

MEME WORLD SYNDROME:  
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
OF THE FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS  
AND THIRD WORLD SUCCESS INTERNET MEMES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis applies the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the ideological components of the First World Problems (FWP) and Third World Success (TWS) Internet memes. Drawing on analytical concepts from CDA and related perspectives, such as multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics, the paper analyzes the visual and textual elements of a sample of the FWP and TWS memes. The paper argues that the text and images featured in the memes are ideologically salient and discursively construct oppositional binaries between “us” and “them” in terms of wealth disparity.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Internet memes are an emerging form of discourse currently prevalent in online discussion forums, social media and general Internet culture. Biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” to describe a theoretical self-replicating unit of cultural transmission that spreads by imitation. Within Internet culture the term is commonly used to refer to phrases, videos, images, or a combination thereof that are widely propagated by Internet users. This usage of the term has further evolved to refer to a specific type of Internet artifact consisting of a combination of images and text and generally understood as intending to be found humorous by viewers. This specific form of Internet artifact is known as an “image macro,” defined by the Oxford online dictionary as “a photographic image on which a humorous caption or catchphrase has been digitally superimposed”. Image macro memes consists of a single image (either photograph or illustration) with text superimposed such that the juxtaposition of text and image is intended to evoke a humorous effect. Typically there are two lines of text, one at the top of the image serving as the set-up for a joke, and another at the bottom of the image serving as the punch line. Aside from sustaining popularity among Internet users, memes have also received attention from journalists, academics, and media organizations that have borrowed elements of Internet memes for advertising and marketing efforts. Examples include television commercials for Vitamin Water brand beverages and print ads for Cadbury candies (Myhre, 2012).

Issues pertaining to wealth disparity and class-consciousness have returned to the forefront of public discourse as a result of the ongoing economic recession. In the United States this trend has manifested in a variety of ways, including social movements like Occupy Wall Street and We Are the 99%, and mainstream media coverage of nation-wide unemployment rates



and pervasive student loan debt. These and other developments in the U.S. and around the world have also precipitated a resurgence of interest in Marxist and other critical perspectives of capitalism and socioeconomic issues. Last year an essay in *The Guardian* newspaper (Jeffries, 2012) titled “Why Marxism is on the rise again” described the “renaissance of interest in Marxism” against an economic backdrop where workers “struggle in debt, job insecurity or worse” (p. 1). A recent *Time* magazine article (Schuman, 2013) associated the resurgence of interest in Marx’s critique of capitalism with the wealth disparity highlighted by the ongoing global economic crisis, stating “the consequence of this widening inequality is just what Marx had predicted: class struggle is back” (p. 1).

This preoccupation with economic and class issues has been reflected in Internet memes, as well. Both the Occupy movement and We are the 99% are considered memes in their own right, and images of a police officer pepper-spraying student protesters on the UC Davis campus turned in to a meme called “casually pepper-spraying everything cop.” A blog created in 2011 and named Memes of Resistance aggregates and analyzes Internet memes as they relate to the themes of resistance and revolution. Contributors to the blog cited the viral spread of “pepper-spray everything cop” meme as contributing to awareness of the original incident (and becoming part of the popular narrative of the event and its fallout). The Memes of Resistance blog writers highlighted the “pepper-spray cop” meme as an example of the potential for memes to function as vehicles for resistance; outlets for communication that occurs outside the power structures inherent in the mainstream media, and provide a platform for anyone to critique and satirize the systems of control and oppression and the people who enforce them.

Other popular image macro-style memes focus on areas of critical and cultural studies such as political ideologies, ethnic stereotypes and representations of gender, including the “college liberal,” “successful black guy,” and “privilege denying dude” series of image macro memes. A seemingly more frivolous, but no less salient example of Internet memes involving critical subjects and themes is the First World Problems (FWP) meme. The most popular incarnation of this meme features a close-up photograph of the face of a visibly distraught white-appearing woman, tears rolling down her cheeks and her hand held to her head. The text accompanying the images typically detail incidents and conditions that could be considered banal nuisances and inconveniences that one might encounter, such as “I poured a bowl of cereal then I realized that we are out of milk.” The humor of the FWP meme hinges upon the juxtaposition of the picture of the clearly distressed woman and the text describing a scenario that could be considered a mild inconvenience at worst. In other words, the apparent disproportion between level of emotional distress visible in the photograph and the degree of inconvenience described in the text results in irony stemming from the incongruity of the appearance of the distressed woman and the reality of the situation described.

The popularity of the FWP meme led to the creation of the Third World Success (TWS) series of memes. As described by the Know Your Meme web site, the TWS meme is a reaction to the FWP meme, and can be seen as its antithesis. The image associated with the TWS meme is a photo of children, ostensibly African and clothed minimally in what could indicate a tribal fashion. The children are smiling and looking toward the camera that captured the photograph, and one boy in the center of the image is posed such that he appears to have been dancing when the picture was taken. In contrast to the FWP memes, the text in the Third World Success memes

often refer to situations evoking impoverished and endangered existences. The first Third World Success meme featured the text: “FOUND WATER / WASN’T CONTAMINATED”. This is the theme of the TWS meme: the text implies that the child is celebrating his good fortune while also drawing attention to extremely unfavorable conditions that exist around the world. That is, the comedic irony of this meme series is derived from the incongruity of the happy children seen in the image and the often dire conditions and events described in the text.

Internet memes are salient artifacts for critical media studies for several reasons. For one, these memes are a relatively recent discursive form that has yet to be analyzed in-depth by communication researchers. Another significant aspect of these Internet memes is the ease in which they are created and disseminated. After a person has uploaded a new background image for a meme, sites called “meme generators” archive the image and anyone can access the site, select the background image and type in text to be superimposed. Once a meme is generated it can be posted in any number of places online, including social networking sites, discussion forums, and specialized web sites that primarily function as meme aggregators. Image macro memes have become very popular in online communities and are pervasive in online communities and social networking sites. These conditions have led to a unique situation in the history of mass communication, as a diverse group of anonymous individuals engage in a new form of mass communication open to interpretation and contribution by anyone with Internet access. These memes are deserving of critical analysis because they represent new communication artifacts and discursive forms enabling the transmission of cultural representations and ideological content. The effects and implications of such ideological

transmission have yet to be systematically scrutinized by communication scholars, and the present research aims to initiate this line of inquiry.

The preceding introduction has addressed the ongoing economic crisis and the associated increase in popular discourse about wealth disparity and global inequality. Discourses of political and economic ideology have become prominent, as indicated by increased attention on related issues in the mainstream media, a resurgence of interest in the Marxist critique of capitalism, and movements like We are the 99% that highlight issues pertaining to wealth disparity and unequal power relations. Concurrent to these events, Internet memes have emerged as a popular and influential discursive form and mode of communication. Among these memes are the popular First World Problems and Third World Success meme series, which also deal with issues pertaining to wealth disparity and global inequality.

The perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis views discourse as a powerful political tool for shaping the social world. As an increasingly pervasive form of online communication with the ability to spread virally, Internet memes have the potential to transmit ideological content to a large number of people in a short time. Recognizing this potential for ideological transmission, and the ideologically salient content relating to global inequality implicit in the First World Problems and Third World Success memes, the present study intends to examine the ideological assumptions indicated by the content of these memes. Critical Discourse Analysis is closely associated with social problems and a goal of radical social change. In keeping with the aims of CDA, the researcher will also address how these memes could better address inequality and represent dominated groups.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following section will review literature pertinent to the present research project. The literature review will first address the “meme” concept, starting with the term’s origin in biology and subsequent development as a theoretical unit of cultural transmission. This will be followed by discussion of the term’s usage in online culture to refer to specific types of communicative artifacts. The review will proceed with an overview of discourse analysis and establish Critical Discourse Analysis as the principal theoretical and methodological framework to be used in the study. The literature review will also identify and define key concepts relevant to the research such as discourse and ideology.

### **Memes**

The idea of memes is central to the analysis undertaken in this study, but the meme concept itself has been conceptualized and defined in different ways by different people. Although the term itself was only coined in 1976, the intervening years have seen the popular understanding and use of the meme concept undergo several amendments and alterations. It is therefore helpful to trace the development of the meme idea from its inception to its popular understanding today. The history and development of the meme concept can be divided into two epochs: memes understood as theoretical units of cultural transmission, and memes understood as particular Internet artifacts. This section will first address the origin and development of the meme concept to represent units of cultural transmission, then proceed to an overview of the terms usage in Internet culture. Finally, this section will conclude by summarizing and elucidating the connections between the two broad phases of the meme concept.

## **Meme as unit of cultural transmission**

The term “meme” originated in zoologist Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene* (1976/2006). The bulk of the book addresses a central question within the perspective of Darwinian evolution concerning the nature of the biological unit that either survives or is extinguished in the process of natural selection (p.viii). Dawkins identifies this unit as the gene, and the book proceeds to expound on the attributes of the gene and the process of genetic transmission. One chapter of the book, however, is dedicated to exploring not genetic transmission but cultural transmission.

Dawkins cites several examples of cultural artifacts that evolve in historical time through non-genetic means; these include language, customs, ceremonial practices, trends in dressing and eating, fashions in art and architecture, and engineering and technology (p.190). Dawkins identifies an analogous relationship between genetic evolution and cultural evolution, noting for example the pervading sense that modern medicine is superior to ancient practices, but states that cultural evolution “has really nothing to do with genetic evolution” (p.190). To explain the apparent similarities between the two separate processes Dawkins proposes the emergence of a new replicator on the planet. Previously Dawkins had established the titular selfish gene as “all replicas of a particular bit of DNA” (p.89). The proposed new replicator functions to replicate cultural, rather than genetic, material. Dawkins suggests a name for this new replicator: meme (p.192).

Examples of memes presented by Dawkins include “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches” (p.192). The name “meme” was chosen due to its similarity to the word “gene”, as well as its relation to the Greek root “mimeme” meaning

“that which is imitated” (p.192). Imitation is key to Dawkins’ notion of the meme because imitation is the means by which memes propagate themselves amongst members of a culture. Imitation as a definitive characteristic of a meme is evident in the Oxford English Dictionary entry for meme: “A cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation) is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene” (“meme,” 2012).

Dawkins compares the process of genes spreading themselves in the gene pool, “leaping” from body to body, to the process of memes spreading through the “meme pool” by leaping from brain to brain via imitation. Dawkins quotes colleague N.K. Humphrey’s argument that memes should be considered living structures: “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell” (p.192).

Although memes may replicate through imitation, not all memes that are imitated survive in the meme pool as successfully as others. Dawkins identifies three qualities associated with high survival in memes: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity (p.194). As with genes, the longevity of any one copy of a meme is insignificant compared to the lifespan of the meme itself. For example, Dawkins’ ideas about memes as they exist in his mind will only survive as long as he does, whereas the idea of memes as reproduced in *The Selfish Gene* can be said to survive as long as the book remains in print. For particular copies of a meme fecundity is more important than longevity. The fecundity of a particular meme refers to how widely it is spread among members of a culture. A particularly catchy pop song may receive extensive airplay on broadcast radio and also be hummed or sung by many people; in this example the meme as tune has high

fecundity. Finally, copying-fidelity refers to a particular meme's resistance to alteration as it is transmitted from person to person. Alteration of some kind is inevitable as the meme is transmitted; a salient example from American culture is the children's game of Telephone, where a phrase is whispered from person-to-person, and often the message is so distorted throughout the process that the phrase as understood by the final recipient bears little resemblance to what was originally said by the initial sender. Dawkins states that the meme transmission "is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending" (p.195). In addition to fulfilling the three characteristics outlined above, successful memes must also compete with rival memes. The scarce resources for which rival memes must compete include the attention of human brains, billboard space, newspaper-column inches, radio and television broadcast time, and shelf-space (p.197).

Blackmore (1999) took up Dawkins' concept of memes in *The Meme Machine*. Blackmore uses much of the terminology introduced by Dawkins for describing memetic transmission, including the distinction between replicators and vehicles: a replicator is anything of which copies are made, and vehicles are entities that interact with the environment (p.5). Vehicles carry replicators around and protect them from the environment. Blackmore also addresses what concepts are memes and what are not, stating that anything learned by imitation is a meme (p.6), but perceptions and emotions are not memes because they cannot be passed on to others (p.15). Imitation as defined by Blackmore involves decisions about what to imitate, complex transformation between different viewpoints, and the production of similar (or matching) physical actions (p.52). The emphasis on imitation is crucial in distinguishing memetic transmission from other processes of cultural propagation. Blackmore states that much



of human learning is Skinnerian rather than memetic (i.e. reliant on principles of conditioning and reinforcement as opposed to imitation) (p. 45), and that in memetic terms developments in art and science can be considered instances of selective imitation (p.29). The emphasis on imitation leads Blackmore to conclude that humans alone are capable of extensive memetic transmission (p.50).

