

**MEMES AS POLITICAL DISCOURSE** by Hiral Jayesh Parekh

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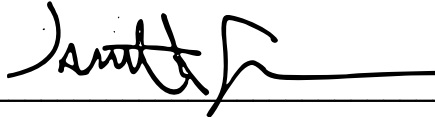
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Received and approved:

Lead Thesis Faculty



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Jarrett Fuller

Chairperson

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Santiago Piedrafita

May 2020

MFA Thesis Candidate



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Hiral Jayesh Parekh

May 2020

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## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

How do memes have the potency to alter the discourse around U.S. politics?

## ABSTRACT

Not owned by any one person, memes are those “units of culture and behavior” (Velden and Kruk, 27) that are shared and remixed over time in a community. They are an invitation: “You can do this too, and here’s a whole community of us doing this. You’re not alone,” thereby “breaking pluralistic ignorance” (Mina, 21) and giving rise to an avenue for expression. This avenue for self-expression then provides ordinary people the motivation and ability to “resist the ruling structures and powers” (Certau) and bring attention to causes that they believe in in a socially acceptable and urgent manner.

In February 2016, the *Washington Post* characterized the presidential primaries as ‘the most-memed election in U.S. history.’ Funny yet persuasive, “memes are the newest trending tool shaping political contention today” (Mina) and “have become the lingua franca of the modern campaign” (Chmielewski). Thanks to their subversive nature, memes possess the power to influence voters in any way desired.

As “memes can be silly, they can be harmless, they can be destructive, they can be extremely serious, and they can be all these things at the same time” (Mina, 6), perhaps the time has come to interpret them critically. This thesis aims to analyze the budding role of memes as U.S. political discourse.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“The birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.”

These are the words of the author Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay, ‘The Death of the Author’ where he breaks down the connection between the author and his work, as well as the role of the reader in literary criticism.

Citing French novelist Honoré de Balzac’s example, he states that literature is that neuter in which all character is lost, including that of the author. Barthes, like the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, believes in allowing the language to ‘perform’ and not the author and let the language and word-choice express our thoughts and creativity without the author compelling meaning into those words. He chooses the word writing instead of literature to make the author’s work universal and allow the readers to interpret what it means based on their readings and observations.

Barthes’ primary focus lies on the separation of the personal from the analytical and the creative in literary works. He contends that once published, the author is redundant and has no control over the content which means that the reader holds more responsibility to the text than the author. In other words, a work’s meaning is not reliant on authorial intention but the individual point of reception.

Although agreeing with Roland Barthes on the inevitability of the death of the author in literature, author Michel Foucault further problematizes the foundational definitions underlying author and text by extending the conversation to the domain of non-fictional writings in his 1969 essay ‘What is an Author?’

Foucault pursues an interesting approach in illuminating the meaning of the term ‘author’ and delineates the role of an author not as the creator of discourse but as an ‘author-function.’ He strongly suggests that the author is a function used by society to control texts as they circulate. The author function does not affect all texts in the same way. For example, unlike literary texts, scientific texts are not required to be associated with the

author. The author-function is not a sudden creation, but a carefully created social position. The form, the complexity and even the existence of author-function are not universal.

According to Foucault, the author as a central figure has been constructed to establish a consolidated meaning from the text, but in today's time, the text itself becomes meaning. Thus, Foucault urges us to imagine a world where discourse would circulate without the need for any author and a world where it did not matter who was speaking.

The concept of authorship is questioned continuously in Limor Shifman's 'Memes in Digital Culture,' where she attempts to "bridge the gap between academic and popular discourse about memes." The term 'meme' was first introduced in biologist Richard Dawkins' 1976 book 'The Selfish Gene.' Shifman defines Internet memes as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users."

Shifman examines the communicative roles memes like *LOLcats*, *Planking*, and *Gangnam Style* serve in digital culture which embodies the many embedded aspects of Web 2.0 participatory culture (websites that emphasize user-generated content, ease of use, participatory culture and interoperability for end users).

Contrasting 'viral' from memes based on variability, Shifman states that virals become memes when ordinary Internet users alter the original content for their communicative purposes. This slight difference is where the power in memetic content lies. When ordinary people interpose their perspective into their version of the meme, social discourse begins to take place; in an era marked by "network individualism," memes give people the opportunity to express both their uniqueness and their connectivity simultaneously. The uploaders are the medium and also the message.

While memes may appear to be unimportant bits of mainstream culture, Shifman demonstrates they are worthy of further consideration because they provide a democratic avenue for polyvocal digital discourse.



Further expanding on the strength of that polyvocal discourse, author Ryan Milner contends in his novel 'The World Made Meme' that Internet memes are now a lingua franca of online life — a common language of the netizens. Memes — collectively created, circulated, and transformed by endless users over large systems, are shaping public conversations in different fields, be it pop culture or politics. Memetic media offer participation by reappropriation, adjusting the familiar and the foreign as new replications intertwined with established ideas.

Milner considers the formal and social components of memetic media, and contends for five principal logics of memetic participation: Multimodality imparts the impermanence of expressive modes to the media landscape they populate. Reappropriation is historical yet integral to memetic media, as they emerge when participants poach from multiple methods of communication and engage in bricolage (creation from a diverse range of available things). Resonance covers a complex inclination for memes to connect with or encourage different people for different reasons. Collectivism foregrounds the social experience of being part of a local or sizable collective. Lastly, spread sums up the inescapable dissemination and sharing of resonant media texts.

Thus, Milner underlines how memetic media have changed the nature of public conversations.

Authors Daniel van der Velden and Vinca Kruk of Metahaven, in 'Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?' talk about a world where dissent has new strategies, thanks to internet memes. With its lightweight nature and viral potential, memes have become a method of scaling up protest.

