Meme as a rhetorical concept for digital media genres

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Meme as a rhetorical concept for digital media genres

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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DEDICATION

To Brooke, who has borne with me (and our chaos-bent young children) through this project, and to her brother Jacob, who has shared hundreds of delightful memes with me over the years.
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Finally, thanks to the glorious, bizarre, frightening, offensive, majestic, hilarious, and dumbfounding Internet and its billions of participants, especially the memers, without whom this project would have had no conception.
ABSTRACT

Studies in digital media and rhetoric often focus on fast-moving and constantly changing phenomena, and memes are undoubtably one of the most mercurial concepts to arise online in recent years. Memes are now a widely recognized online phenomenon, but their definition, particularly the genres they employ, is still a subject for debate. Although many scholars have offered insights into the meme phenomenon, few have articulated the intersections of medium, genre, concept, and symbolism that most memes embody.

Using concept-oriented, genre-based rhetorical discourse analysis, this dissertation analyzes 132 meme artifacts to better understand how meme genres interact with each other and the social purposes they fulfill, including their ideological functions. Analyses of the memes Yo Dawg, Philosoraptor, Lenny Puppet, Pepe the Frog, We Are Number One, and others demonstrate how memes are complex, intertextual artifacts that rely as much on symbolism and cultural knowledge as they do on structure and form in fulfilling their social purposes.

Memes are likely to remain a notable presence in digital media, and this dissertation provides a deeper understanding of how meme creators use them to address a variety of social purposes, ranging from political advocacy to marketing and fundraising. The primary finding here is that memes are not inherently genres, yet memes often rely on genres of digital media and genres are often formed around them. The dissertation also defines the meme concept as a rhetorical device in an effort to help guide future meme studies and establish the phenomenon’s position in digital rhetoric scholarship.
## NOMENCLATURE

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<td>Artifact</td>
<td>A human- or machine-made object. In the context of this dissertation, the term refers to a single, discrete piece of media.</td>
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<td>Normie</td>
<td>An Internet user who is not considered a member of Internet subculture; the uninitiated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photoshopped</td>
<td>A verb describing image manipulation. The term derives from Adobe Photoshop, although other software might be involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction Image</td>
<td>Any kind of image that is posted in a digital environment in response to another Internet user, usually to express an emotional reaction. “Reaction GIFs” are employed similarly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translanguaging</td>
<td>A process of translation that involves more than semiotic transfer; an indication that ownership of multiple languages has taken place. Here used to denote careful wordplay across languages.</td>
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: “WHAT DEFINES A MEME?”

A Popular yet Ambiguous Concept

Thousands of digital artifacts called “memes” are created and disseminated daily across the Internet. These ubiquitous artifacts combine pictures and words to visualize messages about a wide array of topics—from ordinary life, sports, and work to art, academia, and politics—their messages ranging from the silly and the ordinary to the serious and the sublime. As artifacts with rhetorically dynamic features, memes embody widespread cultural participation and dissemination. Internet memes have been in vogue for some time now, with the earliest reference to a “net meme” dating at least as far back as 1998 (OED.com) and the term coming into more common parlance during the mid-2000s, until its widespread digital presence in the 2010s. The concept of a meme now provides a sort of metric for assessing how digital content is shared, spread, and altered by various Internet users (Shifman, 17–18). Although Richard Dawkins’ poignant idea that cultural artifacts are shared and subsequently reconfigured has become a popular lens for understanding digital media in the 21st century, the study of memes has expanded well beyond that early formulation and now fosters questions regarding genre, remix, multimodality, authorship, and other rhetorical concepts.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the explosion of memes on the Internet, they still lack a coherent definition. Many popular journalists and scholars from various fields (Aunger; Blackmore; Dennett; Gleick; Leith) continually ask what exactly memes are, and what purposes they serve. Is “meme” a theory, a metaphor, a concept, a genre, or something else? One of the major complications behind these
questions is the simple fact that shortly after coming up with the original notion, Dawkins himself backed away from the conversation, making the direction the theory ought to take unclear. Heedless of the term’s exact prior definitions, meanwhile, Internet users have seized the idea and run with it, clearly finding some intrinsic rhetorical motivation to call their digital creations “memes” as they continuously produce them for various audiences and purposes. These Internet memes are not the thoughtless, selfish replicators of Dawkinsian genetics, but rather the socially oriented creations of intelligent and purposeful human beings. Accordingly, rhetoric has become in many regards a more appropriate lens through which to understand Internet memes than Dawkins’s original theory. As Ryan Milner (2016) puts it, “Dawkins’s…genes may be selfish, but his memes are social” (41).

A definition of memes, then, is still highly debated among scholars. In his article, “What Defines a Meme?”, upon which the title of this introductory chapter is based, James Gleick discusses the contested nature of memes, a state that has not changed much in the seven years since he wrote the article. Gleick provides an overview of the meme concept’s history since Dawkins’s original definition, including an analysis of how the Journal of Memetics eventually faded away, in large part due to internal squabbles regarding how to define the field and from which discipline(s) it derived its legitimacy. “The term ‘meme’ could be applied to a suspicious cornucopia of entities,” Gleick observes (para. 40). Ultimately, rather than establishing clear, delineated parameters for defining memes, Gleick leaves open-ended the question of what does or does not constitute a meme. The article is thus emblematic of the larger problems the field faces in that scholars continue to struggle to define the phenomenon but ultimately are forced into ambivalence, as
the complexities of defining memes are daunting due to a wide range of possible understandings for the term.

This dissertation will further explore the meme phenomenon through rhetorical genre-based discourse analyses of 132 Internet meme artifacts, which will include concept-oriented reading of the memes as found in a variety of contexts and consideration for the conversations surrounding them in popular journalism, social media, and online discussion threads. The dissertation sheds light not only on the ongoing definition of memes but also on the purposes and roles such artifacts play in various social contexts, their interactions with genres, and their affordances and constraints for effective multimodal communication. This analysis will provide further understanding of how memes operate in conjunction with the concept of genre as well as further insight into why they are important and useful devices for the 21st century. Key to this discussion is my conclusion that memes are not genres, but do use and create genres. Genres require either a structural or rhetorical thread to keep them intact, and memes defy both traditional structuralist definitions of genre and even rhetorical definitions of genre; in the moment a meme is formed, the structure is immediately played with by meme creators, and its rhetorical purposes are often manifold. Memes do, however, rely on structures, forms, and rhetorical goals. They therefore use genres to establish continuity, and genres are also formed around the use of memes. Memes and genres are not, however, synonymous.

By the end of the dissertation, I come to my own more rhetorical definition for memes as well, that of groups of intertextual artifacts that bear commonalities in content, form, stance, and/or genre. But before proceeding into a discussion of the meme phenomenon, I will cover some additional history of the term.
How Memes Began: Dawkinsian Memetics

As has now been cited in well over 100 publications, biologist Richard Dawkins first defined the concept of a meme in 1976 as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (192, emphasis in original). Ever since Dawkins made this comparison between genes and cultural ideas, the meme concept has been a source of excitement, insight, controversy, and skepticism among various scholarly disciplines. Memetics, a term coined by extending “meme” to its genetic corollary (genetics), became a field of study in its own right during the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, with numerous scholars including Robert Aunger, Susan Blackmore, Richard Brodie, Daniel Dennett, Kate Distin, Aaron Lynch, and Tim Tyler contributing their thoughts and perspectives on the phenomenon over the years. Although Dawkins has been referred to as the “patron saint” of this brand of memetics, he has only occasionally associated himself with the movement (Tyler, “The Patron Saint”). Nevertheless, the label “Dawkinsian memetics” is appropriate for how these scholars approached the subject.

The scientific community has largely dismissed Dawkinsian memetics. Dan Sperber calls the grand project of memetics “misguided” (172) and Peter Kinnon describes the meme as an “ingenious neologism” that “spawn[ed] a body of pseudoscience” (60). Even rhetorical scholar Carolyn R. Miller has disparaged memetics. In a 2012 symposium talk on genre evolution, she began her discussion of memes by saying, “I was really hoping I wouldn’t have to talk about memes” (32:54). Although the cause of her trepidation is not entirely clear, it is likely related to the widely held perception that memetics is a pseudoscience, which she also refers to. Miller discusses how the literalist camp of memetics has been perceived as an attempt to explain culture through scientism rather than humanism, a move that has
been thoroughly criticized both within the humanities and sciences (see Goodheart, for instance). Miller also mentions that the *Journal of Memetics* lasted only eight years, just as Gleick discussed, heavily implying that the demise of the field’s primary journal is yet further evidence of the field’s misguidance.

Writing in 2011, Tim Tyler provides a comprehensive literature review of memetics and considers and challenges its disparagements over the years. Rather than labeling memetics a pseudoscience, Tyler suggests the term “protoscience” might be more appropriate, as the object of study (the human brain) still has not been studied at the level necessary to establish the empirical reality of memes. Tyler discusses two camps within memetics: intercranial memetics, which assumes memes are a reality and studies their outward manifestations, and intracranial memetics, which seeks to understand how memes form in our brains. The two polar-opposite authors on this spectrum are Susan Blackmore and Robert Aunger. In *The Meme Machine*, arguably the best-known memeticist book, Blackmore takes memes’ existence for granted and explores different artifacts and customs as cultural manifestations of memes. Aunger, in *The Electric Meme*, on the other hand, painstakingly lays out a scientific case for how memes might exist in our brains, but the neuroscience necessary to test his theories remains inaccessible to him.

The failure of Dawkinsian memetics can be attributed to the division between these two camps. To scientifically demonstrate that memes exist, we likely must take Aunger’s approach and start with the brain. As he laments, however, neuroscientists are not interested in investigating memes’ scientific existence. (Frankly, they have better things to do.) Aunger elsewhere suggested that “memetic science [is] ailing” due to “the lack of a useful definition” (“What’s the Matter with Memes”, 178). On the other hand, if we take the approach of Blackmore, Brodie, or Lynch and simply
assume that memes are real and study culture through a memetic lens, we will merely find exactly what we are looking for, which is that popular ideas spread in human culture. The intercranial memeticists tend to rely on generalizations, hunches, and non-empirical data in promoting their theories; they generally do not conduct empirical, scientific studies. Here again, Tyler laments that the researchers with the proper training who might investigate such phenomena scientifically, social scientists, not only see little value in memetics but often downright abhor it, perceiving a reductionist, neo-Darwinian plot led by biologists seeking to overstep their disciplinary turf into the social sciences.

In short, memetics has failed to qualify as a science because memeticists have either been too scientific, but lacking the proper training or equipment to investigate their object of study, or not nearly scientific enough, relying on generalized, non-empirical reductions. Until neuroscientists or social scientists identify a need to scientifically investigate whether memes exist, memetics will remain a protoscience. And as a protoscience, memetics resembles pseudoscience; the parallels between memetics and the 19th century pseudoscience of phrenology are undeniable. (See Gieryn for a discussion of the rhetoric involved in labeling phrenology as a pseudoscience.)

Given Dawkinsian memetics’ stalled state as a protoscience, and in light of the Internet meme’s nearly total eclipse of the memetic project in recent years, the pursuit of Dawkinsian memetics as a field of scientific study is all but defunct. However, the *idea* of memetics, or the notion that ideas do spread from brain to brain based in part on inherent sharable, useful, or otherwise persuasive properties, or that units of culture either die out or spread based upon their ability to replicate, is a powerful metaphor for how memes succeed in the public forum and does hold...
promise for the study of communicative artifacts, especially as we consider how
genres are molded to fit certain rhetorical situations. In the same symposium cited
above, Miller suggests that a softer, more metaphorical application of Darwinian
evolution may yield a more fruitful analysis of genre evolution than a hard,
Dawkinsian memetic approach. Miller’s suggestion should apply particularly well
in considering whether the Internet meme is a genre, then, considering that the
Internet meme owes its etymological and semantic origins to this same
Darwinian/Dawkinsian concept.

Despite its drawbacks, memetics paved the way for the Internet meme by
establishing a basic theoretical framework from which remixed viral digital content
can be better understood. The remixed nature of Internet memes and their inherent
reliance on previously existing cultural artifacts offer significant justification for the
application of Dawkinsian meme theory to these digital artifacts; Internet memes are
different from other pictures, cartoons, and similar genres in that they are born from
prior cultural ideas through a remixing of those ideas, and they are “spread”—that
is, shared—with great rapidity. Yet to apply such a soft memetics to digital
rhetorical artifacts, a basic understanding of those artifacts is necessary.

A Baseline Definition for (Internet) Memes

The concept of a “meme” has clearly shifted since its initial conception, now
more than 40 years ago. Some still use the term in its original memeticist sense, as
did Deputy Defense Secretary Robert O. Work in a relatively recent interview (Dec.
2016) with the Washington Post: “There is this meme that we’re some bloated, giant
organization,” he said (Whitlock and Woodward), using the term meme to refer to a
general idea regarding the Department of Defense that pervades our culture. Most
people today, however, tend to associate memes with widely shared digital media, and thus the additional label of “Internet memes” is frequently used to distinguish the online phenomenon from Dawkins’s original theory, which Internet memes have superseded over the past two decades. These various understandings of the meme phenomenon—a vague descriptor that I use quite deliberately, given the wide range of possible understandings of the idea—appear in Figure 1.1, which shows the multiple levels of definition behind the term meme, given that it can be used to mean a variety of things.

Fig. 1.1. The multilayered connotations associated with the word “meme.” Source: Author.
The hierarchy of Figure 1.1 represents both chronology and levels of abstraction. At the top level lies memetics, as just described, which acts as the all-encompassing notion that Dawkins originally put forth. From those original theories postulated by Dawkins, Blackmore, Dennett, and others, the idea of a general meme emerged, which the Robert O. Work quotation above exemplifies. When memes became digital and posted online, the term Internet meme became a fitting descriptor. And finally, after years of Internet memes going viral, the term has come to be associated with one particular genre, the image macro. In the next section I list a few key Internet meme genre forms, including image macros, to demonstrate the wide variety of artifacts that this dissertation concerns. Even a casual look at the homepage of KnowYourMeme.com, a website often hailed as the prime authority on Internet memes (the third level down in Figure 1.1), reveals that “meme” could refer to any of the following communicative events:

- News items, such as something a politician said or did recently
- A statement or action by a celebrity
- A grammatical or lexical formation, such as a particular sentence structure or saying (see “snowclone” below)
- A viral video
- An artifact that has been imitated, that is, copied and altered
- A tweet or other social media post
- A screenshot of a text message conversation
- A subreddit (section of Reddit.com)

This is far from an exhaustive list. An Internet meme really could consist of any act or series of acts of communication, whether it be computer-generated,
photographed, filmed, typed, handwritten, scanned, audio recorded, or otherwise put into a computer and shared with others. Analog memes have also existed for centuries, as noted by Limor Shifman (24–27). Yet equating memes with artifacts, or suggesting that the two words are synonyms, would be erroneous. The term’s use in association with loosely defined ideas shared on the Internet bespeaks its abstract nature, and memes very seldom exist as one-off artifacts; rather, they exist as the products of cultural collectives (Milner, 2016; 2–3). Of all the definitions for meme that I have encountered, I like Shifman’s the best from her 2013 book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, a definition Ryan Milner has also quoted:

a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which  
b) were created with awareness of each other, and  
c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (41)

“A group of digital items” is highly inclusive, yet the term meme is frequently applied to just that—any group of digital items. This open-ended definition also makes a finite list of the media features of the Internet meme virtually unattainable, considering that GIFs, videos, comic strips, still images, music, slideshows, and whole websites all have the potential to become memes. And thus we return to Gleick’s concern that meme has become such a universal identifier that it has been nearly defined out of usefulness. Yet genres have formed around these groups of digital items, and certain memes tend to be reproduced and altered in certain ways. I refer to these genres as “meme genres,” although as stated previously memes are not genres; they operate in conjunction with genres. One valuable method for beginning to understand these meme genres will be to consider their
forms—that is, the kinds of media and structures that are typically used in their creation.

As Amy Devitt once told a group of graduate students during a speaker series event, “Genre makes rhetoric visible.” Without some notion of an artifact’s genre, whether explicitly defined or implicitly understood, any viewer will have a hard time making much sense of the artifact. Identifying some key genre forms here at the start of this dissertation will therefore provide the reader with some tenable understanding as I delve into these complex digital item groups, which in turn can serve as a basis for their definition. A major goal of this dissertation is to explore meme genres, so this is but a preliminary glance at a few of the common forms employed. More complete discussions of genre can be found in Chapters 3 and 4.

A Tentative List of Meme Genre Forms

The list of key meme genre forms below is by no means exhaustive: Because virtually any digital artifact can be considered a meme, I have not included every possible type of meme; these are but general categories, not a complete taxonomy of the whole phenomenon. The genres listed here differ from Shifman’s list (100), for instance, but many of those listed here show up in subsequent chapters, so this list serves as an essential starting point for understanding memes in their various instantiations. I have decided to order this list from least data-intensive to most data-intensive, which serves as a rough metric for the levels of medium involved.

Alphanumeric Memes

Words form many basic-level memes. I prefer the term alphanumeric to clearly indicate that the texts discussed here do not signify text in the broader sense, as Roland Barthes or multimodal scholars use it—possibly meaning speech, images,
ideologies, etc.—but rather words composed of an alphabet and/or numbers. Although I won’t make the argument here, some memeticists might consider all rhetorical theory to have sprung from alphanumeric memes as rhetors have latched onto certain devices and figures that have worked time and again for rhetorical effect. At any rate, alphanumeric memes are alive and well in our digital age, as the following examples demonstrate.

**Snowclone.** First introduced by Geoffrey K. Pullum in 2003, “snowclone” has become a useful term for describing phrasal templates where certain words can be readily swapped for others, similar to the rhetorical device metaplasm. Phrases like “X is the new Y,” “The X to End All Xs,” “X is my middle name,” “X-gate” and “We’re gonna need a bigger X” have been employed as stock phrases for years. Many image macros (discussed under Image Memes below) have a reciprocal relationship with snowclones, sometimes generating them and sometimes coming from them.

**Screenshot of Text.** Many Internet users take screen captures from phones, tablets, or computers of alphanumeric text-based conversations to share on the Internet (see Figure 1.2), and many news organizations and other professional communicators refer to tweets or Twitter handles from the popular social media platform as memes. These memes are outliers in that the original artifact is seldom altered. Shifman’s use of “and/or” in her assertion that memes are “circulated, imitated, and/or transformed…by many users” (41) is an
important caveat for her definition since large numbers of digital artifacts are called memes when in fact they have not been imitated or transformed. Such is frequently the case with screen captures of alphanumeric conversations. If we take the descriptive grammarian approach to defining terms, which is the more widely accepted approach compared to prescriptive grammar among today’s linguists, then we must look at how a term is used rather than how we as scholars might choose to define it. Calling an unaltered screenshot a meme is, in this regard, accurate, regardless of whether it matches any particular scholarly definition.

**Image Memes**

Images are widely acknowledged as the best way to reach audiences quickly and effectively. In the grand agora of the Internet, images often wield more power than alphanumeric text when it comes to engaging audiences.

**Image Macros.** As indicated earlier, image macros are by far the most widely recognized genre of meme. The exact origin of the image macro is hard to identify, though Milner suggests that 4chan is where memes in this sense really saw their rise. The genre itself is somewhat like a medium, with certain unspoken rules for its proper orientation.
and display. The base characteristics are an image with text superimposed on it, but
the more precise rules of the genre would state that white Impact font text with a
thin black border is located at the top of the image and below it, as in Figure 1.3.
Kate Brideau and Charles Berret offer an insightful analysis into why Impact font is
a particularly popular choice for image macro memes.

Image macros are so called because they rely upon stock images that are
replicated again and again but with different text (often English, given the genre’s
origins on American-centric sites like Tumblr and 4chan) superimposed upon them.
The name comes from computer software macros, which are programmed scripts
that perform certain repetitive functions. The idea is that some images are used
again and again, much like a coded script is. The text in image macros is substituted,
much like certain words are swapped for others in snowclones, and indeed the
generic rules of many image macros call for the use of a specific snowclone. Image
macros tend to create stock characters, objects, and/or scenes through their repeated
use. In the example used for Figure 1.1, a still shot from a Dos Equis commercial
featuring the “Most Interesting Man in the World” became an image macro meme as
Internet users copied the formula “I don’t always _____ but when I do, I ______”
employed by the character’s original phrase, “I don’t always drink beer, but when I
do, I drink Dos Equis.” The syntactic formula became a standard phrase associated
with the image. Many image macros rely on a similar codification process; in Figure
1.3, the image of a brain serves as an “advice animal,” which KnowYourMeme.com
(again, one of the leading online authorities on memes) defines as a type of image
macro that makes life observations, in this case describing unfortunate
contradictions often perpetrated by human brains. The alphanumeric text in image
macros prevents ambiguity regarding the image, suggesting how the audience
should interpret the image’s meaning. Image macros will feature prominently in Chapter 3.

**Comics.** Although many Internet comics are shared as “memes” without any notable alterations, some comics are manipulated through repeated imitation to the point where they become somewhat iconic. Figure 1.4 shows such a comic by Owl Turd Comix, which has been photoshopped many times. The Rage Comic faces (Figure 1.5) also have a notorious online presence as memes. Some Internet comic series and artists, such as Sarah Andersen, *Hyperbole and a Half*, and *The Oatmeal*, have achieved popularity among Internet meme enthusiasts to the point where much of their work is often posted as memes. Pepe the Frog, discussed in Chapter 4, started as part of a similar popular Internet comic.

![Fig. 1.4](image1.png) **Fig. 1.4.** An alteration of Owl Turd Comix’s original comic-based commentary on Google Plus. Source: Memebase.

![Fig. 1.5](image2.png) **Fig. 1.5.** The rage comic faces have been used in thousands—possibly millions—of memes over the years. Source: Wattpad.
Photoshopped Images. Alphanumeric text is not necessary to create a meme. Take Figures 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8, for instance. I think this meme speaks for itself. Photoshopping is often employed to humourous, clever, and sometimes insightful effect. Pepper Spray Cop, discussed in Chapter 2, is another example of such a meme.

