

# HOW'S IT GOING BROS: PEWDIEPIE'S MEMEING IN TERTIARY ORALITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Shira Chess)

## ABSTRACT

PewDiePie, the most subscribed YouTuber with 61 million subscribers, became a controversial figure in 2017 after cases of hate speech in his videos. While his hate speech has obvious room for exploration, it is impossible to examine his hate speech without first analyzing the creation of his memetic language within the broader digital culture in which he exists and how users within that digital culture adopt his language. This thesis explores the development of orality in digital culture, placing PewDiePie in the middle of the tertiary orality and meme culture. Upon analysis of PewDiePie's videos and the language adopted by his audience, I conclude PewDiePie's intent for his speech does not matter, as propagators of hate speech interpellated that they are the subject of his speech.

INDEX WORDS: orality; tertiary orality; digital culture; participatory culture; memetics; internet memes; ambivalent internet; interpellation; YouTube; PewDiePie

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## DEDICATION

To Mom, for instilling in me my love for learning;  
And Elizabeth, for keeping me sane while I do so.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

I am a so called digital native, born as the world transitioned to put its communication and information hubs in digital spaces. That being said, I can still remember a world where digital media had not fully penetrated society. As a child, we had a television with rabbit ears until my parents finally cracked and got cable. I remember my father being quite disappointed that his expensive beeper was stolen from his car. My mom had the classic Nokia brick phone that could withstand a drop from any height. I also remember the time before we had a computer, and the incredible day that we finally got one. Those were the days when internet came through the home phone line, yelling at you along the way as it connected slowly but surely. This was the state of digital world when I arrived in it, developing into something that would change the larger world for better or worse.

Despite these almost hilariously dated concepts, the digital world has grown tremendously in my lifetime. Internet access and speeds have increased tremendously with advent of DSL and fiber. The first smartphones were invented, allowing for internet access from anywhere with a strong enough signal. The addition of cameras to phones and the increasing quality and decreasing size of standalone cameras let people film and edit their own content with ease. YouTube and Facebook act as sources of this new content. Streaming services allow for access to types of film and television that many users have never seen before. This barely scratches the surface as to the advancements made in my own lifetime.

This shift in culture is of great significance to me. There was a time when I struggled to find the letters on the keyboard, taking more than a sizable amount of time typing out a single sentence. Family road trips evolved from maps to printouts of MapQuest to GPS. I started college with a “dumb” phone, being a decently late adopter for the time. My first smartphone absolutely thrilled me, as I immediately downloaded all the apps that could fit on my entry level Samsung phone. Our first high-speed internet connection allowed me further access to my growing fandom for the *Legend of Zelda* series. Speaking of video games, the incredible development from my first Gameboy to the new Nintendo Switch has allowed my favorite hobby to push creative and artistic boundaries.

All of this is to say that I grew up during the transition to digital culture, where our society has become increasingly integrated with digital technologies. It has obviously impacted my development as a member of society, a fan, and a scholar. And truthfully, considering these developments and critically evaluating them means a great deal to me, as it is something that has quite literally happened and will continue to happen for the foreseeable future. Thus, this broad idea of my thesis was born. A quest to discover some piece of how digital has impacted culture.

In this thesis, I seek to explain how content creators impact the communication of their consumers. This is of particular importance because it is a departure from the more traditional views on the relationship between producer and consumer, where content flowed directly from producer to consumer. Now it is perceived as being much more complicated with interplay between the two, where both give and take in a symbiotic relationship. A key platform that displays this symbiotic relationship is YouTube, where content producers interact with their consumers on a personal level. One such YouTuber is PewDiePie, the face of YouTube with over 61 million subscribers.

## Digital Challenges

This digital biographic sojourn sets the stage for my interests in this thesis. The speed at which digital has exploded makes it difficult to fathom and reconcile how far we have come in such a short amount of time. Quite simply, I find it hard to simply pause for a second and truly take in the digital world around us. By the time that we take pause to analyze a piece of the digital world, it largely feels outdated and irrelevant to the current moment. I have heard the frustrations of my colleagues, voicing concerns that their work is already old after only a few months. I know of entire books written only to be published as “old news” of a digital object.

Despite the challenges to stay at the forefront of these changes, it is paramount that there be continued study of the digital. The work being done now is historicizing exact moments in digital time, where context and meaning may be fleeting and ultimately lost. This work helps us track development across time and recognize how our digital world is changing around us. So while a piece may feel irrelevant before it is even published, it gives us an insight into what that exact moment meant, and how that moment can inform future study. If ignored, it will lose its historical context. Without this context, it will be impossible to evaluate this space critically into what this specific digital moment means and how it deepens our understanding of where we are and where we are going.

De Ridder, Vesnic-Alujevic, and Romic (2016) present four themes to the study of digital audiences: affordances, the political economy of digital audiences, self-representation and identity, domestication and (problematic) uses of ICT. “Affordances,” here, refers to the interplay of technological development and the current social climate. The political economy is concerned with how both the industry and society make sense of the “user” and commodification of audiences. “Self-representation,” then, is about the development of both online and offline

cultural identities and their contexts within the broader society. “Domestication” focuses on the consumption of media and adoption of media technologies in people’s everyday lives, relating to the power relations between genders.

Within these four themes, De Ridder, Vesnic-Alujevic, and Romic present three current challenges to the study of digital audiences. They identify these as “exploring the diversity of digital audiences that now engage with digital media, allowing more room for the semiotics and contexts in which people experience digital media, and moving beyond the functionalistic uses of the concept affordances” (De Ridder, Vesnic-Alujevic, and Romic, 2016). The first challenge of diversity is concerned with the fact that audience researchers are focused on young people’s usage of media. Rather, there needs to be an acceptance and study of media in all people’s lives. The second challenge is that the term “user” as a singular is the dominate way to describe an audience. This completely ignores the audience as a whole and how groups are affected by media messages. Also, the focus on “user” tends to delegitimize the user as only viewing content while ignoring any interpretations of media messages they may have. The last challenge of affordances in digital audience studies is functionalist views such as the uses and gratifications approach can lead to rigid uses. Instead, affordances should be thought of as “imagined entities” that have meaning to people. This is important to keep in mind for this thesis, as the emphasis needs to be less on the user and more on the impact on digital culture. Affordances also need to be thought of less as technological and more in the context of how the culture uses those affordances because different cultures use these technologies differently due to societal structures.

## **Contemporary Communications**

At this moment in time, there are several ways for cultures to communicate digitally. One of the most common ways is through text message, a mode of communication that allows for the transformation of language with emoticons, emojis, and acronyms which can change the entire meaning of a statement by simply utilizing an ‘lol’ at the end. Other messaging apps have been developed, including WhatsApp, GroupMe, and Kik Messenger that allow for a range of options like group chatting and different emojis. There’s also Viber, which is a text and call app that allows for international communication for a more reasonable price than most mobile carriers. Moving away from mobile, there are desktop-oriented messaging apps like Slack and Discord that allow for longer messages than mobile. Many also have a function for voice chatting, allowing for gamers and office workers alike to seamlessly transition from text to voice chat. Twitch is a live-streaming video service that has gained steam over the past several years. And of course, there are giants like Skype that are used for more personal communications. All these options are now available in the digital world that easily allow for the flow of information and ideas, and this is before even mentioning social media and its impact on communication

Social media are ways for people to share and discuss information, in which they form networks of users that interact in a meaningful way. Twitter is a microblog that has a newly increased 280-character limit per post, leading to a style of quickly thought out and easy to digest posts. Facebook allows for longer posts, which in turn allows for more meaningful posts. People can communicate by sharing or commenting on posts as well as through the Facebook Messenger app. Also, people can livestream themselves directly through Facebook. There are even games on Facebook, allowing for even more depth of communicating by requesting help getting certain items or milestones. Tumblr is a blogging website where users can post short blog



posts or media content. All this is to say that the modes by which people communicate ideas on a broader level changed dramatically.

Suffice it to say, communication has changed dramatically thanks to the introduction and adoption of these digital technologies. Designed with the user in mind, these apps, websites, and social media have changed communication by allowing for immediacy of feedback and remixing of language. They also allow for communication on a much wider scale, promoting discussion of political and social issues across social and geographic borders. It has also allowed for regular people to become content producers. Several comedians have gotten their start on sites like (the now defunct) Vine or Facebook. Models have launched entire careers from posting on Instagram. Gamers have gained cult followings while streaming games on sites like Twitch.

In digital culture, the way language negotiation occurs has drastically changed. As previously mentioned, emojis can mean different things depending on the context. An example of this is the fire emoji, where users now use it to represent the slang term ‘fire’ as opposed to an actual fire. Gifs are essentially short, soundless videos that can be used as reactions in different contexts. Among some of the most popular ones are the blinking man gif and Michael Jackson eating popcorn in a theater during his hit video *Thriller*. Internet memes, a topic discussed full in the next chapter, are units of the internet that convey some sort of cultural meaning. These are usually humorous, though they can be about a multitude of cultural phenomenon.

A key aspect of the new negotiation of internet language is that no matter the source, language can be mixed and remixed to have a completely new meaning. A now infamous example of this is the Pepe the Frog meme. Pepe was originally created in 2005 as part of the *Boy’s Club* comic by Matt Furie. Around 2008 it had become a popular internet meme on sites like 4chan and reddit, where it was initially an inside joke for the platforms signaling

melancholy. From there, it gained wide popularity across the internet by 2014, becoming one of the most popular internet memes. However, Pepe was appropriated by the alt-right in late 2015, when it became a contentious figure. It has now become so associated with white supremacy and racism that it is now considered a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League. What was initially intended to be an innocent comic character has now turned into one of the most infamous symbols for white supremacy. Furie has become so disenchanted with the hijacking of Pepe that he killed him off in a comic. Despite this, he is still widely associated with the alt-right.

As seen with Pepe, the original intent behind a piece of content does not necessarily matter anymore, nor does it factor into the larger culture's interpretations. Instead of keeping Furie's original melancholy Pepe, internet users highjacked the meaning, giving rise to the racist hate symbol Pepe. There is also a larger consequence of this change in meaning. While some still use the Pepe meme in its first meme meaning, either ignoring the larger appropriation of the symbol by white supremacists or they are simply not in the know of its new meaning. This sparked the #SavePepe trend by the creator to try and get Pepe back from the alt-right. While it largely failed, it showed the ability for there to be contention in meaning of internet language.

## **Contemporary Content**

Where countless different modes of digital communication appeared, so too have various sources of entertainment content. Quite simply, the opportunities to both create and distribute content exploded since the turn of the century. Cameras now conveniently fit inside a pocket. Editing software allows for video and images to easily be manipulated without needing a strong technical prowess. Simply the ability to share content allows for its easy mixing and remixing by others across the internet.

Some of the most voluminous content that exists on the internet today is video content. Streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu provide access to hundreds of TV shows and movies, allowing users to bypass cable for more flexible viewing times. Specialty streaming services have also appeared that allow access to specific types of content, such as the anime-centered Crunchyroll. Facebook has also staked a large claim in the video content realm, with videos automatically playing without sound as you scroll through your feed. Services such as Sling and PlayStation Vue that allow for the streaming of television channels, offering packages based on preference of the channels you most want to watch. One more addition to this list would be YouTube, which has evolved to host the most video content on the internet.

YouTube is quite notable, where users can upload videos and have them be viewable by anyone on the internet. Fans have become central to the YouTuber, where they are literally the reason these content creators are able to abandon traditional jobs and create YouTube videos for a living. This can be quite lucrative, as some YouTubers earn millions of dollars a year through ads on their videos. This is largely rare though, as most YouTubers do not earn enough to make a living and must supplement their earnings with part-time jobs. Also problematic for YouTube is the rise of Twitch, a live-streaming video platform to which gamers have flocked.

## **Digital Importance**

It is of vast importance to understand the implications of the transition from electronic to digital media and its impact on how cultures communicate. The development of these recent technologies has allowed for completely new ways for cultures to communicate. Cultures that could not even exist before digital have sprang up across the internet. This has been a boom for audiences, as it has allowed for more streamlined and voluminous communication. Fans that

used to be relegated to discussion with the occasional friend who also enjoyed the show, movie, or comic now have forums, blogs, conventions, meet and greets, and group messaging apps. This has allowed fans the new opportunity to communicate and remix fan content with each other nearly immediately. A now famous example of this is ‘Black Twitter,’ where black Twitter users take to the platform to discuss relevant topics in their culture (Brock, 2012). This type of communication was impossible before and unpacking the cultural significance of these types of moments are critical to understand digital culture and fandom.

### **Digital Object of Study**

As a digital platform, YouTube has carved out its place among some of the most influential sources of entertainment. Among the most popular YouTubers is PewDiePie, who boasts over 61 million subscribers. At initial viewing, PewDiePie communicates in a completely unique way, something that has never been seen before. This thesis explores the development of orality in digital culture, placing PewDiePie in the middle of a tertiary orality, meme culture, and fandom. Within this, I argue that he not only exemplifies the way that tertiary orality has evolved, but that he also memes himself and his digital world around him to the point where only those with knowledge of those memes can understand him. From this language, his fans then negotiate the ways in which they communicate together in digital spaces. Yet, it is impossible to consider PewDiePie without looking at him as a site of controversy. Throughout his time on YouTube, he has been accused of being inherently homophobic and misogynist due to the language of his videos. However, no single instance had an impact on his success until a 2017 video that brought his alleged problematic views to light.

The original inspiration for this thesis occurred on 11 January 2017, when PewDiePie posted a video where he browses the website Fiverr, a site where people offer random services for five dollars, and tries to initiate offensive requests as a commentary on how many people will do obscene things for five dollars. Among the requests was for two men to hold up a sign that read “Death to all Jews.” Another request was a man dressed as Jesus to say that “Hitler did nothing wrong.” This was picked up by *The Wall Street Journal* two weeks later and reported as PewDiePie being anti-Semitic. The backlash was widespread, as Disney’s Maker Studios dropped them from their YouTube network and Google cancelled his YouTube Red show. However, he also received support from fans and fellow YouTubers, defending him by saying *The Wall Street Journal* took his jokes out of context and did not understand the video. Popular YouTubers such as H3H3, Jacksepticeye, and Markiplier all defended his jokes, with the entirety of YouTubers coming to the consensus that *The Wall Street Journal* was in the wrong for their reporting on his jokes.

