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Winter 2019

## Memes and Metamodernism: An Analysis of a Medium

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### Recommended Citation

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Western Washington University

Memes and Metamodernism:

An Analysis of a Medium

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Honors Capstone Project

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22 March, 2019

On social media platforms and discussion forums today, you're likely to encounter many memes. The term meme has been colloquially adopted by internet culture to refer to a variety of media, such as images, videos, and gifs, that most typically express some kind of joke referencing culture at large. While internet memes had rather simple beginnings, they have evolved to become increasingly more self-referential, self-conscious, and complex. More recently, our memes have begun to express nihilistic, absurdist truths about human experience, while maintaining the humorous nature of the medium. Memes have become a language of humor through which we can relate to each other; they represent the prevailing structure of feeling of our time, which is characterized by the oscillation between ironic expression and the quest for optimism. In this essay, I will analyze the medium of memes through the lens of metamodernism – the name proposed for the overarching cultural movement of the moment – and within this analysis, I will consider the positive and negative implications of meme culture as it is evolving today.

### **Defining Metamodernism**

In order to explain the cultural movement of today, metamodernism, we first need to understand what came before it: modernism and postmodernism. From what I've learned throughout my research, it is extremely difficult to try to define the prevailing mode of thought for a period of time. Modernism and postmodernism are notoriously difficult to define, and the exact beginnings and ends of modernism and postmodernism are not agreed upon unanimously by theorists. The descriptions of modernism and postmodernism that I offer in this section are simplified, and they capture merely the general aspects of each movement.

Modernism is generally considered to have begun following WWI. This time represented a period of immense loss and violence, and essentially hopelessness. Notions of faith and tradition were being undermined by all of the death that occurred in the war. People were left feeling alienated and were unable to find meaning or resonance in the prevailing philosophies, which were generally optimistic. During this time, literature, art, and philosophy centered around creating a new way to find resonance and meaning in the world. This manifested in art and literary movements such as surrealism and cubism, which sought to see the world from perspectives of honest experience (Modernism). Additionally, a new value was given to reason and science, as they were seen to offer definitive and objective meaning to everything. Modernists thought that science led to the truth of all experience and that it would bring cultures together because of its universality (Modernism vs. Postmodernism). To characterize modernism succinctly, during the period there was a high level of sincerity and conviction in how people understood truth in the world.

By contrast, postmodernism, which began in the mid-1900s, emphasized skepticism and thought of truth as subjective and not at all definitive. Postmodernism rejected the idea that objective reality was universal and thought that the sentiments of modernism represented a very naïve way to view truth the world. To postmodernists, the narratives and philosophies of the modern period were “myths” created by humanity, and while these myths were not discounted entirely, they were no longer seen as absolute truth. Additionally, art, television, and literature tended to be characterized by parody and irony (Modernism vs. Postmodernism).

Postmodernism has been criticized by many as being self-defeating and purposeless at a certain point. Author David Foster Wallace criticized postmodernism for its overuse of irony in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction:”

‘Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage.’ This is because irony, entertaining as it is, serves an almost exclusively negative function. It’s critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. [...] I find gifted ironists sort of wickedly fun to listen to at parties, but I always walk away feeling like I’ve had several radical surgical procedures. And as for actually driving cross-country with a gifted ironist, or sitting through a 300-page novel full of nothing but trendy sardonic exhaustion, one ends up feeling not only empty but somehow...oppressed.” (Wallace 67)

Wallace characterizes overuse of irony as hollowing and ultimately purposeless, as it pokes fun at sincerity and definitive meaning, and thus ends up eschewing it altogether. It follows from Wallace’s analysis of the effects of postmodernism that eventually, we will need to escape from the echo chamber of irony and meaninglessness, and many theorists think we have begun to emerge from this through metamodernism.

The term metamodernism was coined by Mas’ud Zavarzadeh in 1975, but it has been adopted by many theorists to describe the current mode of thought, beginning in the 1990s. The prefix “meta” refers to notions of being “with,” “between,” and “beyond,” and this prefix is employed in this term because metamodernism is largely defined by its relation to modernism and postmodernism. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, in “Notes on Metamodernism,” explain the structure of feeling of metamodern thought, particularly in terms of the art it produces: “[metamodernism] is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (2). In other words, metamodern thought oscillates between sincerity and irony, simultaneously striking a sort of balance between modern and postmodern thought and transcending the two movements to become its own period. One of the epigraphs at the beginning of “Notes on Metamodernism,” from art critic Jerry Saltz, captures the essence of the structure of thought that characterizes metamodernism:

I’m noticing a new approach to artmaking in recent museum and gallery shows. [...] It’s an attitude that says, I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this

isn't serious. At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (Saltz, in Vermeulen & van den Akker 2)

Although Saltz's observations are in direct reference to fine art, his commentary upon the outlook that comes with metamodern thought and discourse is precise, and, I think, applicable to the attitude of the movement in general. Metamodernism is self-referential and wholly self-conscious. It is a way of thinking that pokes fun at itself while still embracing the idea that there is meaning to things. Like modernism, metamodernism does not lose track of the idea that there may be meaning in the world, but unlike modernism, it does not try to definitively state what that meaning may be. Then, much like postmodernism, metamodernism embraces a level of cynicism about the world, but, again, it does not abandon the idea that there may be some greater meaning somewhere. Metamodernism is reminiscent of absurdist philosophy in the way it embraces a seeming lack of meaning, but then finds meaning within the very lack of it. Emerging from a period of postmodernism, when irony and cynicism prevailed, metamodernism makes sense because it indirectly seeks to reconstruct the philosophies of sincerity of the modern period (Abramson). With this understanding of the sentiments of metamodernism, we can move into defining memes and understanding how they reflect structures of feeling.

### **Defining Cultural Memes**

The term meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins, an ethologist and evolutionary biologist, in 1976, in his book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins). Finding himself dissatisfied with proposed explanations for human behavior, as he believed that they relied too much upon genes to explain the evolution of culture, Dawkins decided to use the gene as an analogy for explaining

culture, and not as an explanation itself. The genetic principle that Dawkins's analysis of culture rests upon is "the law that all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities" (Dawkins). Dawkins believes that this law is observable in a sense other than genetic evolution in our world:

I think that a new replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. (Dawkins)

Dawkins clarifies that this "soup" is human culture, and the replicating entities within it are to be called memes, rather than genes. The word meme is an abbreviation of the Greek word "mimeme," meaning "something imitated," or "something copied" (Hiskey). According to Dawkins, memes can refer to "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches." From how I've learned to understand them, memes can refer to almost anything within culture: any kind of concept, idea, or family of ideas, but not to physical entities. Physical entities can be vehicles for memes and can have memes that revolve around them, however. Memes can refer to the ideas that circulate around popular culture phenomena, such as movies, books, and items advertised on television. To return to Dawkins's more simplistic examples, memes can also refer simply to units of cultural knowledge, such as the best way to construct a sturdy table.

Dawkins employs the example of the idea of God to examine how memes mirror genes. The idea of God is ancient, and "we don't know how it arose in the meme pool. Probably it originated many times by independent 'mutation'" (Dawkins). Memes parallel genes in the sense that they can come into existence randomly, and then spread from person to person within a culture through various media. The meme of God originally replicated through forms of art, such as music and stories, and the reason for its high survival value as a meme is its psychological

appeal; the idea of God is comforting in the face of existential anguish, injustice, and hopelessness (Dawkins). Other memes survive for different reasons, but ultimately their survival comes down to their advantageousness within a culture.

### **A Brief History of Internet Memes**

It has been difficult to determine the first instance of the word meme used in reference to the internet, but the first two that I could find are from 1998: the first is in a paper titled “The Internet and Memetics” by Garry Marshall, and the second is a website called Memepool, a community forum. In “The Internet and Memetics,” Marshall proposes that memetics and memes are an effective tool of analysis of the workings of the internet. Marshall uses the word meme to describe units of information that are communicated across the internet. Marshall writes “The consequence of the availability of both e-mail and the World Wide Web is that the Internet is, for its users, an ideal medium for the spread, replication and storage of memes” (Marshall).

Although Marshall may not have been referring to internet memes in the image- and humor-based way that we understand them today, this paper could be what served to popularize the term and its use in reference to the internet. Conversely, the website Memepool used the term meme to refer to interesting, obscure, or humorous articles and images, which is very similar to how the term is used colloquially today (Nagy).

Today, internet memes refer to a specific medium through which information is conveyed, primarily on the internet. Internet memes, because of their wide scope, are difficult to define, but in “The Language of Internet Memes,” Patrick Davison offers a definition: “An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (Davison). That internet memes are most often humorous in nature is what most



clearly differentiates the definition from Dawkins' original definition of memes. Although it is not specified in Davison's definition, I think that internet memes also differ from cultural memes in the sense that they tend to take the form of specific media, such as text, videos, gifs, and most frequently, images. Whereas cultural memes are noncorporeal, amorphous ideas that are transmitted through culture, internet memes are very closely tied to the media through which they are transmitted and could thus be said to be more "tangible" than cultural memes. Of course, internet memes can also refer to intangible ideas themselves but used colloquially, the term typically refers to pieces of media.

