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DOING GENDER ON THE 'GRAM: FEMINIST COUNTERPUBLICS IN INTERNET
MEME CULTURE

THESIS

PRESENTED

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BY

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FOREWORD

This research is framed in a desire to better understand how social media use affects everyday life. Meme-making can be considered by memers as a daily habit or practice that allows them to create an online presence while connecting with their audience. As an occasional memer myself, I can attest to the fact that there is more than just humour in the process of meme creation: it can also be a means for displaying political arguments in a humorous way. The meme format allows great plasticity in the semiotic coding and decoding of messages, resulting in a rich intertextual medium for online activism.

As this research is a feminist critical discourse analysis that maintains an intersectional and situated perspective, it is necessary to disclose that I am a cisgendered White heterosexual middle-class able woman. This research standpoint not only informs my observations but leads my research interests which are guided by a sense of social justice and allyship. The goal of situating oneself *vis-à-vis* their research subject is to put in work to make research more just in many ways, including considering the significance of the word "intersectionality" before simply applying it to the object of my study. In this study, the term intersectionality refers to the nature of the memers' discourse, which considers multiple oppressions including race, class, gender, sexual orientation and ableism.

Furthermore, the work of postcolonial feminism has been important in the construction of my theoretical framework, which aims to conduct research that avoids reifying

systems of oppression for marginalized folks[1]. My commitment to these principles is the foundation of this research, as I believe academics often fail to acknowledge their privileged subject position.

Furthermore, this thesis research is intended to be interdisciplinary, at the intersections of Feminist Studies, Digital Sociology and Communications while always maintaining a critical sociological lens of analysis. As the medium studied is ephemeral in nature, much effort was put into the capture, compilation and organization of the data. Problems encountered such as members of the meme collective shifting and controversies within the meme community made this process even more arduous. This is expounded upon in Chapter 3.

Finally, I would like to warn the reader that this thesis contains explicit language and content. Coarse language and "lowbrow" humour are often used in memes but are very seldom discussed in this type of academic work. I have chosen to include this subject matter as it is relevant to capturing the cultural phenomenon, as is part of the *lingua franca*[2] of meme culture. I would also like to warn the reader that issues such as sexual assault, trauma and mental health issues are discussed in Chapter 4. While these issues are not the central focus of the study and are not discussed in detail, they may still be triggering to some. They have been included as they emerged as important discursive themes relating to feminist activism online. Furthermore, a sexual assault scandal within the meme collective occurred in August 2019 after the data capture and analysis

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[1] The use of the term "folks" in this thesis is used to signify gender inclusivity or to avoid misgendering a person where the information about their gender is unclear or not stated. In feminist meme culture and in gender-inclusive places on the Internet, the term is often used in this way and is sometimes stylized as "folx" to signify explicit and intentional gender inclusion, in the same vein as "Latinx".

[2] In Ryan Milner's 2013 study of American political memes, he found that "[…] memes […] function as a 'media lingua franca', where individuals can express themselves in an understood vernacular. In this thesis I use the term lingua franca to signify the language that is used in intersectional feminist meme culture, which is built and based on social processes of meme sharing and creation within this collective.

were completed, which reinforced the discussion on sexual assault, call-out culture and #MeToo (see Section 4.1.1).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, People of Colour

Cis: contraction of cisgendered (one who identifies with the biological sex they were born with)

LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer

POC: People of Colour

WOC: Women of Colour

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RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif de la recherche était d'investiguer comment la création de mèmes féministes sur Instagram contribue à l'activisme féministe en ligne et comment la pratique de partager ces discours mémétiques créé des contre-publics subalternes. Une perspective basée dans la Sociologie numérique a été employée comme point de départ de l'analyse, pour considérer la socialité en ligne comme une extension de la socialité hors-ligne. Ainsi, la culture du mème est considérée dans cette étude comme étant une pratique de la culture utilisée pour la praxis féministe. L'observation ethnographique en ligne a été utilisée pour trouver les cas d'analyse et pour documenter les tendances de la culture mémétique. Un portrait du collectif de mèmes féministe *The Bottom Text* a été créé en analysant une période d'un mois de chaque compte Instagram consistant le collectif, ainsi que son compte de groupe. Une approche féministe à l'analyse critique du discours a été employée pour déceler des significations du pouvoir, de l'idéologie et du patriarcat dans les mèmes sélectionnés, en analysant l'image, le texte et la légende du mème. Le discours analysé dans les mèmes a été jugé indicatif d'une réaction envers une société perçue comme postféministe. Les sept thèmes discursifs qui ont émergé de l'analyse sont : la culture du viol, l'intersectionnalité, la masculinité toxique, la consommation postféministe, le travail numérique, la politique radicale et les troubles de santé mentale. En employant ces thèmes discursifs par l'activisme ironique et en utilisant les affordances de la plateforme Instagram (par ex. le bouton « Like »), ces personnes mèmeuses forment un contre-public féministe intersectionnel en réponse à une société suprématie blanche capitaliste cishétéro-patriarcale.

Mots-clés : sociologie numérique, mème, intersectionnalité, activisme féministe, Instagram

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to investigate how feminist meme creation on Instagram contributes to online feminist activism and how the practice of sharing feminist discourse in memes creates subaltern counterpublics. A Digital Sociology framework was employed to study meme culture in its everydayness: this perspective considers online sociality as an extension of offline sociality. As such, meme culture was considered an everyday practice of culture used by memers for feminist praxis. Online ethnographic observation was carried out on the Instagram platform to find relevant feminist meme examples and document meme culture trends. A one-month snapshot of memes was selected from each meme account consisting The Bottom Text meme collective: the six members' accounts as well as their group account were analyzed. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis was used to unveil meaning about power, ideology and patriarchy in these memes by analyzing the image, text and caption. The discourse in the memes studied was found to be a reaction to a perceived postfeminist society. The seven themes that emerged from the results were rape culture, intersectionality, toxic masculinity, postfeminist consumption, online labour, radical politics and mental health issues. By using these discursive themes through ironic activism and the affordances of the Instagram platform (e.g. the "Like" button), these memers form an intersectional feminist counterpublic in response to a White supremacist capitalist [cishetero] patriarchy.

Keywords: Digital sociology, meme, intersectionality, feminist activism, Instagram

INTRODUCTION

As Deborah Lupton says in Digital Sociology (2015), we are "digitised humans" (p. 7). This assertion is the starting point of reflection on the topic of this study. Scholars in the emerging field of Digital Sociology (DS, for short) have highlighted the cross-pollination between digital technology and society. Breaking from falsely dichotomous views of technology being merely utopian or dystopian, this field of inquiry intends to study how digitized human's sociality is impacted (and how it impacts) digital technologies. DS is inherently different from digital anthropology or digital humanities, in that DS does not necessarily explore a culture or a medium in-depth but rather aims to better understand how the digital has changed our sociality through online social behaviours and social dynamics (Lupton, 2015).

In North America, Internet technologies have become essentially ubiquitous: they permeate every action of our daily lives and our sociality. From buying groceries to finding a potential romantic partner, digital technologies are an integral part of contemporary daily life. Through the use of applications on mobile devices, everyday life is datafied and quantified at unseen rates.

> "*Or, toute l'histoire des usages du numérique repose sur des blocages, des ratages ou des délais dans le couplage homme-machine, qui constituent une sorte de clinique sociologique, de cimetière des innovations géniales et de constituant élémentaire de la fracture numérique*" (Boullier, 2016, p. 103).

Thus, our proximity to technology has had a profound effect of this sociological "clinic" of society, as Boullier postulates. The evolution of digital technology use is based in a

long history of social and technological innovation beginning in the Industrial Revolution.

As social media grow closer to us, they are integrated into a daily routine in a seamless fashion: the human-machine coupling theorized by Donna Haraway as the cyborg is not so far off from tech-driven Western society. As she states in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s*, "[…] there are also great riches for feminists in explicitly embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" (Haraway, 2004). In this way, feminized technology use may serve to deconstruct material boundaries between human and machine and consequently the binary notion of disembodied technology.

What it means to "be online" has also shifted, as the pervasiveness of mobile phones has changed the relationship to technology through a greater physical proximity to the devices we use. Hine (2015) states,

> Now, however, for many Internet users, much of the time, the Internet has lost its exotic edge, and both we as analysts and they as users can think about the events that happen online as a part of everyday life rather than separate from it (p. 164).

As such, most Internet users today would not consider the uses of their mobile phone as "being online" but rather "posting a photo" or "paying a bill". It is the mundaneness of our interactions with digital technologies that is the foundation of this study, which considers the Internet and digital technologies an integral part of contemporary life. Following this, I will explain how engagement with social media technologies are inherently social as an extension of our "offline" sociality.

Social media have become an integral part of everyday life in postmodern society (Lupton, 2015). They are indispensable tools used to connect with others, as well as to use services or buy products. As these social networking tools are now increasingly being used on mobile devices (Duggan, 2015), our relationship to social media has changed by making their use physically closer to us and thus easier to access. In terms of uses of these technologies, "[…] our interactions with digital technologies contributes to research into the nature of human experience, it also tells us much about the social world" (Lupton, 2015, p. 2). In this sense, our relationship to social media speaks to what sociologists have always asked about humans: what does this mean for society?

To answer this question, the aspect of online sociality I would like to address is the creation of online media by feminist counterpublics. As the social sciences tend too often to accord the emancipatory or dystopian outlook on feminist media technologies, I have adopted a perspective of online feminist activism based on current literature in the fields of Communications and Internet Studies. As Green and Singleton (2013) state,

> Early feminist theorisations of gender and digital technology, from a range of disciplines, tended to bifurcate into overtly positive or negative theoretical and political positions, with some emphasising the digital (the Internet) as a means of overcoming gendered inequality and others adopting a more technophobic approach which stressed the inherent masculinity of such technologies and urged women to resist patriarchal oppression through feminist forms of engagement with the digital revolution (p. 37).

While we can consider both the negative effects of digital media technology on feminism and the positive nature of digital technology as a tool for feminist activism, I consider this tension as rather dull in light of the pervasiveness of Internet technologies in our everyday lives. Burgess (2006) argues,

> The central placement of the politics of ordinary participation through everyday cultural production shapes our concerns towards access, self-representation, and literacy, rather than resistance or aesthetic innovation. This approach also preserves the distinction between the everyday (as signifier of a particular form of mundaneness, viewed from above by the privileged cultural critic or artist) and the specific dignity of everyday lives, expressed using vernacular communicative means (p. 206).

It is this interest in the communicative means of sociality and online participation that I have analyzed feminist activism through meme creation on Instagram. As feminist politics and activism is often linked issues of the "ordinary" or "mundane", this framework enables a nuanced analysis of feminist meme culture in both its cultural specificity and its *everydayness* (de Certeau, 1990).

Instagram was chosen as site of the analysis because of its unusual appropriation by feminist memers. While Instagram now is owned by Facebook and contains many features such as a longer video streaming functionality (IGTV) and Stories, when the research took place the Instagram home screen was still only a single feed of photos which could not be re-shared publicly (i.e. there was no "Share" button like on Facebook where one could circulate the content of others). These particularly limited affordances make it a particularly unlikely platform for sharing memes, a medium which depends on widespread circulation. For these reasons, Instagram was studied for its unlikely usage by these feminist memers.

In Chapter 1, I review the literature pertinent to the current study. First, the definition of a meme, from its origins in evolutionary biology to its current existence as an Internet medium. The social aspects of Internet memes are discussed in the meme-making as cultural practice definition, which comes from a Communications perspective. Then, I discuss the esthetics that are specific to Internet memes: "Internet Ugly", intertextuality and American pop culture iconography. While these are only a

few of the esthetic themes of Internet memes at large, they are the most pertinent to the memes studied in this thesis. Next, I survey several existing definitions of the "feminist meme" concept, from a historical liberal definition (Botting et al., 2014), to one that considers ironic activism (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015) a core concept to understanding the intersectional feminist meme phenomenon.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework of this thesis, which is rooted in the emerging subfield of Digital Sociology (DS, for short) (Boullier, 2016; Daniels et al., 2017; Lupton, 2015; Marres, 2017; Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013). DS scholarship focuses on considering online sociality as an extension of offline sociality, in the same vein as Internet Studies, where the on/offline dichotomy is refuted and rather considers sociality to be fluid. The feminist perspective adopted in this thesis is Judith Butler's post structural position of gender performativity. As Butler considers gender as limited by the social constraints which make up its own existence, this perspective is particularly useful to analyze discourse on gender norms in a critical way. For feminist meme discourse, intersectionality is a fundamental component of the political orientation of the memers' discourse. The term has been popularized in the media in recent years, and has, I argue, a new feminist norm of online sociality.

As a feminist researcher, I use Sandra Harding's (1992) postcolonial perspective of Standpoint Theory to situate myself in relation to my research subject. The ambition towards a Strong Objectivity, in Harding's words constitutes an awareness of the subjectivity of the researcher and the impossibility of "neutral" research and knowledge. Earlier in the foreword I stated my situation of privilege to be able to do such research, and how this privilege informs my observations of intersectional feminist meme culture. Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of counterpublic has been particularly fecund for feminist media studies, as it allows for a great deal of theorisation of feminist assembly and activism online. For this thesis, the concept is used to demonstrate how memers

come to identify others with similar values and thus create collectives to deconstruct dominant gendered discourses through making feminist memes.

In Chapter 3, I present my methodological and epistemological frameworks. By documenting my entry into the field of meme culture observation, I created a complete and detailed account of the steps of the research. Following this, I describe how I came to identify the meme accounts in the sample (The Bottom Text meme collective) and how I selected memes from those accounts in a systematic way. This process was done manually, as the analysis was qualitative. My findings were recorded as they came about, in the tradition of Critical Discourse Studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The methodology used was Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, a method with a large societal goal of better understanding how discourses are influenced by power, ideology and patriarchal assumptions. Digital methodological considerations and ethics are then briefly discussed. Ethics Board approval was not sought for the media studied because it did not involve human subjects. Finally, I touch upon the concrete ways in which I analyzed the data, and the questions that led my observations.

In Chapter 4, the results of the study are presented by visuals and by text. Here I reproduce screenshots of certain memes that are particularly indicative of each discursive theme that I uncovered. These themes generally relate to the characteristics of "emergent feminism" (Keller & Ryan, 2018) such as rape culture, online activism, humour, intersectionality and inclusion. More generally, the discourse within the memes sampled constitute important talkback to the perception of a postfeminist society. The memers communicate with derision their dissatisfaction of the White supremacist capitalist [cishetero]patriarchy that is the United States of America. The discursive themes in the results of the analysis all relate to what could be described as Western neoliberal ideals of feminist activism.

CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This chapter will outline the context of the phenomenon studied, as well as a literature review of the meme, beginning with the Dawkinsian definition. First, the meme concept will be defined, from its evolutionary biology origins to its contemporary social and cultural Internet form. Then, the literature about Instagram will be explored. Following this, the definition of the feminist Internet meme by Rentschler and Thrift (2015) will be adopted as a foundation to the analysis of feminist memes on Instagram. Finally, the guiding research questions of this analysis will be stated.

1.1   Meme

1.1.1   Origins and Etymology

The term "meme" was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Meme is derived from the Greek word *mimeme* (to imitate) and shortened to sound like the word "gene" (or "cream" as he says in the book).

> Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to

brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192).

It is through this process of imitation that memes circulate within culture and ensure their survival. Dawkins proposes an evolutionary theory of cultural transmission as being from person-to-person, through the depositing of an idea or a piece of culture from one brain to another.

Dawkins' meme theory is based on an evolutionary model of culture which posits that culture is transmitted through shared symbolism. He argues that a good meme is one that ensures its replication: memes in their original paradigm were considered to contain the will to replicate on their own. This is what constitutes the "selfishness" of the meme (Dawkins, 2006). This theory of cultural transmission may lead to a belief in social Darwinism in that the biological metaphor is a limited one at best.

Furthermore, the Dawkinsian perspective of cultural transmission accounts for little agency of the creators of the memes themselves. The replication of memes and their subsequent propagation is not in fact an *a priori* condition to their existence. Rather, they are replicated intentionally by the people who produce, remix and modify them (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). By adopting a Darwinian framework, Dawkins leaves out the personal subjectivity of the meme creator and thus, loses a part of the meaning behind the meme in its current existence online.

Instead of adopting the Dawkinsian biological analogy, we adopt a communication lens to the sociological study of memes. This theory considers them as a medium through which "postmodern folklore" may be transmitted, as opposed to trying to consider them as constituting a totalizing theory of culture. Looking at memes as a *practice* of culture instead of a theory of it can thus include the meme creator's social context as well as their agency in the study of memetics. Shifman (2014) states:

> […] the "ritual" model defines communication not as the act of imparting information but as the construction and representation of shared beliefs. It highlights the sharedness of values, symbols, and cultural sensibilities that embody what people see as their communities. According to this view, the "message" in communication is not a unit whose reach and effect are easily traceable, but an ongoing process in which identities and senses of belonging are continually constructed (pp. 60-61).

Thus, the *communication as ritual* model allows for memes to be considered as parts of culture situated in a greater tendency of sharing on the Web. In this perspective, user-generated content (here, the meme) is seen more as a cultural practice which enables belonging than a display of "spectacular creativity" (Burgess, 2011, p. 323). The ritual of sharing considers the meme creator's intentions as significant to the meme phenomenon. "Memes or virals do not replicate themselves like Dawkins suggested in the early days of meme research (Dawkins 1976); instead, their circulation beyond their immediate social networks of the disseminators is guided by the tactical decisions of the people who use them" (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017, p. 27).

Although it is important to highlight the etymology of the term "meme", the Dawkinsian definition of the meme is now far removed from its online reality. As Shifman (2014) argues, "While enthusiastic advocates argue that the meme concept explains everything and their opponents assert that it explains and changes absolutely nothing, it might be worth asking whether the term may be useful for something" (p. 6). It is necessary to reject memes as a totalizing theory of culture transmission to instead define it as a medium on the Internet, a part of culture that is shared, modified and remixed but does not necessarily encompass all of culture within it. Although we may say that Internet memes are cultural artifacts, they have no *a priori* condition to existence if they are not part of a participatory Web culture.

1.1.2   Internet Meme

An Internet meme is defined by Davison (2012) as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (p. 122). The meme concept itself is important both for understanding Internet culture in general, and for feminist action more globally, as our use of mobile technologies is ever-growing. "Three main attributes ascribed to memes are particularly relevant to the analysis of contemporary digital culture: (1) a gradual propagation from individuals to society, (2) reproduction via copying and imitation, and (3) diffusion through competition and selection" (Shifman, 2014, p. 18).

In this thesis, the term "meme" refers after this point to Internet memes. Laineste and Voolaid (2016) propose a simplified and complete definition of meme:

> A meme is a relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) image and text that is disseminated by the *active agency* of internet users, becoming popular among them. The full set of meanings of a meme is recovered only by having a complete overview of the origin and history of its development (Lin et al. 2014), but it is open to various interpretations as well [emphasis added] (p. 27).

Memes can take several forms, whether they be image macros, videos, songs or gifs (see below) but share the same recognizable characteristics that define the medium. As Knobel and Lankshear (2005) state, memes contain at least one of these constitutive elements:

1. Some element of humour, ranging from the quirky and offbeat, to chortle-worthy potty humour, to the bizarrely funny, to parodies, through to the acerbically ironic

2. A rich kind of intertextuality, such as wry cross-references to different popular culture events, icons or phenomena, and/or

3. Anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images (p. 6).

Even though these characteristics were laid out during early Internet meme culture (2005), they still hold true today. Most of the memes sampled contain one (if not all) of these elements.

Shifman (2014) proposes a definition of Internet memes that takes into account current practices of the social Web sharing culture. Shifman differentiates memes, which are always a collection of text and images, from virals, defined as "a single cultural unit" as in the case of a viral video[3]. For her a meme is: "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (p. 41). This definition situates the Internet meme in its digital reality by also considering their intertextuality and implicit networking ability. Through this lens, we consider memes to not only be discrete entities existing with relations to other memes but also their discursive realities both on- and off-line, as is the case in the example of meme-based art shows such as By Any Memes Necessary (Breheny, 2017), or The Bottom Text Collective. These types of art shows usually take place in bars or galleries to showcase the work of meme artists, which contributes to the instituting sociality of meme creation.

As memes proliferate in the online world, they acquire, modify and shape cultural meanings by referencing each other, which is indicative of their intertextuality (Shifman, 2014). Once shared, the meaning that a meme once had is thus modified and

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[3] The viral used to demonstrate this by Shifman is the Leave Britney Alone video on YouTube. This video became viral on its own but was only a memetic phenomenon through the remixing and response videos which were produced. Virals can be a part of meme but require intertextuality to become a meme on their own.

remixed every time one makes changes to the text or chooses a different image. Thus, the meme format being transposable to many different contexts, the message within it remains discursive and original through the remix. This is demonstrated by Laineste and Voolaid (2017) in their analysis of Estonian memes: the most popular memes are usually the ones which include culturally familiar imagery, in this case Cold War propaganda. While they research memes that are particular to Estonia, they found that the meaning-making process within the meme format is transposable across different cultures. In the case of the accounts sampled in the present study, it is mostly American pop culture iconography that is used in an ironic way in order to critique heteronormative and patriarchal significations.

An Internet meme can be an image macro, a video, a song or a dance that is humoristic in nature and that is generally widely transmitted. Whereas Dawkins coined the term to explain the transmission of elements of culture from person to person by imitation (Dawkins, 2006), it is now most often used to refer to image macros found on social media. The term "meme" has become appropriated by Internet culture at large and is now an integral part of the Internet lexicon. As Jouxtel (2013) states aptly,

> "*Le court-circuit linguistique ne s'est pas fait attendre, bien que personne ne l'ait anticipé : les « mèmes Internet » sont devenus « les mèmes », par la grâce simplificatrice des médias grand public. Le nom sans objet a fusionné avec l'objet sans nom*" (p. 53).

