DO THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEMES?

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

YOUTH, INTERNET MEMES, AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

by

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Abstract

This project explores the relationship between youth, Internet memes, and digital citizenship. Adopting an interdisciplinary orientation that drew on the fields of information, communication, and education research, I investigated the sense-making underlying young people's engagement with Internet memes. Creating a methodology inspired by aspects of design ethnography, participatory design ethnography, design-based research, and critical design ethnography, I conducted a study with a teacher and twenty-one of his students (aged approximately 15-18 years) at a secondary school in Langley, British Columbia. Through the design of a class unit we ran in three different English classes, we examined the relationship between memetic storytelling and digital citizenship. This process involved having students reflect on their own meme engagement and design final research projects on a meme-related topic of interest. Using a multimodal approach to narrative analysis that drew on the work of Arthur Frank (2012), Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2006, 2019), and Gillian Rose (2016), I analyzed the different materials I collected through the unit workshops (e.g., field notes, photographs, assignments, etc.), as well as the seventeen interviews I conducted (i.e., two teacher interviews and fifteen student interviews). The findings I arrived at showcase the significance of humour to memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice, drawing attention to the role laughter plays in people's personal negotiation of the values represented through memes. While the students' observations regarding their meme engagement highlighted the joyful nature of these digital texts and the potential information needs they might meet, their final project designs drew attention to the tensions memes hold, revealing both practical and theoretical insights that can inform literacy and digital citizenship education moving forward.

Lay Summary

This study explored how a group of twenty-one young people (aged approximately 15-18 years) used Internet memes to communicate information in their daily lives. Working with their secondary school teacher, I co-designed a class unit on Internet memes and digital citizenship that we ran in three different English classes. Drawing on the field notes, classwork, and student interviews I collected during these units, I analyzed how these young people used Internet memes to tell stories that guided their understanding in different contexts. This analysis led to the discovery of: 1) the significance of humour to these students' engagement with memes; 2) the joyful ideals guiding that engagement; 3) the information needs those ideals might represent; and 4) the tensions humour and laughter can create when it comes to memetic representations of reality.

Preface

This dissertation reports on research completed by the author, Bonnie Joline Tulloch. The study on which it is based took the form of an ethnographic investigation during school hours at a secondary school. It involved twenty-two participants, one of whom was a teacher and twenty-one of whom were students (aged approximately 15-18 years). I collaborated with the teacher in the design of a class unit that we co-facilitated in three different English Language Arts classes during three different semesters of the 2020/2021 school year. I performed two semi-structured interviews with the participating teacher and fifteen semi-structured interviews with different participating students. In addition, I collected various classwork-related materials during the units, including field notes, photographs, workshop materials, and copies of participating students' assignments. Employing methods of narrative and visual analysis, I then analyzed these materials and wrote this dissertation. Some of the ideas from the first two chapters of this dissertation appear in the following article, which is based on aspects of my dissertation research proposal:

Tulloch, B. J. (In Press). Memes to an end: Why Internet memes matter to information research. *Libri: International Journal of Libraries and Information Studies*.

This dissertation research required the approval of the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Certificate #: H20-00357).

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ACRL: Association of College & Research Libraries.

CDE: Critical Design Ethnography.

DBR: Design-Based Research.

DE: Design Ethnography.

GIF: Graphics Interchange Format.

NLS: New Literacy Studies.

PDE: Participatory Design Ethnography.

Glossary

Constructivism: A worldview that acknowledges the role human subjectivity plays in people's perceptions of reality. It is often associated with qualitative research (see Creswell, 2014).

Dialogic: A term used by literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to describe texts that promote multiple perspectives and highlight the dynamic nature of human meaning-making (see Bakhtin, 1984/2014b).

Digital citizenship: This concept broadly refers to the way people conduct themselves in digital contexts and thereby encompasses the range of issues that impact their online behaviour (e.g., rights, responsibilities, regulations, etc.) (see Government of British Columbia, n.d.(d)).

Image macro: A captioned image that often conveys a humorous message or well-known phrase (see Milner, 2016).

Internet meme: Although definitions of the term vary, an Internet meme generally refers to a digital text that circulates online via processes of mimicry and remix. Internet memes are often associated with humour and frequently take the form of image macros, quotes, GIFs, tweets, hashtags, and YouTube videos. The term "Internet meme" was inspired by biologist Richard Dawkins's term "meme," which he coined in 1976 when trying to develop a theory of cultural evolution (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014).

Intertextuality: A term coined by literary scholar Julia Kristeva, intertextuality highlights the relationship between different texts. It refers to the associations between one text and the many other texts that shape the meaning it is understood to produce (see Allen, 2011).

Meme: Coined by biologist Richard Dawkins's in 1976, a meme is a basic unit of culture that passes on through processes of imitation. It can represent any aspect of culture (e.g., idea, hairstyle, gesture, etc.) (see Dawkins, 2016).

Memetic storytelling: The storytelling that occurs through Internet memes.

Mimicry: The imitation of something (see Shifman, 2014).

Monologic: A term used by literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to describe texts that promote a single message or interpretation (see Bakhtin, 1984/2014b).

Objectivism: Closely associated with positivism, objectivism is the belief in an objective reality and people's ability to know it through a specific means of engagement. In its emphasis on neutrality, this view is often associated with scientific inquiry and promotes understandings of truth as objective (see Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Positivism: A worldview that promotes objective methods of inquiry that are often associated with the scientific method. This view supports objectivist beliefs in its representation of reality. (see Creswell, 2014).

Poststructuralism: A theoretical movement inspired by the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva (among others) that posits that language and texts are unstable sign systems that escape the boundaries of scientific investigation. The potential for meaning inspired by language surpasses people's attempts to establish single correlations between symbolic representations and the interpretations they produce (see Allen, 2011).

Remix: The creative modification, reassembling, and integration of content using technological tools (see Shifman, 2014).

Small stories: A concept developed by Alexandra Georgakopoulou in her attempts to highlight the significance of narratives that do not fit conventional understandings of a story. The term "small stories" can refer to brief, fragmented, incoherent, and unusual narrative interactions that have previously been overlooked by scholars (see Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2019).

Socio-narratology: An approach to narrative analysis developed by Arthur Frank (2012). Following Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogic nature of meaning-making, it promotes analysis that highlights the dynamic nature of storytelling and its different functions in people's lives (see Frank, 2012).

Structuralism: A theoretical movement inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure that posits that language and texts are sign systems that can be studied scientifically. The relationships between symbolic representations and their associated meanings can be firmly established via systematic attempts to account for the structures that underlie them (see Allen, 2011).

Subjectivism: Closely associated with constructivism, subjectivism is the belief that people's ability to know reality is shaped by their subjective experience of it. All truth is subjective in the sense that it is framed by people's subjective interpretations (see Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was made possible by many people. I owe a debt of gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Eric M. Meyers, whose guidance and support over the years has helped me grow into the scholar I am today. I would also like to thank the members of my doctoral supervisory committee, Dr. Lisa Nathan, Dr. Maureen Kendrick, and Dr. Jennifer Douglas, whose willingness to engage with my ideas has helped make me a more thoughtful person and a more rigorous scholar. I am also extremely grateful for the funding I have received throughout my doctoral studies. I was fortunate to receive the support of a UBC Killam Doctoral Scholarship (2016-2018), a Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship (2018-2021), a UBC Anne and George Piternick Student Research Award (2019), the Library Research Round Table Jesse H. Shera Award for Support of Dissertation Research (2020), a Beta Phi Mu International Honour Society Eugene Garfield Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship (2020), as well as a UBC Public Scholar's Initiative Award (2020-2021). Alongside this financial support, I have been blessed with the priceless encouragement of family and friends, whose belief in my ability to accomplish this goal was stronger than my own at times. Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, Christine, Karen, Soosan, Karli, Eri, and Kendall, thank you for your love and prayers. T.J., thank you for your amazing pep talks and root beers. Michelle, Saguna, and Andrea, thank you for sharing the ups and downs of this academic journey with me and for reminding me of the joy of togetherness. Erin, Tess, Brittany, and Grace, thank you for the opportunity to run our respective races alongside each other. Finally, I would like to thank Mr. Rowe and the students who participated in this study. I am forever indebted to you for allowing me the opportunity to learn from and with you. Thank you so much.

Dedication

To God, who makes all things possible.

To Dad and Mom, for loving me unconditionally.

To Grandma, for her hugs, wake-up calls, and reminding me never to give up.

To Karen, for being the best twin and friend a girl could ask for.

To T.J., whose creativity and talent never fail to inspire me.

And to Christine and Grandpa. I never thought I would reach this milestone without you by my side, but my heart knows you are cheering me on from Heaven.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Me explaining my interest in memes

"Do y'all want the long story or the short story?" This question comes from Quenlin Blackwell. In a 2021 video associated with the BuzzFeedVideo YouTube series, *I accidentally became a meme*, the young Internet celebrity, who goes by "Quen" online, tells the story behind the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme.[1] This meme, which is often used to indicate a situation where someone becomes frustrated trying to explain something to someone else, features a screenshot of Quen paired with a screenshot of another celebrity, Ms. Juicy.[2] As Quen details, her screenshot was taken from a video that she had posted to Twitter (BuzzFeedVideo, 2021). At the time, she was suffering from the complications of an eating disorder and the mental and emotional challenges that accompanied it. Although Quen had suffered from this disorder previously, it had been re-triggered by an extremely negative response one of her earlier Twitter posts had received. The video that inspired the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme showed Quen screaming out her feelings. Internet users eventually began re-contextualizing her emotional outburst by pairing a screenshot of it with one of a concerned Ms. Juicy, taken from a livestream as she watched a Dallas Cowboys' football game (BuzzFeedVideo, 2021). This pairing reframed the images of both women to produce new meaning: Quen was pictured as a frustrated daughter and Ms. Juicy was pictured as her dumbfounded mother.

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[1] YouTube does not list the video's upload date on the video's actual page. However, when looked up online via a search engine this information appears next to the video's official YouTube link.

[2] Ms. Juicy is best known for her work on the reality television show *Little housewives atlanta* (BuzzFeedVideo, 2021).

But what does this meme story have to do with the research narrative I am about to share? Well, to begin, when I tell others that I study Internet memes, I often experience a "Me Explaining To My Mom" moment. My attempts to communicate the significance of this phenomenon to those who are convinced of its insignificance can be frustrating at times. Part of this frustration comes from the fact that Internet memes are significantly insignificant (see Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). They are trivialized artifacts because they are artifacts that are often used to trivialize (e.g., events, experiences, ideas, beliefs, etc.). These digital texts, which tend to take the form of popular image macros, YouTube videos, TikTok videos, tweets, hashtags, and GIFs, are paradoxical on many levels. On the one hand, they represent short, simple, visible stories that are accidental, fleeting, and false. On the other hand, they combine to form long, complex stories, that are intentional, lasting, truthful, and invisible. Short, but long. Simple, but complex. Visible, but invisible. Fleeting, but lasting. Accidental, but purposeful. Untrue, but true. Funny, but serious. Is it any wonder that attempts to explain the significance of this phenomenon can lead to frustration and confusion? Or to a research project?

For that is where my attempts brought me. In the pages that follow, I recount this project and the insights I have obtained through it. Specifically, I explore the implications Internet memes hold for young people like Quen, who are growing up in a world where they have become an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life. As her story demonstrates, memes can create multiple narratives that have different effects depending on the contexts in which they circulate. "Stories," narrative scholar Arthur Frank (2012) observes, "work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Quen's understanding of the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, for example, is different from those who are not

featured in it. To use Frank's (2012) expression, the meme *works* in a different way for her. Although Quen enjoys her association with the meme, she uses the BuzzFeedVideo opportunity to caution other young people about spending so much time on social media, telling them not to make their mistakes in front of a huge audience (BuzzFeedVideo, 2021). The meme has shown her that it is possible for something positive to come from a negative experience, but she still uses the video to teach others what they should avoid.

In this way, Quen's story highlights the significance of memes to digital citizenship. As a popular form of online communication, Internet memes are narrative representations of people's digital behaviour (see Mina 2019), and, as such, are a powerful means through which to explore the rights and responsibilities associated with online engagement (see Government of British Columbia, n.d.(d)). As an information scholar with a background in children's and young adult literature, I am interested in how the narrative work of memes factors into young people's interactions with information and how these interactions relate to their digital behaviour (i.e., digital citizenship). For this reason, I describe memetic communication as "memetic storytelling." Like other scholars (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Mina, 2019; Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shifman, 2014, etc.), I argue that memes are worth studying because they represent a significant communicative shift in the 21st century, one that is directly related to the technological and sociocultural changes that have taken place in the last several decades. Digital technologies have not only made it possible for Internet users to make video posts and live streams, but also to appropriate online content with ease. Access to meme generator websites further streamlines processes of mimicry and remix by allowing Internet users to add new text to pre-existing image templates (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). These templates

serve as storytelling devices for individuals who are looking to represent their ideas, feelings, and experiences (Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Mina, 2019).

Simply put, the narrative work associated with Internet memes is fascinating. These digital artifacts create intertextual connections that have varying levels of intelligibility. Those who are familiar with Quen's post or Ms. Juicy's livestream will know where the images come from and how variations of the meme function as a playful reaction to those events. People who do not possess knowledge of the meme's backstory, however, are left to re-contextualize its variations within the framework of their own understanding. The "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme transcends Quen's and Ms. Juicy's personal lives to communicate aspects of other people's experiences, many of whom have no idea as to the real identities of these women. Underlying the meme's fictional framing of Quen as Ms. Juicy's daughter is the racialized assumption that they could appear related due to their similar skin colours. This tendency to appropriate other people's images for one's own purposes points to some of the ethical concerns associated with memetic storytelling. In an increasingly globalized, digital world, Internet memes cross personal, professional, and national boundaries (Eichorn, 2019; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Mina, 2019; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2014). Many juridical systems are still negotiating whether these texts represent violations of privacy, copyright, and proper conduct, or whether they are protected under the concept of fair dealing and freedom of expression (Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021).

1.2 Where this research journey begins

How, then, are different young people navigating the complexities of memetic storytelling? Asking this question led me to conduct a research project with students and their teacher at a secondary school. The story behind this project, however, began in a completely

different educational setting. As a doctoral student who was new to the field of information research, my first years of study involved trying to figure out why it might seem odd to think of Internet memes as information resources. This oddness, I realized, can be attributed to a variety of cultural narratives that perpetuate different assumptions about the nature of information. These narratives are connected to scientific and industrial discourses that contribute to the tendency to view information as serious and Internet memes as silly, a tendency that arguably extends to the trivialization of various forms of social media. In an effort to share what I learned and how it guided my own research journey, the remainder of this chapter focuses on contextualizing my understanding of Internet memes within different meta-theoretical perspectives of information.[3] I position myself within the interdisciplinary field of information research and explain in greater detail the motivations, questions, and objectives of this inquiry into the possible relationships different youth might have to Internet memes and digital citizenship.

1.2.1 Scientific narratives of information

One of the first discoveries I made when I began investigating Internet memes was that they have an interesting connection to the fields of science and information research. Memetic theory, after all, is a scientific attempt to describe the social transmission of cultural information (Aunger, 2000). Coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976, the word "*meme*" was created as a cultural analogue to the human gene (Dawkins, 2016, p. 249, emphasis in original). Dawkins (2016) posited that memes are basic, self-replicating cultural units (e.g.,

[3] In its focus on the theoretical discourses that shape popular conceptions of information, this chapter expands on some of the prior conceptual work I have done (see Tulloch, In Press).

ideas, behaviours, trends, etc.) passed on through processes of imitation.[4] While this "unit principle" provides a link between memes and early information theory, which sought to describe information in discrete, measureable terms (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 570), it also helps explain why it is difficult to think of "Internet memes" as information resources. Historically, scientific discourses have perpetuated a view of information as objective fact (Day, 2001). Appropriated by Internet users to describe the circulation of digital artifacts, (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shifman, 2014), Dawkins's term now serves as a designation for a highly affect-driven form of communication (Katz & Shifman, 2017; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). This association distances Internet memes from scientific conceptions of information that view it as a neutral entity.

Further distancing Internet memes from this popular view of information, however, is the controversial nature of Dawkins's theory, which has often been regarded as unscientific by the academic community (Aunger, 2000; Shifman, 2014).[5] The linguistic association of Dawkins's term with digital artifacts means that discourses surrounding Internet memes retain some of the skepticism associated with his theory (see, for example, Jenkins et al., 2013; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). Most notably, there remains a conceptual division between Internet memes, as subjective phenomena, and information as supposedly objective phenomena. Although popularized in contemporary discourses, this neutral conception of information is rooted in various technological advances of the twentieth century (Day, 2001; Geoghegan, 2016). The

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[4] While Dawkins is generally credited with the coining of the term meme (Shifman, 2014), the concept of a contagious cultural unit preceded his memetic theory (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 200).

[5] One of the reasons Dawkins's theory has proven controversial is because it is difficult to test. This fact has led to perceptions that the study of memetics is unscientific (see Aunger, 2000).

positivist worldview promoted by scientific methods of investigation, coupled with those of industrialization, emphasized the importance of systematic thought, standardization, and quantitative reasoning (Day, 2001; Geoghegan, 2016). Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of information proved especially influential in promoting this objective view (Bates, 2010; Geoghegan, 2016). Although Shannon's probability theory is a mathematical account of "data encoding and transmission" (Floridi, 2010, p. 38), its association with information nevertheless impacted popular perceptions of the concept (Bates, 2010).

Where digital culture is concerned, this emphasis on the objective nature of information underlies discussions of the post-truth crisis (Tulloch, In Press). In fact, Policy Horizons Canada's (2018) website identifies "Truth under fire in a post-fact world" as one of "The next generation of emerging global challenges." Describing this challenge, it states:

> We live in a world where information is flowing at unprecedented rates, and the media ecosystem has drastically changed. Political leaders and ordinary citizens can disseminate their thoughts at the click of a button, bots can wreak political and societal havoc, and there is growing distrust of our peers, institutions, and scientists. Continuing down this path could undermine the importance and concept of truth. (Policy Horizons Canada, 2018, Truth under fire section)

As a popular means through which people "disseminate their thoughts" online, Internet memes contribute to the flow of information at "unprecedented rates" and are thus part of the "drastically" altered "media ecosystem" (Policy Horizons Canada, 2018, Truth under fire section). Contextualized within this discourse, the affect-driven nature of memetic storytelling can lead to the association of memes with "growing distrust of our peers, institutions, and scientists" (Policy Horizons Canada, 2018, Truth under fire section). The alarmist nature of this

language highlights some of the anxieties surrounding digital forms of communication, including memes, which upset the popular view of information as objective fact or truth (Shifman, 2018).[6]

In their seminal work, *Metaphors we live by*, which was first published in 1980, cognitive linguists and philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003) refer to this view as the "myth of objectivism" (p. 186). "Objectivism," they observe, "takes as its allies scientific truth, rationality, precision, fairness, and impartiality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 189). One of the consequences of the myth of objectivism is that it can obfuscate the role metaphor plays in human reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Reflecting on the importance of metaphors to scientific thought, psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) notes: "They are crutches to help us get up the abstract mountain. Once up, we throw them away (even hide them) in favor of a formal, logically consistent theory that (with luck) can be stated in mathematical or near-mathematical terms" (p. 48). Evidence of this approach is found within the field of information research. In an editorial for the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, Cassidy Sugimoto and Javed Mostafa (2018) note that: "Precision is the cornerstone of scientific discourse. The use of metaphors is complicated by sociocultural factors and may not adequately translate across borders. While metaphors can be useful to explain complex phenomena, they are unnecessary when sufficient terminology exists" (p. 347). The irony in the above-mentioned critique is that the authors employ a metaphor when they state that "[p]recision is the cornerstone of scientific discourse" (Sugimoto & Mostafa, 2018, p. 347). Their attempt to discard metaphor in the name of scientific precision points to the way science and communication depend on it.

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[6] For a more detailed discussion of the philosophy underlying the association of information with truth, see Floridi, 2010.

Where Shannon's theory is concerned, the metaphor of a direct channel carries important implications for how people view Internet memes. This model, which has also been described as the "'conduit metaphor'" (Reddy as cited in Day, 2001, p. 38), portrays communication as a direct channel connecting an informer and an informee.[7] In doing so, it presents a simplified view of communication as a straightforward process of one-to-one correspondence. This view, in turn, has influenced how many people think about the meaning associated with information. Literary scholar William Paulson (1988) notes that "Shannon's initial exclusion of meaning from his mathematical theory of communication was methodological, not ontological. He made no claims to having dealt with meaning, but he did not say that the theory had no relevance to questions of meaning" (pp. 60-61). Applied to language, the conduit metaphor reinforces the perception that words are neutral channels through which meaning is communicated.[8] Shannon's theory is important to this discussion of Internet memes because, semantically speaking, memes do not follow the simple logic of one-to-one correspondence promoted by the conduit metaphor.

To be sure, the wide-spread transmission of these digital texts, which are created and circulated through processes of mimicry and remix, is often indirect and difficult to trace (Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2014). While mimicry pertains to the act of imitation involved in memetic storytelling, remix pertains to the creation of new compositions through the technological re-packaging and integration of different content (see Shifman, 2014). These aspects, combined with the ambiguity of different forms of memetic humour (e.g., dark

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[7] It is worth noting that while many people may not be familiar with Shannon's work, they are likely familiar with the model of communication his work promoted.

[8] In his attempts to develop a "general theory of communication", Warren Weaver actually tried to apply Shannon's theory to an analysis of language (Day, 2001, p. 41).

humour, irony, parody, satire, etc.), contribute to perceptions of Internet memes as chaotic and disorderly. The association of Internet memes with deliberate forms of disruptive activity, such as trolling (Katz & Shifman, 2017), also contributes to this overall impression of meme culture as something that interrupts the transmission of information. This perception explains why memetic storytelling is often portrayed as a kind of interference to effective communication, one that contributes to the problem of fake news (e.g., Albright, 2017; Dewey, 2016; Ohlheiser, 2018) and thereby raises concerns about the role of memes in political elections (e.g., Green 2019). Understood as a means through which to disrupt official messages, Internet memes begin to resemble Shannon's concept of *noise*, the additional content that accompanies the transmission of a message and acts as a potential barrier to its successful communication (Floridi, 2010).[9] Understood in this way, memes become akin to the static on a television set that interferes with one's ability to tune in for an official broadcast.

These scientific discourses of information provide important context to the phenomenon of memetic storytelling, not only because they highlight popular ways of thinking about information, but also because they reveal the influence scientific metaphors can have on people's understanding of the world. As I have already mentioned, the meme concept originated from the realm of science as a biological metaphor. As in the case with all metaphors, however, there are limits to the analogy it promotes. For example, unlike the human gene, it is difficult to find biological evidence of a meme's existence. Robert Aunger (2000) notes: "But if memes exist in the brain, we are unlikely to ever be able to read out the memetic content of some section of the

[9] In their discussion of memetic nonsense, Katz and Shifman (2017) note the way memes can be used to create deliberate noise in communicative channels (see, for example, Katz & Shifman, 2017, p. 838).

cortex" (p. 3). Added to the problematic associations created by the gene comparison is Dawkins's (2016) use of a virus metaphor to explain meme transmission. "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind," he explains, "you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (Dawkins, 2016, pp. 249-250). Although Dawkins's (2016) virus metaphor, like the gene metaphor, may have been intended as a mere analogy, his use of the phrase "literally parasitize" undermines figurative interpretations of it (p. 249). Viewed through the framework of his analogy, memes are transmitted from mind to mind without conscious awareness.

Similar to the conduit metaphor, these gene and virus metaphors contribute to some of the tensions surrounding Internet memes. Just as the conduit metaphor can present an overly simple view of communication, so can these biological metaphors, like other viral metaphors, present an overly simple view of human agency (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2014). The title of the recent BuzzFeedVideo series (n.d.), "*I accidentally became a meme*," which chronicles the stories of people like Quen and Ms. Juicy who find themselves the unexpected subjects of memetic attention, demonstrates the way this rhetoric continues to impact people's understanding of Internet memes. Although Internet users have appropriated Dawkins's term to describe the creation and circulation of digital texts, the gene and virus analogies continue to conceal the conscious role humans play in their production. The word "accident" suggests that Internet memes are not intentional products of human action, but rather, products of forces that are outside of human control. Whether viewed as disruptive texts or units of culture that cannot be managed, the general association of memes with noise and different biological metaphors (e.g., genes and viruses) can promote a reductive view of them as information resources.

1.2.2 Alternative narratives of information

While these scientific metaphors are problematic in their ability to account for the complexity of memetic storytelling, they nevertheless point to the importance of metaphor to human thought. Ignoring how the conduit, gene, and virus metaphors work to shape popular perceptions of Internet memes can prevent people from understanding their significance. For, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) observe, "[t]he very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g., comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept" (p. 10). One of the ways researchers can surface some of the hidden aspects of Internet memes is to look for an alternative meta-theoretical view for understanding information. They can do this by exchanging a positivist stance for a constructivist one. Unlike positivism, constructivism posits that any understanding of reality is a construction based on people's subjective and intersubjective experiences of the world (Creswell, 2014). Although different facets of constructivism exist (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005), in general, it presents a favorable view of affect as an integral part of human experience. Most importantly, it highlights the embodied and situated nature of experience itself.

By acknowledging and privileging the role subjectivity plays in the creation of meaning, constructivists seek to adopt a holistic approach to their understanding of the world. For this reason, constructivism is often associated with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). One of the strengths of constructivism is that it not only accounts for the different meta-theoretical perspectives that exist, but it also highlights the fact that people's meta-theoretical assumptions are likely to fluctuate over time (Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005). Where this discussion of Internet memes is concerned, a constructivist approach allows people to recognize how their perceptions of memes are often mediated through pervasive cultural metaphors related to

scientific discourses of information. At the same time, it also changes conceptions of what constitutes a "fact." Ian Cornelius (2014) observes that:

> For LIS, the problem with the scientific approach arises because the phenomena we investigate are social products and social 'facts' (that is, social inventions), which cannot always be treated in the same way as the phenomena of interest to science. (p. 188)

An Internet meme, for example, may not represent scientific facts (although it hypothetically can), but it does represent socially constructed attitudes towards the world that shape what people perceive to be true (Shifman, 2018).

This attention to the contexts underlying people's engagements with memes changes one's view of them as information resources. The informational value of memes is shown as arising from the processes of meaning-making that inform their creation, dissemination, and reception, processes that are influenced by individual experiences, behaviours, values, and circumstances. Adopting this holistic perspective allows researchers to acknowledge how people's emotions figure into their engagements with information, something that information research has not always accounted for in its representation of people's information seeking behaviours (Kuhlthau, 2004), but has increasingly begun to embrace over the last several decades (e.g., Kuhlthau, 2004; Laplante & Downie, 2011; Lee et al., 2021; Lopatovksa, 2014; Sun et al., 2022). That being said, one of the important critiques of constructivism is that it can lead to a kind of relativism that denies the existence of any shared sense of reality. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) refer to this "radical subjectivity" as the "myth of subjectivism" (pp. 185, 188). The antithesis of objectivism, this myth gravitates toward the opposite extremes in the assumptions it makes about the world. Consequently, its emphasis on the importance of emotion

and individual experience is equally as limiting as the myth of objectivism's emphasis on impartiality.[10]

Both cultural narratives, in this respect, present a reductive view of reality, and, as a system of binary thought, reinforce each other's existence. To praise the subjective logic of Internet memes as the ultimate source of truth only serves to reinforce objectivist critiques of them as affect-driven artifacts. By downplaying the importance of the intersubjective connections that underlie human sense-making, the myth of subjectivism can lead people to overlook a crucial element of memetic storytelling. This element, for example, is particularly important to the truth sharing that takes place in testimonial meme rallies where people share similar experiences of disenfranchisement (Shifman, 2018). Recognizing the limiting nature of these extreme myths, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) offer an alternative view: "the experientialist account of understanding and truth" (p. 192). Rejecting the idea that truth is always objective and absolute, as well as the idea that it is only accessible through people's individual, subjective imaginations, they attempt to establish a middle position that acknowledges the creative aspects of human reasoning.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) justify this middle position based on their understanding of "*imaginative rationality*", which highlights the important role metaphor plays in people's understanding of reality (p. 193, emphasis in original). Describing the logic of this experientialist view, they write:

> This does not mean that there are no truths; it means only that truth is relative to our conceptual system, which is grounded in, and constantly tested by, our experiences and

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[10] For a more extensive critique of constructivism, see Floridi, 2011a.

> those of other members of our culture in our daily interactions with other people and with our physical and cultural environments. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 193)

In its emphasis on the contextual factors underlying people's perceptions of truth, Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) experientialist approach aligns with constructivist perspectives that account for the situated nature of human experience. Pictured as a continuum with extreme positivism (i.e., the myth of objectivism) on one end and extreme constructivism (i.e., the myth of subjectivism) on the other, the experientialist perspective lies somewhere in the middle.

By presenting a different understanding of truth, a constructivist view that abides by the logic of an experientialist approach offers a different epistemological framework for defining "information." Cornelius (2014) suggests that information scholars modify the philosophy underlying their view of information by viewing it as "a guide for action" (p. 202). "This theory," he explains, "makes information normative by setting information not as the final retrieved objects of any enquiry, but as the logic that determines what type of statement would constitute an answer to the enquiry" (Cornelius, 2014, p. 202). Viewing information as the logic that governs people's actions opens up opportunities for acknowledging the different kinds of rationality that influence their behaviour, including the affective logic that informs their choices. Through its alignment with an experientialist approach, this view shifts researchers' attention from information resources to the information practices surrounding different resources, practices that include a consideration of the values, behaviours, communities, and contexts that influence people's understanding of what is true.

This practice-oriented approach not only offers a different understanding of Internet memes and information, but also of culture itself. Speaking of some of the criticisms of Dawkins's memetic theory, Aunger (2000) writes:

> Culture may not in fact be composed only of socially transmitted units of information—in effect, there may be no identifiable or measurable unit of culture. Rather, culture might be considered—or at least felt to be—a large, interconnected body of implicit knowledge which only has meaning as a whole. (p. 10)

This holistic view of culture creates a different picture of the complexity surrounding people's engagements with information, particularly where digital interactions are concerned. Milner (2016) notes that "[t]he participatory media world is made—is brought into existence and sustained—through messy memetic interrelationships" (p. 2). Likewise, danah boyd (2014) points out that, "[r]eality is nuanced and messy, full of pros and cons. Living in a networked world is complicated" (p. 16). A practice-oriented approach allows information researchers to acknowledge and embrace this messiness along with the insights it offers into the varied nature of human experience.

1.2.3 My narrative of information

I locate my work as an information researcher within this experientialist perspective and constructivist view of information. As a humanities scholar with a background in literary studies, I am interested in the way people communicate information through the stories they create and share with each other. Specifically, I am interested in the way storytelling functions as a sense-making device through which people account for their experiences of the world. Information philosopher Luciano Floridi (2011b) notes that storytelling is one of the more common ways of accounting for information. People often tell stories to establish the truth of the constructs that inform their thinking. In fact, cognitive scientist and linguist Mark Turner (1998) argues that "[i]f we want to study the everyday mind, we can begin by turning to the literary mind exactly because the everyday mind is essentially literary" (p. 7). While Lakoff and Johnson (2003) draw

attention to the metaphorical nature of the human conceptual system, Turner (1998) draws attention to its narrative properties, particularly as they concern the mental function of parable, which he defines as "*the projection of story*" (p. 7, emphasis in original). "The essence of parable," he observes, "is its intricate combining of two of our basic forms of knowledge—story and projection. This classic combination produces one of our keenest mental processes for constructing meaning" (Turner, 1998, p. 5). Storytelling, Turner (1998) points out, is one of the primary ways people create a sense of the realities they inhabit. The projection of stories onto situations allows people to establish comparisons that help them make sense of their circumstances.

Certainly, these narrative activities are at work online. In fact, one sees the process of parable at work in the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, where Internet users combine two stories to project a new one that is subject to endless appropriation. These kinds of remixed narratives are one of the primary means through which information is communicated across different social media platforms, thus contributing to what media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green (2013) describe as "'networked culture'" (p. 12) and boyd (2014) describes as "*networked publics*" (p. 5, emphasis in original). The importance of stories to people's engagements with information helps explain the popularity of Internet memes, which are often inspired by actual events and people (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2014, 2018). Of course, there are as many different kinds of storytelling as there are different kinds of stories. While some of the narratives people tell are based on their personal experiences, others function in more of a fictional capacity, allowing

people to think through hypothetical scenarios.[11] Both kinds of stories have the ability to impact the way people think and act in the world.

While stories (literary or not) may be basic to human thinking (Turner, 1998), the fact remains that they often struggle to assert a place for themselves in scientific discourses of information. This struggle is particularly evident where literature is concerned. As Paulson (1988) notes:

> Literature and information make an uneasy pair. For seventy years formalist criticism has instilled in us the idea that literary texts are not primarily messages bearing information but, rather, autonomous objects that put into question our everyday view of language as communication and that must be investigated on their own terms. (p. vii)

This disconnect between literature and information is partly due to the pervasive nature of the objectivist and subjectivist myths, which can prevent people from recognizing the relationship between literature and the imaginative rationality that informs their experiences of the world. These myths contribute to the perceived divide between the sciences and the arts (see Bruner, 1986; Paulson, 1988), which continues to create barriers for interdisciplinary researchers.

These barriers often include reductive assumptions about what constitutes "research." As Melanie Feinberg (2012) notes, many information scholars tend to frame research according to a "data-centric paradigm," which aims "to provide a *true* answer, or at least the *best* answer to the question" (p. 19, emphasis in original). As a result, researchers whose work does not fit this paradigm often feel the need to defend their use of art-based methods against the logic of

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[11] Psychologist George Kelly (1963) explores this function of stories in *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs*.

objectivism (e.g., Hartel & Savolainen, 2016). Recognizing the lack of arts-informed, aesthetic experiences within iSchool curriculum, Robert Heckman and Jaime Snyder (2008) advocate for their importance, suggesting that "[…] this interaction will provide a useful and necessary complement to the more familiar rational, scientific model that currently informs iSchool professional education […]" (Introduction section, para. 1). Like these scholars, I recognize that positivist assumptions fail to account for the multiplicity of discoveries available through different kinds of research. The value of humanities research lies in the perspectives it creates, which can impact how we think about different phenomena (Bruner, 1986; Feinberg, 2012). To believe Internet memes can only be studied scientifically is to deny the value of memetic storytelling itself, which, in its creative exploration of different topics and perspectives, does not provide a single answer, or even best answer, to the ideas it explores.

Academic prejudices within the humanities, however, can also impact people's understanding of the significance of Internet meme research, most notably by limiting the kinds of narratives that qualify as "art." Turner (1998) notes that "[a]lthough literary texts may be special, the instruments of thought used to invent and interpret them are basic to everyday thought" (p. 7). The special status accorded literature can and does limit people's appreciation of the literary mind as it manifests in other art forms. While literature has struggled to assert its relevance in relation to the sciences (Paulson, 1988), children's literature has struggled to assert its relevance in relation to adult literature (Hunt, 2011), and digital literature has struggled to assert its relevance in relation to print literature, hence the continued advocacy work related to the importance of "new literacies" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007, p. 1). Further contributing to the depreciation of Internet memes is the tendency to associate them with youth (e.g., boyd, 2014; Shifman, 2019). Culturally speaking, both Internet memes and young people have been

associated with nonsense (Katz & Shifman, 2017). The binary logic that positions adults as sophisticated and children as unsophisticated (Nodelman, 2008; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Wesseling, 2016) can lead people to underestimate the complexity of these texts (Katz & Shifman, 2017), not to mention the intelligence of young people themselves.

Highlighting these different assumptions is necessary if one is to avoid some of the reductive perspectives that surround memetic storytelling. If Internet memes are often presented as a kind of noise, then it is important for researchers to consider the information this noise contains, even as it disrupts the transmission of other messages in society. Paulson (1988) argues that literature "[…] functions as the noise of culture, as a perturbation or source of variety in the circulation and production of discourses and ideas" (p. ix). Internet memes, it seems, also function in this capacity. They, too, provide information, albeit in ways that differ from more conventional sources (e.g., newspaper, brochure, broadcast, etc.). Media scholar Limor Shifman (2014) notes that "[w]hile memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures" (p. 15). Reading her work and that of other researchers (eg., de la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shifman, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016; Voigts, 2017) led me to embark on a study that would increase the depth of Internet meme scholarship by exploring Internet memes from an information perspective, one that was rooted in Cornelius's (2014) view of information as a guide to action.

In doing so, it also increased my desire to learn how different young people are making sense of Internet memes. After all, what better way to question some of the assumptions surrounding youth and memetic storytelling than to conduct an inquiry with different youth? Since many social media platforms require participants to be at least 13 years or older to have

accounts, I decided to orient this study toward teenagers (approx. ages 13-18). The possible connections between memes and digital citizenship education influenced my decision to run this project in a secondary school. Although a lot of Internet meme research focuses on online contexts, I knew a classroom environment would broaden the scope of inquiry to include an understanding of the physical communities that shape young people's engagements with Internet memes. By researching in the British Columbia public school system, I could also explore the role Internet memes might play in the province's recently revised K-12 curriculum, which includes a New Media course option for students in grades ten to twelve.

In selecting a classroom setting for this project, I was inspired by Henry Jenkins's observations on "participatory culture" and the way schools can help engage students in learning what participation means in different social contexts (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 266). Reflecting on how individual classrooms might figure into this process, Jenkins observes to Nico Carpentier (2013):

> […] we can promote notions of coteaching or peer-to-peer learning, which takes seriously what young people have to contribute (Jenkins et al., 2013a). We can try to expand the learning ecology to connect what happens in the classroom with larger communities so that young people find their way into spaces where they may enjoy greater communicative and decision-making capacity. (p. 282)[12]

Framed in this way, researching young people's engagements with Internet memes in the classroom could provide the opportunity to learn alongside students and their teacher. By

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[12] This quote comes from a written debate that appears in *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* (See Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013).

incorporating the project into the design of curriculum being explored, I could: 1) foster co-teaching relationships that would ensure all participants' interests and contributions were taken seriously; and 2) connect their contributions to larger communities of inquiry, including the design of course curriculum based on their input.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

The questions guiding this research study were:

1. a) How do Internet memes function as information resources?

   b) How does memetic storytelling constitute an information literacy practice?

2. a) How are different youth engaging with Internet memes outside of traditional educational contexts (e.g., on their own time)?

   b) What kinds of Internet memes are youth engaging?

3. a) How do different youth want to engage with Internet memes inside traditional educational contexts (e.g., the classroom, library, learning commons)?

   b) How does this engagement relate to new conceptions of literacy and digital citizenship within the fields of information, communication, and education research?

The main objectives of this study were: 1) To develop a new conceptual framework for the study of Internet memes as information resources; 2) To develop a research methodology for investigating and representing young people's engagement with Internet memes; and 3) To reflect on how the sense-making processes underlying this engagement relate to new conceptions of literacy and informed digital citizenship, particularly as they concern the new curricular outcomes being introduced in the B.C. school system.

1.4 Significance of research

This research is timely for a number of reasons. In 2017, Harvard College revoked the acceptances of at least ten incoming students on account of their posting offensive Internet memes on a private Facebook group chat (Natanson, 2017; Schmidt, 2017). This event, among others, highlighted the need for more research on the ramifications of memetic play, which, taken out of context, can be interpreted in different ways. In a culture that is increasingly marked by memetic storytelling, knowing when and how to engage with Internet memes has become an important skill. The significance of this skill is even more apparent in the wake of the controversial events of the last few years, which have not only encompassed various issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the U.S. 2020 election, and a range of social justice undertakings, including: racial protests (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter), defund the police efforts, "cancel culture" movements, and climate change activism. In this cultural context, posting and sharing memes can easily impact one's digital footprint. boyd (2014) notes that "[c]ontent shared through social media often sticks around because technologies are designed to enable *persistence*. The fact that content often persists has significant implications" (p. 11, emphasis in original). One of these implications, as the Harvard incident demonstrates, "[…] is that those using social media are often 'on the record' to an unprecedented degree" (boyd, 2014, p. 11). Memetic storytelling may seem fun and trivial, but it can have serious consequences.

Reflecting on these consequences, Kate Eichorn (2019) suggests that young people today will not be able to forget or escape aspects of their past that are documented online. "Everyone," she observes, "in a sense, has become the sum of their online archives" (Eichorn, 2019, p. 65). Many questions, therefore, remain as to how the field of education and information research can best account for some of these concerns. As different governmental bodies are adjusting their

educational curriculum to address the perceived needs of young people growing up in today's world, Internet memes deserve consideration (Knobel, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), particularly when it comes to digital citizenship education. The concept of digital citizenship, which encompasses the range of issues associated with people's online behaviour (Jones & Mitchell, 2016), is one of the focuses of B.C.'s recently revised English Language Arts curriculum (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(b)). One of the "Big Ideas" associated with the New Media course selection is the recognition that "[d]igital citizens have rights and responsibilities in an increasingly globalized society" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(d), Big Ideas section). Just what these rights and responsibilities are when it comes to memetic storytelling, and how they can be best imparted to youth through the development of educational curriculum and policy, is still being discovered.

This research project is my effort to contribute to that discovery. Commenting on the technological shifts of the 20th century, media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1964) notes that "[e]very culture and every age has its favorite model of perception and knowledge that it is inclined to prescribe for everybody and everything. The mark of our time is its revulsion against imposed patterns" (p. 21). When it comes to viewing Internet memes as extensions of humanity, memetic storytelling presents an interesting picture of the way we perceive knowledge in the 21st century, because it is premised on patterns of meaning-making that rely on variation and conformity (Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2018, 2019). How this mode of communication translates into people's negotiations of information will inevitably impact their sense of themselves and each other in online contexts. Accordingly, when thinking about the informational role these digital texts serve in today's world, it is crucial that we examine the logics underlying their creation and circulation in different contexts. Only then can

we understand how best to support different young people as they navigate the plethora of memes that seek to prescribe certain ways of seeing the world, thereby helping them recognize the critical implications of embracing different patterns of meaning-making.

1.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the importance of Internet memes as an area of inquiry for information scholars. In particular, it has shown how Internet memes relate to current cultural discourses that impact people's conceptions of information in today's world. By highlighting the way scientific discourses can limit people's ability to appreciate the informational value of affect, I argued that a constructivist-based, experientialist view allows researchers to surface an alternative understanding of information that offers a more nuanced perspective of memetic storytelling. Situating myself within this theoretical perspective, I discussed how my experience as both an information scholar and a literature scholar have influenced my interdisciplinary approach to the study of Internet memes. Specifically, I outlined how a constructivist-based, experientialist view has led me to question common disciplinary assumptions related to the terms "information," "literature," "research," and "youth." Problematizing these assumptions, I then outlined the motivations, questions, and objectives of this proposed study, which focuses on young people's engagements with Internet memes and their relevance to conceptualizations of literacy and digital citizenship education. I ended by emphasizing the potential significance this investigation holds for young people's lives as they navigate the changing expectations and policies associated with online behaviour.

1.6 Dissertation overview

In the following chapters, I outline the theory and methods that inform this investigation. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that situates Internet meme research within theories of

textuality and literacy. This review provides a basic foundation for conceptualizing Internet memes as information resources and memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice, which will be further developed in dialogue with this study's findings. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework for this research project, including a description of its location, participants, methods of data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4, in turn, details the enactment of its research design, as it involved the co-creation and co-facilitation of a unit on Internet memes and digital citizenship in three different English classes. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 introduce the findings and discussion arrived at through analysis; and Chapter 8 provides a summary conclusion of this investigation, reviewing its contributions, limitations, and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Embracing an interdisciplinary orientation

When I began my doctoral studies in 2016, I was new to the field of information research and the study of Internet memes. Part of the reason I wanted to study memetic storytelling was because it represented an emerging area of inquiry (Shifman 2014). Since that time, however, Internet meme research has gained interdisciplinary attention and is steadily increasing in scope. Memes, after all, can be about anything, thereby making it relatively easy for scholars from different disciplines to find an entry point into discussions concerning their existence. Presently, scholarship spans the fields of Communication Studies (e.g., Milner 2016; Miltner, 2014; Shifman 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015), Law (e.g., Bonetto, 2018; Matalon, 2019; Mielczarek & Hopkins, 2021; Tan & Wilson, 2021), Education (e.g., Bini et al., 2020; Harshavardhan et al., 2019; Kariko, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), Gender Studies (e.g., Andreasen, 2021; Drakett et al., 2018), and Religious Studies (e.g., Bellar et al., 2013), among other areas of interest.[13] And yet, aside from some work that briefly acknowledges the relationship between memes and "'happy' information" (Tinto & Ruthven, 2016, p. 2329), I have yet to find a substantial contribution from the field of Information Science (also referred to as Information Studies, Library and Information Science, etc.).

With this view in mind, I orient this literature review towards establishing a foundation for thinking about Internet memes from an information perspective. Building on the meta-theoretical orientations I introduced in the previous chapter, I explore how theories of textuality and literacy figure into possible understandings of Internet memes. This theoretical background

[13] This is but a sample of the wide range of Internet meme scholarship that exists.

provides a basic conceptual foundation for thinking about Internet memes as information resources and memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice,[14] which I will develop in this study's findings chapters in response to this project's discoveries. In choosing to conduct my literature review in this manner I hope to highlight some of the ways Internet meme research and information research can inform each other, while also pointing to the conceptual contribution this study is positioned to make.

First, however, I will clarify what I mean by "Information Science" and how it relates to the more general field of information research. As a student in a School of Information that hosts programs in Archival Studies, Librarianship, Children's Literature, and Informatics, I am situated within the Information Science and iSchool communities. According to Marcia Bates (1999), the field of Information Science, similar to the fields of Communication Studies/Journalism and Education, is a "meta-discipline" (p. 1044). "The meta-disciplines," she explains, "are distinguished by the fact that they are interested in the subject matter of all the conventional disciplines, they do something with that subject matter that is of value for society […]" (Bates, 1999, p. 1044). Bates (1999) argues that the value of Information Science lies in the "[…] study of the gathering, organizing, storing, retrieving, and dissemination of information" (Bates, 1999, p. 1044). In her view, Information Science tends to focus more on the different forms that organize information than the content of information itself, which is what distinguishes it from other areas of research (Bates, 1999). Still, the fact remains that the meta-discipline of Information Science is highly interdisciplinary and this interdisciplinarity inevitably

[14] This chapter will elaborate on prior work that I have completed through the course of my degree in preparation of this dissertation project (see Tulloch, In Press).

influences how different information researchers understand the role form and content play in people's engagements with information.

My efforts to locate my own work within Information Science has led me to recognize how the boundaries associated with it are unclear. As Michael Buckland (1999) observes, "[t]he landscape is complex in part because knowledge (and, therefore, information) is significant in all contexts" (p. 974). This complexity is further revealed in the relationship between Information Science and the iSchool movement, the latter of which further emphasized the importance of people's engagements with information and technology. Andrew Dillon (2012) notes that there was a "[…] recognition, at the heart of the iSchool movement, that pressing intellectual problems by their nature will cross existing disciplinary boundaries, and the best chance of progress is yielded by collective and interdisciplinary efforts" (p. 270). This interdisciplinary view of information research guides my selective review[15] of Internet meme scholarship and my efforts to integrate it within the context of Information Science. In my attempt to understand the significance of Internet memes as information resources, I consider how different theories of textuality and literacy can impact interpretations of their content, thereby impacting how these texts are *gathered*, *organized*, *stored*, *retrieved* and *disseminated*. To do this, I draw on literature from the fields of Information Science, Communication Studies, Education, and Literary Studies, all of which inform my own background as an interdisciplinary scholar.

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[15] One of the challenges of interdisciplinary scholarship is engaging in-depth with the different fields it highlights and their respective bodies of work. This study's information perspective serves as a guide through which to focus that interdisciplinary engagement, and, in doing so, admittedly limits its scope. However, these limits create opportunities for deeper critical engagement that unpacks some of the central theoretical assumptions linking these different fields, which have impacted prior scholarship on Internet memes.

2.1.1 Theories of textuality

2.1.1.1 Structuralist views of textuality

When thinking about how Internet memes work as narrative artifacts, questions surrounding the nature of their textuality inevitably arise. Just as cultural narratives can influence people's perceptions of "information," so can they also influence people's understanding of what constitutes a "text." As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note, the myth of objectivism tends to perpetuate the assumption that "[w]ords have fixed meanings. That is, our language expresses the concepts and categories that we think in terms of. To describe reality correctly, we need words whose meanings are clear and precise, words that fit reality" (p. 187). This view of language is generally associated with structuralist understandings of textuality, which emerged from the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who sought to develop a scientific study of language that was objective in its analysis of different sign systems (Allen, 2011; Orr, 2003/2008). As literary scholar Graham Allen (2011) observes, "[s]tructuralism took texts, from works of literature to aspects of everyday communication, and accounted for them in terms of the system from which they were produced" (p. 226). This particular view of language presents texts as relatively stable entities.

Scholars have employed Saussure's ideas to explore how Internet memes like "Me Explaining To My Mom" function as templates through which to communicate specific meanings (e.g., Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018). Structuralist approaches, for example, are particularly evident in scholars' attempts to view memes through a genre perspective (e.g., Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). Shifman (2014) observes:

> In theory, all Internet users are free spirits, individuals who take their unique path to the hall of digital fame. In practice, they tend to follow the same beaten tracks of meme creation. These paths can be thought of as *meme genres*. (p. 99, emphasis in original)

As Asaf Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) observe, "[a]lthough the memetic sphere is continuously evolving and changing so that memes can be applied to communicate a diverse array of ideas, being template-based, they are still limited and thus limit those using them" (p. 296). Viewed from this perspective, structuralist approaches are useful for identifying some of the *patterns* of meaning-making associated with memetic storytelling (McLuhan, 1964). They highlight aspects of the intersubjective agreement arrived at through collective interpretations and applications of a particular meme.

2.1.1.2 Poststructuralist views of textuality

While structuralism continues to influence researchers' approaches to and understanding of textuality, its emphasis on order and precision means that it is limited in its ability to account for the messier sides of human communication. The main idea behind the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, after all, is that communication is not always as straightforward as we perceive it to be (hence one person's trouble explaining something to someone else). Recognizing this aspect of communication, scholars have pushed back against structuralist understandings of language. This movement, generally known as poststructuralism, seeks to highlight the inherently unstable aspects of the sign systems people use to communicate. Influenced by the work of Saussure, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan, poststructuralist thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva have all drawn attention to the dynamic nature of semiotic meaning-making (Allen, 2011; Orr, 2003/2008). As Allen (2011) explains, "[p]oststructuralists deny any claims

for a scientific study of texts or cultural sign systems and insist that all texts are polysemous" (p. 224). This polysemous view accounts for the multiple meanings associated with different signs, and, in doing so, challenges the view of words and images as straightforward channels of communication.

Taken to an extreme, however, this view can be seen as an extension of the subjectivist myth, one that leads to a nihilistic view of language (e.g., radical deconstructionism). Acknowledging the instability of language does not mean that it is incapable of functioning as a communicative tool. An Internet meme, for instance, operates on a shared premise that is remixed to mean new things (Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014). Understanding the concept behind the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme is an important part of knowing how to apply it to different situations and contexts. As media scholar Ryan Milner (2016)[14] observes:

> Media texts become memetic when they connect with enough participants to inspire iteration after iteration from a fixed premise. The nature of that resonance is difficult to articulate definitively or universally, as individual texts resonate with different people for different reasons. Texts carry personal meaning and importance; that meaning and importance motivates the creation, circulation, and transformation essential to memetic media. (p. 29)

Simply put, the tension between collective and individual meme engagement serves as a catalyst for variation *and* conformity (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014).

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[14] Milner (2016) draws on some of Barthes's work in his analysis of the logics of Internet memes.

Some texts, however, are specifically designed to conceal the instability of language. In his discussion of literary forms, Bakhtin (1984/2014b) describes such texts as "monologic" (p. 79). Explaining this concept in greater detail, he writes:

> A monologic artistic world does not recognize someone else's thought, someone else's idea, as an object of representation. In such a world everything ideological falls into two categories. Certain thoughts—true, signifying thoughts—gravitate toward the author's consciousness, and strive to shape themselves in the purely semantic unity of a worldview […] (Bakthin, 1984/2014b, pp. 79-80)

Monologic texts, in other words, conceal alternative perspectives associated with the ideas they communicate. And yet, as Bakhtin (1984/2014b) points out, there are also texts that do the opposite. These "dialogic" texts strive to expose the diversity of perspectives associated with the ideas they raise (Bakhtin, 1984/2014b, p. 184). Whereas monologic representations of reality seek to enforce singular interpretations, dialogic representations seek to inspire multiple interpretations. The existence of both kinds of representations points to the way different social realities are constructed through language and the power struggles that underlie them.

These theories of textuality add nuance to our understanding of the way Internet memes challenge scientific narratives of information. For, as Milner (2016) observes, "Internet memes complicate narrow ideas about the singularity of media texts" (p. 14). Viewed from a Bakhtinian perspective, these digital texts are highly dialogic. Recognizing this aspect of memetic storytelling, Shifman (2014) defines an Internet meme as:

> (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)

This definition highlights the way Internet memes exploit the unstable aspects of human communication. Each variation of an Internet meme extends the meanings it can be used to create. Thus, while scientific methods can be employed to study these digital artifacts, any attempt to monologically account for their semiotic possibilities will ultimately be limited in the view it provides. That being said, any study of Internet memes that disregards the shared subjectivity developed through collective participation will be equally as limited in the understanding it presents.

Another way of thinking about this dialogic aspect of memetic storytelling is to view it through the lens of intertextuality, a concept coined by Julia Kristeva (Allen 2011; Orr, 2003/2008). Explaining the significance of this concept and its extensions, the New London Group (1996) writes:

> Intertextuality draws attention to the potentially complex ways in which meanings (such as linguistic meanings) are constituted through relationships to other texts (real or imaginary), text types (discourse or genres), narratives, and other modes of meaning (such as visual design, architectonic or geographical positioning). Any text can be viewed historically in terms of the intertextual chains (historical series of texts) it draws upon, and in terms of the transformations it works upon them. (p. 82)

Simply put, while a text might seem like a standalone object, it is not an isolated instance of meaning-making. Although Internet users often encounter particular instances of an Internet meme, making sense of these different instantiations involves understanding some of the sociocultural references they invoke. Individual processes of interpretation are always related to collective processes of interpretation (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014).

