

The Curious Case of Confession Bear: Analyzing anonymity and online memes

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Abstract

“Advice animals” are popular user-created, image-based (.gif), online meme formats. The memes include a humorous image of an animal juxtaposed with text offering advice and/or making a joke. One such example is known as “Confession Bear”, which features a sad looking Malayan sun bear “confessing” to something silly, shameful, taboo, or embarrassing. Confession Bear was first circulated through the online community Reddit and was intended to be humorous. However, users unexpectedly started creating and sharing more serious confessions involving topics such as rape, abuse, and addiction. These more serious confessions juxtaposed with the “Confession Bear” image spurred lengthy in-depth conversations on the Reddit message boards about the validity, authenticity, and appropriateness of such confessions. Some users argued advice animals were not “supposed” to be serious, claiming these confessions were an inappropriate use of the form; as such, some users attempted to police the participatory culture created by the production of image-based memes. Others sought to find the “truth” in the claims; some argued the confessions were false and therefore inappropriate, while others defended the confessions as authentic, and therefore appropriate. This paper argues anonymity allows users to appropriate and repurpose humorous image-based memes in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce hegemonic culture.

Keywords

memes, anonymity, Reddit, reappropriation

Introduction

As the broadest definition, memes refer to cultural norms, behaviors, and practices. Biologist Richard Dawkins first coined the term meme to refer to anything not biologically “wired” into human behavior; that is, it refers to the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena (Dawkins, 1976). Applying the concept of memes to the internet, Coleman (2012) defines online memes as, “viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them” (p. 109). Additionally, memes are embedded within a culture that enables participation and remix (Lessig, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Gasser and Ernst, 2006). In their study of online memes, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) found that many memes “were not passed on entirely ‘intact’ in that the meme ‘vehicle’ was changed, modified, mixed with other referential expressive resources, and regularly given idiosyncratic spins by participants” (p. 208); in other words, the memes were remixed, reappropriated, and repurposed. As part of a broader remix culture (Lessig, 2008), memes are not typically beholden to authorship, but rather facilitate and encourage anonymous participation (Davison, 2012). Davison refers to these as nonattribution memes, in which the lack of author (Foucault, 1984) enables generative practices and renders the form highly malleable. In accordance with Davison, we also argue anonymity affords participants the freedom to appropriate and reconfigure meaning in unanticipated and at times potentially transgressive ways.

One subset of image-based memes is known as “Advice Animals”. The image macro series follow a distinct format in which a humorous looking animal is placed in a square with short text at the top and bottom of the square (see Figures 1-4).¹



Figure 1 Advice Animal Dog



Figure 2 Socially Awkward Penguin

¹ According to KnowYourMeme.com, Advice Animal images began September 7, 2006, and a subreddit for Advice Animals was created on Reddit December 7, 2010.



Figure 3 Foul Bachelor Frog



Figure 4 Advice Animal Raccoon / "Call Me Maybe" meme

Confession Bear is one example of an Advice Animal macro image meme started in 2012. It includes a sad looking black Malayan sun bear learning on a log juxtaposed with text “confessing” to something humorous, unexpected, taboo, controversial, or embarrassing (Figs. 5-7).² Some are silly and humorous, while others focus on (perceived) deviant sexual acts and fantasies. However, alongside these forms are other more serious confessions related to addiction, rape, violence, racism, homophobia, and abuse (see Fig. 8-13). These “inappropriate” and potentially transgressive Confession Bears serve as the focus on this paper.

² On June 21, 2012 Redditor F-18Bro submitted a post to Reddit titled, “I have a lot of weird stuff that I’d like to be able to confess to reddit so i can get it off my chest, so I made Confession Bear” [sic]. The macro image meme gained rapid popularity on Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, and various humor websites (KnowYourMeme, 2013).



Figure 5 Confession Bear Example



Figure 6 Confession Bear Example



Figure 7 Confession Bear Example



Figure 8 Confession Bear perpetrator example



Figure 9 Confession Bear victim example



Figure 10 Confession Bear racist example



Figure 11 Confession Bear serious example



Figure 12 Confession Bear victim example



Figure 13 Confession Bear xenophobic example

Looking at the evolution of Confession Bear memes, we pose the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent can the appropriation of the Confession Bear meme be considered transgressive?

