

THE POWER OF **MEME** DISCOURSE:

SHAPING A NEW DEMOCRACY
IN POPULAR CULTURE

A Dissertation by Nadine Nella Gan

GAN17527272

BA (Hons) Creative Direction for Fashion
19/20 CHS Dissertation | Matthew Crowley

I, Nadine, certify that this is an original piece of work. I have acknowledged all sources and citations.
No section of this essay has been plagiarised.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	03
METHODOLOGY	05
<u>PART 1: MEMES IN POPULAR CULTURE</u>	
CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF MEMES	07
CHAPTER 2: INTERNET MEMES	09
2.1 PARTICIPATION	13
2.2 RESISTANCE	13
CHAPTER 3: REPRESENTATION	15
CHAPTER 4: POPULAR CULTURE	18
<u>PART 2: CASE STUDY</u>	
<i>GAME OF THRONES' #DEMTHRONES</i>	<i>22</i>
5.1 INTRODUCTION TO GAME OF THRONES	22
5.2 BLACK TWITTER	23
5.3 #DEMTHRONES	24
5.4 #DEMTHRONES MEMES	26
CONCLUSION	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY	35
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	38

INTRODUCTION

In today's world of globalisation and connectivity, it has become easier for citizens of the world to communicate, connect and share information with one another, regardless of distance.

Technological advancement has granted mankind this privilege and it has disrupted many industries as a result. Popular culture is not an exception.

There are 7.7 billion people in the world and of that, 3.5 billion have access to the internet (Roser et al, 2019). This means the majority of the population has the ability to broadcast their individual opinions online, namely through social networks. As a result, internet citizens find each other who share the same voice and eventually form a community online that “[shapes] narratives across great distances, leaping geopolitical boundaries to drive conversations in other countries’ media” (Mina, 2019, p. 76). The internet has challenged the total control industries had over the contents that are being shown and said to the public. These communities now are harder for powerful figures to ignore, they have become a body of influence with a unified discourse powerful enough to trigger cultural shifts.

These ‘voices’ are often shared in various formats; audio, visual, text or a combination of all three, and internet memes is one the main transmitters, mainly among today's younger generation; Gen Zs and Millennials. Internet memes are user-generated bite-sized nuggets that come in the format of images, texts or videos that often carry a humorous and satirical tone of voice. They propagate from one person to another via the internet, mainly on social media. “The remarkable growth

of social media has amplified the public's appetite for popular culture products." (Burns 2009, p. 1). Relatable in nature due to its satirical element, memes have great potential to be shared and eventually go viral, making them an unlikely powerful medium of online communication capable of shaping a new democracy in popular culture, where there is a rise of co-creativity from the no-longer passive audience.

In this essay, I will introduce the origins of memes according to Richard Dawkins, a biologist who coined the term 'memes'. Then, I will further explain how the term 'memes' has become a powerful communication tool for internet users by referencing various academic texts focusing on internet memes, the internet and social media. This essay will then highlight the importance of the role of memes in today's popular culture, which I will discuss, in reference of Stuart Hall's *Popular Arts* theoretical text. I will be focusing on the television series *Game of Thrones* and the memes created based on the show that were publicized and shared by the black community #DemThrones on Twitter. Through this case study, I will adopt a more focused perspective to illustrate the discursive power internet memes hold through intertextuality, or in other words, through the relationship they maintain with other relevant works of content on the internet or current events.

METHODOLOGY

Due to internet memes being a visual medium, I will study the discursive manner of internet memes mainly by conducting visual analysis. In contemporary society memes can be “[dismissed] as low culture, but their very accessibility is a transformative change from media consumption to media creation and public sharing.” (Mina 2019, p. 25). Although internet memes may be far from the traditional material for research, this essay aims to show that they are a worth the discussion. Lucy Rose (2016, p. 2) supports the importance of visual analysis further by starting that “All the different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world. These images are never transparent windows onto the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways.”

It is also important to highlight the gap between the speed of production of academic literature and the rapid evolution of the digital culture. New waves of trends occur almost on a daily basis, especially on social media which includes *Black Twitter*, a community that came together in 2010. Thus, it is important to address the lack of of academic sources that discuss relevant theories to the topic of this essay. Numerous recent online articles have also been used as reference and source of research as they provide a more updated review on today’s internet society.

Discourses are articulated through all sorts of visual and verbal images and texts, specialized or not, and also through the practices that those languages permit. The diversity of forms through which a discourse can be articulated means that intertextuality is important to understanding discourse

Rose (2016, p. 142)

PART 1

MEMES IN POPULAR CULTURE

CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF MEMES

To understand the power of the discourse of memes, it is important to briefly study the origin, history and evolution of the medium. 'Memes' is a term coined in a book titled *The Selfish Gene* written by Dawkins. He was originally investigating why humans behave in a selfish manner by prioritizing the pursuit of their own interests, and secondly, whether the biology in human genes plays a part in this attitude. Hence, the title of the book (2016).

Through his research, he also studied how culture is being transmitted horizontally and vertically in society; How lowbrow and highbrow culture spreads throughout the masses. As Dawkins looked further into the human genes, he learned that they have to be preserved as accurately as possible through generations. Humanity survives through constant mutation of the same genes. However, culture behaves in the opposite manner. Dawkins (2016, p. 245) stated that "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution." Change is vital for the survival of culture and Dawkins had identified that 'memes' are a type of gene that mutates based on imitation and develops further along the way by absorbing new attitudes, forms and ideas. There are fundamental traits of a meme that would be preserved but as it travels through, it adjusts itself to the new environment.

