Meme Marketing to Fellow Kids

Corporate identity in memetic media and vernacular communities

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Abstract

Corporations attempting to enter the realm of memetic media often find themselves lost and embarrassed; the chaotic nature of meme culture as a global way of expression on the internet has proven difficult, and communities like Reddits r/FellowKids enact vernacular criticism on corporations who attempt to use memes in order to reach their target audience. This study aims to reach higher knowledge of successful corporate engagement in memetic media through a text analysis of discussions between users on Reddit and the interplay on Twitter where users engage in vernacular ways with the Wendy’s Twitter account. Drawing on branding theory and Goffman’s dramaturgical model, the study draws conclusions on how users of a vernacular community engages the Wendy’s Twitter account in different ways. It shows how an authentic identity is ascribed to the corporation through vernacular means, and how the prevalence of vernacular play forces the corporation to surrender message control in order to gain authenticity. It further suggests that an authentic corporate identity in vernacular communities requires the corporation not to act like one; preferring fast, playful communication rather than slow, institutional responses. Implying that the correct plan of action is not to have one, the study further understands the paradox of crafting a marketing strategy not based on controlled communication, and suggests further research into vernacular communities and citizen creative control in memetic media.

Keywords: Memetic media, corporate identity, vernacular criticism, intangible assets, memes, Reddit, Twitter, authenticity
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Sources
1. Introduction

As digital marketing strategies make their way further into our lives and culture on social media, efforts by corporations to seem as relatable as possible becomes more apparent. While many have realized the potential of social media marketing, some take their first steps into internet culture and so-called memetic media (Literat & van der Berg, 2019) in order to reach their target audience. Memetic media can be regarded as expressions of a global networked culture on the internet, and reaching consumers through memetic media is thus reaching a global cultural community. While these attempts appear on a range of different social media platforms, this study focuses on one case in particular. On the Reddit forum r/FellowKids, users partake in the vernacular criticism of corporate usage of memes. The name is itself a vernacular expression and part of a meme used to respond to those pretending to be part of a community they are unfamiliar with, in reference to the tv-show 30 Rock, and a character played by Steve Buscemi (Know Your Meme, 2015). While the forum initially was created to ridicule of companies failing to understand internet culture while still pretending to be part of it, some members have come to appreciate certain efforts and argued them as “actually funny”. Examples brought forward on several occasions on the forum are Twitter posts from Wendy’s corporate account (@Wendys). Wendy’s marketing strategy on Twitter involved hiring a group of “mostly millennials” and people with knowledge of internet culture or comedic expertise to run their account (Reddit, 2017). This is in contrast to using the same practitioners and same market strategy as the communication carefully crafted for other platforms. This study focuses on how Wendy’s through this strategy manages to gain a satisfactory ascribed identity within memetic media. This is done by analysing posts made within the community discussing Wendy’s and the interplay that took place between company and audience.

The aim of the study is to reach further knowledge of how companies are able to market themselves and establish an authentic identity in digital spaces with inherent anti-corporatist opinions, and how the interplay between company and consumer and among consumers have built it. While corporate identity online has been a practice since the early days of the internet,
the rise of social media has put new requirements for corporations to not only be informative or funny, but also to be relatable and “with it”. Savvy consumers online are quick to deconstruct and criticise heavy handed attempts at social media marketing, and an authentic corporate identity is built in the eyes of these savvy consumers. This study is timely as promotional culture is an ever increasing factor of our everyday lives, and consumers are becoming more aware of marketing and branding efforts. The intended contribution to the field is knowledge of how the brand identity of corporations are shaped by audience discussion and interplay between audience and producer on digital media.

The proposed research question is:

*How does meme culture and the interplay between consumer and corporation shape corporate identity in online communities?*

There certain delimitations to this study. This study will not examine the visual methods Wendy’s use in their marketing within memetic media, and it will not look at how memes in general are crafted visually. It rather looks into the discussions around the brand, which are present in textual form both in the form of comments and conversations on Reddit and Twitter. It will neither examine how these marketing efforts are received in other media like news, podcasts etc., but will rather at the direct communication from company to consumers and among consumers. This study also only looks at recurring themes apparent in the discussions around the company and its usage of memes. It doesn’t do further discourse analysis of vernacular communities, criticism or memes as a phenomenon, as this has been covered in part by other scholars like Literat & van den Berg (2019).

2 Background

2.1 Wendy’s

Wendy’s is an international fast food restaurant with locations in 30 countries around the world (Wendy’s, 2019), with its head office in the United States. As part of their social media strategy, they have since 2015 adopted a non-bureaucratic stance on social media marketing, with
virtually no approvals required to make a tweet from the company account (Cheng, 2018, October 8). The strategy has proven successful, and has helped Wendy’s take the spot as the 3rd biggest fast food chain in the United States (Cheng, 2018, October 8), as well as experience an almost 49.7% growth between 2016 and 2017 (Eriksen, 2018, April 26). While other companies have adopted similar strategies and have an active social media presence, the success of Wendy’s can be considered abnormal, and thus a relevant case to study.

2.2 Reddit

Reddit is a massively popular internet forum where users can find subforums in regards to special interests or topics (subreddits). Other than the ability to post, users are also able to “upvote” and “downvote” posts or comments, which counts towards an individual users “karma”. Posts with high karma points quickly rise to the top, and posts with low or even negative karma gets forgotten or deleted by volunteer moderators. Describing itself as “the front page of the internet”, the website has quickly increased in popularity as usage grows. Authors like Fuchs (2014) discuss social media as participatory cultures. Participatory cultures are defined by their low barriers of entry, strong belief in sharing creations and individual autonomy. Among this, a strong sense of community and social connection within participatory cultures tie individuals together, and they care about what other people think of their creations. Jenkins (2008) however, takes a critical approach. He suggests that an Interned dominated by corporations can never be truly be a participatory culture through its expressions, as these accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users.

As Reddit is an international social forum from the US with English as its main language, one could say that while US local culture is central on the platform, there are influences of international culture, from users with English as a second language. This can be seen as the creation of a global culture; memetic media contains expressions of all cultures that participate within, and they end up as a chaotic mishmash of cultural expressions that get remixed and repurposed infinitely.
Undoubtedly something being looked at with interest by marketers, certain aspects of online marketing are different to its offline counterpart. Fill (2013) discusses one of the strengths of online branding as the ability of providing a large amount of information constantly available to the consumers. Other scholars also mention the increased acceleration with the introduction of the internet (Rosa, 2015). While forums like Reddit are asynchronous by nature, the increased volume and speed in which things are posted increases the synchronous nature of the forum, to the point of near-synchronicity.

Massanari (2015) talks about cynicism on Reddit and further discusses the concept of what is “cringeworthy”. While forums like r/cringe exists, it’s use is similar to that of r/fellowkids; expressing cynicism towards individuals and institutions. They discuss how this cynicism can express itself toward those who act “inappropriately” in regards to their circumstance; often adults acting in ways we generally ascribe teenagers. This can be tied to Goffman (2005) and his discussions around embarrassment and social organization. When an individual thus acts inappropriately and finds themself in a situation that should make them feel shame, others will do the same, even if the individual themself don’t have the capability to understand the circumstances by themselves. This is due to the unfulfilled expectations given their social identities and the situation, where participants senses what behavior should be maintained as the appropriate thing. But this sense of cynicism and embarrassment could also be applied on a further level. If a corporation acts in a way where the perceived producer has the same qualities as those explained by Massanari (2015), the reaction will be as such, due to a mode of behavior that is unfulfilling to the expectations of behavior within the group.

2.3 Memes and Meme Culture

2.3.1 Memes

While “memes” in this study is used to refer to internet memes, the term itself was taken from the greek word for “imitated thing”. “Mimeme” was used as a basis for conceiving a noun conveying the idea of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation. However, Wiggins (2019), mentions how the word enthymeme better captures what an internet meme is; a concept marked
not by imitation, but by the capacity to bring up or counter argument through visual or verbal interplay. It brings up an argument, while leaving the conclusion empty, as it doesn’t have to be stated (Wiggins, 2019). Thus, enthymemes make their own points through the interpretation of the reader rather than through visual or verbal proof. Enthymemes can thus be seen as an effective way to deliver humorous content, leaving the punchline of a joke to be interpreted by the reader.