In the chapter on memes, Metahaven defines three characteristics of a successful meme: longevity (relating to what extent an image can endure online), fecundity (relating to whether an image spreads effectively), and copying–fidelity (relating to whether an image can withstand transformation as it flows). These three characteristics are likewise critical to jokes which are low budget. Of the numerous components of "memetic" culture that they depict, one of the most intriguing has to do with language. A meme usually consists of an image component to which text is added at the top and bottom. The image and one part of the text

(usually the top) remain stable across different contexts while the bottom is transformed to produce new implications. Drawing on theorists of language, Metahaven argues that memes are simultaneously based on self-referentiality and internal knowledge communities. With reference to the latter point, we can say that only those who know the particular image and text are “in” on the joke. The joke is self-referential because it references an “original” event (say, a film or a song or image) and yet parasitically sells out the meaning of the original text. Thus, jokes are an open-source weapon of politics, and have become a resistance strategy.

Bridging academic research and street activism in ‘Memes to Movements,’ author An Xiao Mina, presents a global investigation of internet memes as agents of pop culture, politics, protest, and propaganda on- and offline. She draws on a broad scope of experience, from China to America, in her attempts to show the conceivable outcomes and difficulties of galvanizing political activism through social media.

“Culture shifts, culture changes, culture is informed by much deeper processes than the internet, but the internet also informs culture,” writes Mina. “Memes come from deep wellsprings in society, and as more of society comes online, more memes of contention and disagreement appear.” Memes shape and shift the popular narrative, as hashtags intensify the power of “Black Lives Matter,” or the campaign for gay marriage, and so often dispatch countermovements in their wakes.

Essentially, Mina reveals how, in parts of the world where public dissent is absolutely perilous, memes can belie contentious political opinions that would bring about drastic consequences if communicated outright. She finds that the “silly” stuff of meme culture—the photo remixes, the selfies, the GIFs, and the pun-tastic hashtags—are fundamentally intertwined with how we discover and affirm one another, focus on human rights and social justice issues, build narratives, and make culture.

Thus, in this incisive and illuminating book, Mina highlights the relevance of the power of memes, the power of the internet, and the intersection of the two.

## **HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK**

The ensuing historical framework elucidates the relevant cultural and political episodes and elements relevant to this thesis. This framework also leads the way for comprehending memes in the light of U.S. politics.

### **The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author**

This is the starting point in understanding the possible nature and trading of memes. "...The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes, Heath, and Dove, 148). Likewise, once a particular meme is shared, the creator of the meme has no control over the content. The meme mutates based on individual reception, which makes it interpretative in nature.

### **The author as the function of discourse**

In *What is an Author?* French philosopher and author Michel Foucault (1969) pursues an exciting approach in illuminating the meaning of the term 'author' and delineates the role of an author not as the creator of discourse but as an 'author-function' — the author as the function of discourse. Similarly, the creator of a meme acts as a function of discourse, helping the discourse to circulate and mutate without the need for the original creator. Thus, in "a period of productive remixing" (Kelly, 193), memes are those "units of cultural transmission"(Dawkins) that are not owned by any one person and survive and spread via imitation and adaptation.

### **What is a meme?**

The standard etymological origin of the term "meme" is attributed to biologist Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he defines memes as the cultural equivalents of biological genes: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body... so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain" (Dawkins, 206).

While writing the book Dawkins ran into a problem – how to explain those human behaviors that seem to operate in direct opposition to the survival of genes. A notable example of this concern is the presence of voluntary celibacy in human societies, which prevents the reproduction of genes. To explain this phenomenon, Dawkins argues that culture is a force that competes with and can overcome genetic interests. Yet, just as life does not perpetuate itself without the replicative functions of genes, Dawkins needed a concept to explain the way that culture circulated and reproduced (Dawkins).

Dawkins derived the word meme from the Greek word 'mimema,' meaning 'to imitate.' He shortened the term to 'meme' so that it would rhyme with gene, bolstering the parallelism of the two concepts. While genes carry the instructions for the reproduction of particular biological traits, Dawkins contends memes give the instructions for the reproduction of culture (Dawkins). Under this definition, memes take a variety of forms ranging from specific cultural artifacts such as songs and fashion to broader cultural phenomena, including ideologies and religion.

### **Memes + Internet = Internet Memes**

The idea of the Internet meme was first proposed in 1994 by Mike Godwin in an issue of Wired. Internet memes are defined as '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman, 58).

This concept helps the thesis in providing more nuanced accounts of the meanings, applicability, utility and possible implications of Internet memes. The term conveys an extra property that ordinary memes do not: Internet memes leave an impression in the media through which they propagate (for instance, social networks) that renders them discernible and analyzable as we can see today.

### **Spelling error a meme?**

During a presidential debate in 2000, then-candidate George W. Bush mispronounced the internet as 'internets.' Four years later, he repeated this mistake in a debate with John Kerry - "I hear there's rumors on the, uh, internets that we're going to have a draft" (Attention101).

However, this clearly was no mere mistake as the internet responded—making this Bushism one of the first political internet memes.

### **Mememes in the form of Catchphrases**

In 2007, designer Christopher Messina coined the term “hashtag” on Twitter, a portmanteau of the words “hash” and “tag.” In a tweet, Messina (@chrismessina) said “How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?” This tweet initiated associational grouping of messages, trends, and events on Twitter by means of hashtags which eventually created the base for expressing political opinions through catchphrases and leading to meme hashtags.

### **Mememes as acts of Resistance**

“The winter day in 2016, was a relatively brisk one in Washington, DC, when a gunman walked into Comet Pizza, a popular independent pizza joint, pulled out a Colt AR-15 assault rifle, and opened fire. He fired three bullets but fortunately didn’t take any lives or injure any people. The gunman surrendered and was taken into custody” (Hsu, 2017). Shootings are generally attributed to mental health issues, frustrations at work, and a culture of violence. “This shooting was slightly different: online meme culture played a strong role in the violence” (Mina, 119).

Several weeks after this incident, a conspiracy theory circulated on the web starting with “a 4chan thread that showed people actively trying to make memes that connected Clinton with sex trafficking” (Mina, 120). The conspiracy took the catchy name of #Pizzagate. This incident reflects how internet memes start getting progressively professionalized and politicized during elections.

“Mememes play a distinct role in protest; they seem to be to the resistance of today what ‘political posters’ were to yesterday – the embodiment of shared ideas in a community. They can be JPEGs, or rumours. Indeed, part of their appeal is that mememes seem to spread spontaneously” (Velden and Kruk, 27). The Pizzagate mememes aimed at attacking opponents and spreading rumours. These mememes and the media attention surrounding them were powerful enough to have generated ambiguity and doubt among voters. This brings to light the usage of mememes as a rhetoric tool.

## CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Thanks to the internet, it has become effortless to duplicate and reproduce online content, which leads to remixing, and bricolage. The internet opened the doorway to uploading and downloading material i.e. to participate and simulate (Lunenfeld). Social media platforms enabled people to find and affirm each other, thereby “breaking pluralistic ignorance” (Mina, 21), and giving rise to an avenue for self-expression. According to Mina (2019) this avenue for expression made space for different groups and their diverse perspectives based on their cultural differences, which began to be shared and spread in the form of internet memes.

The political economy of memes deals with the production and trading of these internet memes. This includes their flexible yet viral nature, their ability to connect with people's emotions, and their impact on external factors like politics.

According to Van der Velden and Kruk (2013), “The standard internet meme is an image captioned with heavy type, superimposed on it for humorous effect.” Is it possible that jokes have an untapped political power, which was historically always present but never realized until recently?

Hashtags over time, “have evolved from a way to organize information online to a form of expression in their own right” (Mina, 55). Their repetitive, iterative and informal nature have made them into small movements that spread from person to person via social networks like Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, Instagram, Know Your Meme and various others.

This raises important questions: What role do memes play in movements today? Why do people make so many of them?

This also highlights the communicative role of memes in digital culture, which embodies the many embedded aspects of Web 2.0 participatory culture and “shapes and reflects the general social mindsets” (Shifman, 17). When ordinary people interpose their perspective into their version of the meme, social discourse begins to take place. “In an era marked by ‘network individualism,’ people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness

and their connectivity” (Shifman, 47). This makes the uploaders the medium and also the message.

“The ease of sharing memes and their lightweight nature allow them to act as signals of identity and belief” (Mina, 21) Memes get their power and interest due to their status as ideological machines which “doesn’t mean they are useless, debased, etc.—on the contrary, it demonstrates how complex and powerful they are” Galloway (2017).

Memes are “ ...most powerful as a site of identification, coalescing the values of the individuals who identify with them through thematic sentiment” (Goerzen). This relates to Roland Barthes' contention of individual reception being more critical than authorial intention (1-6). Foucault, introduces the term “author-function” which relates to the absence of the creator in memes. “The default moniker on 4chan to post stuff is anonymous – and, indeed, the notion of anonymity was central to the site from the start. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan” (Velden and Kruk, 20) This anonymity makes it simpler to express one's ideals and opinions without fear.

Author Ryan Milner considers the formal and social components of memetic media and contends for five principal logics of memetic participation: Multimodality, Reappropriation, Resonance, Collectivism and lastly, Spread (86). According to Metahaven, longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity are the three qualities that define the success of memes (29). Moreover, “intentional overproduction is a key strategy” (Mina, 57) in which multiple memes are created and shared because one doesn't know which meme will quite take off.

“Facebook and Twitter replaced hierarchy and bureaucracy. Smartphone in hand, coordination now came for free. And along with its tools, the network injected its own indigenous culture into protest” (Velden and Kruk, 19). Regardless of whether it's a comedic reaction to a politician's tweet or a post calling for awareness on an issue, political statements have progressively been reaching people in this far-fetched structure of internet memes. It sometimes seems complicated to accept that social media sites like Twitter — which were at first intended for keeping up with friends— could impact our political perspectives. According to Pew Research Center, “About 66% of Americans get their news on social media.” At the point when youthful grown-ups are taking a gander at social media

to stay informed, there's a decent possibility they're experiencing funny memes that incorporate political updates. "In these environments, internet memes spreading misinformation are much easier to generate. And amid the confusion, the real policy issues can often be missed" (Mina, 2019, p. 10-11).

One of the first political memes started in 2000 by the then-candidate George W. Bush's mispronouncing the internet as "internets." While political memes have been around since then, in February 2016, the Washington Post characterized the presidential primaries as "the most-memed election in U.S. history." Donald Trump, with his controversial statements competing with Hillary Clinton's traditional political style, was gold for meme makers. Policy issues are no longer dry topics one reads about in newspapers; they're viral jokes shared among friends. It is surprising to know how "Memes can be a form of power in the face of traditional institutions of power" (Mina, 7).

But could they have an impact on elections? It seems likely.

For example, a long-running internet joke based on a 2013 conspiracy that politician Ted Cruz is the never-recognized mass murderer known as the Zodiac Killer. The statement may appear to be invalid — particularly knowing that Cruz was born a year after the Zodiac Killer's last confirmed killing — yet in 2016, 10% of Floridians reviewed by Public Policy Polling said that they believed the then-Republican presidential candidate was, in fact, the Zodiac Killer, and 28% said they didn't know. The joke appeared to lose steam once Cruz dropped out of the presidential race. How can something so ephemeral and frivolous like memes support meaningful change? And can they be used to harm people?

On the flip side, memes can offer an inroad to young adults who wouldn't otherwise pay much attention to politics. According to Pew Research Center, "In 2016, millennials represented nearly as large a segment of the electorate as baby boomers (almost one third), but only 49.4% of them voted in the presidential election, compared to 68.7% of the older generation."

If memes help politics connect with young adults, who weren't recently intrigued and get them involved as much as the baby boomers, the political atmosphere in America could move radically for the millennial age.



“Memes are not phenomena of language; they are phenomena with language. From words that simply “annotate” a meme, conveying its minimally required meaning in a given context, to words that become an integral part of the meme’s functioning” (Velden and Kruk, 30-31). Words matter and maybe that is why politicians have started creating or sharing catchphrases as a way of PR. Hillary Clinton's tweet directing Donald Trump to “delete your account” (@HillaryClinton) immediately became a meme, spurring hundreds of thousands of variations.

