

Why is it not Just a Joke? Analysis of Internet Memes Associated with Racism and Hidden Ideology of Colorblindness

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how Internet memes associated with racism can be analyzed and pedagogically utilized through the theoretical frame of Critical Race Theory. The assumption of the study is that Internet memes, as a site of ideological reproduction, can show one aspect of racial discourse. I consider Internet memes regarding race and racial issues as racial humor in this study. I gathered a total of 85 memes addressing or connected to racism primarily from the Memecenter website (www.memecenter.com). In this study, I analyzed their forms and content to consider how these memes deal with racism in different ways. Methodologically, this study implements critical discourse analysis in combination with multimodal discourse analysis. Through this study, I found that the majority of Internet memes about racism perpetuate colorblindness by mocking people of color and denying structural racism. I argue that challenging colorblindness through critical analysis of Internet memes and creating counter-memes will enhance students' critical awareness of racial issues.

Overt Jim Crow racism is rarely found in public discourse; there has been a decline in overt racist talk (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This might explain why one of my students challenged me about showing racist Disney movie clips in a college art class. The student argued that the video I showed was outdated and we no longer see "that kind of racism" these days. I agreed with him in the sense that the video clips were from the 1970s and 1980s; from our current perspectives, the clips were extremely and obviously racist. However, I did not agree with his idea that we are no longer exposed to racism in media. Overt racist discourse has been replaced with covert colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) or denial (van Dijk, 1992). Bonilla-Silva (2006) explains that colorblindness is a gentler form of racism or "racism lite," which operates in a covert, subtle, and institutional way (p. 3). In a similar vein, overt racism in media and pop culture has been altered from aggressive racism to subtle colorblindness.

Critical race scholars consider race an important factor that affects peoples' lives. John Calmore contends, "Racism operates so effectively that we seldom distinguish serious racist harms from a variety

of other harms that categorically run from 'bad luck' to 'natural catastrophes'" (as cited in Powell, 2008, p. 792). Even though critical race theorists have heavily influenced my perspective, I admit that engaging students in discussions of racial issues in the classroom is not an easy task. In the era of political correctness, phrases such as "I don't see people's color, I see individuals" become a way to avoid the discussion about racial issues. Nevertheless, being truly colorblind is an unachievable goal given that we are both consciously and unconsciously aware of people's phenotypic traits.

This project stemmed from the question: how can art educators engage students in discussions of racial issues in their classrooms? As a way to bring racial issues to the art classroom, I examined Internet memes about racism. Goldberg (1993) considers racialized expressions in Internet culture "in terms of a field of discourse" (p. 41). I started this project by collecting Internet memes including the phrase "that's racist." "That's racist" is popular as a catchphrase among Internet users and is widely used in Internet memes. Ulaby (2011) points out that saying "that's racist" becomes a way to avoid difficult discussions of racism among young people. Additionally, Google Trends (2015) shows a steady growth of search queries for the keywords "that's racist." In this sense, "that's racist" memes can provide an understanding of critical aspects of racial discourse in Internet memes. I also included different types of Internet memes associated with racism in order to expand the variety of my data.

An assumption underlying this study is that Internet memes on racism should be investigated as a site of ideological reproduction. Popular discourse including humor is an ideal lens through which to examine how everyday interaction and social dynamics influence and are influenced by ideology and the social structure (Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013). Many researchers study Internet memes as a prism for looking into certain aspects of contemporary society and culture (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006b; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013, 2014b). Given that digital media and the Internet have become a more compelling means to participate in art activities (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010), I assume many teenagers and young adults know and are actively involved in Internet meme culture. Moreover, Internet memes can show unfiltered thoughts and comments due to their anonymity. Internet culture is especially significant in the study of racial discourse in that the Internet became one of the most important mediums available to those who post racist invectives with impunity (Hill, 2008). Weaver (2011a) also states that the Internet is one of a few sites where racist humor can be accessed

and shared without being censored. Thus, I chose memes addressing racism in order to explore their hidden ideology and discuss pedagogical implications of how to employ memes to examine racial issues in art class.

The aim of this study is not to analyze the impacts of Internet memes on racism; rather, the intention is to analyze the racial discourse embedded in popular Internet memes and explore how colorblindness is ingrained within them. I argue that the majority of Internet memes associated with racism should be critically analyzed and challenged because of their hidden ideology of colorblindness. Thus, I suggest that art educators utilize Internet memes for the purpose of exploring racial issues and colorblindness. First, I review literature on Internet memes, critical humor studies, visual culture education, and Critical Race Theory. Then, I discuss the findings from my critical discourse study on Internet memes and suggest possible ways to employ Internet memes in art classes as a way to raise color-consciousness – a critical understanding of how race matters, how racism works, and how issues around race and racism affect people’s lives (Ullucci & Bettey, 2011).

Internet Memes in Art and Visual Culture Education

In this section, I discuss the concept of Internet memes, humor studies on Internet memes, critical racial and ethnic humor studies, and visual culture inquiry in art education, in order to situate the study on Internet memes within art and visual culture education. I consider Internet memes addressing racism as a part of racial jokes. Numerous scholars studying humor examined the psychological, historical, and social aspects of racial jokes; some scholars view racial jokes as a benign form of humor (Davies, 1998), and some critical scholars put an emphasis on dehumanizing aspects of racial jokes (Billing, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Husband, 1988; Kuipers, 2006; Weaver, 2010, 2011b). I particularly shed light on several critical studies on racial jokes, which examine possible negative impacts and ethical concerns of racial jokes.¹

1 In order to highlight critical aspects of racial jokes, I do not cover other humor studies that may be relevant to this study, such as a historical approach to nature of humors (i.e. superior theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory) and humor in visual art (see Klein (2007) for the study of humor in historical and contemporary artists’ works).