![Fig. 1.6](image1.png)
**Fig. 1.6.** A humorous meme where photos of birds have their wings replaced by human arms through photoshopping, known simply as “birds with arms.” Source: Pinterest.com.

![Fig. 1.7](image2.png)
**Fig. 1.7.** Another “birds with arms” example. Source: Pinterest.com.

![Fig. 1.8](image3.png)
**Fig. 1.8.** Yet another instance of the “birds with arms” meme. Source: Backyardchirper.com.

Video Memes

Video can communicate more information than static images despite the notable disadvantage of requiring the viewer to stop what they are doing to watch them. Social media users have not let this disadvantage deter them from sharing terabytes of video memes daily.
GIFs. Although technically not video files, animated images using the .gif file extension appear as videos. Here, given the constraints of a paper manuscript prepared in Microsoft Word, the multiple screenshots in Figure 1.9, taken from Milner’s book, will have to suffice. Imagine the six images being animated. Milner discussed this Sad Batman GIF (59–60), which features Ben Affleck as Batman Photoshopped so that he appears to be pushing a swing in the rain to poke fun at the original photo from which the GIF was compiled. (For a more complete GIF experience, visit the homepage of https://giphy.com/, which features a milieu of GIFs.)

Fig. 1.9. Milner’s compilation taken from the sequence of images that have been animated as a humorous GIF of Sad Batman. Source: Milner.
GIFs have succeeded as memes largely because of their small file sizes, which allow them to load quickly on webpages, and because they can be embedded directly into webpages without requiring a video player, which means they can start playing immediately once the page has loaded. They have no embedded audio track, which is often advantageous as they can provide a purely visual experience, making them optimal for social media feeds.

**Captioned Short Videos.** Some videos have circulated as memes in part by employing the image macro aesthetic of short phrases superimposed above and/or below their frame. Figure 1.10 shows screenshots from such a 33-second video where a man walks outside with a parka on, realizes it is much warmer outside than he thought, runs upstairs to change, and comes outside to discover that it has started snowing in the past 10 seconds or so. Many of these videos speak to generally “true to life” themes, and the alphanumeric captions serve as an additional guide to the video, thus rendering audio playback unessential. This medial feature demonstrates great audience awareness, as many people surf Facebook and other social media at work or other venues where having their sound on might cause distractions.

![Fig. 1.10. Screenshots of key moments in a video commenting on unpredictable weather patterns. Source: UNILAD Magazine.](image)

**Video Parodies (and other Remixes).** Finally, plain old videos are often uploaded to sites like YouTube and Vimeo with clearly memetic properties. These vary in length, though shorter videos often have greater success in going viral since
people are generally more willing to give up 30 seconds of their time for a laugh than 10–20 minutes. Many video series have appeared as memes, probably the most (in)famous being the “Hitler finds out that…” series. Multiple authors have commented on this meme (including myself), and because some creators of the movie Downfall, from which the clip was taken, have denounced the videos, I feel inclined not to use screenshots here. The videos rely on using different captions, usually in English, for the famous scene where Hitler learns that his army has been defeated. Chapter 4 will discuss a video parody meme at length, “We Are Number One but…”, and how iconic video memes can be used for more than mere entertainment.

**Meme Forms Wrap-Up**

Those are, in my estimation, some of the key genre forms that have surfaced across the Internet as “memes.” There are many others. For the purposes of a dissertation, I have had to be judicious in determining which to discuss. Chapter 3 will spend more time delving into the nuanced issues of medium, genre, purpose, and uptake involved with memes. For now, I conclude this introductory chapter by describing the rest of this dissertation and its underlying project.

**Dissertation Overview**

Central to this dissertation’s objectives is an effort to better understand memes and their implications for visual and digital rhetoric. The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter two will combine a literature review of Internet meme studies, genre theory, multimodality, rhetorical criticism, and discourse analysis with a justification of the concept-oriented, genre-based rhetorical discourse analysis methodology to be employed for the dissertation study. Chapter three will
discuss how memes operate as genres through multiple modes and purposes and relying on various icons and other topoi. Chapter four will discuss how memes create arguments, evolve to suit different circumstances, and contribute to ongoing discourses. Chapter five concludes the dissertation by defining meme as a rhetorical concept for future rhetorical studies based upon the analysis of memes conducted up to that point. The chapter then offers strategies for using meme as a rhetorical concept, as related to but not synonymous with genre, and discusses potential areas for future research that might utilize this new perspective on memes.

The central project of the dissertation is to ascertain nuances, affordances, constraints, and rhetorical utility among memes and their corresponding genres in an effort to better understand the phenomenon and its implications for digital media. Following from Carolyn R. Miller’s 1984 assertion that genres are simply formed as repeated responses to recurring situations (159), the project here will follow how meme genres gain codification through continuous use rather than delineate exactly what a meme is or taxonomize different kinds of memes into finite groups. The next chapter will provide justification and methodology for such a study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY: POSITIONING
“MEME” AS A RHETORICAL CONCEPT FOR RHETORICAL STUDY
Introduction

This chapter will cover both the literature review and methodology for this dissertation. I intend to conduct concept-oriented rhetorical discourse analysis of memes for my study’s methodology. Consequently, reviewing concept-oriented rhetorical criticism becomes a required component of my literature review, which in turn directly informs the rationale for my methodology. Thus, the interrelated conceptual framework, theory, and methodology warrant discussion and exploration in one single chapter.

My literature review begins with four theoretical approaches that together provide a comprehensive overview of memes: studies of Internet memes, genre theory, remix, and multimodality. The literature review then summarizes concept-oriented rhetorical criticism and briefly discusses methods of discourse analysis. I then propose the rhetorical concept of “meme” as a new addition to the long list of rhetorical devices that have already been identified, then describe other rhetorical concepts I will use in this dissertation. Finally, I lay out the artifacts of analysis and the goals for the study.
Studies on Internet Memes

Rhetorical Internet Meme Studies

Numerous studies on Internet memes have now been conducted, a few of which are explicitly rhetorical, such as Heidi Huntington’s work in visual rhetoric, Stephanie Vie’s considerations of the rhetorical context of memes in social media, and Ben Wetherbee’s assertion that certain aspects of memes can serve as rhetorical *topoi*. I’ll start the discussion of Internet meme studies by reviewing these rhetorical scholars first, few though they are. Huntington first theorized how visual rhetoric can be applied to memes in 2013 and compared the approach to semiotic and discursive studies of memes. In 2016, she interrogated the Pepper Spray Cop meme (see Figure 2.1 below) as an example of synecdoche, the rhetorical tactic of using a part of something as a symbol to represent the larger whole from which it is derived. The symbol of officer Pike pepper-spraying protesting students at UC Davis represented the discourse surrounding the subject of police brutality as iterations of the meme continued the conversation of police force further than its original context, Huntington argues. For instance, in Figure 2.2, we see Pike pepper spraying the Declaration of Independence, suggesting that police brutality has desecrated the principles of this founding document. Ryan Milner, Limor Shifman, and others discussed below have also analyzed the Pepper Spray Cop meme.
Fig. 2.1. Original photograph of police officer Lieutenant John Pike administering pepper spray on occupy protesters at UC Davis. Source: Louise Macabitas.

Fig. 2.2. In one of dozens of Photoshopped variations on the original photograph, John Pike pepper sprays the Declaration of Independence in John Trumbull’s famous painting. Source: jetuchs (Reddit user).
Huntington laid significant groundwork for evaluating memes as visual rhetoric. In this dissertation, I take her arguments further by suggesting that the concept of a meme itself can be used as a rhetorical concept for concept-oriented rhetorical analysis.

In her analysis of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo (Figure 2.3), which the HRC changed to pink and red colors to stand in solidarity with the LGBTQIA community around the time of the Supreme Court’s Proposition 8 and Defense of Marriage Act decisions in 2013, Vie interrogates some of the symbol’s memetic iterations and reasons, through her critical rhetorician lens, that the symbol was sometimes effective in its messaging and other times poorly appropriated. While some users appropriated the symbol to stand in solidarity with the HRC, others simply made jokes or appropriated the symbol for their own marketing (see Figure 2.4). Vie concludes, “[T]he power of Internet memes lies in their ability to draw attention to issues and causes worth our interest” (para. 35), not necessarily in their accuracy or informativeness. As mentioned above, Vie explicitly used memetics as a framework for her study, particularly as it relates to the logo’s spread and success, but she came short of considering memetics as a rhetorical concept. While dissemination and “success” are undeniably integral to the nature of memes, the concept of a meme can be called upon for understanding other aspects of rhetorical phenomena, such as
their potential for community identification, their notable pithy qualities, and their ability to call upon tropes or *topoi*.

![Fig. 2.4. Anheuser–Busch, Bonobos, and Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants each appropriated the new Human Rights Campaign logo in an ambiguous cross between marketing and solidarity. Source: Vie.](image)

Wetherbee’s assessment of the memes based on the “binders full of women” comment made by Mitt Romney during the second presidential debate of the 2012 election season (see Figure 2.5) revealed that memes often serve as *topoi*, or commonplaces, from which other rhetors can draw. Romney’s comment became more than a regrettable misstatement of his enthusiasm to find women to hire, as the meme it spawned became a sort of *topos* for discussing the glass ceiling and other feminist issues. Other memes have similarly created cultural reservoirs that can serve as something akin to idiomatic expressions, which meme creators draw on again and again. While it’s unclear whether the binders full of women
memes contributed to Romney losing the 2012 election, their influence on digital media discourse in the following years is undeniable, and the way that “binders full of women” has served as a sort of ideograph or condensation symbol demonstrates its position as a stock *topos* for use by multiple rhetors.

Huntington, Vie, and Wetherbee have helped pave the way for rhetorical analysis of Internet memes, but they only scratched the surface of this phenomenon with their respective analyses. Next I look at scholars from related fields who have conducted broader studies.

**Internet Meme Studies in Media and Communication Studies and Linguistics**

Other Internet meme scholars have worked from a frame very similar to rhetorical criticism, including the critical discourse analyses of Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear; Ryan Milner; and Limor Shifman, and Michele Zappavigna’s corpus linguistic analysis, each scholar in her or his turn investigating and considering how memes make arguments and why they are so widely spread. These scholars have described meme phenomena and advanced meme theory toward a more holistic understanding of Internet Memes.

**Discourse analysis approaches.** Knobel and Lankshear conducted the first full-scale discourse analysis study of Internet memes, included as a chapter in their 2007 book. Their study was foundational in establishing multimodal discourse analysis as a method for studying Internet memes, and they also offered pedagogical approaches for considering memes as literacy. Their analyses of early memes offer a quasi-historical accounting of how memes were perceived and used in the early 2000s. They also acknowledge the importance of humor and absurdity in many memes’ fecundity and replicability.
Ryan Milner and Limor Shifman are, in my estimation, the prominent meme scholars in the humanities and social sciences as of this writing, and I have therefore relied heavily on their work in formulating this dissertation. Milner theorizes memes as artifacts of large cultural collectives, and through an extensive, multi-year discourse analysis, he assessed their multimodal properties and labeled a few genres and subgenres of memes (79). His work suggests that memes are not always as inclusive of certain groups as one might think; even though participatory media seems like it ought to include all groups and society as a common collective, he found that many memes ostracize or otherwise alienate certain groups through racial or sexual stereotyping. Shifman, meanwhile, provides a solid grounding for meme theory as applied to Internet memes, including her definition discussed in Chapter 1. Her discourse analysis of multiple meme artifacts, including many videos, allowed her to further theorize on memes’ collaborative creation and dissemination. I will return to Milner and Shifman throughout the dissertation.

**Linguistic approach.** Zappavigna conducted corpus-based linguistic analysis of memes based on alphanumeric text. She identified several phrasal templates, the “snowclones” discussed in Chapter 1, that Internet users imitate through slight alterations (107). One example she focuses on is “Im in ur [noun] [present infinitive verb] ur [noun]” based on the original phrase, “im in ur base killing ur d00ds” (I’m in your base, killing your dudes), which originated from a particularly famous instance of mockery during an online gaming interaction. An instance of this phrasal appropriation would be “im in ur forums, trollin ur threadz.” Zappavigna looked at several other phrasal templates, and I will return to her findings during my exploration of the Yo Dawg meme in Chapter 3. Her large-scale corpus analysis
provides significant linguistic findings regarding memetic online interactions in the alphanumeric mode.

This previous scholarship establishes memes not only as legitimate communicative acts that have real potential for verbal and visual argumentation, but also as valuable genres with which rhetors can engage various audiences by remixing already existing artifacts. Yet despite all of this insightful scholarship on Internet memes, I have identified several rhetorical devices and tools that these scholars have not yet tapped but that should prove fruitful in continuing to understand meme phenomena, including *anesis*, ethos, genre, kairos, and the visual ideograph. I outline these devices in the methodology section and explain how I intend to apply them. Suffice it for now to say that, given the relative newness of the scholarly field, there are many rhetorical aspects of Internet memes left unexplored.

**Genre Theory**

The genre(s) used by Internet memes have been considered by a few scholars, but more work is needed in this area, as the modes of communication and the sorts of arguments made by meme creators vary significantly. Below I discuss how genre theory relates to Internet meme studies.

**Rhetorical Genre Studies and Typified Responses to Social Situations**

The nature of memes’ social construction and enactment and their eventual arrival at a “stabilized-for-now” (Schryer, 108) state as a genre is often difficult to determine given the rapidity with which memes are created and disseminated, and thus the generic expectations of many memes are in constant flux. This flexibility of meme genres aligns with Miller’s 1984 article, “Genre as Social Action,” wherein she famously classified genres not as formally structured guidelines for producing texts
but as rhetorical responses to recurrent situations. In discussing Schutz’s work with
typification, Miller said, “If a new typification proves continually useful for
mastering states of affairs, it enters the stock of knowledge and its application
becomes routine” (6). This explanation of genre formation also describes quite well
how memes arise, spread, and become part of our “stock of knowledge”; they
become a serviceable response to social situations over time. Anne Freadman
continued Miller’s notion of genres as diachronic in nature in her 2012 article, “The
Traps and Trappings of Genre Theory,” saying, “Any genre...alludes to, or carries,
the history of its own practice” (547). As Bakhtin famously declared, “[A]ny speaker
is...a respondent to a greater or lesser degree.... [No one] disturbs the eternal silence
of the universe” (69). Genres don’t surface out of nothing but are an amalgamation
of the artifacts that precede them. This reuse and frequent redefinition of genres is
what Freadman terms “uptake”:

No genre can do more than predict the kind of uptake that would
make it happy, and no speaker or writer can completely secure an
uptake. This is partly because no discursive event is a pure example of
any genre, and partly because of the unpredictable historical
complexity of its moment and its ongoing action. (560)

According to the principles of uptake, we cannot expect to see a meme with
no prior discourse surrounding it. Indeed, such a notion runs counter to Dawkins’s
original conception of the meme as a replicated cultural element that transforms as it
is copied. Likewise, we also cannot expect a meme to strictly follow the original
artifact’s predetermined rules, and variations are virtually inevitable.

The fluctuating, potentially ill-defined nature of genres and the often-
requisite understanding of the discourse that precedes them does not make them
inherently unusable, however. The mutual acknowledgement by a group of a typified response to a given social situation is enough to validate that response’s usefulness. David Hailey, drawing on Miller’s work, suggested that, “Extending the argument that genres are repeatable situations to their ultimate conclusion gives us the possibility of the existence of genres of as few as one or even of zero” (77). Hailey offers the example of an interaction with an extraterrestrial as an example; although we can imagine what such an interaction would be like, we have no genuine example to draw from in defining such an interaction’s characteristics. Because the notion of genre itself is a schema for classification, Hailey argued (78–79), a totally distinct artifact could still potentially exist within its own genre as a response to a singular social situation. This does not, however, decrease the usefulness or importance of genre as a method for evaluating texts. It follows that the inability to peg down a specific genre for a specific artifact should not prevent us from considering generic features of that artifact. Rather, we can look to what an artifact calls the reader to do, and its accompanying “rhetorical situation” as first defined by Lloyd Bitzer, or as redefined in Jenny Edbauer (now Rice)’s “rhetorical ecologies,” to understand the social purpose(s) and constraints the artifact grapples with; labeling a specific genre is less important than understanding what a given artifact is doing.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Miller has also theorized that genres evolve, not through their own volition, of course, but as people identify new exigencies and constraints that require new generic approaches to rhetorical situations (“Do Genres Evolve”; Miller and Shepherd, 2004; 2009). Miller argues that the memeticist take on the evolution of ideas is too literal in that it suggests that ideas (or genres) take on their own agency and propagate themselves, using humans as their vehicles. Such a
literalist view of a Darwinian evolution of genres poses many problems; nevertheless, memetic theory does offer valuable insights into how ideas are copied and altered as they are taken up. As Miller also points out, memetics has seen a falling out with the scientific community, suggesting the literalist viewpoint of memetics has inherent issues. Miller falls short of discussing the widely popular term “meme” as applied to online cultural artifacts, however, but at least one article has directly considered Internet memes in terms of genre.

**Memes: Genre or Medium?**

In their article “Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape,” Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers provide a method for investigating the generic features of Internet memes. They draw on Giddens’s structuration theory of genre to explore how memes interact with the social structure from which they originate. Meme genres can be identified through considering the nature of a meme’s spread and its eventual typification. Wiggins and Bowers then articulate three separate generic stages of memes:

1. Spreadable media—any kind of artifact that lends itself to being shared quickly and widely via the Internet (12)
2. Emergent meme—a piece of spreadable media that is altered or remixed by someone other than the original creator (12–13)
3. Meme—an emergent meme of which “participatory digital culture has produced imitations, remixes, and further iterations” (14)

By following the evolution of the “Joseph Ducreux / Archaic Rap,” “The Most Interesting Man in the World,” and “Numa Numa” memes, Wiggins and Bowers demonstrate how memes begin as an instance of spreadable media that gradually
becomes more widely shared, altered, and remixed in a variety of ways, thereby becoming a new meme.

However, Wiggins and Bower’s article is unsatisfactory as a full accounting of meme genres, given that it does not account for the multiple layers of media and genre involved with memes. I have found memes to be highly complicated genres, relying on multiple modes to address a variety of ideas, yet Wiggins and Bowers plainly state, “Memes are a genre, not a medium, of online communication” (11). I see a potential conflict between this claim and Miller and Shepherd’s evolved approach to the blog starting in their 2004 article, “Blogging as Social Action”, wherein they treated the blog as a genre, a position which they later recanted in 2009, when they were forced to admit, “The blog, it seems clear now, is a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordances—and not a genre” (283). I see very little reason that the Internet meme should be considered a genre and yet the blog should be considered a medium, given that both phenomena share many common characteristics: 1) the potential for multimodality, 2) being “born digital”, 3) having widespread online audiences, (4) an awareness of relevant artifacts (oftentimes each other), and (5) a highly versatile array of subject matter. Indeed, when we have memes commenting on nearly every subject including news stories, political matters, cultural commentaries, entertainment, and individual personalities, it’s hard to see how the social action carried out by memes differs significantly from the purposes of blogs (which, I hardly need point out, cover nearly every subject as well). Calling memes a genre, accordingly, does not account for the multitude of rhetorical purposes in which they engage.

Admittedly, it may simply be too early to tell which term is the correct one to apply. Miller and Shepherd in 2009 continued discussing the blog’s origins, saying
that at the time of their 2004 article, “The genre and the medium, the social action and its instrumentality, fit so well that they seemed coterminous, and it was thus easy to mistake the one for the other—as we did” (283). Although Internet memes have been around for about 20 years, they may still be so poorly defined that genre seems to fit just as well as medium in describing them. At any rate, genre, or at least a single genre, does not satisfactorily account for the disparate social actions taking place with memes, given their rhetorical similarity to blogs as elements of online discourse.

And yet there is a fundamental difference between the blog and the meme that suggests Miller and Shepherd’s model is also unsatisfactory, which is that a meme can be virtually any kind of artifact, as discussed in Chapter 1. Perhaps it was this very multimedia nature of the meme that caused Wiggins and Bowers to come to a different conclusion from that of Miller and Shepherd’s regarding the blog. Regardless, I find Miller and Shepherd’s categorization of the blog as a medium inadequate for explaining how “a group of digital items” come to be classified with each other via their association within public memory. It seems, therefore, that neither genre nor medium perfectly describes the nature of memes. To describe what is going on with memes, then, I propose a more nuanced approach than that of Wiggins and Bowers or Miller and Shepherd.

In many regards, memes defy the need for the typified responses to recurring social situations identified by Miller, as generic and medial novelty appear to be higher priorities for many meme creators than following even implicitly established norms, such as when video remix memes try to outdo each other by incorporating zany elements. John Frow suggests that genres rely on formal, rhetorical, and thematic features (74–75), and the concept of thematic features is of particular note
in relation to memes and the iconography that they incorporate as they use remix to pull thematic features from each other.

**Remix Scholarship**

The frequent use of mashed up features in memes, including multitudinous cultural references (often to other memes), is a major reason they have drawn the attention of remix scholars. Remix scholarship, in its rhetorical sense, is often published in *Computers and Composition*, where Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri discuss how the political video remix projects that they conducted with their classes helped students understand the potential wealth of cultural references that they can draw from and how they can manipulate such artifacts with relatively little training. Students can express themselves through remix in culturally and even politically significant ways, and working with remix allows opportunities to work in multiple modes and draw from prior cultural knowledge and understanding. “[A]sking [students] to compose political video remixes offers them an opportunity to apply traditional rhetorical concepts in new ways” (89). The application of rhetorical theory to remixed artifacts, including memes, has been an exciting area for digital rhetorical scholarship.