Memes are described by Literat & van der Berg (2019) as “transformational reappropriations of pre-existing artefacts and thus bridge individual expressions and collective aesthetics.” (p. 234) and often appear as a “you know it when you see it” type of humor which can be difficult to pin down (Philips & Milner, 2017). While scholars have attempted to map out the specifics of humor, a fog of uncertainty still looms over it, and memes have proven to be a type of humor that is difficult to explain while instantly recognizable.

Katz & Shifman (2017) discuss this special kind of humor as memetic nonsense or subversive play. They mean that doing something “for the lulz”, just for fun, does not necessarily only mean posting silly things on the internet, but instead liberates participants from a modern obligation to generate new meaning at every turn. Instead, through the obliteration of meaning, users are able to create inclusive communities with the potential to include anyone, allowing participants to express themselves and in vernacular, everyday, and creative manner. Humor as expressed on social media is not strictly in relation to memes however; scholarly work has been made in regards to humor in other types of social media. Molyneux (2014) talks about how Twitter can be used as a platform for humorous commentary and personal branding. They mention how journalists change their professional norms by embracing social media, often through self-deprecating humor and self-referentiality. Lister et al (2015) also discuss how using a so called “laugh model” framework can be used in order to reach and engage communities using entertainment, engagement of populations, and humorous messages to prompt action and connect with an audience.
2.3.2 Meme Culture

One could apply Miltner's (2008) concept of phatic communication to memes; instead of consuming content, users consume people, and the connections made to them. Thus, memes can be seen as a way of consuming a collective identity and culture, as opposed to strictly the visual content. Memes can also be seen from the perspective of media and communication as a shared social phenomenon through imitation, competition and selection (Ask & Adbin, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). One can talk about memes as the imitation and reuse of culture for individual expressions of collective, shared aesthetic. Wiggins (2019) also mentions how something becomes a meme only after the participatory digital culture has imitated, remixed, and further iterated a piece of culture.

Memes in general cultivate the so called “Internet Ugly” aesthetic: they are often crude of nature, with no to limited professional editing, and celebrating ugliness as authenticity (Douglas, 2014). This aesthetic is described by Literat & van der Berg (2019) as part of an anti-corporate authorship; and Douglas (2014) talks of memes as democratizing participation. From this, memes can be seen as counter-cultural artefacts; celebrating ugliness as individualistic and authentic, and rejecting corporatist notions. Wiggins (2019) adds to this and mentions how an individual conceptually should be able to reproduce a meme without much difficulty. This ties together with Symons (2017) and the establishing of the outsider image of podcast comedians. In contrast to traditional media production, podcasts operate smaller and simpler, are independent from commercial interests and sponsors, and have limited post-production. He also mentions how this outsider authenticity is established for the audience in ways that could tie into the Internet Ugly aesthetic lack of set theme or narrative, improvised dialogue, and personal anecdotes and information different from the highly edited and directed mainstream productions.

Members cultivating this aesthetic also acts as curators of culture. Literat & van der Berg (2019) talk about how members of communities on Reddit separate themselves from outsiders, often called normies, in order to define themselves as culturally superior. Douglas (2014) mentions several examples of how these communities have lashed out toward outsider usage of these artefacts for capitalist and political usage. Fuchs (2014) further discusses this, bringing up
research that argue the contemporary Internet contains a conflict between a creative audience that tries to establish citizen control, and global businesses with the goal of commodifying the internet. This conflict is thus represented in the resistance of corporate adoption of a democratized practice.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Goffman’s Dramaturgical model

This thesis draws heavily in Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model for its analysis. This model sees social interaction where people are actors performing on a stage with each other and in front of an audience. This model is most often understood as a way of impression management, where actors perform on the front stage in front of the audience in order to affect the perception of the self.

3.1.1 Impression Management

Impression management in a corporate sense can be seen as the management of intangible assets. Intangible assets have great value for companies, and Zerfass & Viertmann (2017) discusses how one of the biggest challenges in organizational communication is to take these assets in consideration and realize their value for the organisation and its strategy. This study considers intangible assets as the brand, organizational, reputation and identity, as described by Villagra et al (2015). These assets are needed for external relations, branding and to maintain a good reputation. Successful management of a brand triggers associations in the mind of a consumer which may not be related to function or utility, but are a rather emotional connection (Fill, 2013). In a dramaturgical sense (Goffman, 1959), these emotional connections to a brand or organization is thus the previously mentioned perception of the self. The difference here is that the self is not applied in the literal sense as a physical, embodied person, but rather as something built within the company (White & Hanson, 2002).

Fuchs (2014) also mentions how consumers in social media are made into an integral part of a commodity’s success through the use of spreadable media. It is thus of utmost importance in an
organizations communicative efforts to strategically deal with its position in regards to different stakeholders, as well as realizing that stakeholders themselves shape these assets. The shaping of these assets requires a message strategy; something deciding what to say and how to say it (Laskey et al, 1989). Message strategies require a certain level of control; in order to employ and utilize a strategy the producer must have the ability to shape the message in the correct way so that it is received in the intended ways by the audience. Dobele et al (2005) extends this way of looking at marketing messages in regards to viral marketing. They press the importance of managing viral marketing through its three main strengths: the low cost, the voluntary forwarding of messages (also regarded to as word of mouth marketing), and the fact that the recipients of these forwarded messages are most likely to have interest in that which is forwarded. Word of mouth marketing are informal, unplanned and unsolicited conversations and recommendations between consumers in regards to a company, service or product. The difficulty with word of mouth marketing is in it’s creation: it is impossible for companies to manufacture, as any attempt to do so is against the nature of it. There is a great importance of word of mouth marketing on the web through user-generated content (Hills & Cairncross, 2011), and it is seen as a central point for corporations looking to manage their intangible assets online.

3.1.2 Identity and the performing of the self

Identity is described as a function of separating the self in polarized dichotomies to the other, (L’Etang, 2008; Tench & Yeomans, 2014; Wiggins, 2019) can arise from both economical and political conditions, and are apparent in both local and virtual communities. This study focuses on how corporate digital identity is constructed in order to give an implied authenticity and idea of lived reality that virtual communities can identify with. This means that, in regards to organizational identity, this study focuses particularly on the attributed identity, the identity ascribed to the organisation by their audiences and stakeholders (L’Etang, 2008). As ascribed identity is created by the audience, one can see the building of identity as a way of word of mouth marketing (Fill, 2013).

Philips & Milner (2017) discuss the different aspect of identity through Goffman’s (1959) theories in regards to the performing of the self. They mention how Goffman’s point in regards
to identity expression is that it is about asserting who and what one is, or at least what they want to be seen as. Masks, or fronts as Goffman (1959) calls them, are used in this manner, as they are the equipment utilized in different expressions of identity. These masks can be either specific artifacts, such as personal belongings, clothes or profile photos, or they can consist of semiotic and affective expressions, meaning choice of words, tone, and gestures. Masks are not permanent however, but can be employed in certain situations or toward certain people (Philips & Milner, 2017). Wiggins (2019) also mentions how identity is both temporary and unstable. There is thus the requirement to maintain identity through performative acts and a perceived anxiety of retaining identity. Goffman (2005) also discusses identity through the dramaturgical concept of face, not in the way of a physical face, but the positive social value claimed by the self in line with approved social attributes. Members of a group can have feelings toward themselves or each other, and a member may be said to have, be in, or maintain face when presenting themselves. Face thus concerns the social actions in regards to the place within the social world it inhabits. Face ties into the different stages of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959), where individuals take on different roles and present different information about themselves. On the front stage, participants act in a certain way depending on who is watching in ways that have meaning to them. The person knows they’re being watched and acts accordingly, however this front requires a setting, which is the situation in which the person acts within. As opposed to the front stage, the back stage is where the person can “drop the act”, relax, and step out of character. Whereas the audience is present on the front stage watching the actors, the actors are alone in the backstage, and no audience member can enter. Goffman (1959) gives the example of the restaurant; where servers become actors in the eyes of the guests until they arrive in the kitchen (backstage) where they can drop the act and speak freely. One can be out of face when acting on the front stage in a way that is out of line with how participants in such a situation is expected to take. While this is the intent of many pranks, it can also be a situation where one is regarded as out of touch with the situation through their expressions. Fill (2013) mentions different transformational motives that relate to the creation and maintenance of identity. This means that the motive of a certain message, instead of informing the consumer, the company promises to enhance or improve the user of a brand. Three main transformational motives can be
distinguished; sensory gratification, intellectual stimulation and social approval. This paper focuses mostly on the motive of sensory gratification; the promise that the users emotional state will go from dull to elated.

