

Hey Girl, Feel My Thesis. Know What it's Made of? Research Material.

By

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

As Generation Z becomes the newest generation to enter adulthood, it is valuable to understand their thought processes and communication patterns. Individuals of Generation Z are known to be digital natives, as they were born into a world of technology with the internet at their fingertips. Understanding Generation Z's use of memes is an area where little research has been done so far. The purpose of this study was to determine how Generation Z interprets and communicates with memes on the internet and social media platforms. Unlike previous research, this study analyzed the participants' perceptions, which further contributes to an understanding of this generation. This study used the Speech Act Theory to analyze how Generation Z interprets the visual portion of a meme and what Generation Z communicates through memes. This qualitative research study interviewed 16 members of Generation Z in which they created three memes from a provided template and explained their creative process. Findings indicate that Generation Z views memes as symbolic images and uses them to share concepts about themselves, recent experiences, or relatable events that occur in everyday life in a humorous way.

Keywords: Generation Z, Memes, Communication

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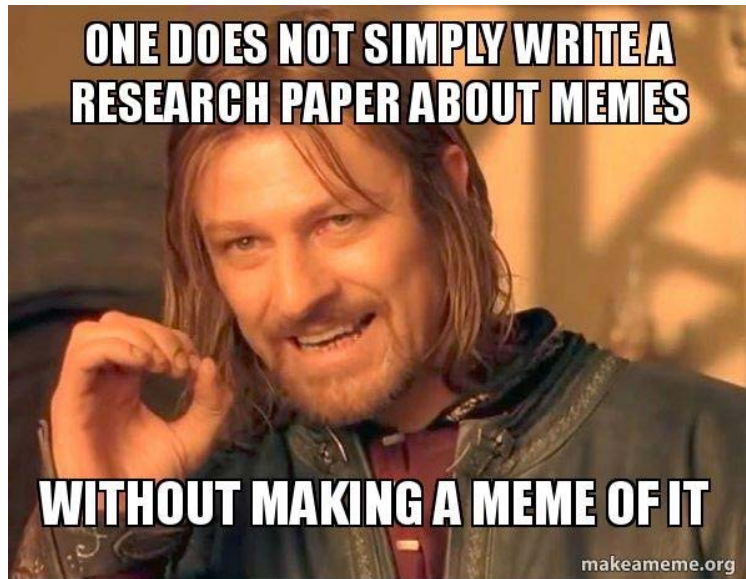


Figure 1: <https://makeameme.org/meme/one-does-not-Sacac5>

Chapter 1: Introduction

The internet has expanded its reach by over 1.5 billion people from 2014 to 2020 (Kiziltan, 2020). This huge increase in reach is mainly due to the members of Generation Z. Generation Z includes those born between 1995-2012 (McLean, 2020). This generation is known to be true digital natives. "Most of their interaction has transferred from face-to-face to digital environments which have made them excel in representing complex situations in one-image or slang expression that makes online communication more efficient" (Mendez-Reguera, 2020, para.1). As a result, members of Generation Z use digital platforms as their main form of communication. Unlike any other generation in the past, Generation Z is the first generation to grow up with technology at their fingertips. They are a generation that has been immersed in video platforms, searching the internet and social networks since they were born. Communication has shifted from a linear mode towards a more transactional process which includes sender and receiver interactions in a continuous exchange. With Generation Z being the first generation to shift their main form of communication to digital platforms, this resulted in

internet memes becoming a popular form of communication for younger generations to connect with one another over the internet using inside jokes (Kiziltan, 2020).

Understanding how Generation Z connects and communicates with internet memes will contribute to an area of research in the field of strategic communication and marketing. This research study will examine how Generation Z communicates through memes. Two main objectives of this research will be to: 1) understand how Generation Z perceives the visual image portion of a meme and 2) what Generation Z communicates through memes. This first chapter will introduce the study.

Social media can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Web 1.0 did not allow user-generated content or participation, which is the key difference compared to Web 2.0. Social media played a huge role in increasing internet reach in recent years. More than 75 percent of internet users use some aspects of social media. With the introduction of Web 2.0 foundations, social media users are now able to create identities, engage in conversations, share content, find other people, foster relationships, build reputations, and join groups. Traditional mass communication is based on a one-to-many model, however, social media opened a new form of online communication by creating a two-way interactive form of communication. Social media allows content to be communicated and quickly spread on a large scale.

With communication taking place primarily online, the role of humor has been adapted to the new platforms of social media through memes. One of the main forms of communicating humor is through Memes. The root of the word "meme" is from the Greek word "minema," meaning something that is imitated (Shifman, 2013). Today, Oxford dictionary defines a meme

as, "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations" (Kiziltan, 2020, p.1). The most followed meme page on Instagram alone has over 54 million followers, with many other top meme pages with a similar number of followers.

However, the term "meme" was first defined in 1976 by Biologist, Richard Dawkins rereferring to memes as to the viral spread of an idea which he compared to genes due to their replication, mutation, and fecundity characteristics (Denisova, 2019). With memes, the same image is used repeatedly with the written content changing. The written text changing is what sets memes apart from iconic images and from viral texts that do not experience many alterations. Memes are never fixed symbols, stories, or icons, but interactive artifacts that provide a snapshot of the culture and public dialogue which is why they can change shape, size, and style through mutation (Denisova, 2019). This results in memes changing over time and evolving to adapt to current events and relatable content that is trending.

Memes are viewed as organic ideas because they undergo a process of variation, competition, selection, and retention (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). This process is like storytelling. When a story is told from one person to another, the story changes slightly and is told from a unique perspective each time resulting in the original content being altered. In the early 1930s, Sir Frederic Bartlett proved that a story changes every time with its retelling, becoming either decorated with new details or losing components" (Denisova, 2019). Memes can be about any relatable topic such as work, school, politics, and current events. Every meme tells part of a story and changes with culture and trends as times change. "Memes are not comprehensive stories; they are elements of storytelling. They are the artifacts of remix culture"

(Denisova, 2019, p.9). As time and culture changes, memes adapt and tell the story of specific time periods and culture.

Media virality, or the capacity for media to spread rapidly through online spaces, differs from Internet memes (Wiggins, 2015). This is because viral media becomes popular over a distinct period. Internet memes, however, persist due to the dynamic interaction among members of participatory digital culture. Memes stay because of the ease of being recreated. An example of how the staying power of the image of macro memes can be found on websites such as <http://www.memegenerator.net>. These meme generator websites give users the opportunity to save a macro meme image and edit the text. The term "macro" meme refers to memes that are the most popular mass-produced and spread on the internet.

The communication process of how memes go viral starts with the sender who creates a humorous meme and distributes it through a social media platform. "The meme is then transmitted to a destination which is the computer or electronic device of the receiver, who decodes the message. The mechanism of humor creates a humorous response. Finally, the receiver can respond to a humorous meme on Facebook in numerous ways. According to a review of the literature, concepts and theories of humor and virality are used to augment the traditional model to generate a framework to assist practitioners in related fields" (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, para.8). See figure 2.

