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Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board

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Abstract

This article explores the workings of memes as cultural capital in web-based communities. A grounded analysis of 4chan's /b/ board reveals three main formulations of memes as capital, delineating them as *subcultural knowledge, unstable equilibriums*, and *discursive weapons*. While the first formulation follows well-documented notions about subcultural knowledge as a basis for boundary work, the latter two focus on the dualities intrinsic to Internet memes. The contradiction between following conventions and supplying innovative content leads to memes' configuration as unstable equilibriums, triggering constant conflict about their "correct" use. Paradoxically, this struggle highlights collective identity, as it keeps shared culture at the center of discussion. Similarly, when memes are used as jabs at the most intense points of arguments, they function simultaneously as signifiers of superior authoritative status and as reminders of common affinity. Thus, the dualities underpinning memes' structure lead to their performance as contested cultural capital.

Keywords

4chan, cultural capital, digital culture, Internet memes, web-based communities

Introduction

Internet memes—digital items with common characteristics that are imitated and reiterated around the web—have become an integral part of digital culture in the past few years, attracting both popular and academic attention. Memetic exchanges are rooted in

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intricate social dynamics: they operate in a decentralized and seemingly chaotic sphere, yet are often associated with intense coordinative work and pervasive mimicry (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Wiggins and Bowers, 2014). Previous studies have analyzed memes as products of digital communities that require subcultural literacy and are often used for gatekeeping practices (Burgess, 2008; Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2014). Some of these works have broadly associated the dynamics of Internet memes with Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) conceptualization of cultural capital, which views the command of cultural knowledge as a means to achieve a privileged position within a social field. In this article, we aim at unpacking the mechanisms that underpin the association between memes and cultural capital by addressing a central question: *how are Internet memes used to create membership-based distinctions within web-based communities?*

In the first part of the article, we review studies delineating Internet memes' social usage and functions. We then discuss Bourdieu's work on social fields and capital as a theoretical context for understanding memes' social dynamics. Following that, we present the test case in which these dynamics were analyzed, 4chan's /b/ board. Characterized by the trying conditions of anonymous and ephemeral communication, this meme hub is a particularly revealing site for exploring the role of memes in creating social distinction and a sense of community. A grounded analysis of the site yielded three formulations of memes as capital: memes as *subcultural knowledge*, as *unstable equilibriums*, and as *discursive weapons*. These frames highlight the notion of Internet memes as *contested* social capital; paradoxically, the unremitting debate about memes is what grants them consolidating social power.

The social logic of chaotic memes

On the surface, Internet memes might appear shallow or insignificant, silly jokes sent around and soon forgotten. Yet while they often lack seriousness, memes are a distinctive product of current digital culture and typify many of its underlying qualities (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013). The term *meme*, coined by Richard Dawkins (1976), refers to a cultural unit that moves from one person to another, akin to a gene in biology. Memes are characterized by both similarity and variation: while each individual might perform cultural information differently (like different articulations of a musical piece), the basic idea, the meme, constitutes a common element duplicated by many minds.

Originating in academic scholarship, the term memes was later widely adopted by Internet users and assigned a more specific meaning. *Internet* memes, on which this study focuses, are groups of digital items (such as images or videos) that share common characteristics, are created with awareness of each other, and are distributed online by multiple participants (Shifman, 2013). Thus, memes' divergent versions retain certain characteristics or follow a shared pattern that unifies them (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014). This interplay of disparity and similarity creates the differentiation between a meme (the textual group) and what we call a *meme instance*, a particular implementation of the meme template that follows its pattern but adds new details that extend its meaning (Milner, 2013b).

Internet memes are deeply intertwined with other—former and contemporary—forms of cultural representation. Among their many precursors are *netspeak* expressions which

disseminated in early hacker culture (Crystal, 2006) and *cyberplay* (Danet, 2001) practices in early chat groups, who collectively created shared, playful identities. The practices and ideologies of *culture-jamming*, in which the reappropriation of commercial content produces subversive meanings, are further important influences on Internet memes (Bennett, 2003). As products of contemporary participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), memes are often created by repurposing items from digital and gaming culture, as well as popular culture at large (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). A constant flow of signifiers borrowed from movies, ads, games, and street art reciprocally influences, and is influenced by, Internet memes.

Memes serve a wide variety of social, cultural, and political purposes, from conveying feelings in interpersonal settings (Miltner, 2014) to publicly protesting against governmental corruption (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). A significant strand of research has looked into the use of memes in political discourse. As bottom-up creative resources, memes are invoked by different groups to express views about current issues and events. In some formulations, these discussions tend to echo the voices of privileged groups; others facilitate what Ryan Milner (2012) describes as "polyvocal" discourse, incorporating many points of view, including marginal and subversive ones.

In this article, we focus on one of the main roles ascribed to memes in contemporary digital culture: forming and signifying communal belonging. Although its decentralized grassroots dynamics may seem chaotic, the exchange of Internet memes is to a large extent a product of societal and communal coordination. Simply put, the *user* who creates *user-generated content* in the form of memes does not post them randomly, but addresses a specific, familiar crowd (Burgess, 2008). Furthermore, the successful dissemination of memes is reliant on their fitting within mindsets or frames of social networks (Spitzberg, 2014). Memes thus function as part of a culture, contributing to the set of ideas around which communities gather and act.

Some researchers argue that the use of Internet memes should be seen as a form of literacy, incorporating both direct knowledge of meme templates and a wider understanding of specific groups or communities (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). According to Milner (2012), this literacy is not only needed in order to understand memes but also functions as a gatekeeper, marking communal belonging to a group "in the know." Yet, Milner also stresses that definitions of "right" and "wrong" use of memes are in a constant state of flux and communal debate. Users participating in meme-based discourse are thus measured by their ability to express an up-to-date literacy in the specific culture of the group contrasted with the wider, unaffiliated mainstream digital culture (for an illuminating discussion of this divide, see Miltner, 2014). Missing the mark—using the wrong conventions—is judged as failing to be part of the group. Simply put, the deep connection between memes and the culture of some online communities means that they function as cues of membership, distinguishing in-group members from mere passersby. In this sense, as demonstrated below, memes constitute forms of cultural capital.