An additional controversy occurred on 10 September 2017, where PewDiePie said the n-word while livestreaming a video game. While playing the popular multiplayer online battle royale game PLAYERUNKNOWN’S BATTLEGROUNDS, he seemingly got frustrated at another player and exclaimed “what a fucking n-word” to the thousands of people watching him at the time. This time around, there was no defense for his words, as media outlets and YouTubers alike condemned him for his choice of words. YouTubers that previously defended PewDiePie quickly condemned his words, calling this instance impossible to take out of context.

Interestingly enough, PewDiePie reacted differently to the fallout of these two cases of hate speech. In the first case, he largely defended himself for making the actual statements. While he acknowledged he could see why they could be offensive, he attacked *The Wall Street*

*Journal* for seemingly taking all his social commentary out of context (PewDiePie, 2017). Specifically, he referenced how in *The Wall Street Journal* exposé, they sampled from a video specifically about how the news media takes things out of context. They sampled a portion as “anti-Semitic commentary” while he was dressed as a Nazi watching Hitler speeches which was intended to be a meta joke about how it would be taken out of context (Winkler, Nicas, and Fritz, 2017). During that second case of hate speech where he dropped the n-word, he had a completely different reaction. This time, he recognized there was no context for his hate speech, calling it inexcusable and idiotic (PewDiePie, 2017).

Also, central to these instances of hate speech was the rapidity of which the alt-right lauded these statements by PewDiePie. The alt-right is a loosely-connected group of far-right groups such as white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and neo-fascists, which has a large following on sites like 4chan. One alt-right news website proudly proclaimed themselves the “favorite website of PewDiePie. PewDiePie was quick to distance himself from the alt-right’s praise, saying he did not mean to promote or participate in that kind of speech (PewDiePie, 2017). This did not stop them from utilizing him as a “member” of the alt-right.

Controversy over the links between PewDiePie and hate speech continue to be pushed to the forefront of discussions about him. While it is worth examining his hate speech, it is also impossible to decouple that speech from the memetic language system from which he performs. This, by no means, is meant to be apologist for his incendiary language. Instead, my argument offers an effort to use his memetic language structure to better unpack the complicated ambivalence of his language via tertiary orality. I begin with a history of PewDiePie to give context for his rise to fame. From there, I discuss the orality of media and the impact of the disruption of digital culture, detailing the tertiary orality that arose out of this disruption. Internet

memes are added as a way to describe the cultural units used as communication. Once this background is established, I will analyze PewDiePie's videos for how he creates his language in this tertiary orality, utilizing memetic language to do so. This language will be further explored within his consumer's language, with online spaces analyzed for their usage of the language that PewDiePie creates.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As its most subscribed channel, PewDiePie has become the face of YouTube. His videos get millions of views, subsequently sparking conversations across all types of social media. However, one case of controversy sparked discussion of PewDiePie across all media. On 11 January 2017, PewDiePie uploaded a video titled *I've Discovered The Greatest Thing Online...* where he made numerous requests on the website Fiverr, a site which allows people to offer their services or skills in exchange for five dollars. While it has since been deleted by PewDiePie, it is readily available on YouTube as users have reuploaded the video. In this video, he made several ridiculous requests to users of the site including playing video games together, Photoshopping a picture of PewDiePie to make him look more attractive, having a man dressed as Jesus say to subscribe his friend's YouTube channel, and learning to sing in Hebrew. However, the request that subsequently caused all the fallout surrounding his hate speech was when he requested that the users 'funnyguys' write out the message "death to all Jews" on a scroll and dance around/laugh. Reaction was swift among his fellow YouTubers, with accusations of the media, namely *The Wall Street Journal*, taking the messages out of context of their intended meaning. PewDiePie himself defended these messages as commentary on what someone would do for money. Regardless of intent, those messages were either defended for their intent, chastised for the content, or celebrated by alt-right groups.

To understand the ramifications and implications PewDiePie is doing in his online spaces and how it is reaching and affecting others online, it is necessary to dive into the language that he



creates and how that language reaches across spaces online. In this literature review, I explore how language, particularly media language, has developed over time to our current moment in digital culture. I then explain the cultural units, or memes, that digital language is disseminated in, diving into how these memes are used for an in-group mentality in a participatory culture. In turn, I argue this creates fertile ground for online groups, interpolate the hate speech as a way of identifying with PewDiePie.

### **History of PewDiePie**

Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, better known by his internet personality PewDiePie, is a YouTuber born Gothenburg, Sweden now residing in Brighton, England. Kjellberg was a fan of art and games as a child, drawing video game characters during class. That interest in gaming continued into high school, as he would sometimes skip classes to play games online. After dropping out of college, he created his first YouTube channel, Pewdie. His first videos on that channel mostly consisted of gaming and vlogs. After losing the passwords to that channel, he began his second channel, becoming the famous PewDiePie as currently known (PewDiePie, 2013, 2017).

PewDiePie's rise to stardom was the culmination of great timing and innovative gaming videos. He started his main YouTube channel in 2010 as the platform was experiencing tremendous growth. His videos were initially of the "Let's Play" variety, where a person plays video games and provides commentary while playing a game. When PewDiePie dropped out of college, he sold Photoshop art to pay for a computer to make his YouTube videos (PewDiePie, 2013). Soon after, his channel experienced tremendous growth, eventually surpassing one million subscribers by 2012. This was made possible because of his unique style and penchant

for playing horror games that garnered humorous jump scares. By early 2013, he became the most subscribed YouTube channel (Social Blade, 2018).

To say that PewDiePie is one of the most influential YouTubers would be an understatement. As of August 2017, PewDiePie has over 61 million subscribers and 17 billion views (Social Blade, 2018). He is widely considered one of the most popular YouTubers and a pioneer for the Let's Play genre. He has developed from providing commentary on *Minecraft* and horror games into one of the most prominent brands on YouTube. PewDiePie's style has also changed immensely over time, most notably starting in 2016 in a shift away from focusing solely on video games. Now, his content subsists of parodies, original comedy videos, rants against YouTube, and his original "Let's Play" style. PewDiePie has also garnered controversy over his hate speech stemming from his 11 January 2017 video. In analyzing the PewDiePie phenomenon, I seek to establish the connections between language creation by a content creator and the adoption of the language by fans or internet users online. This thesis, thus, contributes to literature describing how memes and hate speech are spread online, tracing these back to the original source and then exploring how and where this language disseminates.

## **Orality and Media**

A major aspect of PewDiePie's videos is that they embody new language structures indicative of a change in how communication happens in media. To fully understand this development of language in media, it is important to detail the roles of orality and literacy in culture and media. While it is obvious that the language that PewDiePie uses in his videos is much different from than that of the first television shows, radio shows, or even stage performances, it is important to understand how we got to this moment in time. Context as to

how language developed in media is necessary to fully understand how PewDiePie communicates. I do want to note here that when discussing literacy, it is inclusive of not only reading/writing, but also its relationship to media and how reading and writing is behind every medium. Also important to note is that literacy is culturally learned, where reading and writing is impacted by culture it is a part of. An example of this is the ‘y’all’ that is used in primarily the American South.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong (1982) describes how communication has developed from a preliterate to postliterate society, where the impact of the spoken and written word is considered in the context of societal development. His work has helped contextualize the changes in communication as our abilities as well as our technologies allow us to challenge former ways of communication. He explains the primary orality, residual orality, and secondary orality as the stages in cultural development of communication. According to Ong, primary orality can be defined as a “culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print” (Ong, 1982: p.11). This type of oral culture has no written word and solely exists based on sound. It posits that sound is powerful, since there is no way to pause sound, as it disappears whenever sound stops. In a primarily oral culture, since there is no written text, all knowledge exists as sound. It cannot be accessed through texts or passed down without being intoned in some sort of sound. Ong describes primary orality as additive but not subordinative, aggregative but not analytic, redundant, traditionalist, descriptive of human life, agnostic, participatory, homeostatic, and situational but not abstract (Ong, 1982). A perfect example of this is a story being passed down from generation to generation. The same plot points of the story will survive, but some tweaks may be made as the story is told over and over. That story is the collective and cumulative story of all of those who told it previously. It is one of the affordances that spoken

word allows. Ong then argues that the introduction of written word then gives rise to a post-primary culture, or residual orality.

Once written word is introduced to a society, a residual orality develops, creating pathways for new modes of communication. Residual orality is when a culture has been exposed to the written word but has not fully adopted it into their daily lives (Ong, 1982). It is the in-between of the primary and secondary oralities. While the technology of printed text has been introduced in this society, these texts have not diffused enough to gain widespread popularity or adoption. Residual orality is also gradual in development, as speech is so inherent to communication it can never be abandoned outright. However, this residue can begin to diminish once the culture becomes increasingly literate. An example of this is the introduction of the printing press in Europe, where literacy rates were exceedingly low prior to the ability to mass produce books. Even still, literacy rates were slow to rise for several decades after, showing that the printed books took some time to be fully adopted into daily lives.

Once residual orality wanes, the secondary orality takes shape as the written word becomes pervasive in society. Secondary orality is “essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print” (Ong, 1982). Where there was once a gap in knowledge of writing, there is now a wide knowledge of writing and its impact on society is known by the society itself. This culture relies on writing/print and the literacy of the people to exist. While secondary orality does feature sound like primary orality, it nonetheless is based on a written text. Both create a strong group sense due to sharing of a common language, but primary orality does not come close to eclipsing secondary orality due to there being a permanent text that shares common experiences. It is no longer redundant, agnostic, nor homeostatic because the written word has permanence. This type of orality has

extended from written books to mostly discuss electronic media, as technologies such as radio or television depend on print to transmit their messages.

A key outcome of electronic media is that makes it easier for people to communicate with others across the world. Ong addresses this and brings in is McLuhan's (1962) idea of the "global village." As a part of his well-known book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, the global village is the concept that electronic technology has made the world into a village, leading to less individualism and more of a collective identity. This, coupled with McLuhan's (1964) mantra "the medium is the message" gives us the jumping off point for how media can be examined as related to changes in societal communication. Specifically, this gives us the point at which to recognize that there is a relationship between disruption and orality that changes communication in accordance to the culture that rises out of these changes. Because of disruption in media technologies, society then takes these technologies and adopts them according to their cultural ideals/beliefs, thus shaping and altering orality.

To contextualize this as it relates to PewDiePie, his YouTube channel was born out of and shaped this change to electronic media and culture. This secondary orality necessitated by this medium opened the floodgates for communication on a global scale, with impact of communication affecting a more global society rather than more insular groups. As orality grows more global and less local, exposure to different types of communication becomes easier. PewDiePie, as a cultural icon, was possible because of the newfound ease of obtaining and maintaining a larger, global audience with which he can communicate. This is all possible because of the disruption in communication that digital media has caused. PewDiePie exemplifies this perfectly, as he originally started his channel while he still lived in Sweden and

now lives in the United Kingdom. Because of the more global nature of orality, geography did not matter in his development of being the most subscribed YouTuber.

## **Disruption of Digital Culture**

Before discussing the disruption of digital culture, it is helpful to first define what exactly is meant by the term 'Digital culture.' As a standalone term, it is quite vague and nondescript, as it tends to carry connotations of technology being the catalyst for cultural change. In my usage of the term, digital culture I am referring to the interplay of technology, the internet, and human beings and how those three shape communication in a society. Additionally, new media will be defined as media that require digital technologies to be actualized.

Disruption in communication has long been a source for change, and the rise of digital culture has once again shaken the way we communicate. This idea of disruption was explored heavily by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) in his exploratory work *No Sense of Place*. In this book, he details the way electronic media has affected the everyday experience and behavior. Borrowing from McLuhan and sociologist Erving Goffman, Meyrowitz shows how electronic media have created social situations that are no longer shaped by physical location. Instead, these changes in media change the way we perceive information and our physical/social spaces (Meyrowitz, 1985). Essentially, new media give us the vehicle for which society can change based on how information is dealt in these new media. Despite being used to describe the way that *electronic* media has impacted communication, there is an important lesson to be learned. Meyrowitz summarizes the way that new media impacts society:

Regardless of the ways in which new media change a society, the resulting new social order must grow out of the old one. New media have an effect by being *different* from older media and by changing those aspects of society that depended on earlier means of communicating. The printing press, for example, was able to spur both the Reformation and scientific inquiry because it bypassed the relative monopoly of information created by the slow, tedious writing of the scribes. The potency of a new medium emanates not only from its own uses and inherent characteristics, but also from the ways in which it offsets or bypasses the uses and characteristics of earlier media. The same media, therefore, may have different effects in different societies (Meyrowitz, 1985: p. 69).

To summarize Meyrowitz, new media impacts society differently because of the ways that they incorporate characteristics of old media. As Sandra Gustafson puts it, “today’s digital revolution is an extension and reconfiguration of earlier media forms,” which means a new medium changes the inherent way communication happens by changing the parts of the society where the old medium once was (Gustafson, 2014: p. 19). Digital media is leading to a more connected world because it makes connecting to others across the world much easier, thus leading to a more global village. As we have seen digital culture change societal communication, it has had a tremendous impact on the *what* and *how* we communicate with each other.

As such, it is paramount to examine some of the ways that digital media has impacted communication. Digital cameras and smartphones have led to pictures becoming more about identity formation and communication as opposed to familial history (van Dijck, 2008). Digital media also play a significant role in political communication (Bimber, 2014). Bloggers have indicated as influencers in brand communication (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Even digital

videoconferencing can support online language learning (Hampel and Stickler, 2012). These studies characterize the impact that the transition from electronic to digital media has had on communication. It is within the context of this disruption that PewDiePie has been able to thrive, allowing him to communicate in new ways thanks to the affordances that digital allows. It is also what allows for his hate speech to have as much impact as it has, something that will be unpacked later in the chapter.

