

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE MEMED: DIGITAL MEMES AS SITES FOR
HEGEMONIC AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PRACTICES

By

Kim Sisu

A Project Presented to

The Faculty of California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

Committee Membership

Dr. Lisa Tremain, Committee Chair

Dr. Andrea Delgado, Committee Member

Dr. Janet Winston, Program Graduate Coordinator

December 2023

ABSTRACT

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE MEMES: DIGITAL MEMES AS SITES OF HEGEMONIC AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PRACTICE

Kim Sisu

Internet memes have become a part of everyday life as a way to participate in digital and online culture. The study of memes, known as memetics, have analyzed memes in many ways: for their political and social participation, for their multimodal presence, and their influence on online discourse. What has not yet been deeply studied are the ways memes participate in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices. This project aims to address this gap by investigating how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices show up in memes on feminism, and how those practices uphold or disrupt dominant narratives. Fifteen memes on feminism are analyzed to see how their imagery and language uphold or disrupt social, cultural, and political ideologies about feminism. This analysis reveals that not only do memes on feminism exhibit hegemonic and counter-hegemonic behaviors, but also that memes on feminism more generally adhere to racist and exclusionary tendencies in feminist ideologies that uphold heteronormativity and whiteness (?), further complicating the way memes and power are connected. Because memes can both engage in counter-hegemonic practice and uphold dominant narratives of feminist representation, this research implies that additional research is

necessary to study the connection between memetics and hegemony. This research offers a starting point for discussing such connections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been both a source of gratification and a monster since its conception, and I could not be happier that I chose to attend graduate school and found a unique space for my voice.

First and foremost, I want to thank my committee members. Dr. Lisa Tremain, my committee chair, has been an unwavering source of support, inspiration, and patience throughout this process. She saw me at my best and worst, and still never doubted me. It was through this project that we realized how alike we are, which helped greatly when trying to figure out the best ways to formulate, discuss, and write this beast of a project. Her dedication to this project is astounding, and I will never be able to properly express my gratitude. To Dr. Andrea Delgado, committee member and amazing instructor I had the pleasure of taking Digital Humanities with, I extend my endless thanks for deepening my interest in memetics by pushing me to think outside the box. She has supported me all the way through, and her knowledge of digital theories paved the way for my project to stand on 2 legs. I'd also like to thank Dr. Janet Winston, our department coordinator, for her amazing support and guidance throughout my graduate experience. As both an instructor and department head, she always came through with insightful words.

I want to thank my amazing partner, Nic, whom I met in this program, for the many hours of discussion (mostly just me talking *at* them about my project) and the extraordinary support they've provided. They have been a steady source of inspiration, insight, and knowledge. I love you, Nic! I want to thank my best friend Danielle for being

such a beam of light in my life. She has supported my attempt at graduate school from day one and has never doubted me and my potential. She has provided an endless amount of creative thought, love, and understanding for which I will never be able to thank her enough.

I also want to extend my gratitude to my dear friend David, without whom I would not have even applied to this graduate program. Grad school was the furthest thing from my mind after finishing my BA, but David made me believe I could do it, and encouraged me to go for it. It was he that suggested attending Cal Poly Humboldt, and for that I will forever be thankful as the friendships and connections I have made here have changed my life.

Thank you to those that let me rant *at* you and talk about my project as a way of teaching, learning, and exploration. Thank you, Steve H, Ben M, Bri D, and many others for allowing me to work through my project out loud with you. I love you all.

Lastly, I want to thank my amazing cohort. Throughout this program, we laughed, cried, argued, and supported each other. I would never have been able to survive grad school without these amazing and intelligent people to go through it with.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Memetics.....	8
Semiotics.....	18
Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony.....	22
METHODS.....	27
Introduction.....	27
Research Questions.....	28
Research Methods.....	28
Positionality.....	31
Limitations of Research.....	32
DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS.....	34
Introduction.....	34
The Feminist Meme: Analysis.....	35
Meme Group 1: General Anti-Feminism.....	41
Meme Group 2: Feminist Mocking.....	46
Meme Group 3: Feminism Claps Back.....	50
Meme Group 4: Pro-Feminist, Pro-Women.....	53

Meme Group 5: What Feminism is Not.....	57
Discussion.....	60
CONCLUSION.....	64
REFERENCES	68

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Meme group signals and frames	38
Table 2: Meme group 1	41
Table 3: Meme group 2.....	46
Table 4: Meme group 3.....	50
Table 5: Meme group 4.....	53

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Meme A.....	42
Figure 2: Meme B.....	44
Figure 3: Meme C.....	45
Figure 4: Meme D.....	47
Figure 5: Meme E.....	48
Figure 6: Meme F.....	48
Figure 7: Meme G.....	51
Figure 8: Meme H.....	51
Figure 9: Meme I.....	52
Figure 10: Meme J.....	54
Figure 11: Meme K.....	55
Figure 12: Meme L.....	56
Figure 13: Meme M.....	58
Figure 14: Meme N.....	58
Figure 15: Meme O.....	59

INTRODUCTION

“If the oppressed must be alert enough to follow the rulers’ instructions, they are therefore conscious enough to challenge them” (1991).

-Terry Eagleton

My interest in hegemony began in my undergraduate program at The University of Oregon. I had officially declared my major in sociology and had been in the middle of taking a 300-level course on the sociological classics (Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim) when the concept of hegemony was introduced. As my professor noted, it was a hard concept to grasp at first, and by the end of the class, I felt I had a strong sense of its meaning. That all changed when I continued to take more courses and I began to realize how complex and nuanced hegemony is.

As I continued to take more courses, I was drawn to media studies through a sociological lens. I read texts on race and gender representation in the media, and quickly saw a connection between modes of power and media representation. At that point in my academic career, I wasn’t sure what to do with this knowledge and how to apply it.

Memes have been a part of my online life, as is the case for many folks in my generation, for at least a decade, and I feel like I had noticed some ideological normalizations in them, but still did not make a clear connection between memes and hegemonic practice. In my first semester of graduate school, I had a conversation with my professor about memes and how I thought it would be fun to do my master’s project on them. I thought about memes as sites of normalizing stereotypes and tropes, and

suddenly... a lightbulb. "I think memes contribute to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice!"

As memes have been things my friends and I send to one another when we feel they are funny, relatable, or otherwise entertaining, they have become a fun way to have a conversation. I have had full length conversations *just* using memes before.

Initially, I thought I would look at various types of memes that address a span of topics (feminism, politics, gender, masculinity), and even began to write outlines for each topic. The first meme topic I was going to introduce in the project was feminism, and as I began to research memes on feminism, and look at them through a critical analysis lens, my interest in it grew. After suggesting this change to my committee chair, I began to dive deeper into memes on feminism, seeing the deeper connections to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice. I think feminism was a topic of interest, not only because I am a feminist myself and have been advocating for equality, but also because in looking through the many anti-feminist memes, I saw how much animosity there was and how much real conversation was needed. Feminists need to see how much disruption we create among the many people who are still upholding feminist tropes.

Internet memes have become not only a part of everyday social interaction, but also a valid form of communication across digital platforms. They contribute to discussions across a multitude of topics such as pop-culture, politics, music, movies, gender, feminism, video games, etc. If the topic exists, there is likely a meme that touches upon it. The study of memes, known as memetics, has shown connections to social and political participation, even demonstrating how memes are used to gain traction for

various social and political movements (i.e. Occupy Wall Street, and George Floyd protests). Memetic scholars have also identified memes as ways of understanding cultural meaning. As fleeting as popular meme topics can be on the internet, they provide windows into what is being discussed by the general online community. It demonstrates what matters to various communities, and even uses the same meme to vocalize opposing opinions.

The study of power, specifically hegemonic power, has been extensive in several academic fields, demonstrating the ways power not only takes hold, but also how it manifests in such ways that cultural truths and ideologies put upon the masses are indistinguishable. Hegemony requires that the subjugated consent to their ruling, and that as culture shifts over time, the tactics for gaining and maintaining power shift also.

Memes on feminism span both accepting and opposing thoughts and opinions on the subject, and as the history and definition of feminism seem to be different among different communities, it is the perfect meme category to examine with the concept of hegemony in mind. While the study of memes has been linked to power in the sense that they have the power to spread facts, statistics, and opinions, what has not been studied are the ways they are directly related to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice. This project examines how memes reinforce and maintain hegemonic beliefs in conversations of feminism, and how they also disrupt and dismantle them. In order to understand how this occurs, I analyzed 15 memes on feminism and examined patterns that demonstrate how each meme might reinforce or disrupt cultural norms through a critical analysis lens.

The reinforcement or disruption of such norms exhibit the existence of dominant ideologies which are seen and accepted as cultural truths.

In order to understand memes as discourses on feminism, it is important to consider the history of feminist movements as well as my own intersectional positionality in relation to it. An article written by Martha Rampton titled *Four Waves of Feminism* (2005) historicizes the feminist movement, noting the four moments since its inception that changed the course of women's lives. Rampton notes that the four waves occurred as follows: the first wave began in 1848 at an equality convention in Seneca Falls, New York where an outline of the movements' strategy was created; the second wave ran from the 1960's to the 1990's amid anti-war and civil rights efforts, resulting in women-only organizations and spaces; the third wave started in the mid-90's, "and was informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking" (para. 10) where the destabilization of social constructs was in conversation; the fourth wave, according to Rampton, is currently happening, and is largely focused on changing language and gendered ways of thinking. However, what this succinct account of feminism fails to acknowledge is how race is imbricated in feminism today.

Brent Staples addresses this history and its ongoing white supremacist ideologies in a 2018 New York Times article called *How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women*. Staples posits that suffrage turned its back on Black women when it became clear that they were also fighting for the voting rights of black men. The author goes on to say that white women did not think it fair that Black men get the vote before them, causing the white feminist movement to leave black women in the dust and moving

forward without them. To this, Staples writes, “this betrayal of trust opened a rift between black and white feminists that persists to this day” (para. 3). He notes that white feminists were unable to understand why Black women could not “separate their blackness from their femaleness” (para. 11) and is an issue that still shows up in the language of white women, maintaining dissension between white and Black women in modern day feminism.

