Memes as Visual Tools for Precise Message Conveying

A Potential in the Future of Online Communication Development

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this article is to explore publications related to Memes, their uses and functions in modern society, and based on this discuss the potential to improve written, online communication by the adding of Meme-based visual tools for more precise message conveying. Articles were gathered mostly from the Scopus database, with additions from Google Scholar. Width in article topics was prioritized before depth in singular topics. When information on specific Memes in articles was found lacking, knowyourmeme.com was used as a reliable main source of additional information. Personal experience comes from several years of presence on relevant online forums. Based on found observations from articles and studies, potential problems and opportunities were located and assessed accordingly. A confirmed feasibility based on these finding was presented.

KEYWORDS: Memes, Online Communication, Visual Tools, TPD4505.

1. Introduction

Online Communication (OC) has been under constant, rapid development since the dawn of the internet, and implemented remarkably fast in parts of modern society. During most of their entire existence, telecommunication portals for written messages (e-mail, instant message services, chat rooms, discussion threads, SMS, even Morse and telegrams) have relied mostly on the interpretation of the other participants' choice of words in written form. In its basic function, written OC is simply a more time- and effort-saving version of the now much less used paper letter. It also provides a relieving alternative to the availability-requiring telephone call (which was itself a paradigm shift away from telegraph and letters). But even though written OC is the currently dominating mode, visual communication was quickly applied where suitable: Live picture and sound streaming provided access to synthesized face-to-face communication, which can now be viewed as the go-to option when formal conversations, meetings, and teleconferences are had.

As internet culture developed through OC, the first online *Memes* appeared. The term 'Meme' was introduced by Richard Dawkins [1][2], and it is to culture what genes are to biology; in simple terms, a piece of information that replicates and evolves according to environment, yet maintains a core principle. If a random person was asked what a 'Meme' is, answers are likely to be quite different, depending on who is asked. If we were to ask most people who are over a

certain age or do not frequent online, social networks, 'Meme' might be associated with the pantomime; the stereotypical, French street performer who pretends to be in contact with invisible objects. Indeed, the word 'Mime' is fundamentally the same in Norwegian, English, French, German (Pantomime), Spanish (Mimo), Lithuanian (Mimika), and most European languages; the core principle is replication, recreation, or synthesis of something else. If we would ask those who work with or study biology or behavior patterns, they might actually assume we refer to Dawkins cultural version of the gene; Meme as a behavioral term. But to anyone who regularly visit web based forums like Reddit, 4Chan, Tumblr, the term 'Meme' would possibly be explained using something like 'a picture template for telling jokes.' It is no surprise that something which is mostly used to share humorous content or personal stories has its greatest field of play in such social, online arenas.

This paper is concerned not with these social, cultural memes, but rather the latter, digital version in popular, online culture, used to describe the phenomenon of popular pictures and figures that flourish on social web pages; often referred to as Online Memes. A widely covering description of the term Meme, is provided by Saike He et al.: "In Online Social Networks, [a meme] can be free text, trending catchphrase, or micro media such as photo, video, audio clip, or animated gif (Graphics Interface Format)[2]." Based on this definition, both written and visual content can be a Meme. E.g. the famous phrase "I have a Dream" and a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King can both function as individual Memes related to social inequality. An example of a famous text-based Meme is the WWII poster from the British Ministry of Information, where the phrase "Keep Calm

and Carry on" has been reworked into a new Meme template: "Keep calm and (…)" [3]. A visual example is the popular "Upopular Opinion Puffin" Meme (Fig. 7), where the picture of a walking puffin bird serves as a picture template for expressing an honest but potentially unwelcome opinion.

Because this paper focuses on how text-based OC can be improved by visual tools, it useful to simplify the term Meme by temporarily excluding the written component (free text and catchphrases) and focusing solely on the visual component (micro media). Therefore, I propose to define a Meme as: *a picture or figure functioning as a template or situational background, to which a specific and related, written content is added.* The word 'content' is meant to define the new material that a user has added to the Meme, e.g. a personal story or confession. This explains the relation to Dawkins' version, where the information in question is under constant evolvement, spreads through exposure, while maintaining its visual core.