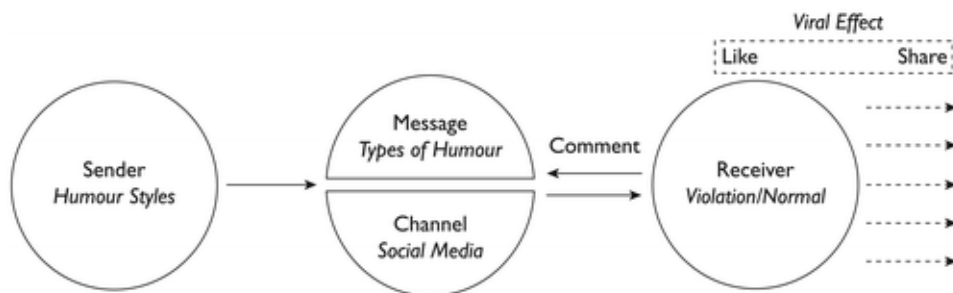


Figure 2: Framework for the Communication of Humorous Memes on Facebook

"There is no such thing as a "successful" meme. A meme is already successful because it has spread" (McLean, 2020, para.18). According to Jenkins (2013), there are a variety of technical and strategic considerations that can increase the chances of viral success. Content is more likely to be shared if it is available, portable, easily reusable, relevant, and part of a steady stream of material. These five factors contribute to a viral meme:

Availability: The material shared must be easily accessible

Portability: The material must not be restricted to only one environment or medium. The material should be easily edited and easily transferred to another medium in order to be fully utilized

Reusability: A meme must be applicable in multiple situations in order to spread. The best memes cut across genres and are reworked to fit almost any conversation.

Relevance to multiple audiences: The content appeals to more than one audience or easily reworked to do so.

Part of a steady stream of material or larger narrative: Creators should maintain a steady stream of material to ensure content continues to resonate with audiences.

In 2020, memes were not the only thing that spread rapidly on a large scale. Towards the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic became a global health crisis of unprecedented magnitude in a short time span (Jones, 2021). With the COVID-19 pandemic came a worldwide shutdown forcing billions of people to quarantine. Stay at home orders and quarantine resulted in more people at home on the internet, which means more memes. Memes of a society reflect a deep social and cultural structure revealing the hidden

ideologies rooted within them. The memes created during the coronavirus pandemic reflected the time period and how it was perceived. Memes allow users to process current events, issues, and people. They communicate relatable behaviors, experiences, and stances and present them in humorous ways. During the pandemic lockdown, connecting on the internet through memes created a sense of connection and community on online social platforms.



Figure 3: (Jones, 2021)

Me after washing my hands for 20 seconds 57 times in one day



Figure 4: (Jones, 2021)

Most memes about COVID-19 communicate innocent humor focusing on daily hygiene practices such as handwashing, wearing face masks, toilet paper shortage, quarantines, video calls, and the challenges of working from home (Jones, 2021). While most people were stuck inside their homes during this time, COVID-19 memes made for light-hearted humor bringing internet users together through humor. Memes were also used to educate health practices related to COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, memes were used to communicate light-hearted relatable content about the negative events in society to the media as well as spread education on this topic.



Figure 5: <https://time.com/5932101/bernie-memes-mittens/>

During President Joe Biden's inauguration, a photograph of Bernie Sanders looking sad, cold, and bundled up wearing a puffy jacket, homemade mittens, and a face mask went viral. This image became a macro meme at the beginning of 2021. This photo was first shared on an Instagram account run by Nicolas Heller who posted three images of Sanders edited into New York City scenes. Heller shows a series of photos of Sanders sitting on a sidewalk, in a park, and on the subway (Hadden, 2021). The popularity of the Bernie Sanders meme became viral after President

Joe Biden was sworn in as president (McCluskey, 2021) Shortly after the inauguration a Twitter user shared a transparent PNG image of Bernie Sanders that could be photoshopped into any scene.

This photo instantly became a viral trend beyond NYC and was included in other iconic photos. The photo of Sanders was Photoshopped on iconic photos of famous landmarks, movie scenes, such as Forest Gump, album covers, and much more. Although this meme includes a political figure in the image, the meme united internet users regarding the social or political division of political parties. Due to this, both sides of political parties were contributing to this meme going viral making it a unique political meme. This example of macro meme shows how memes can unite people through humor.

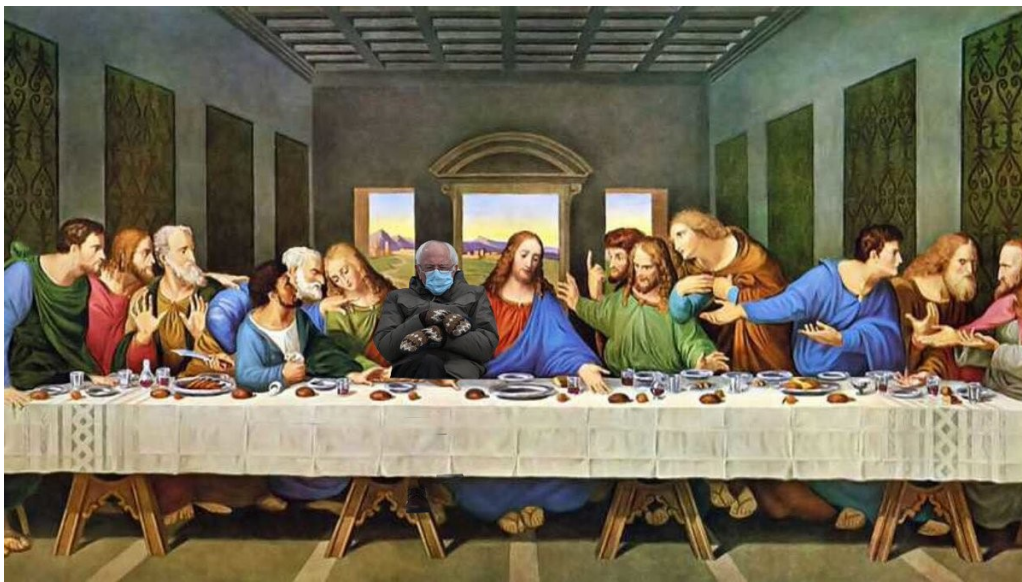


Figure 6: <https://time.com/5932101/bernie-memes-mittens/>



Figure 7: <https://time.com/5932101/bernie-memes-mittens/>

Political figures also influenced the production of internet memes. As trends in political culture change, internet memes are constantly evolving and reproduced by their consumers aligning with current political events. Politicians use internet memes to influence consumers' political views. However, this type of persuasive communication is not new. "Memes are not new – They clearly borrow from the tradition of the political cartoon, satirical communication, poster art, and advertisement, among other influences" (Denisova, 2019, p.44). The persuasive symbol originates from methods of propaganda as a type of communication aimed at manipulating the recipient's opinions and achieving 'a response that furthers the desired intent of the persuader. When politicians generate political memes, they communicate their opinion to persuade other users. "Memes serve as the artful format of sharing ideas and drawing public attention to specific issues" (p.33). When communicating a political message through a meme, the content condenses a complex idea into a visual element with condensed wording. Political memes use qualities of humor such as sarcasm, exaggeration, and altering mainstream media to aid in changing the minds of consumers. Memes with this type of intention fit under the genre of

propaganda because they present a reduced depiction of reality. Political memes can be extremely biased through altering reality with humor.