By bringing memes and hegemonic practice together, and considering my own position as a cis, white woman and bringing memes and hegemonic practice together, this project strengthens my understanding of polysemic discourse through the lens of power. Considering my own position as a cis, white woman, this project strengthens my understanding of polysemic discourse through the lens of power. Such power, whether utilized to uphold or disrupt dominant ideologies, frames an important perspective on both the individual memes that contribute to discussions on feminism and on the overarching hegemonic practice exemplified throughout the research and findings of this project.

In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Audre Lorde (1981) writes about how Black women have been excluded from feminist conversations, and how the centering of white women in feminist spaces divides not only women but feminists from each other. Lorde writes, “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries” (93). It is impossible for me to write about feminism without acknowledging both its general racist history and the ways that discourses on feminism continue to center white women and therefore exclude

women of color from conversations about it. To ground the dialogue of what feminism means in this project, I look to another point by Lorde, which states, “As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change” (95). So, while many memes on feminism seek to disrupt dominant narratives about women and gender, the memes explored in this project don’t do enough to represent different versions of women *and* feminism. We must consider and embrace the differences of women to revolutionize this “fourth wave of feminism” we are in the midst of. With these situated definitions for hegemony and feminism in mind, the project is organized as follows:

Chapter 1 includes a non-exhaustive literature review on three main concepts to ground this study: memes, semiotics, and hegemony/counter-hegemony. Though a semiotic analysis was not conducted for this study, the frameworks provided in semiotics provide important concepts which support a critical analysis of memetic culture. The literature review creates a foundation of threshold concepts that aid in the overall discussion of memes and hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used throughout this project. It details the purpose of this study, and the process through which memes were selected and analyzed. This chapter also presents the research questions created to gain a sense of direction, which include:

- In what ways do digital memes reinforce or challenge dominant narratives?
- How does memetic language assist in enacting culturally disruptive practices?
- How is feminism being discussed online through digital memes?

- To what extent do digital memes about feminism reinforce or disrupt feminist tropes?
- To what extent is the creation of memes a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic practice in itself?

Also included in chapter 2 is my positionality in relation to this project. As the history of feminism is permeated with racist and exclusionary tactics, the privilege I hold and the view from where I've sat as a white woman conducting this study is paramount to its integrity. Finally, I present a brief explanation of research limitations.

Chapter 3 details the analysis, discussion, and findings. I present 15 memes on feminism, and discuss each meme individually, and then zoom out to look at the overall concepts and discourse on feminism through memetic language and use of imagery. I include analytic tables and visuals of each meme analyzed for this project. Chapter 3 ends with a brief conclusion, which presents the significance of the memes analyzed and their contribution to the discourse on feminism. This chapter also explores further ideas for study and what might be needed to change the way we talk about feminism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Memetics

In this chapter, I track various critical ways digital memes have been studied or theorized. The scholarship reviewed in this chapter considers memes through concepts such as digital discourse, multimodal expression, polyvocality, memes as language, semiotics, and hegemony. These frameworks allow us to understand the creation, maintenance, and meaning of memes in relation to language and power.

Limor Shifman's work on memetics is broadly focused on several characteristics of memes, including: genre, participation (political and otherwise), variability, discourse, and history. Her work in the field has become one of the most cited among memetic scholars. In her book, *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014), Shifman dedicates each chapter to the various properties of memes mentioned above. In the introduction, she states, "This book is a first step in bridging the yawning gap between (skeptical) academic and (enthusiastic) popular discourse about memes" (4). Shifman asserts that memes should be examined as a way of communication within digital culture, while acknowledging that some scholars believe the meme concept both explains nothing and everything simultaneously. This is to say, according to Shifman, that scholars should look to memes for "understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture without embracing the whole set of implications and meanings ascribed to it over the years" (6). Intertextuality, according to Shifman, is a significant characteristic in memetics as memes have the

ability to speak and relate to one another, often touching upon multiple references such as pop culture, politics, and participation within one image or video.

Paramount to her work in memetics, is the examination of memes as participants in digital communication. Shifman notes that prior to the twenty-first century, memes were not seen as viable forms of communication (6). Of course, this viewpoint has changed over time, and as Shifman states, “In a time marked by a convergence of media platforms, when content flows swiftly from one medium to another, memes have become more relevant than ever to communication scholarship” (7).

Shifman’s work in defining what is a meme and the study of memetics is crucial to both memetic studies and the work I am doing here. Like many memetic scholars, she refers to Richard Dawkins in coining the term, which stems from his work as an evolutionary biologist. According to Shifman (as well as many other memetic scholars), Dawkins related the transmission of biological data from one gene to another to the manners in which social behaviors and ways of thinking are also transmitted. Shifman writes, “As mentioned above, Dawkins’s initial definition was quite ambiguous: he referred to a meme as ‘a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation’” (37). Since this conception, scholars in the field have agreed and disagreed with various definitions, creating a difficult starting point for overall study. There are three general perspectives on the meme genre which Shifman uses to create a new definition for meme: *mentalist-driven*, *behavior-driven*, and *inclusive*.

Mentalist-driven pertains to the creation of a difference between memes themselves and how a meme is transferred and arriving at the conclusion that “memes are

idea complexes and meme vehicles are their tangible expressions” (38). Conversely, *behavior driven* memetics looks to memes as types of behavior in which there is no difference between a meme and a meme vehicle. Regarding this further, Shifman notes that contrary to perceiving memes as merely abstract units, as represented in mentalist-driven memetics, behavior driven memetics asserts that “defining memes as concrete units enables their evolution and diffusion to be studied empirically” (38). Shifman looks to Susan Blackmore’s work in *The Meme Machine* (1999) to define *inclusive* memetics, which, in short, is defined as “any type of information that can be copied by imitation” (39). It is through these three stances on memetics which gives Shifman her own definition of an Internet meme as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (41). It is Shifman’s definition of meme that I will utilize for the upcoming analysis and discussion. The three parts mentioned above are crucial to how digital memes are seen through a semiotic lens and allow for a clearer understanding of why each meme I will analyze has been chosen.

Chapter 8 of Shifman’s book concerns the participation that stems from meme making, sharing, and imitating, largely within the political sphere, noting that whether they are humorous or serious, “political memes are about making a point—participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there” (120). Shifman discusses that in the world of digital [use], political participation is more than simply voting or following political organizations, and that participation manifests itself

in forums, blog comments, and memes. Throughout this section, Shifman contends that political internet memes serve three ideas, which include: “(1) *Memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy...* (2) *Memes as grassroots action...* (3) *Memes as modes of expression and public discussion*” (122-123). She writes that the Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish Los Indignados protests were not organized in person, but rather through digital organization, including the use of memes. In regards to the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS), Shifman chronicles the evolution of memetic participation and the birth of both the digital and in-person protests. As Internet users began to create memes which visually imitate various corporations in protest of the narratives they represent, these types of memes seeped into the conversations of economic inequality and became a digital discourse and protest that grew into an in-person protest in September 2011. Shifman, as well as others in the field of memetics, argues that these memes were in conversation not only with the U.S. government and the way it was being run, but with one another as well. Counter-memes were created on all sides of the issue, forming a nation-wide digital communication network that led to real, in-person conversations and actions.

Additionally, Ryan Milner’s work in memetics is referenced by several scholars in the field, including Limor Shifman, and points to similar ways in which memes are used in the political sphere. Milner (2013) explores the connection between the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) in 2011 and internet meme participation, noting that “Participatory media--seen as a personal answer to exclusionary mass media--can facilitate this active, polyvocal citizenship” (5). In his text *Pop Polyvocality: Internet*

Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Milner discusses the bridge between pop culture and political discussion. He contends that, “Image memes, in their very form, house potential for populist expression and conversation” (4) and that an empirical look at Internet memes allows for a richer discussion on how these memes come to be and to where they are headed.

Milner examines the use of pop culture in memes, especially those with political connotations, noting that pop culture? serves its own purpose of creating discourse among the population and can be seen as an “alternative form[s] of understanding” (4). Milner uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate the relationship between social and cultural implications and memetic communication (6). His findings indicate that the use of pop culture in memetic discourse offers a positive approach to political participation. Milner points to traditional news channels showing segments of memes created during the OWS movement, giving those pop culture and political messages a polyvocal participatory attribute. What was a simple meme initially created, altered, or mimicked on social networking sites became national news, giving OWS a bigger voice. Milner quotes van Zoonen (2005) regarding the benefits of pop culture in society:

Popular culture does have its flaws, but it needs to be acknowledged as a relevant resource for political citizenship: a resource that produces comprehension and respect for popular political voices and that allows for more people to perform as citizens (pg. 32, Milner quoting van Zoonen)

Milner also stresses the importance of polyvocality, noting its significance in political discourse. While he does not provide a definition of polyvocality, we can consider the definition suggested by Swarupa Anila in their article, *Polyvocality and*

Representation: What We Need Now (2017): “the integration of many voices and streams of discourse” (para. 4). Upon opening an art exhibition in Detroit where the pieces are meant to look back on the Detroit Riots on its 50th anniversary, Anila explores the importance of polyvocality in the reflection of the riots. Anila acknowledges that the definition of polyvocality should be expanded to note that it does not inherently mean all voices included in a polyvocal discourse reflect the same perspectives. In fact, they add three paramount concepts to the definition: individual perspectives, ways of knowing, and temporality.

To explain these 3 concepts as part of polyvocality, Anila writes that individual perspectives “honor[s] individuality and heterogeneity”; that ways of knowing “access[es] collective knowledge bases” and temporality acknowledges “that perspectives and perceived ‘truths’ change over time” (para. 5). When looking back to Milner’s work with OWS and memetic culture, polyvocality can be observed through examination of the discourse about it on social networking sites including Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, Canvas, and 4Chan. The political engagement seen coming from these sites vary widely in perspective (individual perspectives), uses well-known pop-culture references (ways of knowing), and shifts with new information and research (temporality).

