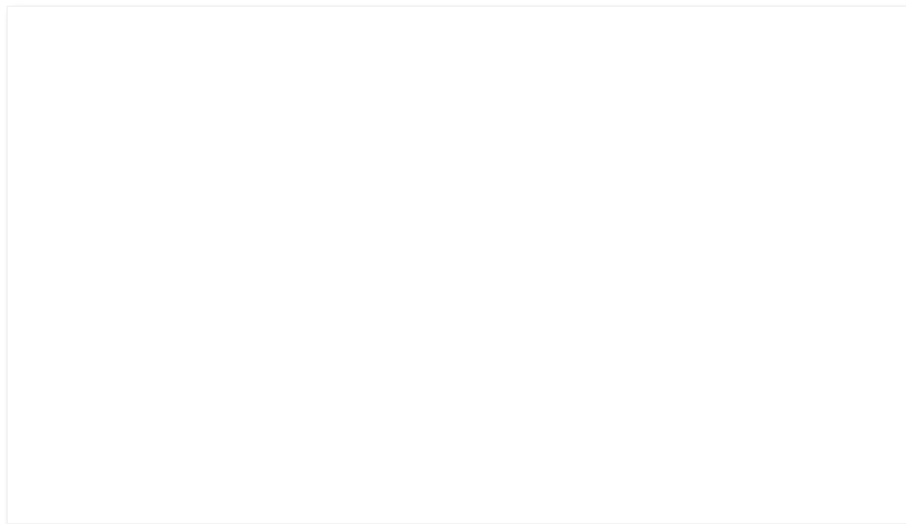
Figure 56: Domino Effect regarding MP100, posted on the 9th.

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[30] Domino Effect, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/domino-effect

Some instances of text-changing memes were also used by netizens, as is the case with Figure 57, below. In this example, a screenshot from the anime whose subtitles originally read "Mob loves milk" has been modified to read "Mob loves socialism". Figure 57 well exemplifies how memes evolve as a discourse progress. No aspect of Figure 57 can be a direct reference to Eric Trump's tweet; instead, only the link between left-wing ideology and *MP100*, appropriated by the fandom, is conveyed. Here again, the context of creation is necessary to fully understand the relevance of such a modification.
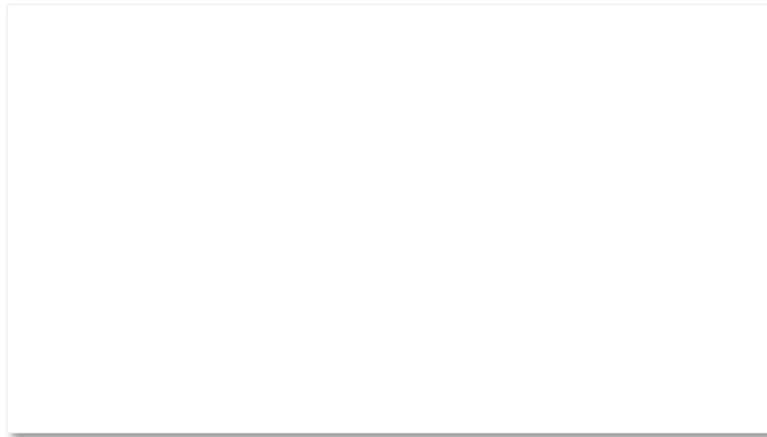
Figure 57: Example of subtitles change, posted on the 8th.

Text Changing was also used on panels from the original manga. Figures 58, 59, 60 and 61 are all examples of the netizens' adaptation of the source work for their memetic needs. It is important to note that manga panels must be read right to left. This cultural specificity is relatively well-known by manga and anime fans worldwide as manga have been spreading outside of Japan since the late 1980s, but an individual must still have previous knowledge of this fact in order to read these iterations correctly. This question of cultural specificity was raised by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006:14) when they discussed the impact of globalisation on visual communication; they pointed out that globalisation "demands that the cultural specificities of semiotic, social, epistemological and rhetorical effects of visual communication must be understood everywhere, since semiotic entities from anywhere now appear and are 'consumed' everywhere". While their position must be nuanced as cultural specificities still remain, it is true that, generally speaking, people now have a broader knowledge of visual codes from other cultures. This can, in turn, account for the fact that the specific knowledge regarding the reading order of manga panels is assumed by the meme creators.

All of these modified manga panels relate Mob to potential propaganda. Figure 58 is the only panel in which Mob does not speak; it is Reigen (a piece of information only available to people familiar with the manga) pointing at Mob and exclaiming (as shown by the spiky speech bubble), "Look at this sad boy," in the original version. Here "sad boy" has been

