“One does not simply categorize a meme”: A dual classification system for visual-textual internet memes
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Introduction

As part of our ongoing study of disability discourse, we began researching Instagram memes countering “inspiration porn” (Young 2014) and other false societal discourses (Gee 2015) about disability. As we collected our corpus, we noticed patterns in the ways meme creators used multimodality and intertextuality to subvert harmful master narratives. The original purpose of our research was to study how a marginalized community combats damaging narratives in online discourse. However, while existing literature on memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Yus 2018) offered some tools for analysis, they lacked a sufficiently flexible framework to describe the variation that we observed in online discourse. However, while existing literature on memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Yus 2018) offered some tools for analysis, they were to study how a marginalized community combats damaging narratives in online discourse. However, while existing literature on memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Yus 2018) offered some tools for analysis, they lacked a sufficiently flexible framework to describe the variation that we observed in online discourse.

Meme Composition

Meme composition describes the visual language of memes, and thus explains how meme creators combine and re-contextualize images and text to create new meanings. Different styles of meme composition describe memes by their structure, beyond previous studies’ limitation to the individual images or fonts they employ.

Method

We collected a corpus of 50 memes from the social media app Instagram from January 2019 to December 2020. We limited our dataset to English language memes posted on public accounts. Our work provides insight into new methods of meaning-making in digital spaces.

Definitions

Although the term memes can describe a variety of cultural artifacts, we limited our use of the term to a small-d discourse posted online or on social media that is both multimodal and intertextual.

- Multimodality in our study required both text and image to interact meaningfully with each other.
- Intertextuality in our study required the meme to draw on an identifiable prior text for understanding of the current text.

This study was specifically concerned with visual-textual memes, not with video memes or text-only memes.

Findings

- Meme composition and multimodal quality are two separate but interrelated dimensions of a meme.
- The dual classification system reflects linguistic choices made by meme creators and explains creative flouting of expectations.
- Our work provides insight into new methods of meaning-making in digital spaces.

This flexible system is designed to be expandable to other data, including other online communities of practice and alternate modalities.

References


Young, S. 2014. I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much. TED Talk. Sydney, Australia.


Meme Composition: Character
Figures in the image are redefined using text, thereby attributing the figures’ actions/reactions to the textual object.

Multimodal Quality: Label
Entities in an image are labeled with text to indicate alternative representational meanings.

Multimodal Quality: Caption
Text recontextualizes the image as a whole by giving it a different referential meaning.

Multimodal Quality: Utterance
Text represents the language attributed to a figure in the image.

Definitions

Multimodal quality describes how the text interacts with the image in the meme. This is the manner by which the meme composition is created by the user. Based on our data, the system allows more than one multimodal quality for each meme.

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