

# Mememes, menomes, and LOLs: expression and reiteration through digital rhetorical devices

## *Mememes, menomas e LOLs: expressão e reiteração a partir de dispositivos retóricos digitais*

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### ABSTRACT

The popularity of *internet memes* as communication items presents a series of research issues, including the characteristics of any connection with the original *meme* concept from biology. Also, an aspect that demands exploration is how these items serve a broader communicative purpose, as mechanisms for individuals or groups, and how they impact society as a whole. This paper presents a revision of perspectives on memes, and proposes to analyze them as rhetorical devices, devising a general interpretation of these items as *menomes*, and concentrating attention in a particular iteration, the image macro *meme*, which we propose to call LOL.

**Keywords:** Memes, digital narratives, internet studies, communities of practice

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### RESUMO

A popularidade dos *memes de internet* como itens de comunicação apresenta uma série de questões de investigação, incluindo as características de todas as suas ligações com o conceito original de *meme*, tomado da biologia. Além disso, um aspecto que demanda pesquisa é a forma como a exploração desses itens serve a um propósito mais amplo de comunicação, como mecanismos para indivíduos ou grupos, ou como eles impactam a sociedade como um todo. Este artigo apresenta uma revisão de perspectivas sobre memes, e propõe analisá-los como recursos retóricos, propondo uma interpretação geral desses itens como *menomas*, e concentrando a atenção em uma iteração particular, a macro imagem *meme* que, sugere-se, deva ser chamada de LOL.

**Palavras-chave:** Memes, narrativas digitais, estudos de internet, comunidades de prática

AS THE INTERNET gains widespread presence around the world, it is no longer possible to understand its diffusion in mere technical or access terms, or even as a function of media usage. Some media are experienced intensely by young and older people alike, at different income levels. It is the actual communication practices, the content and the rhetoric expressed through commonly used media, that constitute the markers of cultural and social distinctiveness that matter, as they can be as relevant for research as those commonly exhibited through everyday language or clothing habits.

Just consider one of the preferred forms of communication among young users of social media: the so-called *internet memes*. Starting as a generic name for a combination of images and texts that allude to specific situations, cultural references, or interest groups, through quick commentary, mood expression or plain mockery, *memes* point to the existence of a series of communication codes of great reach that are, however, used locally and in different languages. The genealogy, evolution, and popularity of memes are one of the most intriguing developments of the internet as a communication space in recent years.

It must be said that one of the most significant issues regarding the study of memes is the actual delimitation of the subject: it is not easy to discuss something that has not been clearly identified and parceled as a specific research subject. Thus, besides defining the phenomenon colloquially understood as an *internet meme* as a research subject, this paper will discuss the relevance of such digital items in the context of collective expression and potential for persuasion and dialogue.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

The meme was originally proposed as a metaphor for a significant, unique, and persistent idea, transmitted through generations: the behavioral equivalent of the gene. It circulates among individuals and within communities, and eventually crosses from one generation to the next, evolving in the process. It is a neologism coined by Richard Dawkins (2006), given the phonetic similarity with *gene* in English and to point out the similarity with *memory* and *mimesis*.

The use of the genetic analogy equates two different systems of information processing, present in every human being: first, the genome, the complete set of genes or genetic material present in a cell or organism; genes are replicated and transmitted over generations but band together into a complete species as a genome. On the other hand, the brain and nervous system process information received by cultural teaching, imitation (*mimesis*), or assimilation, divisible into

an idea, concept, technique, skill, habit, and others. These cultural units that replicate human activity, therefore, have been called memes.

The big difference between the two is that while genomes are independent, natural units, the cultural dimensions are our constructions and require our agency. Thus, while it may be said that each culture is a specific manifestation of a set of memes, which may be transcendent to the community, or local in nature, the individuals who act through communication practices are the ones who make the dissemination, and thus replication, of memes possible. Of course, not every idea is a meme nor memes constitute the whole of culture; and more importantly, memes do not exist as such, but take the form of specific manifestations of cultural activity, or *meme vehicles*.

Based on this, Dawkins (2006) postulates that all memes can be interpreted according to the characteristics of all evolutionary processes: fertility, or survivability, since some ideas are especially attractive and welcomed by many very quickly; longevity, since some ideas persist long beyond specific social and material conditions; and fidelity of replication, i.e., the latest meme survives beyond transformations that turn it into a specific expression for each case.