replaced by "left wing propaganda", playing with the idea of Mob as a new symbol of this movement. Furthermore, within the context of this iteration, the hand pointing at Mob could be interpreted as Eric Trump's, in a way paralleling the idea of Trump mistaking *MP100* for propaganda. It can also reinforce the creator's stance that this is a ridiculous mistake as, like with previous memes, "left wing propaganda" is embodied by Mob, a teenager in his school uniform with a bowl cut.
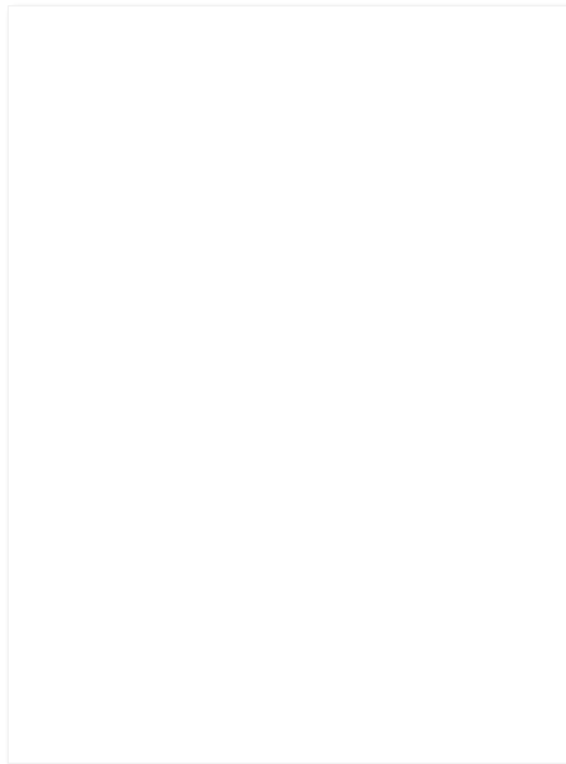
Figure 58: Reigen gesturing at Mob, posted on the 8th.

The three other panels actualise what Eric Trump implied by putting words in Mob's mouth. In Figure 59, Mob says "Marxism.", as indicated by the speech bubble. The confused reaction of the character Dimple, a spirit, on the left and the "the fuck is he saying…" speech bubble could be interpreted as an embodiment of the *MP100* fans seeing Mob being equated to communist propaganda, the word 'Marxism' being literally put into his mouth.
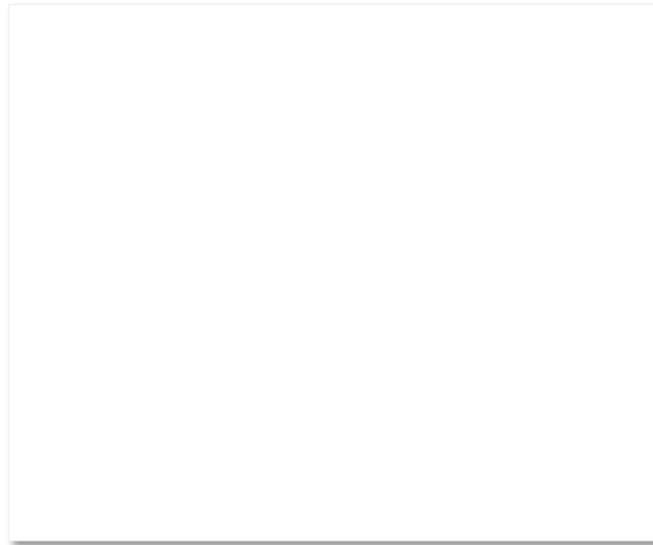
Figure 59: Mob "saying" Marxism., posted on the 9th.

A similar actualisation happens in Figure 60 and Figure 61 as, again, Mob's speech bubbles have been replaced with sayings commonly associated by netizens with communism and anti-capitalism more broadly.[31] These two memes present Mob as more intimidating than in the two previous examples, adhering more closely to the potential threat Eric Trump could have seen in the character.
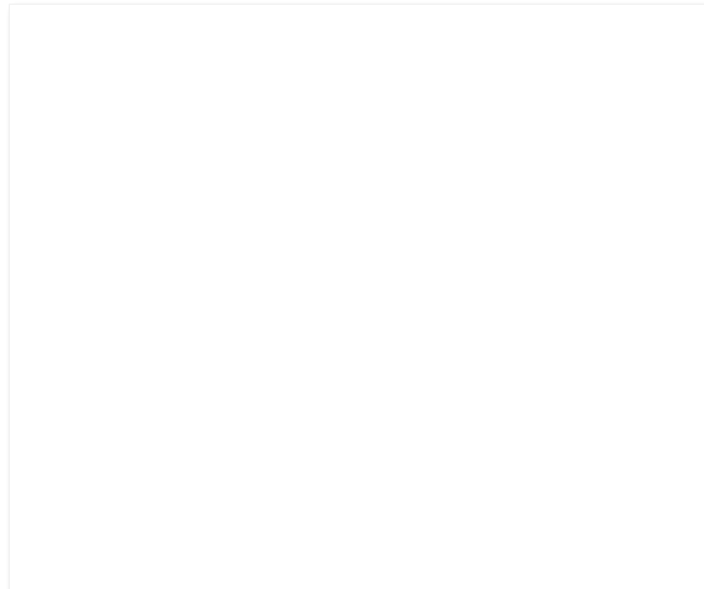
Figure 60: Mob "saying" seize the means of production, posted on the 9th.

