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Towards memetic legitimation of knowledge: memes and cultural heritage

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Abstract

Introduction. We introduce legitimation practices through Know Your Meme documenting the high-profile sex-trafficking and suicide ruling of Jeffrey Epstein.

Method. Using netnography, we analyse legitimation discourse provided by the six authors reported previous knowledge and what Know Your Meme legitimised about memetic knowledge, the website, and the Epstein case and surrounding conspiracy.

Analysis. Our preliminary analysis suggests that legitimation discourse is a valuable netnographic methodology to understand how documentation both technically and textually establishes '*authoritative*' contexts for memetic and conspiracy theoretic content. We have found that Van Leeuwen's categories of legitimation function in relation to self-reported claims about cultural heritage sites such as Know Your Meme's archival and narrative accounts of memetic meaning.

Conclusion. Our work begins filling two gaps in contemporary digital information environments. Firstly, we begin to close the gap between netnography and cultural heritage sites such as archives, repositories, and so forth. Secondly, we contribute diverse individual legitimations of memetic content. Future work will develop more rich interpretations of what is legitimated by Know Your Meme. Additionally, we compare individual participants' legitimation process relative to their prior reported knowledge.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories are abundant online, sometimes hiding within otherwise verifiable claims. Whether '*true*' or not, conspiracy theories exemplify cultural processes. Especially through social media and documentation practices, they gain legitimacy in popular discourse. As such, conspiracy theories exemplify *cultural heritage* understood as a media imbued with the power of memory (Taylor, 1995; Viejo-Rose, 2015).

A recent example of media and cultural memory surrounds Jeffrey Epstein's sex-trafficking case and the ambiguity around who was involved and what occurred. Epstein was a New York financier who was arrested and convicted for sex-trafficking charges in 2019. A part of the motivation for the conspiracy around Epstein was the legitimation provided by the *documented* connections to social elites. Associating with powerful figures like the Clintons and Donald Trump generated speculation about the involvement of social elites in Epstein's human trafficking (Colyar et al., 2019). Refuelling interest, Epstein's travel logs to and from his private island – where much of the sex trafficking took place – was released in January of 2024 including many high-profile names. However, the legitimacy of the narrative is elusive. Despite his death being ruled a suicide, there exists competing documented evidence about Epstein's death through autopsy reports. Additionally, motivation and opportunity existed for any co-conspiring social elites to have him murdered. In response, the '*Epstein didn't kill himself*' meme/conspiracy theory circulated widely (Stockler, 2019).

Like this meme, conspiracy theories are linguistic claims about political knowledge that are often difficult to validate (Zannettou et al., 2019). Yet, the declarative statement, '*Epstein didn't kill himself,*' is unusual for memes. Memes often provide contexts that resist immediate linguistic reduction (Yus, 2019). Regardless, memes often elusively shape worldviews (Wiggins, 2019) much like conspiracy theories. We make use of Know Your Meme (KYM) entries that document and legitimise perspectives surrounding Epstein conspiracy theories. A meme serves as affiliated digital media traces that shape and sustain knowledge as cultural heritage.

This paper contributes to cultural heritage research by making use of KYM's perceived authority in generating connections between memetic contexts and personal memory and knowledge. It does so by using the authors' varying degrees of knowledge surrounding Epstein, and the knowledge/perspectives the KYM facilitated for us. We further used netnography to analyse how memetic content legitimises aspects of the Epstein case. Using legitimation discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2007) from the authors' produced texts, we respond to the following questions:

> RQ1. How do memes surrounding Jeffrey Epstein legitimate people's perspectives of knowledge surrounding conspiracy?
>
> RQ2. Does KYM generate or instigate memetic knowledge that is incomplete, fabricated, or limited?

The first question is about reinforcement/disjunction of what was remembered by the researchers. The second question focuses on the idea that perhaps some of what KYM does is afford systematic documentation of cultural events. This question is designed to ask about how meme data as organised by KYM might privilege a particular kind of cultural heritage.