Figure 1: British WWII poster. Figure 2: A repurposed version. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

The basic functionality of a Meme is to convey a specific emotional, contextual message. J. L. Zittrain attempts to describe

the potential of a Meme as a conveyor of information [4]: "A meme at its best exposes a truth about something, and in its versatility allows that truth to be captured and applied in new situations." However, Memes are in comparison rarely used in communication between low numbers of participants (such as in instant messaging and e-mail). The main purpose of this paper is to use scientific publications directly or indirectly related to Memes, to explore their uses and functions in modern society and, based on the findings, discuss how Memes could be used as a more precise, visual communication tool than existing solutions in OC.

Scientific articles from the database Scopus related to the search term "Memes" were screened for relevance: titles, abstracts, and contents were screened in sequence. Some articles were found on Google Scholar when Scopus could only supply abstracts. Core findings from each article were systematized in a bullet point list; the list is not included in this paper for the sake of article length. The systemized list of findings was then used to determine the most relevant topics for this paper, which were: Memes used in critique expression, Memes related to movements, and use of Memes in popular online culture. Findings were compared to and supplemented by personal experience has been gathered through years of activity on Meme based, social web forums, such as Imgur, Reddit, 4chan, 9gag, and social network sites and services with instant messaging, such as Facebook, MSN, and Skype. Pictures of Memes were mostly located from knowyourmeme.com, as I deem this to be a reliable source of background information and examples.
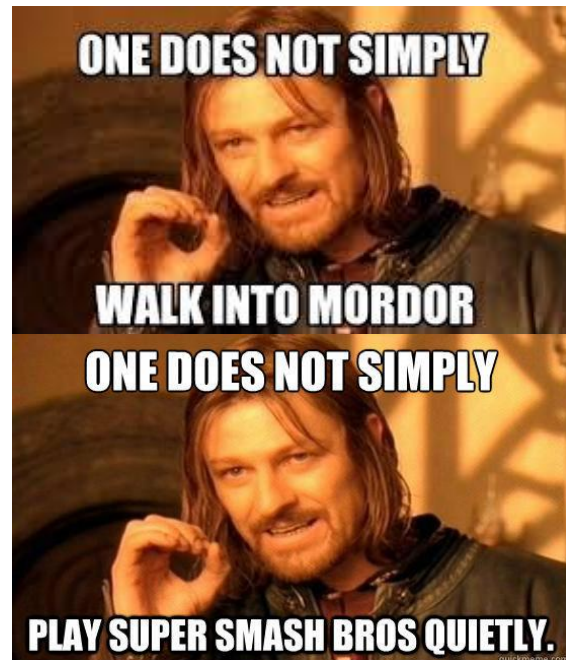

Figure 3: The original line and picture taken from the movie The Lord of The Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Figure 4: Repurposed Meme for expressing the sometimes unforeseen challenge of a trivial action. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

2. The Use of Internet Memes

Simple, visual tools made their way into parts of written communication long before live video streaming became accessible for the public domain; the emoticons, the most classic of which is the *smiley*, consisting of a colon and an end parenthesis: *:)* The very first use of this emoticon in OC was supposedly to mark thread posts containing jokes [5][6]. This might have been the first attempt at making a composite of explicit words and a symbol representing a tacit message, namely that the emotion *behind* the message was one of humor [7]. The use and function was simple, yet it opted for expanding communication on several dimensions, as well as greatly easing the interpretation of otherwise easily misunderstood messages. In their study of silence in text-based communication (i.e. complete and deliberate lack of both visual and written feedback) Zembylas and

Vrasidas found that even not replying can be interpreted to have a meaning, but also that this interpretation is highly subjective [8]. Emoticons appear to serve the exact same function as Memes [7], but personal experience suggests that Memes allow for a much more precise message conveying. A similar result was found by Park et al. when comparing text-based, graphical, and animated emoticons [7].