Memes as cultural capital: LOLCats meet Bourdieu

The link between communal belonging and cultural conventions did not start with Internet memes, of course; memes are only a recent incarnation of a well-established

pattern. The work of Pierre Bourdieu has been a primary pillar in deciphering it: his writing on cultural capital provides a prism for understanding the relations between culture, identity, and communal belonging. At its basic level, capital in Bourdieu's work refers to resources used to achieve and maintain social standing or status, such as education, social connections, and skills (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). Capital operates within what Bourdieu calls a field, the social environment or context enveloping daily life and behavior. Fields comprise individuals or groups in different positions who typically struggle to gain symbolic power and improve their standing.

Of the various kinds of capital used to gain status within fields, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) is especially relevant to the phenomenon of Internet memes. Cultural capital encompasses the advantages of a knowledge of culture and the social implications of cultural taste. Recognizing and understanding cultural items, references, and codes, along with the ability to implement them independently, generate respect and status from those in one's social surroundings. Knowing culture in this sense is a form of distinction, in both meanings of the word: setting oneself apart and serving as a mark of honor.

However, simply knowing a cultural item is not sufficient to build capital; the item must belong to a particular, desirable canon, one defined by a constant normative differentiation: "In order for there to be tastes, there have to be goods that are classified, as being in 'good' or 'bad' taste … Classified and thereby classifying, hierarchized and hierarchizing" (Bourdieu, 1993: 108). Each social field has its own classification system, a set of taste distinctions between good and bad culture (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). These are designated by those who enjoy high regard in the group and thus wield the symbolic power to curate the canon of good and bad taste. Accordingly, liking or disliking a particular cultural item is a double act of classification: their marking of both the item and the person making the judgment creates status distinctions within a field.

While fields change what is valued as valid capital over time, there are some things that all participants do not dare question: the existence and importance of the field itself (Bourdieu, 1993). The field abides because of what is shared and agreed upon by its members: first, the shared knowledge of rules relating to what is valuable and desirable, which sets the members apart from those who are foreign, and second, basic allegiance to the field at large and the belief that it has irrefutable value.

The association between cultural capital and Internet memes relates both to memes' unique creation processes and to the social dynamics surrounding them. "Meme literacy" influences users' status in online communities and indicates membership, while the reliance on a relatively small set of accepted formulas to create memes is akin to what Bourdieu describes as valued cultural items. Thus, the communal taste defines "right" and "wrong" forms of expression and, through those definitions, creates differential social positions among those members posting memes.

Interesting as it is, however, this parallel is not quite a revelation, since Bourdieu's work gained its prominence by being relevant to most relationships between culture and community. What does remain to be investigated is *how* Internet memes, as a relatively new form of creative cultural artifact, generate these social dynamics. Addressing this issue requires an in-depth analysis of a community in which memes have a central cultural position. One prime example of such a community is 4chan's /b/ board.

Cultural capital in an anonymous and ephemeral meme factory

4chan is an image board, a forum site where users can upload images and textual comments. It is divided into different categories, or boards, each containing discussion threads opened by users. Each thread must be initiated with an image in its opening post, which can also include text. Other users reply in a thread using image, text, or both. The interface supplied by the site is relatively basic and low-tech. There are no advanced options or integrations, and the only way to follow a discussion is to remain on its page and continually refresh.

What makes the site different from most other forum websites is the absence of marked identity and history (Bernstein et al., 2011). *There is no way to create a stable identity on 4chan*: the site has no user profile pages of any sort and no place that belongs to the individual users or reflects their identity and activity. Nor does it offer a fixed nicknaming system. Each commenter can set a name that appears with his or her comments, but there is no mechanism preventing others from using the same name.[1] As a result, the vast majority of participants use the default nickname on the site, "Anonymous." A further unusual quality of 4chan is that the site has no archive, limiting the amount of threads existing in each board and deleting those with the least activity (usually after no more than a few hours). As a result of these characteristics, 4chan's discourse exists only in the present—there is no record of people or the past, just the current conversation.

Despite its limiting technical infrastructure, 4chan houses a group of users who admittedly have a collective identity and a sense of community. The site is a vibrant forum, hosting startling activity volumes: no fewer than 35,000 threads and 400,000 comments are posted each day (Bernstein et al., 2011). Furthermore, it is well known for being a hub of digital culture in general and memes in particular (Knuttila, 2011). This applies mostly to one specific board within the site, /b/, which is considered the heart of the site's community (Phillips, 2012). While most boards on 4chan have a specific topic (e.g. video games, fitness), /b/ is designated as "random." Nevertheless, as Herwig (2011) notes, /b/ users share a common idea of what the board is about, a spirit and attitude that are undefined but present, constituting an underlying unwritten etiquette.[2] Thus, while identity markers for *specific* users are not presented, altogether they still exhibit a unique collective cultural identity. In this sense, the /b/ community forms a subcultural group within the wider context of digital culture. This subculture adheres to distinctive norms and values (Yinger, 1960) which differ from "mainstream" digital culture. The board is also characterized by a unique set of expressive forms and rituals (Hebdige, 1979), which, as detailed below, are regularly disseminated among its members (Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

For /b/, this subcultural identity is based on a set of shared ideas and tastes, which often revolve around highly crude, cynical, and irreverent content, aiming to provoke and shock for the sake of humor. Users of /b/ have a reputation of being whimsically uninhibited, sometimes to the point of aggression. The site's general atmosphere is one of "trolling" (Phillips, 2012), a practice which legitimizes the use of nearly any means to anger or fool others for the entertainment of the troll and his crowd (Burroughs, 2013). The reasoning of "doing it for the lulz" (Coleman, 2012; Milner, 2013a) governing many acts of trolling is related to an approach of strict non-seriousness since sentimentality or idealism makes

one easily offended and thus creates an easy trolling target (Phillips, 2012). Trolling is generally directed at those external to the group, especially those uninformed and uninitiated (Coleman, 2012). As such, it fills a role beyond "lulz"—that of demonstrating to such outsiders they are not welcome and should not intrude. For /b/, however, this does not exclude trolling *within* the site since the user crowd's degree of familiarity with it is *always* unknown and thus tested time and again through interaction.