Literature review

KYM is a website that contextualises *internet memes*: collections of artefacts that spread online, carrying some common '*content*, *form*, *and/or stance*' (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). KYM provides documented references for internet memes and digital culture. The site's curators validate meme entries developed through crowdsourced labour of artefact collections and metadata. With few exceptions (e.g., Bratt & Smith, 2022; Pettis, 2021; Rogers & Giorgi, 2023) KYM is under-studied.

KYM curates content based on the associative quality of cultural context, contributing to the understanding of memes' meanings. KYM attempts to account for these meanings with ambiguous degrees of completion (Pettis, 2021). The platform provides histories of memes, accounting for the way people position or perform in relation to memetic content. As such, KYM is an exemplary cultural heritage site of memes. Memes and how they are documented as cultural heritage is a particularly recent research interest (Bratt & Smith, 2022; Modrow & Youngman, 2023; Rees, 2021; Tulloch, 2023), playing an increasing role in more recent information studies' contributions to memetics (see, Smith et al., 2024).

KYM's curation provides new interpretations of culture through technological organisation (Rogers & Giorgi, 2023) and internet history (Pettis, 2021). As such, KYM generates memetic '*authority*' for possible truth claims about the memetic content. KYM is a site that focuses on internet culture by sorting piles of digital ephemera using crowdsourced labor. The site has a '*roguish*' (Kosnik, 2021) and '*dumpster-esque*' (Hogan, 2015) quality to its piles of content, where the archival meaning is inductively assembled. As such, in aggregation, KYM provides a post-humanesque generation of living media and memory (Bennett, 2010). These roguish collections of ephemera are granular, and not necessarily narrative in their parts. Yet, they coalesce into material traces of memory (Smith & Loewen-Colón, 2024), suggesting legitimation from what otherwise might be disconnected without the archive. Using the memetic quality of the Epstein case limits the validated empirical knowledge accessible to researchers and forces a focus on the conspiratorial narrative provided by these post-human memetic aggregations. Nevertheless, the results of aggregating these ephemera into a dumpster-like collection requires questioning the human-focused narratives surrounding how individual people play a part in legitimating a conspiracy theory. As such, memes contribute exemplary tensions in documentative agency and power of archives, crowdsourced curators, and sourced actors in '*canonizing*' stakeholders into a morally charged conspiracy narrative (Mackinnon, 2022).

Prior discussion exists on the importance of memes in contextualising conspiracies (Hagen, 2022; Harvey et al., 2019; Wiggins, 2021b, 2021a). However, little work explains how memes *actively* provide context. We contribute a development of how memetic contexts integrate into legitimised knowledge of conspiracy theory. Additionally, we provide a methodological approach to cultural heritage generated through memes.

In developing notions of knowledge through memes, Harbo (2022) analysed (de)legitimation discourse practices of a Facebook group, considering memetic artefacts and related evaluative knowledge claims about economic theory. We use a framework of narrative knowledge: legitimation discourse analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Below, provides our protocol for integrating this framework of legitimation into our netnographic data.

Methodology

Netnography (Kozinets, 2019) has diverse methodological applications in memetic research. Previous literature in memetics has used netnographic inspirations, specifically spanning topics like extremist ideological spread (Trillò & Shifman, 2021), adoption of religious ideas (Rohmatulloh, 2019), audience recontextualization of fictional narratives (Rendell, 2019), and memories and visual journaling (Terzimehić et al., 2021). A netnographic approach specifically for memetic content has also been developed (Kaltenhauser et al., 2021). In our specific case, netnography enables us to select a subset of linked KYM entries as a cultural heritage site, and have our author-participants use 'cultural engagement strategies' (Kozinets, 2019, p. 250) with the site. Netnography enables us to look at the documented symbolic developments related to the site's categories of legitimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2007) relative to our diverse interactions with meme content.

