# The Inherent Vice of Internet Memes: The Double Bind of Recognition and the Aesthetic of Haste

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Internet memes often feature low resolutions, imprecise editing, and they may be poorly cropped—leaving elements of a platform's interface within a screenshot. However, these flaws do not inherently diminish their impact. Despite technological advancements in digital image quality, the visual characteristics of memes are secondary to their social resonance. The cultural practices of memes allow for quality degradation, embedding the copying and remixing process into the meme itself. In this article, I apply Lucas Hilderbrand's description of VHS tape degradation as the "inherent vice" of the medium to Internet memes. I argue that memes contain a tension between mutation and recognizability—which I term the "double bind of recognition." Memes gain meaning through user recognition, yet their nature involves constant remixing and change. This dynamic is visually represented by an "aesthetic of haste," marked by pixelation, blurriness, and cropping—evidence of their iterative evolution. Analyzing these visual changes offers insights into a meme's cultural relevance within its community.

*Keywords: memes, compression, image degradation, aesthetics, online communities*

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have. (Lucier, 1981)

At the beginning of the recording, experimental musician Alvin Lucier's (1981) voice is clear, and each of the above words is distinct and intelligible. However, after repeated recordings and rerecordings, the quality and coherence of Lucier's voice degraded significantly. After the 45-minute process, his voice is

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completely unintelligible, and the sounds no longer bear any resemblance to human speech. Originally performed in 1969, and rerecorded in 1980, Lucier's (1981) "I am sitting in a room" represents the inherent materiality of media objects and how such materiality becomes increasingly apparent through repeated processes of copying. Technical specifications of the recording equipment and human practices such as how Lucier positioned himself in the room become centered and emphasized in each subsequent copy.

The material traces of copying remind us that media objects are just that—objects. Phenomena such as the wearing down of a record stylus or even damage to the grooves on a record itself underscore the physical volatility of analog media. Digital media objects are subject to similar conditions of degradation and decay that emerge as material traces within subsequent copies. The degradation of subsequent copies is especially the case in the context of the widespread adoption of the World Wide Web and the continuing popularity of social media platforms. On the Internet, digital texts are frequently characterized by low definition and degradation, even in cases where a higher-quality reproduction is technically possible. This has contributed to the establishment of a particular aesthetic of Internet culture, which Nick Douglas (2014) has described as "internet ugly." He explains that a sloppy, amateurish, and often eclectic style "best defines the internet against all other media" (Douglas, 2014, p. 315). Though it is theoretically possible to create a perfect one-to-one copy of a digital image by simply duplicating the file, in practice, the methods of sharing and remixing introduce many opportunities for the quality to degrade. And when the file being copied was already in the style of "internet ugly," this degradation may take place much more quickly. Regardless of the specific circumstances, attending to the visual degradation of a digital text becomes a useful approach to understanding the cultural transformation and social significance of the text as it circulates throughout online spaces.

Internet memes are digital texts characterized by their widespread sharing and remixing throughout different online communities. The cultural practices of Internet memes introduce many opportunities for the overall image quality to degrade and for material traces of the copying and remixing processes to become inscribed within the text itself. But there is a tension between this mutation and the overall recognizability of a given meme. Acknowledging the low image quality of many Internet memes attends to the user and community practices surrounding these objects. The persistence of low-quality digital texts despite continually improving technologies demonstrates that in certain cases, the visual quality of an image is comparatively less important than its social meanings. An analysis of the degradation of digital texts can illuminate the cultural values and priorities of the social groups within which they circulate.

Accordingly, this article demonstrates how each time a meme instance is copied, shared, or remixed, there are opportunities for traces of these processes to become inscribed within the text itself. Low-quality copies and the material traces of digital copying processes within many memes suggest that they are significant units of culture not because of a particular artistic quality or humor, but because of the cultural capital and overall meme literacy that they represent. The visual quality of a meme is less important than its recognizability. In this article, I argue that Internet memes face what I term as a "double bind of recognition," or a tension between mutation and recognizability. A meme is meaningful as long as users can identify it, yet simultaneously, memes are characterized by remixing and circulation. The negotiation of this tension becomes visually inscribed within a meme instance in the form of what I call the "aesthetic of haste." This aesthetic includes characteristics such as pixelation, blurriness, cropping, and other image degradations, which function as material traces of the copying and remixing processes. Attending to the

visual traces of copying and remixing as they appear within Internet memes can be a valuable approach for Internet researchers to consider the significance of a given meme for certain online communities.

