

Contemporary subjects, mediatization and socio-cultural practices

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Abstract

This paper relies on digital ethnography as a methodological frame and addresses the cyberspace as a context for the research of social and discursive interactions. Mediatization is taken as a key concept for the investigation of cultural practices that involve digital technologies. The assumptions are supported by the study of the case of “Know your meme”, a website dedicated to find and document memes and viral phenomena. Grounded on a critical view of the interrelations between digital media, communication and society, it pinpoints remix and multimodality as two of the main stylistic resources employed in meaning-making processes. The analysis suggests that the contemporary subject resorts to digital media affordances and the immediateness of internet communication to create/share memes in response to offline events. It also considers that featuring memes as objects in a curator’s page turn these texts into social-cultural artifacts. Assuming a dialogic point of view, the discussion highlights that the cultural products created by subjects in discursive interactions both shape and are shaped by axiological positions. It also caters for the idea that the mediatized practices analyzed show that the boundaries between online and offline universes have been increasingly blurred in the current society.

Keywords: mediatization, digital ethnography, discourse, subject, multimodality.

1. Introduction

Digital media changes have highly affected the ways in which communication is established (Androutsopoulos, 2014). They have also broadened the opportunities for subjects to engage in discursive interactions that go far and beyond previously known social contexts. As a consequence, in order to better understand the current society, academic studies applying to a social and historic perspective of language and discourse need to take the cyberspace as a research context (Bloommaert & May, 2019). Within digital time-spaces, several social media present the common citizen with an open, free and public arena where communication is established by different means such as joining in website comments, by blogging, vlogging, and so forth. In those digital media environments, participants often rely on multiple modes and resort to hybrid languages to create texts that exceed the verbal code only. In such context, this paper aims to study the case of “Know your meme” <<https://knowyourmeme.com/>>¹, a website dedicated to locating, tracking and cataloguing online memes and viral phenomena.

¹ Access on Aug 15, 2019.

Grounded on a critical view of the interrelations between digital media, communication and society, the present discussion pinpoints remix and multimodality as two of the main stylistic resources employed in meaning-making processes. It then suggests that contemporary subjects rely on digital media affordances and the immediateness of internet communication to create/share memes that materialize their discursive (axiological) positions which arise in response to offline events. It also considers that featuring memes as objects in a curator's page contribute to turn those texts into social-cultural artifacts (Hine, 2000) situated in/resulted from the cyberculture.

As Lyman & Khale (1998) have already stated "our cultural heritage is now taking digital form, whether born digital or born-again by conversion to digital from other media". Situated in the early years of the internet advent, the scholars' work reported a tentative definition for the term "digital cultural artifacts" that stemmed from anthropological and archeological ideas of culture, artifacts and cultural memory archive. Lyman & Khale (1998, n/p) remind us that "[c]ulture is something we do, a performance which fades into memory then disappears, but the record of culture consists of artifacts which we make, which persist but inevitably decay". Moreover, they explain that "... digital cultures are simultaneously performances and artifacts, although digital artifacts are profoundly different from physical artifacts". Stating that they would not try and formulate any formal definition for digital artifacts, since the internet and digital media were still taking their first steps into society by the time Lyman & Khale (1998) were broaching the matter, the authors proposed to "... describe some of the parameters differentiating digital artifacts from other kinds of cultural artifacts that may be useful in building digital archives." However, the researchers threw a light on the academic discussion when they brought about the fact that "...while things occupy places (and are therefore always local), digital documents are electronic signals with local storage but global range.". As a consequence, Lyman & Khale (1998) stated that "...as things, digital cultural artifacts are dramatically different from those in other media". When digital media products, internet and the media themselves are seen as cultural artifacts, it sounds logic to talk about the concept of "cyberculture".

Teixeira et al. (2017) inform that, in the late nineteen nineties, Levy defined cyberculture as "a set of material and intellectual techniques: practices, attitudes, modes of thinking, and values, that have developed alongside the growth of cyberspace" (Teixeira et al., 2017, p.119). As previous works have already discussed (Jaff, 2009, 2011), it is important to notice that, from an anthropological and linguistic point of view, discussions about mediatization need to be addressed by inter and multidisciplinary approaches that "include[s] all the representational choices involved in the production and editing of text, image, and talk in the creation of media products" (Jaffe, 2009, p. 572). Another important aspect relies on the idea that, in terms of socio-cultural changes, the expanding way in which communication has been currently established is also closely linked to the new affordances implicitly offered by free and public digital online media (Androutsopoulos, 2014, p.12).