I do want to note that I am not intending for this idea of digital disruption to be wholly technologically deterministic. Specifically, the social construction of technology theory posited by Bijker and Pinch (1984) highlights that technology does not determine human behavior, but humans impact the way technology is created. Ongoing, it states that a technology cannot be understood without examining its context in society. Within social construction theory, it can be said that this disruption of communication was not caused exclusively by digital technologies, but rather digital *culture*, which has thrust us into a new era of communication. Digital media are designed with a specific purpose that reflect the culture in which it is created. Thinking back on Ong's oralities, reconciliation with digital culture is required to understand where cultural communication has developed. This is obviously different than secondary orality because of the affordances in the written word versus the digital word, which means we must explore where we find these affordances in our digital culture.

Speaking on these affordances, the way PewDiePie creates language could not have happened without the disruption of digital culture. He was born out of a transitional period in media, as more and more eyes went to digital platforms like YouTube and Netflix. It is within this space of transition that he has defined how he communicates in his videos, and where we can



begin to see where and how this transition took place. It is also a place where we can see how and why his hate speech has an impact on internet communication.

### **Tertiary or Digital Orality**

As the effects of the disruption of digital culture are felt on communication, tertiary orality has evolved as the next step in orality. The move towards a digital world spurred the tertiary orality” (Logan, 2007). Specifically, it can be thought of as a way to reconcile the disruption that digital culture has had on orality. The origin of tertiary orality’s usage is tricky to trace, but the most influential person to purport its usefulness is Robert Logan (2007). Before exploring tertiary orality in depth, it is important to first make it distinct from other oralities. Logan offers distinction distinguish between the primary, secondary, and tertiary oralities:

Mimetic or gestural orality is non-verbal and unspoken. Primary orality is spoken in which the semantics and syntax are characteristic of oral culture. Secondary orality is also spoken but the semantics and syntax are characteristic of literate culture. And finally, tertiary or digital orality is written in which the semantics and syntax are characteristic of digital culture (Logan, 2007: p.10).

Unfortunately, the term ‘tertiary orality’ has not been widely used, though it has had increased popularity in exploration during recent years. This is evidenced by there being no consensus as to naming, sometimes being called a *tertiary* orality or others a *digital* orality. This is only exacerbated by Logan himself since he refers to it as *either* digital *or* tertiary orality (2007). Though interchangeable at this juncture, I will solely refer to it as a tertiary orality, since it

indicates a more appropriate homage to Walter Ong and rids itself of the connotations of technological determinism that the term *digital orality* emanates.

Specifically, the term tertiary orality has been connected to several areas of digital culture that has influenced its rise. It has been used as the basis in exploring photographic habits, showing that mobile snapshots are a part of the language of the tertiary orality (Lee, 2013). Additionally, big data has been shown to be a mode of storytelling in tertiary orality, something that was not afforded in previous oralities (Papacharissi, 2015). Changes in the transmission of radio to more digital properties in tertiary orality has been explored (Ángel-Botero and Alvarado-Duque, 2016). The way teenagers use linguistic practices on Facebook also has been contextualized in tertiary orality (Lees, 2016). This shows exactly how language has evolved as digital culture has made its influence known.

A key takeaway from the discussion of tertiary orality is that it has arisen due to the internet, where the use of these technologies have altered how language is created and perceived, within that context. An important outcome of tertiary orality is that ideas are disseminated much more easily across society. Because of this, it is important to discuss memes in this context and where they are currently situated as a being of the internet and their importance in the spread of information and cultural units.

It is in this tertiary orality embedded in digital contexts wherein PewDiePie has constructed a unique mode of communication. The way that he negotiates language was simply not possible in past oralities. Specifically, the structure of his videos, from the editorial changes to linguistic habits to physical presence in his videos are the culmination of disruption, are nothing we have ever seen in media. It is not simply that puts videos online; something more pivotal is happening within these videos, vis-à-vis tertiary orality. PewDiePie videos are

stylistically something that has never been done, owing to the types of language choices that he makes, be them editorial, physical, or verbal language packages. This makes it important to examine the specifics of how he packages his language, as it can provide clues as to how language has developed from the secondary to tertiary orality. This topic will be explored at length in Chapter Three of this thesis. However, part of the power of PewDiePie's linguistic plays on tertiary orality is entrenched in how he employs what I identify as a memetic style of speech.

## **Memes**

Memes, as a construct, have changed dramatically over the last four decades since the concept was first introduced. The idea of a meme has had a tremendous impact on how cultural ideas disseminate in the digital age. Upon its first usage, the meme was not intended to be hijacked and transformed into a being of the Internet. The concept of the meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976) who sought to define the ideas that are spread and replicated throughout a culture:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream' (Dawkins, 1976: p. 192).

As such, the meme was born as an idea packaged as a cultural unit that is spread throughout a society. In the original definition, memes behave much like genes, as they are self-replicated and mutated within culture (Dawkins, 1976). An example of this are melodies. For example, the basic melody of *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, and the alphabet song are all the same. These are different songs born from the same melody. This is a meme because the cultural unit of the melody has been imitated and transformed into different songs.

However, this original definition of the meme has been hijacked and transformed into the internet meme (Dawkins, 2013). Because of the way the internet carries information, it has “turned memes’ diffusion into a ubiquitous and highly visible routine” (Shifman, 2014: p. 17). In this new, altered version of memes, internet memes are not the product of natural selection, but by creative selection. Limor Shifman (2014) offers an apt definition of an internet meme, defining it as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance...(b) were created with awareness of each other...(c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). This establishes a new take on the meme, transforming it as a vessel for digital culture that spreads across the internet.

These vessels of digital culture are not only present in YouTube but are used as currency for communication. Specifically, research on YouTube shows it is a place for internet memes (Burgess and Green, 2009; Shifman, 2011; Horwatt, 2009). While YouTube is certainly not the only avenue for the spread of internet memes, YouTube is an obvious focus of this thesis since PewDiePie creates most of his language on the platform. This previous research shows how the internet, generally, and YouTube, specifically, are a place for memes as language. Further expanding on this idea, Ryan Milner notes the way that memes have developed in an internet vernacular, saying they can be “understood as examples of vernacular activity, memetic media

are significant for their expressive and conversational potential [...] memetic media are not mindless imitation or artless pastiche; they are instead everyday acts of conversational creativity, tying into a tapestry of texts that came before them” (Milner, 2016: p. 96). What Milner is arguing is that memes are not just funny pictures but are acts of conversation that build upon each other and are all tied together in the big mess of internet language. Memes are a part of language.

Given these emerging meanings of memes in the context of the internet, memes can be understood as a part of the language on the internet that builds upon each previous iteration of the meme. Memes are so shareable and spreadable because they can be understood as a “virtual mode structuring all subsequent actualizations” (Jenkins, 2014: p. 442). This means that a meme is a building block for future memes. As more and more people contribute to a meme, more memes are born. The meme ‘socially awkward penguin,’ a macro in which the creator describes a socially awkward moment in their life, gave birth to the ‘socially awesome penguin’ which describes when a person does something ‘cool’ in a social situation. This shows how previous memes inform all future memes.

In what follows, I argue that internet memes are a vessel of communication functioning as a kind of tertiary orality. Because internet memes are a part of the language of digital culture, they are inherently a part of the tertiary orality. They are a way that language is created in the tertiary orality. Thus, by examining the world’s biggest Youtuber, we can synthesize how this occurs on the YouTube platform and in what ways it manifests itself. In this thesis, literature on memes serves two purposes. First, I use the meme to make sense of the way PewDiePie communicates. PewDiePie’s language always builds upon itself, with his jokes being self-referential and leading to other language. Building off that, memetics will show how his

language is adopted into his audience's own internet language as cultural units of communication.

## **Participatory Culture**

A distinct aspect of tertiary orality is the ease of which internet users can participate in the dissemination of media content. This is distinct from other forms of orality because the flow of content has changed due to the ease of which information can be accessed by internet users. In this vein, a participatory culture has arisen. Henry Jenkins (2006) describes this as a “culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and of new content” (p. 331). This works contrary to the previous, secondary orality, in which content flowed in one direction from content producer to consumer. This has forced the fan to have a much larger stake in the creation of content, as they have more direct access to the creators of their favorite content and have a much more symbiotic relationship. Content creators also benefit with the capability of directly accessing fans for feedback and criticism.

From this idea of participatory culture has emerged much research into the relationship between audience and content creator. Participatory culture has been shown to open new opportunities for both producers and fans of ‘boys love’ anime, despite issues ranging from file-sharing to the boundaries between the margin and center becoming blurred (Wood 2013). Fandom also has a gift economy, where fan art objects are distributed across the fandom and fans derive value out of their work (Turk, 2013). Even something like fan editing of Wikipedia articles is a way for fans to engage in production of paratexts and feel as though they are contributing expert knowledge to the public (Thomas, 2016).

However, there is much research that also challenges the idea of participatory culture. Catherine Burwell (2013) argues that there is a need to account for corporate profit interest in any approach to participatory culture, using the *Colbert Report* as an example of struggle between fan and producer interpretation. Megan Condis (2014) challenges the assumptions of democratic inclusiveness of participatory culture, citing BioWare's decision to include the option to play as a gay male character. She argues that some fans masked their desires to keep politics out of games to reinforce the heteronormativity of video gaming culture. Matthew Guschwan (2012) shows the potential for football (soccer) fans to create branded commodities that threaten the relationship between fan and team. Jaroslav Švelch (2013) argues that fan-subtitling of the show *Game of Thrones* leads to fans not challenging the producer of the subtitles since fans are dependent on the fan-subber. This research makes the relationship between content producer and fan all the messier due to the power struggles present in several of these cultures.

Largely, PewDiePie has accepted and encouraged a participatory culture from his fans. In 2017, he started doing weekly videos in which he both directs and reacts to his reddit page, with topics ranging from diss tracks to Photoshop challenges. There is also particularly active fan community surrounding him, with fan art and Internet memes being among the popular creations of fans. Being so, it could be said that PewDiePie is a fan himself, who uses all sorts of other media to create his own content. He muddled the distinctions between fan and creator, as his original works were fan commentary on video games. This commentary then earned him a fan following himself, where he developed into a fan and producer of content. While this is not unique anymore on the internet, it is worth exploring. These will all be discussed in depth in Chapters 3 and 4.

## **In-Groups, Hate Speech, and Tying it all Together**

PewDiePie has surely had some unique moments regarding tertiary oralities, memes, and fan culture – however recent accusations have also insinuated that he has disseminated hate speech. There is some difficulty here, because PewDiePie’s content is not typically overtly hateful. However, I will argue throughout the course of this thesis that overt intentionality does not necessarily matter. The internet is what Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) refer to as inherently “ambivalent” – meaning can shift depending on speaker and context. While we can never know PewDiePie’s intent with these words, some internet users believe his words to be speaking directly to them and their own world view.

One way to think about how hate speech disseminates online is through the lens of “Interpellation.” Interpellation is largely associated with the work of French philosopher Louis Althusser. In his work “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” he identifies what he calls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) that help to shape and form the ideology of society (1971). ISAs include schools, churches, media outlets, family, and social clubs that are private institutions where RSAs include governments, police forces, and courts that dominate the working class. In this way, individuals are produced by social forces, not by their own desires. Essentially, these ISAs and RSAs create not individuals, but subjects. Thus, interpellation is the process by which a subject forms their identity through them being “hailed” in social contexts. An example of this would be if a police officer yells, or hails, “hey you there” and an individual turns around believing the officer is yelling at them. By answering this hail, that individual becomes the subject of the ideology of the RSA. Thus, the individual interpellates that they are the subject of the yelling. This related back to PewDiePie’s hate speech, where once the words ‘death to all Jews’ appears in his video, people with those



types of views will believe that PewDiePie is speaking to them. Due to the ambivalence of the internet and internet speak, it is impossible to know who PewDiePie intended those words to be for, nor does this even matter. What does matter is that by saying ‘death to all Jews,’ PewDiePie invites those with bigoted beliefs to interpellate that they are the subject of these words.

At the same time, interpellation is possible because people identify with certain kinds of media and speakers. These identifications are not random. Kenneth Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, suggests that rhetoric is not necessarily about persuasion, but about *identification*—in other words, we persuade a person because we demonstrate that they identify with us, creating a relationship where we are consubstantial. Burke explains how those with similar interests identify themselves in relation to each other:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so. [...] In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (Burke, 1950: p. 20-21)

In other words, a person is persuaded because of how they believe they can see themselves in another person. In his terms, person A is not exactly like person B, but if their interests align, then they are automatically identified as being one with that person. Also, they may be identified together if either person A or B believes themselves to have the same interests as the other. Despite this, persons A and B are still different because they are motivated differently as to their

particular interests, thus being associated and disassociated with each other. Essentially, when a person interpellates that they are the subject of a ‘hail,’ they believe their interests align with the person who hailed them. Where there is a disconnect is the motivations behind why they align, which can be owed to the ambivalence of hate speech online.

While PewDiePie may, himself, believe or not believe that the language he uses is hate speech, his is almost irrelevant. The memetic structure of tertiary orality creates an ambivalence of language that allows it to be infinitely malleable. At the same time, those who *interpellate* that speech as hate speech and identify with him, and it, as such, are essentially transforming it into hate speech. This is not to remove the blame from PewDiePie, suggesting that he is not responsible for his own speech, but to suggest that there are larger things at play here.

These theories from Althusser and Burke explain the situation surrounding PewDiePie’s hate speech. With the release of the initial hate speech video and subsequent fallout, defenders/propagators of this type of speech interpellated that the speech is intended for them. Thus, they identify themselves with PewDiePie and believe their own interests to align with his. This explains why alt-right websites were so quick to identify themselves with PewDiePie after the hate speech fallout. These theories show how PewDiePie, intentionally or not, created a collective identity for those who lauded his language. It does not matter what PewDiePie intended with his words, be it hate speech or otherwise. What does matter is that people like the alt-right found it to be hate speech and transformed whatever ‘intent’ PewDiePie even had to begin with. And the usage of memes for hate speech and in-groups only serve to bolster this claim.