### **The Evolution of Memes and Meme Platforms**

Although internet memes can take the form of many different media, I will focus on image-based memes in this analysis. The base images that internet memes consist of are most often taken from some element of popular culture, such as TV shows, YouTube videos, movies, advertisements, books, comics, and illustrations. Most often, and toward the beginning of meme culture, these images reference something commonly recognized or understood in popular culture. These images can stand alone, but they most often incorporate text in some way. The text can be a direct reference to the image itself; for example, a meme that is a still from a music video might have lyrics included as text, but the text can also be a commentary upon the image, so that the image serves as a "reaction" to whatever is expressed through the text. Most image-based memes are based on meme "formats," which are templates that users employ to make new memes that branch off of an original meme. As meme formats are used, the joke of the original meme evolves, and memes made with the format become more self-referential and therefore more niche. Meme formats can combine and evolve together, and they can become a

commentary upon the medium itself, resulting in a meme that would likely be incomprehensible to someone unaware of the meme’s evolutionary history. The Drake meme in Figure 1 is an example of a self-conscious meme that makes fun of itself, and it is an amalgamation of three different references to meme formats. The most obvious reference is to the Drake meme template, which is typically just the first two boxes of this meme, but it also imitates the meme format of the expanding brain, which is used to indicate some kind of transcendence of understanding. At the very end, it references Elon Musk, whose supposed elusive presence on the internet has become a meme. The meme is complex and absurd, and it would be extremely difficult to understand the joke that it is making without having a prior understanding of the culture’s evolution.



Fig. 1. Self-referential meme posted to Reddit, titled “Drake has a big brain.”

While most of today's memes emerge from some reference to popular culture, some of the earliest internet memes existed mostly on their own: they arose from the mind of one person, and according to Dawkins's analysis, are independent mutations. For example, the Hampter [sic] Dance and its accompanying song, popularized in 1999, is a single-serving website created by Deidre LeCarte called Hampton's Hamster House (Hampter Dance). LeCarte made the website in honor of her pet hamster, so the website and its meaning really only made sense to her, and perhaps people who knew her. Despite not referencing anything known to the general public, the meme rose in popularity as it was spread largely through e-mail, and it is widely known now because of artists who remixed the song that played on the website (Hampter Dance). Although a few early internet memes arose this way, it is not the norm for the memes of today.

Most internet memes, current and past, have evolved from memes circulating in the general popular culture for many years. For instance, concepts and ideas surrounding *Star Wars* have been cultural memes since the first film of the franchise was released in 1977. It is speculated that the first internet meme referencing *Star Wars* is an image of Admiral Ackbar with the text "It's a Trap!" overlaying it, posted in the early 2000s. The image was popularly used as a reaction "to warn others of a potential bait-and-switch prank ahead" (It's A Trap!). Since this Admiral Ackbar internet meme, if it was the first to reference the franchise, *Star Wars* images, concepts, and lore are used to create thousands of memes. On Reddit, there are communities devoted solely to *Star Wars* memes, such as r/PrequelMemes. *Star Wars* is just one example of an element of popular culture that has evolved to have a significant presence within meme culture online, and it would be near impossible to detail them all. Many other movies,

television shows, and music have also contributed significantly to the meme pool online and have subcultures and communities that center around them exclusively.

One of the earliest genres of memes that have retained their popularity over the years can be classified as “relatable” memes. These memes are deemed relatable because they speak to something many people can identify with, and these memes are popular because, as Dawkins wrote about the meme of God, they are psychologically comforting in a sense. When you see other people making memes about experiences you can relate to, you feel less alone.

While the earliest internet memes spread primarily through email forwarding and sites like Memepool, their presence is ubiquitous today due to the multitude of platforms through which they can be disseminated. Some of these platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, 4chan, Reddit, iFunny, and 9GAG. Each platform has its own “rules” for the types of memes that are typically posted, and subsequently, each platform has a different reputation surrounding its meme culture. Platforms like Reddit, iFunny, and 9GAG allow users to preserve anonymity, as usernames typically do not include any personal details. This anonymity also applies to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to an extent, but it is more typical for users of these platforms to include personal details. 4chan is unique in that it is a platform that eschews profiles and usernames entirely; all posts are made anonymously, and posts are only identified by numbers. 4chan’s complete anonymity allows users to be less cautious about the content they post, and as a result, the platform is infamous for offensive and shocking content. The reputations of each platform differ, and these reputations are largely determined by what users of one platform think about other platforms. For instance, Reddit users have made a meme out of Instagram users “stealing” memes from Reddit. Redditors will occasionally overtly make memes

in sizes or in files not conducive to Instagram so that Instagram users cannot repost them on the platform, and the central humor of these memes comes from poking fun at Instagram users.