Blackmore distinguishes two modes of memetic transmission: copy-the-product and copy-the-instructions (p.61). To explain the difference between the two modes Blackmore uses the analogy of a recipe for pumpkin soup. Suppose your grandmother had invented a recipe for pumpkin soup, and your mother learned how to make the soup from being in the kitchen with your grandmother and watching her prepare it many times over. The knowledge of how to make the soup then passed to you through observing your mother prepare the dish. If you wanted to make the pumpkin soup yourself you could imitate the preparations you witnessed your mother practicing. This is illustrative of what Blackmore calls copy-the-product memetic transmission. Yet suppose your mother had never actually seen your grandmother prepare the pumpkin soup, and instead had inherited the written recipe created by your grandmother. She then used the written recipe to make the soup, and then the knowledge of how to prepare it passed to you in the form of the recipe. This is an instance of copy-the-instructions memetic transmission.

Aunger (2002) identified two main analogies employed by memeticists: memes as genes, and memes as microbes (p.17). The former perspective is exemplified by memeticists such as Dawkins and Blackmore who employ extensive analogies from genetics and evolutionary theory to describe memes. This view argues that memes have some form of agency, and memetic evolution occurs for the benefit of the memes themselves (as opposed to their usefulness to

human culture) (p.19). The latter perspective emphasizes memes as “mind viruses” (p.18) that spread from brain to brain and parasitize the host. These analogies are not mutually exclusive (Dawkins, for instance, employs both analogies), but are cited by Aunger as the two main analogies used in the literature on memes. Aunger’s analysis of memes eventually arrives at the relationship between memes and artifacts, questioning whether artifacts undergo evolution (p.277). No single category can apply to all artifacts, so Aunger defines artifacts as having “the quality of being produced from environmental materials through the activity of organisms” (p.277). Aunger argues that artifacts do indeed evolve, in that they become more complex over time as a result of interactions with memes.

Distin (2005) further developed the meme hypothesis in *The Selfish Meme*. Furthering the gene/meme analogy, Distin defines memes as “units of cultural information” characterized by the representational content they carry (p.20), and the representational content is considered “the cultural equivalent of DNA” (p.37). This conceptualization of memes and their content forms the basis of Distin’s theory of cultural heredity. Having established memes as carriers of representational content, and characterizing that content as cultural DNA, Distin then seeks to identify the representational system used by memes to carry their content (p.142). The first representational system considered is language, what Distin calls “the memes-as-words hypothesis” (p.145). Distin ultimately rejects this hypothesis, citing three principle weaknesses of the theory: the ambiguity often involved in linking words and meanings (as well as the fact that the meanings associated with certain words can change over time); the role of individuals in deciding to reject or accept the concepts represented by words (meaning that understanding the meaning of words, and experiencing external circumstances conducive to participating in the

actions they describe, are not enough to ensure that a person will take action based on the words alone); and the fact that natural language consists of more than just words themselves (including rules governing the ordering and combination of words, which vary among languages). Distin concludes that language itself is “too narrow to play the role of cultural DNA” (p.147). Distin asserts that the memetic analogue of DNA is the “general capacity for representation, of which language is merely a particular” manifestation (p.147). Other examples of representational systems include musical notation, mathematical formulas, and cryptography. Thus, Distin argues, the “memetic equivalent of DNA is not one, but many cultural systems of representations” (p.167).

In considering the implications that this view of memes poses to cultural and social evolution, Distin posits “that cultural evolution is an autonomous process over which we exercise a limited amount of control” (p.206). Distin argues that while the human mind is the mechanism by which memes evolve and spread, the directions of memetic evolution are largely beyond the control of individual will. Individuals can develop new ideas and respond to the ideas of others and the existing cultural environment, but individuals can do little to affect the ideas, responses, and effects of others. “The vast body of cultural material means that the success or failure of novel hypotheses, technological inventions, or even ethical opinions will be determined more by their relative fitness for this immense meme pool than by their intrinsic merits” (p.206). Distin amends these sentiments by cautioning against despair and affirming the importance of exercising care in each individual’s contribution to the meme pool. Although cultural development may ultimately be determined by the intricate transactions between memes and their environment, individuals will determine the content of those memes (p.207).

## **Viral media and the Meme as Internet artifact**

As Internet culture evolved, users adapted and mutated the term “meme” to refer to specific online artifacts. Even though they may be considered a type of online artifact, Internet memes come in a variety of different forms. Several key characteristics apply to Internet memes of all forms and identify them as such. One defining trait of an Internet meme is viral transmission. Viral media and particularly viral marketing are not necessarily exclusive to Internet activity but have become closely associated with online culture. Abercrombie and Longhurst (2007) define viral marketing as “marketing in which news of a product or service is passed from person to person rather as a virus is transmitted” and state that viral marketing “only works well if the rate at which the message is passed on is high” (p. 358). In describing viral videos online Chandler and Munday (2011) state that a viral Internet video “becomes hugely popular in a very short time through amplified word of mouth, whereby users recommend it to others using online communication tools” (p. 451). This notion of online content spreading virally among users or “going viral” is related to the origins of the meme concept as analogous to a virus or parasite, and is one example of how the term’s application in Internet culture retains elements of its original formulation. Gelb (1997) applied Dawkins’ definition of memes to communication artifacts, understanding memes as: “self-replicating ideas that move through time and space without further effort from the source” (p. 57). Gelb proposed that advertisers can create “infectious ideas” and that products themselves can become memes (p. 58). Examples of advertising memes cited by Gelb include the “Got milk?” advertisements and the “Where’s the beef?” slogan popularized by ad campaigns for Wendy’s fast food restaurants (p. 58). Gelb states that once a memetic message enters common communication it can replicate and become “part

of the language” of popular culture (p. 59). Additionally, Gelb suggests that memes pose both negative and positive potential outcomes for advertisers, as negative or unintentional memetic messages have “the capacity to live on, although few will come to the attention of society as successful memes” (p. 59).

Berger and Milkman (2012) sought to define the attributes of viral media content. They highlight the importance of sharing online content in modern life, as seen in forwarding news articles to friends, sending links for YouTube videos, and posting reviews of local restaurants and businesses to review aggregator sites, among other examples (p. 192). These online behaviors have become of particular interest to companies, especially in relation to how their brands will be represented and received on the Internet. The authors examine why certain content is more viral (i.e. more active in social transmission) than other content by investigating how content characteristics affect the virality of that content (p. 192). Their analysis is geared toward advertising professionals who would benefit from an understanding of how to design a successful viral media campaign (p. 193). To facilitate their analysis, the authors analyzed a data set of almost 7000 articles from the New York Times to see which articles were among the “most e-mailed” stories from the Times web site (p. 192). They also experimentally manipulated the emotions evoked by the content of the articles to investigate what impact affect had on social transmission (p. 193).

Berger and Milkman identify several factors that can affect individuals’ decision to share online content, including: the presence of useful information, altruistic reasons, and emotional aspects of the content (p. 193). The authors focus on the effect of emotional aspects and how emotional valence contributes to the virality of content, hypothesizing that content that evokes

positive emotions will be more viral than content that evokes negative emotions (p. 193). Their results showed that more affect-laden content was more likely to appear among the New York Times most emailed stories, and that articles with positive content went viral more often than negative content (p. 196). The authors concluded that a primary motivation behind sharing content online is the desire to entertain others, and accordingly “surprising and interesting content is highly viral” (p. 201). This would presumably also apply to the sharing of image macro memes that are principally intended to be humorous. A primary reason for image macro memes such as First World Problems and Third World Success quickly becoming popular and being propagated by Internet users is that particular memes will be shared on social networking sites. A single user might post a meme image on their Facebook page, where other users will encounter it and potentially post it on their own Facebook pages thereby perpetuating the viral transmission of the meme, or they may even elect to contribute to the meme series by creating their own submission.

As mentioned at the beginning this section, Internet memes can take a variety of forms. First World Problems and other image macro memes are principally static images, but Internet memes can also be interactive content, audio clips, and videos. Shifman (2011) analyzed the characteristics of video memes on the YouTube video streaming web site. Shifman uses the definition of meme established by Dawkins: “units of culture that spread from person to person by means of copying or imitation” (p. 188). Describing YouTube as a “paradise for meme researchers” (p. 190), Shifman defines a memetic YouTube video as a “clip that lures extensive creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work” (p. 190). The videos sampled in the study were selected based on their popularity and the volume of

derivative work they generated (p. 191). As a result of the study, Shifman identified several common features of memetic YouTube videos: a focus on “ordinary people” (p. 193), portrayals of flawed masculinity (p. 194), use of humor (p. 195), simplicity (p. 196), repetitiveness (p. 197), and whimsical content (p. 197). These attributes are also present in many popular image macro meme series such as First World Problems and Third World Success, and may be related to the popularity of those memes.

Southgate (2010) examined how creative attributes contributed to viral viewing of TV advertisements. In contrast with “forced, paid viewings” of advertisements broadcasted on television, online videos are considered viral when Internet users choose to share, promote, and seek out video advertisements online (p. 350). The potential for viral videos to reach a large number of Internet users is of great value to marketers, who may design video ad campaigns with the potential of viral online transmission in mind. Southgate identifies video hosting site YouTube as “the heart of the growth in viral video in recent years,” and thus the dataset for the study was drawn from the YouTube site as well as the Milward Brown Link database (p. 351). All videos investigated in the research were video advertisements initially aired on television and later made available online (p. 351). Southgate hypothesized that the volume of viral viewing of video advertisements online would be positively predicted by certain creative drivers (such as enjoyment of and involvement with the content and branding practices) (p. 352), ad distinctiveness (p. 353), the popularity of celebrities appearing in the advertisements (p. 353), levels of brand interest (p. 354), and survey responses indicating a “likelihood to forward” among online viewers (p. 354). To select the data sample for the study the researchers selected advertisements included in the Milward Brown database (a service that uses survey questions to

evaluate and predict the impact of an advertisement) that were also available on YouTube (p. 355). Results indicated that the three elements of enjoyment, involvement, and branding all had significant positive correlation with the “views per week” measure (p. 360). The research also identified new factors that can influence the virality of an advertisement: distinctiveness of the ad, the role of a celebrity in the ad, and potential “buzz” of an advertisement (p. 360).

One of the oldest and most prominent series of image macro memes is the “LOLcats” series of memes. The LOLcats memes could be described as the prototype for all image macro memes that followed. According to the LOLcats entry on Know Your Meme, a web site hosting articles with background information about notable Internet memes, the LOLcats series originated in 2005 from an image of a reclining cat submitted by an anonymous user on the popular 4chan message board. Other Internet users began uploading images of cats, and eventually users added superimposed text to the pictures. Some of the earliest mainstream media coverage of the LOLcats phenomenon came from a Time magazine article by Grossman (2007). Grossman described the LOLcats memes thusly:

Take a picture of a cat doing something cute. Then make up a caption--something witty that the cat would be saying if cats could talk. Bear in mind that cats can't spell all that well and that they're not so hot on subject-verb agreement either. Photoshop the caption onto the image, and post your creation on a blog. What you get is lolcats: lol for laugh out loud, cats for cats (Grossman, 2007, p. 1)

The template established by LOLcats of superimposing humorous text over static images became and remains the standard format for image macro memes. Grossman defines an Internet meme as “a running gag that won’t stop running but instead reproduces and mutates in the petri



dish of the Net's collective imagination" (p. 1). Grossman cites as the oldest example of a LOLcats meme an image first posted online in 2006 of a "chubby gray kitty" looking at the camera accompanied with the caption "I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?" (p. 1). Among the striking features of LOLcats memes Grossman cites the "amazing fecundity and variety," as well as the fact that the memes are "actually pretty funny" (p. 1). Grossman suggested that the advent of LOLcats memes signaled a "revolution in user-generated content," but also noted that as the World Wide Web became more mainstream, Internet content became more "homogenous, opportunistic and commercial" (p. 1).

In an article for Bloomberg Businessweek, Tozzi (2007) identified the original creator of the "I can has cheezburger?" meme image as Eric Nakagawa, a software developer in Hawaii (p. 1). According to Tozzi, Nakagawa saw traffic to his blog increase soon after the posting of the cheezburger image. Tozzi cites Nakagawa's blog as unusual among similar Internet success stories because of the compressed timeframe between the initial launch and achievement of critical mass of readership (p. 1). Another critical factor differentiating Nakagawa's blog from similar sites was that users did not just rate or comment on the original postings, but users could actually create their own LOLcats memes by posting images of cats accompanied by funny captions (p. 1). Tozzi identifies a direct connection between authors and readers as contributing to a sense of community on the blog and creating a conversation among users that has no end in sight (p. 1).

Wortham (2008) interviewed the founders of the Cheezburger Network. Beginning with the account of Nakagawa, Wortham details how Nakagawa and friend Unebasami launched the web site "I can has cheezburger?" to host the popular images of animals accompanied by

humorous captions (p. 1). Nakagawa and Unebasami were inundated with submissions to the blog, and were considering ending the site, but before they could do so they were contacted by Ben Huh. Huh “just couldn’t let that happen” (referring to the closing of the cheezburger site) and bought the blog for \$10,000 (Wortham, 2010). This move established Huh as the CEO of the Cheezburger Network.

