

A Virtual Visual Artefact of Internet Meme: Case Study: 2018 - 2020

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Currently, the internet has become the apparatus of information, business and entertainment source and communication. Consequentially, the internet become one virtual world, it possessed almost the same mechanism as the real world, and subsequently rising new culture. Among them is internet meme. Recent study conducted on internet meme conclude that the internet meme is another way of communication and the sample of the study is fairly obsolete. This study is an endeavor of new approach on internet meme, seeing it as a visual culture and phenomenon rather than mere communication phenomenon. This research also seeks to provide a novelty of understanding about internet memes. Three samples of internet meme were taken, ranging from 2018 to 2020. Samples is analyzed using visual methodology by looking at 3 sites of the sample image: production, image, and audience. Each of the sites contain 3 modalities: technology, compositionality, and social which will be elaborated through this study. The result of the study is that the internet meme can be a visual representation of important events from the history presented in more amusing way by people, although the communication aspect is still attached. The internet meme is also an attempt to respond an important historical event of their time in an amusing way.

Keywords

meme, internet, visual artefact, digital

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INTRODUCTION

Since the rise of mass culture, namely television shows, movies, product advertisement we live in a visual surrounded world. Visual culture sparked by the spirit of global capitalism (citation needed) which influenced people to consume not by looking at the function but by the meaning behind a commodity. Such behavior keeps developing as time pass by supported by the advancement of technology. Technology advancement influencing how people communicate, moreover by the invention of the internet. Internet today have become a virtual world for most people in the world, as shopping, gathering information, taking course, or simply look for entertainment, all of those activities provided by the internet. With the existence of new virtual world, we have a collective consciousness of the novelty of that world, like entering into a totally different world. From that collective consciousness, people formed a sub-culture, thus internet culture was formed. There has been a lot of internet culture, namely food snapper on Instagram, "like" button on Facebook and "retweet" on Twitter. Besides all of those phenomena, the internet also has a visual phenomenon since the inception of internet meme. Internet memes have been around since 2001 and become a new sub-culture in cyberspace. The emergence of internet meme phenomenon is catalyzed by websites such as YouTube, Brazzers, 4chan, Reddit and many others. The term meme is pioneered by Richard Dawkins in "The Selfish Gene" which he argued that human gene is replicating for the sake of themselves have [1]. This idea is developed by Richard Brodie who took idea from Dawkins and argued that a piece of information act the same as human gene, it's replicating itself and resides in the brain [2]. Brodie has the idea on meme as an information, but not as visual phenomenon although the vehicles of this information is also in the form of visual.

To this date, not many studies conducted on internet meme, however there is one study on internet meme by Limor Shiffman in her book "Memes In Digital Culture". Shiffman compile the definitions of internet memes. One of the initial definitions is in accordance to Brodie's "The Virus of The Mind" and stated that memes is a piece of information which replicating itself and drives human behavior. Furthermore, Shifman is also stated that "*behavior-driven memetics sees memes as behaviors and artifacts rather than ideas. In the behaviorist model, the meme vehicle and the meme itself are inseparable: the meme has no existence outside the events, practices, and texts in which it appears; that is, it is always experienced as encoded information. Moreover, this approach claims that if memes were indeed only abstract units of information*" [3].

Although it is implied that the vehicle which can also means images and the idea is inseparable in this study, but on the further statement Shiffman stated that internet memes is more to way of communication and a form of expression which formed in the internet culture [3]. On the the last chapter on "Memes In Digital Culture" there are several suggestion on further study on Internet memes and aim to the role of internet memes in contemporary formulations of political participation and cultural globalization. Although Shifman also gave discussion on political internet memes and meme genre but the statement still tends to be on the communication aspect, moreover due to the fast trend shifting on internet memes examples of memes from 2013 at the latest might to lose its relevance as people to this time uses different kind of internet memes. To fill in the gap this study aims to give more updated understanding on internet memes and use different approach.

