

# INTERNET MEMES AND DIGITAL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by

BRIAN EDWARD MCCLURE

(Under the Direction of Aliko Nicolaidis)

## **Abstract**

Internet memes are rapidly becoming a prominent discursive tool in online conversations, though previously dismissed as merely humorous or trivial contributions. The ease with which memes can be created and adapted provides unprecedented access to public conversations to an increasing number of voices. Recent meme scholarship has demonstrated that memes are being used to engage in digital public discourse about serious social and political issues. Nike's advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick and the phrase, "Believe in something. Even it means sacrificing everything" has become a meme used to participate in public conversations that have little to do with Nike or Kaepernick. This study used critical discourse analysis to examine manifestations of the meme and the discourse facilitated by it.

**INDEX WORDS:** Internet Memes, Digital Public Discourse, Discourse Analysis

INTERNET MEMES AND DIGITAL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by

BRIAN EDWARD MCCLURE

B.A., Western Carolina University, 1996

M.A., Western Carolina University, 2003

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

©2020

Brian Edward McClure

All Rights Reserved

INTERNET MEMES AND DIGITAL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by

BRIAN EDWARD MCCLURE

Major Professor: Aliko Nicolaides

Committee: Donna Alvermann  
Peggy Kreshel

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I must acknowledge God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, without whose grace I would not even be here. I wish to thank Dr. Nicolaides for taking me on as a Padawan, guiding me with patience and encouragement. Thank you to Dr. Alvermann and to Dr. Kreshel for their patience and guidance, as well. Thanks to Dr. Nienhuis, Dr. Fenton, and Putman for helping me begin this journey. Finally, I want to thank my parents, Thomas and Dianne McClure, my first and most influential teachers, without whose love, encouragement, and support, this would not have been possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
The Internet and Public Participation.....	2
Internet Memes.....	4
Purpose and Research Questions.....	15
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	17
What Are Memes.....	20
Non-Political Memes.....	26
Memes and Political Discourse.....	28
Critical Theory.....	32
Media and Discourse.....	38
3 METHODOLOGY.....	42
Critical Theory.....	44
Critical Discourse Analysis.....	51
4 FINDINGS.....	81
5 CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, & IMPLICATIONS.....	100
REFERENCES.....	116
APPENDIX.....	125

## Chapter One

### Introduction

My favorite literary genre is speculative dystopian fiction. I was 12 when I discovered a paperback copy of *Animal Farm*. It was short, and I skimmed a few pages. I was immediately captivated by the talking animals, as I had read and re-read *The Chronicles of Narnia* several times. I knew nothing about ideology and very little about totalitarian forms of control, but I was fascinated with the story of the animals rebelling and making the farm their own. It bothered me in some ways that I could not understand at the time, and in one way that I did. The farm's laws had been painted on a wall of the barn, but most of the animals could not read and were dependent on the ones who could. And when the laws were changed, none of the animals could prove that they had been changed. And then I found similar stories of different worlds, *Brave New World*, *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Harrison Bergeron*. In each of these dystopian societies, the systems of control are different, with different ideologies and different mechanisms of control, but a consistent facet of each involves controlling language and discourse. *Fahrenheit 451* illustrates this most vividly with a world that burns books as a policy, a means of control.

In college, I read Postman (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* in a film as lit course. Postman examined the effects of television on public discourse, contending that the skills necessary for comprehending what one read were not required for comprehending what one watched on television. As television supplanted the written word as the dominant source of information in public discussions, the content of discourse naturally become the content of television. Anyone who watched the news could talk about what

they saw on the news. Soon after, I began reading other authors who explored relationships between media and public discourse.

These two genres, dystopian fiction and media and discourse studies, are the foundation of my research interests. I discovered Critical theory almost ten years ago, through Brookfield (2005) and experienced an immediate resonance. Here were a group of scholars who were studying culture, the arts, media and public discourse, the very things that fascinated me. Among the aspects that fascinated me was the belief that systems of control were deliberately employed to keep conformity and just like in dystopian fiction, these systems of control included control over the flow and discussion of information. That belief is fundamental for me, seminal. In 2013, I began to pay attention to Internet memes as objects of study, as texts to be interpreted, and as contributions to public discourse that were not receiving the attention I thought they should. These are the primary areas that have influenced me, and they wind through this study.

### **The Internet and Public Participation**

The Internet is a reality for the American adult. We bank and shop, share pictures and stories with friends and family, watch sporting events, research issues, and learn about candidates running for public offices. The Internet is, as Raine, et al (2017) describe, “a global ecosystem of social interaction” (para. 1). Anderson, et al (2019) indicate that 90% of American adults, those at least eighteen years old, use the Internet regularly. Gottfried and Shearer (2016) note that more than 60% of American adults use social media sites to become informed about issues and to engage in public discourse.

Writing as the Internet was beginning to demonstrate its potential for increased access and participation, Tannen (1998) indicates that while “ease of posting makes available enormous amounts of useful information, it also makes possible dissemination of useless, false, or

dangerous information—and makes it more difficult to distinguish between the two” (p. 249).

Raine, Anderson, and Albright (2017) raise questions about the future of information and discourse on the Internet, noting that the ease of access, participation, and access to mass audiences and numerous perspectives are conditions that can also be manipulated through propaganda and disinformation. Raine, et al (2017) identify possible solutions to assuage such potential manipulation, including various forms of regulation meant to reduce the availability of fake news. On the surface, this would seem to be a logical course of action, though I argue it must not come at the cost of critical thinking skills.

Disinformation and foreign bots that allegedly swayed the results of the 2016 Presidential election are among the most identified catalysts for popular articles addressing how the Internet and social media sites might affect democracy, and what should be done to limit negative or manipulative influences (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Kruikemeier, et al, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017; de Zuniga, et al, 2017). Smith (2018) indicates that 14% of Americans now believe the Internet has been both a good and bad thing for society, up from only 8% in 2014. Recognizing this potential for both good and bad, however one defines those rather subjective terms, is an emerging theme explored in a growing body of academic literature. Smith, et al (2019) note that developing countries and societies recognize the ability of social media to foster divisiveness, but also its ability to provide previously unattainable access to politics and political engagement. The authors indicate that American adults also recognize that technology such as the internet and social media affects public and political discourse in both positive and negative ways.

De Zuniga, et al (2017) contend that the Internet provides “more opportunities to encounter news and political information than ever before” (p. 104). Kavada (2015) identifies a potential factor for increased participation, that the Internet “is thought to facilitate looser and

more personalized forms of collective action” (p. 883). Halupka (2014) asserts that “the internet provides an unparalleled environment for communication and information distribution [ . . . ] it allows individuals to pursue political issues autonomously, on their own terms” (p. 115). Ross and Rivers (2017) indicate that, “if desired, and armed with a very basic knowledge of the participation tools required, almost any individual with a view or a stance on any issue can participate and have a say where previously they might not have been able to” ( Ross & Rivers, 2017 p. 10).

However, as Jenkins (2014) indicates, “Different viewers see different images as extreme, unique, or interesting” (p. 447). These, then, are two elements the study must address: the ability to access and engage in public conversations of unprecedented size and scope, and the corresponding ability of each participant to interpret and engage with any piece of material in any manner they choose. One type of material that is rapidly becoming a ubiquitous form of communication is the Internet meme. The Internet meme transcends political ideology, social issue, geography and culture, and topic.

### **Internet Memes**

Internet memes are an increasingly popular form of communication on the Internet, and as they such are receiving increasing academic attention. The accessibility of memes makes them popular and convenient choices to engage in public discourse. Diaz (2014) suggests that the internet meme “is not a static concept” (p. 102), but there are identifiable qualities, nonetheless. Increasing research into memes has provided vocabulary and terminology that identify and define attributes, characteristics, and facets of memes. Shifman (2014), refers to Dawkins (1976) as the originator of the term “meme” (as does virtually all meme literature), short for mimesis, rhyming with “gene, and generally referring to pieces of cultural information that pass along

from person to person, [that] gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon” (p. 18).

Lamphere (2018) indicates that “At first impression, internet memes are mindless entertainment [though] they are complex cultural objects [. . .] and carry great cultural significance” (p. 29).

Benaim (2018) also describes memes as superficially stupid yet rich with “symbolic values” (p. 902). Scardina (2017) contends that a “well-crafted meme captures so many layers of meaning” (p. 14).

Memes constitute complex discursive texts on the Internet, where people become deliberately or inadvertently informed about news and current events, and subsequently engage in public discussion on those issues. Shifman & Thelwall (2009) indicate that “the Internet, probably more than any previous medium, is suitable for large-scale meme distribution” (p. 2568). Internet memes are easy to create and share. People who want to do so need only to access the Internet, as there are abundant sites—Memegenerator.net, makeameme.org, memebetter.com, and imgflip.com, for example—that simplify and streamline the process. As Vickery (2014) notes, “the tools and literacies necessary to create a macro-image meme are minimal; websites such as QuickMeme facilitate participation without acquiring technical or design skills” (p. 313). Once created and circulated, memes surface on Facebook, 4chan, Twitter, Knowyourmeme, and even through Google, available to anyone who searches.

### **Internet Memes and Public Politics**

Memes are a popular and accessible way for people to add their voices to conversations of all types, including political conversations. Anderson & Sheeler (2014) describe how politicians have far less control over their images than they did before the Internet, as the platform makes it far more difficult to control the message, as it were. Ross & Rivers (2017) examine how internet memes were used to both legitimize delegitimize the 2016 presidential

candidates. Piata (2016) highlights the success of “memes that parody or mimic political ads of election campaigns” (p. 40).

However, Bimber (2014) and Howley (2016) have each examined instances of President Obama’s use of social media and internet memes, both during campaigning and governing, as exemplary practices. Bolter (2019) examines President Trump’s use of Twitter, along with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as someone who “understands how to use the platform to mobilize her 4 million followers in the moment [. . . she] even gave a tutorial for fellow Democrats on the use of Twitter to connect with constituents” (para. 20). Kruikemeier, et al (2016) consider how potential voters responded to politicians’ messages, during campaigning and governing.

Martinez-Rolan & Pinero-Otero (2016) describe the “capacity of memes to synthesize an idea, situation, or expression” (p. 146), and indicate that the “internet has a large democratic potential due to the low cost” (p. 145) of participation. Internet memes are easy to create and to share on social media sites. The reach of those sites has expanded based partially on the growing public demand for (or at least interaction with) memes (Wang & Wang, 2015). At its worst, a meme is an oversimplification of something complex. But, as Zittrain (2014) describes, “the meme at its best exposes some truth” (p. 389) and is “serious and playful at the same time” (p. 392), introducing a key element of memes, humor. In fact, the most common description of how a meme works is as a joke, being altered slightly by each teller.

### **Natural or Forced?**

*Knowyourmeme.com*, an online meme repository and reference site, highlights a difference between natural or “grassroots” memes, which emerge more organically, and “forced” memes or “astroturf”, which are part of more deliberately constructed and distributed marketing

plans. Mielczarek (2018), for example, examines the “Pepper Spray Cop” meme, with the image of Officer Christopher Pike tear-gassing protestors on the UC Berkeley campus as the central image or theme that spread over social media. This is an example of a more organic, grassroots meme that emerged as wide-spread public commentary on a particular event. Two examples of the Pepper Spray Cop are illustrated in Figure 1.1. The first is a picture of the catalyst event, and the second is an adaptation in which Pike is pepper spraying the signing of the Constitution. Both examples communicate without language.



Figure 1.1 Pepper Spray Cop Examples

In contrast, Davis, Glantz, & Novak (2016) examine a forced, constructed marketing campaign sponsored by Shell. The public was invited to create memes based on Shell’s “Let’s Go!” slogan, which was intended to garner support for their Arctic drilling program. Greenpeace capitalized on this invitation by encouraging supporters to submit counter-memes, memes that

challenged or delegitimized the desired Shell narrative. Davis, et al indicate that many examples used language that made it difficult to determine if they were authentic from Shell or not. Both the narrative and counter-narrative are forced, as Shell’s manufactured “Let’s Go!” slogan is the focal point. Figure 1.2 offers two examples. The first is part of Shell’s original ad campaign, and the second mocks Shell for not recognizing that their ad campaign had been hijacked or appropriated.

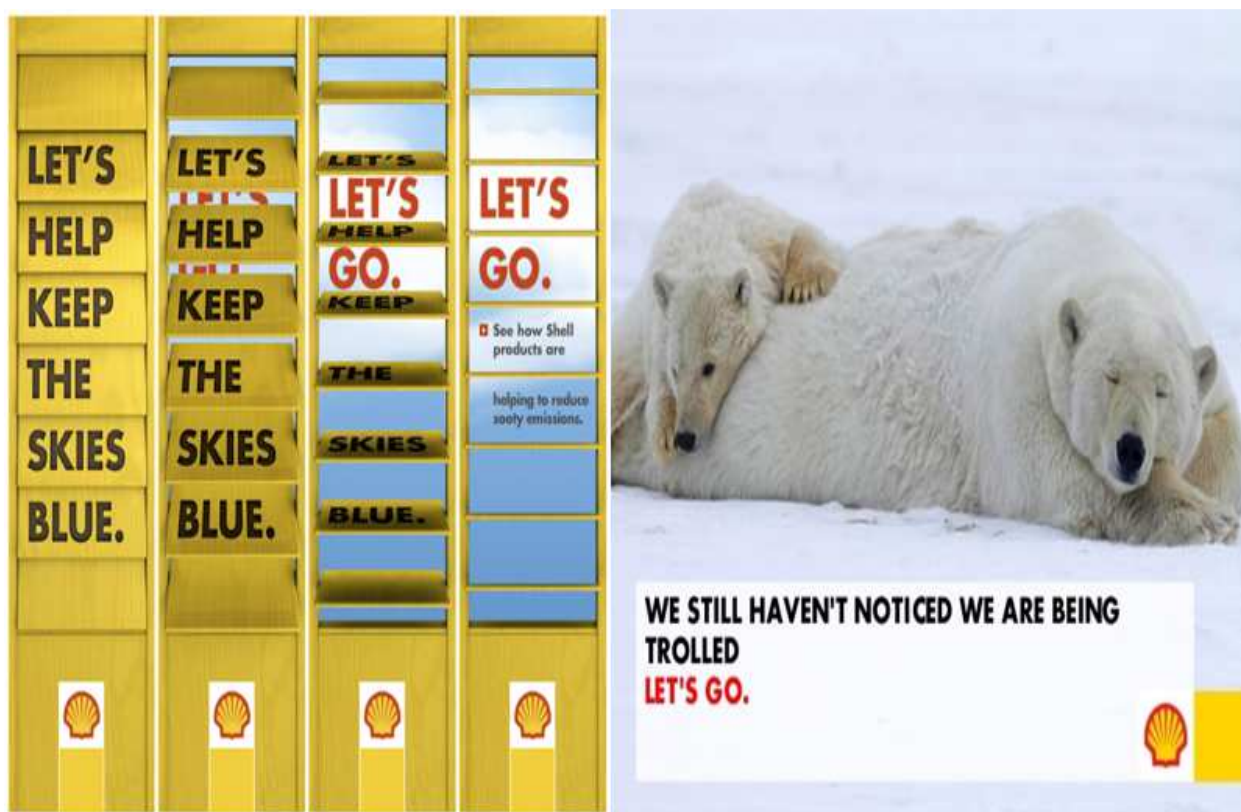


Figure 1.2 Shell’s Ad and Appropriated Example

Scardina (2013) suggests that the “meme occupies prime real estate at the intersection of pedagogy and popular culture. The meme is a beautiful tool to explain a concept and for students to express their knowledge on a topic and flex their critical-thinking skills” (p. 13). Wells (2018) describes using memes for in-class critical-thinking exercises. Memes provide “different types of

information statements [and] often focus on current events”, which is important because they “can catch the attention of a reader in a way that an article cannot” (p. 241). Learning how to distinguish between forced and natural memes can be an important pedagogic tool to further critical thinking and foster media literacy. It is important in this study concerning how the discourse can be influenced. Typically, as Nooney & Portwood-Stacer (2014) indicate: “in meme culture, flow takes primacy over origin, as the creator of an object and even the conditions in which it was made often remain unknown to the legions of users who remix it and pass it on” (p. 249). Yet, users who remix these items do so according to formal criteria. Those criteria comprise templates, or macros. Remixing occurs within the frame of the macro.

### **Image Macros**

Image macros are a commonly recognized type of meme (Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013, 2014; Vickery, 2015). Davison (2012) provides a succinct definition: “An image macro is a set of stylistic rules for adding texts to images. Some image macros involve adding text to various images, and others involve adding different text to a common image” (p. 127). Two popular image macros are the What if I told you Morpheus and the One does not simply Boromir. Both involve adding different text to the same image and refer to specific characters and lines from *The Matrix* and *Fellowship of the Ring*. These are also indicative of memes as vehicles of popular culture such as film and television (O.Meara, 2018). Figure 1.3 provides an example of each type, found in a Google search.

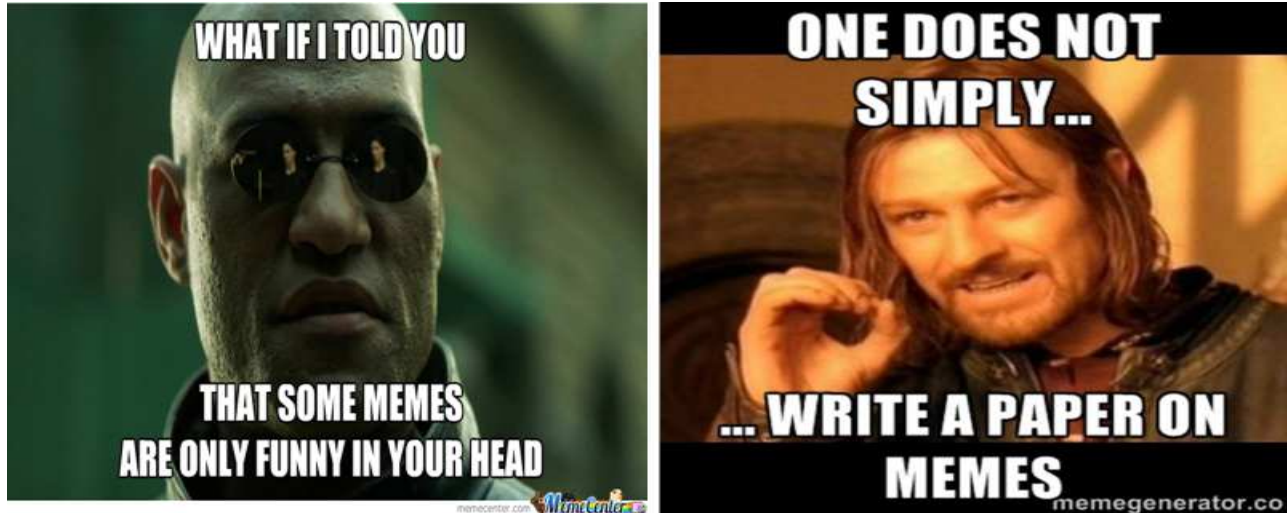


Figure 1.3 Morpheus and Boromir Image Macros

In the case of Shell, the “Let’s Go!” macro features that text paired with arctic landscapes or wildlife scenes and additional ironic text. Vickery (2015) notes that the image macro is a form “which serves to simultaneously enable and constrain appropriations” (p. 312), meaning the form is both open and restricted. Nissenbaum & Shifman (2017) concur, suggesting that “meme creation is based on inherent [and] intrinsic structural dualities” (p. 493). For an example to be recognized as belonging to a particular macro, it must adhere to the limits of the template. It can also demonstrate creativity within that frame.

Regardless of Greenpeace’s intent, every successive “Let’s Go!” iteration refers to Shell, whether they support the sentiment or narrative, or not. Could a company such as Shell capitalize on a natural catalyst such as the Pepper Spray Cop? The short answer is, “Yes, they absolutely could.”

### **Enter Kaepernick**

Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013) identify timely controversy as being a characteristic of material that spreads successfully on social media. The Pepper Spray Cop and Occupy Wall Street are examples of events that spawned countless memes. Bayerl & Stoyanov (2016), for

example, examine “the role memes play in framing public discourse about police injustice and the factors that make memes successful in this process” (p. 1007) through various iterations of the Pepper Spray Cop meme.

In August of 2016, Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem before his NFL games. In the press conference after his initial refusal, Kaepernick explained the reasons behind his actions:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2016, para 4)

As Shifman (2014) has noted, the ease with which memes can be created and shared allows for many voices to enter political discussions in online environments, within moments following a catalyst event such as Kaepernick kneeling. The initial iteration of this study focused on memes that addressed Kaepernick’s actions and reasons. Hundreds of grassroots memes emerged and spread organically following Kaepernick’s actions, representing a wide variety of perspectives, positions, and voices contributing to the discourse. Nike’s involvement altered the direction of the study.

### **Enter Nike**

On September 3, 2018, Nike revealed Colin Kaepernick as the face of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their “Just Do It” marketing campaign in an advertisement. A close-up of Kaepernick’s face, with the slogan: “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” appeared on billboards and online. On September 5, Donald Trump, Jr. posted a picture of his father’s face, President Trump, with the same slogan. He added, on his Twitter

post, “Fixed it for you.” In the sense that the meme originated with Nike, it is forced. However, Nike did not exactly suggest that people spread remixes of the ad. Nor did they complain when people inevitably did.