The circulation of political memes serves as symbolic ideological negotiation; meaning it may not sustain a coherent public debate online but can come before the formation of communities or substantial discussions (Denisova, 2019). With social media offering an interactive platform of two-way communication behind a screen, opinions that would normally stay out of the public are now brought into the light. Social media platforms allow for egalitarian communication, meaning that all users are equal. All users want to be unique and heard and this is made possible with social media. This introduced the concept of users defining themselves by sharing their opinions. Politics greatly influences the creation of internet memes which influences this research study.

The second factor that influences this research is time. The visual image of a meme is in a constant cycle of being recreated with the verbal message changing. This is due to memes relying on culture of the local society and global cultural references (Denisova, 2019). "This twofold nature proves that, despite being a global phenomenon of communication, memes nonetheless bear a special local value that depends on regional culture and tradition (p.44). Memes reflect jokes and humor that reflect the social trends society experiences placing a timestamp on them.

In addition to social trends, niche memes draw groups of people together creating an online community. "For example, the subreddit r/Historymemes, a larger community, has 1.9 million subscribers, and has split off into subdivisions with content focusing on time periods such as the Cold War, and the Roman Empire, or even history memes with anime characters" (Kiziltan, 2020, para.3). These memes often only require a basic understanding of history, they

are still niche enough to attract a specific crowd of people. The development of communities centered around niche meme topics has become an influential way to attract more users to a specific community group. Social trends and niche online communities influence this study in the way memes are created and shared.

Another factor that influences this research is the consumers' sense of humor. Generation Z is known to be brutal when it comes to comedy and will roast anything and everyone (McLean, 2020). An example of this is the macro meme of Harambe. Back in 2016 at the Cincinnati Zoo, a child climbed into the gorilla enclosure (Storlie, 2021). Harambe, a 17-year-old silverback gorilla, was killed in order to protect the child. This event made it on national news and quickly became viral on the internet as consumers turned Harambe into a pop culture icon, specifically through memes. Internet culture quickly took this event from a tragedy to the perfect meme on the internet.



Figure 8: (Storlie, 2021)

A consumer's sense of humor differs from person to person which means that not all members of Generation Z understand memes equally. A sense of humor is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration in this study. While one person may find a tragic event such as

Harambe's death easy to make light of through internet memes, others may view it as a tragedy that should not be taken lightly. Seventy-five percent of 13–36-year old's share memes (McLean, 2020). However, it is unfair to assume all members of this age group understand the same types of humor. Due to this factor, a consumer's sense of humor influences the way memes are perceived, therefore influencing this research study.

The main purpose of this study is to observe how Generation Z perceives the visual aspects of a meme and how they communicate a verbal message through the visual image. This research will be observed by presenting three trending macro meme images to a select group of Generation Z members. The participants of this study will write verbal messages for the memes. This research will take the completed memes and observe the type of message that is being communicated through the meme. Each meme will be analyzed separately and the results will be compared.

"A format of the meme suggests the frame of perception, yet it is the audience who needs to finish the sentence to complete a joke and interpret its meaning" (Denisova, 2019, p.11). A meme is not complete without its audience; therefore, this research is valuable in that it will observe how Generation Z interprets and communicates with memes. This research will contribute to understanding the minds of Generation Z and how they contribute to the field of communication by analyzing memes as a speech act.

"Speech Act Theory (SAT) is a well-known theory in the field of the philosophy of language that involves the study of the performative function of language and communication" (Hanna & Richards, 2019, para. 2). The speech act theory aims to understand how an utterance can be used to achieve action. This theory proposes that any form of expression, verbal or textual, represents acts to be performed, and there are some actions that need to be performed

from the receiver. The main use of the speech act theory in communication is during the communication process. People do not just utter propositions to be answered with acceptance or rejection but, in every exchanged sentence where communication takes place includes the intention for the speaker to accomplish something. Austin (2020) described three characteristics of statements, or acts, that begin with the building blocks of words and end with the effects those words have on an audience.

- 1.1. *Locutionary acts:*** the physical act of uttering the sentence.
- 1.2. *Illocutionary acts:*** the action of conveying the speaker's intention, such as informing, ordering, warning, and undertaking.
- 1.3. *Perlocutionary acts:*** what we achieve by saying something, such as persuading, convincing, requesting. The perlocutionary effect of an utterance is what is achieved by the locution. The perlocutionary effect could be informing of a possible next step, informing of accomplishing a task, persuading someone of my point of view, etc.

This thesis will involve a qualitative study on how Generation Z perceives the visual image of the meme and how they use it to communicate a verbal message. Therefore, the goal of this study is to observe patterns of Generation Z's preferred ways to communicate through popular macro memes. Analyzing the results through a speech act provides a deeper understanding of how Generation Z communicates. The results will provide a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of how Generation Z communicates through memes.

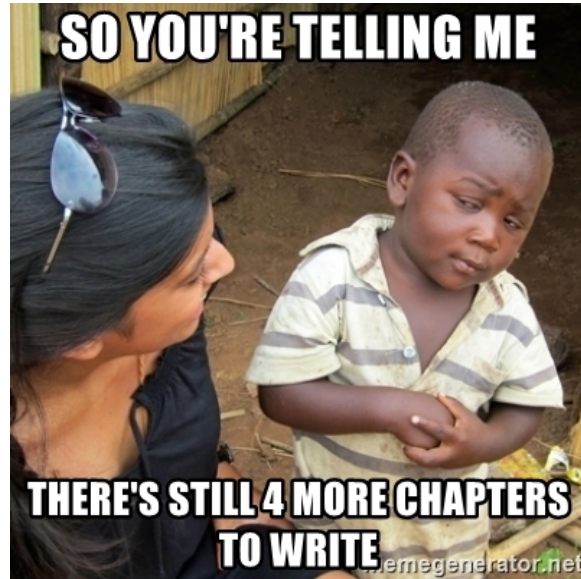


Figure 9: www.memegenerator.net

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, the influence of internet memes will be defined in relation to Generation Z's communication style. This chapter will define Generation Z and the importance of studying their communication habits and style. This will include their attitudes, values, and behaviors that define communication style and structure. It will also define a summary describing the types of memes and their influence on social media; therefore, a brief overview of the social media platforms will be explained.

It will also review previous research and how it contributes to this research topic. The results of past research will be compared and taken into consideration in this research study. Understanding the impact of memes as a form of communication within Generation Z will cover an area of research in the field of communication, social media, and humor. This literature review will identify the gaps in similar research and suggest the next steps to contribute to research in this area of research.

Defining Generation Z

Each generation is shaped by different situations and events. Generation Z includes those born between 1995-2021 (McLean, 2020). "As soon as they were old enough to click, swipe, or tap, those in Generation Z have had news at their fingertips about every global and local crisis, giving this generation much to worry about even at a young age" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.258). Generation Z would never know the world without the internet.

The internet also shaped their educational experiences. Their educational environments and learning preferences shaped their experiences and expectations. "With so many search engines, websites, video platforms, and social media sites available, there are nearly infinite places where Generation Z students can get information. Because of this, for them, research is

less about acquiring new knowledge and more about accessing a quick answer to complete an assignment" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.203). Generation Z uses video-based learning most of the time. About 90 percent of Generation Z college students use YouTube as a platform to learn new knowledge.

