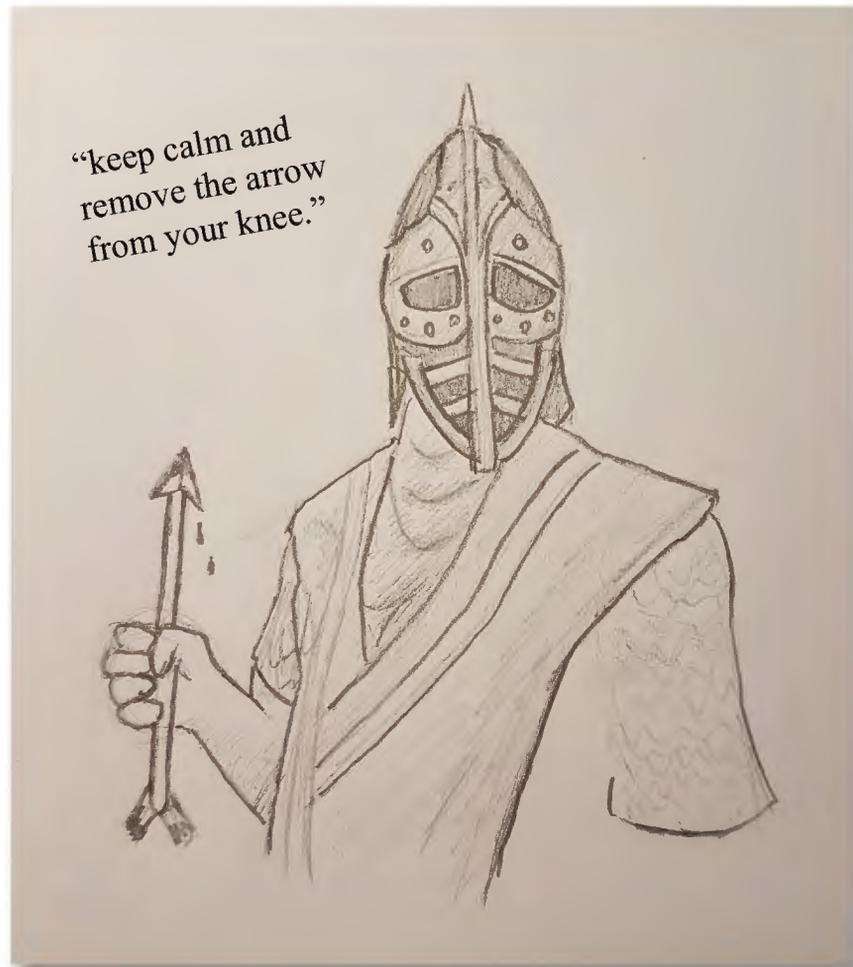


A visual translation of

Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures



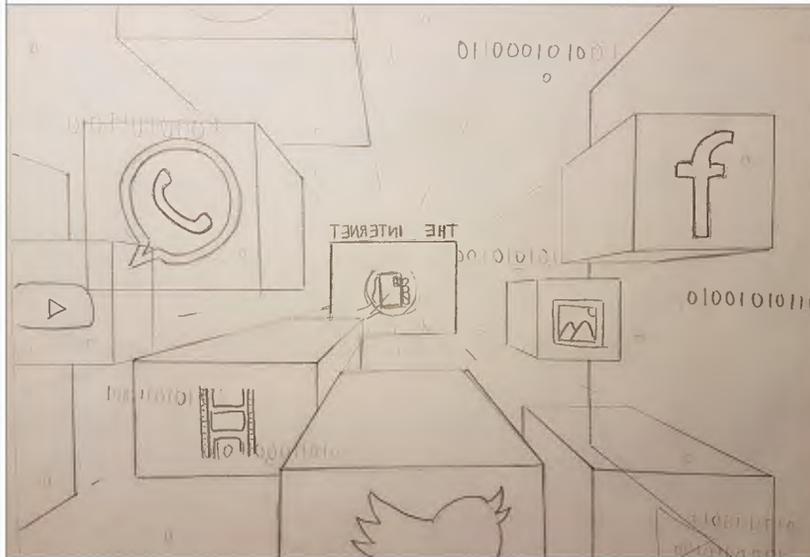
Source:

Varis, P., & Blommaert, J. (2015). Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures. *Multilingual Margins: A journal of multilingualism from the periphery*, 2(1), 31-31.