This expanded view of textuality allows researchers to consider the multimodal nature of an Internet meme's signifying potential. Educational researchers Bella Dicks, Rosie Flewitt, Lesley Lancaster, and Kate Pahl (2011) observe that "[m]ultimodality is now a widely invoked term in social research. It has become a generic label, often used interchangeably with the terms 'multimedia' or 'multisensory', to refer to projects where data generated are not primarily linguistic or numeric" (p. 228). Internet memes constitute such data, because they incorporate different modes of communication into their messaging. "Digitization," Milner (2016) points out, "affords engagement through multiple senses, even if it's tempting to focus narrowly on the interplay of words and visuals online. Mediated conversations intertwine language, image, audio, video, hypertext, and more" (p. 25). Multimodality, therefore, helps explain the generative nature of Internet memes as textual artifacts. In fact, that is why Milner (2016) lists multimodality as one of five central logics governing memetic participation, the others being: "[…] reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread in participatory media" (p. 15). As examples like the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme demonstrate, intersecting sign systems (e.g., videos, screenshots, text, etc.) allow for endless permutations. In this respect, the concepts of multimodality and intertextuality are inherently related. Understanding the multimodal nature of Internet memes increases one's understanding of their intertextual potential (see, for example, Miltner, 2014).

2.1.2 Internet memes and information

2.1.2.1 Defining information

Still, the question remains: How do these theories of textuality factor into an understanding of Internet memes as information resources? Answering this question requires one to consider the role these theories play within the field of Information Science. Historically, the

field's emphasis on standardization and organization has supported a structuralist view. Poststructuralism, therefore, disrupts some of the meta-discipline's long-held assumptions. Describing the nature of this disruption, information scholar Ronald Day (2005) writes:

> This reopening of language to something other than auto-affective meaning or data, this reopening of knowledge to something other than certain mental content, and this reopening of information to something other than representation, fact, or 'true belief' constitute a challenge to the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that have, for so long, dominated not only information studies research and even practice, but also popular conceptions of the materials it studies. (p. 581)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, these "popular conceptions" extend to Internet memes (Day, 2005, p. 581), which are often presented as disruptive to the communication of information. Part of viewing Internet memes as information resources involves accounting for the unstable aspects of meaning-making that underlie their creation, dissemination, and reception. Poststructuralist understandings of textuality create an opportunity for thinking about the various kinds of logic that determine an Internet meme's function in different contexts and the informational purpose it may serve for different people.

In order to understand how an Internet meme can be informative, however, people need to possess some understanding of the term "information." Like the term "meme" (see Shifman, 2016), the term "information" tends to have many different interpretations (Geoghegan, 2016). "The character string 'i n f o r m a t i o n,'" Michael Buckland (2017) notes, "has been used to refer to many different things. So any simple assertion in the form 'Information is …' has little meaning and encourages confusion unless it is made clear which of the meanings is intended" (p. 4). Within the field of information research, Jonathan Furner (2015) notes that "[i]t has become a

cliché to note that as many definitions of *information* have been suggested as there are writers on the topic" (p. 364, emphasis in original). Alternatively, where communications research is concerned, scholars often use the term "information," but rarely define it in depth (e.g., boyd, 2014, p. 12; Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 13; Knobel, 2006, p. 423; Shifman, 2014, p. 65). "With digitization," Milner (2016) explains, "new types of information become easier to create, circulate, and transform. The participatory barriers are lowered, and new forms of communication can be encoded and decoded by a broader group of individuals" (p. 25). Internet memes are frequently discussed in relation to these "new types of information" (Milner, 2016, p. 25), but it is not entirely clear how these types differ from old types. Like many discourses concerning the "*information society*" (Buckland, 2017, p. 17, emphasis in original), the term "information" thus operates as a general designation. The lack of definition surrounding it is problematic, because it fails to account for the significance of information apart from its use as a cultural buzzword.

One way the field of Information Science can contribute to Internet meme research, therefore, is by offering researchers nuanced ways of thinking about the concept of information. Amid the plethora of definitions that exist, I have chosen to focus on the definitions provided by Cornelius (2014) and Buckland (1991). While Cornelius (2014) offers an epistemological frame through which to view information as the logic that guides our actions, Buckland's (1991) work provides an ontological frame for identifying the three ways information is often understood: "*Information-as-process*," "*Information-as-knowledge*," and "*Information-as-thing*" (p. 351, emphasis in original). Describing these categories, he writes:

> A key characteristic of 'information-as-knowledge' is that it is intangible: one cannot touch it or measure it in any direct way. Knowledge, belief, and opinion are personal,

> subjective, and conceptual. Therefore, to communicate them, they have to be expressed, described, or represented in some physical way, as a signal, text, or communication. Any such expression, description, or representation would be 'information-as-thing.' (Buckland, 1991, p. 351)

Such acts of communication, in turn, can be understood as *information-as-process*, because they involve informing oneself or others (Buckland, 1991). Figuring this ontology into Cornelius's (2014) epistemological framework, one thus begins to see how the logic of information involves identifying the knowledge, processes, and things through which people attempt to answer their inquiries.

Buckland's (1991) categories are useful when considering how the term "information" is applied to Internet memes. On the one hand, people tend to speak of Internet memes as representations of knowledge, that is, as information things. On the other hand, the association of Internet memes with Dawkins's (2016) memetic theory means that they also represent information processes. Milner (2016) notes that "[t]he appeal of memetic theory is its power to explain the spread of vast information bit by bit, through micro circulations and transformations" (p. 19). Likewise, Shifman (2014) explains that, where Dawkins's theory is concerned, "[…] 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*" (p. 18, emphasis in original). These digital artifacts, therefore, represent collective processes of communication. An Internet meme is a representation of some kind of knowledge, but this knowledge includes an awareness of the processes through which the Internet meme was created. An iSchool perspective that expands its focus to include "the contexts in which people, information and technology interact"

(Dillon, 2012, p. 269) allows researchers to consider the different informational logics through which Internet memes are understood as knowledge, processes, and things.

2.1.2.2 Internet memes as documents

Viewed as information-things (i.e., representations of knowledge and processes), Internet memes essentially take on the function of documents. While Internet memes might not resemble conventional information documents (e.g., a contract, brochure, policy booklet, etc.), they nevertheless operate as representations of knowledge that can influence how people think and feel about some aspect of reality (Shifman, 2018). Buckland (1997) notes how documentalists like Suzanne Briet define a document in terms of its ability to serve as evidence of something. Explaining this function, he writes:

> Documents and documentation constitute evidence that may be useful to us in making sense of our situation and options. Documents are used as intermediaries between ourselves and others, and we judge documents in varied ways. We try to understand what we see. We decide how far we trust what we perceive, and how we feel about what we see influences us. (Buckland, 2017, p. 24)

Internet memes can also be understood as intermediaries between people, because they serve as representations through which people can negotiate different aspects of their experience. An Xiao Mina (2019) notes that "the creative practice of meme-making means people can expose each other to narrative ideas and remixes. Some ideas float up, others sink, others stay in our minds and shift the conversation" (p. 73). Through the creation and dissemination of these digital artifacts, Internet users record and exchange their knowledge with others.

But what kind of evidence can an Internet meme provide? Contributing to the impression that these texts are unreliable sources of information is the fact that they are subject to

continuous alteration. Buckland (1997) notes that "[o]rdinarily information storage and retrieval systems have been concerned with text and text-like records (e.g., names, numbers, and alphanumeric codes)" (p. 804). These texts are generally presented as more stable entities, precisely because they are not subject to physical modification by numerous users. Speaking of Paul Otlet's pioneering work within the field of documentation studies, Day (2001) writes: "In Otlet's writings, 'the book' stands for facts, documents, physical books, and knowledge as information or 'science,' and in turn, each of these signifiers refers back to the culture of the book" (p. 10). Digital technologies, however, facilitate participation in a way that printed texts do not, hence the evolution of the term "participatory culture" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 266). While the physical book stands for order and stability, Internet memes often stand for the opposite. And yet, to discount their role as evidence is to overlook the significant role they play in people's everyday lives. Internet memes may be difficult to organize, but that in itself may be why they should be of interest to information researchers who are looking to expand their understanding of the various kinds of documents that exist.

When it comes to discussions of the evidence memes provide, the notion of truth becomes important. In her efforts to think about the different kinds of truth memes can convey, Shifman (2018) distinguishes between what she refers to as "internal and external authenticity" (p. 173). According to her, external authenticity refers to scientific conceptions of objective truth or fact, whereas "[i]nternal authenticity is deeply intertwined with individualism" (p. 174). This latter notion of the authentic depends on evaluations of one's personal experience, which is used as a measure for determining the legitimacy of a claim as a representation of oneself. Such evidence is more difficult to refute because of the fact that it is so intricately connected with the way people choose to portray themselves to others. One way scholars can consider the

intersubjective negotiations underlying the representation of these truths is to reflect on the role values play in memetic storytelling. Shifman (2019), for instance, finds it useful to think of memes through the lens of two different categories of values: "overt values, which are expressed through memes' content, and covert values, which are intrinsic to Internet memes as communicative formats" (p. 45). While the first set of values are connected to the meme's message, the other set of values refers more to the context that shapes how one interacts with the message.

In work leading up to this research, I also explored how Internet memes represent people's values (Tulloch, In Press). Specifically, I proposed that people use Internet memes to test their values against those of others (Tulloch, In Press). Drawing on the work of Nassim JafariNaimi, Lisa Nathan, and Ian Hargraves (2015), who contend that values function as hypotheses in the design process, I had examined how memes, as puzzle-like texts (Shifman, 2014), function as value hypotheses. The "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, for example, can be viewed as a value hypothesis concerning the desirability of effective communication. The memetic nature of the remixed image invites viewers to evaluate the value claim as it might pertain to different situations and contexts. In posing such hypotheses, I suggested that Internet memes create what philosopher John Dewey (1938/2013) refers to as "indeterminate" and "problematic" situations (p. 171).[16] People react to memes differently and these reactions are based on how they make sense of the value hypotheses the memes represent, which, in turn, can impact their understanding of the level of "internal and external authenticity" of a meme's logic

[16] JafariNaimi et al. (2015) draw on these concepts in Dewey's work when exploring how values function as hypotheses in the design process.

(Shifman, 2018, p. 173). The *indeterminate* nature of a meme's message can result in *problematic situations* when the potential value claims associated with it are contested.

2.1.3 Theories of literacy

2.1.3.1 Autonomous views of literacy

Having explored some of the ways Internet memes can be viewed as informative texts (i.e., documents), I will now endeavour to explore how memetic storytelling can be viewed as a form of information literacy. The objectivist and subjectivist assumptions that shape different theories of textuality, also shape different theories of literacy. Traces of structuralism, for example, are apparent in certain approaches to literacy instruction, specifically those that privilege what scholars have called "the autonomous model" of literacy (Street, 2003, p. 77). This particular model, which is often associated with written language, presents "[…] the idea of literacy as an autonomous neutral set of skills or competencies that people acquire through schooling and can deploy universally […]" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 244). Autonomous views of reading and writing tend to support a functionalist approach to literacy that promotes the development of basic skills, such as decoding, vocabulary, and syntax (Dyson, 2004; Perry, 2012). These skills are generally represented as important to people's economic survival, particularly when it comes to successful employment (Scribner, 1984). Such conceptions of literacy are premised on a very specific understanding of people's educational needs.

In their standardized approach to literacy instruction, autonomous approaches are more prescriptive than descriptive. The problem with this prescriptiveness, Anne Dyson (2004) points out, is that it fails to account for the diversity of people's experiences. Describing what she identifies as "the central educational paradox of our times," she writes:

> On the one hand, children are attending school in a time of curricular standardization, enacted through a discourse of 'the basics'; on the other hand, they are growing up in a world that is not standardized, so to speak—they are growing up amid cultural and linguistic diversity and in a time of rapidly changing communicative practices (e.g., literacy's multimodal nature and its complex links to popular media). (Dyson, 2004, p. 211)

As Dyson (2004) argues in her article, this emphasis on basic literacy can lead people to overlook the significance of unconventional literacies, dismissing students' proficiencies with different sign systems as failures to abide by institutionally sanctioned norms. Under this view, Internet memes might easily be viewed as a kind of "trivial" slang that is too informal for educational contexts (Shifman, 2014, p. 15).

Aspects of this autonomous model of literacy are also present within the field of information research. While information literacy extends beyond traditional print literacy, it too, has often been presented as a need and defined as a set of standardized skills (see Chevillotte, 2010; Lloyd, 2010; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). Reflecting on the information search process, Kuhlthau (2004) notes that "[w]ithin the traditional bibliographic paradigm, we have attended almost exclusively to actions with source identification and location as the central objective" (p. 93). This focus, however, does not take into account the different circumstances and environments that shape people's engagements with information. According to Claudia Dold (2014), "[a] common assumption in evaluating information literacy classes is this: if the student can perform the tasks, then the instruction in the skill set has been effective" (p. 180). This instrumental approach to evaluating information literacy, while conventional, fails to address the various factors that influence people's understandings of what information is and the different

processes underlying its use in different communities (Lloyd, 2010). In an attempt to create a set of generalizable competencies, autonomous approaches to defining and teaching information literacy, like the autonomous approaches associated with print literacy, inevitably overlook the various contexts that give literacy meaning.

2.1.3.2 Sociocultural views of literacy

In their attempts to move away from an autonomous view of literacy, scholars are increasingly embracing a sociocultural view of the concept. Within the field of Education, this alternative approach is often referred to as the New Literacy Studies (NLS). As literacy scholar Brian Street (2003) explains, NLS research tends to follow an "ideological model of literacy" (p. 77). According to him:

> This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model—it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being. (Street, 2003, pp. 77-78)

Unlike autonomous approaches, the NLS approach emphasizes the importance of context to the understanding and representation of literacy. By identifying the role ideology plays in shaping conceptions of literacy in different cultures, this model draws people's attention to the social values and beliefs that underlie their engagements with written language. Applied to memetic storytelling, this approach can be used to highlight the situated nature of the meaning-making that occurs. While Internet memes like "Me Explaining To My Mom" might become decontextualized in their travels online, the fact remains that their reception is always re-contextualized by Internet users who appropriate them.

This ideological model highlights the need for a new research framework that accounts for the complexity of literacy in different contexts. One of the ways Street (2003) and other NLS researchers have attempted to account for this complexity is through their attention to "literacy events" and "literacy practices" (p. 78). According to Street (2003), literacy events are observable from the outside whereas literacy practices are less observable. While a literacy event can be conceived of as any specific instance of literacy engagement, he notes that "[…] we bring to literacy event concepts and social models regarding what the nature of the event is and makes it work, and give it meaning" (Street, 2003, p. 79). Thus, while NLS scholars observe literacy events they do so with the purpose of identifying the practices that shape them. "Literacy practices, then," Street (2003) explains, "refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (p. 79). Studying the cultural practices associated with literacy in different contexts, therefore, requires careful observation and thoughtful engagement with different communities. For this reason, NLS researchers often adopt an ethnographic methodology for conducting their research (Street, 2003).

Although NLS research focuses on reading and writing, its emphasis on literacy events and practices provides a way of conceptualizing Internet memes as literacy events that are representative of the larger literacy practices associated with memetic storytelling. The "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, for instance, might be viewed as a literacy event that is shaped by "[…] concepts and social models regarding what the nature of the event is and makes it work, and give it meaning" (Street, 2003, p. 79). Within the field of Education, sociocultural views of literacy have led to the development of multiple research areas, including: 1) new literacies research, which examines the literacies associated with new technologies and participatory media

(Lankshear & Knobel, 2007); 2) critical literacy, which examines the ideological power structures that shape people's engagement with communicative systems (Luke 2012); and 3) multiliteracies, which examines the way different kinds of literacies intersect (New London Group, 1996). The fact that there are numerous other possible designations associated with literacy studies (e.g., digital literacy, critical digital literacy, visual literacy, etc.) testifies to the concept's diversification over the last few decades. All of these areas of literacy hold significance for the study of Internet memes, which are a collective phenomenon that draws on multimodal methods of meaning-making.

This sociocultural focus and general respect for different kinds of literacy practices has made its way into information research as well. Arguing for a reconceptualization of information literacy, Annemaree Lloyd (2010) argues that it should be viewed from a practice perspective. Similar to the arguments put forth by NLS researchers, Lloyd's (2010) view of information literacy emphasizes the importance of context in shaping people's engagements with information. Drawing on the work of practice theorist Theodore Schatzki, she suggests that information literacy be viewed as a dispersed literacy practice that is enacted differently depending on the setting and situation. Given the wide range of information-related activities, Thomas Mackey and Trudi Jacobson (2011) contend that information literacy should be understood as a metaliteracy. Noting the significance of this view and others, the Association of College & Research Libraries's (ACRL) "Framework for information literacy for higher education" emphasizes the importance of understanding the roles that authority, creative processes, value, inquiry, scholarship, and strategic exploration play in people's interactions with information (ACRL Board, 2016, Contents section).

2.1.4 Memetic storytelling and information literacy

As I have argued elsewhere, a sociocultural, practice-based view of information literacy creates opportunities for thinking about memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice (Tulloch, In Press). Within the field of Education, researchers such as Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007) have already drawn attention to the way Internet memes constitute a new literacy practice (see also, Knobel 2006). Explaining the significance of this digital form of communication, they point out the way it highlights the ideological nature of different meaning-making practices. According to them:

> Studying online memes that aim at promoting social critique can help educators to rethink conventional approaches to critical literacy that all too often operate at the level of text analysis without taking sufficient account of the social practices, ideas, affinities and new forms of social participation and cultural production that generated the phenomenon under examination. (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 225)

To the extent that Information Science focuses on the informational logics surrounding people's engagements with different kinds of resources, it offers a different lens through which to comprehend memetic storytelling. For, if Internet memes are often referred to as information, then it stands to reason that comprehending the beliefs, values, skills, and behaviours that surround these digital texts may constitute a kind of information literacy.

Lloyd's (2010) framework is particularly useful for thinking about memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice (Tulloch, In Press). Applied to an understanding of memetic storytelling, her view points to the fact that the information literacy practices surrounding people's engagements with Internet memes will vary. Information literacy, she explains, "gains meaning through the way it is manifest as actions and activities, centred on information and

knowledge that is prefigured and shaped by historical, social, cultural, economic and political dimensions" (p. 253). To uncover the sociocultural features of an information literacy practice in a specific context, Lloyd (2010) suggests that researchers attend to several activities: "influence and information work, information sharing and coupling" (p. 254). These meta-cognitive activities provide a way of thinking about how the context in-question shapes people's engagements with information. Lloyd's (2010) framework informs my analysis of memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice and will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. This practice-based approach to understanding memetic storytelling also has the potential to contribute to scholarship on social media rituals, which seeks to explore the values that shape different forms of communication in community contexts (e.g., Trillò, Hallinan, & Shifman, 2022).

Attending to these information-related actions and activities, which draw on understandings of textuality and literacy, are important when considering the narrative function of Internet memes. "More than vectors of affirmation and attention," Mina (2019) observes, "memes contain the kernels of narratives and the ability to challenge narratives" (p. 74). The majority of Internet meme scholarship has centered on identifying some of these stories and the communicative processes that shape them. Many scholars, for instance, have attempted to define and explain the phenomenon (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2012, 2013, 2014; Voigts 2017; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). In doing so, they have linked Internet memes to various forms of self-expression, including: political and social activism (e.g., Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016; Milner, 2013a; Shifman, 2014; Shifman, 2018; Shresthova, 2016; Mina, 2019), cyberbullying and trolling (e.g., Eichorn, 2019; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013b; 2016; Miltner, 2014), entertainment (e.g., Katz & Shifman, 2017; Knobel & Lankshear,

2007; Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2014), social networking (e.g., Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014;), mental health (e.g., Kariko & Anasih, 2019), and arts-based education (e.g., de la Rosa-Carillo, 2015). This study's exploration of the informational role Internet memes serve in the lives of different youth represents an important addition to the current scholarship. Not only does it provide more space for their voices to be heard, it also provides insight into the logics that determine how memes function as evidence in different situations and possible records of people's behaviour.

2.1.4.1 Internet memes and digital citizenship

Another way this study is positioned to contribute to Internet meme research is through its exploration of the relationship between memetic storytelling and digital citizenship. The K-12 curriculum in B.C. defines "digital citizenship" as the "self-monitored habits and actions of participation and membership in digital communities" (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(d), Curricular Competency section). The above research on Internet memes highlights the way these digital texts factor into some of the issues associated with this concept (e.g., copyright, privacy, social justice, politics, etc.). The product of individual and collective engagement, Internet memes serve as representations of people's "habits and actions" (Government of British Columbia, n.d. (d), Curricular Competency section). A consideration of these habits and actions are important, because the distinction between online and offline worlds is becoming less and less clear. Moonsun Choi (2016) notes that "[…] citizenship in the Internet era can be referred to as digital citizenship, including *abilities, thinking, and action regarding Internet use, which allows people to understand, navigate, engage in, and transform self, community, society, and the world*" (p. 584, emphasis in original). For many individuals, digital and non-digital worlds are heavily integrated. The activities that take place online impact people's experiences offline.

The concept of digital citizenship exposes the expectations for human behaviour that have emerged with technological advances. These expectations are apparent in the ACRL's (2016) understanding of information literacy, which states that: "Students have a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge, in understanding the contours and the changing dynamics of the world of information, and in using information, data, and scholarship ethically" (Introduction section, para. 1). Viewed from this perspective, information literacy can actually be viewed as a facet of digital citizenship (Atif & Chou, 2018). The practices that shape people's engagements with information impact the way they enact their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens. Understanding how information literacy figures into memetic storytelling is necessary if educators and juridical systems are to come to a deeper understanding of the rights and responsibilities associated with this form of communication. More importantly, it is necessary if they are to successfully communicate these expectations to others and support them in understanding why they are important.

2.2 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an interdisciplinary overview of the theories of textuality and theories of literacy that figure into people's perceptions of Internet memes and memetic storytelling. I outlined how structuralist and poststructuralist views of textuality influence people's understanding of information, and, by extension, what constitutes an information resource. Building on Cornelius's (2014) epistemological view of information and Buckland's (1991) three categorizations of information as knowledge, process, and thing, I established a basic foundation for thinking of Internet memes as documents. I then outlined how structuralist and poststructuralist assumptions are found in autonomous and sociocultural approaches to literacy, the latter of which better accounts for the dynamic, mutimodal nature of memetic

storytelling. Drawing on the work of various scholars (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear; 2007, Lloyd, 2010; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011, Street, 2003), I established a basic foundation for thinking about memetic storytelling as a new information literacy practice, one that relates to the rights and responsibilities associated with digital citizenship. By outlining how these theoretical insights from the field of information research are positioned to add nuance to present understandings of Internet memes, young's people's engagements with Internet memes, and the relationship between memetic storytelling and digital citizenship, I highlighted the intellectual contribution this study is positioned to make to existing Internet meme scholarship.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Reframing "research"

One of the benefits and challenges of being in an interdisciplinary program is that it forced me to question what it means to do research. I recall one moment in my first year of classes when someone questioned the significance of a presentation I gave on Internet memes. Having given such humanities-style presentations at various literature conferences, it upset me to think that people would fail to see the value of this kind of inquiry. As naïve as it may seem, that moment helped me realize the importance of learning to communicate the value of different research approaches. I knew early on in my program that I wanted to adopt a methodology that aligned with my understanding of research as an activity that can contribute to the production of knowledge in a variety of ways, ways that do not have to submit to scientific standards of replicability, statistical validity, and precision in order to be considered generative. Research, I contend, is a form of storytelling through which we attempt to account for different phenomena. How researchers from different disciplines choose to conduct and tell the stories surrounding their work will vary. As a literary scholar who was embracing a project that would take her beyond the worlds of written works to the worlds of people who inspire, write, and read them, I needed to think carefully about how I would help craft this study's story through its methodological design.

This methodology chapter, therefore, begins with a discussion of how I frame "research" in the context of this project. For me, designing a study that viewed participants as co-teachers and co-learners involved challenging some of the expectations surrounding academic investigations. In his work, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2006) has problematized the tendency to adopt a narrow view of human inquiry, noting that "[r]esearch is normally seen as a

high-end, technical activity, available by training and class background to specialists in education, the sciences and related professional fields" (p. 167). And yet, as he and other scholars argue, people conduct research in a variety of ways. Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams (2008) point out that, "[i]n the broadest terms, we do research whenever we gather information to answer a question that solves a problem" (p. 10). The more I thought about it, the more I realized the close relationship between information literacy and research. The informational logic that guides our problem-solving endeavours is the logic through which we investigate areas of import to us. Understanding how memetic storytelling functions as an information literacy practice required me to let go of some of the reductive assumptions surrounding how research should be done so that I could better understand how it is often done in people's everyday lives. The rest of this chapter details how I approached that process. I begin by describing my ethnographic methodology and its theoretical underpinnings. Following this description, I outline the logistics of this study's procedures, including the methods of data collection and analysis I employed.

3.2 Adopting an ethnographic approach

In my efforts to embrace a sociocultural, practice-based view of meaning-making, I chose to follow the strategy of many NLS researchers and adopt an ethnographic approach (see Street, 2003). Every ethnography, however, is shaped by the theoretical belief system of the researcher. At its core, anthropologist Laura Nader (2011) explains, "*ethnography is a theory of description*" (p. 211, emphasis in original). Explaining the relationship between ethnography and theory, she writes:

> Ethnography has commonly been summarized as description, albeit description in context, but not exactly theory. Yet, theory is defined as the analysis of a set of facts in

> their relation to one another, or the general or abstract principles of any body of facts, which to my mind makes ethnography most definitely a theoretical endeavor, one that has had and still has worldly significance, as description and explanation.
>
> (Nader, 2011, p. 211)

An ethnographer's theoretical orientation, therefore, will influence how observations are organized through the act of description. The first two chapters outlined some of the theoretical background underlying my particular approach to this study. Theoretically, I adopt a constructivist-based, experientialist view that recognizes the dialogic nature of meaning-making. This view lends itself to a poststructuralist understanding of textuality and a sociocultural understanding of literacy. In this chapter I will outline how that theoretical orientation translates into this study's methodological design. The first half explains my dialogic approach and the specific methodological influences that shaped its enactment. The second half provides a detailed description of the methods used in this study's recruitment procedures, data collection, and analysis.

3.2.1 A dialogic theory of description

Bakhtin's (1984/2014b) concept of dialogism serves as the guiding theoretical frame for this study's methodological design. Through this research I aimed to analyze how different sets of socially constructed ideas surrounding memetic storytelling relate to each other. I obtained these constructed ideas through different dialogues that I facilitated. The first three chapters of this dissertation represent a conversation between myself, popular culture, and scholarship. The last five chapters represent my attempts to expand this dialogue by extending it to include the perspectives of various young people and their educator. These perspectives are inter-relational, shaping each other through different interactions that are bound by a variety of contextual

factors, which I will outline throughout. The main idea behind this ethnographic approach, however, is that the story of this research is a story of dialogues, dialogues that did not end with this project but continue to evolve.

3.2.2 Creating a remixed methodology

Where the design of this research project is concerned, this dialogic view provided a strong basis for adopting anthropologist Annette Markham's (2017) remix approach to ethnography, which offers a more flexible view of how researchers might approach their investigation of different phenomena. "A remix framework," Markham (2017) explains, "could be understood as a literacy focused on a set of critical strategies, skills and competencies for analysing, making sense of and communicating ethnographic knowledge about contemporary cultural phenomena" (p. 227). As Markham's (2017) use of the word "remix" suggests, this approach draws inspiration from the meaning-making practices associated with memetic storytelling. To help enact it, she offers the following verbs: "Play. Borrow. Interrogate. Move. Generate" (Markham, 2017, p. 226). These verbs, she explains, represent the activities associated with research and are connected to the three central strategies of remix, which she identifies as: "*Sampling*," "*Hybridization*," and "*Linkage*" (Markham, 2017, pp. 232, 233, 235, emphasis in original). As Markham (2017) points out, these strategies are interrelated; sampling different ideas can lead to their hybridization, which, in turn, creates new conceptual links in the form of arguments and perspectives.

To better understand how Markham's (2017) strategies guide this study's methodology, it is important to clarify what they mean. Markham's (2017) use of the word *sampling*, for instance, differs from conventional social science approaches that use the term to describe the process of selecting participants (see Creswell 2014). In the context of her approach, *sampling* is

inspired by artistic recombination processes (e.g., remixed music), which, she suggests, can provide inspiration when selecting aspects of different research approaches. “Most simply,” she writes, “we can say that a sample is the outcome of picking some particulars and leaving others behind. From what we have selected, we make meaning, whether through examination or generalization” (Markham, 2017, p. 232). This understanding of sampling, she points out, “[…] is a prominent practice in social research; feminist, interpretive, and postmodern schools of thought have long understood the value of sampling in this sense” (Markham, 2017, p. 232). Markham’s (2017) use of the word *hybridization* builds on this understanding of sampling to focus on “[…] how new and creative things emerge from mixing previously understood elements” (p. 233). The word linking, in turn, refers to the relationship between the elements that have been sampled and hybridized. A linkage “delineates the connection or relation, which might be a comparison, a juxtaposition, an interweaving, or some other type of relationship” (Markham, 2017, p. 235). These terms highlight similarities between the sense-making activities that take place within social science research and popular culture.

3.2.2.1 Remixing design-based research methodologies

Where this research project is concerned, Markham’s (2017) framework offered a strategy for navigating different ethnographic approaches. Her remix terminology helped me articulate the logic behind this study’s methodology, which is situated in different discourses surrounding design-related research practices. Since this study was to take place in a classroom context, I knew that it would involve the creation of educational activities that: 1) aligned with the objectives of the B.C. curriculum and the participating teacher’s course planning; and 2) supported the objectives of this research. The term “design,” in this respect, allowed for a broader view of this study’s different research activities, thereby accounting for its processes and

products.[17] To use Markham's (2017) terms, the concept of "design" provided a *link* between different ethnographic approaches, which established a basis for *sampling* from them to create a *hybridized* methodology.

This study's methodology samples from the following research approaches: Design Ethnography (DE), Participatory Design Ethnography (PDE), Design-Based Research (DBR), and Critical Design Ethnography (CDE). There are significant debates surrounding each of these approaches, which means that any attempt to account for them is limited in its ability to highlight the range of dialogues they have generated. However, by linking them together in this context I draw attention to some of their central ideas and strategies, which inspired aspects of my own approach. While the similarities between these methodologies provided a strong basis for their connection, their differences pointed to creative opportunities for sampling, hybridization, and linking. Below I provide brief descriptions of DE, PDE, DBR, and CDE. Following these descriptions, I outline the way I sampled from them to create a hybridized approach, which created the conceptual links that I applied to this project's methodological design.

3.2.2.1.1 Design Ethnography (DE)

Design ethnography (DE) represents a relatively new methodology in the field of information research, one that adopts a holistic approach to studying the practices and contexts that: 1) inform the research being conducted; 2) inform the design process; 3) constitute the design process; and 4) impact how the design itself is enacted in different contexts (Baskerville

[17] The New London Group (1996) employ the concept of design for similar reasons when reflecting on its relevance to literacy development. The B.C. curriculum also employs the term "design" when describing some of the competencies associated with its New Media 10 course (see British Columbia, New media 10, n.d.(d), Create and Communicate section).

& Meyers, 2015). One of the key differences between this approach to studying design and other ethnographic approaches is that the researcher is directly involved in the design process and intervenes in the research context (Baskerville & Meyers, 2015). The researcher in DE enters into the community as a co-participant who is also under investigation (Baskerville & Meyers, 2015). For this reason, "DE is an important advance because it enables both the IS researcher and the people in the field to learn from each other" (Baskerville & Meyers, 2015, p. 24). Through its commitment to dialogue, DE thus privileges the intersubjective nature of meaning-making and emphasizes the importance of the sociocultural practices and contexts that shape it. By acknowledging and accounting for the researcher's subjectivity in the research process it aligns with a constructivist-based, experientialist worldview.

3.2.2.1.2 Participatory Design Ethnography (PDE)

To the extent that DE engages both the researcher and participants in the act of design, it resembles aspects of participatory design ethnography (PDE), which is closely associated with participatory action research (PAR), collaborative research, and community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Gubrium et al., 2015). However, in PDE the ethics underlying participation form a central concern in the design process. This methodological approach is "[…] rooted in an egalitarian ethic where the research participants and communities are first and foremost prioritized" (Gubrium et al., 2015, p. 18). Practically speaking, this ethic ensures that the research agenda reflects the input of its participants, who, as co-researchers, inform the design of the project undertaken so that it takes into account their interests. As Aline Gubrium, Krista Harper, and Marty Otañez (2015) observe: "Lying at the heart of much of this work are process questions: What good is it? Who is it good for? And who determines what good it is for?" (p. 18). By highlighting and attending to the processes of negotiation underlying collaborative

inquiry, PDE allows scholars to engage in research that is not only beneficial to their disciplinary fields, but also to the communities in which their research is situated.

3.2.2.1.3 Design-Based Research (DBR)

Similar to PDE, a central goal of Design-Based Research (DBR) is to conduct studies that directly benefit participants, particularly within educational communities. Part of this process ensures that research designs are not only applicable, but also practical, in educational settings (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). This functionality is ensured through the repeated trial of a design and its subsequent modifications based on analysis. Like DE, then, DBR attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice that is often found in applied research contexts. Similar to PDE, DBR acknowledges that an important part of this process involves taking into consideration the perspectives, practices, and needs of the communities in which the research is being conducted. All three methodological approaches recognize the importance of context to understanding the implications of the design process and the research surrounding it. By actively intervening and participating in the knowledge activities being researched, DE, PDE, and DBR researchers enter into collaborative dialogues with their participants in order to ensure that the research has positive, practical applications for the people involved.

3.2.2.1.4 Critical Design Ethnography (CDE)

This same emphasis on dialogue is found in Critical Design Ethnography (CDE), which also overlaps with various aspects of DE, PDE, and DBR. This method "[…] sits at the intersection of participatory action research, critical ethnography, and socially responsive instructional design" (Barab et al., 2004, p. 255). Like DBR, CDE focuses on creating practical instructional designs that are applicable and relevant to educational communities. At the same

time, CDE adopts a more participatory, action-oriented framework that is often associated with the promotion of a particular social agenda. This emphasis is neatly demonstrated in the three main focal points of CDE, which are: "*trust*," "*intervention*," and "*sustainability*" (Barab et al., 2004, pp. 264, 265, emphasis in original). These points, in turn, reflect some of the ethical goals associated with participatory action research. Building trust between researchers and participants is crucial to designing an intervention that empowers community stakeholders, as is ensuring that the intervention is sustainable (Barab et al., 2004).

3.2.2.1.5 Methodological limitations and affordances

Each of the above-mentioned methodologies has recognized limitations. Some concerns associated with DE, for example, include whether or not the ethnographer will be able to balance ethnographic fieldwork with the act of designing; whether the design emphasis will raise certain expectations related to the kind of research product produced; and, what the ethical guidelines governing this research approach, which involves direct intervention by the researcher, should be (Baskerville & Myers, 2015). PDE, on the other hand, is motivated by a particular ethical standard, but often falls short of its egalitarian ideals (Gubrium et al., 2015). While researchers aspire to create more equitable relationships with research participants, they cannot escape the power dynamics that still impact the kinds of collaborations that are possible in different situations. Where research with youth are concerned, these dynamics not only include the institutional bodies that regulate research in specific settings (e.g., university ethics boards, schools, etc.), but also the adult guardians who mediate their children's participation in different activities and the adult-child dynamic between researchers and participants (Horgan, 2017).

Like DE and PDE, DBR also recognizes the constraints that factor into its imagined ideal of research. The researcher's dual role of advocate and critic presents an ongoing challenge, as

do the identification of causal relations, the maintenance of a productive collaborative partnership, and the refinement of interventions while developing "globally usable knowledge" (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003, p. 7). CDE researchers, in turn, face similar challenges when trying to "[…] develop flexibly adaptive designs that remain useful even when applied to new contexts" (Barab et al., 2004, p. 263). There are, in other words, limits to the dialogues each of these research methodologies are used to produce. Rather than detract from this project's remixed methodology, however, these limitations justify its formation. The respective strengths of each approach help compensate for their various weaknesses. PDE and CDE, for instance, provide an ethical standard through which to approach DE and DBR. Alternatively, DE and DBR create practical ways through which to engage in interventions that allow researchers to: 1) contribute through the sharing of their expertise; and 2) produce knowledge outputs that are practical, sustainable, and beneficial to the communities engaged.

3.2.2.2 This study's remixed design methodology

This study drew on the above-mentioned design methodologies in various ways. Following DE, it focused on the researcher as a co-participant who shares personal expertise in the research project. As a researcher who was looking to collaborate with a secondary school teacher, I wanted to be actively engaged in classroom interactions that would allow me to learn from other participants while sharing my expertise with them. The ideals of PDE, in turn, inspired the ethic through which I wanted to engage participants. While the constraints of this study's timeline, classroom setting, and pandemic-related context made it so that I could not facilitate "'deep' participation" as outlined by participatory research (Horgan, 2017, p. 252), the ideal of PDE still provided a basis for deeper engagement. Specifically, PDE's emphasis on meaningful participation, which is grounded in an ethic of shared interests, trusting relationships,

knowledge exchange, collaboration, and growth, created a co-learning orientation that informed the decisions I made throughout the course of this project. Just as Jenkins describes the value of moving towards "'a more participatory culture'" (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 266), so did this project aspire to be more participatory, even if it did not meet the standards of participatory research itself.

DBR, on the other hand, provided a practical way to design a research product (i.e., class unit) that would contribute to the educational community where this study occurred. By co-creating research activities with the participating teacher and facilitating them multiple times, we could collaborate on a practical, class-based intervention that was not only sustainable, but also shaped by the feedback we received from participating students. In line with the aims of CDE, this would allow us to produce an instructional design that could serve as a resource for different community members (e.g., teachers, youth, administrators, parents, etc.) and be modified to fit different contexts.

3.2.3 Designing a research-based educational unit

This remixed approach, in other words, aligned with my decision to conduct this research during school hours in a secondary school. Working with a teacher to design and co-facilitate a class unit on Internet memes, I could: 1) try to ensure that this project provided practical benefit to the participating teacher; 2) reflect on how youth participants' experiences and interests might be incorporated into the research process; and 3) think about the way Internet memes might fit within the revised curriculum. Conducting this research during school hours would also create less of a time commitment for the participating teacher and students, thereby allowing me to respect their busy schedules. I could open the unit experience to all of the students in the class, regardless of whether or not they wanted to participate in the study. Should they not wish to be

included as research participants, they could still participate in class activities. I simply would not collect any data related to them.

As it turned out, situating this research within a classroom also allowed me to highlight the similarities between different kinds of research experiences. Although the power relationships of classroom interactions remained (e.g., teacher/student, adult/child, researcher/participant), a concentrated effort was made to create an environment that acknowledged the students' expertise and allowed them the ability to incorporate their own inquiries into the project. This effort translated into the following methodological decisions: 1) Student participants were given a range of options for how deeply they wanted to participate in the research (e.g., in-class engagement, interview, participation in a research showcase); 2) Teacher and student participants were given the choice of how they wanted their contributions attributed in public research outputs (e.g., by name or by creating their own pseudonyms)[18]; 3) Student participants were invited to help shape future iterations of the class unit through their feedback; 4) Student participants were given training opportunities to help build their capacity to engage in research; 5) Student participants were able to select the topics and textual materials they wanted to analyze (i.e., memes) for their final projects; and 6) Student participants were encouraged to draw on this research experience to help them meet their own personal and professional goals (e.g., job applications and university applications).

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[18] This decision was made in agreement with the students' adult legal representatives. Students' adult legal representatives had to agree in order for students be acknowledged in reports by their actual names. Select students who found themselves in circumstances that required them to consent for themselves were able to make this decision on their own. See section 3.3.4 regarding student recruitment for further details.

The participating teacher, in turn, was encouraged to use this experience as a basis for professional leadership opportunities (e.g., presenting at staff meetings, developing professional development workshops, etc.). The support this project received from the UBC Public Scholars Initiative program would make it possible to create an educational resource based on the unit design as well as a website, both of which would reflect the participating teacher's input into this project, along with that of the participating students.

3.3 Study logistics

As per UBC protocol, this study received ethics approval from the university's Behavioral Research Ethics Board, a process that involved securing the permission of the Langley School District where I conducted this research. I worked to secure this approval shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Summer of 2020. I discuss some of the particulars associated with these circumstances below, elaborating on how they impacted this study's procedures. I also had a criminal record check performed, which I submitted to the principal of the school.

3.3.1 Study location

This research study took place at Langley Secondary School (LSS) in Langley, British Columbia during the 2020-2021 school year. My selection of this location was based on multiple factors, including my familiarity with the high school in question. A lifetime resident of Langley, I was interested in conducting this research in my local community. I am acquainted with many teachers in the Langley School District, and, as a past graduate of the Langley school system, I wanted to give back to it through this research project. A couple of years prior to this study, I began volunteering at LSS with the teacher who ended up becoming my collaborator, Mr. Aaron Rowe, who elected to be acknowledged by name. I knew Mr. Rowe briefly from my own days as

a student at another secondary school in Langley. While I had never been taught by him, I had attended one of the basketball practices he held when I was in grade eight. Reconnecting with him and periodically volunteering in his English classes over the last couple of years[19] allowed us to develop our shared interest in new media education, which served as a foundation for this collaboration. I knew from my work with him that he was interested in incorporating memetic storytelling into some of his class activities.

Further contributing to my decision to conduct this research at LSS was the diversity of its school community. LSS is the oldest high school in Langley and serves a catchment of students that includes the downtown core of Langley City and some suburban areas within the Langley Township. The student population, which numbers at approximately 930, contains young people from a range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, including self-declared First Nations students, as well as international students from China, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Spain, and Germany. In addition, there are also refugee students from places such as Burma, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. The school offers a range of different programs that highlight the diverse interests and career pathways of its students. These programs include: Baseball Academy, Softball Academy, Intensive Fine Arts Program, Piping/Plumbing Dual Credit Post Secondary Program, Musical Theatre, AVID Program, Kwantlen Xcel Program, Trades I and Trades II Intensive, Japanese, Italian, and Dance (see Langley School District, n.d., About Us section). As I became better acquainted with the LSS community, I decided that it would be an ideal place to conduct this research project, because it would allow me to learn from students from different walks of life.

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[19] I had been periodically volunteering in some of Mr. Rowe's English classes since 2018.

3.3.2 COVID-19 precautions

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted this research in various ways. As part of the UBC ethics approval process, I submitted a safe research plan that outlined how I would abide by the protocols set by the Langley School District, as operationalized by LSS, and, specifically, the teacher in whose classroom this research took place. This involved performing daily health checks before entering the school, regular hand sanitizing, physical distancing in different areas, and mask/face shield wearing. The cohort-system implemented by the Langley School District limited the number of interactions between students, staff, and visitors. This cohort structure accounted for the increased proximity of interactions that inevitably took place in the classroom. In addition to the cohort-system, which was based on a quarter-semester school year, the district arranged the school time-table so that there were staggered start and end times for different grade levels, as well as different break periods. This time-table reduced the number of people in the hallways. As part of this system, senior students (grades eleven and twelve) attended morning courses in-person each day and alternated attending afternoon courses in-person. Half of the afternoon course attended class one day and the other half attended class the following day. Wednesday afternoons were online for all senior students so there were no in-person classes taught during that time.[20] Halfway through the quarter semester the morning courses and afternoon courses switched time slots (i.e., the courses that were meeting every day in the morning switched to alternating afternoon classes and vice versa). As I will detail later on, this scheduling influenced how Mr. Rowe and I chose to conduct the unit in different rounds.

[20] The senior students, in other words, were on a blended model of instruction.

Throughout the year, as health guidelines changed, safety measures increased within the classroom (i.e., mask wearing became mandatory for everyone in the class). In an effort to make sure that I was following appropriate procedures I met with the principal prior to the start of this research and in the middle of it, adjusting my practices based on our conversations. When conducting in-person interviews, I constructed a plastic barrier using a three-sided presentation board as a further protective measure. During recruitment, I informed Mr. Rowe and his students that I would abide by the safety protocols as they were operationalized at LSS and in Mr. Rowe's classroom. When distributing consent and assent forms I also provided all potential participants (including Mr. Rowe) with a UBC created documented titled, "Notice of COVID-related risks during research," as mandated by the UBC ethics board. I am extremely grateful to UBC, the Langley School District, and Langley Secondary School for their support in allowing this study during such a challenging time.

3.3.3 Teacher recruitment

Out of courtesy to Mr. Rowe, who had already demonstrated support for this research, I invited him to participate in this study before considering other avenues of collaboration. He accepted this invitation, which was issued via email, and, in late September 2020, we began the process of selecting the courses in which this study would take place.[21] Based on the quarter-semester system and Mr. Rowe's course schedule, we decided to conduct this research unit in three of his English courses throughout the year: A New Media 11 class in semester one; a New

[21] During the consent process Mr. Rowe was given the option of whether he would like to be acknowledged by name in reports related to this study or if he would prefer a pseudonym. He opted to be acknowledged by name.

Media 10 class in semester two; and a Composition 11 class in semester three.[22] The age of the students in these different classes ranged from approximately fifteen to eighteen years old.

3.3.4 Student recruitment

In an effort to honour my commitment to positioning student participants as co-learners, I created a recruitment presentation that focused on the value of research. In each of the three semesters mentioned, I gave this presentation to Mr. Rowe's selected English class.[23] This presentation was an interactive exploration of the nature of research that contextualized this study as an opportunity for students to investigate their own interests in relation to Internet memes. In this respect, it functioned as an introduction to the class unit. These recruitment presentations took place at least one week prior to the start of the unit itself. Students wishing to participate in the study were given a week to decide and were required to return assent forms they had signed themselves along with consent forms that had been signed by a legal adult guardian or representative. Given the unusual circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, I did, upon consultation with my supervisor, allow several students to turn in their forms a few days after the week deadline had passed. I also encountered several students who requested the right to consent for themselves, which led my supervisor and I to amend the consent process so that it would allow youth 16 years and older, who appeared to be emancipated or did not have an available adult guardian, to consent for themselves. This change, which was supported by the Langley School District and UBC, allowed me to honour my commitment to fostering a more participatory research environment for students.

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[22] Given the unusual scheduling created by COVID-19, it was necessary to complete this research in three different quarter semesters as opposed to one long semester.
[23] These presentations were given in October 2020, December 2020, and March 2021.

At the same time, this amendment required that I trust students to represent themselves honestly, because I had limited knowledge of their lives. Consequently, one of the tensions I experienced as a new researcher was learning how to navigate discussions related to students' personal lives at the beginning of our acquaintance. This process involved balancing respect for students' privacy and trust in their judgment with my responsibility to ensure that I abided by the protocols approved by the Langley School District and UBC. For this reason, I stressed to students that, if possible, they needed to provide consent forms signed by their legal adult guardians. I made myself available to answer questions related to the project after each recruitment presentation, and, in the second and third rounds of this project, made myself available throughout the following week as well.[24] In each round, only a portion of the students in the class decided to participate in the study. In the first round, ten of the twenty-four students participated. In the second round, five of the seventeen students participated, and, in the third round, six of the twenty-one students participated. The total number of students who participated in this study was twenty-one, which was approximately one third of the total number of students who experienced the unit. I renewed student assent throughout the course of the units, reminding students that their participation in the research was optional and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Students in the study received a certificate of participation at the end of the unit that was signed by myself, my supervisor (Dr. Eric Meyers), and Mr. Rowe. The idea behind

[24] Given the change in how we chose to schedule the units in these semesters, I helped out in Mr. Rowe's class following the recruitment presentations to build familiarity and make myself available should the students have any questions related to the project. In the first round, the unit was dispersed over more weeks, so I had more time to get to know the students. I discuss this in greater detail in the next chapter, which details the unit's design.

this certificate was that participating students could reference their involvement in the study on their resumes moving forward.

Like the participating teacher, participating students were able to indicate their preference regarding how they wanted to be acknowledged in reports related to this study. In consultation with their adult guardians/representatives, they chose whether they wanted to be acknowledged by name or by a pseudonym. In the analysis that follows, I refer to students based on the preference they indicated in these documents. Due to a number of factors, I was unable to collect detailed demographic information about them. These factors included the limited time I was able to spend with them in the classroom; the nature of the interactions we shared in-class, which were not conducive to private conversations; the kinds of interview questions asked, which were oriented more towards students' experience with Internet memes; and the fact that I was not able to interview all of the students. I will discuss these limitations further in this dissertation's concluding chapter.

Consequently, I can only offer an approximation of the age range represented by these youth participants (approx. aged 15-18 years). I am also unable to speak as much to the impact that ethnic and cultural identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status might have had on their engagement with memes, although my analysis and the students' own insights certainly gesture to the way these factors impact one's understanding of why different memes resonate with different individuals. I can say that all of the participants in this study had access to technology through which they encountered memes and that some of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented were of Caucasian, Asian, and South Asian origin. I have tried to provide more detail related to these cultural backgrounds where relevant in my analysis. While this lack of personal detail is a limiting factor of this research, the details I was able to collect

nevertheless offer a glimpse of the students' diversity as individuals. Below is a brief introduction to each based on information they shared during the study. Most students and their guardians/representatives opted for attribution by name, but several opted to create pseudonyms.

3.3.4.1 Student participants from New Media 11 class (Round one)

Kate Phan. Kate's passions included travelling, cooking and exercising. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career in either logistics, IT, or business.

Yeji Lee. Yeji's passions included reading non-fiction books, playing videogames, and learning new things. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career as an international business lawyer, programmer, or university professor in math/science subjects.

Steven Rutherford. Steven's passions included music, sports, and cooking. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a sports broadcaster, cameraman, or music composer.

Jordan Kaye. Jordan's passions included growing every day, spirituality, and art. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career as a waitress, an entrepreneur, or an employee at a metaphysical shop.

Justin Alford. Justin's passions included working out, music, and sports. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a pro NBA player or a career in psychology. He was also interested in developing a new strain of cannabis.

Tanya Kennedy. Tanya's passions included horseback riding, basketball, and family. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career in economics, therapy, or human studies.

Aidan Formilleza. Aidan's passions included working out, playing videogames, and friend groups. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career in the military, a science degree from UBC, or owning a company.

Armaan S. Grewal. Armaan's passions included spending time with his husky, basketball, and videogames. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a software engineer, game designer, or something in computer science at UBC.

Quinn St. Andrassy. Quinn's passions included fish keeping (i.e., in fish tanks), working out, camping, hunting, and fishing. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a firefighter or carpenter.

Emily Sousa. Emily's passions included ringette/skating, skateboarding, camping, and cooking. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career in ortho, as a vet tech, or a park ranger.

3.3.4.2 Student participants from New Media 10 class (Round two)

Simon (chosen pseudonym). Simon's passions included kart, laser tag, and a war game. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a worker in karting, an occupational therapist, or a career in IBO.

Nate Goldstone. Nate's passions included cars, sports, and guitar. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career in architecture, a career as a millwright, or a career as a private trainer.

Zoe Petersen. Zoe's passions included trumpet, school, and softball. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career as an author/screenwriter, video editor, or lawyer.

Cedrik Melendez. Cedrik's passions included music/saxophone, exploring tech, and basketball. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career related to something in the sciences, computer science, or content creation.

Lucas Rand. Lucas's passions included rugby, water sports, and cooking. At the time of this study, he was interested in exploring a career in something related to computers, business, or cooking.

3.3.4.3 Student participants from Composition 11 class (Round three)

Becky Cheon. Becky's passions included travelling, listening to music, and cooking. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career as a fashion designer, flight attendant, or possibly cooking.

Shaunti Chernos. Shaunti's passions included softball, working out, and travelling. At the time of this study, she was interested in pursuing a career as a flight attendant, softball player, or ultra sound tech.

Tooka pack (chosen pseudonym). Tooka pack's passions included sports, videogames, and working out. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career related to something medical, as a firefighter, or a police officer.

T (chosen pseudonym). T's passions included sports, computers, and money. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a rugby player, online business consultant, or real estate agent/graphic designer.

Dale Mebs. Dale's passions included science, acting, and swimming. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career as a marine biologist, actor, or astronomer.

Brano Kopec. Brano's passions included playing videogames, sports, and shoes. At the time of this study, he was interested in pursuing a career in either welding, landscaping, or trades.

3.4 Methods of data collection

As is often the case in ethnographic research, I decided to employ a variety of methods of data collection for this study. These methods, which I describe in greater detail below, were designed to enable different levels of participation and ensure that those who chose to participate had the flexibility to determine the nature and extent of their contributions as they pertained to the research opportunities presented. These methods were also designed to document the different kinds of activities and storytelling that took place through this project.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

In an effort to create more opportunities to learn from participants, I decided to conduct semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the participating teacher and some of the participating students. They were semi-structured in the sense that I prepared a set of open-ended questions and prompts that guided the interviews, but remained flexible as to the direction the conversations went as participants helped shape them through their responses. These interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that I was able to document each participant's insights as fully as possible.[25] In each interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of their own.

3.4.1.1 Teacher interviews

Prior to the design of the class unit, I conducted two interviews with Mr. Rowe. The first focused on topics related to the revised B.C. curriculum and the second focused on Internet memes. These interviews were conducted after school and lasted approximately one hour each. The interviews were designed to help me learn more about Mr. Rowe's knowledge, experiences,

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[25] To view these interview protocols, please consult Appendices A and C.

and practices as a teacher, thereby providing further insight as to how we might collaborate. Along with my volunteer experience in Mr. Rowe's classroom, these insights provided a way for me to account for some of his interests and expertise when co-designing the class unit with him.

