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## The Genre of the Meme

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# The Genre of the Meme

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*Thomas Monson*

## Introduction

The development and proliferation of the Internet has led to numerous discoveries in the study of media and communication. Such a recent development in online communication is the rise of the online meme. The traditional meaning of meme has been transformed and has developed a new meaning within the sphere of online communication. The meme as defined by its new meaning has recurred in myriads, which have provided enough reason and data to develop a rhetorical genre for the subject. The first half of this study—the background—will begin with an orientation to the meme, an explanation of generic criticism, and a look at ten examples of generic criticism. The second half of this study—the analysis—will begin with an application of the theory to the artifacts by developing common characteristics, contextual commonalities, and representative qualities; then an analysis of the generic development through rhetorical strategy, rhetorical situation, and audience effects; and finally a development of implications of this study.

## Background

### *Orientation to the Meme*

**Traditional Definition.** The origin of the term “meme” is in the book *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins from 1976, as he defines it as the basic unit of culture (Chick, 1999). A meme according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture” (2012). The general concept springing from this definition of the meme is essentially any component of a culture whatsoever. Such a definition is too broad to comprehend, so another more tangible conception is necessary for continuing this thought. Dictionary.com defines the meme as something relatively more tangible and specifiable- “a cultural item that is transmitted by repetition in a manner analogous to the biological transmission of genes” (2012). This concept then narrows the understanding of the meme to the notion of a cultural unit that is communicated over and over. The word “meme” has also come to mean something much more specific in recent online communications.

**Development of the Online Meme.** The meme has now become viewed as something far more tangible than a cultural unit transmitted through repetition. The newfound tangibility of the online meme is from the specificity of the online culture and environment. Additionally, the online meme is tangible because it is now easily recognizable. While the technical definition of the online meme includes any idea that is transmitted electronically, such as a mood ring, hyperlink, or phrase, the online meme has come to be commonly recognized as a combination of a picture and a short blurb spread through

social media (Schubert, 2003).

In understanding this anomaly, it is important to begin with a working description to orient any sort of study of such a genre. The baseline for the online meme is the combination of a single picture and short blurb via text. An understanding of the makeup of such a meme and its characteristics will be further developed in the analysis of historical clustering. The online meme exists within the sort of ambiguity that makes up its traditional definition. Its time or place of inception is unclear (as is the origin of the vast majority of these particular memes), but it is possible to strip away such ambiguity in order to understand the basis of this genre. The online meme is a form of communication that usually includes graphic and textual components and a general tone of sarcastic (and occasionally ironic) humor, and fits in one of two substantial categories: still picture and sketched. The still picture category is made up of a screen shot of an event as the primary backdrop and has text printed across it that ties in another one or more rhetorical situations. The sketched category of the meme depicts either a single picture or a comic strip using a set of sketched facial expressions specifically developed to be used along with stick figures and text printed across the image. One example of the sketched category and the six selected artifacts of this study can be viewed in the appendix. For the sake of specificity and focus this paper will examine the first category: still image.

### *Description of the Artifacts*

The artifacts selected for this generic criticism are six popular online memes: “Replacement Referees,” “Alzheimer’s,” “Binders Full of Women,” “Queen of England,” “Joker,” and “Tuition.” This section will briefly describe each of these memes and very briefly their rhetorical situation. It should be noted that the senders and/or creators of the memes are largely unknown.

The “Replacement Referees” meme pictures two referees from the National Football League discussing a call on a football field. The words over the picture say, “After further review, the runner did not touch second base. Touchdown Celtics.” The first sentence is in smaller white block letters at the top of the meme and the phrase “Touchdown Celtics” is in larger white block letters at the bottom of the page. The meme depicts a common picture used to show the replacement referees, shows two of them discussing, uses words to create a blatantly confused air about the referees, and jokes that the replacement referees don’t even know what sport they’re officiating. By its nature this meme, like all others, is sent over and over by means of social networking and websites. Thus the sender of this particular meme can be viewed as the ambiguous “sports fan.” The intended receivers/audience are Internet users in general, although it is specifically targeted at other sports fans that keep up-to-date on football, basketball, and baseball. At this point it is important to note that each of the senders of the different artifacts must remain in broad terms as opposed to specifically defined authors due to the ambiguity created by their channel, which is the internet. Thus the artifact constitutes a form of online communication between sports fans through the use of the public sphere of the internet and contributes to a specific culture.

