

REBELLIOUS CREATIVE MAKING:
A MEME-MAKING STUDIO PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

Rebellious Creative Making: A Meme-Making Studio Pedagogy explores the potential for meme-making to function as a heightened form of studio pedagogy in design education. It investigates how meme-making can effectively critique and challenge conventional design methods, inspiring students to be bold and take risks by considering non-conventional design processes and outputs. This dissertation begins with a brief introduction to the contemporary social and political impact of memes, linking them to art and design history to speculate on their potential in creative making. It then details a meme-themed workshop that was conducted to directly observe participants' meme-making processes. Participants' meme work, presentations, and interviews were closely analyzed to achieve an understanding of how their learning through meme-making differed from their previous experiences in design school. Participants' meme works reflected a variety of design styles and topics pertaining to political, social, and personal issues. These works and the participants' own responses suggest that the workshop functioned as a stress-free design-making process in which makers felt sufficiently relaxed to comfortably explore their desired topics and styles. As participants expressed themselves and their viewpoints through meme-making, they also felt healed from both their negative thoughts and experiences in life and, more specifically, their previous oppressed experiences with design education. The results of the meme workshop provide valuable insight into current issues of studio pedagogy in commercialized education institutions; these insights give way to potential improvements aimed at valuing the benefits of creative education beyond its practical purposes in pursuit of self-growth among learners.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This dissertation explores the visual culture of internet memes and the making process behind them as a pedagogy that encourages graphic designers to break conventional rules and foster self-growth as creative individuals. Having spent half my life as a student, professional, and educator in art and design, I have observed a paradox within the creative industry and artistic institutions. Despite the myth that such environments foster creativity and open-mindedness among artists and designers, the reality is often the opposite. Once graphic designers have learned and practiced design principles and rules through their education and professional experiences, they frequently come to constitute gatekeepers of these conventions. Instead of becoming more open-minded to different forms of visual communication, many experienced designers become more defensive about the genres and styles that are familiar to them—meaning those that have been long established in the industry. This closed-off mindset is particularly harmful in design education, in which the goal should be to encourage designers to experiment and explore innovative new avenues of design. Graphic design work that abides by conventional rules and is oriented toward market trends often has a generic “business” look; capitalism ultimately homogenizes graphic design, leading to unoriginal and uninteresting outcomes. Through education and social conventions, creativity often comes to be associated with its economic value (Kalin, 2016). In my field of graphic design, this association manifests as an undue emphasis on functionality and problem-solving, overshadowing the potential for design to serve as a form of critique or to explore other artistic expressions that may lack immediate commercial applications. The concept of design’s “sublime uselessness,” by which design transcends utilitarian purposes to serve as a medium for critique and artistic exploration, remains undervalued (Cabianca, 2016).

Still, I am able to find great joy in viewing creative works on social media, especially those that people call “memes.” Contemporary meme researchers define internet memes as digital artifacts that spread in online communities while constantly being altered, modified, and recontextualized (Börzsei, 2013; Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2013). Today, internet memes have developed into complex creative forms that users employ to share their ideas or create a social or political impact. Memes constitute a form of visual culture that thrives on breaking conventions and subverting expectations. They are created and shared by everyday people—often those without any formal training in art or design—and they make use of humour, irony, and absurdity to communicate ideas and emotions. This grassroots nature of meme culture democratizes creative production, challenging the professional design field’s gatekeeping and traditional hierarchies.

I have long found the humorous core and constantly evolving nature of internet memes highly attractive on a fundamental level. At the same time, with my professional knowledge and habits in mind, I’ve observed that the visual components of memes are highly similar to those common in graphic design. This observation naturally led me to wonder how I could use memes to explore different means of design-making. By using a design-based method, I completed my master’s thesis by studying memes and creating designs influenced by memes rather than traditional design conventions. The findings of my master’s thesis ultimately broadened my views and bolstered my prowess in graphic design. I gained a deeper understanding of how meme-making provides designers with novel means of design-making and a straightforwardly fun creative process. Around this time, I began working as a design educator at York University’s School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design (AMPD). I noticed a tendency in design classrooms that starkly contrasted meme-making; many students experienced stress, fear, and even nervous breakdowns following harsh critiques of their imperfect work along conventional standards. I realized that the professionalism in the field of graphic design could reach

beyond mere gatekeeping and inflict more serious harm. This motivated me to look into the literature on design education, in which I found many designers and design educators addressing the limitations of institutional education on conventional design principles. It was in this context that I shifted my focus from my own meme-making to its potential to benefit a larger group of learners.

Commercially-driven institutional design education may limit one's creativity by focusing on conventional work. With that said, my experiences visiting Cranbrook Academy of Art, attending a workshop of Jeff Keedy - a professor at California Institute of the Arts(CalArts) and influential designer, and interviewing influential designers Rudy VanderLans and Zuzana Licko, who collaborated closely with CalArts, have shown me that experimental artwork and movements can also thrive within art institutions. My interactions with these designers and educators demonstrated that experimental work can flourish through pedagogies that avoid setting conventional standards, encourage risk-taking, and foster a creative space where artists and designers share feedback and inspiration. In contrast, while memes are often shared in large online communities, the process of meme-making is usually a private endeavour. This is where a studio setup and pedagogies that promote experimental creative practices could benefit meme-makers looking to enhance their skills. When creators isolate themselves from diverse perspectives during their process, their work tends to reflect only their own beliefs and experiences. This can also lead to "art block," where creators feel stuck in their creative work due to a lack of fresh ideas and inspiration. Multiple studio pedagogy literature have suggested that art classrooms and studios are "communities of practice" where learners get help from not only the instructor but also other learners in polishing their skills, expand their knowledge and get different perspectives to see their work(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sawyer, 2017). Thus, I believe that a studio setup or a community of creators is crucial for fostering creativity, which inspired me to design a meme-making workshop.

This dissertation assesses a non-conventional studio pedagogy through the lens of meme culture to understand how students can gain media literacy, confidence in exploration and experimentation, and several other benefits through novel design-making approaches. During my fieldwork, I was fortunate to have all nine of the participants in my meme-making workshop come from AMPD at York University. This enabled me to more attentively observe how art and design students engage with meme-making practices. I sought to uncover how my participants (art and design students) could consider, reflect on, and violate the conventional design-making principles and habits shaped by their experiences in an art or design program. Beyond my direct observations of the making process, I also prompted the participants to talk about their process and work through group presentations and individual interviews in order to determine the degree to which they felt they could break from their familiar design-making patterns and habits through meme-making. Their descriptions delineate their mental journeys from nervousness and perfectionism to an openness toward rule-breaking and experimentation. The memes they created during the workshop demonstrate how they utilized memes to rebel against conventional aesthetics and design-making. Most importantly, through in-depth conversations, I explored the other benefits of meme-making felt by each participant from a personal perspective. These findings offer valuable reflections and critiques of the current outcome-oriented pedagogies in design education. They also provide fresh insight into the potential alternative purposes of design-making, resonating with the idea of “sublime uselessness” (Cabianca, 2016).

Internet Memes: Background and Problems

Over the last two decades, internet memes have emerged as a significant element of daily online communication. For younger people born since the 1990s, memes have come to wield a ubiquitous presence in digital environments. They are

created and shared across various social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, Instagram), which feature what functionally serve as meme databases, enabling users to incorporate pre-made memes into their posts or comments. Additionally, meme-generating websites provide users with the ability to create memes within a matter of seconds using template-driven software, while mobile applications facilitate the rapid editing of photos and videos for use in the meme-making process. As memes continue to dominate social media and networked communication, they are increasingly being recognized as a form of civic participation. Beyond serving as a way for people to express their emotional reactions—their agreement or disagreement—memes have played a central role in the promotion of multiple social and political movements, including #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, and the #UmbrellaMovement. In such contexts, memes serve to connect individuals and communities across different geographical locations, rallying support for social justice and democratic aims (Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2013).

Like many other artforms, memes can serve as vehicles for ideology. While memes play a significant role in media activism, certain aspects of meme culture have become notorious for fostering stereotypes, discrimination, and hate speech. For instance, during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, social media users frequently employed memes to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, influencing the atmosphere of the U.S. presidential election (Mina, 2019). According to McSwiney et al. (2021), memes "have an increasingly salient role in the far right's digital visual culture" (p. 2502). Shifman argues that certain image-macro memes (most commonly seen memes with captions on the top or the bottom of an image), like "Successful Black Man" and "High Expectations Asian Father," perpetuate stereotypes about racialized communities (2014). Nakamura views internet memes—as well as digital images and avatars more broadly—as a form of "identity tourism" that enables individuals to disguise or manipulate their identity for various purposes (2001).

Dean (2016) cautions us, explaining that memes are “vulnerable to appropriation and capture”; they are subject to interpretation by whoever is in possession of them at a given moment (para. 13). Hence, it is crucial to recognize that memes can become platforms from which dominant ideologies oppress and marginalize minority communities. Additionally, engagement algorithms on search engines and social media platforms can promote the spread of digital content, including memes, that perpetuates oppressive misrepresentations of racialized individuals (Chun, 2021; Noble, 2018).

Like any artwork, meme creators’ intentions, artistic techniques, and social context as well as the audience’s understanding within that context all influence the way in which memes are interpreted. In other words, as Lasn (2002) describes, the public sphere of creative production is a battleground on which individuals express their political demands through creative expression; individuals must be literate to both construct such artistic signals and interpret those of others. Essentially, memes are never ideologically neutral; they are inherently intertwined with broader questions about equity, oppression, self-determination, and critical decision-making. This underscores the importance of social media users developing a high degree of media literacy in the modern digital era; only with such literacy can users truly understand the content published online, including its means of production and dissemination. Meme-makers need to be aware of their own intentions when creating memes and understand the potential sociopolitical impact of their finished works.

To comprehensively understand the nature and characteristics of meme culture, it is critical to organize hands-on learning experiences that allow learners to deconstruct and reexamine memes’ visual components. This approach is elaborated further in Chapter 2 through a review of existing theories and practices in art and design history. This effort to teach media literacy through the creation of memes is significant, as it bridges modern internet meme culture with a historical perspective from the fields of critical art history and design-making.

Defining Memes in Their Context

The word “meme” predates the Internet by several decades. Dawkins (1976) introduced the term in *The Selfish Gene* to refer to the process by which culture is passed from one person to another without biological mediation. He asserted that a meme is a self-replicating unit that becomes established in one’s thoughts, leading to mimicking forms of behaviour. Thus, memes can be passed from one individual to another by way of media communication (e.g., bodily gesture, sound, voice, text, ritual, narrative) and evolve as this conveyance process is repeated (Dawkins, 1976). Blackmore (2000) offered a novel perspective on Dawkins’s (1976) theory by referring to contemporary psychology, arguing that the human body is functionally a machine that carries and conveys memes. This idea understands culture, discourse, and language as things that individuals inhabit—as things that shape them—rather than as autonomous notions that they can simply control or act upon. As a result, one’s identity is not necessarily self-generated or autonomously constructed; rather, it is the result of sequential replications and transformations of that which already exists (Blackmore, 2000). For Blackmore (2000), patterns of memes can typically be identified within forms of social power and ideology, including religion, political propaganda, aesthetics, and culture, all of which demonstrated the existence of memes long before the emergence of “internet memes” on social media.

Early precursors to internet memes generally entailed the expression of emotions or clarifying text. Since screen-based communication in the early 1980s relied heavily on text (e.g., email) meme precursors like emoticons functioned as supplementary tools in online communication, serving to clarify intentions, convey emotional tones, and avoid misunderstandings in textual exchanges (Davison, 2012, p. 124). Over the course of the first two decades of the 21st century, memes evolved beyond emoticons to clarify text-based messages further still, undergoing significant growth alongside the rising prominence of personal digital devices, such as

smartphones and laptops. Memes flourished in the increasingly interactive Web 2.0 environments, particularly on social media platforms.

Today, screen-based media and social media tools shape our communicative practices, forms of social affiliation and expression, and civic and political practices. Digital platforms have come to constitute a major source of information and culture, and the speed with which visual information spreads across social media and networks has risen exponentially. Internet memes have emerged within the landscape of new media as a creative way for people to communicate with one another while expressing viewpoints and critiques. Memes have become ubiquitous on and integral to nearly every social media platform, having proliferated as part of the wave of emerging interactive Web 2.0 environments. Many memes are created by activists as accessible messages that convey emotional sentiments alongside simplified sociopolitical concepts, both imbued with critical meaning, to viewers with the ultimate aim of effecting social change and political action (Cole, 2021). This practice draws inspiration from various art movements throughout history, including Dadaism and Surrealism. Common techniques include “finding new ways of juxtaposing image and text” (Lasn, 2002), with such juxtaposition often serving as a foundation for critical art and design activism. Reflecting on these insights, I contemplate memes as a novel form of art and design that—despite being criticized for their amateur appearance and supposed status as “low art” among creative professionals—represents a culturally significant form of expression rooted in the masses.

Internet memes have several features in common with Dawkin’s (1976) original notion of memes; they are visual replicators that mimic, mutate, and “compete” with other memes for “viral communicability.” In the era of the Internet, memes are generally defined as cultural activities and productions that emerge online. Shifman (2013, p.29) defines memes collectively as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness

of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” Similarly, Milner (2018) defines them as “the linguistic, image, audio, and video texts created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives” (p. 1). Modern internet memes take various forms as digital artifacts that connect people in “complex, creative and surprising ways” (Shifman, 2013, p. 13). Earlier, I provided the definition of memes as digital artifacts that spread in online communities while constantly being altered, modified, and recontextualized by those communities (Börzsei, 2013; Mina, 2019; Shifman, 2013). In other words, only the collective can define whether a digital artifact constitutes a meme, as it is communal circulation itself that makes something a meme through a sense of “collective being” (Dean, 2016).

In one sense, most memes can be straightforwardly identified by their formal artistic conventions and their sociotechnical context. In another sense, nothing can become a meme without first undergoing widespread circulation and communal alteration. Thus, the online spread or viral communicability of a meme is one of its defining characteristics. This notion aligns with Dawkins’s (1976) comparison of memes to genes, by which he suggested that memes, like genes, must compete in order to survive and evolve. According to Baurecht (2020), a meme must first be recognizable before it can serve a purpose and, in turn, endure. Thus, a meme’s value is dependent on whether its viewers can understand it, relate to it, and then share it. This concept aligns well with the cornerstone of communication design (Baurecht, 2020): to transmit the message clearly and artistically, coordinating form with content. Continuing Dawkins’ (1976) analogy, such well-considered and innovative meme-making tactics enable individual memes to dominate discourse on the virtual “battlefield” where culture itself serves as a site of ideological debate (Lasn, 2002).

The rise of visual culture theory (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2002; Tavin, 2000) in digital media over the past two decades has offered theorists, artists, and educators

a valuable non-institutional perspective on creative activism that tones down the aforementioned “warfare”-adjacent language. More specifically, Bezemer and Kress (2008) insist that educators should pay closer attention to the multimodal aspects of screen culture, such as font, layout, colour, genre, and graphics, all factors to which designers pay attention. From the perspective of professional graphic designers, memes may be viewed as “amateur” work. Some memes employ a rough and “kitschy” intentionally in an attempt to subvert conventional design principles for comedic effect. More importantly, in an online community, memes are unlikely to be judged based on their aesthetic attributes. They are more likely to be judged based on (1) whether they immediately resonate with their viewers on an affective or emotional level; (2) whether they are done based on a surprising, unexpected, or original idea or use allusion or intertextual references in a relatable manner; (3) whether they effectively employ irony, satire, or parody to great comedic effect; (4) whether they make a political statement that the community supports (or rejects) and wants to spread further; and (5) the extent to which the viewers understand its cultural references, allegories, or meanings.

Many scholars have come to view social media platforms as a new public sphere where anyone with a smartphone and internet connection can participate in public debate—where individual voices can be heard and valued (Hinzo & Clark, 2019; Shifman, 2013). The widespread accessibility of the smartphone has influenced the daily lives, behaviours, relationships, and social structures of people around the world, transforming the way in which information is conveyed and spread and greatly expanding the number of people who can take on the role of “makers” of media (MacEntee et al., 2016). Jenkins (2006) argues that social media platforms support marginalized populations by facilitating their cultural output, driving the emergence of a more democratic online environment. This platform for critical digital cultural output provides opportunities for marginalized populations to represent themselves by sharing their ideas as well as the difficulties and injustices that they face (Hiebert

& Kortés-Miller, 2021; Hinzo & Clark, 2019; Vickery, 2014). Memes can be powerful tools for voicing social justice concerns and resisting power and oppression in cultural and political arenas, especially for marginalized and persecuted groups (Land, 2021; Yavuz, 2023; Zidani, 2023). For instance, memes created during the online #NoDAPL movement not only reflected the historical issues around colonization and the marginalization of Indigenous communities but also used humour to highlight the fact that “Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing survive” (Hinzo & Clark, 2019, p. 804). Similarly, children who belong to gender and sexual minority groups commonly use TikTok as a supportive online community in which they feel safe and comfortable discussing their experiences (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2021). A visual analysis carried out by Vickery (2014) reveals that online communities frequently use internet memes as a form of visual rhetoric to discuss inhibited subject matters, such as those pertaining to mental health, injustice, and bullying.

Of course, social media platforms facilitate efforts aimed at oppression alongside efforts aimed at doing away with oppression. While digital activists use memes to advocate for human rights and social justice, far-right internet trolls and cyberbullies view memes as a tool with which to spread hate speech targeting ethnic minorities, women, the LGBTQ2S+ community, and immigrants. Evidently, internet memes can be created, shared, and utilized for a wide variety of purposes by different online communities. In the sections that follow, I present several case studies illustrating ways in which internet memes have been employed across diverse contexts, including political, sociocultural, and personal arenas. Furthermore, I discuss the potential contributions that memes can make toward a brighter future with emerging technology.

Meme to Resist Political Surveillance

Memes' often vague, allusion-driven, and symbolic nature means that they are too complicated for AI-based censors and image-recognition tools to detect and interpret at the textual-linguistic level (Chen, 2021). As memes may or may not be allegorical in nature, they require interpretive work on the part of their viewers; even then, certain juxtapositions and allusions may slip through the cracks of human censors. For this reason, Mina (2014) asserts that memes have come to constitute an important political act against internet censorship in China:

Seen from the level of the individual and small communities, memes have great power and beauty. In China, we must understand social change memes as a form of citizen media, a small reclamation of power contra state media. They challenge official state media through remix and humor and draw on the norms of a broader internet meme culture to spread an alternative while encouraging others to participate and join the community. In response to censorship and erasure, they create voice and visibility; in response to terrifying human rights abuses, they create laughter and community; in response to droll Party euphemism, they create irreverent puns and fuzzy creatures. In the face of systematic dehumanization and unitary state messaging, they are a basic declaration of humanity composed of creative, idiosyncratic media. In the vast expanse of the digital Gobi Desert, they are a glimmer of hope, joy, humor and community. (Mina, 2014, p. 372)

Many meme-making techniques serve to (1) twist the original meanings of an image or a word by combining it with a new one to create new meanings; (2) use the image as a metaphor to reflect something implicitly or ironically; and (3) blend irrelevant elements together to create new connections. These functions align with Mina's description of the creation of "irreverent puns and fuzzy creatures" that foster a safe

space where meme-makers can escape internet censorship and discuss politics. In the case of China, argues Phillips (2015), even “trolling” behaviour is justifiable, as it serves to troll the Chinese government, which represses meme-makers’ freedom to openly discuss social events and point out the government’s mistakes.

The way that Chinese meme-makers use memes to avoid state censors while talking about politics resonates with de Certeau’s (1984) notion of “tactics” as actions taken to escape from social regulations, norms, and conventions shaped by the dominant power. Phillips (2015) pulls one example from Mina’s presentation that I think effectively elaborates on both ideas of “tactics” and the ways in which memes work as “tactics” on Chinese social media. She writes:

In 2011, a high-speed rail train crashed in Wenzhou, southern China. Initially, the government attempted to cover up the cause of the crash. Sina Weibo’s users (Weibo is a Chinese microblogging platform similar in function and layout to Twitter) didn’t buy this explanation and posted countless image macros and subversive comics, with which the government censors couldn’t keep pace. Not long after the crash, and as a direct result of these memetic interventions, the Chinese government was forced to reverse its position. In this way, Weibo users essentially trolled the Chinese government into publicly acknowledging both the crash and its cause. (Phillips, 2015, p. 166)

In China, the majority of social media platforms currently employ algorithms to detect and remove “sensitive” online posts. Although sophisticated tools are being created in China to suppress free speech, some posts can avoid detection through the use of homophones and memes (Hiruncharoenvate et al., 2021). While such posts may be taken down in the future, with their means of avoiding detection added to a list of words and symbols to track moving forward, Chinese Internet users never cease to

innovate, developing new tactics—including novel terms, phrases, and memes—to get around social media censorship. This Chinese case demonstrates how individuals can use internet memes to question and fight back against political power structures (such as those found in state media and mainstream social media), outdated social norms, conventional aesthetic values, media hegemony, and surveillance capitalism, among many other oppressive institutions.

Meme to Resist the Hegemony of Cultural Symbols

Pepe the Frog is a cartoon character created by artist Matt Furie for a 2005 comic entitled “Boy’s Club.” Pepe was designed as a laidback, amiable figure and quickly became a pop culture icon and popular meme element on platforms like MySpace, Tumblr, and 4Chan. As the meme spread, it gave way to countless alternative versions, such as “smug Pepe,” “sad Pepe,” and “angry Pepe.” “Angry Pepe” became particularly popular on 4Chan’s /b/ (random) board, which is well-known today for being a base for the earliest internet trolls and alt-right groups (Phillips, 2015).

Pepe was first prominently linked to a hate symbol after the 2015 Umpqua Community College shooting in Roseburg, Oregon. Before this mass shooting, an anonymous user on 4Chan had posted a meme with Pepe holding a gun alongside the following caption: “don’t go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest.” The next day, ten people (including the shooter) were killed at Umpqua Community College. Although there is no solid evidence, many people linked this Pepe post with the Umpqua Community College shooting (Lopez, 2015). The connection between Pepe the Frog and the alt-right was reinforced during Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign when many Trump supporters posted memes on 4Chan that associated Pepe with Nazi symbols and white supremacy. Donald Trump also retweeted a meme depicting himself alongside Pepe, captioned “You Can’t Stump the Trump” (BBC, 2016).

Given the high frequency of alt-right groups expressing their political views with

depictions of Pepe in memes and the affirmation of their spiritual leader, Donald Trump, there is a perceived cultural and symbolic link between Pepe and the alt-right. In late September 2016, the Anti-Defamation League, a U.S.-based civil rights organization, added Pepe the Frog to their Hate Symbols Database, which serves to help the general public identify widespread online hate symbols. Notably, an ADL representative said in an interview that there is still a chance Pepe the Frog could regain its status as a fun and positive meme figure once more non-hateful Pepe memes are created and people no longer readily associate Pepe with alt-right sentiments. In response to this statement, Pepe the Frog's creator Furie put out an illustration of Pepe wearing a "Make Pepe Great Again" cap and urinating on a Pepe-faced Trump (Roy, 2016). Around this time, Furie also kickstarted an online movement—#SavePepe—to encourage people to make positive memes featuring depictions of Pepe. This battle for Pepe's soul eventually came to an end in 2017, when Furie created an illustration of Pepe's funeral and announced his death to prevent further harm from the alt-right movement (Vincent, 2017). Nevertheless, Pepe remains a beloved and well-known meme character in many nations today. By utilizing their favourite meme characters in increasingly novel, inventive, and constructive ways, people refuse to allow the far-right ideology to co-opt and conquer them. In this case, positive uses of Pepe's image manifest the figure's anti-oppression nature.

With their capacity to wield both oppressive and anti-oppressive characteristics, the nature of memes resonates with Lasn's (2002) assertion that all cultural products can become sites of ideological battle (2002). Thus, it is essential for us to consider who is behind these cultural products with a focus on their intentions, past statements, and objectives. To achieve this, viewers must place themselves in the shoes of creators. Thus, the role of creators is not solely focused on the craftsmanship behind cultural products but also on comprehending their audiences, who effectively constitute active participants in the creative process. My area of study in graphic design is

closely intertwined with the visual culture of internet memes given that they lie at the intersection of informal artistic practices and studio-based artistic techniques. By examining internet memes through the lens of critical visual creation, one can detach memes from as well as scrutinize the commercial and instrumental aspects of visual design. Memes may also serve as a source of inspiration for designers to envision a form of graphic design that transcends its utilitarian and commercial nature.

Meme for Collective Healing

It is also worth pointing here to a trend started from 2024 among Chinese and Japanese online communities wherein meme-makers use cat memes to craft videos recounting traumatic experiences, including instances of family trauma, domestic abuse, and bullying, among other taboo themes. While there has yet to be any proper research done on this specific trend, it aligns with the findings of Vickery's 2014 study on the Confession Bear meme from 2012. Vickery's research elucidates how an animal macro meme like Confession Bear evolved into a standard image template for memes addressing taboo topics. Vickery highlights how this meme provided an outlet for previously silent victims of traumatic experiences, empowering them to outwardly express their feelings and stories, albeit within the confines of anonymity and without necessarily resolving the underlying social injustice (2014). The trend of cat meme videos (#猫ミーム) originated within Japanese online communities on YouTube, which were initially inspired by a video made by a content creator under the name of Yokohama Chinese Guys (横浜中華guys). In this video, the creator humorously recounts their decision to study in China despite having no prior knowledge of Chinese life using a series of expressive cat meme clips. These clips feature popular cat figures from lighthearted videos that had previously trended on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. They encompass a wide range of emotional sentiments, including happiness, excitement, anger, shock, and befuddlement. This video gained traction and was

later translated into Chinese for a repost on Bilibili, one of China's most popular video platforms. Bilibili users were intrigued by this unique and creative storytelling format and began creating their own cat meme videos, each with their own narrative. More and more cat meme videos were produced and posted on YouTube by Japanese users before being translated and reposted on Bilibili. While cat meme videos that conveyed funny and positive stories initially garnered a higher level of popularity, there was a significant undercurrent of videos on Bilibili using this style to share deeply personal, dark, and traumatic stories. For example, a cat meme video depicting how the creator's father's affair destroyed their parents' marriage and tore their family apart has garnered 4.83 million views on Bilibili (as of January 2025). A similar video portrays the creator's childhood, detailing how their mother had neglected them following the death of their father, falling into a life of constantly rotating partners (3.02 million views as of January 2025). Another recounts the creator's experience of being diagnosed with a malignant tumour the day before a university entrance exam and their subsequent journey fighting the disease with a positive attitude (1.95 million views as of January 2025). There are innumerable videos in this vein beyond these handful of examples; they cover a wide range of sensitive issues, such as mental health, adolescence, bullying, and growing up with a single mother, among many others.

