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Singaporean Internet Memes in Visual Culture

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Abstract

Internet memes have been studied as digital artifacts in pop polyvocality (Milner, 2013b; Yoon, 2016), and for vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2007; Milner, 2013a; Tannen, 2007). Educators' engagement with memes is crucial to aid young students' critical readings of them (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). In late-authoritarian Singapore, memes have been studied for their popularity and as outlets for expression (Sreekumar & Vadrevu, 2013; Liew, 2015). In this study, I examined memes related to education using theories and methods of social semiotics (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), and Machin and Mayr's (2012) Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to understand discursive and social practices surrounding Internet memes, and education, a perennial issue for Singapore. The analysis suggests Singaporean memes exhibit dense networks of intersemiotic meaning, sharing features of comic and sequential art in portraying local educational issues related to public pedagogy and hegemonic discourses. Intertextuality and humor featured in cultural representations, with global memetic vernacular and local languages. In the context of art education, meme literacy may help teachers equip students with skills to respond knowledgably to online visual culture.

Keywords: Internet memes, Art, Visual Culture, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Singapore

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Singaporean Internet Memes in Visual Culture

The term *meme* was coined by biologist Dawkins (1976), who was in search of a word to “convey the idea of a unit of transmission, or a unit of imitation” (p. 192). Notions of memes as biological analogies—as parasites, or as genes—come into conflict with the idea of human beings as active and conscious agents of their spread, and are part of the debates in the now thriving field of memetics (Blackmore, 2000; Shifman, 2013).

In the context of these debates, recent research has traced the trajectory of memes proliferating on the Internet. Shifman (2013) defines Internet memes as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, created with awareness of each other, and circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). In the context of art and visual culture, memes tend to “riff” on visuals and are subsequently “appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the Internet infrastructures they came from” (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014, p. 249).

In doing so, Internet memes can hit discordant notes; for example, Yoon (2016) found that Internet memes about racism tend to mock people of color and deny structural racism; subsequent color-blindness was challenged by critical analysis of Internet memes, and the creation of counter-memes to heighten students’ critical awareness of racial issues in the context of art education. Internet memes in themselves can be used in art and art education as long as one considers not just the visual aspect of the memes but also the humor, remix, distinct voices and shared authorships involved in their production (De la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015). Conceptualizing the language of Internet memes as “visual, succinct and capable of inviting active engagement by users” (p. 15), De la Rosa-Carrillo (2015) identified specific educational contexts where the language of Internet Memes could incorporate technology, storytelling, visual thinking and remix practices into art and visual culture education.

However, there is a paucity of research that examines in detail memes that are both educational and offers some commentary about education, and the role they can play in literacy curricula. Based on this extant research, it is only appropriate to look at Internet memes related to education as they highlight educational issues that students and teachers can both relate to and talk about in the classroom, and may prove to be useful to include in literacy curricula.

Public Pedagogies and Internet Memes: The Singaporean Context

Decoding text-image combinations such as those present in memes is especially crucial in the democratized arena of the Internet, which often becomes the site for public pedagogies to take effect, in the context of the current neoliberal condition. Neoliberalism can be defined as a variant of new-capitalism characterized by “less state intervention, more deregulation and widespread privatization of public services [which] was the way to set free market mechanism” (Holborow, 2013, p. 15). To understand the effects of the combination of public social media with pedagogy, it is worth turning to Giroux’s (2005) visualization of neoliberal public pedagogy as the orchestration of ideological and institutional forces molding individuals only invested in “material and ideological gains” (as cited in Reid, 2010, p. 195). Freishtat (2010) also commented on the public pedagogy of Facebook, noting the mediating role played by Facebook in the perceptions of activities deemed controversial by society. While Facebook was found to encourage user resistance, this resistance tends to be curtailed and contained within the framework of the social network itself. Ironically, the democratic arena afforded on Facebook tends to be governed by the rules, norms and interests of the various stakeholders involved. The potential for real and transformative change is arguably limited as the actions required by the users—a simple like or comment—purportedly bestow on them the role that they are change agents, when actually, they are not.

Thus, users are not adequately critically engaged in social issues they may show mild interest in during the act of “liking” or “commenting” on social media. Facebook as a social movement is characterized by language and symbols. In “A Pedagogy of Defiance,” Jaramillo (2010) highlights public pedagogy’s role as an act of “unlearning”; Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008) locate meaning in social relation, in ambiguity, change and contradiction (as cited in Jaramillo, 2010). It is such fertile ground that helps birth phenomena like memes and meme culture that are constantly in flux on the Internet.

Meme culture in the Singaporean context is part of a “cacophony of emerging voices of a city-state in a late authoritarian phase” (Liew, 2015, p. 22). Memes reject nostalgic and romanticized notions, especially in relation to political figures and public discourse. A study of young Singaporean’s attitudes to Internet memes found that memes were viewed as objects of “humor, cultural resonance and personal identity representation” (Sreekumar & Vadrevu, 2013, p.3). The youth did not see the production and transmission of memes as a serious mode of engagement for the circulation of political ideas.

In this light it is worth noting the recent relative affluence of young people in the first world, which has increased in proportion to access to technological innovations; young people of the electronic generation (Tapscott, 1998) are empowered by the Internet to create their own culture, and this is especially significant with regard to the high rate of Internet connectivity in Singapore. The societal issue of education in Singapore is significant and encompasses the imbrications of educational institutions, politics, and the more individual social and cognitive processes of lifelong learning in the context of both adult and young learners. Thus, my main research question is: How is the interaction of global and local socio-cultural meanings reflected in both the linguistic and visual modes in Singaporean Internet memes related to education? The second part to this question is: what is the role of

Internet memes in the expanding literacy curricula of the contemporary classroom?