The Concept of Internet Memes

Dawkins (2006) coined the term “meme” in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, which was first published in 1976. He proposed the concept of “meme” as an element of culture encompassing fashion, ideas, religion, and so on. He notes that memes are transmitted from brain to brain through the process of imitation. Based on his idea, the traditional definition of “meme” indicates units of cultural transmission that “diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets” (Shifman, 2014b, p. 4).

On the other hand, the current definition of memes within Internet culture is generally associated with user-generated online contents in the form of image macro, video, .GIF, etc. In this paper, I refer to this type of meme as an “Internet meme” in order to specify the terminology. Shifman (2014b) defines Internet memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). In a similar vein, Davidson (2012) states that the uniqueness of Internet memes is “the speed of their transmission and the fidelity of their form” (p. 122). According to Davidson (2012), three components of Internet memes are “the manifestation, the behavior, and the idea” (p. 123). The manifestation indicates that Internet memes are external, observable phenomena. The behavior refers to an individual’s action to produce Internet memes, such as photographing or manipulating pictures. The last component – the ideals of Internet memes – are the concepts or ideas that the memes convey.

Drawing upon Dawkins’ (2006) concept of memes, Knobel and Lankshear (2006b) examine characteristics of Internet memes. They borrow three key characteristics from Dawkins’ work: “fidelity, fecundity, and longevity” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006b, p. 201). Rather than suggesting that Internet memes exemplify fidelity because they are passed on from mind to mind intact, Knobel and Lankshear (2006b) understand “fidelity” in terms of “replicability” since the majority of Internet memes are modified and remixed over the process of transmission from participant to participant. They note that “remixing,” including “modifying, bricolaging, splicing, reordering, superimposing, etc.,” is an important practice of producing Internet memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006b, p. 209). This aspect resonates with Gude’s (2004) postmodern principles, such as “appropriation,” “juxtaposition,” “recontextualization,” “layering,” and “hybridity”

(pp. 9-10). Shifman (2014b) also states that the diffusion of Internet memes is amplified through competition and selection.

In addition, Knobel and Lankshear (2006b) explicate three characteristics of Internet memes contributing to each meme's fecundity. The first is humor, including quirky humor, satire, and social commentary. The second component is rich intertextuality, which refers to the layering of cross-references to popular movies, cultural events, artifacts, and practices. The last characteristic, "anomalous juxtaposition," is used for "maximizing the susceptibility of the idea being passed from mind to mind." (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006b, p. 215). This kind of juxtaposition is usually made through putting incongruous images together, and can be provocative or simply odd.

Shifman (2014b) also suggests that Internet memes are "cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon" (p. 18). He goes on to say that Internet memes impact people on the macro level in that they shape people's mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions, despite that they are spread on a micro basis. He also delineates means of repackaging that enable Internet memes to be reproduced. Two main repackaging mechanisms are mimicry and remix. Mimicry involves recreating a specific text by different people; remixing is a new strategy that refers to technology-based manipulation such as Photoshopping or adding sound to an image.

Internet Memes as Internet Humor

Humor has been studied in multi- and inter-disciplinary fields including but not limited to psychology, philosophy, sociology, literature, and linguistics. This is because humor is one of the most pervasive elements of public culture, which is a central aspect of everyday life and interaction (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). With the advent of the Internet, humor has become a dominant mode of online communication, and humorous content has significantly increased in scale and speed of diffusion (Shifman, 2014a). Furthermore, the themes and formats of humor are diversified in the Internet-based environment. Shifman (2014a) defines Internet humor as "any type of humorous interaction or performance that is manifest on the Internet" (p. 390), and insists that the main characteristics of the Internet, which are multimedia and global reach, have significantly influenced the new types of Internet-based humor (Shifman, 2007). One of the

notable Internet-related shifts in humor is that Internet humor is no longer predominantly verbalized; rather, it is heavily based on visual formats that can be diffused quickly and easily across the world (Shifman, 2007, 2014a).

Internet humor has been highly linked to popular discourse with Internet memes since 2010 (Shifman, 2014a). Though not all Internet memes are humorous or intended to make jokes, humor is a key component in many (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006b). Humorous Internet memes often manifest as quirky and situational jokes through remixing pop culture and commercial imageries. However, humor is sometimes used to generate social commentary memes as well; successful social commentary memes reach people at a high speed, get attention from the public, and ultimately raise awareness on a social practice or event (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006a, 2006b). Shifman (2014a) notes that "humorous Internet memes are often employed as forms of political and social participation" (p. 393). Shifman (2014b) also argues that Internet memes can be "forms of persuasion or political advocacy," "grassroots action," and "modes of expression and public discussion" (pp. 122-123).

Critical Studies on Racial and Ethnic Humor

In this section, I introduce studies of critical racial and ethnic humor in order to argue that Internet memes about racism should be critically studied even though they are "just jokes." Despite resistance in humor scholarship regarding the possible negative impacts of humor, there is a growing body of literature that addresses the negative aspects of racial humor; the field is labelled critical humor studies (Weaver, 2011a). Critical humor scholars take humor very seriously (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Studies in critical humor put an emphasis on offensiveness and its negative consequences, which are often overlooked. Billing (2005a) notes that the "just joking defense of ethnic or racial joke-telling" is based on an assumption that humor should not be taken seriously or considered genuinely racist (p. 29). For instance, some scholars contend that ethnic humor is a benign and innocent form of expression (Davies, 1998), and is widely enjoyed by racial and ethnic minorities (Rappoport, 2005). Nevertheless, my argument in this study is aligned with critical scholars who have paid attention to the hostile and dehumanizing aspects of racial and ethnic humor (Billing, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Husband, 1988; Kuipers, 2006; Weaver, 2010, 2011b).