An image macro is a .jpg file consisting of a photo with a text overlay. These types of memes were some of the first to become viral (Vickery, 2014) and are still arguably the most popular type of meme on the Web. While the same basic elements remain in the image-based meme, the format has become more nuanced than early versions: the image macro format in and of itself has become a meme (see Figure 3.2, p. 64 compared to Figure 1.1, p. 17). Given the speed at which memes circulate, meme culture changes

from day to day (and even from hour to hour), making it a difficult phenomenon to follow, catalogue and research in general.

Although memes are discrete entities existing online, they are also part of a larger participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). The meme fits into this participatory culture as a medium produced by users which can carry a personal message. The "participatory culture" perspective has been criticized as being overly utopian of an egalitarian society while in fact these practices remain of the realm of a minority of highly skilled Internet users (Proulx et al., 2014). Considering this, it is still useful to regard meme creation on the Instagram platform as participatory, if only in the sense that they deliberately transgress the platform's affordances through their participation in meme creation on Instagram.

These seemingly mundane parts of culture which are shared on social media platforms tell us a lot more about society that many may think: they mirror not only the intentions and values of their authors, but also of the social conditions from which they come (Shifman, 2014). Furthermore, the cultural referents within these memes is indicative of a consumer-based culture – that of the United States of America. The meme admins[4] sampled are American, and thus share a certain ethnocentrism that influences their memes. For example, they often use pictures of pop culture icons such as Ariana Grande and the Kardashians to provoke a reaction to their feminist critique of pop culture mis-en-scène of iconography.

The study of memes, or memetics, has only recently hit media studies and communications studies. Jouxtel (2013) states that memetics should be a collaborative interdisciplinary project which gives us a new perspective on human life and changes

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[4] Meme page administrators (meme admins), memers and meme creators are all used interchangeably in this thesis.

our self-conception (p. 55). While Jouxtel's ambition transcends the limits of a case study of memes, his/her work is useful in the legitimization of "memetics" as a potentially important field of study as memes become more common place. This emerging field of study is a shift from considering Internet culture as exceptional within academia, to studying internet culture in its everydayness (Lupton, 2015), situating them in a Cultural Studies framework which considers culture as a "whole way of life" (Hall, 1980).

Prior studies of Internet memes have explored their "ugly esthetics" (Douglas, 2014), inherent sexism (Drakett et al., 2018), inclusion in LGBTQ campaigns (Gal et al., 2016), lingua franca (Milner, 2013b), humour logic (Milner, 2013a), cultural capital (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017), structures of feeling (Szablewicz, 2014) among other dimensions. The present study is situated at the intersection of sociology, media studies and feminist studies. This analysis aims to be inter- and multi-disciplinary to highlight how the meme format is increasingly commonplace in everyday life and thus, an important element for feminist online activism. I aim to prove that this type of activism is not merely performative, but that these critical feminist memes are units of counter-discourses in response to the memers' perception of a patriarchal and gender-oppressive society.

1.1.3   Trace-Based Meme Research

The concept of trace, as applied to communicational technologies, has been very present in the francophone literature in Digital Sociology and Internet Studies in recent years (Bonenfant, 2014; Boullier, 2016; Lazko-Toth et al., 2017). The concept of trace[5]

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[5] Translated as "track" in Bonenfant's article, but I maintain the direct translation "trace", as I consider it closer to the intended meaning in her article.

in meme studies enables the understanding of meme production through its sociality: the aim is to look at memes by deconstructing how the visual traces left by the author are indicative of a certain social position. Considering trace data within the meme format results in a much more complete and nuanced reading of the meme in question. As Bonenfant (2014) states,

> *Partant du fait que les communautés (en ligne) partagent une encyclopédie (Eco, 1984), c'est-à-dire un ensemble de connaissances et expériences communes, les mèmes deviennent significatifs pour définir les référents d'un groupe (et donc son identité). Il y a partage d'un univers commun de sens et les mèmes peuvent être compris comme « objets » sémantiques partageables, partagés et « symptomatiques » d'une culture. Dans ce contexte, les mèmes numériques, vus comme phénomènes culturels propres aux réseaux socionumériques, peuvent être considérés en tant que signes de rapports et de relations entre individus et certaines communautés en ligne* (para. 13).

This definition is possibly the most complete and up to date when considering memes in their sociality of production, consumption and diffusion as well as their group-forming capacity. Studying the traces of a meme means analyzing not only what is signified but also how the meme itself was produced, giving us clues as to the identity of the meme producer (Bonenfant, 2014, para. 17). A trace-based approach, coupled with Feminist CDA (see Section 5.3) not only identifies the traces of social data in their creation, but also remains critical about the discourses underlying those traces by considering how language is informed by power.

1.2   Meme Esthetics

Trace-based research of the memes in this study have revealed several themes and tendencies that relate to their esthetics. Each of the memers selected have a specific

and original esthetic: while memes usually circulating on other platforms tend to remix and alter existing memes, these memers often produce original content solely for the purpose of sharing it once on Instagram (or, hoping it will be shared in other's profiles). Here I will expound upon themes that are characteristic of this type of meme production.

1.2.1   Internet Ugly Esthetics

Intentional use of bad grammar and spelling is common in this type of meme (see use of "your" vs "you're" in Figure 1.1. Misspelling is used as a humour device that fits into the established "ugly esthetics" that characterize meme culture. While some memers use misspelling, they do not necessarily do so in a necessarily regular or consistent fashion – it is applied haphazardly in an ambiguously intentional esthetic choice. Even as meme culture changes over the course of days, weeks and months, memers' commitment to this type of esthetic still remains popular and definable in most meme collectives. Douglas (2014) defines this as "Internet Ugly,"

> There's a definable aesthetic running through meme culture, a celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish. It is eclectic and contains many visual genres. Its major techniques over time have included freehand mouse drawing, digital puppetry, scanned drawings, poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation. All of these techniques show up in multiple well-known memes, often in combination (p. 315).

While he argues that these esthetic characteristics show up in well-known memes, they also show up in niche ones, as demonstrated in Figure 1.1. These esthetic elements essentially define the community. In the case of The Bottom Text, each memer has

their own esthetics, but all demonstrate usage of misspelling, deep frying[6], excessive screenshotting and distortion (photo manipulation techniques) as well as other elements such as cut-off text and longform paragraphs.

Figure 1.1: meme by @males_are_cancelled

These esthetics are not stable, but rather may be applied arbitrarily in various meme contexts. As Douglas (2014) explains,

> It can appear and disappear from a developing meme, and these shifts can (as in the case of Advice Animals) carbon-date a meme's spread into the mainstream. It's a visual dialect with social and cultural implications, as it telegraphs the practitioner's casualness, capacity for irony, and internet savvy. And it is a tool of the rebel that, like all such tools, will be co-opted by the objects of rebellion (p. 336).

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[6] "Deep Fried Memes are a style of meme wherein an image is run through dozens of filters to the point where the image appears grainy, washed-out, and strangely colored" (*Deep Fried Memes*, 2017).

The author's focus on the co-optation of ugly meme esthetics is an interesting one, as the memers in the sample all have paid partnerships with certain brands for which they produce sponsored content. Furthermore, they may even produce advertisements for their own merchandise by creating original ads through the form of memes.

> Part of the aesthetic cycle of internet content is its co-option by corporate and political interests, whose goals are often at odds with those of internet creators. The dialectical purposes of Internet Ugly, as we've seen, include glorifying the amateur, validating the unglamorous, and mocking the self-serious, formulaic, and mainstream. Its practitioners will try to punish any entity that runs counter to these or similar purposes, yet tries to hijack their aesthetic (Douglas, 2014, p. 334).

Indeed, many memers will use this willful co-optation of their esthetics to capitalize on it, mostly by selling meme ads to companies. While this has now become quite common (all members of the Bottom Text meme collective created sponsored content), it may be seen as a way of "selling out" in The Meme Economy.

Figure 1.2: meme for @gucci campaign, by @gothshakira

A notable Instagram example of a brand utilizing meme esthetics for advertising is a Gucci campaign designed by the intersectional feminist meme artist @gothshakira (see Figure 1.2).

1.2.2   Intertextuality and Remix

Memes include cultural reference to something outside of meme culture but also, more often, reference other memes. Even in "original content" (the memes that are not remixed from a known meme format) this type of intertextuality is common. What Shifman (2014) calls a "viral" is relatively unimportant here, as niche memers strive for originality[7] through mostly original content. As Rentschler & Thrift (2015) argue,

> The difference between what is repeated and what is transformed through remixing is the distinction between viral media and memes. While the repetition of different meme elements illustrates how memes become both visually and textually standardised, the uniqueness of others shows how people individualise the meme format based on their own humorous interpretations of both Romney's gaffe and the meme form itself in the case of 'Binders Full of Women' (p. 333).

Even if their memes were to achieve viral status, it would be difficult to reference them outside of the community because of their subject matter and content (see Figure 1.1). In this sense, the homogeneity of memetic language influences how meme-making and propagation functions: while a meme can reference another older meme, it also gains its own meaning within a certain community or meme collective.

The use of intertextuality and remix is generalized across all the accounts in the meme collective studied here, to varying degrees. By using the "detective method"

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[7] Sometimes termed "dankness" in the meme community (*Dank Memes*, 2015).

(Bonenfant, 2014), I was able to glean that the memers in my analysis had very high meme culture literacy: they were able to not only stay abreast of meme trends and stay relevant to fellow memers, but they recall older memes in an ironic way, making a joke out of meme culture itself.

Figure 1.3: meme by @gangsterpopeye

This meme culture literacy is in fact one of the most influential factors in meme production: in order to produce memes, one needs to know a certain amount of the *lingua franca* of meme culture. As Milner (2013) states,

> Discourse uses fixity and novelty to weave together cultural precedent and individual expression. This interrelationship allows memes to function as a 'media lingua franca', where individuals can express themselves in an understood vernacular. Getting the 'nationwide inside joke' of memes means adhering to broadly accepted aesthetic practices and touching on resonant cultural moments. The 'media lingua franca' is decided by social process (p. 2).

The case of Figure 1.3 demonstrates a remix of a "Joker Meme" which usually states "We live in a society" superposed onto an ironic image that mocks society. In this case, the text has been inverted to mimic Yoda's speech, while the character is wearing

makeup to mimic the Joker. In this way, intertextuality requires multiple and complex layers of both meme culture *lingua franca* and pop culture iconography.

1.2.3 American pop culture iconography

The cultural references used by this meme community are indicative of a decidedly North American pop culture register: the images and characters used to create the memes are mostly from American television, film and music (for example: Louie CK, Peter Griffin, Grimes). This decidedly Western iconography situates meme production in a particular social context. As such, these memes depict a culturally specific reality where the mise-en-scène of the feminist response is one that comes from a culturally-situated American perspective (see Figure 1.4). By using these cultural codes to communicate certain feminist discourse, they utilize cultural familiarity to create a relational response from the viewer.

Figure 1.4: meme by @djinn_kazama

As American pop culture is dominant on the participatory web in general, it does create a certain hegemony on the types of Internet references used within meme culture at large. However, studies on meme cultures outside of North America show that they tend to have distinct and culturally specific meme and Internet cultures (see Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).
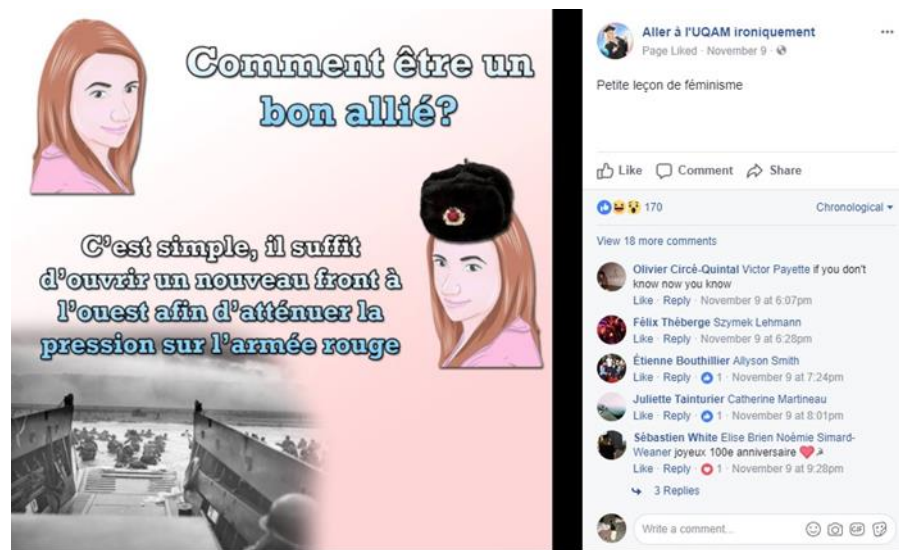
Figure 1.5: meme by Aller à l'UQAM ironiquement (Facebook)

For example, Canadian meme culture differs from American meme culture, as does Quebec meme culture from the rest of Canada. Often, these cultural differences come about when the topic of the memes is politically oriented. The geographic specificity of meme production and sharing is vital to understanding meme production as a practice of everyday life. Looking at the example of Quebec memes brings us to posts that are generally in French and about French-language culture specific to Quebec (seeFigure 1.5). While they still demonstrate American iconography and intertextual elements such as remixes of existing formats, the discourse within this meme subculture is usually specific the place it comes from. Similarly, French memes from

France are not always understood by a Quebec audience as their respective cultural referents are different. The title of the meme page in Figure 1.5, for example, may not be seen as humorous by a French audience that is not aware of the existence of the Université du Québec à Montréal and its political history in the province.

In the meme by Aller à l'UQAM ironiquement, a *double entendre* of "ally" is used to make a political joke about feminism. Although the meme is not necessarily about UQAM or Quebec, it demonstrates a sense of humour and irony that is culturally specific: it pokes fun at academic feminism through the use of Soviet iconography. Even by only looking into the name of the meme account, it signifies a certain opinion or political position in that its specific goal is to make fun of UQAM students. Thus, this meme niche is greatly influenced by both its institutional and cultural context.

1.3   Feminist meme

As Limor Shifman (2014) states in *Memes in Digital Culture*, we live in a "hypermemetic" era, one where every public event and any pop culture happening creates a stream of new memes. While Shifman points out the notion that memes are seen as relatively insignificant forms of Internet jokes by the general public, it is not necessary to start an analysis of the medium with such self-effacing postulates. As digital research becomes more common place in Sociology, studying memetic phenomena is essential to understanding the social.

In their study of Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist meme, Botting, Wilkerson, and Kozlow (2014) propose the following definition of the feminist meme: "[…] "feminist memes" can be understood as dominant clusters of public symbols that embody the political ideas and influence of the movement for women's liberation as a group from

conditions of patriarchal oppression" (p. 14). While this may be an appropriate conceptualisation for the analysis of the Wollstonecraft meme as an ideological symbol representing both womanliness and political pioneering, it has leanings of gender essentialism that is indicative of White Western feminism, which restricts its application in other settings. The authors mention its application to the definition of other memes such as Rosie the Riveter and Feminist Ryan Gosling (see Figure 1.6) although I argue that more critical and intersectional memes cannot be defined by a paradigm that aims to be *dominant*. Rather, these memes are most often on the margins of what are the dominant meanings of feminism and the women's movement.

Figure 1.6: Feminist Ryan Gosling meme

As bell hooks (1984) states in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*,

> By repudiating the popular notion that the focus of feminist movement should be social equality of the sexes and emphasizing eradicating the cultural basis of group oppression, our own analysis would require an exploration of all aspects of women's political reality. This would mean that race and class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism (p. 25).

It is necessary to include the multiples intersecting oppressions that hooks mentions within a theorisation of the feminist meme. The definition of the feminist meme proposed by Botting *et al.* (2014) is problematic, namely because they believe it to be the medium of emancipation through shared meaning. I would argue that this is an exclusive definition that does not consider the different oppressions that influence women's lived experience as well as not accounting for the intertextuality of memes. The subjectivity and lived experience of memers on Instagram are indicative of a disenchantment with the dominant order of feminism rather than a reification of it through memes. This is apparent notably in memes calling out White feminism as a form of White supremacy, considering its exclusion of POC and gender diverse people in their political ideology.

Rather, I suggest that a feminist meme should be defined as *praxis*, in the same theoretical tradition as Rentschler and Thrift (2015), in their study of the Binders Full of Women meme:

> Eschewing the biological, genetic and evolutionary connotations of early meme theory tied to biologist Richard Dawkins (1976), who analogised the spread of culture to the transmission of genes, feminist meme propagation instead refers to the *social practices of cultural production* that create and transform memes as small units of culture; a social, rather than genetic, mode of cultural reproduction [emphasis added] (p. 331).

In this perspective, I consider meme creation as a potential counter-cultural production of discourse which aims to deconstruct both dominant meaning about gender and the compulsory heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2004). By using the meme medium, intersectional feminist memers display and mock situations of oppression, characterized by their mundaneness. Thus, by sharing discourses based on the lived

experiences of multiple oppressions based on gender, race, class and ability, they make these experiences visible, beyond mere theorization.

The emphasis here on praxis both coincides with a theory of networked intersectional feminism but also that of the counterpublic, theorized by Nancy Fraser. This concept is defined by "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and need" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Feminist meme counterpublics serve to bring together publics with similar intersectional feminist values and to create communal discourses in response to, on the one hand, mainstream meme culture and on the other, the larger White supremacist capitalist [cishetero]patriarchy in which they live. This capacity to respond constitutes an engagement of feminist subjectivity based in social media networks of distribution, what we term 'doing feminism in the network'" (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 331). It is in this sense that feminist meme creation constitutes an agentic utterance: much like tweets or other online discourse, image macro memes allow for dissent to be communicated through social media.

For example, the Binders Full of Women meme, which gained prominence as a feminist activism phenomenon on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Amazon,

> […] reveals a model of a feminist movement that adheres less to formal movement organisations and established social media protest strategies, embracing instead a model of 'ironic activism' where satire and dissent interlink in crowd-sourced expressions of feminist *détournement*" (Day, 2011: 149, in Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 336).

It is this same type of *détournement* that is present in feminist memes on Instagram. The type of activism is indicative of the lived experiences of folks who comes from a

generation (Millennials) that is considered to have little to no hope of the financial and social stability promised to previous generations, such as home ownership, steady employment and the nuclear family. This political nihilism may aid to shape the type of political dissent conveyed through memetic discourse. Furthermore, Western feminist meme discourse often embodies a reaction to a postfeminist world order (see Section 2.6).

Amber Day (2011) theorizes ironic activism in her book "Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate,"

> While the efficacy achieved by ironic activists (as opposed to more traditional activists) is often less measurable in terms of concrete legislative goals, it is instead located in the strengthening of the visceral experience of community and in the attempt to slowly shift debate by turning laughter over a shared joke into anger and engagement (p. 146).

Using humour to garner engagement has been a longstanding feminist coping mechanism, so this is not different within meme culture. Feminist memes have their own *lingua franca*, that is also influenced by the intertextuality of meme culture and feminist politics. Whereas the Rosie the Riveter or Mary Wollstonecraft memes explicitly exhibited feminist iconography of a certain historically situated feminist moment, the memes on Instagram are cloaked in layers of irony that require a certain "meme literacy" to unpack. As Lawrence and Ringrose (2018a) state, "a meme can reference a shared feminist literacy without [it] having to articulate or spell out the views themselves" (p. 225).

Day (2011) builds upon Linda Hutcheon's definition of irony as "[…] the simultaneity of both a said and an unsaid meaning, "each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other," as I think it best captures the knowing wink these groups offer to those who already share their views" (p. 148). This definition of irony considers both the

intended meaning and the perceived meaning of the joke, as well as highlighting the oft-forgotten fact that this type of humour is a type of "preaching to the converted," considering the sometimes-insular nature of both meme culture and feminism.

In this way, the meme's message communicates a feminist perspective by using certain themes or esthetics, but rarely do they seem at first glance to be explicitly "feminist" or mention the word "feminism" specifically (as in the case of Feminist Ryan Gosling or Rosie the Riveter). This type of coded language of Internet feminism is based on the knowledge of meme culture, Internet culture at large, intersectional feminism and personal experiences.

The Western Millennial generation is one that grew up during a period in which Third Wave feminist ideals were becoming popularized in pop culture. Given this, their understanding of feminist struggle is one that considers the multiple intersecting oppressions of WOC and gender non-conforming folks (see section 2.3). It is this implicitly intersectional approach that characterizes this type of feminist activism (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018b, p. 217).

In the same theoretical vein, Dias da Silva and Garcia (2012) note,

> Humour therefore plays a role in twenty-first century political discussion, rather than merely diverting the attention of citizens from such matters. In this sense, satirical remixing may be regarded as a new form of participation, especially as cause-oriented political action, and contribute to the formation of counterpublics, bringing new vitality to democratic debate (p. 109).

Rentschler and Thrift's (2015) approach to the theorization of the feminist meme is essential to this study, as it has laid the theoretical groundwork for the study of this medium. As it is a difficult phenomenon to capture in its ephemerality, the authors do

mention that the social implications for this type of activism may be different from those traditionally assumed from social media.

> Rather than see the ephemeral quality of feminist memes and their publics as a sign of ineffectiveness (because they do not build durable political infrastructures over time), we see the relatively short temporal life of the meme as the very condition of possibility for networking feminist response, and intervention, into current political debate (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 340).

As such, it is the very heterogeneity of the political inclinations of the Binders Full of Women meme that create its distinct mobilization. A sense of community is formed by networked structures of communication, rather than physical approximation (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 341).