Memes and Meme Literacy

To establish the ontological and epistemological significance of this study, I want to explore the notions of memes and meme literacy, and, subsequently the lenses I found were most appropriate to use to analyze memes. This involves a consideration of the relevant epistemological practices surrounding memes, their creation and spread. Epistemological practices, that is, processes relating to knowledge creation, dissemination and understanding, in the contemporary digital sphere are characterized by the participatory, democratic, convergence culture of the Internet (Jenkins, 2006), and manifested in phenomena such as online fan fiction, the collaborative nature of online content in editable “wikis,” and the blurring lines between content producers and consumers. Specifically, *meme literacy* (Milner, 2012) in the practice of creating an Internet meme requires certain skills and a “discursive competency” (Milner, 2012, p. 132), “speaking” the accepted language fluently and employing literacy in relation to creating new forms based on that fluency. Meme literacy involves “inserting images, overlaying text, building from a subculturally specific corpus of pop culture texts” (p. 271). These can be done, for example, in meme generator websites. Such literacy does have links to remix culture, which I will discuss shortly in this paper. Meme literacy is needed to be accurate in terms of conveying one’s intended meaning.

Taken together, memes form a crucial part of online discourse. To examine memes, then, I draw upon Kress’s (2010) conception of social semiotics, and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis as delineated by Machin and Mayr (2012). Social semiotics focuses on the agency of individuals who use signs to make meaning, and thus differs from traditional semiotics. The arbitrariness of signs as described by traditional semiotics is instead “replaced by motivation” (Kress, 2010, p. 67). In the context of Internet memes, and in relation to the

“Internet Ugly Aesthetic,” Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014) put forth Nick Douglas’ idea that Internet memes are “the result of material and cultural conditions in which ‘creators have more ideas than capabilities’ and there are no gates to keep ‘unpolished’ or even ‘unpublishable’ works out of the public view” (p. 251). Internet memes tend to delegitimize the power of mainstream media to instigate social change (Huntington, 2013; Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2015; Milner, 2013b). Exemplifying the power and influence of Internet memes is the September 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, in which thousands protested against social injustices, income inequality and unchecked business practices. Memes about the movement here facilitated conversations and “employed populist argument and popular texts, intertwining them into a vibrant polyvocal public discourse” (Milner, 2013b, p.1). The use of social networks among the common people has contributed significantly to the success of events such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. Thus, memes can play an influential role in online discourse, and are worth investigating further.

From an educational perspective, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) asserted the necessity for educators to engage with Internet memes, claiming it could help educators equip students with “important strategies for identifying the memes that infect their minds, and for evaluating the effects these memes have on their (ethical) decision-making, social actions and their relations with others” (p. 223).

Various components come together to make a successful, powerful meme. To investigate memes further, Brubaker (2008) employed a simple semiotic approach in analyzing “LOLCats.” The approach involved analyzing the stylistics of the popular series of image macros while comparing this to the use of text in silent films. In this regard, it is worth noting that image macros consistently use the Impact font to caption images. Brideau and Berret (2014) discussed the history and suitability of the use of the font Impact in online static

Internet memes, highlighting its regularity of rhythm that lends a certain stability to the mutating nature of these memes. The regular rhythm has become a defining feature of the meme, to the extent that the use of the font has also become a meme.

In Brubaker's study, while text in silent film "provided filmmakers a temporary narrative solution that was largely abandoned upon the advent of sound," text continues to be used in LOLCats, despite richer alternatives to effective storytelling. Part of the appeal of LOLCats is that the captions eschew prolixity, thereby making them "faddish." Language play as used in LOLCats and dogespeak alludes to the inherently ludic nature of memes and memetic vernacular which aligns meme literacy with digital literacies.

Memetic vernacular often contains formulaic language elements known as phrasal templates, which are most often "snowclones" (Pullum, 2004), a term used to refer to "a multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence" often used by journalists; for example, "X is the new Y." However, while phrasal templates like snowclones were originally wielded to sound intelligent or original, in the context of memetic vernacular it is used more as an exercise of wit (Zappavigna, 2012). Internet memes, described as "nationwide inside jokes" for this reason, weave the particular with the universal. Underlying the humor in Internet memes is the subversive nature of their creators and their refusal to acknowledge the nostalgic and ciphered portrayal of people in power, notably, in the case of Singapore, the late Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew (Liew, 2015). Humor can be seen as reverse discourse in relation to contentious issues like racism (Weaver, 2010) because it is the kind of resistance that can, "first, act rhetorically against racist meaning and so attack racist truth claims and points of ambivalence" (p. 31). It can also rhetorically resolve the ambiguity of the reverse discourse itself. Howard's (2008) notion of

the “vernacular web” views online content in participatory media as a “product of hybrid agencies made possible by these new forms” (p. 490). Thus, an Internet meme can have numerous facets that when combined, become a powerful force to be reckoned with.

Methodology

Three broad approaches were proposed by Huntington (2013) to analyze Internet memes—the semiotic approach, the discursive approach, and the visual rhetoric approach—the latter of which encompasses both the former--semiotic and discursive—approaches. An early example of a simple semiotic approach used to study memes is the study by Brubaker (2008) on LOLCats. Discourse analysis of memes was undertaken by both Milner (2012) and Chandler (2013). While Milner (2012) looked at Internet memes as a form of public discourse and resistance, Chandler’s (2013) analyzed image macros in relation to how they portrayed wealth disparity.

To analyze Internet memes, it would also be useful to consider the humor, shared authorship, and remix practices that are involved. The practice of remix in cyberspace may have shifted contemporary culture from a read-only (RO) to a read-write (RW) paradigm; users are “prosumers,” preferring to rewrite media texts like music and films (and possibly Internet memes) in new and meaningful ways, rather than simply consume them. (De la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015).

The relationship of memes to visual rhetoric was explored by Jenkins (2014), who used the approach to circumvent the difficulties involved in isolating the exact element replicated in the dissemination of an Internet meme. He argued that it was the mode, the manner or orientation of viewing a digital artifact that was replicated, and examined the Fail/Win online phenomena as a mode, which in this case is the ability to see life as a game that could be won or lost. In this light, Jenkins (2014) discussed the affective capabilities of

memes above all else, and relates them to the anxieties of a control society which is characterized by the forces of continuous surveillance and self-discipline and the anxieties that these forces evoke. Humor in the memes dispels these anxieties. These dimensions of memes are worth considering in light of meme website SGAG's motto "We are serious about making you laugh" (SGAG, n.d.) which primes the humorous nature of memes over other factors which could also lend themselves to analysis. Like Jenkins (2014), Varis and Blommaert (2014) also contest Shifman's notions of memes being unchanged as they are spread via "copying and imitation" (p. 36). Drawing attention to the phatic nature of communication in social media, they call for a shift of focus from the meaning of memes to their main "effect," which is conviviality: "the production of a social-structuring level of engagement in loose, temporal, and elastic collectives operating in social media environments" (Varis & Blommaert, 2014, p. 31).