Internet Memes are perhaps normally thought to be limited to social network sites where users create and upload material related to certain topics, all the while contributing to the Meme's evolution and potentially expanding its areas of use: Completely new material is viewed by other users and given votes of approval. This increases the popularity of the material, and can potentially lead to a mass usage of the core principles in the material, thus giving birth to a new Meme. The new Meme can (and will) then be used for other purposes, all influenced by whatever the public finds most fitting, much in line with Zittrani's previously mentioned statement [4]. Zittrain goes on to tell the descriptive, cautionary tale of how Reddit users actively started to give a specific Meme associations to racism after the retailer brand Hot Topic decided to use that praticular Meme on their products.

The change of utilization appears to have been more widely researched in scientific literature; the 'read-vote-rewrite' idea behind internet Memes allow for rapid expansion into areas where anonymous creators can turn the Memes into tools of radical idea sharing, confession, expressing critique towards government, social norms and ideas, politics, and society in general [1][9][10][11]. Multiple examples can be found of both humoristic Memes being used to convey serious topics, and Memes originally reserved for e.g. political expression, being used to ridicule its

own idea. In the world of Online Memes, it would appear that Memes are almost consistently and actively turned against its original motive (see Fig. 1 and 2): a hypothetical example would be that in the rapidly changing world of Memes, a picture of Davinci's Vitruvian Man can be a Meme for the excellence of the human body in one day, while being used to tell stories of failing bodily functions in the next.
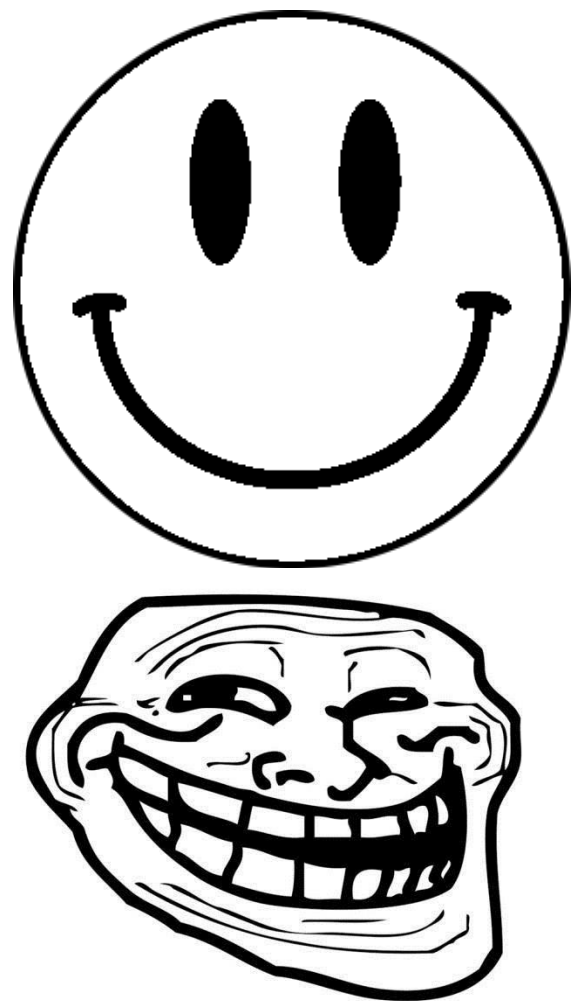

Figure 5: The Common Smiley. Source: www.spontaneoussmiley.com.
Figure 6: The Trollface Meme is similar to the Smiley in shape and basic expression (smiling), but contains a teasing component meant to provoke. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