Image is discussed by Tench & Yeomans (2014) as the set of meanings that is bound to a company or brand, and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. They also talk of it as an interaction of someone's perception of it. Similar to attributed identity, image then means how people remember and feel about a company. However, important to notice is the concept of temporality with image. Opposite to reputation, image is an emotional, short-term snapshot of the company. This ties together with Goffman (1959) and the performance of the self. Image can thus be seen as a snapshot of a performance, which is an ongoing factor of retaining identity (Wiggins, 2019). Interesting here as well is Tench & Yeomans’ (2014) discussion is the question of where stakeholders get their information regarding from which shapes the perception of image. In the case of this study, the stakeholders get their information both from the company itself, and indirectly from members of an online community, depending on platform.

### 3.1.3 Authenticity

Authenticity can be described as something that is true to the personality, spirit or character of the producer, and as something made or done in the same way as an original (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This means that something can be regarded as authentic if it’s made under the same circumstance as that which is seen as original, as long as it has the spirit of the person who creates it. Authenticity can be tied to Goffman's (1959) theories on dramaturgy in regards to the role of the actor; when acting on the front stage, individuals have to have a believable mask or front to be able to act effectively. If the mask isn’t believable or authentic, the actor will lose face. Authenticity thus regards to the believability of the actor on the front stage. In the case of authenticity within meme culture, corporations looking be believable on the front stage thus has to refrain from acting like themselves, due to the anti-corporate authorship of memes (Literat & van den Berg, 2019). Rather, authenticity in meme culture looks to the individual in the democratic participation of it (Douglas, 2014), and corporations must refrain from their own
notions of message strategy and control to be regarded as individualistic and relatable. This thesis then understands authenticity in relation to attributed corporate identity by regarding authenticity in a sense of relatability. Thus, this thesis defines digital corporate authenticity in memetic media as a perceived sense of something that is done in an identifiable and self-aware manner, both in sense of production and spirit.

3.2 Vernacularity

Without the traditional social cues present in face to face communication, users have to adopt different modes of communication in order to express themselves in different ways to emulate social cues. When limited to textual communication, users employ asterisks as brackets, upper-case letters and repetition of punctuation (like dots or exclamation marks) in order to convey meaning or emphasis in a statement (Baym, 2012). Users also describe nonverbal reactions in different ways to convey their reactions, as well as using acronyms. Language in this way is often informal, and filled with slang, casual words, profanity or non-standard spellings of words. Fuchs (2014) also discusses the concept of mass self-communication, which consists of messages that have the potential of reaching a global audience due to the nature of the internet, with the production qualities of private messages.

Informal use of language in different ways is part of what Philips & Milner (2017) calls vernacular creativity. This is the everyday creative expressions of the everyday cultural participants, and the term vernacular or vernacularity is used to describe how a specific population expresses themselves amongst each other. This is a way of understanding local language and expressions as opposed to other types of language, such as that of institutions or corporations. In this study, the population regarded to are those who are local to meme culture, as explained earlier. Memes relate to culture in different ways, and are, in ways, local (Wiggins, 2019). Memes in Portuguese or Swedish are in general related to those local cultures, and memes in English are in general related more specifically toward local cultures in North America and the UK. However, this thesis regards to memes as localised in meme culture; a type of culture circled around the shared interest and appreciation of memes. Thus, just like different subcultures have manners to communicate with each other, memes can relate to an international
subculture around itemself. Important to notice as well is the focus on everyday in the term; vernacular expressions are the opposite of traditional marketing, as they are spontaneous, chaotic, and created by “common people” in different local communities. Vernacular communication also relates to Goffman (1959) and the discussion regarding masks or fronts; vernacularity can be seen as a type of communal mask, which guides the ways in which members of online communities speak to each other in an everyday, unplanned manner. When actors thus perform on the front stage, this vernacular mask becomes the way in which the talk and interact with each other; both from expressions to references and jokes, which are specific to that type of performance and the basic understandings of the different participants.

This thesis, when using the word vernacular in different ways, thus regards to the term as a way of describing certain language and behavior. It is thus not only bound to single expressions or a certain usage of slang, but can rather be seen as a way in which members of a local community or culture communicate and how they establish themselves. This interplay, or vernacular play, may not make sense to an outsider looking at a single expression or interaction, as it is a system of how a local culture, online or offline, understands themselves and each other.

3.3 Previous Research

3.3.1 Previous research on memetic media

Previous research of memetic media and digital culture has in most regards looked into the interplay between individual users and how memes are created and treated within these communities (Douglas, 2014; Ask & Abidin, 2018; Literat & van den Berg, 2018). This interplay has mostly been discussed within the political context; how memes and their symbolic values shape political discussions (DeCook, 2018; Fang, 2018; Greene, 2019). While scholarly work on right-wing extremism and the alt-right is more prevalent in regards to memetic media, some writing on communist politics exist (Fang, 2018). Although, further research on certain internet communities and video gaming culture shows open hostility for women and more liberal ideology (Paaßen et al, 2017; Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Ruvalcaba et al, 2018). This can be explained by Fuchs (2014) who lifts research discussing how participatory culture has an
idealized view of community, and how these easily can be turn to right-wing extremism, especially in situations of capitalist crisis. Some mention corporate involvement in meme culture (Higgins, 2019), although these mostly discuss corporate attempts in creating their own viral media, as opposed to becoming a contributor in culture.

3.3.2 Previous applications of Goffman in corporate communication

Goffman’s dramaturgical model has been applied by other scholars in order to understand the decision-making and processes in corporations, both in the private and public sector. White & Hanson (2002) described the corporate identity tied to Goffman’s concept of the self when looking at impression management. They discuss the self both as achieved in interaction, and through the predictability of collective life through individual actions. The self is also always subject to change however, if the actions do not fulfill the expectations of the character. The self, as discussed by White & Hanson (2002), is seen as far more than an embodied individual, and they rather see that the corporation is a self as the self is a corporation, since the self can be built up by a team of people. This self then makes utterances in specific ways that is received by the presumed audience, in this study as exemplified in a corporate annual report.

Cho et al (2018) looks into Goffman’s theories on the frontstage and backstage through a case in regards to the frontstage sustainability discourse of large US oil and gas firms, with the subsequent backstage corporate political activities in the context of a law allowing further oil exploration within sensitive environmental areas. They as well as White & Hanson (2002) utilize the theories in regards to impression management, except they focus on the way companies present themselves on the frontstage through sustainability reports in a sense of self-presentation. They as well draw on Goffman in the sense that they see organizations, like individuals, as actors engaging in performances in a dramaturgical sense. Thus, the organization is not seen as a group of individuals within the organization, but as having an identity of its own (Cho et al, 2018).

Further scholarly work with Goffman’s theories in regards to organizations can be seen with Zavattaro (2013) who uses some of the concepts of the dramaturgical perspective to understand city branding practices. They talk about branding in a sense of identity creation and image
management, and discusses Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor to define co-creative aspects of place-image management. Urick (2014) also uses the dramaturgical perspective in an organization context. However, they rather use it to examine the presentation of the self as a way of understanding generational identity within organizations.

It can be concluded that previous research using Goffman in organizational context uses it as a way of understanding impression management; looking at how organizational identities are built on the frontstage in order to be accepted by the audience.

4. Methodology

Textual analysis in social science with a social constructionist epistemology studies people in different societies and the types of texts they produce. In a networked society texts are produced infinitely across the globe as a result of extended discussions between people (Bergström & Boréus, 2005). As the analysis is based in texts produced by users on digital platforms, this methods fits well in order to further look into the themes present in the texts and analysing them in order to understand the discourse.

This thesis aims to make use of a textual analysis of personal documents reflecting the users own wording on the internet forum Reddit and on the micro blog Twitter. The strength of a platform like Reddit as an arena for research is that these documents are public; no post can be hidden unless the user themselves deletes their post, or it is removed by volunteer moderators for breaking the rules. Personal documents can be seen as a trustworthy source of information when looking at attitudes and opinions (Merriam, 1994). The comments themselves are gathered from different forum threads about Wendy’s on the subforum r/FellowKids.

