

# **Memes in Marketing**

*Exploring how internet memes can be integrated  
into social media marketing activities in a  
manner that is accepted by online communities.*

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work, except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Brunel University or other institutions.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Internet memes have become a central element in community socialisation and social media culture. In response to this, brands are creating more entertaining content that appeals to their audience, using internet memes and humour to craft a relatable and engaging brand personality. While existing research has acknowledged that the usage of internet memes by brands increases brand engagement, the literature also suggests that it is difficult for brands to integrate with online communities due to issues of authenticity and shifting power dynamics. This research aims to understand *if* and *how* internet memes can be acceptably adopted by brands.

**Methodology:** Guided by marketing literature, the researcher undertook netnographic data collection and observed one consumer community and one non-consumer community for a duration of 18-months. Data was collected in the form of fieldnotes, tweets, comments, and Instagram posts. This data was analysed using a discourse analysis approach. Textual data was examined at a linguistic, discursive, and practice level to understand the systems of meaning that enable or restrict brands from utilising internet memes.

**Findings:** Brands that engaged with online communities over a long period of time, creating value through social media interactions, were perceived by community members as being more authentic, and were therefore accepted into community spaces. Through consistent interaction, brands became embedded within communities' collective memories. Brands that adopt trending internet memes were construed to be opportunistic and profit driven and were therefore driven out of community digital space.

**Limitations:** The research utilises one form of data collection (netnography) and only observes two communities.

**Value/Implications:** This research is of value to marketing practitioners as it provides them with an understanding of how to navigate social media and engage with online communities. It is also of value to researchers, as it brings together research on internet memes from the areas of culture and media studies. This facilitate a multidisciplinary understanding of the usage of internet memes by brands within a marketing context.

**Keywords:** Internet memes, social media marketing, online communities, netnography, discourse analysis.

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## Chapter 1 | Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an introduction for the research project. It will firstly establish the context of the study, discussing the relevance of internet memes and their impact as a cultural and social phenomenon. It will then provide an overview of the practice of internet memes, with a brief overview of the evolution of these and an examination of their current usage. In particular, this provides context regarding brands' adoption of internet memes in social media marketing. Some key words that are utilised throughout the thesis will also be defined. The research gap is then addressed, with the research aims, questions, and objectives set out thereafter in response to these. The primary theories that underpin the research are then discussed. An outline of the methodological approach, research philosophy, and research design are presented. Finally, the research contributions are established in light of the research gaps. The chapter concludes with a synopsis of the chapters that follow.

### 1.2 Contextual Background

“Meme” is a term that originally emerged in the works of Richard Dawkins (1976), and was used to describe the propagation of ideas or cultural artefacts through socialisation. Memes span from seemingly straightforward concepts, such as the melody to "Happy Birthday to You," the first notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or even the pop culture term “*catfish*”, which is used to describe someone who pretends to be someone else on social media. However, memes also encompass more nuanced concepts (Borenstein, 2004). Dawkins (1976) regards entire philosophies and faiths to be “memeplexes,” which are collections of knowledge and concepts that effectively pass from generation to generation. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), memes influence social groups' mindsets and behavioural patterns, hence influencing overall culture and identity. The term *meme* now colloquially has come to represent any unit of humorous or interesting content that is created to be shared (Lewis, 2015). Memes on social media, referred to as *internet memes* henceforth, have grown in popularity as a way of communication in online communities. As defined by Shifman (2013, p. 367) internet memes are “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience”. These units are made and shared online, where users can modify and remix them before re-posting them into the network. This practice results

in a wide range of derivative works based on the original meme. Each online community has a unique collective identity that is based on common cultural norms, rituals, beliefs, language, and symbolism. This is reaffirmed and reflected in group interactions, including through memes that are circulated among or made by the group (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010).

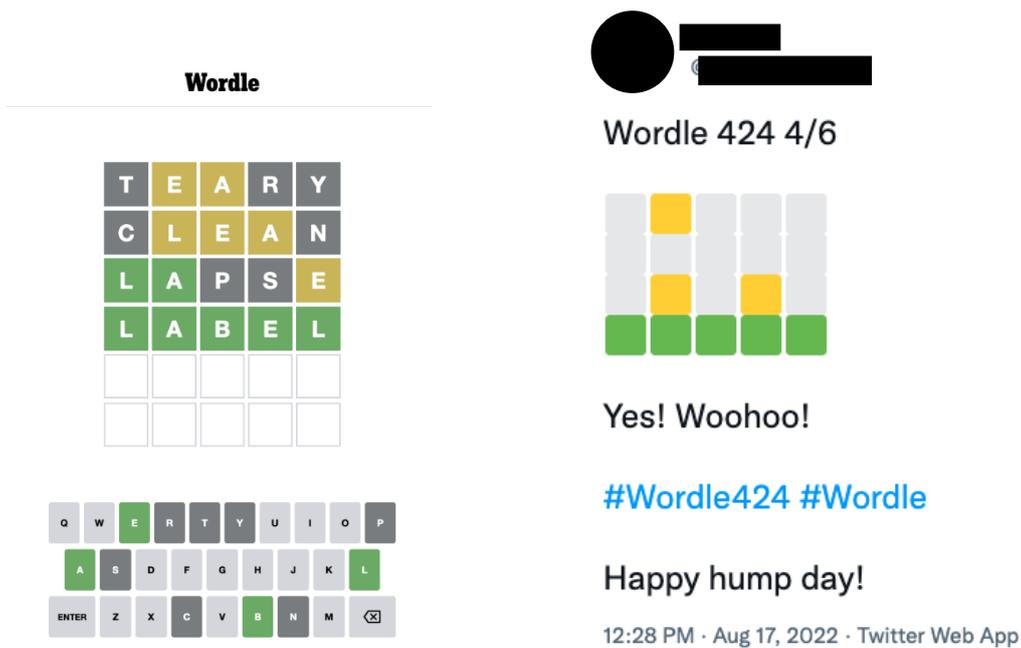
The Financial Times suggested that the internet would be a “poorer, less creative, and barren space” without internet memes (Lewis, 2015). Internet memes are the aggregated effort of millions of people, forming the basis of social media culture. The production of internet memes involves remixing content, and borrowing and accessing ideas to create something new, producing culture (Dewey, 2015). In the past decade, internet memes have transcended the realm of social media, and have become highly influential to mainstream culture. The #MeToo movement, which started on Twitter, began a global conversation on sexism and harassment, leading to the transformation of institutional thinking, societal norms, laws, and outlooks (Sanders, 2018). More recently, the high-profile televised defamation trial of Amber Heard v Johnny Depp was dubbed the ‘Trial by TikTok’ (Tait, 2022). A flurry of social media content and internet memes were created by users using audio and video clips from the trial to mock or empower either side, with tens of billions of views gained per video (Nicolaou, 2022). Internet memes are a cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

Internet memes have been acknowledged as the currency of social media. Known for their humorous quality and their ease of shareability, internet memes have become a central element to community socialisation on social media platforms. Brands struggle to get noticed on social media, as people are no longer interested in posts that are centred around selling products. As a result, brands are creating more entertaining content that appeals to their audience, using internet memes and humour to craft a relatable, and engaging brand personality. When “done right” the usage of internet memes by brands has been found to increase intimacy and engagement with the audience (Teng *et al.*, 2021). Brands entering digital spaces are attempting to ‘speak the community’s language’ (Fournier and Avery, 2011), which has seen the uptake of internet memes by brands within social media marketing activities. While brands’ usage of internet memes has been found to facilitate brand-consumer engagement (Teng *et al.*, 2021), in other cases, the brand is often ridiculed and mocked by users for their attempts (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Internet memes are central to social media culture and practices. Culture is created and transformed through internet memes, and the practices of “*memeing*” are a prominent form of socialisation and entertainment amongst online

communities. Therefore, internet memes are an inherent part of social media. As social media as a marketing tool increases in importance, overtaking more traditional means of marketing, understanding *if* and *how* internet memes can be acceptably adopted by brands becomes ever pressing.

### **1.2.1 The Practice of “Memeing”**

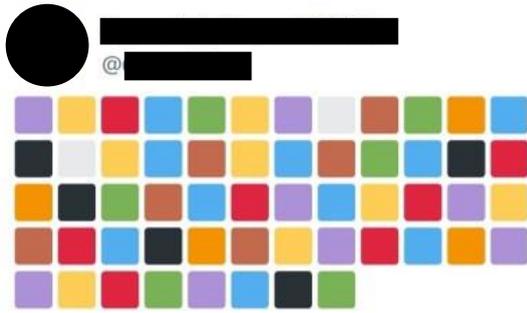
Internet memes in the mid-2000s were relatively self-contained. In this sense, the internet meme could be understood individually, without the need for understanding a wider cultural context. *LolCats*, which were a popular internet meme format in the mid-2000s to early 2010s, are an example of this (see **Appendix A**). These internet meme formats were standardised, and featured humorous images which were overlaid with accompanying text (Denisova, 2019). The meaning of these internet memes could be conveyed and easily understood to a user who had not engaged previously with the community that produced these. These Internet memes were primarily shared on community message boards, and resulted in fewer iterations than is the norm today. However, as internet culture continued to grow and evolve, so did internet memes. Due to increased participation in “memeing” – the creation of internet meme iterations – amongst social media users, internet memes become entangled in complex webs of meaning. Users employ internet meme formats to communicate their identities and experiences to their audiences, who then take on this internet meme and produce their own iterations. The use of these formats to playfully embed and communicate user and community-specific meanings serve to structure and communicate identity and experiences at individual, community, and societal levels (Wardle, 2021; Mina, 2019). To demonstrate this current practice of internet memes, a recent example will be discussed below.



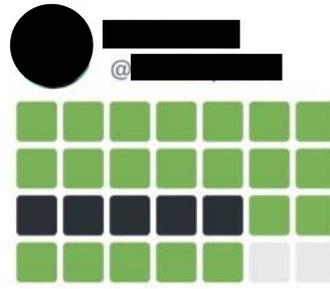
**Figure 1 (left).** A screenshot of a player’s Wordle screen, where grey letters indicate incorrect letters, yellow letters depict letters included in the word but in the incorrect place, and green letters indicate correct letter positioning.

**Figure 2 (right).** A Wordle player shares their score of the day. The player’s gameplay is depicted through coloured squares, as not to spoil the word of the day for the community. They celebrate guessing the word in four attempts and wish other users a ‘happy hump day’. The familiar tone is indicative of the closeness of the community of players.

In 2021, the web-based word guessing game *Wordle* became popular on social media. Each day, users have six attempts to guess the five-letter word of the day (Lum, 2021). The letters in each guess are highlighted in grey, yellow, or green, indicating the correct or incorrect positioning of the letter (**Figure 1**). In order to share their results but not spoil the game for other users, daily results are shared on Twitter with grey, yellow, and green emoji squares to indicate players’ guessing sequence (see **Figure 2**). The oversaturation of these tweets led to the emergence of the “*not a Wordle*” meme, characterised by emoji compositions unrelated to the game (KnowYourMeme, 2021a) (see **Figures 3-4**).



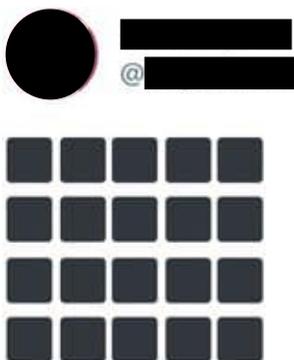
Not a Wordle. This is how many tabs I have open on my work computer.



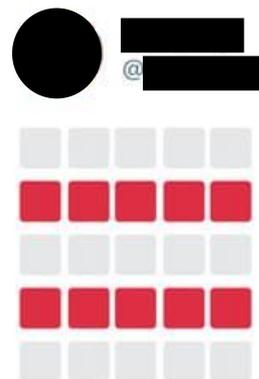
not a wordle, just the number of days ive cried this month

**Figure 3 (left).** A remix of the “Not a Wordle” internet meme reflecting a user’s personal everyday experiences. The internet meme refers to the large number of tabs open on their web browser, expressing that they are inundated with work.

**Figure 4 (right).** Another example of a remix of the “Not a Wordle” internet meme. This is reflective of the self-deprecating humour that is a prevalent theme within internet memes, and an example of the typical way in which internet memes are remixed to be applicable to an individual’s narrative and identity.



Not wordle, just a zoom class.



Not a wordle just my antigen test

**Figure 5 – 6.** Remixes of the “Not a Wordle” internet meme that are reflective of the experiences unique to the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure IV is in reference to the remote learning platform screen used by educational institutes during lockdown, while Figure V uses the emojis to depict a positive Covid-19 lateral flow test.

The basis of the Wordle score sharing tweet, emoji patterns, are taken and reinterpreted based on the users' personal interests, the community they belong to, as well as wider societal events (KnowYourMeme, 2021a). Through this, intertextual links with other elements of internet culture are created. For example, self-deprecation is a common theme observed within internet memes and internet culture as a whole (Ask and Abidin, 2018). This style of humour a display of self-reflection that is general enough to provide relatability amongst a wider audience, aiding in the resonance of the internet meme (Zappavigna, 2014). *Figures 5 and 6* portray the way the internet meme format is remixed to reflect collective societal experiences. The Covid-19 pandemic presented a host of unique societal experiences, which are captured and encoded within the users' remix of the internet meme and shared on social media. The internet meme format has also penetrated niche communities, for example, fandoms of television shows, where community-specific artefacts are reimagined through the template. The internet meme, which emerged due to feelings of frustration at the oversaturation of Wordle scores on user's social media pages is transformed as it moves across the network to carry new meanings. The internet meme becomes a vessel for communicating and transferring symbolic meaning through a veil of humour across communities.



*Figure 7. “Not a Wordle” remix posted by the Spider-man Movie referencing the character’s costume*



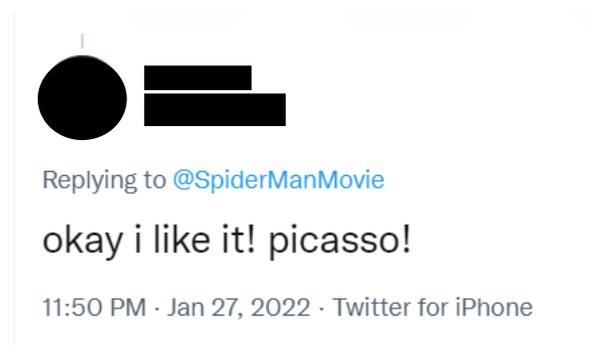
*Figure 8. “Not a Wordle” remix posted by the official Lego account which provides a rendition of the original internet meme but with coloured Lego pieces.*



*Figure 9. “Not a Wordle” remix posted by the Twitter account for the Twilight movies, which references an iconic scene from one of the movies that is widely memed by fans.*

Brands with a social media presence often attempt to connect their audiences and harness the cultural zeitgeist to benefit their brand (Craft, 2022). In *figures 7-9*, brands embed brand-specific meanings into the internet meme through remixing. The usage of internet memes by brands in this way has become a playful way to connect with consumers, creatively engage in

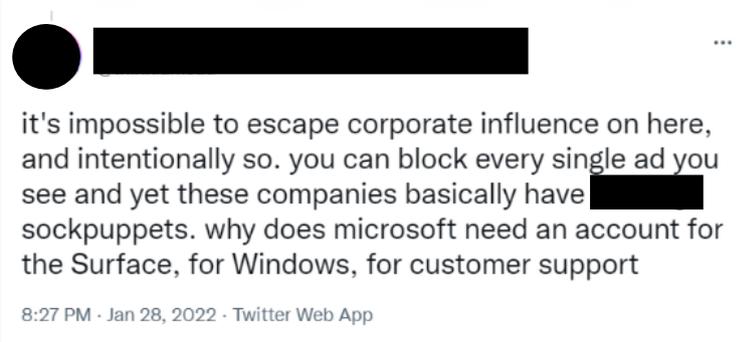
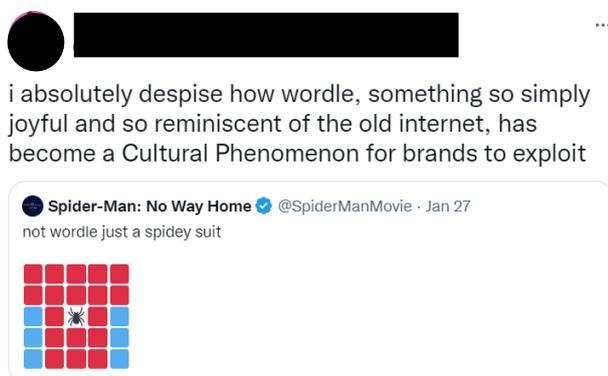
trending conversations, and increase brand visibility (Teng *et al.*, 2021). Using internet memes as a part of social media marketing has been found to help brands showcase their personalities (Intel, 2022). As social media culture grows and evolves, brands attempt to immerse themselves in the same culture as their consumers, establishing a common ground between them (Malodia *et al.*, 2022; Sharma, 2018). When utilised correctly, internet memes can be an efficient way of providing customers with entertainment, while allowing the brand to gain exposure and achieve cultural resonance. As seen in *figures 10-11*, these attempts can bode well with consumers. Users compliment the brand’s branding and social media marketing strategies, and reaffirm their love for the brand (*figure 10.*). Similarly, the user in *figure 11* expresses surprise by playfully complimenting the brand by referencing another popular internet meme (“okay I like it! picasso!”). In these instances, the user accepts the brand’s rendition of the internet meme, uses this as a point of engagement with the brand, and compliments the brand’s creative efforts.



*Figures 10-11 (left to right). Users’ positive reactions to the Lego “Not a Wordle” (L), and the Spiderman “Not a Wordle” (R).*

However, in some cases, brands’ adoption of internet memes is ridiculed and rejected. As Miltner (2014) asserts, internet memes are produced by individuals as a means to bond through humorous interpretations of their identity and experiences. Once an internet meme is adopted by a brand, becoming commercialised, users consider the internet meme to be dead (Thorsberg, 2022). This causes users to cease from engaging with the internet meme as it changes the meaning of the internet meme, becoming less authentic (Thorsberg, 2022). In *figures 12-14*, users resist the brands’ adoption of the “Not a Wordle” meme. In particular, the user’s comments attach themes of exploitation and interference to brands presence on social media, and their usage of internet memes. While the user in *figure 12* comments on this through a veil

of sarcasm and irony, the user in *figures 13* and *14* addresses this directly. Interestingly, in *figure 13*, the user describes the renditions of the “*Not a Wordle*” meme derived from community interaction to be simple and joyful. Through this description, it can be deduced that the user views the brand’s adoption of the internet meme to be *joyless*. The user employs the verb *escape* in the context of getting away from brands on social media. This positions the brand as an omnipresent entity that the individual desires to break free and seek recluse from. Therefore, in these instances, brands’ adoption of internet memes is posited as negative and undesirable.



*Figures 12 (top) 13-14 (L-R bottom). Users’ negative commentary to the Spiderman “Not a Wordle”.*

Internet memes are a by-product of community socialisation, and are therefore an inherent aspect of social media culture (Shifman, 2013). Social media is an attractive tool for marketers due to its facilitation of two-way communication, instantaneous nature, and low cost (Constantinides, 2014). As marketers increasingly adopt social media as a means to connect and engage with consumers, internet memes become unavoidable for them. It appears, then, that the adoption of internet memes by brands is a logical aspect of engaging with online communities within this setting. However, through this case study, it becomes apparent that

there is a need to understand *if* and *how* brands can adopt internet memes. In the current climate, the *practices* of internet memes and “*memeing*” are becoming increasingly visible and embedded in everyday life and mainstream culture. Evidently, internet meme practices have evolved from observing and circulating existing relatable internet memes, to engaging in the remixing and transformation of internet memes in creative and self-relevant ways (see *Appendix C*). According to Thorsberg (2022). The rise of the “remix meme”, an internet meme that can be easily customised to carry self-referential meaning, is in part due to the shifts in the digital zeitgeist during the pandemic. People turned to social media as a tool for self-expression, for connecting with others, and for sharing vulnerabilities. The role of internet memes as a sense-making tool grew amongst a wider audience, enabling users to communicate larger existential ideas through a replicable and shareable format.

This shift in social media activities has caused brands to attempt to actively engage in these practices to connect with their consumers. Mainstream entities have grasped the power of community conversation and commentary, as it occurs through the generation of internet memes. At the time of writing this PhD dissertation, Love Island, a popular reality television dating show, began to encourage viewers to discuss the show on various social media pages. Resultant internet memes are showcased during the show’s ad breaks, blurring the lines between the marginal and the mainstream. Furthermore, the practices of internet memes are becoming increasingly corporatized. Canva, a graphic design website intended for businesses, marketers, and other professionals, includes a meme template amongst its design options (see *Appendix B*). While phone applications and websites that have facilitated the creation of internet memes by providing appropriate templates have existed prior, the incorporation of this on Canva is indicative of the increased commercialisation and embeddedness of internet memes in marketing practice. As this community specific practice transcends into the realm of social media marketing, this increases the importance of understanding this phenomenon from the outlook of the consumer.

### **1.2.2 Definitions**

The following subsection will provide definitions to commonly used words and phrases within this thesis. These ideas are central to the discussion and in answering the overall research questions. While these will be analysed and discussed throughout the thesis within the context of the research, it is important to define these concepts and their relevance to the research. A

summary of the definitions is presented in a table format, and these are subsequently discussed in depth. Internet memes are the subject of the thesis, and so are defined first. Reposting and remixing are two prominent strategies for sharing internet memes, and are crucial *practices* for the longevity and success of an internet meme. Online communities are the actors behind the practices of creating and sharing memes, and the generation and mediation of cultural meanings. Finally, discourses refer to systems of thought that undergird the creation of internet memes, while practices are the ways in which these systems are mobilised and enacted through the medium of internet memes:

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Source</b>
Internet Meme	Internet memes are “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience”.	Shifman, 2013
Reposting	Reposting is the act of resharing content to one’s own page, duplicating an existing post.	Shifman, 2013
Remixing	Remixing involves the altering of content by a user before it is then shared to their community or audience. Users remix content in self-relevant ways, using the content to communicate identity, experiences, or commentary.	Shifman, 2013
Online Community	Online communities are groups of people on social media who engage with one another based on similar interests.	Kozinets, 2015
Discourse	Discourses refer to sociohistorical systems of thought that produce knowledge, meaning, and power. Discourse is a culturally constructed representation of reality. It constructs and organises knowledge through the production of categories of knowledge and assemblages of texts, which ultimately serve to govern what is and is not possible in society.	Foucault, 1975, 1980, 2000
Practice	Practice encompasses the ways in which discourses are mobilised through action (Fairclough, 1992). It is the application of discourse through action. Through practice, discursive structures are reproduced and maintained. Practices are rooted in established discursive structures that underpin a society or culture, and as such, are actions	Fairclough, 1992, 2013

or activities that are repeatable, regular, and recognizable  
in a given cultural context.

*Table 1. Summary of definitions*

### **Internet Meme**

Shifman (2013, p.367) describes internet memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience”. Internet memes have been described as the currency of social media, and therefore are an important aspect of user interaction and community socialisation. In the earlier years of social media, internet memes mostly referred to standardised images overlaid with humorous text (see *Appendix A*). However, they now encompass more complex ideas such as particular phrases, actions, and soundbites. Internet memes are fundamentally social, and cannot spread without social interaction and knowledge. Therefore, they are an important tool in the dynamic of online communities, and in the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Miltner, 2014). Internet memes have become a fundamental aspect of social media culture due to their ease of transformation and sharing, allowing users to communicate, sometimes complex, meanings in an easily digestible, humorous format.

### **Reposting**

Reposting is the act of resharing content to one’s own page, duplicating an existing post. Through this, the reposter redirects the content to one’s own social media audience and community. Content forms one of the pillars of social media (Ang, 2011), and therefore, a feature that enables reposting is built into many social media platforms. Content that is reposted is not altered by the reposter. However, they may offer commentary on the original content of the post (KnowYourMeme, 2013). Reposting is a resharing strategy that can be considered to be more passive when compared to remixing. According to Shifman (2013), mimicry forms one of the ways that internet memes may be transmitted on social media (Shifman, 2013).

## **Remixing**

Remixing involves the altering of content by a user before it is then shared to their community or audience. Remixing is the modification of the internet meme in self-relevant ways, which involves embedding individual or community specific meanings within the internet meme format (Shifman, 2013). Remixing forms one of the ways in which internet memes are shared from user to user, gaining meanings as they move through the network. This practice proliferates the life of an internet meme by increasing its relevance to a wider audience. Community specific meanings and symbols are embedded through the creative reproduction of the internet meme. Users are motivated to remix and share social media content and internet memes as this provides them with an opportunity to express their self-identity, or enables them to bond with their community members (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). Remixing content is an important aspect of social media practice and internet culture (Shifman, 2013). The intertextual links created through this interpretive practice reveals much of the community's customs, habits, values, and experiences, and ultimately, a glimpse into the constructed realities of online communities.

## **Online Community**

Online communities refer to groups of people on social media who engage with one another based on similar interests. Social media has redefined the concept of community. Social media and online technologies multiply communication links (Fiore, 2007), fostering cultural aggregations which come to form online communities (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). Online communities typically consist of a small core of active members, and a majority of users who do not actively participate and follow active members (Hauser *et al.*, 2017). According to Coleman (2010), socialisation within online communities is centred around practices that circulate, reimagine, magnify, translate, revise, and remake a host of cultural symbolism, experiences and identities. Communities are no longer situated in the communal, but in a notional space of interaction and information exchange around particular topics, which are located on and through online platforms (Kozinets, 2015). In essence, online communities' user bases are unstable as users enter and exit communities frequently. It is *the area of interest* that occupies the space, rather than a specific set of individuals. For example, within the Beauty Community, which consists of users who are interested in cosmetics products, cosmetics brands, and their application, it is the interest

in beauty that defines the space. The internal hierarchy of users and influencers fluctuates, with users entering and leaving the space as their interests change. However, the area of interest remains.

### **Discourse**

The concept of discourse as discussed throughout this research project is rooted in Foucault's (1975, 1980, 2000) ideas. Discourses refer to sociohistorical systems of thought that produce knowledge, meaning, and power. These are expressed at the linguistic level, and through discursive and social practices. Foucault views discourse as not referring only to formal linguistic aspects, but also to institutionalised patterns of knowledge that manifest in disciplinary structures which operate through the connect of knowledge and power. Foucault asserts that knowledge and power always exist together. Where knowledge is found so is power, and vice versa. These power relationships are expressed through language and practices, which ultimately form social structures. These structures determine the way the world is perceived and interpreted. Understanding these structures can provide insight into a particular social group's constructed reality, which has implications on the legitimisation of identities, authority, and power.

The principal idea in Foucault's work is that an understanding of discourse should be obtained in order to understand social phenomenon (Foucault, 1980). Foucault emphasised the role of institutions, such as hospitals, schools, and prisons, in maintaining power and in creating discourses. Discourses make available to people certain ways of seeing and being in the world. They create subject positions which structure subjectivities and experiences, which are largely constructed through language (Lyotard, 1984). Discourse is a culturally constructed representation of reality. It constructs and organises knowledge through the production of categories and assemblages of texts, which ultimately serve to govern what it is and is not possible to think, say and do. It produces and reproduces both power and knowledge simultaneously. It is possible to understand why some ways of thinking and doing are tolerated while others are marginalised by examining discourse. As a result, discourse analysis has become a very effective and important type of analysis in the social sciences. Throughout the thesis, discourses that undergird communities' constructions of brands on social media are explored in an attempt to make sense of communities' behaviour toward brands.

## **Practice**

Practice encompasses the ways in which discourses are mobilised and activated (Fairclough, 1992). It is the application of discourse through action. Through practice, discursive structures are reproduced and maintained. The idea of practice within this research is rooted within Fairclough's (1992) ideas related to sociocultural practices. Fairclough (1992) highlights the role of language in shaping and maintaining power relations through social interactions. He emphasizes the need to analyse language use to uncover hidden power dynamics and challenge dominant discourses. Foucault (1975, 1980), on the other hand, focuses on power and knowledge, particularly how power operates through discursive formations and institutions. He emphasised that power is diffused throughout society and constantly negotiated and transformed through social interaction. Considering social practice through this lens is useful in understanding the intertwined nature of language, power, and social structures, providing critical insights into the construction and reproduction of societal norms and practices within online communities.

Practices are rooted in established discursive structures that underpin a society or culture, and as such, are actions or activities that are repeatable, regular, and recognizable in a given cultural context. The production and consumption of Internet memes is a social practice. Internet memes can only be understood and created via the discourses that surrounds them. The production and consumption of Internet memes is a social practice, and therefore, this dimension is vital in this research. Discourse leads to practice, and practice leads to discourse. Internet memes operate on a practice level. They require community members to interact actively to enable their creation. However, they are also discursive in nature. Internet memes can only be understood and created via the discourses that surrounds them. The production and consumption of Internet memes is a social practice. References to practices throughout the thesis refer to community specific practices, and to the practice of creating and remixing internet memes. These practices are undergirded by discourses.

### **1.3 Research Gap**

Internet memes have been of interest to media and culture studies researchers for the past decade (Shifman, 2013, 2014; Milner, 2014; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). These researchers

have utilised interpretivist, qualitative research to explore the relevance of internet memes to social media culture, as well as their importance as a socialisation and bonding tool for online communities. In recent years, research has emerged linking marketing and internet memes. Benaim (2018) discusses the symbolic value associated with internet memes, and their strategic reuse by marketers as intangible assets to penetrate niche communities. Lubis *et al.* (2021) explore the utilisation of internet memes in digital marketing strategies, and the ways in which this can generate engagement and establish a common form of expression between the brand and the audience. Kurochkin and Bokhan (2020) examine the use of internet memes in digital marketing strategies, adopting a quantitative method to establish the characteristics of internet memes that generate the highest rates of engagement. Teng *et al.* (2021) devised a study that establishes the effect of internet memes on brand image amongst consumers. This quantitative study established that when utilised correctly, internet memes have been found to improve brand image and enhance consumer-brand relations. Recently, Malodia *et al.* (2022) conducted research on the role of internet memes in marketing communications, with a focus on the factors that enable an internet meme to become viral. While qualitative in nature, the research is ultimately concerned with utilising internet memes for social media metrics and ignores online community dynamics.

In contrast to their media and culture studies counterparts, researchers in the marketing field mostly adopt a positivist stance when studying memes, analysing the metrics of internet meme usage and their implications on brand engagement and brand perceptions amongst consumers (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Kurochkin and Bokhan, 2020; Lubis *et al.*, 2021). Quantitative studies and their focus on reach and engagement dilutes the very human essence of both internet meme practice and marketing. Internet memes are a product of human interaction and socialisation. They are a tool for sense-making and the mediation of community-specific meanings and culture. They are subjective and fluid (Burgess, 2008; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to adopt interpretivist, constructionist, qualitative methods for the analysis and understanding of data concerning internet memes and the practices that surround them. The first gap this research aims to fill is the lack of qualitative and interpretive research exploring internet meme usage within a marketing context. This will provide richer insights concerning communities' interactions with brands on social media, and the way in which they construct the brands usage of internet memes. Gaining an understanding of the systems of meaning that underpin communities' interactions with brands on social media is necessary for the continued refinement of social media marketing practices.

Fournier and Avery (2011) provide a nuanced breakdown of the contemporary issues that brands face as they venture onto social media. One of the main issues faced by brands is establishing an authentic presence on social media amongst users. As internet memes are a prominent socialisation and communication tool on social media, they become unavoidable for brands and have to be adopted or at least engaged. In an age where consumers expect brands to be vocal online and establish a brand personality, many social media managers are utilising memes to realise this (Bain, 2022). However, brands often find themselves making mistakes that come across as ingenuine, negatively impacting their relationship with consumers (Paris, 2022). It is necessary to break down the idea of authenticity further and understand communities' construction of authenticity. Authenticity has re-emerged in the literature within the context of social media, mostly in response to the rise of the social media influencer, and the implications of perceived authenticity in social media marketing (Audrezet *et al.*, 2022). This research will explore constructs of authenticity as they pertain to brand presence on social media, and its implications for creating an environment that enables or restricts brands from interacting with communities. The second gap the research aims to fill is in regards to construction and employment of authenticity amongst communities, as well as an exploration of the way in which brands may earn authenticity credentials. Through this, an understanding of what constitutes authentic internet meme practices can be built.

Consumption patterns and behaviour are informed by societal and cultural aspects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). In a postmodern world, individuals are free to construct their identities through the objects they interact with (Van Raaij, 1993). The creation and consumption of internet memes has been acknowledged as crucial for establishing in-groupness and identity building and maintenance by researchers within the cultural studies field (Milner, 2013; Kanai, 2015). The increased personification of brands on social media through their adoption of internet memes has been a topic of interest amongst marketers in the past decade (Kwom and Kim, 2013; Caig, 2016). However, the current literature does not bring together the ideas of consumption, brands, and internet memes. The third gap the research hopes to explore is establishing the way in which communities interact with and consume internet memes posted by brands on social media. By examining the discourses and practices that underpin these acts of consumption, the role brands play in the consumers' social media socialisation and consumption activities can be established. This will enable social media managers to

understand how they can navigate social media and engage with communities in meaningful ways.

Finally, Vargo and Lusch's (2004) ideas relating to service dominant logic and co-creation emerged during a time when social media was in its infancy. The paper asserts that the power dynamic between the brand and the consumer has shifted. The consumer, previously an entity that was passive, wishes to become a co-creator of value within the marketing process. Marketing has become a process of value co-creation amongst actors, rather than a practice of managing customers and markets (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Consumers become *prosumers*, acting as both *producers* and *consumers* of value within the marketing process. Social media has caused a further shift in power. Unlike mainstream spaces, social media is dominated by people, not brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011). The final gap the research will address is exploring the implications of this power shift on the brand-consumer co-creative process, particularly co-creation through joint engagement in internet meme practices for the generation of collective value. An inherent aspect of the co-creative process is resource integration (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Internet memes have been considered a valuable resource for the transformation of culture and fostering relationships (Milner, 2013). Therefore, the consumers' outlook towards the adoption of internet memes by brands to initiate and foster relationships with social media communities should be explored.

### **1.3.1 Research Questions**

The overall question that the research aims to answer is: *How can internet memes be deployed by brands and integrated into their marketing activities in a manner that is accepted by online communities?*

In order to answer this question, the research aims to investigate the discourses that underpin consumers' constructions of brands' usage of internet memes, as well as the practices that surround brand-community internet meme usage. These discourses and practices, when combined, provide the basis of consumers' constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), and with this, the way in which they construct brands on social media. The research questions are divided into *theoretical* and *empirical* questions. Empirical questions (EQ1, EQ2, EQ3) will be answered through data gathered through the observation of online communities and conducting fieldwork. Meanwhile, theoretical questions (TQ1, TQ2, and TQ3) aim to analyse

empirical data through the prism of theoretical frameworks to generate new theoretical positions.

Empirical questions are based upon observations and their findings are explained using existing literature. The use of empirical questions is important in research, especially netnographic research, as the researcher embeds themselves within fields and draws observations from this. Research from an empirical perspective aims to map out the social life and practices of a community or social group. Beneath these practices are power relations and hidden social institutions that guide these communities. The empirical questions in this research are concerned with constructions of authenticity, which vary from community to community. Therefore, they are dependent on observations, which can then be analysed to create generalisations. Theoretical questions are questions that bridge empirical findings to expand upon existing theories. The theoretical questions in this research are underpinned by Vargo and Lusch's (2004) ideas relating to service-dominant logic and co-creation, Foucault's (1975, 1980) ideas relating to discourse, and Foucault's (1980) ideas relating to knowledge and power. The combination of empirical observations, and the aforementioned theories, will be used to expand on these theories within the context of brand-consumer relationships and internet memes. Through this, the overall question of the research can be answered.

### ***Empirical Questions***

**EQ1.** How is authenticity constructed and employed within different communities on social media?

**EQ2.** How can brands earn authenticity on social media?

**EQ3.** Can brands acceptably contribute to societal and cultural conversations through internet memes?

EQ1, EQ2, and EQ3 seek to understand the ways in which authenticity is interpreted and constructed by communities on social media. EQ1 tackles consumers' *construction* of authenticity. It examines this at the linguistic, discursive, and practice levels to understand how authenticity is constructed and employed by communities, and from this, its implications for brand-consumer relationships can be established. Fournier and Avery (2011) highlight that one of the challenges brands face when establishing a social media presence is earning authentic credentials. Therefore, EQ2 aims to build on this further by discovering through empirical

findings the ways in which brands can operate in an authentic and organic manner on social media. Finally, EQ3 is concerned with how brands can engage in social media conversations using internet memes. Conversations and content form two of the primary pillars of social media (Ang, 2011). Conversations and social media content are sites for value creation (Rashid *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, it is essential for brands to be able to engage in these to initiate co-creative relationships with online communities. Therefore, the research's empirical questions are interlinked and build on one another. EQ1 is concerned with establishing how authenticity operates on a community level; EQ2 uses the implications drawn from EQ1 and applies this to brands' presence on social media; and finally, EQ3 is concerned with how authenticity can be absorbed by brands, enabling them to organically engage with consumers on social media.

### ***Theoretical Questions***

**TQ1.** How can internet memes be used by brands to initiate relationships with online communities and foster prosumption?

**TQ2.** How do discourses and practices enable communities to achieve a position of power on social media?

**TQ3.** What is the relationship between community discourses and practices in creating power structure?

TQ1 links to the shift in marketing practice covered by Vargo and Lusch (2004) in their work on service-dominant logic. Internet memes form an attractive tool for marketers for connecting with communities (Teng *et al.* 2021). However, in order to fully answer this question, it is important to explore consumers' openness to brand memes. Linking with TQ1, TQ2 is concerned with power on social media. An examination of the discourses and practices that underpin the community can be used to understand the constructed reality of the community. Through this, the roles and subject positions of both the brand and the community can be established. This can then be used to recognise the role that both the brand and the content it produces plays on social media. Finally, TQ3 aims to explore and establish the relationship between the discourses and practices that emerge from communities, and how this contributes to the exercise of power on social media and the ability of brand memes to be accepted by online communities. Exploring the relationship between discourses and practices can uncover the schemes of knowledge that create and uphold the power structure between communities and the brands on social media.

### **1.3.2 Research Objectives**

#### ***Empirical Objectives***

- To successfully carry out empirical research, in the form of netnography, to obtain an understanding of consumer outlooks towards brand usage of internet memes.
- To understand the factors that contribute to the authenticity of brand posts that utilise internet memes.
- To provide advice to marketing organisations, and related parties, with findings that will allow them to successfully interact with communities on social media through internet memes.
- To furnish an understanding of how brands may operate and utilise internet memes for marketing purposes to enhance their effectiveness and acceptability within online communities.

#### ***Theoretical Objectives***

- To provide explanations for consumers' perspectives towards brands' usage of internet memes using existing literature
- Develop an A Posteriori framework based on an inductive approach that utilises research data and existing theories.
- To bridge the gap between media studies, cultural studies, and marketing literature to understand consumer outlooks towards usage of Internet memes in a marketing context.

Through an exploration of communities' constructions of the usage of internet memes by brands, the research hopes to develop and continue to build upon existing literature, as well as develop a conceptual framework presenting the overall findings of the research. As highlighted in the research gap, internet memes and their relevance to social media communities have already been explored by scholars within the areas of culture and media studies (Shifman, 2013, 2014; Milner, 2013, Burgess, 2008; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). However, this obviously does not consider social media marketing, or brand-consumer relationships in relation to internet memes. The perceived implications of using internet memes in social media marketing has been quantitatively explored by researchers in the area of marketing (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Lubis,

2018). This research hopes to bridge the gap between these disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of consumers' attitudes towards the usage of internet memes by brands. Through this, it hopes to provide practical advice for social media managers that enhances the relationship between the brand and their consumers.

#### **1.4 Overarching Theories**

Marketing, a discipline that is fundamentally concerned with people (Levitt, 1960), cannot be studied in the absence of significant sociological and sociocultural theories. Foucault's (1975, 1980) idea relating to discourse are utilised throughout this research project. As defined in section 1.2.2.5, discourses refer to sociohistorical systems of thought that produce knowledge, meaning, and power. Foucault views discourse as institutionalised patterns of knowledge that manifest in disciplinary structures which operate through the synthesis of knowledge and power. The production and consumption of internet memes is a social practice that is discursively structured (Wiggins, 2019). These practices erect and maintain community boundaries, enable socialisation, and enable and legitimise identities (Miltner, 2014). Therefore, this is an appropriate lens to adopt when analysing the phenomenon. Within this study, Foucault's (1975, 1980) theories relating to discourse form the basis for the analysis and presentation of the findings, as well as the discussion of TQ2 and TQ3, both of which are concerned with power structures. The researcher examines linguistic features of the data and analyses the sociohistorical context of online communities to identify the discourses that underpin them. The system of knowledge that generates consumers' perspectives towards brands' adoption of internet memes is then determined. The exploration of the structures of knowledge that underpin prominent discourses within each community can ascertain the constructed reality that the community operates within, and as such the brand's role and usage of internet memes can be understood further.

Foucault's (1975, 1980) theories will be used in conjunction with Fairclough's (1992) ideas relating to discourse analysis. Fairclough's (1992) work is particularly important in this context as it aims to examine how language is used to maintain or challenge dominant social practices and to reveal the underlying structures of power and inequality. In particular, Fairclough (1992) emphasises the idea of socio-cultural practices. Within Fairclough's approach, the term "practice" often refers to the ways in which language and discourse are employed in social interactions, institutions, and broader societal contexts. He emphasizes the importance of analysing the language used in various communicative situations to uncover the hidden power

dynamics, ideologies, and social norms that shape those situations. Communities occupy digital spaces where they uphold and maintain their own set of positions and practices (Kozinets, 2015). This influences the way individuals perceive reality, which in turn influences the way in which they navigate social situations and environments.

The research employs discourse analysis to underpin the analysis and discussion of the authenticity and organicity of brands' existence in the domains of communities, the practices that surround the use of internet memes by community members, and the implication of this on brands. This can then be used to answer EQ1, EQ2, and EQ3. Literature on internet memes emphasises that the creation of these is a social practice, which is discursively structured (Gal et al., 2016; Nowak, 2016; Milner, 2012, 2013). Through the practice of internet memes, users deploy different discourses. Similarly, existing social discourses shape internet meme practices analysing language and discourse in social contexts can provide insights into the ways in which individuals and groups engage in practices that shape and are shaped by broader social structures.

Theories relating to consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) are also prominent in this thesis. In a postmodern world, individuals are free to construct their identities through the consumption of symbolic meaning (Van Raaij, 1993). Consumer culture is based on the expansion of capitalist commodity production, which results in the development of material culture in the form of consumer products that serve as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Featherstone, 1990; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This necessitates the transmission of cultural meaning from society to products via marketing methods, which is then transferred to individuals via consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). As a result, the marketplace offers consumers a diverse range of resources from which to develop their individual and collective identities (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

This material culture is not limited to physical goods, and includes digital artefacts. Waqas *et al.* (2022) have begun exploring the link between content, namely brand content, and consumer culture. For example, they highlight that the consumption of brand content and its meanings is important for users' constructions of their identity on social media, as well as for its facilitation of social bonding. However, this perspective does not explore the relevance of internet memes within this practice, but rather looks at brands' social media content as a whole. Internet memes are culturally symbolic elements that are produced and consumed by individuals to express

identity (Milner, 2014). Therefore, ideas within the realm of consumer culture are applicable and will be used in conjunction with prominent sociological theories to analyse this phenomenon. While the symbolic consumption of internet memes has been explored by theorists in the area of culture studies, this research redirects this focus on the consumption of internet memes posted by brands, as well as the generation and consumption of content by the community in response to brands' adoption of internet memes. The creation and consumption of this content is selective and contributes to maintaining an authentic identity at both the individual and collective level. Therefore, schemas of knowledge are activated during this process to align the act of consumption with the individual and community's underlying identities and constructed reality. These ideas will contribute to answering EQ1, EQ2, and EQ3.

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) concepts of service-dominant logic and consumer-brand co-creation are significant to this study. It was observed that consumers demand to play an active part in creating value for goods and services, becoming *co-creators of value* (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). In an increasingly digitised world, much brand-consumer interaction takes place online and on social media. The rise of the prosumer is, in part, due to a shift in power between the consumer and the brand. However, social media has shifted this dynamic further, empowering individuals and communities, and not brands (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Cova and Cova, 2002). It has been established that internet memes are a fundamental aspect of social media culture (Lewis, 2015), and are unavoidable for brands. Therefore, through the re-examination of these power structures in the context of social media, it will be possible to determine the ways in which co-creation and prosumption can be initiated. This will answer TQ1, and EQ3.

### **1.5 Outline of Methodology**

As outlined earlier, there is little research exploring consumers' attitudes towards brands' usage of internet memes from a qualitative perspective. The research is concerned with internet memes, which are an outcome of human socialisation. Therefore, this will be examined from a constructivist perspective. Constructivism assumes that the social world is created and understood through interpretivist social structures. Reality is socially constructed and is upheld by language, symbols and shared practices. Social concepts emerge as ideas and are concretised through a process of socialisation leading to them becoming institutionalised and acknowledged as social facts (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In line with this, a discourse analysis approach is adopted to interpret the data generated in this research. Discourse analysis

is an approach to analyse written, vocal, symbolic, or any significant semiotic event (Van Dijk, 1997). Discourse analysis embodies the epistemological viewpoint of constructivism, viewing the world, and our place in it as actors, as socially constructed through language (Gergen, 1999). It views the intentional usage of language by people as a means to construct their own accounts and versions of the social world, and this active process of construction is displayed and demonstrated through language variation.

Data will be collected netnographically within two different communities chosen for observation based on their criteria of consumption. One community was chosen where brands and products play a central role to community interaction and practices, while another non-consumption community was chosen where the consumption of products and brands is not integral to communities' interaction and socialisation. Studying these two communities allowed for the accrual of a balanced set of results, one that did not wholly favour or oppose brands' attempts at integrating within communities using internet memes. Aligned with the ideas of constructionism, consumer culture theory highlights that meanings are created and maintained within neo-tribal groups (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Bauman, 1990; Small, 2006; Cova and Cova, 2002). While previous research on consumers' perceptions of the usage of internet memes by brands perceived social media users as a monolith, this approach will identify differences in discourses and sociocultural practices amongst different communities.

## **1.6 Research Contribution**

From a theoretical standpoint, this research bridges the gap between media, culture studies, and marketing research by providing an exploration of the usage of internet memes within a marketing context. A qualitative methodology is adopted to further develop the findings of recent quantitative studies that explore the usage of internet memes in relation to marketing practice (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Kurochkin and Bokhan, 2020; Lubis *et al.*, 2021). The research will expand current marketing knowledge. It is timely considering the increased hyper-digitisation of all facets of life, which sees brands and individuals continuously partaking in social media activities. From a managerial perspective, the research contributes to marketing managers' understanding of the social media landscape. In particular, it establishes the way in which consumers construct brands' presence on social media. Through this, marketers will be able to devise social media marketing strategies that are of value to their consumers, as well as social media users as a whole. Finally, the research will enhance the agency of social media

users by contextualising their social media practices within the realm of marketing. This will provide them with a deeper understanding of the significance of these practices to marketers as social media marketing becomes a mainstream marketing tool.

## 1.7 Chapter Synopsis

<p><b>Chapter 2   Literature Review</b></p>	<p>The literature review is divided into four sections: the first provides a discussion of major relevant social sciences theories related to postmodernism and poststructuralism, and their link to consumption and identity. A discussion of brand-community co-creation is then provided. This explores the shifting role of the consumer and communities, and the implication of this on marketing practice. Social media marketing is then explored, with a particular focus on the creation and exchange of content online. Finally, this is all tied in with a discussion on internet memes, their role in identity construction, consumer culture, and their relevance to marketing strategies.</p>
<p><b>Chapter 3   Methodology</b></p>	<p>This chapter discusses the philosophical standpoint of the research, the research design, and the research approach. It also introduces the two communities that will be observed, as well as providing a rationale for this choice and its appropriateness for the research. Data is analysed at a linguistic level, then at a discursive level, and finally at a practice level (Fairclough, 2013).</p>
<p><b>Chapter 4   Findings</b> <i>Community 1</i></p>	<p>The findings chapters analyse the netnographic data collected from the two communities observed: Black Twitter and the Curly Hair Community. These chapters identify the main discourses that emerge from the data, and highlight the implications of this on brands' usage of internet memes for social media marketing purposes.</p>
<p><b>Chapter 5   Findings</b> <i>Community 2</i></p>	
<p><b>Chapter 6   Discussion</b></p>	<p>The penultimate chapter answers the questions that have been introduced in this chapter. It is divided into three sections. The first section answers the research questions using the findings from the research. The second section within the discussion examines the relationship between the ideas emerging from the study. In the third section, the overall research question is revisited and answered.</p>

**Chapter 7 |  
Conclusion**

The final chapter revisits existing theories in light of the discussion, and highlights which theories have been confirmed, or expanded upon. New theories are also highlighted and presented. Managerial implications are also provided, along with a discussion of the limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with the overall conclusions drawn from the research.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a contextual background for the research in this thesis. It emphasises the increased importance of internet meme culture to mainstream society, and its importance for marketing practice. An overview of the current practice of “memeing” has been provided. The chapter has noted the shift from the passive sharing and observing of internet memes, to a culture of actively partaking in their creation and evolution. This shift has multiple implications, most notably the shifting role of internet meme usage for community socialisation online. As brands establish their presence on social media, it becomes necessary for them to adopt internet memes for their social media communications strategies.

The research gap for this thesis has also been established. There are four primary gaps that are addressed by this research. Firstly, it aims to produce qualitative data through means of netnographic research to supplement the growing number of quantitative research emerging in the marketing literature. Secondly, it aims to explore consumers’ constructs of authentic internet meme practice, particularly what constitutes authentic internet meme adoption by brands. This will support social media marketers as they navigate social media. Thirdly, the research will revisit literature relating to consumer culture within the context of communities’ consumption of internet memes posted by brands. This will establish the role brands and their content play in community’s social media activities, enabling social media managers to formulate content that has social value. Understanding the role assigned to brands by online communities is fundamental for social media marketing, as it determines the degree to which communities will engage with brand content and co-creation (Peters *et al.*, 2013). Finally, the research revisits Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) ideas relating to co-creation in light of the power shift facilitated by social media. Internet memes are a valuable resource on social media, and therefore cannot be avoided by brands. Through an exploration of power structures, an

understanding of the ways in which internet memes may be incorporated in social media marketing can be gained.

The research questions and objectives have been presented and explained. These were linked to the identified research gaps, and categorised into theoretical and empirical questions. As the research is netnographic, this necessitates the researcher to immerse herself into social fields that online communities inhabit. This approach is inherently reliant on observation, which is the foundation of empirical knowledge. Observations taken during the course of the research will be used to build upon existing theories. The theories that underpin the research questions are highlighted and explained. Due to the social nature of internet memes, it is necessary to adopt sociological theories in conjunction with marketing theories to answer the overall research questions. The interweaving of these two disciplines will become evident as the literature is discussed in Chapter 2. The netnographic approach adopted by this research will allow the researcher to observe users' interactions with the social context of their respective communities, as well as their engagement with internet memes posted by brands. The findings of the research will build on marketing theory in the areas of consumption, social media, and brand-consumer relationships.

## Chapter 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines and analyses existing literature pertaining to the research question of this thesis. The literature review draws upon ideas from the fields of philosophy, linguistics, culture, media, communications, branding, and marketing. Theories from these fields have been woven together to form a narrative that aims to understand *why* internet memes emerged, their significance to online communities and their practices, and their relevance to marketing practice. There are four main sections within the literature review. The first section is concerned with postmodernism, identity, and consumption; the second section explores online communities and co-creation; the third section discusses social media marketing; and finally, the fourth section discusses internet memes and their usage by brands.

The purpose of section one is to explore the concept of postmodernism and its implications for identity. Postmodernism stresses the erosion of traditional social structures, such as religion, class, and gender roles, that undergirded societies. Individuals are free to create their own identities with the people, objects, and structures they interact with, and become creators of their own meaning. This first section provides a contextual background that underpins the remainder of the thesis, especially the methodology, which stresses ideas of social constructionism and the role language plays in creating reality. However, the section stresses the importance of social-identity in the postmodern world. The second section of the literature review builds on this by exploring the idea of online communities, and the power afforded to collectives due to the rise of social media. This section also discusses Vargo and Lusch's (2004) ideas relating to service-dominant logic and co-creation. Here, the marketer is encouraged to initiate collaborate relationships with consumers and online communities for the generation of collective value. The section discusses the implications of social media on the co-creative processes between brands and online communities.

The third section builds on the ideas of co-creation presented in the section that precedes it. Co-creation forms the basis of social media marketing, which is premised on conversations, collaboration, content-creation, and connection (Ang, 2011). The section focuses on the role brands play on social media, especially in regards to identity construction for online communities. It also explores the idea of content creation and exchange, as content forms one

of the pillars of social media. The final section explores the idea of internet memes. It first differentiates between the traditional idea of a meme and compares this with internet memes, which are form of social media content. It then establishes the role of internet memes in the creation and mediation of community-specific meanings and identity. Finally, it explores literature surrounding brands' adoption of internet memes, highlighting the contributions and limitations of these papers, and how this present research aims to supplement this.

## **2.2 Postmodernism, Identity, and Consumption**

### **2.2.1 *The Emergence of Postmodernism***

Postmodernism has been a difficult concept for academics to define due to its abstract nature. Postmodern ideas emerged during the 1960's and 70's, closely following the rise of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism is the theory of *knowledge* and *language*, while postmodernism is the theory of *society*, *culture*, and *history* (Agger, 1991). Poststructuralist thought emerged in the 1950's to counter structuralist ideas. Structuralists believed that once meanings have been assigned to texts, they become fixed (Berman, 1998). In other words, *language is universal*. However, post-structuralist ideas that came to light in the 1960's argues that language is not limited to one structure, instead, language is infinitely varied (Elliott and Ritson, 1997). Derrida (1976), known for his contributions regarding the idea of intertextuality, insists that all texts are *undecidable*- they conceal conflicts between various authorial voices. Intertextuality is "the conscious or unconscious use in one text of material from others" (Berger, 1991). Intertextuality relies on both encoding by the author, and decoding by the receiver, who consciously or unconsciously, place it in a wider frame of references of knowledge, cross-fertilising the idea presented with other discourses drawn from their own socially, culturally, and historically situated experiences (Derrida, 1993). Therefore, it is impossible to establish a single universal meaning.

Poststructuralism led to the emergence of postmodern views, during the 1960's. Postmodernism initially arose as an architectural movement, and later moved through fields of expression and arts, and later influenced other social and cultural aspects; art that addressed and challenged social narratives was popularised (Jameson, 1985). Much like post-structuralism, postmodernism rejects perspectives that attempt to explain the world in terms of 'patterned interrelationships', or a universal voice. Through cognition and creating intertextual

links, meanings are constantly being generated, which presents us with various social discourses and practices. These discourses and practices formulate and structure our knowledge to understand different phenomena (Foucault, 1980). Discourses are constantly being constructed and reconstructed as we formulate and gain more knowledge. This makes the adoption of a universal social science impossible. One can only tell small stories from the position of individuals and plural social groups (Lyotard, 1984). Multiple perspectives exist, rather than a universal one.

The main change that signifies the shift from modernism to postmodernism is the erosion of societal ideologies (social class, religion, monarchy, and so on) that once defined society. This led to the emergence of various formal cultural functions and a new type of social life and economic order, which we know as multinational capitalism and consumer culture (Jameson, 1985). In a postmodern world, identity is not *imposed* on individuals, instead individuals are free to construct their own identities through the objects they interact with (Van Raaij, 1993). This creates a society comprised of ever-evolving identities, where individuals are free to associate themselves with whomever at any given time, and where identity is fluid and free flowing.

### **2.2.2 *Postmodernism, Marketing, and Consumption***

While postmodernism emerged in architecture, it has since *colonised* the marketing discipline. Architects first used the term in the 1960's to describe a break in modern functional and rational thinking. Postmodernism is not simply an academic concept, but it is a radically new view of culture, and how we experience and view the world (Stierli, 2016). This is particularly significant to marketing, whose direction is highly influenced by the social climate it is embedded within. Since traditional social structures have fallen, individuals are faced with uncertainty, and look to define themselves through consumption (Van Raaij, 1993). Products have become carriers of cultural meaning, which the consumer adopts during consumption. Therefore, in the postmodern era, marketing is an important resource for identity-building. According to Firat (1993), there are five important conditions of postmodernism: individualisation, fragmentation of meaning, hyperreality, paradoxical juxtapositions of opposites, and reversal of production and consumption.

One of the main social changes that should be considered by marketers is *individualisation*, and the focus on the *decentred individual*. People have become highly individualised and are freed from roles and structures which would have dictated their life's path. Postmodernism has led to the emergence of the *decentred individual*, one that has no single 'self', but multiple selves existing fleetingly moment by moment. Furthermore, *fragmentation of meaning* is another major social change. Dominant ideologies and value systems are now replaced by a plurality of values and norms; therefore, market segmentation cannot be based on lifestyles that are valid over several product categories (Firat *et al.*, 1994). Fragmentation of information and experiences, propelled by marketing messages and images, encourages consumers to 'play a game of image switching'. Postmodern consumers do not possess one self-image but have many self-images which they adapt to the requirements of any situation. The 'real self' is hidden behind many role-played selves, if it exists at all (Van Raaij, 1993).