This digression could be extended, but the main point is that memes, as defined in Dawkins' tradition (2006), are ideas that come to life, of which the core itself survives beyond specific forms that change as societies do. For instance: the idea, or meme, of a supernatural creator of all life has existed for many generations in many cultures, and has transformed in many instances until reaching the specific form that predominates in a given culture. It is possible to speculate that such idea will continue to evolve according to the changing expectations of different cultures. Then, God is a meme incarnate.

## MEMES ON THE INTERNET

To be consistent with Dawkins' concept of memes (2006), the files we call internet memes would have to be seen just as vehicles that carry concepts or ideas that would behave like memes, just using the internet as the material substratum to spread and perpetuate. What matters is permanence in time, through practices and communities, thus making the original idea or concept the focus of understanding, instead of the specific version that we live with. In other words, whether a concept manages to transcend its original form and is still popular even as a culture changes enough so that its original form is not feasible, then we would have a meme (Burman, 2012). Of course, these memes are *on the internet* rather of *the internet*: they can be detected on the internet, taking advantage of the different communication features available, but they

are not specific forms of expression associated with a specific medium, which are the main characteristics of what is usually called an *internet meme*. To paraphrase Lunenfeld (2014), a meme of the internet is just a collection of extrinsic elements, related superficially to the transformative process usually associated with a gene, through the changes in usage and appearance; while memes on the internet are intrinsic manifestations of Dawkins' paradigm (2006). Therein lies a contradiction: an internet meme is an item that cannot exist without specific media that requires the internet to function, but that carries ideas and expressions, not memes. The name appears to be wrong, and confusion is created as two concepts clash when explanations are attempted.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 745) state that a meme is "a symbolic packet that travels easily across large and diverse populations because it is easy to imitate, adapt personally, and share broadly with others". The core lies in the "symbolic" part of the definition, since any symbolic item that "travels easily" must be also understandable, or at least believed to be understandable, by a variety of the "diverse populations" that are part of the definition.

Shifman (2013: 18) proposes a slightly different definition:

memes may best be understood as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindset, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups.

This assertion actually has two propositions: a conceptual definition and a scope definition. As a concept, a meme for Shifman is less than Dawkins' meme (2006), since it has a synchronic nature, but not the diachronic dimensions that make for the importance of individual memes. An idea only needs to spread along a specific cultural or societal axis to be called a meme. The scope definition purports that memes have in their nature the power to shape a collectivity through their penetration; thus, the use of "macro level" would suggest a societal impact instead of just small communities or groups.

Finally, Wiggins and Bowers propose that memes are artifacts of participatory digital culture, as well as a specific genre, while understanding genre as "[...] a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication [...]" (2015: 1893).

However, there are memes: specific, identifiable items, easily created, copied and disseminated. While the reason they received this name can be tracked down to exchanges taking place in websites like 4chan (Baukage, 2011; Chen, 2012), it is their specificity as meme-carrying vehicles that should be of interest,

complementing the identification of the process that brought such a term into daily usage. Many of the variety of items that can be generically called internet memes are grouped by Wikipedia under the banner of *internet phenomena*. The term *meme* may be used to group videos, pictures, animations, texts, phrases, or even commercial products that happen to be popular, or that follow some specific format.

Let's consider a specific case that may be illustrative: the so-called "Letter from Bill Gates", offering money for participating in a beta test (Redmond, 1999). An example of a viral letter, i.e., spreading from person to person through social networks but using e-mail as the disseminating medium; it purports to offer a reward for a specific action, which should be taken at face value. It is similar to some common social practices well known in Latin America, such as leaving printed prayers for catholic saints under door frames, with a promise of a reward/miracle after a specific action is executed (disseminating the same request after praying a number of times). It is an idea that lingers on, in which any original mischief attempted is lost in the resending. In a way, the meme is not the actual letter, but the quasi-religious, perhaps magically infused belief in the intercession of prayer and actions towards a material goal. As such, this letter is a meme on the internet.

On the other hand, a different approach, less sophisticated but quite popular: LOLcats, or "I can has cheezburger", those cute pictures of baby cats stating *cute* phrases, the kind a child who cannot yet properly speak would say. The name comes from the fact that the pictures make you Laugh Out Loud. (<<https://goo.gl/HNh9ds>>). These items themselves have created a meme: the notion that the internet is just about cats, or a precise incarnation of the internet as a waste of time, expressed since the early age of the network by *serious* commentators and still widespread.