Despite the subject diversity, these cat meme videos generally have quite a bit in common. Most significantly, they often feature dramatic narratives after initially garnering engagement from their visuals. As the audience becomes immersed in cat-driven narratives, they discover that the stories tackle serious, taboo, or heavy topics. Viewers frequently share similar experiences or messages of support in the comments, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Through this trend, meme-makers and their audiences engage in discussions about challenging and taboo subjects, expressing their feelings and experiences while seeking affirmation. These expressions may not directly solve real-world problems, as Vickery notes (2014), but

I have personally observed that they serve as a way for creators and audiences to anonymously address personal issues through collective healing. The creators behind cat meme videos effectively utilize the act of creating and sharing these videos as a form of collective therapy. By openly discussing their challenges and supporting one another, individuals participate in a shared journey of self-healing and self-care while simultaneously fostering a sense of community and resilience that enables them to confront and navigate life's challenges together. This process may help in shaping communities, thus serving as a starting point for addressing social problems rooted in shared concerns among people. What is also notable in this case is that the meme serves as a bridge between the Japanese community on YouTube and the Chinese community on Bilibili. Evidently, memes can extend beyond the functionality of language, bonding communities across different cultures.

Meme-Making as a Form of Resistance Against Algorithmic Power and AI Image-Making

Algorithms and big data are increasingly responsible for the content that we encounter online, and these automated decisions shape our cultural experiences, norms, advertisements, and media interactions based on the data that we provide online and the communities that we are “matched” with on popular media platforms (Jones, 2021). Many scholars have raised concerns about the modern dominance of algorithms, highlighting issues of automation, election interference, political polarization, surveillance technology, and algorithmic bias, which can manifest in new forms of racism and discrimination (e.g., Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Leander & Burriss, 2020; Noble, 2018). Algorithmic operations often result in biased content, directing users toward “ideological bubble worlds” based on user data regarding their gender, age, race, and even emotional state. These algorithmic classifications shape individuals’ understanding of themselves as “scalable subjects,” the identities and emotions of

which can be quantified (Stark, 2018).

In this environment, we are surrounded by narratives and representations of “reality” that define our identities and shape our imaginations and desires. In the modern social media era, these experiences are translated into social media feeds and digital creations, such as Instagram posts, YouTube videos, TikToks, Tweets, Spotify playlists, and, of course, memes (Chun, 2021; Nakamura, 2002; Stark, 2018). This tailored content-delivery system can exacerbate social injustices like racism and sexism by perpetuating stereotypes and biases via algorithmic identity classifications (Noble, 2018). Moreover, the issues of cultural appropriation and the circulation of images of racialized persons by both humans and algorithms (Dean, 2016) represent significant concerns that AI model developers, social media content producers, and social media users need to address.

The problematic logic of big data is also evident in models of generative artificial intelligence (AI). According to journalist Ananya Rastogi (2024), a graduate student and her colleagues at Stanford University discovered (in 2022) that generative AI models like Stable Diffusion and Dall-E routinely produce images featuring racist stereotypes without direct prompt, associating skin colours with different levels of wealth and poverty. This occurrence is not surprising considering that AI models are trained using massive datasets (similar to common algorithms) that are generally sourced from the Internet, where information is not fact-checked and may contain severe biases. Many scholars today are concerned about the overemphasis on big data, insisting that categorized and labelled data may not fully capture the complexities of cultural information (e.g., Langlois et al., 2015; Noble, 2018; Van Dijck, 2014). Some even argue that data represents abstract thoughts, emotions, and facts as sets of “computable symbols” (e.g., Langlois et al., 2015, p. 7). A significant issue with algorithms and generative AI built on big data is their lack of a critical understanding of the pre-existing information on which they are trained. Generative AI technology is advancing at a rapid

pace. As of April 2024 (the completion of this dissertation's first draft), the most recently released generative AI model is Sora AI, which is capable of producing high-quality videos based on text prompts. It is undeniably the most powerful form of generative AI yet. Despite such generational improvements in AI technology, what I have observed from the perspective of a professional visual designer are mere improvements in visual quality, image resolution, and detail accuracy. Advancements in AI technology have not necessarily signified an improvement in the technology's critical understanding of cultural information, representation, or complex symbolism. I consider memes to play a crucial role in addressing the concerns raised by generative AI and resisting the creative making approaches impacted by AI.

The logic of memes opposes the common logic of visual communication. Meme-making often entails no predictable pattern or sense. Unlike the logic of big data, which categorizes data using common labelling for communication, searching, and archiving purposes, memes are non-direct and non-literal in their communication. Their humour, which lies at the core of memes, is often implicit and symbolic, requiring a certain level of contextual knowledge to understand. Memes are also often open-ended when it comes to interpretation; they are ambiguous in their visual messages to the point where audiences with different experiences and backgrounds may understand them differently.

The three case studies outlined in this chapter demonstrate that internet memes have always stemmed from a culture of collectiveness. Throughout these cases, we can see numerous people putting active effort into debating the meaning of memes and even giving new meanings to them. This highlights another significant characteristic of memes: the fact that the symbolism embedded in a meme is constantly evolving based on the groups that make, use, and spread it. Memes have come to constitute an irreplaceable force of cultural production in the modern digital landscape. They may not be as delicate as sophisticated artwork created by professional artists or AI, and they may be viewed by many as "low art" and "low culture." Regardless, they are undeniably

vivid, surprising, and unpredictable as a result of the manner in which they are made and shared—as a result of the many people and communities behind their underlying culture. At the same time, meme-makers are currently exploring how they may use generative AI as a tool with which to create funny memes. Some older memes used “deepfake” technology, which employs AI to, for example, replace one face with another in a video in order to create humorous scenes like politicians singing pop songs. Newer memes, such as “A Time Traveler Going Back to Stop Memes,” use generative AI to reverse the actions of people in the video to interrupt some meme scenes from happening. These cases demonstrate that meme culture is open, constantly looking to incorporate new tools and technologies.

Summary

This chapter provided a brief introduction to my research and its focus on “internet memes,” tracing the evolution of the term from its origins as a biological concept to its current status as a prominent feature of pop culture. It explored the political, social, and personal impacts of memes within the digital landscape that they inhabit. The introduction sought to highlight the significant role that memes play in contemporary online activities, communication, and connections. Despite their amateurish appearance in the realm of visual culture, memes serve multiple functions within today’s public sphere, where they are utilized for political discourse, social justice advocacy, and personal expression. Having originated in grassroots communities, memes represent the thoughts, experiences, and emotions of everyday individuals using readily accessible digital tools. Consequently, they have emerged as valuable cultural artifacts worthy of study in pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of their impact in the digital era.

Throughout this chapter, I presented several functions of memes through a

series of case studies. The first two cases illustrated how memes serve as a form of daily resistance against online political surveillance and a way to spark political debates while creating new cultural symbols. These examples highlight the critical role that memes play in moulding contemporary political discourse on social media platforms. Some cases also showcased the potential personal impact that memes can have, as they provide a collective means with which individuals can navigate challenging life circumstances and foster communities. Furthermore, memes' unique characteristics—which defy the logic of big data—naturally encourage contemplation about an alternative future of creativity amid the rise of generative AI. As someone with a background in professional design, I envision memes as emblematic of a new generation of creative expression liberated from capitalist constraints, media hegemony, and institutionalized creativity. They offer a glimpse into a creative process that is truly free from conventional aesthetic conventions, allowing for uninhibited expression and humour in lively forms.

Moreover, this introduction acknowledged the genuine political power of memes. The public sphere has always been a battlefield on which artwork is created with underlying political intentions and demands (Lasn, 2002), and memes are no different in this regard. In the later chapters, rather than solely focusing on memes' political function—which is commonly one of the most discussed topics among scholars—I delve into meme-making techniques and the act of meme-making itself alongside their relationships with creators. Understanding the intentions and identities behind meme-makers may provide us with a better understanding of how memes shape sociopolitical views.

Chapter 2 examines memes through the lens of art and design history and theory, aiming to understand how meme-making techniques and intentions are rarely new. Rather, they generally have their roots in historical art movements, particularly those that were once radical and experimental. This analysis aligns with critical theories

on how aesthetics and conventions are infused with social class and capital activities through the tastes and styles imposed by institutional education (Bourdieu, 1989). In this way, social and educational institutions categorize works' level of creativity based on their cultural legitimacy, reflecting the societal belief that only a select few are truly creative and gifted in art and design. Thus, meme-making represents an opportunity to liberate creators from the conventional aesthetic system of making and judging creative work.

Chapter 3 proposes a meme workshop based on design studio pedagogy to potentially help social media users explore media literacy and embrace diverse methods of creative making. Studio-based learning offers an authentic, tool-rich environment for hands-on inquiry, making, and design while facilitating straightforward means of critique and reflection. Through studio-based pedagogy, I get participants to explore memes in depth—their aesthetic and cultural complexity, their meanings, and their potential for creativity. My research method aims to create a critical meme-making studio that serves as a learning environment that encourages critical making, creativity, and dialogue while fostering a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sawyer, 2017).

Chapters 4 to 6 outline my findings from the meme workshop, showcasing selected memes from the more than 80 that were originally made by my participants alongside insights from their final presentations and post-workshop interviews. These findings are intended to provide us with a better understanding of memes by breaking down the production process behind them, examining their appearances and underlying techniques, exploring the intentions of meme-makers, and, most importantly, assessing how the overall meme-making journey impacts meme-makers in their learning. These findings also offer a fresh perspective on potential issues with formal design education as well as potential means of improving the current studio model. The interviews also gave way to a particularly surprising and exciting finding: the fact that meme-making constitutes an important and meaningful practice for creators in fostering creativity

and self-healing from issues caused by the oppressive aspects of current education and other social issues. Overall, these chapters aim to articulate my curiosity about how design students and designers make memes to rebel against conventional and commercialized means of design-making, to experiment and explore alternative ways to pursue graphic design, and to challenge the conventional aesthetics of design in order to push its boundaries. Moreover, they provide insights into other potential benefits of meme-making beyond its educational value, particularly when it comes to creators' self-healing and growth.

Chapter 2: Critical Remix: From Dada to the Cult of the Ugly and to Memeing

The last chapter discussed the role of meme culture in political and social movements as well as the personal significance it holds for certain communities. While memes and their content have become a popular subject in sociology and political science research, my research shifts the focus to the process of meme-making and its potential benefits for learning and self-growth. I intend to dissect the elements of memes, including the techniques, tools, and creative rationale behind their creation. Meanwhile, as I discovered how similar the constitution of memes is to graphic design (to the extent that they may be generalized to visual communication), I realized that memes were barely considered to be graphic design in the professional field during my master's thesis period in 2018. In recent years, more advertising and marketing campaigns have used memetic strategies, as marketers have discovered the impact of memes on younger audiences.

Despite memes having become more generally acceptable as a form of visual communication, informal debates persist among designers regarding whether memes constitute design. Design professionals still widely consider memes to be “low art” or nothing more than mere jokes, largely due to their (sometimes intentionally) poor visual quality and unconventional style. I would like to stretch the boundaries of what we know about design by integrating memes under that umbrella, pushing design out of the bulb of professionalism that limits itself to alignment with industry standards. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine memes through the lens of art and design history and construct a theoretical framework for meme-making as a form of art and design. By exploring historical art and design movements, particularly those of the 20th century, I emphasize two key points. First, the techniques employed in meme-making are not novel; rather, they have roots in various avant-garde art movements throughout history. Second, memes can be considered a form of art, albeit one that is often categorized as “low art.” Moreover, I am intrigued by the meaning represented by meme-making to the creators themselves.

The intentions and social contexts of artists play a crucial role in visual analysis, as highlighted by scholars like Rose (2001). The intentions behind meme-making and the creative decisions made by meme creators (e.g., choice of techniques and tools) can provide valuable insights into the social contexts in which we live.

In my exploration of art and design movements, I am particularly drawn to the experimental and radical ones—those that were not recognized as proper art in their time but surprised people with their refreshing techniques, challenging our perceptions of visual creation. I am also attracted by work done by female artists in traditionally male-dominated eras, which often offered alternative perspectives and pushed the boundaries of artistic expression. These art and design movements influenced one another sequentially over time, inheriting a spirit of questioning and rebelling against aesthetic conventions and social norms. From Dadaism and Surrealism to Postmodernism and culture jamming, artists have long challenged established aesthetic norms, questioned ownership of art, and presented us with refreshing means of creating visuals. By exploring the history of such rebellious artists and their works, we can gain a deeper understanding of meme culture as a visual phenomenon and develop an appreciation for its significance in the spirit of rebellion in artistic practice.

Furthermore, this exploration of art history serves as a reminder of how avant-garde movements were often led by people from privileged backgrounds with professional training. This contrast underscores the liberating and inclusive nature of memes, which are accessible to everyday people through accessible everyday tools. Toward the end of this chapter, I explore how memes diverge from historical experimental art movements to form a unique experimental visual culture rooted in grassroots participation and democratization. This trend highlights the potential for digital technology and personal media to empower grassroots movements to adopt leading roles in art creation in the future.

Defining Critical Remix: The Intersection of Meme and Design

In this section, I look at a technique routinely involved in meme-making—remixing—and explore its intersection with early artwork that also employed a similar technique. Remixing is an artistic approach that originated in the realm of music production, particularly rooted in DJ and hip-hop music (Navas, 2021). Through the use of existing works (samples), artists alter, recombine, and compose them into alternative versions (Manovich, 2001; Navas, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that the rise of remix culture has been closely tied to the growth of digital media and tools, which have made copying and pasting, sampling, and layering elements far more flexible and accessible (Manovich, 2001; Navas, 2021). To identify a work as a remix, two critical components must typically be considered: 1) the use of samples or ready-made material; and 2) an alteration of these samples to create an alternative version of the original work. Remixing has taken root in various art genres, well beyond the confines of visual creation. In my professional field of graphic design, Adobe Creative Suite serves as the foundational digital toolkit that designers today must master to create high-quality design work. This collection of software includes Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, and many other applications that aid designers in creating and processing visuals, designing layouts, and programming motion graphics.

Today, Adobe Creative Suite applications offer creators large pools of fonts, stock images, and even AI-generated content, aligning with Manovich's (2001) description of new media language, whereby production involves the selection of existing materials and the recombination of those materials into new works. Hence, we could arguably identify graphic design as a component of remix culture given its digital tools, the logic of those tools, and its approaches to composition. Interestingly, the emergence of meme culture is also a result of the popularization of the internet and digital tools for visual creation, leading to similarities in the logic and composition of memes and design.

In the face of rapid technological advancement in cultural production, traditional

craftsmanship is encountering critical challenges. As early as 1996, design educator Lorraine Wild emphasized the importance of shifting design education from crafting perfect artifacts to fostering a greater understanding of research methods, questioning, and “learning how to learn” (para. 47). She outlined potential directions for “expanding the field” that designers could pursue to strengthen their professionalism, including writing and verbal expression techniques, visual grammar, sound design, system critiques, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of historical perspectives on social and cultural media development. Toward the end of her list, Wild (1996) also mentioned appreciating elements of fantasy, surrealism, game-playing, pranks, and bricolage as sources of creativity and stimulation when approaching new media (para. 48), which clearly resonates with the rise of meme culture. The work of both Manovich (2001) and Wild (1996) suggests that, especially from the late 1990s to the early 2000s alongside the popularization of new media, many artists and designers have undergone a major transformation in their skills and techniques, shifting from craftsmanship to a critical understanding of their work and its social contexts. This shift emphasizes traditional art-making skills less than it does learning research methods, critical self-reflection, and the development of historical and interdisciplinary perspectives. Rather than attempting to cover all types of memes and remix work, this dissertation focuses on what I consider to be “critical remixes”—artwork that can be identified as part of remix culture while still critically examining the existing conditions of art or understanding sampling cultures from a critical perspective.

Remix to Critique

Upon reviewing the significance of “technique” (Baurecht, 2020; Know Your Meme, 2010, 2013, 2015; Quinn, 2018; Tactical Tech, 2013), I identified several skills essential to critical meme-making and the corresponding critical understanding necessary to create critical memes:

- Juxtaposing recognizable photos with text or photos with other photos; requires a critical understanding of the visual grammar of the chosen photos.
- Using photos as a metaphor; requires a critical understanding of narrative development, storytelling, and visual grammar.
- Composing images and text while adhering to visual hierarchy; requires an understanding of visual grammar.
- Appropriating elements from both pop culture and new media culture; requires a critical perspective on the social and historical contexts of the sampled elements from both spheres.
- Video recording and editing; requires skills and knowledge in interactive visuals and video production (interdisciplinary knowledge).
- Audio composition; requires skills and knowledge in sound or music production (interdisciplinary knowledge).
- Writing; requires writing skills to narrate concepts effectively.

This list of techniques and the critical knowledge that they require overlap to a significant extent with Wild's (1996) list of means of "expanding the field" for future professional graphic designers. Instead of identifying these critical skills and this knowledge as that which is required for contemporary designers, I prefer to identify them as elements of critical literacy for creative individuals who want to create experimental and innovative work. Looking back at art history, many artists have practised critical literacy in their creation of impactful work. In fact, the aesthetic techniques outlined above are typical learning objectives across various art disciplines, including visual art, film, and graphic design. They are often rooted in historical art movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, and Postmodernism. For instance, collage techniques that involve juxtaposing ready-made images with text, remixing images, decontextualizing

everyday artifacts, and imbuing them with new meanings were common practices in Dadaist artwork (Hopkins, 2004). More specifically, the common technique of critical remixing—juxtaposition—is “essentially the act of pulling an image out of its original context to create a new meaning” (Darts, 2004, p. 321), or the “appropriation of existing texts into newer texts,” in which contradictions and ironic tensions are brought into play (Jocson, 2013; Thumlert et al., 2020). The use of juxtaposition requires creators to have an in-depth and critical understanding of pre-remix materials as well as the artistic skills needed to deliver new meanings through their creative recombination.

Juxtaposition dates back to Dadaism’s emergence in World War I-era Europe. Dadaist artists particularly love combining everyday objects in unexpected ways to create artifacts that challenge notions of bourgeois art, which is isolated from everyday life (Hopkins, 2004). Marcel Duchamp’s work *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figure 2.1) has multiple meanings presented through juxtaposition. For example, the work depicts a mustache on the face in the famous *Mona Lisa* portrait. The doodled mustache is done on a postcard reproduced from the famous painting to create a new piece of art. The mustached *Mona Lisa* is titled *L.H.O.O.Q.*, which sounds like “she has a hot bum/ass” when verbalized in French (Seekamp, 2004). These juxtapositions—an image and doodles, an image with a caption, and a pun in the title—create several layers of meaning that are left up to viewers’ interpretation and ingenuity. Duchamp’s work *Fountain* (1917; Figure 2.2) juxtaposes a porcelain urinal with a signature: “R. Mutt 1917,” which he called “an ordinary manufactured object designated by the artist as a work of art.” What initially made *Fountain* so absurd was that Duchamp submitted it to the Society of Independent Artists as a piece of formal artwork—and it was declined (Howarth, 2000). I perceive the work as a multimodal juxtaposition in which the artifact, the name of the artifact, and the story behind the artifact all constitute elements of the meaning of *Fountain* as a whole. Perceived from the perspective of the people and artists of their time, both of the Duchamp works mentioned here were not initially

considered to be art and were likely seen as pranks. The addition of a mustache to the *Mona Lisa* alongside the inclusion of “vulgar language” on an everyday object disrupted the revered aura of the masterpiece. Duchamp’s work had a profound impact on artists, particularly those who practised Postmodernism. I believe the impact is less about his artistic techniques and more about his spirit—endlessly pushing the boundaries of what art can be and what artists can do. The use and remix of readymade materials offer artists ways to pause from crafting “original work” and re-examine what has previously been produced from a fresh perspective.

Max Ernst’s Surrealist work *Une Semaine de Bonté* is a collage book featuring



Figure 2.1 L.H.O.O.Q.,
by Marcel Duchamp, 1919



Figure 2.2 Fountain,
by Marcel Duchamp, 1917



Figure 2.3 Une Semaine de Bonté, by Max Ernst, 1934

artworks created by cutting images from other sources and recombining them into new visuals. For example, the visual above (Figure 2.3) depicts a collaged illustration of a man observing a woman while the floor is flooded with water alongside victims of a shipwreck. Surrealist collages, like those in Ernst's works, create an "irrational juxtaposition of pre-existing elements [that] mirrors the construction of dreams, which also bring together seemingly unrelated things to create strange narratives and scenes," (Cramer & Grant, 2008), suggesting that they had a key influence of Sigmund Freud's study of dreams and unconsciousness. In other words, when an artist creates an "irrational juxtaposition" that refers to fantasies or dreams, it resists or critiques the reality of the present—our rationally understood norms. The technique of juxtaposition also allows for impossible scenes to occur in the creation of art, combining objects or

scenes from different dimensions and times. Surrealist artwork uses existing elements to make unexpected juxtapositions in order to concretely create a new reality whose similar techniques can also be found in the work of Duchamp and Rosler. Both Hopkins (2004) and Burger (1984) address avant-garde art as a critical artistic discourse that examines and critiques art itself as an institution in addition to understanding art as a means of transforming everyday life.

Photomontage artist Martha Rosler is well known for her use of war photographs alongside images from popular culture to create anti-war collage work (Meyer, 2008). Her well-known series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (Figure 2.4) explores the concept of “living-room war”—the way in which media images influence a communal conflict experience—by contrasting images of war scenes in Vietnam with the opulence of American homes (Hubber, 2020). The photomontage-induced contrast between “peaceful everyday American life” and war scenes clearly demonstrates how critical remixing can be effective in terms of elevating our everyday experiences (the collective war experience) by fusing the familiar (a living room) with the unfamiliar or repressed (a war scene). Roser made this work to “draw attention to the horror of the war raging overseas, while the mainstream media underplayed it” (Halverson, 2019); it reminds us of how postwar domestic plenty in the U.S. rested on the apparatus of imperialist wars abroad. The underlying concept here is somewhat similar to that in Max Ernst’s surrealist work *Une Semaine de Bonté*, which also uses collage to create impossible or surreal scenes as a way to question what is real and “normal” in our daily lives. Thus, Rosler’s work is representative of many collage artworks that, instead of aiming to recreate a real scene and focusing on photos’ factual elements, focus more on creating feelings, impressions, fantasies, and other types of subjective experiences. The core of a collage work is constantly situated in its interpretative ambiguity, evoking mixed feelings and experiences rather than a clear or factual assertion.

The collage series *President Collage* (Figure 2.5) by Sherrie Levine similarly



Figure 2.4 House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, by Martha Rosler, 1967-1972

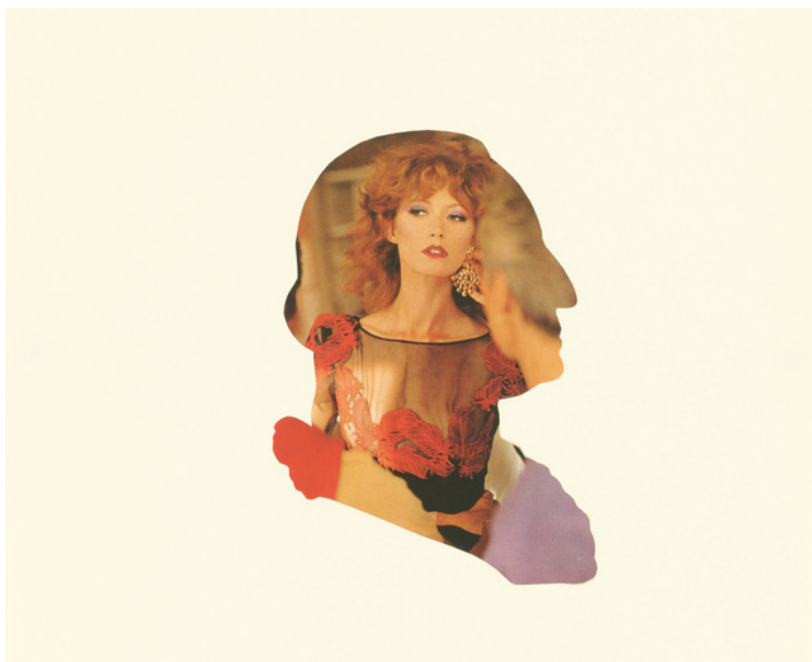


Figure 2.5 President Collage, by Sherrie Levine, 1979

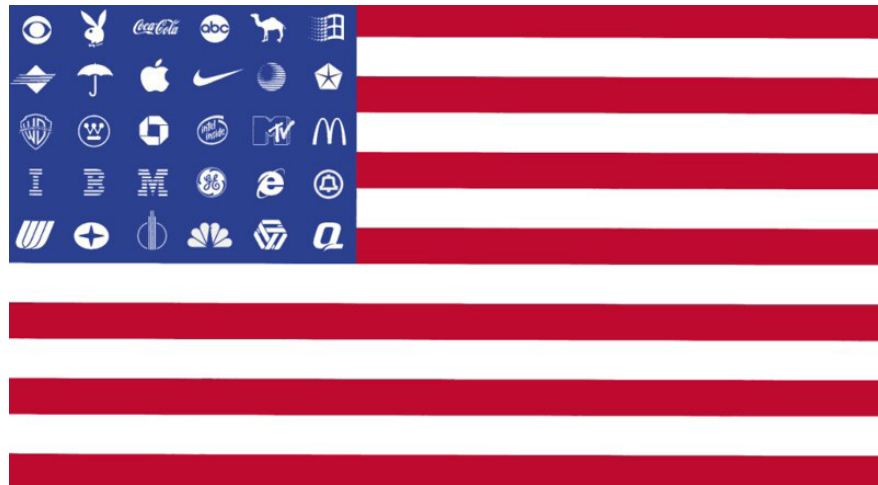


Figure 2.6 Corporate Flag, by Shi-Zhe Yung, 2000

uses juxtaposition between photos. Levine framed magazine cutouts of female models into silhouettes of former Presidents of the United States. Levine's *President Collage* series ponders issues and dynamics of political power and its links to patriarchy and the male gaze; it also raises the issues of authorship in artistic making, as Levine's collages are remixes of pictures from mass-produced magazines (Gugala, 2010). As with Rosler's work, the elements of the collage are minimal, combining only two major visual elements. The selection of which images to remix is constantly critical of artists based on the critical perspective conveyed in their artwork. Another aspect frequently brought up when discussing Sherrie Levine's work is her appropriation of images. Although such appropriation in the Postmodern art movement led to extensive discussions on authorship, this trend persists in contemporary art and even meme culture, becoming a far more natural approach in modern remix production.

Similar to the use of readymade materials and remix techniques in the works mentioned above, some contemporary creative organizations like *Adbusters* have a

clear focus on criticism with their sights on capitalist activities (e.g., advertisements, logos). *Adbusters* is a Canadian publication founded by Lasn (2002) in 1989 to serve as a hub for activists and creatives who primarily employ culture jamming as a means of opposing capitalism. Works in *Adbusters* frequently employ juxtapositional techniques, taking familiar consumerist symbols that people see in their everyday lives and modifying them or fusing them with other aspects to create satirical works or images that provoke conversations about ideology, consumerism, environmental justice, social injustice, and/or identity formation (Klein, 2002). According to Lasn (2002), culture jamming as a practice helps jammers to better understand corporate structure. Through this practice, individuals can appropriate the same innovative design techniques and corporate symbols that businesses employ for self-promotion in order to deploy them against consumerism in a way that reveals the contradictions inherent in capitalism. For instance, *Adbusters*' well-known piece *Corporate Flag* (Figure 2.6), designed by Shi-Zhe Yung for *Adbusters*' design contest, replaces the stars on the American flag with well-known corporate logos. This juxtaposition satirizes the dominance of corporate power over political power. The American flag and the logos of corporate giants are both well-known symbols, but their pairing produces fresh interpretations that force the viewer to consider the links between politics and capitalism.