However, the importance of social identity in the postmodern world remains, which is paradoxical since it heavily emphasises individualisation (Sheth, 1983). In the postmodern world, we are seeing the rise of the *social-individual*, and the rise of various social structures-which are *elective*. Cova (1996) argues that extreme individualism belongs to the transitional period between modernity and postmodernity, rather than an inherent characteristic of postmodernity. He highlights that in reality, societal dynamics are not that of individualism, but of tribalism. Tribalism involves the re-emergence of quasi-archaic values, such as local identity, religious feeling, syncretism, and group awareness. Postmodern tribes, however, are centred around the catchwords and brand names of consumer culture. The market plays a central role in postmodern society, replacing other institutions and forms of mediation, such as the state, class, school, family, who have lost their legitimacy. Marketing acts as a source of meaning for consumers and a way to structure their lives. This has led to the increased importance of 'the brand', which offers self-expressive benefits to the consumer (Firat *et al.*, 1994). Consumption can be viewed in terms of the functional and symbolic aspects relative to the individual, as well as the aesthetic (living emotions, feelings, and shared passions), and emotional aspects relative to intra-communal links. Thus, postmodernism is both a time of the individual and the tribe (Maffesoli, 1990).

In an increasingly virtualised society, consumption of brand images and symbols reassure people of their identities while also offering the illusion of belonging to a virtual community (Belk and Bryce, 1993). According to Baudrillard (1994), we exist in a *hyperreal* age, where

distinctions between objects and their representations, the real and the unreal, are diminished. We are left with *simulacra*, which are copies of a copy for which there is no original, and no distinction between the real and the representation. Brand images, designs, and styles are the product of a fictitious realm, one that is imagined by consumerist society and technology, purely for marketing purposes (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). Meanings that once represented reality loses contact with things they once signified; products have a “sign value”, consumed primarily to exhibit the meaning they represent; we now consume for symbolic benefits. The relationship between the product (signifier) and meaning (signified) do not necessarily have ties to any reality but are constructed through discourse.

Finally, in the postmodern age, the consumer becomes active in the production of products and services, becoming a ‘prosumer’, engaging in *prosumption* activities (Kotler, 2010); the postmodern consumer wants to play a part in the production processes rather than encounter the product in its completed state (Van Raaij, 1993). As a result, postmodern marketers must include the consumer during all stages of the marketing process. The customer is not a passive target for marketers but acts as an active link in the continual production, assignment, and transformation of meanings and value (Vargo and Lusch, 2014).

### **2.2.3 Identity and Consumer Culture**

The maintenance of self-identity, which is the coherent narrative of the self, requires complex choices to be made continually under all manner of circumstances (Giddens, 1991). All choices related to consumption are not simply decisions about how to *act*, but also about who to *be*. This has led to the emergence of *consumer culture*, which is premised upon the expansion of capitalist commodity production, in turn leading to the creation of material culture in the form of consumer goods that act as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity (Featherstone, 1990). This requires moving cultural meaning from society to the product using marketing tools, namely advertising, which is transferred to the individual via consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). As a result, the marketplace provides consumers with an expansive palette of resources from which they can construct individual and collective identities (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

While individuals in a postmodern world are free to form their own identities with the objects they interact with, personal identity can only be formed in a social context This raises the

importance of the social dimension when discussing identity (Wilska, 2002). The individual is a product of the social and cultural setting in which they are embedded (Baudrillard, 2018). According to Elliott (1997), the development of the individual's *self-identity* is inseparable from the development of collective *social identity*: they are *embedded* in one another (Jameson, 1985; Elliott, 1997). This relationship is referred to as the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins, 2014). Self-identity must be validated through social interaction. Although consumers are led to believe that they have free will in a postmodern world, social factors remain an influence on identity. The selection pool of possibilities is derived from the individuals socio-cultural and historic context, and symbols provided by the media, and the individuals immediate social experiences (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Consumers are only able to improvise within the constraints of unwritten societal rules (Bourdieu, 1990). Categories based on traditional socio-economic traditions that existed in the modern era are now replaced by 'neo-tribal' lifestyle groups. Identification and belonging to these groups depend entirely on the individual's consumption style (Bauman, 1990). Individuals consume to integrate with a larger social group (Small, 2006).

Although the above arguments view individuals as *consumers of meaning*, some academics state symbolic signs do not express any pre-existing set of meanings, instead, meaning is created through the act of consumption (Baudrillard, 2016; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This alternative view considers consumers as *culture producers*, rather than *culture bearers*. This view the formation of tribal groups and subcultures as a direct outcome of inter-group meaning creation, rather than simply through the consumption of products whose meanings are assigned by the market (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Consumers play an active role in meaning creation, and foster collective identifications within their groups, which are grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies, rituals, social practices, and status systems (Kozinets, 2002b). Status within these groups is not determined by monolithic consumption norms, but through displays of localised cultural and social capital. Cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1986) describes it, is culturally defined assets, such as knowledge, education, and skills, which are usually acquired through an individual's upbringing. Social capital, on the other hand, refers to the aggregate of the resources that are tied to membership of specific groups. The resources are provided by the group, and provide members with capital pertaining to worth, status and leverage (Bourdieu, 1986). These resources are important in group dynamics and in terms of social-identity. The exchange of these resources reinforces the social relationships of the group, and generates collective meanings. When combining, reworking, and innovating the pool of

symbolic resources that are shared by group members., intertextual links are formed. These intertextual links aid in the definition of social groups, and erect symbolic boundaries through a system of mutual referentiality (Miltner, 2014). These consumption patterns are informed by consumers' dispositions, which as discussed, are determined by the social structures of society. The interpretation and reinterpretation of cultural meanings, , are not only informed by existing societal structures, but also shape these structures. They are, therefore, influential in guiding the social practices that lead to meaning creation amongst individuals and consumers.

#### **2.2.4 Symbolic Consumption of Brands**

Ernest Dichter was a psychologist who had a significant impact on the marketing sector in the 50 years following World War II (Aaker, 2012). He defined a brand as a product with a soul (Stern, 2006) or "a product with an identity" (Heller, 2018). The purpose of a brand is to differentiate, provide value, and decrease risk (Aaker, 2012). The brand's soul has an emotional and dynamic impact on people's daily lives (Stern, 2006). Products provide four different types of benefits: functional, emotional, moral, and self-expressive. The postmodern consumer seeks self-expressive benefits from brands, as they aid in creating, maintaining, and projecting their identity (Firat et al., 1994). In the postmodern world, the consumption of brands has become one of the primary ways of defining oneself, with the act of consumption moving the meaning from brands to the consumer (Elliott, 1997). Marketers focus on the social and human qualities brands embody (Soron, 2010). Brands have been regarded as one of the most potent sources of valorised symbolic meanings. There is a dialectical relationship between the brand and the consumer (Ritson and Elliott, 1995). While symbolic brand meanings serve as a guideline to define aspects of the consumers existence (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Panigyrakis and Zarkada, 2014), the consumer also transforms these symbolic meanings through consumption (Ritson and Elliott, 1995). Brands serve to counter threats faced by the individual due to postmodernism, including fragmentation, loss of meaning, and loss of individuality (Giddens, 1991).

Interpretation and consumption of symbolic meanings relies highly on the consumers personal perception, as well as their social knowledge (Livingstone, 2013), resulting in varied and diverse interpretations. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) refer to these influencing factors as the consumers *lived experience*, which is knowledge gained by first-hand experiences, and *mediated experiences*, which are the outcome of mass-communicated culture and media. Both

forms of experience are validated through social interaction, especially brands that have a high social symbolic value. However, mediated experiences that are not reinforced through lived experiences of purchase and usage are often rejected or forgotten about. Furthermore, interpretation and consumption of brand meanings are highly influenced by reference groups and societal values. As a result, symbols and meanings contained within brands often highlight and emphasise qualities that are desired by these groups; consumers then construct their extended selves around the social qualities emphasised. Individuals consume meanings that they feel they lack, in a process referred to as *symbolic self-completion* (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 2013). The consumer attempts to fill gaps using symbolic resources made readily available by brands. Individuals are faced with a fear of fragmentation, and as a result, aim to construct an identity that will withstand a rapidly changing environment. Individuals will construct an identity partly through developing coherent narratives of the self, and partly through investing in various institutions. Brands are extremely important to the postmodern individual. The consumption of brands is an accessible, appealing, and convenient way to build and establish a narrative for oneself, enabling the individual to feel a sense of security and assurance in the long term, feelings that are highly desired in a postmodern world.

## 2.3 Online Communities and Co-creation

### 2.3.1 *Online Communities*

Communities are founded on *sameness*. Community members must have something in common with each other, whether this is a common interest, geographical proximity, shared culture, or shared institutions (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The concept of community is historically situated in critiques of modernity, with academics attributing the destruction of community to the rise of mass culture (Putnam, 2000). This discourse is based on the underlying notion of an organic and authentic community being replaced by a depersonalised, mass produced, and less grounded human experience. The growing focus on the individual consumer and their materialistic desires played a significant part in the loss of community (Brogi, 2014). Consequently, there seems to be a dissonance between the concept of community, which stresses togetherness and sameness, and postmodernism, which emphasises individualisation and fragmentation (Furman, 1998). Motivated by the underlying assumption that individuals are defined by their differences, rather than their similarities, an exploration of what constitutes community in a postmodern world began. Theorists argue that community can exist in the postmodern world. However, these communities are now self-constructed, rather than a by-product of predetermined societal groups, and are centred around symbolic consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Cova, 2013; Elliott, 1999).

The emergence of networked technologies continued to redefine the idea of community. The participatory and inclusive nature of social media and networked technologies were predicted to retribalize human society (McLuhan, 2015). Lone individuals would be brought together to form vast collectives that synchronise their consciousness via interactive technologies. The fragmented, postmodern individual seeks deeply human connections. Social media and online technologies multiply communication links (Fiore, 2007), fostering cultural aggregations which come to form online communities (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). Through social media's facilitation of asynchronous and interactive communication, these collectives share information and content that fosters interpersonal relationships and social interaction that are not limited by geographical boundaries or time (DiGangi and Wasko, 2009).

Literature on consumer tribes sheds light on the formation of community in the postmodern age, particularly with the development of the internet and social media. Cova and Cova (2002)

emphasise that the concept of “community” is now intertwined with the idea of “interest”. Communities are brought together by shared emotion and passion towards an area of interest. These groups exist symbolically, and maintain citizenship via community specific rituals. Maintaining citizenship to tribal groups is through the cycle of (re)construction and (re)possession of meanings through shared experiences and rituals, creating a joint construction of reality (Cova and Cova, 2002). Consumers engage with these communities in order to satisfy goals at two levels: individual goals, which refer to information gathering, experiences, developing relationships and social interaction – and collective goals, which refer to developing a sense of community or group identity and affiliation, contributing to the group’s collective resources, and supporting the group’s culture (Pongsakornrungruip and Schroeder, 2011). Tribal communities are not to be confused with *brand* communities, which are commercial in nature and centred around a specific brand. While marketing is a vector of links to both brand communities and tribal groups, the latter group does not centre the brand at the heart of their rituals. Social media has catalysed the process of (re)construction and (re)possession of meanings, enabling consumers to engage with a wider span of interest groups. These collectives are henceforth referred to as ‘online communities’.

Online communities typically consist of a small core of active members, and a majority of users who do not actively participate and follow the active members (Hauser *et al.*, 2017). According to Coleman (2010), socialisation within online communities is centred around practices that circulate, reimagine, magnify, translate, revise, and remake a host of cultural symbolism, experiences, and identities. In line with postmodernist scholars’ constructions of current society, these interactions constantly reshape institutions, social identities, and *communities themselves*. The online community is fluid (Peters *et al.*, 2013). Members’ actions are informed by the social structures that bring them together, but in the same token, through their acts of socialisation, users restructure and reimagine these very social structures.

Social media enhances the social experiences of the postmodern community. On an individual level, personal accounts created by consumers enable them to engage in self-referential acts, enabling them to construct and reveal their true selves, and more frequently, multiple selves. However, these selves are not created or negotiated in a vacuum (Schau and Gilly, 2003). The construction of these identities relies on the individuals’ experiences, which inform their appropriation and manipulation of digital texts, images, and cultural references, many of which are commercial. In the context of online communities, and in line with postmodern theory, the

individual self cannot be constructed in isolation from the social self. Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995) highlight that identity is characterised by the tension between how an individual defines themselves, and how they connect with others in social settings. Therefore, in the context of online communities, social media affords consumers greater freedom to express their identity via digital proximity. Building on earlier literature relating to tribal communities, this enables consumers to engage in various interest groups, using digital artefacts as cornerstones for community rituals and as a means to negotiate symbolic meanings. The meanings produced and assigned to an object or symbol in a specific setting by online communities, while always dynamic, are generally objectified by the group and act as a shorthand that infer certain meanings (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Marketing content plays a major role in this process, providing consumers with the 'palette' from which meanings are negotiated and objectified. However, this also places more power in the hands of the online community, who may assign meanings to a brand that were not intended by the marketer. While social media is the community's playground, marketing and consumption interests play a role in bringing these communities together.

Linking the idea of online communities to those of consumer culture discussed in earlier sections, Campbell (2005) notes the communal-commercial tension that exists within the fabrics of the online community. In his observation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) online communities, he noted that individuals craved an authentic and inclusive communal experience. However, the inherent visibility and accessibility of social media repositions the experiences of the online community under corporate surveillance, what he refers to as a *corporate panopticon*. Spaces that aim to serve the needs of members are simultaneously under the watch of corporate entities, who may seek to monetize the real and authentic online experiences of online communities. This raises the question of whether there can be a balance between the interests of community and the drives of capitalism within a digital space that online communities occupy (Kozinets, 2015). The plethora of information made available through networked technologies and its ease of dissemination does not liberate the individual, but rather severs their capacity for critical enquiry. In this sense, networked technologies become a major source of reification for new kinds of governmentality (Rouvroy and Berns, 2013).

However, Jenkins *et al.* (2013) offer a different perspective, arguing that online communities are self-aware, gaining pleasure, capital, and esteem through their outputs. Online

communities' contributions towards social media culture are in pursuit of their own interests, which influence their decisions and connections within the network. Jenkins *et al.* (2013) suggest that for some communities, the benefits reaped from their engaged creative efforts are not strictly economic. Gorbis (2013) suggests that social media and networked technologies give birth to a new kind of community, one that creates a relationship-driven economy. Individuals come together to create and share knowledge, services, and products that existing institutions and corporations do not provide. This, more optimistic view, regards online communities as autonomous in their engagement and production and reproduction of cultural elements. The individual develops a new form of rationality that enables them to navigate and engage critically with their environment (Delanty and Harris, 2021).

Networked technologies and social media shift power from marketers and firms to the collective (Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Social media allows individuals to come together and amplify their voices across the world (Constantinides, 2014). Power is a fundamental area of concern that underpins and influences behaviour and social systems and hierarchies (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). The shift in power created by both postmodern conditions and the emergence of networked technologies and online communities should not be ignored by the marketer. It has been suggested that online communities gain power, firstly, through their access to information online, and secondly, through their ability to distribute, remix, and enhance this information through the production of digital content (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). The networked nature of social media and digital technologies enables individuals to access a vast pool of information instantaneously, empowering them to gain expertise in areas that were previously dominated by professionals (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). The individual consumes information to produce content and disseminates this within their network. The ability of the collective to consume online information and reproduce this through the creation of context-specific user-generated content through various acts of socialisation is an exercise of cultural and social capital. This empowers collectives to create their own cultural landscapes and symbolic meanings. The online community and its culture become disproportionately represented in the digital sphere, granting them power over the marketer who once dominated traditional media.

### **2.3.2 *The Shifting Role of the Consumer***

From the early 1900s to the 1920s, marketing institution's primary objective was to produce and facilitate the exchange of goods. By the 1950s, scholars argued that the focus of marketing institutions began to focus increasingly on the *customer* rather than the *product* (Levitt, 1960; Kotler, 1967; McKittrick, 1957). Marketers then began to make decisions starting with the customer, working backwards to the product, and making strategic decisions for how to best satisfy them (Levitt, 1960). Marketing practice transitioned towards a new dominant logic that integrated goods with services (Rust, 1998; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The need for the inclusion of service marketing in new marketing theory and practice is reflective of the expectations of today's consumers, ultimately induced by postmodernism. From this, ideas surrounding service dominant logic were born. Service-dominant logic emphasises a need for a change in perspective in the field of marketing. This logic foregoes the idea that marketing is a process for the exchange of goods, and instead views markets as a complex intertwined service ecosystem that is governed by institutions (Vargo, 2011). The central idea is that value is not embedded in a tangible product, which is then absorbed through the process of consumption by an individual. Instead, value exists in interaction, and is co-created through a process of exchange among a configuration of actors within the context of institutions and institutional arrangements. In this sense, the process of value creation is highly contextual. Co-creation involves active collaboration amongst consumers and firms for the generation of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This is a social process that is dependent on the ability of the collective to share and create resources (Kao *et al.*, 2016).

Social media and networked technologies, which brought with them an era of participatory culture by easing two-way communication, has enhanced the role of the online community (Miltner, 2014). This has increased the online community's power, increased consumer power, and has created a space for a collective voice and identity. Due to the agency and influence afforded to consumers and online communities, these groups now demand to play a far more active role within brand and marketing activities (Kotler, 2010). Social media presents an opportunity for marketing managers to tap into online community's collective intelligence and creativity (Bradley and McDonald, 2011). It also enables the integration and sharing of resources and information with consumers. In this sense, co-creation and social media have a natural alliance.

To understand the ideas surrounding service dominant logic, it is compared with traditional, goods centred marketing. Service dominant logic is premised upon the shift from viewing the consumer as an *operand resource*, to an *operant resource* (Constantin and Lusch, 1994). Operand resources can be defined as “resources on which an operation or act is performed to produce a desired effect”, on the other hand, *operant resources* are “resources that are employed to act on operand resources (and other operant resources)” (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 2; Constantin and Lusch, 1994). Customers were viewed as an operand resource to be obtained and acted upon, which implies the customer is a passive entity in the marketing process (Constantin and Lusch, 1994). Operant resources became desired when people realised that skills and knowledge were more important resources, as they can be transferred and utilised (through services) to create both operand and operant resources, which are both infinite and dynamic.

	<b>Traditional Goods-Centred Dominant Logic</b>	<b>Emerging Service-Centred Dominant Logic</b>
<i>Primary Unit of Exchange</i>	Tangible goods are created by the industry, and it is the role of marketing to facilitate their exchange to customers.	People exchange to acquire intangible benefits in the form of specialised competences (knowledge and skills), and services.
<i>Role of Goods</i>	Goods are regarded as <i>operand resources</i> and are end products.	Goods are used to transfer embedded knowledge and skills ( <i>operant resources</i> ). Products are used as a tool in value co-creation processes.
<i>Role of Customer</i>	The customer plays a passive role, only involved in the ownership transferral stage to receive the goods.	The customer plays an active role and is regarded as a co-producer of a service. Marketing becomes a process of doing things in interaction with customers.
<i>Determination and Meaning of Value</i>	Value and utility are determined by the producer and is defined in terms of exchange value.	Value is determined and perceived by the consumer. Firms can only make value propositions, and these will be realised by the consumer.
<i>Firm-Customer Interaction</i>	Customer is an <i>operand resource</i> . Consumers are acted on by marketers to generate transactions.	The customer is primarily an <i>operant resource</i> and are active actors in relational exchanges and co-production.

**Table 2.** Shift from goods-centred to service-centred dominant logic (Constantin and Lusch, 2004).

Thus, we can observe a shift in power, where consumers play an active part in creating value for goods and services, becoming *co-creators of value* (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Many of the ideas presented here align with ideas we have previously discussed. For example, Baudrillard (2016) argues that goods do not have pre-existing meanings, but instead, meaning is created through the act of consumption, which is compatible with the idea that value is determined by the consumer and is actualised through the act of consumption. Furthermore, a defining feature of the postmodern consumer is their search for self-expressive benefits and experiences (Firat *et al.*, 1994), supporting the view that the good is not the end product, but the means to an end.

### **2.3.3 Implications for Marketers**

Consumers are key in the production of value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The development of networked technologies brings together consumers who form powerful online communities that engage in a constant cycle of meaning creation and exchange. As a result of their interactivity, and participatory actions, these collectives present an environment where value creation takes place. Online communities represent a vital *operant resource* for marketers in a postmodern world. Transactional exchanges should be jettisoned and replaced with relationship-driven marketing. The existence of social media has removed power from the hands of the marketer (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). Marketers can regain some power by identifying, connecting with, and influencing socially connected consumers. However, power can never be fully regained, as social and symbolic brand meanings are co-created by consumers, particularly opinion leaders within each online community (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010).

Engaging in the co-creative process is voluntary for consumers. Online communities consist of a small core of active members who regularly participate with one another (Hauser *et al.*, 2017). The engagement of this group of consumers with the co-creative process has been found to be dependent on their self-concept and identities in virtual settings (Stephen, 2016). A recent study exploring consumers' motivations for engaging with marketers in the process of value co-creation has found that consumers' own experiences and motivations drive and shape their level of participation in co-creation (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). Particularly, when examining this motivation within the context of networked technologies, social media, and online communities, it is important to consider that these social spaces allow users to exhibit their

identity and experiences (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). As such co-creative opportunities that appeal to, and align with, consumers' identity and experiences create an incentive for engagement and participation (Waqas *et al.*, 2022; Patterson and Shroeder, 2010), aligning with the needs of the postmodern consumer. Social media allows marketers to exhibit and communicate their brand identities, providing an incentive for consumer engagement. Postmodern brands embody certain personas, or characters, which consumers use to connect with (Stern, 1994) Marketers communicating through brands also have the opportunity to create fun and playful experiences that build a sense of intimacy with brands, strengthening interactions and building emotional connections.

Interestingly, much of research on co-creation within the context of social media and networked technologies examines the role of co-creation in the process of product development and organisational innovation (Piller *et al.*, 2012; Lorenzo-Romero *et al.*, 2014; Martini *et al.*, 2014; Leonardi, 2014). In this sense, the co-creative process is intended to end with a new product. Researchers within this area argue that co-creation enables consumers to feel a sense of connection and ownership of the final product, increasing their likelihood of purchase and post-purchase engagement. However, there is less literature within the areas of co-creation and social media that explores the value of user-generated content as a vital operant resource in the process of co-creation (Rashid *et al.*, 2019). User-generated content describes all media content created and produced by social media users, rather than paid professionals (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2012). Vargo and Lusch (2004) assert that the value of co-creation is not embedded in the product itself, but rather exists within the interactions between the consumer and brands. While the value of some user-generated content, such as reviews, ratings, blogs, wiki, digital videos, and podcasts have been explored (Rashid *et al.*, 2018), little attention has been provided to increasingly popular user-generated content such as internet memes [*explored further in section 2.5*]. This form of user-generated content is co-created within online communities through ongoing interaction, and requires users to utilise various skills, ingenuity, innovativeness, and creativity. In line with Vargo and Lusch's (2004) assertion that value is generated through interaction, there is much to explore about the value of internet memes as a resource for value co-creation within the context of networked technologies and social media.

Moreover, the concept of value has evolved in response to empowered consumers. Brand communication has shifted from merely conveying stories to consumers to actively sharing stories with consumers (Pongsakornrungsrip and Schroeder, 2011). Consequently, value can

be comprehended as symbolic meaning, an added value concept, linking value (Cova and Cova, 2002), or value-in-use (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). To discern the value that consumers seek, brands must gain insight into their life projects and how they enact their life narratives (Price *et al.*, 2000). Within the context of this research, which focuses on online communities and social media, the derived value is linked value, an idea rooted in tribal marketing literature (Cova and Cova, 2002). Communities create 'linking value' by collaboratively constructing their consumption, resistance, and empowerment experiences. Value emerges from collective interactions within the community, fostering an online flow. Consequently, social interactions at a peer-to-peer level become increasingly significant, with value generated by communities independently of marketers. The marketer's engagement in these social networking practices may be perceived as interference. Consumers, now assuming a more active role in meaning creation, are often referred to as working consumers (Cova and Dalli, 2009), actively contributing to brand culture and meanings through the appropriation and re-appropriation of meaning. Therefore, when brands treat consumers as unpaid contributors, accusations of 'double exploitation' may arise, reflecting instances where brands interfere with brand-related meanings crafted by online communities' brand culture (Pongsakornrungrasri and Schroeder, 2011). This concept is intriguing as it presents a certain contradiction with research such as that of Fournier and Avery (2011), who suggest that brands can engage with online communities by attentively listening and integrating themselves online conversations. Given the context of this research, where the production of internet memes is a labour-intensive effort by consumers collectively negotiating cultural meanings, the challenge lies in how brands can engage with this process in a manner that is not considered exploitative.

Lusch and Vargo (2006) assert that firms will eventually co-create all aspects of the marketing program with their consumers. Dialogue is the primary element in co-creation, and it implies interactivity, deep engagement, and the ability and willingness to act on both sides and should be centred around issues of interest to both parties (Payne *et al.*, 2008). Dialogue also implies a level of equality between parties involved. Marketers should recognise, accept, and allow for this fundamental shift in power by treating consumers as actors, rather than simply acting upon them. Co-creation encompasses the view that *customer-firm interactions are the source of value creation*, and involves personalised interactions based on how individuals choose to interact with brands (Chathoth *et al.*, 2013; Merz *et al.*, 2009), at any stage of the marketing cycle (Lusch and Vargo, 2014). Thus, it requires a complete restructuring of the marketing infrastructure (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

## 2.4 Social Media Marketing

### 2.4.1 Defining Social Media Marketing

The emergence of networked technologies and social media, coupled with the power it has unleashed to online communities, have required marketers to establish and develop new marketing practices that are compatible with developments in consumer lifestyles, and are perceived to be credible (Constantinides, 2014; Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). The market became fragmented, and the mass marketing approaches that had previously been successful lost their effectiveness. Mass marketing, such as advertising, was far too expensive, lacked credibility and was suboptimal in performance (Ries and Ries, 2002). In the age of a post-truth society and postmodernism, consumers are far more likely to trust friends and community members concerning product information (Kitchen and Proctor, 2015). New media, particularly social media, is particularly appealing to its audience as it empowers them to define this space on their own terms, which is something traditional media does not allow (Bezjian-Avery *et al.*, 1998). Marketers now seek the formation of a relationship with the entire community, rather than individual customers. This requires the marketer to gain a deep understanding of the dynamics of these social groups and communities, and how they operate (Martini *et al.*, 2014).

The term 'Social Media' is rooted within two areas of research: sociology and communication science (Peters *et al.*, 2013). As a medium, within the realm of communication science, it is a means for storing and communicating information. Within sociology, the 'social' aspect is concerned with social networks, which are structures comprised of a set of actors (individuals, groups, or organisations) with a complex set of dyadic ties among them. As such, Peters *et al.* (2013, p. 282) define social media media as, "*communication systems that allow their social actors to communicate along dyadic ties*". This egalitarian environment reduces marketers to mere actors within a network (Peters *et al.*, 2013). By implication, marketers do not have the power to push commercial messages and enforce users to watch these. Social media is built upon individual relationships, and brand messages appear to rudely interfere with communities' conversations (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Social media platforms have become an appealing tool for marketers due to their ease of communication, low cost of communication, instantaneous nature, and the large number of users that brand messages are able to reach (Sajid, 2016).

Social media marketing involves much more than ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ made by individual users. It involves networks of individuals, whose group dynamics dictate the way in which they share information amongst themselves (Heller, 2018). Social media marketing is a form of relationship marketing, which sees marketers shifting from “trying to sell” to “making connections” with groups of consumers (Gordhamer, 2009). Social media marketing aims to influence online communities’ opinion leader to encourage conversation, whether consciously or unconsciously, between community members about brands, thus changing their perceptions regarding it (Huffaker, 2010). While traditional marketing is rigid in structure and involves months of planning prior to the launch of any campaign, social media marketing is the opposite. It demands flexibility, opportunism, and adaptation by marketers. Social media strategies are often *discovered* by simply engaging with online communities, rather than constructed. Marketers must be engrossed in conversations to be able to capitalise on opportunities (Fournier and Avery, 2011). As a result of this, social media marketing necessitates the marketers to move away from big campaigns, to much smaller ones, and regular interactions with consumers (Coon, 2010). Ang (2011) regard the following as the pillars of social media:

- 1) **Connectivity:** for social networking communities to exist and grow, members must be well connected, as evidenced through acts of ‘following’, ‘subscribing’, ‘friending’.
- 2) **Conversations:** Posts on social media encourage discussion and dialogue, resulting in the formation of bonds (Du Plessis, 2017).
- 3) **Content-creation:** often referred to as ‘user-generated content’ (UGC). Members of online communities create and share things with one another, connecting through this (Bughin, 2007).
- 4) **Collaboration:** content-creation and connectivity between community members on social media naturally leads to collaboration; the most prominent example of this is Wikipedia (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012).

Over the past decade, there has been a large focus on influencer marketing as a primary approach for conducting social media marketing (Jin, *et al.*, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Woods, 2016). This approach has been largely concerned with identifying a distinct online community and understanding their interactions and group dynamics. The marketer must distinguish the opinion leaders within networks and establishing a relationship with them (Iyenger *et al.*, 2011). The goal is to influence the influencer into speaking positively about the brand to their

network, who will then be influenced to hold positive attitudes towards the brand. The network will begin to market to *itself*, without direct input from the marketing manager (Heller, 2018). However, in more recent years, it has been noted that users' trust towards influencers has diminished (Kim and Kim, 2021). Users' question the sincerity and authenticity of such posts, likely due to the oversaturation of such posts within social media. Opinion leaders within communities that endorse brands too frequently in the eyes of online communities display instrumental tendencies which are eventually rejected by the very community that previously elevated them to a high position (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, hierarchies within online communities are fluid, never fixed (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). These networks change their size, composition, and structure like a living organism as they evolve (Peters *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, while this form of social media marketing has been extremely effective, the increased critique it faces from online communities, coupled with the fluid nature of online communities, suggests that social media marketing should be reformulated.

#### **2.4.2 The Role of Brands on Social Media**

Researchers are increasingly noting the important role brands play within social media (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). This is linked to the postmodern condition which drives individuals to consume brand meanings for the construction of identity (Firat *et al.*, 1994; Elliot, 1999). A brand's identity provides an incentive for consumer engagement on social media (Gensler *et al.*, 2013). In line with perspectives offered by consumer culture theorists, the meanings assigned to brands by the marketer are not fixed and are actively transformed by consumers through consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Engagement with brands serves two purposes for the postmodern consumer. Firstly, consumers increasingly seek to engage with brands on social media as it allows them to develop an individual persona, identity, and a perception of the self (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). For example, a study conducted by Waqas *et al.* (2021, p.110) found that a participant engaged with content shared by Victoria's Secret on social media as it enabled her to view *herself* as "fresh, fancy, sexy, charming, preserved, and slim". In this sense, the consumption and interpretation of branded content on social media enables the consumer to inwardly experience and construct their self-identity. Secondly, brands on social media enable social bonding. Users often express that brands' content brings them closer to one another, enabling them to feel closer as brands' content ignites similar feelings amongst users (Gensler, *et al.*, 2013; Waqas *et al.*, 2022).

The consumption of brands' content is a socially constructed experience (Enginkava and Yilmaz, 2014; Peters *et al.*, 2013). Marketers no longer are the sole curators of meaning on social media. Rather, this is co-created amongst groups of consumers, or online communities, through the collective interpretation of this content. While individuals are free to consume and behave freely, the interpretation and consumption of meanings and goods are highly influenced by reference groups, societal values, and the discourses that take place within the communities they belong to (Richins, 1994; Roper *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, individuals on social media are highly influenced by their networks, and the cultural context of communities. Online communities are empowered to consume brand meanings and content on social media and co-construct these meanings to make sense of their environment and anchor their experiences and lives (Kozinets, 1999, 2002a, 2002b). In this sense, social media marketing treats the consumer and online communities as an *operant* resource. The consumer and online communities are active components, without them, social media marketing is not possible. If a brand wishes to persuade an individual to engage with them on social media, they must persuade online communities as a whole (Gordhamer, 2009). Brands play a central role in the postmodern world, aiding consumers in the construction of a strong and meaningful identity (Firat, 1997). While Fournier and Avery (2011) argue that brands are not invited to the social media space, Merchant (2006) claims that social media provides a context for new identity performances, and due to their significance to the postmodern consumer, this implies that brands are very much a part of this performance. Brands are actors on social media, fulfilling a specific social role (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012). Therefore, it is important to identify the new role brands play within the dynamics of social media.

Marketers are increasingly opting to take on a more overt role, directly engaging with consumers on social media through their brands due to its facilitation of brand engagement (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Gensler *et al.*, 2013). Brands attempt to create social media content that enhances the online experiences of the consumer. This builds a sense of consumer intimacy with brands (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012). Marketers shift their perspective from that of selling, to relationship building and making connections with consumers (Gordhamer, 2009). This content must be interactive, as to invite consumers to participate in the co-creation of brand meanings and value. However, brands are actors within the network, and it fulfils a specific social role (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012). This social role is assigned to brands by online communities and affects the way in which communities interact with brands. Current literature highlights that brands may be viewed as an acquaintance, which induces weak ties

between brands and online communities and results in superficial interaction. Alternately, brands could be elevated to the status of a friend within the context of communities, inducing frequent intimate interactions, which empowers brands to shape community discourse and culture (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Understanding the social role assigned to brands by the online community is fundamental in initiating social media marketing, as it determines the level of power afforded to brands within social media, and the degree to which communities will engage with brand content and co-creation.

### **2.4.3 Brand Authenticity**

Brand authenticity is a broad and dynamic concept that has been debated by marketing scholar in the last twenty-five years (Södergren, 2021). These ideas have been explored within the context of brand authenticity (Beverland, 2005; Brown et al., 2003), the authenticity of consumption practices (Belk & Costa, 1998; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), and the authenticity of advertisements (Beverland et al., 2008; Botterill, 2007; Stern, 1994). As such, the idea of authenticity is broad and changes depending on the context in which it is applied. Of particular relevance to this study are the issues of brands' legitimate presence within the sociocultural realm of the community, as well as the issue of brand authenticity, particularly in the context of the alignment of the brands' purpose and history with their actions and behaviour. The notion of authenticity encompasses qualities such as sincerity, genuineness, and truthfulness, as highlighted by various researchers (Cappannelli and Cappannelli 2004; Beverland and Farrelly 2010). Within the realm of branding literature, brand authenticity is frequently explored as a multi-faceted construct that mirrors consumers' subjective assessments of how brands perform across several dimensions. These dimensions include continuity, originality, reliability, naturalness, credibility, symbolism, integrity, and genuineness, as examined by scholars like Bruhn et al. (2012), Morhart et al. (2015), and Akbar and Wymer (2017). Authentic brands are characterized by their stability and often attain a level of cultural significance, as observed by Holt (2004). Such brands hold particular importance in fostering consumer identification, serving as symbolic resources for individuals to express themselves (Holt, 2002; Morhart et al., 2015) and gaining acceptance within specific subcultures (e.g., Beverland et al., 2010; Kates, 2004).

Brand legitimacy has been explored by Kates (2004) in his article exploring the discursive strategies employed by members of the gay community, focusing on how shared community

meanings and myths legitimise or problematise brands' presence on social media. In this context, legitimacy refers to "the generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p574, cited in Kates, 2004). This assumes that brands are afforded subject positions within the sociocultural environment of the community by means of meaning co-creation amongst the actors, which are borne from the everchanging and fluid shared cultural environment maintained by the group. Brands entering these cultural spheres must undergo a process of institutionalisation (this will be discussed further in *section 3.2* of the Methodology chapter). In essence, this involves the brand abiding by the ideals and social norms that have been legitimised by community members. These produce systems of meaning that constitute the reality that the community operates from. These systems of meaning then form "frames of action" that are used to make sense of and evaluate brands' behaviour. Brands, therefore, can become legitimate and authentic entities by cultivating socially acceptable meanings (Kates, 2004). In essence, this requires consumers to co-create brand meanings and create brand stories by assessing brands' accumulated past histories and current social events. For example, in his study concerning the gay community's constructions of various brands, Kates (2004) found that brands that historically championed the interests of the gay community were constructed as legitimate and afforded a voice within the community, whereas brands whose actions were inconsistent were not legitimised. Legitimate brands become intertwined in the community's social interests, concerns, and life. These brands earn citizenship in the community, becoming a part of their rituals and providing the community with subcultural meanings in the ongoing construction of their collective identity.

Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 205) emphasise that brands must earn authenticity credentials in order to interact with online communities in a natural way. They also acknowledge that brands must be opportunistic and follow the "ebbs and flows" of social media. However, the idea of authenticity requires further refinement, and explored within the context of internet memes. Authentic brands are those that deliver what they promise, and whose actions are in line with their current or past core business, meaning/image, positioning, and culture (Sobande, 2019). The brands' intentions must also be viewed by consumers as genuine, and not profit-seeking, self-centred, or exploitative. Internet memes tend to be topical and short-lived, creating internet trends. Therefore, understanding the implications of brand legitimacy and cultural authenticity, and how these enable or restrict brands from engaging with social media content becomes

important. How can brands authentically engage in cultural conversations that occur through internet memes?

#### **2.4.4 Content Creation and Exchange**

If a brand wishes to exist on social media and create engagement opportunities, they must be able to create content that is relevant to online communities (Fournier and Avery, 2011; Constantinides, 2014). This approach is referred to academically as ‘content marketing’. This is regarded as an alternative to connecting with and building relationships with customers, instead of using the platform to simply inform about new products and promotions (Hillebrand, 2014), which will just be ignored by customers. Content marketing, however, is not a new concept. It can be traced back to the late 1800s. Gas companies in the 1920’s and 30’s created cookbooks that featured recipes that can be recreated using a gas cooker (Scott, 2017). There are fundamental differences between content in the current age and content from a century ago. Firstly, current content is *interactive*, meaning it should inspire users to engage, modify, and reshare it (Peters *et al.*, 2013). Secondly, communities are *active actors* in the creation and dissemination of content. Thirdly, the meaning embedded within content is not constant, but changes through modification as it moves from user to user (Miltner, 2014; Waqas *et al.*, 2021; Gensler *et al.*, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

Content marketing creates content that is user-based and is largely driven by current topics and requires spontaneity (DesAutels, 2011). Content shared by brands is taken on by creators and opinion leaders within the network, and if they wish, transform it, and feed it back to their network. This embeds brands within the naturally occurring conversations of the online community (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Marketers that wish to make a presence in a social network must focus their efforts on creating interesting content, fostering a community, and engaging with the network in a more direct, casual, and personal way, as online communities are now the main drivers of conversations (Brown, 2010). Content has been acknowledged as the currency of social media; it is *made* to be shared. It should be interesting, humorous, thought provoking, and most importantly, self-relevant (Schmitt, 2012). Marketers should reflect on the identity and characteristics of brands to determine the type of content they should be producing. Brands can suffer if their audience feel the relationship is one-sided, or the brand does something that is not consistent with the consumers’ identity (Huang and Mitchell, 2014). Ultimately, marketers must become familiar with the relevant online community before ever

attempting to post content. Reputation is the currency in which social media brands deal with regularly and maintaining a level of authenticity is key; regarding content marketing, authenticity is largely displayed through social capital, which can only be acquired through listening and engaging (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Authenticity is a major discourse within social media, and it serves as an underlying criterion for many when encountering content.

Many marketers create social media content with the intention of achieving the ‘*viral effect*’, which refers to the rapid spread of a specific discussion topic throughout the virtual space (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). While ‘virality’ is a goal that many marketers aim to achieve when utilising social media platforms, the view that networked distribution results in ‘millions and millions of views’, while logical to advertisers, oversimplifies the dynamics of online networks and popular culture (Burgess, 2008). Existing literature suggests that activity on social media must be user-centric rather than message-centric, making it challenging to send messages relating to the brand explicitly (DesAutels, 2011). This increases the need for marketers to understand the network and community and create content that is appealing and relevant to them, so they are more likely to engage with it in self-relevant ways (Schmitt, 2012). What marketers fail to understand is that virality is not about the viral content itself, but is about all the conversations occurring around it that have allowed it to ‘go viral’ (Payne, 2013). Additionally, this may be viewed as opportunistic and exploitative by consumers, impacting the perceived authenticity and genuineness of the brand.

Marketers should aim to embed their brand in their own artefacts, social rituals, and cultural icons, inviting online communities to *their* conversations, in addition to engaging in theirs. Social media outlets simply provide individuals with a new context for identity performances (Merchant *et al.*, 2006). Consumers will feel motivated to share their own opinions with the brand’s content to their audience, furthering conversations that are relevant to their community’s culture (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). Interactions are projections of their identity, and they are shared to online communities to further the conversation and reinforce their shared identity. Belk (2013) takes this further, arguing that identity in the digital world is co-created. Others’ collective input into our online self-presentation help shape self-image in ways that were not previously possible. Cooley (1902) stated that we come to know ourselves through the mirror of other’s reactions to us, further strengthening Jenkins (2014) argument that self-identity and social identity are created parallel to one another, and are embedded in one another. These interactions display a form of discursive elaboration. Discursive elaboration refers to a

process in which material and meaning are socially consumed, where they are described, discussed, debated, and ridiculed amongst a group of people until their meaning can be concretised into what Eco (1979) describes as ‘realised texts’. The process is an exercise of cultural and social capital, as well as lived experiences and experiences gained vicariously. Regardless, negative engagement should not deter the marketer. They should use these opportunities to listen to online communities and respond to them, provoking further conversation (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Ultimately, brands place on social media is dependent on their integration into conversations, which should occur naturally.

The creation of content on social media by users is reflective of prosumption activities that do not directly involve brand interaction. Prosumption activities on social media in particular illuminate creative ideas of consumption and interaction, as well as user experience and content generation via mediatisation and transmediation (Lam, 2019). Users co-create their online and offline experiences by storytelling via content which are then disseminated within the social media ecosystem, creating a sense of belonging among users both online and offline. Here, active cultural citizenship leads to the formation of communities (Kozinets, 2015). The wide variation of content that is possible to produce allows users to employ imagination and creativity to play new cultural roles on social media, ones that demand a rethinking of both aesthetic and cultural representation (Russell, 1999). Individuals have a strong desire to engage in creative acts of self-representation and expression and consume by creating their own aesthetically significant end products that describe their tastes, their interests, and their everyday lives (Campbell, 2005). This allows them a space for cultural production that was formerly controlled exclusively by corporations and studios. As a result, a large percentage of users have a strong anti-corporate culture outlook (Van Dijck, 2009). This is underlined by different logics, primarily that of anti-capitalism and anti-establishment. This potentially makes it difficult for brands to integrate themselves into these spaces.

Ultimately, the core of social media is interaction, and content facilitates this. Peters *et al.* (2013) describe social media as living organisms. Marketers must develop content that inspires users to engage, modify, and share it. Through this, marketers are feeding and nurturing this organism. If the marketer does not create content that feeds and satiates the online community, they will turn elsewhere for “food” [content], or produce it on their own, as discussed earlier. Some research has suggested that marketers will need to act like trusted friends and socialise with the online community and users to unlock the opportunities provided by social media

(Panigyrakis and Zarkada, 2014). However, marketers on social media will be treading a fine line between being intrusive without seeming intrusive (Fournier and Avery, 2011). They must be able to know to what extent they can join in on the conversation, which would differ from community to community. Online communities on social media are self-policing, and members attack other users that are unfriendly, appropriate their community culture, or are invasive (Briggs, 2010). The marketer would also be sacrificing their complete control over the brand identity and the brand messages. Once content is released to online communities, the marketer cannot control the end message; it will continue to transform as it travels through online communities. However, as indicated by Kates (2004), this process of meaning co-creation may be beneficial for the brand, allowing them to cultivate socially relevant and acceptable meanings, gaining resonance within various subcultures. The brand's identity is no longer carefully formulated by marketers, it has instead become constituted by interactions amongst both internal actors and their external target groups through a process of discursive elaboration (Pharr, 2016; Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Brands attempts at connecting with online communities can have disastrous outcomes. Social media platforms were created for linking people with people, *not* for selling branded products. Brands' presence on social media seems out of place, intrusive, and inauthentic (Fournier and Avery, 2011). The power afforded to online communities by social media has strengthened their beliefs that their claims on brands are legitimate and urgent, with consumers expressing they could "make things difficult for the brand if their demands are not met" (Tsai and Pai, 2012, p.114). When attempting to engage with, and establish relationships with communities online, brands risk being mocked by communities, and these movements often gain traction and are noticed by mainstream entities who spread unfavourable narratives about the brand (Pitt *et al.*, 2002). At the heart of social media is the ability to connect, to converse, and to create; for these to occur, users must be able to actively listen to one another, and participate in two-way conversations. It is critical for brands to actively listen to communities, not just when conversation is directed towards them, but listen to all conversations; by doing so, brands can embed themselves naturally into Web 2.0 conversations, integrating brand messages seamlessly into the ebbs and flows of the online conversation (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

## 2.5 Internet Memes

### 2.5.1 *The Concept of 'Memes'*

#### *The Traditional Meme*

The concept of memes has existed for almost 100 years to describe contagious and inheritable units of cultural information. The concept first appeared in the 1920's in biological studies of memory persistence in organisms and appeared in the "diffusions of innovation" theory, before finally appearing in Richard Dawkins' cultural research in 1976 (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Much of the current research on memes stems from Dawkins' (1976) work explaining the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena. Dawkins (1976) conceptualises memes as small units of cultural transformation, that spread from person to person through copying or imitation (Shifman, 2013). Dawkins views memes (which he rhymed with genes) as replicators that undergo variation, competition, selection, and retention (Shifman, 2013). At any given moment, numerous memes are competing for the attention of hosts. Only memes fit to their sociocultural environment spread successfully, whilst others become extinct (Chielens and Heylighen, 2005). Although this concept of memes has only been around for a century, memes themselves have been around as long as humanity has. Memes are ideas that spread on an interpersonal level through acts of socialisation, which is the very basis of how culture is created and passed onto new members. Memes have the power to shape mindsets, behaviour, and actions of social groups (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). When broken down, the entire concept of religion and God are "memeplexes", which are conglomerations of information that successfully replicate themselves from generation to generation, dictating social dynamics, individual behaviour, and commonly held beliefs and values (Watkins, 2002). Popular religions today are successful memes in that they have outlived their predecessors. Memes encompass any cultural unit that spreads from person to person, including melodies, urban legends, dances, and folklore.

Dawkins (1976) describes the following as the key characteristics of a successful meme: *fidelity*, *fecundity*, and *longevity*. Fidelity refers to qualities of the meme that enable it to be passed from person to person relatively intact. The meme does not have to be truthful, useful, or logical in the traditional sense, but simply only have to be memorable (Blackmore, 2000). Fecundity refers to the rate at which an idea is spread. the more quickly the idea spreads, the

more likely it is to resonate with a wider audience (Brodie, 1996). This is enhanced by the meme's relevance to current social events, and interests and values of the people within the cultural space. Finally, longevity refers to the length of time in which a meme survives. Successful memes survive for long periods of time, ensuring ongoing transmission.

### ***Internet Memes***

The current colloquial use of the term 'meme' is different to the original Dawkinian construct. These memes, referred to as *internet memes* hereon, have been defined as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (Shifman, 2013, p. 357). Internet memes have been described as the currency of social media, and therefore are an important aspect of user interaction and community socialisation. Internet memes are fundamentally social and cannot spread without social interaction and knowledge. Therefore, they are an important tool in the dynamic of online communities, and in the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Miltner, 2014). Internet memes have become a fundamental aspect of social media culture due to their ease of transformation and sharing, allowing users to communicate meanings in an easily digestible and often humorous format.

While stemming from Dawkins' work on memes, internet memes differ. Firstly, using the term 'unit' to explain internet memes implies that each internet meme is an isolated concept. In actuality, internet memes are not clearly defined ideas, but instead are amalgamations of a multitude of social media conversations and events. Internet memes are seen as elements of popular culture, and therefore form *popular texts* (Burgess, 2008). These texts have *leaky boundaries* meaning they flow into each other, and everyday life, and are only understood within the context of their creation (Fiske, 1989). Furthermore, internet memes do not have the same level of longevity and long-term cultural influence that memeticists assign to memes. Social media has sped up the rate in which ideas and conversations spread, and consequently, it has also sped up the rate in which these ideas lose relevancy as they become replaced by new ideas. Internet memes are highly topical and experience sudden success mostly by chance, and they may or may not become successful or resonant in the long term (Shifman, 2013). Internet memes are a prevalent form of social media content. As a result of participatory culture on social media, internet memes are less about the content of the meme itself, and more about the practice of 'memeing'.

An interesting thing to note is that the fecundity and overall success of internet memes is directly impacted by the following characteristics: 1) elements of humour, ranging from quirky and offbeat, to potty humour, to parodies and ironic humour, 2) rich intertextuality and cross references to everyday life and popular cultural events or icons, and 3) anomalous juxtapositions, usually of images (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). **All three characteristics are characteristics of postmodernism.** Postmodernism is, as Baines *et al.* (2011) define it, ‘*a rejection of modernist thought and approach, which at its heart contravenes and pokes fun in an irrelevant way at the existing received wisdom as a way to draw attention to itself and challenge the existing order*’. Thus, both postmodernism and Internet memes are reactionary. Postmodernism allowed the individual to break free from constraints of the Church and state, and similar institutions, allowing them to voice their opinions freely, and construct their own meanings and identities. Internet memes, therefore, are represent an important development in the postmodern era, and are an important practice for postmodern consumers.

Internet memes are often created to respond humorously or satirically to social and cultural events, allowing users’ viewpoints and opinions to be mediated through the medium, eventually resulting in change. While playful and humorous in nature, Internet memes sometimes can use creativity to solve, or shed light on much larger problems. The creativity that is required when remixing existing Internet memes strengthens collective identity, which in turn induces play and communion, expands the movement’s tactical repertoire, and increases transformative energy. According to Weijo *et al.* (2018), for an idea to establish itself within a collective, it must entice human actors to mobilise resources to codify it and order practices around it, it must survive contention by affected parties, and lead to new subjections, identity positions, and projects that promote habituation. In consumer research studies, consumer collectives that explore emerging ideas in creative, playful, and iterative ways ultimately led to the emergence of new markets, or in this case, social discourses. This is overarched with a playful tone, one that encourages participation. As George Orwell (1945) once observed, “every joke is a tiny revolution”. Internet memes that contribute to social or political discourse often transcend the online medium and are reported on my traditional media outlets. They are, therefore, a crucial part in the shift in discussion on a mass scale, inspiring complex public conversation (Van Zoonen, 2005). Internet memes can take on a more serious role, becoming a way for people to present new ideas and challenge societal ideologies and structures. Thus, the implication is that it is inherently difficult for marketers to integrate themselves into such

movements, especially since a large percentage of users have a strong anti-corporate culture outlook.

### **2.5.1 Consumer Culture, Identity, and Internet Memes**

The rise of postmodernism has destroyed the idea of imposed identity, and instead, individuals must craft their identities through acts of consumption. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), the consumption of market-made commodities and symbols is central to consumer culture, which they describe as an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use to make collective sense of the environment and orient their members' experiences and lives (Kozinets, 2001). Consumer culture encompasses symbolic and ritual practices, consumer stories mediated through products, and symbolic boundaries that structure personal and communal identities. Individuals and communities on social media choose key signifiers from elements of popular culture and replicate these on a mass scale, with each user reinterpreting the symbolism. Through this act of reinterpretation, users and communities assign and insert meanings that are relevant to themselves to tell stories about their identities and perceptions of their experiences and the world around them (Burgess, 2014).

Burgess (2008) argues that Internet memes are mediators of ideas that are taken up in practice within social networks and are not discrete texts that are produced in one place and then consumed elsewhere by isolated individuals. Ideas within Internet memes are propagated by taken up and being used in new works, in new ways, being transformed through each iteration, they therefore representing a 'copy of the instructions' rather than a 'copy of the product' model of replication and variation. Thus, Internet memes are a practice rather than a product. Internet memes are rich in intertextual links, with each not only cross-referencing a host of popular culture events, but also contain links to individual and community experiences, culture, and identity, increasing the need for cultural and social capital to understand these. This practice involves people deciding how they will choose to read and interpret an internet meme before they 'spin' it and pass it on to others (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). As a result, this practice is highly post-structuralist in nature, with each Internet meme being interpreted a different way by social media users. Internet memes are vehicles for meaning-making, social significance making, and identity-making in one's life worlds. This viewpoint aligns with Arnould and Thompson's (2005) assertion that consumers are *culture producers* rather than *culture bearers*. The content of Internet memes is never free-standing and is instead implicated and generated

out of various discourses and networks of shared experiences, interests, and worldviews that use texts, events, and cultural phenomena in socially idiosyncratic ways (Milner, 2013). Therefore, copies of the Internet meme become much more important than the original, and in most cases, it is almost impossible to trace the origins of a meme trend. Internet memes are not about the meme itself, but the *process* of meaning making how they can be interpreted and adapted from user to user.

Parallels can be drawn between the consumption and reinterpretation of products and advertising symbolism and meanings within culture systems that is central to consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), and the consumption and reinterpretation of Internet memes to build and reinforce individual and group identity. Literature linking internet memes and consumer culture theory is limited. However, Deus *et al.* (2022) have acknowledged that internet memes are new cultural texts that are infused with beliefs, ideologies, and values. The production, consumption, and dissemination of internet memes are social practices that create intertextual links between social ideologies. Internet memes are fundamentally social. They cannot spread without social interaction and knowledge, and as a result, are an important tool in the dynamic of online communities, and in the construction and maintenance of collective identity (Miltner, 2014).

Social media and networked technologies ease the construction of collective creativity by allowing users to find likeminded collaborators. On social media, creativity becomes central for community interaction (Shifman, 2014), and the co-creation of cultural meanings. The formation of collective identity involves a dialectic process that consists of the ongoing production, performance, and validation of values, codes, and norms through discourse (Gray, 2009). Cross-references and in-jokes extend the life of an Internet meme by encouraging other users to input their own engaging cross-references for those in the know, adding new layers of meaning and facilitating interaction within the group. Internet memes are performative acts applied both for persuasive purposes, and for the construction of individual and collective identity. On a social level, the creation and sharing of internet memes enables the mapping of discursive norms, the erection of discursive boundaries, and the legitimisation of narratives, conventions, and behaviours that underpin community identity (Miltner, 2014). On an individual level, a users' reworking of an internet meme allows them to unveil their disposition and interpretation of texts. Therefore, self-identity is co-constructed through group interaction via digital media (Belk, 2013). This contributes to the belief that Internet memes are an

important part of the culture industry, and shape mindsets, behaviour, and identities. Creating, disseminating, or simply consulting Internet memes transmits the individuals' sense of self into these cultural products (Gehl, 2016), thus encapsulating an aspect of their identity and experiences within the Internet meme.

### ***2.5.2 Internet Meme Usage by Brands on Social Media***

It is now apparent that online communities are not only vectors of cultural transmission, but actors behind the process. The online community are an operant resource in the creation and diffusion of culture, as apparent through various internet memes practices. According to Fournier and Avery (2011), brands have begun to 'play the community's game', aiming to seek cultural resonance by being where the action is on social media, and attempting to fit in seamlessly with what is happening there. This requires the mastery of nuanced principles, styles, and mechanisms that dictate the new cultural environment that exists on social media. Due to their prevalence, influence, and importance to the online community, marketers have begun to adopt internet memes in their social media posts (Benaim, 2018; Teng *et al.*, 2021, Kurochen and Bokhan, 2020). However, the adoption of internet memes by brands is not a new phenomenon. Some brands began by adopting internet memes through traditional avenues of marketing communications. For example, in 2011, the 'Success Kid' meme was used by Virgin Media on their billboards, capitalising on the popularity and positive meanings associated with the meme, which was compatible with their brand and campaign. The campaign utilised the 'Success Kid' meme to humorously emphasise various small wins that consumers can experience by switching to Virgin's services (England, 2012). Brands later adopted internet meme formats as part of their traditional campaigns. For example, Snickers created a meme generator as part of their 'You're Not You When You're Hungry' campaign, offering templates for users to post their own versions to social media, offering a prize for the best entry (Hall, 2015). More recently, the marketing campaign for the 2023 Barbie movie included a cast reveal using character posters. The campaign was accompanied by an official selfie generator that allowed users to create their own humorous, and more important, community-specific renditions. Internet memes now feature regularly on many brands' social media pages.

Earlier research linking memes and marketing aligned with the Dawkinian (1976) concept of memes. Here, researchers explored how memetic processes – the propagation of information from one person to another – could be applied to advertising (Williams, 2000). However, the

concept of internet memes began to emerge in marketing literature around 2015, with interest focusing on the use of internet memes as a communication tool. Researchers then began to understand the concept of internet memes and marketing through understanding their significance to internet culture. Current literature on internet memes and marketing explores the effectiveness of internet memes in generating brand engagement, as well as the factors that lead to viral marketing memes. Research on the usage of social media for consumer reach and engagement continues to grow (Malodia *et al.*, 2022; Teng *et al.*, 2021; Vasile *et al.*, 2021), with internet memes becoming an attractive tool for the generation of ongoing engagement and maintaining contact with consumers (Teng *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, there has been a shift from utilising social media for big campaigns, to focusing on small acts of engagement as these have been found to be more effective for accomplishing marketing goals (Coon, 2010).