Memes are important for community identity and folkloric expression. By using an aesthetic approach to studying Internet memes, I show that we can often locate these priorities within the text itself. The visual characteristics of a meme emerge, in part, from the imperfections and artifacts of the copying and sharing processes. First, I trace the history of the relationship between fidelity and media formats. Next, I describe the visual style of memes in the aesthetic of haste—a set of visual characteristics that emerge from the replication process itself alongside incentives to quickly produce and share remixed meme instances. Though these material traces of copying and remixing are often introduced inadvertently into a meme image, they can be employed intentionally. To that end, I conclude with the phenomenon of "deep-fried memes" to show that the aesthetic of haste itself can become a meme in and of itself. This final example furthermore emphasizes the stakes of meme aesthetics when they become associated with racial groups. Throughout this article, I draw on the crowdsourced website Know Your Meme. Given this site's potential for smoothing over and asserting nuanced community understandings of a meme, I use it primarily to locate meme examples and turn to specific community contexts to ascertain a meme's specific definition and meaning (Pettis, 2021). The examples I employ throughout show that the degradation of subsequent copies of a meme can emerge from not only technical processes but from cultural practices as well.

### Copying, Fidelity, and Analog Decay

Despite the limitations of labels such as "new media" and "old media," or the inaccuracies of a strict linear progress narrative, looking to older technologies can help contextualize newer ones (Gitelman, 2006; Mattern, 2017). Lev Manovich (2002) argues that new media represent the convergence of computing and media technologies. By this characterization, memes are a form of new media and can be understood simultaneously as both media and a type of computer data. Additionally, the technological predecessors of modern Internet memes can help contextualize their current use. In his analysis of the MP3 audio format, Jonathan Sterne (2012) writes that "all standards presuppose particular formations of infrastructure with their own codes, protocols, limits, and affordances" (p. 15). Technical standards do not simply arise independently; they emerge from and are built on their predecessors.

In his history of analog videotapes, Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) describes their "aesthetics of access" (p. 15), explaining that the altered look and sounds, as well as the reduced resolution, of analog video are a set of formal aesthetics that are linked to the widespread accessibility and use of such tapes. The somewhat lower quality of analog video is a trade-off for widespread access and engagement, as well as indexical evidence of the tape's circulation and use. The physical degradation of the tape through continued use and circulation represents that particular media text's spread and accessibility. Although Hilderbrand (2009) focuses his analysis on magnetic videotape, he does note that "we see this in analog photocopies, microfilm, videotapes, and even digital PDFs and streaming videos" (p. 15). The continued presence of compression artifacts and image degradation in digital texts suggests that the aesthetics of access are not limited to analog formats.

Despite digital technologies supposedly enabling perfect one-to-one copying of data, most users do not actually encounter or engage with electronic texts in this fashion. People are generally willing to accept some amount of signal degradation, so long as the media are still conveniently accessible. Visual artifacts and degradation of quality can arise both from the technical specifications of a file format as well as from user actions. Such cases of degradation are an instance of what Lawrence Lessig (2009) describes as "Read/Write" culture, which enables individual citizens to not only "read" culture but also to create and recreate the media around them. The trade-off of being able to easily copy and remix a particular text is the introduction of imperfections and material artifacts of copying. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2003) note, new media *remediate* prior forms of media, refashioning the logics and characteristics of older media into new formats. Just as older mediums like magnetic tape were subject to physical degradation, digital media can also exhibit evidence of their ongoing copying and remixing. The more a particular media text is copied and remixed, the more visible those processes become through the accumulation of material traces and image artifacts.

### Defining Internet Memes

The words "meme" and "viral" may be used interchangeably at times but as Limor Shifman (2014) emphasizes, the two terms should be distinguished from one another. She defines an Internet meme as "(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with *awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*" (Shifman, 2014, pp. 7–8).

This definition acknowledges the fluid nature of memes and centers the processes of replication and transformation for their cultural significance. A meme is more than just a series of images that are widely circulated; individual meme instances are also regularly remixed by countless people. Memes are layered texts, where each iteration has the potential to add new cultural significance (Milner, 2018). Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) position Internet memes as a form of folkloric expression, where individual users create their own meanings as they circulate a particular meme text within their online communities. Individual memes, therefore, are difficult to define, given that the general meaning of "memes" more broadly can vary greatly across online contexts (Adiga & K., 2024; Pettis, 2021). In this article, I develop a definition of "meme" that draws together aspects of these earlier writings on memes to attend to how online communities incorporate Internet memes into their practices: A meme is a unit of online culture, comprising jokes, phrases, or other common traits that have salience for the communities within which they circulate; memes develop through the circulation and remixing of individual meme instances, which may be texts, images, videos, or a combination of mediums. This definition attends to the community identity functions of memes while also acknowledging their unstable meanings as they are continually remixed and recirculated within and across online contexts.