Through all the artists and artworks discussed above, it is clear that the modern path for memes was paved by predecessors who practised collage (an early form of remixing), utilized everyday readymade materials (sampling), and challenged the prevailing norms of their times. There are clear parallels in modern memes, which I will break down in the following sections. Most significantly, memes constitute an everyday form of digital remixes. By employing familiar/everyday elements in novel ways to produce a discordant collage, critical remixes create alternative meanings and counter-narratives, helping us to reassess and reimagine how our routinized everyday lives may be structured largely by taken-for-granted assumptions and hegemonic systems;

through memes, “new meanings and counternarratives are constructed through the aesthetic yoking of one image to another incongruous or contradictory image, a coupling of heterogeneous elements generative of a critical illumination” (Thumlert et al., 2020, p. 56). Like culture jamming, critical remixing (which takes inspiration from 20th-century art movements), challenges the ideologies and narrative conventions that gave rise to pre-remix components through the use of juxtaposition, collage, and montage techniques. We can observe how remixing cultures—which entails the creative conversion of existing pieces into new creations—was practised as a critical method in the context of 20th-century art movements. This practice continues today through critical meme-making, and the digital form in which memes are made and circulated will further reinforce meme-making as an affordable, accessible, and everyday practice for ordinary people. Hence, critical meme-making will contribute to the liberation of creative making from commercial and instrumental purposes, enabling creative amateurs to practise creative making on a daily basis with everyday materials while encouraging young social media users to explore the issues and concerns in their communities.

The subtle and unexpected mixing of images in memes prompts viewers to reassess their existing knowledge and forge new connections between disparate elements, often revealing the contradictions of or offering critical insights into a situation or state of affairs. Regardless of their level of sophistication, these techniques often culminate in memes’ conceptual and emotional “punchline”—the insight or the humorous response. This assumes that the audience can interpret the collision of images and text or grasp the cultural allusions and references embedded in the remix. Indeed, humour is another core characteristic of memes, echoing the spirit of Dadaism.

Humour: A Deconstructive Play

Earlier avant-garde experiments were predominantly confined to traditional

artforms. And many contemporary memes now employ avant-garde techniques to challenge established norms and conventions. In fact, some scholars have likened memes to distinct art genres, such as Neo-Dadaism. Hoins (2018) suggests that meme culture, akin to Neo-Dadaism, emerged from a shared desire to express disillusionment with an “over-promised world” in which individual prosperity is not guaranteed, be it due to war or neoliberalism. Surreal memes, those explicitly labelled as “surreal,” boast a bizarre and absurd artistic style (Know Your Meme, 2017) that is heavily influenced by Surrealist art. Essayist Greenbaum (2020) contends that internet memes embody quintessential Postmodern artistry. According to Greenbaum (2020), Postmodern art and memes exhibit similar characteristics, including irony, irreverence, intertextuality, self-reference, and meta-fiction, alongside an overarching skeptical, cynical, and pessimistic tone. Like other artforms, memes have become a means of artistic representation for “ugly feelings,” meaning negative emotions indicative of late capitalist conditions; these emotions express powerlessness and inequality through art through specific representations, styles, techniques, and other aesthetic forms (Ngai, 2007). In fact, the representation of negative feelings through humorous rhetoric is also common in Dadaism and Surrealism, under which many humorous artworks were created to counter despair, sorrow, and fear in wartime (Sliwinski, 2011). This may explain the deeper rationale behind these humorous expressions.

No matter the feelings that a meme seeks to convey, it often manifests itself through humour rather than through direct criticism or assertion. Many theories associate humour with emotional outlets (Eagleton, 2022) or reflections of the subconscious, including those put forward by Freud (1976). In this section, I review Terry Eagleton’s (2022) theory of humour and Gina Barreca’s (2013) theory of women’s humour to explore the purposes and functionality of humorous techniques in meme-making.

Eagleton (2022) suggests that laughter reflects an intense form of a breakdown

of coherence in line with extreme displays of emotions like grief and rage, both of which lead to a loss of physical control reminiscent of infancy. Therefore, laughter cannot be easily suppressed; when it occurs, it reflects an honest reaction to that being perceived. In this way, humour and the laughter it evokes pose a threat to authority and prevailing power structures:

Comedy poses a threat to sovereign power not only because of its anarchic bent, but because it makes light of such momentous matters as suffering and death, hence diminishing the force of some of the judicial sanctions that governing classes tend to keep up their sleeve. It can foster a devil-may-care insouciance which loosens the grip of authority. In its carnivalesque mode, it may also breed a phantasmal sense of immortality, one that dispels the sense of vulnerability essential for the maintenance of social order. (Eagleton, 2022, p. 59)

In other words, humour can completely deconstruct the meanings, systems and unpredictable events in one's life—all the uncertainties that make one feel powerless, including governments, ideologies, tragedies, and even death. Comedy effectively serves as an act of rebellion against everything by claiming absolute autonomy of mind with no concern for or obedience to the subjects to which one is assigned. These uncontrollable uncertainties that people are forced to cope with are made easier by humour.

Gina Barreca (2013) points out that women—disciplined by social conventions to be “good girls”—have a particularly strong need to cope with the restrictions imposed on them by social norms. Humour can allow them to be their true selves without concern for conformity to conventional expectations of well-behaved women. Barreca (2013) also highlights another important function of humour, asserting that “women use comedy to narrate their experiences and diffuse the pain” (p. 22). She suggests a desire

to use humour to encourage women to openly discuss their experiences and feelings. Such open expression can make individual women feel better, much like how modern therapy works through conversation, but it is not purely a matter of venting; it is a matter of “narrating one’s experience,” enabling women to tell a better story that pleases both themselves and their audience. Indeed, humour is a technique that can only be improved through learning. Perhaps, as with other forms of knowledge and practice, one can get better at humour through learning and practice.

I believe that meme-making could be one way that people can practise to become more humorous in their work. Notably, such improvement may benefit learners beyond their ability to make jokes; it would also provide them with a better understanding of their own relationship with the society they live in and help them get through hard times using their creativity. Memes’ visual ugliness is an important element of their humorous nature. Memes constitute a visual culture that transforms verbal humour into visual humour through an understanding of both visual grammar and composition. In the next section, I address the importance of crafting “ugly” visuals by citing a few movements in graphic design. Through this discussion, I aim to explore how the crafting of “ugly” visuals may be a meaningful practice.

Cult of the Ugly 1.0 and 2.0

In my area of study, Postmodern graphic design draws significant inspiration from the Dadaist and Surrealist movements in its engagement in critical artistic dialogues. One notable intersection of “Poststructuralism” and graphic design occurred in North America in the 1970s and 1980s. The Cranbrook Academy of Art and the magazine *Emigre* constantly collaborated with designers and design students from the California Institute of the Arts. Many Cranbrook alumni and *Emigre* designers emerged as influential figures in experimental graphic and type design during the 1980s and 1990s, such as Ed Fella, Rudy VanderLans, and Zuzana Licko (both are founders of *Emigre*).

Their work demonstrates the exploration of non-mainstream graphic design styles and experiments in the incorporation of digital technology into design to push the boundaries of the field (Figure 2.7 and Figure 2.8). These critical experimental practices were closely associated with Postmodernism and deconstruction in graphic design and other product designs by the mid-1980s. Lupton and Miller (1994) describe deconstruction as part of the critical domain of “Poststructuralism,” asserting that it provided a critical path to aesthetic “Postmodernism.” This era was characterized by works that blend historical references and styles (pastiche) to challenge notions of progress and totality and those that utilize everyday materials and consumer objects to question essentialized definitions of art or implicate artworks within commodity-exchange relations.

Art in this era posed the question of what graphic design is when detached from its commercial value. Hence, experimentation may begin with a redefinition of the constitution of graphic design work itself. Wall (1995) argues that an artform, such as a photograph, “can only put into play its own necessary condition of being a depiction-which-constitutes-an-Object” (p. 249). Cabianca (2023) believes that Wall’s



Figure 2.7 Collection of Emigre's Covers

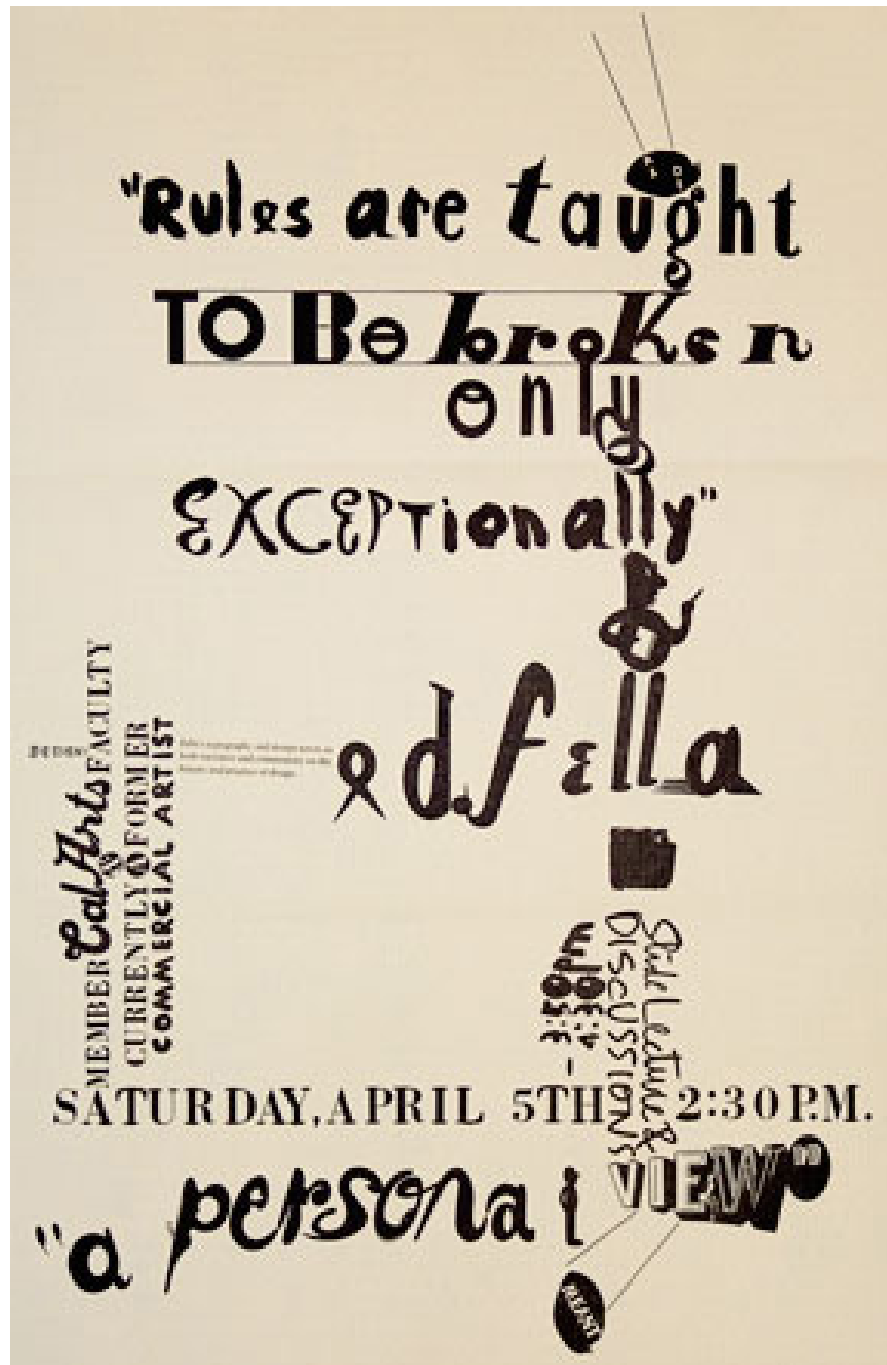


Figure 2.9 Rules Are Taught to Be Broken Only Exceptionally by Ed Fella, 1997

principle can be applied to graphic design as a deconstructive and experimental practice in order to reimagine graphic design forms in a manner detached from the utility of visual communication. According to Lupton and Miller (1994), the technique of deconstruction in Postmodern design is a critical “act of questioning.” In line with Darts’ (2004) description of the concept of “detournement” as the detachment of an image from its original context to reclaim it by creating new meanings Lupton and Miller (1994) assert that, through deconstruction, “design can critically engage the mechanics of representation, exposing and revising its ideological biases; design also can remake the grammar of communication by discovering structures and patterns within the material media of visual and verbal writing” (p. 365).

Additionally, deconstruction can signify a disruption of conventional design norms. Experimentation with “ugly design,” pioneered by designers and design institutions like the Cranbrook Academy of Art, the California Institute of the Arts, and *Emigre* magazine, was termed the “Cult of the Ugly” by Steven Heller (1993). Heller (1993) acknowledges that Postmodernism played a significant role in this “cult,” which challenged traditional notions of beauty:

The layered images, vernacular hybrids, low-resolution reproductions and cacophonous blends of different types and letters at once challenge prevailing aesthetic beliefs and propose alternative paradigms. Like the output of communications rebels of the past, this work demands that the viewer or reader accept non-traditional formats which at best guide the eye for a specific purpose through a range of non-linear “pathways,” and at worst result in confusion. (para. 5)

Memes exhibit characteristics similar to those of “ugly design” as described by Heller. Often created with low-quality aesthetics (in contrast to the conventions of

“good design”), memes have never been formally recognized as a genre of graphic design despite sharing almost identical creation processes. Notably, within the internet landscape, where memes originate and proliferate, this experimental visual practice extends beyond professional designers. Unlike Heller’s (1993) “Cult of the Ugly,” which was initiated by professional graphic designers, memes emerge from grassroots communities and individuals with no formal background in traditional aesthetics and with no fixation on the “truth of beauty.” Thus, I propose identifying internet memes as the “Cult of the Ugly 2.0”—a widespread but unconscious experiment in online visual expression initiated by ordinary individuals using everyday digital tools to articulate their experiences. According to Heller (1993), our culture requires a “Cult of the Ugly” in some form:

Ugly design can be a conscious attempt to create and define alternative standards. Like warpaint, the dissonant styles which many contemporary designers have applied to their visual communications are meant to shock an enemy—complacency—as well as to encourage new reading and viewing patterns. (para. 8)

Memes could inspire graphic designers to explore non-conventional means of crafting designs, encouraging them to examine the use of so-called “bad design decisions” in order to consider pushing the boundaries of that which are considered “good” and “bad” design. This approach may liberate graphic designers from the rules and restrictions they have internalized from their time at art institutions and in the industry, enabling them to focus on the constitution of visual communication itself. The “Cult of the Ugly” also serves as a constant reminder of the importance of re-examining “ugliness” in a world that constantly pursues beauty. Such re-examination can help us to understand how social norms are established and enable us to push the boundaries of

our knowledge.

We Are All Capable of Making Memes

As mentioned earlier, memes represent a unique cultural movement distinct from previous movements in art and design history (though such movements do provide valuable theoretical and practical frameworks for understanding memes). What sets meme culture apart is its widespread grassroots foundation. Memes are shared across different nations and cultures, sometimes transcending language barriers. They have the power to bring people together from around the world due to advancements in digital technology and the accessibility (and popularity) of the Internet. This widespread reach has fundamentally changed who can create and publish cultural productions, distinguishing creators today from those of the past. Media experiences play a significant role in shaping our behaviours, identities, and social narratives (Rose, 2016). Visual experiences—in addition to influencing our discursive systems, cultures, and social norms—contribute to the (re)construction of ideologies and narratives (Darts, 2004; Foucault, 1969; Rose, 2016). Much of our knowledge and beliefs are informed by our daily culturally shaped aesthetic experiences and dominant ideological encounters (Darts, 2004; Rose, 2016). By consuming visual culture and media artifacts, we may be unconsciously influenced by cultural forms and ideological narratives, impacting how we respond to social norms, political events, and activities. The complexity lies in the various forms in which ideology manifests in everyday media, spanning a wide range of cultural products, platforms, and consumer experiences—some explicit, some implicit. Understanding the constitution of media representation requires both visual literacy and critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Ideology, social narratives, and identity-related experiences are continually expressed through our daily screen-based media experiences, with memes becoming intricately intertwined in these spaces. As Duncum (2002, as cited in Darts, 2004) notes, ideology

can be challenging to resist when it seems to belong to the natural realm as a result of its discrete presence within ordinary cultural artifacts. These everyday visual artifacts are often designed using a complex visual grammar through which ideology and power are conveyed in both explicit and implicit forms (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Today, internet memes have become an integral component of such everyday visual artifacts.

Recognizing that popular media forms are never neutral and that creative expression, like memes, is often subjective and personal, it is imperative to critically re-examine questions about freedom of expression, self-determination, and decision-making in popular media. Consequently, critical inquiry and cultural production are necessary to provide digital media users with transparency regarding the technical and aesthetic mechanics of contemporary digital media culture. Such an understanding enables individuals to better comprehend and resist the power dynamics inherent in everyday media systems, empowering them to visualize and create their own futures. In the traditional fields of art and design, professional artists were expected to possess educational experience in skills like drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpting, and film/photography production/editing, among many other hands-on craft techniques. While these skills are undoubtedly important, they have traditionally been associated with social roles and hierarchies that draw a distinction between modern experts (specialists with creative capacities) and everyday people (who primarily consume culture and have limited agency in making art or culture themselves).

The emergence of Web 2.0 media tools and technology environments has reshaped access and participation opportunities, particularly among young people (Jenkins, 2006). Manovich (2001) expands on this notion, proposing new ideas about how media users can leverage existing resources to remix them into redesigned artifacts and knowledge. Drawing parallels with the model of the DJ and remix techniques, Manovich (2001) illustrates how remixing involves selecting, recombining and composing existing elements to create innovative artistic forms. Remixing, a

fundamental technique in meme creation, entails the deconstruction of existing elements and the reassembly of those same elements in a way that conveys meaning. Internet memes, just like graphic design, are integral to remix culture. Manovich's (2001) theories shed light on the proliferation of cultural production among non-professional artists and everyday individuals who lack formal education in art and design. This phenomenon reflects the decentralization of creativity and creative acts, diverging from the traditional paradigm of Modernist creative elites. The democratization of creative content creation has been facilitated by the more general democratization of skills and abilities (Jenkins, 2006). Web 2.0 environments facilitate participatory and interactive platforms on which individuals, including everyday people—especially young people—can actively engage in the creation and sharing of art, knowledge, and culture (Jenkins et al., 2006). On a similar note, Wild (1996) underscores how new media tools have democratized creative production, challenging the authority of professional designers and the entrenched conventions that once privileged them.

In contemporary digital spaces, media and artistic productions are not subject to modernist categories of technical or aesthetic virtuosity and may be valued by others using non-traditional metrics of quality or value. This gives amateurs in cultural production a virtual space in which they can comfortably share and display their work, acquire constructive feedback, and continue to develop their artistic pursuits. At the same time, these acts and efforts enabled by new tools and media platforms challenge the traditional boundary between experts and non-experts—between artists and amateurs—enabling young people to experiment with and enact their identities as makers (Thumlert, 2015).

But...How Do We Make Better Memes?

Mememes are particularly tricky as communicative artifacts because they

are intertextual, referring to both themselves and other texts, media, and cultural phenomena. They are constantly recirculated and remixed, and their meanings are often ambiguous, conveyed through complex techniques. While some ideological content is explicit and easily identifiable at a denotative level, other meanings are implicit, requiring viewers to interpret connotatively, understanding the meme within specific cultural or historical contexts (Barthes, 1973). This makes memes complex in conveying messages, especially when underlying meanings reference previous events. As a result, online users may lack critical understanding and instead treat memes solely as entertainment, mimicking behavior without deeper reflection. A prime example of this is the notorious 4Chan forum mentioned earlier, where “trolling” behavior emerged, using memes for hateful and discriminatory speech (Phillips, 2015). Memes and AI-generated visuals can play a significant role in spreading misinformation and disinformation online, where images are often perceived as evidence supporting specific political viewpoints (Dan et al., 2021). This can manipulate public opinion and decision-making in ways that undermine democracy (Dan et al., 2021). A recent example is Donald Trump posting an AI-generated meme of Taylor Swift endorsing him for election. Given Swift’s immense influence, particularly among young people, as one of the most famous celebrities of our time with millions of fans, the potential impact was considerable. If Taylor Swift hadn’t clarified on her social media who she was actually endorsing, the misinformation created by the AI-generated image could have affected young voters’ decisions. This highlights the importance of critical media literacy. While media literacies can help people critically interpret social media content and identify misinformation, they may not equip users to become thoughtful content creators. Without critical thinking, meme-making and sharing can lead to cyberbullying, misrepresentation, discrimination, and cultural appropriation (Chun, 2021; Dean, 2016; Noble, 2018).

However, this lack of critical engagement is not unique to meme culture. It can happen in any creative field when creators isolate their process and refuse to seek

feedback or consider different perspectives. In art and design education, receiving feedback and revising work in a community setup, such as a studio, is a common practice. Similarly, social media influencers who listen to their audience can improve their work by engaging with feedback from their communities. A community-based setup for meme-making opens opportunities for learning and sharing techniques, fostering a more thoughtful and refined meme-making process.

Additionally, comparisons between meme culture and historical experimental art and design movements suggest the potential for creative pedagogies centered on memes. For example, the “cult of ugly” is closely tied to pedagogical strategies from institutions like CalArts and Cranbrook Academy of Art. During my visit to Cranbrook’s 2D design master’s program, I observed that students are given independent space for creativity, while group critiques are held regularly to exchange ideas and inspiration. These institutions are known for bold pedagogies that encourage risk-taking, experimentation, and non-conventional graphic design work. Similarly, Miles and Springgay’s research shows that contemporary pedagogy and curriculum are still influenced by art movements like Fluxus, encouraging students to create unconventional artwork and define their own aesthetic standards (2019). Ultimately, studio-based pedagogy is an open-ended learning model that generates higher-level learning outcomes by centering on the learners rather than the teachers (Sawyer, 2017; Vanada, 2016). Studio pedagogy is considered constructivist, where communication, dialogue, or “negotiation” are central to the learning process (Sawyer, 2017). In this approach, learners gain new perspectives and break out of their knowledge and creative “bubbles” through interactions and communication with others in the studio. This aligns with Freedman et al.’s (2013) research on youths forming art groups to network through shared interests, engage with diverse groups to learn about the world from different angles, and seek motivation through a group setting. It further suggests that a studio-based setting can benefit learners in multiple ways, enhancing their meme-making skills

while fostering connections within a small community.

Thus, meme-making can find space in both institutional and non-institutional artistic practice by introducing studio setups to improve the meme-making process. In studio environments, critical inquiry and meme-making can help social media participants gain transparency in the mechanics of digital media, resist the power of everyday media systems, and have agency in visualizing and creating their own futures. By engaging with artistic techniques and understanding professional terms related to visual communication—such as font and color choices, visual hierarchy, composition, and juxtaposition—meme creators can produce more thoughtful and impactful work. This improved understanding can contribute to a safer social media environment, empowering users to prevent actions like trolling and cyberbullying through critical and autonomous engagement. Based on the above conclusion, I believe a community-based setup and the pedagogy encourages students to explore their own styles and creative processes, would be beneficial for improving meme-making. This approach influenced the design of my research methodology, which will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored artwork from historical art movements that engaged in remixing everyday materials and rebelling against social conventions, drawing clear parallels with the characteristics of memes. While meme culture emerged alongside digital technologies like computers and the Internet, it can be situated within a historical context to elucidate its characteristics and artistic values. By examining avant-garde art movements, remix culture, and graphic design through the lens of meme culture, I sought to transcend labels and genres to hone in on the essential elements of creative making in the digital age.

Comparing memes to art movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, and

Postmodernism reveals their shared deconstructive nature, challenging that which is often taken for granted in art and design. While forms of meme-making may seem novel, their rebellious spirit and opposition to prevailing power dynamics were inherited from past generations. Such rebellious movements are now spearheaded by everyday people using everyday tools, marking a clear shift from elitist-led initiatives to grassroots creative expression.

While much attention is typically given to the final artifacts, I am equally fascinated by the actual process of meme-making, which remains understudied due to several constraints. One reason is the private nature of meme-making, as memes are often created individually, using digital devices in personal spaces. People rarely create memes together in a physical setting, making it difficult to observe the process. Another reason is, that while professional skills in image-making could benefit the observational study of meme creation, professional designers often do not view memes as serious design work. As a result, there is limited research on meme-making from the perspective of designers. To address this gap, I employed a research methodology that involves setting up an environment to observe how people create memes. Drawing inspiration from studio setups common in formal art and design education, this approach allows for close observation of the individual meme-making process as well as the dynamics of creators working as part of a group. Beyond mere observation, I engaged closely with meme creators using interviews to explore the myriad benefits of meme-making, which are elaborated in the next chapter. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I aim to gain deeper insights into the cultural significance and creative processes underlying meme culture.

Chapter 3: Data Collection and Methodology

In this chapter, I elaborate on my methodology for examining and gaining critical insight into meme-making as a process by setting up a studio-formatted workshop. Through hands-on meme-making practice, I intended for my participants to fully and immersively explore each component and stage of meme-making as a group of people learning from and helping one another. My critical meme-making workshop—as the central method of and source for my data collection—combines the participatory visual method (PVM) with traditional studio-based pedagogy to establish a meme-making-focused learning environment in which I can closely observe the process of meme-making, the ultimate goal being to examine the possibility that meme-making can contribute to rebellious creative making, novel creative pedagogies, and other potential benefits for the creators behind it.

Due to the complex nature of meme themes, which are often tied to personal experiences and emotions, online research and analysis may lack the necessary depth. By bringing participants together through PVM, I was able to closely observe the meme-making process, gaining rich, in-depth insights. Gubrium and Harper (2016) highlight the inherent power imbalance in traditional ethnographic studies, with historically oppressed groups typically being passively studied and represented with an emphasis on their trauma and pain. In contrast, PVM has gained prominence in community-based research by involving community members in the creation of self-documented visuals, empowering them to represent themselves as they wish. PVM actively engages communities, encouraging self-expression in creative ways and fostering motivation among participants (Altenberg et al, 2018; Giancarlo et al, 2021; Mitchell et al, 2014; Pedri-Spade, 2017).

Participants get better learning experiences in workshops that allow them to create, explore, and interact in a shared physical space. As a workshop is defined as

“an arrangement whereby a group of people learn, acquire new knowledge, perform creative problem-solving, or innovate in relation to a domain-specific issue” (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 71), its learning objectives align with studio-based pedagogies that aim to foster a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sawyer, 2017) in which learners participate in a process of creative making with a common theme in a shared space. That said, in the communities of practice described by Lave and Wenger (1991), critical reflection on processes and products may not be present in the social and technical domains where a skillful practice is being engaged, apprenticed, and learned.