The Believe in Something meme macro is composed, most simply, of a picture of a person with some recognizable variation of the phrase, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.” Milner (2016) describes these components as memetic image and memetic text. These are the identifiable elements of the meme that can be tracked. In this way, the body of memes that has emerged since 9/3/18, that incorporate the “picture/believe in something” form is separate and distinct a) from the body of Kaepernick memes existing previous to 9/3, and b) from Kaepernick memes that reference his kneeling during the anthem without using the “picture/believe in something” form. The body of examples this study will use is comprised *only* of those that follow the Believe in Something macro. Just as examples of Shell’s “Let’s Go!” meme macro refer back to Shell regardless of who uses it, examples using Nike’s Believe-in-Something meme macro refer back to Nike regardless of who uses it and why. As Diaz (2014) notes in his definition, memes can be constructed as part of a marketing campaign or can originate organically from the public. Figure 1.4 presents Nike’s original ad and the first reproduction, with Donald Trump.



Figure 1.4 Kaepernick and Trump

### Manipulation Through Meme

If something becomes a meme, it contains something that resonates with large numbers of people (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016). A forced meme macro, such as those from Shell or Nike, is typically used for marketing. As such, they have had behind them a significant budget for research and development, creation, and initial distribution not typically found in natural memes. While abundant resources are not necessarily guarantors of success, they would seem to provide an advantage.

Nike used billboards, magazine ads, and social media to inundate the populace with a single message, “Believe in something. Even if it costs you everything. Just Do It.” What of

governments that possess the resources to create and disseminate memetic material over multiple platforms, as Nike did? The U.S. government, for example, disseminated Rosie the Riveter during WWII, with the phrase, “We can do it.” Had our digital tools been available then, Rosie could have become a meme in her own time. Knowyourmeme.com says she is one, now. Successful memes make connections to individuals, become part of popular culture (Scardina, 2017), folklore (Savirimuthu, 2005; McNeill, 2017), and contribute to discourse (Peck, 2017). Rosie the Riveter exists in each of those areas, as well as meme and as government propaganda. Figure 1.5 presents two examples of Rosie. The first is the original and the second is an updated version, adapted to Covid-19.



Figure 1.5 Rosie the Riveter then and now

### **Current Scholarship**

There is a growing body of meme scholarship. These studies have been conducted with the understanding that social media and memes as forms of public political discourse do not

appear to be going away. Quite the contrary, the use of memes in digital discourse is increasing, providing different facets for study. Wells (2018) for example, indicates that “Internet memes shared on social media do not include written explanations of the content of the memes and the limited space for explanation in Internet meme captions can often oversimplify political arguments” (p. 243). Studies have addressed social media, fake news, and manipulation (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Raine, Anderson, & Albright, 2017; Anderson, Toor, Raine, & Smith, 2018; Bolter, 2019). Kreiss & McGregor (2017) examined the roles tech corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter are performing in political campaigns, including teaching how to best use their platforms to reach voters.

Discourse analyses have examined the roles of memes in the legitimization and delegitimization of political candidates, legislators, and corporations (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014; Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2016; Ross & Rivers, 2017). Critical discourse analysis has been used to ask questions of power and influence by examining memes that are ostensibly only humorous responses to current social issues. In fact, memes are shown to be embedded with ideology and to reflect ideology in the positions they take (Bimber, 2014; Bratich, 2014; Yoon 2016; Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016; Glaveanu, et al, 2018).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study adds a component thus far missing in the literature. It examines the discourse facilitated by the resulting body of examples inspired by the form of Nike’s original advertisement. That advertisement is the meme macro to which all the examples in the data set conform. Shell created a meme and invited response. Respondents adapted Shell’s meme to use exclusively as a critique of Shell’s practices. That is, the meme was not used in broader, non-Shell conversations. While Nike’s original advertisement focused attention on a divisive social

and political issue, the form of the advertisement became a meme macro which was subsequently modified by users to participate in many different conversations. Most of these conversations have nothing to do with Nike, Kaepernick, or social justice issues. Discourse conducted through the Believe in Something meme is discourse conducted through advertisement. Participants are using the language of advertising to participate in political discourse. The differences between the purposes and goals of advertising and politics, and the languages they use to reach these goals, create competing commitments. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the discourse the Believe in Something meme facilitates, and to ask the following questions:

*Research Question:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse?

*RQ 1A:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse?

*RQ 1B:* Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

### **Conclusion**

Internet memes are a burgeoning field of study with a “the yawning gap between popular and academic uses of memes [which] may serve as a fertile site for an improved meme theory” (Shifman, 2013, p. 364). Ross & Rivers (2017) contend that “in an increasingly virtual interconnected society, it is important to understand the differing ways that technology, the Internet and social media provide citizens, and non-citizens, greater means with which to engage in political participation” (p. 10). And Marwick (2013) asserts that “memes are the closest thing to a native cultural form the Internet has, and, as such, they demonstrate the sprawling variety of the medium” (p. 13). Nike’s ad featuring Colin Kaepernick intersected with sports, marketing, and political and social issues. When the ad become a meme that contributed to public

conversations, it provided an instance in which the language of public discourse was also the language of advertising. This study fills a gap in the literature by examining it as such. In the following chapter, literature comprising the current field of meme scholarship is identified and discussed.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This study examines the digital public discourse conducted through Internet memes, specifically through the Believe in Something meme based on Nike's advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

*Research Question:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse?

*RQ 1A:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse?

*RQ 1B:* Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

The conceptual framework for this study is composed of four primary areas of scholarship with corresponding bodies of literature. First, there is literature *about* memes, what they are and how they communicate. It is from that literature that we derive definitions and terminology about memes and about how to study them as empirical pieces of data. We then turn to literature that considers how memes have been used in different conversations. Memes have value to participants in both political and non-political discussions. I do not distinguish here between political and popular, as memes are a popular discursive form. Some examples contribute to political discussions and some to non-political discussions. There are studies of both types that provide insight into how memes have contributed to public discourse, many of them employing some form of critical discourse analysis, which this study does as well.

The general purposes and motivations of the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School serve as a guide for critical theory in this study, particularly their emphasis on examining different relationships between media and discourse and culture. Of these scholars, Herbert Marcuse examined relationships of technology, language, discourse, and democracy, relationships which spawned Marcuse's concepts of one-dimensional society (1964) and repressive tolerance (1965). One-dimensional describes a society that appears to be openly democratic, yet effectively resists and refutes challenges to the established order. One mechanism that reinforces the status quo in such a society is repressive tolerance, comprised of practices that encourage both a plurality of voices and the lenses through which those voices are to be properly interpreted. To put it another way, limited narrow perspectives are broadly applied to interpret an abundance of information, and influence what is understood and what can be done.

To identify elements of one-dimensional thought and repressive tolerance in public discourse, we must examine public discourse. This is not simply a matter of examining the content of public discourse, but also considering where the content originates, content being composed of language, images, tone, attitude, and perspectives. For this reason, we turn to media and communications scholars for analyses and critiques of relationships between communications technology, public discourse, and practices of democracy. This body of literature is foundational for my research agenda in general and for this study in particular. Boorstin (1961), Postman (1985), Tannen (1998), Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), and Rushkoff (2013) unpack how media technologies influence public discourse, what that discourse looks and sounds like, and ways it empowers participants as well as constrains them. Public discourse as examined and illustrated by the above authors has come to closely resemble the type of discourse

Marcuse warned was indicative of a manipulated democracy. Memes are communicative tools used in a wide variety of conversations on the Internet, and we can examine the discourses to which they contribute. First, we need to identify and define what will be examined, Internet memes.

### **What are Memes?**

Shifman (2013, 2014), one of the predominant authors in the field of meme studies, identifies challenges, suggests possible remedies, and explores ways of approaching and studying memes. Shifman (2014), identifies the “core problem about the exact meaning of the term—the jury is still out on what is meant by ‘meme’”(p. 7). As Shifman (2014) indicates, “only a handful of studies have actually examined the practices and politics involved in the creation and diffusion of Internet memes” (p. 7). Wang and Wang (2015) contend that, as “the primary medium of social connection between participants, online memes function as a medium for cultural production and consumption, as they produce cultural value” (p. 266). Wiggins & Bowers (2014) note that “social networks distribute Internet memes without cessation every moment of every day” (p. 1890). What are memes? I will introduce and examine the most relevant of these in the following section to illustrate what we know about memes, and to identify the definitions and terms that will determine what this study means by “meme”.

### **Definitions of Memes**

Shifman explores the origin of the term “meme,” coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) referring to gene propagation in biology. The term has evolved beyond that science, however, and Shifman (2013) suggests, “we should look at memes from a communication-oriented perspective” (p. 363), which does not necessitate always trying to express a scholarly language about Internet memes in biological terms.

Diaz (2013) provides a definition of the concept of a meme that combines the most relevant elements from various fields of meme scholarship, biology, art, and communications.

Diaz's definition is by far the most comprehensive:

An internet meme is a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve. The mutation on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice versa. The mutation occurs by chance, addition or parody, and its form is not relevant. An IM depends both on a carrier and a social context where the transporter acts as a filter and decides what can be passed on. It spreads horizontally as a virus at a fast and accelerating speed. It can be interactive (as a game), and some people relate them with creativity. Its mobility, storage, and reach are web-based (Hard disks, cell phones, servers, cloud, etc.). They can be manufactured (as in the case of the viral marketing) or emerge (as an offline event taken online). Its goal is to be known well enough to replicate within a group. (p. 97)

The very thoroughness of Diaz's (2013) definition also illustrates challenges in defining a meme as a unit for empirical study. Milner (2013a) addresses this, indicating that memes are frequently "multilayered intertextual snippets of fuller texts. It is precisely this symbolic complexity that makes them such fascinating cultural texts and performances ripe for subversive play. But their complexity is also what makes them difficult to analyze" (p. 4002). Jenkins (2014) suggests that "because they [memes] often emerge in numerous places simultaneously and frequently spread like wildfire, memes pose fundamental methodological challenges" (p. 446). "Memes," as Shifman (2013) describes, "are a pain" (p. 362).

Other scholars working with memes have shortened and adapted the definition to make it more concise, while retaining aspects identified in Diaz. Patel (2013) for example, describes a meme as “a picture with juxtaposed text, which develops over time through derivative authors who slightly (or largely) mutate the original meme, usually by retaining the image and general theme while altering the specific language” (p. 237). Dynel (2016) indicates the term “applies to any artifact (a film, spoof, rumor, picture, song, etc.) that appears on the Internet and produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused by countless participants in technologically mediated communication” (p. 662). Most simply, Davison (2012) suggests that “an Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (p. 122). De la Rosa-Carrillo (2015) describes “Internet Memes as a message-delivering artifact that carries opinions and emotions” (p. 22). Wiggins and Bowers (2014) argue “that Internet memes are messages transmitted by consumers–producers for discursive purposes” (p. 1892). Lamphere (2018) suggests that “Internet memes, as humorous, amusing, and harmless as they appear, are packed with implications about our modern world. Memes are shared and created to easily articulate and communicate complex emotions to others in a digitally saturated world” (p. 32). Dynel (2016) contends “that the Internet meme has emancipated itself as an independent creativity-based species, now omnipresent in online reality” (p. 661). And Lamphere (2018) suggests that “memes also are changing the way we relate and communicate with each other and increasing the influence of social media on our lives” (p. 29).

What the literature thus far indicates is that memes are popular tools for digital communication on the Internet. They are small units of culture easy to create and share. They provide increased ability for participants who might not ordinarily have a voice in public discussions to express themselves. And memes allow people to contribute to conversations as

catalyst events occur. Memes are primarily understood as being humorous and have frequently been dismissed as being only trivial. Because of their ease of use and growing ubiquity, memes are being used to contribute seriously to both political and non-political conversations.

Most of the definitions above refer to memes as individual units. Shifman (2014) suggests the need to move beyond this understanding of meme, and provides the definition of meme that will be used for this study: “(a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*” (Italics in original) (pp. 7-8). As Shifman (2014) indicates, “This definition is helpful for analyzing Internet memes as socially constructed public discourses in which different metric variants represent diverse voices and perspectives” (p. 8). Analyzing memes as such discourses is one of the purposes of this study.

Shifman (2014) identifies one of the problems with narrowing down meme terminology: different scholars use different terms to describe the same things. Davison (2012) for example, uses the terms ideal, behavior, and manifestation to describe recognizable elements of memes, where Shifman uses content, form, and stance. Broadly, according to Shifman (2014), form is “the physical incarnation of the message” (p. 40), and includes what kind of meme it is, such as a Photoshop or video. Davison (2012) uses manifestation in a similar way, describing it as “the observable, external phenomena [. . .] the records of its existence” (p. 123). Shifman (2014) defines content as “both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by” the meme (p. 40). Whereas Davison (2012) suggests, “The ideal of a meme is the concept or idea conveyed” (p. 123). Stance (Shifman) refers to possible receptive stances regarding the form and the content of a meme. There is little overlap between stance and Davison’s (2012) third term, behavior, defined as

“action taken by an individual in service of the meme” (p. 123). According to Davison (2012), “the ideal dictates the behavior, which in turn creates the manifestation” (p. 123). This study will use form to refer to the form of the Believe in Something macro, and manifestation to refer to the individual iterations of the form.

### **Non-Political Memes**

Not all memes are political, as defined by Shifman (2014). Most are used to contribute to non-political conversations. Dynel (2016) defines image macros as “a salient Internet meme category divisible into a number of subtypes” and notes that “one picture (a template) may give rise to thousands of independent humorous units” (p. 661), Dynel’s study examines Animal Advice memes as a popular form of macro, focusing on their capacity as vehicles for humor. Each has its own set of stylistic rules, which Dynel analyzes through an “incongruity–resolution framework” in which “the receiver of humor first recognizes incongruity and then resolves it in the light of [. . .] an adequate cognitive rule that renders the incongruous element congruent with the remainder of the text” (p. 672).

Similarly, Silvestri (2018) describes that recipients “must be sympathetic to the broader argument. In this way, audience members become cocreators [and have] a shared investment in the critique of the original text” (p. 4002). Katz and Shifman (2017) indicate that “some memes that may seem to outsiders as lacking referential meaning will actually have one in personal encounters. This kind of meaning may relate to individual histories or to the shared worlds of meaning built by small communities” (p. 838). As Gal, et al (2016) indicate, “memes [. . .] are closely related to the process of norm formation. The memetic practice is not merely an expression of existing social cultural norms, it is also a social tool for negotiating them” (p. 1700).

Milner (2013b) examines discourses of racism and sexism on the meme-sharing sites of Reddit and 4chan. Milner analyzes a broad range of different meme macros, selections which specifically communicated some commentary on race or gender and examines them using critical discourse analysis with the uncensored discussions that take place about them on sites like 4chan. As Milner (2013b) notes, “Critical discourse analysis is sensitive to the subtle and powerful relations between communication created [. . .] and ideology reinforced. Exclusionary, dominant ideologies discursively undermine broad cultural participation” (p. 69). Like Milner, Yoon (2016) performs a critical discourse analysis, though following Fairclough rather than Wodak and Meyer, as Milner does. Yoon’s data set is comprised of examples primarily from the “That’s Racist” macro, typically shared as jokes, though blatantly racist even with cursory readings.

Vickery (2014) examines an Advice Animal macro through the lens of Foucault’s works on the importance of confession. Vickery notes that, despite the original intent of the meme to be merely humorous, users appropriated the macro to anonymously share “confessions that were not intended to be interpreted humorously, but rather expressed anxieties or drew attention to social and/or personal injustices” (p. 307). This is typical of memes in general, that regardless of original intent, memes can be appropriated for any purpose, which becomes particularly evident when memes are used for political discourse or commentary, or for argument.

### **Memes as Tools of Rhetoric and Argument**

Some studies have examined memes as types of communicative forms. McNeill (2017), for example, examines memes as a form of modern folklore, noting that “as it moves through a population, folklore changes each time its shared — sometimes slightly, sometimes greatly — making it a widely available, culturally salient platform for communication” (p. 18). McNeill

also indicates the need to recognize that memes, like folklore, have value for study in the present, though this is frequently overlooked or trivialized.

Hahner (2013) examines “The Riot Kiss” as a form of visual argument. The original picture was taken during the riots in Vancouver, British Columbia, following the loss of the Vancouver Canucks in the Stanley Cup, and features a couple lying down and kissing in the middle of the street, with riot police advancing behind them. Hahner approaches the body of examples “as forms of visual argument by extending the concept of argument frames” (p. 153). Similarly, Jenkins (2014) approaches memes as a type of visual rhetoric, and examines the “Fail/Win” meme, “one of the first and most widespread Internet memes” (p. 442). Jenkins addresses these challenges by focusing on the Fail/Win meme as a mode, an “emergent phenomenon” as “bodies in relational assemblages, in engagement with one another” in a Deleuze-inspired framework based on the rhizome (p. 448). The study examines how an image macro visually conveys fragments of arguments, which they do exceptionally well. Jenkins concludes that, “in today’s media environment, many different modes of visual perception circulate; [. . . which] means rhetorical scholars cannot afford to ignore such visual practices” (p. 462).

Peck (2014) refers to Photoshopping as the practice of modifying and redistributing images online. I include this practice as part of meme culture and practice. Peck’s argument is that this practice is worthy of “scholarly attention because of the ways it facilitates vernacular discourse and critique” (p. 1640). Peck (2014) contends that “developing an understanding of photoshopping as a vernacular discursive practice is essential to understanding an increasingly prevalent mode of expression in the digital age” (p. 1641).

Grundlingh (2018) analyzes a variety of image macro memes and Photoshopped responses through a lens of semiotics, indicating that “certain memes (specifically image macros) are essentially speech acts and are also understood as being speech acts by internet users” (p. 148). Grundlingh (2018) notes that “although all meme types could potentially be interpreted as speech acts, it is true that some types are easier to interpret than others and are also used with more frequency” (p. 154).

Silvestri (2018) contends that “memes reflect an attempt to manage the present. [. . . and] help audiences digest and gain critical distance from unfolding events, often providing an affective comic blanket for those still suffering in the present” (p. 3998). Silvestri examines the “Never Forget” meme and “Mission Accomplished” meme through case study. These two memes emphasize the text over the picture or image used, as does the Believe in Something meme. Silvestri also employs rhetorical criticism, which “focuses on the possibility of meaning rather than its certainty [. . .] with the ideological potential of a text” (p. 4003). This approach results in asking questions such as, “How emancipatory or hegemonic is the text?” and “What societal debates and representation are being played out?” (p. 4003). While each meme originated from actual events, neither was an official production as might be expected from a political campaign. Yet each represented or communicated an expression resonant with the spirit of intense political moments.

As Silvestri suggests, “these inquiries suggest rich opportunities for future meme research” (p. 4011). Similarly, Grundlingh (2018) relates, “this article only examined image macros and reaction shots. Research into other meme types and their possible functions as speech acts could add valuable insights” (p. 165). Memes have been examined as speech acts through semiotics, as pieces of rhetoric and argument, as folklore, as vernacular discourse, and as

tools to help people make sense of current events. These examples indicate that memes are being recognized as legitimate contributions to digital public discourse.

### **Memes and Political Discourse**

Memes are sometimes deliberately and intentionally used to contribute to political discourse. Shifman (2014) describes political memes as comprising three activities, frequently all three at once, persuasion and advocacy, grassroots action, and modes of expression and public discussion. Elements of these can be seen in the following examples. Milner (2013a) contends that “image memes are a populist means to express public perspectives even when those perspectives are diverse” (p. 2360). Howley (2016) “situates memes at the intersection of popular culture and geopolitics in digital space” (p. 156). As Martinez-Rolan and Pinero-Otero (2016) describe, “the capacity of memes to synthesize an idea, situation or expression has resulted in their widespread use in the political context. Memes can condense a complex political fact in a brief, powerful and effective container that engages people” (p. 146). Dynel (2016) suggests that “it is via memes that Internet users respond to current sociopolitical events, some of which might not have been widely recognized otherwise” (p. 662). Rushkoff (2013) identifies a condition that arises as a result of such widespread adoption, namely that “everyone’s opinion may as well matter as much as everyone else’s, resulting in a population who believes its uninformed opinions are as valid as those of experts who have actually studied a particular problem” (p. 51). Memes do not restrict access to discourse based on lack of either technical or content knowledge. The Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, demonstrates the increased participation and access memes provide, as well as the nature of memes to be adapted to virtually any topic.