Figure 60 shows Mob with his face in the shadows, hands reaching towards the reader. The original text of the speech bubbles has been completely erased and replaced with "seize

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[31] Note that these sayings, along with others, are quite common online and inscribe themselves in the ongoing conversations and debates about communism and anti-capitalism taking place in some circles online. These conversations are gaining more and more traction as the wealth inequality increase worldwide (aspect which the COVID pandemic highlighted even more), and netizens are turning back to ideas and philosophies of communism and the French revolution. https://www.gq.com/story/eat-the-rich-digital-generation

the means of production", one of the central tenets of communism proposed by Karl Marx, which has since been appropriated by netizens as a memetic catchphrase.[32] The caption, reading "can you believe mob said this" underlines the playfulness of the creator of the meme. By attributing Karl Marx's words and ideas to Mob by way of the speech bubbles, the creator takes part in the discourse and playfully "confirms" what was implied (or not) by the original tweet.
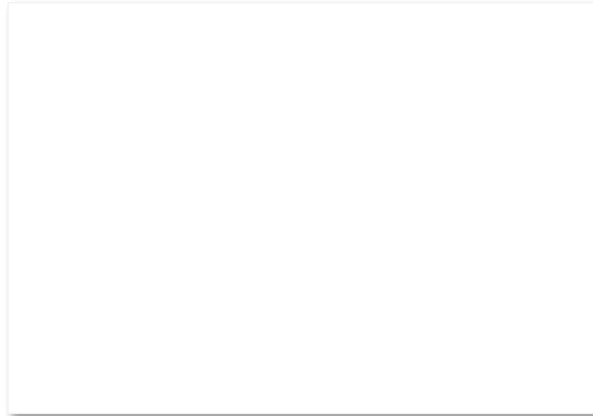
Figure 61: Mob "saying" eat the rich, posted on the 9th.

Figure 61 works the same way. In this panel, a close up of Mob's face, again half in the shadows, shows him disdainfully looking to the right. The original text, "tch… shut up and eat the steak", has been modified to "tch… shut up and eat the rich", the last part being a motto attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which is often used by netizens in opposition to wealth inequality and capitalism (Lavin 2019, para. 3). Figure 61 thus once again makes Mob an anti-capitalist symbol by putting a famous saying in his mouth.

In these last examples, the presence of Eric Trump and the original tweet have disappeared and only the link between *MP100* and leftist ideologies remains. This may indicate an appropriation of the discourse by netizens, shifting its focal point from the broadly political (i.e. a thinly veiled message by a political figure about the mass protests going on at the time) to the more niche realms of the *MP100* fandom.

This case study has shown the development of a discourse and the evolution of memetic media within this discourse. The discourse was the liveliest on the 8th and 9th and died down rapidly afterwards, a common time frame for a memetic discourse based on a single tweet. It was possible to observe the development of this discourse over time due to Tumblr's chronological feed, though the chronology of the development of the different memes must not be understood as strict "real time" chronology, but rather as "discourse spread time" chronology. Tumblr is an international platform and people have entered and participated in

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[32] Seize the means of production, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/seize-the-means-of-production

the discourse at different times due to time zones. This means that users who were online when the tweet was posted responded more immediately than those who were, for example, asleep and who did not see the tweet or the related discourse for many hours afterwards. These first respondents could therefore be considered to be further along in the discourse. This explains why some memes from the 8th are closely related to the tweet and others have already distanced themselves from it. Despite this, a general trend is that earlier meme iterations, created soon after the tweet was posted, referred more directly to the tweet and its author. As the discourse progressed, netizens shifted slightly and focused more on "Mob as a left-wing symbol" rather than Eric Trump himself. The later memes also indicate that meme creators project a shared understanding of the context of production on their recipients, as the starting point of the conversation has been put aside. Such a development well exemplifies Grundlingh's (2018: 149) idea that "[w]ith memes, the choice of resource and the social context in which the meme is interpreted are central to successful communication since communicating through memes is dependent on the addressee understanding why, for example, a certain meme was used to comment on a statement", highlighting the importance of understanding memes in their broad cultural context. In this case, the knowledge of Eric Trump's tweet has shifted from being explicit to being implicit, with participants assuming others would know the origin of the discourse taking place and the reason why a link between *MP100* and left-wing politics and communism is being made.

The various examples provided in this section have shown that the different types of memes can and do, in fact, co-exist on the internet and within the same discourse. The different genres cannot be seen as strict and finite categories, as it is, after all, the very nature of memes to be in constant evolution and to be remixed in many ways; blends between the genres I have defined happen regularly, as demonstrated in Figure 24 and 54. The memes under discussion have been created both from well-known meme templates and from content poached directly from the source material of *MP100* (both anime and manga). This underlines a contrast between older memes such as *Success Kid* and other Image Macros that required more specific templates, such as a coloured wheel background and a picture of a specific character in the case of *Success Kid*, in order to function, and the more recent memes which can be created over virtually any image. In this way, the idea stays similar to old Image Macros in that the image informs the way in which the text, and the whole meme, must be read and interpreted. However, the more recent genres have gained complexity in that they are more than just a joke that can be taken out of the context of production. (Most old Image Macros like *Success Kid* and *Advice Animals* are totally independent of context and refer to wider stereotypes and experiences).

Netizens now need a level of meme literacy and broad (pop-)cultural knowledge, as well as awareness of the context in which the memes were produced, in order to be able to understand the full referentiality of memes (see Yus 2019: 109). There are obviously exceptions to this but it seems like the general trend of modern meme genres such as those presented in this study follow this idea of context-dependent complexity.