As /b/ is the known source of many Internet memes, some of which have become widely popular in other contexts (Milner, 2013a), memes also constitute an example of the site's relative cultural homogeny and were shown to have a part in building its social world (Phillips, 2012). As shown in other contexts (Gal et al., 2015), memes often have an important performative aspect. This seems particularly pertinent on /b/ since its ephemerality dictates that posting on the board continually recreates it, giving every expression an underlying performative (Austin, 1961) value. Functioning as social and cultural performative acts (Butler, 1988), exchanges on /b/ constantly constitute both communal identities and the positioning of individuals in relation to them. In other words, each participant posting a meme on 4chan simultaneously co-constructs himself or herself and the collective or community in which she or he operates.

To better understand /b/'s relevance to a study of cultural capital, it is important to observe how status and capital generally work in this community. Despite its apparent pointlessness in an environment based on ephemeral and anonymous interactions, status plays a meaningful role in /b/'s community. Users regularly seek to impress fellow frequenters of the board (Bernstein et al., 2011; Milner, 2012): they routinely boast of their own merits and berate others' shortcomings, often viciously, only to disappear back into anonymity moments later. While this is an unusual form of social status, /b/'s members still aspire to overpower others within the interactional terms set by this unique environment. The motivation may be personal pride or collective belonging, but the seeking of status remains prevalent. Moreover, one of the most frequent topics of these struggles for social status is whether or not a user understands the etiquette and culture of /b/ (Herwig, 2011).

From an analytic viewpoint, it seems that despite the severe limitations on members' ability to mark and maintain individual identities, many of the principles outlined in Bourdieu's (1993) theory of fields still apply to the board. Status, although fleeting, is important to /b/ users, and cultural capital is a major factor in signifying this status. Displaying knowledge of the board's customs and codes is a predominant form of capital used to determine status. As Bernstein et al. (2011) explain, "Lack of fluency is dismissed with the phrase 'LURK MOAR,' [sic] asking the poster to spend more time learning about the culture of the board" (Bernstein et al., 2011: 56). Knowledge about the community culture thus distinguishes members from outsiders.

These properties of 4chan in general and of /b/ specifically create a unique opportunity to study memes as cultural capital. Since users of /b/ are stripped of the usual social cues for identity, cultural capital may have greater salience here than in more conventional communities. Furthermore, since the board's nature dictates that memes function as important indicators of capital, /b/ could illustrate the practices and particularities of dynamics underpinning the use of memes as cultural capital. Essentially, through studying /b/, we wish to find out *how* Internet memes function as cultural capital.

Methods

Observing the rules as they are broken

To investigate how memes act as cultural capital, it is necessary to establish a method for tracing the dynamics of their use within social settings. In this study, this was accomplished by investigating cases of social violations and condemnation. Social violations have been described as a breaking of conventions to an unacceptable degree, which threatens social relations or balance (Kampf, 2007; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993). To be considered a violation, an act must (a) transgress moral codes or norms and (b) trigger a response that publicly criticizes the act and/or its perpetrator (Ekström and Johansson, 2008). This public calling out of a violation may be expressed in various forms of complaint or accusation, which we will generally refer to as *condemnation*. The properties of violations and condemnations offer an opportune setting to inspect the logic and codes by which a group operates. When acts are seen as breaking conventions, their condemnation expose groups' shared yet unwritten rules. This may be particularly relevant to communities in which the codes of conduct are in a constant state of flux, such as 4chan's /b/.

Fixating a flow: capturing /b/'s rapid discursive stream

Sampling 4chan's /b/ board was a particularly challenging task. Due to the site's ephemeral quality, sampling had to be carried out in real time, by capturing a copy of the webpage at a specific moment, before it was removed as part of the site's routine operations. The section chosen for sampling was the first page of the /b/ board of 4chan, on which threads with new comments are listed. The sample was gathered using HTTrack, a webpage downloader freely available under the General Public License (GPL). To ensure a wide enough archive of material, copies were made three times a day from 20 August 2011 through 31 August 2011. An additional sample was collected about 3 months later, between 19 November 2011 and 1 December 2011; this collection period was slightly longer to compensate for errors. The recording times were set with reference to Bernstein et al. (2011), who indicated that the board reaches its highest activity rate at 5:00 p.m. and its lowest at 9:00 a.m. (Eastern Standard Time). Accordingly, sampling was carried out twice, 2 hours apart, during the period of high activity and once during a low-activity period. This routine was designed to ensure a varied collection of threads that represented the discourse of /b/ as fully as possible. Altogether, 56 samples containing 840 discussion threads were compiled as initial material for analysis.

In order to detect meme-related "breaching" events in this vast corpus, we traced two relevant keywords: *newfag* and *meme*. The first is a popular slang word in the /b/ community, a derogatory term indicating a new, inexperienced user or one not familiar with the board's customs, codes, and culture.[3] The second is an explicit mention of memes, connoting a direct discussion of the subject at the heart of this study. Using these keywords, we aimed to create an on-topic corpus of threads in which memes were used as the means or objects of condemnation (Kozinets, 2002).

The term *newfag*, used in our search to mark condemnation, has deeper connotations than the general run of criticism and insults that characterizes discourse on 4chan. Because the word was coined on the site and is part of its unique lingo, it specifically

attacks individuals who lack familiarity with 4chan's culture while using the codes of that very culture. The discourse in threads that include this term could thus be expected to frequently flag issues of defining the community and its borders. When this flagging also includes memes and their usage, these threads become fertile ground to investigate the relationship between memes, culture, and status in the community.

The keyword search resulted in 130 threads that included one or both of the terms searched for. Among these, 34 threads were disqualified due to partial content sample or extreme length (over 1000 comments). The remaining 96 threads included thousands of comments that were further scanned to detect 228 relevant meme-related comments that constituted the corpus for analysis.