> We interpret the call for action not as a challenge to the value of feminist memes for activism, but as a reminder that memes are 'not enough' politically, just as other forms of culture jamming are, on their own, insufficient for creating change. This image macro begins to signal the work of linking the humour and feelings of community created through meme production and propagation to concrete political actions like voting (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 350).

Although there are commonalities between the feminist meme accounts which create a sense of community, there is no formal "grouping" of feminist memers. Based on my perception of feminist memes on Instagram, I chose the sample to describe this grouping and will expand about it in Section 3.2. The chosen accounts create a counterpublic: a grouping of people who find themselves together to name a common struggle and are able to coordinate actions towards social change by either disrupting or disturbing the dominant public sphere (Travers, 2003). In the case of feminist meme culture on Instagram, a counterpublic can be useful to create new discursive spaces to contest an unjust social order. In this way, feminist counterpublics on Instagram may

be part of a niche subculture (intersectional feminist memes) which responds to a larger memetic subculture (memers).

Image macros present political messages that are critical of a dominant order in a Western patriarchal society. They aim to transgress gender norms through counter-discourses about gender and personal politics – they attack certain structures of domination such as gender roles or the family to create new meanings for what it is to be a woman or femme-presenting. Through these memes, feminist memers explore such themes as: mental health issues, self-care, astrology, toxic masculinity and sexual assault callouts. These different types of discourses intend to carve out space for women to be able to talk about and bring attention to their oppression through humour and irony. While the memes from The Bottom Text meme collective on Instagram constitute just one form of feminist meme, there is a greater movement beyond the platform to create critical and political image macros.

1.4   Instagram

In this thesis, Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing application (app) is studied. Instagram offers content-sharing functions such as the post (photos which become a part of one's profile) and the Story (photos or videos which appear at the top of the app's home page and disappear within 24 hours). Instagram was created in a "mobile-first" philosophy: its mobile app was thought of before the desktop site, placing more emphasis on components made for smartphone use (Gibbs et al., 2015). It features a continuous feed of content on the home page, which allows for endless scrolling on mobile devices. This Web creation philosophy takes into consideration that most Internet usage now happens on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets thus creating apps that match that experience. In the USA, smartphone use has become almost ubiquitous,

with 95% of teens having access to a smartphone, regardless of socioeconomic factors (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Instagram is the social media platform which popularized the use of filters on photo-sharing apps, establishing a vintage esthetic to the photos shared that was characteristic of the platform. As Highfield and Leaver (2016) explain,

> […] Instagram filters enable publication of pictures which are not the same as the original captured photograph (just as analogue photographs could be retouched and filtered). The question of an 'authentic' image on Instagram is perhaps less artistic concern and more aesthetic contest on the platform (#nofilter) (p. 52).

The issue of authenticity is thus rendered less important as the primacy of esthetics takes over on Instagram. While I would argue that filter use has now become common-place by the popularization of such tools as FaceTune, Instagram filtering allowed the casual user of the app to modify their photos easily, thus democratising the use of photo-editing software, once reserved for professional photographers.

Highfield and Leaver (2016) also highlight the platform-specific affordances of Instagram, as it compares to other platforms:

> […] what is possible on Instagram is not the same as on Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr: there are practices and communities on one platform which might not be present on the other, or which have originated in one space and appeared in others with cross-posting and the popularisation of behaviours (p. 51).

The functions of each of the platforms allow for different types of use and result in different content being created and shared on each one. In the case of memers' posts in

this research, although Instagram remains their main meme sharing platform, several of the memers also cross-post them to Facebook.

The function of temporary disappearing photos (the Instagram "Story") initially appeared on the social media platform Snapchat. After Facebook's acquisition of Instagram for 1 billion dollars in 2012 ('Facebook Buys Instagram', 2011), the company essentially mirrored the "story" function from Snapchat and integrated it into both Facebook and Instagram, with great success for the latter. This was done to retain a younger user base, as the Facebook user demographics are aging, with younger people leaving the platform at rising rates. A 2018 Pew Research Centre study found that teens' use of Facebook went from 71% in 2014 to 51% in 2018 (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

The short duration of these stories creates an accelerated cycle of consumption of social media data: knowing that the content will disappear makes its users more alert to it, wanting to catch a glimpse before it disappears. In this way, Instagram enables this cycle of consumption of story content, which echoes the generalized hyper-consumerist values of Western society. The ephemerality of the story enables a cycle of production and consumption that lasts 24 hours[8].

1.4.1 Instagram usage demographics

Instagram is one of the most popular social platforms today and demonstrates strong user engagement for those who use the app. Daily user engagement doubled since 2012, reaching 59% of Instagram users in 2015 (Duggan, 2015). A 2018 Pew Research

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[8] Stories made by the memers were not included in the study.

survey found that Instagram surpassed Twitter for mobile usage (Smith & Anderson, 2018). The app boasts a particularly young and diverse user base: 55% of online adults aged 18 to 29 are Instagram users as well as 47% of online African Americans. More women than men use Instagram – it is often spoken of as a 'female' app – with 31% of online women using it, compared to 24% of online men (Duggan, 2015).

As this photo-sharing app is most popular with young women and POC, it is necessary here to expound upon the perception of gendered and racialized usages of social media technologies. Gendered stereotypes related to social media platform use are pervasive, as certain platforms become historicized as associated to gender. This problematic idea of technology use as gendered has sparked debate in Game Studies and elsewhere, but this issue is beyond the scope of this research. As Gajjala (2014) states,

> Use of feminized social media such as Facebook among women is greater than among men, while the use of the social media characterized as more for hardcore Internet technology users (such as Reddit) has more male users than female users […]. Women's engagements with online technologies are often characterized as casual and social, and not hardcore (p. 289).

"Hardcore" platforms are characterized with message boards and feeds that usually are sites of trolling and circle-jerking, while "casual" apps are characterized by leisure use such as scrolling. Thus, while Reddit also enables scrolling content, engagement with the platform is considered more complex than the singular "like" function on Instagram, as one must seek out specific subreddits as well be familiar with the codes and mores of interaction on Reddit.

This sexist perception of social media apps creates a divide between socially constructed "serious" and "fun" uses of technology. Stereotypes of women's Internet use for online shopping, acquiring health information and sending emails are still

pervasive in public perception of online spaces (Daniels, 2009). These perceptions evidently only consider a certain type of privileged Western woman and proves a dated characterization of female engagement online. As Daniels states (2009),

> While it is true that many affluent women in the global North have "depressingly familiar" [referring to the stereotypes mentioned above] practices when it comes to the Internet, this sort of sweeping generalization suggests a lack of awareness about the innovative ways women are using digital technologies to re-engineer their lives (p. 103).

This echoes Haraway's (2004) technologism: the use of technology is something that can be used for emancipation and evolution while critically shaping women's engagement. This is the case of the creation of feminist Internet memes on Instagram: although they hosted on a for-profit platform, women, non-binary, trans and gender non-conforming people use the platform to generate subaltern discourse.

1.4.2   Researching Instagram

Unlike Facebook, relatively little research has been done on the social implications of Instagram as a platform for sharing content or organizing political and feminist mobilizations. This may be mostly because of its limited functionalities: there is no permanent direct way of publicly sharing another account's content, there are no organizational functions such as "events" or "groups" like in Facebook and "sharing" is done from person to person in a private conversation, not publicly on one's profile. The Story function allows one share others' content if it is public, but only in a temporary fashion.

> At the same time, though, what is possible on Instagram is not the same as on Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr: there are practices and communities on

one platform which might not be present on the other, or which have originated in one space and appeared in others with cross-posting and the popularisation of behaviours (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 51).

Although third-party apps have been used for photo sharing since the beginning of Instagram, their use is relatively uncommon in the meme community. Because one can take a screenshot and post someone else's content quite easily, I argue there is not much need for these "regramming" type apps (Highfield & Leaver, 2015) for Instagram. Likewise, these functions do not facilitate meme sharing because of the limitations of the app. Thus, memes circulate on Instagram in much more intentional ways than on other social media platforms: because there is no one-click function of sharing a meme to the account's audience, it requires a certain amount of familiarity with photo editing apps or software to share or replicate a meme. In this way, the affordances of the Instagram app structure how users share content (i.e. by screenshotting and posting it, instead of clicking "share" as on Facebook).

On Facebook, for example, a memer may share someone else's post directly on their feed, but Instagram does not offer a built-in option to do so. In this sense, Instagram's affordances allow for greater emphasis on original meme content.[9] While the use of third party apps and other means to avoid these limitations are used, the general goal of a memer is to achieve popularity through the creation of original and authentic memes not by the simple recirculation of a dominant meme format.

Moreover, Instagram is a platform that contains certain challenges at the level of analysis. Unlike Twitter users, the meme admins studied in this research rarely use hashtags. I posit, through my empirical observations, that hashtag use in the meme community in this research is generally uncommon, as it is generally seen as an uncouth

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[9] Often called OC (original content) to differentiated it from dominant meme formats which were shared and remixed from another user.

way to gain followers. Hashtags are antithetical to the originality of the meme content in itself because a hashtag de facto links a memer's content to similar content. This is considered almost as an admission of participation in the functionality of the platform, something that is undesired when the message communicated is ironic. The meme accounts in the sample of this study do not use hashtags and seem to emanate a certain *insouciance* concerning their popularity: as ironic activism (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015) dictates the circulation of their memes, hashtags are rarely used. If used, it is rarely in earnest intention.

This ironic use of the platform is related to a repository of Internet meme activity: The Meme Economy. The term comes from economic exchange theory – as a meme format rises in the ranks of the Meme Economy, it becomes less niche and, consequently, more popular which in turn results in less valuable meme. The Meme Economy also refers to a subreddit[10] on the social media platform Reddit which assembles emerging memes to "invest in" – meme formats that have not yet become popular but have potential to in the future (*Meme Economy | Know Your Meme*, n.d.). As such, the popularity of a meme account may offer economic incentive to the meme admin (both in the Meme Economy and the formal one, as monetization is possible on Instagram) but rarely does this mean that they are on the cusp of meme dankness[11]. As one's popularity increases, the "nicheness" of the meme de facto decreases, in an inverse correlation of meme desirability.

Considering this, I follow the argument that the concept of agency is essential to the analysis of memes: "human agency is an integral part of our conceptualization of memes' and describes them as dynamic entities that spread in response to

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[10] https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeEconomy/

[11] "Dank Memes" refer to memes which are generally appreciated for their irony and newness in the meme community. "The word "dank," originally coined as a term for high quality marijuana, is satirically used as a synonym for "cool"" (*Dank Memes*, 2015).

technological, cultural, and social choices made by people" (Shifman, 2012, p. 190).
Treating the meme admins as legitimate actors in the creation of Internet content is
essential for considering their influence in the creation of meme culture. Agency is
defined by Davies (1991) as the agent's ability to speak with authority.

Cixous (1981) further defines this agentic and discursive authority: "Not authority in
the sense of the one who claims and enforces knowledges, dictating to others what is
"really" the case, but as a speaker who mobilises existing discourses in new ways,
inverting, inventing and breaking old patterns" (as cited in Davies, 1991, p. 51). The
definition of agency used here is with regards to an individual's ability to enforce action
through discourse. In this paradigm each individual meme has the ability, through their
creation of memes, to disrupt any existing discourse on the Internet. As Butler argues
(2006),

> A great deal of feminist theory and literature has nevertheless assumed that
> there is a "doer" behind the deed. Without an agent, it is argued, there can
> be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations
> of domination within society (p. 35).

The transformation of social relations aimed at in memes are the discourse on women
as a homogenous category: we see these patterns of talk-back against a given normative
discourse that requires agentic action by the person who creates the memes.

1.5   Research questions

Considering the previous review of the literature, I aim to prove that online activism is
not merely performative, and that these critical feminist memes are units of counter-
discourses in response to the memers' perception of a patriarchal and racially-

oppressive society. As the use of satire and irony are essential to meme creation and sharing, it is vital to frame this praxis in a type of activism that reflects this. Given this, the research questions I sought to answer in this research are as follows: How does feminist meme creation on Instagram contribute to online feminist activism? How can the practice of sharing feminist discourse in memes participate in the creation of subaltern counterpublics?

The research is anchored in interdisciplinary theoretical framework at the crossroads of Digital Sociology, Internet Studies, Feminist Theory and Communications. This perspective was constructed to glean a better understanding of feminist activism using an original theoretical and methodological framework. Through this study, I aimed to not only document, but also highlight the sociological importance of activism in niche spaces on social media.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical framework foregrounding the research. I adopt a queer feminist perspective to understanding gender through cultural means, relying on Butler's theory of gender performativity. I then position my standpoint as a feminist researcher. Nancy Fraser's concept of counterpublic is used to demonstrate how communities assemble through similarities to create online feminist activisms. Postfeminism is explained as being the overarching state of Western feminism today and the Fourth Wave hypothesis of current feminist activism is refuted as being inconsistent with a Digital Sociology framework. In Chapter 3, I outline how the research questions will be answered through digital ethnographic observation and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Finally, the results of this analysis are summarized in Chapter 4 in seven discursive themes relating to current activism in online feminist memer spaces.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I build on Boellstorf's (2008) assertion that the virtual world may be studied in the same way as the "actual world," as the author calls it. This postulate is necessary to legitimize the study on online cultures as significant in and of themselves, as opposed to being necessarily meaningful beyond their virtual or online existence. To demonstrate this, digital sociology is discussed as the framing sub-discipline that guides this research. Furthermore, I will elaborate on how the theories of gender performativity, intersectionality, Standpoint Theory and counterpublics are essential to understanding the phenomenon of the feminist meme on Instagram.

2.1   Digital Sociology

It is no coincidence that five books have been published with very similar names on the subject of Digital Sociology (DS), in the period between 2013 and 2017: *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives* (Orton-Johnson & Prior, 2013), *Digital Sociology* (Lupton, 2015), *Sociologie du numérique* (Boullier, 2016) *Digital Sociology* (Marres, 2017) and *Digital Sociologies* (Daniels et al., 2017). There has evidently been an upsurge in thinking the social as something that occurs not only in the "actual world" but also that extends to the online world. DS takes into consideration that our engagement with media technologies such as smartphone and social media use can be studied within the "everydayness" of culture and not only as exceptional practices associated with youth. As Lupton states (2015), "The sub-discipline of digital

sociology provides a means by which the impact, development and use of these technologies and their incorporation into social worlds, social institutions and concepts of selfhood and embodiment may be investigated, analysed and understood" (p. i). Much like Science and Technology Studies (STS) before it, DS aims to legitimize the relationship between human and society. It explores what it means for online technologies to be part of our daily social existence and how they mediate our social relations. This thesis adopts DS as the epistemological basis for the study.

Prior to its official naming, there have been numerous studies on digital cultures, in Digital Anthropology, Digital Humanities and Science and Technology Studies (STS). This subfield of the discipline aims to explore the online world while giving it the same importance as the offline one. DS has developed mostly at universities in England and Australia (Lupton, 2015), these handbooks being introductory guides for studying online sociality. As Green and Singleton (2013) argue,

> We need to view the digital as a significant lens through which sociologists can continue to analyse the localised nature of everyday life, including gendered behaviours and contexts, rather than becoming dazzled by the shiny new vista that the digital age appears to open up (p. 36).

Given the fact that social media technology and mobile devices are essential elements of sociality in the postmodern era, this field aims to study the impact of our engagement with such technologies. As Marres (2017) argues, "the digital opens up new occasions for interaction and interactivity between social life, technology and knowledge, and that these form a central challenge for sociology in a digital age" (p. 21). This subdiscipline aims to legitimize the study of digital technologies as inherently social as well as the use of these technologies by sociologists. Lupton (2015) considers this as essential to the establishment of a truly digital sociology: being a public scholar on the

Internet, embracing a social media presence as a researcher, and adapting or adopting methods to these types of studies.

> A crucial issue here concerns the relation between technology and society: whereas the computational social science narrative above suggests that digital data open a window on the social world, social and cultural researchers have pointed out that digital platforms presents first and foremost socio-technical arrangements (Gillespie, 2010), in which human and computational elements combine to structure social action (Marres, 2017, pp. 34–35).

It is in this perspective that the present study looks at the creation of memes on Instagram: through a social lens which examines both the medium itself and the discourse within the memes circulating on that medium as a means for social action (i.e. the creation of a feminist counterpublic). The line between human as actor and medium as transmitter is thus blurred, as technologies like smartphones become more and more prevalent in people's daily lives.

> From this vantage point, 'digital sociology' not only entails a shift in our ways of 'knowing society', but also in the ways sociology relates to digital technology (Back, 2010): the digital no longer features as either object or method of social enquiry, but refers to the setting, or field, from which social enquiry operates (Marres, 2017, p. 51).

The focus of this study is not only to explore the link between feminism and digital technologies, but also to contribute to a growing scholarship in DS. There is certainly a lot of room for feminist theorizing within the sub-field. Given this, I have adopted a DS framework which considers social activity on the Internet as an extension of everyday life.

2.2   Gender Performativity

The feminist framework used in this analysis is based in the epistemology of gender as performative. Judith Butler, in *Undoing Gender*, theorizes gender as a fluid expression that requires the agency of the person who embodies it. This poststructuralist queer feminist theory was influential in attributing cultural significance to the recognition of gender. This perspective considers any understanding of gender as phenomenological and transmissive, reproduced as meaning ascribed through social agents. Butler (2004) states that the act of embodying one's gender means navigating the world through established gender norms. In essence, gender is considered as both historical and performative: it exists within a specific context which confines gender expression to given norms of intelligibility. Thus, one's gender expression can only exist within the confines of the norms that make up its iterability (Butler, 2006).

Butler considers one's gender identity as constituted by the paradox of its limits: one's gender identity is always constructed in relation to the heteronormative sexual order. Thus, whether one is a cis man or a trans woman, that identity is always already imbricated into the dichotomous binary "man vs woman". Even if, for example, one identifies as "non-binary," they are identifying themselves as opposition to the existing binary of gender norms (Butler, 2006).

Although it is often believed that Butler's theory does not consider materiality in the constitution of gender, it is quite the contrary. She states that: "It is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms and apprehended in their social meanings" (Butler, 2004, p. 20). However, we must take into consideration that this embodiment of gender happens always already within the norms of the gender. As such, there are necessarily power relations within every decision to act upon one's gender identity. It is with great

intentionality that one's gender becomes intelligible, but the frame within which that intelligibility can exist is limited. Thus, the reflexive nature of a gender identity is *a priori* socially mediated and socially constituted in a framework of regulation through discourse.

In *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Michel Foucault defines discourse as a historically situated formation of meanings, objects and signs. He states,

> "[…] *il désignait un ensemble de performances verbales; et par discours, on entendait alors ce qui avait été produit (éventuellement tout ce qui avait été produit) en fait d'ensembles de signes. Mais on entendait aussi un ensemble d'actes de formulation, une série de phrases ou de propositions.* […] *le discours est constitué par un ensemble de séquences, de signes, d'énoncés, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'on peut leur assigner des modalités d'existence particulières*" (p. 141).

Discourse, in Foucault's view, is a social fact that emerges from the object's speech act. It is a collection of statements (*énoncés*) that make up a system of understanding and knowing the social world. For Foucault, discourses make up the larger logic of knowing, or *episteme*, through particular *a priori* rules and orders of power which traverse the social world. It is in this way that gender regulation becomes intelligible to the social world: through discourses on gender which become constitutive and constituting of the social reality of its existence.

Foucault considers regulation as permeating the entirety of society through power relations (Foucault, 1976). Established gender norms are not only a construct of power but are also the instrument that governs upon discourse on gender. "When Foucault claims that discipline "produces" individuals, he means not only that disciplinary discourse manages and makes use of them but that it also actively constitutes them" (Butler, 2004, p. 50). Foucault's theory of power gives little agency to the individual

because he considers power to be existent in all facets of society. As one cannot escape the matrix of power instituting gender norms, one cannot simply embody their gender only by choosing it[12]. "Gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary power" (Butler, 2004, p. 41). It is within this deeply uncomfortable matrix of power that one can in fact act as a gendered subject: the paradox of agency acts as an artificial tool which gives the subject the ability to act in a gendered order which has limited possibilities.

> Gender is performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized *under constraint.* Social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization ([author's emphasis] Butler, 1993, p. 21).

In Butler's theory, norms of recognition function to produce and reproduce the notion of the human. Change may be instituted if power is subverted – the needs of humanity and acceptability need to be updated if people of diverse genders are to be accepted in society. Thus, the recognition of gender identity is the fundamental aspect influencing our social intelligibility (Butler, 2004). While the concept of gender performativity put forward by Butler is a very restrictive framework within which to analyze gender, it allows to take into consideration the fact that discourse can be used to create a legitimating lexicon within which "the ability to live and breathe and move would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom" (Butler, 2004, p. 31). It in through this regulatory framework that gender is discussed in this study.

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[12] It is important to note here that Foucault wrote about sex as sexually constructed, not on gender specifically. Here, I employ his theory of power as it relates to sex as well as Butler's theory of gender performativity.

2.3   Intersectionality

The feminist discourse conveyed within feminist memes usually employs an intersectional framework. Similarly, intersectionality has become a type of "buzzword" in American pop culture, lending the theory more visibility albeit while losing some of its historical importance. The concept of intersectionality was first popularized in the United States with critical legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," published in 1991. Crenshaw (1991) points out the ironic tendency of marginalized groups to not take into account multiple identities, which further marginalizes women of colour:

> The problem is not simply that both discourses [anti-racism and feminism] fail women of color by not acknowledging the "additional" issue of race or of patriarchy but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to the experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms (p. 1252).