Milner also discusses the multimodal condition of digital memes, observing that they “braid text and image—and even audio and video—in their expression and commentary” (7). He continues to explain that combining CDA and the multimodal position of digital memes “can inform our understanding of popular commentary, mediated polyvocality, and multimodal discourse” (7). In other words, as memes became

ways of participating in public discourse, their multimodal expression allowed for various perspectives creating a polyvocal discussion not seen in digital media prior to OWS. The examination of the multimodal and polyvocal characteristics of digital memes will be applied in the discussion section of this text to observe how they reinforce systems of power and hegemonic behavior.

George Rossolatos (2015) also considers the multimodality of memes by examining their cultural reproductive qualities and their communicative function in *The Ice-Bucket Challenge: The Legitimacy of the Memetic Mode of Cultural Reproduction is the Message*. Rossolatos contends, “that memes should be viewed as structural gestalts that allow for recognizability by virtue of semiotic constraints in the form of an invariable inventory of expressive elements” (135). The text inspects a series of video memes in which social media users dump a bucket of ice water on themselves in order to bring awareness to certain social or political issues. The user’s intention with these “ice-bucket challenges”, as they’re referred to, is to promote an issue and ask the audience to donate to the cause. In his text, Rossolatos looks to “expressive elements” (139) of the ice-bucket challenge through both an ontic and ontological lens as a means to understand the various communicative elements of such a multimodal meme. Rossolatos points to dominant ideological representations within the ice-bucket challenge meme, noting that it “constitutes a performative enactment of Symbolic Order” (15).

Symbolic Order, as per Rossolatos, is a concept coined by French psychoanalysis and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan who asserts that it represents a system in which language shapes individuals and culture around them. This shaping occurs when we use language

to understand the world around us and internalize values and norms in society. Dominant ideologies may be maintained through the Symbolic Order by placing value on certain shared cultural beliefs, marginalizing groups which do not comply with dominant ways of thinking (14). Memetic language provides a powerful example of Symbolic Order in its representation of meaning-making and cultural participation. As discussed above by Shifman and Miner, if memes are a way to engage in digital discourse about any given topic, the language used has the power to influence or maintain various ideologies. Power within shared cultural beliefs will be discussed further in the discussion chapter of this text. I will examine how language in digital memes may be used to maintain dominant ideologies as symbolism, signs, and signifiers.

Memes must be understood as sites of linguistic participation, and thus, we must consider the implications of power embedded in its use and circulation. Bradley E. Wiggins writes about the connection between power and memes in his book, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* (2019). In the preface of his book, he argues “that internet memes are discursive units of digital culture and that these units of discourse indicate an *ideological practice*” (xi, original emphasis). In viewing memes in the context of ideological practice, Wiggins urges the reader to relate digital culture and genre as a means to examine the ways in which meaning is made within cultural systems. He writes, “to posit that culture is a lived experience means that people must use tools, such as genres, to make sense of the structure they inhabit” (41). The author does note that this observance does not imply that genres are fixed. As we will discuss later, various meme genres have come and gone in popularity, though their perceived meaning

represents a point in time within digital culture. Wiggins states that memes should be seen as “a genre of communication” (41), and within this framework, become a unit that is to be studied.

Communication using digital memes, Wiggins posits, is an important notion when investigating structure and agency among internet users within memetic culture. He refers to Giddens’ (1984) notion of structuralization, and within social structures, first had to come social action. The author notes that social action, including digital social action via memes, serves as cultural participation which is consistently being modified, imitated, and shared. Wiggins addresses this concisely, stating, “Memes are enacted by agents participating in normalized social practices which recursively reconstitute the structure” (43). He goes on to say that “where we deploy memes is susceptible to transformation” (43). Wiggins’ main point stands tall here: putting memes in the genre of communication demonstrates how social structures are influenced by them, as well as how memes are influenced by social structures; both are steadily and simultaneously being re-written.

Salikoko S. Mufwene (2019) discusses the phylogenetic attributes of language evolution and contends that language is, in itself, a “cultural artifact.” Mufwene notes that this creates a bridge between language and biological evolution. This biological connection can be linked with Vilém Uhlíř and Marco Stella’s (2012) study of language under a neo-Darwinian framework in that what has been created is what Uhlíř and Stella refer to as a “biosocial” approach. This approach contends that memetics are an example of both biological and social phenomena, via the foundational work of Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), and asserts memes are cultural transmissions and that

genetics and memetics are inherently connected. Dawkins draws upon evolutionary concepts such as gene transmission to support the idea that cultural behaviors act in a similar fashion. That is to say, just as biological genes are transferred and altered (what biologists call mutated), Dawkins contends that cultural behaviors act in a similar way as they are transferred and altered among cultures, including digital cultures. While his work is referenced by a high number of memetic scholars, many state that the analogy he provides demonstrates a binary conversation and assert that it is much more complicated than that.

Love (2019) pulls away from this binary mindset and asserts that culture is much more dynamic than Dawkins discusses. He notes, “in a community of practice, the members shape their norms through their interactions and are not assumed to have simply inherited them from previous speakers. Their interactions also define their communities” (369). Here, Love acknowledges the interrelation between culture defining language and language defining culture. His work demonstrates the consideration of how culture and language represent one another, both evolving and informing in such a way that it is unnoticeable until time has passed. Cultural evolution should be considered as an important aspect of language and representation, as they work to orient each other, in this case, through digital memes. If we are to look at language as a cultural artifact, and as something that informs our understanding of the world, we must also look at how translation of memetic language can be seen as signs.

In her text, *Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Culture* (2016), Sara Cannizzaro explores the bridgework between internet memes and signifiers.

As Mufwene examines the relationship between language and culture, Cannizzaro posits that viewing the linguistic and cultural elements in memetics through a semiotic lens can provide a better understanding of cultural evolution (582). While looking to memes as units of cultural transmission, the author discusses the varying ways they have become replicators of cultural behavior through translation. Cannizzaro asserts that many scholars of memetics have not truly considered the impact of semiotics and notes, “Dropping memetics’ jargon and adopting a systemic-semiotic perspective on digital culture instead allows us to consider internet memes as *systems of signs that are subject to translation*” (574, original emphasis). She also asserts that “internet memes are to be considered as systems of signs that are subject to translation” (582), and that semiotics are crucial when analyzing memes as it exposes the cultural evolution embedded within them. I take up the subject of semiotics as a framework for analyzing memes in the next section.

Semiotics

As discussed in the previous section, and as Cannizzaro (2016) argues, the theory and applications of semiotics can help us understand memes as reflective of cultural ideologies. In order to understand how semiotics can be used to analyze the power of memes, I begin this section with a review of semiotics as an organizing framework for understanding language.

For both Saussure and Barthes, the concepts of the *signifier* and the *signified* are paramount of any semiotic study. Gillian Rose (2005) explores the dynamics of these terms, providing an example of how intensifying the sign and the signified plays out in

daily life (75). Rose states, “The signified is a concept or an object, for instance ‘a very young human unable to walk or talk.’ The second part of the sign is the signifier. The signifier is a sound or an image that is attached to a signified; in this case, the word ‘baby’” (75). Digital memes provide ways to examine both the signified and the signifier, however, as Rose indicates, signifiers might have more than one meaning across languages and cultures, making varied interpretations (75). What semiotics provide memetic studies is the ability to note cultural references and their cultural meaning, geography, and timestamp, allowing for narrower interpretation. Rose also discusses the contrasts in these terms, noting, “the distinction between signifier and signified is crucial to semiology because it means that the relation between meanings (signifieds) and signifiers can therefore be problematized” (76). This means that if the signified and the signifiers are always in question, various cultural meanings and explorations can be made from one image.

In *How to do Media and Cultural Studies* (2002), Jane Stokes provides examples of what a semiotic study of media might look like as completed by Barthes. One of the case studies Stokes examines under a semiotic lens is a photo of Panzani pasta spilling out of a shopping bag made of string (126). The image itself is multimodal in that it uses both image and text to represent the brand. In this image, Barthes notes the contents within and spilling out of the shopping bag: pasta, pasta sauce, and fresh produce; this represents the denotation as the term *semiotics* was initially conceived by Ferdinand de Saussure as a way of looking at culture through signs (Hall, 2013). His argument, as stated by Hall in *Representation* (2013), is that “since all cultural objects convert

meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs” (21). Semiotics asserts that physical objects also serve as signs of meaning-making just as much as language and images. Though Saussure coined the term *semiotics*, it was Roland Barthes who utilized its value in studying cultural and social phenomena. Barthes contends that there are two levels of meaning when looking at signifiers: denotation and connotation. According to Hall (2013), Barthes posits that denotation refers to the “descriptive level” while connotation refers to the shared cultural meaning and “broader themes and meanings” (23).

Though there might be meanings attached to words or images which are culturally agreed upon, it is important to note that, even within one culture, there can be various interpretations as well; this is known as polysemy. Looking at visual words and images through a polysemic lens allows us to understand how signs and signifiers might inform one another through multiple translations. As Barthes describes the pasta image (the denotation), he asserts that the connotation lies in a shared cultural belief that this is a grocery bag full of ingredients to make an Italian pasta sauce, thus the notion of Italy comes into play. Barthes posits that “images are *polysemic* - they have multiple meanings and are open to diverse interpretations” (127). However, as most images are accompanied by words, the interpretations become narrower as context is revealed. Stokes also notes, “how analysis of the cultural codes which are being triggered by the image can explain how the meaning gets into the content of the media” (127). In the discussion chapter of this text, we will look at how cultural codes inform interpretation of digital memes, and how those codes reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. Stokes reminds us that,

“while semiotics may be used to prop up capitalism or to encourage us to buy into consumerism, it is also a deconstructive method frequently used to challenge mainstream ideas, mores, and values” (134). In the next section, we will take a closer look at how semiotics converges with power and dominant narratives, including how those narratives may be challenged.