This two, as well as many other instances, are *digital rhetorical devices*: they provide us with a message that is presented in such a way as to convey a meaning that should persuade us, or at least nudge us, towards a similar understanding of a situation or actor. A letter from Bill Gates should provoke action; a LOL Cat is just an appeal for cuteness against boredom, an in-joke gone wild that it is not possible to stop. Shortcuts to share similar understandings or approaches to message decoding, they do not provide meaning as much as a chance to assert points of view or to share specific versions of interpretations already accepted or shared. To achieve that, these devices express and exploit memes. This constitutes the rhetorical tradition that grounds memes into one of the predominant discourses present on the internet, the *meme*-based commentary.

### THE GRAPHICAL INSTANCE OF THE MEME ON THE INTERNET

In recent years, the word *meme* has come to refer to a specific type of rhetorical device. It provides a group of more or less standardized iconic references that are *defaced*, i.e., have some text inscribed on them, for the purpose of commenting on current events in a sharp or ironic way. The idea behind is that each of these images serves as a counterpoint to the situation, and have a pre-coded reading, which is interpreted in much the same way by all who know the patterns.

There are many standardized styles, therefore, it suffices to point to sites such as *Know your meme* to review the diversity. A set of four major patterns is proposed here:

1. Image macro: a standard image, providing a similarly standardized interpretation, combined with a topical text that defaces the image while providing commentary. The accompanying illustration is known as *liberal college girl*<sup>1</sup>, i.e., a college student with stereotypical left-wing ideas in the context of USA tertiary education. The text has to refer to her forthright attitude and the certainty of her convictions, always passionately presented (Figures 1 and 2). While originally using standard images for referencing interpretations, now the practice is to use almost any image that makes sense to a specific audience, for instance, college students using images of their professors to make a point about their experience.

<sup>1</sup>All images (LOLs and memes) were found on the Web, and/or on Facebook. It is not possible to establish authorship nor to attribute the original post. They are used only for academic purposes and it should not be understood that this paper is claiming any kind of rights on them. Information on specific memes, when available, were taken from <<http://knowyourmeme.com/>>.



FIGURES 1 and 2 – The original image and an example of Liberal College Girl image macro



2. Public character or celebrity as sardonic comments: a first image defaced with an assertion about an event or character is followed by a standardized image based on a character, usually a line drawing of a celebrity caught in a particular expression, defaced by a standard text, which serves as a commentary on the first image. The example provided here is known as “you do not say?”, which can also mean “nooo, is it true?”; drawn from a particular frame taken from a Nicholas Cage’s 1988 film called *Vampire’s Kiss*.

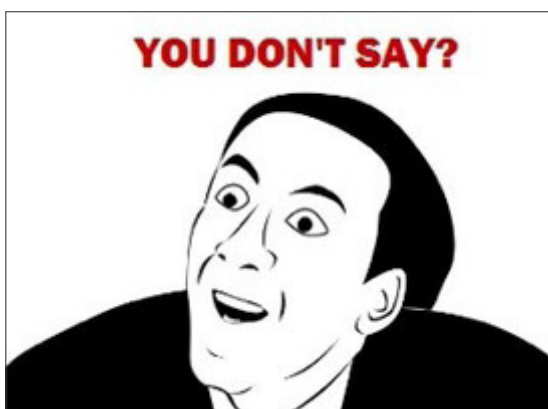


FIGURE 3 – The *You don't say?* comment image

3. The *character*: the protagonist of a series of comics originally produced in the 4chan forum, appearing in short stories of a few panels length, in which the conclusion is always similar, in keeping with the character and features. One of the best known is *Forever Alone*, who always end no matter what you do or say, alone in the world, and serves both to tell short stories in this trope, as well as to create *rage faces* or image macros (next page).



FIGURE 4 – *Forever alone* as character in a graphical joke

4. Exploitable: Images and videos that can be taken out of context to create new meanings, usually ironic or hurtful regarding the subject of the photo. Not just images in this category: one of the best examples is the scene of Hitler's emotional collapse in *Downfall*, a German movie. For non-German speakers, it requires subtitling, thus, a number of clips have been posted by amateurs, adding false subtitles mocking specific situations that bear no relationship with the plight of the German military in 1945 (Cannizaro, 2016).

It is evident that none of these *internet memes* are really memes; in some cases, they may be called, following Dawkins (2006), meme vehicles: expressions that carry memes to new audiences. In fact, most of them are just digital rhetorical devices, associated with specific groups of users and allowing for collective expression and understanding inside each group: it is possible to understand each other in specific ways using these items, in a way that is more efficient and entertaining than using standard, written communication. However, the cases presented do not seem to have either the strength, or the ideational background needed to endure over time, thus discarding them as potential memes. On the other hand, their duration in *internet time* may be longer, though their impact in culture and society is debatable beyond their rhetorical value (Bernstein et al., 2011).