In our protocol, we netnographically (Kozinets, 2019) evaluated eight meme entries' descriptions and image galleries connected to Jeffrey Epstein. Netnography is frequently a method used to

evaluate the discursive qualities of memes and surrounding discussions (e.g., Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017). Kozinets' outline of netnography is particularly useful for this case for several reasons. Firstly, it allows us to look at the pragmatic cultural implications of digital media's interpretation (Kozinets, 2019, pp. 16–17). Also as KYM is both a curatory site and a memetically investigatory resource, it fills a gap by bridging the digital curatory aspects that Kozinets (2019, pp. 95–96) notices is understudied from the netnographic lens with the digital traces and the suggested external knowledge to those witnessing these traces. In particular, netnography enables us to interpret KYM's data as an ambiguous cultural reality and integrate it into our own personal knowledge. In turn, netnography provides investigatory tools to interpret the knowledge provided by this memetic reality as a culturally situated integration of trace data as newly lived memories of cultural heritage.

Within our netnography, we designed questions informed by Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, motivating researchers to reflect on gained knowledge. Van Leeuwen provides four categories of legitimation: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. *Authorization* is how authority is discussed. The netnography of KYM suggests how authority is given to the memetic context of artefacts and the textual analysis of entries for each meme entry on the website. *Moral evaluation* considers how value systems are implied concerning the entries. The netnographic values are extracted surrounding how researchers moralise the claims KYM provides to them. *Rationalisation* is how knowledge is justified. We evaluate netnographic rationalisations of the knowledge and moral claims. *Mythopoesis* is how knowledge is narrated. We evaluate mythopoesis by considering how our researchers narrate their own knowledge through the site's curated information.

The first two authors designed a set of questions for each researcher to report their knowledge about memes, KYM, and the Epstein case/conspiracy. Then, questions were designed for all the authors to interpret the meme entries that prompted researchers to analyse (de)legitimation discourse surrounding KYM and how the information might be memetically '*authoritative.*' Together, the questions provided room for the researchers to narratively explain the legitimacy of the memetic content.
Each author evaluated a '*main*' entry, called '*Jeffrey Epstein sex trafficking case*', and one or two other entries related to the main entry using a Chrome-based browser. The 'main' entry is the primary KYM entry as it exists at the top of a hyperlink hierarchy. The other entries considered the conspiracy theories surrounding Epstein's suicide, his client list, the '*Epstein files*,' with information regarding powerful figures; his mansion; some of his connections, such as socialite Ghislaine Maxwell, politician Donald Trump, and British royal Prince Andrew.

We independently followed a set of structured survey questions and instructions on how to answer them. Additionally, our authors Zoom-record their process of analysis. Some of the questions asked about the entries were as follows: How did the entry frame Jeffrey Epstein? Who are the characters involved and what is their relation to the case? How do the visual elements complement the encyclopaedic entries? How can the artefacts be interpreted as a *'meme'*?

In the next session, using the legitimation categories of Van Leeuwen (2007), we analyse how the researchers viewed the content of their assigned entries and how said content suggested knowledge about the Epstein case and his death.

Results and discussion

First, we introduce our authors in summary. It is of cultural significance to situate who the participants/authors are. Our background knowledge and diverse cultural contexts shape our understanding of memes and Epstein. For this, each author self-reported our knowledge of memes, KYM, and Epstein in a document prior to our analysis.

All six authors served as our participants, all of whom are PhD students or university faculty spanning two Universities in two countries. We range in age from mid-20s to late-40s, being male, female, agendered, and spanning many different ethnicities, carrying citizenship to at least four different countries. So, while we are all focused within a research university setting, otherwise we are a diverse research team. As such, our individual legitimation from memes, KYM, and Epstein is more robust, enabling us to have more diverse cultural contexts for approaching the formation of cultural heritage as documented on the site.

Of our authors, Smith and Hemlsey have published memetic research while the rest have not. Self-reported knowledge of memes ranged from more academic to casual social interaction. Some understood memes more as '*visual artefacts*' shared with their friends, while others reported academic conceptions of collections of artefacts (Shifman, 2014) or semiotic references (Cannizzaro, 2016). Most of the authors had heard of KYM or had interacted with the site briefly. Smith and Hemsley were very familiar with the site. Self-reported knowledge of Epstein ranged from detailed facts about the case to incorrect geographic information about Epstein's location. Duan developed a Twitter data collection surrounding Epstein before the study, but otherwise there was no academic involvement in Epstein or conspiracy theory literature.

