PEPE THE FROG:

A Case Study of the Internet Meme and its Potential Subversive

Power to Challenge Cultural Hegemonies

by

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This thesis examines Internet memes, a unique medium that has the capability to easily and seamlessly transfer ideologies between groups. It argues that these media can potentially enable subcultures to challenge, and possibly overthrow, hegemonic power structures that maintain the dominance of a mainstream culture. I trace the meme from its creation by Matt Furie in 2005 to its appearance in the 2016 US Presidential Election and examine how its meaning has changed throughout its history. I define the difference between a meme instance and the meme as a whole, and conclude that the meaning of the overall meme is formed by the sum of its numerous meme instances. This structure is unique to the medium of Internet memes and is what enables subcultures to use them to easily transfer ideologies in order to challenge the hegemony of dominant cultures.

Dick Hebdige provides a model by which a dominant culture can reclaim the images and symbols used by a subculture through the process of commodification. Using the Pepe the Frog meme as a case study, I argue that Hebdige's commodification model does not apply to Internet memes, because traditional concepts of ownership and control affect Internet memes differently. As such, the medium enables subcultures to

claim and redefine an image to challenge a dominant culture. Unlike with other forms

of media, it is difficult for the dominant culture to exert its power or control over

Internet memes. Internet memes, therefore, have significant real-world implications and

potential to empower subcultures.

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Introduction

The 2016 Presidential Election, and the months of campaigning between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump that led up to it, have been widely regarded as one of the most divisive and vitriol-filled elections in recent American history (Cummins; Baron). During the campaign, something unique and unexpected occurred. Both candidate Donald Trump and his son Donald Trump Jr. posted a cartoon image to Twitter and Instagram and in doing so completely changed the effect that Internet memes can have on a presidential campaign. Both Trumps had shared with their followers the image of anthropomorphized frog, complete with a cartoon version of Trump's distinct hairstyle. This image, known as Pepe the Frog, was not unique to the Trump campaign, and had existed years prior as an Internet meme, constantly being shared, modified, and spread throughout online communities. The images that the Trumps had shared online were the most recent instances among countless others that comprise the overall history of the Pepe the Frog meme.

Figure 1 -   Can't Stump the Trump

Figure 2 -   The Deplorables

With the *Can't Stump the Trump* (Figure 1) and *The Deplorables* (Figure 2), Pepe the

Frog had entered the limelight of U.S. politics and brought significant national attention

to the wide-reaching influence and potential of Internet memes.

Virtual space can be seen as an expansion of physical social interactions, so it is

not unheard of for social media and the Internet to play an important role in connecting

candidates to their voters. But these posts by Trump and Trump Jr. represent the first time that an Internet meme became closely associated with a specific political campaign. Trump supporters readily accepted the cartoon frog as a symbol of the campaign and their political leanings, in what was the most recent evolution in the Pepe the Frog meme and its meaning. What this meme represents and how it is interpreted has changed rapidly over its lifetime. The Pepe the Frog image has existed since 2005 when it appeared in an online cartoon, but in recent years it has taken on a significantly new meaning (Furino). For many years, Pepe the Frog was nothing more than an Internet joke, a silly image shared among users online. However, its history soon took a darker turn as the white nationalist movement began using Pepe the Frog to represent their own ideologies. The Pepe image has deviated so far from its original source, that it was declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League due to its associations with racism, white supremacy, and anti-Semitism (ADL, "Pepe the Frog"). This is the same distinction given to the swastika symbol used by the Nazi party, and the burning cross used by the Ku Klux Klan. Some instances of the Pepe the Frog meme that were shared online contained these same Nazi symbols as well. For example, Figure 3 includes the Swastika and distinctive toothbrush moustache that were increasingly used in instances of Pepe the Frog.

Figure 3 -   Hitler Pepe

With the ADL's hate-symbol designation, mainstream culture was forced to address and confront the complicated history of Pepe the Frog—from its beginnings as an Internet joke, to its eventual use by white nationalists. Memes might be considered a low-brow component of culture, but the fact that the Pepe the Frog meme became shrouded in controversy as part of the 2016 Presidential election suggests that they are a worthy topic of study.

Internet memes consist of not just the flow of images between individuals, but the flow of ideas and ideologies as well. When one group controls the use of a particular image, they are also able to control its associated ideologies as well. Typically, this can be thought of as a relationship between a dominant group or dominant culture, and subcultures that split off from it (Hebdige). A dominant culture is generally able to control the use of images and propagate their associated ideologies. By controlling images and what they symbolize, dominant cultures can exert control over subcultures.

Dick Hebdige argued that through the commodification of images and symbols, a dominant culture could prevent subcultures from threatening their dominant position.

However, Internet memes complicate this relationship between dominant cultures and subcultures due to their unique medium and methods of transmission. Individual instances of an Internet meme can easily be shared between individuals and spread quickly thanks to social media services such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Sites such as these make it a trivial manner for any individual to reach a wide audience. The sudden appearance of Pepe the Frog in mainstream US Politics makes this meme in particular an ideal case study for the importance of Internet memes and how they complicate the traditional dynamic between dominant culture and subculture.

The overall meaning of an Internet meme arises from each individual instance of the meme. For instance, each specific occurrence of the Pepe the Frog image has its own individual meaning, but contributes to the general meaning of the meme as a whole. In turn, this overall meaning redefines how each individual instance is interpreted as well. Even the original appearances of Pepe the Frog—that contained no references to white supremacy whatsoever—are still associated with those ideologies. The fact that a simple cartoon frog now carries connotations of neo-Nazism and white supremacy is significant; Pepe the Frog represents the ability of a subculture to easily exert power over the images and symbols that would normally remain controlled by a dominant culture, a reversal of the process that Hebdige described. The phenomenon of Pepe the Frog and its role in the 2016 Presidential election suggests that other processes are at work, and that Internet Memes are a medium worthy of scholarly study. The

unique mechanism of memes and the way they are shared enables them to redefine the traditional transfer of images—and ideologies—amongst subcultures.

Internet memes have significant ideological power and have already demonstrated their potential to have significant influence on actual events in the physical world. Because they are so widespread, it is crucial that we dedicate attention to the ways that memes function, and the potential effects that they can have.

Methodology

A Note on Terminology

In their coverage of many contemporary events, various print, TV, and online news outlets have used terms such as "alt-right," "neo-Nazis," and "white supremacists" to describe certain groups and their actions. These groups are generally characterized by their values of racism, populism, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, and extreme conservatism. Such groups often self-identify as the "alt-right," as a means to disguise and subtly introduce their racist aims (Daniszewski, "Describing Extremists"). I use the terms "white nationalists" and "white nationalist movement" to describe these groups, in concurrence with the position of *The Associated Press*:

> We should not limit ourselves to letting such groups define themselves, and instead should report their actions, associations, history and positions to reveal their actual beliefs and philosophy, as well as how others see them. (Daniszewski, "The 'Alt-Right'")

I use "white nationalists" and "white nationalist movement" to refer to these types of groups, but avoid the term "neo-Nazi" because it is not necessarily the case that they support authoritarian and totalitarian regimes—similar to the German Third Reich—to achieve their racist and white supremacist beliefs.

Defining Memes

The term "meme" was first defined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Writing about the process of natural selection, the the genes encoded in DNA as "replicator machines", optimized to survive and create copies of themselves. Dawkins theorized that ideas and culture could spread in a similar process to how genetics are spread. From the word Greek word "*mimeme*," meaning "imitated thing," he coined the

term *meme* as "a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins 249). Dawkins picked the term due to its similar phonology to the word "gene" as well as its similar spelling to the French word "même", which means "same." When defining memes, Dawkins wrote not about images and videos specifically, but rather any unit of culture that could be replicated and transmitted among individuals, such as popular songs, fashion trends, or religious traditions. As an example, he suggested that the notion of "God" or a universal creator was one of the most widespread memes amongst all of humanity. Although Dawkins created his original definition well before the widespread use of online communication technologies, many of the characteristics that he identified still apply to our modern understanding of what constitutes an Internet meme. For instance, he recognized the importance of imitation as the process by which memes replicate, and noted that "meme transmission is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending" (Dawkins 251–53). Dawkins wrote that the primary "goal" of genetic transmission was to ensure that a certain set of information continued to replicate and propagate itself; similarly, the primary "goal" of meme transmission is to spread a particular idea as wide as possible, even if the specific details about its form did change somewhat in the process. While Dawkins did identify the fluid nature of memes in his initial definition, it is important to note that the contemporary definition of a meme within the context of online communication has changed somewhat.

With the proliferation of online communication and increased prevalence of social media, the ability for any individual to quickly consume, modify, and spread a message or image has become incredibly commonplace. As such, the modern definition

of memes has evolved from what Dawkins originally wrote. Today, the word "meme" is used almost interchangeably with the more specific term "Internet meme," both of which refer specifically to combinations of images, videos, and text that are shared online. A meme has a certain meaning attached to it, and a set of common understandings of how the meme is to be used and what it represents. These are not established through any hard-set rules, but instead emerge through repeated transmission and alterations of the original images until a set of common codes Is established. Almost any piece of content online has the potential to become a meme, and predicting what will or will not become popular in online communities is virtually impossible do to with any degree of accuracy. However one common characteristic in content that spreads online as a meme is its quality of virality–that is, its ability to spread wide and at a near-instantaneous speed. Memes have to spread like viruses, but instead of carrying diseases that infect our bodies they carry ideas that infiltrate our minds.

Memes and Meme Instances

To help further explain this process and clarify the study of memes, I defined the terms *meme* and *meme instance* to describe components of the Pepe the Frog phenomenon. A meme instance is a single iteration of a particular meme, such as one specific image, or one specific video that is shared online. For instance, Donald Trump's *Can't Stop the Trump* Tweet (Figure 1) is a single meme instance; it is one single appearance of Pepe the Frog with its own specific meaning. But each meme instance does not exist completely independently; Once there is a large enough quantity of individual meme instances being created and shared, they can be examined together

in a larger sense as a single meme. A meme is the culmination of every individual meme instance that share some common element. For the Pepe the Frog meme, that common element is the inclusion of Pepe, the cartoon frog character. It is important to note that there is no specific number of instances, or number of users reached, that must be achieved before a series of instances can be considered a meme. However, once a certain "critical mass" of cultural transmission is reached, the meme takes on a life of its own.
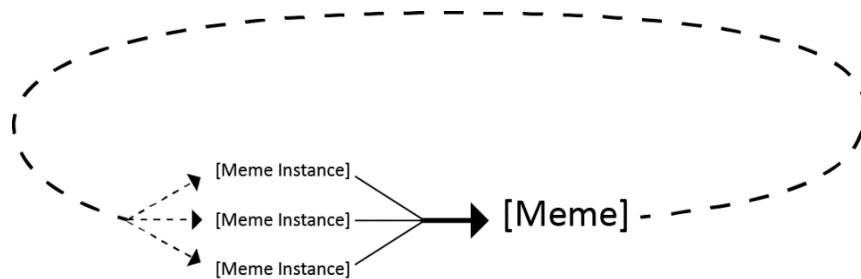
Figure 4 -   Memes and Meme Instances

The overall meaning of any given meme comprises the specific ideas expressed by each individual meme instance. Just as the individual instruments of an orchestra contribute to the larger musical composition, each individual instance contributes to the meme as a whole. However, memes are unique because while each meme instance creates meaning for the meme, the overall meme simultaneously influences the meaning of each individual meme instance. A viewer's interpretation of one meme instance builds upon every other example of that meme that they have seen previously. The meme feeds back into itself, and in this cyclical process, the meaning of each meme instance is larger than just that single instance. Figure 4, above, presents a graphical representation of this cyclical process of memes and meme instances.