Learmonth (2009) described the sites hosted by Huh as an “empire” consisting of the original “I can has cheezburger,” Failblog, and Engrish Funny, among several others (p. 1). According to Learmonth’s article, the Seattle-based Huh acquired the “Cheezburger” blog in 2007 and in combination with other blog acquisitions built an online empire comprised of more than 30 individual blogs visited by more than 11.5 million users each month (p. 1). As Learmonth points out, all of the content hosted on the blog network is user-contributed, and blog editors select which content is eventually posted on the site (p. 1). In an interview with Learmonth, Huh said that the sites are “creating content that makes people happy for just a few minutes a day” (p. 1). Huh approximated the number of submissions received by the blogs at 10,000 daily, and stated that an editorial board evaluated each submission for its humorous value as well as its “advertiser-friendly” nature (p. 1). According to Huh, the blog network does not have a direct sales force, and sells advertisements through ad networks and social-networking companies. (p. 1). Huh states that the company’s focus is on growing user traffic to the blogs and trying to improve an already profitable business (p. 1). As detailed in an article by Rao (2011), the Cheezburger Network received \$30 million in venture capital investment from the Foundry Group (p. 1). Describing CEO Huh as a “former journalist,” Rao states that the Cheezburger Network consists of more than fifty web sites that collectively receive more than 375 million

page views each month (p. 1). Shortly after receiving the venture capital funds Cheezburger Network acquired Know Your Meme, adding the meme information site to its online empire (Terdiman, 2011). Rao states that the Cheezburger Network has been profitable since its inception and that Huh intends to use the venture capital investment to hire more employees for the Cheezburger Network (p. 1).

The emergence of Internet memes as a pervasive and powerful media form is evidenced by the success of the Cheezburger Network. From its origins as an anonymously submitted cat photograph to its establishment as a multimillion dollar media company, the case of the Cheezburger Network and the LOLcats phenomenon indicates that not only are Internet memes extremely popular, they are extremely profitable as well. The examples of LOLcats and the Cheezburger Network illustrate that even such simple and seemingly silly artifacts as image macro memes can become salient and significant communicative forms. Although the First World Problems and Third World Success memes are not part of the LOLcats genre they share the format common to all image macro memes and have each become popular in their own right.

The preceding section of the literature review provided an overview of the inception and development of the meme concept. Now that the review has considered application of the concept in two broad stages, it is illustrative to note points of intersection and relation between the two. Dawkins originated the term “meme” to refer to a hypothetical unit of cultural transmission by which cultural elements and behaviors persisted in a population over time by means of imitation rather than genetic inheritance. The current study analyzes two specific series of memes: the First World Problems (FWP) and Third World Success (TWS) memes. As with the LOLcats memes, both of these series originated from a single image. Over time, Internet

users who had encountered the original meme imitated it and created their own by devising new text to superimpose over the original image. So just as imitation is a crucial component to Dawkins' original conception of memes, imitation is key to the concept of Internet memes as well. Furthermore, this original definition of memes can be applied to Internet memes as artifacts in at least two ways. First, in the sense that Internet users may be inspired by image macros to either add new text to an existing image template or to create a new image macro meme with an original background picture, the act of creating an Internet meme can be considered a meme itself. In this case the process of adding humorous text over an image and then disseminating the image through the Internet for others to view is a behavior that spreads by imitation. Secondly, the Internet meme as artifact can fulfill the role of memes as defined by Dawkins. This means that a single image macro meme, such as one FWP example, can function as a vehicle for the spread of ideas (as information, attitudes, or other ideas conveyed in the textual and/or visual content of the artifact).

Dawkins employed biological metaphors in describing memes and identified three qualities associated with the survival of memes: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. These qualities can be identified in Internet memes, too. In the realm of online culture, the most popular and pervasive Internet memes could be considered the memes with the highest survival rate. The Know Your Meme entries for the FWP and TWS memes states that the versions of the memes studied in the current research (i.e. the image of the distressed woman and the dancing child, respectively) each first appeared in 2011, although the concepts of a "first world" and "third world" predate the Internet memes. The fact that the FWP meme remains popular and active after two years speaks to the meme's longevity. Fecundity of the Internet memes is indicated by

the many examples both memes, there are hundreds each of FWP and TWS memes online. Finally, the copying-fidelity aspect of Internet memes is most clearly illustrated by the presence of meme generating web sites. These sites host the images associated with various image macro series enabling users to select a preexisting image and enter text to be superimposed. For instance, someone wishing to create a First World Problems meme need only to access any of the web sites hosting the template image and enter the desired text to be superimposed. Most meme generator sites will create a unique URL associated with the image macro so the meme can be sent and shared around the web. This function of meme generator services bolsters the copying-fidelity of the Internet memes, which thereby enhances the meme's resistance to alteration as it is transmitted and later imitated. Having provided an overview of the inception and development of the meme concept, the next section of the literature review will discuss Critical Discourse Analysis, the theory and method to be employed in the present study.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) define Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as “the analysis of linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes and problems” (p. 271). The authors state that CDA views social and political processes as having “a partly linguistic-discursive character” and that “social and political changes in contemporary society generally include a substantive element of cultural and ideological change” (p. 271). Fairclough, one of the founders of CDA (Fairclough, 2003), described the purpose and function of CDA in the following way:

to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural

structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power.

(cited in Locke, 2004, p.1)

There are several different approaches referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis, and Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) identify five features common to all of them: the view that discursive practices constitute the social world, including identities and relations (p.61); the perspective that discourse not only constitutes the social world but is also constituted by other social practices (p.61); linguistic textual analysis of language use in social interaction (p.62); the position that discursive practices have ideological effects, creating and reproducing unequal power relations amongst social groups (p.63); and a political commitment to social change (p.64).

The framework used by Fairclough draws from a range of concepts for analyzing discursive practices. Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) cite the view that there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social relations (i.e. that discourse is constitutive as well as constituted) as a defining characteristic of Fairclough's CDA, a trait that distinguishes it from poststructuralist discourse theory (p.65). In Fairclough's framework, social relations in both general society and specific institutions consist of discursive as well as non-discursive components, which taken together comprise the social structure (p.65). Fairclough's approach to discourse analysis is text-oriented and combines three traditions: detailed linguistic textual analysis (p.65), macro-sociological analysis of social practices (p.66), and micro-sociological interpretation (p.66).

To outline the research methods of Fairclough's CDA and illustrate how an analysis would be performed, Phillips and Jorgensen present a six-step research process. The first step is

identifying a problem that the research will help to solve; CDA is a perspective committed to social change, and as a critical social research methodology it should contribute to “the rectification of injustice and inequality in society” (p.77). Next, research questions are formulated. This step should begin by identifying the social practice in which the discourse is embedded (p.78). As the CDA approach considers discursive practices dialectically related to other social practices, the character of a discourse is dependent on the social practice it is part of. The third step is selecting the research material to be analyzed, and the choice of material will be influenced by factors such as the researcher’s knowledge of relevant material, the availability of relevant material, and the specific research questions (p.78). If the research material is a speech act or other forms of talking, then the fourth step is to transcribe the material (p.80). The final two phases of the process are the actual analysis of the text (p.81) and writing the research results (p.88).

Fairclough (2003) outlined a “manifesto for critical discourse analysis” focusing on the characteristics of CDA that distinguish it amongst other critical social research approaches and other forms of discourse analysis (p.202). Fairclough states that much of CDA research focuses on the contemporary transformations of capitalism referred to as “new capitalism” (e.g. globalization and neo-liberalism) based on a belief that understanding of these developments is “crucial to improving the human condition” (p.203). Textual analysis is an important tool for gaining such understanding because the removal of obstacles to the new economic order exemplified by neo-liberalism is powered and guided partly by discourse (p.204). Fairclough describes the notion of social practice within CDA as relatively stable forms of social activity comprised of different elements such as activities, objects, time and place, and values (p.205).

While the components of social practice are distinct from each other, they are not considered wholly discreet and separate from one another as they are dialectically related (p.205). The objects of analysis in CDA are these dialectical relationships between discourse and the other elements of social practice (p.205). Fairclough identifies radical changes within contemporary social life as the primary concern of CDA.

Locke (2004) describes CDA as specifically concerned with how power relations are produced by discourse, and the ways in which these power relations are maintained or challenged through texts and social practice (p.38). Fairclough states that “text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis, but discourse analysis is not merely the linguistic analysis of texts” (p.3). In Fairclough’s discourse analysis, discourse is considered in the context of “new capitalism,” referring to the “most recent of a historical series of radical re-structurings through which capitalism has maintained its fundamental continuity” (p.4). These radical re-structurings involve transforming relations in the economic, political, and social realms, as well as adjusting relations among different levels of social life (p.4).

Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as a political and economic theory “that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). Harvey locates the origin of neoliberalism in government reforms enacted after the close of the Second World War designed “to prevent a return to the catastrophic conditions that had so threatened the capitalist order in the great slump of the 1930s” (p. 9). Harvey identifies two possible interpretations of neoliberalization: as a utopian project to reorganize international capitalism according to theoretical designs; and as a political project to



ensure capital accumulation and restore the power of economic elites (p. 19). Harvey characterizes the neoliberal attitude toward technology as a fetishistic belief that every problem has a technological solution (p. 68). Harvey considers wealth redistribution, rather than wealth generation, to be the “most substantive achievement” of neoliberalism (p. 159). Harvey states that this redistribution of wealth was achieved through a process of “accumulation by dispossession” comprised of four key elements: privatization and commodification; financialization; the management and manipulation of crises; and state redistributions (p. 160).

Fairclough (2003) defines neo-liberalism as “a political project for facilitating the re-structuring and re-scaling of social relations in accordance with the demands of unrestrained global capitalism” (p. 4). For the most part Fairclough uses the term “new capitalism” rather than neo-liberalism to refer to “the most recent of a historical series of radical re-structurings through which capitalism has maintained its fundamental continuity” (p. 4). Like Harvey, Fairclough identifies the origins of new capitalism as a “response to a crisis in the post-Second World War model” (p. 4). These “re-structurings” are not limited to economic issues, and involve the economic, political, and social domains (p. 4). Fairclough suggests that critical research into new capitalism should be concerned “with how these transformations impact on politics, education, artistic production, and many other areas of social life” (p. 4). Among the effects of new capitalism Fairclough identifies “an increasing division between rich and poor, increasing economic stress and insecurity and stress even for the ‘new middle’ classes, and an intensification of the exploitation of labor” (p. 5).

Torring (1999) characterizes neo-liberalist discourse as consisting of “attacks on the centralist and bureaucratic ‘nanny state’, celebration of the family and individual

entrepreneurship, and appraisal of the market as a privileged steering mechanism” (p. 102).

Torring states that “neo-liberal forces have criticized what they see as an excess of democracy and an excess of equality” and that some intellectuals have suggested that “liberal values such as individualism and free market economy should take precedence over democratic values such as political and socioeconomic” equality” (p. 271).

Van Dijk (1993), one of the scholars most associated with CDA along with Fairclough, described CDA as concerning “relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships” (p. 249). Van Dijk encourages critical discourse analysts to take “an explicit sociopolitical stance” in order to achieve “change through critical understanding” (p. 252). Van Dijk states that “dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, and everyday forms of text and talk” (p. 254), and that when “the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful, out of their own free will, we use the term hegemony” (p. 255). Van Dijk defines the core of CDA as “detailed description, explanation and critique of the ways dominant discourses (indirectly) influence such socially shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, namely through their role in the manufacture of concrete models” (p. 258).

Van Dijk analyzed parliamentary discourse on ethnic affairs from several governments to examine how the structures of dominant talk employ positive self-representation and negative other-representation (p. 265). This sort of “top-down” discourse analysis, or focus on text and talk by influential elites such as politicians and the press, is common in CDA, and van Dijk states that such elites are “the most obvious target of the critical approach in discourse analysis” due to

“the unique access of these elites to public discourse, and hence on their role in the discursive management of the public mind” (p. 280). Parliamentary discourse is a salient object of discourse analysis because the speakers are powerful and influential individuals whose arguments can reproduce dominance and legitimate racist attitudes (p. 275). Van Dijk states that discourses can justify inequality through two complementary strategies: positive representation of the own group, and negative representation of the other group (p. 263). Among the discursive strategies used in parliamentary talk about ethnic minorities and immigrants van Dijk identified apparent sympathy (“We make these decisions for their own best interest.”), apparent democracy (“The people do not want more immigration.”), and blaming the victim (“They are themselves to blame for discrimination, unemployment, etc.”) (p. 267).

