Title: Ironic memes
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Pyli, August 2020
For my Supersister Alex

“I think the potential of what the internet is going to do to society, both good and bad, is unimaginable. I think we’re actually on the cusp of something exhilarating and terrifying.”

David Bowie, Interview on the BBC with Jeremy Paxman (1999)

MEMEANDWATCH [@memeandwatch] on Instagram
Abstract

As internet memes are becoming a staple of our social lives online, this thesis project examines the phenomenon of ironic memes, a type of memetic content that proliferates online despite being seemingly incomprehensible. Drawing on recent theoretical developments in sociolinguistics, research on multimodality, and New Literacy Studies, this project analyzes ironic memes as a sociocultural “new literacy” phenomenon linked to processes of identity construction and the emergence of social formations online. In this vein, the study explores both (a) how ironic memes are designed as multimodal texts based on particular semiotic design strategies and (b) what the cultural significance of ironic memes is for “ironic memers” as reflected in the memes’ design patterns.

This study thus comprises a digital ethnographic approach complemented by multimodal discourse analysis. With the subreddit r/ironicmemes as a primary research site, this methodological approach allows for a situated understanding of ironic memeing as a literacy phenomenon, generating data through naturalistic observation and participant interviews. At the same time, the study sheds light on the stylistic particularities of ironic memes’ design through multimodal discourse analytical tools, primarily drawn from the tradition of social semiotics.

Our analysis suggests that ironic memes are a hybrid genre of multimodal texts, in which authors jokingly represent personas of users that are perceived as being “less literate” in internet memeing than the authors themselves are. This is achieved through design strategies such as making ironic memes “worse, on purpose,” which results in purposely embarrassing (or “cringey”) semiotic work associated with “less literate” memers (or “normies”). Ironic memes are also rendered deliberately “less direct,” which makes them incomprehensible to outsiders but enjoyable to ironic memers as an in-group who is well-versed in the relevant literacies. Ironic memers are thus constructed as a counter-mainstream cultural group based on their difference from normies along the lines of digital literacies in the domain of internet memeing. Overall, the phenomenon of ironic memes illustrates how cultural identities and social formations can emerge around digital literacy practices today, and particularly around playful online practices like memeing.
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1. Introduction

Internet memes are everywhere. Ephemeral and highly spreadable, they come in all shapes and sizes. Whether they are made simply as jokes (Dynel, 2016) or as forms of public discourse (Huntington, 2013), advancing activist rhetoric (Barlas Bozkuş, 2016) or even promoting conspiracy theories (Varis, 2019), memes are becoming a staple of our social lives across various online platforms, and their social importance is becoming difficult to ignore.

Research suggests that internet memes foster the formation of communities online as people with common interests come together through the making and sharing of memes (Literat & van den Berg, 2019; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). As forms of communication that serve to establish a connection among users, memes and their appreciation through likes, comments, and shares might appear trivial, yet they serve to nurture feelings of groupness and conviviality online (Blommaert, 2018; Miltner, 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). These social formations are increasingly variable in today’s globalized world, where thanks to the internet our social lives unfold in an online-offline nexus, and where “niche” group formations appear to emerge around social practices more diversely than ever (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019; The New London Group, 2000). Internet memes are thus being approached as cultural artifacts that can illuminate facets of digital culture (Shifman, 2012) in the context of research that explores the workings of our online-offline social world through the lens of communication.

As interdisciplinary research on internet memes has proliferated in recent years, there also appears to be a growing consensus that internet memeing relies on the systematic manipulation of digital content (e.g., see Burgess, 2008; Cannizzaro, 2016; Marino, 2015). Patterns of content manipulation or editing are often based on “template-like” structures that recur in different meme iterations (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Jenkins, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Lou, 2017; Marino, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Memes are thus constantly re-designed by users as multimodal texts; that is, texts that are constructed through the use of multiple semiotic systems (or “modes”) besides just language; images, layout, fonts, all play a role in the way memes make meaning (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Dynel, 2016; Piekot, 2012). Memes thus combine (a) recognizability by being tied to a genre of similar memes (e.g., adhering to a “template-like” structure) and (b) individual innovation, as elements of a recognizable structure are constantly
reshaped by users in new meme iterations (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). What users do when it comes to this latter element of innovation rests upon how they manipulate the multimodal structure of memes as texts, which thus becomes an object of relevance.

Despite investigations both of memes’ social function and of their structure as multimodal text forms being well underway, little attention has been paid to systematically linking these two empirical pursuits. The present study attempts to achieve this by focusing on ironic memes in particular. When it comes to the analysis of how meaning is made through the manipulation of various resources, ironic memes make for an intriguing object of inquiry as they are provocatively nonsensical creations, describable as “digital memetic nonsense” (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Yet, despite their inscrutable appearance, people make, share, and enjoy ironic memes en masse. The present study thus asks: How are ironic memes designed as multimodal texts in ways that are socially meaningful to users well-versed in them? Further, how does an “ironic memeing culture” emerge around these textual artifacts based on the patterns of design observable in them?

In an attempt to answer these questions, the present study takes a sociolinguistically-informed look at how ironic memes are shaped and enjoyed by their makers, who are experts in this genre of multimodal texts. In doing so, it considers the central role of “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) in our contemporary online-offline social lives. As ironic memes are incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with them, yet are systematically made, shared, and appreciated by well-versed “ironic memers,” it is worth examining ironic memeing as a form of literacy that ironic memers share. This approach follows the tradition of New Literacy Studies, where literacies are viewed as sociocultural phenomena tied to meaning-making practices, which produce social effects (Gee, 1999, 2015). Overall, this amounts to a situated examination of meaning-making practices informed by recent work in sociolinguistics that stresses the role of digital infrastructure in shaping our communicative practices (and thereby, our social lives) at a time in which the world is getting more and more diverse (Blommaert, 2018).

Methodologically, the study adopts a digital ethnographic approach paired with multimodal discourse analysis. The subreddit r/ironicmemes served as a primary research site with some observations also made in demonstrably relevant digital spaces. Naturalistic observation was combined with interviews with users on the subreddit. This allowed the researcher to achieve an understanding of ironic memes as a literacy phenomenon in their own terms, as described by the
users who expertly engage in ironic memeing. At the same time, the multimodal discourse analytical approach taken, primarily informed by the tradition of social semiotics (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005a), allowed for in-depth semiotic analyses of ironic memes’ design, examining their characteristic meaning-making patterns in order to explore their social meaning. Within this analytical approach, the complementary adoption of elements from the multimodal (inter)action analysis framework (Norris, 2004) alongside social semiotics, allowed us to explore the memes as suggestive of particular patterns of action involved in their making and sharing. In the end, the chosen method made for a two-pronged approach that matched the study’s double focus: (a) a focus on the texts themselves and how they are produced and shared, which was achieved through multimodal discourse analysis, and (b) a focus on the cultural practices that emerge through and around these texts, as revealed through ethnographic observation and interviews with users and further analytically approached with tools from multimodal (inter)action analysis.

In the end, this emically-oriented analysis suggested that ironic memes are a genre of memes concerned with their makers’ “superior” literacies in internet memeing, and their irony is directed at those with less advanced knowledge and less refined tastes when it comes to memes. These stances are reflected in the multimodal design of ironic memes as texts, where “less literate” memers are represented as unskilled or naïve digital media user personas, whose taste in memes is outdated. Our findings illustrate that ironic memes can provide a valuable lens through which to examine situated understandings of the social world based on digital literacies, as they reveal how the memes’ authors construct their own and others’ identities on the basis of how “literate” people are in internet memeing.

In this sense, the present study’s findings suggest that the examination of “niche” internet memeing cultures can be valuable for understanding processes of (group) identity formation in an online-offline world, while they also draw attention to an often overlooked aspect of culture: its playful or “ludic” aspect (Huizinga, 1949). Ironic memes exemplify how literacies and concomitant ways of viewing the world can emerge through people’s engagement in practices that are not conceived as “serious” or gain-oriented, but only serve to provide a pastime removed from the serious aspects of life. In today’s world, these literacies can pertain entirely to digital practices, and social groups can come to be typified as a function of who enjoys what kinds of memes, or who can make what kinds of digital texts and share them in appropriate spaces.
In what follows, I first present the theoretical background of the present study as it draws on sociolinguistics (2.1), research on multimodality (2.2), and New Literacy Studies (2.3). I then survey interdisciplinary literature on internet memes, thereby articulating an operational definition for a “conceptual troublemaker” (Shifman, 2013) and framing memeing as a new literacy (2.4). Chapter 3 outlines the ethnographic methodological approach taken, along with the multimodal discourse analytical tools employed in the study. Chapters 4 and 5 provide inductive qualitative analyses of textual data. Starting from semiotic analyses of the texts’ makeup and the actions involved in their making (chapter 4), findings are also triangulated with interview data and complemented by further textual examples (chapter 5). In chapter 6, the analytical findings are discussed under the lens of a New Literacy Studies approach to literacies. The importance of “memeing literacies” for identity formation is also considered as exemplified in the case of ironic memers and their creations. In chapter 7, our findings are summarized and the study is critically evaluated.
2. Literature review

2.1. Sociolinguistics for an online-offline world

In the current stage of globalization, the world is bearing witness to an unprecedented level of worldwide mobility of people, which dramatically increases the complexity of their social lives. As people move across and through a multitude of spaces staying in touch with each other like never before, the study of their use of language in society is facing the challenge of adopting renewed theoretical and analytical tools to keep up with these developments (Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). In what follows, I briefly survey how sociolinguistics is facing up to this challenge, thereby sketching the theoretical background of the present study.

Firstly, the vast increase of the lines along which people and their practices differ today as they exhibit unprecedented levels of mobility and are socialized in increasingly diverse ways has been captured by Vertovec’s (2007) concept of “superdiversity,” which is now widely applied in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological scholarship (Blommaert, 2010, 2013; Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; De Fina, Ikizoglu, & Wegner, 2017). Superdiversity as a concept in sociolinguistics refers to the “diversification of diversity” that has come about as a result both of the mobility of people across physical space and of the advent of communication infrastructure (first and foremost, the internet) which has revolutionized the ways in which people can stay in touch in digital space, communicating “translocally” (Blommaert, 2010, 2013; De Fina et al., 2017). These developments have shaken the conception of stable social categories operationalized in older sociolinguistic work (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011).

Indeed, the terms in which sociolinguistic work views the question of who people are at an individual and at a group level today have changed dramatically. Theoretical notions such as that of “speech communities” as well as the discipline’s understanding of individuals as “bundles of demographic characteristics” (Eckert, 2012, p. 88) have been problematized (Blommaert, 2010, 2013, 2018; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). Such developments, sometimes motivated by explicit theorizations on the current stage of globalization (e.g., “the sociolinguistics of globalization”; Blommaert, 2010), sometimes not (e.g., “third-wave sociolinguistics”; Eckert, 2012), point to a more general shift towards work on language in society in a poststructuralist vein, which focuses
not on stable categories or groups of people, but on social agents and how meaning emerges through their practices, thereby shaping social reality, including their identities.

More specifically, this increased focus on what people *do* through language (and other semiotic resources too, as will be stressed below) has resulted in more fine-grained, practice-based treatments of the notion of identity itself (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; Blommaert & Varis, 2013; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Maly & Varis, 2016). Identity is now increasingly understood as articulated through communicative practices that individuals engage in as they move through a variety of online/offline norm-governed time-space configurations (or “chronotopes”; Blommaert, 2018) in their social lives (Blommaert, 2010; Blommaert & De Fina, 2017). Such practice-based definitions of identity have led to a shift also in the terms used to describe collective identities and group structures, as sociolinguistics has moved from “speech communities” to “communities of practice” (e.g., Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999) and “light” communities (Blommaert, 2018). A large part of the present study focuses on issues of identity formation and is informed by this poststructuralist approach to identity.

Conceptualizing identity in this way rests upon an understanding of language use as social practice. Contemporary approaches to language use and identity construction theorize that, through their socialization, individuals acquire language in a way that shapes a dynamic “pool” of linguistic resources that they accumulate over the course of their lifetime; this is understood as the individuals’ “linguistic repertoire” (Blommaert, 2006, 2010, 2018; Blommaert & Backus, 2013), “stylistic repertoire” (Eckert, 2012) or “lingual biography” (Johnstone, 2009). Individuals then actively draw upon these resources in order to make meaning in particular ways, which means that their use of language reflects a *choice* to use particular resources over others (Blommaert, 2006; Coulmas, 2005; Eckert, 2012). These choices are context-bound and they reflect knowledge about what the use of particular linguistic resources over others entails in social terms; for example, for the construction of one’s identity (Blommaert, 2010; Eckert, 2012, 2019). The social effects of using language in particular ways stem from the fact that linguistic resources come with “a history of use and abuse” (Blommaert, 2001, p. 23)—their meanings (from the strictly semantic to the more broadly socially indexical1) are shaped based on how the linguistic resources (e.g., words,

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1 The adjective “indexical” alludes to the notion of indexicality, “the connotational significance of signs” (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, p. 5). The concept of indexicality and its employment in the current study is presented in more detail in subsection 3.2.2.
accents) have been used historically by (other) social actors. This view of language use as social practice has also led to the proposal of the term “languaging” (e.g., Sabino, 2018), which underscores this analytical orientation towards how people “do language,” rather than how language (as an abstract system) is used by people.

So, language use is understood as practice and it is practices that shape (and are also shaped by) the social world, including individuals’ identities, and ultimately social groups (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019). Importantly, as terms like “languaging” indicate, it is social agents that are placed in the spotlight in such a theoretical treatment, rather than, say, “languages” (Sabino, 2018). These observations constitute important ontological positions, which have changed the empirical focus of sociolinguistics as well as the research methodologies used in the field in recent years. The result was what Lillis (2013) calls the “ethnographic pull” in sociolinguistics. Increasingly, sociolinguists have been employing ethnographic methods to reach situated understandings of how (social) meaning emerges through patterns of language use in particular settings (Blommaert, 2006; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Eckert, 2012, 2019). Such an ethnographic focus is also adopted in the present study, which relies on ethnography’s potential to examine community formations, and to highlight not merely language in society, but language and society (Blommaert, 2006).

Importantly, our approach is a digital ethnographic one. This investigation of online practices as valid in their own right reflects the theoretical staple that this study adopts about the central role of the internet and the digital element in general (e.g., its mediation, its algorithmic infrastructure) in shaping today’s superdiverse world (Blommaert & Dong, 2019). Our social lives today unfold in an online-offline nexus, meaning that the online and the offline dimension of our social practices are inseparable and just as valid (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019). By examining meaning-making practices in what might be seen as a “niche” corner of the internet, the present study details the organization of social life through situated semiotic work, thus embracing a theoretical agenda that proposes broadening the focus of contemporary sociolinguistics to promote more socially-oriented online-offline sociolinguistic work (see Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019).

The theoretical and methodological considerations put forth so far can be summarized as follows. In the current stage of globalization, our social lives unfold in a superdiverse online-offline world.
Our meaning-making practices that draw on semiotic systems like language are both shaped by and shape “the social”; it is through our practices that we position ourselves in the social world by constructing identities and emergent groups. Ethnography provides a well-suited methodological approach for situated investigations of meaning-making and social actuality in this vein.

Moving on, the consideration that people also rely on semiotic systems beyond language in making meaning necessitates a more thorough examination of meaning-making as reliant on various social semiotic systems, or in other terms, a view of meaning-making as “multimodal.”

2.2. Sociolinguistics going multimodal

In their paper on superdiversity and its importance for research on language in society, Blommaert and Rampton (2011) draw some attention to the fact that people communicate through more than just language. Meaning is understood as “multimodal” in that it is articulated also through resources other than language, or other “modes.”

As suggested above, sociolinguistic work concerned with superdiversity acknowledges that language is but one of many systems available for people to make meaning with (Adami, 2017; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), which is the key position adopted in the very diverse field of research on “multimodality” (see Geenen, Norris, & Makboon, 2015; Jewitt, 2015; Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016). Yet, despite this acknowledgement, as Adami (2017) stresses, little work in this vein has engaged specifically with multimodal meaning-making practices and how they may contribute to our understanding of a superdiverse society. The ontological and epistemological assumptions for engaging in such multimodal research are there: both superdiversity-oriented sociolinguists and multimodality researchers understand language as one semiotic resource among many, and they accept that multiple forms of meaning-making (multiple modes) can be studied within the same approach (Jewitt et al., 2016). The present study thus engages in a sociolinguistically-informed examination of more than language when it comes to ironic memes. In doing so, it addresses the programmatic concern expressed by Blommaert and Rampton (2011) regarding how studying a superdiverse world should tend to more than just “the linguistic”; or as they put it,
with people communicating more and more in varying combinations of oral, written, pictorial and ‘design’ modes (going on Facebook, playing online games, using mobile phones etc), multi-modal analysis is an inevitable empirical adjustment to contemporary conditions, and we are compelled to move from ‘language’ in the strict sense towards *semiosis* as our focus of inquiry, and from ‘linguistics’ towards a new sociolinguistically informed *semiotics* as our disciplinary space. (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, p. 6, original emphasis)

Following this rationale, the present study relies on multimodal discourse analysis, the study of how meaning and communication unfold along a variety of modes (Geenen et al., 2015). Further qualifying what this field of inquiry entails requires acknowledging its wide internal diversity. Work on multimodality follows several theoretically diverse traditions, which provide various analytical toolkits for approaching issues such as identity construction and literacy practices, both of which lie at the heart of this study (see Geenen et al., 2015; Jewitt et al., 2016 for overviews of various traditions of multimodality research). In this context, the present study is primarily informed by the tradition of social semiotics (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005a) while it also complementarily draws on notions from multimodal (inter)action analysis (Norris, 2004; Norris & Makboon, 2015) to illuminate particular facets of the analytical phenomenon at hand.

Social semiotics is considered an advantageous choice of framework for the study of a superdiverse world (Adami, 2017). Stemming from Halliday’s (1978) understanding of language as a “social semiotic,” this approach was inspired by a Hallidayan view of (linguistic) grammar and, to a large extent, it comprises examinations of others modes’ “grammars,” or rather, the *semiotic potential* at their disposal for shaping meanings in particular ways based on how social agents mobilize them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Spoken language, written language, image, font, page layout, color, gesture are all such *modes* with “grammars” of their own; that is, they are sociocultural resources through which social agents can make meaning in varying ways by drawing on each one’s particular *affordances* and arranging various modal elements in *multimodal texts* (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). In this sense, meaning-making in general (including but not limited to language use) is a social practice, in which individuals actively draw on resources that are socially shaped.
While social semiotics provides powerful tools for analyzing how meaning is made through different modes, multimodal (inter)action analysis sheds an analytical light on individuals’ concrete actions and how they can be understood as making meaning (Norris, 2004). In the present study, this more action-oriented approach is used to complement our social semiotic analysis by focusing on individuals’ behavior whereas social semiotics focuses more closely on the texts they produce and their multimodal design. Subsection 3.2.2 provides further qualifications on how the combination of these two approaches is orchestrated in our analysis along with a detailed presentation of relevant analytical concepts.