2.1 Critique Expression

J. Bratich [10] stated that a joke needs an objective spectator in addition to the joke's victim and presenter. Perhaps the most famous protestor movement connected to a group of Memes was the Occupy Wall Street movement, where participants would use a picture of a ballerina on top of the Wall Street Bull as their original template for posting comments and opinions related to a protest on social and economic injustice. However, in an open, online society where users can submit Memes that express an opinion or experience that could have actual consequences for the creator, critique of government and sharing of unpopular opinions, is likely to be minimal. J. R. Viskery suggested that "anonymity allows users to appropriate and repurpose humorous image-based memes in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce hegemonic culture" [9]. This has become a very common practice in China; a society with high degree of government censorship and consequential punishment, political dissent, and relatively high consumer access to online communities [12]. Xiao Mina shares stories about how anonymity is paramount to the safety of key figures that express opposition against the Chinese Government. What I believe is more interesting, is how Mina suggests that anonymity is at the same time not necessary for common users because "[oppositional Memes] slip past machine and human censors through coded verbal and visual language." I believe it points out the unspoken, yet commonly agreed upon, interpretation of a specific Meme; the writing between the lines; the highly specified context.

Several authors that write about online critique of the Chinese government, point out the situational versatility in use of Memes. Shih-Wen Chen describes how Baozou Manha, or abbreviated Baoman (a specific group of Memes also known as Rage Comics), are used to comment on both humorous everyday life situations, and major incidents and problems occurring related to the political situation in China [11]: It is suggested that the emergence of this has led to Chinese people having an arena of presenting frustration and critique, where modern, online Western culture has more ventilation-oriented sites; an opinion supported by Xiao Mina [12], who, as previously mentioned, also suggest that the sheer number of users and the "hidden" nature of the Memes, allow evasion of censorship and removal from the network.
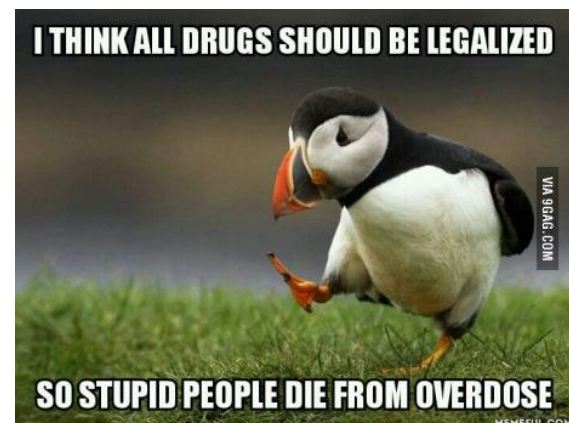

Figure 7: An example of the Unpopular Opinion Puffin. This picture Meme is used to express personal beliefs that the creator perceives as an opinion not commonly accepted. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

Chen states that "While Baoman (Rage Comics) may not lead to political reform in China, it has given voice to many netizens who need a space for emotional and political catharsis." It appears that in the case of Baozou, the tacit language that Memes represent has been paramount to its success: Chen goes on to state that "the majority of Baoman creators prefer the pre-existing rage faces because these familiar faces depict so vividly different emotions and attitudes that may be difficult to articulate." I find that many Rage Comics exemplifies this: Compared to the common Smiley (Fig. 5), 'Trollface' (Fig. 6)

is similar in shape and basic emotion, but the facial expression is radically different: while the Smiley conveys a simple smile that can be interpreted in numerous ways, Trollface has a more distinct expression of humor. It is often used to underline a joke and provoke the victim with its teasing expression; the Smiley would fall utterly short to provide the same precision. In critique expression, the Trollface can be used to signify how governments can act as 'trolls' when exploiting the public without risk of retaliation, thus fitting the teasing expression.

This way of establishing portals for expressing critique and lowering the threshold for doing so, is clearly greatly aided by the use of such common communication tools as Rage Comics. In fact, I argue that this specific group of Memes has perhaps the greatest potential of use in instant OC, simply because of their versatility, diversity, and precision in expression. For the sake of using Memes in OC, such online networks that delve in anything from critique expression to humorous commenting on everyday situations, support how a simple Meme can spark a defined emotion or context, and thus contribute to a text-based conversation.

