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# **An investigation of the applicability of theories of humour to internet memes**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the requirement for the degree of Master's by Research in Linguistics**

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**University of Huddersfield**

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I am lucky to have met such fantastic people on my path. I couldn't have done it without you.

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# Abstract

In this thesis, I report on how, and if we can use existing theories of humour in order to analyse new theories of humour, such as internet memes. This thesis takes the most influential and well known theories of humour such as incongruity theories, superiority and relief theories, as well as linguistic theories such as the SSTH and GVTH to aid in an investigation to how and if these can be effectively used to analyse new genres of humour.

This thesis also draws on cognitive studies in order to investigate how humour is processed and created in our minds in order to try and gain an understanding on how one may process new genres of humour.

Memes are a growing and popular form of humour. Some claim memes to be the successor to jokes and claim that they do not remember the last time they have told a joke. With the rising popularity of internet memes, this thesis takes on the challenge to investigate if internet memes are a new genre of humour, or if internet memes are jokes, under a new guise.

Most scholarly works on humour only take into consideration jokes, other forms of verbal humour and “traditional” forms of humour, such as puns or wordplay. This thesis reports on whether internet memes can be analysed in the same or similar ways, or if a new approach is necessary.

Through a meticulous data collection method, this thesis gathers a large pool of internet memes to use as examples all while comparing the two genres of humour throughout the paper.

This thesis aims to answer three main research questions, which were carefully engineered in order to answer the main question this paper sets out: are internet memes truly a new genre of humour?

# **Contents**

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview**

### **1.2 Motivation**

### **1.3 Document outline**

## **Chapter 2: Introduction to internet memes and humour**

### **2.1 what are internet memes?**

### **2.2: Defining humour**

## **Chapter 3: Data collection and aims**

### **3.1: Methodology**

### **3.2: Research questions**

## **Chapter 4: Literature review**

### **4.1: Theories of humour**

### **4.2: Incongruity theory**

### **4.3: Superiority and relief theories**

### **4.4: Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH)**

### **4.5: Schema**

### **4.6: General Verbal Theory of Humour (GVTH)**

### **4.7: Canned and situational jokes**

### **4.8: Incongruity through structure**

### **4.9: Humorous mode and suspension of disbelief**

### **4.10: Conceptual integration networks**

## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

### **5.1: Using Conceptual Integration Networks to analyse memes**

### **5.2: Appropriate incongruity**

### **5.3: Incongruity and its impact and importance in relation to internet memes and jokes**

### **5.4: Intertextuality and democracy of internet memes**

### **5.5: Jokes vs internet memes**

### **5.6: Communities**

## **Chapter 6: Internet meme categories**

**6.1: Picture-caption format**

**6.2: Picture-label format**

**6.3: Story format**

**6.4: Solo-picture**

**6.5: Free Form**

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

**7.1: Research questions answered**

**7.2: Topics for further study**

## **References**

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Overview.

We experience humour everyday, whether we seek it directly or are exposed to it indirectly, humour is a part of our everyday lives. One new genre of humour which we experience or are subject to more frequently are internet memes.

Memes are defined as a "cultural feature or a type of behaviour that is passed from one generation to another, without the influence of genes" (Cambridge Dictionary). Therefore, by that definition, the act of shaking hands, or expressing our frustration by shaking our fist at someone could be labeled a "meme". Yet, today the term is used as a label for humorous discourse found on the internet. Humorous pictures and videos are known as internet memes and many of us have come across memes on social media, our daily commute and even on the news, our daily newspaper and advertisements. We come into contact with memes everyday, and we do not tell or see jokes anymore, we share memes.

It may seem that internet memes have become the preferred term over not only the term *joke*, but also joke telling in general. Chiaro (2017) mentions that "I really cannot remember the last time anyone actually told me a joke. But day and night family and friends literally bombard me with a wide selection of humorous repertoire albeit strictly online arriving in real time on my smartphone." (Chiaro 2017 p.3).

Jokes are not shared and told as much as they were before the arrival of the internet meme, which seems to have taken over as the preferred vessel of sharing humour between one another, albeit electronically.

Jokes on the other hand are defined as "something, such as a funny story or trick, that is said or done to make people laugh" (Cambridge Dictionary). The definition is significantly different from the definition of "memes", giving the impression that the two genres of humour are different, serve different purposes and operate on different parameters. One is grounded in the social and cultural aspect, whereas the other is purely to "make people laugh". If the two are so different, why are jokes not told anymore? It seems that memes have taken the spot in social interaction that jokes may have filled some time ago. This observation has inspired the call for this paper, which investigates internet memes as a new genre of humour and the humour contained in internet memes.

In this thesis, the relationship between internet memes and jokes is explored and analysed, using existing theories of humour in order to investigate the applicability of these theories to a new, yet ubiquitous genre of humour. This thesis reports an investigation of internet memes, considering them as examples of humour and exploring how the humour is created. I investigate whether existing theories of humour can be used in order to understand and analyse the humour of internet memes.

## 1.2 Motivation.

In academia, internet memes are a new topic and although we can find some research conducted on internet memes, it is an area of academia which is mostly still unexplored. Some have conducted research on internet memes, but call for future research to be conducted, as internet memes prove to be complex in many ways. Internet memes, like jokes may have humorous, social, and political motivations, but unlike jokes, they are created, consumed, and reproduced in different, new ways. A byproduct of my investigation will include a look into whether internet memes are a different phenomena to jokes, or if internet memes use similar mechanisms as jokes under a different and new guise.

Although Internet humour and internet memes have not received much attention from academia, compared to jokes for example, it is still considered an influential genre of humour which should not be disregarded, as since the inception of internet memes, there has been no sign of the popularity of internet memes declining. Some have pointed out that "the importance of technologically mediated humorous self-expression is a phenomenon that needs more recognition from scholars" (Laineste and Voolaid 2017).

As existing theories are theories of *humour*, these theories should also prove to be useful when analysing humour in internet memes. Existing theories tend to focus on verbal humour, jokes in particular. This paper investigates whether these theories of humour are also useful in analysing a form that combines both verbal and pictorial elements. This also facilitates investigation of whether existing approaches are useful when considering a new genre of humour such as internet memes, or whether a new approach is required. To this end, the similarity between internet memes and jokes will be considered.

Internet memes are a new genre of humour, which have originated from the internet, a source not previously taken into consideration by authors of existing theories of humour. This paper investigates if humour is the same across the genres of verbal humour and internet memes, or if new genres follow different rules and operate on different principles.



## 1.3 Document outline

This paper starts by looking at what constitutes internet memes, what they are, what academic efforts have been made and are being made in chapter 2. The section opens the discussion of how the term is being used today by internet communities, as opposed to the original coinage of the term. The section looks at how internet memes have impacted jokes, joke-telling and explores the popularity and scope of internet memes. Some comparisons to jokes are made in order to better understand how internet memes operate and what sets them apart from jokes.

The chapter then continues to define and outline what constitutes humour, as in order to understand the humour in internet memes, humour should also be clearly outlined. In order to understand how humour may be created, important theories and approaches are explained and outlined in this chapter.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology behind collecting data and how data was selected for the paper. The chapter also outlines research questions which are answered by this thesis' analysis.

Chapter 4 is a literature review, which includes some of the most impactful pieces of literature which have contributed to this thesis. In this chapter we can find approaches to how humour has been analysed and approached by previous research. In this general discussion, models and theories which investigate the previously outlined overarching theories are investigated, and their importance and applicability is evaluated in this section.

Chapter 5 is the main analysis section, which takes previously mentioned theories, models and approaches to analysing humour, and looks at how these can be used, if they are applicable and how relevant these are when trying to apply to a new genre of humour (internet memes).

Chapter 6 uses the previous analysis and tries to categorise internet memes, as one of the main limitations of humour, is that humour can not be categorised. This thesis illustrates and argues that internet memes on the other hand, can be categorised, which is important to their analysis.

After the analysis, chapter 7 concludes main points raised in the analysis. This section is a discussion on how applicable and relevant existing theories of humour are in relation to internet memes. The section tries to identify the main differences between existing genres of humour which are analysed by existing theories of humour and the new genre of inter-

net memes. This section also looks to come to a conclusion and a definitive answer to research questions outlined in chapter 3.

Chapter 8 is a short section outlining topics for further study and mentions some of the limitations of this thesis. The thesis then finishes with references, and an appendix.

# Chapter 2: Introduction to internet memes and humour

## 2.1: What are internet memes?

In 1976, Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme”, as a name for a noun that “conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation” (1976, p.249). The term emerges from the Greek “mimeme” which translates to “that which is imitated”, which was abbreviated by Dawkins in order to closely resemble *gene*. Dawkins points out that “just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which [...] can be called imitation (1976, p. 249).

In 1976, the examples of memes given were “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (1976, p. 249). Today, if one was to google or research the term “meme”, they would be flooded with what the term “meme” is used for today: humorous images with captions, short videos and other pieces of humorous internet discourse. Often the term “meme” is used to refer to a humorous text, image, event or a combination of these. The term “meme” has become a term for labelling inter-textual, pictorial internet humour and is rarely used as the original definition of 1976.

The term has also become a mainstay in describing people, events and behaviours. We may call an event a meme, or a person a meme, due to their humorous nature. The term “my life is one big meme” is used on the internet as a way of saying “my life is one big joke”. On the Internet, memes are the vessel of communicating humour between people and users, the term “meme” is often used as a substitute to the term “joke”, and it begs the question: are memes and jokes the same, just under two different names?

Currently, internet memes are one of the most popular formats of sharing humour on the internet, and have surpassed jokes by an enormous percentage. In fact, it is a challenge to

Why doesn't anyone tell jokes any more?  
Well, we have memes now

find internet users sharing humour, which is not in a internet meme-format. Articles have arisen, asking the questions such as the one below, by The Guardian.

Source: The [guardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

Throughout the article, internet memes are considered to be the successor to jokes, as a replacement rather than a new genre of communicating humour “The internet has changed the mode and means by which we tell jokes. Old joke formats still exist in places like Twitter, where the pullback and reveal joke is still king, but we’ve found a more efficient way of telling the old standard: memes.” As more of us realise the incredible scope and importance of internet memes, I noticed that similar observations are made, such as that “They[memes] fulfil exactly the same criteria as old vaudeville standards, easily recognisable, simple to tailor to your immediate context. [...]The ability to share goes without saying but also the speed at which every culturally permeating image is instantly transformed into a new canvas from which a thousand more jokes are based.” (J.Colley: The Guardian).

An overarching notion and observation made is that we may have stopped telling each other jokes, as we now live two lives; our “normal”, and our “virtual” lives, and we experience humour and joke telling (or meme sharing) on the latter of the two.

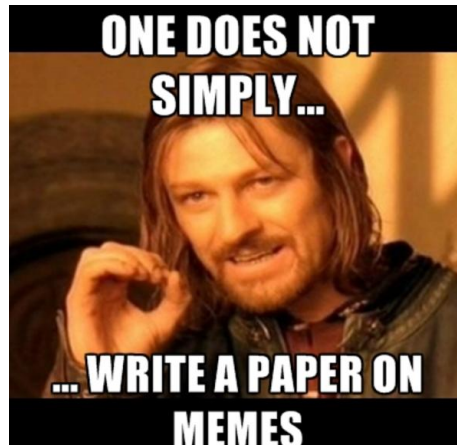
The overall feeling is that humour is most at home online. I really cannot remember the last time anyone actually told me a joke. But day and night family and friends literally bombard me with a wide selection of humorous repertoire albeit strictly online arriving in real time on my smartphone. (Chiaro 2017, p.3).

Such observations were an inspirations to delve into the investigation of whether internet memes are a successor, or an entirely new format in humour.

The internet is where internet memes are born and shared, therefore the fact that we now experience most humour on the internet as opposed to jokes does not surprise. Jokes, a predominantly verbal form of humour will naturally struggle to survive on a virtual platform, where users lose the ability to convey humour through delivery of speech, body language, and facial expressions, which all add to the effectiveness of a joke.

Although internet memes allow for an addition of emotion, body language, or facial expressions through pictorial elements, the essence is still lost due to internet memes being static images most of the time.

However, internet memes have their own unique characteristics, which jokes may not. Internet memes allow for a continuation of humour by referring to each other, as well as be-



ing able to present humour by anything and anyone. An internet meme can picture a famous actor saying something they have never said, said in an iconic way they are known to, such as the example of Boromir, played by Sean Bean, in the Lord of The Rings trilogy. The "one does not simply" is an example of an internet meme, which plays on something that was said in the film, which is then altered and changed to display something that was never said, for comedic purposes. Instead of a poor imitation by a friend, the scenario plays out in our imagination, in which we can imagine the actor's voice, accent and body language.

Prototypical internet memes are considered to be tokens of humour which involve a picture and caption format. Although most newer internet memes have moved away from this format, this format still occurs often and is effective in achieving a comedic effect, just as a "knock knock" joke may be considered old and overused, but can still sometimes make us smile, even if it is due to how bad and "unfunny" the joke may be. Although early internet memes were solely created for the purposes of humour, today we can find internet memes being created and shared with political or personal motivations.

As mentioned, internet memes, as opposed to traditional forms humour (such as jokes) are still considered as a new genre of humour and their analysis is imperative to the advancement of humour theories. As internet memes have risen to popularity in the last decade, attention is been given to internet memes in academia, especially in sociologically focused fields. Therefore, not all types of internet memes have yet been explored or analysed on a linguistic level, unlike jokes, which were the focus point of a large amount of humour studies prior to this new genre.

This is especially true of internet memes which are controversial, such as internet memes based upon a popular, yet thought provoking music video by the American artist Childish

Gambino. In the music video the artist addresses some of America's societal problems in an interesting and shocking way. Internet memes which were made of the video gained traction not only due to the hilarity of the meme, but also due to the controversy which sparked as a side effect. The anonymity of internet memes allows for controversial humour to be spread and replicated easily. Message-boards such as 4chan are well known for their endless flow of controversial, and sometimes racist, homophobic or hateful internet memes, for the sole purpose of being "edgy" (controversial/ taboo). We can draw our first comparison to jokes here, as sexist or racist jokes are no novelty, but unlike jokes, which carry an identity of the person telling it, internet memes are anonymous, and can be shared much quicker than jokes can be retold, reaching wider audiences quicker.



Source: Vice.com

Internet memes today are not exclusively made to invoke humour; internet memes have evolved and also taken on poignant roles of propaganda and critical pieces, with humour-evoking internet memes still being the most popular form of internet meme to date. Like in other forms of humour, some internet memes can take on such qualities as silly, witty humour. This is interesting as we start to realise that although internet memes are a new form of humour, some qualities are a mainstay, ones which occur in existing forms of humour, such as using humour as commentary pieces on political or socio-economic situations. This is important to keep in mind when we address exactly how similar/different internet memes are to existing forms of humour.

In internet memes, the caption(s) often is/are treated as the punchline, as it changes the perception of the picture in a significant way, similarly to how a punchline in a joke may affect and modify what was previously said in the joke (the set up). The example of “one does not simply” shows a simple and easy to understand internet meme, which changes the second part of the quote “one does not simply walk into Mordor”, into an unexpected second part which talks about the real world and not the fantasy world of Lord of The Rings.

It is important to point out that the meme, on surface looks simple and easy to grasp (as long as we are familiar with the Lord of The Rings franchise), as internet memes tend to heavily rely on previous knowledge and understanding in order to understand the humour in the meme. This is a reoccurring motive and as a result, the correlation between exclusiveness and humorousness in internet memes is one of the focal investigations of this paper.

As internet memes become more complex and intertextual, their exclusiveness increases, alienating those who are not familiar with the meme and the references, as a result creating the other group of those readers who do understand. Shifman (2014) notes that a “meme literacy” is necessary to understand and create memes. Some can be understood and created by anyone, whereas other memes require a “detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture” (2014, p.100).

This is an important point to raise, as to the naked eye, or someone that is new to internet memes, some memes such as the “loss” meme could be viewed as sad, touching, and personal, and it is important to possess detailed knowledge behind the origin and evolution of the meme in order to understand why some find such memes humorous.

As more of us start to understand and grasp the enormous scope of internet memes, more memes and sub-genres will evolve, as one of the reasons as to why internet memes are becoming so viral and popular is the ease of access and creation: “specialised websites offer templates that even a six-year-old can operate” (Shifman 2014, p.100).

Some academic efforts have been made to shine a light on internet memes and their ever-evolving popularity. The ever growing scope and popularity of internet memes have led to observations being made on how internet memes “cannot be ignored because the internet is the place where people spend more and more of their time; it is a place where they, among other things, share folklore.” (Laineste and Voolaid 2017).

Take stand-up comedy as an example. In order to be exposed to stand-up, one has to consciously seek out a programme or a video containing stand-up, which is often of a pro-

fessional comedian carrying out their work. Internet memes on the other hand can be created by anyone, and shared on widespread platforms such as FaceBook or Twitter. Unlike comedians, one does not require any past training, and only requires a fraction of past experience and understanding to create an internet meme.