Finally, the multimodal analytical frameworks embraced in this study are adopted in the wider context of an ethnographic inquiry. This practice is widely adopted in multimodal discourse analysis since ethnography as a wider methodological approach allows for situated examinations of social practice with an emic orientation, which then inform aspects of the multimodal analytical approach per se (e.g., see Kress & Mavers, 2005; Norris, 2005; Pahl, 2008; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). In this sense, the present study could be labeled a “multimodal ethnography” (Jewitt et al., 2016) of ironic memes. Indeed, this approach, as succinctly presented by Jewitt and colleagues (2016), proves particularly advantageous for examining literacy practices, a key concern of the present study. First, however, we have to present what is meant by “literacy” here.

2.3. (The) New Literacy Studies: Studying literacies in today’s society

The understanding of the concept of literacy in the present study draws on a body of work that comes under the label of “New Literacy Studies.” Starting with work in the 1980’s, New Literacy Studies emerged in the context of a broader interdisciplinary shift towards socially-oriented research, which Gee (1999) calls “the social turn.” Moving beyond a strictly cognitively-oriented view of literacy, researchers in New Literacy Studies approached literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon (Gee, 1999, 2015; Street, 2012). This entailed that literacy no longer be conceptualized in “neutral” terms, as an objective kind of competence that individuals simply either have or do not have, but rather as a concept bound in social practices, and as such, as something that both shapes and is shaped by the social world (Gee, 1999; Maybin, 1999). This required moving away from what Street (1995) describes as an “autonomous model” of literacy, whereby literacy is viewed as a single skill that can be transferred and which inherently entails
“progress.” Instead, an “ideological model” of literacy was proposed, which brought to light how literacy is necessarily entangled in practices, views, and attitudes about the world, which shape relations of power and vary locally (Street, 1995, 2012).

Apart from reframing literacy as a concept in social terms, New Literacy Studies also stressed the plurality of literacies in social life. As meaning-making and learning are situated phenomena (e.g., see Gee, 2004, 2008a; Bezemer & Kress, 2015), types of knowledge that are required to read, write, and generally make meaning in socially meaningful ways across various situations constitute various literacies that individuals acquire in their socialization (Gee, 1999, 2004, 2015; Maybin, 1999; Street, 1995, 2012). Literacies are thus viewed as social “achievements”: they are about people being able to participate in social life through their meaning-making practices in ways that render them successfully recognizable as doing what they are supposed to be doing in social situations (Gee, 1999, 2015). For example, for this document to be considered a good thesis, the author is relying on his knowledge of and actively working to enact what it means to “do a thesis well.” The people responsible for judging this thesis as a good or a bad one will likewise rely on their knowledge to do recognition work based on their literacy of “thesis writing/reading” (see Gee, 1999, for how literacies rely on enactive work and recognition work). In this somewhat simplistic example, the literacy of “thesis writing/reading” has been acquired by individuals such as the author and the graders through practices they engaged in over the course of their social life—and it has been acquired alongside multiple other literacies, such as the literacy of “writing/recognizing a work-related email” or even that of “making/recognizing a good ironic meme.”

Evidently, the definition of literacy hinted at here goes far beyond the conventional understanding of literacy as the ability to read and write. Viewed under the lens of practices, literacies involve more than just using written language, including “different ways of (1) using oral language; (2) of acting and interacting; (3) of knowing, valuing, and believing; and, too, often (4) of using various sorts of tools and technologies” (Gee, 2015, p. 36). Crucially, they do not involve (written or oral) language as the sole system(s) for meaning-making either; rather, they are multimodal (Kress, 2000; Kress & Mavers, 2005; Kress & Street, 2006; Mills, 2009, 2010; Street, 2012; The New London Group, 2000). In their word of caution against the danger of “stretching” the conception of literacy excessively to encompass virtually any practice based on systematic knowledge, Kress
and Street (2006, p. vii, original emphasis) succinctly define literacies in New Literacy Studies as “social practices of representation,” which at once widens the concept’s definition enough to include more than just “reading and writing,” but also contains its focus on meaning-making specifically and points to its social orientation.

So, according to the tradition of New Literacy Studies, literacies are sociocultural phenomena, they are multiple, and they involve multimodal (inter)action often articulated through the use of various tools. These considerations are vitally important for the examination of the making and sharing of ironic memes as situated social practice, and more specifically, as a kind of literacy that is dependent on the mediation of digital infrastructure. Such an investigation relies on literature that more closely links literacy practices like the design of digital multimodal texts to the workings of social life in today’s globalized world.

First, it is worth clarifying that the socially-oriented conception of literacy in New Literacy Studies rests upon a post-structuralist view of society (Maybin, 1999; Street, 2012), same as the sociolinguistic framework outlined above (2.1). Literacies are social practices that concern meaning-making as realized through socially shaped semiotic systems like language. The “macro-level” of society plays a part in shaping these social practices of meaning-making, but the local enactment of these practices at the “micro-level” in some way innovates in relation to those “macro” structures, so that particular, local meanings are generated (Gee, 2004; Maybin, 1999; Street, 2012). That is, when the use of semiotic systems that are socio-historically shaped but also subject to local innovation (e.g., language) is involved, there is a dialogic, mutually constitutive relationship between individual agency at the “micro-level” and social structure, the “macro-level” (Gee, 1999, 2004; Maybin, 1999; Street, 2012). This resonates with the view of language and society adopted in the present study (see 2.1; Blommaert, 2018). It is worth noting that this view of society has also driven the methodological directions taken in the field of New Literacy Studies towards the employment of ethnographic methods (Gee, 1999; Kress & Street, 2006; Maybin, 1999; Street, 2012) similarly to how sociolinguistics has been driven to the “ethnographic pull” (2.1) and how “multimodal ethnography” has emerged (2.2).

This post-structuralist view of a globalized world also underlies the pedagogy of multiliteracies (see Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; The New London Group, 2000), an approach shaped in the vein of New Literacy Studies. As its name suggests, this interdisciplinary educational approach, proposed
by a team of scholars dubbed “The New London Group,” stresses the multiplicity of literacies acquired by individuals today, as over the course of their social lives, children become immersed in a multitude of (sub)cultural spaces that make up the social fabric (The New London Group, 2000). In the current stage of globalization, people’s immersion in multiple cultural spaces, which are increasingly variable (Blommaert, 2018), entails the acquisition of literacies based on the practices in which people engage there, in the context of diverse forms of communities described using a variety of terms in the relevant literature (e.g., “communities of practice,” “affinity groups/spaces”; see Gee, 2015; The New London Group, 2000). The New London Group (2000, p. 15) describes this state of affairs as a “fragmentation of the social fabric,” which leads to the development of varied forms of identity formation and group belonging that rely on the enactment of their concomitant literacies. These theoretical observations echo the view of superdiversity presented in section 2.1, and they are central to the present study’s focus, which examines a particular subcultural space in order to explore the literacies and identity formation processes shaped therein (see chapter 6).

As noted before, the current stage of globalization is characterized by technological developments that reconfigure our social lives as unfolding in an online-offline nexus mediated to a large degree by digital infrastructure. It is thus unsurprising that a “natural offshoot” (Gee, 2015, p. 44) of research in the vein of New Literacy Studies has honed in specifically on digital literacies; that is, the knowledgeable use of digital media “to creatively engage in particular social practices, to assume appropriate social identities, and to form or maintain various social relationships” (Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 12, original emphasis). Evidently, such research (see Mills, 2010 for an overview) rests on the staples of New Literacy Studies with a renewed focus on the role of digital technology in the shaping of literacies. This “digital turn” (Mills, 2010) in New Literacy Studies is termed by Gee (2015) as “The New Literacy Studies”; that is, the study of new literacies, as opposed to the study of literacy in a new vein (which is what “New Literacy Studies” stands for). Such digitally-oriented research is of major relevance to the present study since the literacy practices associated with memes are characterized as such “new” literacies in part also because they rely on relatively new digital technology tools (Procházka, 2014; see subsection 2.4.2 for further qualifications).
Finally, the multimodal aspect of literacies has promoted a close cooperation of multimodal research approaches with New Literacy Studies investigations, which according to Mills (2010) has intensified with the digital turn. Early sociolinguistic understandings of literacy focused only on the linguistic and, at that, relied on a rather simplistic view of writing that was prevalent in the field at the time (Street, 1995; see also Lillis, 2013). Boosted by the development of research on multimodality and an increased emphasis on it in the context of the multiliteracies approach, New Literacy Studies research has come to systematically embrace the multimodal nature of literacies (Mills, 2009, 2010). This development has aligned significantly with the development of “new” digital literacies among the youth, as digital infrastructure (particularly Web 2.0) has increased the opportunities for participatory multimodal text creation to an unprecedented degree, also leading to the increased emergence of hybrid text forms (Mills, 2010), which are also examined in the present study.² Kress and Street (2006, p. ix) have come to note that multimodal approaches to meaning-making (in a social semiotic vein, specifically) and New Literacy Studies can be understood as “compatible and complementary” (see also Street, 2012). This compatibility has been exemplified in works such as the volume edited by Pahl and Rowsell (2006), and is also relied upon in the present study, which examines digital literacy practices in an ethnographic investigation. Our approach is thereby based on this established cooperation of multimodality and (The) New Literacy Studies for studying today’s social world, and specifically the social significance of people making memes. But first, we have to ask, what are memes?

2.4. Understanding memes

The term “meme” has a long history of varied and often conflicting definitions (see Shifman, 2013 for an overview; see also Cannizzaro, 2016; Knobel, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Marino, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Ever since its coinage by Dawkins (1976), which spawned the field of memetics, the term has been widely used in a vast array of academic fields and approaches studying various aspects of meaning-making and culture, including semiotics (Cannizzaro, 2016; Marino, 2015), visual rhetoric (Huntington, 2013; Jenkins, 2014), cognitive linguistics (Dancygier

² Note that the notion of hybridity mentioned here might be related to but is far more broadly conceived than the notion of genre hybridity employed in this study’s analysis (chapters 4 and 5) and presented in the section on analytical methodology (3.2.2).
& Vandelanotte, 2017; Lou, 2017), sociolinguistics (Varis & Blommaert, 2015), and communication studies (Katz & Shifman, 2017; Shifman, 2014) to name a few.

When it comes to internet memes specifically, the concept has often been used “as a prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture without embracing the whole set of implications and meanings ascribed to it over the years” (Shifman, 2012, p. 189; Burgess, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a). The present study follows this tradition of engaging with the concept, and it is thereby not concerned with providing a thorough overview of the term’s history. Instead, it adopts an operational definition based on a survey of interdisciplinary literature on the subject of internet memes, presented in subsection 2.4.1. In that section, I present three defining characteristics considered in the present conception of internet memes as brought forth in the relevant literature, leading to a final description of how the term is employed in this study.

First, however, some non-academic considerations are in order. In line with the present study’s emic orientation, non-specialist internet users’ understanding of the term “meme” is also considered of major relevance to our aims. The internet itself provides “the most comprehensive and dynamic source of information on internet memes” (Cannizzaro, 2016, p. 563) with websites such as knowyourmeme.com providing rich databases of meme descriptions. And if the various definitions and descriptions of internet memes found online are diverse and non-unitary, so are the concept’s academic definitions as a whole. Notably, when popular and academic views of memes are compared, it seems that users’ conceptualizations of the term tend to refer to concrete phenomena (e.g., a YouTube video), whereas theorizations (particularly in the film of memetics) rely on extensive abstraction (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Shifman, 2013).

According to Shifman (2013), the differences between non-specialist users’ and academics’ understanding of internet memes provide fertile ground for new investigations, offering up an important gap to bridge. Therefore, the present study adopts a conception of memes that remains close to users’ understanding of the concept while also being informed by the relevant literature and shaped by the study’s aims. The result, presented at the end of subsection 2.4.1, is an employment of the concept in a way that is both academically informed, emically oriented, and analytically relevant.
Finally, as the present study also treats memes from the perspective of literacies, the establishment of the view of memes as a “new literacy” is introduced in section 2.4.2.

2.4.1. Memes: Towards a definition

A definition of internet memes that provides a good starting point for the present literature review is given by Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014). Focusing on how memes are understood “within internet cultures,” the authors define memes as “digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from” (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014, p. 249). This definition alludes to three traits of internet memes that also recur in the relevant literature: (a) they can be conceptualized as digital artifacts (“objects”) with a multimodal makeup (“visual, textual [i.e., linguistic] or auditory form”), or more succinctly, they can be viewed as multimodal texts, which exhibit certain recurring structural patterns (they “riff on” particular “forms”); (b) they are subject to manipulation or editing of various sorts by users (they are “appropriated, re-coded”); and (c) they are made and disseminated on the internet (“slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from”).

Starting from the third observation and progressing towards the first, a key characteristic of memes appears to be their spread in online spaces. Internet memes’ attribute of being spread around the web amounting to cultural diffusion is uncontroversially accepted in the relevant literature as one of their defining characteristics (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Literat & van den Berg, 2019; Marino, 2015; Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero, & Shifman, 2015; Shifman, 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015 inter alia). In fact, short definitions of the concept tend to foreground memes’ wide diffusion, such as Segev and colleagues’ (2015, p. 417, my emphasis) “pieces of digital content that spread around the web in various iterations,” or Varis and Blommaert’s (2015, p. 31, my emphasis) “signs that have gone viral on the internet.” This latter definition, however, also introduces the controversial concept of virality.

The metaphor of viruses has been associated with memes and their spread, in part also thanks to Dawkins’ influential work in memetics (e.g., Dawkins, 1993). Today, “going viral” constitutes common internet phraseology for content being widely shared. However, there are those who object to the use of this metaphor for describing memes’ spread. A central point of critique is the
fact that the virus metaphor overlooks users’ agency, which is key in the shaping and sharing of memes (Marino, 2015). Shifman (2012), in fact, differentiates between “viral” and “memetic” content on the basis of a difference in user involvement: viral content is content that spreads around “as is,” whereas memetic content is always subject to manipulation, some form of reshaping done by users (see also Burgess, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; cf. Varis & Blommaert, 2015 for a less structurally- and more socially-oriented treatment of virality). Of course, this distinction between viral and memetic on the basis of manipulation involved is to be understood less as a binary distinction and more as a continuum (Shifman, 2014; see also Marino, 2015).

This brings us to the second salient trait of ironic memes presented here: their constant reshaping by users. Memes are not simply copied or merely “transmitted,” but they crucially involve a process of transformation, of manipulation, and ultimately of human action that is involved in their spread (Burgess, 2008; Cannizzaro, 2016; Marino, 2015; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Shifman, 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). In fact, Knobel and Lankshear (2007a) link the property of “remixing,” which involves various forms of content modification, to the success of internet memes. The ways in which memetic content is modified abound (see Marino, 2015 for a taxonomy), as does the terminology that describes this process of changing the content as it spreads—for example, Cannizzaro (2016) proposes the term “translation” rather than “remix” in her semiotic approach.

Despite the wide variety of ways in which memetic content can be reshaped, memes do not change in random ways. Rather, many argue that memes exhibit standard structural patterns, sometimes defined as “constructions” or “templates,” which invite manipulation along particular lines (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Jenkins, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Lou, 2017; Marino, 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). Different memes may invite or facilitate manipulation to varying degrees (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a). As memes tend to be centered around a particular “hook” that is to be replicated (Burgess, 2008; Marino, 2015), the common structures and functions that are developed around such “hooks” lead to the emergence of “families” or “genres” of internet memes (Barczewska, 2020; Dynel, 2016; Marino, 2015; Miltner, 2014; Segev et al., 2015; Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

This relates to Nooney and Portwood-Stacer’s (2014) observation that memes “riff on” certain recurring patterns and signs. In relation to the points presented above concerning content
manipulation in internet memes, this “recurring” element is perhaps best described in Varis and Blommaert’s (2015, p. 40) statement that “memes operate via a combination of intertextual recognizability and individual creativity.” This observation captures, on the one hand, the “rich intertextuality” of memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a) as they draw on recognizable textual elements (which might be simply references or template-like “constructions”; Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017) and, on the other hand, the agency that we have noted is central to reshaping the texts in various ways. In fact, thanks in part to their recognizability, memes foster phatic communion, the establishment of interpersonal bonds based on one’s communicative connection with other people and not on the content per se of the messages shared with others (Katz & Shifman, 2017; Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

So, the nature of memes is two-fold, they comprise recognizable elements but are also constantly reshaped, innovated upon. Memes’ recognizable elements/patterns and their central role in memes’ interpersonal function suggest that the term “meme” may quite suitably refer to a meme genre that encompasses the system of recognizable features at hand (e.g., the distracted boyfriend meme; see “Distracted boyfriend,” 2020). Therefore, it might be best to understand memes in “relational” terms as “systems” (Cannizzaro, 2016). At the same time, the term may also refer to a “token,” a particular text within a wider genre (Marino, 2015), which exhibits an individual agent’s creativity in putting a “twist” on the expected generic recognizability. In fact, both uses of the term are common in everyday parlance, as in “This new meme with the distracted boyfriend is hilarious” (genre meaning), but also “I saw this really funny distracted boyfriend meme on Facebook the other day” (token meaning).

What this points to is that memes—wider “genres” or “systems” though they may constitute—still materialize as single textual entities, particular digital artifacts (or “objects”), which are emphatically treated in this study as multimodal texts. Their multimodal makeup is a defining characteristic of memes as texts, since there is an observable “division of labor” between, say, language and visual elements, which differs across various memes and might be characteristic of a genre (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Lou, 2017). Further, the technical aspect of making memes, as shaped through the affordances of the digital infrastructure used in their making (e.g., text- and image-editing software), also influences how the particularities of memes’ multimodal makeup are understood. That is, aspects of memes’ multimodal design (e.g., the use of a particular
font or filter), which are made possible thanks to (the use of) digital tools, become recognizable as belonging to “traditions” of memes. For example, the Impact Font has been associated with a particular meme aesthetic (Brideau & Berret, 2014). Similarly, the amateurish design of memes by Web 2.0 users unspecialized in digital image editing led to a “rough” look in early memetic content (e.g., rage comics) that was then intentionally adopted as what Douglas (2014) terms the “Internet Ugly” aesthetic. In another relevant example, the availability and particular features of the MS Paint software also shaped the “visual character” of older memetic content, which subsequent software emulated in order to retain the cultural significance that older designs shaped by MS Paint’s affordances had acquired (Davison, 2014).

All in all, in this study, the term “meme” is used to refer to single textual entities, which exhibit the recognizable characteristics of wider meme genres and thus have an undeniable intertextual dimension. This employment of the term is more economical for the present investigation, which systematically focuses on in-depth analyses of single texts. It also echoes everyday uses of the term that reflect the fact that wider meme “systems” materialize across single textual instances. These wider “systems” are referred to as “meme genres” here. Finally, considering that such genres are shaped by patterns of action that become widespread online (e.g., manipulating texts in a particular way; Marino, 2015), the present study also uses the term “memeing” to refer to these patterns of action.

2.4.2. Memes as new literacies

The relevance of making memes as a new literacy has been considered in a number of studies (Knobel, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2005, 2007a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Procházka, 2014) with some also considering memes’ relevance for literacy education contexts (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2017; Knobel, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a). For example, it has been argued that memes as multimodal texts are increasingly important for the development of visual literacies within a multiliteracies pedagogical approach (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2017). The case made here, that memes constitute “new literacies,” has been argued for in social terms, echoing a New Literacy Studies approach to literacy.

