

Memes: Agents of Community Membership

We're all familiar with the Bernie in Mittens meme. He sits cross legged, brown coat, large mittens. He looks cold and bored, almost sleepy, at Joe Biden's inauguration. He can be seen photoshopped into an endless range of photos - a canoe, a Bob Ross painting, a bench next to Keanu Reeves. Since that photo was taken, it has become a viral internet sensation. However, there are also much smaller memes that are circulated only in tightly-knit communities, such as sports teams or extracurricular groups. In this commentary paper, I will explore the significance of memes in smaller communities and their relation to the concepts of sacrality and social belonging that Emile Durkheim discusses in Chapter 7: "Origin of the Notion of Totemic Principle, or Mana" from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

As Durkheim might put it, memes often serve as an emblem of a social group. Those that know the meme and appreciate it can do so because they are members of a specific community. For example, I am one of 26 athletes on the women's lightweight rowing team here at MIT. Scrolling through our team group chat, I stumble upon multiple meme-ified photos that we shared amongst ourselves. Out of context, it's hard to appreciate the humor and significance of the captioned photos, but having undergone certain experiences shared only with my teammates, the memes hold special value and meaning. This strikes me as analogous to Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane. When otherwise ordinary photos are treated specially - edited, cropped, and captioned in a humorous way - they take on a "sacred" significance. As Durkheim states, "The sacredness exhibited by the thing is not implicated in the intrinsic properties of the thing: *It is added to them*" (1912: 230). One of our team's favorite

memes is a photo of our coaches smiling, layered under another teammate and serving as a zoom background. In any other setting, the photo would hold no importance. However, by sharing it among our chat and enjoying it together, the photos have developed a special property. Those who recognize the faces in the photo and find it humorous may feel a deeper sense of belonging to the team. Those who are external to the team cannot appreciate the photo in this manner.

Additionally, the memes shared amongst our team often serve as symbols of our values and collective goals. Another well-loved meme is a photo of my teammate rowing on a homemade erg machine made up of a bike wheel, skate board, and sand-filled milk carton. It's captioned "Is this an erg?". Taken during the height of the 2020 lockdown while we were all at home, the meme communicates multiple team values including the handiness and inventiveness of MIT engineers (the homemade erg was a feat of creative engineering), and the unwavering dedication to training (finding alternative solutions to traditional methods when circumstances demand it). This reminds me of one of Durkheim's passages: "The unity of the group can be felt only because of the collective name borne by all the members and because of the equally collective emblem representing the thing designated by that name. A clan is essentially a company of individuals who have the same name and rally around the same symbol" (1912: 235). In a sense, this meme became a symbol around which we rallied. While the pandemic held potential to fragment our team and induce a state of anomie as teammates discontinued training or fell out of contact with the team, the memes we circulated served as reminders of our values and principles. They brought us closer and unified us despite the physical distances imposed by the pandemic.

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