Design a Meme:

Visual Representation, Creative Strategies and Memetic Culture

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Abstract

Millennials today are highly engaged with social media, which offers them a platform to openly express their emotions and opinions. These social media platforms have become important parts of their daily lives. In this environment, a new visual form of expression—internet memes—has emerged. Cultural memes develop in an extremely fascinating manner and have gradually become mainstream on social media. Memes have a significant impact on young people; the emerging visual culture may alter their perceptions of visual representation through digital media.

My thesis uncovers the emotions behind the development of memes that lead its popularization in the modern online environment. Additionally, I detail the creative strategies of meme-making to explore the potential to apply memetic methods to design as a form of criticism. It is essential to understand the culture behind constitutive memes and explore the community and emotions behind memetic visual representation in the modern context of social media.

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Introduction: A Brief History of Internet Meme

The concept of a meme originated as a biological term developed by Richard Dawkins; the term referred to a unit that transfers cultural information from one individual to another through imitation (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins used the example of a saddleback bird to demonstrate how memes work. Saddlebacks learn to sing from others and have a pool from which they pick songs. Occasionally, when a bird sings off tone, a new song is inadvertently created—the instinct of saddlebacks to mimic the songs of others to be part of the community is driven by meme (p. 189). Dawkins argued that memes are central to the spread and evolution of our cultures (1976). Memes can be any cultural creation that we maintain and share. Susan Blackmore, a student of Dawkins, says that numerous things from our daily lives can be viewed as memes, such as fashion, music, skills, political slogans and any ways of doing things that are copied from one another through a mental process (1999, p. 7).

Considering the origin of the concept, it makes sense that people use the term "meme" to refer to online digital joke formats. Memers share and spread memes that trigger our emotions; they re-create and spread memes so memes evolve and new contents are being generated. There are copious meme formats on the internet today, ranging from activities such as the "Ice Bucket Challenge(Fig. 1)" to random video clips like "Keyboard Cat(Fig. 2)", from photo parodies such as "The Situation Room(Fig. 3)" to remixes like "Obama Singing(Fig. 4)". Limor Shifman categorizes memes into several genres: reaction photoshops, photo fads, flash mobs, lipsynch, misheard lyrics, recut trailers,

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Fig. 1 "Ice Bucket Challenge", 2014

Fig. 2 "Keyboard Cat", Video, 2007

Fig. 3 "The Situation Room", 2011

Fig. 4 Maestro Ziikos, "Donald Trump And Barack Obama Singing Barbie Girl By Aqua", Video, 2017

LOLcats, stock character macros, rage comics and etc. (Shifman, 2014, pp. 102–120). In this study, I focus on visual meme formats, especially image-text-based memes and video remixes. Additionally, considering the short lifespan of some meme genres and the constantly changing visual styles, my research focuses on the most up-to-date meme trends.

Internet memes today are sophisticated and complex—they are more than just jokes. They are beyond the scope of linguistics, as they are implicit and visual. The visual components of memes allow for more symbolic context and expressiveness in messaging.

The earliest online meme is thought to have been created in 1982 when people added the symbol of a smile, :-), at the end of online messages. The smile emoticon added emotional context to messages and helped to avoid potential misunderstanding which might be caused by the iconic language (Davison, 2012, p. 124). Thus, it is clear that internet memes were created as a way to be more expressive in digital communication. Since the use of computers and the internet at home became mainstream, memes have evolved tremendously by moving beyond text and symbols and emerging in a wide array of forms. Memes can now be websites, videos, online activities, images, gifs, jokes and rumours that people share and spread—they connect people in "complex, creative and surprising ways" (Shifman, 2014, p. 12).

Shifman used "Gangnam Style(Fig. 5)", a music video from Korean pop star PSY, as a case study to demonstrate how modern memes function and succeed on the internet. After breaking the all-time viewing record on YouTube, the song's catchy rhythm and signature "horse-riding" dance became widespread memes. Countless memes were created based
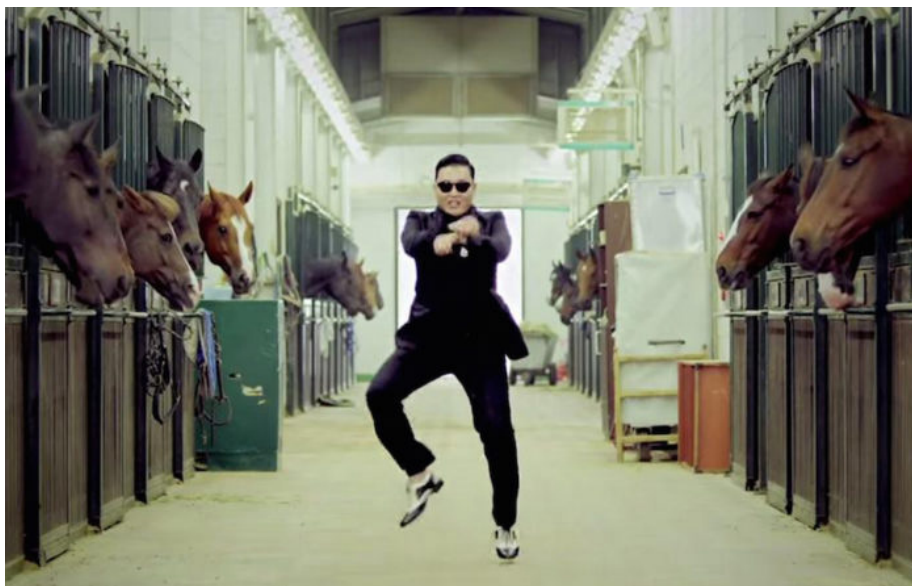
Fig. 5 PSY, "Gangnam Style", Music Video, 2012

on the song and its dance, including "Mitt Romney Style", "Singaporean Style", and "Arab Style." People dedicated time, passion and effort into imitating the dance and incorporating it into their identities (Shifman, 2014, p. 11). This case also shows the evolving nature of memes.

This begs the questions: why was "Gangnam Style" such a monumental success as an internet meme? The subject of the music video is a middle-aged, ordinary-looking man dancing around Gangnam, a luxury living area in central Seoul. Unlike most popular figures, PSY looks very "reachable" and "relatable in this video, presenting a grass-roots image. The rhythm of the music and the "horse-riding" dance are both simple and require no artistic ability to imitate. However, the emotional attitudes that this video conveys have multiple layers. "Gangnam Style" is a mental state of "swag"—cool, fearless and hyper despite an ordinary and grass-roots lifestyle.

From the concept's origin to the modern internet meme, memes have constituted cultural creations that are widely spread and, in turn, re-created. The spread of a meme is spontaneous—its success requires mass cultural recognition. Sharers and viewers alike contribute to the cultural creation of its presence.

The Visual Representation of the Internet Meme and Its Creative Strategies

Visual memes speak to the cultures behind them. The communities behind memes are young, creative and urgent for self-expression. Over the last two decades, internet memes have developed unique visual styles and forms of speech. They have also become more implicit and require certain knowledge and understanding of contexts in memes to interpret. Memes are constantly changing to reflect the mentality of memers, who are mostly millennials, as well as the society they live in. Therefore, researchers can understand memetic cultures through the visual representation of internet memes.