Recent literature has confirmed that the usage of internet memes by brands in social media marketing strategies can generate engagement and establish a common form of expression between brands and the audience (Lubis *et al.*, 2021; Kurochkin and Bokhan, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2021). Teng *et al.* (2021) assert that internet memes, when are used effectively by brands, can enhance brand image. However, this can only occur if the internet meme is ‘highly spreadable’, humorous, and interactive, prompting users to remix and share the internet meme. Similarly, Malodia *et al.* (2022) note that the use of internet memes by brands can drive brand engagement on social media. They identify similar dimensions that determine the success of internet meme usage by brands, which are humour, relevance, iconicity, and possess spreadability. Studies on internet meme usage by brands are highly focused on the aspect of *virality* (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Malodia *et al.*, 2022). This links to the traditional concept of a meme, as defined by Dawkins (1976), which is rooted in its ability to spread.

Burgess (2008) has remarked that the concept of virality oversimplifies the dynamics of online communities. While internet memes posted by brands may be highly spreadable and have a high level of positive emotional intensity, the consumer may not necessarily associate the symbolic values contained within the meme with the brand (Teng *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, Internet memes pass through users at such a rate that authorship is difficult to trace, and the message is changed so drastically through remixing that occurs from user to user that it becomes divorced from its original context or is metamorphosed to carry unfavourable meanings. Howell (2019) argues that users do not have a predetermined audience when creating an Internet meme. Instead, an audience is created through social media’s operations,

which include sharing, liking, and commenting. The creator never truly knows who their audience may be. This goes against the very principles of marketing, which includes meticulous planning and identifying of audiences, who are then carefully targeted (Anderson, 1982). One could argue, as previous literature mentioned points to, that marketing requires a fundamental paradigm shift. Marketers must be flexible and opportunistic enough to go with the ebbs and flows of social media (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Additionally, Sharma (2018) conducted a study on the role of internet memes in marketing communications. The research paper interestingly explores the phenomenon of utilising internet memes in marketing from the perspective of both *marketers* and *consumers*. For marketing managers, internet memes are a powerful new way to build brand affinity and get brands noticed. Marketing managers have also established that the brand's identity determines the appropriateness of their usage of internet memes, citing fashion and youth brands as the most likely to be playful and 'young'. Marketers also acknowledge that they must partake in internet meme practices such as remixing to embed themselves in social conversations, aligning with the arguments presented by Fournier and Avery (2011). Sharma's (2018) netnographic analysis of consumers' perspectives towards brands' usage of internet memes presented four types of consumers based on their mode of engagement with internet memes posted by brands: the casual commenter, who simply tags their friends on brands' posts; the opportunist, who uses the post to seek additional benefits (financial or otherwise) from the brand; the whistleblower, who are consumers that express dislike for the brand and have the potential to make the internet meme backfire; and the smart consumer, who are consumers that reject internet memes and view them as marketing ploys. While this provides insight into individual consumers' behaviour towards brands, it does not consider the complex, organism-like (Peters *et al.*, 2013) structure of online communities. This view does not consider the networked nature of social media and internet meme propagation, as well as the implications of online communities' culture and system of beliefs within this.

Internet meme propagation through social media represents something larger than the Internet meme itself, and instead is a part of a larger pattern of being in the world. Internet meme consumption and creation requires a new literacy that enables the proper creation and consumption of Internet memes. An Internet meme is born from a contextual system of conversation that is collaborative and cumulative (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). By understanding the larger conversations and interactions they derive from, brands can better

understand online communities and their beliefs, values, and views, thus allowing them to cater towards them in an effective manner. can determine the suitability of adopting these. For example, Coca Cola may appear in Internet memes and seem like they are a part of a positive, humorous conversation. However, Coca Cola would need to understand that their product and brand are perceived as a euphemism for capitalism, which is inherently exploitative and inauthentic, and thus their adoption of Internet memes would backfire (Kucuk, 2010).

## ***2.6 Concluding Comments***

This literature review has borrowed from philosophy, linguistic, culture, media, communications, branding, and marketing to attempt to produce a coherent narrative of all the factors that have created internet memes and made them an important subject and object of marketing practice and discourse. More importantly, it has enabled an understanding of how and why internet memes are significant to online communities, social media culture, and the postmodern consumer. The literature review has attempted to weave all these elements together, firstly by setting the scene of the sociological climate we exist in, and the reasons for its existence. It has then explored how this influences identity and has empowered not only consumers, but communities too. It has explained how social media marketing fits in with all these factors, and has finally introduced Internet memes. Internet memes are an outcome of postmodernism. They aim to draw attention to themselves and challenge the existing order, are essentially reactionary, and are created and consumed by individuals and communities to not only express identity, but also negotiate and create this identity through various discourses. They are inherently poststructuralist as they do not have a universal meaning but are instead interpreted in various ways depending on the decoder, who creates a rich level of intertextuality when reinterpreting it and feeding it back to social media networks. Internet memes have become an important element of social media, as individuals and communities use them to mediate their personal beliefs and life narratives under a veil of humour, which then have the power to influence whoever encounters them.

The shift to postmodernism has given consumers power. Social media has amplified their voice. Consumers and online communities demand to be at the very centre of the marketing process, and are now able to input their thoughts and opinions into decision making and brand building. They have become *operant resources*. Social media has allowed online communities to be able to create, consume, and disseminate content on their own terms. This is particularly evident through the practice of internet memes. This medium allows communities to transform,

mediate, and negotiate cultural meanings, while also acting as a tool for socialisation and bonding. Internet memes are prevalent on social media and are important for online communities. As such, they have been considered to be the currency of social media. Online communities are the dominant entity on social media, and if brands wish to interact with them, they must play their game. It is no surprise that the incorporation of social media content in marketing strategies has been an area of interest for researchers. In particular, they have explored the positive effects of using internet memes on the facilitation of brand engagement.

While the positives of internet meme usage by brands have been explored by some researchers (Teng *et al.*, 2021; Benaim, 2018; Sharma, 2018; Malodia *et al.*, 2022), we do not yet understand how brands use internet memes in a way that is accepted by online communities. Marketing scholars appear to focus on utilising internet memes to drive engagement (Teng *et al.*, 2021), or how marketers may achieve virality through using internet memes (Maloda *et al.*, 2022). However, this ignores the fundamental purpose of internet memes, which is to create a shared cultural experience amongst users. As highlighted in the literature, social media is a place for connecting *people with people* (Fournier and Avery, 2011), and as such, brands are often pushed out of online spaces, and their attempts at connecting with consumers mocked and ridiculed. It has been established that there are issues with brands' authenticity, as well as feelings of intrusion. However, these are general to brand presence on social media, rather than concerned with brands' usage of internet memes as a form of content. The phenomenon of internet memes, as well as the practices associated with them, are complex, community-specific, and culturally significant (Shifman, 2013, 2014; Milner, 2013; Miltner, 2014; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). As more of consumers' lives and socialisation practices move online, it becomes increasingly important to understand how brands may integrate themselves into the social media landscape, engage with consumers, and initiate relationships with members of communities. This research aims to build on this and provide the next piece of the puzzle, which will be beneficial for brands who wish to establish a social media presence, as internet memes are unavoidable in the digital realm.

The distribution of power amongst marketers and the online community in the context of social media is an area that continues to evolve. Initial literature on service-dominant logic and co-creation asserts that consumers wish to partake in the marketing process (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2006; Constantin and Lusch, 1996; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). However, this research took place at a time when social media was in its infancy. It is necessary to revisit

ideas relating to co-creation, and place these within the current social media context, where the online community's voice outweighs that of brands. While researchers have begun to explore issues of power, social media, and co-creation (Rashid *et al.*, 2018), no research has been conducted to explore how this power dynamic impacts on the brands' adoption of internet memes. This is particularly important in the context of co-creation as internet memes are an important intangible resource for online communities. Internet memes are important for constructing, maintaining, and communicating both individual and community identities. They are also a tool for social commentary and social change. Therefore, they are powerful and influential, and must be understood by scholars and marketing managers. This research hopes to address the gaps identified in the literature. These are namely the issue of power on social media and its implications for brands' adoption of internet memes; the issue of authenticity, and how brands' may establish an authentic presence; and finally, the issue of co-creation, and the ways in which brands may establish relationships with communities and generate value through internet memes as an intangible resource.

## Chapter 3 | Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss aspects relating to methodology. It will first explain and justify the philosophical and research approach adopted for the study. It will then lay out the methodology strategy, and the analysis method employed. The research design will then be discussed in depth. Finally, research limitations and research ethics will be considered.

### 3.2 Philosophical and Research Approach

The approach chosen by the researcher shapes the research methodology and the way the world is viewed, thus affecting the way data is interpreted and analysed (Bryman, 2016). This section will lay out and justify the philosophical and research approach adopted. Firstly, this research is interpretivist in nature, rather than positivist. Positivism is a philosophical standpoint that assumes that society shapes the individual and their behaviour. ‘Social facts’, which are phenomenon that exist independently of individuals, shape individuals’ actions. These include values, cultural norms, social structures, laws, and so on. Therefore, positivist believe that the same methods used to study the natural world can be applied to study the social world, opting to quantify behaviour with the aim of measuring social trends, and identifying relationships and correlations between various variables (Bryman, 2016).

Interpretivism believes that the social realm cannot be studied through scientific methods in the same way the natural world is, and instead calls for a distinct epistemological standpoint (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). It views individuals as meaning creators and aims to explore the circumstances of the creation of these meanings and their many interpretations, within their relative context (Lin, 1998). A fundamental belief of interpretivism is that language shapes researcher’s and subject’s perceptions of the social world, and that perception is reality. Habermas (2015) argues that positivism as a unified science that assimilates all sciences to a natural-scientific model fails in social settings. This is because intimate relationships exist between the social sciences and history, which are based upon situation-specific understanding of meaning that can only be examined hermeneutically. Access to a symbolically prestructured reality cannot be gained through observation alone (O’Regan and O’Donnell, 2000).

The research tapped into the consumers' socially constructed world, with the aim of understanding the way in which brands and their co-option of community content are constructed. Interpretivism's underlying belief is that subjects behave in the way they do due to beliefs or understandings they hold (Hay, 2011). In order to understand behaviour, the researcher must first seek to establish the beliefs that motivate said behaviour. Research such as that of Fournier and Avery (2011), Shifman (2014), and Benaim (2018) notes that users display unfavourable attitudes towards brands usage of internet memes. This, as Fournier and Avery (2011) frame it, is due to consumers' view that social media is a space *for* them. This research builds upon this using an interpretive approach to focus on meanings that shape these views and actions, in order to understand and explain these actions by establishing the beliefs and meanings that enable them. Interpretation is a critical aspect of the interpretivist approach. This required the researcher to actively interpret the data, treating the individual as intricate and complex beings that have varying experiences, and therefore understand the same 'objective reality' in different ways (MacDonald, 2012). For interpretivist research, the key to explanation is understanding. the world must be seen through the eyes of the actors doing the acting (Tracy, 2010), rather than placing a focus on external forces that have no meaning for those involved in a specific social action.

In line with this, the research is also constructivist in nature. Constructivism assumes that the social world is created and understood through social structures. Thus, reality is socially constructed. In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explored the process of constructing both objective and subjective reality, which they argued occurs through socialisation. Reality, as they described, is a phenomenon we recognise as existing independently of our own volition. The concepts of race, class, law, nationality are viewed as part of an objective reality, and are 'real'. Objective reality is a structure that is built over time. Social concepts emerge as ideas and are concretised through a process of socialisation leading to them becoming institutionalised and acknowledged as social facts. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social facts are created through a process of externalisation, objectification, and then internalisation. Externalisation involves creating the social world by making sense of experiences and ordering knowledge to create a meaningful whole. Consequently, meanings in the social world are entirely a human product. Socially constructed systems such as laws and regulations would not exist if it was not for individuals actively sustaining these by being

observing and abiding by them.

The second step of the process, objectification, describes the way in externalisations eventually become acknowledged as social facts and as an objective reality through language and discourse (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Products of human activity become external to it; humans forget the social world was created by them. Phenomenon become objectified through the processes of institutionalisation, and legitimisation. Institutionalisation occurs when actions and beliefs are repeated and passed through generations, thus becoming typical and seen as objective. Legitimation, on the other hand, is concerned with the knowledge and norms that are used to explain and justify institutions; these include scientific knowledge, philosophy, or mythology (Flecha *et al.*, 2001; Eberle, 1992). The final step, internalisation, occurs when the objective world acts back on human consciousness through socialisation. Here, man becomes a product of the social world. When a sufficient level of internalisation occurs for individuals to be considered as members of any given society, the term socialisation is used. By implication, we are limited by whatever options are available in a society at any one time. Social concepts that we have collectively created and maintained are viewed as objective.

Constructivism is an appropriate approach for the research at hand as memes are entirely socially constructed. As discussed in the literature review, Dawkins' (1999) conceptualisation of a 'meme' described it as an element of culture that is passed on from one individual to another by imitation or replication. By definition, Dawkins' conceptualisation of a meme aligns with the epistemological stance of constructivism, and by implication, also aligns with the nature of internet memes. In many instances, to 'become', internet memes undergo a process of social construction. Meanings are placed (and contested) within internet memes as they are used and shared, until a meaning is agreed and thus objectified (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2013). As this process is entirely constructivist in nature, it is appropriate to apply a constructivist perspective.

Furthermore, this research is inductive, rather than deductive. Deduction and induction are approaches that are fundamentally concerned with epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge, primarily its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion (Steup and Neta, 2005). Saunders *et al.* (2012, p. 125) define deductive research as "the process of reasoning from one or more statements to reach a logically certain conclusion". Deductive research involves the development of a theory,

or hypotheses, based on existing theory. The researcher then devises a research strategy to test the hypothesis (Bell *et al.*, 2013). Data collection is driven by theory and the hypotheses generated. After hypotheses are rejected or accepted, theory is revised.

Inductive research differs from deductive research as it does not begin with a theory, but instead builds up an understanding of a phenomena throughout the research process (Bryman and Bell, 2013). Inductive research is defined by Rainbold and Dwyer (2014, p57) as “a method of reasoning in which the premises are viewed as supplying some evidence for the truth of the conclusion”. The inductive researcher begins by making detailed observations of the world, which then can be applied to develop theory and generalisations (Bell *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, the process of inductive research begins with observations and tests, then leads to analysis and identification of patterns in the data which is then used to create theory. The researcher may go back and forth between observation and pattern identification until new ideas cease to emerge. This ensures the researcher reaches data saturation and thus data can be generalised (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The distinctive difference between deductive and inductive research is that deductive research *begins* with theory, which leads observation and findings. Inductive research begins with observation and findings, which ultimately creates or expands upon theory.

This research follows an inductive approach, as it does not begin with generation of theory. It, instead, is entirely exploratory and began with observation, exploring the socially constructed world of the consumer then using these observations to construct and expand on existing theory. The primary reason for opting for an inductive approach is that the pool of theory in the research field is limited. While there is a deeper level of research on internet memes and their use within communities, knowledge on attitudes of consumers and communities towards brands usage of internet memes is deficient. As inductive research begins broadly and becomes narrower as data is collected, the direction of the research unfolded as the research takes place. The research generated meanings from the data collected to identify patterns and relationships between ideas to build upon theory.

In order to answer the research questions, this research employed qualitative research methods, rather than quantitative. Quantitative research deals with numbers. According to Given (2008) quantitative research is the systemic, empirical investigation of observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical, or computation techniques. Therefore, it typically collects data

through the use of surveys and questionnaires. Data extracted from surveys is then analysed to establish a cause-effect relationship amongst the variables proposed in the hypotheses (Bell *et al.*, 2013). A quantitative approach is best suited to positivist, deductive research. As previously identified, this research is interpretivist, constructivist, and inductive in nature. Therefore, qualitative research methods were used as they are a natural fit with the approaches specified. Qualitative research is best suited for the social sciences, gathering non-numerical data through observation and interaction (Creswell, 2002). The data gathered from qualitative approaches focus on describing and explaining a phenomenon in a deeper, and more comprehensive manner, which allows for the identification of new phenomenon (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). While conclusions drawn from qualitative methods may be viewed as anecdotal, themes identified across a pool of participants provide a conceptual understanding of the topic at hand. Furthermore, researchers often continue collecting data until data saturation is achieved, meaning no new themes or ideas are emerging from the data. This increases the validity of qualitative research, making generalisations based on data findings plausible.

### 3.3 Methodology Strategy

As established, this research is interpretivist, constructivist, inductive, and qualitative in nature. According to Flick (2008), research taking this theoretical position ideally collect their data through focus groups, ethnography, participant observation, recording interactions, and/or collecting documents. For this research, the method of data collection is through *netnography*.

	<b>Approaches to subjective viewpoints</b>	<b>Description of the making of social situations</b>	<b>Hermeneutic analysis of the underlying structures</b>
<b>Theoretical positions</b>	Symbolic interactionism Phenomenology	Ethnomethodology <b>Constructionism</b>	Psychoanalysis Genetic structuralism
<b>Methods of data collection</b>	Semi-structured interviews Narrative interviews	Focus groups <b>Ethnography</b> Participant observations Recording interactions Collecting documents	Recording interactions Photography Film
<b>Methods of interpretation</b>	Theoretical coding Content analysis Narrative analysis Hermeneutic methods	Conversation analysis <b>Discourse analysis</b> Analysis of documents	Objective hermeneutics Deep hermeneutics

**Table 3.** *Interpretive Research Approaches (Flick, 2008, p.11).*

As the research is focused on social media, it observed online interactions first-hand, justifying the use of netnography. Netnography is an ethnographic research approach that takes place over the internet. Atkinson and Hammersley (1998) regard ethnography as the most basic form of social research, as it bears a close resemblance to the routine way in which people make sense of the world in their everyday life. Ethnography can be used to describe to all forms of social research that involve researcher immersion and observation of groups (Bell *et al.*, 2013). The researcher takes on the role of both a participant and observer, but the extent of participation varies from research to research. Ethnography encompasses a wide range of activities, but ultimately aims to produce a description of a group's culture, habits, and mutual differences. Geertz's (1973) writings on the interpretation of culture signify the importance of ethnography in the understanding of social behaviour and symbolism. In his essay titled 'The Interpretation of Cultures', Geertz (1973) defines culture as inherited systems of conceptions that are expressed symbolically in the ways we communicate, perpetuate, and develop our knowledge and attitudes towards life. Geertz argues that it is not the informants, the mapping fields, the fieldnotes, or transcribing of texts that distinguishes ethnography from other approaches. Rather, he argues that *thick descriptions* are defining feature of the approach.

Thick descriptions refer to describing phenomenon in as much detail as possible and are mostly used in the fields of interpretive social sciences (Ponterotto, 2006). This takes place in the form of fieldnotes. These are essentially qualitative notes which are recorded by researchers during or after their observation of a specific phenomenon (Canfield, 2011). They are intended to be read and used as evidence to give meaning to the phenomenon, as well as aid in its understanding. The researcher provides a construction of the subjects' construction of their social world; it is an interpretation of their interpretation. Thick descriptions aim to describe behaviour in the context in which they occur, as interpreted by the actors themselves. It describes behaviour in the context in which it is situated and draws upon cultural inferences to draw implications (Geertz, 1973). Context, in the form of culture, provides background information that needs to be understood in order to understand the actual event. Understanding the context in which behaviour exists allows the researcher to uncover and analyse social discourses that enable them. Fieldnotes will be used during the analysis phase to explain the findings of the research.

Netnography is fundamentally ethnographic in nature. According to Kozinets (2015), netnography is the name given to a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical, and representational research practices, where a significant amount of data collected occurs using freely shared internet content. The development of netnography arose as a response to advancements in information technology, particularly the growth of the internet and the growing use of the internet by the ordinary person (Wang, 2020). People are increasingly active online (Kemp, 2020), creating a large pool of information about their activities and experiences, all of which offer rich insights for researchers (Rust and Huang, 2014). Much like ethnography, which is used to gain a deep understanding of marketplace cultures and actors, netnography aims to study and understand consumption-related aspects of consumers' lives online (Kozinets, 2006). However, netnography is different to digital ethnography in that it collects significant amounts of internet data, while digital ethnography mainly refers to traditional ethnography whose data gathering methods are merely mediated by digital technologies (Kozinets, 2015). As a result, netnography as a method is extremely flexible and versatile, as researchers are able to adapt to their own research needs.

While netnographic research allows the researcher to take an overt or covert role, either through passively lurking forums quietly, or by actively participating in the online community, they must aim to move "from the outside in" (Kozinets, 2015). The researcher begins socially outside the group, then moves increasingly inside of it to return out again and explain what is happening on the inside. Fieldnotes, therefore, are a central element of netnographic research, enabling the researcher to synthesise the stories and interactions of others through their viewpoint (Hoey, 2014; Kozinets, 2015). Due to this ongoing active interaction and interpretation by the researcher, netnography can be viewed as a blend of ethnography, content analysis, and discourse analysis (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2013), making it an ideal approach for an exploratory, constructivist, and interpretivist research. The researcher will immerse themselves into the field through participant observation and participation. The role of the researcher is essentially to observe, follow and participate (Kozinets, 2015). Netnographic research allows the researcher to take an overt or covert role, either through passively lurking forums quietly, or by actively participating in the online community. However, the ultimate aim is to move "from the outside in".

There are five steps to the netnographic approach as developed by Kozinets (2012). The design of this research has been based around these five steps. The research field was defined, which

prompted reading of the literature in the relevant field. Once the literature review had been compiled, I was able to select online communities to observe and justify this choice based on theoretical findings based in previous literature. Data was then collected and analysed and subsequently presented to answer the research questions. The five steps are listed and explained below. They are then discussed in relation to the research in *section 3.6*.

- a) ***Definition of the Research Field:*** defining the research field allows the researcher to have a focus for the research, increasing the overall quality of the research. This step involves formulating research questions and determining what the researcher is looking for in the online forum. The research usually begins with broad open-ended questions which are refined as the research continues.
- b) ***Identification and Selection of Online Communities:*** this step refers to choosing the online communities to observe. The researcher must be able to clearly define the characteristics of the community, and then identify Internet sources and platforms where members exchange information on the defined research area.
- c) ***Community Observation and Data Collection:*** during this stage of the netnography approach, the selected community, or communities, are observed by the researcher. The researcher fully immerses themselves into the community and its social context. Data is collected manually by the researcher. This increases the importance of full immersion into the community, as it allows the researcher to understand conversation, and thereby identify valuable and relevant posts within the context of any conversation. The researcher becomes a crucial instrument in the data collection and analysis.
- d) ***Data Analysis and Aggregation of Consumer Insights:*** here, the researcher aims to visit, and revisit the data to identify any patterns and relationships across the raw data to make discoveries about the subject matter of the research.
- e) ***Presentation of Data:*** data is presented and discussed in the context of the research field. The data is discussed and linked to existing literature, and conclusions are drawn to answer the research questions.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

#### 3.4.1 *Discourse Analysis*

Discourse analysis is an approach to analyse written, vocal, sign language use, or any significant semiotic event (Van Dijk, 1997; Hoque *et al.*, 2017). It is a study of the way language is used between individuals in both written and spoken contexts and how this relates to its social context. Discourse analysis considers the world, and our place in it as actors, as socially constructed through language, thus aligning with the epistemological viewpoint of constructionism (Gergen, 1999). It views the intentional usage of language by people as a way to construct their own accounts and versions of the social world, and this active process of construction is displayed and demonstrated through language variation. Unlike other forms of linguistic analysis, discourse analysis is not only focused on the linguistic level of language but places a heavy emphasis on the contextual meaning of this language, and therefore examines the social context alongside any spoken texts (Tannen, 2012). Discourse analysis looks beyond language at face value, and is concerned with the social aspects of communication. In particular, it explores the ways language is used to achieve specific social goals, whether this is to build trust, create doubt, evoke emotions, or to manage conflict. Discourse analysis is a common form of qualitative analysis in the fields of linguistics, social sciences, humanities, psychology, and culture studies.

Foucault (1971) is one of the most prolific researchers in the area of discourse studies, most notably employing genealogical techniques to trace the history of particular discourses. Foucault views discourse as not referring only to formal linguistic aspects, but also to institutionalised patterns of knowledge that manifest in disciplinary structures which operate through the connect of knowledge and power. Foucault asserts that knowledge and power always exist together. Where knowledge is found so is power, and vice versa. These power relationships are expressed through language and practices, which ultimately form social structures and reality. Discourse and language play an important role in the construction of reality. This ultimately has an effect on identity, roles, practices, objects, and meanings. As discussed in *section 3.2*, language is an important tool in the construction and maintenance of a common reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

The main theoretical contribution of Foucault's work is the idea that an understanding of discourse should be obtained in order to understand social phenomenon (Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, Foucault emphasised the role of institutions, such as hospitals, schools, and prisons, in maintaining power and in creating discourse. Institutions, in simple terms, are conventions that are self-policing (Hodgson, 2006). More specifically, they represent an accumulation of historical practices and understandings that govern and guide behaviour (Friel, 2017). They gradually accumulate credibility and become legitimate, thus allowing them to be acknowledged as social facts (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Consequently, they influence and shape thought and interactions. The more institutionalised a pattern of behaviour is, the more difficult it is to deviate from. More established areas and fields display a higher degree of institutionalisation, resulting in a greater push towards homogenisation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutionalisation occurs for the following reasons: once a field is created, those who are the first to occupy the space lay its foundations in terms of norms, operations, expectations, and myths. These subsequently serve to govern and guide behaviour within the space. A threshold is reached wherein new entrants forego innovation and efficiency, and instead absorb the norms and expectations of the environment in order to gain a degree of legitimacy in the field. This is a process called *institutional isomorphism*.

This is relevant to the research at hand because social media can be considered an institution. Media and marketing have long been acknowledged as social institutions (Silverblatt, 2004; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Alvesson, 1994), and social media falls within this. As an institution, social media will have unwritten rules that will dictate the way in which users behave. As Fournier and Avery (2011) noted in their article 'The Uninvited Brand', communities within digital spaces are self-policing and enforce their own rules. This can also be observed in regard to internet meme usage. Individuals and communities can be considered through institutionalisation theory as collectives who establish the foundations of discourse and practice in digital spaces. The collective is so large that it dominates its environment rather than adjusts to it. Brands adopting and absorbing community lexicon and humour in the form of internet memes can be viewed as an attempt to gain legitimacy amongst the community. This is a form of institutional isomorphism.

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organisations resemble the entity in which it depends on for resources. The primary resource in social media, as established in the literature review, is *content*. The higher degree of interaction will result in a greater degree of

isomorphism and homogeneity. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) regard socialisation as an isomorphic force. Social media is dependent on socialisation, and consequently this explains why brands adopt internet memes. Organisations must adopt this to avoid illegitimacy. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that as institutional rules, absorbed from society, arise in a field, formal organisations develop and expand by incorporating these rules as structural elements. As the rationalisation of institutionalised myths arises in existing fields, new entrants expand their formal structure to become isomorphic with these new myths and thus with society. Myths present organisations with great opportunities for expansion and affixing the right label to activities can transform them into worthwhile services. For example, this process has led to the rise of social media and the prosumer led marketing organisations to create departments that focus on co-creation. Institutionalisation theory can be applied in conjunction with Fournier and Avery's (2011) work to explain why brands rush to adopt internet and community humour. Successful brands are those that embed themselves within their social and cultural landscapes (Heller, 2016a).

Discourses make available to people certain ways of seeing and being in the world. The subject positions created through discourse have implications on subjectivity and experience, and these are largely constructed through language (Lyotard, 1984). Discourse is a culturally constructed representation of reality. It constructs and organises knowledge through the production of categories of knowledge and assemblages of texts, which ultimately serve to govern what is and is not possible in society. It produces and reproduces both power and knowledge simultaneously. Through examining discourse, it is possible to then understand why some categories of thinking and some behaviours are accepted, while others are marginalised. This makes discourse analysis a very powerful and important form of analysis in the social sciences and is a crucial element to analyse and effectively answer the research questions.

### **3.4.2 *Discourse Analysis in Marketing***

In the postmodern age, marketing institutions plays a large role in the construction of identities. They embed rich symbolism and stories within their products, which are consumed by individuals to construct their identities (Van Raaji, 1993; Featherstone 1990; Arnould and Thompson; 2005; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Marketing, therefore, is a key contributor to the ocean of consumer culture that exists today - it is a cultural institute. While marketing creates culture and meaning, it is also influenced by it. Marketing adopts existing cultural

meanings, but through doing so reinterprets and diffuses new cultural meanings. This is also true for the consumer. In consumer culture research conducted by Arnould and Thompson (2005), the authors declare consumers to be both bearers and creators of culture. Consumers adopt cultural meanings from the market to build their identity, but also, meaning is created by the consumer through the act of consumption. Both marketing institutions and consumers borrow and reinterpret symbols and meanings from one another in a cycle of cultural consumption and creation.

In terms of discursive dynamics, culture presents its own discourse which is historically transmitted as an expressive system of communicative practices, acts, events, and styles, that are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and meanings (Carbaugh *et al.*, 1997). Breaking this down using the explanation of discourse analysis offered in section 3.1, culture can be seen as a social structure that is upheld through language and behaviour. But more importantly, through the constant interpretation and reinterpretation of cultural meanings through both marketing institutions and the consumer, intertextual links and meanings are constantly being generated, presenting us with various cultural discourses and practices which dictate the ways in which we consume (Derrida, 1993; Baudrillard, 2018). This cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation means cultural discourses are constantly being constructed and reconstructed as we consume and generate new meanings. In essence, structures of marketing and consumption, and the culture that both influences and emerges from them, are socially constructed through discourse (Bjerrisgaard, and Kjeldgaard 2013).

The concept of discourse thus presents several crucial implications for an analysis of marketing. For one, marketing and consumption largely depend on discourse derived from social contexts for the creation, ordering, dissemination, and reinforcement of product knowledge (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015). The market's ability to infuse products with cultural meanings comes from the shared discourse that both the marketer and consumer occupy (Thompson, 2004). While many consumer experiences are individual, such as identity and the self, they are constructed and reconstructed through discourse (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Similarly, while consumption choices may be viewed as individual, the ability of the consumer to interpret product meanings, and integrate them in their brand experiences, as well as articulating the meaning to others is largely grounded in and facilitated by discourse (Bjerrisgaard and Kjeldgaard, 2013). Therefore, the argument for the use of discourse analysis in the study of marketing and consumption phenomenon becomes ever more significant.

Discourse analysis presents a suitable lens for the development of marketing and consumer research due to the assertion that it, in itself, as well as the relationship between markets, consumers, and products, are discursively ordered.

### **3.4.3 *Appropriateness of Discourse Analysis for this Research***

As this focuses on the consumers' beliefs, and their construction and understanding of the social world, discourse analysis was the methodology used. Events constructed in the social world are a result of culture and are therefore wholly enmeshed in the complexities of language. Social behaviour, consequently, cannot be explained in terms of natural causes as related to the realm of natural sciences, but instead are studied in terms of the ways they are produced and accepted as intelligible and sensible (Pomerantz and Fehr, 1997). As established in the literature review, internet memes play a large role in social media discourse (Milner, 2013; Ross and Rivers, 2017). They are largely born through discourse, and they test and change discourse as they are used. They are entirely a social matter, and consequently, purely a matter of discourse (Wood and Kroger, 2000). According to Halliday and Catulli (2013), interactions between a consumer and a brand are 'narrative events', meaning they are discursive forms of 'meaning making'. They regard social life as a narrative, and therefore acknowledge marketing processes as a part of the narrative that constructs our social lives. As a result, much can be understood about these interactions through discourse analysis. Through examining discourse, it is possible to then understand why some categories of thinking and some behaviours are accepted, while others are looked down upon.

The authorship of internet memes is difficult to pinpoint (Shifman, 2013; Lantagne, 2017; Cotter, 2005; Burgess, 2008). It is also not central to internet meme culture. Instead, the focus of users is how they can manipulate internet memes (through the process of remixing) to create new meanings that are relevant to them and their communities. Through remixing, encoding and decoding, the internet meme gains new meanings and audiences. According to Nowak (2016), internet memes have become a significant modality of online discourse, used as a major discursive tool for social, cultural, political, and consumer commentary (Milner, 2013). In the field of culture studies, sharing and creating internet memes is a significant social practice that results in reproducing or questioning ideologies (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019; Milner 2013). Internet memes are an important aspect of social media discourse as through these, opinions

and thoughts are expressed, which have the power to reveal, influence, or challenge discourse. This makes discourse analysis a suitable approach for analysing the use of these.

Additionally, discourse analysis views language as a social practice and that seeks to identify the reproduction of power relations and ideological processes in discourse (Fairclough, 1992). When referring back to the research gaps, the research questions (TQ2 and TQ3) formulated as a result, it is clear that a large focus of this study is uncovering the relationship dynamics between communities and brands within the context of social media. The social media landscape is everchanging – Peters et al. (2013) referred to online communities' networks that change their size, composition, and structure like a living organism as they evolve. The social status of actors within these networks are never fixed, but undergo constant negotiation through language and practices generated via the stream of interaction amongst users. In navigating this environment, it is important to examine the ways in which language and community's shared systems of meaning inform their disposition towards brands, as well as the overall power dynamics. Discourse is not just a tool for conveying meaning - it also plays a central role in constructing and maintaining power structures. It explores how language choices, framing, and narratives are used to legitimize or challenge power relations. Discourse analysis helps dissect the role of language and visuals in enabling or challenging power dynamics within online communities.

#### **3.4.4 *How Will this Research Adopt Discourse Analysis?***

Discourse analysis is not simply a way to collect and analyse data but is a viewpoint that considers the way in which language constitutes reality. Discourse analysis views language as a medium for interaction, rather than a descriptive tool. Therefore, the aim of analysis transcends content, with the interest in how language is used flexibly to construct and communicate meaning. The first step of discourse analysis is to establish context (Song, 2010), as discourse and context are very closely related. Discourse elaborates its context and context helps decipher and interpret meanings of utterances generated via discourse. Meanings are embedded within, and are created through, their historical and cultural setting (Wood and Kroger, 2000). It is important to reiterate Geertz' emphasis on the importance of thick descriptions and contextualisation in qualitative research. As discourse analysis is largely contextual, it is important to consider that individual narratives are not only situated in

particular interactions, but also in the social, cultural, and institutional discourses which must be kept in mind when interpreting them (Riessman, 1993).

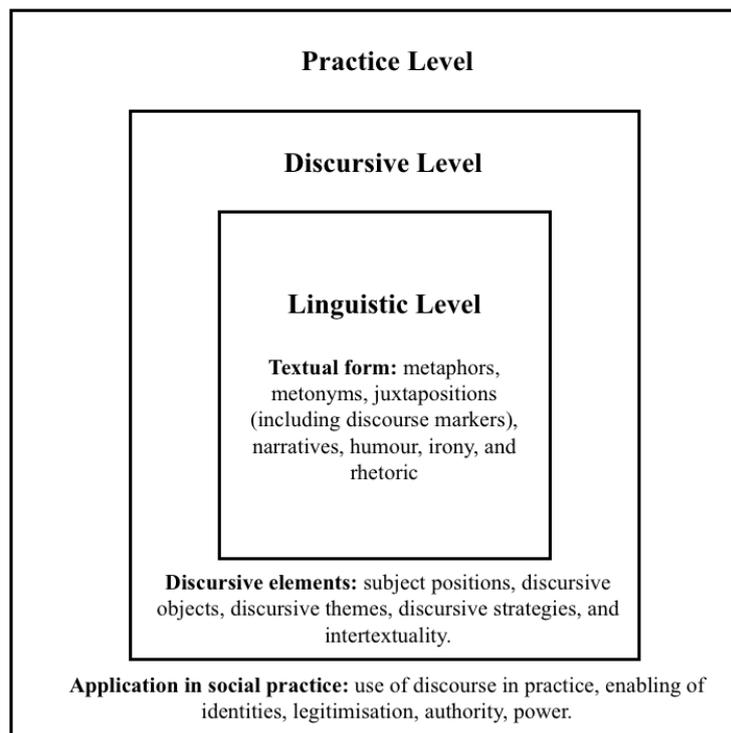
Fairclough (1992, cited in Roper *et al.*, 2013) presents a model of discourse which highlights the levels in which discourse operates. Fairclough's (1992) model of discourses distinguishes between 1) linguistic practice, 2) discursive practice, and 3) social practice. Linguistic practice refers to discourse at its textual form, and is consequently concerned with grammar, metaphors, metonyms, narratives, and juxtapositions. Discursive practice is concerned with intertextuality, in particular how discourse is produced and interpreted locally by drawing upon other texts, which may involve a reinterpretation of discourses that will be either idealised or problematised to particular social ends. Finally, social practice refers to ideological conceptions, which are broader macro-level discourses that influence discursive and linguistic practices, for example, discourses of authenticity, care, and luxury. Discourse begins at linguistic level, then reaches discursive and social, ultimately constructing localised versions of reality for their intended audience.

As evident through Fairclough's breakdown of discourse analysis, the term 'practice' is embedded throughout. *Practice theory* is closely related to discourse analysis but is epistemologically and methodologically distinct. Here, practices as the unit of analysis rather than people. The body and materiality are both regarded as being essential to practices. (Bourdieu, 1977, Nicolini, 2012). Language and representation are viewed as practices, and the social world is viewed as a network of practices, rather than consisting of individual actors (Nicolini, 2012). Practice theory places a large focus on how interactions develop realities, and subsequently, behaviour and attitudes. In particular, Fairclough highlights the role of language in shaping and maintaining power relations through social interactions. He emphasizes the need to analyse language use to uncover hidden power dynamics and challenge dominant discourses. He emphasizes the importance of analysing the language used in various communicative situations to uncover the hidden power dynamics, ideologies, and social norms that shape those situations. Communities occupy digital spaces where they uphold and maintain their own set of positions and practices (Kozinets, 2015). This influences the way individuals perceive reality, which in turn influences the way in which they navigate social situations and environments. While this research will focus on analysing data using a discourse analysis approach, it is impossible to disassociate this from practice theory. Discourse leads to practice, and practice leads to discourse. Bourdieu (1977) emphasises the inseparability of discourses

and practices, noting that sometimes practices emerge and are later assigned meaning through discourse. Internet memes operate on a practice level. They require community members to interact actively to enable their creation. However, they are also discursive in nature. Internet memes can only be understood and created via the discourses that surrounds them. The production and consumption of Internet memes is a social practice. Therefore, this was considered when collecting data.

The application of discourse analysis in this research study was adapted from Roper *et al.*, (2013) research on the construction of luxury brands through discourse, which they adapted from Fairclough. This model forms the basis of this research study, but the model has been slightly altered to suit the context of this study. As Wood and Kroger (2000) state in their book, there is no one correct methodological way to conduct discourse analysis. The method is highly dependent on the context of each research study. Discourse analysis should be viewed as an approach rather than a method. **Figure 15** summarises the way in which discourse analysis was utilised to analyse data.

The researcher analysed discourse at three levels: the linguistic level, the discursive level, and the practice level. As established in this chapter, language *is* discourse. Reality is created and mediated through language (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Consequently, to understand discourse, one must trace it back to its very foundations. The researcher will focus on examining the vocabulary, metaphors, metonyms, juxtapositions, narratives, humour, irony, and rhetoric (Roper *et al.*, 2013) of the discourse of memes. These contribute to meaning structures within the discourse and link them to individuals' sense-making process. They provide insight into how discourses are created, employed, and maintained at the micro-level. This is highly pertinent to how individuals interpret, order, and make sense of the world. Aspects such as narratives and symbolism are embedded within discourse, and the reproduction of these by individuals serves to highlight which discourses are employed to make sense of environment and the meanings which are extracted from it.



*Figure 15. Three layers of discourse (Adapted from Roper et al., 2013; based on Fairclough, 1992)*

Narratives link to the way in which individuals make sense of their social world, and consequently are of ideological significance (Fairclough, 1992). Narratives drawn from an individuals' recollection of an event can reveal the way in which they have interpreted and structured a phenomenon, and the discourses they have drawn on to interpret it. As Heller (2016b) demonstrates corporations use narratives as a discursive strategy to appeal to their audiences. These narratives are carefully crafted using cultural elements as resources. Corporations in the interwar period (1918-39) were seen by publics as monopolistic and soulless, and so crafted narratives to change these perceptions. Brands on social media embedding themselves into cultural conversations through internet memes and engaging with communities in a way that is familiar to them is an extension of this idea. Brands are, in effect, attempting to humanise themselves. Narratives drawn from the data from consumers will aid in understanding how this effort is perceived by audiences, and how they make sense of this.

Rhetoric is also an important aspect to examine. Rhetoric refers to the argumentative and formal structure used in text to persuade audiences and legitimate practice (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This includes anything from rhetorical figures, the tactical sequence of

themes, the identification of argument types, and variations in linguistics. Rhetoric and rhetorical devices serve to shape interpretations of ideological implications within the discourse employed by the speaker. It allows the speaker to mobilise specific values, which ultimately legitimise relations of structural power in the dominant social order (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Rhetoric is used by the speaker to construct certain kinds of categories and relations to shape arguments and frame interpretations of meanings within specific statements (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005).

Once the linguistic level was examined, the researcher identified what discourses are used to frame these conversations (Carbó *et al.*, 2016). These discourses create discursive subject positions, discursive objects, discursive themes, and strategies. They map out ways of thinking and doing, as well as dictating what is acceptable and what is not. They create identities and roles that individuals can occupy. A discourse of science within the Curly Hair Community can create the position of a haircare advisor. Some in the community may speak about hair in terms of racial stigmatisation that occurs as a result of wearing hair naturally, and thus would be adopting discourses of racial equality. Discourses can co-exist and be used in conjunction with one another or may clash. They also create, naturalise, and transform the relationships that are possible between them (Roper *et al.*, 2013). For example, a discourse of capitalism may conflict with a discourse of saving money. However, a subject position of a product reviewer may arise to transform the relationship between both discourses. The reviewer may engage in a discourse of consumption by recommending many kinds of products, which is combined with a discourse of economising by providing recommendations to audiences to enable them to save in the long run by making informed purchases and by avoiding trying many products to find one that suits them.

Analysis at the discursive level allowed the researcher to understand participants views by placing them within discursive formations. The researcher then examined discourses that frame meanings within the text and identify the ways in which the discourses are linked. This began with the process of identifying intertextual links between discourses, and by identifying the ways in which discourses intersect (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Again, context, in the form of discursive formation, is important to consider here. Discursive formations act as regulators of the order of discourse, allowing certain discourses and limiting others, while also giving weight to some discourses over others (Foucault, 1969). The participant is merely a mediator of discourse. Their interests, values, and affiliations play a role in their interpretation and ordering

of the discourse as well as their generation and extraction of meanings. Discourses make available different roles and positions, and it is important to identify which position the participant occupies as this will relate to their discursive actions and construction of discourse. Analysis of the discursive positions that observed individuals in netnography allowed the researcher to explain the connection between the discourse of internet memes and the analysis of power, the social order, intersubjectivity, and the social transformation processes (Carbó *et al.*, 2016). Multiple positions may be identified within a certain text.

While the researcher aimed to identify linguistic aspects within observed texts, she will code reoccurring textual elements. Coding in qualitative research is regarded as an essential aspect of transforming raw data into theoretical constructions of social processes. Corbin and Strauss (1990) describe the process of coding as the breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorising of data. The researcher, essentially, analysed data as they collected it. Once reoccurring ideas at the linguistic level were coded, they were then extrapolated into thematic categories, which form discourses. For example, in preliminary research conducted by the researcher, phrases such as ‘for us’, ‘an outcome of our creativity’, and ‘brands profit using our ideas’ were repeated when describing the use of adoption of internet memes by brands. Therefore, it becomes apparent that these belonged to emerging themes of ‘unity’ and ‘exploitation’, which could be tied to a discourse of community, authenticity, or morality, depending on the wider context that the linguistic aspects were situated in.

Finally, discourses were linked to practices. As discussed, practices are inseparable from discourses. As Heller (2016b) emphasised, discourse does not only relate to speech or texts, but are embedded in fields of expertise and practice. The ability to understand, deconstruct, and remix an internet meme is evidently a practice that requires a high level of cultural and social capital and understanding of discourse. Consequently, practice cannot be separated from discourse, nor would it be natural to do so. At this level, the researcher examined the ways in which discourses and discursive formations were adopted in practice. The researcher then placed a particular focus on how internet memes led and utilised discourse, and how users translated these discourses into practice. Focus was also placed on how discourses structured and mediated through internet memes enabled certain identities, legitimised behaviour and modes of thought, and their effect on authority and power, especially between communities and brands. Practices and discourses inform one another, and consequently a symbiotic

relationship between the two can be observed. One cannot be understood or analysed in the absence of another. They undergird and reinforce one another. As a result, translation of discourses into practices is extremely important to consider for this research.

### **3.5 Research Design**

I undertook 18 months of fieldwork, and engaged with and observed two distinct online communities. The data was recorded in the form of fieldnotes, excerpts from online users, such as tweets, and visual social media content which was analysed in NVivo using a discourse analysis approach. As discussed, netnography can be broken down into five steps. They will now be discussed in relation to this research specifically.

#### **3.5.1 *Definition of Research Field***

The very broad research interest I began with is the idea that internet memes are inherently a product of organic interaction amongst community members on social media and are therefore abundant on these platforms. Due to previous research on the importance of internet memes in online conversation (Milner, 2013; Milner 2014; Shifman, 2014; Burgess, 2008), as well as an observation of the rise of the use of these by brands occupying digital spaces, an interest grew towards attitudes of the community towards this. With a broad research interest, and through immersion into existing literature, a more defined set research questions were formulated. These questions acted as a guide when collecting the data, which were then discussed in depth in the discussion chapter.

#### **3.5.2 *Identification and Selection of Online Communities***

##### ***Sampling Method***

An important question considered when contemplating a sample for this study was whether an internet meme *creates* a community, or whether they are created *by* communities. Referring back to Dawkins (1999) definition, where memes are described as elements of culture that are spread from person to person by imitation, it becomes evident that the latter is true. Memes are a by-product of socialisation. They, by definition, cannot exist without the community that creates them. On social media, they are created organically by communities via their

interactions (Miltner, 2014). Internet memes travel through the web from user to user, and from community to community, and are altered and remixed as they are shared (Shifman, 2014). Internet memes will be found where a social media community is found. Therefore, the choice of *which* community to observe became unimportant.

The core of the study was to understand the discourses and practices that surround users' constructions of brands' usage of internet memes. The discourse of memes, which are what allow internet memes to be created and enable them to carry meaning, colonise all communities. However, the *practice* of memes, meaning *how* memes are actually created and used, as well as the discourses that underpinned the internet memes created by each community, were community specific. By looking at specific communities, it is possible to understand how communities interact with discourses and in turn create community specific practices, and how these practices then go on to establish new discourses. The way in which internet memes are utilised in practice is important to the study – the co-option of internet memes by brands is, in itself, a practice. Different discourses and practices within communities will lead to different forms of sense-making in relation to the adoption of internet memes by brands, justifying the choice to study specific communities. This is not a case study centred around a certain community, rather a study that examined specific communities with the aim of generating data that can be used to understand digital culture as a whole.

Communities were selected using a maximum variation sampling approach. Maximum variation sampling, a strategy that centres on capturing diversity, is characterized by selecting a wide range of cases that vary across important dimensions relevant to the study. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives, experiences, and contexts. By intentionally including cases with differences in factors, such as community values, norms, and experiences, the researcher can uncover patterns, complexities, and insights that might not emerge from a more homogenous sample. This method is particularly useful in qualitative research, allowing for in-depth exploration and the development of a well-rounded understanding of the research topic. Therefore, this approach aims to encompass broad differences within the chosen cases. Thus, the researcher's focus is on embracing diversity in the chosen samples. Additionally, Silverman (2021) emphasises that while behaviour within each community tends to be stable, ethnographic data is difficult to generalise. When devising a sample for ethnographic (and netnographic) data, the use of *collective case studies*, which are

a number of cases studied in order to investigate some general phenomenon (Silverman, 2021, p.164), can improve the generalisability of the data. Typically, ethnography of two cases is time-consuming and costly, requiring insider contacts and resources. However, netnography allows the researcher to be flexible and provides an abundance of data. Therefore, the observation of two communities, in this case, enables the data to be generalised, providing more insightful answers to the research questions, and improving the reliability of qualitative data which is often questioned.

As this research ultimately falls under the umbrella of marketing, two communities were chosen, defined in terms of consumption. These communities observed fall into two categories: 1) a consumer community, and 2) a non-consumer community.

A consumer community is one that is centred around the consumption of a certain type of product. These communities are not affiliated with any specific brand, but with a genre of products (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). They are, therefore, commercial in nature. These communities have created discourses that are centred around consumption, ones that aid them in defining their identities and outlooks. Consumption is seen as empowering. It is an act that aids them in defining their place in the social world. A non-consumer community, on the other hand, are a group of individuals who are brought together by an interest that is not centred around consumption (McDonough, 1997). These communities founded by consumers or third parties on non-commercial grounds, for the purpose of information exchange or relationship establishment (Thorbjørnsen *et al.*, 2002). These communities do not have consumption at the forefront of their identity, and are likely to interact differently with brands. The choice of communities follows Campbell's (2005) assertion that there exists a communal-commercial tension within the fabrics of online communities, and social media culture. Members within online communities seek authentic and human connections to establish a communal space. However, the inherent visibility and accessibility of social media exposes the experiences of online communities to corporate surveillance, what Campbell (2005) refers to as a *corporate panopticon*. This raises the question of whether there can be a balance between the interests of community and the drives of capitalism within a digital space that online communities occupy (Kozinets, 2015). This binary of the communal and commercial in relation to online communities is significant and should not be ignored, as the underpinning logic of communities shape their construction and mobilisation of discourses, as well as their practices. This allowed the researcher to draw comparisons between the two communities that she studies, and allow

the data of this thesis not to be skewed to portray a wholly positive or a heavily critical presentation of brands. What this analysis hopes to achieve, is to establish if there are differences to communities' receptiveness towards internet memes created and shared by brands, as well as *how* and *why*. The chosen communities are described in-depth below:

### ***Communities Chosen for Research***

#### **Non-Consumer Community: "Black Twitter"**

##### **Description**

'Black Twitter' are a community whose defining characteristic is their interest in issues of race and pop culture. The community, at its core, is comprised of Black individuals from various geographical locations. In an article that notes the influence of Black Twitter, Wheeler (2019) describes the community as 'a merciless watchdog for problematic behaviour', which has touched every 'sphere of [American] culture and politics in the past decade'.

In a society which is still wracked by racial injustice, Black Twitter allows Black voices to be heard. It has resulted in various notable movements, including #OscarsSoWhite, #SayHerName, and #BlackLivesMatter. The community's critiques of the Pepsi advertisement's tone-deaf co-optation of the Black Lives Matter movement has forced the company to issue an apology, and their anger of Kevin Hart's homophobic tweets led the Oscars to drop him as a host (Wheeler, 2019). It is important to note that this subsection is not a monolith, but is instead comprised of multiple, small personal communities and networks, that band together when an incendiary event or something that triggers debate. The community are unified when important matters arise. The community is regarded as influential in the digital space (Markus, 2019). Hilton (2013) claims that members do not only influence conversations but have a large hand in creating them.

##### **Member Profile**

Users within the community are Black and come together based on the collective experiences that stem from their shared racial identity. They debate issues that relate to the Black community, and in doing so often create culturally specific in-jokes and Internet memes. The

Black Twitter community is a vibrant virtual space comprised mainly of Black individuals on the Twitter platform who share a common cultural, social, and political identity. Its purpose is to foster discussions and engage in conversations about a wide range of topics linked to Black culture, social justice, activism, entertainment, and more. Within this community, hashtags play a pivotal role in organizing discussions and trending topics, enabling members to unite and voice their opinions. Amplification of messages is common, with community members frequently retweeting and endorsing content that resonates with their shared interests and objectives. Furthermore, Black Twitter serves as a platform for the expression and celebration of Black culture, including music, fashion, and art, while also serving as a hub for activism and raising awareness about racial justice issues. While there is no strict hierarchy within the community, there are influential figures like thought leaders, activists, and content creators who significantly impact the discourse, often setting the tone for discussions and campaigns. Brands also have a presence, primarily through partnerships or sponsorships, but their role is secondary to the organic engagement and activism driven by the community members themselves.

### **Social Media Presence and Community Activities**

As discussed, Black Twitter is a social space that allows users to discuss issues that concern them or their communities, that are either not offered by the mainstream, or not covered in the appropriate context (Freelon *et al.*, 2018). The community also engages in inter-community activities, such as engaging in conversation and debate, sharing experiences, and so on. Black Twitter allows everyday Black people to serve as gatekeepers for the news and information that pertains to the plurality of the Black experience, offering perspectives and considerations that are not found elsewhere. Although the term Black Twitter was initially coined to reference Black twitter users in the USA, there are pockets of Black Twitter within each country that discuss topics relevant to them. UK Black Twitter, for example, often debate issues that are UK specific. These include issues of systemic racism in the UK, appropriation of Black Culture in music, and so on.

### **Justification for Observing**

During preliminary research, this community was mentioned explicitly by various participants, and consequently appear to be a key community in regard to internet meme discourse.

Furthermore, many of the major themes that emerged during the analysis of the data were directly linked to discussion surrounding this community. According to Silverman (2021), researchers can create a sample by relying on existing data to build and define the sample choice. This is a form of methodological reflection, which he refers to as “getting new data from old data” (Silverman, 2021, p.163). This approach uses contextual information to focus the search for a sample. Additionally, various articles corroborate the findings of the preliminary research. Wheeler (2019), for example, regards Black Twitter as a cultural force to be reckoned with and as influential in terms of digital culture (Wheeler, 2019). A vast majority of popular internet memes used commonly in Twitter discourse emerged from Black Twitter. As a result, brands operating on this social media platform who do incorporate Internet memes into their brand activities will, in effect, be utilising Internet memes popularised by this community. It, therefore, seems only logical to include this community’s voice in the conversation surrounding the use of internet memes by brands. Internet memes are a significant practice within Black Twitter. Internet memes are often used to deliver messages, for social commentary, for humorous effect, or simply incorporated into regular communication. Black Twitter do not centre themselves around any particular brand but are instead brought together by a common racial identity. Consequently, they will not have an affinity to any brand. Theoretically, this should result in very different types of engagement between community members and brands, thus providing a more accurate, balanced, and reliable set of data that can be used to generalise to a wider set of communities.

### **Consumer Community: Curly Hair Community**

#### **Description**

This is a community who are brought together by their interest in curly hair care. As such, there is a large focus placed on products: what brands are good or bad, which products suit which hair, product ingredients and formulas (and their benefits) and so on. Historically, the community can be traced back to the emergence of the Natural Hair Movement. While the movement originated in America in the 1960s, its most recent iteration occurred during the latter years of the 90s (Metcalf and Spaulding, 2016). This movement encouraged Black men and women to wear their hair in its natural state and avoid chemically processing and relaxing their hair. As a result, sales for relaxers and chemical processing goods fell and continue to fall, with reports stating they were set to decrease by 45% by 2019 (Brinkhurts-Cuff, 2016). In the

early 2000s, curly hair stylist Lorraine Massey released a book titled ‘The Curly Girl Method’, a detailed and practical guide and approach for the care of naturally curly hair (Massey, 2001). The natural hair movement served to empower Black men and women to embrace and celebrate natural characteristics that for many years were deemed unattractive and undesirable (Wilkerson, 2017), while the Curly Girl Method exposed this method of haircare to those who had perhaps not known their hair was naturally curly or had not known how to care for it. As a result, there are many sub-genres within this community today, and some of the lexicon and phrases are shared and cross-over. For example, there are pockets of this community that focus on social and racial issues of curly or afro hair, some focus on the science behind creating products, some have an interest in specialised hairdressing, and so on. While the community is brought together by a shared interest in natural haircare, they cover a wide range of topics and discourses.

### **Member Profile**

The Curly Hair Community is a diverse and supportive collective of individuals who share the common characteristic of having naturally curly or wavy hair. This community is brought together by the shared goal of providing guidance, support, and camaraderie to those navigating the unique challenges and joys of curly hair. Many members enter this community through a need to nurse their hair back to health, due to damage caused from years of heat-styling, chemical processing, or neglect. Therefore, members of this community support one another by sharing tips, advice, and product recommendations with other members, as evident via various forms, videos, and intra-community conversation. The community is comprised of mostly women of various ages, but men also take part in conversations as evident through their presence on various social media platforms. Members typically have some kind of a ‘curl pattern’, meaning their hair is either wavy, curly, or coily, and they use this to divide themselves into smaller groups within the community, so they are able to offer help and advice to individuals with similar hair types.

Central to this community is the exchange of hair care tips, product recommendations, and styling techniques. Members frequently offer valuable product reviews and showcase their creative approaches to styling curly hair, fostering inspiration and self-expression. Brands in the Curly Hair Community occupy a distinctive role as suppliers of hair care products and solutions. They are important in the context of product recommendations and reviews, as their

reputation and product quality significantly influence the choices of community members. However, in the hierarchy of the community, they do not typically hold the highest positions. Instead, experts in curly hair care, styling innovators, and engaged community members often lead discussions and inspire trends, with newcomers seeking guidance and inspiration. While brands are integral in providing tools and products, the community's core is driven by the individuals who actively share their experiences and expertise, making the community a supportive and informative space for curly-haired individuals.