Common studio-based pedagogies are constructivist, active, and participatory, emphasizing a series of activities involving physical, face-to-face settings (e.g., apprenticeship, deep and authentic engagement within the creative process, creative making (and iterative redesign), open-ended inquiry, hands-on learning with authentic tools) (Sawyer, 2017; Tomin et al., 2020). Tomin et al. (2020) highlight three important components in traditional studio-based pedagogies: experimentation, interaction with materials and tools, and reflective practice. My workshop-based methodology aligns well with these characteristics:

- 1) **Experimentation and an Emphasis on the Design Process:** In studio-based learning, hands-on improvisation and risk-taking are highly valued (Boucharenc, 2006; Sawyer, 2017; Vanada, 2016). Students are encouraged to think critically about conventional methods of creative making, explore variations in ideas and examine the feasibility of these ideas through making.
- 2) **Interaction with Materials and Tools is Central to Learning:** Through interactions with tools, materials, and media, new ideas can emerge and existing ideas can be transformed over the course of experimentation, inquiry, and creative remixing (Manovich, 2001).

3) **Reflective Practice:** This practice, also known as studio critique, is a process whereby students put their work in an open space where all students can view it, ask questions about it, and offer constructive feedback. Critique provides students with “close-reading” analytical skills as well as useful feedback on where to go with their ongoing projects (Sawyer, 2017). Kolko (2012) describes critique as follows: “the defensive quality of a rationalization changes the conversation from a way to produce new knowledge to a verbal debate” (para. 4). Critique is an essential element of studio-based creative learning. Still, it is also generally considered by students to be stressful. In a later chapter, I discuss some potential alternative means of offering feedback.

For this research, I collected data through two methods: 1) a meme-making workshop that enabled participants to discuss and analyze memes, deconstruct models, and engage in the creative process of meme-making; 2) post-workshop one-on-one interviews to assess what participants took away from the workshop with a focus on what and how they learned. The interviews probed whether and how participants’ perspectives on memes and meme-making were transformed by the workshop sessions, whether the meme-making workshop benefited them in a manner distinct from their formal design courses, and whether meme-making benefited them in terms of design practice, self-exploration, and self-care.

In this chapter, I first delineate my data-collection methods more precisely before discussing how I analyzed my data to answer my research questions.

Data-Collection Method 1: A Meme-Making Workshop for Creative Exploration and Self-Expression

My research entailed the establishment of a studio-based workshop as a collaborative learning environment for the meme-making process. This setting

supported participants in their exploration of diverse forms of visual creation and self-expression.

Participants and Recruitment

The workshop details were shared on the Discord servers of York University's Design Students Association and York University's School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design with admin approval immediately after being granted ethics approval from the Office of Research Ethics at York University on June 29th, 2023. The workshop aimed for fewer than 10 participants, both due to research funding limitations and to ensure high-quality communication. Notably, during recruitment, more women than men inquired about the workshop. This gender disparity is explored in a subsequent chapter. When interviewed about their motivation to participate, most of those who ultimately did participate cited their curiosity about and enthusiasm for the sheer concept of a meme workshop—and the provision of a \$250 gift card as an incentive further motivated their full engagement. Interestingly, all nine of the final participants were second-year or third-year female students from York University's School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design, including eight design majors and one media art major. What's more, eight out of the nine participants were racialized. While my dissertation does not explore these demographics in depth, both gender and race ended up being relevant in my analysis of the memes produced by the participants.

Positioning Myself: A Workshop-Facilitator, A Question-Raiser, and an Experienced Meme-Maker with Whom to Talk

Having previously explored meme-making from the perspective of creators for my master's thesis, I chose to assume the role of an observer of meme-makers for this project. Previously, I delved into meme-making by actively creating memes and documenting my process, a practice that I have maintained on Instagram @

nihilistpotata. This personal journey provided me with a profound and intimate understanding of meme-making. For this research, as an observer, I sought to comprehend how others engage in the process and learn from their approaches. I knew that data on a group of people engaging in meme-making would broaden my perspective, allowing me to properly explore the collective benefits of meme-making. Furthermore, many of my participants shared their similar backgrounds and experiences with me as fellow racialized women in graphic design. This coincidental dynamic allowed me to explore how our meme-making experiences were influenced by our backgrounds and identities on both the individual and collective levels

In the workshop, my role was that of a facilitator and instructor. I provided participants with just-in-time and on-demand support for any queries they might have. Unlike traditional instructors who typically demonstrate the “correct” way of doing things, I approached my role from a different place, providing them with no fixed standards or criteria with which to judge memes. Rather than teaching them specific creative techniques, I positioned myself as a question-raiser, prompting participants to articulate the design intentions and solutions behind their memes. I engaged in ongoing conversations with the participants about memes I found online, aiming to inspire them to create new memes based on our discussions.

During the workshop sessions, I closely observed how participants learned and practised meme-making. By engaging in conversations with the meme-makers, I gained insight into the joys and challenges that they experienced throughout the process. In this way, I was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the various ways in which they benefited from the meme-making experience.

Workshop Process

The meme-making workshop, spanning four days from August 21st to 24th, 2023, was held daily from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. in a studio at York University’s Department of

Design. Department staff graciously provided the space and facilities for the workshop.

The first day commenced with a one-hour brainstorming session, during which participants generated ideas about memes' characteristics and forms. Following this, they engaged in a 30-minute meme-curation activity, searching for intriguing memes online and sharing their findings via the workshop's Discord server. This activity saw participants fully engrossed in their phones and laptops with occasional bursts of laughter, indicating their enthusiasm. Next, the participants delved into Gillian Rose's (2001) visual analysis method, focusing on image production, the image itself, and audience reception. With this guidance, participants conducted quick analyses of the memes they had shared on Discord, bolstering their understanding of the visual content.

Table 1

Workshop Activity

Day	Workshop Activity
1	A brainstorming session in which all participants discuss and define the characteristics and forms of memes (1 hour); A quick meme search and share session on Discord (30 minutes); Visual analysis exercise on a meme of the participant's choice (30 minutes); Free time to research and generate meme ideas (1 hour).
2	In crafting sessions, participants focus on making .
3	In crafting sessions, participants focus on making , encouraged to try a new form or tool.
4	Final presentation, 5–10 minutes for each participant.

Table 2*Class Notes Taken on Day 1*

Meme Characteristics	Critical Meme	Format
funny	cultivate discussions	digital
ironic, absurd	thoughtful/creative	image or a set of images
sharable	original, new	comment
catchy, unique	experimental, risk-taking	text/post/tweet
viral/topical/trendy		video/short video (Tiktok)
easy to understand/	with good faith: no hatred,	gif, animation
effective communication	no discrimination, no	audio, song
poor images/ugly	stereotype, and so on	dance
low affordance to make		ads, branding
culturally contextual		news
provocative		visual identity
		a visually documented person/animal/process of making

On the second and third days, the participants were tasked with generating and making their own memes. They were encouraged to generate ideas based on elements of their daily lives, such as things they find inspiring or frustrating. Many participants based their first meme on something that had happened to them recently, expressing how they felt about the event through the meme. What's more, some participants searched for images both on the Internet and in their personal archives to find something with the potential to make a good meme. Many participants struggled to come up with their first meme idea. Some spent considerable time perfecting their

initial meme. But, once they abandoned this pursuit of perfection on the second or third day, they began creating memes at a more rapid pace. On the third day, the participants were encouraged to try a different tool (e.g., tools for video editing and 3D modelling) to make their memes, and a few ultimately did so.

While most participants in this meme workshop were design major students (meaning they were familiar with in-class critique), there was a natural tendency to avoid traditional critique. Instead, most of the participants leaned toward posting their memes-in-progress on the workshop Discord channel for people to react to with emojis in order to get a sense of how good their memes were. This distinct way of receiving feedback is discussed further in the next chapter's discussion about potential alternative means of conducting in-studio critique. Notably, the informal critique system that developed naturally may be what encouraged participants (or at least made them feel comfortable) to make memes at a more rapid pace without perfecting them.

On the fourth day, each participant put all their meme work into a slide show and gave a presentation. During their presentations, the participants elaborated on their making process, where their inspiration came from, and their rationale for making each meme. Many memes that participants found relatable sparked interesting conversations among the participants.

Workshop Data Collection

Field notes were diligently recorded to document specific interesting and notable moments during the workshop. Some of the participants' interactions were posted and archived on the workshop's Discord server. Additionally, the participants' final presentations were audio-recorded, and their visual work was collected for analysis (see subsequent chapters). By the end of the workshop, more than 80 memes had been collected from the nine participants, with some even sending more memes that they continued to make following the workshop's conclusion. This comprehensive data-

collection process helped me to understand the participants' meme-making learning experience. Furthermore, analyzing participants' visual work provided me with insights into their intentions and expressive approaches to meme-making.

Data-Collection Method 2: Post-Workshop Interviews

The participants were individually interviewed via Zoom three to seven days following the completion of the workshop. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, allowing participants to discuss their workshop experience as deeply as they desired. While planned interview questions provided guidance (see appendix), the participants were encouraged to elaborate on topics they wanted to address or shift the conversation to areas that were not covered by the questions. Overall, the interviews sought to explore the following among the participants:

1. Their initial motivation to participate in the workshop
2. Their overall learning experience from the meme workshop (their best, most challenging, and most helpful experiences).
3. Their perception of the studio setting's effectiveness.
4. How they would compare the meme-making workshop with their formal design courses.
5. How their understanding of memes changed after the workshop.
6. Other benefits they gained from the meme workshop.
7. Suggestions for improving the meme workshop.
8. Their experiences sharing their meme work (optional).

The interview data offers profound insight into each participant's learning journey in the workshop. First, by prompting them to analyze "the best," "the most challenging," and "the most helpful" aspects of their workshop experience, I gained a comprehensive understanding of their creative process, including the challenges inherent to it. Second,

by acknowledging participants' shared background in studio learning, I was able to consider how their familiarity with conventional studio learning may influence their behaviour. Asking participants to articulate the differences and similarities between the meme workshop and their current studio courses helped me to recognize the meme-making workshop's unique benefits. This exploration not only shed light on their individual learning experiences but also offered insights into how meme-making can enhance existing studio pedagogy via new ways of creating and breaking established aesthetic boundaries. Third, the interviews delved into the potential impact of meme-making on other facets of participants' learning and personal lives. Instead of thinking of creativity as a purely practical endeavour yielding tangible results, I explored how the creative process enhances well-being through self-expression and self-care. This entailed gaining new knowledge and perspectives. These findings may contribute to evolving perspectives on creative endeavours, shifting the focus from mere production to a nuanced and transformative process of making.

As sharing memes with family and friends was optional, many participants didn't share their memes with others by the time the interviews took place. Hence, participants' reactions and conversations during the final presentations were considered as audience responses in the later part of the visual analysis.

Data Analysis: Thematic, Visual, and Grounded Theory Analysis

Thematic analysis and grounded theory analysis are commonly used together as a dual data-analysis method for the purposes of analyzing qualitative data, such as interview and speech transcriptions. Thematic analysis enables researchers to categorize and code data by identifying common themes, recurring topics, and keywords, allowing them to identify patterns and guiding their focus within large datasets. Once patterns in the data are identified, they can be developed into novel theories or made to support existing theories through grounded theory analysis, thereby

establishing a theoretical foundation for our findings. Given that the considered visual artwork was created in my workshop, analyzing these works is critical to my research, as it helps me to deduce my participants' intentions. The artwork, like the outcomes of the studio-based pedagogy, provides clear evidence of the effectiveness of the pedagogy.

Thematic Analysis

After collecting the data from the workshop field notes, presentations (including the visuals), and post-workshop interviews, I organized and analyzed it using various methods depending on the form of the data. The interview transcriptions and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2022), while the visual work was analyzed using Gillian Rose's (2001) three sites of visual analysis (2001) with the support of thematically coded data from the interviews and presentations.

Thematic analysis is a common approach in qualitative research. It aims to identify themes and patterns in qualitative data by coding it systematically (Clarke & Braun, 2022). Through this method, qualitative data is transcribed into a text-based dataset before being categorized into different themes based on repetitions of certain keywords and themes. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns in large datasets, facilitating the summarization of findings and the development of clear structures and theories. Clarke and Braun (2022, p. 35–36) delineate the six main steps in thematic analysis:

1. Familiarizing oneself with the data
2. Coding
3. Generating initial themes
4. Developing and reviewing themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing up

It is important to emphasize that the data gathered from field notes, participants' work, and post-workshop interviews were not analyzed separately. Instead, my analysis process involved going all data sources simultaneously to identify connections between them. For example, field notes and interviews provided rich, in-depth context for understanding participants' intentions and emotions behind their memes. At the same time, the memes themselves conveyed non-verbal information, often expressing thoughts or feelings that were difficult to articulate in interviews. As a result, the coding and thematic development of the data did not rely solely on any single component. Rather, the themes emerged from an integrated understanding of field notes, memes, and participants' interviews as a whole.

The upcoming section details my thematic analysis process, elaborating on the six steps mentioned above to shed light on my reasoning as well as the challenges encountered throughout.

Familiarizing Oneself with the Data

After collecting all of the audio recordings, I transcribed the files into text while simultaneously re-listening to the audio and taking notes to highlight potential points of focus. This process allowed me to familiarize myself with the data. While transcribing the data, I began to perceive certain intangible patterns. Although uncertain of the significance of these initial perceptions, I documented my initial impressions (see Table 3).

Coding

The interview data underwent both summative and descriptive coding processes (Clarke & Braun, 2022) depending on the complexity of the responses. For instance, when participants described their motivations, common phrases like “fun” and “curious”

Table 3
Initial Insights

Workshop Insights	Interview Highlights
Continualous Creativity: Participants leaned towards continual meme creation instead of focusing on a cohesive body of work, contrary to expectations. Diverse Themes: Finding a consistent meme theme was challenging; memes reflected creators' scattered thoughts and emotions, serving as creative snapshots. Creative Process Documentation: Memes often became a medium through which to document participants' creators' feelings and thoughts during the creative process, lending authenticity to their creations. Continuous Improvement: Participants believed in learning by doing. Making more memes enhanced their skills; they preferred moving forward to create "better" memes inspired by continuous motivation, avoiding extensive revisions. Fearless Presentations: Despite presentation pressure, participants were content with presenting their memes, revealing confidence in their creations. Gender-related patterns were not significant, but some memes touched on women's challenges, highlighting minor inconveniences. Community Building: Given that most participants were design students, they organically formed a sense of community through meme discussions centred around their design school experiences. Perception Shift: Participants' understanding of memes was transformed; initially having initially viewed as them as trivial internet images, they now came to perceived memes as diverse, creative expressions containing complex information and requiring considerable effort.	Motivations: Participants joined due to curiosity, fun, incentives in place, and the instructor's reputation, and incentives, showcasing a diverse range of varied reasons behindfor their engagement. Fear vs. Freedom: Memes offered a contrast to the fear associated with traditional design studio courses, providing a more liberating and fear-free environment for creative expression. Desire for Interaction: Participants expressed a desire for more interaction, believing that peer engagement provided constructive feedback and valuable learning experiences. Key Learning Sessions: Brainstorming sessions and conversations emerged as pivotal moments, aiding participants in their creative journey, and contributing significantly to their learning and meme-making process.

were coded directly from the transcribed data. As discussions became more intricate, the coding process became more summative and deductive. For example, my participants shared various stories about how they began making memes and how the process unfolded, which shared relatively few characteristics. They all mentioned that starting to make memes was initially challenging but became smoother as the workshop progressed. Hence, instead of coding my participants' experiences into more detailed-oriented themes, I coded them into a summative experience of the workshop: "difficult at the beginning but practice made it better."

To capture the overall workshop experience, participants were asked to break down their experiences into categories, such as "the best experience," "the most challenging experience," and "the most useful experience." Collecting such nuanced responses provided intersectional insights, collectively describing the holistic learning experiences of meme-making. I developed a set of code labels derived from participants' actions and emotions, summarizing the dataset to interpret the learning experiences in the workshop. These code labels (see Table 4) facilitated a concise review and analysis, addressing the research question of how individuals learn and engage in creative practices within a studio setting centred around the making of internet memes.

Table 4*Theme Codes*

Motivation to Participate	Learning Experience	Importance of Studio Setting	Regular Design Course (in Contrast)
Fun Curiosity Familiar with memes Relaxing Social Incentive Anti-design Humour Reputation of the instructor	No pressure Fun Humorous Hard at the beginning Hard to be original Informal critique Less conventional judgment Collaborative rather than competitive Meaningful process Got into the flow of making Free to explore Understand memes better Share and see Inspired Social Design practice	See others' work Discussions on work A space for collective creative making Serious meme-making Pressure from others	Perfectionism Formal Pressured Grade matters Burnout Critique/judgment/rules

Generating, Developing, and Refining Themes

In thematic analysis, themes should capture patterns in the dataset that are unified by shared ideas or evidence (Clarke & Braun, 2006, 2022). I observed clear patterns in which similar topics were brought up in my dataset. For example, as already mentioned, all of the participants shared the same educational background, currently undergoing studio-based education in art and design undergraduate programs. This common background naturally led participants to compare their meme-making experience with their regular studio-making experience during the interviews.

Consequently, I created another theme with a series of code labels to document how participants described their regular design studio courses. Although these codes reflected generally negative impressions of such courses, the participants were also tasked with identifying positive characteristics of the studio setting. These two sets of codes offer crucial insights into the current issues with design curriculum as well as the beneficial aspects of studio-based pedagogy.

Furthermore, although most of the memes created by participants were analyzed through visual analysis methods, which are explained below, it is important to note that these memes (alongside transcriptions of the participants’ meme text and final presentations) were also briefly analyzed and categorized along thematic lines using the thematic analysis method. I reviewed all of the memes made by participants and categorized them into different topic/theme groups (see Table 5). The challenge here was that some memes had fairly broad themes, leading them to be categorized under groups like “personal life” and “moments in life,” while others were focused on highly specific issues, such as “housing situations” and “roasting design trends,” though these could be included under “personal life.”

Table 5

Meme Topics

Topics		
Roasting design trends	Roasting design school	Personal life and feelings
Hobbies	Housing situation	Romantic life
Work	Family and friends	Moments in Life
Womanhood	“Just cute” memes	School system
Commute	Ethnic identity	

Note. The topics are listed in order from the most popular topics to the least popular ones.

The categorized themes inform us of the themes that participants sought to express through their meme-making. Yet, they do not necessarily give us in-depth insights into their opinions on and feelings toward these themes. In the next section, I discuss how the visuals of the participants' memes were analyzed to uncover how they served the participants' needs in conveying their feelings about various issues in their lives.

Writing Up

Clarke and Braun (2022) emphasize that “writing up” is the primary path toward creating a coherent and persuasive analytic narrative in response to the research questions (p. 36). To generate a more comprehensive narrative, I also include my findings from the visual analysis. The textual data and visual data support each other, answering my research questions in a persuasive and comprehensive manner. Grounded theory analysis was also used in this stage to connect my findings to the existing literature. Grounded theory analysis serves to systematically develop theory on the basis of collected and analyzed data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This method is often used in conjunction with thematic analysis, involving data coding and thematic categorization. Grounded theory analysis allows for the generation of new theories or the refinement of existing ones based on newly collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In the following chapters, I delve into my findings derived from the data analysis, generating fresh insights that support existing theories in creative pedagogies, feminist studies, and other fields while also contributing fresh perspectives. For instance, after analyzing the memes created by the participants in my workshop, I found that their themes and techniques resonate with concepts discussed by Sianne Ngai regarding “ugly feelings,” Hito Steyerl’s theory on the “poor image,” and common discussions about the value of memes for addressing difficult topics among marginalized communities (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2021; Hinzo & Clark, 2019; Vickery, 2014). These

established theories bolster the notion that memes can serve as a form of rebellion and offer benefits to the meme maker beyond mere creative expression and learning, aiding in self-care and personal development.

Visual Analysis

For my visual analysis of the memes created in the workshop, I utilized Rose's (2001) visual analysis method, which comprises four sites: "the site(s) of the production of an image, the site of the image itself, the site of the image circulating, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" (pp. 24–25). As elaborated by Riessman (2008), the first site pertains to the historical and cultural context of an image as well as the social identities of the image-maker and the recipients. The second site scrutinizes the image based on its denotative and connotative aspects. The third and fourth sites focus on the audience of the image and the ways in which they circulate, perceive, interpret, and respond to the image.

Compared to various other methods of visual analysis, I found Rose's (2001) to be the most suitable for addressing my research questions. I sought to explore not only the visual meanings of the memes produced in my workshop but also the motivations, purposes, and personal growth of the participants behind their meme-making experiences. Rose's method considers the background of creators, providing insights into their perspectives during the image-making process. Thus, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how their experiences or backgrounds may influence how they create and describe their work, surpassing even how the image creator describes their work.

The first site of Rose's (2001) method emphasizes considering creators' identities in visual analysis. Given that the majority of those who participated in my workshop are racialized young women, this observation could lead to a deductive theory highlighting how racialized young women may downplay their experiences and emotions in their

daily lives. I found the visual analysis method to be particularly effective when paired with thematic analysis. For instance, many participants created memes based on what they described as “minor inconveniences,” “toxic affirmations,” or “exaggerated feelings.” These memes typically portrayed girlhood experiences, with sad or frustrated emotions expressed through humorous images but with an undertone suggesting that these emotions should be acknowledged. Multiple participants consistently referenced such themes in their final presentations, indicating a collective pattern.

Furthermore, Rose’s (2001) method provides various perspectives from which to analyze images, enabling me to examine the memes created in the workshop from several angles in order to address diverse aspects of my research questions. The second site of visual analysis focuses on the denotative and connotative aspects of an image, allowing me to observe how my participants use memes to convey their feelings about challenging topics in a humorous manner. As discussed in a previous chapter, memes empower creators to share their experiences and feelings that may otherwise be too difficult or taboo to discuss (Vickery, 2014). There were many common trends among the memes produced during the workshop, ranging from “existential memes” to those speculating about the “meaning of life.” The participants shared their thoughts and experiences on serious topics in a lighthearted way by juxtaposing serious texts with funny images. What’s more, despite the participants’ background in professional design-making, none of them tried to make memes in the vein of conventional graphic design work. Participants intentionally used design techniques that are generally considered to be “unprofessional” or “amateurish” in visual design, such as the use of “notoriously” cheezy fonts (e.g., Comic Sans) and stock images. The denotative and connotative analyses of the memes offer insights into how memes may serve as a novel aesthetic form of rebellion that holds particular meaning for graphic designers looking to push the boundaries of their field.

Finally, Rose's (2001) third and fourth sites of visual analysis focus on the circulation of the image and the audience. My workshop participants were encouraged to share their memes outside the workshop. This provided me with data on a wide range of viewer responses to the produced memes, including those of the participants during the final presentation as well as those of the creators' friends and families, with whom they voluntarily shared their memes.

Summary

Through this comprehensive three-part analysis, I gained a profound understanding of the collected data. The mixed-methods approach highlighted the complex nature of the meme-making process, encompassing creative making, textual and verbal communication (feedback), rationale articulation, and the creation of visual work infused with deep insights that reflect the subconscious of the creator, which is itself influenced by their daily experiences. This process revealed that creativity extends beyond mere production and outcomes; it serves as a psychological journey through which individuals learn, heal, challenge themselves, and construct new meanings.

In the coming chapters, I delve deeper into my findings, presenting them through the lens of my analytical results and existing theories. These findings address how people learn and practice creative making through memes, explore how meme-making functions as an act of rebellion, and uncover the additional benefits that individuals derive from the meme-making process.

Chapter 4: When Meme-Making Encounters the “Elephant in the Studio”

This chapter analyzes the data collected through field notes and post-workshop interviews to achieve an understanding of how my participants learned and practised creative making in the meme workshop. The analysis is based on a comparison with the current design studio model, which served as the original model for the meme workshop. Moreover, this chapter explores how the meme-making process can reflect on and improve the current design studio model. It is also important to note that, as my participants and I all came from an art and design background, comparisons between the institutional design studio and the meme workshop were frequent. Therefore, there was a natural tendency to critique what could be improved in design education, which is likened to the “elephant in the studio”—methods and models that could be improved in design classrooms to positively impact students and instructors but are taken for granted. This chapter’s aim is not to fully reject the studio model, as it has been experimented with and proven to be helpful in art and design education throughout history. Instead, it reflects on issues with the studio model under late capitalism and outcome-driven institutional education.

Notably, I am aware that the majority of my participants share the same educational background from the same institution, which may raise concerns about the generalizability of my research in representing design education as a whole. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize that the issues identified in my study were not solely derived from participant interviews. A substantial body of existing research highlights similar challenges in design education, and my own experiences as an art student, design student, and graphic designer—across different times and regions, including China, Canada, and Singapore in the past 20 years in different institutions and design agencies—have reinforced these observations. I believe these issues are, to some extent, universal for two key reasons. First, there is an inherent connection

between a creative work and its creator, which often elevates critiques in the creative process to a moral level, sometimes eliciting strong emotional responses from students (McDonald & Michela, 2019). Critique, as a fundamental component of design pedagogy, extends beyond providing feedback; it is a complex communication process involving emotional affirmation, articulation, inspiration, and various forms of support which is often downplayed in design education. Second, the Bauhaus model has established a standardized pedagogy across most mainstream design institutions. According to Raby (2019), the narrow and unquestioned understanding of Bauhaus design principles has mythologized the model in design education, making it difficult to challenge or reimagine. This uncritical adherence to the Bauhaus framework reinforces the utilitarian nature of design, which has been further exploited by capitalism, leading to a standardized approach to design-making and an oppressive design pedagogy. Given these characteristics, which align with existing literature on design education, I am confident that my research findings reflect broader issues prevalent in mainstream design education.

To begin my analysis, it is essential to first clarify the definitions of key terms related to creative making. There is a diverse body of contemporary definitions of “creativity.” Some define it as “a process of having original ideas that have value” (Robinson, 2006, n.d.), while others view it as the generation of original ideas that break habits (Lois, 2021). Some even consider it to be undefinable and subject to historical reinterpretation (Harris, 2014, p. 19). Regardless, “originality” or “newness” is typically the key when defining the concept. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the definition of originality has shifted since Marcel Duchamp’s art challenged the very notions of ownership and originality in art-making. Especially today, with the rapid advancements in art-making and design-making technology, originality is less about how artists create something from scratch and more about making great use of existing art assets, deconstructing, recompositing, or recombining them to create meaning (Manovich,

2001). Today, it seems as though creativity is about celebrating the diversity of cultural possibilities and seeking approaches we haven't yet experimented with. Instead of focusing on innovative outcomes, I focus here on the process that fosters diverse cultural productions and explorations in creative making. This entails examining the steps involved in cultivating unique ideas, which are essential to the context of creative pedagogies.

Modern society emphasizes the need to cultivate skills that emerge from complex creative processes, such as inspiration, idea initiation, execution, and outcome refinement. Behind each innovation and creation are individuals driven by a desire to create, change, or express. Hence, it is crucial to explore every facet of one's learning and creative process, including their motivation, methods, and mentality. Moreover, within art and design education, it is essential to reflect on the core elements of creativity detached from commercial and industrial standards.

Before analyzing the interview data and outlining how my participants described their learning experiences in the meme-making workshop, it is necessary to offer some context regarding the current issues with design education. Understanding these issues allows for a deeper understanding of the workshop participants' thoughts and behaviours given their status as design majors and professionals influenced by what they were taught in the context of market-driven creativity. It is important to clarify here that I am not entirely opposed to school programs that equip students with creative knowledge and skills to succeed in the industry. Rather, acknowledging the inherent conflict between encouraging experimentation and the current convention-based teaching practices in schools may prompt design educators to reflect on potential changes needed in design classrooms and studios.