Gillian Rose (2005) looks at how meaning is created through “wider systems” (76), pointing to various terms used by Williamson (1978), Barthes (1973), and Hall (1980). For the purposes of this study, we will be looking at Hall’s description of these ‘wider systems’ he calls ‘codes’ (77). Rose notes that a code, according to Hall, “is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people” (77). Rose draws on Hall’s description of codes as ways of speaking to groups of people who are aware of the context of an image or text. Rose provides the example of an advertisement of a tennis star; those aware of who the tennis player is will understand the advertisement in a way those who do not know them will not.

As we ascertain the value of understanding codes and their role in a semiotic approach to memetics, we must also consider how semiotics can be adopted into conversations of social and cultural ideologies. While semiotics examines the relationship between words/images and cultural meaning, the meanings we gather have the power to uphold, maintain, and challenge those same cultural and social ideologies. Rose writes, “semiology is centrally concerned with the construction of social difference through signs. Its focus on ideology, ideological complexes and dominant codes, and its recognition of resistance to those, means that it cannot avoid considering the social

effects of meaning” (79). This sort of analysis will be important later in this in the discussion section when we analyze digital memes, and look for ways they might uphold, maintain, or challenge different narratives.

Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony

James Lull (1995) draws from Stuart Hall’s and Antonio Gramsci’s scholarship as well as Marxist theory to explore the definition and nuance of *hegemony*. In his opening line, Lull writes, “hegemony is the power or dominance that one social group holds over others” (61). Though the notion of hegemony is extremely layered and complicated, Lull’s definition serves as a fundamental understanding of what it represents. In this section, I explore many facets of hegemony that are useful in understanding memes as cultural units, including: consent, dominant ideology, and counter-hegemony.

The concept of hegemony can be initially linked to Italian philosopher and Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, who expanded on existing discussions on the subject of power, noting that while Marx stressed the economic factors that come into play, he did not account for “ideological influence” (61). The basis of Gramsci’s use of ideology notes the lengths at which the media is used to maintain power. On this, Lull writes, “Owners and managers of media industries can produce and reproduce the content, inflections, and tones of ideas favorable to them... thereby guaranteeing that their points of view are constantly and attractively cast into the public arena” (62). According to existing literature, there are three facets of hegemony that must be understood, and which

make it different from other forms of power: reinforcement, cultural assumption, and consent.

The first facet, reinforcement, contends that hegemony relies on the fact that power is to be constantly fought for, and is not a given once won. Hall (1977) examines the work of Gramsci, asserting that “it is crucial to the concept that hegemony is not a ‘given’ and permanent state of affairs, but has to be actively won and *secured*: it can also be lost” (333, original emphasis). Hall continues on to say that because existing ideologies change over time as culture evolves, it forces the hand of those wanting to be in power to constantly readjust their strategy and renew their position of power. English literary theorist Terry Eagleton (1991) explores hegemony through the lens of ideological theory, and, in agreement with Gramsci and Hall, asserts that because hegemony must always be renewed, and thus, “hegemony is inseparable from overtones of struggle” (115). If culture is always evolving, it is clear that power would shift and evolve as well, creating a society in which power is endlessly up for grabs. When we return to the concept of Symbolic Order, if dominant ideologies can be maintained through language, and language as a part of culture is regularly evolving, so must the tactics for maintaining power. The signifiers represented as visual words and images in memes present an angle of examination that converges both ideological domination and shifting cultural truths. As noted earlier in this chapter, memetics look to memes for ways of understanding the culture around them, and while that culture shifts, so too does the language and approach for gaining power.

Lull posits that dominant ideologies must become a part of everyday life in such a way that it is difficult to ascertain what has been put upon the masses and what is “normal” (62). This is the second feature of hegemony which differs from other forms of power: cultural assumption. Hegemony works to create cultural truths through ideological influence. Lull concludes that dominant ideological messages come from our governing bodies, schools, politics, the military, and religious groups, but in order for those messages to become normalized ideologies, they “must be subsequently reproduced in the activities of our most basic social units—families, workplace networks, and friendship groups in the many sites and undertakings of everyday life” (62). In order for true hegemonic placement to occur, it is best if the masses believe that the narratives they are presented with are natural and normal ways of thinking. On this, Eagleton writes, “to win hegemony, in Gramsci’s view, is to establish moral, political, and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one’s own ‘world view’ throughout the fabric of society as a whole, thus equating one’s own interests with the interests of society at large” (116). Lull makes a similar statement, noting that, “hegemony requires that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions” (62-63).

The third feature of hegemony, and which makes itself most distinct from other forms of power, is consent. Existing literature contends that through the process of making ideological assertions as cultural truths, consent is gained, and thus, the subjugated group becomes complicit in their own subjugation. Hall (1977) refers to Gramsci’s original notion of hegemony, stating that the dominant group gains hegemonic control is “when they not only possess the power to coerce but actively organize so as to

command and win the consent of the subordinated classes to their continuing sway” (332). Lull (1995) also discusses the effectiveness of both coercion and consent, proclaiming that consent presents less risk for push-back. He states, “hegemony implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules, and laws they believe to be in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not (63). Digital memes provide a visual demonstration of how consent is acquired through the use of sharing, modifying, and creating. When we refer back to Shifman’s work, and understand that memes are transmissions of cultural units, those units represent various ideological assertions which are then shared across the internet as constructed cultural norms.

Hall’s framing of hegemony grounds a key claim of my project which contends that memetic language, as cultural units, can demonstrate a power dynamic through which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices are exercised. Hall states, “Knowledge linked to power not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to *make itself true*” (2013, original emphasis). In looking at memetic culture and language, knowledge that makes itself true may be in the hands of those who are making memes and perpetuating constructed cultural norms and passing them as cultural truths.

Counter-hegemony, according to Hall (1985) seeks to disrupt or challenge the dominant narrative and can appear in many ways. Lull (1995) states that counter-hegemony does not always appear as texts but can textually be seen all around us in the form of graffiti, song lyrics, and TV shows. Other ways counter-hegemonic tendencies might show up, Lull states, “are formulated in processes of communication—in the interpretations, social circulation, and uses of media content” (65). He notes that the use

of a grocery cart by a houseless person to carry their belongings is counter-hegemonic, as any resistance to dominant ideologies can appear as simply reinventing a thing, an idea, or message in such a way that was not intended by the creators. Lull writes, “expressions of the dominant ideology are something reformulated to assert alternative, often completely resistant or contradictory messages” (65). Lull posits that counter-hegemonic tendencies also show up in various organizations and groups in which interpretation of a text, image, or message has resulted in social resistance. He points to groups such as punk rockers, metal heads, radical political parties, and feminist organizations. As previously mentioned, hegemonic power has to constantly be fought for and won, and when it is won, is never secure. To this notion, Lull writes, “hegemony fails when dominant ideology is weaker than social resistance” (65).

The next chapter discusses the methodology used for this study as well as the detailed process of researching and selecting memes on feminism.

METHODS

Introduction

I did not begin this project only looking to feminist memes for analysis. I began with the idea that I would examine an array of memes across 3-4 different topics like feminism, politics, masculinity, and gender. That quickly pivoted when I began to research feminist memes and became fascinated with the way feminism was being represented. As a cis white woman, I felt it important to consider how digital conversations of feminism were being created, shared, and perceived in memetic culture. It is also important to note that while examining the hundreds of feminist memes online, including the 15 chosen for analysis, were mostly portraying white women. While I sorted through what kind of memes were being created within the conversation of feminism, few women of color were represented, which speaks to the ways the racist beginnings of the movement still persist today.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways memetic language can uphold, challenge, or disrupt dominant ideologies and cultural norms. As little research has been conducted regarding the intersection between hegemonic power and memetic culture, the overall goal of the study is to investigate how digital memes reflect ideological beliefs and practices. By analyzing a group of carefully selected memes that attempt to document beliefs and practices related to feminism, this project aims to contribute to the overall

discourse of memetic studies. Using a critical analysis approach to observe memes allows for hegemonic tendencies to be drawn out.

Research Questions

While there were many questions to consider for this project, the ones listed here highlight the true curiosity that laid the foundation for its assembly, which are:

- In what ways do digital memes reinforce or challenge dominant narratives?
- How does memetic language assist in enacting culturally disruptive practices?
- How is feminism being discussed online through digital memes?
- To what extent do digital memes about feminism reinforce or disrupt feminist tropes?
- To what extent is the creation of memes a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic practice in itself?

Research Methods

In order to examine digital memes in search of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices, a critical analysis was conducted on 15 memes selected via Google search from my personal computer. As search engines are controlled by algorithms, it is important to note that the memes which appeared after inserting “memes on feminism” into my Google image search bar are particular to my personal profile and may not show up in a search from another Google profile. The 15 memes chosen were pulled from the first 100 that appeared during this search and were selected for analysis due to the specific points

of conversation they added to the overall feminist discourse. In this way, the 15 memes are a representation of the first 100 that appeared in my search, and the corpus that I analyzed was curated.

With regard to the many ways one might add to the discourse of feminism, whether in support or protest, the memes I selected for this study were chosen because they represent more than one perspective on feminism and feminist ideology. The 15 memes were sorted into 5 groups based on their intention, message, and stance on the subject of feminism. The groups that emerged from the sorting are: are: General Anti-Feminism, Feminist Mocking, Feminism Claps Back, Pro-Feminist & Pro-Women, and What Feminism is Not. Each meme group represents a distinct perspective in relation to feminism and serves to create a variety of memes to analyze.

These groups were also determined by looking at whether they seemed to be pro-feminist or anti-feminist. General Anti-Feminism memes displayed obvious distaste for the feminist movement through the use of phrases like “hates men”, “nobody understands”, and “I love whining.” Memes in the Feminist Mocking group show images that portray characters showing emotion, often crying or anger. The group Feminism Claps Back shows memes that display women responding sharply to questions or demands. “Clapping back” is a popular euphemism where the “clap back” is a response to an insult or criticism with sharpness and quickness. Pro-Feminist & Pro-Women display memes that uphold and support women, specifically strong women. Lastly, What Feminism is Not shows memes that directly address and correct common understandings of what feminism is and represents. It was important to create these groups as I quickly

realized after typing “memes on feminism” into my Google image search that each meme contributed to the conversation of feminism in their own way. Such dispersed perspectives deserved closer analysis.