Van Dijk advocates a multidisciplinary approach to CDA, stating that the most relevant methods are “able to contribute to the main aim of the critical approach, namely the understanding of social inequality and injustice” (p. 279). Critical analysis presupposes the serious study of dominance and inequality, and van Dijk argues that analysts should choose positions and perspectives “against the power elites and in solidarity with dominated groups” (p. 279). Van Dijk states that in order for CDA to make a significant contribution to critical social and political analysis it must “provide an account of the role of language, language use, discourse or communicative events in the (re)production of dominance and inequality” (p. 279).

### **Critique of CDA**

Scholars have criticized CDA as a theory and method for a variety of reasons. The present section will focus on three of the most common criticisms: that CDA involves

interpretation from the researcher's predetermined perspective rather than objective analysis; the lack of clarity and consistency of definition of the key terms and approaches used in CDA; and use of nominalization by critical discourse analysts. After detailing each criticism the researcher will address how the present study takes each into consideration.

### **Interpretation vs. Analysis/Political Commitment**

As has already been mentioned, CDA as a theory and method for analysis involves an explicit political orientation and commitment to social change. Several critics of CDA have focused on this political commitment as a weakness of the approach. Chilton (2005) questions if CDA has any "credible efficacy" in producing social effects and whether "a supposedly scientific endeavour should allow itself social and political motivation in the first place" (p. 21). Widdowson (1995) describes the method CDA as employing "procedures not essentially different from literary criticism to identify ideological bias in texts" (p. 157). Widdowson asserts that analysis must be impartial, and while analysts may have preferences that will influence their interpretation of data, they differ from interpreters in that interpreters prioritize their own preferences. Based on this Widdowson declares that CDA is an exercise in interpretation, not analysis, and that the name "critical discourse analysis" as a "contradiction in terms" (p. 159). Widdowson also criticizes the interpretive element of CDA for failing to acknowledge that the "what a writer means by a text is not the same as what a text means to a reader" (p. 164). Widdowson posits that the explicit political commitment adopted by critical discourse analysts means that their interpretations of text will inevitably be based on the researcher's values and beliefs, and not the intent of speaker or writer of the text being analyzed (p. 165). Furthermore,

Widdowson states that critical discourse analysts “cannot explain how people express their ideology by assuming in advance that ideology is already fixed in the language” (p. 168).

Widdowson concludes that CDA “is itself a critical discourse and as such it is interpretation, not analysis” (p. 169).

Poole (2010) cites Fairclough’s focus on neo-liberal discourses as problematic because it limits the scope of texts that can be analyzed. Referring to the emphasis on discourses associated with neo-liberalism as “the greatest shortcoming of Fairclough’s CDA,” Poole argues that a “true criticality” would involve all possible texts, arguments, and theories (p.152). Echoing some of the criticisms made by Widdowson, Poole criticizes the “pretext” of CDA (identified as “Leftist political commitment”) for failing to acknowledge that all readers of a text may interpret it in different ways (p.152) and effectively guaranteeing a predictable interpretation of any text (p.147). By primarily relying on the analyst’s political distaste for the ideological effects of a text as the criteria for selecting research materials, Poole argues, Fairclough has already interpreted the text before conducting any textual analysis (p.152).

In response to Widdowson’s criticisms about the political commitment of critical discourse analysts, Matheson (2008) states “we must also ask about the underlying agendas and preconceptions of the non-radical discourse analyst. Unless one holds tight to a positivist concept of knowledge, the observer is clearly part of the analysis” (p. 86). Matheson adds that the “problem of critical forms of discourse analysis is not that they are critical” (p. 86). Matheson does fault CDA, however, for what he calls “ideology hunting” (p. 86). In Matheson’s view, CDA practitioners focus on elements they deem significant in the ideological functioning of the text, and thereby risk neglecting other aspects of meaning in the text (p. 87). The challenge for

critical discourse analysts, Matheson states, is to “engage in radical criticism without oversimplifying discourse as lived by people” (p. 87). Matheson suggests that practitioners of CDA “should not therefore look at texts as the marks of power but instead at the political contestation for meaning as a process of making power” (p. 93). Fairclough (2003) addresses the notion of objectivity in relation to critical analysis noting that textual analysis is inevitably selective and that “there is no such thing as a complete and definitive analysis of a text” (p.14).

The present researcher acknowledges the explicit political orientation and commitment to social change inherent in Critical Discourse Analysis. The current study is not intended to offer a comprehensive objective analysis of the research material, and the researcher specifies the focus of the analysis, describes the artifacts and concepts under consideration, and acknowledges the limitations inherent in such an approach.

### **Conflicting definitions and approaches**

In discussing the conflicting definitions of “discourse” used by discourse analysts Widdowson (1995) writes that “discourse is something everybody is talking about but without knowing with any certainty just what it is” (p. 158). Widdowson is highly critical of the often ambiguous usage of the terms “text” and “discourse” in discourse analysis, calling the overlapping definitions “vague and confusing” (p. 161). A later section of the present literature review will provide in-depth discussion of different and sometimes contradictory ways that analysts define discourse. Furthermore, the method section of the present study will define and operationalize key terms as they will be employed in the research.

## **Nominalization**

Billig (2008) has focused on the role of nominalization and passivization in the writing of critical discourse analysts. Nominalization here refers to writers or speakers using noun phrases instead of verbs, “turning verbs into nouns” (p. 785), and passivization refers to using passive voice instead of active voice. Billig identifies several ideological features associated with nominalization and passivization including deleting agency, reifying, and maintaining unequal power relations (p. 785). For example, a newspaper headline that says “Demonstrators dispersed during protest” deletes agency by not acknowledging the agents, that is who dispersed the demonstrators. Billig criticizes CD analysts such as Fowler and Fairclough for describing nominalization as a process that permits the deletion of agency without adequately defining how this process occurs (p. 792). Billig states that if “critical analysts use the same forms of language whose ideological biases they are exposing in others, then they might be uncritically and unselfconsciously instantiating those very biases” (p. 784). Billig also posits that critical analysis should have political targets that are not “abstract entities but the actions of actual people or classes of people” (p. 796). Billig is concerned with “critical analysts instantiating in their own writings the same linguistic forms that they criticize in the language of others,” and recommends that analysts “use simpler, less technical prose that clearly ascribes actions to human agents” (p. 783).

In response to Billig’s criticisms, Fairclough (2008) agrees that critical discourse analysts should be more critical about their own writing (p. 811). Fairclough does not suggest that analysts avoid the linguistic forms cited by Billig completely, but rather that analysts “should avoid using such language in problematic ways” (p. 812). Fairclough states that nominalizations

can be useful for generalizing, abstracting, and classifying, although there are potential negative outcomes associated with using nominalizations such as over-generalizations, diminishing differences, and obscuring agency (p. 813). Regarding reification, Fairclough also agrees with Billig's claim that CD analysts occasionally depict language as the agent of action, rather than language users (p. 816), and suggests that the underlying cause is that CDA is not "trans-disciplinary enough" (p. 818). Van Dijk (2008) also responded to Billig's criticisms of nominalization in CDA and agreed that CD analysts should be self-critical of their own academic language. However, Van Dijk asserts that the issue of nominalization in CDA is a "pseudo-problem" (p. 823), and encourages a cognitive approach to understanding the mental processes involved in producing nominalizations (p. 827).

The present researcher acknowledges the potential problems posed by nominalization in CDA, including deleting agency and reinforcing unequal power relations. When reviewing the textual content of the artifacts to be analyzed in the current study the researcher noted examples of nominalization in the sample. More importantly, the researcher endeavored to avoid the potential negative effects of nominalization and passivization when writing the analysis and discussion of the current study. One of the inherent limitations of the present research is the lack of information about the creators of the discursive acts to be analyzed; therefore the researcher can only discuss the artifacts themselves. Due to this limitation there is the possibility of reification to emerge from the analysis, and the researcher exercised a critical attitude in writing the present analysis as appropriate.



## **Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Social Semiotics**

The perspectives of social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis are related to CDA, and scholars such as Machin and Mayr (2012) group these disciplines and others under the categorical umbrella of Critical Discourse Analysis. The present research draws upon these approaches in undertaking the analysis of the FWP and TWS Internet memes. The current study evinces the view that cultural meanings are created and communicated through the interplay of signs, which is the perspective of Social Semiotics; the artifacts under analysis in the present study are comprised of textual and visual elements, and multimodal discourse analysis examines artifacts composed of multiple modalities; and practitioners of multimodal discourse analysis have highlighted a lack of CDA research using Internet-based artifacts, a lacuna the present study aims to traverse.

Semiotics (sometimes called semiology) was defined by Saussure, a founder of the field, as “the study of the life of signs within social life” (Macey, 2000). Semiotics involves the analysis of cultural artifacts to discern how and what meanings are encoded and communicated through the interplay of signs such as words and images. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) characterize cultural commodities such as advertisements as semiotic because they consist of signs, and what is “produced, circulated and consumed in the case of cultural commodities is words and images” (p. 10). Hodge and Kress (1988) outlined a “reconstitution of semiotics” called social semiotics (p. 2). Social semiotics is related to discourse analysis in that it concerns how people make meaning from cultural artifacts, but social semiotics includes signs and images in addition to verbal and linguistic material. The authors developed social semiotics in response to what they considered the limitation to verbal language in their earlier work, and to reflect their

view that “social structures and processes, messages and meanings as the proper standpoint from which to attempt the analysis of meaning systems” (p. xii). Social semiotics also involves the analysis of ideological complexes, defined by the researchers as “functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another” (p. 3). Ideological complexes sustain relationships of both power and solidarity, and constrain behavior by “structuring the versions of reality on which social action is based” (p. 3).

Multimodal discourse analysis is related to social semiotics in that it involves examination of artifacts that consist of multiple modalities (such as images, sound, and music) in addition to linguistic and textual content (O’Halloran, Tan, Smith & Podlasov, 2011). Machin and Mayr (2012) state that multimodal discourse analysis concerns “the way the communicator uses the semiotic resources available to them, either in language or in visual communication, to realise their interests” (p. 17). A relevant example of critical multimodal discourse analysis is Makoni’s (2012) analysis of Zimbabwean pamphlets presenting information on methods of contraception and family planning to examine how language, ideology, and power were manifested in the pamphlets. The framework for the analysis was based on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar as well as the approach to multimodal discourse analysis outlined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (p. 401). The pamphlets consisted of pictures and text, and Makoni sought to establish what the producers of the pamphlets were communicating “through texts that realize both verbal and visual meanings” (p. 402). Makoni asserts that “ideological assumptions underlie not only text but also images” (p. 403). The first part of Makoni’s analysis examined the pamphlets’ visual images using Kress and Van Leeuwen’s multimodal analysis of visual composition, and the second part focused on the text using a form of transitivity analysis adapted

from Halliday. Makoni states that transitivity is “inextricably intertwined with ideology” and power relations because it concerns “who does what to whom, and why” (p. 402), and that transitivity “shows how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them” (p. 403). Makoni identified several salient themes in the pamphlets including vulnerability, protection, and risk (p. 418). Makoni concluded that the pamphlets portrayed women as an “at-risk ‘other’ needing protection, intervention, and reproductive regulation” (p. 419). The pamphlets contained “discourses of difference” that constructed “ideologically-based binary opposites between ‘us’ and ‘them’, creating a hierarchy of power” (p. 420).

O’Halloran, Tan, Smith and Podlasov (2011) also examined how CDA could be conducted with a multimodal artifact. The researchers analyzed a TV commercial and demonstrated how CDA can take audiovisual elements of an artifact into account (p. 111). Their approach is closely related to social semiotics and involves analyzing connotative and denotative meanings (p. 114) and the significance of the soundtrack in addition to the visual semiotics (p. 120). A salient feature of their research is the assertion that “the interactive digital environment makes the analysis itself into a ‘text,’” (p. 122) as “the analyst’s own metadiscourse becomes the site for critical ‘self-reflexion’” (p. 123).

Mautner (2005) argues that practitioners of CDA should analyze web-based materials to fulfill the commitment of CDA to socially relevant research (p.809). Mautner notes that while the Internet has received a great deal of analytical attention across disciplines, it is still rare for critical discourse analysts to study texts originating online (p.810). As Mautner states, “the significance of the internet in contemporary social life is such that web-based material should

become a more obvious choice for projects” in CDA (p.811). Mautner cites the multiplicity of voices expressed on the Internet as another reason web-based research is well suited to the emancipatory agenda of CDA (p.816).

The preceding section of the literature review introduced the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis, including the different ways various scholars have applied CDA, as well as some of the most frequently cited criticisms of the approach. The next section of the review will discuss the concept of discourse, how the term has been understood and used in different contexts, and how it related to the present study.