Industry Standard and Its Presence in Design Education

While design education offers dynamic studio-based methods for engaging in

skilled practice, it is not without its issues. In this section, I discuss the benefits of design education for fostering skills that serve its functional and capital value as well as some of the shortcomings of current design programs, many of which stem from their links to techno-capitalist agendas and instrumental economic interests.

Darts (2002) and Duncum (2004) argue that a crucial component of creative education is the ability to decipher the meaning within or “behind” images, exposing constraining narratives and ideological conflicts in everyday life. However, opportunities to challenge authority through visual communication and “creative talent” have historically been a privilege held only by socioeconomic and artistic elites. Bourdieu’s (1989) critique of cultural legitimacy, which details how the governing class influences and categorizes taste, emphasizes the significant role of art education in this process. Around the time of that critique’s publication, Crowe (1988) predicted that the arts would ultimately evolve into the “research and development arm” of the culture industry and corporate interests.

Institutional visual art and graphic design are frequently criticized for being colonized by research methods geared towards market-driven forms of uncritical “creativism” (Harris, 2014; Kalin, 2016; Thumlert & Nolan, 2020, p. 35). Consequently, institutional art and design education often encourage students to create cultural artifacts that serve as a vehicle for upholding the dominant power and meeting market demands. Notably, graphic design has a long history of being linked to capitalist power. Following the Bauhaus tenet of “form follows function,” graphic design sprang from the arts-and-crafts movement alongside early Russian Constructivism and the “applied arts”; the field is frequently connected to daily life, practical use, and utility (Cabianca, 2016, p. 104). Zizek (2006) suggests that ideology is often present through the utility of daily life, with design consistently translating ideas and concepts into tangible reality and, in turn, reflecting ideology at a material level.

Composition, type design, layout, and visual crafting are concepts and techniques that are frequently covered by graphic design curricula, and interactive design concepts (e.g., UI/UX, motion graphics) have recently been added to this list. Through compositions in which each visual component must be viewed and interpreted as a cohesive whole to fully grasp their message or interactive opportunities, these strategies shape meanings beyond verbal-textual representation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In terms of visual hierarchy (or significance), the composition of a poster or interface, for example, can reveal what its designer wanted the spectator to see first and second. The visual hierarchy can also influence how viewers engage with digital interfaces in modern settings. For instance, if the “accept” button is large or vibrant, users are more likely to click it. In a similar vein, Manovich (2001) claims that many commercial websites are crafted in a way that induces “stickiness” and “eyeball hang time” in order to entice visitors to spend more time on them (p. 150). Increasing user engagement is a goal that may be attained, in large part, by improving the visual design of digital interfaces. Font size and style can contribute an additional layer of information based on how the font plays off of existing cultural-typographic conventions (e.g., formal vs. informal, edgy vs. cutesy).

The discipline of communication design has been separated into multiple genres; some of these genres serve the purpose of visual communication, while others serve as instrumental technological interfaces. But, some components of design education remain fiercely debated. The functional, instrumental, and market-driven orientation of many design courses has sparked much criticism within the design community. In addition, concepts like “design thinking” and “design processes” have been marketed and sold in well-known educational institutions as part of a popular curriculum for “revolutionary inventions.” These simplified, commercially branded design methods were created without contemplating actual design thinking or processes (Jen, 2017; Vinsel, 2020). The rebranded “design thinking” programs, according to

Vinsel (2020), encourage students to pursue limitless technical innovation rather than contemplating means of solving issues with already-existing systems. Design thinking and design processes are complicated systems that designers continually update, enhance, and investigate, which is why established design processes are frequently the subject of criticism. Notably, design thinking and processes vary dramatically based on who a design is for and what difficulties they are facing.

Despite the widespread criticism of current design education, critics agree that the field of design itself is always evolving, self-reflecting, and seeking out new methods of creative making detached from pure functionality and commercialization (Blauvelt, 2003; Cabianca, 2016). For such efforts to be successful, it is important to incorporate more diversity into creative pedagogical methods and assessments and give more attention to the process than the outcomes. I believe that my meme workshop gave my participants an opportunity to explore graphic design beyond what they learn and practice on a daily basis at school or at professional organizations. The practice of meme-making may inspire an alternative design-making method that detaches the conventional standards and values in the creative making process—image juxtaposition, font and colour choices, composition, and many others—which serve the purpose of facilitating humorous expression or breaking design rules.

This notion is explored further in the next chapter, where I analyze my workshop participants' memes. In this chapter, the focus is on how meme-making encourages designers to approach creativity differently, allows them to break free from their design habits, and alleviates common pressures often encountered during the creative process. This leads to a discussion of the “elephant in the studio”—of the need to update and evolve the long-standing model of art and design education to foster an environment that encourages experimentation and exploration among artists and designers. In the next section, I elaborate on my participants' narratives of their learning journey in my meme-making workshop, focusing on how they made memes, fought their fear and

habits, and got into the flow of creative making.

Identifying Elephant #1: Designers and Perfectionists

During my interviews with the nine participants, when asked about their initial motivation to participate in the meme-themed workshop, most responded with something along the lines of “out of curiosity” or “it looked fun.” The simplicity and repetitiveness of these answers suggest that the motivation for creative making may not be particularly complex; it may simply echo a desire for something that is fun and novel—an instinct to pursue adventure, playfulness, and enjoyment.

Two or three participants mentioned being attracted to the poster used to promote the workshop, which featured an unconventional design. I created the poster in a collage style, incorporating several popular cat memes. Since the images were sourced from the Internet, the quality was low, and the font and colour choices were extremely cheezy and visually overwhelming. The central element of the poster was the popular “Crying Cat” meme pointing to the viewers with “I want you” as accompanying text, referencing the well-known *I Want You for U.S. Army: Nearest Recruiting Station* poster by James Montgomery Flagg. One participant, Melody, described initially being drawn by the recruitment poster’s design:

It was something very contradictory to what we’re being taught in school ... I was kind of sick of hearing all the critiques about looking at a piece of design and judging it. So, I thought it was pretty fun ... when I saw the poster, I think it just added a lot more humour and emotion to it, instead of a very rigid (design).

Melody’s response here articulates that, alongside curiosity and a desire to have fun in creative making, there is a need to take creativity less seriously and to infuse one’s emotions and humour into it. There is also a clear need for many creative majors

to occasionally step away from industrial standards and return to the fundamental excitement of creative making—to the passion that comes from crafting something personally relatable.

Something particularly intriguing from the interviews is that eight of the nine participants expressed that coming up with ideas was the most challenging part of the workshop. Some participants worried they were not humorous enough to create a meme that makes people laugh; others said they were overthinking at first because they wanted their first meme to be perfect and presentable. Many of the participants had no idea where to start to make their memes distinct from existing popular memes. The repetitiveness of the responses indicates that although creators may be excited about creative making, initiating original ideas in creative making always represents a challenge. Moreover, the fear that one's work won't be good enough to be accepted or liked hinders learners in their creative making process.

Many participants articulated their sense of fear when considering new meme ideas, linking that fear to their experiences from design school. When describing their experience of learning in regular design courses, my participants said the following:

Dhara: I feel like when I'm in my courses, especially studio time, it's a very serious environment. We're all doing our work and even critique—it's very serious. I think there's so much pressure that goes behind it. I hope my work is good. There are a lot of additional pressures and worries that go behind critiques and just our design courses in general. We obviously want to make something that we like and also something that we get a good mark on to pass the course.

Melody: In design school, every part of your creative process is evaluated or seen by someone. So, you have to reveal your brain to someone, which is very intimidating sometimes. I mean, I'm in my first/second year technically, but I still

delete bad sketches or ideas from my process—scared that the professor would think less of me. But in this workshop, there was less thinking than doing, which I think helped a lot. No one's poking at you and being like, "What are you thinking right now? What is your creative process?" So, I think it helped with not being afraid of doing what you want in general.

Sarina: I did experience meme block or art block because I was just so scared. Because as a designer, we were told we need to make the perfect design. Everything needs to be awesome. Everyone has to love your design.

Michelle: It (a design course) was motivated by fear. I knew it was going to be a good class, but it was definitely stressful coming in every week and being like [terrified sound].

When discussing their regular design courses, my participants often associated their learning with feelings of fear and pressure. These feelings contradict what studio-based creative pedagogy usually encourages: exploring, taking risks, and experimenting by accepting mistakes and continually trying to overcome them (Harris, 2014; Sawyer, 2017). The fear of imperfection can make students more conservative in their making methods and design decisions, generating safer outcomes that are less likely to be considered "bad work" in a design class. Although this mentality may result in students producing decent design work that aligns with conventional taste and industry standards, it can also shape regular design habits and a stable style or method in their creative making in pursuit of a feeling of safety.

It is well established that a small amount of stress can help enhance performance when completing a task while an excessive amount of stress can result in mental issues and inhibit performance in both work and life (Sapolsky, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial

for art and design educators to consider and address the stressful conditions in their studios. As I have observed in my meme workshop as well as my daily practice in studio teaching, there is an inherent degree of stress among students stemming from creating original work and comparing that work to others'. Regular in-person critique in every studio class may exacerbate stressful dynamics if conducted carelessly.

Fortunately, by the end of the meme workshop, all of the participants found that they had overcome the compulsive push for perfection and had entered the flow of meme-making. They considered this shift to be the result of the free characteristics of both memes and the meme workshop setting. Six participants mentioned that they felt no pressure while working in the meme workshop on account of critiques being casual and free from conventional judgment. Moreover, as memes are free and undefinable in both their look and form, the participants were able to create any type of meme in any style without worrying about what their audience or client would think.

Dhara: In this workshop, it definitely felt more like a chill environment and an environment where we could just make anything in whatever we wanted. And there wasn't, kind of, any hard-set criteria we could have explored as much as we wanted, even though a lot of us had chosen to do an image format for convenience's sake ... So, I guess in this sense, the workshop was very—we were just free to express our own ideas without any boundaries.

Melody: There's no fear (in the workshop). I mean, there is validation at the end, but it was more collaborative than competitive, which I think is very important. And it was just very casual. The only time I've been in a blue lab (where the meme workshop took place) other than class was for a designathon, and it was very intense. So, I think this time it's just kind of chilling with friends. It brought a different atmosphere to the usual setting.

Sarina: The best experience was when I got into the flow of meme-making. I think it was the third day that I got into the flow and I started making memes. And while I was making one meme, I would think of the next in the middle of making it. It was such a great experience. Of course, I had to stop myself. I didn't have enough time to make all of them, but that feeling was really good. It's like getting into the flow of making art or something. That was the best experience because usually in a class environment, it is so hard for me to focus and make something. But on the third day of the workshop, it just happened. The flow just happened.

The meme workshop did not strive for any perfect or even solid design outcomes. As a result, participants more openly embraced experimentation and were able to fully enjoy their creative process. The meme workshop could serve as inspiration for design educators moving forward. If we want to encourage students to experiment, innovate, and take truly creative steps forward in pursuit of truly excellent designs while staying engaged in studio classrooms, design curricula must include opportunities for students to pursue their own interests without firm expectations and without a need to conform to conventional aesthetic criteria.

Identifying Elephant #2: Critique Without Critiques

Studio critique, which involves the review and evaluation of students' processes and work in either private or group settings (Barrett, 2000; McDonald & Michela, 2019), is a common and essential practice in art and design education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. On the other hand, studies indicate that students often experience stress during critiques, particularly when instructors dominate discussions and express judgments based on their personal preferences (Barrett, 2000). This power imbalance can foster a studio environment in which students feel

fearful, defensive, and anxious (McDonald & Michela, 2019). Kolko (2012) emphasizes the importance of well-organized discussion during critiques to provide a formal opportunity for designers to receive feedback from a group of people. Despite this, eliciting participation (especially for critical feedback) remains a challenge (Barrett, 2000). These issues raise concerns about the experimental nature of creative making within studio critiques, prompting reflection on how critiques are organized and whether alternative formats can be explored in studio-based learning environments. Fortunately, the responses from my participants may broaden the definition of critiques and inspire new means of receiving feedback in studio learning.

There are always mixed emotions—both love and hate—when it comes to studio critiques among both students and teachers, as it entails complex human interaction affected by multiple factors, including power dynamics, expertise, tone of voice, body language, and personal perspectives. On the one hand, students want their work to be seen and to receive helpful feedback from an experienced instructor and their peers. On the other hand, they fear having their work judged and, in certain unfortunate scenarios, may feel uncomfortable and personally offended when receiving critiques in a studio setting. Nevertheless, critique is a crucial component of studio-based pedagogy in art and design education, through which students learn about the conventions, rules, and expectations in creative production.

During my meme workshop, my participants and I used Discord—an online platform that allows users to create public and private servers for multimedia communication—to share memes and facilitate critiques. Many participants expressed that the use of Discord for the workshop was very helpful. According to some participants, Discord's emoji function—which allows users to react to any post or message with nothing but an emoji—enabled them to quickly respond to one another's other's memes without any stress involved in the interaction. When a posted meme was less interesting, participants simply scrolled past it without reacting. This

served as an incredibly clear and straightforward to identify the most popular memes. When participants found that their memes were not receiving many reactions, they immediately understood the problem and began working on a new meme with a new or revised approach. The use of Discord in my meme workshop functionally facilitated traditional studio-based pedagogy's sharing, viewing, and critiquing of students' work in a more effective and less stressful way. Six of the nine participants expressed that, despite the process's stressful nature, being able to see and share others' curated works in progress constitutes the most useful and essential element of studio learning, as it serves as a major source of inspiration as well as points of reference. My participant Sarina described her experience using Discord as follows:

I realized there are different styles of memes. I saw everyone's meme inspirations in the Discord chat, [and] I realized that my understanding of memes was so limited. I usually see the very neat memes, the ones that sort of look like tweets. But after that, I realized there are so many possibilities for just photo editing—so that was very interesting.

The stressful nature of studio-based learning often stems from the fear of potential failure during the exploration process. This fear is counterproductive, as learners can find inspiration in failures. In a studio setting, failures may manifest when a student comparing their work to that of their peers reveals a gap or when a student is informed by others during a critique that their work doesn't meet expectations. Failures can evoke a wide array of emotions, including "shame, anger, despair, abjection, guilt, [and] frustration" (O'Gorman & Werry, 2012). As some of my participants expressed, the process of sharing work, seeing others' work, and receiving feedback elicit mixed feelings of both excitement and fear. This dynamic motivates me to explore the exciting and fearful aspects of the making process with the aim of developing a studio-based

pedagogy that minimizes negative stress, fosters positive emotions, and ultimately encourages exploration and risk-taking in creative processes. This aim is a worthwhile one, as O’Gorman and Werry (2012) show that failures can be extremely helpful in creative learning if handled carefully and properly.

In contrast to the common stress of studio critiques, five of the nine participants appreciated the meme workshop’s system of “informal critiques”. They enjoyed receiving quick and informal responses and, in turn, the ability to swiftly transition to a new approach when warranted (when a failure appears). The informal nature of the critiques made them feel less bad upon realizing that their meme wasn’t working out; they could simply discard that faulty idea and immediately begin to explore other avenues. This process proved to be particularly beneficial during the exploratory stages, helping them to push further with new ideas and immerse themselves in the flow of making. This finding prompts me to question whether a studio critique must be a “formal opportunity,” as defined by Kolko (2012), in which a student is put under a spotlight and forced to approach their exploratory process in a highly serious manner. Moreover, it forces me to consider critique as more than mere verbal communication. I believe that an inspirational process that involves brainstorming, daydreaming, show-and-tell dynamics, curation, research, and the showcasing of one’s process could instead be viewed as a holistic feedback-giving process. The feedback does not need to be formal; it can be expressed through emotions, such as affirmation, encouragement, interest, and confusion. In the words of my participant Melody:

I think this is more validation-related, but seeing people laugh was really funny. I don’t know; it was very direct. It’s almost like you’re performing at an audience and then they’re reacting to something that you make, which is nice.

The meme workshop showed me that feedback can take various forms in a

studio setting; today, it can happen spontaneously anytime and anywhere, such as during casual conversations or even through emoji reactions on a Discord server. This reactive process mirrors how audiences perceive graphic design work in their daily lives. Most of the time, their reactions are emotional, subjective, and swift; the important thing to remember is that successful design works generally elicit some kind of reaction from their audience, whether positive or challenging. In either case, they prompt people to see and to think.

Identifying Elephant #3: Original Design vs. Design Jammers

Putting internet memes aside and considering the original meaning of “meme” leads to the realization that meme-making refers to a cultural process that re-creates or modifies cultural content via mimicking behaviours (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins (1976) used saddleback birds native to New Zealand as an example to explain memes in terms of cultural transmission. Male saddlebacks typically sing from their “song pool”;



Figure 4.1 Meme Made by Sammi

new songs are sometimes invented as a result of “mistakes” (e.g., a bird singing “off key”). This is similar to the making of internet memes and even art-making in general in that mimicking and imitation play an important role at the beginning stage of learning and throughout one’s life. Many traditional art pedagogies involve learning by imitating others’ ways of working, such as copying a masterpiece to practice essential drawing skills. By repeatedly copying how drawings are made by previous artists, new artists can understand the conventional ways of making art while modifying the process to fit their own art-making needs.

Remix culture may also inform a common epistemological process wherein new knowledge emerges from the transformation or alteration of what is already known. Remixing and culture jamming exemplify a similar learning process in that they entail the reshaping or modification of existing cultural productions into one’s own version with a personal interpretation. For such a process to succeed, creators must possess a profound understanding of the incorporated existing cultural productions, offer new interpretations of them, and possess the skills necessary to remix them.

This process clearly emerged in my meme workshop. One participant, Cindy, began brainstorming by delving into her photo library, reviewing family photos, and identifying those with the potential to become effective memes. An anonymous participant, whom I refer to as “W” in this dissertation, mentioned being “motivated by the images” and wanting to explore “cheezy images” on stock photo websites to discover those with untapped meme-making potential. In another intriguing case, the participant Sammi created a meme (Figure 1) and then proceeded to modify that same meme without hiding the preceding elements to generate different versions.

Throughout the interviews, many participants mentioned that, before getting into meme-making, they had often revisited their familiar or favourite cultural references, such as personal photos, posters, movie scenes, and posts. While traditional art-making often emphasizes creating work from scratch, utilizing ready-made materials through

remixing has become the new norm in creative processes, facilitated by advancements in creative tools and technologies. Participants in my workshop frequently described meme-making as a “low-effort” endeavour, which made them feel less worried about exploration and creation due to the minimal cost of potential failure.

In traditional art-making, considerable effort is expended throughout the entire process of gathering references, generating ideas, and transforming those ideas into tangible productions. As discussed in an earlier chapter, traditional art-making necessitates training for creators to acquire the conventional tastes and the skills that are required for producing conventional art. This could entail years of education in art and design alongside an array of associated material costs. Conversely, meme-making shares a mental process with art-making: exposure to stimuli inspiring ideas and initiating the creative process. Nonetheless, meme-making differs in terms of the level of technological support and knowledge necessary. Generally, individuals do not feel challenged to create memes. Many of my workshop participants expressed that meme-making is less stressful due to its low affordance and effort. Interestingly, as mentioned in the previous section, most participants found generating a meme that is both funny and original to be the most challenging aspect of the workshop. Consequently, some of the participants browsed online memes at length until inspiration struck, while others began by searching for images in online stock image websites or personal archives with the potential to serve as effective meme templates. Some participants built upon their previous memes, allowing their creations to evolve over time.

This observation may represent an evolving process within our culture. In line with Dawkins’s (1976) theory of memes, which explains how cultural elements are passed on to the next generation or spread to different locations with modifications, memes undergo constant evolution over time. This process reflects a learning process, suggesting that creativity doesn’t emerge from scratch; it requires a foundation of knowledge and understanding of existing information.

The minimal effort and labour involved in meme-making motivated my participants to actively engage in the incremental creative learning process. While some may argue that both the quality of memes and the skillset required to make them are low, it's essential to acknowledge that memes undergo rapid production. Over the six hours of my meme workshop during which participants were tasked with creating memes, over 80 memes—spanning images, videos, and gifs—were produced by the participants. Consequently, I think that meme-making is not a process focused on the production of polished creative outcomes; rather, it is a way to prime the creative mind, empowering it to consistently make progress and enter a continuous flow of creative production. The characteristics of memes and the meme-making process minimize the challenges for creators, enabling them to find inspiration, translate their ideas into informal pieces, and incrementally build their learning through repeated minor but rapid attempts, as some of the participants said:

W: It was pretty good because it was pretty easy. I didn't need to learn After Effects [an animation app]. It's very low-effort, and the worse it is, it's actually kind of better. So, that's why I love memes; if it doesn't turn out how you want, it's funny.

Sammi: I think most memes, especially template memes, it's like you already have the expectation that it's going to be really similar to other people. So, you don't really have that pressure because it's a meme which is meant to be copied and shared around and have little adjustments. So, it's really easy to just get it to look similar to someone [else's]. So, you don't have that pressure of trying to make it really unique.

Michelle: I think the first one [meme] was putting a lot of pressure [on me]. I was going to put a lot of effort into it. And then the rest of them I did super quick. But I

still had a flow and idea going, but I put less pressure to make it perfect.

Sarina: The most important thing was I personally wasn't scared of being judged in the class [workshop]. I wouldn't be scared that someone would say, "You could do this" or "You could do that. 'Cuz it's memes; it is very chill. You don't take it super seriously. You don't want it to be perfect. It wasn't a formal academic "you need to be perfect" vibe. It was just: be yourself—just make something you like. Make something that relates to you and you're good to go.

Learning through remix culture also requires a deep understanding of "sampling," meaning the use of existing cultural productions as references in the remixing process. In the words of my participant Sarina:

Before the workshop, I would see memes as something, like, it's just there. It's just a photo and a text, nothing else. But there are actually multiple things. After the workshop, I realized you need to have a higher understanding of something to be able to make a meme and relate a completely unrelated photo or video to the topic you're talking about.

Findings and Conclusion

My post-workshop interviews with participants revealed several things that art and design educators should consider and reflect on when developing new curricula and practising studio-based teaching. The meme workshop made me envision pedagogies that are not outcome-oriented—pedagogies that encourage experimentation and risk-taking, cultivate positive and constructive feedback so that all those involved can broaden one another's perspectives, and make progress little by little through a rich and meaningful process.

An “Unproductive” Process

Criticism from the first section covered the fact that the current profit-driven and market-driven curriculum in art and design schools has resulted in students and teachers pushing for solid outcomes and using formulas to produce “safe” outcomes in alignment with prevailing trends and market needs (Harris, 2014; Kalin, 2016; Thumlert & Nolan, 2020, p. 35). Although the meme workshop provided us with a view of how design-making could look without commercial elements, truly exploring alternative non-commercial designs would represent a serious challenge, as existing models and conventions of design-making have largely been based on the modern needs of capital. Therefore, we need creative processes that explore other potential avenues for design-making, including methods and aesthetics that challenge the dominant ones.

In a similar vein, Harris (2014) advocates for a reevaluation of the relationship between innovation and process-focused creativity (2014). She argues that the emphasis on promoting innovation, both in education and industry, is fundamentally at odds with the more exploratory nature of creative pursuits. Thus, she calls for a shift in perspective, encouraging the recognition and acceptance of failures within creative processes. In turn, she proposes a redefinition of creativity that embraces “unproductive” choices, challenging conventional notions of success and highlighting the significance of the learning process, even when outcomes may not align with commercial standards. It reminds me that there can never be a shortcut for exploring new creative methods; rather, as with meme-making, it takes repeated attempts and failures. Consequently, there could be space for a curriculum that focuses on the process itself and on exploration, enabling students to fail without thinking that they may want to tame their creative imaginations.

Many participants from my meme workshop mentioned believing that the meme workshop was very helpful when it came to initiating ideas or as a “creative warm-up” and that this function would be helpful in a formal design course. The workshop’s

relaxing and informal structure encouraged the participants to rapidly generate ideas and practise visual making with the wild end of their imaginations. Many referred to the experience as a valuable opportunity to take a break from the seriousness of design education and explore non-conventional visual making methods. Although many still considered their primary goal in design education to achieve solid production outcomes, enrich their portfolio, and establish a strong standing in today's competitive market, meme-making served for them as a meaningful reminder of their core passion for creative making and the pure joy that creative making brings them.

An Environment Where Failing is Just Fine

As discussed earlier in this chapter, there is a natural fear among creators when initiating creative ideas, as they strive to—and worry that they may fail to—produce unique and appealing concepts that are recognized and liked by their audience. Unfortunately, studio classrooms in formal education exacerbate this fear by gauging alignment with firmly established criteria through in-class critiques and strict grading. Students may feel embarrassed and anxious when their work gets formally criticized and receives a punitive grade. As a result, many of my participants conceded that they tend to stick with familiar patterns when crafting new designs to avoid potential flops. In this way, they avoid experimentation in their creative process almost entirely in their formal design courses. Despite educators emphasizing in their classes that artwork critiques are not personal critiques, it is critical to recognize the emotional bond that creators have with their work and the implications of this bond for how they receive feedback.

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the existing literature on studio critiques is lacking despite its critical role in studio-based learning. I would like to summarize the insights from the meme workshop regarding how instructors could more effectively give feedback to their students:

- Make critiques more dialogic by asking students questions when encountering something new in their work. Facilitate a two-way learning process in the same way that students may be the ones who tell me about newer memes.
- Articulate whether a comment is conventional or functional. Comments regarding the functionality of an image are usually more objective than those pertaining to taste and style. Provide comments like “the text is too small to see” rather than “I don’t like the colour,” recognizing that memes are not meant to be judged solely by their appearance.
- Show potential avenues for moving forward rather than focusing too much on addressing the weaknesses of the current work. If a student’s meme is not funny, encourage them to move on to a new one.
- Before commenting, ask the student what they like or dislike about their own work—and only contribute points that they themselves did not cover. Recognize that instructors and students are often more similar when it comes to our sense of humour than we may initially think and that, if something is not funny, the creator is usually the first to know.
- Focus on good drafts and ways to improve them. Identify instances of potential in idea drafts, even if they are ultimately discarded—everything has the potential to be remixed.
- When the discussion boils down to subjective opinions, involve other students; this approach mirrors how memes are generally interpreted by a mass audience.

- Give non-verbal feedback, recognizing that we can communicate affirmation, disagreement, confusion, and many more complex emotions through facial expressions and body language, just as we send emojis to react to one another's memes.
- Increase the number of opportunities for small, informal, and private discussions with students about their work and processes instead of relying solely on formal critique sessions.

With these notes in mind, my goal is to create a learning environment that encourages experimentation and risk-taking, where the consequences of failure are not a source of concern. In this environment, learners are motivated not by fear or pressure to get their work “right” but by a desire to create work that is fun, likable, and humorous.

A Community Where We Do It Together

In emphasizing the importance of a dialogic studio environment, my goal is to decentralize the authoritative position of studio instructors and create small communities within the studio classrooms in which people learn, get inspired, and help one another. This effort aligns with Lave and Wenger's (1991) advocacy for “communities of practice” in which instructors also serve as peers (with a relatively high degree of experience) who can both help and learn from their peers.