Dawkins then explained that memes are applicable beyond genetics and can be applied to any medium including music, fashion, ideas or catchphrases (2016). In their early days, memes

functioned as a parasite to these mediums. They serve as by-products and imitations of the original version. Though today's memes have evolved beyond that, as regular genes have, they have seamlessly integrated to the digital ecosystem, becoming a regular element of online conversations spanning a wide range of topics.

CHAPTER 2

INTERNET MEMES

Internet memes are simplified commentaries of the world made by netizens – or internet citizens. They “shape and reflect general mindsets” (Shifman, 2014, p. 4). At first sight, they might seem comparable to a simple, harmless joke that may not carry a deeper meaning. As Shifman (2014, p. 18) writes, “Although [memes] spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level.” One reason why this is true is because there is never a final product when it comes to internet memes. As memes are distributed through the Internet, they have been proven to go through an endless cycle of replication and alteration with a twist of the next user’s agenda, creating an imitation of the original form. The artistic quality in internet memes play a very small role in its success, more often than not its success is proportional to the quantity of its spreading on the internet instead. “Through satire and repetition, social media users are able to shape and define a narrative, and through intentional overproduction [of memes], they start arriving at narratives that have the potential to resonate more broadly” (Mina, 2019, p. 75)

There are two main paths an internet meme could undergo for further replication; mimicry or remix. When an internet meme is being mimicked by another user, it is simply imitated and recreated through no added artistic influence. This form of meme-creating hits close to parody. An apt example would be two individuals recreating the world renowned entertainingly funny *Charlie Bit Me* video (See Figure 1). Not only were internet citizens amused by the two children, they were inspired to recreate the video, adults included (See Figure 2). The original video features

two brothers at a young age, where the younger brother — who is a teething baby named Charlie — seems to enjoy biting his older brother's index finger. This video unintentionally started a wave of trend across the internet where some would argue the parody versions involving adults were funnier; As it showcased a displaced juxtaposition of age maturity and childlike manners.



Figure 1. *Charlie Bit Me* video screenshot

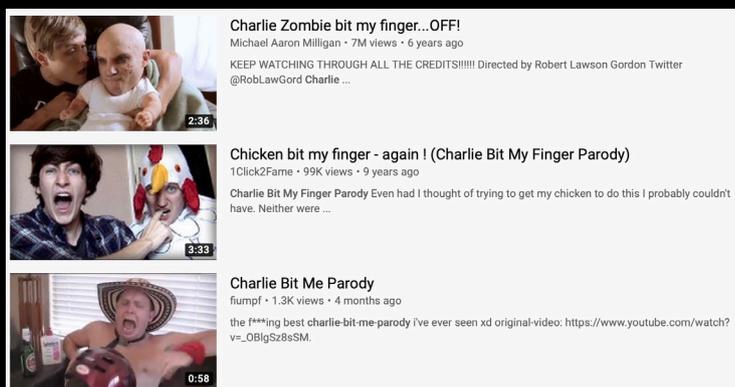


Figure 2. *Charlie Bit Me* parodies on *Youtube*

Remix, on the other hand, involves more artistic interpretation and at times, advanced technological manipulation. Take for instance the *Roll Safe* meme (See Figure 3) of a man pointing his index finger onto his temple, with a facial expression that suggests he had just thought of a brilliant idea. This meme is normally used to poke fun at poor decisions. Versions or reinterpretations of this meme include “You can’t be broke if you don’t check your bank account” and “Your dreams can’t be destroyed if you don’t have any.” This method of repackaging a meme provides more space for the next user’s personal agenda by reappropriating a visual content with specific captions, which is in contrast to mimicry — where the original version undergoes a simple reenactment.

Shifman has identified a simple trait that would help increase a meme’s popularity, which is being easily interpreted. A case that he used as an example was a veteran graffiti art launched in World War 2 *Kilroy Was Here* (See Figure 4) that quickly became viral. He stated that “the slogan’s ‘real’ meaning was mysterious and open to interpretation... it allowed each person to endow it with his or her own preferred meaning. Moreover, this lack of obvious meaning made the meme hard



Figure 3. A *Roll Safe Twitter* meme variant



Figure 4. *Kilroy Was Here* graffiti art on a World War II memorial site

to contradict and, at the same time, enhanced people's engagement with it as they tried to solve the mystery" (2014, p. 26). Denisova (2019) supported this theory further by stating that "Memes are incomplete. They require your knowledge to finish the sentence". Internet memes are not only passed along as individual entities, they relate and communicate to each other through various ways, including the aforementioned intertextuality; which is understood as the discursive manner of an image or a text's meaning not depending solely on itself but along with meanings brought from other texts or images (Rose, 2016, p. 142). This manner of individual internet memes coming together as one body of communication is adopted from how the internet itself functions. As stated by Slevin (2000, p. 76) "All forms of mediated communication, including the internet, contribute to a sphere in which knowledge is shared and opinion is formed."

As Hall (2018, p. 276) suggested "Teenage culture is a contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured; it is an area of self-expression for the young". Although this source was originally written in the 1960s, Hall's explanation of the younger generation still applies very well to today's youth culture and it is even further amplified in the digital sphere. There is no defined age limit as to who can create and view internet memes, as it is accessible by anyone with an internet connection, the main audience that they appeal to is the younger generations. This is perhaps because their vibrant, yet confused youthfulness gives more life to the often-self-deprecating internet meme contents.



Figure 5. The *Hampsterdance* artwork

There is still an on-going debate as to what the first internet meme was, but the *Hampsterdance* (See Figure 5) could be argued as one of the earliest examples. It was a website created 20 years ago by a then art student Deidre LaCarte from Nanaimo B.C. The website hosted a song and an animation of hamsters dancing which was replicated into GIFs and images. Eventually these dancing hamsters travelled through people's emails, forums and chatrooms. The virality it gained turned the Hampsterdance into an internet phenomenon - a meme. It was then broadcasted beyond the Web and into a television commercial, simply due to the nonsensical attitude it bears (Collins, 2018). Marshall (1998) puts forward the idea that "Infectiousness assumes an importance far greater than that of attributes that may well have greater long-term value such as utility or authority." Internet memes behave in an unpredictable manner and there is still not a clear-cut formula that could guarantee an internet meme's successful virality.