As a part of participatory culture, memes have relied on internet users to mix and spread them within groups. Memes have been shown as a way of creating a collective identity (Gal,

Shifman, and Kampf, 2016). This means propagators of hate speech can use memes as a way of both interpellating that hate speech memes are for them and consubstantiating with those of similar interests in creation of these memes. After all, microaggressions are present in memes that are mostly racially themed (Williams, Oliver, Aumer, and Meyers, 2016). It is also largely assumed by white internet users that another person online is white unless they state otherwise (Duchscherer and Dovidio, 2016). Jokes can be used to cause discourse on social practices, which is then amplified due to replication in memes (Kumar, 2015). All of this shows the presence of memes in both propagation of hate speech and creation of groups who do the propagating. A quote by du Preez and Lombard serves as a nice bridge between the ambivalence of memes and creation of online identity:

[A] user is less likely to consider the ways in which a meme could affect their online identity before posting a meme. However, this meme will still reveal an aspect of a user's online and offline identity, as a user still selects memes to share according to their sense of humor, likes, gender, race, and so on. In other words, a user could share a meme hoping to add to their idealised identity or simply because they think that the meme is humorous, but the user cannot control the ultimate interpretation of the meme, and this interpretation adds to their identity (du Preez and Lombard, 2014: p. 16).

As already noted, a complication that has arisen in these units of digital culture is the ambivalence of internet speak, especially regarding hate speech. The uncertainty in terms of the language on the internet makes it difficult to pin down how exactly this speech is spread. In their book *The Ambivalent Internet*, Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017: p.202) explain that

“online expressions that don’t fit into any discernable category [...] are extremely difficult to pin down.” They further note comment on the tangled mess of online speech:

Online spaces are tangled with tissues upon tissues of quotations, multiplicities upon multiplicities of authors, and densely knotted meanings hinging not on who made what thing, or even on the thing itself, but on what memetic motifs resonate with an unknown number of unseen audiences. (Phillips and Milner, 2017: p. 202)

What makes memetic language so hard to dissect is the fact that it resonates differently with different people. Specifically, the nature of PewDiePie’s racist comments are hard to understand for anyone watching his videos because it is impossible to know what the true intent of his words were. Due to the ambivalence of internet speak, we cannot truly know what PewDiePie intended for his speech to do or who he wanted it to reach. What is vital for understanding *what* is happening is to break down this language into distinct categories for analysis. Even without knowing his intentions, we can explore the consequences of his words and the adoption of his language, be it hate speech or otherwise. The questions are less about whether or not his language in that 11 January 2017 video was hate speech, but rather does (a) his memetic style somehow excuse the events of the video (b) the fact that he paid others to say “death to all Jews” excuse it and (c) this serve as a cover for actual racist or anti-Semitic sentiments from PewDiePie. This thesis aims to unpack those questions.

## CHAPTER 3

### CREATION OF PEWDIEPIE'S MEMETIC LANGUAGE

In the previous chapter, I described PewDiePie's language as being inherently memetic and a result of a kind of tertiary orality that has developed on the internet. PewDiePie has a unique linguistic style that employs memetics in creation and transmission. In this chapter, I break down the three ways that PewDiePie creates a kind of memetic language based on tertiary orality: through editorial, verbal, or physical means. Within each of these categories, several themes are explained with examples pulled from several of PewDiePie's videos. Finally, the how of PewDiePie's language creation is explored, laying the groundwork for Chapter Four's exploration into how this language is adopted across the internet.

#### **Methodology**

Quite simply, the first step in examining the language that PewDiePie creates in his videos is to watch said videos. However, PewDiePie has created a *lot* of videos, and it would be impossible to analyze them all. PewDiePie boasts over 3,365 uploads on his channel as of December 2017, with videos dated as early as 2010 and ranging anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours long. Besides the massive undertaking it would be to watch all these videos, going back several years past would not be fruitful, as the language that he uses in his videos has evolved tremendously from his first videos till now. Specifically, his past videos mainly consisted of him doing 'Let's Plays' in which someone records themselves playing a video game. In these videos, he mostly provided commentary on horror games or difficult games, where he became famous

for having over the top reactions to scary moments. This contrasts greatly to his more recent videos, which are less geared towards gaming and more towards comedic commentary videos which feature heavy editing. Also, while PewDiePie is the main content creator of his channel, he has used other people in his creation of content through editors, collaborators, and cameramen. However, it is important to note that he has final say over every video that is posted, and as such will be treated as the sole content producer. Furthermore, given the recent claims of hate speech against him, it is useful to consider more recent videos.

As previously alluded to, PewDiePie's linguistic style has changed dramatically from his first videos to now. Initially, he provided commentary on video games through the 'Let's Play' format, concentrating on horror games and difficult games where he screams much of the time. Some examples are his series where he plays the horror game *Amnesia* and the platformer *Happy Wheels*. Interestingly, this is the style that PewDiePie is still somewhat associated with in popular culture because he became so well known as the screaming face of YouTube. This contrasts to his current style of videos which are based around comedic commentary with heavy editing, even in his 'Let's Plays.' He also makes videos including sketches, rants about issues, or still his traditional 'Let's Play' style. However, examination of the most recent version of PewDiePie is more significant than past iterations. His recent videos demonstrate an evolution, highlighting editorial, verbal, and physical language beyond his original style. Additionally, internet memes were not as spreadable as they were six or seven years ago. Finally, getting data about how the memetic language PewDiePie creates spreads across the internet would be quite difficult as any posts may have long since been deleted. The older the posts, the more likely those posts have been deleted due to expiring accounts, changes in communication spaces, or threads of posts being archived.

However, the most crucial factor in choosing this timeline was so that I could examine the aftermath of the 11 January 2017 video which contains PewDiePie's hate speech. In this way, we can understand how hate speech is memetically created and how that differs from other memes. It can also be understood how this type of speech is spread across the internet in the form of memes and how they are adopted in the language of certain platforms. This will be the focal point of Chapter Four, which explores the adoption of memes created by PewDiePie as established in Chapter Three.

Keeping these limitations in mind, I viewed all of PewDiePie's videos from January through April of 2017. I selected this timeframe because it coincides with the release of his controversial video on 11 January 2017, which contains his hate speech. Upon viewing all these videos, I selected 2 videos each from January, February, March, and April that stood out as exemplars. These 8 videos wholly capture his style of videos as well as how he creates and distributes memes. These videos were selected to give a wide range of his types of videos, ranging from commentary videos, challenge videos, Let's Plays, and rants:

- *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: Challenge video in which PewDiePie tries not to laugh at funny clips. If he does, he shaves part of his moustache off. Video begins with him jokingly trying to make his video ten minutes long.
- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!*: Let's Play of *Gal\*Gun: Double Peace*, a Japanese rail shooter video game with sexual themes.
- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: Challenge style video which mimics some of the popular videos at the time. He looks through images and video meant to 'blow your mind.'

- */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN*: PewDiePie discusses his favorite movie, *The Room*, the infamously terrible movie by Tommy Wiseau.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: PewDiePie watches some videos that mention his name in the title. Seemingly, those videos which use his name in order to get more views on the video.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING?*: Let's Play of the indie adventure game, *House Party*, which features sexually suggestive content.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: Discusses the controversial Pepsi ad starring Kendall Jenner.
- *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: Watches several instructional videos on how to be 'cool.'

Upon selecting these exemplars for analysis, I initially sought to categorize the entire video into distinct categories. This proved to be counterproductive since the categories of memetic language can blur, embodying aspects of several categories. After watching each of these videos several times and analyzing his speech patterns, I arrived at three separate ways PewDiePie communicates in his videos, which are *editorial*, *verbal*, and *physical* means of communication.

### **Orality and the Structure of PewDiePie**

Upon analysis of several PewDiePie videos, there are three distinct categories in which PewDiePie constructs his memetic language: editorial, verbal, and physical. *Editorial* communication can be defined as anything deliberately edited in post-production to convey meaning. *Verbal* is sound created by PewDiePie himself only and not by special effects. *Physical* is using his body or the concrete world around him to communicate. Below I will expand upon these categories and delve into the specific themes of how PewDiePie communicates. An



important note here is that these themes are not exclusive of each other; often they are used in conjunction, sometimes crossing categories. Despite this, it is easier to contextualize and understand as three distinct categories.

## **Editorial**

“Editorial” refers to any deliberate edits in post-production to convey meaning. Editorial can take several different forms, as it covers both audio and visual elements. This is because PewDiePie will edit several different elements into one meaning, crossing the boundaries between audio and visual. Editorial is also characteristic of PewDiePie not having control of editorial communication during the filming of his videos, but only after he has filmed and began to work on the editing of his videos. As such, editorial communication for PewDiePie is the product of specific choices. There are several types of editorial communication that appear after viewing several videos:

- *Overlay of songs*: Overlay of songs is when music is added as some sort of reaction. This is oftentimes sad music, used as a reaction to a sarcastically sad moment. It is always done in conjunction with a slow zoom on his face as well as him being silent during the song, emphasizing the use of songs as reactions.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie overlays suspenseful non-diegetic score at the beginning as he jokes about making his video ten minutes. He also overlays sad music as he reads comments making fun of his moustache and suspenseful music as he almost laughs.

- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* Suspenseful non-diegetic score plays as PewDiePie laments the fact that he hasn't recorded a video and must come up with an idea.
- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS):* Suspenseful non-diegetic score as he searches for video ideas.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT:* PewDiePie overlays a song while scrolling through Stewie Griffin impressions on YouTube, suspenseful music when determining who uses his name the most in their videos for views, and sad music when he questions why he can't use his own name to clickbait for more views.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING:* Sad music as PewDiePie says he doesn't have any friends. Also inserts songs during glitchy parts of the gameplay. Suspenseful music during a fight.
- *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE:* Overlay of suspenseful music.
- *Audio/video distortion:* Audio/video distortion is when the editing purposefully changes the audio/video to become exaggerated. This includes everything from stretching out the video, closely zooming in on PewDiePie's face, making PewDiePie's voice extremely loud, or making it sound like his voice is coming from a loudspeaker.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\*:* Distortion of PewDiePie's voice while he looks at the camera 'seductively.'
  - *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* Distortion of PewDiePie's voice to make it lower and video to be shaky in reaction to coming up with a video idea. It also zooms in on PewDiePie's face and played distorted music after he asked for

people to ‘like’ the video, doing so again when he discovers part of how to play the game.

- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: Camera zooms in on PewDiePie’s face and increases the volume to capture audio of his breathing and overlays clock over his face when he must come up with an answer to a quiz quickly.
- */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I’VE EVER SEEN*: PewDiePie’s face gets stretched out when talking about his favorite character.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: Fake rain falls in the background as PewDiePie discusses the views YouTubers get from using his name in the title of videos.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*: The video turns to black and white as PewDiePie says he doesn’t have any friends and zooms in on his face frequently while doing so.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: PewDiePie’s voice distorts to sound like it is coming over a loudspeaker when fake quoting his audience about why he makes videos.
- *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: Closely zoomed onto PewDiePie’s face while going to black and white. Another case where the video is heavily saturated to mock the quality of the video PewDiePie was commenting on.
- *Voices given to objects, animals, or pictures*: Many times, PewDiePie has featured cardboard cutouts or his pets in his videos. Among the cardboard cutouts, he has featured several celebrities including English chef Ainsley Harriott, actor Danny DeVito, and YouTubers Markiplier, Cinnamon Toast Ken, and Emma Blackery. He also features his

pet dogs, Edgar and Maya, as well as his pet toad, Slippy. In relation to editorial, he will give these objects or animals voices that are eerily mechanical, making them into characters under their own right.

- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* Gives a voice to a picture of his girlfriend, Marzia, as he plays a suggestive part of the game while faking that she is coming in his recording studio to catch him playing the game.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT:* A monotonous voice is given to an Ainsley cardboard cutout.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING:* A monotonous voice is given to one of the Danny DeVito cardboard cutouts.
- *References pulled from other media:* PewDiePie will also sample from several forms of media, using them as references to larger culture. This can range from video games to television to other YouTube videos.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\*:* A sample is taken from YouTuber leafyishere's content as example of how to stretch out YouTube content. There is also a compilation of funny videos that he reacts to.
  - *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* A reference to a video that teaches "freestyle dancing."
  - *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS):* Samples are taken from videos partaking in the then popular 'mind trick' trend. There were also additional references *Shark Tank* and the infamous game Bullet Ball from the show, the infamous 'Disappointed!' meme from the show *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, and the show *Johnny Bravo*'s picture of towers burning in a cartoon

prior to 9/11. At one point the moment that Luke Skywalker finds out Darth Vader is his father in *Star Wars: Empire Strikes Back* was overlaid in response to convoluted 9/11 theory PewDiePie found on the internet.

- / *The Room* / *THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN*: PewDiePie shows several of clips from *The Room* while discussing why it is his favorite movie. An additional reference to *Iron Man* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* occurs when saying we don't need another superhero movie.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: PewDiePie watches several videos from other YouTubers who use his name in the title of their videos, calling out traditional media for doing the same in their articles. There were also samples from YouTubers Keemstar, Scarce, Pyrocynical and Ricegum relating PewDiePie watching videos of those who put his name in the title of their videos.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*: PewDiePie plays the indie adventure game *House Party*.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: References the part of the movie *Spiderman 2* where Mary Jane asks who Spiderman is. The video also samples from the infamous Pepsi ad starring Kendall Jenner while PewDiePie looks at social media posts about the Pepsi ad.
- *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: Several instructional videos on how to be 'cool' are sampled.
- *Photoshop*: The last theme in the editorial category is Photoshop, the image creator and editor that PewDiePie uses to create the thumbnails for his videos. Most of his

thumbnails are over the top, colorful, or ridiculous to draw in audiences. Descriptions of the thumbnails are as follows:

- *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie making a sad face as he shaves his moustache. The background is bright orange with the text ‘DON’T LAUGH.’
- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!*: Sexualized women cover the thumbnail with the text ‘BEST GAME.’
- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: PewDiePie laughing with the text ‘MIND=BLOWN.’
- */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I’VE EVER SEEN*: PewDiePie cuddling with Tommy Wiseau.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: PewDiePie with his watch circled in red and crying emojis surrounding him.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING?*: Seemingly topless woman with the text ‘HOUSE PARTY’ across the thumbnail.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: Kendall Jenner with her mouth made to take up half her face.
- *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: Man filled in with yellow coloring and a blue background with the words ‘DON’T CRINGE.’