As I mentioned above, the purpose of critical studies on humor is associated with the question of offensiveness in humor (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). It is also related to ethics of humor, which concern effects of humor (Morreall, 2005). Humor is heavily dependent on context; depending on the joker, audience, time, and place, a joke can be perceived as funny or not funny (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Therefore, people may perceive the same joke very differently based not only upon the person-to-person context where the joke is told, but also the “ideological and political context that can affect the meaning and understanding of the joke” (Billing, 2005a). Thus, regardless of intention, the consequences of humor depend on the circumstances and political and ideological context; negative consequences, whether they are intended or not, should not be overlooked.

Racial and ethnic humor have significant consequences in the current American context, which can be named as the era of political correctness and colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Rosenberg, 2004; Ullucci & Battey 2011). Racial or ethnic humor is defined as “humor directed at racial and nationality groups, denigrating alleged attributes of those groups” (Schutz, 1989, p. 167). Weaver (2010), on the other hand, uses the term “racist humor” instead of racial and ethnic humor. He explains that “where humour has a racist potential, in relation to stereotype and inferiorisation used, it remains accurate to label it racist humor” (p. 537).

In the era of political correctness, the idea of a critical approach to humor may be considered particularly disturbing (Billing, 2005b). This is due to an exculpatory approach towards humor that considers it a harmless and benign form of communication (Weaver, 2011b). Furthermore, positive functional explanations of humor tend to focus only on positive aspects of humor, such as a means to improve one’s life (Billing, 2005b; Weaver, 2011b). Billing (2005b) argues that humor has been seen in terms of both “positives” and “negatives,” and the “positives” have been more prominent in studies by psychological and humor scholars. Comparatively little attention has been paid to potential mental and physical consequences of humor, especially as a form of ridicule (Weaver, 2011b).

Situating the Study on Internet Memes within Art and Visual Culture Education

This study can be situated within a broad range of educational studies on visual culture. It is difficult to define visual culture due

to its rhizomatic nature (Duncum, 2001; Wilson, 2003).² Yet, it can be generally understood in terms of visual artifacts (visual) and the social, cultural, and historical context in which the artifacts are produced, distributed, and used (culture) (Duncum, 2001). According to Duncum (2001), the shift to visual culture within art education represents “a recognition of a vastly changed cultural environment, which includes a new symbiosis between new technologies, new economic arrangements, and changed social formation” (p. 103). Many art educators have vigorously discussed this new paradigm of visual culture (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Chalmers, 2001; Duncum, 1990, 2001, 2002, 2010; Freedman, 1994; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Garber, 1995; Tavin, 2000; Wilson, 2003). Freedman and Stuhr (2004) state that a critical aspect of visual culture pays attention to “issues concerning the power of representation, the formation of cultural identities, functions of creative production, the meanings of visual narratives, critical reflection on technological pervasiveness, and the importance of interdisciplinary connections” as well as a wide range of visual artifacts (p. 816). Visual culture inquiry in art education requires “a substantial shift in what is to be known about images and thereby has far-reaching implications for changing the pre- and in-service training of teachers” (Duncum, 2002, p. 7). Furthermore, it necessitates new curriculum, content, and instructional strategies to move the focus from conventional and didactic approaches to creative and critical inquiry (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

From this perspective, Internet memes, which are visual artifacts produced and shared online, are a part of visual culture. *The Journal of Visual Culture* published a special issue on Internet memes in 2014, and many researchers discussed the cultural and historical trajectory of Internet memes as well as their notions, characteristics, and aesthetics. Educators who have been exploring the incorporation of digital arts and new media in art education also touch on the topic of Internet memes as a part of digital arts (see Black, Castro, & Lin, 2015).

The study of Internet memes is a current topic of interest among numerous forms of visual culture in art education. For instance, March (2013) studies the function of Internet memes in online activist

2 Visual culture can be considered rhizomatic, which reflects the complex notion that it occurs, moves, and evolves sporadically without a root or center (see Duncum (2001) and Wilson (2003) for the conceptual explanation of visual culture).

spaces. She organized the public response to the child sex abuse scandal at Pennsylvania State University by using Facebook in 2011. Through the analysis of functions and themes of Internet memes posted on the Blue Out Facebook event wall, she creates an argument about the Internet meme and its role in art education. March (2013) insists that Internet memes created by people on the webpage were art-based activism and the efficient transmission of Internet memes can benefit the social justice goals. Digital tools elicit more user interaction; therefore, she believes that Internet memes can facilitate active online dialogue and share social justice values. While March (2013) studies the content and functions of Internet memes on a specific website from a social activist perspective, De la Rosa-Carillo's (2015) study focuses on exploring Internet memes as an art-based research instrument. Unlike the majority of research on Internet memes, which views the forms and processes of Internet memes as passive objects to be studied, he attempted to actively use Internet memes to respond to academic topics. Through generating Internet memes as a process of learning and researching, he argues that Internet memes should be considered as a craft and a language, rather than mere Internet objects. The second phase of his study engages young students at a summer art camp where he facilitates reading, writing, and remixing memes as an art-making process. He discovers that the language of Internet memes incorporates storytelling, visual thinking, remix, and technology in art education. Overall, his study expands the notion of Internet memes and proposes the pedagogical practice of employing Internet memes as a visual language.