Intersectionality aims to consider multiple intersecting identities such as race, class, gender, ability or others. To think of oppression as intersectional is to analyze oppression in a contemporary way – there are few gender studies scholars today who would deny that race and gender influence one's lived experience.

This paradigm has been influential especially in American gender studies departments, which tend to be critical of "White feminism[13]": feminism which does not consider that the lived experiences of people of colour have historically been left out of conversations related to gender. The intersectional feminist framework has evolved into a paradigm of thought that has permeated social justice advocacy as well as academia. As it has become more popular as a concept, some argue it has lost some of its critical prowess (Bilge, 2015; Chauvin & Jaunait, 2015). However, intersectionality has allowed for more complex analysis of social processes of domination, and thus must be maintained as an epistemology of oppression that seeks to better understand how one's lived experience depends on the multiple facets of their identity.

Although intersectionality has reached a level of academic popularity rarely seen with any other theory of oppression concept, it is not without its critiques. In fact, the use of intersectionality in certain spheres of academic and community work may have effects opposite to the intentions first theorized by Crenshaw:

> *Les savoirs minoritaires qui sont les produits des marges et leurs théories radicales connaissent désormais une ascension relative qui les vide en même temps de leur substance politique. La théorie radicale devient un objet de consommation, une marchandise, qui circule comme badge de prestige dans un environnement élitiste néolibéral, alors qu'elle était l'œuvre des savoirs engagés dans des projets de justice sociale et d'émancipation* (Mohanty, in Bilge, 2015).

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[13] The concept of white feminism has been used to describe tenants of feminism which refuse to recognize intersectionality. In short, white feminism is a type of bourgeois neoliberal feminism popularized by texts such as Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 bestseller "Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead" which place the onus of responsibility on (white, middle-class) women to embody traditionally male traits in achieve social mobility, disregarding the structural barriers and systematic inequality that women may face (Daniels, 2016; Rottenberg, 2014). See Section 2.6 on postfeminism for a more in-depth discussion.

Creating an academic discipline out of intersectionality would have, in fact, lead to its White washing. Considering intersectionality as a discipline has, argues Bilge (2015), ridded the concept of any political importance. That most academic discussions about intersectionality excluded women of colour would have had a delegitimizing effect on the concept. In fact, postcolonial feminists have even argued that intersectionality is used in a condescending way by White feminists to explain WOC's situations to them. This being overtly problematic, I aim to clarify the use of the concept as framework through which to analyze meme accounts and not a label that I am imposing upon the meme admins. As intersectionality has become the "norm" of feminism within this meme community[14], its importance is implicit in the discourses present within their memes.

2.4   Standpoint Theory

At this point, it is important to mention that the feminist epistemology used in this analysis is informed by the standpoint of the researcher. Standpoint Theory considers how one's worldview is constructed while recognizing that all knowledge comes from a historical and social context.

> Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. Moreover, these accounts end up legitimating exploitative "practical politics" even when those who produce them have good intentions (Harding, 1992, p. 442).

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[14] The term "meme community" is a self-referential term used by members of The Bottom Text meme collective to refer to the larger community of feminist and progressive memers that they interact with on Instagram.

Standpoint Theory considers both the privilege and the political positioning of the researcher in the production of localized knowledge. Evidently, reflexivity is required of the researcher to analyze their standpoint – to recognize how their privilege may shape their worldview, and more specifically, their research object.

> Standpoint epistemology sets the relationship between knowledge and politics at the center of its account in the sense that it tries to provide causal accounts—to explain—the effects that different kinds of politics have on the production of knowledge (Harding, 1992, p. 444).

In the Foreword, I have stated my situation of privilege *vis à vis* the subject of my research: the fact that I am an able-bodied White heterosexual cisgendered woman who stems from a middle-class background impedes my personal understanding of certain types of injustices such as racism. Considering this situation of privilege, the meme accounts chosen in this study to speak to these issues include standpoints which offer insight to the lived experiences those who do experience these oppressions. By letting theses discourses speak for themselves, the analysis aims to achieve the Strong Objectivity that Harding theorized and to offer a more nuanced perspective of intersectional feminist discourse.

2.5   Counterpublic

Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics is informed both by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conception of subalterity and Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The concept of counterpublics will be useful to the analysis of memes collectives, in order to study how the medium itself facilitates these counter-narratives to compulsory heteronormativity in Western society.

In order to understand Fraser's theory of counterpublics, we must first look at how Habermas himself conceptualized the public sphere. Fraser (1990) summarizes,

> According to Habermas, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest." This idea acquired force and reality in early modern Europe in the constitution of "bourgeois publics spheres" as counterweights to absolutist states (p. 58).

By deconstructing this definition, Fraser fleshes out a theory which challenges the patriarchal capitalist and elitist notion of the "public sphere". Fraser highlights the fact that the public sphere has been historically dominated by bourgeois men, and thus should not be glorified as a democratic ideal because it is a meeting place of privileged discourse. Fraser argues that to create an effective oppositional discourse, spaces must be created by minorities, who have historically been left out of the public sphere. She calls these "subaltern counterpublics": "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and need" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). An example she gives of a subaltern counterpublic is the US feminist movement of the late twentieth century – by creating oppositional discourses to a given patriarchal order, women were able to create change in society through democratic principles.

On the Internet, counterpublics are multiplicities of networked groups which aim to subvert dominant meanings of a given issue from within. "The ability to ignore public spaces characterized by traditional dialogue by constructing, participating in, and modeling an alternative cyber-public in the middle of a mainstream public is unique to cyberspace" (Travers, 2003, p. 9). This theorization resembles the dynamics present on Instagram, where the feminist meme community operates within the larger scope of the platform and against the more normative meme culture: memetic counterpublics

created on the platform aim to deconstruct gender binaries from within social media itself.

> The point is that, in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies (Fraser, 1990, p. 68).

Consequently, I argue in this thesis that the Bottom Text meme collective constitutes a subaltern feminist counter public in that (1) the members have identified in each other a common value of intersectional feminism, social justice and sense of humour, and (2) the memers' ironic activism through their meme production constitutes a potential agitational activity directed to the meme audience, their followers.

This process may include the vetting of certain people in the meme community by collective means. For example, after the analysis of the memes in this study, one of the memers in the sample accused another of sexual assault. The other members of the collective as well as feminist memers on Instagram came to the defense of the accuser, calling out the alleged sexual assault perpetrator. Here, the onus of responsibility was immediately put on the alleged perpetrator, demonstrating strong networked ties within the collective and also within the meme community at large. As we can gather from this specific instance, actions carried out in the "material world" have real repercussions in the online world, thus reinforcing the Digital Sociology perspective that our social interactions online and offline blend together seamlessly to produce our cultural interactions.

2.6   Post-feminism and the Fourth Wave

2.6.1   Post-feminism

The contemporary cultural landscape relating to women is one characterized by post-feminism. While many authors have written on the subject, Angela McRobbie remains as one of the voices that defined the cultural significance of post-feminism in media. As she notes,

> "[…] post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255).

By stressing feminism of something of the past, something old that no longer has importance in the current moment, post-feminism is a normative retaliation on the activism of several centuries of feminist struggle. McRobbie notes that as feminism (in the West at least) becomes at once common-sensical in the Gramscian sense and generally hated, these opposing but complimentary perspectives aim to depoliticize the movement (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). It is this "double entanglement" that McRobbie posits as the defining characteristic of post-feminism. Crossley (2017) concurs, "This trifecta of "feminism is dead," "feminism is everywhere," and "girls can do anything" is at odds with the well-documented pervasiveness of gender and other interrelated inequalities" (p. 4).

Furthermore, as the neoliberal capitalist project produces subjects that are increasingly self-defining upon the basis of "success" through competition in education and the job markets, this impacts the way in which the feminist movement defines itself as well.

This individualization of femininity, feminism and success institutes power on the gendered subject:

> Thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics (McRobbie, 2004, p. 260).

Then tension between empowerment and a self-effacing normative gendered identity are products of the depoliticization of feminism: by focusing on issues such as consent (see Section 4.1.1) and wellness (see Section 4.1.4), female individualization becomes the basis upon which young women build a "life of one's own" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 160). Essentially, with the erosion of traditional structures of class and gender within the feminist movement, feminism is embodied through individualized means, often based on agency defined as the choices afforded by conspicuous consumption and commodity fetishism (Marx, 1992) as demonstrated in the use of self-improvement products.

2.6.2   The Fourth Wave

In recent years, there has been some hypothesizing about a potential Fourth Wave of feminism. This wave would be defined by the inclusion of Internet activism as creating a rift with the previous Third wave of the 1990s. The definition of the Fourth Wave is unclear, but as Cochrane (2013) states, there are several defining concerns which characterize this type of activism: rape culture, online feminism, humour and

intersectionality. All of these concerns where present in the analysis of the feminist memes in this research, which is telling in that contemporary Western feminism has indeed several commonalities – regardless of the form of activism it is presented in. While these four defining concerns and characteristics are a departure from the First Wave's primary goal of universal suffrage or the Second Wave's fight for global access to birth control[15], they are in no way "new" feminist concerns. In this sense, I argue that the activism observed in this study does not constitute a new Wave of feminism even though it includes Cochrane's characteristics. To postulate online feminism as a new Wave is also to put too much onus on the medium through which activism is popularized. As the theoretical framework chosen posits digital life as a seamless extension of physical life (Lupton, 2015), it would be amiss then to consider the technology-driven feminism as anything particularly new. Furthermore, feminists before the purported Fourth Wave had already woven materialist concerns with emerging technology (Haraway, 1988), without necessarily branding it as a new feminist paradigm.

Alison Dahl Crossley's book *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution* discusses the nature of feminist activism in the contemporary landscape in the US. The author finds that young women in various feminist circles do not identify with any one wave of feminism or posit themselves as activists in a new or Fourth Wave. Rather, Crossley argues that it is not the wave metaphor or any one struggle that maintains feminist movements over time, but rather "everyday abeyance structures" – the research subjects' allegiance to the movement was enacted through individualized instances relating to their lives while also often including participation in some form of collective organizing. According to Crossley (2017), everyday feminism as the defining characteristic of Millennial feminist

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[15] Second Wave was also defined by other political priorities such as domestic violence within heterosexual couples, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. As I am critical of the use of the wave metaphor, I chose to not expound upon it in more detail in this passage.

activism in the United States: individual experiences of sexism or oppression become the focus compared to the systemic or collective focus of feminisms past (pp. 155-156).

As many scholars agree, the wave metaphor is not essential to theorizing or understanding feminist action and is generally Western-centric as a typology (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015). I argue that although Internet technologies such as social media may highlight certain (privileged) feminist concerns, the nature of those concerns is no different from "previous" feminist theories. The queer feminist intersectional framework used in this thesis is not aligned with any one wave, as characteristics of several different feminisms make up the political orientation of feminism perceived within meme culture. Thus, this research is anchored in the belief in "waveless feminism," emphasizing the continued "persistence of feminism over time, the variations in feminism and the interaction between feminism and other movements" (Crossley, 2017, p. 20).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the main methodological and epistemological underpinnings of this study are outlined. First, I describe my entry into the field, building on ethnographic observation techniques. Then, I outline how the sample of meme accounts was built, as well as the rationale for meme selection. I then discuss how feminist ethics relating to online research were vital to the construction of this study by highlighting potential ethical issues which I was able to surmount. As Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis was used as the main methodology, this chapter outlines its characteristics and epistemological basis. Finally, I explain the specific analysis procedures used for this research.

3.1   Entry into the field

While this current initial sampling of the meme accounts was developed during the writing of my thesis proposal in 2018, the actual entry into the field began long before. I first downloaded the Instagram app for personal use in 2013. The platform's beginnings as a filter-heavy photo-sharing platform is far from its contemporary form. Instagram was intended for sharing photos online with a polaroid esthetic that aimed to convey a certain nostalgia for old media.

I started noticing memes on Instagram in late 2015. Before this point, my personal Instagram feed was populated mostly by earnestly produced personal pictures of the

accounts that I followed (mainly friends and acquaintances). When the platform designers introduced the Explore page, this changed how one could engage with the content, as it was now capable of suggesting similar accounts to the ones liked by a user. Thus, if I "discovered" a feminist meme page, there was likely to be more of the same style on my Explore page. In this way, early on I caught onto this increasingly popular feminist meme movement though the affordances of the platform itself.

During the exploration phase of the feminist memescape on Instagram, for the purposes of this research, I observed that there was a peak of activity covering explicitly feminist intersectional memes in 2016-2017, as corroborated and documented in other theses (Breheny, 2017; Westfall, 2018). While this period of feminist meme-making initially inspired this study, this particular meme culture evolved into a much more developed and complex phenomenon. What Westfall (2018) calls "Femme Niche Emotional Intersectional Political/Feminist Memes" is indicative of an esthetic moment on the platform, where longform feminist memes discussed more individual problems related to emotions and trauma. While these still exist, I have chosen to focus my attention on memes that use a more subtle feminist critique and that demonstrate a more critical systemic view of White capitalist cishetero-patriarchal society.

3.1.1   Observation

Initial observation prior to sampling came from daily scrolling of the platform, as well as interacting with the content itself, sharing it with friends through the direct messaging function of the app. This technique of non-participant observation influenced the content that appeared on my personal feed. Although I will not focus on a detailed discussion about the Instagram algorithm here, other studies (Kitchin, 2017) have looked at how clicks and taps influence the content we receive online.

As the research project became more concrete, an Instagram account was created in September 2018 specifically for this study, following the meme accounts that I had previously identified as intersectionally feminist through preliminary observation of their account activity and the discourse within their memes. This was a subjective selection process wherein I curated a public feed that was exclusively constituted of meme accounts. My observation time on the platform varied between 5 and 15 hours per week during the course of over two years. The aim of creating this research-based Instagram account was to attain a more "neutral" algorithm of posts that would appear in my feed and to get a more "objective" field of observation, as opposed to my personal account, which had data collected for years of my likes and views which in turn affects the algorithm. In this way, the Instagram app was also a non-human actor in the process of curating the research field: even though one follows certain accounts willfully, the app's own algorithm suggests posts that resemble what a user has indicated liking.

Given that I initially curated the accounts I followed, the claim to objectivity was abandoned at one point during the observation process. Similarly, my positionality as a long-time Internet user is of note in this process. To observe memes as they present themselves is an important part of the observation process, as is the meaning-literacy of the researcher providing a certain level of familiarity and understanding of meme culture. As a regular user of social media, I have been observing and sharing memes on several platforms (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram and, rarely, Twitter) for years. Part of a meme's popularity comes from its intertextuality (Laineste & Voolaid, 2016), which involves meanings referencing other memes, or meanings on other platforms. For example, many of the memers included in this study also have active Facebook pages. These pages do not receive the same amount of traffic as their Instagram profiles (as the number of likes indicates). This is consistent with demographic data indicating a loss of retention of younger Facebook users who tend to use other platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Part of the interest in this object of research comes from the omnipresence of memes in my personal communications within my social networks. A meme can replace parts of a conversation or even a message. Given this, I situate myself as a literate observer and experienced user of multiplatform memes trends.

3.2   Sample

3.2.1   Sampling technique

The aim of the sampling technique was to create a small sample of Instagram accounts by memers to prioritize "thick data" (Lazko-Toth et al., 2017). By doing this, the researcher aims to capture more of the trace-based context surrounding the actual data surveyed. This results in something closer to a thick description (Geertz, 2008) than a Big Data analysis that uses quantitative methods like data scraping. As the authors of the article "Small data, thick data":

> The process of 'thickening' data is in line with the interpretive/constructivist paradigm of qualitative inquiry, which recognizes that a social phenomenon can only be understood 1) in context; 2) through fine-grained accounts; 3) in light of the meaning attributed by actors to their own actions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schütz, 1967) (Lazko-Toth et al., 2017, p. 203).

This three-layer approach adopts three steps for attaining thick data:

1. Context: understanding the contextual information surrounding the data being studied, both in terms of the practices producing it and the technological conventions surrounding it;
2. Thick descriptions: these enrich the data being studied by reaching into the deeper meaning by actively engaging with the data;

3. User experiences: engaging with the users who produced the data to better understand the meaning they ascribe to the data itself (*ibid*, p. 203).

For the purpose of this research, I have not sought the third aspect of this data collection technique. The engagement with users themselves was not deemed necessary as the object of analysis was in fact the discourse included in the memes and not the identities of the memers themselves. All of the Instagram profiles were public, so the content analyzed was considered to be accessible from an ethical standpoint. A small amount of meme data provides a rich basin of research material, so this decision was justified by time and space constraints.

The context surrounding meme production on Instagram was essential to their sampling. Through constant observation of meme culture on Instagram and other platforms, meme trends were regularly followed, and the evolution of the meme collective was tracked and recorded on a weekly basis. Thick descriptions of these intertextual memetic trends and localized discourses follow in Chapter 4.

3.2.2   Research Sample

The memes of the following Instagram accounts were selected: @djinn_kazama, @gayvapeshark, @namaste.at.home.dad, @males_are_cancelled, @gangsterpopeye and the collective's aggregative account @thebottomtext. These accounts are run by young Millennial-generation American adults who identify as either women, non-binary or trans[16]. These are the accounts that make up the Bottom Text meme collective,

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[16] Any demographic factors have been deduced from their posting of Stories, selfies or other information clearly stating their identity. When this information was not clear it was not included. For more information on their respective esthetics, number of followers and account bios, see Annex A.

as is displayed on the aggregative @thebottomtext Instagram account, which posts memes from all five accounts. The collective's page was once that of @lettucedog (see Figure 3.1), a secondary meme page by @gayvapeshark. The account was taken over by the collective to share the (presumably) best memes from each of the members' accounts.

Figure 3.1: meme repost by @thebottomtext

As of data capture in May 2019, two changes directly affected the data collected: @bunnymemes (now posting as @bunnymercedes) disappeared from the @thebottomtext page and Instagram decided to pull the number of likes from posts as a pilot project to be carried out in Canada (Edwards, 2019). Because of these two changes, my sample went from six meme accounts to five and the screenshots taken did not always include the number of likes, as that data no longer became available. As @bunnymemes (@bunnymercedes) had only produced 10 memes in the one-month sampling period, a small amount compared to the other memers who generally post daily. As such, this did not affect the results greatly, as theme saturation was achieved with the amount of data already collected.

Opportunistic sampling (also known as convenience sampling) is a non-probabilistic type of sampling which was used to select the accounts chosen for the analysis. It is often used for qualitative and visual analysis in media analysis work, to hone in on the media examples that most evidently appear as part of the problem to be analyzed. As Pauwels (2010) states,

> [Opportunistic sampling] is used for recording things that attract the researcher's attention or that can only be collected on an ad hoc — "when it occurs" or "comes into view" — basis. Examples are the reactions of bystanders at the site of a car accident, illegal street sellers, and unanticipated or remarkable aspects of visual culture. As always, the sampling technique codetermines the inferences possible from the visual data in a later stage (p. 561).

Given this, during the "discovery" process of these meme accounts, a separate "research" account from my personal account was created, to better catalogue the different meme accounts on the app. This was a choice made to have all the accounts in one place without the interference of friends' photos on my Home page, as well as to have a more "neutral" algorithm. Furthermore, in an effort to reduce influence of the app's algorithm, interactions with the posts (i.e. liking or sharing them in direct messaging) were avoided. These precautions were taken to limit the influence on what content would appear in my Home page. Given that it is impossible to defy the Instagram algorithm completely, these precautions were unfortunately mostly done in vain, although they did help in creating a coherent field. At a certain point during this observation, I realized that several of the accounts in my sample interacted with each other by commenting and liking each other's posts, which led to me discovering that they were part of @thebottomtext meme collective.

As Pauwels (2010) states, "Visual research in particular benefits from the continued fertilization between theory and practice, thinking and doing. Non-systematically

acquired data can often serve as a test for more systematically acquired data" (p. 562). This "non-systematicity" was central to this study, as the phenomenon was at once clearly defined as feminist media activism and was also ephemeral in nature, a factor which greatly complicated each step of the research procedures. The methodology and sampling schemes were an assemblage of several traditions and techniques, as there was no specific methodological and epistemological precedent in each of these components. The techniques used to isolate certain accounts are essential in setting a methodological precedent for research on Instagram memes, as few have elaborated detailed sampling schemas or procedures.

The accounts included in the study were selected by the following selection criteria:

1. They must create and post memes which exhibit feminist discourse and/or identify as feminist;
2. They must have a medium to large following (10,000-100,000 followers). A large following on Instagram is a subjective quantification as there is no specific barometer for measuring Internet importance. For example, if one were to make a general comparison of the number of followers: popular American singer-songwriter Ariana Grande has 154 M, United States President Donald Trump has 12.8 M, Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau has 2.9 M and Montreal mayor Valérie Plante has 21.2 K[17]. As we can gather from this cursory list of Instagram accounts, having 10,000 to 100,000 followers is more than an average person's Instagram following but not as much as a major celebrity's;
3. They must identify as a woman, non-binary, trans or gender non-conforming[18] (no accounts knowingly run by cis men are considered in this analysis);
4. They must post regularly to Instagram: this could mean posting several times per day to several times per week. Posting habits change from time to time so it is virtually impossible to define the posting frequency of a certain account. Considering this, I have selected meme accounts that have been active long-term (several years) and that post at least once per week.

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[17] Number of followers on Instagram as of May 11th, 2019
[18] Gender and pronouns were deduced from either the information on the memers' profile, their stories, or on the meme show The Bottom Text on Adult Swim.