It may be postulated from casual observation that the first example so far presente, the image macro, is the one quite commonly referred to as a *meme*. As it appears on Facebook profiles, Tumblr, or similar pages or sites like 9GAG, it is a combination of an image, as a iconic reference, with an original, colloquial



expression defacing the image; it is the existence of the iconic reference that enables the text to function as commentary. They are rhetorical devices of a highly structured nature, acting as examples of what Walther and Jang (2012) call *user generated content of an interactive nature*, in which a dialogue with others through modifications of the original content is set to the practice of creating new variants of communication items, derived not so much as an urgent message, but with the same characteristics of the interaction within a specific group of people: a specific social network, or a community of practice.

However, assuming their status as rhetorical devices and considering its rather strict formal nature, a soft parallel may be drawn between this style of devices and Iambus, the ancient Greek genre poetry that, using mostly but not just iambic meter, had its origins traced by modern scholarship to the cults of Demeter and Dionysus. This particular genre featured in its very oldest instances scorn, insults, and declare obscenities, however, in Alexandrian times, it was transformed into a definition of any poetry of an informal kind that entertained, comparable to an elegy but without the formality and decorum of the latter (Lesky, 1996). Of course, *memes* are not poetry, but just a genre of self-expression that follows specific rules and present a soft-hard intonation, as an assertion or question is first stated to be answered by a sardonic or sarcastic comment. It is clearly Dionysiac, a celebration of wit and a statement of irreverence, which also presents itself in a rough, quickly made manner: internet ugly, as called by Douglas (2014).

Also, it is possible to connect the Image Macro *meme* with the early-modern tradition of emblematic literature, based on emblems as representation of moral virtues through images interpreted in a standard way. This literary tradition was used as a didactic tool to carry the teachings of the Catholic church into the less literate sections of society in countries like Spain or contemporary Italy, and is based on the emblem as a combination of *pictura*, or the image central to the interpretation proposed; an *inscriptio*, or inscription/title, a sentence of wit; and finally a *subscriptio*, connecting the image and the *inscriptio* and explaining the desired interpretation (Mounin, 1972: 113-145). In other words, it is possible to find specific expressions of ideas through literature that approach the rhetorical function that is currently being expressed by the image macro meme<sup>2</sup>.

Young internet denizens are making use of increasingly specific media-based references, appealing simultaneously to originality and generality: commentary of a humorous and irreverent stance seems to be the intent behind these items; the variety of fandoms, practices such as cosplay, interest in sports, and many more, creates a canon of references that is quickly recognizable among insiders, who participate in multiple media fueled exchanges, enabling the iconic and

<sup>2</sup> Using a different terminology, Lin and Hsu (2014) propose a similar structural explanation of image macro *memes*. However, the explanation already presented is preferred as it serves to connect with traditional literary expressiveness.

textual appeals to be easily identifiable. In other words, *memes* of this specific image-based style are a new instance of an old approach to expression: a celebration of wit through the scorning of those making mistakes, expressed through references that are understood by those *in the know*.

Of course, it would be possible to make similar assertions regarding the specific conceptualization, relationships, and traditions expressed by other types of *memes*, but in this case the main point presented about the Image Macro meme is valid for all kind of *memes*: they are rhetorical devices that require following specific rules and presenting specific information in a context recognizable to those that participate in a shared space of cultural exchanges. The richness of the specific meme, the Image Macro, deserves some further analysis, though.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE NAME?

First of all, the obvious statement: a meme is a meme is a meme. In the hands of users, it will be what they designate as such, no matter what is discussed here, or the use of *image macro meme vehicle* to designate this particular variant. Following the already provided notion of meme, they are cultural items that withstand the passage of time based on their powerful nature. Internet memes are shared and disseminated quickly, but are also lost quickly in the din of exchanges that take place constantly in social media and communities of practice.

That does not mean that an image macro meme vehicle may not be carrying a meme. But it does point to the need to differentiate this specific, potential meme vehicle from the actual concept of memes. It is therefore proposed to call this kind of communicative item a LOL: originally an acronym for *laughing out loud*, it being used already in the aforementioned specific genre of *memes* known as LOLCats, which are also mostly image macro jokes. A LOL describes the kind of rhetorical devices that are commonly created through simple tools like <<http://memegenerator.com/>>, with similar external characteristics (fonts, file dimensions, and sizes), as well as structural ones (the emblem-like presentation, the iambus-alike combination of soft and hard statements with a Dionysian approach to humor and commentary).