Regarding the main entry, the researchers identified memes being used as part of the construction of the narrative. However, we experienced difficulty understanding *how* the meme entry was '*a meme.*' Instead, KYM was identified as being like an encyclopaedia, presenting data as factual. We noted that KYM editors seem to frame sympathy with the narrative that Epstein didn't kill himself, but they do not go as far as stating it was not suicide. Rather the editors provide us with hints for how Epstein might not have killed himself. While embodying the encyclopaedic genre, defending an editorial view with data, the information presentation appeared playful and humorous in tone. It also felt like an invitation to learn more about the situation, either by the hyper-textuality of the platform or through other means.

In our initial analysis, we see some initial evidence of legitimation practices surrounding the conspiracy of Epstein's case. Van Leeuwen's (2007) categories helped identify that *authorization* is used in the entries by using constant affirmative sentences; every entry states the events related to it as a fact, even if absurd. *Moral evaluation* may consist in the way the website presents the actions of Epstein and some of his clients as actual crimes, with some of the entries having warnings of sensitive content and framing that he might have not killed himself. The way the events are presented, inclusive of evidence for possible conspiracies, does not frame them as unimportant or morally correct. Regarding *rationalisation*, every entry presents sources for what is claimed, either official, from news outlets or social media posts that contribute to what is being presented. For the *mythopoesis* provided by the entries, our researchers reported they appear as encyclopaedic pages: there is an introduction of the event and a further description of it, with links leading to related entries and to outside sources that may give to the entry its dispersion characteristics. Every entry also has a gallery of the images and videos of it. Overall, it is identified that the content of the entries makes sense within their own logic.

The secondary meme entries mostly focused on conspiracy theories themselves or powerful figures connected to Epstein (e.g., Donald Trump, Prince Andrew, Ghislaine Maxwell). These entries mostly reinforced the researchers' understanding of the main entry. The frequent use of humour in entries and artefacts act to motivate through pathos via '*meme*,' engaging the reader and contributing to the rationalisation of what is being presented, the mythopoetic way in which those entries are narrated. The visual artefacts manage to provide a greater understanding of the contexts, acting as evidence of what is being said, further contributing to the rationalisation of the entries. The visual elements not only added to the context but were themselves often described in detail in the entries. More than one researcher noted that reading the entries enticed them to learn more about the subject, either to have a larger understanding or simple curiosity about the

individuals involved. Thus, in the presentation of various events as facts, including the dubious ones, and using an online encyclopaedic format of various memes to come up with a larger story, we could say that KYM does contribute to the generation and instigation of memetic knowledge, even if what is being presented is fabricated or incomplete. By using an authoritative tone and coming up with multiple sources to back up its statements, KYM shapes the narratives it presents as both memes and factual events. Its uses of mythopoesis and rationalisation, in particular, contribute to the feeling of legitimation of the entries.

Closing remarks

We have shown promise in filling two gaps: one in netnographic approaches to cultural heritage sites and a second in internet memetics. First, our work begins filling a gap between netnography and cultural heritage sites, like archives. As noted by Kozinets (2019), application of netnography has been scarce. However, our use of legitimation discourse specifically responds to how individuals report gained knowledge netnographically. Second, we contribute diverse individual legitimations of memetic content, moving toward understanding how unique and diverse individuals recall pre-linguistic memetic content's meaning within their own words.

The study of this one narrative works as an initial study on how legitimation emerges from KYM, although it is not an exhaustive investigation of the many ways this may happen. Future work will develop richer interpretations of what is legitimated by the platform. In doing so, we aim to develop a more full understanding of the narrative power dynamics extending legitimation to an '*archival promenade*' (Mackinnon, 2022) ethics-oriented methodology, considering all actors, visible and invisible. We will compare individual participants' legitimation process relative to their prior reported knowledge. Our netnographic writing suggests that the application of Van Leeuwen's legitimation practices can be more fully evaluated through his categories to contribute a methodological approach more fully for cultural heritage sites. Further, we notice the potential for unique '*knowledge*' about the conspiracies as seen through subjective paths through data, through a variety of documented entries.

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