Hence, in this study we will look at internet memes as a visual phenomenon rather than communication units, although we're not leaving the communication aspect as that is also the content of the image

per se. Using visual methodology suggested by Gillian Rose, we look into internet memes as visual phenomenon which have specific context. Our expectation is that there will be a further multidisciplinary approach on this study as visual culture will opens up new multidisciplinary discussion as we all live today surrounded by visuals [4]. By using samples of one of the most prominent memes from 2018 to 2020 we are hoping to draw new conclusion and to update the understanding of internet memes. The result of the paper may be compared to previous other study on different topic as it shares similar result.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the obtained data which tend to be more visual than textual the suitable analysis methodology is through the visual methodology as suggested by Gillian Rose [5]. This is also mean that we look at internet memes as mere images rather than a piece of information or way of communication. Rose suggest that researcher must focus more on the image as most social scientist tend to look at the sociological context of the image, to look at the visual rigorously means we can find different effects, as they have their own effect if we look to the image independently before we look at the sociological context. Secondly, we should look more about the social conditions, the data about the social can articulate the meaning of the image. Social condition is the production point of visual artefacts "*Cultural practices like visual representations both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings.*" [5]. Lastly, researcher should have their own way of interpretation.

As human senses is natural based it captured a meaning of us as human being in particular social, political, ecological and economic conditions on our own consciousness. It's one of the reason that Rose gave a warning that the researcher should have contextual knowledge on particular image [5]and that brings us to the 3 sites suggested by Rose. There are three sites which the meaning of visual artefacts are being perceived: (1) the site of the production, (2) the site of the image/certain visual artefact, (3) site where the audiences look at the image. Rose also suggest that there are also three different aspect of the sites which in Rose's terminology called modalities which we need to look at in order to analyze the 3 sites, namely (1) Technological (2) Compositional (3) Social. These 3 aspects are contained in each of every site. The technological aspect is the apparatus that is used to create certain image, from oil painting to digital imaging. The compositional aspect is the formal aspect that contained in the image, such as color, content, contrast, texture etc. lastly the social aspect, which means the relation to the political and economic which contained in the image. This social aspect also suggests that in every visual artefact, there are some clue that it served which describes social context of each times. To this extend, it would make adequate satisfaction if broader description regarding Rose's 3 sites (which previously mentioned) explained. In this explanation Rose breakdown technological, compositional and social on each site.

Production Sites

The condition of the production of particular image hasits own effect. One image created in one way or another. Here's the direct quote from Rose" *the technologies used in the making of an image determine its form, meaning and effect. Clearly, visual technologies do matter to how an image looks and therefore to what it might do and what might be done to it*"[5]. Rose asserted that technological aspect of the production would affect the visual presentation. Visually, an image created by pencil drawing and an oil painting or even photograph would give different effect if we disregard its content, therefore the technological aspect is really important to look at. The second modality is compositionality, which at most certainty contained in an image. Rose argue that this compositionality modalities is strongly related to genre. Genre is a way of classifying images into certain groups[5]. Certain image most likely to share certain feature or other similarities, in this case we can look at some similar features on the image, for example objects, locations, for the case of movies or film narrative aspects. And the third modality is the social aspect which most writer argued that this is the most important aspect. The political, economic and ecology situation are most likely affected how the image is produced. In one case we might look at the political condition where (for instance) the government policy banned the production of the camera film in certain city or country due to its toxic damage to the environment.

The sites of the images

Certain image has particular meaning contained by the image itself, in this case one meaning constructed by 3 of the modalities on the image. If one look at certain image it's almost certainly they look at the formal aspect first. This formal means the certain technique, composition grid, texture used to produce the image, and that concludes the technological modalities on the image. The social modalities to look at the image is how one image affected people, how certain people in certain group change their behavior by the image, we must assert that in our opinion this wouldn't happen instantaneously rather than gradually. The example that Rose provided regarding the social modalities also convince

us so. Lastly the compositional modalities on this site is how people look at the image. Going back to previous description on how compositionality strongly related to genre or how people classifying things this inurement also applies on the sites of the images. How people look at the image and classify the meaning of it. For instance, one might look at nude images and classify them as pornography or inappropriate content.

Audience Sites

In this last site, we positioned ourselves as audience and have our own interpretation. Rose uses the term audiencing to “refer to the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances”[5]. Compositionality in this case is not the formal aspect in which audience look at the “naked” image, sees everything on the image and give their own interpretation (although this is not fallacious either), rather Rose suggest that we must look at the organization of the image which doesn’t have any effect on the audience. In our own opinion we must position ourselves as a neutral being, meaning that we shouldn’t agree or disagree at certain image that we look at, which in this case is quite challenging. The compositionality modality on this site is more related to the ideology of certain audience. The technological modality in this case is the aspect which drives the reaction of the audience. How the image is presented also drives the reaction from the audience. For instance, the reaction we get when we see computer generated graphics for the first time, that reaction is our reaction to the technology modality. The social modality according to Rose, is the most important modality in this site. The way we see how certain image is being presented in the society is the scope of this modality.