Text in this study consisted of static Singaporean Internet memes with image macros of both local and global macros and their captions. Discursive practices included the processes of productions and consumption of the Internet memes on the social networking platform Facebook, which in the context of this study was limited to the number of *likes* that determined the visibility of the Internet memes. Visibility is the inherent property of Internet memes and is predicated upon the act of "liking" or "sharing" an Internet meme, which potentially marks it out and draws attention to it while embedded in networked communities. If a particular static Internet meme had a higher number of *likes* it was deemed to be more visible than one with a lower number of *likes*. Social practices included the context and background conditions behind the processes.

For the purposes of this study, considering Internet memes to be multimodal texts, I primarily used methods of multimodal CDA (MCDA) as delineated by Machin and Mayr

(2012), which draws heavily on social semiotic theory, which in turn deals with the way language is used in social contexts. Due to the disputed nature of the word “discourse,” the operational definition is defined in the context of this study as the broader ideas communicated by the texts in relation to sociocultural context (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Text is defined as a product of discourse, while ideology is defined by “a set of beliefs or attitudes shared by members of a particular social group” (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 10) embedded in discourse. Ideology, according to Fairclough (1995), is also “meaning in the service of power” (p. 14). While he posited that ideology lies hidden in discursive practices, he rejects the notion that people are passive ideological subjects. Ideology is embedded in both text and image in memes. For example, memetic catchphrases were always prevalent in modern society and were spread by those in power; language has since become decentralized and catchphrases in Internet memes are now created and spread by the general public. The same applies to images, whether local or global image macros. Arguably, the language in Internet memes responds to or perpetuates certain ideologies through text and image, as I detail in the sections below.

Data Collection

To examine the confluence of image macros shared on social networks, I employed frameworks and theories relating primarily to text-image relations, social semiotics, and multimodal critical discourse analysis. While social semiotics focuses on the agency of individuals who use signs to make meaning (Kress, 2010), CDA has traditionally been concerned with addressing social injustices and “exposing ideologies that are hidden within language, whether these are produced by authorities, ruling groups, and institutions or in individual face-to-face situations” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 15). This study also borrows from Fairclough’s model (1989; 1995) for Critical Discourse Analysis and his notion of the

three dimensions of discourse. CDA can aid in discerning ideology and stances towards different ideologies present in the construction of Internet memes.

For the purposes of this study, data was drawn from the local meme website SGAG's (n. d.) Facebook page. The data collection process started off in early 2015 and resulted in a total of thirty Internet memes and image macros from four primary websites, Know Your Meme (n.d.), Quickmeme (n. d.), Meme Creator (n.d.), and SGAG. Singaporean Internet memes were selected from the corpus of the Singaporean satirical website, SGAG, whose founders create and post static Internet memes relating to local issues daily, and screen and post Internet meme submissions from patrons of the website. As of April 2018, the SGAG Facebook page has 801,308 followers. According to its Facebook page, it was founded in February, 2012. Highly visible Internet memes—memes that drew around 2,800 to 3,000 likes and above and related to the topic of education—were chosen. The methodology of criterion-based sampling was primarily used, as this is particularly useful for identifying and understanding cases that are information rich (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The repetition of recognizable global image macros in Singaporean Internet memes was at first noted and these macros were then looked up on other websites such as Know Your Meme (n. d.), Meme Creator (n.d.), and Quickmeme (n. d.) to discern their representational meanings from a global perspective.

Eventually, the final data set was narrowed down by using criterion sampling to select static Internet memes that contained global image macros, and were related to education, during the crucial end-of-year examinations in most public schools, which begins around the end of September and goes on until October. The criterion of education was chosen given the relevance of memes as public pedagogy, and the popularity of memes with schoolgoing youth. Seven local Internet memes were chosen, which were posted during the examination

period in 2014. If one were to browse SGAG's Facebook page and website, it would be clear that over the years, the content and style of many of the memes have changed and their website was updated numerous times. Such changes are not unexpected, given the nature of the evolution of memes and meme aggregator websites. Memes in more recent years have tended to be more complex in their appropriation of highly localized content, even if they were juxtaposed with global image macros—often including the faces and names of the creators. However, this study focused on examining memes from a few years back, which were noteworthy in their incorporation of both local and global content, much before they started to carry highly contextualized meaning and content relevant to local culture. The criteria ensured that the Internet memes chosen would contain global image macros as appropriated in the local Singaporean context. Using such criteria would ensure understanding the interaction of global and local sociocultural meanings. Of the data set, there was only two global image macros, that of *Futurama Fry* and *Unhelpful High School Teacher*, chosen from Know Your Meme (n.d.) and Quickmeme (n. d.) respectively. These Internet memes were then analyzed for the meanings that emerged when the global image macros were appropriated in the local context.

Data

This section features an analysis of Internet memes while making references to the image macros and their captions, and briefly discussing the discursive and social practices surrounding the Internet memes.

Interplay of Sociocultural Meanings in Memes

Understanding the meanings denoted and connoted by the first Internet meme that I selected, as depicted in Table 1, warrants some background of the fictional narrative of the character Philip J. Fry, from the American T.V. series *Futurama*.