In order to analyze distinct memes within and across these groups, I created a table that demonstrates the categories of meme type and categories of analysis. The table provides an overview of the analysis by organizing the corpus by: meme group (shown above), individual memes (A-O), discoural signals that were broken down into visual and linguistic, and analytical frame (whether each meme upheld or challenged dominant narratives). Each meme was individually analyzed using this table as an organizing tool, which includes short descriptors for each one represented.

As memes are multimodal, it is important to consider both the linguistic and visual signals of each one for analysis in relation to the research questions. When looking at each one, I first examined the image, looking for pop-culture and political references. A brief summary of the image was documented, then I looked at any text included in the meme. In some memes in the corpus, the text would appear both within and outside of the image, and I examined these texts for what it was suggesting or contending. Whatever is being suggested in the text may reveal a trope or ideology that is being upheld or challenged. It is discovering those tropes or ideologies that reinforce or challenge dominant narratives which exemplify whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic practice exists within the creation and sharing of the meme. This led me to the final category: analytical frame. Analysis in this column revealed the ways in which each meme contributed to or challenged dominant narratives and expectations. While hegemony

requires that the subjugated consent to their rule, it is nonetheless a strict power that is intentionally put upon them. To reinforce the hegemonic structure (whether intentional or otherwise) is to reproduce and contribute to the overall dominant ideology; that is to say, hegemonic practice serves to uphold the dominant narrative. Conversely, counter-hegemony seeks to challenge, disrupt or dismantle the dominant narrative, resulting in a direct or indirect challenge to that narrative. The analytical frame used in the discussion section of this text points to whether, through critical analysis, each meme upholds or challenges dominant ideologies.

Positionality

In order to analyze and make claims about feminist memes and their relationship to power, it is imperative that I acknowledge the racist history of the feminist movement and my own participation in its continuance. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) addresses how academic research is a “site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting the Other” (2). When sorting through the first 100 memes that appeared in my search history, it became clear that the majority of images included white women. The lack of intersectional diversity and representation was notable and has become another way of looking at how hegemonic practice has seeped into the core digital representation of feminism. This is important to keep in mind as the exclusionary nature of the fifteen memes chosen for analysis contributes to the overall study and conversation of hegemonic power.

In considering my positionality as a female-identifying white woman, the following pages of analysis and discussion have been carefully crafted to avoid using othering rhetoric and ways of thinking, but Smith also writes, “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (5). I must recognize what is at stake and take care to not only uphold marginalized communities throughout this text, but also to make sure that I am considering my positionality when writing about subjects that are drenched in white supremacist ideologies.

Limitations of Research

This study has three distinct limitations. The first is sample size. As there are millions of memes available online on almost every topic imaginable, it would be impossible to sort through all of them in order to gain a thorough understanding of the memetic discourse on feminism. To get a true reading of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice in feminist memes, I believe a few hundred meme examples would be necessary. The sample of 15 memes has been chosen due to the size of this project. If more memes were chosen for deeper critical analysis, it would be easy to turn it into a study the size of a manuscript.

The second limitation concerns the private Google search completed to showcase various feminist memes. As the search was done on my private computer using my personal Google account, it is important to note that the results were due to algorithms

based on my search history, queries, etc. The same first 100 memes to appear in my search may not appear in another's.

The third limitation is cultural bias. As this project aims to examine cultural assumptions and hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tendencies in feminist memes, the culture in question was narrowed to the United States. Because I am uninformed of cultural assumptions as it pertains to feminist ideologies in other countries, it is best to maintain consideration for the culture in which I experience.

Though these limitations exist, they do present ways this study could be expanded in the future. The hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice existing within memes on feminism appears to be continuous, and as our culture continues to evolve, as do these practices and discourses.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Introduction

As internet memes speak to and about cultural ideologies and dominant narratives, they can also uphold or challenge those narratives through language and use of images. In other words, a meme which upholds a dominant narrative exhibits hegemonic behavior, whereas a meme which challenges these same dominant narratives exhibits counter-hegemonic behavior. Drawing on Lull's (1995) claim that the reproduction of dominant ideologies occurs within everyday relationships, as memes are a way to communicate in those relationships, they too, contribute to the reproduction of "ideological streams" (34). This reproduction normalizes dominant ideologies, maintaining and upholding values and beliefs which are accepted by the population as the same meme is shared across internet platforms.

Any meme might exhibit hegemonic behavior through imagery and/or language, but what is equally as important are the contexts in which each meme is used. Pop-culture, politics, education, stereotypes, tropes, and trends are all contextual factors, so whatever dominant narrative a meme is upholding might depend on one or more of these factors existing within the frame of the meme. The list of factors mentioned above is not exhaustive, but for the purposes of this project, those are the ones which will be considered as we move into a critical analysis of memes on feminism.

While notions of power (the perpetuation and creation of) and hegemonic structures are widely discussed in memetic studies, what doesn't seem to be closely examined are the rhetorical ways that memetic language can uphold, challenge or disrupt cultural norms and dominant ideologies. This project aims to address this gap by rhetorically analyzing memetic language and the ways in which it contributes to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice through upholding and disrupting dominant narratives. Referring back to Milner and Shifman's assertion that memes are sites of political and social participation, the analysis conducted below assists in a deeper understanding of how these types of participation contribute to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice. Furthermore, if digital memes are sites of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice, they in turn contribute to the overall narratives we are all subject to. The participation in memes as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic practice, whether behavioral, political, social or internal, can provide extensive insight into the ways people are looking to dismantle cultural norms, while adopting a lingual framework that allows for multi-modal communication.

The Feminist Meme: Analysis

There are many stereotypes about feminism and feminists. Megan Grant lists some of these in an article written for Bustle.com (2017), noting that stereotypes describe feminists as those who: are anti-men, all hold the same political beliefs, believe that sexism and chivalry are synonymous, are always angry, have a desire to BE men themselves, have a desire to be treated like men, believe all women should stop shaving

body hair, and that socially accepted feminine attributes are something to be rejected.

These stereotypes are represented and analyzed in the memes below.

In looking at hundreds of memes about feminism and how these memes are represented, shared, and altered, it is important to note that not only do they move across multiple social networking sites (Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram), but they have also made appearances in popular women's magazines like *Elle* and *Vogue*. As memes are a reflection of ideological practice, according to Wiggins (2019) and discussed in Chapter 1 of this text, they reflect current narratives regarding the existence of feminism as a practice. Upon Googling "feminist meme", for example, I was hit with an onslaught of websites where they commonly appear: Pinterest, PowerToFly, Bored Panda, and Reader's Digest showcased articles with titles like *14 Feminist Memes to Make You Laugh*. The majority of memes on these sites appear to be pro-feminism and point to disparate ways of thinking. However, after selecting the "images" button on this Google search, the types of memes displayed become much more varied. The first 30 memes in the "images" search are a mix: some in support of women and feminism, but many that are critiquing it. In this chapter, I address different types of memes that come up in a Google search and discuss the hegemonic facilitation they are or are not a part of.

I analyzed a corpus of 15 memes which appeared via my personal Google image search. I acknowledge that these searches are algorithm controlled and the same memes may not show up in other Google profiles. As discussed in the methods chapter, I selected these 15 memes because they represent a conversation that covers various feminism tropes. I created five meme groups from my Google image search, all of which

contribute to the digital conversation on feminism from varying perspectives. The groups are: General Anti-Feminist, Feminist Mocking, Feminism Claps Back, Pro-feminist & Pro-women, and What Feminism is Not. These 5 groups were named to represent the perspective from which they contribute to the overall conversation about feminism, and all have been carefully analyzed both as groups and as individual images. The table below records patterns and observations represented in each meme group; these patterns and observations will be discussed at length in this chapter.

There are two general findings from the entire data set. The first is that the majority of memes I analyzed on the subject of feminism, whether they were for or against it, represent that it is a white, cis-gendered space. This reflects a tension at the core values of feminism in that the ideology supposes that *all* women should have equal opportunity and representation, but because the memes I analyzed represent images of predominantly white cis-presenting women, women of color, trans-women, and non-binary persons are omitted from the conversation. This imagery and lack of imagery reinforces the constructions of feminism that support primarily white cis-presenting women and uphold dominant ideologies of what feminism represents. The second finding is that each meme group is connected to their own political spheres, which speaks greatly to how ideas of feminism are closely related to political ideologies. Political affiliation often influences one's social beliefs, creating a binary way of thinking which dictates that one cannot be feminist if one finds flaws in its ideology. Additionally, as feminists are often linked to liberal ways of thinking, and anti-feminists are linked to conservative

ways of thinking, discussions on feminism may become heated arguments about what is “right” rather than what is needed or what is best for the community.

One of the biggest dominant narratives being upheld is lack of diversity in the memes themselves. While the last 9 memes show a challenge to dominant ways of thinking, they still uphold the white feminist experience just as much as the first 6. Meme groups 1 and 2 reveal hegemonic practice in their reinforcement of feminist tropes, while the last 9 challenge them. That said, only 2 of the 15 display non-white women. Meme D shows a black woman in the left corner, and meme K shows an Asian woman. But this is not enough, and still upholds the white feminist experience.