3.4.1.2 Student interviews

Throughout the different research rounds, I conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the participating students. These one-on-one interviews, which were scheduled so as not to interfere with participating students' class activities,[26] were optional and held in an empty classroom to ensure privacy. Out of the twenty-one students who participated in this study, fifteen opted to be interviewed. Although designed to last between fifteen and thirty minutes, these interviews fluctuated between approximately five and fifty minutes depending on how much each student had to say. In many ways, they allowed for extended conversations that built on classroom interactions. In doing so, they provided me with the opportunity to become better acquainted with some of the participants and gain a deeper understanding of their interests and expertise. This relationship-building opportunity was especially appreciated given the way COVID-19 restrictions could contribute to feelings of distance from others (e.g., mask wearing, physical distancing, etc.), not to mention the fact that my time in the classroom with the students was limited due to various factors, including the shortened semester length.

[26]Most of these interviews took place after school. To accommodate a couple of students' schedules, one took place during the lunch hour and another took place at the end of class, but only after ensuring that it would not interfere with any class activities.

3.4.2 Participant observation

To document the design and facilitation of the class unit, I engaged in participant observation. With the participants' permission, I wrote notes and took photographs related to their contributions. During the planning stage, I wrote notes based on my conversations with Mr. Rowe and took photographs of any relevant brainstorms we created on the whiteboard or scrap pieces of paper. When conducting the unit, I wrote down observations related to participants' contributions, particularly statements made during my conversations with them during class activities. I also took photographs of their brainstorms, which were sometimes written on scraps of paper, in journals, or on top of their whiteboard desks. Following each of the workshops, I wrote detailed reflections that incorporated these observations, both written and digital, into more detailed accounts of each day's interactions, contextualizing the notes and photos. This process allowed me to identify any questions I had related to my observations, which I could follow-up on in later discussions with students.

3.4.3 Collection of classwork (i.e., unit-related materials and assignments)

To aid in the documentation of participants' contributions, I also collected materials related to the activities Mr. Rowe and I facilitated during the class unit (e.g., sticky notes, cue cards, reflections, etc.). These activities were designed to provide students with the opportunity to record their insights. Since I was helping co-facilitate the unit, collecting materials made it easier to navigate some of the safety precautions and ensure that all of the participants could have their ideas represented in relation to the different issues discussed. At the end of each research round, I also collected copies of the unit assignments that participating students had turned into Mr. Rowe, which included activities that allowed them to reflect on their own meme engagement and the final projects they completed.

3.4.4 Workshop reflection questionnaire

To help document Mr. Rowe's feedback on the unit workshops, I had created a written reflection questionnaire for him to fill out after each class. The idea behind these questionnaires was that I could reference them when making modifications to the unit. At the start of this project, I was unsure how much time we would have to collaborate outside of class. However, as our collaboration progressed, it turned out that these questionnaires were unnecessary, because Mr. Rowe and I had debrief conversations after each workshop. During these conversations, I wrote down any reflections he had related to how the workshops went. Since these debrief sessions covered the questions outlined in the questionnaire,[27] we decided to dispense with it. This decision was more convenient for Mr. Rowe and myself, because it meant that he did not have to fill out extra documents on his own time and there was no delay in making changes to the unit.

3.4.5 A research showcase

As part of this study's commitment to facilitating a more participatory research experience, I wanted to provide participants with an opportunity to share their knowledge with the public and give back to the school community. For this reason, all student participants were invited to participate in a research showcase event that would be scheduled after the different research rounds had been completed. This event, like the interviews, was presented as another option for participating students. At the end of each unit, participating students who were interested in learning more about the event were invited to sign-up to a contact list. Due to concerns associated with COVID-19, Mr. Rowe and I decided to postpone this showcase until

[27] To view this questionnaire, consult Appendix B.

restrictions had lifted. We informed the interested group of students that we would let them know when the event occurred. We ended up holding the research showcase in Spring 2022. The time delay between the research units and this event likely explains why only two students from the study were able to participate in it. We ended up creating a poster exhibit based on some of the research topics explored in the unit and displayed it in the school library. I documented the design process of these posters with written notes and photographs.

3.4.6 Limitations of data collection

There were, of course, limitations to these processes of data collection. Some of these limitations were due to the pandemic, as irregular attendance made it difficult for me to document all of the participating students' responses to different workshop activities associated with the unit. Absences also made it challenging to schedule interviews, as did the irregular school timetable. My own time was divided between helping facilitate the unit and documenting participants' involvement in it, which meant that I did not always have the opportunity to record every participating student's reaction to each activity. At the same time, this data collection was also limited by different students' decisions not to be interviewed or hand in all of their assignments. The diversity of this collection process was further impacted by the unit revisions Mr. Rowe and I made, which changed some of the activities/assignment structures in each research round. Added to this unique picture of student participation was the fact that I did not collect Mr. Rowe's assessments of student work. While this did not impact the project's ability to respond to its research questions, it does mean that I cannot comment in-depth on this unit's assessment measures.

3.4.7 Materials collected

For all of the above-mentioned reasons, I ended up collecting a range of materials in relation to this study. These materials, which will be explained further in relation to the unit's design, included: connection cards, meme definitions, sticky notes, student meme journals, field notes, photographs, digital assignments (e.g., meme collections, final projects), feedback cue cards, and audio-recorded interviews. These materials represent different kinds of textual representations that can be combined in various ways to inform this study's research questions. Below is a summary table of the number of student connection cards, definitions, interviews, and assignments I collected. As I will detail in the next chapter, these numbers were affected by changes made to the unit in each round, which, along with students' presence or absence during different classes, their decision to participate/not participate in interviews, or submit assignments, impacted the materials I was able to collect.

Material Type	Number Collected
Student Connection Cards	21
Student Written Meme Definitions	14
Student Interviews	15
Student Meme Collections (Journal Charts)	3
Student My Favourite Meme Assignments	6
Student Final Projects	20

Table 3.1 A summary of different student materials I collected.

3.5 Methods of analysis

3.5.1 Organization of materials and interview transcription

As a first step of analysis, I organized the unit materials according to their respective activities, comparing students' responses in each round. I created: 1) a table that displayed all of their connection cards; 2) a table that displayed all of their meme definitions; 3) a list that outlined the topics of the different memes they shared in their meme collection assignment, and 4) a table that outlined the topics they chose to explore in their final projects. My list of the students' memes included a description of where they located them (e.g., name of social media platform, group chat, personal text, etc.), as well as the possible emotions and values the texts represented based on the students' written descriptions. My table outlining their final projects included a description of the topics they chose to explore, the style of their presentations (e.g., PowerPoint presentation, Word doc, etc.) and the different ways they used memes (e.g., to illustrate a point, as evidence of their topic/claims, etc.).

I also transcribed this study's interviews, a process that allowed me to identify connections between students' responses, as well as those of Mr. Rowe. I performed verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, including verbal sounds (e.g., "ums" and "uhs"). I did this so I could have access to this information when analyzing the transcripts in greater depth. However, when including direct interview quotes in the findings chapters I decided to remove unnecessary filler sounds (e.g., "ums" and "uhs"), along with stammers (e.g., th-the), word repetitions (e.g., like—like), and incoherent transitions (e.g., pre-tha). Following my transcription of the interviews, I engaged in close readings of them, noting the different perspectives they represented, experiences shared, and examples offered. I then performed additional close readings of all of the study materials, including the detailed workshop reflections I had written, which contextualized my photographs of students' brainstorms. At one point, when debating the inclusion of memetic images, I hand-drew many of the students' meme examples, a process that forced me to pay greater attention to their respective details. Through these different forms of engagement, I familiarized myself with the different materials I had collected and opened myself to the possible insights they could impart.

3.5.2 Analytic framework

In keeping with this study's remix approach, my analytic framework sampled, hybridized, and linked different methods. While the concept of *design* served as the basis for my remixing of different ethnographic styles, the concept of *dialogue* served as the basis for my remixing of different approaches to the narrative analysis of materials I collected. While my analysis adheres closely to Arthur Frank's (2012) socio-narratology, the flexibility of his approach created space for the use of other scholars' concepts and strategies. As a complement to his work, I drew on Alexandra Georgakopoulou's (2006, 2019) small stories approach to

narrative analysis, and Gillian Rose's (2016) approach to the critical analysis of visual materials. I describe these scholars' work in greater detail below, focusing specifically on the concepts and strategies I employed in my analysis.

3.5.2.1 Socio-narratology

According to Arthur Frank (2012), socio-narratology is grounded in an awareness of the way stories act in people's lives. This is an inherently dialogic process: stories shape people and people shape stories. Moving away from social scientific understandings of method that prescribe and standardize analysis, he prefers to use the term "analytic practice" to describe his approach, which he labels "*dialogical narrative analysis*" (Frank, 2012, p. 16, emphasis in original). Describing the ethos of this form of analysis, he writes:

> Interpretation, in its hermeneutic and dialogical tradition, is less a matter of decoding stories than of seeing all the variations and possibilities inherent in the story. The narrative analyst opens him- or herself to these possibilities, in order to invite others to open themselves. Interpretation seeks *not* to say: all the story is here, analyzed and stated in clear, explicit terms. Interpretation seeks not to stand over the story, speaking about it. Interpretation aspires to be an ongoing dialogue with the story. (Frank, 2012, p. 104, emphasis in original)

This understanding of interpretation resonates with my own dialogic theory of description, which recognizes the significance of identifying different perspectives. The aim is not to arrive at an ultimate answer, but rather, to engage in conversations about the different answers that exist.

For Frank (2012), dialogical narrative analysis involves asking questions about stories, their tellers, and listeners. He offers various strategies for entering into dialogue with narratives, such as thinking about them in terms of images, viewing them from the perspective of a minor

character, highlighting possible omissions, and recognizing differences between the storyteller and researcher. He presents five questions that can aid researchers in performing dialogical narrative analysis:

1. "What does the story make narratable?" (Frank, 2012, p. 75). This question brings to attention the performative nature of storytelling, and, in the process, highlights how stories make certain realities appear possible and others less possible. Reflecting on what a story makes narratable allows researchers to think about the way it can validate or invalidate people's existence by giving them the means to express it.
2. "Who is *holding their own* in the story, but also, is the story making it more difficult for other people to hold their own?" (Frank, 2012, p. 77, emphasis in original). By making people's lives narratable, stories can give individuals a means through which to assert themselves. This question exposes some of the power dynamics inherent to stories as representations that work to the advantage of some people while working to the disadvantage of others.
3. "What is the effect of people being caught up in their own stories while living with people caught up in other stories?" (Frank, 2012, p. 78). As Frank (2012) explains it, being *caught up* in a story means failing to see the possibility of alternative tellings of it. People can lose the ability to recognize the significance of stories that challenge their own narratives. This question invites researchers to consider the kinds of effects storytelling can produce, including silences.
4. "What is the force of fear in the story, and what animates desire?" (Frank, 2012, p. 81). Frank (2012) views fear and desire as connected aspects of storytelling. Asking how fear

enters into a story and informs its telling allows researchers to consider the desires that motivate it.

5. "How does a story help people, individually and collectively, to remember who they are? How does a story do the work of memory?" (Frank, 2012, p. 82). This question helps researchers think about the relationship between stories and identity, as well as the role time and experience plays in shaping people's changing relationship to stories as they mature.

Frank (2012) offers these questions as possible tools for researchers engaging in dialogical narrative analysis, but he does not maintain that they must be applied in any specific way. On the contrary, in order to stay dialogic, this form of analysis grants researchers flexibility when engaging in interpretative inquiry. These questions may serve as prompts for critical engagement, but the process of discovery is different for everyone.

All of these questions provide entry points into analyzing this study's materials. The stories this project generated highlight different students' relationships to memetic storytelling while drawing attention to the possible relationships other people might have to it. Underlying Frank's (2012) dialogic approach is an understanding of the way researchers and participants co-construct meaning. He notes that: "Participants *do things*. Specifically, they are not data for investigators; instead, they co-construct with investigators what count as data" (Frank, 2012, p. 98, emphasis in original). The students in this project co-constructed what counted as data in various ways, most notably by choosing to what extent they wanted to participate when it came to sharing contributions through classroom interactions, interviews, or their assignments. The stories they chose to share or not to share through their participation shape this study's findings.

Frank's (2012) dialogic approach to narrative analysis provided a way of accounting for this study's insights while remaining open to the reality that they do not act as a final word or answer. His questions serve as reminders that any story is limited in its ability to represent its subject matter and tellers, partly because people are positioned to share in certain ways, but also because they are constantly changing. "Dialogical interpretation," he observes, "requires *making the achievement of the story questionable*, in order to ask what that achievement achieves" (Frank, 2012, p. 107, emphasis in original). By questioning what this study's materials can say, I also highlight what they can achieve. Appreciating the achievement of the students' contributions, as unique as they appear to be, allowed me to illustrate the significance of the perspectives they create. This process of interpretation involved making connections between different materials and raising questions. My role as a co-participant in this study and analyst involved creating links between the different stories this project generated and those that had previously shaped my own thinking in relation to this project.

3.5.2.2 Small stories approach to narrative analysis

Part of what makes Frank's (2012) approach dialogic is its recognition of the different kinds of stories that exist (e.g., literary, folklore, news, talk, etc.). While this understanding aligns with my narrative view of this study's materials, I find Alexandra Georgakopoulou's (2006) concept of "small stories" research additionally helpful (p. 123). Recognizing that stories come in all forms, she argues for the significance of stories that might not fit the criteria of conventional narratives. Often used in relation to ethnographic research, her approach raises the following questions:

> What will the analysis miss out on if it does not see its target as a story? What is at stake for the analyst, and what is the analyst's investment in embracing the narrative

perspective on the study of everyday life discourse activities? (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260)

Where this project is concerned, the stakes included my ability to see the significance of the narrative exchanges I had with participants, no matter how brief, fragmented, or unconventional they might have appeared. A small stories perspective allowed me to identify the narratives that emerged in my conversations with Mr. Rowe and the students, their brainstorms, assignments, and interviews.

A small stories perspective also laid a foundation for acknowledging the narrative work of Internet memes. Georgakopoulou (2019) argues that small stories research is especially relevant when thinking about the different kinds of narratives that circulate online. "Small stories research," she observes, "having developed tools for examining fragmented and transposable activities, can offer a suitable bridge between narrative analysis, discourse transposition, and social media" (p. 266). Some of the characteristics of small stories have included: 1) "Non- or multi-linear unfolding events sequenced in further narrative-making"; 2) "Emphasis on world-making, i.e., telling of mundane, ordinary, everyday events"; 3) "Emphasis on detachability and recontextualization of a story"; and 4) "Co-construction of a story's point, events, and characters between teller and audiences" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260). These characteristics serve as potential links between small stories research, Internet memes, and the discourses that emerged through this project.

When analyzing small stories Georgakopoulou (2019) recommends that researchers focus on the following aspects, which are interconnected:

1. "*Ways of telling*" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 258, emphasis in original). The sociocultural features that circumscribe the telling of stories in particular contexts,

including the conventions that establish the types of stories that are told, the expectations surrounding them, and how the stories interact.

2. "*Sites*" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 258, emphasis in original). The contexts in which stories are told, which encompass the social, physical, and technological factors that impact the way people engage in storytelling in different environments. Sites can also refer to the contexts represented by the story.
3. "[*T*]*ellers*" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 258, emphasis in original). This focus pertains to the roles people adopt when telling stories, which determine how they participate in communicative encounters with others.

Combined, these three elements serve as a complement to Frank's (2012) questions, which, in their own way, seek to highlight these aspects of storytelling. Dialogical narrative analysis, after all, involves maintaining an unfixed attitude toward the people who tell stories, the ways they choose to tell them, the sites that shape how and why they choose to tell them the way that they do, and their effects. For me, Georgakopoulou's (2019) paradigm of small stories provides a practical vocabulary through which to describe the processes associated with socio-narratology.

3.5.2.3 Critical visual analysis

The multimodal nature of this study's different materials, however, means that many of the narratives it produced are represented in images. The Internet memes students engaged, as well as the projects they designed, make use of visual modes of storytelling. For this reason, I also drew on Gillian Rose's (2016) strategies for developing a critical visual methodology that: 1) "*takes images seriously*"; 2) "*thinks about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution*"; and 3) "*considers your own way of looking at images*" (p. 22, emphasis in original). The ethic underlying Rose's (2016) criteria for visual analysis aligns with

those of Georgakopoulou (2006, 2019), and Frank (2012). While Rose (2016) describes various methods for analyzing images, she offers a critical framework through which to navigate them. This framework draws attention to the four sites that contribute to the possible meanings an image produces:

> the site of *production*, which is where an image is made; the site of the *image* itself, which is its visual content; the site(s) of its *circulation*, which is where it travels; and the site where the image encounters its spectators or uses, or what this book will call its *audiencing*. (p. 24, emphasis in original).

Rose's (2016) articulation of these four sites provides a way of engaging with small stories that are visual. To use Georgakopoulou's (2019) terms, they offer a strategy for reflecting on the *ways* stories are told in different *sites* by different *tellers*. At the same time, Rose's (2016) framework also provides a way of thinking through Frank's (2012) questions about the work stories accomplish. A dialogic perspective can highlight the connections between these sites, while also noting potential disconnections.

When thinking about each of these four sites, Rose (2016) draws attention to three modalities that influence the work they accomplish in relation to an image. Researchers, she suggests, often attend to the "*technological*", "*compositional*", and "*social*" modes of these sites when thinking about the meaning an image produces (Rose, 2016, pp. 25, 26, emphasis in original). Different theories of visual analysis, she points out, privilege different sites and modalities when describing the significance of an image. The technologies through which images are created, circulated, and viewed can impact the meaning they create. However, the composition of the image also impacts the purpose of its production, the way it circulates, and how it is received by different audiences. Social relations, in turn, permeate every site associated

with the production, circulation, and audiencing of an image, and are often represented in the image itself. Combined with Rose's (2016) four different sites of meaning-making, these three modalities are extremely useful when thinking about the images produced through memetic storytelling. They not only draw attention to the limited knowledge one might have when interpreting an Internet meme, but also highlight how knowledge of these sites shapes the possible meanings a meme can convey. What is made *narratable* through a meme, how it allows people to *hold their own*, get *caught up* in their own storytelling, express their *fears* and *desires*, and affirm their sense of identity (Frank, 2012) depends on how they choose to read a meme in light of these aspects of its existence, some of which may be more or less available. In my analysis, I employed Rose's (2016) framework when thinking about how students were positioned to make sense of memes and how I was positioned to make sense of them.

3.5.3 Rigour and research quality

To the extent that a dialogical approach to narrative analysis challenges conventional understandings of method, it can raise questions about the rigour of the research it produces. From the start of this dissertation, I have endeavoured to make the rigour of my approach clear by outlining its theoretical foundation in a way that demonstrates the logic behind the decisions I made and the actions I took. Where my methods of data collection are concerned, I demonstrated rigour through the variety of documentary measures I employed. I double-checked direct statements written down in class with the participating students and Mr. Rowe to ensure that I had recorded them properly. Following the classes, I wrote detailed reflections that integrated my notes and photographs and allowed me to note questions I wanted to follow-up on. During the interview sessions, I clarified statements with participants when I was uncertain of their meaning. The participating students had control over what they wrote and included in their

workshop materials and assignments, which ensured that the representations I collected of their work had been approved by them. I personally transcribed the interviews I conducted, a process that involved carefully listening to conversations and replaying sections multiple times to ensure they were represented well.

Analytically speaking, I carefully crafted this ethnography's dialogic "*theory of description*" (Nader, 2011, p. 211, emphasis in original). Remixing elements of Frank's (2012) socio-narratology, Georgakopoulou's (2019) small stories paradigm, and Rose's (2016) critical framework for visual analysis, I established a lens through which I could analyze this study's "set of facts in their relation to one another" (Nader, 2011, p. 211, emphasis in original). Frank (2012) notes that dialogical narrative analysis can begin with a researcher's "analytic interest," observing how "[t]hat interest becomes a device to organize the multiple stories that participants tell according to how the device selects from and among stories […]" (p. 114). Where this study is concerned, my research questions form the basis of my analytic interest, which is why I organize its findings according to them. These questions guide my organization of the stories told through this project and my selection of the examples used to illustrate them.

I demonstrate the rigour of this process through my critical engagement with these materials. Grounded in the above-mentioned methods of analysis, I try to highlight the range of possibilities associated with this analytical arrangement, while rendering it questionable in a way that leaves it open to alternative arrangements and interpretations. The intellectual meticulousness of this process is modeled through my close engagement with the examples I examine, which showcases how I engaged with the materials that are not represented, thereby revealing the skill and care with which I attended to the details of this project. Rigour comes through my asking of questions that reveal different aspects of a story's work, connecting it to

the work of other stories generated through this project. One's student's interview comment can link to another student's assignment or another's classroom observation. Identifying and facilitating dialogues through this connective process is one way I attempt to speak *with* my participants instead of *about* them (Frank, 2012). I place students' insights, Mr. Rowe's insights, and my own in conversation with each other and other scholarship. As Frank (2012) points out, researchers do not approach projects without a set of knowledge that informs how they view it. For me as a co-participant in this study, making sense of its materials involved considering how they related to what I had previously known about Internet memes. My findings, therefore, are not separate from my discussion. On the contrary, my findings are discussions.

3.5.4 A note about the inclusion of visual materials

One of the interesting challenges I faced when creating this study's findings chapters was how to navigate the tensions surrounding the inclusion of images. The meme examples students shared with me frequently took the form of decontextualized images drawn from a variety of online sources, some of which they identified and others of which they did not. Given the widespread, collective nature of memetic storytelling, it is not easy to determine the origins of a meme or to attribute authorship to it. For this reason, I have not included bibliographic information for the memes associated with this project, but rather, identify how I accessed them through the students' assignments.[28] When it came to determining whether or not I could include images of the different meme examples, I had to ask myself whether doing so would qualify as fair dealing. After discussing this issue with my supervisor and the UBC copyright librarian, I

[28] The students did not provide detailed source information related to how they located different memes. If mentioned, they usually gave the name of the platform on which they discovered it.

was left to determine a course of action. Since there continue to be debates surrounding the criteria of a meme, I have decided not to include images of examples that might possess more contentious meme status, opting instead to describe those examples in writing. I have, however, included some images that I believe would qualify as well-known memes, or at least, memes that have made it into various sites online as popular commentary. I have tried to ensure that the images I include only feature people who are: a) public figures; b) performers; c) civilians who have embraced their meme celebrity; or d) unrecognizable (e.g., their face is not shown). I have done this out of respect for people's privacy, as I recognize that some individuals who become associated with a meme are not pleased about it. I justify my inclusion of these remixed images based on the belief that doing so qualifies as fair dealing (see Government of Canada, 2022, Part III section).

3.5.5 Note about the presentation of quoted written materials

In an effort to keep direct quotes accurate to how they appeared in the written materials associated with this project, I have not edited for grammatical or spelling errors. This means that readers will encounter a number of such errors, particularly in the students' classwork. I highlight the presence of these errors only to point out that their presence is actually evidence of this study's careful writing, rather than neglect. I double-checked quoted sources to ensure that they appeared as they were originally written by participants. Given the number of these kinds of errors, I have chosen not to indicate my awareness of them aside from this note and a footnote at the beginning of each chapter. Drawing attention to specific instances through the inclusion of "[*sic*]" would likely detract from the reading experience if it appeared in great frequency. Moreover, as this study is focused on memetic storytelling, it is positioned to appreciate unconventional orthography and syntax, even as it recognizes the tensions it can produce in

different settings (e.g., the classroom, academia). Grappling with these tensions is central to thinking about the implications memes hold for different forms of literacy.

3.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I outlined the methodology for this study's exploration of young people's engagement with Internet memes. Building on the theoretical framework of the first and second chapters, I explained how a dialogic understanding of human meaning-making provided a strong theory of description for this study's ethnography. Drawing on Markham's (2017) remix approach, I then relayed the rationale underlying my sampling, hybridization, and linking of four different design-based research methodologies: Design Ethnography (DE), Participatory Design Ethnography (PDE), Design-Based Research (DBR), and Critical Design Ethnography (CDE). After describing the benefits and challenges associated with these different methodologies, I demonstrated how I remixed them for this project, which was conducted in a secondary school during class hours. This course of action, I explained, involved the collaborative design of a class unit on Internet memes. After outlining the rationale behind this decision, I described the logistics of this study as they pertained to my choice of location, recruitment process, and methods of data collection, expounding on the way these procedures were impacted by COVID-19. Finally, I concluded by describing my approach to analyzing this study's materials. I explained how my analysis was guided by aspects of Frank's (2012) socio-narratology, Georgakopoulou's (2006, 2019) small stories research, and Rose's (2016) framework for critical visual analysis. Their work, I argued, justified my approach to presenting this study's findings as narrative exchanges between this study's participants, myself, and prior scholarship.

Chapter 4: Unit design, facilitation, and revision

4.1 My plans/2020

When I initially envisioned this research project, I never realized how nervous I would be to actually conduct it. In the excitement of embarking on a new academic adventure, I was full of imagined ideals and best-case scenarios of how things would unfold. I knew this project would take me out of my comfort zone, but there is a big difference between knowing something and experiencing it. One of the first lessons I learned is that research, as much as we might like to think about it as a neat and orderly endeavor, is actually quite messy. The best of plans are, in the end, only plans. And, as we all learned in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, plans change. I had never imagined living through a pandemic, let alone researching through one. A meme emerged during this time that summarized how the unexpected events of 2020, particularly those related to the COVID-19 virus, impacted people's lives in this way. The "My Plans/2020" meme involved pairing two images together, one of which represented a person's plans for 2020, and the other of which represented the thing that destroyed those plans (Sophie, n.d.).[29] The logic behind the meme was that there was an adversarial relationship between how people had envisioned the year would go and how it actually went. Whether represented in the form of a superhero and a villain, a peaceful image and an explosion, a put-together person and a disheveled person, the main idea was that the year did not go as people imagined it would. For me, this meme acts as a reminder that I was certainly not the only one navigating the challenges of unforeseen circumstances.

[29] I have spoken about this meme in other work as well (Tulloch, In Press).

And yet, if I had to represent my own version of the “My Plans/2020” meme, I think I would end up changing its logic to communicate a more positive message. Maybe I would have a picture of a person sitting under an apple tree and pair it with a picture of an apple falling on the person’s head. Maybe I would have a picture of a petri dish and pair it with a picture of a petri dish with mold growing inside of it, or perhaps a picture of a construction site and one of an oil spring. Looking back on this project, I realize that the events of 2020 did not detract from my research as much as they enriched it. Not only did they humble me by challenging my plans, but they also reminded me that true inquiry involves embracing the unexpected. The cultural context that shapes this study is one that is incredibly unique; the events of the last few years represent a relatively turbulent time that has raised more questions about the nature of online communication and its significance to people’s mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing than ever before. I might not have felt very comfortable at different moments, but that discomfort was a catalyst for personal growth and analytical insight.

My prior volunteer experience with Mr. Rowe made the unknowns associated with this study slightly less intimidating. In this chapter, I outline the collaborative process through which we designed, facilitated, and revised the class-unit on Internet memes and digital citizenship. Specifically, I explain how Mr. Rowe’s knowledge and experience, along with my own, informed the structure of the class activities and assignments. In keeping with this study’s dialogic orientation, I draw attention to the way our approach relates to different ideas within the field of education and how the unit we created connects to aspects of the B.C. curriculum. By outlining our design process as it occurred in the different rounds of this research project, I attempt to create a picture of the different contexts and activities where my dialogues with

participants took place, as well as the kinds of materials I collected from them. In doing so, I introduce the unit design that forms one of this study's research outputs.

4.2 A workshop format

In preparation for this study, I had drafted a workshop-based format for its facilitation that would offer the participating teacher a sense of the unit's possible structure. By designing the unit as several workshops, the teacher and I could ensure that we were providing students with the knowledge and skill building opportunities needed to create their own research projects, while remaining flexible as to how the workshops themselves might be scheduled. Also, moving away from "lesson" terminology would contribute to our efforts to reframe the learning experience as research. The New London Group's (1996) pedagogical approach to teaching multiliteracies provided a useful guide when thinking about these workshops, because it outlines four factors that can contribute to the facilitation of meaningful learning experiences: "Situated Practice," "Overt Instruction," "Critical Framing," and "Transformed Practice" (p. 83). While *situated practice* draws on students' prior knowledge and experiences, *overt instruction* pertains to the sharing of concepts (e.g., key terms, ideas, etc.) that will equip students to further develop their skills. *Critical Framing*, in turn, describes the process of analyzing the ideological implications of different meaning-making processes, and *transformed practice* represents the opportunities where students are able to apply their knowledge to different contexts.

These elements of the New London Group's (1996) multililiteracies pedagogy seemed especially appropriate for this unit, because they are centered on a philosophy of meaning-making that is grounded in the concept of design, which the group refers to as "*Designs of Meaning*" (p. 73, emphasis in original). Describing the significance of this philosophy to literacy education, the group states:

> We propose to treat any semiotic activity, including using language to produce or consume texts, as a matter of Design involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. Together these three elements emphasize the fact that meaning-making is an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules. (New London Group, 1996, p. 74)

The New London Group's (1996) concept of design provided yet another link to this study's remixed design-based methodology. The four elements associated with their pedagogical approach provided a vocabulary through which to position students as designers. By drawing on the students' experiences with Internet memes (i.e., Situated Practice), providing them with knowledge of the research process (i.e., Overt Instruction), and opportunities to practice analysis (i.e., Critical Framing), Mr. Rowe and I could equip them with the foundation for designing their own projects (i.e., Transformed Practice).

I proposed this basic structure to Mr. Rowe, who was familiar with multimodal approaches to literacy education and the concept of multiliteracies. After receiving his approval, we began to lay out the number of workshops and their different topics, eventually settling on three: the ethics of research, research and documentation, and critical analysis. The aims of these workshops were: 1) to establish a safe and supportive research environment for the students; 2) to provide them with the tools they needed to document their meme engagement; and 3) to give them an opportunity to develop their skills of critical analysis in preparation for their own research projects. While this workshop format provided a way to approach the design of the class unit, developing the specific activities for each session required more discussion. Initially, I had hoped to obtain two teacher release days for Mr. Rowe at the beginning of this project for that purpose. However, given the challenging nature of the COVID-19 situation, Mr. Rowe and I

decided that this was not a feasible option at this time.[30] In the absence of these planning days, the two interviews I conducted with him after school hours proved especially helpful.

4.3 Co-designing with Mr. Rowe

4.3.1 Guiding principles of educational design

These interviews, which were held prior to the design of the unit workshops, allowed me the opportunity to learn more about Mr. Rowe's experiences with the B.C. curriculum and his thoughts on Internet memes. Setting this intentional time for discussion gave me a better understanding of his teaching philosophy, which he had developed over his approximately twenty years as an educator. It also allowed me to see how his methods of delivery could be adopted in the design of the workshops. The help these conversations provided came in the form of several key insights that provided a path forward through the design process:

1. *Getting rid of the 'checklist approach' to teaching*. In his description of the revised curriculum, Mr. Rowe explained how the focus is not on covering a certain amount of content as much as it is about helping students develop a certain set of competencies. As he told me, "[…] the focus overall in terms of skill building has shifted away from the checklist to the progress throughout the course." This principle helped us plan activities that emphasized the importance of the learning processes that were taking place through the unit as a whole.
2. *The value of formative assessment*. Part of letting go of the "checklist approach" to teaching, Mr. Rowe explained, involves embracing the value of formative assessment.

[30] Instead of providing these teacher-release days at the beginning of the project, Mr. Rowe was given the option of scheduling them after we had completed the research rounds, which he did.

Instead of focusing on summative evaluations of students' progress, educators adopt a more holistic approach that acknowledges the value of all learning experiences that take place in the classroom. While I did not evaluate any of the students' work in relation to this unit, this understanding of formative assessment helped me work with Mr. Rowe to plan activities and assignments that would allow him to monitor students' progress throughout the unit.

3. *The importance of puzzles*. One of the ways Mr. Rowe tried to motivate students to embrace the learning experience was to use puzzles that piqued their interest. When you give students a puzzle to figure out, he told me, "[…] we tend to jump into it as humans." In this respect, Mr. Rowe acknowledged the importance of engaging students' curiosity in classroom activities.
4. *Knowing the reason why*. One of the aspects Mr. Rowe appreciated most about the current curriculum was its focus on "understanding things under a big picture mentality." He remarked, "[…] if you know why you're doing something you tend to do it a lot better." This mentality shaped the way we explained the value of this unit to students. We tried to communicate the logic of its activities in a way that gave them purpose beyond the classroom.
5. *Revised not new*. Throughout our conversation, Mr. Rowe emphasized that there was a lot of continuity between the previous and present curriculum, which is why the latter should be described as *revised*, not new. Mr. Rowe pointed out, "[…] we never throw out what we had before." This view allows one to see how the changes to the curriculum represent a progressive journey to understanding the value of different educational approaches. Instead of emphasizing divisions between different forms of thought, this understanding

identifies connections. This perspective was especially important when thinking about the importance of different forms of literacy in relation to each other and the connections that exist between old and new media.

These insights, which reflect Mr. Rowe's understanding of the revised curriculum and his own educational views, align with the findings of contemporary research. Speaking of different speeches made by past presidents of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Carol Lee (2016) suggests the value of looking at educational changes in terms of "shifts" and "continuities" stating: "I think of shifts as fundamental reconceptualizations and continuities as expanding the dimensions around which we seek to understand a persistent phenomenon" (p. 73). This view resonates with Mr. Rowe's understanding of the current B.C. curriculum as a revision of the old. The current curriculum's emphasis on formative assessment and the interconnected nature of the learning experience over time correspond with the findings of the 2000 report, *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*, and the 2018 report, *How people learn II: Learners, contexts, and cultures* (National Research Council, 2000; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

4.3.2 Drafting the workshops

After my interviews with Mr. Rowe, I began drafting a detailed outline for the first workshop, which included a breakdown of its different activities and time estimates associated with them. Once I had drafted the first workshop, I showed it to Mr. Rowe and asked for feedback, which I then implemented. The second and third workshop outlines were created in the same manner after the first round of the unit had begun. I provided Mr. Rowe with a binder and print-outs of the workshop lesson plans prior to the days we ran them. In addition to the workshop outlines, I also created accompanying PowerPoint presentations that we co-presented

when facilitating the activities. Any YouTube videos shown in the unit were pre-approved by Mr. Rowe to ensure that they were appropriate for the students. Below, I provide an overview of the workshops associated with the unit and the activities they contained. As previously mentioned, each of the workshops were designed to equip students with the knowledge and resources they needed to create their own research projects on Internet memes. New iterations of the workshops were based on revisions Mr. Rowe and I made after running them with the different groups of students. This revision process aligned with the DBR and CDE aspects of this project. While the content of the workshops remained similar throughout the three rounds, they were combined and spaced differently in the different semesters.

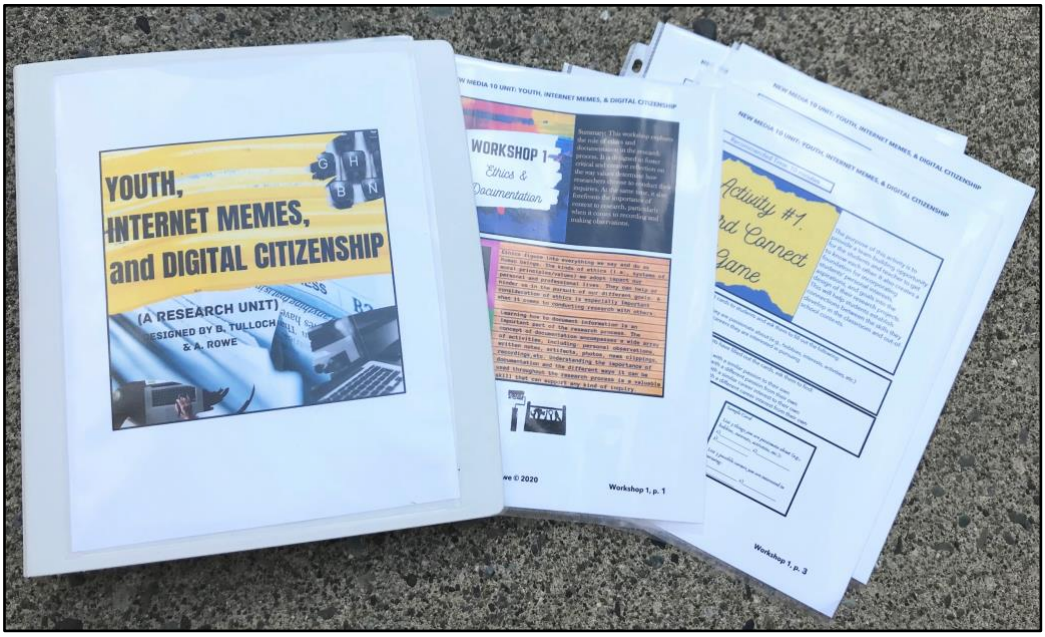

Figure 4.1 Image of the unit binder and the first workshop outline.

4.4 The unit

4.4.1 Round one

In the first round of research, which took place between October and November of 2020, the workshops were held in the half of the semester when the class was divided into two groups,

which met in the afternoon on alternate days. This schedule, which was created as part of the COVID-19 protocols at the time, meant that we ran each workshop twice, with half of the class on one day and the other half on the following day. This scheduling choice was the only one available to us, because the semester was already underway when I obtained ethics approval. However, from the start, it had some unique affordances. The alternating class schedule meant that Mr. Rowe and I were able to run each workshop twice, which allowed us the opportunity to make revisions between classes. The smaller class sizes were also more conducive to getting to know the students and made it easier for me, as a researcher who was helping facilitate the activities, to collect data from participating students. Mr. Rowe and I also thought that the spacing of the various workshops over several weeks would allow students more time to observe their own meme engagement. The length of class periods was approximately two hours long. Mr. Rowe and I designed the workshops to run between 60 and 90 minutes. Prior to each workshop Mr. Rowe and I divided the facilitation tasks between us so that each of us was in charge of leading different activities.

4.4.1.1 Workshop one: Research and ethics

The first workshop focused on the ethics of research. This topic was selected as a means through which to honour this study's commitment to establishing trust among participants. Mr. Rowe and I wanted to create an environment where the students would feel that their contributions were respected. The activities were designed to focus on ethics as a topic apart from memetic storytelling. By presenting this focus we hoped to highlight the transferability of the skills the students were developing through the unit, thereby helping them answer the "why" question underlying this research experience. At the same time, this workshop provided a path forward for thinking about the ethics associated with memetic storytelling and how they factor

into understandings of information literacy and digital citizenship. A deeper understanding of ethics would help students when thinking about the impacts of people's online behaviour, which would assist them when creating their research projects later on. Where the B.C. curriculum is concerned, this focus on ethics related to people's responsibilities as citizens, as well as the role values play in people's interpretation and creation of texts. By inviting students to reflect on what makes for a safe and respectful research atmosphere, Mr. Rowe and I hoped to establish a shared code of conduct through which to approach the study of Internet memes in-class. When designing this workshop, we drew on some of the activities I had co-created with other scholars for a workshop at the 2018 *iConference* (Tulloch et al., 2018) and an interactive session at the 2019 iConference (Kaczmarek et al, 2019).

4.4.1.1.1 Connection Cards (Activity #1)

Approximate time: 15 minutes

We started the first workshop with a variation of an ice-breaker activity that I had helped facilitate at a half-day workshop held at the 2018 *iConference*. This activity was an informal way for me to: 1) get to know the students; and 2) acknowledge the importance of their individual talents, interests, and aspirations to the class unit. Students were given Connection Cards that required them to list three of their passions (i.e., hobbies, interests, activities) and three possible careers they would be interested in pursuing. The purpose of this activity was to invite the students to reflect on their interests and goals so they could think about possible ways to connect them to class research activities and discussions. When introducing this activity, Mr. Rowe and I related it to B.C.'s mandatory Career-Life Connections course, which all B.C. students now need to complete in order to graduate (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(a)). The Connection Cards, in this respect, were designed to help students see the bigger picture behind the research

unit and the ways it could help them meet their goals. Although variations of this activity involve mingling among participants for the purpose of discovering shared interests, we modified it so that it was more of a self-reflective exercise that students were able to discuss with the classmates closest to them. I collected the Connection Cards of students who were participating in the study and kept them as a resource for future interactions to remind myself of their different interests and goals.

Figure 4.2 Sample of a blank Connection Card.

4.4.1.1.2 Lost and Found Boxes (Activity #2)

Approximate time: 10 minutes

In an effort to incorporate Mr. Rowe's use of puzzles as a pedagogical tool, we modified another activity I had co-designed with several scholars for an interactive session at the 2019 *iConference*. Mr. Rowe and I labeled this activity, "Lost and Found Boxes." Students were given small treasure boxes containing various miniature items. After dispersing the boxes, Mr. Rowe and I asked them to describe the possible significance the items might hold for the owners who had misplaced them. Using their whiteboard desks, students then brainstormed the possible

stories behind the importance of some of the objects in their boxes, which included items such as a marble, decorative drink umbrella, butterfly cut-out, mini-message in a bottle, dice, etc. Mr. Rowe and I tried to frame this activity as an imaginative exercise by providing a fictional scenario in which the students encountered the boxes (e.g., found on a bus stop bench, during an archaeological dig). By inviting them to see the interpretive exercise in this way, we hoped to broaden their understanding of storytelling to encompass different activities and contexts. This exercise was also designed to engage students in tactile forms of meaning-making that were not writing intensive. Our aim was to emphasize the multimodal nature of meaning-making and engage students with different competencies. While some students chose to come up with stories for each individual object, others chose to link the significance of each of the objects to create a single narrative. I took photos of participating students' brainstorms when documenting this activity.

Figure 4.3 Sample of a Lost and Found Box.

4.4.1.1.3 Class brainstorm/discussion (Activity #3)

Approximate time: 10 minutes

After giving students the opportunity to develop their ideas regarding the box items, we discussed the activity as a class. To aid this discussion, Mr. Rowe and I asked the students to reflect on how the exercise might relate to the workshop's focus on ethics and research. Specifically, we asked them to consider how this creative exercise might impact: 1) the way one chose to treat other people's information; 2) the assumptions one made about people; and 3) the kinds of boundaries people might want to set when sharing their own information or that of others. When facilitating this discussion, Mr. Rowe and I connected it to conversations surrounding new media and the ease at which information is circulated online. This provided a conceptual link to the unit on Internet memes. By connecting the activity to the context of this research project, Mr. Rowe and I reminded students that they should respect their own comfort levels and those of other people when sharing information in the class context or outside of it.

4.4.1.1.4 Ethics-based acrostic poem (Activity #4)

Approximate time: 20 minutes

Building on this discussion, Mr. Rowe and I then invited the students to reflect on what the word "ethics" means. After exploring its meaning as a class, we asked the students to create an acrostic poem using the term. To make an acrostic poem, students had to come up with a word for each of the six letters of "E-T-H-I-C-S" (e.g., E = equality, T = trust, H = humility, I = integrity, C = caring, and S = sensitivity). Each of the words they selected needed to relate to their conception of what ethics meant. After the students completed their individual poems, they were invited to share their words. I recorded some of these words on the whiteboard at the front

of the class. The idea behind this word collage was that it would help establish a positive research environment for the unit.

4.4.1.1.5 Word dice game (Bonus Activity)

Approximate time: 20 minutes

When planning this workshop, Mr. Rowe and I decided to include a bonus activity that would provide students with the further opportunity to play with the poems they had created and reflect on the values they had listed (e.g., honesty, trust, equality, etc.). This game was a modification of another activity I had co-designed with other scholars for a workshop at the 2018 *iConference*. Students were given blank paper die and asked to write the six words of their acrostic poems on each side (1 word per side). They were then asked to roll their dice in table groups and challenged with the task of explaining how the rolled words relate to each other/the concept of ethics. This activity was designed to facilitate dialogue and allow students another opportunity to solidify their understanding of the values discussed in the workshop.

4.4.1.2 Workshop two: Research and documentation

Extending the insights from the first workshop, the second focused on the significance of documentation to research. Drawing on the students' experiences with the Lost and Found Boxes, Mr. Rowe and I invited them to think of the role context plays in the act of meaning-making. We pointed out that, where the boxes were concerned, knowledge of the owners and the circumstances surrounding their collection of each object would likely have changed the students' interpretation of the items' value. In alignment with some of the B.C. curriculum English Language Arts competencies (n.d.(b)), our goal was to help students think about how the details surrounding a phenomenon of interest, whether that be an event, experience, or object, can factor into one's processes of interpretation. By highlighting the significance of context to

interpretation, and by extension, the importance of documentation to research, this workshop was designed to: 1) connect how documentation relates to ethics; 2) equip students to think about the role context plays in memetic storytelling; 3) prepare students to record details related to their own meme engagement; and 4) help them develop the skills they would need to conduct their own research projects on memes and digital citizenship. When designing this workshop, we drew inspiration from Mr. Rowe's teaching practices, adjusting them to fit the topic of memetic storytelling.

4.4.1.2.1 What is an Internet meme? (Activity #1)

Approximate time: 5-10 minutes

As an introduction to this second workshop, students were asked to document their understanding of an Internet meme by creating their own definitions. They recorded these 1-3 sentence definitions on cue cards that I distributed. Mr. Rowe and I started with this activity so that the class could recognize the different understandings of Internet memes that exist and consider how their own understanding relates to them. Mr. Rowe and I did not want to impose a "correct" definition of an Internet meme onto students, but rather, invite them to recognize how the word is used to refer to different things. After students had time to write down their definitions, we discussed them as a class. I then provided the students with some background as to the conceptual history of the term "meme," describing how it was originally coined by Richard Dawkins and has since been appropriated by Internet users to mean something different. All students were encouraged to keep their cue card definitions to guide their understanding of their own meme engagement. I ended up collecting some of the participating students' definitions later on in the unit. Unfortunately, I was not able to collect all of their definitions

because some of them did not keep their cue cards, while others were not present during some of the subsequent classes.

4.4.1.2.2 What does the meme mean? (Activity #2)

Approximate time: 15 minutes

To highlight the importance of context to memetic storytelling, Mr. Rowe and I facilitated an activity that we titled, “What Does the Meme Mean?” or, “The Story Behind the Meme.” Together, we selected six images that had been associated with popular memes online, I printed them off and glued them onto sheets of poster paper, which we hung at the front of the class. Each student was then given a small stack of sticky notes and asked to identify what they thought was going on in each of the images (i.e., the meaning or significance of each image). When we introduced this activity, we explained to students that their responses would not be evaluated based on their correctness, because we recognized that they might be unfamiliar with the images. Instead, we asked them to consider what meaning the image conveyed from their perspective. Once students had written down their brief explanations they were asked to post each of their notes on the corresponding poster. After reviewing their interpretations as a class, I shared the original context behind each of the images, some of which a few of the students knew, but others did not. Mr. Rowe and I borrowed the idea for this activity from one of the assignments he often ran with his classes, which he titled, “What’s the Story?” In this assignment, Mr. Rowe gave students a handout with an image on it and asked them to answer a number of questions about the image. Like that activity, this exercise was designed as a kind of puzzle. Some students immediately decided to view the images as memes by captioning them. Other students chose to literally describe what they saw in the image. They were asked to write

their names on their sticky notes so I could collect the ones that belonged to those who were participating in the study.

4.4.1.2.3 Class discussion (Activity #3)

Approximate time: 10 minutes

Following the "What Does the Meme Mean?" activity, we had a class discussion about the different aspects that contributed to the students' interpretations of the images. This led to a conversation about the various factors that influence people's understanding of an Internet meme's meaning. Mr. Rowe had the students brainstorm ideas on their whiteboard desks and then we discussed them as a class. Factors students came up with included: time of day, the image, its origin, sense of humour, cultural perspective, etc. As in the case of the other discussion activities, I took photographs of participating students' brainstorms.

4.4.1.2.4 Designing data collection protocols (Activity #4)

Following this class discussion, Mr. Rowe and I introduced a take-home meme tracking activity that gave students the opportunity to document their own meme engagement. The idea behind this formative exercise was that it would help students collect potential material for their projects and get them thinking about meme-related topics that appealed to them. Unlike the students' final projects, this activity was not for specific marks. We asked the students to track their meme engagement for one week. Since Mr. Rowe often used journals for class activities, we decided to get the students to track them using these books. However, to distinguish this research unit from other classwork, I distributed separate journals to the participating students for this activity.

When introducing this formative assignment, Mr. Rowe highlighted the importance of documenting the contextual information related to one's interpretation of a meme. He presented

a diagram to the class, which he referred to as “Contextual Spheres.” He had developed this diagram during one of our planning discussions and we provided cue-card-sized handouts of it to the students to help them track their meme engagement. Mr. Rowe asked the students to use the diagram to indicate the contextual spheres that applied to the memes they engaged. In addition, we also provided a sample tracking chart. Students could design their own tracking process or use the template we provided. This activity did not end up being as effective for a number of reasons, the first being that, because it was not for specific marks, many students did not end up completing it. The second reason was that print journals were not a very practical resource for documenting students’ online engagement. That being said, several students did track their engagement and I collected their journals as workshop materials at the end of the unit. Other participating students recorded some of their workshop statements in their journals, which I also collected.

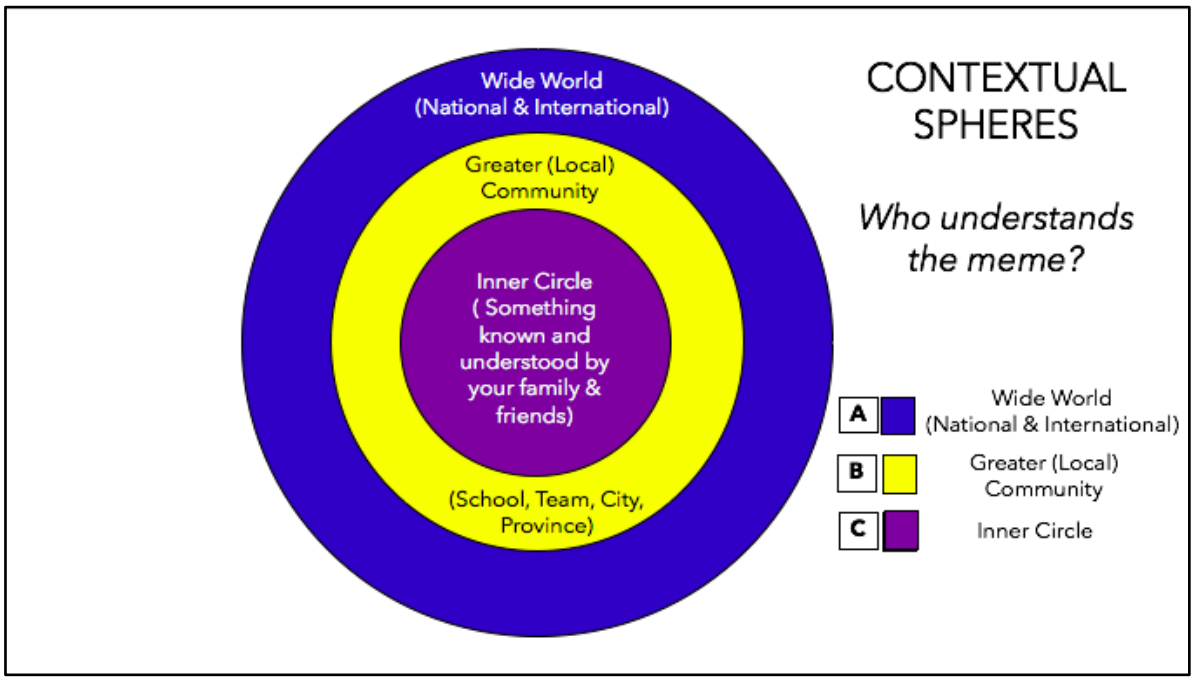

Figure 4.4 Image of Mr. Rowe’s Contextual Spheres Diagram.

MEME (Description)	Date/ Time (Morning, Afternoon, or Evening)	Social Media Platform	Technology	Context
Baby Yoda Drinking Tea Image Macro A B	October 21, 2020 Afternoon	Instagram	Phone	I was scrolling through my favorite meme channel while waiting in line at the store. I was bored and I like Star Wars so I found this meme pretty funny because… I decided to share this meme on my Instagram and Facebook page because…
Scared Cat A C	October 22, 2020 Evening	Facebook Message to Friend	Laptop	Sent my friend this meme when describing my reaction to the mark I got on my math test.

Figure 4.5 Image of sample Meme Tracking Chart.

4.4.1.3 Memes and novel study (Optional hybrid lesson)

Approximate time: 30-45 minutes

During the first round of this project, Mr. Rowe and I decided to include another activity in the unit. In the interim period between the second and third workshops, he created a hybrid lesson that linked the unit on Internet memes to his class novel study of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (1953/2003). We decided to include this class assignment as an optional activity in our unit's design, because it would provide teachers with a resource for emphasizing the way memetic storytelling links to other kinds of storytelling. Drawing on the way he had previously used Internet memes with his classes, Mr. Rowe asked the students to create memes that captured the main ideas represented in the novel. For this class, my role was one of a participant observer. I engaged in conversation with participating students regarding the process through which they created their memes, documenting some of their insights with written notes and

photographs. After Mr. Rowe modeled how to create a meme and gave a few examples to the class, students had a work period where they could finish the assignment. Students were tasked with condensing the complex ideas of the novel into a succinct statement that took into account the interplay between language and image. I collected copies of the finished assignments of participating students from Mr. Rowe at the end of the course.

4.4.1.4 Workshop 3: Critical analysis

In this first round, the final unit workshop was on critical analysis. While the second workshop on documentation had been oriented towards providing students with situated practice, this third workshop was designed to provide the students with critical framing experience that would help them conduct their own research on Internet memes. In this class, Mr. Rowe and I invited students to think about the reasons memetic storytelling should be taken seriously, focusing on how Internet memes impact people's lives and how memetic storytelling relates to the B.C. curriculum's understanding of digital citizenship. By encouraging students to reflect on some of the controversial issues and tensions associated with Internet memes, we were able to support them as they practiced their research skills. We encouraged students to think about how the topics addressed in this workshop related to their reflections on their own meme engagement. At the end of the workshop we introduced the final assignment associated with this unit, which allowed students to conduct their own research projects on Internet memes and a topic related to digital citizenship.

