Research Article

Digital Communities as Online 'Gardens' for Memes: Metamorphic Narratives of Two Filipino 'Memeifiers' as Cultural Pollinators

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Abstract.
The increasingly ubiquitous digital communities have become dynamic online social hubs for netizens to proliferate internet memes. While there have been an abundance of studies of memes, a dearth of investigations have examined how an internet user becomes an active producer of memes. Hence, we explored the narratives of two Filipino netizens, whom we call "memeifiers," as we identified them as constant generators of memes. Based on the semi-structured interview data and analysis of their memes, we metaphorically posit that digital communities can be likened to online *gardens* where *butterflies* (memeifiers) dynamically engage in producing and pollinating memes. Using narrative configuration, we labelled their experiences into metamorphic narratives with three stages: (1) the *cocoon stage*, in which meme literacy is formed through active memes consumption; (2) the *metamorphosis stage*, in which meme-literate netizens vigorously generate memes then metamorphose into memeifiers; and finally, (3) the *pollination stage*, when memeifiers, akin to butterflies, continuously become cultural pollinators as they spread cultural artifacts through memes in various online communities. With these findings, we lay down some recommendations for future meme studies, such as that the metamorphic narrative of memeifiers be investigated in other geographical contexts since a memeifier's story may vary due to cultural differences. Moreover, we recommend that the scope of participants be broadened, employing similar or other qualitative research designs and even quantitative perspectives to further scrutinize the metamorphosis of memeifiers and their roles as cultural pollinators.

Keywords: digital communities, memes, narrative study, online communities

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1. Introduction

With a relatively new medium for expression and creativity, digital media formed a concept that is forever synonymous with internet culture – memes [1]. Since the evolutionary biologist named Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in his book, *The Selfish Gene* where he described memes as something that are similar to our genes that could be passed on from person to person, and have the ability to evolve and change into different things [2]. Memes can be described as something that constantly

adds upon itself, morphing into something else the more the public gets involved, with them adding their own beliefs and ideas to it [3].

The creation of memes have become very accessible to the mainstream with the use of different applications but creating memes have started to have the need for the understanding of memes which has been coined as meme literacy [4]. According to [4] meme literacy is the understanding of memes; some memes are understood by almost everyone and other memes need specific knowledge to understand the meme subculture. As for the reason people create memes, according to [5], the willingness of a person to create a meme can be deduced from our desire to be liked and to relate. We imitate certain things that we are exposed to [6]. Our ability to imitate results in the "social glue" that allows us to be successful social animals with empathy.

Due to the unprecedented rise of online memes, we propose to use the term "memeifier" to pertain to a netizen who does not have only meme literacy, but engage as well in meme-generation, producing memes and regularly posts them in a public platform. These memeifiers are people who put in creative and physical effort in formulating, and editing a meme.

While the scholarship of memes is ever-expanding, there is still a lack of studies that zeroed in on the narratives of memefier. Hence, the process through which one becomes a memeifier has yet to be explored. Therefore, we utilized narrative case study to have a profound examination of the memefiers' narratives since a narrative case study is used to understand the in-depth social processes, and to investigate the phenomena in its environmental context [7].

Another gap that this research seeks to fill in is the dearth of studies about memes in the Philippine context. Past studies on this topic like [8] aimed to categorise Filipino memes with the characteristics of humor signifiers, format, and propaganda. These studies focused on the experience of the people who consume these memes and how they impact them politically. On the contrary, this study aims to direct its efforts into understanding the memeifiers.

2. Methodology

As mentioned, we used narrative case study design as they would like to study the experience of memeifiers and given that case study is an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables [9]. The data source was from two Filipino memeifiers aged 17. These two memeifiers were selected through a mix

of convenience sampling and snowball sampling as one of us is acquainted already with one of them and the other was referred to us by him. The two memefiers were identified as such with the use of the criteria we set: (1) they must be Filipino and (2) they must be producing memes at least twice a month in an online forum. When asked as to how many memes so far they have created and shared in online forums, both gave an estimate of 100. After securing parental consent and the participants' assent, we proceeded with the interview. We also asked them to give us their sample memes for us to sharpen our analysis. The interview data was transcribed and analyzed through thematic coding. Moreover, we used a final validation informed by Colaizzi's method of using the participants to validate the description provided by the researchers based on their analysis of the themes and experience [10].