While copying and circulation are both important characteristics of memes, transformation and remixing are equally significant. When Richard Dawkins (2016) initially coined the term "meme," he outlined three defining characteristics: Longevity—how long a meme lasts; fecundity—how far a meme spreads; and fidelity—how closely a meme conforms to its original. But as Milner (2018) argues, fidelity is no longer a defining characteristic of memes. Individual meme instances are not so much perfect copies of an original

text; instead, they are artifacts of participatory culture where individual users are able to interpret and add their own meanings to a given digital text. He writes, "Fidelity, in memetic media, can only be kept to a certain degree. . . . A shared premise has to remain just recognizable enough to allow for create innovation within a social vernacular" (Milner, 2018, p. 73). Phillips and Milner (2017) describe four affordances of new media: Modularity, modifiability, archivability, and accessibility, noting that these "allow online participants to create, circulate, and transform vernacular media much more easily than in previous eras" (p. 54). The affordances of modularity and modifiability cause many memes to be characterized by a tension between mutation and recognizability, or the double bind of recognition. So long as a user can identify the layered cultural references and decode the meme, its actual visual quality can be overlooked. But simultaneously, new instances of a particular meme must be different enough to be recognized as a *new* remixed version that contributes to the overall mutation of the meme.

My working definition of "meme" as a unit of online culture, along with the distinction between individual instances of a meme and an overall grouping of instances that comprise a meme, foregrounds the ways in which these online texts are significant for the communities in which they circulate. Given the continued presence of visual traces of copying and remixing, memes can be understood within the context of remediation, which encapsulates how new media replicate and reinforce logics and practices from earlier formats (Bolter & Grusin, 2003). The videotapes that Hilderbrand (2009) describes had a lower visual quality, but this aesthetic of access was an indicator of their popularity. Similarly, memes are not valued wholly for their sharpness, resolution, or other typical markers of visual quality. Instead, their cultural significance lies in their ability to be widely circulated and remixed among and within online communities. In some cases, the double bind of recognition privileges community affinity over the specifics of any one image. It is okay for a meme instance to have a low overall visual quality and appear to be quickly hacked together because the right community is able to recognize it. Indeed, some memes may be entirely meaningless outside of very specific communities (Katz & Shifman, 2017). There is much scholarship across disciplines that shows that shared sets of discourses, including shared humor, can be a powerful aspect of forming and maintaining community (e.g. Curry & Dunbar, 2013; Katz & Shifman, 2017; Kehus, Walters, & Shaw, 2010; Rheingold, 2000). Given that memes are a part of community affinity, the actual quality of an individual meme instance is less significant as long as it is recognized by the community. But under the double bind of recognition, there is also the competing tension of mutation; subsequent meme instances must be remixed enough to continue contributing to the community.

### Beyond Image Memes

It is important to note that memes are not an exclusively visual medium, despite the ongoing tendency in meme scholarship to overemphasize imaged-based memes. Drawing on Shifman (2014), Rogers and Giorgi (2024) note that "memes are broadly understood as multimodal cultural artefacts, which are created, remixed and circulated by users across digital platforms" (p. 74). Importantly, this framing acknowledges that the cultural significance of a specific meme may spread beyond the bounds of a single text. This is a characteristic that has been developed by numerous other studies on Internet memes. As one example, Laineste and Voolaid's (2017) analysis of meme circulation in post-Soviet nations attributes the humor and relatability of such memes to their intertextuality—specifically the continued influence of the "Soviet jokelore." However, they do note that in many memes, "the visual side usually makes the base of

the meme . . . whereas the text adds new layers of meaning" (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017, p. 32). However, the category of "meme" is not necessarily limited to a single medium or format. For instance, Robert Topinka's (2022) description of "copypasta," meaningless blocks of text that are circulated across various platforms and are recognizable only to the already initiated, shows how text-only cultural fragments can also circulate as online memes.

There is ongoing work that problematizes the tendency of meme scholarship to overlook memes in nonimage formats. Noah Roderick (2024), for example, compares audio-based and visual memes to argue that "an audio meme can both effect a sense of urgency and draw the audience temporally closer to the event" (p. 82). In recent years, significant attention has focused on a specific platform, TikTok, and its multimedia affordances. The way the platform incorporates audio and video into an endlessly scrollable feed of algorithmically curated content has become an important way that memes are circulated. Abidin and Kaye (2021) have directly challenged the generalization of memes as an inherently visual format and noted how the growing popularity of TikTok has brought about an "aural turn" in memes. There has been much work that has specifically analyzed TikTok's role in the creation and circulation of audio and video memes (e.g., Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

Under my definition of "meme," the specific text of a meme instance can be many different mediums—images, videos, audio, written texts, and combinations thereof. Given that each of these modalities is experienced differently, I focus my analysis on just one: Visual memes. However, I do not mean to suggest that my observations on the aesthetic of haste are wholly exclusive to this format. Indeed, for all of these, there may be ways to see how the logics of haste affect the meme texts themselves as they circulate through various online contexts.