To put it another way, each meme instance indirectly affects the meaning of *every other* instance of that same meme. For the Pepe the Frog meme, instances of the meme that contain Nazi imagery carry that same meaning and associated ideologies into every other instance of the Pepe the Frog meme—even those that contain no Nazi imagery whatsoever.

Figure 5 -   SS Pepe

Figure 6 -   Smug Frog

In the examples shown in Figure 5 and 6, *SS Pepe* and *Smug Frog* are two individual instances of the Pepe the Frog meme. They exist independently of one another and have

their own specific meanings. Figure 5 shows that the meme instance includes the helmet and logo from the Schutzstaffel uniform, referencing the Nazi party and World War II era Germany. Figure 6, on the other hand, contains no direct Nazi imagery. The meme instance is simply a depiction of the Pepe character with a sly facial expression, possibly intended as a reaction image to depict a particular emotion. Both of these meme instances contribute to the overall Pepe the Frog meme, which now has meanings of both Nazi ideologies and simple portrayals of a given emotion. This combined meaning then "feeds back" into the meaning of each individual meme instance. *SS Pepe* (Figure 5) can be read as depicting a particular emotion, similar to *Smug Frog* (Figure 6). The words "feels good" within this image might be interpreted as an endorsement of Nazi Germany's ideologies of anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Furthermore, the meaning of *Smug Frog* (Figure 6) is now influenced by the Nazi imagery of *SS Pepe* (Figure 5). This is not to say, though, that *Smug Frog* (Figure 6) is now a direct depiction of white supremacy or anti-Semitism. However, the image is now, at the very least, somewhat associated with those ideologies and may cause the viewer to remember the other meme instances in which Nazi imagery actually appeared.

This cyclical process is unique to Internet memes and is why further study of memes is necessary. One individual instance can have meaning beyond that single image, which can then quickly spread between different communities. For this reason, memes are incredibly powerful for spreading ideologies; creating just a few instances of a meme with a certain meaning can influence and change the meaning of *every other* instance of that same meme. Much like a single drop of ink can completely change the color in a bucket of water, memes make it possible to make very minor changes, but

still achieve incredibly wide-reaching effects. Pepe the Frog is not the only meme for which this process occurs, and in fact it can be used to understand any given Internet meme. For any academic study memes and their effects, understanding this cyclical relationship of meme and meme instance is critical.

Finding Meme Instances

Another unique challenge with the academic study of Internet memes is what seems like a simple problem to overcome—finding instances of a particular meme to study. In a seemingly paradoxical nature, it seems that memes are found throughout modern culture, but when it comes down to locating instances of a particular meme, it is unclear where best to begin looking. In compiling a history of the Pepe the Frog meme, I employed a few methods for locating specific instances of the meme to study.

The website *Know Your Meme* is a useful place to begin a study of a particular meme. The site offers an encyclopedia-like overview of a meme's origins, history, and general usage by various groups. Any registered member of the website is able to write and submit potential memes, meme examples, and other research. However, there is editorial staff and moderators who review submitted content and evaluate whether any given submission is actually worthy of being confirmed as a meme (Kim). The *Know Your Meme* page for Pepe the Frog was useful as a launching-off point for specific research and study of the meme's history. Beyond offering just a basic summary, the website allows users to upload their own video and image examples of each meme, effectively turning *Know Your Meme* into a basic repository of meme instances. However, most of the meme instances found here appear out of context, and with little

information intact regarding who posted the instance originally, and where it was posted.

In order to find instances of Pepe the Frog that appear alongside their original context, I also actively sought out examples of the image as it was used within specific online communities. I visited /pol/, the "Politically Incorrect" board, on the discussion-board site 4chan. /pol/ is an online community that has been linked to the white nationalist movement, and is known by many for its "rhetoric of hate and racism" (Hine et al. 1). 4chan was an ideal website to search for meme instances because it enables users to easily and anonymously share their ideas with others, frequently in the form of meme instances and other images. A measurement study of the /pol/ board offered this brief description of how the 4chan discussion-board works:

> 4chan is an imageboard site, built around a typical discussion bulletin-board model. An "original poster" (OP) creates a new thread by making a post, with a single image attached, to a board with a particular interest focus. Other users can reply, with or without images, and add references to previous posts, quote text, etc. Its key features include anonymity, as no identity is associate with posts, and ephemerality, i.e., threads are periodically pruned. (Hine et al. 1)

When searching /pol/ for meme instances, I would first scroll through the first page of the board to search for threads where the original poster included an image of Pepe the Frog. After this, I expanded the comments for all the threads appearing on the first page of the board, and quickly scrolled through the comments, looking for more Pepe the Frog images. Whenever I located a meme instance on 4chan, I took a screenshot of the page, and saved a separate copy of the relevant images to reference later.

I also used Reddit, a community-based website for sharing links and text posts, to search for meme instances. Reddit is based on small communities called

"subreddits," where users can up- or down-vote submissions from other users, allowing content that is most popular to rise to the top. Users are able to comment on each submission, often leading to lively discussions amongst the users within each community. I chose to focus on the subreddit /r/The_Donald, a community of Donald Trump supporters, because of Pepe the Frog's close association to the 2016 Presidential Election and the Trump Campaign specifically. Pepe the Frog meme instances are frequently posted to the subreddit, or included within comments to other posts. I visited the front page of the /r/The_Donald subreddit, and used the "Show all Images" option to quickly expand all posts containing image links; I then scrolled through the page to look for any instances where Pepe the Frog images were posted. I also expanded the comments section of the top posts from the /r/The_Donald front page and used the same "Show all Images" to skim through the comments for Pepe instances. As with meme instances from 4chan, I also saved screenshots of any instances that I found on Reddit to ensure that I would not risk losing access to the content after it was found.

Finally, as part of my research process, I imposed an arbitrary deadline on myself to create a reasonable cutoff date to end my search for new meme instances. As with any study of contemporary media issues, the primary challenge was that Pepe the Frog is a meme that is still being used frequently in various online communities, which means that new instances of the meme are continually being created and shared between individuals and among different communities. Keeping up with any and all new developments of the Pepe the Frog meme would be a Sisyphean task; I would conceivably spend the rest of my academic career searching for the most recent instances of the Pepe the Frog meme. In order to keep my research manageable, I chose

to ignore any meme instances that occurred later than September 1, 2017. Though this inevitably excluded instances of the meme that may have been useful and appropriate for this case study, it was necessary to arbitrarily pick an end date.

Through these methods, I amassed a sizeable collection of meme instances. I used this collection to inform my analysis of the Pepe the Frog meme as a whole, and draw conclusions as to how the meaning of the meme has developed over time, and has spread between various communities and subcultures.

Internet Memes in an Academic Context

Unlike other areas within Media Studies, there are currently no established conventions for writing about Internet Memes academically. Researchers of television or film generally follow the same guidelines when it comes to studying their medium in a scholarly setting. However, Internet memes are only just beginning to be studied by Media Studies scholars, and any academic work on Internet memes has largely handled the medium in a different way. Some have included full-page reproduction of meme instances within the text, some have simply placed all the images referenced in an appendix at the end of the paper, and others yet have omitted specific meme instances entirely from their work. There is not necessarily one correct way to include Internet memes within academic work, and surely as further work is done in Meme Studies specific conventions will be adopted.

For this thesis, I have chosen to include any meme instances that I reference in-line within the text itself. Because my work focuses specifically on the Pepe the Frog meme, I use several instances of the meme as examples and including the actual image next to the text where it is referenced provides a fuller context to what is being

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discussed. Rather than requiring the reader to flip back and forth to a separate appendix

and look up specific images, each meme instance is included directly where it is

mentioned. If the instance was given a title in its original source, that same title is used

within the paper. However, in most cases, I had to create my own title—typically based

on either the image's source or its contents. In example shown in Figure 7, I chose the

name *Sad Frog* based on the context in which that instance of Pepe the Frog was used—

as a reaction image to convey a user's emotions in response to a situation. Assigning

each instance a unique name is useful because it provides a simple way to refer to the

image, without necessarily needing to include multiple copies of the image. Unique

names also removes the need to provide a written description for each instance—a

process which may inadvertently overlook important elements of the image, and leaves

open the potential for a reader to misinterpret the meme instance.
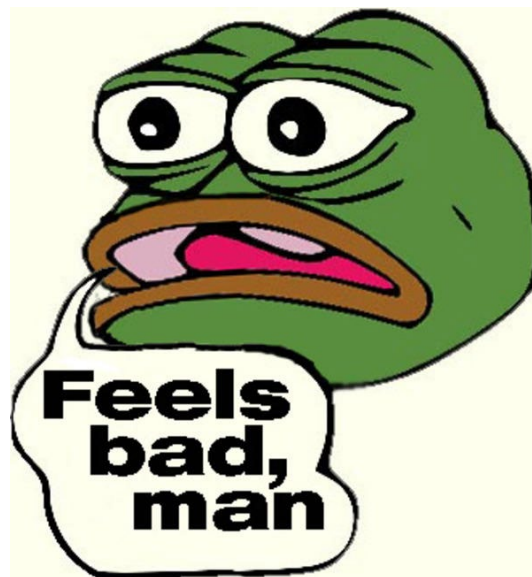
Figure 7 -   Sad Frog

Much like there are no established conventions for writing about Internet memes

in a general sense, there are also no specific guidelines for a proper citation format of

meme instances. I have chosen to take the MLA citation style for digital images and adapted it for meme instances. Meme instances are difficult for scholars because there is often little information available about their source; for each citation I attempt to include as much information as possible, including the meme instance's name, date published online, author, and website that it appeared on. Unfortunately, much of this information is simply nonexistent for many of the meme instances that I use, and I have had to concede defeat and accept that many of my citations will perhaps not pass muster with strict followers of citation style guides.

Unfortunately, when it comes to Internet memes, the person who posts the meme instance is rarely the same person who actually created it, which makes attributing the actual authorship very difficult. Another limitation of citing meme instances in an academic context is the impermanent and fleeting nature of the medium. Meme instances are often posted on websites that will not be permanently archived, or in contexts that cannot be fully preserved—such as a 4chan thread or a Reddit comment. Providing a URL to where I found the meme instance is not always a guarantee that the same link will work for someone else several months later. This, along with the general difficulties with creating citations for memes, are among the key reasons that I have chosen to include screenshots and copies of each instance within the text itself.

As mentioned previously, meme studies is a new and rapidly developing field of study. I hope that the style conventions that I have created will serve as a useful contribution to the field and eventually lead to the long-term development of stylistic conventions and writing practices for other scholars in the field.

Theoretical Framework

The modern definition and understanding of what constitutes an Internet meme has changed greatly from Dawkins' original definition of a "meme" within the context of genetic transmission and mutations. As the meaning has shifted firmly into the space of online communication, many scholars have began to research and write about the specific ideological implications of Internet memes and their relation to the concept of Internet culture in general. As background for my study of the Pepe the Frog meme and its use by various subcultures, I have summarized the work of many previous scholars who have also touched upon the issues of memes and online communication.