### **Social Media Presence and Community Activities**

This community has a wide presence on every corner of the web- there is a dedicated curly hair 'sub-Reddit' (a forum on social media site Reddit) where users exchange progress pictures accompanied by their routines, ask one another for advice, styling tips, and so on. They also have a very large presence on YouTube, where influencers and members within this community post product reviews, hair wash and hair styling routines, progress videos, and so on. Also, a popular topic for videos within this community seems to be 'curly hair journey' videos, where people explain how their journey into the community started, which usually begins with the point at which they came to the realisation they had curly hair, and then the steps they took to nurse it back to health. The community are also fairly active on Instagram, with many using the platform to show their hair to their followers, as share any aspects of their personal lives. There are pages on Instagram dedicated to sharing any promotional offers that are occurring for any specific products, pages dedicated to posting individuals with curly hair, posting humorous internet memes that the community can relate to, and so on. There are also various large, and microblogs dedicated to sharing information regarding products and haircare. The main aims of this community seem to be offering support and encouragement to community members, sharing advice and information, and encouraging them to embrace their natural texture and find the best way to care for it- which is why products are at the centre of this community.

### **Justification for Observing**

As a community that places a large focus on products (which are ultimately provided by brands) they will engage differently with marketing and social media activities on brand pages. This is largely due to their inclination towards certain brands and the centrality of their products to

their identity as a ‘curly haired’ individual, as well as their importance in their day-to-day self-care routines. The researcher aimed to opt for two very different communities, one that is centred around brands and products, and one that is not. This allows for a well-rounded set of data that can be generalised to other communities and prove to be insightful for stakeholders.

### **3.5.3 *Community Observation and Data Collection***

I undertook 18 months of fieldwork, engaging and observing each community. I did not bind myself completely to the community, and instead was open to moving in the direction interactions take them. This is another defining feature of netnography that distinguishes it from traditional ethnography. Its lack of physical presence makes adhering to a strict location unnecessary, which in the context of the Internet is almost impossible. I adopted a mindset of flow and connectivity, rather than a mindset of location and boundary. This ultimately increases authenticity, as the researcher experienced an organic user experience (Kozinets, 2015).

I utilised NCapture, a programme that allowed the capturing of webpages and content, to collect data. Data was collected in the form of comments (from Instagram and Reddit) and tweets (from Twitter). I also collected visual data in the form of images and memes which were posted by users in response to brands’ usage of internet memes. In the case of the Curly Hair Community, brand posts which utilised internet memes were collected. This is because much of the brand-community interactions within this community took place through these posts. These posts also form an important piece of information which serves to contextualise brand-consumer interactions within this community. I also utilised fieldnotes to capture the context surrounding community interaction. This aided in the analysis and write-up stage of the findings (see *Appendix E*). This also aided in annotating data, again providing contextual information so that I was able to determine the discourses employed by user’s through their social media comments.

### **3.5.4 *Data Analysis and Aggregation of Consumer Insights***

Social media excerpts were captured and uploaded to NVivo. I immersed myself into the dataset, reading and rereading excerpts and annotating these with relevant insights. This process commenced after I had engaged with each community for 4 months. During this period,

I focused on establishing an immersive and organic experience. During this time, attempts were made to move “from the outside in” (Kozinets, 2015). In the following 8 months, data was collected in the form of fieldnotes and by capturing images, tweets, and comments through NCapture. In the final 6 months, I engaged with the community, collected data, and began the process of analysing the data. The phases of data collection and analyses over the 18-month period of observation are summarised below:

Phase	Months	Researcher’s Focus
<p><b>Phase 1</b></p> <p>July 2020 – September 2020</p>	<p>0 – 4</p>	<p>Moving from the “outside in” (Kozinets, 2015). Since online communities are not bound to a physical location, I identified topics and people of interest. In the case of Black Twitter, this consisted of opinion leaders and influencers within the community, who frequently started conversations regarding brands and often critiqued mainstream opinions. However, in the case of the Curly Hair Community, after a week of searching it became evident that the hierarchies and structures within this community are different to Black Twitter. The Curly Hair Community appeared to be more practice-based and did not freely generate as much discourse as Black Twitter. As such, this required a change of approach. When referring back to the research questions, the focus of the research is to examine interactions between community members and brands. Therefore, in the case of the Curly Hair Community, I located <i>brands</i> of interest. The social media algorithms then suggested key influencers within the community. I then began to grow my network and move inwards to the heart of each community. I was then able to participate and engage with each online community.</p>
<p><b>Phase 2</b></p> <p>November 2020 – June 2021</p>	<p>5 – 12</p>	<p>In November 2020, once I identified and immersed myself in each community, I began the process of data collection. Throughout this period, I created fieldnotes to capture my day-to-day observations of community interactions (see <i>Appendix E</i>). This enabled me to place community events within their wider context, as contextualising events is an extremely important defining feature of discourse analysis. As I collected the data, I also annotated it with contextual information in Nvivo as I collected data (see <i>Appendix F</i>).</p>

		<p>After I had collected around 100 posts from each community, I began the coding process. This took place in at the end of January 2021. Guided by Fairclough’s three layers of discourse, I began to focus on the linguistic features of the text, coding these, as well as their purpose within the context in which they are used. At this stage, it was difficult follow the same coding process for both communities. Black Twitter created linguistically rich data, and their references to brands and their perspectives towards brands were explicit and therefore more straightforward to code. In comparison, the Curly Hair Community had limited interaction and therefore, it was necessary to find <i>where</i> brand-community interactions occurred. After identifying key brands within the community, such as Rizo’s Curls, Shea Moisture, Bounce Curl, Flora and Curl, it become apparent that community members interacted with brands through these brand posts. As such, the analysis of the data from this community required further contextualisation as it mostly occurred through brand posts.</p> <p>In April 2021, the relationship between emergent linguistic and discursive themes were began to emerge and were identified, and practices of the community began to become visible and recognisable (see <i>Appendix G</i>). This process required me to visit and revisit the fieldnotes, raw data, annotations, and codes to establish relationships. I began to create mind maps to understand the relationship between these discourses, and how they are mobilised by each community through their interactions.</p>
<p><b>Phase 3</b>  July 2021 – December 2021</p>	<p>13 – 18</p>	<p>In July of 2021, I began to move “out” of each community. As Kozinets (2015) states, the researcher begins socially outside the group, then moves increasingly inside of it to return out again and explain what is happening on the inside. I utilised the list of codes generated to identify the primary discursive themes and practices that underpin each community (see <i>Appendix H</i>). While discourse analysis does not solely rely on codes, this process was necessary for identifying repetition and relationships.</p>

Quotes were chosen to be included in the findings chapters to exemplify the essence of the discourses identified and included in the main text. Additionally, I began to compile the fieldnotes from the journal I had kept to record the context in which data emerged. I used these fieldnotes to provide further context when writing up each findings chapter.

**Table 4.** *Phases of observation, data collection, and analysis.*

As mentioned, data collection began after 4 months of community observation. I first identified the linguistic elements of the text, such as metonyms and metaphors, but also smaller textual features and syntax. I analysed the way in which these textual elements were used in the text, and to what purpose. For example, in one case, one user utilises the conjunction ‘unless’ to anchor two opposing discourses. Therefore, in this instance, the use of this word is for the purposes of not only presenting two discourses, but their emergence in this way through text reveals their significance to that particular community member and her/his structuring of reality. I also annotated the data to identify the context from which these posts were created. Discourse analysis is highly reliant on context, and therefore this was an important step. As such, the fieldnotes created during observation were crucial in establishing context.

I then began to identify similar themes in the data, and began to code these. I aimed to visit, and revisit the data and identify any patterns and relationships across the raw data. Through the generation of codes and categories, I was able to establish the discourses that frame and underpin these. While similar codes and categories could emerge in both communities, the discourses that underpin these did differ. Again, the deciding factor is the *context* in which these codes and categories are presented. For example, within both communities, the pronoun ‘we’ is utilised frequently through posts to signify a user’s unity with their community. However, when considering the context, within the Curly Hair Community, this is underpinned by discourses of *care* and *relatability*. In contrast, within Black Twitter, this is underpinned by a narrative of ‘The People vs the Corporation’, as the pronoun ‘we’ was contrasted with ‘brands’ through the community’s conversations. Brands, within this context, were described as being soulless ‘big companies’. Therefore, this approach differs from traditional coding and categorisation of data as I utilised context to identify discursive elements of the text.

Finally, I linked discursive structures to practices within each community. While practices were not the focus of the study, they cannot be divorced from discourses. Within the Curly Hair Community, for example, practices were omnipresent. The community is brought together through an interest in haircare, which is in itself a practice from which discourses can be drawn. One of the primary discourses that was drawn from this practice is a discourse of *expertise*. It became evident as the observation of the community continued that a discourse of expertise was a prominent discourse that emerged through internet memes, as well as brand-community interaction.

### **3.5.5 Presentation of Data**

The data from each community is presented in its own findings chapter (*Chapters 4 and 5*). Within these chapters, the overarching narratives and discourses are presented, as well as the discourses that emerge from these. The findings chapters are themselves an exercise of data analysis, highlighting the linguistic, discursive, and practice elements of the text. This provides the reader with an insight into the process of data analysis. The findings from each community are discussed independently within their respective chapters. The findings from both communities are then combined and linked to the existing literature, where they are used to answer the research questions of this thesis (*Chapter 6*).

### **3.6 Reliability, Validity, and Bias**

As the research is qualitative, its reliability could be contested. Reliability, in a research context, is described by as the extent to which results are consistent over time, and an accurate representation of the total population (Joppe, 2000). For discourse analysts, relationships between concepts are multiple, often contentious, and always socially constructed (Wood and Kroger, 2010). Additionally, within the social world, meaning is tied to context. Therefore, the findings from the research reflect reality at the time they took place, and therefore are not intended to be universal or repeatable. However, it should be noted that discourse is not only tied to present-context, but rather encompasses socio-historical systems of thought. It is a socio-linguistic structure rather than a process of mere utterances. The researcher placed discourses that emerged from the research into their socio-historical context, allowing for greater reliability of the data.

The research has a small sample size, with only two communities observed. This, theoretically, may create problems in terms of research validity (Queirós *et al.*, 2017). To counteract this, existing theory is used to generalise findings. It has been argued that the context-specific nature of qualitative research makes generalisation difficult. However, other researchers argue that the in-depth qualitative research is well-suited for revealing higher-level concepts and theories that are not specific to any setting or participant (Polit and Beck, 2010; Misco, 2007). As a result, the rich, highly detailed, and insightful nature of qualitative findings make it particularly suitable for extrapolation. The researcher has chosen two very different communities and has justified the observation of these. Micro-foundational observations that are derived through data collection can then become macro-foundational conclusions through the process of analysis, and subsequently, discussion.

Additionally, the researcher was heavily involved in the analysis and interpretation of data. While precautions will be taken to minimise researcher bias, it is impossible to remove this completely. The discussion of intertextuality earlier in the chapter serves to highlight this. An understanding of a text and its meaning is not delivered by the author of the text but is crafted through external factors that influence the reader's construction of meaning, such as cultural norms, experience, and other texts. Consequently, answers provided by the researcher are simply their interpretation of the problem, rather than an absolute answer. Despite this, interpretations delivered by the researcher are not fixed. Readers will develop their own interpretations of the text produced by the researcher based on their experiences and in the context of the particular problem they are facing. Therefore, answers provided by the research will be relevant to readers who will connect their interpretation of the findings to their unique context.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Saunders *et al.* (2012) have defined research ethics as the “standards of the researcher’s behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of a research project, or who are affected by it” (Saunders *et al.*, 2012, p. 183). They are moral principles that govern how the researcher carries out their work. The research underwent an ethical approval process, carried out by the University Research Ethics Committee, and data collection commenced when approval was granted (see *Appendix D*). While data collection conducted through the Internet has become favoured due to the abundance of data available, ease of access, and its

instantaneous nature, it highlights a need for extra considerations when it comes to research ethics.

Firstly, there is wide discussion on whether online posts are considered to be public or private (Williams *et al.*, 2017; Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Kozinets (2015) distinguishes between what may be considered ‘private’ versus ‘public’ internet data – where the former requires the informed consent of the subject. Private internet data pertains to interactions transpiring within enclosed digital domains. For instance, situations where a researcher engages in direct exchanges with a participant via platforms such as Facetime or Skype – platforms characterized by intimate, one-on-one interactions – require explicit consent from said participant. Conversely, other social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, afford users a symbolic ‘megaphone’ to publicise their opinions and participate in the production of digital culture. Upon signing up to many social media platforms, users are presented with Terms and Conditions which they must agree to before proceeding. A clause in the majority of these documents, which is true for large social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and the like, is that any content posted on the site may be used by third parties, which includes researchers. The direct clause in Twitter’s terms of service, as an example, is:

*“This license authorizes us to make your Content available to the rest of the world [...] You agree that this license includes the right for Twitter [...] to make Content submitted to or through the Services available to other companies, organizations or individuals for the syndication, broadcast, distribution, Retweet, promotion or publication of such Content on other media and services”.* (Twitter, 2020)

In the context of this study, the researcher exclusively relied upon publicly available content. Participation within closed, moderator-moderated groups was deliberately avoided. This decision was rooted in the study's primary focus on exploring the dynamics of brand-community relationships, as opposed to delving into the intricate personal experiences of individual community members. The researcher observed brand-community engagement around internet memes. Due to the size of each community observed, each consisting of more than one million users, it would not have been feasible or necessary to foster relationships with members. This would have differed if the researcher had engaged in a smaller, intimate community. Additionally, these communities constitute areas of interest, and as such have a higher turnover of users. While key users and opinion leaders frequently post within each community, it appears that many members engage in conversations ad-hoc. This was

particularly the case for members within the Curly Hair Community. Reddit, a platform that was used to observe this community, allows users to display a users' post history. An examination of one users' post history revealed that the user engaged with the community to receive haircare tips, but engaged more frequently in other communities, relating to other niche interests the user had. As Kozinets (2015) asserts, the Internet contains digital doubles of our identities and selves, containing multiple types of social interaction and interests. Therefore, the researcher focused on observing areas of interest, rather than individual users.

However, while data posted on social media may be used freely by researchers, the researcher should exercise some moral judgement. From a moral standpoint, some data should be considered private, and therefore should not be used in research (Townsend and Wallace, 2016; Hibbins *et al.*, 2018). For example, a user whose account is set to 'private' should be considered as private by the researcher. Seeking informed consent remains a critical component of ethical considerations for research. Consent refers to the participant explicitly agreeing to taking part in a study. In non-ethnographic studies, consent is usually granted through consent forms (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). As a part of this study will take place on social media, from a research ethics standpoint, consent is gained from the moment a user signs up to the social media site. However, in the case of online observation, again, only posts made publicly will be used (Williams *et al.*, 2017).

Participant anonymity refers to the degree in which a participant may be identified through their data. Anonymisation becomes critical when data is shared through publication in journals, conference proceedings, or in any other form (Townsend and Wallace, 2017). This issue mostly pertains to data collected through qualitative means, and as such is an important aspect to note for this research study. It is fairly simple to anonymise data in this particular study. Any identifiers, such as social media handles, will be blanked. Linked with the issue of anonymisation is the issue of risk of harm. This is in reference to any identity breaches which may present a risk of harm to any social media users. There is a risk for published data to harm online users, especially if they are identified, or if sensitive information shared on a forum is publicised (Kozinets, 2002). While the researcher made every effort to remove personal identifiers, accounts could still be traced by searching for the content of a specific tweet or post. Therefore, to protect individuals further, content which specifically details aspects of a users' personal life, or sensitive experiences, were not be included in the data. Particularly in the context of the communities observed, discussion would sometimes include the recollection

of personal and sensitive experiences – for example, in the case of the Curly Hair Community, members sometimes shared struggles that they had endured in their childhoods and would discuss the implications of this on their self-image and self-esteem. While the researcher mentioned that discussions of this nature took place in the community to provide context, the details were not included to protect the anonymity of the participants. As the quotations collected are general, posted on public platforms, and do not contain sensitive information, it can be considered that the correct protocols were followed when collecting publicly available social media data, meaning their usage in research publications does not require the consent of participants.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has covered all aspects relating to the methodological approach that will be undertaken for this research. It first considered and justified the philosophical and research approach it will adopt, which will be interpretivist, constructivist, and inductive. The researcher has justified the adoption of these approaches due to the sociological nature of the study. The research is concerned with concepts such as internet memes, community, and social media, which are socially constructed. As such, a different viewpoint than those adopted in studies of the natural world is required to understand and interpret the subjects of the research. The research will be qualitative in nature as this is best suited to the philosophical approach of the research and will also answer the research questions more effectively than a quantitative approach.

Data will be collected using an ethnographic approach. The researcher will firstly observe the chosen communities online (the Curly Hair community, and Black Twitter), The data will be recorded in the form of fieldnotes, screenshots of interactions. These will be analysed using a discourse analysis approach, which aims to examine how meaning are created through language in various social contexts. Understanding meanings communicated and their relevance to their context will aid in answering the research questions, which largely focus on understanding how communities respond to brands using internet memes and the discourses that enable and legitimise these responses.

Research limitations and ethics were also considered. The main research limitations are its small sample size, the reality that discourse analysis can only produce interpretations and not

concrete answers, the anonymous nature of social media, and the fluctuating number of users within online communities. The researcher has presented ways that these limitations will be minimised through implementing various methodological methods. In regard to research ethics, the primary issue is centred around consent in privacy for research in an online setting. However, when signing up for social media, users agree to their content being used by third parties, which include researchers.

## Chapter 4 | Findings

### *Black Twitter*

*“Lmaooooo viral memes happen when WE the people make them happen.”*

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents and analyses the findings from the first community observed as part of this study: Black Twitter. As established in the methodology chapter, the research is disciplinarily rooted in marketing. As a result, the research will consider phenomenon from the perspective of marketing and consumption. The researcher has chosen to observe one consumer community, wherein products play a central role in the community, and one non-consumer community, wherein the community do not have an affinity to any particular brand or product. Again, as highlighted by Kozinets (2015) and Campbell (2005) there exists a communal-commercial tension within the fabrics of online communities, raising the question of whether there can be a balance between the interests of community and the drives of capitalism within social media. This binary of the communal and commercial in relation to online communities is significant as it shapes communities’ construction and mobilisation of discourses, as well as their practices. Black Twitter will be the non-consumer community observed as part of this study.

During a preliminary study conducted by the researcher, this community emerged frequently in discussion with respondents. As such, they are important to consider in building an understanding of brand-community relationships on social media, as well as understanding how brands’ usage of internet memes may be accepted by social media communities. The researcher has engaged and interacted with the community over the period of 18 months. It will first provide a contextual background for the community, highlighting their community structures, norms, values, and their behaviour and practice. It will then discursively analyse excerpts of data collected through netnographic means over the period of observation and interaction, situating these excerpts within the themes they borrow from. Finally, the data will be discussed in the context of the research.

#### **4.2 Contextual Background – Black Twitter**

‘Black Twitter’ are a community whose defining characteristic is their interest in issues of race and pop culture. The community were brought up by participants frequently during preliminary

research and was, therefore, chosen to be observed as the non-consumer community in this research. The community, at its core, is comprised of Black individuals from various geographical locations. It is important to note that the community is not monolithic. While they are often acknowledged as one large community, which in some instances is true, this is a misconception. There are sub-pockets within the community with their own norms, structures, and values. Individuals have their own personal interests, which they connect with others with to form these sub-pockets. For example, there are pockets interested in football, in cuisine, in history, in pop culture, in music, in makeup, in politics, and so on. The difference between this community, and any other community, is that these are discussed and framed using their shared background and culture. Within each of these sub-pockets are opinion leaders, or ‘influencers’, whose opinions have more weight than the rest of the community. Needless to say, these individuals are leveraged into these positions by the community themselves, and so are trusted and respected by them. The community often come together to discuss topics that affect them all, through the lens of Black culture.

The community is very active and have been acknowledged as key contributors to pop culture in both offline and online contexts, which includes internet meme culture (Wheeler, 2019). Black Twitter is a social space that allows users to discuss issues that concern them or their communities, that are either not offered by the mainstream, or not covered in the appropriate context (Freelon *et al.*, 2018). The community also engages in inter-community activities, such as engaging in conversation and debate, sharing experiences, and so on. Consequently, the community adopt a more critical lens to mainstream opinions, corporations, and culture. This is due to the fact that the community regard there to be little representation of them in these spaces, and so mainstream events are commonly the subject of debate within the community.

Debating with one another is an activity that the community commonly partake in, as is the general sharing of opinions on various topics, some trivial. This naturally stems from the need to provide alternate takes and viewpoints that are not represented in the mainstream. As such, trending topics, or topics of relevance to the community, are taken and discussed within the community. In fact, in recent years an internet meme became viral within the community. The meme involves tweeting random images, people, ideas, and topics accompanied by the caption “sco pa tu manaa”. This phrase originated from a Ghanaian rapper, and seemingly does not translate to anything in particular, but was transformed to mean “*give your opinion on this*” or “*what are your thoughts on this*”. The subject of debate can be anything from a type of food

or clothing, a scenario, or a politically issue. It seems that the community value discussion and sharing and debating of opinions and thoughts on various topics, making it a particularly rich and worthwhile community to be studied as part of this research topic.

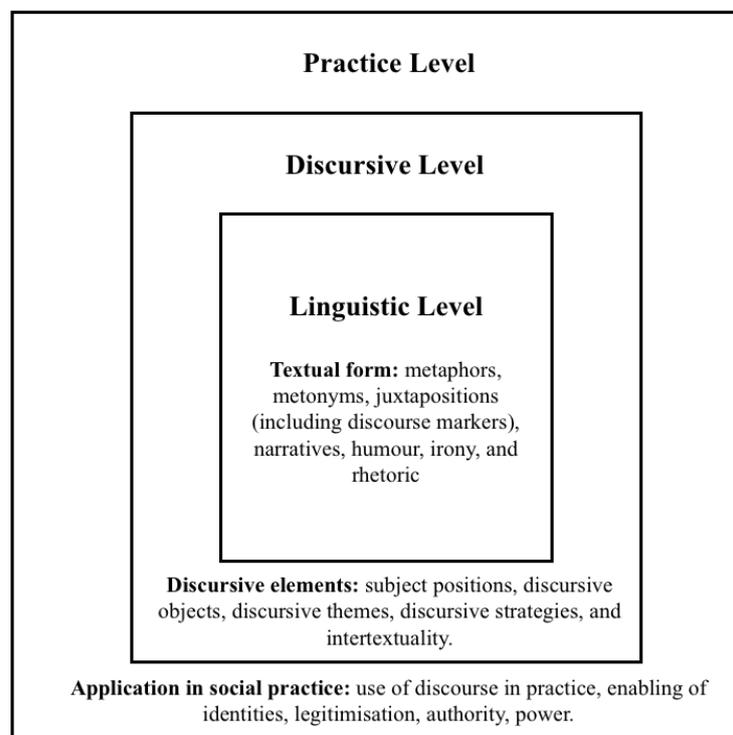
An implication of the community challenging the mainstream and the status quo, which occurs through conversation, debate, and internet memes, is that they commonly change their collective behaviour depending on the outcome of the debate. For example, the community commonly uncover brands', public figures', or celebrities' behaviours that go against the community's values, and will act on this by stopping their support for them. The community is very active in terms of this, always debating and conversing on various topics leading to changed behaviour. For example, a meme that was popular within this community is the '*this you?*' meme. This catchphrase was used to call out the hypocrisy of tweets. While the trend began in the summer of 2019, it gained popularity in May 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic and the George Floyd protests (KnowYourMeme, 2020). The meme became targeted at tweets posted by politicians, celebrities, and brands. Those deemed performative were quoted with previous tweets, articles, and so on that highlight the hypocrisy in the tweet. For example, Boohoo, an online fast fashion brand, frequently post tweets that they deem to be relatable to their audience. On August 1st 2021, they posted a tweet that stated "*my budget for August is £3.02*". The tweet plays into the commentary from the community at the time. Following the so called 'Freedom Day' the previous month, where all coronavirus restrictions were ended in the UK, individuals were meeting and socialising, and thus consequently overspending. Boohoo's tweet taps into this, and the community's desire to limit their spending. However, they received backlash when the community, and others on twitter, quote tweeted this tweet with screenshots of Boohoo's net worth (£4.3 billion), the fact they pay their workers below a living wage, and so on. In terms of discourse, the implications of contestation such as this is that discourse is constantly being created, challenged, modified. Again, this makes the community particularly insightful for this particular study.

### **4.3 Analysis of Netnographic Data**

Discourse, in the context of analysis, can be broken down into three levels as introduced by Fairclough (1992) in his book *Discourse and Social Change*. The levels are comprised of the linguistic level, the most basic level of discourse which encompasses language, phrases, rhetoric, narratives, metaphors, syntax, prepositions, and grammar. This then links to the second level of discourse, which constitutes discursive elements such as subject positions,

objects, themes, and intertextuality. And the third and final level is related to practices, which is concerned with the way in which discourses are applied in social practice.

The following section discusses initial netnographic findings of the non-consumer community, Black Twitter, using Fairclough's model. It examines the themes identified within the data, which are analysed discursively to gain an understanding of the way in which users construct brands and their activities in relation to themselves and the community, revealing much about the online dynamic and the unspoken social structure of the digital space.



*Figure 16. Three layers of discourse (Adapted from Roper et al., 2013; based on Fairclough, 1992)*

### **4.3.1 Community as the Central Subject**

Unsurprisingly, the central idea in which themes derive their context is that of community. This can be regarded as the common denominator in which themes within, and across communities, revolve around. In particular, the focus can be acknowledged as the way in which discourses are employed by the community to either allow brands into their digital space or extend the distance between themselves and the brands. Discourses and linguistic elements are also used to alienate and 'other' the brand. The idea of community, and the way in which it is constructed

by the community, is used to frame and structure other discourses. In essence, ‘community’ is the central subject– it is the centre point that underpins the other themes.

#### **4.3.2 Meta Narrative - Us vs Them -**

The community uses pronouns – ‘us’ ‘we’ ‘our’ contrasted with ‘you’ ‘you people’ - to communicate and build a typical ‘us’ and ‘them’ narrative. The brand is conceptualised as the ‘other’, which the community, through the language used, aims to keep at a distance, denying them membership to their space.

“can *brand twitter* stop using memes that aren’t 10 years old stick to what you do best the new memes are *for the people*”

“It’s only funny when *us commoners* do it”

“It’s only funny when *we* do it”

“*We, poor people*, can never have anything to *ourselves*.”

“*You people* have no shame”

“*They* shamelessly woke up and decided to try *us* today. *Big brands* are constantly testing *their* boundaries.”

“*Big corporations* trying to get involved with memes is so cringe to watch.”

The pronouns, and the wording that surrounds them, is a good starting point to begin understanding the way in which the community constructs the community-brand dynamic. Metonymically speaking, ‘commoner’ here is used to represent the community as a whole. Using this terminology, users paint themselves as the underdog – ‘poor people’ ‘commoners’ ‘*the people*’ – which is juxtaposed with the image of the brand that is constructed – ‘big brands’ ‘corporations’ – a metonym for capitalists and capitalism, which sees the community viewing brands as those that have a larger degree of control. Metaphorically rich, ‘commoner’ can be linked to larger discourses that underpin society and the ways in which these enable power and identity. The noun ‘commoner’ can be considered to be rooted in discourses of class. ‘Commoner’ draws upon a polarity of the marginalized and the privileged in society. It enables the construction of relations of domination and subordination between these two groups and implies an oppositional relation (Johnson, 2005). As such, the brand is painted as one that

dominates in society. In terms of identity and power, ‘commoner’, parallel to the social conception of the working class, solidifies a group identity and enables feelings of solidarity within the group. As such, this narrative enables two forms of power. Firstly, it conceptualises that the brand (*corporation*) holds power over the community, and ultimately society as a whole. It also enables power from within the community. ‘Commoner’ draws the community together in solidarity and positions them as opposing the brand.

This dualistic narrative constructed presents us an image of brands as large, impersonal entities that feed off of the community (in later sections, we see users metaphorically liken brands to mosquitos), while the community construct an image of them being weaker in comparison. The use of the ‘only’ to prepose ‘funny’, by not one, but multiple users, functions to express conditionality. This emphasises that the community consider that meme content created by the community is the *only* acceptable form of meme content. The discourse of community, in the way it is used here, functions to separate the community from brands within the digital space, and also serves as a foundation for subsequent discourses.

### ***The People Vs The Corporation -***

Interestingly, despite findings that indicate that the community have the upper hand in the digital space (Fournier and Avery, 2011, Gensler *et al.*, 2013, Peters *et al.*, 2013), the narrative that is crafted here by the community largely opposes this. However, in some instances, the community acknowledges their power in the digital space. Delving deeper, the tweet below helps us to develop a better understanding of how the community construct the brand in relation to themselves, revealing a richer image than just that of ‘us vs them’.

“Lmaooooo viral memes happen when *WE the people* make them happen.”

While ‘the people’ is used by the commenter to position the community in relation to that of the brand, the term here can reveal more about the construction of brand-community relations. ‘The People’, according to the dictionary, are a group of ‘ordinary’ people who do not have any special power or privileges. It seems, therefore, terms such as ‘the people’, ‘commoners’, and any reference to ‘ourselves’ when discussed in connection with brands and corporations, can be regarded as synonymous. They are a mass of people without special distinction – ‘commoners’, if you will, which was a term used by a member of the community earlier. This language is metaphorical in nature. Here, metaphors act as a tool to support understanding and

sensemaking of the community's position in relation to the brand. Metaphors function as lenses into a subjective reality and the construction of this reality (Öztel and Hinz, 2001). As such, this metaphorical conception reveals the way in which the community constructs and organises their construction of a brand. Here, 'the people' is metaphorically opposed to 'corporations'. The term corporation often emerges in discourses of law, of business, of commercialisation, and so on. These areas can be viewed as harsh and rigid, as opposed to community, which is a group of people with shared interests. This is the basis of many dualisms and polarities that are presented by the community.

The use of the acronym 'lmao' (laughing my ass off) at the beginning of the sentence is used here to suggest that the user is tweeting in response to a situation. The acronym is sometimes extended by adding additional o's to express that something is very funny. It can also be used in a sarcastic manner, which is the case in this instance. According to contextual cues, they are using irony and sarcasm to mock the suggestion or idea that internet memes can even become viral without the community. Internet memes become internet memes by the power of the community. This is reinforced by the use of the capital 'WE' before the user refers to the community as 'the people'. In this tweet alone, all three of the main discourses that emerge from within this community make themselves apparent, whether directly or indirectly. These will be briefly discussed below, and then examined at length individually.

#### **4.4 Primary Discourses - *Authenticity, Ownership, and Capitalism* -**

When breaking down the themes that are used to uphold the group's concept of community, it is apparent that this is embedded within three main discourses. These are as follows:

- a) authenticity;
- b) ownership; and
- c) capitalism.

Community is the central theme – it is the idea that serves as the *context* for the above discourses. Users use language to construct, and re-construct, discourses to communicate what is and what is not acceptable in terms of meme use in relation to the community and outsiders, which is where brands would fall. The root beliefs within the community's construction of the idea of community – us vs them, the people vs the corporation – carry over into subsequent

three themes that emerge from it (authenticity, ownership, and capitalism) providing legitimacy to the ideas communicated through them.

Primary Discourse	Emergence within the Community	Sample Quote
Authenticity	Authenticity emerged in community discussions to reveal what is considered to be the correct way to use internet memes. The community uses discourses of authenticity to establish who the ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are to the community, and to question the motivations behind brands’ usage of internet memes.	<p>Brands always overshoot using current meme trends and it always comes off corny as hell/trying too hard.</p> <p>How does this relate to buying clothes??</p> <p>Setting aside the questions of ownership, just look at this video. It’s so miserable. Broken, exhausted culture.</p> <p>The meme is usually organically created by Black twitter, then when the rest of Twitter catches wind of it, including the brand pages ran by white people, they converge to beat the shit out of it.</p> <p>It felt soooooo fake</p> <p>new rule: unless your staff is majority Black, can’t use Black memes on the company twitter</p>
Capitalism	Discourses of capitalism are employed by the community to highlight the co-option and commodification of internet memes by brands for their persona gain and the generation of profit.	<p>These brands constantly try to be apart of &amp; capitalize off the culture but when real issues arise they are dead silent. of stupid memes.</p> <p>If brands could stop using Twitter memes to promote their marketing agenda, that’d be great.</p> <p>Companies on twitter are not your friends. They’re advertising, and when they meme you into doing their work for them, they’re using your creativity and brand to sell their products</p> <p>brand personification is getting out of control and i hate it</p>
Ownership	A discourse of ownership is employed to challenge brands’ usage of internet memes and emphasise that the content produced by the community is a result of their collective interaction, and therefore they should be compensated if these are used by brands.	<p>Damn I know y’all didn’t just straight steal the meme from that young lady and trynna make profit off of it that’s low</p> <p>I’m sorry but it’s about time we start claiming cos these insta pages are literally gaining sooooo much off of what we’re giving out for free</p> <p>when are yall gonna start paying the Black people who create the slang and memes and jokes you steal &amp; profit off?</p> <p>You see how instead of stealing a product idea, they reach out to work with the creator? Brands take notes.</p>

*Table 5. Summary of Discourses Emerging from Black Twitter.*

#### 4.4.1 Authenticity

Authenticity appears to be the most prevalent theme within this community. Discourses of authenticity that emerge in discussions reveal what is considered to be the correct way to use internet memes. As such, this theme, which is both rich and multidimensional, serves to establish a better understanding of discourses at the *practice level*. Much can be determined about structures and institutionalised practices within the community from this theme. Within the theme of authenticity, ideas relating to organicity, impersonation, performativity, and representation. Through these ideas and the way in which they are constructed, the community taxonomises practices into categories of authenticity and inauthenticity. Foucault's (2000) conception of taxonomy is fundamentally concerned with the way in which individuals categorise the human world into arbitrary categories. The community construct the theme of authenticity within the context of internet memes and social media content, which they then strategically weave at the various levels of discourse to problematise or idealise behaviour. The community uses discourses of authenticity to establish who the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are to the community. In the context of brands' adoption of internet memes, the community employs discourses of authenticity to question the motivations behind brands' usage of internet memes, as well as highlighting that they are used by the brand to generate more profits. As Kates (2004) highlights, brand legitimacy can be achieved through a sustained commitment to a community's interests, which forms one of the bases for the community's questioning of brand intentions.

In excerpts discussed earlier, it is evident that the authenticity of brand usage of internet memes is called into question.

"It's *only funny* when us commoners do it"

"It's *only funny* when *we* do it"

Again, the conditional 'only' here is used to emphasise that memes are funny when used by the community, not when they are adopted by brands. However, delving into more tweets, we can begin to understand that this is not a Black and white issue. It is, instead, complex and context specific. While the community outright reject some of the co-opted attempts by brands, there are some contexts in which this is deemed acceptable. The tweets below offer a deeper look into this:

“Please stop using memes as content *unless* it's a) totally appropriate *and* b) you've got someone who *actually* 'gets' it creating them.”

The user pleads with brands to stop using internet memes for *content*, which in this context refers to subject matter that is used by the brand to appease to the community. However, they follow this up with the conjunction ‘unless’ to introduce exceptions to this statement. ‘Using memes as content’ is a significant and purposeful use of words here as the user is communicating the notion that internet memes are not naturally enmeshed within brands’ natural online activities. ‘Using’ is a term that suggests 1) an exploitative element to the adoption of internet memes by brands, and 2) an assumption that internet memes are the means to an end – the content is ‘used’ to achieve something, which in the wider context of the discussion alludes to company profits. The exceptions are offered in the form of a list, denoted by the use of a) and b) separated by an ‘and’, which signifies their sequential dependence. Internet meme usage may be excused if it is used in an appropriate context, and by someone who understands their application. Here, we are also introduced to the idea of cultural and social capital. Cultural and social capital can be transferred to the brand, and consequently injected into their content, by employing someone who ‘actually gets it’. Around the term ‘unless’, the user anchors discourses of manipulation and inauthenticity around discourses of representation and authenticity. A discourse of representation is not only used within the same context as authenticity, its appearance following the preposition ‘unless’ means it is presented as a prerequisite for achieving authenticity and creating legitimate content that is deemed acceptable by the group. Thus, the linguistic tools adopted by the user, and the discourses they inject into the tweet, are used to propel a discursive strategy of representation. The discourse of authenticity is being challenged here, and through this is being modified by the user who introduces exceptions in the text.

### ***Representation and Impersonation***

The discourse of authenticity produces texts that accrete to form new discourses, most notably those of representation and impersonation, which appear to be embedded throughout. These new discourses constitute new objects and concepts that appear to be of significance and relevance and importance to the community. This is particularly helpful in understanding the practice of using internet memes. Authenticity is valued by the community, and in practice this translates into allowing members of the community into positions within brands, offering their cultural and social capital to the company and enabling them to operate within the space in an

authentic manner. This seems to have been implemented by companies that receive positive responses. Discourses of representation are presented in discussions relating to authenticity by Black Twitter, and the Black Community in general. Placing this within its social context, beyond discussion surrounding the use of internet memes, the issue of representation of Black people in the mainstream is widely discussed by the community. And thus, this is interdiscursive in nature. Texts produced by the community, in the context of internet memes and social media content, include references to existing discourses, which in turn legitimises the text. Content is taken from the community by others and presented as their own for their personal gain, without acknowledging its originators.

“You know what’s annoying? When brands *take* popular memes or trends from Black twitter and *use* it for marketing and *it don’t be funny*”

The user begins the tweet with a question, using the discourse marker ‘*you know what*’ to emphasise the statement that follows it. ‘You know what’ also implies a level of shared knowledge that is needed to understand the context of the tweet, cementing the assumption that this is a topic that the community is aware of, and by implication, have previously discussed. Through the words ‘use’ and ‘take’, brands continue to be discursively framed as an entity that is rapacious and unethical, exploiting content created by the community for their personal gain (represented metonymically through term ‘marketing’, which here symbolises streams of corporate activities that aim to generate profit). In recent months, the app *Clubhouse* became popular amongst the community. This app allows users to create ‘rooms’ which are centred around topics. The rooms can be viewed as a digital stage, with moderators allowing the audience to ‘come up to the stage’ and offer their opinion on a topic. One of the rooms, which frequently discussed and debated relationship related issues, became viral on twitter. Due to the fact that not everyone is able to speak in the room, users took to Twitter to communicate their thoughts in relation to the topics discussed using room-specific hashtags. Due to the popularity of this, Boohoo, a fast fashion company, posted a tweet asking their audience to share their own relationship stories. The community, in particular the moderators and the room’s audience, began to criticise Boohoo. Their critique stemmed from the fact that Boohoo ‘took’ and ‘stole’ the idea without appropriately crediting the originators. The community also criticised Boohoo for not collaborating with the originators, and for appropriating an idea solely due to the appeal of its popularity. Discourses of authenticity make themselves apparent when the user infers that content is taken for the sole purpose of marketing, and nothing else. The

user separates the community and the brand (*'brands take from Black twitter'*) and relates this action to the outcome that content fails to resonate with the community (*it don't be funny*). This, when tied into the wider context, and the way in which the user separates the brand from the community, can be attributed to a lack of representation, which in effect, leads to a lack of authenticity.

Discourses of representation appear as the basis to the argument that brands lack the cultural and social capital to create content authentically, and so must supplement this by, essentially, employing community members into the company so that this capital may be transferred into the content. This idea is communicated quite clearly in the following tweets:

“This is what happens when you don't have Black executives at your company. You make hilariously racist memes without even knowing”.

“new rule: unless your staff is majority Black, you can't use Black memes on the company twitter”

“It's sad because most brands that are combing Black twitter memes have zero Black people on the team”

“I'm damn tired you know. All these fast fashion brands continually cashing in on movements and stealing from fat, Black, queer and trans creators. Just hire a diverse & intersectional team and maybe you could avoid the backlash.”

The theme of representation continues to be discussed within the context of the discourse of authenticity. Within this context, themes of inclusion, particularly that of racial inclusion, permeate these discourses. Metonyms such as *'cashing in'* and idioms such as *'combing [through] Black twitter memes'* continue to uphold the image that brands are built off the back of the community. Furthermore, much of these excerpts are laced with irony, particularly situational irony. Situational irony relates to outcomes that are the opposite of what is expected (Lucariello, 2007). Therefore, ironic unexpectedness is characteristic of this type of irony. For example, the first excerpt refers to an ironic outcome of the brands' attempt at creating an internet meme, which in this case was a Black Lives Matter related post shared by KFC. While the original post was a hoax, this comment is still insightful. The hoax brand post consisted of a chicken drumstick whose shadow created the shape of a raised fist. The association of fried chicken with the Black community is rooted in racist stereotypes that emerged in Blackface minstrelsy at the beginning of the 20th century (Mobley, 2014). The sharing of content that is

rooted in racist stereotypes, therefore, is painted to be ironic and an outcome of a lack of representation of Black individuals on social media teams. Through these excerpts, we can begin to see the ways in which this discourse lends itself to the practice level. While the discursive object remains the *content*, the discourse is birthing the subject position of a *content creator* or *social media manager*. The community quite explicitly refer to *executives*, *team*, and *staff*. Built upon the discourses of authenticity and representation, the community presents the solution to enabling brands' meme literacy, and thus increase transparency, is to hire individuals from the community into the company. This discursive strategy seeks to legitimise this practice as a mode for increasing authenticity and literacy.

The converse of the discourse of representation is the discourse of impersonation.

“been knew that! all the big meme ones “*relating*” to Black culture is white people behind the screen! just stealing shit they see off lesser-following accounts and *monopolizing* off it”

“I *want* brands to *act like* brands, or *at least* act like people speaking for a brand. I’m tired of brands *pretending* to be a best friend using emojis and gifs and memes. I don’t want to be friends with a brand.”

The theme of authenticity, or rather *inauthenticity*, materialises here in the first tweet, which was posted in response to a tweet in which the owner of a popular meme page who posted internet memes sourced primarily from Black Twitter, was outed as a non-Black individual. The user’s positioning of the term “relating” between speech marks functions to emphasise a supposed degree of relatability, alluding to the idea that it is not relatable at all. The term ‘behind the screen’ here can be viewed as literal: the party accused of impersonating *are* technically behind a screen. However, in the context of this tweet, ‘behind the screen’ is used as a metaphor for the real identity of the party and relates to larger discourses of virtuality and anonymity that is provided by the internet. The terms ‘stealing’ and ‘monopolisation’ continue to uphold the image that brands take and use content for their personal gain, and falls into discourses of capitalism which will be discussed later. This tweet focuses on impersonation in the context of racial identity.

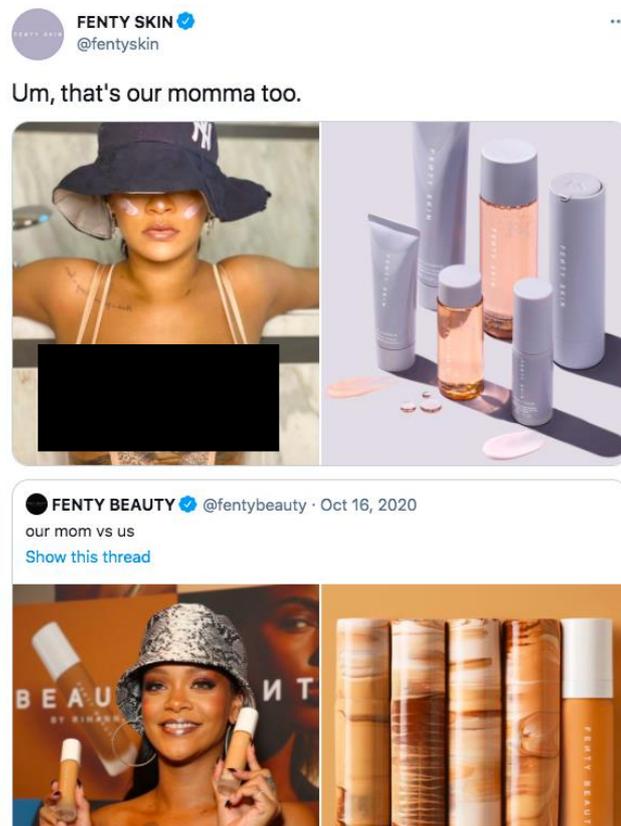
The second tweet frames impersonation in the context of humanisation of the brand, and through this, we can begin to understand certain expectations that the community has of a brand. Through the word ‘want’, the user reveals their expectations of the way brands may conduct themselves in online space. The phenomenon of brand humanisation has been well

documented, by both academics (mostly under the umbrella of brand personality) and by online users. Brands use their social media accounts to comment on current events that are of relevance to the community, using the same lexicon that the community would adopt. The user wants brands ‘to *act like* brands’, and the use of the phrase ‘act’ here is interesting. The implication of this is that the way brands behave, even on a default level, is a pretence, and as such inauthentic. This is confirmed in the following sentence where the user expresses that they are tired of brands ‘*pretending*’ to be their best friend, again tying into larger discourses of inauthenticity and impersonation. It is implied here, then, that the community views the brand as one with little sincerity and truthfulness. This has implications for the way the community receives and deciphers brand messages, and ultimately the regard in which they hold the brand.

“brands are kinda like if *mosquitos* were able to *gang* together and carefully *debate* the most effective way to wear *human suits* so that they could *sneak up* on you to *steal your blood*, except the blood is money”

These ideas are conveyed further in the extract above. However, the rich images offered via the metaphorical use of ‘mosquitos’, implies that brands are akin to insects that leech off of humans. The verb ‘gang’, which has negative and sinister connotations, is used here to describe the brands. The term ‘debate’, an active verb, implies that there is nothing passive about the way in which brands leech content – in fact, it is very active and deliberate. ‘Human suits’ is metonymic of impersonation – ‘suit’ suggests this can be worn and taken off, a persona that can be turned on and off depending on when the brand needs it. This, coupled with the metaphor ‘mosquito’, supports the construction of the brand as the ‘other’ (but here as a blood (*money*) sucking parasite) and the community as the ‘humans’. The excerpt takes on an ironic tone, with the observation framed sarcastically. The user constructs the way in which brands behave as impressive, as indicated through the positive adjective *effective* and positive adverb *carefully*. However, through this, it ultimately seeks to express annoyance and irritation. Even likening brands to mosquitos, which are considered to have irritating qualities from the way they sound to the way their bites cause itching, is indicative of the irritation the user wishes to convey.

In some instances, it appears that these constructions are forgone, with the community using positive language and phrasing towards internet memes posted by brands:



*Figure 17. A playful tweet response between two brands (Fenty Skin and Fenty Beauty), which uses a meme format that was popular at the time.*

“Okay Social media team”

“This was the BEST makeup launch hands down”

“monumental moment tho... revolutionized makeup fr”

“I love this family”

This seemingly clashes with discourses of community, wherein the community distances itself from the brand and paints it to be soulless and manipulative. Fenty Beauty’s presence in the community since its inception, as well as the favourable views the community hold towards Rihanna, seem to overpower this discourse. A favourable figure being the face of the brand clashes with the image of the brand being soulless, and this could further explain the positive attitude towards the brand’s co-option of internet memes. The humanisation of brands is

frowned upon and is problematised, but seems to be tolerated here. This reveals that while the discourses appear to be stable, in relation to users pushing brands from the digital space, viewing them as ‘money-sucking corporations’ that ‘pretend to be your friend’ is a highly unstable proposition that is contested and greatly dependent upon context. The use of the term ‘family’, in the last extract for example, constructs an image of the brand that is different to what has been constructed up to this point. However, the term is preceded by the preposition ‘this’, and so the user still views the brand to exist outside of their digital space as a community. Within this context, the tweet was a meme exchange between two of Rihanna’s brands: Fenty Skin and Fenty Beauty. The meme involves posting your parent alongside a picture of yourself, to which the Fenty Beauty posted Rihanna (as their founder), and alongside a picture of their products. Fenty Skin then jokingly responded “*that’s our momma too*” to the post. Consequently, ‘family’ in this context is signified in reference to the meme and can also be interpreted to be a synonym for umbrella branding. Regardless, the phrase ‘family’ being preposed with ‘this’ is significant as it reveals that the brand is still held at arm’s length. The user does not use collective language, such as ‘my’ or ‘our’, to unify themselves with the ‘family’. They show appreciation for the brand while not associating themselves with the brand.

The tensions within the discourse is evidenced further by a user, who published an opinion piece entitled ‘Brands on Twitter Are Not Your Friends, They Just Want Your Money’, in which they stated that social media allows brands to express sentiments that they would not get away with in regulated adverts. To place this within its context, the piece was published during a season of Love Island, a dating reality television show which brought the community together, enabling brands join in online conversation. The opinion piece continues to uphold the discourses employed earlier, woven around ideas of community and capitalism.

“In doing this, they hope that *rather than see* them for the *blood and money-sucking corporations* they are, we’ll see them as peers. We’ll imagine them getting wasted in a ‘spoons, getting a spray tan and signing off messages with tons of emoji kisses in their fictional group chat, populated with *‘their girls’* I Saw It First and Missguided.”

The first extract, rich in imagery and metaphor, functions to express the same sentiments that other users have expressed. Through metaphors that paint the brand as a free-riding parasite that seek to satisfy their own self-interests, polarities in discourses in the form of insider/outsider, authentic/inauthentic, and credibility/deception are present. The user provides

a rich image of the way in which the consumer constructs and makes sense of brand conduct on social media. The community know that brands are posting for engagement, which in turn generates profit, but still view them as ‘peers’. The is built upon further:

“Our *fickleness* as viewers is because *we’re human*; these companies are *fickle* because they’re *trying to sell us co-ords*.”

In the second extract, the term ‘fickleness’ functions as a pivot to present two different discourses. To be fickle is to change frequently, particularly in regard to one’s loyalties or affections. In the first instance, the author attributes the community’s fickleness to the fact that they are human. We are thus presented with a discursive polarity of natural/unnatural, authentic/inauthentic, normal/abnormal behaviour, contributing to, and further legitimising, the idea that brands are soulless entities that are different to the community, who are human and, by implication, ‘normal’. Fickleness attributed to being human also implies an involuntary aspect to this, and so is unintentional. The author then contrasts this with fickleness of brands, attributing this to the fact that they are trying to ‘*sell us co-ords*’. A discourse of manipulation and inauthenticity is employed here to make sense of brands’ conduct in the way they partake in community conversations and adopt community language. It implies a sinister intention behind the action, and again, implies action that is deliberate, intentional, and calculative. The term ‘co-ord’, which refers to co-ordinated items of clothing, here acts as a metonym for fast-fashion, and in turn, represents mass consumption and marketing, which placed within the context of capitalism implies an element of exploitation. Brands such as I Saw It First and Missguided (which are explicitly mentioned), and other brands within this group, such as Boohoo and PrettyLittleThing, like other fast fashion brands, operate by churning out high volumes of sweatshop-made clothes daily. As these stores operate primarily online and use cheap labour and materials, they are able to keep clothes inexpensive meaning that more articles of clothing can be consumed. These practices have been widely discussed and contested and have been deemed to be unethical and exploitative. Thus, this view has been *legitimised*. The author embeds this already objectified discourse, indirectly into their comment to offer validity to, and naturalise, their construction of brand intentions in terms of engagement on social media.

“Brands *infiltrating* online spaces and *performing* creepy mimicry is the most *obvious of Trojan horses*, yet we still *perceive them as human*.”

To ‘infiltrate’ is to enter, or gain access to, a space covertly in order to gain secret information or cause damage (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This, coupled with the word ‘performing’, employs a discourse of impersonation and inauthenticity to continue to perpetuate the idea that the brand is cunningly invading spaces for an ulterior motive. The following part, however, is the most significant. Continuing on with the themes of infiltration and performance, the author inserts the metaphor of the Trojan Horse, likening brand activities to this. Preposed with the superlative ‘the *most*’ to describe the actions’ blatancy implies an element of knowledge, that this is widely known by the community, but they still ignore this somehow. The story of the Trojan Horse, a large wooden horse that was constructed [parallel with *performing*] by the Greeks to gain entrance into [parallel with *infiltrate*] Troy during the Trojan War (Homer, 2015). The horse was taken into the city gates, and Greek warriors emerged from it, who opened the gates to allow the Greek army in. In this context, this story is used as a metaphor for an entity that appears to be harmless on the surface, but is underneath working to infiltrate and undermine an ‘enemy’. It can be implied, then, that the brand is an ‘enemy’ to the community. This can begin to uncover the hegemonic structure that exists within the digital space. Through the dominating discourses upheld by the community, a hegemonic structure, in which the community dictate the status quo and the brands are obliged to submit to, can be established. The fact that the brand is seen to be ‘performing’ and are ‘infiltrating’ alludes to the belief that the community is the dominant group within the space.

#### **4.4.2 Capitalism**

Unsurprisingly capitalism as a theme is an idea that crops up throughout community discussion. This dimension builds upon themes of authenticity that have already been discussed but now, instead of regarding the co-option as inauthentic, explore the reasons for this through the lens of capitalism. Ideas within this theme are centred around the co-option and commodification of internet memes by brands for their personal gain.

“I’ll be honest all this *is just a marketing thing, it feels so hollow* I hate capitalism man”

“*Amazing how brands are using memes for adverts now as much as possible*”

The rise in the adoption of internet memes by brands is acknowledged by the community. In the excerpts above, this is quite explicitly tied to advertising and marketing, which the community constructs as a by-product of capitalism. Users employ discourses of authenticity,

which are interdiscursively woven with discourses of marketing and capitalism, to make sense of the use of internet memes by brands. Discourses of marketing, in this instance, are problematised to convey the hollowness of brand meme content. Using themes already discussed to understand this further, the community regard the brand to be a faceless, soulless entity that operates selfishly in its best interests. Lacking the personality and the personability of an individual from the community, meme usage, when coming from a brand, does not resonate with the community in comparison to internet memes posted by members of the community themselves.

“it was only a *matter of time*”

“*When* brands start using memes”

“capitalism is a disease and we keep feeding it”

The commodification of internet memes is painted as an inevitability, as indicated by the phrasing ‘a matter of time’ in the first extract, and ‘when’ in the second. This reveals that the community views this to be a predictable part of brands’ existence on social media. Both tweets are negative in tone and appear to be enveloped with an air of exhaustion and inevitability, almost as if this is something that cannot be stopped or prevented by the group. Through this, the image that is constructed is almost that of the brands *catching up* to the consumer or uncovering their secret location. This can be supported by imagery presented within the theme of authenticity through the terms ‘infiltrating’ and the metaphorical use of the story of the Trojan Horse, as well as the imagery of likening brands to mosquitos. This can be attributed to the fact that the community dominates the online space, which brands must assimilate to. However, this is not constructed in this way by the community, who paint the actions of the brands as very intentional and as having impure intentions.

“cuz *most ppl* dont want *everything to be an advertisement*, memes for a lot of people are like the *common man's entertainment* and are *something fun and untouched by corporations* ... id even argue part of the fun of memes is that *theyre just silly jokes or pages run by randos online*”

The extract above expands on this idea. The discourse of commodification is embedded within the context of the digital space. While social media apps began as a way to keep in touch with friends and family, they were eventually bought out by larger corporations, who redesigned

them to be customer-centric, rather than community-centric. In fact, the current versions of major social media platforms place a greater focus on the generation of sales. Goods are displayed in posts, which can now be linked directly to the shop website and purchased from there. Alternatively, Instagram has replaced the ‘notifications’ tab with a ‘shop’ tab. The community has become a commodity. The user then goes on to describe internet memes as ‘*common man’s entertainment*’. The use of the term ‘common’, and the way it continues to be repeated across the community continues to uphold the image of the community as ordinary common people, which can only exist when opposed with an entity with more power, in this case the corporation. Memes are then described as something fun and untouched by corporations. Untouched, here, can imply a pureness and authenticity. Internet memes are pure, and real, when they come from the community. When they are touched by corporations, they become impure. The user then presents an argument, preposed by the adverb ‘even’, to suggest that what is presented after will be surprising. This signifies that this may be an uncommon viewpoint within the community. The user asserts that the primary appeal of internet memes is that they are ‘silly’, which signifies their insignificance and fleeting spontaneity, jokes that are created by ‘randos’ (random people) online. The polarity this presents us with is that the use of internet memes by brands is meticulously planned. Corporations employ social media managers who, using their meme literacy and knowledge of the digital space, seize upon the opportunity to engage in trends in an organic way (Fournier and Avery, 2011) This, inherently, is spontaneous in nature, and so clashes with the community’s construction. However, the social media manager, in this instance, is not a ‘rando’, but an individual who has gone through a selection process to gain their new role, which is in and of itself a planned process. The construction of the individual running the brand account is expanded upon below:

“ok but like. why do people get so angry at brands for using memes. like.....who do u think is behinds the accounts???”

The user contests discourses that present an image that have constructed the brand to be a faceless and soulless entity. The function of this tweet is, in essence, to bring to the foreground the individuals who are behind the brand account. Much of the discussion on brands refers to them simply as that: a brand. This term, abstract and vague in nature, linguistically functions to further the distance between the brand from the community. The use of the “like .....” before the rhetorical question here serves to highlight the obviousness of the point. Brands behave like a human, because they are, quite literally, powered by humans. However, this still

does not contest the intentions of the brand and their use of internet memes in this new, positive, context.