Analytical processes

The analysis of the sampled threads combined principles and protocols drawn from netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2010) and grounded theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). As both approaches are based on sensitive inductive analyses of rich corpuses, we found them particularly suitable for examining the flow of interactions surrounding 4chan's memes. Netnographic reasoning informed our focus on conversational acts and their symbolic interpretation as a source for insight into the social dynamics of a particular digital community.[4] As our main purpose in this analysis was to understand the social dynamics of 4chan's community within its own terms, we conducted observations on the website. Entry-phase information-gathering and acquaintance were followed by an in-depth process of familiarization with the community and its conduct, providing observational data and insights. Based on this knowledge, copies of forum threads were sampled and filtered (as described above), utilizing keywords originating from the site's culture to better locate informative and on-topic messages. The grounded analysis of the resulting corpus (depicted below) was thus contextualized by impressions from unstructured observation, striving to identify symbolic interpretation as well as repeated, typical patterns (Kozinets, 2002).

While netnography guided our emphasis on interactions in a specific community, the analysis of the meme-related utterances was informed mainly by the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). According to this method, categories emerge inductively in the process of comparative analysis, and, indeed, our goal was to trace the meanings ascribed to memes from the collected material. Yet, we also took into account existing theoretical frameworks when interpreting the data, in line with recent developments in this approach (see Kelle, 2007). The research process thus included close reading of all relevant threads and an evaluation of their implications for the dynamics of memes as social capital. We took into account both the context of the specific conversation and the wider /b/ culture (as depicted in research literature and emerging from our netnographic-oriented observations). After an initial overview and conceptual outlining, the corpus was re-evaluated in accordance with the constant comparative methodology process (Dey, 2007). In this process, overlapping or ineffective categories were discarded, and closely related sub-categories were unified into three categories that account for the vast majority of the observations.

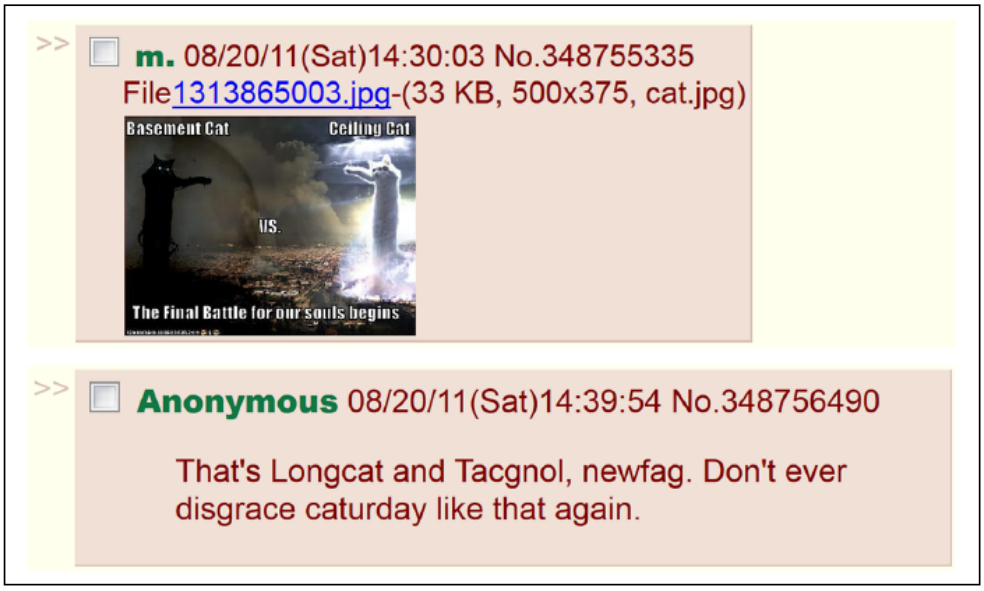

Figure 1. Condemnation for misuse of a meme template.
Extracts from thread 348752270.

Findings and discussion

Our analysis revealed three main formulations of memes as capital, delineating them as *subcultural knowledge, unstable equilibriums*, and *discursive weapons.*

Memes as (sub)cultural capital

As detailed above, we traced the role of memes as capital by inspecting instances in which their use resulted in condemnation for not following the community's etiquette. Our analysis revealed three main motivations for such condemnation: alleged misuse of meme templates, disputes over the framing of particular units as memes, and reliance on memes prevalent in other communities.

Condemnations of template misuse were prevalent across the corpus. Figure 1 captures one of these events, in which a commenter posted an instance of the LOLCats meme. Another user objected to this post, claiming that the image should have included "Longcat" and "Tacgnol," names of specific characters, rather than "Basement Cat" and "Ceiling Cat." The commenter called the author of the inappropriate message a *newfag*, accusing him with disgracing the site's tradition of posting instances of this meme on Saturday, commonly called *caturday*. This comment, like many others on the site, demonstrates the basic dynamic of memes as cultural capital. Failing to follow meme conventions is not only condemned; the vocabulary used for this denunciation, in invoking internal languages and traditions, marks the "breaches" as outsiders.