RQ2: What is the significance of anonymity in facilitating users' re-appropriation of Confession Bear memes?

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

We viewed hundreds of Confession Bear memes posted to QuickMeme.³ Our sample for analysis includes Confession Bear images that confessed something unexpected and serious, defined as: a) confessions (as opposed to fantasies) b) that alluded to lived experiences c) with reference to trauma, suffering, violence, or pain, OR explicit xenophobic confessions that d) were not intended to be interpreted humorously.⁴ We identified a sample of Confession Bear images that fit our criteria (see Figs. 8-13 for examples).

From a theoretical perspective, we are interested in how remix culture enables unexpected appropriation of malleable forms such as macro image memes and how anonymity simultaneously affords and contains the transgressive potential of confessions. As such, we turn to Stuart Hall's (1994) notion of dialectic cultural struggle in order to analyze how Confession Bear demonstrates Hall's idea of "double movement", that is containment and resistance vis-à-vis hegemonic culture. Macro image memes are virtually limitless in terms of malleability, yet they are not without (socially enforced) boundaries.

Findings & Discussion

We argue anonymity and remix allows users to transgress social boundaries, for instance by allowing victims of violence, rape, and homophobia, to share their stories in an unexpected and "inappropriate" space. In this way, users appropriate the "funny" Confession Bear meme by challenging its form and conventions, but also their own positions as silenced victims. Although Confession Bear encourages taboo confessions, victim narratives transgress social boundaries that attempt to contain and silence victims.

However, users' reactions and comments on the message boards also attempt to contain the form and meaning of the meme itself, and by extension police and silence the victim narratives. We found that the Reddit community a) doubted users' confessions, b) attempted to seek the "truth" or c) argued the confessions were an inappropriate use of the meme. As such, we argue that memes such as Confession Bear simultaneously challenge and reproduce the transformative nature of confessions. The fragmented and anonymous form of Confession Bear does not preclude the possibility of individual liberation (via therapeutic narratives), but we contend that the lack of context frames the confessions as fragmented personal narratives, rather than part of broader social narratives (MacAulay and Magnusson 2009).

³ QuickMeme archives macro images and also provides templates for users to create their own macro image. As of March 2013 there are more than 98,000 Confession Bear memes.

⁴ We excluded confessions that were explicitly sexual in nature when the intent was to share a fantasy or desire rather than a traumatic or explicitly xenophobic experience. For example, we did not include confessions such as, "I really like it when my girlfriend does (*fill in the blank with a sexual act*)". Although these sometimes led to conversations on the Reddit message boards as to whether these were actual confessions or not (and thus rather they were an appropriate use of Confession Bear or not), for the purpose of our analysis we did not include them.

However, alongside victim narratives there are also Confession Bear memes that explicitly confess racist, homophobic, sexist, and other xenophobic beliefs and anxieties in serious ways not presumably intended to elicit a laugh. These Confession Bears were personalized confessions that contribute to the larger societal problems, but in a fragmented, decontextualized, and disembodied space without repercussions or justice. Thus, the confessions appear transgressive, yet are simultaneously contained within the decontextualized and anonymous borders of the meme itself.

Significance

What is significant is that the separation of form, confession, and experience fails to address the broader societal and cultural problems that led to the traumatic experiences and secrets in the first place. Additionally, anonymity negates a call to action on the part of the viewer. As MacAulay and Magnusson, (2009) write, “The silence encoded in written discourse is also telling: by encouraging the submission of unspoken secrets, anonymity may reinforce suppression, exhibiting disembodied, silent confessions. Borders are therefore not resisted but contained” (p. 97). There is no call to action, perpetrators are not identified nor held responsible (despite confession), and viewers can easily dismiss the confessions as merely personal rather than symptomatic of larger social issues. Yet, at the same time, the otherwise unspoken confessions are heard and discussed by the Reddit community, thus generating conversations and propelling discourses into a more public space. Anonymity provides the means through which users can appropriate memes for fragmented, personalized, confessions and address injustices and anxieties. Nonattribution macro images such as Confession Bear enable remix and participation that simultaneously resist and contain hegemonic culture.

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