On this note, the post-workshop interviews with my participants revealed three major functions of meme-making in a group setting. First, participants would like to see different perspectives and making methods that might motivate them to try something different. Second, participants would like feedback on the memes they make. Third, participants would like to share their work and references with others to receive

affirmations and empathize with one another on topics that are difficult to discuss through standard conversation. These functions also resonate with the nature of memes, which are inherently associated with communities. Memes have always been a community-based culture. When introduced to studio-based teaching, they serve as a great reminder of how the studio classroom has always functionally been a community in which creative making is practised together. Practising meme-making in a group setting also prompted me to consider that the essence of creative making lies in broadening one's views to truly see the diversity of cultural productions, receiving feedback from different perspectives to overcome personal limitations, and achieving a sense of belonging in a community by engaging in collaborative creative endeavours.

Like memes, graphic design is consistently associated with community-based work, as final designs are generally displayed in public spaces facing a massive audience. Meme-making may aid designers in understanding how their work could be perceived, circulated, and interpreted by their audience. As with a successful meme, successful graphic design work must capture the audience's attention and garner reactions using appealing visuals or cultural references. Therefore, creators must position themselves within the community that they are addressing. Studio classroom-sized communities serve as rehearsal spaces for cultural productions before they reach mass audiences, providing creators with opportunities to gauge potential audience reactions and revise accordingly. While one could very well create decent memes on their own, a community can be a significant asset for facilitating effective learning and a long-term commitment to creative making.

A Practice We Do All the Time to Make Changes

While creative making methods, such as remixing and alteration, are often considered to be low-effort, they represent a common approach to learning in art and design education. As discussed in a previous chapter, many studio-based pedagogies

involve copying or mimicking the art styles of masterpieces. Common learning processes often entail various levels of behavioural mimicking, which leads to alterations and revamped approaches (Dawkins, 1976). Learning through altering and remixing requires persistence and a commitment to regular practice—and meme-making facilitates this persistence. When asked if they would like to continue meme-making as a daily practice, all nine of the participants responded positively, viewing it as something that would be easy to incorporate into their routine. They believed that, over the course of the workshop, both their meme-making skills and sense of humour improved, meaning that they would likely improve further going forward. Maintaining meme-making as a daily practice will allow these creators to stay up to date on social and cultural trends while expressing their thoughts and opinions in a humorous manner.

Another aspect that participants felt could sustain their commitment to daily meme-making is the journaling function that it serves. Participants expressed that documenting and reflecting on their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through memes represented a worthwhile endeavour. This perspective adds another layer to how persistence and commitment in creative making are intertwined with personal experiences and beliefs. Yet, among designers—whose creative making often serves a financial purpose—the situation is typically more complex. Many participants expressed appreciation for the meme workshop, as it allowed them to “take a break from formal design courses.” I continue to wonder how meme-making can provide designers with a long-term safe and comfortable emotional space in which they can rediscover their enthusiasm and joy in creative making.

In the next chapter, I assess the memes created by the participants during my workshop, exploring the feelings, thoughts, and experiences that the participants sought to express and document through their memes. The analysis aims to provide support for the notion that meme-making could transform creative making into a more committed practice in one’s daily life as well as to uncover the themes that art and design students care about, concern themselves with, and celebrate through memes.

Chapter 5: Meme to Rebel

The objective of this chapter is to explore the ways in which memes can serve as a form of aesthetic rebellion by challenging conventional tastes in visuals, advocating for social justice, and pushing the boundaries of new knowledge. In this chapter, I analyze the memes created by my participants during the workshop sessions. As discussed earlier in the methodology chapter, I focus on the denotative analysis of the images (Riessman, 2008; Rose, 2001) to lay the contextual groundwork for the next chapter's connotative analysis. By analyzing the denotative aspects of these memes, I explore what constitutes memes and how their constitutions differ from conventional graphic design. The distinction between the two in terms of their forms of visual communication ultimately inspires me to re-examine the models of modern graphic design alongside the ways in which they have been taught in art school for the last century since the emergence of the Bauhaus model. This exploration seeks updates and novel approaches to prevailing design pedagogies.

Many participants brought up the contrast between meme-making and design-making in their interviews, expressing their appreciation for the meme workshop being “free to explore” relative to formal design education, which focuses on abiding by firm design principles and rules to meet professional requirements, a pursuit that often causes stress. Design, as a creative discipline typically categorized within the realm of art, often prioritizes functionality, especially since the Bauhaus laid a firm foundation for design principles rather than emphasizing artistic expression. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once criticized the Bauhaus model as “the genesis of the universal extension of design” (Holt, 2016, p. 56), commodifying everything into a political economy. Setting aside radical comments, it is undeniable that the Bauhaus's standards have significantly influenced modern design education and conventions through “minimalist design” and notions like “form follows function,” making it challenging to question these

standards once successfully practised (Raby, 2019).

This finding also highlights what critical media literacy can look like, particularly among designers. By definition, critical media literacy refers to “skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 372). There are many aspects involved in developing critical media literacy. While art and design students commonly study visual analysis in their undergraduate curriculum, critical reflection on design conventions is often underexplored or insufficiently practiced. The non-conventional nature of memes offers design students—who are typically focused on learning and practicing design for professional purposes—an alternative perspective for examining conventional design. This suggests that when art and design learners develop critical media literacy, it often manifests in their media production process. For designers, whose profession is frequently intertwined with capitalist activities, critical media literacy reveals an understanding of how conventions are shaped by market forces, popular taste, and other external powers.

Before looking at the memes created by my workshop participants, I must first briefly showcase and explain some common design principles (e.g., visual hierarchy, the grid system, readability) as well as some branding concepts (e.g., simplicity, colour, font, primary and secondary visual identity). These principles and concepts serve various purposes in visual communication and production, especially in the marketing industry. I also discuss the graphic design industry’s pivot toward digital technology over the last three decades, which has motivated many graphic designers to shift to the IT industry and work on user interface and user experience (UI/UX) design. In this context, designers not only adhere to traditional design principles but also follow the new principles and logic of technology corporations.

“Form Follows Function”

In the previous chapter, I explored critiques of the commercial design market and the market-oriented approach of design education. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of how traditional commercial graphic design operates, this section looks into the historical development of graphic design, articulating the conventional design principles shaped for different purposes across multiple different eras.

When individuals embark on their design education journey, they typically encounter the revered Bauhaus’s “form follows function” principle. Coined by architect Louis H. Sullivan in the 19th and early 20th centuries to address the utilitarian nature of architecture and industrial design, this principle has had a lasting influence. It has been superficially understood by the mainstream, leading to an unquestionable mythology of the design pedagogical model, which in turn influences how graphic design is taught in mainstream institutions (Raby, 2019). Despite having the potential to pursue a purely aesthetic existence, modern graphic design mainly serves functional purposes. In simpler terms, the principle of “form follows function” means that functionality should guide and take precedence over visual form.

In the pre-digital era, graphic design was closely tied to printing technology, conveying visual messages through traditional print mediums like books, posters, flyers, and brochures. Consequently, pre-Bauhaus graphic design primarily facilitated reading. Design principles like visual hierarchy and the grid system aimed to optimize reading experiences and streamline the mass production of printed materials. The advent of modern global capitalism in the 20th century resulted in the expansion of the role of graphic design, particularly in the marketing industry. Logos, branding, and visual identity became standard requirements for corporate businesses. Design plays a crucial role in advertising when it comes to crafting distinct visual identities for businesses that set them apart from their competitors. Paradoxically, this pursuit of uniqueness often results in aesthetic homogenization within the broader business ecosystem. The 21st

century witnessed the emergence of new genres of graphic design, particularly those in the realm of UI/UX design. This field has quickly become a dominant learning path for graphic designers, ushering in a new era of design practices. UI/UX design takes the utilitarian aspect of design to new heights by prioritizing user experiences and behaviours. Collaborating closely with software engineers, UI/UX designers are tasked with creating digital interfaces, tools, and platforms that optimize users' interactions and overall experiences with digital applications. These applications—especially social media platforms—are getting a lot of criticism for their design and engineering logic being aimed at extending use time as much as possible. Deibert (2021) argues that these applications draw strategic inspiration from the marketing industry and behavioural psychology to capture users' attention by providing content that stimulates their senses. Manovich (2001) discusses how interface design plays a critical role in this retention process as part of the logic of new media. Thus, graphic design in non-traditional commercial contexts effectively serves as an accomplice to the digital power of technology corporations.

While the functionality of graphic design may evolve alongside technology itself, its use in efficient visual communication and mass production has persisted. Despite the conventional principle of “form follows function,” the form of design has constituted a battleground on which designers advocate for alternative paths in the future evolution of graphic design. The field continually evolves to address broader social concerns despite its intimate association with consumerism. Whether through packaging, posters, books, magazines, logos, or digital interfaces, the form of graphic design profoundly influences social conventions and realities. On the other hand, graphic design education often lacks a critical perspective, prioritizing the mastery of digital tools for practical utility in social and commercial contexts. Students are frequently encouraged to conform to contemporary standards of cultural production in pursuit of what Bourdieu (1989) terms “cultural legitimacy” through the acquisition of cultural capital.

Meme to Rebel: Form Follows Fun

Although the 20th-century boom in capital development seems to have defined the mainstream role of graphic designers as visual communicators in commercial activities, the overall form of graphic design still ultimately falls under the category of visual culture and visual history. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, there were and still are graphic designers who experiment and explore potential future pathways for the field of graphic design by examining the constitution of graphic design and its principles. Meanwhile, meme-making offers an interesting and unexpected path for visual making with digital tools. Detaching graphic design from its commercial purpose, it exhibits a clear link to the process of manipulating text and images to convey certain messages and emotions. As discussed in Chapter 2, forms of art should readily dissect each aspect of their constitution to define their essence (Wall, 1995). Similarly, by breaking down memes' components, my participants and I may gain insight into how graphic design could be in the future while learning visual making techniques through memes (rather than traditional graphic design methods). In the following sections, I categorize the memes made by my participants during the workshop based on their techniques or aesthetics, focusing primarily on the denotative aspects of each meme in order to articulate the ways in which visual messages and effects are conveyed.

Satire and Irony in Memes

I closely observed the process behind Michelle's first meme (Figure 5.1). Over the preceding summer, Michelle had been looking for a new rental when she came across a Facebook post advertising a cramped room with three beds for \$800 per month. She found the post amusingly absurd, particularly the unrealistic arrangement of the three beds alongside the exorbitant rent. The image reminded her of the "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" fairy tale. Michelle decided to create a collage using a screenshot



Figure 5.1 Meme made by Michelle



Figure 5.2 Meme made by W

of the rental photo alongside illustrations of the fairytale in various different styles. The depictions of the bears and the little girl add a touch of childlike innocence and whimsy to the visual, creating an ironic contrast with the outrageous rental price. The line “Omg this is so goldilocks coded” in Comic Sans, a font known for its amateurish appearance, was added to further enhance the meme’s sarcastic tone. Furthermore, the heart-eyed emojis overlaid atop the photo of the room make the meme function as a satirical commentary. It suggests that only the three bears from this fairytale would find the living arrangement acceptable.

If we consider this meme along conventional standards, it does not adhere to any established design principles. There is no grid, and the choice of images is seemingly random and stylistically disparate. Additionally, there’s a blatant visual hierarchy issue, as the rental price of “\$800” is difficult to even see. Michelle proactively handled this issue by encircling it with a red heart with minimal effort. Ultimately, all of these rough and seemingly random design choices enhance the meme’s comedic value.

The anonymous participant W developed a distinct personal style in her memes throughout the workshop. When discussing the rationale behind her memes, W mentioned being a nostalgic person who enjoys images of girls dressed in early-2000s style. She appreciates the cheesiness of stock images and tacky fonts like Comic Sans, which she believes instantly add an identifiable sarcastic tone. W's use of stock images reflects her style well. Typically, stock images are staged photographs available online that corporations and designers can use for various purposes. As anyone can upload to and download from stock image websites, many such images are poorly taken. In most cases, the models in the photos appear performative, with stiff bodies and unnatural facial expressions. The staged nature of stock images is inherently funny and somehow lends itself to being excellent remix material for memes. One meme made by W (Figure 5.2) features several staged and "fake" stock photos to represent various mundane aspects of her life, the focal point being a girl with an intensely 2000s-era look making an awkward heart-shaped gesture with her hands alongside the following line in cursive: "being alive is awesome." These elements together maximize the sarcastic tone of the meme. With nearly every denotation in these memes being fake, we can discern the creator's true satirical expression along with a hint of nihilism.

In both Michelle and W's work, I observed a learning process of image elicitation where they created memes by encountering images and eliciting new stories and visuals to remix them into something new. For instance, Michelle described how she stumbled upon the aforementioned absurd image (three beds in a small room) while browsing rental ads, which reminded her of the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Additionally, Michelle mentioned having been amused by the popular "OMG the water is so matcha coded" meme, which humorously referred to a green, dirty pond as "matcha coded." She then combined elements from these recent experiences, linking visuals together to create the meme displayed in Figure 5.2. Similarly, W described beginning her meme-making process by browsing images on stock image



Figure 5.3 Meme: Undertaker Standing Behind AJ Styles



Figure 5.4 Meme made by Michelle

websites. She noted that some of the stock images were cheezy but had a lot of meme-making potential. Her process required that she consider each image's potential for juxtaposition with other experiences as she browsed. It also enabled her to view each image with critical insight, easily taking them out of their original context. For example, the stock images of a woman exercising and a woman in a suit in W's meme (Figure 5.2), which might typically be used in more serious contexts to convey positive messages of a "healthy and professional" woman, instead become satirical in W's meme. The "misplacement" of some images in her juxtaposed memes added humour and satirical value to her work. This process could be seen as learning to critically re-examine existing cultural productions through remixing which demonstrates the learning of critical media literacy through meme-making.

Memes as Metaphorical Templates

During a discussion about the purpose of meme-making, my participant Sammi indicated an interest in using memes as templates to depict situations or emotions that are difficult to express verbally. This practice of utilizing meme images as templates is quite common in meme-making. Michelle, another participant, exemplified this approach in a meme she created that she created using the well-known "Undertaker Standing Behind AJ Styles" meme template (Figure 5.3). This WWE-based macro series originated from a scene from "Wrestlemania 36" (Know Your Meme, 2020). In the template, wrestler AJ Styles is depicted smiling, unaware that his opponent, the Undertaker, is standing right behind him. This image has been widely used in memes to illustrate scenarios in which someone or something appears confident or victorious while unaware of a looming threat or danger. In Michelle's alteration of this template (Figure 5.4), she used text to portray AJ Styles as students gleefully entering their first year of school, optimistic about their future. She then replaced the figure of the Undertaker with a photo of a design faculty member (removed from Figure 5.4 to protect



Figure 5.5 Meme: Ara Ara Chase



Figure 5.6 Meme made by Nina

their privacy) known for their blunt critiques and humorous “burger-flipping type of graphic design” critique. Through these modifications, Michelle conveyed a complex narrative based on her own experience. This meme carries significant contextual meaning, resonating most strongly with those who have had similar experiences and are familiar with the referenced faculty member.

The Ara Ara Chase meme (Figure 5.5), which comes from a series of panels in the Soul of Neko webcomic, features three distinct comic panels depicting a girl in a yellow shirt and red shorts first following a boy in a blue shirt before ultimately chasing after him at a high speed (Know Your Meme, 2019). This meme template is typically used to illustrate a situation in which someone is being pursued by something frightening or irritating with the pursuit intensifying over time. In Nina’s use of this meme template (Figure 5.6), she depicted her experience of being constantly harassed as a person of Thai identity by those displaying ignorant and aggressively curious behaviour after finding out about her identity. The running child in the meme symbolizes herself, expressing her desire to escape from the persistent issue.

In both Michelle and Nina’s memes (Figures 5.4 and 5.6), the use of meme templates functions as a form of symbolism. This technique enables the creators to describe complex situations without any intention of making a clear stance, something that can be difficult to articulate verbally and may evoke discomfort. As discussed in Chapter 1, meme templates are often used to discuss taboo topics (Vickery, 2014). Research indicates that the famous “confession bear” meme (consisting of a bear’s photo accompanied by a single line of confession) has become a widely used template with which individuals express their peculiarities, honest yet unpopular opinions, and issues that they deal with, including serious ones like mental health struggles and instances of bullying or sexual assault (Vickery, 2014). Similar intentions can be seen in some of the memes created during my workshop. For instance, I was surprised to see Michelle boldly using a photo of a design faculty member in her meme (Figure 5.4).

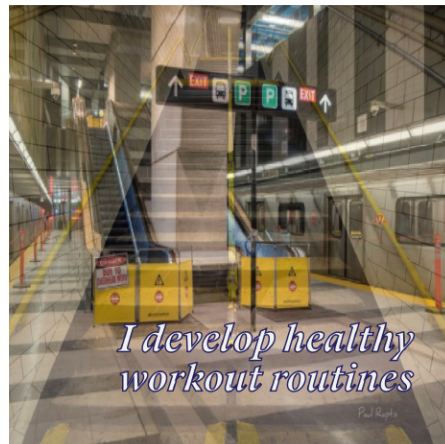


Figure 5.7 Memes made by Melody

Although photo was not employed in a hostile manner; it merely played a role in her adaptation of the original “Undertaker Standing Behind AJ Styles” template. In fact, the template aptly captures the situation that many first-year students face when entering their design program and experiencing critique sessions for the first time. The meme does not aim to pass judgment one way or the other; rather, it serves to represent one’s challenging experiences during their first year of design study using creativity and humour.

Photo Montages

Photomontage is the artistic technique of putting multiple photos (either those taken by oneself or readymade images) together in various ways to create a “juxtaposition of unrelated, readymade photographic images whose original significance or intention would thereby be uncovered, disrupted, flouted or enhanced”



Figure 5.8 Meme made by Nina

(Ades, 1996, p. 6). Having emerged around World War I, photomontage remains a common technique in photography, graphic design, and now memes. Melody created a photomontage-based meme (Figure 5.7) narrating her dream of meeting a future partner on public transportation. Each quadrant of her meme depicts multiple overlapping and translucent photos covered by fuzzy, blurred filters. All of the photos were sourced from the Internet, including those depicting the interior of the TTC (the Toronto Transit Commission), capturing the everyday experience of commuting in a dark, cramped, and crowded public transportation space. This creates a stark contrast against the lines expressing the creator's romantic desires and aspirations. The



Figure 5.9 Meme made by Melody

Note: the word “cries” are typo auto-corrected by input, which supposed to be “crits”.

overlapping blurred photos also evoke a sense of being lost in the frenzied and lonely urban life .

In one of Nina's memes (Figure 5.8), multiple images depicting worried or distressed facial expressions or body language are juxtaposed to convey a mixed feeling toward the line “So ur telling me that not a single thing I lived through was an original experience??” Although the three images do not share a unified style, each is well-known as an expressive meme . When one views this meme, moving their line of

sight across this meme's scattered components, the viewer feels as though they are going through the same emotional roller coaster as the creator—from a cat struggling to hold back tears to an inebriated head wearing sunglasses and finally to a character experiencing an emotional breakdown. Each image sets the stage for the next, enhancing the emotions conveyed by the meme.

Although photomontage is a common technique in meme-making, some memes are more effective than others when it comes to employing it, especially in attempts to convey complex, mixed, contradicting, and non-linear feelings. Melody's use of the technique of overlapping photos creates a multi-dimensional scene in which none of the photos is presented clearly to convey a clear message; rather, the memes reflect a general vibe or feeling through multiple layered sets of unclear images. A few weeks after the completion of the workshop, Melody expressed her appreciation for the sessions and mentioned that she has been continually making memes to document her experiences and feelings. In her latest meme (Figure 5.9), she used the same technique of overlapping photos to describe her feelings during critique sessions in a design course. These overlapped photos depict multiple prominent figures crying alongside a silhouette engaging in meditation, conveying a mixed feeling of offence, self-doubt, and disappointment while at the same time affirming the creator's learning journey, which is common during studio learning process.

A similar technique was used in Michelle and W's previously discussed work (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). Michelle's work connects seemingly unrelated photos to create meaning through juxtaposition. W's work presents multiple aspects of a concept to create a multi-dimensional scene that, alongside the attached line, expresses the theme of life. In summary, photomontage is an effective technique for conveying mixed feelings, complex experiences, and multi-layered expressions or for juxtaposing multiple images to create new meanings.



Figure 5.10 Meme made by Janice



Figure 5.11 Meme made by Sarina



Figure 5.12 Meme made by Cindy

Meme Aesthetics

Some memes emphasize a specific aesthetic category instead of conveying a clear message. Such memes often feature distinctive styles that can be classified into certain aesthetic categories. For instance, my participant Janice created a meme (Figure 5.10) featuring a cute winking cat surrounded by a flood of heart emojis alongside the text “Hey Sexy, Good Morning” in a cutesy font. According to Aesthetics Wiki, this type of meme falls under the category of “wholesome memes,” which are characterized by an aesthetic centred around “wholesomeness, love, positivity, and happiness” (2023, para. 1). These memes typically feature cute or amusing images edited with an abundance of heart-related imagery and overlaid with positive and heartwarming messages, fostering a sense of comfort and joy.

Similarly, Sarina’s meme (Figure 5.11), which depicts an image of a smiley face drawn on a plate using ketchup, may be classified as a “smilecore” meme, as it aligns with an online aesthetic characterized by the use of smiley faces and themes of happiness (Aesthetics Wiki, 2023). “Smilecore” memes may occasionally convey subtle and peculiar emotions that are not necessarily linked to happiness and may even be the opposite. Sarina’s meme, the juxtaposition of the text “why he so sad? :[“ creates a subtle and peculiar emotion that is difficult to verbally articulate.

Another example (Figure 5.12) comes from a series of memes created by my participant Cindy in the style of “What? How?” meme template, which features a boxed-in image on a black background accompanied by plain text underneath it. Although there is no formal definition of this meme style, it is commonly used to humorously define, describe, or question something in an unserious and playful manner. Cindy mentioned that her inspiration for these memes stemmed from her elective philosophy class, in which they practised defining concepts. Cindy extended her experience from the philosophy class to the meme workshop, creating a series of memes attempting to

define various words in a comedic manner. These memes juxtapose the seriousness of “trying to define something philosophically” with the lighthearted style of the “What? How?” meme, thereby enhancing the overall amusing quality of the visuals.

The above analysis demonstrates that memes play a significant role in cultivating various genres of online aesthetics. These diverse aesthetic genres tend to focus on conveying subtle emotions rather than delivering explicit visual messages. The visual styles of these memes generally speak for themselves, often expressing feelings that are nuanced, nostalgic, and complex but difficult to articulate verbally. Engaging in different styles of memes allows designers to explore alternative and experimental approaches to expressing complex emotions.

Use of Pop Culture Elements

Pop culture references are common in memes, including those created during my workshop. These references can come from TV shows, movies, and images of popular figures. These images are often sourced straight from their original context and used to create juxtapositions in memes. As these images and figures are already popular from their original context, the use of popular figures adds another layer of meaning to the memes for those familiar with the references. Therefore, many of these memes can only make sense or be funny (at least in their entirety) to audiences who understand their full context.

For example, extending her concerns over housing costs, Michelle created her second meme (Figure 5.13) using a screenshot from the movie *Barbie*, which she had just watched at the time. In the original scene, Barbie is dancing at a party with good vibes when she suddenly asks, “Do you guys ever think about dying?” This unexpected question startles the other characters, momentarily stopping the party. Michelle used this scene and modified Barbie’s question to “Do you guys ever think about how we will never get to own a house in this lifetime?” This modification highlights how housing



Figure 5.13 Meme made by Michelle



Figure 5.14 Meme made by Dhara



Figure 5.15 Meme made by Sarina

issues can be as jarring for young people as the notion of death itself, disrupting the “good vibe” of striving for a better life. Viewers who have not watched the movie “Barbie” may not grasp the full context of the meme, while those familiar with the film may find the contrast between the party atmosphere and the serious question just as amusing in the meme as in the movie .

Dhara made a meme (Figure 5.14) using the well-known eponymous BoJack Horseman character. In the show, BoJack is a washed-up actor struggling with mental health issues and addictions to drugs and alcohol. BoJack attempts to run away from his problems in life rather than confronting them, only exacerbating his issues. Dhara described this meme as a “realization” that one cannot escape from life’s problems. This sentiment resonates with many *BoJack Horseman* viewers, as it reflects a central theme of the show and serves as a reminder for audiences facing similar issues. The line “maybe you can’t run away from all your problems...” conveys a deeper and more sincere feeling when placed alongside BoJack’s image, referencing the character’s experiences in the show and the ways in which the audience relates to them.

Lastly, Sarina’s meme (Figure 5.15) features a K-pop figure to reflect the growing influence of Korean pop music culture (K-pop referring to the Korean musical style and idol group culture that has gained global popularity over the last decade). Sarina’s memes often feature images of JYP, a famous K-pop singer and producer, making humorous gestures such as the “finger heart” pose. Sarina explained that this meme signifies several jokes that only make sense to those familiar with JYP and his characteristics. JYP, a senior K-pop star who is still active in the field, is often teased by his own fans when he mimics the trendy behaviours of younger K-pop figures, such as making the “finger heart” gesture, adding to the humour of the meme. The use of the term “oppar,” a playful version of “oppa” (a term used to refer to senior men in Korean), alongside the blurry photo of JYP adds another layer of humour to the meme, particularly for those familiar with JYP’s persona and the cultural nuances of K-pop

fandom.

The use of popular cultural references and figures in memes can help to identify their intended audience. In many cases, popular figures attract attention because viewers are drawn to trending topics and figures. Over time, memes featuring popular figures are more likely to be shared and altered by their fan base. Popular figures and scenes from popular shows and movies provide pre-context to memes, particularly for those familiar with the subject matter. For example, someone who has watched the show *BoJack Horseman* is more likely to understand the wider implications of Dhara's meme (Figure 5.14). Thus, this category of memes is more effective and precise when it comes to conveying messages to their target audience using familiar cultural references.

Use of Cheezy Fonts

One font that many of my participants used in their memes was Comic Sans—one of the most notoriously hated fonts among professional graphic designers. Comic Sans is widely considered to be unprofessional and childish, making it unsuitable for formal matters (Craig, 2023), and its poor letterfit and sketchy form make it suboptimal for reading (Kadavy, 2017). Interestingly, I observed that my participants, all of whom are professionally trained design students, frequently used Comic Sans in their memes purely for comedic effect. One personal belief of mine rooted in my own experience as a design student is that students are often told about rules they must follow before understanding why those rules are in place. Design students are commonly instructed to avoid “cheezy” fonts from an early stage in their learning process without a clear understanding of why fonts like Comic Sans are “forbidden” in “good” design work. The rationale behind this instruction is that Comic Sans is unsuitable for most professional and formal matters, such as branding and advertising. This fact being stretched into a universal rule in the field reflects how aesthetics have been homogenized as a result of

commercialization. What students should be learning is that every font has a personality that can contribute different effects to their design, humour included. The emphasis on avoiding “cheezy” fonts demonstrates how humour in graphic design is often overlooked in pursuit of commercial aims. Therefore, the frequent use of Comic Sans in the participants’ memes may suggest the release of a long-suppressed desire to defy conventional rules. While this rebellion is evident, it also raises the question of whether we design educators should permit students to use any fonts rather than imposing strict rules from the outset. This approach would enable students to experiment with the nature of visual elements from a more neutral standpoint.