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Vincent Miller (2008) explains the rise of the so-called 'phatic media' in which communication without content has taken precedence.



Miller sees the avalanche of 'empty' messages on new social media as an illustration of the 'postsocial' society in which networks, rather than (traditional, organic) communities, are the central fora for establishing social ties between people.

The messages are 'empty' in the sense that no perceptibly 'relevant content' is being communicated;

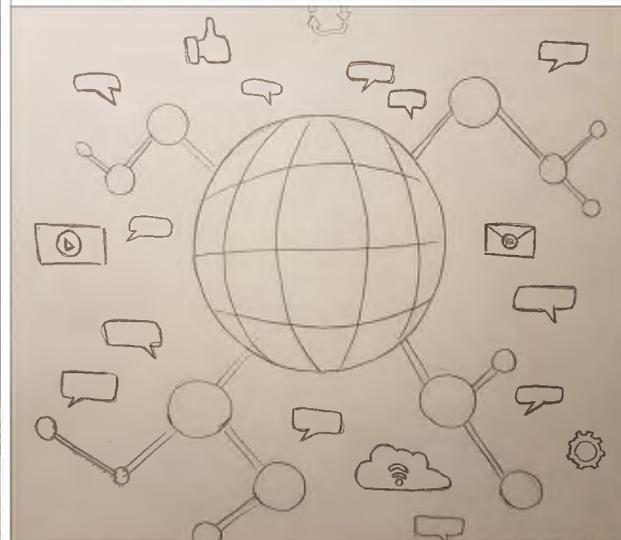


thus, such messages are typologically germane to the kind of 'small talk' which Malinowski (1923 [1936]) identified as 'phatic communion'.

Malinowski never used the term phatic 'communication', and for a reason: 'communion' stresses (a) the ritual aspects of phatic phenomena, and (b) the fact that through phatic communion, people express their sense of 'union' with a community.

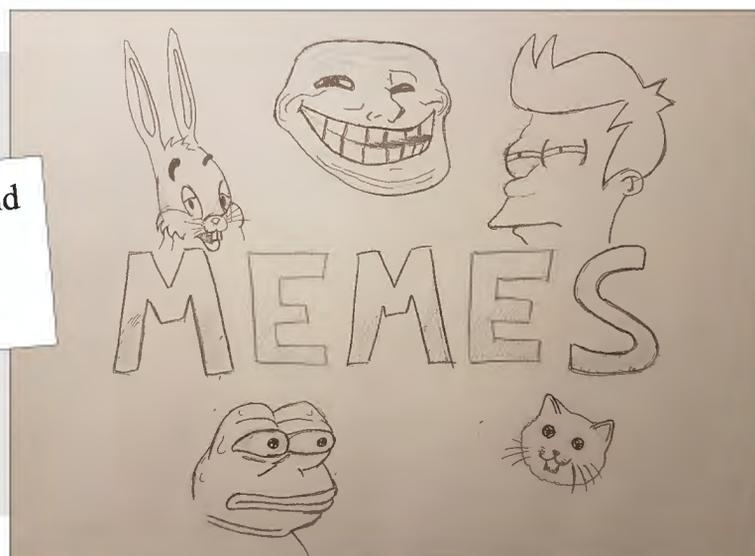


The perceived plenitude of phatic communion on the internet pushes us towards attention to such 'communication without content'.