As detailed above, some literacies may be characterized as “new” partly due to the fact their development is contingent on engagement with digital technologies and their mediation. However,
for them to significantly qualify as “new,” they have to feature innovation in more than just the “technological stuff” involved; that is, they need to also be associated with a new “mindset” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005b; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). This relates to Gee’s (2003) concept of Discourses, which is central to literacies viewed in a New Literacies Studies vein, and it involves patterns of moral evaluation and views about the world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; see also chapter 6 for a more in-depth treatment of the notion of Discourses in relation to memes as literacies). This kind of social stance-taking is embedded in internet memes as new literacy practices (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Procházka, 2014).

Lankshear and Knobel (2006, see p. 38) specify the mindset associated with new literacies as differing from its more “traditional” counterpart along a few dimensions, including: an increased “focus on collective intelligence,” a view of expert knowledge as distributed, an understanding that the structure of social relations is changing as these can now emerge in digital space, and a re-thinking of the value of texts. These characteristic views are underlain by the central position that there has been a significant change in the world we live in with the advent of digital technologies that offer increased interconnectedness (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

As largely suggested by Procházka (2014), these “mindset” elements are present in the engagement with internet memes. For example, memetic content is defined by constant manipulation or “remixing” by various users who share knowledge on how a memetic genre is supposed to function. There is thus a clearly collective aspect to memes’ creation and distribution, which is based on shared knowledge. In this sense, memes “enjoy global collaboration” (Procházka, 2014, p. 70), which renders them a case of new literacies due to their “participatory nature.” This attribute of memeing alludes to the new-literacy views of distributed knowledge and expertise as well as of “collective intelligence” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Further, according to Knobel and Lankshear (2007b, p. 21), new literacies prioritize “relationship over information broadcast.” Therefore, memes’ primarily phatic function as stressed by Varis and Blommaert (2015), which prioritizes the establishment of interpersonal connection over the communication of information, also renders them a prime example of new literacies. This focus on the establishment of togetherness and conviviality online rests on the new literacy mindset about how social relations can be forged on the digital plane (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).
Additionally, since internet memes can often be difficult to interpret for uninitiated observers, they further qualify as new literacies also in the more traditional sense of involving a kind of knowledge required for deciphering (“reading”) and designing (“writing”; Procházka, 2014). In fact, this kind of shared knowledge can come to serve an exclusive function by differentiating “literate” in-groups from those not literate in making memes (see Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). This function in particular is further explored in chapter 6, but it is worth noting here that, together with elements of the “new literacy mindset” that we have traced in internet memes, this function concretely points to how internet memes are literacies in a New Literacy Studies sense: they are knowledge about how to make meaning in particular ways that amount to socially consequential practices, as they can lead to people being viewed as having a “literate” identity (or not), and consequently, as belonging (or not) to a certain group of individuals who are “in the know” when it comes to these practices.

At the same time, the technological manipulations required for the “literate” shaping of (particular) memes relate back to the role of digital mediation in defining the “new” in new literacies. For example, the fact that technological developments in the software used for memeing can leave their mark on the memes’ aesthetic (Davidson, 2014; Douglas, 2014) further illustrates the central role of the digital in their making (Procházka, 2014). Through their digital making, memes are also shaped as dynamic novel texts, which also challenge assumptions about texts that are associated with the more “traditional” literacy mindset, particularly as regards “the dominance of the book as the text paradigm” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 52).

In summary, due to the participatory nature of their (re)shaping and spread, their function in establishing social bonds online, and their obvious characteristic of being made digitally, internet memes can be viewed as a new literacy. These considerations provide a background for approaching ironic memeing as a literacy in the present study.
3. Methods

Methodologically, this study adopts a digital ethnographic approach to multimodal discourse analysis grounded primarily in social semiotics as an analytical framework. Digital ethnography comprises a field of largely internally diverse approaches, which allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis methods while remaining based upon a firm epistemological and ontological position (Hine, 2015, 2017; Varis, 2015). As a result, the ethnographic approach in the present study allows for the adoption of social semiotics as the primary analytical framework, also enriched through the use of analytical tools from multimodal (inter)action analysis (Norris, 2004, 2019). The adequacy of the chosen method also lies in the potential that (digital) ethnography provides for understanding the complexities of situated social practices from an insider’s perspective (Blommaert & Dong, 2010; Varis, 2015), which is paired here with the adoption of well-defined analytical frameworks for more fine-grained analyses of texts and social action.

As the present study is focused primarily on textual products, the analytical frameworks chosen allow the analyst to approach them both with regard to their internal structure and as social actions that are to be understood in situ. On the one hand, social semiotics provides an analytical toolkit for exploring the resources that are mobilized in textual design, connecting them to their function within textual ensembles (Jewitt, 2015; Kress, 2011). On the other, multimodal (inter)action analysis allows the analyst to shed light on patterns of behavior involved in the making of these texts, based on an understanding of texts as “bundles” of actions that come to be crystalized in the final textual products (Norris & Makboon, 2015). A more detailed presentation of the study’s analytical methodology is given below (3.2).

As regards concrete data generation techniques, the study relied on the following data sources: (a) naturalistic observations of the primary research site recorded in field notes (primarily texts shared but also comments and page infrastructure), (b) participant interviews, and (c) observation of relevant aspects of the broader environment in which the cultural practices under investigation unfolded. Data sources under (c) include an examination of events in manifestly relevant cultural spaces (e.g., other subreddits like r/okbuddyretard), a study of online outlets providing metapgramatic descriptions of online cultural practices (such as website knowyourmeme.com), and lastly, the examination of available software tools that facilitate the production of the texts.
under discussion. The techniques employed for gathering the study’s data are presented in further detail below (3.1).

3.1. Data collection

The period of data collection, including naturalistic observation of the research site and the conducting of interviews, spanned from March 9, 2020 to June 28, 2020, for a total of roughly three and a half months. In what follows, I present the primary research site, subreddit r/ironicmemes, and relevant spaces (3.1.1) as well as details on interview participant selection and interview protocol along with ethical considerations (3.1.2).

3.1.1. Research site(s)

The study’s primary research site was the subreddit r/ironicmemes. A subreddit constitutes a Reddit “community” of users (“How Reddit works,” 2014). r/ironicmemes appears to be one such community of modest size, growing from roughly 5.5 thousand members at the beginning of observation (March 9, 2020) to 6.7 thousand members by June 28, 2020. In the subreddit, members share “ironic memes,” that is, textual creations that are consumed and evaluated by other members through the website’s infrastructure (e.g., through upvotes and/or comments). In this sense, r/ironicmemes is a cultural space based on an online platform for sharing and enjoying user-generated content. The choice of r/ironicmemes as a primary research site was largely influenced by its name, which explicitly frames the content posted therein as “ironic memes.” As users’ descriptions guide our ethnographic approach, the subreddit’s name provided an excellent starting point for examining what ironic memes are from an emic perspective.

The subreddit’s environment has seen changes over the period of data collection, the most important being the establishment of a Discord server on March 18, on which users can communicate. Since its establishment, the Discord server has been featured in a pinned post that invites users to join (seen in Figure 1, third frame). The background of the subreddit has also been customized over the course of these months, from being plain to featuring a pastiche of cultural emblems, ranging from public figures (e.g., Justin Trudeau) to characters popularized through memes (e.g., Pepe the Frog) to artifacts that represent a certain aesthetic or identity label (e.g.,
anime-style hairdos, fedoras alluding to the incel community). Figure 1 presents the subreddit’s changes in background, captured at three points in time.

Figure 1. The subreddit’s background as captured on March 9, 2020 (top/first frame), May 21, 2020 (middle/second frame), and June 28, 2020 (bottom/third frame).
Despite r/ironicmemes being designated as a primary research site, this subreddit was not the sole cultural space considered in the study. According to Hine (2017, p. 13), when it comes to online research, “it is no longer obvious that immersing oneself in a particular online space is the most fruitful approach for an ethnographer to take.” Indeed, considering the mobility that characterizes individuals’ practices in the current stage of globalization, whereby individuals find themselves immersed in multiple norm-governed spaces over the course of their daily life (Blommaert, 2018), a strict definition of a single research site for investigating a cultural phenomenon like ironic memes might be limiting. This is all the more relevant in online research as the internet’s infrastructure allows for virtually unlimited translocal engagement with various online sites (Blommaert & Dong, 2019). As a result, a user with an interest in ironic memes might be fully immersed in both r/ironicmemes and other subreddits, 4chan boards or Facebook groups that host similar content, and it is through their experience of all such spaces that their understanding of what constitutes an “ironic meme” is shaped.

Consequently, the choice of spaces to observe remained flexible throughout the observation period despite a continued firm primary focus on r/ironicmemes, which was visited daily. This flexibility was guided by the users’ own commentary on the relevance of additional spaces similar to r/ironicmemes. Another subreddit that emerged as relevant was r/okbuddyretard as interviewees often pointed out the similarity of its content to r/ironicmemes’. Interviewees who made such remarks included r/ironicmemes moderator 42069lmaoxd, who described r/okbuddyretard as a sort of sister-subreddit to his own as r/ironicmemes could be a sort of “refuge” for disenfranchised members of r/okbuddyretard after posting restrictions were put in place there (42069lmaoxd, 2020; see chapter 6). It should also be noted that r/okbuddyretard is a massively-followed subreddit compared to r/ironicmemes. Further comments on the size and relevance of r/okbuddyretard are reserved for chapter 6.

Finally, this broad outlook in conceptualizing the study’s research site(s) also led to the utilization of other “external” data sources mentioned under category (c) above; for example, the descriptions of cultural practices and meme genres provided on knowyourmeme.com. Knowyourmeme.com provides significant bottom-up descriptions of online culture trends, which are readily available to users thanks to their form of dissemination (a public website). Similarly, publicly available online
software mobilized for the creation of memes is also relevant due to its wide availability, which renders it a material resource of the kind that shapes users’ meaning-making practices.

The approach to site selection echoes Hine’s (2017) view on the advantageous practice of tracking a phenomenon’s (in this case, ironic memes’) spread across multiple sites. In doing so, the research site(s) “emerg[ed] in the course of the study” (Hine, 2017, pp. 318-319) rather than being strictly predetermined.

3.1.2. Interview participants and ethics

Potential interviewees were selected on the basis of their activity on Reddit. A baseline condition for contacting potential participants was that they should be following r/ironicmemes and should have posted on the subreddit. Priority was given to subreddit moderators, users with multiple posts on the subreddit, and users whose memes were chosen for analysis after data reduction. In total, 23 users were approached, out of which 15 either did not respond or refused to cooperate (on two occasions responding in a hostile manner). As a result, eight interviews were conducted.

Interviewees were approached in a friendly manner that was tailored to fit the relevant etiquette of this particular space, as Hine (2017) states is preferable. Users were given the choice to participate in the interview either through a voice call or through Reddit’s chat function. The users invariably chose Reddit’s written live chat, which is in keeping with a more general reluctance observed on the interviewees’ part as regards sharing their details or even engaging with the researcher. After the researcher had introduced himself, interviewees were asked to volunteer as many details about their offline identity (e.g., demographic characteristics) as they felt comfortable sharing. Interviewees were also asked whether they would like for their usernames to be withheld for the purposes of anonymization, which they invariably rejected with some noting that their usernames were felt to be anonymous enough.

The anonymization of interviewees was thus limited to using only their usernames in this study. Still, two out of eight interviewees revealed that they were underage. Despite the interviews being conducted, it was decided that no mention of them would be made in the study to avoid the underage users’ exposure. The insights revealed by the underage users unavoidably still informed our approach despite their exclusion from the study’s final text due to ethical concerns.
In terms of content, the interviews were semi-structured ethnographic interviews adapted to users’ profiles, especially in the case of the subreddit moderator’s interview.\(^3\) That said, the interviews invariably focused on: the user’s relationship with and their view of r/ironicmemes, their potential affinity for other online spaces in which they enjoy ironic memes, their definitions of what defines ironic memes, and their views on concepts that emerged as salient during our analysis in connection with ironic memes, such as “cringe.” On average, interviews lasted approximately one hour.

Further ethical concerns pertained to the anonymization of post authors’ usernames. Given that Reddit usernames constitute simple avatars, which are felt by the users themselves to be “anonymous enough,” and which do not encourage the establishment of connections between them and the users’ offline identities (cf. “nonymous” social media like Facebook; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), the posts discussed in the study were not anonymized. Such an anonymization measure was felt not to be essential in this study as the content shared in the subreddit does not communicate sensitive messages and it could not result in exposing individuals in potentially perilous ways (as in the case of political activists, for example; Varis, 2015). Further, r/ironicmemes is a publicly accessible site, and the searchability of content on it still renders even an anonymized post easily retrievable if one searches for its title. Since hiding post titles would have hindered their analysis and was thus not preferred, author username anonymization on its own would have been futile at any rate.

3.2. Data analysis

In what follows, I outline how data for analysis in the final text were chosen (3.2.1) as well as how different analytical frameworks and relevant concepts were mobilized in the analysis (3.2.2).

3.2.1. Data reduction

The ethnographic observation period yielded a large volume of data, out of which a representative sample was determined for further analysis. Selection was based on a holistic evaluation of the observations made on ironic memes, so that the posts were representative of the central analytical

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\(^3\) Only one subreddit moderator agreed to an interview despite all being contacted. Other moderators did not respond, and some were noted by the interviewed moderator to be currently inactive on Reddit.
foci of the study. The main criteria for selection were: (a) recurrence of stylistic features and (b) the posts’ (un)popularity as indicated by up/downvoting and other indicators of engagement such as comment extensiveness.

The data sample cannot be considered as representative of the diversity of the types of memes found on r/ironicmemes. The design patterns found in the subreddit’s posts, and ironic memes more generally, are incredibly diverse. The sample, therefore, is more abstractly representative of the discursive practices which were observed to recur at the site(s) of investigation.

3.2.2. Analytical frameworks and relevant concepts

Firstly, the theoretical backbone for the approach to multimodal discourse analysis in this study is provided by the framework of social semiotics. The concept of mode is thus understood here in social semiotic terms, whereby a mode is “a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning,” including written language, spoken language, image, layout, font, gesture, and so on (Kress, 2009, p. 54). Meaning-making involves choices of particular resources by the individual, which are made in the process of the multimodal design of a text (Kress, 2010). Various modes (e.g., written language, layout, font) are thus organized in textual arrangements that are internally coherent and where different modes work in tandem, each with varying functions (Kress, 2010). Importantly, a multimodal text cannot be conceptualized simply as the sum contribution of each individual mode in isolation (Royce, 1998). Rather, the interrelationships across and between modes contribute to producing meanings contingent on but not reducible to individual communicative modes. This is captured, for example, in Royce’s (1998) notion of intersemiotic complementarity, which describes meaning-making relations articulated between modes.

In the present study, ironic memes are approached as multimodal texts through the analytical tools laid out in social semiotic work on visual meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The main aim is to show what the semiotic principles involved in their design as coherent texts are (Kress, 2011). A key concept in our analysis is that of information value relations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) developed in the texts based on the placement of various elements, which amounts to the creation of different zones (e.g., a Top and a Bottom zone or a Center and a Margin). Center-Margin compositions, where elements in the Center are foregrounded as more salient (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), are of particular relevance to our analysis. The different salience with which
particular elements feature in a text also plays a role in shaping reading paths that the text’s audience may follow: for example, readers might tend to more salient elements in a text first (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Finally, also relevant is the examination of processes of framing; that is, the determination of visual boundaries that are used to structure texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The adoption of social semiotics thus makes for an advantageous analytical choice since this framework allows for grounding one’s analysis on the arrangement of semiotic resources, or the “stuff” that is involved in making meaning (Jewitt, 2015; Kress, 2009). However, the “stuff” (e.g., a digital image) is manipulated through social action. A focus on social action is thus also needed, a point which is stressed in social semiotics to a significant degree. Social semiotics emphasizes the role of the rhetor. This term refers to the social actor who engages in meaning-making by designing texts through choices that make the actor’s interests material and encompass their knowledge of the tools they have at their disposal for making meaning (Kress, 2010). Text design is thus clearly viewed as a social process.

However, as social semiotics is primarily focused on providing tools for analyzing the texts themselves, the framework of multimodal (inter)action analysis is adopted here complementarily to analyze how these texts are used in communicative action by providing insight into the behaviors (actions) that shape the texts. This complementary approach is “practice-based” (Norris, 2004, p. 101), and it places emphasis on agents’ mediated action drawing on Scollon’s (1998) mediated discourse analysis. In this sense, it is a suitable approach to adopt in the interest of illuminating “parts of what has been termed context in traditional discourse analysis” (Norris, 2004, p. 101, original emphasis).

The main analytical notion drawn from the framework of multimodal (inter)action analysis is that of frozen actions (Norris, 2005; Norris & Makboon, 2015). This concept refers to the observation that actions may be “embedded in objects” found in the environment (Norris & Makboon, 2015, p. 43; Norris, 2019). For example, a flower pot placed on a dining room table in someone’s apartment suggests a series of previously performed actions, which resulted in the flower pot’s placement there: someone procured flowers and the flower pot, arranged them thus, and placed them in that spot. These actions are now embedded in the object as frozen actions, and they are “readily read off of [it]” (Norris & Makboon, 2015, p. 47; Norris, 2019). For example, imagine
someone exclaiming “Oh, you’ve made the room look so nice!” upon entering the room and seeing the flower pot; such a remark alludes to the actions taken in decorating the dining table with the flower pot. By the same token, an ironic meme found on r/ironicmemes constitutes an object (a multimodal text) found in a particular environment (the subreddit), and the actions that led to its creation and its placement there are embedded within it. The concept of frozen actions is thus used in the analysis of ironic memes, specifically with the aim of investigating identity construction from an anti-essentialist perspective, which constitutes an established application of the concept (see Norris, 2005; Norris & Makboon, 2015).

Having clarified the principled combination of social semiotics and multimodal (inter)action analysis in our analytical approach, the presentation of four more concepts that are relevant to the analysis is in order: genre, production format, voice, and indexicality.

The concept of genre is widely used in various traditions of linguistics to define “a class or type of (spoken or written) text” (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014, p. 739) although specific definitions may vary depending on the research tradition’s angle (see Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). In systemic-functional linguistics, for example, genres are understood as “staged goal-oriented social processes” or, put differently, the term describes “how things are done, when language is used to accomplish them” (Martin, 1999, p. 30). In this analysis, this notion of genre is adopted to mean a class of texts although our focus is not simply on linguistic, but rather on multimodal texts. In this sense, the focus is on “how things are done, when language and other modes are used to accomplish them” (see van Leeuwen, 2005b).