Findings and Conclusion

From their very appearance to the messages that they convey, memes are a form of rebellion. In this chapter, I analyze the appearance of memes as a means of resisting conventional design practices. As discussed in Chapter 2 regarding the “cult of the ugly,” designers and artists sometimes embrace that which is deemed “ugly” in their current aesthetic context to discuss and critique prevailing notions of beauty and how these standards have been constructed (Heller, 1993). Memes operate along the principle of rebellion, as expressed by my participant Sarina:

Another thing I realized was the different styles of memes every single person had. Everyone who did the presentation had a different style than the last person. That was so interesting because I had no idea we had so many different kinds of memes that we could make. I feel like some people have ... kind of created their own style of memes. I realized it’s very different. And the uglier the meme, the funnier.

The memes created throughout the workshop exhibit substantial stylistic and

topical diversity as well as various approaches, many of which aligned with Sarina's assertion that the core of memes' humour lies in their ugliness. This ugliness stems from various aspects: low image resolution, cheezy fonts and stock images, eye-blinding colours, and absurd juxtapositions, among many other elements not typically considered part of "good design." This is precisely the point of memes as a form of rebellion. In Hito Steyerl's (2009) *In Defense of the Poor Image*, she emphasizes the cultural significance of low-quality digital productions from an artist's perspective. Although this article did not specifically include memes as part of the "poor image", it highlighted the significance of reproduced cultural artifacts in art during a time when illegal digital cultural production was thriving. These "poor images," in Steyerl's definition, include copies or pirated versions of images and movies edited with subtitles or other alterations; regardless of their legality, in the early 2000s, they contributed to the dissemination of culture, the establishment of global fandoms, and the alterations made to cultural productions through digital technology and the Internet in a non-hegemonic manner. As with Heller's sense of the "cult of the ugly," the notion of "poor images" challenges people's sense of what constitutes a "good image," breaking our obsession with well-executed cultural productions and the standards they solidify (Steyerl, 2009). Nonetheless, distinct from the "cult of ugly," which is an experimental movement initiated by professional graphic designers and students, the culture of "poor images" is one with roots at the grassroots level at the start of the digital age. Steyerl (2009) addresses this distinct characteristic as follows:

Poor images are thus popular images—images that can be made and seen by the many. They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission. Altogether, poor images present a snapshot of the affective condition

of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction. The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, re-edit, or upload them. (para. 19)

Steyerl's (2009) words here call to mind Sianne Ngai's (2007) discussion of "ugly feelings" and the ways in which social contexts are often represented through artwork and cultural production, either subtly or explicitly, especially in the context of negative emotions shaped by late capitalism. Through memes, such "ugly feelings" become collective, as people create, alter, and circulate these cultural productions to affirm their emotions. In this way, memes reflect an authentic condition of collective emotions that may bolster scholars' understanding of contemporary social conditions. Therefore, I believe that meme-making could be one of many approaches for graphic designers to gain critical media literacy and to reflect on their roles in the creation and gatekeeping of modern design conventions.

The grassroots origin of memes means that their visual culture is inherently non-hegemonic and in constant rebellion against whatever interferes with one's way of having fun with memes. For example, capital-related trends like NFT (non-fungible token) memes and YouTube's monetization of memes all encountered heavy roadblocks (Singh, 2023; Soha & McDowell, 2016), reflecting the fact that people are not particularly interested in the privatization of memes; rather, they prefer to move on to new memes that are free to access and use. Perhaps one of the most essential characteristics of memes is their free, anti-capitalist spirit, which aligns well with Steyerl's (2009) notion of the "poor image." She said that "poor image" offers valuable experimental materials for the production of artistic remixes and alterations, challenging the notion of "originality" in artistic creations (2009). The existence of memes could

represent a discomfort to the capital-dominated empire built by capitalists and their subordinates, as memes inherently stand opposed to their agenda. Memes are not supposed to look good or be profitable, challenging what is so often taught in creative industries. With this spirit in mind, memes present an opportunity for designers to develop their own unique style of design with less concern for conventional criteria and a greater focus on experimentation with new methods, past styles—especially non-Western-centric styles—and diverse cultures.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Meme to Heal

This chapter explores the benefits of meme-making beyond its educational purposes, using my participants' works and interview responses to do so. The data illustrates that memes are more than just creative artifacts that people make to get likes online. They can carry significant personal meaning for their creators, reflecting their hopes, love, passion, aspirations, desires, rage, awe, struggles, and reconciliations—things that are too heavy or “cringe” to talk about, that they would prefer to make jokes about. These driving factors showcase meme-making's benefits for creators as well as the importance of having an emotional outlet and of celebrating and sharing love through creative methods, both of which can contribute to one's self-healing and growth.

I conduct this exploration through an in-depth thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2022) and connotative analysis (Riessman, 2008; Rose, 2001) of the memes created during the workshop. The thematic analysis enables me to categorize the common topics in the memes, shedding light on shared concerns among the participants. The connotative analysis highlights the underlying messages conveyed by each meme, exploring the creators' perspectives, emotions, symbolic interpretations, and references. This type of analysis requires a nuanced understanding of the signs within an image (Barthes, 1973; Rose, 2001), which are usually highly contextual.

As discussed in earlier chapters, artworks—especially those expressing negative sentiments—can reflect the social contexts and conditions in which they are created (Ngai, 2007). While my research does not intend to dig deeply into anthropology or sociology, I believe that this chapter offers valuable insights for scholars in these fields by demonstrating how memes represent important cultural artifacts for understanding generations raised amid online cultures and with access to digital tools and platforms for self-expression. Therefore, my analysis focuses less on the “why” and “how” surrounding social concerns manifesting and more on the presentation of these issues

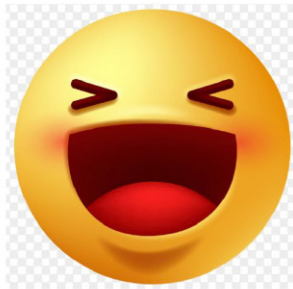
through meme analysis.

Furthermore, I analyze some memes alongside post-workshop interviews with participants to gain insight into how the process of meme-making can contribute to self-healing. I explore the motivations behind participants' creations and the emotions that they experienced throughout the meme-making process. This analysis aims to develop theories beyond pedagogy in order to comprehend how meme-making—and perhaps other forms of creative expression—can function as tools for self-understanding and personal healing. As discussed in the previous chapter, memes represent a form of rebellious art-making, and this act of rebellion may serve multiple purposes beyond the mere practice of design skills. This chapter also serves as a conclusion, highlighting the therapeutic nature of memes as a form of rebellious expression. I break down the following sections by the common themes derived from the workshop memes to articulate what each theme represents and why my participants created memes within these thematic categories.

Meme Theme #1: Designers Vent

As all nine of the workshop participants came from the School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design at York University, a small community quickly formed in the meme workshop, with participants bonding over their common major in art and design. This resulted in many of the produced memes centring on the “roasting” of conventional design styles and art school.

For example, Cindy created a series of memes (Figures 6.2–6.4) joking about minimalist design, a style that has been a mainstream design preference among many contemporary design professionals, especially in design education. While design trends consistently evolve toward simplicity, this technique and principle are also highly recognized—and, in turn, regimented—in design institutions. Cindy expressed her skepticism toward this widespread style through her memes. In her two memes (Figures



sleep deprivation

back problems at 18

**contemplate wanting
to drop out**



imposter syndrome

broke

welcome to
art school

**buying
expensive art
supplies you'll
never use**

where you get:

lack of a social life

**having nightmares
of getting roasted
by your prof**

crippling self esteem

caffeine addiction



Figure 6.1 Meme made by Dhara

6.3 and 6.4), she used satire to project an extreme depiction of minimalist design. In her meme (Figure 6.2), she juxtaposed an image of a sparsely furnished room corner with nothing but a bed and a small table with the line “I’m not broke... just minimalistic.” Cindy’s satire of minimalist style reflects her suspicion of the widely dominant design trend. Although she does not explicitly state her negative perception of minimalism, the sarcastic expressions in the memes indicate a clear lack of interest in this mainstream design style. Janice’s meme (Figure 6.5) similarly exhibits a skeptical attitude toward a recent trend in fashion, using broccoli as an analogy to mock the look of a high-end dress.

Moving to Nina’s meme (Figure 6.6), she created a compact composition with a set of images representing popular Asian cultural elements. During her final presentation, Nina explained that her intention was to mock how people online tend to glamourize Japanese and South Korean pop culture while overlooking Chinese pop culture, from which many cultural references originate. The meme consists of images of multiple products that resemble Japanese and Korean products at first glance but actually originated in and were produced in China. Nina sought to convey how consumer culture often brands products to align with prevailing trends, leveraging existing fanbases to sell products. This meme also demonstrates Nina’s critical insights as a designer, especially her strong understanding of branding and cultural dynamics.

Aside from the memes poking fun at design trends, many were also based on my participants’ ongoing experiences in art school. The previous chapter examined two memes made by Michelle and Melody (Figures 5.4, Figure 5.9, respectively) to express their experiences with and feelings about critiques in the studio learning process. Both of their memes addressed the fear, stress, and frustration that they constantly experience in their shared studio learning environment. While several memes specifically mocked the exhaustion that comes with studying in design school, Dhara’s meme (Figure 6.1) encompasses multiple emotional issues stemming from art school.

Im not broke.... just minalistic



Figure 6.2 Meme made by Cindy

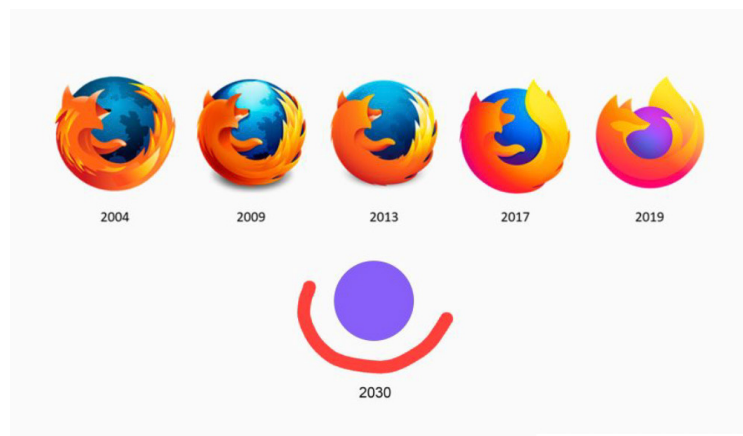


Figure 6.3 Meme made by Cindy

Design School: Less is more



Figure 6.4 Meme made by Cindy



Figure 6.5 Meme made by Janice



Figure 6.6 Meme made by Nina

In Dhara's meme, the centre text reads "welcome to art school where you get:" followed by several lines in smaller fonts scattered asymmetrically in the periphery. Despite the "happy" emojis and image surrounding the text, the smaller lines read "sleep deprivation," "broke," and "caffeine addiction" among many other negative aspects of art school. This stark contrast between cheerful images and the content of the text creates a strong sense of irony, highlighting the gap between students' expectations of art school and the intimidating reality.

Meme Theme #2: Moments in Life and Existential Memes

This category of memes documents thoughts, feelings, and experiences that occur at particular moments in daily life. Such memes often involve a random fleeting thought that the creators may consider unimportant or minor but still want to document. I find this category of memes worthy of study because it sheds light on the contradictions that prompt meme creators to document seemingly insignificant events.

Although multiple participants made memes centred on the theme of "moments in life," I found Dhara and her series of memes—especially following her presentation—to be the most representative. Dhara created a series of memes (Figure 6.7) that document thoughts related to her ongoing daily experiences. For example, she made a meme expressing the feeling of being "on [her] death bed" because she "just climbed up a flight of stairs"; of "reaping the consequences of living in a capitalist society forced onto us" because she "worked a 5-hour shift"; and of "[her] will to live ... fading away" because "Adobe crashed" (i.e., a common design software glitches). Dhara emphasized during her presentation that her memes are "exaggerating minor inconveniences" in life, and both the audience and I found the exaggeration between the initial descriptions and the parenthetical explanations to create a strong comedic effect, especially against the backdrop of images showcasing women seemingly in despair. This same technique of exaggeration can also be found in one of W's memes (Figure 6.8), in which she

describes a fairly banal event: “when my dog leaves the room I just let it in and shits on the floor.” The red text at the bottom of the meme, frames it as an existential sorrow set against a prototypical “edgy” backdrop of flames and human skulls, one of which is smoking a cigarette: “why does everyone leave me.” Alongside her previous memes complaining about the troublesomeness of everyday self-maintenance, it’s easy to imagine how much she may hate needing to clean up her dog’s mess given the death-related imagery.

In fact, according to psychiatrist Jess P. Shatkin, exaggerating feelings is a common behaviour among adolescents. In *Born to Be Wild*, Shatkin (2017) says that adolescents tend to exaggerate their negative feelings even when encountering minor obstacles in their daily life or in interactions with others, potentially leading to misperceptions of reality or “cognitive distortions”, which then lead to feelings of “confusion, irritability, anger, and sadness” (p. 70). However, as adolescents continue to grow into young adults, they typically develop skills to let go of such feelings through practice. As most of my participants are in their early 20s, they may be experiencing an emotional transformation from adolescence to adulthood. Shatkin (2017) refers to such a transformation as part of the growing process, through which young adults need to constantly practise in order to overcome the pain of cognitive distortions that put them at risk. I believe that meme-making offers young people a safe way to let go of such frustrations and overcome their cognitive distortions. Upon questioning why one would make a meme to document something they consider to be unimportant, I came to a realization: making memes to document negative feelings about a moment is a way to let out negative feelings and, in turn, to move on. Therefore, meme-making represents a meaningful process for individuals. When my participants were asked what meme-making meant to them personally, they answered as follows:

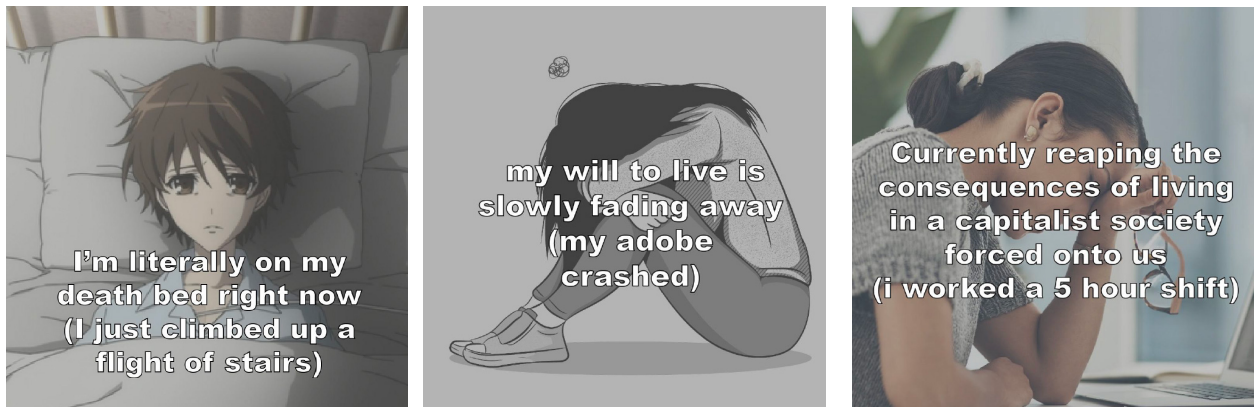


Figure 6.7 Memes made by Dhara



Figure 6.8 Meme made by W

Michelle: I think it's really nice to be able to voice that frustration. I think it's very easy to feel powerless in light of all the different forces in the world. There's the climate change crisis and the housing crisis and affordability. It's just a lot. And also, even with the university, tuition is a lot, and there are just a lot of different things to process. Those struggles—the daily struggles—it's nice to be able to voice that and make fun of it because, ... otherwise, how else do you cope? You got to make fun of it.

Melody: If you're just trying to make memes to make people laugh, they might not be as good as [they] should be. And also, I think if you put your personal experience as the intention behind it, I think you'll put a lot more effort into it. And also, it's more like a casual and funny way of complaining instead of venting to everyone. It also makes you find new perspectives [and ways] of thinking when you're doing this ... It's more reflective in a way, but not negative. It's more positive.

Nina: I'm bound to come up with something since memes are kind of based on the everyday experiences we live through.

Dhara: Even before this workshop, I found that I would make memes to express my current [situation]. I would post on Instagram after any minor inconvenience. It's a form to let your emotions out in a funny way, or also in a way other people would relate to ... Specifically, in my case, I do it [meme-making] based on the current experiences or situations that I'm in. So, if it's something that I don't necessarily want to talk about with a friend or anything, it's kind of like an outlet to let these emotions out for a little bit, and then you get a bit of a reaction. So, it kind of makes you like, "okay, I'm good."

Sammi: Sometimes, I'll be having a bad day and then I'll just document that bad day through memes. Sometimes, if the situation I'm going through can somehow be communicated through a meme, then I'll replace some of the text instead. It's like I think of a meme that I think could be a good template for me to show this bad situation that just happened or this minor inconvenience and kind of make fun of it but in a good way. it kind of makes it feel less bad—at least I got a laugh out of it.

Nevertheless, although some memes in this section could sound to some just like teenage venting, I do not think that they are *purely* venting. Ngai's (2007) theory of "ugly feeling" consistently reminds me of the value of negative feelings and reflections of powerlessness in artwork. I think these memes made by young people are worthy of study, as they provide a valuable understanding of the social context that young people are facing when transitioning to adulthood; this insight can help us determine whether something is truly just a "minor inconvenience" or is an issue that we everyday people have simply been ignoring. Given the coincidentally entirely female composition of my workshop participants, the sessions offered insights into the meme-making practices of young women specifically. While feminism was not an initial focus of my workshop or a primary research interest, I nevertheless uncovered intriguing patterns in meme creation and the ways in which women describe their processes and works.

In *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ (1983) outlines a series of significant factors that inhibit women from engaging in creative pursuits (e.g., writing). One aspect of her work that particularly intrigued and resonated with me during the meme workshop was her discussion of the double standards imposed on women's creative work. She highlights how women's experiences and artistic endeavours are often regarded as less important, representative, and interesting than those of men

(1983). This observation may explain why many participants indicated that their memes are merely “exaggerating,” addressing “minor inconveniences,” or created “just for fun.” At times during the workshop, final presentations, and interviews, I detected a certain level of self-doubt among many of the participants, who critically assessed and underestimated their memes despite having largely affirmed their experiences in meme-making. This phenomenon reminds me of how memes, as a form of art, have been consistently underestimated and undervalued. In many cases, they are not even recognized as formal artistic expressions. As viewers of memes generally do not hold high expectations for them, with some participants even saying that memes are “supposed to be ugly,” memes have been able to become a vehicle for truly unrestricted expression. This may elucidate why women are particularly drawn to meme-making: It offers them a space free from suppression. Memes are not judged according to conventional standards of appearance or content. This notion aligns with Russ’s (1983) discussion about how womanhood is often perceived as “deviant” or “special” relative to the “normative” perception of manhood (1983). Memes, frequently regarded as quirky, naturally serve as an ideal outlet for women to express their idiosyncrasies. They enable women to deconstruct their experiences of suffering in womanhood, with regard to which their expressions and experiences are frequently overlooked and undervalued, through lighthearted jokes. While such jokes may not always evoke laughter, they serve as a means of resilience and empowerment.

During my interview with W, she expressed her interest in what are known as “existential memes,” or those that pertain to concepts surrounding existentialism, a philosophy that explores the existence of one’s being. According to John Macquarrie, common existentialist concepts include “freedom, decisions, responsibility,” and the “ability to shape the future,” which distinguishes humans from other beings (1977, p. 4). Additionally, existentialism examines the negative aspects of human existence, addressing the “tragic elements” through which freedom and the pursuit of authentic



Figure 6.9 Meme made by W



Figure 6.10 Meme made by Cindy

being met with resistance and frustration (1977, p. 4). I noticed several similarities between what I categorize as “moments in life” memes and existential memes. Both types generally poke fun at everyday experiences, question common feelings, and exaggerate daily occurrences. The difference lies in the fact that existential memes tend to go deeper and more directly into questioning life itself. Rather than representing specific moments or fleeting thoughts, they encapsulate humans’ complex and mixed emotions and thoughts after having endured absurd experiences. They often highlight personal issues that remain unresolved but that individuals can still find humour in. For instance, W created a meme (Figure 6.9) depicting a house on fire to humorously convey her feelings about being a woman and experiencing premenstrual syndrome each month (similar to receiving mail at a burning house). Another example is Cindy’s meme (Figure 6.10), which depicts one girl innocently holding a dog while another girl suddenly leaps into the frame. This serves as a metaphor from Cindy’s perspective for the relationship between “my hopes and dreams” and the perils of “life,” which are depicted as coming about suddenly. This meme reflects Cindy’s disillusionment upon realizing how real-life situations often disrupt her aspirations and pursuits.

A considerable number of existential memes were produced during the workshop, such as W’s meme (Figure 5.2) questioning the mundane aspects of daily life, Nina’s meme (Figure 5.8) realizing the universality of life experiences, and Dhara’s meme (Figure 5.14) discussing the need to face life’s problems using BoJack Horseman as a reference. During the research for my master’s thesis, for which I curated and thematically categorized hundreds of memes online, I found that existential memes were among the most popular. People use memes to discuss very serious topics, such as the will to live, suicidal thoughts, questioning existence, and means of coping with life’s struggles (Han, 2020). As with the memes made during my workshop, I found existential memes in general tend to be fairly generic, as they address profound questions pertaining to life rather than specific issues. Therefore, when creators post

such memes online, they expect the wider audience to resonate based more on their feelings than on their experiences.

Notably, the characteristics of existential memes may partially align with Ngai's (2007) theory on how "ugly feelings" often reflect one's powerlessness in the anxiety-riddled modern society. The powerlessness one feels in life can lead to lingering negative emotions, yet even when we make memes about life's problems we may struggle to properly identify these emotions. Still, we make memes to try to let go of these feelings—to try to move on and improve our lives. Perhaps Nina's meme (Figure 5.8) was right: None of us have original life experiences. Therefore, we inherently have one another's back throughout the journey. I would like to use a quotation from my participant Sarina alongside Dhara's meme (Figure 6.11) to summarize this section:

Sarina: I feel like I'm more inspired to make memes. There are some scenarios



Figure 6.11 Meme made by Dhara

in daily life that are just ridiculous. And then after the workshop, or since the workshop started, I found myself having conversations with myself about an object. [If] something happened and I just thought of something funny in my mind, I was just thinking—that would make a great meme. It sort of changed my view on life. It made it more joyful. Because I don't see stuff as seriously anymore.

Meme Theme #3: Common Experiences, Hobbies, Fandoms, and Family

Dynamics —Building Communities on What We Love and Hate

Among the memes made during the workshop, there were a fair number of memes based on themes or images from the creators' hobbies, favourite celebrities, and family. Such memes are usually highly contextual, as only viewers who share the same interests or know their references find them funny. This is not surprising, as one significant characteristic of humour is its social nature within an ingroup; humour serves as “a communicative tool to help build and sustain social worlds across degrees of mediation” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 96). Therefore, by sharing a laugh at the same joke, people can identify one another as part of the same social group and community. Meanwhile, fans who share the same hobbies and interests develop fandoms, creating memes and other forms of artistic expression to showcase their love for whatever the subject of the fandom is. Grant and Love (2019), in *Fandom as Methodology*, argue that practising fandom aligns with many artistic methods in that adherents are encouraged to “embrace the excessive, the deviant, the willful, and the overblown” (p. 2). This argument also aligns with my assertion that memes serve as an artistic, sometimes quirky, form of expression. In fact, it is commonly understood among scholars that memes play an important role in many fan communities given humour's highly important social function as an indicator of ingroup status. Hence, in this section, I discuss the memes made during my workshop that relate to one's hobbies, fandoms, and common experiences as well as to more private matters, such as family dynamics.

Hobbies and Fandoms

A quick browse of hobby-based memes reveals that there are a few centred around the movie *Shrek* (Figures 6.12–6.13); Michelle made a series of memes about her love for popular singer Taylor Swift and her identity as a fan (Figures 6.14–6.15); Sammi created various memes implying her strong passion for videogames while complaining about their excessive prices (Figures 6.16–6.17); Janice made a meme in which she used her favourite anime character, Doraemon, to represent herself (Figure 6.18)—and this list does not even mention the memes that made cultural references

**me when they
wanna talk about
the political and
economic state of
the world**



**me when they
wanna talk about
why the shrek
movies are the
greatest movie
series to ever exist**



Figure 6.12 Meme made by Dhara



Figure 6.13 Meme made by Melody



Figure 6.14 Meme made by Michelle

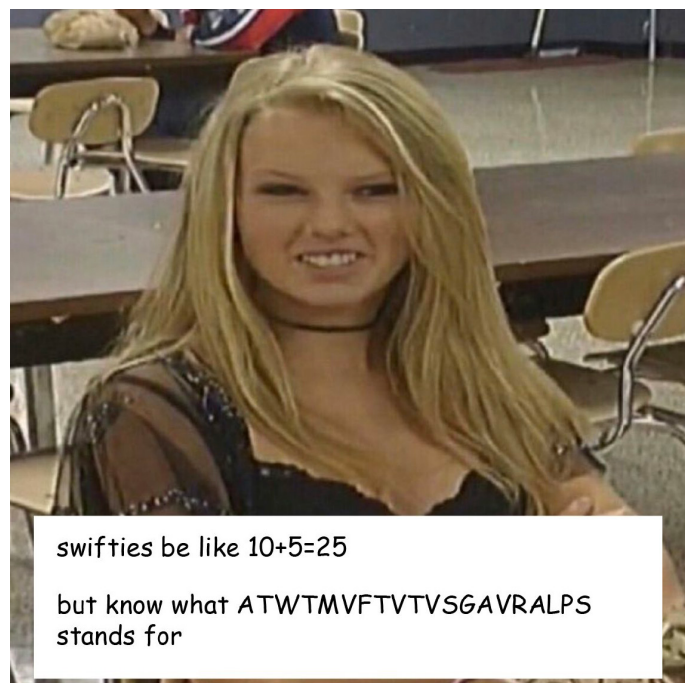


Figure 6.15 Meme made by Michelle



Figure 6.16 Meme made by Sammi

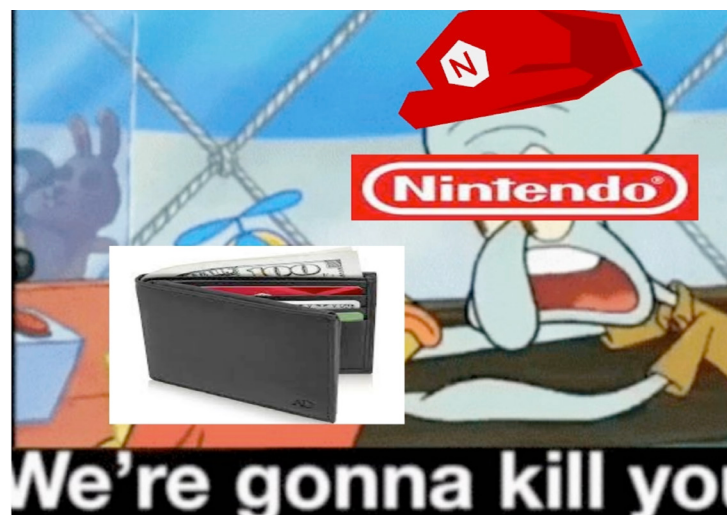


Figure 6.17 Meme made by Sammi

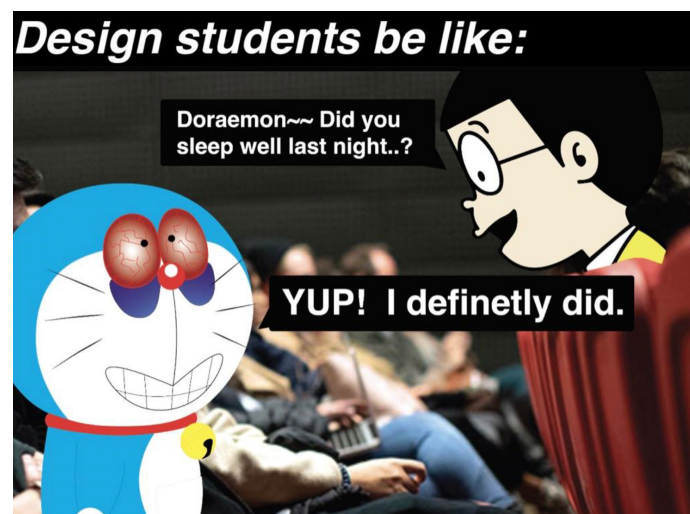


Figure 6.18 Meme made by Janice

in the last chapter (e.g., Figures 5.13–5.15). Through these memes, my participants conveyed their love, passion, desire, and sometimes even a sprinkle of irony about their beloved popular figures, hobbies, and fan identity. Although this type of meme simply cannot be universally resonant, the meme-makers themselves find great satisfaction and pleasure through the underlying process.