“brands: let *creators* use their *personal tone* when creating content. I know you wanna hit certain speaking points, but they get more engagement when they *act like themselves*. their *personality* is what attracted their audience in the first place

“a tweet drafted by a brand: 10 likes. a tweet using my personal tone & memes: 10k likes”

This ideas of personability and personhood continue above. These tweets come from a member of the community who specialises in dermatology, and who regularly tweets product updates suitable for women of colour. The user’s account is a mix of tweets relating to their own personal life, product recommendations, sponsored posts, and the like. The user also regularly engages in community discourse, while also initiating her own. In the tweets above, the user is addressing brands and offering a critique about the tone of sponsored messages from influencers within the community. The tweets are underlined by discourses of authenticity and personability and are interwoven with discourses of public relations. Discourses of authenticity, capitalism, and ownership are mobilised to construct an image of internet memes from brands as hollow and a by-product of capitalism. Here, the same discourses are employed strategically to add dimension and nuance to the discourse.

“Why don't these places *just* sell/promote clothes and *shut up*?”

“Even if they *do somehow* get engagement, what is that *actually* doing for your business objectives? Make useful *AND* good content!”

Some of the community’s expectations of how brands should behave are revealed here. Previous tweets highlighted that the community does not want brands to act like their ‘best friend’, and in this context it implies brands inserting themselves into community spaces, adopting community lexicon, and parading around as a member of the community. The use of the adverb ‘just’ in the first extract reveals that this is the only expectation the community have of brands – selling and the promotion of merchandise. Interestingly, brand activities on social media, which humanise and personify the brand, do fall under promotional activities. However, from the context of the Black Twitter community, this implies marketing in the traditional sense: mass messages, instead of an infiltration of community spaces. The second excerpt continues to build on this and brings to the forefront the issue of perceived misalignment. The

use of the adverb ‘somehow’ in connection with gaining engagement on brand posts suggests that a level of satisfactory engagement is unlikely to be achieved by the brand. The manifestation of the negative discourses that surround brand practices is evident here on a practice level. The community do not engage with these posts. The user then goes on to question the objective of the use of internet memes by brands. Tying this in with concepts of impersonation that were brought up earlier, it is evident that the community does not view internet memes to be a natural fit in terms of brand activities.

#### **4.4.3 Ownership**

Naturally, wherever the idea of capitalism is discussed, the questioning of ownership follows. While this is not always explicitly tied to capitalism, it is an idea that naturally follows from this. Capitalism can be regarded as the control of industries by private owners for profit. Ownership is embedded with this, and consequently emerges frequently within the community’s discourse. The community regard the content they produce as their own, and a product of their collective interaction.

“Slightly related I’d use #BlackTwitter as an example *representative* of Black culture. Major corporations steal memes, jokes, dances all the time for profit which is quite similar to most all other Black culture throughout history. And if not stolen, co-opted, w/e you want to call it”

The user, quite explicitly, constructs Black Twitter as a representation of Black culture. Elements of Black culture, historically and currently, are considered to have been co-opted and appropriated by non-Black individuals and groups, who then present and modify these elements of culture and present them as their own. Common genres that crop up within this conversation are music (jazz, rock’n’roll, blues), elements of pop culture (lexicon, fashion), and the like. Beginning the tweet by contextualising and rooting the statement within a well-established conversation, the user provides legitimacy to their subsequent argument. They then continue maintaining the conceptualisation of the brand as a ‘major corporation’, an ‘other’ that is distant from the community, who steal for their personal gain. This is set against a historical context and compared to the way in which Black culture has been co-opted over the years. The user interdiscursively weaves historically situated discourses of racial injustice and discourses of appropriation, with already established discourses of inauthenticity and manipulation. As such,

a new understanding of the brand emerges. When foregrounded against this historical context, the brand is now constructed as an oppressor.

According to Francis (2021), capitalism is often conceived as primarily concerned with contracts and markets, however, it is more accurately rooted in colonialism. Therefore, there exists a historic relation between violence and capitalism. Therefore, entities continuing to perpetuate, or embody, capitalism (such as brands) are diametrically opposed to the interests of the community. Sobande (2019) expands on this further – brands attempt to tap into public discourse that paints them to be allied with the interests of a community. In particular, when brands do not indicate any sustained commitment to addressing matters that are of interest to the community, their co-option of the identities of marginalised groups is viewed as inauthentic and exploitative. Therefore, here, the issue of ownership and the co-option of community-produced content, within the context of the community, can be viewed as having a historical context.

“And while you can say "it belongs to everyone" one group consistently monetizes it to great effect. It's like comedians stealing another comedian's jokes, or magicians another's trick- after a while if there's a pattern, you start trying to direct your business to the creators.”

This is expanded upon above. The issue of ownership is not simply a question of who has created the content but is embedded within wider historical discourses of appropriation and injustice. The user constructs this by first breaking down current discourses of ownership. Much of the discourse relating to ownership of content online has been grounded on the themes of average social media users and ownership of the content they share, the issue of intellectual property, copyright, and monetisation. This is rooted in the context of the law, specifically the rules and regulations that govern and dictate what is acceptable in the business practices. The user borrows from these discourses to frame the issue. The first sentence of the tweet functions to deconstruct the issue of ownership and detach it from the aforementioned discourses and then begins to weave it into a new discourse. The user deconstructs to reconstruct again. The term ‘*while*’ is significant here. The user does not seek to diminish or dispute the arguments that have been previously made in the context of the law, but simply introduce a new background and perspective for understanding the issue. The user then presents this as a pattern of behaviour, with reference to the historical context in which the discourse is situated. Both of the extracts discussed thus far in the context of ownership seek to embed and intertextualise

the issue of the co-option of internet memes and content within a historical context, providing the basis for further discussion surrounding ownership.

“the thievery. have you no shame???”

“Big brands have no shame whatsoever”

“Damn I know y’all didn’t just straight steal the meme from that young lady and tryna make profit off of it that’s low”

The construction of brands as big, soulless entities continues here as evident through the term ‘big brands’ in the second extract, and in the implied polarity within the term ‘young lady’ (human, harmless, opposed with non-human, ominous). The community appear to be ascribing an emotion (*shame*) to the brand. This contradicts with their construction of brands as a non-human entity, which by implication, cannot feel emotions. The same discourses may lead to opposing, but not contradictory, practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Discourses of capitalism and ownership lead the community to construct brands as being soulless, money-sucking entities, but they also lead to discourses that argue that there are humans behind the account, and so the brands’ conduct can be justified. This leads to discourses of representation which in turn births practices such as hiring community members into the company in positions that allow them to navigate social media in a literate manner. But, in turn, this is opposed as the use of this content is framed as theft. Of course, there is nuance that allows one to explain away these opposing practices. Internet memes adopted by brands would not be considered theft if they were created by a member of the community working for the brand, and so on.

“These large brands are nothing *without* stealing from BIPOC. *Start* normalising paying us for our work rather than *perpetuating* the exploitation of us as a people.

“when are yall gonna *start* paying the Black people who *create* the slang and memes and jokes you *steal & profit off?*”

The community acknowledges that brands’ social media presence is largely dependent on the content they share. An additional layer is added to the discourse of ownership here. The idea of theft was introduced in the previous excerpts, but this is now weaved in with the idea of providing credit, and monetary compensation, for the use the community’s content. Pivoted around preposition ‘without’, the first user attributes the brands very existence to the way in which they appropriate and ‘steal’ from communities of colour. This is underpinned by

discourses of exploitation and theft and serves to invalidate the brand's identity. Brand identities are very carefully constructed to resonate with its audience, to stand out against competition, and to withstand time. The user is, essentially, popping the brand's bubble and contesting the idea that construction of brand identity and image is an original concept that is masterfully and intelligently created, and instead frames it as something that is built on exploitation and theft. This continues the themes of inauthenticity and unethicity previously mentioned. The first and the second user then use the term 'start' in the context of paying the community for their content, implying that this does not currently occur. This is reinforced in the first tweet through the term 'perpetuating' in the context of exploitation. Again, this continues to place ideas within a historical context which provides legitimacy to them.

"Yikes wouldn't it be easier to just collaborate with *instead of* taking their idea"

"i love that they collaborated with the artist *instead of* taking all her ideas and profiting from it."

"You see how *instead of* stealing a product idea, they reach out to work with the creator?  
Brands take notes."

Discourses of collaboration now re-enter the context of ownership. Each of the excerpts uses the adverb 'instead of' to present a polarity in the discourse in the form of theft/collaboration, where the former is problematised and the latter idealised. Collaboration is, therefore, presented here as a strategy for brands, and is quite explicitly expressed within the phrase '*brands take notes*', meaning that other brands should follow their lead. An emphasis is placed upon collaboration and the creation of a culture of co-creation on social media between brands and the community. The term 'reaching out' suggests an element of activeness. The community places the onus on the brand to initiate contact with the person whose content they wish to adopt. Furthermore, this is followed up by 'work' and thus indicates collaboration. The idea is not to simply ask consent from the community, but to include them in the process of creation.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

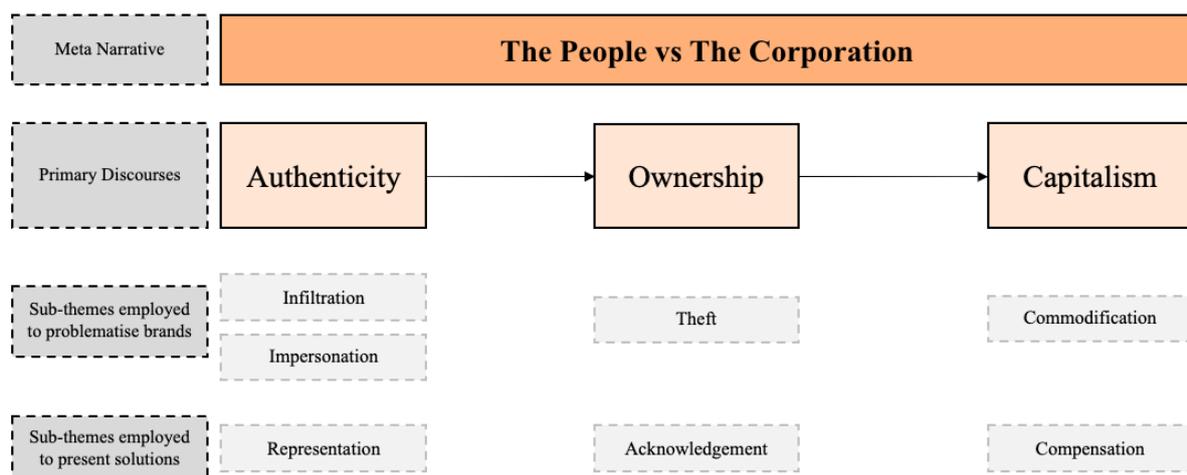
The discursive narrative of corporate brand memes within Black Twitter are constructed around the theme of community. Language is used purposefully to push brands away from the digital space which the community occupy. The brand is constructed as an entity that is soulless and money-driven, while the community is constructed as human and authentic. The language used

by the community displays a typical ‘us vs them’ narrative, which is expanded upon to create a ‘The People vs the Corporation’ narrative. When examining this term in its historical context, discourses that involve ‘the people’ always arise when collective communities are subjected to what they deem to be an imminent threat. ‘The People’, a self-ascribed moral and legitimate referent used by communities, band together to oppose the corrupt, projected as an individual with authority, a higher power in government, the monarchy, and so on. Thus, brands are constructed as a corrupt authority that the community rallies against. This is a historical discourse that over time has become institutionalised and objectified. Embedded in a new digital context, this serves to structure, define, and colonise new fields and spaces. This shared consciousness and ‘we-ness’ displayed by the community is typical of that of an online community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Fournier 1998). Members are connected and express an affinity to one another. Brands are pushed away and othered and members become protective of their space, as evidenced through their discourses and use of language. As discussed in the contextual background section of this chapter, members of Black Twitter challenge the mainstream and status quo, which is evident throughout the primary discourses that emerge from this community. These discourses (authenticity, capitalism, and ownership) are consequently employed to this end.

Foucault’s (1971) ideas relating to discourse and discursive formations appear to be of great relevance here, helping to understand the relevance of emerging discourses, particularly that of authenticity, and its implication for the existence of brands within digital space. Discourses provide schemes of thought and determine what is “thinkable” or “sayable” within any sociocultural environment. As such, it affects the way individuals, and through a process of homogenisation, groups of people, perceive and make sense of the social world around them. It produces a standard way of being and seeing, which is upheld and maintained by the group. Social media communities are homogenised. They operate using similar schemes that are made available to them by their social landscape and shared cultural norms. Brands entering the space have not been socialised within the group, and as such, do not attain the same social processes and internalised thought structures that are common to the group. As such, their behaviour, even if it involves *perfect* impersonation of the group, is viewed as inauthentic. Once the community constructs a brand’s behaviour as inauthentic, an interdiscursive process begins wherein other discourses are strategically combined to legitimise and provide validity this construction. For example, the community weaves discourses of representation within the context of authenticity to problematise a brand’s behaviour. A brand’s attempts at producing

community-specific content are inauthentic and inorganic because they are not produced by community members.

The figure below summarises the key findings from the community: a meta narrative of ‘The People vs The Corporation’ is evident, with this deployed via the primary discourses of authenticity, ownership, and capitalism. Through debate and discussion, the employment of these primary discourses produces texts that accrete to form new discourses. For example, through debate regarding authentic practices of internet meme usage, a new discourse is presented, which is that of infiltration: brands that utilise community specific internet memes do so with the aim of infiltrating the community space. This seeks to problematise the brand. However, from this, a discourse of representation is presented to provide solutions: brands must hire community members who are able to offer the cultural and social capital that will enable brands to use internet memes in an authentic manner.



*Figure 18. Overview of findings from Black Twitter.*

There are many dialectical dualisms, both explicit and implied, that are presented by the community that contribute to the construction of the discourse of community. For example, there is community/corporation, authentic/inauthentic, human/soulless, organic/inorganic, natural/unnatural, and so on. While this continues to construct the ideas mentioned previously, it also serves to produce new discourses that will go on to constitute new objects and concepts. In one of the excerpts, the vivid imagery provided in the description of brands as mosquitos who gang up together to debate ways in which to act human, is one that quite clearly implies that the community is intentionally alienated from such practice, and such brand practice is frowned upon. It is portrayed by the community as inauthentic and impersonative. These

discourses are then strategically employed to legitimise the need for the inclusion of the community in marketing activities. For example, a lack of authenticity may be caused by displays of insufficient cultural and social capital. The community repackages this to construct the hiring of community members into the company as a remedy for this. Brands ‘taking’ content from the community without offering them compensation is problematised through discourses of ownership and capitalism. However, these same discourses are employed to suggest that content produced by the community is a form of labour, and consequently they must be compensated fairly for this. As Vargo and Lusch (2014) discuss in their works on service dominant logic, consumers are active, and wish to be involved in all aspects of the marketing process. The language that leads to these logics in the context of internet memes and their brand usage is evident here. This idea is disclosed in discourses surrounding ownership, which leads to ideas surrounding collaboration (‘cocreation’, in academic terms), which will be discussed in the following sections.

Viewing the issue of representation and authenticity in practice can reveal these discourses to be unpredictable. Fenty Beauty, for example, a makeup brand created by singer Rihanna, routinely receives positive engagement from the online community. This can be accredited to the way in which the brand was built, embedding itself within the community since its inception. In an industry that routinely ignores and overlooks Black women, the brand acknowledges the community and caters towards them. Its initial launch consisted of a total of 40 skin foundations, covering skin tones from the very fair to very deep. This set a precedent in the cosmetics industry, and consequently, brands which released skin products but did not release an extensive range were vilified. Evidently, Fenty Beauty cemented itself within the community’s social landscape and continues to uphold this place by contributing to community discussions, jokes, and, essentially, speaking the community’s language. In response to memes posted by the brand, which have injected brand related messages through a process of remixing, the community has responded positively, either congratulating the brand’s team, or engaging in conversation, which normalise and legitimise the brand’s co-option of internet memes. It appears that discourses of authenticity and impersonation that are employed to criticise brands are dismissed, or better yet modified, when brands initiate ‘brand parties’. Brand parties, as defined by Fournier and Avery (2011), refer to social media events which brands themselves begin, as opposed to events created by the community which the brand later joins (or ‘coat-tails’, as described by Fournier and Avery, 2011). While the above is not entirely a ‘brand party’ by definition as the brands were interacting through an internet meme produced by the

community, it does involve an element of brand partying as characterised by brands interacting with one another, which in turn generates engagement from the community.

Therefore, it is evident that there are tensions within the discourse. Community interaction with Fenty Beauty's post is a prime example of this. It is, however, possible to argue that Rihanna, and by association her brands, are viewed favourably within the community, and as a result this may skew any reactions to the brands involvement and engagement with the community. By way of explication, another brand post by Weetabix and Heinz Beans can be used to further demonstrate the tensions between these discourses. This takes place in the form of another instance of a brand party, where events were created entirely by the collaboration between Weetabix and Heinz Beans. This interaction was understood as positive by the community. This post took place in the form of an image of a Weetabix product in a bowl, topped with Heinz beans, accompanied by the caption "*Why should bread have all the fun, when there's Weetabix? Serving up Beanz on bix for breakfast with a twist. #ItHasToBeHeinz #HaveYouHadYourWeetabix @HeinzUK*". In response to this, many brand pages engaged with the tweet in a humorous, but self-relevant way. For example, the NHS official twitter page

responded with “*this tweet should come with a health warning*”, while the Government Communications Headquarters responded with “*we found... no intelligence*”.



**Figure 19.** A viral tweet shared by Weetabix, which resulted in a ‘brand party’. A response from another brand (PrettyLittleThing) is visible. In the tweet, they reference the Gorilla Glue girl meme (a woman who had gone viral for using spray super glue instead of hairspray, resulting in her needing surgery), which was trending with their target audience, adding an element of intertextuality.

While there were pockets of users that commented that this was simply a marketing and PR tactic, the reception was largely positive. The tensions within the discourses outlined in this chapter, is apparent in the above examples. Through discourses of authenticity and the construction of the brand as an entity that operates solely for the generation of profit, brands’ adoption of internet memes is problematised. However, discourses of authenticity are employed here to idealise the brand party initiated by Weetabix, owing to the fact that it is original, brand relevant, and does not capitalise on trends created by the community. Brand parties allow brands to create events on their own terms, minimising the risk of incorrect co-

option of an internet meme or trend. As such, discourses are modified and contested within this new context. Internet meme usage can be excused because brands are no longer ‘taking’ ‘leeching’ or ‘stealing’ but are creating their own parties.



*Figures 20 and 21. Examples of responses from other brands to Weetabix's tweet. Note that these responses are made in brand relevant ways.*

This questioning leads to the emergence of discourses of capitalism. Inauthentic practices are viewed within a discourse of capitalism. Discourses of capitalism in the context of internet memes and brand usage are employed by the community as a backbone for critiquing the commodification of organic group-produced content. What makes a commodity is its possibility for trading for profit. The community constructs the adoption of internet memes by brands as an outcome of the commodification of their organic socialisation and creative efforts. The discourses of commodification are prevalent within the discourse of capitalism. As mentioned in the analysis section, social media is increasingly becoming commercial in nature. Consumption is encouraged through rampant use of advertising, and functions which were community-centric have now been replaced with consumption-centric features. As such, brands are quickly taking over a space that was deemed to be for the community, and with it they are (inauthentically) adopting community practices and content in a bid to appeal to them. the resultant environment has been deemed as inorganic, unnatural, and in one instance was described as ‘hollow’. This, when understood in parallel to discourses of authenticity, makes

sense. What does seem paradoxical, however, is the construction of advertising that is completed on behalf of the brand by an influencer within the community. Internet memes coming from brands are hollow. However, when they are brand messages that are delivered by a community member using community lexicon, they are well received. While this seems paradoxical, it is rational when placed in the context of other ideas already discussed. For example, within the context of representation (*'[brands should] stop using memes as content unless it's a) totally appropriate and b) you've got someone who actually 'gets' it creating them'*), the community would like community specific content to be delivered *by* members of the community. This is because the community are able to utilise and transform content appropriately, in a manner that is authentic and relevant. The construction of a brand narrative, therefore, needs to be co-created within online communities, in collaboration with the community. In their article 'The Uninvited Brand', Fournier and Avery (2011) discuss the concept of open-source branding. This, essentially, is branding that takes place when the brand is placed within organic cultural conversations, and in turn allows consumers a great deal of power in terms of the direction the brand takes. By implication, this draws upon the participatory, collaborative, and socially linked behaviour within communities, enabling consumers to serve as creators and disseminators of branded content. This is largely evident here, where discourses are employed to legitimise this as a solution for brands. When placing this back into an 'economic' context, the community does not wish capitalistic behaviour to extend into their digital space, and instead idealise discourses that point towards a more 'socialist' and equitable approach – brands should not dominate the space, should not take what is not theirs, and should not take without returning.

In addition to this, the concept of community is constructed in a very different way to those of commercial brands. Influencers emerged from the community due to their popularity. Whereas, in contrast, brands are seen as outsiders, money-hungry, and soulless. As such, influencers already have advantage over brands in the way they are viewed by the community, making their use of internet memes, which are underpinned by consumerist and branded messages, to be acceptable. Furthermore, these attempts will come across naturally and organically as the influencer will masterfully interject these into organic conversations, in a way that does not make them appear out of place or predatory. There is much more nuanced than the influencer vs brand binary. In many cases, some pages, which are created for the purpose of sharing community relevant internet memes, begin to post advertisements amongst their content. This is often viewed by community members as inevitable. Once brands join social media, they post

internet memes, and when meme pages become popular, brands seek to advertise through their pages. Discourses of representation and personability can be reintroduced here to address this disparity. Brands and meme pages are, in most cases, faceless. Influencers, on the other hand, have built their popularity through their personality. Discourses of representation and discourses of personability allow influencers to post brand content in a way that is palatable for the community. The community offers various strategies for brands. They can employ individuals who are competent in creating content, those creating content should be representative of the community, and content must be relatable and personable. All these requirements are met by the influencer.

Finally, discourses of ownership were analysed. In relation to this the notion of theft in the context of digital content was introduced. This was naturally followed by ideas relating to paying individuals for their content, and then followed by discourses of collaboration. The theme of ownership, and the way in which other discourses emerge from it is very insightful in terms of how discourses change and become layered. Discourses of ownership are employed and reconstructed to perpetuate the narrative that content is owned by the community and is therefore 'stolen' when adopted by brands. Brands should, as a result, compensate the community and acknowledge the originators of the internet meme that they are using. These build to reveal discourses of collaboration, which are idealised and presented as a solution. Interestingly, discourses of ownership have a rich historical context within the community, and this is embedded within the social media context which serves to legitimise other emergent discourses. The oppression of the Black community, and Black individuals in society in general, is a topic that has entered the mainstream many times throughout history. Consequently, this topic is widely acknowledged and understood. By placing the issue of ownership of social media content, framed within the lens of oppression, into a historical context, the discourse is strengthened. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the community frequently engages in debate with one another. Many of the internet memes produced by the community encourage and catalyse debate. Internet memes are a digestible medium, which can characteristically be shared easily from individual to individual, be easily modified by the individual to be reflective of their outlook and fed back to the network. As such, tensions in the discourses within the community become apparent due to the fact they are constantly contested and modified through debate and discussion, enabled and catalysed by various internet memes. The historicity of some discourses, such as that of ownership, make them more stable and less likely to be discarded or changed dramatically.

This also legitimises the community's emergent solution, which is that of collaboration. All the negative discourses that have been presented by the community offer positive discourses which are underlined by a need for collaboration between the community and the brand. This collaboration, however, must be mutually beneficial. Through discourses of capitalism, it is evident that the community already constructs the brand as profit-driven, and the community's understanding of the extent of this profit is implied through the primary narrative of 'the people versus the corporation'. Corporations are typically large entities that have many people working for them, and consequently turn over large profits, which the community would want to be fairly compensated from. Vargo and Lusch's (2014) ideas of service dominant logic continue to dominate here. Communities demand that they be involved in the marketing process, and that they be given appropriate acknowledgement and fiscal rewards for the products of their socialisation.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

While arising from different contexts, discussion within the community regarding the use of internet memes by brands are underpinned by common discourses. These are primarily those of authenticity, capitalism, and ownership, which are framed through a discourse of community. As such, there are certain 'rules' that govern and guide the discussion on internet meme usage by brands. Discourses of community structure the way in which authenticity, capitalism, and ownership in the community context are constructed, which then structure the way in which these are constructed in the context of internet meme usage by brands.

In most instances, the language chosen by the community suggests that they construct the brand as a villainous entity. They use language to distance the brand from themselves in the digital space. While, technically, all it takes to join an online conversation is to simply add your own input, the brands' input is constantly contested by the community, resulting in them being rejected from the digital space. Discourses are applied to the social media context, but are carefully woven with broader external social discourses that have a rich historical context. The oppression that the community perceive they have faced is referenced in conjunction with discourses of theft and ownership in the digital context, providing legitimacy to these constructions.

While discourses begin as negative, in the form of inauthenticity, capitalism, and theft, through various discursive strategies solutions are clearly sought by the Black Twitter community. For

example, in the context of authenticity, discourses of impersonation arise, which then present a solution in the form of discourses of representation. Inauthenticity could be reduced by allowing community members into positions in the company where they can create relevant and literate content. The role of social media manager used to be a ‘one-stop shop’ of sorts, covering many different bases. However, as social media has exponentially grown, and become more important in people’s everyday lives, a greater number of roles are now necessary. At the time of writing this, a cryptocurrency brand has advertised for the post of ‘Meme Artist and Community Manager’, evidently in response to the centrality of internet memes within communities. Similarly, the issue of theft is met with discourses of collaboration and acknowledgement of creators. Therefore, while the community reject brands and their usage of internet memes, they use discursive strategies to present solutions for brands. This is significant on a discursive level as it signals that brands may be able to adopt internet memes in a way that is accepted by the community. However, this requires brands to offer value to the community.

## Chapter 5 | Findings

### *Curly Hair Community*

*“So many of us curly girls were treated like this in our youth □ SO glad for all the curly hair products that’s come out over the years and social media showing us just how awesome our hair is 🌿”*

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents and analyses the findings from the second community observed as part of this study: The Curly Hair Community. As emphasised, the researcher has chosen to observe one consumer community, wherein products play a central role in the community, and one non-consumer community, wherein the community do not have an affinity to any particular brand or product. This aligns with Kozinets’ (2015) and Campbell’s (2005) assertion that there exists a communal-commercial tension within the fabrics of online communities. This binary of the communal and commercial in relation to online communities is significant as it shapes communities’ construction and mobilisation of discourses, as well as their practices. Observing two communities, defined by these criteria, hopes to provide a balanced discussion in relation to the overall research question.

This particular section looks at the initial data collected from the consumer community, which in the case of this research comes from the Curly Hair Community. The researcher has engaged and interacted with the community over the period of 18 months. It will first provide a contextual background for the community, highlighting their community structures, norms, values, and their behaviour and practice. It will then discursively analyse excerpts of data collected through netnography over the period of observation and interaction, situating these excerpts within the themes they borrow from. Finally, the data will be discussed in the context of the research. This chapter aims to uncover the degree of acceptance of internet meme usage by brands, the discourses that influence this, and the way in which these discourses are constructed leading to social practices. When contrasted with the findings from the non-consumer community (Black Twitter), this will create a richer and more nuanced understanding of how and why brands may acceptable create and disseminate internet memes on social media.

## 5.2 Contextual Background

### 5.2.1 *The Curly Hair Community*

This is a community who are brought together by their interest in curly hair care. There is a large focus placed on products: which brands are good or bad, which products suit which hair type, product ingredients and formulas (and their benefits) and so on. Historically, the community can be traced back to the emergence of the Natural Hair Movement. While the movement originated in America in the 1960s, its most recent iteration occurred during the latter years of the 1990s (Metcalf and Spaulding, 2016). This movement initially set out to encourage Black men and women to wear their hair in its natural state and avoid chemically processing and relaxing their hair. As a result, sales for relaxers and chemical processing goods fell and continue to fall (Brinkhurts-Cuff, 2016). In the early 2000s, curly hair stylist Lorraine Massey released a book entitled ‘The Curly Girl Method’, a detailed and practical guide and approach for the care of naturally curly hair (Massey, 2001). The natural hair movement served to empower Black men and women to embrace and celebrate natural characteristics that for many years were deemed unattractive and undesirable (Wilkerson, 2017). The Curly Girl Method exposed this method of haircare to those who had not known their hair was naturally curly or had not known how to care for it. As a result, there are many sub-genres within this community today, and some of the lexicon and phrases are shared and cross-over. The community is multicultural. It is comprised of a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds and interests in relation to curly hair. For example, there are pockets of this community that focus on social and racial issues of curly or afro hair, some focus on the science behind creating products, some have an interest in specialised hairdressing, and so on. While the community is brought together by a shared interest in natural haircare, they cover a wide range of topics and discourses.

The community are spread across the internet, with users on Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, and TikTok. The community are concerned with hair care, and with the sharing of tips and tricks that can help other members to care for their hair. A recent trend, enabled by an Instagram update that allows multiple pictures to be posted in a ‘slideshow’ format, is the sharing of tips and tricks in the form of attractive infographics. On Reddit, a heavy emphasis is placed upon one-to-one engagement and advice. Users post images of their hair with their queries, which other users within the subreddit respond to. Descriptions that accompany Reddit posts are full

of closed-community language that is in reference to various haircare practices taken up by the community. For example, *'plopping'* hair refers to a technique, born on a natural hair forum, wherein individuals apply product to their hair, flip their heads and lay their hair on a cotton towel or t-shirt, and then wrap this around their heads. This allows the hair to dry and curls to form in the cotton material, which is a material that is considered gentle to their hair. *'Scrunching'* is another technique that is used on wet hair. Product is applied post-wash and the head is flipped upside down. Small sections of hair are then pushed towards the scalp in a scrunching motion, encouraging hair to absorb product and allowing curls to form. During this stage, individuals often apply hair gel to the hair using the scrunching motion. This allows products to be sealed within the hair. *'Scrunching out the crunch'*, or SOTC for short, is another technique that is commonly referenced by the community. After the scrunched hair dries, a hard, crunchy 'cast' is often created due to the application of hair gel. To counteract this, individuals will SOTC. This involves performing the scrunching technique on the dry hair until the cast created by the gel is 'broken' and frizz-free, shiny curls are revealed.

On Reddit, it is a requirement for users to accompany their images with a description of their current haircare routine. Haircare routines are a popular category across platforms and exist in short-form on apps such as TikTok, and long-form on platforms such as YouTube. This does not only display the community's extensive knowledge of products and brands, but the centrality of these within the community's activities and practices. Categories of products lend themselves to individual community practices. For example, to care for curly hair, which is typically dry, the community often deep condition their hair. This involves applying conditioning masks to the hair, with the frequency of use backed by scientific findings. Wavy hair is less dry and is prone to being weighed down. Therefore, it is recommended that it is deep conditioned less frequently. Coily hair is considered to be drier and requires more moisture. As such, it is advised to be deep conditioned more frequently. Hair which feels too soft requires masks with a greater protein content. Hair that feels too brittle needs masks with less protein content. This act is ritualised and placed within a wider context of self-care, a theme which has been emerging on social media in recent years and has become increasingly commercialised (Arboine, 2019).

It appears that the community takes a much more passive stance when it comes to brand interaction, which can be attributed to the significance of brands and their products within their community. Brands make available a wide range of products to the community to fit into these

haircare practices. On social media, the community are open to receiving information and product news from brands and engage with posts in a positive manner. The community are heavily involved with brands and products. Key influencers within the community often review and recommend various products. Due to varying types of hair that fall under this community, users gravitate towards influencers with similar hair to theirs so that they are able to receive appropriate hair care tips and product recommendations. The community is very much built on the premise of giving and receiving information, where products play a significant role. As a result, brands' presence in the community are not problematised by its members and they seamlessly fit into the collective.

### ***5.2.2 Types of Brand Pages***

It is important to differentiate between the types of brands that were observable within the community. The researcher initially joined Instagram and visited a prominent curly hair influencer's account. This allowed me to identify key brands in the sector and follow them. The researcher also followed other influencers and began engaging with their media. In response to this activity, the Instagram algorithm began to suggest similar accounts and content. It became evident that there are different types of brands within the community and modes of posting. There is a notable distinction between 'grass-roots' community brands, and 'corporate' brands. This will now be explained below.

- ***Grass-roots brand pages*** are those that have been established by community members. They share community relevant posts, such as memes, hair care tips, product recommendations, and so on. These pages then begin either producing their own products and embed this within the page, or they will heavily advertise products from other brands. While the products are advertised on the page, they do not appear to be the focus. Pages vary with some displaying limited branding, and others containing a more considerable amount. For example, a meme will be posted alongside a relevant caption, which will later remind followers that the page stocks hair growth oils, or satin lined hair caps, that can be purchased via the page. Posts are very informal and unpolished and can be best described as 'messy'.

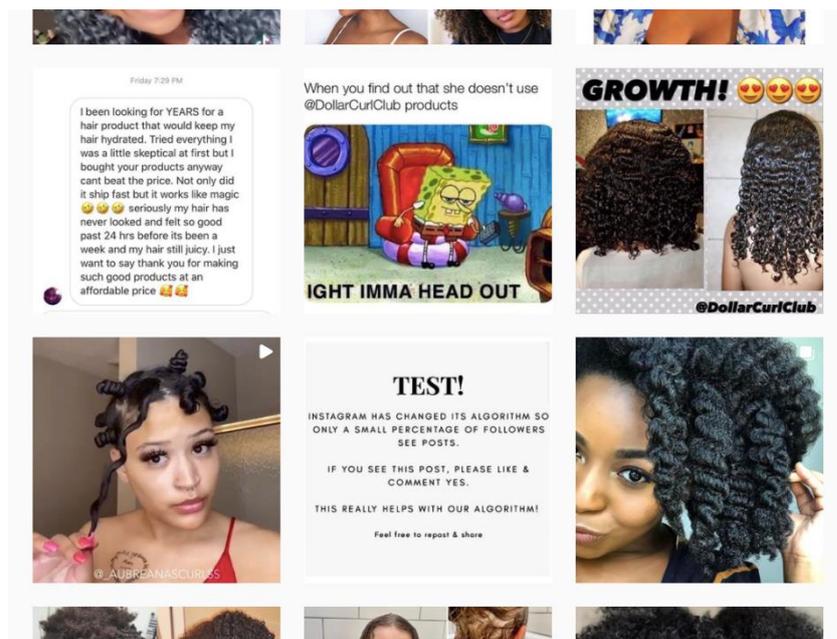
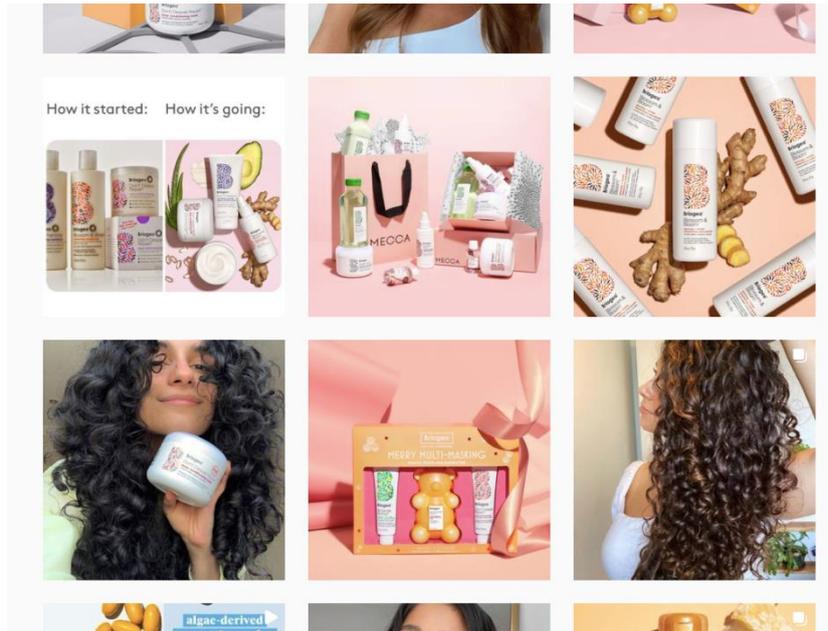


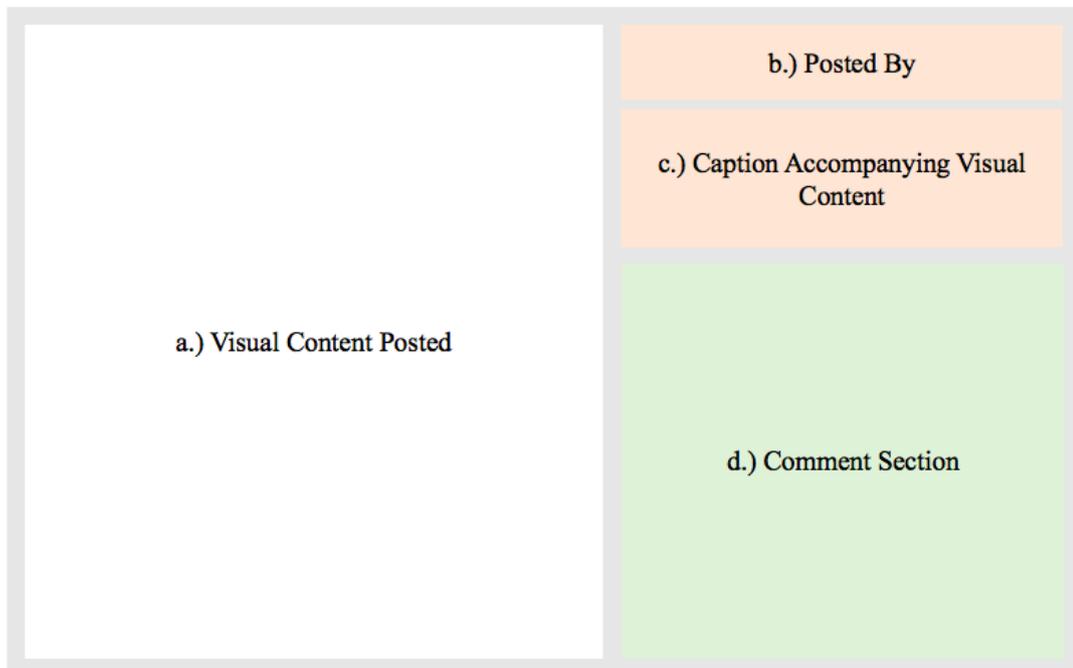
Figure 22. Example of a grass-roots brand feed (@DollarCurlClub) (DollarCurlClub, 2021a).

- Corporate brand pages**, on the other hand, are those that exist to promote an established brand. The aesthetics of the page are polished and professional. It is evident that pages are carefully curated. There are clear colour themes within the images that are linked back to the branding of the company. There is a good mix of product images, which are professionally shot, as well as more humorous ‘filler’ images. Brands make use of the ‘stories’ feature, which allows them to share posts with followers that disappear after 24 hours. The stories feature is typically employed by users to post unfiltered, instantaneous, raw, snapshot of the user’s day, or allow them to share things more informally. In contrast, the ‘feed’ is a much more curated space.



*Figure 23. Example of a corporate brand feed (@Briogeo) (Briogeo, 2021).*

Brands are most active on Instagram, and as such, this platform became the focus of the study. The analysis section will include some screenshots of brand posts, from which consumer discourse will be extracted. The figure below outlines the various elements that can be viewed in the screenshots.

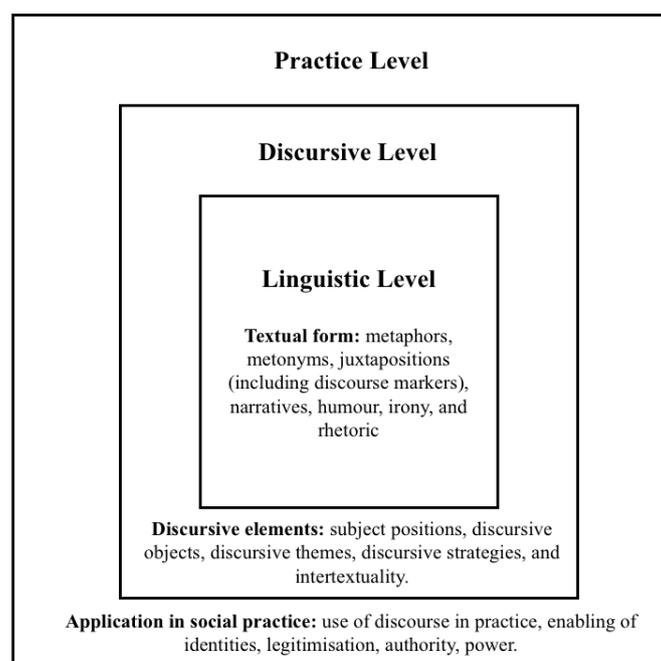


*Figure 24. Elements included within an Instagram screenshot.*

The left-hand side of the screenshots will display the post shared by the brand (a). The right-hand section of the screenshots will have three textual elements that are important to consider. Section (b) will list the name of the user who has shared the post. As only brand posts will be screenshotted, section (b) will display the brand's name. Section (c) is the space wherein captions for the content shared are displayed. This is typically a space for the poster to engage with their followers, often through recounting experiences, providing further context for an image, or asking questions. Finally, section (d) is the space wherein followers can send comments in response to the post shared. The original poster can then engage and respond here. Comments analysed in this chapter will mostly be extracted from section (d).

### 5.3 Analysis of Netnographic Data

Discourse, in the context of analysis, can be broken down into three levels as introduced by Fairclough (1992) in his book *Discourse and Social Change*. The levels are comprised of the linguistic level, the most basic level of discourse which encompasses phrases, rhetoric, and narratives. This then links to the second level of discourse, which constitutes discursive elements such as subject positions, objects, themes, and intertextuality. And the third and final level is related to practices, which is concerned with the way in which discourses are applied in social practice.



*Figure 25. Three layers of discourse (Adapted from Roper et al., 2013; based on Fairclough, 1992)*

The following section discusses netnographic findings using Fairclough's model. It examines the themes identified within the data, which are analysed discursively to gain an understanding of the way in which users construct brands and their activities in relation to themselves and the community, revealing much about the online dynamic and the unspoken social structure of the digital space. There will be a larger focus on the third level of discourse, which is the practice level of discourse. While discourse and practice are not mutually exclusive, some communities lean more towards one than the other. Black Twitter, for example, are evidently more discourse based. They are centred around an identity that is contested and re-created and defined via constant debate and the generation of discourse. The consumer community, the Curly Hair Community, are more practice based. This will become increasingly evident as the data is analysed and discussed. In what follows, there is a strong focus on the discursive object, which in this case is curly hair, and the sharing of practices for the care of this.

### ***5.3.1 The Brand-Community Dynamic***

Through observation of the two communities alongside one another over the duration of 18 months differences became evident. While the non-consumer community (Black Twitter) hold a defensive position in their dealings with brands, the consumer community (the Curly Hair Community) are more open to brand messages and communication. Language within Black Twitter is used to push brands away. In comparison, within the Curly Hair Community, language is used to *admit* brands into the digital space. As products and brands are central to the community, the community displays a generally favourable attitude towards brands, and as such allow them into their digital space. Users are active in terms of following brands and influencers within their community, who then promote brands and their products to their audience. As such, the community and brands are very much intertwined in terms of their digital activities, and products are clearly embedded into the community and their identity.

Due to the centrality of brands and their products to the community, the brand is regarded as a credible entity, and their input is of importance. This credibility is rooted with products available from brands, which eventually appears to encompass all aspects of brand activities. This is comparable to the 'halo effect' (Thorndike, 1920). The halo effect describes a phenomenon wherein one trait of a person or thing defines its overall judgement by others. This overall positive impression thus generates a higher level of trust towards the person or entity. In

this instance, the community logic appears as follows: brands create products that function well and are central to haircare routines → the community becomes accepting of brands' advice regarding the use of products → influencers work in collaboration with brands to promote products which reinforces brands' advice to the community → brands earn credibility and consequently communications are accepted by the community. This serves to explain the community's more passive attitude and relaxed stance towards brands.

### 5.3.2 *Meta Discourse – Care -*

The Curly Hair Community is largely premised on the care of their hair, and as such, tips and routines are constantly being shared. Therefore, a discourse of care undergirds all other emergent discourses within this community. A discourse of care can be considered to be the *meta discourse*. It is the discourse on which all other discourses are built. The central subject within the community is curly hair and the care for this. However, the idea of care does not only encompass the many ways in which members care for their hair, but rather extends beyond this and underlines the way in which members interact with one another, and ultimately, themselves. For example, this is evident on the popular Curly Hair Reddit forum. The curly hair Reddit forum explicitly states that anyone with any amount of texture in their hair is welcome and passing judgement on whether an individual's hair is "curly enough" is neither useful nor productive to the "common goal" of the community, which is described as "bringing out the best in our hair". One user had been accused of using hair rollers to achieve their look after posting a photograph showcasing their curly hair. The user created a subsequent post reminding other to accept both themselves and others:

“We are here to embrace how individual our curly hair is! Hopefully this transfer to how we see ourselves and others in general. Treat people how you want to be treated ♥”

The comment succinctly summarizes the community's construction of care, and the way it is applied in practice. The user reinforces the community's sense of collectivity through the continual use of the pronoun 'we'. While the community are constructed as a collective, within the same sentence the community member uses the adjective 'individual' to highlight the unique attributes of each person's hair. This rhetoric, which balances the individual with the collective, is embedded within the concept of a curly hair journey. The curly hair journey is referenced implicitly in the excerpt above. Within the community, the point at which an

individual decides to commit to care for their hair is described as the beginning of their *curly hair journey*. Referring to haircare as a ‘journey’ is common phrasing within the community and is metaphorical of the obstacles and milestones members encounter as they learn to care for their hair. The adverb ‘here’ can be, in this instance, used literally to express that members are all, in that moment, present on the forum together. It could also infer that members are all ‘here’ on their curly hair journeys, learning to embrace and care for their hair, and by extension, one another. Care underpins the comment posted by the user. Discourses of care, which underline the community’s need to tend to their hair, extend beyond the confines of the product/hair realm, and instead underline every aspect of the community dynamic – including the way in which users treat one another.

Discourses of care are heavily drawn upon by brands. Discourses of care align the brand as an entity that listens to the community and *cares* about them (Heller, 2016a). Considering the prominence of this discourse, the researcher reviewed some of the curly hair brands’ websites. The following excerpt is extracted from the ‘about’ section of Rizo’s Curls website. Rizo’s Curls is a curly hair brand founded by Puerto Rican CEO Julissa Prado. The excerpt below can aid in understanding the ways in which discourses of care function when employed by brands. This ultimately seeks to provide context for themes and ideas employed within brands’ adoption of internet memes, as well as subsequent brand-community interaction.

“While *battling* with my hair over the years, I told myself that one day I would create the very best product for *curly-haired girls like me*. I *spent years creating* the perfect formula. I wanted a product made with *quality and natural* ingredients that could celebrate *all curl types*, from my Tia’s coily strands to my sister’s loose waves.”

Through the excerpt above, it becomes evident that a theme of manageability is tied to the discourse of care. Discourses of care arise in response to the need to *manage* curly hair. Rizo’s Curls position themselves as a caring brand that has the community’s interests at heart. Through Prado’s recount of her personal experiences, the brand is positioned as being akin to the community. Through the verb ‘battling’, Prado is describing the care of her hair as a struggle. ‘Over the years’ signals that this struggle takes place over a long period of time. Again, this is an implicit reference to the idea of a curly hair journey. There is a temporal element to the text which evokes a sense of continuity. This strengthens the belief that brands and the community operate within the same discursive field. Introducing the brand as an outcome of Prado’s

‘battle’ with her hair ‘over the years’ immediately aligns and situates the brand within the social and cultural realm of the community. This reveals the foundations of the community’s construction of its identity. It appears that the community’s identity is underlined by a *struggle* that has been experienced in regard to the maintenance of hair, which drives the purpose of community activities (sharing of care practices, product recommendations, and so on). Products are mentioned immediately thereafter; which Prado mentions are targeted towards curly-haired girls ‘like me’. Products, which are ritualistically used to care for curly hair, are positioned as a care-based solution for the manageability of hair.

#### 5.4 Primary Discourses – *Relatability, Expertise, Aspiration*

The discourse of care can be considered to be the meta discourse upon which all other discourses are built upon. However, from this, other discourses emerge from brand-community interactions and the use of internet memes. These are as follows:

- a) relatability;
- b) authenticity;
- c) expertise; and
- d) aspiration.

Discourses of care are prevalent in all of these discourses, which are that of relatability, authenticity, expertise, and aspiration. It can be considered, therefore, that a discourse of care is the omnipresent discourse, while subsequent discourses are the tools by which this discourse is propelled in its various forms. The following sections will be a discussion of the primary discourses that emerge from the community, which are that of relatability, authenticity, expertise, and aspiration. It will become apparent as the analysis progresses that the meta discourse of care undergirds these discourses, as well as community practices. Below is a table providing an overview of the primary discourses and sample quotes from the data pool. These will be expanded upon throughout this chapter:

Primary Discourse	Emergence within the Community	Sample Quote
Relatability	Discourses of relatability are employed within the community to	<p>“Me I’m like this 😂😂”</p> <p>“Said better than I could. 🤪🤪🤪”</p>

	<p>establish a common frame of reference and as a tool that community members utilise to connect with one another.</p>	<p>“That’s me allll day!!!!</p> <p>This is do true omg</p>
Authenticity	<p>Authenticity within this community is constructed as the act of embracing their textured hair, going against social pressures and norms. Authenticity, therefore, is tied to the community’s idea of a ‘real’ identity.</p>	<p>It hurts my feelings when I get complimented like that ☐lol</p> <p>I had a client tell me I don’t look glamorous anymore with my curls. I told her I feel glamorous!</p> <p>Straight hair is boring anyway</p> <p>I hate straightening my hair for work just to here people say, “You look so good! Are you going to do this more often?” The answer is no. I don’t have the time, the desire, or the upper body strength to live like this. It took me fifteen years to fall in love with my curls and I’m not going back</p> <p>100% but I wouldn’t trade it for anything! 🙌❤️</p>
Expertise	<p>One of the primary practices of the community is the communication of expertise in the form of haircare routines and practices. Discourses of expertise undergird many internet memes, which offer an attractive vehicle for the communication of haircare related expertise.</p>	<p>Can someone please let me know how often your suppose to use this? Do you guys use it everything you shower.</p> <p>Love this!! A lot of people don't understand the connection of healthy scalp = healthy hair.</p>
Aspiration	<p>Users within the community often reference a ‘curly hair journey’ which begins when they begin to care for their damaged hair and ends when they reach their ideal hair health. As such, users constantly create aspirational content which indicate a common goal shared by the community.</p>	<p>Definitely mood for the whole year ❤️🙌</p> <p>This is inspo 🙌🙌</p> <p>My current hair looks like your old pic. There is hope after all 🙌❤️ Btw, You are gorgeous 😊</p> <p>We love yoy girl! You inspired us so much          ❤️❤️❤️❤️</p> <p>Omg i have hope lol i love it</p>

**Table 6.** Summary of Discourses Emerging from the Curly Hair Community.

### 5.4.1 Relatability

Discourses of relatability appear to be employed within the community to establish a common frame of reference and as a tool for users to connect with one another. Relatability simply describes the quality of being identified with on a personal level – that is to be real, easily connected to and understood (Reade, 2021). ‘Relatability’ emerges in academia as a non-linguistic concept which has become a ‘buzzword’ amongst social media marketers and is commonly associated with social media influencers (Abidin, 2016). The term has shifted its meaning over time. In the context of social media, achieving a degree of relatability amongst your audience is desired and sought after, and arguably the foundation of a successful and popular digital presence (Venekataramakrishnan, 2020). Kanai (2019) argues that relatability is not about bonding over matching experiences, but rather it is about addressing the reader in a way that offers them a space where they could feasibly insert themselves into the situation described. Experiences, both positive and negative, in relation to haircare are discussed frequently by the community. In addition to this, common experiences are mediated through internet memes under a veil of humour.



**Figures 26-28.** A collection of internet memes shared by both curly hair brands and community members.

*The person on the left symbolises a plan the user had, while the laughing person on the right symbolises the plan going wrong. In this instance, the internet memes pertain to plans concerning hair care and styling, and the curls behaving unexpectedly (TheNaturalsLife, 2021).*

Above is a collection of internet memes shared by the grassroots page, TheNaturalsLife. While they do not sell their own products, this is a grassroots community page that frequently

advertises products on their page for profit. The page shares aspirational images of individuals with curly hair, as well as relatable memes, product recommendations, and routine tips. The internet memes shown above (*figures 26-28*) detail experiences that are general to the curly hair community, and consequently allows the reader to insert themselves into the situation described. A culturally embedded belief is that textured hair is undesirable due to its difficulty to manage in comparison to straight hair (Jaima, 2022). Stemming from racist and colourist outlooks, textured hair was deemed to be unprofessional and unpresentable (Jaima, 2022). This belief is negative in nature but is transformed through the internet meme. The idea of manageability is removed from its negative cultural context and is repackaged through the internet meme as a neutral experience that is habitual and normal for those with curly hair. The excerpts below evidence this level of relatability:

“Meeeeeee I *feel seen* 😊”

“These are absolutely hilarious and all *so true*”

“Why are these so *relatable* 🤔🤔🤔”

“Hahahahahahaah this is so relatable 😊”

The degree of applicability of an internet meme to the user and their lived experiences appears to be a central component of internet memes shared within the community. Experiences communicated through internet memes in a humorous manner are well received. This is indicated in the above excerpts through the laughing emojis used, as well as through the adjective ‘hilarious’ and the exclamation ‘haha’. In the first excerpt, the user describes the internet meme as allowing them to ‘feel seen’. The metaphorical phrase ‘I feel seen’ originated as an internet meme in itself, and through this became a part of common internet lexicon. The expression, which is humorous in nature, is employed to convey that the user feels acknowledged and understood. The internet meme reflects the user’s self-identity, or the way in which they construct their self. The users’ identities are legitimised in the wider social sphere. The internet meme enables users to be brought together by a commonality. Relatability, therefore, is more so concerned with unlocking a feeling of affective sameness between the author and the community, rather than the need to relate to extremely specific experiences. Relatability is the outcome of the skilful balancing of two binaries, that of the *general* and the *personal* (Kanai, 2019). A post that is too general and vague will not evoke a sense of insider knowledge and affinity between the author and the reader. At the same time,

a post that is too personal and specific will alienate readers who have not experienced that specific situation. To be relatable, general experiences must be articulated under the guise of a personal experience, mediating a desirable ‘self’ that others may relate to.



*Figure 29. Internet meme shared on Instagram by Rizos Curls (RizosCurls, 2021a).*

The internet meme above is shared by Rizos Curls. The internet meme contains various facial expressions from an Oprah interview, ranging from confusion, rejection, shock, and annoyance. This internet meme utilises these reactions to express the way it feels towards people expressing that they prefer their hair when it is straightened than when it is in its natural state. Again, this draws upon the culturally embedded belief that straight hair is more favourable than textured hair. Relatability is achieved by drawing upon common social narratives, as well as consumers’ lived experiences.

Rizo’s Curls post (displayed above in *figure 29*) was accompanied by the following caption:

“@[rizoscurls](#)

We don’t want to hear it! 🙄🙄

We also can’t get enough of these Oprah memes lol

Comment 🗨️ if you agree!”

The caption makes use of the personal pronoun ‘we’, which serves to unify the brand with the community. This implies a sense of togetherness between the brand and the community and is an example of the ways in which the brand embeds itself within the social and cultural landscape of the community through language. The second line, relating to the series of Oprah memes generated following the interview with the Duchess of Sussex, alters the community’s perception of the brand. In this context, the use of the personal pronoun ‘we’ sets to humanise the brand. ‘We’, within this sentence, functions as the subject of the sentence. Consequently, there is a focus on the brand as an independent agent that is able to perform an action, which in this instance is actively viewing and enjoying Oprah memes in the same way the community does. Due to the popularity of the Oprah meme at the time, the caption also implies that the brand is up to date with cultural events. This continues to build on discourses of relatability and positions the brand as an entity that is akin to the community. This functions to legitimise and normalise the familiar and personal tone they adopt when addressing and integrating with the community.

The internet meme displayed in *figure 28* received the following responses from the community:

“We don’t need that negativity 🙄”

“Love this!! *More Oprah memes!!*”

“*They need to be silent AND silenced*”

The excerpts above function to legitimize the sentiments encapsulated within the meme shared by the brand. The first uses the personal pronoun ‘we’. However, the effect of the use of this differs to the brand’s use of the term. While Rizo’s Curls’ use of ‘we’ functions to unify the brand and the community, in this instance, the community show acceptance of the brand in their space. They legitimize the brands efforts and regard it as a genuine member of the community. The use of the signifier ‘negativity’ serves to uncover some of the dualisms and polarities within the community. The act of expressing that straight hair is preferable to curly is problematized, which inherently implies the opposite is idealized. This stems from the community’s construction of an authentic identity, which will be discussed in the following paragraph. The second excerpt, on the surface, displays approval of the meme shared by the

brand. However, this can be analysed on a deeper level. Internet memes, by nature, do not exist in the same form permanently. Their meanings change as they travel through digital space whilst traversing individuals and communities. In addition to this, internet memes have a very short lifespan. By the time an internet meme has reached its peak, a new one is born. Therefore, in this context, the user's reference to more "Oprah memes" can be seen as not referring to Oprah memes at all. Rather, it is metonymic of internet memes as a whole. The user not only shows acceptance for the internet meme but paves the way for the brand to engage in community-specific conversations. This naturalizes the brand into the community, which grants them the power to socialize with the community without being questioned. Through this, the brand is empowered to adopt community humour and lexicon. The final excerpt responds to the meme posted by the brand by referencing the quote that went viral alongside it ("*were you silent? Or were you silenced?*"). The user humorously alters this by stating that '*they*' need to be both silent and silenced. This playful response again displays a degree of comfortability with the brand's presence, signifying the legitimization of their existence in the digital space. Through the pronoun '*they*', the response also points towards an opposing other.