### The Aesthetic of Haste of Internet Memes

Regardless of the format, medium, or technology that is used to create and circulate new instances of a meme, the traces of copying can get inscribed within the text itself. Through both inherent technical characteristics of certain file formats and the ways that individual users access and interact with such files, visual traces of copying and remixing processes can become inscribed within an individual instance of a meme. In the following section, I discuss several meme examples and identify specific visual traits that contribute to the aesthetic of haste and how it emerges from the double bind of meme recognition. While memes are meant to be circulated and remixed, once too much mutation occurs, the memes may no longer be recognized or understood by desired audiences and no longer circulated.

The aesthetic of haste is a material marker of a meme instance as it shifts and jumps across different contexts. Subsequent meme instances become increasingly disconnected from their original meaning—if such an original can even be traced. After enough degradation, what is more significant for a given meme instance is whether a particular community is able to recognize the various elements and references. When it comes to memes, cultural literacy and comprehension do not arise solely from the actual fidelity of the copy or image quality; as long as the image elements are just recognizable enough, the meme can still be successful.

The aesthetic of haste results in the seemingly imperfect and unpolished quality of many Internet memes. The creation of a new meme instance is often time-sensitive; a user often feels the pressure of time to create or modify a new image quickly so that it can be posted and shared as soon as possible. If the user takes too long to create the new meme instance, the online context for sharing may no longer be applicable. The aesthetic of haste is characterized by quickly created image masks with imperfect selection edges, text that is simply overlaid on an earlier image, or the quick painting over or erasing of particular image elements. It can also arise from the actual processes by which a particular meme instance is duplicated and circulated. It is rarely the case that a user simply duplicates a file on their computer to share. Instead, they may download and re-upload an image. They may use the screenshot function to quickly save a copy of an image, or they may use a meme-generator website like imgflip or 9gag. Such practices inscribe themselves on the meme text itself, such as in the form of image compression artifacts, cropping, or various logos and watermarks. The specific user practices of the remixing process become inscribed materially within the text of the Internet meme. The point is to quickly produce and transmit the new meme instance, and there is a significantly reduced emphasis on fidelity so long as it remains recognizable to the user.

### Needs More JPEG

One of the primary sources of copying artifacts is digital image compression. One of the most popular compressed image formats is the JPEG. The JPEG standard—named after the Joint Photographic Experts Group (2014), which developed it in 1992—is a lossy image compression format. Whenever a new JPEG file is saved, visual aspects of the image are lost as part of the compression algorithm, and it is impossible to fully recreate the original data. The JPEG is not an especially great format for high image quality and fidelity. Yet for most applications, it provides an acceptable balance between small file size and image quality. But when a JPEG file is saved, copied, and re-saved, repeatedly applying the compression algorithm, the small characteristics of image loss become highly apparent. What begins as a small amount of image noise and signal loss can eventually render the image unrecognizable. Compression artifacts such as blockiness and pixelation, reduced image resolution, and splotches of color are examples of the material traces of copying that are present even within digital formats. These compression artifacts, while not unique to the JPEG image format alone, have become somewhat immortalized in the phrase "it needs more JPEG." This pithy response, which calls attention to the presence of image compression artifacts, can be found throughout various Internet communities as a common response to low-quality or low-resolution images, even in cases where the image in question is not saved in the JPEG format.

Figure 1 showcases the visual artifacts of JPEG image compression, including low resolution, visible pixelation, and purplish areas of image noise.[2] On Reddit, users of the /r/needsmorejpeg community collect and share examples of memes that, well, need more JPEG. The meme instance shown in Figure 1 is somewhat of an extreme and overexaggerated example of image compression but is nevertheless indicative of the type of content that is frequently traded by /r/needsmorejpeg's users. The fact that a community

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[2] There is a certain irony in the fact that I am further copying and degrading these images for the purposes of this article. Depending on how this specific file is read, or possibly even printed onto physical paper, the ensuing degradation would be further representation of the dual digital and analog processes of copying and degradation.

exists solely to spotlight instances of overly compressed images demonstrates not only the hyper-specific nature of online communication but also the general awareness and acceptance of such image compression artifacts. Users here are not clamoring for the widespread adoption of higher-fidelity image formats. Instead, they are merely acknowledging, perhaps even celebrating, the material traces of copying in digital texts.