Dustin Edwards, also in *Computers and Composition*, proposes a rhetorical framework with which to understand remix. After considering case studies in remix and relevant rhetorical concepts, he proposes four typologies for considering remix: assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play, each of which articulates a different level of artifact alteration. Edwards also offers suggestions for classroom activities focused on each of the typologies, and all four are certainly present in the kind of remix that takes place with memes.
Ethics considerations are a particularly important aspect of remix, and the ethics of photo manipulation for technical communication were identified at least as early as Nancy Allen’s 1996 article. Although this dissertation will not focus on remix and copyright, such concerns are impossible to ignore. Rife’s *Computers and Composition* article and Stanford University’s “Copyright & Fair Use” website are additional excellent resources for understanding how to address issues like fair use and legal liability. Because memes also tend not to have well-identified authors, let alone properly attributed source material, intellectual property issues become even more complex. (I will discuss authorship later.) Jared Colton has also pointed to ethical considerations for remix and how sampling media from certain cultures or individuals may “wound” them in a sense by exploiting their vulnerabilities (24). In short, remix is an important aspect of the meme genre framework, as potential harm (unwanted publicity, defamation, disenfranchisement, etc.) to those referenced in memes and other ethical and legal considerations are vital components of text, image, audio, and video manipulation.

**Multimodality**

As expressed by Milner, the exploration of memes as genres can enhance our understanding of multimodal communication. Visual rhetoric scholarship—including that of Hanno Ehses; Charles Kostelnick; Gunther Kress; Charles Hill; and Anne Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc—must play a role in considering memes’ multimodal attributes. For example, Ehses suggests that certain attributes of visual rhetoric can be considered as tropes (e.g., metonymy, amplification, hyperbole) and that by viewing individual aspects of images as rhetorical tactics, we can see various tropes in play. Some of the tropes
Ehses discusses that might pertain to memes include antithesis, personification, periphrases, and pun. Ehses’s thoughts on rhetorical tropes coincide somewhat with Wetherbee’s assertion that memes function much like topoi, or commonplaces; meme creators have both established rhetorical tactics (tropes) and stock content subjects (topoi) from which to draw.

Charles Kostelnick has proposed metrics for assessing visual rhetoric and conducted many of his own visual rhetorical analyses, which serve as models for the visual rhetorical analyses conducted in this dissertation. Gunther Kress’s semiotic view of visual rhetoric leads him to care more about the social and educational implications of visuals than labeling specific visual genres, a useful viewpoint for this study given the complexity of identifying meme genres. Charles Hill makes a strong argument for the importance of emphasizing visual literacy in writing courses due to images’ symbolic power, something that Diana George, Anna Palchik, and Cynthia Selfe similarly discuss. Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc also argue that new media cannot be ignored in writing courses but should rather be embraced.

Multimodal communication in the 21st century is, more often than not, increasingly digital and online (George, Palchik, and Selfe; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc). With the massive number of memes posted on the Internet over the past decade or so, the meme has become an ever more important aspect of multimodal communication. Not surprisingly, then, the phenomenon holds interest for multimodal communication educators (Knobel and Lankshear), partly evident from the various presentations and class projects with memes found online (DeLuca; Moore; Rudd; Sessolo) and the pedagogical articles beginning to be published (Silva; Stones). Chapter 5 will further explore this interest in memes among multimodal
communication instructors by interrogating their associated genres and providing a framework for using meme as a rhetorical concept.

**Literature Review Wrap-up**

Previous scholarship in memetics, Internet memes, genre theory, remix, and multimodality (particularly visual rhetoric) have explored the nature of memes, genres, and multimodal communication in ways that will provide viable, productive lenses for interpreting Internet memes and how they operate throughout this dissertation. The dissertation draws on this previous scholarship to conduct concept-oriented rhetorical discourse analysis of Internet memes, a methodology which is described in the next section. However, none of this previous scholarship has fully explored how memes operate as or in conjunction with genres of communication, and no publication I am aware of has articulated how memes can be considered as a rhetorical concept. Both questions will be considered here, as well as the social actions that memes perform and how related rhetorical devices are employed in the creation, dissemination, and uptake of Internet memes.

**Methodology**

This dissertation entails a concept-oriented rhetorical criticism approach to discourse analysis, including an analysis of 132 Internet meme artifacts. My rhetorical discourse analyses will reveal concepts, features, contexts, purposes, and genres of Internet memes. I start this section with a brief overview of two methods—concept-oriented rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis—and how I intend to combine them; then move on to a discussion of the rhetorical concepts used in the dissertation project, beginning with a discussion of meme as its own rhetorical
concept (a theory more fully established in Chapter 4); and I finally discuss the artifacts collected and analyzed for the project.

**Concept-Oriented Rhetorical Criticism: Background**

Following Herbert Wicheln’s famous 1925 essay in which he proposed evaluating oratorical texts differently from literary texts, rhetorical criticism emerged as a valuable lens for analyzing purposeful arguments. Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black helped to further define the field in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with Michael Leff and Michael McGee continuing their legacy into the 1980s and 1990s. While close reading of texts has been standard practice for rhetorical scholars during much of the 20th century, concept-oriented criticism came to be viewed as particularly preferable during the latter half of the century owing to disagreements led by Black over the value of the neo-Aristotelian critical model, which largely drew from Aristotle’s rhetorical canons and appeals to evaluate whether texts demonstrated Aristotle’s theories. Analyzing a rhetorical concept and an artifact together has for many rhetorical scholars proven more fruitful than the etic (or outside-in) application of theory practiced by earlier neo-Aristotelian critics.

In James Jasinski’s article, “The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism,” he makes a strong argument in favor of concept-oriented rhetorical criticism. Rather than taking an overarching method or theory (such as neo-Aristotelianism) and predicting how the theory will apply to a given artifact, Jasinski suggests that Browne and Leff’s approach of locating theory within the subject of study is a more effective method for thickening “our grasp of political and rhetorical judgment as it reveals the way perspectives are crafted, circulated, and subverted” (262). Concept-oriented criticism, according to Jasinski, has “rhetorical
scholars engaging in conceptual reflection and refinement as part of the practice of criticism” (259). In other words, close reading of an artifact while bearing a rhetorical concept or concepts in mind allows for the flexibility rhetorical scholars require to situate rhetorical understanding within real contexts. Jasinski concludes, “Conceptually-oriented criticism provides a rather clear alternative to methodologically-driven criticism and the social science model of theoretical development that it tends to entail” (266). The method of concept-oriented rhetorical criticism calls for close reading and careful consideration in an effort to explore rhetorical concepts as they are manifested within artifacts. The goals of such work are to “thicken” (to use Jasinski’s term) both concept and artifact by “vibrating” (Leff’s term [1980, 345]) the two against each other through deep analysis and criticism. The rhetorical critic can thus teach us more regarding the chosen rhetorical concept and the chosen artifact at the same time.

My goals with applying concept-oriented rhetorical criticism to a variety of Internet meme artifacts are to 1) seek further understanding of how memes operate as genres, 2) uncover creator-context-audience relationships within singular meme artifacts, and 3) “thicken” rhetorical concepts and devices as appropriate and possible. Coalescing these findings will help me achieve my final goal, and the title of this dissertation, which is to propose “meme” as a rhetorical concept for entry in the rhetorical canon.

Several aspects of memes, however, complicate their rhetorical analysis:

1. *We rarely know who the author is*. Usernames are the standard identifier for the creators of most memes. However, a username tells us nothing about the author, their motivations, or their stake in the conversation they are
attempting to join, unless we happen to know more about their online personality or ethos.

2. *The audience and context for most memes is general and undefined.* Because the vast majority of memes appear on popular social media sites, the intended audience tends to be anyone with a passing interest in the subject matter. This can force the assessment of memes’ rhetorical situations to be based largely on conjecture.

3. *The humor in memes can shield the author’s stake in the topic.* When a meme creator gets called out on creating an offensive or abrasive message, the comical component to memes gives the author a copout, along the lines of “I was just joking around.” Milner discusses this complication in relation to Poe’s Law (136, 142–143), and John C. Meyer provides a broader discussion of humor’s rhetorical uses.

Despite these constraints in conducting rhetorical criticism of memes, there are enough obvious moves in several memes that allow us to make educated guesses as to their authors’ social motivations and rhetorical purposes.

**Meme as a Rhetorical Concept**

As Milner, Shifman, and other meme scholars have suggested, memes exist only as small parts of larger cultural collectives. The threads of these cultural collectives have proven remarkably difficult to follow due to the large quantities of artifacts and authors involved, and scholars such as myself in turn rely perhaps overly much on resources like KnowYourMeme.com to understand them. But the ability of rhetorical studies to delve into and understand the genre lifecycles of memes is imperative to maintaining relevance, utility, and influence in what is now
a thoroughly digital world. I therefore see a need to develop a rhetorical concept that can accommodate analysis and criticism in such an environment. To articulate an approach to the interconnectedness of these various online cultures, I turn to Michael McGee’s 1990 article, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” in the next section to demonstrate how rhetorical studies might be so adapted.

The Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture

McGee’s 1990 article was quite insightful and forward thinking for its time, and he predicted the social condition created by the Internet with almost uncanny accuracy, several years before its widespread adoption. McGee was concerned that American culture was becoming fragmented and disparate, and that the traditional methodology employed by rhetorical criticism of analyzing discrete texts was becoming obsolete. Even isolated texts like public speeches, books, or films are part of a larger cultural context, and discourses are becoming ever more fragmented, yet also interconnected at the same time. He asserted, “I think it is time to stop whining about the so-called ‘post-modern condition’ and to develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of human life, perhaps in the present, certainly in the not-too-distant twenty-first century” (278). As deconstructionists portrayed a bleak view for postmodern textual criticism, McGee was anxious that critics develop new strategies to cope with increasingly disparate texts. He suggested,

Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from
what we can call “fragments.” ... Further, whether we conceive it in an Aristotelian sense as the art of persuasion, or in a Burkean sense as the social process of identification, rhetoric is influential (see Condit, 1987a, 1987b). That is, the rhetor understands that discourse anticipates its utility in the world, inviting its own critique (the interpretation and appropriation of its meaning). (279)

Neither creators of text nor their creations stand in isolation, and rhetors expect their audiences to apply cultural knowledge as they interpret texts. For the critic to truly understand cultural artifacts, evaluating their relationship to other cultural fragments is necessary. What’s more, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to call any singular artifact “finished” enough for analysis: “Scholars are all analysts at heart, but nothing in our new environment is complete enough, finished enough, to analyze—and the fragments that present themselves to us do not stand still long enough to analyze. They fly by so quickly that by the time you grasp the problem at stake, you seem to be dealing with yesterday’s news, a puzzle that solved itself by disappearing” (286–287).

Again, permit me to declare my amazement that McGee was writing in 1990 because he described a key issue that meme scholars struggle with—ephemerality. Milner discusses how many memes, especially stock character macros, become tired and lose popularity rather quickly (43–49). McGee’s suggestion that artifacts become irrelevant before they can be analyzed correlates well with Internet meme scholars’ woes. Cultural understanding now comes from audiences’ individual interpretations, not from a homogenous cultural background.

[T]oday no single finished text could possibly comprehend all perspectives on even a single human problem, let alone the complex of
problems we index in the phrase “issues of the day.” The only way to “say it all” in our fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue them to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, *text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse*” (288, emphasis in original).

I’ve heard some scholars refer to memes as rhetorical enthymemes, though I have yet to see the concept published, nor will I be spending much time on it in this dissertation. Yet McGee’s idea here that audiences must extrapolate meaning from cultural fragments is resoundingly true regarding memes and how they operate with assumed premises, which is essentially how enthymemes work. Being able to account for how memes draw on assumed premises and invite readers to construct certain interpretations is an important aspect of accounting for their rhetorical nature and import.

McGee concludes, “If you analyze contemporary discourse, … ‘fragment’ or some concept that can be made equivalent (Said’s ‘formation,’ for example) is necessary. Only something very similar to the strategy I propose has the power to account for discourse produced in consequence of the fragmentation of culture” (288). McGee strongly asserts that a rhetorical framework that accounts for fragmented cultural sound bites is sorely needed. A related concept might be Barry Brummett’s discussion of cultural signs, “that everything signifies something else” (45), and culture is comprised of countless signs around us. I see yet another opportunity to explore this line of thinking through meme theory, with its focus on interrelated cultural ideas and concepts.
Now, McGee likely didn’t have memes in mind when he was writing in 1990. Judging by the content of his essay, I deem that he was more concerned by the nature of TV journalism and its kin. But the fragmentation of culture that worried McGee has surely become more manifest in social media venues of the 21st century, including 4Chan, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Yik Yak, Twitter, and dozens of others. One of these platforms alone contains millions of fragmented, disparate, occluded, yet interrelated and referential texts. To continue solely focusing on isolated, discrete texts such as presidential speeches or other magnum opuses for rhetorical study is to ignore a large, sweeping sector of society and might even doom rhetorical analysis to near irrelevancy. I am far from the first author to suggest as much, and Brummett also discusses the related interplay between elitist and popular meanings of culture (58–61).

I propose applying meme theory to rhetoric as one viable option for ameliorating McGee’s concerns. The process of finding out about, getting to know, researching, studying, analyzing, critiquing, and finally learning from memes requires a broad, iterative, dialogic interaction with multiple artifacts rather than a concentrated close reading of a singular artifact. For this reason I turn to discourse analysis as a method for analyzing memes rhetorically, yet I do so in the spirit of concept-oriented criticism, which has traditionally been conducted via close reading.

**Concept-Oriented Rhetorical Criticism Conducted through Discourse Analysis**

Finally, I get to the actual method that this dissertation project implements. While close reading works for large, substantive artifacts like speeches and long texts, this dissertation deals with ephemera and whimsy in the form of images with minimal text, short alphanumeric quips, and comical videos. Truly most memes are
not designed to be read closely, and they accordingly seldom yield opportunities for deep analysis. The “tl;dr” (too long; didn’t read) affect is all too real for most of these cultural fragments called memes. Although not a favored method by rhetoricians who prefer close reading, discourse analysis offers a way forward for a project centered on small cultural sound bites.

Brian Paltridge, in referencing Bhatia’s work and that of Bawarshi and Reiff, offers five steps for conducting discourse analysis for genres (77–78):

1. “[C]ollect samples of the genre you are interested in."
2. “[C]onsider what is already known about the particular genre."
3. Define the creator of the text, its audience, and their relationship.
4. “[C]onsider the goal, or purpose, of the texts.”
5. Consider “typical discourse patterns for the genre.”

The next section addresses that first step. Steps 2–5 have or will be addressed elsewhere in this dissertation. In general, however, discourse analysis is a broad methodology that calls for many of the same steps as concept-oriented rhetorical criticism. Combining the two schools of thought as one methodology is not only natural, but fairly straightforward.

While Milner and Shifman have conducted rich discourse analyses of Internet memes already, I seek to bring in the critical framework of rhetoric to explore concepts and nuances that have as yet been unexplored. By analyzing other memes I also seek to draw understanding from different kinds of artifacts. I describe such artifacts next.
Artifact Selection

Paltridge states regarding step 1 above, “Clearly, the more samples you can collect of the genre...the better you will be able to identify typical features of the genre” (77). Following McGee’s fragmentation theory, yet with a desire to conduct concept-oriented rhetorical criticism, I collected and conducted a close reading of approximately 132 Internet meme artifacts as part of this dissertation study. This sampling is not as large as that of Milner’s 2012 dissertation project, which used 4890 image files (74), but Milner’s critical discourse analysis called for a much higher quantity of data in his effort to identify general trends among participatory collectives than the current project does. Indeed, 132 would be far too many artifacts for a typical rhetorical close reading, but due to memes’ disparate yet self-referential natures, the high quantity is necessary for a solid hold on the memes themselves, and thus discourse analysis presents itself as an option to bolster rhetorical study. This rhetorical discourse analysis will only constitute five core memes, with 44 extra examples here and there to demonstrate specific points. The five core memes for this study are listed below, with the number of individual artifacts I collected of each in parentheses:

- Yo Dawg (9)
- LendingTree’s Lenny Puppet (6)
- Philosoraptor (7)
- Pepe the Frog (16)
- We are Number One, but…. (50)
- Other relevant examples (44)

A description and justification for these choices is presented below.
Yo Dawg. Although it has dwindled in popularity, Yo Dawg is a multi-faceted, multipurpose, and in many instances, a very “meta” meme. Chapter 3 was inspired by a study that first sparked my interest in memes as genres wherein I explored Yo Dawg in depth for the first time. The meme has proven fruitful for genre study due to its self-referential nature and its history; because the meme is “old,” there is a wide range of artifacts available for analysis.

LendingTree’s Lenny Puppet. When memes become corporatized, they inevitably lose their flavor and appeal, or “resonance” as Milner puts it (29–33). The LendingTree came out with a series of memes featuring Lenny the puppet that are particularly stilted as the analysis in Chapter 3 reveals. While not necessarily the worst advertisements, these memes are decidedly forced, and the analysis shows how coerced genre uptake can result in awkward textual/visual constructions.

Philosoraptor/Filosoraptor. One of the more common criticisms raised by and leveled at meme scholarship is the near-total lack of international examples, given that Internet memes have heretofore been primarily an American (U.S.) phenomenon. Many excellent examples of successful translanguaging can be found in Spanish speakers’ appropriation of the Philosoraptor meme into the Spanish language, and I include Filosoraptor examples to demonstrate how meme genres transfer across languages and cultures.

Pepe the Frog. Some memes evolve dramatically during their short lifespans, and Pepe the Frog is one of the clearest examples of a simple meme that was taken to extremes. Pepe started life as a simple cartoon but was appropriated by various groups including a hostile takeover by white nationalists during 2016, to the point that many sources cited Pepe as a hate symbol and racist icon (Nuzzi). Pepe’s strange odyssey is rife with rhetoric, and although the conversation continues, the
events involving Pepe during the 2016 election provide valuable insight into the roles memes play in sociopolitical affairs.

**We are Number One, but....** Finally, a 2016–2017 meme that many Internet commenters have suggested was the single best meme of 2016, and which I myself have taken great pleasure in following, is the “We are Number One, but...” meme. Like many memes, this video series has a storied history, and its social uptake has been largely driven by the original video’s prominent actor, Stefán Karl, and his fight with cancer.

**Rhetorical Concepts (other than “Meme”)**

In the rhetorical analyses of Internet memes that follow, several rhetorical concepts will be used in conjunction with meme as a rhetorical concept. A few select concepts that I will apply on a case-by-case basis to multiple memes include *anesis*, ethos, genre, kairos, *topoi*, and the visual ideograph.

**Anesis:** The rhetorical device of *anesis* occurs when a phrase or sentence is added toward the end of a statement that diminishes or negates what was said previously. *Anesis* is used in many image macro memes, and a study of how *anesis* is used to convey humor in memes reveals insights into both the rhetorical device and memes in general. One of my favorite examples of *anesis* is found in the Successful Black Man image macro meme, as shown in Figure 2.5. The joke, for better or for worse, is found in stereotypes of black men that are then subverted through the device of *anesis*. Shifman questions whether these memes reinforce or counteract such stereotypes. I like to think that the *anesis* helps us realize how...
absurd such stereotypes are, but Milner argues that even the meme’s name makes us question why a “Successful Black Man” is considered unusual.

**Ethos:** Ethos is a complex, yet intriguing, rhetorical concept to consider with Internet memes. Of particular interest in regard to the rhetorical context of memes is their nearly universal lack of a clearly designated author, given that so many memes are posted online under a screen name or even anonymously, and even then it is generally unclear whether the author created the meme or is simply sharing it. In Roland Barthes’s essay “The Death of the Author,” he asserts,

> [T]he modern writer, having buried the Author, can...no longer believe, according to the “pathos” of his predecessors, that his hand is too slow for his thought or his passion, and that in consequence, making a law out of necessity, he must accentuate this gap and endlessly “elaborate” his form.... (para. 4.)

In other words, identifying an author has traditionally been considered necessary to the rhetorical (or literary) critical model. Herein, then, lies an awkward situation for the rhetorical critic studying works without clearly defined authors, for, as Barthes also suggests, “once the Author is discovered, the text is ‘explained’” (para. 6), and without this ability to explain a work through its author, criticism loses this traditional path toward exposition of the text. It is in the reader, not the author, Barthes concludes, that newer, multi-authored (or in the case of most memes, anonymously authored) works must be analyzed. This reverses the role of ethos a bit; it becomes more about how well an author can speak to, or identify with, an audience in the moment of discovering the meme than it is about the credibility/authority/likeability of the author her or himself. The meme’s ethos, in the classical sense, is thus more constructed on the spot than made explicit or reliant
upon years of prior familiarity with the author, such as might be the case with name or brand recognition. Such authorship-related issues with ethos are crucial to understanding the rhetorical situations surrounding Internet memes.

**Genre:** Genre has already been discussed as a framework for the dissertation, and it essentially figures in as Chapter 3. Miller’s suggestion that genres are “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159) has become a guiding principle for rhetoricians’ understanding of genre, and Freadman’s ideas of genre uptake figure heavily into how we perceive and understand the ways genres are used or rejected. Memes represent unique genre situations in that, while they respond to recurrent situations and we can see uptake taking place, they often defy typification or traditional models of uptake as they seek to create new media from old. Jasinski in his *Sourcebook on Rhetoric*, meanwhile, considers genre to be a rhetorical concept that helps rhetoricians analyze “common characteristics or discursive conventions relating to style, argument, structure, and situation” (268), each of which are manipulated constantly in memes. While some work has been done with the rhetorical concept of genre as it relates to memes (e.g., Wiggins and Bowers), I find meme genres to be considerably undefined and underexplored, particularly as the genres involved relate to media and **topoi**.