Online memes are as diverse and unpredictable as the internet itself, though there are certain patterns that all memes share. The birth of a meme is not determined by a single creator—it is determined by a group of people who share the recognition of a symbolic visual. The seed of a meme can be anything, including an image, a video clip or even just a tweet. What makes a meme, however, is the process of collective storytelling (Milner and Phillips, 2017, p. 127). In other words, an image alone does not constitute a meme without a community modifying and sharing it.

Memes: The De-skilling of Design

The standard process of developing and sharing a meme results in the appearance of memes being visually unconventional from the perspective of visual designers. The visual quality of memes is typically very poor due to the loss in image resolution whenever

an image or video is replicated and shared among memers. This low quality, however, comes alongside technological affordance and the subsequent de-skilling of the design process. With the tools available on digital devices, it is easy with accessible tools to edit images(Milner and Phillips, 2017, p. 45). This accessibility rapidly has boosted the number of memers and, in turn, memes (p. 46). Having the simple purpose of making jokes, the taste of a meme is less likely to be judged artistically. However, unfunny or unoriginal memes tend to get less attention. This environment fosters some unspoken rules for making memes. For example, the content of a meme is always more important than the visual arrangement of texts and images; in fact, a meme *should* be ugly and poorly designed.

The ugliness of memes lies at the core of memetic cultures. This ugliness offers a sense of security to millennial memers. As capitalism has developed into a more sophisticated global system of consumer culture, millennials have come to understand the cost of beauty—millennials perceive beauty as something costly and distant. Ugliness, in contrast to beauty, gives off the impression of a more "chill" attitude for millennials. Ugly things are generally inexpensive, reachable and achievable. The ugly nature of memes is indicative of its widely accessible culture. Not only are memes free to view, but the culture is accessible without any necessary artistic knowledge or skills. The visual representation of memes emphasizes that memes are cultures of the masses, as well as a form of low art.

The field of graphic design generally adapts to and takes inspiration from emerging visual cultures. As originality and creativity are being redefined by memes, it is unknown how designers may take inspiration from meme culture. The ugly nature of memes may not

offer any technical principles for the actual design process directly, but the success of memetic cultures today is an interesting reflection of design as self-criticism in terms of the aesthetic expectation of a design artifact and the cultural and economic context in which it lies. As younger generations are celebrating and worshiping "ugly images", it may be time for designers to look at their discipline from a critical perspective to see potential social issues through the shift in visual culture.

The Visual Construction of Image-Based Memes

While text-based images (such as a screenshot of a tweet) can stand alone as a meme, many memes are made with both text and imagery. The text generally serves to indicate context while the image shows a reaction to or visual metaphor for said context.

The images in memes are symbolic. Image-based memes are categorized as reaction Photoshops, stock character macros and photo fads (Shifman, 2014, p. 343). For all of these genres, the image is usually the part that is collectively recognized and that which carries plurally interpretative information. The image no longer reflects an actual event— it serves as visual rhetoric or a symbol interpreted by the creator (Shifman, 2014, p. 344). Additionally, memes sometimes use iconic photographs to garner more attention and emotional reactions (Shifman, 2014, p. 347). It is clear that the image is typically the abstract aspect of a meme. It succinctly conveys complex facts or emotions.

The type fonts of memes are digitally defaulting. One might argue that memers are being lazy and thoughtless when choosing a font. The earliest popular meme font, Impact, suggests that memers were simply looking for a convenient and loud digital font (Brideau

and Berret, 2014, p. 308). When we look at the popular fonts among modern memers, we see Impact, Arial and Helvetica, all of which are at the top of most typeface lists. The logic behind meme fonts is surprisingly simple: memers want convenient, accessible and affordable fonts. The only aesthetic consideration is likely that bold fonts are more visible in the chaos of social media.

The visible clues of collective storytelling in a meme are significant. Memes are always a remix of readymades. Online search engines offer a practically infinite image pool for the public to download meme materials. Since most memers are not trained designers, memes are often quite ugly—their designers use cut, copy and paste as primary tools and often overlay various fonts in a single meme. Memers could not care less about the roughness of their creations; in fact, the roughness constitutes part of the irony in a meme. There is no obvious originality or creativity in the process of meme-making. However, the humour in memes comes from unexpected ways of arranging imagery and text as well as the use of certain images in surprising contexts. Stock character macro is the meme genre that most accurately represents this point. "Hide the Pain Harold(Fig. 6)" is a series of stock photos of a gleeful elderly man working a modern life with a laptop. However, due to the subtle smile of the man, this meme is interpreted as a representation of "hiding internal pain through a smile". While making memes with "Hide the Pain Harold", collectives offer familiarity and symbolism through the stock image, but they still aim for unusual ways of using the image; this makes the meme more original or creative and leads to success.

However, a meme's success is not determined by its appearance but by the emotions it brings out from the community as a whole. Thus, researchers must not only understand
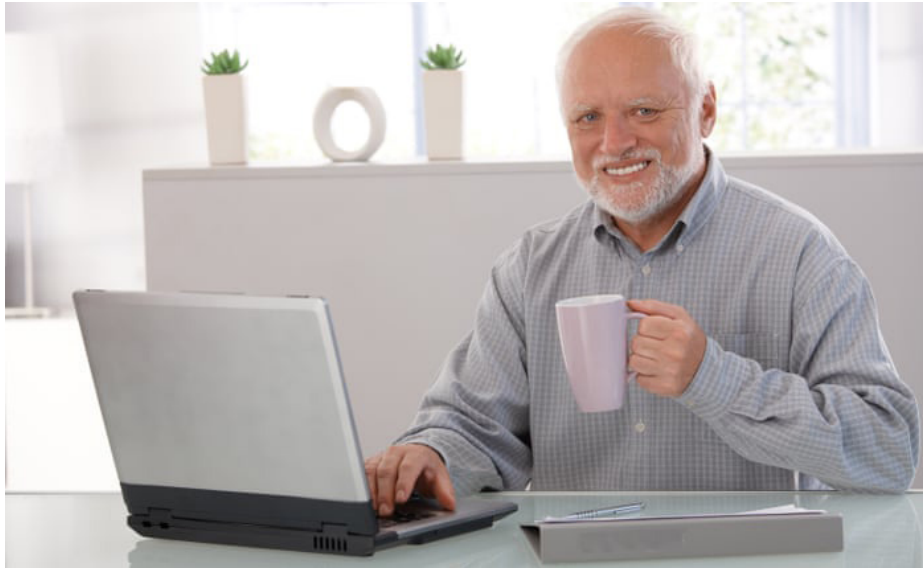
Fig. 6 "Hide the Pain Harold", 2011

the visual construction of memes but the cultures and collective emotions behind them. The visual characteristics described above cannot alone guarantee a meme's success. Visual representation only helps us identify and classify them. To understand their impact, researchers must understand the communities. The messages conveyed by successful memes empathize with collective emotions or at least reflect something that is commonly seen as a problem. By understanding the emergence of memes, researchers can see the cultures behind them and the potential social problems that millennials may face.