Clearly if we see this as a whole presentation it’s strongly related to the social convention. For example, we don’t see television soap opera the same way as we see a renaissance painting, we might see the television soap opera in more exuberant state of mind and we see a renaissance painting in contemplation or even transcendence. The way we see image is affected by how the image is presented, we don’t see abstract paintings on television, or on Facebook, generally speaking. Therefore, there is social convention which ties how image is being presented. Lastly, the way people see image is affected by their social class or social identity. Clearly how the upper-middle class see the image, how they reacted to it would be different than the lower class, Rose also provided one example on survey conducted by sociologist Pierre Bordieu and Alain Darbel on gallery visitors and later found out that middle class visitors have different reaction and their own practice in contemplating to certain painting. As Bordieu and Darbel stated “*museum visiting increases very strongly with increasing level of education, and is almost exclusively the domain of the cultivated classes*”[5].

Sampling

The study will be conducted through several sample to be analyzed by the visual methodology as proposed by Gillian Rose. The sample obtained by internet search from 2018 to 2020. Although the search for the data is conducted in 2020. One of the most up-to-date and well-known source for internet meme is Twitter, therefore the sample collected through this source. There were many examples of internet meme on Twitter, all of the obtained examples are selected conscientiously and broken down into three most prominent internet meme: The Ghana Dancing Pallbearers, Black Hole, and Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un meeting. The original image source for the specified internet meme will be obtained through the original sites which published the original image. The original image source for each of the internet meme will be compared to the internet meme sample and observed how the image is produced and modified from its original content. These three samples will be described and subsequently analyzed.

SAMPLE DATA

Ghana Dancing Pallbearers



Figure 1. Ghana Dancing Pallbearers
Source: <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-52327936>
(28 May 2020)

Ghana's dancing pallbearers became an internet phenomenon, It's their second-round prominence since 2017. They first appear in the BBC documentary in 2017, then someone took the liberty to edit the video by adding some modern electronic music [6]. According to BBC Documentary, in Ghana funeral is one of the most important event, the deceased family can request the choreography for the funeral, it can be an upbeat choreograph, contemplative or solemn dance, based on the family's request for the funeral the pallbearers will do the dance. Apparently, this type of occupation opens up a new type of job, since it's prominence, it's opens up 100 new job. Since it's a common tradition in Ghana hold a dancing ritual to present the deceased to God [7]. The Ghana dancing pallbearers also gave new paradigm of death, instead of mourning in grief they are celebrating life shifting a whole new meaning of funeral to give meaning more to life rather than death [8]. Since the Covid-19 breakout to this date, most of the country around the world got infected with this new type of respiratory virus, the dancing pallbearers got their new moto "Stay at home or dance with us"[6]. Such statement represented the social campaign which at their endeavor to convince people to stay at home avoiding the risk getting infected or infect people.

During the Covid-19, the Ghana dancing pallbearers got their nickname which is shortened to "Dancing Pallbearers" due to the use as internet memes. As previously mentioned, this is their second-round prominence. This internet meme became a darker joke in the internet society. This is also the symbol of depressing situation the people have to endure, but rather than mourning in grief people seems to choose to celebrate the predicament in more amusing way [9].