Critical Race Theory and Colorblindness

Critical Race Theory (CRT), the theoretical framework of this study, emerged in the 1970s and is built upon critical legal studies and radical feminism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Leonardo, 2013). Delgado and Stefancic (2012) define the CRT movement as "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 3). Because the CRT movement in legal studies is rooted in struggles to seek justice, liberation, and empowerment, its goal is socially active (Tate, 1997). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), the basic tenets of CRT are; 1) "racism is ordinary, not aberrational" (p. 7), 2) the majority of people in America have little incentive to eradicate racism since racism advances the interest of Whites, 3) race is socially constructed, 4) racial relations are shifted in response to social needs, and 5) CRT values the unique voice of color to apply

their perspectives to assess law's master narratives. These tenets are related to those of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), who introduced the term CRT in educational scholarship. They state three propositions in their foundational study. The first is that race has been a significant factor in determining inequity in American society. This is the common premise of CRT; structured racial oppression is embedded in an educational reality (Leonardo, 2013). The second proposition is that American society is based on property rights. They contend that democracy should be disentangled from capitalism, and explicate through Manning Marable's work that "Traditional civil rights approaches to solving inequality have depended on the 'rightness' of democracy while ignoring the structural inequality of capitalism" (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). They insist that property is also related to education in many ways: through taxes, funding, curriculum as intellectual property, and so on. The last proposition is that the intersection of race and property provides a tool to analyze social inequity.

Dixon and Rousseau (2005) provide an overview of literature on CRT in education from 1995 to 2005, and describe common themes that exist in CRT studies in education. First, CRT pays attention to the voices of people of color, especially their experiential knowledge. Therefore, CRT scholars often utilize personal narrative as a valid form of evidence to show inequity or discrimination. The second theme is a restrictive and expansive view of equality. They point out that many educational scholars employ these contradictory views in order to analyze the nature of inequity in education. The other theme is the problem of colorblindness. I will discuss this concept in depth in the next section.

Colorblindness

If CRT is an umbrella term encompassing critical studies of racial equity in American society, colorblindness is a lens for analyzing racial talks. Bonilla-Silva (2006) calls colorblindness "a new racism" that reproduces inequality through "subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial" ways (p. 3). As "a revealing metaphor for the dominant ideology of race in America," colorblindness hinders people from seeing race as a significant factor in equity and social justice (Rosenberg, 2004, p. 257). Rosenberg (2004) states that "those who favor a colorblind society fail to see that race, especially skin color, has consequences for a person's status and well-being" (p. 257). Ullucci & Battey (2011) argue that colorblindness not only plays a role

in contributing to a collective ignorance, but also reduces the fight against the impact of racism.

Through intensive two-year long survey studies conducted in universities and the Detroit metropolitan area, Bonilla-Silva (2006) finds four central frames of colorblind racism: “abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism” (p. 26). He explains,

1. *Abstract liberalism* “involves using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 28).
2. *Naturalization* is a strategy to explain away racial phenomena by calling them natural occurrences.
3. *Cultural racism* uses culturally based arguments to explain injustice and the position of minorities.
4. *Minimization of racism* proposes that racial discrimination is bygone and no longer a crucial factor affecting minorities’ lives.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), people use these frames in order to deny social inequity and racial factors in minorities’ lives. These frames are closely related and have been taken for granted as dominant ideologies. For instance, he introduces one college student’s answer about African-American students’ low academic achievement. The student mentioned that Black students’ failure is due to their lack of personal motivation, not discrimination. He argues that this statement shows a mixture of the cultural racism frame, the belief of meritocracy, and individualism. By bringing down group-based discrimination to an individual level, racial inequality is justified. Moreover, individualism excuses racial segregation and Whites’ racial preference (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and the meritocratic frame is used to ignore contemporary racial factors at the institutional level.

Methodology

One of the goals of this study is to understand and examine Internet memes relevant to racism as a racialized discourse. In order to analyze hidden beliefs and ideologies of the multimodal form of Internet memes, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) as research methodologies. Note that both CDA and MDA are not single methods nor theories; rather, they are collective studies or approaches (Fairclough, 1995;

Gee, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA and MDA are complementary and sometimes brought together as critical multimodal discourse analysis (see O’Halloran, Tan, Smith, & Podlasov, 2011). MDA rests upon social semiotics and attempts to analyze multi-modal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Social semiotics is an approach to understanding how people communicate and produce meaning through various means in specific social settings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2001). This is where MDA and CDA align. The relationship between communicative artifacts and social realities and contexts is where those artifacts are situated. CDA argues that “language-in-use is always part and parcel of, and partially constitutive of, specific social practices and that social practices always have implications for inherently political things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power” (Gee, 2011, p. 68).

As Fairclough (1995) states, CDA is more than a research methodology; it includes collective studies to dissect the function of language in the production of ideology and power in the certain social and political contexts. According to Wodak and Meyer (2009), CDA is interested in “studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (p. 2). CDA emphasizes the interdisciplinary approach to understand how language functions in transmitting knowledge and exercising power (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 7).

The goal of CDA is to explain naturalization, or how ideological representation comes to be seen as non-ideological common sense (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough notes that this critical concern is absent in descriptive discourse works. He continues,

The critical approach has its theoretical underpinnings in views of the relationship between ‘micro’ events and ‘macro’ structures which see the latter as both the conditions for and the products of the former, and which therefore reject rigid barriers between the study of the ‘micro’ and the study of the ‘macro.’ (Fairclough, 1995, p. 28)

Based on this understanding, I attempt to disclose beliefs and ideologies hidden in the Internet memes associated with racism. In other words, I analyzed their forms and contents to study how memes deal with racism in different ways. I examined how images have addressed the meaning of racism, how they address racial issues, and what ideological assumptions are hidden in the coupling of visual

images and texts.