Internet memes, through their accessibility, rate of replication, and most importantly the anonymity are a form of humour which we may find to be more explicit and controversial to others at this point in time. Compared to stand up comedy for example, as mentioned by Holm 2016, the comedian Daniel Tosh faced “intense controversy” after the comedian wished rape upon a female heckler during his show in 2012. Internet memes, on the other hand rarely carry a face or name behind them when they are being shared or reproduced on the web, apart from the person sharing the meme of course, but we can never be sure if an online profile is real or not. Internet memes are at the forefront of how far boundaries can be pushed in terms of what is deemed to be acceptable to laugh at or make humorous parodies of. I have mentioned that I have left out taboo memes which cover topics like rape or gore, but that does not stop them from existing and being made and shared. As mentioned by Holm 2016, “tendentious jokes allow humourists to communicate otherwise unacceptable opinions or ideas, which must normally be repressed”. Internet memes are a new vessel for these unacceptable opinions and ideas to be shared, created and imitated more freely, almost guaranteeing no repercussion, as although we may go to a stand up comedy show to experience this “true pleasure of giving voice to repressed and unpermitted thoughts”, as illustrated by Daniel Tosh, this may not always be the case.

Holm 2016 puts forward the term “edge work”, which “is a form of humour that functions through an engagement with the edge of acceptable standards of social relations, but that does not constitute a rejection of those relations” (2016, p.117). Although the memes in this thesis are not exactly “edgy”, internet memes may often be perceived as tokens of this “edgy” humour in which degenerate humour can be shared and reproduced. The internet may be a new way of sharing and collectively enjoying this type of humour.

Internet memes are a form of humour which is extremely accessible, as in this digital age, one simply needs access to a device such as a smartphone or computer and access to the internet to create and share their meme, with incredible ease. Memes are starting to be adopted by companies, websites and are shared by popular figures on the internet, therefore we may be exposed to memes as a bi-product of our morning routine of checking our social media or emails, which, when compared to stand-up is highly unlikely.



## 2.2: Defining humour

Before humour production through internet memes is analysed, one requires an understanding of how humour is defined and what constitutes humour.

Although some may label humour as “anything that makes a person laugh or smile” (Ross 1998, p.1), humour is not the production of laughter or smiling as we may laugh or smile as a coping mechanism, a form of politeness or other means. Mulkay points out how “one must decide on what constitutes as humour; it cannot be defined as ‘something which makes you laugh’, as laughter is not always produced after humour, nor is humour the sole cause of laughter production” (1988, p.23).

However, Mulkay points out that analysis and study of humour can still be carried out, as although it can not be defined or categorised, it can be studied and analysed, as humour still follows rules and patterns, which can be found in all types of humour (Mulkay 1988).

Many approaches have been taken in order to define and classify humour, proving it to be a challenging task. Although the feeling of humour, or being humoured by something/ someone is a familiar feeling, definitions are never accurate enough to warrant a definitive and accurate description of humour itself, “there is not much consensus among theorists regarding what exactly humour is?” (Bali, Ahuja and Singh 2018, p.1).

One of the reasons as to why humour is so hard to define and classify is that “sense of humour varies from person to person and therefore giving its types is even more difficult” (Bali, Ahuja and Singh 2018, p.1).

Humour is an ever changing, cognitive and personal phenomenon. Long and Graesser mention humour being “a complex linguistic, affective and psychological phenomenon” (1988, p.35). Long and Graesser also mention that existing psychological theories and studies “fail to deliver explanatory and complete accounts of humour” and the “handful of simple hypotheses” have a “very restricted scope” (1988, p.35).

Long and Graesser have pinned humour production being the result of one of, or the combination of three main approaches of humour study: relief, incongruity-resolution and disparagement theories. Long and Graesser, in their study use a “broad” definition of humour, which is defined as “anything done or said, purposely or inadvertently, that is found to be comical or amusing” (1988, p.37).

T.Veale (2004) mentions that "humor is such a diverse phenomenon that it easily resists any essentialist attempt to define it in necessary and sufficient terms. We should thus be slow to invoke the idea that humor has any "necessary ingredients." (2004, p.424).

Through this, Veale proposes the idea that humour may not have "ingredients", as this paper will later discover, as all "ingredients" which are proposed to be a necessary part of humour can be disproved. Attardo points out that (1994, p.6) "Ultimately, it seems that, not only has it not been possible to agree on how to divide the category of "humour" (e.g. "humour" vs "comic" vs "ridiculous"), but it is even difficult to find a pre-theoretical definition of "humour" in the most general sense. As a matter of fact, the claim that humour is undefinable has been advanced several times".

The definition jokes and wit are given is "anything done or said to deliberately provoke amusement. Jokes are also context-free and self-contained", "Wit will be defined as anything deliberately said that provokes amusement in a specific conversational context" (1988, p.37).

These definitions are significant, as although these are given to conversational humour, which internet memes are not, internet memes fit both of these definitions in the sense that memes are tokens which are made and shared to provide amusement, and most of the time, they require context.

Due to humour being a personal, affective and psychological phenomenon, categorising humour proves to be especially difficult, this is due to how one may perceive a joke as a pun, others may perceive the same joke as a sexist joke, Bali, Ahuja and Singh 2018, p.1 make the following observation: "A clean desk is a sign of a sign of a cluttered desk drawer, can be labeled as a sarcastic joke as well as a wordplay joke/pun". (Bali, Ahuja and Singh 2018, p.1).

Internet memes, on the other hand, seem to follow different rules, due to them being visual tokens of humour. The visual aspects of internet memes can help us in categorising memes and possibly creating a model of how certain elements of memes can aid in defining the meme's category. However, internet memes are tokens of humour, and they produce humour. Therefore, although we may be able to categorise memes, the humour which they evoke may still be difficult to categorise.

# Chapter 3: Data collection and aims

## 3.1: Methodology

In order to investigate internet memes and humour, I first gathered memes from online sources where internet memes are shared and reproduced.

I gathered a large collection of internet memes into a folder, which contained over 100 internet memes.

Memes were collected over the data collection period from multiple sources, these included dedicated Subreddits, Facebook groups and internet meme pages such as Know-YourMeme. I did not change/ expand my sources during and after the data collection period. After data was collected, no more was added, no data was altered or changed. These sources are recorded in the references. The ways in which I decided which memes qualify was based on the following determining factors:

1. **Popularity:** I collected a number of different genres and types of internet memes which have been popular across the internet sources in the last 10 years. By doing so, I could illustrate and investigate how internet memes change, and this would also allow for a look into certain qualities and features internet memes contain that may make them become viral. I collected internet memes from a number of sites: Reddit, KnowYourMeme and Facebook groups being some of the examples. I only collected memes which had over 100 likes, upvotes or entries as a way of quantifying popularity. I chose 100 likes/upvotes as the benchmark quantity as early 2010 memes would have a lot less likes and upvotes compared to memes today which can range in the thousand's.
2. **Relevance:** I then examined my pool and looked and chose memes which were appropriate. I chose memes which followed patterns, such as the "distracted boyfriend" and the "connect 4" memes, as this would allow for an analysis of many examples of a similar structure. I also chose memes which were well known among the internet community as exclusive, or cryptic as this genre of internet memes is often overlooked, due to the intense intertextuality and background knowledge necessary to understand the humour contained in such memes, these include the "loss" and "watermelon" memes. Some internet memes were selected as they fit the norm of what internet memes are considered to be: captions and pictures. These include the "one does not simply" and "I'm not drinking tonight" memes.

I decided to not use any internet memes or pictures which included gore, nudity, sexism, racism, or any type of taboo language. Although internet memes sometimes include these as a way of expressing the “free” nature of the internet, I deemed them inappropriate for this paper, as I could still present all of my ideas and findings without including such topics and notions. Surprisingly, a large proportion of popular internet memes included these features, possibly due to the controversy they spark, leading to a larger exposure.

### 3.2: Research questions

The research questions were designed to answer the main aim of the paper, which is an investigation of the applicability of theories of humour to internet memes.

The questions are designed to be answered thoroughly throughout the paper, and will be revisited in the conclusion.

In order to investigate the humour of internet memes I designed the following research questions:

1. How do internet memes differ from existing forms of “traditional” humour, such as jokes?
2. Do existing theories of humour apply to internet memes in the same ways they apply to jokes? If these theories do not, does that make these theories limited to the particular category of humour they discuss?
3. Do existing theories of humour need to be altered or changed to also incorporate internet memes and therefore cover new genres of humour, or can we simply add to these theories to accommodate new genres of humour?

Once the questions are answered, the paper, as a whole should report on the applicability, and the importance of existing theories of humour, when these are applied to internet memes, which is a new genre of humour. This paper also explores the falsifiability of these theories to a certain extent. If the theories are *theories of humour*, they should apply to all genres of humour. The main aim is to explore how applicable existing theories are to a genre which at the time of the creation did not exist. Is it possible that internet memes are close enough to a certain genre, such as cartoons, that theories which look at cartoons can also be applied to internet memes, or is a new theory and/or approach required?

# Chapter 4: Literature review

## 4.1: Theories of humour

It is widely regarded that there are three main theories of humour; incongruity, relief and superiority, and Attardo (1994) labels these theories as "a commonly accepted classification", which divides these theories into the aforementioned "incongruity theories (a.k.a. contrast), (Raskin 1985, pp. 31-36), hostility/ disparagement (a.k.a. aggression, superiority, triumph, derision) theories (Ibid.: 36-38), and release theories (a.k.a. sublimation, liberation) (Ibid.: pp.38-40)"(Attardo, 1994, p.47).

Attardo (1994) provides the following table, which groups the theories into three "families": the cognitive, social and psychoanalytical families.

**Table 1.2: The Three Families of Theories**

Cognitive	Social	Psychoanalytical
Incongruity	Hostility	Release
Contrast	Aggression	Sublimation
	Superiority	Liberation
	Triumph	Economy
	Derision	
	Disparagement	

The three theories are regarded as the main theories of humour partly due to their roots tracing back to the times of Aristotle and Plato. Attardo explores how the three theories were discussed by the two philosophers in the explanation and exploration of the theories.

## 4.2: Incongruity theory

The incongruity theory can be found to be claimed as the most influential humour theory in many studies, approaches and theories. Attardo points out that "Since incongruity theories are based on the mismatch between two ideas in the broadest possible sense, they are the direct ancestors of 'cognitive' theories, which currently seem to dominate the psychological field" (1994, p.48).

Attardo (1994) states that roots of the incongruity theory could be traced back to Aristotle, "Aristotle's definition of humor as something bad was interpreted as meaning something unbecoming, out of place, thus not necessarily evil" (Attardo 1994, p.48).

The general and widely accepted definition of the incongruity theory is the expectation and an unexpected result of what occurs in a joke. Incongruous humour relies on situations and events presented in jokes that are highly unlikely and possibly absurd. Beattie(1776), defines incongruous humour as:

Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them (1776, p.348).

Mulkay explains how incongruity may create humour, as "the basic idea is that humour occurs when there is a sudden movement between, or unexpected combination of, distinct interpretative frames" (Mulkay, 1988, p.26). Attardo (1994) uses the following definition of incongruity, by McGhee (1979, pp.6-7).

The notion of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationships between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous (Attardo 1994, p.48, McGhee 1979, pp.6-7).

From the above definitions, an understanding can be made of what incongruity is and how it will be defined and used in this paper. Incongruity arises through something unexpected happening, resulting in a clash of scripts or frames. Incongruity belongs in the "cognitive" family of the three theories and efforts have been made to explore the cognitive processes that take place when experiencing incongruous humour. Suls' "Humour-appreciation model" (1972, p.85) helps with grasping how incongruous humour may cause a humorous effect, and although the flowchart presents "laughter" as the end result, it may be necessary to substitute it with "humorous effect" for the purpose of this paper. This is due to the fact that laughter is not the only result of humour, and laughter is not exclusive to humour. One may laugh as a result of relief or as a coping mechanism, as mentioned by Mulkay "laughter is not always produced after humour, nor is humour the sole cause of laughter production" (1988, p.23).

The model shows that in order for a humorous effect to be achieved, the joke receiver follows a mental flow chart in order to grasp an understanding of the joke. Suls also presents a “two-step process” which a reader/ joke receiver may follow.

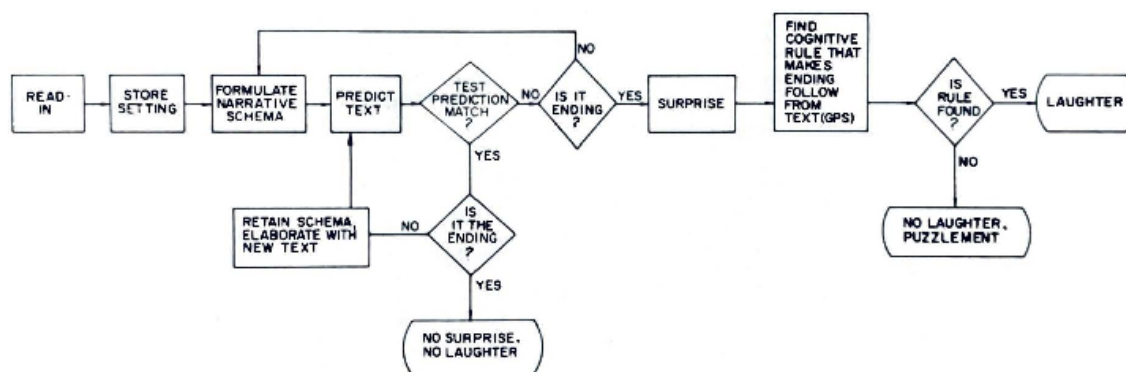


Figure 1. Humor-appreciation model.

Stage 1: “In the first stage the perceiver finds his expectations about the text disconfirmed by the ending of a joke or, the case of cartoon, his expectations about the picture disconfirmed by the caption” (Suls 1972, p.82).

Stage 2: “ In the second stage the perceiver engages in a form of problem-solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punchline follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts” (Suls 1972, p.82).

Suls goes as far as to say that “the perceiver must proceed through these two stages to find the joke funny” (Suls 1972, p.82). Suls points out that when the joke is first presented, the joke recipient may create a schema or a text world in which this joke can exist. As the joke and incongruities unfold, the recipient of the joke starts to solve and try to picture the joke. The resolution leads to either a humorous effect, or puzzlement, as presented by the humor-appreciation model.

Therefore one must understand that “a joke’s ending does not follow logically from its proceeding text”(Suls 1972, p.84). Thanks to this illogical structure of jokes, and internet memes for that matter, a humorous effect can be achieved despite the joke not following logically from its “proceeding text”.

### 4.3: Superiority and relief theories

The other two main theories of humour are the superiority and relief theories, which, according to Attardo (1994), could also be traced to Aristotle and Plato, which “all mention the negative element of humor, its aggressive side” (1994, p.49). Also referred to as

“schadenfreude”, the theory of superiority is based around the feeling of joy or happiness at the expense of another’s misfortune. The superiority theory is amplified and better illustrated when the subject of the joke is of a higher status, such as political figures or religious figures. This is due to the idea that these figures are often perceived as pure and without fault, therefore when these figures are found to experience very human and normal misfortune, the humour is amplified.

The relief theory is thought to be centred around the sense of relief one might have as result of humour, due to psychological tension being lifted. This theory is deeply psychological, illustrating that one may not only enjoy humour for its funny nature, but also as a psychological relief. Attardo notes that “humor ‘releases’ tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws” (1994, p.49). Attardo also notes that linguistically, the release/ relief theory “account for the ‘liberation’ from the rules of language, typical of puns and other word-play, and also for the infractions to the principle of cooperation” (1994, p.49).

Also sometimes referred to as “hostility” and “release” theories, these two theories are indeed impactful theories of humour, and ones which should not be disregarded when studying humour. However, the theories which will be later explored in this paper are all centred around incongruity, and it will be found to be the most appropriate theory throughout this paper.

#### **4.4: Semantic Script Theory of Humour(SSTH)**

*Semantic mechanisms of humour* (1985) introduces the Semantic Theory of Humour, in which Raskin proposes the following hypothesis:

“A text can be characterised as a single joke-carrying text if both of the conditions in (108) are satisfied.

108(i): The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts.

108(ii): The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite.” (Raskin 1985, p.99).

Raskin proposes the idea that in order for a text to be characterised as a joke, there have to be two scripts, which are opposites of one another, or completely different. Raskin gives us the example of the following joke:



“Is the doctor at home? -The patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No”, the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in” (Raskin 1985, p.100).

The first script proposes the idea that a sick patient has come to see a doctor, asking if the doctor is home. The second part of the joke introduces a pretty wife, which should be irrelevant in most story telling scenarios about someone coming to see a doctor. However, the “pretty wife” serves a critical role in the joke, as it plays a vital part in understanding the punchline “come right in”. The punchline subverts our expectation of what should happen next, as we would assume that after the reply of “no”, the wife lets the patient know where the doctor is or what time he will be back. Instead the joke delivers the punchline of “come right in” which relies on the recipient of the joke to decode what will happen after the pretty wife lets the patient in.

We can see the two scripts clashing in this joke. Instead of letting the patient in, if the doctor was home, or instead of letting the patient what his options are if the doctor is not home (letting him know when the doctor will be back, giving his contact details etc.), the wife lets the patient in, which illustrates this “clash” of scripts, resulting in a humorous conclusion to the joke.