4.4.1.4.1 Who is the "me" behind the meme? (Activity #1)

Approximate time: 15-20 minutes

To begin this workshop, I shared the stories of three different people who became meme celebrities as children. These youths were respectively associated with the Internet memes

known as “Disaster Girl,” “Star Wars Kid,” and “Success Kid.”[31] While I recounted the details of the first and second meme stories, Mr. Rowe and I showed a short YouTube video about “Success Kid” (BuzzFeedVideo, 2020a). [32] The aim of this opening activity was to share meme-related stories that concerned young people. Mr. Rowe and I wanted to include examples of people who were closer to the students’ ages. Each of the stories we chose to share highlight some of the long-term effects and consequences of memetic storytelling, both positive and negative. This part of the workshop was designed to emphasize the fact that while people featured in memes are often viewed as fictional characters, they are real people.

4.4.1.4.2 How would you feel if you accidentally became a meme? (Activity #2)

Approximate time: 15 minutes

Following the sharing of these stories, Mr. Rowe invited the students to engage in a mini-debate with their seated groups. They were asked to brainstorm a list of the pros and cons associated with becoming a meme celebrity. This activity allowed the students to critically reflect on the stories they had just heard and to consider the trade-offs associated with being featured in an Internet meme. These conversations included a discussion of how students might attempt to handle unexpected meme fame. This activity built on the other topics of the unit, most notably the workshop on ethics. By considering the potential consequences of finding oneself the subject of memetic storytelling, students were encouraged to think about the way memes factor into people’s right to privacy. At the end of the debate session, we discussed some of the pros

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[31] Their real names are Zoe Roth, Ghyslain Rhaza, and Sam Griner.
[32] YouTube does not list the video’s upload date on the video’s actual page. However, when looked up online via a search engine this information appears next to the video’s official YouTube link.

and cons the students had come up with and had them vote on whether or not they would like to be associated with an Internet meme. The results were mixed.

4.4.1.4.3 What do memes have to do with digital citizenship? (Activity #3)

Approximate time: 5-10 minutes

Following this debate activity, Mr. Rowe and I transitioned into a discussion of how Internet memes relate to the concept of digital citizenship. Continuing with our presentation, we highlighted the way memetic storytelling factors into one's online behaviour, sharing the B.C. curriculum's definition of digital citizenship as a reference point for students. One of the aims of this workshop was to invite students to think about the relationship between memetic storytelling and people's everyday lives. The examples we shared represented our effort to incorporate some of the Big Ideas associated with the B.C. curriculum into the unit, specifically those that seek to deepen students' understanding of the relationship between storytelling, sense-making, and identity formation. Mr. Rowe and I wanted to provide students with real-life situations that would emphasize why thinking about these issues might be important. For this reason, we shared the 2017 news story about the incoming Harvard students whose admission offers were rescinded because of offensive memes they had posted in a private Facebook group chat (see Natanson, 2017).

4.4.1.4.4 Memes information policy debate (Activity #4)

Approximate time: 15 minutes

Following the sharing of this news story, Mr. Rowe and I asked the class to debate in small groups whether they thought Harvard's decision was fair. When debating, students were encouraged to brainstorm both sides of the argument on their whiteboard tables before arriving at a decision. Mr. Rowe and I asked them to think about how issues such as free speech, hate

speech, dark humour, and privacy could figure into this situation. In essence, this was a kind of information policy debate, because we were inviting the students to consider what kinds of rules educational institutions should have regarding their members' online behaviour. Like the other stories we had discussed in this workshop, the activity was designed to emphasize the significance of Internet memes to young people's lives. Asking students to vote on whether the university's decision was fair allowed us to embrace a more participatory ethic that acknowledged the importance of their perspectives to issues that impact them. As in the case of the previous debate, the students were mixed in their opinions.

4.4.1.4.5 Meme matters (Activity #5)

Approximate time: 15 minutes

After this debate, Mr. Rowe and I provided an overview of other ways Internet memes factor into issues associated with digital citizenship (e.g., social justice, misinformation, advocacy, political propaganda, cancel culture, copyright, free speech, etc.). We showed a brief ReasonTV (2017) YouTube video titled, *Memed into the public domain? The battle for Pepe the Frog.*[33] This video recounted one of the legal battles surrounding a copyright vs. free speech controversy associated with Pepe the Frog memes. We shared this video and other examples in the hope that they would give students an idea of the wide range of topics they could explore for their final research projects. Students could focus on lighthearted issues or heavier issues depending on their preferences. Since the concept of digital citizenship is broad and memes can

[33] YouTube does not list the video's upload date on the video's actual page. However, when looked up online via a search engine this information appears next to the video's official YouTube link.

be used to convey messages related to any topic, students had a lot of choice when selecting a research area of interest.

4.4.1.4.6 Final projects (Activity #6)

Approximate time: 5 minutes

To end the workshop, Mr. Rowe and I introduced the general criteria for the final research projects. When coming up with the parameters of this project, there were a couple of constraints. While we wanted to structure the assignment so that it was open to students' creativity, Mr. Rowe pointed out that too many options could overwhelm them and the remaining time frame for completion would make certain kinds of projects less feasible than others. Mr. Rowe also wanted to include a written component to emphasize how traditional forms of communication, such as written analysis, can be applied to new media forms. For this reason, we outlined four steps for students to follow when designing their final projects: 1) Choose a topic of interest; 2) Consider how that topic of interest might relate to memetic storytelling and digital citizenship; 3) Design a meme-based creative project that explores that topic (e.g., create a meme collage, tell a story using memes, draw a detailed map of how the meme has spread, tell the history of a meme, film a mini-meme documentary, perform close readings of memes, etc.); and 4) Write a multi-paragraph response explaining how that project explores the connections between Internet memes and digital citizenship. Our hope was that these steps were general enough to provide students with some options when designing their final projects, while also providing them with sufficient structure. Since I was not involved in the assessment of these projects I am not aware of how Mr. Rowe marked them or the due date he set for them. I collected copies of the students' final assignments from Mr. Rowe at the end of the semester. As

it turned out, most of the participating students ended up choosing to create presentations using a slide format (e.g., PowerPoint).

4.4.2 Round two

In the second round, Mr. Rowe and I chose to conduct all the workshops consecutively within a week. Our aim in doing this was to limit the number of distractions that would compete for the students' attention and give them more time to finish their final projects (i.e., the assignment would be issued earlier). This change was made in response to student feedback we received after the first round and our own observations. Since this second round was conducted with a grade ten class, the schedule was slightly different. The grade ten class, for example, met every day at the same time and the class was earlier in the day (i.e., it was in the morning). Class time was also divided by a lunch break, which meant that there were essentially two instruction periods. This class was already smaller in size so the number of students in the workshops were similar to the previous round. While I had conducted recruitment in December 2020, we began the unit in January 2021 after the students had returned from Winter Break. During this round, Mr. Rowe and I made the following changes to the unit:

1. **Combined workshops one and two**. In an effort to provide students with more class time for the completion of their final projects, Mr. Rowe and I decided to combine the first and second workshops from the previous round into one. This meant that the first workshop changed from "Research and ethics" to "Ethics and documentation." Condensing these workshops into one required us to eliminate some of the previous activities. To make room for the content on documentation we did not run the acrostic poem and the word dice game. We also reduced the number of images we used in the "What Does the Meme Mean?" activity to four. We did not introduce the meme tracking

chart template as before, but Mr. Rowe did introduce his Contextual Spheres Diagram. This time I made sure to collect all of the participating students' definitions of an Internet meme during the class in which they were created.

2. **New meme assignment**. Since the journal activity did not work well in the previous round, we designed a new assignment that would be more practical for students. The "My Favourite Meme" assignment asked them to document five of their favourite memes or memes they did not like. The students were asked to place the meme images or links to the memes (if they were videos) in a word document and write brief descriptions explaining their significance, as well as the contextual factors that influenced their understanding of them (i.e., referring to the Contextual Spheres Diagram). Students were then given some class time to start this assignment, using school iPads or their own technological devices. The idea behind this activity was that students would start thinking about their own meme examples when we did the workshop on critical analysis. To ensure that students completed the activity, Mr. Rowe requested that they submit it. To aid students' understanding of what we were asking them to do, I created a sample assignment that they could look at for reference. I collected copies of the participating students' assignments from Mr. Rowe at the end of the semester.
3. **Omitted memes and novel study lesson**. Since we were trying to condense the unit, Mr. Rowe and I did not include a crossover lesson that linked Internet memes to a novel study.
4. **Switched video**. When conducting the "Critical analysis" workshop, Mr. Rowe and I decided to switch the ReasonTV video concerning the Pepe the Frog meme to a

BuzzFeedVideo (2020b) interview concerning the "Overly Attached Girlfriend" meme.[34] We chose this video because it dealt with another aspect of meme fame, particularly, the mental health considerations that come with trying to maintain a social media presence. Mr. Rowe and I thought that this topic might be of interest to the students and appropriate to some of the themes they were exploring in this grade level, which were different from the grade eleven class of the previous semester.

5. **A new workshop on project design.** The biggest change in this round was the creation of a workshop on project design. Instead of introducing the final project assignment at the end of the "Critical analysis" workshop, Mr. Rowe and I moved it to the beginning of a new workshop. To help students visualize different ways they could design their final projects, we provided them with a couple of sample assignments, as well as a sample multi-paragraph response so students could see how they might want to structure their own write-ups. Mr. Rowe described how past students had chosen to structure this project, but we reminded the current students that they had other options available to them should they want to approach this assignment in a different way. We also presented a series of slides that detailed the resources students might want to consult when researching (e.g., online news stories, the Know Your Meme website, YouTube videos, etc.). Mr. Rowe and I suggested that they might want to begin by looking up the dictionary definition of the topic they chose (e.g., humour, racism, privacy, free speech, etc.). The majority of the class was spent as a work period where the students could start

[34] YouTube does not list the video's upload date on the video's actual page. However, when looked up online via a search engine this information appears next to the video's official Youtube link.

their projects. I checked in with them to see if they needed any assistance and to learn more about their project ideas. For students who wanted my help, I offered to come early to school to assist them with their projects. Mr. Rowe always opened his classroom early to students for this purpose. Most of the students, however, were very independent. Only one participating student ended up using one of these morning work periods. After this workshop, Mr. Rowe provided space in subsequent classes for students to work on their projects and I tried to make myself available during these times to offer them support.

4.4.3 Round three

Based on the positive feedback we received from students and our own observations, Mr. Rowe and I decided to schedule the third round of research in a similar manner to the second. Since we were working with a grade eleven class again, this meant we would run the unit in the half of the semester when all of the students met together each day during the morning session. Running the unit in this part of the semester meant that we could conduct the workshops consecutively within a week period and we would not have to repeat each workshop twice. This grade eleven class was smaller than the first round, so the collective number of students each day was still manageable from a research perspective. This round was held during the third semester in April 2021. During this round, Mr. Rowe and I made the following changes to the unit:

1. **New meme examples.** Based on student feedback we received in the second round, Mr. Rowe and I decided to change some of the images in the "What Does the Meme Mean?" activity. I found some more recent meme images that would hopefully be more interesting for students. We also decided to switch the BuzzFeedVideo (2020b) concerning the "Overly Attached Girlfriend" meme to another BuzzFeedVideo (2021) that described the "Me Explaining To My Mom" meme, which was more recent.

2. **Trimmed content.** In an effort to further streamline the workshops, Mr. Rowe and I cut some of the content to reduce the duration of different activities. Specifically, we: 1) cut down the number of discussion questions we used as prompts when facilitating the different activities; and 2) moved some of the content from the second workshop on critical analysis to the third workshop on project design. This content, which included our overview of some issues that factor into discussions of memes and digital citizenship, fit well with this presentation, because it gave students an idea of the different kinds of inquiries they could pursue for their final projects. At Mr. Rowe's suggestion, we did not show the meme story sample in this round so that students were not overwhelmed by options.

4.4.4 Proposed revisions based on round three

By this round, Mr. Rowe and I were pleased with the unit and decided that we definitely preferred structuring the workshops consecutively. We felt that we could rearrange the presentation content in the third workshop to improve flow, but overall, we were happy with how the unit went. We wanted to create a flexible unit design so that other teachers could adapt activities to suit their own class schedules. As in the previous two rounds, the feedback we received from participating students was very positive.

4.4.5 Research showcase

Thanks to the support of UBC's Public Scholars Initiative, I had funding to host a Student Research Showcase at the school. Given the postponement of this event due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was very grateful that Mr. Rowe and two students from the first round of research, Aidan Formilleza and Steven Rutherford, were available and interested in helping create a display in the Spring of 2022. The exhibit, which was titled, "Internet Memes & Digital

Citizenship: Exploring the role memetic storytelling plays in the communication of information online," consisted of nine posters themed around different topics related to the class unit we had run: Memes & Digital Citizenship, Memes & Inquiry, Memes & Carelessness, Memes & Privacy, Memes & Humour, Memes & Music, Memes & Sports, Memes & Literature, and Memes & Politics. In addition to these posters, which Mr. Rowe, Aidan, Steven, and I co-designed during several school meetings,[35] I also created six reflection points that were stationed throughout the room. Similar to the posters, these reflection points contained brief write-ups on different topics related to memetic storytelling, as well as questions for viewers to consider. Below is an image of the exhibit, which was on display in the LSS library for approximately one month (i.e., the last weeks of May 2022 to the early weeks of June 2022). I have numbered all of the posters and alphabetized the different reflection points so they are easier to identify.

Figure 4.6 A picture of the research showcase in the LSS library.

[35] Mr. Rowe, Aidan, and Steven each chose two poster topics to include in the exhibit. They provided the written content and memetic images for their posters, which I then arranged into a style template we had agreed upon.

To encourage interaction with the exhibit, I also designed a lesson outline to accompany it. I gave this outline to Mr. Rowe so he could approve or modify it and share it as a resource with teachers in his department. Providing this opportunity was part of my attempt to give back to the community that had allowed me to conduct this research. This exhibit provided a means to inform teachers in the school about the work we had been doing in the classroom and some of the insights that had emerged through the project. Mr. Rowe kept all of the materials associated with the exhibit, storing them at the school with the purpose of re-staging it in future, perhaps in association with a Professional Development Day (i.e., Pro-D Day) presentation. As part of the UBC PSI project, I am also developing an educational resource for educators and a website that will make the unit Mr. Rowe and I designed, as well as the insights of this project, widely available.

4.5 Note about materials and analysis

Since this unit's workshops were designed to equip students to reflect on their own meme engagement and create their own research projects, my analysis draws mainly from their: 1) meme definitions; 2) interviews; 3) My Favourite Meme Assignments; and 4) Final Projects, which are supplemented by my field notes and other materials collected. Where this unit was concerned, other activities (e.g., brainstorms, sticky notes, novel study memes, etc.) were capacity-building exercises for students to practice the skills they would need to engage in research. While I did not collect the same number of above-mentioned materials in relation to each student, the materials I did collect can connect in various ways to create interesting dialogues that inform this study's research questions. Different students' meme definitions, for instance, link to examples raised in interview conversations and those provided in their assignments. Together, they provide glimpses into the possible work memetic storytelling

achieves in different young people's lives and the way it functions as an information literacy practice.

The emphasis of my analysis, in other words, is less on the quantity of materials and more on the depth of conversation they can inspire. Highlighting the way these contributions relate to each other is part of my role as a researcher. Frank (2012) writes:

> But most people hear only a limited number of other people's stories. They have a limited understanding of what lies beyond the particular crossroads at which they live, even as they feel affected by what lies beyond. The analyst hears those other stories that remain as possibilities for the person who has not yet ventured down those roads. (p. 102)

The aim of this project was to create opportunities for young people, their teacher, and myself to engage with each other's stories. While each of us were limited in what we were positioned to hear and say, together, we were exploring beyond the crossroads of our own experiences. In my analysis, I try to make this exploration evident by highlighting the intersections of different conversations and activities.

In my effort to organize this analysis according to this study's research questions, I draw on specific materials in each chapter that follow the basic trajectory of the unit. The first findings chapter, for instance, begins with the students' meme definitions, noting how they connect to some of the insights they shared in their interviews, My Favourite Meme Assignments, and Final Projects. Building on these observations and drawing on more insights from these research materials, the second findings chapter focuses on the students' narrative descriptions of their own meme engagement. The third chapter, in turn, examines the students' Final Projects, which not only showcased some of the ways they chose to engage with Internet memes in the classroom, but also some of their insights on memes and digital citizenship. In my selection of these

examples, I try to highlight the range of different perspectives the students' contributions create. Frank (2012) notes that "[e]ach person's story can remain unique while being representative in that uniqueness" (p. 116). While this study is not positioned to offer a comprehensive account of these young people's uniqueness, it can offer glimpses of it that allow us to reflect on the different effects memes had in their lives.

My selection of examples was made with this purpose in mind. They were chosen based on the thematic links I found between their different subject matter, which, when explored, highlight the conceptual "crossroads" associated with some of the claims students made and the stories they shared (Frank, 2012, p. 102). This does not mean that the examples in the first findings chapter do not have any relevance to those that appear in the second and third, but rather, that, as I go through the process of exploring what this project is positioned to say in response to this study's research questions, readers will be able to see the connection between emerging insights and previous examples.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the design, facilitation, and revision processes associated with the development of this research unit on Internet memes. Following this study's remixed methodology, I outlined how Mr. Rowe and I adopted a workshop structure that was guided by the principles of the New London Group's (1996) Pedagogy of Multiliteracies (e.g., Overt Instruction, Situated Practice, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practice). I then explained how my interviews with Mr. Rowe provided a foundation for designing the unit, connecting his insights to education research from the last several decades. In the remainder of the chapter I detailed how these workshop drafts were created and revised based on his input. After explaining the breakdown of workshop activities in round one, I identified changes we

made in subsequent rounds based on our own observations and participating students' feedback. Finally, I explained how the different materials I collected can provide insight into this study's research questions. I outlined how my analysis drew on these materials in each findings chapter, a process that involved reflecting on the way this research narrative produced dialogues that can inform our understanding of the different effects Internet memes have in young people's lives.

Chapter 5: The informational logic(s) of memetic storytelling

5.1 The art of finding

By this point readers will recognize that a significant part of my academic journey has involved questioning the logic of various terms, the words "information," "text," "literacy," "story," and "research," being a few. As I seek to share the insights I arrived at through my analysis, it is now necessary to question the concept of "finding," particularly as it relates to this study's dialogic theory of description. Like the term "design," the word "finding" can represent both a process and a product. On the one hand, finding involves looking for or at something; and, on the other, it represents what one finds as a result of looking. In either case, questions form the basis of discoveries made. A question may lead someone to look for something, but, at the same time, looking at something may also lead someone to ask a question. Where this study's analysis is concerned, both processes apply. The art of finding, I contend, is essentially the art of asking questions, which is why questions serve as the key plot points in this research narrative. They form the heart of the dialogues facilitated through this project.[36]

In this chapter, I engage in dialogical narrative analysis to explore how the research I conducted with Mr. Rowe and the students can help us think through the first research questions associated with this study, which are:

1. a) How do Internet memes function as information resources?

   b) How does memetic storytelling constitute an information literacy practice?

[36] Quotations of unit-related materials are presented as they were written.

In keeping with this study's dialogic approach, the findings presented here emerge through discussion. Frank's (2012) understanding of the stakes of storytelling and narratability provide a conceptual entry point into thinking about Internet memes as representations, while Georgakopoulou's (2019) understanding of small stories guides my exploration of the *ways* memes work to convey the complexity of their different *tellers* and the *sites* in which they are situated. Alternatively, Rose's (2016) four sites (i.e., production, image, circulation, and audiencing) and her three modalities (i.e., technological, compositional, and social) provide a means through which to articulate this complexity from a visual standpoint.

The first part of this chapter focuses on question (a). In my attempts to understand how Internet memes work as information resources, I explore different students' understandings of what they are, how they think others engage with them, and how they engaged with them. This process involves drawing various connections between their meme definitions, interview comments, and meme examples. The second part of this chapter focuses on question (b). Extending the insights made in the first part, I employ Lloyd's (2010) concept of information literacy to reflect on how activities such as *information coupling*, *information sharing*, *information work*, and *influence work* figure into these young people's observations about memes and their engagement with them. Specifically, I explore how these students' dialogues can offer insight into the ways memetic storytelling functions as an information literacy practice.

5.2 Part one: How do Internet memes function as information resources?

5.2.1 The 'funny' thing about Internet memes

To speak about Internet memes as information resources, one needs some understanding of what constitutes an Internet meme. Dialogically speaking, the students' definitions act as a starting point for thinking about how they understood memetic storytelling and how their views

can impact our perception of the informational role memes serve. Reading their statements, a theme began to emerge. Words like "funny," "joke," "humor," "parody," and "laugh" frequented the definitions I collected. Whatever form an Internet meme might take (e.g., video, image, phrase, etc.), it appeared to possess one central attribute: Humour.[37] In fact, some students found this attribute so important that they referenced it several times. Steven Rutherford, for example, defined an Internet meme as:

> A picture of a person, place or thing with words that mean something funny. A joke about something that makes sense. I think it is an entertaining source of the world. I would say, it is a part of social media. It is funny jokes about something. (Meme Definition, Round #1)

Steven's definition offers a specific view of memetic storytelling. On the one hand, a meme is a "picture" that can be about anything; on the other, it is distinguished from a regular picture through the addition of "words that mean something funny." A meme, he explains, is a "joke" that "makes sense." The purpose of this joke is to entertain a global audience in a somewhat public manner, because a meme is "a part of social media." While referred to in the singular, Steven acknowledged that an Internet meme can be funny in a variety of ways, hence his pluralization of the word "jokes" in the final sentence of his definition.

Exploring Steven's definition in dialogue with those of other students, one sees how they collectively offer a more nuanced understanding of memetic humour. Nate Goldstone, for instance, wrote: "a meme is a picture or freeze frame of a funny or serious image with top text

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[37] Out of the fourteen written definitions I collected, thirteen referenced humour in some way. The student who did not include humour in his written definition referenced the importance of a meme's punchline in our interview conversation.

and bottom text to make it funny or a short video but of context that is funny" (Meme Definition, Round #2). Viewed in relation to Steven's definition, Nate's offers additional insight into the importance of memetic humour. While a meme's funniness can arise from the nature of its visual content (i.e., funny pictures), it can also arise from the appropriation of a serious visual through the addition of text that "make it funny." In such a case, humour serves as the impetus for remix. If the main objective of an Internet meme is to be funny, then other considerations, such as providing an accurate account or explanation of a meme's visuals, appear to be less important. While Nate's definition expands the textual format of a meme beyond a picture to include a freeze frame or video, like Steven's definition, it acknowledges the interplay between visual images and written text. Both recognize the multimodal nature of Internet memes.

While the students in this study generally seemed to associate Internet memes with humour, I noticed that they did not take that to mean that: a) everyone finds memes funny in the same way; or b) that they find the same memes funny. Shaunti Chernos, for instance, wrote that a meme is: "Something that you find funny and seems simple or useless to others but can have a deeper meaning. lots of people know about the one funny meaning" (Meme Definition, Round #3). Shaunti's definition highlights the fact that as much as humour is a defining characteristic of a meme, it is subjective. Someone might find a meme funny, while others might find it "simple or useless." The subjectivity involved in interpreting a meme can impact one's appreciation of the "deeper meaning" it carries, which appears to be less obvious than "the one funny meaning." Based on her definition, one might say that the humour of a meme is expected, but not guaranteed. Cedrik Melendez seemed to imply something similar when he wrote that an Internet meme is: "An image, video or saying on the internet designed to be funny" (Meme Definition, Round #2). The words "designed to be" suggest that memes are jokes that do not always succeed

in making others laugh.[38] Recognizing this fact does not change the claim that Internet memes are funny, but rather, qualifies it to imply that memes are not always funny to everyone. Since humour is subjective, it is possible for a person to recognize how a meme is designed to be funny while not enjoying the humour it represents.

The belief that Internet memes are designed to be funny, combined with the recognition that they are not funny to everyone, points to the diversity of memes that exist. Lucas Rand wrote that: "A meme is an 'inside joke' that is shared among the internet. That the comunity makes there own variations of" (Meme Definition, Round #2). While the word "inside" reinforces the idea that memes are often directed to a specific audience, the word "internet" implies a general group of people. This statement highlights the fact that an Internet meme is something that is both general and specific at the same time; general, because many people know about it, but specific because it can be tailored to an individual's circumstances, that is, a community can make its "own variations" of it. Zoe Petersen, in turn, wrote that: "A meme is something that shares a joke with a select group of people. Often a fanbase on a spisific book, movie or content creator. These people share this joke in a form of a photo with text" (Meme Definition, Round #2). Zoe's description suggests that Internet memes are often designed with a particular audience in mind. Both her and Lucas's definitions imply how people who fall outside of these "select" demographics may not appreciate the meme's humour, but can still recognize the appeal it holds for others. Memetic storytelling thus implies a level of social and self-

[38] Tooka pack, for example, noted that an Internet meme is: "Something on the internet that is intended to make you laugh or react" (Meme Definition, Round #3).

awareness. Although an Internet meme can be about anything, the meme's potential for humour depends on how the designer uses it to denote different things.

5.2.2 The work of memetic humour

5.2.2.1 The indeterminate nature of memetic storytelling

As a co-researcher working with these students, their different insights concerning memetic humour have informed my understanding of the way Internet memes work as information resources. While I had previously thought of Internet memes as documents through which people test their values against those of others (Tulloch, In Press), I had not fully accounted for the role humour plays in this process. The students' identification of Internet memes with humour, in this sense, added a new lens through which to consider how memetic value hypotheses are constructed. While various scholars have acknowledged the association of Internet memes with humour (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014), they do not suggest that all Internet memes are funny.[39] The fact that these students did reveals some of the cultural expectations they had of these digital texts, expectations that other people might have as well (e.g., Harshavardhan et al., 2019; Kariko and Anasih, 2019; Miltner, 2014). If the assumption underlying an Internet meme is, *Other people will find this funny*, then the negotiation of values essentially emerges through the question: *Why do I, or why don't I, find this funny?* Dewey (1938/2013) notes that "[…] it is of the very nature of the indeterminate situation which evokes inquiry to be *questionable;* or, in terms of actuality instead of potentiality, to be uncertain, unsettled, disturbed" (p. 168, emphasis in original). As Shaunti's and Cedrik's

[39] For an example of a non-funny meme, see Milner's (2013b) discussion of the serious texts associated with the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

definitions pointed out, the expectation of laugher associated with an Internet meme exists as a *questionable* potentiality. If the logic behind memetic storytelling is *funny until proven not funny*, then the process of making sense of a meme involves determining if its plea for humour is warranted. Adopting the students' view that memes are funny allows one to see how people might interpret them as representations of reality. To use Georgakopoulou's (2019) terms, it offers insight into the *ways* memetic stories are told.

To better understand the narrative work involved in this process, one needs to consider how a meme's humour can create certain conditions. According to Frank (2012), the questions that guide dialogical narrative analysis can be summarized as: "*what is at stake* for whom, including storyteller and protagonist in the story, listeners who are present at the storytelling, and others who may not be present but are implicated in the story?" (p. 74, emphasis in original). Based on the above student definitions, we can already identify several stakes associated with memetic storytelling: 1) the potential that a joke will or will not make sense to others; 2) the potential that a joke will create competing claims to reality through its remixing of pre-existing content; and 3) the potential that the joke's logic will or will not appeal to people's different senses of humour.

5.2.2.2 Memes as self-representations

The students accounted for these stakes in various ways through the observations they made, the meme examples they gave, and the stories they shared through this study's activities. One of the positive implications of memetic storytelling appeared to be that it can be used to represent people's personalities. Contemplating what makes a meme memorable, Yeji Lee told me:

> […] There are so many memorable memes, so, [laughs] I just—whenever I'm like lying around, chilling, in the sofa, and go through something that is like—that fits me the most, I save that post and share it around and that's my memorable thing. Like, just, fitting me. [laughs] (Interview, Round #1)

Yeji's observation illustrates how people can use memes to create a sense of identity. When a meme fit her, it became memorable enough to "save" and "share." In her written definition of an Internet meme, she noted that they are "funny or entertaining," and are used "to educate or entertain audiences" (Meme Definition, Round #1). Her interview description of what makes a memorable meme suggests that one of the ways memes educate and entertain people is by creating stories with which they can identify, an observation that aligns with Milner's (2016) understanding of how memes resonate with different individuals.

Yeji's response, in this respect, demonstrates how people can view memes through a personal lens. Applying Frank's (2012) question, "What does the story make narratable?" to this discussion (p. 75), one might say that an Internet meme can make people's "selves" narratable. Here the idea of small stories comes into play. On the surface, memes might appear to be small representations that take the form of humorous value hypotheses. However, as Yeji's experience suggests, the process of identifying with these general representations involves extending their significance to consider whether they *fit* one's personal experience. People, in other words, do not have to be creators of a meme to be the *tellers* of one (Georgakopoulou, 2019). Being the teller of a meme can be as simple as identifying with the character/perspective its narrative creates, which can lead people to save and share it in a new context.

Consider, for example, the following entry Lucas included in his My Favourite Meme Assignment. This meme featured two side-by-side illustrations of the same person vacuuming. In

the first picture, the person had a contented look on his face. In the second picture, his face was disgruntled.[40] The caption above the contented picture read, "Cleaning your room," while the caption above the disgruntled picture read, "Being told to clen your room." Explaining why he chose to include this meme, Lucas wrote:

> This meme I think it's funny because I can relate to it. When I'm cleaning my room and then my mom says I should clean my room I get a bit mad because I'm right in the middle of doing it. Same with the dishes or the garbage. I found this meme on Reddit. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

Lucas's description demonstrates how the meme was a good fit for him. He explained that he found it "funny" because he could "relate to it." He not only identified with the viewpoint it represented, but was also able to extend it to other situations he had experienced (i.e., doing the dishes or taking out the garbage). Applying the logic of Mr. Rowe's Contextual Spheres Diagram to the image, he ranked the relevance of the meme as "global because everyone has had to do chores for their parents at one point" (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). The main value expressed in this meme appeared to be autonomy; the cleaner wanted to clean out of his own volition as opposed to being told to clean. And yet, Lucas's interpretation also highlighted the value of trust. He wanted to be trusted to do his chores instead of being told to do them when he was already doing them.

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[40] I have chosen not to share this image because I am uncertain of its recognized meme status, which makes it more difficult to determine whether including it would fall under fair dealing.

5.2.2.3 Laughter and emotion

Lucas's entry reveals how the laughter associated with Internet memes is closely connected to other emotions, thereby offering further insight into the complexity of their narrative capacity. A meme can be about feeling angry and still make people laugh. Reflecting on the nature of memetic storytelling, Yeji told me:

> […] memes come in the different forms so the communication through memes can differ, but mostly I believe that the memes tend to share the emotions of certain kinds of topics. So, for example, if you think something's bad you share that meme to make—to show your type of feelings about certain things. (Interview, Round #1)

Viewed from this perspective, laughter not only makes personal experiences narratable, it also makes other emotions narratable. The meme Lucas shared made the feeling of irritation/anger narratable, and, in doing so, showed how he felt about being told to clean his room when he was already doing it. Humour was used to express a negative feeling in a positive way. Media scholar Kate Miltner (2014) found similar examples in her study of people who use LOLCats memes, some of which used humour to express emotions like embarrassment and frustration.

Understood as self-representations, memes serve as possible narrative resources through which people can make aspects of their experience known. Looking for memes that "fit" is one way people can negotiate the plethora of memes that exist. Describing his own meme engagement, Aidan Formilleza told me:

> I look for memes I can relate to […] There's a lot of memes that are for people that are, let's say, like, sure, maybe like I could relate to them, but it relates more to people that are like let's say in England or something—it will say something about London or something. Other people might find it amusing, but it will relate more to someone else.

> Then I'll see a meme about Vancouver or Toronto and it will make more sense to me […] Something like that. Or, games I've played, or movies I've watched, or T.V. shows I've seen. (Interview, Round #1)

Like Yeji's observations, Aidan's comment also emphasized the personal aspects of memetic storytelling. Similar to other students, he preferred to look for memes that were relatable to him. This relatability, he explained, could be established in a variety of ways, including his geographic location, as well as his interests and pastimes (i.e., playing games, watching movies and television shows). In acknowledging these different connection points, Aidan demonstrated an awareness of himself as a *teller*, who possesses a "specific biograph[y]" and is positioned within specific *sites* (e.g., sociocultural contexts) (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 258).

5.2.2.4 Laughter and relevance

From an information perspective, then, one might say that the humour of a meme is directly related to its relevance. Furner (2015) describes relevance as the relationship "between a work and one of its potential readers" (p. 372). Where Internet memes are concerned, these students' observations suggest that the funniest memes are also familiar. What makes a meme relevant or funny is its depiction of a relatable perspective. The following entry from Zoe's My Favourite Meme Assignment offers another example through which to explore these insights.

Figure 5.1 An entry from Zoe's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Zoe's entry description:

I think this is funny because I often find weird stuff like this funny and when I laugh, my parents give me weird looks. I found this on the gram while I was scrolling. It's funny because I laughed a little at this and my mom gave me a weird look. I was quite funny. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

Zoe's description of this meme demonstrates how she related to the narrative it creates. The scenario it describes is one that she had personally experienced. She knew what it was like to have parents who did not always understand her laughter and she also knew what it was like to enjoy "weird" things. Using the Contextual Spheres Diagram, she ranked this meme as "Global," noting that people who "[…] look at memes will understand their parents asking them about it" (Zoe, My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). This meme was relevant to her and others because it described a familiar experience.

That being said, we can get an even better understanding of this meme's relevance by considering the logic it conveys. While Zoe described this meme as "weird" it actually makes a

lot of sense. For instance, it makes sense that people who like weird things might find it difficult to explain their laughter to others. The word “nothing,” as it appears here, does not serve as a verbal response, as much as it represents the speaker’s inability to articulate an explanation in words. Given this inability, it is entirely rational that the speaker shows an example of that weirdness instead of describing it. The misspelling of the word “Watermelon” as “Materwelon,” along with the inside-out colour scheme of the fruit pictured, are self-explanatory. Consequently, the joke of the meme appears to be that nonsense makes sense to those who appreciate it. For Zoe, the humour of this meme was magnified by the fact that her encounter with it led to a real-life interaction similar to the one it described. She explained, “It's funny because I laughed a little at this and my mom gave me a weird look.” Her experience confirmed the hypothesis the image posed, which could be understood as: *People who laugh at weird things will find this funny because they know what it is like to try to explain themselves to their parents.* In posing such an implicit hypothesis, the meme appeared to promote the value of playfulness.

One of the most interesting things about this meme is the way it functions as a commentary on memetic storytelling. In the situation represented, the speaker’s use of a meme makes narratable what ordinary language cannot. The image serves as a small story because it does not possess all of the conventional elements one might expect of a complete narrative. And yet, in this scenario, it serves as a shorthand response for a bigger narrative. Zoe’s inclusion of this entry in her assignment demonstrates how such responses are extended through the act of interpretation. Frank (2012) notes that:

> Interpretation is necessary for deciding how to respond to a story: whether to pay attention at all; if attention is paid, how to react (laughter or tears, indignation or affirmation); and if the story is told in conversation, what story to tell next. (pp. 86-87)

To make the meme's narrative relevant to her life, Zoe re-contextualized it to fit her circumstances. Her interpretation highlighted her reason for paying attention to it and the logic behind her reaction (i.e., laughter). While she included a written explanation of her reaction for the purpose of the assignment, her description merely made the thought processes associated with this memetic storytelling more visible.

Like Lucas's interpretation of the cleaning meme, Zoe's response reveals how memes function as bigger stories in the minds of those who interpret them. Her interpretation of the Materwelon meme, for example, created a new narrative that applied the meme's logic to her everyday life. The truth of the meme lay less in the actual representation than it did in Zoe's understanding of it as a possible account of her experience. Frank (2012) points out that:

> Stories' capacity to report truths that have been enacted elsewhere is always morphing into their more distinct capacity to *enact* truths. These truths are not copies of an original. They are enactments in which something original comes to be, as if for the first time, in the full significance that the story gives it. (p. 40, emphasis in original)

In their interpretations of the above-mentioned memes, Zoe and Lucas appropriated them as a means through which to reflect and report on their lives. Their interpretations of these memetic narratives enacted truths differently by fitting them into specific contexts, or, to use Georgakopoulou's (2019) and Rose's (2016) phrasing, *sites*. In doing so, they made the memes even more relevant by making them more relatable. Like Lucas, Zoe located her "me" in the meme she shared, thereby establishing herself as both a teller and character in the story conveyed.

5.2.2.5 Memes that do not fit

But what about memes that do not fit? The highly personal nature of memetic storytelling can increase the stakes surrounding differences of opinion. As various students pointed out to me, the indeterminate nature of a meme's humour can quickly become problematic when someone reads it as a personal affront. Describing the possible fall-out memes can create, Dale Mebs relayed the following scenario:

> […] Like you post one political meme and then say you have—you know someone that's on the other side and they're like really hard core about it. It's like, 'I see you posted this meme and I can't believe you'd attack me like this.' And it's just a meme. It could mean nothing. (Interview, Round #3)

Dale's example, while hypothetical, points to the tensions surrounding memetic storytelling. In their interpretations of memes, people can make narratable messages that were never intended to be communicated. In his fictional scenario, someone felt personally attacked because an acquaintance posted a meme that represented a different political view. Dale's statement, "And it's just a meme. It could mean nothing," suggests that the meme was not designed to be taken seriously. Like the other examples discussed, his observation draws attention to the way small meme stories can become bigger stories in people's minds.

Viewed from this perspective, the personal nature of memetic storytelling is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Speaking of the pros and cons of using memes to communicate, Tooka pack told me:

> I think there's a lot of pros because, you know, like, everybody can get a good laugh and stuff, but the cons could be like, somebody doesn't get it and then like even if it's like a dark humour meme, you know, you're always going to have that one person in the

> group chat who doesn't like it and that could like backfire really quickly. (Interview, Round #3).

Tooka pack's observation sheds further light on the purpose of memetic storytelling as he and others understood it. If a meme is designed to create a shared experience of laughter, then its purpose is to establish a sense of connection between people. Consequently, if a meme fails to make people laugh, it can result in disconnection. As Tooka pack observed, it can "backfire really quickly." Memetic humour thus introduces a higher level of uncertainty into the act of communication. When responding to a meme, people must negotiate whether it fits them and whether it fits others. Finding memes that fit is more than just affirming what one already knows about oneself, it is also about fitting in with different people.

5.2.3 Laughable evidence

Having explored some of the implications of memetic humour, how might one think about the informational role laughter serves in memetic storytelling? If we accept humour as the defining criteria through which one evaluates a meme as good or bad, the expectation of laughter provokes personal inquiry. When looking for relatable memes, people have to think about how they do or do not align with their ideas, values, beliefs, and experiences. Bakhtin (1981/2014a) writes:

> Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (p. 23)

Lucas' meme entry and Zoe's meme entry both demonstrate how laughter brings subjects *up close*. These memes allowed them to explore familiar situations, but in ways that made them reflect on the logic underlying those situations. The meme about cleaning, for instance, led Lucas to think about how being told to clean when one was already doing it was more annoying than the act of cleaning itself. The Materwelon meme, in turn, led Zoe to reflect on the weirdness of her own sense of humour.

Based on these students' observations, then, Internet memes can be described as "laughable evidence." The fact that a meme's evidence is often seen as laughable, however, does not detract from its importance as an information resource. As these students' examples demonstrate, making sense of a meme can shape people's self-narratives. When responding, they must narrate the logic of their reactions in a way that fits with their own identity narratives. Reflecting on what memes can teach us, Quinn St. Andrassy told me that they:

> […] could maybe teach us a different way to show kind of where—what we like, what we don't like. Cause like I'll share something—some meme that I really like and that's kind of my thing and someone will show me their memes that's to do with something else. That kind of, I guess that shows, what we're into? (Interview, Round #1)

Like Yeji's comment regarding memes and emotion, Quinn's observation suggests that part of the relevance of memetic storytelling lies in how people use it to express their positionality on different topics. Buckland (1991) observes that, "[i]n a significant sense information is used as evidence in learning—as the basis for understanding" (p. 353). Memes, Quinn pointed out, can serve as personal evidence through which to understand oneself and others. People will like different memes and these differences can create new learning opportunities as individuals attempt to make their experiences narratable to each other.

5.2.3.1 A diagram of the informational logic(s) of memetic humour

To illustrate this view of Internet memes as laughable evidence, I have created a diagram that outlines the informational logics of memetic humour as I have discussed them here. I have done so with the understanding that diagrams are always limited in their ability to convey the complexity of a phenomenon. These limitations aside, this diagram aims to highlight the insights I arrived at through my interaction with the students' different contributions. In the diagram, I have simplified potential responses to a meme's humour hypothesis to indicate how the presence or absence of laughter can indicate different levels of a meme's *fitness* as a representation of reality. I have located these responses on a spectrum between certainty and uncertainty (positioned at the top of the diagram). This spectrum corresponds to one's sense of a meme's trustworthiness as potential evidence of one's views (positioned at the bottom of the diagram). This trustworthiness is established based on the nature of the evidence a person's interpretation of a meme produces, which might also be understood as the truths it is seen to convey. The meme's humorous hypothesis is presented as an indeterminate situation that, through the process of interpretation, becomes problematic in the awareness it promotes regarding one's own positionality in relation to that of others.

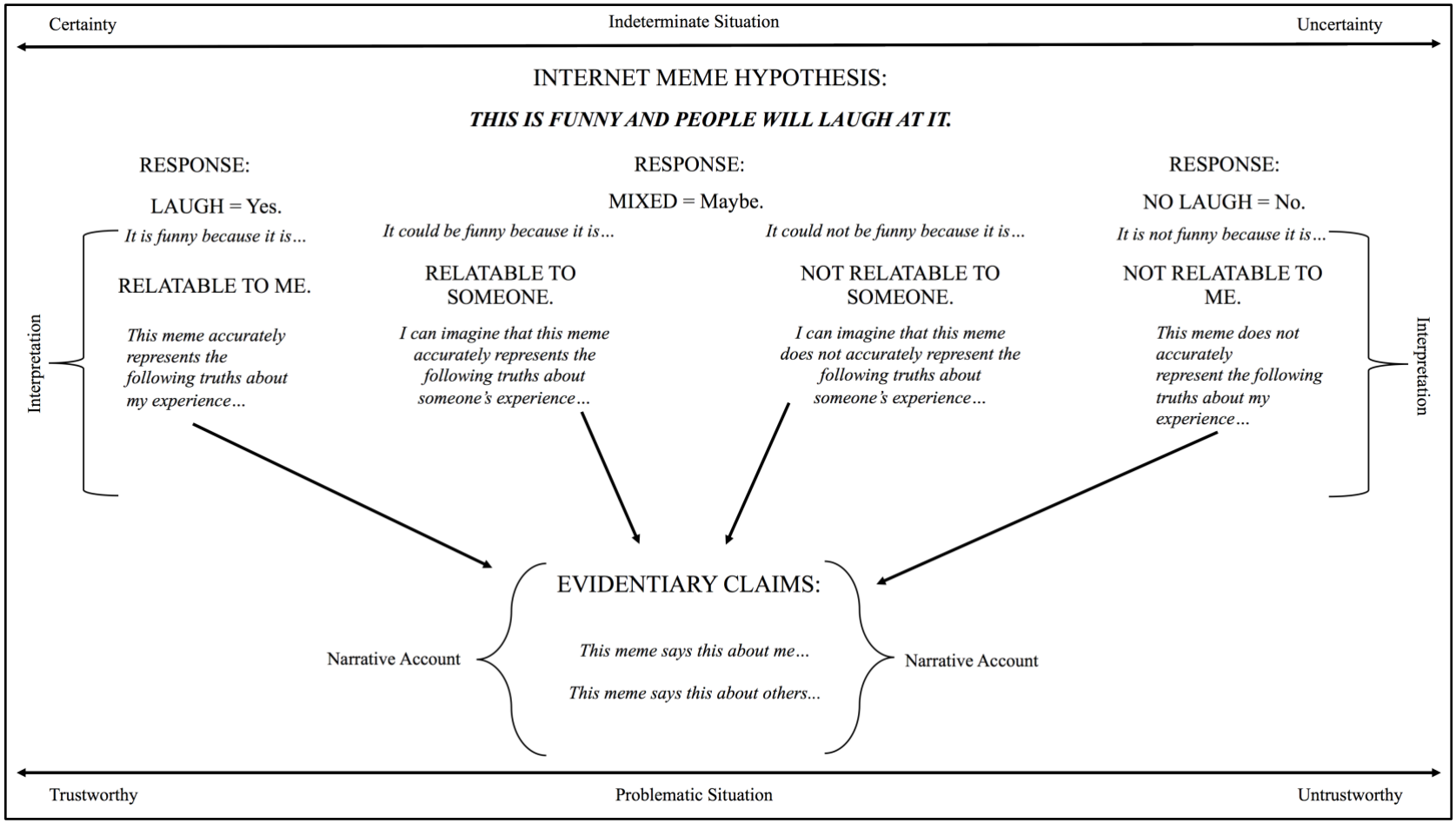

Figure 5.2 Diagram of the informational logics of memetic humour.

5.3 Part two: How does memetic storytelling function as an information literacy practice?

5.3.1 The practice of relating

The question of how Internet memes function as information resources directly relates to the question of how memetic storytelling constitutes a new information literacy practice. My different interactions with the participating students and their contributions to this study provide glimpses of their engagement with these digital texts, which offer ways of thinking about them from a practice perspective. The students' observations concerning the humorous nature of Internet memes, for example, point to the situated nature of the responses a meme generates. Through the act of interpretation, people appropriate a meme's narrative to make it their own. Their accounts of its message are thus shaped by the various *sites* in which they find themselves, *sites* that figure into their immediate responses and the fitness of that meme as a possible representation of reality. When reflecting on the stakes created by a story, Frank (2012) asks: "How does the story, and the particular way it is told, define or redefine those stakes, raising or lowering them?" (pp. 74-75). Applying this question to Internet memes, we begin to see how different contextual factors figure into the particular ways memetic stories are told and the stakes associated with them. Where the above diagram is concerned, this process involves thinking about what is involved in the act of interpreting a meme, which can be thought of as the practice of relating.

5.3.1.1 Layered interpretations

Making sense of a meme, after all, involves trying to understand the narrative surrounding a de-contextualized text, a narrative that, depending on the number of remixed variations associated with it, can represent multiple connections that people may or may not be

able to access. In our interview, Aidan described these different connections as "layers" and provided the following example as an illustration:

> The thing is that someone took a movie, *Star Wars*, and then took out frames and put captions on them—two different photos and then someone used that for a pick-up line and then someone else put that back and then it becomes funny. That's how it is. That's it. And someone takes that puts it on social media—spreads like wildfire—and then, this third layer that I see is when someone takes the same picture, puts it on someone else's Tinder and says, 'This could be you and me.' And then that spreads like wildfire and it goes over and over again. Like there is no end to the layers […]. (Interview, Round #1)

This example, which Aidan used to explain how memes develop online, illustrated his understanding of the different sites a single meme can represent. In his description of the role technology plays in creating access to memes, he went on to tell me how the act of interpretation constitutes a layer. He stated: "[…] I see it, which creates another layer. When I see it, it has the potential of me adding on a layer, which means I could use that in some way" (Aidan, Interview, Round #1). Summarizing his understanding of this meaning-making process, he stated, "Take it, share it. That's another layer. Take it, edit it, share it. Take it, use it, share it. You can use it a thousand different ways to add a layer" (Aidan, Interview, Round #1). Aidan's understanding suggests that the information literacy skills associated with memetic storytelling include the ability to discern what "layers" of a meme's meaning are relevant to one's experience.

Rose's (2016) framework for critical visual analysis provides a lens through which to consider the complexity of a meme's different contextual layers. While the sites of the image's production, the image itself, its circulation, and audiencing offer a sense of the complexity involved in interpreting visual media, they pose a challenge when thinking about how one might

make sense of a meme from a practice perspective. Distinguishing between these sites may be helpful for research purposes, but the fact remains that the sites themselves are highly interrelated, particularly when it comes to the composition of a remixed image. For, as Aidan pointed out, a meme is reproduced through the act of looking, which leads to a new interpretation. The site of the meme, therefore, is also the site of its audiencing and circulation, which, together, form a new site of production each time the meme is viewed. Below, I have created a nested diagram that draws inspiration from Rose's (2016) framework, but departs from it in an attempt to illustrate the logic Aidan described and demonstrate the fluidity between these sites.

To better illustrate the situated nature of the meaning-making process, I have presented the site of the meme/text as positioned within the gaze of the interpreter/storyteller. I have described the interpreter of a meme as a storyteller, because Frank's (2012) understanding of interpretation highlights the way it functions as a narrative activity, as does Aidan's observation that looking at a meme adds another layer. I have positioned this interpreter/storyteller within a particular situation of encounter with a meme, a situation that gestures to other sites that may or may not be knowable. I have titled these secondary encounters as "repertoires of knowing," because they represent the different layers or sites that shape a meme but may or may not be accessible to the interpreter/storyteller. These "repertoires of knowing" might also be thought of as a meme's inter-texts. The idea behind this diagram is that the site of the meme/text is essentially reproduced within the specific context of its viewing by a particular person, in a particular situation, with access to a particular set of knowledge that is shaped by a variety of contextual factors, which include a specific understanding of the *technological*, *compositional*, and *social* aspects of meme culture (Rose, 2016). By drawing attention to this dynamic set of

factors, this diagram is designed to facilitate a glimpse of memetic storytelling from a practice perspective.

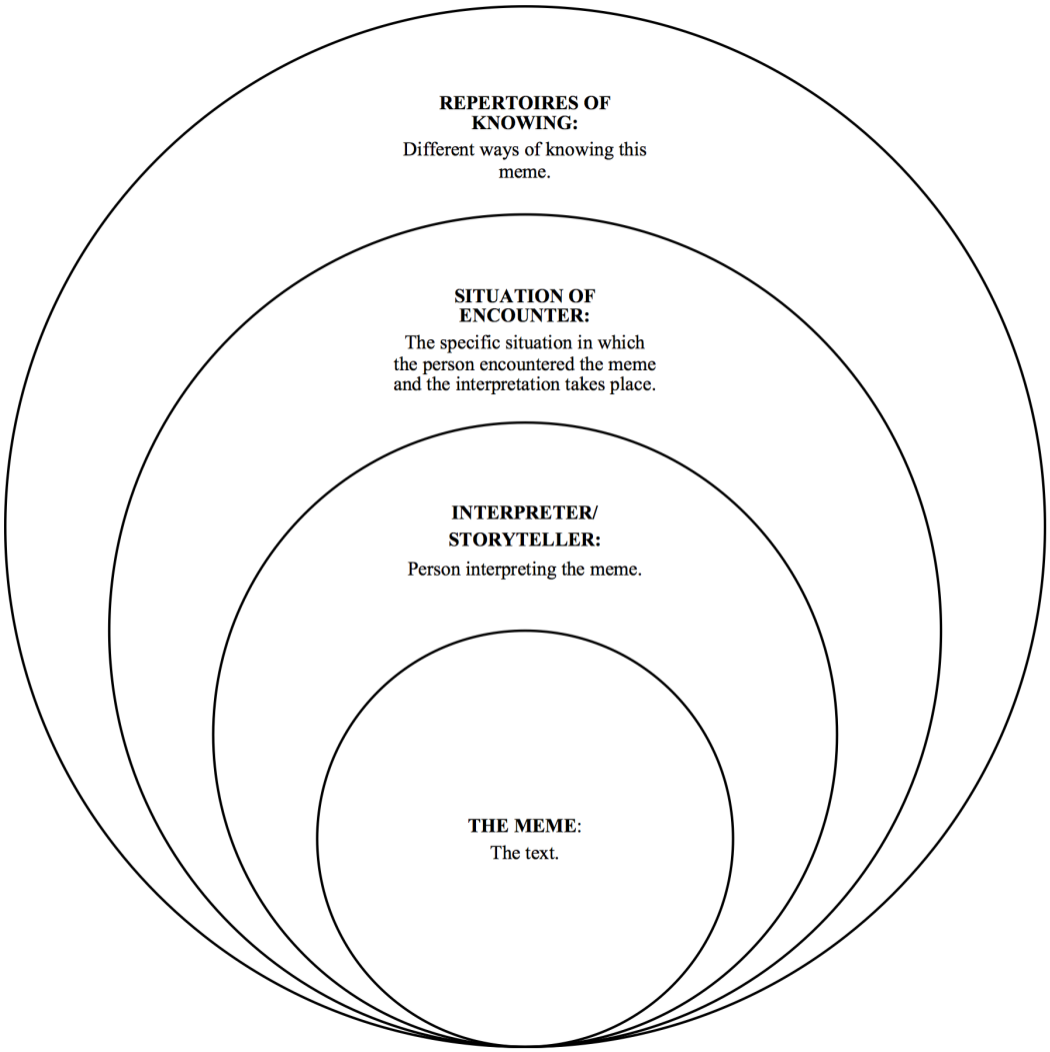

Figure 5.3 Diagram illustrating the layered nature of memetic storytelling as a situated information literacy practice.

The following example from Lucas's My Favourite Meme Assignment offers us a way of thinking through this diagram as it pertains to a person's lived experience.

Figure 5.4 Entry from Lucas's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Lucas's entry description:

I play a video game called rainbow six siege and in this game there is an app called tower. Tower is a terrible map that nobody likes. I also I hate tower so I can relate to this meme. Another reason I like this meme because it's from the office which is a show that I like. I found this meme on Reddit. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

In his description, Lucas explained that he connected to this meme's content because it drew on two of his interests: *Rainbow six siege* and *The office*. However, in connecting to this meme's content he also connected to the communities of people who shared these interests (e.g., *Rainbow six siege* players and fans of *The office*). Tower, he explained, "is a terrible map that nobody likes." He ranked this meme as "global because a lot of people play video game and watch the office" (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). His description demonstrates how he drew on different repertoires of knowing when interpreting this meme's narrative.