*Figure 1. "Y'all got any more of them pixels." Source: Know Your Meme (2015).*

Memes are both technical and cultural objects that inform how researchers should approach them. As digital files transmitted in online settings, memes, and their visual appearance, are influenced by their technical characteristics as well as the specifications of the file format. "Needs more JPEG" memes demonstrate the double bind of meme recognition because the introduction of visual artifacts from technical aspects of the copying process may limit a user's recognition of a meme. Albeit deployed here in a mocking manner, this pithy response suggests that with too much image degradation, the original meme and its meaning is superseded by the low quality of the specific image. Yet the aesthetic of copying is not always the result of technical processes alone. As I discuss below, there are instances where image degradation is purposefully introduced by users during the copying and sharing processes.

### *Image-Editing Artifacts*

One way that the aesthetic of haste appears throughout Internet memes is as artifacts of the image-editing process. While digital image-editing software is advanced and enables significant manipulation and virtually imperceptible edits, such techniques often require a high level of technical skills and considerable time. When creating a new instance of a meme, such attention to detail is largely

unnecessary given that so long as the joke or reference within the meme is still recognizable and comprehendible, the overall visual quality is comparatively irrelevant.

For instance, Figure 2 shows an instance of the "They're the same picture" meme, a simple two-panel format that parodies a scene from the popular NBC sitcom *The Office* in which an employee presents another with two identical images but claims that there are several differences (Lieberstein & Blitz, 2011). The meme format is often used to compare two similar objects. Here, the meme is critiquing 4Kids Entertainment, the company that produced the English dubs of the *Pokémon* (Grossfeld, Kahn, Kenji, Kenny, & Tsunekazu, 1997–present) anime for American audiences. In the original scene, the characters eat several rice balls, but in the English scene, the audio was dubbed as "jelly-filled donuts" despite the animation remaining unchanged (Atsuhiro & Shigeru, 1998). This particular meme instance requires significant context to understand it. Its humor arises more so from the references and cultural context and not necessarily from the specific visual elements of the image. Thus, high quality and high fidelity are not necessarily important for comprehension because the hastily edited image components are recognizable enough for many viewers.



*Figure 2. "Nothing beats a jelly-filled donut." Source: Know Your Meme (2019).*

In this example, many of the image elements are sloppily edited together. The background of the rice balls image has not been fully removed. Portions of the 4Kids logo are not easily readable because the white background was only partially removed. To many, this may seem to be a nonsensical mosaic of images, especially given the imperfect image-editing techniques. However, for others, the seemingly incongruous image elements contain enough context and recognizability to create a cohesive cultural reference with layers of meaning. Given these imperfect image-editing techniques, the meme instance contains just enough context and recognizability so that it creates a cultural reference with layers of meaning.

Artifacts of the image editing that remain within a meme instance serve as visual evidence of the fact that the process of creating a particular image was carried out hastily and somewhat imprecisely. Though it is technically possible to create a more visually refined image, the time and effort to do so are not strictly required to maintain the recognizability of the meme. Put another way, these editing artifacts are an acceptable level of image mutation. Memes are characterized by a tension between mutation and recognizability, and so long as the humor and cultural references that are central to a given meme are still recognizable, a considerable amount of image mutation can be introduced into a meme instance without it losing its cultural meaning.

### *Poorly Cropped Screenshots*

The aesthetic of haste is not only found within the image-editing process. In fact, cases of meme instances that have not been edited at all also demonstrate how much mutation is acceptable while still maintaining the recognizability of a meme. One of the fundamental characteristics of a meme is its circulation. The movement of a meme and its constituent meme instances throughout online contexts and across various platforms is one way to distinguish a *meme* from a mere image or joke that is posted online at one time. The specific process of this circulation can vary. In some cases, it is possible for a user to download a copy of an image from one website and upload it to another. While this does maintain a one-to-one copy of the image file, the process is somewhat lengthy and inconvenient. A more common practice is to use the screenshot feature of a smartphone or computer to quickly capture a copy of the image to then repost it elsewhere. Though a screenshot is often a more convenient and quicker way to circulate an image, unless the user takes the additional time to crop the screenshot to include only the content in question, the screenshot will likely include additional artifacts of the meme instance's initial setting and context. The inclusion of these artifacts within subsequent copies of a given meme does not necessarily detract from its recognizability; instead, it becomes further evidence of the meme's spread and mutation.