Twitter is a widely used global micro blog where users can post short texts as a way of expressing themselves. The platform also enables users to directly target brands, public figures or other regular users, either by writing at them (on the platform used described with the symbol @) or by responding and commenting on certain posts. This study specifically looks at the conversations that take place between the official Wendy’s Twitter account (@Wendys) and users who comment on their posts. Just like Reddit, a strength with Twitter as an arena of
research is that the texts published are public by default; while users can decide to make their accounts private, most users publish their texts as public. Twitter also has a larger corporate presence as opposed to Reddit; where company Twitter accounts are considered standard, corporate Reddit accounts aren’t. Thus, Twitter becomes a good platform in order to look at the interplay between producer and audience.

The goal is to develop a frame of analysis after reading through the data, and choosing specific posts that represents certain thematic fields in order to make a text analysis. A text analysis enables me to understand the ways in which users express themselves and bring forth their opinion on issues. The analysis will dig deeper into these thematic fields and examples within to uncover how these shape the intangible assets and identity of a company on social media. Themes are regarded as products of a thorough reading and rereading of data, where themes and subthemes are recurring motifs applied to data (Bryman, 2012). These can be recurring topics, local expressions, metaphors, how subjects discuss different topics differently, or what isn’t said in the texts. Repetition is central in order for something to be considered a theme From this, I will be able to reach knowledge on the ways members of an internet community reacts to promotional culture and shapes the organizational identity toward membership through vernacular criticism.

The usage of text analysis also enables the paper to extend into reflections on discourse. Analyzing discourse is analysing how a certain subject or person is talked about and represented in different modes of speech, and also seeks to understand how certain ideas are formed in society (Möllerström & Stenberg 2014; Lindgren, 2009). As this study seeks to understand how Wendy’s establishes itself as a cultural collaborator in memetic media, this approach enables a deeper discussion on how the Wendy’s brand is shaped through online discussion.

The anticipated results are a higher knowledge about how online audiences shape brand awareness and opinion on a larger scale. These anticipated results are important in order to further understand globalized culture on the internet and the rise of promotional culture within. It will be of use for scholars looking into both brand identity online as well as those researching internet culture and capitalism from a critical perspective.
4.1 Data collection

The data consists of comments made by users on the Reddit forum r/fellowkids in four threads discussing Twitter posts by Wendy’s from the account @Wendys, as well as discussions taken place between Wendy’s and its audience on Twitter around these posts.

In order to gather the comments used in the analysis, the four threads on Reddit was chosen by using the sitewide search tool in r/fellowkids and searching for the word “Wendys”. After this, the four threads with the highest karma points were chosen, which were found by sorting the search results by “Top” and in the time span “from all time”. One thread was disregarded from the search results, as the meme discussed was not originally posted by Wendy’s. The four Reddit threads gathered all discussed these three posts from the Wendy’s Twitter account:

![Figure 1. First meme.](image1)

![Figure 2. Second meme.](image2)

![Figure 3. Third meme.](image3)

The comments within the thread was gathered by using the built in screen cap tool on Windows and Mac, to get a virtual snapshot or picture of the conversations. As the memes discussed on Reddit were initially posted on Twitter and screncapped by a user who later posted it on Reddit, visiting the original posts on Twitter is useful for the analysis. These posts were found by using
the advanced search tool on the platform, where I was able to search for posts made by Wendy’s twitter account during certain dates, in order to easily find the original post. This enabled the collection of discussions by gathering the conversations between Wendy’s Twitter account and users from the original Twitter posts. To gather the conversations on Twitter, using the built in screen cap tool was helpful as well.

The forum threads on Reddit were chosen because of their spread; a total of 1651 comments were posted, as well as accumulating a large amount of “karma” points on the platform. The comments chosen to represent the debates of Wendy’s social media identity and the brand in different ways, affecting their status and authenticity as a cultural collaborator. The texts on Twitter were chosen after gathering a total of 86 conversations on social media between the official Wendy’s Twitter account and different users, in order to analyse the interplay between consumer and producer on the platform. The data gathered is divided into thematic fields, which evolve from reading and rereading the material and identifying recurring factors (Bryman, 2012).

When looking at the initial gathering of data from Reddit, the concept of “karma” points becomes useful in order to find samples representative of larger sentiments. Initial readings showed that a large portion of comments either had only 1 point, meaning there had been no reaction; either positive or negative. Thus, these comments can be seen as “yelling into the void”; while they are a part of the thread, there is no answer or reaction. As Reddit is a participatory platform, these comments will merely be considered in their relation to the larger, overarching themes. Certain comments also had negative karma points; hiding them far down in the thread. While these comments would be interesting to look at as well, they will as well only be looked at as a way to confirm overarching themes; if a number of people voted to give a comment a negative score, it can be seen as confirming that the general population doesn’t agree with that comment. However, initial readings showed that while some comments can garner negative points in the thirties, it is far from the top positively voted comment with ~12100 points. An exact number over a thousand points is not possible to get, as the website abbreviates the number.
From this initial data gathering and sorting, a total of 6 examples from each Reddit and Twitter was chosen. These examples contained a total of 9 individual Reddit comments and 15 Twitter entries, and are regarded as representative samples. Representative samples accurately reflects the gathering of data in a way where it encapsulates the characteristics of the whole (Bryman, 2012). The examples from Twitter contain more individual entries as they looked into the interplay between individual Twitter users and Wendy’s Twitter account. The examples from Reddit were chosen as they all had a high “karma” score; with hundreds and even thousands of users choosing to “upvote” the comments and elevate them.

4.2 Thematic fields

Five thematic fields have been developed through rigorous reading and rereading of data; which will lay the foundation for the analysis and discussion. These five fields are: Vernacular play, discussions about products, meta-conversations, mentions of ‘others’ and acknowledgement.

Vernacular play regards comments and conversations that have value through their phatic qualities; they are areas of vernacular expression where users consume the connection with each other through referentiality and other memetic means. The theme is based on Philips & Milner (2017) and was developed to further examine the everyday cultural discussions by users on the different platform, especially as it ties together with Goffman (1959) and other discussions in regards to humorous content or communication in a creative way.

Discussions about products regards the times where users have taken it to themselves to, regardless of the original post that is supposed to be discussed, discuss the food served by Wendy’s and give each other recommendations, or just use the terminology in vernacular ways. This theme draws upon the importance of word of mouth marketing (Hills & Carincross, 2011, Doele et al, 2005, Miltners, 2008) in managing and shaping corporate intangible assets such as brand and identity (Villagra et al, 2015). It also serves to analyze how consumers in social media are an integral part of commercial success through the use of spreadable media (Fuchs, 2014).

Meta-conversations contains the discussions and comments where Wendy’s self-awareness and perceived qualities is discussed, and/or where Wendy’s themselves comment the production and
goals of their own Twitter posts. This draws partly on the theories of Douglas’ (2014) theory about the Internet Ugly aesthetic and the production quality and circumstances around the production of the memes, as discussed by Literat & van den Berg (2019). They do also draw on the dramaturgical concept of the backstage (Goffman, 1959), and the discussions that happen when the actors are not on stage performing, and thus discussing the performance itself.

Mentions of ‘others’ regards the conversations or comments where Wendy’s Twitter account or marketing practice is regarded either directly or indirectly as opposed to other companies. This theme was developed in order to look deeper into the discursive truths shaped when users compare Wendy’s Twitter account to other entities, and draws on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical of the actors and their different roles. It also understands this theme through Fuchs’ (2014) theory about the ‘creative audience’ as the bridge between business and users on the internet.

Acknowledgement regards conversations where users reject the notion that Wendy’s can or should be ridiculed for their posts and that they have evolved from deserving it in different ways. This ties heavily to theory on the anti-corporatist authorship of memes (Literat & van der Berg, 2019), and the theoretical concepts of cynicism (Massanari, 2015) and embarrassment (Goffman, 2005).

5. Ethical concerns

As this study will look at individual personal documents as comments on an internet forum, this study requires certain anonymizations of texts. Users who post on Reddit do not use their own names however, but instead pick usernames to represent themselves, which can be seen as a type of self-imposed anonymisation, although this study seeks to anonymise these usernames as well. However, seeing how Reddit is a public forum, one can assume that those who post understand the public nature of it and thus realize that people other than the intended recipient are able to read it.