The SSTH was impactful at the time of its inception, as it could be used as a useful tool in order to illustrate incongruity in humour. Incongruity may arise through a “clash of scripts”, which is arguably the most prevalent way of creating humour. The joke relies on making the reader realise that what they are reading is not adding up as expected, as a result making the reader backtrack and go over what happened in order for them to realise why what they read does not make sense as expected. The result of the problem-solving process is often humour, one may make use of Suls’ Humour Appreciation Model here.

Therefore, it is understood that incongruity arises through something unexpected happening, resulting in a clash of scripts or frames. In order for an incongruity to arise, there has to be an agreed standard or expectation which can be subverted in the first place. It seems that this is the formula for incongruous humour to arise: an expectation, and the clash of scripts based upon the initial expectation. A good example of incongruous humour is shown by the following joke:

**Justice is best served cold because if it was served warm it would be justwater.**

Firstly, the joke relies on a number of parameters to be true before the joke can achieve its humorous effect, such as not being read aloud and the reader reading “justice” as “justice” and not “just-ice”.

The punchline, although being very short is effective and makes the reader backtrack and try to work out exactly why “justice” would be “justwater” if it were warm. The reader then realises that “justice” in this joke should be read as “just- ice”, and although this creates a rather ordinary sentence, the incongruity in reading “justice” as “just ice” creates a humorous effect. The double meaning is hidden in the two components of the joke, resulting in a clash of scripts about a common expression/aphorism about justice, vs a somewhat nonsensical expression, when the reader does in fact analyse why they have read a nonsensical expression.

One does not usually read “justice” as “just ice”, and in this case it is imperative that the reader reads it correctly, in order to then be able to go back and realise how it should be read in this instance. The SSTH would label the above joke as a “clash of scripts”, in which as we read, we need to understand why and how “justice” and “just ice” differ, making the reader go back over what they are reading and realise the difference between the two.

The SSTH proposed the idea that for humour to be created, there are criteria which need to be met, more specifically, two opposing scripts need to clash. This is easy to spot in jokes, and to a certain extent in internet memes also. The SSTH being a theory of humour should also apply to internet memes, as one of the aims is to explore if internet memes and jokes can be explored and analysed using the same, existing theories.



This meme is a combination of two internet memes, the “finally a worthy opponent” meme, and the “Bluetooth hose” meme, this meme contains an advancement, or addition to the meme with “wireless seatbelts”, which follow the same trend set by the Bluetooth hose example.

By the rules of SSTH, one should easily identify the scripts which clash with each other, although there are many layers to this meme. The first observation is the humour contained in the two inventions, making them ridiculous and in some cases, dangerous. The script oppositions are clear and easy to understand; seat belts cannot be wireless, nor can a bluetooth hose exist.

As a result of this one can understand the incongruity being the extreme unlikeliness of these inventions being real. The addition of the “finally a worthy opponent” adds another internet meme format into the grand picture, which acts as an introduction to a new meme which follows a similar trend.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), one may class such memes as a “language game”. The term refers to specialist language a group of people may use between each other for a number of reasons, whether it is to efficiently communicate or to communicate in a way only that group will understand, see *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

## 4.5: Schema

In order to better understand exactly how certain types of incongruity lead to humour, some authors have used the schema theory to refer to the concepts on which the joke is based. Some may use the term “schema”, others may use the term “scripts”.

However, both schema and scripts refer to a package of knowledge a reader possesses, and how that package helps understand and modify what is read and pictured.

Deckers and Buttram talk about the joke mentioned earlier of the Doctor and his Wife in relation to schemas and SSTH in *Humor as a response to incongruities within or between Schemata* (1990).

“A Schema is similar to Raskin's (1985) script and can be likened to a play script, outline, blueprint, or plan.” (1990, p.54). Deckers and Buttram talk about how schemas and incongruity are important as one sets an expectation (schema), and the other (incongruity) subverts expectations, possibly resulting in humour.

Snel (1991), in her analysis of Little Britain explains that schemata are “organised packages of knowledge”, that are triggered by:

Either linguistic terms in the text or contextual cues. Once activated, schemata generate expectations and those expectations fill in what is not explicitly mentioned in the text. However, expectations may be subverted, resulting in incongruity and this incongruity may give rise to humour. (2006, p.59).

Schemata are packages which help set a backdrop for what happens in a joke or an internet meme. Schema has often been referred to as “building blocks” that constitute what is read: “A schema is a cognitive structure for representing generic knowledge in memory. A schema represents stereotypical concepts of objects, situations, and behaviour sequences.” (Deckers and Buttram 1990, p.53).

For example, when being told a joke which occurs in a coffee shop, mentally the recipient will imagine an image of a coffee shop, what may be inside, the people, the smell, and the mood of the coffee shop. Incongruity crashes through this setting and may “give rise to humour”, if appropriate. The following joke also displays this well:

Example 4:

“I went to Cost yesterday, for a coffee”

“Don’t you mean *Costa*?”

“Yeah, it was really expensive though, it’s more like Costa-lot!”

The above example relies on both parties knowing what Costa is and how much a coffee costs in Costa. When told about Costa, the joke recipient may think about what Costa’s look like, the smell, service, colour schemes and prices. The schema is triggered instantly by a trigger such as the name of the establishment or the mispronunciation of the name in this case, some parameters have to be met, or be appropriate.

Another example of a schema or script is of going to see a doctor:

Patient: “My back hurts when I get up in the morning.”

Doctor: “Get up at night then.”

The joke employs a schema of a patient seeing a doctor, in order to let the doctor know that his back hurts. The schema of a patient and doctor exchange may lead to the doctor analysing the patient's pain, and then resolving the issue with either medicine or advice. The joke is compliant with the schema the recipient may possess, but not with the resolution.

The doctor instead resolves the patient's pain with the advice of "get up at night then", which is incongruous, as it illustrates the doctor's misunderstanding, or lack of understanding. The response of "get up at night then" suggests that the patient's back only hurts if he gets up in the morning, instead of understanding that the patient's back hurts every time the patient wakes up, it just so happens that the patient adds "in the morning", to illustrate the fact that after a night of sleep, the patient's back hurts.

The incongruous resolution makes the recipient pause and realise that the schema does not comply with this resolution. They may then may apply their problem-solving skills in order to understand why this response was made by the doctor, by which time they may realise the humorous intention of the exchange between the doctor and the patient.

## **4.6: General Verbal Theory of Humour (GVTH)**

In 1991, Attardo and Raskin revised the *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (Raskin, 1985), transforming it into the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GVTH). Criticisms of the SSTH as too general or too ambiguous led Attardo and Raskin to make an "extension" of SSTH involving 6 "KR's" (knowledge resources), which can help us establish how jokes are humorous, and analyse similarity between jokes.

Although the GVTH is a verbal theory of humour, it has been included in this paper as the GVTH is one of the most popular humour theories for joke analysis. Given that this paper looks at jokes, I have included GVTH. One of the aims of this paper is to look at how jokes and internet memes compare, to be able to do so I have included GVTH to aid me in analysing jokes and internet memes. Although internet memes are mostly visual, comparisons between internet memes and jokes may be drawn.

Raskin points out in *Semantic mechanisms of humour* (1985) that this study of humour tackled a subject which had not received much attention until his advancements in the field. In the beginning of the book Raskin claims that "the book is the first ever application

of modern linguistic theory of verbal humour” (Raskin 1985, p.13). However, as his study paved the way for more studies in the field, SSTH proved to be too vague and general. As a consequence Attardo and Raskin (1991) expanded the theory by adding the 6 knowledge resources creating the GVTH, illustrated by the following hierarchy:

1. Script Oppositions (found as the main focus of the SSTH).
  2. Logical Mechanisms
  3. Situations
  4. Target
  5. Narrative Strategies
  6. Language
- Joke Text-

(Figure 10 in ATTARDO, S. and RASKIN, V. 1991, p.325).

GVTH looks at and explores main principles of the SSTH further, employing the “6 Knowledge Resources” (KR’s), as well as 6 “parameters of joke difference”, maps and hierarchies. GVTH refines Raskin’s theory and observations, and establishes SSTH as a cornerstone theory in the field which Raskin started exploring in 1985, giving birth to GVTH, a refined and expanded version of this theory of humour.

The article takes one joke, and looks at six variations of that same joke, and explores how each one varies and what it does by doing so. By employing the six KR’s, which can be used to “model individual jokes and act as the distinguishing factors in order to determine the similarity or differences between types of jokes” (Bali, T et. Al. 2018).

The article explores how variations of the same joke employ different methods, such as changing parameters or the target in order to evoke humour. By using KR’s we can establish how humour is evoked, although the joke changes.

In *Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model*, the following observation was made:

It has been frequently noted in humor research, especially since the inception of the incongruity theories of humor (...) that a joke must provide a logical or pseudo-logical justification of the absurdity or irreality it postulates. Very little has been done in humor research to follow up on this observation. (Attardo and Raskin 1991, p.307).

The above comment illustrates that a joke must provide a justification or explanation to the absurdities which occur in the joke and although at the time of Attardo and Raskin's exploration not much was done to follow up that observation, it gives us an interesting perspective on how jokes are to be explained and understood.

The joke which is used as the base example by GVTH is the following:

"How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's Standing on (Freedman and Hofman 1980)" (Attardo et al. 1991, p.295).

The target may change from "Poles" to "Irishmen" for example, but the effect and aim the joke has stays the same. For example, the original joke has Poles as the target of the joke. However, the following joke is using Irishmen as the target: "How many Irishmen does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's Standing on (see Raskin 1985, p.176)" (Attardo et al. 1991, p.295).

The jokes are formulated in the same way and only the target changes. Attardo and Raskin then explore other ways that these jokes may change and differ, by using KR's (knowledge resources) and parameters in order to establish the GVTH.

A similar process can be applied to knock-knock jokes, as one can replace the cow with any other animal, person or item, as long as it can be associated with a certain sound of that object/ animal, and the recipients are educated enough as to understand why it makes that sound.

Example:

T: Joke teller.

R: Joke recipient.

T:"Knock-knock"

R:"Who's there?"

T:"The interrupting straight-piped Honda Civic"

R:"The interrupting straight-piped Hond-"

T: (Before the above response finishes) "VROOOOOOOM"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A *straight-piped Honda Civic* refers to a modified, small hatchback car, with a 4-cylinder 1.6litre engine, which has a single exhaust, normally of a diameter of about 3.5inches, without silencers or resonators. These cars are known in the automotive scene to be especially loud and obnoxious cars. Therefore, if we are educated enough on a certain premise, we will understand the joke.

It can also be seen how internet memes follow a similar formula. For example, to have an established internet meme, with only slight variations of target or language. This may be a significant observation as it would mean internet memes may be much closely related to jokes than previously expected. An example is shown below:



The internet meme could be analysed using the GVTH by first understanding which parameters would be relevant in order to match with KR's, as the meme is not a verbal joke, which is what the GVTH was created for.

For one to analyse the internet meme using the GVTH, one would first have to understand how the meme would be formulated in joke form, at which point there is a risk in losing a portion, if not all of the humorous effect. Jokes and internet memes are designed in ways that makes them humorous, if we were to interfere with their constructions and applications, we risk changing the jokes and memes into pieces of discourse they were not meant to be when first created.

One could argue that in the internet memes above, the TA stays the same (the youth), and the SI changes. However, an argument could be made that all of the KR's may change, due to the fact that there is no actual joke which could be analysed. Internet memes are heavily reliant on the picture, which poses an incredible challenge to analyse in terms of GVTH, as the picture could be analysed in many different ways. It may be apparent that the man looks at a different woman whilst walking with what may be assumed to be his girlfriend. However, without text specifying that this is exactly the case, an argument could be made that the woman in the blue may be his sister, mother, or a stranger. An attribute of internet memes is that they are extremely malleable pieces of humour which can be adapted to one's current situation or mood.



GVTH has received some criticism, as it became apparent that the way the GVTH was claiming jokes to differ turned out to be somewhat unfalsifiable. For example, Oring (2011) states that some of the jokes included in the article, although claimed to vary in one KR (knowledge resource), varied in many more than one.

Oring claims that “this is not a minor problem in categorisation. Much depends on it” (2011, p.211). Oring writes about when an experiment was carried out on the GVTH, it turned out that the KR’s in which the joke differed were not singular and identical, but in fact KR’s in the jokes presented in the experiment were different and there were more than one KR in variation between the jokes.

One of the jokes included a chicken as a target, however, as discussed by the theory, stereotypes or people ought to be the “butt” of the joke and a chicken “cannot be considered a stereotype’ or the ‘butt’ of the joke” (Oring 2011, p.211 quoting Attardo and Raskin 1991, p.301).

Oring explains that the chicken should have never been considered, and as a result “further upset the parametric analysis of the experimental joke materials”, and claims that “the experiment on GVTH was flawed from its beginning” (Oring 2011, p.212).

The above criticism begs the question of how accurate and reliable GVTH is as “a template for analysis” (Attardo and Raskin 1991, p.341).

## **4.7: Canned and situational jokes**

GVTH proposes that there are two types of jokes; the “canned” jokes, and “situational” jokes. Canned jokes are reproduced from memory when thought to be appropriate to the current situation, for example if we are in a crowd of people telling jokes. Situational jokes are explained to be “produced out of their components. The Situation provides some of the components explicitly or implicitly, and the producer of the joke provides the rest.” (Attardo and Raskin 1991, p.326).

One may already see how in this case this limitation of only acknowledging the fact that there are only two jokes may have an impact on trying to use GVTH in order to look at internet memes. This is due to the fact that internet memes are new, and although we may consider internet memes to be virtual, multimodal “jokes”, it would be hard to group them into one of the two categories produced by Attardo and Raskin. One of the reasons as to

why it is almost impossible to put internet memes into one of the two groups is because internet memes are non verbal.

Attardo and Raskin limited the GVTH only to verbal jokes. Internet memes, as discussed here can simply be a joke illustrated and put against a background picture. Therefore, how would one group internet memes against this idea that there are only “canned” and “situational” jokes?

One may possibly argue that the way that one “uses” internet memes is in the same way we may tell “canned” and “situational” jokes, whether that be on social media or in private chats between friends.

On the other hand, there are dedicated pages, sites and groups which share internet memes between users, for the sheer point of sharing internet memes. Which group do internet memes like these belong in? Are they considered to be “canned” or “situational” in this case? On one hand the users are reproducing internet memes they may have created prior or found to be created by someone else. The same way one may reproduce “canned” jokes, either we heard the joke before or we have made the joke ourselves and would like to share it.

Some users may (re)produce internet memes as a result of something that has happened in the group/forum/chat, which arguably would classify these types of internet memes as “situational”. For example, making internet memes as a parody-like response to someone else’s post on a forum/group/chat in the form of an internet meme could be argued to be a “situational” internet meme in this case.

However, how would one group internet memes which are shared to a non-specific audience? Many pages and sites, such as news and corporate may share internet memes because they are relevant to a story they are reporting on, or perhaps it enhances the positive view of their product. Would one consider for these internet memes to be “canned” or “situational”? An argument could be made that these types of internet memes belong in both groupings. These internet memes may belong in the “canned” category as the page sharing these memes deems them to be “appropriate to the current situation”, as the people who share and subscribe to that page may also agree and be willing to see what humorous content that page puts out, similarly to how we may subscribe and agree to humorous content a newspaper may put in its humour section.

One may argue that these types of internet memes are also “situational”, as memes heavily rely on what is currently in fashion in terms of internet memes. Due to the fact that in-

Internet memes have an extremely short “half-life” and fall out of popularity quickly, these pages may share memes in formats that are currently popular, but may not be popular in the following weeks/ months. A page or a site may share a meme in order to appeal to a certain audience and to appear aware of the internet humour/ culture. An example can be seen below of Virgin Media using an internet meme in order to promote a promotion.



Therefore, it may be necessary to investigate how relevant a theory such as GVTH may be in analysing this new genre of humour. It may be the case that the GVTH was a theory designed to look at verbal jokes, as the name suggests, and it may be limited to verbal humour only.

## 4.8: Incongruity through structure

The above is also true for incongruity in other jokes, such as those which follow a structure, such as knock-knock jokes.

T: Joke teller.

R: Joke recipient.

Example 1:

T: "Knock-knock"

R: "Who's there?"

T: "Boo"

R: "Boo who?"

T: "No need to cry, just let me in!"

The above joke also relies on multiple parameters in order for the joke to work and for the incongruity to take place. Both the joke teller and joke recipient need to be aware of how to tell and respond to the joke in order for the joke to work, similarly to how two people need to know how to converse in order to have a conversation. The joke also relies on the correct responses, such as “boo who?”.

Nash (1985) states that “the listener or reader recognises a convention, realises that he or she has met something like this before, understands that his wits are being keyed and preconditioned to the acceptance of humour” (1985, p.6).

This observation tends to apply to jokes which follow a certain pattern such as “knock-knock” jokes or certain internet memes, which are set out in a particular structure or use language which we are familiar with. As Nash explains, “if, for example, I hear the statement *there was an old lady of Slough*, the odds are that I will register the onset of a limerick [...] I will therefore prepare to be amused” (1985, p.6).