As social media platforms evolved, so did memes; The rise and fall of various forums, blogs and social networks, from *4Chan* to *Instagram*, have affected the appearance, behaviour and most of all, the purpose of memes. They originally served the purpose as nonsensical visual decorations but now have evolved into a platform of itself that enables the people to affect change over their discursive conversations on organisations and authority figures (Shifman 2014, pp. 2-7). This participatory medium allows today's consumers to play beyond the role of spectatorship and into

the influencing roles in the production of popular culture. Burns (2009, p. 75) puts forward the idea that “[Meme] practice views the original content creation as the mere starting point for what happens to it once it is embraced.” Internet memes have diminished or at least redefined what the final product is - as there almost never is.

Through my research, it is safe to suggest that internet memes have formed genres within themselves based on humour, topic, stylistic style and the intended audience. However, throughout these vast differences in the memetic world, I have found structural regularities and identified that there are three purposes in the discursive manner internet memes now serve for digital natives, in relation to popular culture; Participation, resistance and representation.

2.1 Participation

A social phenomenon or meme trend occurs when a large number of online users participate in recreating or imitating the original idea. Shifman (2014, p. 26) stated that “people strove to join a circle of individuals who ‘shared the joke’”. Internet memes could be consumed as inside jokes amongst those who participate however are then shared in a public landscape. An example would be the image of Canadian singer Michael Bublé emerging out of a cave only during Christmas time. The individuals who are familiar with the singer and his work will understand the joke and be able to indulge in the humour collectively. Some of those who consume the meme may be inclined to share the meme to their social media followers or privately to their friends and family through a different channel as it also demonstrates their sense of humour.

2.2 Resistance

By repackaging an internet meme through mimicry, the internet user is not only recreating a meme, but they are also participating into the growth of the meme’s virality. Slevin (2000, p. 90) discussed the role of internet in human connectivity and stated that “In late modernity, we are increasingly engaged in forms of social interaction which are becoming intensely reflexive and open-ended.”

Due to its participatory nature, internet memes offer a form of resistance for the people on a level that has never been met by an underground level mode of communication. As mentioned before, when internet users recreate memes, they interpret and incorporate their own creativity into their versions. Thus, it goes beyond just the art of self-expression and as well gives the users a sense of ownership on their stance. Slevin (2000, p. 96) states that “No matter how fragmented human experience has become, under reflexive modernisation most of us live in the same ‘discursive space ... there has never been a time when information about current events and problems has been more publicly debated, in a chronic fashion, than in the present day”. Not only in popular culture, but internet memes have also been utilized for political agendas both by the people and the government. Denisova (2019) focused on the role of internet memes in Russian politics. The Kremlin learned that instead of trying and failing to seize the production of memes in Russia, they decided to create their own memes that would create a counternarrative against the memes created to challenge the government. Mina (2019) discusses the danger of meme-making due to the freedom and accessibility it comes with

In a world of remixing and mashups, there is rarely stasis in our media, and so frequently, when one group generates a meme that resonates widely, a group in opposition can generate a remix that enters the discourse. Sometimes this means challenging the auspices of power... This lack of stability in meme culture migrates upward into media and political discourse, and it shapes culture, sometimes amplifying long-standing divisions.

Mina (2019, p. 163)

which is further supported by Foucault (1979) “where there is power, there is resistance ... a multiplicity of points of resistance”.

CHAPTER 3

REPRESENTATION

Along with participation and resistance, internet memes have also become a visual medium for online users to create further representations of themselves, or a community they identify with. It is important to discuss the theory behind representation as it plays a significant role in the visual analyzations conducted in the case study, that will be discussed in the chapters to come. As Hall (2013) has identified “Representation connects meaning and language to culture.” Language is the bridge the world uses to convey messages and signify meaning. Whether it is in a visual, audial or textual format, language operates on a representational system. We make sense of things based on the understanding we share on the recognised signs and symbols. Representation works in three different ways, which has been defined by Hall as reflective, intentional and constructionist (2013, p. 1).

A reflective representation could arguably be seen as the simplest form of representation. It is when the true meaning from the subject in focus is being mirrored onto the visual content. There is not much room for interpretation in this approach as the message intended carries a meaning that has already been predefined by the society. Through each reflective representation, the subject goes through an imitation. This links closely to the root word of memes, mimesis that originated from Ancient Greece which translates to the art of imitation. This approach represents subjects based on a mutual cultural understanding.

Meanwhile, the intentional approach heavily lies on the author's intention. The subject in focus is being represented through the preferred lens of the creator. However, this could cause misinterpretations as we experience and express our own language privately. Though there are shared conventions, we may use differing codes that could carry different meanings to other people. Hence, it is important for the creator to ensure that the message is conveyed clearly through this approach of representation. As stated by Hall "our private intended meanings, however personal to us, have to enter into the rules and codes and conventions of language to be shared and understood." (2013)

The constructionist approach is more abstract whereas the intended meaning is not fixed by the subject in focus nor by the creator of the image. Constructionist representation allows individual readers to construct their own meaning(s) of the image. As Hall (2013, p. 45) stated that "Things – objects, people, events in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify."