Users on Twitter however often post using their real names or with pictures of themselves. In this way texts will be anonymized for all except for those coming from Wendy’s Twitter
account, @Wendys. This is because as it is a corporate account it can be assumed that it is an account that should be regarded as public and to be read and interacted with at all, especially since it’s used as means of marketing.

6. Analysis

The analysis discusses how users between each other and with Wendy’s discuss topics in certain ways on both Reddit and Twitter. Users in this thesis is seen as those who take part in discussions or post their opinions as part of digital communities on the two platforms. Each meme posted by Wendy’s on their Twitter account spawned discussions on both forums, and users gathered to discuss the company and meme in vernacular ways. When “Wendy’s” is mentioned, and as they are mentioned in the analysis, it refers to the producers of the memes on the Wendy’s social media team. It can thus be said that while the conversations taking place isn’t with the literal brand itself, with any person working in the store or with a person who has authority or position within the company, these conversations that take place end up shaping the Wendy’s corporate identity. It can be said that a kind of vernacular arena opened up in the comment sections on these two platforms; they both became places where members of meme culture joined in and discussed Wendy’s in different ways using their own language. In regards to Goffman’s (1959) theories on dramaturgy, the users on Reddit and Twitter commenting on Wendy’s memes can be seen as critiquing the performance made by Wendy’s as an actor. In this case, the front stage and acting is the creation and posting of memes themselves, where the Wendy’s brand can be seen as putting on mask and thus adopting a face of social values in line with the younger, savvy audiences on social media. The setting in which Wendy’s is acting is the internet; as digital media has evolved, those who wish to act in a digital setting do so on a global scale, and for a potentially global audience, especially with the spreadability of the performances.

While comments on both platforms contained both positivity and negativity, the karma system on Reddit brought forward discussions mostly positive of Wendy’s, as mentioned earlier. On Twitter however, discussions of all kinds were present, and interesting to note is that even if the original comment toward Wendy’s by users on this platform were negative, the transformative
manner of Wendy’s replies often ended the conversation on a positive note due to the vernacular mannerisms Wendy’s apply, often answering to an expression common in meme culture with another. Thus, Wendy’s can be seen as implicitly having a transformational motive (Fill, 2013) of sensory gratification with their messages in this sense. The promise can be seen as when Wendy’s make jokes on Twitter, the user are able to read them and will become entertained. While the transformation isn’t necessarily present when the user visits a Wendy’s restaurant and buys the products, the user still interacts with the brand and is affected by its qualities.

6.1 Vernacular play

Twitter User: “I don’t even understand this”.

@Wendys: “welcome to most days on the internet”.

A vast amount of the comments on both platform involved high levels of vernacular play. Remembering memes and vernacular expressions in general as spontaneous, chaotic and made without a plan in mind, the previous quote introduces this part of the analysis excellently. It shows one of the sometimes paradoxical relations of building an identity in a vernacular community around meme culture; not all might understand it. Drawing a from Goffman (1959) about masks or fronts; Wendy’s are here putting on a mask, both in their original post and in their reply to the user, that is thoroughly vernacular. When Philips & Milner (2015) mention memes as a “you know it when you see it” type of humor, the implication becomes clear that there will be a group of people who do not “know it”. Thus, this type of mask is only intended for a specific type of the audience; presumably the sayvy, younger Twitter users, and Wendy’s comments on the absurdity of the own performance in an extended sense of it. While posting the initial meme is an action on the stage that itself is judged and discussed by the audience, Wendy’s extends the performance by taking part of the discussion with the same vernacular mask as they used earlier.

Twitter User: “The award for social media account most likely run by an edgy teen goes to...”.
A presumed understanding of the ways in which this community around meme culture behave can be seen here. In both of the replies made by Wendy’s there is a distinct lack of both punctuation and capital lettering; giving an air of informality to the posts, as previously described by Baym (2012). There is a synchronous air in the post; while Twitter as a medium is asynchronous, the quickness of the post makes it almost seem like verbal ping pong. This type of near-synchronicity coupled with informal wording shapes the recipients attitudes, and it can be assumed that the post written in a spontaneous way. The post has thus has all the characteristics of a personal document, except for the fact that it is written by the Twitter account of a multinational corporation. This can be an indicator of a fast online culture; where fast play and spontaneous, unplanned discussions trumps slow, institutional responses. One can also see this example as a user trying to make the company “slip up” and act out of face (Goffman, 2005), by making a post that would bait the company to act in a more institutional manner and addressing the criticism. Had Wendy’s done this, they would have acted in a way that would reveal their institutional corporate identity, which would have embarrassing for them (Massanari, 2015).

However, Wendy’s manages to twist the attack on the character into a further act of vernacular play. The conversation can thus also be seen as an expressed example of attributed identity; after getting an answer to their comment in a vernacular manner, the user reverts from criticizing Wendy’s to instead praising the company in a manner closely resembling word of mouth marketing, even if it lacks a recipient. This is in part because of the vernacular creativity employed by Wendy’s, and is interesting as it directly addresses the critique expressed by the community and counters it in a vernacular manner. Taking the definition of memes by Literat & van der Berg (2019) into account, this type of vernacular play takes a memetic structure; it is transformative, and bridges the expressions on an individual level between Wendy’s and it’s audience. This type of transformative reappropriation becomes more noticeable in the third example.
Twitter User: “I was born into a family of non yeeters”.

@Wendys: “This is sad, Alexa play Boyz in the Hood”

Twitter User: “wow I am now confident enough to yeet thanks wendy’s”.

Memes as transformative reappropriations are very much represented in this example of where the meme “This Is So Sad Alexa Play Despacito” (Know Your Meme, 2018) is used by Wendy’s. While Wendy’s uses a previously established meme in a correct manner, by changing out the song “Despacito” to another song, It is distinctly referential to another meme but reappropriated in a new, although nonsensical manner. The meme Wendy’s is reappropriating doesn’t relate at all to the comment written by the Twitter user, but makes sense in a nonsensical and vernacular manner, as discussed in regards to the Internet Ugly aesthetic. This also strongly relates to memes in the perspective of media and communication as a social phenomenon, partly through imitation (Ask & Abdin, 2018). Like the previous conversation, the user interacting with Wendy’s ends the conversation on a positive note; this time with more confidence than earlier. In this conversation, the user takes part in the acting on the front stage in a dramaturgical sense (Goffman, 1959), and acts in accordance to the answer Wendy’s gives. The interaction can thus in a sense be given a story where both actors take part and create meaning together. One can also understand Wendy’s usage of the meme as a prop in the dramaturgical sense, where it is used in order to aid the performance (Goffman, 1959).

In general, the examples prove the different ways in which Wendy’s engage in vernacular play with its audience through textual communication in an informal manner. The textual mannerisms in the conversations have high levels of both self-referentiality and reappropriation. Thus, as referred by Goffman (1959), Wendy’s thus can be seen as putting on a mask similar to what the audience wears when discussing Wendy’s when interacting in this way, while simultaneously referring to the abstract nature of the mask, as apparent in the first example. Interesting to note as well is that while traditional model of marketing communication is planned with a producer and a recipient that is carefully crafted, the nature of these conversations is spontaneous and quick; even one Twitter user was surprised by the speed of the answer provided by Wendy’s. While the nature of digital communication increases the speed of asynchronous communication nearing the
synchronicity of a face to face communication, responses of this kind from a corporation can still be seen as unusual. The transformative nature of users conversations with Wendy’s also proves the ability to change opinions in regards to attributed identity and image through the vernacular play on the front stage. As it is ascribed to the company by its users, and deals with how users remember and feel about a company, Wendy’s actions on the front stage and the involvement of other on the vernacular arena points towards the importance of community. While vernacular expressions are the established ways in which a group talks, the expressions themselves are continually negotiated through the play within the arena and on the stage. An actor looking to maintain face (Goffman, 2005) thus cannot only repeat what others are saying, they have to come up with their own expressions and reappropriations.

### 6.2 Discussions about products

*Reddit user 1*: “buy our cheeseburgers’ with nothing else is the best part”.

*Reddit user 2*: “Upgrading to the Baconator was the best decision I’ve ever made”.