3. Results and Discussion

The data gleaned from the two memeifiers, Mond and Maggie (fictitious names were used all throughout), could be arranged into a metamorphic narrative with three crucial stages. First is the **cocoon stage** in which a person gathers and sharpens their meme literacy. Second is the **metamorphosis stage**, the stage in which meme literate netizens begin to use their meme literacy to start creating and spreading memes. The last is the **pollination stage**, the stage in which a netizen moves and spreads cultural artifacts akin to butterflies.

The first memefier, Mond, is a young male student. He started consuming a lot of memes around the year 2016 up until 2017. This serves as his cocoon stage, which means at this period of time he was still gathering enough knowledge before he started to create memes. During this period, he started watching Reddit comment videos on YouTube and interacting with the Reddit platform. For his metamorphosis stage, he created a Reddit account in 2018 to start posting memes and he continued to do so for a few years. He eventually quit Reddit and jumped to different Discord servers. Discord is a voice, video, and text communication service that are used by over a hundred million people (Discord, n.d.). From this point forward is his pollination stage as he starts jumping from server to server while spreading memes. At present, he believes he will continue to create memes as it is not time consuming for him and serves as a fun pastime.

The second case, Maggie, is a young female student. She has always been exposed to memes through the social media site, Facebook. During her cocoon stage, she started to be more exposed to fandom communities and their memes which allowed

her to build more knowledge on certain topics to create memes with. Fandoms are communities that take entertainment and turn them into a pleasurable and signifying popular culture, they are typically populated by romance novels, pop music, comics, and Hollywood mass-appeal stars [11]. The memes from these fandoms inspired her and along with her love of humor, led her to start creating memes of her own. Her metamorphosis started in 2017, where she joined the Hamilton fandom, a musical play that follows Alexander Hamilton set to a hip-hop soundtrack (IMDB, n.d.), and started becoming a memeifier of that community. She starts to enter her pollination stage and spreads memes by learning and joining different fan communities about the things she fixates on.

$$x+y=z$$

Figure 1: A Meme by First Interviewee.

Figure 1 is an example of a meme the Mond has generated. This meme uses a screenshot from the Dragon Ball franchise, which first started as a comic for Weekly Shonen Jump in the year 1984 in Japan and quickly branched to different pieces of media [12]. Dragon Ball is a popular piece of media because of its ability to transcend

People: Math won't benefit you in life.

Math teachers:

breath in

boi
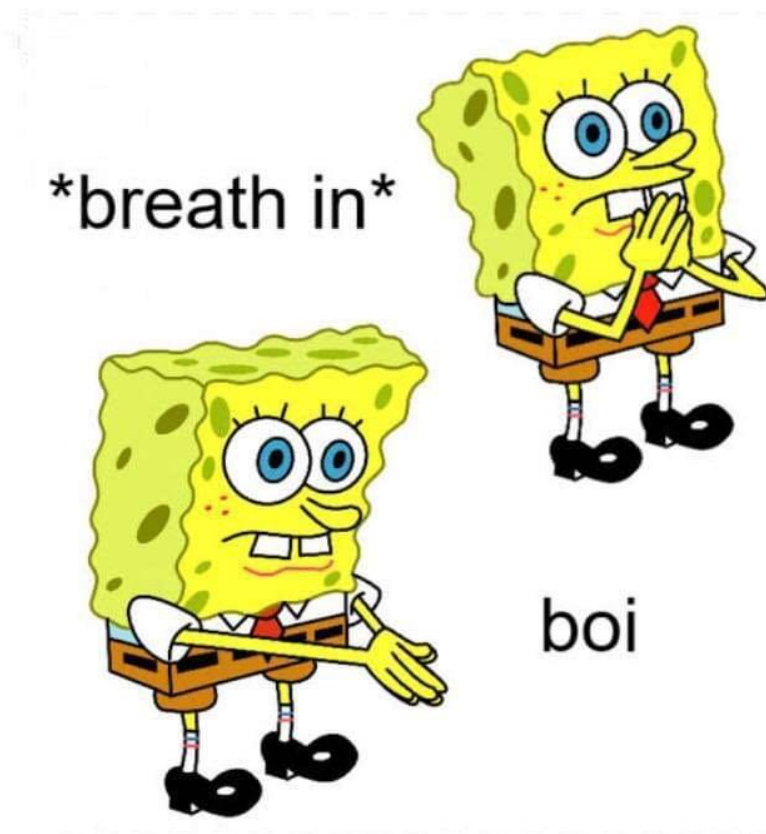
Figure 2: A Meme by the Second Interviewee.