Additionally, according to Lemke (2014, p.85), "(e)very text and multimedia product is not just a window on what they present, but a window on the society and culture in which they were created". Thus, in order to expand the research and build knowledge about the interrelations of subjects, culture and society in the present days, there is a pressing need to investigate social practices that account for different uses of digital

media in meaning-making processes. To make meanings, subjects need to rely on threads that, weaved, materialize discourses (Kress, 2014). Although it has always been inherent to language, multimodality has certainly been boosted by the global digital sphere. Socially constituted, texts/discourses are highly dependent on their situational contexts and neither mode, media nor meanings are independently settled. Therefore, whenever one studies multimodal ways of meaning-making, they are automatically referred to the social, historic, political and ideological dimensions of human communication.

As a concept, multimodality refers to the combination of two or more modes, resulting in texts which socially shape those modes whilst they are also socially shaped by the material features of the particular modes one chooses to work with. Thus, in order to approach social-cultural productions from a multimodal perspective, one needs to face that “language, whether as speech or as writing, is one means among many available for representation and for making meaning”, and then, consequently “(...) the meanings of the maker of a text as a whole reside in the meanings made jointly by all the modes in a text” (Kress, 2014, p. 37). Immersed in digital landscapes, subjects have also come to adapt and adopt communication practices that favor multimodal text constructions that employ stylistic resources such as remix (Komesu et al, 2018), an aspect set to be reviewed in this paper discussion.

2. Materials and Method

Digital ethnography was selected as a methodological ground for this investigation since it is a perspective that favors investigations in and of the cyberspace. According to Pink et al (2016), ethnographic approaches are widely known in qualitative research queries and have already being spotted as the methodological guidance in several studies throughout research fields such as the ones devoted to anthropology, sociology, linguistics and other multiple disciplines. Given that the digital arena is such a relevant social context in which most communicative interactions occur these days, Pink et al (2016, n/p) present digital ethnography as a multi-perspective way of performing investigations which aim at the study of human relations from a socially contextualized point of view. Thus, digital ethnography was adopted as a cross-theoretical methodological perspective that accounts for digitally-permeated cultures.

In such a context, investigators can find several free and/or payed online tools that offer search mechanisms developed to identify trending concepts, terms, sites, objects, images, etc. One of those tools is “Google trends”². In this case study, “Google trends” was adopted as a reliable search method that allowed the exam of trending online results for the terms “meme” and also “Know your meme”.

“Google trends” presents users with several different free searching criteria, such as: geolocation, time frame for the searched term occurrence, commonly and repeatedly sought categories and even image searches. It provides users with result graphics that show the trending term throughout a desired and previously determined time period, creating a virtual narrative of conceptual performance. This performance accounts for the “interest” showed by how interested in the searched term internet users have been, according to the criteria set by the investigator. For this study, the searching criteria selected were: the worldwide performance of the term “Know your meme”, between January to late August 2019. In terms

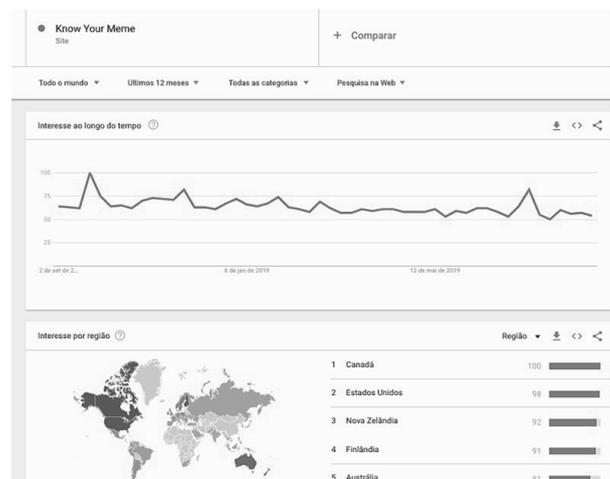
² Available at: <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=US>.

of categories, “all” were selected in order to expand the scope of the search, thus multiplying possible findings. The results are represented by Figure 1.