Kress (2010, p. 114) notes that, in multimodal discourse analysis, the notion of genre “offers the means for contextualizing/locating/situating [the meanings materialized] in social spaces and at the same provides an account of the social characteristics of those spaces.” This is because genre is shaped as a result of doing things with relative regularity, and its meaning is shaped through these recurrent practices (Kress, 2010). Therefore, say, ironic memes as a genre are shaped through the habitual practice of making ironic memes as social practice in particular spaces. It is along these lines that genre is used as a descriptive term for multimodal texts in the present study. This approach amounts to treating multimodal genre in similar terms as genre in texts viewed from a solely linguistic angle with the added consideration that multimodal genre unfolds over multiple “stages” that are themselves multimodal (van Leeuwen, 2005b). Note that deeper investigations of
how a genre’s practice unfolds along different stages in a multimodal text might complicate such a parallel treatment of multimodal and language-specific notions of genre as such investigations require a deeper analysis of reading paths (van Leeuwen, 2005b). However, these concerns are beyond the scope of the present study.

Further, given our analytical focus on text-making as social practice, a more-fine grained approach to the role of the rhetor, the actor responsible for the text, is needed. Goffman (1981) problematized the traditional conceptualization of the speaker-listener, explaining that any textual construction or any person is not so straightforwardly “just speaking.” Instead, there can be multiple positions and/or roles being realized through a text, so that where otherwise one might have spoken of a single “speaker”—or, in our case, “rhetor”—Goffman (1981) proposes a distinction between three roles, those of animator, author, and principal. The first term, animator, refers to who is materially conducting the act of meaning-making. For example, in a spoken interaction, the term would be used to identify the person producing the sounds that make up speech. The notion of author refers to “someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded,” and the notion of principal refers to “someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (Goffman, 1981, pp. 144-145). These three roles define what Goffman (1981) calls the “production format.” This tripartite distinction is adopted here to promote a more fine-grained analysis of the rhetor’s role in ironic memes.

The multitude of roles involved in text-making as brought forth in Goffman’s (1981) production format also invites the adoption of the Bakhtinian notion of voice (Bakhtin, 1981) as that allows the analyst to tease apart multiple voices that may be embedded in a text. More specifically, voice makes for a useful tool for analysis as it facilitates the identification of contrasting ways of speaking that may index particular registers (e.g., “the speech of teenagers”). Voicing contrasts can be entextualized within broader textual constructions, and can be realized through various “semiotic channels” (Agha, 2005, p. 39) or, in our terms, along various modes. This renders the concept of voice as conceived by Bakhtin (1981) and elaborated by Agha (2005) appropriate for identifying voicing contrasts also in the context of multimodal texts. Since different voices can also be articulated through modes other than (spoken) language, Agha (2005) proposes the term “figures of personhood” due to the inadequacy of the metaphor of voice when discussing more
than oral speech. In the present study, the term “persona” is used as shorthand for Agha’s (2005) term. The present analysis thus treats voice as a multimodal phenomenon in the context of multimodal discourse analysis.

Finally, the observation that voices can “index” various personas (Agha, 2005) rests on the theoretical notion of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003), a concept widely used in recent decades of sociolinguistic scholarship (see Blommaert, 2007; Eckert, 2012, 2019). Indexicality refers to signs’ property of “pointing to” (indexing) things in the social world, or the material world more broadly, besides representing their referential meaning (Eckert, 2019). It is by virtue of this property that ways of making meaning can come to be associated with particular social “types” of people, so that meaning-making can come to typify particular personas or social attributes (Agha, 2003, 2005; Silverstein, 2003). Indexicality lies at the heart of Agha’s (2003, 2005) concept of enregisterment, whereby patterns of meaning-making (registers) become socially recognizable as indexing particular kinds of people. This renders indexicality a key concept that underlies our analysis too.

Having clarified the theoretical notions pertinent to the analysis, a final note is in order with regard to the analytical treatment of data. The analysis begins with an examination of visual meaning-making in textual artifacts, and proceeds relying primarily on similar analyses of relevant memes while combining insights revealed in interviews, comments, or/and “external” data sources (e.g., relevant website sources). In this way, these data sources are used to provide support to the analyst’s observations on the texts in a form of triangulation. The driving principles for the treatment of data sources beyond the texts stems from the employment of a “discourse-oriented” ethnographic approach (Smart, 2011) based on Geertz’s tradition of interpretive ethnography. The aim is to link participants’ descriptions of their actions (“experience-near concepts”) to the sensitizing concepts that the researcher brings to the analysis (“experience-distant concepts”; Geertz, 1983). For the identification of the former, particularly in interviews, our attention is mostly directed at data that show patterns of “a mutually reinforcing network of social understandings” (Geertz, 1983, p. 156); that is, “convergent data,” which are identified as common threads in the content of various interviews.
4. Analysis 1.0: *OMG IT’S IT’S EMINEM*

In what follows, I illustrate how ironic memes are structured as a hybrid genre, focusing on memes that draw on the demotivator and Impact-Font image macro meme genres. In section 4.1, I analyze how the memes’ visual design contributes to processes of genre hybridization involving both genre embedding and genre appropriation (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014). The emergent hybrid generic construction is then analyzed in terms of its function as a “polyphonic text,” a text that is host to multiple voices. In section 4.2, I examine the identity construction of “ironic memers” based on a view of their creations (their memes) as frozen actions (Norris, 2019; Norris & Makboon, 2015). The tentative conclusions drawn in this chapter are then subject to further elaboration in the next chapter, which features different ironic meme examples and triangulation with interview data and comments.

4.1. Genre hybridization and polyphony

Figure 2 below is a screenshot of an ironic meme submission titled “retar,” which was posted on r/ironicmemes on March 12, 2020. Adopting a top-down direction in our analytical approach following Kress (2010), we must first note that the meme as a whole constitutes a multimodal textual unit, clearly framed on the surface of the webpage, which arranges meta-textual information and clickable elements around it (above: title of the subreddit, username of posting account, relative time of posting, title; below, left: clickable elements for actions afforded by the platform such as commenting and sharing; below, right: percentage of upvotes).

The submission itself in terms of information value relations comprises a Center-Margin composition with strong framing, where the Center features as the “nucleus” of information while the Margin is dependent upon it (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The Center is a cartoon image of an anthropomorphic penguin character displaying typical rapper identity emblems (e.g., body posture, microphone, hat, sunglasses). The represented participant (the penguin rapper) features with increased salience as it is presented over a plain white background. However, its image is overlain with linguistic text, realized in Impact Font (Brideau & Berret, 2014), which renders the Center of this composition an example of an Impact-Font image macro meme, a highly
conventionalized meme genre (Dynel, 2016). The Margin features two lines of linguistic text in two different fonts that shape an apparent textual status for each line.

Figure 2. “retar.” Posted on r/ironicmemes on March 12, 2020. Screenshot captured on May 17, 2020.

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4 Image macros constitute a super-category of digital multimodal constructions with linguistic text overlain on images, which are used in a variety of meme genres (“Image macros,” 2020). Researchers sometimes differentiate between different “image macro genres” (Barczewska, 2020) while there is also talk of “the image macro genre” as a whole (Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Dynel, 2016). The focus here is on image macro memes that characteristically rely on the use of the Impact Font, which has shaped a highly standardized aesthetic for internet memes (Brideau & Berret, 2014). In the present study’s terms, what we refer to as “Impact-Font image macro memes” or simply “image macro memes” corresponds to Barczewska’s (2020) notion of “character-based image macro memes” with the added staple of the Impact Font realizing the aesthetic associated with it.
This particular frame arrangement is very similar to that of so-called “demotivational posters” or “demotivators,” which have long constituted an established meme genre (Baran, 2012; Piekot, 2012). Demotivators, first designed in 1998 by souvenir production company Despair, Inc., function as “the opposite of motivational posters designed for use in schools and offices” (Piekot, 2012, p. 190; “Demotivational posters,” 2020). As an internet meme, knowyourmeme.com describes demotivators as having seen a consistent spread across various platforms (“Demotivational posters,” 2020) and Piekot (2012) describes them as being among the most popular meme genres at the time of his writing. Figure 3 displays an example of a demotivator taken from the production company’s official website and Figure 4 displays a demotivator internet meme.

Figure 3. “Competence.” Official demotivator. Retrieved from: https://despair.com/collections/demotivators

5 Under both Barczewska’s (2020) and knowyourmeme.com’s (“Image macros,” 2020) broad conceptions of image macros, demotivators also constitute one of many image macro meme genres, but they evidently differ from Impact-Font image macros.
As evident from Figures 3 and 4 ("traditional demotivators"), demotivators share very similar framing and Center-Margin arrangement with the ironic meme in Figure 2, but also notable differences. Following Piekot’s (2012) tetrapartite analysis (cf. Baran, 2012), demotivators feature: a photograph (the Center), a frame featuring a characteristic black background, a title (the first line of verbal text found in the frame), and a caption (subsequent lines of text in the frame). By contrast, Figure 2 features an image macro meme arrangement at its Center instead of an image with no overlain text. Second, the linguistic texts in the margin (title and caption) differ markedly between Figure 2 and traditional demotivators. In traditional demotivators, the linguistic element in the Margin is found in an ideational intersemiotic complementarity relation (Royce, 1998) with the image element in the Center, whereby it has a direct intersemiotic sense relation to the image. This can be articulated, for example, by way of antonymy or synonymy (see “competence” vs. a depiction of incompetence, Figure 3; “alcohol” and a depiction of alcohol consumption, Figure 4). Conversely, the specific kind of mixing of image and language found in the Center of Figure 2.
creates a novel effect, which influences the role of the text in the Margin within the multimodal construction as a whole, as will become apparent.

As the Center of Figure 2 constitutes an Impact-Font image macro meme within a visual arrangement structured as a demotivator, the resulting multimodal ensemble constitutes an example of genre embedding. In genre embedding, a text, in this case the image macro meme, “is incorporated as a clearly distinguishable part of another text” (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014, p. 745). In Figure 2, the Center’s textual status (which renders the image macro meme “clearly distinguishable”) is reinforced by the strong framing realized through (a) the powerful color contrast between the black background of the Margin and the Center’s white background, as well as through (b) a thin white line framing the image macro meme. In this way, the framing arrangement commonly found in demotivators is utilized in the ironic meme in Figure 2 for the embedding of an Impact-Font image macro meme.

At the same time, the meme in Figure 2 constitutes a case of genre appropriation. According to Mäntynen and Shore (2014, p. 747, my emphasis), genre appropriation occurs when “an entire text appropriates the form of a text representing another genre in order to exploit the meanings related to a particular generic form for a particular purpose, often for an ironic purpose.” Mäntynen and Shore (2014) illustrate this process with an example of a music review that takes the form of a cooking recipe for ironic purposes; notably, that text remains a music review in spite of “donning” the recipe genre. In this case, the meme in Figure 2 appropriates the generic form of demotivators, which results in a hybrid generic construction, a “mock demotivator,” which still fulfills established expectations for the ironic meme community. That is, the meme in Figure 2 is deemed and functions as an ironic meme even as it takes on the generic format typical of demotivators. Had it not fulfilled the community’s standards, it would have been taken down by the subreddit’s moderators (42069lmaoxd, 2020).

In sum, as a result of the processes of genre embedding and appropriation that can be traced in the text, the ironic meme in Figure 2 can be characterized as a hybridized genre creation. From our observations so far, we can note that the appropriation of the demotivator’s generic form with its

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6 This function is also captured by Martin and Rose's (2008) term “contextual metaphor” although this latter term appears to have a broader scope, also covering appropriations of formats typical of particular contexts more broadly, which cannot be described as genres per se (see Mäntynen & Shore, 2014 for a discussion).
strong framing facilitates the embedding of the image macro meme. Still, a more in-depth analysis of how the demotivator form is appropriated is necessary to reveal how the resulting text achieves its “ironic meme” status through this form.

With the help of the demotivator form, the linguistic text in Figure 2 overall contributes to the representation of a participation framework (Goffman, 1981): an informal interaction taking place between two distinct ratified participants as a commentary on the image of the penguin. The text in the Center and the text in the Margin are construed as two utterances, the latter coming in response to the former. The first utterance (Center) identifies the represented participant (the penguin) as rapper Eminem. The second utterance (Margin) amounts to a negative comment made on the first, first correcting (“NO THAT SLIM SHADY”) and then deprecating the first imagined participant (“Retard”), making use of the title/caption contrast found in text in the Margin of demotivators to separate the apostrophe “Retard” as an addendum to the main reply. The topic cohesion between these two utterances, the pragmatic opposition of the Margin utterance to the Center utterance (in a declarative-negation sequence), and the visual contrast created through the modes of both layout (Center-Margin) and font suggest that the ironic meme features two distinct voices (Bakhtin, 1981) belonging to imagined ratified participants, embedded in the appropriated demotivator generic form.

Consequently, the meme represents a disagreement between two imagined participants on the identity of the represented participant (the penguin), who features with increased salience in the Center of the composition. This example points to the fact that the demotivator generic form appropriated is particularly advantageous for the representation of such an imagined debate. The status of the Margin as dependent on the Center in this Center-Margin composition functions in a case of visual-verbal textual intersemiotic complementarity along the lines of reading path. That is, the presence of verbal text (a) overlain on the top and bottom of the (more salient) Center image and then (b) in the Margin exclusively underneath the image creates a top-bottom ideal-real information value relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), where the Center voice’s claim is presented as the “ideal” in these terms, and then replied to with the “real” answer. The increased salience of the Center functions to shape a (potential) reading path whereby the user first examines the image macro meme, and then reads the comment made on it in the second voice, found in the
composition’s Margin. In this way, the generic structure of demotivators is repurposed in its appropriation for hosting an imagined debate.

This use of the demotivator genre differs markedly from traditional demotivators. In traditional demotivators, the Center (image) element is, as (Baran, 2012, p. 176) puts it, “forwarded by the verbal part of the demotivator,” which, traditionally, is always in the Margin. Similarly, in Piekot’s (2012) analysis, the title (i.e., Margin) part of the demotivator is seen as establishing a topic, expectations around which are undermined by the image, which is supposedly tended to after the topic-establishing title is read. Yet, in Figure 2, it is the Center element (the image macro meme) that establishes the topic. The dependency of the Margin thus functions to add more comments, or rather, more commenting voices on the topic. As Figures 5 and 6 will illustrate, the Margin zones can be stacked multiple times to add additional voices to the debate, providing further illustration of how the demotivator generic form is appropriated to suit the ironic meme’s ends.

In the end, we could reformulate the function that the appropriated demotivator generic structure takes on in an ironic meme in the following terms. The Center-Margin composition and the strong framing found in the generic form of demotivators are appropriated by creators of ironic memes to reconfigure the zones outlined in the generic template (Center, Margin) as character zones (Bakhtin, 1981); i.e., zones in which a particular character’s voice is differentiated through various semiotic strategies, as outlined above. The hybridized genre formation that emerges is thus distinct from demotivators as it differs in function (van Leeuwen, 2005b).

The function of ironic memes (specifically those based on the appropriation of the demotivator genre) as polyphonic texts is further illustrated in Figures 5 and 6 below. Figure 5 presents a meme which appears to have been created in response to “retar” by a different user. In this meme, another layer of Margin is added to the textual arrangement, creating a third character zone with another utterance, which responds to the second voice by pointing out that Eminem and Slim Shady are in fact the same person. Apart from visual framing, the differentiation of this third voice is also achieved through stylistic choices, such as the addition of punctuation (“NO,”), the addition of the copula (“THEY’RE”), and changes in capitalization (“retard” vs. “Retard”). Echoing the addition of an extra layer, the addition of semiotic material to the existing text from Figure 2 is also mirrored in the title of the meme in Figure 5, which adds one letter to the original’s title (“retar” becomes “retard”). This example further accentuates the potential afforded by the demotivator form for
ironic meme design due to the Margins’ stackability. In fact, what emerges here is a “meme convo,” according to the creator of the original meme, whose intention it was to start such a “convo” (toryguns, 2020).

Notably, “retard” (henceforth “the response”) fares better in terms of approval by the community compared to “retar” (“the original”). Two months after its submission, the original has only garnered an upvote score of 11, and only 88% of voters have upvoted it, which suggests that users actively engaged with it to downvote it. Indeed, the user who created the meme also states that,
judging from the low number of upvotes, he deduced that people did not find his meme that funny after all (toryguns, 2020). By contrast, in the same window of time, the response has garnered an upvote score of 42, with 95% of voters upvoting it. These data may suggest that the original fulfills its function of being an ironic meme less satisfactorily by the community’s standards than the response does.

Regardless of whether the better reception of the response compared to the original is attributable to the stacking of an additional Margin, the Margins’ stackability remains a key element of demotivator-based ironic memes, as exhibited also in Figure 6 above. Figure 6 presents a much

more successful meme in terms of upvotes (score: 154, 99% upvoted) titled “What an absolute retard.” This meme does not constitute a response to a previous meme, but rather it is an original design that features two layers of Margins stacked on top of each other. Similarly to the previous memes, this one features an Impact-Font image macro meme in its Center, and the Margins provide additional voicing zones. The Center image depicts what appears to be a photograph of a common Windows error message displayed on a computer screen, the so-called “blue screen of death,” which itself has long been an Internet meme according to knowyourmeme.com (“Blue screen of death,” 2019). An imagined debate between three voices again takes place along three character zones, as in Figure 5, this time centering on the topic of the error message. The Center voice asks what the error message means (“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?”); the first Margin voice identifies the error as the blue screen of death, and explains what it means in a deprecating tone, closing with the apostrophe “retard,” which is common across the ironic memes seen so far; finally, the second Margin voice appears to be defending the Center voice/character (“Maybe he did not know”), suggesting that the first Margin voice/character is being “a jerk.”

Through the examples seen so far, it has been made clear that ironic memes function as polyphonic texts and that features of the demotivator generic form (strong framing, stackability of Margins) help differentiate between multiple character zones. An investigation of the ascribed identity constructed for these multiple voices, however, reveals that, although they are multiple, they share a similar identity ascription.

In Figure 2, both imagined participants follow what could generally be termed informal digital writing norms including “conceptual orality” (“GUYS OMG,” “NO … Retard”), and “texting jargon” or brevity (“OMG,” “THAT SLIM” with copula deletion; Coulmas, 2013, pp. 130-131). At the same time, both utterances appear stylistically “unkempt”: the first features an unnecessary repetition of “IT’S,” while the second is excessively cropped making the last word appear only partially. The extra Margin layer added in the response in Figure 5 continues along this trajectory, displaying “unkemptness” as lack of spacing after a comma (“NO,THEY’RE”), and through a failure to crop out the watermark “made with mematic” appearing in the bottom-left corner. This watermark is left by the image-editing application mematic, which is used widely in the creation of memes, and removing it requires either acquiring the premium version of the software or cropping the watermark out of the image. The presence of this watermark has itself become a
subject of parody online according to knowyourmeme.com (“Mematic,” 2020). Finally, orality and stylistic unkemptness also feature in Figure 6, where unkemptness is more subtly expressed by the use of a “flair” labelled “Poop.” Flairs are used in the subreddit to thematically sort posts, but can also be used to add to the meme’s content (42069lmaoxd, 2020), which is the case here as the meme does not pertain to “poop.” The post is thus purposely mistakenly sorted.