"It's nice to *change it up* sometimes *BUT* I feel 10x more powerful with my colochos"

The excerpt above provides insight into the construction of identity in the community. Due to the fact that these comments were posted under a brand post, this provides grounds for the analysis of identity within a brand-community dynamic. The first excerpt reveals the significance of hair on an individual level. Continuing on from the original meme shared by the brand, the user expresses that straightening one's hair is acceptable occasionally. 'Change it up' is a phrasal verb that describes the altering of something from its usual method. Therefore, it can be deduced that the default is curly hair. This is followed up by the conjunction 'but', which is emphasised through capitalization. This functions to mark a contrast, providing a second consideration to be compared with the first. While the user finds it acceptable to alter their outward appearance, they feel more powerful (emphasised as it preceded by 'x10') in their natural state. The adjective 'powerful' implies a sense of control, and when traced back to ideas relating to manageability, the jigsaw pieces begin to fit together. To manage something is to have control over it. The theme of manageability are rooted within a socio-historical context. Stemming from racist and colourist outlooks, textured hair was deemed to be unprofessional and unpresentable (Jaima, 2022). The experience is recontextualized in reference to both historical and existing hierarchies of power. The user rejects this context and

reclaims textured hair as a part of their identity ('my'). They do not only accept it but redefine it as an overwhelmingly positive characteristic of their external appearance. The user refers to their curls as '*colochos*', the Central American term for 'curls' or 'curly-haired'. '*Colochos*', therefore, can be viewed as a metonym for the authentic self. Prado is Latina, with '*Rizo*'s' also translating to 'curls'. The intimate public space provided by the brand allows the community to connect beyond the level of products. The internet meme facilitates a polyvocal discussion which contributes to the ongoing construction of a multi-layered community experience. This anchors the brand at the centre of the consumer's reinterpretation of their experiences.

#### 5.4.2 Authenticity

Discourses of authenticity emerge frequently through discourse generated by the community. In the context of the community, authenticity relates to identity. To be authentic is to embrace and take ownership of your textured hair, going against social pressures and norms. Textured hair is constructed to be a physical and outwardly manifestation of an individuals' identity. This authentic identity is embraced through the care and maintenance of individuals' curly hair, which is constructed to be accomplishable through the use of products.

“RIGHT!! I don't look better as *something I'm not!* [#curlyforlife](#)”

“thee audacity. I look better with my *natural* curls so foh with ya *negativity* and *society bias*.”

The excerpts above were collected under **figure 28**. These comments build upon discourses of authenticity and the community's construction of their identity by placing it in a wider, sociocultural context. The 'RIGHT' in the second excerpt followed by exclamation displays strong agreement of the sentiments encapsulated in the meme posted by the brand. However, the user continues by expressing that they do not look better 'as something [they] are not'. This points towards discourses of authenticity, and can also be observed in the third excerpt, where the user refers to their curls as *natural*. An authentic identity, as characterized by the ownership of one's natural hair, is presented through polarities in discourse in the form of authentic/inauthentic, natural/unnatural, real/fake, and so on. For the community, to wear their hair in its natural state is to be authentic to themselves and is an authentic display of their identities. Through this, it becomes evident that the external appearance of individuals, and

particularly the discursive object (*hair*), is a largely what identity is centered around. The user then hashtags their comment ‘#curlyforlife’. This can be then regarded as a promise to live authentically. However, it can perhaps be inferred that the commenter is unifying themselves (and by implication, the community) with brands for life. This is a reasonable conclusion to draw as products are necessary for the maintenance of curly hair, and consequently the maintenance of an authentic identity. The final part of the third excerpt, which relates to negativity and social bias, places the authentic identity within its societal context. It constructs the social norm as having straight hair, which the community deviates from. The social norm is problematized, with the user continuing to uphold the idea that natural hair is authentic. Here, the community members consciously construct themselves as a group that experiences social stigma.

The use of internet memes to challenge and contest social structures and communicate and authentic self continues. In another internet meme shared by Rizo’s Curls, the movie trope of the ‘ugly girl in glasses’ is critiqued. This is a common trope within pop culture that involves a drably dressed woman who becomes desirable and attractive after removing her glasses and undergoing a makeover. The internet meme posted by Rizo’s Curls pertains to the movie *The Princess Diaries*, which sees Anne Hathaway’s character, Mia Thermopolis, learn that she is the heir to the throne in a European kingdom. In a bid to appear attractive and suitable for the throne, the character receives a makeover that involved the removal of her glasses, a reconfiguration of her clothing style, and straightening her hair from its natural, curly state. The “[entity name] EXPLAIN” meme format emerged from short form video platform Vine. The catchphrase is now used to draw critical attention to someone’s unacceptable actions or behaviour. The critique is tweeted by Rizo’s Curls’ founder, Julissa Prado. This is significant as it positions the brand within the community. The brand becomes an entity that stands with the community against an opposing other. As described by Kates (2004), this legitimizes the brand into the community as they display a shared identity, acquiring citizenship into the group. The brand stands with the community and offer continued expressions of support, through both actions (providing products that enable the consumer to accept their ‘authentic selves’) and by vocally championing the community’s cause as shown through the internet meme below.



Figure 30. Internet meme shared on Instagram by Rizos Curls (Rizos Curls, 2021b).

The internet meme prompted users to contextualise their past personal negative experiences into the societal narrative that underpins the internet meme. User’s accounts of their past experiences are constructed through their own subject positions, creating intertextual links between the internet meme, their experience and their own construction of the social narrative. The temporal element in users’ exchanges continue here. In the second and third excerpt, users employ language to create a juxtaposition between their negative past experiences, and their positive present experiences. We are presented with polarities of shame/acceptance, hate/love, care/indifference. The excerpts below display the way in which the internet meme facilitates the rewriting and reimagination of consumers’ narratives of experience:

“I blame this scene for all the years I spent damaging my poor hair straightening it every single day in high school and my early 20’s 🤔. I’m *finally off that mess thanks to y’all!* 💕”

“So many of *us curly girls* were treated like this in our youth ☐ *SO glad for all the curly hair products* that’s come out *over the years* and social media showing us just how awesome our hair is 🙌”

*Finally* I hated this it's horrible !!! All *she* needed was product !!! Rizo's 😊

The internet meme posted by the brand appears to act as a mediator between both the consumer's past and present experiences. The internet meme functions to trigger users to reflect on their past experiences. When commenting their responses to the internet meme, users are constructing these experiences into a coherent and relevant narrative. Interestingly, in this reconstructing and communicating their negative past experiences and their positive current experiences, the community credits the brand as the cause of the shift in experience ("*finally off that mess thanks to y'all*", "*All she needed was product !!! Rizo's 😊*", and "*SO glad for all the curly hair products*"). There is evidence of temporal language in the excerpts above through the adverb 'finally', which symbolises the user's relief that they no longer need to heat damage their hair by straightening it. The term 'finally', therefore, links the user's *past* negative experiences with their *present* positive experiences. The brand is consequently embedded within the users' past, with positive connections attached to them. The way in which users' make sense of their past is modified in light of the text presented within the internet meme posted by the brand. The user credits the brand as source of relief, or the point at which the negative past becomes a positive present. The generation of intertemporal language, in which the brand is implicated, appears to be a common outcome of community discourse.

### **5.3.3 Expertise**

One of the primary functions of the community is the offering of advice and tips to one another to aid them in their curly hair journeys. This is particularly evident on the curly hair community page on Reddit, for example, where this practice is inbuilt into forum. There is a specific (and frequently used) 'help' tag that where individuals are able to ask for advice. It is also a requirement for all posts to be accompanied by a detailed description of the user's current hair routine and products used. On YouTube, lengthy hair care videos are posted. TikTok features tips in snappy short-form videos. On Instagram, tips are shared through infographics, both short-form and long-form videos, images, captions, and through the story feature. It is clear that the community utilises many channels for the communication of hair related knowledge, including via the medium of internet memes. Through internet memes, haircare practices are communicated, elaborated through discourse, and institutionalised.



*Figure 31. Internet meme posted by TheNaturalsLife (TheNaturalsLife, 2021)*

The internet meme above in *figure 31* was shared by the grassroots community page, TheNaturalsLife. In this particular internet meme, the person on the left symbolises an incorrect haircare practice, while the person on the right symbolises the curls not responding well to the practice. The practice in this instance is related to diffusing. This is the act of drying curly hair using a diffuser attachment, which is affixed to a hairdryer. A diffuser attachment works by dispersing the airstream from the hairdryer over a wider area in a more controlled manner. This attachment is used by those with textured hair as the softer airflow does not disrupt the curl pattern, allowing hairstyles to be less frizzy, while also protecting the hair from the hot air. The response below reveal the significance of internet memes in the communication, elaboration, and reification of haircare related expertise:

“😬 So you have to diffuse the roots first? Just working with a diffuser... so... fill me in”

“*Did not know* about roots and ends defusing”

Users specify that they were not previously aware of the haircare practice of diffusing (drying) the roots of their hair (the sections of the hair that are the closest to the scalp) before the ends of the hair. Hair is dried in this way because the roots take the longest to dry. The first user

begins their comment with a shocked emoji (😱) which suggests that they are astonished at the haircare tip communicated through the meme. They then begin the sentence with the discourse marker “so”. This is used in verbal contexts to indicate that the speaker is collecting their thoughts. Within the context of a textual social media comment, it can indicate that the user wishes to draw attention to the point that follows. However, in this instance it is also important to note the sense of continuity that it elicits. It is as though the community are engaging in an ongoing conversation with the brand and one another regarding haircare. This indicates that the community are engaged in a constant cycle of meaning making, of which internet memes are an important element. The user then proceeds to ask other community members to “fill [them] in”. This phrasal verb is used when asking someone for information about something they have missed or did not know. The phrase implies that there is a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, with the information being missed somewhere between the two. Therefore, temporal elements within language reappear here. The expression is used within this context to reconstruct a journey element that is emphasised within the community, focusing particularly on the gaining of haircare knowledge over a period of time.

“Wait *I didn't know* about [this], why do u have to diffuse ur roots first[?]”

In excerpt above, the user echoes the sentiments of the previous two users, in regard to being unaware of the haircare practice. However, the user goes on to explicitly enquire about the reasoning behind this. The internet meme, therefore, prompts users to debate and elaborate upon haircare practices and discourse. This then allows the discourse to be modified or solidified. By enquiring about the practice, members continue their socialisation into the community. Through this interaction, users internalise the ‘correct’ way to care for their hair, which they then pass onto others through future interactions. The internet meme facilitates the generation of texts that aid in the socialisation of the group, the construction of legitimate haircare practices, and the imparting of expertise.

Evidently, discourses of expertise are prevalent within the community. Discourses of expertise encompass the wide variety of ways in which people can position themselves as experts, or draw on expertise, within a given interaction. These are drawn upon by both the community and the brand, as demonstrated above. Experts and expertise are examined at the level of the community (Schneiker *et al.*, 2018). Those who communicate care practices within the digital space must possess the qualifications, or professional and educational trajectories that are

considered by the community to be sufficient to warrant their position as an ‘expert’. These individuals are further constructed as experts by the community if they are intersubjectively recognised as competent performers of practices. In essence, experts must legitimise their expertise by successful performativity. The following internet meme case study will examine the way in which discourses of expertise are presented by brands through internet memes, and the way in which this allows them to continue engaging with the community and offering culturally transmitted guides for haircare via the medium of internet memes.



*Figure 32. Internet meme shared by DollarCurlClub (DollarCurlClub, 2021b).*

The meme above is shared by DollarCurlClub, a brand that can be categorized as a grassroots brand. DollarCurlClub are not funded by a large company or group, and instead appear to have emerged from the community. The brand claims to have begun developing curly hair products due to a gap in the market for affordable, yet high quality products (DollarCurlClub, 2021). The internet meme shared, while humorous in nature, communicates a prevalent hair care practice within the community. Curly hair tends to be much drier than straight hair, and consequently requires more moisture. Therefore, a routine that includes conditioning, deep conditioning, and regular use of creams and other moisturisers is a standard care practice within the community.

This care practice, and the scientific reasoning that underpins it, is widely accepted within the community, and this is reflected in the responses to this post. Expertise, in the form of a common care practice, is embedded within the internet meme.

“Say it with me y’all POROSITY 🤔🤔🤔”

“If you saw my thickness, you’d understand”

“I use an entire bottle of conditioner Everytime I wash my hair.”

The first excerpt is posted in agreeance with the internet meme posted by the brand. “Say it with me y’all” is an ironic expression that precedes a statement that the speaker wishes to emphasise. It also implies a sense of collectivity. While the act of ‘saying it’ with the user in this instance is metaphorical, it points to the existence of a shared pool of knowledge. The user does not exclude the brand from this utterance. In fact, the ‘y’all’ (you all) seems to be left open to anyone who reads the comment. Additionally, the user legitimizes the expertise practice that is communicated by the brand in the internet meme. The user follows up this statement by mentioning hair porosity, with the latter capitalised for emphasis. Porosity is concerned with the hair’s ability to absorb and retain moisture (Lambert, 2021), which is determined by the hair’s cuticle type. Hair cuticles are flattened, overlapping cells that comprise the outermost layer of the hair (Smith, 2000). Low porosity hair has cuticles that are closely bound, while high porosity hair has cuticles that are spaced out. The more porous the cuticle, the less moisture it retains. The user, therefore, is borrowing from scientific knowledge to underpin and provide legitimacy to their comment.

The second excerpt displays a similar style of intertextuality. The user references the thickness of their hair as a reason for using a large amount of conditioner. This is preceded by ‘if you saw’ and followed by ‘you’d understand’ which draws upon ideas of manageability mentioned earlier. The hair thickness is painted as out of the ordinary and requiring extra care, justifying the need for more product. It also, again, draws upon shared, unspoken knowledge (‘you’d understand’). Scientific knowledge and discourses of expertise are often interdiscursively woven together within this community. This could be used to rationalize the acceptance of the brand within the community. The formulation of hair products requires a great deal of knowledge and is scientific in nature. Therefore, it necessitates a level of expertise to do so.

At a practice level, this positions the brand as an expert and warrants them the authority to offer and reinforce product usage tips and instructions to the community. The way in which the community comment in agreement with the post, while also creating intertextual links to other practices and discourses using linguistic tools such as metaphors and humour, sets to institutionalise practices laid out in the meme. Through these internet memes, the brand reinforces care practices within the community while also linking them to their own products in the caption they have written (visible in *figure 11* in the top right). The internet meme functions to bridge together science-backed expertise with the brand's offerings. As mentioned, the subject position of 'expert' must be earned through competent and successful displays of expertise. This brand, and others observed as part of this research, interpolate videos of their products being used by community members, before and after images that feature improvements due to product use, and testimonials from community members. Expertise offered by the brand is reinforced and solidified through these repeated displays of competency, warranting the brand's position as an expert. Internet memes, therefore, function as both a digestible tool for imparting expertise onto the community and for the reinforcement of the brand's subject position as an expert. Additionally, it enables the brand to become interwoven in the shared rituals of the community (Cova and Cova, 2002), fostering affective sameness amongst the community members and the brand. The brand becomes a vector of tribal links (Cova and Cova, 2002). This allows brands to embed themselves into the community as figures of power and authority, becoming legitimate members of the community.

#### **5.3.4 Aspiration**

Discourses of aspiration underpin internet memes that are shared within the community. This is very much intertwined within, and is an inherent outcome, of the overarching narrative of a 'journey'. A curly hair *journey*, which is used in a metaphorical sense by the community describes taking the hair from a state of damage to a state of health. As such, there is a constant need to learn and improve in terms of hair care to achieve a desired state. This desire manifests itself in the digital space in the form of before and after pictures, idealistic images of curly hair, and the like. In fact, aspiration does not only translate to curly hair, but is evident in the portrayals of an idealistic lifestyle. For example, many pages (both grassroots community pages and corporate pages) frequently interpolate aspirational images into their social media pages. These are commonly in the form of images of families with a mother, father, and child

with perfectly styled curly hair, images of curly haired individuals depicted as has having successful careers, and living in luxurious houses, for example. Turning the focus back on the concept of curly hair journey, for an individual to go from A (damaged hair) to B (healthy hair) the use of products is necessary. By implication, brands are intrinsically tied to this process.

The internet meme below was shared by Pattern Beauty. Pattern Beauty is a curly hair brand owned by Tracee Ellis Ross. Ross, who is the daughter of singer Diana Ross, is an American actress who appeared on the popular television show *Girlfriends* in the early 2000s where she appeared with her natural hair. Pattern Beauty can loosely be categorised as a corporate brand. Ross was not engaged with the community online and was established prior to starting the brand. The initial success of the brand is attributed to her link to it. The internet meme shared by the brand utilises the ‘*how it started vs how it’s going*’ format, in which the basic concept is to show the passage of time through oppositional bookends. The more surprising the second image, the better. In true internet humour, the images do not even necessarily need to make sense. In this case, it shows an image of Ross’ curls on the set of *Girlfriends*, contrasted with a recent image of Ross.



Figure 33. Internet meme shared by Pattern Beauty (Pattern Beauty, 2020).

In a bid to initiate engagement, Pattern Beauty ask the community to provide details of how ‘it’ is going for them. The context of the ‘it’ in the internet meme changes as it travels through the internet and as users insert their own images into the meme format. As such, there is a need for an understanding of the context in which the meme emerges. In this instance, the ‘it’ is in reference to the curly hair journey. Pattern Beauty conclude the caption with the hashtag #RockYourPattern, which links and reinforces discourses of individuality and authenticity discussed earlier with the branding.

‘Teach me ☐ 😍’

‘I’m in between right now. Lmao’

The post received questions about specific products in the range as well as detailed and personal recollections of users’ journeys. The above excerpts, however, can reveal much about the brand-community dynamic, and the ways in which brands are leveraged in the community through language. The first excerpt reveals much about the position of the brand in the community. To teach someone is to impart knowledge onto them. The phrase ‘teach me’ is used informally on social media as a compliment to the person in which it is directed at. The commenter would like to be ‘taught’ how to achieve aspects they deem desirable in the image. As this is targeted towards the brand in this instance, the language used automatically places the brand in a position of power within the community. A discourse of expertise (teaching) is interwoven with a discourse of aspiration (the implied end goal). This suggests the brand is embedded in various facets of community activity. In a position of ‘teacher’, the brand has the power to influence many aspects of community practice through internet memes. The user follows the comment up with a pleading face emoji, which is generally used to express a feeling of adoration, as well as a heart eyes emoji which is used to convey love and admiration. This, again, cements the brands position in the community as an entity that is welcomed and appreciated. These sentiments are echoed implicitly in the second excerpt. The user legitimises the way in which aspiration is constructed and communicated through the internet meme. Through the internet meme, the brand depicts an idealised self for the community. Community interaction signals that the brand provides aspirational content, and consequently have a power in guiding the community towards their end goal.

‘A great beginning and a better ending #rockyourpattern 😊’

‘I can’t wait to get my hands on your product 🙌’

The first of the two excerpts above is noteworthy due to the hashtag it uses. The user repeats the hashtag that is used by the brand. Psychologically, the act of mirroring is way to establish a connection (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999). While this is traditionally studied in physical settings, the same logic can be applied here. The repeating of the hashtag by the user signals that they are in tune, sharing the same attitudes, opinions, and interests. The message of the hashtag, #RockYourPattern, again carries the same ideas of authenticity, acceptance, and identity. This is an idea that is carried throughout the community and their activities and is underlined by a discourse of care. An individual must accept and care for their hair, which becomes a part of their authentic self and represents a part of their identity. Taken from a rock and roll context, to ‘rock’ something is to wear it with enthusiasm and pride. ‘Your’, a pronoun used to indicate possession of something, precedes ‘pattern’ to highlight the individuality of each person’s hair texture and embraces the diversity of this. Thus, this communicates ideas of inclusivity, individuality, and acceptance. The acceptance the brand towards all members of the community influences others to accept those who do not fit their expectations. It therefore enables and legitimises the identity of individuals who lie outside the community. It can be argued that the brand is much more than the products it offers. The brand plays a key role within the community, actively offering expertise and aspirational content that aid the community with the care of their hair.

## 5.5 Discussion

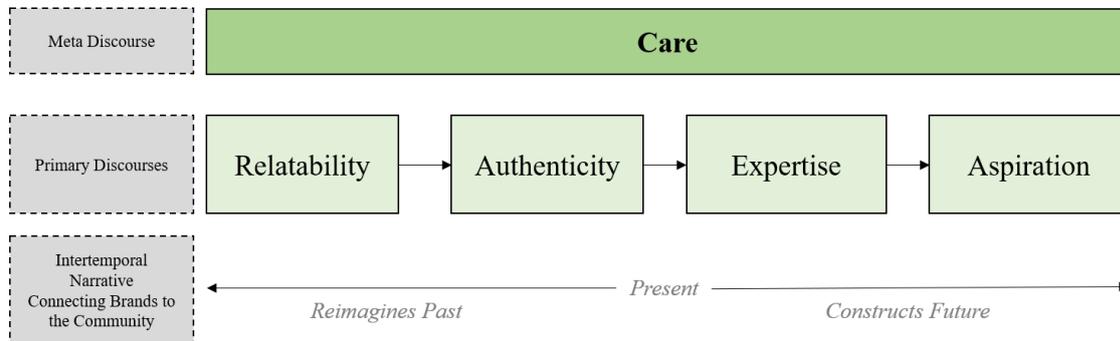
Within the curly hair community, curly hair is the time object in which all community activities are centered. Using internet memes (wherein hair is the primary object) the community create a common intertemporal narrative that binds together narratives and experiences from their past, present, and future. As such, texts produced within the community generate a collective memory (Ricoeur, 1979). The community’s experiences in relation to time are communicated through internet memes, and subsequent discourse leads to the contestation, modification, and reification of this. The way in which time is presented within the community is not linear. The community and the brand continually interpolate elements of the past, present, and future in texts that are produced. Interestingly, Heidegger (2010) suggests that there is no past, no

present, and no future. Instead, he assumes the paradox of a threefold present. One, a present about the future, two, a present about the past, and three, a present about the present (Heidegger, 2010) Time is an extended phenomenon that occurs simultaneously, rather than an organized list of events separated into specific time periods.

Care is a major discourse that emerges through the observation of community and content. This underpins the emergent discourses of relatability, authenticity, expertise, and aspiration. The concept of care extends beyond hair-related matters, and instead encompasses the way in which members treat themselves and one another. Using discourses of care, the brand presents itself as an entity that exists to provide the community with tools and information (Heller, 2016a) to care for their hair, thus allowing them to achieve an authentic identity. As such, the employment of this discourse, and the way in which it is used to underpin subsequent discourses, legitimizes the brand into the digital space. An important finding is the way in which these discourses are presented. There is a great deal of temporal language and elements emerging in the texts produced by both brands and the community. With these discourses and time-based language combined, a temporal consumer experience is generated. This can be used to understand the ways in which the brand embeds itself into the community's collective experiences, contributing to the way in which their co-option of community related content is accepted within digital space.

Through internet memes, community revisit and reconstruct the past from the perspective of the present (relatability, manageability). In parallel to this, they construct the present, focusing on the creation of care practices and an authentic identity (expertise, authenticity), and then project these to form an idealized self (aspiration). The result is a second-order narrative that underpins the community and their understanding of their position in the world. Second-order narratives, or representational narratives, are those that account for other stories used to make sense of the social world and other people's perspectives (Ricoeur, 1979; Clark, 2010). Second-order narratives, in this instance, can be regarded as the narrative at community level. This narrative is woven using first-hand narratives derived from the individuals' own experiences. Therefore, second-order narratives are embedded within first-order narratives. This is

particularly evident through various references to the curly hair journey, an experience that occurs simultaneously at both the individual and community level.



**Figure 34.** Summary of findings from the Curly Hair Community.

The centrality of products in the community leverages the brand and provides it with means of access to the community and its members. Through this, brands are able to embed themselves into the community, becoming active actors in the ongoing communication and construction of a collective narrative. The idea of a temporal consumer experience, and the recounting of this through internet memes, appears to underpin both community-community and brand-community exchanges. Through internet memes, experiences at individual, collective, and social level are repackaged and reimagined. The result is the generation of a collective narrative and a common group memory. In comparison to users within the Black Twitter community, users within the Curly Hair Community are seemingly completely accepting of the brand and construct the brand as a member of their own community.



**Figures 35-37.** Parodies of an album cover posted by curly hair brands (from L-R: Eden Bodyworks, 2021; Cantu Beauty, 2021; Mielle Organics; 2021).

For example, Canadian artist Drake's recent album cover which featured emojis of twelve pregnant women was parodied by various brands and individuals. Within the Curly Hair Community, many brands remixed the album cover, using it as an opportunity to showcase their product selection. This continues to solidify the centrality of products within the community. The posts received positive engagement:

“BYEE THIS COVER 🤔 Do you guys ship to Canada?”

“Lol great marketing team 😊”

“This is so clever!”

The community naturalizes brands' co-option of internet memes and constructs this as an original and creative effort. In the context of social media lexicon, “bye” is not used as a shortened version of the exclamation “goodbye”. Instead, it is used in response to something that has been said, in a similar manner to the way in which the acronyms “lol” or “lmao” are. “Bye” is used by the speaker to express that they are figuratively leaving as they cannot deal with what has been said. While this can be used in many contexts to mean different things, here, the user comments “*BYE this cover*” to imply that the brand's rendition of the internet meme is exceedingly creative and humorous. This is echoed through the third comment, where the user states that the cover is “clever”, further legitimizing the brand's creative attempt. The first user immediately links their comment back to the brand's products, enquiring about shipping to their country (“*do you guys ship to Canada?*”), while the second user commends the brand's employees (“*lol great marketing team 😊*”). While the brand is accepted by the community as a member who is entitled to engage with the community and their content, they are still acknowledged as a brand. The community does not construct the brand negatively. The linking of the comment back to the brand's products reinforces the notion that products are central to the community, and the brands' proximity to these enables the community to create a favourable construction of the brand. The brand's is naturalised into the community space, and constructed as being akin to the community.

Additionally, Foucault's ideas relating to power sheds light on the power dynamics at play, as the brand actively participates in the construction and maintenance of discourses that shape the community's perceptions. As described by Foucault, power is not a fixed possession but a

complex network of relations. In this context, the brand exercises power through discursive practices that shape and influence the community's perceptions. Through discourses of relatability and discourses of authenticity, the brand recounts narratives that are personal to the community, thus aligning the brand as an entity that is understanding of the community and their position in society. Through discourses of expertise, the brand and the community collaboratively generate care practices and discourses, diversifying and fertilizing the field in which they exist. As such, the brand is intrinsically tied to the space and actively contributes to the way in which they are constructed. Similarly, discourses of aspiration are employed within internet memes by brands and community members to construct a vision for the future. The discussion will revisit each of the primary discourses, reflecting on the ways these are employed through internet memes by brands and the implication of this on their acceptance by the community in the digital space.

Discourses of relatability form one of the major discourses that both underpin internet memes within the community and are employed by brands to maintain citizenship within the community space. Relatability can be considered to be the foundation for establishing both community-community connection, as well as brand-community connection. Kanai (2019) constructs relatability as achieving a feeling of affective sameness through the communication of a general experience in a way that appears personal. However, relatability in this context appears to be achieved by the brand through tapping into consumers' common experiences or their construction of identity. Experiences communicated through internet memes do not have to have been experienced personally by an individual user. Instead, users may feel a sense of relatability to the internet meme due to the feelings of affective sameness that it may evoke. Building on Kanai's (2019) conception of relatability in the digital space, it appears within this particular context that discourses of relatability embedded within internet memes are used as a tool to construct and revisit existing social narratives. Through internet memes, brands and the community collaboratively generate, reconfigure, and explore narratives that make sense of their place in the world (Ricoeur, 1979; Clark, 2010). Thus, the brand is inserted into the collective memory of the community by facilitating the process through which members understand their own past, and how this aligns with the wider experiences of the community. The brand becomes present in the collective memory as a champion for the community's interests and concerns (Kates, 2004).

One particular social narrative that permeates the group and their disposition, guiding the content of internet memes, is that of manageability. A culturally embedded belief is that textured hair is difficult to manage in comparison with straight hair (Jaima, 2020). Previously, the expectation was for those with textured hair to engage in practices that manipulate their hair to fit a socially desirable image. This discourse, and the narratives that surround it, are obviously negative in nature but is transformed through the internet memes. The idea of manageability is removed from its negative cultural context and is repackaged through the internet memes as a positive experience that is habitual and becomes normal for those with curly hair. The brand, therefore, restructures elements of the community's *past*, and embeds itself there. Consumers increasingly support brands that align with their beliefs (Amed *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, they support brands that display an interest and commitment to addressing social issues that are of relevance to the community, using the brands power to drive positive change in society, and educating the public about social issues, which in this case relates to societal beauty standards (Amed *et al.*, 2019; Menon & Kiesler, 2020). The brands active and vocal championing of community specific causes enables them to gain legitimacy within the digital space, as well as embed itself in the collective memory of the community (Kates, 2004). These actions, which are enduring over time, contribute to the genuineness of the brands' stance, allowing them to cultivate an authentic presence, without consumers questioning the motivation behind their activism (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022).

Brands and marketing play an essential role in the identity construction of the consumer in the postmodern world (Firat *et al.*, 1994). Brands and marketing, in collaboration with the community, play a large role in the modification of existing institutions. Through marketing, brands reinterpret culture. Intertextual links are created that build upon existing social relations. In collaboration with the community, they produce spaces through which value is drawn from the communication of common experiences, which the brand directs back to them. Internet memes that are posted by brands draw upon historically situated contexts and reimagines them using humour and community language. Social institutions uphold the dominant ideologies of a time, dictating what is acceptable or unacceptable. Textured hair was once widely frowned upon and deemed to be unmanageable, unprofessional, and unkempt (Jaima, 2022). Together with the community, brands produce texts that modify these social institutions, influencing and challenging existing discourses. The embracing of one's natural texture becomes an act of displaying one's authentic identity. Experiences relating to haircare that may have been viewed

as negative are repackaged under a veil of positivity. Thus, the idea of manageability within the context of textured hair becomes understood in a different, more positive, light.

The reconstruction of consumer experiences embeds the brand within the temporal consumption experience of the community. The brand's challenging of, and subsequent recontextualization, of negative discourses aligns it with the community. The brand actively and vocally champions the community's causes using language and tools that are familiar to the community, granting them citizenship in the digital space and providing them with the authority to further engage with community content. The feelings of relatability that are evoked by internet memes are transient, and thus must be maintained over time. As mentioned earlier, while brands are naturally enmeshed with the Curly Hair Community due to the significance of their products to the daily practices of the community, they must still work to achieve and maintain relatability, which in effect has implications on their citizenship in the community. This, therefore, requires ongoing labour, resourcefulness, and adaptability to be achieved. Brands employ and incorporate discourses of expertise into their online activities and internet memes to offer further benefits to the community.

Online spaces have become fundamental for individuals to learn to care for their hair (Gill, 2015). There are a large number of curly hair blogs, forums, and YouTube channels that are supported by the multi-million-pound curly hair product industry. Users are able to find a personal tutor with a texture similar to theirs who will guide them through appropriate care and styling techniques, as well as product recommendations. The employment of discourses of expertise within internet memes places the brand in a position of power within the digital space. It is, in essence, a dynamic display of power and authority. Expertise is accepted from those who are deemed credible to offer such expertise. The brand is placed in a position of power and authority by the community. They are constructed as a teacher, and in this role, they guide the community and their activities. Using internet memes and enabled by the community's acceptance of them, the brand constructs a sphere for the production and contestation of care practices. Through internet memes, discursive structures constantly undergo a cycle of interpretation, reinterpretation, and modification.

Discourses of aspiration in this context relate to the ways in which a narrative of an idealized self is constructed through internet memes. Through internet memes, and wider community discussions, the community exchanges memories and creates a joint web of experiences.

Through this, an imaginary desirable self is constructed from which aspiration is drawn. This self is based upon the present, but resides in the future, always existing ahead in time to the community. Through the projection of a desirable self through internet memes, the present is linked with the future. For example, care practices which are routinised by individuals and embedded into their daily lives are envisioned to lead to the cultivation of healthy hair, a characteristic that the desirable self possesses. The brand's successful embedding of itself into the community's collective memory, through the resurgence of experiences and reconfiguration of narratives through internet memes, affords them the position to actively co-construct the idealized self. In fact, through various excerpts, it became apparent that the idealized self that is communicated by brands through an internet meme is constructed as achievable through the brand's products and guidance ("*teach me*", "*I can't wait to get my hands on your product* "). The desirable self is built upon the various collective narrative that permeates through the community.

Brands utilise internet memes to draw upon existing hierarchies and experiences that are of relevance to the community. Through this, the brand is able to embed itself into the community space. Brands anchor themselves at the centre of the consumer's reinterpretation of their experiences, past, present, and future. As such, a temporal consumer experience and a collective narrative is the defining factor that enables brands to successfully co-opt community specific-internet memes and engage with community on an intimate level. Temporal consumer experience, in this context, refers to the way in which consumption is placed within a longitudinal context. Within the curly hair community, the past is constructed as a time of difficulty, one where consumers exist in a social space that does not afford them the tools and knowledge to embrace their authentic identities. The present represents the time in which the consumer begins to incorporate hair care practices and products into their lifestyle, engaging with likeminded people, reflecting upon their experiences, and gaining and sharing knowledge. The future represents the consumers' aspirations and desires. Put simply, the brand utilizes products to enter the community space. The brand, now having established itself as an entity that is akin to the community, is in a position of authority to facilitate discussion through a medium that is familiar to the community. Using internet memes, the brand draws upon existing narratives and experiences, injecting this into internet meme formats. Internet memes function as a foundation for users to intertextualise their own experiences through contributing to the overall culture of the community. The result is the production of a web of interdiscursive

references, narratives, and concepts in which the brand and the community are intrinsically tied. The successful co-option and use of internet memes by brands allow them to continue building a co-created narrative, and in turn utilize community specific content.

## 5.6 Conclusion

There seemingly exists a symbiotic relationship between the brand and the community. The brand provides the community with products, expertise, and aspirational content. The community engages with the brand and purchases their products, which ultimately provides the brand with financial gain. It can be considered that through internet memes, the brand embeds itself into the past, present, and future of the community. In essence, the brand is implicated in the consumer's experiences relating to their hair. As such, the brand and the community are structurally bound. Through the reinterpretation of negative socio-historical narratives, the brand positions itself as an entity that is understanding of the individuals' past experiences and struggles in relation to the care of their hair. These experiences are repackaged in relatable internet memes that pertain to the community. This initiates a discursive process that embeds the brand into existing experiences, creating interdiscursive links between brand and community. Expertise communicated by brands in internet meme format delivers this information in a community-specific way. As such, the brand continues to speak the community's language and tap into their cultural realm, while also transferring knowledge. This knowledge enables members to uncover their authentic identities. Aspiration content is posted by both brand and the community to construct an idealized self that the community collectively strives for. By positioning themselves at every point of time in the community's journey, while also offering products central to community practice, and continually engaging with the community in ways that are of relevance to them, the brand cements its place in the digital space. As evident through the analysis, this position is legitimized through the community's language and actions. By embedding themselves into the temporal facets of the consumers' experience, the brand achieves *dasein* (Heidegger, 2010), or *being there*, and becomes an omnipresent entity. The brand is firmly present within the community's collective memory. This allows the brand to move freely within the community's online space and avoiding questioning of their authenticity.

In a postmodern world, consumers search for self-expressive benefits to provide a coherent narrative for oneself (Firat *et al.*, 1994). The product, therefore, is not the end, but the means

to the end. Through this collaborative effort, the brand learns from the consumer, allowing it to be adaptive and responsive to their individual and dynamic needs (Haeckel, 1999). The product in this community, therefore, is not the primary focus. Rather, the focus is on the way in the brand brings the community together, allows them to embrace and explore their authentic identities, communicate relevant experiences, develop discursive practices, and the like. Though internet memes, brands contextualise community experiences through references to existing hierarchies of power, for example, references to straight hair as the social norm and curly hair as a deviation from the social norm. Internet memes posted by brands provide the community with digestible ways to interpret and reinterpret discourses and practices. Internet memes also act as a guide for expected, normative ways of behaving and being. The community are then able to contest these and produce tests that accrete to form new discourses and constitute new objects and concepts.

The brand taps deeply into the community culture and embeds elements of this into their social media content. This aligns the brand as an 'official' entity that acknowledges and legitimizes the community and their identity. This, coupled with the significance of products, earns the brand trust and authority within the community. Language used by the community is reflective of this and shows the ways in which it upholds and maintains the brand's authority and power in the community. Together, the brand and the community modify existing institutions within the field, which go on to influence existing discourses and practices. Internet memes play an important role. They function to present elements of culture in a digestible form, which either permits the maintenance of discourse, or catalyses the contestation and modification of discourse. The community reflects the brand. The brand reflects the community.

## Chapter 6 | Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will firstly discuss the main findings from each community, and will then use this to discuss and answer the research questions that were introduced in the first chapter. This study was fundamentally concerned with internet meme usage by brands. Online communities were studied to gain a greater understanding of how consumers construct the presence of brands in the digital space, with a particular focus on brands' adoption of community-created content and internet memes. After quickly discussing the findings, this chapter lays out the research questions in three distinct categories and aims to answer these by combining existing literature and concepts and findings from this study. It firstly examines relevant concepts and their significance to the research, and then answers the research questions.

### 6.2 Overall Findings

Before answering the research questions, it is important to compare the findings from each community. Both communities operated in different ways and the nature of their relationship with brands differed, however, there were still similarities present. While both communities produced a different of discourses, these discourses have strong implications on the concepts of brand authenticity, and citizenship within each community, which in turn have a significant impact on brands' ability to engage with these communities on social media, including interactions with community-generated memes. Authenticity is a discourse that emerged explicitly in both communities. Within the Curly Hair Community, authenticity is constructed as the act of embracing an individual's 'true self'. This is underlined by users sharing their personal experiences, which bring them together and allow them to challenge societal norms. Therefore, brand authenticity in this context is closely tied to the provision and efficacy of hair care products, and brands that consistently provide effective solutions earn trust and citizenship into the community by aligning themselves with the community's interests (Kates, 2004). This citizenship allows brands to engage with internet memes, which allow brands to align with the diverse needs and experiences of curly-haired individuals, often reflected in community-generated memes. Engaging with these memes, brands have an opportunity to showcase their understanding and embrace of the community's experience, enhancing their authenticity.

Citizenship in this context involves actively participating in discussions, addressing concerns raised by the community, maintaining and legitimising community rituals, and demonstrating a commitment to the community's values.

Similarly, within Black Twitter, authenticity is constructed through the sharing of personal experiences and cultural references. Black Twitter is a social space that allows users to discuss issues that concern them or their communities, that are either not offered by the mainstream, or not covered in the appropriate context (Freelon *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, these shared experiences build solidarity among members of the community, who come together to produce systems of meaning and in-jokes based on these experiences. Internet memes produced as a result encapsulate profound social commentary or convey light-hearted humour which resonates with the community. They are cultural artefacts that carry meaning and serve as a vehicle for collective expression. Internet memes and trends which emerged on Black Twitter tend to travel through the social media network and become viral, which then brands engage with them. As brands do not acknowledge the origins of these memes and attempt to commercialise them, they lead to backlash from the community. Again, brands that engage with the community and demonstrate a genuine understanding and commitment to their interests can be legitimised into the group. Brands that successfully engage with the Black Twitter community, including its memes, do so by addressing these critical aspects, demonstrating a sincere commitment to the community's causes, and respecting the cultural and social nuances present in meme culture. In both communities, internet memes, and the practices surrounding them, derive from their authenticity from the shared ownership of community experiences.

The idea of commercialisation emerged in both communities. Within the Curly Hair Community, this most prominently emerged through the discursive themes of *expertise* and *aspiration*. For example, expertise is imparted through the development and use of tailored products. Additionally, advertisements and the representation of models and influencers showcasing their natural hair is a source of aspiration within the community, serving to inspire and empower individuals. Members of the community that receive sponsorships from brands, or go on to create their *own* brands [such as those grassroots pages observed] are supported and Therefore, within the community, the commercialisation of the community's experience is not vilified, but constructed as validating and empowering. The brands' proximity in providing

products, expertise, and aspirational content positions them as positive actors within the community.

In contrast, within Black Twitter, users display a strong anti-corporate stance, which underlines the findings from within the community. Sociohistorical discourses are employed by community members to dispel brands from their space. As Francis (2021) explains, capitalism is considered to have colonial origins. Black Twitter's relationship with capitalism and commodification within the context of brands usage of internet memes is a dynamic and multifaceted one. On one hand, Black Twitter users consistently resist the appropriation and exploitation of Black culture by brands, demanding authenticity and cultural sensitivity. It places a premium on ownership and empowerment, using memes and cultural expressions as tools to define and reclaim its narrative. Here, the commodification of the community's collective creativity by brands is deemed to be exploitative. However, on the other hand, the community engages with some brands that are deemed to be legitimate, leveraging its cultural influence for mutual benefit, sometimes through partnerships and sponsored content. Yet, this engagement is underpinned by a deep sense of vigilance and resistance. Moreover, it serves as a powerful force for accountability, mobilizing to challenge brands when they perpetuate harmful stereotypes or engage in exploitative practices (Wheeler, 2019). It became evident in the findings that the transcendence of internet memes from the bounds of the community to the wider social media network, and eventually, to brands, is an inevitability. Therefore, while the community is opposed to the commodification of their creativity, since this commodification is viewed as inescapable, they demand that brands compensate them for this and acknowledge the originators. The influence of Black Twitter on social media allows them to shape conversations and challenge detrimental capitalist practices.

The idea of intertemporality was presented more clearly in the Curly Hair Community. The community's exchanges were rich in intertextual language. Additionally, there was a clear and linear relationship between the community members' past, present, and future, and the implication of this on the relationship between community members with another, and brands. Community members embark on a 'curly hair journey' to embrace their authentic identities. However, this idea was not explicitly mentioned in the findings chapter relating to Black Twitter. As Wheeler (2019) highlights, Black Twitter is a space for Black users to express ideas and challenge the mainstream. Therefore, their interactions tend to centre around pop culture and current moments. However, during interactions with brands in the context of internet meme

appropriation, the community drew on sociohistoric discourses to legitimise their arguments against brands. Therefore, in both communities, the idea of a collective memory underpins the ‘frames’ of action within the community, which aids in constructing community boundaries and determining ‘outsiders’ from ‘insiders’.

With the similarities among both communities now clarified, it is appropriate to revisit and address the research questions that have guided the study. Below is an overview of the questions that will be answered in this chapter:

### **Authenticity and an Authentic Presence**

EQ1. How is authenticity constructed and employed within different communities on social media?

EQ2. How can brands earn authenticity credentials in the digital space?

### **Embedding the Brand into the Prosumption Cycle**

TQ1. How may Internet memes be utilised as a viable and effective option for brands to initiate relationships with communities and foster prosumption?

EQ3. How can brands acceptably contribute to societal and cultural conversations that occur through Internet memes?

### **Brand-Community Power Dynamics in the Digital Space**

TQ2. How do discourses and practices enable communities to achieve a position of power in the digital space?

TQ3. What is the relationship between discourses and practices, and its implications in creating this power structure?

These are split into empirical questions (EQ1, EQ2, EQ3) and theoretical questions (TQ1, TQ2, and TQ3). Empirical questions are primarily answered based on data gathered through the observation of online communities and conducting fieldwork. Meanwhile, theoretical questions aim to utilise empirical data to connect empirical findings to build upon or generate new theoretical positions. The research questions were grouped based on the themes they pertain to. More importantly, they form the key dimensions that were identified in the research to be of importance to brand-community dynamics in digital space. The first section is related to authenticity, its importance to the research, and the way in which it emerges in both

communities. In particular, this section is concerned with how internet memes may be incorporated by brands authentically. The second section explores the concept of prosumption, and how brands may embed themselves into the cycle of content creation and consumption in an organic way on social media. Thus, this is concerned with the organicity of the brand's co-creative activities on social media. The final section examines power structures within the digital space, how these structures are created, and the implication of this on brands' adoption of community content. This is a fundamental element as power dynamics are an inherent part of any relationship. To establish a relationship with the consumer, and to co-exist within the same digital space, this element must be examined and understood. After these individual research questions are answered, the relationship between them will be discussed. Through this, the overall question of the research can be answered.

### **6.3 Authenticity and an Authentic Presence**

This section will answer the research questions relating to authenticity and an authentic online presence. Authenticity is regarded in existing literature as the very basis for a successful digital presence. According to Fournier and Avery (2011), reputation is the currency which social media deals with regularly. The key to achieving a positive reputation is to achieve and maintain a degree of authenticity. The key to achieving this is through a display of cultural and social capital, which can only be acquired through listening to and engaging with communities (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Authenticity is a major discourse within social media and serves as an underlying criterion for many when it comes to the evaluation of content from both brands and other users. Those whose conduct is regarded as inauthentic may be rejected, or even ridiculed and mocked by communities. The concept of authenticity is context-specific and multidimensional. For example, in the context of branding, there are various meanings to brand authenticity in current literature, and little consensus regarding what these meanings entail (Moulard *et al.*, 2021). As an example, brand authenticity has been rooted in a brand's genuineness (Akbar and Wymer, 2016), its credibility, symbolism (Morhart *et al.*, 2015), heritage and traditions (Napoli *et al.*, 2014), or maintenance of standards (Spiggle *et al.*, 2012), to name a few. The ongoing contestation of the concept of authenticity in the realm of marketing and branding literature suggests that this is an area that can be explored further, especially in the context of this study.

**EQ1. *How is authenticity constructed and employed within different communities on social media?***

Authenticity is a major discourse that emerged both from current literature and in the research findings. Within the literature, authenticity is described from the perspective of the marketer and is emphasised as being key for successful brand presence (Fournier and Avery, 2011). In the research findings, authenticity is constructed from the perspective of the community, highlighting the ways in which authenticity is composed at individual, and community levels, and the implications of this for the acceptance of brands. To communities, to be authentic is to be 'real'. This 'realness' is a driving force for identity and experienced-based social media usage. The legitimate creation, consumption, and dissemination of internet memes must be born from an authentic self. An authentic self, as constructed by both communities, is one that undergoes experiences that are common to the group, contributing to a shared, authentic, identity. This 'real' and authentic identity and experience is then transmediated and embedded within the output of the community, which includes content. Authenticity, in both communities, is ubiquitous.

One of the most intriguing findings of the study is the way in which discourses of authenticity are employed in both communities. In the non-consumer community, Black Twitter, discourses of authenticity act as a *shield* around the community. The language surrounding authenticity, and the mode of discourses of authenticity underpinning constructions of the brand, are used as a tool to propel the brand away from the digital space of the community. On the other hand, authenticity in the consumer community is something that is *absorbed* by the community through the consumption of products, the employment of haircare practices, and the collaborative construction of a collective memory. The community constructs authenticity as being their 'true' selves, which is in reference to the natural state of their hair. This is enabled through care for their hair, which involves the consumption of products and the undertaking of various haircare practices. Furthermore, within Black Twitter, authenticity is primarily constructed from the *outside in*. The community draws upon social structures, which exist externally, then uses them to make sense of their position in the world (Bourdieu, 1977). Conversely, authenticity within the Curly Hair Community is constructed from the *inside out*. The language used points to authenticity being an act of reclamation of an individuals' naturally curly hair, facilitated through the consumption of products. Curly hair is considered a physical manifestation of an authentic identity, which is presented outwardly to the world. It is a site for expression and identity building, and represents a journey that individuals undergo in the wider

world. Authenticity is passed on from the brand to the community through consumption. While both communities observed behave and operate differently, there are similar themes that emerge within both. The alterity in the construction and employment of discourses of authenticity within both communities has different implications for the brand-community dynamic, which will become evident as the analysis progresses.

The idea of poststructuralism and rejection of a metanarrative was introduced at the very beginning of the literature review (Derrida, 1993, Jameson, 1985). This was introduced to lay a foundational understanding of internet memes and related practices. It has been argued that structuralist thought can be applied not only to texts, but to social interactions (Barthes, 2015). In this instance, internet memes can be regarded as the discursive object in which discussion is centred (Foucault, 1975). The idea is that meaning on social media is ascribed to seemingly unrelated objects, and these meanings change dramatically as they make their way through digital space. Discussion of communities and community dynamics in marketing, digital culture, and consumer behaviour research appears to be presented monolithically. The idea that is presented is that all users make up a singular community, where everyone, more or less, have similar constructions and behaviour patterns towards brands. Much of the value this research brings to the field is the distinction it makes between consumer communities and non-consumer communities (Campbell, 2005; Kozinets, 2015; Jenkins, 2013) and how discourses and practices vary between both. Discourses and practices that structure knowledge are context specific and ever changing (Foucault, 1980; Bourdieu, 1977). The adoption of a universal narrative is, therefore, impossible (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1985). One can only tell small stories from the position of individuals and plural social groups.

### **6.3.1 *Non-Consumer Community (Black Twitter)***

It must be emphasised that discourses of authenticity within the context of this research are underpinned by, and intrinsically tied to ideas relating to a shared identity and experience. Discourses of authenticity emerged explicitly within Black Twitter, the non-consumer community observed as part of the study. In the non-consumer community, there is a clear set of implications between the construction of the brand and the employment of discourses of authenticity in the context of an authentic identity and a shared community experience which function to problematise brands. The permeating narrative of the community is that of ‘the People vs the Corporation’. The language that surrounds this automatically ‘others’ brands and creates a distinct barrier between the community and the brand. The community builds upon

this conception by attaching specific characteristics for both brands and for themselves. Essentially, they assign an identity to the brand. Brand activities are then viewed and processed within this lens. The community constructs the brand as an inorganic, impersonal, and exploitative entity. By comparison, the community construct themselves as natural, organic, and real. Internet meme content is only regarded as acceptable when created by the community (*'lmaooooo viral memes happen when WE the people make them happen'*). The community constructs itself in counter distinction to the brand. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) consider the content of internet memes to be a vehicle for meaning-making, social significance-making, and identity-making in one's world. Internet memes are implicated and generated through networks of shared experiences, interests, and worldviews (Milner, 2013; Burgess, 2014). They are a tool for storytelling that involve the recontextualization of texts, events, and cultural phenomenon in socially idiosyncratic ways (Milner, 2013). The removal of all elements of humanness from the brand implies that the practice of 'memeing' cannot be enacted organically by the brand within non-consumer communities. Through language, the brand is positioned in a different social domain to the community, one that is out of touch from its everydayness. The implications of this are that the brand does not possess the lived experience that allows them to interpret cultural events naturally and authentically.

The community's construction of the brand is characteristic of the anti-corporate stance that underpins aspects of social media culture. It has been established that the community position themselves away from the mainstream, offering outlooks that challenge that status quo (Wheeler, 2019; Freelon *et al.*, 2018). The community's anti-corporate outlooks can be viewed as the outcome or product of the community's disposition, which ultimately influences their construction of the brand and perceived authenticity. This form of narrative switching is consistent with themes of authenticity as they emerge in the community. Authenticity, as it pertains to identity and experience, are concerned with ownership, which appeared under the discursive theme of capitalism. For example, a fast-fashion brand, Boohoo, attempted to engage with community internet meme activities by adopting community humour and language. This was in an effort to align the brand with the community. However, the community hijacked this attempt and switched the narrative (Howell, 2019), highlighting the brand's unethical business practices.

The anti-corporate narrative that permeates the community brings to light a set of ideals that influence community discourse that is related to brands. Through the discursive themes that

emerge within Black Twitter, it is increasingly evident that the community are hyper-aware of social structures in which they exist, as well as their position in relation to these. Much of the discourses that emerge from the community are historically situated. Through discourses of capitalism, the community continually reference sociohistorical discourses in parallel to ideas relating to ownership of digital content. Combining this construction of the brand and the sociohistorical context from which it is constructed, the community draws inferences from the way brands conduct themselves in the digital space in relation to the brand's intentions. The community constructs the co-option of internet memes by brands to be grounded in inauthentic impersonation and motivated by financial gain. The problematisation and subversion of brands' co-option of internet memes is in itself a display of authenticity. The ownership and reclamation of community-created content constitutes a form of cultural engagement in which structures and meanings are re-ordered. The community employs discourses of authenticity to push the brand from the digital space and reclaim ownership of their organic intra-community engagement.

### **6.3.2 Consumer Community (*The Curly Hair Community*)**

Within the Curly Hair Community, a discourse of authenticity emerged closely following discourses of relatability. Discourses of relatability within the community are premised upon the communication of personal experiences that are applicable to the community. As such, the emergence of the discourse of authenticity in succession to experience-centric discourses of relatability (Kanai, 2019), indicates that authenticity is drawn from experiences. The practice-oriented nature of the community leads to the construction and employment of discourses of authenticity in parallel to community practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Engagement in haircare practices activates an authentic self. While both communities interweave external social structures and discourses to construct their own authentic identity, Black Twitter constructs authenticity in response to the social structures that surround it. In this sense, an authentic identity is constructed in parallel, and in response to, external elements. For example, issues of race and discrimination, which exist at a societal level, inform and construct the community's subject positions. This then goes on to influence how the community constructs brands, which has implications on users' constructions of brands' usage of internet memes. In contrast, the Curly Hair Community constructs authenticity intrinsically. In essence, members are initially brought together by shared experiences in relation to the maintenance of their hair, but then

construct an intimate space that is mostly self-contained. Ideas relating to authenticity and identity are then constructed within this space.

The self-contained nature of the intimate digital space nurtured by the community has implications on constructions of authenticity, particularly in relation to internet meme usage. The community is almost solely focused on issues relating to the discursive object (Foucault, 1975), which is textured hair. An authentic identity is constructed to be one where an individual embraces their hair and begins their journey of nurturing and displaying this. An authentic identity, therefore, emerges from the inside. The community is self-contained in the sense that they are primarily concerned with communicating narratives based upon their own experiences, exploring products and refining their haircare practices based on these. When compared to Black Twitter, there are fewer activities that are structured by external events. In essence, while the community does initially utilise externalities to construct its identity, this is not a primary feature in its ongoing construction and maintenance of an authentic identity. As authenticity and an authentic identity is constructed intrinsically and within the realms of the digital community, once brands enter this space, they become active contributors to the construction of the authentic self. Brands are purposeful in their usage of internet memes to edit and rewrite the community narrative, placing themselves at the centre of this narrative. The text produced by the brand forms a springboard that triggers community members to recontextualise their own experiences within the context of the text. The building of a collective memory, in which an authentic identity is rooted, is built through a process of interpretation, reinterpretation, and production of texts as presented through internet memes. An authentic identity becomes intrinsically tied to consumption, and by proximity, brands.

Interestingly, there lies a paradox in the construction of authenticity and the presentation of an authentic self within the community. The authentic self is one that is both natural, organic, and individual, while simultaneously being highly commodified and commercialised (Delanty and Harris, 2021). The community empowers the brand to lead conversations in the digital space, positioning them in the role of an expert or teacher. The brand imparts product related knowledge and haircare practices through key influencers within the community, legitimising their presence in the digital sphere. Authenticity, and the idea of an authentic identity, is promoted through this process. This is then internalised, which is apparent through language used by the community and the way in which an authentic self is constructed. The authentic self is created as natural and real and is *owned* by the individual. The ability to reclaim this self

is credited to the use of products. The intimate space created by the community and the engagement that occurs therein is no longer a journey in pursuit of an authentic identity. Rather, it is a network of marketing in which the aspirational, authentic self is never reachable. The authentic self is always at arm's length. The creation and sharing of internet memes structure and facilitates the continuous consumption of products to reach this authentic self. The authentic self, and the act of self-expression, no longer becomes a matter of *being who you are*, but rather is a performative presentation of a semi-fabricated self for consumption by a hypothetical audience. The 'real self' is hidden behind many role-played selves, if it exists at all (Van Raaij, 1993).

### EQ2. *How can brands earn authenticity credentials in the digital space?*

As emphasised by Kates (2004), communities produce systems of meaning that constitute the reality that the community operates from. These systems of meaning then form "frames of action" that are used to make sense of and evaluate the behaviour of outsiders. This establishes common modes of action, based on a shared worldview, and a common set of symbolic meanings and values between members of the community. This is particularly relevant in our understanding of constructions of authenticity assigned to brands by the community. While Kates (2004) uses ethnography to study offline communities, this can be applied to social media communities. The digital space a community occupies comprise the cultural settings wherein cultural and social conditions are produced and contested by the collective. Brands are legitimised into the digital space by embodying the values that are of interest to the community over a sustained period of time. Brands that consistently stand up for the community and their interests are consequently accepted by the community. As evident in the study, language used by community members around 'legitimate' brands reveals that the brand is not only accepted but placed within a position of power. The brands' input into community's discourse is appreciated. In contrast, brands that only engage in trending discussion are constructed as opportunistic entities whose motivations for internet meme usage are purely profit-motivated. Social media discourse, particularly internet memes produced as a result, tend to be topical and short-lived, creating internet trends. Therefore, brands who engage in trends created by particular communities, without contributing to the community's interests, and only opportunistically adopting internet memes when they trend on social media are rejected.