In their article, Applegate and Cohen expand upon Dawkins' definition and state that memes "combine text and images to create a mode of communication more articulate than the emoji but less robust than the grammar and syntax of a natural language" (2). In other words, a meme instance with relatively simple visual and textual elements can have a complex meaning associated with it. Mihailidis and Viotty expand upon this definition and assert that memes give individuals "the ability to bring their own meaning to an image," which has significant implications for the propagation of ideologies, implying that it is difficult for any one entity to control the interpretation of a given meme (Mihailidis and Viotty 6). They examine the Pepe the Frog meme within the context of media spectacle, concluding that many memes are simply snippets of culture, but in some instances become so widespread that they are key facilitators in amplifying messages as well. Mihailidis and Viotty also discuss the manner in which memes can be used to circumvent the mainstream media industry and spread ideologies direct to mass audiences in a new manner. Any individual is empowered to be a

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producer and distributor of meme content, unlike other media industries where large corporations have traditionally dominated. This is particularly important background for my research, as it specifically suggests that memes are a unique medium and interact with audiences and ideologies in a different manner than many other traditional forms of media.

Early scholars such as McLuhan and Elias wrote about the cultural aspect of the Internet while it was still a new and emerging technology. As early as 1967, McLuhan recognized the potential of online communication technology to completely change the way that individuals interact and that culture spreads. He wrote that "'Time' has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a *global village*… a simultaneous happening" (McLuhan 63). He defined the global village as the eventual result of developing communication technology, where time and space no longer divided separate groups. The world would be consolidated into one single group, the global village. This metaphor has many limitations, which are pointed on in Michael Elias' thesis from 1997. Elias breaks down McLuhan's metaphor and offers a new metaphor, the "global metropolis" as an explanation for how communication technology has influenced culture. Unlike a village where "everyone knows their neighbor," he describes a metropolis as "a hub for specific types of transactions and people" (Elias 66). Rather than communications technology creating a single homogenized culture, it enables a diverse group of many different subcultures to interact and exchange ideas with one another. Recent work by Grant Kien expands on this notion of online culture consisting of several subcultures and specifies that identifying members of these subcultures can be difficult. According to Kien, the anonymity of the Internet makes it so that a

subculture appears to "include the 'ironic' community members who find the content resonates with them because they bring an oppositional reading to it, and the 'sincere' community members who take the message at its hegemonic face value" (556). When it comes to online communities, it is impossible to know for sure who anybody actually is, nor what they actually stand for.

Many contemporary scholars have produced additional work that further describe the development and effects of online culture, which provides a useful framework for studying Pepe the Frog as a meme that has spread throughout the Internet, and even into the physical world. In 2008, Lovink described the new era of "Web 2.0" in which nearly anyone was able to participate and contribute content. According to him, "What defines the Internet and its protocols is…the deep underlying social architecture" (Lovink 207). In other words, the reason that the Internet is important to study is not just that it enables communication over long distances, but that it affects culture in the physical world as well—virtual online communities have the power to shape *real* social experiences. Negrine takes this a step further and claims that the Internet has significant power for political communication, and that it is unique from other forms of telecommunication because could target not just large groups, but specific individuals as well (170). Given the appearance of Pepe the Frog in the 2016 Presidential Election, this seems like a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, Negrine's work is useful as a base framework for studying why Internet memes are able to exert such considerable influence. Finally, Nooney's article connected the issues of Internet culture directly in the context of Internet memes. He writes that memes have the potential to redefine power relationships because they offer the "ability for anyone to

reach anyone without mediation, and for groups to form around shared ideas, expressed in common forms owned by no one and everyone" (Nooney et al. 393). Of particular interest to me is the issue of ownership, and that regarding Internet memes, there is no one specific owner. Yet at the same time, memes are owned collectively by all ownership. This unique dynamic of ownership—and by extension, control—suggests that memes have unique implications for the development of both online culture as well as culture in the physical world.

To analyze the use of the Pepe the Frog meme by various groups and the manner in which it flows between them, I rely on the theories put forth by Marxist philosophers who wrote on the dynamic between the ruling class and the ruled, and the role that ideologies have for maintaining this power relationship. Antonio Gramsci defines the notion of cultural hegemony, which arises when the domination of a ruling class is so established that it becomes normalized and accepted as the status quo. He writes that the media is crucial for propagating and reinforcing this normalized culture; the images and stories that appear in the media all contain with them ideologies that are consumed by its audience and maintain the ruling class' position in power (Gramsci). The concept of hegemony is central to my research on Internet memes, because much like any other visual image, they have the potential to carry with them ideological meanings. According to Louis Althusser, ideas have significant power for establishing the dominance of a ruling group. He describes the difference between Repressive State Apparatuses—such as police and military, and Ideological State Apparatuses—such as schools and churches. Althusser argues that while Repressive State Apparatuses can enable one group to take power over another, it is actually the Ideological State

Apparatuses that allow them to successfully maintain power and establish themselves as the ruling class and determine the hegemony of dominant culture (Althusser et al.).

Their writing has served as the basis for the work of many media studies scholars, including that of Dick Hebdige, who wrote about the relationship between a dominant culture and subcultures. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige described the way in which the images that are used by a subculture to define itself can be taking back by the dominant culture and ultimately reclaimed by the cultural hegemony. According to him, subcultures challenge accepted cultural norms and represent a threat to the established power or as Hebdige describes it, a "catalyst for a moral panic" (Hebdige 131). In order to identify themselves, subcultures will use specific visual images that are distinct—such as the Punk subculture's fashion of ripped clothing, leather, and tight jeans. Hebdige describes a process by which the imagery of a subculture can be commodified by the dominant culture, therefore neutralizing the threat to the hegemony by normalizing the subculture and forcing it to be "brought back into line" (Hebdige 132). In Hebdige's Punk example, the distinct Punk fashion is transformed by the dominant culture into a widespread consumer product, stripping away its power to challenge the stronghold of cultural hegemony. My research focuses on the power that Internet memes have to identify particular subcultures and whether or not this same process of commodification that Hebdige described necessarily applies to them in the same way as it does for other forms of media.

If Hebdige's model applies to Internet memes in the same manner, we would expect to see a tension between the different groups that attempt to use the meme to spread ideologies. Hegemonic power structures maintain a dominant mainstream culture

in which the ideologies of the white nationalist movement are not tolerated. Within that dominant culture, the image of Pepe the Frog is shared and spread virally among online communities, but is generally free of noteworthy ideological significance. However, when members of white nationalist movements begin using the Pepe image to create meme instances that promote their own ideologies, it directly challenges the stronghold of the dominant hegemony. Under Hebdige's model, we would expect to see tension between the white nationalist subculture and the dominant culture, the two groups fighting over the use and meaning of the Pepe meme. Eventually, the dominant culture would reclaim Pepe the Frog by commodifying the image—perhaps seen by consumer products featuring Pepe the Frog, or as an increased exchange of Pepe instances within the dominant culture. This commodification would then effectively erase the white nationalist meanings of Pepe the Frog and bring the meme back within the mainstream dominant culture. The previous scholarship by Applegate, Cohen, Mihailidis, Viotty, and others has identified the potential for the Internet and online communication to challenge this relationship. I add to this body of work and argue that the structure of the meme medium itself, and not necessarily the content, is what enables this so-called "short-circuiting" of the commodification process that Hebdige described.

My historical analysis of Pepe the Frog traces the development of the meme, and follows its spread between various online communities and compares its use by the dominant culture and the subculture of white nationalism. Once the subculture began using the meme and redefining its meaning by creating its own Pepe the Frog instance, the mainstream dominant culture was unable to reclaim the image or its meaning. The ideologies associated with Pepe the Frog, as established by its use within the white

nationalist subculture, eventually gained traction and propagated throughout the dominant culture as well. I argue that the unique structure of the Internet meme medium is what enabled a subculture to easily redefine the meaning of Pepe the Frog even for mainstream audiences within the dominant culture. Pepe the Frog is not an isolated occurrence, and I argue that Internet memes have the capability to subvert the flow and commodification of images that Hebdige outlines.

History of Pepe the Frog

The Pepe the Frog meme makes an ideal candidate for an Internet meme case study because of its prominent position in contemporary culture. Over the last several years, Pepe has entered the public sphere and generated much controversy. The Pepe image began as a character in Matt Furie's zine comic *Boy's Club*, and represented "sheer stupidity and absurdity" (Furino). However Pepe grew and evolved as a meme, and is now a "vehicle for a wide range of emotions and ideas," including racism, anti-Semitism, and white nationalist groups (Domonoske). While this evolution of meaning has certainly been seen in other Internet memes, Pepe the Frog is ideal for study because it is an "extreme example of how mutating uses of memes can morph visual images into something completely different and new than what they started as" (Lantagne 31). Furthermore, the Pepe image is widespread and there are many examples available in a large spread of different contexts. The meme has appeared across the Internet—on Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, 4chan, and more—and has been discussed in scholarly, journalistic, and informal articles. I have broken the history of Pepe the Frog into several categories to trace how the image, and its associated meanings, have developed over time and as the meme has spread between groups.

Origins

Pepe the Frog was originally created in 2005 by Matt Furie, as part of an online Zine that he created and shared via MySpace for his friends. Furie used Microsoft Paint to create *Playtime*, a comic featuring a character named Pepe, who was essentially a complete slacker in his mid-twenties (Collins). Furie has explained in various

interviews that Pepe and his friends were originally meant for himself and his friends—

cartoon representations of the early-20s lifestyle that they had experienced (Furino).

Figure 8 shows a page from the *Playtime* Zine, one of the earliest appearances of Pepe

the Frog. It depicts Pepe thinking of, and partaking in a wide array of junk foods. This

instance's image of Pepe has several similarities to the meme instances that would be

shared frequently years later such as the large droopy eyes, thick lips, and rounded

shape of his head.

Figure 8 -   Snack Attack

    Playtime was originally a small creation, intended for Furie and his close

friends. About a year after the first appearance Furie developed this comic into a

slightly larger scale publication called *Boys Club* (Mazur). However, *Boys Club* was

still fairly small-scale; Furie distributed it online via MySpace and would also make

physical copies for his friends at a Kinkos near his home in San Francisco (Miller). This

new comic featured Pepe alongside his friends Landwolf, Brett, and Andy. Furie

described *Boys Club* as a comic featuring "four best buds as they smoke, drink, puke, and party their way through life" (Furino). Many of the comics featured mundane content, such as *Pepe's Shirt* (Figure 9), in which Pepe asks Andy for feedback on his new T-shirt.

Figure 9 -   Pepe's Shirt

From *Boys Club* pg 18

Boys Club was never really meant to have any specific meaning, but instead was just a generic representation of the lifestyle that Furie himself had experienced (Furino). It is possible that many of the events that occur within the pages of *Boys Club* are somewhat based on Furie and his friends, and captures how they lived in their own post-college lives. Furie claims that he wanted *Boys Club* to be "very chill and mundane and absurd," and that it was created with no specific goal in mind (Miller). These

characteristics are exemplified in Figure 10, *Acid Reflux* from *Boys Club*. In this meme

instance, Pepe experiences stomach pain while sitting on the couch. He ends up

vomiting on Brett and dissolving his skin. This nonsensical sequence, and simplicity in

which it is presented embodies much of what Pepe's origins in the *Boys Club* Zine were

about. Pepe was never meant to take a political stance, or even be widely known outside

of Furie's group of friends.

Figure 10 -   Acid Reflux

From *Boys Club* pg. 125

Of course, Pepe did not remain confined to the pages of an obscure Zine comic. Though

originally confined to a small group of readers, Pepe eventually spread to other areas of

the Internet, and as more instances of Pepe were created and shared, soon went from a

simple cartoon image to a full Internet meme.

Early Usage Online

In 2008, instances of the cartoon frog began appearing on other websites as well. An anonymous user of 4chan's /b/ imageboard posted a version of Pepe the frog that was lifted from *Boy's Club,* the original page shown in Figure 11, along with the phrase from the original cartoon, "feels good man" (Triple Zed). This new image, *Feels Good Man* (Figure 12), began circulating online throughout 4chan and other online communities.