A criticism of CDA is its tendency to analyze visual images as if they were linguistic texts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also point out that CDA is mostly confined to language or verbal parts of texts. From this perspective, MDA can contribute to broaden works of CDA (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) by studying how visual strategies are used to convey certain messages (Aiello, 2006). There is also a criticism of MDA that suggests multimodal studies do not consider enough for the reader, listener, and viewer (Gibbons, 2012). I attempted to compensate for this criticism of MDA by looking at comments on each Internet meme. Nonetheless, I admit that this is not sufficient to consider the reader's side since I did not interact with people who made memes or left comments. Among the many approaches of MDA, I particularly employ visual social semiotics drawn upon the work of Roland Barthes (Aiello, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2001) in order to analyze the visual aspect of Internet memes.

Data Collection and Analysis

I gathered memes including the words "racism" and "racist" primarily from the Memecenter website (www.memecenter.com) for four weeks in October of 2015. The Memecenter is a user-based website where people can create and share their own memes. Users can see popular memes at a glance through daily, weekly, and monthly top-rated memes. I selected this particular website as my sample since it hosts a comprehensive set of memes. Memecenter also allows users to leave comments or images on each meme; this function allows for an examination of interactions between users on the memes I collected.

As of October 18, 2015, I found 7762 Internet memes on Memecenter by searching memes including the key phrase, "That's racist." I collected 85 memes based on their relevance to the topic and popularity. The website offered functions of pushing a "like" button and sharing through other Social Network Services, so I gauged the popularity of each meme and how widely it has been shared by checking the numbers of "likes" and "shares." I took screen-shots of each Internet meme and saved them in my personal computer. I also saved each webpage address in a separate file to access later if necessary.

At the beginning stage, I only collected Internet memes including the

phrase "that's racist." After collecting over twenty memes, I found different forms of memes talking about racism that were popularly shared and modified. For instance, the Internet meme featuring the movie character the Joker and a Black man appeared often.³ I expanded the range of data to Internet memes relevant to racism. After taking screen-shots and saving Internet memes, I named each file with their original names given by the creators. In a separate notebook, I wrote down key words describing each meme.

Once the data collection ended, I reviewed all data and the key words I recorded. Then, I grouped them into different themes: cultural stereotypes, embodied racism (biological racism), denial of racism, racist media/commercial images, crimes committed by people of color, immigrants, police brutality, criminal justice, and Black/White binary (see Table 1). Some memes fell into more than two different groups. After thematic grouping, I grouped them by characteristics such as stereotypes against African Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and Middle Eastern people, mocking physical appearance of people of color, police abuse, crime, racially intensive commercials, sign, merchandise, etc. (see Table 2).

Table 1: Themes and Frequency of Internet Memes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>The Number of Memes</i>
cultural stereotypes	24
embodied racism	8
denial of racism	7
racist media/commercial images	19
crimes committed by people of color	15
immigrants	2
police brutality	5
criminal justice	2
Black/White binary	8

³ I found over ten Internet memes that are made with four consecutive images of the Joker and a Black man. These types of memes convey racial jokes that focus on Black people. For more information about these memes, refer to <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/1016082/the-jokers-racist>.

Table 2: Racial/Ethnic Groups Represented in Internet Memes

<i>Racial/Ethnic Groups Represented in Memes</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
African Americans	74
American Indians	1
Asians	5
Jewish	1
Mexicans and Mexican Americans	3
Muslims	1
Whites	2

I used a Barthian visual social semiotics approach as suggested by van Leeuwen (2001) in order to analyze visual components of the Internet memes. MDA is based on social semiotics, which consider semiotic action as social action in social context and power relations (Aiello, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Aiello (2006) states that social semiotics could benefit from referring to Barthian’s work, “especially in relation to the role of denotation in naturalizing culture or connotative messages” (p. 100). The crucial idea of Barthian visual semiotics is “the layering of meaning” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94). The first layer, which is the layer of denotation, deals with the question of “what, or who, is being depicted here” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94). The second layer is the layer of connotation, which asks: “what ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?” (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94). I analyzed the first layer by describing “denotative signifiers” and “denotative signified”⁴; then, I moved to the analysis of the connotative layer by examining the style of memes, such as framing, focus, distance, and so on (van Leeuwen, 2001). Table 3 details an example of my visual analysis process.

4 The signified and the signifier are the components of the sign in Saussurean terminology (Barthes, 1967). While the signified is “a mental representation” of “a thing” or a concept, the substance of the signifier is material, such as sounds or images (Barthes, 1967, p. 42).

Table 3: Visual Analysis Example

	<i>Denotative Signifier</i>	<i>Denotative Signified</i>
<i>The First Layer</i>	A guy with darker skin and buzzed hair	A Black man
	Jumping (above the fence)	Jumping over the fence
	A building and houses in the background	Residential area
	Text in the center of the meme “Jumping over fences and shit because I heard a police siren”	He is jumping over fences because he heard a police siren
<i>The Second Layer</i>	<i>Connotation</i>	
	The focus is on a Black man. The text located in the center indicates that the quote is relevant to this man. A young Black man is running away from police because he might have done something illegal. But he is smiling as if it is common.	

In addition, I focused on intertextuality, which refers to “the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 84). In other words, I paid attention to how the meanings of the image are constructed not solely in the image itself, but through the connection to other meanings carried by other images. The effects of the images are also carefully considered. Rose (2007) states that a critical visual methodology requires the researcher to “take images seriously,” “[think] about the social conditions and effects of visual objects,” and consider one’s own way of looking at images reflectively (p. 12). From this perspective, I identified key themes in Internet memes and tried to find hidden and explicit messages by paying attention to details and considering their social effects (Rose, 2007). The three major themes I identified were: “that’s racist” memes exemplifying racism and stereotypes, othering through embodied racism, and the denial of racism.

Findings

“That’s Racist” Memes: A Jest Pointing out Racism Versus Stereotyping People of Color

The image macro that is usually included in the “that’s racist” memes features a child yelling with the caption, “That’s racist!” (see Figure 1). For the most part, an animated GIF of this black child yelling is combined with or followed by politically incorrect or racially intensive images, commercials, online comments, etc. An example is the juxtaposition of Figure 1 with a video clip of a Disney movie considered to be racist.⁵ In this case, the “that’s racist” meme can be understood as a type of jest to point out racism which is often seen in our everyday lives and media.