The LOL is a concrete expression of the cultural diversity of appeals existing on the internet, and also test the real hurdles to meme creation: a meme is not a specific item or communicative work, but an idea that is evolving. In several instances, LOLs consist of nothing but a silly joke on a predictable image, but they are used and re-used, casually but constantly, a *cadavre exquis* for the digital age, built on top of a recurring image for which many different meanings are attached through resignification and new comments, time and again, by

accumulating individual actions into a concrete result. And that brings a preliminary conclusion: a LOL does not require a meme, and if memes do exist, they may or may not be present in LOLs.

So, from memes to LOLs, the question pending is how ideas and opinions turn into the kind of daily discourse that merits its conversion into a digital item that serves as a rhetorical device to scorn and laugh at daily events. There is one step missing in the process, a step that may explain how in some instances a meme turns into a LOL but why a LOL does not always come from a meme. The meme as a metaphor can be useful to understand that there is a quantum of specific information, configured according to the cultural practices of a specific social grouping, necessary to achieve the purpose of intertextuality and successful communication. That quantum of information is not relevant outside such a group even if the meme carried in the quantum is.



FIGURE 5 – Flying Spaghetti Monster on a LOL

For instance: the Flying Spaghetti Monster is the *deity* of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or Pastafarism (see Figure 5). This is an obvious humorous take on religion, that has been created with the explicit purpose of mocking organized religion and the notion of *Intelligent design*, a transformation of creationism, popular among certain Christian churches, that brings a patina of scientificism into the debates against the teaching of evolution. This church is based on a meme: the understanding of religion as a cultural creation, combined with a tradition of humor based on mocking the establishment. While the meme as such may be understood by many educated people in the North hemisphere, Pastafarism is known only by a smaller group of people that either:

a) have been exposed to it through conventional means; or b), have met the iconography and jokes based on the religion's deity.

While the FSM may be used in a LOL, knowledge of the character is a requisite to understand the joke; to fully appreciate its connections with criticisms of organized religion, an understanding of the meme is required. The FSM is an intermediate step between the meme and the LOL, an incarnation of the meme in specific terms, an evolution, so to speak. It is a menome, the meme version of a genome, the arrangement of genes that constitute a species.

This collection of information is formally arranged in a specific way for different kinds of expression; in LOL's case, the arrangement is as described, for others, the arrangement may change, but will still be recognizable as a member of the same *information species*, as it carries the same information in a different arrangement (let's say as an exploitable). The standardized arrangement may carry different information, but it is used by many to communicate in a predictable way, akin to the classical and early modern ones just described. It is a literary genre, although the cultural baggage may refer to different sets of information.

If the body is LOL, and it is assumed that a meme lies behind it, then an Image Macro/LOL is a menome: the whole hereditary information of an organism in a specific, recognizable *costume*.

*Meme (as a perdurable idea) → menome (family of elements based on the same meme) → LOL (organism containing menomes, based on menomes)*

For the specific application of this model, let's consider the following LOL (Figure 6), popular in the Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America:



FIGURE 6 – Last Supper Facebook Pic LOL

The *pictura* itself is quite recognizable as a The Last Supper, by Leonardo da Vinci. It is quite well known in the region because Catholic homes used to, and in many places still do, hang a copy in dining rooms or close to the dining table, as a token of faith. The *inscriptio* quotes a slightly distorted phrase used during Mass, “and so Jesus said to his disciples”, while changing “Jesus” with “Yisus”, a phonetical version of the English pronunciation of the name. The *suscriptio* expresses a common phrase used by young people: it means “let’s take a picture for Facebook”, in colloquial Spanish, literally “photo for Face”.

The rhythm present in this LOL is quite standard, and the comment itself is harmless, cheeky rather than disrespectful. The *suscriptio* is recognizable by users of Facebook, but it makes a point that its intertextually is different for those that are intense, young users of this service, mocking the rather automatic attitude towards justifying the constant recording of daily activities with the dissemination excuse: this goes into Facebook. In a way, it is an in-joke for intense Facebook users, not a meme as there is nothing there that carries deeper and potentially transcending meaning. It is a joke that has a specific form and rhythm and works now, but probably will be forgotten, as with many many jokes, in the near future.

So a LOL can be powerful while lacking any ideational power. It may be intertextually rich while expressing simple, rather predictable comments. In other words, LOLs and other menomes that may or may not carry memes are mechanisms of self-expression that are simultaneously easy to use and easy to understand, as long as you are *in the known*, as long as you are part of a group of people sharing the right kind of information.