Yet "proper" knowledge of memes on /b/ is not limited to their templates. Another way in which meme use begets condemnation relates to disagreement about the status of a piece of content as a meme. While there are many memes and many variations on them in /b/ discourse, not all are accepted as suitable cultural material. Members often post images with the aspiration of them being treated as a meme (i.e. creating a thread that

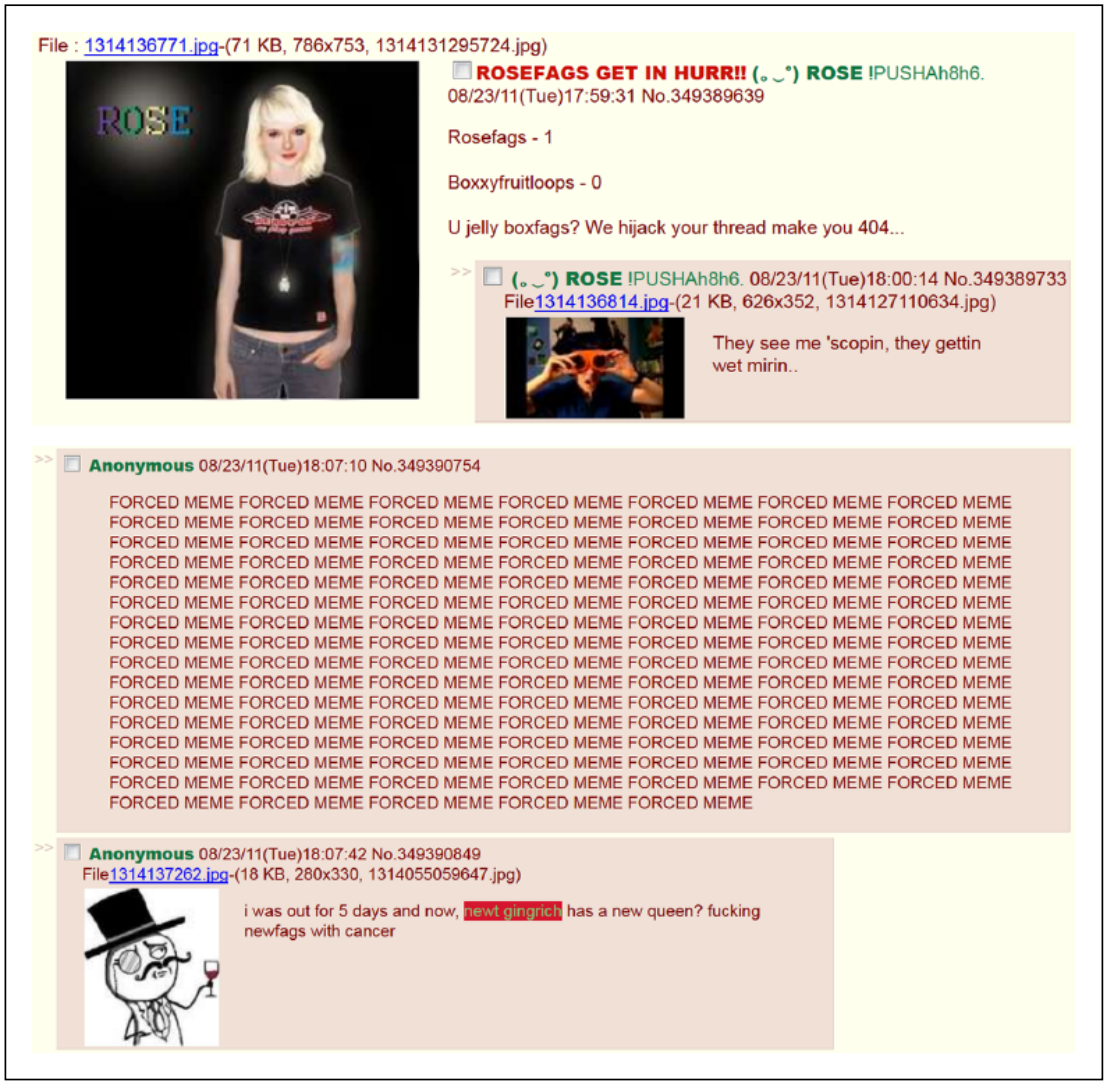

Figure 2. Condemnation of a forced meme.
Extracts from thread 349389639. The marked phrase "newt gingrich" is an automated text replacement for the word "4chan" applied throughout the site by its administrators, supposedly for humorous purposes.

requests variations on the image's content and/or form). These threads are prone to be accused of hosting *forced memes*, that is, memes that are imposed on the board's repertoire rather than emerging organically from the community.

An example of such a response appears in Figure 2. The comment which opens the thread claims that Rose is the "queen" of /b/, calling on loyalists ("Rosefags," utilizing the -fag suffix that marks identity in the site's lingo) to post memes about her and her greatness, expressed by the thread title, ROSEFAGS GET IN HURR!! (*hurr* is lingo for "here.") Although this call initially received some responses, condemnations claiming that the Rose meme is not part of /b/'s culture appeared later in the thread. The first condemnation, shown in the figure, takes a direct approach, repeating the phrase "forced meme" to create a sort of text billboard to signal aversion and try to "flood" the thread (an obviously futile gesture used symbolically). The second condemnation identifies the Rose version of the "queen of /b/" meme as having no roots in the site's culture; it

adds the label *newfags* and describes those using the meme as bringing "cancer," a word commonly used to describe the corruptive effect of outsiders who are destroying the /b/ community.

A third reason for condemnation is posting memes that are seen as belonging to another culture, usually a competing online community. For instance, in a thread (crudely) discussing the death of Steve Jobs (thread 350010171, 26 August 2011), a commenter condemns the use of the word *derp*, urging the person who invoked it to "go back to your shitty fucking reddit." Using memes, or even (as in this case) meme-related lingo, that belong to other (possibly competing) communities is enough to prompt other users to move beyond the usual barrage of insults and add a more direct condemnation—get out, go back to where you came from. This example, along with other interactions that condemn use of external sources, such as Google searches and meme-indexing sites, stresses the importance of uniqueness to the cultural capital encompassed in memes. As Milner (2012) argues, this particular type of condemnation demonstrates that using memes requires not only digital literacy or general meme literacy but also a specifically tuned understanding of the accepted repertoire of a specific meme-related *subculture*.