Figure 1. “That’s racist” Meme
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYu2jAD6sdo>



Figure 2. “That’s racist” Meme
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVViqUNeKeg>

Another type of “that’s racist” meme carries typical racial stereotypes. Figure 2 shows a modified meme based on Figure 1; it adds images of a basketball, a slice of watermelon, and a box of KFC fried chicken. These images are associated with racial and cultural stereotypes against African Americans. I also found similar forms of memes showing racial and ethnic stereotypes against Mexicans, Muslims, and Asians. For example, “That’s waisis” memes mock the accent of Asian people.⁶ One might think this genre of memes is a mere joke that will barely affect the public’s mindset or lead to negative consequences. However, I found numerous comments about negative

5 Refer to <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/298534/thats-racist>

6 Refer to <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/3454611/proof-that-face-book-is-racist>

stereotypes against people of color on the comment sections under each meme. The top-rated comments were mainly about other racial stereotypes against groups of people, such as Mexicans, Asians, and Middle Eastern people. Weaver (2010) points out that the structure of a racist joke does not always cause offence; rather, the “audience also play a constitutive role in constructing offence” (p. 545). Thus, racial discourse surrounding these memes reflects negative stereotypes and colorblindness regardless of the creators’ intention. Furthermore, critics of racial humor deny that racial and ethnic humor containing unappealing stereotypes against certain groups of people are harmless (Billing, 2005a). For instance, Husband (1988) argues that the repetition of racial and ethnic jokes serves to solidify stereotypes in society and perpetuate racism.

The dominant amount of Internet memes mocking people of color reflects historical racism perpetuated in our everyday lives. Among the 85 memes I collected, 64 were associated with racial/ethnic stereotypes, mockery, denial of racism, and overt racism. Even if the intention of these memes is satirical, they function to create a space where people can mock and ridicule people of color. Furthermore, racial and ethnic humor should not be discussed in terms of the speaker’s intentions, but with regard to its impact on people of color and the whole society. Hill (2008) points out the danger of the linguistic ideology “personalism, which holds that the meanings of utterances are determined by the intentions of speakers” (p. 64). She argues that the meaning of utterance is “the complex product of long chains of historical negotiation” (p. 64). Additionally, van Dijk (1992) explains how this linguistic ideology of personalism is used to deny racism. According van Dijk (1992), one of the strategies of denying racism is “intention-denial” saying, “I did not mean that” or “you got me wrong” (p. 92). The possible negative impacts of racial humor are usually nullified by assuming the intention of racial humor is not malicious. Through these types of denials, one can evade the responsibility for the possible negative consequences of racial humor. However, if there are possible negative consequences of racial humor, ethics and responsibility of humor should be critically discussed.

Racial Representation: A Way of Othering through Embodied Racism

The other major problem of Internet memes about racism is that their racial representation is a detrimental way of “othering.” Leonardo (2013) asserts that, “representing race is always a relational

enterprise inasmuch as it works through the politics of difference” (p. 119). Difference itself is not a problem. However, race as a field of representation needs to be challenged since Whiteness is normalized. This is also connected to the Black/White binary that is widely accepted in racial discourse. Under the Black/White binary, Blackness is often depicted as evil, irrational, and uneducated in contrast to Whiteness. Ladson-Billings (2005) contends that the issue of the Black/White binary is “the way everyone regardless of his/her declared racial and ethnic identity is positioned in relation to Whiteness” (p. 116). For example, Figure 3 implies that the Black man is thinking about stealing the bike by juxtaposing images of many bikes hanging on the wall and a Black man saying “SHHHHHHEEEEEEEIIITT.” Of all of the memes that I collected, more than ten described African Americans as committing larceny; they often depict bikes and people wearing masks or running away. The images of black masks and the act of running away connotes the crimes committed by African Americans. Some memes also depict Mexican Americans as illegal immigrants by juxtaposing a picture of people hiking and using phrases that imply illegal border crossing.⁷ This racially discriminatory representation also supports cultural racism, which blames the culture of the minority as a cause of inequity and a strategy of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).



Figure 3. Who put bikes like that? <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/1782141/who-put-bikes-like-that>

Additionally, I found that racial representation is closely connected to embodied racism in Internet memes. Weaver (2010) states that

⁷ Refer to <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/344470/mexico>.

biological racism emerged from colonial race science, philosophy, and anthropology, and appears in “embodied racial humor” (p. 549). Biological racism ascribes the cognitive, behavioral, and cultural characteristics of “other” to the racial corporeality and “constructs boundaries and places certain civilized bodies on the inside of favorable categories, and uncivilized ‘others’ on the outside” (Weaver, 2010, p. 549).

Figure 4 is one example showing colorblindness and embodied racism. In Figure 4, a Black anime character wearing a turban is followed by the “that’s racist” meme, which implies that the character can be considered a racist representation. The meme continues by adding an Asian character and old man saying “I don’t SEE anything wrong with that.” The capitalization of “SEE” implies that Asians have small eyes, and thus a physical trait of Asians becomes the object of ridicule in racial jokes. This meme not only conveys the idea of colorblindness in that racism is a matter of perspective, but also makes jokes about phenotypical and physical characteristics of people of color. Therefore, the meme in Figure 4 is a distinct example of embodied racism.