Apart from orality and stylistic unkemptness, from a stance-taking perspective, all three memes feature utterances that constitute strong epistemic stance-taking moves (Johnstone, 2009). In Figure 2, the Center voice enthusiastically identifies the penguin as Eminem addressing an imagined audience (“GUYS OMG”), while the second voice refutes the statement in a brusk and offensive tone lexically materialized particularly through “NO” (in capitals) and “Retard.” In Figure 5, the extra Margin adds a similarly aggressive character (“retard”). Figure 6 features only one similar voice, in the first Margin. Still, the Center and second Margin voices also appear intense (“WHAT THE FUCK,” “HEY DON’T BE A JERK”). The intense stances of all voices are a common denominator across the examples.

All in all, the combination of these semiotic elements in the construction of an identity for the imagined participants (orality, stylistic unkemptness, intensity of the voices) could be seen as indexing an identity of “sloppy opinionated digital media user.” Therefore, it could be argued that the characters in the ironic memes seen so far share a “persona” (Johnstone, 2009).

4.2. Identity construction 1.0: Towards understanding what an “ironic memer” is

According to Kress (2010), through design, rhetors make their interests material by making meaning through the mobilization of available semiotic resources within a given space and with a consideration of their audience. In this sense, through design, a rhetor positions themselves in relation to the social surroundings at hand. However, the notion of rhetor is not fine-grained enough as an analytical concept for analyzing ironic memes due to the pronounced polyphonic arrangement of these texts. We thus turn to Goffman’s (1981) notion of production format, analyzing the concept of rhetor into the roles of animator, author, and principal.
In the examples seen so far, we can note that while the user who created and shared the meme undeniably acts as animator and author of their message, the role of the principal belongs to an imagined constructed persona. This persona, provisionally identified above as “sloppy opinionated digital media user,” is reified as distinct imagined participants engaging in a participation framework embedded within the multimodal text; for example, in Figures 2 and 5, a debate over the penguin rapper’s identity. So, in the production of demotivator-based ironic memes, the authors’ identity construction is contingent upon their ability to index this persona through their semiotic choices and to embed multiple individual voices enacting this persona in the text.

However, while the persona in question can be argued to be emerging as an “archetype” for the principal in the texts examined so far, the performance of this persona through the creation of the memes is nonetheless the result of an array of mediated actions taken by the authors when designing the memes. Each of these actions can be seen as contributing to the authors’ identity construction (Scollon, 1998), and they can be examined as they are crystallized in the frozen action that a meme posted on the subreddit constitutes (Norris, 2019).

Our analysis has hitherto shown three main characteristics constructing the archetypal persona of the Goffmanian principal in ironic memes: orality, stylistic unkemptness, and intensity. These characteristics are realized through particular semiotic choices, the mobilization of which is the result of mediated actions. For the representation of conceptual orality, the authors would have had to rely on their knowledge of what informal digital written discourse looks like, and then mobilize that knowledge to type into the appropriate dialogue boxes provided by the image-editing software they used to create the memes. Similarly, to represent “intensity,” a mixture of metalinguistic knowledge and concrete action was required of the authors for typing particular linguistic elements over others. It is the case of stylistic unkemptness that is particularly revealing of a sequence of identity-constructing actions.

The memes examined are multimodal textual creations that have been shared among a relatively small online community in the form of a subreddit. The design of the memes required, as briefly sketched above, the use of third-party software (e.g., mematic) as well as appropriate use of text-typing features to design the linguistic part of the ensembles, also requiring the manipulation of fonts. These observations point to the fact that the authors of these memes are well-versed in the creation of memes as they know how to use third-party software to design texts that they can then
share in particular environments. In this case, this environment is described with the title tagline “When the meme man memes a lil’ harder,” suggesting that the authors of the texts posted therein are memeing in some way more intensely, perhaps more expertly, as suggested in users’ interviews (toryguns, 2020; 42069lmaoxd, 2020; see next chapter). To the analyst, these are all indicators of individuals that act skillfully in digital environments, calculating how to semiotically arrange particular texts and how to publish them. The characteristic of stylistic unkemptness, then, appears to be paradoxical.

The reasoning that can be offered to resolve how a skillful meme creator makes “unkempt” memes is that this unkemptness is constructed on purpose. Concretely, this would mean, for example, that the outer margin in “retar” is deliberately cropped too narrowly. In the same way, the “made with mematic” watermark has also purposely been left in the meme in Figure 5. In Figure 6, the flair “Poop” was chosen by the author when sharing the post in the subreddit despite (or rather, because of) being irrelevant, in order to add to the element of apparent unkemptness.

Finally, the hybridization processes we have noted point to the authors’ familiarity with other memes’ generic forms. Therefore, in the creation of these texts, authors act based on their knowledge of other meme genres, which indicates that they are well-versed enough in internet culture to at least know what Impact-Font image macro memes and demotivator memes are. So, authors are familiar with the practice of memeing having been “consumers” of older memes, but apparently also producers, who know how to make and share memes in particular spaces where they can be enjoyed based on established norms and expectations.

The identity elements that arise for the authors based on these observations are those of: literate internet user, skilled (image) content creator, and avid memer. The characteristic of unkemptness found in the memes further accentuates the skilled content creator identity element by providing insight into the goal-orientation of the “ironic memer,” which is not to create perfectly-rendered memes, but memes that are purposely imperfect. What is achieved through this deliberate imperfection (based on our analysis so far) is the representation of an archetypal persona of “sloppy opinionated digital media user.”
While this analysis provides some preliminary insight into the identity construction of “ironic memers” overall, these preliminary findings are triangulated in the following chapter (section 5.2) with the viewpoint of the ironic memers themselves as revealed through interview data.
5. Analysis 2.0: *NO THAT SLIM SHADY*

This chapter relies on a combination of interview data and further textual examples to elaborate on our intermediate findings on memes’ design as hybrid polyphonic texts and on the identity construction of their authors as skilled internet users who represent “sloppy” ones in their creations. I start from r/ironicmemes moderator 42069lmaoxd’s observation that what differentiates an ironic meme from a similar meme found on a mainstream platform like 9gag is “what it is mocking, and how it is made” (42069lmaoxd, 2020). In what follows, I first address matters of design (“how it is made”), providing further evidence for ironic memes’ status as a hybrid genre, along with their characteristic features of being “worse, on purpose” and “less direct” (5.1). I then turn to who the memes are “mocking,” understanding mockery as an artifact of an orientation towards “cringe,” which is typical of Reddit’s cynicism (Massanari, 2015). Section 5.2 thus elucidates how the perceived “targets” of ironic memes contribute to our understanding of ironic memers’ identities.

5.1. Bad inscrutable hybrids

In the following excerpt from our interview, r/ironicmemes moderator 42069lmaoxd presents how ironic memes differ from “regular” memes in how they are made.

Excerpt 1

42069lmaoxd: Often, ironic memes will have *more swearing*, and will use *bad grammar* in addition to *making it less direct*. 9gag memes are often just “statement, image, punchline”. Ironic memes are often a joke over an image.

Memeguistics_Galore [researcher]: So they don’t follow formulas in the same way?

42069lmaoxd: No, and also, IronicMemes are often *worse, on purpose*. They use *horrible grammar, spelling, pixel quality*, and often *steryotypes*[sic] to make the joke. Also, ironic memes *use specific words* to make it funny, like *sex, pee and poop*. There is nothing funny

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7 In the interview excerpts, turns articulated without interruption by an interlocutor over multiple instant messages are presented as single continuous paragraphs. The text also features the addition of sentence-initial capitalization and punctuation (mainly commas and full stops) where needed to facilitate reading in this paragraph format.
about it on paper, but it is funnier if you think about the meme as a whole. (42069lmaoxd, 2020, my emphasis)

In Excerpt 1, the subreddit’s moderator presents typical traits of ironic memes, presented above in italics. His observations on the linguistic elements of ironic meme compositions shed more light on observations made in our analysis so far. The examples discussed in the previous section indeed feature ample swearing (“retard,” Figures 2 and 5; “WHAT THE FUCK,” “jerk,” Figure 6), “bad grammar” (“NO THAT SLIM SHADY,” Figures 2 and 5), and buzzwords like “poop” (Figure 6). Some of these characteristics of the verbal element in ironic memes’ design are also exemplified in Figure 7 below. The meme in Figure 7 also features unnecessary word repetition across the top and bottom text (“MOM TOMMY TOMMY”), also seen in Figures 2 and 5, as well as lack of punctuation (“MOM TOMMY”, “WONT”).

![Figure 7.](Wallace mug). Posted on r/ironicmemes on May 9, 2020. Screenshot captured on July 4, 2020.
Importantly, these characteristics are presented by the moderator as part of a general tendency of ironic memes to be designed as “worse, on purpose,” which in the previous section we termed “stylistic unkemptness.” However, this feature appears not to be restricted to the mode of written language. Figure 7 displays further unkemptness in its layout, for example. The submission’s title (“give me the wallace mug tommy” with three angry emojis) is used for the voicing of a request, which appears to be presented as uttered by the same character who voices a complaint in the rest of the meme. In this participation framework, some unknown character, supposedly underage and supervised by their mother, first requests (in the title) that Tommy give them the Wallace mug (a naturalistic picture of which features with increased salience over a white background in the image), and subsequently complains to their mother that Tommy is not responding to the request (top/bottom text). The title/main body distinction as provided by the infrastructure of the webpage is thus mobilized in a novel way that could be viewed as “wrong” or “worse”: instead of presenting or commenting on the content of the textual unit as a whole, the title region of the post hosts a speech act performed by the same character who continues with another speech act in the main body of the text. Combined with the use of top and bottom text as (purposely) imperfectly complementary segments (seen in the repetition of the top text’s last word in the bottom text), this points to a novel use of layout that strays from expected compliance with the common practices of not unnecessarily repeating words and of using titles to present or comment on the content of a text.

Further, the participation framework sketched out in the meme stereotypically elicits a quarrel between children that do not share their toys. This contributes to the identity construction of the character voicing the utterances as a child, potentially a stubborn one, judging from the three emojis that accompany the request and the fact that the request is immediately followed by a complaint to their mother. Ironic memes’ reliance on stereotypes is also mentioned by the moderator in Excerpt 1, and the particular stereotyped voice that emerges here bears some resemblances to that of “sloppy opinionated digital media user.” In the end, what is notable here is not only that layout is mobilized along with linguistic text to make the meme more intensely “worse, on purpose” as seen above, but also that this mobilization of layout is tied to voicing effects, which we have already presented as central to ironic memes and as interacting with layout in demotivator-based examples. Voicing and layout thus work together here too, in order to construct a stereotypical identity for the character presented in the meme’s verbal part, by stirring
up conventions of textual design in a way that makes the final product appear “worse, on purpose” when compared to a “traditional” meme, which would feature “statement, image, punchline” (Excerpt 1).

Intentional renditions of bad quality materialize through the mode of image too. This is exemplified in the cropping of the image in Figure 7, which is excessively cropped at the bottom, revealing only a partial view of the represented participant (the Wallace mug). Similarly, Figure 8 features another visual manipulation that renders the meme “worse, on purpose,” whereby the original aspect ratio of the image has been tampered with, making the image vertically overstretched.

Figure 8. [Stupid blurry man]. Posted on r/ironicmemes on April 1, 2020. Screenshot captured on July 4, 2020.
Image-based “poor renditions” are also found in “pixel quality” (Excerpt 1). Figure 9 below presents a so-called “deep fried meme.” Deep fried memes feature a visual effect whereby the image “is run through dozens of filters to the point where the image appears grainy, washed-out, and strangely colored” (“Deep fried memes,” 2019). The popularity of such memes is linked to the existence of widely available online software that specifically produces this kind of visual manipulation (see Narkevich, n.d.). Deep frying memes is widely viewed as a practice of ironic memeing. Knowyourmeme.com catalogues the entry on deep friend memes as “[p]art of a series on Ironic Memes” (“Deep fried memes,” 2019), while an interviewee mentions that, when it comes to ironic memes, “it all started with deep fried memes” (toryguns, 2020). In Figure 9, a picture of a bird with the overlain text “birb” in Impact Font, and the same title, is disfigured through the use of the deep frying effect, making for a “worse, on purpose” ironic-meme appearance.


In sum, Figures 7-9 exemplify how a key characteristic of ironic memes, being “worse, on purpose,” is articulated across various traits (e.g., novel layout deployment, top/bottom text
repetition, deep frying), which materialize across various modes. Crucially, these examples are also shaped through a process of genre hybridization, which we have argued to be key in ironic memes.

More specifically, similarly to how the memes discussed in the previous section appropriated the generic form of demotivator memes, the memes examined here appropriate the generic form of Impact-Font image macro memes. Figures 7-9 feature text in Impact Font (imperfectly) split into top and bottom text, which is a generic staple of image macro memes. According to interviewee toryguns, “when ironic meme artists brought back the impact font, it was a start of a new era for ironic memes” (toryguns, 2020). This observation points to the use of the Impact Font as a salient design practice that is meaningful to ironic memers. Importantly, the memes in Figures 7-9 still function as ironic memes by virtue of merely appropriating the generic form of and not meaningfully following the setup-punchline pattern that is typical of top and bottom text in image macro memes.

In Figure 7, the top and bottom texts articulate the character’s complaint and appear to be arbitrarily split in a disruptive way. For example, the top text does not isolate a pragmatically distinct unit (e.g., the apostrophe “MOM”), a fact which, paired with the lack of punctuation, renders the utterance difficult to read at first glance. This is further accentuated by the unnecessary repetition of “TOMMY” noted above. Similarly, in Figure 8, the bottom text again simply completes the utterance without delivering a punchline. In Figure 9, the generic form is appropriated in even more novel terms as the top-bottom text division is scrapped altogether and the linguistic text is placed only roughly toward the bottom of the image and kept to a minimum (the mere description “birb”). Notably, even in the case of embedded image macro meme formats in Figures 2, 5, and 6, the meaningful top-bottom text distinction was similarly undermined.

Unlike the memes examined in the previous section, genre hybridization in these ironic memes only occurs through genre appropriation and not through genre embedding too. As pointed out before, genre embedding in demotivator-like ironic memes is facilitated by the demotivators’ generic form with its strong framing composition. The simpler Impact-Font image macro meme generic form, on the other hand, only provides a textual distinction for the verbal element in the form of top and bottom text. Still, much like demotivators’ framing is appropriated to create voicing zones in demotivator-like ironic memes, this top-bottom text division is only appropriated
here to be undermined again, which could be argued to add to the “worse, on purpose” trait of ironic memes. This points to the moderator’s observation that ironic memes are “just a joke over an image” as opposed to following the formula of “statement, image, punchline” (Excerpt 1).

All in all, this manipulation of formulas through genre appropriation, particularly in a way that makes the end product appear “worse, on purpose” also contributes to ironic memes being “less direct,” as put in Excerpt 1. In other terms, the resulting ironic memes are not designed as straightforward visual jokes (which memes often are; Dynel, 2016) that simply follow recognizable generic patterns. Instead, they are designed as generic hybrids, which twist existing genre conventions and are thus difficult to understand for the uninitiated observer. This function of ironic memes comes through more evidently when examining memes that fail to follow ironic meme norms, such as the meme in Figure 10.

**Figure 10.** “What now?” Posted on r/ironicmemes on May 4, 2020. Screenshot captured on May 5, 2020.
Figure 10 presents a meme posted on r/ironicmemes, which is a normative instantiation of the “disappointed black guy” meme genre (“Disappointed black guy,” 2020). The meme follows the established generic form: in the top half of the composition, a situation is presented (on the left) that warrants a “happy” reaction, always conveyed through the same naturalistic photograph of Brazilian actor Lázaro Ramos (on the right); in the bottom half, there is a situation that warrants disappointment (on the left), and a still of the actor expressing disappointment accompanies it (on the right). In this case, the meme refers to the practice of using the Windows Task Manager feature to terminate unresponsive computer software, which is a last-resort solution when applications being run on Windows do not respond. In the bottom left panel, a screenshot of the Task Manager feature itself being unresponsive is presented, which warrants disappointment. Notably, this situation could also be described as “ironic” since it refers to one’s last-resort solution: ironically, something done when all else fails is itself failing. This might have prompted the user to post the meme in r/ironicmemes, but as evident from the responses the meme received (see Figure 11 below), this space understands the term “ironic” when it comes to ironic memes as entailing something different.


This submission is ostensibly rejected by members of the community. For one, this is exemplified in its low upvote score (9), where 25% of votes are downvotes. The submission is also commented
upon, which is not particularly common in the subreddit. Figure 11 above shows that four out of four comments agree on the inadequacy of the post, with one commenter suggesting that the user who submitted the post is “lost” by providing a link to a subreddit where screenshots of out-of-place posts are shared (first comment). According to the second comment, this content does not fit r/ironicmemes, which the user would have known if they would have browsed the subreddit first. The user is thus in the “wrong subreddit” (third comment). According to moderator 420691maoxd, such unfitting posts are deleted from the subreddit (420691maoxd), which has most probably occurred here as this post is no longer retrievable.

All indicators thus point to the fact that the meme in Figure 10 is not considered a submission fit for r/ironicmemes as a result of its normative reliance on an established generic form, which does not produce a genre hybrid. The fourth comment on the submission (seen in Figure 11) points out that memes in r/ironicmemes “are supposed to not make sense,” which again underlines how generic hybridization in ironic memes renders them “less direct” (Excerpt 1) or more inscrutable. This is a result of how generic forms are merely appropriated in ironic memes and generic norms are thus undermined, making the final product fundamentally different compared to the established generic function of the form. Interviewee toryguns also stresses that ironic memes are characterized by being particularly inscrutable and something that his uninitiated friends would not understand (toryguns, 2020). Similar observations are made by interviewee ahyuus, who enjoys ironic memes’ nonsensical appearance (ahyuus, 2020), interviewee godisdeadlmao, who says that ironic memes are often “nonsense” that can be enjoyed ironically because ironic memers are “against meaning” (godisdeadlmao, 2020), and interviewee Ssh4m4n, who says ironic memes can be meaningless but people somehow find meaning in them (Ssh4m4n, 2020). Similarly, to interviewee Horizon_n3bula, ironic memes are a “parody” of “traditional memes,” and they differ in that the latter have “actual comedic properties” and are “straightforward” (Horizon_n3bula, 2020). It seems that this effect of generic manipulation, the interpretive inaccessibility of final textual products, is a particularly salient characteristic of ironic memes.

In the end, genre hybridization again emerges as an essential feature of ironic memes, especially in ways that render the final products “worse, on purpose” and “less direct” (Excerpt 1). In the following section, we will focus on the content of ironic memes as it reveals processes of identity construction around it by virtue of being “cringey.”
5.2. Identity construction 2.0: Cringe as a goal

So far, a considerable part of our analysis has focused on the concept of voice and the personas that are constructed for characters presented in ironic memes. For example, demotivator-based ironic memes are pronouncedly polyphonic, and the examples discussed point to the construction of a “sloppy opinionated digital media user” persona. Ironic memes that appropriate image macro forms may feature one voice throughout (Figures 7 and 8) or may not provide enough elements for indexing a partial image of an imagined persona at all (Figure 9).