These examples illustrate the dynamics of meme use on the /b/ board and their role in creating and maintaining distinctions based on cultural knowledge. Those who fail to conform are met with condemnations from the anonymous crowd that makes up the community. This condemnation creates and enforces distinction, dividing users of the board according to their knowledge of memes and the community's deployment of them. The linkage between these denunciations and 4chan's culture of trolling further indicates their relationship to membership boundaries since trolling is customarily reserved for outsiders marked by their lack of familiarity with the community (Coleman, 2012). Reactions to improper meme use diverge from the range of insults considered colloquial on /b/ (Milner, 2013a); rather than degrading specific qualities (such as intellect or social skills), these condemnations demand that those at fault leave the board completely, stressing that there is no room for those who lack its community-specific meme literacy. Other, less harsh condemnations demand that their targets remain mute observers (and thus invisible) until they gain the needed cultural knowledge. This demand is expressed by calling the targets *newfags* or by announcing they should "lurk moar" (Bernstein et al., 2011). A salient marker of memes' gatekeeping role is that condemnations are often made by self-proclaimed guardians of /b/'s culture, who attack other commenters for damaging the site's traditions (e.g. disgracing *caturday* in Figure 1) or its metaphoric body (e.g. by bringing "cancer," see Figure 2). Such instances reflectively highlight the function of memes in a specific subculture. Yet, as detailed below, the constant discontent about memes may be rooted in deeper layers that relate to memes' unique structures.

Memes as unstable equilibriums

Meme creation is based on an inherent duality: the demand to follow the rules and codes of meme use exists alongside a contrasting demand for innovation and creativity. On /b/, this latter requirement is expressed in frequent calls for OC, an acronym for "original content." Posts on the site are often criticized for reposting (copying from another source)

or for not creating a new variation. Milner (2013b) refers to this tension as a balance between fixity and novelty: meme creators are required to know which aspects of a meme should be kept unchanged and where they can express originality—a balancing act between including enough group knowledge to establish a frame and expanding the meme with novel expression. Yet, such a balance can be difficult to achieve within discourse. Indeed, on /b/, there does not seem to be any agreement either on what the common frame is or on what constitutes an acceptable expansion of it. Instead, the requirement to simultaneously follow rigid meme conventions and offer innovative meme instances creates an unsolvable contradiction.

The result of these conflicting demands is a particularly narrow scope within which a meme may be accepted as fully legitimate. When posters predictably fail to stay within this scope, at least in the eyes of some, an argument erupts. On one hand, condemnations are made against innovative material for failing to follow the meme template or forcing content as a meme, and on the other, criticisms are voiced against unoriginal material that has been exhausted in the community. These contradicting claims are common, at times even appearing in the same thread.

An example of this is found in a thread devoted to Legal Age Bear, a reversed spin on the infamous Pedobear meme. Some responses are positive, commending the innovative content: "This is the most OC I've seen in one thread I have to admit" (Thread 349798451, 25 August 2011). Other responses, however, condemn the meme. Some complain that the poster is forcing the meme, leaving comments such as "SameFag[5] Trying too hard." Others condemn the poster for the contrary offense of offering outworn, exhausted content, with comments such as "WE HAD THE SAME THREAD YESTERDAY." Altogether, this one thread includes three different kinds of responses to the same meme—appreciation of innovation, condemnation for irrelevant content, and condemnation for triteness. As in many cases on /b/, this disagreement leads to a prolonged argument, made all but unavoidable by the conflicting demands associated with meme use.

The result is that in essence, consensus is almost impossible on /b/. There is no agreed-upon set of values, no coalition based on familiarity or history that determines right and wrong. While the previous section describes condemnations for what is defined as "incorrect" use of memes, there are no definitive guidelines about these norms. Some conventions about memes may be widely held, but none are ubiquitous, and the particular crowd participating in a thread determines transient sets of definitions which are as likely to change as they are to recur. Accordingly, right and wrong are as ephemeral as the rest of the board's settings.

This state of affairs can be seen as eroding the already unsteady common ground of the /b/ community. However, following Bourdieu's (1993) theorization, it can also be seen as having a positive effect. Artistic and creative fields are arenas of constant struggle over what is regarded as desirable cultural capital, the definitions of which constantly change, empowering some while weakening others. The dynamics of memes on /b/ are similar, although adjusted by the board's unique environment. The struggle relates to the correct way to deploy memes—when the codes should be rigidly maintained and when innovation is demanded. On /b/, however, there are no specific winners and no clear resolution regarding the current valued trend. What remains is the struggle over what is valued, and on /b/, as in more traditional fields, this struggle reaffirms culture and

community. They are implicitly promoted as worthy to be fought over, important enough for disagreements to be aired and explored rather than ignored. As the arguments rage on and the board's culture is continually scrutinized, what remains mostly undisputed is the importance of the culture for those working to protect and define it.

The role of arguments in advancing community solidarity is not unique to /b/. It has been found to feature in several cultures and interactions in which arguments ratify social structures and serve as a sign of shared culture (Blum-Kulka et al., 2002; Garfinkel, 1956). Nevertheless, the site's unique characteristics may be a factor in creating the need for constant argument over cultural right and wrong. Because the /b/ community exists only in the present and without a set of known participants, the ceaseless bickering over what constitutes "proper" meme use is a constant reminder of what brings this group of unknown strangers together.

Memes as discursive weapons

The dynamics described above are often manifested through a third function that memes play on the board: that of discursive weapons. Milner (2012) notes that memes often constitute a form of visual language, carrying messages and response cues. Within the realm of /b/, this type of use often assumes a derogatory function. At points of multidirectional aggression on the board, meme instances are frequently deployed as a rhetorical device to express hostility. Memes posted in these contexts offer direct castigations of individual commenters or groups in the general audience (e.g. Europeans, metal fans, or simply newfags, assuming they know who they are). Although the posters' reasons and objects of insult differ, they all use memes to deliver their message. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the board's veteran memetic stars such as 1960s Spiderman and Trollface are often called upon in such times.

The use of memes as discursive weapons is not limited to posts *about* memes. Despite the board's generally farcical atmosphere, discussions on /b/ do at times touch on more serious issues (Bernstein et al., 2011). In many cases, these conversations offer a substantive exchange of opinions, even if those opinions are formulated using crude language or mocking tones. However, the duration of such (relative) seriousness is often limited, as discussions devolve with exchanges of insults leading to escalating aggression. At this point, even in threads with no previous memetic content or affiliation, memes frequently emerge as discursive weapons. An example of this can be found in a thread requesting names of loved-yet-unknown rock bands (350861175, 31 August 2011). For the most part, the discussion focuses on music and band suggestions, but at a few points in the long exchange, the conversation devolves into aggression. At these points, memes, which were largely absent from the discourse until then, appear as weapons that deliver pointed insults (see Figure 4).