Table 1

Singaporean Internet Memes

Internet Meme	Image ¹	Approximate Number of Likes	Upload Date
Fry Image Macro	1	(nil)	(nil)
	4	5,600	21 September 2014
	5	4,300	26 September 2014
Coloring Kid Image Macro	2	6,100	3 October 2014
	6	3,000	13 October 2014
	7	3,000	21 October 2014
Unhelpful High School Teacher	3	(nil)	(nil)
	8	2,800	20 October 2014

Futurama hinges on Fry's ability to survive and thrive in an environment completely unfamiliar to him, given his portrayal of a "sexually undesirable, addicted to television and junk food, naïve, relatively unintelligent, and supremely lazy" character (Bailey, 2002, p. 244). Yet his portrayal as a dim-witted young man who "accidentally falls into a cryogenic chamber and awakens 1000 years later, in the year 3000" (Greenwald, 2007, p. 53) is deceptive in light of *Futurama*'s potent combination of highly intelligent satire of contemporary societal issues, and accessibility and appeal to a wider audience. This unique characteristic makes *Futurama* rare as a science-fiction television show. In its satire, the show subverts naturalized discourses about love, sex, media and capitalism in society. The humor in *Futurama* is also noteworthy for its high intellectual quality, in view of the

¹ See Tables 2 & 3 for Image URLs.

complicated mathematics, science, and programming jokes and references in each episode, including references to computational number theory and geometry (Greenwald, 2007).

Futurama's humor is also found to alleviate math anxiety and provide students motivation to learn mathematics.

Furthermore, *Futurama*'s primary theme of technological innovation and its representation of the issues surrounding it ensure the show's relevance in Internet discussions dominated by digital natives already familiar with these discourses. Bailey (2002), for example, notes the show's function in engendering "a vast and diverse virtual community" of fans in the context of rising computer mediated communication, which affects the interpretation of such television shows (p. 239). Therefore, *Futurama*'s presence on the Internet, whether in the form of discussions, image macros, or videos, is inevitably mediated by the discussions, discourses and digital literacy practices surrounding it.

Much of the animation in *Futurama* is based on traditional two-dimensional pencil drawing which depicts a global image macro of Fry based on a still of the *Futurama* episode *The Lesser of Two Evils* (see Table 1). Fry is drawn with simple strokes with the occasional jagged edges to portray unkempt hair and exaggerated facial features—for example, a protruding upper lip, and large eyes; this artistic style is familiar to fans of the more widely known TV series *The Simpsons* (unsurprising as the two series are both created by Matthew Groening). Furthermore, given that oblique lines tend to connote dynamic action, the lines can be interpreted to connote the dynamism associated with discourses of technological innovation. Arguably, this tendency of the lines is brought to the fore due to their salience in the image macro. These notions are also reflective of *Futurama*'s satire of the "future-gazing obsession" consistently present in discourses of technology (Bailey, 2002, p. 242), which remains relevant in view of constant technological innovation in contemporary society. Kress

and van Leeuwen (1996) also refer more broadly to the idea in contemporary Western society of squares, rectangles, and associated geometrical structures as elements of the mechanical and technological order, related to human construction, connoting rationality, as opposed to the warmth connoted by circular figures (p. 54). As a global image macro used in Internet memes, the iconic image of Fry not only conveys the aforementioned ideas but also links them to the discourses surrounding *Futurama* and the Internet.

As a representation of the character Fry, the image macro inevitably conveys specific ideas with regard to identity. In terms of color, the bright orange hue of Fry's hair clashes with his maroon jacket; this clash of colors and their vividness reflects stereotypical depictions of "nerds" in television and stereotypes of nerds common among many adolescents in real life (Engelhart, 2012). As Machin and Mayr (2012) note, cartoons stylize and exaggerate individual characteristics, resulting in stereotypical representations (p. 101). Notably, however, there are no shadows in the image, and this fact, along with its juxtaposition with the photograph on top of the image, serves to anchor the image firmly in fiction.

The dichotomy between Fry's unkempt appearance is contrasted with the superimposed caption "Not sure if X // or just Y", arguably representing an internal monologue. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) concept of *vertical elongation* in reading images suggests that the idea of "X" is the more dominant idea in comparison to the idea represented by "Y" by virtue of being at the top of the image. For audiences familiar with the Fry image macro, and the discourses surrounding *Futurama*, it is the immediate point of departure to understand the caption, which in this case is the phrasal template "Not sure if X or Y." In terms of modality, which Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) describe as the speaker's affinity to his or her statement, the speaker in the image macro is seen to commit to the

phrasal template; there are no pronouns used, despite the caption representing internal monologue. In capitalizing on the moment of suspicion, as indicated by Fry's narrowed eyes, the image macro with its caption depicts the in-between state of questioning the status quo. At the same time, it implies an inability to openly express doubt. Thus, the fragmented nature of the internal monologue and lack of pronouns can be seen as critical of society's overreliance on facts and the correspondence theory of truth, which posits that a statement is true if it corresponds with a fact (over personal opinion). Additionally, the diagonal lines behind and above Fry move upwards from left to right, exemplifying Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) concept of *horizontal elongation*, in which the left side of the image is most commonly the "departure point," while the right side of the image represents information that would be "new" from the point of view of the viewer; the lines are suggestive not only of the progressive discourses of technological innovation, but also the progression and dynamism in traversing the in-between state.

Furthermore, the Singaporean Internet meme containing the global image macro of Fry is satirical of certain entrenched ways of thinking (see Table 2).

Table 2

Internet Memes Chosen from Facebook and meme aggregator websites

Serial Number	Title	Image URL	Image Description	Text
1	Futurama Fry	http://s.quickmeme.com/img/8f/8fc3162d32c7e051f086e0b5b18c443365deb6892f3fe5bc6f2677bba3447afd.jpg ²	Headshot of the character Fry looking from the left to the right of the image; his eyes are narrowed,	Not sure if trolling/ / or just stupid

			his posture slouched, his hair unkempt, against a plain dark blue background featuring straight lines.	
2	Coloring Kid	https://www.memecreator.org/meme/i-fucking-love-coloring668/ ³	Medium shot of a young boy in a green shirt. His right hand holds a pencil and his left is placed on an open book on which he is working. He is looking downwards, against a background featuring two people, one standing and one sitting.	I fucking love// coloring
3	Unhelpful High School Teacher	https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/newsfeed/000/172/249/352183.jpg ⁴	Medium shot of a long-haired, smiling lady, with extended arms, one	May I ask a question ?// “You just did”

		pointing at the viewer and the other towards a map in the background .	
4	https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/10447633_1041054229242898_267086359983928685_n.png?nc_cat=0&oh=330a69821e63c4b103b76bd7aa97d057&oe=5C35D245 ⁵	‘Unhelpful high school teacher’ image macro stacked on top of a photo of a student highlighting a book and finally featuring a Yao Ming face below.	Teacher be like// highligh t the importa nt points// And I’m like// Sure

