

The Representation of Americanization Myths in the Internet Memes on the 9gag Comedy Website

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ABSTRACT

The use of Internet memes in the websites is believed to be a new media to disseminate important ideologies and cultural values which represent the current norms of people in today's life. Dealing with this issue, this study entitled "The Representation of Americanization Myths in the Internet Memes on the 9GAG Comedy Website" is aimed at investigating the Myths of Americanization of 9GAG Internet memes in the Hot Page of the website where the popular Internet memes are provided. The data consisted of five 9GAG Internet memes which were taken from the 9GAG Hot Page. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach framed in a semiotic analysis, specifically Barthes' (1991) orders of signification to examine the myths in each Internet meme. The myths of the Internet memes then were analyzed using the USA's values and assumptions theory proposed by Althen and Bennett (2011). The findings reveal that there are eight myths of Americanization which are delivered globally through the Internet memes. Those are individualism, freedom, equality, materialism, and informality. The myths of Americanization are represented through the symbolic signs in the Internet memes which represent the United States of America.

Keyword: *Semiotic, Orders of Signification, Myth, Meme, and Internet Meme.*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has a tendency to defend the patterns of Western socialization which are already established in the world (Sardar & Borin, 1999). Globalization, they further explain, promotes dominant values and cultural practices which are visions about how to deal with life by sacrificing their own values and culture (Sardar & Borin, 1999). Thus, globalization has serious practical consequences.

Some critics said that globalization is nothing but the introduction of the American culture to the whole world (Ssenyonga, 2006). Thomas L. Friedman (1998) states his opinion on the Americanization as follows:

“Globalization is in so many ways Americanization: globalization wears Mickey Mouse ears, it drinks Pepsi and Coke, eats Big Macs, does its computing on an IBM laptop with Windows 98. Many societies around the world can't get enough of it, but others see it as a fundamental threat.” (Friedman, 1998)

Horkheimer and Adorno (2007) argue that US mass media (including websites) share an ideology to support their status quo or existence. Horkheimer and Adorno believe that the enormous businesses which control messages from the mass media have ideological interests in it (ibid).

One of the ways to share ideologies is through Internet memes. Memes can be ideas, symbols or practices formed in various forms, such as melodies, catchphrases, clothing fashion or architectural styles (Shifman, 2011). Nowadays, memes are widely used in many websites. The term “Internet meme” is a reference to the concept of memes, an idea or behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture, although the latter concept refers to a much broader category of cultural information (Schubert, 2003).

A comedy website named 9GAG (<http://9GAG.com/>) is one of the websites that use Internet memes to share ideas among the members. The 9GAG had 67 million visitors in April 2012, and is still growing until now. It has more than one billion monthly page views as of December 2011 (Gannez, 2012). In 9GAG, the members can upload “gags” which are usually comical images (Internet memes). The Internet memes are inferred as a language in the form of images. Internet memes are also considered to be signs and can be interpreted as something else.

Semiotics is often used to confront the question of how images make meanings head on (Rose, 2002). The orders of signification theory proposed by Barthes (1991) explore

the meanings behind things. In that theory, sign can be denotative that describes something, or connotative that carries a range of higher-level meanings. Myth is the naturalization process when every representation is portrayed as something normal, usual and fine (ibid).

Myths help to make sense of experiences within a culture. They express and serve the ideological function of naturalization (Chandler, 2002). A myth is a culture's way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding something (Fiske, 2002)

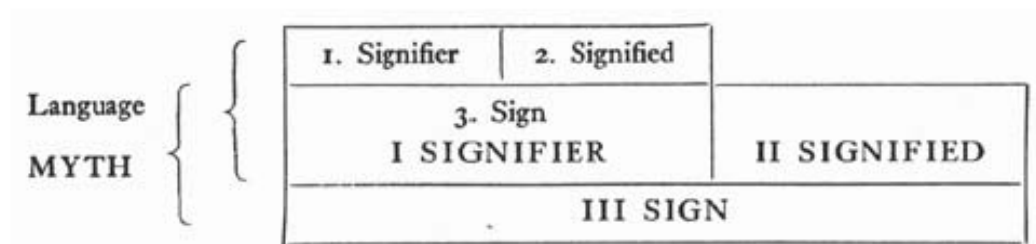


Figure 2.4 The myth in the theory of orders of signification (Barthes, 1991: 113)

The implication of Barthes' order of signification is that any form of denotative signification must contain ideological meaning and significance. However, Barthes gives priority to connotation and claims that connotation is not merely a second order of signification or an ideology, yet it is a starting point of a code (Fiske, 2002). Connotation and myth are the main ways which signs work in the second order of signification, which is the order in which the interaction between the sign and the user or culture is the most active.