Visual Curation as a Research Method

Compared to science, art and design are more practice-based disciplines, partially aggregating knowledge from science as well as the humanities. Thus, the research process for design requires the integration of practice. Visual curation offers a practice-based

perspective to study visual cultures. Curator Raul Gschrey believes curation is a valuable research method:

> It provides a middle ground that allows for more open ways of addressing material and the inclusion of more practice-based work. Through its polyphonic nature, it challenges the linearity and decisiveness of academic reasoning and allows for a less hierarchical and a more open-ended and associative occupation with topics, ideas, and artifacts. This does not imply the abandonment of the established and justified methods and practices of academic knowledge production, but curatorial practice might contribute some elements to a more open and practice-based form of academic research. (2016)

Using visual curation in my research allows me to understand collective cultures through individual cases and look for commonalities through the visual curation process.

My visual curation projects explore the characteristics of internet memes and incorporate my findings on the creative strategies of internet memes. By curating and analyzing internet memes as a visual research method, I discover commonalities among internet meme designs.

Project *The Meme Look: Part 1*(Fig. 7) explores the visual representation of internet memes, mainly the popular figures and fonts. The first part of the project consists of the visualization of research conducted in 2016 when seven researchers collected hundreds of millions of memes and categorized them to determine the most popular figures. Quartz, an international news organization, classified the results into general popular figures and non-fictional popular figures in the chart(Fig. 9) below (Sonnad, 2018).

Fig. 7 Yaqing Helen Han, *The Meme Look: Part 1*,
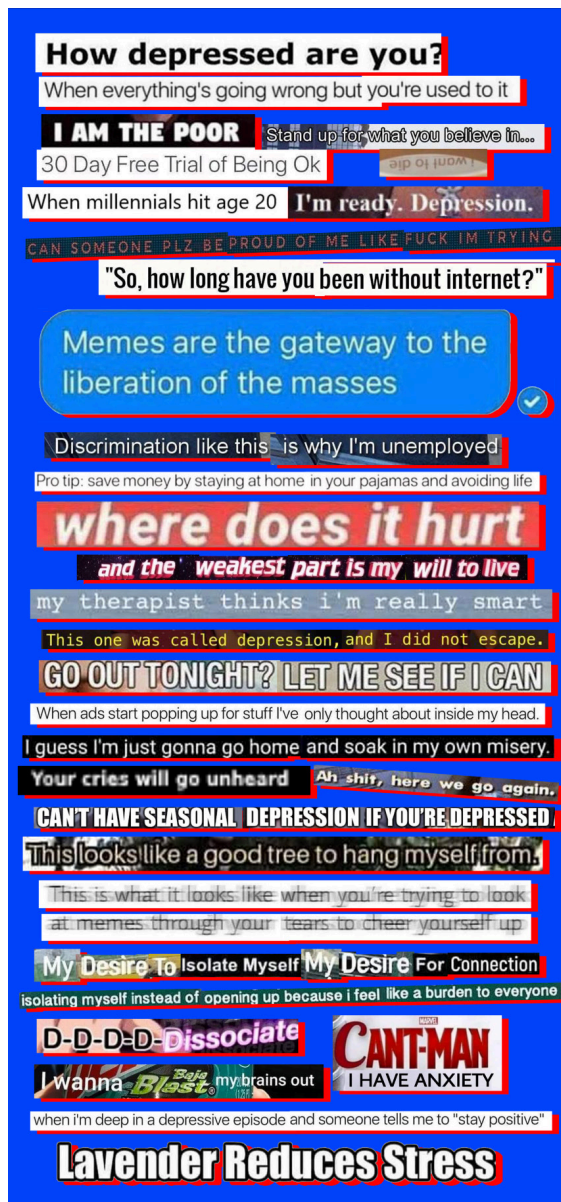poster, 2019

Fig. 8 Yaqing Helen Han, *The Meme Look: Part 2*,
poster, 2019

Some cartoon figures, such as Pepe the Frog and SpongeBob, are more popular than non-fictional figures. Among the non-fictional figures, there are mostly politicians and social movement activists, as well as a few celebrities. Fictional cartoon figures tend to be more expressive and have more space to interpret; these are often used in reaction memes. The popularity of these cartoon figures emphasizes the expression of the speech to garner more attention online. At the same time, memers are also passionate about attaching their opinions or criticisms directly onto politicians' photographs and using irony in political debates.

Rank	/pol/	Reddit	Twitter
1	Feels Bad Man/Sad Frog	Manning Face	Roll Safe
2	Smug Frog	That's the Joke	Arthur's Fist
3	Happy Merchant	Feels Bad Man/ Sad Frog	Evil Kermit
4	Apu Apustaja	Confession Bear	Nut Button
5	Pepe the Frog	This is Fine	Spongebob Mock
6	Make America Great Again	Smug Frog	Reaction Images
7	Angry Pepe	Roll Safe	Expanding Brain
8	Bait this is Bait	Rage Guy	Demotivational Posters
9	I Know that Feel Bro	Make America Great Again	Cash Me Ousside/Howbow Dah
10	Cult of Kek	Fake CCG Cards	Conceited Reaction
11	Laughing Tom Cruise	Confused Nick Young	Computer Reaction Faces
12	Awoo	Daily Struggle	Feels Bad Man/ Sad Frog

Fig. 9 *Finally, a scientific list of the most popular memes on the internet.* Quartz, 2019
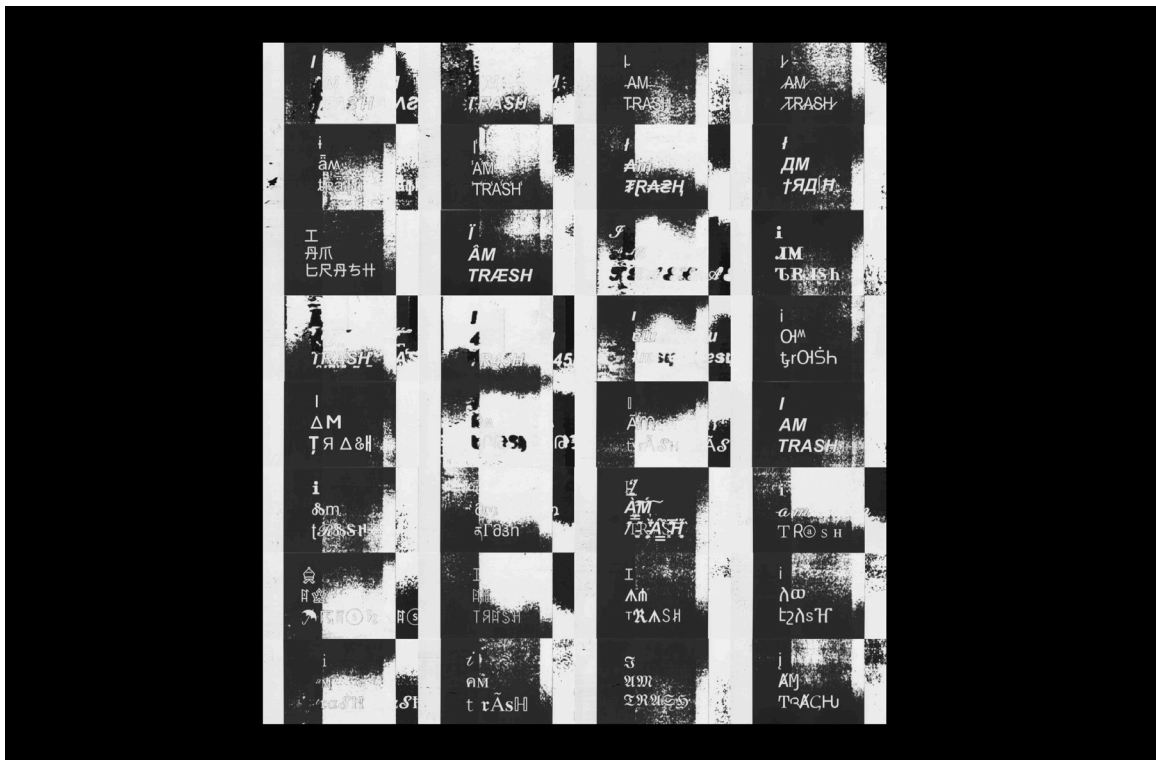
Fig. 10 Yaqing Helen Han, *The Meme Look: Part 3*, poster, 2019