Black Hole Memes

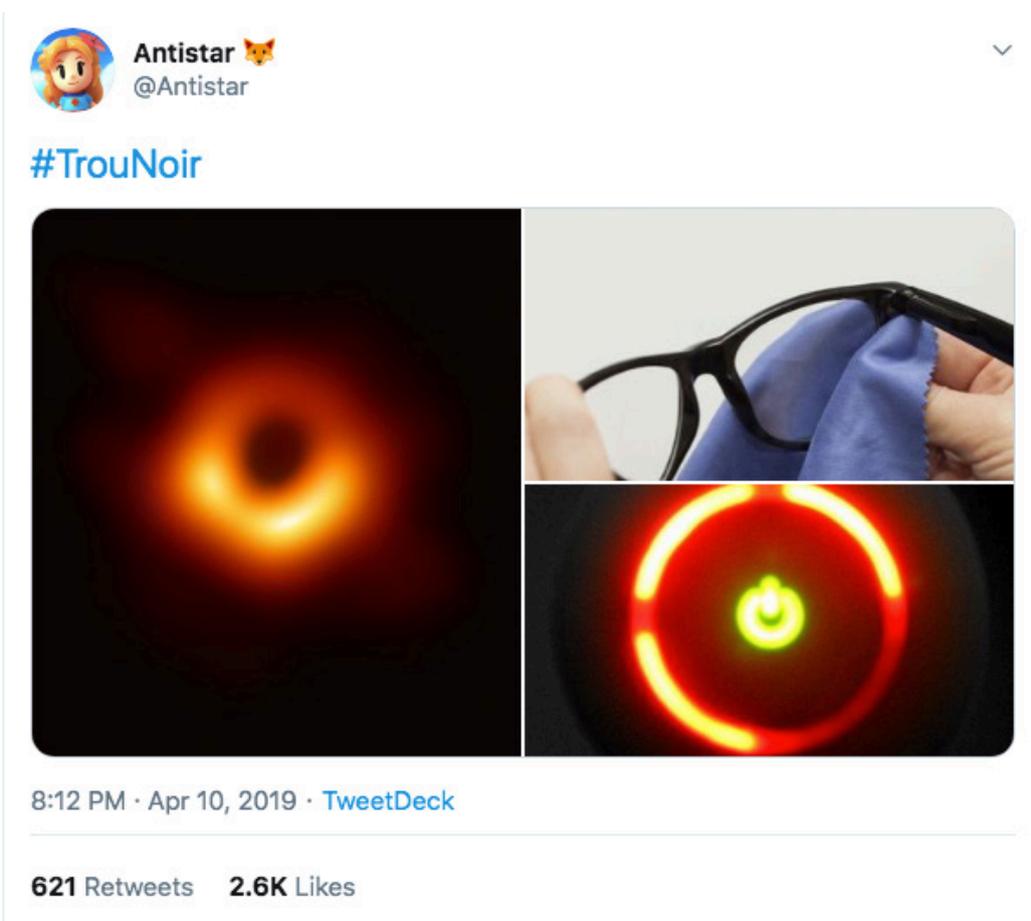


Figure 2. Black Hole Meme
Source: <https://twitter.com/Antistar/status/1115965904645439488>)

In 2019, there is a new breakthrough in the world of science. A group of 200 scientists around the world, developed a concept of an earth-sized telescope called the Event Horizon Telescope, to take images of black holes. The technical aspect of how the scientists were able to take images of black holes that could not be captured on camera will not be discussed further. However, What is clear is it took up to 2 years to produce a real picture of a black hole in the Messier 87 Galaxy or M87, the distance from

the earth to 53.49 million light years [10]. They then held a press conference to inform the world of their findings on April 10, 2019 [11].

The blurry looking photo is a new breakthrough that breaks the assumption that black holes cannot be taken. Although the quality of the image is not sharp enough, but it marks significant developments in the world of science. This big breakthrough is fast becoming a new material for the internet world. Not only for scientists, but also internet users who nimbly use the photo as a meme. The internet meme is one of the reactions of the citizens in responding to an event that is being discussed. Quickly, the image of this black hole becomes a meme with various meanings and formats. Its appearance which resembles opaque donut provoked the imagination of internet users by translating or interpreting the image with various things. Although this response can be considered as celebration response, many people also express their disappointment of the appearance of the image. Either way, people construct a relation of the image to pop culture [12]. High expectations of the appearance of the image of a black hole catalyze the creation of memes filled with amusement in blatant words: fun nonsense.

Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un Meme



Figure 3. Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un Meme

Source: GuillaumeTC (<https://twitter.com/JamesonBerkow/status/1006509264494620672/photo/1>)status/1006509264494620672/photo/1)

This meeting provoked reactions of many parties, including the public on the internet. This moment resulting in the production of many internet memes made by people on the internet. Starting from themock of the lack of McDonald's (fast-food restaurant franchise)in North Korea, to memes in various contexts that may or may not be related to the historic meeting.

ANALYSIS & RESULT

On this analysis, 3 samples of one most prominent internet memes ranging from 2018 to 2020, the sample from each year taken randomly from twitter.com, one of the most prominent platforms and where internet memes being distributed. However, the original image or theme which is set as the base of the meme creation in the sample is one of the most prominent of the year. For sample from 2018 meme, we took the meme of Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un Singapore meeting. For sample from 2019 we took the Black Hole image meme and for 2020 we took the Ghana dancing pallbearers meme. Each internet meme from each year will be analyzed using Gillian Rose's visual methodology, The 3 sites, production, image, and audience. Each site will be analyzed by the modalities that supported the sites, technology, compositionality, and social.