As memes evolve, new subcultures and subdivisions of memes develop. Some of these subdivisions include Dank memes, Deep-Fried memes, Wholesome memes, Political memes, Normie memes, and many more, all of which have their own associations and “rules” regarding what constitutes their content. Divisions of memes can narrow even further; an example is a community on Reddit called r/bonehurtingjuice, which stemmed from a Winnie the Pooh meme and centers around making memes that deliberately misunderstand the intended use of a format (bonehurtingjuice).

### **“The Medium is the Message”**

It is in Davison’s definition of internet memes that they are mostly all jokes, but I’ve begun to notice that many of the most popular memes on the internet reference rather serious subject matter, or express controversial opinions. Some of these memes traverse subjects related to mental illness, suicide (as in Figure 2), politics, and cultural events such as 9/11 (as in Figure 3). There’s a kind of cognitive dissonance that occurs when one sees a meme of this nature, because, after all, it is a meme, but in its humor, it is expressing something that is emotionally provocative. In other words, the content of the meme, something serious, seems to be at odds with the medium itself, which conveys humor. There is something very interesting here, in how memes, a medium of humor, are so frequently used to express ideas related to provocative subjects, and I employed the approach of Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in order to further understand how the medium works.



Fig. 2: Posted by Silvah\_Dukeson



Fig. 3: Posted by funnymemesplug

In this book, Postman contemplates the medium of television. His central thesis is that the medium of television is inherently one of entertainment, and then, using Marshall McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message," Postman explains that everything that is conveyed through television is automatically received by people as entertainment. This becomes problematic when people receive information about politics, world events, and other pressing matters through the medium of television. Because people watch television for entertainment purposes, news broadcasters are incentivized to sensationalize the news to make it more entertaining, and politicians are incentivized to make themselves and their ideas come across in a favorable light on television. Honesty and rationality are thus sacrificed in the name of good television and ratings (Postman).

If we are to apply Postman's analysis of the medium of television to memes, we might come to a similar conclusion – that memes are inherently a medium of entertainment, of humor. Memes are bite-sized and need to convey something that entertains people quickly and that encourages people to show the meme to others, to increase its popularity and to get more upvotes on a given platform. This means that memes that are relatable or provocative are likely to get a

lot of attention. It makes sense, then, that memes that traverse controversial subject matter are so popular, it is because of their shock value. Either way, if the meme is received positively or negatively, it will get a reaction out of people, either of which brings more attention to the meme. Additionally, memes are hard to trace, especially on platforms that give users anonymity, such as Reddit, 4Chan, and even Instagram, Twitter and Facebook if the meme creator chooses not to disclose their personal information. Memes are constantly reposted on different platforms, which makes it extremely difficult to trace who made the original meme. This disconnection from the meme creator's identity makes it a lot easier to post memes that are controversial since anonymity largely prevents any real risk to the individual.

There is an inherent contradiction when memes traverse controversial subject matter: the seriousness of the content of the memes conflicts with the medium itself. Because of this inherent contradiction, I think that many genres of memes represent a metamodern mode of discourse. Memes that make a statement about something larger oscillate between sincerity and irony: they are poking fun at something, but still acknowledging that the object of humor is something serious. The meaning of the meme becomes this strange interstitial entity, then, existing between truth and satire. In one sense, memes can bring attention to serious topics that should be discussed, like mental illness, but in another, memes can be seen to minimize the seriousness of things and can potentially be harmful in this way. This is especially so if memes are used to advance a political agenda because most people will not take the time to check facts to know if the information presented in the meme is correct. Social media platforms do not encourage critical thinking, as they, too, are ultimately media of entertainment and are usually accessed during idle time.