Figure 11 -   Boy's Club Feels Good.

From *Boys Club* pg. 42

Figure 12 -   Feels Good Man
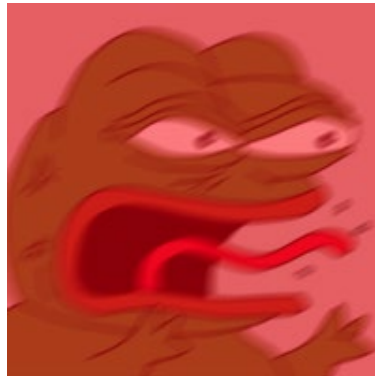
Figure 13 -   Angry Frog

Other versions of the *Feels Good Man* image eventually appeared to represent different

emotions and reactions. Instances such as *Angry Frog* (Figure 13), *Smug Frog* (Figure

6), and *Sad Frog* (Figure 7) were used throughout /b/ and other 4chan imageboards, and

slowly spread to other websites as well (Triple Zed). Throughout the early history of the

meme, this is how the Pepe image was used and initially "went viral." Many Internet

users were not familiar with Pepe's origins in an underground Zine, and simply saw it

as a funny cartoon image of a frog. This ambiguity in the meme's origins likely

contributed to the ease in which it was shared, modified, and copied—spreading far and

wide across the Internet. Each time an image of Pepe was reposted and re-shared, the

meme became slightly more ubiquitous and a bit stronger. Even Furie was surprised by

the scale and extent to which his creation was being spread. Asked about why he thought the meme was so popular, he attributed it to the unpredictable nature of the Internet: "I don't know why it was Pepe specifically, just as much as I don't know why a frog evolved to look like a frog" (Frank).

Pepe's popularity was bolstered when celebrities such as Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj used the images to convey their own emotions in various situations, as shown in Figures 14 and 15 with *Katy Perry Jet Lag* and *Minaj Followers*, respectively. The usage of Pepe in this fashion was entirely innocent and free of any white nationalist subtexts. It was nothing more than Internet users using a silly cartoon frog to share how they were feeling.
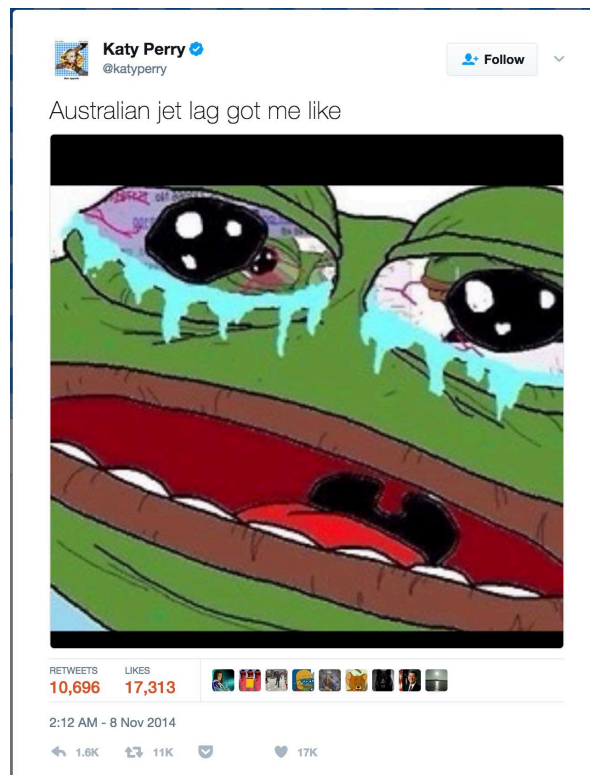
Figure 14 -   Katy Perry Jet Lag

Figure 15 -   Minaj Followers

Even in 2017, after Pepe had become surrounded by controversy, some users

continued to use Pepe for this purpose. For example, Figure 16 shows an instance of

Pepe the Frog that appeared in a thread on 4chan's /b/ imageboard. In this thread, the

original poster writes that some of his or her friends decided to start selling drugs in

order to pay off their loans. The attached image shows Pepe dressed in a black hoodie,

rubbing his hands together, and eyes looking toward the side. This imagery represents

the caution and concern over discussing potential criminal activity. *Bank Loans* (Figure

16) underscores the manner in which Pepe the Frog was used in its early history—a

commonly shared image amongst Internet users, and used to represent a wide array of

emotions and situations. When describing the modern controversy over Pepe the Frog,

the Clinton campaign described the early history of Pepe as "a cartoon frog who began

his internet life as an innocent meme enjoyed by teenagers and pop stars alike" (Chan).

File: 1478134216368.jpg (19 KB, 480x480)

Anonymous 04/21/17(Fri)14:29:15 No.730025870 ▶ >>730026110 >>730026269 >>730026591 >>730026666 >>730027113 >>730026110 >>730026269 >>730026591 >>730026666 >>730027113 ▶

>have idiot friends with student/bank loans
>they decide to start selling to make money to pay it off
>did absolutely zero research
>tryin to not get my mans thrown in jail because they also owe me money

how do you pay taxes if you sell?
is there any way to get into trouble without actually being busted and arrested?

>> Anonymous 04/21/17(Fri)14:31:49 No.730026110 ▶ ▶

>>730025870 (OP) (OP)
>how do you pay taxes if you sell?
You don't

>> Anonymous 04/21/17(Fri)14:33:29 No.730026269 ▶ ▶

>>730025870 (OP) (OP)
?????

Figure 16 -   Bank Loans

In many of these examples, the actual image used has been heavily modified from the

original character that Furie created. However, they are still recognizable as instances of

the Pepe meme due to features such as the green skin, large eyes, and exaggerated lips.

Even though *Katy Perry Jet Lag* (Figure 16) is significantly different from the *Boy's*

Club Feels Good (Figure 12) and its online copy *Feels Good Man* (Figure 13), there is

little difficulty in recognizing the connection. Though the form and context has changed

completely, there is nonetheless similarities in Pepe's green skin, large eyes, and thick

lips. However it is difficult to describe what specifically constitutes an instance of the

Pepe meme, because each instance is unique from any others and often deviates so

greatly from the 2005 original. Nonetheless, this ease and speed of modifying and

copying images, while simultaneously maintaining a connection to each other, is crucial

to what makes memes spread so quickly (Dawkins; Mihailidis and Viotty).

The ease of modification and viral nature of the Pepe meme was underscored by

the brief appearance of a "pepe market" among some Internet users. Some posts on

4chan's /rk9/ imageboard in 2014 included Pepe instances that treated the frog image as if it were a rare trading card (Triple Zed). Users rapidly modified and shared new versions of the Pepe image, often including watermarks and other additional text jokingly intended to preserve the value of each. For instance, the *Tritium Pepe* shown in Figure 17 instance asserts itself as being the "rarest of pepes."

Figure 17 -   Tritium Pepe

Figure 18 -   Rare Pepe Sales

Users that participated in the exchange of these "rare pepe" images created thousands of unique versions of Pepe the Frog. In May 2015, *Buzzfeed* published an article that singlehandedly featured over 1,000 unique Pepe images. (Notopoulos) On Reddit, individual subreddit communities appeared to discuss and partake in this exchange

(*/R/Rarepepemarket*; */R/Memeeconomy*). Demonstrating the fact that some people will continue a joke as long as possible, some users attempted to sell supposedly-rare and valuable Pepe images on eBay. As shown in Figure 18, one such auction reached $99,166 in bids before finally being removed from the site. This exchange of "rare pepes" represented the peak of Pepe's initial history and original usage as a silly Internet phenomenon with little significant meaning. "All in good fun, teens made Batman Pepe, Supermarket Checkout Girl Pepe, Borat Pepe, Keith Haring Pepe, and carved Pepe pumpkins" (Nuzzi).
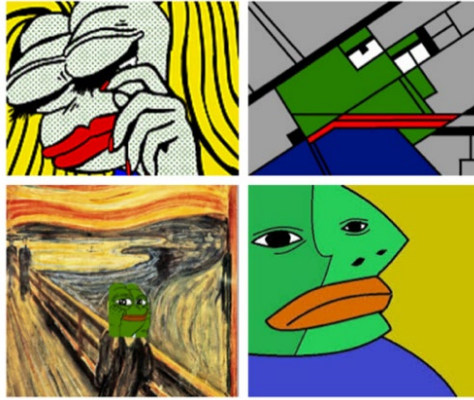
Figure 19 -   Art Pepe

Out of nowhere a Legendary Pepe appears. Like this post to catch it with a 🔴.If you don't your all pokemon will die and Bad Luck for 30 years.

Figure 20 -   Pokémon Pepe

Figure 21 -   The Pepe Connection

Here in Figures 19-21, I include a small sampling of my own "rare Pepe collection."

These represent the general trends by which the Pepe meme operated during its early

history. Users combined the cartoon frog image with other works of art or culture, and

exchanged their new creations with one another in a single wide-reaching meaningless

Internet joke. Interestingly, Furie embraced the Internet's general appropriation of his

original creation. At this point, he made no effort to combat or limit the usage and

remixing of his image by other groups. With each new iteration, the Pepe meme spread

a little further and reached additional audiences as well, though in these early years of

Pepe's history the meme carried with it little—if any—ideological significance.

Use by White Nationalists

The first stage of Pepe's history ended around 2015, as certain online groups

began using the meme for their own purposes. These subcultures took advantage of the

popularity and widespread use of Pepe the Frog by modifying the images to contain

their own messaging and ideologies. Anonymous users of the 4chan imageboard /r9k/

began posting instances of Pepe that were modified to contain various elements of Nazi

propaganda (Nuzzi). In some instances, such as *Hitler Tea Pepe* (Figure 22) and *SS Pepe* (Figure 5),* traditional Nazi imagery such as swastikas, Schutzstaffel uniforms, or Hitler's distinct toothbrush moustache were added to earlier instances of the Pepe meme such as *Feels Good Man* (Figure 13) and *Smug Frog* (Figure 6). Such imagery is highly associated with the German Third Reich and the atrocities committed by the regime during World War II, as well as the general ideologies of the Nazi party. As such, the inclusion of these elements embeds within the Pepe meme values of racism, anti-Semitism, and white nationalism.

Figure 22 -   Hitler Tea Pepe

Instances of Pepe that contained elements of Nazi imagery were also shared on other 4chan image boards, including /b/ and /pol/. Such instances were also shared among white nationalists via other social media websites. Figures 23 and 24 are examples of meme instances that continued to use elements of Nazi imagery including the Schutzstaffel bolts, distinct brown shirts, and the official symbol of the Nazi Party—an eagle atop a swastika. However, it is important to emphasize that before 2016, Pepe the Frog as a whole was not yet associated with Nazism and white nationalism. Though

some instances were being shared that used Nazi imagery, the usage was contained to the subculture of white nationalists, and was not widespread enough to influence the entire meaning of the meme as a whole.

Figure 23 -   Skinhead Pepe

Figure 24 -   Adolf Pepe

Kekistan

In order to understand how Pepe the Frog instances with Nazi imagery jumped from small-scale usage among subcultures to mainstream attention and influencing the meaning of the meme as a whole, we must take a brief interlude to examine another related meme, the phrase "kek" and the fictional nation of "Kekistan." In the 2004 game *World of Warcraft* any chat text from enemy players was obfuscated so that teams

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would be unable to spy on one another. The phrase "kek" was used to replace any use of "lol," or "laugh out loud" (Mercer). Use of "kek" to represent "lol" soon spread from the game to use online—initially on websites and forums related to *World of Warcraft*, but eventually within any online community. In 2015, the "kek" meme evolved when an Anonymous user posted an image to the 4chan history board, /his/, with information about a God figure from ancient Egyptian religion, which was named Kek. That 4chan post and its first few comments are shown in Figure 25.