As an example, Figure 3 shows how an uncropped screenshot not only shares an instance of a meme or joke but also carries evidence of the platforms that the meme has circulated through. At the center of the image is a screenshot from an iMessage conversation with the message "Your uncle Mark died" followed by a skull emoji. Above this screenshot is text, possibly from a Tweet, that provides a little additional humor or context but, more importantly, signals the spread of the original screenshot. The inclusion of a YouTube comment below the iMessage screenshot further underscores the wide circulation of the image across multiple platforms. Finally, all the layered screenshots and interface elements from other platforms are contained within a post on the Reddit community /r/OldPeopleFacebook, which shares memes and jokes about (presumably older) users misunderstanding how to use certain social media platforms. The Reddit post's title, "Found on Instagram but perfect for this sub" does not specifically identify any element of the image and, by doing so, suggests that members of the subreddit community will have enough shared cultural knowledge to understand where the source of humor is. In effect, the screenshots being poorly cropped—a form of image mutation—are not significant enough to impede the recognition of the meme's humor. Instead, the uncropped screenshots serve as evidence of the image's spread throughout different communities and across many platforms.
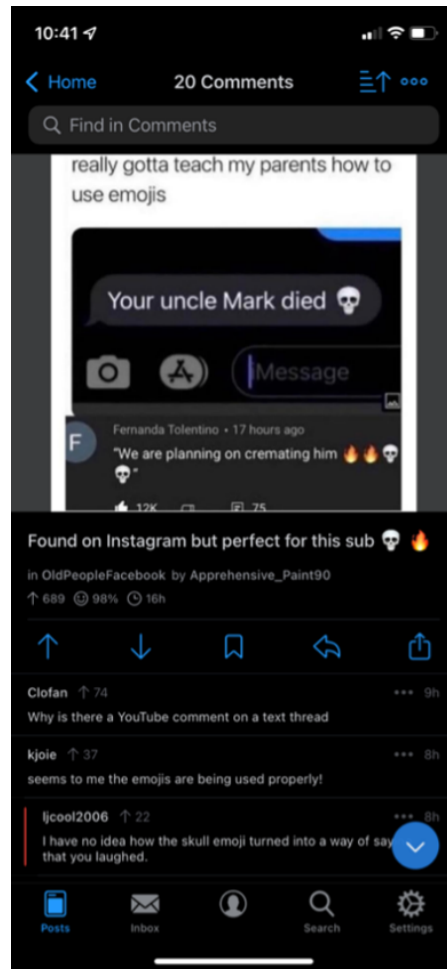
***Figure 3. "Found on Instagram but perfect for this sub." Source: Apprehensive_Paint90 (2021).***
***Screenshot by author.***

The inclusion of interface elements from iMessage and YouTube, along with the Reddit elements and iPhone menu bar from my own screenshot, all signify the various contexts in which this image has appeared. Uncropped images are one possible manifestation of the aesthetic of haste, and the example above demonstrates how this form of image mutation does not necessarily detract from its meaning and in fact can be a subtle reference to the circulation of a meme.

In other cases, however, there is a direct mention of the meme's circulation, which is then reinforced by the appearance of interface elements from various platforms. Figure 4 is a screenshot of an Instagram post that itself is a screenshot of a Tumblr post. This initial Tumblr post contained a hand-drawn cartoon, which refers to the line "I hope this email does not find you," which had initially appeared on Twitter.

***Figure 4. "I just really like this tweet." Source: lizard [imaginehowtouchisthesky] (2021). Screenshot by author.***

The text contained within the screenshot of the Tumblr post directly acknowledges Twitter as its origin, which directly describes the line's move from one platform to another. The appearance of the Tumblr interface—identifiable by the squared edges on the profile picture—alongside the Instagram interface—identifiable by the circular profile picture are examples of the aesthetic of haste and further underscore the meme's circulation across online spaces.

As demonstrated in the above examples, the aesthetic of haste is visual evidence of what I have described as the double bind of recognition. Many meme instances engender a tension between mutation and recognizability. Though memes are generally meant to be widely circulated and remixed, the ability to be recognized and understood by members of a certain community is also a priority. As long as the core meaning of a meme is still recognizable, a high degree of mutation is acceptable. Visual characteristics such as image artifacts, sloppy editing, and uncropped screenshots provide evidence of the circulation and remixing processes but without impeding a meme's recognizability. Because significant time or effort to create a new meme instance is not always necessary, this aesthetic of haste emerges and becomes a way

in which a meme's ability to signal membership in a group becomes more important than the visual quality of its individual elements.