2.2 Movements

Closely related to critique expression, we find movements that aim to gain support through use of Memes as gathering points, reference, and situational applicability; they become banners or mascots, mostly decided upon by the group of users that are connected to the movement. Regarding the contributors to the process of selecting specific Memes for their cause, Hristova found a similar result to Viskery when looking at the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and the use of its memes [1]: through users' reproducing and creation of the memes, a common description of the political situation was established and,

more importantly, perceived as reality. One of main quotations from the OWS movement, was the "we are the 99%", meaning the participants viewed themselves as representing 99% of the population, when it was suggested that in fact only 1% participated in the actual movement [1]. Based on this, we can see that it is quite possible that using Memes as banners for a cause may in fact gather support from followers who would not originally support

Figure 8: The Rage Guy Meme from Rage Comics. The Meme expresses intense anger or pain. Figure 9: The Are You Serious / Seriously? Meme from Rage Comics. While showing some of the same signals as Rage Guy, the expression is not of anger or pain, but rather disbelief in another person's statement. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

said cause. But from the view point of creating a commonly accepted symbol representing a specific message, this points out how entire groups can orient themselves around this symbol through the 'read-vote-rewrite' process; it seems that whatever the topic is, this process will inevitably draw followers towards whatever symbol becomes the most appropriate for that context, thus creating societal agreement on what should form the basis of the group's OC.

Figure 10 and 11: Examples of the Annoying College Kid – OWS Meme. This is an example of Memes connected to a theme, but which exist to oppose the original, in this case, the ridicule of participators of the OWS movement. Source: www.knowyourmeme.com

In many ways, I have found the online critique of and comment on Chinese government (and consequential censorship and shut-down) has similarities to movements that develop their own Memes for OC. And naturally, this is true for any country where online culture is available; it almost seems like the internet was invented solely for the purpose of allowing private users to express critique on society. (Mina provides a more innocent alternative when quoting Ethan Zuckerberg: "The contemporary Internet was designed, in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats." [12]) But while a movement may have a very specific message to convey (such as World Wildlife Fund), the general, online culture is of a much more fluid and adaptive nature. This is an important part of why Memes can improve upon the current communication portals in OC: the general public seems to absorb, utilize, and modify whatever it finds to serve a useful purpose. Consequently, if a Meme-like tool was to be developed for the specific purpose of conveying messages in more formal, text-based communication portals, it could and should be absorbed, changed, and made to fit whatever precise, emotional message the users wants to convey.

2.3 Popular Online Culture

It is in online forums like the ones mentioned that Memes flourish, grow in popularity, and evolve the most. The online community that participates in creating new Memes, voting on others', and repurposing them with their own ideas, serves as a perfect example of how Memes actually are used in OC. In the article on the Confession Bear Meme, Vickery describes the extreme absorption and repurposing that the Meme passed through [9]: "Within hours of the initial submission, Confession Bear had its own page on Quickmeme, an image captioning website that hosts galleries of user submitted macros and allows users to add their own text to images. Within four days, the post received 1100 comments and 13 000 upvotes." To give a comparison, my experience is that a high ranking post rarely receives more than 5000 upvotes in its time one the front pages. This indicates how adaptive and responsive online

media can be when a new tool is discovered and found to be both appropriate and fun.

Another phenomenon known as "Green Text Stories" is particularly interesting because it mostly includes more text in combination with a picture, and the text and picture are normally not integrated like in the common 'picture-plus-text' Memes. A good example of this particular Meme format is one of the earliest known Green Text Stories [13]: In it, the creator tells the story of how he (presumably the creator) was denied from going to his own twin brother's funeral; see Fig. 13. The text component incorporates a very specific 'start-stop' structure where short sentences tell a story, often ending with a direct reference to the picture, such as "my face when" or "Win/fail-Memes" [14]. I believe these brief sentences that normally do not utilize capital letters or punctuation, have a lot in common with how we structure Instant Messages. They hold a key to how the information density of a simple four sentence story is greatly increased by the adding of a

picture: The downward gaze shows both resignation and reluctant admission of defeat; the eyes contain sadness, anger, and frustration at the parent's lack of empathy; the emotionless expression hides unhappiness behind indifference. It is a face certainly fit that of an 11 year old child in this situation. The quality of the content is approved by an anonymous commentator who shows appreciation by giving it "10/10 [points available]". Relaying the same information and attempting to create a similar emotional setting by using text only, is something left to the greatest poets and authors.