The Meme Look: Part 1 is a general observation of the appearance of memes and the potential reasons behind their creation and spread. It is clear that social media and internet memes have become prominent in political discourse among young people online. Evidence shows that internet memes are constantly used as promotional materials in political activity and protest, such as during the 2008 US presidential race and the "Occupy Wall Street" movement (Shifman, 2014, pp. 121–143).

The Meme Look: Part 2 (Fig. 8) addresses the already stated finding: meme fonts are digitally defaulting. I exacted all text from the 65-meme curation project and placed it on a single poster. The majority of the fonts are free sans-serif fonts, which are commonly

used as default fonts in digital interfaces. Some other fonts are preserved from original photos in the memes as readymade.

However, the rising trend of so-called "Zalgo" texts in memes may indicate a different mentality of font choice. "Zalgo" texts have "glitchy" looks that are generated by web-based plugins. Those web-based plugins automatically change the standard of translating codes to Latin letters to create a scary and messy look (Kumar, 2018).

 The Meme Look: Part 3 (Fig. 10) is a curation project on meme fonts focuses on the phenomenon of these font types. I curated 32 different "Zalgo" code-generated texts with the same content. Outside of this sample, there are hundreds of irregular code-generated fonts online. This phenomenon demonstrates that there are few font choices available to memers without a background in font design. Thus, memers are still looking for alternative ways to add more personality and uniqueness into their memes.

Memes as a Visual Language of Criticism and Speculation

The Generations of Speculation

Since memes began receiving public attention, there has been a discussion about the role of memes in teenage culture. Many digital culture experts observed that young people share their emotions in online communities, and not only the positive ones—also fear, anxiety, frustration and depression (Owens, 2018). Teenagers feel more comfortable sharing genuine feelings and reactions to current events with mockery and satire; it has become a part of their daily lives (Fink, 2020). Thus, memes enable more expressive communication about ongoing social events online among young people.

This means that memes have research value for studying collective emotions. By researching memes, researchers can understand young people's intentions. This offers a better understanding of memetic cultures and may provide interesting perspectives for the fields of psychology and youth education. I decided to use curation design and visual analysis as the research method to look into the messaging and mentality behind memes. From February to July 2019, I curated 65 most popular memes at the time by the numbers of likes and shares, each with at least 10,000 likes on major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit). Meme curation focuses on personal emotions, daily lives, attitudes and thoughts. Visual denotation and connotation analysis methods are used to read curated memes. After the visual analysis is completed, all memes are classified based on the problem it references. The curation outcome is made into a book,

titled *Obsolete Memes* (Fig. 11), with three chapters containing memes about different problems alongside visual analysis. There are three major themes found in these memes: financial struggle, self-deprecation and mental health issues. In curated memes, young people have no fear of expressing their disappointment in themselves and the world they live in. They speculate about minor things in life and react to them using ironic visual language in memes.

Fig. 11 Yaqing Helen Han, *Obsolete Memes*, book, 2019

This result may raise some questions: Why are young people so critical and cynical about themselves and their environment? What is behind these rebellions and setbacks? Researchers cannot answer these questions without first understanding the context. Family therapists Atwood and Scholtz perceive rebellion and frustration during the transition from adolescence to adulthood to be a modern phenomenon. It is defined as a "quarter-life crisis", which they believe is the result of social, historic and economic changes in the West after World War II (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). Globalization has promoted the growth of the global economy. As a result, children grow up in affluent environments, which leads to a rise in expectations from life (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). Another result of globalization, however, is increased volatility in livelihoods and financial situations (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). Technology is desocializing millennials while consumer culture is materializing them (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). With these major problems in life, they may also experience minor stress when they fail to meet their parents' expectations or endure common relationship issues during their 20s (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). The "quarter-life crisis" may begin at age 17 and last until one's late 20s or even 30s (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). This age group is basically the same as that of most memers. Young people need a way to express their emotions—especially the negative ones—to help them find a community and the support they need to pass through life's hard moments (Owens, 2018). In my curation project *Obsolete Memes*, all of the above problems are addressed implicitly. Therefore, it is possible that internet memes constitute a visual culture that emerged from a complex context: the popularization of social media and personal digital devices, youth in frustration, and the impact of pop culture on digital media. All of these factors together created the environment that fosters the ambivalent online meme cultures.

Humour as Criticism

The humour behind memes uses several layers of an image to convey emotion. Millennials are the ones who started internet memes in the first place. Millennials are identified as those who were born in or after 1982, attending high school around the year 2000 (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Their sense of humour through memes is odd, offensive and absurd. When people make fun of their own suicidal thoughts with memes and share them with strangers online, are they sad, or are they amused? Writer Megan Hoins who did not find it surprising because of something similar from history, said:

> Sounds pretty complicated for a bunch of weird, silly videos, huh? But this is simply one slice of the complex and rich world that absurdist humour has to offer. Not only does it provide a means for people to express their disillusionment with the world through an open and accessible medium, but it also has precedence in a widely-respected art movement called "Dada", dating back to the First World War. (Hoins, 2016)

Comparing memes with Dada on the basis of "ugly visuals" is nothing new. They both reflect creators' attitudes of defiance and disillusionment using an anti-authority aesthetic (Hoins, 2016). In Hoins's words, memes and Dada both do not define their works as art and refuse to follow the path of conventions. But those ugly images do get their market or at least cultural impact from millennials (Hoins, 2016). Memes and Dada share the spirit of criticizing the ideological power structures. As Dada "sought to overturn traditional bourgeois notions of art" (Hopkins, 2006), memes are unconsciously fighting against notions of power.

Memes can be a source of inspiration for designers, allowing them to better integrate this humorous visual language into critical design. This is perfectly reasonable, as the discipline of design has always explored the possibility of "socially engaged design for raising awareness; satire and critique; inspiration, reflection, highbrow entertainment; aesthetic explorations; speculation about possible futures; and as a catalyst for change" (Dunne and Raby, 2014, p. 33).