A way to capture the variety of voicing effects found in ironic memes instead of engaging in case-by-case analyses of personas emerging in them is to focus on the notion of “cringe,” which is systematically labeled as important for ironic memes by almost all interviewees (42069lmaoxd, 2020; godisdeadlmao, 2020; Horizon_n3bula, 2020; Ssh4m4n, 2020; toryguns, 2020). According to Massanari (2015), an orientation of content towards cringe is typical of the cynicism that characterizes more “fringe” subreddits. The notion of cringe refers to the feeling of embarrassment that a viewer experiences for represented participants (Massanari, 2015). Massanari (2015) mentions various categories of cringe content, one of which is related to teenagers being shown behaving immaturely, where embarrassment for the viewer stems from seeing their naiveté.

This cringe category sketched out by Massanari (2015) is reminiscent of what we have defined as the persona of “sloppy opinionated digital media user” and how it is multimodally constructed. In our treatment of ironic memes as frozen actions in the previous chapter (4.2), it was mentioned that the archetypal persona of the principals involved in the creation of ironic memes relies strongly on the characteristics of orality, stylistic unkemptness, and intensity. Updating these observations with our more recent analytical findings, we can think of the “worse, on purpose” characteristic of ironic memes being adhered to by authors to show that whoever is the principal behind these texts can only conceive of them in a way that materializes as poor design. The “poor” design (previously defined as stylistic unkemptness) is then actually materialized through the ironic memer acting as animator and author and purposely making the final product look “worse, on purpose.” The intensity of stance-taking, in turn, is also evidenced in more recent examples (Figure 7: emojis,

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8 User ahyuus is the only interviewee who does not label cringe a staple of ironic memes as she argues that whether something is cringe or not may vary depending on the audience. Importantly, ahyuus does not identify as an “ironic memer,” but as someone who enjoys ironic memes and is in the in-between of enjoying traditional memes and enjoying ironic memes (ahyuus, 2020).
request-complaint sequence; Figure 8: “STUPID BLURRY MAN”), as is orality (see the speech acts in Figure 7). Such indicators could be seen as indexing immature users and their memeing practices being the source of cringe, which ironic memers purposely aim to evoke through their content (see Excerpt 2 below). In fact, interviewee Horizon_n3bula also remarks that ironic memes are about “taking the piss out of cringe kids” (Horizon_n3bula, 2020).

**Excerpt 2**

42069lmaoxd: Ironic memes are often extreme exaggerations of things in 9gag and facebook memes, to add another layer of cringe on.

Memeguistics_Galore: Alright, so cringe is like a goal.

42069lmaoxd: Yes. The more cringe, the better. Cringe works on a curve. On one end, there is no cringe, which people like. On the other end, there is high cringe, which people like ironically. In the middle, there is facebook, which people who are meme savvy hate.

[...]

Memeguistics_Galore: but why do meme savvy people hate facebook?

42069lmaoxd: I guess because it is just normie memes. It is like how mc donalds is good enough for most people, but gordon rams[e]y wouldn’t go there […] Once you see enough memes, you realize that most of them are utter bullcrap, and so people started mocking those memes, creating ironic memes. (42069lmaoxd, 2020)

In Excerpt 2, r/ironicmemes moderator 42069lmaoxd presents ironic memes as a sort of mockery of what is perceived as qualitatively inferior memes found on sites like 9gag or Facebook, which echoes views expressed by other interviewees (Horzion_n3bula, 2020; Ssh4m4n, 2020). This judgement of inferiority is based on ironic memers being “meme savvy,” and it is articulated through the notion of cringe. The moderator distinguishes between three categories: (a) *non-cringey memes*, which are universally liked; (b) *normie memes* found in spaces like Facebook or 9gag, which “meme savvy” users hate as they evoke a degree of cringe for them; (c) “*high cringe*” *memes*, which are appreciated ironically. Ironic memes are such “high cringe” memes, which come about by “adding another layer of cringe” (Excerpt 2) on top of normie memes. In fact, cringe is
also described by other users as a “goal” of ironic memes (godisdeadlmao, 2020) and something that is manufactured on purpose in ironic memes (Ssh4m4n, 2020).

The dislike for normie memes appears to stem from ironic memers’ refined tastes that make them reject normie memes. User toryguns’ conception of the same principle of elaborating on something cringe stresses that ironic memes are based on now-dated material (toryguns, 2020). When asked what ironic memes make fun of, he replies: “The shit that we used to find funny that is now cringe. It’s like we are reliving all of the memes but ironically” (toryguns, 2020). Ssh4m4n also notes that ironic memes “sarcastically use overused/old jokes” (Ssh4m4n, 2020). It would seem that part of ironic memers’ “meme savvy” status relies on being more up-to-date in terms of what cutting-edge, non-cringe memeing is. This temporal dimension, then, is to be understood in terms of experience with memes: keeping up with the newest thing is seen as qualitatively superior, cutting-edge memeing, and a user who achieves this status enjoys cringe ironically (see also the mention of r/cringetopia in Excerpt 3 below).

**Excerpt 3**

**Memeguistics_Galore:** So now are there any other sub[reddit]s that also do stuff like ironic memes does and that you also love?

**toryguns:** Cringetopia sometimes has some good stuff but other than that it’s mostly just the ones we’ve mentioned. There’s probably good memes on 4chan but I’m not ready for that yet lol

**Memeguistics_Galore:** haha how do you mean? Is it somehow next level?

**toryguns:** All the 4chan dwellers always bark about how all memes come from there, I’m fine with reddit and insta[gram] memes for now.

**Memeguistics_Galore:** Okay.

**toryguns:** I’ve heard it’s full of neckbeards but I also hear the same about Reddit so idk [=I don’t know]

**Memeguistics_Galore:** Oh, so I guess it’s also about who the users who do the memeing are?
Excerpt 3 illustrates that the quality of memes is defined for the user on the basis of originality (“all memes come from there”), but can ultimately be disputed on the grounds of the perceived identity of those making the memes (4chan “neckbeards”). Similar observations are made by other interviewees, who view ironic memes as being based on somehow cringe content created by “cringe kids” (Horizon_n3bula, 2020) or 50-year-old Facebook users (Ssh4m4n, 2020). Once again taking a multimodal (inter)action approach to ironic memes’ design, we can note that the actions taken by users in creating ironic memes (and hence the artifacts in which they are embedded) constitute a kind of identity work that is shaped in relation to the users’ social habitus, a position formulated by Norris (2005) thus:

Individuals choose many of their actions on a moment-by-moment basis, yet, we can argue that their choice often is limited by their internalized perceptions, social and cultural norms, and social histories, which are all intertwined in an individual’s identity construction. (Norris, 2005, p. 195)

More specifically, through their familiarity with negatively perceived identity types (e.g., cringe kids, neckbeards), attained through their socialization in/knowledge of various environments, ironic memers design texts in ways that differentiate them from content that is associated with disliked identities. They thus construct the identity of “ironic memer” through an opposition to other, negatively perceived identities. This is achieved through design practices we have noted so far: where normie memes would follow formulas and be straightforward, ironic memes undermine established generic forms by merely appropriating them, and they gain a nonsensical appearance in the process. Through these design practices, ironic memers instill “high cringe” in their creations. As frozen actions, then, the ironic memes are artifacts where we see crystalized digital text design actions that very deliberately put a twist on “normie” content, thus differentiating themselves from it, and indexing a different identity. Notably, this ironic memer identity is commented upon in positive terms: “meme savvy” users (42069lmaoxd, 2020), “ironic

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9 “Neckbeard” is a term used as slang for “A man who is socially inept and physically unappealing, especially one who has an obsessive interest in computing” (“Neckbeard,” n.d.).

10 In fact, the very label “normie memes” alludes to the creators: memes made/enjoyed by normies, a normie being “a normal person, who behaves in the same way as most other people in society” (“Normie,” n.d.). As the Cambridge Dictionary notes, the term can be used disapprovingly (“Normie,” n.d.).
meme artists” (toryguns, 2020), people who have “talent in making memes” (godisdeadlmao, 2020), whereas normie identities are linked to qualitatively worse content and mocked.

The following chapter summarizes our analytical findings and elaborates on the issue of ironic memer identity through the lens of New Literacy Studies.
6. Discussion: Literacies, identities, and the internet

This chapter seeks to recast our analytical findings in New Literacy Studies terms, aiming to elucidate how ironic memeing can not only be understood as a form of literacy (Knobel, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Procházka, 2014), but can also be viewed as constructing a unique conception of the social world based on digital literacies. To reiterate some key points of this sociocultural approach to being literate, literacies are viewed here as “social achievements,” (plural,) multimodal, and necessarily caught up in specific social practices (Gee, 1999, 2003, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2015; Street, 1995; The New London Group, 2000).

First, the present discussion requires a conceptualization of memeing as a *semiotic domain*; that is, a set of practices articulated multimodally that have the function of communicating particular domain-specific “messages,” which can be ideas, values, acts or information of any sort (Gee, 2003, 2008a). As understood in the present study, internet memeing constitutes a semiotic domain that pertains to the design and dissemination of multimodal texts on the internet for the fulfillment of affiliative practices, “phatic communion” being the principal part of its “message” (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). A semiotic domain, be it internet memeing, literary criticism, stochastic calculus or first-person shooter computer games, features a certain “design grammar”; that is, “a set of principles or patterns in terms of which materials in the domain are combined to communicate complex meanings” (Gee, 2008a, p. 139).

Our analysis has largely sketched elements of the design grammar of internet memeing that feature specifically in ironic memes, teasing out relevant design patterns through multimodal discourse analysis. In that sense, it has shed light on the “social language” (Gee, 2008a) of ironic memeing, with this term broadly conceived to encompass multimodal design practices beyond “language” (e.g., image manipulations, layout arrangements). Our key finding in this regard was that the creation of ironic memes relies on processes of genre hybridization through design practices that make the memes appear “worse, on purpose” and “less direct” in ways that are strongly reliant on voicing effects. Section 6.1 below discusses this finding in light of its significance for illustrating users’ literacies and how their knowledge is mobilized in ironic memes in ways that might amount to forms of social commentary.
Our analysis was also concerned with the construction of ironic memers’ identity. Through the deployment of their characteristic design practices, making up their social language, ironic memers enact what Gee (2008b) describes as “Discourses.” This concept encompasses not only particular (multimodal) meaning-making patterns, but also patterns of beliefs, moral judgements, and use of various tools (like digital software), which are adhered to by individuals so that they might be seen as enacting a socially recognizable identity or “niche” (Gee, 2008b, p. 161), such as that of an ironic memer. The notion of Discourse helps to elucidate the context in which particular behaviors are meaningful as it refers to a web of beliefs and actions within which behaviors like the design practices involved in ironic memeing unfold. For example, ironic memes might appear nonsensical to an uninitiated observer, but to those acquainted with the relevant Discourse, they take on some form of meaning that allows them to recognize them as “what ironic memers do,” and thereby enjoy them and develop communal relations based on them in the process.

The notion of Discourses plays a key role in the sections below. In Section 6.2 specifically, the “ironic memer” Discourse is analyzed in terms of how it functions in creating an exclusive identity for ironic memers that sets them apart from other memers. This observation is further developed in section 6.3, where the concept of identity characteristics in an online-offline world more generally is problematized.

6.1. Hybridity meets literacies

Ironic memes are hosts to a variety of voicing effects which construct different personas. Using Goffman’s (1981) terminology, the principal represented in an ironic meme is a persona that can only design memes “poorly,” relying on dated formats. From the angle of the Goffmanian author, this is an effect of design practices employed to construct such personas in a way that elicits “cringe” and results in genre hybrids, as dated meme formats are appropriated and/or embedded in the ironic meme. In this sense, what we see in ironic memes through this hybridity is an involvement of two Discourses, one relating to who the principal is and one relating to who the author is. On the one hand, we have a normie principal, a memer whose work is “cringey” as it is poorly designed, reliant on an outdated taste in meme genres (e.g., liking Impact-Font image macros), and engaged with trivial, irrelevant topics (e.g., a birb, Figure 9; the identity of a penguin rapper cartoon character, Figures 2 and 5; a figure represented in the background of an image,
Figure 8) or topics that have had their place in the internet spotlight and have long left it (e.g., the blue screen of death; Figure 6). These practices situate the identity of the principal within the Discourse of normie memeing with its (perceived) design practices and its own concerns and values. On the other hand, we have an “ironic meme artist” (toryguns, 2020) of an author, who is well aware of their difference to normie creators due to their superior and up-to-date knowledge of internet culture. This identity, as articulated through the actions taken when designing the meme, sits within a Discourse of what it means to be “meme savvy” (42069lmaoxd, 2020).

Gee (2008b, p. 176) defines literacy as the “mastery of a secondary Discourse,” which might also involve a form of mediating technology for meaning-making, like digital technologies in our case. Secondary Discourses are those that the individual becomes acquainted with over the course of their lifetime in the public sphere (as opposed to early in their life within an initial socializing unit like the family). What follows from this observation is that, as previously clarified (see 2.3), we can only speak of literacies in the plural for an individual, in this case because the Discourses individuals become acquainted with in their life are bound to be multiple. Indeed, there can be multiple literacies within a single semiotic domain (Gee, 2003), as we have defined internet memeing here. In this case, the two Discourses of being (recognizable as) a “normie” and being (recognizable as) an “ironic memer” are the bases for two literacies within the domain of internet memeing. In order to represent both in their textual creations, ironic memers need to be literate in both, so that their socialization within the domain of internet memeing is such that they know how to recognize both normie and ironic memeing when they see it.

So, the voicing effects observable in ironic memes’ design result in genre hybridity as outdated generic formats are appropriated to enact the persona of a normie principal. At the same time, these voicing effects also result in Discourse hybridity in that they mix distinct Discourses (Gee, 2008b). Since Discourses and their concomitant literacies are sociocultural concepts rooted in and shaped through individuals’ social histories, what we see in ironic memes are traces of ironic memers’ socialization in multiple subfields of the semiotic domain of memeing. Given the mobility and complexity that characterizes individuals’ social practices in the current stage of globalization (Blommaert, 2010, 2018), such hybridity is to be expected, especially when dealing with multiple digital (and therefore translocal) sites of socialization.
Such sites are conceptualized by Gee (2004) as “affinity spaces.” The term refers to sites in which people come together around a common practice that they enjoy, resulting in the development of situated learning. In that sense, the term is synonymous with that of community of practice or the more recent concept of “light” communities (Blommaert, 2018), which has explicitly been theorized to capture the complexities of an online-offline world. Despite speaking of “affinity groups” elsewhere (Gee, 2008a), Gee (2004) aptly argues that the metaphor of affinity spaces might be more appropriate for characterizing these sites of learning since “groupness” and “membership” are suggestive of more closely-knit interpersonal structures than we might find when speaking of, for example, the people who enjoy a particular kind of memes or a specific type of computer games.

Indeed, aggregates of people engaging in common practices in the current stage of globalization are characterized by notoriously porous category boundaries, increased localized variation, and a tendency to resist categorization on the basis of “thick” identity categories such as race, class or gender (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert et al., 2019; Maly & Varis, 2016). As early as 2000, this diversification, or “fragmentation of the social fabric” as a result of “multi-channel media systems,” was noted in the multiliteracies pedagogy framework (The New London Group, 2020, p. 15). It was argued that this state of affairs led to “complex and overlapping” boundaries for any conceptualization of “communities” (The New London Group, 2020, p. 17). This vast diversification of social categories as intensified in more recent years has been captured in Vertovec’s (2007) concept of superdiversity, which sits at the heart of the present study’s theoretical background (see 2.1).

This increasingly appropriate anti-essentialist focus on the many things people do together rather than what people traditionally “are” in stable macro-category terms is reflected in the grassroots typification of personas found in ironic memes. Ironic memers’ literacies, their mastery of Discourses defining normies and ironic memers like themselves, are based on (imagined) individuals’ digital cultural practices—and they also materialize through digital cultural practices. That is, the dimension that differentiates a normie from an ironic memer is not so much “thick” identity characteristics, but rather “new” literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006): that is, situated learning acquired through socialization in affinity spaces, which might be entirely digital. Specifically, their differences pertain to their practices vis-à-vis the making and sharing of internet
memes and all that their design and dissemination entails. It is for this reason that a normie can be identified as diversely as a 50-year-old Facebook user (Ssh4m4n, 2020) or a “Fortnite kid” (Horizon_n3bula, 2020). Stereotypes play a central role in ironic memes (42069limaoxd, 2020), but the normie identity type is based not so much on any generational, racial or gender stereotype, but on one primarily defined in terms of what people like and know how to do online, specifically in the semiotic domain of internet memeing. To be more specific, this appears to be a stereotype defined in terms of how people’s digital lifestyle correlates with their online-offline identity more generally (e.g., a “kid” that likes the computer game Fortnite, a 50-year-old who uses Facebook more than other social media and likes fishing—an example of a relevant offline activity given by Ssh4m4n, 2020). After all, memes can be enjoyed without being the primary focus of one’s online-offline social practices.

This typification occurs through the way in which ironic memers draw on social languages (of normie and ironic memeing) and arrange them in their memes’ design through what we have analyzed as voicing effects. That is, social languages or, synonymously, registers (Agha, 2003, 2005; Gee, 2008a) are used to typify a particular kind of person by indexing social characteristics that they are associated with. In our case, multimodal registers are recognizable as indexing the identities of normies and ironic memeres and are deployed in the creation of ironic memes. Crucially, most elements of these registers are shaped by patterns of manipulation of digital infrastructure like image-editing software (e.g., deep frying, poor image cropping, watermarks). Indexing the persona of normie or ironic memer is dependent on signs specifically shaped by and/or alluding to the technological infrastructure that renders patterns of meaning-making possible for these user “types” or personas; for example, whether one uses the image-editing application memeatic or not is something that is meaningfully parodied (“Mematic,” 2020). This suggests that the elements relevant to the definition of the personas involved in ironic memes, “cringe normies” and the ironic memers themselves, are a matter of digital literacies.

Another crucial point is that the enactment of each of these different registers typifying user personae is qualitatively different. Specifically, in Agha’s (2005) terms, the enactment of the “ironic memeing” register is “appropriate to context” in that the entextualized voicing effect (e.g., making the text “worse, on purpose” as an author, creating character zones) matches “co-occurring signs” that construct the context as congruent to the authorial persona indexed by the register’s use
That is, the audience can retrieve contextual cues that confirm that this is in fact an ironic meme: it is posted on r/ironicmemes, among multiple other posts exhibiting similar characteristics. In this sense, the use of the ironic memeing register by the author is appropriate. By contrast, the enactment of the normie register is incongruent with the space in which the meme is found as contextual cues point to the text’s status as an ironic meme. This amounts to what Agha (2005) calls a “tropic” use of the register. The enactment of the normie register is merely a trope in ironic memes; the persona it indexes is not one that represents the author of this text in this particular space. This explains the divergence of Goffmanian author and principal in the making of ironic memes, and is also reflected in the genre hybridization processes we have described. Generic forms that are outdated and would be liked by normies, thus indexing normie personas when used (Impact-Font image macros, demotivators), are merely appropriated and/or embedded, and their conventions are undermined, while the resulting text remains recognizable as belonging to another genre, namely ironic memes.