## **Occupy Wall Street**

One of the most prominent sociopolitical events to utilize memes was the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, which began on September 17, 2011, when protestors “occupied” New York City’s financial district. The physical movement spawned mass online activity as well. Kavada (2015), for example, identifies the Occupy movement as the emergence of a collective voice on social media. Bratich (2014) notes that *Knowyourmeme* “listed Occupy Wall Street as one of its top memes of 2011” (p. 64). Milner (2013a), for example, presents the “I am the 99%” meme template that OWS supplied for participation, and contends that “members of the mediated public participated in nuanced commentary and conversation by drawing on a broad range of sources” (p. 2388). Bratich (2014) examines how the movement became associated with memetic phrases and images that circulated on the internet. His model is based on Deleuze and Guattari, and the rhizome. He describes OWS as “one of these moments of accumulation, a convergence of practices and mechanisms” (p. 67). Bratich (2014) also identifies a common theme of memes and political discourse, the pejorative practice of devaluing a movement by referring to it as a meme, “trivial, innocuous amusement,” but also contends that “the innocuous hides things” (p. 65). OWS flourished for a time because the movement resonated with people, encouraged digital participation, and provided the tools for communication—memes. As indicated, the tools are a double-edged sword in that they can be adopted to support or oppose movements or, as seen in the following section, political candidates.

## **Memes and Politicians**

Martinez-Rolan & Pinero-Otero (2016) suggest “the communicative value of memes has not only been paramount for social movements; it has also led political parties, leaders and institutions to integrate them in their strategies” (p. 147). Anderson and Sheeler (2014) argue that

“in the Internet age, a politician’s image also can be shaped by non-elite discourses on sites such as Twitter and Tumblr. Politicians of all genders attempt to capitalize on favorable memes and resist unfavorable ones” (p. 225). The authors describe this process as meta-memeing, when politicians deliberately attempt to adapt a popular meme to construct positive images about themselves. Anderson & Sheeler (2014) examine this process with the “Texts from Hillary” meme that the Clinton campaign began using as a large image macro to disseminate positive messages about the candidate. Lamphere (2018) notes that “Texts from Hillary was one of the highly reblogged and shared memes of the year in 2012. [. . .] It went viral and she [and] former President Bill Clinton, staged several gag photos referencing the meme” (p. 31).

While Clinton’s campaign adopted and used the meme to convey images of Clinton as a strong leader, opponents seized upon the meme to do the opposite, mocking and denigrating the candidate with the same form used to support her.

Anderson & Sheeler (2014) assert that more politicians and groups are adopting strategies to reach people via the Internet and on social media sites for two reasons. These are that “social media allow politicians to engage their audience directly outside of the framing of news and entertainment media, but supporters can then drive the message through sharing, retweeting, and otherwise disseminating relevant text, images, or hyperlinks” (p. 228). Milner (2013a) describes the counter-balance of such access, however, indicating that “By utilizing hashtags on Twitter, subreddits on reddit, tumblogs on Tumblr, and videos on YouTube, OWS spread its message, made its claims, and mobilized its support. However, so did those critical of the movement” (p. 2359). The very tools that can spread positive messages can also be appropriated to delegitimize candidates’ images.

Ross and Rivers (2017) employ van Leeuwen's (1997) conduct a critical discourse analysis that examines patterns of de-legitimation in memetic discourse about candidates Trump and Clinton in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Specifically, the body of memes used as data focuses on Trump's Wall and Hillary's Emails. While there were examples that expressed support for one or the other, there were significantly more that made one or the other appear foolish. Ross & Rivers (2017) highlight examples "created as part of a participatory digital culture where there is an assumption that they are intended to function as a discursive form of delegitimization" (p. 4). Brkich and Barko (2013) examine how the use of a popular meme form used to mock its recipients was employed during the 2012 presidential election and was applied to both President Obama and Mitt Romney. The authors note there were abundant examples, particularly because the meme was typically used to shame behaviors in non-political examples before it was adapted to the 2012 campaign. Ross and Rivers (2017), similarly, suggest that even restricting the data set to Trump's Wall and Hillary's Email memes, they still could only examine a fraction of what was available. The authors refer to delegitimization as a tool "not only to help the creator share their view and spread their message, in the hope of influencing others, but to delegitimize the target of the meme in order to bring about their own desired political result" (p. 10).

Bimber (2014) examines the Obama campaign's use of social media in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. Bimber found that "digital media provided opportunities for strategic as well as tactical innovation in electoral contexts where personal political communication is crucial" (p. 131). However, he also argues that the increased access, this "multiplicity of opportunities for involvement simply constitute the hyper-management and control of citizens by campaigns rather than a meaningful shift toward more deliberative

processes or toward more real citizen influence on the actions or positions of candidates” (p. 133). In other words, more opportunity and increased participation do not automatically mean that the discourse and resulting democracy are not being manipulated.

As many scholars have noted, the ease with which memes can be created, spread, and adapted to any topic of conversation would seem to make them an ideal discursive tool. Yet, they also possess a duality that needs to be identified. Anderson and Sheeler (2014) indicate that “because mimesis can involve both faithful depiction and irreverent mimicry, mimetic texts have the potential to capitulate to hegemonic ideologies; challenge conventional power structures; or, paradoxically, do both. (p. 235). Hristova (2104) similarly notes that memes “emerge at moments of contestation of dominant narratives and through their participatory structure of imitation and mutation, and they allow for the dissolution of points of ideological conflict as well as for the reestablishment of a normative narrative” (p. 265). What these scholars are referring to is how memes as discursive tools can communicate. As message-carriers memes can challenge or reinforce narratives. As a discourse, they fulfill a different function. To examine that function, we turn next to Critical theory.

### **Critical Theory**

This study applies critical theory from the work of a body of scholars commonly referred to as comprising the “Frankfurt School” (Held, 1980; Prasad, 2005; Brookfield, 2005). Collectively, these scholars were concerned about authoritarian features of systems such as capitalism, socialism, communism, and fascism; the roles and effects of science and technology in society; and the influence of mass culture in areas of the arts and entertainment, politics and education. (Held, 1980; Kellner, 1991; Prasad, 2005). They were committed to rigorous interrogations of the relationships, potential and actual, between those areas of influence and the

people who lived under them, with the goal of changing those aspects that were oppressive in practice.

It is important to note, as Held (1980) does, that “Critical theory [. . .] does not form a unity; it does not mean the same thing to all its adherents” (p. 14). Prasad (2005) reaffirms this, indicating that “the Frankfurt School did not ever speak with a single unified voice” (p. 137). Held (1980) describes how each scholar engaged with Critical theory according to his own specialty. Viewed as a tapestry, the work of the Frankfurt School displays threads of Marxism, political science, philosophy, music, economics, sociology, popular culture, psychology, literature, law, and government. Prasad (2007) also indicates that neither “did any of the theorists claim to have developed a systemic approach to cultural criticism” (p. 137). Among this group of thinkers, the work of Herbert Marcuse emerged as relevant for this study. His ideas of one-dimensional society (1964) maintaining systems of domination through processes of repressive tolerance (1965) resonated strongly with discourse conducted through memes.

Brookfield (2005) suggests that “critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized” (p. viii). As such, these are also core assumptions for this study. The first of these assumptions is that practices of Western democracy enable and conceal “empirical realities” of inequality and oppression (p. viii). The appearance of an open democracy does not of necessity preclude inequality, nor does it prevent oppression. Marcuse (1964) actually posits the opposite, suggesting that “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails” (p. 3), and that “Democracy would appear to be the most efficient system of domination” (p. 52). Marcuse (1965) contends

the democratic argument implies a necessary condition, namely, that the people must be capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge, that they must have

access to authentic information, and that, on this basis, their evaluation must be the result of autonomous thought. (p. 95)

Absent those qualities, democracy in this sense provides a participatory role as one component of a larger system of control.

The next assumption Brookfield (2005) identifies is “that the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology” (p. viii). Marcuse (1964) describes it like this, “the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests—to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible” (p. 9). And such control might not be obviously totalitarian. Marcuse describes “a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests [which] precludes the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole” (p. 3). Such conditions are indicative of citizens not having access to authentic information.

Marcuse (1964) explains it this way: “This language controls by reducing the linguistic forms and symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction; by substituting images for concepts. It denies or absorbs the transcendent vocabulary; it does not search for but establishes and embellishes truth and falsehood” (p. 103). The resulting discourse is one-dimensional, and not limited to one ideology: “the process always replaces one system of preconditioning by another” (p. 7). A discourse conducted by images is unable to produce necessary change, in part because participation in it does not require autonomous thought. As such, one could argue that it does not consist of the quality of information necessary to effect change.

Thirdly, critical theory seeks to understand the situation, circumstances, methods of control, or whatever it is that is happening, with an eye toward changing it. Brookfield (2005) notes “that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it” (p. viii). Prasad (2005) concurs, in that Critical Theory “refuses to take knowledge claims at their face value; relentlessly interrogates all bodies of knowledge to unearth the interests shaping them; and is committed to creating knowledge that is explicitly intended for emancipatory purposes” (p. 141). It is important to note that the emancipation is of the individual, of many individuals rather than of groups. Held (1980) indicates that, for Marcuse, “the process of liberation entails a process of *self*-emancipation and *self*-creation” (italics in original) (pp. 25-26). And Kellner (1991) describes Marcuse as “a radical individualist who is deeply disturbed by the decline of the traits of authentic individuality that he values” (p. 26). Community voices do not necessarily represent the individuals who reside in them.

### **Marcuse**

Marcuse (1964) diagrams a society and culture where this sort of discourse is the norm, in *One Dimensional Man* and critiques the resulting democracy as one that reinforces an oppressive status quo. A well-functioning democracy is one in which access to information, quality of information, time and the ability to process the information, and the ability to act upon it are essential and intertwined. It is essential, Marcuse (1965) argues, that decisions be based on the “expression and development of independent thinking, free from indoctrination, manipulation, extraneous authority” (p. 96). Marcuse warns that when these components are absent the process, public discourse and resulting democracy can be manipulated. This is a society in which “independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function” (1964, p. 1). While appearing to open possibilities

of access and dissent, the systems of control are in place to “reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of policies *within* the status quo” (p. 2). Any of the proffered choices can be accepted because none of them seriously threaten the established order.

One way this is accomplished is by what might be called an abuse of pluralism. Citizens can hold any opinion on any topic they wish and, in our contemporary digital era, can express them to as many people as they like. Marcuse (1964) describes, “in the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference” (p. 54). This is a key component of a one-dimensional system, repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1965). Repressive tolerance takes advantage of the widespread belief in the efficacy of a liberal, open, pluralistic democracy. Belief that necessitates what Boorstin refers to as “an informed, participating citizenry, people that ought to read more and more” (p. 131). Tannen (1998) suggests that “Democracy is not only a matter of giving everyone a right to vote. People need to understand what they’re voting about” (p. 30). This image of democracy is one that includes well-informed participants representing a range of issues, engaging with well-informed participants representing a range of views, resulting in good decisions.

Repressive tolerance is a practice and a condition that emerges from that image of those principles of democracy, in which all voices in the conversation must be considered as equal in validity to any other voice in terms of being heard. Marcuse (1965) describes what such discourse looks like, remarkably like contemporary digital public discourse:

All points of view can be heard: the Communist and the Fascist, the Left and the Right, the white and the Negro, the crusaders for armament and for disarmament. Moreover, in endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same

respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood. (p. 94)

One could make the argument that with such a broadening of the range of voices, real solutions might surface in discussions. However, this is not the case. Marcuse describes that through mechanisms of mass distribution, such as news and entertainment media and advertising, “a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society” (1965, p. 95). This is the essence of repressive tolerance, that responses to the things that matter are predetermined. It is the imposition of a dominant public interpretive stance that influences all topics of discourse. This perspective, as Marcuse (1964) describes, promotes “the common interest to defend and extend the established position, to combat the historical alternatives, to contain qualitative change” (p. 51). Practices of repressive tolerance in discourse are indicative of and reinforce a one-dimensional society. All points of view can be allowed because the system is immune to change.

### **Media and Discourse**

My fascination with speculative dystopian fiction, particularly how control in those fictional worlds was maintained by controlling media and discourse, lead me to this body of scholarship, which is seminal to who I am as a scholar. My interest is in public discourse and the media that informs it. This study was influenced primarily by the work of media and communications scholars, each of whom address relationships between communications technology, public discourse, and democracy. The different facets of tech and discourse in these different technological areas can help us understand such relationships in contemporary times. These illustrate a timeline of communicative tools that speaks to Bimber’s (2014) assertion that “as digital tools—which will continue to change—saturate the political communication system,

the interesting questions will involve the strategies and content of political communication undertaken by elites in an environment of ubiquitous technology” (p. 132). These authors illustrate what public discourse looks like. Marcuse resonated with me because he examines discourse as a means of control, as part of a system of domination, and identifies qualities of the discourse for us to look for when this is the case. For me, it is a perfect match.

Boorstin (1961), a contemporary of Marcuse, discusses the influence of the graphic revolution, the rise of advertising and communication of images, provides a set of criteria for identifying and examining images and explains how images function in discourse to inform and influence. Boorstin wrote at the advent of mass-adoption of television, which would become the dominant technological form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Postman (1985) examines television as such and argues that everything on television is ultimately entertainment, be it sports, education, news, or politics. He notes the rise of the TV commercial as the pre-eminent discursive form, and argues that political ads are no different, as they use the same tools that other commercials do, communicating through images. Postman wrote as computers were becoming the next widespread technological tool, prior to the Internet.

Tannen (1998) picks up the thread in an era where personal computers were a fixture in schools and homes in the United States, and examines how our media forms (newspapers, TV, the burgeoning Internet) contribute to an increasingly bifurcated and polarized citizenry. Tannen wrote as smartphones were becoming widespread and social media sites began to emerge.

Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013) explore the easy access provided by the Internet and smart phones to more participants in every area of interest. Spreadable media are easy to create and share to make one’s voice heard to wider audiences. The tools of communication have contributed to a condition Rushkoff (2013) describes as “present shock,” in which the immediacy

of the moment demands attention. In short, the technology encourages quick responses, not individual reflection, or autonomous thought. Our contemporary discursive tools and attitudes might be cultivating the very conditions of oppression Marcuse warned of.

One facet that is shared by each of the above media scholars and Marcuse is that of the influence of advertising on public discourse. Boorstin (1961) contends that “we have underestimated the effect of the rise of advertising. We think it meant an increase of untruthfulness. In fact it has meant the reshaping of our very concept of truth” (p. 205).

This is not simply the content of advertising, the products being advertised, though that is part of the discussion. More important is the form that carries the message. The form of the advertisement carries images that “sell, comfort, or excite” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 56). If the product is a pair of shoes or collective discontent, it makes no difference as both can be reduced to the images of products through advertising. In other words, they can be made one-dimensional, existing on the same plane together. Nike’s advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick illustrates facets of this one-dimensionality. When the ad became a tool for conversation, it provided the opportunity to examine different claims made by the same vehicle. The ad became the meme. The meme is the contemporary tool of discourse.

### **Conclusion**

Internet memes are popular tools that allow more people to participate in digital conversations. They can be created quickly and easily, can be adapted to virtually any topic, and require no special skills to create. They have identifiable component parts that can be used for analysis. Memes are no longer being dismissed in scholarly circles based on surface-level observations of their triviality. More people are using memes as legitimate contributions to discourse with the intention of effecting change.

This study takes the line that simply because there are more democratic forms of participation does not imply that participants are not oppressed or that the discourse is liberatory. Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013) indicate that the result is not necessarily “a more informed, more responsible, more ethical society. Rather, as people take an active role in shaping the creation and circulation of media texts, the public has access—for better and worse—to a greater range of voices” (p. 227). Milner (2013a) examines OWS, for example, as a form of populist media, something that “in the best conceptions, expand participation in public discourse” (p.2361). Milner (2013a) argues that “vibrant public discourse depends on more voices having access to channels of engagement. If more people can [ . . . ] engage in political discussion from more perspectives, democracy benefits” (p. 2361). In describing the discourse facilitated by OWS, Milner contends that “alongside the daily deluge of jokes and links, participants shared public perspectives on issues fundamental to democratic rule. [ . . . ] Members of the public had a means to engage with issues of wealth, power, and inequality” (p. 2388). The result, as Milner (2013a) describes, was that “the polyvocal assertions of the mediated public were weaved together” (p. 2388).

However, O’Meara (2018), in examining how fictional female characters are used in memes by many to “voice their dissatisfaction in ways that may not explicitly change the status quo but that nonetheless help to fight digital fire with fire” (p. 39) acknowledges that nothing might actually change by using memes. Hristova (2014) uses Derrida’s concept of autoimmunity to examine OWS, which is in some respects similar to Marcuse’s concept of one-dimensionality and process of repressive tolerance from critical theory. Essentially, OWS memes were allowed to flourish online, where they were relatively harmless. This was true, in part because of what, as Milner (2013a) describes, jokes and serious content contribute to discourse on the same plane.

Control might occur through technological forms that influence the issues and language of public discourse. Prasad (2005) notes that “Adorno, Fromm, Horkheimer, and Marcuse were also equally disturbed with the mindlessness of American culture and the ease with which public opinion and behavior could be manipulated without the use of force and violence” (p. 137). As Keiss and McGregor (2017) suggest, large firms that control the platforms on which digital discourse must occur are more and more exerting their influence on what kinds of discourse circulate. What information does circulate depends partly on a system that aligns providers of access with providers of content—tech firms with corporations and political organizations—in mutually beneficial, mutually reinforcing relationships. Both groups profit when content that has been adapted to communicate effectively in digital environments flourishes.

How does this relate to discourse through memes? Postman (1985) contends that “how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture” (p. 6). Seiffert-Brockman, et al (2017) indicate that as “social media and the Internet continue to dominate the media landscape, scholars have struggled to understand how new media technologies are re-shaping political discourse” (p. 2862). The use of memes in political discourse is increasing in part because they are perhaps the most convenient vehicle for contributing to political discourse on the Internet and on social media platforms. These platforms are primary sites of digital public discourse, and the language that is spoken there most conveniently is the language of memes.

Studies have examined memes as forms of argument, rhetoric, and discourse. Studies have widely examined broad and narrow meme categories. Studies have examined the effects of memes in political discourse, some of which have used critical discourse analysis. This study

proposes to use Gee's (2014) critical discourse analysis through the lens of Marcuse's (1964, 1964) concepts of one-dimensional society and repressive tolerance, to examine the discourse facilitated by the Believe in Something meme. None of these three components have yet been done. Gee is explored and his methods explained in Chapter Three.

## Chapter Three

### Introduction

This study seeks to examine the digital public discourse produced by Internet memes. and to ask these questions:

*Research Question:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse?

*RQ 1A:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse?

*RQ 1B:* Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

I am interested in what the memes communicate and the ways in which they communicate. Metrics such as the number of shares or “Likes” an example has might be helpful in demonstrating its popularity, and content analysis may highlight commonalities among examples. Neither of those approaches provides what I think is needed for this study, though both could be complementary quantitative additions. This study will proceed from a qualitative paradigm. I agree with Patton’s (2015) explanation that “important things can’t be reduced to standardized instruments [that] only tap the surface of human experience; experimental designs are too rigid and controlling” (p. 91). Or, to add my own explanation: if the phenomenon is systemic, then its already more or less affecting everyone. I want to understand how it is doing that and why. Is it by design and if so, by whose and for what purpose? Qualitative research allows me to ask these questions as part of the study. Qualitative research draws from disciplines as varied as Anthropology, literary criticism, and Philosophy, and encourages interdisciplinary

approaches, a corresponding range of questions, and options in how we can see and understand the world (Patton, 2015).

### **Critical Theory**

I tend to look at the world from critical perspectives. Prasad (2005) describes “a set of intellectual positions that examine social arrangements through the lenses of power, domination, and conflict” (p. 109). Critical Theory is interpretive, but not merely, as critical theory is “far more skeptical” (p. 109). As examined in Chapter Two, Brookfield (2005) identifies the core assumptions of the theory as the recognition that even democratic societies can be oppressive, that maintenance of the unequal system is maintained in no small part by its communicative technologies and the discourse those facilitate, and that we must first understand what is going on and then try to change it. Prasad indicates that the Critical tradition is traced back to Marx and Marxist thought. Held (1980), Kellner (1991), and Brookfield (2005) also indicate that later Marxists, particularly the Frankfurt school, gravitated more toward Marx’s cultural and aesthetic critiques, and away from his materialist and economic ones. Understanding as paramount to changing, however, is a concept that remains consistent to Marxist thought, regardless of the variant, as Patton (2015) suggests.

Prasad (2005) refers to Comstock (1982), who contends “that working in the critical theory tradition requires a five-step process that guides the design, implementation, and analysis of the research project” (p. 149). Critical Theory is a process. The steps include: 1. interpretation; 2. “an understanding of the relevant sociocultural structures and processes that may mediate and constrain people’s subjective understanding;” 3. “ideology-critique where the researcher actively looks for inconsistencies, contradictions, distortions, and asymmetries;” 4. sharing results with others; and, 5. Praxis, how the theory is used to effect change (pp. 149-150).

Prasad (2005) suggests that “if there is one single concept that is emblematic of the critical theory tradition, it would be that of ideology-critique—the incessant and systematic critique of ideological forces in every aspect of social life” (p. 139). Brookfield (2005) describes this “as a learning process” which “describes the ways in which people learn how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded into everyday situations and practices” (p. 13). Does this include everyday practices like digital public discourse, so ubiquitous it passes without critique? Possibly, I think. Patton (2015) suggests “three interconnected elements: (1) inquiry into situations of social injustice, (2) interpretations of the findings as a critique of the existing situation, and (3) using the findings and critique to mobilize and inform change” (p. 692). Prasad (2005), drawing from Habermas, explains that “ideology refers to all systematically distorted accounts of reality that both conceal and legitimate social asymmetries and injustices. Critical theory aims at piercing these ideological veils in all walks of life” (p. 139). Or, as Patton (2015) describes it, the goal is “to critique existing conditions and through that critique bring about change” (p. 692).