If the joke recipient did not respond in the assumed way, the punchline may not work, or it may lose part of its humorous effect, as it only works if the joke teller can deliver a punchline which plays on the sound the joke recipient makes when pronouncing “boo who”, which loosely resembles the sound someone makes when crying. The incongruity here clearly also arises when we realise that instead of being told that we can enter the door or we are being refused access, we are being told “no need to cry”. The joke recipient realises that the joke teller is not addressing them by the name “boo who”, but instead is referring to the sound that the joke recipient produces when saying “boo who”.

Therefore, when we are being told a joke which follows a structure, we can then realise that we are taking part in the joke-telling process, take part in the humorous mode, and we are ready to experience a humorous effect of the joke.

This observation is significant, as the incongruity theory plays on this very quality: we may know that we are taking part in a joke we heard before, but the structure or content may be subverted later on during the joke-telling process, in turn creating humour in more than one, expected way; the punchline.

Incongruity can arise in many ways, and not just in a clash of scripts as explored earlier. One may experience humour as a feeling of being “caught out” not only by the punchline, but also where the punchline was inserted in the joke. For example, the age old “knock-knock” joke may feature incongruity in the following ways:

T: Joke teller.

R: Joke recipient.

Example 1:

T: “Knock-knock”

R: “Who’s there?”

T: “Boo”

R: “Boo who?”

T: “No need to cry, just let me in!”

Example 2:

T: “Knock-knock”

R: “Who’s there?”

T: “The interrupting cow”

R: “The interrupting cow w-”

T: (Before the above response finishes) “MOOO!”

Example 1 is a fairly *traditional*, easy to follow and understand knock-knock joke, one that follows all rules of the known formula. However, it is safe to assume that we have heard so many knock-knock jokes with bad puns at the end of them, that at the end of the joke, our reaction may involve a roll of the eyes, or a slightly more audible release of air from our nose.

Example 2 however, takes an incongruous spin on the formula of the “knock-knock” genre; before the recipient of the joke can finish the penultimate part of the joke, the teller interrupts the “X who?” response with an interruption, making the trigger from the first script of the joke, which introduces an “interrupting cow”.

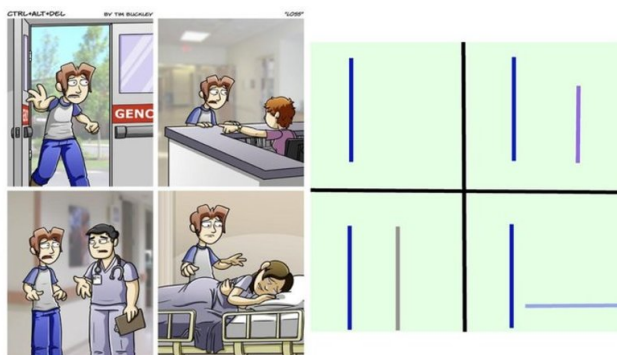
It can be seen here that the one taking part in a convention may realise that their wits are being tested. In example 1, the recipient may be able to figure out what the teller is trying to accomplish, and as a result the humorous outcome may be somewhat suppressed, as they may know what to expect.

On the contrary, in example 2, the same happens initially, but the unusual position of the punchline disturbs the recipient's suppressed expectation of humour, as they could not finish their response which leads to the punchline. As can be seen, incongruity plays a key role of delivering humour in example 2.

It can be argued, however, that despite example 2 breaking a certain established formula, as observed by Attardo et al. "most jokes place the punchline in the final position or a pre-final one, if followed by something inconsequential and anticlimactic." (Raskin and Attardo 1991, p.299).

What is significant is that the punchline of the above joke is *still* the last part of the joke, despite it being delivered in a different way. Although the structure of the joke is disturbed by the unusual placing of the punchline (as an interruption to the final question of the recipient), it is still the last part of the joke, and it is the part that is supposed to amuse the joke recipient.

Internet memes follow in similar way, as although a certain genre of internet meme may look different, may have different syntax, or even a different picture, the reader will still understand a certain internet meme through other means, such as how the meme is laid out or through specific terminology which is exclusively only used in that particular genre of meme. A good example of this is the "is this loss?" meme, which relies on cryptic variations of the internet meme. *Is this loss?* Is an internet meme which erupted from message boards and early meme forums in 2008. The original comic pictures a woman having a miscarriage and her partner coming to the hospital to find out the awful news. As internet memes started being made about the comic, many received backlash for being insensitive. In turn, these communities disguised the comic in cryptic ways, such as simple lines to illustrate the positions of the characters in the comic or handles on a clock; 12, 12:10, 12:05, 12:15 on a clock face show the positions of the characters in the comic.



The internet meme has transcended the usual variation strategy, and has evolved into an internet meme which relies on creating a cryptic message through pictures, symbols and other visual aids which are not the original comic on the left.

What is significant here, is that the reader will not be looking for a deeper meaning of a picture of four different illustrations of lines, if they have not been previously exposed to this internet meme and fully understood it, they may skip over the illustration.

## **4.9: Humorous mode and suspension of disbelief**

The way we experience humour is also important to explore. One of the ways may be due to a "suspension of disbelief. However, suspension of disbelief has been noted to be "nonsense" by Sacks (1978).

Sacks then says that: "for the story to come off, we may need to accept its events, the story is in the first place built in such a way as to have it not occur to us that "this is implausible but we shall suspend disbelief." (1978, p.258). After Sacks' observations, one may achieve an understanding of how a joke achieves humour: a joke in itself must either have "a logical or pseudo-logical justification of the absurdity or irreality" (Attardo and Raskin 1991, p.307), or be constructed in such a way that the joke recipient accepts the events which occur in the joke.

Mulkay (1988), on the other hand makes a different observation. Mulkay proposes the idea that humour takes place in the "humorous mode" and "in the realm of humour we can tell of men who walk upside down, of elephants that breed with fish and of other marvels too numerous to list" (1988, p. 20).

Mulkay argues that Sacks may have been incorrect in his observations of jokes hiding away the implausibilities, as "adoption of the humorous mode appears to depend, not upon participants' ability to conceal implausibility, but on the contrary upon their active involvement in its production" (1988, p. 20).

Mulkay points out that in this discursive mode they are an "expected feature". Unlike the "serious mode", which is the opposite of the humorous mode, these implausibilities and absurdities can freely take place, as the recipients know that they are participating in a joke telling experience.

Mulkay points out that to allow for an analysis of a joke, one needs to transport that joke into a "different interpretive realm", and as a consequence, they may fall into a trap, as

analysts of transporting discourse which belongs in the humorous mode, into the serious mode, in which the discourse both does not make sense or belong.

Mulkay compares this to *Alice in Wonderland*, it is imperative to keep in mind that these worlds operate on completely different rules and principles. Raskin and Attardo explain that “an ordinary utterance belongs to casual language; a joke is noncasual” (1991, p. 299).

Therefore, Sacks’ observation that implausibilities are “hidden” make sense, although Mulkay labels them as false, as according to Mulkay, this is true if one is to enter the humorous mode as an analyst, and not a participant, as “in the realm of humour, almost anything is allowed and implausibilities do not have to be camouflaged” (1988, p.21). The humorous mode is a realm in which jokes are made and humour is created through implausibilities and absurdities, Mulkay makes this comment towards the end of the explanation of the humorous mode:

Every joke and in every humorous remark, structure and content are in fact designed to produce the incongruity essential to humour. It is a paradoxical feature of the humorous mode that [...] it must continually generate incongruity and contradiction (1988, p.21).

## 4.10: Conceptual integration networks

Humour, and more importantly, internet humour, has also been analysed on a cognitive level. Many efforts have been made to link cognitive linguistics and psychology with humour.

The Conceptual integration network (CIN) was introduced by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). Conceptual integration networks act as maps of how one may mentally break down metaphors or riddles in their mind and what cognitive processes one may take in order to understand and make sense of what they are reading and hearing.

Usually, a conceptual integration network is made up of 4 parts:

The top part, the “generic space”. The left and right parts, the “input spaces”.

The bottom part, the “blended space”. The first part contains what the following spaces have in common, and the two input spaces contain parts which then contribute to the last part, the blend.



The blend displays how we may mentally combine parts of the information we receive, as well as using our own, previous knowledge in order to create a meaningful explanation and projection to a joke, riddle, metaphor etc

The Conceptual Integration Network (CIN) was introduced by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), who explain how readers may create these networks in their minds by using the following riddle as an example:

A Buddhist Monk begins at dawn one day walking up a mountain, reaches the top at sunset, meditates at the top for several days until one dawn when he begins to walk back to the foot of the mountain, which he reaches at sunset. Make no assumptions about his starting or stopping or about his pace during the trips. Riddle: Is there a place on the path that the monk occupies at the same hour of the day on the two separate journeys? (2002, p.39).

Fauconnier and Turner explain that it is impossible for the monk to actually “meet” himself as “it is impossible for the monk to travel both up and down” (2002, p.39). However, the reader still projects an image or a visualisation of the monk being at the same place at some point during the journey, as the scenario of two people meeting is “not only possible but also commonplace” (2002, p.39).

What is significant is that the reader may not know what the place is, but they do know that the monk is there at the same time of day of the two separate journeys, Fauconnier and Turner say that “for many people, this is a compelling solution to the riddle” (2002, p.39). Therefore, the reader’s imagination and projection pose the question: how does one get to that resolution?

Fauconnier and Turner explain that in order for the reader to achieve a *compelling solution*, the reader may use “mental spaces” which are “connected to long-term schematic knowledge called ‘frames’ ” (2002, p.40).

Frames, or scripts are used by schemas in order to activate them and project a certain image, as mentioned earlier in the *schema* section. In this case, the reader may have a frame of walking up a mountain, or meeting people whilst on a path.

Fauconnier and Turner explain that frames are “interconnected, and can be modified as thought and discourse unfold” (2002, p.40). This is, because if the reader is told about “the mountain you climbed”, it “sets up the mental space in order to report a past event” (2002,

p.40), if the reader is told “if you had climbed that mountain”, it “sets up the same mental space in order to examine a counterfactual situation and its consequences” (2002, p.40).

The latter example is significant, as it illustrates that events do not need to happen in order for the reader to create mental spaces of those events, the reader can still imagine what it would be like to climb that mountain, the consequences, preparation, what the climb may look like and entice. One may use a similar projection in order to solve the Buddhist Monk riddle.

The following is a CIN drawn up by Fauconnier and Turner for the riddle of the Buddhist Monk, and can see the following parts, which make up a CIN.

**Generic space:** The top space, known as the *Generic Space* “maps onto each of the inputs and what the inputs have in common” (2002, p.41). The generic space contains the “moving individual and his position, a path linking foot and summit of the mountain, day of travel and motion in an unspecified direction”, the double headed arrow represents the unspecified direction.

**Input spaces:** The spaces which the Generic Space maps into are *Input Spaces*, the following diagram is a basic diagram, “conceptual integration networks can have several input spaces and even multiple blended spaces” (2002, p.47).

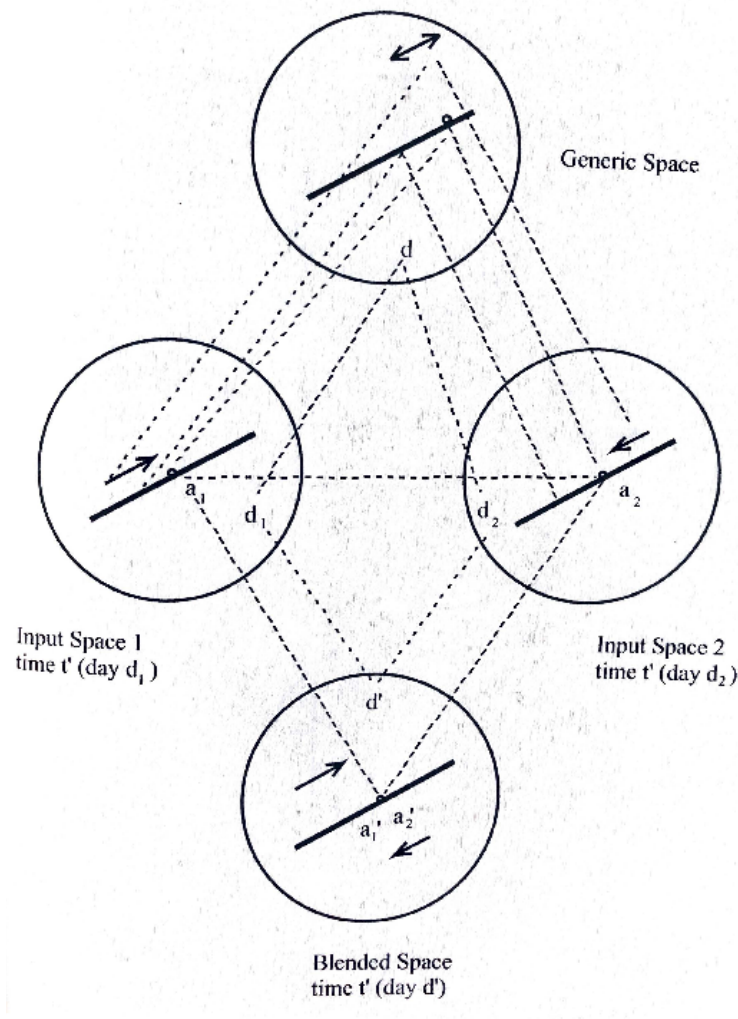
**Blend:** The fourth space is the blended space, which contains elements from the two input spaces and contribute to an *Emergent Structure*.

**Emergent structure:** The blend creates an emergent structure, in which the reader can now see two Buddhist Monks moving along the same mountain at the same time, instead of one, as seen in the input spaces. The emergent structure is generated through three ways:

1. **Composition:** “Blending can compose elements from the input spaces to provide relations that do not exist in the separate inputs” (2002, p.48). Completion provides the reader with the blend, that may not necessarily be contained in the input spaces. In the example of the Buddhist Monk, in the blend there are two Monks, where in the input spaces there is one Monk, once at the bottom of the mountain, and once at the top, the reader also has to fuse the two days from the input spaces into one day, and the same is true for the mountain. This process is also known as “fusion”.
2. **Completion:** “We rarely realise the extent of background knowledge and structure that we bring into a blend unconsciously” (2002, p.48). Completion is the step in which the

reader unconsciously brings in own background knowledge and frames in order to *complete*, or fill in the missing spaces. The reader does not need some information explicitly given to them, as they can use their own background knowledge in order to fill in some gaps, such as “the composition of two monks on the path is completed so automatically by the scenario of two people journeying toward each other” (2002, p. 48).

3. Elaboration: “We elaborate blends by treating them as simulations and running them imaginatively according to the principles that have been established for that blend” (2002, p.48). By elaboration, readers can imagine and project this scenario in their minds, and explain how this situation may happen.



Conceptual integration networks are usually made of a generic space (top circle), two input spaces (middle left and right circles) and a blended space (bottom circle), although a network can have multiple input spaces and blends.

“The generic space captures the shared elements of both inputs and these elements from the generic space are in turn mapped onto the counterpart elements in the input spaces” (Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic (2017, p.6).

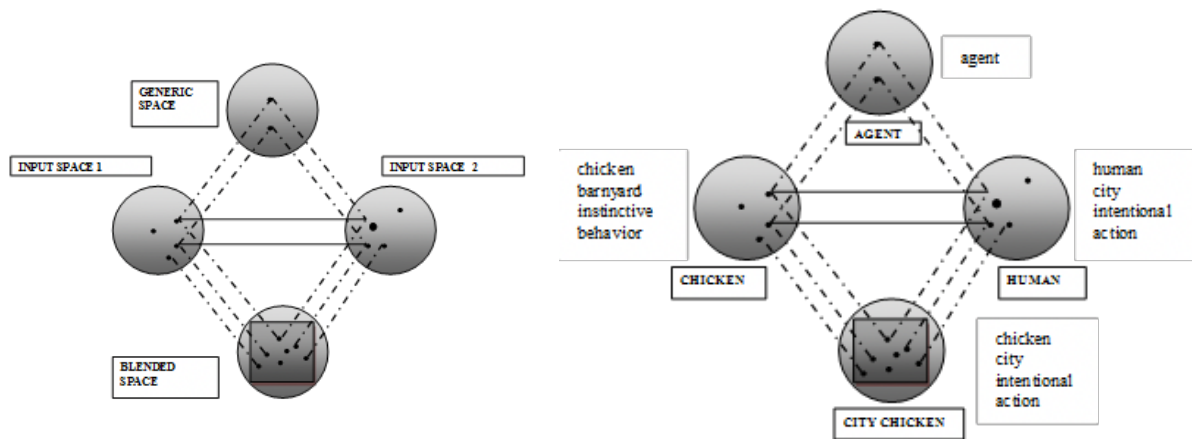
It can be understood, therefore, that a generic space has elements which are then unpacked into input spaces. Elements from each input space then contribute to the blend to illustrate which elements exactly create the blend which we unconsciously perform.

