

Commentary Paper: Is a Meme a Totem?

You're on the T, heading to work. A glance around the packed train car reveals hundreds of eyes glued to their smartphones, hundreds of fingers mindlessly scrolling. Every once in a while, they let out a slightly stronger than normal nose breath (@MemesCentral: 2020). A group of MIT students performs this ritual at a meme about course 6 students being sell-outs (MIT Admissions: 2018). While, similarly, a group of Harvard students performs this ritual at a meme about Harvard College's confusing new mask policies.

Memes are a form of totemic expression, as defined by Durheim, within the groups that use them. Durkheim wrote that "the totem is above all a symbol, a tangible expression of something else." (1995: 208) Memes are potentially found humorous by members of the given community while serving as a symbolic representation of their struggles, successes, and history. An example of this is when the official Twitter account for the Ukrainian government tweeted out a meme about the potential for conflict with Russia, far before the recent invasion of Ukraine (@Ukraine: 2021) In this case, the meme served as a symbol of the struggle that the Ukrainian people are subjected to by the menace of a Russian invasion.

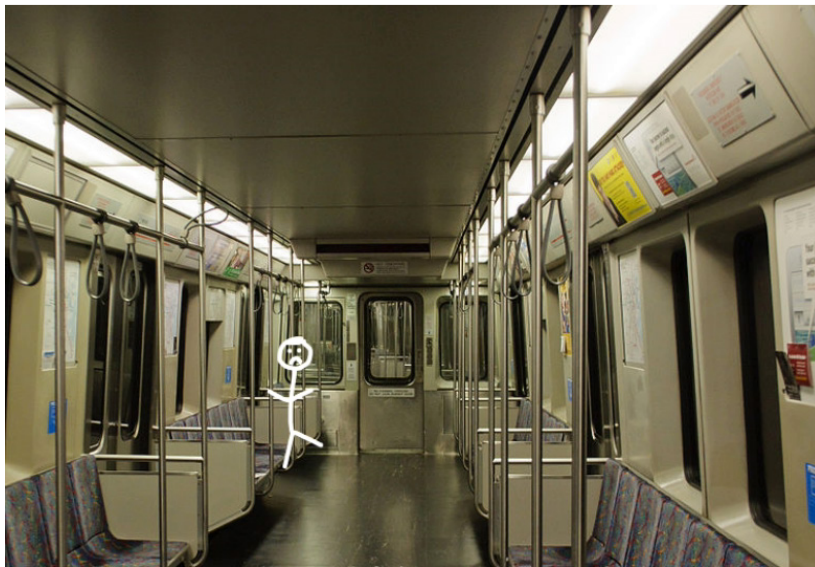
According to Constance Iloh, the meme has become “a part of everyday communication and expression.” (2021: 3) However, this everyday communication through memes is restricted to members of a particular group. Typically, memes are only worthy of performing the nose exhalation ritual when the viewer understands the meme and finds it humorous, or at least relatable. Similarly, Durkheim wrote that “the totem serves as a symbol of a particular society that is called a clan.” (1995: 208) Memes can serve this form by symbolizing the beliefs of a particular group or community. This is seen in the Ukrainian example, where the tweet represents the belief in Ukrainian independence.

Durkheim writes “the sacredness exhibited by the thing is not implicated in the intrinsic properties of the thing: *it is added to them*” (1995: 230). Memes are also similar to totems in this way. A meme is only an image or a video, it holds no real significance to the group in itself. The meaning attributed to the meme is what gives it significance within the group of people who understand it. In some cases, the supplementary text above the meme is what gives it meaning by adding additional context. For example, a meme posted to Reddit described an American’s reaction to another American making fun of the United States as opposed to when a European makes fun of the United States. In this case, the meme only makes sense with the text which gives it the context of the American revolution and other anti-European notions in American culture. (Reddit: 2021).

A meme does not represent the “clan” as a whole in the same way that something like a flag could, rather represents different beliefs they hold. This differentiates it in part from a totem. However, memes and totems share many similarities in the groups in which

they are used. Due to this, many ideas used to explain the existence of totems in religion and societies can be used to explain the existence of memes and their significance to their particular groups.

When you miss your stop because you were too busy watching people look at memes for an anthro paper



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Works Cited:

memes 🇺🇦 [@MemeCentral]. "Haha nose breath goes weeee" *Twitter*, 1 Jun. 2020, 3:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/memescentrai/status/1267357088356892674?lang=en>

Me: sees a good meme

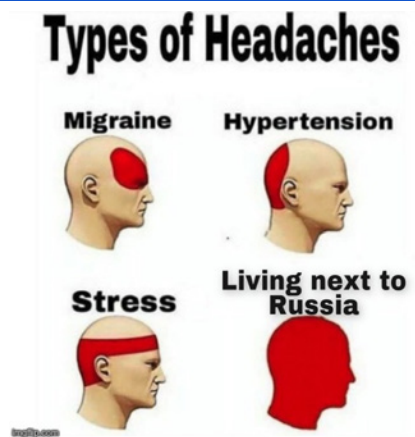
My nose:



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Ukraine/ Україна [@Ukraine]. *Twitter*, 7 Dec. 2021, 3:58 p.m.,
<https://twitter.com/ukraine/status/1468206078940823554>



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Danny and Allan G. '20. "Axes of Confusion." *MIT Admissions*, 21 June 2018,
<https://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/axes-of-confusion/>.



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"R/Memes - It Is True Tho." *Reddit*,
https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/mqxs9e/it_is_true_tho/.



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