I am interested in examining the discourse perpetuated by Internet memes to see through its ideological veil. Memes are popular forms of communication on the Internet, in part because of the ease with which they can be created, distributed, and used to engage in public conversations. To put it another way, memes provide unprecedented access for many voices to be heard on virtually any topic. This raises questions for me. What do memes allow us to say about topics? What exactly do memes contribute to public discourse? Is memetic discourse a broadening of democratic potential, as Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) argue? Or do memes contribute to what Marcuse (1964, 1965) refers to as an illusion of democratic participation? This study will examine one type of Internet meme to discover how and what it contributes. The

meme then becomes the unit of analysis (Patton, 2015) for this study. In the next section, I will define what meme means for this study, present operational terms, and supply the initial example.

### **Internet Meme as Unit of Analysis**

The term “meme” is credited in the literature to Dawkins’ (1976) *The Selfish Gene*. Most simply, memes are units of culture, transmitted from person to person, mutating along the way. Three essential qualities of memes that emanate and emerge from Dawkins (1976) and biology are, longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Marwick, 2013; Beck-Fernandez & Nettleton, 2015; Fenton, 2016; Ballard, 2018). Memes last long, travel fast and far, and remain recognizable through the process. Davis, et al (2016) illustrate these aspects in their study of Shell’s “Let’s Go!” campaign. Davison (2012) examines these qualities in the Advice Dog meme. Shifman (2014) explores longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity in the Pepper Spray Cop and the “We Are the 99%” memes. One could argue that there are no unsuccessful memes; either a meme demonstrates longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity, or it is not a meme, regardless of whether it is natural or forced. As Bacalu (2014) indicates, “Memetic success depends on the content of the meme itself; the way in which it fits with other memes; and the external environment” (p. 154). Davison (2012) suggests, “engagement with a meme [. . .] takes the form of either use or viewing or, more in keeping with the terms of malleable and replicable, of transformation or transmission” (p. 126). And Jenkins, et al (2013) assert: “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead!” (p. 3).

While the qualities of longevity, fecundity, and copy-fidelity are good starting points, they do not exactly tell us what an Internet meme is. Knowing that memes are “malleable and replicable” (Davison, 2012, p. 126) does not tell us what they are. Davison provides a short

definition: “a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (2012, p. 122). Memes as analogous to jokes is a good comparison, as ten people telling the same joke may alter certain facets of the joke, while keeping it essentially the same, and the same is true of memes. However, I find this definition insufficient to clarify what is meant by meme in this study.

Shifman (2014) indicates the need for academic terms and definitions for meme research, noting the slipperiness of the term and the need for a less-biologic, more communication-oriented understanding. Shifman proposes:

Instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated successfully, I suggest defining an Internet meme as (a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*. This definition is helpful for analyzing Internet memes as *socially constructed public discourses* in which different metric variants represent diverse voices and perspectives. (Italics in original, p. 8)

This is the definition of Internet meme I am using for this study, and I will unpack these pieces.

The content of a meme, according to Shifman (2013), refers to “the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it” (p. 367). To discover these, I will examine each example individually. The form “is the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses” (p. 367), those qualities that identify examples as belonging to specific families. Stance has to do with the “communicative positioning” (p. 367) of the form in relation to the message, the context, and other participants. In many cases this will mean potential stances, particularly in terms of potential receptive stances.

Shifman (2013; 2014) identifies two types of forms that are relevant for this study: image macros and photoshop responses. Image macros are perhaps the most easily recognizable type of meme. They are like templates. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) and Milner (2016), along with Shifman, discuss macros. Davison's (2012) definition is most succinct: "an image macro is a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images. Some image macros involve adding the same text to various images, and others involve adding different text to a common image" (p. 127).

Photoshop reactions involve altering pictures. The meme examined in this study includes both types that Davison describes, as well as photoshopped responses. For that reason, I will be using the term macro, rather than form, as the macro includes both forms that Shifman describes.

Davison (2012) supplies an additional term to help crystallize the meme: manifestation.

According to Davison, "manifestations are the individual images, among which numerous replicated elements are obvious" (p. 130). Each of the individual examples is a manifestation.

### **Macro and Manifestations**

At this point, I want to introduce the original manifestation of the meme that serves as the macro for this study. It is the example that spawned the 349 other manifestations that comprise the "group of digital items sharing common characteristics" (Shifman, 2014, p. 8). That body of 350 items is the data set for this study. The original is, of course, Nike's ad featuring Colin Kaepernick that debuted on September 3, 2018, shown in figure 3.1. The ad sparked passionate responses, both in support of Nike and Kaepernick and in opposition to them. Nike was able to capitalize on the moment and on the issues raised by Kaepernick. Jenkins, et al (2013) indicate that, "timeliness (and timing) can be particularly tricky because cultural relevance can change quickly. Such timing is hard to predict" (p. 215). And, I would add, hard to hold, because of the speed at which the moment passes (Rushkoff, 2013; Shifman, 2014). Nonetheless, Nike managed

to ride the wave as it were, with their “Just Don’t Do It” ad, released on May 29, 2020, in the wake of violence following the killing of George Floyd.



Figure 3.1 Original Nike Ad

Diaz (2013) highlights two additional distinctions that I think are important for this study. First, the form of the transformation or the adaptation from manifestation to manifestation is not relevant, only that it has been altered, substituting someone else’s face for Kaepernick’s for example. Second, for purposes of this study, meme origin is irrelevant to meme success. Know your meme, for example, differentiates between grassroots memes that emerge organically, from what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) refer to as Astroturf, memes that are the result of design and marketing. I recognize this difference and yet must clarify that neither type is necessarily a guarantor of memetic success. Propagation is the essential quality. The ad possesses what Milner

(2016) refers to as memetic image and memetic text. Figure 3.2 presents three manifestations of what I am referring to in this study as the Believe in Something meme.



Figure 3.2 Dylann Roof, Kaepernick, Presumably a Nike Sweatshop

I will return to the specific strategies used to examine manifestations like these in the Data Analysis section. However, as Shifman (2014) indicates, the definition and terms she provides help us examine these as contributions to public discourse. Each manifestation contributes to different topics. To understand each one, we need to ask questions about what is being made significant and how, what identities are represented and how, and what practices are being endorsed or critiqued and how. As such, the choice of method for this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in which these and similar questions are asked of pieces of language.

They are not asked simply to identify what meanings are communicated and how. They are asked so we can subsequently determine who has power in the discourse, over language, meaning, and knowledge, and to enact change. It is necessary, next, to examine CDA and identify those aspects of it that will be applied in this study, before proceeding to the sample selection, data collection and data analysis sections that will follow.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

I chose to employ Gee's (2014) style of Discourse Analysis (DA) for this study, as his philosophy, explanations, and methods are both well-explained and partner well with the conceptual framework of the study. Gee's illustrations and descriptions of what language is and what it can do are quite accessible. He indicates that "language serves a great many functions in our lives," and further contends that "saying things in language never goes without also doing things and being things" (2011, p. 2). This theme is common throughout DA literature, that we study language as it being used by the people using it to determine what they are saying and what they are using the language for (Fairclough, 1995; van Leeuwen, 1997; van Dijk, 1993). DA is a large field, and there are as many styles as there are practitioners, though, as in Critical Theory, there are common threads one would expect to see that are markers that indicate a study is performing DA. As Gee (2014) indicates, "There are many different approaches to discourse analysis, none of them, including this one, uniquely 'right'" (p. 10). I selected Gee for several reasons, not least of which are the accessibility he provides to the theory and the clarity of an operational vocabulary which, in practice, provide tools for inquiry.

Gee (2014) discusses a common distinction in DA, between descriptive and critical forms. Descriptive analysis is satisfied by the examination and understanding of the discourse, not concerned with going further into practice. This is, in my view, like looking at a problem in

an abstract way, as an intellectual exercise. That is not the point of this study. Gee explains the difference, indicating that

Some other approaches to discourse analysis, which we can call “critical” as in “critical discourse analysis,” answer this question differently. Their goal is not just to describe how language works or even to offer deep explanations, though they do want to do this. They also want to speak to and, perhaps, intervene in, social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world. They want to apply their work to the world in some fashion. (Gee, 2014, p. 9)

Gee contends “that all discourse analysis needs to be critical, not because discourse analysts are or need to be political, but because language itself is [...] political” (p. 9). This aligns nicely with Marcuse’s contention that the language of discourse needs to be examined and critiqued, as it is political. My study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) first in this broad sense.

There are other components of CDA that are both generally accepted practices and purposes, and adaptable to the tools provided by Gee. Van Dijk (1993) describes assumptions of CDA that correspond with the conceptual framework of this study, as well. He indicates that providing access to discourse is a matter of power which means the researcher typically assumes “mind management, involving the influence of knowledge, beliefs, understanding, plans, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values. Ultimately, the management of modes of access is geared towards this access to the public mind, which we conceptualize in terms of social cognition” (p. 257). Yoon (2016), for example, describes this process in terms of Fairclough (1995), suggesting that CDA works “to explain naturalization, or how ideological representation comes to be seen as non-ideological common sense” (p. 103). One assumption of this study is that such naturalization is accomplished through the language that is being used, Internet memes,

in this study. Both of these descriptions align with Marcuse's considerations of how repressive tolerance (1965) functions as part of a one-dimensional society (1964) in maintaining unequal conditions. Van Dijk (1993), like Marcuse, suggests that

Control of knowledge crucially shapes our interpretation of the world, as well as our discourse and other actions. Hence the relevance of a critical analysis of those forms of text and talk, e.g. in the media and education, that essentially aim to construct such knowledge. (p. 258)

This study is concerned with the control of knowledge that will be explored through analysis of discourse that is conducted with Believe in Something manifestations. I adapt Gee's tools of inquiry and questions to the content (Shifman, 2014) of the manifestations.

As Gee (2014) describes, "Tools of inquiry are designed to describe and explain what the researcher takes to exist and to be important in a domain" (p. 11). He further indicates that "People with different theories about a domain will use different methods for their research. The reason this is so is because a research method is made up of various 'tools of inquiry' and strategies for applying them" (p. 11). He identifies six tools of inquiry which are, social languages, Discourses, Conversations with a capital C, intertextuality, situated meanings, and figured worlds. Of these tools, Conversations and intertextuality are the most relevant for this study. I will unpack these in the next section, along with the questions asked of the manifestations.

### **Conversations and Intertextuality**

At the outset of the 2016 NFL season, Colin Kaepernick, who was the quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, began kneeling during the playing of the national anthem before his NFL games, stating that he was protesting police brutality. Specifically, Kaepernick cited the killing

of Mario Woods as the catalyst for his protest, as Woods “died after being shot 20 times after he allegedly refused police orders to drop his knife” (Li, 2019, para 3). During the post-game press conference after Kaepernick kneeled for the first time, he stated:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2016, para 4)

Shifman (2013) has noted the ease with which memes can be created and shared allows for many voices to enter political discussions in online environments, within moments following a catalyst event, such as Kaepernick kneeling. This is also what Jenkins, et al (2013) refer to as “controversy [. . .] the ways that material may spark intense disagreement among those who encounter it, especially in terms of conflicting values and judgments” (p. 213). Gee (2014) defines such a discussion, that is, “all the talk and writing that has gone on in a specific social group or in society at large around a major theme, debate, or motif as a ‘Conversation’ with a capital ‘C,’ using the terms metaphorically, of course” (p. 29). Abortion, smoking, and, currently, climate change are examples of such Conversations. As Gee explains, “to know about these Conversations is to know about the various sides one can take in debates about these issues and what sorts of people are usually on each side” (p. 29). As will be demonstrated in the Data Analysis section, many of the manifestations are contributions to these Conversations. some that do, are examples of intertextuality. Most simply, as Gee describes, “in instances of intertextuality, one spoken or written text alludes to, quotes, or otherwise relates to another one” (Gee, 2014, pp. 29-30). Shifman (2014) indicates a “fundamental attribute of Internet memes is

intertextuality: memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways” (p.

2). I see this as a natural bridge between memes and the method of analysis I have chosen for this study.

### **Practices and Questions**

Gee (2014) provides seven building tasks of discourse: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, politics (the distribution of social goods), connections, and sign systems and knowledge. I use these for interrogation by asking what the language and image of a particular text makes significant, what practices are encouraged or discouraged, and what is made relevant and irrelevant to the Conversation. In this study, I am substituting “manifestation” for “language”, which is to say the questions will be phrased like, “What is this manifestation of the Believe in Something meme indicating is significant and how?”. Table 3.1 is a list of Gee’s building tasks and the questions applied to the manifestations.

The primary question is one of significance; what is made significant is usually a practice, or an identity, one of the other building tasks. Not every question is applicable to every manifestation, in other words. As Gee (2014) describes, “such tools and strategies are continually and flexibly adapted to specific issues, problems, and contexts of study. They are continually transformed as they are applied in practice” (p. 11), and that is occurring in this study. One aspect of memes is that they express complicated things simply, in part because of the constraints of their size, resembling bumper stickers, soundbites, or advertisements. Because of those factors, meme manifestations are brief and concise, which is to say that each manifestation prioritizes or makes significant one piece of one facet of the Conversation.

Table 3.1 Building Tasks and Questions

<b>Building Task</b>	<b>Discourse Analysis Question</b>
Significance	How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?
Practices	What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?
Identities	What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as operative)? What identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity?
Relationships	What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?
Politics (The Distribution of Social Goods)	What perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be “normal,” “right,” “good,” “correct,” “proper,” “appropriate,” “valuable,” “the way things are,” “the way things ought to be,” “high status or low status,” “like me or not like me,” and so forth)?
Connections	How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?
Sign Systems and Knowledge	How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems (e.g., Spanish vs. English, technical language vs. everyday language, words vs. images, words vs. equations, etc.) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief (e.g., science vs. the Humanities, science vs. “common sense,” biology vs. “creation science”)? (Gee, 2014, p. 20)
NOTE:	In this study, in each of these questions, “this piece of language” will become “this manifestation” or “this content”

One last note about CDA and applying Gee’s tools and questions to manifestations of the Believe in Something meme. Davison (2012), Jenkins, et al (2013), Shifman (2014), and Milner (2016) have all discussed challenges with using memes in scholarly work, and one might rightly ask if these manifestations constitute suitable texts on which to practice CDA. I will let Gee answer:

We have argued that discourse analysis starts by asking questions which are tools for doing discourse analysis. We have introduced building tasks and tools of inquiry all of

which lead us to ask certain sorts of questions to texts. Suitably adapted, all of these questions can apply to studying images and multimodal texts. (2014, p. 194)

It is my intention to demonstrate that these methods have been suitably adapted to the texts in this study, and that these manifestations are being used to participate in public discourse. In the following sections, I will describe the sample selection, criteria, and collection methods, before moving into the detailed process for analyzing the data.

### **Sample Selection and Data Collection**

The primary data unit for this study is the Believe in Something meme. Shifman (2014) describes a meme partially as a group of related content units. The individual manifestations (Davison 2012) of the Believe in Something meme represent the data set. The sample selection was purposeful, (Patton, 2015). Criterion-based selection was used to select samples. The primary criterion was that the manifestation was of the Believe in Something macro, and recognizably so, regardless of how it had been re-mixed. In one sense, this data comes from a convenience sample (Maxwell, 2013), in that it was all found on the Internet. However, that, too, was part of the overarching criteria.

The manifestations used in this study were collected during January 2020 through March 2020. They were collected from Google searches on Google Images. The initial search term was “Nike Kaepernick Ad”, which primarily produced, as one would expect, the original ad illustrated in Figure 3.1. Additionally, there were examples of what were referred to as “parodies”. One site, for example, was “100 Best Parodies of Nike’s Kaepernick Ad”. This site proved to be an excellent source, not just for specific examples of the meme, but also for different types of remixes. Subsequent Google searches included the term “Nike Kaepernick meme and” politics, Trump, Clinton, Sanders, popular culture, films, television, animals, and

historical characters. Each manifestation was copied to its own PowerPoint slide, along with the website address where it was retrieved.

The initial analysis was based on categorical thinking (Freeman, 2019; Galman, 2014). This is one area in which PowerPoint's tools were helpful, particularly the Slideshow function. With all the examples in one place, I started a slideshow from the beginning, and made notes of the primary category of each example—politics, pop culture, history, for example—and then went through and labeled each slide according to these primary designations. Additional slideshows with the same data labeled in such general categories allowed me to identify aspects where Gee (2014) and discourse analysis could be applied. For example, the two most prominent tools of inquiry were Conversations and intertextuality. I began to view each manifestation of the meme as a piece of language. Subsequent passes through the data set provided for asking Gee's questions about the building tasks of each piece of language, in what it made significant, what practices or identities it was highlighting or prioritizing, or what connections it was making.

Additional Google searches followed, using the same terms as before to determine if new manifestations had been produced. If there were new examples, they were collected and labeled as the previous examples had been. I also conducted new searches adding terms that emerged from the first round of analysis to the "Nike Kaepernick meme" phrase. Some of these included 9/11, Obama, and Star Wars, for example. Near the end of March 2020, I had collected 387 different manifestations of the Believe in Something meme. Of these, there were 37 about which I could not identify the people pictured or the issue or topic involved. Those 37 became a category of their own, one which exists without further analysis. At that point, I had the original and 349 different manifestations of the Believe in Something meme. I made final Google searches using the original search terms and those that had emerged in the preliminary analysis.

Finding no new manifestations at the end of March, I declared the data set for the study closed and proceeded with analysis. In the following sections, I will unpack and explain the processes used to organize and analyze the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Preliminary analysis of the Believe in Something meme consisted of two layers of organization and categorization. These first two layers were essential filters, like sunglasses that reduced the overwhelming brightness of the data set, they helped me see more clearly what I was looking for. Like other meme macros, the Believe in Something meme transcends topic and individual, meaning it can be and was made to fit a wide variety of contexts. The first layer of analysis consisted of organizing the manifestations according to type of person or context. Initial categorization yielded six different types of people and contexts: political, sports figures, celebrities and pop culture, historical, fictional, and animal. Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders are political characters, for example, while Anakin Skywalker and The Dude are fictional, from film. Each person represents a larger context, a broader Conversation with a capital C (Gee, 2014).

The next layer of analysis was formal, to identify the structural components of the Believe in Something macro. This was like diagramming a sentence, identifying grammar and structure. This was a surface-level of analysis, and four formal components were identified: the person and context, the instruction, the condition, and the brand and slogan. Manifestations in this macro can consist of any of combination of these components, and any variations thereof. Each variant influences how the manifestation communicates. When these language variants are combined with images, then we can analyze what and how they communicate.

## Formal Analysis

Nike's original Believe in Something ad with Colin Kaepernick is the first manifestation of the meme. I followed Davison's (2012) analysis of the Advice Dog meme to diagram the components of the Believe in Something macro. Davison refers to this as the macro's "formula" (p. 127). Labeling the components and elements of the formula of the Believe in Something macro was necessary in order to identify the range of variations that could exist and to examine how different variations influenced meaning. Figure 3.3 identifies the four components of the original, any one of which could be modified or transformed or re-transmitted (Davison, 2012).



Figure 3.3 Components of the macro

Identifying these formal components allowed me to group manifestations according to variant and consider how the variant influences potential meaning.

As there are four primary components, there are subsequently four types of variants, with a fifth representing all other four types combined. There is also a sixth, least frequent variant, like a watermark indicating a source of origin. That component is in addition to the original macro. The four primary variant types are: person and context; in instruction; condition; and brand, logo, or slogan. Some examples contain more than one variant. I will unpack each of these and provide diagrammed examples of these individually in the following sections. As my interest is primarily in manifestations that are more deliberately political, the examples I chose to use to identify the variants are composed of political characters and events I thought would be recognizable. The manifestations were chosen because they provide excellent examples of the formal variants. Some of the manifestations were stretched to make them more readable and to identify certain elements, which I judged to be a necessary evil. While this resulted in some distortion, unless otherwise noted, such distortion was not part of the original.

### **Variants in Manifestations**

**Variant one: Person and Context.** The first variant is in the person or context identified in the example. Most frequently and most simply, someone else's picture replaces Kaepernick's. The Believe in Something meme is unique in the sense that "image macro" is not an entirely accurate description. Most image macros feature the same image with only the text altered. Some examples of this include, "What if I told you Morpheus" or "One does not simply Boromir", in which the title characters are present in almost all manifestations of those macros. This is not so with the Believe in Something meme. Substitution of person and context is by far the dominant variant, by which I mean it occurs in 335 of 350 examples. There are not, however, 335 different

people in the other 349 examples. There are multiple iterations of President Trump and former President Obama, for example. After unpacking and explaining the variants, I will unpack and illustrate the different types of people and contexts.