This representational system heavily relies on the symbolic function the subject carries. What it signifies could indicate the intended meaning, however it leaves space for further interpretation. Hall explained further on how this free-reigning representational system could succeed, which is through "the acceptance of a degree of cultural relativism between one culture and another." (Hall 2013, p. 45). This system could open up a discussion leading to a discourse from the socially accepted main meaning(s). Fyfe and Law (1988, p. 1) supports this theory by stating that "A depiction is never just an illustration ... it is the site for the construction and depiction of social difference"

Through these various approaches we are able to express our thoughts and potentially produce multiple meanings from one body of work. This could occur through intertextual representation. When two mediums are brought together, the conjunction of these two signifies a different meaning. An image without a caption is more open to interpretation of the spectator but when a text is present to highlight the preferred message, a defined perspective is formed. Roland

Barthes argued that it is often the caption that signifies the main message of an image. However, this does not eliminate the opportunity in further interpretation and the production of alternative messages. In fact, intertextual representation produces two discourses - within the image and text themselves. The image could be read connotatively and be investigated further through semiotics. As Shifman (2014, p. 22) argued "Memes vary greatly in their degree of fitness, that is, their adaptability to the sociocultural environment in which they propagate." Although memes have become a language of itself, it still derives itself of macro cultural trends. One that I would like to focus on, as mentioned before, is the platform it provides for the people in asserting power over their voice and opinions in popular culture.

CHAPTER 4

POPULAR CULTURE

Hall (2018) discusses popular culture as a form of mass media, which historically originated from folk art and minor art. Works of mass media are formulated based on the current social situation or perhaps influenced by the past. They hold up a mirror against their spectators and reflect upon the bigger image of the current world they live in. This could be seen as a passive communication between the media and audience. However, mass media unites their audience creating a community, within the society they reflect. Conversations within the community that carry further interpretations of the 'end-product' opens an opportunity for the 'end-product' to develop. An excerpt from Hall's *Popular Arts* explains the role of popular culture in society and how it has gone beyond a form of visual content for the mass

People are brought together in a new relationship as audiences, new kinds of language and expression are developed, independent art forms and conventions arise. The media are not the end-products of a simple technological revolution. They come at the end of a complex historical and social process; they are active agents in a new phase in the life-history of industrial society. Inside these forms and languages, the society is articulating new social experiences for the first time.

Hall (2018, p.45)

Works of popular culture, also known as popular art, consist of recognised archetypes such as the performers involved. In most cases, performer could mean the producer, main actors

or artist. They conform to the standard made and agreed upon by the society. However, it is produced and shared on an amplified level. Similar to what I have discussed previously on internet memes, popular culture is a means of transmission. They adapt traditional works of art into the contemporary world. From one adaptation to another, the quality of work could differ and not necessarily bear the same message. It is the level of recognition that helps a work stand out amongst the others as well as measure its' success. Unlike its mass media predecessors (folk art or minor art), popular art is an individualized form of art. The audience as a community, appreciates popular art based on the known performer and the skills they bear. Hence, the popularity of the work also heavily depends on the performer.

Although popular culture lives off of the relationship it has with the community it has united, Hall has identified that this form of mass media could lack inclusivity when it involves serious art, especially for the younger generation. It highlights their lack of knowledge or experience of the world. They lack confidence in finding their voice on high culture and tend to stay away from commenting works with significant seriousness applied onto them. This exclusion takes place as there is a challenge in maintaining the quality of the work. Successful creations in popular arts are often the ones that are open, available and enjoyable for all classes. Hall argues that the younger generations are in the state of confusion and still discovering both the society and their own voices. Their participation in popular arts are more robust as compared to the older generations as they behave in a less unfiltered and in-the-moment manner (2018, p. 75). This aspect of inaccessibility to the younger generation gives more standing power to internet memes; As they have opened a pathway creating the inaccessible, accessible. Shifman states that we are now living in "an era of blurring boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, bottom-up and top-down communications." (2014, p. 7) This puts forward the concept that we no longer live in a world of exclusion and isolation which results to everyone having equal opportunities to voice their opinions.

As mentioned before, historically popular culture functions on the basis of the audience exclusively

playing the spectator role. However, the invention of social media as well as internet memes have broken the chain of command; Giving power to the people. As stated by Burns (2009, p. 75) "Today's consumers have broken down the wall between production and consumption. The notion of creativity has changed from one where producers create content for consumers to enjoy to one where consumers are part of the creative process." Rose (2016, p. 143) further supports the change in production process through the discursive perspective by stating that "Power is not something imposed from the top of society down onto its oppressed bottom layers. Power is everywhere, since discourse too is everywhere."

PART 2

CASE STUDY: GAME OF THRONES'
#DEMTHRONES

INTRODUCTION TO GAME OF THRONES

Game of Thrones is an American fantasy television series adapted from the novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, written by George R. R. Martin. The show was created by directors D.B. Weiss and David Benioff and eventually became a world phenomenon that transcended through different generations on a global scale. Ever since the show premiered in 2011 on *HBO*, it had received 160 *Emmy* nominations of which they won 59, including the *Outstanding Drama Series* award and pulled in 13.6 million viewers on *HBO Live* for its final episode, breaking the show's records itself as well as *HBO's* (Gartenberg, 2019). From *HBO* subscriptions alone, *Game of Thrones* earned \$3.1 Billion and had 566 casts in total (Finance Monthly, 2019).

Set in a fictional medieval-resembling world, the series ran 8 seasons long showing how the dynasties from seven different kingdoms violently battled for the *Iron Throne*, that ruled over all the seven kingdoms. To visualize the other-worldly medieval universe, *Game of Thrones*, often shortened as *Thrones* was set in various countries including Morocco, Iceland, Croatia and Ireland.