In the conversations, among the different modes of vernacular play, spontaneous discussions regarding Wendy’s products sprung up. These discussions existed up on both platforms and is a good example of word of mouth marketing (Fill, 2013, Dobele et al, 2005, Hills & Cairncross, 2011), where users discuss the products and give each other recommendations. These discussions can be seen as examples of digital word of mouth communication; while traditional word of mouth is exemplified when individuals discuss and recommend products to each other spontaneously face to face (Fill, 2013), digital word of mouth is via textual exchange between users. It is important as well to note the spontaneity within the digital word of mouth; the first user doesn’t engage in word of mouth, but rather makes a comment regarding the meme posted by Wendy’s on their Twitter. It can be said as well that in commenting in an appreciative way about the meme, they can be seen as a curator accepting a new piece of culture (Literat & van der berg, 2019). Through that comment, an assumption can be made that the original meme posted by Wendy’s fits into the Internet Ugly aesthetic (Douglas, 2014).
Reddit user 1: “GODS I WAS LUNCH THEN”.

Reddit user 2: “IN AN OPEN FROSTY NED”.

This example is a mishmash of vernacular play, referential humor, and word of mouth marketing. The users are making playful references to a character in the popular tv series Game of Thrones, but are exchanging words with words that relate to Wendy’s and their products (in this example, “lunch” and “frosty”). In the same sense where memes are transformative reappropriations that can exemplify themselves in nonsensical manners, it as well relates to Ask & Abdin (2018) in regards to communication as a social phenomenon through imitation.

Important to note here is Dobele et als (2005) mention of how individuals help word of mouth marketing reach people who have interest in the type of product organically. While the discussions are about the products, the discussion and word of marketing does not start with a viral product, but with a viral message. Thus, instead of this type of viral marketing reaching people who have an interest in hamburgers or fast food, it first and foremost reaches people who have an interest in memes. This can be seen where the first Reddit user refers not the initial meme posted by Wendy’s. While it consists of a marketing message (“buy our cheeseburgers”), the user refers to in the way it was produced and posted, and the word of mouth marketing doesn’t truly start relating to products until the second user starts recommending the Baconator. Indeed, in the thread are other user discussing how they either do not like fast food or haven’t visited a Wendy’s restaurant in a long time; they are just there for the memes, or “for the lulz” (Katz & Shifman, 2017). However, the virality of the discussion morphs it into what can be seen as word of mouth marketing; where users with an interest in memes end up discussing Wendy’s products. Thus, this can be seen as a sense of word of mouth marketing that is phatic of nature (Miltners, 2008). Instead of consuming the content of the meme or the word of mouth marketing, they are participating as a sense to express and consume the relationship with others on the platform.
6.3 Meta-conversations

Reddit user 1: “Wendy’s is so fucking Meta and self aware I love it”.

Reddit user 2: “Cus a 24 year old intern that spends half the day on Twitter and the other half on memeeconomy runs the account”.

Within the comments on both Reddit and Twitter were so-called meta conversations; conversations that discuss the nature of the posts made by Wendy’s rather than it’s visual or textual qualities. In this sense, users discuss the perceived self-awareness of Wendy’s, and speculating about the producer of the original post. Interesting to note is how authenticity is ascribed here; the second user talks of how an intern is the producer of the messages, and that this person spends a lot of time on Twitter and Reddit. Coincidentally, the forum mentioned by user 2, r/memeeconomy, is referenced by Literat & van den Berg (2019) as a forum that claims cultural superiority over others and acts as curators of meme culture. Thus, users mentioning how the supposed producer spends time there can indicate higher levels of perceived authenticity within these communities. Similar posts like this also mention how the producer of the posts has to be young and without formal experience or education in marketing. While this could be a situation of the user projecting themselves in the situation, it also shows how Wendy’s is perceived as something different to marketing professionals. One could almost make the analysis that the Twitter account @Wendys gets a separate identity to Wendy’s as a corporation through the distinction of the person who supposedly spends long hours on both Twitter and Reddit that just happens to be running the official corporate account.

Twitter user: “Promote this tweet”.

@Wendys: “the tweet is the promo”.

This conversation between Wendy’s and a user further shows on the self awareness mentioned in the previous example. Through this, it can be shown that Wendy’s not only admits that its social media presence is part of a digital media marketing strategy, but also that the Twitter post itself is a sort of promotion. Thus, it can be said that Wendy’s are separating themselves in a polarized dichotomy to traditional corporate marketing, although it is a paradox as scholars on corporate
identity are the ones to bring up separating oneself from others (L’Etang, 2008; Tench & Yeomans, 2014; Wiggins, 2019) as a way to manage identity and other intangible assets. To put it simply, Wendy’s is marketing themselves in a traditional manner by distancing themselves from traditional marketing methods.

Twitter user 1: “Why tho?”.

@Wendys: “for the likes”.

Twitter user 2: “Got to love the honesty.”

This conversation further deals with the self-awareness of Wendy’s and the transformational nature of it. By answering in a vernacular and playful manner, Wendy’s is able to twist a critical comment and turn opinion from questioning to accepting. This also ties together with the transformative nature of memes, as previously mentioned in regards to the vernacular play between Wendy’s and Twitter users. Noteworthy distinction however, is that there is the one user posing the question and another reacting to the answer. This can be seen as an example of a combination of mass self-communication and word of mouth marketing, where users can join in on an ongoing conversation as if they were part of it in the beginning. This is due to the nature of mass self-communication; messages with the qualities of private conversations with the spreadability of mass communication (Fuchs, 2014). Combined with the ability to directly comment and jump into the conversation, a sort of mass self-communicative arena is created, where a potentially infinite number of users can join in on the conversation and engage in word of mouth marketing within these posts.

The later two examples display certain dramaturgical (Goffman, 1959) qualities as well. The meta-conversations remind the reader of conversations that would take place within the backstage; they discuss the performance itself, something that can be seen as stepping out of character. The conversations have an air of something that would take place between two actors as opposed to an actor and it’s audience. This can be seen as an indication of the blurring of lines on social media; where individuals can partake as both audience and actors through the evaporation of traditional gatekeepers of production of texts. This would mean that the
vernacular arena on digital media is both the front and backstage, as both have the potential for
global spreadability and have the same technical qualities. It is however, the setting here that
differs. The original meme posted by Wendy’s has a specific setting, where Wendy’s want to be
seen as taking part in the production of vernacular expressions. The meta-conversations between
Wendy’s and Twitter users however, can rather be seen as in a setting between two backstage
actors, both part of a larger production on the vernacular arena.

6.4 Mentions of ‘others’

Reddit user: “Wendy’s PR needs to be put in a history book so other company PR
reps can learn from the best”.

This comment directly positions Wendy’s as a company in polar opposite to an “other”. This “other” is explicitly mentioned as “other company PR reps” but can implicitly be seen as the way in which other companies attempt to communicate and relate to their audience as opposed to engaging in vernacular play on the level that Wendy’s does. The discursive truths discovered here regards to what is seen as a good PR representative. Through their acting, Wendy’s has been able to reshape the general discursive truths within this community about the practice of public relations. Previously seen as not being able to relate to an online audience, Wendy’s are established as an example as opposed to the rule. Wendy’s does then, in this way, gets a privileged position as opposed to the “other”, and thus enjoy an attributed identity. This identity comes partly through the modes of speech in the meta-conversations, where they it is established that Wendy’s PR representative cannot have formal education or experience, as they would have acted in a different way if they had.

This identity can also be seen as including Wendy’s into what Fuchs (2014) mentions as the “creative audience”; a bridge between global businesses and everyday users in a conflict over control of the internet. While Wendy’s are a global business with the ultimate goal of market dominance, they can here be seen to be enjoying membership within the creative audience.
Twitter user: “This is real marketing”.

@Wendys: “we’ve peaked”.

While this exchange between the Twitter user and Wendy’s in this example can be seen as a meta conversation, it is important to remember both what is being said and what is left unsaid, to be implied and interpreted by the reader. The comment by the Twitter user can be seen simply as praise, but the comment also positions Wendy’s posts on Twitter as opposed to other types of marketing. This binds this example to the previous, except for the implicit rather than explicit nature of the exchange. Thus, one can argue that attributed identity can be assigned both explicitly and implicitly, however due to the vernacular nature of memetic media, this is not something that is decided by one or a few users, however as discussed by Literat & van den Berg (2019) these users can take the role of curators of culture within these communities.