## **Memes, Metamodernism, and the 2016 Presidential Election**

Donald Trump's 2016 campaign to become the President of the United States of America rests upon principles of metamodernism and relates to meme culture in multiple ways. In Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 11/9*, an interpretation of the processes leading up to Trump's presidential run, nomination as the Republican Party's candidate, and eventual election to office is detailed. Moore argues that Trump's initial run for president was a joke – a farce to get back at NBC for paying Gwen Stefani, a judge on the television show *The Voice*, more than they were paying him for his involvement with the show *The Apprentice*. Moore states that Trump paid extras fifty dollars to be his supporters and that Trump hoped NBC would acknowledge his improvisational skills in faking a presidential announcement (Moore). After this, Moore plays a montage of racist and politically ignorant lines that Trump delivered at this first, and according to Moore, artificial rally, and we are informed that NBC cut ties with Donald Trump due to his comments. Moore says,

[Trump's] plan backfired. He was now out of a job. Though he had no real plans to run for president, his sons encouraged him to go ahead with the two rallies that he had booked and paid for. As he looked around at the adoring masses, a crowd the size of which he'd never seen before, he had his epiphany. Maybe running for president wasn't such a bad idea after all. (Moore)

After Moore presents his argument, he plays a clip from an ABC Newscast during the presidential race: a pundit says, "We be better be ready for the fact that [Trump] might be leading the Republican ticket" and George Stephanopoulos replies, laughing along with everyone else, "I know you don't believe that." TV news programs and American citizens dismissed the legitimacy of Trump's campaign, passing it off as a joke that would never lead to his election.

Of course, the interpretation of Donald Trump's election that Moore sets forth in the documentary is merely speculative, and it rests on supposed premises that only Trump can



confirm or deny. However, Moore's argument presents a view of Trump's campaign as one of ambiguity, of the public's (and perhaps Trump's) inability to discern whether the campaign was real or not. Based upon Moore's view that Trump orchestrated the rallies for publicity purposes, it can be argued that Trump himself was unsure about his intentions as he garnered more support and the possibility of actually running seemed more feasible. Thus, if we are to take Moore's lens, Trump's campaign began as a metamodern joke: to American citizens and the media, his campaign oscillated between the absurdity of the star of *The Apprentice* vying for a seat of political power and the seeming legitimacy that comes with a campaign rally. It was a contradictory situation. Even without the lens of Moore's interpretation, the mere facts of Trump's campaign – that he is not a politician, but a reality TV star, and that he held campaign rallies – is metamodern in essence because the public was unsure of his sincerity in running.

Beyond the metamodern oscillation that was at the core of Trump's campaign, Trump's election to the office of the President of the United States is tied to meme culture. The "Make America Great Again" slogan became a political statement and a meme itself, but further, one of the reasons Trump was elected may very well have been memes. In 2018, the Senate Intelligence Committee found that Russian online operators created accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to undermine Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's campaign, and to strengthen Republican candidate Donald Trump's. Some of the groups targeted were Bernie Sanders supporters, Black Lives Matter supporters, veterans, LGBTQ supporters, and conservatives (Keating). The accounts first posted mostly truthful videos, images, and memes of relevant political and social issues and values, such as police brutality and homelessness. The reason for this was to make the accounts appear legitimate and trustworthy and to appeal to values and beliefs of certain groups of people (Keating). After establishing a semblance of credibility and a

following, the accounts posted memes to encourage division in the country and encouraged people to take sides on issues and to view political issues as inherently dichotomous, as in Figure 4. The accounts took advantage of people’s trust via extremely consumable propaganda that had been tailored to fit their specific views.



Fig. 4: A political meme targeting Christians (Keating).

This instance of propaganda being used to manipulate American politics is an extreme example of how memes can influence people, but it is also an example of why media literacy is more important now than ever. We must be aware of how our media can be used against us without our knowledge, and this is why understanding memes as an interstitial, metamodern medium is crucial. Despite this risk, it is possible that memes can also operate in the opposite way: that rather than being used to divide people, memes can unite communities.

### **Memes as Communities of Support**

Since the 1970s, a nationally representative survey called Monitoring the Future has been conducted to analyze the “behaviors, attitudes, and values” of teenagers. In 2012 and 2013, there was a significant increase in teenagers who experienced symptoms of depression, feelings of

hopelessness, and loneliness, and there was also a decrease in overall happiness. It is not a coincidence that also in 2012, the percentage of Americans who owned smartphones rose above 50%. (Twenge).