Further, the hybridity we have traced along multiple dimensions of ironic memes can be more broadly captured by the concept of intertextuality, a term coined by Kristeva (1986) based on Bakhtinian dialogism, which conceptualizes texts as combinations of (elements of) other texts. According to Fairclough (1992, p. 271, my emphasis),

The concept of intertextuality points to the productivity of texts, to how texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions (genres, discourses) to generate new ones. But this productivity is not in practice available to people as a limitless space for textual innovation and play: It is socially limited and constrained, and conditional upon relations of power.

As noted elsewhere (2.4.1), intertextuality is a key feature of internet memes (e.g., see Barlas Bozküş, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007a; Miltner, 2014). Applying these additional qualifications on the concept to ironic memes specifically, we can note how the manipulation of generic conventions through genre hybridization processes results in ironic memes being molded as a new (hybrid) genre, the production of which relies on transforming prior formats. In fact, a general tendency towards hybridity is observed in today’s world of digital text-making (Mills, 2010).
However, what also needs to be noted is the asymmetry between the represented textual elements (normie elements) and the representing text as a whole, which taps into ironic memer Discourse. The ability of ironic memers to represent normie textual elements leading to generic innovation is socio-historically constrained, as Fairclough (1992) notes. It is only thanks to their literacies (i.e., their histories of acquiring knowledge within the semiotic domain of memeing) that ironic memers can represent normie memeing. Interviewee toryguns, in fact, understands ironic memes as mocking “the shit that we used to find funny that is now cringe” (toryguns, 2020, my emphasis), suggesting that in the process of acquiring ironic memeing literacies, one has gone through being a normie (acquiring that literacy) and has surpassed that, now viewing it as “cringe.”

Crucially, it is within the practice of representing other texts that, according to Fairclough (1995), we can trace ideology. Our analysis consistently shows ironic memers’ practices representing normie registers as “poorer” through multimodal design practices that suggest “sloppier” action taken in their design (and thus “frozen” in the artifacts): badly cropped images, watermarks left in final textual products, distorted visuals, “bad grammar.” Moreover, participants describe these normie-representation practices as “taking the piss” or “parody” (Horizon_n3bula, 2020), and most importantly, as “cringe.” These points suggest an ideology of differentiation from and dislike of normie practices, which are viewed as qualitatively inferior to ironic memers’ “artistry.” These evaluative judgements are once again based on differences in literacies, whereby ironic memers are “fluent” in more than just normie Discourse, and are in fact reflexively aware of that normie register (Agha, 2005).

Finally, it is difficult to review these observations from an angle of institutional power imbalances, as suggested by Fairclough (1992) in the quote above. This is because the typification of personas at hand in ironic memes relies on characteristics of their behavior that are not institutionally ratified as “valuable” practices. Internet memeing remains a purely “ludic” semiotic domain in Huizinga’s (1949) sense; that is, a cultural practice that people engage in playfully, with no intention of gain, viewing it as an action somehow removed from daily life and its “serious” aspects. This should under no circumstances be interpreted as a devaluation of the practice of memeing as something “unimportant” or “not real.” Not only has the ludic element of culture been shown to be majorly relevant in our lives (e.g., see Frissen, Lammes, de Lange, de Mul, & Raessens, 2015), but the importance of ironic memes is accentuated in how they reveal an ability to reflexively refer to
social reality in an online-offline world, typifying groups of people based not on “thick” characteristics but on their digital practices. This exemplifies the new literacy “mindset” described by Lankshear and Knobel (2006) and how it underlies memeing as a new literacy: it is implicitly understood here that social relations can be constructed on the digital plane in very “real” ways (see 2.4.2). Put simply, ironic memes show that ironic memers are deeply versed in having fun online to the point that they understand how some social practices that become indexical of identity “types” today can be entirely online ludic practices, a point which I return to below.

The following section further explores how this understanding of social identity types is reflected in ironic memer identity work by examining the “limits” and “boundary work” surrounding ironic memer identity.

6.2. Literate contrarians: The limits of ironic memer identity

A key feature of ironic memes is their property of being “less direct,” which means that they are purposely designed in a way that makes them inscrutable to casual onlookers not vested in the relevant literacies. According to one interviewee, ironic memers are “against meaning itself” (godisdeadlmao, 2020), which suggests that the memes’ nonsensical appearance is understood by some as a deconstruction (rather than a lack) of meaning (see Katz & Shifman, 2017). In fact, ironic memes can be argued to constitute what Katz and Shifman (2017) define as “digital memetic nonsense.” The creation of such content finds fecund ground on the internet, where one can find ample resources for making multimodal artifacts, where remix culture has its heyday, and where phatic communities centered around image-sharing abound (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Types of digital memetic nonsense defined by Katz and Shifman (2017), such as “linguistic silliness,” in fact capture design practices involved in ironic memeing—in this case, the “worse, on purpose” rendering of linguistic elements.

Nonsense such as that found in ironic memes acquires meaning and significance on the interpersonal plane as it has a phatic function; that is, the function of establishing and stressing a connection with other communicators (Katz & Shifman, 2017), which is a key aspect of memetic content in general (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). More specifically, since even the creation of nonsense adheres to certain rules (as we have found for ironic memes), shared knowledge of these rules becomes an indicator of common membership in a (loosely defined) community of users that
share this literacy (Katz & Shifman, 2017; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). The literacies that underlie making sense of and being able to produce a particular kind of nonsense (say, ironic memes) thus become a common denominator around which an in-group can be formed (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Importantly, this shared belonging to an in-group based on (sub)cultural knowledge can lead to users also engaging in forms of “boundary work” in order to keep outsiders out (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017).

A “key incident” (see Emerson, 2007) illustrating this kind of boundary work being done in ironic memeing affinity spaces occurred early in my fieldwork, on r/okbuddyretard, a subreddit massively more populous than r/ironicmemes (with 725,000 followers as of July 2020), which participants systematically noted as a space that produced similar content. On March 10, 2020, YouTuber PewDiePie, owner of the second most followed YouTube channel, with 105 million subscribers as of July 2020, posted a video about r/okbuddyretard (PewDiePie, 2020). PewDiePie describes r/okbuddyretard as “The Most OFFENSIVE Subreddit” in the video’s title (a label the subreddit moderators reject; see Appendix, pinned post 1) and says it is “bombarded with ironic memes.” In the beginning of the video, he also preemptively acknowledges that since he has given the subreddit attention on the massive platform of his channel, it is going to be ruined and considered “not funny anymore.”

The publication of PewDiePie’s video resulted in the publication of a pinned post on r/okbuddyretard, an excerpt of which is pictured in Figure 12 below (the entire post can be found in the Appendix as “pinned post 1”).

The post stated the concern that PewDiePie’s video would cause an influx of users to the subreddit who would “likely not have a great idea what this subreddit is about” and would thus make “low quality/unfitting posts.” Moderators thus temporarily suspended the ability to post on the subreddit in order to prevent such posts from being shared. It was also noted that this unpleasant situation was expected, and it came at a time when the subreddit had “more or less reached the “meme mainstream”.”
We thus have a massively popular YouTube channel making a video about a subreddit, and the subreddit responding by “locking” posts in order to prevent an influx of inexperienced users from posting. This chain of actions shows that r/okbuddyretard implicitly identifies a threshold of literacy required for users to post content therein. New, inexperienced users are not welcome to post memes that do not fulfill the expectations shaped by the relevant Discourse when they do not yet have sufficient mastery of it, and thus do not belong to the in-group. This would have had bad enough effects on the subreddit in its current state, where it was approximating the “meme mainstream,” and it would have been even worse, according to the post, in the days when it was still a “fledgling sub.” This can be interpreted as a prior “purer” state of r/okbuddyretard, a space which is now close to joining the “meme mainstream.” A subsequent pinned post by moderators, in fact, comments on the increase in the number of subscriptions as an unpleasant development (see Appendix, pinned post 2).

All in all, this key incident shows an instance of boundary work on r/okbuddyretard, done in order to prevent non-literate engagement with it as a platform. Despite an increase in size being also undesirable for the subreddit (see Appendix, pinned post 2), note that this kind of action was not...
entirely based on a quantitative criterion. r/okbuddyretard already constituted a populous subreddit at that time, it still is one, and “size” has not been noted by any of the participants interviewed as a significant factor in their enjoyment of ironic meme spaces. In fact, r/ironicmemes moderator 42069lmaoxd anticipates his own subreddit’s growth (given that it is still of modest size) and is not averse to it (42069lmaoxd, 2020). He views his subreddit as a sort of safe haven for users from r/okbuddyretard—already literate users, that is—after the events there. So, in terms of the evaluation of popularity, big numbers can push a space like r/okbuddyretard into the “meme mainstream,” something generally undesirable, while small increases in followers for smaller subreddits like r/ironicmemes are welcome, especially if new followers are already well-versed ironic memers. In the end, an excessive growth is understood as detrimental to these spaces, not so much on the grounds of sheer numbers, but in that it entails non-masterful, non-literate engagement with ironic memes.

Paired with the dislike for normie practices discussed before, this culture of exclusion frames ironic memers (their practices, and consequently, their identity) as counter-mainstream. Similar attitudes are exhibited in spaces distinguished for the supposed originality of the memes shared therein (e.g., 4chan’s /b/ board; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015) as authenticity and a counter-mainstream stance appears to be often central to memers as cultural producers (Zittrain, 2014). In fact, the phatic bonding that can occur through (sub)cultural knowledge based on memetic content can lose its appeal when this content reaches “the mainstream” (Miltner, 2014) as memetic content comes to be considered somehow “spoiled” by immense popularity (Burgess, 2008). According to Literat and van den Berg’s (2019) study of users’ judgements on the “value” of memes, a key criterion that shapes a meme’s quality is its “positioning in relation to the mainstream.” Memes in the mainstream, which are enjoyed by normies, are considered the worst, and in fact, when content becomes associated with normies, it can then evolve into being used ironically—a practice which increases its value (see Figure 3 in Literat & van den Berg, 2019, p. 240). Normie (i.e., mainstream) memeing and more “niche” memeing are thus framed as being in opposition to each other, the

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11 Indeed, there is at least one post made on r/ironicmemes that mentions in its title “OKBR [r/okbuddyretard] is gone. I have nowhere else to post this,” and explicitly refers to the PewDiePie video incident (see Appendix, “OKBR is gone” post).

12 r/okbuddyretard moderators take additional precautions to prevent or delay a dramatic increase in following by choosing not to have their posts featured on r/all, a Reddit page featuring posts from various popular subreddits (see Appendix, pinned post 1).
former being of the lowest value and the latter being considered generally valuable and certainly better. In fact, making an ironic meme out of memetic content that has reached the normies increases the meme’s value.

Examples of this counter-mainstream attitude on the part of ironic memers were noted throughout the present study. For one, the very construction of ironic memer identity is rooted in a counter-mainstream position when it comes to the semiotic domain of memeing. The design of ironic memes relies on a differentiation from and mockery of normie Discourse, which appears to be fundamental to the Discourse of being (recognized as) an ironic memer. Participants have noted ascribing to this ideological stance to varying degrees. User toryguns appears concerned with “curating” his taste in memes in a way that would differentiate him from his friends, and would be up-to-date (while at the same time distanced from more “original” but negatively perceived content like that made by “4chan dwellers”; toryguns, 2020). Another counter-mainstream stance was expressed by interviewee godisdeadlmao, who understands “talent” in making memes (which ironic memers supposedly have) as a product of one’s ability to express their “total nihilism” (godisdeadlmao, 2020). This tendency for counter-mainstream curation is also expressed by interviewee Ssh4m4n, who comments on the use of “poop” as a keyword in ironic memes (Ssh4m4n, 2020). Its appeal in this type of memes comes from the fact that “in real life, poop is referred to [as] something [...] disgusting or nasty, but it’s funny how some people are actually serious about poop” (Ssh4m4n, 2020). The engagement with the topic of “poop” is thus “cringe” (Ssh4m4n, 2020), making for good ironic meme content.

This orientation towards counter-mainstream ideology can thus be conceived in varying ways: as nihilism, as mockery of normies, as “cringe” references to “poop.” Importantly, at least according to the participants interviewed, these counter-mainstream tendencies are not designed to offend, and when they appear offensive, this is not taken as a serious statement of how individuals (the Goffmanian authors) feel. For example, engagement with controversial topics is tolerated and understood as “playful.” This kind of engagement relates to what Milner (2013, p. 88) terms the “logic of lulz”: a “hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced” way of viewing social reality that is found on platforms like 4chan and Reddit, in which sensitive and controversial topics are engaged with just “for the lulz” (i.e., for laughs). In these cases, users’ earnest stance towards the represented topics can be difficult to determine (Milner, 2013). The most indicative examples of
this orientation found in the present study include the ample use of the slur “retard” in ironic meme content as well as r/ironicmemes’ subreddit picture being Family Guy character Peter Griffin in blackface (see Figure 1).

Interestingly, interviewee ahyuus, who does not see herself entirely as an ironic memer, draws the line at offensive content: “I’m ok with ironic memes to a certain extent, if it’s not severely offensive. As long as it’s not harmful or disrespectful, then it’s fine with me” (ahyuus, 2020). She also feels that sometimes “it’s [ironic memers’] sense of humor to be edgy and borderline racist, transphobic, homophobic and something like that along the line” (ahyuus, 2020). The example of interviewee ahyuus on the one hand points to the variety of ways in which ironic memes can be enjoyed as content by different social actors. On the other hand, the fact that she does not fully claim the ironic memer identity label for herself indicates that a tolerance for offensive jokes might be understood as part of ironic memers’ identity, the “logic of lulz” might be part of the users’ “sense of humor” and the ironic meme community’s ethos.

The discussion so far has brought to light a counter-mainstream orientation of ironic meme content, sometimes materializing as offensiveness “for the lulz,” where the users’ earnest stance is debatable. Consider, for example, PewDiePie’s video title labeling r/okbuddyretard “The Most OFFENSIVE Subreddit,” and the moderators’ subsequent post rejecting that label as not representative of what they do (see Appendix, pinned post 1). Regardless of ironic memers’ underlying stances towards sensitive topics like race or people with disabilities, that fact remains that virtually every characteristic of ironic memeing discussed in the present study can be understood as reifying a contrarian stance: a subversion of established generic formats, an orientation to making content “worse, on purpose” and resistant to easy interpretation, a mockery of normies, use of offensive signs, an orientation towards “high cringe” (42069lmaoxd, 2020), a reluctance to accept inexperienced new users in relevant affinity spaces. In an interesting further example, one of the users approached for an interview, who ultimately refused to participate, responded to an invitation to have a chat about ironic memes with “I hat pepl of color[sic].” Not only was this response uncooperative (e.g., flouting the Gricean maxim of relevance), but it also featured elements of ironic memes’ design grammar. The misspelled phrase (“hat pepl” instead of
“hate people”) alludes to the “worse, on purpose” design pattern found in ironic memes and the message’s racist content is an instantiation of ironic memers’ embracement of the “logic of lulz”.

All in all, by staying away from “the mainstream,” ironic memers seem to be safeguarding their identity as individuals defined by their “refined” literacies in the semiotic domain of internet memeing. In fact, as this particular semiotic domain is not institutionalized but pertains entirely to an informal ludic aspect of cultural life, through their increased experience with memes, ironic memers effectively control Discourses on memeing. Control over Discourses leads to hierarchical structures and inequality (Gee, 2008b), and in this case, as this particular Discourse is confined to the ludic, this hierarchical imbalance is seen in the exclusion of “less literate” memers from ironic memeing spaces.

Notably, the action that ironic memers take in this regard significantly differs from the laxer antinormie attitude observed in another “meme connoisseur” space, Reddit’s r/MemeEconomy. Members of r/MemeEconomy might regard normies as mindless and their engagement with memes as the worst since it falls within “the mainstream,” but they nonetheless remain normie-friendly to a degree, with the argument that normies are part of the bigger picture of “the Meme Economy” (Literate & van den Berg, 2019, p. 239). Ironic memers are set apart not merely by their knowledge, but by also actively engaging in boundary work, either by enforcing exclusivity (e.g., the suspension of posting on r/okbuddyretard) or by alienating “the mainstream” (e.g., Peter Griffin in blackface).

Such an observation might be seen as begging the question of agency: to what extent are ironic memers being deliberately exclusive? However, this question is all but easy to answer as individuals’ social actions involved in identity formation are necessarily contingent on sociohistorical constraints, and specifically their own social histories (Norris, 2005), so that it might be said that Discourses “speak through” people (Gee, 2008b). In turn, as shown by Pahl (2008), one’s habitus (their long-term social practices, resulting in habits, skills, knowledge) is also represented in and shapes the (multimodal) texts one produces, so that, for example, an individual’s history of being well-versed into memeing and observing their difference to those in “the mainstream” finds

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13 In fact, the intensity of this contrarian stance-taking here further linked this message to ironic meme content and had a disarming effect as the researcher could not possibly engage in further conversation. Assuming that the user in question does not in fact hate people of color (because racism is no laughing matter) and only provided this reply as a stylized response that would baffle me to the point where I would simply leave them alone, I have to say: touché.
its way into their texts, making them effectively show that the author is a “more literate” memer. Becoming literate in ironic memes entails acquiring reflexive knowledge of one’s more well-versed literacy profile in the semiotic domain of memeing as that defines the practices one engages in. This knowledge, in turn, shapes the content users make, which thus gains an exclusionary function. Accompanying actions that aim to “keep outsiders out” (such as the post suspension on r/okbuddyretard) are also products of this same culture of knowingly being part of an “elite” with a control over Discourses of internet memeing.

By the same token, members of r/MemeEconomy might often be more accommodating towards normies also as a result of the cultural formation of their identity. “Meme Economists” are a community defined by self-reflexivity to the point that part of their identity practices entails taking it upon themselves to provide holistic descriptions of how the value of memes is to be determined (see Figure 3 in Literate & van den Berg, 2019, a figure made by Meme Economists). According to Literat and van den Berg (2019, p. 246), Meme Economists “often frame their activities as establishing a new field of research, which they refer to as ‘memetics’, ‘meme economics’ or ‘memetic theory’.” If they were to take a more absolute stance towards the exclusion of normies, this would detract from their identity formation as “the expert traders” and “the detached scientists,” engaged in this pursuit of describing (and, in doing so, locally determining) the value of all things memetic.

Both for Meme Economists and for ironic memers, their collective identity is shaped by their “superior” literacies in the domain of internet memeing, but it is also shaped by their stance towards other (imagined) groups defined by their memeing literacies (for example, the normies), and that is a key point where they differ. Through controlling Discourses on being an “advanced” memer, Meme Economists provide “the science” behind why normies are the worst; that is, they collectively agree that things are so, and they do so explicitly when they design texts or engage in relevant debate. By contrast, ironic memers merely mock normies through digital memetic nonsense that is based on an appropriation of their practices for ironic purposes. Ironic memeing is not about explaining why normies are the worst while taking the whole world of the Meme Economy into account, it is about being better than normies at memeing, and making nonsensical memes about that, which bring ironic memers closer together and farther away from the normies. Practices that keep the normies away from this in-group that understands the ironic nonsense are
an extension of this cultural identity and they serve to further solidify the local norms that shape it, rather than having them “tainted” by less literate users’ contributions.