While Lucas did not provide an extremely detailed description of this meme, he did offer a glimpse of the different contextual layers (i.e., sites) that shaped his understanding of its meaning. Lucas, remember, defined an Internet meme as "an 'inside joke' that is shared among the internet. That the comunity makes there own variations of" (Meme Definition, Round #2). On the one hand, the images and subtitles from *The office* create a joke for the community of people who are familiar with the television sitcom. The characters depicted in this meme are Michael Scott and Toby H. Flenderson, two coworkers who are constantly at odds, because Michael is always breaking company rules and Toby, as the human resource representative, is constantly trying to keep him in check (see Carell & Kwapis, 2006). By comparing the "Tower" function to the character of Toby, the meme creator drew on references to both the show and the game to illustrate how the map ruins people's fun. Lucas's familiarity with the television show and the game allowed him to access these specific repertoires of knowing the meme. While these repertoires of knowledge contribute to his understanding of the meme's *composition*, his understanding of some of the *technological* and *social* aspects of meme culture, which helped him find and identify the meme on Reddit, also impacted his interpretation. The fact that Lucas encountered this meme on his own suggests that the stakes associated with his response to it were low. Based on his description, there appeared to be no pressure for him to respond to this particular meme.

Speaking for myself, I would not have understood the reference to *Rainbow six siege* in this meme, because I am unfamiliar with the game. However, I am familiar with *The office* and therefore can draw on my knowledge of that show to make sense of the humour this meme creates. While I do not understand the full import of the comparison between the "Siege Community" and Michael Scott, I am able to recognize how the comparison could be funny to

someone who is part of that community. I can see how the visual analogy of Michael Scott with one group, and Toby with another, establishes the foundation for a funny commentary on a relationship. My knowledge of meme culture and my interactions with the students have also familiarized me with different kinds of memes (e.g., remixed images, videos, phrases, etc.) Consequently, I understand that memetic storytelling often involves acts of comparison that create connections between seemingly disparate narratives. My knowledge of how memes are created through mimicry and remix provides another reference point for making sense of this meme's logic.

5.3.1.1.1 Memes and information coupling

Comparing my reaction with that of Lucas allows us to see how people draw on different repertoires of knowing when making sense of a meme. The different sites that shaped Lucas's interpretation included the contexts in which he had viewed the television show, those in which he had played the game, and the literal site in which he encountered the meme (i.e., Reddit). These sites of experience are separate from other sites that make the meme possible (e.g., the site of filming *The office*, the site of *Rainbow six siege*'s design, etc.). Still, they are what made the meme possible as a representation for Lucas. They are also what make the meme less possible as a representation for myself. Making sense of a meme's layers involves engaging in what Lloyd (2010) describes as information coupling. "Coupling," she explains, "facilitates emergent awareness of where information is situated, and the strategies used to access it within the various modalities" (Lloyd, 2010, p. 255). When Lucas drew on his knowledge of *The office* and *Rainbow six siege* to make sense of the meme, he coupled his understanding of their different narratives. A television show and a game represent different modalities, particularly when it comes to storytelling. Lucas's understanding of a meme as an "'inside joke'" allowed him to

comprehend the connection between these two different media types (Meme Definition, Round #2). He could access this meme's meaning through the humorous hypothesis it created.

The situation of encounter, of course, also factors into the sense-making associated with memetic storytelling. In his entry, Lucas did not say that this meme was directly sent to him, a circumstance that could have added more layers to his interpretation, particularly as it concerns the *social* modality associated with the image's *audiencing*. My reaction to this meme, for example, was shaped by the fact that I encountered it through Lucas. Coupled with my knowledge of *The office* was my knowledge of his interpretation of this meme and the fact that he felt comfortable enough to include it in his assignment. The interpersonal connections that factor into someone's encounter with a meme can thus represent another way of knowing it. Although I only knew Lucas through a classroom context that included his involvement in this research project, my interactions with him provided a means through which to understand the significance of the meme's humour. I could make sense of it as a representation of something that related to his experience.

5.3.1.1.2 Memes and information sharing

This observation brings me to an important point. So far, the student meme examples I have explored are those they discovered on their own. While social relationships figured into the meaning-making associated with the memes mentioned, the interpersonal contact appeared to be less direct. That is, the social relationships were implied through the meme's representation of certain communities of people, but not explicitly connected to specific acts of communication between acquaintances. Examining other meme entries students provided, one can see how personal relationships factor into the layers of information sharing that take place through these digital texts. Lloyd (2010) notes that "[i]nformation sharing is a purposeful directed activity,

which enables a member to give and receive information" (p. 255). While this information sharing can take place in a general manner through the posting of a meme on a public platform, it can also take place in more specific ways through direct messaging. This kind of sharing adds another contextual layer to one's interpretation of a meme. If memes serve as humorous representations related to any aspect of human experience, they can also serve as commentaries on personal relationships.

Consider, for instance, the following meme entry Shaunti included in her My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Figure 5.5 Entry from Shaunti's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Shaunti's Entry Description:

My sister had sent me this meme because we can both relate to it because it almost happens every day. When my mom is coming home, and we have not done our chores yet. We can hear her coming down the hallway, so we know we're already in trouble. At

> this point we don't try and just get ready for the consequences. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #3)

Shaunti's entry description demonstrates how encountering a meme through an acquaintance can impact one's interpretation of its significance. The fact that her sister sent it to her created a special way of knowing it. Shaunti could relate to this meme because they both had experienced what it was like to be caught not having done their chores.

For Shaunti, then, relating to this meme simultaneously meant relating to her sister. She interpreted the "you" in the meme as a collective "we" when describing her reaction to it, a "we" that stood for them both. This interpersonal connection appeared to be one of the most important aspects of the meme's narrative, because it made narratable an aspect of their sibling relationship. Shaunti made no mention of the fact that the meme's images came from the film, *The Incredibles 2* (2018). This lack of acknowledgement suggests that the visual allusion to the film did not play as important a role in her response. Unlike Lucas's reaction to the meme associated with *The office*, which contained a visual reference to a television show he liked, Shaunti did not mention that she liked the film. That being said, this particular meme did not draw on the film's narrative in the same way Lucas's meme drew on the television show's narrative. The meme's screenshots of the character, Violet Parr, are taken from a scene where she is surprised by her dad, who embarrasses her by bringing her to a restaurant where the boy she likes works (see Bird, 2018). This storyline does not align with the meme's remixed hypothesis, because the creator has appropriated Violet's surprised reaction to describe a completely different situation. Consequently, it makes sense that knowledge of the film would be less important to understanding this meme's meaning.

Shaunti's entry reveals two aspects of memetic storytelling that are important to one's conceptualization of it as an information literacy practice. The first is that there is a difference between finding a meme that fits oneself and having an acquaintance find and send a meme that does. The latter case, as demonstrated in the above-mentioned meme example, indicates how well people know each other. Shaunti's sister personalized this meme's hypothesis when she chose to send it to Shaunti. The sisters shared a personal history together and the meme functioned as potential evidence of that history. For Shaunti, it seems, the hypothesis was no longer: *People will find this meme funny because it is uncomfortable to be caught not having done one's chores*. Instead, it was something like: *My sister thinks I will find this funny because we have felt this discomfort when we haven't done our chores and our mom comes home*. The meme, in other words, was not merely testing a joke related to their experience, it was using a joke to confirm something about their relationship.

In my representation of Shaunti's reaction to this meme, I have inferred that she found it funny. I based this inference on her definition of an Internet meme as funny, as well as the nature of the meme itself, which possesses some inherently funny qualities (e.g., shooting water out of one's nose). As I mentioned earlier, Shaunti defined an Internet meme as, "Something that you find funny and seems simple or useless to others but can have a deeper meaning. lots of people know about the one funny meaning" (Meme definition, Round #3). Her meme entry, in turn, demonstrates how people might construct a sense of a meme's deeper meaning. In this particular case, the deeper meaning appeared to be connected to Shaunti's experience with her sister, something that fewer people would know. This personal narrative made the meme useful to them as a resource for representing an aspect of their shared experience. Viewed from this perspective, the situation in which Shaunti encountered this meme likely increased the stakes associated with

her response. The fact that her sister sent it to her meant that the expectations surrounding its evaluation held more personal implications. She was not only evaluating the validity of the meme's message, but also, her sister's interpretation of its relevance to their lives.

5.3.1.1.3 Memes and information work

The second aspect of memetic storytelling Shaunti's example reveals is the way the logics of meme culture create opportunities for different kinds of reading. This logic can be described in terms of Lloyd's (2010) concept of information work. Information work, she explains, is connected to the development of skills related to "[…] collective knowledge about the ways things are done" (Lloyd, 2010, p. 254). We have already seen how the expectation of laughter can create a lens through which people interpret a meme's informational logic. The students' general understanding of memes as humorous demonstrates a collective understanding of "the ways things are done" in meme culture (Lloyd, 2010, p. 254). As something that is often connected to relatability, humour becomes a means through which one can justify one's interpretation of a meme. The image from *The Incredibles 2* had nothing to do with doing one's chores. The character's reaction was associated with something completely different (i.e., embarrassment in front of one's crush). However, within the world of memetic storytelling, the meme creator's re-contextualization of this image was permissible, as was Shaunti's reading of it, precisely because they were accurate in what they aimed to describe. The caption may not have correctly described the film's scene, but it did correctly convey what some people feel when they experience a certain situation.

A meme's trustworthiness, in other words, stems from its ability to convey truth about something, but that something is less about the text and more about the person reading it, as well as the contexts that shape that reading. Dale, for example, pointed out that:

> An internet meme is normally a picture with a form of text describing or comparing something. The text doesn't have to be related to the image which means the meme can be obvious or vague depending on the text and picture used. (Meme Definition, Round #3)

The students' different observations place more emphasis on the relatability of a meme's message to its audience than they do on the actual connections between a meme's intertextual references. The students' general knowledge of meme culture factored into their understanding of this view as an acceptable way of making sense of memes. This knowledge, however, was necessarily shaped by their interactions with other people engaging in memetic storytelling.

5.3.1.1.4 Memes and influence work

Lloyd (2010) describes such interactions in terms of influence work. Through influence work, she contends, people introduce others to "knowledge sites that are sanctioned" within a practice (p. 254). While Lloyd (2010) uses the concept to describe the interactions between established members of a community and newcomers, I suggest that influence work is actually an ongoing process between individuals. Certainly, where memetic storytelling is concerned, different people will sanction different sites. Yeji observed that she experienced memes:

> […] through my friends because everyone sends me memes, but I guess I never saw any Internet memes that were like kind of like political or like intense or like very serious because whoever you're communicating with everyone tries to entertain you rather than to like make you sad or devastated. So, I guess, Internet memes' purpose was mainly to entertain people. (Interview, Round #1)

Yeji's description of the memes she exchanged with her friends showcases the way influence work occurred within her network of acquaintances. The knowledge sites that were sanctioned

were those that were not “political,” “intense” or “very serious,” because the aim was “to entertain people.” They avoided memes that could make each other “sad or devastated.”

The following example from Becky Cheon’s My Favourite Meme Assignment demonstrates how such influence work can impact one’s reading of a meme. Titled, “Daily Job Moods at Work,” the meme showed a series of eight images, each featuring a different infant with a different facial expression. These images were labelled different week days, all the way up to Sunday Night (Sunday had two images).[41] The emotions represented on the babies’ faces ranged from extremely upset (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday) to sad (Thursday), tired (Friday), extremely happy (Saturday), positive (Sunday), and scared (Sunday Night).[42] Alongside this image, Becky wrote this description:

> While texting with my dad, he sent me an image saying that this baby was looked very similar to me. I couldn't stop laughing when my dad said that my face was almost dying on Sunday and Monday, but on Thursday, my face began to bloom because I was excited and hilarious on Friday morning. This meme was just complete me. I get depressed on Sundays and go to school with a sad expression on my face on Mondays. On Thursday, when Friday is almost there, I can't control my excitement and it comes to Friday, and I'm so excited and just thinking of going out. Maybe everyone does, but it was funny because it looked so much like me, and it was completely accurate. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #3)

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[41] I have chosen not to include this image out of respect for the children’s privacy, since they likely did not give their consent to their images being used.

[42] I recognize that other people might choose different words to describe the various emotions represented in the children’s faces, but the ones I have chosen give a basic understanding of the affective states represented in this meme.

Becky's description offers insight into how her interpretation of this meme was influenced by her father's suggestion that it looked like her. He invited her to identify with this meme and her claim that "it was completely accurate" suggests that she accepted the hypothesis that the meme fit her own emotional states throughout the week (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #3).

As I examined Becky's description of her own daily moods, however, I began to see how it did not fit perfectly with the meme's depiction. The picture for Thursday, for example, was of a sad, melancholy-looking baby and the picture of Friday was of a yawning baby. Yet Becky noted, "[o]n Thursday, when Friday is almost there, I can't control my excitement and it comes to Friday, and I'm so excited and just thinking of going out." She also observed that she gets "depressed" on Sundays. However, in the meme, only the image of the Sunday Night child was upset.[43] The other image for Sunday was quite positive, featuring a famous baby known as Success Kid.[44] Accordingly, Becky's claim that the meme was "completely accurate" seems somewhat questionable. Literally speaking, the babies did not look completely like her. After all, they were babies and Becky was a teenager, although it is possible that some of them might have resembled her as an infant. Some of the babies were also of a different biological sex and ethnicity than Becky. And yet, her reading of this meme as "completely accurate" was sanctioned by her father's claim that the meme "looked very similar" to her. In her efforts to relate to this meme, Becky interpreted it in a way that made it fit her. She identified a general emotional trajectory that she related to and extended it to account for the specific aspects of her

[43] Of course, it is possible that Becky could gradually become more depressed on Sundays.
[44] Success Kid is a well-known meme.

experience. Through her interpretation she altered aspects of the meme's design, but, given the context of her encounter with it, her reading appeared completely valid.

Becky's example demonstrates the interconnected nature of information coupling, information sharing, information work, and influence work in memetic storytelling. The contexts surrounding the *sharing* of a meme *influence* how people engage in the *work* of making sense of it, *coupling* its different aspects to produce an interpretation that fits the situation of encounter. In his efforts to understand how different narratives work, Frank (2012) asks: "How does the story change people's sense of what is possible, what is permitted, and what is responsible or irresponsible?" (p. 75). Becky's interpretation of the meme her father sent her highlights the way memetic storytelling opens up opportunities for reimagining what is or is not possible when interpreting a meme. As part of her written definition, Becky had noted that an Internet meme is a "Parody of trendy photos" that "Satirize a situation" (Meme Definition, Round #3). Her reading of this meme suggests the way she viewed it as a parody of her own weekly mood swings, one that was not so much satirical as it was lighthearted. In the context of her relationship with her father, her reading of the meme was both permissible and responsible because it embraced the interpretation he had sanctioned when sharing it.

5.3.2 Memes as mimetic and memetic narratives

The students' meme examples, then, suggest the way memetic storytelling is both mimetic and memetic. On the one hand, memes are *mimetic* because through the act of interpretation they become representations of people's lived experiences. On the other hand, they are *memetic* because the act of interpretation, while imitative, creates variation. Memes will not be mimetic in exactly the same way for everyone. They are narrative resources that people can adjust to fit their circumstances (see, for example, Miltner, 2014). T, for example, described an

Internet meme as: “Something that helps and builds off your imagination to create humor” (Meme Definition, Round #3). The above meme examples show this to be true. In their interpretations of different memes, Lucas, Zoe, Shaunti, and Becky all extended the texts’ narratives to encompass aspects of their own realities. In his exploration of narratives, Frank (2012) notes their ability to animate and breathe. Where the practice of memetic storytelling is concerned, the students’ meme examples demonstrate how humour serves as an animating force. Through laughter people breathe life into representations of their experience. When this laughter is reciprocated, it can increase the breathability of a story because it opens up new possibilities for interpretation. However, as Dale’s hypothetical scenario suggested, when laughter is not reciprocated, it can be suffocating. If a meme can mean nothing, it can also mean everything, because it embraces the active role imagination plays in people’s attempts to narrate their lives. That being said, the unique situations through which people encounter memes will inevitably place limits on interpretations by sanctioning certain readings over others.

5.3.3 The temporal nature of memes

Another factor, however, when thinking about the practice of memetic storytelling is the temporal nature of Internet memes. If these digital texts are generally designed to reflect people’s attitudes, opinions, interests, feelings, and experiences, what happens when people undergo change in these areas? My interactions with the students suggest the importance of memetic storytelling as a contemporary activity, something that other scholarship has also suggested (Miltner, 2014).[45] Aidan, for instance, told me that an Internet meme is “[…] really just a big trend—some—most of the time that makes sense […]” (Interview, Round #1). Speaking of the

[45] In her work, Miltner (2014) talks about the ephemeral nature of Internet memes.

memes he saw online, Quinn observed, "[…] most of them all have some sort of funny—something to do with what's happening right now, or, something that's—I'd guess you'd say trend of some sort […]" (Interview, Round #1). This emphasis on memes as trends suggests the temporariness of their existence. A meme that fits a person in the moment may not fit several years down the road. At some point, Lucas may stop playing *Rainbow six siege*, Shaunti may no longer be accountable to someone for doing her chores, and Becky might get a job that changes how she feels during the week. As these students develop over time, the memes they included in their assignments may no longer be as relevant as they once were.

That being said, change occurs on both a cultural and personal level. If memes represent things that are happening in the world, they represent both collective and individual experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic provides one such example of an event that produced a number of memes that may not be as relevant in the future. The "My Plans/2020" meme, for instance, is specifically connected to the events of that year. Other memes, however, are general enough that they might continue to resonate. Focusing her final research project on the pandemic, Emily Sousa included a meme in her presentation that featured dialogue that said: "Me: I'm going to be so productive today." Below this statement were the words "Also me:", which were followed by the image of a Google search query that read: "do cows have best friends" (Final Project, Round #1). Emily positioned this meme on a slide she titled, "Losing Motivation." Explaining the meme's significance to this topic, she wrote: "Everyone around the world has lost their motivation to clean, cook or do homework, this is a real problem because of Covid we are all in the same boat" (Final Project, Round #1). Emily's interpretation of this meme connects its message of unproductiveness to the situations created by COVID-19. While she does not mention the pandemic restrictions, her association of the loss of motivation with the virus points

to the way it has impacted people's professional and personal lives. For me, reading her description elicited some of the challenges of working from home and trying to do school online, hence the general lack of motivation to "clean, cook or do homework" and the temptation to engage in silly Google searches.

Although Emily used this meme to describe life during COVID-19, the fact that it contains no direct reference to the pandemic suggests how it might be reimagined in future to describe other contexts. As the circumstances people find themselves in change, so will the way they interpret this meme as a possible narrative representation of their lives, thereby changing one's understanding of its composition. Since Emily did not include the source of this meme in her presentation, it is possible that it existed prior to the pandemic as a description of a completely different circumstance. The continued trendiness of the meme will thus depend on the ease at which people can relate to it over time and how funny it appears. As the nature of information seeking changes, Google searches may no longer be as relevant to people's everyday experiences. There may be other company logos that are more representative of people's online distractions. That being said, sometimes jokes just get old. My conversations with the students pointed to the way certain memes get boring simply because they have been seen too many times. At least, this was the case with some of the images Mr. Rowe and I had used in the "What Does the Meme Mean?" activity.

5.3.3.1 Memes and repetition

Even so, the subjective nature of memetic humour means that there will always be some debate as to what constitutes a trendy meme. Some memes may never be as popular in status as others are, but they nevertheless might constitute personal trends in the communities in which they circulate. One of the interesting things to note when considering the ongoing relevance of a

meme is the nature of its subject matter. When analyzing the students' meme examples, I noticed that many of them tended to represent reoccurring situations. Lucas's cleaning meme, Zoe's laughing meme, Shaunti's chore meme, and Becky's mood of the day meme all described repeatable events in their lives. The frequency of their experiences contributed to their sense of the memes' fitness as personal representations, because it provided more evidence to support the memes' hypotheses. As narrative resources, memes about habitual events in a person's life may be more relevant simply because they remain connected to things that continue to happen on a regular basis. Losing motivation, for instance, is likely a struggle people will continue to face throughout their lifetimes. The COVID-19 meme can be applied in different sites that audience it in new ways, reproducing it to make narratable different stories of distraction or procrastination.

This observation adds nuance to one's understanding of the role repetition plays in memetic storytelling. Dawkins's (2016) theory, for instance, suggests that memes are passed on through replication. Most discussions of Internet memes, in turn, tend to highlight similar processes of transmission in their explanation of the way these digital texts circulate (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). As storytelling devices, however, it is interesting to note that the replicability of certain experiences can help determine the lifespan of an Internet meme. Frank (2012) notes that "[s]tories enact *how* memory reconfigures; they are the process of memory-in-action as much as they are repositories where memories are kept" (p. 83, emphasis in original). The students' meme examples demonstrate how memetic storytelling does the work of "memory-in-action" (Frank, 2012, p. 83), but they point to the fact that memes re-enact memories as present events. Memes can make narratable people's feelings about the past, but those feelings are ultimately anchored in the present. Once they lose their ties to the present, they begin to lose their relevance. Memes are used to narrate life as it happens.

5.3.4 An information-based model of memetic storytelling

The glimpses of memetic storytelling this analysis has provided offer insight into how it functions as a dispersed information literacy practice. Drawing on this discussion, I have conceptualized an information model that outlines the way memetic storytelling functions as an ongoing narrative act that can inform people's sense of who they are in relation to others. The open-ended cyclical nature of this model is intended to highlight the temporal nature of memetic storytelling. As my examination of the students' examples pointed out, memes are representations that are continually being remixed through people's interpretations to mean something new. At the same time, this model is also intended to represent the continuity of storytelling as an act that both shapes experience and is shaped by it. The main idea here is that the sense-making underlying people's interpretations of memes is dynamic, not static. People's responses to memes can change over time. From an information perspective, this model highlights how memes can be used to shape the logic underlying people's self-narratives, which can translate into how they choose to act in the world. For the purposes of this model, I have conceptualized this process as five different stages: Informed Self-Narrative, Information Filtering, Information Testing, Information Discovery, and Information Action.

I have assigned Lloyd's (2010) information activities to these different stages, recognizing how they are intricately connected. Information Filtering, I contend, is achieved through the *influence work* of different factors related to the situation in which one encounters a meme (e.g., technology, interpersonal messaging, participation in certain online communities, etc.). These factors, in turn, shape the Information Testing that takes place through one's evaluation of a meme's hypothesis, which constitutes a certain amount of *information work* (e.g., knowing how to read a meme). Information Discovery, I suggest, is the conclusion one arrives at

through the act of interpretation, a process that involves *information coupling* related to the previous stages of filtering and testing. Drawing on all of these repertoires of knowing, people can make their own evidentiary claims about a meme. This evidence can then inspire different Information Actions. For example, they might save and share it, like it, remix it, dislike it, ignore it, etc. Even doing nothing constitutes an action, because it represents a personal choice related to the possible *information sharing* that results from people's encounters with the text. These actions, in turn, can inform their self-narratives.

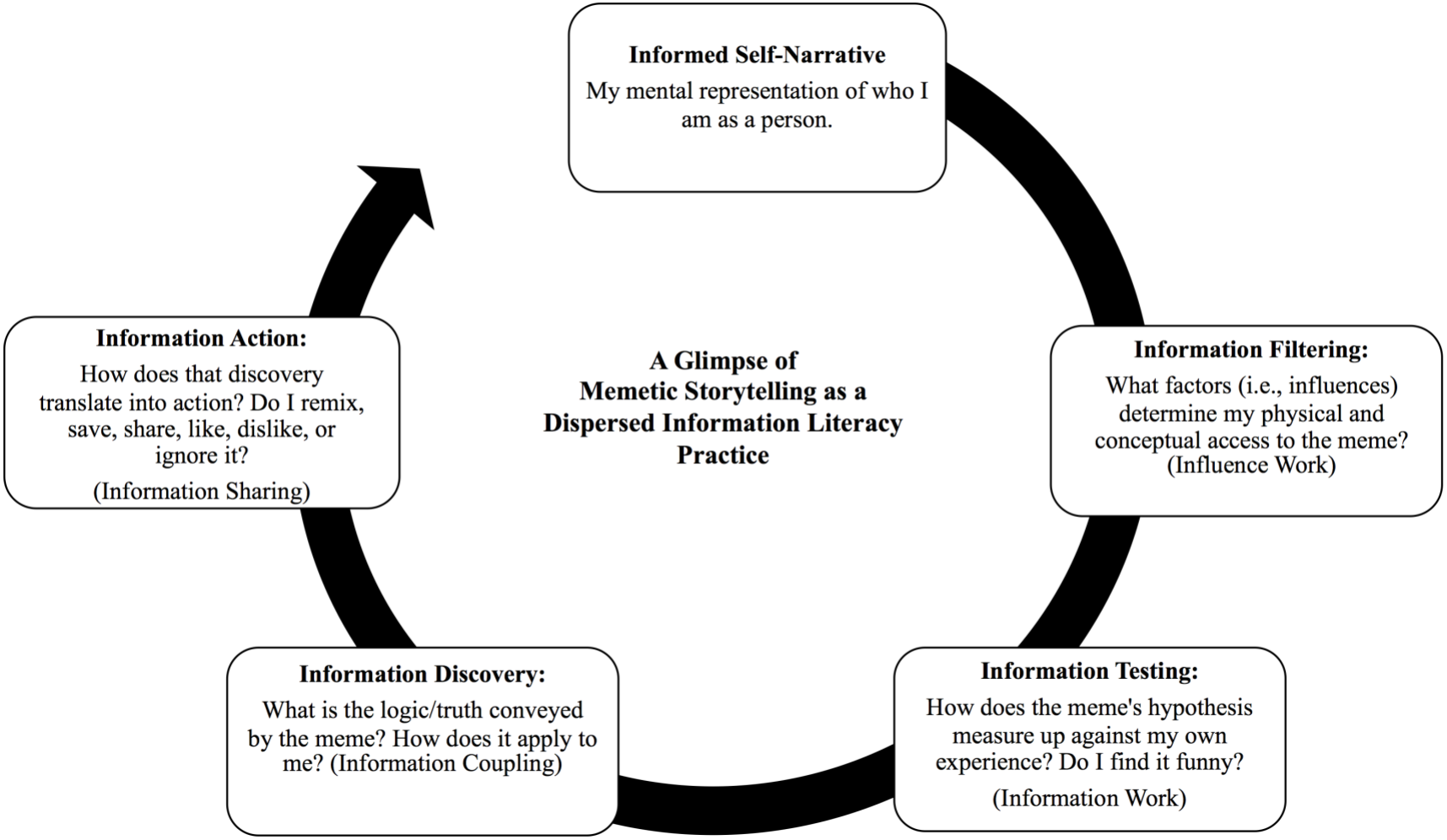

Figure 5.6 A model of memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice that incorporates Lloyd's (2010) information activities.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how the students' different meme definitions, observations, and examples can inform our understanding of this study's first research questions, thereby offering insight into: a) how Internet memes function as information resources; and b) how memetic storytelling works as an information literacy practice. In the first part of the chapter, I drew on the students' understanding of Internet memes as funny artifacts to explore how humour factors into the logic of Internet memes as documents. Specifically, I examined how the expectation of laughter surrounding memes can provoke personal inquiry by generating a level of uncertainty as to people's reactions. Responding to some of the students' observations and meme entries, I considered how the funniest memes are often the most relatable because they draw on familiar subject matter. This emphasis on relatability, I argued, demonstrates how memes function as self-representations. In dialogue with the students' insights, I considered how laughter can be a strong indication that a meme fits with people's personal narratives. I then discussed how the expectation of laughter surrounding memes can lead to what Dewey (1938/2013) describes as *problematic situations*, particularly when people find themselves in disagreement over the evidence a meme represents. Building on the observations of different students, I pointed out how laughter can be used to communicate people's feelings about different topics, which explains why people will come to different conclusions about a meme's trustworthiness. I then provided a diagram of the informational logic(s) of memetic humour to illustrate how Internet memes function as information resources.

In the second part of this chapter, I explored how this understanding of Internet memes invites us to think about memetic storytelling from a practice perspective. Examining the

different contextual layers that can factor into a person's interpretation of a meme, I considered how one might account for people's negotiation of them. Responding to aspects of Rose's (2016) framework for navigating critical visual analysis, I created a diagram of how one might conceptualize a person's interpretation of a meme. I then explored how this diagram can be used, in conjunction with the previous one I introduced, to understand the sense-making underlying some of the students' responses to different memes. In my analysis of these meme examples, I drew on the students' observations to further reflect on the information processes that take place through memetic storytelling. Using Lloyd's (2010) information activities, I considered how people's personal dispositions, contexts, and relationships shape their understanding of the kinds of stories communicated through these humorous documents.

These observations, along with others that students made, led me to reflect on the temporal nature of Internet memes. Specifically, I noted how the fitness of memes, as personal representations, are likely to change over time as individuals change. That being said, I also pointed out how memes that are associated with reoccurring events in one's life might stay relevant for a longer period of time because they are related to an ongoing experience. In an effort to summarize this chapter's glimpse of memetic storytelling as a humorous information literacy practice, I concluded by introducing an information model that outlined some of its different stages. This model was based on the insights arrived at through the above-mentioned analysis. When designing it, I incorporated Lloyd's (2010) information activities into its representation of the sense-making processes surrounding Internet memes. The aim of the model was to demonstrate the dialogic nature of the thought processes surrounding people's engagements with memes as potential evidence that can guide their actions in the world.

Chapter 6: Young people and the joy(s) of Internet memes

6.1 Young people and Internet memes

One of the interesting aspects of this study's research methodology is the way it embraced a view of young people as researchers of their own meme experiences and those of others. In our class unit, Mr. Rowe and I discussed aspects of memetic storytelling with the students for the purpose of obtaining their opinion on different issues associated with it. Sometimes, these opinions took the form of general commentary related to how Internet memes work. Other times these opinions took the form of personal commentary that focused specifically on their own experiences. In the last chapter, I adopted an information perspective to explore what their views and experiences might say about memetic storytelling in general. In this chapter, I will explore what their views and experiences might say about *their* memetic storytelling in particular. Frank (2012) notes that narrative analysis is "meta-interpretive," because its main focus is to study how people interpret stories (p. 18). As researchers of their own meme practices, these students were called to engage in meta-interpretive activities throughout the course of the class unit. Consequently, their contributions can be used to reflect on memetic storytelling, but they can also be used to reflect on young people's experiences of memetic storytelling. Rather than view this shift in focus as a separate discussion, I view it as an extension of the dialogues that have already taken place up to this point.[46]

Guiding this chapter's finding process, then, are the second research questions associated with this study. In the sections that follow, I examine the ways this project can offer insight into the following questions:

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[46] Quotations of unit-related materials are presented as they were written.

2. a) How are different youth engaging with Internet memes outside of traditional educational contexts (e.g., on their own time)?

   b) What kinds of Internet memes are youth engaging?

When I originally constructed these questions, I was thinking about how youth interact with memes outside of school contexts. However, the more I reflected on the dispersed nature of memetic storytelling, the more I realized how it is not bound by physical settings, as much as it is bound by other factors (e.g., social constraints, access to digital technologies, the Internet, etc.). The tendency to distinguish between life inside school and life outside school can lead people to overlook the ways these contexts overlap. Part of the school experience, after all, involves socializing with one's friends. For that reason, I qualify these research questions to mean how young people are engaging with Internet memes *on their own time*.

The first part of this chapter draws on the students' interviews and meme examples to address question (a). I outline how this study is positioned to offer more insight into the ideals they associated with memetic storytelling than it is the actual pragmatics underlying their meme engagement in different contexts. Building on the students' understandings of memetic humour, I consider how their observations suggest the importance of joy as an ideal that guides their memetic storytelling. Following Georgakopoulou's (2019) small stories approach, I identify eight different joyful narratives that emerged through their contributions. Drawing on material from their interviews, meme collections, and a couple of their final projects, I highlight the *uniqueness* of their examples (Frank, 2012), while exploring how that uniqueness represents the complex work these joyful narratives can accomplish. This exploration includes a discussion of

the paradoxes and tensions these narratives introduce, which are connected to the roles *fear* and *desire* play in people's experiences of joy (Frank, 2012).

The second part of this chapter explores the significance of this joyful ideal as it relates to question (b). Adopting an information perspective, I consider how these joyful narratives can inform our understanding of the possible information needs the students' meme engagement represents. Frank (2012) notes that typologies can be used to highlight the work of stories and draw attention to the stakes associated with them. While my exploration of these eight joyful narratives reveals some of the work they accomplished in these students' lives, my exploration of the possible information needs this work represents leads me to consider who is *holding their own* through these texts and how (Frank, 2012). This discussion involves a careful consideration of the relationship between big and small stories, which can impact our understanding of the "world-making, i.e., telling of mundane, ordinary, everyday events," and the "world-disruption and narration of complications" that occurs through these texts (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260). By drawing attention to the possible information needs the students' memetic storytelling might be understood to meet, I showcase the importance it can hold to their lives, while also highlighting some of the tensions it introduces.

6.2 Part one: How are different youth engaging with memes outside of traditional educational contexts?

6.2.1 The ideals vs. the pragmatics of memetic storytelling

While there are many ways to approach the "how" of memetic storytelling, my exploration will focus more on the ideals surrounding it, because they represent the personal philosophies that guided the students' meme practices. The students' positive association of memetic storytelling with humour provides a basis for thinking about how they viewed their

meme engagement. From a meta-interpretive perspective, it serves as a lens for examining some of their interactions with these digital texts when scrolling online, exchanging messages through text or group chats, and participating in different events. My exploration of their engagement, however, does not delve into extensive detail concerning their interaction with specific platforms and technologies, partly because these details were not provided.[47] Of the fifteen students I interviewed, I can say that all of them used their phones some if not all of the time when engaging with memes. A few mentioned that they would sometimes use iPads and computers. Combined, the platforms they referenced included Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, and Twitter. Web browsers like Google/Google Images and meme generator websites such as Imgflip and Mematic were also mentioned, the latter in specific association with the creation of memes.

This list of platforms, websites, and search engines highlights the range of places these young people could encounter memes. In fact, when reflecting where people can go to find memes, several students told me, "everywhere." During our interview, Tanya Kennedy observed, "You can really go anywhere to find memes. Like, even if you walk around a school or when you're out you see memes everywhere. Like they are just too popular to not see […]" (Interview, Round #1). Speaking along similar lines, Aidan remarked, "[…] doesn't matter if it's Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat. It doesn't matter what you're on, you'll find it" (Interview, Round #1). Thus, while the cultures and communities of these different platforms inevitably figured into how these young people engaged with memes, as well as the convenience of certain technologies, I am only able to gesture to the impact they had on them. This study was designed

[47] Several of the students I interviewed mentioned that they do not look at memes very often.

to think about memetic storytelling on a broad level, one that allowed students to talk about their meme engagement across multiple platforms and contexts. What I do know is this: the students who participated in this study were in possession of various technologies through which they could access memes, they accessed them through different channels depending on their personal social media preferences and community groups, and they generally spoke of their meme engagement in positive terms.

Although these observations might not appear that profound, they actually hold significant implications. As someone who obtained her first cell phone and laptop when she started university in 2008, I did not have the same level of access to the emerging Internet meme culture during my high school years. Class laptops and iPads were not available for classroom use. Several of the social media sites mentioned above had yet to be developed. Internet access was not as widely available. Fast forward twelve years, access on all of these levels now appeared to be the norm in the place where I had grown up. Although economic disparity still existed among students, their lives were heavily impacted by digital culture, not only because it was strongly integrated into the school experience, but also because it was strongly integrated into the lives of their wider network of friends, family, and acquaintances. As a teen, I had no conception of a meme. Now teens were speaking of them as being "everywhere."

6.2.2 The joyful ideals of memetic storytelling

The students' meme definitions provide insight into their understanding of the purpose of memetic storytelling, and consequently, how they engaged in it. One can begin to identify the ideals they associated with this practice by reflecting further on the socio-cognitive and socio-emotional effects of memetic humour. Memes, the students pointed out, are designed to create positive experiences of laughter, often serving as an educational form of entertainment through

which people can express their emotions. Jordan Kaye summarized this view when she told me that Internet memes are used "[…] for people's enjoyment and people normally make them to make other people laugh […]" (Interview, Round #1). Speaking of her own experience, she said, "[…] I only ever see them about stuff I would specifically find funny, cause it would like come up or like my friend would find—send it to me […]" (Interview, Round #1). Similar to the other students mentioned, Jordan engaged with memes that were specifically connected to her own interests. While she told me she did not see memes that often (Field Notes, Round #1), part of her enjoyment of memetic storytelling came from finding humorous representations of things she "would specifically find funny." In other words, the ideals that circumscribed her understanding and appreciation of memes were highly personal. The memes she liked were relatable, because they were tailored to fit her personality.

And yet, as we have already seen, there is a deeper element to the sense-making that underlies the laughter of memetic storytelling. Memes may be for people's enjoyment, but that does not mean that they always describe enjoyable aspects of people's lives. Of the twenty-nine meme entries represented through the six My Favourite Meme Assignments I collected, some of the less pleasant emotions expressed through memetic humour were: derision, disillusionment, anger, frustration, discontentment, dislike, loss, oppression, fear, depression, disappointment, anxiety, hurt, and discouragement. Jordan touched on this sober side of memetic storytelling during our interview when she remarked that memes "[…] can also be used in like political stuff or like for serious stuff too. Cause, I guess that's like a lighthearted way of talking about that kind of stuff? […]" (Interview, Round #1). Jordan's comment revealed her understanding of the complexity of memetic humour, which can serve as a "lighthearted" means through which to address potentially uncomfortable topics. As she and other students pointed out, meme-inspired

laughter allows people to acknowledge and negotiate the more difficult aspects of their existence along with the less difficult.

T summarized this upbeat attitude towards memetic storytelling when he told me that an Internet meme is: “Something that brings joy to everybody in a different way” (Interview, Round #3). Upon reflection, the word “joy,” which made its way into several of the students’ observations, seems particularly apt for describing the emotional depth memes carry as representations of people’s interests, experiences, values, and beliefs. While the students who participated in this project did not necessarily like the same kind of memes or agree on what constituted a good or bad meme, they recognized different ways memes bring joy to people’s lives through humour. Contemplating T’s statement in dialogue with those of the other students, the word “joy” highlights the range of emotional depth represented by their interactions with these digital texts. When thinking about how these youths were engaging with Internet memes on their own time, the general answer I discovered through our interactions was: *joyfully*. In the following sections, I examine how memes brought joy to these students’ lives by considering the different ways they spoke about their understanding of memes and their engagement with them.

6.2.2.1 Understanding the depth of joy

Exploring these joyful narratives, however, requires that I first define “joy” as a guiding concept. Although dictionaries often associate joy with happiness, there is a difference between the two terms, one that is accounted for in spiritual interpretations. The *Unger’s bible dictionary*, for example, offers the following statement in its entry on the topic:

> Joy is a delight of the mind arising from the consideration of a present, or assured possession of a future good. When moderate it is called *gladness;* raised suddenly to the highest degree it is *exultation* or *transport;* when the desires are limited by our

> possessions it is *contentment;* high desires accomplished bring *satisfaction;* vanquished opposition we call *triumph;* when joy has so long possessed the mind that it has settled into a temper, we call it *cheerfulness*. This is natural joy. (Unger, 1983, p. 613, emphasis in original)

This definition of joy gestures to the balance of heaviness and lightheartedness people navigate in their daily lives, which range from moments when they are transported beyond their circumstances to those when they experience contentment, satisfaction, triumph, and cheerfulness. While this interpretation of the term carries specific connotations in religious contexts, for the purpose of this inquiry I adapt it to apply to secular experiences as well.

When it comes to Internet memes, this view of joy underscores the range of emotions that underlie people's desire to laugh about things that concern them. The student reflections I share in the following sections are offered as small stories of how memes brought joy to their lives. I have described these stories in terms of the following narrative types: *joy of a pick-me-up*, *joy of a positive distraction*, *joy of the unusually familiar*, *joy of imperfection*, *joy of nonsense*, *joy of a shared experience*, *joy of connection/belonging*, and *joy of learning*. While these stories are presented as different kinds of joyful narratives, they often intersect. As the students' examples demonstrate, memes can inspire joy in multiple ways. My attempts to distinguish between the following narratives are intended to showcase the nuanced way joy can manifest in young people's engagements with Internet memes. Rather than present rigid categorizations of different kinds of experiences, these headings are designed to highlight different sides of a larger dialogue.

6.2.3 Joyful narratives of memetic storytelling

6.2.3.1 Joy of a pick-me-up

My interactions with the students showed me that one of the most obvious ways Internet memes can bring joy is by *transporting* people to a more positive state of mind, what I refer to as the *joy of a pick-me-up*. Describing what he knew about memes, Armaan Grewal told me, "I know that Internet memes can be images that portray funny texts and stuff to other people and they can sometimes make people's days" (Interview, Round #1). This statement, I learned, related to Armaan's own experience. Describing his meme engagement to me, he said, "Well I follow a lot of meme pages on Instagram. So, whenever like I'm having a rough day I usually just go on Instagram and scroll through memes and stuff. Yeah, just to brighten my day a bit" (Armaan, Interview, Round #1). Quinn made a similar observation when he reflected that people use memes: "For entertainment and laughter or just to kind of bring up your mood" (Interview, Round #1). Both Armann's and Quinn's statements suggest that people are not necessarily in happy moods when they engage with memes. On the contrary, descriptive phrases like "rough day," "brighten my day a bit," and "bring up your mood" imply that people who are looking for Internet memes are often experiencing heavier emotions. In such cases, memetic humour can help alleviate people's negative feelings.

Tanya, for example, explained to me that the ability to find humour in something negative is actually a trait of a good meme creator. When asked about how challenging she thought it would be to keep a meme page relevant, she remarked:

> […] if you have a life it can be harder cause you can't relate to anything cause you see the brighter side of a lot of things—like you can't really be negative. But if you don't really have a life like—that's a hard thing to say, I know, but it's just like, most people

> that don't have anything or can't get anything, they turn themself into—like, they have like depression or they're sad so like they like kind of turn that into a meme to make themself feel good and are like, 'Hey, let's make a meme out of like this llama because this llama looks hilarious so it cheers me up,' and then they post it and then, it can go viral, you never know, but most people don't give up on something that they think that will make them happy. (Interview, Round #1)

Tanya's observation offers further insight into how memes can serve as a pick-me-up. According to her, making a relatable meme comes easier to people who have experienced difficult times and do not have other positive things in their lives. The impetus for creating memes, she pointed out, is often to counteract the negativity people face and help them "feel good." Finding the humour in a negative situation, she reasoned, comes easier to those who have actually experienced those situations, because they are actively looking for something to cheer them up.

6.2.3.1.1 A joyful paradox of memetic storytelling

Tanya's observations create what might be understood as a joyful paradox of memetic storytelling: in order to be positive, you have to be negative. That is, in order to create an uplifting meme, you need to possess an understanding of the feelings that bring you down. While everyone might not agree with her view, it nevertheless offers insight into how memetic storytelling can work as a joyful information practice. A brief re-cap of the student meme examples I have already examined shows this connection between memetic humour and negative experiences. The memes Lucas shared about being told to clean his room and using the Tower function on *Rainbow six siege* both drew on upsetting feelings (e.g., anger and frustration) to create positive ones, as did the meme Becky shared about her different moods during the week, most of which were negative (e.g., sad). Likewise, Shaunti's meme about failing to do her chores

and Emily's meme related to losing motivation during COVID-19 both created a lighthearted view of unpleasant experiences. These examples demonstrate how making fun of unhappy situations can provide a means of *triumphing* over them, because they help people feel *glad* or *cheerful* in spite of the negative associations a meme references or the unhappy moods they might be in when they initially view it.

Simon explored this triumphant aspect of memetic storytelling in his final research project, which focused on Internet memes and depression (Final Project, Round #2). The following excerpts from his PowerPoint presentation, which included a meme collage, reveal his thoughts on the role memes play in navigating some of the challenges of mental illness. Through his creation of this meme collage Simon highlighted how people use memetic storytelling to narrate difficult emotional experiences.

Figure 6.1 Excerpt #1 from Simon's Final Project on depression.

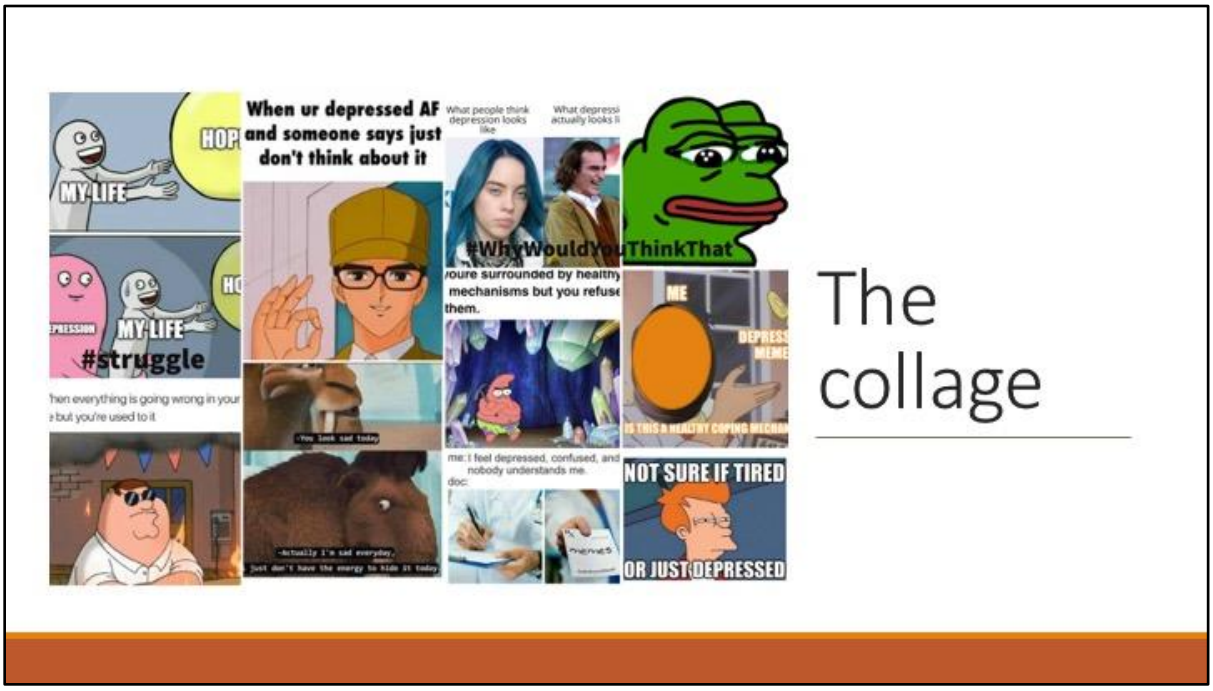

Figure 6.2 Excerpt #2 from Simon's Final Project on depression.

The humour represented in Simon's presentation belies the heavier emotions that come with depression, particularly the challenge of feeling like one's condition is misunderstood or dismissed by others. To the extent that such memes are used to establish a sense of relatedness, Internet users can employ them to overcome feelings of isolation. Simon's collage[48] illustrated how individuals who are feeling alienated or stigmatized because of their mental/emotional challenges can find common ground with others through memetic storytelling. The following memetic image, pulled from his project, captures this view of memes as good medicine. The doctor prescribes memes as treatment for depression. Interestingly, the ideas of Simon's project

[48] Simon did not reference where he found each of the memes that made up his collage. I have blocked out the image of one of the people featured in this meme collage for privacy reasons, as I did not recognize the person to be a public figure, entertainer, or Internet celebrity.

align with the results of contemporary research (Kariko & Anasih, 2019), which I only discovered after this unit had been completed.

Figure 6.3 Meme example from Simon's Final Project on depression.

Based on these different students' observations, one of the purposes of memetic storytelling is to transform people's emotional states through laughter. Frank (2012) notes that stories do not merely describe realities, they also create them. The fact that memes can brighten people's days and bring up their moods suggests how they can bring into being new perspectives that change how people view and feel about different situations. Consider, for instance, the following entry Shaunti shared in her My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Figure 6.4 Entry from Shaunti's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Shaunti's entry description:

> My friend sent me this the other day because she knows how much I eat out because of my sports. I'm always in a rush and eat somewhere near my house so I'm supporting local businesses to make myself feel better for eating out so much. It's not always a good thing but I can't complain. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #3)

Shaunti's description reveals her understanding of why her friend sent her this meme. The message it conveyed could make her feel better about her eating habits because it suggested the way she was "supporting local businesses," as opposed to being lazy. The pick-me-up provided took the form of a more positive outlook on one's habits. Shaunti recognized that eating out is "not always a good thing," but she also admitted that she "can't complain." In its positive justification of the situation, this meme appeared to inspire *cheerfulness* and *contentment* regarding her lifestyle. Positioned as a character in this narrative, Shaunti was reminded of the options she had when narrating her life decisions.

6.2.3.2 Joy of a positive distraction

Memes, however, can also promote joy by distracting people from an unpleasant reality or situation. I use the term "distraction" here, because, as Tanya pointed out, people who are spending time engaging with Internet memes could be doing something else. "Internet memes," she observed, "are things that people look for for entertainment when they're bored or when they have nothing else to do or to draw attention from other kids that they just don't talk to. […]" (Tanya, Interview, Round #1). Speaking of her own meme engagement, she said:

> […] I have a lot of social media friends. So like I talk to them a lot, but, when it comes to like, nighttime, we'll say around eleven/ten, I tend to just, like I can't sleep cause like there's so much on my mind and it's hard, so, I usually just go on social media and see like, what's out there. And sometimes I will see a meme repeated and repeated and so I get bored of it. So I'm like, okay, swipe, swipe, swipe, but then when I see something new I find it funny and I'm just like, 'That's actually relatable. I want to save that and maybe print it off so I can see it on my wall cause it makes me happy.' […] (Tanya, Interview, Round #1)

For Tanya, a meme had to be novel and relatable in some way to get her attention. If it was used too much she lost interest in it. The joy of discovering something different was part of the *gladness* memetic storytelling afforded her, while the monotony of seeing the same memes was part of the displeasure. If memes were new, funny, and relatable, they could be worth saving and displaying in a physical space.

Tanya's experience suggests how memes can serve as an antidote to boredom and a form of stress relief. She looked at memes when she was bored and could not sleep because there was "so much on [her] mind and it's hard." This mental taxation may be why she appreciated newer

memes, because they were more successful at capturing her attention and *transporting* her mind to other things. That being said, this positive distraction did not have to come from a close acquaintance. Tanya noted that people look for memes "to draw attention from other kids that they just don't talk to." She reflected that she sometimes looked at memes after she stopped talking to her social media friends. During this time of night, she went on social media to see "what's out there." This distinction between talking to her friends and scrolling for memes showcases the different levels of investment associated with memetic storytelling. Looking at people's posts may be a way of giving them attention, but it is a less demanding form of attention than actually talking with them. Viewed as a low-stakes form of communication, memes can be a way of establishing basic connections with people outside of one's close circle of acquaintance.

Like Tanya, part of the joy Nate found in memetic storytelling was the reprieve it offered from boredom. For him, however, that reprieve was also found in the act of creating memes. When asked if he liked to make memes, Nate told me, "Yeah, sometimes when I'm bored, I'll create them for myself and I'll just laugh at them for a while […] And then show them to my friends and we all laugh" (Interview, Round #2). Speaking of the different memes he remembered and liked, he remarked:

> […] One of the most memorable ones for me is probably—would have to be the two guys kind of doing like a—kind of clasping hands together. And then, it's usually like one side says something/ one side says something and then they kind of have an agreement in the middle of the hands. And it's funny. (Nate, Interview, Round #2)

Nate's appreciation for this particular meme stemmed from its potential as a template that allowed for new variations. When I asked him why he liked it, he explained, "Just the

opportunity for what you can put there. Like it leaves a big open space for what you can put there. It's always funny to come up with something" (Nate, Interview, Round #2). By engaging him in creative play, this meme presented him with a positive diversion. His description demonstrated his knowledge of how the meme format worked as a storytelling device and why he chose to use it. For him, the joy of creating a meme brought with it the *satisfaction* of expressing himself in different ways and making his friends laugh.

6.2.3.3 Joy of the unusually familiar

Tanya's experience and Nate's experience suggest how the newness of a meme creates feelings of joy. And yet, it seemed that this newness was grounded in a sense of the familiar, because they and other students often spoke of memes as being relatable in some way, either in form or content. Describing the kinds of memes he liked, Lucas told me, "[…] If I see something that's funny then I guess I'll like it. Oh! If they are related to—if it's related to something I like I will like it or if I can relate to it" (Interview, Round #2). There is joy, in other words, in seeing aspects of one's experience reflected in a meme. When thinking about what people need to know in order to understand memes, Jordan observed:

> […] normally like the only memes I've ever really seen are just like stuff that would be funny that you like spread around to like spread joy or like make someone else laugh. But I've never really had a meme that like I sent to someone to like—I mean, maybe like I showed someone a meme on something that we both already knew about and we would think it's funny, but like I've never really showed it to someone to like show them a—like a new opinion or like a new thing. […] (Interview, Round #1)

Along with Tanya's and Nate's reflections, Jordan's comment highlights how the newness of a meme is not necessarily "new" in the sense that it presents a completely unfamiliar topic or idea, but rather, that it presents a familiar idea in a funny way.

6.2.3.3.1 Another joyful paradox of memetic storytelling

Here we arrive at another joyful paradox of memetic storytelling. The students' different insights suggest how memes are *uniquely redundant*. In prior work, I had considered how understanding a meme's references factors into one's understanding of a meme's message (Tulloch, In Press). However, I had not deeply considered how uniqueness and redundancy factor into people's interest levels in a meme. These students' observations demonstrate the importance of this paradox to a meme's popularity. On the one hand, memes have to be unique enough to stand out from the large number of memes in circulation. On the other hand, they have to be redundant enough to be relatable. Joy, it appears, can come from telling an old story in a new way. A meme about being too lazy to cook, for instance, may not be new to people because it is a repeated event in their lives, but seeing that story illustrated through someone else's facial expressions can make it new. People might be used to having agreements and disagreements, but they might not be used to seeing those agreements/disagreements represented in the form of a hand clasp or arm wrestle.