generational boundaries [13]. This particular screen shot comes from the third instalment in the mainline series, Dragon Ball Super. His meme uses the screenshot to convey having a hard time understanding Mathematics because to him it is, as Vegeta puts it, "the language of the gods". This meme, in particular, is an example of a cultural artifact.

The second Figure is a meme that features the popular cartoon character, SpongeBob Squarepants, who is looking exasperated as they take a deep breath and prepare to explain something. The piece of culture spread by this meme is the titular character of SpongBob Squarepants, SpongeBob has been called a cultural wave because of its

ability to transcend generations, create merchandise, and strong multimedia marketing [14]. In addition to making use of SpongeBob, it also jokes about Mathematics and its usefulness in day-to-day life.

These memes produced by Maggie and Mond, along with their other memes that feature other items in pop culture such as Filthy Frank, Genshin Impact, Takodachi, Thanos, and Eminem are a proof of how they become potent cultural pollinators across many digital communities and platforms, effectively disseminating a myriad of cultural artifacts.

Moreover, the results of both interviewees' cocoon stage lend credence to [4] claim of meme literacy as both participants seem to focus more on consuming and gaining a base knowledge of memes before they start creating. For Mond, it was his exposure to memes from Reddit comment videos and Maggie experienced memes by being exposed to them on Facebook before experiencing more of it within fandom communities. They both experience a similar metamorphosis stage that has both of them enter a community in some form as Mond signs up and creates a Reddit account to start posting memes at the Reddit communities while Maggie becomes a part of the Hamilton fandom and becomes a memeifier for that community. According to [5], people create memes from their desire to relate and be liked. Both interviewees already experienced the communities that they will eventually come to join which come from a desire to relate and make people laugh similar to [5] previous study and in this stage we can also see another effect of being exposed to memes as humans imitate certain things that they are exposed to [6] Their pollination stages are similar to each other as they start to jump from different communities. Mond chooses to abandon posting memes at Reddit in favour of Discord servers and even choosing to create his own servers. He believes that he will continue to create memes because it is fun and does not take him much time. Likewise, Maggie does not abandon sharing within different fandoms but doubles down on it as she starts to move between different fandoms, learning about their communities and making memes on the things she loves as long as she can.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the two cases, Mond and Maggie, show a lot of similarities in how they became memeifiers. Evaluating the experiences they shared, we can argue that becoming a memeifier involves a process with three stages: the cocoon, metamorphosis, and pollination stages. These memeifiers' narratives are proof that digital communities such as Reddit and Discord continuously serve as a fertile online garden where *butterflies,*

the memeifiers, thrive and engage dynamically in meme generation and proliferation as they become potent cultural pollinators, effectively spreading and preserving digital cultural artifacts. For further meme research, we recommend increasing the scope and employing similar or other qualitative and quantitative methodologies. We recommend that the narratives of memeifiers be investigated in other geographical contexts such as in other Asian or Western settings since a memeifier's story may vary due to inevitable cultural differences.

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