The rapid changes in technological advancements have also impacted career options. As times change new types of jobs are constantly emerging. Generation Z is just now entering the workplace. 75% indicated that they were motivated by the opportunity for advancement (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Generation Z wants jobs that give them the opportunity to develop professionally. "Generation Z are likely to blend their dreams and aspirations with emerging occupational fields to blaze the trail for what will be the future of the world of work" (p.224). They find it important to be passionate about their career and enjoy their job.

Mental Health

Generation Z lives in a time where there is a never-ending news cycle. They have become hyper-aware of the world's problems which results in any worry about larger societal problems. They have been exposed to vicarious trauma, which has contributed to mental and emotional health issues. Generation Z is constantly exposed to global and local crises, making them a worried generation that wants to make a difference. "In 2017, marketing and research firm, Ipsos, conducted a study of more than 29,000 people in 38 different countries to better understand their estimations of problems facing their countries" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.145). The results show that individuals overestimate problems and exaggerate the danger in situations.

when both you and your friend are
severely depressed but find
happiness in the mutual feelings of
despair



Figure 10: <https://medium.com/on-advertising/two-type-of-tears-unpacking-the-rise-of-mental-health-memes-f7aafelc68da>

Anxiety is one of the most common mental and emotional health issues faced by Generation Z.

In 2015, 12 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls under the age of 17 had received mental health services for anxiety disorders. And more than one in five college students surveyed by the American College Health Association had been diagnosed or treated for anxiety and increase from around 4 percent in 2000 (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.149).

Additionally, depression is also another mental and emotional health issue this generation experiences.

In 2015, 12.5 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 17, which is around 3 million youth, had at least one "major depressive episode" in the last year. Nearly half of all college student clients are concerned with depression, 53 and, in 2017, nearly 17 percent were diagnosed, 54 up from 9 percent in 2000 (p.149).

Anxiety and depression contribute as an influencing factor shaping this generation.

Eighteen percent of Generation Z college seniors surveyed rated their emotional health as below average or lower (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). The main concern for this generation is the fear of failure or not being successful. The second top rated concern was money. "These young people have the weight of the world on them financially, knowing they need to pay for school and living expenses, get a job, and be able to afford to take care of themselves and their loved ones in the future" (p.146). Additionally, stress also emerges from their passion to change the world. Many are also trying to manage the stress of carrying the world's problems while balancing their personal and digital lives. They care about social issues, especially individuals that believe they have a current and future impact on society. This adds to another layer of stress with the concern of world issues. Generation Z has a realistic outlook on life and tends to have a pessimistic view of the future.



Figure 11: <https://www.india.com/news/21-grumpy-cat-memes-to-instantly-make-you-grumpy-however-happy-you-are-746432/>

With Generation Z exposed to electronics at a young age, the early exposure may contribute additional factors that affect their mental health. "A study by Common Sense Media

found that half of teens feel they are addicted to their cell phones and nearly three-quarters feel they need to respond immediately to texts, messages, and notifications" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.150). Mobile devices have created a constant connection and dependence. This resulted in users experiencing a sense of urgency to connect and respond immediately. This is defined as FOMO or the "Fear of Missing Out" and time away from mobile devices causes anxiety and the feeling of missing out on something online.

Generation Z also fears failure due to the comparison on social media. "In addition, they may struggle with the paradox of maintaining an external image online that may exaggerate success, happiness, and great fortune while coping behind the scenes with the realities of life" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.151). The judgement they may face through the screen might also induce anxiety. This then leads to Generation Z's increased exposure to screen time and less in-person social interaction. Less interpersonal interaction may lead to depression and those who are depressed might use their devices more often to avoid loneliness or to seek help and support. "Teenagers who seek support through social media and feel they get that support, their depressed mood decreased; for those who didn't feel they got support after reaching out, their depressed mood increased" (p.152).

Political Views

"With the political ideologies of Generation Z not fitting squarely into a partisan category, the time may be ripe for a shake-up in U.S. politics. While we don't know if they will reshape existing political parties or create new ones of their own, we do know that feeling disregarded and disengaged may drive this generation to either mobilize at the voting booth or simply just stay home" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.271). Research shows that most members of

Generation Z identify as liberal or moderate on social issues and moderate or conservative on financial issues.



Figure 12: <http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3r6wzg>

In fact, this generation has a low voter registration turnout. Research shows that this generation does not view political leaders as role models and most think politicians are greedy and corrupt, feel fatigued and disgusted by political partisanship. Some find that no candidate is worthy of their vote. Less than 17 percent of Generation Z believe politicians have influenced them at all (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Many members of Generation Z believe the general political system is not responsive to the concerns of young voters. These concerns are the high cost of higher education, racism, and an economy that appears to be controlled by and benefits wealthy elites. With Generation Z feeling as though their concerns are left out of the political narrative, many feel powerless and believe their opinions carry little weight with lawmakers. Due to this generation feeling disregarded and disengaged may be the reason that drives them to either mobilize at the voting booth or avoid voting altogether.

Social media has opened a new platform for individuals to share their opinion.

Generation Z is not afraid to share their opinion. "A study of first-year Generation Z college students found that nearly 44 percent reported frequently or occasionally having publicly shared their opinion about a cause in some digitally or written format by the time they had come to college" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.227). Social media has been a place for Generation Z to openly express their concerns about such issues.

Devices

Generation Z grew up in front of multiple screens at once. Most members of Generation Z own a smartphone and it is their top preferred device over laptop computers, tablets, and gaming consoles" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). They are heavy users of mobile tech devices with 80 percent as computer users. Another popular device used among Generation Z are tablets. They use tablets for note taking, streaming videos, listening to music, reading, or gaming. With internet connection being a primary way of connecting, online streaming has become Generation Z's primary way of watching T.V. Additionally, 18 – 34-year old's make up the largest share of wearable technology users. The popularity of wearable technology such as smart watches and fitness trackers have become a normalized device for this generation. Wearable technology exposes users to the digital world at all times. Wearable smart devices allow users to combine the physical and online world together. This allows them to track health and physical activity while also receiving notifications from their phone on their watches.



Figure 13: <https://imgflip.com/i/2p278j>

Generation Z has navigated the world with technology with online banking, shopping, health, GPS navigation, entertainment, and news.

A study by Dealspotr found that more than 46 percent of those in Generation Z prefer payment apps over using a credit card when buying online. But this generation does not use just any payment app. Nearly 22 percent of those in Generation Z prefer PayPal, and 12 percent prefer Apple Pay (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.43).

Generation Z also prefers to shop online from clothing to online grocery shopping and food delivery apps. 62% of smartphone users have used their mobile devices to get health information and telemedicine has been utilized by 70% of healthcare providers. Additionally, smartphones are a popular tool for navigating the roads. Two thirds of smartphone users use their phone as a GPA while driving. Services through mobile devices have been of great appeal to this generation. "More than two-thirds of smartphone users utilize a GPS while driving. While traditional navigation apps like Google Maps and Apple Maps offer turn-by-turn directions, the

app, Waze, uses crowd-sourcing and other integrated social features to provide navigation" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.44).

In addition to navigating the world, Generation Z also uses mobile technology for information and entertainment. The devices provide many platforms that allow easy access to find any information online and stay up to date on current events. Over two-thirds of smartphone users utilize their phones to follow and stay informed of trending news, while more than half get push notification news alerts sent directly to their phones (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). YouTube is a popular learning platform among Generation Z where they learn by watching "how-to" videos. Two of three members of Generation Z use YouTube to learn and 50 percent of those in Generation Z state they could not live without YouTube.