The show was notoriously known for its vulgar scenes and unpredictable plot twists, including the spontaneous assassinations of their main characters. This consequentially increased the show's popularity as they proved to the viewers that they do not follow any archetypal rules (See Figure 6). The inability to keep up with 'what's to come' on the show galvanized the viewers to engage on different social platforms amongst their own fans as well as the rest of the fanbase,

Thrones. When a season was airing, they were either posting spoilers, of what happened in the latest episode or hiding from one. Opinions, criticisms, theories and memes of the show were shared and passed on from one platform to another.



Figure 6. The execution of Eddard “Ned” Stark ordered by the Queen of the seven kingdoms, Cersei Lannister. Ned Stark was framed as the main character that was assumed to play a crucial role to the show but was beheaded before the end of the first season.

5.1 Black Twitter

By the second season, a hashtag community based on the show, *#DemThrones* emerged in *Black Twitter*, a collective of black *Twitter* users where their voices unite and strengthen social movements including *Black Lives Matter*. They contributed into the cancel culture that emerged in the 2010s; Where famous figures and organisations are being called out and at times boycotted for their insensitive controversial actions. The community aims to break social stereotypes on black people that are amplified through media depictions by joining in and continuing the dialogue. “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” (Adichie 2010). Black Twitter held cultural conversations that showcased how creative and humorous discourses created by black people can; On a technology that was also not originally designed for them. “Allowed mainstream, white culture an unprecedented glimpse [of black discourse]” (Brock 2012). A vital part of the discourse in Black Twitter is the art of meme-making and sharing. It has become a part of their language that allows them to visually express and represent their identities and cultural standing. The united voice of Black Twitter has brought strength in quantity for *#DemThrones* to become a beacon of memetic

discourse in the mainstream American popular culture. Mina (2019, p. 49) supports this theory by stating that “memes acquire charisma through regular remix and iteration, and they drive attention to groups’ causes through connecting with media and other influencers.”

5.2 #DemThrones

#DemThrones brought together black *Thronie Twitter* users. The hashtag was originally created by a small podcast *FiyaStarter* and initially sparked debates with a fellow *Twitter* user as to who invented the hashtag which resulted into the creation of another *Thronie* hashtag community on Black Twitter, *#ThronesYall*. *Black Twitter* has created hashtags for popular television shows including *#DemDeads* for *The Walking Dead*, *#DatFlash* for *The Flash* and *#DatBot* for *Mr. Robot*. The hashtags all start with the *Dem* or *Dat* which is a re-appropriation of how white writers, in the past, would stereotypically use these words when they are writing black characters. Now the black community is satirizing and owning the term, of what used to be a racist and degrading term used against them.

#DemThrones enabled the black viewers to have a more than just a passive role in the show’s main fanbase but instead become active viewers and participate further by taking ownership of their commentaries, often humorous of the show, with their identities in mind; In an exclusive community where they can celebrate experiencing the show altogether. Slevin (2000, p. 177) supports this concept by stating that “While people may, for example, complain about how they or their lives are portrayed and represented in the mass media, the internet offers them a platform to frame their own experiences and take control over their own symbolic projects.”

There is an apparent division between *Thronies* who are not of colour and Black Twitter’s #DemThrones fans as scenes in the show signify different messages to them; The hashtag served as a safe space where the black community in Twitter could comment upon the show without being ‘interrupted’. It allowed them to personalize the way they view a television series

that noticeably lacked diverse racial representation; With white people as the main characters and people of colour casted as the stereotypical characters such as slaves and handmaiden to the Queen.

Internet technology allows individuals to cope with cultural differences through dialogue... More communication may in potential at least, lead to a greater mutual understanding and therefore to cosmopolitanism as an attitude of mind

Slevin (2000, p. 179)

As seen in Figure 7, Daenerys Targaryen is being lifted up and called upon *Mhysa* which means “Mother” in the language spoken in *Slavers Bay*. She overthrew leaders in the city and started a new democracy for the people, allowing them to choose their own leaders. Daenerys holds the rightful heir to the *Iron Throne* and this scene is a monumental humanitarian event that served pivotal to her character growth and power status, which helped accelerate her journey towards ruling over the seven kingdoms. As she strongly believed in taking back the throne not by force but by admiration and genuine support from the people. However, the scene resonated differently towards the #DemThrones community. Discussions regarding the racial profiling of the heroic role being a white pure-looking woman and the slaves portrayed by people of colour sparked up amongst the viewers. Nonetheless, the conversations were lighthearted and not in the attitude of Black Twitter boycotting the show (Vice News, 2019). As stated by Slevin (2000) “The internet



Figure 7. A scene taken from the final episode of Season 3. Daenerys Targaryen, a Princess of *House Targaryen* carried and worshipped by slaves she had just freed at *Slavers Bay*.

offers them a platform to frame their own experiences and rake control over their own symbolic projects”. By simply engaging in the discussions, the black community felt inclusivity within #DemThrones and a stronger connection towards the show.

5.2 #DemThrones Memes

Focusing further on the memes, in Season 8 Daenerys meets with Jamie Lannister.. A character infamously known as the *Kingslayer* as he allegedly assassinated Aerys Targaryen, in Season 1 who was Daenerys’ father and also King to the *Iron Throne* then. Thus, when Daenerys met with Jamie Lannister in person for the first time (See Figure 8), he was greeted with hostility and distrust. During the meeting, Daenerys questioned Jamie’s loyalty and Brienne, whom he befriended throughout the seasons, stepped up to defend and vouch for him. The scene itself emphasized female empowerment on both sides, which could be seen as an uncommon situation where the female roles are making the decisions, instead of the men. In Figure 9, a #DemThrones fan tweeted her interpretation of the meeting using a meme taken from a scene in a parody television show *Real Husbands of Hollywood* where a scared man, Kevin Hart latches onto his angry partner who was defending him to their friend. The meme visually translated the serious scene into a humorous point of view; Though still with the same narrative of a frail man being defended by a strong woman. However, in contrast to Figure 9, the original scene the tweet was referring to, Figure 8 shows the absence of people of colour in the meeting. It is evident that there



Figure 8. The meeting in Season 8 with Brienne standing in front of Jamie Lannister facing Daenerys Targaryen who is seated down on the other side of the table

is a lack of racial representation, especially in this scene where political decisions were made.