Table 1: Meme group signals and frames

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
1. General Anti-Feminism: Memes A-C	Meme A	Photos of women before and after feminism	Performing feminist and non-feminist behavior	Upholding feminist tropes with a visual comparison and lists of what a feminist and non-feminist looks like
	Meme B	Drew Carey from the show, “Whose Line is it Anyway?”	Performing feminist tropes: playing the victim	Upholding narratives of what feminists believe
	Meme C	Woman looking at the camera	Performing feminist tropes: expected behavior	Upholding narratives of what feminists believe
2. Feminist Mocking Memes:	Meme D	Four photos of women	Performing feminist tropes:	Upholding feminist/classic fem emotions

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
Memes D-F			expected feminist behavior	
	Meme E	Pikachu from Pokémon	Performing feminist tropes: expected way of thinking	Upholding narratives of feminists being offended by all words with “men” or “man” in them
	Meme F	Cartoon in tears	Performing feminist tropes: expected way of thinking	Upholding narratives of feminists being offended by all words with “men” or “men” in them
3. Feminism Claps Back: Memes G-I	Meme G	Scene from film “Mean Girls”	Performing gender roles: dress code	Challenging classic trope re: dress code Challenges female caricature of “the bitch”
	Meme H	Older professional woman (stock photo)	Performing gender roles: lady-like	Challenging expected feminine behavior
	Meme I	Pam from “The Office” (secretary)	Performing gender roles: smile	Challenging expected feminine behavior
4. Pro-feminist, Pro-Women: Memes J-L	Meme J	Stock photo of woman on the phone	Performing gender roles: outdated expectations	Challenging expected feminine behavior
	Meme K	Stock photo of woman drinking coffee	Performing gender roles: expected behavior	Challenging the normalization of disrespect towards women

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
	Meme L	Stock photo of woman wiping away tear	Performing feminist roles: women supporting women	Challenging the normalization of disrespect towards women
5. What Feminism is Not: Memes M-O	Meme M	Photo of women wearing a “feminist” sash	Performing feminist trope: women are better than men	Challenging dominant notions of what feminism is
	Meme N	Lisa from “The Simpsons”	Performing respect for women	Challenging expected behavior towards women
	Meme O	Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka	Performing feminist tropes: sexuality and body hair	Challenging feminist tropes: all feminists are hairy lesbians

Meme Group 1: General Anti-Feminism

Table 2: Meme group 1

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
1. General Anti-Feminism	Meme A	Photos of women before and after feminism	Performing feminist behavior	Upholding feminist tropes with a visual comparison of what a feminist and non-feminist looks like
	Meme B	Drew Care from the show, “Whose Line is it Anyway?”	Performing feminist tropes: playing the victim	Upholding narratives of what feminists believe
	Meme C	Woman looking at the camera	Performing feminist tropes: expected behavior	Upholding narratives of what feminists believe

Memes A-C represent a general attitude towards women and feminism and exemplify common tropes and narratives on feminism. There are 2 distinct patterns which appear in this group: 1) performative feminist tropes, and 2) the upholding of what feminists believe, act, and look like.

Meme A shows two women in side-by-side frames with lists below which are used to describe who they are and what they stand for, using “before feminism” (BF) and “after feminism” (AF) as labels. Though these images may suggest visual differences between the two women shown, the titles above and lists below further represent cultural and collective meanings. Additionally, it has created rules by which a feminist or non-feminist might look and act like. As outlined in chapter one, hegemony requires that

dominant beliefs are to be made natural ways of thinking; meme A has found a way to create a “natural” dichotomy which posits that all women fall into one of the columns presented. It is these implied connotations which have become so normalized among society that they are believed to be cultural assumptions, which are constantly upheld through memes such as this. These assumptions imply that being angry and the desire not to raise a family is abnormal, whereas a woman living a normal life is happy and willing to raise a family. This suggests that the life of a feminist is abnormal, and of course, the implied life of feminists is often drawn from the same tropes listed in the meme.



Figure 1: Meme A

Meme B uses imagery from the show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (WLA) featuring Drew Carey as the host. WLA began in Britain as a 30-minute improv show from 1988-

1999 in which the performers act out scenes given to them by the host and audience in real time. The American version maintains the original British structure and ran from 1998-2007 with host Carey and was revived again in 2013 hosted by Aisha Tyler. At the beginning of each show, Carey would recite the phrase, “Welcome to Whose Line is it Anyway, where everything’s made up and the points don’t matter.” This phrase has been altered for the purpose of the meme, and reads, “Welcome to feminism where everything is sexist, and nobody understands but them.” The creator of this meme uses/implies the same cadence as Carey’s original catchphrase, suggesting that while those who are not familiar with the show will understand the message, those who know the show will likely hear the phrase being said the way Carey reads his line in the show.

This particular meme addresses the stereotype that feminists use sexism to explain everything. The second point this meme touches upon is the concept that “nobody understands but them.” By including that statement in the meme, it would seem that the creator is attempting to shed a negative light under the concept that no one but women would understand the sexism and discrimination they endure. Referring back to Milner’s examination of pop culture within memes and political participation, meme B has used pop culture in order to make a blanket political statement about feminism and is actively participating in the politics it insinuates. What is more, the circulation of such a meme allows the opinion it suggests (that women make everything about sexism) to develop into a cultural assumption, which aligns with hegemonic behavior.



Figure 2: Meme B

Meme C reads well immediately following Meme B because its point leads to another trope which often accompanies the one previously mentioned, which is: feminists do not want to do any work regarding their oppression. Meme C also notes that feminism is about whining and complaining, supporting the very common stereotype that women are complainers, naggers, and whiners. The meme uses a photo of a woman with an overlay of text reading: "I need feminism because I love whining about everything and doing nothing about it." The text suggests that not only do women love to whine about everything while doing nothing about what they are whining about, but more importantly, it posits that those things are what feminism is about.



Figure 3: Meme C

Shifman's work (2014) plays an important role in understanding memes as sites of a hegemonic presence. If memes are considered transmissions of cultural units, their messages provide a window into what conversations, beliefs, and narratives are being circulated, shared, and accepted. A meme being shared across social media networking sites suggests that the sharer agrees with the meme's message, and is contributing to the overall conversation it is encompassed in. This memetic participation, according to Milner (2013), empowers the political views it addresses, and shapes future conversations which enforce the narratives it supposes. All three memes exhibit hegemonic behavior by not only upholding dominant ideologies about feminism, but many people, women included, often consent to these tropes by believing them as normal. It is important to remember that hegemony requires consent from the subjugated party, and that consent is often also displayed as normalization. The hegemonic forces at play here maintain power through the reinforcement of such ideologies and any challenge to them is considered

abnormal. As mentioned previously, and shown in the table above, this group of memes demonstrates the expected physical and psychological attributes of a feminist, participating in a hegemonic system of power.

Meme Group 2: Feminist Mocking

Table 3: Meme group 2

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
2. Feminist Mocking	Meme D	Four photos of women	Performing feminist tropes: expected feminist behavior	Upholding feminist/classic fem emotions
	Meme E	Pikachu from Pokémon	Performing feminist tropes: expected way of thinking	Upholding narratives of feminists being offended by all words with “men” or “man” in them
	Meme F	Cartoon in tears	Performing feminist tropes: expected way of thinking	Upholding narratives of feminists being offended by all words with “men or “man” in them

Memes D-F represent ways in which feminists are expected to be and react. All 3 memes showcase images which suggest a mocking of feminism and its perceived abhorrence to all words with “men” or “man” in them. One of the patterns exemplified in this meme group is the performative feminist tropes that appear in each one. While meme group 1 represents feminist tropes by way of appearance and the general notion of feminism,

meme group 2 demonstrates detailed assumptions made about how feminists and women are emotional in what they believe.

Meme D shows a grid of 4 images that represent various aspects of a feminist which include intellect, humor, body, and personality. The caption in this meme states, “The best meme about feminists (made by a girl).” All 4 images used show women making faces with 1 showing the body of a woman while covering her face with the text “your body.” It is presumed to be mocking the attributes of feminist women due to the photos chosen for each category. Meme E and F demonstrate similar mocking styles through the use of images that represent shock and sadness upon seeing words with “men” or “man” in them. For meme E that word is “mental” while for meme F it is “Manhattan.” Pikachu from Pokémon is shown in meme E and has a look of shock, and meme F shows a cartoon character in tears, both are emitting distaste for each word.



Figure 4: Meme D

feminists after realizing
it's called mental and not
womental



Figure 5: Meme E

**Feminists when
they find out they
live in Manhattan
and not Womanhattan**



Figure 6: Meme F

Both meme groups 1 and 2 exemplify ways in which the use of language and image perpetuate dominant narratives on what many people perceive feminism to entail.

The negative tropes that have been attached to the feminist ideology have become so normalized that creating a meme about them is as common as the memes that stand up for feminism. Returning to the concepts of hegemony and Symbolic Order, it is the constant evolution of language that evokes a need for the dominant group to also evolve their tactics for maintaining power. All 6 memes shown in meme groups 1 and 2 take both visual and linguistic routes to maintain feminist tropes, to which, as in the case with meme D, even women consent. The mocking of feminism upholds patriarchal and misogynistic stances as it is perceived that feminism desires 2 things: to degrade and emasculate men, and to put men on a lower pedestal than women. As men may believe these things, their responses to what feminism stands for is skewed and is believed to be an attack on their way of life. As these memes are created and shared across the internet, the notions that all feminists look and act like what is represented here become cultural truths.

Meme Group 3: Feminism Claps Back

Table 4: Meme group 3

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
3. Feminism Claps Back	Meme G	Scene from “Mean Girls”	Performing gender roles: dress code	Challenging classic trope re: dress code Challenges female caricature of “the bitch”
	Meme H	Older professional woman (stock photo)	Performing gender roles: lady-like	Challenging expected feminine behavior
	Meme I	Pam from “The Office” (secretary)	Performing gender roles: smile	Challenging expected feminine behavior

Memes G-I demonstrate the first set of memes we will look at which appear to challenge the dominant narratives that feminists are feminists to whine about their lives, hate men, and are naturally emotional people. All 3 memes feature a woman replying to common statements or questions directed towards women with a bold attitude.

Meme G, showing a photo of the character Regina George from the 2004 movie Mean Girls, displays the response to “girls shouldn’t wear” with an interrupted “shut up.” Meme H shows a professorial woman pointing to a globe with a slight smile on her face with the text reading, “show me where I asked” in response to the notion that something is not lady-like. Meme I shows Pam the receptionist from the show The Office. She is holding up a piece of paper to the camera revealing a response to the question, “hey beautiful, why don’t you smile?”