Figure 3.4 illustrates this first variant, with the manifestation published by Donald Trump, Jr., on his Twitter page, the day after Nike revealed their ad.

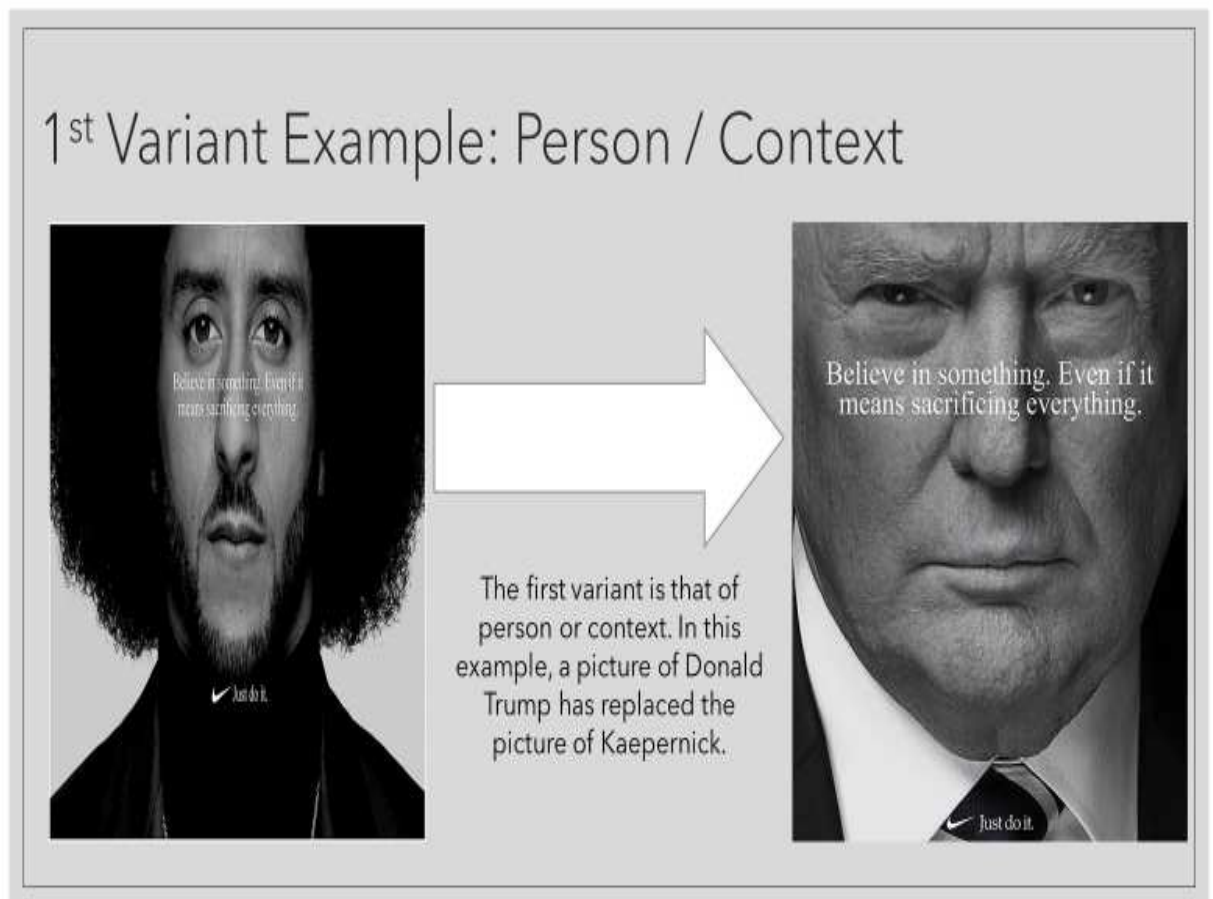


Figure 3.4 Variant 1: Person / Context

**Variant two: Initial Instruction.** The second variant is in the first instruction, which deviates from, “Believe in something”. This variant occurs least of the four. “Believe in Something” is the most consistent first instruction in the body of manifestations. Examples of this variation typically take one of two lines. The first is a more general adaptation, “Stand for

something”, for example. The other is a more context-specific adaptation in which the instruction relates specifically to the actions of the person who is pictured. “Delete everything”, for example, over a picture of Hillary Clinton, is an example of this second type. Figure 3.5 illustrates this variant in the person of Representative Anthony Weiner, and the line “Go for it” taking the place of Believe in something.

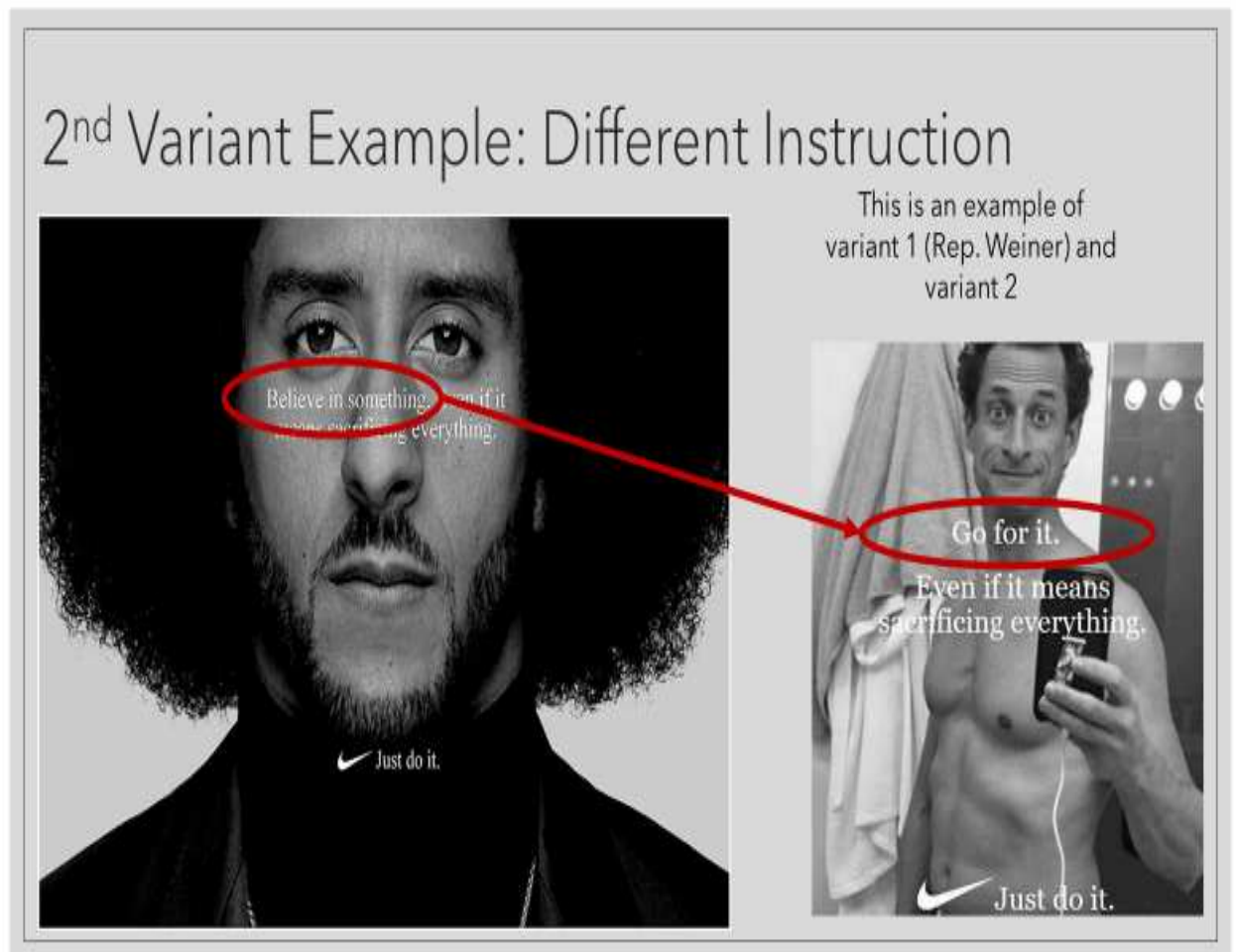


Figure 3.5 Variant 2: Different Instruction

**Variant three: Condition.** The third variant occurs in the “Even if” component that I am referring to as the condition. This is most typically adapted to context-specific situations, as

illustrated in Figure 3.6. This is the second-most altered component and frequently offers commentary on the person and context.

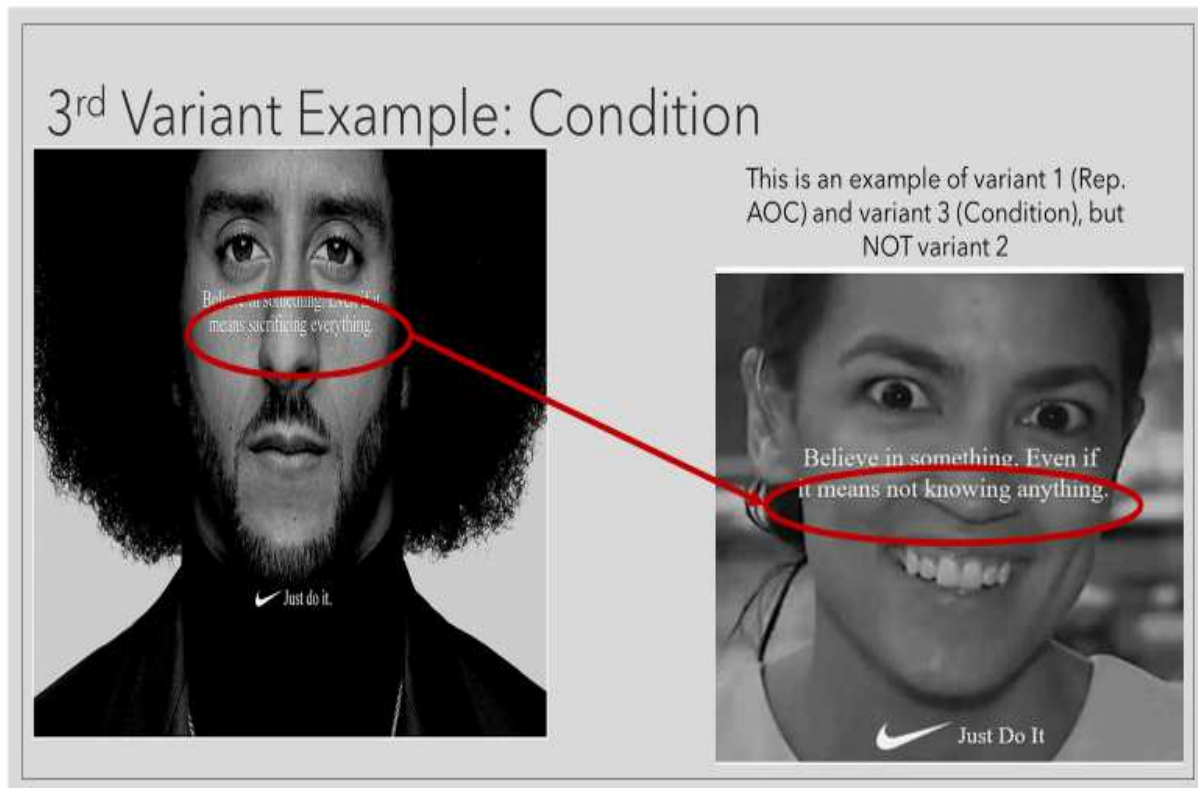


Figure 3.6: Variant Three: Condition

**Variant four: Logo, Slogan, or Brand.** The fourth variation is one of logo, slogan, or brand, altering the “Just Do It” with Nike’s “Swoosh” logo. Sub-variations include different combinations of logo, slogan, and brand, though the “Swoosh” logo remains in almost half of the manifestations. Some examples of different “logos” include the GOP Elephant and DNC Donkey, Swastika, and Hammer & Sickle. Some examples of different slogans include: Just Screw It, Just Collectivize it, Just Dodge It, Just Delete It, Just Chop It, Just Take It, and Just Don’t Do It. Some examples incorporate the names of apparel brands such as New Balance,

Adidas, or Kangol. Figure 3.7 illustrates this variant with former press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, substituting “Whitehouse.gov” in the place of the Nike Swoosh and “Just do it” slogan.

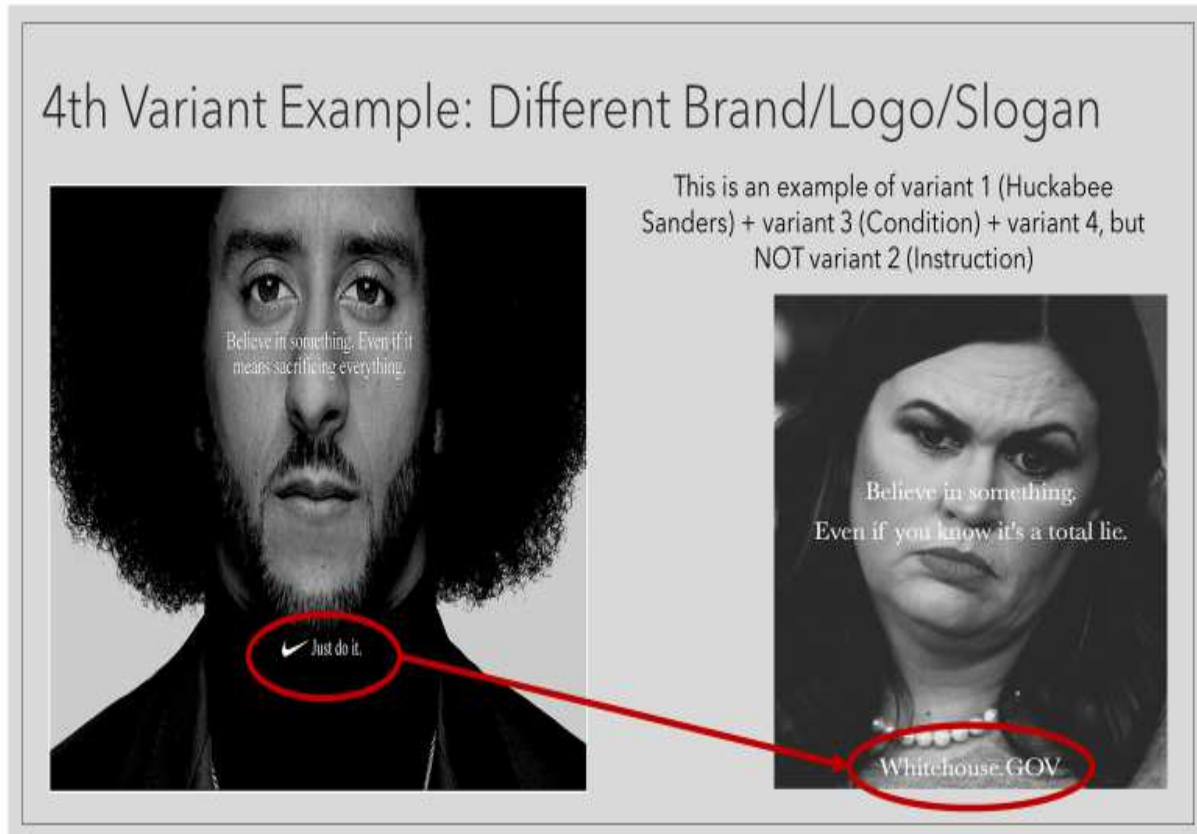


Figure 3.7: Variant Four: Brand/Logo/Slogan


**Variant five: Variants 1-4 in the same manifestation.** The fifth variant is one in which each of the four primary components has been altered and yet the manifestation is recognizable as a Believe in Something. As Davison (2012) describes,

what is replicated from instance to instance is the set of formal characteristics. We are able to identify each instance as part of the larger [. . .] meme because of the similarities in form and regardless of the differences in meaning. (p. 130)

This is also consistent with Shifman’s definition of meme as “a group of related content items” (2014, p. 8). Figure 3.8 illustrates this, as each of the four components in the Trump version are

different from the original (except for the “Swoosh”), yet the manifestation clearly adheres to each of the formal components of the Believe in Something macro.

5<sup>th</sup> Variant Example: Each of the other 4 Still Recognizable



- **Variant 1: Person**  
Kaepernick → Trump
- **Variant 2: Instruction**  
Believe in something → Stand for something
- **Variant 3: Condition**  
Even if it means → Unless you have
- **Variant 4: Brand/Logo/Slogan**  
Just do it → Just dodge it (but same Logo)

Figure 3.8: Variant Five: Each component altered

**Variation six: Additional Branding or Commentary.** This variation is made different from the previous ones by the addition of commentary outside of the basic meme form, or by the addition of a watermark-like logo that is not so much taking the place of the “Swoosh” as it is indicating authorship for a particular iteration. It is six and not five because it is in addition to the macro and not a defining characteristic of the macro itself. If someone had created the original and added their watermark, then that would be the form. It is not. Figure 3.9 presents an example of this type.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Variant Example: Additional Branding



Figure 3.9 Variant 6, Additional Branding

### Types of People and Contexts

As Freeman (2019) indicates, “when we name something, we are, at the same time, framing it conceptually” (p. 17). Each of the examples thus far, except for Mike Tyson in Figure 3.9, has been of people in what I have named the political category. President Trump, Representatives Weiner and Ocasio-Cortez, and former White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders are recognizable from their public positions. There are more people in that category and there are more categories of types of people. Freeman (2019) contends that “the primary purpose of categorizing is to identify the criteria for determining what something is, is made of, or is a part of. Identification or, more precisely, labeling things to define or to order them, is its primary aim” (p. 19). The categories I labeled are, political, sports figures, celebrity

and pop culture, historical, fictional, and animal, each with a different conceptual frame. The spectrum of these categories, and the people in them, represents the range of the Conversations these manifestations address. Once this was achieved, then I could categorize based on Conversation and potential stances or positions within Conversations. In some examples, such as from popular films, the manifestations are contributing less to Conversations, and are more representative of Intertextuality as a tool of inquiry. In the following sections, I will explain the criteria of each category, provide examples to illustrate, and identify some of the Conversations and intertextualities.

**Political.** Political people can be identified from the arena of public politics. There are Presidents (Trump, Obama, Bush, Clinton), Senators (Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren, Ron Paul, Rand Paul), and Representatives (Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Anthony Weiner, Paul Ryan). There are also examples with Vice President Pence, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Rahm Emmanuel, General Mattis, George Soros, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Justice Kavanaugh, and Dr. Blasey-Ford.

Trump, both Clintons, Obama, Sanders, and Warren all have multiple manifestations using their pictures. However, while there are different Conversations involving Hillary Clinton—Benghazi, deleting emails, suspicious suicides—Warren’s manifestations all contribute to the Conversation of her claims of Native American ancestry. Similarly, while manifestations using Trump’s picture contribute to Conversations such as his deportment and language as President, dishonesty, or declassifying FISA, all of Sanders’ manifestations refer in some way to socialism.

Most of the manifestations in this category also alter the original phrasing and use more context-specific language. Figure 3.10, for example, presents two manifestations of the Believe

in Something meme with Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Both are examples of Variant five, in which all the components except the “Swoosh” differ from the original but are still within the macro. The language in each indicates the Conversations they are contributing to and the potential stances they are taking. Once the Conversation was identified, then I asked questions from Gee (2014), such as: how is this piece of language being used to make things significant or not, what identities is this attributing to others, and what sorts of relationships is this seeking to enact with others. In this way, I examined the content (Shifman, 2014).



Figure 3.10: Political examples

**Athletes and coaches.** This category includes athletes and coaches whose manifestations are related to on-field performance, general persona, or otherwise sport-related activity. I put this category second in the organization simply to differentiate between it and the celebrity category which follows. This category includes Matt Ryan, Bill Belichick, Ed Orgeron, Nick Saban, Kawhi Leonard, Kevin Durant, and the Cleveland Browns. Manifestations in this group are

related either to events of sport or to the persona of the individual. Figure 3.11 illustrates this with manifestations of Matt Ryan and Kobe Bryant. These examples are making connections (Gee) to Conversations in the world of sport.