Visual Exploration as a Research Method

Project *The Life of Potato* (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13) explores the "quarter-life crisis" among millennials (Atwood and Scholtz, 2008). The artifact of the project is a fictional family album that documents the life of a potato from his birth to his early 30s. The character of "potato" represents millennials who do not feel they have control over their lives. The entire album records the story of the potato—he was born into a loving family and

Fig. 12 Yaqing Helen Han, *The Life of Potato*, book, 2019

Fig. 13 Yaqing Helen Han, *The Life of Potato*, book, 2019

grew up in an affluent environment but struggled with alcohol and drugs after entering

adulthood. Unable to find the job or the relationship that he wants, the potato can only

adapt to an unsatisfying life. The story was narrated by a "grandmother's" voice to reflect

the older generations' expectations of young people with a sense of naivety. In *The Life*

of Potato, the creative strategies of meme-making are fully integrated into the design. All

the visuals in the project were taken from the internet and organized in a way that mocks

certain scenarios. *The Life of Potato* reflects a possible real-life story of the collectives

and could garner emotional responses from a millennial audience.

Projects *Meme Vending Machine* (Fig. 14 and Fig. 15) and *Maybe I'm Meant to Be*

Lonely (Fig. 16 and Fig. 17) critique and speculate about the application of creative meme-making strategies into commercial design. In 2019, Burger King's #FeelYourWay campaign launched in Los Angeles. It raised a debate among marketing professionals on whether the use of negative emotions in advertising is ethical. Reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany from Vox commented:

> It should go without saying, I think, that a line of meal boxes does not honor the full range of human emotions, and instead flattens the full range of human emotions into a handful of options [...] Whatever market research these brands are referencing—which obviously told them that young people are anxious and financially insecure and suffering from emotional isolation—could have been cited as a good reason not to manipulate and exploit customers any more than is necessary to sell a hamburger.(2019)

Negative emotions, a fundamental piece of meme culture, are very private for individuals. Certainly, more shopping cannot solve the problems that millennials face. Project *Meme Vending Machine* is a fictional TV commercial, incorporating memetic visual language, to introduce a new vending machine that sells memes to young customers.

The video is narrated by a typical "business" voice tone and promotes a meme vending machine that sells emotion-triggering memes. While these memes are offensive and meaningless, consumers still feel the urge to purchase them. This project criticizes the use of negative emotions and speculates about what memetic culture actually brings to its audiences.

Maybe I'm Meant to Be Lonely takes the previous critique to a deeper level by experimenting with integrating the visual language of memes into luxury design. Two

Fig. 14 Yaqing Helen Han, *Meme Vending Machine*, screenshot from video, 2019

Fig. 15 Yaqing Helen Han, *Meme Vending Machine*, screenshot from video, 2019

Fig. 16 Yaqing Helen Han, *Maybe I'm Meant to Be Lonely*, fashion design, 2019

Fig. 17 Yaqing Helen Han, *Maybe I'm Meant to Be Lonely*, fashion design, 2019

patterns are designed to apply to a variety of luxury fashion products that mix low-resolution flower clipart and popular meme words. Alongside the designs themselves, there are photographs in which the products are shown on models; they are set in a dark, messy room, though the products are under a glossy spotlight to represent the gap between young consumers and luxury products.

My visual exploratory projects at this stage examine the possibility of using memetic language as a form of criticism and speculation. Andrew Blauvelt believes that the critical practice of graphic design will save the discipline. And
he wrote:

> Graphic design, precisely because it is an instrumental form of communication, cannot divorce itself from the world. Rather, graphic design must be seen as a discipline capable of generating meaning on its own terms without undue reliance on commissions, prescriptive social function, or specific media or style. Such actions should demonstrate self-awareness and self-reflexivity; a capacity to manipulate the system of design for ends other than those imposed on the field from without, and to question those conventions formed from within.

> A newly engaged form of critical practice is necessary, one that is no longer concerned with originality as defined by personal expression, but rather one dedicated to an inventive contextuality. Uniqueness should be located in the myriad circumstances and plethora of social and cultural contexts in which design find itself. (2003, pp. 42–43)

Studying the visual cultures of internet memes would not only bring graphic designers refreshing inspiration from humorous and critical visual language but also a potential

research method to see the social problems behind internet memes; in this way, researchers can understand the cultures that were born and have evolved among the young masses.

The Truth and Falsity of Memes in the Post-Authenticity Era on Social Media

The emerging visual cultures of memes seemingly play an important and positive role in young memers' daily lives. Whether they are talking about personal issues or politics, they are becoming more engaged with their communities. The humour in memes also motivates young people to participate in various types of debates online and unites people when protesting for certain social changes as communities. However, in the post-authenticity era on social media, it is questionable how effective memes are in terms of authentic and constructive comminication.

Media researcher Jay Owens argues that we are living in the era of post-authenticity, where media isn't all real and technologies exacerbate the problem of fake news. The notion of fake news has shifted from false information to something that people simply disagree with. Research shows that social media has a much lower trust rate compared with traditional media (2018). The sheer abundance of information on the internet, both accurate and inaccurate, and the immediacy with which it is distributed has created a chaotic environment. It prompts a natural reaction from those online—since information on social media is so chaotic, people will only believe what they agree with(2018).

Owens believes there is another level of post-authenticity on social media, that being aesthetic consistency (2018). Certain looks and narratives are preferred on social media. As a result, images and posts on social media no longer portray the real world. Guy Debord once addressed how media plays a role in de-authenticating the real world. He

wrote:

> In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation. (1977, Thesis 1)

Some critics believe that, as technology develops and marketing shifts toward digital efforts, this criticism now belongs to social media. Advertising, fashion, influencers and Instagram posts de-attach us from the real-world (Morgan and Purje, 2017). The online environment fosters a mindset among internet users that nothing is genuine or true on social media. Kantar's survey in 2017 found that 41% of people do not fully trust information online while 78% read news from the internet. It's another ambivalent aspect of the internet—people constantly rely on it but are unable to fully trust it.

In an ecosystem of post-authenticity, memes speak some truth. As part of the mass of information on the internet, memes do not purport to carry factual information. A meme is more likely to be a symbolic reflection of one's genuine emotional state or belief rather than a medium that carries an objective matter of fact. Memes are significant because the emotions behind them are authentic.

Of course, emotions are not always reliable. Research shows that there is significant emotional decay after social media users participate in an online discussion about a social event. Afterwards, people move on to the next topic fairly quickly (Goldenberg, Gross and Garcia, 2018). It is not an ideal situation if we want these online discussions to bring about real social change. Owens writes, "Youth culture today, in two words: practicality and memes. Seriousness, and also taking nothing seriously" (2018). It raises some serious questions. In the most advanced technological era, are young people practicing their

freedom of expression properly as responsible citizens? Beyond all of the criticism and speculation, do they truly care about anything?