We see this balance between uniqueness and redundancy in the following image, taken from Shaunti's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Figure 6.5 Entry from Shaunti's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Shaunti's entry description:

This is a meme I found while on Instagram, I find it funny because it's saying how that 2021 has not been any better than 2020 to do with covid. This man looks very angry and stressed out which I feel a lot of people can relate to in the past year. I shared this with my friends as soon as I saw it because I'm sure they would laugh at it as well.

(My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #3)

As Shaunti explained, this meme appealed to her because it represented a familiar feeling. She thought that many people could relate to experiences of anger and frustration in the midst of the pandemic, which is why she immediately shared it with her friends. That being said, the fact that she did not state where the image of the man came from or who the man was points to the way

he might have been unfamiliar to her.[49] Even if she recognized him, his association with COVID-19 might be new. The *old* feeling of being angry or frustrated with the virus was repackaged through its association with a *new* face. Shaunti automatically interpreted the man's dissatisfaction with 2021 to be COVID-related, even though the pandemic was not directly mentioned in the meme itself. The context surrounding the meme's appearance on Instagram might have contributed to her interpretation, but, even if it did not, the shared impacts of the pandemic in 2021 would have provided her with a cultural context for understanding the meme in this way.

6.2.3.4 Joy of imperfection

In addition to providing pick-me-ups, positive distractions, and unusually familiar representations of one's experiences, memes also brought joy to some of these students by encouraging them to laugh about human imperfection. For instance, when discussing the most memorable memes she had encountered, Yeji relayed the following examples:

> […] There's one political meme that is very memorable or like, is stuck in my head, but the scene where Justin Trudeau just touches his hair like kind of like slowly—that just makes me feel like, 'Oh, that's funny' and just, yeah. And sometimes like the scene where one woman—I don't remember who she was but—the name of her—but like when she like flips her page while touching her mouth. When she just said that 'Don't touch like—don't get hands near your mouth or nose or eyes because of COVID-19' and that

[49] I was not able to determine who the man in this picture is, but because it appears to be a staged picture I am guessing it comes from some kind of public entertainment media, which is why I have included it here.

> makes me feel like people make mistakes. Like the pol—famous people make mistakes and I feel confident [laughs]. (Interview, Round #1)

Yeji's reflection highlights the way Internet memes can alleviate the pressure to be perfect. The fact that "famous people" who occupy important positions of authority have funny quirks and make mistakes helped her realize that these things are normal. As she admitted, this awareness increased her self-confidence. The joy she felt in viewing such political memes did not stem from the ridicule of others as much as it did from the recognition of a shared human condition. For Yeji, these memes appeared to inspire *cheerfulness* regarding her own state.

While making fun of people's imperfections can create obvious tensions, learning to laugh at one's mistakes can also be seen as a healthy attempt to move beyond them. In his book on managing stress, medical doctor Amit Sood (2013) notes the healthy benefits of such laugher. However, he also cautions that:

> Creative balance is needed, since humor can offend people if it's perceived as indecent or insensitive. When in doubt, the safest bet is to make fun of yourself, a perfect icebreaker. If you can't laugh at yourself, someone else will. (p. 243).

The memes Yeji referenced featured public figures who were likely used to being the subject of public scrutiny. This dynamic might have contributed to the freedom she felt to laugh at them without the concern that doing so would hurt their feelings. When it came to these particular memes, laughter humanized powerful political figures rather than dehumanized them. Where Yeji was concerned, it reduced the perceived social divide between "famous people" and regular people. She had mentioned to me that, while she liked political memes, her friends and her did not share a lot of memes that were "kind of like political or like intense or like very serious"

(Yeji, Interview, Round #1). Her discussion of these meme examples, in turn, also demonstrated the way she did not view them as intense or serious.

The memetic humour surrounding people's imperfections, therefore, is not necessarily malicious, although it certainly can be.[50] Becky, for instance, was able to laugh at her weekly mood swings and Shaunti was able to laugh about not completing her chores and eating out too much. The joy Yeji found in the above-mentioned memes did not appear to be rooted in making the public figures feel bad, but rather, in recognizing that they were human, too. In this sense, memes about people's imperfections or mistakes can function as a tool for humility, particularly when it comes to making judgments about others. The COVID-19-related meme Yeji described illustrates the challenge of following one's own advice, especially when it goes against one's natural instincts. The serious circumstances of the pandemic required people to change their behaviour in ways that proved extremely difficult at times. Frequent mandates imposed restrictions that introduced a "new normal," one that heightened people's consciousness of their natural habits and challenged them to change them. Interpreted within this cultural context, it is easy to understand why people might find such a meme encouraging. The fact that an authority figure was struggling to keep up with the changes she was introducing could release people of the shame they might feel when they failed to follow all of the rules properly.

By drawing attention to people's imperfections, such memes also function as a potential tool for accountability. This accountability not only concerns public figures, but anyone

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[50] In my interviews, various students told me they did not like memes that were negative or hurtful towards others (e.g., body-shaming, critical of celebrities, etc.). Tanya, for example, pointed out that memes centered around people tend to be more negative than those centered around animals (Interview, Round #1).

participating in public discourse. Cedrik, for example, included an image of an online customer review in his My Favourite Meme Assignment. This review, which was of the book, *Kaguya-sama: Love is war, Vol. 1*, rated it one out of five stars and criticized it for being printed the wrong way. The overall recommendation was: "Do not buy." Describing his reaction to this entry, Cedrik wrote:

> This is a meme I found while I was scrolling through reddit, This Meme is humorous to me because they are saying not to buy It because its printed from back to front and that is ironic because the item is manga, and they are always produced from back-to front. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2).

Cedrik's description highlights how the book review demonstrated a lack of cultural awareness on the part of the reviewer. Manga, he pointed out, is printed differently than Western books because it follows the reading traditions of the genre's place of origin (i.e., Japan). Consequently, this reviewer's negative evaluation of the book appears to be unjust because it focuses on a design element that has nothing to do with the actual quality of the story. The fact that this review became the subject of memetic attention demonstrates how it was connected to the joy of *triumph*. The reviewer's unfair judgment of the book did not prevail.

The judgments associated with the above-mentioned memes suggest how they might create feelings of "superiority" in those who view them, something that Shifman (2014) notes can contribute to a meme's humour (p. 79). And yet, each of these examples also demonstrates how feelings of inferiority can figure into people's responses. Another question Frank (2012) asks of narratives is: "What is the force of fear in the story, and what animates desire?" (p. 81). In each of these students' meme examples, there is the *desire* to be right and the *fear* of being wrong. Government officials, for instance, often present the standards by which other people are

expected to live, hence why it might come as a relief to realize they are not perfect. Alternatively, people who feel cheated by a book purchase might *desire* to prove themselves right by proving the book to be wrong. However, fans of the book's genre might *desire* to prove that the book is right and the reviewer is wrong. Thus, when it comes to establishing feelings of superiority, memes can simultaneously play on people's fear of inferiority. Internet users may find joy in learning that everyone is wrong sometimes (something that makes them feel less inferior), just as they may also find joy in realizing that they are right sometimes (something that makes them feel superior). Examined closely, however, one sees how this desire and fear coincide. Read on a deeper level, laughing at another person's imperfections can be desirable because it *transports* one beyond the fear of being the only one who makes mistakes.

6.2.3.5 Joy of nonsense

That being said, various students also observed that memes can bring joy through the celebration of intentional mistakes, what might be understood as the joy of nonsense. Although memes are often tied to familiar, relatable things, they do not have to be. Aidan, for instance, made the following statement during our interview, "I would say all memes I see are somewhat amusing. Some don't make as much sense but they're funny just cause I've seen it a lot" (Interview, Round #1). Elaborating on this logic, he went on to explain, "Something doesn't have to be actually funny to make you laugh. It just has—you just have to see it a lot until you start to get a pattern and a joke" (Interview, Round #1). Repeated exposure to nonsensical memes, in other words, can create a sense of relatability that did not originally exist for someone who first encountered them. When sharing his knowledge of Internet memes with me, Aidan remarked, "[…] Most of the time they're not funny, but it's funny because everybody knows what it is" (Interview, Round #1). He recognized that part of a meme's meaning lies in the act of memetic

storytelling itself, that is, the processes of collective imitation and repetition through which it comes to exist.

Memes, in other words, can be amusing simply because they are pervasive. Aidan offered the following example to describe such a meme:

> There is literally a meme that's just a bunch of zombies from *Call of duty* walking down a hallway and the caption on there is, 'Me and the boys at 3am looking for beans.' And I find that hilarious because I've seen it so many times. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense at all. I don't know why zombies are there—I don't know why they are looking for beans. There's no context to anything, but it's funny. Like there's never any build-up it's just funny—that's it. (Aidan, Interview, Round #1)[51]

The meme Aidan described appealed to him because of its absurdity. He admitted that he could not discern the logic behind the statement and the image it contained, but he nevertheless found it funny. Of course, the fact that this meme was associated with a video game and Aidan enjoyed playing video games might factor into his repeated encounters with it. It is also possible that, while Aidan observed there was no context, the nonsensical nature of the meme might actually fit with gaming culture. One possible reading is that it represented tired gamers who were looking for coffee after pulling an all-nighter. The zombies could be seen as a relatable representation of the gamers' exhausted state.

That being said, Aidan's experience of this meme demonstrates how someone does not have to understand its message in order to enjoy it. Seemingly senseless memes can inspire

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[51] To view variations of this meme, search the phrase, "Me and the boys at 3am looking for beans." Most variations I have found use "2am" instead of "3am."

feelings of joy simply because they are an excuse for silliness. Reflecting on his meme engagement, Lucas remarked:

> […] sometimes I just text my friends stupid things that I guess can be considered memes, maybe. They're not pictures. They might just be like a text message and then I guess that can be a meme saying—like sometimes I misspell words on purpose or spell—use a different word instead of that one. Like just to get them mad or to get—not mad, but like, to have the laugh something. […] (Interview, Round #2)

Lucas's reflection illustrates how nonsensical memes can bring joy by testing the boundaries of communication, including those associated with memetic storytelling. As he pointed out, experimenting with the rules of communication can be a fun way of engaging others and irritating them in a lighthearted way. Making intentional mistakes for the purpose of making others laugh is not only a permissible act according to the norms of meme culture, it is also encouraged.

This appreciation of nonsense was apparent in several of the meme examples students shared. Zoe's Materwelon meme, for example, possessed written and visual nonsense, as did the COVID-19-related meme Emily shared in her Final Project, which showed someone searching, "do cows have best friends" (Round #1). The following entry from Zoe's My Favourite Meme Assignment offers additional insight into the joy nonsensical memes can create, particularly when it comes to playful exchanges between friends.

Figure 6.6 Entry from Zoe's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Zoe's entry description:

I asked my friends to send me some memes because I don't usually look at memes and they sent me this. I don't really understand it, but they thought it was funny. When I asked them why, they said (and I quote) 'it is just funny bro'. I don't understand. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

Zoe's description highlights how part of the joy of nonsense comes from the fact that it does not merit an explanation. For Zoe's friends, the image was "just funny." Interestingly, Zoe's interaction with her friends actually resembles the one described in the Materwelon meme she liked. Only, in this case, Zoe was the person who did not understand the joke. For her, it seemed that the most interesting thing about this meme was the mystery of why her friends found it so funny. And yet, she still ranked this meme as "Global" according to Mr. Rowe's Contextual Spheres Diagram, noting: "My friends seem to fine this funny and they sent it to me over

instagram so I would assume that more than just my friends understand this" (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). Although she did not understand the meme, Zoe still decided to include it in her assignment.

6.2.3.5.1 Ticklish memes

A close reading of the meme Zoe's friends sent, however, suggests that its humour lies in the comparison it creates, one that projects the human experience of getting distracted by a nice outfit onto a non-human entity. According to Sood (2013):

> People laugh when they find a sudden, unexpected shift in communication flavored with exaggeration. Surprise is the other ingredient of laughter. You can't tickle yourself, but someone else's fingers on your skin can make you giggle. The difference is the element of surprise. (p. 242)

The surprise of this image stems from the contrast between the illustration and the dialogue that accompanies it, what other meme scholars refer to as "incongruity" or "anomalous juxtaposition" (Shifman, 2014, p. 79; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 215). The incongruity between the darker implications of claiming people's souls and the lighter implications of complimenting their wardrobe, creates an unexpected pairing. Adding to this sense of ridiculousness is the deliberate misspelling of words (e.g., "Gurl") and use of slang (i.e., "fleek"). Abbreviations like "ur" and the use of informal grammar contribute to the sense of play taking place. These mistakes were not accidental. Like the misspelled words Lucas sent in messages to his friends, they were designed to *tickle*.

As Aidan's interpretation of the zombie *Call of duty* meme demonstrates, memes can be ticklish simply because one finds their ridiculousness appealing. Cedrik, for instance, included the following entry in his My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Figure 6.7 Entry from Cedrik's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Cedrik's Entry Description:

This is a just a video I found on YouTube and thought it was funny.

(My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

This video, which shows a seal playing a saxophone, departs from the logic governing one's understanding of the real world. In the real world, seals do not walk down streets, fall in love with saxophones, break into music stores to steal instruments, get chased by the police, deflect bullets with music, and escape. *But in this video a seal does*.[52] While Cedrik did not include a lengthy description of why he found this meme funny, his comment suggests that its appeal lay in its absurdity. In her study of popular YouTube memes, Shifman (2012) lists "whimsical content" as one of their key features (p. 187). These videos, she explains, "[…] share a certain

[52] Cedrik did not include a link to the video in his assignment. However, when I searched on YouTube, I found the video that contained this image (see iTMG, 2020). Although there is no title and date listed for this video on the actual YouTube page, when looked up via a search engine the date it was uploaded appears next to the official YouTube link.

mode of presentation: depicting people playing or performing, often acting in a silly or irrational manner" (Shifman, 2012, p. 198). This understanding of the more whimsical aspects of memetic storytelling further highlights the joy nonsensical memes can create. The fun lies in the meme's obvious departure from reality. And yet, it also lies in the fact that a real person created it and real people enjoy it. The fact that this whimsical video communicated a love of music/saxophones, two things Cedrik had listed as passions/interests on his Connection Card (Round #2), likely also contributed to the appeal it held for him.

6.2.3.6 Joy of a shared experience

From a sense-making perspective, nonsensical memes also gesture to the joy a shared experience can create. Aidan, for example, may not have understood the zombie *Call of duty* meme, but he was part of the large group of people who saw it on a reoccurring basis. Part of the joy the meme inspired came from sharing in the collective experience it created. Describing the importance of experience to one's understanding of memes, Aidan told me:

> I'd say that memes are much easier to see than they are to explain. To know what they are themselves. Like, once you know what a meme is you know what it is, it's just hard to explain. So, I would say that it—no one really knows what a meme is until they've experienced it. It's impossible to explain cause if you tell a definition it doesn't make any sense until you connect it. (Interview, Round #1)

Aidan's emphasis on the experience of memetic storytelling points to the fact that an Internet meme is a phenomenon. Encountering a meme is an event that involves making connections between it and the circumstances associated with that encounter. This view of memetic storytelling does make it more difficult to define, because it is hard to generalize something that is so distinct. To be phenomenal, after all, is to be extra-ordinary; and yet, Internet memes are

phenomenally ordinary. They are unique enough to attract attention, but they are also ubiquitous enough to be recognizable and relatable.

Viewed as an event to be experienced, part of the joy memes create comes from being part of their evolution and witnessing their story unfold. Speaking of memes he liked, Dale told me:

> I like ones that are from like movies or shows or videogames that I have personally have like investment in, cause then it's like I have that attachment to it apart from just being like, 'Oh, that's funny.' Like, I watched *Endgame* obviously and then I see the memes and then I see them turn into like actual templates like, 'Hah!' I was there when that was in theaters and I saw that—how people probably thought about that in the theaters. Just like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna turn that into a meme.' (Interview, Round #3).

In this description, Dale expressed the joy of recognizing memetic potential that would later be realized. Watching the *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) in theaters (Russo & Russo, 2019), he was able to anticipate the memes the film would inspire. The pleasure he experienced when he saw these memes come to fruition stemmed from his cultural awareness of how memetic storytelling works. Dale felt *satisfaction* upon realizing that his predictions were right. On the one hand, he was able to delight in getting the meme references, because he had watched the film. On the other hand, he was able to delight in the realization that his experience watching the film aligned with that of other viewers, who acted upon the memetic potential he recognized.

6.2.3.6.1 The joy of creating a shared experience

As this exploration of the students' meme engagement has already shown, the shared experiences surrounding these digital texts operate on different levels and take many forms (e.g., scrolling, participating in group chats, text messaging a person, etc.). They can even be as simple

as following the same meme account. Quinn told me, “Like there’s lots of meme accounts out there that people follow. Like I have one account and I think I have like thirty other friends that follow that same account […]” (Interview, Round #1). Quinn’s reflection points to the way following the same meme account can create a sense of a shared experience among friends, something that could help maintain a sense of connection when that group extends to thirty people. And yet, as I found out, sometimes people do not need to follow the same account as one’s friends to feel this sense of connection. Describing the places where she finds memes, Zoe reflected:

> […] I mean, my friends all kinda like follow this one meme account where it’s like post memes. I don’t cause they send them to me. So like I kinda already see them. But other than that not really. I just kinda like I see a meme I’ll like acknowledge it and find it funny, but I don’t really seek them out. (Interview, Round #2)

Zoe’s encounters with memes, in this respect, were often filtered through her friends’ tastes and their awareness of her own. They viewed the memes on the account they followed and selected the ones they wanted to share with her. She did not often seek them out herself.

Direct messaging, in turn, is one of the most obvious ways memetic storytelling can create shared experiences. Explaining how he found memes, Tooka pack noted:

> I have a group chat with my friends and we all just send like random stuff on it. So I can find some there but also like Instagram and like YouTube sometimes—from like the YouTubers I watch, they’ll like have a meme on there. But like, yeah, mainly Instagram. (Interview, Round #3)

The group chat Tooka pack shared with his friends allowed them to curate their own set of memes that appealed to their tastes. While he described the content as “random stuff,” the fact

remains that, while the subject matter might appear random, its presence in the group chat was not. Members of the chat had to intentionally select and share it as part of their conversations. The dynamic of this shared experience thus appears more intimate than the solitary activity of finding memes on a platform like YouTube or Instagram. The context of the group chat represented an ongoing dialogue between friends, one that situated memes within the shared understanding of who was part of the conversation. In this sense, it created a private channel.

6.2.3.6.2 The joy of documenting a shared experience

Memetic stories, however, are not only used to create shared experiences, they are also used to document them. When asked about how he thought students were engaging with memes outside of class, Mr. Rowe shared the following story during one of our interviews:

> […] I remember, well, I think a couple of years ago, right, immediately after the English 12 exam, like the students sent me or showed me a meme that went—was going around immediately, which is interesting because every kid in Grade 12 at the time is taking the exam at the same time. So, after that two-hour period, all of a sudden there's commentary on what they had just done and it was on the confusion created by the poem. And you know that had gone around the province, really, in a matter of minutes. And so, while kids showed me that here, I'm—you know—they didn't create it, nor did another LSS student create it—it just, you know, kind of came to them through the Internet, you know, and it got picked up. So it was funny to hear that you get a collective sense of confusion from every Grade 12 student [laughs] about the poem at the end of the exam, which, yeah—it wasn't easy—it was challenging. […]

Mr. Rowe's story reveals how memes can formulate around shared experiences. The fact that the experience of the exam was not enjoyable for the students brought them together. They could

relate to the "sense of confusion" each other felt when working through the poem it contained. Together, they were able to find joy through the humorous expression of their feelings.

6.2.3.7 Joy of connection/belonging

Mr. Rowe's story about the meme that circulated after the English 12 provincial exam highlights how memes can create joy by fostering a sense of connection and belonging. The students might not have understood the exam itself, but the sharing of the meme allowed them to feel understood by their peers, many of whom could relate to what they were going through. This feeling of being understood can be viewed as a *triumph*, because it is not always easy to express oneself and feel understood by others, hence the memes about depression that described people's experience of being misunderstood. As we have already seen, following the same meme account can also connect people, as can a direct message, group chat, or shared interest. Sharing her knowledge of memetic storytelling, Tanya told me:

> […] It's a way to communicate. It's a way to connect with someone, cause, if you send an Internet meme relating to that person or your friendship it brings on a conversation of explaining the meme, basically, and it's something that provides us new information we learn and it provides us with communication with others that we lost. (Interview, Round #1)

In this respect, memes can reinforce a sense of unity between people. While some of the above-mentioned meme stories have highlighted connections in close relationships (e.g., between friends and family members), as different students pointed out, they can also be found between strangers. Reflecting on some of the pros of memetic storytelling, Quinn observed, "[…] I guess it could be a conversation starter. Like, cause you could send it and then you and whoever can talk about what you guys think about the meme" (Interview, Round #1). As possible

conversation starters, memes not only represent existing dialogues and relationships between people, but also *potential* dialogues and relationships.

To further illustrate the connections people can experience through memetic storytelling, consider the following story Tooka pack shared. Describing what people can use memes for, he told me, "I feel like, you can make friendships off of memes as well" (Interview, Round #3). Explaining his reasoning for this statement, he stated:

> Cause, I—there's been this one time where like I used to play soccer for Guilford, so we had like the big group chat, but like, it was like two teams in one. So there's some people in the other team that I had no idea who they were. So somebody sent the meme and I'm pretty sure it was that guy—sent the meme—and then nobody really liked it, but I found it funny. So then me and him both like—connection off that one meme. (Interview, Round #3).

Tooka pack's story draws attention to the different kinds of group chats people can have and how memes might function differently within them. In the big group chat he described, there were two different teams, which meant that he did not know everyone who was participating in the conversation. His connection with the unknown player stemmed from their appreciation of a meme their other teammates ignored.

Interestingly, the fact that the other players did not like the meme appeared to increase the sense of connection Tooka pack and the other player felt. This sense of connection resembles that found through the sharing of an inside joke. Speaking of his interest in anime-related memes, another student, T, told me that:

> […] Yeah. I'm into those and sometimes when it's one of those like—referring to one of those shows that only like you and a couple of people know about—it just gives you

> pride of like, I don't know it's just the feeling like, 'Oh, only I know that.' It's a pretty fun feeling. Like, I could show that to all my friends and they have no clue what I'm talking about. (Interview, Round #3)

T's description of the pride associated with getting a meme's reference demonstrates another way these texts can create joyful connection. He went on to say, "But like, there's that one friend you show it to and then you're just like, 'Oh, he knows'" (T, Interview, Round #3). Memes, in this respect, can establish more intimate bonds between select friends within a larger friendship group. T noted, "It's just kinda like a personal thing, you know? Like, you just kinda like, 'Wow, feels good to know that someone else is there'" (Interview, Round #3). Sometimes having one person understand can be even more significant than having everyone understand.

6.2.3.7.1 Joy of being known

The joy of connection/belonging some of these students experienced through memes was closely associated with the joy of being known. Memetic storytelling gave them the joy of expressing themselves, as well as the joy of expressing their knowledge of each other. Zoe, for example, made the following observation about the different messages that are communicated through memes. She told me:

> I think in little memes like the ones me and my friends make, I think it's almost showing like—almost a form of like affection where they're like, 'Yeah, this is like—we all find it funny,' but it's a form of someone showing each other like, 'Oh, yeah, I noticed that. That you were doing that, you know.' Or like, 'I found this really funny when you did this.' And it's showing that like we care about each other almost in a way. (Zoe, Interview, Round #2).

As Zoe's observation reveals, one of the ways memes can make people feel known is by making them feel noticed. Zoe described her meme engagement with her friends as a form of affection. To the extent that memetic storytelling can be used to pay attention to others' lives, it can be a way of letting people know that others care. In their My Favourite Meme Assignments, the memes students received from their friends and family often highlighted how well those people knew them.

To illustrate how memes can make people feel noticed, consider the following story Zoe shared about her experience. Explaining some of her encounters with memes, she stated:

> […] See, I get sent a lot of memes from my friends and so it's often about situations we've been in—like I slept in the other day and missed a morning—part of the morning for school—told my friends about it and they sent me a meme about being late for school [laughs]. I was like, 'Okay.' […] (Interview, Round #2)

This small story demonstrates Zoe's point concerning how memes can make people feel seen. Upon hearing that she had slept in and missed part of the morning at school, her friends sent her a meme that related to that particular situation. The fact that they sent her a meme about her recent experience shows how they paid attention to her when she told them about it. At the same time, the fact that it brought some humour to what might have been a disconcerting event may have been their way of making her feel better, just as the meme Shaunti's friend sent her about eating out was designed to make her feel better.

That being said, Zoe's friends and Shaunti's friend were also teasing. Aidan told me that people sometimes use memes to "Make fun of their friends in a joyous way. And I'd just say all around just have like an inside joke between people" (Interview, Round #1). Zoe appeared to

share this view. Describing the memetic storytelling that took place in her friendship group, she stated:

> Usually we send them over Instagram, cause that's where we find them. And it's just kind of to—kind of tease each other on a situation we're in. Once my friend called me a weasel because I would always pop up in the middle of their conversations. And so we have this thing, like kind of inside joke in our friend group where we create weasel memes about me. So once I wore a purple shirt to school and everyone liked it and then I—my friend drew a weasel wearing a purple shirt and was like, 'This is Zoe when she wears her purple shirt' and it's kinda—it was just to kinda tease each other in a loving way. (Interview, Round #2)

Zoe's story aligns with Aidan's observation related to the way people engage in memetic storytelling. Her friends created weasel memes to tease her about something she often did, but, in the context of their relationship it was a form of endearment. They were making fun of her in *a joyous way*.

6.2.3.8 Joy of learning

As we have already seen, the conversations started by memes can create learning opportunities, which, in themselves can generate feelings of joy. If memes are often viewed as representations of people's feelings about different issues and experiences, they can be a way of learning more about others. There are, of course, different kinds of learning opportunities. Depending on their subject matter, they can function as what Georgakopoulou (2019) describes as "breaking news stories" (p. 258). The provincial exam meme, for instance, was breaking news about students' experiences writing it, whereas the memes Zoe mentioned, which were about sleeping in late or wearing a purple shirt to school, can also be seen as breaking news events.

And yet, as various students pointed out, memes can also be a way of learning about each other's interests, as well as the similarities and dissimilarities that exist among people. Quinn, for example, told me, "[…] I've had some friends show me anime memes and I don't watch that kind of stuff or know any of that so I didn't get it at all, but he found it really funny cause that was his kind of thing" (Interview, Round #1). Memes, in this respect, can invite people to consider things outside of their usual interests. When confronted with memes one does not understand, a person can choose whether or not to learn more about them. Although the participating students did not always choose to ask about such memes, sometimes preferring to laugh them off or ignore them, sometimes they *did ask* and sometimes they *did learn*.

Dale, for instance, pointed out that people can become "invested in learning" about a meme (Interview, Round #3). Describing what he meant by that phrase, he stated:

> Like, you see a funny meme and then you're—you recognize like, 'Oh, that's from a show, I'm gonna check out that show' and then you start going through the show and then you get to like the scene that the meme's from and is like, 'Oh, this is where it's from, then. Now I know where it came from and the show is actually pretty good so I'm gonna keep watching this show and maybe they'll be more memes there.' (Dale, Interview, Round #3)

As Dale's sample scenario suggests, memes can introduce people to new interests and communities they will enjoy. While people might initially find themselves on the outside of an inside joke, they can choose to look up the reference and become more invested in the community in which it is situated. Acquiring such knowledge can be viewed as a form of *triumph*.

The learning that comes through memetic storytelling, however, is not restricted to memes that people do not understand. On the contrary, through their references to different ideas, events, and emotions, memes carry many layers of meaning. Speaking of what people can learn from memes, Aidan remarked, "I would say that you can learn basic knowledge about things" (Interview, Round #1). Describing the kinds of information memes can portray, T said:

> Well, like, it could be simple. Like sometimes it could be like a joke about a basketball player who just did something dumb and you didn't know they did something dumb and you just recently learned about it and laughed, and sometimes it could be like a political meme and then you learn a whole different thing about like a certain party you never knew about and then, you know, it grows your knowledge in politics, but, yeah. I don't know if it would vast—like grow to like a vast knowledge of like, you learn an entire series about a book, but like, I think it can—sometimes it can provide little pointers about information you never knew in your life. (Interview, Round #3)

Aidan's and T's reflections on the kinds of information communicated through memes points to their significance as small stories. While T recognized the potential limitations of this mode of storytelling, observing that it might not produce a "vast" body of new knowledge for people, he simultaneously recognized the range of knowledge memes can represent as "little pointers about information." Memes might be small, but, as he observed, they can be used to "grow" one's understanding about different issues.

Aidan, for instance, noted that memes can teach us about culture. He told me, "There is a cultural thing about memes, almost. There is almost a cultural element […]" (Aidan, Interview, Round #1). Kate Phan, for instance, told me that Vietnamese memes have "[…] like a lot of meanings in one word more than like the English […]" (Interview, Round #1) and Yeji observed

that "[…] Korean memes are—tend to be more kind of—moving as like a group […]" (Interview, Round #1). Simon, who was an international student, also remarked on this cultural element in our interview. Speaking about new language learners, he observed, that a meme is a thing "[…] you can't learn on the books. Because book is too formal" (Interview, Round #2). Explaining this statement in greater detail, he said, "[…] when you like see more memes it's like more to understand what the people they will say at usual life—like oral or something like that" (Simon, Interview, Round #2). Memes, in other words, offer people insight into different aspects of a culture in ways that traditional texts might not (see Harshavardhan et al., 2019). This may be because people use memes to casually communicate about their everyday lives—making jokes, referencing events, using colloquial phrases, and sharing interests that form part of their experience. For people who are new to a culture, memes can thus provide a glimpse into its different norms and trends.

6.2.4 A recap of the joyful layers memes can create

This exploration of the students' comments and examples has demonstrated how memes can create joy on multiple levels. These levels of joy flow into each other in different ways depending on the situation. The joy of a pick-me-up, for example, can serve as a positive distraction because it provides a funny outlook on a familiar experience. At times, this outlook can be a lighthearted view of one's imperfections. At other times, it can be an escape into the world of nonsense. In all of these cases, part of the joy can be traced to the fact that memes represent shared experiences between people. Depending on how memes facilitate interpersonal connection, they can foster a sense of belonging to different communities, something that other scholars have also found (e.g., Milner, 2016; Miltner, 2014). When used to demonstrate awareness of each other's lives, they can even make people feel known. To the extent that they

reveal new insights about each other and cultural events, memes can result in joyful learning experiences. The students' different observations highlight the way each of them engaged with memes for some of these purposes. While these narratives do not represent an exhaustive list, they do represent a starting point for thinking about how the pleasures of memetic storytelling might be viewed through a joyful lens.

6.3 Part two: What kinds of memes are young people engaging?

6.3.1 The diversity of 'relatable' memes

My exploration of *how* these young people engaged with Internet memes naturally factors into my exploration of the *kinds* of memes they engaged. Generally speaking, these students looked for relatable memes that made them laugh and created joyful experiences. However, as people who possessed a diverse set of interests, knowledge, values, and circumstances, they related to different memes, and some of them engaged with memes more often than others. Consequently, any attempt to comprehensively account for the diversity of texts they engaged would inevitably be incomplete. A basic overview of the topics addressed through their My Favourite Meme Assignment entries includes: video games, books, COVID-19, school/homework, chores, nonsense/wordplay, generational differences, moods during the week, musical instruments, politics, public transit, funerals, being blindsided or destroyed by something, eating habits, decision making, changes in memes over time, tagging a friend on a meme, working on the weekend, and people getting hurt. These memes and others mentioned throughout the unit took various textual forms, the majority of examples being captioned images, with some YouTube videos, and phrases also mentioned. Some of the different ways the students encountered these memes were through scrolling on Reddit and Instagram, going on YouTube, private messages from friends and family, and group chats. Combined, these different

observations point to: 1) the variety of texts students identified as memes; and 2) the variety of situations in which they encountered them.

6.3.2 The kinds of information needs memes represent

But what implications do these texts carry as personal documents? Perhaps a more generative way of exploring the kinds of memes these youths engaged is to consider, in greater depth, the significance of the joy they associated with them. Here I return to Frank's (2012) observation concerning the importance of *meta-interpretation* and Georgakopoulou's (2019) observations concerning the *ways of telling*. Frank (2012) notes that studying how people interpret stories offers insight into the *ways* interpretation mediates a narrative's possible effects. Based on this understanding, one might consider how memetic storytelling is itself a form of interpretation, a *way* of responding to cultural and personal narratives through humour. The above-mentioned joyful narratives suggest how these young people used memes to mediate the effects of different stories in their lives. By considering the *work* these memes accomplish, one can begin to reflect on how these young people used memes to *hold their own* (Frank, 2012). At the same time, such reflection also offers insight into the possible reasons why young people might feel the need to hold their own through memetic storytelling.

In an effort to explore these reasons, the following sections consider the possible information needs the students' joyful narratives might represent, which I have described as: *the need for a positive outlook*, *the need for a personalized perspective*, *the need to reclaim control*, *the need to define what is newsworthy*, *the need to question common sense*, *the need to take oneself less seriously*, *the need for connection*, and *the need for justification*. These eight different needs are framed as dialogic responses to the above-mentioned joyful narratives, and, like them, intersect in various ways. They are not intended as rigid categories, but rather, as a

means for engaging with some of the questions the students' meme engagement raise. Together, they allow for further reflection on the stakes that figure into memetic storytelling, which can shape the *ways* they are understood and told by different *tellers* (Georgakopoulou, 2019).

6.3.2.1 The need for a positive outlook

The joyful nature of the students' meme engagement, particularly as articulated in the *joy of a pick-me-up* and the *joy of a positive distraction* narratives, suggests how Internet memes are used to meet people's need for a positive outlook. Armaan, Quinn, and Tanya identified this need in their descriptions of memes as something that can improve people's moods. When having a "rough day," memes helped Armaan *hold his own* by adding some brightness to it (Interview, Round #1). Likewise, Quinn's observation that memes are "For entertainment and laughter or just to kind of bring up your mood" (Interview, Round #1) also implied a desire for a positive outlook, as did Tanya's observations related to the negative circumstances that often drive meme creation. Her own experience looking at memes to take her mind off other things suggests how people can use these texts to hold their own against difficult thoughts. While Simon's presentation on depression showcased how people use memes to cope with mental health issues, Emily's presentation on the pandemic demonstrated how people used memes to cope with a global crisis. Viewed in dialogue with one another, these student interpretations illustrate how the joyful focus of memetic storytelling can meet an information need for people, as it provides them with a positive means to mediate the negative effects of different situations.

6.3.2.2 The need for a personalized perspective

The students' meme examples, however, not only point to the need for positivity, but also to the need for *personal* stories, as can be seen in the *joy of the unusually familiar* narratives I explored. The students' focus on memes that *fit* them, which represented *relatable* things, reveals

a desire for personalized narratives. For, as Yeji pointed out, people use memes to show their "type of feelings about certain things" (Interview, Round #1). Quinn also highlighted how people express themselves through these texts when he commented that they can be used to show "what we like, what we don't like" (Interview, Round #1). The tendency to personally re-contextualize a meme can be seen as one way people attempt to hold their own against the collective narratives it represents. For instance, the COVID-19 memes that appeared in some of the students' My Favourite Meme Assignments demonstrate how something as *big* as the pandemic can be translated into personal experiences. The COVID-19 memes they included focused on *small* (i.e., mundane) topics, such as the challenges of working from home, different stages of quarantine, and the inability to travel.

In fact, as Emily pointed out in her final project, laughing at something as life-threatening as the pandemic was one way people could combat the fear it inspired, because it focused their attention on something positive. Sood (2013) observes that "[t]rained attention doesn't deny or repress reality. It gives you temporary freedom from negativity. You stop carrying the entire load of the past and the future in your head" (p. 50). Lucas, for instance, included the following COVID-19 related meme in his My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Figure 6.8 Entry from Lucas's My Favourite Meme Assignment.

Lucas's Entry Description:

> This meme is funny because no one is allowed to travel right now because of the pandemic. But it says that dogs are allowed to travel because they cannot get it and it's a funny picture of dogs taking a selfie in front of the pyramids of Giza. I found this meme on Instagram. I also think it's funny because I like dogs and I think this picture is pretty cute. (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2)

Lucas's description demonstrates how the meme's humour minimized the unpleasant travel bans associated with the pandemic. He recognized how the creator used these dogs to present a "cute" face to a seemingly ugly situation. He labeled this entry as "global because everyone is stuck in the pandemic" (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). The meme did not repress the reality that people could not travel on account of the pandemic, but rather, gave viewers the temporary freedom to laugh about it.

6.3.2.3 The need to reclaim control

Understood in this way, memetic storytelling can also be seen as a way to regain control of a narrative. As the students' observations related to their own meme engagement demonstrate, memes highlight the choices involved when responding to different ideas and situations. By appropriating and personalizing memetic narratives to fit their own experiences, these young people could relate to others while maintaining a sense of self. The *joy of a pick-me-up, joy of a positive distraction, joy of the unusually familiar*, and the *joy of imperfection* narratives highlight the "world-making" that takes place through these texts, which involves the "telling of mundane, ordinary, everyday events" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260). And yet, as some of the paradoxes associated with these narratives reveal, this world building was often framed as a response to some form of "world-disruption" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260), whether that be a rough day, bad mood, negative experience, or even, a pandemic. The fact that memes are extraordinarily ordinary seems to encompass this tension, which reveals how these digital texts, while seemingly trivial, actually employ humour for the "narration of complications" (Georgakopoulou, 2019, p. 260). By making students' positions narratable, memes empowered them as tellers of the stories that impacted their lives, thereby giving them a level of control over the disruptions they faced.

Part of this control, it seems, came from how memes allow them to hold their emotions through humour. Along with a positive outlook and personalized perspective, this narrative control might also be viewed as a kind of need. Of the different memes I examined in the students' My Favourite Meme Assignments, two served as critical commentaries of government control in a specific country. While I have chosen not to share these memes as a privacy measure

given this study's open position on attribution,[53] I mention them as reminders that the need to reclaim control over one's narrative through memes becomes especially important when freedom of expression is denied. The joyful nature of memetic humour is connected to extremely difficult and painful situations. While humour might be employed to help triumph in these situations, the need to triumph through humour is revealing even as it can be concealing of the level of distress it represents (e.g., censorship memes, depression memes, etc.).

6.3.2.4 The need to define what is newsworthy

Viewed in relation to major news broadcasts, these joyful narratives also allow people to hold their own by helping them define what is newsworthy. The *joy of nonsense*, *joy of a shared experience*, *joy of connection/belonging*, and *joy of learning* narratives all highlight the significance memes can hold as small stories that are connected to big emotions. Many of the students' meme examples, for instance, drew attention to moments of existence that might not seem as important to others, but were important to them. The kinds of topics these students addressed through memetic storytelling often related to their everyday lives. Many of the memes they described in their interviews and meme assignments, such as wearing a purple sweater to school, tagging a friend in a meme and not getting a response, playing a video game and getting frustrated with an aspect of it, reviewing a book, saying yes or no to something, not wanting to work on the weekend, and eating out too much, etc. are regular encounters that are grounded in repeatable, known events. These memes drew attention to aspects of the students' lives that may not have made the evening news, but nevertheless were important to their experiences.

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[53] To protect the privacy of the students who opted for pseudonyms I have decided not to share certain details that would make it easier to identify them, which could create complications.

6.3.2.5 The need to question common sense

The nonsensical nature of many of the memes students shared, whether in the form of an inside-out-watermelon, someone researching cow's friendships, a grim reaper who likes fabric, a seal playing a saxophone, or zombies looking for beans, suggests a need to question common sense. In her study of nonsense, Susan Stewart (1980/1989) notes that "[…] acts of common sense will shape acts of nonsense and acts of nonsense will shape acts of common sense" (p. vii). To the extent that these memes challenge common sense interpretations of reality, they can actually lead people to question the very nature of that reality. In their own way, such memes raise valid questions concerning generational differences, the colouring of fruit, social practices of animals, what productivity is, the spirit world, the power of music, and the supernatural. One of the memes Simon shared, for instance, concerned a group of pallbearers from Ghana who performed a joyful dance as they transported a casket.[54] Simon noted that "[…] Many people feel very funny about there funeral procession and there dance. People will use it for when something dangerous happening […]" (My Favourite Meme Assignment, Round #2). For people who associate funerals with solemn proceedings, such activity would likely be considered extremely unusual because it violates the social norms associated with the mourning process. And yet, the meme also questions the logic of that mourning process by exploring the possible benefits of honouring the deceased in a different way. While its departure from certain cultural conventions may lead people to use it to convey danger, the real nature of the video's footage nevertheless raises questions about why people do not dance at funerals.

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[54] To learn more about this meme, see Zoric & Ilevbre (2020).

Seemingly nonsensical memes, in other words, can demonstrate the need to question aspects of people's experience that they take for granted. While nonsensical memes might not always be realistic in their depictions, the feelings of wonder, amusement, confusion, surprise, and strangeness they inspire are relatable. As Zoe's Materwelon meme demonstrated, sometimes memes succeed where spoken or written language fail. It might be difficult for people to articulate their feelings, but they know them when they see them. At the same time, such texts can also represent a desire for fun. In their study of nonsensical memes, scholars have noticed how they concentrate "[…] far more on social bonds, often reflecting mainly playfulness" (Katz & Shifman, 2017, p. 839). The students' engagement with nonsensical memes seems to support this observation. Such texts may not be easy to explain, but, as Aidan pointed out, they can still be understood and enjoyed by those who experience them.

6.3.2.6 The need to take oneself less seriously

The humorous and personal nature of memetic storytelling, however, also allowed students to hold their own by helping them take themselves less seriously, as can be seen in the *joy of the unusually familiar* and the *joy of connection/belonging* narratives some of them shared. Whether the memes concerned sleeping in and missing school, eating out too much, not doing one's chores, or having predictable mood swings throughout the week, they inserted a sense of levity into their experience by making their experience the subject of laughter in a "loving" or "joyous way" (Zoe, Interview, Round #2; Aidan, Interview, Round #1). Frank (2012) touches on the relationship between stories and identity when he asks: "How does a story help people, individually and collectively, to remember who they are?" (p. 82). On the one hand, these memes gave different students a sense of stability by representing their feelings about certain things and having those feelings affirmed by others. On the other hand, memes also gave them the

necessary flexibility to change. By helping them remember who they were through the use of laughter, memes reminded them not to take their self-narratives so seriously that they could no longer question them. Shaunti, for example, could laugh about her eating habits and reflect on how they might not be as good as she would like them to be.

6.3.2.7 The need for connection

Along with the above-mentioned insights, is the students' understanding of the way memetic storytelling established a sense of connection between people. The *joy of a shared experience* and the *joy of connection/belonging* narratives illustrate the importance of interpersonal relationships to many of their engagements with memes. While memes were a personal form of communication that were often tailored to fit their individual tastes, they were also used to foster relationships by creating space for them to be individuals *with* others. Memes could connect them to strangers who possessed similar views and experiences (e.g., watching a film in theatres), but they could also connect them to family and friends by highlighting specific aspects of their relationships (e.g., sisters, parents-child, etc.). As inside jokes, memes were a way for some of these students to notice others and let them know they were not alone. And yet, as Quinn pointed out, they were also a way of acknowledging and appreciating differences. While humour can bring subjects close, it can also bring people close by allowing them to share in a positive experience. As Tooka pack put it, "everybody can get a good laugh" (Interview, Round #3). Memes can facilitate this sense of connection by representing shared experiences and creating them. The desire to engage in memetic storytelling, in this respect, can represent people's need to connect with others, something other research appears to support (e.g., Katz & Shifman, 2017; Milner 2016; Miltner, 2014).

6.3.2.8 The need for justification

The final need I will discuss here in relation to the students' meme engagement is the need for justification. The students' descriptions of their memetic storytelling point to the way memes could help them hold their own by justifying their feelings. The *joy of the unusually familiar* narratives, for instance, emphasize how different memes were designed to fit what the students already knew and accepted as true. In fact, part of the *joy of a shared experience* or *joy of connection/belonging* came from the feeling that one was understood and accepted by others. In his discussion of the pros and cons of memetic storytelling, Tooka pack framed shared laughter as the pro, and potential confusion (i.e., someone does not get the joke)/offense (i.e., someone does not like it) as the cons (Interview, Round #3). As Becky noted in her meme definition, "[…] It's fun to see some memes, but sometimes it's uncomfortable to see ridicule something too much" (Meme Definition, Round #3). While sharing the same position on a meme can be one way people can hold their own, it also raises potential concerns related to other people's ability to hold their own. For example, the people in the group chat who fail to get the meme or are offended by it might not feel able to make their position narratable in that context. I will discuss the tensions this need for justification introduces more thoroughly in the next chapter as I examine the students' final projects.

6.4 Chapter summary

This chapter explored how the students' descriptions of their own meme engagement can inform our understanding of this study's second research questions, which concerned: a) how different young people engage with Internet memes outside of traditional educational contexts (i.e., on their own time); and b) the kinds of Internet memes they engage. In the first part of the chapter, I explained how and why I focus on the ideals surrounding the students' memetic

storytelling. Building on their observations related to the humorous nature of memes, I considered how memetic storytelling functioned as a joyful information practice in their lives. Drawing mainly from the students' interviews and their My Favourite Meme Assignments, I identified eight different ways memes brought them joy: *the joy of a pick-me-up, joy of a positive distraction, joy of the unusually familiar, joy of imperfection, joy of nonsense, joy of a shared experience, joy of connection/belonging*, and the *joy of learning*. In the second part of the chapter, I explained how these joyful narratives offer insight into the different kinds of memes these students were engaging on their own time. Specifically, I examined the possible information needs their engagement might represent, which were related to the different ways they *held their own* through memes (Frank, 2012). These needs, I suggested, include: *the need for a positive outlook, the need for a personalized perspective, the need to reclaim control, the need to define what is newsworthy, the need to question common sense, the need to take oneself less seriously, the need for connection*, and *the need for justification*.

Chapter 7: Memes, literacy, and digital citizenship education

7.1 Memes in the classroom

So far this investigation has focused on memetic storytelling as a humorous information literacy practice that occurs in different contexts. My consideration of the joyful nature of the students' interactions with Internet memes highlighted: 1) the way they engaged with them on their own time (i.e., outside of traditional educational contexts); and 2) the possible information needs that engagement might be understood to meet. However, the fact remains that this study took place within a traditional educational context and was designed to provide youth with the opportunity to create their own projects of interest related to Internet memes and digital citizenship. While this unit presented a structured exploration of memes in a classroom context, it also facilitated opportunities for these young people to contribute to Internet meme research and curriculum development by pursuing their own inquiries. Mr. Rowe and I considered their projects to be examples of possible assignment formats other educators could adopt when teaching the unit in their own classrooms. Along with the feedback students provided, their projects served as possible evidence of the different ways they wanted to engage with Internet memes in school.[55]

The students' engagement, of course, was shaped by the social constraints associated with the classroom context. These constraints, however, were less constrictive than they might have been had Mr. Rowe and I designed the unit differently. While my presence as a researcher and co-facilitator of the workshops influenced my interactions with the participating students, it does not mean that the insights they shared were any less their own. Rather, it means that their

[55] Quotations of unit-related materials are presented as they were written.

insights were produced within the context of specific dialogues. As I detailed in the methodology chapter and the chapter on unit design, Mr. Rowe and I had taken various measures to: 1) encourage students' interests; 2) ensure that they knew their contributions would be welcomed and respected; and 3) provide them with more decision-making opportunities. For these reasons, as well as my commitment to respecting their contributions, I view the ideas the students shared as the ones they wanted to share and the choices they made in their assignments as the ones they wanted to make.

With that view in mind, this chapter addresses the third and final research questions associated with this study, which are:

3. a) How do different youth want to engage with Internet memes inside traditional educational contexts (e.g., the classroom, library, learning commons)?

   b) How does this engagement relate to new conceptions of literacy and digital citizenship within the fields of information, communication, and education research?

The first part of this chapter addresses question (a). Drawing on the insights students shared in their interviews and the way they chose to design their final projects, I reflect on how they wanted to engage with Internet memes in the classroom.

Where the interviews are concerned, this process involves a dialogic exploration of how the students envisioned Internet memes being used in school and how they had previously seen them used. Examining some of their different responses, I reflect on the ways this unit represented a departure from some of the ideas and experiences they shared. Following this discussion, I consider how the students chose to engage with Internet memes in their final projects. Specifically, I examine: 1) the topics they chose to explore; 2) the kinds of formats they selected (e.g., meme collage, meme story, etc.); and 3) the different design approaches they took

when using memes to communicate messages. As in the previous two chapters, the examples I draw on are intended to showcase the diversity of the participating students' choices. I highlight the uniqueness of their contributions while also establishing connections between them. McLuhan's (1959, 1964) ideas about mass communication, myth, and technology help frame this discussion of the communicative choices students made and their possible narrative effects.

The second part of this chapter addresses question (b). Placing the students' projects in dialogue with the revised B.C. K-12 curriculum, I consider how their work relates to the concept of literacy it promotes and the standardized measures through which it is currently assessed in grades ten and twelve. I then explore how the students' work can inform our understanding of the relationship between Internet memes and digital citizenship, highlighting the explicit and implicit ways they framed the rights and responsibilities associated with it in their projects. Continuing with my dialogic approach to narrative analysis, I connect their work to McLuhan's (1959, 1964) ideas, as well those of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and Turner (1998). These scholars, in conjunction with Frank (2012), Georgakopoulou (2019), and Rose (2016), provide ways of thinking about the critical implications of the students' project designs and conclusions. Specifically, they help unpack some of the sense-making activities associated with the students' use of/analysis of memetic storytelling in their projects.

7.2 Part one: How do different youth want to engage with memes in traditional educational contexts?

7.2.1 Memes as a communicative tool

An interesting insight to emerge out of my interview conversations with students was that, from an education standpoint, many of them spoke of Internet memes as a means for discussing something else. Whether speaking of the way they had previously seen memes used in

schools or the way they thought memes should be used in schools, the majority of students I interviewed did not suggest that memetic storytelling be studied as a topic, but rather, that memes be used primarily as a form of communication. Unlike the unit Mr. Rowe and I were facilitating, which focused on memetic storytelling as a *subject* of inquiry, many of the students spoke about memes as a *tool* to be used (e.g., as a form of teacher explanation, an assignment, etc.). T, for example, pointed out that memes could reduce tension in situations that are stressful, such as the moment before a quiz (Interview, Round #3). Alternatively, Nate suggested that they could be used to introduce or highlight a topic in a unit/subject (Interview, Round #2), and Zoe observed that sharing Internet memes related to a class concept could get students to ask questions about it (Interview, Round #2).

Jordan, Kate, and Simon, in turn, all noted that memes might make information easier to understand, because they are: 1) a familiar form of communication for students (Jordan, Interview, Round #1); 2) more visual, "[…] so it's really easy to absorb the information […]" (Kate, Interview, Round #1); and 3) funny, which can prevent presentations from being "too formal" for listeners (Simon, Interview, Round #2). Aidan, on the other hand, pointed out that memes can help people make connections that allow them to remember content (Interview, Round #1) and Armaan suggested that memes should be used to convey one's thoughts (Interview, Round #1). Generally speaking, all of their different ideas were in line with how many of them had previously encountered memes in the classroom. The experiences they shared underlined the way teachers had often used them as lighthearted conversation starters, which had sometimes manifested as awkward, unfunny jokes (Aidan, Interview, Round #1; T, Interview, Round #3). Many of the students' suggestions are in line with some of the ideas put forth by

different meme researchers, particularly as it concerns the positive role memes might play in the classroom (e.g., Harshavardhan et al., 2019).

Viewed altogether, the students' suggestions emphasize the use of Internet memes as a form of communication. Their suggestions reveal how memes can make the learning experience less intimidating and more engaging, albeit in a somewhat minor way. In terms of class time, the students did not say that memes should take up a lot of space. Lucas, for example, suggested that memes be presented "Just as a little joke on the side" (Interview, Round #2). In fact, several students presented cautions to using memes in school. Tanya noted that if used only for jokes memes can become a distraction (Interview, Round #1) and Dale pointed out that students might get tired of seeing the same memes too many times (Interview, Round #3). Steven also suggested that the memes in school should be age appropriate (Interview, Round #1). Along with the other students' remarks, theirs reinforce some of the insights that have already emerged through this investigation, which are: 1) the importance of humour to memetic storytelling; 2) the smallness of memes as informational artifacts; 3) the relationship between a meme's contemporaneity and its relevance; and 4) the way memes create connection/disconnection through shared or divided experiences of laughter.

Simply put, these students' observations demonstrated their tendency to think of memes as a medium, rather than a message. The students' insights highlighted their awareness of how memes work to convey messages to the world, as well as their understanding of the limited nature of those messages. In the context of our interviews, however, few students suggested that people should study *how* memes shape people's thoughts and feelings. In his prescient study of media, McLuhan (1964) notes that "[c]oncern with *effect* rather than *meaning* is a basic change of our electric time, for effect involves the total situation, and not a single level of information

movement" (p. 39, emphasis in original). The students' responses highlight how this concern with *effect* can manifest in different ways. Where the educational use of Internet memes was concerned, their emphasis was on achieving certain effects (e.g., laughter, interest, connection, expression, and stress relief) rather than studying how one creates them and why those details are important.

7.2.2 A different orientation

These interview conversations, in other words, revealed how this class experience represented a shift in the way many of the students had previously encountered Internet memes in school. And yet, the positive written feedback Mr. Rowe and I received from them suggested that this departure was not unwelcome. Tooka pack, for example, told me:

> I feel like what we are doing like in this class is very good—like how they're used for privacy and stuff like that. Cause I never looked at them like that. Like I always thought it's—like memes and stuff—like I always knew that different topics—but I didn't see them as like as big as they were. So I think like showing how big they are and like how much they can like impact—also impacting someone's life like the Success Kid and stuff like that […] (Interview, Round #3)

Tooka pack's comment highlighted how this unit attempted to draw students' attention to the way memes *work* to achieve different effects. He was not used to seeing them as "big as they were." For him and many of the other students, it seemed that memes had occupied a minor role in their classroom education. This unit, in turn, invited them to think about some of the bigger implications memes carry, thereby questioning popular conceptions of them as small and trivial artifacts.