Since ironic memers’ identity is entirely about practices (those that shaped their literacies and those that keep them safely within this niche community of literate memers), one final question that might be asked concerns how this identity is enacted “properly,” or specifically, how one’s practices come to be recognizable as constructing an “authentic” ironic memer identity. This question becomes all the more relevant in an age of superdiversity, where broad categorizations fail to capture (more than ever) the intricacies of what makes people who they are. Anti-essentialist notions of identity proposed in relevant literature include Norris and Makboon’s (2015) notion of “identity elements,” which can be retrieved from objects as frozen actions constructing an identity for social actors, as well as Blommaert and Varis’ (2013) notion of “enoughness.” While both are relevant to the present approach, the latter provides a heuristic for discussing authenticity specifically in times of superdiversity. Blommaert and Varis (2013, p. 146) argue that identity construction results from “discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen (or can be seen) as emblematic of particular identities,” and that authenticity is a matter of degree. One must display enough relevant emblematic identity features to be judged as authentic and at the same time must not display too much of said features (Blommaert & Varis, 2013).

In exploring the limits of ironic memer identity through the texts in which its relevant emblems are crystallized, it would be useful to provide one example that does not “do enough” and is thus rejected as not meeting the “benchmark” for ironic memeing, and an example that does “too much.” An example that does not do enough has been provided in Figure 10, which features a generic disappointed black guy meme. As stated in the analysis (see 5.1), no elements contributing to genre hybridization feature in the meme (e.g., “worse, on purpose” elements, “less direct” elements), so the meme comes to be judged as not enough of an ironic meme, and is later deleted from the subreddit. Consequently, the identity of the author is judged as not an authentic ironic memer’s.14 Two out of the four comments under the post specifically call attention to the author by implicitly calling them a “lost redditor” (first comment), and by suggesting they have not even

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14 As noted in the analysis (5.1), the meme could be construed as depicting an “ironic” situation to be in. Its failure to be recognized as an “ironic meme” in the more technical sense of the term used in this study further accentuates that the meaning of “ironic” among ironic memers is situated (Gee, 2004); that is, it is shaped by the literacies relevant in this space.
“browsed” the subreddit and thus lack insight into what content therein is expected to include in terms of emblematic features (second comment). All the comments call attention to the author’s action of posting this meme in this subreddit, which echoes how the meme in question is readily read as a frozen action: a chain of actions has led to the creation and publication of this object for it to be encountered in this space, and its audience recognizes this. It is this chain of actions that does not construct an authentic enough ironic memer identity.

By contrast, an ironic meme that does “too much” for the construction of an authentic ironic memer identity for its author is presented in Figure 13 below. This meme is a demotivator-based ironic meme featuring three layers of margins. Overall, the image quality has been tampered with as especially evident in the white text over black background, which exemplifies a lack of sharpness. The Center is arranged in a way that foregrounds a human figure as the most salient represented participant, too distorted to be discernible, through the use of a circle and four arrows pointing to it. Five emojis (three sad and two shocked) provide visual commentary in the Center, surrounding the participant. The text element identifies the figure as that of deceased actor Paul Walker, whose death became an internet meme in 2013 (“Paul Walker’s death,” 2013). The verbal element overall features ample “bad grammar” (e.g., the title, “he is not died”), conceptual orality (e.g., “hi bro”), and intensity (e.g., “stupid” with four accompanying emojis). All these features reify the “worse, on purpose” elements that characterize ironic memes, but their co-presence has an overwhelming effect. This is made clearer when one examines how character zones are used, where there is the deliberate “mistake” of two characters/voices being featured in the first margin. Additionally, while font is first used to differentiate characters (first margin), this convention is then dropped, and character zone differentiation relies entirely on margins, making for more inconsistency. The watermark “made with mematic” appears three times. Finally, perhaps most strikingly, the meme features a meta-commentary of ironic meme staples by having the characters comment on the convention of leaving watermarks in, and having a typical naive discussion (as in Figures 2, 5, and 6) about the term that describes “made with mematic” (“waterproof”/“watermark,” second and third margin). The character in the third margin even identifies the meme as “ironical” and begs for likes intensely (“plzz” followed by a praying-hands emoji).
Four months after its publication, the meme has garnered a low upvote score (15; 91% upvoted), which suggests that users did not approve of it much, perhaps as a result of it missing the mark. Notably, the memes in Figures 2 and 8 also had similarly low upvote scores. Indeed, the former one’s (“retar’s”) author took its low upvote score to mean that the meme was not considered “that funny” (toryguns, 2020). However, if anything, it might be argued that “retar” and the disfigured meme in Figure 8 (“stupid blurry man”) did not do enough, not that they did too much like the meme above does.\(^\text{15}\) Regardless of the extent to which “retar” or “stupid blurry man” were more

\(^{15}\) Additionally, the fact that “retar” received a response (“retard”; Figure 5) was an act that ratified it as a valid ironic meme entry on the subreddit; indeed, this uptake was a goal of the author’s (toryguns, 2020). Despite its
or less successful than the meme above, they provided very useful examples from an analytical standpoint. “Retar” allowed for a gradual presentation of the features of demotivator-based ironic memes and “stupid blurry man” showed an inventive way of reifying the “worse, on purpose” feature of ironic memes.

The meme in Figure 13 is a good exemplification of “too much” identity-signaling in terms of how it represents ironic memer Discourse. We have noted that the meme includes a “meta-commentary” on its status as an ironic meme, and at the same time exhibits “too much” of ironic meme emblematic characteristics, which entails that it is “even worse, purpose.” Exaggeration being seen as a key concept in ironic memeing (42069lmaoxd, 2020; Ssh4m4n, 2020), what we see here is that the meme in Figure 13 gives ironic memes the same treatment “authentic” ironic memes give normie memes: it makes a mockery of them by applying a “worse, on purpose” layer of semiotic work, or an additional “layer of cringe.” This meme could thus be seen as a meta-ironic meme since ironic meme Discourse itself features in this text as a register that is reflexively commented upon, and at the same time, this text itself should be labeled an ironic meme judging from contextual cues (its posting on r/ironicmemes, its similarities to other ironic memes, and the fact that it has not been taken down).

What follows from such an argument is that the author (who was not available for comment) exemplifies an even “higher” literacy by showing an awareness of ironic meme conventions that fuels an exaggeration of them that functions as parody. In this sense, the author constructs an identity of being “too literate.” In the same sense that the exclusive culture of ironic memeing leaves out “less literate” memers, the low upvote score of this meme indicates how “too literate” memers also do not fare well in this space. Notably, there is a difference in the consequences of the two types of transgression: when an author is perceived as not enough, their post might be deleted or they might be pre-emptively banned from posting, as in r/okbuddyretard; when they are “too much,” their meme might “pass” as a regular ironic meme, but not succeed as one. The meta-ironic meme in question is no different than many memes posted on the subreddit in that it receives low scores quantifying the attention it gets, yet it stands out from other unsuccessful memes by modest success in quantitative terms, “retar” provided qualitative evidence for its appreciation as an authentic ironic meme, albeit a less successful one.
virtue of semiotically doing “too much.” It thus provides evidence as to how excessive signaling is treated in this space in terms of identity construction.

In summary, ironic memers are individuals well-versed in literacies that are specific to the domain of internet memeing. The affinity spaces in which they engage in memeing are exclusive of those seen as not literate enough to be able to participate. In fact, the ideological orientation observable in their work is a contrarian one, whereby the users seem to want to be “set apart” from the mainstream, making light of “normies” in their texts and/or engaging in provocative behavior that might offend. But what does the formation of ironic memer identity tell us about the concept of identity and social formations today?

6.3. Identities through “thick” and “light”

Our discussion of ironic memeing suggests that for many people, all of them internet users, we live in a social world populated not only by people of different races, genders, classes or other so-called “thick” identity categories, but also in a world populated by people who make and enjoy texts online in strongly recognizable ways. As opposed to “thick” identity labels that refer to what we would call the “demographic us,” people engage in “light” practices online (Blommaert, 2018): they like their friends’ photos on Instagram, they retweet public figures’ tweets, and they make and share memes with complete (demographically speaking) strangers on Reddit. These “light” practices contribute to the establishment of conviviality and social bonds of togetherness (Varis & Blommaert, 2015), and they are contingent on the affordances of digital media and the opportunities that they offer for making meaning in different ways based on their technological makeup (Blommaert et al., 2019; Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018).

People thus develop digital literacies: they learn how to do things involving digital infrastructure in socially meaningful ways that allow them to perform particular identities through representational work. Groups are thereby formed around the communicative practices people are literate in and which they follow in common with other people; that is, patterns of communicative practices are developed, which shape people’s relationships. In fact, social groups today can be conceptualized as “communicatively organized and ratified set[s] of social relationships” (Blommaert et al., 2019, p. 3). In the example of ironic memes, we see such a group emerge centered around the collective identity of “ironic memers” which is defined in relation to the
identity of “normies,” by being opposed to it. These identities are based on how people manipulate digital infrastructure when choosing particular resources for meaning-making, so that the role of these resources and what people do with them based on their literacies emerges as majorly important for identity construction. The study of how these technological resources shape social practices on the online plane is already underway (e.g., Domingo, Jewitt, & Kress, 2015; Gruber, 2019). Still, future research taking a closer look at the minutiae of meaning-making through analytical tools like social semiotics could shed even more light into how digital technologies reshape our social practices today.

Further, ethnographic approaches to the ludic online aspect of people’s social life can reveal that what sociological traditions have considered “thick” identity characteristics are often no more valid to individuals in their daily lives than the “light” practices around which “light” groups take shape online (Blommaert, 2018). People today still very much understand the world as shaped by the categories of social class, race or gender, and some argue that these differences are becoming increasingly significant as “the social” is becoming more and more “fragmented” as a result of the intricate technological infrastructure through which we communicate daily (The New London Group, 2000). Still, this “fragmentation of the social” noted by The New London Group (2000) suggests the necessity of further research on social “fragments” if we aim to understand the complex puzzle of society today.

The present study has shown that “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) can be the axis along which people may conceptualize others as different than themselves, and form bonds around these divisions, which are crystalized in cultural artifacts. In fact, the focus on literacies here was centered around a semiotic domain as seemingly “insignificant” as that of internet memeing. Yet, examining the ludic or playful aspects of cultural life is far from insignificant (Huizinga, 1949), especially since people today seem to be more and more “playing at” social life (e.g., see Chughtai & Myers, 2014; Frissen et al., 2015; Timmermans, 2010).

Apart from stressing the importance of a focus on people having fun and on the technological forms of mediation that shape their practices, the present study has also hopefully shown that multimodal texts like memes can be very revealing vehicles for analyzing such phenomena. Since such texts are often one of the main means through which people communicate on online platforms (Miltner, 2014), an examination of just how these texts are made is rendered particularly
worthwhile. Not only are users’ identity performances crystallized in these artifacts pointing to their social habitus (Norris, 2005; Pahl, 2008), but crucially, these artifacts and what they stand for are then subject to thorough evaluation and judgement (Blommaert, 2018), which can then fuel more subcultural fragmentation as groups of people come to define their identity based on these judgements.

All in all, both people’s normative orientations in how they perform identities in the making of texts and their normative orientations in how they then judge theirs and others’ texts are powerful indicators of how they live in and understand society. As patterns of making meaning come to be (recognizable as) associated with particular “types” of people, or enregistered (Agha, 2003, 2005), the conception of such social “types” is born and maintained through social formations based on these enregisterment phenomena and the judgements generated through and around them.
7. Conclusion

The present study set out to understand the phenomenon of ironic memes, seemingly nonsensical memetic artifacts that are still created, shared, and enjoyed by groups of people online. In order to closely examine both ironic memes’ construction as multimodal texts and how they are rendered socially meaningful through their semiotic structure, we adopted a digital ethnographic approach complemented by multimodal discourse analysis. The study focused primarily on the subreddit r/ironicmemes as a research site, also including some consideration of relevant spaces. Naturalistic observation, conducted over a period of three and a half months, along with participant interviews yielded emically-oriented insights, which informed our semiotic analysis of ironic memes. This multimodal analysis component itself was primarily based on the tradition of social semiotics, but was also complemented by analytical tools from multimodal (inter)action analysis, which illuminated patterns of action unfolding around the making and sharing of these texts.

Our analysis of ironic memes suggests that they are generic hybrids relying primarily on the appropriation of outdated meme genres, which serves for the representation of enregistered personas of users “less literate” in internet memeing. Through their creations, ironic memers jokingly represent what they perceive as multimodal design practices associated with so-called “normies,” “mainstream” digital media users: poorly cropped images, “bad grammar,” outdated cultural references, and so on. By rendering their memes “worse, on purpose,” ironic memers ironically elicit “cringe,” a feeling of embarrassment felt for such “poor” multimodal textual products, which index less advanced literacies in internet memeing. At the same time, ironic memers work to make their own creations nonsensical or “less direct,” which separates them as a group (who is in on the joke) from the uninitiated normies baffled by the apparent nonsense. The result is a new hybrid genre of multimodal texts, through which ironic memers construct themselves as a sort of “elite” group when it comes to being literate in internet memeing.

Ironic memers also take care to set themselves apart from “the mainstream” more broadly, for example by engaging in boundary work to prevent non-literate engagement in their affinity spaces or by exhibiting an overly detached and crudely ironic stance when it comes to sensitive issues like race or the use of slurs. While this stance is interpreted as being somehow apart from society, ironic memers are very much a part of society, no matter how “niche” or counter-mainstream their
group might be. In fact, their example shows that social formations can be said to emerge around playful practices as niche as ironic memeing, which constitute “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In other words, the phenomenon of ironic memes illustrates that people can come together based on what they (know how to) do with and through digital media for fun, suggesting that the things people do playfully, even if they are chiefly online, shape their social lives in significant ways.

Overall, this study’s findings suggest that the sociolinguistically-informed examination of niche memeing cultures is a valuable pursuit for understanding a superdiverse social world. As identities are currently constructed more diversely than ever before through people’s engagement in a vast array of social formations online and offline, objects of inquiry such as meme-related subcultural phenomena illustrate the complexity of people’s meaning-making practices, which amount to identity construction. In fact, this study also illustrates that such practices can take shape entirely digitally, as people acquire “new literacies” through their day-to-day playful online behavior.

Future investigations could examine how these literacies are specifically acquired or what they entail for people’s practices in social spaces outside these literacies’ immediate semiotic domain. Such questions could be investigated through ethnographic case studies focusing on particular users’ day-to-day practices. At any rate, such explorations may serve to further recognize “new literacies” as valid, perhaps also at an institutional level. In the context of a multiliteracies pedagogical approach (e.g., Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2017), memeing literacies could be legitimized and mobilized even in formal learning contexts as they involve complex abilities for multimodal text design.

Further explorations of niche memeing practices as situated new literacies could also overcome some of the present study’s limitations. In terms of its empirical focus, despite taking care to branch out into some relevant digital spaces, the present study still primarily centered on a single subreddit, which may arguably have revealed a more limited conception of ironic memes as a phenomenon. A study of more varied sites where content identifiable as “ironic memes” is encountered may reveal a more complex picture of the social functions of ironic memeing. Such a more pronouncedly multi-sited digital ethnographic approach would also more closely reflect the dynamic nature of people’s translocal practices online. While the present study was primarily focused on Reddit, internet users’ everyday experience is seldom limited to engagement with one
online platform as users jump from Reddit to Instagram to Facebook, staying connected and potentially enjoying their favorite memes in the process. In fact, ideological views on memes and their quality are often tied to the memes’ space of diffusion as suggested by interviewees in the present study, who speak of 4chan and Facebook memes in different terms compared to Reddit or Instagram content. Such ideological orientations offer interesting avenues to be explored in future research on memeing literacies.

The present study also faced some practical limitations. The inductive qualitative orientation of our analysis left no room for in-depth explorations of larger amounts of data, which might have represented a wider variety of ironic meme forms. While the data chosen for analysis here revealed discursive orientations attested across the observed data set, a focus on more semiotic design patterns might have yielded additional insights and more refined analyses of the stylistic particularities of internet memeing and their social meanings. Additionally, the present study could have benefited from the recruitment of more interview participants. Unfortunately, this was rendered difficult at present due to r/ironicmemes followers’ reserved stance in engaging with a researcher as well as due to practical (e.g., time-related) restrictions. More insights from users could lend further empirical support to our analytical observations on the social importance of particular meaning-making practices, for example when it comes to exploring multimodal enregisterment phenomena.

In the end, ironic memes as cultural artifacts exemplify the increased subcultural fragmentation that is observed in today’s social world. As people are socialized in increasingly diverse ways, this leads to the shaping of increasingly “niche” identities, sometimes constructed around entirely playful digital practices like ironic memeing. In this contemporary context, it seems that the question of who we are might also just be about where we get our memes.
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Appendix

**Pinned post 1** (posted on r(okbuddyretard on March 10, 2020; screenshots captured on March 13, 2020)

**General Announcement**

*READ PINNED MESSAGE*

Hey all. Only a few minutes ago, our good friend PewDiePie from YouTube made a video about this subreddit. I'm not going to link it because it doesn't really matter either way, but the point is he made it, and, as you might expect, this will cause a considerable influx of users to stream into here. The vast majority of these potential users will likely not have a great idea of what this subreddit is about from only watching a 10 minute video on it, meaning they will likely make low quality/unfitting posts. Hopefully you can see where I am going with this.

We are going to lock submissions for a bit. A few days at least, maybe a week, maybe more. We have been preparing for this for quite some time, and in all honesty, it's pretty fortunate that this happened after we have already more or less reached the "meme mainstream." Had this happened when we were still a fledgling sub, the effects would have likely been much worse.

I would also like to add that this subreddit does not have any posts show up on r/all, and that is my and the modteam's personal choice. We are aware that Reddit at large will not get or appreciate the content here, so we opt to remain out of their way and let users who want to be here find us. I do not appreciate PewDiePie flashing this proverbial light on us, and I very sincerely hope no other large YouTubers do something like this again. I repeat, we do not want more attention than we have. Our natural growth is just about perfect the way it is.

It is also worth noting that PewDiePie labeling us as an "offensive subreddit" is a gross misrepresentation of what this place is. Our goal has never been to cause offense to anyone, and we do not condone that in any form. We try our hardest to remove any excessively upsetting material posted here. Everything here is in good fun. If anyone has legitimate concerns about this, we would be happy to discuss them in the modmail.

That's the deal. I sincerely apologise to all of our regular users for this inconvenience, and I hope for my sake and yours that we can reopen in a timely and orderly fashion. Please feel free to discuss this or anything else in the comments of this post - treat this as a megathread for the closed sub, for the time being.

Thanks.
**Pinned post 2** (posted on r/okbuddyretard on March 12, 2020; screenshot captured on March 13, 2020)

Subscriptions By Day 3 - Everything is going to be okay. I think.

[Image of a bar chart showing subscription trends]

**“OKBR is gone” post** (posted on r/ironicmemes on March 11, 2020; screenshot captured on March 11, 2020)

OKBR is gone. I have nowhere else to post this

[youtube link]