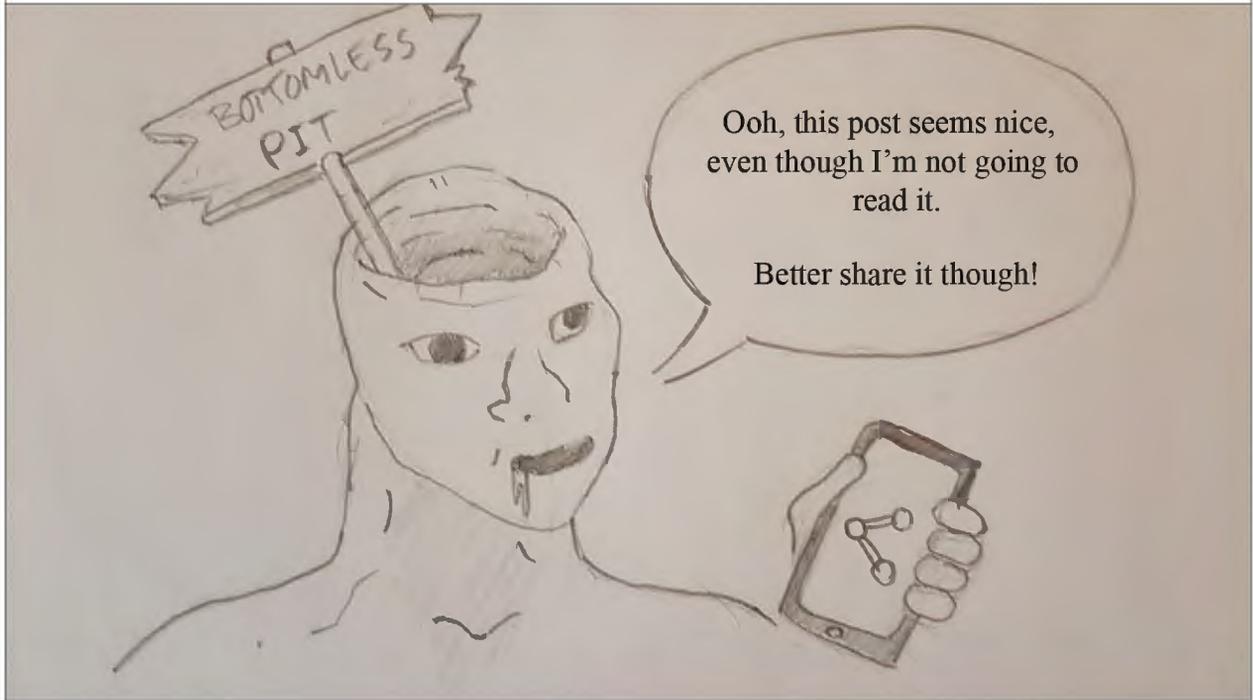


In what follows, we will engage with this topic and focus on a now-current internet phenomenon:

memes.



Abstract: “observations on social media interaction patterns show an amazing density of such phatic interactions, in which signs are shared and circulated without an a priori determination of the meaning.



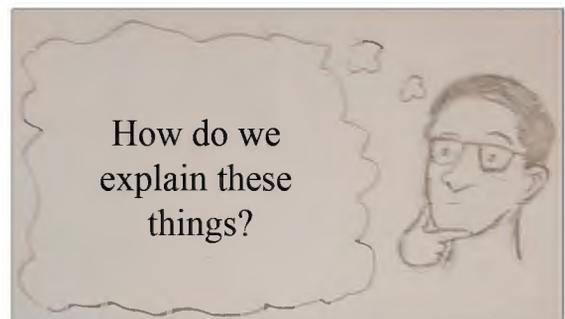
Example 1: Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook update, which accumulated over 3000 likes and 200 shares in just 2 minutes.



Example 2: Gangnam Style, the pinnacle of "virality" (over 2 billion views in under 3 years). The singing, dancing and production of the video don't appear to be what made the video go ultra-viral, though...



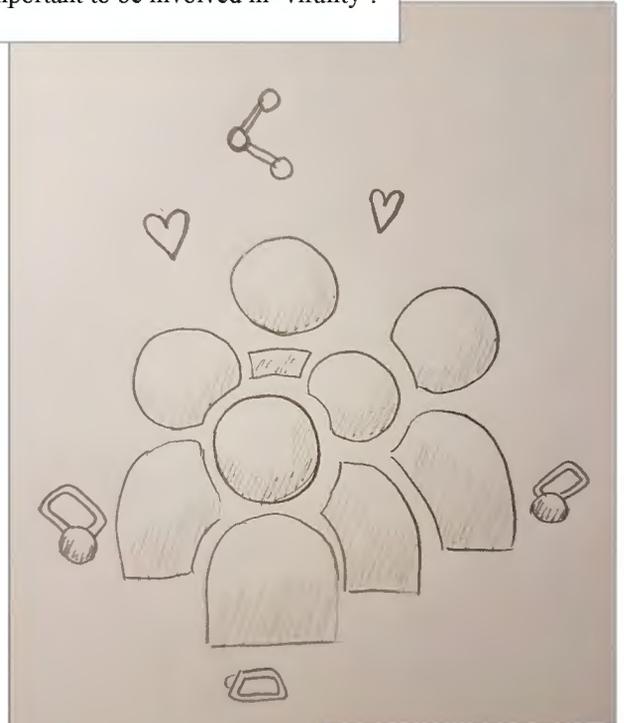
The point is that we see a communicative phenomenon of astonishing *speed* and *scope*: large numbers of people react on a message by expressing their 'liking' and by judging it relevant enough to share it with their 'friends' within their social media community ("virality").