The “Alzheimer’s” meme depicts an old, Caucasian man with his arms crossed on a background of alternating red and green rays. There are the words “I may have Alzheimer’s but at least I don’t have Alzheimer’s” printed across it. The phrase “I may have Alzheimer’s” is in larger white block letters across the top of the meme, while the rest of the text is noticeably smaller at the bottom of the page. This meme does not apply to a specific context, but rather the general event of an elderly person struggling with the disease. The sender can be viewed as the broad personification of the “Alzheimer’s observer” that appears to be relatively insensitive to the disease at face value because of the nature of their meme. The audience appears to be Internet viewers that have or are open to having a sarcastic perspective on Alzheimer’s disease and those that know the general basis of the disease. The meme assumes the audience has a basic understanding of the disease’s effects, but also assumes that it has an understanding of the disease from a sarcastic perspective—two contradictory concepts causing them to be separate references.

This particular “Binders full of women” meme depicts Bill Clinton walking onto a stage gesturing with both of his hands extended open-palmed away from his body around the height of his waist. President Obama stands at a podium on the other end of the stage with an expression of disapproval.

Across this image, the phrase “Did someone say” is across the top in large white block letters and the phrase “Binders full of women???” on the bottom. The phrase references a sound bite from the second presidential debate of 2012 when Mitt Romney used the phrase to describe lists of possible female appointees to federal appointee positions; it was taken out of context as a hashtag for Twitter feeds. Bill Clinton is pictured because of his infamous Monica Lewinsky sex scandal that has resultantly developed an image of Clinton as a womanizer. The sender of this meme can be considered the “observer of American politics.” The audience of the meme is also made up of those that are aware of American politics because it references both the Romney sound bite and the Clinton scandal.

The “Queen of England” meme shows a picture of the Queen of England staring grimly in a picture taken at the 2012 Olympics. The picture is zoomed and cropped so that she is the only one seen in the photo. At the bottom of the picture there is a statement that says, “Look at all these countries I used to own” in white block letters. This artifact is referencing the gathering of nations at the Olympics in London in 2012, Britain’s former status as a major colonial power, and the fact that many of the now-sovereign nations that compete in the Olympics are former colonies of the UK. The sender is the “2012 Olympics spectator” because the picture used is from that event and references all of the nations gathering during the opening ceremonies. The audience is also made up of 2012 Olympics spectators and is also assumed to know the general historical information of England’s former status of colonial power.

The “Joker” meme shows a heavier man with his face and hair painted and dyed so as to look like the Joker from the movie *The Dark Knight Rises* taking a picture of himself in the mirror. The artifact depicts this within a white outlined box that set against a black backdrop. On the bottom of the shown backdrop, large white letters say “IT’S SIMPLE.” In much smaller font it says, “We eat the Batman.” This artifact is referencing the previously mentioned movie—*The Dark Knight Rises*—and the common problem of obesity. It references the movie through the Joker face paint and hair dye in the still image as well as in the direct reference to eating Batman in the text. The reference to obesity is in the picture as well as in the textual reference to eating a person. The sender is “the Dark Knight fan” who is sending the meme to an audience that both has seen the movie and feels sarcastically humorous towards obesity.

The “Tuition” meme shows a picture of a group of eight older Caucasian men wearing suits and ties at a cocktail party. All eight of them appear to be laughing hysterically. Over this picture text in large white block letters, says “And then I said...” at the top of the artifact. At the bottom of the image in substantially larger white block letters it says “We’d lower tuition.” The artifact references the stereotypical appearance of elites, culturally-assumed elitist disdain for others and an uncaring disregard for those held at the whims of elites, as well as recent significant raises in college tuition. It depicts elites through the dress, gender, race, and setting of the people set in the artifact. Furthermore, it references the culturally-assumed elitist (here considered synonymous with administrative) disdain for the student by depicting an obviously disrespectful response of hysterical laughter at something those paying for college would so desire through using the image as a response to the text. Finally the raises in college tuition are referenced through the text by treating the idea of lowering tuition as sarcastically humorous. The sender of the “Tuition” meme is a person frustrated by rising tuition costs, sending to an audience that is also aware of the issue and has a preconception of elites as insensitive, male Caucasians that set these numbers.