As memers often post other content such as selfies or advertisements (sponsored content) to their Instagram profiles, I only considered their memes as relevant material for this analysis. Image-macros are the most common type of meme shared on social media: they consist of a .jpg file with superimposed text. An early-Internet example of an image macro is Condescending Wonka[19] (see Figure 3.2). These other types of content created by the memers have social importance, but I considered this data beyond the scope of this project as different research techniques would have to be devised in order to analyze them. Selfies and original photos were discarded from the sample and only the image-macro style memes were retained in order to create a purposive sample of memes to be analyzed. Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative social research, as it aims to create a sample based on the research goals of a study while taking into account the expertise of the researcher (Salmons, 2017, p. 183). As Lavrakas (2008) explains,

> The main objective of a purposive sample is to produce a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population. This is often accomplished by applying expert knowledge of the population to select in a nonrandom manner a sample of elements that represents a cross-section of the population.

Applied to a qualitative object of inquiry, this means to quite clearly demarcate meme content from non-meme content – posts were left out if they did not satisfy the definition of a meme or if the meme was produced for an external sponsorship. As the aim of this study was to understand meme discourse and not memers' presence on a given platform, this decision is justified to establish a coherent set of images to analyze

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[19] This meme is used to convey patronizing or sarcastic jokes (*Condescending Wonka / Creepy Wonka*, 2012). It comes from a larger memetic style called Advice Animals, which generally portray a character or archetype (*Advice Animals*, 2011).

Figure 3.2: Condescending Wonka meme

Considering the sampling criteria, I collected all the posts from the accounts during the month of January 2019, yielding a total of 144 memes, after excluding selfies and sponsored content other than their own (see Chapter 4). Memes that had already been analyzed from their original account and were reposted on @thebottomtext were excluded, as the only change from their original post was providing the meme's author in the caption, which did not add significant data to the analysis.

3.2.3 Data collection strategy

Data from the sampled Instagram accounts were extracted manually by recording screenshots from PC. Mobile screenshotting strategies were initially explored, however, the desktop technique proved to be more user-friendly as it allowed the insertion of recorded screenshots into a text document. The manual screenshotting technique (as opposed to data scraping) also forces the researcher to directly engage with the content being captured (Laestadius, 2017). As such, the text within the meme as well as its individual caption were transcribed into a Word document for subsequent analysis. This technique enabled me to analyze all of the textual and visual data of each meme simultaneously in order to better capture meaning.

3.3   Feminist Ethics in Online Research

The methods used to analyze the memes were non-obtrusive, meaning that they do not involve human subjects and did not require research ethics certification. While the content used was publicly available on the Instagram platform, certain ethical considerations were considered. The situated perspective of the research was outlined in Section 2.4.

Leurs (2017) argues, feminist ethics need to be applied in online research as in any other type of research:

> Conventional empiricist knowledge production is predicated on the 'the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1991, p. 189), meaning the researcher operates as disembodied, rational master subject with transcendental vision. He assumes detachment from a discrete, knowable world (p. 134).

By adopting a situated feminist ethics in this research, I have recognized the privileges and biases that inform my research perspective. This type of positionality leads to results that are more subjective, situated and transparent, refuting detachment from the knowable material world. Furthermore, this reflexive positioning takes into account the subjective nature of research: there is no way to "see everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988), perspectives are always partial, so stating one's biases from the outset allows knowledge to be socially contextualised and located.

As Highfield and Leaver (2016) argue, even if the social media content researched is public from a research-ethics point of view, responsible treatment of the material studied is necessary in order to not reproduce oppressions through feminist research. By not involving the meme admins in the research process, they were not required to

invest emotional or other forms of labour on this project. The research conducted involved their memes, but it did not focus on them as actors nor did it use any data that could unintentionally identify them (outside of their Instagram handles). As Hine (2015) states matter-of-factly, "It is problematic, in ethical terms, to collect observational data on people and then make inferences about those behaviors that may in some way impact on the individuals concerned without their consent" (p. 163). Considering this, care has been taken to avoid obtaining any information from the memers' personal data that could, in any way, harm them. As such, the potential risks of this study for the meme admins are considered minimal.

The ethical considerations outlined here are part of a larger debate in Internet research both in the feminist research and DS scholarship. As we establish increasing legitimacy for feminist online research methods, ethical standards will be solidified within methodological settings.

> Recognising and reflecting upon the contingencies of digital method techniques and the epistemologies of digital methodologies will enable feminist data scholars across the humanities and social sciences to produce more robust and meaningful stories rather than universal truths or disembodied generalisations (Leurs, 2017, p. 133).

The goal of any feminist research is undoubtedly to avoid generalisation on the category of "women". As with any post-structural approach, feminist ethics do not aim towards universality, but rather to capture the narratives of feminist thought and community.

3.4   Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a broad category of methodologies that aims to derive meaning from language and social text in general. In this study, discourse is considered to be the combined textual and visual elements that constitute meaning within the meme.

> "[Critical Discourse Studies] see discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of 'social practice'. Describing discourse as a social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. […] Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people" (Fairclough and Wodak, in Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 6).

This method of analysis is quite broad, as there are many types of discourse analysis and many types of discourse. The approach used in this study is one that focuses on the social text at both the macro and micro levels, thus providing a greatly detailed account of a specific context (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1333; Van Dijk, 1993). In this perspective, the language used in the memes was analyzed as having meaning in their social context, but also considered in relation to their larger global context. This micro-macro level analysis aimed to better deconstruct the power relations within discourse (including the textual and visual elements of the meme).

This perspective is also informed by a situated (see Section 6.4 above) approach to data analysis. "(Self)reflexivity of […] researchers is a powerful methodological resource in support of an ethical stance to discourse analysis that through ethnography builds

social and interpersonal relationships that become integral components of the research process" (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011, p. 1187). Thus, the relationship between researcher and research subject is considered as one where knowledge is co-constituted, as the text and images are subjectively produced by the memer and then analyzed through the researcher's subjective lens.

The type of discourse analysis used is Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as this research aims to analyze how gendered discourse is regulated by power relations. Thus, it is important to utilize a method that considers power to be an integral part of discourse.

> CDA oscillates […] between a focus on structures (especially the intermediate level of structuring of social practices) and a focus on strategies, a focus on shifts in the structuring of semiotic difference (orders of discourse) and a focus on strategies of social agents that manifest themselves in texts (Fairclough, in Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 12).

In this perspective, discourse is studied on multiples levels: the text, its meaning but also the structures which influence those meanings. "Good, persuasive, insightful discourse and multimedia analysis is always *critical* analysis" (J. L. Lemke, 2012, p. 85). CDA tends to be a less structured mode of analysis that varies widely given the context it is used in. In fact, an entire field of Critical Discourse Studies aims to clarify the intentions of CDA as a philosophy of analysis rather than a strict set of rules applicable in all contexts.

> Critical discourse analysts invite us not to restrict the spectrum of desirable methodological variation; instead, '"protocols" for analysis should be left deliberately porous, rather than being contained by a universalist procedure of strict and continuous explications of research choices (either at the level of data selection or analysis)' (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011, p. 1180).

Thus, CDA is used as a perspective to analyze discourse, and not necessarily as a strict set of guidelines on how to do research, although it does seek to gain knowledge on how power structures and ideologies act upon language. As Lazar states (2007),

> The aim of feminist critical discourse studies, therefore, is to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities (p. 142).

By deconstructing the common-sensical meanings of gender, feminist CDA not only analyzes how language is influenced by power but also, sexism. Feminist CDA recognizes how gender discrimination acts differently than other forms of discrimination, as it is deeply entrenched in our everyday lives through the reification of traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships. Although explicitly feminist CDA is a relatively recent field of analysis, it acknowledges the fact that CDA scholars have borrowed from the feminist literature, without ever necessarily identifying as explicitly feminist. Furthermore, feminist CDA is a methodological perspective that focuses on "social justice and the transformation of gender" (Lazar, 2007, p. 144), which is consistent with my theoretical framework and research objectives.

Within any given meme, both the image macros and their caption were both taken as discourse to better grasp the power relations within it. The caption was an important element for deconstructing the meaning within the meme, as the ironic content the message could easily be misread if taken out of context. By analyzing all parts of the medium, the combined signifiers allow us to generate more meaning into the message being conveyed. Thus, decoding both the image and the text overlay is necessary in order to get a deeper understanding of the memes included in the sample.

Given that the object of analysis aims to challenge the normative gendered order, this analysis is concerned with better understanding of not only how gender is constructed within this discourse, but also with the subtleties of how language and images combine to create discourses that aim to undo a post-feminist mediated space like meme culture. As Lazar (2007) states,

> The central concern of feminist critical discourse analysts is with critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order – relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group (p. 145).

As such, I critically looked at how the feminist memers critique discourses of power, privilege and patriarchy. Themes such as disempowerment and exclusion are common among their memes and, as mentioned above, often have a reflexive and ironic message to convey those themes.

Feminist CDA strategies also aim to understand how language can differ according to gender, and how essentialist structures of domination influence speech. While a social constructivist approach applied to discourse analysis appears to be the norm, the term "women" in this research is used to generate a certain level of generality about women and gender non-conforming folks.

> As Holmes (2007) argues, the category of 'women' as a group (and some level of generalization about this category) is still 'strategically indispensable' if the aim of the scholar is to explore the 'gender order', that is, the 'ways in which women are the victims of repressive ideologies and discriminatory behaviour' (p. 56) (Coates, in Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 100).

This position considers the reality of the gendered social order as having a dominating power over the categorization of the concept of gender. Even though gender is considered as performative, discursive and socially constructed in this analysis (see Section 2.2), the term "woman" is still used to describe a social category having historically experienced injustice and domination from patriarchal society. "Post-structuralist ideas have led to a loosening of ideas about gender, while at the same time a new understanding of the role of ideology has led to the re-emergence of binaries when used strategically" (Coates, in Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 101). The aim here is not to bring back the gender binary as research categories, but rather to use gender binaries strategically as to unveil ideological processes at work in their production.

3.4.1   Digital Considerations for FCDA

While it is not always necessary to create new methods to study online phenomena, digital discourse analysis considers certain limitations that researchers may have while studying online platforms.

> The aim of digital discourse analysis ought to be to show that the meanings and norms in the digital texts under analysis are transferable – that they have relevance to other texts in other small, forgotten digital spaces, or in other online sites with similar thematic or emotional content, and to build up from there in future research (Recuber, 2017).

These small forgotten digital spaces are where the everydayness of online cultural practices shows up. By participating in the creation of memes, these memers create niche cultures of social significance which need to be studied using appropriate methodological tools. It is with these considerations in mind that this methodological

framework was constructed: considering the affordances of the Instagram (see Section 1.4) platform for the productions of feminist counter discourses.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis does not only highlight how dominant meanings about gender can be analyzed critically but it can also help to legitimize the discourses of niche communities like @thebottomtext. This perspective combines multiple theories and methodologies in order to provide a deeper understanding of the meanings behind the memes.

3.5   Guiding questions and Analysis

As Feminist CDA does not provide a specific step-by-step methodology, my approach has been to analyze the memes intuitively (see guiding CDA questions in Table 3.1) with the intention to decipher meanings that exist within the meme. Considering that Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Studies are methodological frameworks described as "anti-methods", this makes putting into practice their principles particularly difficult. For example, Critical Discourse analysts usually do not explicitly state how they came to collect their data. In fact,

> […] similar to Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), data collection is not considered to be a specific phase that must be completed before the analysis can be conducted : after the first data collection one should perform first pilot analyses, find indicators for particular concepts, expand concepts into categories and, on the basis of these first results, collect further data (*theoretical sampling*) [author's emphasis] (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 21).

Taking this into consideration, the data collection process was abductive: as is outlined in Section 3.1, the feminist meme accounts were discovered through continuous use of

the Instagram app, and were selected through observation. The initial analysis provided several concepts which are discussed in the next section.

Table 3.1: Grid of analysis, adapted from Knobel and Lankshear, 2005

Referential or ideational system	The focus is on the meaning of a meme: • What information is being conveyed by this meme? How do we know? • What does this meme mean or signify (within this space, for certain people, at this particular point in time)? How do we know?
Contextual or interpersonal system	The focus is on social relations: • Where does this meme 'stand' with respect to the relationship it implies or invokes between people readily infected by this meme? What tells us this? • What does this meme tell us about the kinds of contexts within which this meme proves to be contagious and replicable? • What does this meme seem to assume about knowledge and truth? • What does this meme tell us about the kinds of contexts within which this meme was created?[20]
Ideological or worldview system	The focus is on values, beliefs and worldviews: • What deeper or larger themes, ideas, positions are conveyed by this meme? • What do these themes, ideas and positions tell us about different social groups? • What do these memes tell us about the world, or a particular version of the world?

In a more practical sense, the analysis was carried out in four sections: the text, the visual, the caption and finally, my interpretation. The specific questions that guided the observation and analysis are outlined in Table 3.1.

The three general axes of analysis (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005) used to guide the analysis were the referential/ideational system, the contextual/interpersonal system and

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[20] This question was added to the original analysis grid to look for deeper contextual meanings within the meme and its creation.

the ideological/worldview system. The focus was primarily on the first and third categories, as the framework proposed by Knobel and Lankshear was created for memes with emphasis on replicability. The *referential/ideational* system of a meme refers to the meaning created by the combination of the text and image. There is a level of decoding necessary to understand the meaning of a meme. As each section of these analysis guidelines takes into context the contextual elements (i.e. "within this space, for certain people, at this particular point in time"), they situate the meme's significance in time and space.

Considering that the present research on feminist memes considers meme creation as a social practice, I was less concerned about the "infectiousness" of the memes. Furthermore, the emphasis on the viral analogy refers to a more Dawkinsian framework than the one I have adopted in the definition of the feminist meme (see Section 1.3). Considering this, the *contextual/interpersonal* aspect of the meme analysis was framed primarily by the question: "What does this meme seem to assume about knowledge and truth?" and, I add "What does this meme tell us about the kinds of contexts within which this meme was created?". We can better understand the context of its creation through the traces of production left in the creation of a meme (Bonenfant, 2014). For example, we may ask: "Was professional software used?" or "Were the pop culture cues niche or easy to understand?" to know if the creator has a certain technological ability or a particularly developed meme literacy.

The *ideological/worldview* system of the meme was investigated to better understand the type of feminist activism guiding meme creation in the Bottom Text meme collective. As such, the question "What do these themes, ideas and positions tell us about different social groups?" was a highly significant guiding question to frame this type of feminist activism. By arranging the analysis by themes, I then could glean more

hints about the specific feminist priorities (e.g. intersectionality) that were conveyed through the memes.

This process was subjective and required knowledge of the *lingua franca* (Milner, 2013b) of meme culture. As some meme content is original (i.e.: not a remix of an existing meme format), sometimes the meme origin was not immediately obvious. In that case, Google search engine, Google Reverse Image Search, KnowYourMeme.com[21] and UrbanDictionary.com[22] were used to decipher meme format origins and acronym meanings.

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[21] KnowYourMeme is a large-scale web repository "dedicated to documenting Internet phenomena: viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, web celebs and more". It features user-generated pages dedicated to memes and other Internet phenomena deemed noteworthy which are then vetted by a panel of moderators .

[22] As its name indicates, Urban Dictionary is a resource to understand slang terms, often based in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). It is particularly useful in some instances of understanding if the language used in a meme is pure absurdity or a meme in its own right.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter discusses the main findings of the study carried out by the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. The analysis of five Instagram meme accounts and their group account yielded far more data than could be addressed in this thesis. From the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the 144 memes sampled, seven themes were deemed characteristic of The Bottom Text meme collective and its online feminist activism.

In Chapter 1, I stated the following research questions:

1. How does feminist meme creation on Instagram contribute to online feminist activism?
2. How does the practice of sharing feminist discourse in memes participate in the creation of subaltern counterpublics?

This section will outline the general findings of my results. It is important to note here that the long-term observation period prior to the formal analysis is what enabled me to interpret these memes. This study would not have been feasible without prior knowledge of meme culture and the feminist meme culture specific to Instagram. In this sense, my entry into the field and observation (see Section 3.1) did not yield any results but rather informed the ongoing process of my comprehension and interpretation of these memes.

In a feminist CDA-driven research, the goal is to explore and analyze how systems of power and ideology inform discourse. On any social media platform there is tension between the creativity of the memers and the affordances of the platform, which on Instagram seek at once to restrict certain expressions (through reporting and flagging) while protecting users (through blocking users who post abusive comments). Instagram also has some of the strictest "community guidelines" of any other platform insofar as nudity (Olszanowski, 2014) and offensive images are concerned. The following section will lay out the themes derived from my interpretation of the memes of the Bottom Text collective.

4.1   Discursive Themes

Many of the themes exposed in this analysis are intertwined and interlinked, as they all have to do with different forms of oppression derived from the lived experiences of young folks who live in a "White supremacist capitalist [cishetero]patriarchy" (hooks, 1984). The concerns that stem from these experiences created discourses which are decidedly part of a Millenial feminist activism. This type of feminism is often qualified as "emergent," "Internet feminism" or "Fourth Wave" (see Section 2.6). The generational concerns of Millenials are different from previous generations, as they are said to have lived through several factors that affects their employability and life chances.

According to a 2011 Pew Research Centre report on adults in the United States aged 18-35, Millenials generally study longer than their parents' generation, live with their parents until they are older, have a tough time getting and maintaining employment that matches their skillset and postpone life decisions until later than previous generations (eg. marriage, having kids or buying a home). This means that adulthood

begins later than it used to, with young people waiting to have kids until they have finished their studies or established a career (Taylor et al., 2012). This demographic portrait highlights the increasing vulnerability that young people face within their everyday lives, as their social attributes (e.g. employment, marriage and procreation) are all characterized by uncertainty.

This generational portrait is important to understanding contemporary feminist activism, as it contextualizes current concerns of women, non-binary and trans folks' values and priorities. As feminism becomes simultaneously more normalized and vilified (McRobbie, 2004), feminists adopts tactics to refute the postulates that consider feminism as already achieved. As such, the discursive themes arising from this analysis are concerns that are linked to the Millennial demographic's life conditions. The uncertainties attributed to the post-2008 job market, the neoliberal marketing of the Self, the increasing acceptability of mental health issues and sexual assault as a topic of cultural conversation as well as an increased acceptability of intersectionality are all factors which influence the discourse of these memers. While this analysis is focused on the United States, where these themes are dominant in feminist communities, I would argue that these discursive themes are intertextual and applicable in other cultural contexts as they aim to critique a racialized and gendered order that consistently aims to oppress minorities.

While there were 144 posts included in the final sample, 72 were found significant to the research question. Some posts were excluded because they did not fit the criteria of what an image macro is (see Section 3.2.2). The other ones that were excluded were generally selfies, sponsored posts or memes that did not have to do with gender, feminism or feminist activism. The basin of data was effectively cut in half by this sorting, resulting in a much more manageable amount of data to analyze. In Table 2, the summary of my findings is presented: self-deprecation was unsurprisingly the most

occurring theme (in almost 21% of posts), as it is a technique often used in *détournement* to signify the opposite of an intended meaning through irony. Furthermore, toxic masculinity figured within the most common themes (19%), as it is certainly one of the main targets of oppression of Millenial feminism. As mocking men has probably always been seen as a form of feminist catharsis, it is no surprise then that it would be present in feminist meme culture.

Table 4.1: Discursive theme distribution

Theme Distribution (n=72)		
Discursive themes	Occurrences	% in n
1: Consent and sexual assault	11	15.28
2: Intersectionality	6	8.33
3: Toxic Masculinity	14	19.44
4: White Supremacy	9	12.50
5: Paid Labour	6	8.33
6: Left-Leaning Politics	11	15.28
7: Self-deprecation and Mental Health	15	20.83
Total	72	100.00

The themes focusing on paid labour and intersectionality are the least recurrent with about 8% of posts mentioning them. If sponsored posts (memes created for partnerships with brands like Adam & Eve or Unbound Babes, for example) had been included, they may have increased the occurrence of paid labour themes greatly. The intersectionality category consisted of also only six posts, but this may be explained by what I have previously named the "innocuous" nature of this type of feminist meme. While a certain post may not scream "intersectionality!" it may still contain discourse which recognizes and critiques the multiple and interlocking systems of oppression that women, non-binary and trans folks experience through a "shared feminist literacy" (Lawrence &

Ringrose, 2018a). As such, these discursive themes were not mutually exclusive, with several themes overlapping (most notably toxic masculinity and consent).

4.1.1 Consent and sexual assault: generalized trauma of women, trans, nonbinary and gender non-conforming folks' experience

One of the most recurrent discursive themes stemming from the analysis is that of sexual assault and consent. The #MeToo movement was an influential cultural moment because of its sheer importance in the media during 2017. In fact, Time Magazine's "Person of the Year" was the silence-breakers against sexual assault perpetrators in the #MeToo movement (Zacharek et al., 2017). This pivotal moment in popular culture in the United States brought to light the systemic nature of sexual violence and the lived experiences of survivors.

In the post-#MeToo era of memes, sexual assault is approached in a mundane manner. With the normalization of discussions about sexual assault in the media, the systemic nature of sexual and gendered violence became more evident than ever before. During this period, a cultural shift towards "cancel culture" of male celebrities, where alleged sexual assault perpetrators' careers could be ended from one day to the next in the court of public opinion, created a rift in the media. The case of Harvey Weinstein was the first and most notorious of cases highlighted by the #MeToo movement. The film producer was accused of assaulting several women over years and after the first accusations came out, many other followed, creating a domino effect which effectively "cancelled" him in the public eye. Numerous accusations against Matt Lauer, Donald Trump, Kevin Spacey and Louie CK (to name a few) were covered in the US media. Slightly predating the height of the 2017 #MeToo movement was the Jian Ghomeshi case in Canada. In Quebec, Éric Salvail was one of the most discussed cases in the media.