**Kairos:** The concept of God’s timing, or kairos, is distinguished from chronos, or linear time, in rhetoric as a way to consider the appropriateness of the timing of a given artifact’s presentation. Memes often travel as fast, if not faster, than traditional news, and their success depends on timeliness. A casual user of social media might see a meme related to a newsworthy story and learn something about the situation from the meme before she has a chance to look at the news herself that day. When memes are reposted multiple times or after a period of months or years since their
original creation, Internet users frequently balk at the poster’s lack of awareness toward kairotic appropriateness. Reddit users are particularly notorious for treating such outdated reposting with contempt, often labeling memes as “dead” after a month or so of popularity. Political and insider memes particularly rely on kairos for their effectiveness due to rapid news cycles and the fact that people “in the know” tend to expect more from others who profess to belong to their inside-knowledge-based community.

**Topoi (or commonplaces):** Topics, also known as topoi (singular, topos), is a disputed rhetorical term. Jasinski (Sourcebook) suggests at least three possible ways of considering topics, “Prior to Aristotle, a topic was considered primarily as a recurrent theme or image that appeared in discourse and could be used by speakers and writers to help generate discourse” (578). The notion that certain thematic or visual content can serve as commonplaces from which various rhetors can draw in creating discourses has held great value for rhetoric throughout the ages. Aristotle later introduced the ideas of universal and special topics. Leff (1983) considered the special topics to be “propositions that express…generally accepted beliefs and values” (26) of a community. Jasinski suggests such special topics might manifest as ideographs, a rhetorical concept covered below. In the Roman era, topics for Cicero and Quintilian served as source materials in the process of invention. Later commenters suggested that topics might be used to create “heuristics” or “checklists” for approaching subjects.

Of these possible uses of the concept of *topoi*, I want to focus on the first two for the purpose of considering how memes operate in relation to genre. If certain images hold value as commonplaces for discourse, as what we might call icons or symbols, then certainly such a phenomenon occurs in memes. Ben Wetherbee talked
about *topoi* and memes as part of his description of the “binders full of women” meme discussed earlier that arose from the 2012 presidential election cycle when Mitt Romney used the phrase to describe how he and his staff approached hiring females in his organization. This meme took the singular phrase and treated it as a rhetorical commonplace, or *topos*, that various rhetors could make reference to as they created their own takes on the discussion. “Individual *topoi* can evolve formally” (3) Wetherbee suggested, providing examples of how *topoi* such as the Christian *ichthys* (fish) symbol or Obama’s “Hope” slogan have been satirized. Although *topoi* have been traditionally considered somewhat fixed and static in their formulations and uses, they are in reality largely intertextual and even capable of rapid change. Wetherbee also asserted, “*Topoi* often function as memes that evolve to suit rhetorical circumstances” (4). This sense of topics or commonplaces being used to bolster and add ideological weight to memes is tied to memes’ symbolic values, which is related to the next concept.

**Visual Ideograph:** The visual ideograph, a visual rhetorical device conceived by Edwards and Winkler, shows up in a variety of memes. Visual ideographs can basically be defined as icons that have obtained such familiarity and widespread use as stand-ins for ideological discussions that they can serve as metaphorical markers of whole conversations; the example Edwards and Winkler use is the famous photograph “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima.” While Huntington considers officer Pike, the Pepper Spray Cop, to be an example of synecdoche, I also see a potential application of the visual ideograph concept, or possibly its related kin, the condensation symbol. Many images, or even parts of images, serve as iconic messages, from Scumbag Steve’s Hat to the Rage Comic faces. I conducted initial explorations of how the ideograph also features in memetic videos in my article,
“YouTube Video Parodies and the Video Ideograph,” a concept I will further explore in Chapter 4. The visual ideograph can provide additional insight into the fixity of symbols in cultural awareness as found in Internet memes.

**Literature Review and Methodology Conclusion**

Internet meme studies, genre theory, remix scholarship, and multimodal communication research all offer relevant insight into the meme phenomenon. McGee’s proposal for approaching rhetorical analysis of cultural fragments can be approached through critical discourse analysis, and this dissertation thus employs a concept-oriented rhetorical discourse analysis that will rely heavily on genre and meme theory. Five core memes and a few relevant examples are the subjects of this discourse analysis project. Some of the rhetorical concepts mentioned above will be analyzed explicitly in relation to the meme artifacts while others will be mentioned occasionally. In short, I will look at memes, assess what’s going on with them rhetorically, and hope to provide relevant analysis and theory for the ongoing effort of understanding Internet memes as artifacts of sophisticated multimodal remix.
CHAPTER 3
MEMES AS GENRE(S) FOR DIGITAL MEDIA

To start my analysis of meme as a rhetorical concept, I first look to genre theory and related issues of medium, structure, and rhetorical situation to determine how memes operate throughout a variety of contexts, media, and rhetorical tactics. This chapter then explores the extent to which memes can be considered genre(s) and how genre can then be used as a rhetorical device for understanding meme phenomena. Some scholars have considered memes as genres, most notably Limor Shifman’s definition and list of Internet memes (41, 100), Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers’s analysis of memes in terms of genre (11), and Ryan Milner’s efforts to describe certain “subgenre[s]” (79) of memes. However, none of these scholars has fully articulated how memes function as genres, with current Internet meme scholarship largely focused on the virality and spread of memes rather than the rhetorical aspects of the generic choices and constraints memes afford. In addition, scholars disagree about the rhetorical nature of memes, some possible formulations of which include genre(s), medium(s), topoi, phenomena, or concept(s).

In this chapter, then, I hope to shed light on the generic features that both formulate and constrain Internet memes. In the process, I intend to demonstrate how not just one of the possibilities for explaining memes listed above but how all may be necessary to fully define memes and how they function. The nature of memes allows them to be repurposed for a variety of rhetorical uses, and the social action carried out through this reclassification and repurposing of generic elements demonstrates the amorphous yet utile rhetorical life of memes. Rather than looking at the agency of how memes are spread as Wiggins and Bowers did, I hope to shed
light on the uptake of meme genres, relying on genre uptake theory as discussed by Anne Freadman (1994, 2012) to investigate the rhetorical moves and purposes of meme codification and manipulation. Through such an analysis of memes’ generic features and their uptake, I will also build a foundation for proffering meme as a rhetorical concept in my fourth chapter.

For this chapter’s analysis, I will begin with a close reading of one image macro meme, “Yo Dawg”, which has had interesting uptake throughout its history. The generic constraints of this meme have been manipulated, ignored, and exploited in comical, meaningful, and successful ways and in weak, flippant, and unsuccessful ways. Although this meme is a bit older and therefore no longer as common in popular circulation, I find this to be an advantage for analysis, as it is a bit easier to analyze a phenomenon more set in stone than a moving target. Following my analysis of Yo Dawg, I will proceed to analyze advertisements by the financial institution Lending Tree that have re-appropriated other memes for product promotion as an example of stilted genre uptake with memes, or how meme appropriation can fail to take up a meme in ways acceptable for that meme while still achieving a company’s advertising objective. Finally, I look at Philosoraptor, another older meme, and how it has been repurposed for use in another language as an example of genre uptake across linguistic boundaries. My analysis suggests that a multi-layered approach that considers concepts, genres, and media is likely to be the most effective rhetorical analytic approach to understanding the uptake of memes and how they operate rhetorically and culturally. Such a nuanced approach to meme analysis can assist future rhetorical scholars in understanding meme phenomena.
Analyzing Yo Dawg as Genre

To closely analyze how memes are formed, identified, classified, and eventually altered, in the spirit of Miller’s 1984 approach to genre as social action, a close look at the rhetorical purpose behind the artifact(s) so that we can decipher the typified responses and their recurrence is necessary. To make sense of the social action taking place with memes, I investigate below a few select artifacts (out of thousands) from one particular meme, the image macro “Yo Dawg.”

Yo Dawg originated from studio photographs of the rapper Xzibit (Alvin Nathaniel Joiner) and a reference to the MTV show he appeared on, *Pimp My Ride*. The original “emergent meme,” as Wiggins and Bowers would define it, is shown in Figure 3.1. As you can see, and as explained on KnowYourMeme.com (where this information and picture can be found), the original meme followed a [noun] in your [noun] so you can [verb] while you [verb] formula, or snowclone, which Zappavigna included in her corpus analysis. The rhetorical purpose behind this first iteration of the meme was to highlight the extravagant features from the show *Pimp My Ride*. The critical response to the show’s excessiveness is lightly veiled by the humor of the absurd redundancy in the text’s construction.
As this emergent meme was taken up by other Internet users, however, it soon morphed as it was repurposed for other rhetorical situations. Figure 3.2 uses the original portrait studio photograph with different text. Here we can see the idea from the original that something has been placed inside something else. However, although the “noun in yo noun so you can verb while you verb” construction is still present, here it all uses a single word, Facebook. The repetition of the word Facebook four times makes this artifact even more repetitive, highlighting the redundancy of having the Facebook messenger show up while you are in the Facebook app.

Figure 3.3 uses the same portrait studio photograph, but now the image is heavily modified. A chef’s hat and moustache have been photoshopped in, and Xzibit himself has been taken out of the original background and placed in front of a pizza that appears to be made of multiple mini-pizzas. The rhetorical intent here is clearly even less serious, yet the meta-awareness and the concept of things inside of things are nevertheless present. Note that the original alphanumeric snowclone construction is entirely absent,
suggesting that alphanumeric text is an unessential medium for this meme to function.

Figure 3.4 furthers this point about alphanumeric text’s unessential nature in memes. This example certainly relies on absurdity, which Knobel and Lankshear noted to be common in memes, and uses a comedic zooming effect that has been used in many memes over the years. The notion that Xzibit’s iris and pupil resemble his own face is ridiculous, but the joke doesn’t rely on believability, but rather how Xzibit’s face has become a symbol for things being inside of things.

Now for a more serious topic that uses the meme’s construction to communicate a sobering message (Figure 3.5). Teenage pregnancy is a real-world concern, despite occurrences of teen pregnancy declining in the United States in recent years (“Trends in Teen Pregnancy”).

The meta-redundancy of the original meme is now applied not to Xzibit’s face, but to an adolescent holding her pregnant belly. Here the original text is used formulaically (noun in your noun so you can verb while you verb), thereby calling up the original emergent meme more faithfully than the previous two examples (even using the misspelling “herd”). The serious topic requires a measure of faithful alphanumeric uptake, especially considering Xzibit’s visual absence. The intent here seems to be an effort to promote
awareness of teenage pregnancy with a dash of humor to make the topic more approachable. Also noteworthy is the fact that multiple variations of this same idea have been created, such as the iteration in Figure 3.6 that tells the story of Lina Medina, the youngest girl to have ever birthed a child at the age of 5, suggesting that a poignant idea like this example calls forth its own uptake. Just beneath the surface here are critiques of rape culture and older men making sexual advances on younger women. There exists a possibility that these meme creators are referencing Xzibit’s own experience with becoming a father to his son Tremaine when the rapper was 19, which could be a direct criticism of Xzibit. If so, the connection seems loose at best since neither meme seems to refer to Tremaine’s mother directly. The racist undertones of a criticism of African-American absentee fathers is another potential message of these memes. Whatever the underlying motivations, the original emergent meme caused multiple Internet users to take it up in the same way, by referring to a child inside a child so you can parent while you parent. The true meaning behind the memes’ message is unclear, but the connection to the Yo Dawg meme as a whole is plainly discernible.
Most iterations of Yo Dawg are lighthearted, such as Figure 3.7, which shows how even casual references to this meme can be used in a variety of situations.

The screenshot is taken from the videogame Starcraft II, where one player has built a base structure inside another player’s base. This sort of taunting gains comedic potency through its reference to the widely recognized Yo Dawg meme of Internet culture.

To reference the Yo Dawg meme, not even the idea of something being inside of something is entirely necessary. Figure 3.8 includes a cameo appearance of Jesus Christ, arguably the most famous shepherd, with the inclusion of Simon Dewey’s painting “The Lord is My Shepherd.” The joke in this instance relies on the atypical spelling of heard, “herd” used in Yo Dawg memes, itself a disparagement of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), an arguably racist phenomenon that Milner has noted in a variety of memes.

Xzibit’s reaction face here is ambiguous, but is likely intended to make the reader pause in considering the spelling of heard/herd and the semantic difference between the two homophones.
Yo Dawg also shows up in video formats. Figure 3.9 is a screenshot from a GIF that features a scene from a wrestling match where one of the wrestlers takes his mask off only to reveal identical face paint underneath. Although no explanation accompanies the GIF, the title, “Yo Dawg,” makes a clear reference to the something-inside-something concept that defines the Yo Dawg meme as a whole. The reference to Yo Dawg, like the Starcraft example above, serves mainly as an inside joke that only people familiar with the meme will get, thus heightening the comedic effectiveness of the artifact for the initiated.

Finally, even cartoonist Jim Davis has taken up the Yo Dawg meme in one of his Garfield comics (Figure 3.10). Comic artists frequently employ such demonstrations of their pop cultural savvy to assure audiences that they are still in the know, and when you have a long-running cartoon like Jim Davis’s, showing that you know about Yo Dawg (even if you spell it differently) does just that. Like in the
Facebook example above (Figure 3.2), Jon uses the same snowclone formulation of “noun [on] your noun so you can verb while you verb,” but the noun and verb are the same word, “Garfield.” Garfield expresses dissatisfaction with Jon’s attempt at humor, which anticipates how many millennials likely received the comic. This last Yo Dawg example demonstrates the fluid boundaries of memes, as it would be hard to call this an “Internet meme” since it was printed in hundreds of newspapers.

The manner in which various Internet users (and Jim Davis) have taken up the Yo Dawg meme suggests that something other than “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller, 159) is taking place. The exigencies of these memes range from the whimsical to the quasi-thought-provoking to the serious. Zappavigna found that Yo Dawg (which she calls “Pimp My Ride”) “had less semantic consistency than the other memes” that she analyzed, suggesting this meme is applied to an unusually wide range of subjects. Some artifacts retain the original codified structure of the original, others are variations on the theme with different pictures featured, and some are even GIFs or other formats of video. If memes are to be considered a genre, then, a more complex approach may be necessary to understand the various typified responses we see with Internet memes.

**Concept (or Topos) vs. Genre vs. Medium**

With the multiple purposes and situations surrounding the Yo Dawg meme and its repurposing, to simply call it part of the meme genre or to suggest that this is a single medium does not adequately explain the immense variety of types of uptake witnessed with this one meme.

In her 1984 article, Miller argued against the use of higher-order genre categories for labeling genres into predefined constraints. She acknowledged the
need for classification, yet suggested that we consider the rhetorical situation of an artifact rather than its classification as a genre for determining its typified features. However, I see a consideration of the multiple layers of both medium and genre involved with a given meme as essential to understanding its generic features, which, as Miller and Shepherd articulated (2009), may include media features as well. Indeed, considering what we see happening with just one meme as discussed above, it seems that memes operate more by the principles of uptake as discussed by Freadman than as a single medium or genre; individuals take up the Yo Dawg concept in such different ways that the genre and medium become ill-defined rather quickly. And that word I keep using, concept, may also not be articulating the rhetorical actions occurring as might a related term, topos.

Hearkening back to my definition of topos (the plural form of topos) in Chapter 2, they serve as recognizable conversation points, also known as commonplaces, from which communities can draw to craft discourses. If certain images hold value as commonplaces for discourse, as what we might call icons or symbols, then certainly such a phenomenon is occurring with Xzibit’s smiling face in the memes above. This “special topic” of Xzibit’s meme-based persona and his penchant for things inside of things also creates a mode of ideograph, or a commonplace phrase or notion that expresses a community’s accepted idea. In this case the special topic at its core is quite simple: The Internet-based community aware of the Yo Dawg meme simply understands that Xzibit’s studio portrait or the “X in yo X so you can Y while you Y” snowclone refer to an awareness of something(s) being inside something(s).

Thus, when memes reference an idea rather than a generic or medial feature, Ben Wetherbee’s theory that memes function as topos seems to have merit in considering how memes are taken up and altered. A screenshot of a Starcraft II
player taunting another player has little to do with a studio portrait of a rapper, except that both call out to a topos of something being inside something. The thematic content of genres that John Frow discussed plays out in memes as topos in the form of concepts, ideas, or symbols rather than common rhetorical purposes or medial forms.

Yet despite this reliance on topos, a genre/medium relationship is also still clearly at play with memes. And as happens with most texts, memes can be classified by higher-level genres, like novels, and more specific-level genres, like hard-boiled detective novels. Figure 1.1 back in Chapter 1 exemplified this effect; at the most abstract level, we can say something is a meme, which calls up the Dawkinsian memeticists’ original definition. At this stage we know only that an artifact has been imitated. Below the level of meme we need to be able to identify an Internet meme, which would be “any digital item” that has been imitated, to use Shifman’s definition specifically. Next down the scale we can point to a specific meme, as a set of self-aware artifacts, and even give it a name (such as Yo Dawg) and say that it is operating according to its own set of expectations (that something is inside of something); at this level we may see a recurring topos. Note that even with a specific meme there may or may not be medium constraints, as virtually any medium (photo, photo remix, screenshot, GIF, comic) can be used to take up the Yo Dawg topos. Some artifacts hearken to the medium features of other artifacts, though, such as the original studio portrait, so medium cannot be wholly discarded at this stage. Finally we would arrive at an individual artifact of the meme (which is also frequently called “a meme” by Internet users). As Hailey suggests, it is also easy to imagine a spreadable media artifact that bears similarities to other image macros yet would not qualify as a meme per se, according to Wiggins and Bowers, because there
is only one instance of it. Such artifacts are also frequently called memes by Internet users, even though they are not operating within their own genre but rather as part of the larger genre or medium of “Internet meme.”

Figure 3.11 may help clarify these levels of genre and medium, with the single artifact on the left and the higher order genres toward the right:

![Figure 3.11](image)

Fig. 3.11. This genre diagram demonstrates how meme genres operate on layers, much like “hard-boiled detective mystery” is a layer of the novel genre. Source: Author.

I hesitate to use the terms super-, supra-, or meta-genre here as it can be difficult to say which is the genre or subgenre and which is the supergenre, etc. But the need to use some hierarchical order to make sense of the memescape is all but unavoidable if we are to have a productive conversation about how each meme is borrowing and repurposing the generic features of other memes with similar generic features and medium constraints, much as such a genre hierarchy has evolved for film, literature, or other communication technologies.

Meme creators have a wide range of levels of genre and medium available to take up as they remix cultural artifacts. The fact that one iconic photograph of Xzibit could be coupled with a snowclone invented by an Internet user and from there call for such a wide variety of social uptakes is evidence of the wide range of possible uses for memes such as Yo Dawg. Yet this kind of genre uptake is often more stilted, or forced, resulting in cringe-worthy misappropriations of genre.
Stilted Genre Uptake: Lenny, the Universal Meme

The analysis of Yo Dawg above suggests that meme genres are complex and that there is great nuance involved in ascertaining the appropriate topoi, genres, and media to use in a given situation. Next I analyze a series of memes where a corporation, LendingTree, has capitalized on the creativity of media collectives, a process that Milner laments (202–208). Milner sees memes as expropriated labor for corporations when they repurpose memetic ideas as the Dr. Pepper Snapple Group did with the Sunkist advertisements in Figure 3.12.

Fig. 3.12. Milner collected the following examples of Sunkist’s capitalization on memetic ideas during a certain ad campaign. The referenced memes are, from left-to-right, top-to-bottom, “All Your Base Are Belong To Us,” McKayla Maroney’s famous “unimpressed” face that she made during the 2012 Olympic Games, Sweet Brown’s famous news interview, the “…said no one ever” snowclone, the “Ermahgerd” image macro, and “First World Problems.” Source: Milner (2016).
The nature of such genre uptake can be described as stilted, unnatural, or forced. “Forced meme” is a phenomenon catalogued by KnowYourMeme.com as “any ‘meme’ that is artificially created and spread. Rather than spreading through word of mouth as a naturally created meme, a forced meme made with the intent of becoming a meme and aggressively promoted by its creator” (“Forced Meme”). The notion of tapping into popular culture and demonstrating cultural savvy is irresistible for many advertisers, but the risk of backlash from those who resent such expropriation of Internet cultural labor is great.

Merkley+Partners, LendingTree’s ad agency, launched a multi-platform ad campaign in Spring 2013 that involved Jim Henson’s Creature Shop to create Lenny the puppet (“Lenny Puppet”). As part of the campaign, Lenny was featured in a series of image macro memes, included as Figures 3.13–3.15 below. The success of the ad campaign itself is not in question here, but rather the import of such stilted genre uptake.

Fig. 3.13. A screenshot from Facebook where Lenny shows up in a feed as a meme, with links to LendingTree surrounding it. Source: Facebook.
Figure 3.13 is a screenshot taken from Facebook, one of the many platforms where Merkley+Partners has distributed their Lenny memes. The reader may recognize the genre format here as that from The Most Interesting Man in the World meme referenced in Chapter 1. The can of Dos Equis beer has been replaced with a LendingTree water bottle, and The Most Interesting Man in the World replaced with Lenny. Even the background looks quite different, including the shape and size of the white sofa. Lenny’s pose imitates that of the Dos Equis mascot, but with the arm flat against the table, and the thin-lined smiles are also similar. However, the forced nature of the re-appropriated snowclone makes the credit card actually sound commonplace, when the company surely intends for it to be considered unique. If every new credit card Lenny gets features 0% APR for 18 months, then LendingTree’s offer has diminished merit. Finally, the 201 reactions, 29 comments, and 36 shares are not negligible numbers for an advertisement, yet they bespeak an unenthusiastic reception all the same.

![Figure 3.13](image1)

Fig. 3.14. A screenshot similar to Fig. 3.10, also with an internal contradiction. Source: Facebook.
In Figure 3.14 a very similar meme features the “Brace Yourselves...X is coming” snowclone from “Imminent Ned,” a meme based on Sean Bean’s *Game of Thrones* character. Although the puppet imitates Sean Bean well (if perhaps a bit less masculine), the idea that Facebook users should brace themselves *against* a 0% interest rate credit card like a winter snowstorm is a non-sequitur at best and counterproductive to LendingTree’s messaging at worst.