### *Description of the Method*

**Inception/Classics/Theory.** Generic criticism is a rhetorical approach that focuses on three primary elements: situational, substantive/stylistic, and organizational (Foss, 2009). The basic concept of genre goes back to Aristotle; general belief held that different types of speeches shared similar characteristics, but this was not formed into a theory for thousands of years (Foss, 2009). Generic criticism as an approach to rhetorical criticism emerged in 1965 when Edwin Black used the term generic criticism in his book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Foss, 2009). In his critique of neo-Aristotelian criticism he posited four primary assumptions: (1) “there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself,” (2) “there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situation type,” (3) “the recurrence of a situational type through

history” will allow a rhetor to better understand the possible rhetorical responses, and (4) that there will be “congregations of rhetorical discourses” that have similar affects to one another (Black 1965, p. 133). Out of this come three things: the rhetorical strategy, the rhetorical situation, and audience effect. Rhetorical strategies can be understood as “the characteristics of discourse; rhetorical situations refer to extralinguistic influences on the audience; audience effects refer to responses to the strategies in the situations” (p. 134). These three factors are then tied together by what Black refers to as “rhetorical transactions” which can be understood as the underlying relationship between the factors that causes one to change the others.

Black’s initial development of the theory provides the current basis for the perspective, but it was further developed by Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of the “rhetorical situation” in his article *The Rhetorical Situation* (Foss, 2009). In this article, Bitzer shows rhetoric to be situational, meaning that it takes shape within context (Bitzer, 2000). He argues that “rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task” (p. 61). He defines the rhetorical situation to be “a complex of persons, events, objects and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (p. 63). It is important to note here his further unpacking of the term “audience” which is not to be understood simply as the viewer or onlooker, but rather is a “rhetorical audience” which is able to be swayed and can possibly invoke change to the exigence (p. 64). By defining the rhetorical situation and further unpacking the concept of the audience in such a way, the idea of rhetorical transaction becomes clearer. Different rhetorical strategies will invoke different responses, especially when different rhetorical situations create sets of presuppositions within its audience. This audience is then required to be understood as being able to invoke change upon being swayed, which is a prerequisite to any audience effect taking place. As such, the third factor proposed by Black can be viewed as semi-dependent upon Bitzer’s analysis of the rhetorical situation through the inherent involvement of the rhetorical audience.

E. Bormann’s (1972) development of fantasy theme analysis sheds further light on audience effects. He explains that collective identity is created through the formation of a “dream” via fantasy chains that come together to solidify a common understanding of reality. As rhetorical audiences are engaged within genres they experience rhetoric within a complex context of already being immersed in the situation. The solidification of such a fantasy theme falls well within the range of generic rhetoric.

Another contribution to generic criticism, according to Foss (2009), was provided by the 1976 conference, “‘Significant Form’ in Rhetorical Criticism.” Sponsored by the Speech Communication Association (now the National Communication Association) and Kansas University,” (p. 138). The conference developed the notion of the significant form, which was based on the idea of “recurring patterns in discourse or action,” (p. 139). The recurring patterns included metaphors, images, arguments, configurations of language, and structural arrangements or combinations referred to as “genres” or “rhetorics,” all published in the book *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action* edited by Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson (p. 139). The analysis of such structural arrangements is the basis of why memes can be developed into their own genre.

Foss (2009) explains that now the theory has three primary elements that define generic criticism: situational, substantive/stylistic, and organizational. Situation as an element refers to the requirements or perception that there are requirements in a particular situation that mandate a certain type of rhetorical response. Genre also has substantive and stylistic element which are the characteristics of rhetoric the rhetor selects to use to respond to the situation. Finally, the organizational element refers to the internal intermingling of the “substantive, stylistic, and situational features of the genre” (p. 138).

**Uses.** There have been a number of efforts at further developing and exploring the notion of genre and it has been applied to a plethora of topics and significant forms. Each of them crosses into different aspects of rhetorical context, forming new genres or shaping the contours of the old. To examine some of these developments this prospectus will briefly summarize ten examples of generic criticism.

Paul J. Achter (2009) in his article *Narrative, Intertextuality, and Apologia in Contemporary Political Scandals* examines the use of apologetic strategies by Jon Grunseth in his 1990 Minnesota gubernatorial campaign as an Independent Republican candidate. Achter begins by examining the rhetorical context of the situation where Grunseth had been accused of sexual transgressions by several women, as well as the larger context of “late 1980s/early 1990s cultural discourse concerning mediated scandal, sexual infidelity, and male behavior” (p. 318). Achter goes on to analyze the accusation and response of Grunseth in the situation and determines that in order to more fully understand the “apologetic framework” not only with the object of developing conceptualization of physical circumstance, but with a perspective that encompasses the inter-linkages of textual meanings that make up the context. He proves that this is a better approach to understanding the rhetorical situation through using Walter Fisher’s narrative criticism approach to compare it to the classic Bitzerian method and shows that it provides a fuller understanding of Grunseth’s order.