## **Discourse**

The term discourse has been defined and operationalized by various scholars in a number of different ways. Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter (2000) differentiate between general and specialized understandings of discourse, briefly discussing the myriad meanings of the word as used by philosophers from Thomas Aquinas to Michel Foucault. While the popular meaning of discourse typically refers to “learned discussion” or “dialogue,” scholars and discourse analysts have generated several distinct meanings of the term including speech, a sequence of statements, and the total linguistic domain (p. 25). Critical discourse analysts also define the term in different ways, but a common element among CDA practitioners is the view that discourse is a form of social practice (p. 26). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) use the term discourse to refer to “semiotic elements of social practice” (p. 38). This definition of discourse includes written and spoken language, nonverbal communication, and visual images. They define social practices as ways that people interact to produce social life through both discourse and non-discursive

elements (p. 38). Locke (2004) identifies two broad categories in which the term is used in discourse analysis: as specific uses of language in social practice, and as a practice of representing and signifying the world (p. 13). Machin and Mayr (2012) define discourse as “language in real contexts of use” and “discourses” as “the broader ideas communicated by a text” (p. 20).

Gee (1999) differentiates between “Discourse” (capitalized) and “discourse” (all lowercase) (p.6). The lowercase discourse refers to “language-in-use,” specific speech acts used to enact activities and identities (p.7). The capitalized Discourses refer to what Gee calls “ways of being in the world” (p.7), overarching systems of social arrangements in which individual communication acts occur. These Discourses always involve language combined with “other stuff” such as beliefs, values, objects, and places (p.18). The combination of these elements creates a context in which an individual can recognize their own role and the roles of others. Gee asserts that communication of information is not the primary purpose of human language. Rather, Gee suggests that the primary function of language is two-fold: to structure the performance of social activities, and to structure human affiliation within cultures and social groups (p.1). For Gee, language is always political, and plays an integral role in the distribution of power, status, worth, and other “social goods” (p.2). Every communication act involves adopting a perspective, and is therefore inherently value-laden.

Similarly to Gee, Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) state that language is not merely a channel for the communication of information. Rather, they see language as a powerful tool that creates and shapes the social world (p.9). They define a discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (p.1). Their notion of a “complete package” approach to

analyzing discourse involves four components: philosophical assumptions about the role of language in the construction of the social world; theoretical models; methodological guidelines; and specific techniques of analysis (p.4). The authors also identify three different ways that Fairclough's practice of CDA applies the concept of discourse: language as social practice; the kind of language used within a specific field; and a way of speaking that gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective (p.66). These different uses of discourse correspond to three functions of discourse: an "identity function" (constructing social identities); a "relational function" (constructing social relations); and an "ideational function" (constructing systems of knowledge and meaning) (p.67). Analysis from this perspective focuses on two different dimensions of discourse: the communicative event (a speech act, instance of language use, or communication artifact such as a film, transcript, or specific Internet meme), and the order of discourse (the way in which types of discourses and discursive practices are configured within a specific institution or field, such as the different levels of relations and types of technical language in use within a hospital) (p.67). Thus, in Fairclough's framework, every communicative event consists of three dimensions: it is a text (speech, writing, images or a combination); it is a discursive practice (involved in the production and consumption of texts); and it is a social practice (p.68). In order to address all the components of Fairclough's three-dimensional model for CDA, the analysis must consider the linguistic features of the text, processes related to the production and consumption of the text, and the wider social practice in which the communicative event is situated (p.68).

Lincoln (1989) asserts that discourse and force (the exercise or threat of physical violence) are "the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and

habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified” (p. 3). For Lincoln, discourse supplements physical force through ideological persuasion. The power and scope of a discourse’s ideological persuasion is dependent upon how widely and effectively the discourse can be propagated, whether the discourse is persuasive or not, and whether a discourse is successful in eliciting the sentiments necessary to gain a following (p. 8).

Kress (1985) states that the term discourse derives from and belongs to the social domain, while the term text derives from and belongs to the linguistic domain (p. 27). Kress discusses discourses as “modes of talking,” as in “medical discourse” or “legal discourse” (p. 27). Text, for Kress, is how discourse is expressed in specific instances and certain linguistic features (p. 28). In their formulation of social semiotics Hodge and Kress (1988) differentiate between discourse and text, using the term discourse to refer to “the social process in which texts are embedded” and text to mean “the concrete material object produced in discourse” (p. 6). Van Dijk (1998) refers to the “verbal dimension of the spoken or written communicative act” as talk or text, and uses discourse to refer to the product of a communicative act, “the written or auditory result as it is made socially available for recipients to interpret” (p. 194).

## **Ideology**

The present section will present an overview of the concept of ideology from its use in Marxism and critical theory through its use in CDA. Like discourse, ideology can be a slippery concept to pin down. Eagleton (1991) states that no one has developed “a single adequate definition of ideology” (p. 1). McLellan (1995) calls ideology “the most elusive concept in the whole of social science” (p. 1). Van Dijk (1998) acknowledges the “theoretical confusion”

surrounding ideology and adds that “the various versions of the concept of ideology are simply the scholarly constructs of competing theories” (p. 1). The term was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy, a 19th century French aristocrat, to mean the study or science of ideas (Freeden, 2003). Today the term is closely associated with the writings of Marx, who with Engels co-authored a book titled *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, 1846/2006). In that work Marx and Engels wrote that “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (p. 9). As Eagleton points out, this suggests that ideology involves not just ideas and belief systems but also questions of power and particularly the legitimization of power (p. 5). Freeden (2003) describes Marx and Engels’ characterization of ideology as a sort of false philosophy, “an inverted mirror-image of the material world” that obscures and distorts the reality of dehumanizing social conditions under capitalism (p. 5). Additionally, Marx and Engels associated ideology with class division, as a tool of oppression wielded by the ruling class against the subservient proletariat class (p. 6). Through ideology members of the oppressed class falsely believe that working for the dominant class is in their own best interests. McLellan (1995) summarizes Marx’s notion of ideology thusly:

[T]he exploitation and inequality which were inherent in the relations of production were concealed by the appearance of free exchange in the sphere of circulation, concentration on which gave rise to the typically capitalist ideology of freedom, equality and so forth. (p. 14)

The next significant development of the ideology concept came from the 20th century Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci introduced the concept of hegemony, a state of ideological dominance maintained by a dominant class through force as well as cultural means



(Freeden, 2003). In his notebooks written while a political prisoner in Mussolini's Italy, Gramsci (2006) wrote that "the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (p. 14). McLellan (1995) states that Gramsci developed the notion of hegemony to explain how the ruling class did not have to resort to force in order to maintain dominance (p. 27). In addition to the development of hegemony, Freedon states that Gramsci contributed to Marxist theory by elevating the notion of ideology "to the status of a distinct phenomenon worthy of, and open to, study" (p. 24).

Another important contributor to the development of ideology was the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (Freedon, 2003). Althusser (1994) introduced the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) (p. 110). Examples of RSAs include the military, police, and courts and prisons (p. 110). Examples of ISAs cited by Althusser include the family, the educational system, and religions and churches (p. 110). Althusser states that RSAs function by violence and ISAs function by ideology, but each contributes to the same goal of "the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation" (p. 117). Eagleton (1991) describes Althusser's contribution to the concept of ideology as a shift from a cognitive theory of ideology to an affective theory (p. 19). For Althusser, Eagleton states, "ideology is no mere set of abstract doctrines but the stuff which makes us uniquely what we are" (p. 20).

Eagleton (1991) offers six possible definitions of ideology based on how the term has been used by different theorists: the social determination of thought; ideas and beliefs that represents the conditions and life experiences of a specific group or class; a collective "symbolic self-expression"; the promotion and legitimation of a dominant social power; ideas and beliefs

that legitimate the interests of a ruling group through distortion of the material conditions of society; and false or deceptive beliefs that arise from the material conditions of society (p. 28). Eagleton states that the relation of discourse to ideology is a question of “who is saying what to whom for what purposes” and that “ideology is a function of the relation of an utterance to its social context” (p. 9). In Eagleton’s view, ideology is a matter of discourse rather than language, and represents “the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them” (p. 223).

Freeden (2003) identifies four features of ideologies: ideologies are typical forms; ideologies are influential; ideologies are instances of imaginative creativity; and ideologies are communicable (p. 127). Freeden describes discourses as “the communicative practices through which ideology is exercised” (p. 105). Kress (1985) states that ideologies “find their clearest articulation in language” (p. 29), and thus the examination of language is “a powerful way of examining ideological structure” (p. 30).

Van Dijk (1998) lists some of the “commonsense conceptions” of ideology such as false beliefs, beliefs held by others, and deceptive beliefs that conceal real social relations (p. 2). Van Dijk offers a succinct definition of ideology as “the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group” (p. 8), or “shared social representations that have specific social functions for groups” (p. 191), and suggests that ideologies are constituted “by socially shared, general beliefs” (p. 32). Van Dijk distinguishes between ideologies as such (i.e. socially shared beliefs), and the expression or enactment of ideologies in symbols, discourse, or other social practices (p. 26).

Fairclough (2003) defines ideologies as “representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation” (p.9). This definition situates ideologies as representations, but Fairclough states that ideologies are also enacted in social relations and instilled in social identities. Fairclough’s approach to discourse analysis emphasizes the role of texts in contributing to power relations. Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) cite an earlier definition used by Fairclough of ideology as “meaning in the service of power” (p.75). They identify Althusser and Gramsci as principle influences on Fairclough’s notion of ideology, while noting that Fairclough rejects aspects of Althusser’s theories that view people as passive ideological subjects with limited agency (p.75). Rather, Fairclough has adopted the consensus position within communication and cultural studies that texts have multiple “meaning potentials,” and that subjects participate in creating the meaning of a text through the process of interpretation (p.75). Phillips and Jorgensen state that the role of audiences in creating meaning through interpretation makes resistance to ideologies possible, “even though people are not necessarily aware of the ideological dimensions of their practice” (p.75).

Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter (2000) state that discourse is closely related to ideologies because discourse can be understood as a type of social practice and, like ideologies, “locate human beings in specific ways as social subjects” (p. 145). Locke (2004) defines ideology as “an elaborate story told about the ideal conduct of some aspect of human affairs” (p.33). The power of an ideology is dependent upon its “truth value,” and the truth of an ideology is determined by the number of people who subscribe to it (p.33). Locke defines hegemony as a

“state of affairs” that exists when an ideology is held by a large number of people, and belief in the ideology is reinforced by the social status of those subscribing to it (p.33).

The preceding review of literature introduced and explicated the concepts, theories, and existing research pertinent to the present study, as well as the method to be employed. The review began with the meme concept, providing an overview of the term’s origin as a theoretical unit of cultural transmission and its subsequent use in advertising and Internet culture. Next, the review addressed the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis, establishing CDA’s theoretical positioning, explicit political commitment, and manner of application. Lastly, the literature discussed and defined the concepts of discourse and ideology as they pertain to the present study. The following section will elaborate on the specific method to be followed and data to be analyzed in the research.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHOD**

The present section will elaborate on the method employed in the study. This section introduces the statement of purpose and research questions guiding the analysis, describes the process used in selecting the research materials and data sample, define and operationalize the terms to be used, and outline the procedure to be followed. The research proceeded according to Phillips and Jorgensen's (2002) basic 5-step process for CDA (as the research material is text and images, the optional sixth step of transcription is not needed). First, the researcher identified the social problem of Internet memes representing wealth inequality during a time of global economic crisis. Second, the researcher formulated research questions. Third, the researcher selected the research material to be analyzed. Then the researcher analyzed the research material, and lastly wrote the analysis results.

### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The present study seeks to answer the research questions by applying the theory and method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze examples of the "First World Problems" (FWP) and "Third World Success" (TWS) Internet memes.

RQ1: What ideological assumptions about global wealth inequality are communicated through verbal and visual representations in the First World Problems and Third World Success memes?

RQ2: How could the FWP and TWS memes better challenge existing power relations and represent dominated groups of people?

CDA is an appropriate method for analyzing these particular memes for a number of reasons. First of all, the FWP and TWS memes contain both explicit and implicit political and ideological content due to their association with the “first world” and “third world” concepts as well as the theme of economic inequality inherent in the memes’ content. As practiced by Fairclough and others, CDA is rooted in an expressed political commitment, and the application of the method is concerned with examining language and discursive practices to uncover the meanings created by historical, social, and political contexts. Furthermore, studies employing CDA are frequently concerned with how power, dominance, and inequality are reproduced through discourse.

Secondly, when considered together the two series of memes can be viewed as a discourse about wealth disparity and inequality. Individually each meme series presents ideological assumptions about conditions in the First and Third worlds, respectively. When compared and contrasted with one another the collection of memes convey ideas about similarities and differences between the First and Third worlds.

### **Data Selection**

Several web sites aggregate Internet memes, and all the examples analyzed in this study were collected from Meme Generator (<http://memegenerator.net/>). Meme Generator aggregates examples of memes and provides image templates that can be used to create new memes. Meme Generator was chosen as the sole source of memes for the study because the number of memes hosted on the site is far greater than other meme aggregator sites. The author determined that the

collection of memes on Meme Generator was comprehensive enough to provide the entire sample for the study, and drawing from a single site would have the additional benefit of minimizing the chance of selecting duplicate memes. As of November 12, 2012 Meme Generator hosted 6,498 examples of the FWP meme and 243 examples of the TWS meme. Another benefit to using Meme Generator is the site's voting component. Users of the site can "upvote" and "downvote" each meme, a function that affords a gauge of the popularity of each meme and a general idea of how widely it has been seen. When viewing memes on the site the examples can be organized based on when they were posted (newer or older memes) or arranged by popularity of the memes (sorted according to the number of votes received).