“With the internet [...] and above all with the advent of social media, it's become possible to observe the development of memes at an accelerated pace [...]. What happens is that ideas arise, are immediately ‘market tested’, and then are seen to either take off, bubble under, insinuate themselves into the mainstream, or, if they are deemed no good, disappear” (Velden and Kruk, 27). Memes spread spontaneously. Users are free to test their views by expressing themselves in whatever way they want, even if their statements are outright lies. Even conspiracies like 'Pizzagate' have consequences. Network Propaganda, a book by analysts at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center, portrays how almost 50% of Trump voters gave some trustworthiness to the Pizzagate rumor (Benkler and Faris). This discovery suggests that memes can successfully influence people's opinions on politicians. Memes can be utilized to undermine a politician's reputation, but can also popularize them, as the memes portraying Trump in heroic ways do.

"Memes are entertaining, they're appealing, they're sexy, so we stick with that, and we don't ever go beyond our one news source," says Terri Towner, an associate professor of political science at Oakland University. And when that happens, she adds, "You get one single view. Your viewpoint is never challenged."

It's even possible, that memes can lead people to disengage. "Humor can create cynicism and can increase distrust in government," Towner says. "If you're cynical about government, then maybe you won't participate or consider being a public official, and that's concerning. What is that going to do for democracy?"

Memes have the potential to be influential in an era where likability can be a deciding factor in elections.

Younger generations are moving increasingly more to visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Images are, therefore, more likely to shape their perspectives and opinions on U.S. politics. While visuals such as Beto O'Rourke cleaning his teeth in an Instagram story (@betoorourke), and congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez streaming herself while cooking (@ocasio2018) might engage today's youth in novel ways with politics, this may also limit the room for discussion, as each idea needs to fit into a tweet.

Memes “contain within them the potential for shaping change, but only if given the right conditions” (Mina, 176). When memes form harmless jokes about speech errors, this negative effect is limited, but when they start to weaponize rumors and limit thoughts to soundbites effectively, we have to ponder whether the advancement of political internet memes is going in the right direction.

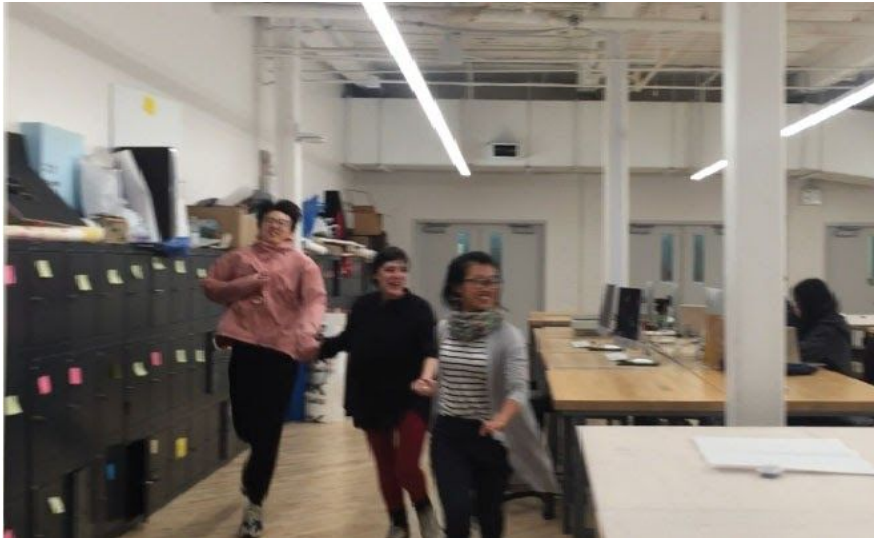
This thesis analyzes the political economy of memes and takes them seriously as tools of rhetorical production, arguing that their rapid and viral nature makes them a powerful tool for swiftly shaping the public's image of different candidates. Especially in the upcoming election cycle, the role of memes should not be underestimated.

This thesis does not only focus on blowing out of proportion issues that need to be brought in attention to increase awareness, but more importantly, on montaging pieces of information from multiple sources, in multiple forms, to portray said issues in the desired light to bring about a previously chosen goal.

## PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The following projects helped in guiding the thesis.

### Polyvocality



In 'Memes in Digital Culture,' author Limor Shifman states that at a time where individuals live in loose, fragmented networks rather than being bound within a group, memes help them express both their uniqueness and their connectivity. The uploaders are the medium and the message. This makes memes tools of discourse circulation. To convey this idea, I made the class play an interactive game called chain tag where on tagging a person, the two of them become a team, and every other member tagged gets added to the duo forming a chain.

The time it takes to tag one person initially is cut down immensely when it is a chain of 5-6 people. This chain works much faster and more efficiently since it is a team and its reach has now increased. Similarly, internet memes provide a democratic avenue for polyvocal digital discourse. I witnessed the functioning of this chain in the next project.

## Collaboration and interpretation



Using an object that represents an important element of my thesis, the project aimed at creating multiples of that single object by following specific rules and actions. I used Knots as tightly knit memes which are used to connect in this era of 'networked individualism.'

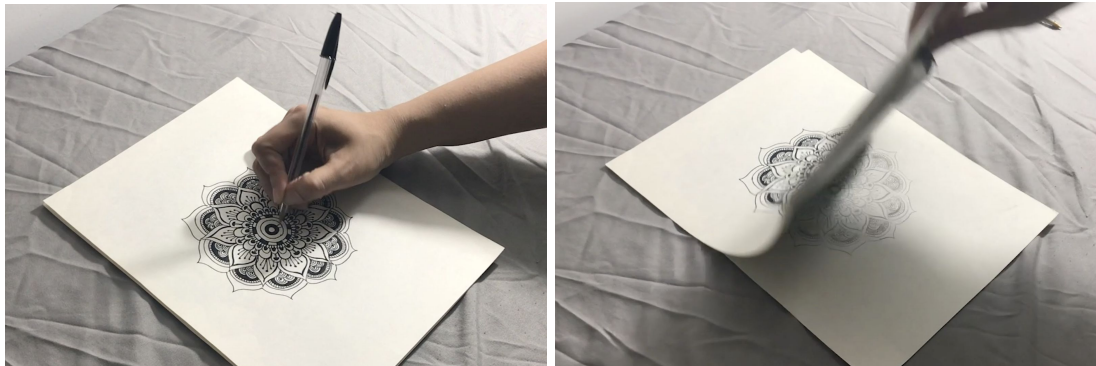
Each knot tied, depicts the number of memes and the length of the medium after tying the knots signifies the reach of these memes and ultimately their power. The different materials used symbolize their life and also the scale of their impact. Outside participation helped create an unplanned journey of this project and also some exciting contexts in which the study could be used.