What stands out when defining the editorial category is that it is explicitly of the digital age. The ability to manipulate images with such ease was simply not possible in the past. Because of this, he can pack more of his self-generated memes into each video, which makes his videos easier to identify since they are so distinct. The inherent way he packages his videos editorially is a

meme; anyone in the digital culture around PewDiePie will instantly recognize his style of video. He always has a ridiculous thumbnail, distortion of his voice or video, and overlay of songs. His videos always include one or more of these editorial clues that let you know immediately that you are watching a PewDiePie video. In doing this packaging, PewDiePie creates his own units of memetic language, negotiating a new way of communicating in the tertiary orality in which he finds himself: a way that becomes memetic how he builds it, references it, and remixes it.

## Verbal

“Verbal” can be any sound that is created by PewDiePie himself. This is differentiated from other sound because verbal excludes the sounds that are created during post-production. It also excludes other sounds that may be in the background of videos that are not made for the specific purposes of the video. Some of the common themes include:

- *Catchphrases*: Catchphrases are the common phrases said by PewDiePie in nearly every video. He usually starts every video with his classic “Hey how’s it going, bros? My name is PewDiePie.” He also ends most videos with a “brofist.” Finally, he refers to his fans as “bros,” even saying himself that he thinks of it as a familial phrase.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie says “how’s it going bros” to the audience. This phrase is used consistently through many of his videos, before, during, and after the period in question.
  - *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: PewDiePie mentions his classic brofist.
- *Yelling*: PewDiePie yells a lot in his videos. He usually yells in reaction to being scared during a video game, watching something creepy, overreacting to something funny, or simply to end his videos.

- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* PewDiePie yells at the very beginning of the video reacting to the game he was playing.
- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS):* PewDiePie yells about looking through the most popular videos at the time for ideas.
- */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN:* He yells in reaction to the third sex scene in *The Room*.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT:* PewDiePie jokingly yells in fake conversation with a YouTuber who claims to have called him.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD:* PewDiePie yells about how he isn't making enough money on his videos and that he can have more family friendly content like Kendall Jenner.
- *Raspy voice:* Another common theme that appears in PewDiePie's videos is a raspy voice that is intended to portray sarcasm. This sarcasm ranges from saying he lied about making videos for the fun of it to making fun of YouTubers who beg their audience to like their video and subscribe to their channel. PewDiePie even references this in a video, commenting that whenever he uses this raspy voice, he is only joking and being sarcastic.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\*:* PewDiePie speaks with a raspy voice to disapprove of his audience's choice of comment to write on his studio wall.
  - *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS):* He sarcastically tells his audience to press a button to make sure they get notified when he uploads a video.
  - */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN:* PewDiePie uses the raspy voice when saying that *The Room* is the greatest movie ever and discussing



romantic scenes during the movie, how often Tommy Wiseau mentions his name at the beginning of the movie, and how ‘great’ the soundtrack is.

- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: He jokes that if a video uses ‘PewDiePie’ in the title it will get more views.
- *References*: References are when PewDiePie mentions other media or channels. This is differentiated from *references pulled from other media* because he only mentions them by name or quotes them in this theme without including any editorial ques. This can range from other YouTubers to quotes of movies.
  - *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!*: PewDiePie references indie games that he played, such as *Bear Simulator* or *Hatoful Boyfriend* and his girlfriend/fellow YouTuber, Marzia, after mentioning a girl from the video game is cute but not as cute as Marzia.
  - *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: He refers to Markiplier and Jacksepticeye as ‘attractive’ YouTubers.
  - *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: During a fake conversation with a YouTuber, PewDiePie claims he is Markiplier. Mentions other YouTubers who use his name in the title, such as CinnamonToastKen and The Game Theorists.
  - *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: PewDiePie mentions Jacksepticeye and DJ Khaled.
- *Bodily noises*: Finally, he will oftentimes make bodily noises as response to something. This is always some sort of burping, coughing, grunting, or wheezing.

- *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie breathes heavily during suspenseful parts of the video and uses a kazoo as part of the joke that he looks like the kid from the meme ‘Kazoo Kid.’
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*: He grunts at his own sexual joke.
- *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: He grunts repeatedly at the start of the video.

A major point that the verbal category raises is that it is different than the idea of most other Internet memes. Where most Internet memes reside in a more visual realm, PewDiePie is creating memes that have sound. What is interesting is that he is borrowing from the secondary orality, where the writing of scripts allows for a more polished method of communicating. There is permanence to his words, which allows him to constantly reference as well as have running verbal cues that indicate the type of meaning he is attempting to convey. This is also to say that his verbal language is easily translated in written form, and thus adopted by his audience. A note here is that while the verbal category is certainly the category in which hate speech would be found, no explicit hate speech was noted in these sample videos. This ties back to the ambivalence of language in the tertiary orality, in that his words are vague enough that his speech can be interpreted in several ways.

## **Physical**

“Physical” can be defined as using his body or the concrete world around him to communicate. This includes any sort of gestures, body movement, or objects that are intended to convey meaning. Physical themes include:

- *Cardboard cutouts*: As previously mentioned, a big part of several of PewDiePie’s videos are the cardboard cutouts that are featured in his filming studio. The most notable one is a

cutout of Ainsely Harriott, the British chef and television personality. Additionally, actor/writer/director Tommy Wiseau received the cutout treatment after several videos about the cult classic *The Room*. Other cutouts to appear are actor Danny DeVito and YouTubers Markiplier, Cinnamon Toast Ken, and Emma Blackery.

- *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: He turns around to talk to the Ainsley cardboard cutout, but it isn't there.
- */ The Room / THIS IS GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN*: Ainsley cardboard cutout is in the background and PewDiePie slow dances with him and asks him questions.
- *PEWDIEPIE CLICKBAIT*: An Ainsley cardboard cutout in the background with the top of his head ripped off from a previous video's sketch.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*: Five cardboard cutouts of Danny DeVito are placed in the background. PewDiePie has conversations with them about the video game he plays.
- *Pets*: PewDiePie also owns three different pets that he will bring in to his videos. He has a pet toad named Slippy and two pugs named Edgar and Maya (PewDiePie, 2017). Slippy is usually left in his cage, though PewDiePie will get him out sometimes and ask for his opinion on things. Edgar is brought on at random, though he features heavily in videos filmed outside his studio. Maya does not appear nearly as frequently as the previous two, but she does appear on occasion.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie jokes that he will shave Edgar instead of his moustache.

- *Exaggerated body movements*: A large part of PewDiePie’s physical communication is exaggerated body movement. Notable among this theme is climbing walls during a “cringey” moment and flailing around to express dissatisfaction.
  - *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!*: PewDiePie dances around in reaction to the cheery music of the video game he’s playing and climbs the wall of his studio after dancing.
  - *UNREAL MIND TRICK! (99% CANT DO THIS)*: He throws off his headphones in response to having his mind ‘blown’ and bobs his head back and forth when he finds an image that changes when it is either near or far away from you.
  - *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*: PewDiePie dances to the music of the video game at several points in the video.
  - *THE DELETED PEPSI AD*: PewDiePie mimics a ‘sexy’ photo of Kendall Jenner.
  - *HOW TO BE COOL - TRY NOT TO CRINGE CHALLENGE*: PewDiePie tries several of the ways to be ‘cool’ including fake slamming into a door and going down fake stairs.
- *Facial/attire changes*: Facial and attire changes are when PewDiePie puts on or removes clothing or facial objects. During several parody videos, he will take off his shirt to express extreme anger. Also, he sometimes will take a water bottle and pour it over his face to either simulate tears or sweat. Tears in a sad moment or sweat in a sexually suggestive moment.
  - *TRY NOT TO LAUGH! #07 \*\*moustache edition\*\**: PewDiePie shaves part of his moustache every time he laughs during the video and Mocks video of a woman doing a sinus rinse by half-heartedly attempting one himself.

- *GOD BLESS JAPAN FOR THIS GAME!:* He dumps water on his head in reaction to a sexual moment in the game.
- *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING:* He pours water on his face when a character in the video game says ‘no sweat.’

A feature of the tertiary orality of internet memes that is not particularly obvious is the physical side behind the screen. What PewDiePie does is treats the physical world around him with the digital conveyance in mind. He plays up his physicality for it to translate as a digital property. This is in culmination of primarily oral cultures, where physicality is key in communication. He then packages this physicality in specific units as ways to convey reactions. While the physical aspect of his language is harder to exactly mimic, it is still possible for there to be specific references to his physicality. Specifically, references can easily be made to his pets or cardboard cutouts. This shows how PewDiePie’s audience can adopt and remix language in participatory culture.

### **Hate Speech Video**

On 11 January 2017, PewDiePie uploaded his controversial video titled *I've Discovered The Greatest Thing Online...* that contains his hate speech. In this video, he makes several requests on the website Fiverr, where users can pay other users for skills and tasks. The hate speech in the video first starts at around the 3-minute mark of the video, where PewDiePie first mentions the user ‘funnyguys’ and describes how they will write any message on their bodies and dance around. A note here is that while the ‘funnyguys’ have one user account, there are three people that participate on the account, two of which will appear in the “death to all Jews” clip. PewDiePie then mentions the other things that they do on the site such as singing a

depressing happy birthday song. It should be noted here that the ‘funnyguys’ are young adult males from India and they mention that English is not their first language. Around the five-minute mark PewDiePie makes the actual request for the ‘funnyguys’ to dance around holding a sign. PewDiePie ponders what message should be included and starts typing “death to all Jews.” However, while saying it, PewDiePie purposely edits out where he says “Jews” so that he is only saying “death to all.” PewDiePie then tells the ‘funnyguys’ to pronounce it like “subscribe to Keemstar,” a controversial YouTuber. Then, at the 11-minute mark, PewDiePie watches the video that the ‘funnyguys’ sent to him. The ‘funnyguys’ fight over the scroll for a bit and then unfurl it to reveal “death to all Jews” and say “subscribe to Keemstar” while laughing. PewDiePie, seemingly shocked that they did his request, remains speechless for a while before commenting that someone wouldn’t do a less ridiculous request but the ‘funnyguys’ performed the request. He then says “sorry, I didn’t think that they would actually do it” while still acting shocked and gives them a five-star rating on Fiverr since they completed the request even though he didn’t expect them to.

Based off the previously stated categories of memes PewDiePie creates and themes within those categories, the “death to all Jews” remarks would easily fall into the verbal category. However, it certainly doesn’t seem to fit within any of the other categories that were suggested, especially when considering the ambivalence of hate speech on the internet. It isn’t a catchphrase that PewDiePie uses regularly or a reference to another media. It has the qualities of the verbal category, where PewDiePie verbally said the term “death to all Jews” as he created the request. Thus, the questions are less about whether or not this is hate speech but does (a) his memetic style somehow excuse the event (b) the context that he paid others to do it excuses it

and (c) if this was all just a cover for actual racist or anti-Semitic sentiments. These questions can only be answered by looking at how the audience adopted his language.

### **What Does This meme?**

A note on these categories is that they often, if not usually, blend across each other and are used in conjunction with each other. For example, in the episode *DOES THIS GAME COUNT AS CHEATING*, he will use all three of verbal, editorial, and physical memes all at once when talking with a cardboard cutout of Danny DeVito. These instances are the norm, where he stacks memes on top of each other to create and blend meanings. This is highly indicative of meme culture, in which a meme is used, reused, and mixed to create new meanings. This accounts for the ambivalence of tertiary orality, and the ability of a variety of audience members to interpellate a statement in several ways, identifying with PewDiePie, regardless of whether they consider the January 11 video “hate speech.”

In the emerging tertiary orality, PewDiePie has found several ways to make memeing. First, none of the things that PewDiePie does in his videos would be possible in a secondary orality. Simply the nature of past oralities would have limited the way PewDiePie makes his videos. The way that digital technology is used in the tertiary orality allows for different language creation than before. Specifically, due to the way that editorial software is utilized in the tertiary orality, PewDiePie creates memetic language in ways never seen before. This is particularly prevalent in the editorial category of his communication, where we see him mixing and remixing both his own words and internet memes to create a mashup of himself and the internet culture where he thrives.

Second, PewDiePie is simultaneously memeing himself and the digital world around him. This was easy to see once the categories and themes of communication developed, as there are cultural snippets that he is creating, modifying, and finally releasing in his videos. An example of this is his cardboard cutouts. Initially just a seemingly random idea, it transformed over time as he took ownership of the creativity over these cutouts, evolving them into what they are today. This memeing of the digital space around him leads to the overall meme of PewDiePie.

Finally, through this creation of memes, he creates a language that only he and his audience can understand. A newcomer probably would not fully understand the language of PewDiePie the first time they watch one of his videos. To understand his work, the audience member needs to be already embedded in the linguistic structures he has pre-established. For example, the cardboard cutouts cannot be understood in one initial viewing. They are celebrities taken out of context and placed into new creative spaces, complete with new personalities and meanings. By taking ideas and creating memes as vernacular, he negotiates the way he and his fans understand his content. Yet, this gives his audience the ability to identify with the message they perceive from him. They are necessarily in on the joke.