Finally, Figure 3.15 features a screenshot where LendingTree presents a compilation of their Lenny memes and touts the campaign as an instance of “Knowing Your Audience & Acting Fast.” The side-by-side comparisons demonstrate how LendingTree (or perhaps Merkley+Partners) are proud of the imitation they have mustered with their puppet. Here again, the uptake of these snowclones is far less effective than the visual imitations, and they suggest a lack of understanding of the character macros upon which they are based. The boss from *Office Space* was always making unreasonable demands of his employees, but
LendingTree is actually offering us something. The phrase “Yeah…that’d be great” doesn’t make sense because it’s already being offered; it’s not in some future conditional state. Next, Leonardo DiCaprio’s toast is usually offered to people, not to a congratulatory feeling such as that of taking advantage of a financial product. Although this example of Imminent Ned seems more effective than Figure 3.15, the caution against higher mortgage rates is somewhat unfocused. And finally, Success Kid is usually used for serendipitous or congratulatory occasions, not saying that a credit card is exactly what a person needs.

Again, my purpose with this analysis is not to lambast LendingTree or Merkley+Partners (Reddit users have already done that anyway). The nuances of meme genres and the specific discourses that they invite are meant to be altered, and all users, even large corporations, are free to take up the genres as they see fit. Merkley+Partners merely saw a way to make LendingTree seem cool and relevant, and they seized it. However, to plug in a promotion for a certain 0% interest rate credit card into a variety of image macros is destined to translate poorly across the image macro genres, especially as each image macro’s genre has been formed through typified responses to social situations, not all of which call for uptake in the form of a credit card advertisement. Comedic effect is also lost by the shift in purpose from entertainment to overt persuasion, creating in many instances a desire to roll one’s eyes rather than laugh. This collision of the serious and humorous worlds that Kathleen Hurley discussed in her dissertation creates cognitive dissonance that may very well work against LendingTree’s favor for many viewers.

For my last set of examples in this chapter, I turn now to a few instances of more successful genre uptake in the form of bilingual translanguaging from English to Spanish. Milner discussed how most memes are typically American in nature and
origin, while my analysis of Philosoraptor (or Filosoraptor in Spanish) below suggests that even memes that originate in the United States can be successfully appropriated into other languages and their corresponding cultures.

**Translating Genre-Based Puns: Philosoraptor/Filosoraptor**

The image used in the Philosoraptor meme was first created by Sam Smith in 2008 as a T-shirt design. By 2009, the Internet took hold of the image, superimposed text upon it, and the meme was born. According to KnowYourMeme.com, “By July 2011, Philosoraptor reached the ‘God Tier’ on Memegenerator with over 38,000 instances and 12 different templates.” The meme poses paradoxes, riddles, and philosophical quandaries, relying upon the divided space between the two phrases to emphasize paradoxical turns, occasionally using *anesis*. These often silly questions tend to rely on puns and plays on words, which is why the meme is interesting in the translanguaging examples below. Puns seldom translate across languages very well, and so some instances of the meme translate directly into Spanish, but some do not. Figures 3.16–3.21 provide examples of successful, nearly direct translations.

![Fig. 3.16. Alcoholic/fantastic play on words. Source: Imgflip.](image1)

![Fig. 3.17. Spanish translation of Fig. 3.16. Source: Meme Generator.](image2)
The main reason I chose these particular instances of the Philosoraptor meme is that although the Philosoraptor meme originated in English, a close reading reveals that the Spanish versions of these particular meme artifacts actually operate better than their English counterparts. In Figure 3.16, the phrasing of necessity changes quite a bit between the top phrase, which uses a noun (alcoholic), and the bottom phrase, which uses an adjective (fantastic). In Spanish (Figure 3.17), there is some ambiguity with the term “fantastico” as it could refer to a fantastic person as a noun. The English version also requires a shift in verb conjugation as the phrases switch from present conditional tense (top phrase) to future conditional (bottom phrase). The Spanish word “soy,” on the other hand, and the lack of a syntactic requirement for a shift in tense, causes the phrase to read much more smoothly, and the verb “bebo” remains the same. Finally, the drink Fanta referred to in the memes is pronounced in English as either [fæntə] or [fæntə], neither of which sounds much
like fantastic [fæntæstək], especially due to the “schwa” sound that shows up in unstressed English vowels. (See Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2014 for more on the English schwa.) In Spanish, however, Fanta and fantástico are pronounced with the same first and second position vowel sounds. Each of these linguistic factors combine to make the Spanish version of the meme more effective than the English version. With this and all of these Philosoraptor examples, I was unable to verify which version of the meme was created first, so it is difficult to ascertain which version copied which. But the fact that the Spanish version is even marginally more successful suggests that effective translanguaging and re-appropriation of the Philosoraptor meme into Spanish has taken place.

Figures 3.18 and 3.19 are an instance of the same phenomenon: An English version with a Spanish equivalent. However, this time the victory goes to the Spanish meme not by virtue of any linguistic variables in the two memes, but due more to the fact that Latin American cultures are more likely to encounter a situation where a police officer would ask for “papers” (or “papeles,” in this case). The routine phrase “license and registration” is more likely to connect with most (U.S.) Americans’ experiences with encountering the police. Yet in many South American and Central American countries, a series of papers may be required in a variety of situations, depending on the country’s political bureaucracy and law enforcement requirements. Because fewer Latinos are likely to own or drive a car as frequently as Americans, the probability of needing to show visas, work order forms, or similar documents to police is much higher, and therefore the phrase “papeles” is more easily associated with an encounter with the police. Notably, the Spanish meme does not include the phrase “pulls me over,” referring to operating a motor vehicle, a
situation where “license and registration” is realistically what a police officer is much more likely to say.

Finally, we arrive at Figures 3.20 and 3.21, where the Spanish meme is more appropriate in a subtle linguistic manner. The word “señal” could be interpreted to mean both “sign” and “signal,” which allows for a slight play on words as the Wi-Fi could be referred to here as either a signal (physical) or a sign (spiritual) message. The Spanish interpreter, assuming the Spanish came from the English, seems to have added a little to the original meme as well, suggesting that the Wi-Fi thief is “recibiendo” (receiving) the signal of God. And speaking of “of,” the Spanish word “de” can mean both “of” and “from,” and this ambiguity also adds to the overall intended meaning. The word “la” here could also potentially be less definitive than the English “the,” since definite articles are required much more often for Spanish words. To sum up, we have “it is the signal of God?” in the English meme, which sounds a little off from typical religious phrasing of such an experience, and “am I
receiving the [a] sign of [from] God?” in Spanish. Spanish simply operates better in all three of these examples.

Before I move on from Philosoraptor/Filosoraptor, it’s worth pointing out that sometimes a Spanish-speaking Internet user will create a meme that is clearly native to the Spanish language; that is, it would be difficult to translate into English with the same comedic effect. Thus we can see that the meme’s genre has been fully appropriated by the Spanish speakers for their community of practice: online Spanish-speaking culture. Figure 3.22 is one example of many such memes. The direct translation of this meme into English would be “If sleeping is free, why does it cost so much to get ourselves up?” While the idea here makes sense, and may even cause a slight smile, the idea of getting up “costing us” is unusual in English vernacular. More typical phrasing would include “why is it so hard” or “how come we hate” getting up. The term “cost” is so frequently associated with money in English-speaking discourse communities that the joke here would be lost, whereas the Spanish verb conjugated here as “cuesta” more often signifies difficulty, sacrifice, or hard work than its English counterpart does.

Philosoraptor is but one of thousands of memes spread throughout the Internet, yet it is characteristic of what I suspect is a fairly common phenomenon: that of memes and their accompanying genres being repurposed by a variety of communities of practice, even at the level of translation and bilingualism. The success with which these Spanish speakers have re-appropriated the Philosraptor
meme speaks to their ability to translanguage the ideas and characteristics of the image macro in a way that speaks to their linguistic community. Although this might be more simply termed “translation,” which I have used multiple times already, I see some translinguaging going on as the Spanish speakers are aware of their audience’s desire for clever phrasing and English’s inability to convey those same ideas as effectively. The genre of the Philosoraptor meme, then, allows for uptake across linguistic and cultural borders, sometimes with even more success than the English versions, further complicating genre as social action by introducing other languages into a meme genre’s rapidly codified typicality.

So, what are Meme Genres?

I hope by now I have demonstrated that our typical notions of genre become complicated rather quickly when applied to the ephemera of memes. The further that scholarship delves into genre theory, especially as applied to digital media, the more we seem to realize how complicated and mysterious the notion of genre really is in digital spaces. Miller and Shepherd put this eloquently: “In fact, given the proliferation of change that the Internet represents and makes possible, it’s remarkable that anything as stable as a genre has arisen there at all” (“Questions”). Memes are so ephemeral, so quickly taken up, altered, and eventually discarded by the larger population, that it’s difficult to assume much of a “stabilized for now” list of traits for a particular meme until the moment of its widespread popularity and uptake has largely passed.

Nevertheless, I see a further developed understanding of the genre, medium, and yes, *topoi* of a given meme as essential to understanding its place in Internet culture and its viability for uptake in certain rhetorical environments.
Chapter Conclusion

I have tried here to demonstrate the need for a more flexible understanding of genre than even that articulated by Miller (1984) since many typified communicative acts form around certain concepts, icons, tropes, and *topoi*, and not necessarily around specific social actions. There is certainly more work to be done in defining meme genres beyond the scope of this dissertation—not necessarily taxonomically, considering that Miller and others suggest such a rhetorical approach is unfeasible anyway—but in understanding how memes are formed, propagated, repurposed, and altered into new generic forms through the social and cultural necessities that arise and are identified by various actors in the Internet meme activity network. A better understanding of how these genres are created and repurposed can help us understand how digital media rhetors find new, clever ways to communicate their ideas. Genres will inevitably continue to evolve to meet the needs of those who use them, and unlike the strong memeticist point of view that these cultural ideas control us, genre as social action clearly indicates that it is the rhetors who shape the genre, and not the other way around. As memes are employed for a wide range of rhetorical purposes, their creators employ their properties toward ends that impact our society for good and for ill. Accordingly, it is expedient for us to seek a better understanding of the whirlwind of genre uptake taking place online, that we might better understand how people can and will engage with it.

Chapter 4 will continue these notions of a more complicated genre theory and interrogate how iconography, in the form of visual ideographs (or condensation symbols) plays a vital role in shaping the socially acceptable social actions performable through certain meme genres.
CHAPTER 4

MEMES AS SOCIAL ACTION:

MEME AS A RHETORICAL CONCEPT

While Chapter 3 focused on three memes primarily in terms of genre uptake, structure, and form, this chapter will consider two memes (including both their corresponding artifacts and reactions to them on social media and in news reports) that resemble something more like social movements than the mere re-appropriation of stock characters for individual purposes. The goal of this chapter is to explore how memes can have wide impact and affect lives through their symbolism and ability to rally people around causes. I begin with the notorious example of Pepe the Frog, a fun cartoon character that eventually became labeled as a hate symbol, and then discuss the feel-good meme “We Are Number One, but…”, a philanthropic and entertaining effort to raise money for a beloved Icelandic actor diagnosed with cancer. I will finish out the chapter by theorizing how meme may not be an appropriate genre label after all, but must be considered in its full complexity and utility as an independent concept for rich rhetorical analysis. My goal, then, is to proffer meme as a new rhetorical concept that can be applied to rhetorical study, just as other rhetorical concepts like genre, parellipsis, pathos, or decorum might be used in concept-oriented criticism. The rhetorical significance of meme as a rhetorical concept has import for digital media collectives and their audiences well into the foreseeable future.
Ambiguous Icon: Pepe the Frog

My first example for this chapter represents how memes evolve over time, and not always for the overall benefit of society. The Dawkinsian memeticist perspective claims that memes are only interested in their own perpetuation and survival. However, human agents are inseparably connected to the rhetorical purposes of, the conversations surrounding, and the symbolism formed by memes. Pepe the Frog demonstrates a case where the socially accepted symbolism of the meme evolved quickly in unforeseen ways due to the willful imposition of human agents in its appropriation. This evolutionary process took the form of a rapid, hostile takeover enacted by meme creators, not some organic, unconscious process of replication and random mutation over thousands of years.

Pepe the Frog has a strange, winding history. Although perhaps always associated with deviance, crassness, and stereotypical millennial attitudes, Pepe has transformed dramatically over the years from a cartoon character that was often used to react to friendly exchanges into an international symbol of racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism. First drawn in 2005 as part of Matt Furie’s comic Boy’s Club, Pepe reached Internet fame during 2008 when a particular moment from the Boy’s Club was used repeatedly as a reaction image—an emotive response to a situation as part of social media posting—on 4chan (Figure 4.1). 4chan is sometimes referred to as the seedy underbelly of the Internet, and it serves as a creative yet often lewd social media platform with few restrictions placed on users. As a result, many memes get their start on 4chan, including Pepe.
Pepe has gone through a variety of iterations since its inception as a meme, many of which involved thorough alterations. Performing artists Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj helped bolster Pepe’s fame in 2014 with their Pepe-featuring posts on Twitter and Instagram, respectively (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Both artists used Pepe’s iconicity in bodily comparisons, blurring the frog’s sexuality and character somewhat in an effort to call on Pepe’s cultural capital. Perry and Minaj demonstrate their awareness of Pepe yet forcefully employ his iconic status to promote their own brands, a phenomenon similar to what we saw with Sunkist and Lenny the puppet in Chapter 3.

Fig. 4.2. Katy Perry uses an image of Pepe crying to convey her jetlag fatigue. Source: KnowYourMeme.com.

Me on Instagram for the next few weeks trying to get my followers back up.

Fig. 4.3. Nicki Minaj addresses her obligation to use certain poses in Instagram shots to gain viewers. Source: KnowYourMeme.com.
Pepe’s foray into politics is perhaps more surprising—and noteworthy—than his re-appropriation by artists. Many 4chan users started using the cartoon frog in references to their support of Donald Trump, starting with Trump’s announced candidacy in June 2015. As happens with most memes, the association between Pepe and Trump gradually gained momentum as more and more Internet users created images of Pepe with clear Trump references. Figure 4.4 is one of many images with Pepe featuring the iconic “Make America Great Again” hat from Trump’s campaign. In July 2015, a Malaysian artist posted the image in Figure 4.5 to 4chan’s /pol/ board, a space where much of the Internet meme-fueled support for Donald Trump originated. The image depicts Mexicans barred from entering the United States due to a fence that Pepe as Trump (wearing Trump’s signature hair) presumably erected. Pepe’s smug face recalls the “Smug Frog” appropriation of Pepe that had circulated on the Internet for some time before. Pepe holds a campaign button in his hand, symbolizing the campaign’s promise to deter foreigners from entering the country illegally.

As many news sources began claiming that the field of the Republican Primary for the 2016 presidential election had narrowed to four real contenders, Trump used a Pepe meme in a tweet on October 13th, 2015 (Figure 4.6). By this time,
Pepe had already been used in several political memes, and Trump’s use of the image solidified the meme’s association with him and his campaign. It’s difficult to parse Trump’s decision to openly associate his campaign with Pepe, but at least one of the motivations behind Figure 4.6 was likely to offer a shout-out to the online collaboratives that were supporting his campaign. Trump supporters on 4chan, r/The_Donald, and elsewhere continued to use Pepe the Frog as a symbol of their often xenophobia-fueled rightwing rhetoric, and in time many factions from various political persuasions began to associate Pepe with the “alt-right”, a fringe conservative political faction closely associated with white nationalist and sexist rhetoric. Alt-right fans of Pepe fanned the flames of this association deliberately, although evidence suggests that many meme contributors did so in somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion in efforts to mock

Fig. 4.6. Donald Trump tweets an image of himself as Pepe the frog at a podium with the president’s seal. Source: KnowYourMeme.com.

Fig. 4.7. An alt-right 4chan user cobbled images together to draw a connection among the Egyptian god Kek, Pepe the Frog, and alt-right Internet memes. Source: KnowYourMeme.com.
those trying to make sense of the connection between Pepe and Trump (Nuzzi). One example of this intentional ambiguity was the introduction of the Egyptian god Kek as a source of lore for Pepe. Although Egyptologists disagree on many aspects of Kek’s nature in Egyptian theology, meme users cobbled together their own mythology of Kek, a god in the shape of a man with a frog’s head (similar to Pepe), and a harbinger of darkness preparing the world for the dawn. The number 7 is closely associated with Kek as an important symbol in ancient numerology, and the /pol/ group on 4chan reacted wildly when the 77777777th (that’s eight sevens in a row) post to the group on June 19th, 2016 said, “Trump will win”. Alt-right posters on /pol/ advanced the lore further, calling up an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph in a meme purporting Kek-as-Pepe’s mythical origins (see Figure 4.7).

Various journalists have covered the Kek phenomenon and the role it has played for the alt-right including David Neiwert, who suggests,

> Whether they really believe any of this or not, the thrust of the entire enterprise is to mock everything “politically correct” so loudly and obtusely—and divertingly—that legitimate issues about the vicious core of white male nationalism they embrace never need to be confronted directly. The alt-right’s “meme war” is ultimately another name for far-right propaganda, polished and rewired for 21st-century consumers. The ironic pose that Kek represents, and accompanying claims that the racism they promote is just innocently meant to provoke, in the end are just a façade fronting a very old and very ugly enterprise: hatemongering of the xenophobic and misogynistic kind.
Regardless of individual intentions among the alt-right, the result of the Kek lore and Pepe’s association with the alt-right and President Trump’s campaign led many on the left to conclude that Pepe was a racist symbol. The Anti-Defamation League and Hillary Clinton’s campaign expressly called Pepe a “racist meme” and “hate symbol,” and several news organizations ran stories confirming Pepe’s new hatemonger status. What sealed the deal for many groups was when Donald Trump Jr. posted the image in Figure 4.8 to Instagram on September 10th, 2016, in reference to Clinton’s comment wherein she said that half of Donald Trump’s supporters were in a “basket of deplorables.” The image is a photoshopped reworking of the movie poster for “The Expendables,” and the rugged-looking bodies serve to reinforce the toughness of the male-dominated cast of Trump’s close supporters at the time. Most notable for this discussion, of course, is Pepe the Frog’s position on Trump’s left-hand side, complete with Trump’s iconic hairdo. Because Clinton had been commenting on alt-right groups who supported Trump’s campaign when she called them “deplorables,” the meme served to demonstrate the group’s resilience to such name-calling, which in turn bolstered concerns among the left that Pepe had now become a rallying symbol for the alt-right. Pepe soared into infamy on the kairotic wings of a tumultuous presidential election, and that kairos served to strengthen Pepe’s impact as a symbol of hatred that harmed targeted groups while bolstering the alt-right’s resolve and sense of unity.
The line between “joke” and “hate symbol” became blurred in the final months of the 2016 election, and it’s still difficult to this day to pin down exactly what Pepe the Frog symbolizes. Even so, the association with the alt-right seems to have affixed a permanent negative connotation to Pepe as a white supremacist, misogynistic, hate-fueled icon. News reports like the one from which Figure 4.9 is a screenshot have argued strongly that Pepe is a hate symbol while many Internet users think that groups on the political left have overreacted to what has traditionally been a benign reaction image. Regardless, Pepe is no longer a socially acceptable meme in the public sphere as it once was.

This transformation of the Pepe meme resulted in practical consequences, especially for users who were allegedly unaware of its occurrence. On January 4, 2017, the fast-food chain Wendy’s posted a photoshopped reimagining of the company’s mascot as Pepe the Frog (Figure 4.10) to their Twitter account. After an outcry from several people on social media, the Tweet was promptly deleted. A Daily Beast article that ran the story reported that the company’s response was, “Our community manager was unaware of the recent evolution of the Pepe meme’s meaning and this tweet was promptly deleted.” If we take Wendy’s at their word, then their social media
team was clearly just trying to be cool and relevant by creating a meme that linked their brand identity to a popular cultural icon, similar to what we saw with LendingTree’s Lenny memes in Chapter 3. However, the new connotations with Pepe introduced by the alt-right had defamed the symbol to the point where its casual use on social media had become taboo, and the company was forced to retract their meme accordingly. In terms of Anne Freadman’s uptake, the genre of using Pepe the Frog for casual, fun observations about life is no longer a viable form of genre uptake for the meme. The symbol has become irrevocably associated with the values of the alt-right, and corporations and individuals are no longer able to access it in ways they used to.

Wendy’s was not the only corporation affected by Pepe’s new negative connotations. In a related incident in April 2017, Spanish clothing retailer Zara released a denim skirt with cartoon frogs patched onto it (Figure 4.11). The backlash on social media was severe again, and the company quickly took the product off their website. Although a spokesperson for the company later claimed that the artist had intended no similarity to Pepe the Frog, the resemblance was strong enough to make the product unviable. This example is interesting because it’s no longer the explicit use of Pepe’s face or his postures that creates contention over the character’s unsavory associated meanings; the mere use of a cartoon frog is also now a source of controversy.

Fig. 4.11. Zara, a clothing retailer, advertises a new denim skirt featuring frog faces. Source: KnowYourMeme.com.
Another victim in Pepe’s transformation has been the original artist himself, Matt Furie. Furie affirms that he himself is anti-racist and has been deeply troubled by the direction his cartoon frog has taken. He has issued multiple calls to reclaim his frog character from the alt-right since September 2016. After months of trying to reclaim Pepe from alt-right groups and others whom he considered to be abusing his beloved character, in May 2017 Furie created the comic shown in Figure 4.12 where Pepe is now dead and laid to rest, in what was interpreted by many as an attempt to “kill” the character.