Figure 25 -   /his/ Kek

Kek represented the primordial concept of darkness, and was portrayed as a man with a frog head. Many users made an immediate connection between the Egyptian God Kek, the Internet slang "kek," and Pepe the Frog. Some users referred to this coincidence of Internet memes and Egyptian history as an example of so-called "meme magic." For them, Pepe the Frog is a modern form of the deity, and that Kek is capable of

influencing actual events using his "meme magic" (Caldwell). Because of Kek, Pepe the

Frog achieved God-like status among many Internet users. (Figure 26) is an example of

the kinds of meme instances that were circulated online to explain the supposed

connection between the Egyptian God Kek and Pepe the Frog. *Cult of Kek* (Figure 26)

shows an actual statue of Kek and a set of hieroglyphics that bear some resemblance to

a person looking at a computer, which some people interpret as proof of Kek's

supposed "meme magic."
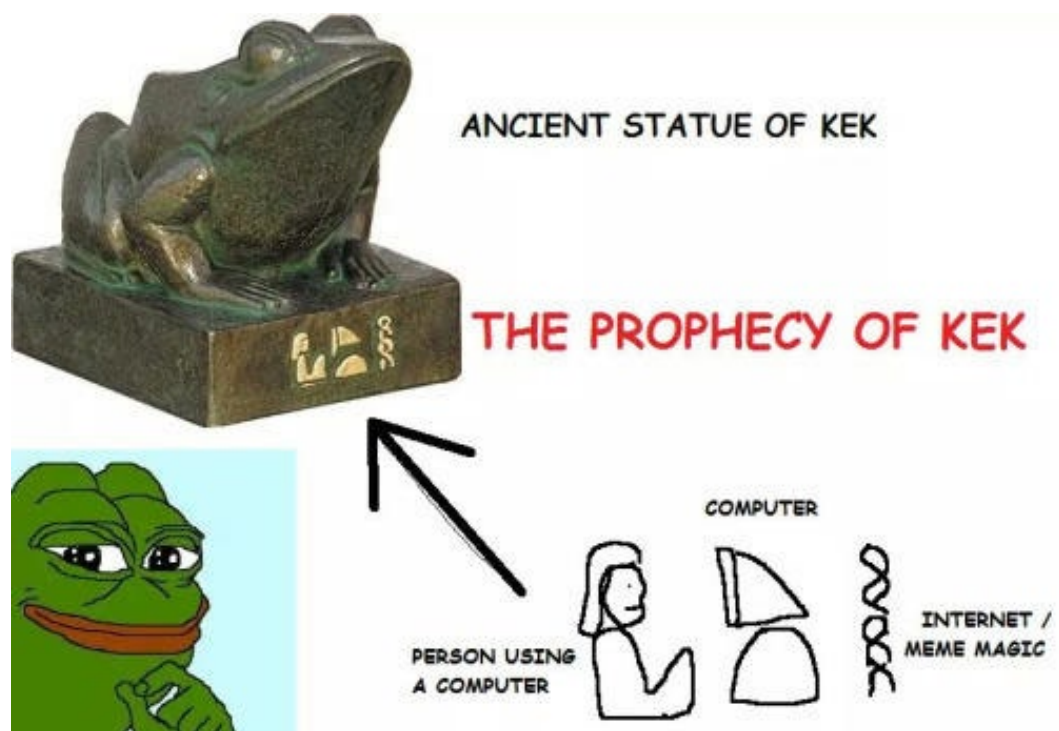
Figure 26 -   Cult of Kek

In late 2015, anonymous users on 4chan's /pol/ board created Kekistan, a fictional

country as a fake ethnic origin for those who believed in a worshipped Kek. (Don) As

with most things that occur anonymously on the Internet, it is impossible to determine

the extent to which this was intended as a joke, and how much it was genuinely

accepted. A fake flag of Kekistan (Figure 27) was created, which shared many

similarities to the actual Nazi War Flag (Figure 28) that was flown during World War II.

Figure 27 -   Flag of Kekistan
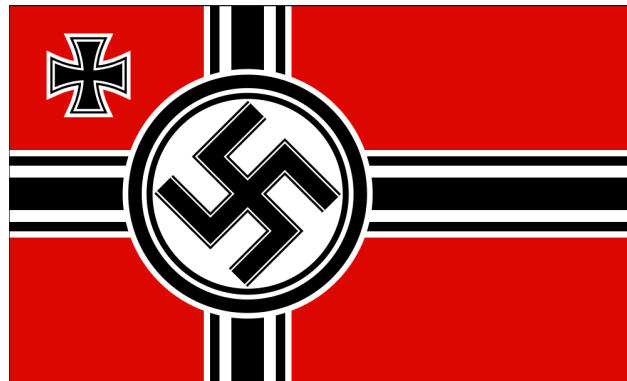
Figure 28 -   Nazi War Flag

Both flags contain a circle centered on sets of crossing black and white lines. Instead of a Swastika in the circle, the Kekistan's flag contains a stylized version of the word "Kek" repeated. Rather than the Iron Cross symbol in the top left corner, the 4chan logo is used instead. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the similarities in design serve dual purposes. It directly references and glorifies its Nazi origins, while simultaneously providing enough "cover" to criticize anyone who recognizes those origins and becomes offended (Neiwert). Kekistan, and its use by white nationalists, exists in the gray area between serious belief and casual joke, the same area occupied by

countless other Internet memes. Regardless of intent, it is clear that the Kekistan flag

(Figure 27) is based on the Nazi War Flag (Figure 28), and therefore evokes similar

ideologies of white nationalism which are in turn connected to Pepe the Frog and, later,

Donald Trump as well.

This connection between Kek, Pepe the Frog, and white nationalism was

solidified in April 2017 at a protest that took place in Berkeley. Conservative political

commentator Ann Coulter, who has previously advocated some white nationalist

ideologies, had been scheduled to speak at the UC Berkeley campus, but cancelled after

criticism from the student body. In response, hundreds of her supporters took to a

nearby park to protest, "many of them dressed in flak jackets, helmets and other

protective gear in anticipation of violence" (Sim). Some of Coulter's supporters wore

clothing from the Trump campaign, some carried images of Pepe the Frog, and some

marched under a physical version of the Kekistan flag, as shown in Figures 29 and 30

("Berkeleyside").

Figure 29 -   Kekistan Protest

Photo by Pete Rosos (from Berkeley Side)

Figure 30 -   Pepe Protest

Photo by Stephen Lim (from the IB Times)

Pepe the Frog, and its associations with Kek and Kekistan, appeared alongside images from the Trump campaign, as part of a protest by a group calling itself the "alt-right." This single incident confirms what had been developing for several years prior, a direct connection between Pepe the Frog, white nationalism, and Donald Trump.

However, this connection was being developed long before the 2017 Berkeley rally. A 2016 post in the /r/pepethefrog subreddit, shown in Figure 31, proclaimed that the similarities between the Egyptian God and Pepe the Frog was no coincidence, and that Pepe the Frog was the most recent "vessel" being used by Kek to spread its message and exercise its so-called "meme magic." This post featured several instances of Pepe the Frog, including one image which showed Pepe alongside an image of then-candidate Donald Trump wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat.

Figure 31 -   Kek Meme Magic

Individuals sharing meme instances with Pepe the Frog and Kek alongside one another claimed that the Egyptian deity could influence real-world events though "meme magic," and that through Pepe the Frog, they could harness Kek's "meme magic" to help Donald Trump win the Presidency. For them, Kek and Pepe represented anti-

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establishment forces fighting for the truth, a message closely aligned with Trump's

campaign promise of being a Washington "outsider" (Spencer). Specific references to

Donald Trump were even included within "A Prayer to Kek," a parody of "The Lord's

Prayer":

> Our Kek who art in memetics
> Hallowed by thy memes
> Thy Trumpdom come
> Thy will be done
> In real life as it is on /pol/
> Give us this day our daily dubs
> And forgive us of our baiting
> As we forgive those who bait against us
> And lead us not into cuckoldry
> But deliver us from shills
> For thine is the memetic kingdom, and the shitposting, and the winning, for ever and ever.
> Praise KEK. (ATL)

Through these new instances of the Pepe the Frog meme, white supremacist groups

were slowly redefining the meaning of the overall meme to incorporate their ideologies

and associating the Pepe image with their support of Donald Trump. The connection

between Pepe, Trump, and white nationalism, was strengthened as the meme continued

to develop and users created and shared new instances combining the Pepe image with

white nationalist ideologies Instead of only adding Nazi imagery to the Pepe image,

some users also added offensive captions, as well as additional associations with

Donald Trump. For example, *Oven Pepe* (Figure 32) gave Pepe the same distinct

hairstyle as Trump, and combined the candidate's assertion at a campaign rally that

"The wall just got ten feet taller" (*Washington Post*), with specific references to the Holocaust into an anti-Semitic declaration, "The wall just got ten Jews taller."

Figure 32 -   Oven Pepe

Because this new white nationalist usage of Pepe the frog emerged on 4chan's /r9k/ with anonymous posters, it is impossible to determine with any degree of certainty what the original intention of modifying the Pepe in this manner; It is possible that that the merging of Pepe the Frog with Nazi imagery and ideologies started as a crude joke among Internet users (Nuzzi). However, as Kien notes, the audience of a meme may include both the "ironic" community and the "sincere" community (556). Though memes are capable of carrying ideological significance, the same image can be used mock and critique and idea, as well as to promote it. It is impossible to determine whether a meme or meme instance is being spread as a joke, or if those sharing it sincerely subscribe to its beliefs. The most likely scenario is that some users sharing Pepe instances with Nazi imagery were the "ironic" community, and others truly did

believe and supported the white supremacy represented by that imagery. Without information on every Internet user and their activities, determining the actual size of the "sincere" community is impossible.

Regardless of why this new version of the Pepe meme began, the fact remains that it was eventually used deliberately by members of the white nationalist movement. According to an anonymous member of the movement, known only by his Twitter username @JaredTSwift, the mixing of Pepe and Nazi imagery was done deliberately (Nuzzi). Though these fringe groups were beginning to attach their political agenda and ideologies to Pepe the Frog, it is important to keep in mind that this was only occurring on a small scale and within small subculture online. For the vast majority of Internet users, the Pepe meme was still being used as a general reaction image, and did not have associated ideologies. Without being exposed to instances of Pepe the Frog that contained references to white supremacy, most audiences' interpretation of the overall meme was that it was a simple cartoon frog with little ideological significance. For them, the well had not yet been poisoned; the meaning of Pepe the Frog had not yet been tainted by white nationalist ideologies. This difference in usage and interpretation between the dominant culture and subcultures is a contributing factor to why this new evolution of Pepe the Frog was so shocking to many. The new usage of Pepe by white nationalist groups came to the forefront in 2016 when it was declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League, which is the same distinction given to symbols such as the swastika and the burning cross (ADL, "Pepe the Frog").

Appearance in Mainstream Politics

Once Pepe the Frog had been declared a hate symbol, it was virtually impossible to avoid discussing the new ideologies that had been associated with the meme. Though it had begun among small fringe groups of white nationalists, members of the dominant culture as well were now exposed to the new meanings of Pepe the Frog. The image had been co-opted and redefined by many groups, including Trump supporters, white nationalists, and by Internet trolls. It was near impossible to define clear boundaries between these groups and determine whether the Pepe meme was being used seriously or in a joking manner. Many news and other media organizations ran stories that discussed the meme and where this meaning had come about (Andrews; Begley; Bowerman; Grinberg; Jamieson). These articles briefly mentioned Pepe's origins in Matt Furie's comic, but focused primarily on its association and similarity to white nationalism and other ideologically-charged images such as swastikas, burning crosses, and the confederate flag (Andrews). The effect of this is that Pepe the frog entered mainstream politics by being presented alongside those ideologies. This reinforced white nationalists' and other fringe groups' usage of the meme, and for individuals who were previously unfamiliar with Pepe, this was all they knew the image as—a hate symbol.