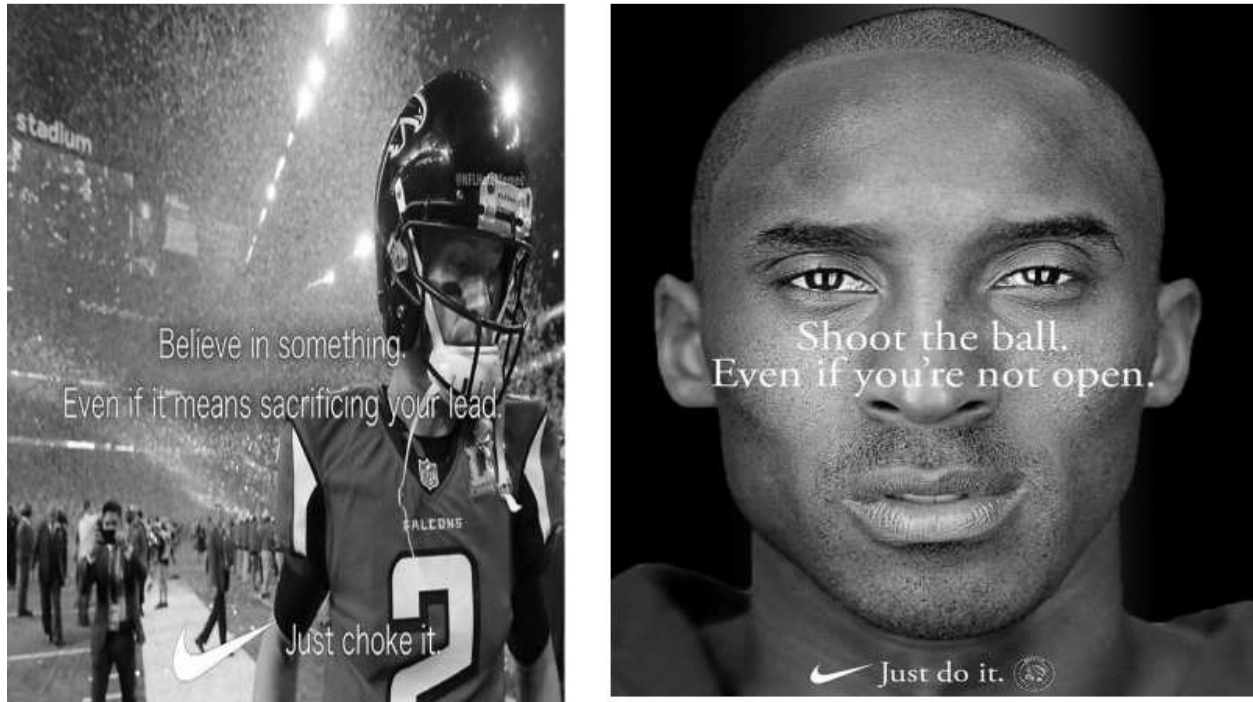


Figure 3.11 Athlete and Coaches examples

**Celebrity and Pop Culture.** The category of Celebrity and Pop Culture includes members who are well-known and recognizable public figures. This category includes performers like musician and actors, professional athletes, and Elon Musk, for example. Members of this category are famous for off-field or real-world behavior. In this category, I distinguish between Bill Cosby and the role of Dr. Cliff Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*. Bill is in this category. Cliff is not. Jussie Smollett is in this category. Jamal Lyon, the role he played on *Empire*, is not in this category. Tiger Woods is in this category because his manifestation places him in the middle of the porn stars and prostitutes he was having sex with, not because of his golfing skills. Johnny Manziel, Heisman-winning quarterback, is in this category because his

manifestation places him between two bikini-clad women who are kissing his cheeks, commenting on how his lifestyle ended his professional career.

Caitlyn Jenner, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jared from Subway, Harvey Weinstein, Papa John (Pizza), Jimmy John (Sandwiches), Brian Williams, R. Kelly, and Rachel Dolezal are in this category. The Conversations these manifestations contribute to involve the behavior or actions of the people involved. I include Colin Kaepernick in this category, as his status is not because of his performance as a quarterback. Figure 3.12 provides examples of two manifestations from the celebrity category, Bill Cosby and Jussie Smollett.



Figure 3.12 Celebrity and Pop Culture Examples

**Historical Figures.** Another category, Historical Figures, is also subdivided into other categories. There is a sub-category for events, which includes 9/11 and the Civil War as historical contexts, along with the Charleston church shooting and Charlottesville marches. There is a category for people, which includes Osama Bin Laden and Robert E. Lee as historical personages, or personas, as well as Dylann Roof, and John Brown, who led the raid on Harper's Ferry, 1859. Pictures of Jesus are in this category. In other words, this includes both recent and distant history, as well as people and events. These represent issues of depth and complexity. This category is most interesting, and meaning is most ambiguous, when examples retain Nike's original language and shift the context to questionable characters. Examples in this category are excellent tools to examine the limits of the phrase, both in the abstract and in the practical.

This category includes people like Stalin, Hitler, Che Guevarra, Ben Franklin, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, David Koresh, The Unabomber, Richard Ramirez, Timothy McVeigh, the Apostle Peter, Lee Harvey Oswald, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Pinochet, Osama bin Laden, and Gandhi, among others.

Some manifestations in this category raise issues that contribute to current Conversations. An image of Stalin, for example, that makes connections with socialism and collectivism, allow for cross-categorical Conversation consideration. What I mean is that socialism and collectivism are the Conversation, in which manifestations of Stalin, Bernie Sanders, and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez each contribute.

Figure 3.13 provides two examples: Gavrilo Princip, whose assassination of Archduke Ferdinand started WWI, and Jesus Christ.



Figure 3.13 Historical Figures

**Fictional Characters.** Connections need not be limited to the world of politics or the celebrity. Another category is Fictional Characters, primarily drawn from film and television. And from those, there were two sources that emerged as categories of their own: *Star Wars*, and *The Office*, the U.S. version of the show. What I mean is there are multiple manifestation of different characters from each of those. Other examples present characters such as Ron Swanson from *Community*, Red Foreman from *That 70s Show*, the Waterboy from *The Waterboy*, the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, George Costanza from *Seinfeld*, and Dale Gribble and Boomhauer from the animated *King of the Hill*. Each of those characters has an attitude or persona in the same manner as Morpheus, Willy Wonka, and Boromir; that is, there is a distinct interpretive tone that is consistent with the character. Examples in this category make connections to items of popular culture, more related to intertextuality than to particular Conversations. However, some

examples do make connections to Conversations, as the examples in figure 3.14 illustrate, with the characters of Dale Gribble, and Karl, from the movie *Slingblade*.



Figure 3.14 Fictional Characters

**Animals.** Finally, we arrive at the Animals. Here is where we place cat and dog manifestations, of which there are multiple examples. There is also a horse example about “Stick to it—Just Glue It”, and a few hamster/gerbil examples. Most of these relate to the behavior of the particular animal that is pictured, but also are consistent with the Believe in Something macro. These are mostly humorous, though there is one in particular that I have included in the three examples in Figure 3.15, as it is “The elephant in the room” if you will, which connects back to Kaepernick’s protest. Kaepernick is a character in that example, which is categorized by the elephant; I refer to Kaepernick as a celebrity. What we find is the meme macro is capable of conveying both the trivial and the significant.



Figure 3.15 Animal manifestations

### Trustworthiness and Validity

Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2018) refer to “trustworthiness” as practiced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the components of which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to “the degree to which the findings are congruent with reality” (p. 187), and transferability implies enough information “be provided to the reader of the study to determine whether the research findings can be applied to other contexts” (p. 187).

Dependability involves being forthright and open about data collection and analysis methods, which I am in this chapter, and will be again in the findings chapter of this study. Confirmability is probably the easiest, as the raw data, the individual manifestations, are readily available

through Google searches using the terms I identified in the Sample Selection section. Figure 3.3, which identifies the components of the Believe in Something macro, follows Davison's (2012) treatment of the Advice Dog meme, and that part of the process is certainly transferable to other types of memes, as if identify variants. The variants specific to each meme and macro will be different, however.

Maxwell (2013) identifies "rich data" as one way of working toward validity. Validity in this sense is used in a qualitative, not quantitative sense. Rich data appears to be the most effective strategy he provides, in terms of this study, and in terms of "credibility". Rich data "are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on" (p. 126). This was my intention in developing this study, in choice of data and analytical methods.

The 350 manifestation of the Believe in Something meme include prominent politicians, such as Donald Trump, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders, involved in different public Conversations, about which there are numerous sides to be aware of. I think I have done my best to not takes sides on the issues and topics that are presented, as they are of less importance to me than how meme communicates those issues and positions. One measure I have taken is to not assume either the productive or receptive stance of people who produce and consume these manifestations. The result, as demonstrated in the findings chapter, is frequently the emergence of multiple potential stances and meanings for each manifestation. Changes to the language in variants 2-4 sometimes include commentary that might help clarify a position or stance. Typically, more changes to the language made meaning potentially less ambiguous, as evidenced in many of the political examples. Manifestations that maintained Nike's original language, while substituting the picture of a more nefarious or infamous character—Lee Harvey Oswald or Dylan Roof, for example—provide at least two distinct potential meanings. On one hand is a

critique of Nike's language, an ironic interpretation. On another is an unironic interpretation, one of prescriptive action, potentially dangerous action. Whether these are read as ironic or unironic depends on the receptive stance of the individuals consuming them.

Freeman (2019) contends that, "whether concepts are thoughts to be grounded in perception, cognition, or language, or in all of these things, it is important that the assumptions researchers make about what it is they are researching are clearly understood and stated" (p. 19). I will endeavor to do that, now. I come to this topic being significantly influenced by Neil Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. He outlines, describes, and explains differences between print- and image-based epistemologies (primarily TV), including how they deliver content, how the method of delivery affects the content, and he makes judgments about the quality of the information and how that affects public discourse. The following passage from Postman sums, perhaps, my fundamental bias in this study:

Puffs of smoke are insignificantly complex to express ideas on the nature of existence [. . .] You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content. [. . .] You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content. (p. 7)

I believe the logical extension in the progress is, "You cannot conduct serious public discourse through memes. The form excludes, works against, and potentially negates the content". And I believe the quality of the content is directly related to the quality of the discourse, which is, in turn, directly related to the quality of the democracy.

What strategies do I employ, then, to manage my bias, this belief in the insufficiency of the meme to carry the weight of significant content? Most importantly, I think, and something that will be evident in the findings chapter, is a setting aside of the pejorative perspective.

That is, to reserve judgment until the research is done and findings presented. To present multiple potential meanings for each manifestation, as I indicated previously. And to consider strengths and weaknesses of memes as thoroughly as possible, so that an external auditor or future researcher with different perspectives might arrive at similar results. I will apply my Critical perspective in interpreting the findings, but I will be clear when I am doing so, so as to differentiate between the findings and my interpretations of the findings. Finally, in this section, I would like to share two manifestations from the data set, that represent a beginning and an end to the research process. These are presented in figure 3.16.



Figure 3.16 Stevie Wonder and Galileo

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

This study examines one type of meme, what I call the Believe in Something meme. The data set is comprised of 350 different manifestations that conform to the formal and structural components of the meme. Criterion for selecting data was simply that a manifestation obviously conformed to the Believe in Something macro. The data set includes a variety of politicians, actors and actresses, celebrities, fictional characters, and animals. The manifestations contribute to different public Conversations on a variety of topics and suggest different positions that may be understood as potential stances in those Conversations. Topics range from the trivial to the significant.

A meme such as “What if I told you Morpheus” that has existed longer obviously would have a larger data set and different formal components that comprise the macro. The data set for the first iteration of this study contained hundreds of manifestations of multiple meme types, all engaged in the Colin Kaepernick Conversation, regarding his protest. That was also before Nike’s involvement. This study examines manifestations of one type of meme to determine what it communicates, how it communicates, and the range of conversations to which it contributes. Those findings are interpreted through a Critical perspective to consider what the discourse produced by this meme looks like, whose has influence in it, and who benefits from it.

### **Conclusion**

Broadly, Internet memes are pieces of language with identifiable components, contributing to public discussions about a wide range of topics. The components comprise the macro, the template for communicating with the piece of language. Each meme macro consists primarily of a picture that represents a context, along with some sort of commentary or related text. Re-mixing the components produces different meanings within the framework of each

macro. Manifestations are frequently grouped on parody sites, though not all examples are parodies.

The form of the meme itself influences in three distinct ways. Memes allow many people to participate in public discourse on an ever-expanding body of topics. The small size of manifestations limits what can be discussed, requiring a narrowing of context and perspective. The result is that discourse is conducted by providing an abstract, synopsis, or image of an issue rather than an issue itself. The unique formal components of each macro (picture and text) frame how something can be discussed, which requires adherence to a specific style of expression. Though memes allow broad participation by simplifying images, each type of meme macro possesses its own style of expression.

The Believe in Something meme is an empirical form that can be analyzed according to discourse analysis methods. The different categories of types suggest the broad range of topics and Conversations with a capital C (Gee (2014) to which manifestations of the meme contribute. While the meme allows for broader participation, each manifestation is limited by the size of the frame and by the rules imposed by the macro. As such, the Believe in Something meme contributes to discourse in specific ways. These findings will be identified in Chapter Four.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### Introduction

This study set out to examine Believe in Something memes as tools of public discourse. Marcuse (1964, 1965) provided the theoretical framework through his explanations of one-dimensional society and repressive tolerance. Shifman (2013, 2014) and Davison (2012) provided the tools for a structural analysis of the memes, and for identifying component parts. These parts were then interrogated by adapting Gee's (2014) method of discourse analysis. The research questions this study set out to answer are:

*Research Question:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse?

*RQ 1A:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse?

*RQ 1B:* Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

The findings are organized and presented according to the research questions. It is essential to note that interpretation and meaning in memes are, like beauty, in the eyes of the beholder. Different receptive stances produce different reactions and opinions. Manifestations of the Believe in Something meme can be read ironically or unironically, for example, producing different interpretations. A common thread that runs throughout the findings is that many manifestations illustrate more than one finding. Many manifestations use parody to criticize politicians or celebrities for example. Many examples abridge arguments and facilitate

dichotomous responses. I selected examples that provide clear illustrations for each finding. As political manifestations were my primary focus, most of the manifestations selected relate to politics in some way, some clearly from the political Left and some just as clearly from the political Right.

Table 4.1 Findings and Definitions

The Believe in Something Meme is in the Form of an Advertisement	Manifestations of the Believe in Something meme macro follow the form of Nike's ad
The Meme Idealizes	Elevates a person as worthy of recognition and emulation, as Nike's original ad does
The Meme Critiques	The opposite of Idealizing, using the form to criticize
The Meme Abridges	Over-simplification, reduction of complex issues to single points
The Meme Dichotomizes	Facilitates quick, non-reflective responses of agreement or disagreement, support or opposition
The Meme Parodies	Use of humor to provide commentary, frequently mocking, sarcasm, ridicule, and derision
Manifestations are Independent Expressions	Manifestations can contribute to any conversation without regard to any other manifestations in the conversation, even when using the same form

### Research Question 1

The first research question was: What can an analysis of the Believe in Something (BIS) meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse? Analysis of the meme itself revealed seven findings: the BIS meme Advertises, the BIS meme Idealizes, the

BIS meme Critiques, the BIS meme Abridges, the BIS meme Dichotomizes, the BIS meme Parodies, and manifestations of the BIS meme are independent expressions.

### **Finding 1: The Believe in Something Meme is in the Form of an Advertisement**

The original macro of this meme was an advertisement with memetic qualities. When it was replicated, it became a meme. All subsequent manifestations take the form of advertisements because the macro was originally an advertisement. This is not to say that every manifestation was created with the intent of selling something, only that by following the macro each manifestation takes the form of an advertisement. Figure 4.2 presents the original advertisement from Nike, featuring Kaepernick. The picture of Kaepernick works with the phrase “Believe in something. Even if it costs you everything” and refers to Kaepernick’s activism to create an image of Kaepernick that represents certain qualities and positions. The Nike ad identifies those qualities and positions as worthy of recognition, elevation, and emulation, which presents an image of Nike as worthy of the same. Nike and Kaepernick each do a celebrity endorsement of the other’s product, in this sense. In this example and all those in the data set, people can form favorable or unfavorable opinions on the product that is being advertised. In the original example, the “product” extends beyond being merely shoes or athletic apparel, and the products in subsequent examples are equally less tangible.



Figure 4.2 Original Nike Kaepernick Ad

### **Finding 2: The Believe in Something Meme Idealizes**

The first manifestation with a variation appeared two days after Nike released their ad campaign. Donald Trump, Jr. posted a re-mixed ad with President Trump instead of Kaepernick. This manifestation is presented in Figure 4.3. The language remained the same, but contained a different product, a different spectrum of qualities and positions. Manifestations that retain the original language idealize people other than Kaepernick. Idealize in this sense is used differently than Davison's (2012) concept of ideal, the idea that is expressed by the meme. When the manifestation idealizes someone, I mean that it elevates that person in the same way that Nike's ad elevated Kaepernick as worthy of recognition and emulation. It represents a putting of someone on a pedestal. This is what has been done with the manifestation of President Trump.

This is no longer an advertisement by Nike but is consistent with the form of the original advertisement. Donald Trump is portrayed as representing a set of qualities and positions. Those qualities and positions are the product being sold. And opinions on the product, whether one wishes to buy the argument that the philosophy is rightly applied to Trump, are made without the need for reflective thought.



Figure 4.3: President Trump

### **Finding 3: The Believe in Something Meme Critiques**

The first two examples are slightly ambiguous in the sense that they ostensibly provide the opportunity for people to decide if they agree or disagree with the idealization of Kaepernick or Trump. Figure 4.4 presents two manifestations that are selling different perspectives on Kaepernick and the issue of police brutality. These are less ambiguous than the first two

examples because they contain added language and modified phrasing. These examples critique Kaepernick's actions and motives. Critique is easier to identify when the language is modified. The first claims the narrative to which Kaepernick referred as the motivation for his protest is not a true narrative of reality. The second manifestation does not dismiss the accuracy or truth of the narrative. Instead, it suggests that the narrative Kaepernick represents is not the most important issue. The lines, "Blacks killing blacks is a much larger problem. Just ignore it" as presented as "the elephant in the room", i.e., the real problem that is being ignored at the cost of the following the other narrative.

Both examples seek to negate the narrative of police brutality and Kaepernick's protest. The first by claiming it is false, and the second by claiming it is not the real problem. Each implies that the position they counter is not well-informed. Neither presents further evidence for the claims they make. As meme manifestations in the form of advertisements, they are not required to present more evidence. These examples were selected because they modify the original to deliberately critique Kaepernick's actions and motivations, directly countering Nike's idealization.



Figure 4.4: Counter Perspectives

#### **Finding 4: The Believe in Something Meme Abridges**

Memes are limited by their size as to what or how much content they contain. Individual memes and manifestations of memes simply cannot convey all the nuances, subtleties, or complexities of an issue, argument, or position. Of necessity, the people in each manifestation represent a larger issue or context. Issues are reduced to single prioritized facets which presuppose the actions that have been taken. The examples in Figure 4.5 illustrate this. It is presupposed that Clinton deleted her emails, and that Trump asked the Russians to retrieve those emails. The events and actions have been abridged to single facets. The full truth of either is less relevant than the appearance provided by the abridgements, which each prioritize one facet of the larger context. The actions of each are described as “treason”.



Figure 4.5 Emails, Russia, and Treason

The manifestations in Figure 4.5 were chosen because they both speak to a common conversation from different sides. Neither tells the “whole” story or even a complete accounting of its own position. The discourse these facilitate is dependent upon people who are already informed and have some understanding about the issue, and likely already have an opinion on it.

#### **Finding 5: The Believe in Something Meme Dichotomizes**

Examples in Figure 4.6 illustrate how manifestations can facilitate dichotomized responses, positing scenarios in either-or, polemic responses. There are two manifestations of Donald Trump, one calling for his impeachment and the other for his re-election. No reasons are given for either position, which are polemically opposed and critique each other. Recipients can agree or disagree, as with the examples in Figure 4.5, above, but cannot argue. These examples

situate the discourse within a dichotomous, either-or frame.



Figure 4.6: Impeachment/Second Term

### **Finding 6: The Believe in Something Meme Parodies**

Jokes and humor are particularly well-suited to memetic forms. Different versions of the same joke may be re-told with slight variations from teller to teller, just as the manifestations in this data set differ from producer to producer yet remain recognizable. Examples that are deliberately remixed to be humorous are said to be parodies. The humor in these examples frequently takes the form of sarcasm, mockery, or ridicule. While these examples may critique the people in them, they do so as parodies, with mean-spirited humor. The manifestations in Figures 4.7 and 4.8 illustrate this.



Figure 4.7: Elizabeth Warren

This manifestation is clearly intended as a parody, as the Photoshopped Native American headdress on Senator Warren seems to mock her claims of Native American ancestry, ridiculing her. This is reinforced by the text, which connects the issue of Warren's claims to the Believe Women movement which encourages claims of sexual violence and assault to be believed. That example combines and equates two different types of claims. Another example is presented in Figure 4.8, featuring Tom Cruise, referring to his belief in Scientology. These manifestations were selected to illustrate how the meme can use parody to both delegitimize a politician or issue and to mock a celebrity. In this sense, there is no difference between Warren and Cruise, though the first is an elected official and the latter is an actor.



Figure 4.8: Tom Cruise

### **Finding 7: Manifestations of the BIS Meme are Independent Expressions**

Manifestations of the Believe in Something meme can contribute to conversations without listening to any other voices in the conversation. Memes allow for a range of voices to be heard, including fictional and non-fictional perspectives. Each manifestation contributes to larger conversations but does not necessarily converse with other manifestations in the same discussion. It is as though participants are called upon to share their opinions without regard for the opinions that others might share. For example, consider the manifestations in Figures 4.10 and 4.11. These have been arranged according to the topic of what one should believe in. In these examples, the voices of comedians, philosophers, and characters from film and television are contributing to the discussion on the same plane. Likely intended to be jokes, these examples nonetheless convey serious perspectives. They are not arguing with each other. They are

expressed independently of each other. They are not responding to each other, yet each contributes to the discussion.