This dependency on context can be explained by the current use of memes in more specific contexts of communication. To come back to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and more broadly social semiotics' idea of semiotic signs as socially motivated entities, mentioned at the beginning of this section, the various memes presented align themselves quite well with the concept. The different types of memes used in what I will refer to the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse (encompassing all the memes created in reaction to Eric Trump's tweet) showcase the choices of semiotic resources made by the meme-makers. A large number of them opted for multimodal ensembles (combinations of textual and visual modes, see Jewitt 2013: 255) in order to participate in the conversation, as these two modes are easily available for online communication nowadays. Such memes can be used in many different contexts as their general meaning is now well-known by netizens and logics such as those of Object Labelling or Blank Filling allow them to express an almost infinite array of messages. To meme-literate netizens, templates such as *Is this a pigeon?* carry a particular meaning, (in this case "someone mistaking something for something else"), which can then be filled in with additional information to create a new meaning, depending on users' needs in specific communication contexts.

Additionally, as these memetic logics become commonplace within cyberspace, users are capable of forming and understanding memes based on templates that are non-standard (for example, less well-known memes and random pictures), which, in turn, makes meme creation even more productive. This idea of productivity is linked to creativity; this was highlighted by Milner (2016: 95), who explained that,

> [a]s fixed premise and novel expression intertwine, unique expressions are born from prepatterned tropes. Far from being mere formula, the memetic balance of imitation and transformation is evidence of both social utility and creative adaptation.

The fixed elements and prepatterned tropes help guide meme creators and allow them to form memes on non-standard templates, just as a grammar helps in new word formation, rendering meme creation productive. The examples provided in this case study, and more broadly through this whole mémoire, illustrate this balance between fixity (i.e. the elements that are conserved from iteration to iteration) and novelty quite well. Each meme genre has a set of fixed rules,

which serve to make it recognizable and replicable, as well as the potential for novelty, as demonstrated with the numerous remixes and non-standard iterations.

Furthermore, the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse exemplifies Milner's idea of memes as a lingua franca, a social and creative vernacular, of the internet. While the specific iterations in context may not be understood by all, the different memes used in the discourse are well-known by meme-savvy netizens. More broadly, memetic conversations function as the online lingua franca in the sense that netizens are, for the most part, literate in memes and are capable of using this "language" to participate in conversations when they wish to. The reactions to Eric Trump's tweet are prime examples of the way internet users make use of the different resources available to them in order to create multimodal items to take part in a conversation. As Milner (2016: 95) pointed out, "[t]he memetic lingua franca is conversational, but it's not merely conversational; it's also a language threaded together by individual acts of creative expression". Individuals' creativity shines through their use of the different tools at their disposition and their personalised iterations, as we have seen with Figure 51 and 52. Redraws are perhaps some of the most striking examples of this creative expression with communication as a goal, as netizens make use of their artistic skills to playfully participate in discourses and engage with others.

The newer genres of memes, presented in this mémoire, highlight the complex communicative potential of such artifacts. As highlighted by Wiggins (2019: 40):

> a meme, viewed as a genre, is not simply a formula followed by humans to communicate, but represents a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication.

This idea is well exemplified by the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse. In the case study presented above, the surge of memetic content – be it in the form of Object Labelling, Text Changing, or Redraws[33]– was clearly motivated by an event seemingly unrelated to memes. The perceived absurdity of Eric Trump's tweet was seen as an impetus for a dynamic social conversation. Furthermore, the very creation of memes around this topic certainly pushed other users to contribute their own iterations, spreading the topic further and fuelling the conversation, showcasing the complex system of social motivation and cultural activity mentioned in Wiggins' quotation. All the participants in the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse were able to understand and engage with each other as they used the same "language"; that of memes. This

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[33] I did not encounter examples of Blank Filling in the data I collected for the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse and it is why this genre is not listed with the others here. That is not to say that none were created; I simply did not find any instance of it.

idea of memes as a "language" also touches on the importance of the (projected) intersubjectivity between the participants (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Grundlingh 2018).

In addition to creating the possibility for netizens to playfully engage with each other about their favourite media, the "Marx Psycho 100" discourse allowed participants to use this memetic discourse to take part in a conversation about power (in the person of Eric Trump and his opinions). Indeed, while more serious in-depth and informed commentary of Eric Trump's tweet and its implications can be made, the memetic conversation is accessible to anyone, as long as they have previous knowledge of *MP100*. This idea has been discussed by previous authors:

> As Dahlgren argues, humorous commentary works to "strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies, and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse" (2009, 139). In doing so, humor "offers pleasurable ports of entry to current political topics, as it contributes to the evolution of mediated political culture" (139). (Dahlgren 2009, qtd in Milner 2016: 169)

The memetic discourse surrounding Eric Trump's tweet is a strong example of the appropriation of a political topic (in this case, the Black Lives Matter protests) by the common people. The "Marx Psycho 100" discourse was certainly a humorous way to mock and challenge authority, Trump having received status through his role as a support and spokesperson during his father's presidency. To borrow Dahlgren's words, this discourse "highlight[s] inconsistencies" in Eric Trump's reasoning, namely his conclusion that an anime would be used as left-wing propaganda by a corporation, expanding it to ridiculous proportions.

With this discussion, my aim was to showcase the complex use of multimodal memes within discourse. While the case study refers to a specific event, the observed practices and interactions are quite typical of memetic conversations found online nowadays. I will reiterate here that the "Marx Psycho 100" event was presented here through the Tumblr lens, and other platforms most certainly have different approaches to the discourse. I will, however, point out that Tumblr's affordances, such as the ability to search for specific tags, the possibility to post in a wide variety of formats like images, videos, texts, etc., as well as easy text-modification tools, helped this conversation be as dynamic as it was. Additionally, the chronological nature of Tumblr allowed me to see the progressive shift in the different meme iterations, from the direct references to Eric Trump to Mob as a communist icon. All these different elements play an important role in the progress of the conversation.