Pepe the Frog entered the world of politics specifically when Trump and Trump Jr. shared specific instances of the meme on Twitter and Instagram, *Can't Stop the Trump* (Figure 1) and *The Deplorables* (Figure 2)*.* In response, the Clinton campaign published an article online that offered readers an "explainer" on the association between Pepe the Frog and white nationalists (Chan). The article declared "That cartoon

frog is more sinister than you might realize," and featured prominently the *Can't Stop the Trump* (Figure 1) and *The Deplorables* (Figure 2) instances of the meme as examples and further strengthened the association between the cartoon frog and white nationalists. Intentional or not, the Trump campaign was now directly connected to the white nationalist movement, with Pepe the Frog as the connecting link.

Figure 33 -   The Frog in Hillary's Throat

The Clinton campaign's article condemning Pepe the Frog as a symbol of white nationalism actually served to unify Trump supporters and encouraged them to continue adopting the meme as a symbol of the Trump campaign. For them, the response by the Clinton campaign represented liberal hypersensitivity and taking a simple Internet joke out of context and into a larger issue than it actually was. Political cartoonist Ben Garrison created a political cartoon, shown in Figure 33, which depicts Pepe the Frog, complete with a red "Make America Great Again" hat, emerging from a coughing and wheezing Clinton's mouth. On his website, Garrison writes that the Clinton campaign fabricated the connection to white nationalism and overstated its significance as an

attempt to demonize her opponents (Garrison, "The Frog in Hillary's Throat). Many

Trump supporters shared Garrison's sentiment and saw the Clinton campaign's

response to Pepe the Frog as an avenue that could be used to mock and criticize both the

candidate as well as her supporters.

Trump supporters increasingly turned to the Pepe the Frog meme as a way to

identify themselves and promote their candidate in the campaign. For example, *Maga

Kek* (Figure 34) depicts Pepe the Frog as an Internet user, wrapped in a "Make America

Great Again" blanket, face illuminated by the computer screen. This is an image that

many Trump supporters can identify with, perhaps representing the tendency of some to

stay up late in the night creating and sharing more meme instances to support their

candidate.

Figure 34 -   MAGA Kek

In addition to meme instances that depicted Trump supporters with Pepe the Frog

imagery, there were also meme instances that ascribed that same imagery to the

candidate himself. *Smiling Trump Pepe* (Figure 35) is one such example of this type of

meme instance. It takes a stylized drawing of Pepe the Frog and adds a politician's suit

and tie as well as gave the frog Trump's distinct hairstyle. Meme instances such as these also provide a more direct connection between Trump and his supporters, with Pepe the Frog as a perceived "shared identity" between them.

Figure 35 -   Smiling Trump Pepe

The interpretation that Pepe the Frog might not just promote Trump, but irritate Clinton supporters as well encouraged the creation of even more meme instances that connected Pepe with the Trump campaign, this time directly attacking liberals as well. *Liberal Tears* (Figure 36) places Pepe the Frog relaxing in a bathtub, bathing in a shower of tears that are implied come from the Clinton campaign and other anti-Trump groups.

Figure 36 -   Liberal Tears

The creation of pro-Trump meme instance continued throughout the campaign, and

further shaped the perception of the Pepe the Frog meme by the mainstream dominant

culture. These meme instances culminated in the days immediately before November 8,

2016, the date of the presidential election, with the #rainOfFrogs Twitter campaign.

This was a movement by Trump supporters in the final days and hours of the

presidential campaign to increase support for Trump by spreading an onslaught of Pepe

the Frog instances. A Twitter search for tweets containing #rainOfFrogs in the days

before the election returns thousands of tweets, most of which contained Pepe the Frog

meme instances. Some of these, such as *Pepe Revere* (Figure 37) simply encouraged

Trump support or connected Trump to American heroes, whereas instances such as the

example in Figure 38, *Curbstomp Pepe*, depicted direct attacks on Clinton.

One more day till MAGA - this calls for
#RainOfFrogs
We need every single Pepe back up on Twitter.
Make it green!
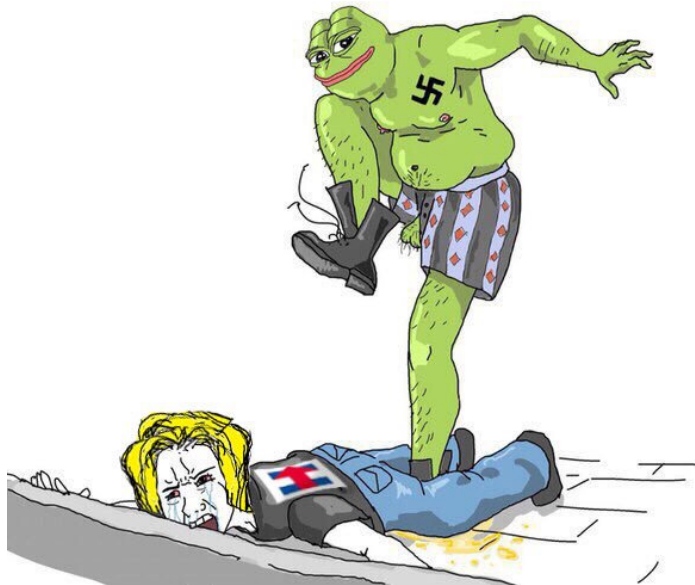#MondayMotivation

Figure 37 -   Pepe Revere

Figure 38 -   Curbstomp Pepe

These meme instances represent a small sampling of the meme instances that were

created and shared once Pepe the Frog had been propelled into the mainstream. They

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reinforce Pepe the Frog's association with the Trump campaign and contribute to the dominant culture's interpretation and reception of the meme overall.

It is important to note that this development in the public perception of Pepe the Frog's meaning was happening alongside its increased association with explicit white nationalism. While these developments were somewhat separated from one another, it is impossible to treat them as two distinct developments. Much like Kien and Warner argue that "ironic" and "serious" online communities are indistinguishable (556), it is impossible to separate the use of Pepe the Frog by white nationalists, Trump supporters, and others. Nor is it possible to definitively say there is not any overlap between those groups. Every meme instance shared by one of these groups slightly redefines the meaning of the overall meme for themselves as well as any other group using the meme. The meaning of a given meme is highly malleable and constantly shifting.

However, it is important to note that these changes in the meaning of the Pepe the Frog did not occur in a linear fashion. Indeed, the shifts in the meaning of an Internet meme are significantly more complicated and interconnected. At the same time that certain subcultures were beginning to attach ideologies of white nationalism to Pepe instances, members of the dominant culture were still using the meme without its associations with white nationalists. Internet users still used Pepe instances as general reaction images, or engaged in the trade of rare Pepes. Though their use of the meme in these settings was not intended to spread and propagate the ideologies of white nationalism, the intimate connection between individual meme instances and the meme as a whole still affected these innocent uses of Pepe the Frog. Because white nationalist groups had appropriated the Pepe image into their own meme instances, all other

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instances of Pepe the Frog referenced those white nationalist instances as well. Even if an instance did not specifically reference white nationalism, a viewer would be driven to think of the previous meme instances that they have seen—including those spread by white nationalists.

For example, the *Rare Pepe Directory* is a website that attempts to provide a separate environment for the exchange of Pepe instances free of white nationalist ideologies. The website attempts to promote the rare pepe exchange from the early history of Pepe the Frog, while simultaneously differentiating itself the more contemporary white nationalist usage of the meme. It is described as a way to "separate good Pepes from bad, common from rare, dank from deplorable" (Faife). The website claims to work by providing a unique token for each meme instance that is uploaded, which is associated with a transaction on the Bitcoin blockchain. Each time the instance is exchanged, the transaction can be tracked and verified using the unique token, thus protecting the value of each rare pepe (The Rare Pepe Directory). Indeed, scrolling through the directory of Pepe instances that have been uploaded to the website, it appears that *The Rare Pepe* Directory has successfully prevented any instances explicitly associated with white nationalism from being uploaded. However, just because those instances are no longer present, the white nationalist history of the Pepe the Frog meme is nonetheless unavoidable. Users of the website specifically distanced themselves from the white nationalist links, stating that it was "best just to ignore those extremists and Be rare, Be Pepe" (Faife). However, the fact that specific steps to distance themselves from white nationalism underscores the effect that white nationalist instances of Pepe the Frog have nonetheless influenced the overall meaning of the

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meme. Even instances of Pepe the Frog that are not explicitly associated with white nationalism still have an implied connection that must be negotiated with and confronted.

The instances of Pepe the Frog that specifically reference white nationalism affect the meaning of the meme as a whole, and by extension the meaning of any other Pepe instance. Therefore, even uses of the meme such as *The Rare Pepe Directory* which attempt to avoid Pepe's white nationalist ties must confront and contend with them regardless. It is entirely possible that these connections with white nationalism and the associated ideologies will permanently be a part of the Pepe the Frog meme.

Death of Pepe the Frog

During its initial use as an Internet meme, Furie remained relatively uninvolved with how Pepe the Frog was being used. As the artist who created Pepe, Furie owns the copyright on the Pepe image and could theoretically attempt to litigate any unauthorized use of the image. However, in the early years of the Pepe the Frog meme, Furie made no attempt to stop the remixing and spread of his creation. In a 2010 interview with *Know your Meme,* Furie described it as the image simply taking on a life of its own, explaining that it "seems kinda (sic) random but [he's] happy that it has" (Mazur). However, after the meme had taken on associations with white supremacy and became significantly more widespread through the 2016 Presidential campaign, Furie attempted to reclaim ownership and control of his creation.

After Pepe's classification as a hate symbol, Furie collaborated with the Anti-Defamation League to attempt to push back against the meme's use by the white nationalist subculture and reclaim the image through the #savePepe campaign. In an

attempt to "use the frog's likeness as a force for good," the campaign promised to create

new instances of Pepe the Frog and spread them across the Internet in hopes of

redefining what the meme had come to mean (ADL, "Campaign to #SavePepe"). In the

press release, Furie took a hard stance against the use of Pepe the Frog by white

nationalists and made a specific claim of ownership, stating "I condemn the illegal and

repulsive appropriations of the character by racist and fringe groups. The true nature of

Pepe, as featured in my comic book, 'Boys Club,' celebrates peace, togetherness and

fun" (ADL, "Campaign to #SavePepe"). One of the instances that Furie created as part

of this campaign to save Pepe and published online on *The Nib* is shown in Figure 39.

Figure 39 -   To Sleep, Perchance to Meme

The instance depicts Pepe gradually morphing into a version of Donald Trump,

complete with his distinct hairstyle. The morphing continues however, and Pepe's

features become increasingly grotesque and surreal. Eventually, he is jolted awake in his bed suggesting any instances of Pepe used by white nationalists or Trump supporters was simply a nightmare that Pepe was having. Through this instance, Furie attempts to define an official canon for Pepe the Frog, and characterize any unauthorized use of the image as an unofficial parody that does not represent the true meaning. Furie asserted that Pepe represented peace, togetherness, and fun and that any other meanings that other groups had tried to assign to the meme were nothing more than a nightmare.