My visual exploratory project *Nihilist Internet* (Fig. 18) is a response and speculation toward my concerns above. In this project, all the memes and iconic photographs from 2019 and the first two months of 2020 are mashed up together into abstraction. The mashups represent the chaotic and ambivalent online environment.
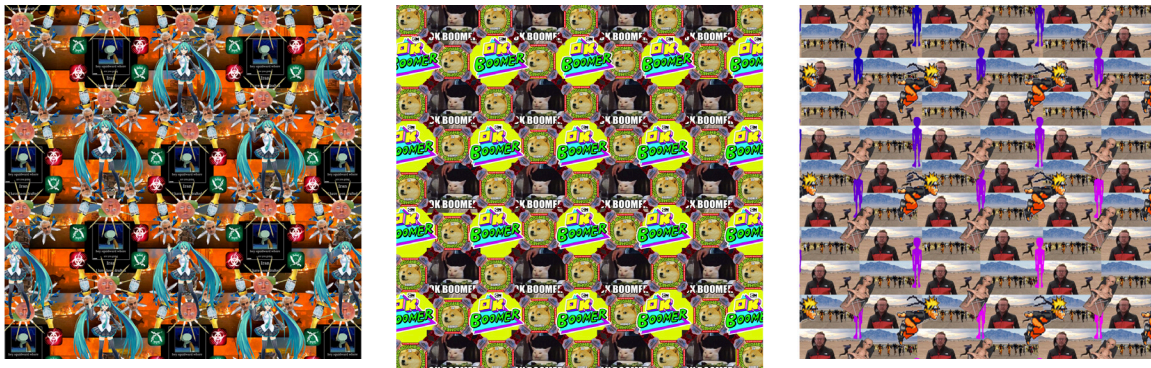

Fig. 18 Yaqing Helen Han, *Nihilist Internet*, pattern design, 2020
Full project in Appendix E

Conclusion

Studying memetic visual cultures may help graphic designers develop creative strategies for critical visual-making. It may also help researchers develop a better understanding of millennials' collective emotions. Both of these benefits offer refreshing research and design opportunities that enable meaningful contributions to the academic literature and design that can engage younger audiences. However, in the process of critiquing and speculating with memes, one must not forget the root of criticism. The intentions of criticism must be articulated. When speculating about everything with jokes, people who offer criticisms need a ground on which they can stand. Without a firm belief in the issues they want to address, it is not likely that informal critiques communicated in a virtual space can prompt any real social change.

Furthermore, when designers draw inspirations from emerging visual cultures, they must have a full understanding of the communities behind them. Memes constitute a collective and community-based visual culture but the emotions behind memes could be private and meaningful for individual memers. As designers, we must aim to rationally understand how to apply creative, meme-based strategies properly without crossing any emotional boundaries. Through expertise in design discourse, designers can play a leading role online fostering social change using more impactful and positive efforts.

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    goods/2019/5/2/18527110/burger-king-unhappy-meals-steakumms-sad-brand-twitter

Appendix A

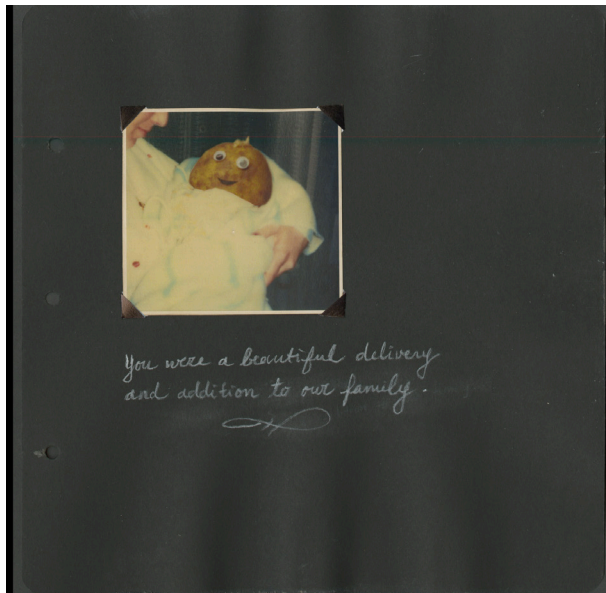Curation Project - *Obsolete Memes,* selected page from book

Appendix B
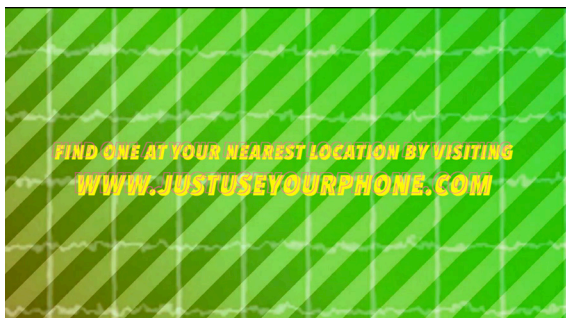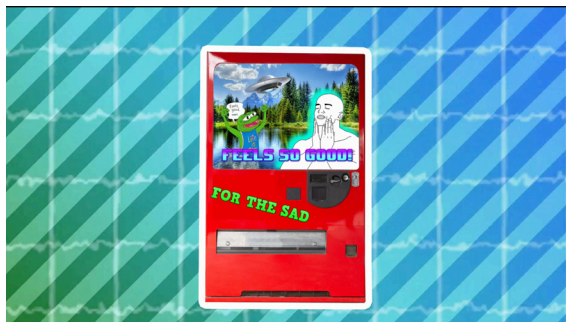
Visual Exploratory Project - *Meme Vending Machine,* screenshot from video

Appendix C

You were a beautiful delivery and addition to our family.

A joy to all, we love you so much.

Wishing we could give you everything we can.

Visual Exploratory Project - *Life of Potato,* book

Visual Exploratory Project - *Nihilist Internet : Area 51*, pattern design

Finally your first job!
You seem to enjoy it a lot.

How's that girl you were seeing? I haven't heard much about her.

We understand that you want to focus on work right now and we totally support that.

So proud of you, my little man, so grown up moving to your own little house!