In September 2017, a few news articles stated that Furie had begun suing individuals who have re-appropriated his meme (Gault). Furie’s efforts to reclaim his character call up additional questions regarding intellectual property with memes. The complexities involved with suing specific meme creators have led to surprisingly few lawsuits being filed over the years of meme creation, though Cristina Hanganu-Bresch has documented four cases that went to or were settled out of court. Regardless of whether Furie is successful in discouraging Pepe’s use in alt-right rhetoric, it nevertheless is unlikely that he will ever regain full intellectual “control” over the character and the values originally associated with Pepe, those of a fun-loving, laid back, care-free cartoon character. As Slack, Miller, and Doak discuss, “[T]he practice of attributing ownership to ideas, the conception of invention as the expression of individual genius, and capitalist relations of property
and appropriation” (30) all contribute to a notion that the original author of an idea is the true owner, whereas in reality, “The process of communication is…an articulation of voices, much like what Bakhtin has characterized as the orchestration of ‘heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled, and often multi-languaged elements’” (31). Pepe’s authors have become multiple throughout the proliferation of the meme, and the cartoon frog’s purveyors can never be reduced to a single comic artist again.

**Pepe’s Evolution: Analysis**

Pepe the Frog presents a curious case study in how memes evolve as human actors shape the discourse surrounding them. A symbol that started as an innocent set of jokes became a sort of mascot for far right-wing political views, and its current and ongoing interpretations remain in doubt. The transformation Pepe went through from a cartoon character used for reacting to posts on social media into a disputed symbol of racism and hatred occurred over a mere matter of months (much faster than many symbols transform), yet it still was not instantaneous. Rather, a community of Internet users appropriated Pepe toward their political ends through thousands of postings of Photoshopped images, and these images became associated with certain ideological values until the values perceived in the symbol of Pepe had shifted. Table 4.1 summarizes the events of Pepe’s hostile takeover by the alt-right and Matt Furie’s subsequent attempt to reclaim the cartoon frog.
Table 4.1. Summary of key moments in Pepe’s evolution as an iconic meme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Artifact or Event</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Pepe’s Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>First issue of <em>Boy’s Club</em></td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Benign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Reaction image memes</td>
<td>Conversational</td>
<td>Well-liked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj tweet Pepe memes</td>
<td>Promote brand / relatability</td>
<td>Popular, ubiquitous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>Maldraw photoshops Pepe as Trump stopping immigrants at Mexican border</td>
<td>Encourage xenophobia</td>
<td>Still well-liked and popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2015</td>
<td>Trump tweets Pepe as Trump</td>
<td>Promote brand / relatability</td>
<td>Notorious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>Kek lore leads to 777777777th/pol/ post, “Trump will win”</td>
<td>Establish Pepe-fueled ideology</td>
<td>(In)famous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 2016</td>
<td>Donald Trump Jr. posts “The Deplorables” poster</td>
<td>Show resolve against Clinton’s campaign</td>
<td>Hate symbol?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 2016</td>
<td>Anti-Defamation League labels Pepe a Hate Symbol</td>
<td>Decry racist uses of Pepe</td>
<td>Hate symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2017</td>
<td>Wendy’s tweets Pepe as Wendy</td>
<td>Promote brand / relatability</td>
<td>Hate symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 2017</td>
<td>Zara creates frog skirt</td>
<td>Sell clothing</td>
<td>Hate symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2017</td>
<td>Matt Furie “kills” Pepe</td>
<td>Erase Pepe</td>
<td>Disputed hate symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 2017</td>
<td>Furie begins lawsuits against alt-right Internet users</td>
<td>Reclaim Pepe copyright</td>
<td>Disputed hate symbol</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the most perplexing aspects of Pepe’s saga from a visual rhetoric perspective is that the image of a cartoon frog does not bear any inherent visual elements that would lend itself toward being appropriated as a racist symbol. Pepe is often portrayed as looking smug, as is the case in Figures 4.5, 4.6, 4.9, and 4.10, and this attitude of superiority does lend itself toward a white supremacist ideology.
But Pepe’s use as an icon of pseudo propaganda for online alt-right groups surely stems more from the character’s kairotic popularity and notoriety than from any intrinsic sort of need to use a green anthropomorphized frog character. Kermit or the unicycle frog could have just as easily served the purpose (and indeed, some meme creators endeavored to make racist Kermit and unicycle frog memes that were never taken up on the same level that Pepe has been), but Pepe held a special level of notoriety among insider Internet users because they saw Pepe as being taken over by “normies,” a term that likely needs definition.

In her book *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle explains how Internet users who spend long hours on sites like 4chan, Tumblr, and Reddit (where meme creation is popular) eventually develop a sort of insider status that sets them apart from other regular Internet users, whom they term “normies.” These insiders tend to resent the popularization or over-simplification of their memes’ historical context, and many such Internet users reacted angrily to Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj appropriating Pepe (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). The appropriation of an inside joke to the popular mainstream often makes meme creators feel a sense of loss for their creative work as it becomes commonplace. Posters to 4chan’s /pol/ board with alt-right ideological inclinations therefore sought to make Pepe disdainful to regular Internet users, or normies, by forcefully turning the popular cartoon frog into a symbol of racism and hate. In simple terms, these users subscribed to the attitude that “If we can’t have Pepe, no one can.” These alt-right groups have undeniably succeeded in their goal, as Pepe is indeed no longer a fit symbol for polite society.

This phenomenon of a perceived exchange in ownership of a cartoon frog among different groups presents a fascinating case in how a symbol’s meaning changes over time as different people use the symbol for their own purposes. In the
grand cultural collective of the Internet, maintaining ownership and control over an image and its associated meanings is demonstrably difficult. Pepe’s original owner, Matt Furie, lost control over what Pepe symbolized as Internet users appropriated the cartoon frog in thousands of benign memes from 2008 to 2015. Then, insider meme creators felt they were losing control over the meme’s insider status when popular artists began to appropriate Pepe, so they started using Pepe as a racist symbol to “reclaim” it during 2015 and 2016. Finally, Furie is suing individuals to reclaim or perhaps to just “kill” the symbol, lest it continue to be used toward racist or misogynist ends.

This issue of ownership introduces another issue at play with memes and their evolution as concepts; they become more than mere medial templates for appropriation, as values are associated with and eventually ascribed to them. They become, in essence, ideographs.

**Memes as Visual Ideographs**

Recalling my brief literature review of visual ideographs in Chapter 2, I contend that many memes acquire the kind of symbolic weight and meaning ascribed to icons of the sort that Edwards and Winkler termed to be a visual ideograph. I’ll simply repeat the definition I gave in Chapter 2 here: Visual ideographs can basically be defined as icons that have obtained such familiarity and widespread use as stand-ins for ideological discussions that they can serve as metaphorical markers of whole conversations, and Edwards and Winkler used the famous World War II photograph of soldiers raising the American flag as an example. While “Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima” certainly holds more historical
weight and deeper links to national identity and political discourse, Pepe, for good or for ill, has come to represent weighty values to many people.

Where I see a potential disconnect between the original notion of an ideograph posited by Michael McGee (1980) and Edwards and Winkler (1997) and how symbols are used in memes is how rapidly the shifts in meaning can take place, even at a collective level. Ideographs can be understood differently by different people, McGee suggested, but they generally hold some sort of stock value that has at least some fixity to it. The speed with which topoi can be constructed alongside memes surely applies to how quickly ideographs can form, then, as has taken place with Pepe as hatemonger.

In a 2016 article, I built a case for videos performing a function much like that of visual ideographs. I turn next to such a video ideograph, or video meme, that has enjoyed a much more positive and pleasant lifecycle than Pepe the Frog’s controversial maelstrom in order to contrast the different forms of social action that ideographs can take.

**Philanthropic Entertainment: We Are Number One, but…**

Although memes can be used for antagonistic or political ends, as seen with Pepe the Frog, they can be employed in non-adversarial, positive social action as well. Many memes are benign and perceptibly harmless, even vapid, and many others fade into obscurity before they reach the level of notoriety that Pepe the Frog has. Occasionally, though, a meme comes along whose influence on society can only be reasonably considered as wholesome and beneficial. Even rarer among this group are the memes who change lives and succeed in becoming popular and enduring (or at least, enduring in Internet meme terms), generating a community of support and
goodwill along with the creative energy that accompanies vibrant memes. I turn now to one meme that has attained status as a form of such positive social action.

The “We Are Number One, but….” meme is a vast collection of videos and songs that originate from a two-minute fifty-second music video compiled from an episode of Lazy Town, a children’s TV show filmed in Iceland, and uploaded to YouTube on July 25, 2015. As of this writing, the music video has close to 23 million views. The original episode, “Robbie’s Dream Team,” aired on October 3, 2014, and was about Robbie Rotten, the show’s villain, recruiting help in his efforts to capture Sportacus, the show’s primary hero. The music video was a viral success with its lively tune, goofy aesthetics, and portrayal of classic villainy performed by bumbling characters.

What makes this meme special is the sense of community it has fostered around a philanthropic cause, as Stefán Karl Stefánsson (hereafter referred to as Karl), the actor who plays Robbie Rotten, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2016. Mark Valenti, one of Karl’s fans, started a GoFundMe fundraiser on October 10, 2016, to raise money to help Karl pay medical bills and to support him and his family while he could no longer work as he recovered from surgery. The GoFundMe’s main page said, “He created a foundation to help stop bullying. He is a tireless advocate for special needs children. And now Stefan Karl needs our help” (para. 1–2). The fundraiser has surpassed its original goal, and the LazyTown crew and Karl himself have acknowledged that its success is in no small part due to the memes spawned from the “We are Number One Music Video.”

“We Are Number One, but…” was voted as “The Meme of the Year” on knowyourmeme.com in 2016, winning 35% of the total votes in their poll. While the meme’s heyday was largely in November and December of 2016, it has had
surprising longevity, with videos still being uploaded through February 2018. The longevity of this meme has been bolstered in part by Karl’s deteriorating condition in his battle with pancreatic cancer, which his wife announced in June 2017 had advanced to stage IV, or terminal cancer. In August Karl announced that he is free of metastases of the cancer after a successful surgery, but that he’s not entirely out of danger of more appearing.

I have watched roughly a hundred YouTube videos related to this meme. For my analysis of the “We Are Number One, but” meme, I will of necessity use a slightly different approach than that of the memes discussed so far, all of which have been primarily image-based. Before I begin my actual discourse analysis, I will first provide a general description of the original music video using screenshots. Then, I will give a broad overview of 50 of the video memes that have spawned from the official music video, pointing out ways in which they differ and the corresponding rhetorical actions taking place with each.

**Description of “Lazy Town | We are Number One Music Video”**

The YouTube user LazyTown posted the official music video, “Lazy Town | We are Number One Music Video” on July 25, 2015. The video is silly and fun, depicting scenes from the original episode “Robbie’s Dream Team” and edited in such a way that it effectively tells the story of the whole episode. Once the meme had taken off during 2016, LazyTown posted a video on December 9, 2016 called “We Are Number One but it’s the original and it’s 1 hour long….” The video loops 27 times a two-minute, 14-second clip from the original episode where Robbie teaches his fellow evildoers how to be villains through song. Comparing the two videos, it’s clear that the official music video more effectively condenses the story of the original
24-minute episode into two minutes and fifty seconds by featuring more scenes from the episode and using a slower tempo. Some of the meme artifacts use the shorter clip from the original episode, but most use the official music video, which is described below.

Describing a video is not as interesting as its rhetorical discourse analysis, but the medium of a document-based dissertation requires a breakdown of the video by its parts through text and screenshot images, and I imagine most readers will be unfamiliar with the video. (A richer experience would of course be to simply watch the video, but the following description will have to suffice for this context.)

**Introduction.** The video begins with a short clip of Sportacus (Figure 4.13), one of the show’s primary heroes, performing athletic poses and running toward the camera, set to music. The show’s logo then appears. These first seven seconds merely establish the show’s brand, signifying that this video is officially from their production team. The show’s primary moral drive is that of promoting exercise to young children, and Sportacus’s athleticism thus provides context for the show’s driving rhetorical purpose.

Once the intro segment ends, the logo zooms toward the camera and a scene appears where Robbie Rotten asks one of the other Rottens, “Are you a real villain?” Source: YouTube.
Robbie Rotten is asking one of the other “Rottens,” that is, the dream team he just ordered over the phone, “Are you a real villain?” to which the first Rotten responds, “Well, technically, uh…nah” (Figure 4.14).

Robbie immediately replies,

“Have you ever caught a good guy, like a—like a real super hero?”

“Nah,” comes the reply.

“Have you ever tried a disguise?”

“Nah, nah.”

“All right, I can see that I will have to teach you how to be villains!” Robbie declares.

In an immediate comedic shift, Robbie is suddenly shown playing the song’s main melody on a toy saxophone, but it sounds just a little sad and out of tune (Figure 4.15). After playing the main refrain, however, the song begins in earnest, with a full synthesized band accompaniment, and all of the Rottens jump up and yell, “Hey!” After Robbie gives his saxophone a puzzled look, the Rottens all suddenly have instruments of their own, and begin singing the song’s main refrain, “We are number one!”
“Now listen closely,” Robbie says next, to accompanying choreography and changes of scenery (Figure 4.16), “Here’s a little lesson in trickery. This is going down in history! If you want to be a villain number one, you have to chase a super hero on the run. Just follow my moves and sneak around. Be careful not to make a sound. Shh!” One of the other Rottens steps on a branch. “No, don’t touch that!” Robbie reprimands him.

The Rottens sing “We are number one!” three more times, accompanied by other antics.

“Ha ha ha! Now look at this net that I just found. When I say go, be ready to throw. Go!”

The other Rottens accidentally throw the net on Robbie, missing the intended target, Sportacus. “Throw it on him, not me!” Robbie yells. “Augh. Let’s try something else. Now watch and learn, here’s the deal: He’ll slip and slide on this banana peel!” Robbie says next as he lays out some banana peels, then throws back his head and laughs. The other Rottens then slip on the banana peels (Figure 4.17). “What are you doing!?” Robbie shouts at them.
The video then shows clips from the original episode when the Rottens finally manage to capture Sportacus and his subsequent escape as Robbie prepares to shoot him with a cannon. The singing in the background includes a “Ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba ba” refrain followed by the “We are number one! Hey!” chorus. In the middle of these vignettes, Robbie is shown looking up at the camera, spinning and yelling, “Villain number one!” Finally, Robbie sees that Sportacus has escaped and the other Rottens are playing soccer with him, and he gets frustrated and kicks a bucket at the cannon, causing it to fire. The cannonball hits Robbie, sending him flying (Figure 4.18). Finally, the video closes with the “We are number one!” refrain two times, the last of which is shown with the band back at Robbie’s hideout.

The screenshots and description above demonstrate the silly, child-like, humorous and whimsical nature of the video, all of which contribute in part to its success. The story of a cartoony, classic villain recruiting others to do his dirty work and then discovering that they are even less up to the task than he is offers viewers a recognizable, moral, even wholesome narrative. There exists a sort of catharsis in watching Robbie Rotten’s failed attempts to subdue Sportacus, and the character that Stefán Karl has created in this amateurish, goofy-looking bad guy carries a
potent charm that no doubt has contributed to the meme community’s desire to aid the GoFundMe’s cause.

**We Are Number One’s Memetic Iterations**

This one music video has spawned hundreds (perhaps thousands) of video and audio memes. Again, a large part of the meme’s success can be directly attributed to Karl’s declining state of health and his fans’ impetus to raise awareness of the GoFundMe to help him and his family. Many YouTube commenters toward the end of 2016 and in January 2017 were saying that the meme was dead—in other words, it had run its course and it was time for it to end. However, as of February 2018 the meme continues to churn out new artifacts as several meme artists continue to put forth different versions of the video and other references to Robbie Rotten and his band’s exploits. The positive social action associated with the meme has thus given it a longer life than many comparable memes.

While a definitive list of every single spin-off artifact is almost always untenable with a given meme, I wish to be more extensive in my coverage of “We Are Number One, but...” than I have been in my analysis of prior memes. I do so for three reasons:

1. With the theory of ideographs (video ideographs, in this case) in memes laid out above, I hope to demonstrate how iconic imagery acquires ideographic status as symbols themselves come to represent whole discussions. The videos that refer to the meme itself exemplify this phenomenon.

2. Now that I have analyzed a number of different memes, a broader look at one specific meme will help demonstrate the diffuse yet intertextual
nature of memes. By focusing on one medium, that of online video, I intend to focus more on social purposes than I did with the Yo Dawg analysis in Chapter 3.

3. This meme embodies a wide range of creative talent in its manifestations, and 50 videos can better capture the variety of approaches meme creators use than a smaller number could.

The artifacts I have selected for this analysis are not a comprehensive list, and I did watch others (~50) not included below. I have chosen the following based upon their level of rhetorical interest; that is, in part by how they were 1) referencing other memes or cultural topics, 2) making poignant arguments or social commentary, or 3) remixing entertaining media in unique or creative ways. To perform a rhetorical discourse analysis of fifty videos, each approximately 3 minutes in length (one is 27 minutes), I have decided to simply list each video, with the YouTube user who posted it in square brackets [] and the date marked off with em dashes (—), and provide one to four sentences describing and/or commenting on each just below these headings, with occasional screenshots as appropriate. To provide a bit more structure, I have listed these video descriptions and commentaries roughly in order of their subject matter, then chronologically by date uploaded to YouTube within the subject categories. After these brief video-by-video synopses, I will end this section with a fuller analysis of the “We Are Number One, but...” meme.

The Meme Emerges: SiIvaGunner

The zany joke channel SiIvaGunner was the first YouTube user to take the “We Are Number One” music video and alter it for entertainment purposes. SiIvaGunner itself has built a community of video creators and commenters from
the odd, obscure, and repetitive references introduced in many of the channel’s videos. The channel’s professed purpose is to upload the “highest quality rips” of video game music, which in part refers facetiously to the channel’s purpose and in part refers to the channel’s origins as a largescale trolling joke. The channel started as a response to GilvaSunner, another YouTube channel, which uploads audio files of video game music with the corresponding game’s cover art as a static image for the video. The crew behind SiIvaGunner deliberately made their name confusuable with GilvaSunner to lure unsuspecting fans of the GilvaSunner channel to click on SiIvaGunner videos. SiIvaGunner’s original name was SilvaGunner, with a lowercase “L” as the third letter, and changed the channel’s name to use a capital “i” for the third letter after complaints were leveled, making it harder to search. This linguistic trickery is emblematic of the channel’s content, which is almost solely dedicated to subverting viewers’ (or, more accurately, listeners’) expectations.

The two videos in this section helped get “We Are Number One, but…” off the ground, though SiIvaGunner has referenced the meme dozens of times in other videos.

**We Are Number One – LazyTown: The Video Game [SiIvaGunner]—September 13, 2016:** The very first “emergent meme,” to use Wiggins and Bowers’s useful term, is a remix of the audio from the original music video with lyrics, quotes, and sound effects borrowed from popular music, memes, and other forms of content, including lines from the 2009 song “Smoke Weed Everyday” by rapper Snoop Dogg, featuring Dr. Dre. The video simply displays a still shot of the Lazy Town logo. The joke in the title is that there is no such thing as a Lazy Town video game. This video has about 2 million views as of this writing.
We Are Number One (Beta Mix) – LazyTown: The Video Game [SiIvaGunner]—
September 20, 2016: Just a week later SiIvaGunner uploaded a very similar video to
the first. The remix simply borrows from different kinds of audio content.

Self-Contained Alterations

Videos in this category involve changing some aspect of the original video,
usually in a comedic way that resonates with viewers who have seen many other
iterations of the meme. The humor in these memes relies on the meme’s popularity
and the audience’s familiarity with the original music video.

We Are Number One but
it's opposite day!
[grandayy]—December 6,
2016: Every phrase that can
be reasonably substituted
with an antonym has been
replaced with its semantic
opposite, excepting for
function words and the like.
An automated screen
reader talks throughout the
video in lieu of singing,
though there is still music.
The video also features a
palette of colors on the
opposite end of the color

Fig. 4.19. An opposite color palette and horizontal orientation. Source: YouTube.

Fig. 4.20. The video is distorted to amplify the effect of the music sounding strange. Source: YouTube.
spectrum as shown in Figure 4.19. The video is even recorded as a mirror image (flipped left-to-right).

**We Are Number One but all notes are actually C for reals this time [grandayy]—December 14, 2016:** Every single pitch in the entire video has been changed so that they are all the standard “C” pitch used in music, or 523.25 hertz. For extra flair, grandayy distorted the images throughout the video as shown in Figure 4.20.

**We are number one but it just has the on-set sound record. [Lord VitaWrap Junior the Second]—December 14, 2016:** The music stops whenever no one in the video is clearly shown singing, and the few instruments that the Rottens use play the sounds they actually would, that is, cymbals, a bass, a toy saxophone, and a trombone. The video pokes fun at the way many music videos make the actors on screen seem like they are singing when they actually are not, and thus demonstrates how much music adds to the medium of film.

**We Are Number One but the vocals are reversed [Draculus]—December 16, 2016:** In this audio reconfiguration, each phrase is played in reverse, yet the music is still played normally. Clips from the music video are combined with clips from the original episode to make for an even more disorienting yet amusing experience.

**We Are Number One but the Lyrics Are Ruined [KeeperOfBeans]—December 23, 2016:** As the name implies, parts of the audio track have been cut up, rearranged, and placed in different parts of the video. In a particularly shock-value-laden moment, when Robbie normally yells, “What are you doing!?” he only yells “What are you-” and the video freezes for a moment while the music continues. The video resumes, and a few seconds later, a still shot of Robbie pops up and yells “DOING!”

**We are number one but weew nuun wow [Reekabo]—January 3, 2017:** Similar to “…the Lyrics Are Ruined” above, according to this video’s description, “Words are
cut in half and played backwards.” The result is a disorienting jumbled mishmash of sounds that is still recognizable as “We Are Number One.”

**We are number one, but I sing it live for the school talent show**

[Galaxion]—February 12, 2017: Three high school students sing “We Are Number One” on the stage at their high school; they dance too. The only props used are a net and banana peels (Figure 4.21). A Sportacus actor runs across the stage during the net scene. I find this example interesting because it shows that memes like this spill out of the digital sphere into other facets of life, such as a live high school student talent show.