Denise Bostdorff (2003) explains the genre of covenant renewal rhetoric in her article *George W. Bush’s post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation* through an analysis of President Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric, as well as an examination of New England, second-generation Puritan rhetoric. She explains the political rhetoric of Bush in his response to terrorism through the theory of covenant renewal and determines if his rhetoric falls into its genre, which she defines through an analysis of the genre in a different rhetorical situation. Bostdorff defines a situation as covenant renewal by determining if it repeats patterns of discourse in a similar situation, which is the approach developed by the conference of “Significant Form’ in Rhetorical Criticism.”

Karlyn Campbell (1999) used generic analysis to define the rhetoric of women’s liberation as a specific genre in her article *The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron*. Campbell based the argument on the unique rhetorical qualities of substantive and stylistic aspects. She uses an approach of analyzing the substantive and stylistic features separately through comparing women’s liberation rhetoric to already available explanations of rhetorical situations, but finds that it consistently falls between rhetorical and non-rhetorical as well as between persuasive and non-persuasive. She also finds that it has no audience that matches Bitzer’s definition of an audience meaning that women’s liberation rhetoric on a number of fronts must be defined as a unique genre, thus creating a new genre as well as further defining feminism.

Kathleen Jamieson and Karlyn Campbell (1982) studied the concept of the idiosyncratic and the common mixing together in a single genre to show that the generic critic can also highlight the variable in addition to the common through an understanding of fusions of different elements that make up the genre. In their article *Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusions of Generic Elements* they examined many eulogies given for Robert Kennedy after his assassination and determined that they all were identifiable as eulogies, but that due to institutional and personality differences of the rhetors in their nuanced rhetorical situations, they all made idiosyncratic speeches that did not hold onto a completely rigid structure. They did, however, remain within a set of elements that could be fused. Jamieson and Campbell examined these fusions of elements through comparing their analyses of the substantive/stylistic, organizational, and situational elements through qualitative research. They showed the role of the intermingling of the dynamis and the recurring, which furthered generic criticism by explaining the deviants of the theory.

W. Lance Bennett (1981) seeks to define gaffes and efforts to repair them in American politics as a particular communicative ritual within political campaigns in his article *Assessing Presidential Character: Degradation Rituals in Political Campaigns*. He begins by explaining the political context of attempts to recover from gaffes and the general consensus about the coverage of such recovery efforts, and then determines that they do not match the contextual consensus on the matter but need to be redefined. He then goes on to define “Degradation Rituals” and then determine their roles in electoral patterns in contrast with the definition and roles of gaffes simultaneously. Bennett determines that gaffes are mistakes that cause someone to be viewed as outside the norm and the degradation rituals as the efforts to take eyes off of the policy matters and focus on the value of the actor, an attempt to repair the

gaffe. As such, this process is normative and can be defined as a sort of genre.

Thomas Clark (1977) examined 45 speeches—15 American sermons, 15 campaign speeches, and 15 speeches of social concern—to conduct a comparative analysis of what features determine a speech to be a sermon in his article *An Exploration of Generic Aspects of Contemporary American Christian Sermons*. He did not focus on content of the speeches (substantive features), but on the structure of the sermons (stylistic features) through the use of Toulmin models, Chi Square analysis and the TEXAN computer program. The Toulmin models were used to determine the structure of warrants, data, and claims; the TEXAN computer program analyzed the language used in the speeches such as use of nouns, verbs, and adverbs; and the Chi Square analysis was used to determine a level of certainty of either similarity or difference between genres. In the results, Clark determines that American Christian sermons share common precepts, a level of certainty, and subordination to the truth, abstraction, presentism, and coherence. He concludes that he has determined strong enough trends within enough sermons to use this to suggest “distinctive rhetorical constituents of sermons,” thus furthering generic criticism by determining another genre (p. 394). Clark shows that the determining such distinctive rhetorical constituents to be critical in a deeper analysis of a genre and that underlying and thematic elements are a basis for understanding the arguments made within genres. Complex analysis, although contrary to Bitzerian preferences, is feasible in the field of generic criticism.

Jeff Bass (1979) analyzes the rhetoric used to oppose wars and revolutions to determine whether Bitzer’s claim that “a loosely structured, complex situation involving multiple exigencies which may or may not be compatible” is structurally weak because it contains “many elements that must interact” (p. 181). Bass then seeks to determine if a generic approach should or shouldn’t be precluded from such complicated situations through an analysis of the rhetorical opposition of the Vietnam War. He goes on to describe the rhetorical context by explaining that the rhetoric preceding war must produce either fear or a desire for revenge, thus allowing the anti-war rhetoric to have a specific context to respond to as opposed to responding to generalities. He concludes that his research is enough to provide a preliminary study of anti-war rhetoric, thus proving his point that through a closer and more thorough analysis and comparison, generic criticism is able to be used in the analysis of complex issues.