Regarding PewDiePie's controversies over anti-Semitic and racist comments, it is truly hard to understand his intent behind these comments due to the ambivalence of such language. The question, then, becomes whether or not that intent matters. Memetic language and its ambivalence allows for hate speech that can both look like and not look like hate speech. Again, this is in no way meant to be apologist for his language. Rather, it is the structure of PewDiePie's language that allows people to defend him, regardless of his intent in using this kind of speech. It does not matter the intent behind his words, whether they were meant to comment on the crazy things people would do for money or using a racist slur instead. What does matter is the



interpretation of those words by others, which at best is mixed between those who support him and those who lambast him. Thus, in Chapter Four I analyze how PewDiePie's memes are spread out across the internet through the memetic speech he has established.

## CHAPTER 4

### ADOPTION OF PEWDIEPIE'S MEMETIC LANGUAGE

As shown in Chapter 3, PewDiePie certainly creates memetic language in a unique way. Specifically, PewDiePie creates editorial, verbal, and physical memetic language in his videos. This hate speech from his 11 January 2017 video was also established as a different category for analysis. In this chapter, I now explore how fans then take the memetic language that PewDiePie creates and adopts into their own online spaces, further memeing the memes. In this investigation, my goal is to not only discover *where* these PewDiePie fandom spaces are, but also *how* these fans converse in reference to PewDiePie's language. In other words, to what extent is PewDiePie's memetic language structure transformative and spreadable, and how is it adopted by fans and other internet users.

Upon identifying these spaces, an analysis of the language was required to fully understand the extent to which PewDiePie's memetic language was adopted. In the second part of my analysis, I explore the social media spaces that PewDiePie fans tend to migrate towards: Twitter, Tumblr, and reddit. From there, I contextualize how language is adopted distinctly on each platform, each still deploying the memetic language that PewDiePie created, within the categories I established in Chapter 3 (editorial, verbal, or physical). Additionally, I discuss how these linguistic structures facilitate the adoption of hate speech on each platform and how some users of those platforms interpellate this language, identifying with the speaker. Finally, I discuss how each platform compares in terms of linguistic adoption and the broader impact of his words. This will benefit the understanding of hate speech online, in that authorial intent does not matter

if propagators of hate speech interpellate that the hate speech is for them and thus identify with that content producer.

## **Methodology**

To tackle the question of how audiences adopt the memetic language that PewDiePie creates, the spaces that his audience uses needs exploration. Not all platforms are amenable to this kind of analysis; certain spaces are insignificant for analysis due to lack of data. For example, apps like GroupMe and Discord that allow for fans to create groups for private messaging, private blogs and forums that require special permissions or links to view. While 4chan users might discuss PewDiePie from time-to-time, the platform is inherently impossible to analyze because of its use of anonymity and because its threads disappear after a certain amount of time. Thus, I had to find spaces that were readily open and available for me to view, allowing me to download and evaluate the data produced by fans.

The most obvious types of spaces to gather from are social media, which is now readily accessible due to the abundance of social media analytics tools that have data gathering capabilities. Figuring out the social media platforms containing the most meaningful conversation the next step. Forums showed promise, but there is not a dedicated PewDiePie forum active enough to perform thorough analysis. That said, reddit has a great deal of discussions relating to PewDiePie. Facebook conversation, while longer, does not have the pure volume of posts, and a great deal of what is posted on this platform is inaccessible unless I am “friends” with the participants, making it a difficult platform to tackle. Instagram, too, was not a strong contender because it is so inherently photo-centric. Twitter, on the other hand, was a sure bet because there were plenty of posts about PewDiePie on the platform, being the most popular

social media in terms of pure volume of posts. Finally, Tumblr was a logical choice because of the fan centered nature of the platform where fans share and discuss some of their favorite content.

I needed to establish a few parameters before I started to gather from these platforms. First, a justifiable timeframe would need to be set. To be consistent with my first analysis of PewDiePie's videos, I set a timeframe of 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017. To analyze the material I used Crimson Hexagon, a social media analytics tool, setting two different "monitors" to catch social media data. The first was a monitor that directly pulled from PewDiePie's Twitter account. This was to see how fans interacted with his own content. The second was a monitor that listened for any posts on Tumblr or reddit that mentioned PewDiePie. Because of the broad nature of the memes he creates or uses, using a broad search for these terms would bring back results that are unrelated to PewDiePie. Terms like "Ainsley" and "bros" would simply turn up too many results that were not about PewDiePie. By specifying posts that only mentioned PewDiePie by name, I captured only conversation happening is directly *about* him. I also limited these monitors to English only posts.

With those established parameters, I gathered and sampled data, initially gathering 1,130,946 posts on Twitter, 293125 posts on Tumblr, and 26,790 posts on reddit. From there, I sampled 1,026 posts from Twitter, 1,033 posts from Tumblr, and 1,000 posts from reddit using Crimson Hexagon's own random sampling tool which gives you around 1000 random tweets through specified filters. In terms of analysis, I read through all 3,059 posts to get a sense of the overall conversation happening on those platforms as to the adoption rate of PewDiePie's memetic language, choosing some exemplars to highlight this conversation. From there, I analyzed posts using the previously established categories of editorial, verbal, and physical

memes and the themes within each of those categories. I also discussed hate speech separately within each platform.

## **Twitter**

The conversation gathered on Twitter consisted of replies to PewDiePie's tweets from 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017. As of this writing, PewDiePie has deleted all his tweets from this timeframe, with his earliest tweet coming on 17 December 2017. It is unknown why exactly he deleted all his tweets. Luckily, Crimson Hexagon pulls in deleted posts, so while tweets cannot be directly accessed from Twitter, they are still available for view. I also wanted to note that for the purposes of this analysis, all retweets of PewDiePie's own tweets will be excluded. This is because I did not consider this to be actual adoption of language, rather it is mere mimicry since the fan does not even need to create a post to retweet. I consider part of adoption of language to be usage, and mimicking the language is not specifically using the language of PewDiePie. Upon analysis of the 1,026 sampled replies, PewDiePie's memetic language is not strongly adopted, with much of the conversation simply being in response to his tweets. However, there is adoption as verbal and physical memetic language.

It is in PewDiePie's verbal memetic language that tended to be most adopted by Twitter users. While this language was adopted among fans, it was not as widespread as expected. Most of the verbal memetic language adopted came in the form of catchphrases or references, where fans essentially mimicked the language without much remixing. A catchphrase that used was PewDiePie's term "bros" for his fans (Figure 1). While he was previously known for using that word often, he dialed back its usage at the start of 2017. Largely, fans followed suit, with only a handful of people using the term to describe themselves or fellow fans. Also prevalent was using

the references that PewDiePie uses in his own videos. Especially popular were references to Jacksepticeye as “Jack Spedicey” and the “my name is Jeff” meme from *22 Jump Street*. Verbal memetic language such as PewDiePie’s yelling or raspy voice were non-existent as it is impossible to exactly adopt that language into text-based communication. Even taking all caps as yelling, there were few fans who opted to use all caps in their posts.

One of the more surprisingly adopted of PewDiePie’s memetic language structures was his physical language, mostly consisting of fans referencing his pets or cardboard cutouts. Fans mentioned his dog, Edgar, quite a bit. Another topic of discussion was the Ainsley cardboard cutout. Much of the fan adoption of Ainsley was asking PewDiePie for certain types of content featuring Ainsley, including mashups with the Kazoo Kid meme and to spank Ainsley (Figures 2, 3, and 4). Fans also asked PewDiePie if he missed him since in one of his videos during this time he ripped up the cardboard cutout. Largely missing from this physical adoption were his exaggerated body movements and facial/attire changes, fans not even referencing his sometimes-excessive language in those regards. This shows how audiences can take language from a creator and remix it to their own meaning. For example, PewDiePie never ‘spanks’ an Ainsley cardboard cutout in his videos, but a user created language referencing this. The participatory culture around his content allows for the audience to create and remix their own memes from PewDiePie’s memetic language.

In terms of hate speech, there really are no blatant uses of hate speech directed towards a particular minority. Most of the language used in regards to his perceived anti-Semitism was in response to people who did not understand the situation or were asking about the specific messages that PewDiePie created. Specifically, fans asked about the message on Fiverr, where the two men unfurled a sign that read “death to all Jews” while dancing around. Despite this,

there was still some speech that could be interpreted as hate speech. Specifically, there were several users that were asking for a fanfic between PewDiePie, Hitler, and Jacksepticeye. Aside from Jewish people, there was also a case where a user called Japanese people “small.” Other than this, Twitter largely did not see much hate speech, something that cannot be said about some of the other platforms.

## **Tumblr**

For Tumblr, the conversation was gathered using the Boolean search ‘PewDiePie OR ‘Pewds’ to gather all Tumblr mentions of PewDiePie during the specified time of 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017. I decided to use only these terms to limit the amount of extra noise in terms of conversation, as searching for some of his commonly used phrases such as “got ‘em” would pull in conversation that was not related to PewDiePie. To rectify this, gathering posts that only mention him makes sense so that it is assuredly a conversation happening about him and only him. Additionally, while PewDiePie only posted twice on Tumblr throughout the entire timeframe, his fans posted 293,125 times. This shows a strong adoption rate for the platform, which makes sense given the nature for Tumblr to be used by fandoms to post pictures and discuss their favorite content. Since there was so much content, I sampled 1,033 posts using Crimson Hexagon’s sampling tool and used these for the analysis of the language adoption on Tumblr.

Unsurprisingly, the platform showed much stronger adoption of PewDiePie’s memetic language than Twitter, given that the platform is more conducive to longer, more thought-out responses. The Tumblr figures show this well, with much longer content as compared to Twitter. However, most of the language used indicates that Tumblr was much more used for discussion

about PewDiePie and his content, collaborators, and language. This adoption seems much more about the commentary of PewDiePie rather than using the language, indicating that Tumblr is used much more heavily as a platform of discourse rather than language adoption.

Editorially, PewDiePie's memetic language was largely adopted via the creation of fan art, where fans took images and used some sort of image editor or creator and made art. Largely, this made editorial language adoption about the remixing of PewDiePie. Images ranged from imagining PewDiePie with white hair and wearing makeup to him with his collaborators in airport fashion (Figures 6 and 7). It is significant because this type of language adoption embodies the idea of a meme being mixed and remixed among culture. Fans used this type of language to contribute to the overall fandom of PewDiePie and to share either their own or someone else's work.

Adoption of PewDiePie's verbal memetic language was not nearly as prevalent on Tumblr than it was on Twitter. The lack of adoption compared to Twitter mostly came in the form of catchphrases and references, where fans simply did not use that type of language when talking with each other. However, there were several references to his other verbal language. One user commented on the use of PewDiePie's use of his raspy voice to indicate sarcasm (Figure 5). This seems to be much less about the adoption of the language, however, since it is more of explaining what this language means as opposed to using the language itself.

An unexpected language adoption by PewDiePie's fans on Tumblr was his physical memetic language. Specifically, this seemed largely to reference some of the jokes that PewDiePie often uses. One user referenced how he will pour water on his face to simulate crying (Figure 5). Another one also referenced how he will change his attire during his videos, referencing his cases of putting on dresses. A surprising omission from physical aspect was the



references to PewDiePie's pets and cardboard cutouts. Only one such post referenced any of those, with it being a piece of fan art. However, all this language was translated to text, with none of the adoption reenacting the physical language.

One of the most insightful conversations happening on Tumblr was regarding hate speech and the discourse on the fallout of PewDiePie's language. Most of this conversation was quite divided, ranging from straight condemnation of his words to celebration. On one side, there were people who lamented his hate speech, bashing him for normalizing the speech and calling him racist for the types of jokes that he used. One such user was eager to point out all the perceived anti-Semitic jokes that PewDiePie made on his channel dating back to August of 2016 (Figure 12). This same user also pointed out that an anti-Semitic website called PewDiePie "our guy" and celebrated his language. Another user admonished PewDiePie for normalizing Nazis, calling the fact that he defended the speech as jokes taken out of context as inexcusable (Figure 11). Some users even celebrated that PewDiePie's career was over (Figure 10). On the flip side, there were several users who were quick to defend his language, saying that they were just jokes and should not be taken seriously. One user went so far as to say that PewDiePie is a "master level troll" and was glad he is not a "liberal moron" (Figure 9). Overall, these opinions were evenly split between those either defending PewDiePie or admonishing his jokes. Tumblr is known for being an inclusive platform, so the type of divisiveness that this created is certainly noteworthy. There were even some users who defended his jokes but wished that his career would end, marking how contentious this debate became (Figure 8).

Also noteworthy is that while most of the conversation around this speech happened directly following the *Wall Street Journal* article which accused PewDiePie of using hate speech, there continued to be discussion in the following weeks as well. However, this conversation

focused more on the broader issues of free speech and comparative racism. Several posts focused on the fact that people that several YouTubers defended PewDiePie's freedom of speech but did not speak out about when YouTube was accused of restricting LGBTQ videos. Additionally, several users compared PewDiePie's speech to infamous YouTuber JonTron, who has been largely criticized for his views on immigration and race.

## **Reddit**

Similarly to Tumblr, data from reddit was collected from a Crimson Hexagon monitor using the Boolean search 'PewDiePie OR pewds' during the timeframe of 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017. This was done to limit the amount of irrelevant conversation, as searching for his more generic terms would broaden the conversation to include posts that aren't about PewDiePie. With that being said, the Boolean search found 26,790 posts during the specified timeframe, being several times fewer than the posts found on Tumblr using the same search. This broke my expectations, as I expected there to be many more posts on reddit. Sampling exactly 1,000 posts using Crimson Hexagon's sampling tool, it became apparent that reddit's conversation and language vastly differed from Tumblr and Twitter.

By and large, reddit saw the least amount of direct memetic language adoption, especially when compared to Twitter and Tumblr. Where both Twitter and Tumblr both saw at least some adoption of his language, reddit adoption was nearly non-existent. On reddit, users both discussed PewDiePie the PewDiePie controversy and the surrounding fallout. While fans did reference some of his memetic language, it was largely not actually utilized as a means of conversing. Rather, it was commentary on his language, such as clarifying certain catchphrases.

This went against my initial expectation, as I assumed that most of the reddit conversation would adopt his memetic language since reddit is conducive for fan speak.