A post's "phatic" value may be more important than its actual content and meaning.



People on social media find it very important to be involved in 'virality'.

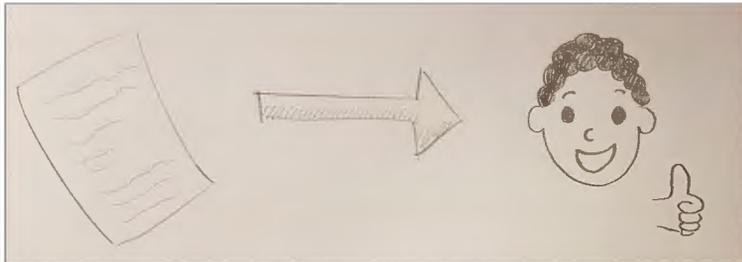


People find it important to be part of a group that 'likes' and 'shares' items posted by others.

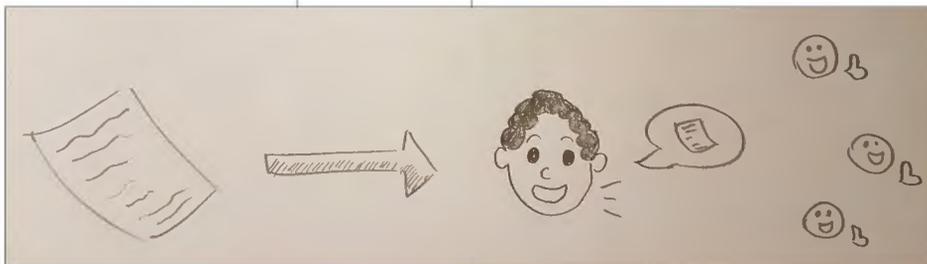
I'm not sure what the exact distinction is between "liking" and "sharing", could you elaborate?



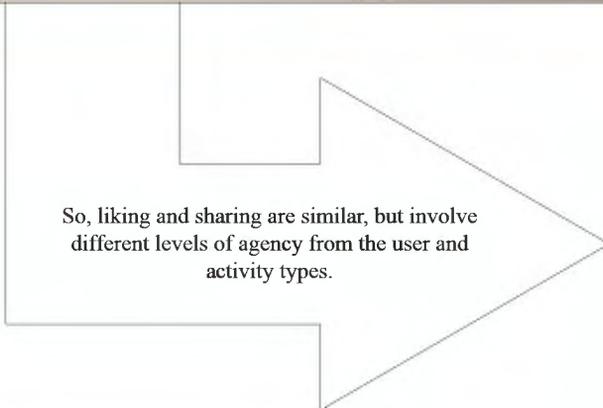
"Liking" is expressing one's approval of a message, generally an interaction between the original messenger and their audience only.

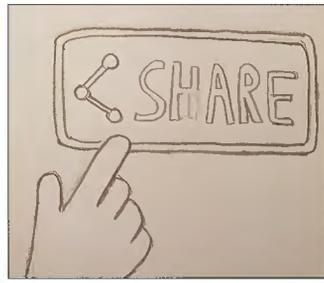
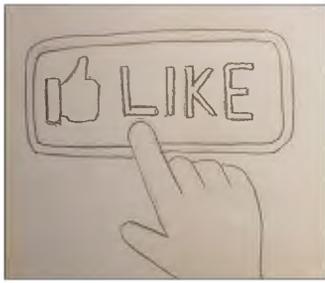


"Sharing" is recontextualizing and directly reorienting the message to one's own audience or community. It is a step above "liking" in the viral circulation process.