Dealing with those issues, this study attempts to explore the myths of Americanization in Internet memes

on 9GAG. This study uses five Internet memes taken from "Hot Page" of 9GAG. This study uses Barthes' (1991) orders of signification to discover the myths of Americanization represented in the Internet memes.

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach framed in Barthes' (1991) orders of signification theory to achieve the aims of the study. Each collected Internet meme was analyzed using Barthes' (1991) orders of signification theory which consisted of three levels of signification. The analysis was focused on the elements of the first orders of signification in the Internet memes, also the

elaborations of the local and global meaning of the second orders of signification. The myths were discovered from how the connotation is naturalized.

Five Internet memes were purposively selected as data source of this study. Those Internet memes

were selected because they were suitable and relevant to the problems and the aims of this study. The selected Internet memes were those that appear in the “Hot page” of 9GAG comedy website. Thus, the data in this study were popular Internet memes on 9GAG.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

a. Individualism



The Internet meme that represents the individualism value of the U.S. Americans is “Ned Stark” Internet meme. In the first order signification, Ned Stark Internet meme portrays a man wearing a thick-fur-robe holding a sword on front of him. There is also a verbal description in the Internet meme: Brace yourself, winter is coming.

In the second order of signification, the man is a US TV series Game of Thrones character, Eddard Ned Stark. He, who is wearing a thick-fur-robe and holding a sword, is considered to be a brave man. The

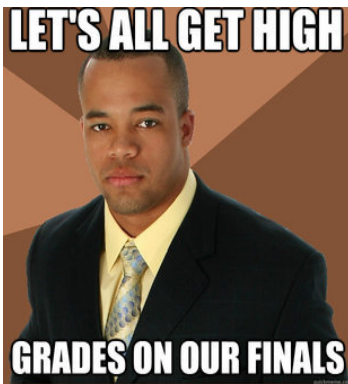
wardrobe which he is wearing shows that he lives in a cold place. The cold itself connotes with danger. Meanwhile, Brace yourself winter is coming line has a connotation that people have to prepare themselves for something unexpected. The winter has a connotation of danger or war which is coming.

The second order of signification has naturalized the myth of individualism. The U.S. American has a value that is trained each of them to realize that they have to be responsible with their own situations and destinies (Althen & Bennett, 2011). It shows that the U.S. American people need to be prepared for something unpredictable. Individualism is the fundamental values in the U.S. American culture. It reflects how important the role of individual for human to face other social groups and collective institutions. Every human being is seen as one individual that has a unique identity (Heywood, 2001).

The U.S. Americans are trained from their early year of life to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They do not see themselves as a member of a group, tribe, or any other collective (Althen & Bennett,

2011). They assume that people from abroad who seems excessively concerns with the opinions of parents, following traditions, or fulfilling obligations to others are weak, indecisive, or overly dependent person.

b. Equality



The Successful Black Man Internet meme is an Internet meme which represents the value of equality in the USA. This value of equality is being represented by an Internet meme which portrays a colored man wearing a suit and a long tie, in the first order of signification, along with a motivational line.

In the second order of signification, the long tie and the suit that he is wearing represent his success. However, colored man tend to be mistaken as an uneducated and violence (Althen & Bennett, 2011). The connotation of the colored man is in line with the first part of the

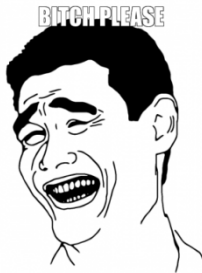
verbal description in the Internet meme: "let's all get high..." That first part of the line also has a negative connotation; the 'high' connotes that person who said that line is a bad guy or a drug user. In contrast, when the first part of the line is combined with the second part of the line, the sentence transforms into a motivational sentence.

This Internet meme comes with the myth of an American values, equality. The U.S. Americans believe that every people has their right to get the same chance and opportunity as a part of their human rights (Heywood, 2001) and all people are created equal (Althen & Bennett, 2011). That Internet meme tries to spread the message that the USA is a country which provides equality values for their people.

However, USA was a country which does not have good history in providing equality for the people (Heywood, 2001). There were civil wars which occurred because of the slavery of the Afro-Americans.

There was also struggle of the women in the USA to get their rights

c. Freedom



The Yao Ming Internet meme is an Internet meme which represents the value of freedom of the U.S. Americans. In the first order of signification, this Internet meme portrays a laughing Yao Ming, a professional NBA player, with an offending line: Bitch please. The 'Bitch' means female dog. Meanwhile, 'Please' means used as a polite way of asking for something or telling somebody to do something.