The tacit information residing in the artist's drawing of Edgar Allen Poe (the picture used in the Greentext example) does a remarkable job at bringing the reader into emotional experience of the child. But it is quite unlikely that the creator of the content and the original comic [13] is the same person. So how can users of instant or semi-instant OC locate what they deem is the visual counterpart of their written content? There is a critical gap between the way Memes are created and OC is done, namely time spent creating and communicating. As new content is presented on online forums, viewers become judges that give votes and comments to the content. This allows for accumulation of positive responses, leading to ranking of all the content created: this is the basic function that led to the Confession Bear's rapid popularization [9]. The fixation on making the content that receives the most votes (or as often used in online language: "Front page material") likely leads to significant time being spent combining and locating text and visual material. Are we even able to provide Meme-like visual information rapidly enough to be a part of instant messaging?
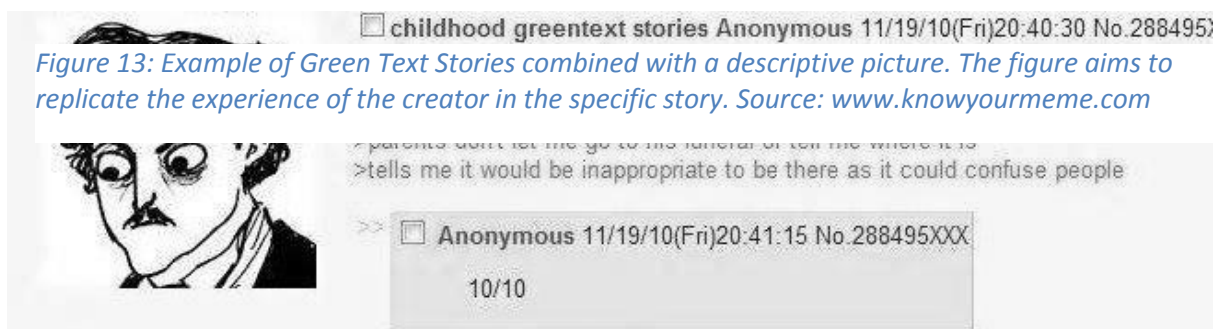
Emoticons are readily available due to the integrated use of existing symbols. Among the 53 participants in study conducted by Park et al. [7], 50 used emoticons on their smartphones in instant messaging. The top reasons to why they would use emoticons were as listed:

1. Improve understanding of a message (35%). Improve understanding of message (35%).
2. Create a better atmosphere (22.5%).
3. Using emoticons are faster than writing (18.8%).
4. Using emoticons are fun (15%).
5. It is popular (6.2%).
6. Other (2.5%).

Among the four largest, three are linked to the emotional component of the message (1, 2, and 4), while only the third is concerned with efficiency. In their own words, "These results mean that emoticon use was considerably correlated to enforcing richness of information exchange. To make the conversation smooth and bright is not the first reason." Contrarily, they found that people who do not use emoticons find them annoying, interrupting, and make conversations less serious [7]. Only 3 out of 53 participants did not use emoticons, but this may correlate to another finding in the study: emoticons are used less between vertical levels in hierarchy, than in horizontal ones. Fear of not being perceived as serious in work relations is perhaps the greatest reason for this. In any case, the study indicates that precision and information density in the message is paramount in short, instant communication. I argue that this is a valuable finding that supports the idea of Meme-like visual tools in written OC.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The nature of Memes is vast and vague, yet each individual Meme can be a potent vessel of setting a very specific, emotional state. In the articles and references that have been examined, the resounding factor is the confirmation that Memes project information with high specificity, and yet is malleable and fluid in its availability to be reformed and repurposed. A visual Meme lays a foundation of context, e.g. a specific situation, emotion, topic, affiliation, or specifies the purpose of a statement, such as confession or critique. The written content is combined with the visual Meme in such a way that they complement each other, making sure that the reader receives a tailored message.