John Jones and Robert Rowland (2005) develop a new form of the Jeremiad genre through examining the ideology and political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, post-presidency. They analyze the language that he uses and compare the optimistic and lack of blame placed on America that differentiated his rhetorical appeals from the traditional Jeremiad, but they noted that he continued to follow much of the rest of the generic features by warning of impending danger, need for change, and suggesting corrective measures. Essentially they show that Reagan created a divergent branch of the Jeremiad through his rhetoric. Through this analysis Jones and Rowland develop the Covenant-affirming Jeremiad, an offshoot of the classic Jeremiad that does not blame the audience but still warns of impending danger and the need for change. In this way, they further develop generic criticism’s contours through developing a new sub-genre and analyzing another rhetorical situation that can be referenced to understand recurring contexts in the future.

Kathryn Olson (1993) argues for the necessity of “rehistoricizing a rhetorical act once it has been identified as an instance of a particular genre” in order to understand the impacts that different rhetorical acts had on others throughout history (p. 299). Her argument is made by first, re-examining the situational aspect of generic criticism, second, by analyzing how rehistoricizing a rhetorical artifact answers different questions when it has been generically defined, and third, applying these theoretical underpinnings to Barry Goldwater’s and Ronald Reagan’s campaign rhetoric. She shows that there are similarities and connections between the different uses of rhetoric through history that makes the additional step of rehistoricizing rhetorical situations after they’ve been generically categorized a very important one for understanding the broader application. As such, she adds to generic criticism through her argument for another step to the process of generic criticism.

## Analysis

In order to understand communication in the broad sense it is often imperative to understand its specific developments and contexts, so as to begin to grasp the underlying currents of the human experience through communication. Generic criticism allows for partitioning of the intricate and complex communicative process, which creates room for an understanding of communication in pieces that are comprehensible for human conception. Additionally a study of genre sheds further light on the patterns of rhetorical strategy, rhetorical situation, and audience effects within their clusters of historical occurrences. These recurrences allow for deeper understanding of communication and how people respond to discourse. Determining a genre for memes would allow for a fuller perception of how online communication operates and what it produces. A further understanding of generic criticism and the genre of memes will be developed through an application of a generic analysis on the selected six artifacts. This application will be conducted through the generation of common characteristics of the artifacts, determination of contextual commonalities, development of representative qualities of the genre, a rendering of implications in the understanding of generic assumptions and factors according to Black's and Bitzer's developments of the theory, and a conclusion on the overall purpose of the genre.

### *Common Characteristics*

In order to understand a genre it is necessary to identify common characteristics held by artifacts within it, so as to draw a stronger definitional boundary as to what constitutes it. This particular examination of characteristics held by memes will look at visual and literary characteristics held by the six selected artifacts. If these six artifacts are to in fact create the basis for developing a genre, then they should have an underlying basis of common characteristic of defining proportion. First, examining the visual similarities is necessary to note that each of the selected artifacts is primarily visually graphic in nature. Specifically, each of them is a still picture of a subject and then has a blurb typed across or directly above or below the picture. The second subcategory uses pictures from a public event that a group of people can identify with. Through addressing this collective identity, a stronger sense of unity is fostered because of the use of insider language and the continuance of a fantasy theme as the terms have been developed by Ernest Bormann. As such the existence of the collective identity is expanded from whatever its original context is into the online context as well. This expansion of collective identity is created through not only the visuals used, but also the shared understanding of the connection between the visual and the text. By engaging three aspects of shared communication—visual, textual, and internal—the collective identity solidifies more quickly and more thoroughly than most forms of communication. As such the visual characteristic combined with the textual and contextual aspects make the meme characteristically a highly effective tool in creating collective identity.

### *Contextual Commonalities*

In order to bind together a genre it is necessary to understand the rhetorical situation around the involved artifacts so as to unpack the historical purpose and meaning of the genre and artifact. If all six of the artifacts form a single genre, then they ought to have contextual commonalities (rhetorical contexts) that are definitional in nature to the artifact, thus deeming them memes. These six artifacts each approach the intent of humor, operate with multiple pre-requisite outside contexts, and engage a topic that is of current relevance.