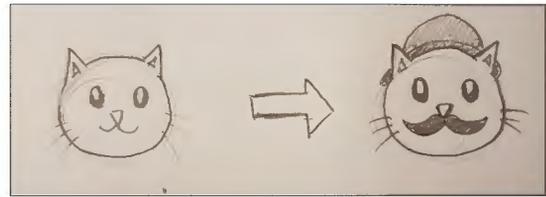


So, liking and sharing are similar, but involve different levels of agency from the user and activity types.



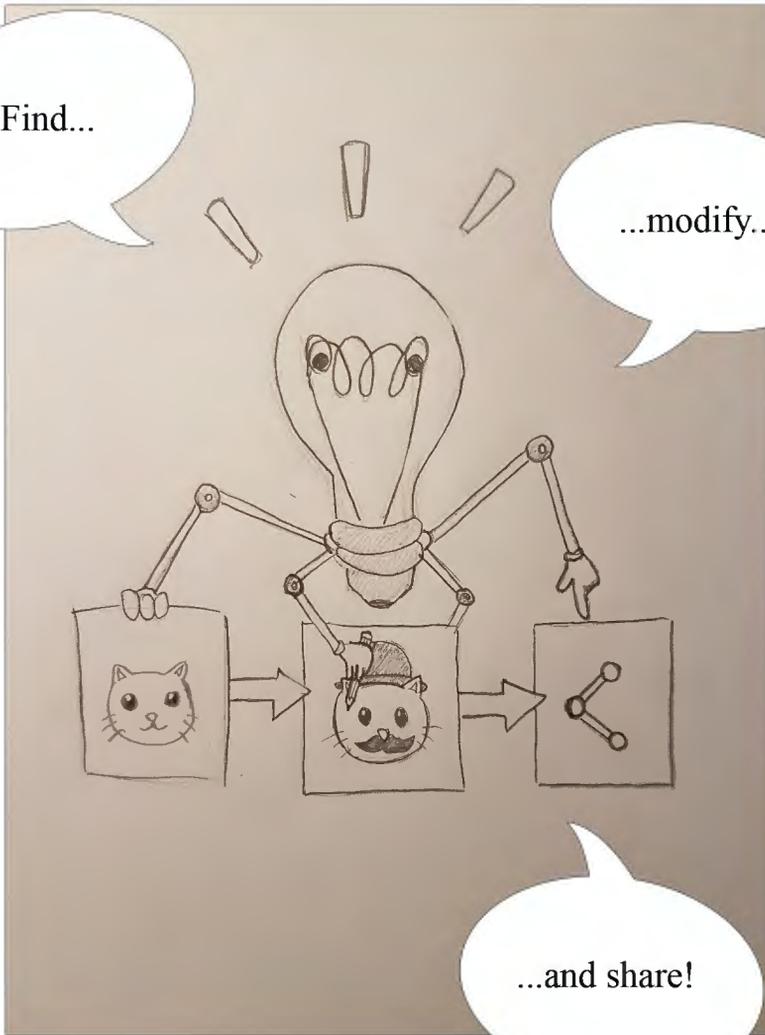


Memes add another dimension to the process...



...by involving modifications to the original sign itself.

Find...



...modify...

...and share!

It is important to distinguish *virality* from *memicity* by considering the level of significant change to the sign (Shifman, 2011).

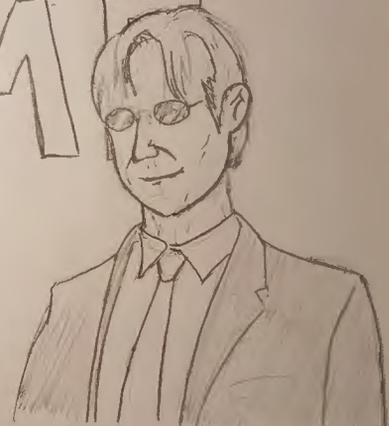


(but this distinction is not *always* valid.)

To define 'meme', Shifman (2011) draws on Richard Dawkins (1976), author of *The Selfish Gene*:

"a small cultural unit of transmission (...) spread by copying or imitation".