Visual tools to be combined with text for precise expression is already available in OC, most noteworthy of which is of course the emoticons. In addition, many Instant Message services have expanded the available visual tools far beyond the simple emoticons. While it seems that they can be viewed as informal or less-than-serious, visual tools have made an impact in the way that Memes are used to affiliate with movements and political opinions, among others. In these online environments there large numbers of likeminded gather, Memes are allowed to evolve and become powerful symbols and

icons. The distinct meanings that they represent indicate that Memes are first of all tools whose functions are decided by the ones who use them. This supports the idea of using Meme-like visual tools in more formal, written communication, as long as all communicators are able to agree on the meaning and see it as something other than a joke template. But there still appears to be a few catches: For visual tools to become applicable in all parts of OC, all users must agree on the mentioned meanings. Emoticons are already known throughout the world, and I argue the unspecified meaning that a smiley represents, is actually to its advantage: if it had not been a simple smile, perhaps it would not have gained a place as an accepted icon to be used in e.g. e-mails between coworkers. This is where Memes as foundation for similar use meets its perhaps greatest challenges: achieving widespread acceptance. This is why I would suggest looking to Memes that are already somewhat similar to existing solutions, and I have found that Rage Comics are especially suited due to their basis in facial expression, emoticon-like shape, and online fame.

A second potential challenge for Memes is the way they are sometimes interpreted differently in two cultures. And naturally, the same is applicable on a personal level, where it is likely that if a Meme can have two completely different emotional areas of use (e.g. Confession Bear as humorous confessions or telling traumatic stories), one will be subjectively perceived as the dominant one. How will this affect the written communication between two parties with different views on the Meme's emotional meaning? In order to better understand how these can be repurposed to fit written OC in

the future, more research into the context that they provide is needed.

The third potential issue with using Memes to create visual tools is that Memes are fundamentally different from emoticons in their availability while communicating. However, I believe the research I have examined largely indicates that information density, precision of message, context appropriation, and group affiliation is more important to communicators than efficiency. It is quite possible that a separation between formal and informal OC is needed, and that Meme-like visual tools are only fitting in the latter.

Attempts have already been made at implementing Memes in areas where conveying opinions are relevant: R. Engel et al. [15] suggested that Memes can be combined with economic term and education so that "Educators can get ideas about how to incorporate memes into their classes to either reinforce a concept or have their students create memes to artfully show their comprehension of key concepts" [15][16]. The crowdsourced tool is currently available at economicsmemes.com, and I believe this is a use of Memes that indicate their message conveying potential, even if still in their unchanged forms. As being active online becomes more and more online, it is likely that we will see changes in OC, especially when the users of popular online culture become older. I have argued that Meme-based visual tools can become a part of this future development of OC, and that the future developers of interfaces in OC will benefit from exploring this option.

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FIGURES:

[Fig. 1 and 2] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/keep-calm-and-carry-on (Accessed 10. February 2015)

[Fig. 3 and 4] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor (Accessed 6. February 2015)

[Fig. 5] http://spontaneoussmiley.com/2011/01/no-poofty-foofty-for-me/ (Accessed 13. January 2015)

[Fig. 6] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trollface-coolface-problem (Accessed 13. January 2015)

[Fig. 7] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/unpopular-opinion-puffin (Accessed 6. February 2015)

[Fig. 8 and 9] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics (Accessed 13. February 2015)

[Fig. 10 and 11] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/annoying-college-kid-occupy-wall-street (Accessed 6. February 2015)

[Fig. 12] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/confession-bear (Accessed 13. February 2015)

[Fig. 13] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/green-text-stories (Accessed 13. February 2015)