The phrasal template in particular is noteworthy for its existentialist connotations and is also indicative of Kohlberg’s (1976) stages of moral reasoning. While the narrator aspires to be a “better person,” the exact definition of “a better person” is not elaborated on, leaving its meaning in the abstract. Underlying assumptions of the definition of “a better person” are best understood in contrast to the second half of the phrasal template, which highlights more routine and functional dimensions of literacy. The material processes of getting good grades and a good job and buying food are contrasted with the relational process of being a better person. The humor in the infinitive “to not die” expresses in its more sinister sense “the anxieties induced by control society” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 261), where surveillance is ubiquitous. While the modality of the phrasal template seems objective, the Internet meme as

a whole parodies the harshness of its certainty. The phrasal template suggests a certain mechanical way of thinking in talking about the notion of “death” in a flippant way that almost borders on black humor. Furthermore, it also parodies the discourse of survival prevalent in the current economic neoliberal condition, in which young people unable to cope with educational demands are increasingly and implicitly encouraged to see themselves as pragmatists who must depend on their school grades to thrive and survive (Brunila, 2014). While neoliberal discourses of well-being seek to shape young people as economically productive subjects, the Internet meme, in parodying such a notion, conveys the idea that they are more human than mere cogs in the economic machinery.

Foregrounding the “humanity” of the act depicted, the Internet meme further reinforces its message through the male character in the top panel. Based on Barthes’ assertion that poses signify values, ideas, and identities (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 74), the male character, with his hunched posture and creased shirt, is juxtaposed with Fry’s appearance in the image macro, suggesting similarity of identity. While the background remains blurry, the hierarchies of salience in the image foreground his individuality over the education setting he is situated in. The pixelated blurriness of the top panel is contrasted with the clearly typed Impact font draws upon discourses of digital image processing and reinforces the “Internet Ugly Aesthetic” (Douglas, 2014) as one of the defining features of the Internet meme. Simultaneously, this Internet Ugly Aesthetic in the top panel is also contrasted with the relatively sharper, clearer image macro below. The juxtaposition of the brightly colored image macro with the duller, pixelated top image results in bathos, or failed attempt at sublimity, to achieve humorous affect.

In contrast, the second meme features a sharp photograph of a male with his eyes closed. The caption “Every time I see people sleeping during exams” suggests that the student

is sleeping. Unlike the meme in item 5 (see Table 3), in which the pronoun “I” is visualized by Fry, the male character here visualizes “people.” Internal monologue belongs to the observer, who is represented by Fry, a stance that contrasts with that in item 5 (see Table 3). The use of non-standard English is noteworthy for its subversion of politically correct expression. In Singapore, the government’s stance on the creole Singlish has for a long time been unfavorable in view of economic necessities. The use of standard English, on the other hand, is encouraged (Liew, 2011, p. 116).

In this light, it is interesting to note the prominence of Singlish in the meme. “Sibeh,” a Hokkien term meaning “very,” connoting frustration, is contrasted with the defeatism implied by “sua,” a Singlish term that “indicates or expresses contentment with whatever outcome the situation provides” (Urban Dictionary, 2011). Lexical choices in texts indicate “levels of authority and co-membership with the audience” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 42); the use of Hokkien terms and the subjective modality conveyed by the use of the personal pronoun “I” establishes a convivial rather than authoritative relationship with respect to the audience, whether they can understand Singlish, or not.

While both Internet memes appropriate the “Fry” face, it draws on discourses associated with *Futurama*, including moral dilemmas, existentialism, and satirical humor in the context of a technologically advanced society such as Singapore. It also highlights the anxieties and existence of human emotions in relation to the high educational expectations of the role of the student in contemporary first world society.

In contrast to these memes, a different class of image macro (popular in late 2014) appropriates the image macro of a young black boy, identified on meme aggregator websites by the ambiguous term *coloring kid* and shared widely. The choice of label, a pun suggesting the “kid” is “colored” even as he colors on the paper, brings to fore the notion of “color” in

the image itself. Unlike the Fry face image macro, which suggests discourses of technological innovation and advancement, the choice of a photograph of the boy in the *coloring kid* image macro anchors it in reality. While the boy's head tilts towards his right arm, his eyes are fixed upon his work and his tense facial features and open mouth suggest intense involvement with writing. Hierarchies of salience are created in which the primary focus is on the boy while the background is blurry and other characters face away from him. The use of the colloquial, vulgar, vernacular term "fucking" in the caption, when juxtaposed with the image of the young boy, is used for ironic and humorous effect. The vernacular creativity exhibited here is "not elite or institutionalized; nor is it extraordinary or spectacular, but rather is identified on the basis of its commonness" (Burgess, 2007, p. 32).

The Singaporean meme featuring the image macro has two layers of textual data: a student essay and the caption of the Internet meme as a whole. Student voice is discernible in the photograph of a lined paper with handwriting that gets more illegible from top to bottom, indicative of the discourse of schooling. Notably, the phrase "another cause of conflict" is repeated, as are "tension" and "conflict." The disorderliness of the illegible handwriting contributes to the discourse of conflict connoted by the image. Lines conspicuously and clearly divide the meme into sections; rectangular shapes as depicted in the series of stacked images on the right indicate rational thought (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 54). The second layer of text is evident in the use of the bold Impact font in the caption—"How a student's essay transforms when answering structured essay questions [*sic*]" (see Table 3).