Figure 14: <https://hotinsocialmedia.com/social-media-memes/>

Social Media Platforms

Generation Z was born and raised under a social media era. Web 2.0 introduced interactive platforms; which created a social connection. Generation Z has never known a world without technology. Over 50 percent of Generation Z teens admit to using social media for three

or more hours a day (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). According to Pew Research, most 18- to 29-year-olds use Instagram or Snapchat with approximately half using TikTok (Auxier & Anderson). "The younger end of Generation Z are very likely to be Instagram with those on the younger end of this cohort – ages 18 to 24 – being especially likely to report using Instagram (76%), Snapchat (75%) or TikTok (55%)" (para.12). Instagram users in this age group admit to visiting Instagram every day, with fifty-three percent admitting to visiting several times per day.

Table 1.0 Generation Z and social media platforms

Social Media Platforms	How Generation Z Uses It	Prevalence of Use Among Generation Z	What Generation Z Has to Say About it
Instagram	Share about themselves	73 percent of teens and young adults (13–24-year-olds) use Instagram	<i>"Instagram is the method I used the most because I like to communicate through pictures."</i>
Facebook	Follow others' lives, especially family	46.2 million users between the ages of 13 and 24.	<i>"More of my friends and family are on Facebook so I can talk to them much more than another social media outlet."</i>

Snapchat	Connect with friends	67 percent of those in Generation Z use Snapchat and 1 in 3 use it to stay connected to friends.	<i>"It's fast and more fun than texting"</i>
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Snapchat

Snapchat is a mobile messaging app developed in 2011 that allows users to send photos and videos that disappear shortly after being viewed (Strong, 2021). By 2012 Snapchat's popularity started to catch on and is now a multi-billion-dollar business partnership. It quickly became with high school students using it to pass digital notes in class that disappeared which eliminated the risk of teachers seeing them. As time went on, Snapchat added different features which included the ability to add drawings, text, and captions to photos. They also added one of the most popular features called Lenses which was released in 2015.

Lenses allow users to alter their selfie with visual and animated features and in May 2017, the company announced that it was adding an "infinity" option to the timer users set for their photos. The update included a similar option for videos, giving users the option to view videos on loop (para.6).

Snapchat allows users to communicate quickly while facial expressions in the messages. "With more than 178 million daily users, Snapchat has become the most used and preferred social media platform among members of Generation Z in keeping in touch with friends" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.46).

Instagram

Instagram is known as an American photo and video sharing social networking service. Over 90 million posts are shared on Instagram every day (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Instagram was originally launched on Apple's operating system in 2010 and is now owned by Facebook. It has more than a billion users and is an active social media platform that is the hub of eye-catching visuals (Koetsier, 2020). Instagram content can be in the form of a photo with a caption, stories, and video formats such as IGTV and Reels.

Instagram is also another popular social media app used by Generation Z. "Those in Generation Z prefer to use Instagram to share about themselves as the platform allows users to carefully tailor their profile and audience to determine who sees their content (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). However, some members of Generation Z have separate accounts that align with a different identity. "Instagram accounts depend on the audience – their Rinsta and their Finsta. Rinsta refers to a "real Instagram" account, which typically has more followers and features content that is carefully crafted. The Finsta account is a much more private account, shared with a small group of friends, where users post silly content, memes, and screenshots" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.47). This trend allows users to have multiple identities through this social media platform.



Figure 15: <https://hotinsocialmedia.com/social-media-memes/>

Facebook

Facebook is known as the largest social platform with 2.4 billion active users each month (Koetsier, 2020). Facebook content can include anything from photos, videos, live streams, status updates. Although Generation Z prefers to use Snapchat and Instagram, many still use Facebook to keep in touch with others. Eighty seven percent use Facebook to keep up with others, but only 53 percent use it to share information about themselves (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Over time, members of all generations joined the Facebook community making it no longer the "adult-free" social media platform. "Seventy percent of Generation Z Facebook users are friends with their parents, and more than 90 percent are friends with extended family members" (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p.47). Generation Z's main presence on Facebook is to stay connected with their parents and older family members.

Generation Z and Memes

A research study analyzing Generation Z and memes states that Generation Z uses memes to express their indirect opinions towards various issues with social media platforms

becoming an avenue of expression (Pontillas, 2020). This study focuses on how indirectness is a way of conveying a message through hints, insinuations, questions, gestures, or circumlocutions. It has become a way to express opinions in an indirect way. This research study discusses the Theory of Politeness which states that there are different perceptions in every interaction (Pontillas, 2020). A meme gets recreated each time a new person edits the text. The meme is interpreted differently depending on an individual's perspective. "During an interaction, one's face can be vulnerable or not depending upon how they express ideas and intentions" (Pontillas, 2020, para.4). Another theory used in this research study is the Theory of Paul Grice. This theory is about conversation implicature and how it plays a vital role in our interactions. It is hard to understand others without their straightforward intentions, which results in others interpreting by universal conventions in human interaction called cooperative principles. This helps provide a better understanding of others when they express themselves in a sarcastic or offensive manner.

This example of research served as an avenue to understand the hidden messages that are underlying in the memes Generation Z made or utilized to express themselves. It highlighted the memes as a form of expression through photo and texts and provided a perspective of how Generation Z sees society (Pontillas, 2020). The researcher analyzed the data through content analysis method using manifest content and latent content. This method helped the researcher analyze and gather data. The results of this study found that Generation Z internet users are aware of the current issues in society, memes can be used by anyone to express their insights in an indirect way, and through memes Generation Z internet users affect the perspectives of others regarding certain issues. Regarding this thesis, this research contributes to the understanding of Generation Z and memes. However, it lacks contextual information addressing how members of Generation Z perceive the image portion of the meme.



Figure 16: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/what-does-it-all-meme>

Memes as a Genre

There has not been much research done on the theoretical framework of literature on internet memes. When individuals engage in communication, an array of tools, or media, are available from which to choose to encode a message, transmit it, and possibly wait for a response.

Genres are social institutions which are produced, reproduced, and/or transformed when individuals communicate. From a structuration perspective, we see memes as messages which "exist within social structures made up of micro-level discourses" There are three modes of enacting social institutions that can be used to understand the production and reproduction of genres – maintenance, elaboration, and modification (Ægidius, 2017).

The genre of memes is described in three categories of memetic transformation which include – spreadable media, emergent meme, and meme. Memes are altered and repeated messages that are rapidly spread by members of digital culture.

Theoretical Orientation

Language is used to communicate and can be either verbal or non-verbal. In this case memes are a form of nonverbal communication. The two most important factors in communicating a message are intention and context (Grundlingh, 2018). The intention of a speaker can be described as what the speaker wants the hearer to recognize in communication.

"The speaker intends the hearer to recognize the point of his utterance not just through (1) content and (2) context but also because (3) the point is intended to be recognized" (para.27).

"The illocutionary act refers to performing one of the functions of language, that is, the act of saying something" (p.21). An illocutionary act is carried out with the intention that the receiver will correctly identify the act being performed. For this recognition to be successful, the speaker provides a basis for the hearer to conclude what the intention of the act is.