Especially given Furie's original indifference to the use of his creation by online communities, this sudden change of opinion is particularly interesting. It is entirely possible that he was specifically moved to action because the use of Pepe the Frog by white nationalist groups strayed so far from its origins and into the realm of extremism that Furie felt obligated to push back and attempt to reclaim his image. However, another possible interpretation of Furie's pushback and attempt to redefine the meme through the #savePepe campaign is as another attempt by the dominant culture to commodify and reclaim the image. The #savePepe campaign, and the new comics that Furie created as part of it, represented an attempt by Furie and the dominant culture to raise money to specifically combat the use of the Pepe image by white nationalist groups. Turning to Hebdige's original predictions, such attempts at commodification are to be expected by members of the dominant culture in response to the use of an image by a subculture group. However, Hebdige's model of commodification also predicts that such a commodification attempt would be able to successfully neutralize the subculture's threat to the cultural hegemony and reestablish the dominant group's power. Yet due to the unique nature of the medium of Internet memes, Furie was able to

regain control over the Pepe the Frog image, despite his valid assertions of his ownership and status as its creator. Though he may own and control the Pepe the Frog *image*, the Pepe the Frog *meme* evades attempts to be commodified and co-opted by the dominant group.

As such, the #savePepe campaign had little effect and was unable to combat Pepe the Frog's new associations with white nationalism. Though Furie is the copyright holder of Pepe the Frog, he had very little control over how the image was being interpreted. Much like Roland Barthes' post-modernist assertion that the author is dead, Furie has no control over the meaning of his work and how it is interpreted (Barthes). He could create new meme instances, but they would still be influenced by the previous instances and their associations to white nationalism. The Pepe meme as a whole had been redefined through its use by the white nationalist subculture and its ideologies. The dominant culture's attempt to reclaim the image was unable to escape that white nationalist association. With and Internet meme, the meaning of a single instance affects *every other instance* of that same meme. In other words, there is no single original version of that can act as the official meaning.

Pepe the Frog faced continued controversy regarding its white nationalist associations after the 2016 election. Many white nationalist ideologies had become associated with the meme as part of the campaign, but those meanings remained attached to the meme and lingered on. In April 2017, the Spanish clothing company Zara faced public pressure to remove a denim miniskirt that it was selling online and in its physical stores (Friedman).
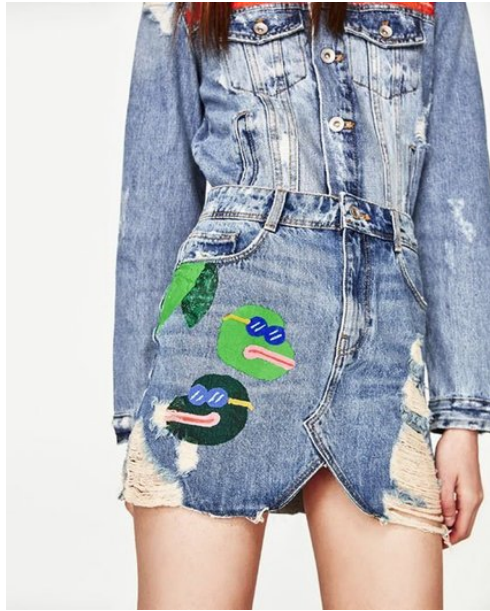
Figure 40 -   Zara Pepe

Zara's skirt, shown here in Figure 40, included a green cartoon face printed along one side. The image was created by artist Mario Santiago, and a spokesperson for Zara claims that the design was entirely unrelated to Pepe the Frog (Friedman). However, some Twitter users drew a connection between the design and Pepe the Frog, claiming that Zara's product promoted anti-Semitic values (@meaganrosae). This underscores the fluid nature of Internet memes, and how even unintentional instances of a meme can spread the same ideologies as previous meanings. Taken at face value, there is nothing anti-Semitic about Zara's skirt. However, because of its association with the overall Pepe the Frog meme, previous Pepe instances spread by white nationalists are connected to the skirt and as such their ideologies are connected as well. The unique medium of Internet memes made it possible for white nationalist subcultures to spread their ideologies onto a multi-national clothing company's miniskirt without ever having interacted with the product at all.

The public outcry that Zara received represents a significant turning point in the history of Pepe the Frog, and highlights that Internet memes do behave in a unique manner that have the potential to challenge traditional power structures. Under Hebdige's model of commodification, the mainstream culture should have been able to combat the use of Pepe the Frog by the white nationalist subculture by turning into a widely available commercial product. Zara's miniskirt should have been one step in this direction, and may have represented a redefinition of Pepe the Frog by mainstream culture to push back against the white nationalist ideologies. However, this process was unable to occur and instead Zara was forced to pull the miniskirt from the market entirely (Friedman). This suggests that Pepe the Frog will never be able to escape its new definitions as a symbol of white nationalist subcultures. The overall meme will always be, at least in some part, defined by those previous meme instances.

Perhaps realizing that reclaiming Pepe's meaning from white nationalists was virtually impossible, Furie took more dramatic action and in June 2017 attempted to officially kill Pepe the Frog once and for all (Fortin). As part of a comic anthology published by Fantagraphics Books, Furie published a one-page Pepe comic, *Pepe Funeral* (Figure 41). Brett, Andy, and Landwolf gather around an open casket and look upon Pepe's dead body. Landwolf offers a toast, lifting a bottle of alcohol before irreverently pouring it over Pepe's face. A fitting sendoff worthy of the experiences the four characters shared in *Boys Club*, before spreading virally as an Internet meme.

Figure 41 -   Pepe Funeral

There is no specific reason given for Pepe's death, though it is implied that he was

killed as a result of the meme's use by white nationalist subcultures to spread hateful

ideologies. Furie's artist statement for the Fantagraphics anthology explained, "'Boy's

Club' is about friendship. We are all going to die, so remember to treat your friends

nicely and give them lots of hugs" (Fortin). Though it never explicitly mentions the

meme's previous use by white nationalists, Furie's statement specifically defines what

he wants the meme to represent. Asserting that Pepe and his friends represent friendship

and tolerance specifically pushes back on the hateful and anti-Semitic meanings that

other subcultures attached to the Pepe meme.

Of course, killing off Pepe would not actually be as simple as releasing a single

comic. As shown by the ADL's #SavePepe campaign, Furie actually had very little

control over how his own creation was used. Internet memes, by the nature of their

medium, evade most claims of ownership or attempts to be controlled. Instead they are defined simply through the way that they are used, and the way that those instances are interpreted. The meaning of the overall meme is the sum of its individual instances, each of which is in turn influenced by every other meme instance.

Even after *Pepe Funeral* (Figure 44) was published, Pepe as a meme was still unable to be killed. In the days after Furie killed Pepe, cartoonist Ben Garrison published *Matt's Fury,* shown in Figure 42. The cartoon depicts a well-dressed Pepe shaking off a distraught Matt Furie. Pepe does not even recognize his own creator, representing that the meme truly has taken on a life of its own. Furie may be the owner, but he has virtually no control whatsoever over how Pepe is used.

Figure 42 -   Matt's Fury

On his website, Garrison writes that "Pepé (sic) is a meme that can't be eliminated with an official declaration or wave of a hand from some 'authority.' He's part of the public domain of free speech. Praise Kek" (Garrison, "Matt's Fury"). Pepe the Frog will

continue to spread as a meme, and despite its creator's effort to halt the process, its meaning will continue to be influenced by the countless individual meme instances in which the Pepe image is used. That Furie was unable to explicitly define the meaning of his own creation and reclaim it from the ideologies of white nationalism suggests that Internet memes are best explained by post-modernist interpretations. In "The Death of the Author," Barthes writes that "To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification" (Barthes). Pepe the Frog shows us that Internet memes are unable to have such as "final signification" and thus by extension cannot truly have an author as well. Furie's inability to actually kill off Pepe the Frog is a result not of any action or inaction on his part, nor on the part of the subcultures that claimed the Pepe image as their own. Instead it is the result of the Internet meme medium itself.

This post-modernist conclusion stating that Furie no longer has any control over his creation is slightly complicated, however, by another recurrence of Pepe in August 2017. The assistant principal of a middle school, Eric Hauser, published *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede*, a children's book that bore striking similarities to Pepe the Frog as well as the actual United States political situation (Wootson, Jr.). The book took place in a fictional town called "Wishington," features a smiling cartoon frog as its protagonist, and even has a location called "covfefe cliff," and apparent reference to one of President Trump's tweets (Wootson, Jr.; Heavey and Alexander). The book faced significant criticism for its supposed connection to Pepe the Frog and, by extension, white nationalist subcultures as well; Hauser lost his job as assistant principal as a result of the book (Wootson, Jr.). Furthermore, Furie attempted to push back against this use

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of Pepe the Frog, and made a copyright infringement claim against Hauser. This is one of the few times that Furie has specifically used his status as Pepe's copyright holder to police the spread of Pepe the Frog (Deb). Furie and Hauser were able to reach a settlement; Hauser admitted that he infringed on Furie's copyright, and agreed to donate all profits from *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede* to the Council on American-Islamic Relation, a Muslim advocacy organization (WilmerHale).

While this incident does highlight the fact that Furie is still the owner and copyright holder of Pepe the Frog, it must not be misconstrued as also suggesting the Furie has complete control over the meme as well. The meaning of an Internet meme is still the result of the sum of its meme instances, a process driven by the countless individuals who remix and spread the image. So although Furie was able to successfully assert his intellectual property rights and reach a settlement with Hauser, he was still unable to redefine the meaning of Pepe the Frog away from its ties to white nationalist ideology. The mere fact that Hauser's book was controversial is proof that the connection to white nationalism still lingers over the Pepe the Frog meme. Any reference to Pepe the Frog will likely make a viewer think of the Pepe instances associated with the white nationalist subculture, and not of Furie's intended meanings of peace, togetherness, and fun from the #savePepe campaign. With Internet memes, ownership of an image does not necessarily imply control as well. There is no single official version, or meaning, of an Internet meme which makes them unique as a medium for spreading and sharing ideas amongst subcultures, and particularly powerful for challenging the dominant culture.

Meme Magic: The Real and Wide-Reaching Potential of Memes

Understanding how Internet memes function and are used to transfer ideologies between groups requires us to look beyond Hebidge's model of the commodification of images and symbols by the dominant culture. Applegate and Cohen explain that "the Pepe meme, despite its recent popularity, exists as a means of subverting the very process by which memes become commodified" (Applegate and Cohen 85). Pepe the Frog has entered mainstream culture after its appearance in the 2016 campaign, but nonetheless the very nature of Pepe the Frog as an Internet meme enables it to circumvent Hebdige's commodification model. Applegate and Cohen suggest that this is due to the fact that virtually anyone is able to participate in the spread and modification of Internet memes. Because they exist in a virtual space, memes are unique from other forms of media in the way that they are able to move between groups. Pepe the Frog demonstrates that it is a trivial manner for one group to appropriate, redefine, and propagate the new meaning of an Internet meme. In this sense, the "meme magic" described by some white nationalist groups is in fact real (Neiwert). Internet memes empower small subcultures to spread their ideas into mainstream culture and challenge the dominant hegemony. Virtually anyone is able to use memes, which exist primarily in virtual space, to influence and affect actual events in the physical world.

The distinction between a meme and an individual meme instance explains how this so-called meme magic works, and why they weaken the hegemony of dominant culture. There is a cyclical relationship between a meme and its component meme instances that defines its overall meaning. A meme instance is a single image, video, or

occurrence of a particular meme whereas a meme is the sum of all the individual instances of it that have been created. The way that a viewer interprets an individual meme instance is influenced by their understanding of the meme as a whole, which is in turn influenced by all the previous meme instances that they have seen.