MEME



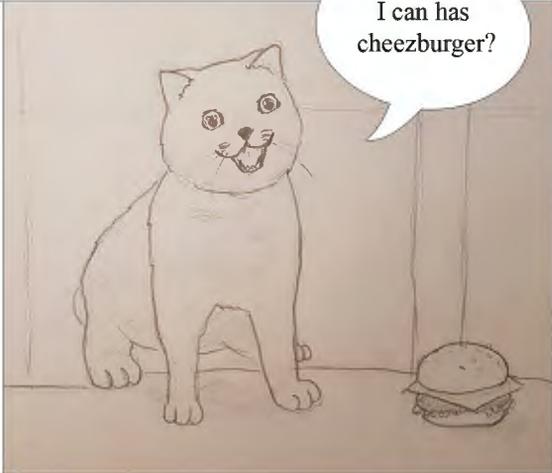
C-could you show some examples?



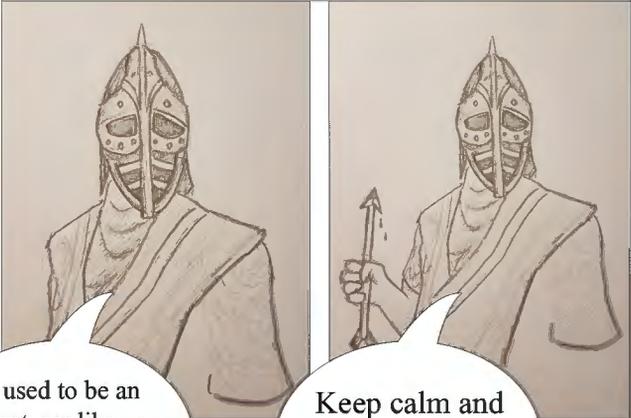
The "Keep calm and carry on" poster (which was originally a WWII British propaganda poster). This poster has been resemiotized into new versions, which have been viral since 2000. The poster is characterized by the speech structure, graphic features and layout. The template gives way for new variations like "Keep calm and call Batman".



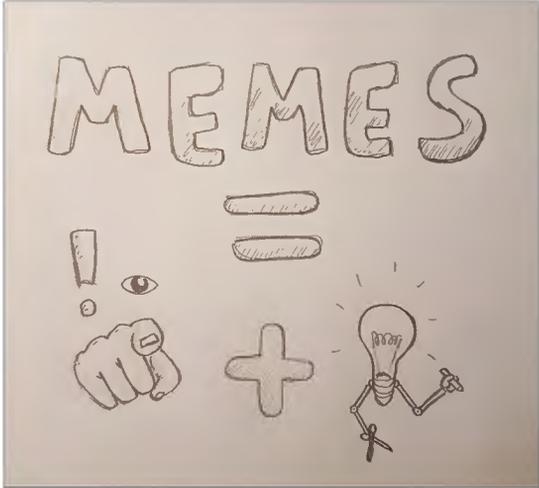
The meme displayed here has an instance of 'lolspeak', which is an example of textual-stylistic memicity. It is mostly used with cat pictures, but has a ton of other applications. Even the Bible has been translated to 'lolspeak' by a group of people.



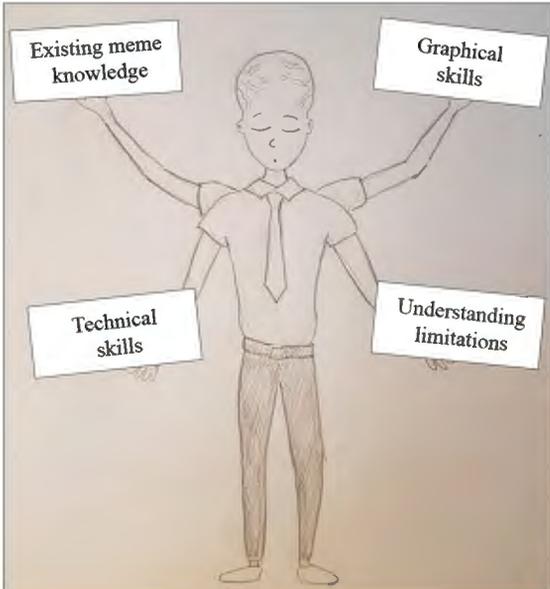
The phrase "but then I took an arrow to the knee" from the video game *Skyrim* became a rapidly spreading meme (and no one really understands why). The phrase also became integrated with other memes, for instance the "Keep calm" poster.



Keep calm and remove the arrow from your knee.