As already mentioned, there are far more instances of the FWP meme than the TWS meme. In order to have more equal pools to draw samples from, both collections were sorted based on all-time popularity, from most popular to least. The memes are displayed on pages with 15 images per page, in five rows of three memes each. The samples for the study were taken from the first 15 pages of each collection, being the 225 most popular examples of each meme. The researcher selected the 100 most popular examples of each meme as the sample for analysis. Rather than randomly select examples of the memes, the researcher believes that focusing on the instances with the most "votes" have been upvoted by readers/users because something about the memes' content resonates with readers and causes a positive response. Furthermore, the status of Internet memes as a form of popular discourse is key to the present study, so the researcher chose to focus on the most popular individual examples of the memes. The meme examples with the most votes are therefore among the most often seen and read memes, and so can be considered particularly salient as regards the potential for ideological transmission.

## **Definition and Operationalization of terms**

The literature review introduced the key concepts underlying the present analysis, including several terms with difficult or disputed definitions. The review mentioned various definitions and applications of the term “meme”. Henceforth in the present study the term meme will be used to refer to the Internet memes that constitute the research material. Each specific artifact, being an image macro consisting of visual and textual elements, is a meme; the First World Problems and Third World Success collections of memes are each a series of image macro memes using the same respective image template. References to “text” in the analysis will refer to the textual elements of the image macro memes in the data sample, and not a separate artifact.

Another disputed and potentially confusing term discussed in the literature review is discourse. The word discourse has been used to refer to a variety specific language use or communicative acts, as well as the larger social practice that such communicative acts occur within. The present study refers to discourse in two senses of the term’s use: in the sense of discourse as language in real contexts of use, but also in the sense of discourse as dialogue in that the collection of Internet memes constitute an ongoing conversation or discourse about perceptions of life in the First and Third worlds, respectively. The discussion of the results draws on Machin and Mayr’s conceptualization of discourses as “the broader ideas communicated by a text” to make observances and inferences about the broader ideas about life in the First and Third worlds communicated by the meme content. The analysis will also refer to ideology, ideological assumptions, and ideological content. In all cases the author is using ideology in the sense that van Dijk defined it as socially shared beliefs.



## Procedure

The researcher selected 100 examples of the FWP and TWS memes each. To select the memes the researcher accessed the web site Memegenerator.com and sorted the archive for each meme to be arranged from most popular to least popular. These rankings are based on the number of “up votes” each meme image had received by users of the Meme Generator site. After the 100 most popular memes from both the FWP and TWS archives were selected, the researcher printed hard copies of the meme images. The hard copies were printed on regular 8 1/2 x 11 paper, and the images were arranged so that the collection of FWP and TWS memes were printed on twenty pages each, with 14 pages featuring six meme images and the other six pages featuring three images. The researcher used a pen to mark which numbers out of 100 of the Meme Generator popularity rankings were represented on the corner of each page.

Analysis of the memes began by considering the images used as the backgrounds for the memes. The researcher limited the sample to instances of each meme that use the same photograph as a template: the crying white-appearing woman for the FWP meme, and the dancing black child for the TWS meme. Analysis of the visual element will consider many salient components, including iconography, poses, and gaze. The analysis will consider why these particular images have come to represent the “first world problems” and “third world successes” and what ideological assumptions can be inferred from the association of these particular images with the meme themes.

The researcher conducted initial coding through a “broad brush” for organization of content around themes. Once common themes were identified in the memes’ textual content each thematic grouping was analyzed to investigate how the concepts referenced and the language

used demonstrate ideological assumptions underlying each discursive artifact. Examples include explicit references to money and wealth, and mentions of food and/or eating. Special attention was paid to contextualization signals, thematic organization, binary oppositions, and examples of transitivity. Acknowledging the debates about the use of nominalization in CDA, the author endeavored to avoid nominalizations in the analysis whenever possible, so as to not obscure agency in the creation of the memes and the ideological assumptions of the discourses.



Figure 1: First World Problems sample meme

Source: Meme Generator, all-time most popular First World Problems memes  
<http://memegenerator.co/First-World-Problems-Ii/images/popular>



Figure 2: Third World Success sample meme

Source: Meme Generator, all-time most popular Third World Success memes  
<http://memegenerator.co/Third-World-Success/images/popular>

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS**

The following section presents analysis of the selected memes. First, the visual elements of both memes' template photographs will be analyzed based on categories of visual semiotic analysis. The second part of the analysis will examine the textual content of the meme sample.

### **Analysis of the Visual Elements**

#### **First World Problems: Visual Semiotic Analysis**

The Know Your Meme web site describes the First World Problems meme as comprised of “frustrations and complaints that are only experienced by privileged individuals in wealthy countries,” and states that the meme “is typically used as a tongue-in-cheek comedic device to make light of trivial inconveniences”.

The background image for the First World Problems meme series is a close-up photograph of a white-appearing woman's face. The woman in the photograph has dark, black-appearing hair. Her eyes are closed, and she is holding her right hand up to her face, fingertips touching her forehead. These visual elements convey the sense that the woman in the photograph is distressed, through the combination of the closed eyes, pained expression and the gesture of holding a hand up to one's forehead. Due to the close-up perspective and framing of the photograph only the woman's face and hand are visible. The background of the photo is stark white and featureless.

One salient feature of the FWP image is the woman's gaze; her eyes are closed and her head is directed slightly downward. Following the visual semiotic analysis practiced by Kress and van Leeuwen, Machin and Mayr (2012) refer to images of people whose eyes are not visible,

or who are not “looking out at the viewer,” as “offer images” (p. 71). Kress and van Leeuwen differentiated between this type of images and “demand images,” where the pictured person’s gaze is directed toward the viewer as a form of visual acknowledgment. *Offer* images are so called because the pictured persons do not visually acknowledge the viewer, and therefore no demand is made of the viewer and no response is expected. Another salient aspect of the woman’s gaze is that it is directed downward. Machin and Mayr point out that the directional indicators “up” and “down” have strong metaphorical associations in Western culture (p. 72). A depressed person may be said to be “feeling down” or “down in the dumps,” while feelings of elation may be described as “being on cloud nine”; similarly, people may be described as having their “head in the clouds” or being “down to earth”. So the woman’s gaze serves as another visual indicator of the suggested mood. Her downcast face furthers the suggestion that the woman is sad or emotionally distressed.

There are no cultural symbols present in the FWP meme image aside from the white-appearing woman herself. Her presence alone can be interpreted as a cultural symbol, as it communicates white culture, often associated with western culture. The color scheme of the image, exemplified by the stark white background of the photo, further establishes “whiteness” as a central idea of the image. Size is another salient feature of the FWP photo, as the close-up view and tight cropping of the woman’s face is such that her face nearly fills and even extends beyond the frame. This makes her unmistakably the most important element of the image because she is essentially the only element in the image.

### **Third World Success: Visual Semiotic Analysis**

The Know Your Meme web site describes the Third World Success meme as “an advice animal image macro series featuring a photograph of a dancing tribal child with captions about overcoming hardships that are associated with life in underdeveloped countries”. The meme is also described as “the anti-thesis of First World Problems”.

The image used for the Third World Success meme template is a photograph of four children, cropped in such a way that one child is centered and the only figure fully visible. The figures of the three other children are only partially visible. The children are black and are wearing only loincloth-style coverings. The landscape visible in the background is mostly dirt ground and a patch of tall grass. The center child is apparently male, and is looking directly toward the camera lens and smiling. The child’s pose suggests that the photograph has captured him while dancing, as his arms and legs are positioned in a way indicative of dancing rather than walking or standing. The salient details of the photograph suggest both elements referenced in the name of the TWS meme: the image of black children wearing only meager coverings against a backdrop of sparse dirt and brush connotes tribal living and impoverished conditions associated with archetypal depictions of the Third World or developing nations. The center child’s smiling face and pose suggest joy and celebration.

The gaze of the dancing child in the center of the TWS image template is directed toward the camera that captured the photograph, giving a sense of the child making eye-contact with viewers of the image. Using the of visual semiotic terminology developed by Kress and van Leeuwen, Machin and Mayr (2012) refer to images where the gaze of the depicted is directed toward the viewer as “demand images” (p. 71) . As Machin and Mayr explain, a *demand* image

“asks something of the viewer in an imaginary relationship, so they feel that their presence is acknowledged and, just as when someone addresses us in social interaction, some kind of response is required” (p. 71). The nature of the demand is determined by other elements of the image, such as the facial expression of the pictured person, the apparent setting of the photograph and other visual cues. In the TWS image, the child’s facial expression and body language evoke feelings of warmth and positive mood. The child’s evident smile and his body language (and that of the children visible around him) convey high spirits and a carefree attitude, suggesting that one possible demand a viewer may perceive in the image is to join adopt a similar attitude and join the celebration.

The TWS meme image contains several potent cultural symbols. The group of apparently African children wearing only sparse garb against a background of bare earth all serve as visual shorthand for impoverished peoples in developing African nations. These cultural symbols cue viewers’ interpretation of the image, as evidenced by the Know Your Meme site’s description of the central figure as a “tribal child”. Unlike the FWP meme image of a close-up on a single figure’s face, the TWS image shows a whole figure and partial others. The central child is not the largest of those in the picture, as two of the other figures are clearly taller, but his central placement in the frame and the fact that his entire figure is visible establish the child as the central figure of the image. A close-up image of the child, cropped to show just his smiling face, would ostensibly serve the same function as the image used in the FWP meme. The fact that the image most associated with the TWS meme depicts multiple figures may be considered ideologically salient. The colors present in the TWS meme image are strictly earth tones: a palette of browns, tans, and green. This color scheme further contributes to the association of the

children depicted with undeveloped nations as the photograph contains no evidence of industrial or technological development.

### **Textual Analysis**

Applying the methods of traditional discourse analysis to the textual content of the memes is difficult, because virtually all the meme text consists of sentence fragments and lack proper grammar or punctuation. After collecting the sample of 100 examples of each meme the researcher conducted initial coding of the textual content of the sample. The researcher reviewed each meme and created categories based on commonality of subject references and theme in the meme text. For example, the categories generated to code the First World Problems meme included “Food and Eating,” “Technology,” and “Money and Wealth”. Categories created to code the Third World Success meme included “Food and Eating,” “Hunger/Lack of Food,” and “Internet Culture”. Some categories also included sub-categories. For instance, sub-categories of Technology specified whether the text of the meme referred to a smartphone or other specific device. Furthermore, only references to electronic technology were counted for that category.

In this coding process a single image macro could be counted only once for each category, but could be counted for multiple categories. For example, the FWP meme with the text “I FORGOT MY PHONE / AND I’M ALREADY SITTING ON THE TOILET” was counted for both the technology and hygiene/bathroom categories. However, the FWP meme with the text “WENT TO CLICK FULL SCREEN ON PORNHUB VID... / CLICKED FACEBOOK SHARE BY ACCIDENT” would be counted for the Internet culture category only once, even though the meme text references two separate web sites. For the TWS collection the researcher differentiated between references to food and eating, and references to hunger or lack



of food. The TWS meme with the text “CAN’T AFFORD FOOD / LOST FIVE POUNDS” was counted a reference to hunger/lack of food, and not to food and eating. The TWS meme with the text “BELLY IS FULL / OF FOOD, NOT FLUID DUE TO MALNUTRITION” was considered a reference to both the lack of food and the food and eating categories because it references a belly full of food and also malnutrition. All meme images that contained a variation of the word “hunger” were counted in the hunger/lack of food category.

In the textual content of the FWP sample, there were 52 references to technology; of these, 7 specifically referred to cell phones or smartphones, with two of these specifically referencing the iPhone brand. There were 33 references to Internet culture; 8 of these were specifically references to Internet memes, 7 referenced Facebook, and 2 referenced the YouTube video site. There were 22 references to eating and food; 8 references to personal hygiene/bathing; and 3 references to money and/or wealth. In the textual content of the TWS sample, there were 16 references to sickness, disease or death; 14 references to hunger or lack of food; 12 references to Internet culture; 8 references to food and eating; 6 references to technology; 4 references to dancing; and 3 references each to aid and relief organizations (i.e. Red Cross) and wild animals. To assess whether specific subjects or references might be related to the popularity of each meme (based on the number of upvotes each had received on the Meme Generator web site at the time the sample was collected) the researcher also examined the textual content of the 20 most popular examples of each meme separately from the rest of the data collection. Of the 20 most popular FWP memes, 15 contained references to either general technology or Internet culture. The researcher did not identify a significant grouping or commonality in the textual content of the 20 most popular FWP meme images.