3. Results

“Know your meme” was identified and deemed relevant for this case study due to its performance in a search ran with the help of “Google trends”.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the search results for “Know your Meme”.



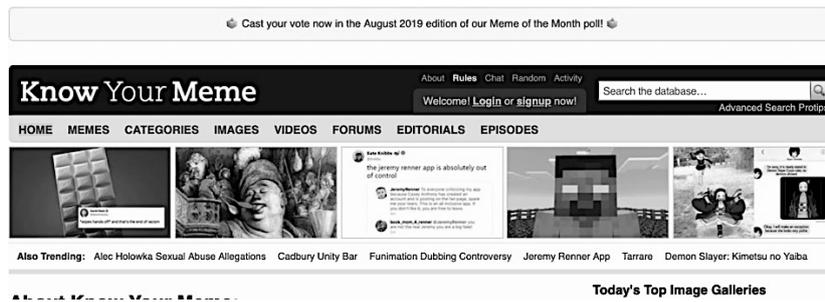
Source: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=%2Fm%2F09g6pyy>. Accessed on Aug 10, 2019.

According to the site developer, the page “Know your meme” has been active since 2008, and its staff members are described as “independent professional editorial research staff and community members”.³ It is also presented as an interactive/collaborative type of platform, much alike other wiki pages, one that counts on its users participation, i.e., users are expected to contribute to its content by sending memes or any other viral phenomena related items and/or discussion topics – which are seemingly welcomed by the page curators who would, however, reserve their right to moderate any sent contributions before they are actually added to their webpage.

The platform also mobilizes participation by inviting users to cast their vote in monthly editions of favorite memes. Apart from static multimodal remixed texts, “Know your meme” also spots categorized videos, meme episodes, and basic trending and categorized images (that might be “borrowed”/taken away by the page user, would they wish for any text material in order to re-signify and/or create their own memes).

³ Retrieved from: <https://knowyourmeme.com/about>. Access on Aug 12, 2019.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the page “Know your Meme”



Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos>. Accessed on Aug 10, 2019.

4. Discussion

All in all, contemporary social and cultural practices situated in the cyberspace such as the ones represented by “Know your meme” (as well as the memes themselves), exemplify some of the ways in which subjects interact and communicate with/by digital media, thus calling one’s attention to mediatization processes. As per Lyman & Khale (1998) discussions, the page itself could be described as a digital artifact that was designed to serve as a place for “cultural memory archive”. Moreover, it could be also perceived as a sort of digital museum where, once promoted to the status of digital artifacts, memes would be carefully archived, classified and/or exposed. All in all, both the webpage and the memes as any other viral phenomena items the platform archives/exhibits are examples of multimodal productions situated in the cyberspace.

Digitally created/shared multimodal texts tend to offer a variety of imagnetic-verbal combinations that rely on a stylistic resource which is currently popular: the remix. Remixing (texts, modes, media), as a text-construction strategy in meaning-making processes, can certainly be traced to days prior to the advent of internet. The simple bricoleur’s practice of cutting and pasting together print pictures from different magazines, for instance, could have been already regarded as a remixing technique. However, it is within the digital borders of online mediatized communication that the remix practice has gained popularity and prestige.

As a matter of fact, memes are one of the most common and well-spread examples of remixed textual productions these days. Komesu et al (2018, p.1) explain that the concept of (internet) meme has already been extensively discussed and it seems to be derived from a Greek word used for “imitation”. Resorting to the work of Knobel and Lankshear, Komesu et al (2018, p.1) inform that memes are often referred to by subjects communicating in online environments due to their fast mobility, since they are multimodal textual creations that are rapidly spread by the means of “sharing”, “copying and pasting”, “favoriting” and other online digital practices alike. It is also remarkable that the preference for remixing modes and texts in meaning-making processes is one of the reasons why online memes both account for and derive from the communication shifts resulted from the digital change.

In lieu of an example of a multimodal and remixed artifact exposed in the platform, one of the memes found in the “most popular” category at “Know your meme” features a photo of a man who appears to be ecstatic, with a highly positive and happy body posture and facial expression, facing a laptop screen. It is

remixed and overwritten with an axiom related to internet usage rules. According to “Know your meme”, the meme was “confirmed” (which means that its trending history in the web has been checked by the curators). Its origins traces back to a series of memes based on axiomatic expressions that were first spotted in the cyberspace in 2006. Apparently, those series had also been created in reference to “a list of protocols and conventions” for people who identified themselves in the internet as “Anonymous”. As the curator’s page later informs, these rules are far from a set of ethic concepts, as they implicitly favor irony and sarcasm in response to a previously shared list entitled “Netiquette”.⁴

Figure 3. A popular meme sample retrieved from “Know your meme”



Available from: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rules-of-the-internet>. Accessed on Aug 10, 2019.