**Meme-Referential Videos**

Many of the videos in this meme refer to other memes (even memes inside the meme), which further highlights the incredibly intertextual nature of these artifacts. Below are a few of the videos that are laden with references to other memes. Note that the “Dank” memes refer to “Smoke Weed Everyday,” which was included in the first emergent meme by SiIvaGunner.

**Lazy Town - We Are Number One [DANK EDITION] [Flater]—November 1, 2016:** This first meme-referential video references the fact that many memes are called “dank” to ironically suggest that they are of high quality. The word “dank” in this sense was originally applied to strong forms of marijuana, and Ryan Milner (2016) discusses how the word came to be associated with memes. The video is edited and
modified in such a way that it could either be interpreted as how a high person
would see the video or that a high person would get an extra rise from this version.
Lines from the 2009 song “Smoke Weed Everyday” by rapper Snoop Dogg featuring
Dr. Dre and air horn sounds are added to the background of the audio, and images
of Snoop Dogg dancing, air horns, marijuana leaves, and other memes are added to
the video.

We Are Number One but every one is replaced with one of my favourite anime
openings [MrMrMangoHead]—November 16, 2016: Some meme artifacts engage in
a sort of substitution play, where every time “one” is sung in the song, some
alteration is made to the video. (The Bee Movie meme is particularly well known for
playing with substitution.) MrMrMangoHead makes a pretty tongue-in-cheek
statement by including clips from American-made movies, shows, and games each
time “one” would normally be said (even though the title advertises anime).
Included are Shrek, Monsters, Inc., Cory, The Simpsons, Planet Ajay, Scooby Doo,
Even Stevens, Game Theory, The Bee Movie, Shrek 2, Toy Story 2, School of Rock,
and Donkey Kong 64. This bait-and-switch tactic of promising anime and delivering
Americana is quite typical of how memes will often troll people into false
expectations, much like happens with Rick-Rolling, another famous meme.

We Are Number One but the lyrics have been replaced with the Bee Movie script
[grandayy]—November 29, 2016: This video pays homage to the meme’s confluence
with the Bee Movie meme, as mentioned above. Instead of the original sung lyrics, an
automated reader reads lines from the Bee Movie.

We Are Number One but at every “One” the video gets DANKER [Crafting
Vegeto]—December 12, 2016: In a direct reference to the DANK EDITION video
discussed above, this video features many of the same wacky elements but
introduces them slowly each time “one” is said. As Robbie and crew sing “one,” an air horn blows, and a dank meter tracks the progress until the video is at full dankness. Snoop Dogg and marijuana leaves also make appearances again.

**We are Number One But It’s MLG Style [mihroK18]—December 19, 2016:** This video is along the same lines as the one above, but more memes are referenced. MLG is the acronym for Major League Gaming, a professional eSports (video gaming) organization. As such, various references to video gaming culture also abound. The video is disorienting, wild, and crazy as are the two DANK videos.

**We Are Number One but it’s co-performed by Epic Sax Guy [grandayy]—December 20, 2016:** Epic Sax Guy is a meme based on a live performance of “Run Away” at the Eurovision contest in May 2010 by Moldovan band SunStroke Project in which the band’s saxophone player, Sergey Stepanov, danced during his solo with remarkable showmanship. This video features clips of Stepanov’s performance interspersed into “We Are Number One.” Epic Sax Guy is a fitting meme to refer to with “We Are Number One” as Robbie begins the song with a saxophone solo.

**We Are Number One but it's a Remix Compilation of Memes [TwinkieMan]—December 28, 2016:** Numerous memes are referenced here, including Doge, Epic Sax Guy, videos by YouTube user iDubbz, Donald Trump’s “Bing bing bong” comment, and Smash Mouth’s “All Star.” Other features of the video and audio have been altered such as Robbie’s laugh.

**We Are Number One but THIS IS SPARTA [grandayy]—January 4, 2017:** Clips from the 2006 motion picture *300* are interspersed into the music video, with Gerard Butler’s face superimposed on Robbie Rotten’s throughout the Lazy Town segments. “This is Sparta!” was a widespread meme in the late 2000s, making this a sort of
retro-meme reference. Quotes from the movie are also interjected in moments that somewhat fit with the song.

**We Are Number One but it’s co-performed by Epic Sax Guy AGAIN [grandayy]—**

**May 20, 2017:** SunStroke Project performed at Eurovision again on May 9, 2017, and Stepanov gave another spectacular solo while dancing with his saxophone. Grandayy jumped on the opportunity to make another Epic Sax Guy / We Are Number One crossover.

**We Are Number One but it’s explained by Bill Wurtz [grandayy]—**

**June 3, 2017:** The video and audio have interjected clips from “history of the entire world, i guess” and “history of japan” by YouTube user Bill Wurtz, two popular YouTube videos that briefly (and comically) cover thousands of years of history in a few minutes.

**In Other Languages**

These videos are examples of the video being translated into other languages. The meme, technically, is inherently international as Lazy Town is an Icelandic show and the memes mostly originated in the United States. But this interest in translating the meme into other languages demonstrates its potential appeal for a broader international audience.

**We Are Number One but it’s been translated to Shakespearean [grandayy]—**

**November 27, 2016:** Although technically not a different language from English, Early Modern English has enough differences that to say it requires “translation” is accurate. Grandayy uses an automated reader again to read out his ridiculous lyrics, which are a bit over the top in their attempts to mimic Early Modern English lexicography, grammar forms, phrases, and structures. As an example, “Look at this net that I just found” becomes “Anon behold at this meshes, yond i just hath found.”
We Are Number One Español Latino [Bädo Innos]—Dec. 17. 2016: This video uses voice overs to replace the English lyrics with Spanish. The creator also used the original version of the song from the TV episode. The refrain, “¡Somos lo mejor!” translates more directly as “we are the best.” The lower production values of this video compared to the Japanese version below no doubt are related to the differences in number of views; this video has about 20,000 while the Japanese is approaching 3,000,000.

We Are Number One but it’s in Japanese [Rindou]—Apr. 1, 2017: In addition to replacing the original speech with Japanese voice-overs, Rindou has also added subtitles with Japanese characters, Japanese phonetically spelled with Roman characters, and English translations that are faithful to the Japanese reproductions. Rindou has also altered a few scenes to make them reminiscent of anime and other Japanese shows (see Figure 4.22).

Social Commentary Videos
These three videos by grandayy cover controversial topics that he approaches with humor, although his motives and how seriously he takes these topics remains in question with each. Regardless, these videos demonstrate that although generally silly, the meme is capable of treating on serious topics as well.
We Are Number One but it’s the First Crusade [grandayy]—December 7, 2016: The crusades are a constant source of heated debate regarding the role of religion (specifically, Christianity) in political and social endeavors. While there is little in this video that explicitly suggests an opinion one way or the other on the topic, the connection between the crusaders and the bungling Rotten band is clear: The crusades were a botched attempt to pursue a questionable (villainous?) goal. Grandayy includes voiceovers in what I presume is medieval Latin and alters a few of the lyrics, calling Sportacus a Saracen and saying, “No don’t besiege Constantinople” as well as inserting clips from the motion picture The Kingdom of Heaven. It is also worth noting that the phrase “Deus Vult” (God wills it) shows up in the video, a phrase that has been associated with white nationalist memes according to Justin Caffier. I am honestly not sure how to interpret that connection, again due to Poe’s Law.

We Are Number One but we have crippling depression [grandayy]—December 24, 2016: The original singing has been replaced with an automated-sounding voiceover with a British accent that replaces many of the lyrics with statements about how depressed the singers are and making casual references to killing themselves. The video’s colors have been desaturated significantly to create a darker atmosphere, and the new lyrics are superimposed on the video as captions in a Halloween-esque font. See Figure 4.23.
We Are Number One but it's sung by crazy feminists [grandayy]—February 4, 2017: Grandayy also takes on feminists by photoshopping the faces of YouTube-famous feminists over Robbie Rotten’s and interjecting the music video with footage of impassioned interactions between feminists and other individuals. The video smacks of potential sexism, but grandayy says in the video’s description, “Pls don't take this too seriously thx :)”, so it seems likely that he is pursuing some of these controversial topics just to get a rise out of his viewers. Yet watching this video in light of the crusades one and its potential link to white supremacy certainly makes grandayy’s social motivations suspect.

Popular Movie-Referential Videos

These videos refer to action film trailers and the Star Wars movies, especially the prequel trilogy. Other references to cinema have been made through this meme, which is a natural step for a meme that originates from a TV show. Still, these videos demonstrate the creators’ creativity in referencing other cultural material.

We Are Number One but it’s an Epic Movie Trailer [Action Mug Productions]—December 30, 2016: The music video is recut and edited to create the sort of drama endemic to blockbuster action movies and with heavier, serious music replacing the fun, energetic, happy music of the original video. Large 3D letters occasionally appear against a black background to give faux gravitas, using the phrases “This summer,” “Based on a true meme,” “A story of family,” and “We Are Number One.”

We Are Obi Wan [Stycroft]—January 27, 2017: Multiple quotes by Obi Wan Kenobi from the Star Wars movies are used in lieu of some of the lyrics. Many of Robbie’s moments of frustration are replaced with Obi Wan’s, including, “You were the
chosen one!” Obi Wan’s face is super-imposed over Robbie’s, and Anakin Skywalker’s face is superimposed over Sportacus’s.

**We Are Number One but Robbie Rotten is the Senate [Ewoutro Productions]—March 28, 2017:** Multiple quotes by Emperor Palpatine from *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* are used in lieu of some of the lyrics, and a couple of clips from the Star Wars films are also interspersed.

**Popular Music-Referential Videos**

The catchy tune of “We Are Number One” lends itself well to audio mashups/remixes. I’ll be brief in this section as each of the videos here is simply a mashup of the original We Are Number One music video with a popular song. Most are by grandayy, who has demonstrated great acumen for remixing songs together. Each of these videos includes an editing of the original video, an adjustment of original pitches to match musical keys, and adjustments in tempo to fit the two songs together. I will simply list the song being remixed with “We Are Number One” unless there are other notable qualities.

**Feel Rotten Inc [Fresh Memes For Your Health]—December 13, 2016:** “We Are Number One” is combined with “Feel Good, Inc.” (2005) by British alternative hip-hop band Gorillaz in an expertly crafted audio remix. Noteworthy in this remix is the fact that a quote from Stefán Karl’s own meme tribute (discussed below) is featured, and the video’s description includes a link to the GoFundMe before quoting Karl: “And remember, keep memeing!”

**We Are Number One but we're RADIOACTIVE [grandayy]—February 28, 2017:** “Radioactive” (2012) by American rock band Imagine Dragons.
We Are Number One but it's Linkin Park (We Are Numb) [grandayy]—March 11, 2017: “Numb” (2003) by American alternative metal band Linkin Park.


We Are Number One but you’re just Somebody That I Used To Know [grandayy]—April 21, 2017: “Somebody That I Used to Know” (2011) by American one-hit wonder Gotye.

We Are Number One but Turn Down For Net [grandayy]—April 29, 2017: “Turn Down for What” (2013) by hip hop artists DJ Snake and Lil Jon.

We Are Number One but Wake Me Up When Net’s All Over [grandayy]—June 17, 2017: “Wake Me Up” (2013) by Swedish electronic dance music artist Avicii.

We Are Number One but you've probably heard it on the radio a 100 times already [grandayy]—July 19, 2017: The title of this video refers to the featured song, “Despacito” (2017) by Puerto Rican Reggaeton artists Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee. “Despacito” made the news on the same day this video was uploaded for becoming the most streamed song of all time. Shortly thereafter “Despacito” also surpassed “Gangnam Style” as the most-viewed video on YouTube, the first to pass three billion views. (As of February 2018, “Despacito” has nearly five billion views.)

Video Game-Themed Videos

Video games are a subject area on which many meme creators like to focus their energies. The stereotypical meme creator is a 14–25 year-old male, and video games also happen to be quite popular with this demographic. Since SiIvaGunner, the
channel that really brought the “We Are Number One, but…” meme to life, is a joke channel dedicated to video game music remixes, it seems fitting that others with interest in video games would choose to invest in the meme.

**We Are Number One but every one is a Smash Bros. player getting so salty they throw their controller** [Nintoonist]—December 14, 2016: The title serves as an adequate description. Most of the inserted clips are taken from tournaments and other competitive situations where the loser of a match loses their cool and throws their controller, sometimes accompanied by other violent outbursts.

**We Are Number One but sung by the DK Rap dude** [PCDamonD]—December 30, 2017: All of the original voices have been replaced with edited snippets from “The DK Rap” that features at the introduction of the game Donkey Kong 64. Many of the original lyrics are used with spliced words from “The DK Rap” mashed together to form words as needed. Toward the end of the music video, the refrain “Walnuts, peanuts, pineapple smells, grapes, melons, oranges, and coconut shells. Aw yeah!” replace the usual “ba ba ba” and “We Are Number One” refrains.

**We Are Number One But It’s Sung By Waluigi** [Nintendo Beyond]—December 31, 2016: Waluigi’s face has been superimposed over the Rottens, as have other Mario characters on others’ faces. The original voices are replaced with a whiny, nasally voice that sounds like Waluigi’s. The banana peels are replaced with those found in Mariokart, and the poison apple Sportacus (now Luigi) eats is a poison mushroom.

**We are Number One, but it’s a Banjo-Kazooie/Tooei/DK64 Boss Remix** [ICreateVideoGameMusic]—January 1, 2017: The melody of “We Are Number One” has been re-orchestrated to match the composing style of celebrated video game music composer Grant Kirkhope, who worked on the Banjo-Kazooie and Donkey Kong 64 games. Interjected into the theme are motifs from “It’s the Nut Shack” and
“The Flintstones,” no doubt references to SiIvagunner’s influence on the We Are Number One meme.

We are number one but it’s a Waluigi parody [SMG4]—January 7, 2017: This is probably one of the lower-quality videos, but this YouTuber did generate all new video footage reminiscent of Super Mario 64. Luigi asks Waluigi if he can train him to be a villain, and the story somewhat follows that of “We Are Number One” but in the Mario universe.

[YTPMV] Robbielovania [Hexcubed]—January 27, 2017: Hexcubed re-orchestrates “Megalovania,” a piece from the game Undertale (2013), with saxophone and Robbie’s laughter. Scenes from “We Are Number One” are spliced together to accompany the music.

We are number one but it's a Geometry Dash layout [SoulsTRK]—March 24, 2017: The video shows a player running through a layout of Geometry Dash, a game that lets players build levels that can be set to certain tempos and rhythms. “We Are Number One” plays in the background, timed to the music. SoulsTRK is a Spanish-speaking YouTuber and discusses the video in Spanish at the end, again demonstrating an international appeal for this meme.

Music-Focused Videos

A few videos focus explicitly on the music of “We Are Number One.” While these videos generally do not feature interesting visual features, they do make points about the music worth mentioning. Musical analysis has seldom been the work of rhetorical criticism, yet these videos demonstrate both the simplicity and potency of the well-appreciated music in the original song “We Are Number One.”
We Are Number One but it’s played on a $1 piano that I found on eBay [Joe Jenkins]—
June 30, 2017: As the title suggests, this brief 58-second video shows the creator playing the main melody of “We Are Number One” on a cheap, simple, toy piano (Figure 4.24). This video helps demonstrate that for all of the song’s musical exploits, it really is a simple tune that can be played within an octave’s range.

We Are Number One, but it’s so beautiful, I’m 99.99% Sure You will CRY! [Toms Mucenieks]—July 16, 2017: The video creator has arranged “We Are Number One” into a stirring piano ballad in minor key with complex chords and riveting background runs among other musical features. The song seems to pay homage to Karl’s ongoing battle with cancer by turning a fun, silly song into a deep, contemplative, bitter-sweet piano solo.

We Are Number One, but it’s EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL, I’m 100% sure YOU Will Cry! [Toms Mucenieks]—August 24, 2017: Toms Mucieneks tries to outperform himself by trying his arrangement in the video above again. This time he records himself playing at the keyboard. This type of self-referencing is common among meme creators.
Meta Videos (Videos about the Meme itself)

Finally, there are a few videos that directly discuss the meme itself. These offer both a look back on the meme and a forward glance toward where the meme is headed and how its impact has been felt.

**We Are Number One live but it’s the live version with a interview 12.11.16 [Stefan Stefansson]—December 11, 2016:** Karl recorded a video featuring himself with the composer of We Are Number One, Máni Svavarsson, and his fellow castmembers who played the other Rottens. In the video, Karl expresses that he has been so touched by the outpouring of support from his fans as demonstrated in part by the popularity of the We Are Number One meme that he wanted to contribute. He and the original cast sing the original song, but it’s obvious that they’re a little out of practice. Karl concludes by thanking everyone who has supported him, and says, “Keep memeing!”, a phrase which many meme creators have replicated.

**It’s We are Number One But Every Time They Should Say One It Changes To Different Remix [superidiot55]—January 22, 2017:** As the name indicates, this video has been remixed in such a way that every time “one” is sung in the song, the video switches to a clip from a previously created “We Are Number One, but...” video. The video thus serves as a sort of retrospective on the meme.

**A health update on Robbie Rotten - Ways you can help Stefan Karl Steffanson [Behind the Meme]—July 19, 2017:** A fan offers tribute to Karl and explains that the cancer has advanced to stage 4. The video also describes the GoFundMe and a petition to erect a statue of Karl in his hometown. The user “Behind the Meme” has been controversial on YouTube, and many meme insiders accuse him of taking the fun out of some memes. This video, at least, seems to be produced in good faith.
We Are Number One: Analysis

As the videos described above attest, the “We Are Number One, but...” meme attracts a wide range of interests, values, and social purposes. Its popularity has been bolstered by the philanthropic effort to raise awareness of Karl’s cancer and GoFundMe, but its entertainment qualities are likely even more responsible for its success. Voted the number one meme of 2016 and often lauded as having one of the longest periods of longevity of any video meme, this meme has a demonstrable impact, including generating support for a considerably successful GoFundMe campaign. Table 4.1 summarizes details regarding the 50 videos discussed above. Here is an explanation of the columns: The number (＃) indicates the video’s order of appearance in the analyses above, “Date Posted” indicates when the video was uploaded to YouTube, the “Title” is the name given to the video, the “Creator” is the username of the account that uploaded the video, and the “Views (as of 10/3/17)” indicate how many views each video had on October 3, 2017, which is simply the date I captured this data.
Table 4.2. Summary of “We Are Number One, but…” videos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date Posted</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Creator</th>
<th>Views (as of 10/3/17)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>9/13/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One – LazyTown: The Video Game</td>
<td>SiIvaGunner</td>
<td>1,927,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9/20/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One (Beta Mix) – LazyTown: The Video Game</td>
<td>SiIvaGunner</td>
<td>198,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>11/1/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One [DANK EDITION]</td>
<td>Flater</td>
<td>6,773,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>11/16/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but everyone is replaced with one of my favourite anime openings</td>
<td>MrMr MangoHead</td>
<td>1,684,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>11/27/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s been translated to Shakespearean</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,090,216</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>11/29/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but the lyrics have been replaced with the Bee Movie script</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>373,979</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>12/6/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s opposite day!</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>4,218,148</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>12/7/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s the First Crusade</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>2,554,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>12/11/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One live but it’s the live version with a interview 12.11.16</td>
<td>Stefan Stefansson</td>
<td>5,826,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>12/12/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but at every “One” the video gets DANKER</td>
<td>Crafting Vegeto</td>
<td>2,738,254</td>
</tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>12/13/16</td>
<td>Feel Rotten Inc</td>
<td>Fresh Memes For Your Health</td>
<td>498,234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>12/14/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but all notes are actually C for reals this time</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,557,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12/14/16</td>
<td>We are number one but it just has the on-set sound record.</td>
<td>Lord VitaWrap Junior the Second</td>
<td>202,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>12/14/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but everyone is a Smash Bros. player getting so salty they throw their controller</td>
<td>Nintoonist</td>
<td>1,485,038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12/16/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but the vocals are reversed</td>
<td>Draculus</td>
<td>34,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>12/17/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One Español Latino</td>
<td>Bädo Innos</td>
<td>26,732</td>
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<td>Date Posted</td>
<td>Title</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>12/19/16</td>
<td>We are Number One But It’s MLG Style</td>
<td>mihroK18</td>
<td>744,424</td>
</tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>12/20/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s co-performed by Epic Sax Guy</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>2,928,112</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>12/23/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but the Lyrics Are Ruined</td>
<td>KeeperOfBeans</td>
<td>560,139</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>12/24/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but we have crippling depression</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,710,242</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>12/28/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s a Remix Compilation of Memes</td>
<td>TwinkieMan</td>
<td>6,613,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>12/30/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s an Epic Movie Trailer</td>
<td>Action Mug Productions</td>
<td>649,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>12/30/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One but sung by the DK Rap dude</td>
<td>PCDamonD</td>
<td>38,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>12/31/16</td>
<td>We Are Number One But It’s Sung By Waluigi</td>
<td>Nintendo Beyond</td>
<td>623,326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1/3/17</td>
<td>We are number one but weew nuun wow</td>
<td>Reekabo</td>
<td>153,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>1/1/17</td>
<td>We are Number One, but it’s a Banjo-Kazooie/Tooei/DK64 Boss Remix</td>
<td>ICreateVideo GameMusic</td>
<td>47,679</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>1/4/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but THIS IS SPARTA</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,778,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>1/7/17</td>
<td>We are number one but it’s a Waluigi parody</td>
<td>SMG4</td>
<td>2,497,067</td>
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<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>1/22/17</td>
<td>It’s We are Number One But Every Time They Should Say One It Changes To Different Remix</td>
<td>superidiot55</td>
<td>1,365,729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>1/27/17</td>
<td>We Are Obi Wan</td>
<td>Stycroft</td>
<td>169,514</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>1/27/17</td>
<td>[YTPMV] Robbielevania</td>
<td>Hexcubed</td>
<td>1,283,887</td>
</tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>2/4/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it's sung by crazy feminists</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,293,305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2/12/17</td>
<td>We are number one, but I sing it live for the school talent show</td>
<td>Galaxion</td>
<td>1,538,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>2/28/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but we're RADIOACTIVE</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>811,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>3/11/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s Linkin Park (We Are Numb)</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>992,078</td>
</tr>
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<td>#</td>
<td>Date Posted</td>
<td>Title</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>3/18/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but NUMA NUMA YAY</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,008,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>3/23/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s Nirvana</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>398,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>3/24/17</td>
<td>We are number one but it's a Geometry Dash layout</td>
<td>SoulsTRK</td>
<td>444,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>3/28/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but Robbie Rotten is the Senate</td>
<td>Ewoutro Productions</td>
<td>2,325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>4/1/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s in Japanese</td>
<td>Rindou</td>
<td>3,343,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>4/21/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but you’re just Somebody That I Used To Know</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,753,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>4/29/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but Turn Down For Net</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>227,537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>5/20/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s co-performed by Epic Sax Guy AGAIN</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>1,556,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>6/3/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s explained by Bill Wurtz</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>870,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>6/17/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but Wake Me Up When Net’s All Over</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>282,306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>6/30/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but it’s played on a $1 piano that I found on ebay</td>
<td>Joe Jenkins</td>
<td>2,958,194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>7/16/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One, but it’s so beautiful, I’m 99.99% Sure You will CRY!</td>
<td>Toms Mucenieks</td>
<td>2,280,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>7/19/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One but you’ve probably heard it on the radio a 100 times already</td>
<td>grandayy</td>
<td>257,847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>7/19/17</td>
<td>A health update on Robbie Rotten - Ways you can help Stefan Karl Steffanson</td>
<td>Behind the Meme</td>
<td>485,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>8/24/17</td>
<td>We Are Number One, but it’s EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL, I’m 100% sure YOU Will Cry!</td>
<td>Toms Mucenieks</td>
<td>401,118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The videos range in popularity from 2,325 views (Robbie Rotten is the Senate) to 6,773,123 (DANK EDITION). SiIvaGunner’s September 13, 2016, video is the first, and videos are still being uploaded as of February, 2018. This meme has enjoyed impressive longevity and spread, especially considering its somewhat niche nature as a celebration of an Icelandic children’s show.