Visual Exploratory Project - *Life of Potato,* book
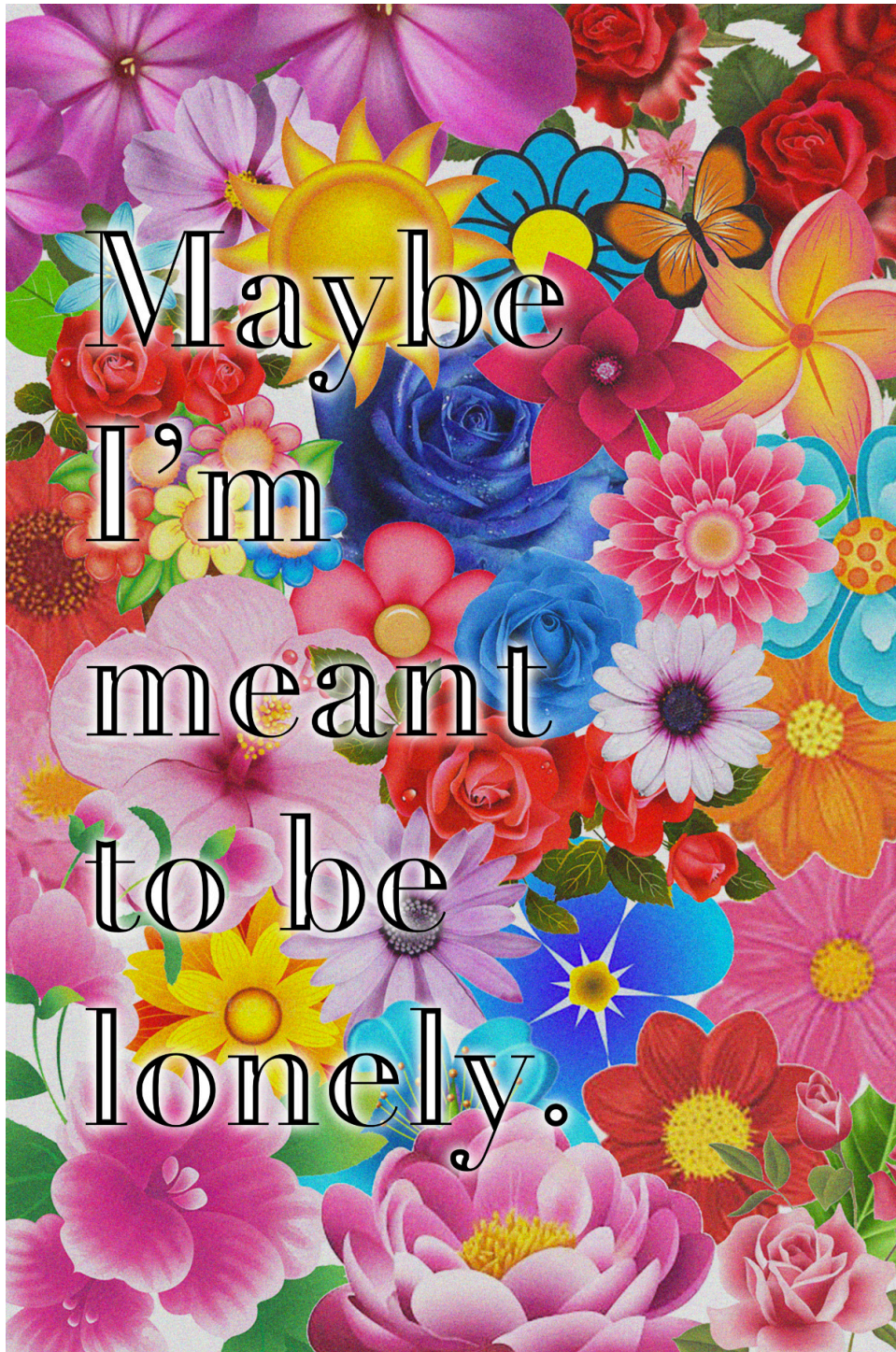
Visual Exploratory Project - *Maybe I'm meant to be lonely,* poster

Appendix E-1
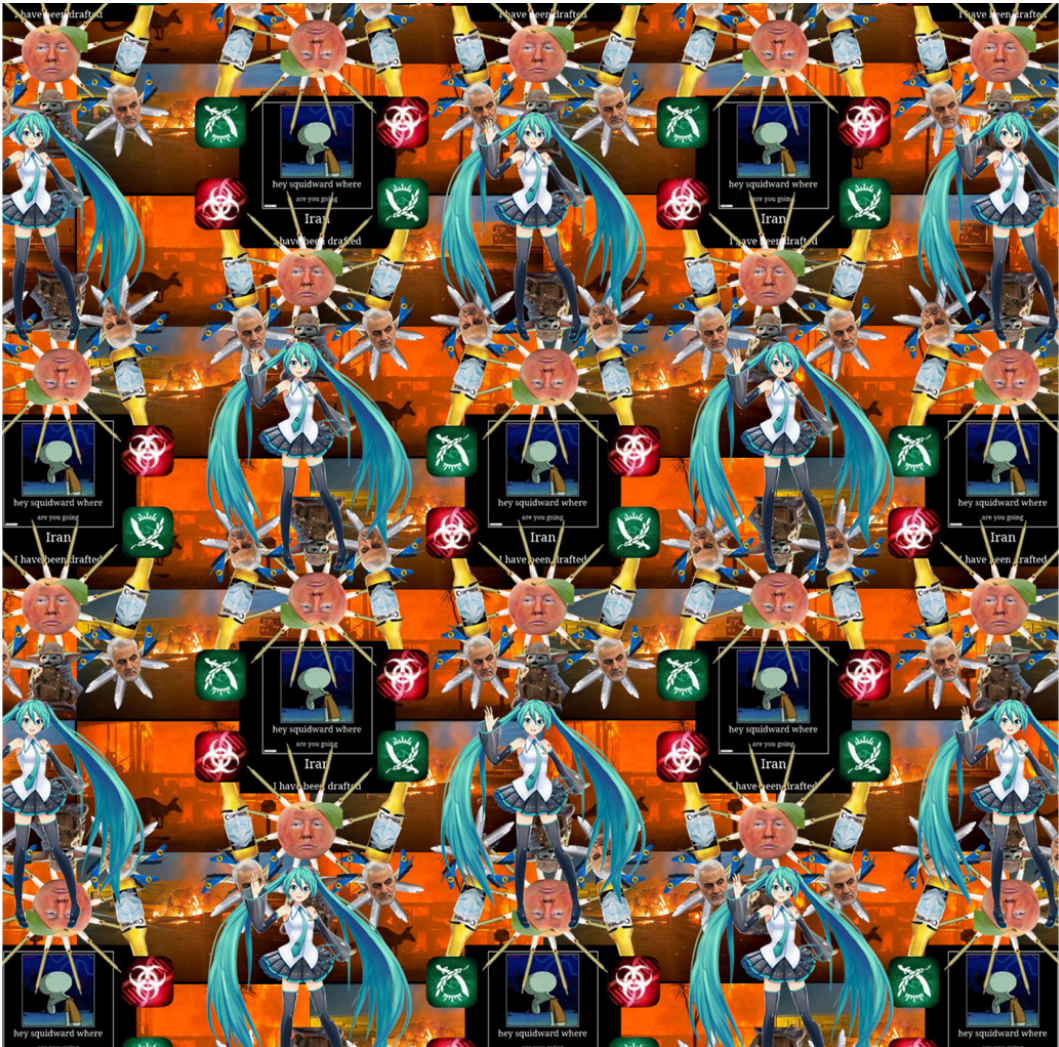
Visual Exploratory Project - *Nihilist Internet : Hello 2020,* pattern design