In the connotation meaning, the phrase 'Bitch Please' means an impolite expression which is used to express incredulous disgust, usually in reaction to a statement that is incredible, false, or otherwise outrageous. When it is used as an adjective, 'bitch please' describes a quality that one knows the subject is immature, stupid, or takes its

to vote in the general election in that country.

outrageousness too seriously, and yet is somehow still impressive (KnowYourMeme, Yao Ming, 2012). In the visual description, Yao Ming looks very happy with the circumstances where he belongs.

This Internet meme brings the value of freedom, a value that means to give a better priority of freedom of speech, equality, justice, and authority (Heywood, 2001). Freedom arise naturally based on the belief to each individual which ensures every people has rights to do what they want to do. This is in line with what Althen and Bennett (2011) states that the U.S. americans believe freedom is a strong positive idea that which assures they have a general sense of freedom and can express opinions openly.

Someone's freedom, however, can be a threat to other people because it can interfere other people's freedom (Heywood, 2001). Someone's freedom can harm other people who might have different opinion about something. Thus, in many cultures, the U.S. American value of freedom is considered to be self-centered and lacking in consideration for others (Althen & Bennett, 2011).

d. Materialism



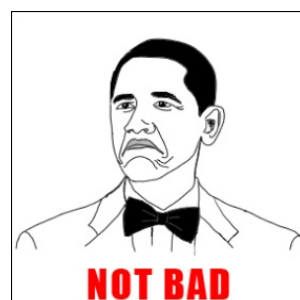
The next value which was found in the 9GAG Internet meme is the value of materialism. In the first order of signification, the U.S. American materialism value is being represented by an Internet meme which portrays a character from the tv sitcom Futurama airing in the USA TV cable. He looks like holding a lot of money and try to give it to someone else. In the verbal description, in the Internet meme, there is a line Shut up and take my money!

In the second order of signification, the character of Fry, who holds a bunch of money, represents a very rich man who wants to buy something. Meanwhile, Shut up and take my money! line is a representation that someone with a lot of money can ask whatever they want.

This Internet meme comes up with the value of materialism of the people in the USA. The U.S. Americans tend to define someone according to their jobs and how much income that they make (Althen & Bennett, 2011). They consider that family backgrounds, educational accomplishment, and other personal characteristics are less important in identifying people than the jobs they hold. The U.S. Americans tend to measure a person's success in life by referring to the amount of money someone has acquired and the title or position that someone has achieved (ibid).

This Internet meme also brings the U.S. Americans characteristic that they like spending their money on material goods, regardless their income (Althen & Bennett, 2011). They often spend their money on items that they considered luxuries such as personal electronic devices, large-screen television sets, cellular phones, even electric garage-door opener. The credit cards are now widely available for the teenagers, encouraging them to spend their money.

e. Informality



The value of informality is represented by an Internet meme which portrays President of the USA, in the first order of signification, Barack Obama, who is wearing a tuxedo with a bow tie, showing his informal expression.

In the second order of signification, the suit and the bow tie are the connotations of a formality and the royal impression for Barack Obama. However, the 'not bad' is one of the expressions which is used to show acceptance of something in an informal manner. The expression that he shows indicates that he does not always behave like a royal member who should always convey formal expressions.

This Internet meme brings the value of informality, the value which Althen and Bennett (2011) describe as the U.S. American general behavior. The U.S. American people

tend to be informal in their relationships with other people. They use idiomatic speech and slang on most occasions, reserving formal speech for public events and fairly formal situations. The U.S. Americans, from every status can often be seen in public wearing sandals, jeans, or other informal clothing (ibid).

However, in some cultures, those behaviors and values are seen as disrespectful toward other people (Althen & Bennett, 2011). In many other cultures, formality is valued. Some people from other cultures also see that that kind of values are also disrespected the people who behave informally themselves. The Mexican, Chinese, Asian Indian, South American, and Arab cultures are more formal. Mainstream Americans share several cultural values with Europeans but people from France, Germany and England also value formality (Zafar & Zafar, 2000).

According to Zafar&Zafar (2000), sometimes people get frustrated and upset that the U.S. Americans lack any manners. The values of informality, for some people outside the USA, appear to be very rude and cannot be applied in other culture.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that the popular Internet memes taken from 9GAG “Hot page” contains ideological cultural values which represent the current norms of people in today's life. By discovering these U.S. Americans values, this study is expected to help people to discover what the ideologies and values represented in the Internet memes.

Each Internet meme has at least a symbol which has a correlation with

the USA. That fact is followed by the myths which were found in the Internet memes by using Barthes' (1991) order of signification. Those myths of the U.S. American values somehow are not proper to be collided with other values from different cultures. The fact that people can see those Internet memes in the 9GAG “Hot page”, shows that many people around the world, especially the members and the visitors of 9GAG, accept the USA's ideological values.

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