4.3 Summary of findings

Section 4 has shown how multimodal memes have gained in complexity over the last few years. They have evolved past the relatively simple Top Text/Image/Bottom Text form, which characterised classic Image Macros, towards more complex structures like Object Labelling, Blank Filling, Text Changing and Deconstructed memes. These newer formats have gained a central place in online communication and it is their complexity that makes them prime tools to convey information. Whereas older meme genres relied more on joke-like constructions, with a set up and punchline, newer genres such as those explored in this mémoire allow for a broader organisation of information and thus for more complex messages to be conveyed. Based on observations from sections 4.1 and 4.2, I argue that, as meme genres become more complex, memetic conversations become easier for those with the necessary literacies. Meme-making is not a niche practice anymore and, while some genres, like Redraws, still require more skills than others, standard templates and meme generators offer the possibility for every individual with internet access and broad (pop-)cultural knowledge to partake in such conversations. Furthermore, genres like Object Labelling, Blank Filling and Text Changing are becoming common enough that they can be constructed using non-standard templates, providing netizens with almost endless possibilities regarding the images they deem most suitable for conveying their messages. This de-standardisation shows two things: (1) the underlying rules of such genres are becoming common knowledge within the online community, prompting netizens to use them regularly, and (2) as memes circulate, netizens gain a wealth of memetic knowledge which, in turn, allows for further evolution and complexification of existing meme types. A clear example of this evolution shown in this mémoire is the case of Redraws which can be seen as a further evolution of image labelling.

Memes showcase an ever-present tension between niche and mainstream as oftentimes new types emerge in niche communities before reaching the mainstream audience. Even with the memes that have reached mainstream, meme literacy is now necessary in order to navigate conversations within cyberspace, be it to understand how to correctly read a meme (e.g., Object Labelling) or to understand the full referentiality of an image-text combination and the meaning underlying such combinations. My findings align themselves with the most recent literature on memes (Milner (2016), Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017), Grundlingh (2018), Yus (2019), Wiggins (2019), etc.), especially with reference to the importance of the context of creation and circulation, as well as the need for broad (pop-)cultural knowledge.

The existence of Deconstructed memes is a perfect example of this necessity of previous knowledge of memes in order to navigate current online conversations as these iterations are

fragments of other memes; one cannot understand the fragment without knowing the complete meme. I was able to analyse this genre because I possess the needed memetic background knowledge and was able to identify these iterations when I came across them during my data collection period; a less familiar researcher would likely have not been able to recognize them. This shows that common background knowledge is assumed by the creators and circulators of such memes. They presume that viewers will be able to identify the original meme by only a fragment of it, be it a quotation or a visual element, and make sense of its use in the given context. Thus, Deconstructed memes rely on the meme literacy of the community in order to be understood. Such deconstructed occurrences would not exist if memes had not become such an integral part of online communication as only a long period of circulation allows for memes to be recognized even when stripped to some of their core elements. It is probable that such deconstructed occurrences will only increase as the memetic tapestry grows and more and more memes enter circulation.

While Deconstructed memes showcase this aspect particularly well, the need for a meme literacy is true for all of the genres presented in this study. Object Labelling, Blank Filling, Redraws and Text Changing draw upon netizens' broad and niche cultural knowledge in order to convey messages. These messages can be more or less precise and targeted, and the choice of template and labelling plays an important role in the transmission and reception of these messages. Standard templates and textual annotation allow for broader audience understanding while non-standard templates and image-only labellings or Redraws appeal to more niche communities, as they would most likely require more precise knowledge in order to be wholly understood. As seen here, meme creators draw from a wide array of cultural information and items, from classic philosophy (such as Karl Marx's writing) to current events (Eric Trump's tweet) to media and their associated fandoms (the popularity of *MP100*) in order to craft complex memes and participate in online conversations. As more and more memes come to life, the potential layering and referentiality becomes more and more complicated. Memes are not simply jokes that can be imitated anymore; they have become tools created and used by netizens to participate in online communication. This is not to say that older formats have completely disappeared from the cyberspace, only that newer formats are now preferred as they offer the possibility for more complex messages to be shared.

5 Conclusion

The goal of this mémoire was to give an overview of the newer genres of memes present in online conversation which are still overlooked by scholarly literature. This mémoire has shown

that memes are a complex and always-evolving area of study and that it is quasi-impossible to be on top of it as new types and combinations emerge every day. I have focused solely on multimodal memes for this study, omitting several important genres myself. One might argue that studying a fast-paced and ever-changing phenomenon such as memes is in vain. However, as CMC evolves, memetic communication becomes more and more prominent; gaining an understanding of the different ways memes are created and have evolved gives essential insights in order to understand how CMC, as a whole, functions. The four genres explored here, –Object Labelling, Blank Filling, Text Changing and Deconstructed memes– constitute some of the most prominent genres used in online communication nowadays. Of the four, only Object Labelling has an official name known by netizens; the others were named by myself in an attempt to classify them. Their categorising is tentative and, as seen, meme genres often merge with or emerge from other/previous genres, building a complex tapestry (to borrow Milner's analogy) of (pop-)cultural information. What have been commonly regarded as "funny pictures" in fact constitutes a complex network of communication devices, created and used by netizens in a true Web 2.0 fashion.