All six refuse to handle any of the issues or subjects they address in a way that handles them in a persuasive, informational, or tragic way. "Replacement Referees" does not discuss specific failures or why it has impact, but rather assumes these things in order to exaggerate the problem to the point of ridiculousness. Similarly, the other memes assume knowledge instead of addressing it in a serious or tragic way, but rather address an issue through irony, exaggeration, or double meaning. A major component of the involved humor is impressed through the humanistic desire that comes with being a part of an inside group, and as such this paper contends that memes as a genre develop collective identity

and engage humor, which tend to be reciprocal in nature.

Another contextual commonality is that the context requires an understanding of multiple outside contexts in order to fully unpack the intended message of the meme. These outside contexts can largely be anything that the audience relates to, whether common or unique. For instance, the “Replacement Referees” meme assumes there is an understanding of basic baseball rules, the strike that the NFL referees were in at the time of the meme’s creation, NBA teams, basic football rules, and the frustration and controversy in dealing with the temporary replacement referees filling in during the strike. Additionally the Joker meme assumes an understanding of the storyline of the movie *The Dark Knight* and a very particular view of obesity. “Alzheimer’s” assumes that there is a basic understanding of the impacts of the disease as well as a very specific perception of the disease as connected with elderly people and yet another understanding of the disease through a lens of sarcastic humor. Furthermore this understanding of multiple outside conversations creates a similar experience to an inside joke through the presentation of insider language. This created experience is most similar to the experience created by fan bases, highly popular games, or cult classic movies.

A third clear contextual commonality among memes as represented through the above six artifacts is their relevance to the current time of their creation and circulation. The commonality of current relevance can be understood by examining the rhetorical situation surrounding each of the artifacts. The “Replacement Referees” meme referenced an event occurring in the fall of 2012 and came out during the fall of 2012. While a date or time of creation cannot be completely be determined for any of the artifacts due to their online grassroots nature, they each reference a something that carried/s meaning at the time of its appearance and circulation. The “Binders Full of Women” meme also follows this suit. It references the second presidential debate in which 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney gave the sound bite “binders full of women” and depicts Bill Clinton who infamously had an affair with Monica Lewinsky during his presidency. Its references tie together a newsworthy event that occurred days before its creation and a second event of such historical infamy that it still carries relevance in today’s world. The “Alzheimer’s” meme maintains current relevance because of the current state of the disease. Based upon the analysis of the Alzheimer’s Association one in eight older Americans suffer with the disease, and 15 million provide unpaid care to someone suffering with it (Alzheimer’s Association, 2012). This meme then deals with a matter of widespread current relevance. The “Queen of England” meme references an event that occurred during the summer of 2012 and much like the other event-based memes, came into circulation while the event was ongoing. It then ties the photo from this event to commonly held historical knowledge—the US is a former English colony. In doing so, the meme carried current relevance during the time of its circulation both through its reference to the 2012 Olympics and through its reference to commonly held knowledge. The “Joker” meme finds its rhetorical situation in the very popular American superhero movie, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and obesity. The meme treats both references with sarcastic humor whether the storyline of the movie or the extent and cause of obesity through suggesting obesity can lead to cannibalism.

Furthermore these extralinguistic influences not only impact the audience but select the very rhetorical audience by using virtually only insider language whether image or text based. The “Tuition” meme has its rhetorical situation stemming from a cultural perception of elites and rising tuition for colleges. The intersection of these topics then impacts its audience by developing a rhetorical audience that both is impacted by college tuition and negatively views elites. These negative connotations form the rhetorical audience into an insider group that does not wish to contemplate the policy or budgetary needs of educational institutions but rather seeks a scapegoat and wishes to separate itself from the guilty party through some means. The means is then given through the treatment of the subjects with the use of sarcastic humor, which leaves less room for dialogue with the target subject and allows the audience more separation from its scapegoat. This strategy is similarly used to gain separation from all of the target parties in these memes, whether the replacement referees for their alleged faulty calls or from the pain and discomfort otherwise associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

### *Representative Qualities*

Representative qualities of this genre can be understood as those characteristics and commonalities that are conclusively important enough to be considered definitional in nature. In memes, these are important because the genre of the meme is not fully understood. As such, this aspect of the paper aims to advance that generic understanding of the meme, and thus communication. The representative qualities can be understood in the categories of explicit and implicit.