Appendix E-2
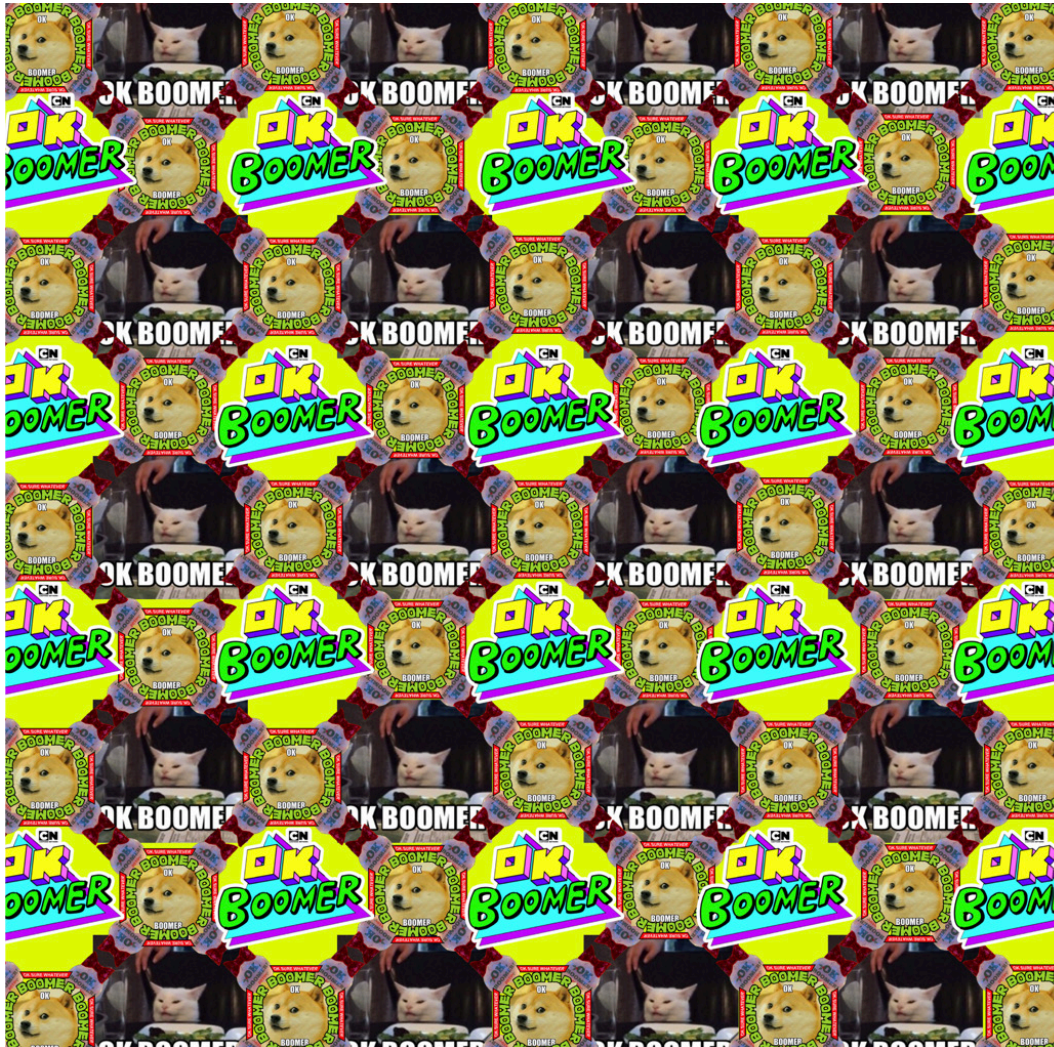
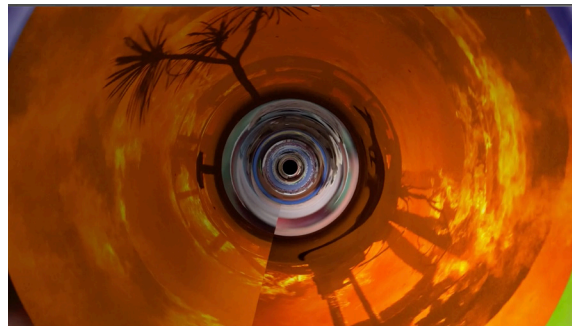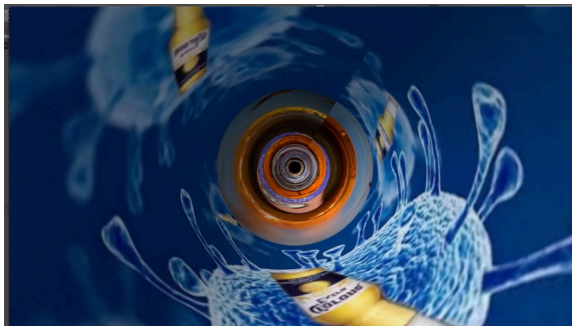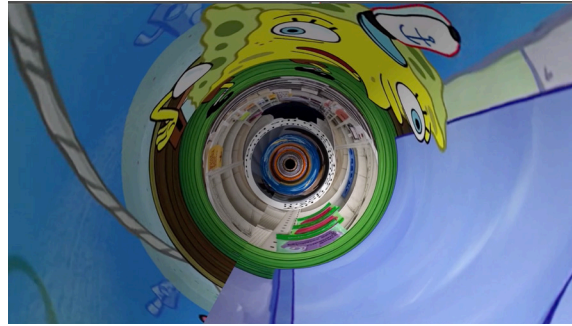Visual Exploratory Project - *Nihilist Internet : OK Boomer*, pattern design
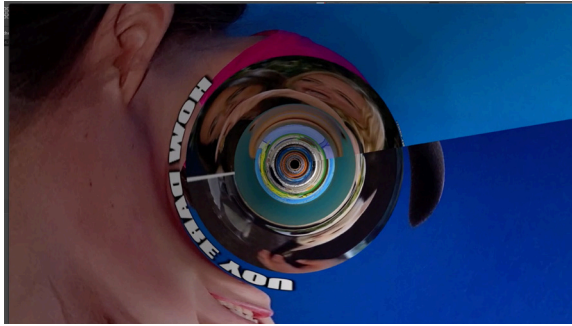
Appendix E-3

Visual Exploratory Project - *Nihilist Internet : Area 51*, pattern design

Appendix E-4
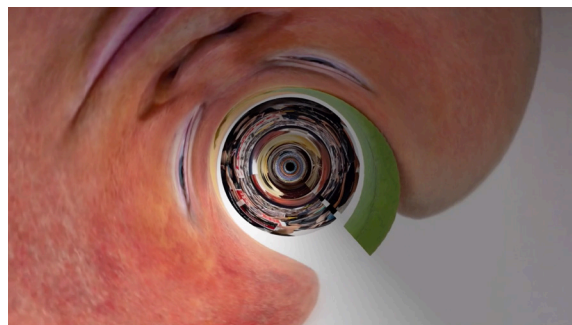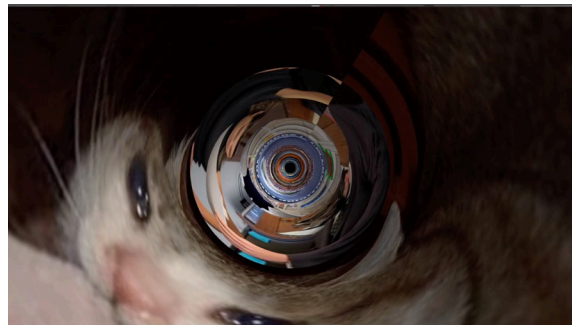
Visual Exploratory Project - *Nihilist Internet : Balckhole*, video