Figure 9. A #DemThrones Meme based on a scene from Season 8

Through the tweet and the use of an image taken from a different film (in Figure 8), intertextuality takes place by contextualizing the image with the caption into a meme-fied version, that may frame the image into a form of mimicry meme to the original scene in Figure 8. Without understanding the original scene, the tweet has no meaning, or at least no completed one to the reader. This could be argued as a constructionist form of representation where, as discussed previously, is a build-up of multiple linguistic systems to form and represent a preferred meaning or concept. Applying the constructionist approach onto, in this case, *Game of Thrones* memes, Shifman (2014, p. 38) explained this best by stating that “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.”

Towards the end of the final season, Daenerys burnt down the city, *Kingslanding* where the *Iron Throne* was located. This resulted to Cersei’s death as she was inside the castle when major parts of it collapsed. The viewers, however, quickly noticed that not all parts of the castle collapsed, including the room she was in. Cersei was under the only pile of bricks that were in the room which highlights the show’s poor production and attention to detail. Figure 10 shows a #DemThrones fan commenting on the scene where Cersei’s corpse was found under a hill of bricks that was right

next to an empty space. By noticing this, another #DemThrones fan was quick to respond with her own interpretation. Contrary to the previous meme in Figure 9, this #DemThrones fan in Figure 11 displayed her personal sense of humour and creativity. Shifman (2014, p. 30) discusses this use of memes by stating that “In an era marked by “network individualism”, people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity.” As shown in Figure 11, she re-enacted the scene herself with just one brick on her head to perhaps point out that Cersei could have survived if it was not for her poor selection of area to stand in. It also suggests an avoidable, dramatic yet underwhelming occurrence of death orchestrated by the show. Cersei was a prominent and nefarious role in the show causing her death to be very heavily anticipated that fans of the show speculated who would kill her. Much to the fans’ disappointments, it was a pile of bricks. Through this re-enactment, not only has the user created a meme herself but she has participated in a discussion amongst the #DemThrones fans, including with the user in Figure 10. Shifman (2014, p. 2) supports this inter-meme relationship by stating that “[A] fundamental attribute of Internet memes is intertextuality: memes often relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways.”

Another significant event that took place was the killing of the Night King. As mentioned before, the Night King is “the embodiment of destruction [and] a nihilistic threat” (Gartenberg 2019, p. 270). His most fearful power is the ability to turn both live and dead humans into his army of blue-eyed



Figure 10. A #DemThrones tweet pointing out the empty space right next to where the ceilings collapsed on Cersei



Figure 11. A #DemThrones meme created by a fan based on the scene

soulless *White Walkers* and *Wights*. All through the eight seasons, the Night King and his army were the most anticipated villains in the show despite the roaring battles that took place amongst the seven kingdoms. His motives of building an army has never been clear but it was assumed that his mission was to wipe the existence of all the seven kingdoms and as the winter gets colder, the stronger his army gets. Hence, the popular line of the show “Winter is Coming”

There were numerous attempts where characters in the show attempted to kill him and greatly failed, as nobody could fathom the enormous powers he possessed; So much so that several characters had a hard time believing of his actual existence.

Figure 12 shows Daenerys’ theatrical attempt in burning the Night King, whilst riding her dragon with *Dragonfire* which resulted in great disappointment as he stood unharmed in the fire. Without a doubt, this failed attempt sparked up memes across the fanbase and Figure 13 shows one of the examples a #DemThrones fan shared. The meme selected in this tweet was a scene taken from a comedy-drama *Waiting to Exhale*. One prominent aspect that increased the meme’s successful humour was the similar point of view with the original scene, angling downwards towards the subject. Figure 12 is another fitting example of how the popular art, or scene in Figure 8 is no longer the final product due to the existence and ability of meme-making and sharing. Burns (2009, p. 75) touches upon this further by claiming that creating memes reinforce “the concept of an active consumer who is re-presenting the content and adding an interpretation”. The original



Figure 12. The Night King surviving the Dragonfire with a subtle smug smile



Figure 13. A #DemThrones meme referring to when Daenerys ordered her dragon with the word ‘Dracarys’ which meant ‘burn’ in her language and the Night King responding to “You Raggedy Bitch” due to her failed attempt.

scene did not involve any dialogue within Daenerys and the Night King. However, the meme in Figure 12 continued the scene further under the translation of Black Twitter humour.

Often, black identities are portrayed in stereotypical roles in mainstream media and Hall (2013, p. 215) discusses his theory of this outdated misrepresentation “The Other” that adopts the portrayal of black people from the period of slavery. It is not only the verbal labels given but it is also the connotation that lies within images involving people of colour that depicts them wrongfully; As photographs are malleable to portray a preferred meaning regardless of the truth. Through applying and visualizing difference, it constructs meaning within the classificatory system; which plays a vital role in Game of Thrones for its tale-telling clashes of emerging royalties within the seven kingdoms. However, the fans of #DemThrones have brought to light, to the mainstream media, of their true light-hearted, humorous and creative perspective that have enabled them to latch onto a show where they are under-represented.