This network was open ended, leaving room for future connections and interpretations. This project helped me in exploring the lightweight and interpretative nature of memes.

## Absence of Authorship

This project helped me form a cogent narrative using ten verbs related to my topic and got me to an essential conclusion in my thesis.

## To Create



Once something is created, it is effortless to copy it! Memes are copied and posted and shared by hundreds of people everyday, and the person sharing it may not necessarily be the originator.

## To Remix



Copy gives rise to combining or editing existing materials to produce something new. This is called remixing! ..... Using the same music in different media provides a sense of remixing. Similarly memes are bits of remixed designs/works of art that pass from one person to the other in various forms. This raises the question - What does it mean to own then?

## To Own



A book is incomplete unless it is read. Although the content of a book belongs to the author, once I have read it, I also own that knowledge. This brings into picture the concept of multiple ownership or no ownership at all.

## To Share



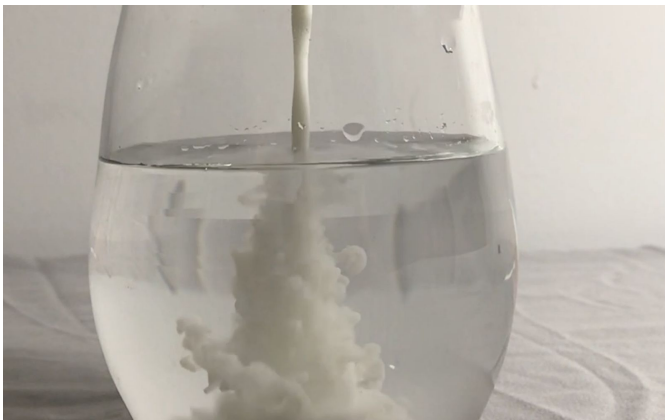
The way one would share a cookie is the way memes are shared. It is not a linear chain and has connections at unplanned points of their journey. This leads us to the next verb...

## To Connect



Just as the water connects the different compartments of the ice tray, in the same way, memes connect different people. This forms a big network.

## To Spread



How does it do this? The way milk dissolves in water and unites with it immediately, in the same way, memes spread spontaneously in a short amount of time.

## To Joke



And what makes them so spontaneous? Jokes!! To joke is a low budget. They are among the cheapest goods we all have access to. They are contagious, even if their intention is deadly serious. That's how memes are.

## To Protest



This provides some people the motivation to express themselves and protest for their beliefs. Just like I am trying to surround this cactus with water, even though I know it will most likely die with so much water, memes also try to play a distinct role in protest. They are those bits of information that are trying to impose their opinions.



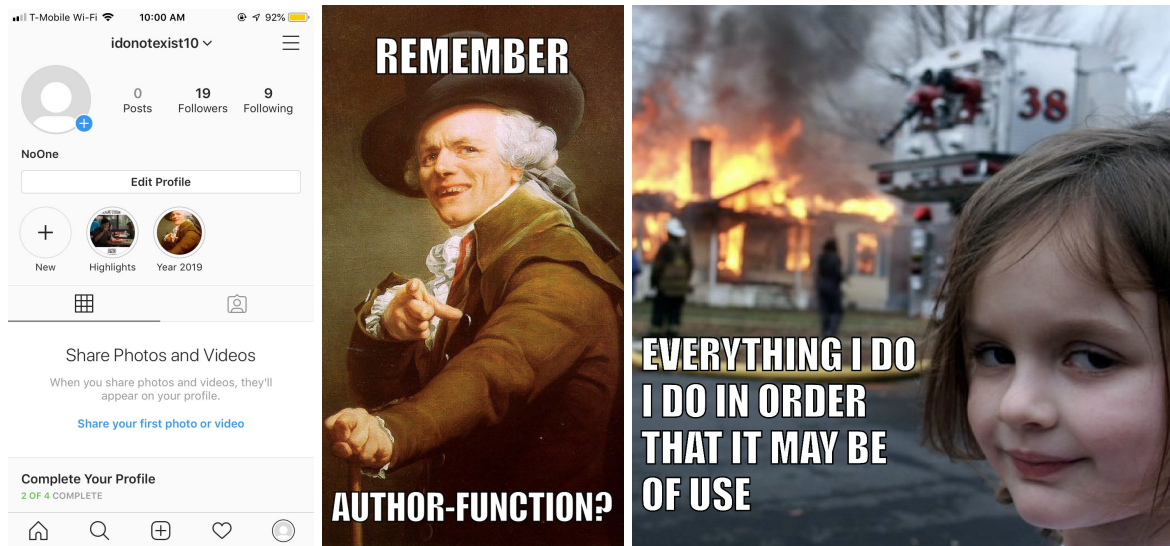
## To Manipulate



The way the shadow is bigger than what the hand shows, there's a bigger picture to memes. They are powerful bits of communication that can manipulate us.

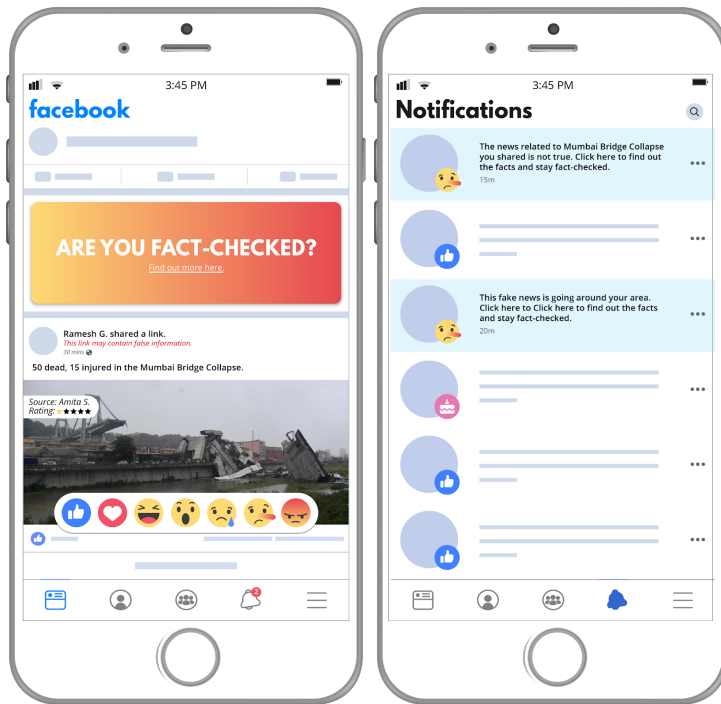
This project made me realize that authorship was no longer relevant in the functioning of memes because it did not exist.