Explicit characteristics of a meme can be understood as those that are apparent upon simply glancing at a meme. This category looks at why a meme looks like a meme. The explicit characteristics of a meme include a graphic nature, a textual component, and a relatively simplistic design. Examining the graphic nature of memes, it is clear that in each of the 6 artifacts that there is not only a graphic component, but that memes are primarily graphic in nature. Looking at the textual component, memes seem to have blurbs, phrases, or labels to further explain the thought process. In such a way they tend to act as the reversal of a Rorschach test, in that instead of allowing the viewer to determine the words that are associated with an image, the meme shows the viewer what to associate with a certain image. Thus the textual component is necessary to the genre of the meme. The artifacts are all relatively simplistic in design. They tend to be simple images with no more than a single sentence. This allows the viewer to quickly view and process the meme and its message. The simplicity makes the meme easy to read and also allows it to more easily conform to much of the communication online.

Implicit characteristics of a meme can be understood as those underlying the general design and tending to operate within the environment of internal processing. This category looks at why a meme feels like a meme. The implicit characteristics of a meme include references to multiple outside contexts, a humorous nature, and being targeted at a collective identity. An underlying characteristic of each of the artifacts is that they refer to multiple outside contexts. This paper understands “multiple outside contexts” to mean references to other jokes, norms, communications, or insider language different from those communicated directly within the artifact. For example, the “Replacement Referees” artifact refers to the overall sentiment towards the replacement referees during the NFL referee strike, the controversial calls in games previous, and knowledge of the differences in the sports references made by the meme’s statement. It is notable that these outside contexts can be either specific or general in nature, but must be multiple and independent experiences that others relate to outside that specific artifact. The humorous aspect of these artifacts comes from the aforementioned analysis on memes’ focus on making issues laughable through either irony or exaggeration. This aspect makes the artifact a positive experience for the audience and thus adds to their identification with this collective identity in a positive manner. The effect of the humor presupposes the third implicit commonality, which is the targeting of a collective identity. The multiple outside references within a meme indicate a collective identity to address; the effort at approaching it in a positive manner through humor shows intentionality. Furthermore, the meme also is effective in adding to and/or solidifying a collective identity and thus shows further intentional targeting through a meme, making it a representative quality of the genre.

### *Generic Criticism*

Now that the ambiguous nature of the meme has been stripped away a bit and a base understanding of the common qualities of memes is set, they can be examined through the eyes of generic criticism. As mentioned earlier, genres can be understood through an analysis of the three factors that come from historical recurrence of similar situational types and responses: rhetorical strategies, rhetorical situations, and audience effects (Black, 1965).

**Rhetorical Strategy.** The rhetorical strategy of the meme assumes that rhetoric exists for a purpose of altering reality in some way (Bitzer, 2000). The rhetorical strategy of the meme is one of sarcastic humor through insider language that is communicated in a combination of still image and text. The meme seeks to develop a collective social consciousness between people that are not together through the means of insider language. Furthermore the genre of the meme styles itself in humor. In this approach its pragmatism can be found in its efforts to create insider language between groups of people

that have not necessarily met. The collective consciousness that is then developed with enough artifacts surrounding this particular point of historical occurrence is one of sarcastic humor. In particular this style of rhetorical strategy fits within the same group as comic strips, political cartoons, comedy movies, and other cultural manifestations of humor spread through mass media.

**Rhetorical Situation.** The rhetorical situation of this genre is collected around the point of online communication about events that can be related with other events, which will cause a rhetorical intersection point that then defines an audience through extralinguistic means. The rhetorical intersection appears to be a possible means of forming a rhetorical audience, as such an audience is described by Bitzer, as well as creating a means in which the development of insider language is easily developed. Insider language requires that a word, phrase, or term is imbued with meaning that only a select group understands, and the intersection of two rhetorical contexts allows for the simple use of a word or phrase to connect them if they are both clearly depicted as target subjects. Memes effectively accomplish this task through the presentation of at least one rhetorical context in an image and at least one more presented in the text printed across the image. The meme then finds its effectiveness in creating its own insider language within the rhetorical situation by using a word or phrase to connect the presented subjects.

**Audience Effects.** Audience effects are largely unseen due to the ambiguous and decentralized nature of the meme and online communication as a whole. It is essentially infeasible to describe the effects that result in an audience from memes as a genre because their audiences are dispersed, experience the meme at varying times, and usually don't communicate with one another after the experience. This is the point that the genre of the meme ceases to be effective aside from creating possible laughter or sharing links with friends through the social media. Because of the extent of dispersion that is inherent in meme audiences they do not engage in any sort of coordinated or related reaction, but rather individual audience members respond individually. The genre of the meme thus has a component of paradox because it creates insider language that is largely known by dispersed individuals for the most part. It remains to be seen that the rhetorical audience of any meme(s) comes together or operates in any sort of unison. Rather, the rhetorical strategy of the meme can be accomplished without any such effort because it only seeks to alter the mindset of the audience and engage it through humor. As such the typical means of uniting or engaging an audience through the development of a collective identity and insider language to create an active response is instead seen as the ends of the meme. The meme does not seek to change the world, but rather the audience's perceived experience of the world.