### "Deep-Fried," "Nuked," and "Sautéed" Memes

The aesthetic of haste shows how copying and remixing become materially inscribed within a digital text. This materiality emerges from both unintentional and intentional practices. While virtually all memes contain aspects of the aesthetic of haste, the overlap of intentional and unintentional image degradation is most apparent in "deep-fried memes." These are meme instances with exaggerated low image resolutions, color filters, and general degradation of the overall quality.



*Figure 5. "bruh." Source: LilCheeseburger. (2020).*

Saskia Kowalchuk (2018) explains that deep-fried memes have particular significance for marginalized communities by challenging established aesthetic norms of other memes:

> Deep-fried memes . . . bear little or no resemblance to their source imagery and associated in-groups. In doing so deep-fried memes can bring users together from a place of mutual alienation, demonstrating an uncanny awareness of the existing tensions of memetic production and consumption. (pp. 1–2)

This sentiment is echoed in the /r/DeepFriedMemes subreddit, whose moderators explain that "the original purpose of deep-frying was to parody via exaggeration how memes from hood meme pages would repeatedly get posted on platforms such as Instagram, with more and more filters being tacked on over time" (Hyp3r10n, 2020).

It would be a disservice to discuss deep-fried memes without acknowledging their racial aspects and relationship to how content from online Black communities is often reappropriated and recirculated across the Internet. Much like the growing scholarship on Black Twitter, there is a rich avenue for further research to consider the subcommunities of dominant platforms, particularly when they form around racial minorities and other historically marginalized groups (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). The fact that deep-fried memes stem from so-called "hood culture" and Black communities underscores the extent to which the appropriation of minorities and marginalized individuals continues to persist in online spaces. Though a meme and its associated aesthetics may seem relatively insignificant, the popularity of deep-frying memes represents the continued exploitation of Black labor, thought, and communities. By focusing on their aesthetics and visual degradation, their cultural significance among particular online groups can be emphasized and centered. Though deep-fried memes were initially a way for minority groups to challenge established norms of Internet communities, the practice gradually became more widespread and disconnected from these roots. A moderator of the /r/deepfriedmemes subreddit described the evolution of the practice: "Deep frying any meme doesn't actually make them a 'deep fried meme.' The purpose of deep frying is to parody ghetto humor, it doesn't magically make any shitty meme funnier or 'danker'" (Hyp3r10n, 2020). What had once begun as a practice for minority and marginalized individuals was eventually co-opted by the broader hegemony of Internet meme culture.

By deep-frying a meme, an individual acknowledges the processes of copying and remixing and centers them within the text. In this way, the users responsible for the meme instance, their communities, as well as the particular technologies and their affordances are foregrounded. Deep-fried memes show that in some circumstances, low quality and uglier aesthetics are not just tolerated, but are in fact the expected norm. Communities may value this aesthetic for a whole litany of reasons that may stem from their own identities. The visual degradation of a digital text should not be understood as cause to cast it as irrelevant; instead, it can provide a useful entry point to consider the cultural significance of the text for a specific group.

Most deep-fried memes are overexaggerated for the purposes of parody, as shown in Figure 6 with the oversaturation, image warping, and inclusion of the iMessage and iOS interface within the screenshot. This shows that deep-fried memes can contain both the aesthetic of copying and the aesthetic of haste. Because the emphasis is on sharing the image among a particular community, perfecting details such as cropping the image is not necessary. The repeated image compression—here exaggerated through the overly saturated colors—is a material trace of the copying and sharing processes. It emulates the image being shared and reposted many times. Much like the earlier meme examples, there is still an implied in-group and an out-group. However, what makes the aesthetic of deep-fried memes unique is that it is a specific attempt to visually delineate a particular online community from the others.

*Figure 6. "Teaching my friend 'bout deep fried memes." Source: guzmonster11 (2019).*

Because deep-frying a meme involves the intentional use of the image format to degrade the image and lower its overall quality, there is opportunity for significant control and customizability.

There are several spin-off communities from /r/deepfriedmemes, including /r/nukedmemes and /r/sauteedmemes. The /r/sauteedmemes subreddit is meant for "partially fried memes" and describes itself as a space "for people who like the aesthetic of frying but want to be able to still read their memes" (/r/sauteedmemes, n.d.) This statement embodies the double bind of recognition. Memes rely on a certain amount of mutation and recognition but only up to a point. With too much visual degradation, it is no longer possible for the viewer to "read their memes," thus causing the meme to no longer be meaningful for community formation. Figure 7 is an example of a meme instance that has been "sautéed" rather than deep-fried. The saturation is less exaggerated, and despite there still being significant pixelation, the text is still legible. This particular meme instance relies on the viewer being able to recognize a cultural reference, a clip from *The Eric Andre Show* (André, 2012-present). Whether the viewer has this cultural literacy from having seen the original show or having seen other similar meme instances, they will still be able to identify with a particular community. Sautéed memes, however, have lost the "hood culture" connection of deep-fried memes and represent a different online community instead—one that strikes a different balance between image degradation and comprehension.