Below is the basic diagram of a conceptual integration network drawn up by Fauconnier and Turner (2002, p.46), used for unpacking the joke “why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side”. The network contains all of the elements, a generic space, two input spaces and a blended space.

However, one of the main problems that arises is the legibility of the networks. Unlike the Buddhist Monk example, this diagram lacks labelling and addressing the “dots” in the diagram. This ultimately makes it harder for readers to decode what the dots are representing and more importantly, why they are there, why some are matched up, some are not, and why some are transferred to the blended space. A reader who may not be familiar with conceptual networks may find the diagrams drawn up by Fauconnier and Turner hard to decode and understand.

Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic use Fauconnier and Turner’s basic diagram in order to analyse internet memes in their article. The readers also get an explanation as to what the lines and circles represent, the dots are not addressed. As Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic change the topic of what the diagram is addressing, the dots remain unchanged.

Therefore, readers were possibly left to presume that the dots are parts of the input space(s) that do not contribute to the blend, nor do they affect the opposing input space. These dots also do not have a link to the generic space, posing the question: where are these projected from? It would also be safe to assume that these would change when there is a change of the subject of the diagram. Input space 2 shows a slightly bigger dot, readers are left uninformed about if the size of a dot also holds any significance, and if the positioning of the dot holds significance, as the dots appear to be in different positions in the input spaces. The blend has two dots that do not have a link to the input spaces, and if these are the dots coming from the input spaces, where is the slightly bigger/ bolder dot?



This paper makes efforts to look at how one could use conceptual integration

This paper looks at whether Conceptual integration Networks could be an efficient way of exploring and explaining internet memes and the incongruity contained within, as one could argue that through the way internet memes are created, there are many inputs and previous knowledge a reader needs in order to understand the humour an internet meme is trying to communicate.

# Chapter 5: Analysis

## 5.1: Using Conceptual Integration Networks to analyse memes

Incongruity lends itself to the “cognitive” family of humour, therefore the first section of the analysis will look at the cognitive aspect of humour. This section uses the conceptual network framework in order to test if it is an effective way of looking at incongruity found in internet memes.

Delibegovic Dzanic, N. and Berberovic, S. (2017) have written about a certain genre of internet memes, which are made by internet users in order to criticise Bosnian politics. By using a framework known as “conceptual integration networks”, one can map out how humour is produced by understanding how mentally one may link the information and sometimes the lack of information when being the recipient of a piece of humour. Conceptual integration networks have also been used in order to understand and illustrate how one may understand and grasp meaning of a metaphor. Jeffries and McIntyre cover these maps, and use the following example for the metaphor “surgeon is a butcher.” (2010, p.145)

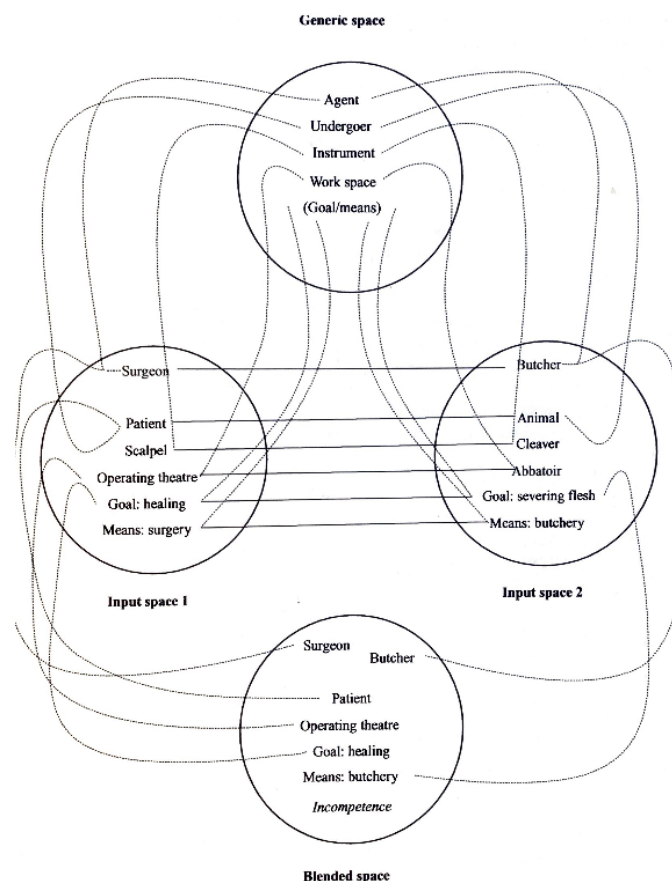


Figure 5.2. Conceptual integration network for SURGEON IS A BUTCHER (based on Evans and Green 2006: 406)

One of the reasons as to why the idea of internet memes being similar to jokes is arising is due to the fact that internet memes have been analysed by the same techniques as ones analysing jokes. Many frameworks and theories can be applied to internet memes the same way they can be applied to jokes. For example, the article *#ForgiveUsForWeHaveSinned* in the European Journal of Humour, by Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic (2017) use the Conceptual Integration Theory in order to break down the internet memes they talk about in the article. The memes in the article are internet memes concerning the Bosnian prime minister Fadil Novalić, who criticised his people for “wastefully spending money on luxuries” (2017, p.9). Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic refer to humorous discourse criticising F. Novalić as “creative and humorous static images combining verbal and visual components that are spread via social networks” (2017, p.9), which fit the description of memes, as described by Laineste and Voolaid (2017).

A meme is a relatively complex, multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) image and text that is disseminated by the active agency of internet users, becoming popular among them. The full set of meanings of an internet meme is recovered only by having a complete overview of the origin and history of its development (Lin et al. 2014), but it is open to various interpretations as well. (Laineste, L., and Voolaid, p. 2017)

The article uses the conceptual integration network theory as a way of unpacking and deconstructing the memes, similarly to how we would analyse jokes. However, one may find that the conceptual integration network theory may not be a good and efficient way of explaining internet memes.

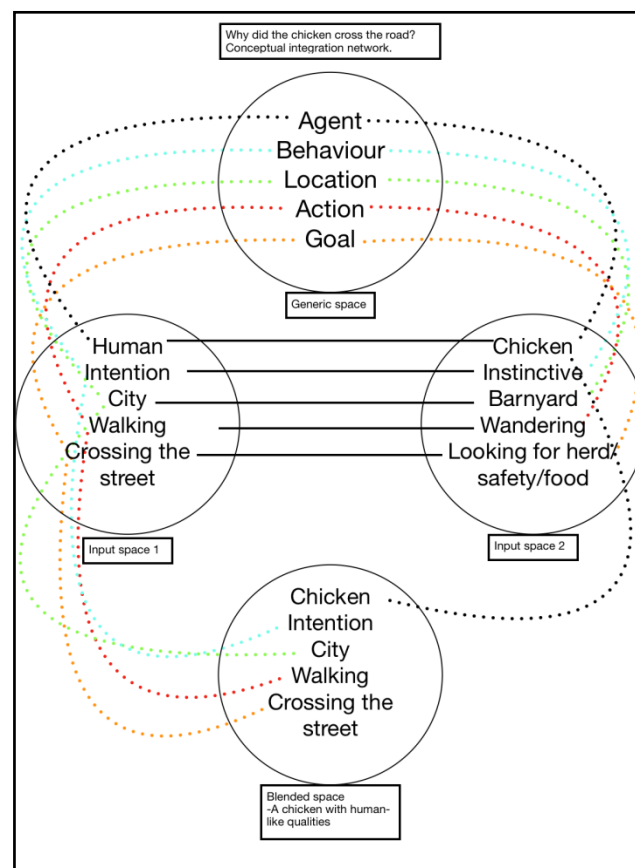
### **5.1.1: Using Conceptual Integration Networks to “unpack” internet memes.**

This paper makes efforts to look at how one could use conceptual integration networks in order to explain internet memes. As one may find the diagrams produced by Fauconnier and Turner to be confusing, this paper looked at other ways of mapping.

Therefore, the method used is the mapping technique employed by Jeffries and McIntyre (2010). This technique appears to to be more thorough and clearer, with explanations of what is contained in the four spaces and how they link.

For an example of how one can use Jeffries and McIntyre's way of drawing the diagrams for jokes/ internet memes, the same joke is taken which is used by Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic: "Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side", and was mapped out using the technique employed by Jeffries and McIntyre.

One may argue that the map illustrates how the incongruity in the joke is created, as the blended space illustrates a chicken with human-like qualities, which is both highly unlikely/ incongruous and possibly humorous. The reader may know this, as the blended space contains a chicken, but all other sections of input space 1, of a human living in a city are found in the blended space, which proposes the idea of a city-dwelling chicken, which understands the act of crossing a road, intentionally, to achieve a goal of getting to the other side of the road. The qualities of the chicken are replaced with qualities of a human, so instinctive behaviour, living in a barnyard etc. are left in input space 2 and are not transferred to the blend.



(Different colours are used for ease of tracing links.)



The next map shows how one may employ the same technique in order to analyse the “joke within the meme”. The following internet meme is of one proposing that racoons treat trash the same way a human would treat (free) real estate. The internet meme was formed from a sketch on the show “Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!”.

The humorous sketch was made to mimic a commercial and was exclusively aimed at a character named Jim. The characters in the commercial are giving Jim a house, for free. They keep reiterating that the house is free, that it is *free real estate*, and that Jim should take up the opportunity to get a house for free.

The last part of the sketch is what has become a meme among the internet community, in which the words “its free real estate” are whispered at the camera. Since then, the static image of the commercial has been edited with numerous different captions and taken out of context, to make it look as if the words “its free real estate” are said in different contexts, and by someone else than the actors. The meme also presents situations in which someone else would say “its free real estate”, ironically or not.



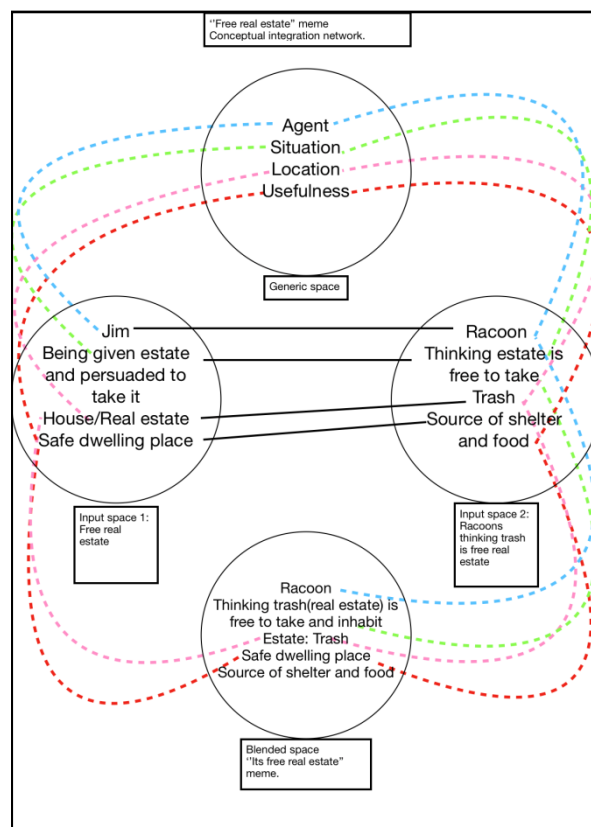
For example, the meme puts the idea forward that racoons think trash is free real estate for them to claim. The joke within the meme could be for example that for as long as trash “exists”, racoons will think of trash as a dwelling place and treat it as “free real estate”, i.e. an opportunity that they would be stupid to pass up on.

The internet meme relies on the reader being familiar with both this meme format, and possibly the sketch from which the picture is taken. Often the meme proposes situations and scenarios which are ethically questionable, or provides the reader with absurdities,

such as racoons regarding trash as free real estate, considering the fact that racoons do not have a concept of estate.

The conceptual integration network shows how a reader may look at the joke using this technique. How readers may unpack it in order to spot where the incongruities arise and how humour is created through these incongruities.

Internet memes also often rely on the application of quite specific schemas and previous knowledge in order to understand the humour that is being put forward. This specific knowledge may be a reason as to why some readers may not understand some memes, as there seems to be a very specific and niche schema that can only be applied to that particular internet meme. However, readers may also be applying different frames and schemas when reading internet memes, as part of the *elaboration* process. Readers may imagine racoons with human like qualities and concept of estate, which may in itself be humorous to some.



What needs to be acknowledged is that I have decided to keep the input spaces limited to two, as I wanted to illustrate that some internet memes need previous knowledge in order to help the reader understand the full scope of the humour in the meme, as well as illus-

trating that sometimes the emergent structure provides us with a lot of the missing information through the use of our own, previous knowledge.

However, would previous knowledge constitute another input space? Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic use Conceptual Integration Networks with multiple input spaces and it poses the question; how much can we leave to Composition, Completion and Elaboration? What constitutes another input space?

Similarly, to how only two input spaces are given in the chicken example, as readers need previous knowledge in order to understand that what is being experienced is a *joke*. For example, above is explained how a racoon is treating trash as *Free Real Estate*, which, similarly to the chicken joke is both extremely unlikely as racoons do not understand real estate.

Racoons inhabit trash because it is a source of shelter and food, not because a racoon sees trash as real estate like we civilised humans do. The internet meme suggests that racoons may think this way, humorously triggered by the phrase from the sketch “its free real estate”, with the implication that it is being given to them, or it would be unwise for a racoon to not make the most of what seems to be “free real estate”. It is always there, all they have to do is *take it*, like Jim in the sketch.

One can argue that my diagram unpacks the humour in an effective way once the reader has already been preconditioned with the knowledge of internet memes in general, and the meme which it is referencing, in this case, the *its free real estate* internet meme.

However, this can also be argued for jokes. This is due to the fact that one has to understand that they are partaking in a joke-telling experience when the joke recipients are being told a joke. Otherwise joke recipients would fail to understand or even try to put together the absurdities, such as a chicken crossing a road or a cow interrupting us in conversation. Again, one can look at Nash’s (1985) observation of the *reader realising a convention and being prepared for an acceptance of humour*.

When an internet meme is read, the readers know that what they are reading may have certain qualities of humour and other internet memes, in turn making the reader prepared for a certain result, such as racoons treating trash as free real estate.

On the other hand, it is clear that the conceptual integration network does bring its own limitations and it is not without flaws. Oring criticises the application of the blending theory

to humour. Oring states that “chickens do not move through space randomly (random movement would suggest a lack of intention)” (2016, p.41), and that they move through space in order to find food, to reproduce etc.

Oring states that the incongruity is not in the chicken having an intention, but that the “intention -‘to get to the other side’- is simply another way of describing the action that is the object of inquiry” (2016, p.41). Thus, Oring argues that the answer is both incongruous and appropriate: “it reveals an intention, but that intention provides no more information that was contained within the question” (2016, p.41).

Oring carries on to say that “if the analysis of the joke is wrong, the description of the proposed blend is wrong as well” (2016, p.41). Oring disagrees with the idea that we can use the conceptual integration networks as a way of looking at how incongruity is created in a joke. Oring argues that the joke “does not depend on merging the mental spaces of chickens and humans or countryside and cityscape. It depends upon what constitutes a satisfactory answer to who, what, where, when, why or how questions” (2016, p.41).

Oring also disagrees with the idea of using this method of analysing jokes as the “blending theory does not necessarily identify the properties essential to joke creation or comprehension, and that when a joke has been misinterpreted, there is nothing in blending theory that will identify or correct the error.” (2016, p.41).

These points are valid and understandable, and that Oring disagrees with using conceptual integration networks to analyse jokes. However, As seen above, attempts have been made to show how conceptual integration networks can aid in understanding why a joke/ internet meme is humorous, as it shows how different inputs work on the end result (the blend).

## **5.1.2: Criticism**

Internet memes are often hard to understand due to intertextuality taking such a big part in how we read, understand and ultimately, find them humorous. Although, Oring does make an interesting point, in that he asks the question “do all jokes equally lend themselves to blending analyses?” (2016, p.42).

The question does raise some concern, as it suggests be that the blending theory may be somewhat subjective. Although one may think that chickens move in a space with very little purpose, an expert may argue that through studies conducted on chickens, they

prove to be extremely clever animals with plenty of purpose and intelligence. The same can be said about internet memes, one may argue that a raccoon's purpose is to look for leftover food in trash and shelter, but it might not be the case. Although some may agree with Oring that the blending theory may not be the optimal way of analysing jokes/ internet memes, as some jokes/ internet memes may not lend themselves to blending analysis.

As explained by Oring, it may be possible that some jokes "do not depend on the mixing together of two distinct semantic domains but rather to operate on some deviation within a single domain" (2016, p.45).

One example that Oring puts forward is of the joke "if you buy a goldfish, I'll throw in the aardvark", which does not create any joke or humour in the blend since it is a fairly common practice to give incentives to customers when they buy a product. However, Oring notes that "the joke is easily grasped in terms of appropriate incongruity" (2016, p.44). Thus, one may argue that the conceptual integration network is perhaps unreliable in explaining how jokes work. Perhaps blending theory is not (yet) refined enough and falsifiable as well as other theories such as the incongruity theory.