Table 3

Singaporean Internet memes featuring global image macros

No.	Global Image Macro	Remixed Internet Meme URL	Date Posted	Image Description	Text
5	Futurama Fry	https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/10624863_1022900927724895_2366212390544530730_n.jpg?nc_cat=0&oh=a0d199daf9a4d1008b0862ebc2d2ed93&oe=5C251F5C ⁶	21 September 2014	Medium shot, male character writing on paper, with a hunched posture, juxtaposed over an image macro of Futurama Fry.	Every time I study, Not sure if I am studying to be a better person in life or studying to do well in exams// or studying to get good grades to get a good job// to buy food and to not die.
6		https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/10464405_1025408500807471_7745935344063389666_n.png?nc_cat=0&oh=cfa775815285e35ccd9f57d601cd73d8&oe=5C27277C ⁷	26 September 2014	Medium shot, male character sleeping on a table with a pen in hand, with students also in focus in the background, over a Futurama Fry image macro	Every time I see people sleeping during exams// Not sure if the guy finds the paper easy and finish sibe early// or the guy think too difficult than just sleep sua
7	Coloring Kid	https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/10505328_1028866087128379_9137628200665260378_n.png?nc_cat=0&oh=808421bfdfaab2c9126626ce0f430826&oe=5C25D991 ⁸	03 October 2014	Screenshot of a student's exam paper, medium shot of three boys on the left, including 'coloring kid'.	How a student's handwriting transforms when answering structured

				essay questions
8	https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/1454899_1036859306329057_6183429676595856454_n.png?_nc_cat=0&oh=89dce6ddfa72f8421f59fbc319567eb&oe=5C35284A ⁹	13 October 2014	A series of three image macros stacked on top of each other, featuring ‘coloring kid’, an unknown baby with glasses, and a Yao Ming image macro	2 months before math exams// chiong all the practice papers ah!!!// 2 weeks before math exams// The night before math exams// I think I just memorise all the formulas sua!
9	https://scontent-sin6-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/10509740_1041471102534544_2306622801210552771_n.png?_nc_cat=0&oh=ce849e0e37636a70030b7b383f235909&oe=5C22344D ¹⁰	21 October 2014	Two ‘coloring kid’ image macros stacked on top of each other	During exam, all the students be like// have to finish the paper before time is up!// After exams, all the teachers be like// have to mark finish this pile of papers and try not to kill myself looking at all the stupid answers!!

The text, when viewed along with the photograph of the student’s essay, suggests that the meme is about the change in a student’s handwriting in a written response to a question on a test. The sentence fragment beginning with “How” and an accompanying image that explains the text, is common in discourses surrounding Internet memes and serves to anchor the humor in the image as a whole. The fair-skinned boy in the top panel is focused upon, smiling directly at the audience, exemplifying the kind of “demand image” that Kress and van

Leeuwen (1996, p. 124) discuss; it establishes “an imaginary relationship” with the viewer that demands a reciprocal reaction. Machin and Mayr (2012) cite Fairclough’s view of the hidden ideological loadings underlying the use of metaphor; one could say the shining trophy in front of the boy serves as a metaphor for achievement and good performance. The trophy’s relative blurriness in contrast to the boy foreground the boy’s confidence in his ability to succeed over the actual achievement; he is clearly marked out as an individual. This is in direct contrast to the two other boys, who are depicted looking down and surrounded by other people and are therefore collectivized. The humor in the Internet meme arises from references to the pressures of performing in an examination-oriented culture, with contrasts between rationality and emotion as expressed through the facial expressions of the boys in the photograph.

The next meme in the series features three images stacked together; thus stacked, the rectangular panels connote order and rationality. The *coloring kid* image macro is appropriated to symbolize the Singaporean student. Text on the upper-left corner of each panel in the image provides the context, while text on the right corner represents the student’s corresponding internal monologue. Another layer of text is discernible in the appropriation of mathematical terms in the third panel. While the *coloring kid* depicts the fervent intention to work on practice papers, this heightened emotion is accentuated by the appropriation of the Hokkien phrase “chiong” which means “to rush.” The second image lends a softer, serious, nostalgic quality by virtue of its sepia coloring. Furthermore, the youthful naivete of the baby is in direct contrast to the book it holds and the glasses it wears. The sepia tone of the image conveys a sense of agedness and maturity, corresponding to the somber tone of the accompanying sentence, and the incongruous juxtaposition creates some humor.

The bottom panel marks a return to Singlish with the appropriation of the dismissive

Singlish term “sua”; it shows a stark contrast between black and white and contains a popular image macro featuring a contour drawing of the smiling face of professional American basketball player Yao Ming. The image macro “is typically used as a reaction face to convey a dismissive attitude” (Know Your Meme, n.d.) and is associated with the slang phrase “Bitch please,” usually uttered in reaction to an ignorant comment or provocative comment. Blommaert (2015) calls attention to image macro’s complexity as a sign. According to him, “the choice of the image—entirely unremarkable in itself—as well as the collocation of image and caption appear entirely arbitrary, and have no ‘etymological’ meaning for users of the meme.” (p. 19) Arguably, however, the appropriation of the Yao Ming image macro provides a relatable and recognizable expression for most young netizens and incorporates the discourses of sports, sportsmanship, competition, and “coolness.”

Noteworthy, too, in the meme is the subtle suggestion, through the use of red and green, to Christmas season, when viewed in context of the caption, notably “the night before math exams.” The loss in chromaticity moving through the meme is arguably indicative of the implicit shift from a holistic manner of studying, suffused as the *coloring kid* image macro is with color, to an anticlimactic, “colder,” mechanical memorization of formulas. Greyscale, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 233) is the scale of value, symbolizing the fundamental light and dark of human experience. The progression towards such a realization is further underscored by the sequence of actions and depictions of the student in relation to the objects that surround the student—with a writing instrument, actively involved in the learning process, followed by the student with a book, symbolizing a more passive absorption of information, and finally, smiling, without any extraneous parts whatsoever. The discursive practices involved are problem-solving, prioritization, and rote memorization as he or she goes through the processes. These practices are embedded in the

larger social practices regarding student voice and the expression of their emotions online. Viewed in the context of Christmas season, text and image reflect common societal expectations and practices surrounding the religious festival, which has been secularized and commodified in modern times, both in Singapore as well as in other countries. This secularization and commodification have stripped the season of its religious and spiritual significance for many, and thus parallels the routines students must go through before their exams, where grades, and the need to memorize and regurgitate information, are prioritized above actual learning.