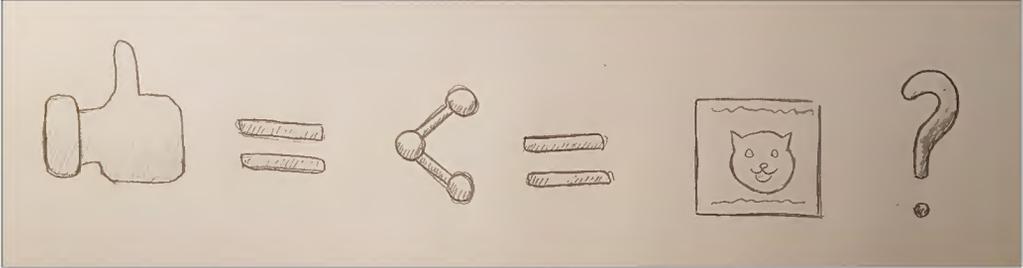


We see how memes operate via a combination of intertextual recognizability and individual creativity – individual users adding an accent to existing viral memes, in attempts to go viral with their own adapted version."



Making memes can be complex. It requires knowledge of existing memes, understanding the limitations and affordances for altering signs, and some graphical and technology-related skills.

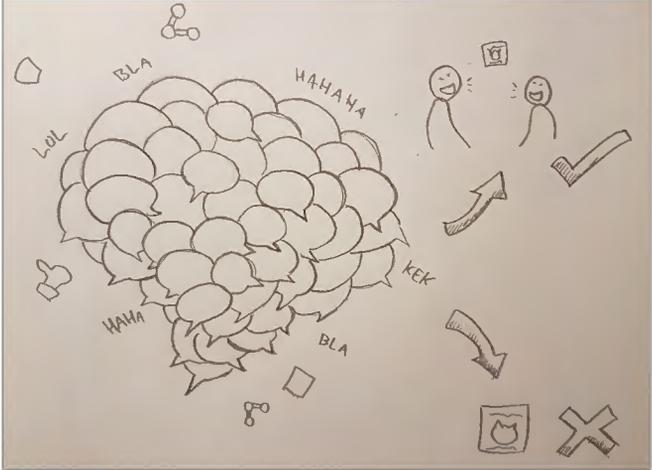
When considering memes as a “phatic” practice, they are actually not that different from liking and sharing. Beyond the alteration of the signs, there are **communicative practices** that take precedence.



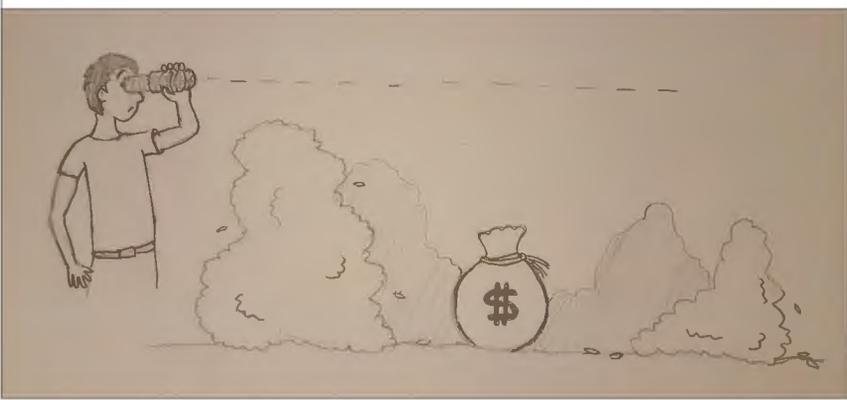
In other words: enjoying the meme together with others is more important than the contents and meaning of the original sign. This “phatic” function, however, is rarely an object of research.



What explains the immense density of these phatic practices on social media? Not necessarily the features of signs, nor the practices they prompt. Explanations may need to be found in the social world.



Memes force us to think about levels of social structuring that we very often overlook, because we consider those levels meaningless.



The present era is not “postsocial”. There is a great deal of sociality on social media, but this sociality might require a new kind of sociological imagination.



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Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Miller, Vincent. 2008. New media, networking and phatic culture. *Convergence* 14: 387-400.

Shifman, Limor. 2011. An anatomy of a YouTube meme. *New Media & Society* 14(2): 187-203.

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