Production site

From the 3 samples obtained, visually the 3 samples fall into the same category and that is a parody although from the formal aspect look different from one and another. From the production sites of

each samples share the same technological modality, it's taken from an image from an important event and subsequently reproduced them by appropriating the image using digital apparatus. Sample 1, the Ghana dancing pallbearers meme in plain view may differ from 2 other samples If we compare the historical context. However, the way that Ghana dancing pallbearers presented in the context of 2020 Covid-19 pandemic it still marks as historical event from the cultural aspect. Therefore, all 3 samples are still related to an important event or historical event. On the compositionality 3 samples are different from one and another. Sample 1 consist of single image with 7 figures and a coffin as the focal point, the 2 other sample consist of multiple images, and it's sequential, one image is a sequence of another image. On the social modality, 3 samples share the same production modality, as regulation on disseminating internet meme is not quite clear and internet users took the liberty to make a parody or appropriating the original image. In conclusion, the production site on 3 samples shares the same result.

The site of the image

On the production modality, the 3 samples share the same result, as all of 3 samples are internet meme, internet meme is a digital image from the technical aspect. On the compositionality modality, all 3 samples generally share the same result, internet meme as a form of a joke or amusement whether it's from popular culture or from historical or important event. But regarding the context of meaning, each sample have different result, sample 1, is an amusement of pandemic situation as death rate from Covid-19 is quite high. Sample 2 is an amusement of scientific discovery, it's a form of celebration and disillusionment at the same time in the context of quality of the image of black hole. Sample 3 is an amusement of the meeting of 2 controversial figure, Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, as 2 countries were on feud at the time and one of the topics of the meeting is nuclear, which most people associated with mortality and destruction. As an internet meme the sample 3 is also a form of mockery. On the social aspect, 3 samples share the same result, it's a response to an important historical event of its time in a form of digital image which disseminated on the internet.

Audience site

The analysis of this site is generally on the society and the image. How spectators react to the image, how they interpret the meaning behind certain image, and where the image is presented. On the technology modality, the 3 samples share the same result, as people more adapting to the digital visualization the reaction to this image is indifferent. On the compositionality, generally 3 samples share the same result in terms of the meaning in broad sense. It's a form of a joke of important events, whether it's a predicament, or fortunate events. But in more specific meaning, each sample have different meaning in the term of its historical context. As for social modality, 3 samples share the same result, they disseminated through internet platform, such as, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and many others. Thus, these 3 samples only can be seen on the internet.

CONCLUSION

If communication in the internet culture, it's also a visual response of an important event occurring at the time. It is a representation of historical events of the certain time. If we analyze the production, image, and audience site we can discern a clue of the important or historical event that has been represented through the image. The inurement of internet meme whether it's visually or contextually, clearly, it's become a visual culture. The traits of internet meme are generally an amusement response to certain event. Although on this research the sample of the internet meme represents certain important or historical event, but there are several internet memes that is also a response to a pop culture event, for instance TV series, movies, sport events, advertisements and many others, the internet meme is also a representation of that events although the significance of those event represented in an internet meme is not as prominent as an important or historical events, as on the social context not many people can relate to the context and the meaning. On the visual aspect, an internet meme can contain appropriation aspect, assimilating one visual style and constructing a context out of the original image, this can also be seen in sample 1. On the other hand, the visual on internet meme can be raw, took an "ugly" aesthetic to present it, moreover, the visual of the internet can be sequential constructing its own narration, this can be seen on sample 2 and sample 3.

The result of this study may share some similarities from the study of visual character of Indonesian advertisement prints (Karakter Visual Keindonesiaan dalam Iklan Cetak di Indonesia) conducted by Widiatmoko, which conclude that through the visual analysis we can look for clue on the social, political, and economic situation of the time, as visual artefact is a representation of certain history [14].

Looking back to the study by Limor Shiffman which is also stated that all parodies includes some kind of imitation, this study also agree to that statement based on the result. However the current internet memes characteristics are shifting, people tend to responds to certain important events and source image to creates memes came from news, as news is also source of information of important events but other than that, people also responding to important pop culture events which strongly related to TV series, movies, sport events and many others. Other traits may include a reminiscent of pop culture events in the past, it's a form of nostalgia of certain generation, further study on this are needed. Other recommendation for further studies on internet memes needs to includes a multidisciplinary approach, such as psychology and data science. the results from this study are only a fraction of internet memes, as discussed previously, internet meme contains more than we can see. As a part of digital artefact, further internet meme needs to be explored more, with different scope, and different focus.

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