Editorial memetic language was again sparingly adopted due to the technological limitations of using editorial language on social media. Something in Tumblr that I thought would appear on reddit too was fan art. However, no posts with fan art were made over the timeframe. This was odd to me because while not entirely picture based, it is still easy to upload images to reddit and for there to be no fan art was odd. This could simply be because fans used reddit for discussion, not for sharing their own images. This seemed to fit, as the only post with a significant image was about how someone looked like PewDiePie's girlfriend.

Verbal memetic language adoption largely mirrored that of Tumblr, in that there was a little adoption of his catchphrases or references. Most of the references to his catchphrases centered around his more classic catchphrases, discussing the "bro fist" or his "how's it going bros" that he used to start his videos (Figures 21 and 22). Interestingly, one user corrected someone's misuse of the latter, saying even though they weren't a fan, that "how's it going bros" was the correct way to say the phrase (Figure 23). Not referenced at all was his yelling, his raspy voice, or his other bodily noises.

Like the editorial, physical memetic language was simply not adopted by fans on reddit. No single reference was made to his pets, a common thread among fans on Twitter. Only one reference was made to Ainsley, which proclaimed the meme to be dead since PewDiePie "killed" off his character in one of his videos (Figure 20). Even in posts criticizing his content, there was no mention of his exaggerated body movements or his facial/attire changes. This is one of the larger indicators of the lack of adoption considering Twitter was able to adopt this sort of memetic language.

One thing that largely distinguished reddit from both Tumblr and Twitter was its adoption and defense of hate speech. Fans were quick to point out that the hate speech was jokes taken out of context. Even users who do not like PewDiePie came to his defense (Figures 13 and 18). An added aspect to this defense is that much of the conversation around PewDiePie occurred on /The\_Donald, a subreddit for Trump supporters. A big aspect of this community is that they tend to be anti-establishment and love to troll. Overwhelmingly, this subreddit supported PewDiePie through his controversy. An example includes a supporter calling PewDiePie the “Joseph Goebbels” of this generation and calling out the media that broke the story as “leftist” journalism (Figure 17). Another case of hate speech occurred where a user started to type the n-word (Figure 15) These fans never explicitly referenced that they even watched or cared for his content. Rather, they appreciated him because they perceived him as anti-pc and anti-establishment. However, there were some people who were more critical of his speech, though it was more commentary on the outcomes of his words than actual admonishment (Figures 14 and 25). This concentrated on how his language is interpreted by media and the alt-right. Also prevalent was the hate directed towards PewDiePie, but not because of his hate speech. Some reddit users chastised PewDiePie’s content, calling his content terrible and wishing for his channel to become obscure once again (Figures 16 and 19). On the flip side, several fans were quick to defend his content, with some praising how much PewDiePie has matured and that his content has improved (Figure 24).

### **What does this meme for the audience?**

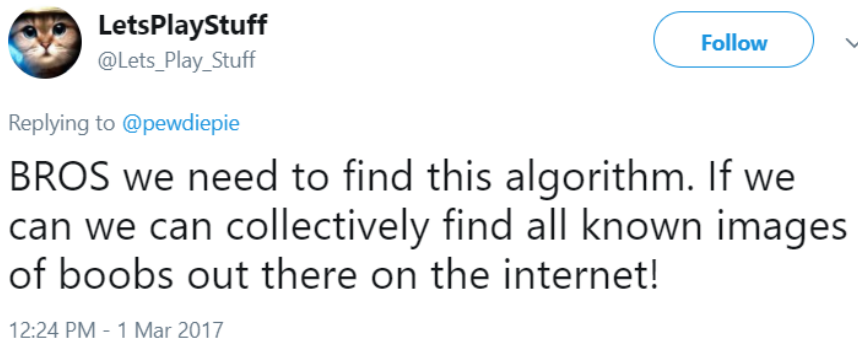
The obvious thing here is that adoption of language varies from platform and category of language. A major insight from examining Twitter, Tumblr, and reddit is that fan adoption of a

content creator's memetic language differs across the platform. Twitter saw decent adoption in PewDiePie's verbal and physical memetic language and largely referenced them in the text of replies to his tweets. Tumblr saw a sizeable proportion of physical and editorial language adoption, where fans created fan art or referenced PewDiePie's physicality in his videos. Reddit essentially saw no adoption whatsoever across memetic language; it was simply discussion of PewDiePie, not a memeing of him. This shows how the affordances and structures of the platforms can influence the language adopted within tertiary orality. Twitter largely concentrated on quick replies because of the character limits in place on the platform, which was conducive for verbal language adoption. Tumblr saw much more editorial adoption because the platform is structured to easily host photos. Reddit was largely more discussion based and less about adopting language because of its nature as a forum. These differences occurred due to the nature of the platforms and expected conduct on them. Twitter is largely public so much less hate speech appeared, compared to Tumblr and reddit which offer a degree of anonymity. This lead to more discussion/use of hate speech.

An unexpected incident across Twitter, Tumblr, and reddit was the adoption of hate speech comparatively across platforms. Twitter largely saw no hate speech adoption besides a few cases, which makes sense because it is a more public platform where it is much more risqué to post blatant hate speech. Tumblr, being a more inclusive environment, was quite divided in terms of hate speech. There was meaningful discussion from both sides of whether or not PewDiePie used hate speech in his videos and the broader implications of how his words impact society. Then there is reddit, where hate speech was widely defended and adopted by several users. Notably, several of these cases came from the subreddit r/The\_Donald, where speech that marginalizes certain groups is quite common.

The differences in these platforms – yet the maintenance of hate speech – highlights the ambivalence of language on the internet, where fans of the same YouTuber all defended, chastised, or adopted the hate speech of PewDiePie. While PewDiePie may or may not have meant for his jokes to become part of the language of hate speech for the alt-right, the ambivalence of his words made it is for those types of groups to adopt the language. The singular meme that was survivable between platforms was the implicit and explicit use of anti-Semitism. Where he tried to distance himself, these groups embraced him and made him part of their vernacular. To this point, it doesn't matter if PewDiePie is anti-Semitic or not because those who propagate that type of speech interpolate that the speech is for them and thus consubstantiate themselves with PewDiePie. This is the power of memetic language within tertiary orality.

## Figures



*Figure 1: Twitter Example 1*



**Tony Catanese**

@ThatOneDudeTony

Follow



Replying to @pewdiepie

- 1) Dab.
- 2) Spank Ainsley (sounds weird out of context)
- 3) Flip off Wall Street Journal

4:01 PM - 2 Mar 2017

*Figure 2: Twitter Example 2*



**BlazingShadow†**

@BlazerShadow491

Follow



Replying to @pewdiepie @YouTube

Kazoo Kid YTP: Poodiepie Edition (feat. Ainsley)

10:58 AM - 14 Jan 2017

*Figure 3: Twitter Example 3*



**Fraische**

@Fraische4

Follow



Replying to @pewdiepie

WHEN KAZOO KID GREW UP TO BE DRACO MALFOY 😂

4:34 AM - 9 Feb 2017

*Figure 4: Twitter Example 4*

# Underappreciated Pewdiepie Things



i-am-avacado

- His gravelly voice he uses whenever he's being satirical or messing around
- Pouring water on his face on camera and then pretending to be crying
- Anytime he attacks the media for shitting on his name for no reason
- Unverifying himself
- Being genuinely honest in his videos where he's serious
- “MY VEEEGAN BOODY”
- Overuse of “they ask you how you are and they say that you’re fine—”
- Edgar taking over the channel

*Figure 5: Tumblr Example 1*



*Figure 6: Tumblr Example 2*





*Figure 7: Tumblr Example 3*



healthbyholly

I don't think there's anything wrong with the "anti Semitic" jokes pewdiepie included in his videos, they're fucking jokes, it's entertainment, it's not his actual beliefs.

However I still fucking hate pewdiepie lol and his anti vegan murder and rape supporting bullshit and just his arrogant attitude in general and I really do hope his career ends someday soon.

*Figure 8: Tumblr Example 4*

Pewdiepie, master level troll. Really, I didn't know he had it in him, props. I absolutely love that the most subscribed-to Youtuber isn't a liberal moron. He could do a lot of damage with this position, but instead he's actually doing a pretty good job of just being funny without indoctrinating the impressionable minds that follow him.

#pewdiepie #pewdiepiedidnothingwrong  
#fuck that joke was actually hilarious

2 notes Feb 15th, 2017



*Figure 9: Tumblr Example 5*

weavemama:

a pregnant beyonce performed a bomb ass cinematic masterpiece, a KKK member was killed, pewdiepie's career is over, trump is on his way to impeachment,, black history month is fuckin lit so far



*Figure 10: Tumblr Example 6*

### Don't normalise Nazis

smalljewishgirl:

I was reading this article this morning, about Disney cutting ties with PewDiePie, a YouTube star (I've never heard of him?) who had included antisemitic content in his videos. This guy has continually claimed that all the antisemitic content he's produced (which includes statements such as 'death to all Jews' and 'Hitler did absolutely nothing wrong') is a joke, and that people who are offended simply don't understand the context, suggesting that it's 'laughable' that he might agree with these viewpoints. So far so unsurprising; we've heard all this before.

*Figure 11: Tumblr Example 7*

jewishshowl

It would be really nice if people could please stop claiming that it took an antisemitic joke for Disney to drop PewDiePie despite all his prior racist and misogynistic content.

PewDiePie has expressed antisemitic and Nazi sentiments in his videos long before this incident with fiverr.

August 7, 2016: PewDiePie, wearing a Make America Great Again hat, begins his video with a swastika and other Nazi imagery, and uses a photo of Hitler as a segue between clips

September 24, 2016: In a video criticising YouTube policy, he shows a clip of Hitler giving a speech

October 15, 2016: PewDiePie posts swastikas drawn by his fans

December 8, 2016: PewDiePie wears a brown military uniform while watching a Hitler clip at the end of his video

Antisemitic website the Daily Stormer has also given PewDiePie praise for Nazi imagery in his videos, writing:

"PewDiePie is /ourguy/.

*Figure 12: Tumblr Example 8*

[-] **Falloutguy100** 1 point 1 year ago

Well first off I'd like to say that I don't like pewdiepie. He's annoying to me and that's just me, people can like him and that's fine. I don't think there's any shortage of good jokes, and I think there's more important things to be up in arms in than people perpetuating unfunny jokes haha. But I understand your anger.

Figure 13: reddit Example 1

[-] **lkjhgfdsamnbvcx** 0 points 11 months ago

No one is stopping Pewdiepie from saying offensive shit or making racist jokes. He can continue to do so. His supporters can continue to support him if they want. He just won't get Disney's money anymore. It's his choice to do it, it is Disney's choice to draw the consequences.


Disney's decision to boot Pewdiepie makes sense for Disney- they avoid bad PR and protect their 'family freindly' reputation. I'm not saying "they don't have the right to fire him", I'm saying "I wish they didn't fire him, because incidents like this are huge recruiting platforms for bigots.". The rise of 'alt-right' types over recent years is directly related to tone-deaf, heavy-handed incidents like this.

Figure 14: reddit Example 2

[-] **Zander1988** 71 points 1 year ago

We comin for you N...PEWDIEPIE!!

Figure 15: reddit Example 3

**DrMostlySane**  A MIRROR CRACKS WHEREVER I APPEAR 4 points 11 months ago

I thought pewdiepie was a nice guy though and it was his fanbase that was the issue?

Everyone who talks about him tends to say he is nice in person even if his content is meh.

Figure 16: reddit Example 4

[-] **netflix-and-maga** 13 points 11 months ago

Pewdiepie is secretly this generation's Joseph Goebbels. He's great!

Figure 17: reddit Example 5

[-] **CocotheGorilla** 20 points 11 months ago

Jeezes, i dont even like pewdiepie. But now I have to defend him. Thanks shit media. But honestly, now that I know more about him, I've got respect

Figure 18: reddit Example 6

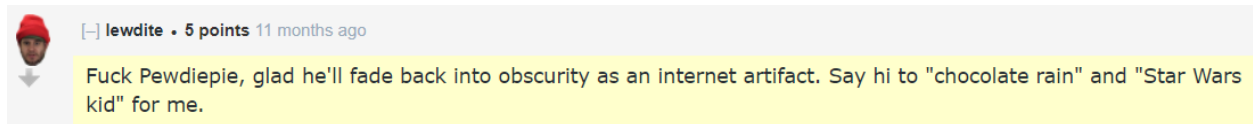


Figure 19: reddit Example 7

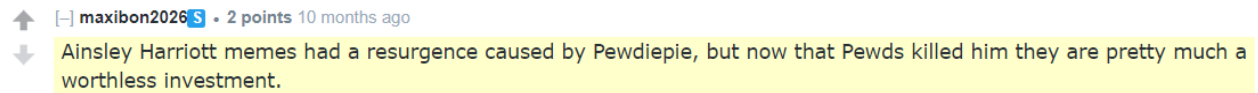


Figure 20: reddit Example 8

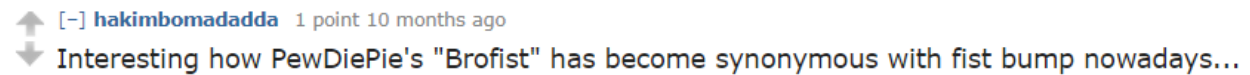


Figure 21: reddit Example 9

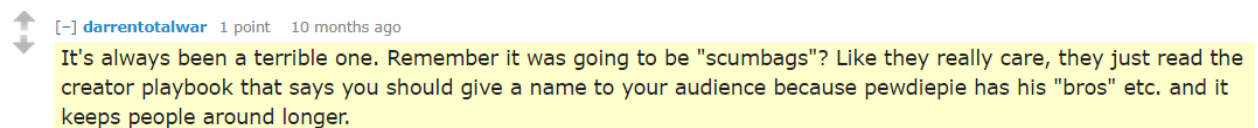


Figure 22: reddit Example 10

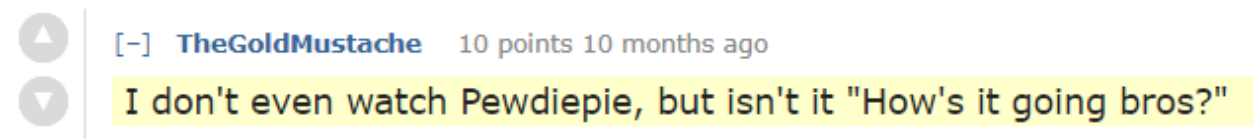
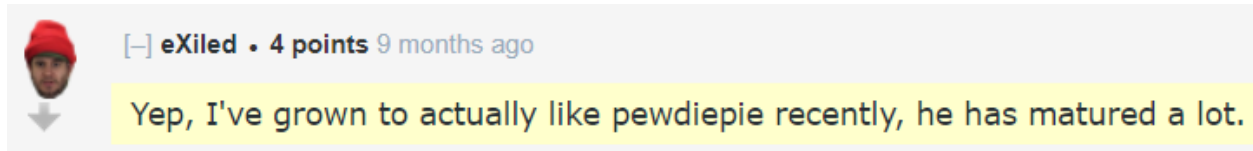
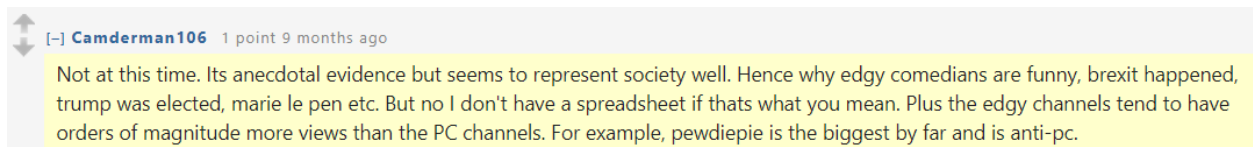