The menome would be the Last Supper as a homely depiction of Christian faith, something that is recognizable even by those who are not Christians. At the same time, the phrase “Foto pal Face” is in itself an emerging menome: a call for action quite common among young people all around the world, stated in recognizable terms for a young person in Latin America, especially with use of the incorrect contraction *pal* (meaning *para el* and usually indicating a coarse, uneducated and/or very colloquial spoken language, not properly used in written Spanish), making the joke particularly effective. Thus, while the LOL itself is simple, it comes from two very different memes: the popularity of Facebook and the importance of Catholicism and other Christians faiths in Latin America’s home life, expressed iconically through Leonardo’s painting.

On the other hand, the *Bender phrase* one (Figure 7) is a completely different case: it requires knowledge of the specific context of a phrase coming from a rather minority interest TV show, in its Latin American Spanish; and it also

requires to be aware of a particular political situation in Peru. The original phrase was “I’m going to build my own theme park with Blackjack and hookers”, and as such it is a popular source for the (inverted) *inscriptio* part in English-written LOLs. However, the Spanish dubbing used a quite singular version: instead of Blackjack (usually referring to 21 in Spanish), the more generic “juegos de azar” (card games), and instead of whores, “mujerzuelas”: a word so stilted that it immediately turns any expression using it into an old fashioned, quaint sentence. The *suscriptio* in this case refers to a controversy about the demand for a *new, fair* National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (CVR), since the original one is considered by the conservative parties as biased towards a leftist perspective. While the inverted *suscriptio* could be understood by many in Peru, the *inscriptio* is completely cryptical but to those participating in the Futurama fandom.



FIGURE 7 – CVR and Bender LOL

This points to the fact that LOLs usually come from virtual *communities of practice*, in which teen culture flourished specifically around sets of media products that reflect their values and interests. To understand the processes lying under the creation of LOLs and other menomes, an agenda for researching these practices and the communities that bring them into being is required.

Among both communities of practice and the public at large, some LOLs use and reuse specific statements, combining both the *pictura* and the *inscriptio* in a way that relays a clear idea that serves both as refrain and as moral of a story. In the same way that the “Bender phrase” LOL is used to point the absurdity of any specific counterclaim, the *Aliens* LOL is used to qualify the general absurdity of a proposition, comparing it to the rather preposterous assertion that anything



that cannot be explained must come from extraterrestrial visitors (Figure 8). This particular LOL is just presenting straight commentary in the form of an interjection, that reduces the argument to its fundamental absurdity by referring to the absurdity of the original statement, which comes from a 2010 History Channel presentation. However, it relies on a common notion: that extraterrestrial life is a valid explanation for almost anything that is not understandable by your own eyes. A meme, the supernatural, takes a specific form, the alien explanation. Thus, it becomes a menome that can be called upon to explain or to mock, and this LOL uses the Alien menome, with the common *pictura*, to make a statement. The *pictura* itself may be understood as a menome, with the LOL recurring to it to make a generic claim, while many other instances use the menome for other purposes.

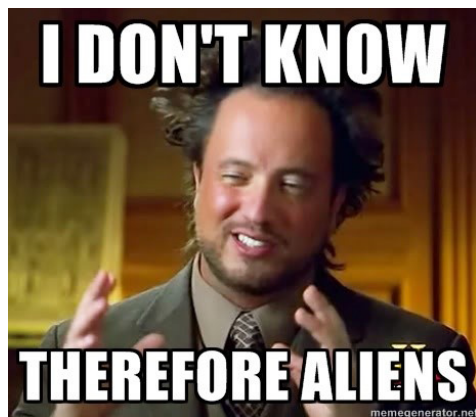


FIGURE 8 – Ancient Aliens image macro

This brings a final concept to illuminate the usefulness of LOLs: as Segev et al. (2015) proposed, the main feature to consider is the quiddity of a LOL, which could be understood as the meme behind the image macro. As *quiddity* refers to the essence of something, what makes it original, it can be construed so that the most popular LOLs, both as commentary and as an original expression of ideas or beliefs, are those that expose the quiddity of an underlying meme through the correct juxtaposition of the three elements they are composed of.

## COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE SOCIAL WEB

The contention that appears from the previous analysis is that LOLs are created by individual users that express themselves using specific cultural



references that make sense inside virtual communities of practice (Lave; Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). We create meaning by acting (practice) collectively around subjects of common interest (community) (Cox, 2005). Motivations to participate in each community vary depending on the case, but work or economic interest are not the main drivers, but rather identification and fun (Ardichvili; Page; Wentling, 2003). The virtual dimension is added when the interactions are conducted only through digital media. This allows for dissipation of traditional markers of identity, from class to race and gender, into a chorus of voices formed from practicing the “logic of lulz” (Milner, 2013b; Miltner, 2014), as shown in 4chan or reddit, but also in the construction of identities in more diffuse, less dedicated virtual places like Facebook (Preez; Lombard, 2014).