According to Sabonde (2019), brands' actions must indicate a sustained commitment to addressing matters of interest to community members, and wider society. In the case of the

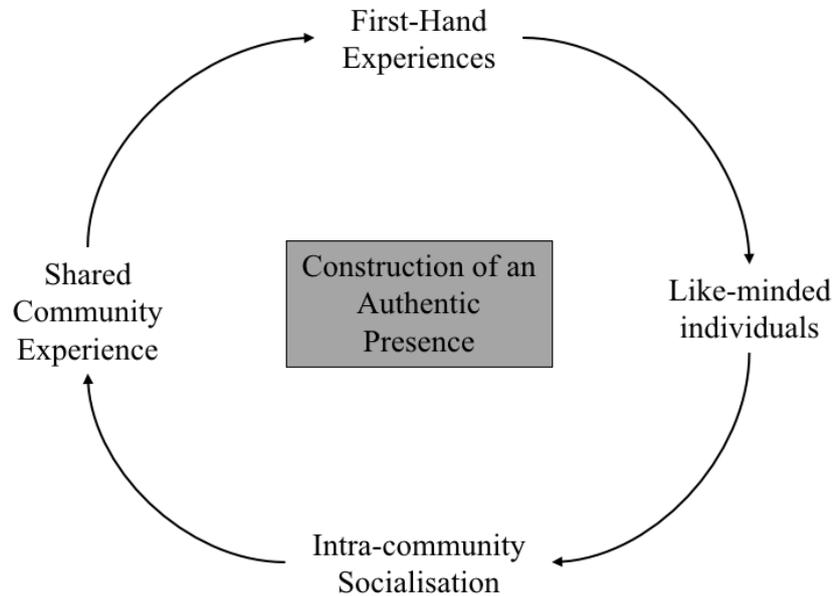
non-consumer community, users frequently questioned the motivations behind brands' adoption of internet memes, suggesting these attempts are opportunistic, profit driven, and capitalistic. Brands that are perceived to be jumping on the bandwagon are accused of being inauthentic and exploitative (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022). In this instance, these brands are accused of free riding on trending discourse to redirect online discussions towards their brand. It is continually emphasised in the literature (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022, Kates, 2004) that brands' practice must align with their heritage, values, positioning, and culture. For example, brands within the Curly Hair Community are founded on the grounds of challenging beauty standards and empowering individuals to embrace their natural texture. At these brands' core, they are dedicated to providing products and imparting expertise for a group who acknowledge themselves as being disadvantaged by societal beauty standards. Therefore, brands offering products and care rituals are accepted into the community space, as these brands are inscribed with meanings that are of relevance to the community and their interests. The brand, therefore, signal support of structural change and inequalities (Sobande, 2019), with their presence deemed to bring together the community and allowing them to embrace their 'authentic' identities. These brands, therefore, are authentic as they embody the interests and concerns of the community, and are embedded within the collective memory of the community (Kates, 2004).

This aligns with previous definitions of authenticity, where genuineness, naturalness, and truthfulness are emphasised as characteristics of authenticity (Cappannelli and Cappannelli 2004; Beverland and Farrelly 2010). Owning and *living* the experiences encapsulated within internet memes is a mark of authenticity. The process of legitimisation via a collective memory (Kates, 2004) becomes crucial to our understanding of authentic internet meme adoption and practices. Brands that continually draw on the common experiences of the community to engage in internet meme creation can be interpreted as drawing on the "embodied cultural capital" of the community (Crockett, 2008, p.253, cited in Sobande, 2019). Therefore, with this in mind, authenticity in the context of internet meme usage, as constructed by communities, appears to be a matter of ownership. Ownership is an idea that emerged explicitly as a discursive theme within the non-consumer community (Black Twitter). Emphasis was placed upon ownership of content that is produced by the collective. Language was used to vilify entities that utilise community-created content to their own ends and failed to appropriately compensate community members for the collective efforts. Ownership within the consumer community (the Curly Hair Community), in contrast, is constructed as shared between the

brand and the consumer. The brand is constructed to be an active and welcome participant in the creation of a collective memory. In essence, ownership of the digital space, and by implication the content created and consumed therein, is shared between the brand and communities. Authenticity is an idea that appears to be intrinsically tied to ownership. This idea is not new, but instead is linked to the Heideggerian word for authenticity, *eigentlichkeit*, which can translate to ‘ownership-ness’ (Heidegger, 2010). Individuals in the Curly Hair Community *own* their experiences in that they had experienced them first-hand. These experiences are therefore *theirs*. These individuals then come together online in digital spaces, brought together by their shared individual experiences. This idea of ownership then transcends the bounds of the individual and becomes a collectively owned experience. They then *own* the content they produce through their socialisation as it based upon their shared pool of experiences. To be authentic is to own.

Literature exploring virality often emphasise that it is not guaranteed, and instead occurs organically and outside the control of the marketer (Burgess, 2014, Payne, 2013). This research demonstrates that internet meme usage differs from community to community, and as such it is worthwhile for brands to embed themselves organically within a community, where authenticity is produced naturally as content is created and shared. By seeking an appropriate community and catering to their needs and adding value to the digital space, brands are leveraged and becomes active members in the ongoing construction of communities’ narratives. The meaning of internet memes changes as it passes through the digital space (Shifman, 2013). Engaging with specific communities, or hiring individuals who come from

these communities, allows social media managers to understand communal meanings and not become the subject of internet ridicule.



**Figure 38.** Construction of authenticity within communities in the digital space.

The main implication to take into consideration is the *organicity* of the cycle in which authenticity is built and mediated. Internet memes are a product of socialisation. The creation and consumption of internet memes is fundamentally concerned with organicity. If the process is not organic, it is inherently inauthentic. For an internet meme to emerge and propagate, there must be organic interaction between like-minded individuals and communities. The propagation of internet memes within and across communities is dependent on the possession of cultural and social capital and an understanding of the context in which the internet meme is situated. An understanding of the community, their experiences, and their disposition allows brands to participate in a valuable way, while encouraging the community to engage with content they produce (Schmitt, 2012). It is evident, through findings, that users are able to detect an internet meme being used or interpreted in an incorrect manner, which usually results in rejection and ridicule.

## 6.4 Embedding the Brand into the Prosumption Cycle

The initiation of an active and engaged community is regarded as a prerequisite for successful brand-community co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; O'Hern and Rindfleisch, 2017; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Schau *et al.*, 2009). The successful creation and dissemination of content, which forms the basis of social media, forms a major part of brands' marketing activities. Internet memes are regarded by academics as a novel communication tool for marketers and social media managers. The adoption of these by brands is becoming widespread. Social media content can aid in engaging with the network in a direct, casual, and personal way (Brown, 2010). The creation of content by communities is reflective of prosumption activities that do not include the brand. In the postmodern age, the consumer becomes active in the production of products and services, becoming a 'prosumer' (Kotler, 2010). The postmodern consumer wants to play a part in the production processes rather than encounter the product in its completed state (Van Raaij, 1993). Prosumption activities allow the community to employ their imagination and creativity to play new cultural roles on social media (Russell, 1999). Findings show that the implementation of internet memes by brands can be a viable and effective tool for initiating relationships with users and fostering brand-community prosumption activities. When brands are correctly embedded into the prosumption cycle, the community become an *operant resource*, facilitating active actors in relational exchanges and co-production in the marketing process (Constantin and Lusch, 1994; Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

***TQ1. How may Internet memes be utilised as a viable and effective option for brands to initiate relationships with communities and foster prosumption?***

It is evident through findings that the brand must be aligned with the community. Furthermore, the brand must be reflective of the community's identity while also providing symbolic resources for the ongoing construction of community identity (Firat *et al.*, 1994). Marketing has been regarded as an important resource for identity building in the postmodern era (Firat, 1993). The emergence of consumer culture premised upon commodity production that leads to the creation of material culture acts as symbolic resources for the construction of identity. Individuals are decentred. There is no longer a single self, but rather a collection of selves that exist fleetingly moment by moment. Consumption is not limited to goods, but encompasses all forms of consumption, including that of internet content (Waqas *et al.*, 2021, 2022). The very act of aligning of an individual with a community, engaging with them, and collectively

creating symbolic and cultural content contributes to the creation and maintenance of identity (Belk, 2016). This can be regarded as the very basis for brands to enter the community's digital space.

#### **6.4.1 Consumer Community (*The Curly Hair Community*)**

The Curly Hair Community displays a greater acceptance of the brand and its content. Curly hair is constructed as a reflection of the 'true' self. Therefore, it appears that curly-hair products activate and enable consumers to embrace their natural hair, which is symbolic of their authentic identities. Products leverage brands in the space and allow brands access into the community's space. Brands, in collaboration with the community, condense everyday experiences and communicate these through the medium of internet memes (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Creating feelings of relatability, which is the act of communicating general experiences through a personal lens (Kanai, 2019), allows brand-community connections to form. The brand shows understanding of the community and their daily struggles, experiences, and life goals. This familiarity allows the community to interact with the brand on an intimate level. The brand exists within the cultural domain of the community (Bourdieu, 1977). The brand maintains this resonance by continually engaging with the community in ways that are of relevance, for example, by posting internet memes, enabling discussion, and reiterating community practices. This earns them credentials in this communal space, thus allowing them a voice within the community and the power to contribute to discussion. Continual engagement allows the brand to accumulate social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which facilitates the initiation of meaningful relationships with the community.

Through internet memes, the brand and the community collectively assign symbolic value to products, hair, and care practices. The production of value becomes a shared practice. By embedding themselves into the community and speaking their language, the brand is able to foster prosumption activities and generate value. In terms of experience, it is appropriate to revisit the concepts of lived and mediated experience that were first discussed in the literature review. Lived experience refers to knowledge gained through first-hand experience. Mediated experience, on the other hand, are the outcome of mass-communicate culture and media (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Both forms of experience are validated through social interaction. If mediated experiences are not reinforced through lived experience, these are often rejected or forgotten. Social groups comprise a key reference point for the interpretation and reinforcement of both lived and mediated experiences (Jenkins, 2014). Brands operating within the Curly Hair

Community encourage community engagement under internet memes. This takes place in the form of sharing of experiences, ‘tagging’ friends under a post, or asking the community their thoughts towards the message relayed in the internet meme. Through this, the community interpret and discuss the post collectively. Lived experiences are reinforced and legitimised through discussion, while simultaneously mediating these experiences to those who had not experienced them first-hand. Internet memes present us with a digestible tool to communicate the prevalence and normalisation of an experience to the collective identity of the group.

The applicability of the experience to the community renders it as desirable for those who have not experienced it, and they consequently craft narratives around this experience to align themselves with it. One user had not experienced being told that their hair ‘would look better straight’. Consequently, they responded to the post expressing gratitude and relief that they had not experienced this, while also alluding to the fact that this may happen in the future (“Since I started *my curly hair journey*, I’ve been *thankful* that I haven’t been told this lol 😊”). Internet memes and brand involvement become cornerstones for the socialisation of members. The brand enables the exchange and accumulation of experience, social and cultural capital amongst members, while also placing itself in a position wherein it can continue accumulating its own social and cultural capital. The careful balancing of the cycle of the mediation and reinforcement of experiences through internet memes exemplifies the way in which brands are absorbed in the day-to-day operations of the community.

#### **6.4.2 Non-Consumer Community (Black Twitter)**

Black Twitter, the non-consumer community, differs in its disposition. The community provides outlooks that differ from mainstream thought (Wheeler, 2019; Freelon *et al.*, 2018). The group frequently engages in debate and discussion, challenging the status quo. The discourses that emerge from the community (authenticity, capitalism, and ownership) are employed to this end. The language used by the community constructs a ‘The People vs the Corporation’ narrative. ‘The People’, a self-ascribed moral and legitimate referent, band together to oppose the corrupt, projected as individuals with authority, government, the monarchy, and so on. Thus, brands are constructed as a corrupt authority that the community rallies against (Kucuk, 2010). This is a historical discourse that over time has become institutionalised and objectified. Embedded in a new digital context, this serves to structure, define, and colonise new fields and spaces. As such, it is difficult for brands to establish

connections, and foster prosumption, in a manner that is deemed authentic and acceptable. Brands must show both acknowledgement and respect to the members of the community to garner a positive reputation. Reputation is the currency which social media brands deal with regularly (Fournier and Avery, 2011). A positive reputation is achieved through maintaining authenticity. The key to achieving this is through a display of cultural and social capital, which can only be acquired through listening and engaging with the community (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Two examples from the findings can be contrasted to illustrate this point are that of Fenty Beauty and Boohoo. Fenty Beauty is a beauty brand that was built on catering to the needs of women who are routinely ignored by the industry (Klara, 2022). The brand's first product release consisted of a 40-shade foundation range, offering shades for those with very deep skin to those with very fair skin. Fenty Beauty engages with the community frequently, and this engagement is greeted with enthusiasm and is reciprocated. The use of community-specific language appears to be a natural part of the brand's identity. An instance that was observed when collecting data is the brand's collaboration with an artist within the community. As Fenty Beauty are well known for their extensive foundation shade range, capitalising on the 'nude tone' trend, an artist created face masks in corresponding shades to the Fenty Beauty foundations. Rather than launch a lawsuit against the user, Fenty connected with the artist and collaborated on a similar product to be released by Fenty Beauty. When contextualising this within the theory of lived and mediated experiences, through collaborating with the artist, Fenty Beauty reinforced and cemented the ethos of inclusion and representation that they founded their brand on. As such, it continues to reinforce this belief within the community, while also earning the brand credentials and a place within the community. Identity is co-constructed through group interaction via digital media (Belk, 2016). There is an implicit acknowledgement that brand value is co-created with the community. As such, this paves the way for the brand to interact with and utilise community-specific content. As Sartre (1969) states, "the greatest source of self-definition is the doing rather than the having". Fenty Beauty may *have* an inclusive range of products, but this identity of inclusion can only be reinforced by it being embedded in the community in its day-to-day activities.

This can be contrasted with Boohoo, an online fast-fashion retailer, who attempted to capitalise on a trend within the community. Through Club House, a social audio app that gained popularity in the summer of 2020, the community communicated in audio chat rooms that were

centred on specific topics. Twitter was used alongside this app for community members to ‘live tweet’ their thoughts in relation to topics being discussed. Room moderators often created a hashtag to create a public for the community to interact and engage. Due to the large amount of engagement within these hashtags, they often begin trending on Twitter, alerting other users that this was a popular conversation. As such, Boohoo tweeted their own discussion related hashtag in which they asked their followers to share their worst dating stories. The community had noticed that this was identical to the topic that had gained popularity within their online space and began to question Boohoo. The company had not reached out to the originators of the audio room to collaborate with, had not acknowledged that this trend was inspired by them, and had committed ‘theft’. This resulted in the community coming together to publicly criticise Boohoo’s ethical conduct, as well as commenting on their wider activities as a fast fashion brand. Fournier and Avery’s (2011) assert that brands must listen to community’s criticism. By doing so, Boohoo would have earned much-coveted credentials in online communal space.

***EQ3. How can brands acceptably contribute to societal and cultural conversations that occur through Internet memes?***

Is it possible for brands to successfully embed themselves into the community’s presumption activities and contribute to societal and cultural conversations through the medium of internet memes in both communities? It appears that at the heart of this success is a deep understanding of both the community and their needs, as well as the brand’s position in relation to this. All choices individuals make in the postmodern world are related to the maintenance of self-identity or a coherent narrative of the self. This requires complex choices to be made continually under all manner of circumstances (Giddens, 1991). The community navigates the digital space, accepting or rejecting brands based upon their symbolic value and their contribution to the maintenance of self and community identity. Social media content is created and consumed. All choices related to consumption are not simply decisions about how to *act*, but also about who to *be* (Giddens, 1991). While brands are important to the postmodern individual in the construction of their self. The *rejection* of brand is also a performance that contributes to the maintenance of identity. The community do not only define themselves by who they *are*, but who they are *not*.

Brands within the Curly Hair Community laced themselves into the everyday lives of the consumer. This enables constant exchange between the brand and the community, resulting in generation of symbolic value in which the brand is intrinsically tied. Symbolic value appears

to be the factor on which engagement is dependent upon. Brands are of importance to the postmodern individual, providing them with an accessible way to construct a narrative for oneself (Firat et al., 1994; Firat, 1997). Social media provides consumers with context for new identity performances (Merchant, 2006). The hyperreal nature of social media enhances the fictitious realm in which branding exists (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Baudrillard, 1994). While being, for the most part, faceless, brands within the Curly Hair Community take on the identity of a friend. The brand, therefore, assume a social role within the community, enabling them to become an actor in the process of meaning creation (Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Peters *et al.*, 2013). The brand is then able to begin co-creating symbolic value in the same way the community does through their interactions in the form of content creation (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010), and the exchange and modification of experiences. Long-term connection with a brand enables feelings of security and assurance in the context of identity for the consumer on an individual level. In addition to their symbolic significance, brands also offer consumers what is known as *linking value* (Cova and Cova, 2002). Within the realm of haircare, brands and their associated rituals become integral to peer-to-peer interactions. For instance, the practices linked to expertise form collective rituals that collaboratively generate cultural capital through interactions among brands, consumers, and their peers. This aligns with the learning-doing application process observed in consumer creativity communities (Kozinets et al., 2008). Interaction on social media is a way of constructing identity (Waqas *et al.*, 2021, 2022). The community will engage with brands who offer symbolic value in the construction of their identities, or linking value that enables them to create a collective identity, and thus brand-community prosumption can take place. As such, brands must offer an incentive in the form of symbolic value for the community (Waqas *et al.*, 2021). This requires a deep understanding of community identity and the practices that surround the construction and maintenance of this over time. Only then can a brand embed itself into the community's prosumption cycle.

The rejection of brands also appears to be a form of identity building and maintenance. Black Twitter is critical of the mainstream (Wheeler, 2019). The primary narrative within the community, 'The People vs the Corporation', is underpinned by anti-establishment views. The community's rejection of brands within the digital space is reflective of this. However, through various discursive strategies, the community offers brands alternate modes of engagement that are centred around fair exchange. If the brand is to utilise symbolic value created by the community, the community must benefit in some way (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Discourses of ownership emerge in contexts wherein content is deemed to be 'stolen' from the community.

Its emergence identifies outsiders and determines the boundaries of the community. It has been established that the brand is considered to be an outsider. However, another conclusion can be drawn when factoring in the way internet memes are created and the organicity of these. It has been established in the findings chapter that the community wishes to be represented through their inclusion in internal positions that enable them to create content for the brand themselves, to collaborate with the brand, or be compensated fiscally. The Boohoo example utilised earlier sheds light to brand practices that are deemed unacceptable by the community. The creation and diffusion of internet memes is dependent upon the organic interaction of like-minded individuals. This is because the internet meme must be encoded by a user, shared, decoded by another user and understood within the context of its creation, encoded, and shared again. This is reminiscent of the idea of ‘double exploitation’ discussed in the literature review. ‘Double exploitation’ occurs when brands interfere with brand-related meanings crafted by online communities’ (Pongsakornrungrasri and Schroeder, 2011), treating as unpaid contributors. In this instance, the community have constructed active roles and cultural codes to react to the exploitation. In addition to this, the rejection of this exploitation forms one of the linking values that bring the community together – they are anti-mainstream and inherently resistant to marketing efforts (Sobande, 2019; Francis, 2021). The community produces practices that empower them as a group against brands, collectively acting in a manner that forces brands to acknowledge them and do something for them. Therefore, this research suggests that values drawn from the brand may not always be beneficial for the brand.

Social media is a space for social interaction. It is a space wherein each individual action inspires another action. As such, the brand does not exist in a vacuum. Brand practices on social media are a product of all practices that precede them. Consequently, the brand should acknowledge the community and their contribution. In effect, the community, through their ongoing interaction, lay the foundations that enable brands to adopt internet memes. Without the community, these would not exist, and this is something that the community encourages the brand to publicly acknowledge.

## **6.5 Brand-Community Power Dynamics in the Digital Space**

Before concluding the discussion chapter, an examination of the impact of community discourses on the brand-community dynamics within the digital space and its implication on brands’ adoption of internet memes is required. Current literature does not differentiate between types of digital communities, instead presenting these as monolithic entities that

behave in the same way. It has become evident through observation of two different communities that there is a difference in power dynamics just within this small sample. Researchers emphasise that it is the *community* that has the power in the digital space (Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Gensler *et al.*, 2013, Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). Communities are self-policing and enforce their own rules. These communities are seen to override brands, who are considered to be a minority on social media, and as such brands are forced to adjust and homogenise to fit with the community in a process of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). While this is true, this research builds upon this argument by adding further nuance to explain brand-community power dynamics that exist on social media, adding a further element to our understanding of communities' construction of brands' adoption of internet memes. Social media phenomenon, particularly in relation to community behaviour, is a nuanced topic that is influenced by many factors. Ideas relating to identity and its relevance to marketing were particularly useful in understanding the factors that may influence a community to engage with a brand and foster a culture of prosumption (Waqas *et al.*, 2022; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Power dynamics are a further element that is pertinent to the social media landscape, and existing theory coupled with research findings will be analysed below to add further depth to our understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

***TQ2. How do discourses and practices enable the community to achieve a position of power in the digital space?***

Institutional isomorphism, where social media forms the institution, the community comprises the dominant entity, and the brand the assimilator within the institution, is the outcome of the community's dominance on social media (Fournier and Avery, 2011; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Findings from this research provide insight on *how* community dominance is achieved, and the impact of this on brands' ability to successfully co-opt community-created content and internet memes. The idea of an underpinning narrative, or a metanarrative, is one that became apparent during the analysis stage of the research. It appeared that both communities were underpinned by a metanarrative that then went on to structure and contextualise all emergent discourses. Within the non-consumer community, Black Twitter, this metanarrative was that of the 'People vs the Corporation'. The imagery attached to this narrative is that of the brand being a soulless and exploitative entity when contrasted with the community who are constructed to be a group of ordinary people. The metanarrative that emerges from the consumer community is that of care. Its implication on the construction of the narrative that

underpins the brand-community dynamic was discussed in depth during the findings chapter. In essence, this metanarrative of care underpins how the community members conduct themselves in digital space. Members treat one another, themselves, and brands with care. This metanarrative of care allows the brand to ascend in the community, occupying the position of a mentor or a teacher, as indicated by comments analysed during the findings chapter.

It has been established in the literature that objective reality is constructed and upheld by language (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The metanarratives that underpin each community are created by the community's purposeful use of words and sentences in the digital space. This is then internalised by members who are socialised into the group, who go on to uphold these structures themselves. It also became evident in the findings chapter that much of the discourses that underpin these objective realities are historically situated. The implication of this is that they have been legitimised by society. These intangible structures maintain an objective reality that is internalised by community members, enabling certain perceptions and modes of behaviour. In the case of the non-consumer community, Black Twitter, the reality and metanarratives that underpin the community makes it more difficult for brands to enter the space occupied by the community. The narrative that the brand is opportunistic and money-motivated is difficult to shake by the brand due to its historically situated nature. It also makes way for subsequent discourses that underpin the argument that community members are to be compensated for their output. This metanarrative, that has been legitimised by the community and wider society, affords the collective with power in the digital space. Furthermore, the subject position of the brand and the community that emerge and are upheld by this metanarrative generates conflict between both parties. These factors make it difficult for brands to co-opt internet memes without offering value to the community.

By comparison, the metanarrative that upholds the Curly Hair Community is that of care. This is underpinned by the primary practice of the community, which surrounds the care of the primary discursive object, which is hair. This metanarrative, and the way in which it underlines emergent discourses within the community, was discussed extensively in the findings chapter about this community. However, this narrative's implications for the distribution of power in the collective space will be discussed here. As evident in the findings chapter, the metanarrative of care is not only concerned with the discursive object, but it extends beyond this and dictates how community members treat themselves and one another. The level of care afforded to one another appears to extend to brands once they have entered the digital space through their

offering of desirable products. The metanarrative of care and the modes of behaviour it enables, coupled with the centrality of products within the community, facilitates the leveraging of the brand into a higher position within the digital space. In particular, the position the brand appears to occupy is that of a teacher. The defining metanarrative enables the brand to be afforded power, which allows brands to contribute to discussions and influences community practices. The metanarratives within these communities, which is underpinned by the very language that communities use, is what dictates the power distribution within the community.

***TQ3. What is the relationship between discourses and practices, and its implications in creating this power structure?***

Coupled with metanarratives, there appears to be another factor that may influence the way in which power manifests in the digital space. The relationship between discourses and practices and its implication on brands' co-option of internet memes will be discussed here. There appears to be a distinction in the way discourses and practices operate in each community. It was made clear in the findings chapter that the Curly Hair Community are a much more *practice*-based community, in that practices precede discourses. Whereas in Black Twitter, the community appears to be *discourse*-based. In discourse-based communities, it appeared that ideas begin with a process of discursive elaboration (Eco, 1979), which could be premised upon ideas relating to identity, which are regulated by existing social structures, history, and so on. Through this, the concepts are negotiated and legitimised within the community (Jenkins, 2014). These legitimise constructions that inform community practices and structure how experiences are understood, including dealings with brands in digital space.

Conversely, in a practice-based community, it is the ordinary practices taken up in the daily existence of the community and its members that generate discourses (Bourdieu, 1977). Practices can sometimes emerge for purely functional needs and can then accrue cultural and symbolic meaning over time. In the consumer community, care for the one's hair is, at its foundations, a functional practice that requires specific materials and competencies. However, discourses emerge as a result of this practice, such as that of expertise for example, and the practice gains discursive meanings beyond its functionality. For example, the practice of haircare becomes enmeshed in scientifically rooted haircare routines, which in itself births a multitude of individual haircare methods which underpin this practice. These routines then may become entangled with other meaningful discourses, such as that of self-care, which emerged as a counter-capitalism discourse (Arboine, 2019). While in some instances one can come

before the other, practices and discourses are dyadic, in that one cannot be understood in the absence of the other. Discourses lead to practices, which lead to more discourses, which birth more practices. The weighting of discourses versus practices in a community appears to influence the degree of acceptance communities have towards brands. These processes are important to recognize as it provides an understanding of the how an objective reality is created in each community. The relationship between discourses and practices, the generation of these, and its implication on power structures within the digital community will be elaborated on below.

The sharing of memes is in itself a social practice (Shifman, 2013; Knobel, 2006). They are created through socialisation (Dawkins, 1999). As such, internet memes reflect the very specific and intricate social fabrication of the group. The non-consumer community's delineation of their position in the world, produced via the community's rich inter-community discourse, produces a structure of power in which brands are simultaneously powerful and powerless. These ideologies, dispositions, and structures of power are legitimised into the wider sphere of the community. The majority of internet memes created within the community observed do not have brands at the centre of them. However, the community's underpinning structures and narratives make themselves apparent when brands enter digital space. The presence of brands in the digital sphere creates tension, and the community utilises discursive practices in their production of internet memes. This practice of internet meme production is characterised by its reproduction of established community discourses and narratives through a veil of irony and humour, with the function of dispelling the brand from the community's digital space. Internet memes are produced in response to these discursive tensions, which for example could be a misalignment in the community's motivations versus the brand's motivations. These tensions disrupt the established social order within the community, and the practice of producing internet memes reinforces the already legitimised socio-historically rooted social structures and power relations that are established in the community. The initial production and negotiation of these discourses in response to the wider world, therefore, produces power structures within the community. These are upheld through various discursive and social practices, which includes the sharing of internet memes. The relationship between the discourse and the practice is cyclical. Internet memes can simultaneously be a contemporary commentary outlet, a product of socialisation, and a tool for regulating arising power tensions in the digital space.

Conversely, the consumer community appear to be malleable in their assignation of cultural meanings to practices. Haircare is fundamentally a functional practice and is undertaken by every individual in some form as part of their personal grooming routine. However, this practice then accrues meaning through polyvocal discussion within the intimate digital space where brands and the community co-exist (Milner, 2013). The brand's affordance of products to consumers, which is a key element of haircare practices, allows them a voice in forming discourses and meanings that emerge as a result of these practices. The prominence of haircare practices within the community, coupled with the significance of brands to the execution of these practices, enables the brand to participate in the cycle of meaning creation. For example, expertise is a dimension that is largely scientific (Schneiker *et al.*, 2018). The brand is constructed as a credible entity due to its successful development of these products. Through discourses of expertise, brands offer the community ways in which they may use the products. These practices become routinised, becoming a part of consumers' lifestyles, and assigned with meanings thereafter. The practice of haircare in the context of a daily routine is constructed to be meaningful in terms of self-care, which is then commodified and commercialised by the brand (Arboine, 2019).

The Curly Hair Community's practices are underlined by the sociohistorically rooted discourse of manageability. Black Twitter are underlined by sociohistorically situated discourses of racial identity. These discourses also operate in different ways in each community that has implications in relation to power. Language used by both communities reveals an opposing other that the community stands in opposition to. In the Curly Hair Community, discourses of manageability are employed to underpin the community's construction of the opposing other. Interestingly, this construction is left open for the interpretation of the user and is never specified in detail. For example, the opposing other could be society, whose beauty standards favour those with straight hair, family members, who may have pressured users to straighten or alter their hair, and so on. The vagueness of this construction builds upon Kanai's (2019) conceptualisation of relatability in which she specified that relatability is achieved by addressing the reader in a way that offers them a space where they could feasibly insert themselves. The brands' adoption of these discourses, the legitimacy they earn through their affordance of products, and understanding of the subjective reality that the community has constructed, allows them to position themselves *with* the community against the opposing other. In comparison, on Black Twitter, brands do not seem to be aware of the community and their realities. This lack of awareness leads them to embody the characteristics and behaviour

that the community associates *with* the opposing other, particularly that of exploitability. Brands co-opting trending community-created internet memes without prior engagement with the community or compensating the community for the efforts is deemed exploitative. This reinforces the notion that brands must be acclimated with the community and must offer value in return. In the Curly Hair Community, the brand stands together with the community against an opposing other. In Black Twitter, the brand *is* the opposing other.

## **6.6 Overall Discussion**

### **6.6.1 *Interconnectivity of Authenticity, Prosumption, and Power***

The discussion regarding the adoption of internet memes by brands is a multi-layered one. The primary question this research attempted to answer is how may brands adopt internet memes in their marketing activities in a manner that is deemed acceptable by communities. Through the research, it appears that there are three primary dimensions for consideration by marketers in implementing internet memes into their marketing activities. First, is the idea of authenticity. This emerged in both communities as a major discourse. The concept of authenticity was analysed in the context in which it appears in both communities in the findings section but was applied here to consider a holistic viewpoint of the phenomenon. Authenticity appeared to be a question of ownership. Brands who contribute to the digital field in which the community exists, in a manner that offers *value* to consumers will, in turn, cultivate an organic relationship with the community. This ongoing relationship will al The concept of value differs from community to community, and through conducting a discourse analysis, it appears constructions are underpinned by sociohistorical structures.

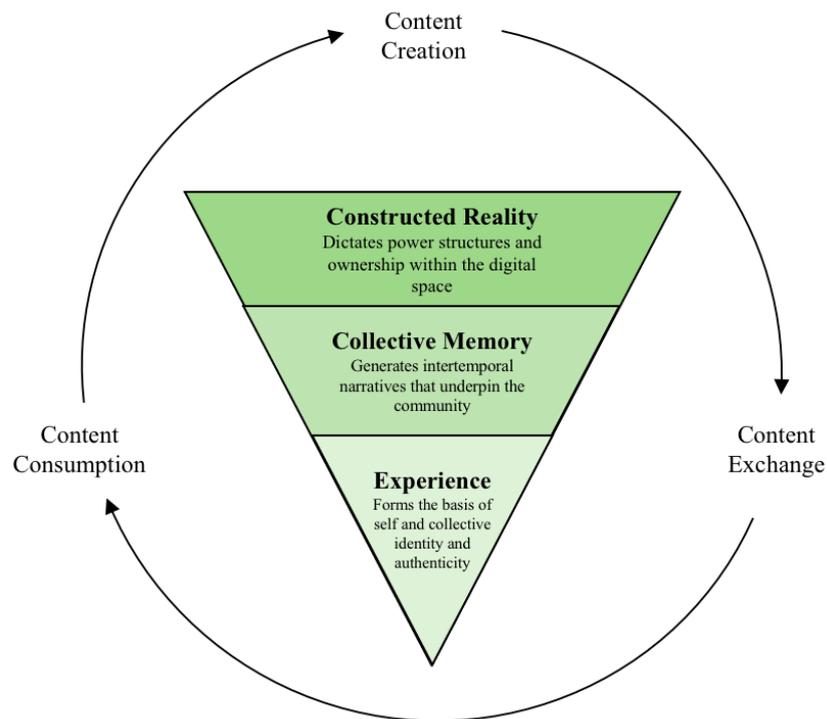
Second, the discussion considered the idea of prosumption (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The creation of internet memes may be considered, in academic terms, to be a presumptuous activity in that internet memes undergo a constant cycle of production and consumption. As internet memes are created and consumed, the meanings embedded within these are changed and adapted. As such, a high degree of cultural and social capital is required to partake in the cycle. The study highlights the importance of embedding the brand into the prosumption cycle, and the implication this has on the cultivation of cultural and social capital which can prevent mockery and backlash from communities. In particular, this section adopted theories concerning identity and experience and their implications on the ways in which consumers

interact with content on social media. This was then linked to consequence to brand-community interactions on social media.

Finally, power relations within the digital space and how they are upheld by discourses was considered. This was discussed within the context of isomorphism and social constructionism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), explaining the environment that enables communities to assume a position of power within the digital space. The section then concluded with a discussion on the relationship between discourses and practices within the communities observed and considered that this relationship may have implications for brands' influence on the assignation of meaning in each community, and in turn the generation of collective reality.

While the ideas of authenticity, prosumption, and power dynamics in the digital space were discussed separately when answering the research questions, they must be understood in connection with another to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon at hand. To do so, it was necessary to break down the ideas of authenticity, prosumption, and power further and examine the parts from which they are comprised. Then, the relationship between these parts in light of the research findings was deliberated upon. These were then put back together again to provide an answer for the overall research question. In this research, ideas concerning authenticity relate to the construction of an authentic presence in digital space. When broken down to its elements, authenticity is underpinned by identity and experience, and the organicity of these. Individuals from both communities are brought together by similar experiences. Internet memes in both communities draw upon these shared experiences. Prosumption is concerned with the creation and consumption of content. In the context of the literature and the research findings, these creation and consumption activities are fundamentally underpinned by the generation and sharing of meanings, which then are consumed to maintain and exhibit an identity in digital space. The concept of power in the digital space is underlined by the constructed reality that is upheld by communities. This is ultimately a result of the collective narrative and memory that is produced by the shared experiences of the community, through socialisation with one another. Through this, meanings are deliberated, objectified, and reified

by the group (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), generating a lens from which the community views the world and the brand.



*Figure 39. Underpinnings of content creation, consumption, and exchange.*

The model above rearranges and amalgamates these components to provide a framework for understanding the interconnectivity of the ideas presented in the context of the research. As laid out in existing literature, the model acknowledges that a key part of social media is the creation, exchange, and consumption of content, including that of internet memes. However, this model attempts to look beneath this, and understand the underpinnings of content creation on social media, which ultimately provides an understanding of why brands co-opted of internet memes are accepted or not accepted by communities in the digital space.

Experience is considered to be the very foundation of communities and the internet memes they produce. Communities are brought together by similar experiences. These experiences influence both self-identity and collective identity, which then shape future experiences. This notion underpins the idea of authenticity. In both communities, members align themselves with others who understand their experiences and identity, and other themselves from those who do not. This could be observed in both communities in the very language they use. For example, users within Black Twitter use unifying language to knit themselves together, while othering

brands. The brand is constructed as non-human, and so by implication cannot undergo the same experiences the community do. There is evidence of acceptance for brands such as Fenty Beauty, for example, which is founded by Rihanna. As the face of the brand, the human qualities she possesses are passed on to the brand, and so users show a greater degree of acceptance. In the Curly Hair Community, brands acknowledge and refer to the experiences that are common to the community. In turn, they are accepted within the community by users, and are unified through language against an opposing other. As such, experience can be considered to be the core of the community and their content-creation efforts.

Through various acts of socialisation, including through the creation and consumption of internet memes, these experiences are communicated amongst the group and expanded upon. The creation of internet memes through socialisation and interaction is reflective of presumptuous activities that do not directly involve the brand. The idea of authenticity is directly interlinked with presumption in that engagement in such activities can only occur if an individual is deemed to be authentic. Individuals engage with one another based on a commonality, which is communicated and shared amongst the group. Through this, a collective memory is generated. The ongoing engagement and presumptuous activities that occur within the realm of communities implicate its members in an intertemporal and intertextual web of narratives that then underpins communities and their activities. The creation of internet memes borrows from this collective memory and produces cultural artefacts that are pertinent to the specific community that it is born from.

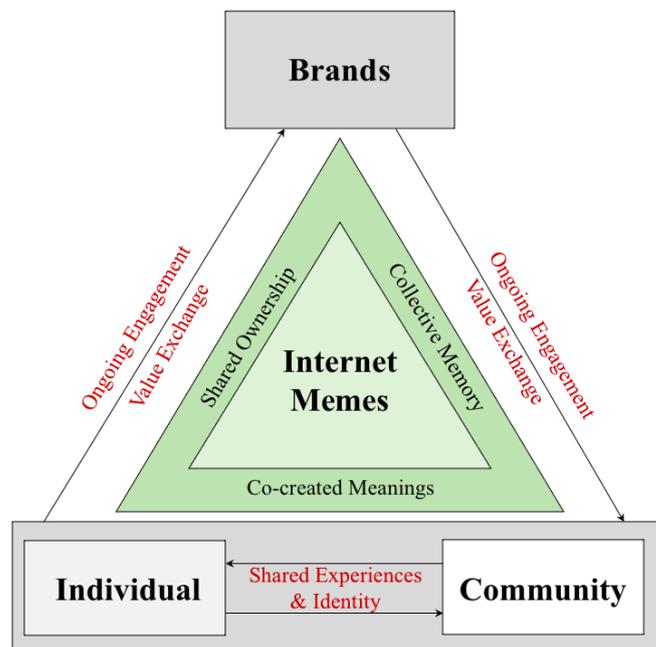
Brands such as Boohoo and their widely ridiculed attempts at utilising internet memes were discussed earlier both in this chapter and findings chapters. Boohoo, as a brand, do not have similar experiences to the community and do not regularly engage with the community organically. And as such, they cannot acquire social capital, they do not understand the web of narratives that surrounds the community, and therefore were not able to organically engage in presumptuous activities and the co-option of internet memes. On the other hand, brands from within the Curly Hair Community seem to have a grasp of the overarching narratives that shape the community and their dispositions and embed this into their marketing activities. Through this, the brand creates a familiarity and resonance amongst the community. For example, Rizo's Curls often refer to historic beauty standards that were not in favour of the community. Through this, a common narrative is intertextualised by the brand, which is then implicated in the narrative as a hero.

Through the act of prosumption and the socialisation it entails, communities create, negotiate, communicate, and reinforce a variety of discourses and practices. These underpin communities and their activities, and ultimately serve to shape their collectively contracted reality. The section on power dynamics makes clear that prosumption activities and socialisation differ from community to community, and this has implications on the way meanings and constructed reality are negotiated. This ultimately impacts on how communities construct and deal with a brand's presence, and how ownership of content is determined. For example, within Black Twitter the brand is constructed as a soulless corporation that acts on the basis of self-interest. The generation of profit, therefore, underlines brands' activities. This constructed reality is internalised and generates schemes of thought, wherein the rejection of a brand is expected and justified. This shared reality and the discourses that underpin it also empowers the community to request financial compensation and recognition for the product of their collective creation. Within the Curly Hair Community, the brand aligns itself with the community and implicates itself in the community's experiences and narratives. Its engagement with the community and the content created through ongoing engagement enables the brand to share ownership of content and utilise this freely.

### **6.6.2 *Successful Co-option of Internet Memes by Brands***

This chapter has answered the individual research questions which relate to authenticity, prosumption, and power dynamics in the digital space. It has broken these concepts down into their component parts and reassembled them to provide a holistic and synthesised view of the ideas discussed and how they relate to the phenomenon at hand. Through this, it is now possible to answer the overall research question: *How can internet memes be deployed by brands and integrated into their marketing activities in a manner that is accepted by online communities?*

While two very distinct and different communities were observed for this research, it is evident through the previous section that they undergo a similar process in creating internet memes. Communities are brought together based on a shared identity and experience. Through engagement based on this commonality, a collective memory is generated. The narratives that underpin this memory and the meanings they generate dictate power within the digital space. Through this, the brand is either empowered or prevented from entering the digital space. This must now be examined explicitly within the context of the brand-community dynamic in relation to the usage of internet memes to answer the overall research question.



*Figure 40. Successful co-option of internet memes by brands on social media.*

The bottom rectangle symbolises the exchange that occurs between individuals within a community. Individuals interact with one another within online communities to exchange experiences, establish a community identity, and construct a collective memory and narratives. This relationship is symbolic, intimate, and comprises a fairly equal distribution of power. Engagement with one another is consistent, enabling the accumulation of a shared pool of shared content, intertextual references, and closed-community language. A brand entering this space with no prior understanding of communities and their dynamics, as well as the intricate webs of meaning and symbolism that permeate the community, will not be able to engage in a meaningful and efficient way. As such, the need for consistent and long-term brand-community

engagement is a necessary prerequisite for the successful co-option of internet memes by brands.

In addition to this, it became increasingly evident during data collection that ongoing engagement is not sufficient in itself. Instead, this engagement must offer value to communities. Within Black Twitter, there is a strong discourse of capitalism that reinforces community's constructions of brands. As such, the community express a strong collective ownership of community-specific humour and content. The brand, which attempts to capitalise on this without understanding its origins and ownership are accused of theft and exploitation. In parallel to this, this community has a consistent discourse of representation underpinning their language. The community emphasises that brands who wish to utilise community created internet memes and content cannot do so without hiring community members who understand how these may be co-opted. Through this, brand-community engagement will be meaningful and authentic, but in doing so the community member is compensated fiscally for their labour. Within the Curly Hair Community, value is derived from a different source. It is evident through the findings chapter that value is drawn from the exchange of expertise, which is related to the care of textured hair. Value is also derived from the products that are developed by brands, as the usage of these enables community members to display an authentic identity, and come together to share their experiences. The brand is afforded the position of a teacher by the community, who turn to them to cultivate haircare related expertise. As such, brand-community engagement is mostly centred on hair and related experiences, as well as products and their use.

Through this ongoing engagement and exchange of value, the brand and the community develop co-created meanings, a collective memory, and shared ownership of content that is produced as a result of this engagement. The brand, then, is free to assimilate these meanings and communicate them through community-specific internet memes. Furthermore, as a result of long-term brand-community engagement, the brand will have acquired the cultural and social capital that enables them to understand underlying contexts and symbolism from which these meanings arise. It is, therefore, more likely that these internet memes will be organic, effective, and well-received. The successful adoption of internet memes by brands requires deep and meaningful engagement with a community over a long period of time, where there is an equal exchange of value. As such, brands cannot dip into the community as and when they please and co-opt their content. They must dive in.

However, despite this, a brand will be viewed as a guest and as such will not be able to engage with the community in the same way they engage with one another. Within Black Twitter, even in instances where the brand is accepted in the community, they are still separated from the community through language. The community will congratulate the social media team or the marketing effort, but not fully accept them. Within the Curly Hair Community, while the brand is accepted, they cannot offer the same level of emotional depth and connection that community members offer one another in their support of each other's curly hair journeys. As evident through this research, brands *are* able to utilise internet memes in a successful and effective manner. Yet, the brand will always be a brand.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided answers to the research questions. The overall research aim was concerned with how can brands adopt internet memes into their marketing activities in a manner that is accepted by communities. The research methodology allowed the researcher to identify the discourses that underpin and frame consumer reactions to brand usage of internet memes. The researcher identified and analysed the discourses and practices that influence communities' acceptance towards brands' co-option of internet memes. These findings allowed the theoretical and empirical research questions of this research to be answered, and three distinct areas for consideration were revealed, that of authenticity, presumption, and power dynamics. After answering the research questions, the three dimensions were broken down further into their parts. The relationship between these parts was examined in the wider context of the research, and were synthesised and presented in a model which succinctly summarises the research answers and the relationship between all these elements. This was applied to answer the overall research question.

## Chapter 7 | Conclusion

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude the research by reflecting on its contribution. It first summarises the research's theoretical contributions. This is divided into three subsections: theories which are *confirmed*, theories that are *elaborated on*, and *new* theories that emerge from the research. It will then examine the managerial implications that can be drawn from the research. In essence, this provides practical suggestions for brands and marketing managers in light of the research findings. The research limitations will then be reflected on. These limitations are then used to inform the section on suggestions for future research.

### 7.2 Theoretical Contribution

This section will divide the research's theoretical contributions into three subsections: confirmed, elaborated on, and newly developed theories. The first of these three subsections discuss existing theories that this research has agreed with, and their relation to the context of the research. In the second subsection, theories which have been built upon will be examined. The final subsection will look at new theories that emerge from the research.

#### 7.2.1 *Confirmed Theories*

##### *Meaning Making and Identity Building on Social Media*

As with all research, it is imperative to begin by embedding old knowledge in emerging knowledge. The research revisited ideas relating to postmodernism and poststructuralism and their link with consumer culture, social media marketing, online communities, and internet memes. The research confirms that there is an inherent link between these phenomena. Ideas relating to poststructuralism highlight that a universal meaning does not exist. Lyotard (1984) rejects the idea of a universal narrative and instead emphasises that stories can only be told from the position of individuals and plural social groups. The literature ties in these ideas with ideas relating to consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Individuals consume in different ways and with different goals, contributing to the construction and maintenance of their identities in the postmodern age (Van Raaji, 2001). Individuals also consume to integrate themselves into self-defined communities, or neo-tribal lifestyle groups (Bauman, 1990). These communities are governed by their own norms and rules that are upheld and maintained

by the group. For example, in the Curly Hair Community are governed by the theme of care, and this underpins their activities and the way they interact with objects and one another. This research confirms that social media is a site for identity performance (Barassi and Zamponi, 2020; Kanai, 2019). Social media has provided both individuals and communities with new tools and mediums for identity building and interaction, one of which is through internet memes. Internet memes are consumed for identity building at both community and individual levels. This idea has been covered by Miltner (2014, 2018) and by Shifman (2013, 2019). The majority of internet meme literature lies within the context of media (Miltner, 2014), communications (Lysenka, 2017, Shifman, 2013), and culture and politics (Milner, 2014).

This research builds on this further by examining identity-building through internet memes within a marketing context and foregoes the monolithic perspective that previous research has adopted. It has been established by the authors that internet memes are consumed for identity building, but this research explores the different ways that internet memes are consumed for identity building within the context of marketing. For example, this research has highlighted that communities' interactions, both positive and negative, with internet memes and brands are forms of identity building. Communities reject entities that they deem to be opposed to preferred modes of identity and being, and to maintain underlying discourses that underpin communities and their collective ethos and identity. The study confirms that brands are an invaluable source of narrative building for the postmodern individual (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, Firat *et al.*, 1994, Jameson, 1985). Consumers do not simply consume the meanings assigned to products by brands (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), but instead use the brand and various tools, such as internet memes, to construct meanings that align with the group's narrative. For example, the rejection of a brand in digital space can be considered a form of identity building and narrative construction.

### ***7.2.2 Elaborated on***

#### ***Brands in the Digital Sphere***

In 'The Uninvited Brand', Fournier and Avery (2011) provide a nuanced exploration of the brand-community dynamic in the digital sphere. The paper highlights the contemporary issues that a brand may face as they venture onto social media. Social media is a space that is defined and governed by communities (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Due to this, the brand-community relationship is redefined. Brands entering the space are often perceived as outsiders, and face

criticism and backlash from communities. The study confirms that on social media, a community's power comes from its collectiveness. Brands must listen to communities, abiding by the unwritten rules of the digital sphere. When a brand executes this well, it becomes accepted within collective digital space (Fournier and Avery, 2011). The research confirms that while brands may encourage consumers to engage with them by posting content they perceive to be of relevance to the community, these attempts may be futile (Tsai and Pai, 2012). For example, in response to an internet meme that was deemed to be insensitive by the community, one user proclaimed that the community would “*shut [the brand] down like Debenhams*”. Debenhams, a UK department store, had suffered financial difficulty and closed down during the data collection stage of this study. Community members come together to challenge brands' intentions and the ethicality of their conduct.

In relation to internet memes and brands, Teng *et al.* (2021) highlight the issue of authorship on social media. Internet memes pass through users at such a rate that authorship is difficult to trace, and the message is so changed drastically through remixing that it becomes divorced from its original context. While internet memes posted by brands may be spreadable and have a high level of positive emotional intensity, the consumer may not associate the symbolic values contained within the meme with the brand. Fournier and Avery (2011) acknowledge the intentional use of parody by marketers to be an effective use of advertising. Here, the consumers' generation of spoof and parody material leverages the brand and provides them with a competitive advantage. This is portrayed as a code that must be ‘cracked’ by the marketer, as the brand cannot influence the consumer to generate this material. This research accepts that parody marketing can be effective, but it is not a viable long-term solution for marketing on social media. This form of marketing follows the logic of mass marketing that was effective decades ago, in the hopes that the message will resonate with one group who will create a spoof that will gain traction amongst the masses. Social media has facilitated the ability for smaller, niche communities to materialise. Therefore, a long-sighted, and more sustainable approach to brand-consumer interaction on social media is required.

### ***Experiences and Authenticity***

Within this research, connections have been made between constructions of authenticity and the idea of lived and mediated experiences as conceptualised by Elliott and Wattanasuwan, (1998). A focus on authenticity questions what constitutes authentic internet meme creation and consumption. Here, it appears that authenticity is tied to ownership. This is linked to the

Heideggerian concept of *eigentlichkeit*, commonly translated in English as 'authenticity' which in German means 'ownedness', 'being owned', or even 'being one's own' (Heidegger, 2010). The concept of authenticity within this study and its relation to ownership manifests in different ways, for example, the ownership of an experience, the ownership of content, the ownership of identity, and so on. The importance of a shared identity and experiences, the ownership of these and their interconnection with authenticity are indicated by the type of language used across both communities. For example, unifying language is used by both communities ('we' and 'us') to establish community citizenship and collective identity. Separating language is used to establish community borders and cast out outsiders, or to refer to an opposing other. Brand authenticity is associated with intentions. For example, within Black Twitter, the intentions that are assigned to the brand are exemplified through discourses of capitalism. Ideas relating to impersonation and representation, which are again tied to identity, are subsumed in this construction of authenticity. Identity should be *real* and not a pretence. This construction of an authentic identity forms the criterion from which the community evaluates others, and by implication their adoption of internet memes.

These constructions of authenticity can be linked with ideas relating to lived and mediated experiences. Lived experiences are those that an individual has experienced first-hand, while mediated experiences are those that are gained vicariously through mass-communicated culture and media, allowing individuals to experience events that are spatially distant from their everyday lives (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). There is a gap in the literature in terms of the link between lived experiences, mediated experiences, authenticity, and the role of internet memes within this. As an act, authenticity within this context appears to be rooted in the individual's ability to possess relevant lived experiences and mediate these to their communities in group-specific ways. Communities then consume this content. Through consumption, the community recontextualises the mediated experience in a way that aligns with their lived experiences. The collective pool of experiences that underlines communities and their practices forms the basis of a shared identity, within which these constructions of authenticity are rooted. Authenticity is then employed through language both to erect community boundaries and to socialise new members into the group providing they possess relevant lived experiences that align them with existing members. Through this process, 'outsiders' are legitimised into the group and become 'insiders' (Kates, 2004; Cova and Cova, 2002).

Internet memes appear to be an attractive vehicle for this process. The act of content creation enables the individual to input meanings derived from lived experiences into the internet memes they produce. These internet memes are then shared amongst the network, and the meanings are then consumed by the wider community, who gain mediated experiences from their consumption, which are then validated through social interaction. Encountering Internet memes that do not represent any lived experience allows the individual to further construct the self, teaching members how to legitimately behave within their community. This cycle of content creation, content exchange, and content consumption and the experiences it reinforces and mediates is fundamental in solidifying lived experiences and communicating mediated experiences, providing the foundations for an authentic digital presence and community identity.

These exchanges generate a collective pool of meanings and a shared reality that is internalised by individuals within the community, establishing common modes of action, a shared worldview, and a common set of symbolic meanings and values. The intimate digital spaces wherein the community exists constitutes the cultural settings in which cultural and social conditions are produced and contested by the collective. An individual that enters the intimate digital space, partaking in community activities, becomes socialised into the group and thus emerges as an active agent in the production of the cultural elements that comprise the field. Establishing authenticity is dependent on embedding oneself in the cycle of meaning-making that is undergone by the community, allowing one to take ownership of these experiences. Thus, engagement with communities becomes underpinned by a shared pool of owned experiences, rather than a façade to meet marketing goals.

### ***Co-creation, Prosumption, and Cultural and Social Capital***

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) ideas relating to co-creation are central to this study. Co-creation is a form of value creation which depends on a collaborative effort between the brand and the consumer. The consumer becomes an active actor in the marketing process. Internet meme creation and consumption amongst community members form prosumption activities that do not directly include the brand. Brands must try to encourage consumers and the community to have ongoing interactions with the brand and their products beyond the point of purchase (Schindler and Holbrook, 2003). This enables the consumer to create deeper meanings and connections with the brand, allowing it to gain resonance in their personal life, as well as within

their community. It also ensures that meanings mediated through advertising are harmonious with those created through lived experiences.

Brands' usage of internet memes within the Curly Hair Community correlates with this logic. While products form a central part of community practices, the brand enmeshes itself within the everydayness of the community, becoming a cornerstone for community interaction. Internet memes are used to foster a co-creative and presumptuous relationship that is fruitful for the community and the brand. This contrasts with brands that attempt to profit from trends that emerged within the Black Twitter community. While the community may use the brand's products in their everyday lives, the brand is rejected as they have not engaged in a co-creative relationship with the community. Brands within the Curly Hair Community utilise internet memes and subsequent interactions with the community to generate value drawn from the establishment of a collective memory that involves both the brand and the community. In line with the logic of co-creation, this research agrees that internet meme usage by brands must offer value to the community. This can be through offering tools for identity building and identity performance, through offering legitimate ways of behaving, expertise, or validating lived experiences.

Co-creative relationships that utilise internet memes within the digital sphere are dependent on displays of cultural and social capital. Cultural capital can be described as culturally defined assets, such as knowledge, education, and skills, which combine, rework, and innovate symbolic resources that are shared by group members (Bourdieu, 1977). Internet memes are an amalgamation of culture (Shifman, 2013). They experience microchanges as they spread from person to person. A single internet meme spawns countless culturally and contextually bound variations. Consequently, a degree of cultural and social capital is required to decipher these. Brands' ongoing engagement and presence in communities' spaces allow it to, over time, organically accumulate the cultural and social capital required to correctly engage with community content. And as such, this leads to the culmination of social capital and status within the group.

The research agrees with Holt's (1998) expansion upon Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social and cultural capital and social status. Holt asserts that social status is composed of an amalgamation of resources. These are rooted in educational, economic, social, and cultural capital. The brand draws upon the latter two resources to achieve status within the community. Status is not determined by monolithic consumption norms but through displays of localised cultural capital

(Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is concerned with the social network, while cultural capital derives from the milieu in which one is immersed in daily life. Cultural capital is deemed the most important in terms of social status (Bourdieu, 1977; Holt, 1998), as no one can escape the game of culture. Brands who successfully adopt internet memes appear to commodify community-specific culture and experience, repackaging these and distributing elements of them back into the digital space which the community occupies.

This is in line with Jameson's (1985) commentary on the consumption of popular culture for image construction. Supported by the capitalistic system that continues to profit from it, the brand commodifies elements of popular culture creating an image that people can idolise. Ideas relating to commodity and capitalism emerged frequently during the study within the context of internet meme usage and brands. For example, within Black Twitter, the community constructs the brand as capitalistic by nature. The adoption of internet memes by brands in this instance is inherently an unethical exercise of profit maximisation and commodification. Within the Curly Hair Community, the brand and community construct an aspirational image and lifestyle that are portrayed to be achievable through the consumption and usage of products that the brand offers. In this sense, Jameson's (1985) critical perspective on the brand's role in the commodification and redistribution of cultural elements remains true in the context of the study. Internet memes are a vehicle for brands to redistribute cultural elements aiding the consumer in constructing an image of themselves that emulates this. It is apparent that many of the theories of the social sciences remain true, although the research in this thesis on internet memes and social media have added further nuances and dimensions to them.

### ***Power Dynamics in the Context of Internet Meme Production and Consumption***

Through the observation of multiple communities, it became apparent that there are power structures that are produced, reproduced, and maintained through group interactions. Various sociologists have provided rich descriptions of power structures and their implications on group dynamics (Foucault, 1975; Bourdieu, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), which underpin many of the ideas presented here. Observations and analyses of power structures cannot be divorced from any context that is centred around human interaction and community, for the production and reproduction of power structures is an inherent by-product of group socialisation. This research explores the production and maintenance of power within social media platforms. This is examined in relation to the creation and consumption of internet memes, and the power structures that either enable or prohibit entities from adopting these.