Figure 4. Racism is Just a Matter of Perspective <http://www.memecenter.com/>

fun/4748373/racism-is-just-a-matter-of-perspective

Weaver (2010) defines “racist humor” as humor that has “a racist potential, in relation to stereotype and inferiorisation” (p. 537). If people of color are portrayed as foolish, indolent, or criminal in the memes, those can be considered as racist humor. Weaver (2010) argues that Internet-based racist jokes coupled with embodied racism represent “the expression of a form of repressed racism that, in other situations, is the subject of social disapprobation, and is not a part of a white supremacist network” (p. 552). The other significant issue of racial representation is that it comes with material consequences (Leonardo, 2013). Leonardo (2013) notes that, “once institutionalized, the effects of representation have a way of perpetuating themselves, creating even more intricate webs of images. They have material consequences, especially representations that tap into a society’s collective racial unconscious” (p. 116).

The Denial of Racism and Minimizing its Impacts

The last major finding is the denial of racial oppression. While I found eight memes that clearly show the denial of racism, there are more than twenty memes that covertly deny racial oppression by blaming people of color for injustice. The denial of racism manifests as a rhetoric insisting that racism is a matter of perspective or racial injustice that comes from faults of people of color rather than the social system. The meme titled “It’s only racist if it’s a Black guy, just like its only terrorism if it’s a Muslim” is a good example (see Figure 5). It denies police brutality against people of color by implying it as case-by-case. Moreover, it depicts Black people as biased and too sensitive about police brutality. In the last segment of Figure 5, an African American guy is yelling with anger and saying “THIS IS RACIST AND POLICE BRUTALITY! DAMN COPS.” On the Internet, capitalization of letters usually implies shouting. On the layer of denotation, a facial image of an African American man yelling with a quote in all capital letters represents his anger; on the layer of connotation, the meme implies that African Americans overreact to police brutality. Even though only seventeen people shared this meme through their SNSs, over 1200 people pushed the “like” button. Some people addressed disagreement with this meme on the comment section. However, the top comment,⁸ which gained 80 up-votes,

8 For more info about the image and comments, refer to <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/5162071/its-only-racist-if-its-a-black-guy-just-like-its-only-terrorism-if-its-a-muslim>

states that that police brutality is irrelevant to racial oppression, but rather reflects people’s biased reactions. This is the strategy of “minimization of racism” which Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes as one frame of colorblind racism. In a similar vein, Figure 4 also shows the denial and misunderstanding of racism. Its title, “Racism is just a matter of perspectives,” is a typical colorblind rhetoric, which reduces the systematic and institutional level of racial oppression to the matter of personal perspective.



Figure 5. It’s only racist if it’s a Black guy, just like its only terrorism if it’s a Muslim <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/5162071/its-only-racist-if-its-a-black-guy-just-like-its-only-terrorism-if-its-a-muslim>

On the other hand, Figure 6 poses a question about the fairness of the criminal justice system. This meme juxtaposes two news stories about the three-billion-dollar fraud committed by ex-mortgage CEO

and a Black homeless man stealing 100 dollars. An image of the Joker with the catch phrase “justice isn’t blind, it’s racist” attracts attention with the purpose of raising a question about colorblindness. Though the meme does not provide enough background to judge the fairness of the legal cases, it is successful in questioning our so-called post-racial society. Many people responded to the meme by leaving numerous comments, including more memes with a surprised face or other evidence of racial inequity. From this perspective, the meme in Figure 6 raises awareness of racial issues and effectively challenges colorblindness.



Figure 6. Justice isn’t blind, it’s racist <http://www.memecenter.com/fun/1389757/are-they-even-serious>

Powell (2008) argues that the individual frame of racism, which is a narrow merit-based and individualist viewpoint, misdirects our attention from systematic and structural racial issues. Instead, he proposes the structural racism framework that highlights the “cumulative” impact of racial discrimination within and across domains (p. 796). He suggests that the reason many African Americans and Latino/a are living below the poverty line is related to their lifelong relationship to not only the labor and housing

market, but also to educational and criminal justice systems. Though I found one example of memes addressing structural racism (see Figure 6), most Internet memes do not show this connection between structural racism and minority groups’ lives. Rather, they perpetuate colorblindness by saying that racism is a personal issue.

Implications

I found that racism manifested in various ways in Internet memes, including stereotyping, othering, and the denial of structural racism. One of the key themes throughout many racist memes is colorblindness, which is widely accepted and justified through different strategies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For example, some of my university students have talked about affirmative action as reverse-discrimination. Internet memes not only reflect these thoughts, but are also a factor that impacts people’s understanding of racial issues. Thus, I argue that Internet memes can be an effective channel to discuss colorblindness and racial issues, and I suggest possible activities for engaging university students in the discussion of racial issues by using Internet memes. As I mentioned in the literature review, few educational researchers have discussed using Internet memes as a pedagogical tool. Just as teaching students how to create memes for visual language or social activism is significant, teaching critical analysis of Internet memes is necessary to challenge the dominant ideology. Knobel and Lankshear (2006a) note that the analysis of memes can include

where and how certain memes were most likely acquired; what effects these memes have on decision-making, mindsets, and action; the effects these memes may have on other people; and what ethical decisions must be made with respect to passing on, or not passing on, certain memes. (p. 85)

I employ Duncum’s (2010) seven principles for visual culture education, including “power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality, and multimodality” (p. 6) as a frame of critical questions for meme analysis. Duncum’s (2010) principles provide a guide post for art educators who would like to examine various forms of visual culture with their students. Possible educational activities are two-fold: critical questions which can be used to analyze Internet memes about racism, and a counter-meme making activity. The suggested ideas are geared toward university students.