## Alter-Ego



Attaining insight from the previous project, I used it as a tool in my next project wherein I embodied author Michel Foucault. Imagining how Foucault would be fascinated by social media sites like Instagram and express his opinion on the usage of memes in digital culture via an anonymous account and multiple stories using his quotes. The stories gained a lot of views and made me realize how social media sites have made self-expression so easy and influential.

## Are you fact-checked?



Internet Memes have been circulating since then. These memes being more about expressing one's views on a political matter, may, in a way influence other individuals and result in spreading misinformation. Facebook came up with the concept of fact-checkers to mitigate misinformation on the platform. For my technology class, Improvising on this I created a design campaign called fact checked. I added new features to post sharing like Provide the facts, Provide extra links to verify the facts, Provide the source of information, Rate the source of information. I also created a fact check emoticon to be used when the authenticity of a post is in doubt. And other features like Alert on any fake news going around your area, Fact-Checked Design Campaign (News Feed, Messenger, Profile Picture, Emoticons).

## CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCIPLINE

This thesis plays a pivotal role in Communications Design, thanks to the profound analysis undertaken on the role of memes as a trans-formative tool and their ramifications on the U.S. politics with regards to informing, persuading and entertaining.

Memes are a part of remix culture. They are energizers of information that, when shared, shed the context of their creation, along with their authorship. Unmoored from the trappings of an author's intention, they become the collective property of the culture. Eventually, memes take on a life of their own.

At a time where individuals live in loose, fragmented networks rather than being bound within a group, internet memes help them express both their uniqueness and their connectivity (Shifman).

Compared to the conventional medium of communication like TV and print, memes are a more successful and trending medium of communication currently because of the following three qualities: longevity, fecundity, copying-fidelity (Velden and Kruk, 29) which provides a democratic avenue for polyvocal digital discourse (Shifman).

Memes — collectively created, circulated, and transformed by endless users over large systems, are shaping public conversations (Milner). While expressing their political viewpoints, people on either side of power have the opportunity to use remixed media as acts of resistance (Navas, Gallagher and Burrough, 8) thereby, making meme wars a new feature of U.S. politics. This meme culture cultivates a more critical and democratic culture.

Memes are themselves a type of rich discourse that communicate through the troubling and defamiliarization of shared associations. Often involving the adoption of culture, tropes, and catchphrases, remixed media like memes both situate and dramatize contemporary political discourses. Familiar images, melodies, and popular references are reflected, recombined, and decontextualized to produce the remix as a vehicle for communicating and expressing political opinion (O'Dwyer, 325). This hybrid production found in remix practice is

increasingly aimed at not only addressing but also engaging the receiver as a proactive thinker (Navas, Gallagher and Burrough, 8).

In presenting explicitly political messages using solely bits of dominant mainstream discourse, the form is as fraught as it is full of subversive potential (Conti, 346). Political memes have 3 common traits: they present political messages. They are guerilla insofar as the material they use is copy-right protected. They utilize and embrace dominant media forms (Conti, 346). This encourages voters to interrogate dominant ideologies and has an influence on their voting decisions.

These qualities of political memes are also being adapted by governments, political candidates, and activists across the globe. The power of memes to influence politics is enhanced due to their ability to amplify messages quickly through diverse social media platforms. From Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush's Photoshop Twitter war to Beto O'Rourke cleaning his teeth in an Instagram story, the candidates of the U.S. presidential elections have in the past and are currently trying to imitate this accessible, humorous, and engaging genre in their propaganda, to maximize their contact with the young voters over the internet.

This proves that memes have the potential to be dominant in an era where likability can be a deciding factor in elections.

No doubt that memes have brought about a humorous and lightweight shift in the tone of serious political messages and have vastly expanded the potential for political information to reach even the most apolitical citizens. Attention to the 2018 midterm elections was unreasonably high, and the ability for citizens to express themselves openly through social media has added to this engagement. However, the constant exploitation of memes by the powerless expressers and the political candidates has brought the U.S. voters to a tricky spot. Excessive political information, misinformation and disinformation in the form of memes has put voters' political knowledge at stake. For example, the recent meme where one of the Democratic challengers Christine Clarke is shown holding a white board reading '... I support increasing state income tax by \$536 million dollars' as opposed to the original board reading 'No Fossil Fuel Money' (The New York Times, 2019).

During the past decade, social media has come to play an indisputably significant role in campaigning and politics and have in the process empowered memes. Memes have indeed become the techno-political tools of media activism (Navasa, Gallagher, Burrough). There is a significant change in how and where people get political data, as more people turn to digital sources permitting social-media messages to turn into a primary source of information. Finally, the emergence of the political 'Twitterverse,' and 'hashtag memes', which have become a locus of discourse between politicians, citizens, and the press, has coarsened political discourse, fostered "rule by tweet," and propelled the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Humor as a diversion has always been a vessel for engaging the masses in areas that might otherwise be of little public interest, and memes are no exception. Rather, the rapid and viral nature of memes makes them a carrier of information and an incredible asset for swiftly shaping the public's image of different candidates. It is now time to rejig internet memes as a prepotent communication tool that they have become.

## CAPSTONE PROPOSAL

My thesis, *Memes as Political Discourse*, explores the transformative power of memes in U.S. politics. Memes being the "street art of the internet" (Mina, 2019), this thesis looks at the growing role of meme culture and humor in addressing political issues in the United States. The recent shift to imagery and animation as a primary mode of political propaganda on the web is a fundamental shift from the primacy of newspapers, news channels, and online text. This has effects not only on civic engagement, and creative expression, but also in making political choices.