It should be acknowledged, however, that other jokes may be better explained by conceptual integration networks instead of incongruity for example. Jokes which "proceed from a single domain" (Oring, 2016) tend to be better explained by theories like the incongruity theory, where it is quite apparent how the humour is formed without the need for maps or diagrams. Oring uses the following example as an illustration:

Patient: "How much to have this tooth pulled?"

Dentist: "Ninety dollars."

Patient: "Ninety dollars for just a few minutes work?"

Dentist: "I can do it slower if you like." (Keillor 2005, p.184)

Oring does acknowledge that a network of Dentist and Patient could be created, and indeed I agree, one could have input spaces with the dentist having the expertise of pulling a tooth out and a patient wanting to get a tooth pulled, however as Oring points out, the humour lies in the "ways a rate of pay can be reckoned" (2016, p.43).

On the other hand, one could add additional input spaces which can illustrate the humour, in which the dentist purposefully misunderstands the question in order to achieve a comedic effect with his response, all while letting the patient know that you do not pay a dentist for solely pulling a tooth out, but for pulling a tooth out with minimal damage and pain. However, this would come with some disadvantages. Once the analyst starts adding

additional input spaces, when does one stop? Also, how does one determine what constitutes an input space, and what should not qualify for an input space?

The following internet meme illustrates Oring's point. The internet meme is essentially a joke, but with the aid of the picture, one can establish it as an internet meme, especially if there are other iterations of the same format. For example, if the same picture is used but with a different context/ joke.

The joke within the internet meme is based on incongruity. Ben Shapiro, an American conservative political commentator and author well known for his aggressive defending of his views and opinions. Therefore, internet memes have been made on his techniques in debating and commentating.

As seen below, the internet meme labels his skills as destructive, and that he "destroys" the left wing. However, in the meme the reader may realise that the left wing, often used as a label of parties and outlooks on politics has been taken out of the political context and has been used literally, as the reader then realises in the second part of the joke that the joke takes place in an airplane.

Obviously, it is highly unlikely anyone could destroy an actual wing of a plane with facts and logic, but that is what makes the joke humorous, as it subverts expectations of what should logically occur. It is acceptable that someone could "destroy" the left wing with facts and logic, if the "left wing" represents a group of people. But instead, the joke recipient finds that the "left wing" is of a plane, and although extremely unlikely to happen, one can understand the humour and the clever use of metaphors in the joke.

Again, it would be hard to produce a conceptual integration network for such a meme, as previously explained by Oring, this meme/ joke is an example of one which "proceed from a single domain" (Oring, 2016). A conceptual integration network explaining the following internet meme would either have to include a multitude of input spaces or use a different method in order to illustrate the multiple layers the metaphoric meme uses. A Venn diagram may be a suitable substitute in order to illustrate how parts of the meme overlap into different frames.

Ben Shapiro: destroys left wing with  
facts and logic

Everyone else in the airplane:



## **5.2: Incongruity and its impact and importance in relation to internet memes and jokes**

The following sections of this analysis look at the importance of incongruity theories in humour and how incongruity is relevant, if it is clearly present, and what role it plays in portraying humour/ the creation of humour. This chapter also looks at how jokes and internet memes may change when incongruity is present, or absent: will the joke still achieve a humorous effect? Some claim that incongruity is a necessary ingredient to the production of humour (Mulkay 1988, p.21). Humour may still be achieved through other methods and this section will look at how incongruity contributes to this.

The first part of the analysis in the GVTH looks at the jokes of GVTH, the 6 variations of the "How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's Standing on (Attardo and Raskin 1991 quoting Freedman and Hofman 1980)".

GVTH itself mentions incongruity taking a part in the joke being effective in achieving a humorous effect, as in the joke, a simple task of turning a lightbulb into its fixing is blown out of proportion by turning the entire table rather than the wrist, proposing this idea of an extraordinary, inefficient way of carrying out this task.

GVTH states that "the choice of the target is not completely free", when talking about parameter 3: target. It is pointed out that the target of a joke has to be plausible with what

is said about the target in the joke. For example, the idea that Poles are “stupid”, and that the target “must have the ‘dumb’ stereotype associated with it.” (1991, p.301).

Most of the time, the stereotype is a “sweeping generalisation”, but nonetheless, it exists. It is also irrelevant whether the “teller or hearer of the joke believes in the stereotype as long as they possess it and can apply it to the humorous act of telling and hearing the joke” (1991, p.301).

As long as the joke recipient possesses the knowledge of what the stereotype encompasses they can partake in the joke and enjoy it to its full potential. When one thinks of a Polish person, it may not mentally trigger a schema of a dirty Pole. However, when being told a joke, especially one which has a known formula such as “how many X does it take to Y”, the recipient is being preconditioned by the linguistic triggers to think about stereotypes and generalisations, even if they do not agree with them, in order to partake in the joke telling process, as one may listen to, and tell jokes in order to achieve the humorous effect jokes carry.

A similar process may take place when reading internet memes. However, internet memes may carry the same triggers in a different format. Whereas jokes have triggers through linguistic means, such as “how many X does it take to Y”, memes may carry similar triggers in language, but also in pictures or a certain structure of the frames.

For example, the “Winnie the Pooh” internet meme may include a trigger in which the reader is ready to read the second frame in an over-exaggerated former fashion. The internet meme is a parody of being overly formal to the point where the formality is ridiculous and obviously wrong, a pattern can be seen here in blowing simple features to new proportions. The meme is usually illustrated in a vertical comic form, in which the character of Winnie the Pooh increases in “formality” by his appearance, such as having a top hat and monocle to illustrate this. The humour contained in these internet memes is the ridiculous increase in formality, which is in fact simply an increase in cryptic and complicated ways of conveying the same information as the first panel. However, some iterations of this meme rely on the previous knowledge of the reader to convey humour, such as the “data” example below.

In the following internet memes, the reader understands that the first frame is referring to the standard pronunciation of /dɛɪtə/, with the /a/ as pronounced in “crater”.



However, the second frame refers to an overly-formal way of pronouncing data, as /ˈdɑ:tə/, as in “smarter”. Once a reader becomes familiar with the internet meme and how the meme operates, every meme in that format triggers an understanding of how to read the meme correctly.

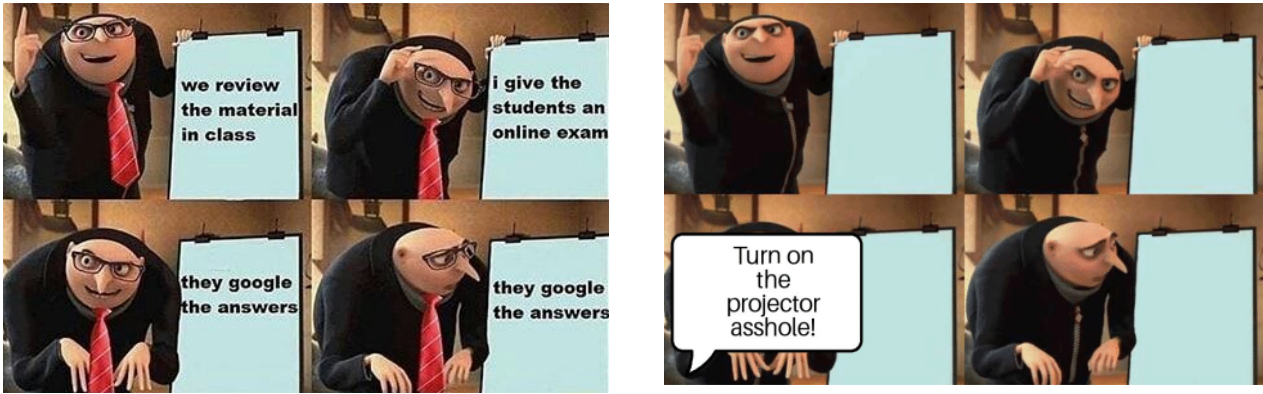


The following joke can be taken as another example of how jokes may compare to internet memes:

**And the Lord said to John: “come forth and you will receive eternal life.”**

**But John came fifth, and instead, won a toaster.**

The joke plays on how the reader understands the word “forth”, and it is crucial the reader understands “forth” as it is meant to be understood in the case of the order “come forth”. The joke does not logically follow the proceeding text, as it suggests that John “came fifth”, which would require the proceeding line meaning that John would need to come *fourth*. This rule also trickles down into internet memes, although it is a little more abstract.



This internet meme relies on the reader understanding of how this internet meme format works. The character of the popular film *Despicable Me*, presenting something on his board has been used as a template for internet memes, in which the character's plan that he is explaining is foiled due to an omission of a detail, as seen in the first example.

Although the first example is logical and easy to understand, the second example is completely illogical until the reader reaches the third panel, in which they can solve the incongruity in the internet meme. What is significant is that the incongruity does not come from the text in the meme, which is usually the case, but instead, the lack of text.

This incongruity is later solved, creating a humorous effect in the last panel, in which the character realises that there is nothing behind them on the display. Internet memes, similarly to jokes are often humorous due to how relatable the situations they pose are, or how absurd they are.

One could use the humour appreciation model (1972) as a guide to how humour is created in the above memes. As the meme is read, panel by panel, the reader tries to piece together the panels. As they reach the third panel, which can be treated as a punchline for the purpose of comparing internet memes to jokes, the reader can start to "solve" the incongruities and understand the humour. If the reader fails to understand or "solve" the meme, the reader may become puzzled and the element of surprise/ feeling of achievement may fall flat and as a result humour may not emerge.

Suls mentions schema in his model, which is significant. This is due to the fact that one reading an internet meme may not only trigger a schema of what is presented in the meme, but of internet memes in general, and especially of how to read a certain meme. One reading the above memes may understand that a punchline may occur in the third panel, or that the proposed idea may be foiled and the character may realise their mistake by the fourth panel.

Usually, internet memes are stretched to their limits of complexity, as it extends the decoding process, which may result in a larger reward of being able to understand and decode a complex joke. The 5 panel Winnie the Pooh meme is a perfect example of this. It explores how the “smarter” may respond with the affirmation “ok”. Some write “ok”, some only respond with the latter letter as it is the popular variation of text speak. Potassium, on the periodic table is recorded as “K”, OK disguises the number zero as a letter, and -273.150°c is known as “absolute zero”, or Zero Kelvin (OK).

Similarly to the joke about Poles fitting a bulb, the internet meme looks at a similar phenomenon: doing something very simple in an overly-complicated way. The joke about Poles portrays Poles as stupid, and similarly, the Winnie the Pooh meme portrays those who think of themselves as highly educated, and use overly complicated terms, or what seem to be formal terms to them, as ridiculous and carries the message of “more complicated does not mean better”. Whereas the “data” meme is covert, the “OK” example is overt and clearly exaggerated in order to be clear to the reader that the meme is aware of the message.

Internet memes need to rely on different ways of displaying this awareness, unlike jokes which are told by a person, who can display this feat by means of conversation, such as delivery method or body language.

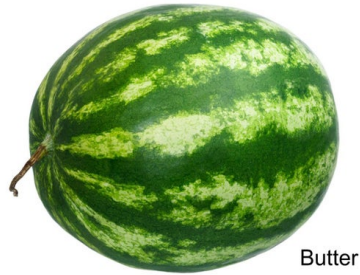
Internet memes and jokes often rely on incongruity as the catalyst for humour. Veale (2004) looks at whether incongruity is the *Main cause or epiphenomenon* of humour. This paper takes arguments made by Veale, as Veale also looks at GVTH and SSTH when looking at incongruity. Is incongruity the *main cause*, or an *epiphenomenon* of humour in relation to memes?

### **5.3: Appropriate incongruity**

Incongruity has to be to some degree appropriate, however. There is a thin line between humorous incongruity, and complete chaos and nonsense.

Some internet memes create “humour” through complete and utter chaos, or nonsense and although some call it “humour”, it may be safe to assume that to many, such memes may make absolutely no sense, and fail to produce humour.

Visits to the doctor be like:

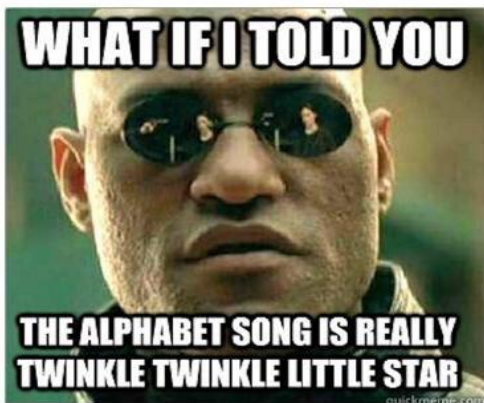


It seems that some forums and creators of such memes create abstract internet memes such as the above watermelon meme, as a way pushing the norm to the absolute extreme, and through the confusion and lack of humour, the internet meme may hope to evoke humour through confusion and lack of a tangible scenario or understandable schema.

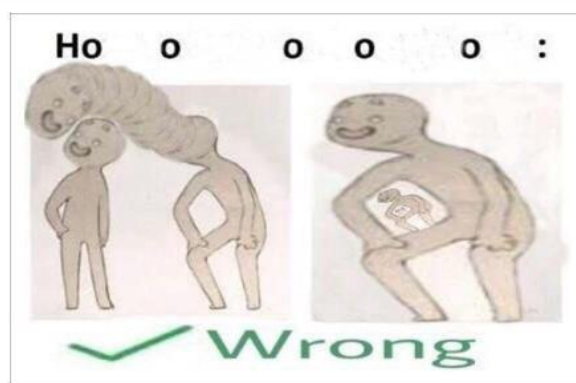
The above meme may invite the reader to trigger a schema, or script of a visit to the doctor, and is then followed up by, what seem to be random and illogical tokens: a picture of a watermelon and the word “butter”.

Obviously, internet users whom share internet memes are aware of this shift and have created internet memes about this phenomenon.

## MEMES IN 2012



## MEMES IN 2017



Articles have been written about this abstract and nonsensical “millennial humour”, reaching newspapers such as the Washington Post or The Guardian. Self conscious internet memes such as these, however, are ought to be analysed further in their own right, and may deserve a spotlight in further study.

## 5.4: Intertextuality and democracy of internet memes

One aspect of internet memes which sets them apart from other genres of humour is their intense reliance on previous knowledge of certain genres and types of internet memes. This is due to how popular and reliant internet memes are on intertextuality and references to other internet memes, making some internet memes seem as collaborative projects, where in fact they are simply referencing other internet memes.

This type of intertextuality can come in many forms, whether it be an internet meme using the same syntax and way of formulating captions as another internet meme which is specifically recognised by that exact structure of discourse, or using an image which references another internet meme.

A brilliant example of intertextuality is the “is this loss?” internet meme, which by the simple usage of a number of shapes arranged in a certain way, the reader can realise they are in fact reading an internet meme. This secret and exclusive way of displaying humour is significant as it creates its own group of the ones who understand the cryptic message in the internet meme.

A link may arise here, to inside jokes, which amplify their humorous effect by being exclusive, and linking to the superiority theory, a theory which proposes the idea that we may laugh or find something especially humorous at the expense of someone else’s inferiority. Whether this be an example of Schadenfreude, or simply because the other party is not “in” on the joke we are laughing at. This phenomenon creates a sense of exclusivity, which adds to the humorous effect knowing that the humour we are experiencing is reserved for only the person who understands the humour.

It may be worth pointing out that internet memes are somewhat democratic. Unlike jokes, internet memes are shared online, where they are subliminally graded by the receivers and the amount of exposure and popularity that meme receives is subject to the judgement of the internet users choosing to share that meme. Jokes do not have this medium in which they can be graded and shared effortlessly. Jokes do not rely on intertextuality so heavily either, as jokes are straight forward to understand and are engineered in a way that makes them understandable with little to no context. Although some internet memes do this too, a large portion of internet memes are humorous, or create humour through their link to other internet memes or videos online.

It is interesting, as mentioned before, one needs to be preconditioned with specific previous knowledge, in addition to knowing how to read certain internet memes and knowing in what specific tone the internet meme is displaying humour. One needs to realise that sometimes an meme may be written in a certain font or with ambiguousness in order to show humour in a particular fashion. I mention this, as this notion has also been acknowledged in joke study, Attardo (1994) mentions that “there are some special scripts that are used exclusively within humorous discourse” (1994, p.212). This fits our investigation of internet memes, as mentioned above, there are certain scripts in internet memes which are exclusively used in internet memes, and these are absolutely necessary to understand and revel in these tokens of humour.

## **5.5: Jokes vs internet memes**

One of the main questions of this paper is looking at, and investigating whether internet memes are simply jokes under a new guise. In order to accurately answer and understand this, let’s compare and investigate what sets the two genres apart.

“I invited my friend to my house the other day”

“This is the downstairs area” I said, showing him around.

“What’s upstairs?” He asked.

“The stairs don’t talk” I responded.

This joke could also be presented in an internet memetic format, with the addition of a picture:



The internet meme takes a joke, and with the addition of pictures, a lot of language can be omitted, making the delivery of humour faster. What internet memes can also do by including a picture/ pictures, is specific pictures of characters of a popular show, political figures etc. can be used, to look like they are the ones in the internet meme.