Anyone: girls shouldn't wear –

Me:

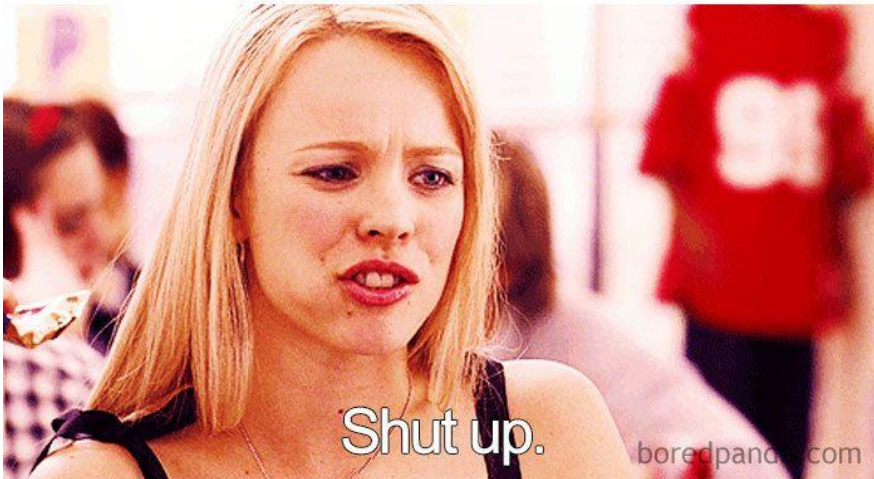


Figure 7: Meme G

When someone says what I'm doing
isn't "lady-like"



Figure 8: Meme H

“Hey beautiful, why don’t you smile?”

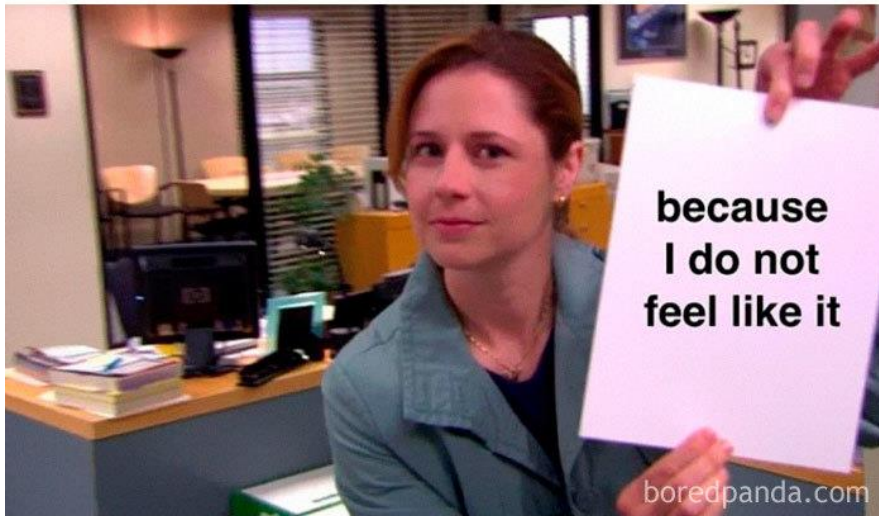


Figure 9: Meme I

This group of memes indicate challenges to performative gender roles expected of women such as dress code, acting lady-like, and smiling at all times. What is especially significant here is while the memes in this group show the ways that women are expected to act, the message suggested in both the language and images is that those expectations will not be met, or at the very least, challenged. The counter-hegemonic behavior displayed is a direct critique and dismantling of the hegemonic ideologies put forth through the cultural assumptions that women should dress a certain way, act a certain way, and smile when asked. Referring back to Hall’s (2013) link to knowledge and power, we can ascertain that these memes are taking cultural assumptions and challenging their weight as cultural.

Meme Group 4: Pro-Feminist, Pro-Women

Table 5: Meme group 4

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
4. Pro-feminist, Pro-women	Meme J	Stock photo of woman on phone	Performing gender roles: outdated expectations	Challenging expected feminine behavior
	Meme K	Stock photo of woman drinking coffee	Performing gender roles: expected behavior	Challenging the normalization of disrespect towards women
	Meme L	Stock photo of woman wiping away tear	Performing feminist roles: women supporting women	Challenging the normalization of disrespect towards women

Memes J-L take a different approach to counter-hegemonic behavior. The 3 memes shown in group 3 above use responses to cultural expectations of women to challenge the dominant narrative, but here in group 4 we see no mention of specific expectations, and the text re-centers women in the conversation. All 3 memes seem to be of a stock photo of a woman accompanied by text that suggests female empowerment.

Meme J shows a woman on a cell phone with a concerned look on her face and is asking for the outdated gender roles to be returned to the past, in this case, the 1950's. Meme K displays a woman drinking coffee, seemingly in peace, with the text pointing towards the peace and respect women deserve. The final meme in this group, meme L, portrays a woman wiping a tear from her eye as the text reads, "when you think about all

the strong and incredible women in the world.” By centering women, meme group 4 exemplifies the support from women to women, and eliminates any expectations put upon them by men, other women, or society. The pattern seen in memes J-L points to the notion that what is expected of women, as far as cultural assumptions go, will not be tolerated, but furthermore, these memes demonstrate the desire for strong, respected women.



Figure 10: Meme J



Figure 11: Meme K



Figure 12: Meme L

Meme Group 5: What Feminism is Not

Meme Group	Individual Memes	Visual Signals	Linguistic Signals	Analytical Frame: Upholding/Challenging
5. What Feminism is Not	Meme M	Photo of women wearing a “feminist” sash	Performing feminist trope: women are better than men	Challenging dominant notions of what feminism is
	Meme N	Lisa from “The Simpsons”	Performing respect for women	Challenging expected behavior towards women
	Meme O	Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka	Performing feminist tropes: sexuality and body hair	Challenging feminist trope: all feminists are hairy lesbians

Just as the memes in group 4 re-centers women in the feminist discourse through support, the 3 memes shown below in group 5 recenter women by pointing out not what feminism is, but what it is not. Memes M-O display images and texts that challenge the notion of what feminism is, as well as, in the case of meme O, asking what is wrong with the characteristics of feminists.

Meme M shows a woman sitting on the ground wearing a sash that says “feminist” with text stating that feminism is not about men. Meme N portrays Lisa from The Simpsons with a big projection screen displaying the text, “only respecting women you’re attracted to isn’t respecting women.” The final meme is from a scene in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory with Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka asking what is wrong with hair and lesbians in response to the contention that all feminists are hairy lesbians. This

particular scene from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory has been used in many memes across various topics, though this was not the only one of its kind regarding feminism.



Figure 13: Meme M



Figure 14: Meme N



Figure 15: Meme O

The biggest pattern seen here is the challenge of the dominant narrative surrounding what feminism looks like and what it doesn't look like. These counter-hegemonic memes disrupt the expectations of feminism and make direct statements or questions that push against common misconceptions or assumptions. Looking at meme M, the misconception it is challenging is that feminism is about men and speaks to the narrative that women are not centered in their own quest for equality. Meme N challenges the assumption that women a person is attracted to is deserved of respect; the meme blatantly calls out those who only respect women they deem attractive and still maintain they are respectful towards all women. The third meme here, meme O, feels like it could have gone another direction and pointed out that all feminists are not lesbians and hairy, but instead challenges the ideology of fear in relation to lesbians and hair.

Discussion

It is also important to consider what is not being said in all of these memes. What is unsaid is an implied understanding of the language being used. For example, in meme A, we see the list in each column representing Before Feminism (BF) and After Feminism (AF). One of the assumptions listed under BF is “lives a normal life,” with no such mention of living an abnormal life on the AF side, but the implication is still there. In meme I, we see Pam from *The Office* holding up that piece of paper in response to being asked to smile. What is not being said here is the ubiquity with which this question is presented to women on a daily basis. The biggest implication here is that if this question was not asked of women as often as it is, it would not have been made a meme. Of course, we could make that argument for all or most of the memes shown.

As the majority of feminist memes found on Google show and as analyzed in this project, women of color are wildly underrepresented, as are non-binary and queer identifying persons. While non-binary folks do not owe the world androgyny, almost all memes shown refer only to women, and people who “look” like women, and do not mention any other gender identity or race. Referring back to the literature on feminism in the first chapter, the movement’s history is riddled with racist and ommissive behavior, and in examining the memes above, it is clear that behavior still persists. The lack of inclusion is a great example of hegemonic practice being upheld. Who is portrayed and who is omitted in a feminist meme speaks volumes as to who is really considered and included in the movement. While meme group 4 clearly represents ways women are

being supported, they still do not mention non-binary folks, trans women, or queer women.

Additionally, Shifman's (2014) work in memetics looks to meme genres as ways to understand the communicative properties they hold. If we consider her notes on the general study of memes, and that they both explain nothing and everything at the same time, the memes shown throughout this text are open for interpretation. As culture evolves, language, assumptions, and tactics for maintaining power also evolve, creating a system of communication that is always adjusting for cultural shifts. In the case of meme groups 1 and 2, the communicative function is to reinforce and uphold various narratives and assumptions of feminism. These memes uphold ideas of feminist (specifically female feminists) attitudes, looks, and emotions, and because they are shared across social networking platforms and available via simple Google search, these narratives are reinforced over and over again. Some of them may be reinforced by other women as represented in meme D. The hegemonic forces at work here are maintaining a sense of normalcy regarding these feminist attributes, and, as Lull (1995) posits, they become natural normal ways of thinking. When an ideology is believed to be a natural way of thinking they become cultural truths, so if anything that contests, challenges, or disrupts that, the dominant narrative develops ways to outcast them.

Referring back to Rose (2005) and Hall's (1980) work in semiotics, the relationship between cultural meaning and signs presents itself to a diverse range of interpretation. This diverse range of interpretation, known as polysemy, can lead different readers of the meme to distinctive cultural meanings. As mentioned in chapter 1,

polysemy is a concept which posits that images are open to varied interpretations, however, these interpretations may narrow as the existence of text creates context. In the case of memes B, E, G, I, N, and O, the images presented are all from popular TV shows and movies, and the perspective of one's understanding of the meme may differ depending on whether the reader has seen or heard of those shows and movies. Meme G, for example, shows Regina from Mean Girls with the tag "shut up." Shared cultural meaning might posit that one does not need to have seen the movie to understand this meme and why the character says, "shut up." However, the meaning behind this meme will likely deepen if the movie, and, more specifically, this particular scene, is in one's repertoire.