Schiffirin (2005) makes the following observation regarding context; "Before being able to ascribe a particular meaning (specifically that intended by the speaker) to any utterance, a hearer must have a clear idea of the context in which such an utterance occurs" (p.5). The first of the three aspects of context are the roles of conversational participants which include the speaker, the addressee, the agent, and the hearer. The second aspect of context is assumed to be common ground which is used to describe background information in communication and is defined as background facts, assumptions, and beliefs. The third aspect of context is the verbal aspect of making an utterance.

For a meme to be a successful illocutionary act, the context of the meme, the text and the image must be interpreted within the context of the larger communication. Even if memes are not used as comments on previously existing statements, they still must be interpreted in a larger context to make sense. For example, when interpreting the meaning of a meme, it is important

that the hearer is aware of the background information that precedes the communication. In most cases, the image in the meme provides the nonverbal aspect of the context or background information needed to interpret the meme correctly.

Speech Act Theory as an Evaluation Tool

"Speech Act Theory has been used to interpret communication" (Richards, 2019, para. 17). The Speech Act Theory has been used in the past to analyze communication patterns in multiple types of settings. This theory was previously used to evaluate data such as examining utilizing speech acts in computer mediated communication. This research study used a qualitative analysis to investigate the various types of speech acts that are manifested in the status message of the *Whatsapp* mobile application. Another example of how the speech act theory was used to interpret data in computer mediated communication was to analyze emails in business-to-business environments to detect deception in business messages in order to help managers and decision makers determine whether their business partners were being deceptive. This study was assessed in three levels including the ability of word use, message development, and intertextual exchange cues. A third example states that this theory was used as a tool to support the supervised classification of twitter messages.

Memes as a Speech Act

Although memes are different from traditional written communication, memes still make use of a creator and a receiver. In most forms, memes are used as jokes but often communicate important information and opinions. According to Austin (2020), the possible functions of memes correspond to most of the communicative illocutionary acts since these functions are also illocutionary acts. The four main illocutionary acts can be classified as:

1. *Constatives*: express the speaker's belief and intention or desire that the hearer has or for a like belief
2. *Directives*: express the speaker's attitude towards some prospective action by the hearer and their intention that their utterance, or attitude expresses
3. *Commissive*: express the speaker's intention and belief that their utterance obligates them to do something
4. *Acknowledgements*: express feelings regarding the hearer or, in cases where the utterance is clearly perfunctory or formal, the speaker's intention that their utterances satisfy a social expectation to express certain feelings and their belief that it does.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an explanation of the steps that were used to collect data. The research used a qualitative content analysis to analyze the data collected from interviews. The question this research aimed to explore is: How does Generation Z communicate and connect with memes? Two main objectives of this research will be to: 1) understand how Generation Z perceives the visual image portion of a meme and 2) what Generation Z communicates through memes. The chapter will introduce the type of research, the steps used in data collection, and the data analysis process. Additionally, tools and materials used in the research are explained and a rationale for choosing this method.

Qualitative research was chosen for this research study because of its exploratory nature and because it deals with feelings, attitudes, opinions, and thoughts of human beings. The purpose of this study is to understand Generation Z through memes. Approaching this research study from a qualitative approach developed insight on the participants' behavior. This process further explored how the participants think and feel.

The goal of this qualitative research was to understand how Generation Z connects and communicates with internet memes. This research was conducted through interviews. The interview process started by presenting three trending macro meme images to Generation Z members. The participants of this study created verbal messages for three macro memes. Participants were asked to explain their thought process behind each meme. This data was collected and observed to determine the type of message that was communicated through the meme. The results will be compared and analyzed.



Figure 17: www.memegenerator.net

Sample Population

Generation Z is defined as those born between 1995-2012. This research study used convenience sampling. This study took place in Lynchburg, Virginia. Participants located in the central Virginia area were interviewed in person. Participants located outside the central Virginia area were interviewed through video call interviews. Participants were required to be 18 years or older to be considered for the study. Informed consent was documented with a written, signed and dated consent form. All participants are anonymous, and all names were changed when referencing participants in the study. There are no known risks associated with this study.

Data Collection

In order to gain a better understanding of how Generation Z communicates messages through memes, structured interviews were conducted on this generation. This study aimed to include diverse participants and collected the participants' age, gender, race, education level, and income level. The interviews were held in person or online through video call. The data collection interviewed new participants until the results showed no new patterns. The data

collection ended when the data was saturated. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to explain the interview process and have participants complete the verbal messages for three macro memes. The first step in collecting data was to select the three macro memes that were used to survey the participants.

These meme templates were chosen for the research study due to their popularity and age. These memes have been around the internet and social media for many years. With Generation Z having a strong background knowledge of memes, the researcher wanted to choose templates that were easily recognizable and understood. The following three macro meme images were given to the participant with the title of the meme. The description of the image was not included. Both Figure 18 and Figure 19 were selected for the interviews because both included the concept of decision making. However, Figure 18 is centered around the idea of making impulsive decisions while Figure 19 is centered around the idea of distractions. The researcher used these two images with slight differences to see if participants would pick up on the differences. Figure 20 was chosen due to its popularity on the internet.



EXIT 12: Figure 18: <https://www.pocket-lint.com/apps/news/140427-best-stupidest-and-most-famous-internet-memes-around>

This image shows a car aggressively exiting at high speed. The photo communicates its message by adding two captions to the road sign; one by the straight arrow and one by the turning arrow. The meme shows the author's preference between two options.



DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND: Figure 19: <https://www.pocket-lint.com/apps/news/140427-best-stupidest-and-most-famous-internet-memes-around>

This image was originally snapped by photographer Antonio Guillem who uploaded it to iStock in 2015. It was not until two years later that the image became a popular meme. Captions used to label each character in the image; the woman in red, the man, and the woman in blue. Previously existing memes using this template add captions to the image to represent real-life things people are distracted by.



DISASTER GIRL: Figure 20: <https://www.pocket-lint.com/apps/news/140427-best-stupidest-and-most-famous-internet-memes-around>

This photo of a young girl with a devilish smile in front of a burning house appeared on the internet in 2014. Four years later it was picked up by BuzzFeed and got the attention of the internet with posts and reposts across the internet. Captions are used on the top and bottom of this image. Previously existing memes using this template communicate satisfaction with destruction.

The interview process started with participants signing a consent form allowing permission to be part of the research study. Then questions collecting the participants' age, race, gender, education level, and income were asked. Participants were given digital copies of the three memes listed above. Blank spaces on the image were provided so the participant knew where to place the text. Participants were asked to complete the meme by writing the text portion of the meme. Answers were recorded by collecting the completed memes. If the participant was interviewed through a video call, a digital version of the image was provided. Once the participants completed the written portion of the meme, they answered three questions (see

Appendix A) for each meme which explains their creative process. Then the content was collected for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data was processed by thematic coding. The themes found in the memes and questionnaire forms were coded until the data reached saturation. Once data saturation was achieved, the themes were categorized, analyzed, and compared to the other participants. Analyzing the data from this perspective provided an interpretation from a linguistic perspective as a speech act. The completed memes were analyzed as a form of speech communication. To understand how Generation Z interprets an image and communicates a message, this study classified the results through this method of communication. Data collection was predicted to be collected during the year 2022.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

This chapter presents and discusses the data analysis and results of this study. The chapter will start with an overview explaining the data collection process and present a profile of the participants included in this research study (*Table 2*). The research was conducted with 16 members of Generation Z; seven males and nine females. Data saturation was achieved at 15 interviews, and one additional interview was added to ensure data saturation. Thirteen interviews were conducted in person and three were conducted virtually. In person interviews were held in Lynchburg, Virginia and virtual results were held in various locations. Each participant was instructed to fill in the blanks on the image and answer all questions. Participants were not permitted to use outside resources to ensure all answers were from original ideas.