A dramaturgical distinction to the meta-conversations can be noted here. While these examples display the same type of meta language that would classify them as taking place in the backstage (Goffman, 1959), there is an acknowledgement of the types of discussions as part of a PR strategy, and thus itself a front stage. The discussion between the Twitter user and the Wendy’s twitter account, while seemingly backstage, can itself be seen as on a front stage, as mentioned by the Reddit user, that contains a back and front stage within it. These meta-stages could explain the chaotic nature of vernacular discussions and subversive play online. As they have the potential of global spreadability, every action taken can be seen as an action on the front stage, and the “true” backstage only comes into play once the actor gets off the internet platform where they choose to act.

6.5 Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement in this sense is used in ways to describe how different online communities accept Wendy’s as a cultural collaborator explicitly in different ways. As these communities contain levels of anti-corporatism through the authorship of memes (Literat & van der Berg, 2019), it can be assumed that corporations seeking authenticity
has to be accepted by the members, as opposed to individuals who simply gain membership by maintaining certain cultural mannerisms.

*Reddit user:* “‘I don’t think this is fellowkids. Fellowkids means ‘haha meme amirite kids??’ But Wendy’s knows exactly what memes are and how to use them; i don’t think everyone/thing who is well know and makes memes is automatically fellowkids’”.

In this example, the user discusses acknowledgement through the context of the forum. They imply that r/fellowkids is a forum dedicated to making fun of corporate attempts at marketing within digital media in an anti-corporatist manner. This would place r/fellowkids as a forum similar to r/cringe, as it exists to express cynicism toward individuals and institutions that act “inappropriately” (Massanari, 2015). However, they mean that Wendy’s in this case has evolved from a subject of embarrassment and ridicule to a legitimate cultural collaborator, and thus doesn’t fit in the forum anymore. This can be seen as an example of ascribed identity, where the user explicitly ascribes an authentic identity to a company on digital media. This sentiment means that in general, companies marketing themselves within memetic media do not truly understand memes, as they try to use them in a corporatist manner; as part of a planned communication strategy to sell more products. They liken it to a person coming from the outside, trying to get in on the joke without actually understanding it, the definition of the “Fellow Kids” meme (Know Your Meme, 2015).

*Reddit user:* “‘I mean this is proper meme format and I really think wendy’s twitter handle has transcended r/fellowkids and putting it here is also just easy mode(...)’”.

This user mentions how Wendy’s has “transcended” the forum, and thus acknowledges them in an almost spiritual sense. This user implies that r/fellowkids is meant for corporate attempts at digital media marketing other than Wendy’s, however they do not imply it in the same sense as the previous example in regards to cringe. They rather mean that Wendy’s has mastered the form of creating memes, and has thus risen above the
vernacular criticism on r/fellowkids. In this “transcendence”, Wendy’s can be understood as transforming from a subject of vernacular criticism into a legitimized contributor of culture. In a dramaturgical (Goffman, 1959) sense, Wendy’s can almost be seen as having completed casting for an actor. R/fellowkids can thus be seen as a stage where the actors are judged not by the audience viewing the front stage, but by the other actors in the backstage, as a sort of “rite of passage”.

What is interesting to note is how the standard view of companies in these communities are regarded as. As users discuss if Wendy’s fits on the forum or not, it is in relation to other companies, which, when trying to express themselves in a vernacular manner, are seen as doing something “inappropriate”. Thus, the basic outlook on companies in this social organization is that of embarrassment (Goffman, 2005). They mean that r/fellowkids is a place where users feel shame for companies who don’t have the capability to understand it themselves; partly due to lack of synchronous response, and partly due to the understanding of what is appropriate behavior. Tying it back to the meta-conversations, it is apparent that users speculate that the person producing tweets for Wendy’s is a young person, and one with great knowledge of memes as opposed to the “other”, namely PR representatives. Given the vernacular nature of memes and the circumstances around the “internet ugly” aesthetic, one can reinforce that that which is here vernacular is also anti-capitalist; those who are acknowledged within the community are those who intend to use memes in a democratized, vernacular manner. When Wendy’s thus is said to not “be fellowkids”, it implies that the users feel no shame for them when they produce memes and act in a vernacular and subversive manner, as their perception of them and thus their attributed identity is vernacular, or “for the lulz” (Katz & Shifman, 2017), as opposed to something with the goal to maximize capital gains.

The identity ascribed to Wendy’s is here a direct opposite to other companies, who is perceived to have a deep understanding of the proper usage of memes and can thus produce them in an authentic manner. Tying back to earlier examples; Wendy’s is perceived as a young person, with no formal position as a marketer, who spends a lot of
time on social media and posts jokes they think are fun. As opposed to a marketing executive trying to get “in on the joke”, Wendy’s can be regarded as someone who was already part of the group before they gained access to the Wendy’s Twitter account.

### 6.6 Summarizing Analysis

The different ways in which vernacularity expresses itself through memes coupled with how marketing and the management of intangible assets in a company reveals a stark dichotomy; where market message strategies and corporate identity efforts centers around the craft of a controlled message to be released to the market, vernacular expressions are anything but. In marketing theory, control over the message is so taken for granted it is hardly ever mentioned. Rather, all marketing theories and strategies discuss *how* to control the message, everything from the production and packaging of it, to the delivery and subsequent reception and reaction. Even viral marketing (Dobele et al, 2005), which recognizes the uncontrolled spreadability and immense speed of messages, still tries to discuss how to command and direct the message in predictable ways to the right audience. In contrast, memes as vernacular expressions consist of every qualification of an almost anarchistic property, they are void of control. As they are chaotic and spontaneous of nature, and made in an everyday sense of creativity, they are a far cry from marketing messages in most senses. Coming from the anti-corporate authorship visible in the “*Internet Ugly*” aesthetic (Douglas, 2014), they reject the notion of professional production and editing, and even would call memes created in a professional manner “cringeworthy” and “inappropriate” (Massanari, 2015). As opposed to traditional gatekeepers apparent in legacy media, digital communities managed to flip the script and rather rejects those who do not act in a vernacular manner, using derogatory names (Literat & van der Berg, 2019). While much of the analysis has gone toward the textual mannerisms of the different actors, a type of technical vernacularity has to be given attention to as well. Wendy’s making memes and posting them via their Twitter account is seen as appropriate, but should the company decide to take the same message and put it on a billboard or on a TV commercial, the reaction would most probably have been entirely different. Not only because there are different audiences who would see the message on Twitter, TV and the billboard, but because the later two are not vernacular or
democratized. A “common person” (Philips & Milner, 2017) does not possess the ability to put a message on a billboard or in a TV commercial; those are platforms for institutions and corporations. A scholar of the two have thus every reason to see how these can be seen as two impossible puzzle pieces due to a single factor: control.

All sections of the analysis show high levels of vernacular play, both within the comment sections on Reddit and in the interplay between the official Wendy’s Twitter account and consumers. Users are making jokes, making imitations of other artefacts of popular media, and in general act in a nonsensical and playful manner, which Wendy’s through their Twitter account join in on. This vernacular play entails a certain surrender of control from Wendy’s in regards to their brand; the message is no longer controlled. This can be seen in examples where Wendy’s makes comments that, taken out of their context (or even in it) are impossible to understand as a marketing message. These have no informational value, and in certain cases don’t even have a transformational motive of sensory gratification; they don’t even implicitly promise to make the user less dull. They are only there as artefacts of vernacular play, and as part of a larger stage where Wendy’s is performing. This can be seen as the triumph of citizen control over the contemporary internet; where even large corporations have to surrender to the whims of the creative audience or be subject to rejection and ridicule. They have to follow the production qualities of the Internet Ugly aesthetic, which eliminates the possibility of shaping a marketing message in most capacities. This could be an explanation as to why Wendy’s is regarded as an outsider in this type of practice; they have realized the chaotic nature of memes and vernacular play and committed themselves to it, where other companies have tried bending it to their will. This could be because larger companies are subject to commercial interest as discussed by Symons (2017), and thus there is a pressure to perform in a certain manner which makes it difficult to establish an outsider image for these companies. Part of it can be because of the production circumstances of larger companies; most often do they consist of a PR department with educated professionals with expertise in controlling the message on the market. The other part can be seen within the anti-corporatist notions of communities around meme culture (Literat & van der Berg, 2019, Douglas, 2014), where a large amount of cynicism and skepticism is directed toward companies trying to gain entrance. Part of this cynicism and rejection can be
seen even in the ways which Wendy’s receives approval from the community as well. In the meta-conversations users discuss how Wendy’s in ways of individualization; they try to separate the person running the Wendy’s Twitter account from the company itself. In a sense, people are thus not accepting Wendy’s as a company into the community and culture, but rather Wendy’s Twitter account, or, even more specifically, the person or people who run the account.