### Implications

The generic criticism of the meme creates a few major implications in the understanding of choosing a rhetorical audience, the development of insider language, the purpose of rhetoric, and effects of online communication. Choosing a rhetorical audience can often involve a number of strategies such as choosing those that can make an impact or those that identify with a message. The selection of the rhetorical audience of the meme is accomplished through determining multiple rhetorical subjects and finding a place of intersection. The idea of the rhetorical intersection must be further developed in order to comprehend its use or measuring in full its operative mechanisms or ramifications. To form a baseline for this concept, it can be understood as related to the ideas of tenor and vehicle. Metaphor criticism brings together "two terms normally regarded as belonging to different classes of experience" by joining tenor and vehicle (Foss 2009, p. 267). Tenor refers to the topic that is being explained or illuminated by the metaphor, while the vehicle refers to the "vehicle or lens through which a topic is viewed" (Foss 2009, p. 267). The rhetorical intersection offers two tenors which it bridges together through the vehicle of placing image and text together when applied to the use of the meme. The two tenors are viewed through the lens of each other and the vehicle becomes the strategic placement of one by the other. An example is the "Binders Full of Women" meme that places Romney's sound bite on the image of Bill Clinton. The meme thus takes two tenors and uses the vehicle of visual placement to bridge the thoughts together. The

intersection then requires an understanding of both subjects for the meme to make sense.

What can be determined from glimpsing it in this analysis is that the rhetorical intersection can be applied to quickly and effectively develop insider language. The development of insider language appears to encourage the presentation of two or more rhetorical subjects at which point the use of a phrase or word can then come to define such a manifestation of a collective identity. Furthermore, insider language appears to not require person-to-person communication, but can be developed through media that does not require interpersonal contact. The creation of insider language without the need for person to person contact is likely what allows for the development of a culture in a population as large as a nation-state. In order to fully unpack such an argument, it would be necessary to conduct a separate, more properly focused study.

The purpose of rhetoric as explained by Bitzer is to change reality and as such rhetoric is pragmatic. However such an understanding of rhetoric does not take into account that reality may be altered within the mind of a person if the person's perception of reality is altered. Such an alteration of a person's perception of reality does not require that any changes be made to anything outside of the mindset or psyche. This effort at changing the person's mindset must be considered rhetoric because a change of mindset guarantees a change of how that person would otherwise respond to reality, which means that an alteration of a person's perception is in itself pragmatic, even if the long term affects are unintended or unforeseen. The audience has been changed in reality according to the purposes of the rhetoric, but the physical action that is then taken by an audience member later in time is not the sought-after impact of the rhetor. As such, Bitzer's explanation of rhetoric ought to be reconsidered and further studied. The effects of online communication further exacerbate Bitzer's analysis of rhetoric because the fullness of audience effects cannot be understood in the genre of the meme—its audience is dispersed by space and time via the internet. If rhetoric seeks to directly alter reality by means of persuasion, then in order to determine if something is rhetoric its intent must be known.

The problem presented by the meme and online communication in its entirety is that it does not allow for the intent of the rhetor to be fully understood; the rhetor is generally unknown since the internet disperses those it mediates for and does not ever require in-person contact. Furthermore, the rhetor can be essentially anyone because online communication invites all and turns away only those who do not have access at that moment. It keeps what has been placed within its domain and allows for constant, limitless additions by anyone, which means that a rhetor for a specific meme cannot be located and that intent remains only determinable through analytical means (as an archeologist or investigator must also use.)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a deeper understanding of memes and generic criticism can be seen through an examination of six artifacts; a brief look at the theory, history, and ten examples of generic criticism; an application of the theory to the artifacts by developing common characteristics, contextual commonalities, and representative qualities; an analysis of the generic development through rhetorical strategy, rhetorical situation, and audience effects; and finally a development of implications of this study. It can be understood that memes are a rather new development in communication and show a more ambiguous side of rhetoric. Memes are useful in developing collective identity through the creation of insider language by means of connecting otherwise separate rhetorical contexts. This notion leads the development of the rhetorical intersection. Furthermore, the genre of memes allows for the continued understanding of online communication on a deeper and more intricate level. Memes are effective in incrementally altering mindsets and seem to pose a new and unique form of communication through a medium that is not yet fully understood.

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