Understanding power dynamics on social media is a prerequisite when moving to a long-term relationship-based model for co-opting internet memes. The power structures that are produced by communities underline their activities and the reality that they construct, which has a direct impact on the way they deal with brands and other entities. It was established in the discussion chapter that power is created through language and the assignation of meaning amongst community members within digital space. Power structures are internalised and reproduced by communities through various acts of socialisation. Social media content, including internet memes, form an attractive and effective vehicle for the reproduction and maintenance of these meanings, and in turn, constructed reality. Communities are implicated in a cycle of content creation, consumption, and exchange. This discursive practice produces systems of meaning that form the referential system that underpin the community's beliefs and behaviour.

While power structures exist in every community, power operates differently based on the dominant discourses that underpin the community. The discursive practices that emerge through community socialisation breed discursive formations that uphold the dominant logics and power structures (McCoy, 1988) that govern the digital sphere. These discursive formations restrict and enable, providing unspoken rules about what is “thinkable” or “sayable” (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 2001). They ascribe subject positions and roles, subjectivizing individuals and mobilizing potential. Most importantly within the discussion of power, discourses define the opposition between what is true and what is false, structuring knowledge. According to Foucault (1966, 1972), there is an intimate link between knowledge and power. Foucault (1966, p.168) asserted that “within any given culture and at any given moment, there is a defining *épistémè*, implicit rules of formation, that defines the possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in practice”. In essence, the culture of each community, with its network of shared values and beliefs, upholds a dominant *épistémè* that presupposes some social power relations, implicating a degree of domination and control within the brand-community relationship.

In applying this to the contestation of internet memes posted by brands on social media, considering the anti-corporate *épistémè* that underpins Black Twitter illuminates the way in which dominant discourses contribute to the subversion of brands within the digital sphere. Many brands who posted internet memes were met with criticism and ridicule. In the case of many fast fashion brands, users mocked their attempts to be relatable and demanded that they “stick to selling clothes”. A user likened the brands to the Trojan Horse, constructing these

brands as opportunistic and deceptive. An anti-corporate narrative, underpinned by discourses of exploitation, capitalism, and authenticity, enact a social power structure that facilitates the rejection and alienation of the branded content from the digital sphere.

While dominant discourses can be found in each community, these discourses can sometimes contradict one another. The acceptance of internet memes posted by Fenty Beauty can be used to demonstrate the struggle between dominant discourses within the community at linguistic, practice and discursive levels. Fenty Beauty founder, Rihanna, achieved billionaire status through her beauty brand (Berg, 2021) and as a result, has both been critiqued and idolised for this. Discourses of exploitation underpin criticism of this status, with users arguing that the accumulation of such wealth is the result of exploitative labour practices. On the other hand, discourses of representation underscore positive behaviours, with users constructing this as a success story of an individual from an underrepresented group. Here, there is a struggle within the conflicting knowledge that is maintained by the community. Two truths can exist simultaneously: *corporations are exploitative*, and *the success of a Black women is to be celebrated*. The contradictory discourses become evident as the community encounters internet memes posted by the brand. The community accepts these posts and engages positively with them, but still maintains a distance between themselves and the brand through the language they use. The brand is held at arm's length while simultaneously being favourable.

Communities will interact differently with internet memes posted by brands due to the different schemas and épistémès that structure their knowledge. Within the Curly Hair Community, a metadiscourse of care underpins the community, structuring and underlining the subsequent discourses that emerge from the community. As such, both communities will behave differently to different phenomenon due to the schemas of knowledge that guide the community. In the case of the Curly Hair Community, the community is brought together through their shared interest in the care and maintenance of curly hair. Through the products it offers, the brand is central to haircare practices and routines. The brand is constructed as an ally and is empowered to contribute to community's digital space, intersubjectively creating social realities through ongoing interpretation and interaction with the community.

These epistemes are both projected by community members through their interactions with brands and are consumed and maintained through socialisation and the creation and consumption of content (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1966). Brand knowledge, beliefs, and the generation of power structures are enabled through the creation and

consumption of encoded, community-specific content. As such, brand identity in the digital space is largely constituted by interactions with external actors, in particular the community (Pharr, 2016). Brand images, designs, and styles are the product of fictitious realms that are imagined by consumerist society for marketing purposes (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). This demonstrates how brand identity is constituted through a process of discursive elaboration within communities (Pharr, 2016; Fournier and Avery, 2011), supported by the consumption, dissemination, and creation of internet memes. Discursive elaboration refers to a process in which material and meaning are socially constructed through a linguistic process of description, discussion, debate, ridicule, and sense-making amongst a group of people until their meaning can be distilled and concretised into what Eco (1979) has described as ‘realised texts’. This forms an untold evaluative criterion against which brands are evaluated, leading to either acceptance, or rejection and alienation. Discursive elaboration is a process that is underpinned by the culture of communities, the shared values, morals, and beliefs that bring communities together, and the dominant discourses and structures of knowledge that guide the community. The resultant power structures determine the way brands are constructed, and consequently, the ease or difficulty for brands to enter communal digital spaces.

Internet memes are texts that are embedded in communities’ social and cultural practices. This research argues that, as a common tool of socialisation amongst social media communities, internet memes are central to the production and maintenance of the power structures within the digital sphere. By implication, they are also central to maintaining the power structures that enable or restrict brands from participating in community activities. It has been argued by various authors within the media field that a meme does not have to be ‘true’ or ‘right’ to thrive, it only has to be attractive and catchy (Borenstein, 2014). While this may be applicable in some instances, this research argues that internet memes are carriers of truths, especially from a discursive perspective. Internet memes play a role in both constructing and maintaining knowledge and power. The creation and remixing of internet memes is a practice of interpreting events and culture, creating the constructed reality of the community. Internet memes are a manifestation of the invisible social structures that underpin the community. They embody the truths and realities of the community, and are propelled by culture and systems of knowledge, creating power structures that have implications on brand-community relationships.

### 7.2.3 *New Theories*

#### *Short-sighted virality vs. Long-sighted engagement*

Dawkins' (1976) earlier works on traditional memes focused on the elements of virality and contagion. Theorists emphasise that longevity is a significant factor in the consideration of a successful internet meme (Dawkins, 1976; Burgess, 2008). Memes that survive a long time, reach a wide audience, relate to current social events, and ensure transition are considered successes (Brodie, 1996). This logic is also applied to internet memes in later years. However, the fast-moving nature of social media discourse has redefined the idea of virality. The success of internet memes remains measurable by their virality – the further they spread, the more successful they are (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014). However, the rate at which ideas pass through social media has shortened the lifecycle of an internet meme. Literature on internet memes today is paradoxical in terms of its Dawkinian origins. Memes, as conceptualised by Dawkins, withstand time. By comparison, internet memes are constructed as fleeting ideas, whose lifespan lasts less than 4-months on average (Veix, 2018). In an attempt to garner widespread attention, marketers attempt to “crack the code” of internet memes by designing campaigns that can be parodied and harness the power of virality (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

This research rejects the viral marketing logic that underpins current internet meme adoption by brands. The adoption of internet memes by brands with the intention of reaching virality requires re-examination. Virality is short-term and it is not guaranteed. It is also not purposeful or productive for the long-term relationship model of marketing practice. An idea may ‘go viral’, becoming popular on social media at that given time, but it is soon forgotten once a new idea replaces it. In addition to this, it is in the very nature of internet memes to change and mutate as they pass through users and communities (Shifman, 2013, 2014). Users remix internet memes adding layers of community-specific language, creating intertextual links between the internet meme itself, and the culture and experiences of the community. Therefore, they become divorced from their original context, and come to represent new meanings. As a marketing manager, utilising social media with the goal of creating viral content simply serves to dilute the brand and its identity in the long term. Marketing managers’ intent behind the creation of content for social media is to be rethought and reconsidered. The creation of internet memes by brands should not be intended to reach a mass audience. Instead, these should be viewed as a tool for socialisation with the community.

Marketing practitioners should understand that internet memes are not an isolated phenomenon. They are the cumulative result of communities' conversations and shared experiences. They represent a fragment of communities' collective consciousness. As such, they cannot be removed from the system that generates them. Brands cannot passively and opportunistically survey social media for viral internet memes to coattail, nor can they manufacture social media content with the intention of creating a viral moment. The findings of this study introduce a new perspective on the usage of internet memes within marketing practice, which are presented through ideas relating to temporality that emerged within the second findings chapter. These ideas can shed light on the ways internet meme usage by brands can align with customer-centric service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). When used in this way, internet memes have the potential to facilitate experience sharing between the brand and the community, generating a shared collective memory in which the brand is embedded. This usage of internet memes is compatible with long-term strategic planning in marketing practice.

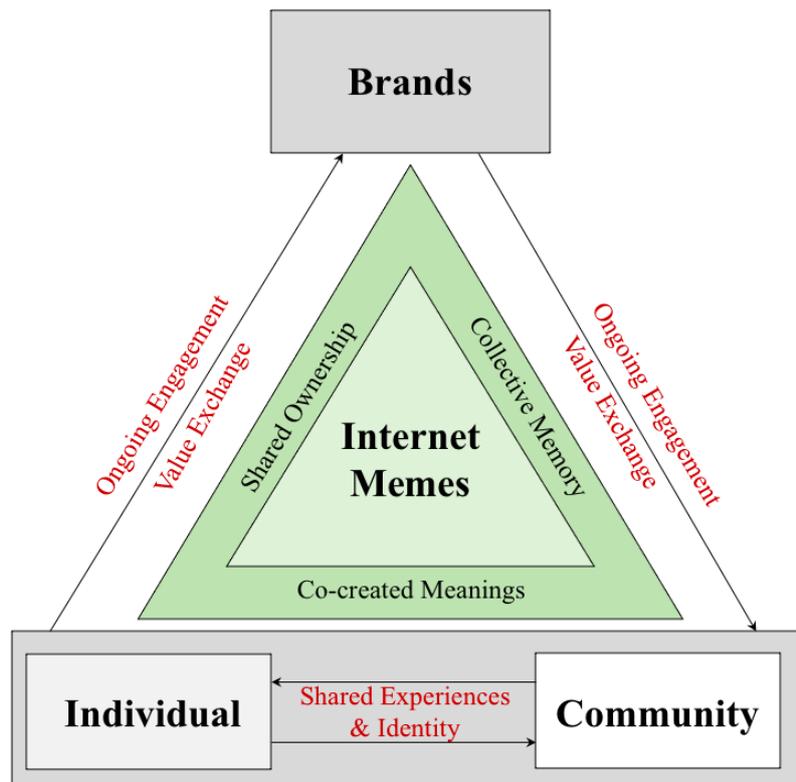
This research has emphasised the temporal elements of language that emerge within communities. This is evidence of the deep interconnectivity amongst communities and their members, and the collective memory, shared consciousness, and web of intertextual meanings that are generated through group socialisation. An internet meme is born from a contextual system of conversation that is both collaborative and cumulative (Kucuk, 2010). One must be immersed within a community, over a long period, to ensure that internet meme usage and co-option are meaningful and relevant. The research argues that the idea of virality in relation to existing social media marketing (Puriwat and Tripopsakul, 2021; Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2019) must be jettisoned, and a long-sighted, relationship-based, and immersive perspective must be adopted. While the ideas communicated by brands on social media can, and do, become culturally embedded in the Dawkinian sense, becoming iconic (Holt, 1998), the creation of content with the simple hope that it spreads across communities is not a sustainable marketing approach.

Marketers should first aim to embed their brand in community activities, social rituals, and conversations, as well as inviting communities' into their own conversations. In this sense, marketers return to the original logic of memes, creating longitudinal relationships and a space from which cultural artefacts can be co-created. Community members are brought together by shared experiences and interests, which forms the foundation for socialisation, social media

practices, and subsequently, the production of internet memes. Successful internet meme production is rooted in this connection. Brands are not exempt from this. Marketers should aim to connect with the community, offering interactions that are of meaning and value to communities. Through this, a socio-temporal space is created which both brands and communities occupy and co-create. The sum of consequent brand-community interactions forms the basis of the shared collective memory where brands discursively create and are the core topic both of discourse and interaction. Memes can only be accessed through these social systems and structures.

### 7.3 Managerial Implications

Four primary managerial considerations should be taken by marketing managers in light of this research. These are: having a deep understanding of the community they wish to engage with, offering ongoing engagement, generating value alongside communities, and understanding the expectations the community has of them as a brand.



*Figure 41. Successful co-option of internet memes by brands on social media.*

### **7.3.1 Understand Community**

This research has highlighted the importance of online communities in the meaningful consumption and successful distribution of internet memes. The successful creation, consumption, and exchange of internet memes is inherently reliant on the existence of a community of like-minded individuals who connect to produce content. Through this content, a web of interconnected meanings is produced, which goes on to underpin communities and their activities. An individual image or phrase can vary in its meaning from community to community. The intended meaning of the internet meme is not always obvious to an outsider. Meanings conveyed through community interaction are often implicit and refer to a large network of meanings that are of prominence to the community. Before a brand can engage in the cycle depicted in *figure 41*, it must first understand the community, the shared experiences that bring them together and the identity they embody. This goes on to structure the content that is produced by the community, and the intentions behind this. Understanding these sensitivities can aid the brand in avoiding any potential backlash from communities, preventing public ridicule on social media. Any past conduct that communities deem to be unfavourable continues to haunt the brand as they move forward, especially through social media trends such as “*this you?*”, which is a meme used to call attention to hypocrisy towards brands, politicians, and celebrities (KnowYourMeme, 2020).

### **7.3.2 Ongoing Engagement**

Ongoing engagement serves two purposes for the brand. First, it enables the brand to become accustomed to the community, thus becoming perceptive to any changes that occur within digital space and understanding the implications this has for the brand. As observed through this study, communities on social media are close-knit and engage with one another constantly and consistently, generating a continuous stream of meaning, and constructing and reconstructing the social structures that inform the community’s collective narrative. A brand that engages infrequently with a community will not be equipped with sufficient cultural capital to engage authentically or organically with community discussion and content. In line with established marketing practice, wherein a brand focuses on an appropriate target market, the same logic can be applied here. This strengthens the notion that a brand should focus on fostering a relationship with an appropriate community, one that is compatible with the brand, its identity, and its offerings. For example, Fenty Beauty regularly engages with underrepresented women of colour, as the brand ultimately aims to serve and empower this

demographic. Rizo's Curls' has fostered a relationship with Hispanic people who wish to care for their curls, as the company's CEO shares a similar background and experience with this audience.

Secondly, ongoing engagement with [an appropriate] community strengthens the brand's credibility. Brands who simply co-opt trending internet memes risk being perceived as opportunistic and capitalistic. In this research project, Black Twitter constructed the brand as being inherently deceptive, with the brand being compared to the Trojan Horse to metaphorically depict this. In many instances, internet memes that spill out of the digital space inhabited by the community and into the mainstream are deemed to be defunct by the community. Brands that then utilise these popular internet memes are perceived as attempting to be relatable to the community and are ridiculed. For example, during this research project, many fast fashion brands such as PrettyLittleThing, Boohoo, and Missguided, adopted popular internet memes in their social media activities to engage with trending events. Users commented under these posts, instructing the brand to "*stick to selling clothes*". They also flooded the post with the "*silence, brand*" meme, which is used to express disregard for posts created by brands in a bid to appear relatable and humorous to the community (KnowYourMeme, 2018). This research suggests that establishing a deeper, long term with the community, rather than attempting to cash in on trending content, earns the brand credibility and authenticity in the digital space.

### **7.3.3 Offer Value**

Vargo and Lusch's (2004) research on service-dominant logic and value co-creation was central to this research project. Consumers are active actors in the marketing process, co-creating value alongside the firm. In this sense, the exchange is of value to both parties: the brand sustains an endless stream of ideas from its audience, while the consumer feels acknowledged and involved in the marketing process. However, the power shift that has been precipitated by social media has implications for this traditional model. The marketing process was initiated by the firm, with consumers' input being included and encouraged to establish a sense of ownership, which resulted in loyalty and satisfaction. On social media, however, communities overpower brands. Ownership was a reoccurring idea that continued to emerge as the analysis progressed. Community members are empowered to set boundaries, and dictate the rules of the game, thereby reshaping traditional consumer-brand relationships. Internet memes are owned by communities as they are the outcome of their collective creativity, and

therefore, if brands wish to engage with this, they must offer value in return. The idea of double exploitation and brand interference presented by Pongsakornrungrong and Schroeder (2011) are of particular relevance here. The practice on internet meme creation is a collective labour that reimagines cultural meanings, using creativity and shared meanings to repackage this into digestible cultural artefacts. The appropriation of this by brands can be viewed as exploitative, and communities will actively resist and subvert brands. While some brands are valuable as they bring communities together and facilitate core practices within the community, such as in the case of the Curly Hair Community, in other communities this may not be case.

The research suggests that financial compensation is desired by the community, as community members should not be dismissed and treated as unpaid actors within this process. However, unless the author is hyper-visible, this can be a difficult option for the brand. Representation has emerged as an alternative solution. To achieve an understanding of the community and establish authentic ongoing engagement, members of the community can be hired into the marketing team to oversee social media activities. For example, during the data collection period, it was observed that Fenty Beauty's use of internet memes was well received, which is highly likely due to their hiring of a Black woman, Janelle Kelly, to oversee the brand's social media content. However, while this does minimise the chance of a brand appearing inauthentic, this does not make the brand immune to any possible backlash, as insensitive posts will still be met with the same criticism. Successful representation is evident with brands within the Curly Hair Community, particularly through Rizo's Curls, whose CEO frequently shares content and internet memes related to her audience's shared experience of being alienated in their communities due to their hair texture. Value is also generated here as the brand offers the community a space wherein they feel accepted, and are able to share their collective experiences in various ways.

#### ***7.3.4 Establishing a New Function for Brand Internet Memes***

Institutions are social spaces with rules and regularities that ascribe subject positions (Bourdieu, 1990). The establishment of power in the digital sphere was discussed alongside Berger and Luckmann's (1969) ideas relating to the social construction of reality. Communities construct a collective reality, producing texts that create and maintain subject positions, objects, and concepts. The language that is continually used within this space upholds the imputed reality that the brand is not a part of the community. While brands can achieve valuable co-creative relationships with the community, they are limited by their existence as a brand.

Revisiting an example provided in the findings section, Fenty Beauty, as a brand, is accepted and respected in the digital sphere due to the brand's values of inclusivity that it embodies. The brand, while utilising internet memes in a manner that is deemed to be correct, received responses from users congratulating the "marketing team". As such, it appears that the brand can never fully become immersed in the digital space occupied by the community. While maintaining engagement and contact with the community through their official brand social media pages, brands cannot engage with the community on a deeper level with community members. For example, while the Curly Hair community engages with brands mostly on Instagram, they actually utilise a wide range of social media platforms. The community utilises Reddit to seek reassurance, one-to-one advice, and the sharing of experiences with one another. The brand cannot establish this level of one-to-one connection and experience sharing with the community.

Brands cannot engage with communities in the very human and organic way its members interact with one another. Social media marketing is strategic, and actions taken must fit in with the brand's overall image and direction. Much of communities' discussion is underpinned by their personal lived experiences, and the brand is not able to engage in this way. However, this is perhaps not entirely necessary. While the use of internet memes on social media is largely a tool for socialisation, boundary creating, and bonding amongst like-minded individuals (Miltner, 2018), these internet memes can take on new functions when used by the brand. The consumption of internet memes posted by brands can be considered as an extension of brand consumption (Waqas *et al.*, 2022). While previously brand meanings were transferred through the consumption of physical goods, social media allows for new forms of interaction between brands and consumers. Liking or sharing an internet meme posted by a brand is a way for the consumer to weave the brand and its personality into their digital identities. For example, in an era where nostalgic consumption is commonplace amongst millennials and Generation Z (Bachem, 2020), retweeting an internet meme shared by the official Bratz doll Twitter page may be a form of nostalgic consumption. Here, the user is publicly acknowledging and weaving elements of their childhood into their social media pages and communicating this aspect of their personality to their community. In the postmodern age, brand meanings are consumed to establish identity. Internet memes, in this sense, offer additional consumption opportunities. In a world that is highly digitised, rather than analogue and face to face, interaction with branded internet memes on social media is a new, accessible, and flexible form of identity construction.

## 7.4 Overall Contribution

The research presented in this study contributes to both marketing practice and marketing theory. In terms of marketing theory, the research builds on existing research relating to online communities and tribalism, highlighting that internet memes emerge as potent tools for these communities to convey their distinct cultural expressions and assert their presence in the digital sphere. It also emphasises the importance of social media interactions and content in the continued discussion regarding consumer culture. The research also deeply examines the relationship dynamics between online communities and brands on social media. While previous research highlights that social media networks are comprised of ‘actors’ (Peters et al., 2013), this research examines the ways in which brands can contribute to the overall network. It also answers questions relating to authenticity. While this is an abstract area that has been explored in previous research, it more so looks at how brands can establish an authentic presence online that enables them to contribute to the everlasting cycle of content creation, consumption, and exchange. In essence, this research paints a vivid picture of the symbiotic relationship between brands and online communities, particularly within the context of internet memes. While brands seek acceptance and engagement, they are also in a unique position to empower these communities through active participation and contributions to their cultural and discursive spaces. In doing so, the research presents solutions for brand engagement with online communities and internet memes, highlighting a need for the respect for culture, and offering value to the communities to establish legitimacy and citizenship within these communities.

In the context of marketing practice, the findings shed light on the nuanced dynamics of engaging with online communities through the adoption of internet memes. The research highlights the importance of authenticity in the creation, consumption, and exchange of internet memes, and how this authenticity may be earned. In addition to this, in an environment wherein the allure of instant virality is enticing to the marketer (Burgess, 2014), the research brings back to the forefront the importance of sustained and meaningful interactions by brands within these communities, highlighting that long-term engagement, characterized by the creation of value through social media interactions, can enhance perceived authenticity. This insight equips marketing practitioners with a tangible strategy for effectively navigating the complex landscape of social media and, subsequently, gaining acceptance within online communities. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this research also alludes to the potential for brands to compensate online communities for their contributions to meme culture. Drawing parallels

from the world of social media and online communities, this compensation could serve as a form of acknowledgment and empowerment, fostering a more mutually beneficial relationship between brands and these digital collectives. In this sense, the research is not only of value to marketing theorists and practitioners, but to policy-makers, who could acknowledge the labour that is involved in the creation of internet memes, and how to better protect online communities against the performative co-option of this by brands for profit. In conclusion, this research transcends the boundaries of marketing practice and theory to offer a nuanced understanding of how internet memes influence and are influenced by brands and online communities. Its significance extends beyond the marketing landscape, resonating with the broader fields of culture, media studies, and sociocultural dynamics.

### **7.5 Research Limitations**

No research project is without its limitations. This research is primarily limited in terms of sample size, the rationale behind choosing which communities to observe, and the research method chosen. The ideal sample size in qualitative research is widely contested. The aim for the researcher is to reach data saturation, which is the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data from the completion of additional interviews or cases (Guest et al., 2006). As such, it is difficult to pre-determine a sample size for qualitative research and this can only be decided as the process of data collection and analysis progresses. For this study, two communities were observed for the duration of 18-months. Each online community has its specific customs and norms which may influence the generalizability of the data (Kozinets, 2015). While some themes and ideas that emerged from both communities overlapped, these communities still presented narratives and ideas that are unique to them. This suggests that there is much yet to explore. However, a sample that is too large does not allow the researcher to achieve the deep, case-oriented analysis that is the *raison d'être* of qualitative inquiry (Sandelowski, 1995).

The basis for the selection of communities to observe may have limited the conclusions drawn from the data. As the research is fundamentally concerned with marketing, ideas in the literature review were concerned with consumption and identity construction in the postmodern age (Jameson, 1985, Firat et al., 1994). As such, the primary criterion for choosing communities was based on consumption. A community that the researcher deemed to be grounded in non-consumption was chosen, to be contrasted with a community where the

consumption of products is central to community practices. Consequently, the analysis of the data was rooted in consumption. The acceptance of brands into consumption-based communities was almost always linked to the centrality of brands and their products in the maintenance of community practices, identity, and an authentic self. Therefore, a dialectical, binary perspective is adopted for the methodology. This is a limitation as not all communities are oppositional. The context of consumption, while originally chosen to provide some structure and rationale for the research, may have restricted the ideas that emerged from the data.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to play an active role in the interpretation of the data. As Bourdieu (1977) asserts, social symbolism can only be perceived if you have been preconditioned to perceive it. While the researcher aims to be objective, conclusions drawn from a dataset can vary greatly from researcher to researcher. While qualitative research can provide rich insights, it is difficult to generalise the data across the whole population. Furthermore, this research project utilised netnography, only one method of qualitative research amongst many. Netnography has benefits in that research takes place in the participants' native setting, giving a more accurate depiction of organic thoughts and behaviour (Kozinets, 2002a). Unlike ethnography, it is difficult to observe participants in all the areas they occupy in the digital sphere. Netnographic research is more about identifying a digital *space*, rather than a specific group of participants (Kozinets, 2015). This can skew data, as data is drawn from individuals, but rather from a boundless digital space where anyone is free to contribute at any given time.

It is recommended that qualitative researchers should aim to employ two different methods of data collection to achieve triangulation. Human behaviour is rich and complex, and the employment of multiple methods seeks to provide a fuller understanding of social phenomenon (Kozinets, 2015). Triangulation of data from multiple sources, including existing research, allows the researcher to establish regularities in the dataset, thus validating the findings of their research (Patton, 1999). Due to time constraints, and the need for netnographic data collection to take place over a long period to yield meaningful results, the researcher could not employ additional methods of data collection. Ideally, the data collected through netnographic means would have been utilised to formulate interview questions. Emerging ideas and themes would have then been explored in-depth with participants. While this would have been ideal and would have provided further validity and reliability to the research, the research questions were

answered through the netnographic data collected, with many valuable insights being generated. The addition of interviews, would, however, have clarified this data.

## 7.6 Future Research

It would be beneficial to explore additional contexts to investigate how the acceptance of brands and internet memes varies in different spaces in the digital sphere. There are different communities whose use of internet memes differ from the communities observed as a part of this research project. For example, cryptocurrency is an area that has piqued mainstream interest during the duration of this study. Cryptocurrency communities are made up of investors who gather to discuss the latest events in cryptocurrency (Kerner, 2018). Internet meme usage differs in this community as many digital currencies are based upon longstanding internet memes. Internet memes, therefore, form the basis of investment opportunities. Brands in this digital space encompass trading platforms and currency founders. The community opposes traditional mindsets, and as such, these brands that are inherently aligned with the community's values and facilitate the growth of the industry and are accepted. This community represents one of the many communities that exist on social media whose usage of internet memes varies. This is worth exploring as the concept of cryptocurrency and its discursive use of memes continues to seep into the mainstream (Pickard, 2022). In this sense, the meme *is* the market.

Further contexts may be explored. For example, marketing is becoming a societal and sustainable concept. The prominence of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Bolton, 2021), and the demands consumers have for brands to become more socially aware (Sheth and Parvatar, 2021), facilitates new modes of identity performances on social media. The 'humanness' of internet memes allows brands to express empathy for various social events and world issues, while also displaying the self-awareness that is demanded from consumers. Marketing is evolving and a binary of consumption and non-consumption, while providing a good foundation, does not provide the nuanced approach needed to understand the brand-consumer dynamic.

The methodology used in this research could be altered to uncover new findings. A wider range of communities could be studied using other research methods, such as interviews and focus groups. This would allow the researcher more control in guiding the research process, rather than passively observing social media. The researcher could probe and explore emergent themes in further depth, allowing for a richer dataset. Discourse analysis was used in this

research project. Future research could use a different method of analysis to uncover new findings. For example, identity, sense-making, and collective memory were prominent themes that emerged through the data. Users' interactions with their community and brands all form important elements of identity and narrative building on social media (Camic, 2021).. Adopting a narrative analysis would aid in exploring these aspects within the context of marketing and the role of brands in the construction and structuring of identity on social media.

Finally, this phenomenon is not one-sided. This research is focused on brand-community interaction, so it may be insightful to explore the brand's side. Examining the formation of brand-community relationships from the perspective of a social media manager may be beneficial in gaining a holistic view of the phenomenon. The rationale behind posting internet memes, the intentions behind these, and the process of keeping up with the community are interesting aspects to explore. Also, one of the main managerial implications that emerged through this study is the need for brands to add value to communities if they wish to interact with them. The response and implementation of this by social media managers from a managerial perspective would be a valuable addition to research in this field.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

This chapter provides an overall conclusion for the research project. Both the theoretical and managerial contributions of the research are emphasized. First, the research confirms the literature on meaning-making and identity building on social media. Internet memes and social media present individuals with a new medium for identity building, in which the possibilities are endless. Fournier and Avery's (2011) exploration of the contemporary issues that face brands in the digital sphere were elaborated on by this research. This research foregoes the monolithic perspective adopted previously, adding further nuances and dimensions to these ideas. Community-specific experiences and their implication of the construction of authenticity were discussed in the context of internet memes. Lived experiences are embedded into internet memes by a user, which is then mediated to their community. This cycle forms the basis for authenticity and forms the shared pool of experiences, that underpins the community. Brands' use of internet memes must offer value to communities, and it must be underpinned by cultural and social capital that is gained through immersion into communities and their activities. New theories were then discussed. The research stresses that the concept of internet memes as it emerges in current literature should be reimagined in the context of marketing. Following this,

power dynamics in the context of internet meme production and consumption were discussed, providing insight into the rejection of brands in the digital space.

This research sought to gain an understanding of communities' constructions of brands' usage of internet memes. As the research developed, it became apparent that overall, this was a question of authenticity. Communities value authenticity, honesty, and organicity in relation to their social interactions. The brand is inherently an outsider, and so marketing managers should exercise care in the way they utilise internet memes. Communities are able to decipher the brand's actions and determine hidden intentions. Interactions and content that are deemed to be inauthentic, outdated, or a pretence are quickly dismissed. As such, any interaction initiated by brands must flow organically and be of symbolic value to the community, while aligning with the identity of the brand. Social media is a space that is dominated by communities, not by brands. Brands must engage with communities on their own terms, within the structural bounds upheld by the community. Internet memes are a fundamental aspect of social media and are present in almost all communities in varying forms. They are cornerstones of social media culture, and consequently, internet memes cannot be avoided by brands. For brands, to refuse to understand internet memes and related practices is to deliberately exclude oneself from the digital sphere.

The centrality of internet memes to social media conversation necessitates their being understood by brands. Internet memes are a fundamental part of inter and intra-community socialisation on social media. In an increasingly digitised world, brands cannot avoid the use of social media, and by implication, cannot avoid social media practices and internet memes. As such, the brand's understanding of these is twofold: they must first understand the *practices* that underpin internet meme production, consumption, and exchange, and second, they must understand the symbolic value of the brand within this cycle. In essence, this is a question of *how* internet memes are created and consumed within the relevant community, and *what* role the brand and its identity play in this cycle. Once this is understood, marketers and social media managers can refine their social media practices and presence in a way that aligns with the organic ebbs and flows of the digital space. Marketing is no longer simply a practice of managing and analysing markets and segments. It must return to its original logic of understanding the consumer, and in light of social media, collaborate with the consumer and the collective at every stage of the marketing process.

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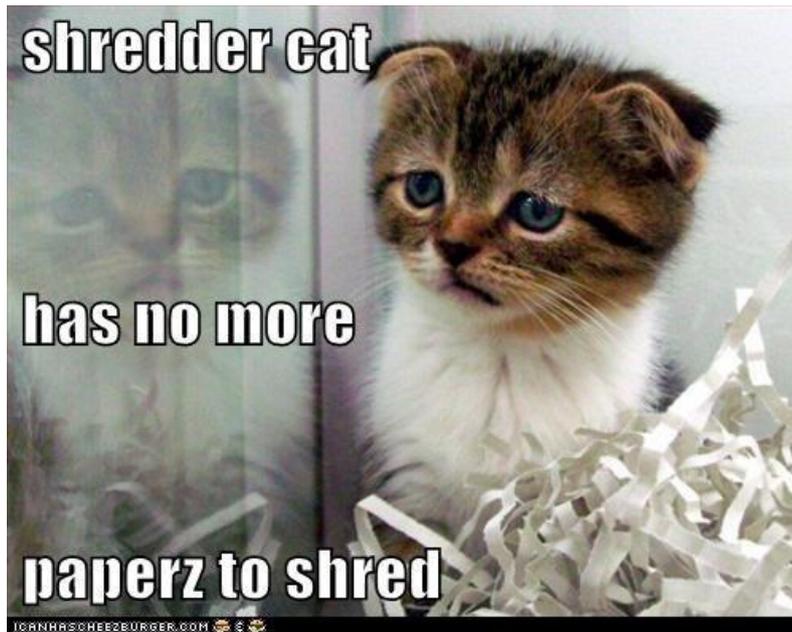
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## Appendix A: Early Iterations of Internet Memes



*Figure A1.* An example of an internet meme belonging to the *LolCat* genre.



*Figure A2.* An example of a *Bad Luck Brian* internet meme.

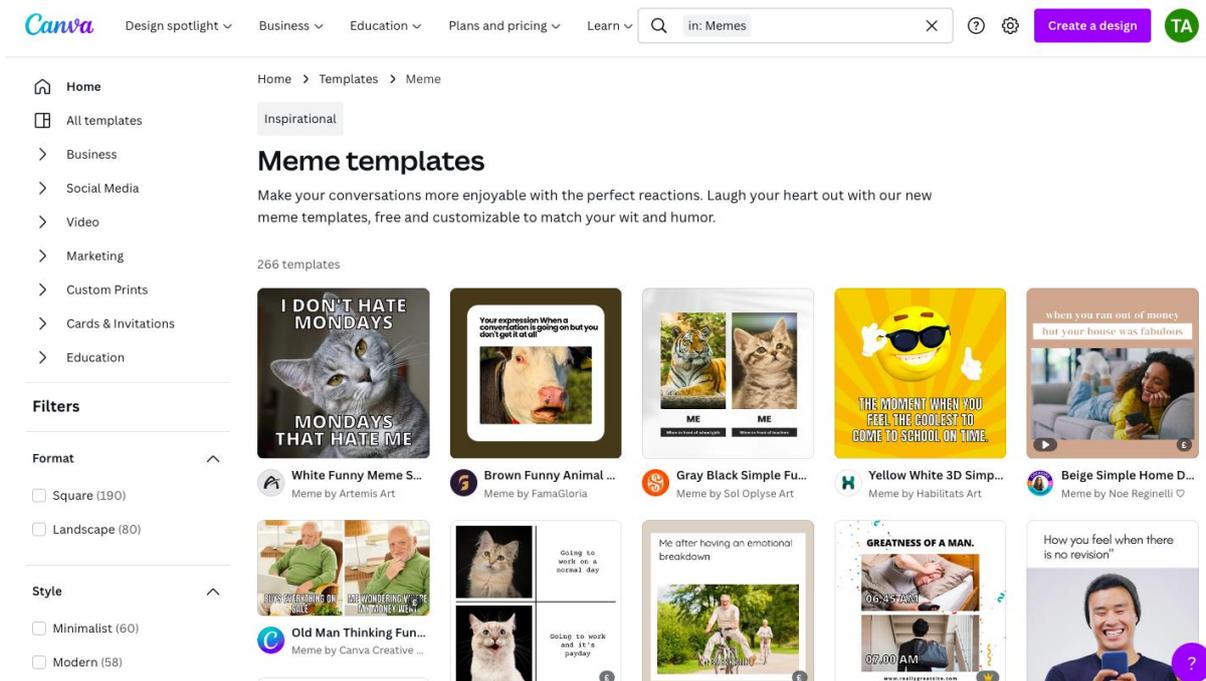


*Figure A3.* An example of an internet meme from the *Overly Attached Girlfriend* category.

The above examples depict the style of internet meme that was popular during the late 2000s to early 2010s. Internet memes were mostly acknowledged as visual images, which were overlaid with white text. Internet meme images belonged to a larger category of internet meme,

with captions relating to a specific sentiment or theme. For example, LolCats (Figure A1) depicted images of cats accompanied by idiosyncratic and grammatically incorrect text. This was known by users as *LolSpeak*. Figure A2 belongs to the internet meme category of *Bad Luck Brian*. Images were accompanied by captions that detailed a variety of unlucky, embarrassing, or tragic events. Finally, Figure A3 belongs to the *Overly Attached Girlfriend* category, with captions portraying stereotype of an overly clingy girlfriend. Internet memes during this time were relatively contained within these formats. Essentially, the image or idea itself would not undergo much transformation or change as it travels through the network, only the captions would be changed, still maintaining the original theme of the image. Internet memes have evolved to be much more transformative mediums, undergoing such change in meaning and format that they can only be encoded by understanding the entire web of meaning from which they emerged.

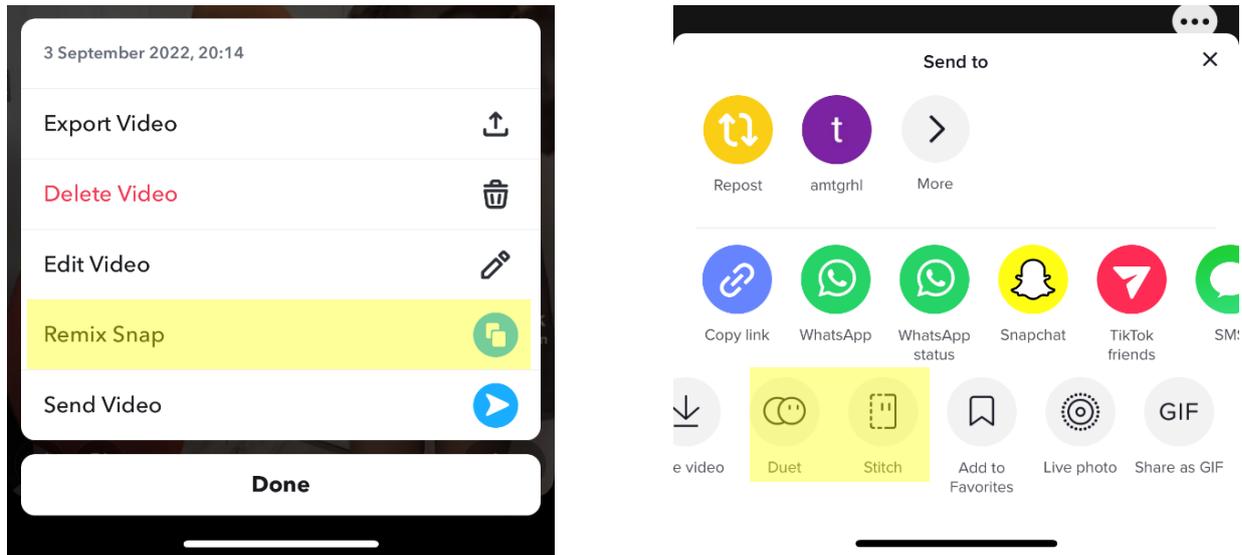
## Appendix B: Corporatisation of Internet Meme Production



*Figure B1.* A screenshot of the *meme template* selection available on the design platform *Canva*.

The practices of internet memes have transcended online communities to reach social media marketers and other professionals. Canva, a graphic design platform, is utilised by businesses to create various graphics for presentations, social media sites, newsletters, logos, and the like. A recent addition is the *meme template* selection, which makes available a wide array of classic internet meme formats as well as trending formats to be utilised by professionals for their social media strategies. This is indicative of the increased commercialisation and corporatisation of internet meme practices, as well as their growing centrality to social media marketers for the purposes of communication.

## Appendix C: Embedding of Remixing Practices



*Figures C1(left) and C2 (right). Screenshots from the social media platform Snapchat (C1) and TikTok (C2) which showcase the embeddedness of remix culture and practices on social media.*

Remix practices, which are the customisation of content to carry self-referential meaning or commentary (Thorsberg, 2022), are becoming embedded within the interface of social media platforms. This, coupled with the availability of internet meme templates on commercial sites, evidences the shift from the passive observation of internet memes, to actively creating these. This shift is not only at the level of social practice, but at discourse level. The interpretation of internet memes involves the act of recontextualising the format and content to intertextually reflect one's own subjectivity and dispositions. This is significant as it changes social media culture, which has implications on the way in which brands may enmesh themselves into the landscape. The adoption of internet memes and engaging in the practices of "memeing" appear to have become an inherent aspect of social media usage.

## Appendix D: Letter of Ethical Approval



College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
Brunel University London  
Kingston Lane  
Uxbridge  
UB8 3PH  
United Kingdom  
www.brunel.ac.uk

2 December 2020

### LETTER OF CONDITIONAL APPROVAL

APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED FOR THIS STUDY TO BE CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 03/12/2020 AND 01/02/2022

Applicant (s): Ms Tala Al-Maghrabi

Project Title: Memes in Marketing: Exploring consumers' attitudes towards brand usage of Internet memes on social media.

Reference: 26211-MHR-Nov/2020- 28646-1

Dear Ms Tala Al-Maghrabi

The Research Ethics Committee has considered the above application recently submitted by you.

The Chair, acting under delegated authority has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. Approval is given on the understanding that the conditions of approval set out below are followed:

- **D23 - On your Participant Information Sheet in the places where you have stated the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), Kate Dunbar, and Derek Healy, please delete those references, and replace them with the "College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (cbass-ethics@brunel.ac.uk)"**
- **D24 - Consent - For your interviews, you must use the latest version of the template appropriately adapted for your project in order to obtain informed consent from your participants - see "Consent Form Guidance" and "Consent Form Template" available in 'Templates' under the Help link at the top of the BREO form.**
- **You are not required to re-submit your BREO form after making the changes listed above. Please make the changes and proceed with your research.**
- **Approval is given for remote (online/telephone) research activity only. Face-to-face activity and/or travel will require approval by way of an amendment.**
- **The agreed protocol must be followed. Any changes to the protocol will require prior approval from the Committee by way of an application for an amendment.**
- **In addition to the above, please ensure that you monitor and adhere to all up-to-date local and national Government health advice for the duration of your project.**

#### Please note that:

- Research Participant Information Sheets and (where relevant) flyers, posters, and consent forms should include a clear statement that research ethics approval has been obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- The Research Participant Information Sheets should include a clear statement that queries should be directed, in the first instance, to the Supervisor (where relevant), or the researcher. Complaints, on the other hand, should be directed, in the first instance, to the Chair of the relevant Research Ethics Committee.
- Approval to proceed with the study is granted subject to receipt by the Committee of satisfactory responses to any conditions that may appear above, in addition to any subsequent changes to the protocol.
- The Research Ethics Committee reserves the right to sample and review documentation, including raw data, relevant to the study.
- You may not undertake any research activity if you are not a registered student of Brunel University or if you cease to become registered, including abeyance or temporary withdrawal. As a deregistered student you would not be insured to undertake research activity. Research activity includes the recruitment of participants, undertaking consent procedures and collection of data. Breach of this requirement constitutes research misconduct and is a disciplinary offence.

Professor David Galliar

Chair of the College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Brunel University London

Appendix E: Sample of Fieldnotes

The model lived in which the brand name + actually emerged was an individualist hub: a community of individuals who talk about trade and offer advice. Gameshop prize pun at this event was taken well & when considering the content and the narrative, that one ~~was~~ prevalent in the community → the people, understanding corporations → the industry, etc. In other instances, internet meme usage by brand does not resonate, however in the case it is okay provided the overall narrative people agreed to side with the brand side, and this pun propelled the existing conversation that it was born from. Therefore, was a successful attempt.

3rd Feb 2021  
 game stop → not gamespot people did not notice the spelling. they noticed an organic movement and jumped on it. brand may be able to understand the organicity of conversation. This was a rather spontaneous effort from the brand who noticed the trend. it appears to have been taken well by the community and wide use of social media. This may be considered within its wider context. This is linked with the stock market and the trading app "Robin Hood" Robin Hood, is associated with thorns of power. Robin Hood beats to give back to the poor. additionally,

with CMC, brand regularly post mems alongside brand content, advice posts, and before and after to promote the product. there appear to be two different types of brand pages. some brand pages are highly polished and curated. for example, bridges, rras cuts. some brand pages are more disorganised but appear more organic and similar to community pages created by other members as a central hub for socialisation and the exchange of tips and experiences. however, there appears to be little difference in the way members interact with the pages. if anything, they require/request more advice + recommendations from

the more "corporate" appearing brands. this is an interesting observation as it can be inferred that members place more emphasis on more credible/trustworthy and are elevated. The language used towards new brands is indicative of this. however, in both instances, the brand pages are welcomed and spoken to. And by community members. brands respond to community members with help and advice and do so informally. they also acknowledge members' experiences as if they themselves had experienced this. this attempts to humanise the brand which for some cases is false/random. in some cases, it is not ("m2as cut")

family beauty is a brand that the community → partner  
true interested in cosmetics  
ad marketplace, regularly  
interact with the brand  
speaks very informally and  
similar to the way the community  
speaks. the brand is welcomed  
into the community. the brand  
represents inclusivity, authenticity,  
and identity. and is therefore  
naturally aligned with the  
community of the partner  
instance observed in the  
collaborative effort with a  
member of the community.  
family beauty's first release  
was a set of 48 foundation  
that is credited to have  
changed the beauty of the  
beauty industry, allowing consumers  
to have higher expectations  
of brands in the industry. a

for had created market 17  
corresponding sheds to the form  
foundations ad was really from  
independently, rather than over  
the community members, party's  
team released out to the user  
ad announced a joint collaboration  
of two products. fellow  
community members used congratulatory  
messages to both  
family ad the user. they stated  
that other companies should take  
note, suggesting that this is  
not regular practice amongst  
companies. it also aligns with  
senses of ownership and  
collectively creating what are  
frequently mentioned in the  
community, as evident in  
the giphy + jasmine notes  
instance observed earlier  
in the year. The individual  
family ad the user.

discourse & surround ad  
in which they are  
embedded within. these  
notes very for networked  
ad interdisciplinary practices  
practices related to  
legitimacy & identity but  
through the strategy of this  
through acts of gatekeeping  
for example - means exposure  
as they contain information  
ad "drift" for people to  
follow again this enables or  
restricts identity. central theme  
to that of temporal consumer  
experience or temporal experiences  
focus on this ad reflection of this  
in internet memes and the  
way brand craft this

relatable experiences communicated  
through meme unlike the  
everyday or conversation  
ad discourse relate to  
practices - seeks to legitimize  
ad embed. more discourses  
are symbolic of senses ad  
embodiment of time in all  
fields of time in all  
example relatable to the  
present with the past  
experience ties the present  
with the future - ad  
aspiration to the future  
with the present. time  
is a unitary element of  
temporality, practice, in  
communicating language ad  
discourse during time is a  
major factor for consideration...  
have feelings. the time  
space in which the

## Appendix F: Sample of Nvivo Annotations

The screenshot displays the Nvivo software interface. On the left, a sidebar lists various data sources and annotations. The main window shows a tweet with a video and a text annotation popup.

**Annotations List (Left Sidebar):**

- DATA
  - Files
  - File Classifications
  - Externals
- CODES
  - Nodes
- CASES
  - Cases
  - Case Classifications
- NOTES
  - Memos
  - Annotations
  - Memo Links
- SEARCH
- MAPS
  - Maps

**Tweet Content (Center):**

Twe...

Watch this video Jasmine Masters getting an award from Giphy for some wholesome content

Created: 5 Apr 2021 By: TA

Giphy is a company that creates gifs. These often include reaction gifs which have emerged from viral content. Jasmine Masters was the subject of a few of these gifs. Here Giphy are acknowledging the originator of the content, which is met by a positive response from the community.

1 item selected

Home Create Data Analyze Query Explore Layout View Q Search

**DATA**

- Files
- File Classifications
- Externals

**CODES**

- Nodes

**CASES**

- Cases
- Case Classifications

**NOTES**

- Memos
- Annotations**
- Memo Links

**SEARCH**

**MAPS**

- Maps

Annotation	#	F
Debby Ryan was the subject o...	1	
past tense	1	#
discourse marker	2	#
The community would value b...	1	#
Dislike for use of memes.	1	€
The community feel like they a...	1	Q
They are uncomfortable.	2	Q
Reference to community	1	
A reference to the community.	1	A
Positive use of a meme. Altho...	1	E
this is significant	1	C
Referencing stolen idea to rein...	1	C
implies inevitability	1	is
The original character concep...	1	J
metonym?	1	j
highlights an expectation. 'just...	1	K
qualifying	1	K
community	1	is
Giphy is a company that creat...	1	L
anchoring	1	M
metonym	2	M
discourse marker to emphasise	1	M
Empty annotation	1	N
This is an interesting tweet as...	1	C
community	1	c
This brand is usin		
Once meme page		
In reponse to may		
Empty annotation		
Fenty, a makeup		
An acknowledg		
The cultural refer		
The use of the w		
Although this is ne		
This is an criticism at brands...	1	t
Mocking brands	1	T
Vapiano is a brand that liked in...	1	V
The community are aware that...	2	V
This comment implies that bra...	3	V
Acknowledges that behind any...	1	V
There is not much considerati...	1	y
Disapproval and dislike of bra...	1	Y

Selection Mode Zoom 100% Recognize Text

Created: 2 Mar 2021 By: TA

pandemic, the UK Government released a series of posters whose general message was ways in which people can find new jobs. One was of a girl called Fatima, a ballerina who became a computer scientists. This meme response borrows from this context.

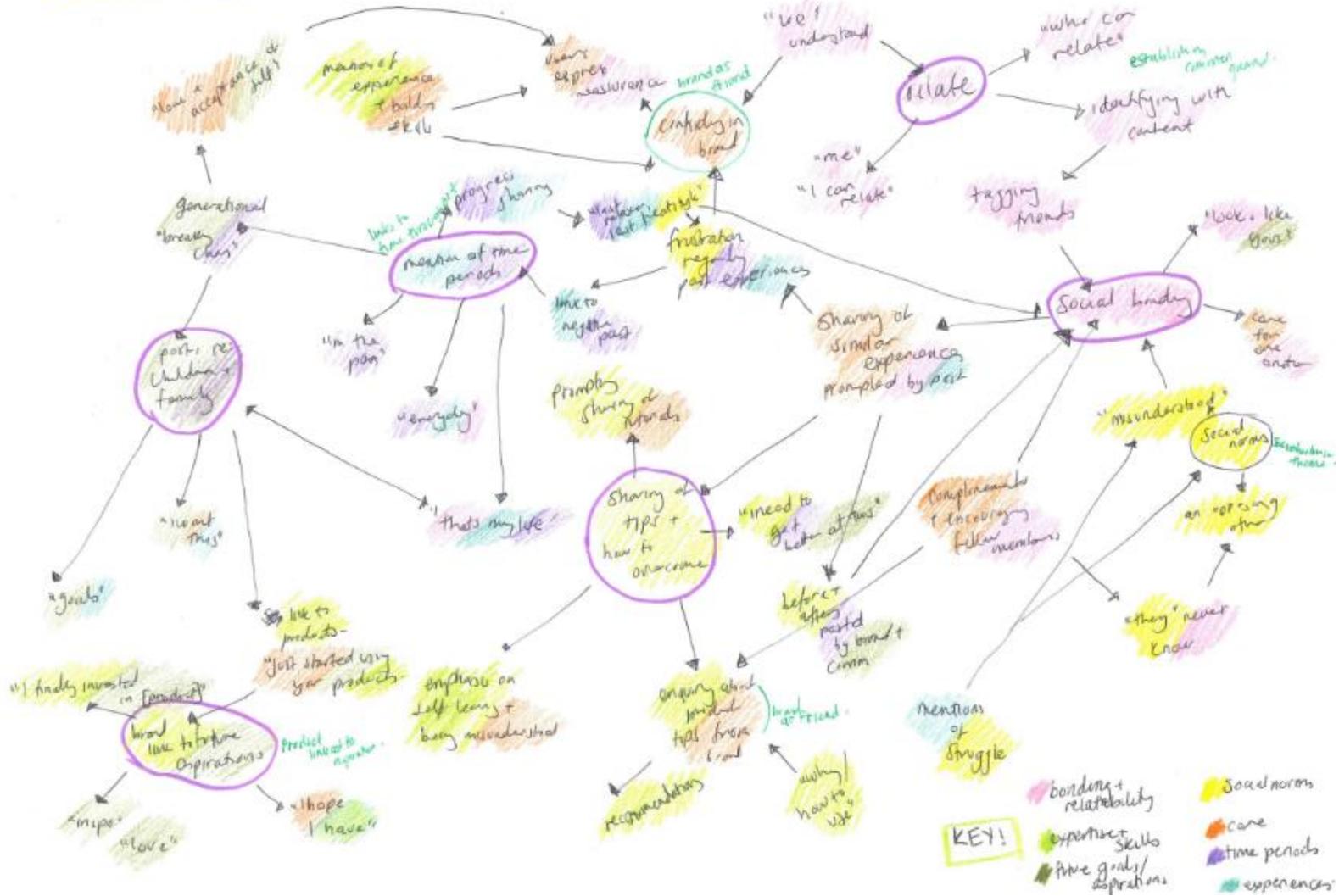
Delete

1 item selected

DATA > Files > Sam P on Twitter ~ https://t.co/pplQLHuP8 ~ Twitter



CHC THEMES



## Appendix H: Sample of Nvivo Raw Codes and Quotes (Example)

The screenshot displays the Nvivo software interface. On the left, a navigation pane shows a hierarchy of nodes: DATA (Files, File Classifications, Externals), CODES (Nodes), CASES (Cases, Case Classifications), NOTES, SEARCH, and MAPS (Maps). The 'Performative' node is selected under CODES. The main area shows a table of codes with columns for Name, Files, Referen..., and Created On. The 'Performative' code is highlighted, showing 9 files and a creation date of 6 Feb 2021 at 15:57. Below the table, an 'OPEN ITEMS' section lists various codes, with 'Performative' also selected. On the right, a detailed view of the 'Performative' code is shown, including a 'Reference' tab. This view displays a quote: 'Posted memes to fake social awareness.' with a coverage of 2.29%. Another quote is shown: 'So black twitter sat there & complained about this company only using black meme & never post black woken w make up. . They posted this shopping there' with a coverage of 6.98%. A third quote is shown: 'EVERY COMPANY SHOULD. Especially those that are posting BLM memes and black squares on their social. OH YOU REALLY CARE? Prove it. Now.' with a coverage of 6.26%. A fourth quote is shown: 'They're doing some real lazy shit. Too scared to make. A statement out of fear of saying the wrong thing. RTing stuff and posting memes is not the same as being vocal.' with a coverage of 3.91%.

Name	Files	Referen...	Created On
Brands Should Take Note	1	4	7 Apr 2021 at 13:11
Brands Use Memes to Inv...	7	7	7 Apr 2021 at 13:13
Congratulating Brand	4	4	9 Feb 2021 at 17:16
Dislike (Brands using Me...	9	9	22 Mar 2021 at 17:53
Humaning	4	4	5 Apr 2021 at 17:01
Impersonation	15	18	19 Feb 2021 at 15:39
In-joke	2	3	18 Mar 2021 at 13:42
Inauthentic	9	9	6 Feb 2021 at 17:08
Inorganic	7	8	18 Mar 2021 at 15:42
Lack of Contribution (Fro...	5	5	5 Apr 2021 at 13:26
Lack of Trust	1	1	7 Apr 2021 at 16:45
Meme Inauthentic (When...	2	2	7 Apr 2021 at 13:03
Meme Used Incorrectly (...)	3	3	5 Apr 2021 at 17:02
Memes are Not for Brands	3	3	5 Apr 2021 at 17:30
Memes Die (with Brand U...	14	14	26 Feb 2021 at 15:...
Organic	3	3	26 Feb 2021 at 16:...
Originality	2	2	2 Mar 2021 at 14:52
Outsider	1	1	1 Apr 2021 at 13:19
Participate	2	2	18 Mar 2021 at 14:20
<b>Performative</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6 Feb 2021 at 15:57</b>
Personability (Needed for...	1	1	18 Mar 2021 at 15:56
Positive Engagement	22	36	6 Feb 2021 at 19:41
Quiet	1	1	26 Feb 2021 at 15:...
Rejection (of Brand Attem...	2	2	1 Apr 2021 at 15:51
Relatable	1	1	5 Feb 2021 at 15:39
Representation	9	10	18 Mar 2021 at 14:27
Ripping off Community	3	3	6 Apr 2021 at 14:23
Silence	6	8	24 Feb 2021 at 15:57
Values (Do Not Align with...	2	2	5 Apr 2021 at 13:25
Working with Community...	1	1	7 Apr 2021 at 13:13
Affect Buying Intentions	4	4	2 Mar 2021 at 16:28
Brand Parties	4	6	22 Mar 2021 at 17:51
Brand-Community Banter	11	18	31 Mar 2021 at 13:08
Disappointed	3	3	2 Mar 2021 at 16:28
Mockery (Made of the Co...	3	3	4 Mar 2021 at 16:25
Mocking	12	14	2 Mar 2021 at 16:26
Negative Consequences	2	2	6 Feb 2021 at 17:12

**Performative**  
 Summary Reference  
 1 reference coded, 2.29% coverage  
 Reference 1: 2.29% coverage  
 Posted memes to fake social awareness.

1 reference coded, 6.98% coverage  
 Reference 1: 6.98% coverage  
 So black twitter sat there & complained about this company only using black meme & never post black woken w make up. . They posted this shopping there

Reference 1: 6.26% coverage  
 EVERY COMPANY SHOULD. Especially those that are posting BLM memes and black squares on their social. OH YOU REALLY CARE? Prove it. Now.

Reference 1: 3.91% coverage  
 They're doing some real lazy shit. Too scared to make. A statement out of fear of saying the wrong thing. RTing stuff and posting memes is not the same as being vocal.