To assess how identity and agency are represented in the meme text the researcher quantified the use of pronouns in each meme series. 46 of the FWP memes used pronouns (mostly “I” and “my”), compared to 25 of the TWS memes. The researcher also considered what verbs were used in the memes to describe action. To compare the specific verbs present in each meme series, the researcher made a list of each unique verb in every meme in the data sample. Going in order from the most popular to least popular memes, the first ten unique verbs in the FWP meme series are: taken; read; see; made; wants; brushed; wrapped; eating; hear; and clicked. The first ten unique verbs in the TWS meme series, going in order from most to least popular, are: have; buy; dancing; needs; raped; dies; killed; wins; arrived; and finds. The verbs present in each meme series include material processes (i.e. Brushed, arrived, etc.), mental processes (i.e. See, hear, etc.), behavioral processes (i.e. Wrapped, dancing, etc.), relational processes (i.e. “Have something more than you,” “has nothing to drink,” etc.) and existential processes (i.e. “The weather is too nice,” “Now I am happy,” etc.).

Table 1: Subject categories used for textual coding of memes.

| <b><u>Subject Categories</u></b> | <b><u>FWP</u></b> | <b><u>TWS</u></b> |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <b>General Technology</b>        | <b>52</b>         | <b>6</b>          |
| <b>Internet Culture</b>          | <b>33</b>         | <b>12</b>         |
| <b>Food and Eating</b>           | <b>22</b>         | <b>8</b>          |
| <b>Hunger/Lack of Food</b>       | <b>2</b>          | <b>14</b>         |
| <b>Sickness/Disease/Death</b>    | <b>0</b>          | <b>16</b>         |
| <b>Hygiene/Bathroom</b>          | <b>8</b>          | <b>0</b>          |
| <b>Money and/or Wealth</b>       | <b>3</b>          | <b>1</b>          |
| <b>Sports</b>                    | <b>0</b>          | <b>2</b>          |
| <b>Animals</b>                   | <b>0</b>          | <b>3</b>          |
| <b>Miscellaneous</b>             | <b>21</b>         | <b>34</b>         |

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The present discussion section will elaborate on the preceding analysis and present the researcher's interpretation of the memes as discourse and the ideological content contained therein. For the purposes of the present analysis the researcher considered each meme collection (the "First World Problems" and "Third World Success" meme series) as individual discourses comprised of distinct discursive acts (i.e. each individual meme image and the associated text); considered together, the two meme series are seen to constitute discourses about conceptions of the "First" and "Third" worlds. This understanding is rooted in both Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) definition of discourses as "semiotic elements of social practice" (p. 26), and in Machin and Mayr's (2012) definition of discourses as "the broader ideas communicated by a text" (p. 20). The researcher examined the semiotic elements (visual and textual) of these discursive acts in order to distinguish ideological content present in the discourses. Ideological content in this sense can best be understood using van Dijk's (1998) definition of ideologies as "socially shared beliefs" (p. 26). Through critical examination of the words and images present in the memes the researcher sought to identify the socially shared beliefs as evidenced by the denotative and connotative associations of the textual and visual content.

RQ1 asked what ideological assumptions about wealth disparity and inequality are evinced by the textual and visual content of the memes in the data sample. To answer this question the researcher considered the words and images present in the memes and made observations about how the memes represented their respective worlds. Several binary oppositions emerge when comparing and contrasting the First World Problems and Third World Success meme series. These dichotomies reflect the ideological assumptions about their

respective subjects inherent in each. The aggregate effect of these dichotomies is a pervading “us and them,” or “self and other” binary that manifests in various ways in the memes’ content. First of all, binary categories identified by the researcher based solely on the visuals in the memes include: white/black (the white-appearing woman contrasted with the black children), serious/frivolous (the distraught woman contrasted with the dancing child), and artificial/natural (the featureless white background of the FWP meme contrasted with the earth tones and natural landscape of the TWS meme). There is also a difference in perspective between the two images: the woman of the FWP memes is seen at eye-level, whereas the perspective of the TWS meme is looking downward at the pictured children. Machin and Mayr (2012) relate gaze and perspective to metaphorical associations with the directions of up and down, such as “upper and lower classes” and stating that “people with higher status are often seated higher than those with lower status” (p. 72). Also, the woman in the FWP image is “larger-than-life,” too big to be contained by the frame of the photograph. In contrast, the TWS image shows several children, even though some are glimpsed only partially. One effect of this difference in perspectives is that viewers of the FWP meme feel “closer” to the woman depicted, and are “distanced” from the children in the TWS meme image. As with gaze, Machin and Mayr identify proximity as a salient signifier of social relations. Returning to metaphorical associations the authors state that individuals “‘keep our distance’ from people we do not want to ‘be in touch with’ and ‘get close to people’ we see as part of our circle of friends or intimates” (p. 97).

Another effect of this difference of perspective between the two images is a visual dichotomy of individual and collective. The FWP image depicts a single individual, while the TWS image shows several people, and this difference can be considered ideologically salient.

For instance, a common sociological distinction used to examine cultural differences is the cultural tendency toward either individualism or collectivism. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) describe an individualist culture as one that “promotes autonomy, individual responsibility, and individual achievement,” while collectivist cultures “honor the community or collective above the individual person” (p. 204). The authors also assert that “cultures in northern and Western Europe as well as in North America tend to be individualist, while collectivism is common in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America” (p. 204). These cultural tendencies and the geographic regions typically associated with each are reflected in the meme images as the First World is represented with an image of an individual and the Third World is represented by an image of a group. The textual elements of the memes also reflect the individualist and collectivist distinction. Machin and Mayr refer to this feature of discourse as “individualization versus collectivization” and cite the effect as a key representational process affecting how subjects of discourse are humanized or not. According to the authors, when subjects are identified as individuals rather than as part of a collectivity (i.e. “John Doe and Jane Smith,” rather than “the group”) the identifying information enables readers to feel empathy for the subjects (p. 81). As noted in the textual analysis, the FWP collection of memes featured 46 uses of pronouns, and the TWS meme series featured 25 instances of pronouns. That the FWP meme image, with its visual associations with Western culture, has more instances of pronouns than the TWS image, with its visual associations with developing nations, suggests that creators and viewers of the memes are more likely to humanize and identify with the subject of the FWP meme. The fact that the FWP meme examples feature many more instances of personal pronouns such as “I” and “my” than

the TWS meme bolsters the association between the FWP meme series and individualistic ideology.

Other binaries become apparent upon contrasting the textual content of both meme series. For example, references to food and eating are among the most common subjects in both the FWP and TWS memes. The contexts in which food or eating are referenced, however, are often very different across the memes. In the FWP data set there are 22 unique references to food or eating, and the first such reference (in FWP #5) is “WANTS TO EAT CAKE”. In the TWS data set, the researcher created two food-related categories for coding: one for references to food and/or eating, and another for references to hunger or lack of food. The TWS collection of memes contained 8 references to eating and/or food, and 14 references to hunger or lack of food. The first time the word “food” appears in the TWS data set (in TWS #6) it is preceded by the word “needs,” and the first time the word “eat” appears in the TWS data set (TWS #81) it is preceded by the word “never”. The dichotomy here is obvious: the First World as described in the memes suffers from an overabundance of food (i.e. “WANTS TO EAT CAKE / BRUSHED TEETH ALREADY”) whereas in the Third World as depicted in the memes, the mere presence of food is considered a success (“BELLY IS FULL / OF FOOD, NOT FLUID DUE TO MALNUTRITION”). Other differences in the textual comparisons of the memes include a want versus need dialectic. The word “need” appears before “want” in the TWS memes (TWS #3), and conversely the word “want” appears before “need” in the FWP memes (FWP #5). While these facts may be insignificant on their own, they are emblematic of the general tone and thematic overtures that characterize the two memes.

Taken all together, what sort of picture do the words and images of the FWP and TWS memes paint of their respective eponymous worlds? The First World as depicted in the textual and visual components of the FWP meme is white, wired, and whiney. Personified by a single white-appearing woman against a featureless white background, the First World abounds with references to technology. In fact, there were more references to technology (52 total) than any other category. The denizens of this First World are online, consuming and creating Internet culture, as indicated by the 33 references to Internet culture and 8 references to Internet memes. It is hardly surprising that a discursive form exclusive to the Internet should abound with references to technology and Internet culture, as by necessity the meme creators and consumers are all Internet users. The citizens of this First World are evidently very well fed, based on the 22 unique references to food and eating, and the most common food-related problem in this world is that it is difficult to hear your television program while eating potato chips or other crunchy snacks (this scenario is alluded to in 6 of the 100 FWP memes). This First World is also self-centered, with almost half of the data selection containing first person pronouns. First World citizens are also chiefly consumers, not only in their widespread adoption of consumer electronics (frequent references to smartphones including specific brands), but also in the frequent consumption of media (especially watching videos and listening to music on the Internet, but there are also general references to reading. Lastly, the residents of this First World are active and creative. Often these actions are specific to using digital technology, involving such verbs as “texting,” “clicked,” and “copy”. Other general creative verbs used include “creates,” “wrapped,” and “write”.



The Third World as depicted in the textual and visual components of the TWS meme is diverse, destitute, and dependent on charity. The apparent diversity stems from the variety of references to different countries and nationalities in the memes (e.g. Phillipine Islands, Sweden, Brazil) as well as the different languages present (while all of the FWP memes were in English, several TWS memes are not. Accordingly, one of the FWP memes from that data sample alluded to such cases: “THE MEME ISN’T IN ENGLISH / I CAN’T TELL IF IT’S FUNNY OR NOT”). The destitution of this Third World is apparent throughout the data sample. In addition to the aforementioned references to hunger and lack of food, there are abundant references to disease (“NO COMPUTER / STILL HAS VIRUS”), impoverished living conditions (“NEW HOUSE / GOT ROOF”), low quality of life and short life expectancy (“ONLY 2 OF HIS BROTHERS DIED / THIS YEAR”), and wild predatory animals as a daily fact of life (“SEE LIONS / NOT CAGED”). Dependence on charity in this Third World is apparent from the references to clothing and other items arriving from aid organizations (“RED CROSS JUST ARRIVED / GOT THE FIRST XBOX”). A total of 9 of the TWS memes refer to imminent arrival of shirts (e.g. “PATRIOTS SHIRTS / GET HERE TOMORROW”) in reference to the practice of sports merchandise manufacturers and retailers donating unsalable clothing items (i.e. shirts printed before a championship match to commemorate the victory of the team that ultimately was defeated) to humanitarian aid organizations such who then distribute the clothing in developing nations. Despite the poor living conditions and reliance on handouts, this Third World is not devoid of technology, with 6 references to technology in general and 12 references to aspects of Internet culture. As with the FWP meme, this should be expected as the memes are a discursive act born and bred on the World Wide Web.

It is possible to deduce ideological assumptions not from what is present in the memes, but also what is conspicuously absent. For instance, the TWS memes contain many references to hunger and lack of food, while the FWP memes feature no references to hunger. This suggests that hunger is unknown in the “first world,” but of course that is not the case. Likewise, the FWP meme featured no mentions of sickness, disease, or death; these aspects of life are not apparent in the First World as described in the memes. These omissions suggest the potential for a new series of memes to fill the logical gaps in the FWP memes. This hypothetical meme series could be called “Real First World Problems”. The First World depicted in the meme examples is without hunger; indeed, the food-related problems stem from an overabundance of food, typically fast food and “junk food” snacks. An example of a Real First World Problems (RFP) meme could feature the text “EAT ICE CREAM EVERY DAY / GET DIABETES” superimposed over an obese child. The RFP meme could reference the obesity epidemic, heart disease, and other social ills associated with overeating and poor nutrition. It is with this hypothetical alternate meme that the researcher proposes to answer RQ2, which asked how Internet memes could better challenge unequal power relations and represent dominated groups. Following van Dijk’s (1993) argument that CDA practitioners should position themselves “against the power elites and in solidarity with dominated groups” (p. 279), the researcher suggests that image macro meme series focusing on Real First Problems could provide such a discourse and introduce topics wholly absent from the FWP meme examples such as unemployment, rampant debt, and other real life problems found in the so-called First World. It follows then that the response to the TWS meme would be Real Third World Success. Ideally such a meme would not involve just racist jokes based on stereotypical perceptions of people in

developing nations, but would highlight actual examples of positive conditions and events in the nations considered to be the Third World.

### **Considerations for future research**

Further research in the area of Internet memes and ideology should be expanded and augmented in several important ways. First of all, one of the limitations of the present research is the total reliance on the artifacts themselves to analyze ideological content and inferences. CDA and related methods of analysis also focus on text, but traditional discourse analysis typically benefits from the knowledge of the speaker or originator of the discourse being scrutinized. In the present case there is not information available about the creators or authors of these Internet memes. As long as the originators of these discursive acts remain anonymous the researcher can only infer about the creators' own ideological positions. Future research in this area could focus on identifying and interviewing meme creators. It would be particularly elucidating to ask meme creators about their intent in creating memes, and comparing the authors stated intent with the analyst's interpretation of the message.