By the fourth season, the hashtag community rose above the mainstream media and trended on *Twitter* which eventually captured the attention of a documentary television series production, *Vice* along with one of the main actors in the show, Nathalie Emmanuele who is of African-descent as well. (See Figure 14) This acknowledgment itself disrupted the traditional relationship between the popular art and its spectators. The narratives shaped in social media by #DemThrones was



Figure 14. Game of Thrones Actress Nathalie Emmanuel tweeting about #DemThrones

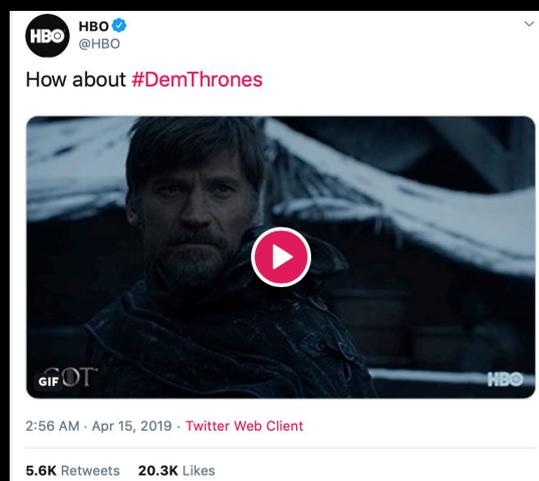


Figure 15. HBO tweeting #DemThrones

arguably as important as the narratives in the show. The focus was divided amongst the popular art and the viewers' community. Some would argue that #DemThrones played a part in the record-breaking number of viewers for the final season (Ellis, 2019). This theory rooted from HBO's official Twitter account using #DemThrones in one of their promotional tweets (See Figure 15). This simple acknowledgment demonstrated the importance of the subculture that formed within their viewers' community; It gave the recognition that #DemThrones needed to break through from being a simply marginalized-community discussion and into the mainstream. This also proves the argument further that internet memes have paved the way for spectators to converse with today's popular art. However, there were no further responses made by HBO or Game of Thrones official representatives regarding the existence of this community which could be seen as room for growth in the relationship between popular culture and its' viewers.

As seen in the scenes and memes analysed, Game of Thrones lack in racial diversity and inclusivity did not hinder people of colour from enjoying the show. The ability to recontextualize the show by creating their own representation in the show through memes brought the black fans into the discursive narrative of the show. Mina (2019) states that "The ease of sharing memes and their lightweight nature allow them to act as signals of identity and belief". #DemThrones allowed black viewers to recognize the seclusion they individually experience and gain a momentary collectivity by sharing them in a public landscape through the use of internet memes.

CONCLUSION

Adopted from Dawkins' study of human genes and cultural transition, internet memes have become a vernacular for today's citizens' online performance. It has revolutionised the production of mass-mediated content which was traditionally "transmitted simultaneously from a single institutional source to many people" (Shifman 2014, p. 6). Nonetheless, the simple action of logging into our social media accounts and sharing a meme has given us the ability to become instant content producers.

Though humour may be a common denominator amongst internet memes, however it is the message they signify altogether that highlights its purpose in today's society - that we are able to voice our opinions and we are not alone in the matter. Shifman also puts forward the idea that "Memes are present in the public and private sphere not as sporadic entities but as monstrously sized groups of texts and images." Within the internet society, memes have formed a subculture that unites people from various cohorts into connected communities. One community that has been discussed in this essay is a subculture within a subculture within a subculture - The online

community of Black Twitter's Game of Thrones' fans #DemThrones.

Game of Thrones has transformed from a popular television show into a complex cultural artefact - indirectly reflecting upon today's current sociopolitical conditions, including the display of power status based on stereotypical racial profiling. It played a significant role worldwide as viewers from across the globe watched, discussed and further interpreted untold stories into speculative subplots. Thrones' complicated plot twists and intricate character development encouraged viewers to engage in applying their personal creativity. Due to these engagements and discussions taking place online, especially on social media, it is only natural for Thronies to make use of memes for further visual expressions.

The case study conducted on #DemThrones aims to demonstrate the three purposes internet memes serve for today's digital users - participation, resistance and representation. The existence of #DemThrones is already an act of resistance in itself. As stated by Mina (2019, p. 76) "For participants, the messages are no longer taken for granted or quietly critiqued but instead can be publicly challenged with regularity through internet meme culture". By simply tweeting and sharing memes of the show and tagging it with #DemThrones, the viewers have broken their silence from being passive spectators. They are participating in a counternarrative discussion of a show that arguably was not originally made for an audience of people of colour. This theory of a growth in communication between the popular art and the spectators is further supported by Slevin (2000, p. 118) "All forms of organisation have become engaged in an endless process of negotiating choices among a diversity of options under conditions of intensified globalisation and reflexivity." Internet memes brings the binding effects of laughter in the age of social isolation, allowing netizens to manifest interventions in the mainstream media.

From being originally a form of visual communication that took place "below the radar of mainstream media" (Nagle 2017, p. 2), internet memes have continuously evolved to not only adjust to but also advance from societal disputes and differences. They have challenged cultural

secularization that have silenced marginalised communities by forming “a new leaderless form of digital revolution” (Nagle 2017, p. 10). Having studied the evolution of internet memes and witnessing its growth in power, it is reasonable to put forward the idea that they will act as a social currency and becoming even more instrumental in democratising the production of mass-mediated content - By equalising the viewers’ voice along with the producers and artists, allowing active viewers to be co-creators and producer in popular culture.