Finally, the last meme I want to discuss, which appropriates the coloring boy image macros, is different from the others in its introduction of the teacher figure into the meme. Appropriation of the image macro to represent both student and teacher leads to similarity of structure of text in both images. The caption appropriates a snowclone variation of memetic vernacular, specifically “Bitches Be Like...” (Know Your Meme, n. d.), usually used as “a preface to describe various clichéd behaviors and catchphrases associated with a specific group of people.” The words in bold provide circumstantial detail while the smaller texts indicate inner monologue; similarity is discernible in sentence structure and wording. Thus, both the teacher and the student in the caption are represented to be both separate yet similar. Depicting a teacher in this manner consciously situates her role in relation to the student in the educational context.

In the local meme appropriating the Unhelpful High School Teacher, intertextuality is evident, as is the orchestration of multiple modes in the image. Intertextuality, as Fairclough (2003) saw it, is a matter of recontextualization, where texts or meanings are extracted from their original contexts and introduced into new ones (p. 51). In the context of the meme,

“Teacher be like” is a snowclone variation of the phrase from memetic vernacular, and “Bitches be like” originates in African American Vernacular English; parallels are drawn between the teacher and “bitch.” The text visualizes the global image macro the “Unhelpful High School Teacher,” which was originally associated with captions describing “lazy or irresponsible teaching methods, as well as cliché[d] expressions and retorts frequently used by teachers in interacting with students” (Know Your Meme, n.d.).

In the analysis of the Internet meme it is worth noting Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) conception of a direct gaze, which purportedly fulfils the function “demand image” and serves to elicit a reaction from the viewer. The demand conveyed by the female teacher’s direct gaze works simultaneously with the hierarchies of salience (Machin & Mayr, 2012) to convey its intended meaning. The light shining in from the left illuminates the teacher as the subject of the image, and the blurring of the background suggests the prominence of the teacher as an individual over subject matter.

It is worthy to note the portrayal of the character as a minority and rather exoticized positioning of her as a role model for not just members of her community but to a wider generic audience as well. Indeed, as Ding (2015) found, many Internet memes depicting Asian Americans often portrayed them as “the model minority” and cultural Other in the United States, emphasizing “the cultural, language and behavioral differences between Asian/Asian Americans and mainstream Americans, as well as generalized Asian and Asian Americans being identical” (p.75). In the original image, the teacher’s appearance demarcates her as a model minority in the North American context. In the global image macro featuring the Unhelpful High School Teacher, the literal interpretation of “May I ask a question?” momentarily silences the student’s request, reinforcing the teacher’s epistemic authority

within the classroom. The meaning potential of the open and direct eye contact lies in its silencing effect rather than an invitation to speak up; with the student asking the question absent from the image, the viewer is positioned as the student. From the student's perspective, the image serves to highlight what the student finds contradictory in the classroom.

Humor in the memes arises from the “incongruity between human intelligence and habitual or mechanical behavior” (Jenkins, 2014, p. 461); for example, while the instruction to highlight is clear, the student is unsure, given his or her level of knowledge and intelligence, what the important points are. Yet the student's willingness to comply supersedes confusion in highlighting the entire page. Deontic modality (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 187) is discernible in the instruction, which is then parodied by the appropriation of the global image macro of the Unhelpful High School Teacher. The students' emotions are acknowledged and symbolized by the “Yao Ming Face” contour drawing, while annoyance is evident in the capitalization of the word “SURE.” Direct communication between the image participants is not observed, and both remain separate from each other as teacher and student, conveying the idea of the local school teacher and student as separate and independent individuals. It establishes the local teacher as an authority figure focused only on his or her individual role as a teacher rather than actively or overly involved in the students' understanding of subject matter. The students are portrayed as left to their own devices not only in their interpretation of the teacher's instructions but also in their own learning journey.

Insights and Implications

Before exploring the implications of the study, it is worth revisiting the research question: how are sociocultural meanings reflected in both the linguistic and visual modes in Singaporean Internet memes? The second part of the question asked about the role of Internet

memes in the expanding literacy curricula of the contemporary classroom. To briefly summarize the answer to the first part of the research question, I turn first to Bateman (2014), who cites Cohn's idea of composite signals in such art, which suggests that pictorial literacy and traditional literacy are not enough—otherwise, there is the risk of its instantaneous consumption as a single source of information. By using paneled sequential art in juxtaposing global image macros with other images and text, Singaporean Internet memes connoted high levels of complexity, not just in intertextual references but also interdiscursive references—where there is relationship between the different discourses (Fairclough, 2003). For example, not only did the Fry image macro connote progressive discourses of technological innovation through its multimodal design, the Singaporean Internet memes that appropriated it showed evidence of Kohlberg's (1976) stages of moral reasoning and Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of vertical elongation, where dominant ideas were often on the top half of the image macro and Internet meme and the less dominant ideas were at the bottom. This concept was well used to eloquently express the opposing degrees of emotion exemplified in the appropriation of succinct Hokkien terms like “sibeh” and “sua.” Furthermore, the *coloring kid* and Unhelpful High School Teacher image macro were also creatively appropriated in Singaporean Internet memes alongside other images and shapes to connote emotions and ideas that added to the meaning of the Internet meme as a whole. Through the image macros, the Singaporean Internet memes conveyed the pressures faced by both students and teachers in the contemporary educational system. Rich intertextual references and interdiscursivity were observed in the use of extraneous texts like song lyrics, snowclones, phrasal templates and similar manifestations of global memetic vernacular and American pop culture. All global image macros work synergistically with multiple images, texts, and shapes to convey coherent and multi-layered meanings.