The Common Experience

The first meme that elicited a loud burst of laughter during the final presentations was Michelle's meme (Figure 5.4), *Undertaker (Flipping Burgers) Standing Behind AJ Styles*. As mentioned in the last chapter, the meme was based on a shared experience among design students at York University's design program. During certain classes, a particular faculty member repeatedly told students that if they don't improve their taste and skills in design, they would end up in a "burger-flipping"-type of graphic design job in the future, playing off of the common refrain "flipping burgers" used to refer to repetitive, dead-end jobs. Although the metaphor vividly describes a potentially difficult situation for designers, students found it just as hilarious as it was brutal and frightening that their four years of effort to earn a bachelor's degree in design could lead to such mundane work. While each student initially thought of their experience with this particular faculty member as an individual case, Michelle's meme confirmed that everyone in the classroom had experienced the same thing, resulting in booming laughter. During the viewing and discussion of this meme, the participants in the workshop bonded as a small community of design students who shared similar experiences. It is also important to note that this meme would simply make no sense to those without this highly specific experience. This aligns with Phillips and Milner's argument that humour bonds ingroup members while isolating outsiders (2017). Therefore, I believe the making and sharing of memes play an important role in the affirmation of one's identity and sense of social belonging. Thus, when individuals use

memes as an emotional outlet to express negative feelings, they are effectively seeking affirmation from the collective. In this way, the individual healing process becomes a collective experience—one rooted in knowing that you're not alone in your experiences and in being able to laugh about them with others who understand.

Family and Friends

Although there were relatively few, the memes involving themes surrounding family dynamics or even images of family members and friends drew my attention. Considering the fact that families and friend circles are very small social units, the memes that involve family members may be meaningful to the meme-makers themselves and then a very small number of people beyond them. Once again, this aligns with Phillips and Milner's (2017) argument that humour (i.e., the core of memes) identifies ingroup members and enhances their sense of belonging within a certain social group (2017). The use of photos depicting family and friends is prominent in Cindy's work. In a previously discussed meme by Cindy (Figure 6.10), she used a photo taken of her two friends from high school. In another (Figure 6.19), she used a photo of her younger sister putting on makeup for the first time with a distressed look on her

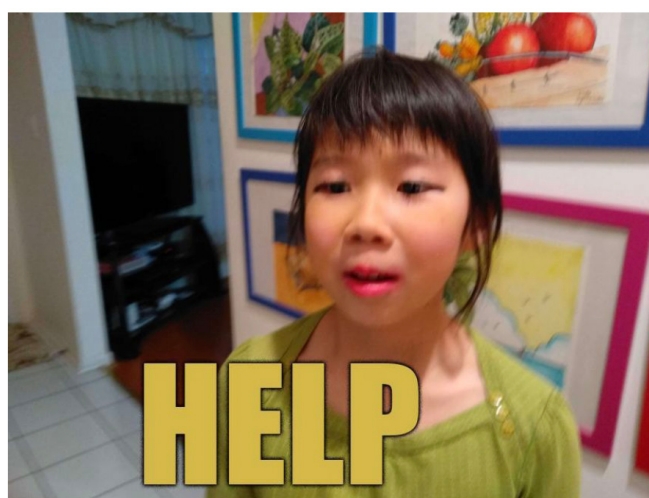


Figure 6.19 *Meme made by Cindy*

face. In the post-workshop interview, Cindy said that her mom really loved these memes and laughed really hard. Cindy's work demonstrates the private aspects of memes' social characteristics. From a nation to a small group of family or friends, memes bring people together. The more we laugh together, the more we bond.

Other Critical Themes

As discussed in Chapter 1, memes also play an important role today in public discourse pertaining to social and political issues (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2013), empowering marginalized groups to have their voices heard (Hinzo & Clark, 2019; Land, 2021; Yavuz, 2023; Zidani, 2023) and allowing people to discuss taboo topics that they are usually unwilling to address in formal situations (Vickery, 2014). As expected, there were a fair number of memes created in the workshop conveying the social and political concerns of my participants. This was demonstrated in the last chapter by some memes made by Michelle, which talk about the absurd situation in the current housing market in Toronto (Figures 5.1 and 5.13). W also made a video using PowerPoint that pokes fun at the absurdity of the house-purchasing experience in a creative way (Figure 6.20).

On top of concerns about the housing market, students like Michelle also face significant financial struggles during their undergraduate studies, with many of them needing to balance school and work. Unsurprisingly, Michelle created another meme describing her efforts to hustle for a better life as a student using a hilarious image of six Shreks holding hands and manifesting their desires around a candle (Figure 6.21).

Alongside the meme critiquing the unpleasant experience of having others perceive one's ethnic identity as "exotic" (Figure 5.6), Nina created two memes featuring the same template of a swinging metronome to symbolize something that is constantly oscillating between two seemingly irreconcilable positions. One criticizes the school system for denouncing bullying while treating actual instances of bullying in a vague and

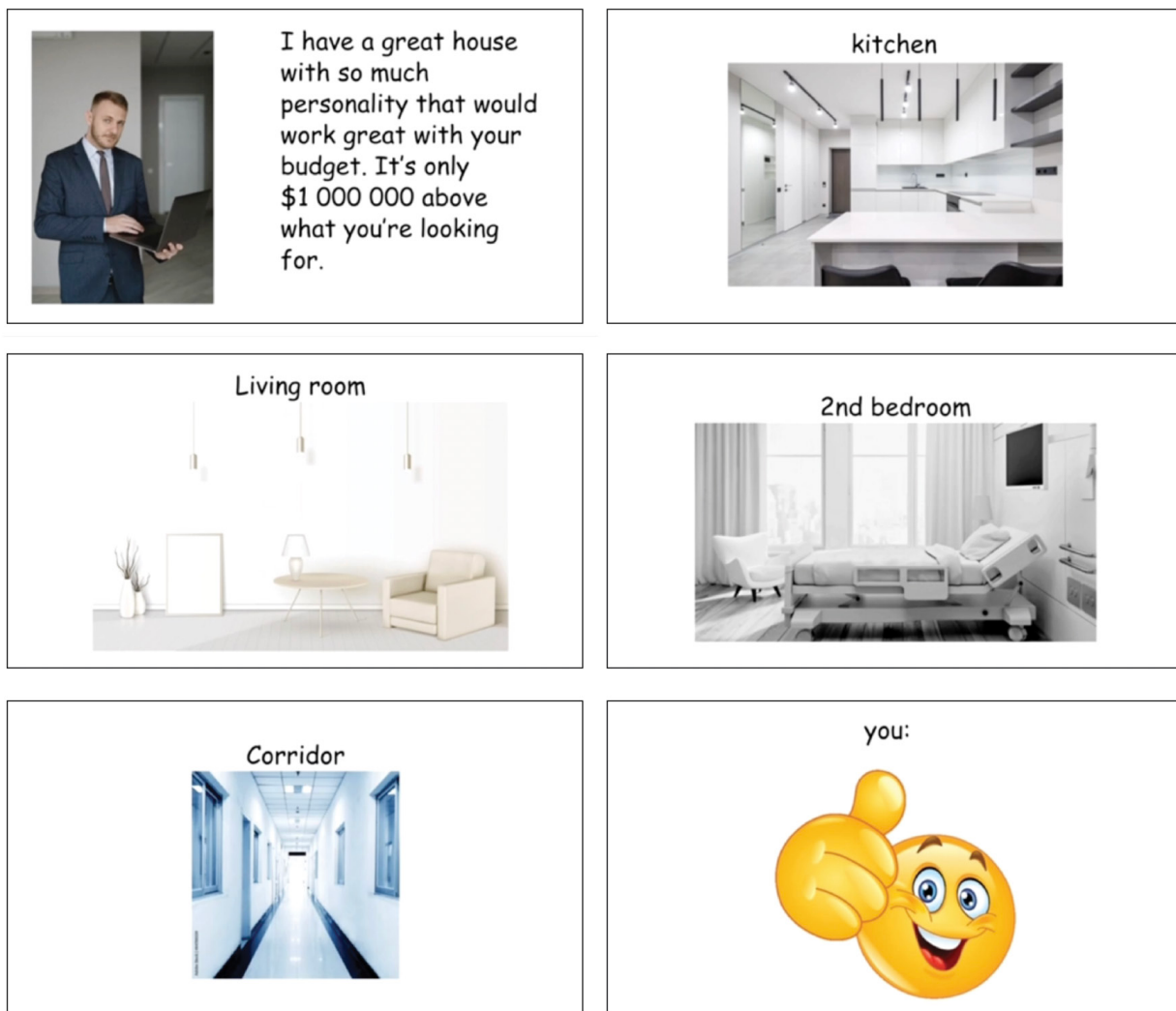
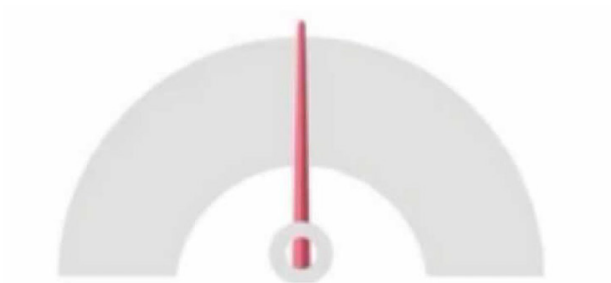


Figure 6.20 *Selected Scenes from Video by W*

me and my 5 other personalities
manifesting clear skin, food
security, money and a good
thesis project



Figure 6.21 *Meme made by Michelle*



**HOSTS
ANTI-BULLYING
ASSEMBLIES
EVERY MONTH**

theres no
evidence aden is
destroying ur
things but u
called him a
bastard lol go
apologize 🙄



"be confident!"
"it's ok to fail go at
ur own pace uwu"
"be urself and do
what ulove"
"love urself xoxo"

"Stop that Kelly, you
suck at dances"
"Act like an outsider
and you'll be treated
like one too!"
"Mfs are too soft
these days"

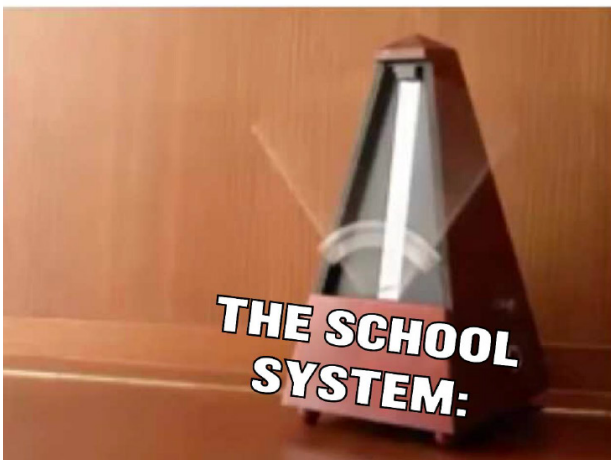


Figure 6.22 & 6.23 Meme made by Nina

lazy way (Figure 6.22), and the other criticizes “authority” figures for constantly shifting between praising and belittling those in subordinate positions (Figure 6.23).

Findings and Conclusion

It is important to consider the social context of the creators as well as the creators themselves when analyzing artistic works to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their intentions (Riessman, 2008; Rose, 2001). By analyzing the memes created during my workshop, I discovered that memes are crafted based on my participants’ identities as art and design students, artists and designers, women, racialized individuals, and, most importantly, young people navigating their 20s filled with excitement and curiosity—but also confusion and frustration in the face of life’s challenges.

In Terry Eagleton’s *Humour*, he suggests that jokes provide people with childlike satisfaction, prompting us to regress to a state that predates the meticulously enforced divisions and precision of the symbolic order, one where logic, coherence, and linear thinking may be totally discarded (2022, pp. 16–17). Therefore, crafting jokes through memes about life’s challenging and rapidly changing aspects (which are inevitably illogical, unpredictable, and sometimes chaotic) can serve as a valuable coping mechanism for young adults dealing with complex and conflicting feelings as they transition into “decent adulthood” in their early 20s.

This section summarizes some of the key functions of meme-making as demonstrated by my workshop. While much of the existing literature highlights memes as communicative tools for voicing opinions or fostering critical thinking (Wells, 2018), my research places greater emphasis on the act of meme-making itself, particularly its potential as a healing practice. Therefore, my findings illustrate the benefits of meme-making for creators, highlighting how the act of creative making can function as a means of both learning and healing. Ultimately, my analyses identified five key benefits of meme-making for creators:

- Coping with adversity or confusion
- Expressing oneself and seeking validation
- Reconciling and progressing
- Celebrating passions and interests (fandom)
- Documenting moments and fostering community

The first three benefits align with theories discussed in Chapter 2, particularly those regarding the anti-oppressive and therapeutic functions of humour, which allow individuals to speak out about their oppressed ideas and heal by narrating their experiences and feelings to the audience (Barreca, 2013; Eagleton, 2022). The last two points resonate with the benefits of creative making when it comes to celebrating and practising fandom (Grant & Love, 2019) and fostering community (Altenberg et al., 2018; Giancarlo et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2014; Pedri-Spade, 2017). These benefits of humour and creative making were reflected in my meme workshop and the work produced in it.

These identified benefits highlight the value of the process of meme-making more than its tangible outcomes. In fact, they may even inspire us to rethink what else we can expect in design education—or even education in any discipline—beyond engaging with the knowledge and skills required for jobs available in the market. The meme workshop demonstrated that the process of learning can be beneficial and therapeutic for individual students because it not only helps them gain knowledge but also empowers them to investigate the world and the issues they care about using experimental approaches. In fact, the therapeutic nature of meme-making embodies its rebellious nature, enabling learners to question, re-examine, and challenge their existing knowledge. Moreover, the meme workshop fostered a small community where participants could address their issues collectively. The healing function of group setups is more commonly studied in the medical field, where workshops for medical workers facing daily grief help them heal through creative and group activities (Jenko et al., 2011;

Kearsley & Lobb, 2014). Studies also suggest that such workshops efficiently facilitate collective healing for systemic traumas experienced by people facing injustice (Bosley et al., 2022). In addition to the therapeutic nature of humor, the workshop setup provided a space for collective healing, where participants engaged in the same activities under a shared theme and navigated an emotional journey together as a group in a physical space.

The findings of this chapter's analysis add to those of the previous chapter by addressing how healing often accompanies the act of rebellion. Rebelling against oppression can help one come to terms with their negative feelings or even trauma caused by said oppression. Being capable of voicing one's frustrations and struggles not only heals one from within but also—as the first step toward solving large-scale social issues and making changes—brings together people who have the same issues to form a community. Memes have always represented a culture that engages closely with everyday people and the communities formed by them. While meme trends may quickly rise and fall given the nature of social media, it is nonetheless important to think about the people behind the memes—what they are making and why they are making it. Truly registering that there is a reason and a motivation behind every meme that someone posts may help us understand one another when it comes to controversial topics, fostering improved online spaces for knowledge and information sharing through which we may learn and heal together.

Conclusion

My dissertation extends my art-based master's thesis with the intention of exploring memes as a form of creative making that may pedagogically benefit a larger group of learners. The research process demonstrates my journey of studying internet meme culture, connecting meme culture to art and design through a historical lens, and using a workshop-based methodology to explore meme's potential pedagogy collectively.

In Chapter 1, through multiple literature reviews, I explore the history of memes' origins and development alongside advances in digital technology. Through critical reflection on literature about internet culture, I notice how our culture has moved into the digital realm while still grappling with unresolved social issues such as racism and cultural appropriation (Chun, 2021; Dean, 2016; Noble, 2018; Shifman, 2014). Meanwhile, memes themselves are an incredible form of creative making, allowing messages to be delivered in a vague and implicit way, enabling users to escape internet surveillance and censorship (Chen, 2021; Mina, 2014). Memes also provide opportunities for digital amateurs to learn and practice the making of digital artifacts, allowing internet users to express themselves and their points of view in a more dynamic form.

In Chapter 2, through multiple literature reviews, I attempt to prove that memes are indeed a form of art, much like artworks that were not recognized as art in their eras, such as Dadaism. By breaking down the techniques and intentions behind meme-making, I connect the commonalities that memes and certain art movements share. By relating memes to art and design movements in history, I analyze the essential components of art making, leading to a more critical understanding of institutional art and design education. This, in turn, inspires potential improvements for current studio-based pedagogy, encouraging curriculums that are more open-structured, allowing students to explore non-conventional art and design making.

Chapter 3 extends the potential of studio-based pedagogy to critical meme-making by introducing a workshop as a key component of the research method, along with field notes and interviews, to analyze how participants learn and practice meme-making in a studio setup. By examining field notes, visual work, and post-workshop interviews, the data provided a comprehensive understanding of participants' creative processes. This addresses the fact that creative making is a complex process, influenced by one's experiences and emotions. By studying these experiences and emotions, I was able to identify some issues in current design education.

Chapter 4 focuses on answering how design students learn and practice in response to issues in the current studio model. The positive experiences from the meme workshop prompted participants to compare them with their experiences in formal studio learning, providing valuable data to understand the oppressive components of the current model and to develop strategies for improving studio pedagogies.

Chapters 5 and 6 intertwine in their focus on understanding how the “ugly” aesthetic of memes is actually a form of critical media literacy and resistance against conventional design-making and, consequently, a means of emotional healing. As my participants felt safe and free to create memes without being judged on their conventions and topics, they found memes to be an emotional outlet for making designs and discussing issues that are often under-addressed in their daily lives.

Throughout this dissertation journey, I have developed a more critical perspective on institutionalized design education, recognizing both its oppressive aspects due to industry demands and its potential to foster avant-garde making with pedagogies that encourage experiments. At the beginning of my research, I learned that memes are an excellent medium for expressing one's point of view. The coincidence of having most of my workshop participants come from design backgrounds was a happy accident, inspiring me to extend my questions beyond meme functions to recognize that the appearance of memes is also a form of resistance, opening up possibilities for visual

making in the digital realm. Memes rebel from both their denotative and connotative aspects. Emerging from grassroots culture, memes are not expected to serve the purpose of cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1989), freeing them from rules of craftsmanship and aesthetic standards. Yet memes remain a visual culture embedded in people's lives. Through voluntary circulation by users, memes' core lies in their sharable and humorous nature. Whether humors are addressing positive or negative emotions, people's happiness and frustrations are expected to be heard and understood in order to be healed.

The data from my workshop further elaborated on the mentalities behind the meme-making process. Through the memes created during the workshop and the interviews, I gained insight into my participants' frustrations and joys as women, design students, and racialized youth, which were expressed in the nuances of their memes. While the broader social issues are complex, I learned that their current educational experiences were a significant source of frustration.

Although professional skills and an understanding of industry principles are important and indispensable in contemporary design education, the critical examination of conventional methods is underaddressed. This gap leads to students' frustration and confusion when they struggle with what they are being taught. By articulating how design principles are created and taught, students can be liberated from this confusion and encouraged to develop their own approaches. Students should be encouraged to experiment with different methods, genres, and styles to embrace the possibilities within design education. Meme-making is one of many ways that may help designers think and create more broadly, and such attempts are not inherently in conflict with institutional design education.

Moreover, interview data from my participants reveals a pattern in traditional studio pedagogy. While it tends to center more on learners than teachers, it still often focuses primarily on learners' final work rather than their creative processes, including

their mental states and intentions. However, creative work is deeply connected to the creator's identity, social context, and emotional state, with feelings—such as frustration or joy—shaping both what is created and how it is made (Rose, 2001; Ngai, 2007). The participants' voices suggest that learners' inner worlds also seek recognition during the learning process. This led me to reflect on how the studio is not only a space for creation but also a space for emotions, where learners can be both vulnerable and strong throughout the creative process.

This calls on studio facilitators and instructors to focus not only on the learners' work but also on the learners themselves, showing empathy and helping them understand their creative decisions along the way. As my teaching journey continues in both York University's undergraduate programs in education and design, I have noticed that the design studio is where I can most perceive students' inner worlds through their work. I can sense their frustration, anxiety, excitement, boredom, and joy in both their designs and the conversations we have during studio critiques. Moreover, art and design education are disciplines rooted in culture, identity, and background, closely linked to emotions. Therefore, the studio is never solely a space for production; it is a space for exchanging ideas, knowledge, thoughts, emotions, and connections. Studio learning can become a source of oppression when these needs are neglected, and the focus is placed solely on the production of polished artifacts. When educators start to care for the process, the final work and the people behind it, the studio becomes a space where people heal through learning and making.

Contribution

My research contributes to two major interdisciplinary aspects. The first explores how memes can serve as one of many pathways to non-conventional design making and design learning. The second examines the cultural and anthropological value of internet memes as digital artifacts that document the creative process, which involves a

complex interplay of experiences, emotions, and identities. By combining these aspects, my research highlights that the learning process of creative making extends beyond the final creative outcomes. We educators need to recognize the humanity behind the act of creation, including the pleasure and pain embedded in the making of these memes.

The study of these conditions informs educators about learners' motivations in the creative process—the need for rebellion and the use of creative work as an emotional outlet for oppression. These emotional expressions, through creative work, can serve as valuable data to reflect on broader societal issues—specifically, in my research, the challenges present in design education and design making. Interview data from my study uncovers the potentially oppressive elements in contemporary design education and explores how learners might find healing from the constraints of conventional design making and learning.

As we advocate for learner-centered pedagogy, the memes created in my workshop, along with the interview insights, raise questions about whether our current educational system centers on learners' outcomes more than on the learners themselves. My findings emphasize the complexity of “learning outcomes,” showing that it is not just about the artifacts produced, but also the transformation of students' mindsets and their healing processes.

Overall, my research underscores the importance of focusing on the process of creative making and learning, rather than solely on the outcomes. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how an approach that centers on the humanity of learners, rather than just their results, can enrich education.

Limitations and Future Explorations

Due to the rapid evolution of memes, my research faces temporal limitations, as it is subject to the constantly changing landscape of digital media, technologies, and the cultures that emerge from them. Additionally, the design of digital platforms is gradually

becoming less transparent and increasingly complex, making it difficult for everyday users to fully grasp. During my years of studying internet memes, I also encountered Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, which I found both inspiring and cautionary. Zuboff warns that the pervasive surveillance in the digital realm, driven by capitalist interests, grows alongside technological advancements (2018). She expresses a pessimistic view, asserting that digital technology is not being developed for the well-being of its users but rather to serve the interests of capital (2018). As mentioned in a previous chapter, this logic is embedded in algorithms, which determine what we see and what we know, trapping us in "ideological bubble worlds" (Stark, 2018).

Although memes, with their ambiguous nature, may resist algorithmic manipulation to some degree, the pace of technological advancement remains unpredictable. For this reason, I would like to continue observing and studying the future of memes. Memes, as reflections of the people behind them, also reveal how individuals respond to the growing influence of algorithms. While memes can certainly be co-opted by capitalist forces, I am more interested in how people resist this capitalization through their creative actions, continuing to make memes in defiance of commodification.

At the same time, as meme culture flourishes, my role as a graphic designer and design educator reminds me not to lose faith in institutional design education. My research and experiences have shown me that design schools can be sites of avant-garde design, where learners master conventional techniques and go beyond them. The voices of my workshop participants prompted me to reflect on current design education and how it can be improved. From this research, two areas of further exploration emerge:

- How can we transform institutionalized design education, which often prioritizes professionalism, into a process that promotes pleasure and healing, where learners explore possibilities rather than merely practicing conventions that constrain them?

- What are the potential future evolutions of memes, and how might they blur the boundaries between professional and non-professional designers as digital technology continues to advance?

I believe these are critical questions to ask, especially as design, both as an industry and a discipline, is closely tied to technological advancements and faces an uncertain future. There is a possibility that the professionalization of design may become obsolete as new digital technologies emerge. This shift could also push designers to rethink the future forms and possibilities of graphic design in the digital realm. If generative AI replaces banal and conventional types of design, does this mean that unconventional design-making will become a more crucial key to the future of graphic design? Will memes evolve to resemble graphic design more closely, or will graphic design become more like memes?

I believe that the rapid evolution of digital technologies will continue to surprise us, but memes may surprise us even more. This line of research requires me to keep my eyes and mind open, staying current with the latest technological changes and the cultures they give rise to. Regardless of how technology evolves, I hope my research and practice will continue to remind us of the humanity behind the technology.

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Appendix: Post-workshop Interview Question Protocol

What motivated you to develop the skill and knowledge in meme making?

What artistic techniques for creative making you have learned and explored during the workshop sessions?

Does your understanding in memes change after the workshop?

What critical insights have you gain from your research process about memes and their social impact/functions?

What critical insights have you gain from the meme making process including the critiques?

Do you think this workshop will benefit you in the future when participating in activities on social media? Or any potential benefit for personal career development? Or personal life?

Who were you communicating to with your meme? How and what have you learned about them and their cultures during your meme-making process?

What social media platforms did you post your work? Have you successfully reached your target audience? What were their reactions to your work? Or any interaction happened during the sharing process? Did the in-workshop critiques help you to locate and communicate with the communities better?

What might you do differently to revise your work according to your audiences' reactions?

What do you think were missing from the workshop sessions that could help you to

achieve your meme-making objectives better?

What do you think were missing from the workshop sessions that could improve your meme-making process?

Ethics Approval



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ETHICS APPROVAL

To: Yaqing Han
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From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of Janessa Drake, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: Thursday, June 29, 2023

Title: **'Make Memes Good Again': A Meme-Making Studio Pedagogy to Support Critical Multiliteracies**

Risk Level: ☒ Minimal Risk ☐ More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: ☒ Delegated Review ☐ Full Committee Review

I am writing to inform you that this research project, **"'Make Memes Good Again': A Meme-Making Studio Pedagogy to Support Critical Multiliteracies"** has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Note that approval is granted for one year. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, **"RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE"**.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM
Director, Office of Research Ethics