Through intense participation and competition for attention and prestige, virtual communities of practice are places that demand discursive action, and menomes emerge as privileged frames of reference that allow for specific action through communicative exchanges based on simple but effective rhetorical devices. These exchanges have led to the exploration of the expressive possibilities predominant in the community, and given that these are mediated communities, i.e., communities that exist thanks to (but in most cases limited to) the resources available through digital media, the best way to express yourself as a member of such a community would be to create cultural items that are popular and significant enough to spread on their own (Jenkins; Ford; Green, 2013).

For menomes in general and LOLs in particular, specific communities of practice, such as 4chan, determine the origin of these rhetorical devices: created by a teenager in 2003, 4chan’s purpose was to channel youth attitudes and enthusiasms for fun, through teasing and shocking content (Stryker, 2011). In fact, what initially drew attention to this phenomenon was 4chan’s b/forum, dedicated to random issue and with a tradition of somewhat unusual if not aberrant practices, not least interesting in their expression of alternative ways of understanding that what is right is not necessarily what is interesting (Knuttila, 2011). Originally a discussion forum dedicated to anime and manga, 4chan/b/ was gradually turned, through everyday communal practice, into a hub not only of messaging exchanges, but of specific thematic approaches to the issues of collective interest, with a critical and rather aggressive approach to them. Their actions have led to groups of hacktivism (activist hackers), as Anonymous, seeking to use their capacity for collective, non-localized action through the internet, in an anonymous way, for actions with political color (Gerbaudo, 2015).

This paper did not study Anonymous, but its origins on 4chan and its relationship to other group, LulzSec, serves as a signal of the limitations that arise from the inherent logic of these communities of practice: gathered from a rebellious and exclusionary attitude that seeks to differentiate between those initiated, in the know, with the rest of the world, groups like 4chan create an access barrier through language. To speak as members of 4chan do is a sign of belonging, and not understanding the dialogue is a clear indication that it is not l33t, but a n00b, and be in constant danger of being pwned (not elite but a new, naive user, ready to be overpowered). As the specific practice of creating LOLs and other rhetorical devices was generalized and somewhat arbitrarily received the nickname *meme*, using them become an initiation process that brought, through the usage of rhetorical devices, recognition of expressive mechanisms and the characteristics of each youth group cultures (Knobel; Lankshear, 2007).

This is a relatively new phenomenon: the urban cybertribe. Following Maffesoli (1996), contemporary sociality manifests membership in communities that are created from individual interest, unlike the traditional way in which interest was defined from the community. When you find people who act and consume like you, one seeks membership in this tribe can anchor the identity and differentiate. Spaces like 4chan can be considered cybertribes, without the limitations but also without the benefits of space/own temporal coincidence of urban society.

The success of communities of practice as 4chan led to the emergence of digital spaces as Fail Blog, which is dedicated to spreading material that is stylistically derived from 4chan's memos, but without the need to belong to 4chan. If 4chan is an urban cybertribe, the Fail Blog and its derivatives, such as 9gag, are just dedicated media outlets that spread content recognizable as part of the discourse of 4chan's cybertribe.

Why is this relevant to the discussion on LOLs? Basically, to state that originality under the rules of group identification has its dynamics, and has little to do with actual memes as ideas that have the strength to go beyond their time and place into the basic stock of human knowledge. To produce and disseminate a LOL is not an act of creativity as much as an expression of belonging, and as such is critical to establish identity and eventually leadership within a community of practice, even if it is defined in a rather loose way.

The social web, of which Facebook is part of but that came to life much earlier with forums and similar exchange oriented sites, is the perfect place for such digital interaction. Social media shape the social web: sharing and spreading are the key, rather than originality of discourse, since the discourse

itself is limited by its own rules, it is rhetorics, rather than content, what should a user be master of. LOLs show that expression is defined by codes and rules made long ago, variations on a theme. The obvious trend is the emerging forms sociality expressed through them, instead of any exercise of ingenuity or creativity.

This *graphical* sociality results in the exchange of ideas and collective recognition signals the redefinition of already known jokes, thus establishing the belonging to a community of practice to interpret in the same way one LOL, and therefore part of strengthening ties within the community through sharing. Not a conversation or dialogue in the conventional sense: what you want to share is expressed graphically, usually through recourse to humor, sarcasm, or aggressiveness.