In a dramaturgical sense (Goffman, 1959), the users are in control of the setting on the front stage online where the actors are present, as opposed to an more institutional setting. Twitter can be seen as the front stage, and the Twitter posts and conversations by Wendy’s is the way in which they perform. Reddit and the discussions there can be seen as a sort of backstage, where users discuss the performance on Twitter and react to it in a manner that is separate the the performance without being the audience. However, while Goffman (1959) mentions that no audience member can enter the backstage, the availability of the internet enables anyone to enter spaces even if they have the qualities of the backstage, and thus, the internet as a whole can be seen as an enormous, global front stage where users are either participants and actors, or observers and thus the audience. While a certain type of front and back stage is apparent, and there are places, these are both on the meta-front stage of the internet. When looking at Goffmans (1959) example of the restaurant, this meta-stage could in this context be a cooking show; while the restaurant with the guests as audience and servers as actors are still present, there is another meta-stage to it, of people watching the guests watching the performance. Thus, as mentioned earlier in the text, the “real” backstage is only present when disconnected from the internet.

While Wendy’s can be seen as enjoying an positive ascribed identity through their performance within digital communities, a discussion in regards to the temporality of this identity along with the speed of the internet and the performative acts required to maintain this identity arises. Identity is ascribed to the organization by their stakeholders and audiences (L’Etang, 2008), which in part takes place through informal, unplanned conversations, and ties together with the dramaturgical concept of front stage and back stage (Goffman, 1959). Thus, the performative acts Wiggins (2019) explain are required as a way of maintaining this identity due to the
temporality and unstable nature of it can be explained as a requirement for an organization to “keep the show going” on the front stage in order to retain identity. However, every action has to be in line with the audience, or the organization loses face (Goffman, 2005), as every misstep has the potential of ruining the show due to the near-synchronous nature of social media (Rosa, 2015) and the spreadability of the act. However, if the organization manages to address those who don’t agree with an individual act in a proper way in a near-synchronous manner, it rather becomes an extended part of the act. This continuous performance by the organization and the temporality of the internet means that every individual action affects the image (Tench & Yeomans, 2014) of the organization, and those reacting to an individual act become part of the snapshot, as they embody the short term emotions felt. This would mean that the ascribed identity towards a company can, in a sense, be managed, as they only have to “keep the act up” for as long as they choose; the second they stop continually acting the identity will be lost. It does however require the company to act appropriately, and on the right platforms, lest they risk rejection from the curative community and will fall into embarrassment.

A very interesting conclusive analysis can be made considering Wendy’s consciously hired people to produce memes (Reddit, 2017) and other material that is regarded as legitimate or accepted within the community. It would mean that through the consciousness of platform (Twitter and by extension Reddit), and the mask of the Twitter account they give people who can be regarded as “vernacular experts” the guise of the company, and lets them off to do what they do best. This would mean that when they get an attributed identity within their preferred community through their actions, it rubs off on company image even if users distinguish between Wendy’s as a company and @Wendys as a Twitter account, as there is a high amount of discussion about products with take place as a digital word of mouth marketing. This could in turn cause a short-term image boost due to the temporal qualities of the internet and the continuous performance required to uphold such an identity, which could be beneficial for a company expecting a plunge in interest due to different factors. It would also mean that by having knowledge of production qualities, platform, and execution, a company has every possibility to use meme marketing in order to reach their organizational goals, even if these communities around memes are part of anti-corporate authorship and harness great skepticism
toward companies and institutions. Simply, this is because the company is thus engaging and building a relationship with users not through official discourse but through a mundane dynamic.

7. Conclusion

This thesis points toward the entry of corporate notions into vernacular culture and memetic media. Through knowledgeable usage and production of memes, Wendy’s has managed to create arenas of vernacular play where members of meme culture discuss the company and in turn establish them as authentic collaborators of culture. These discussions materialize as vernacular play, discussions about products, meta-conversations, mentions of others and lastly acknowledgement. In these discussions, high levels of vernacularity and subversive play is present, as it with the chaotic nature of memetic media. Users can be seen as accepting Wendy’s and the memes they produce not only through explicit mentions or praise, but in the ways in which they incorporate the brand in a subversive manner; through imitation, referentiality to popular media, and reappropriating these references in new and sometimes nonsensical ways. Users separated the Wendy’s Twitter account from the Wendy’s brand in certain ways in these conversations, both in the meta-conversations and in the mentions of others, due to users perceiving authenticity as something not ascribed to corporations. Thus, Wendy’s was discussed and viewed rather as the individual behind the production, as opposed to an overarching market communication strategy employed by the company marketing division. There were however as well users recognizing that these efforts were marketing as well, but rather praised them for their quality. This is due to users recognizing a “proper” use of memes, and giving credit where credit is due.

A strong sense of dramaturgy was present within these discussions as well, and vernacular expressions and discussion could be seen as taking part on a meta-stage. On this stage, actors engaged with each other through mannerisms indicative of both a front stage and a backstage where the meta-stage is the internet itself, through the possibility of spreadability that defines all social media. Setting was rather that which defined the front or backstage, depending on social media platform and situation.
Indeed, the vernacular play is both a play in the dramaturgical and the imaginative sense, and it contains qualities that force companies to surrender control of the message in order to use it in a proper way. Where other companies have been subject of embarrassment and ridicule, memes produced by Wendy’s are regarded as having the correct aesthetic, the correct production circumstances, and being presented on the correct platform. This surrender does not mean that Wendy’s aren’t able to market themselves in this way however, as this only mean the surrender of corporate authorship. By not having a carefully crafted marketing message with a well defined audience and professional delivery as part of a market strategy, Wendy’s are able to market themselves in an authentic and vernacular manner on the same basis and circumstance as any individual would. This is a paradox however, as the conscious surrender of the market strategy is itself a market strategy, and it is rather the production and understanding of memes that enable Wendy’s to successfully navigate memetic media. In other words, by becoming part of the chaos of these communities and of meme culture, they are able to operate from within and retain the approval of the users as long as the ascribed identity is kept through continuous performative acts.

This thesis set out to reach new knowledge on how corporations are able to navigate memetic media and connect with meme culture in a way that resonates with the larger community around it. As research within memetic media is a fairly new concept, theories by Goffman (1959) laid the base for understanding the interplay between consumer and corporation, which proved effective. The analysis, through textual analysis, were able to provide pointers on how vernacular interplay takes place and how these communities treats corporations trying to gain access. The dramaturgical perspective could be employed effectively in order to give context and understanding on why certain actors act in certain ways and how this takes place. More modern research on social media, intangible assets and vernacular play built the bridge between old theories and new concepts to reach a higher level of knowledge. Through the analysis, this thesis managed to paint a picture of how a chaotic community deals with corporate notions and how the corporation portrays itself in an authentic manner, like an actor in a play. This authentic manner is tied to the vernacularity with heavy understandings of self-awareness and referentiality. In short, to be authentic is to “talk the talk and walk the walk” while still showing understanding of
the self. New questions that arise are in regards to the nature of the company and the different communities. Can any company apply these strategies and thus be accepted in memetic media? Do certain types of companies have a higher or lower barrier of entry, depending on the products offered or the general attitudes and how they have treated their intangible assets in the past? Do communities around meme culture only have “room” for a certain amount of corporate actors, or can they only stomach so many before either making the bar higher or rejecting them altogether? Further questions regarding the context of memetic media can continually be asked by future researchers looking to understand the chaotic nature of vernacularity and meme culture.

Suggested further research on the topic could go into a more discursive analysis on what discussions and notions are prevalent in a larger community on the internet using memes, and if these change between platforms like Reddit and Twitter. This would bring an almost cartographic knowledge on how to traverse certain communities or audiences on the internet, or if the temporal qualities of these communities shrouds the discussions in a continuous fog. Research in regards to the production and visual qualities of corporate memes could be a topic of research as well, along with the research on absurdity and obscurity in memes, which would bring knowledge on how different types of memetic content and vernacular expressions are regarded by audiences.
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