- Burns, K.S. (2009) *Celeb 2.0. How social media foster our fascination with popular culture*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO
- Dawkins, R. (2016) *The Selfish Gene 40th Anniversary Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Denisova, A. (2019) *Internet Memes and Society Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*. New York: Routledge
- Ellis, K. C., (2019) *The Important Rise of #DemThrones*. Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/e/the-important-rise-of-demthrones/> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)
- Finance Monthly (2019) *How Much Money Has HBO Made From Game of Thrones*. Available at: <https://www.finance-monthly.com/2019/05/how-much-money-has-hbo-made-from-game-of-thrones/> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)
- Foucault, M. (1979) *The history of sexuality: Volume 1*. London: Allen Lane
- Fussell, S. & Tech Insider (2016) *If you're using the 'Game of Thrones' hashtag, you're missing out on the show's best commentary*. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-dem-thrones-2016-5?r=US&IR=T> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)
- Fyfe, G. & Law, J. (1988) *On the invisibility of the visual: Editors' introduction*. Fyfe, G., J. Law (Eds.). *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations (Sociological Review Monograph 35)* London: Routledge
- Gartenberg, C. (2019) *The Game of Thrones Season 8 Finale HBO Most Watched Show of All Time*. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/20/18633136/game-of-thrones-got-season-8-finale-hbo-most-watched-show-all-time-viewership-numbers-live> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)
- Hall, S., Evans, J., Nixon, S. (2013) *Representation Second Edition*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hall, S. & Whannel, P. (2018) *The Popular Arts*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Marshall, G. (1998) *The Internet and Memetics*. Middlesex: School of Computing Science, Middlesex University
- McNutt, M. (2019) *Game of Thrones: A Guide to Westeros and Beyond. The Complete Series*. United States: HBO Home Box Office

Mina, A. X. (2019) *Memes to Movements*. Boston: Beacon Press

Nagle, A. (2017) *Kill all normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. United Kingdom: John Hunt Publishing.

Romano, A. (2016) *How a Game of Thrones hashtag sparked a debate over ownership, linguistics, and cultural appropriation*. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/5/23/11715748/black-twitter-demthrones-hashtag-controversy> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)

Rose, G. (2006) *Visual methodologies: An introduction to interpreting visual materials*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Roser, M., Ritchie, H. & Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2020) *Internet*. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/internet> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)

Shifman, L. (2014) *Memes in digital culture*. Massachusetts: MIT press

Slevin, J. (2000) *The Internet and Society*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd

TED (2010) *The Danger of a Single Story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg> (Accessed: 8 December 2019)

Turkle, S. (2017) *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books

VICE News (2019) *Black Game of Thrones Fans Have Built Their Own Universe Around Westeros (HBO)* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S4ND_-OcDU (Accessed: 12 December 2019)

Whitten, S. (2019) *Game of Thrones Ends Run With Best Drama Award, 59 Total Emmy Awards*. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/22/game-of-thrones-ends-run-with-best-drama-award-59-total-emmy-awards.html> (Accessed: 12 December 2019)

Figure 1. HDYCT (2007) *Charlie Bit Me* [Screenshot] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OBlgSz8sSM (Accessed: 20 December 2019)

Figure 2. Youtube (2019) *Charlie Bit Me Parodies Search Results* [Screenshot] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=charlie+bit+me+parody (Accessed: 20 December 2019)

Figure 3. ryanwindoww (2017) *You can't be broke if you don't check your bank account tweet* [Screenshot] Available at: <https://twitter.com/RyanWindoww/status/823579333969252352> (Accessed: 20 December 2019)

Figure 4. Carter, E. (2019) *Kilroy Was Here* [Photograph] Available at: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/kilroy-was-here> (Accessed: 20 December 2019)

Figure 5. Hampton the Hamster (2019) *The Hampsterdance Song* [Image] Available at: https://rateyourmusic.com/release/single/hampton_the_hampster/the_hampsterdance_song/ (Accessed: 20 December 2019)

Figure 6. *Game of Thrones Season 1 Episode 9* [Film Still] (2011) Directed by D. B. Weiss & D. Benioff [DVD] United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Television

Figure 7. *Game of Thrones Season 3 Episode 10* [Film Still] (2013) Directed by D. B. Weiss & D. Benioff [DVD] United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Television

Figure 8. *Game of Thrones Season 8 Episode 2* [Film Still] (2019) Directed by D. B. Weiss & D. Benioff [DVD] United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Television

Figure 9. heauxistan (2019) *A #DemThrones Meme based on a scene from Season 8* [Screenshot] Available at: <https://twitter.com/heauxistan/status/1120158458546802688> (Accessed: 2 January 2020)

Figure 10. heyannalaura (2019) *A #DemThrones tweet pointing out the empty space right next to where the ceilings collapsed on Cersei* [Screenshot] Available at: <https://twitter.com/heyannalaura/status/1130331872980922368> (Accessed: 2 January 2020)

Figure 11. kal_morgan (2019) *A #DemThrones meme created by a fan based on the scene* [Screenshot] Available at: https://twitter.com/kal_morgan/status/1130331682412720128 (Accessed: 2 January 2020)

Figure 12. *Game of Thrones Season 8 Episode 3* [Film Still] (2013) Directed by D. B. Weiss & D. Benioff [DVD] United Kingdom: Warner Bros. Television

Figure 13. iamstatmatt (2019) A #DemThrones meme referring to when Daenerys ordered her dragon with the word 'Dracarys' which meant 'burn' in her language and the Night King responding to "You Raggedy Bitch" due to her failed attempt. Available at: <https://twitter.com/IAmStatMatt/status/1122693784196743168> (Accessed: 2 January 2020)

Figure 14. Emmanuel, N. (2019) *Game of Thrones Actress Nathalie Emmanuel tweeting about #DemThrones* [Screenshot] Available at: <https://twitter.com/missnemmanuel/status/1211571761948610566> (Accessed: 5 January 2020)

Figure 15. HBO (2019) *HBO tweeting #DemThrones* [Screenshot] Available at: https://twitter.com/HBO/status/1117607716770471936?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1117607716770471936&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dictionary.com%2Fthe-important-rise-of-demthrones%2F (Accessed: 5 January 2020)