The #MeToo movement has highlighted the rift between those who believe survivors at all costs and those who believe that all alleged assaulters should be entitled to a "fair" trial. Amid the overwhelming media uproar, many survivors considered this topic as triggering because of the sheer extent of influence.

Figure 4.1: meme by @gayvapeshark

In Figure 4.1, @gayvapeshark takes on the subject explicitly with their meme about Louie CK[23], which shows him talking to his tattoo artist about his comeback. In this meme, Louie's comeback is referenced as being problematic, and the comedian as blatantly not caring if he further offends sexual assault victims[24]. By framing him as a misogynist, the meme communicates a clear disdain of the comedian, mocking him by

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[23] Louie CK is an American stand-up comedian and television show producer. Only a few months after being accused by five women of sexual assault, he staged an unexpected comeback at the Comedy Cellar in New York City, to a full audience (Grady, 2018).

[24] The comedian has since had an official comeback by way of a sold out show where he was recorded mocking trans people for demanding their pronouns to be respected as well as making light of the Parkland Shooting (North, 2019).

associating him with a symbol of right-wing memes, Pepe the Frog[25]. This meme not only references American pop culture, demonstrates intertextuality and remix of the Pepe meme, but is also a type of ironic call-out and disdain of sexual assault abusers. By communicating their disdain through ridicule, the memer conveys a sense of identification or support with people who believe victims while also saying that people should not be able to resurrect a career after being cancelled in the court of public opinion.

The *everyday nature* of sexual assault is a recurrent notion relating to sexual assault in these memes. One meme by @namaste.at.home.dad mocks the persistence with which some men pursue women who are uninterested in them (see Figure 4.2). Here we see a clear depiction of an incomplete grasp upon what constitutes female consent, with this caricature of a "flirting" microaggression. The meme text depicts the fear women sometimes feel when a stranger they are not interested in makes unwanted advances. The sentence "that way I'll know if you were just sacred & being polite instead of blatantly rejecting me" shows how systemic sexism and pervasive sexual assault may lead women to live in fear of a possible assault. Here, *détournement* is used to depict the toxic masculine attitude of street harassment: by depicting a stereotype based in lived experience, the memer effectively conveys the notion of systemic violence which enables men to perpetuate these problematic behaviours.

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[25] The meme appeared on 4chan's controversial /pol/ board as a depiction of Donald Trump overlooking the USA-Mexico border smugly. The post gained great popularity, catapulting the visibility of Pepe through its appropriation by the alt-right in the USA (*Pepe the Frog*, 2015).

Figure 4.2: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

Considering how easy it may be to identify with this meme, it highlights the pervasive incomprehension of consent by men and the aggressive nature of their socialization. The passage "what's more romantic than intimidation & force?" demonstrates this clearly: by decoding what a potential cat-caller is saying into its most basic form, the memer clearly highlights that this type of street harassment is not just a way of flirting but in fact a coercive practice rooted in power, through the use of intimidation.

The everyday nature of sexual assault in the discourse in these memes often revolves around the somewhat covert nature of microaggressions. These are defined as: "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). First used to theorize racial discrimination, microaggressions have been used to name gender, race, and sexual orientation discriminations that are by nature more subtle, less overt and more common place that obvious racism, sexism or heterosexism. These interactions

are often perpetuated by a person who has not been made aware that their behaviour is problematic and thus stems from the systemic and pervasive nature of intersectional discrimination.

In a meme by @djinn_kazama (see Figure 4.3), the nihilistic idea of sexual assault as an "inevitable" eventuality is approached. The passage "I'm so glad I have pretty privilege so that *when* I inevitably become a victim of gendered violence people will be slightly more sympathetic" [emphasis added] conveys the systemic and pervasive existence of sexual assault, considering experiences of assault as being expected. In the caption to the meme, the memers adds: "Idk but a lot of ppl with "pretty privilege are kinda ugly they're just thin and white". This passage highlights the Western construction of beauty as being based on certain standards of thinness and Whiteness that pervade the media. If the meme is meant to be autobiographical, coming from the memer's own voice and subject position, they may be trying to communicate that their beauty will elicit more sympathy if one day they become a sexual assault survivor. As @djinn_kazama is a POC and so is the person depicted in the meme, we may deduce that this first-person meme is about the memer.

By deeming people with "pretty privilege" as "just thin and white," the caption rejects White Western beauty stereotypes. The rather curvaceous non-White woman in the meme is then positioned as having pretty privilege and worthy of eventual sympathy. In this way, the memer rejects the notion of thinness and Whiteness as constitutive elements of normative beauty while pointing to the pervasive notion of sexual assault. "Pretty privilege" is the idea that people with certain physical characteristics are treated better by society than others: in this case, race and size are the factors emphasized. In the case of media attention to crimes in the USA, pretty privilege is used to invoke sympathy over survivors of sexual assault. Unfortunately, when the survivor is treated sympathetically, it is often a pretty young White cis woman.

Figure 4.3: meme by @djinn_kazama

For example, a study carried out in Canada found that missing and murdered White women in headlines were treated much more sympathetically than Indigenous women (Gilchrist, 2010). The Canadian context may indicate certain similarities with how race is treated in the mainstream media in the USA.

> While the White middle-class victims were considered legitimate, "worthy," and "innocent," the Aboriginal women by contrast were denied such status and legitimacy (see also Jiwani 2008), perpetuating a hierarchy of victims in the press. At the top of the hierarchy are conventionally beautiful (thin, blonde, young), middle-class, White women, and near the bottom of the hierarchy are Aboriginal women who, regardless of occupation, personal achievement, appearance, or circumstances, are ignored (Gilchrist, 2010, p. 385).

This hierarchy of empathy relating to social standing is, in fact, indicative of the structural and systemic notion of racism, colonialism and classism in North American society. Thus, the "Pretty Privilege" meme serves to highlight how BIPOC and non-

thin folks rarely receive the same amount of sympathy as their White/thin counterparts, highlighting the systemic racism and body-shaming of American society.

The inescapable eventuality of sexual objectification in a cis-heteropatriarchal society such as the USA is then seen as something that one may need to prepare oneself to or find ways of coping with. Issues of sexual assault addressed in The Bottom Text collective's memes generally take a position of believing survivors and of anti-sexual assault. Consequently, we could argue that making this type of meme could be considered as a form of feminist catharsis in reaction to the systems of oppression that govern their lives. In this way, meme-making may be a way of coping with trauma (i.e. by seeing that your followers like your meme about this issue, one may feel less alone in that trauma). But, I would argue that the sole onus of dealing with the aftermath of assault is dealt with in an individualistic manner. In this sense, it is obviously difficult to demonstrate concrete healing strategies for trauma and education on consent through the meme format. Regardless, the fatalistic and nihilistic approach to the topic is not one that necessarily leads to emancipation or healing.

Below is an example of the trauma associated with sexual assault being addressed in a meme by @djinn_kazama (see Figure 4.4). This text addresses the inherent trauma of being a woman in society and consent culture ("stained with violence that is inescapable"). By talking about trauma in this self-deflecting way, the memer highlights the pervasive nature of this experience. This memer's esthetics are often influenced by these "avatars," which femme-styled computer-generated with generally exaggerated features.

Figure 4.4: meme by @djinn_kazama

The discount code "empowerment" promoted in this post is in fact a fake, showing the pressure of being marketable on the platform through brand sponsorships. While this is discussed further in Section 4.1.5, the concept of empowerment through the marketing of the self on the Instagram platform is of note here as well. As a memer accrues a certain following online, they may be approached by brands to do sponsored posts within their memes. I would argue that the text in Figure 4.4 serves to critique the pressures expected from memers to produce content for so-called "feminist" companies online (e.g. sex toy company Unbound Babes partners with many feminist memers). As Duffy argues,

> […] commercial media and advertising producers continue to deploy appeals to ordinariness in their promotional campaigns. This uptick in 'authenticity advertising' is especially prominent among fashion and beauty retailers that integrate so-called 'real women' into their ads as public commitments to female empowerment – or perhaps, more accurately, expressions of commodity feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012, in Duffy, 2016, p. 7)

This meme ridicules neoliberal capitalism, that attempts to ask influencers to sell things to women under the guise of empowerment.

As has been made evident by the above discussion, rape culture, consent and #MeToo movement have been defining characteristics of feminist discourse in this meme collective. Considering that meme culture often mirrors mainstream culture and as the cultural conversation around such issues becomes more normalized, this is also reflected in the discourse that memers include in their work. In these memes, feminist *détournement* is used as an ironic rhetorical device that highlights, through humour, the systemic and pervasive way that rape culture affects women, trans and non-binary folks. While at first glance the discourse may be perceived as self-deprecation or effacing humour, feminist memers use a role-reversal technique where they embody the "enemy" through mockery (see Figure 4.2). By doing this, they displace the onus of responsibility of feminists to come up with solutions or embody a positive feminist stance. Instead, they propose no solution but to mock those who they deem oppressive, because their politically nihilist orientation impedes them from imagining any emancipation.

4.1.1.1 The Bottom Text sexual assault controversy

In August 2019, a controversy arose within the Bottom Text meme collective: @males_are_cancelled accused @gangsterpopeye of sexual assault[26]. The details of the alleged assault were documented by letter written by @males_are_cancelled which was shared on their Instagram bio via a Google Drive folder that was made public for consultation. What followed in the Instagram feminist meme community was a public

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[26] After careful consideration of this event, @gangsterpopeye's memes were still included in the study on account of they were identified, collected and analyzed before (in May 2019) I had any knowledge of the alleged assault.

"cancelling" of @gangsterpopeye: as more assault allegations surfaced[27], memers in the collective and in the larger meme community on Instagram and Facebook issued posts and stories calling for people to unfollow @gangsterpopeye and for her to delete her account.

While this controversy was going on, @males_are_cancelled quit the meme collective and informed the other members of the alleged assault. They (@males_are_cancelled) only returned after @gangsterpopeye was kicked out of the collective, the Bottom Text Adult Swim TV programme and the collective's communal house in Atlanta[28]. This event highlights the nature of the lack of boundaries between online and offline occurrences: concrete actions that occur in the physical world (i.e. assault) have concrete repercussions online. By believing the folks who came forward to call-out @gangsterpopeye, these survivors reinforced the networked relationships in this online counterpublic.

After admitting to having misread certain situations and owing up to others, @gangsterpopeye deleted her Instagram and Facebook accounts, stating in an Instagram Story:

> I'm deleting all my social media. I owe it to the people I've hurt to give them space without me. I am going to work on healing my predatory behaviors and building a healthy life irl. Just getting a few phone numbers. I gotta get off [social media] and work on myself.

The Bottom Text collective has since continued on without @gangsterpopeye, both with the Adult Swim TV show and the collective's meme account. @males_are_cancelled has rejoined both the collective and the TV show.

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[27] The seriousness of these allegations is, of course, not to be taken lightly, but the specific details concerning them are not necessary to be expounded upon here, as it is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[28] This information was included in the public Google Drive folder by @males_are_cancelled.

In a case study of three women coming forward publicly with sexual allegations online, Salter (2013) argues,

> By airing their grievances online they were registering a protest that was at once highly personal but also public and political, since the very act of utilising online technology to circulate testimony of sexual violence suggests a lack of access to, or faith in, the mechanisms of the public sphere and the criminal justice system. This highlights the rational and potentially constructive dimensions of 'revenge' and recasts their frustrations as reasonable responses to the obstacles they experienced in seeking redress for the harms of sexual violence (p. 238).

The impact of social media changes the way that sexual assault is dealt with by survivors: by using the technology that is available to them, survivors can thus seek restitution in the public eye. Without having to go through the formal judicial structures which albeit rarely rule in their favour, survivors may feel a sense of immediate catharsis from being believed by others. This is concurrent with Fraser's (1990) assertion that counterpublics serve as a tool for regroupment and a place of potential agitation. In this case, the memers (re)create a counterpublic of folks who do not necessarily believe in going through the formal judicial structures to accuse someone of sexual assault and circulate oppositional discourse by creating posts and stories which reinforce their position of believing survivors' accounts of assault, effectively cancelling the alleged perpetrator.

By recognizing the potential of social media for survivors to get redemption without overestimating its effects, examples of call-out culture may be related to what is often called "hashtag feminism". Horeck (2014) notes,

> There is now an unprecedented speed and immediacy to affective responses to rape and its hyper visible circulation online; it is the radical potentialities and limitations of this new temporal regime — epitomized by the hashtag — that we as feminists must consider when strategizing how to actively re-

> shape the cultural consensus on questions of gender, violence and power
> (p. 1006).

While in the case of the Bottom Text controversy, it is a question of one person's account against another's, the utility of the platform does come in handy as a tool to claim retribution. As the feminist memetic counterpublic on Instagram is sympathetic to stories of survivors, the "cancelling" of a memer is facilitated. As such, questions of sexual assault, power and violence may all be addressed without the survivors having to go through the official judicial channels which are supposed to grant them justice, but rarely do.

4.1.2 Intersectionality: A Millennial feminist norm

As is discussed in Section 2.3, the current defining characteristic, or "type" of feminism in meme culture on Instagram is one that is intersectional, and which aims to critique White feminism (i.e. tenants of feminism which exclude other oppressions such as race and class in their analysis of gender oppression). This commitment to intersectionality has become so integrated into this culture that it is no longer explicitly mentioned, but rather referred to implicitly in what one could call a feminist "wink" at a feminist politics. A prime example of this is the more explicitly feminist meme by @namaste.at.home.dad (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

The pop star iconography in these memes is undoubtedly North American. Here we see alleged White feminist Grimes telling Azealia Banks to stop "upholding the patriarchy". Grimes, an alternative music star from Canada who was considered to be a feminist music icon (Baker, 2013), has been widely criticized in recent years for her debatable feminist ethics. In Figure 4.5, Grimes is criticized for being a hypocritical feminist. By contrasting the sentence "please stop upholding the patriarchy it isn't safe" and "hi fat bitch," the memer indicates the difference between the discourses Grimes says in general and those she says to Azealia Banks, which evidently lack feminist solidarity.

In 2018, Grimes had a public Twitter argument with Azealia Banks about her partner Elon Musk (McGarrigle, 2018). In this meme, Azealia Banks, also a controversial figure, is not depicted in a sympathetic way either. It is probably no coincidence that the memer chose to include a photo of Grimes where she is sporting what looks like "TERF Bangs": the characteristically short bangs that Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists are known for (Arnold, 2018). Depicting Grimes in this way may indicate that the memer considers her brand of feminism particularly non-inclusive.

In sum, the meme in Figure 4.5 shows that many (White) feminists who are known for their anti-oppressive public persona actually embody problematic behaviours (i.e. have a neocolonial[29] millionaire republican romantic partner and insulting Black women). As Bilge (2013) has written on the White-washing of intersectionality,

> In the present-day political landscape the need for a *radical* intersectional praxis may be more pressing than ever. Intersectional political awareness offers critical potential for building non-oppressive political coalitions between various social justice-oriented movements now required to compete with each other, rather than collaborate, under the neoliberal equity/diversity regime (p. 407).

The general theme of intersectionality is implicitly present in most memes in the sample, as it is the underlying motivation of the discourse. This commitment to highlighting interlocking systems of oppression is the major factor in creating this feminist counterpublic: intersectionality as a basic principle has led memers to find others with similar values. Generally, those who believe that feminism should be intersectional generally have a more inclusionary view of personal politics and social justice.

A major theme in this type of meme is calling out the lack of women's solidarity towards each other and the prevalence of internalized sexism. In a meme by @gayvapeshark, the text references a woman describing herself as "not like other girls" thus differentiating herself from women she deems to be different from her. The text continues "I'm super random and eat pizza," demonstrating how women try to differentiate themselves from others using traits associated with being "one of the boys" (i.e. generally as adopting male attributes). As such, this meme decries internalized

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[29] Musk has said that he wants to colonize Mars through his SpaceX program to ensure the conservation of the human species (Solon, 2018).

misogyny that women may carry and which affects their feminist identity, or lack thereof.

A meme by @males_are_cancelled (see Figure 4.6) mocks TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) for their limited understanding of what constitutes a woman. The visual of this meme is large female gender symbol with the text "cis pride!". Through the combination of text and image, as well as the general esthetic that this memer uses, it is deduced that this meme is ironic. This assemblage of everyday iconography and a reactionary but short phrase creates a rather cogent effect – the equivalency between sex and gender here is refuted by only two words.

Figure 4.6: meme by @males_are_cancelled

The female symbol is put into question by ascribing it a trans-exclusionary meaning. By labelling it "cis pride!" the memer targets feminists who believe that there is an equivalency between sex assigned at birth and gender. Rejection of TERFs and SWERFs (sex work-exclusionary radical feminists) is one of the attributes of current intersectional feminism, which aims to be as inclusive as possible to trans folks, BIPOC

and people who experience multiple oppressions at the same time. This intersectional and anti-oppressive feminist position has become so normalized as the "correct" feminist approach that it is considered mainstream.

In Figure 4.7, a woman stomps on her presumed fiancé in a defiant pose saying "as a feminist, I decided to keep my own last name when we got married […] because FUCK patriarchal lineages that aren't my dad's". This text indicates that the politics ascribed to taking a partner's name through marriage is ultimately null as a feminist point of contention, as the last name people are given at birth is most often the name of their father.

Figure 4.7: meme by @gayvapeshark

The "dad" is depicted as somewhat perverse, shirtless and on the background of a heart. This meme brings to light the fact that most naming practices reinforce patriarchal domination whether or not one chooses to take their partner's name after marriage. It also highlights the tedious priorities of Western liberal feminism. If one's greatest

feminist priority is to keep their maiden name; one could assume that they come from a place of privilege.

In this way, this type of meme subtly highlights the privilege imbued in certain feminisms, a practice which comes from the normalization of intersectionality in popular media. The mainstreaming of intersectionality in feminist circles (see Bilge in Section 2.3) has also been documented on the subject of memes, as in the Vice article "When Feminist Memes Hit the Mainstream" (Dre & Binny, 2017). While this article documents a historical moment in the history of the Longform Feminist Meme, it captures the popularization of the implicitly feminist meme style that we see within The Bottom Text collective today.

4.1.3   Toxic masculinity: mocking men as feminist catharsis

As another theme that is profoundly intertwined with others relating to Western patriarchal society, toxic masculinity is critiqued through the discourse themes that emerge from the memes. An in-depth look at what at first may seem like simply mocking men, is in fact a more profound ideological critique of the forms that toxic masculinity can take. Bro culture, libertarians, poor hygiene and sexism are some of the things that are depicted in these memes to ironically convey a message that toxic masculinity is not only problematic, but systemically pervasive. This theme tends to produce more graphic and discursive content that focuses on corporeal matter (see Figure 4.8).

This type of meme ridicules toxic masculinity that generally regards any form of self-care or personal hygiene as "gay" or effeminate. The words "sugar-tits" in Figure 4.8

are generally used in misogynistic settings to demean or belittle women. Words such as "sissy" have been used as homophobic slurs.

Figure 4.8: meme by @gangsterpopeye

Here, they are used to create the character of the toxic man, by putting these offensive words into the hypothetical character's mouth, the memer is counter-mocking homophobic people through irony. The image depicts a skull with guns wearing a cowboy hat with an image border made from a picture of American money. These visual markers may be used to convey violence, a pro-gun person and/or American imperialism. By presenting this character as highly caricaturized (albeit dead) embodiment of a toxic masculinity, the message conveyed is one that considers male aggression as inherently problematic. Thus, by ridiculing certain markers like guns and cowboy hats that may be construed as right-wing or Republican in the United States, the memer positions herself as being outside of that framework. All these markers indicate an ironic critique of toxic masculinity by using the slurs to highlight the homophobic nature of heteronormative male culture.

Figure 4.9: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

Another example of this theme is in a meme based on the pervasive sex-negative misconception that vaginas "get looser over time". This erroneous assumption serves to uphold the idea that people with vaginas should not be using their bodies for pleasure and should feel guilty for having multiple sexual partners. In Figure 4.9, the meme discourse at once debunks this myth and turns it around to create a similarly ridiculous assertion about the penis.

By using feminist *détournement*, the memer highlights the absurd nature of the "myth" about vaginas. "The more penetration, the smaller the penis" is an equally absurd myth that reverses the sexism to the White male body (as shown in Figure 4.9). In this way, the memer enacts a mode of humorous talkback that allows to critique toxic masculinity by using the same ridicule that is used against women. This wry, dry, irony enables a feminist catharsis that constitutes the "doing" of feminism in these memes. The "feminist" aspect of the meme is implicit, as its manifestation is the visual equivalent of an eye roll. By enacting these direct critiques of problematic (White, cis) masculinity, the cathartic laughter produced by such a meme constitutes the politically-motivated engagement of feminist subjectivity (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015).

Figure 4.10: meme by @gayvapeshark

This feminist tactic is often employed in the memes in this study. In Figure 4.10, we see a depiction of toxic masculinity, based on the so-called feminist Gillette ad. The ad featured men trying to "be better" by intervening in street harassment and not encouraging boys to fight each other. The brand received some praise but also an intense backlash on social media of men saying that the ad was overstepping the brand's mission and to "let boys be boys. Let men be men" (Topping et al., 2019).

Calling women "females" is a way of debasing their existence to an animal level. It also refers to sex organs instead of gender, denoting a profoundly essentialist vision of women. The ironic rhetorical device used here creates a believable stereotype of a misogynist: "I can't even assist in reinforcing their subjugation without them all standing up for themselves". This passage demonstrates a postfeminist response: women need to stop standing up for their rights and be subjugated to me. The anthropomorphic razor responds "uh, men. Just try to be a little less bad sometimes," mocking the message in the ad "The Best a Man Can Be". The "story" of this meme

ends with the man effectively ripping his hair out in such a rage from being exposed to a humanist view of gender saying that he will never shave again.