One of the biggest take-aways from this mémoire is that memes cannot be investigated in exclusion of their context of production. While early memetics considered memes as units of culture that could be studied independently, it has become increasingly clear that such a vision is not viable anymore and cannot be applied to internet memes. It is a point upon which the most recent studies of memes agree and which is once again strengthened by the findings of this mémoire. Memes, no matter the type, are created and remixed in specific contexts and must be understood within these contexts. Thus, extracting a meme and trying to study it independently from its context of occurrence is of little utility. Additionally, this underlines the fact that memes are not simply imitated and passed from brain to brain as was argued by authors such as Blackmore (1999); they are consciously chosen and manipulated by individuals before being circulated.

Social semiotics and multimodal theory are particularly useful in the exploration of memes. Indeed, multimodal memes are prime examples of semiotic signs being motivated, as each instance is built for a particular conversation and the modes are chosen amongst those available (which, in the case of online communication, range from text to images and videos, etc.) and combined to best transmit the message desired by the sign-maker. Additionally, multimodality offers insight into the meaning of images themselves and allows for an understanding of the relationship between text and images. The idea of visual literacy, explored by authors like Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) and Yus (2019), becomes more and more

important in our digital age as relationship between text and images permeate our everyday, be it in our memetic conversations or in more traditional media (see Salway and Martinec 2005).

As mentioned, this mémoire had as a goal to provide an overview of newer meme genres. I have explored four of the most recent memes types and have described their functioning. However, this study remained broad; more targeted, formal and refined analysis of each of these genres would be welcome as it could provide more in depth understanding of their functioning and use. Formal studies combining multimodality and construction grammar (as done by Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017), for example, could allow for a closer look at the rules and grammar of these genres. Furthermore, this mémoire focused on examples collected on a single platform, Tumblr, which influenced the results. While I am confident in saying that the different meme types I have analysed here are present across multiple social media, it would be interesting to conduct cross-platform comparative studies in order to assess the role played by the platform in the creation and circulation of memes.

In sum, this mémoire presented four recent evolution of multimodal memes. These memes exemplify the added complexity of newer meme genres, made possible by the circulation and remix of previous genres. Netizens' compiled knowledge of older memes allow for newer and more complex genres to come to life and these genres, in turn, provide netizens with new communication tools. Recent memes can carry more complex messages due to the assumed common knowledge of netizens, the referentiality of the texts used in their creation and the growing visual and meme literacy of internet users. Participation in memetic conversations underlines the community aspect of Web 2.0, highlighting the blurry line between creation and consumption. Memes provide a means for anyone to engage in conversations, allowing them to give their opinion and share messages in simple and humoristic ways. Furthermore, the newer genres like Object Labelling and Text Changing allow for users to choose which meme best fit the message they wish to convey in a particular situation. This, in turn, helps the conversation be varied and gain levels of complexity as several types of memes co-exist and are sometimes merged. This process of complexification will certainly continue as it is fuelled by the continuous circulation and remixing of memes and memetic communication has become central to Web 2.0.

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Appendix: Originals and blank meme templates

Figure 20 & 21:
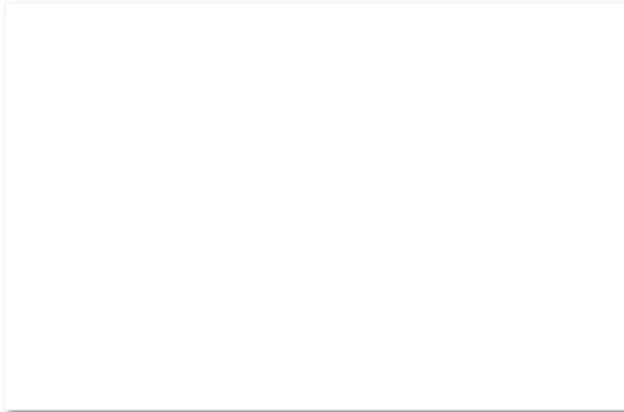
@chaserojo. "Twink Boutta Pounce.." *Twitter*, 19 May 2016, twitter.com/chaserojo/status/733138750151249920?lang=en.

Figure 24:
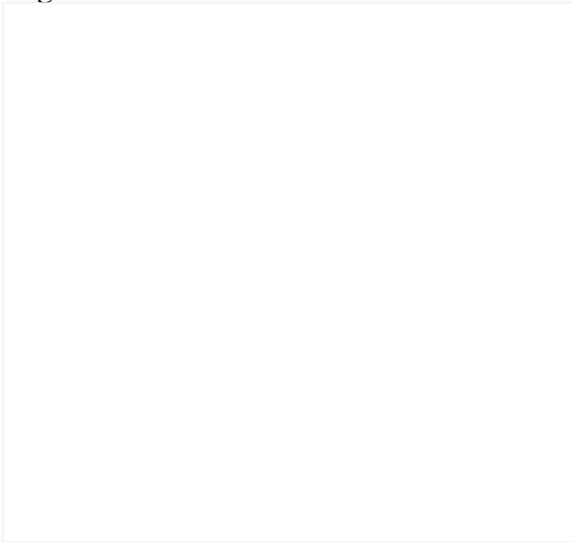
Is This a Pigeon, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, Feb 10 2015, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon
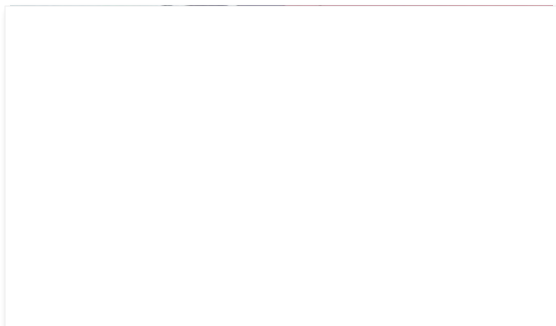
Figure 25:

Spider-man Pointing at Spider-man, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 11 Jul. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spider-man-pointing-at-spider-man
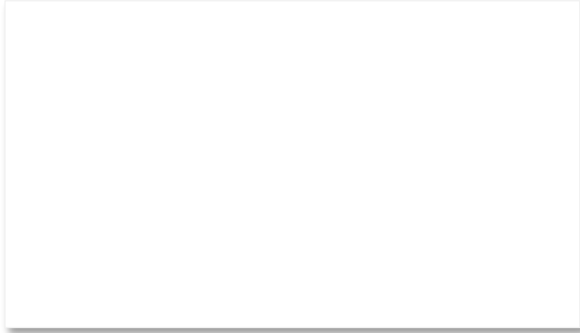
Figure 25:

Mom Said It's My Turn On The Xbox, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 30 Apr. 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mom-said-its-my-turn-on-the-xbox
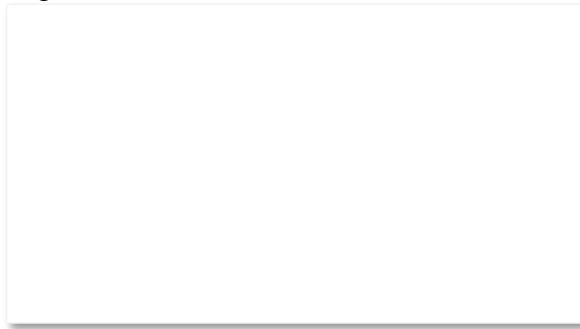
Figure 26:

Monkey Haircut, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 25 Sept. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/monkey-haircut
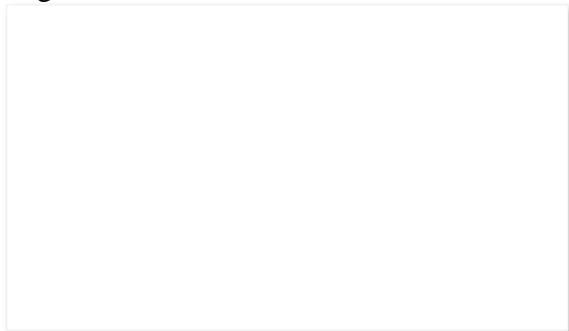
Figure 27:

Confused Nick Young, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 18 Jul. 2015, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/confused-nick-young
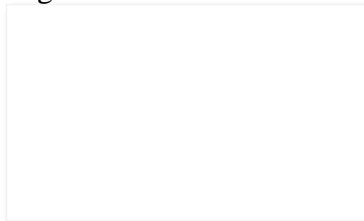
Figure 27:

How About No, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 04 Jul. 2016, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1143752-how-about-no
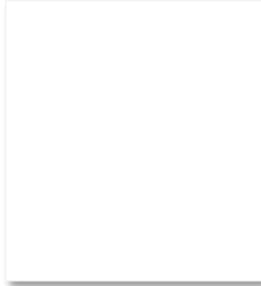
Figure 27:

Its Not That Deep, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 19 Jul. 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/its-not-
that-deep
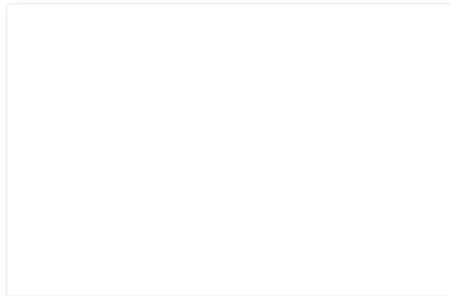
Figure 27:

Guess I'll Die, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 15 Aug. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/guess-ill-
die
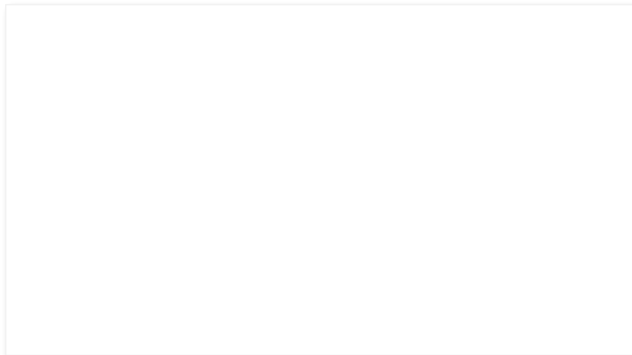
Figure 28:

Woman Yelling at a Cat, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 20 Jun. 2019,
https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat
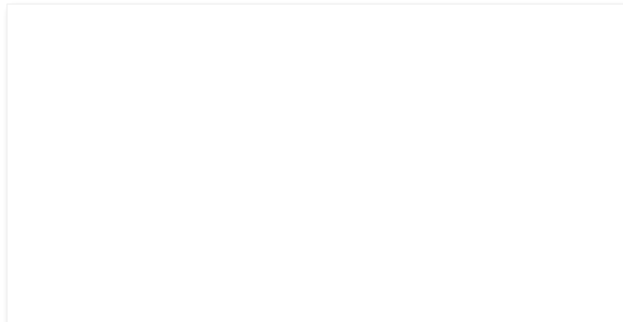
Figure 29:

Draw 25, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 09 Jan. 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/draw-25

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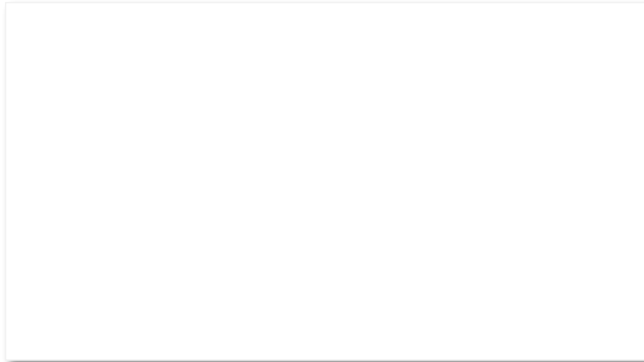
Left Exit 12 Off Ramp, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 04 Jan. 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/left-exit-12-off-ramp
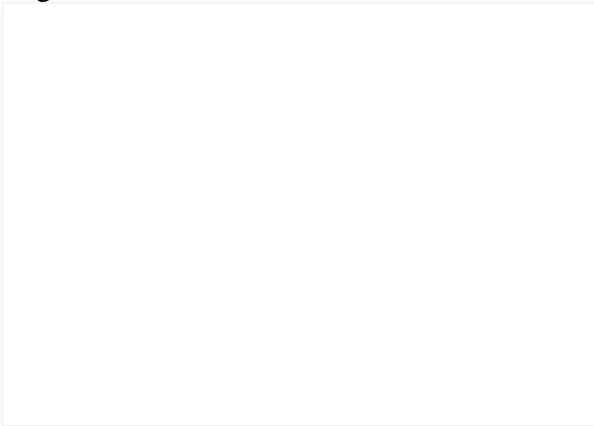
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Larson, Leslie. 2013. President's Obamacare photo becomes comical 'Obama Holding a Sign' meme, *Daily News*, December 13. Available at: https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/president-obamacare-photo-viral-article-1.1546738. Accessed 10/01/2021.

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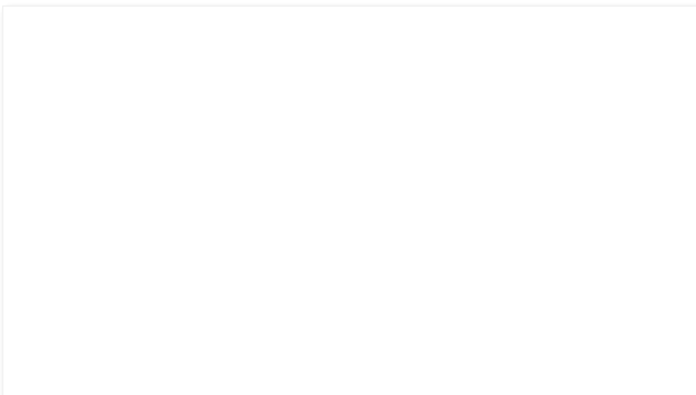
Galaxy Brain, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 17 Feb. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/galaxy-brain

Figure 37:

Chris Fleming, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 09 May 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/chris-fleming

Figure 38:

Sometimes… Things That Are Expensive… Are Worse., *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 24 Jul. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sometimes-things-that-are-expensive-are-worse
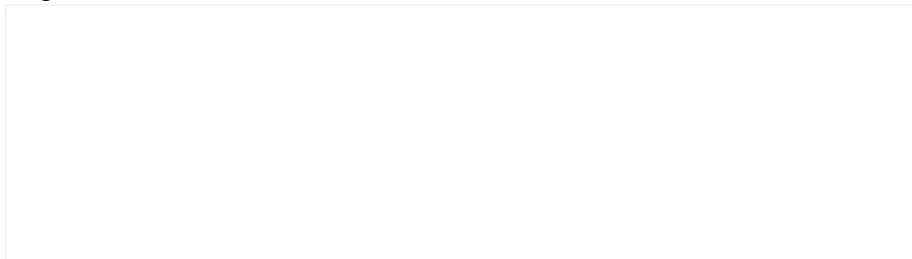
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God I Wish That Were Me, *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 21 Jan. 2017, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/god-i-wish-that-were-me

Figure 40:
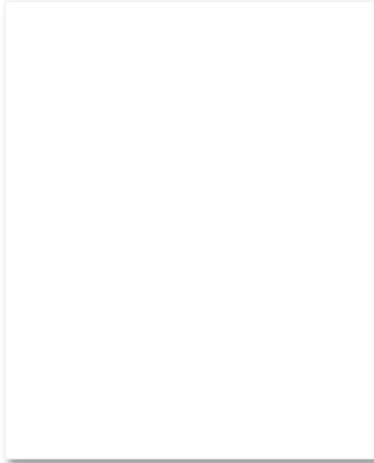
Alone On A Friday Night? God You're Pathetic., *Know Your Meme*, Literally Media, 15 Nov. 2015, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/alone-on-a-friday-night-god-youre-pathetic

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