7.2.2.1 Students' final project topics

Viewed altogether, the students' final projects illustrate the *bigness* of Internet memes as a form of communication that can impact people's lives. The topics they chose to explore included: privacy, misinformation, the pandemic, Donald Trump in COVID-19, conformity, music, wildfire, the history of the Pepe the Frog meme, bullying vs. joking, cyberbullying related to *Call of duty*, stereotypes, depression, politics, online adjustment, racism, dark humour, hate speech, and cancel culture. This range of topics offers some understanding of how the students wanted to engage with Internet memes in the classroom. Frank (2012) notes that processes of selection are also evaluations. When introducing this assignment, Mr. Rowe and I had told the students that they could choose to explore lighthearted or heavier subjects. Aside from one presentation on music, however, most of the projects I collected were oriented towards heavier issues. While I am not privy to all of the factors that influenced their topic selections, their choice of heavier research topics revealed their willingness to engage with some of the tensions associated with memetic storytelling.

7.2.2.2 Students' design decisions

To better understand how these students wanted to engage with memes in the classroom, however, one must also look at the different ways they chose to design their final projects. Nineteen out of the twenty projects I collected took the form of a slide presentation[56] with visual images and written text paired together. The one project that did not take this form consisted of a jpeg of a meme collage and a write-up in a Word document. Many of the students' projects,

[56] Some of these slides were formatted in PowerPoint. Others appeared to have been formatted in some other program then exported into a pdf format.

therefore, can be viewed as a kind of pictorial essay, with the outlier serving as an example of a more traditional essay. Still, students chose to structure these essays differently. While Mr. Rowe and I provided possible examples of how they might want to format their assignments, the students adapted these formats according to their own preferences. Some chose to create a meme collage, while others chose to create a meme history, a meme case study, and a meme story. Some chose to use memes to discuss one topic, while others used memes to discuss several related topics. Some students explicitly addressed the way memes and digital citizenship figured into their selected issue, while others did not. When it came to their designs, each student's project thus represented a unique interpretation of the assignment. Notably, the students did not include detailed information related to the source of the memes in their presentations. This made it difficult for me to tell if they had created them or if they had found them online.[57]

In an effort to highlight the diverse approaches students took when creating their final projects, I have identified several ways they chose to incorporate memes into their presentations. These approaches relate to the different purposes students assigned memes in their designs. In my close readings of their assignments, I saw them use memes as: 1) illustrations; 2) categories; 3) evidence; and 4) dialogue. As one might expect, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Various students employed more than one in the creation of their projects. However, for the purpose of explaining the subtle nuances that differentiated these design strategies, I will examine each one separately, drawing on student examples that showcase them to different effect. Below I have provided a table that contains basic descriptions of the differences between

[57] My experience with students suggested that most of them were inclined to find memes rather than make their own versions. However, a few students did both.

these design approaches. These descriptions are not intended as an absolute representation of the students' final projects, but rather, as a means for understanding my interpretation of the different ways they employed memes as narrative artifacts. My aim in highlighting these strategies is to draw attention to the complex ways the students engaged with memes to create their projects and the possible effects generated by their designs, which may or may not have been intentional. While I explore a limited number of students' projects in this part of the chapter, the design strategies I introduce in relation to them extend to other students' projects, which I explore in the latter part.

Use of Memes	Description
Memes as Illustration	Used memes to illustrate points related to an argument they were making.
Memes as Categories	Used memes to outline different sub-topics of a larger phenomenon.
Memes as Evidence	Used memes as primary texts to provide evidence of a phenomenon.
Memes as Dialogue	Used memes to represent/debate different perspectives related to a topic.

Table 7.1 Students' design approaches when engaging with memes in their final projects.

7.2.2.2.1 Memes as illustration of an argument

One of the primary ways students chose to incorporate memes into their final projects was as an illustration of the arguments they were making. Tanya, for example, used memes to communicate information about wildfires (Final Project, Round #1). Her presentation paired

readings of fire-related memes with fire-related facts and observations. While she did not explicitly discuss the role memes played in communicating information about wildfires, or their connection to digital citizenship, she modeled how they could be used to communicate ideas about the topic. Read as standalone texts, or *the image itself* (Rose, 2016), one would not necessarily associate all of the memes she included in her presentation with information about wildfires. However, the composition of each meme contained some visual or linguistic reference to fire, which Tanya used as a connection to her topic. The following excerpt from her presentation demonstrates how she made her selected memes *work* for her in the context of this assignment.

Figure 7.1 Excerpt #1 from Tanya's Final Project on wildfires.

Tanya's interpretation of the above meme demonstrates how she appropriated it to illustrate the points she wanted to make. The meme was not literally saying that people should be more responsible. However, in the context of her presentation, her claim that it did implies how and

why she was using it to create a specific narrative. In a sense, Tanya made the meme say what she wanted it to say. Her interpretation provided a link between the two text boxes on her slide. Her understanding of the man's irresponsible action was off-set by her explanation of what responsible action would be in this context. She used the meme to illustrate the incorrect way to put out fires and then proceeded to highlight the correct way.

Simply put, Tanya took advantage of the meme's ambiguity and tailored it to fit the context of her presentation, extending it to create her own story. By privileging one reading of the image, she excluded alternative interpretations. Conceptually speaking, the act of "putting out fires" is often used figuratively to describe dealing with a problem. Therefore, depending on how this meme was originally used, the fire might not have represented a situation about fire at all, but rather, a situation where people thought they had something under control, but did not. Tanya alluded to this meaning when she explained how the meme cautions people about showing off to their wives or girlfriends. Still, she framed her understanding of this behaviour within the specific context of her topic (i.e., wildfires). By omitting any discussion of the meme's original context, she was able to establish her own interpretation of its message as valid, something she did for all of the memes she used in her presentation. Their different references to fire provided her with enough of a conceptual link to establish their significance to her project.

Like Tanya and various other students, Aidan also used memes as a visual aid through which to educate audiences on a topic. However, in his project on privacy, memes were used more as a subtext for the points he was making. They were not treated as source texts, as much as they were treated as a visual supplement to the written text he provided. In his introductory slide, for example, Aidan stated the thesis of his presentation: "Privacy is an important topic that must be discussed." His inclusion of the following Gandalf meme, which shows an image of J.R.

R. Tolkien's wizard from the film, *Lord of the rings: The fellowship of the ring* (2001), served to emphasize this importance. Aidan's statement, "Gandalf is saying no to people violating his privacy," demonstrates how the image has been appropriated to discuss a completely different topic than that of the film. Gandalf's famous line, "You shall not pass!" which is cut-off by the formatting of the image in Aidan's presentation, refers to the moment when Gandalf is battling a demonic monster known as the Balrog in the Mines of Moria (see Jackson, 2001). Aidan's use of the word "violating" in reference to the meme demonstrates his understanding of the way its message about privacy draws on the film scene's adversarial connotations.

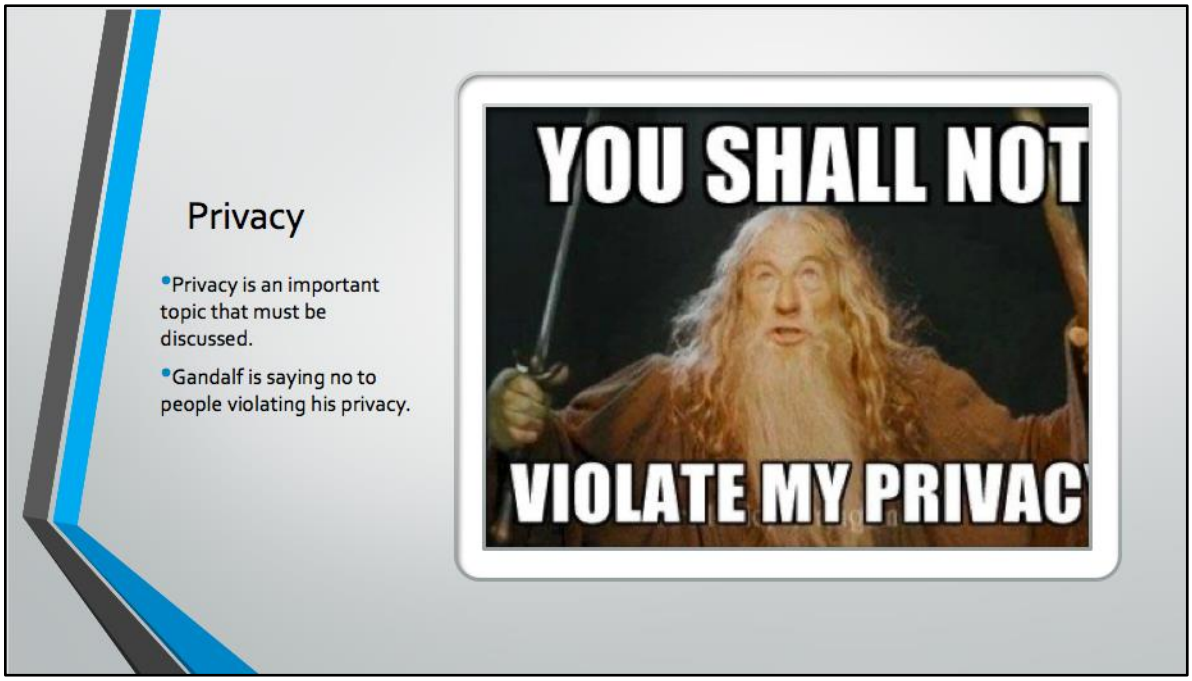

Figure 7.2 Excerpt #1 from Aidan's Final Project on privacy.

While Aidan's description did not detail the significance of the film's intertextual references, it nevertheless set the tone for his presentation, providing a visual cue for the reader as to what would follow. Gandalf, after all, is pictured on the defensive. Visually, Aidan's use of the meme underlined the fact that privacy is something that not only needs to be discussed, but

also, protected. The face Aidan presented as the spokesman for privacy was a fictional character who is known for being extremely wise. Thematically speaking, this choice aligned well with the structure of his presentation, which was designed to make audiences more knowledgeable by outlining different issues related to online privacy. Aidan titled these topics: “Facebook”, “Digital footprint”, “Social platforms”, “Personal protection”, “Online protection”, “Your online profile”, “Online responses”, and “Knowledge is power.” While the first half of his presentation highlighted facts people should know, including how social media sites own and control different aspects of users’ information, the second half highlighted the steps people can take to protect their privacy online, including keeping log-in and personal information to oneself and reading a platform’s terms of service before using it. He placed a meme on each slide as a visual supplement to the written statements he made, but he did not always explain its significance directly. Rather, he let the content of his written statements and the content of the memes speak for themselves. His audience was left to identify the thematic connections between the two, which were made evident through the memes’ captions.

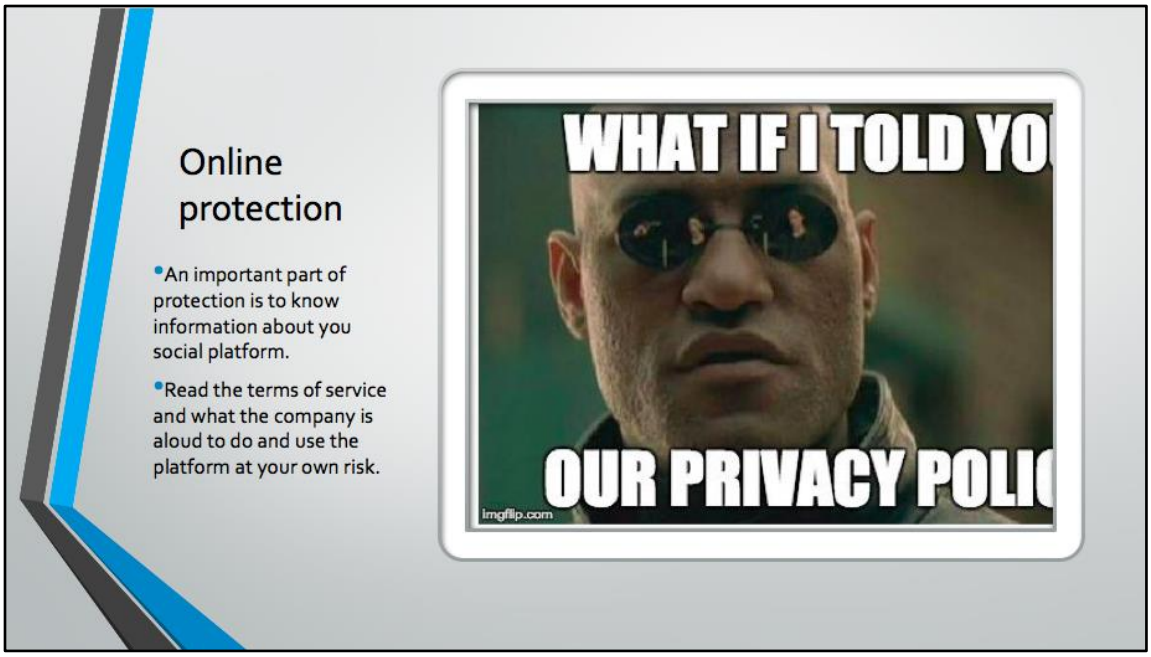

Figure 7.3 Excerpt #2 from Aidan's Final Project on privacy.

7.2.2.2.2 Memes as categories

Aidan's presentation, however, not only demonstrates how he used memes to illustrate different points, but also how he sorted memes into different topics. Unlike the memes Tanya used in her presentation, all of which contained an explicit visual or linguistic reference to fire, Aidan's presentation contained some memes that did not explicitly mention privacy. Aidan organized these memes as sub-topics under the subject of privacy, creating separate headings for each of his subsequent slides. This organizational move provided him with a structure through which to outline and link the different facets of his argument. Steven also employed this organizational approach in his use of memes. And yet, in his presentation, memes did not serve a secondary role, but rather, a primary one. While the topic of his project was music, he titled it, "Meme Collection." He organized the memes he collected into several categories that highlighted different aspects of the musical experience: "Instruments", "Sounds", "Feelings",

“Music Notes”, and “Lyrics” (Steven, Final Project, Round #1). Steven employed these categories to explore how people had used memes to represent their thoughts and feelings about music.

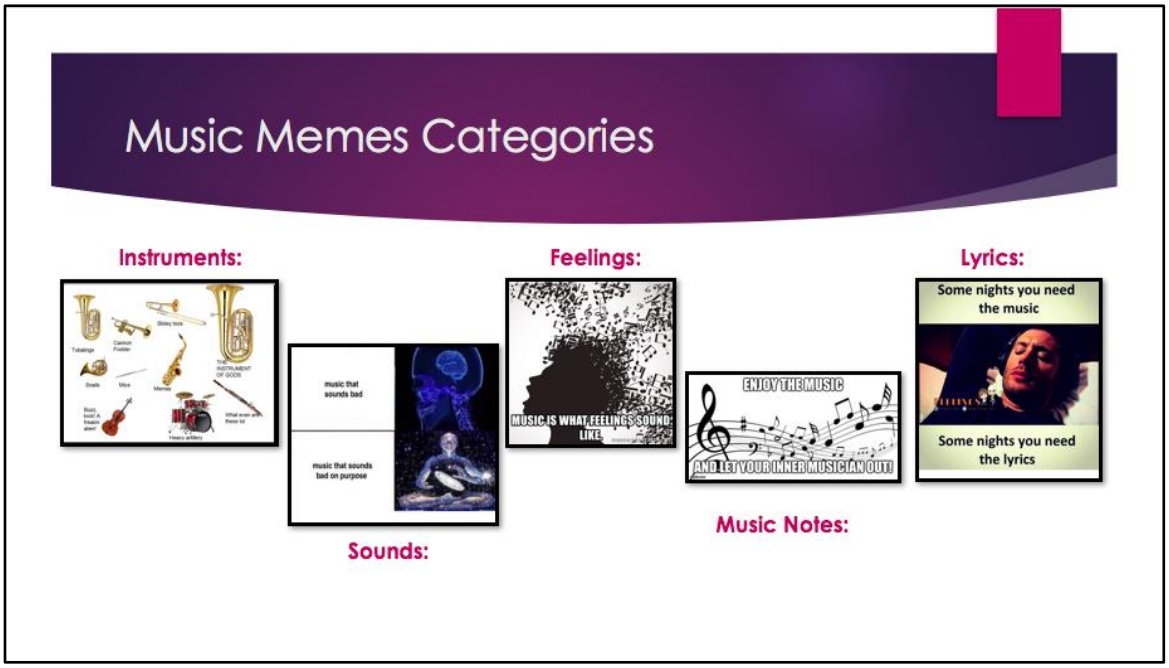

Figure 7.4 Excerpt #1 from Steven's Final Project on music.

As this slide indicates, Steven’s presentation was highly structured in its use of memes. Following his identification of different “Music Memes Categories,” he devoted a slide to each, providing and labeling several examples for memes about instruments, sounds, feelings, music notes, and lyrics. By collecting and identifying different kinds of memes related to each sub-category, which he then further sub-categorized, Steven showcased the complexity of music as a phenomenon. The different memes he included on each of these slides demonstrated the diverse ways people could use memetic storytelling to speak about music. For example, his slide on “Music Notes Memes” presented several examples that were labeled “Treble,” “Bass,” “Pitch,” “Sheet Music,” and “Scales.” His sampling highlighted how memes can represent different kinds

of “basic knowledge” that can combine to form substantial knowledge (Aidan, Interview, Round #1). Steven’s interpretations of these meme examples and the specificity of his presentation, demonstrated his own musical expertise. He had listed music as one of his passions/interests on his Connection Card and music composer as one of the potential careers he might pursue (Round #1).

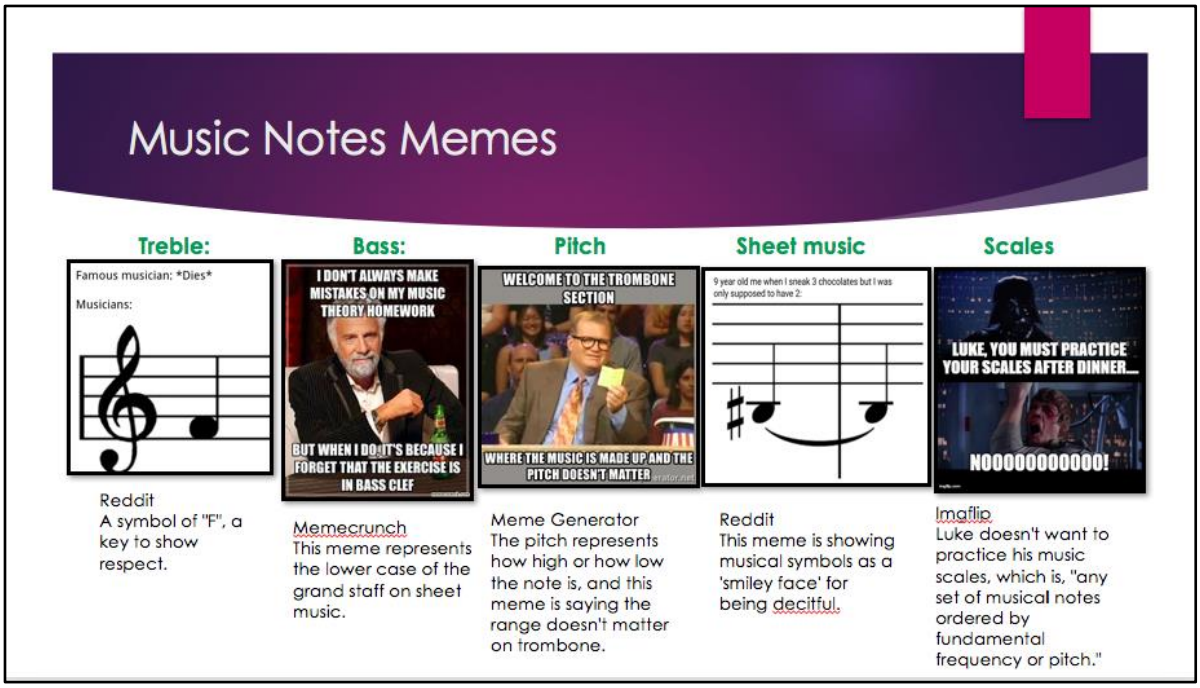

Figure 7.5 Excerpt #2 from Steven's Final Project on music.

7.2.2.2.3 Memes as evidence

Steven’s collection and organization of music memes also highlighted how these texts supported his claim that music was important to people’s lives. One of the concluding slides of his presentation included two written paragraphs that explained the different types and purposes of music, as well as its positive and negative effects. In the final line of his write-up, he stated: “Music plays a part in probably EVERYONE’S life.” Steven’s capitalization of the word “EVERYONE” emphasized the relevance of music as a topic worth exploring. His carefully

organized meme collection helped support this claim because it provided a detailed set of evidence related to the different ways people have represented their thoughts and feelings about music through memes. Unlike most of the other students, Steven provided the names of the websites where he found the memes he used. His inclusion of these references, while general, further showcased the diverse platforms through which people engage in memetic dialogues about music, which, again, helped support his claims concerning its relevance.

Like Steven, other students also chose to use memes as primary evidence in their final projects. In his presentation on misinformation, Armaan analyzed different meme examples to demonstrate how they could create false reports (Final Project, Round #1). Beginning with a collage of memes related to the topic of misinformation, he then examined the majority of them individually, under the categories of "Coronavirus Memes" and "Election Memes." Armaan examined six Coronavirus Memes and four Election Memes in total, spacing them out on the remaining slides. In his critical analysis of each of these texts, he considered how they could be viewed as promoting misinformation and whether he thought people would identify their messages as false or true. His reading of the following toilet-paper meme, for example, highlights his understanding of the false nature of its message.

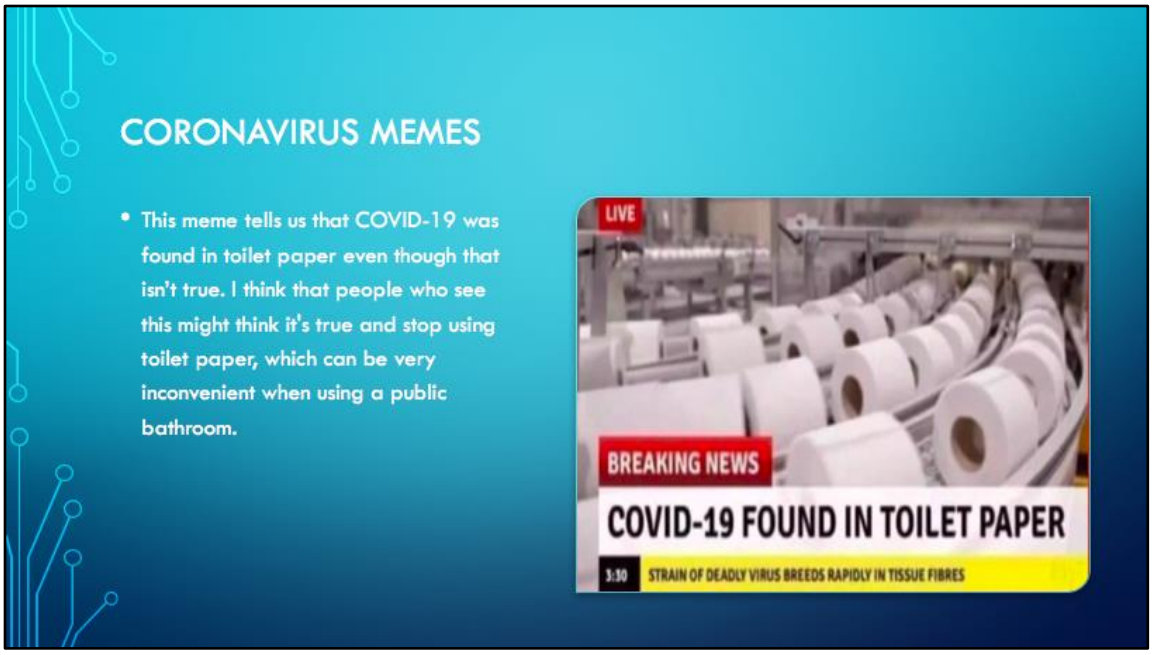

Figure 7.6 Excerpt #1 from Armaan's Final Project on misinformation.

Although Armaan was able to recognize that this meme contained fake news, he suspected that other people might believe it to be true, a suspicion that could have been related to the fact that, in the early stages of the pandemic, there was some paranoia about toilet paper, particularly its availability. Armaan did not state how he knew this meme contained false information, but he did consider the consequences of the fear it might produce if taken seriously, particularly when it came to people's use of public bathroom facilities.

That being said, there were other memes in Armaan's presentation that he did not view as convincing. When describing whether or not he thought people would believe a meme, he considered how editing had been used to make its image more or less realistic looking, as well as the bias people would bring to their interpretations of it. The following excerpts from his presentation demonstrate his understanding of the way different ideas could be made believable based on these factors.

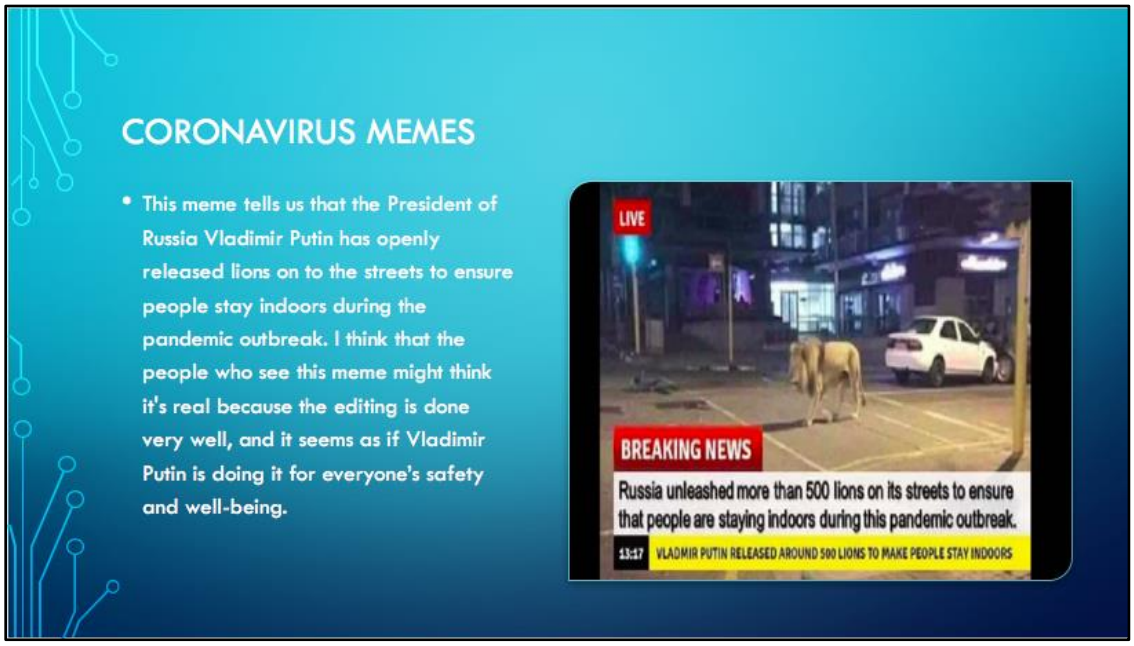

Figure 7.7 Excerpt #2 from Armaan's Final Project on misinformation.

Figure 7.8 Excerpt #3 from Armaan's Final Project on misinformation.

The fact that Armaan thought people might believe the meme about Vladimir Putin demonstrates his awareness of the influence work visual editing and the pandemic conditions can

have on people's interpretations of a meme's message. He pointed out that the meme might be believable because it suggests that Putin was taking extreme measures to protect his people. During an extreme crisis, it seems, such protective measures might not appear as extreme. Conversely, where the Hilary Clinton meme was concerned, Armaan reasoned that supporters of Clinton might agree with the meme's message, while supporters of Trump would not. His reasoning demonstrated his understanding of how memes work to reveal a person's *fears* and *desires* (Frank, 2012). People who feared Trump's presidency and desired Clinton's might want this meme to be true in order to invalidate his win, whereas people who desired Trump's presidency and feared Clinton's would want it to be false so that Trump's victory would be considered legitimate.

7.2.2.2.4 Memes as dialogue

Armaan's analysis of different memes, in this respect, attempted to create a balanced view of the ways they could be read as true or untrue. By addressing different sub-topics of the Coronavirus and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, he presented a dialogic picture of both events. Like him, Jordan also explored misinformation for her Final Project (Round #1). Only, her presentation focused more on memetic commentaries surrounding misinformation than actual examples of it. Consider, for instance, the following excerpts from her presentation, which contained four meme examples she analyzed individually. Her analysis of each meme addressed the way it used humour (i.e., a joke) to contribute to discussions of misinformation.

Figure 7.9 Excerpt #1 from Jordan's Final Project on misinformation.

Figure 7.10 Excerpt #2 from Jordan's Final Project on misinformation.

In her analysis of these memes, Jordan identified the jokes they were intended to convey and what those jokes revealed about misinformation online. The first example, she explained, was about how people spread misinformation by not checking the reliability of the online sources they consult. The second meme example, in turn, highlighted how memes can contribute to the spread of misinformation online. She noted that: "The joke is that memes tend to be a way that misinformation gets spread around quickly, because it is funny." The second meme, in this respect, built on the first to provide a specific example of an online source that can create misinformation. Viewed altogether, the four different memes in Jordan's presentation combined to showcase various factors that contribute to misinformation. The final two memes addressed issues associated with fact-checking via the Snopes website and the misperception that providing a link to a website source means that the content shared is actually true. Jordan, in other words, did not appropriate memes as texts to support her own argument, but rather, analyzed different examples to explain arguments that other people were making. She did not present memes as evidence of misinformation per se, but rather, as different commentaries about it. In this way, she created links between her examples.

Like Jordan, Lucas also created a dialogic meme presentation. However, he constructed this dialogue by opting to create a meme story that explored the difference between bullying and joking (Final Project, Round #2). Aside from the write-up he included on his final slide, he communicated his argument entirely through memes he had either found or created online. In doing so, he chose to embrace the format of one of the sample projects Mr. Rowe and I had shown when introducing the final assignment. Below is a sequence of several slides from the latter half of his presentation that model how he used memes to create a conversation about his topic.

Figure 7.11 Excerpt #1 of the sample sequence from Lucas's Final Project on bullying.

Figure 7.12 Excerpt #2 of the sample sequence from Lucas's Final Project on bullying.

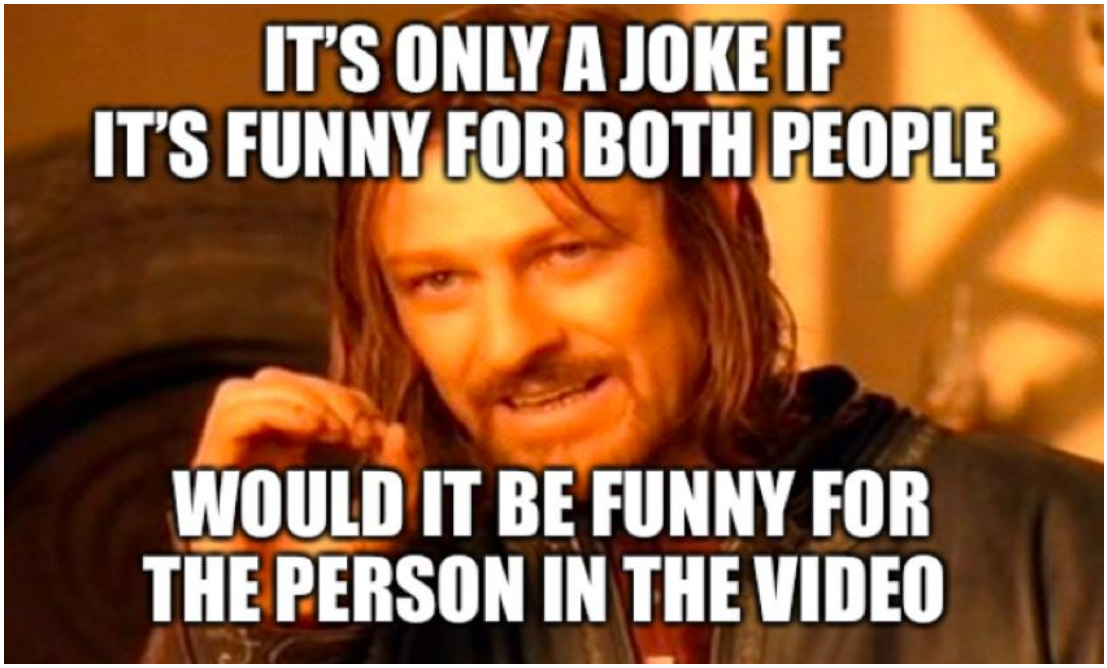

Figure 7.13 Excerpt #3 of the sample sequence from Lucas's Final Project on bullying.

Reading through the above excerpts, one can see how Lucas drew on the visuals of each image to create a dialogue that was grounded in specific reactions, thereby drawing on his knowledge of *gestural* meaning-making (New London Group, 1996). For example, he used the concerned image of Tom, the cat from the cartoon *Tom and Jerry*, to reveal that someone cannot justify bullying with the claim that it is only joking. Tom's reaction was positioned as a response to the statement of the previous slide. Tom's concerned face and the question he poses suggests that this information is "hard to swallow," as the previous image states. The choice of Tom for this reaction seems especially appropriate given the cat's somewhat predatory character (i.e., he is always chasing after Jerry, the mouse). Lucas then used the Boromir meme from the first *Lord of the rings* film to respond to the confused Tom. In this image, Boromir is trying to explain something. Thus, while Lucas did not include the famously memed Boromir quote, "One does not simply," he still drew on the image's compositional elements to create a narrative that made

sense in the context of his presentation. Whether or not he captioned the images himself, their positioning in his presentation demonstrated how he was actively constructing a narrative through them.

7.2.3 Prescriptive versus descriptive designs

These different approaches highlight the way this assignment led students to engage with Internet memes as both a method of inquiry and as the subject of inquiry. What is interesting to note about their projects is the varying levels of authority through which they conveyed their ideas through memes and about memes. Tanya and Aidan, for instance, presented the content of their presentations in a factual manner that did not invite questioning of their positions. Steven, on the other hand, qualified his argument by using the word "probably" when stating: "Music plays a part in probably EVERYONE'S life" (Final Project, Round #1). This hesitancy to claim interpretative authority was even more apparent in Armaan's presentation, where he acknowledged his subjective viewpoint and was careful to point out how different people might react to the memes he was analyzing. In his concluding write-up, he emphasized the importance of digital citizenship, which, he pointed out, involves knowing when, where, and with whom one should share specific memes. Jordan, in turn, was hesitant to draw definitive conclusions in her final write-up, stating that her understanding of the responsibilities associated with digital citizenship was "[…] yes but also no […]" (Final Project, Round #1). Lucas, however, was adamant that "[b]ullying can not be justified as joking […]" (Final Project, Round #2).

Some of these students, in other words, *prescribed* specific meanings and effects for memes by fitting them into the context of their arguments, while others *described* the possible meanings and effects of memes by examining the different kinds of arguments they could be used to make. The difference between these strategies can be conceptualized as the difference

between an argumentative essay versus an exploratory, comparative, or narrative essay. In their final projects, these students used memes for different rhetorical purposes. Frank (2012) notes that people can use stories to create *compelling*, yet singular, perspectives. Students who opted for a prescriptive approach to their use of memes created messages that compelled audiences to align with their point of view. Alternatively, students who opted for a descriptive approach to their use of memes explored how their messages could be viewed as plausible or implausible by different audiences, thereby drawing attention to multiple perspectives. In the next part of this chapter, I will explore the critical implications of these design decisions by considering how they relate to new conceptions of literacy and digital citizenship education.

7.3 Part two: How does this engagement relate to new conceptions of literacy and digital citizenship?

7.3.1 Memes and the revised B.C. curriculum's conceptions of literacy

Before I discuss how the students' meme projects relate to new conceptions of literacy I need to clarify what I mean by "new conceptions of literacy." In the second chapter, I provided an overview of the various ways the term has evolved over the years. Scholars have extended the concept beyond autonomous notions of reading and writing (Street, 2003) to address the sociocultural meaning-making practices associated with: 1) different modes of communication (e.g., tactile, auditory, visual, etc.); 2) technologies (e.g., digital literacy); and 3) power relationships (e.g., critical literacy). The revised B.C. curriculum's definition of literacy reflects these shifts, for it embraces a multimodal view of meaning-making that encompasses both the creation and critical comprehension of different kinds of texts that serve different purposes (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(c), literacy section). Alongside this general understanding of literacy the curriculum also highlights the significance of digital literacy, which

addresses the mindsets and skills associated with the use of digital technologies for the creation, circulation, and comprehension of knowledge (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(c), digital literacy section).

This broader view of literacy is enforced through the curriculum's core competencies, as well as the mandatory grade ten and grade twelve provincial literacy assessments students have to complete in order to graduate. In grade ten, this assessment involves reading different kinds of texts, such as "blogs, infographics, newspaper or magazine articles, social media feeds, and stories," answering "selected-response" questions related to them, as well as providing written responses that involve making personal connections (Government of British Columbia, 2021, What The Grade 10 Literacy Assessment Looks Like section). In grade twelve, this assessment involves critically exploring an important, real-world issue. Students are given a context through which to read different texts and respond to them through selected-response questions, as well as written responses, which involve the use of "a graphic organizer and multi-paragraph constructed response" (Government of British Columbia, 2022, What The Grade 12 Literacy Assessment Looks Like section). In the course of the exam, students are given a key question associated with another central issue and are required to respond to it through selected-response questions. They are also required to select and complete one of two writing prompts.

7.3.1.1 Memes and real-world issues

Combined, the province's definitions of literacy and standardized methods of literacy assessment provide a starting point for this discussion of how the students' final projects relate to new conceptions of literacy within the fields of information, communication, and education research. Many of the interpretative activities represented in the provincial assessments were also present in the students' work. For example, the assignment Mr. Rowe and I designed required

students to choose a real-world issue related to memes and digital citizenship. Consequently, all of the topics they chose could have hypothetically appeared as a possible topic for the provincial assessments. Tanya's presentation on wildfires, for example, was quite timely in its relevance for B.C. residents. In 2020, as in 2021, there were numerous wildfires in British Columbia. Tanya's selection of this issue demonstrated her awareness of its importance to her local and global community. Her presentation showcased how memes could be used to represent a serious issue and educate people about it. The other students' selection and exploration of topics such as privacy, misinformation, online adjustment, bullying, cancel culture, the pandemic, hate speech, racism, and depression also represented their awareness of central issues related to cultural events that took place in 2020 and 2021 (e.g., the pandemic, 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, #BlackLivesMatter protests, etc.).

7.3.1.2 Memes and the integration of ideas

Perhaps even more importantly, the students' use of memetic storytelling in their presentations demonstrated their awareness of the interpretative affordances and limitations of memes as communicative tools. In terms of affordances, Internet memes provided them with the visual means through which to express ideas in compelling ways. In their emphasis on memes as illustrations, categories, and evidence, various students set boundaries on the way they could be interpreted. Whether through visual allusions to other media sources (e.g., books, films, television, etc.), cultural events (e.g., news, election speeches, COVID-19, etc.), gestural expressions, or related themes (e.g., fire, music, misinformation, etc.), these students used memes to draw attention to the messages they were sharing and the arguments they were making through them. Viewed from an intertextual perspective, their project designs revealed their knowledge of how different kinds of texts can shape people's understanding. And yet, making

these arguments also led some students to reflect on the textual limitations of memes. Those who chose to organize and analyze memes dialogically highlighted the different interpretations memes can generate and how they can combine to address multiple aspects of a topic. By integrating different kinds of meme examples into their projects, these students highlighted the range of ways their topics might be discussed using memetic storytelling. To an extent, their slide presentations functioned as graphic organizers through which they organized their ideas. Using this format, they connected different groups of memes to create larger narratives.

At the same time, students who evaluated memes as evidence drew attention to their subjective limitations as representations. While Steven's collection of music-related memes used a diverse sample of texts to support his claim that music was important to people's lives, he was careful to acknowledge the different purposes music might serve and the fact that it can have both positive and negative effects. Likewise, Armaan's evaluation of memes as misinformation showcased how the texts were not evidence of the claims they represented, as much as they were evidence of people's attempts to play with perceptions of reality. His analysis of different Coronavirus Memes and 2016 U.S. Election Memes explored different rumours circulating in relation to those events, some of which may never have been designed to be taken seriously. Armaan drew on his knowledge of meme culture and his knowledge of these social issues to identify the different factors that would shape people's reactions to the texts he examined. Students like him who used memes to represent and create dialogues about their selected topics revealed how memetic storytelling can represent different sides of a story. Their presentations showcased the way memes could create multiple perspectives on an issue.

7.3.1.3 Memes and mythic sense-making

These project examples, which illustrate the range of design strategies students employed in their final projects, demonstrate their understanding of the different purposes memetic storytelling can serve. From a literacy perspective, their interpretations of memes showcased their awareness of the role different kinds of stories play in people's integration of ideas and their communication of messages. The following excerpt from Tanya's presentation, for instance, reveals her understanding of the way fictional and non-fictional narratives inform each other.

Figure 7.14 Excerpt #2 from Tanya's Final Project on wildfires.

Tanya's interpretation of this meme was written as a kind of stream-of-consciousness statement. While her grammar and spelling did not abide by all of the rules of Standard English, the flow of thought represented highlights the personal nature of the critical connections she made in her reading of this meme. She understood the comparison between fiction and reality the images created and applied its significance to the context of her argument, highlighting the fact that the

picture of reality was “red and smokey from the fire.” In her narration of the meme’s message she created a cause and effect story of what was being portrayed.

One way of thinking about Tanya’s interpretation, from both a literacy and digital literacy perspective, is to consider how it represents a mythic form of sense-making. McLuhan (1959) argues that to the extent that each form of mass media functions as a new language, it represents a myth. He writes:

> For myth is always a montage or transparency comprising several external spaces and times in a single image or situation. Such compression or multilayering is an inescapable mode of the electronic and simultaneous movement of information, whether in popular media or esoteric speculation. (McLuhan, 1959, p. 347)

Within the context of her presentation, this meme comprised many of the other points Tanya had already made. Compressed within her description of it is the narrative she had told up until this point in her presentation, one that addressed irresponsible human behaviour in the form of putting out fires incorrectly, ignoring global warming/climate change warnings, and starting fires deliberately to be seen as a hero when one puts them out. These actions were presented as undesirable, repeatable behaviours that linked the past, present, and future together, thereby collapsing time into one image. This collapsing of time was even more apparent in this meme’s comparison of fiction and reality, which Tanya read as a future prediction connected to past and present circumstances.

In this way, McLuhan’s (1959) understanding of mass media as myth reveals the sophisticated thought processes represented in the students’ final projects. Viewed through traditional educational standards that are grounded in print-based notions of literacy, one might overlook the significance of some of their work. Tanya, after all, did not explicitly state why the

memes she included in her presentation were appropriate for her purposes. Neither did Aidan state how or why his use of the Gandalf meme might reinforce the significance of his argument concerning the importance of privacy. And yet, the fact remains that their selection of these images indicated their awareness of their suitability as representations. Steven, in turn, did not state how his detailed collection of memes reinforced the significance of his argument, but the idea was implied by the fact that all of the memes he used were thematically connected to music. McLuhan (1959) notes that one of the mythical features of different media is the way they minimize the complex relationships that underlie their formation as representations. When we think of memes as a kind of language, the sense-making that underlies them can become invisible when the language is adopted instinctively. Read in this way, the fact that some students did not feel the need to justify their inclusion of different memes in their presentation could demonstrate their comfort level with the language of memetic storytelling, which, to some extent, is viewed as speaking for itself. Their focus was on speaking through memes rather than speaking about them.

7.3.1.4 Memes and personal connections

From a narrative perspective, the mythic nature of the students' meme engagement presents a vivid picture of *imaginative rationality* at work (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), because it highlights how people accept visual and linguistic analogies as both natural and inconspicuous ways of making sense of the world. The students used memes to create or draw attention to metaphorical relationships that could shape people's thinking about an issue, leading them to make personal connections of their own. Tanya's interpretation of the fiction/reality meme personalized its message when she wrote the word "we," which demonstrated her understanding of the collective responsibility people have to take care of the world by not contributing to

wildfires. Aidan used the informal “you” when describing the importance of privacy to his implied audience, thereby underlining its significance to himself as the implied narrator of the presentation (i.e., the authorial “me”). Steven’s close readings of music memes, in turn, revealed his personal interest, knowledge, and expertise related to music. Armaan, on the other hand, used the subjective “I” when analyzing the different memes in his presentation and, like Jordan, included a write-up that was written in the first person.

While these stylistic choices highlight some of the personal connections that took place through this assignment, the content of other students’ presentations, which drew more explicitly on their opinions and experiences encountering different kinds of memes, offer further insight into the personal nature of the meaning-making that occurred through their work. I will discuss these examples in greater detail when examining how the students’ projects relate to digital citizenship.

7.3.1.5 Critical implications

Adopting a sociocultural approach to literacy allows one to see how the students’ projects represent sophisticated forms of sense-making that are grounded in a cultural knowledge of the way memes work. While some of their presentations might seem rudimentary, the thought processes they represent are actually quite complex. In fact, the presentations that contained imperfect formatting and less text actually fit with the amateur aesthetic of meme culture (Shifman, 2014), as did any instances of imperfect grammar or misspelling. While the students did not provide a lot of context related to where they found the memes or the facts they presented, this lack of detail aligns with the way information is often communicated through these texts. Most of the students spoke about topics that could be examined on the basis of common knowledge, using common sense as a way of engaging with the memes they used. Their

projects, in this respect, highlight some of the tensions between standard and non-standard literacy practices. McLuhan (1959) notes that unlike the age where print dominated communication, "[…] today we live in a postliterate and electronic world, in which we seek images of collective postures of mind, even when studying the individual" (p. 343). In their projects, students included memes and spoke about memes as "images of collective postures of mind" that they used as a basis for providing their own ideas and arguments (McLuhan, 1959, p. 343). The collective nature of these images, however, made it more difficult to attribute the ideas they contained to specific individuals.

Depending on how one chooses to examine these student designs, then, they may appear more or less rigorous. Viewed through the lens of their own observations, the students' use of memes to represent different thoughts and feelings about an issue might be evidence of their competency, rather than their inability to draw on and cite a range of supplementary critical sources. Likewise, the fact that various students did not address the use of memetic humour in their presentations did not necessarily communicate a lack of understanding regarding its purpose. In their efforts to communicate serious messages about memes, these students (e.g., Tanya, Aidan, and Steven) focused on what Shaunti might identify as the "deeper meaning" of the issues they conveyed, as opposed to the "one funny meaning" that "lots of people know about" (Meme Definition, Round #3). Even those students who did address memetic humour in their projects highlighted some of its serious implications (e.g., Armaan, Jordan, and Lucas). Further complicating one's potential evaluation of these projects in terms of literacy is the fact that memes are texts that tend to contain brief written statements, if any.

Thus, while it might be tempting to view the projects that contained longer, more developed write-ups as more advanced, the fact remains that students' competency with written

language may not be a good measure of their competency with memetic storytelling. McLuhan (1959) notes that young people who are exposed to newer media from an early age will find "[…] the lineality of the printed word a remote and alien language" (p. 345). The mythic ways of thinking promoted by written essays, in other words, are different from the mythic ways of thinking promoted by memes. While his statement might seem dated, it still raises the question of whether young people growing up in an increasingly digital world will find the printed word as easy to access as other forms of communication available to them. Memes, for instance, often combine many modes of communication into one image, compressing numerous conceptual relationships into a compact text. Depending on their upbringing, young people might have an easier time communicating through such images as opposed to words, but that does not necessarily render one mode less sophisticated or significant than the other.

Still, it is possible to acknowledge the students' competencies with memes while also acknowledging opportunities for growth, particularly when it comes to developing a critical "metalanguage" for thinking about memetic storytelling (New London Group, 1996, p. 88). The students' willingness to create categories demonstrates their capacity to develop such metacognitive frames. Their definitions and Mr. Rowe's Contextual Sphere Diagram provided a starting point for identifying these concepts, as did the content and activities involved in the workshops. However, more tools could be developed for unpacking the different relationships that are compressed within memes. McLuhan (1959) observes that "[…] our experience with the grammar and syntax of languages can be made available for the direction and control of media old and new" (p. 348). Identifying the jokes memes convey, how they can lead to competing interpretations of their messages in different contexts, the different emotions they represent, and their allusions to other narratives, are all ways of unpacking the mythical sense-making that takes

place through them. Developing a critical vocabulary for understanding memes would not only provide students with more opportunities to develop their competencies with written language, but also help them articulate the logic of the memes they encounter, giving them terms for explaining how different information activities factor into their interpretations. One way their analyses could be deepened would be to draw upon and cite more sources when analyzing the validity of a meme's message. More support could also be provided to help them develop design skills in programs like PowerPoint.

7.3.2 Memes and the revised B.C. curriculum's conception of digital citizenship

This discussion of literacy naturally leads into a discussion of how the students' final projects factor into digital citizenship, which the B.C. curriculum defines in terms of people's rights and responsibilities online (Government of British Columbia, n.d.(d), Big Ideas section). Understanding the concept of digital citizenship, extending it and applying it to real-world issues, is an act of comprehension that directly relates to literacy development, which is why I treat both literacy and digital citizenship as parts of the same question. While my discussion of literacy focused mainly on the sense-making associated with students' project designs, I will now focus more on their understanding of how memetic storytelling related to the topic they selected and the concept of digital citizenship. In Frank's (2012) terms, this might be understood as reflecting on how students negotiated their "companionship" with different memes and the people who create and share them (p. 2). Drawing on the work of John Law and Donna Haraway respectively, Frank (2012) describes stories as "*material SEMIOTIC companions*" (p. 42, emphasis in original). The idea behind this concept is that stories play a pivotal role in people's lives. They work in good and bad ways, which can determine how "well" people are able to live with them (Frank, 2012, p. 146). Where memetic storytelling is concerned, this project invited

students to consider what kind of companionship memes afford and how people might approach managing it.

7.3.2.1 Students' insights on memes and digital citizenship

Viewed altogether, the students' project reflections identified various rights and responsibilities associated with memes and online behaviour, which I have interpreted as the following takeaways: 1) *know your audience*; 2) *know your impact*; 3) *heed your hate*; 4) *acknowledge gray areas*; 5) *look for the light*; 6) *benefit from doubt*; 7) *judge carefully*; 8) *think for yourself*; and 9) *keep calm*. These takeaways serve as dialogic links between the different students' final projects and demonstrate some of their strategies for "living well" with memes (Frank, 2012, p. 146). I share their insights in the same spirit that Quen Blackwell shared hers in the BuzzFeedVideo (2021) story. Like her advice, these students' observations emerge from their knowledge and experiences growing up in an increasingly digital world. Through this research unit and their final projects, they explored how memes impact "[…] what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided" (Frank, 2012, p. 3). The following excerpts from their projects demonstrate how they negotiated these aspects of memetic storytelling and how the conclusions they drew from their work serve as possible guides to action for them and others.

7.3.2.1.1 Know your audience

One key insight that emerged through the students' research was the importance of knowing one's audience. In his project on misinformation, Armaan framed this responsibility as a preventative measure that could be used to avoid unpleasant consequences. He concluded his presentation with the following reflection:

> I think that my responsibility as a digital citizen is a part of how memes are made and transmitted is high because me and my peers age group are the ones who make and transmit memes the most. I believe that anybody who makes memes should think to themselves if it is appropriate enough to share to the public and if it is not, they should probably keep the memes in a private group chat between their close friends. I do share a lot of memes that I find funny to my friends regardless of what they mean because I know where I should share them and where not to. (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1)

Armaan's understanding of memetic storytelling and digital citizenship highlighted the importance of self-monitoring the contexts in which one shares memes. He acknowledged that the messages of different memes might not be appropriate outside of one's close circle of friends and framed his responsibility as a digital citizen as knowing when to share publicly and when to share privately. People like himself could retain their right to look at memes "regardless of what they mean" as long as they were responsible about making sure their dissemination of those memes was carefully facilitated. Doing so would presumably reduce the risk of a potentially inappropriate joke being taken seriously, which, as his presentation pointed out, could produce misinformation. Digital citizenship, in this respect, was about making sure one's companionship with memes did not negatively impact one's companionship with others. Armaan's friends provided him with a safe space to share and explore different kinds of memetic companions.

7.3.2.1.2 Know your impact

That being said, as various students pointed out, even friends can disagree on what memes are funny. In addition to knowing one's audience, people also have to pay attention to the impacts created by the memes they share. Reflecting on the subjectivity of memetic humour, Jordan wrote:

> I think yes but also no to the 'how everyone is responsible as a digital citizen….' because, isn't the whole point of memes to be funny to a group of people?. Whatever people think is funny is going to be spread around, even if it's not correct (in any sense of what it's about). Also I can say yes because you have to take responsibility and change your ways if what you're spreading around or making for people to enjoy is having negative outcomes or just spreading negativity around. I think it is so important to spread love and positivity, it always leads to a better outcome for everyone. (this is said in a lot of 'religions' as well). (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1)

Jordan's observations demonstrate how she grappled with the tensions associated with memetic storytelling. Her presentation on misinformation pointed out how memes can be good companions in some ways (e.g., they are funny and make people laugh), while being bad in others (e.g., they contain false information). On the one hand, she recognized that memetic humour is not intended to be taken seriously. On the other hand, she also recognized that people have a responsibility to change their behaviour if the memes they create and share have a negative effect on others. Personally speaking, she embraced the idea that it was "important to spread love and positivity." In her mind, this was one of the main things that made memetic storytelling worth doing. If the aim of memes is to help others "enjoy" themselves, then people need to be careful that the memes they share are not having the opposite effect.