When being told a joke, the joke recipients are left to their own imagination to imagine the scenario presented. Internet memes aid our imaginations, allowing us to use a template to imagine what happens in the joke/ meme. In this example, one may assume the person showing the house to the couple may be an estate agent, conducting a viewing to potential buyers. This is due to the "estate agent" being dressed formally and holding a clipboard. For the sake of this example, lets change our joke to fit the meme.

\*An estate agent showing a house to a couple\*

"So that's the house" She says.

"What's upstairs?" The couple asked.

"The stairs don't talk" She responds.



By this illustration it can be seen exactly what is being cut out from the joke when presented in an internet meme format. There is no need for introduction, and no need of a story-like structure. Instead the joke recipients are given a comic strip-like internet meme, which by the use of captions and pictures, shows the reader who is speaking at any given moment.

But what about internet memes which are exclusive in the ways they present humour? The type that cannot be simply transformed into a joke and vice versa? Lets take the following as an example:



This internet meme illustrates the example I make, as it would be a challenge/ impossible to recreate this meme in a joke format. One of the reasons being the men portrayed in the internet meme being known faces associated with their corresponding internet memes. This attachment is comparable to standup comedians and famous jokes they may tell, if someone else was to imitate their jokes, we would quickly begin to understand that what is being done is imitation, and the material is not original, taking away from the humorous effect. However, in this case it may lead to an opposite effect, as internet memes normally do not stretch beyond their digital existence.

The difference in internet memes is that certain images are associated with particular topics, types of humour and methods of reading and understanding a given internet meme. The above internet memes have deep and complicated correlations to other sources. The top picture is a screenshot from a viral video of a man crying, the bottom picture originating as a tweet. What is significant, is that certain internet memes carry a particular energy about them. For example, the top internet meme is often used to illustrate small inconveniences that may happen to us, and the bottom image illustrates a "winning" attitude. How-



ever, to illustrate a sarcastic and over-exaggerated inconvenience, we see the following picture to be more popular and appropriate.

## **When you forget your headphones at home**



Internet memes have a strange and exclusive quality to them which sets them apart from other forms of humour, such as jokes, and that is their ability to create humour through relatability, and connecting with the reader by evoking humour through past experiences the reader may have experienced before. Some jokes may do this too, although a large portion of jokes are humorous through their presentation of the highly unlikely and absurd as a way of evoking humour.

Relatability in internet memes is easy to recognise, as internet memes which present humour through being relatable often use the key lexis “when”, whether it is worded as “this is me when...”, or simply “when...”. This trigger is a fantastic way of showing the reader that what they are reading is an internet meme, and invited the reader to relate to the picture which the caption is describing. Jokes are often made in ways which we can understand the humour being made is due to a stereotype or a widely regarded opinion. The GVTH reinforces this, by making one of the KR’s the “target” KR, which makes the joke recipient know what the joke is being made about. Although the GVTH limits itself to what can be a target, whereas internet memes do not have this limitation.

Internet memes, on the other hand often present a scenario that the reader may have encountered and this is then exaggerated to an unbelievable scale, as illustrated by the above internet meme. Forgetting your earphones at home is a minor inconvenience, hav-

ing to listen to unwanted noise, instead of one's favourite selected and preferred noise.

Internet memes are significant as they can occur in an ambiguous limbo between Mulkay's serious and humorous mode. The humorous mode exists as a reality in which incongruities and the highly implausible can take place. If we take the above internet meme as an example to test the humorous mode, the only part which can be easily labeled as humorous and implausible is the reaction of forgetting something as insignificant as earphones at home.

However, the internet meme is dangerously close to being masked as a part of serious discourse. Some determining characteristics let the reader know that they are reading an internet meme, such as the layout of the caption and image, lack of further information (such as author etc) and font.

If the author was to mask these characteristics further, such as including a more professional font, accurate placement of writing and information, with captions such as "when your cat dies", a number of problems arise. A reader may emotionally connect with the message instead of reacting with a humorous response. Would the internet meme be then classed as serious discourse? Perhaps one would argue that it may be classed as dark humour?

Jokes on the other hand seem to be almost fail proof in this category. Jokes are structured in ways which the mind will always take notice of them. A set up, and an over exposed punchline/ follow up makes sure that the recipient knows they are taking part in a joke telling and joke receiving experience.

Another way in which jokes and internet memes are clearly, and very different is their popularity and determiners of popularity. Unlike jokes, which do not have a medium in which they can be shared, changed, judged and reproduced, internet memes have all of these qualities and more. The main point being that internet memes are an extremely democratic form of humour. Internet users are the ones creating, sharing, and determining which internet memes are the most popular/ humorous due to how many times they are shared, closing the circle of an internet meme's ecosystem. The people also determine an internet meme's "half-life", a term which this paper will use to define the point in time where an internet meme's own parody becomes the now popular and more humorous version of the internet meme, until the meme is exhausted of its humorous potential entirely. To illustrate the phenomenon of a "half-life", the following internet memes are used as an example.



The “connect four” internet meme takes the cover of a popular tabletop game, and alters the cover into humorous parodies. After a number of iterations have been made and the internet meme was recreated and shared so many times, the following internet memes were parodies of the internet meme instead of the cover, as it originally started out. Due to how fast and easily internet memes can be shared on the internet, the “half-life” is reached within weeks, ready for a new internet meme to take its place as the most popular internet meme at any given time.

## 5.6: Communities

The following passage by Oring 2011, which compares jokes to art, was found to be especially significant and interesting, as one can replace all instances of “art” with “memes”, and we will realise that both fit the passage very well.

Although this paper does not claim that internet memes are an art form, though they may be considered as such by some, a very similar comparison can be made between jokes and internet memes, in that they create a “*Community*”. Both jokes and artworks create communities. They can create communities on the basis of the cognitive demands they make. In some respects, joke is kind of “understanding test” (Sacks 1974, p.350).

Communities may be created among those who claim to be able to see the point of an artwork and how the purpose of the artist has been, or has not been, achieved. Because both jokes and artworks are evaluated, they create communities on the basis of the evaluations they provoke. They create communities of taste: social solidarities and disjunctions based on the appreciation, or lack thereof, for particular objects of regard (Oring 2011, p.190; Berguson 1956, p.64; T.

The above passage is a fantastic illustration of the social aspect internet memes create. Internet memes, similarly to explained jokes or artworks "create communities on the basis of the cognitive demands they make". In order for one to understand jokes and artworks, one needs to meet the cognitive demands presented by jokes or artworks... internet memes do this too.

After exploring internet memes, one may realise that they may slot themselves in a medium between jokes and artwork, as they incorporate elements from both. One needs to cognitively meet the demands of both the image and language in an internet meme, whereas in a joke or artwork, the reader only needs to meet one of the demands. As mentioned, some may not be able to appreciate a joke, others may not be able to appreciate a piece of artworks, and I am certain there are individuals who may have trouble in appreciating an internet meme.

Internet memes can, and certainly *do* create communities of taste. The combination and fusion of appreciation of art, of the fine detail, talent and judgement of art, and elements of appreciation of jokes, and adding to the mix the social element of exclusivity, of one individual being to appreciate, understand and ponder upon one of the two are combined in internet memes. An internet meme can be though provoking in both its artistic and linguistic forms. The humour which an internet meme inevitably brings is also an element which lends itself to jokes and art, as it is a cognitive demand which needs to be met by the recipient, or the person decoding the message/ humour. One may not be able to appreciate the imagery, or humour of an internet meme, and without the appreciation of one of these elements, one risks not grasping the intentions of the internet meme presented.

Similarly to jokes, one may have a mental note of "I ought to react in a humorous response, i.e. laughter, but one may simply not understand the joke, making it a not successful match of the demand the joke is making. Others may look at an artwork and although we may think "this piece should evoke a sense of thought and make me ponder", the result may be mere confusion, or it may not produce any emotion at all.

For some the Mona Lisa is a wonder, for others the artwork is simply an old portrait, which is no different as the portraits of kings or queens. Internet memes are similar as they require a match of demands in both elements. The imagery often alludes to an element the

language in the internet meme is referring to. What is significant, is as mentioned above, both elements are crucial to the understanding of the internet meme. We cannot separate the two from each other as then we are left with an incomplete internet meme.

To sum up my observations, it seems that internet memes come with an “expiry date” of when they are relevant and humorous. Although it is important to note that this expiry date is mostly only relevant if the reader is kept up to date with an internet meme’s entire cycle. A reader who has never been exposed to a certain internet meme may find internet memes from the past humorous. This is significant as jokes do not have this same notion of a “half life” or “expiry”.

The only case in which this may be true is jokes that are made on a particular event. Eventually, the event is no longer news or relevant in everyday interaction. For example, jokes about a political campaign from the past will be hard to understand and grasp as to why they are relevant, unless a conversation about the event is made. Other jokes, such as gender and stereotype focused jokes may fall out of popularity due to social shifts and group/ personal preferences. Blonde jokes may have been widely accepted and regarded as humorous twenty years ago, today some may find these jokes offensive due to rise in PC culture. There are jokes which are still shared and made regardless of year and fashion, such as knock knock jokes.

Jokes are also made and shared in smaller groups at particular times, such as puns or insults made in friendship groups. These jokes are humorous due to the timing and given topics of a conversation and may not be shared outside of that group, as others are not involved in that conversation and may not understand the nuances in the conversation and humour.

What is fascinating, is that internet memes take these qualities and enlarge them to a global scale. When we read and understand internet memes, especially variations of a particular internet meme, we are involved in a mass sharing and reproduction of a piece of humour which only the ones involved can understand to the full potential. We can compare it to listening in on a conversation in which jokes are being shared, relevant to that given conversation.

Internet memes can be compared to inside jokes by showing the reader that we need sets of previous knowledge in order to fully engage with the humour being shared at any given moment. Therefore, internet memes create a social element by their own very nature, on a

larger scale. We can summarise my observations by acknowledging that the ways in which internet memes create humour are vastly different, using qualities such as the relatable aspect and intertextuality. However, the social ways in which internet memes evolve and allow them to be perceived as humorous are somewhat similar to jokes.

# Chapter 6: Internet meme categories

Having a greater understanding of existing theories and approaches to humour analysis, I will have a look at the following internet memes in order to discuss the main question this paper looks to answer: are internet memes jokes under a different guise?

One of the main points of this paper is to explore and push forward the idea that existing theories of humour can be applied and used to analyse and gain a deeper understanding of how internet memes create humour and/or how they could be analysed in order to establish a possible framework.

In order to start an analysis of internet memes, we need to understand what constitutes an internet meme in order for one to look at a piece of discourse and label it as a meme, and not a cartoon, joke or anything else. There seem to be a number of factors which contribute to an internet meme being classed as one. I have devised five categories in which internet memes tend to fit into. It seems that almost all internet memes we come across can be put into one of the below categories, these being the:

1. Picture-caption format.
2. Picture-label format.
3. Story format (closely resembling cartoons).
4. Picture only.
5. Free form.

Let's discuss the above categories I have laid out and have a look at how each one of these forms achieves humour and through what means.

## 6.1: Picture-caption format

This format is arguably the most popular and oldest form of internet memes on the internet, it is a simple image-altering format. What I mean by image altering is that the caption is changing the way we perceive the picture. By introducing the caption, which may say "the face you make when you..." or "one does not simply", the image is then modified for us to read the internet meme as if the character in the meme is saying the message contained in the caption, or for us to see the picture in a relatable way which the caption in-

vites us to do. Such internet memes as the “this is me when...” or “the face you make when” are perfect illustrations of this. Picture caption formats also tend to use a particular image in order to prompt a schema of how to read or what to expect when reading the internet meme. This may invite the reader to read the caption as if a famous actor, or a character associated with a certain feature (such as the bad joke chicken) was saying the message. This is significant, as mentioned earlier, some jokes perform a similar process by the way they are formed, or how they are told (“knock knock”, “what do you call...”). Similarly to jokes, these internet memes spark scenarios and whole stories when read. We imagine what is being said in a joke, and these kinds of internet memes perform a similar task, with an aid of an image to help hone in on a certain image, the way that the author of the meme wants us to perceive it. This is significant, as by doing so the meme can present quite specific and abstract situations which, if presented as a joke, may need a lot of introduction, context and explaining. A good example of this is the previous “free real estate” internet meme, which makes us read the meme in the voice of the character, and possibly invites the reader to imagine such a scenario taking place in the show, which is humorous as it is highly unlikely such a scene would take place. If one was to present such a meme in joke form, both parties would need to understand what the joke teller is referring to in order to achieve full comedic effect, similarly to how when reading an internet meme, the reader normally needs to be preconditioned with the knowledge of the inter-contextual references the meme is making.

Carrying on with the example of the “free real estate” internet meme, the following needs to occur for the meme to achieve full comedic effect.

1. The reader needs to be preconditioned with the knowledge of what references the meme is making, both to other internet memes, as well as the original material the internet meme may be altering (in this case it is the show in which the line “its free real estate” is said).
2. The reader needs to understand the genre of the internet meme and what memes in this genre tend to achieve. In this case, “free real estate” internet memes often create humour through the idea that things are free to take, despite it being illogical, illegal or plain stupid.

However, humour can be achieved without the reader having complete access to both of the above conditions. This is due to the fact that the internet meme is fairly simple to understand and grasp without much context. Many of us can image how a raccoon may consider trash “free real estate” for the sake of amusement. The internet meme can still achieve a humorous response if the reader is not fully knowledgeable.



To illustrate this point, if we take a different internet meme of the same category, such as the bad joke chicken, a reader will still be able to understand the humour in the internet meme, as essentially the chicken internet memes are just jokes, written on a background of an image of a chicken. We may be confused as to why there is an image of a chicken in the background, and why it is relevant to the joke. The chicken in this case acts as a trigger to a schema of expecting bad jokes.

On the other hand, the Ben Shapiro example serves a different purpose. The image of Pikachu serves as a post-joke aid, in order to amplify the humorous effect of the caption. The image almost serves as a punchline in this case, especially if we look at the structure of the internet meme. The top caption acts as a set up for the punchline, which is the last part of the meme... the picture below the caption. As mentioned before, punchlines tend to be the last part of a joke. The picture in this meme acts as an illustration to what someone's face may look like if... (insert situation here). In joke format, one may make a facial expression similar to the one being done by the fictional animal.

Notice that internet memes perform something very significant here. Internet memes can portray humour in ways that a joke simply cannot. This is due to the quality that internet memes have that jokes cannot. Jokes are performed by people, whereas internet memes can appear like they are done by celebrities, fictional characters or even inanimate objects. Take stand-up comedians as an example. Their jokes achieve different responses of humour as they are done in their personal style. When we watch Kevin Hart, we expect jokes full of energy, loud volume and jokes about height and race, which are his popular topics. Internet memes perform a similar task. When reading an internet meme of a particular genre, we expect certain topics and motifs. If we read a bad joke chicken internet meme, we expect a bad joke, if we read a "free real estate" internet meme, we expect the punchline of "its free real estate". However, internet memes are free and can be created by anyone. When watching a comedian, we know there are regulations and topics which will not be discussed, no matter how far the regulations are stretched by the comedian. Internet memes can be anonymous, and it is not unusual for some to be insensitive.

You may think that jokes perform in the same way. If we hear "knock-knock", we know what the following responses will be.

Therefore, I would label the picture-caption format of internet memes a close relative of the traditional verbal joke.

## 6.2: Picture-label format

The picture-label format follows closely behind the previous picture-caption format. One of the key differences that I will present and discuss is the function of the labels used in these internet memes. When compared to the picture-caption format, we notice that captions tend to stay either at the top, bottom or in some cases captions are both at the top and bottom of these memes. In the case of a picture-label format, the positioning of a label holds real significance. The labels are placed in ways which alter the image in a different way to the captions. For example, we would take into consideration everything said in the caption when looking at a picture, whereas the labels are giving us information at a staggered pace. Let us take the “distracted boyfriend” internet meme as an example. The labels allow for a specific portion of the image to be altered by the label, instead of the whole image, which is what captions achieve. By placing labels in strategic positions, parts of the image can be left unaltered, which can then be left to the interpretation of the reader, which is something jokes do not often do. For example, everything a joke presents is vital to the understanding or resolution of the humour or punchline. A “pretty wife” is necessary for the punchline of “come in” to hold a comedic effect. However, a part of an image that is not correlated with a label can be interpreted by the reader in a multitude of ways. One can argue that at the same time confusion can be created as the question of “why is this relevant” may be asked about a part of an image that does not relate to the label.

Both the caption-image, and label-image formats of internet memes require similar skills and knowledge in order to be understood. However, the process which one goes through in order to understand the humour of these memes could be linked to the one of jokes. The reader reads the labels, or captions, and then looks at the image. We then engage in a similar “problem solving” process one may engage in when hearing a joke. When being told a joke, we try to piece together the information, which turns out to not match our expectation, resulting in incongruity and as a result... humour. A similar process takes place when reading an internet meme of these formats. When we read the caption or label, we then try and piece together an understanding of how the discourse relates to the image. We then may realise that the caption or label presents a situation which heavily alters the image in a way which makes the reader realise they are partaking in a humorous piece of discourse. The realisation and then acceptance of being a subject of an incongruous piece of humour may lead the reader to a humorous response, as the reader realises, similarly to jokes, that the situation or premise presented in the internet meme is highly unlikely, similarly to jokes.