Figure 4.10: Nietzsche and Eddie Murphy



Figure 4.11: Ron Swanson, *Parks and Recreation*; Vizzini, *The Princess Bride*; The Dude, *The Big Lebowski*

It is also important to note that characters from popular film and television carry the same weight in discussions as do actual political or current events. Non-fiction is held in the same regard as fiction. The Believe in Something meme makes no distinction in quality of contribution based on the categories assigned in this study.

### Research Question 1A

Research question 1A asks: What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse? Analysis revealed three answers about who has power and influence: Meme production sites, Nike, and entertainment media have power and influence.

#### Finding 8: Meme production sites have power and influence

Meme production is facilitated online by sites that provide the tools of production and distribution. Some of the major sites where users can create and share examples are, *Memegenerator.org*, *meme-creator.com*, *imgflip.com*, *memecreator.org*, *makeameme.org*, and the *Whale* app. They are like digital printing presses with step-by-step processes to guide users. Not every manifestation bears the digital watermark of site of origin, and most do not. However, even those sites whose watermarks do not appear have the Believe in Something templates on their sites. The sites in Figure 4.12 are the best and clearest examples cropped and enlarged from manifestations in the data set.



Figure 4.12 Sites of Production, Distribution, and Engagement

Though not specifically part of the study, social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have power and influence by extension because they are sites where memes are shared and where engagement takes place.

### **Finding 9: Nike has Power and Influence in Digital Public Discourse**

As presented in Finding 1, the form of the Believe in Something meme is an advertisement. Manifestations follow the macro, advertisements consistent with the components provided in the original. Nike supplied the frame, the phrase, and the image; subsequent manifestations modified those components.

Other large organizations, including political organizations such as the Democratic and Republican Parties, have the same potential. They have power and influence in three ways. First, they have the resources to produce widespread marketing campaigns. Second, they can use that from the first two, what can be said is said via slogan.



Figure 4.13: Variants in Logo and Slogan

The examples in Figure 4.13 present a selection of slogans and various logos cropped from the data set. These examples appropriate the Swastika, Hammer and Sickle, DNC donkey, GOP elephant, and Nike's Swoosh logo. Some keep the "Just do it" while others modify the slogan, keeping the "Just". Nike has influenced the type of language that can be used, regardless of who is using it.

Already a corporate giant, Nike's significant marketing reach made the elevation and promotion of Kaepernick and the issue of police brutality possible. The marketing campaign featuring Kaepernick was the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their iconic "Just do it" slogan, adorning their apparel and advertisements for three decades. Nike has power and influence not merely because they broadened awareness of the issue but because they aligned themselves and took a stance on the issue, commodifying it in the process. And they were rewarded, as the campaign received an Emmy, recognizing Nike's work as exceptional and essentially establishing the campaign as a model for others to follow.

### **Finding 10: Entertainment Media have Power and Influence**

Entertainment media, particularly from film and television have power and influence in two distinct ways. The first is that parody news shows such as the Daily Show and the Colbert Report, for example, contribute satirical perspectives on issues that viewers adopt and include in discourse. the second is that the content of films and TV shows itself becomes the content of memes, as memes are carriers of popular culture. The two examples presented in Figure 4.14 provide an illustration of each. The first emerges from The Daily Show and critiques an issue. The second is Emperor Palpatine from *Star Wars* in either an ironic or unironic idealization.



Figure 4.14 The Daily Show and Star Wars

### Research Question 1B

Research question 1B asked: Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

#### **Finding 11: Nike's Interests are Being Served**

Nike's "Just Do It" slogan and "Swish" logo appear in the majority of manifestations, essentially free publicity, created and shared by people uncompensated for their efforts. And it appears in manifestations across every categorical type. Every example in Figure 4.16 refers emphasis back to Nike, regardless of whether the logo is the Nike Swoosh or the Nazi Swastika, and regardless of whether the slogan is "Just Do It" or "Just Screw It". Manifestations that seek

to critique or chastise Nike using the form of the original advertisement, also always refer emphasis back to Nike, as illustrated in Figure 4.15.



Figure 4.18: Critiques of Nike

### Conclusion

The Believe in Something meme is a tool for public discourse. Originally an advertisement, all manifestations of it are the form of an advertisement, deliberately or not. It may be ambiguous, retaining the original language and allowing consumers to determine if they agree or disagree that the philosophy is appropriately applied. It may be a critique, adapting the

language to convey perspectives on context specific situations, and allowing consumers to agree or disagree with the perspective. It abridges arguments, contexts, and positions. It dichotomizes positions and responses. Manifestations parody the original and any politician or celebrity whose behavior is deemed worthy of ridicule. And manifestations can contribute to conversations without conversing with other manifestations.

Mememes provide the potential for broad participation, but voices are limited in what they can say and subsequently do. Mememes do not require reflective thought but encourage automatic responses, expressions of opinion as participation. Fiction and non-fiction perspectives, trivial and profound are given the same weight, as in Figure 4.15, with Anakin Skywalker and Dylann Roof.



Figure 4.19: Anakin Skywalker, *Star Wars*; Dylann Roof, Charleston Church Shooter

While this type of discourse serves the interests of Nike, citizens who desire to participate in a well-functioning democracy are not being served. Of course, that was not Nike's objective. Memes may provide broad easy participation and a plurality of voices to be heard, but as Marcuse (1964, 1965) indicates, good democracy demands more. Memes can idealize, denigrate, or criticize. Memes abridge arguments and dichotomize positions. Memes can mock or parody people and issues. Discourse facilitated by memes is composed of these characteristics. Discourse composed of those characteristics, Marcuse contends, is discourse indicative of repression and domination, not liberation. That is the content of Chapter Five, where the findings will be discussed through the lens of Marcuse, critical theory, and the commodification of discourse.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Discussion, and Implications

#### Introduction

This study examined the digital public discourse produced by Internet memes, and asked these questions:

*Research Question:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about the form of memes and how they contribute to public discourse?

*RQ 1A:* What can an analysis of the Believe in Something meme tell us about who has power and influence in digital public discourse?

*RQ 1B:* Whose interests are being served by the discourse?

#### Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate two conclusions. The first speaks to the quality of the discourse produced by the Believe in Something meme and by memes in general. While there is no denying the vast increase of participation memes provide, the discourse facilitated by them offers no new information, little discussion, and requires neither reflection nor depth of knowledge to participate. What it does offer is the opportunity to idealize, criticize, and parody actions and events that have already occurred. It has the appearance of efficacious discourse but lacks substance. It is a pseudo-discourse with little possibility of enacting positive change. The second conclusion flows from the first. A discourse that is not effective at producing positive change, yet appears to do so, is a fundamental component of a democracy that actively reinforces unequal conditions. Tools of public discourse frame what can be said, how it can be said, and

where it can be said. A system capable of manipulating all three exerts considerable influence over public discourse and therefore over the resulting practices of democracy. We can at the least identify some elements, facets, and girders of such a system from the findings.

### **Discussion**

The concept of Pseudo-discourse I propose is based upon earlier considerations of media and discourse. Boorstin (1961) introduced the concept of the pseudo-event, which described the content of public discourse increasingly based in images. That discourse reflected the influence of advertising material, both print and television. Pseudo-events are not organic, and they are “neither true nor false” (p. 214). Rather, they are deliberately designed, staged, and orchestrated with desired returns on investments. They are easily comprehended, repeatable, and knowledge of them becomes the criteria to participate in discourse. Pseudo-events become the content of public discourse. As they are neither true nor false, one can only have opinions about them. Pseudo-events are intended to captivate and engage, to provide topics for discussion.

Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling was not a pseudo-event. Nike’s presentation of Kaepernick as the face of their ad campaign, on the other hand, was a pseudo-event. I assume Kaepernick acted organically, and that his explanation was genuine. Televised political debates on the other hand are a type of pseudo-event. Ostensibly, they are planned, promoted, and produced to provide citizens with the information needed to participate in democracy. Discourse is thus commodified, as the debates give way to the true products, the variety of perspectives and commentary provided by the major news organizations, each unique in its coverage of the pseudo-event. Public discourse is then conducted with the language and perspectives provided on the news channels and subsequent media outlets. As Rushkoff (2013) describes it, “incapable of grasping news directly, the public was to be informed about issues only after a benevolent elite

had crafted all this information and its implications into simple and palatable stories” (p. 45).

The components of discourse are thus pre-packaged and disseminated, ready to be incorporated into public discourse.

Jenkins, Ford, & Green (2013) indicate that material spreads when it is easy to share, like memes. Things also are spreadable when the content is relevant to a group: “material becomes spreadable because it articulates the sentiment of the moment, a situation people have experienced but couldn’t easily explain or an insight people hadn’t quite been able to put into words” (p. 215). Marcuse (1964) raises an important question, “if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel and imagine for themselves?” (p. 50). Especially if, as Jenkins, et al (2013) suggest, someone else says it first, better than we think we can?

Postman (1985) explored television as the dominant communicative tool of our society, informing all areas of public life. As television communicates through images, it became the ideal medium for dissemination of pseudo-events. Postman identifies the resulting discursive landscape as a pseudo-context:

A pseudo-context is a structure invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use. But the use the pseudo-context provides is not action, or problem-solving, or change. It is the only use left for information with no genuine connection to our lives. And that, of course, is to amuse. The pseudo-context is the last refuge, so to say, of a culture overwhelmed by irrelevance, incoherence, and impotence. (p. 76)

I argue that memes are a pseudo-context in this regard. They provide the opportunity for increased participation in public conversations and they make it fun and amusing to do so. The information they contain is useful in most cases simply for engaging people to share their

opinions about issues they have little power to change. The Believe in Something meme, for example, invites participants to idealize or criticize or mock people and events, but depends upon receptive stances that are already familiar with the issue and have opinions on it.

Consider the examples of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in Figure 5.1. The first prioritizes Clinton allegedly deleting emails and the second Trump allegedly asking Russia to hack her account and find them. They provide commentary on the issue and offer opinions as to what should be done, but they offer no new information, nor do they provide the opportunity to do little more than to agree or disagree with the opinion. I would suggest that the entire issue of the emails and hacking constitutes a pseudo-event, a scandal for both participants that serves as fodder for public discourse. This is not to suggest that neither event happened, only that the issue provides a topic for citizens to be actively engaged with in public discourse. The meme, which is the vehicle for discursive expression, is a pseudo-context, providing participants with a place to convey opinions on fragmented information concerning an issue they can do nothing about. But anyone who chooses can share their opinion and make their voice heard, giving the appearance of an openly democratic society.



Figure 5.1 Clinton and Trump Treason

### Advertising

The above manifestations take the form of advertisements as they follow the form of the macro, itself an advertisement. They are also contributions to political discourse. Marcuse (1964) contends that

If the language of politics tends to become that of advertising, thereby bridging the gap between two formerly very different realms of society [. . .] domination has been incorporated into the daily performances and relaxation of the citizens, and the “symbols” of politics are also those of business, commerce, and fun. (p. 103)

The language of politics is being expressed through the form of advertising. Boorstin (1961) contends that “the right ‘image’ will elect a president or sell an automobile, religion, cigarette, or suit of clothes” (p. 183). And Postman (1985) notes, the goal “is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to appear as if you are, which is another matter altogether [. . .] advertising” (p.

126). The more that advertising informs our public discourse, the less likely we are getting the information needed to make good decisions.

Rushkoff (2013) examines one facet of advertising that speaks to the image and appearance, brand mythology. Keebler's cookies are made by elves in trees instead of by humans in non-local factories. This is indicative of Marcuse (1964), noting that "the publicity agents shape the universe of communication in which the one-dimensional behavior expresses itself" (p. 85). Nike does not merely produce high quality athletic shoes and apparel, they also "Believe in Something". They used their considerable public position to elevate and idealize a cause. One product is Nike's apparel, and another is Nike's public image. There is no need for the public image of Nike to be congruous with the reality of the corporation and its practices. The purpose of brand mythology, according to Rushkoff, is not to augment reality, but to replace the truth. Rushkoff explains:

Advertisements in print and commercials on television feed us the mythology of the brand so that it is spring-loaded into our psyche—ready to emerge fully formed when we see the label in the store. Each label we see recalls and unpacks advertisements and commercials, which in turn unpack the cultural mythologies they have appropriated. (p. 167)

Marcuse (1964) describes this process as "being preconditioned for the spontaneous acceptance of what is offered" (p. 62).

Similar to the effect of brand mythology replacing truth in business and marketing, Anderson and Sheeler (2014) suggest that the array of "digital discourses that comprise political culture does not substitute for political reality; it becomes political reality. Political identity is, therefore, less a reflection of a politician's authentic self and more a conflation of diverse and

sometimes conflicting image fragments” (p. 228). Applied to the above manifestations, Hillary Clinton is not a former Senator and Secretary of State, but rather a former Presidential candidate guilty of scandalous and treasonous behavior. Likewise, President Trump is also guilty of scandalous and treasonous behavior. As Boorstin (1961) indicates, believability supplants truth as the criteria for determining credibility. Believability is the language of advertising.

Brookfield (2005) asserts that “language—the prime tool we use in the most private spheres of our lives to mediate and communicate reality—has been ravaged by the consumer society” (p. 192). We are not told that we are using forms of advertising or that employing such forms might be working against our interests. It seems a natural progression: more discourse is being conducted on the Internet, and more people can contribute so long as they contribute using this form. And so long as the form is convenient and accessible, it will be used.

### **Entertainment Media**

Martinez-Rolan & Pinero-Otero (2016) suggest that “today, political statements have left institutions in order to create a complex environment where new and old media converge” (p. 145). Peck (2014) describes how the “Internet enables methods of engaging with visual communications that are perceived as alternative to traditional institutional power structures” (p. 1643). If political discourse is moving away from traditional institutions, what are the alternatives, the new influences, and who are the new experts informing the discourse? Jenkins, et al (2013) indicate that “the concept of civic media moves away from the discourses of public institutions, taking on more of the qualities of entertainment media as creators seek to expand the communities through which they circulate” (p. 227).

Tannen (1998) suggests that in addition to the content of a story, consumers also get “the attitude, the tone, the very wording. The writer of the snappy headline or a jazzy story is

suggesting to citizens how they should regard their government, the world, and one another.” (p. 83). Headlines, one-liners, and zingers in the discourse, easy to learn, remember and contribute, become incessantly repeated until they become part of the discourse and culture. This is one area in which entertainment media have power and influence in the discourse, particularly political parody and late-night talk shows, whose hosts make their audiences laugh. And whose monologues are regularly the subjects of casual conversations at work the following day, suggests Boorstin (1961). In other words, they are part of an influencing system before they are ever transmitted through memes.

The *Weekend Update* segment on *Saturday Night Live* parodies news shows and the news. Shows like *The Daily Show*, first with Jon Stewart and now with Trevor Noah as host, attract viewers by conducting a daily parody of the news. More recently, CBS has debuted *Tooning Out the News*, a daily cartoon parody of news shows and the news of the day. As Tannen suggests, consumers of these shows and clips do not merely receive the facts of the news, but also internalize the tones and one-liners used to communicate those facts. The tone or interpretive perspective becomes as much a part of the product as the content itself, how to think about the facts. The tone of parody in these shows is conducive to comedy and entertainment; zings and mic drops are the methods of presenting certain facets as seemingly unanswerable or as negating positions. The purpose is to get laughs or agreement, not to necessarily foster productive discourse. Internet memes, with their propensity to utilize humor, function in essentially the same way.

Rushkoff (2014) describes “the CNN effect,” the result of a 24/7 news cycle in which it is more important to respond quickly to developing situations than to respond well. The CNN effect influenced the timing of discourse, requiring immediate responses which did not allow for

the reflection and careful thought Marcuse insists is essential to effective public discourse. I suggest we should now consider the Daily Show effect, in which humor, parody, satire, and sarcasm influence the tone of public discourse. Content provided via a parody news show such as *The Daily Show* and content provided on Fox News or ABC News differ less in terms of “facts” and more in terms of how those facts should be regarded and considered. As Milner (2013a) describes of OWS, “alongside the daily deluge of jokes and links, participants shared public perspectives on issues fundamental to democratic rule” (2388). Is this so very different from watching an 11pm news broadcast followed by an 11:30 humorous talk show? I do not think so. I think it signifies what Marcuse (1964) describes: “In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives” (p. 11). Public discourse, in this sense, is becoming a joke.

With news and entertainment media comprising part of the controls, Marcuse (1964) suggests, “One-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information” (p14). Once promoted, as Tannen describes, “it invisibly molds our way of thinking about people, actions, and the world around us. [. . . and] then limits our imaginations when we consider what we can do about situations we would like to understand or change. (p. 15). Discourse and democracy are constrained and directed by ideologies of which we are unaware.

Brookfield (2005) contends that “dominant ideology comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experience and live their lives” (p. viii). I argue that those beliefs and practices, attitudes and perspectives are disseminated by news and entertainment media as discussed in the previous sections. Brookfield continues, indicating that “when it works effectively, it ensures that an unequal [. . .] society is

able to reproduce itself with minimal opposition” (p. viii). Tannen (1998) speaks to this, as well, suggesting that when our perspective is automatically one which sees issues as either-or, we deny ourselves the ability to look for different and possibly effective solutions. In Marcuse’s (1964) terms, our thinking is thus one-dimensional, influenced by the technological controls not even recognized as being there. Which, as Brookfield suggests, is the purpose of dominant ideology, “to convince people that world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous. (pp. viii-ix).

If the pseudo-discourse is systematically promoted as a primary form of public discourse, and if its primary purpose is to provide the appearance of effective participation, there is a strong possibility that the resulting democracy is being manipulated. The content of such public discourse is composed primarily of knowledge of pseudo-events, which only appear to inform. They are discussed in pseudo-contexts which limit what can be said and how and promote limited choices and possibilities for action. When the time comes for people to engage in democratic participation, they have been “informed” about the important facets of issues, have had the opportunity to engage in public discourse about those facets, and are presented with pre-selected options from which to choose. It is democracy, but it is a form of democracy in which the people do not make decisions as much as they accept the choices that are offered, believing their voices are being heard.

As Jenkins, et al (2013) indicate, material becomes relevant and meaningful “when it states a community’s stance on an issue of intense interest at a particular moment better than its members think they can, otherwise” (p. 215). When the practice of participating in discourse through memes becomes the norm, there is no opportunity—because there is no need—for

individual reflection. As Peck (2014) describes, “certain ways of expressing social relationships emerge around online communities and guide the emergence of communicative events [ . . . ] individuals enact social identities consistent with group expectations and values” (p. 1644). Boorstin (1961) suggests that, “public opinion—once the public’s expression—becomes more and more an image into which the public fits its expression. Public opinion becomes filled with what was already there. It is the people looking in the mirror” (p. 238). As a function of repressive tolerance, Marcuse (1965) indicates, “the process of reflection ends where it started: in the given conditions and relations” (p. 96).

Jenkins, et al (2013) recognize the concern, but also contend that “audiences are not simply pawns for commercial interests or political elites; their shared identities and collective communication capacity allow them to speak out about their perceived interests” (p. 165). It is necessary to consider what their capacity allows them to say when they speak. If it is to be understood by others, other outside the community, it must be composed of the language the rest of society speaks. Marcuse (1965) contends that “other ideas can be expressed, but [ . . . ] are immediately ‘evaluated’ [ . . . ] in terms of the public language [ . . . ] which determines “a priori” the direction in which the thought process moves” (p. 96). The process becomes one in which “public discourse creeps into private conversations, private minds” (Tannen, 1998, p. 30). Marcuse (1964) notes that this one-dimensional “universe of discourse is populated by self-validating hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations” ( p. 14). Or, as Tannen (1998) describes, “culture, in a sense, is an environment of narratives that we hear repeatedly until they seem to make self-evident sense in explaining human behavior” (p. 13). Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything, for example. When public conversations are composed of these popular and

commonly disseminated phrases and slogans in easily accessible vehicles like memes, I think we must consider the possibility that the discourse is a pseudo-discourse that reinforces oppressive relationships while providing the appearances of democratic openness and vibrancy.

Anderson and Sheeler (2014) indicate that “mimetic texts have the potential to capitulate to hegemonic ideologies; challenge conventional power structures; or, paradoxically, do both. (p. 235). Hristova (2014) similarly notes that memes “allow for the dissolution of points of ideological conflict as well as for the reestablishment of a normative narrative” (p. 265). What these scholars are referring to is how memes as discursive tools can communicate. As message-carriers memes can challenge or reinforce narratives. As a discourse, they fulfill a different function.

Ross & Rivers (2017) explain that “memes are an organic means through which citizens can respond in almost real time to contemporary political events with no fear of delay or censorship by mainstream media” (p. 3). The lack of concern over censorship is what is interesting here. Hristova (2014), examining Occupy Wall Street, concurs that “The space of ‘digital democracy,’ in which the visual memes as well as humorous modalities of Occupy flourished, faced less censorship and suppression” (p. 274). While on the surface this would appear to be more openly democratic, a closer examination reveals this was not the case.