From this discussion, mocking men is seen to be a useful tool for feminist catharsis: by embodying the enemy through mockery, the memers can depict anti-feminist and postfeminist attitudes to critique them through irony.

4.1.4 Wellness Culture: Postfeminist consumption, governmentality and cultural appropriation

The discourse in the Bottom Text meme collective's memes is committed to critiquing White supremacy and cultural appropriation. In a meme by @djinn_kazama, a White woman in a yoga pose sits mindfully, on a psychedelic background (see Figure 4.11). The caption reads: "Have u tried Speaking to the manager ….within?". This meme demonstrates how intertextuality is used in an ironic way, as it is a remix of the "Speak to the Manager" Haircut meme (see Figure 4.12). The original meme portrays a bob-style haircut which is longer in the front than in the back. As Know Your Meme states, "the hairstyle is often mocked as representative of middle-aged women who insist on complaining to managers at retail stores and restaurants" (*'Speak to the Manager' Haircut*, 2015). The target of the joke is the stereotype of a particularly demanding American mom: in the case of the Starterpack in Figure 4.12, it is a middle-aged White woman with a minivan and two children.

Figure 4.11: meme by @djinn_kazama

Figure 4.12: Can I Speak to the Manager Starterpack

@djinn_kazama's meme conveys the cultural appropriation of "yoga lifestyle" by White Millennial women. By remixing the Can I Speak to the Manager meme, the meme in Figure 4.11 positions yoga and meditation as analogous to the suburban stereotype featured in the Manager meme. As such, the discourse in this meme targets certain aspects of the Millennial generation's stereotypes: White women as being the

bastions of cultural appropriation and the acceleration of consumerist Wellness Culture.

Figure 4.11 is a repost of their original meme because, as the caption reads, "everybody else wants to repost and credit random ass pages who didn't make it 🙄🙄🙄". This meme is at once referencing another popular meme, mocking millennials who do yoga and calling out people for sharing her meme without credit. As is evident in this example, the meme format can convey a lot of information to the audience who receives it, but that information is only properly decoded if the audience understands the *lingua franca* of meme culture and has been following the account for a long time.

Figure 4.13: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

In another meme which critiques wellness culture and lifestyle, @namaste.at.home.dad writes "I may look "dirty" but I practice self-care too!" In this meme, we see a person with dreads who is presumably White, essential oils and other items such as "poppers" and nitrous vials. Here, the discourse depicts a stereotype of a hippie person who believes in the healing properties of essential oils, thinks maintaining basic personal

hygiene is unnecessary, and who takes drugs. This stereotype of a hippie Millennial portrays persons who consider "natural" lifestyle ideals.

"Millennial culture" has been associated with the neoliberal focus on self-improvement, often branded to women as "self-care". The term has become a buzzword for conspicuous consumption for the purpose of self-improvement, often by young professionals who feel the need to escape the pressures of late capitalism. Memes showcasing self-care are often aimed at Millennials, as this is the generation that has popularized the term.

In this Wellness Culture and regime, biopower (Foucault, 1975) enacts control on individuals to maintain a sort of "wellness hygiene" upon their bodies. Given that self-improvement is put forth as one of the goals of neoliberal individualism in capitalist society, it is through these techniques of bodily control that power is enacted upon and emanates from the body.

In this regime, there is a tendency of seeing the body as something that can be perfected. The techniques of self-improvement and "natural" bodily maintenance that figure in these memes is indicative of a regime of biopower that institutes norms of functionality upon the American population (see example of critique in Figure 4.14). As Foucault (1976) states,

> *La mise en place au cours de l'âge classique de cette grande technologie à double face - anatomique et biologique, individualisante et spécifiante, tournée vers les performances du corps et regardant vers les processus de la vie - caractérise un pouvoir dont la plus haute fonction désormais n'est peut-être plus de tuer mais d'investir la vie de part en part* (p. 183).

The Industrial Revolution created institutions regulating every aspects of human life: schools, work, family, prisons and sexuality. While these institutions were not the carriers of power in Foucault's perspective, they aided in creating a regime of discipline that was then internalized by individuals. The modern focus on keeping populations healthy was to ensure an enduring and productive working class. Through surveillance, measurement techniques and the normalization of discourse relating to the body, individuals internalized this *biopower* through constant self-monitoring and self-evaluation (Foucault, 1976).

> *Développement rapide au cours de l'âge classique des disciplines diverses - écoles, collèges, casernes, ateliers ; apparition aussi, dans le champ des pratiques politiques et des observations économiques, des problèmes de natalité, de longévité, de santé publique, d'habitat, de migration ; explosion, donc, de techniques diverses et nombreuses pour obtenir l'assujettissement des corps et le contrôle des populations. S'ouvre ainsi l'ère d'un « bio-pouvoir »* (Foucault, 1976, p. 184).

These polymorphous techniques of power are also present in today's Wellness Culture: the discourse of hygiene and wellness that has been internalized (mostly by women). The monitoring of the self and body is traversed by these techniques of power and leads to the questioning of every aspect of the self (see Figure 4.14)

This process is, I would argue, anchored in a profoundly post-feminist register (see Section 2.6) that considers conspicuous consumption as the path to a "healthy life". McRobbie (2004) states, on the self-management discourses often found in post-feminist films like Bridget Jones's Diary (2001),

> But relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment. These young women's genres are vital to the construction of a new "gender regime," based on the double entanglement which I have described; they endorse

wholeheartedly what Rose calls "this ethic of freedom," and young women have come to the fore as the pre-eminent subjects of this new ethic (p. 262).

Figure 4.14: meme by @gayvapeshark

In a meme by @gayvapeshark (see Figure 4.15), a White woman with dreadlocks says "Ill have u know I wear my hair like this to feel closer to nature and last week Brown Recluse laid her eggs in one of my dreads so yeah id say im doing my fucking part". This meme caricaturizes White women who wear dreads, an act that is widely considered as cultural appropriation of a historically Black hairstyle[30]. "Feeling closer to nature" is a stereotypical phrase associated with living a hippie lifestyle, indicating that the way one styles their hair could presumably change their proximity to nature.

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[30] A recent occurrence of this form of cultural appropriation happened in Montreal, where the student solidarity bar Coop Les Récoltes did not let a White comedian go on stage because he wore dreads. In a Facebook post the bar's organizers said that this form of cultural appropriation constitutes a form of ordinary and persistent racism and necessitates a deconstruction of White privilege (Giguère, 2019).

Figure 4.15: meme by @gayvapeshark

The passage "I will pity those who make snap judgement about me solely on my appearance and then have the nerve to call me the racist one" demonstrates the types of counter-discourse used by White people in reaction to being called racist. The post mocks Millennial Wellness Culture, hippies and those who do not wash themselves for a variety of reasons. In this way, the memer highlights how Millennials have misappropriated certain aspects of other cultures, reinforcing the stereotype of entitlement for which they are generally defined by in the media (Stein, 2013).

New Age spirituality has been appropriated by Wellness Culture as something that can be marketable to a certain demographic (i.e. predominantly White wealthy women, as in Figure 4.11). Along with yoga and essential oils, the pseudoscience of healing crystals has come to be normalized in this type of practice. In an article for The Guardian, it has been said that most people who use and own crystals often do not question their origins. "Healing crystals," just as any other minerals, are products of mining. "In the DRC, seven-year-old children work in the cobalt and copper mines,

where covetable "healing" stones such as citrine and smoky quartz abound" (Wiseman, 2019).

Figure 4.16: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

In Figure 4.16, @namaste.at.home.dad's meme discusses the complex social reality that exists behind these supposedly magical crystals. Part of using crystal is also cleansing them, as the meme states: "all the sweat, tears & blood from the children who were basically enslaved to mine them? Bleach would probably do the trick". The hypocrisy of New Age spirituality coupled with the acquisition of mining commodities extracted by children is stated here quite clearly. In Figure 4.16, the woman portrayed is White, thin and smiling, denoting a calm ignorance about the origins of the crystals laid out in front of her. This memer demonstrates an unwillingness to ignore the social repercussions of Wellness Culture and the hypocrisies therein. In this way, issues related to socioeconomic status, race and gender are upheld in the memers' critiques of this trend.

In these criticisms of Millennials, White privilege is mocked as something that has become pervasive in America. Memers often highlight how POC and lower income folks are generally less accepted when they do not comply with traditional hygiene

standards, deconstructing how Millennial hippie culture is imbued with privilege and White supremacy. These questions of hygiene and lifestyle are indicative of a greater systemic power of the White body being portrayed as dominant on social media and in society in general. These seemingly mundane social media moral panics about such menial habits serve to turn attention away from more pressing issues and thus, create an economy of distraction that makes POC expend more emotional labour. Here, POC expend time and labour explaining how people in positions of racial and gendered privilege have the choice to not conform to societal standards of hygiene while others who do not have those privileges cannot. This cycle of trying to explain to privileged people why they are enacting domination by taking up space on social media necessitates emotional labour that may be used for other more pressing issues.

4.1.5   Paid labour: enacting the modes of capitalism they seek to critique

In a context of online content creation, it is not usual to wish to get paid for one's work. Memers on Instagram may make money by partnering with brands to create sponsored content (eg. a meme for a sex toy company that includes a discount code). Most memers do not earn a lot of money from their online presence because it may be difficult to balance the creation of sponsored posts while still maintaining a steady stream of original content.

As meme creation on social media is seen as amateur activity, is it not ascribed any monetary value even though it does constitute a form of artistic labour (see "providing a service or entertainment," Figure 4.17). Considering this, some meme pages followers become offended when a memer issues sponsored posts, as it is considered inauthentic. Furthermore, the memers may experience backlash if they ask for money by making posts that reference a precarious financial situation. What is noteworthy

about this anger from followers is that they seem entitled to the memers' content in a way that surpasses their ability to conceive of the meme artist as a human with material needs. The backlash feminist memers witness online is sometimes violent, with some posting about "haters" who presumably comment on their posts or message them with complaints relating to the content they share.

Figure 4.17: meme by @djinn_kazama

In Figure 4.17 a White man appears to be dictating his opinion that entitlement to remuneration for work (i.e. creating memes) is a selfish goal instead of something that is common across online content creation. In embodying their enemy by reflecting their discourse, the meme portrays a troll as "unexceptional and untalented with no valuable skills." This type of lowbrow "takedown" is indicative of a certain type of feminist rage that is defined by exasperation with unwanted feedback from people who consume memes for free. The caption calls them "losers who have nothing to offer".

Figure 4.18: meme by @gayvapeshark

Memers in the sample included their PayPal, CashApp and/or Venmo[31] in their profile bio. By doing this, the memers allow their audience to donate money to them or buy their merchandise, if applicable. Some memers ask their followers who enjoy their content to pay them for it by donating a small amount to their account. The irony behind this insistence on paid labour is that it is done on a for-profit platform (Instagram) and the transaction is made though services put in place by other corporations (see caption in Figure 4.18).

These insistences on payment can be quite explicit or more subtle (i.e. posting a meme that is irrelevant and then posting their Venmo ID in the caption) or more explicitly, as is the case in Figure 4.19. Considering @gayvapeshark has a sizeable number of followers (119 K as of June 11, 2019), "a couple of bucks" could potentially amount to several thousand dollars. It is noteworthy that @gayvapeshark is asking for the

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[31] All three are American private companies that allow individuals to set up payment systems or transfer funds to each other (the equivalent of Interac transfer in Canada).

money specifically to cover their meds – a trace from the meme that indicates the American socioeconomic context of the meme production.

In this meme, there is also mention of a "television show," which I assume refers to "The Bottom Text", a show on Adult Swim which has been streaming online weekly since May 2019. In each episode, the memers of the collective and invited memers must create memes live according to different themes on the show. The show description website reads: "Five influential meme artists perform live meme-making challenges in order to free themselves from unseen malevolent forces."

In another meme, by @namaste.at.home.dad, the caption reads:

> I need to leave to drive 14 hours "back home" to atl but don't have much $ because of some unreasonably and unexpectedly high bills, no insurance and being unable to work until I get back there. If you like my page and want to help (if you don't or can't- don't, of course.) if you wanna throw a five spot at me or whatever, that'd be cool.. I only need to raise like $100.

Here, a material need is described by the memer: she is asking her followers for a small sum of money to pay for essential services. This may indicate that she is situated in a precarious financial position, considering the detail given to justify what the potential money gained will be used for. In this way, she is considering her audience of followers as actors in solidarity with her cause, consisting in a legitimate source of help in a time of need.

As is evident from the previous examples, the discourse relating to this theme is a direct result of the privatized healthcare system in the USA. Needing thousands of dollars to pay for medication or having no insurance are typically American attributes that stem from the institutional dysfunctionality of privatized healthcare. Considering this,

Instagram may be used as a platform to counteract the neoliberal capitalist healthcare system by requesting money from one's followers to fund what is not included in one's healthcare insurance. The individualization of responsibility resembles what Foucault has called "governmentality". In the same vein as biopower, governmentality refers to the techniques of control one used by the state that have become internalized and individualized, taken on by citizens. Lemke (2004) summarizes,

> *Grâce au néologisme « gouvernementalité », Foucault désigne les rationalités, les formes de comportement et les champs de pratique distincts qui visent, de diverses manières, à contrôler les individus et les collectivités et incluent eux-mêmes des formes de comportement individuel comme les techniques de guidage des autres. En conséquence, Foucault étend sa microphysique du pouvoir aux macrostructures sociales et au phénomène de l'État. Il s'intéresse également aux formes de la subjectivation au-delà de l'assujettissement disciplinaire, formes qu'il appelle « techniques de soi » et qui ne sauraient être réduites à des complexes de pouvoir-savoir (1994g ; 2001)* (p. 18).

This critique of modern neoliberalism is inciteful in its recognition that the transformation of techniques of power by the state constitute a new disciplinary regime where deregulation is a cause of not economic needs but rather, political ones. While Foucault's theory of biopower related to the body collective, governmentality goes further to extend to the actions of individuals to monitor and control themselves but also each other.

> *La stratégie qui consiste à rendre les sujets individuels "responsables" (mais aussi les sujets collectifs tels que les familles, les associations, etc.) mène, en ce qui concerne les risques sociaux comme la maladie, le chômage, la pauvreté, etc., ainsi que la vie en société, à un transfert de responsabilité dans le domaine de la responsabilité du sujet et transforme ladite responsabilité en un problème de "souci de soi". Cette forme d'individualisation n'apparaît donc pas comme quelque chose qui se trouve hors de l'État. De même, les différences entre l'État et la société civile, la régulation nationale et les instances transnationales ne*

représentent pas le fondement et les limites des pratiques de gouvernement, mais fonctionnent plutôt comme leurs éléments et leurs effets (T. Lemke, 2004, pp. 21–22).

The emphasis on the transfer of social and political responsibilities of the social safety net are thrust upon citizens as "individual problems". The memes discussing labour and remuneration in this section all demonstrate how governmentality instituted in the USA has created a societal shift concerning problems of access to healthcare, housing and employment. The memes creatively represent situations in which, for example, the deregulation of healthcare is seen as an *individual* problem rather than a *social* one.

In another example, Figure 4.19 appears to be an ad for American sex toy company Adam & Eve. After reading the caption, it is evident that the memer was criticizing the company for not paying enough for their brand sponsorships (see amount on cheque, literally: "not enough"). The text in the meme depicts a type of ascent to memer success: "first you get the content, then you get the clout, then you get the dildo company add money". This is a remix of the famous line from Scarface where Tony Montana says, "In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power. Then when you get the power, then you get the women."

The character depicted seems to be a cartoon depiction of Tony Montana with a smoking anime character wearing bunny ears replacing Al Pacino's face. As is evident in this meme, @namaste.at.home.dad's esthetic is complex and multilayered: there is not one corner of the meme that is not populated by data: it combines a known pop culture reference, a psychedelic patterned background and a critique of the neoliberal register of online work. The caption indicates that this meme was printed on hoodies for sale by the memer. As previously mentioned, it is common practice for these memers to produce merchandise that they sell through a link in their Instagram bio on external vendor websites.

Figure 4.19: meme by @namaste.at.home.dad

As is mentioned above, the memer is trying to sell their own merchandise (see Figure 4.19). This example is a clear demonstration of culture jamming and *détournement*. Rentschler and Thrift (2015) define *détournement* as, "the subversion of dominant meaning by 'rerouting spectacular images, environments, ambiances, and events' (Lasn, 1999: 103) in order to '[give] new meaning to the images – a meaning that carries a political message or social commentary' (Pickerel et al., 2002: n.p.; see also Debord, 1967)" (p. 332). In this way, @namaste.at.home.dad is using the marketing visuals from a major company (Adam & Eve) to bring attention to her own brand of merchandise.

Culture jamming is a social practice aiming to counter the bombardment of consumer messages in the mass media (Carducci, 2006). This type of social activism aims to deface, alter or remove messages from advertisers to reduce the "noise" they create. Thus, culture jamming is not an end in and of itself but is rather a tactic employed by certain activists. Memes are an ideal medium to use culture jamming because of their intertextual nature: as in Figure 4.19, one can juxtapose brand iconography while

creating an oppositional meaning that critiques the brand in question. Ironically, this example also shows how one can promote one's own brand while doing this, reinforcing the very consumer culture the memer is critiquing through the promotion of further consumption.

By selling merchandise, these memers create a material *mise-en-scène* of their meme work, which can then be purchased by their followers. Using Instagram to sell their merchandise frames their work as valuable in a neoliberal order which puts importance on the marketing of the self through governmentality. It is at once a demonstration of culture jamming, *détournement* and the reification of the neoliberal capitalist modes of self-marketing.

4.1.6 Anti-imperialist political stance

Donald Trump's election as the President of the United States in 2016 was a pivotal moment for Western society in that it formalized the acceptability of a White, sexist, patriarchal businessman as an acceptable word leader. Keller and Ryan (2018) state,

> The election of Donald Trump gave license to a widespread retrenchment of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia marked by an increase in hate crimes, and white supremacy marches, the implementation of xenophobic and transphobic policies, and a rollback of women's rights (p. 14).

With the increase of these policies and hate crimes, feminists on social media took action in many different ways: the Women's March on Washington was organized through and highly documented on social media. This type of political disdain and defense of women and minority rights is what Keller and Ryan (2018) name "activist feminism," opposing it to the "mediated feminism".

Popular opinions about Millennials is that they are not politically engaged and less concerned with feminism. As Schuster (2013) states, this may be due to a technological rift between generations:

> "[…] many of them choose online activism as their main form of political participation and thus put their political energy into a space that excludes people who are not familiar with this form of organizing. Consequently, the use of online tools contributes to making young feminists 'invisible' – not only to the wider public but also to their political peers of older generations (p. 9).

This assertion also reinforces the argument for a "waveless" metaphor of feminism (see Section 2.6.2): it is not that Millennials are a-political or creating a "new" feminist movement but, rather, their use of certain technologies may render invisible to some the work they are currently doing. In regards to political meme creation and sharing, "the meme constitutes a mode of collectivised and collectivising performance and craft that was experienced as a kind of community via the technological social networks of its platforms" (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015, p. 340).

Where American politics are referenced more blatantly, the perspective is one of general disenchantment and mocking of the neoliberal word order that is gaining more influence in Western countries. Political attitudes associated with Trump's politics such as racism, intolerance of immigrants and patriotism are exposed explicitly and directly, which may be indicative of this political stance. Some memes in the sample reference "revolution," "solidarity" and "activism" (see Figure 4.22), or reference anti-imperialism directly.

As is demonstrated in Figure 4.20, @gangsterpopeye is mocking the intelligence of Trump supporters (see hashtags: "#magaisformorons" and "#communismwillwin"). "MAGA" is the acronym of American President Donald Trump's slogan for his 2016

campaign to "Make America Great Again". This meme mocks the intelligence of MAGA hat wearers by using the combined caps and non-caps font ("bUt HoW") that signifies someone either lacks the intelligence to properly use the CAPS button on a keyboard or also that is so offended that they are exclaiming their indignation by capital letters and the misspelling of the word "racist". The connotation here is that the person who is wearing the hat does not understand that they are being racist, which implies that they are ignorant politically and therefore easily influenced by Trump's politics.

Figure 4.20: meme by @gangsterpopeye

The response "because I fucked your mom" possibly references Your Mom jokes (*Your Mom Jokes*, 2012), popular in the 1990s, presumably the time in which this meme admin grew up. As this meme response is quite an immature critique of Republicans, it demonstrates how the use of slang, intertextuality and coarse language are often used in memes to convey an idea.

Other memes may point to left-wing political values in different ways, namely the presumption concerning what category of people considers itself radical. In another @gangsterpopeye meme, a White man in a leather jacket with a mohawk hairstyle says: "I'm not like all these other people that shamelessly support US imperialism…I'm different. … because I listen to PUNK ROCK!". US imperialism here is most probably mentioned as this meme was posted during the 2019 Venezuelan presidential crisis[32]. The comment captured in the screenshot in Figure 4.21 addresses the conflict, with the "+" sign above his comment indicating that it is part of a larger thread of comments on the subject.

Figure 4.21: meme by @gangsterpopeye

In this example, the memer mocks White "punks" who consider themselves subversive even though their gender and racial privilege still works to uphold systems of societal domination, such as US imperialism. Thus, the meme indicates that regardless of what one's physical attributes intend to demonstrate, if one is not opposed to US imperialism

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[32] The 2019 Venezuelan presidential crisis started concerning the legitimacy of the leadership of the country after the election of Nicolás Maduro. Juan Guaidó replaced Maduro a few weeks after his election, declaring himself the president of Venezuela, what many considered to be a *coup d'état*. This crisis recreated Cold War-esque tensions based on support of Guaidó versus Maduro.

then one's personal politics are no different than those of other pro-imperialists. Furthermore, the Mohawk hairstyle depicted in the meme is a form of cultural appropriation of a hairstyle used by Indigenous people by the punk movement, which was then absorbed into consumerism. In this sense, the meme is also thematically linked to toxic masculinity, intersectionality and cultural appropriation.