7.3.2.1.3 Heed your hate

As the opposite of love, hate may be one of the most negative effects memes can produce. Hate, after all, is an emotion, and, as different students observed throughout this project, memetic storytelling is a way for people to communicate their emotions about different topics. Yeji's presentation on hate speech and Justin Alford's presentation on hate speech both

demonstrated how and why it is important to take heed of how one expresses hate through memes. Reflecting on her own experience seeing hateful memes online, Yeji wrote:

> Hate speeches are still conventional in the meme world. When I go through social media, I see that 30% of the memes are usually hate speeches like the memes shown before. As I come into contact with those types of memes, I always become aware of the media society that everyone is creating. As hate speech memes become negatively impactful in many ways, it is essential to know which hate speech meme would be more accepted in general. The usage of hate memes comes from the anger and disappointment of someone. […] (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1)

Yeji's reflection suggests that feeling and expressing hate represents a smaller, but still significant portion of the memes that circulate online. Her project explored different kinds of hateful memes that exist, noting that what might be considered hate speech becomes more acceptable in specific cases where public opinion seems to support it. For example, her presentation showed how hate speech towards President Trump appeared to be more acceptable. Part of the hate directed at him, she pointed out, was actually criticism of the hateful statements he had made (or supposedly stood for). Kate's project on Donald Trump In COVID-19 also highlighted some of the frustrations people had with how he had handled/was handling the pandemic at the time.

Like Yeji, Justin also came to the conclusion that there are certain parameters to expressing hate through memes. In his presentation, which explored some of the differences between hate speech and free speech, he wrote: "Hate speech is used mass around the word and I think some of it is ok but not all. In the memes they show both sides to the story bye talking about serious things with jokes and gags" (Justin, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). Here Justin

noted how humour can be used to represent competing perspectives, because to mock a perspective one has to acknowledge it. While it may seem controversial to state that hate speech is acceptable in some instances and not in others, it appears that in making such statements, each of these students was negotiating the tensions that come with subjective conceptualizations of what constitutes a hateful meme. Like Yeji, Justin also pointed out that some people think that hate speech towards public figures like President Trump, along with his supporters, is acceptable. In his close reading of one meme he observed: "People make fun of trump supporters and don't call it hate speech" (Justin, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). Different sections of his presentation showcased the double standards associated with hate speech and the hypocrisy they can perpetuate. Both Justin and Yeji included variations of the same meme phrase in their projects, which questioned the tensions that exist between hate speech and free speech, the boundary of which might appear different to different people.

Figure 7.15 Meme from Yeji's Final Project on hate speech.[58]

[58] Justin's presentation contained a variation of this meme dialogue paired with a different image.

For Yeji, part of being a responsible digital citizen involved the ability to interpret this boundary and respect it. In her presentation, she cautioned people about posting a meme out of anger towards someone, as she recognized that memes can spread quickly. Describing why this situation is best avoided, she stated: "[…] However, even though someone angers many people, people should consider when creating or sharing an offensive meme as memes, when released in at least one of the social media platforms, spread exponentially, just like the COVID-19 outbreak […]" (Yeji, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). Yeji's comparison of memes to COVID-19 demonstrated how she adopted Dawkins's controversial metaphor, which we had discussed in one of the workshop sessions. In the context of her project, the virus analogy emphasized how people can quickly lose control of the messages they share through social media. Her use of it demonstrates how she viewed such memes as a real threat, or, to use Frank's (2012) terms, something that can "make life dangerous" (p. 2). In her presentation, she presented these adverse effects as something that should caution people from expressing their feelings of "anger and disappointment" in an intentionally offensive way (Yeji, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1).

What is interesting to note about these students' project reflections is the way they saw past the hateful messages of memes to the potential frustrations that underlie them. Yeji was able to recognize the underlying emotions that drive hateful communication online and Justin was able to point out the hypocrisy of allowing hate speech in some cases, but not in others. Their presentations highlighted the complexity of hate as an emotion that people may have the right to feel at times, but not the right to express. From a literacy perspective, they understood how hate memes compressed a number of ideas, situations, and feelings into one image. Hateful memes, Yeji pointed out, can become more acceptable when they appear to represent the general public opinion, or, to use McLuhan's (1959) phrase, "collective postures of mind" (p. 343). Both her

and Justin's projects, in this respect, demonstrate their understanding of how meme culture works as a collective form of storytelling that sanctions certain ideas, attitudes, and behaviours. And yet, Yeji still cautioned against sharing hateful memes in such cases. Her project implied the ways hate that emerges out of anger and disappointment generates more anger and disappointment when shared, thereby creating a "media society" that is negative (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). Hateful memes might seem "ok" in some instances (Justin, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1), but it is a sign that people are not feeling okay about certain circumstances.

Becky's presentation on racist memes highlighted some of the consequences of this negativity. After explaining the fact that people share a common claim to humanity despite their different appearances, she wrote:

> […] The problem of racial discrimination in our society is that even though they are the same people, they discriminate because they have different cultures and languages, and it also leads to the evil of separating ranks by skin colour, religion, nationality, etc. Racial discrimination leads to opposition from the standpoint of being discriminated against, and in the end, retaliation leads to retaliation and terrorism. These racial discriminations are a factor that denies the diversity of humanity while producing antagonism and confrontation, which also hinders cultural development. […] (Becky, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #3)

This excerpt from Becky's final write-up highlights her understanding of some of the consequences of hate. She noted that "retaliation leads to retaliation." Viewed in relation to Yeji's observations, hers also reveals the way hateful messages can "spread exponentially" (Yeji, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). Becky's presentation, however, remained hopeful in its claim that racism is "[…] a very important issue for us to solve it together […]" (Excerpt, Final

Project, Round #3). Her project, along with Yeji's and Justin's, suggests the importance of recognizing the consequences of expressing different forms of hate online.

7.3.2.1.4 Acknowledge gray areas

Combined, these students' different observations point to the gray areas associated with memetic storytelling and digital citizenship. Depending on a person's values and beliefs, different memes might not be considered hateful, but rather, be viewed as free speech that voices an unpopular opinion. Humour, however, can add another layer of ambiguity when it comes to interpreting potentially offensive messages. In his project on dark humour, Tooka pack provided eight examples of memes that would be upsetting to different groups of people. These memes mocked serious topics such as the tendency to stereotype African American men as violent, the Holocaust, slavery, autism, sexism, anti-Asian racial discrimination, the 9/11 terrorist attack, and the LGBTQ+ movement. As Tooka pack pointed out, part of the harm these memes created came from the stereotypes they perpetuated about different groups of people. In the memes he examined, humour was used to make statements that were, by all appearances, designed to be offensive. They were memes that seemed to valorize the imperfect nature of the *companionship* people live with and the problems that arise from it (Frank, 2012). Though supposedly funny, they were not joyful, because the object was to find delight in harming others. Brano Kopec also problematized this kind of humour in his presentation on the bullying that takes place in the *Call of duty* community, as did Lucas in his presentation on bullying and joking, and Cedrik in his project that chronicled the history of the Pepe the Frog meme. Internet users appropriated the cartoon frog to express what many consider to be hateful propaganda.

Still, the fact remains that, while memes can be used to discriminate against different groups of people, they can also be used to challenge the basis for that discrimination. In his presentation on memes and stereotypes, Nate wrote:

> […] Stereotypical memes relate to digital citizenship by being good or bad. The good being that stereotypical memes are usually good because people joke about them, making them laugh because they understand or people show that they are false. People also don't like them because it can be an attack on their personality and Life style, they don't understand, its not funny, or it hurts someone too emotionally and get upset. While browsing people should take into consideration whether its serious or not. (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #2)

Nate's reflection reveals his awareness of the pros and cons of using memes to address stereotypes. While he pointed out that stereotypical memes can be used to discredit stereotypical views, he also acknowledged that laughing about stereotypes can be hurtful, because people can feel personally attacked. For this reason, he suggested that people should be careful when browsing. Acknowledging the gray areas of memetic storytelling, in this sense, can ensure one maintains an open perspective, while remaining careful about the way they let different stories work in their lives. This consideration might mediate some of the "good" and "bad" effects of stereotypical memes by preventing people from becoming offended or from offending others.

7.3.2.1.5 Look for the light

Discernment, then, is key when engaging in memetic storytelling. Nate suggested that, "While browsing people should take into consideration whether its serious or not." This process can be difficult at times, because, as he and Justin observed, most memes are serious *and* funny. As different students pointed out, part of the joy of memetic storytelling comes from finding the

lighter side to a darker situation. Explaining the role memes played in people's lives during the COVID-19 restrictions, Emily wrote:

> Most people had lots of plans for 2020 but that took an unexpected turn, and everything was shutdown. There was nothing to do all day, so people turned to memes to pass time. This put a lot of stress on everyone, knowing they must pay off a house or apartment with no income. Lots turned to memes to lighted the mood or keeping them distracted with all the down time we had. We are using memes to make us feel a bit better, no one knows how long this will last but we are trying are best. There are some memes out there about Covid that are negative, but most make you laugh or make you feel your not alone. (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1)

While memes can create uncertainty through their humorous value hypotheses, they can also, as Emily observed, be used to cope with uncertainty. COVID-19, she pointed out, was a gray area for many people because it upset their sense of security. Simon made a similar observation in his project on memes and depression, which explored how memes could bring awareness to people's experiences of mental illness and make them feel less alone (Final Project, Round #2). Together, their different presentations highlight how people have the right to look for light in dark situations. However, their projects also imply the ways true light helps people triumph over the darkness, not perpetuate it. As various students observed, finding and spreading positivity is something that makes memetic storytelling worth doing; it provides a pick-me-up or distraction from negative situations, but it does not seek to exacerbate them.

7.3.2.1.6 Benefit from doubt

Looking for light in memetic storytelling can also involve looking for truth. When it comes to reporting news, memes can present extremely biased accounts of people and events, as

both Armaan's and Jordan's presentations mentioned. This was certainly the case with some of the President Trump memes Yeji, Justin, and Kate included in their presentations. Zoe, who focused her project on memes and politics, noted:

> […] Political Memes are used to communicate opinions. If someone were to share a political meme, they're putting their opinion out in the open because political memes aren't subtle. Looking at Trump memes, you can tell that most people don't have a great opinion on him. When someone shares a Trump meme you will be able to tell if they are republican or demarcate. (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #2)

Zoe's reflection highlights how memes can be used to cast doubt on the credibility of individuals, particularly those in powerful positions or campaigning for those positions. While sometimes that doubt may be justified, sometimes it is unfounded. Zoe's project examined people's attempts to falsely accuse Ted Cruz of being the Zodiac Killer, which, she discovered, impacted the results of the 2016 U.S. election.

The case surrounding Ted Cruz demonstrates the impact memetic storytelling can have in shaping public opinion of individuals. By identifying Ted Cruz as the Zodiac Killer, people could shift the narrative surrounding his eligibility as a potential political candidate. Reflecting on this situation, Zoe observed:

> […] When we are on the internet, we must be careful about what we put on and what we believe on the internet. Before we believe everything we see, we should do a little bit of research. I found out that Ted Cruz wasn't the Zodiac Killer after two google searches. […] (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #2)

Part of digital citizenship, Zoe explained, involves maintaining a level of skepticism concerning what one reads online. If Internet memes are often designed as texts that are not to be taken

seriously, then people can actually benefit from doubting their validity. As incomplete texts that are subject to continuous remix, memes are constantly shifting to create narratives that intentionally distort the truth. This may be part of the fun, but, as Zoe and other students pointed out, it is also part of the tensions associated with memetic storytelling.

7.3.2.1.7 Judge carefully

Where Internet memes are concerned, these tensions are connected to the practice of "canceling" a person, which often involves public criticism of one's actions and the removal of personal and professional support. Shaunti, for instance, explored some of the dangers created by memes and cancel culture in her final project, which focused on a 2021 controversy associated with the popular country artist, Morgan Wallen (Final Project, Round #3). As Shaunti's presentation explained, Wallen was caught outside of his home calling his friend the "n" word while intoxicated. The moment was filmed by his neighbors and the footage was soon published, causing a major reaction (France, 2021). In addition to criticism and public scrutiny, Wallen's contract with his music label was suspended, he was no longer played on certain radio stations and streaming services, and was rebuked by fellow musicians (D'Zurilla, 2021; France, 2022). Shaunti's close readings of memes related to this incident demonstrate her understanding of the debates it generated online. She designed her presentation according to the following slide titles: "What is cancel culture?", "Background Story," "Social media sincere side," "Social media negative side," "Is Sorry Enough?", "Was This To Far?", "Can He Be Forgiven?", "Invasion Of Privacy," "His Character," "Saturday Night Live," "Morgans Vocabulary," "Intoxication," "Conclusion," and "Update." Shaunti's examination of these specific topics revealed her understanding of the different social dynamics that lay behind people's responses to this event and the challenges involved in navigating them.

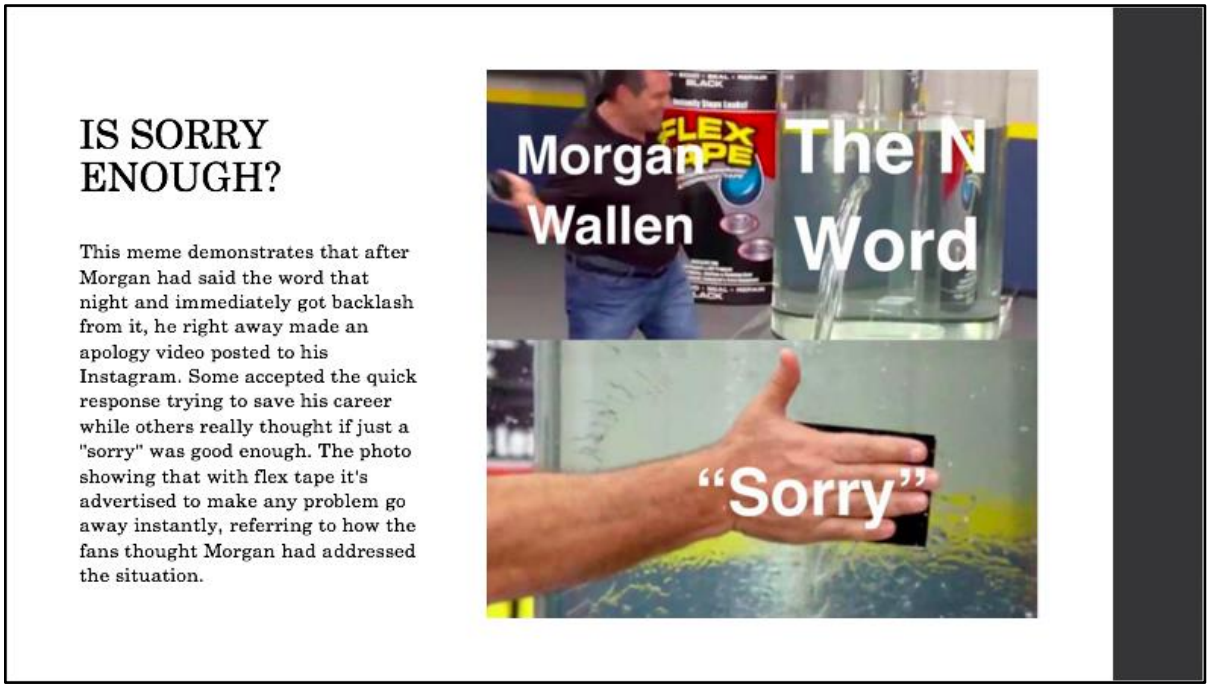

Figure 7.16 Excerpt from Shaunti's Final Project on cancel culture.

Shaunti's description in the above slide detailed how Wallen was quick to make an apology for his mistake. However, as she pointed out, some people remained skeptical as to the effectiveness of his apology, questioning "if just a 'sorry' was good enough," hence the meme image of patching up a leak with tape. Where cancel culture is concerned, the question of what constitutes a "good enough" consequence for an individual's behaviour is key, because the answer dictates how far people will go in trying to punish the person in question. Brano, one of Shaunti's seatmates, touched on this issue during a small group discussion we had in class. During my conversation with him, he pointed out the hypocrisy that often figures into cancel culture. On the one hand, he noted that society often advocates being positive and against violence; and yet, things like cancel culture shows how people are willing to cause harm by ruining others' lives over the mistakes they have made. He explained that while people are taught

to apologize for the mistakes they have made and to forgive others, many are not really forgiving (Brano, Paraphrased Comments, Field Notes, Round #3). Brano's observations pointed to his awareness of the way cancel culture can enact different kinds of violence against people. His comments called out the hypocrisy that keeps people who are calling for positive change from allowing others to change and move on from the mistakes they have made.

As Shaunti's presentation pointed out, she recognized that there were numerous factors at work in this situation, including the influence of alcohol and the neighbours' potential invasion of Wallen's privacy by filming him outside of his home. While these factors did not excuse the fact that he said an inappropriate word, they do remind people that this incident was more complicated than it appeared. Describing her final thoughts on the issue, Shaunti included the following statement in her concluding write-up:

> Overall, there will always be two sides to agree or disagree upon. Whether it is a drunk mistake, and everyone deserves a second chance, or it is very uncalled for, and he does not deserve the platform he has. In the end it being your choice to still support him or not. The spread on social media has an impact on many people's lives to now if you listen to him, you're considered racist for supporting him. Fans are on edge to stand by his side while others did everything, they could to ruin his career even with false information. […] (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #3).

In addition to Brano's observations, Shaunti's reflections on memes and cancel culture remind people to not only think carefully before they act, but also to think carefully before judging the actions of others.

7.3.2.1.8 Think for yourself

Shaunti's conclusion regarding the Morgan Wallen controversy highlights yet another takeaway students made in relation to digital citizenship: the importance of thinking for oneself. She wrote, "In the end it being your choice to still support him or not." After highlighting different public responses to the incident and examining the various factors it entailed, she suggested that people make their own decisions. Quinn made a similar argument in his project, which addressed the problem of conformity and mob mentality.[59] The caption on his title slide read: "People believe other people to much and don't see for them selfs" (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #1). His presentation contained multiple memes that used the metaphor of people as sheep to represent the way individuals do not always think independently, but rather, blindly accept the messages they are told by others (e.g., government, influencers, etc.).

Figure 7.17 Meme from Quinn's Final Project on conformity/mob mentality.

Quinn's project demonstrated how individuals who simply accept "images of collective postures of mind" can start to use collective opinion as a measure for truth (McLuhan, 1959, p. 343),

[59] Quinn did not give his project a specific title, but based on the content of his presentation it is clear that he was addressing the issue of conformity and mob mentality.

something that can prevent them from questioning the logic behind different representations of reality. The fact that he communicated the logic of his argument through memes underscores the critical implications of his message. Taken seriously, his argument would lead viewers to question the validity of his own ideas. His project advocated for taking responsibility for one's thinking. In his discussion, Quinn linked this debate to some of the discourses surrounding the pandemic and the restrictions that were being enforced.

7.3.2.1.9 Keep calm

Along with these different takeaways, came T's project titled, "Online Adjustment: And how the world has to accept it" (Final Project, Round #3). In its own way, his presentation deconstructed the perceived distinction between digital citizenship and regular citizenship. Noting that "The world has changed," he began his argument with the following reflection:

> If were being blunt not one person in the room could live without our phones, whether its looking at memes or calling a parent for a ride not one person could make it to success or happiness in this current world without their phones assuming you aren't currently 'successful' or 'happy'. […] (T, Excerpt, Final Project, Round #3)

As this introductory statement suggests, T's project focused on the increasingly dominant role digital technologies play in people's lives. In his presentation, he made the argument that because so many corporations and people have become dependent on digital devices (e.g., phones) their ability to achieve success and happiness are directly linked to the digital world. His phrase "And how the world has to accept it" suggests that, in his view, digital citizenship was not so much an option to be chosen, as much as it was a reality that had to be embraced.

T went on to explain the role memetic storytelling serves in adjusting to life online. The following excerpt from his presentation, highlights his understanding of how memes figured into his selected topic.

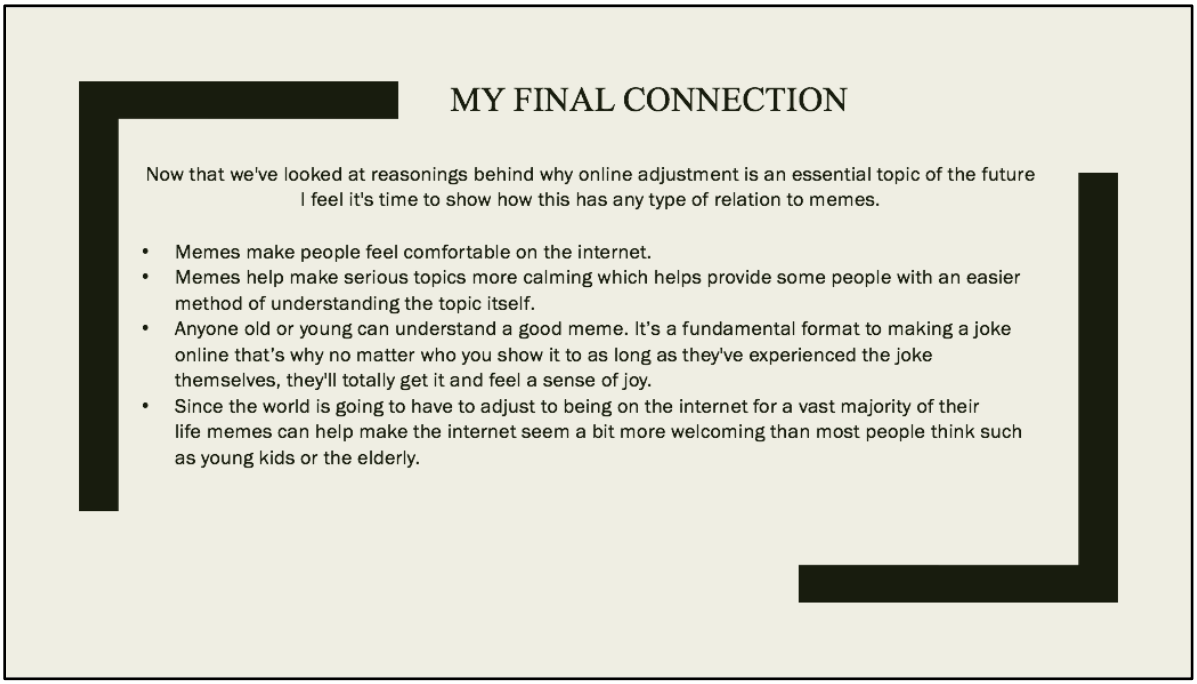

Figure 7.18 Excerpt from T's Final Project on online adjustment.

These different observations showcase T's understanding of the humorous and joyful applications of memetic storytelling. His presentation on the necessity of online adjustment implied that it is not necessarily easy for everyone. Memes, he pointed out, can be used to make people more comfortable by helping them joke about the "serious topics" they face. Viewed in dialogue with some of the other students' projects, his understanding of memes as something that can "help make serious topics more calming" appears aspirational. And yet, like Emily's and Simon's observations, his observations touch on the way Internet memes can create a positive outlet through which to release some of the tensions people experience.

7.3.2.2 My insights on the students' final projects and digital citizenship

The above student arguments concerning the relationship between memes and digital citizenship not only offer insight into the topics they explored, but also the informational logics that guided their own behaviour as digital citizens. In order to ensure memetic storytelling served a humorous, joyful purpose in their lives, they adopted specific strategies for negotiating some of the tensions that came with memes as information sources that are subjectively funny, altered texts that are often ambiguous and frequently taken out of context. The students' exploration of various issues led them to draw different conclusions about their role as digital citizens. Sometimes, these conclusions took the form of recommended actions, while, at other times, they took the form of recommended mindsets. What is interesting to note about the above takeaways is the way they combine to communicate some of the challenges associated with trying to *hold one's own* through memes. The *desire* to connect with others coexists with the *fear* of becoming disconnected. At its best, memetic storytelling can help people find joy and experience calm in community with others. At its worst, memetic storytelling can inspire hate and contribute to a sense of chaos and division.

As different students pointed out, the personal nature of memetic storytelling as a form of self-expression raises the stakes associated with it, because it increases the chance one might offend others or be offended by them. Frank (2012) notes how problems can emerge when people are "[…] caught up in their own stories while living with people caught up in other stories […]" (p. 78). The students' projects reveal some of these challenges. Specifically, they show the trouble that can arise when people fail to see the negative impact they have on others, or even, fail to care about it. On the one hand, their projects show how people who are caught up in their own ideas of right and wrong can fail to acknowledge gray areas and miss the intention behind

specific instances of memetic humour. On the other hand, their projects also highlight how people can use humour to deliberately target others, as in the case with hateful memes that are designed to discriminate against or discredit people. At times, this targeting can appear justified by public opinion, something that can become problematic when it introduces a double-standard, which is why independent thought is important. People who become caught up in representing and validating their own feelings may be unable to see how other people's feelings could also be valid. Those who are so preoccupied with a meme's message may be unable to recognize how memetic storytelling itself represents shared needs that connect them to those who appear completely different. As T pointed out in his project on online adjustment, everyone is facing the challenge of becoming more comfortable with digital technology and the Internet (Final Project, Round #3).

In terms of digital citizenship, then, the students' meme research demonstrates how easy it is to forget the fact that memes are incomplete representations. People may have the right to hold their own through memes, but they also have the responsibility of holding the stories of others through them as well. In her concluding paragraph on memes and cancel culture, Shaunti wrote:

> […] Memes contribute to Cancel Culture because they are easy to share and create. However, they can lead to bigger problems with wrong assumptions. When they first look at them people think that they are immediately true, but memes can't tell the full story. (Excerpt, Final Project, Round #3)

The smallness of memes can conceal the fact that they combine to make some pretty big claims about people. As texts that are "everywhere" they can become conspicuously inconspicuous. Turner (1998) notes that "[t]he kinds of stories that are most essential to human thought produce

experience that is completely absorbing, but we rarely notice those stories themselves or the way they work because they are always present" (p. 12). In their projects, various students presented memes that were designed to absorb the reader in specific perspectives. Other students questioned these perspectives through the close readings and write-ups they provided. Viewed altogether, their work highlighted the absorbing nature of memes as compelling, humorous designs that contain emotional subject matter.

Consequently, one of the challenges for digital citizenship education is to showcase how the memes that appear to make good companions for people do not always make good companions out of them. Unless people's practice of memetic storytelling embraces different perspectives, it may not help them develop into independent thinkers who are capable of engaging deeply with complex issues, exploring different perspectives, and having dialogues with those who are different from themselves. That being said, the students' observations suggest the ways that memetic storytelling could be used for these purposes. If joyful humour is the true object of meme engagement, it serves as the primary informational logic through which to evaluate memes as information resources. When confronted with memes that do not achieve that effect, the critical question may be: What joy could a person get out of these? What kinds of needs do they represent? If no possible answer presents itself to the imagination, then the answer may be that the people who are creating and sharing such stories are experiencing a lack of joy. Critically framed, memetic storytelling can be used as an outlet for empathy *and* accountability.

Admittedly, navigating the tensions of memetic storytelling can be uncomfortable. However, the alternative option is that people can become too comfortable to actually engage in dialogues that address serious issues. The students' choice of meme topics and the memes they included in their presentations demonstrate some of the discomfort they were already facing in

their everyday lives as they navigated memes on and offline. At the same time, it also demonstrated how they felt comfortable enough to discuss these concerns in an educational context. As these projects show, addressing this discomfort in the classroom equipped them with the skills to negotiate it in other contexts. The unit gave students the opportunity to develop and test their own theories about the way memetic storytelling works. Their different ideas about memes represent their own personal philosophies, which were grounded in their knowledge and experiences. Creating space for them to develop these philosophies in dialogue with each other and to find the language through which to articulate them allowed them to refine their thinking. Their insights lay the groundwork for further discussions moving forward.

7.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored: a) how the students in this project wanted to engage with Internet memes in traditional educational contexts; and b) how that engagement relates to new conceptions of literacy and digital citizenship. In doing so, it addresses this study's third and final research questions. The first part of the chapter focused on question (a). Drawing on my interview conversations with students, I considered: 1) how they envisioned Internet memes being used in schools; and 2) how their suggested visions related to the way they had previously seen memes used in educational settings. I observed that they generally recommended that memes be used as a tool to discuss other subjects, rather than serve as a subject for discussion. I then contrasted this recommendation with an overview of the way different students chose to engage with Internet memes in their final projects. In doing so, I explained how they used them to create *illustrations*, *categories*, *evidence*, and *dialogues* for their respective topics.

The second part of this chapter focused on question (b). I examined how the students' engagement in their final projects related to new conceptions of literacy, as defined and assessed

by the B.C. curriculum. I considered how the students' work represented their interactions with real-world issues, as well as their ability to integrate ideas and make personal connections. Drawing on McLuhan's (1959, 1964) work, I reflected on the way their use of memes modeled the mythic nature of memetic storytelling and *imaginative rationality* (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). I then considered how their project reflections can shape our understanding of the relationship between Internet memes and digital citizenship, interpreting their insights as the following takeaways: 1) *know your audience*; 2) *know your impact*; 3) *heed your hate*; 4) *acknowledge gray areas*; 5) *look for the light*; 6) *benefit from doubt*; 7) *judge carefully*; 8) *think for yourself*; and 9) *keep calm*. These takeaways, I argued, serve as possible guides to action that reveal the different students' understanding of the rights and responsibilities that come with being a digital citizen. I concluded by focusing on the way their joyful personal philosophies of memetic storytelling might serve as a pedagogical approach to the study of Internet memes and digital citizenship moving forward.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Me explaining the significance of these findings

I began this dissertation with an explanation of why I find Internet memes interesting as a subject of inquiry. This interest provided the foundation for the research journey I have shared through these chapters, which took the form of an investigation of the role memetic storytelling serves in the lives of young people and its relationship to literacy and digital citizenship education. Working with Mr. Rowe and the participating students shaped my understanding of the way Internet memes function as humorous information resources, thereby impacting the way I had previously conceptualized memetic storytelling as an information literacy practice. The students' observations also shaped my understanding of the motivations underlying their engagement with memes, motivations that demonstrated their knowledge of the way memetic storytelling *works* as a form of communication. This project's remixed, design-based methodology created opportunities for this knowledge exchange to occur. During the facilitation of these units, all of the participants took turns explaining their views on Internet memes. The students' participation in class activities, interviews, and assignments, including their final projects, represent dialogic encounters where we were able to negotiate different perspectives pertaining to these digital texts. As a co-learning endeavour, everyone involved in this research walked away with different stories to tell, stories that will continue to evolve as each person comes into contact with new ideas and experiences that remix their understanding of Internet memes.

With that thought in mind, I now offer some thoughts about the stories I have told and will continue to tell through this research, stories that inevitably raise the question: What can this project contribute to our understanding of Internet memes? Markham (2017) notes that:

> Remix doesn't just value experimentation and playful recombination of cultural units of information but also reminds us that our research products always exist within larger communities of remix. Whatever is created, is a temporary assemblage that will change almost immediately. (p. 226)

While the dialogues facilitated through this project are ongoing, they nevertheless contribute to Internet meme research by bringing important insights into the conversation. In this final chapter, I outline the way this study's findings contribute to present ideas in the fields of information, communication, and education research. At the same time, I also explain how the unique features of this study factor into its limitations, which can be viewed as opportunities for further inquiry moving forward.

8.2 Contributions

To begin this discussion, I return to this study's objectives, which I introduced in the first chapter. The three aims of this project were: 1) To develop a new conceptual framework for the study of Internet memes as information resources; 2) To develop a research methodology for investigating and representing young people's engagement with Internet memes; and 3) To reflect on how the sense-making processes underlying this engagement relate to new conceptions of literacy and informed digital citizenship, particularly as they concern the new curricular outcomes being introduced in the B.C. school system. Viewed altogether, these objectives outline the contributions this project makes to the fields of information, communication, and education research. Where the first objective is concerned, a constructivist view of information as a *guide to action* provides a way of thinking about Internet memes as information resources (Cornelius, 2014), as does Buckland's (1991) understanding of the three forms information can take. Unpacking meta-theoretical assumptions associated with the term "information" offers

insight into the cultural narratives surrounding Internet memes, which tend to trivialize them as a kind of affective noise. At the same time, it also helps establish the theoretical significance of the term information, which is more than a cultural buzzword.

In adopting this view, this project deconstructed the conceptual barriers that prevent us from recognizing the informational logic underlying Internet memes as possible representations of reality. These barriers include the assumptions associated with the *objectivist* and *subjectivist myths* (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), which can keep people from acknowledging the imaginative nature of human reason and the intersubjective processes that negotiate our perceptions of what is true. Integrating this view with the students' observations about Internet memes, I was able to explore how these texts function as humorous value hypotheses that can be used to document and test one's own views in relation to others. Drawing on their insights, I explained how the personal nature of memetic storytelling highlights its function as a form of self-documentation through which people negotiate *indeterminate*, and often *problematic*, representations of reality (Dewey, 1938/2013). This negotiation, I argued, involves the practice of relating to a meme's potential message and the different people it concerns. I created three different diagrams to highlight the informational logics associated with people's meme engagements, which were all informed by the insights I gained from my interactions with students and their different contributions to this project.

When it comes to the second objective, this study's enactment of Markham's (2017) remix approach builds on prior research by highlighting how the sense-making processes associated with memetic storytelling represent a valid approach to inquiry. Specifically, it allows us to view young people's meme engagement as a kind of information literacy practice, one that, broadly understood, constitutes a type of research. Acknowledging the intellectual sophistication

of these forms of meaning-making creates space to view young people as designers and researchers in their own right, which provides a path forward for the development of *more participatory* classroom interactions (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Embracing a remix approach also allows researchers the conceptual means through which to conduct dialogic inquiries that bridge theory and practice. The concept of design serves as a possible link between different approaches to ethnography and design-based research in real-world contexts. Combining elements of these approaches showcases the different ways they are challenging some of the deeply ingrained assumptions associated with academic rigour, including: researcher as objective observer, standardized methods of data collection, statistical validity, participants as subjects of inquiry (as opposed to partners in inquiry), and replicable results. A dialogic theory of ethnographic description and narrative analysis allows us to see the value of unique and, as Bakhtin (1984/2014b) would say, *unfinalized* conclusions.

Combined, this study's conceptual framework and research methodology created the conditions for a dialogue that met the third objective. Drawing on some of the processes of meme culture provided a link between research as a scholarly activity and research as an everyday activity. The ultimate aim of literacy and digital citizenship education is to promote learning practices that are ongoing and transferrable to different contexts. Understanding the educational value of these students' encounters with Internet memes on their own time and in the classroom provides a foundation for thinking about the ways these humorous texts can guide young people's behaviour on and offline. The students' project designs demonstrate how people can use memes to illustrate their arguments, categorize their understandings of an issue, present evidence of a specific phenomenon, and foster dialogues. Reflecting on the tensions surrounding

these texts allowed the students space to identify their own strategies for engagement, which shaped their understanding of their rights and responsibilities in digital contexts.

Accordingly, while this study does not represent participatory research in its *deep* sense (Horgan, 2017), it was nevertheless inspired by the ideals of PDE to create a research environment that provided opportunities for participants to: 1) build their capacity to do research; 2) draw on their interests and experiences; 3) define the terms of the subject matter guiding their exploration (i.e., Internet memes); 4) Choose what topics and texts they wanted to examine; 5) have the opportunity to share their work with others; 6) shape how future curriculum might be taught; and 7) choose how they wanted to be acknowledged in research reports. In its study of memes and the participatory culture in which they are situated, this project thus endeavoured to embrace some of the educational ideals put forth by the revised B.C. K-12 curriculum and other educational initiatives. In their discussion of the role media education should play in the 21st century, which addresses the challenges posed by participatory culture, Jenkins et al. (2007) write:

> We are using participation as a term which cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship. Our goals should be to encourage kids to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture. (p. 25)

While this project was constrained by various factors, including the pandemic context in which it took place, it nevertheless aspired to meet these goals through the workshops, opportunities, and experiences it provided that were aimed at helping young people develop these capacities.

8.2.1 Contributions to information research

Where information research is concerned, this project's conceptual framework demonstrates how the field is positioned to contribute to Internet meme studies and vice versa. This research, for example, expands upon prior work that explores the significance of positive information sharing experiences (e.g., Tinto & Ruthven, 2016). The students' observations concerning the importance of humour to Internet memes provides a lens through which to reflect on the informational logic associated with these funny and relatable texts. Viewed as humorous value hypotheses, these highly personal documents serve as potential evidence of people's interests, values, knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. As self-representations, they are intersubjective records of people's behaviour in particular contexts. In terms of affect, emotions and uncertainty appear to set the stakes surrounding memes as personal, embodied forms of storytelling that align people with different perspectives and communities. The students' definitions of memes as humorous documents and their joyful descriptions of their own meme engagement highlight the function emotions serve in their interpretation of these digital texts, as well as the possible information needs they might meet. Reading one's own and each other's feelings through the lens of memetic humour is a crucial aspect of this information literacy practice; it is part of the process through which people test a meme's validity, which can inform their self-narratives.

From a documentation perspective, these insights are extremely important because memes are not static representations that exist apart from the people they represent. As humorous value hypotheses that are subject to collective and individual terms of evaluation, they also hold aspects of experience in question. In prior work, I suggested that memes are trustworthy because they call their trustworthiness into question (Tulloch, In Press). My experiences with the

students, however, revealed how the uncertainty associated with memetic storytelling can establish trust in a different direction. As unreliable documents, memes can be used to establish bonds of trust between people, which reduces the uncertainty surrounding how they are interpreted. This understanding of uncertainty and trust holds important implications for our understanding of memes as possible records of people's behaviour. Where information policy is concerned, the ambiguity surrounding memes and their status as working documents makes it difficult to set boundaries on the messages they can be used to convey. Whether these policies concern the rights of institutions to rescind admission acceptances, fire employees for their personal media engagement, regulate discourse surrounding political elections, determine the boundaries of free speech/hate speech, censor individuals on social media platforms, or determine copyright infringement, there remain a lot of questions surrounding how organizations should design and enforce such policies, and what a government's role should be in that process.

8.2.2 Contributions to communications research

This project contributes to communications research in various ways, including: 1) the information perspective it introduces in relation to Internet memes; 2) its offline context; and 3) its involvement of youth and their educator. My review of prior Internet meme research reveals a tendency to concentrate on online contexts and text-based meme analysis. The remixed design of this study, therefore, contributes to the field through its inclusion of young people's perspectives and those of their teacher. The offline context of the classroom offered a different community through which to consider young people's engagement with memes, because it is not defined by the insider contexts of Internet meme culture in the same way as online contexts. Conducting this research in a classroom allowed students to reflect on their memetic storytelling as it manifested across multiple media platforms and technologies. The fact that this research did not take place

in an online community known for its memes (e.g., Reddit, 4chan, Cheezburger, etc.) also opened up opportunities to recognize the different ways young people define Internet memes in their daily lives.

The students' emphasis on the importance of humour, for example, presents a less recognized criterion for meme status. While media scholars have acknowledged the importance of humour to this form of communication (e.g., Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014), it has not figured in many of their meme definitions in the same way. This research, therefore, builds on previous understandings of the importance of humour to memetic storytelling, particularly as it relates to the expectations people have of these digital texts (e.g., Miltner, 2014). In doing so, it highlights the way humour augments the affective nature of memetic storytelling by altering one's emotional state in the act of reading. The students' observations concerning the funny aspects of memes suggests that they are often designed as provocative texts that produce an embodied response. To the extent that memes are designed to make people laugh, they are designed to generate a physiological reaction. For, as different students pointed out through their examples and observations, memetic humour is a means through which to communicate other emotions. When connected to the ideals of joy and love, they can open up possibilities for dialogue. When connected to demoralizing aims of hatred, they can shut down dialogue. As collective images of the world they present psychological and emotional coordinates for individuals to map their own identities in relation to those of others.

8.2.3 Contributions to education research

Where the field of education is concerned, this project's remixed ethnographic design allowed for the creation of a teacher and student-informed educational unit on Internet memes and digital citizenship. On a theoretical level, it contributed to education research through its

engagement with the revised B.C. curriculum's view of literacy. The multimodal sense-making associated with the students' creation, interpretation, and use of Internet memes revealed sophisticated methods of communication that depart from traditional, print-based literacy approaches. While my interview conversations with students provided potential pathways for incorporating memes into learning experiences (e.g., as conversation starters, stress relievers, community building tools, and presentation visuals), their final projects showcased their willingness to engage with some of the serious topics associated with meme culture itself. In doing so, their work revealed the educational potential of memes as a means through which to discuss the impacts stories and humour have on our interpretation of current events and cultural debates.

This study's emphasis on design also allowed Mr. Rowe and I to highlight the relationship between digital literacy and other forms of communication, thereby contributing to our understanding of why a sociocultural view of literacy and a multiliteracies pedagogy is so important to young people's development. Just as citizenship and digital citizenship are becoming harder concepts to distinguish, so is it becoming harder to separate digital literacy from other literacy forms. Within this changing context of communication, this project shows how memetic storytelling can be a way of inquiring about the world and representing one's understanding of it. I am profoundly grateful to Mr. Rowe and the students who participated in this study for allowing me the opportunity to learn with them and from them. Their unique expertise and insights into the topics of this inquiry opened my mind to new ways of thinking about the work of memetic storytelling, the challenges it can pose in a classroom context, as well as the wonderful experiences it can produce. They have taught me that I have a lot left to learn, which is as exciting a prospect as it is a humbling one.

8.3 Limitations

Embracing that humility involves acknowledging this study's limitations, a few of which I have already mentioned. One of the most significant factors impacting this study was time. The shortened semester system that was implemented in response to the pandemic meant that Mr. Rowe and I had less time to conduct these units in each round, the students had less time to complete their final projects, and I was unable to discuss their work with them after it was complete. Most notably, this shortened period impacted my ability to build relationships during what was already an unusual situation due to COVID-19 safety measures. This affected my ability to learn more about the cultural background and identities of these students in terms of their ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. The limited time I had with them and my effort to respect the personal boundaries they set when sharing information meant that I was unable to facilitate such conversations in depth. For this reason, I chose not to comment as specifically on these aspects of their experience, but rather, gestured to them in my analysis of the insights they shared. Finding a way to sensitively engage students in these conversations represents an area I hope to improve in as I undertake future projects.

Another limitation of this study is the number of students who participated. Although Mr. Rowe and I conducted this unit's activities with all of his students in the three selected classes, only a portion of each chose to participate in the study itself, which means that I have not accounted for the insights of the students who chose not to participate. The pandemic also meant that participating students were not always present in class due to illness, which led to my recording a different amount of observations related to each person. The different contributions I collected in relation to each of the participating students was partly determined by the level at which they chose to engage in the research project. Some students chose not to be interviewed or

hand in certain assignments, which meant that I collected a smaller amount of material in relation to their involvement. Added to this circumstance was the changing nature of the unit based on the revisions in each round, which meant that I was not able to collect certain materials from different students (e.g., My Favourite Meme Assignments). Where the memes collected through this project are concerned, the students' lack of citation meant that my own repertoires for knowing these texts were limited, and likely miss out on other ways of understanding them.

Many of these limitations are directly related to the nature of this research. This remixed, design-based ethnographic approach meant that my involvement in the classroom required me to divide my time between facilitating activities with students and documenting our interactions. While this project was shaped by the questions I asked, it was also shaped by the questions I did not ask or was not able to ask due to different constraints. As someone who was relatively new to this style of research, I was developing my own capacity to engage in it while also learning how to facilitate activities with youth in a K-12 setting. Along with these considerations is the fact that all of the participants in this study, and myself, are located within a particular cultural context. This project took place in a secondary school where digital technologies and the Internet appeared to be readily accessible to young people. That this study was conducted in English in a North American context also limits its ability to highlight the diversity of ways youth engage with memes in other parts of the world. While the participating students were comprised of different ethnic backgrounds, the cultural diversity of this study was still limited, as was the age range of the participants themselves. Moreover, the individuals who did participate in this study are constantly growing and changing. The time lapse between this study's beginning and end will no doubt have seen a number of developments in their own lives that may have changed some of their ideas about memes.

8.4 Directions for future research

In many ways, these limitations represent research opportunities moving forward. Future studies, for example, could test and redesign this unit in other educational contexts that would expand the age range of participating youth and the diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented. Such research could not only focus on developing strategies for engaging students in deeper conversations regarding aspects of their identity, but also on the design of assessment measures to evaluate the student learning that takes place throughout the unit. Creating more interdisciplinary connections between the fields of information, communication, and education research would be an important part of this process and would foster greater dialogues between these meta-disciplines, placing their respective bodies of important work in conversation with each other. Embracing the humility that comes with encountering these theories and contributions is central to interdisciplinary scholarship and necessary when enacting a future-oriented remix approach to inquiry.

Theoretically speaking, this study also lays the foundation for more research on the informational significance of humour. Examining the role humour plays in the learning process could offer insight into how laughter impacts the way people interpret information. Reflecting on the significance of humour in attention training, leisure, and emotion studies, for example, would provide one path forward for thinking about the serious implications laughter holds for people's mental and emotional well-being. This work could draw on the large body of scholarship in humour studies (see, for example, Martin 2020), as well as the growing number of studies on laughter (Provine 2001), integrating their insights with those that emerged through this study. Jonathan Rossing (2016), for example, argues for the importance of humour to civic experience. He notes: "A defense of humor that recognizes its mixed motives, its generative characteristics,

and its error-correcting attitudes invites movement toward a richer understanding of a sense of humor as a vital need for civic life" (Rossing, 2016, p. 15). Embracing this view, scholars could expand on this study's exploration of the implications memes hold for digital citizenship. This expansion could involve a deeper exploration of the possible information needs associated with memetic storytelling and the important role affect plays in people's engagements with information. At the same time, studying the role humour plays in people's negotiations of uncertainty, truth, and trust would further impact one's understanding of its relevance to the information policy discussions mentioned above.

Where memetic storytelling and digital citizenship is concerned, researchers can also build on the students' insights by designing a joyful pedagogy that is oriented towards the positive ideals of this mode of communication. Starting from a place of joy can serve as a foundation for thinking through some of the affordances and limitations of online communication, while helping students develop a deeper understanding of the information needs that often underlie humorous interactions. Inviting young people to think about and reflect on those needs can provide them with the space to hold their own responses in dialogue with those of others. The complexity of joy as an emotion that is often connected to harder realities could offer one way of thinking past the seemingly simple and superficial surface of memes to recognize some of the deeper emotions (e.g., anger, hurt, and disappointment) that motivate them. Researchers and practitioners can also engage with the information models presented in this project, exploring the way they might help create a metalanguage for articulating some of the work that takes place through memetic storytelling. These models, which are inspired by this project's engagement with students in a classroom context, can serve as a foundation on which to build a critical vocabulary that will help students develop the information literacy competencies

associated with memetic storytelling. In the process of using these models, researchers will be able to refine them through further remix.

8.5 Final thoughts

So, when it comes to the question of whether the ends of memetic storytelling actually justify the memes, this project has shown how memes function as a means to different ends, some of which are more desirable than others. Joy is a value that can be used to acknowledge the extremely difficult and painful nature of the stories shared through memes, while also highlighting their ability to promote positive experiences that are grounded in feelings of gladness, exultation, transport, contentment, satisfaction, triumph, and cheerfulness. To the extent that joy reveals people's need for lightheartedness and connection amidst the heavy and potentially isolating aspects of human experience, it explains why the ends of memetic storytelling can be valuable. A joy-centered view of memes provides educators with a means through which to present memetic humour as a positive force that can be used to unite as opposed to divide individuals. We are, after all, the storytellers of our lives. We are the ones who determine what narratives *fit well* and allow us to *live well* with each other. In the end, we are the ones who are left to justify the means *and* the memes through which those stories are made known to the world. The choice is ours.

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Appendices

Appendix A Teacher Interview Scripts

Youth, Internet Memes, and Digital Citizenship

Teacher Interview Script #1

Interviewer Intro: Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview today. This interview will take a semi-structured format, which means that we will be asking you some questions while also remaining flexible as to what topics we explore through the course of our discussion. Through this interview we are seeking your opinion on some of the topics associated with the new B.C. Curriculum. Feel free to say, "Skip," in response to any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. You will have an opportunity at the end of the interview to bring up any additional items you wish to discuss in relation to these questions and the ideas they introduce.

1.) We will begin by asking you to please state your name, the course subjects you teach, and the number of years you have been a teacher.

2.) Given your years of experience as a teacher, what connections do you see between the old B.C. Curriculum and the new B.C. Curriculum?

3.) In your opinion, what are the key differences between the old and new curriculum in terms of course requirements, such as content, learning outcomes, and processes of evaluation?

4.) How has the new curriculum impacted the way you teach?

Possible prompt:

-Do you approach class instruction differently (e.g., selecting content, preferred methods of delivery, design of assignments, use of technology, evaluation strategies, etc.)?

5.) In what ways has the new curriculum changed learning expectations for you? (If the teacher has already answered this question, skip to the next question)

Possible prompt:

-In your experience, do administrators, teachers, parents, and students have different expectations surrounding what the new curriculum contains and how it is taught?

6.) If possible, please describe some of the challenges you have faced when trying to implement the new curriculum in your classroom.

Possible prompt:

-Have you experienced any challenges related to: a) the development of new course content, b) access to training, and c) curriculum follow-up by the school district and BC Ministry of Education?

7.) What do you think are the main strengths of the new curriculum (if any)?

8.) What do you think are the main weaknesses of the new curriculum (if any)?

9.) In your opinion, what are the main differences between the various English course offerings associated with the new curriculum (e.g., Composition, Creative Writing, Literary Studies, New Media, Spoken Language)?

10.) The new curriculum introduces a focus on digital citizenship. How do you define digital citizenship?

11.) How do you see the concept of digital citizenship figuring into your work as an English teacher?

12.) Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the topics we have explored in our conversation today?

13.) Do you have any questions for me?

Youth, Internet Memes, and Digital Citizenship

Teacher Interview Script #2

Interviewer Intro: Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview today. This interview will take a semi-structured format, which means that we will be asking you some questions while also remaining flexible as to what topics we explore through the course of our discussion. Through this interview we are seeking your opinion on some of the topics associated with Internet memes and the new B.C. Curriculum. Feel free to say, "Skip," in response to any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. You will have an opportunity at the end of the interview to bring up any additional items you wish to discuss in relation to these questions and the ideas they introduce.

1.) Please tell us everything you know about Internet memes.

Possible Prompts:

-How would you define an Internet meme?

-What are memes used for?

-What is the cultural significance of an Internet meme, if any?

2.) How do Internet memes figure into your experiences outside of your work as an educator?

Possible Prompts:

-Do you create memes?

-Do you enjoy searching for them online?

-Do you use them to communicate with your friends and family?

3.) Now let's talk about Internet memes in school. How do Internet memes figure into your experiences working as an educator, that is, inside of the classroom?

Possible Prompts:

-Do you notice your students using memes to communicate with each other?

-Do your students share memes with you?

-Do you incorporate memes into your lessons?

4.) In your opinion, how do Internet memes fit into the new curriculum you are teaching?

5.) What do you think is the educational value of an Internet meme?

Possible Prompts:

-Do you consider memes important sources of information?

-Do you think memes represent a significant new form of communication?

-Do you think memes are part of a larger cultural shift in storytelling?

6.) How do you think young people's engagement with Internet memes relates to some of the issues associated with digital citizenship (e.g., ethical online behavior)?

7.) Is there anything else you would like to discuss today in relation to these topics?

8.) Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B Teacher Workshop Reflection Questionnaire

Youth, Internet Memes, and Digital Citizenship

Teacher Workshop Reflection Questionnaire

Workshop #: _____ Session #: _____ Course Name: _____

Date: _____ Block: _____

Please answer the following questions based on your observations related to the collaborative workshop that took place in your class today. You can answer in one or more sentences or in point form depending on your preference. The purpose of this reflection is to document the results of the workshop and note any aspects of it that might need to be redesigned in the future. These observations may be revisited in a follow-up interview with the researchers.

1.) Overall, how do you think the workshop went today?

_____

_____

_____

2.) Is there anything you particularly liked about the design of this workshop session?

_____

_____

_____

3.) What aspects of the session worked well?

_____

_____

_____

4.) What aspects of the session didn't work well?

_____

_____

_____

5.) Is there anything about the design of this workshop session that you might change in the future?

_____

_____

_____

6.) Was there something that you saw or heard that you would like to follow-up on with the students?

_____

_____

_____

7.) Is there anything else related to this workshop that you would like to discuss with the researchers in a follow-up interview?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix C Student Interview Script

Youth, Internet Memes, and Digital Citizenship

Student Interview Script

Interviewer Intro: Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview today. During my conversation with you, I will be asking some questions about your experience with Internet memes. If any question I ask makes you uncomfortable, feel free to say "Skip" and we will move on to the next one. You can choose to end the interview at any time by stating, "I would like to end the interview now."

1.) Before I begin, please state your name, age, and grade level.

2.) Please tell me everything you know about Internet memes.

Possible Prompts:

-How would you define an Internet meme?

-What are memes used for?

-Where do people go to find and create memes (e.g., what social media platforms)?

-Who uses memes?

3.) Describe some of your encounters with Internet memes.

Possible Prompts:

-What are the most memorable memes you have encountered?

-What kinds of memes do you like?

-What kinds of memes do you not like?

-Where do you go to find, create, or share memes (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, meme generator sites, specific social media channels, etc.)?

-What technological devices do you use the most to learn about, create, or share new memes (e.g., phone, laptop, iPad, etc.)?

-Have your teachers ever used Internet memes in class?

4.) How do you think Internet memes work as a form of communication?

Possible Prompts:

-What kinds of messages are communicated through memes?

-What do people need to know in order to understand and use Internet memes?

-What are some of the pros and cons of using memes to communicate a message?

5.) What do you think people can learn from Internet memes?

Possible Prompts:

-What can memes teach us?

-What can memes be used for?

-What kinds of stories do memes create?

6.) If Internet memes were used in school, how do you think they should be used?

7.) Is there anything else you would like to discuss today in relation to these topics?

8.) Do you have any questions for me?