As such, it can be argued that, socially speaking, it is apparent that LOLs are empowering fun by itself, what is sought is to refer efficiently (in terms of fun) within a community of practice. It is something that has been around a long time: boys laughing together from references that only they understand. The internet allows the scope to be larger, with global references, and broader, richer intertextuality, but it is the same as it ever was, exactly as the use of abbreviations in personal messages on the internet or mobile phones is a repetition of practices of over 2000 years (Crystal, 2008).

The use of LOLs for political means does not necessarily change the dynamics. What is called “polyvocality” (Milner, 2013a) can be understood as a process through which different voices exchange messages that may be different in appearance but, sharing the formal aspects of a LOL and the ideational background of a world interpretation (and perhaps, a meme or two), end up becoming self-fulfilling mechanisms of separation from the mainstream ideas and discussion, breaking down whatever potential chains of communication among those participating in an specific community of practice (in this case, a social movement, extending the concept into such situations) and the rest of the population. Of course, there are cases in which a LOL is used for disseminating or promoting personal beliefs or judgments, rather than attempting to promote a conversation about issues of interest to a community, as Vickery (2014) shows.

#### **EXPRESSION AS SEPARATION AND REPETITION, OR AS KEY LOLS OF INDIVIDUALISTIC MASS COMMUNICATION**

LOLs, as the embodiment of certain menomes, are a fascinating and powerful rhetorical device. The question is how much worth they have as

communication mechanisms. Expression is one thing, but communication may be directed towards persuasion or spreading of belief, affirming positions or views of those who already share a view of the world with us, or just for fun and display of ingenuity. Confusing these dimensions of communication with the act of spreading a message may bring further confusion. A meme is powerful because it has the aforementioned characteristics of fertility, longevity, and fidelity of replication, while LOLs do not have any of those characteristics, but are rather self-referential expressions that depend on reiteration and repetition while based on exclusion of those not participating in the collective understanding brought by the community of practice originating the item.

Of course, it is possible that a LOL be understood by many more people than those originally involved in its dissemination. It may be that the expressive mechanism becomes something known, with adoption and diffusion of meme style communication for content creation becoming widespread and easily recognizable by a large percentage of the population. Perhaps it will not. In fact, as Spitzberg (2014) proposes, it may be the case that dissemination of memes/LOLs is a very complex process that involves many mechanisms that mimic genetic/biological processes, although it is not possible to actually test these hypotheses as the actual objects of research are so varied and the dissemination spheres are dispersed around multiple social and cultural conditions. It can be used for political expression (Boyd, 2014: 224), but it carries the attitude associated with its Dionysian origins, as scorn rather than a constructive message; it may inflame but it may not persuade beyond those already persuaded, failing as a meme while succeeding as a meme, as a specific form of communication unique to the medium and the times, as referred back in 2001 by Atran (2001), who was interested in the general concept of memes as examples of a culture based on imitation rather than creation.

The connection between mass media references and references created by the groups themselves may be a sign of the mainstreaming of LOLs. But mainstreaming does not mean massive: taking the concept presented by Wolton (1999), LOLs represent the climax of individualistic mass society, a society where even though everything is massive and everything is aimed at the greatest possible number of consumers, individuals demand a media offer under their individual control, oriented to individual satisfaction. Thus, we become self-referential and lose sight of the need for collective appeals. Communication as a mechanism to reinforce our outlooks and positions instead of furthering understanding. Our expressive power is greatly expanded, but LOLs do exactly the opposite of what a meme should achieve: become fertile

and live through reliable replication. Thus, LOLs and other menomes, perhaps not carrying memes as such, have a large, macro-level impact: they further deteriorate public discourse through the reinforcement of closed dialogues inside communities of practice with less than forceful disposition to transcend a parochial perspective of what is important.

We may use LOLs and other menomes as purely Dionysian rhetorical devices, or we can use them for political activism and social transformation. The intent behind their creation does not change the dynamics behind their creation as a formalized communication message and the spreading among those that participate in the web of intertextuality required to interpret them in the right way.

In short: A menome is a powerful mechanism for increasing the stock of ideas in society, embodying a meme, that minimum transmission unit, or not. A LOL, as a specific form of menome, may be a meme vehicle or not. In fact, the patterns of repetition and simplification that LOLs promote as central to daily communication and intertextuality turn ideas into circular discourses centered in specific communities. From this vantage point, LOLs are potentially the enemy of memes, since they prevent the strengthening of ideas through societal dissemination, making them powerful enough to exist beyond their first incarnation. ■

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