Hristova (2014) explains that “non- interference in the arena of the digital reinforced the claim that we live in a democratic state – a state in which Internet users can and do indeed express their freedom through creative expression” (p. 274). And as Milner (2013a) indicates, OWS encouraged such digital participation, even providing meme macro templates to users as well as instructions on how to use them. Hristova (2014) notes this was seen “as proof of

democratic political structure, even though on the ground protesters were prosecuted heavily by the state in a highly undemocratic fashion” (p. 274). Or, as Marcuse (1965) describes:

those minorities which strive for a change of the whole itself will, under optimal conditions which rarely prevail, be left free to deliberate and discuss, to speak and to assemble—and will be left harmless and helpless in the face of the overwhelming majority, which militates against qualitative social change. (p. 94)

This is not the same thing as memes being used to delegitimize political candidates or challenge corporate narratives. Memes in those circumstances, as examined by Anderson and Sheeler (2014), Glantz, et al (2015), and Ross & Rivers (2017) were used to some effect to discredit their targets, political candidates and corporations.

Hristova (2014) and Marcuse (1965) are explaining something different, in that seemingly unfettered digital discourse is allowed for two reasons. First, it is allowed because it gives the appearance of an open and vibrant democracy, rich with many polyvocal (Milner, 2013a) voices contributing to the discourse. Second, it is allowed because it has no practical efficacy; the tools of suppression outside of the digital environment are too well established. Under these circumstances, it does not matter whether the memes reinforce or challenge any narrative Hristova (2014) contends that such discourse, “as participatory and decentralized as it might be, functions within the hegemonic political narrative of the state” (p. 274). Hristova (2014) argues that “The digital democratic nature of the visual and cultural memes associated with Occupy [. . .] addresses and neutralizes precisely the attempt of the movement to reshape the political itself” (p. 274) Or, as Marcuse (1965) describes, “the result is a neutralization of opposites, a neutralization, however, which takes place on the firm grounds of the structural limitation of tolerance and within a preformed mentality” (p. 98).

## Implications

I argue that memetic discourse is pseudo-discourse that provides the illusion of democratic participation. It is also a tool that functions as part of a one-dimensional system of administration designed to give the appearance of choice and participation, but which in fact limits both. All voices can be heard. All perspectives on any topic can be offered for public consideration, discussion, and debate. And none of it may make any difference. Marcuse (1965) sums the nature of both one-dimensional thought and repressive tolerance, as well as identifying the role of dominant ideology in a system of administration:

But in a democracy with totalitarian organization, objectivity may fulfill a very different function, namely, to foster a mental attitude which tends to obliterate the difference between true and false, information and indoctrination, right and wrong. In fact, the decision between opposed opinions has been made before the presentation and discussion get under way—made, not by a conspiracy or a sponsor or a publisher, not by any dictatorship, but rather by the “normal course of events,” which is the course of administered events, and by the mentality shaped in this course. (p. 97)

I argue that the administered events are more and more pseudo-events discussed within pseudo-contexts, resulting in a pseudo-discourse that would appear to be the most accessible, and therefore the most desirable form of discourse. In practice, that appearance of increased participation would make pseudo-discourse an ideal tool for a totalitarian democracy, as Marcuse describes.

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the ability to manipulate public discourse and democracy is dependent upon three areas of influence: sources of content, what can be expressed in discourse and how, and where it can be expressed. News and entertainment media (which are

regulated by the government) are the primary sources of the information and content that inform public discourse. That content includes attitudes, tone, perspectives, and vocabulary. Public discourse is becoming more digital, and memes are convenient vehicles to use on the Internet and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, which are self-regulating against misinformation now, though I think they will soon be regulated by the government. Why is that a problem?

Parler, a different social media site that recently experienced an influx of users leaving Facebook and Twitter posits itself as a free speech alternative. A description about the site during a CNN interview caught my attention: "No it's not good, it's a threat to democracy [ . . . ] these people are in echo chambers and they're getting fed a diet of lies essentially" (Ryan, 2020, para 4). I have not visited Parler and I do not know what content it contains. However, that statement resonated strongly with me through the lens of one-dimensionality. What kind of democracy is free speech a threat to? Is it being implied that there is no misinformation, echo chambers or lies on Facebook or Twitter? Regardless, it struck me as a potential attempt at neutralization of a non-regulated discursive site that lies outside of the established system. Additionally, I mentioned in Chapter One that one of my concerns was the potential loss of critical thinking and reasoning skills. And I am more concerned after reading those comments. It is imperative, I think, that we not uncritically accept content from this or that site because they "regulate" content to prevent "misinformation," lest we be lulled to sleep, secure in our beliefs that our technological control are protecting our best interests.

Boorstin (1961) contends: "One of our grand illusions is the belief in a 'cure'. There is no cure. There is only the opportunity for discovery" (p. 261). In the sense that there is no magic regulatory cure that will protect us, I agree. I do not think using memes or social media to

conduct political discourse is a good idea, but nor am I naïve enough to believe that is going to change. Meme use is going to increase. The opportunity for discovery demands rigorous inquiry into our discursive media and the messages they convey. The sort of media literacy I envision as necessary involves an initial stance of Critical skepticism towards *all* media content, followed by the development of the tools necessary to challenge and understand media texts. Such a curriculum would need to include space, isolation, and the cultivation of individual reflection. It would also need to include considerations of the relationships between different areas of discourse, such as recognizing the influences of government, technology and media firms, corporate giants like Nike, and forms of popular culture on the discourse. And it would have to examine the democracy in practice to recognize where it liberates and where it constrains. We must recognize the effects that technology has upon our discourse, our democracy, and our lives.

This study performed one type of discourse analysis on one type of meme macro, the Believe in Something meme, gathered from Google searches. There is no shortage of qualitative approaches, theories, or memes on which to practice. A mixed methods study using this same data set could employ questions with a Likert scale to determine a range of receptive stances. As memes continue to be used to respond to catalytic events, the possibilities for research expands with them. As Zittrain (2014) contends, the meme “represents something more than the trivial yuks that appear at first glance, and it points the way to an element of the modern networked sphere that we dismiss or abandon at our own peril” (p. 393). As tools that provide unprecedented discursive access to an unprecedented number of voices, memes must not be ignored.

### References

- Anderson, K. V., & Sheeler, K.H. (2014). Texts (and Tweets) from Hillary: Meta-meming and postfeminist political culture. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 44(2), 224-243.
- Bacalu, F. (2014). Cognitive features of linguistic memes. *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations*, 13, 152-157.
- Bebic, D., & Volarevic, M. (2018). Do not mess with a meme: The use of viral content in communication politics. *Communication & Society*, 31(3), 43-56.
- Benaim, M. (2018). From symbolic values to symbolic innovation: Internet-memes and innovation. *Research Policy*, 47, 901-910.
- Bimber, B. (2014). Digital media in the Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the personalized political communication environment. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 11, 130-150.
- Boorstin, D.J. (1961). *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Bratich, J. (2014). Occupy all the dispositifs: Memes, media ecologies, and emergent bodies politic. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 11(1), 64-73.
- Brkich, G.A., & Barko, T. (2013). "Steve Obamney": Political scumbaggery, the internet, and the collective memetic American conscious. *The International Society for the Social Studies Annual Conference Proceedings*, 2013(1), 67-74.
- Dancygier, B., & Vandelanotte, L. (2017). Internet memes as multimodal constructions. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 28(3), 565-598.

- Davis, C.B., Glantz, M., & Novak, D.R. (2016). "You can't run your SUV on cute. Let's go!": Internet memes as delegitimizing discourse. *Environmental Communication*, 10(1), 62-83.
- Davison, P. (2012). The language of internet memes. In M. Mandiberg (Ed.), *The Social Media Reader* (pp. 120-134). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- de Zuniga, H.G., Weeks, B., & Ardevol-Abreu, A. (2017). Effects of the news-finds-me perception in communication: Social media use implications for news seeking and learning about politics. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22, 105-123.
- Diaz, C.M.C. (2013). Defining and characterizing the concept of internet meme. *Revisita CES Psicología*, 6(1), 82-104.
- Dynel, M. (2016). "I has seen image macros!" Advice animal memes as visual-verbal jokes. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 660-688.
- Evnine, S.J. (2018). The anonymity of a murmur: Internet (and other) memes. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 58(3), 303-318.
- Gal, N., Shifman, L., & Kampf, Z. (2016). "It gets better": Internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1698-1714.
- Glaveanu, V.P., de Saint-Laurent, C., & Literat, I. (2018). Making sense of refugees online: Perspective taking, political imagination, and internet memes. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(4), 440-457.
- Goriunova, O. (2012). New media idiocy. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 19(2), 223-235.
- Grundlingh, L. (2018). Memes as speech acts. *Social Semiotics*, 28(2), 147-168.

- Hahner, L.A. (2013). The riot kiss: Framing memes as visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 49(Winter), 151-166.
- Halupka, M. (2014). Clicktivism: A systematic heuristic. *Policy & Internet*, 6(2), 115-132.
- Harlow, S. (2013). It was a “Facebook revolution”: Exploring the meme-like spread of narratives during the Egyptian protests. *Revista de Comunicacion*, 12, 59-82.
- Harlow, S., & Guo, L. (2014). Will the revolution be Tweeted or Facebooked? Using digital communication tools in immigrant activism. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 463-478.
- Herman, E.S., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Howley, K. (2016). “I have a drone”: Internet memes and the politics of culture. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 7(2), 155-175.
- Hristova, S. (2013). Occupy Wall Street meets Occupy Iraq: On remembering and forgetting in a digital age. *Radical History Review*, 117, 83-97.
- Hristova, S. (2014). Visual memes as neutralizers of political dissent. *triple*, 12(1), 265-276.  
[www.triple-c.at](http://www.triple-c.at).
- Jenkins, E.S. (2014). The modes of visual rhetoric: Circulating memes as expressions. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 100(4), 442-466.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jessica, I. (2001, May 21). Bored stiff? Not with meme and YouTube. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3.
- Julien, C. (2015). Bourdieu, social capital and online interaction. *Sociology*, 49(2), 356-373.

- Katz, Y., & Shifman, L. (2017). Making sense? The structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 825-842.
- Kavada, A. (2015). Creating the collective: Social media, the Occupy Movement and its constitution as a collective actor. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(8), 872-886.
- Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S.C. (2018) Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 U.S. presidential cycle. *Political Communication*, 35(2), 155-177.
- Kruikemeier, S., Sezgin, M., & Boerman, S.C. (2016). Political microtargeting: Relationship between personalized advertising on Facebook and voters' responses. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(6), 367-372.
- Kushin, M.J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? College students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 election. *Mass Communication and Society*, 13, 608-630.
- Lamphere, C. (2018). It's a meme world after all. *Online Searcher*, 29-32.
- Lantagne, S.M. (2018). Famous on the internet: The spectrum of internet memes and the legal challenge of evolving methods of communication. *University of Richmond Law Review*, 52, 387-424.
- Li, D.K. (2019, August 20). Colin Kaepernick reveals the specific police shooting that led him to kneel. *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/>
- Marcuse, H. (1965). Repressive Tolerance. In *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Martinez-Rolan, X., & Pineiro-Otero, T. (2016). The use of memes in the discourse of political parties on Twitter: Analysing the 2015 state of the nation debate. *Communication & Society*, 29(1), 145-159.
- McDonald, K. (2015). From indymedia to anonymous: Rethinking action and identity in digital cultures. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(8), 968-982.
- McNeill, L. (2017). LOL and the world laughs with you: Memes as modern folklore. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, Winter 2017, 18-21.
- Mielczarek, N. (2018). The “Pepper-Spraying Cop” icon and its internet memes: Social justice and public shaming through rhetorical transformation in digital culture. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), 67-81.
- Milner, R.M. (2013a). Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2357-2390.
- Milner, R.M. (2013b). Internet memes, identity antagonism, and the logic of lulz. *The Fibreculture Journal*, FCJ-156 *Hacking the Social*, 62-92.
- Milner, R.M. (2016). *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Motlagh, V.V. (2012). The futures meme: A new generation perspective. *Futures*, 45, S62-S72.
- Nissenbaum, A., & Shifman, L. (2017). Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan’s /b/ board. *New Media & Society*, 19(4), 483-501.
- Nooney, L. & Portwood-Stacer, L. (2014). One does not simply: An introduction to the special issue on internet memes. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 248-252.
- O’Meara, J. (2018). Meme girls versus Trump: digitally recycled screen dialogue as political discourse. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 82, 28-42.

- Osatuyi, B. (2013). Information sharing on social media sites. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 2622-2631.
- Ott, B.L. (2016). The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 59-68.
- Pareene, A. (2012, Dec.6). Assume joke dead: Why is the political class so obsessed with being funny?. *The New Republic*, 4-5.
- Pasquale, F. (2015). How to tame an internet troll. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 62(5), 19.
- Patel, R. (2013). First world problems: A fair use analysis of internet memes. *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, 20(2), 235-256.
- Pavlovic, L.M. (2016). Internet memes as a field of discursive construction of identity and space of resistance. *Journal of Art and Media Studies*, 10, 97-106.
- Peck, A.M. (2014). A laugh riot: Photoshopping as vernacular discursive practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 1638-1662.
- Penney, J. (2015). Social media and symbolic action: Exploring participation in the Facebook red equal sign profile picture campaign. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20, 52-66.
- Piata, A. (2016). When metaphor becomes a joke. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 106, 39-56.
- Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ross, A.S. & Rivers, D.J. (2016). Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S. presidential candidates. *Discourse, Context and Media*, 16, 1-11.

- Rushkoff, D. (2013). *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ryan, J. (2010). The internet, the perpetual beta, and the state: The long view of the new medium. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33, 673-681.
- Sagun, K.K.A. (2013). Internet memes as an information dissemination tool for libraries: The Ateneo de Manila University experience. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 103, 542-550.
- Savirimuthu, J. (2005). Open source, code and architecture: It is the memes stupid. *International Review of Law Computers & Technology*, 19(3), 341-362.
- Scardina, C. (2017). Why memes and teaching are well suited. *Teacher Librarian*, 45(2), 13-16.
- Schlumpf, H. (2012, August 17-30). Make the world a better place from the couch. *National Catholic Reporter*, p. 17 & 22.
- Scott, D.T. (2014). The empathetic meme: Situating Chris Crocker within the media history of LGBT equality struggles. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 38(4), 308-324.
- Segev, E., Nissenbaum, A., Stolero, N., & Shifman, L. (2015). Families and networks of internet memes: The relationship between cohesiveness, uniqueness, and quiddity concreteness. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 20, 417-433.
- Seiffert-Brockmann, J., Diehl, T., & Dobusch, L. (2018). Memes as games: The evolution of a digital discourse online. *New Media & Society*, 20(8), 2862-2879.
- Shifman, L., & Thelwall, M. (2009). Assessing global diffusion with web memetics: The spread and evolution of a popular joke. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 60(12), 2567-2576.

- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18, 362-377.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smith, K.M. & Jeffery, D.I. (2013). Critical pedagogies in the neoliberal university: What happens when they go digital? *The Canadian Geographer*, 57(3): 372-380.
- Tannen, D. (1998). *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Tarozzi, M. & Bertolini, p. (2000). Children at the dawn of the internet: Exploratory research on current and potential use at home and in school. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 23(2), 189-201.
- Taylor, J., & Burt, E. (2005). Voluntary organisations as e-democratic actors: Political identity, legitimacy and accountability and the need for new research. *Policy and Politics*, 33(4), 601-616.
- Timpane, J. (2012, October 3). Political polls ignite meme war between Democrats and Republicans. *Philadelphia Inquirer, The* (PA).
- Vickery, J.R. (2014). The curious case of Confession Bear: The reappropriation of online macro-image memes. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(3), 301-325.
- Wang, L. & Wood, B.C. (2011). An epidemiological approach to model the viral propagation of memes. *Applied Mathematical Modelling*, 35, 5442-5447.
- Wang, J., & Wang, H. (2015). From a marketplace to a cultural space: Online meme as an operational unit of cultural transmission. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 45(3), 261-274.

- Wells, D.D. (2018). You all made dank memes: Using internet memes to promote critical thinking. *Journal of Political Science Education, 14*(2), 240-248.
- Wiggins, B.E., & Bowers, G.B. (2015). Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape. *New Media & Society, 17*(11), 1886-1906.
- Wyche, S. (2016, Aug 27). Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem. *NFL News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nfl.com/>
- Yoon, I. (2016). Why is it not just a joke? Analysis of internet memes associated with racism and hidden ideology of colorblindness. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education, 33*, 94-122.
- Yu, R.P., & Oh, Y.W. (2018). Social media and expressive citizenship: Understanding the relationships between social and entertainment expression on Facebook and political participation. *Telematics and Informatics, 35*, 2299-2311.
- Zhang, L., Zhao, J., & Xu, K. (2016). Who creates trends in online social media: The crowd or opinion leaders. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 21*, 1-16.
- Zittrain, J.L. (2014). Reflections on Internet culture. *Journal of Visual Culture, 13*(3), 388-394.
- Zywica, J. & Danowski, J. (2008). The faces of Facebookers: Investigating social enhancement and social compensation hypotheses; predicting Facebook™ and offline popularity from sociability and self-esteem, and mapping the meanings of popularity with semantic networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*, 1-34.

## Appendix

### Meme Addresses

Figure 1.1:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/64/Uc\\_Davis\\_Pepper\\_Spray\\_Incident.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/64/Uc_Davis_Pepper_Spray_Incident.jpg)

[https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2011/11/21/declaration\\_wide-eb2b17bb77054493792807c158e1b2cd3efb4e4e.jpg?s=1400](https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2011/11/21/declaration_wide-eb2b17bb77054493792807c158e1b2cd3efb4e4e.jpg?s=1400)

Figure 1.2:

[http://www.stuwilson.co.uk/shell\\_lets\\_go.html](http://www.stuwilson.co.uk/shell_lets_go.html)

[https://www.al.com/living/2012/07/shells\\_non-existent\\_social\\_med.html](https://www.al.com/living/2012/07/shells_non-existent_social_med.html)

Figure 1.3:

[https://img.memecdn.com/what-if-i-told-you\\_o\\_292866.jpg](https://img.memecdn.com/what-if-i-told-you_o_292866.jpg)

<https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/facebook/000/585/812/fba.jpg>

Figure 1.4:

<https://www.currentworldwide.top/daily-show-mocks-trumps-false-puerto-rico-death-claim-with-a-nike-ad-parody.html>

Figure 1.5:

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-can-do-it>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/245024035965306689/>

Figure 3.1:

<https://cms.qz.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RTS200F52.jpg?quality=75&strip=all&w=1600&h=900&crop=1>

Figure 3.2:

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-parodies/photos/page/5>

<http://ace.mu.nu/archives/376954.php>

<https://steemit.com/news/@dannyquest/collection-of-the-best-of-the-nike-colin-kaepernick-just-do-it-memes>

Figure 3.5:

[https://img-9gag-fun.9cache.com/photo/ap2OM4B\\_460s.jpg](https://img-9gag-fun.9cache.com/photo/ap2OM4B_460s.jpg)

Figure 3.6:

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

Figure 3.7:

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

Figure 3.8:

<http://thegreatamericandisconnect.blogspot.com/2018/09/donald-trump-believe-in-somethingeven.html>

Figure 3.9:

<https://cheezburger.com/6688005/19-hilariously-inspiring-nike-ad-parodies>

Figure 3.10:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761776944/>

<https://imgur.com/gallery/OUrJUVY>

Figure 3.11:

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

Figure 3.12:

<http://www.alltheinfo.org/nike-kaepernick-parody-ads-memes/>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149768144655/>

Figure 3.13:

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-parodies/photos/page/3>

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-parodies/photos/page/3>

Figure 3.14:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761744278/>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761744353/>

Figure 3.15:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/247135098288257478/>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761546404/>

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-parodies/photos/page/3>

Figure 3.16:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761744276/>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/62557882309364677/?lp=true>

Figure 4.4:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149761713733/>

Figure 4.6:

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

Figure 4.7:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/682436149762154728/>

Figure 4.8:

<http://www.alltheinfo.org/nike-kaepernick-parody-ads-memes/>

Figure 4.10:

<https://twitter.com/shaunosburn/status/1038629382900740096>

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-parodies/photos/page/4>

Figure 4.11:

<https://www.pinterest.com/brendarkpren/believe-in-something/>

<https://www.chaostrophic.com/17-believe-in-something-memes/>

[https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=organic](https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-colin-kaepernick-nike-ad-memes/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic)

Figure 4.14:

<https://www.currentworldwide.top/daily-show-mocks-trumps-false-puerto-rico-death-claim-with-a-nike-ad-parody.html>

<https://imgur.com/t/palpatine/ahUf0w7>

Figure 4.15:

<https://memebaby2019.blogspot.com/2018/09/child-labor-memes.html>

<https://www.memecreator.org/meme/please-burn-all-your-old-nike-stuff-we-have-kids-in-sweat-shops-that-need-that-n/>

Figure 4.19:

[https://aminoapps.com/c/star-wars/page/blog/star-wars-nike-meme/oKFd\\_uBkp1B0qL38qBo8XpbMJlMrm](https://aminoapps.com/c/star-wars/page/blog/star-wars-nike-meme/oKFd_uBkp1B0qL38qBo8XpbMJlMrm)