Therefore, changing the meaning of a meme is a simple process. Rather than redefining previous instances of the meme, one merely has to create new instances that do contain the desired meaning. Once enough of these new instances have been created, they will gradually start to influence the rest of the meme, including instances that had existed prior. Those previous instances were redefined by an outside group, *without ever touching that original instance*. In the case of Pepe the Frog, once white nationalist subcultures began creating Pepe instances that contained their own ideologies, every other instance of Pepe the Frog was gradually affected as well. Even the original *Boys Club Feels Good* (Figure 12) instance alludes to the instances spread by the white nationalists. Meme magic arises from the very structure of Internet memes, and enables a subculture to achieve wide-reaching effects with relative ease.

With Internet memes, there is no single "official" version that informs its use and meaning by various groups. The actual ownership and authorship of the meme are irrelevant; a meme's meaning is solely determined by those who view it. Roland Barthes described this relationship between a text and its meaning in "The Death of the Author," but his arguments are especially relevant to understanding how Internet memes are interpreted. He argued that the meaning of a text is determined by the individual reader, and is informed by that reader's previous experiences and perceptions. The author's original intention, if any such intention existed, has no role in

determining this meaning (Barthes). Similarly, Furie's original meaning of Pepe the Frog as representing a stereotypical young adult slacker does not contribute to the commonly-held interpretations of the Pepe the Frog meme. Instead, the meaning of the meme is informed by the previous meme instances that the viewer has seen. Furie may be the original author, but has no control over its interpretation. In this sense, Internet memes and their empowerment of the individual are the ultimate portrayal of Barthes' declaration that "the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author" (Barthes 1).

We can take this a step further and examine Internet memes, and the history of Pepe the Frog, in the context of Jean Baudrillard's post-modernist theories. While there is an original version of Pepe the Frog, Furie's creation of the character in *Playtime* and its subsequent appearance in *Boys Club*, that original version is irrelevant for determining the meme's meaning. Each instance of Pepe the Frog is an additional copy which exists solely separated from its original; Pepe the Frog suggests that Internet memes represent Baudrillard's description of a simulacrum—a hyperreality that precedes their actual reality. He describes that rather than merely being a faithful copy of an original, simulacra are instances in which a simple sign of the real is substituted for the real thing itself (Baudrillard 389). A simulacra is a copy for which there is no original, and instead the copy replaces and precedes the original. Baudrillard described his theories of simulacra with examples such as religion, Disneyland, and American politics in general. Had he been alive for the 2016 election, he likely would have concluded that Internet memes, and Pepe the Frog in particular, fit his model of the precession of simulacra.

In fact, Baudrillard's "Precession of Simulacra" can help explain how Internet memes are able to be harnessed by groups to influence actual events, or their so-called meme magic. Baudrillard writes that there are four successive phases in an image's representation:

> It is the reflection of a profound reality;
> It masks and denatures a profound reality;
> It masks the absence of a profound reality;
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard 390)

In the first stage, the image is a mostly accurate representation of reality. Furie created Pepe the Frog as well as Landwolf, Brett, and Andy as characters to represent his own experiences as a young adult. Apart from the obvious physical differences, as well as exaggeration and embellishment of the stories, this first version of Pepe is nonetheless a fairly accurate depiction of Furie's reality. In the second stage, instances of the image begin to distort the original image and change the meaning that it represents. For example, *Angry Frog* (Figure 14), *Smug Pepe* (Figure 6) and other reaction images as meme instances stray away from Pepe's original representation of a laidback young adult and begin to represent new emotions that were not present in Furie's original version.

The entire phenomenon of rare pepe trading further "masks and denatures" the reality of the original Pepe the Frog. In Baudrillard's third stage, the images now hide the fact that they are mere imitations, and that they exist separately from the original. Early Pepe instances that contained Nazi imagery and white nationalist ideologies not only began to redefine the meaning of the Pepe the Frog meme, but also eroded Furie's

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original intention for Pepe to have little ideological meaning whatsoever. It masks the reality that Pepe the Frog is not meant to mean anything significant, and instead embeds itself with the ideologies of white nationalist subcultures.

Finally, in the fourth stage, the image bears no resemblance to the original and instead represents its own reality; it has become pure simulacrum. The representation of the copy now precedes and replaces the actual reality. With Pepe the Frog, this occurred once it was declared a hate symbol and was forced into the public eye by the Trump campaign's use of the meme. Pepe the Frog's white nationalist meanings *precede* any other interpretation and in fact replace any reality the meme may have represented beforehand. This is what I mean when I write that meme magic is a real phenomenon. Under the right circumstances, an Internet meme can function in Baudrillard's fourth stage as a pure simulacrum, and in effect become their own reality. This is what happened in the case of Pepe the Frog, and was made possible by the unique structure of the Internet meme medium.

Internet memes have significant power to challenge the stronghold of cultural hegemony, and forces us to reexamine the relationships between subcultures, and their connection to a dominant culture. Memes enable subcultures to subvert Hebdige's model of commodification and enable that group to push back against the dominant cultural hegemony by spreading their own ideologies in the opposite direction. That they are able to do this calls into question the very power structures that the dominant culture holds over subcultures, and whether a subculture is able to escape from this cultural dominance. The case of Pepe the Frog and its use by white nationalists seems to suggest that Internet memes do make it possible to subvert this power structure. One

conclusion does remain clear, however, which is that Internet memes have the potential

to carry significant ideological power. Whether they are used for malicious intent or

not, they are capable of significant and wide-reaching effects on events in the physical

world and therefore must not be overlooked as playing a significant role in our

contemporary society.

Conclusion

Hebdige's model of commodification by a dominant group works for virtually all forms of media and cultural products. In general, it is possible to take any item, trend, or media text and use Hebdige's model to accurately predict the flow of those cultural products as they move from a subculture, to the dominant group. Those products are repackaged by the dominant group and sold back to the subculture—the dominated group—to complete the cycle of commodification. From Hebdige's original example of Punk culture in London, to contemporary hipster beard styles in Portland, the model of commodification has operated as expected.

However, the Pepe the Frog meme and its role in the 2016 US Presidential Election was a case where the commodification model broke down. The expected flow of the meme from subculture to dominant group, and to eventual commodification simply did not take place. But perhaps what is even more extraordinary is that this process not only failed to occur, but it may actually have been entirely impossible for it to happen in the first place. Pepe the Frog could not be co-opted because the medium of memes itself causes Hebdige's commodification model to break down. With Internet memes, the traditional notions of ownership and control become irrelevant and no longer correspond with complete control over an image's meaning and use. Because the meaning of a meme is determined by the sum of its individual meme instances, it is impossible for a dominant group to ever exert complete control over the meme's meaning and use. Furthermore, even if the dominant group were to somehow purchase and control all of a meme's instances, the subcultures would be able to immediately produce new copies of the image—new meme instances to drive the overall meme in a

different direction, and away from the dominant group's control. Memes are a unique medium that cannot be co-opted, commodified, and repurposed for commercial means. They fervently defy the predictions of Hebdige's, and even challenge the hegemonic power of the dominant group over subcultures.

Despite the unique nature of the medium, there are some cases where a corporation attempts to co-opt a meme and reuse it for monetary purposes. While they do sometimes achieve temporary success with these endeavors, such commodification attempts are typically short-lived and done so at a fairly high the risk for the corporation. At best, the dominant group is only able to *temporarily* co-opt a meme, and only in a limited fashion; they are never able to fully own and control its meaning. Monetization of a meme is not possible in the same was it is for other forms of media. For example In August 2017, the stock photography company Shutterstock attempted to cash in on the Distracted Boyfriend meme, which had become popular in recent months (Schwedel). Figure 43 shows an instance of the Distracted Boyfriend which notably includes the Shutterstock watermark, as the original photo can be purchased from Shutterstock.

Figure 43 -   Profitable Memes

In response to the meme's growing popularity, Shutterstock created an online service

that enabled users to easily generate their own instances of the meme, and then directs

them to a page where they can purchase a license for the photograph. In other words

they were trying to directly sell the meme itself, the purest form of a monetization

attempt. Predictably so, Shutterstock's effort to cash in on the Distracted Boyfriend

meme failed and Antonio Guillem, the original photographer, noted that "[t]he sales that

are related with the memes are probably a 0.00000% of our monthly revenue. It's not

relevant" (Schwedel). In fact, the Shutterstock developer who Tweeted about the

company's meme generation service was mocked online and received in response even

more meme instances produced without payment, such as the example shown in Figure
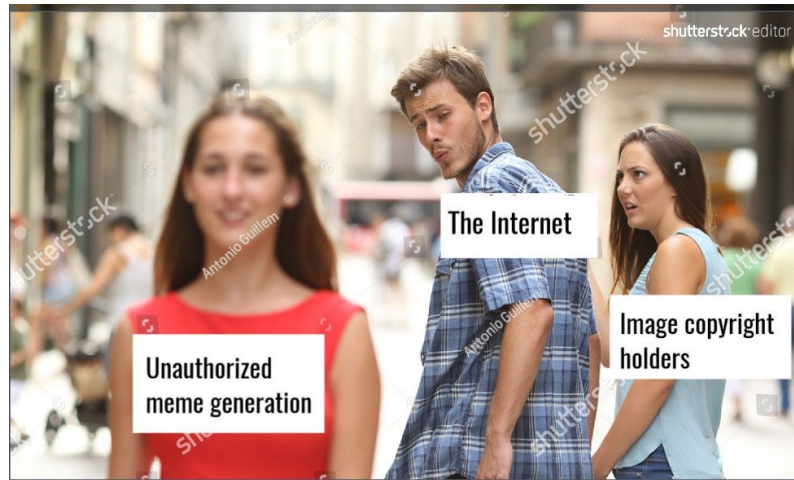
44.

Figure 44 -   Unauthorized Memes

Not only are memes nearly impossible to be commodified by a dominant group, any attempt by a corporation to co-opt the meaning of a meme in the traditional Hebdige process is done so with a significant risk. There is always the possibility that the meaning of the meme will be redefined by another group to something that works against the interests of that corporation. Especially given the widespread availability of image manipulation software, it is incredibly easy to produce additional meme instances that "poison" the meaning of the meme being used. In fact, some corporate blogs from the marketing industry specifically caution against the use of memes for this very reason, declaring that "Coming across as both uncool and unprofessional is your best likely outcome," (Karram).

This redefinition of meaning is essentially what happened with Pepe the Frog, when Internet users took an innocent cartoon frog and transformed it into a white nationalist hate symbol. Despite attempts by the dominant group to resist this change, the meme nonetheless took on those hateful connotations and became embroiled in controversy. These are the real and wide-reaching consequences of so-called "meme

magic." Through memes, it is now possible for a small subculture to push back against the control of the dominant group and redefine the meaning of an image without needing ownership or control. Hebdige's model can predict the flow of cultural products for almost anything, but memes are a case where his predictions no longer hold true. Memes are composed of a unique relationship between the individual meme instances and the meme as a whole, which results in the notions of ownership and control behaving differently than they do for other forms of media. This new relationship is significant because as the appearance of Pepe the Frog demonstrates, Internet memes are no longer just silly jokes that exist only in online space. They can actually matter for events in the physical world and can produce wide-reaching effects and consequences. Though Pepe began as a simple cartoon frog declaring "Feels good man," it soon became turned into a meme and eventually grew to play a significant role in electing the President of the United States. The phenomenon of Pepe the Frog demonstrates a unique characteristics of the meme medium overall: once the meme machine has been started, there is no shutting it off, and there is no predicting where it will lead.

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