Using memes in such contexts serves both to project a favorable position in the social field and to justify judgment, condemnation, and exclusion of others. In this sense, memes fill the role of cultural capital in the most straightforward manner. While in the analysis above *knowledge* of memes was translated into capital, in the case of memes deployed as weapons, the memes *themselves* comprise the mechanism of attaining or losing status.

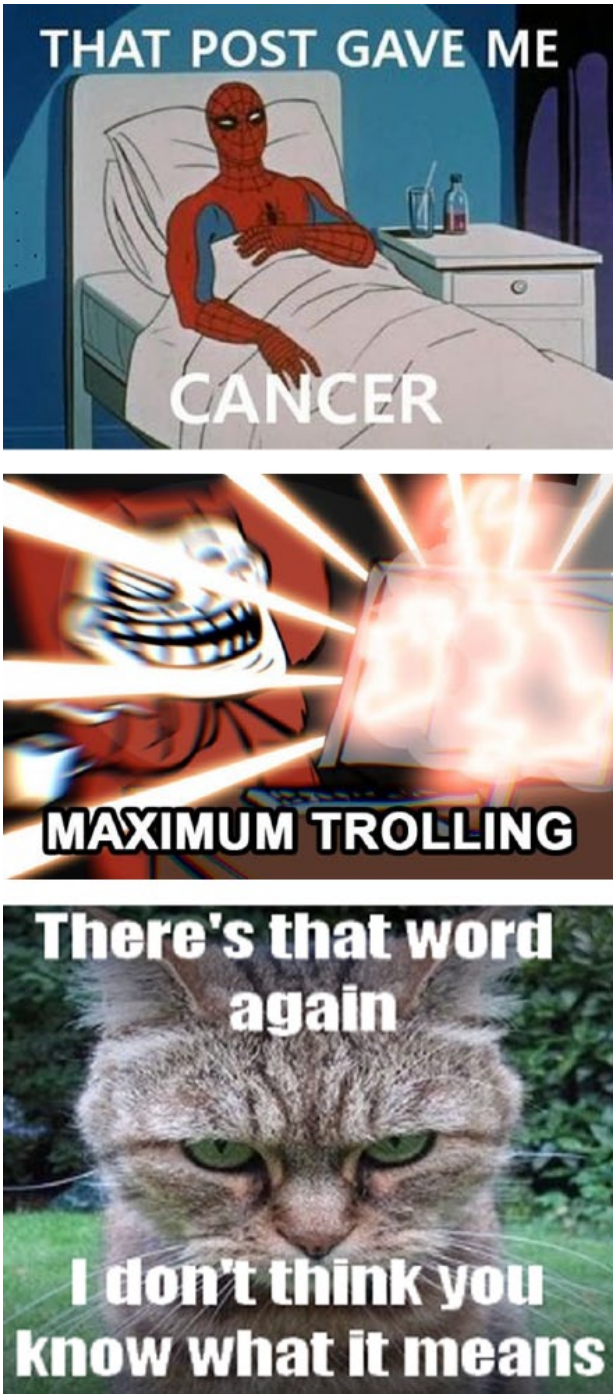

Figure 3. Meme-based weaponization.
From threads 350010171, 350119477, and 350872345, respectively.

However, this dynamic is two-sided. Being a staple of the site's culture gives memes the symbolic power to admonish while concurrently maintaining the links between those involved. As users rely on these images to condemn others— and are themselves subjected to similar condemnations—the common culture within which these insults actually matter is constantly evoked. This use of memes as speech acts in a visual culture embeds a dual role. A single memetic "utterance" in itself aims to assert and elevate an individual identity or self-image, but the vernacular it originates from makes any such