Furthermore, the polysemic nature of memetic language can inform our understanding of what shared cultural meaning is. Though many of the shows and movies represented in the memes above are very popular, it is doubtful that every person has seen them. This does not mean that the point of the meme will be misunderstood, but that the shared cultural meaning has shifted. For example, 1 shared meaning from meme G might be that women are told what and what not to wear; the origin of the image itself is not necessary to understand that. Another shared meaning might be "I see Regina George in a meme about people telling girls what they shouldn't wear." Both understandings are valid, but the shared cultural meaning shifts when various layers of the text and image are perceived differently.

Meme groups 1 and 2 represent the upholding of hegemony through the reiteration and reinforcement of feminist tropes. Both groups directly speak to the general

perceived attitude and behaviors of feminists through blanket statements (such as “I love whining”) and mocking their looks and emotions. Such hegemonic behavior is widespread through the creation and sharing of these memes and contributes to the online discussion of feminism. As previously stated in chapter 1, hegemony requires that the ideas and beliefs of the dominant ideology must constantly be fought for and won, and when the position of men is perceived to be threatened by feminism, the tactic used to reinforce hegemony is to conflate common tropes and make them normalized them, so they pass as cultural truths. All of the linguistic signals revealed themselves as performative and expected behaviors put upon women, and while all memes speak to performative behavior, the representation as such was not always by way of reinforcement.

Meme groups 3-5 are exemplary of counter-hegemonic representation through the blatant disruption of common assumptions made about the feminist community. If we look at meme group 3 once again, all 3 exhibit women not only boldly responding to expectations put upon them by society, assumedly mostly men, but actively disrupting them. In meme group 4, while the general notion of expectations is not directly mentioned, the text does portray a sense of community and support among women and feminists by centering their strength and, as it comes up in meme K, unique character. The counter-hegemonic practice that shows up in meme group 5 candidly challenges common assumptions made about feminism itself and those who identify as feminist.

CONCLUSION

Digital memes can be studied in a multitude of ways. The intention of this project was to analyze the extent to which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices show up as a challenge or disruption in digital memes on feminism. The significance of this analysis lies in how memes are sources of political, social, and cultural participation and contribute to online discourses on feminism. If memes are a form of multimodal communication, and those memes are shared across social media platforms as they reflect a person's opinion or belief, they are directly contributing to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practice. These practices, whether reinforcing or disruptive of dominant narratives, reveal various ideologies (like the feminist tropes mentioned in the previous section) to be taken as cultural truths.

This analysis reveals that not only do digital memes on feminism exhibit hegemonic and counter-hegemonic behavior but display clear patterns of how they uphold or challenge dominant ideologies. These patterns include performing feminist tropes, such as expected feminist behavior and gender roles. Meme groups 1 and 2 mock these behaviors and gender roles by conflating perceived feminist ideologies (i.e. feminists hate all men) and dramatizing them with pop-culture references. Meme groups 3-5 take a similar approach in using pop-culture, but attempt to set the record straight by directly correcting common perceptions about feminism (i.e. "feminism is not about men" in meme M).

Feminist tropes are shown to be one of the leading tools for upholding and reinforcing hegemonic systems in feminist memes. We see this played out in the first two meme groups analyzed above. The first meme group, for example, utilizes classic tropes (like hating men in meme A, alluding to the idea that everything is sexist in meme B, and whining in meme C) put upon women and feminists to uphold the dominant ideologies and are reinforced here which keeps these kinds of tropes in the discussion of feminism.

As mentioned previously, the two bigger findings point to who feminism is “for” and binary ways of thinking. As a great deal of the memes analyzed feature white cis-presenting women, we can ascertain that though counter-hegemonic memes on feminism do exist, they still reinforce dominant ideologies. For instance, meme G enacts counter-hegemonic practice by literally interrupting the common phrase “girls shouldn’t wear” with “shut up,” while using hegemonic practice by displaying a white cis-presenting woman, upholding dominant ideologies regarding *who* feminism is for.

Furthermore, binary ways of thinking about feminism are reinforced through the memes analyzed. All of the memes analyzed appear to take a stand, representing a strictly for or against feminism binary. The political and social discourses that play out in the feminist memes shown above rely heavily on ideologies like “women are like this” and “this is feminism,” pushing the conversation in such a way that a person cannot be in the middle; that is to say that the ideology imposed by this binary thought process is that a person cannot be in support of feminism while pointing out its flaws. In meme groups 3-5, we see a challenge towards common tropes of women and feminism, but none of them mention the lack of racial and gender diversity, and this sort of focus supports,

perpetuates, and upholds the dominant ideology that a person can only be for or against feminist ideals.

This project, though small in scope as far as memes on feminism goes, presents further study into how hegemony and counter-hegemony affect conversations about feminist ideologies and how we might center women and people of color, trans-women, and non-binary persons in those conversations. In addition, a study in which the global conversation on feminism through memes would enhance our understanding of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces on a much bigger scale. Looking only at memes represented in the United States only centers those in the United States, and it is paramount that all feminists around the world be represented, centered, and celebrated if we are to really make a difference. Upholding dominant systems while claiming to assist in disruptive practices does very little to further diversity, inclusion, and feminism itself.

I set out to explore hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices in memes on feminism, and while I did discover many places that those exist, perhaps the most important finding concerns how feminism is being represented in memes in general (both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic). What is most surprising is the persistent exclusion of images that present Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the total corpus.. Maybe I expected more from current conversations (in meme form) on feminism; maybe I expected that feminism had progressed to a point where the center of feminist conversations were not still cis white women. Further research on the discourse of feminism in memes might explore this lack of representation on a deeper level, and look at a bigger sample size of memes to see whether or not spaces of full inclusion exist

in memes on feminism, and how that reflects the direction of feminist ideologies. I use a quote from Terry Eagleton as an epigraph to this project: “if the oppressed must be intelligent enough to follow the rulers’ instructions, they are therefore conscious enough to challenge them” (46). In order for feminism to be progressive and “conscious enough to challenge” “the rulers’ instructions” a diversified revolution in relation to *how* feminism is represented in various discourses, including memes, is necessary. How can we use memes to further our resistance to hegemony and dominant power structures, and can memes be part of what it means to obtain true equality (as discourse on feminism claims)? If memes can uphold dominant ideologies of feminism, as this project has shown, , can’t they also disrupt and dismantle these same ideologies to broaden conversations and ideally uphold marginalized communities and ways of being instead? Otherwise, what is the point of feminism?

REFERENCES

- Anila, S. (2017). *Polyvocality and Representation: What We Need Now – Museum Education Roundtable*. <https://www.museumedu.org/polyvocality-representation-need-now/>
- Barthes, R. (1973). *Mythologies*. Granada.
- Cannizzaro, S. (2016). Internet memes as internet signs: A semiotic view of digital culture. *Sign Systems Studies*, 44, 562. <https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2016.44.4.05>
- Dawkins, R. (2016). *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Fourth Edition, New to this Edition:, Fourth Edition, New to this Edition:). Oxford University Press.
- Dines, G., & Humez, J. M. (Eds.). (2011). *Gender, race, and class in media: a critical reader* (3rd ed). SAGE Publications.
- Eagleton, T. (1991). *Ideology: An Introduction by Eagleton, Terry*. <https://www.amazon.com/Ideology-Introduction-Terry-Eagleton/dp/0860913198>
- Grant, M. (2017, July 7). *11 Feminist Stereotypes That Need To Go*. Bustle. <https://www.bustle.com/p/11-feminist-stereotypes-that-need-to-go-68767>
- Hall, S. (1977). *Stuart Hall (1977), "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'"*,. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/mono/10.4324/9781315264547-26/stuart-hall-1977-culture-media-ideological-effect-curran-gurevitch-wollacott-eds-mass-communication-society-london-edward-arnold-pp-315-48-alan-scott-kate-nash>
- Hall, S. (1980). *Cultural studies: two paradigms - Stuart Hall, 1980*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016344378000200106>

- Hall, S. (1996). *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Routledge & CRC Press. <https://www.routledge.com/Stuart-Hall-Critical-Dialogues-in-Cultural-Studies/Chen-Morley/p/book/9780415088046>
- Hall, S. (2013). *Representation* | SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/representation/book234567>
- Lord, A. (1981). An Open Letter to Mary Daly. Moraga and Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back*, 90-97.
- Love, A. C. (2019). *Project MUSE - Beyond the Meme*.
https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/23/edited_volume/chapter/2390375
- Lull, J. (1995). *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*. Polity Press.
- Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. *International Journal of Communication*, 7(0), 34.
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1949>
- Rampton, M. (2015, October 25). *Four Waves of Feminism*. Pacific University.
<https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>
- Rose, G. (2005). *Research Methods for English Studies*. Edinburgh University Press Books.
<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-research-methods-for-english-studies.html>
- Rossolatos, G. (2015). The Ice-Bucket Challenge: The Legitimacy of the Memetic Mode of Cultural Reproduction Is the Message. *Signs and Society*, 3(1), 132–152.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/679520>
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9429.001.0001>

Staples, B. (2018). *Opinion / How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women - The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/suffrage-movement-racism-black-women.html>

Stokes. (2023, October 28). *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/how-to-do-media-and-cultural-studies/book258085>

Uhlir, Stella. (2013). *Who needs memetics? Possible developments of the meme concept and beyond - Uhlir - 2012 - ANTHROPOLOGIE*. <http://puvodni.mzm.cz/Anthropologie/article.php?ID=1421>

Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. Routledge & CRC Press. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Discursive-Power-of-Memes-in-Digital-Culture-Ideology-Semiotics-and/Wiggins/p/book/9780367661335>

Williamson, J. (1978). *Decoding advertisements: ideology and meaning in advertising*. Marion Boyers. <https://research.uca.ac.uk/1493/>