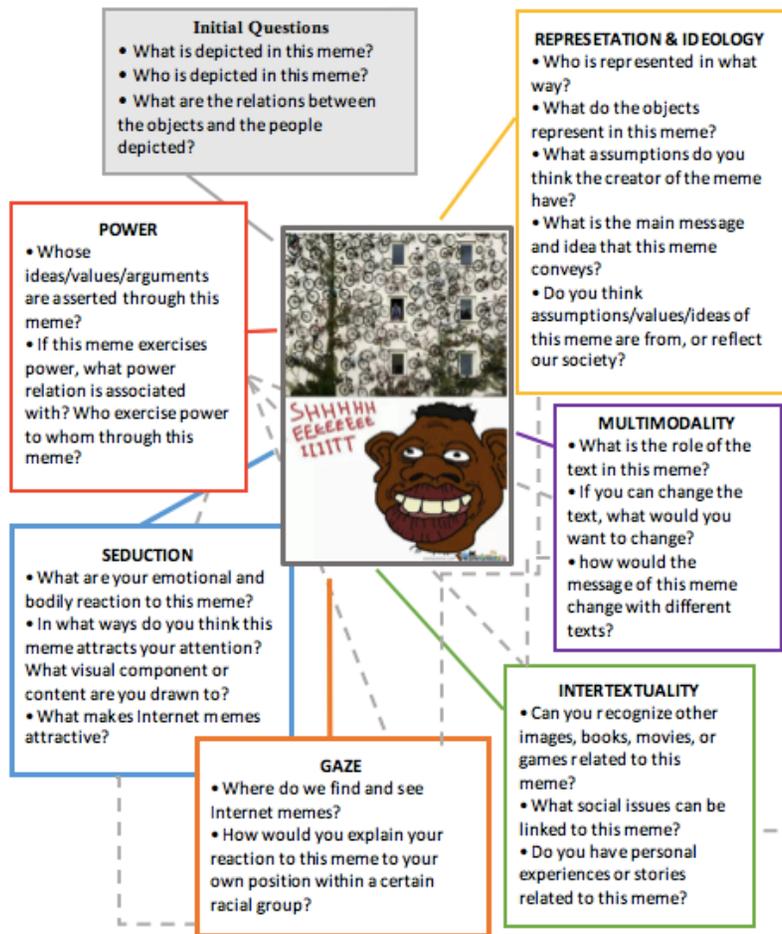


Figure 7. Critical Questions for Internet Meme Analysis

Creating counter memes to challenge colorblind memes is another way to raise critical consciousness. A counter-meme is an Internet meme created as a reaction to other problematic memes. Knobel and Lankshear (2006a) define “counter-meming” as “the deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas” (p. 86). For example, Godwin (1994) created counter-memes in order to subvert the prevalent Nazi comparison in Internet memes and mass media in the 1990s. Godwin (1994) found problematic comparisons on Usenet newsgroup discussions between Nazism and government regulation, such as gun regulation or birth-control. In order to challenge this trivialization of the Holocaust, he coined the term “Godwin’s law” to point out

the illogical and offensive comparisons to Nazism or the Holocaust during the political discussion (Godwin, 1994). The term “Godwin’s law” spread fast through online discussion boards at that time (Godwin, 1994) and it is still commonly used and manifested in Internet memes. Like “Godwin’s law,” students can create Internet memes to counter colorblindness by showing examples of social injustice (see Figure 6) or sharing their own counter-narratives.

Since Internet memes have the power to engage students in the art-making process, art educators should be involved in creating them. This topic is beyond the scope of my study, but I should note that the Internet meme has a different aesthetic than fine art or school art styles (Effland, 1976). Douglas (2014) names it “Internet ugly” and states that it can be sometimes intentionally chosen as a dialect or created without specific aesthetic intentions. He contends that Internet ugly is usually manifested in Internet memes due to its bottom-up creation system. Since this ugly aesthetic is the core value of Internet culture (Douglas, 2014), art educators should study this different aesthetic and how to embrace it as a part of our pedagogical practice.

Conclusion

Internet memes have the potential to open a new door to engage students in art activities that are closely connected to their lives. The Internet itself has enhanced voluntary participation in the variety of activities through two-way communication. For instance, Kellner and Kim (2009) argue that YouTube is a new space for activism and dialogical learning communities where individuals become deeply involved in democratic knowledge production and mutual pedagogy.

Nevertheless, we also need to be mindful of the possibility of misleading and misrepresenting aspects of Internet culture. Shifman (2014a) contends that Internet humor is not particularly subversive; rather, Internet users tend to circulate conservative humors. This contradicts theory arguing that Internet humor has “the potential to express the voice of marginalized and disempowered groups” through the liberation from the institutional structures (Shifman, 2014a, p. 391). Similarly, I found that the majority of meme creators and commenters misunderstand not only the meaning of racism and racial issues, but also the detrimental impact of systematic racism. I contend that educators can effectively rectify this misunderstanding and teach students to question the dominant ideology by examining

popular Internet memes in the classroom.

Desai (2010) argues that students should develop “racial literacy to identify and critique racial discourse in popular culture, media, and other sites of visual culture” (p. 23). Kraehe, Acuff, Slivka, and Pfeiler-Wunder (2015) also note that talking about race and racism in the art classroom is one way to counter racial injustices by bringing to light the narratives of people affected by racial oppression. Nevertheless, teaching about racism is not an easy task in that it is accompanied by intellectual and emotional challenges for both teachers and students. Lee (2013) suggests that teachers encourage attentive and nonjudgmental classroom conversations. He also proposes that teachers should thoughtfully respond to students’ questions and set the tone that welcomes open inquiry in racial issues. Another way to start a racial dialogue is to introduce visual culture that can facilitate conversations about racial issues. Desai (2010) used visual culture to open dialogue about how race relations affect our lives and shape our beliefs about different racial groups. In a similar vein, teaching students how to critically analyze Internet memes about racism and creating counter memes can enhance their understandings of racial issues and give them an opportunity use their own voices to challenge the racial status quo.

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