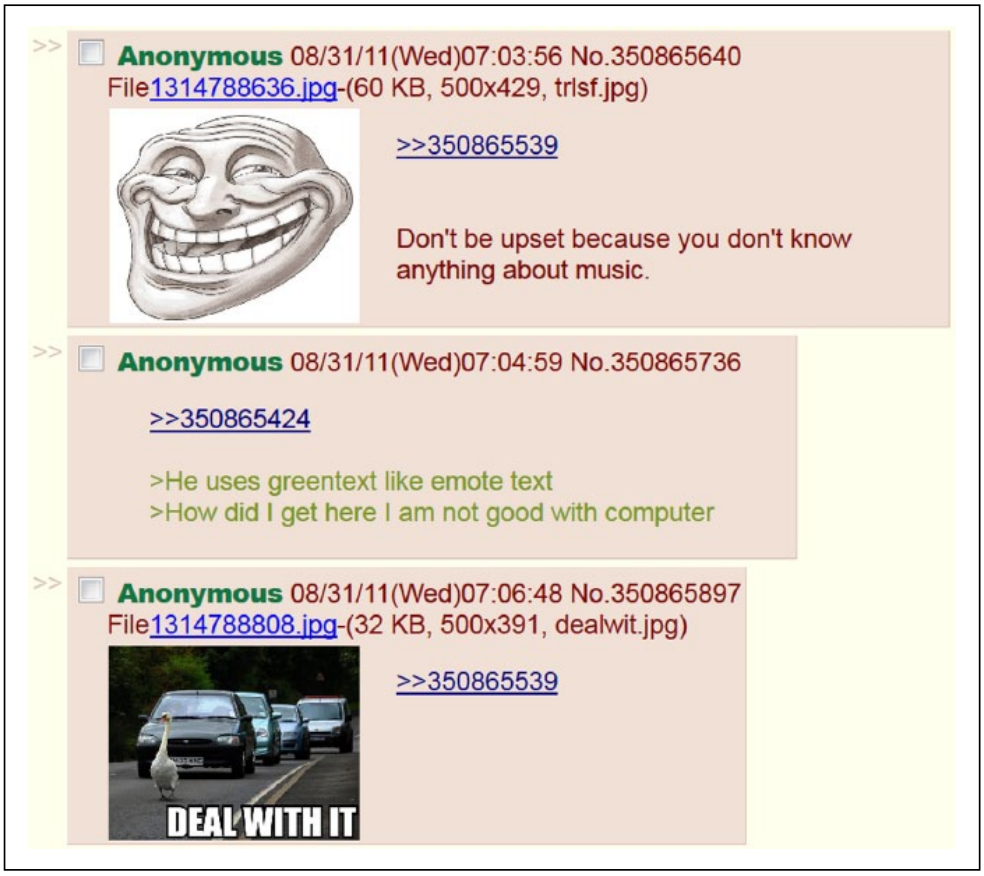

Figure 4. Memes as discursive weapons.
From thread 350861175. Commenters responding derogatorily to others in the thread, using memetic images to carry the message.

attempt reliant on the collective identity and its values. To someone from outside the community, being addressed with an image of a reproachful cat questioning one's intelligence has no effect (or in fact any meaning at all). To a /b/ user, it is a scornful reproach.

This effect may be augmented by the nature of the community's typical discourse: individual conflicts do not end with a clear winner, but simply fade into the ongoing flow of chatter. The community's choice to designate memes, which are a tenet of their shared culture, as the height of belligerence, means there is little chance for the exchange to truly shake any foundations. In fact, the effect could be seen as inverted—the constant arguing, about and through memes, reinforces the common frame and mutual sense of belonging, especially at the most intense moments of mutual aggression.

Conclusion

While Internet memes are often dismissed as trivial humor, this article demonstrates that at least within the /b/ board, they have significant social functions. First, they constitute a cultural base that marks a commenter as part of the board's community, a form of cultural capital that is required in order to assert a legitimate voice. In the "breaching" episodes described, commenters who used meme conventions incorrectly or who chose unacceptable memes were silenced or ousted from the community.

But memes do not function merely as cultural capital; rather, our analysis revealed that they are inherently *unstable* cultural forms. Their foundation upon a largely irreconcilable inner contradiction between convention and innovation leads to constant dissatisfaction, as the delicate balance required is never quite achieved. This conflict, however, was analyzed as a way for the community to reassert its cohesion in the trying conditions of anonymity and ephemerality. Paradoxically, memes' unstable nature keeps this community's shared culture at the center of discussion, reinforcing its importance. A further incarnation of this intrinsic ambiguity was found in the use of memes as discursive weapons, kicking in at the most intense points of conflict. In such cases, memes were used to mark claims of superior status and authority while simultaneously providing reminders of common cultural affinity, keeping hostility within community borders.

The main contribution of this study to the growing field of meme research relates not so much to the association of memes with cultural capital, but to the identification of the unique ways in which memes function as such. The main mechanism that we identified for that function can be dubbed "double duality": The intrinsic *structural* dualities of memes are echoed in their *social* functions, creating capital that is valuable *because* it is contested. Memes are thus used both as concrete *speech acts* and as *vernacular*—a shared cultural structure underpinning language. While the acts are often derogatory, the language, shared by a small group of people in the know, sends a constant signal of affiliation.

The study's findings may also have wider implications for the understanding of web-based social interactions. In this research, memes were found to be fought over by design. While we associated this constant instability with the particularly trying conditions of 4chan, it may apply to digital culture at large. Such incessant movement may be required to engage heterogeneous audiences with a short attention span without devolving into total randomness and chaos. Moreover, this kind of culture denotes a community in which the seams are always showing. Rather than looming in the background, structure, membership, and status are constantly performed and discussed. In the highly mediated, fast-paced communities typical of current digital culture, such constant reminders of identity may be vital.

It should be noted, however, that most web communities differ from /b/ in many respects. In these communities, meme-related interactions may not be as crude as those we found in 4chan, assuming the roles of debate and reflection rather than argument and condemnation. Nevertheless, the basic dynamic by which memes function as objects of social impulsion and exchange could be expected to appear in various settings. For instance, when memes are used in conversations about politics or ideology, their role could be viewed not only as a means of expression but also as a way of establishing common ground and kinship among bickering sides.

A final insight arising from this study is that Internet memes on /b/ also appear to be closer to the conception of the term by Dawkins (1976) than in most digital environments. Without the aid of archives, and while in a constant state of contention on definition, 4chan's memes need to reside first and foremost in participants' brains to survive. Its founder, Christopher Poole, has argued that anonymity and ephemerality contribute to the site's ability to initiate memes which later achieve immense popularity, as forgettable content is obliterated (Herwig, 2011).

This article is only one step in a wider investigation. As such, it leaves many aspects of the links between Internet memes, cultural capital, and communal identity unexplored. Our focal point was one meme hub; future research could compare the function of memes in different web-based communities and social settings. Such a broad approach could also delve into the way these groups view and refer to each other. While Internet memes are typically products of specific subcultural conventions, many are shared by several communities (Miltner, 2014). This potential conflict leads to a complex interaction between various forums that take part in a common digital world yet wish to form and sustain unique identities. Following group discourse when referring to other communities would reveal meme-related gatekeeping functions that are unique to particular communities, alongside properties common to these divergent spheres.

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Notes

1. While there is an option to create a sort of code, called tripcode, attached to the username to indicate a continual identity, this system is seldom used.
2. In fact, a list of /b/'s "rules of the Internet" does exist. While it follows the board's spirit in that it is facetious, satirical, coarse, and comprising multiple contradicting versions, its existence infers that the board operates by some kind of code.
3. The suffix "-fag" is a common way to indicate identity in the site's lingo. There is also the opposite of newfag, which is "oldfag," indicating a respected member of the community who knows it thoroughly.
4. While netnography was adopted as a general scholarly prism, we could not apply all its principles due to 4chan's nature. Thus, for instance, anonymity prevented focusing on selected active posters.
5. Derisive board lingo for users who pretend to be multiple responders, essentially talking to themselves to give the appearance of popularity.

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