Table 2.0: Participant Demographics

Participant #	Age	Gender	Race	Education	Income
1	21	M	Hispanic Latino or Spanish Origin	Bachelor's Degree	\$0-\$24,999
2	22	F	White, Asian	Bachelor's Degree	\$25,000-\$49,999
3	25	F	White	Bachelor's Degree	\$25,000-\$49,999
4	24	M	Hispanic Latino or Spanish Origin	Some College	\$25,000-\$49,999
5	24	M	White	Bachelor's Degree	\$0-\$24,999
6	22	F	White	Some College	\$0-\$24,999

7	24	F	Hispanic Latino or Spanish Origin	Graduate Degree	\$50,000- \$74,999
8	24	F	Asian	Graduate Degree	\$75,000- \$99,999
9	24	M	White	Bachelor's Degree	\$0-\$24,999
10	27	M	White	Graduate Degree	\$25,000- \$49,999
11	19	F	White	Some College	\$50,000- \$74,999
12	20	F	White	Some College	\$50,000- \$74,999
13	20	M	White	Some College	\$75,000- \$99,999
14	21	F	White	Some College	\$0-\$24,999
15	23	F	Hispanic Latino or Spanish Origin, other	Bachelor's Degree	\$25,000- \$49,999
16	25	M	Black	Bachelor's Degree	\$25,000- \$49,999

After the interviews were conducted, the questionnaire form was collected and thematically coded. This chapter is divided into two parts to address the research question. The first part explains how each meme was interpreted and the second part will explain results showing what participants chose to communicate with the images. Twenty-three themes were

identified within this collection of data and grouped into four categories. The findings will be fully presented in the following paragraphs.

Meme Interpretation

Throughout the research results, it became a common answer across many participants to interpret the meme template images based past examples of the meme being used. Many mentioned they have seen these meme templates on social media in the past and then tried to apply the same concept personalized to them. Previous use of these images influenced the way the participants perceived the image.

The Exit 12 image was commonly described as an impulsive decision. Participants used words such as "chaos", "abrupt", "disastrous" when describing the image. Participant 5 explained that it relates to today's society in how people are quick to make choices for a short amount of serotonin for temporary satisfaction. Others described this image as rushing into something they should not be doing. Poor decision making was a common interpretation of Exit 12 as many interpreted it as representing a frantic choice and making disastrous poor decisions. It was also described as an impulse decision resulting in chaos.

The Distracted Boyfriend image was also perceived as a decision-making concept. While Exit 12's overall interpretation was impulsiveness, Distracted Boyfriend's main interpretation was the concept of being distracted. Participant 8 states, "The last image was focused on poor frantic choices whereas this one is focused on choosing a decision because the secondary one is more appealing." Distracted Boyfriend was described with words such as "temptation", "unfocused", and "lack of self-discipline." Temptation was a common interpretation with participants perceiving the image as an internal contemplation between something they want and reality. The contemplation between "wants" and "needs" was also a common interpretation. For

example, Participant 15 perceived this image as being committed to a realistic "need" and being tempted by an unnecessary "want." Many come to the realization that their expensive desires are unrealistic due to their finances.

The Disaster Girl image was frequently described as sabotage. The two key elements that shaped the perception of this image are the little girl and her facial expression. Many participants interpreted the little girl as a symbolism of innocence. The smirk on the little girl's face influenced the participants' interpretation of symbolizing a lack of feeling guilty. Participant 2 describes the meme as "showing how we get ourselves into things and sort of stand by and watch the drama we create unfold." Words such as "stress", "destruction", and "damage" were used to describe the interpretation of the burning building. Others interpret the image as something small and innocuous that is harmful and causes massive damage. Disaster girl was also interpreted as being happy when something annoying is gone or not feeling guilty when things are falling apart. Overall, the participants interpreted it as satisfaction during sabotage.

Point of View

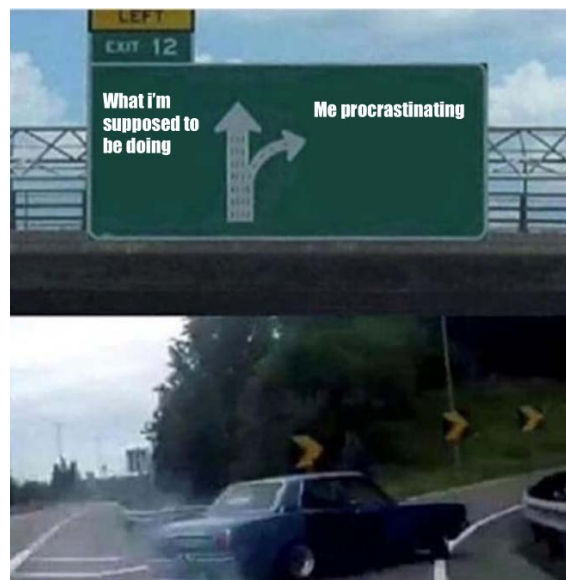


Figure 21

This section will discuss the point of view the participants used in their memes. Most memes included in this research were told from a first-person perspective. A common theme that emerged from the data was relatability. Participants communicated content that was relatable to their personal lives and relatable to others who share a similar lifestyle. The most used theme found in the data was self-reference. All participants interviewed had at least one self-reference example, while many referred to themselves multiple times throughout the interview and questionnaire. Relatability plays a huge role in how Generation Z uses memes. Most participants link the meme to themselves when communicating a message through a meme. Figure 21 is an example of relatability being used to add humor. Participant 15 stated, "I was trying to make it something I related to, because when I can relate to something it is funnier." This participant referenced themselves to make fun of their procrastination problem. Another wrote, "I tried to think of something I do that others may be able to relate to." This participant used the image to communicate a personal experience that is relatable to others.

Participants use relatability to not only communicate a reference about themselves but a statement to others who would understand humor through a shared commonality. One participant wrote "The purpose of this meme is not only to make someone smile, but also feel included and special because of the knowledge that they have over the average person." The inclusivity of this meme is used to communicate humor to a niche group of individuals. Various references of inclusion and statements exclusively understood by specific people were used throughout the research findings. Members of Generation Z use inclusion references in memes to communicate an inside joke to others who can relate.

As Generation Z refers to themselves in most examples, they also include others and communicate from the third point of view perspective. They tend to mention personal

relationships they interact with daily. This includes family, friends, significant others, coworkers, and other acquaintances. Relationship references were a frequent trend found in the data and became an important factor to consider when interpreting the results. There were many examples that were based on past conversations or events that the creator had with another person. These examples were used to communicate a story that included another individual or group of people.