Figure 23: reddit Example 11



*Figure 24: reddit Example 12*



*Figure 25: reddit Example 13*

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As this thesis illustrates, PewDiePie had some unique moments in tertiary orality. From the creation of the memetic language in his videos to the claims of hate speech, he personifies the transition into tertiary orality. The questions are less about whether or not his language in that 11 January 2017 video was hate speech, but rather does (a) his memetic style somehow excuse the events of the video (b) the fact that he paid others to say “death to all Jews” excuse it and (c) this serve as a cover for actual racist or anti-Semitic sentiments from PewDiePie. And the answers to those questions are different for each individual who watches his videos or hears about his language. Some view his hate speech as excusable because of the way he crafts his jokes. Others will argue that he didn’t actually say the words. Then there are those who interpellate that they have the same anti-Semitic views as PewDiePie. The answer wholly depends on who you ask.

The tertiary orality and, most importantly, its distinct characteristics are vital to understand the digital culture that now surrounds us. Language now moves differently than before due to the way that people use digital technologies. As part of tertiary orality, internet memes have become a significant way for internet users to create and negotiate language in cultural units. Where the memes of the past took years to disseminate, internet memes can diffuse among the different groups where they become popular, changing meaning in a fraction of the time. Significant to the way that memes spread and change meaning is the participatory culture born out of the tertiary orality. Memes are a part of participatory culture because of the collective way that consumers breakdown and rebuild memetic meaning. Memes contribute to

the participatory culture because the producer loses control of the meaning of their content. An example is the 'Pepe the Frog' meme, where the alt-right highjacked the original intent of Pepe being in a web comic and made it a symbol for hate speech.

Where internet memes in participatory culture can also become troublesome is the ambivalence of hate speech on the internet. Different memes mean different things to different people because internet memes can transform meaning in a fraction of the time of other forms of communication. Again, the 'Pepe the Frog' meme is the perfect example of this, its meanings range from melancholy to representing of 4chan to a hate symbol of the alt-right. This is also seen in PewDiePie's language, where his 'death to all Jews' hate speech was interpreted in several different ways. People called it out as patently offensive hate speech, defended the comments as taken out of context of the whole video, or celebrated that he used hate speech. His intent is unknown, even despite him calling the comments poorly crafted jokes, attacking the media, and condemning hate towards any type of person. That intent does not matter, because somebody on the internet will interpret his words as hate speech that they believe in and adopt that into their own language, resulting in ambivalence surrounding his words.

## **Chapter Synopses**

In chapter 2, I discussed Walter Ong's orality and creation of language. He noted three stages in the cultural development of communication. Primary orality is when a culture has not been introduced to the written or printed word and communicates entirely by spoken word or sound. Once the written word is introduced, the culture then transitions to the residual orality, where written word has not been fully introduced into society. Once this residue subsides, the culture transitions to the secondary orality, where communications are based around the written

word. I note how the introduction of electronic media in the secondary orality has led to a ‘global village’ as noted by Marshall McLuhan, leading to a more interconnected world. I explain that orality has been disrupted by digital technologies, leading to a digital culture in which PewDiePie thrives. Tertiary orality reconciles the ways that digital culture disrupts communication. As part of tertiary orality, I illustrate how memes and participatory culture function as outcomes of digital culture and, in turn, how PewDiePie uses memetic language for his audience, thus encouraging a memetic linguistic structure around his content. In doing so, he muddles the line between fan and creator in participatory culture. Some of PewDiePie’s recent controversies over hate speech speaks to the ambivalence of the internet, in that it is difficult to pin down how language is spread and the actual intent behind internet speech. This has led to propagators of hate speech to interpellate PewDiePie’s language, further reinforcing the memetic power of his speech.

Chapter 3 analyzed PewDiePie’s memetic language construction in his videos from 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017. For this study, I selected eight videos that exemplified his memetic speech structure, determining that he his speech can be broken into three memetic categories: editorial, verbal, and physical. Within each, I noted the different themes. Editorially, these included overlay of songs, audio/video distortion, voices given to objects and animals, references pulled from other media, and Photoshop. Verbally, PewDiePie uses catchphrases, yelling, a raspy voice, references, and bodily noises. Physically, he uses cardboard cutouts, pets, exaggerated body movements, and facial/attire changes. I then discuss the video containing the speech, breaking down how the categories function in this particular video. I concluded that PewDiePie’s memetic linguistic structure would not have been possible in previous oralities. PewDiePie is also memeing both himself and the digital world around him, where he latches



onto language and makes it a meme. Additionally, his memetic language can only be understood by his audience due to the peculiarities of how his videos have previously employed memetic speech. Finally, I argue that it is hard to understand the intent behind PewDiePie's hate speech because of the ambivalence of such internet language. I question whether or not this intent even matters, as different audiences interpret those words differently.

Building upon the previously established categories, chapter 4 examines how this language is then adopted by audiences. I drew data from Twitter, Tumblr, and reddit because those spaces were the most conducive to inspect the language used by his audience. Using the previous timeline from 1 January 2017 through 30 April 2017 I pulled 1000 tweets from each source. I then read through all the posts, contextualizing the memetic language adoption of each platform. Twitter had higher adoption of verbal language, with some physical and little editorial adoption. Tumblr adopted language across all categories, with physical and editorial adoption standing out. Reddit saw the least adoption among the categories, with verbal being the most adopted. I also examined the hate speech adoption of each platform. While Twitter saw little adoption of hate speech, Tumblr had great debate over the language PewDiePie used. Tumblr users either defended his language as taken out of context or lambasted him for normalizing hate speech. Reddit, however, saw a large adoption of hate speech. This was concentrated on subreddits like r/The\_Donald, where alt-right trolls tend to use hate speech. I determined that PewDiePie's different memetic language structures were more conducive for different platforms. Verbal language is easily translated to text and sent out in tweets. Tumblr is a strong platform for discussion, leading to more fan art and discussion of his physical language. Reddit already stands as a platform the alt-right and hate speech propagators use, so adopting the hate speech of PewDiePie was inevitable as that audience interpellated that this speech was for them. While

many of the other memetic structures dissipate in each social media platform, the only remaining attribute is the hate speech.

## **Findings**

An examination of recent PewDiePie videos and fandom demonstrate how communication has transformed in tertiary orality. To this end, PewDiePie also memes himself and the digital world around him, to the point where only those with knowledge of those memes can understand his language. It is also hard to understand the intent behind PewDiePie's hate speech video because of the ambivalence of internet language. Several types of memes are adopted differently by PewDiePie's audiences as well as on each social media platform. Finally, propagators of hate speech flocked to PewDiePie's language because they interpellated that the language was for them and that they hold the same beliefs as him.

PewDiePie embodies how communication has changed in the age of tertiary orality. The way that PewDiePie packages his language was not possible in past phases of human speech and language. This is particularly prevalent in his editorial memetics category, where he mixes and remixes himself and other media to create entirely new meanings. While the ability to create this type of content has existed for years now, the ability for it to be understood and celebrated did not develop until the rise of digital culture in the tertiary orality. Additionally, PewDiePie memes himself and the digital world around him. His videos are carefully crafted, using distinct aspects of himself and editing ques to create and recreate memes. His cardboard cutouts embody his memeing, as they were originally just set dressing and yet evolved into having their own voices and story lines. This language creation has culminated in the meme that is PewDiePie himself.

Only those with knowledge of the memes that PewDiePie creates can understand the language of his videos. Where consistent consumers of his content will understand exactly why he communicates certain ways, newcomers to his videos will largely not understand all his language. This was certainly present when first watching his videos, as I did not understand several parts of his language until watching a few videos. However, after viewing a few, I started to understand the general way he communicates and how it translates video to video.

Considering PewDiePie's use of hate speech in the famous video, it is hard to understand the intent behind those words due to the ambivalence of such internet language. However, intent does not matter because those who propagate hate speech still flocked to him and celebrated his words. PewDiePie may try to distance himself from the alt-right, but that intent does not matter due to the ambivalence of hate speech on the internet. This is even further muddled because of additional accusations of hate speech after the timeline of this thesis, including other ant-Semitic messages and using the n-word during a livestream. These additional cases further add to the ambivalence of his words, where there is now a pattern of hate speech despite his attempts to distance himself. We will never truly know if he is now leaning into the alt-right accusations or he associated himself with it all along.

PewDiePie's memetic language categories were adopted by his audience at different rates, with the verbal category being adopted most, followed by physical and editorial. Verbal is easily adopted because users simply translated the verbal memes into text and put that in their posts. Physical memes were only adopted if they were used as references. For example, users would refer to the cardboard cutouts or pets that PewDiePie frequently has in his videos. The editorial memetic language was the least adopted because it is harder to communicate effectively

and quickly with edited videos. However, users also did not reference his editorial memes, which is because it is quite simply hard to describe and adopt into text language.

Ongoing, users of different platforms adopted these memes in significantly different ways. Twitter mostly adopted the verbal memetics category, which makes sense because the verbal language is so easily translated to text. Also, the platform itself is much more conducive to short bursts of text. Tumblr adopted more of the other categories with longer, more thought out posts that discussed and commented on PewDiePie. Reddit largely ignored those categories and simply adopted hate speech. This can be linked to how the alt-right uses reddit as a place to troll.

Regarding the hate speech video, internet users who believe in that type of speech interpellated that the speech was for them, thus believing themselves to have the same types of beliefs as PewDiePie. This is why so much of the language was adopted on alt-right subreddits. Propagators of hate speech flocked to PewDiePie after the video because they believed themselves to be like PewDiePie.

## **Future Research**

I want to leave us with areas of exploration that should help contextualize language in this tertiary orality and meme culture's place within it. First, more research in the theory of tertiary orality is necessary to contextualize the changes in communication in the digital age. Research in defining this theory is invaluable in expanding our understanding of not only our current orality, but primary and secondary oralities as well. These studies can help us better understand the past by learning where we are currently at. While there can be no true answer as to when we fully transitioned into a tertiary orality, examination of different media development

will open the cultural understandings of these transitions and why they occur the way they do while giving us insight into culture's next orality.

There is also an apparent lack of consistency with the utilization of tertiary or digital orality, with confusion coming from not just the name but how to use it in the context of the Internet age. With more research should come a better standardization of the term, be it called *tertiary* or *digital* orality. The confusion behind the proper term has caused it to lag in terms of wide acceptance, so arriving at a fully accepted term for this orality can only strengthen its theoretical basis. A way that tertiary orality can be explored is through connecting internet memes and participatory culture to the concept like my thesis did. This is of importance because the spread of memes can be explored compared across the different oralities.

Regarding PewDiePie, there are several other areas of exploration surrounding his content. Since he has been uploading videos since 2010, there's an opportunity to explore how his memetic language structure has changed over time. In that same vain, his videos can also be explored for how hate speech has evolved over time and if this is a longer-term problem with him as a creator. This could help to further our understanding of how his hate speech is spread online and how his audience interpolates his words. Starting in late 2017, PewDiePie has taken his memetic language to a whole new level, where he now explicitly reviews memes on his channel. He also reviews memes that his audience submits to his subreddit on reddit. Both have turned into weekly episodes for his channel. These videos could be examined as to how PewDiePie acts as both a fan and a creator in participatory culture.

Regarding the PewDiePie versus the *Wall Street Journal*/mainstream media controversy, this understanding of oralities can potentially be used as groundwork to explore the disconnects between "new media" and traditional media. Since online video and newspapers were born of

different oralities, this could be part of a fuller explanation as to why there seems to be such a disconnect between the two media. The two were founded upon completely different forms of communication, with the *Wall Street Journal* having to negotiate its new spot in the tertiary orality. This could be explored as a larger aspect of a new residual orality that exists between secondary and tertiary orality. This would assuredly need to be a part of a larger study with more connected dots to tie it all together.

YouTube is also a continued hotbed for examination of memes. However, this is just scratching the surface of potential. Future work regarding the spread of memes in YouTube and YouTube audiences could be a rewarding area of study in learning how the content creators of YouTube influence the language of audiences. Future research should also connect how his language construction is used by his fandom as well as traditional media to explore the connections/disconnections between content source, fandom, and other media. YouTube should also be explored in terms of participatory culture, especially since YouTubers are directly influenced by their fans and interact with them on a much more personal level than other media. There are also indirect ways audiences interact with producers like views and watch time that could be considered in participatory culture.

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