On the other hand, an internet meme can create humour through relatability much easier than a joke. This is due to the picture performing a large percentage of what would need to be either explicably stated before the joke in order to lay a foundation. So, a reader may read an internet meme in a label-picture format, and humour may be created through the relatability, but presented in an absurd way. An example below illustrates the point.



The internet meme illustrates a boy following a girl, while playing a trumpet, and the girl is clearly in discomfort by shielding her ears from the noise with her hands. By adding the labels, we can focus on the two characters, and understand the situation presented in the meme. The element of relatability is added here, with the message being that perhaps vegans announce that they are vegan and their veganism to people who do not want to hear it. This format achieves humour in a different way to the picture-caption format, in the way that the labels allow for the humour to be centered and focused on a particular part of the image. Picture-caption formats are set up like two part jokes, with a set up and a punchline. The caption or the picture can act as one of those elements. However, in picture-caption formats, the whole picture is taken into consideration to be the set up or punchline,

whichever being relevant to the internet meme. In the case of picture-label formats, the joke is contained in the picture, with the labels guiding the reader on what to read, and how to modify what the reader sees.

### 6.3: Story format

The story-telling format of internet memes is one that may be the most controversial to analyse, as there is an extremely fine line between joke cartoons, and internet memes which present their humour in a story form, often these are presented in multiple panels, in a comic-resembling format. In order to accurately separate cartoons from story-format internet memes, we need to understand what sets them apart. One of the biggest differences between internet memes and cartoons is the style that they are made in, and the topics they cover. Cartoons are often politically charged, or revolve around the typical unhappy marriage type jokes which we may encounter in a newspaper. Story format internet memes are similar in the way that the memes also are presented in a comic strip like format. However internet memes, as mentioned earlier can be created by anyone and can contain whatever the author desires. When compared to cartoons, especially politically charged ones, we know that they are produced for a particular outlet, and in order to spark a debate. What is also fascinating, is that internet memes create a genre. The “boardroom” internet meme used to be an extremely popular internet meme which normally ends with the character proposing a logical solution in the boardroom being thrown out of the window. Internet memes allow for a cross reference with ease, whereas cartoons find it hard to cross reference, or follow up to each other. We do not know whether the “cognitive test” example is part of a series of these cartoons, or if the cartoon is referencing a different cartoon. A part of this limitation may be due to copyright laws and restrictions on how artists can use other works. Some efforts have been made by European councils in order to also enforce copyright laws on internet memes. Although there are social issues surrounding internet memes, such as the usage of copyrighted material, internet memes can illustrate situation which cartoons, or larger corporate bodies could not produce. This also adds to the reason as to why internet memes are produced at such a fast pace.

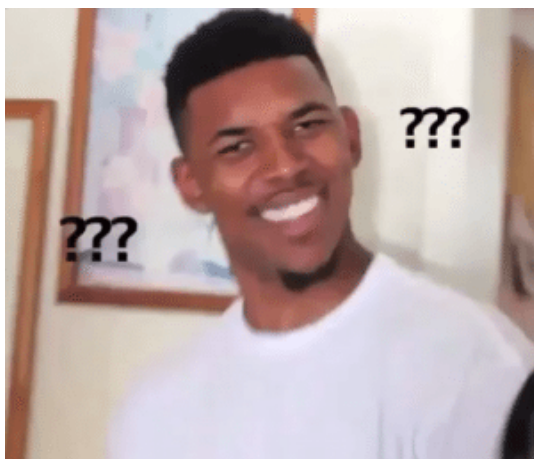
It is often the case that internet memes can arise minutes, or hours after an event, due to the creators omitting the need to ask for permission of copyrighted material. European lawmakers have tried to tackle this issue, but due to the extreme volume of internet memes being produced and the futile task of tracing where an internet meme came from, these laws have failed time and time again. The illustration below shows a McDonald’s ad-

vertisement parody, which would be extremely unlikely to occur in the “real world”, with McDonald’s logos and imagery.



## 6.4: Solo-picture

This type of internet meme seems to be one of the most controversial, as many internet memes mention the existence of internet memes without any lexis, however some is included nonetheless. It is apparent that some pictures have become so well known, that they are associated with the internet meme they are used in more often than they are associated with the origin. Some are used as responses in chatrooms or forums as an illustration of non-verbal communication, an example lies below:



The picture is associated with a person questioning someone else's comment or point, what is significant is how the picture could easily contain a caption or labels in order to change how we may read the image, transforming it to a caption-image or label-image format. Powerful imagery is normally associated with historical events, people and culture, internet memes seem to do this through their immense popularity and reproduction. We may become so familiar with a picture that we instantly link that picture to an internet meme and the popular slogan it may contain, such as the "one does not simply" internet meme. Although we may associate certain images with slogans, such as McDonald's "I'm lovin' it", but rarely is the image used as a token of expression, as the image presents something far too general in order to illustrate exactly what the person is trying to communicate. Internet memes, on the other hand are small tokens of information and do not contain many other links of information such as corporations may do.

## 6.5: Free Form

One is ought to include a section which can include the types of internet memes which are purely abstract or ones which are ambiguous and prove a challenge to group under a specific category. Internet memes like this would include, but are not limited to internet memes which are both abstract in the picture and the caption or label. The watermelon-doctor internet meme is a good example. The picture itself does not correlate with a certain category of internet memes, neither does the caption. The rules I outlined above do not follow with this internet meme, the label or picture do not change the way we perceive the image, and the picture does not influence the labels. Both of these elements seem somewhat random and as a result, I would classify these types of internet memes as “free form” or internet memes which do not follow certain rules or established norms.



# Chapter 7: Conclusion

The study shows that the mechanisms that underpin the internet memes are same as jokes. However, contextual and social elements seem to differ the most between the two genres of humour. The puzzle elements of internet memes are pushed to the absolute extreme, posing a challenge which rewards the reader with humour, if the reader solves the puzzle correctly and in line with previously established techniques and knowledge.

The cryptic nature of internet memes allows for internet memes to be a more exclusive form of humour which appeals to a specific audience. Whereas jokes tend to target stereotypes and established, preconceived, accepted opinions, internet memes work on a different axis, in which the humour is often created as a parody, or creates humour out of an extreme nuance which may be extremely covert. Some internet memes are created in ways which they mask their humour from audiences which are not the target. Jokes are only seen doing this when they are inside jokes, often between small social groups. Internet memes do this on an enormous scale.

Taking into consideration my investigation into the humour of internet memes, I believe that this format is one to not be disregarded, as it proves to be incredibly popular and growing.

This genre, however should not be put in the same category as jokes, the two are trivially different. Jokes and internet memes have some clear defining qualities which set them clearly apart and although many disregard internet memes as being childish, or tokens of humour which only the young generation understand, internet memes are becoming increasingly popular and the preferred way of sharing and experiencing humour.

This study also shows that existing theories of humour are somewhat limited exactly to their genre/ area of humour. Theories such as the GVTH is, as stated, a theory of verbal humour, and is not directly applicable to new genres such as internet memes.

Although internet memes are found to be executing a lot of the same techniques and patterns that jokes present, their analysis under a magnifying glass of a verbal theory of humour does not work to the same extent a general theory of humour, such as the incongruity or superiority theories.



It may be worthwhile conducting a cross disciplinary study which employs attitudes and techniques from other areas of academia, such as psychology or sociology which can explain why this new genre of humour works in the ways that it does. After all, all humour should work in the same ways. It is uncertain whether when reading internet memes we employ the same processes as pointed out by Suls, for example.

I propose a new framework is created for processing and understanding internet memes. This is due to existing theories of humour being not as suitable for internet humour study. The theories tend to consider verbal jokes only, but internet memes demonstrate the importance of considering both verbal and visual aspects together.

As discovered, internet memes are incredibly complex and have qualities which lend themselves to a number of different genres, approaches of study and theories. Their intertextuality and incredible scope of methods of creating humour can be pinned to overarching theories such as the incongruity theory, but there are always qualities which either remained unexplained, or can be explained in non-linguistic manners which do not contribute to linguistic study. The social elements of internet memes go hand-in-hand with all other aspects of internet humour. The reproduction and distribution of internet memes is incredibly fast, with internet memes reaching half-lives within days, before a new one takes over as the preferred format.

The main qualities of internet memes which have proved them to be their own genre, different to jokes can be grouped in three categories:

1. Internet memes are more exclusive than jokes.

Internet memes can reach incredible complexities, as explained by the examples of Winnie the Pooh or the ,’Is this Loss?’ internet meme. This, as a result makes internet memes more exclusive, meaning that unless you, as the reader are familiar with the reference the internet meme is using, chances are you are not going to understand the meme and the humour contained in the meme. Many of us would consider the ,’Is this Loss?’ Internet meme to be anything but humorous, however the internet community which understands the history of the loss internet meme knows that the story contained in the meme is not the reason as to why the meme is humorous, but instead the extent of creativity of hiding the meme within cryptic messages is the humorous message. The internet meme is so popular, that it has become normal to see comments of ,’is this Loss?’ When users see an internet meme which they do not understand.

2. Internet memes require vast background/ previous knowledge (which is sometimes very niche), especially when considering intertextual internet memes.

Internet memes can make niche references to small and unknown events, which then may gain traction. This is as a result of small communities creating their own “inside jokes”, or more accurately “inside memes”, which then may get shared outside of that community, gain traction and become viral. Examples of this could be the infamous *Pepe the Frog* which originated as a humorous picture of a frog used as an “in joke” in early internet forums such as 4chan. As the users used and shared the picture outside of the message board, the internet meme gained traction, although many didn’t know how the meme was used in the message boards or what it represented. “Is this Loss?” Is also a good example of this niche, but vital background knowledge which is necessary in order to understand, and in some cases decode internet memes, to achieve the humour locked inside the meme.

3. Internet memes often operate on a much larger scale than jokes, and can gain popularity and be reproduced much faster.

The previous two qualities of internet memes also play a significant part in the third, and last quality of internet memes, which is their incredible scope, and rate of reproduction. Due to the nature of the internet, internet memes can operate on a massive scale, amplifying their intertextual and exclusive qualities, as it may be harder to understand a niche reference to a different internet meme, as the internet is a vast, ever-expanding medium in which finding a particular reference may prove a challenge. Jokes, when compared to internet memes in this quality are almost *local*. Jokes are shared by friends, or written in dedicated spaces and mediums. Internet memes appear and are shared at such a pace that we can not pin them to a certain place in the internet. Internet memes are a faster vessel for humour than jokes.

## 7.1: Research questions answered

If existing theories of humour can not be used in the same way/ the ways they were designed to analyse internet memes, does that make these theories limited to exclusively what they analysed? In this case, I have discovered that through looking at applying verbal theories of humour to what I firstly considered to be verbal humour, that internet memes

are made in ways which do not follow the observations and criteria made by verbal theories of humour.

A similar observation was made on a cognitive level. Knowing how jokes are processed on a cognitive level, a similar approach was made to analyse internet memes on a cognitive level.

However, as discovered, internet memes may need a new and overhauled approach to a cognitive analysis of how we process internet memes as opposed to jokes in our minds. A linguistic approach which includes sociological and psychological research may provide an important look into how we process and understand memes and it could illustrate how close memes compare to jokes on a cognitive and social level. Internet memes may require a more meticulous approach, without an overarching analysis like this one. Similarly to jokes, which are also a massive and wide spread genre of humour, it may be necessary to first look at particular genres and types, before a holistic approach is made.

As far as altering existing theories of humour, I think that instead, as proposed earlier, I suggest new theories, or frameworks are created, which can act as adapters to current theories.

I believe existing theories can work with internet memes, although efforts have to be made in order to combine elements from each genre and/ or theory in order to clearly illustrate and explain how internet memes can be latched onto each theory.

On the other hand, I do believe that certain theories, such as the GVTH do not work effectively with internet memes. The ways in which theories such as the GVTH were constructed leaves them limited to verbal humour only. The need for an audience, target, situations, limits the theory in terms of its applicability to other genres, in this case, internet memes. Adding to a theory such as the GVTH would change it significantly, and could impact on its accuracy and focus of what exactly the theory is explaining.

One of the most significant differences is the observation of how although internet memes can employ certain aspects of humour found in traditional, older forms, the social and micro details of the internet meme are far more important in comparison to a verbal joke, wordplay or pun. The general consensus was the idea that jokes cannot be executed in the same way on the internet as they can be verbally, therefore internet memes have become a vessel for jokes on the internet to exist. One of the reasons for this hypothesis was due to previous research conducted on internet memes and specifically the theory of in-

congruity. In that study I found that internet memes and jokes achieve humour through incongruity in similar ways. However, after concluding this research I have concluded that internet memes are not only different to jokes, but they belong in their own league.

## **7.2: Topics for further study**

The optimal approach may be to look at internet memes as humorous cartoons and take into consideration methods of analysing humour found in cartoons, and to compare how the two create humour. I propose this due to the methods a reader employs when reading cartoons and internet memes. It is safe to assume that we either read, or the cartoons/internet memes have been subconsciously designed in a way that we read them left to right, top to bottom. This is significant, as explained previously, the positioning of captions and labels in internet memes is linked to set-ups and punchlines in jokes. It may be possible, that by reading an internet meme, we read the top caption as a set up, with conjunction to the picture which is in the middle, and then the punchline is the final caption/ label of the internet meme. However, further would have to be conducted in order to prove/ disprove this observation.

Taking every theory and carefully scrutinising each theory against a certain genre/ type of internet meme is another approach of studying and analysing the humour found in internet memes. Due to restrictions this task could not be completed in this paper, but a careful analysis of particular genres in relation to particular theories could clear the fog which is the question of “how close of a relative are internet memes to cartoons/ jokes?”. As discovered in this paper, internet memes and verbal jokes may take elements from theories previously made which concern themselves with verbal jokes and humour, and although internet memes can not use these theories to their full potential, a possible solution to understanding this new genre of humour would be to revise or extend the current scope of these theories to include internet memes and internet humour as a whole. Some theories restrict their usefulness from the onset when looking at internet memes due to the “verbal humour” restriction, which is understandable seeing the incredible exclusivity and popularity of verbal jokes in the past.

One approach which must be taken and explored is of semiotics. Internet memes are semiotics in the sense that they can be any of the following three categories as defined by Peirce, C. (1991): icon, index and symbol. Icons directly resemble the object, such as internet memes which directly resemble the objects they represent or are talking about, such

as a picture of a car or the connect four internet meme. The index represent an implied association, such as someone shaking a fist may be indicating that they are angry... or an internet meme which requires some amount of inference. Symbols are not inherently connected but are understood through their meaning being taught and passed on from person to person. Such as words... or lines arranged in a way which may prompt us to ask... *is this loss?*

Semiotics may also lead to explanation of how internet memes are read, understood and how through sharing internet memes, we become part of the insider group which knows and understands humour others may not.

This paper took a holistic “gloss” over a lot of questions which have been arising in my research of humour, and more importantly, new genres of humour such as internet humour. A deeper analysis of the evolution of, reproduction and patterns may be a critical baseline study, which although not necessarily linguistic would explain the ways in which internet humour is created and then subsequently shared and altered by users. This is one of the areas which internet humour requires a lot of explanation before the discussion at hand can be initiated. Jokes on the other hand, have been studied extensively by a number of different approaches and areas in academia; socially, psychologically and linguistically, therefore making jokes an easier genre to investigate and analyse than a new genre. What we have to realise, at this moment in time is that we are experiencing a breakthrough in humour, an entire new genre of humour is appearing before our eyes, and it is evolving and changing every day. Internet users often also include videos as internet memes, and although in this paper my definition is limited to static images, videos which are labelled as memes do employ similar techniques which static image internet memes use. Qualities such as reproduction by imitation, or the idea of a half-life are all found in videos which are considered as internet memes by internet users. Both of these types of “memes” could potentially be studied together, although one has the (dis)advantage of sound and movement. This is a vein of ore which I invite linguists, sociologists and psychologists to inspect and mine, as it is a rich deposit of interesting and fascinating humour.

One may argue that it may be possible to look at internet memes as jokes, and try to extract the joke or the premise which the meme is telegraphing. Although this may not be possibly applicable to all formats and genres of internet memes, it may be possible to apply to a large percentage of internet memes. It may be safe to hypothesise that a large proportion of internet memes are jokes but in a different, new format. However, as mentioned earlier, in the GVTH section, we may change the internet meme and alter the intention of the meme into a piece of discourse it was not meant to be.

What is it exactly that sets internet memes apart from other forms of humour such as above cartoons? Is it the freedom of the creator? The fact that anyone and everyone can produce an internet meme with enough (basic) knowledge of programmes necessary to produce internet memes and the overall knowledge of internet humour? How does one make something viral and fashionable, something which other internet users may understand, share and make their own versions of?

As mentioned earlier, today we do not need to have the “traditional” artistic abilities to make cartoons, ones which require finesse with a pencil, paint, brushes or other artistic media. Instead, we require more abstract artistic abilities, which require a wild imagination and understanding of how to create reiterations of something which we have seen before using a programme.

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