Figure 4.22: meme by @males_are_cancelled (reposted by @thebottomtext)

Another more politically oriented meme by @males_are_cancelled intends to show that the rich have no use for social justice, as it does not profit them directly. Through the use of imagery related to conspicuous consumption, the discourse in this meme conveys a lack of empathy towards people who may benefit from "activism and solidarity," indicative of more conservative politics (see Figure 4.22). The character in the meme is presumably a wealthy Asian woman. Considering the fact that the meme admin is Asian American,[33] this may be a cultural critique of rich Asian women who are driven by Western consumerism as opposed to social activism. In this sense, the memer critiques aspects of class and race as interlocking systems of oppression which

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[33] This information is derived from a previous iteration of their Instagram bio that read "Chinese American, they/them […]".

govern Western societies, by highlighting how non-Western women also lack solidarity when is comes to creating strong and cohesive feminist movements.

4.1.7   Self-deprecation and mental health: trauma as lol

As depression and anxiety issues disproportionately affect women (*Gender and Mental Health*, 2002), it is no surprise that this theme emerged from the analysis of memes made by women, non-binary and trans folks. In several instances, self-deprecation is often used in these memes to convey the difficulties these folks face in a cis-heteropatriarchal society. In a study on the "It Gets Better Meme," which was as an anti-suicide campaign for LGBTQ youth, memes were considered

> *performative acts*, applied both for persuasive purposes (preventing gay teen suicide) and for the construction of collective identity and norms. In addition, we treated the concept of memes as a *methodological tool* enabling the mapping of discursive norms at work: determining who was included in and excluded from the discourse, as well as which narratives, conventions, and behaviors were embraced and legitimized (Gal et al., 2016).

As such, memes can be used to create in-group/out-group boundaries which determine who is allowed to create content on a given subject. Furthermore, they may be used in serious ways such as trying to reduce the incidence of suicide of LGBTQ youth by instituting the hopeful message "it gets better". By doing this, memes about real issues that face marginalized communities enable collective identity through self-identification and relatability.

In the case of the Bottom Text meme collective, the tone of memes about mental health is much less "serious" terms, as self-deprecation is the tactic most used in these memes

to demonstrate mental health issues. As such, humour is used not only to communicate that one has a certain mental health issue but also to make the reader identify with their performed self-hatred.

Figure 4.23: meme by @males_are_cancelled

The caption in @males_are_cancelled's meme (see Figure 4.23) reads: "on some real shit i'm sick of trying to love myself as if it's something a 21yo w heavy trauma is capable of, this year im gonna accept that i don't like myself and focus on doing/making stuff lol". In this caption, the memer is indicating the incapability with which they can engage with "Love Yourself" discourses as someone who has experienced trauma. The use of the word "lol[34]" after a sentence is sometimes used to deflect the seriousness of what was previously said. In this way, the "lol" of hating oneself is deemed at once funny but also refers to a tactic of deflection from true self-hatred.

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[34] "Lol" is a contraction of the words "laugh out loud," usually used on social media platforms to indicate laughter at a situation. The word is now sometimes pronounced in abbreviated form phonetically (lul).

In a study of "Love Your Body" discourses, Gill and Elias (2014) found that supposedly body-positive advertisement campaigns by companies such as Dove may in fact reify postfeminist thought about empowerment through consumption. The positive affect employed by these companies elicit an emotional response, what the authors deem "emotional" or "cool" capitalism. This marketing of self-esteem by major lifestyle brands like Dove is part of a larger neoliberal brand culture which banks on the insecurities of women. By selling them products with claims of self-love, "confidence becomes a 'technology of sexiness'" (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 182).

Another meme by @males_are_cancelled states: "of course I despise my body that can't stop me from capitalizing on it!!!". The meme highlights how the commodification of the body drives women to hate their bodies as they are constantly marketed products aimed at improving their self-perception and which reinforce feelings of low self-worth by reinforcing unattainable stereotypes. Or conversely, these discourses "rely upon and reinforce the cultural intelligibility of the female body as inherently 'difficult to love'" (Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 184). One comment on this post reads: "It's the least capitalism can do in return for convincing us our bodies aren't marketable and thus undesirable...? Damn it, I can't even convince myself 😅". This sort of nihilism about the commoditization of everything in life is indicative of an economic system that objectifies the female body. Gill and Elias (2014) suggest,

> "[…] this move to the arena of subjectivity needs to be understood vis-à-vis a new historical articulation of power – knowledge in Western societies, which highlights the interplay between neoliberal and postfeminist governmentality, emotional capitalism and the labour of self-confidence" (p. 185).

The "labour of self-confidence" in Figure 4.23 is framed as something unproductive, presenting it in opposition to "making stuff" and thus, being productive while positing emotional labour and something less necessary than material labour. Thus, here the

memer is submitting to the pressures of capitalism (to produce things), demonstrating an internalization of the postfeminist logic behind self-love discourses and accumulation of capital at the same time.

The example in Figure 4.24, is a meme by @lilperc666 which was reposted by the @thebottomtext account. The meme features the popular imagery of Pokémon to convey the joy one who experiences depression can feel on a good day. The expression "you and all your depressed friends" may imply that people who suffer from mental health issues may tend to be friends with others who experience similar struggles. By using the rejoicing Pokémon characters, the memer depicts how a momentary "wave of serotonin" may feel for a depressed person. This wholesome yet dark meme also points to the pervasiveness of depression: "you and all your depressed friends" could either signify that all the person's friends are depressed or that they have a subsection of friends who suffer from depression. The discussion of mental health is pervasive and normalized in this larger meme community on Instagram. Furthermore, self-deprecating humour is often used on social media to create collective identity (Ask & Abidin, 2018) and in this case, strengthen bonds in the memetic counterpublic by politicizing the personal experience of mental health issues, making it a public issue that fosters solidarity amongst the members of the meme collective.

At the same time, this meme communicates a particular moment in @thebottomtext account's history, referencing the first of their meme shows[35] in the caption. To get "zucked" means to get blocked from the Instagram platform (*Urban Dictionary*, 2016). The word is a portmanteau of "Zuckerberg", the last name of the founder of Facebook (Instagram's parent-company) and the word "fucked". Users may get blocked or shadow-banned on Instagram if they post certain types of content deemed offensive, including nudity, female nipples, suicidal ideation and violence. The "report" function

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[35] Meme shows are gatherings organized by memers, where they discuss their memes, art and sell merchandise. These usually take place at bars or other venues.

of the app allows users to flag another's content if they deem it inappropriate. Getting shadow-banned is when a user is banned from a social media platform or part of a platform (i.e. a forum) in a way that they are not made aware of it ('Urban Dictionary', 2007).

Figure 4.24: repost of @lilperc666 by @thebottomtext

The Instagram platform's "Community Guidelines" are some of the strictest on any social media platform. Olszanowski (2014) describes Instagram's content policies[36] as "draconian", most notably in the case of female nudity:

> The language used in Instagram's policies is particularly focused on nudity and justifies an immediate removal of user accounts without warning and without any way to archive the images, the "likes," and the comments. The ban against certain hashtags comes with similar consequences. Censorship,

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[36] Instagram's Community Guidelines state: "We know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of reasons, we don't allow nudity on Instagram. This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude buttocks. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too"

therefore, has a consequential role in the way that particular subaltern communities are built and maintained on Instagram (p. 85).

Blocking users from the platform does indeed have consequences: once someone has built a following and gets their account blocked, they must start anew, as is indicated in the caption to Figure 4.24 ("please follow their new account @lilperc666). When this happens, memers will share the new account handle to help the de-platformed user get back their following. In this way, the meme community acts as a counterpublic in times when users need support against the practices, policies and affordances of the platform.

Figure 4.25: meme by @djinn_kazama

Mental health is treated similarly to sexual assault (see Section 4.1.1) in these memes, demonstrating the normalization and mundaneness of trauma. In Figure 4.25, a depressive statement is superimposed on the distorted image of a woman: "Being alive is so cringey lol". In the background is the 16th century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch's painting "The Garden of Earthly Delights". The use of this reference is a trace (Bonenfant, 2014) that may indicate that the memer has an astute knowledge of art

history. In this case, the text may indicate a certain suicidality masked as a disenchantment with earthly delights.

The caption further amplifies the fatalistic message: "u expect me to keep doing this cringey shit #cringe #death #heterosexuality". The use of hashtags here is ironic – it would be doubtful that the memer was trying to direct users to their post through the hashtag "heterosexuality" – but may be indicative of the difficulty of being a heterosexual person with feminist politics (i.e. difficulty in maintaining relationships with men when they are critical of patriarchy).

Another similar example by @gayvapeshark (see Figure 4.26) denotes a Nietzschean nihilism towards being alive, saying "none of us consented to being alive in the first place". The caption, which states, "Tag a dumbass who enjoys their life" assume that people who enjoy being alive lack intelligence. This self-deprecative nihilism may appear as suicidality discourse but, I posit, this type of meme is rather about depression and the disenchantment with neoliberal capitalist society, as "enjoying one's life" in a socially normative fashion is something that is frowned upon by the memer (see caption in Figure 4.14: "Destroy your body as a revolutionary act bro").

In this sense, self-deprecation and discussing mental health through memes may be read as a collective coping mechanism for those who experience these issues. By gleaning likes (the meme in Figure 4.26 has close to 10,000 likes) from followers, it may reinforce an identification with the discursive realities stemming from these depression memes. Through this self-identification, the memers create relatability by opposing themselves to the positive neoliberal self-branding that is present on social media.

Figure 4.26: meme by @gayvapeshark

In their study of the Facebook meme page "Student Problems," Ask and Abidin (2018) found discursive themes of students being overwhelmed, stressed and ashamed; using self deprecating humour, flexibility and seriousness; and demonstrating procrastination, control and self-blame. They state,

> that competitive onedownmanship has arisen in opposition to the normative attention economy of self-celebratory social media posts, and emerges as an anti-thesis to prestige on social media. It is an alternative meme ecology hinged upon self-debasement, and an inverted hierarchy of social capital where students who feel they are unable to succeed in higher education can instead acquire a different form of social status by competitive memeing (Ask & Abidin, 2018, p. 845).

While the present study does not focus on students per se, the rejection of normative self-comparison and perfectionism on social media is also true of the memes in the Bottom Text collective, as they contain subject matter that demonstrate radical vulnerability about their mental health and self-conception. Thus, "self-debasement"

has become a trend in this meme counterpublic which exaggerates themes of despair and lack of self-confidence.

From the discussion above, we may claim that self-deprecating memes and memes about mental health enable the creation of a counterpublic, as they assemble folks who find each other in their resemblances. As Nancy Fraser states, counterpublics serve as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" which aid in serving as units to circulate subversive meanings at a wider public (Fraser, 1990). In this case, The Bottom Text meme collective uses discursive themes relating to intersectional feminism to react to the postfeminist framework of neoliberal society. The memes that contain the discursive theme of mental health are usually produced with a certain public in mind: those who also suffer from mental health issues. In this way, the affordances of the platform (i.e. the "Like" function) contribute to the creation of these publics, through the identification with, or appreciation of the content being produced.

4.2   Summary of Findings

The starting points of the analysis were to analyze (1) how feminist meme creation contributes to online activism, and (2) how the practice of sharing feminist discourse in memes create subaltern counterpublics in response to a White supremacist capitalist cishetero-patriarchal society. As an answer to the first question directly, creating memes which aim to undo dominant conceptions of multiple interlocking systems of oppression demonstrates a firm allegiance to intersectional feminism. While the memers use an existing medium, the meme, as a vehicle for their feminist and critical discourse, the affordances of the Instagram platform (i.e. captions, hashtags, image and text) allow them to reach a level of derisive irony that at times seems that cathartic. In sum, this activism is cloaked in irony, which allows the memers to communicate their

critical discourse through self-deprecative humour, mocking, *détournement* and culture jamming (Day, 2011).

The prevalence of the discursive theme of consent and sexual assault was an unexpected though notably unsurprising finding. The banal nature of the discussion surrounding sexual assault in the memes is striking in that it is framed almost as a rite of passage, an inevitable eventuality in the life course of women, trans and nonbinary folks. The everyday nature of microaggressions is also highlighted, showing the ways in which a person's lived experience is affected by living in a Western patriarchal society where men are not taught consent and where male violence against women, racialized minorities and sexual minorities remains a major political and social issue.

The second research question has, in part, been answered through the mere existence of the Bottom Text meme collective. The members of this collective (and of the feminist meme community on Instagram at large) use humoristic cues that identify a commitment to intersectional feminism. By finding each other through the platform, the memers create a parallel public of feminist derisive meme content on the Instagram platform. Through the everyday cultural practice of creating memes, they contribute to what has been called a larger movement towards "everyday feminist activism," which focuses on the lived experiences of folks who deal with sexism as part of their daily lives.

In the case of The Bottom Text meme collective, this research supports Dias da Silva and Garcia's (2012) assertion that

> Humour therefore plays a role in twenty-first century political discussion, rather than merely diverting the attention of citizens from such matters. In this sense, satirical remixing may be regarded as a new form of participation, especially as cause-oriented political action, and contribute

to the formation of counterpublics, bringing new vitality to democratic debate (p. 109).

As such, I would argue that the discursive themes found are cause-oriented activism, as the themes identified suggest, that resembles many characteristics of "emergent feminism" and "fourth wave feminism". This type of feminist talkback is situated in a contemporary media sphere, in a society increasingly based on neoliberal values and in post-feminist discourse. In this sense, I argue that these feminist intersectional memes are in fact a reaction against neoliberal post-feminism that not only considers gender equality as something that has been achieved, but that considers the primacy of the individual through consumer culture such as "self-care".

The issue of paid labour for memers on Instagram is particularly indicative of this neoliberal tendency: even though these memers consider themselves to be anti-capitalist and "woke,"[37] they still participate in external sponsorships for multinational companies such as Unbound Babes, sell their own products through their profiles and quite directly ask for money from their followers. This type of engagement with consumer goods through the production of "original" meme content suggests a tension between creativity and commerciality of the platform, echoing the insecurities produced by the current precarious job market in the United States.

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[37] The term "woke" is derived from the term "awake" in African American Vernacular English. The term was popularized on Black Twitter (*Stay Woke*, 2017) and has since permeated Internet culture at large. Merriam Webster defines the term as "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" ('Definition of Woke', n.d.).

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to find out how feminist meme creation on Instagram contribute to online feminist activism and how the practice of sharing feminist discourse in memes creates subaltern counterpublics in response to a White supremacist capitalist [cishetero]patriarchy. From existing literature on memes and online feminist activism, I have gleaned that intersectional feminist meme creation is indicative of a reaction to a perceived postfeminist society, that of the United States. It is necessary, of course, to situate these findings geographically, as the discursive strategies used in feminist memes elsewhere may be entirely different. As such, memers recognize in each other the types of discourse that align with their own values, allowing them to connect through the Instagram platform to form counterpublics. DeCook (2018) states, "it is not the memes that make the community, but rather the community that makes the memes – meaning that the community themselves use memes as signifiers to strengthen their own sense of an 'in-group' and collective identity (p. 5). Thus, the cultural and social aspects of meme creation are indispensable to theorizing the meme and the activism that surrounds it. In this way, meme collectives may create strong counterpublics for feminist activism through the discourse shared through networked ties.

During the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the themes found in the memes were similar in nature to those presented by Kira Cochrane in her 2013 book *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism*: rape culture, online activism, humour, intersectionality and inclusion. While I prefer to adhere to a "waveless" metaphor of feminism (Crossley, 2017), I do think that Cochrane's reflections on how feminist focus has shifted since the mid-2000s are very important for critical

scholarship on online feminist activism. Furthermore, theorizations of the "Fourth Wave" of feminism as defined by online activism are largely unconvincing, as they highlight the online/offline dichotomy of sociality, putting too much emphasis on the Internet as an emancipatory technology.

> The fourth wave of feminist engagement has been critiqued by those who argue that increased usage of the Internet and new digital media affordances such as social media are not enough to determine a new era of political activism. Nonetheless, it is increasingly evident that the Internet has enabled the creation of a global community of feminists who are challenging misogyny and sexism in new and innovative ways (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018a, p. 213).

While it is true that feminist memers do challenge pervasive misogyny and sexism in innovative ways, I argue that this type of feminist activism is not so different from previous iterations, as the fundamental feminist principles that are agreed upon (intersectionality, for example) are not novel. This also echoes the principles of DS that consider the online/offline dichotomy of sociality as stale: the mere existence of Internet in this type of activism does not constitute a new "wave" of feminism *per se*.

Furthermore, Cochrane's work on the Fourth Wave appeared before the #MeToo campaign (which has also been translated as #MoiAussi in Quebec and #BalanceTonPorc in France), which saw widespread denunciations of sexual assault in the media. I would argue that #MeToo and the media attention surrounding sexual assault and the normalization the topic of conversation has profoundly shaped feminist meme discourse. Creating memes about assault and trauma has become so common that it was the most prevalent theme that came up during my meme analysis. Whether it be by talking about one's own trauma related to assault, expressing solidarity with sexual assault survivors through irony or mocking the ways in which men continue to perpetuate behaviours which lead to microaggressions, these memers highlight the

pervasive and problematic nature of rape culture in a way that is decidedly post-#MeToo.

In this study, feminist meme-making was found to be a reaction to post-feminism. By mocking and rejecting values of self-care, individualist, and consumerist feminism, these memers enact a distinctively anti-postfeminist discourse. Such discourse aids in assembling of actors which have similar values, thus forming this feminist counterpublic. Through their indignancy towards neoliberal politics and post-feminism, these memers subvert common meme culture. Angela McRobbie (2004) highlights this process of depoliticization caused by the double entanglement of feminism as "normal" and the generalized hatred toward the movement as the defining characteristics of postfeminism.

Coincidentally or not, the ironic feminist activism of the memers takes place on a platform made and hosted by a corporation that is for-profit. Most social media influencers use Instagram to make money (probably considering it one of their main income sources) through sponsored brand deals and through promotion of their own projects. These memers are not an exception to this, as meme creation aims to share certain discourses with like-minded people, but ultimately the meme admins also seek remuneration through the affordances of the platform. While there is nothing inherently post-feminist about this, we can still call into question the anti-capitalist and left-wing tendencies of such feminist action.

Considering the multiple elements that memes are made up of (image, data, caption), I was not able to also analyze the comments on each post. For further research on Instagram memes, it would be an element of the platform that could use more attention, as the interactions in the comments on meme posts have a distinct set of social codes than other platforms (for example, there are no "downvotes" as on Reddit, no emoji

reactions as on Facebook). One may think that this would create a more "positive" meme community, but this is not necessarily the case: memers often find themselves reacting to hate in the comments to their memes. Considering this, further research should be done on the social codes that platform affordances create in comments sections.

Furthermore, future scholarship on memes in general could focus on the online/offline practices of memers. While the online/offline dichotomy that characterized early Internet Studies scholarship is largely considered as no longer of interest as digital technologies have permeated every aspect of our lives, there are aspects of the extra-platform practices of people who create memes. For example, Adult Swim[38], which streams several Internet-related shows on their website, now host a show where The Bottom Text meme collective create memes live on air once per week. Adult Swim is a well-established media company, adding to the legitimizing aspects of meme creation as an extension of everyday sociality and culture. From watching this show, I have gathered that there is a seamlessness between the online and offline identities of these meme creators, which Lawrence and Ringrose's (2018a) assertion that within feminist activism, there is a "transcendence of offline and online boundaries" (p. 216)

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[38] Adult Swim is the "adult" programming block of The Cartoon Network, an American cable-TV network. The Adult Swim channel has its own streaming website that can be viewed live online

ANNEX A

MEME ACCOUNTS SAMPLED

The following accounts are explicitly included in The Bottom Text meme collective[39].

@thebottomtext: 46.5 K followers

Profile bio:

Bottom Text
Bottom Text is on @adultswimdotcom
Wednesdays @ 10pm
@djinn_kazama
@gayvapeshark
@namaste.at.home.dad
@gangsterpopeye
www.adultswim.com/videos/bottom-text

@djinn_kazama: 36.1 K followers

Profile bio:
"Lewis Vuitton Khan
just a dumbass w a iphone/hacked at 4 million followers 💀
Meme creator on @thebottomtext on @adultswimdotcom Wednesday's at 10pm EST
www.adultswim.com/videos/bottom-text"

@gayvapeshark: 122 K followers

Profile bio: " 🌈 👉 🦈
Dildo Tester @unboundbabes
Meme Commentator @adultswimdotcom
🏆"[The]most powerful troll on Instagram" -VICE
Growing 🌱
gayvapeshark.threadless.com

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[39] Number of Instagram followers as of July 20th, 2019.

@namaste.at.home.dad: 53.8 K followers

Profile bio:
"saltina marie
I started this trend and everyone thinks I'm the best at it also I'm very humble and kind
DM to send me money (wear my memes; purchase clothing below)
memeconn.bigcartel.com"

@males_are_cancelled: 49.9 K followers

Profile bio: "cindie xin
malesarecancelled.bigcartel.com"

@gangsterpopeye: 47.9 K followers

Profile bio:

"Devil Gangster Popeye
Minister of Digital Agitprop
T-Shirt Designer
all oc, of course
Dm for inquiries
Poetry - @poetpopeye
My venmo is @Raye-Nova
My clothing line -
www.thehyv.shop/gp"

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