In terms of multimodal design, the Internet memes often exhibited Douglas' (2014) notion of the "Internet Ugly Aesthetic," an intentionally "ugly" style running through online content and culture, the appropriation of which online communities strive to ensure lies outside the domains of corporate and political interest. "Ugly" refers to phenomena—thoughts, emotions and situations—that, while acceptable on a private level, become problematic—or "ugly"—when exposed to society at large by virtue of their unpolished nature. The Internet Ugly Aesthetic pervades much of Internet meme culture. Even phenomena previously deemed unprofessional, like pixelization in images, constitute the Internet Ugly Aesthetic. In the Internet memes, the insertion of languages other than standard English (including Internet language, Singlish, and local languages and dialects), is arguably "a subversive political statement that is cued as vernacular because it pops out at its audience as alternate from the very text in which it has been embedded" (Howard, 2008), thus adding to rather than detracting from the meaning to the overall multimodal construction, by being a contrast to the text in which it is embedded. The establishment of such an Ugly Aesthetic has contributed to the high visibility of many Internet memes. Appropriations of global image macros to ordinary situations in local Internet memes enhance these memes' "cool" factor; Zappavigna (2012) notes that "participating in inside jokes can increase what Lankshear and Knobel refer to as one's 'cool quotient'" (p.101). The nationwide inside joke (Milner, 2013), when juxtaposed contiguously with a globally recognized image macro, cements its status as an acceptable Internet meme.

The Singaporean Internet meme thus is a prime example of such a joke—told in a "marriage of tongues." Chun (2016) discusses the commodification of the English language, especially in its British, American, Canadian and Australian varieties, and suggests that the preference of such varieties of English positions it as an "integral ingredient to an identity

invested in global success.” If this commodification is considered to be part of the socioeconomic condition, Singaporean Internet memes offer resistance in the use of Singlish, Mandarin, and dialect in some Internet memes. While such use is at times exclusionary to a global audience, it also rejects naturalized discourses and the privileging of Standard English as reified by neoliberal discourses and can be seen to foster a Singaporean identity among its audience. In this way, Singaporean Internet memes, while offering resistance, inadvertently and perhaps innocently also “enact the monstrosity of neoliberalism” (Whelan, 2015) by implicitly assuming that the target audience understands the non-standard English in the memes.

The use of vernacular also adds to the “cool” factor in Internet memes. For example, in discussing the popularity and use of the “Yao Ming” face, Blommaert (2015) recounts his interview with several male Belgian teenagers who all disagreed about the meaning of the image macro but agreed on the fact that it was “cool” to use it. While Blommaert (2015) claimed that the use of such memes involves no consideration of etymological meanings for the users of the Internet meme, it may be worth exploring the etymological meanings in light of discussions of identity to resolve complex issues through the process of dialogue. Further research could delve more deeply into the meanings and effects of the representations of various identities in Singaporean Internet memes.

Regarding the second part of the research question, Internet memes do have a significant role to play in the expanding literacy curricula of the contemporary classroom. One of the primary concerns of an educator is what goes on in the daily lives and social and cultural worlds of their young people. A young generation of digital natives—people exposed to and interacting regularly with digital artifacts in the online visual culture—would undoubtedly have some exposure to, and engage in, digital literacy practices, including

interactions with memes. The intertextuality and interdiscursivity in Internet memes, and their aesthetic appeal, can aid educators in the teaching of subjects like Art and Mathematics. For example, Greenwald (2007) highlighted *Futurama* activities for use in the classroom, including discussions about the writers and their educational qualification, and the representation of mathematics in popular culture—including memes—as well as activities related to *Futurama*'s references to mathematics, including computational number theory and geometry. These activities could also include the use of *Futurama* image macros to highlight “everyday” creativity, mathematical thinking and the visual grammar of the memes. Students can get to see beauty and structure and even discern subject-specific academic discourse in “everyday” digital artifacts like memes. They could perhaps find value in creating their own memes from particular stills and reflect on the artistic and visual appeal of the memes as well as the meanings that are conveyed through the memes.

Internet memes could be introduced to students to teach them critical literacy skills. A crucial problem, however, in teaching critical literacy lies in the risk of pedagogical imposition (Luke, 2012). When teachers enforce their ideas of memes to students, the subversive potential of memes may be nullified. Approaches to critical literacy could move beyond simple textual analysis to include the “social practices, ideas, affinities and new forms of social participation and cultural production.” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 225) These include digital literacy practices of liking, sharing and creating Internet memes on meme creation websites, remixing images, and using photo-editing software; dealing with issues of identity in digital texts. For Singapore, the issue that this may bring up is the more equitable representation of various identities in Internet memes, while still remaining relevant and appealing to the audience that views these Internet memes on a regular basis. In particular, research could focus on the impact of local Internet memes on those most

vulnerable to their influence—for example, young people in their formative years. An indepth investigation into young people’s digital literacy practices and participation in the vernacular web, especially in relation to memetic visual and memetic vernacular, could lead to further understanding about the enigmatic and fast-changing nature of the Internet meme world. It is hoped that the process will ideally contribute to the understanding and improved creation of Internet memes in the context of visual culture that continues to proliferate online.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study used methods of multimodal critical discourse analysis to look at Internet memes. CDA is not immune to criticism. Notable critics such as Widdowson (1995; 1998), Garzone and Santulli (2004), and Stubbs (1997) point out the shortcomings of CDA, namely its ambition in terms of rectifying social problems, its interpretative rather than analytical nature, its selectivity in terms of a small quantity of qualitative data, and its lack of focus on cognition. Suggested methods for overcoming these shortcomings include the use of corpus studies and ethnography to complement Critical Discourse Analytic methods. However, these methods were beyond the scope of the current study and therefore this researcher addressed criticisms of CDA by being more self-reflexive and critical in analysis wherever possible.

While this study was an attempt to pin down and break apart the meanings of some pertinent Singaporean Internet memes in relation to education, it was not exhaustive and may not be generalizable to all Singaporean Internet memes. However, as an exploratory study, this paper aimed to be a preliminary step in the evolving scholarship on Internet memes in the Singaporean context. Further studies could delve more into detail with regard to the reception of Internet memes as digital, visual artifacts.

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