The ubiquity of smartphones and social media has led to an increase in the fragmentation of social interaction. Teens, and people in general, on average, spend far more time on social media than they do interacting with people and building in-person relationships (Fottrell). This applies especially to Millennials and Gen Zers, who grew up with social media as it has evolved. Social media urges us to compare our lives to idealized pictures, to feel we are missing out, we're too poor, or we're not attractive enough. Social media encourages dissatisfaction with one's life, and when this is compounded with less actual social interaction, it's not surprising that rates of depression have increased. This is why it is interesting that memes that deal with mental illness are so popular. Mental illness memes are ultimately just a subset of relatable memes, which are popular because they connect us with other people. Thus, memes that deal with mental illness have that same popularity – they speak to emotions people feel, but ones that they might not feel comfortable talking about openly with their friends. At this point in my research, I thought that the best approach would be to look to the Millennials and Gen Zers who are immersed in meme culture to consider how memes can facilitate community.

An Instagram meme creator, Cori Hartwig, who goes by the username manicpixiememequeen, explained how making memes became a creative outlet that helped her deal with depression at a Stanford University panel:

Over time, I wove a narrative around my own mental health issues and personal life through creating memes, and I shared my content with an audience who, shockingly, understood my narrative in their own personal ways. Currently, I have over 97,000 followers on Instagram, which is absolutely wild. Clearly, I'm not the only person in the world struggling with mental health issues or having some difficulty navigating our weird and absurd world. While my brain loves to tell me

that no one else really understands and then I perceive isolation, the evidence against this is in the numbers – my audience, the engagement on the posts, the hundreds of messages I receive from people across the globe telling me that they relate so much to my page and they're grateful for the content I make. (Hartwig)

Amato continues, explaining that she witnesses conversations in the comments sections on her posts, where people discuss their personal issues and offer mental health resources to each other. She insists that mental illness memes are not detrimental and that using humor as a way to convey one's emotion generates the awareness and conversation that needs to happen.

I also decided to interview my younger brother, Glen, who is a seasoned memer, about what he thinks memes do for his generation. I have witnessed Glen go through difficult periods as a result of mental health issues, and I wanted to know how meme culture may have affected him. Glen explained to me that he knows his generation has the worst mental health in history, that because of the lack of social interaction, and because of growing up during a period of constant war, heavily divided politics, an unprecedented wealth disparity, and an environmental crisis, he feels his generation doesn't know what to do with their lives. He said "comedy is deeply rooted in fear and sadness," and his generation "laughs to make themselves feel better." He went on, "with this huge partisan divide, with our memes we're creating a pseudo-union. The state of our union is more united online than it is in reality." He told me he likes memes because they don't force you to pick a side, unlike the politics of our day – "memes are funny and that's my only stance," he said (Nevling). Memes represent a welcome interstitial medium in a society characterized by division – the sincere and ironic poles of memes transcend division and create a new type of meaning that resonates with Millennials and Gen Zers. Glen went on to say that memes helped him get things off his chest. When he wasn't seeing a therapist, he made memes about mental health and consumed a lot of them, as well, and he knows that a lot of his friends do the same (Nevling).

## **Memes As a Reflection of a Structure of Feeling**

I think it is clear that in a generation dominated by the internet, it is important to form community where one can, given that smartphones and social media are not likely to disappear. Hearing the words of my brother, I was saddened to learn that he feels his generation is characterized by hopelessness and apathy – but I think they’re transcending this through the language of memes that has developed. The memes Millennials and Gen Zers are making may be humorous, but they also speak to collective observations, conclusions, and emotions. Even though they are often nihilistic and dark, there is something undeniably sincere and ultimately hopeful about the way these younger generations make memes and about how they express themselves through the medium.

I think that the only times we have to worry about memes are when we begin to disregard their interstitial, metamodern nature, and when we start to use them to inform us about current events. Internet literacy and critical thinking in the age of the Internet are incredibly important, and we need to be conscious of the implications of the medium of memes when we consume them. If we consume and create memes responsibly, they have the power to speak to truths about our culture, to unite us in a socially fragmented society, and ultimately, to transcend the irony and cynicism of postmodernism.

Memes are a metamodern medium, and metamodernism is an inherently optimistic movement. It celebrates absurdity and never lets go of the idea that our lives are meaningful, regardless of whether or not we ever truly discover that meaning. Through shared sentiments of nihilism, absurdity, and hopelessness, Millennials and Gen Zers are creating new ways to relate to one another, to build community. Xela Quintana, in a piece for *Logos*, beautifully explains metamodernism’s connection to the younger generations’ prevailing mode of thought:

“[Metamodernism] is the acceptance that we have a limited control over our fate, loved ones  
[and] career, but [it] does not lead to despondence. It guides to liberation.”

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