*Figure 7. "W A C K." Source: ShroomyProphet (2019)*

/r/nukedmemes, on the other hand, goes in the other direction and contains images that have been significantly destroyed, almost to the point of incomprehensibility, as in Figure 8. For this subreddit, "Just adding a saturation filter and noise in paint.net isn't enough. Crank everything up and layer jpegs on top of each other or whatever. Text should be almost illegible or completely illegible or make no sense" (/r/nukedmemes, n.d.). "Nuked memes" represent the destruction of an image for the sole purpose of destruction. Rather than image degradation being something that could be overlooked, it instead becomes the primary defining aspect of a specific community.



*Figure 8. "Good Enough?" Source: Wraith1983seven (2019).*

Within sautéed or nuked memes, there is a certain amount of self-referential and meta-humor. By this, I mean that the images on their own are not actually that humorous. The primary joke in these meme instances is the purposeful degradation of the image itself. The materiality of copying and remixing is foregrounded, to the point that it *is* the only point. Deep-frying a meme was a way to visually signal

connection to a marginalized community, whereas sautéed and nuked memes have wholly abandoned any such connections. This nuance is lost, and the practice that had begun as a serious way to render oneself visible online had quickly morphed into a simple joke.

Whether deep fried, nuked, or sautéed, these memes show that individual user practices coincide with the inherent technical specifications of a particular medium to produce material traces of the copying and remixing process. When a digital text is copied, it is rarely a perfect one-to-one replication process despite this seemingly being possible thanks to the digital format. Instead, each iteration of copying leaves an imprint on the text itself. At times, this imprint is added unintentionally as a result of a particular compression algorithm. And at others, it is a purposeful effect added intentionally by an individual. Deep-fried memes, and indeed all the examples outlined here, demonstrate that by considering both user practices along with the technology, it is possible to pinpoint the various material traces of the copying process. Through the aesthetic of haste, the cultural significance of an Internet meme is conveyed within its visual characteristics.

**Conclusion**



*Figure 9. "Alvin Lucier needs more JPEG." Meme instance created by the author.*

I opened this article with a portion of Alvin Lucier's (1981) "I'm sitting in a room" performance, a demonstration of how continual cycles of recording and rerecording leave their trace within the media object itself. After nearly an hour of this process, Lucier's (1981) recording was left virtually unrecognizable. The aesthetic of haste, as I have described here, demonstrates how the same process can occur online. Internet memes are a form of new media that remediates the logics of prior formats (Bolter & Grusin, 2003). Just as the magnetic surface of audiotapes and videotapes would gradually degrade as the tape passed through its respective playback devices, Internet memes can similarly "break down" each time they are copied, shared, and remixed. Memes can, as Nick Douglas (2014) describes, "look like shit" (p. 314) but still be meaningful for community formation.

The double bind of meme recognition encapsulates the tension that exists between the mutation and recognizability of Internet memes; so long as users can recognize and identify a meme, it can still be meaningful. But simultaneously, memes are characterized by remixing and circulation and rely on some amount of mutation. The negotiation of this tension can be significant for understanding specific memes and their significance for different online communities. Looking to the communities that use a meme (and how they use it) is important because it can illuminate how the Internet is experienced, and who is excluded. Reflecting on the toxicity that was wrapped up within "meme culture" and the "weird internet" of the early 2010s, Phillips (2019) reminds us, "This was a particular culture of a particular demographic, who universalized their experiences on the internet as *the* internet, and their memes as what memes were" (p. 2). The double bind of meme recognition responds to Phillips' (2019) critique by holding space for the ways that a meme that is unrecognizable for certain groups may be meaningful for other users of the Internet.

In this article, I have adopted an aesthetic approach to the study of Internet memes to understand how the visual characteristics of memes emerge from both technical and cultural factors. Visual styles such as pixilation, blurriness, cropping, and other image degradation function as material traces of the copying and remixing processes. I have argued that memes contain a tension between mutation and recognizability, which I have described as the "double bind of recognition." The negotiation of this tension becomes visually inscribed within a meme instance in the form of the aesthetic of haste. Attending to the visual degradation of a meme as it circulates, therefore, can be a useful approach to analyzing its cultural significance for the communities in which it appears.

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