This existence and relevance of memes in U.S. politics and in general needs to be highlighted. I propose to add an Off The Record feature to the Snapchat app to bring across the intricacies of meme culture and its complexities in connection with human decision making and persuasion. Snapchat is one of the most used apps among teenagers. First-time voters, especially teenagers who are high school students, are some of the most important Americans to show up on the upcoming Election Day because they represent the newest voices making their wishes for government known. This population is very impressionable, likely to be misinformed, tech savvy, extensively involved on all social media platforms and the ones whose votes have the power to enact great change at the polls. It is vital to educate them to make an informed and responsible decision and at the same time make them comfortable to talk about politics in general.

Hence I propose to add an update to the Snapchat app - an Off The Record mode wherein the users will lose their username. They will be encouraged to use political meme-faced filters to freely express their political beliefs via a 15-second or 30-second video marked with suggested provocative hashtags to stir up conversation. They are then asked to give their video a cover, a name and a short description along with some hashtags from the auto suggested options and they are done. Once they publish their video they have no record of it except for a notification and it is out in the world for others to view. They can also create their own face-filters and share it in the snapchat community. The posted videos are then categorized into trending videos, lenses, and trending hashtags. They can easily search the videos for a particular hashtag, like the videos and also respond to it in the form of another video with face filters.

Although a different world in Snapchat, the Off The Record section follows the common Snapchat community guidelines while also encouraging teenagers to freely express their thoughts without any guilt and be aware of how memes influence or manipulate their political decisions in the process.

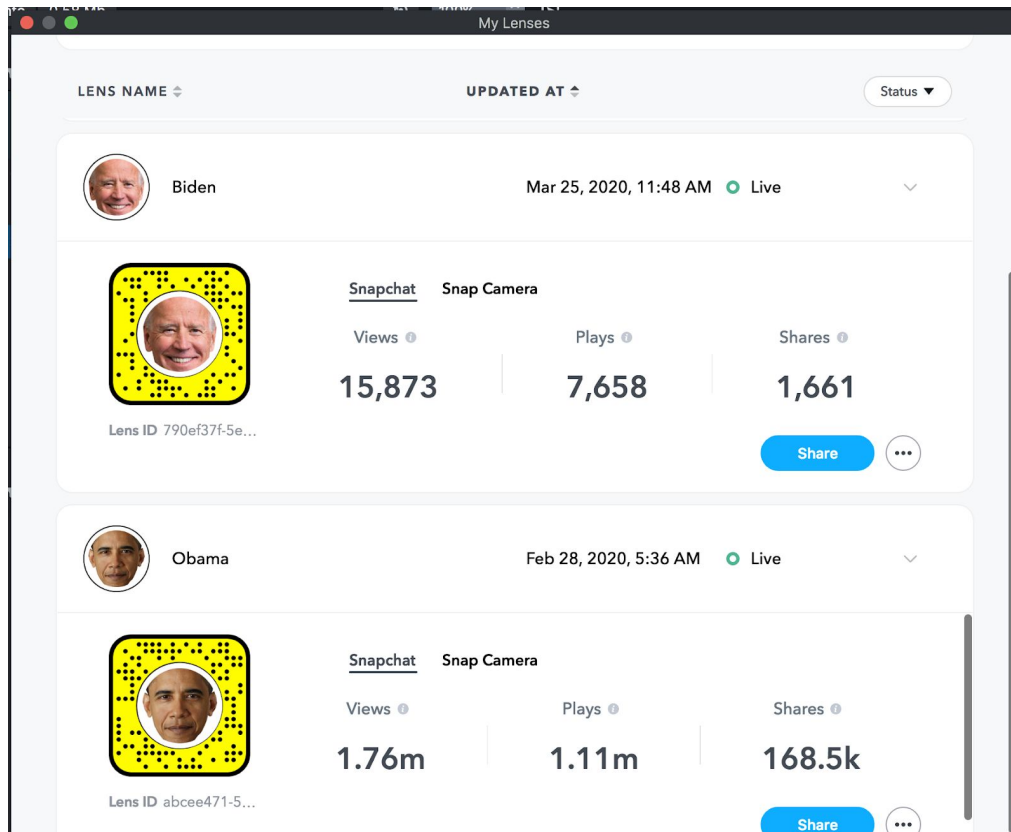
The subtlety, intelligence and subversive nature of memes will be relatable and interesting to watch in the long term. This feature will highlight how humor plays a significant role in altering the existing context of political issues. This feature will live on the web and reach the teenagers in the form of a Snapchat update.

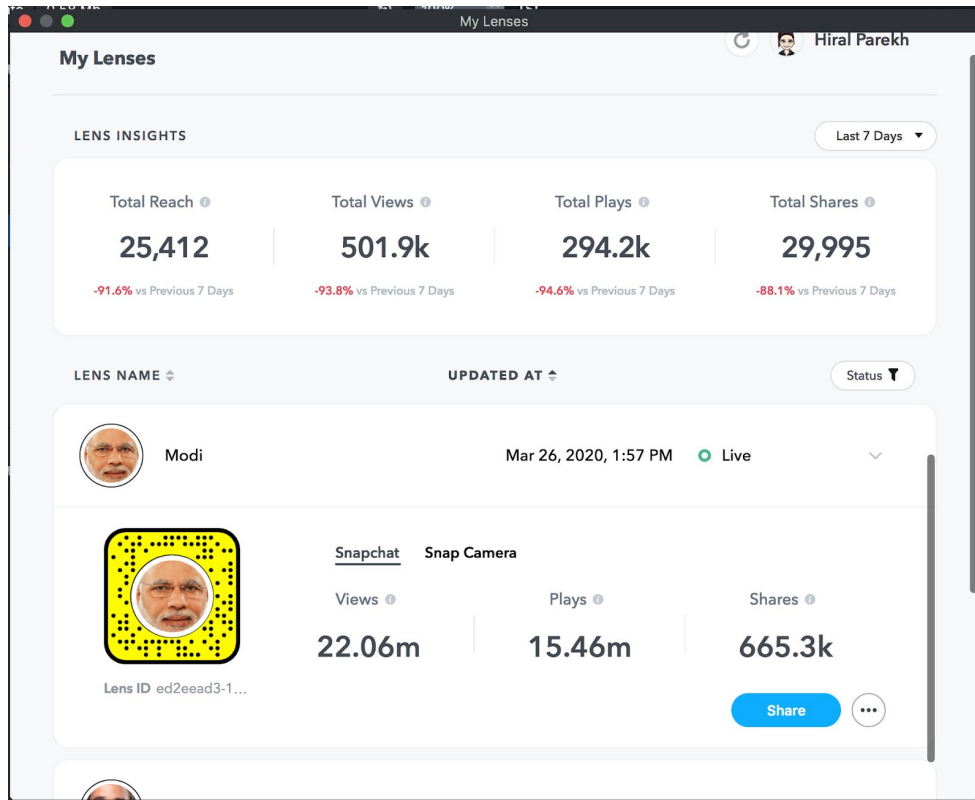
Thus, this proposal looks at the broader implications of the shift to meme culture, and what it can mean for U.S. politics and its voters.



## EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

A lot of videos collected for the capstone prototype show that people who may not express their opinion in the public, did so through these videos because they thought it was funny and also because their identity was under wraps. This suggests how memes thrive on humor, anonymity and self-expression.





The Snapchat filters created using Lens Studio show the number of views, plays and shares they received and that number is in millions for some of them which again shows how such meme filters can gain traction in a short amount of time and have an impact on how we see and talk about politics in the long term.

This thesis definitely changed my perception of what memes exactly are, how they function, and especially how impactful they are. I have always perceived memes as mere jokes and funny bits of culture but never as something that could be persuasive or create an impact on the human decision making.

This realization has made me more conscious about my choice of imagery and words, not only while texting or forwarding messages but also while designing. The capstone project started out as just an idea but after receiving the videos of my friends and peers using the Snapchat face filters I designed makes me believe that this project has the potential to work in the real world and make a difference.

## **FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

This thesis is not the end, because when we talk about memes, teens and politics, it is a never ending pool of possibilities. What this thesis does is open the door for further questions worth investigating - What will happen if Snapchat does come up with a feature like this? What impact will it have on the 2020 Election cycle? What is the future of memes and politics 10 years down the line? What will be the next trending meme? Will the Snapchat filters I created transition to another popular social media app? Will there be a time when there will be a new meme-like culture in the market and the then teenagers will no longer use memes?

This thesis surely acknowledges the impact of memes on politics. But does politics change memes in any way? If so, how? Do memes have an effect outside of their ecosystem? Could memes evolve into some new form? Do they have the same currency outside of politics? I believe these are some areas worth exploring.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

1. **4chan**

An imageboard website on which users upload and discuss visual images. Memes constitute an important facet of 4chan, serving as an integral part of many discussions.

2. **Author-function**

Author as the function of discourse.

3. **Bricolage**

Construction or creation from a diverse range of available things.

4. **Collectivism**

Cohesiveness among individuals and prioritization of the group over the self.

5. **Fecundity**

The ability of memes to reproduce.

6. **Image Macro**

The popular meme format in the West, wherein an image is accompanied by text above and below it to make a statement.

7. **Internet Meme**

(a) A group of digital content units sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance. For instance—photos featuring funny cats with captions share a topic (cats), form (photo + caption), and stance (humor). (b) These units are created with awareness of each other—the person posting the “cat with caption” image builds on the previous cats in the series. (c) These units are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users (Shifman, 2013).

8. **Know Your Meme**

A website and video series which uses wiki software to document various Internet memes and other online phenomena, such as viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, internet celebrities and more. It also investigates new and changing memes through research, as it commercializes on the culture.

**9. Lingua Franca**

A bridge language; in this case a universal language of the netizens.

**10. Meme**

A term introduced by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins defined memes as small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread from person to person by copying or imitation. Like genes, memes are defined as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention.

**11. Memetic**

When viral content lures user-created derivatives in the form of re-mix or imitation.

**12. Multimodality**

Communication in terms of textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources. Memes imparting the impermanence of expressive modes to the media landscape they populate.

**13. Networked Individualism**

The shift of the classical model of social arrangements formed around hierarchical bureaucracies or social groups that are tightly-knit, to connected individuals, using the means provided by the evolution of information and communications technology.

**14. Off The Record**

An incognito-like mode introduced in Snapchat that encourages users to express their political beliefs via videos while attaining anonymity.

**15. Pluralistic Ignorance**

The mistaken belief by a group that their beliefs are not shared by their peers.

**16. Political Economy of Memes**

The study of the production and trade of memes and their relations with the government.

**17. Polyvocal Discourse**

Communication that may be spoken, written or digital consisting of more than one voice.

**18. Reappropriation**

The cultural process by which a group reclaims words or artifacts that were previously used in a way disparaging of that group. Reappropriation is historical yet integral to memetic media, as they emerge when participants poach from multiple modes of communication and engage in bricolage.

**19. Reddit**

A content aggregation site that consists of user-generated news links. It contains subreddits—boards dedicated to various topics. It is known as a “lefty” or “geeky” hub of Internet culture and memes.

**20. Remixing**

*Combining or editing existing materials to produce something new.* Remixing is an old folk art but the techniques involved — collecting material, combining it, transforming it — are the same ones used at any level of creation.

**21. Resonance**

The ability of memes to connect with or encourage different people for different reasons.

**22. Virality**

A diffusion process in which a certain message (such as a catchphrase, video, or image) spreads from one person to another via digital and social media platforms. The process is characterized by great speed, and with broad reach.

**23. Web 2.0**

The second stage of development of the World Wide Web, characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media.

## CREDITS

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- Saloni Mehta
- Heli Shah
- Aishwarya Hoizal
- Christina Burroughs
- Kinjal Mehta
- Tvisha Gopani
- Swati Balasubramanian
- Lingyun Chen
- Mayank Gupta
- Smit Mehta

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