The other pertinent party absent from this area of inquiry is the general audience. Future research on the ideological effects of Internet memes should utilize methods of audience analysis. Surveying Internet users after they have viewed examples of memes would provide insight into the effects that exposure to these memes has on audience attitudes. For example, such a study could focus on whether viewing examples of either the FWP or TWS memes has an effect on personal beliefs about wealth disparity, or problems facing residents of developing nations. Audience analysis data could also be compared against data about authorial intent to examine the relationship between the goals of a message creator when posting a meme and the

eventual effect after someone else has viewed it. Future research into Internet memes using CDA could address all the components of Fairclough's three-dimensional model: the linguistic features of the text, processes related to the production and consumption of the text, and the wider social practice in which the communicative event is situated.

The present research focused primarily on the ideological content related to economic issues, and only cursorily discussed depictions of race and gender in the memes. This decision was based on practical considerations; due to the limitations of time and other resources the researcher chose to focus on ideological assumptions relating to class difference and inequality. Both the First World Problems and Third World Success memes are salient examples of ideologically charged representations of race and gender, and researchers should examine them as such. The researcher's decision to limit the scope of the analysis resulted in other significant aspects of the Internet memes not being addressed in the study. These include the role of humor in the creation and reception of the memes, and the relation of the anonymously authored memes to dominant ideologies represented in mainstream media. Future research on Internet memes should include and address these aspects.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding study presented a Critical Discourse Analysis of the First World Problems and Third World Success Internet memes. The study's purpose was to identify and assess ideological assumptions about wealth disparity and income inequality by analyzing the visual and textual components of the selected sample of Internet memes. To accomplish this goal the author reviewed the relevant literature, outlining the origin and development of the meme

concept, explaining the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory and method, and describing and defining key concepts such as discourse and ideology. After analyzing the data the sample the researcher made observations about the ideological content encoded by the visual and textual content of the memes. The researcher identified several binary oppositions between the meme series that indicated ideological beliefs about the nature of wealth disparity and inequality. In keeping with CDA's commitment to social change the researcher suggested ways that the content of Internet memes could be used to challenge existing power relations and better represent disenfranchised and dominated groups.

The section of the literature review covering the development of the meme concept discussed Distin's (2005) theory of cultural heredity. Distin theorized that units of cultural information are transmitted through various systems of representation in an ongoing process of cultural evolution. Distin argues that in this process "the success or failure of novel hypotheses, technological inventions, or even ethical opinions will be determined more by their relative fitness for this immense meme pool than by their intrinsic merits" (p. 206). Even after acknowledging the lack of control individuals can hope to exert over this process of cultural evolution, Distin affirms the importance exercising discernment in each contribution to the meme pool. Such discernment is worthwhile because, even though cultural development may ultimately be determined by memetic interactions beyond individual human influence, the content of the memes in those interactions are determined by individuals. This notion of a large ongoing process that both influences and is influenced by human reaction recalls how Critical Discourse Analysts view discursive acts.

As Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) state, the perspective of CDA views as both constituting the social world and being constituted by other social acts (p. 61). Both Distin's view of cultural evolution and the CDA notion of discourse as both constituted and constitutive suggest that individual choice in social interaction is important, even if it seems like our actions are determined by factors exceeding the grasp of our control. The theory of CDA includes a commitment to addressing social inequality and injustice, and promoting social change; those who ascribe to this commitment should exercise their critical faculties whenever engaging in discourse and other forms of social interaction. The present study focused on Internet memes, and identified how this particular form could more effectively be used to understand and address social problems like wealth disparity and inequality, but the limits to how the principles and perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis can be applied are determined by those who elect to practice it.

**APPENDIX A:  
TEXTUAL CONTENT OF SAMPLED FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS  
MEMES WITH PRIMARY SUBJECT CATEGORIES**

## **Food and eating**

Wants to eat cake / brushed teeth already

Eating potato chips / can't hear the TV

I want to eat chips / but I can't hear the TV

Can't hear the TV, / over my chewing

I have too much cereal for one bowl / but not enough for two

Cant hear my favorite TV show / over the sound of my crunchy snacks

Found favorite food at end of buffet / plate already full

I want to eat potato chips / but then I can't hear the TV

I can't hear the television / the sound of me eating is too loud

Has nothing to drink / except clean water

Craved Chick-fil-a / on a Sunday

Phone rang after I poured the milk / my cereal is soggy

I love Pringles / but my hands can't fit in the tube

Late night McDonalds / ice cream machine is turned off

In the mood for McDonalds / mum has already put dinner on

Ran out of cola / now I have to drink water

I wanted to dip cookie in coffee / but cookie is too big

But we had / pizza yesterday

## **General technology**

Loading screens are too short / to read text written there



The weather is too nice / can't see the screen on my smart phone

Clicked copy instead of paste / now I have to copy the first file again

When I heat a drink in the microwave / the turntable always finishes with the mug's handle in the rear

The page started to load / right as I clicked the refresh button

I want to click the video link / but I'd have to pause my music

Selected 500 objects with ctrl / accidentally clicked away

New laptop is too light / have to use two hands to open it

Turned off controller instead of console / now I have to reconnect my controller

Playing a game on my iPhone / people keep texting me

Opens up new tab / forgets why

Received a second message while answering the first / now I have to start over again

Brought iPod to school / forgot headphones

Box says storage is 32 GB / actual storage is 28.52 GB

Got the timeline / can't get rid of it

Installed Windows 8 / can't find the start button

Got an iPhone 4 today / just realized iPhone 5 comes out tomorrow

I double clicked a file I wanted to open / computer tries to rename it instead

Chose 'save as...' / accidentally clicked on important file and overwrote it

My batteries in my Gameboy died / before I saved

## **Hygiene/bathroom**

Went to bathroom without my smartphone / had to read the showergel label

I forgot my phone / and I'm already sitting on the toilet

Has to go to the bathroom / toilet seat is cold

Shit came after I finished shower / now I have to clean my ass again

I'm hungry / but I just brushed my teeth

I'm so hungry / but I just brushed my teeth

Went for a shit / forgot phone

## **Internet culture**

Username... / already taken

Made awesome meme / misspeled a word

15 second Youtube ad / can't skip

The meme isn't in English / I can't tell if it's funny or not

Username... / already taken

Went to click full screen on Pornhub vid... / clicked Facebook share by accident

Asked for a dislike button / got a timeline

Told my friend "good night" over phone / can't do anything on Facebook because friend might find out I lied

Creates a meme / gets no likes

All those kids in Uganda / will never get their own sheep on Farmville

Made a meme / no-one upvoted

Thought I made an awesome Facebook status / nobody liked it

Thought of a good joke for Meme Generator.. / found out someone else already made it

Save session on Chrome / it opens youfapfap.com next to your parents

Made an awesome meme / no likes

Meme Generator stopped working / and I forgot my joke

Looks at memes. / Sees duplicates.

Bought from Amazon / item was cheaper than the shipping and handling

Made a typo on my meme / can't correct it

Multiple Internet tabs open / loud ad comes on and I don't which one it's coming from

Page is taking too long to load / loads just as you click refresh

Searched Netflix / only available on DVD

/ I forgot the top text and can't edit

OMG earthquake!!! / I forgot to update my Facebook status!!!!

I just wanted to stalk the profile / but I clicked "add as a friend"

Clicks on Youtube song / live version

I want to "upvote" a post / but I have to sign in

300 friends on Facebook / only 10% wish me happy birthday

Go to show people around me funny video / type password where username goes

I want to create an account / but the password requires at least one

## **Money and wealth**

Spent 5 dollars / didn't win 640 million dollars

I hate when my wallet is full / and it hurts to sit

My parents make too much money / for me to get financial aid

### **Miscellaneous**

My hair tie won't go around my hair 3 times / but it's too loose when it's only wrapped twice

The lead in my mechanical pencil / keeps going back in when I write

1 pillow is to low / 2 pillows is to high

Listened to fabulous song too many times / now I dislike it

Thought it was Friday / but it's actually Thursday

"Please refer to the data in figure 7.4" / figure 7.4 is on the next page

Tries to write fast / first two letters become capital

Found a song with a good chorus / then Pitbull started rapping..

Finally found a good song on the radio / it's almost over

Puts hand under desk / accidentally touches all the old gum

Need job for experience / need experience for job

Needs to do homework / middle of night

Went to the gym / someone on my favorite treadmill

Mom cleans my room unexpectedly / now I can't find anything

My back hurts / from laying on the couch all day

Getting out of car at destination / favorite song comes on the radio

They closed the Starbucks / across the street from the Starbucks

Too cold without a coat / too warm with a coat

Win a contest / already own prize

I didn't have a shitty childhood / so I can't turn my pain into art

Went to a concert / only knew three songs

**APPENDIX B:  
TEXTUAL CONTENT OF SAMPLED THIRD WORLD SUCCESS MEMES  
WITH PRIMARY SUBJECT CATEGORIES**

## **Dancing**

I ain't dancing / this sand is hot

Damn / Ravi is the lead dancer

Eyy watch me do / my African dougie!!

## **Death/disease/sickness**

Raped multiple times / didn't get AIDS

Dies / not black anymore

No computer / still has virus

Only 2 of his brothers died / this year

Nineteenth birthday / beat life expectancy

Four years old / no HIV yet

Mom died / won't need gifts for mothers day

Can have sex with anyone / because everyone has AIDS

That click when I stepped / rickets

Took a shit / no blood in my diarrhea

## **Food and eating**

Belly is full / of food, not fluid due to malnutrition

Oh Yeah! / Time to break fast!!!

Oh yeah! / It's time to break fast!!!

Don't have to worry about / bringing a can opener to eat my oranges

/ lunch

Kids in America finished their dinner / for me.

Found 5p on the floor.. / gunne be eating this week!

### **General technology**

Red Cross just arrived / got the first Xbox

Diablo 3 launches everywhere / finally got a copy of Diablo 2

Ya buddy / USB went in the right way the first time

Doesn't own a computer / still plays Minecraft

### **Hunger and lack of food**

Doesn't need to buy a ticket / to see the hunger games

Who needs food / when you got this much swag, baby

Oppan / hungry style

Can't afford food / lost five pounds

Just won / the hunger games

Can catch dinner / in the blink of an eye

Kid throws away burger in America / still alive

Hunger games? / Played that yesterday

### **Internet culture**

Killed me.ga / no pc for warez anyway



/ Kenyan Gangnam Style

Finally / ranked on lol

This meme / rejuvenated

### **Joseph Kony**

Abducted by Kony / gets a free AK47

Kony ain't / catch my ass

Kidnapped by Kony / made into colonel

Woke up this morning / wasn't kidnapped by Kony

Woke up today / not kidnapped by Kony

I can roam freely / now that Kony's gone

Dancing / on Kony's grave

You got a MW3? / I got Kony

Sick on friends head / don't give a shit

Got accepted... / into Kony's army

Got promoted to general / in Kony's army

### **Shirts**

Patriots shirts / get here tomorrow

Awww yeah! / 49'ers Superbowl champs shirts arrive tomorrow

Bboy hut 100k cheevos / I get a t-shirt!

Tigers shirts / get here on Monday

Obama wins election / Romney/Ryan shirts come next week

URDA championship t-shirts / get here Monday

Yankees ALCS champions shirts / will be here next week

Thunder t-shirts / get here Tuesday

### **Miscellaneous**

Have something more than you / belly of worms

Now I am happy / Brazil win World Cup 2014

Eeeeeeh / sexy leire

Philippine Islands / summer already!

Valentine's Day / bj and steak day niggas

Tax refund / came today

I got an ursula and duex / for my rhea

5 years old / African Navy Seal

Frinds out / Amanda is not coming to school that day

New house / got roof

Think you can take me on? / Come at me bro!

Enemy nunu ults in brush / use mine dodging skills and avoided the ult

Enna paakureenga neengalum dance aadunga / India medal win panniduchu

Oh yeah! / It's Friday!!!

23<sup>rd</sup> birthday / still alive

Today I've made 40 miles for 5 litres of mud water / success

Hey I just met you and this is crazy / I am from Somalia my name is Abdi

No bed / don't have to worry about monsters!

/ woke up this morning

Got married to a white chic / age 68

Sock get wet / I have a sock!?

Sveriges national dag / part time bitchez

You ain't never gon beat / the hall

/ Thanks, fikisha!

Vacation time / bitches

Summer is here / bitches

G's running for vp? / I know who I'm voting for

Unenforceable inter vivos gift / donatio mortis causa

I jst cut mahself / 4 uy bebe.

Found a rock / I'll name him Jerry

Vulture shat on my friends head / I was stood there 2 minutes ago

Born in Africa / not runcorn

/ It's bhantime!

New gentlemen's rant / on Monday!

See lions / not caged

First to see Lion King / in live action

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