From a discursive perspective, using remix in the production of memes such as the one portrayed in Figure 3 gives visibility to the dialogical nature of language and its signs. Lemke (2014, p. 85) informs that Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism is a central aspect of meaning-making processes, due to the fact that it deals with the multiple voices, natural plurality and intrinsically ideologic ways in which discourse is constituted. Grounded on a historic and contextualized perspective of language as social practice, Lemke (2014) highlights that Bakhtin’s discussions highlight the multiplicity of voices present in any discursive communication, and points to inter-discursiveness as an internal element of any utterance.

As Lemke explains “(...) meanings are made within systems of diverse social voices and [...] the texts may ventriloquate multiple voices and speak as if in dialogue with multiple voices”. Nowadays, this discursive dialogue has also been established by subjects who interact and communicate whilst they navigate between two different universes: the online and the offline worlds. So, in order to make meanings, subjects who interact with (remixed texts within) that meme showed in figure 3 need to have a discursive repertoire that mobilizes both online and offline practices and previous events related to discussions focused on ethic/non-ethic, proper/improper uses of the internet – which are themselves evidences of axiological positions or sets of values, components of ideologically oriented and socially shared discourses, which are all interconnected within the meme composition.

Moreover, another aspect informed by the analysis suggests that, by inviting users to directly interact with them, the “Know your meme” webpage establishes a dialogic dialogue with its appreciators from start. Using an imperative verb tense in the title composition, the page does more than simply offer a public space for contemporary subjects to upload/download memes and other forms of multimodal texts. It poses a

⁴ Available from: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rules-of-the-internet>. Accessed on 31 Aug, 2019.

command, summoning the users to get deeply involved within the production, distribution and effectivity of viral phenomena – may it be as an act of response to offline/online events and/or for the establishment of cybercultural artifacts.

The page title is also a statement that ushers internauts to “know” as if any “meme” (or any other form of viral phenomena representation) should be acknowledged as life-meaningful data, or a “much” necessary piece of information. In fact, one might consider, instead, that this kind of cultural artifact stands for a representation of a social-media oriented society in which knowledge building and distribution processes are built upon renewed forms of glorified pop culture. In this sense, to “know your meme” would mean becoming part of or joining in a network of shared appreciations, hating expressions and/or humor-oriented multimodal texts. As a consequence, the bare existence of a platform for meme curation, that trends worldwide in the net, is also justified by the fact that internet memes actually seem to have been around for almost two decades because they materialize multimodal and remixed social practices permeated by more than just a wish to laugh, have some fun times or express one’s sentiment towards life happenings.

4. Conclusion

The case of the “Know your meme” page contributes to the idea that the internet has shifted the digital environment into a context for cultural artifacts production and promotion. Therefore, the page might be either seen as a sub-product of cyberculture or a digital time-space in which multimodal texts such as memes, which are originally linked to up-to-the-moment events in offline universe, acquire the status of cultural artifacts – when one is bearing in mind Lyman & Khale (1998) and Hine (2000) discussions about this concept.

As Blommaert and May (2019) argue, the lines between online and offline events have been steadily erased, because subjects have been increasingly resorting to digital environments in order to find better opportunities to voice themselves. Interactive communication processes fostered by social media and open-source platform participation have made it possible for real-time connections and/or re-significations of the offline-life events, cultural productions and discussions. In fact, the online-offline dialogism accounts for most of the discursive productions which result in memes that entail contemporary education, participatory/fan culture, entertainment, politics, and other meaningful and relevant socially situated discussion topics, as argued and analyzed in this paper.

Finally, academic researchers interested in mapping out the contemporary society, might need to apply to methodological perspectives that favor the dialogic relations that underpins the cultural artifacts that are a result of the different interactions subjects engage to in the present days – particularly when they move to/from online-offline worlds. It might also be one of the contributions of the discussion promoted by this case study, as a signal for future investigations to be carried on.

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