Many of the artifacts that correspond to this meme capitalize on the original music video’s bright colors, goofy aesthetics, and jazzy, upbeat melody as they use irony, amusing external references, pointed alterations, and other remix features to entertain their audiences. Oddly enough, some of the videos are deliberately obnoxious, such as instances where Robbie’s voice is altered to sound high-pitched and irritating. Comedy is the ruling logic behind these videos’ construction, and unexpected and ironic elements are thus deployed liberally.

The categories described above are somewhat arbitrary, and other categories could be used to articulate some of the hundreds of videos not included in this discourse analysis. Nevertheless, I think the 10 categories help to describe what this video meme’s primary purposes have been, aside from the main driving force of promoting awareness of Karl’s GoFundMe, most of which are along the lines of whimsical entertainment. I’ll now discuss each category again briefly in light of this effort to analyze the meme as a whole. The varied approaches of the meme creators demonstrate their creativity and diffuse nature, yet the common objective of enjoying these clips of Karl while celebrating the actor holds them together. So while there is a common rhetorical objective for this meme, the meme artifact categories demonstrate different content-based camps for appropriating the music video.

**SiIvaGunner.** The original SiIvaGunner memes set the stage for other meme creators to have fun with “We Are Number One.” As often happens with memes, it
is likely that many of the subsequent meme creators are unaware of SiIvaGunner’s role, but that does not diminish the part the channel played. YouTube commenters stated in October 2017 on the original video that SiIvaGunner had helped save Karl’s life, which, while perhaps a bit overstated, does credit to these remix masters. The original SiIvaGunner meme said nothing about Karl’s state of health and it predates the GoFundMe campaign, yet it did serve to get the ball rolling.

**Self-Contained Alterations.** The popularity of the meme eventually allowed users to toy around with the video’s original structure and audio and video components. This allowed meme creators to be creative in altering the video, without making any outside references. Most of these videos mention Karl’s GoFundMe.

**Meme-Referential Videos.** The remixing of other memes into “We Are Number One” is equally creative, even if it does distract from the original video a bit. Many of the memes referenced in the videos have close ties to “We Are Number One,” and others are just for fun. These tend to be among the most popular videos, and they accordingly contributed significantly to promoting awareness of the meme.

**In Other Languages.** Demonstrating how the original lyrics of the video can be translated into other languages helped demonstrate the universality of its humor. While the Japanese version pokes a little fun at Japanese media, these videos helped cement Karl’s position as an internationally loved figure.

**Social Commentary Videos.** While grandayy’s efforts to bring more serious topics into the meme are questionable, they do demonstrate the potential for using the meme to address a variety of social topics. Memes are mainly about the humor, but the possibility to engage in serious discussion is ever present.
Popular Movie-Referential Videos. Making fun of Star Wars and action movie trailers is enabled through this meme’s goofy aesthetics and comedic portrayals of villainy. The campy nature of Obi Wan and Palpatine from the Star Wars prequels is emphasized through Lazy Town’s campy features.

Popular Music-Referential Videos. Turning “We Are Number One” into a remixed music video for several popular songs helped bolster the memes’ popularity and demonstrated the widely applicable nature of the music for use in remix. Several of these videos are largely responsible for the meme’s success.

Video Game-Themed Videos. Rounding out the panoply of media that “We Are Number One” memes refer to, these video game-related memes helped to bolster the memes’ popularity among the teenage-to-young-adult demographic. Because SiIvaGunner is a channel dedicated to video game music, the appropriation of the meme for other video game themes is a natural next step.

Music-Focused Videos. Commentary on Máni Svavarsson’s composition is perhaps best achieved by playing with it through music, and these videos accomplish some of that not through remix but through rearrangement and re-orchestration. The simplicity and potential for alteration of the music have contributed to the meme’s success.

Meta Videos (Videos about the Meme itself). With so many iterations of the meme out there, it was inevitable that some dedicated commentary would arise in video form. Karl’s own tribute demonstrates the actor’s sincere gratitude for the campaign and his enthusiasm for how the original video has been appropriated through memes.
The fifty examples above are indicative of the high degree of intertextuality manifest in Internet memes. Multiple popular media artifacts, political and entertainment figures, events, and social situations are referenced by the many videos that have been created with some sort of tie-in to “We Are Number One.” The videos vary in quality, rhetorical purposes, and popularity (number of views). While many videos simply remix popular music, others touch upon serious subjects like depression. The videos have also generated a sort of sense of community as Internet users have shared their memes and discussed the artifacts, forming a larger cultural topic that YouTube commenters and everyday people aware of the meme enjoy discussing, much as they would a popular culture franchise such as Star Wars or Nintendo games (albeit much less well known). Many commenters commend the work of meme artists like MrMrMangoHead and grandayy, while other video creators like Behind the Meme are sometimes vilified for almost killing the meme. People genuinely love this meme (or at least they claim to; Poe’s law proscribes certainty in ascertaining Internet users’ true motives), and it would not be an outlandish claim to suggest that it has brightened many lives. One commenter, seen in Figure 4.25, suggests that grandayy’s work has even helped him or her to cope with some personal life difficulties. Regardless of whether such claims can be trusted, the positive impact of “We Are Number One, but…” is hard to refute.
Concisely articulating the sphere of influence this meme has created and maintained and its societal impact is difficult. Millions of YouTube viewers have enjoyed celebrating Karl’s legacy and hundreds of video makers have sought to generate awareness of his need for financial support throughout his cancer-related health crisis. The result has been a meme that doesn’t simply make people laugh and move on; it has bolstered people’s faith in society as a potential force for benefitting those in need, and has had material impact on Karl and his friends and family.

“We Are Number One, but…” shows that positive social action can be enacted on a large, collective scale through memes. Although promoting Karl’s GoFundMe could be deemed a form of “slacktivism,” or a lazy, half-hearted effort to support a social cause (see Vie), the creative energy that people have poured into this meme and consumers’ reactions to it suggest that the movement this meme represents goes beyond simply raising money for a suffering actor. The idea that memes can be used as a force for good has captivated many YouTube users over the months as they have taken part in this meme, and it can no longer be said that memes are trivial, pointless, silly endeavors. They can inspire people, and that makes them as valid a form of visual rhetoric as any other.

**Memes and Social Action**

The five memes that have been analyzed in this dissertation demonstrate a wide range of possible social motives that meme purveyors undertake as they create digital artifacts for mass consumption. While the original intent of the first emergent Yo Dawg meme was to point out the ludicrous premise of the show “Pimp My Ride,” the meme soon transformed to cover topics ranging from popular media to teenage pregnancy. The memes that were appropriated by the financial firm LendingTree to
advertise their financial products each had quite different origins from their eventual usage as Lenny the puppet’s backdrop to sell credit cards. The Philosoraptor memes originated in English-speaking contexts (predominantly American), but the meme was eventually translanguaged to Spanish-speaking contexts and appropriated to the point of being able to execute Spanish puns.

In this chapter, we have seen memes transform, both in their symbolic meaning or associated ideological values and in the ways in which they can be taken up as genres, as they have fostered different kinds of social action. Pepe the Frog transformed from innocent reaction image to a symbol of racism and xenophobia to the point that Pepe can no longer be used in the meme’s original sense. The many remixes of “We Are Number One” are often aimed at supporting Stefán Karl Stefánsson in his battle with cancer, but the many approaches to remixing the video demonstrate the wide range of possible appropriations for a single artifact. Its “uptake,” as Anne Freadman calls it (1994; 2012), is somewhat sporadic, yet not entirely unpredictable, as most of the videos discussed above are of a silly, whimsical, light-hearted, and even childish nature, even when they involve serious subjects.

Although memes in many respects behave like genres, they call on wide varieties of social actions, ideologies, media, and typified structures. Memes, therefore, are not genres, yet it is clear that they use genres and in some instances they create genres, as genres form around the typical moves and structures that memes employ. Hearkening back to the discussions of image macros in Chapters 1 and 3, we can see how a genre has formed around the placement of large, white, Impact font text on images, and that even individual image macros are associated with standardized moves, such as snowclones (phrasal templates) and generic
approaches to ideas. As a stock character is taken up for use in an image macro, that image becomes in a sense its own genre as its ideographic nature is tied to a *topos* of the image’s values.

To simplify the complex, intertextual, creative endeavors called memes, which are pursued by large, cultural collectives who construct iconic symbols and employ a variety of *topoi* within a short period of time—sometimes spanning hours, sometimes spanning months—down to a “typified response to a recurring social situation” is a large pill to swallow. Memes often defy genericity as the creative impulse leads many Internet users to pronounce a meme “dead” shortly after it has taken off in popularity, and the urge to push the boundaries of a meme’s genre begin in almost the same moment that they are formed. That boundary pushing can lead to the re-appropriation of memes in a variety of rhetorical and modal directions (Yo Dawg), for use in advertising (Lenny), across languages (Filosoraptor), toward political endeavors (Pepe), and for philanthropy (We Are Number One, but…).

A more nuanced approach to memes and genres is required to make sense of these sweeping cultural phenomena, one that recognizes that the social actions memes address and the forms they take are as variable as their creators and audiences. The concluding chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to proposing such a nuanced, more content- and purpose-aware approach to memes that can yield greater insight in future rhetorical studies based upon the findings of the discourse analysis project described herein.
CHAPTER 5

“WHAT DOES IT ALL MEME?”

Through concept-oriented genre-based rhetorical discourse analysis, I have investigated and analyzed several memes and their corresponding artifacts. This study’s findings regarding the layers of genre/medium at play in memes, the nature of visual ideographs serving as *topoi* in memes, and the wide range of rhetorical purposes for which memes are employed have demonstrated how memes offer a compelling yet at times confusing world of digital rhetoric. Memes’ potential uses in communication, their topical utility, and their significance for social interactions in online spaces have been explored through several contexts, media, and thematic features. I might end the dissertation here and say that we have at least learned more about memes. But that would leave the question asked by the title of Sam Leith’s article, “What Does It All Meme?” unanswered, and I see an opportunity here to expand our understanding of rhetorical analytical methods as well given the previously stated purpose of this dissertation, to proffer meme as a rhetorical concept for digital rhetorical study.

**Meme: A More Nuanced Definition**

First, a more rhetorically inclined definition can help us ascertain how meme can be applied to rhetorical phenomena through concept-orientated criticism. While I do think that Limor Shifman’s definition is just fine for most circumstances, I find it a bit too broad and even untenable for rhetorical study. That definition again is, “a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which b) were created with awareness of each other, and c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). I wish to
simplify and expand this definition somewhat to make it more manageable for future rhetorical study.

Here, then, is my definition of “meme” as it might be used for studying meme-like artifacts rhetorically, whether through close reading or discourse analysis:

Meme (n.): A group of intertextual artifacts that explicitly or implicitly refer to each other through the sharing of

- alphanumeric, visual, or audio content
- genre(s) or form(s)
- and/or an acknowledgment of a social phenomenon.

Note the differences between this more rhetorical and genre-focused definition and Shifman’s. First, Shifman’s definition restricts memes to digital media, which, while it is true that the overwhelming majority of memes have been digital in recent years, I see as an unnecessary and possibly even misleading distinction given the proliferation of physical profiteering from memes such as the meme-based commercialized paraphernalia that Milner (2016) discussed, the memes posted around Parks Library at Iowa State University, instances where memes are acted out live on a physical stage (as seen in the high school example of “We Are Number One” above), or the dozens of other possible analog applications for the concept, from bumper stickers and window decals to plushies and tee shirts.

Second, “digital items” is at once more specific and vaguer than “intertextual artifacts.” Memes at their core are referential; they are “created with awareness of each other” as Shifman suggests, but they also often include each other, or bits of each other, as they incorporate visual and audio content through remix. The word
“intertextual” describes the meme phenomenon more fully as they are effectively interlaced with each other through splicing, editing, and recompiling.

Third, I do see it as important to acknowledge that memes can share content, form, and/or stance as Shifman suggests, but I would add that acknowledging the kind of content we are talking about and a relationship with the concept of genre are also important. The distinction between genre and form is a subtle one, and as Frow says, genre can be defined as “a relationship between textual structures and the situations that occasion them” (13, emphasis in original), thus creating a need to understand both how genres are formed and what they look like to fully investigate what they do.

Fourth and finally, I see memes acknowledging social situations in ways that are not indicated by their content, form, or stance. When Wendy’s created a Pepe meme, the situation suggested that the creator was totally unaware of the social phenomena surrounding the meme. A “We Are Number One, but” meme with adult content or that insulted Karl would also fail to jibe with the meme’s socially acceptable uptake. One could argue that this awareness of social phenomena is linked to genre, and that may be. But social situations change, and genres must adapt with them. In the case of many memes, such awareness is not simply a genre-based formality; it is a prerequisite for memetic success.

I could add a second definition to this first one that would acknowledge that many memes exist as one-off artifacts and therefore don’t necessarily exist as groups of artifacts at all. I recently heard fellow graduate students argue that everything is a meme, that no artifact exists on the Internet that could not be considered a meme. My perception is that such a definition of meme has indeed become a commonly understood notion and that any sharable creative work might be well considered as
a meme. But in order to make sense of such a phenomenon, one must hearken back to the concept’s original usage on the Internet, which generally has come in groups of items that refer to each other. Again, I do not see “artifact” and “meme” as synonyms, even if meme is often used to refer to a single artifact.

Using Meme as a Rhetorical Concept

Now that I have provided the term with some additional rhetorically aware definition, I want to conclude by discussing how the concept of a meme can be applied in rhetorical studies and situations. Although I have established that memes are not genres but rather are related to them, I think coming to a rhetorical understanding of the concept will be best facilitated by considering Jasinski’s definition of that related term in his *Sourcebook on Rhetoric*:

> When used in rhetorical or literary studies (where the term is most common), genre refers to the various types, classes, or categories of discursive practice that can serve as objects of study…. In rhetorical studies, common characteristics or discursive conventions relating to style, argument, structure, and situation have allowed scholars to identity [sic] a range of generic classes or categories. (268)

Rhetorical study of memes requires consideration of the interrelation among various artifacts that are part of a particular meme. The nature of such a relationship will come down to one of the features discussed in mine or Shifman’s definition, or it may involve other factors that neither of us identified. Regardless of the specific mode of relation among meme artifacts, an approach similar to that of genre analysis is appropriate for determining a particular meme’s common characteristics, whether they be stylistic, structural, situational, medial, or content-based.
Starting with a source that has already investigated a particular meme such as KnowYourMeme.com, which I have certainly relied upon throughout this dissertation, is a valid method for beginning meme-based rhetorical study. However, Paltridge’s suggestion to look at many examples of a genre, or in this case, a meme, and to then spend time with and read and re-read the artifacts as Jasinski suggests, are both necessary to gain a more thorough sense of what a meme has to teach us. Tracking down and interviewing individual meme creators to ascertain their intentions is not viable, though doing this to some degree may well provide valuable insights. A genre-based discourse analysis such as that which I employed here may be more worthwhile for rhetorical study, but the rhetorical critic must be wary of labelling memes as genres in the same sense we label a political speech, a tax document, a report, or a research article a genre.

Rhetorical studies of memes have a bright prospect for the foreseeable future, and I hope this dissertation may provide guidance for other meme scholars who wish to pursue a similar concept-oriented path in meme analysis. This study lays a framework for considering how memes take up each other’s content, forms, stances, *topoi*, ideographs, and, yes, genres.

**Further Studies**

Memes are, for now at least, phenomena worthy of study. Media and communication studies, Internet, creative writing, and rhetorical scholars all share interest in and motivation to explore the problems and possibilities presented by these wide-reaching, rapidly spreading artifact groups. I’ve had the pleasure of associating with various meme scholars over the past few years, and while more meme scholarship is certain to be published within the next few years, I can see
meme studies taking several exciting directions as we continue to wrangle the phenomena and derive meaning from them. A few approaches I am familiar with and that I am sure current and future scholars will continue to pursue include

- Feminist perspectives, including memes’ empowerment of various groups of women and the counter-feminist influences of misogynist memes
- Global perspectives that seek to understand how memes are used by various nations and language users
- Pedagogical perspectives (Silva; Stones) that make efforts to situate memes within the classroom, both for analysis and creation
- Race-studies perspectives that examine how stereotypes are perpetuated or shut down through certain memes
- Rhetorical perspectives (Huntington; Wetherbee), including this dissertation
- Sociological perspectives that sometimes attempt to track meme spread empirically through quantitative methods (Spitzberg)

While individual memes may come and go, as Milner has suggested, memetic manifestations of digital (and analog) content are here to stay. Collecting, analyzing, critiquing, and then trying to publish research on ephemera such as memes is no doubt frustrating, but the possibilities for continued work in meme studies are still quite open.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation has analyzed 132 meme artifacts including five meme groupings. There are billions of memes left unanalyzed by scholars, and many thousands are continually created each day. While this study’s aim has never been
to solve all questions surrounding memes, it has at least succeeded in the goals laid out in Chapter 2:

1. **Seek further understanding of how memes operate as genres.** While memes certainly carry some genericity, this study has demonstrated that the relationship among memes and their correlated genres is quite complex. Form, structure, medium, and even social purposes are not sufficient frames for understanding how memes operate. They also rely on *topoi*, ideographs, and mere references. What’s more, these factors can be combined or swapped out in a given meme-artifact instance.

2. **Uncover creator-context-audience relationships within singular meme artifacts.** Chapter 4 discussed how social movements are formed and enacted by memes. While pointing to specific creators and audience members when dealing with largescale social phenomena like memes is unwieldy at best, impossible at worst, the power of memes to raise funds for someone’s cancer treatment or band together a political movement show the power of collective artifact creation and dissemination.

3. **“Thicken” rhetorical concepts and devices as appropriate and possible.** While the relationship between memes and ethos and kairos will have to be covered more thoroughly some other day, the rhetorical concepts of *anesis*, *topoi*, and ideographs have been thickened by this dissertation and future rhetorical scholars can consider how memes shape, create, and alter these rhetorical formulations in light of the discoveries discussed herein.

4. **Propose “meme” as a rhetorical concept for entry in the rhetorical canon.** This chapter attempts this final goal. While the definition laid out above will likely not become the standard definition and the methods of analysis
discussed may only be one of many approaches, I hope future rhetorical scholars who investigate memes will consider how meme itself can be a guiding lens as they consider the complex interweavings of social purposes, forms, and phenomena.

Memes still abound on the Internet, and for better or for worse, we will see them for many years to come. Well-reasoned approaches to their ongoing analysis will be necessary for understanding the ever-shifting social landscape that has formed online. And as we consider how meme as a rhetorical concept shows up in a variety of settings, we may find that Figure 5.1 will become us:

Fig. 5.1. Buzz Lightyear tells Woody from *Toy Story* that memes are, indeed, everywhere. Source: Warframe.
WORKS CITED


Devitt, Amy. Personal communication. 27 Apr. 2016.


APPENDIX. MEME EXAMPLES


“If I steal the WiFi of a Church It’s the Signal of God?” Meme Generator, https://memegenerator.net/instance/67512629.


“Si Bebo Alcohol...Soy Alcoholico y Si Bebo Fanta...Soy Fantastico?” *Meme Generator*. Memegenerator.es, https://www.memegenerator.es/meme/766870.

“Si el Policía Me Dice “Papeles” y Yo Le Digo “Tijeras” Gano Yo?” *Frasesparainstagram*, http://frasesparainstagram.es/memes-famosos/filosoraptor-si-el-policia-me-dice-papeles?


*YouTube*. YouTube.com, https://www.youtube.com/. [Note: The 51 YouTube videos used in the “We Are Number One, but…” section do not have individual citations, but enough information is provided in that section to find individual videos.]