Figure 22



Figure 23

The images above show an example of Distracted Boyfriend used in reference to a relationship. For Figure 22 participant 6 wrote "My Fiancé is constantly flirting with his best friend and jokingly threatening to leave me for him. It is a running joke in our relationship, and I think it is quite funny, so it has some personal meaning." This example shows how the participant's boyfriend is distracted by his best friend and tempted to be with his best friend. This is communicating humor through an inside joke. Additionally, others also included content that makes fun of friends and other personal relationships. Figure 23 shows how another participant uses this meme template to make fun of her fiancé. Participant 3 stated, "This meme allows me to poke fun at my partner who is in fact ridiculous." This meme shows how her fiancé intended to have a normal first date but got distracted and ditched the idea of a normal date. This distraction resulted in their first date playing Pokémon Go in his car.

Time

Participants also mentioned specific time frames to communicate through memes. These references include the past, present, or future. These past and future references do not stray too far from the present. The results found participants sharing past stories that recently happened, current situations, and events that are about to happen soon. Figure 24 shows how Disaster girl was used to refer to a recent past conversation.



Figure 24

Participant 10 stated that the creation of this meme was influenced by a conversation with his boss the other day. Participant 10 states, "The image reminded me of walking into my office after a day off and finding out that things had been chaotic while I was gone." The burning building represents the mess that happened at work while he was gone. The little girl and her facial expressions represent that the participant is okay with knowing that he did not have to deal with the mess and picked a good day to call off.

Participant 4 used Distracted Boyfriend to communicate a present situation being experienced. The meme was influenced by his dinner choice that night and eating at the restaurant, Slim Chicken's, for the first time.

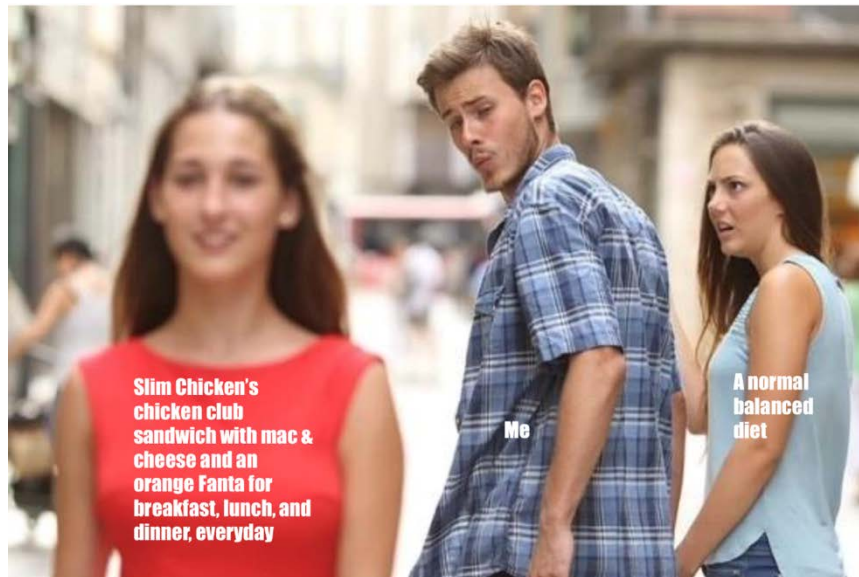


Figure 25

The participant explains,

The lady in blue represents a normal balanced diet while the man in the middle represents me (or anyone who relates to this meme). The woman in red represents the ridiculous desire to eat one thing, three meals a day, every day. This meme plays a niche role in entertaining anyone who has eaten at Slim Chicken's and enjoys eating there.

This meme was used to paint a picture of the present situation this participant was experiencing. Due to his first visit to Slim Chicken's being a positive experience he communicates his new love for their food through this meme. He enjoyed his dinner so much that he is tempted to ditch a normal balanced diet and eat the same meal all the time.

Figurative Language

Another important theme that emerged from the results was figurative language.

Figurative language is a form of expressing oneself without using a word's literal or realistic meaning, typically used to add creativity to written or spoken language or explain a complicated idea (Ellis, 2022). There are various types of figurative language used throughout the interviews

and questionnaire results. The results show that figurative language was used to communicate and add humor. Symbolism was one of the most common forms of figurative language found in the data. Most participants labeled each element in the images to symbolize a specific concept. Each element represented a unique quality in the participant's message. Representation plays a huge role in memes. The image is labeled with custom text and symbolizes a unique concept pertaining to the creator.

In addition to symbolism, exaggerations were also used to portray a situation being more extreme than reality. Participant 14's thought is explained below,

Sometimes when you have tons of homework due or overdue it feels like a burning house or an explosion sometimes and then at that point in the game you just cope by making faces like that kid you just let the house burn metaphorically.

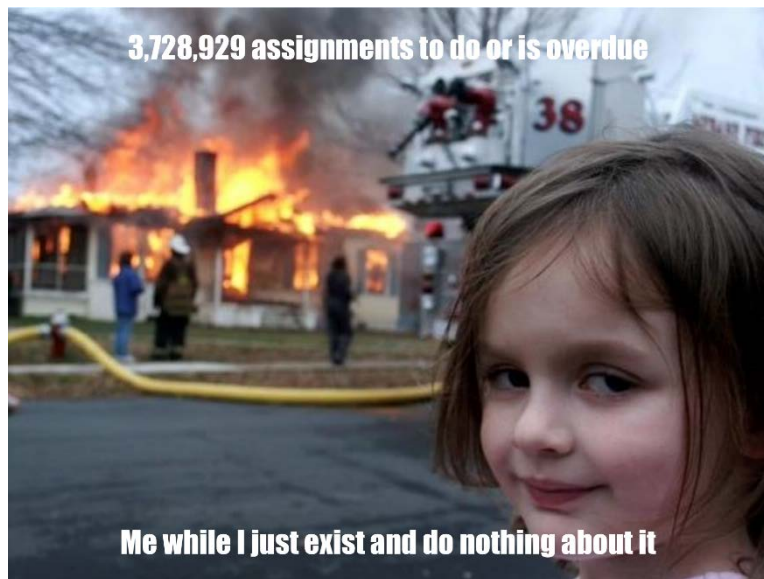


Figure 26

This meme used hyperbole to exaggerate the number of assignments. The excessive number of assignments, over 3 million, is an exaggeration of reality. While the assignments are not literally

on fire, they are metaphorically represented as a burning house or explosion. Another example is shown below in Figure 27.



Figure 27

Participant 4 explained the reason behind including figurative language,

The house on fire would usually give people in the immediate area a sense of concern, maybe even panic. The content, yet dark expression on the girl's face implies that she not only is unbothered by the fire, but she may be responsible for it. To add humor, I applied a figure of speech. The literary element provides added substance and an element of surprise; most people aren't expecting a house fire to result from a request of a 'sick beat.'

The top line of text in this example, refers to the term 'fire' as slang referring to something amazing, great, or cool. The bottom line of text refers to the literal meaning of 'fire'. This example starts by speaking figuratively and ends with the literal meaning to make a joke.



Figure 28

Participant 4 created an anti-joke with the Exit 12 image. An anti-joke is when a joke starts like a normal joke but intentionally uses indirect alternative humor making it not a joke at all. The unexpected irony became the joke. The creator of Figure 28 explained that this image is a popular and recognizable meme format that most people of the same age would recognize and expect to have actual content that would convey a message. Participant 4 stated that this anti-joke takes the expectations of the traditional format and "flips them on their heads". The text included is not what would be expected from an audience familiar with this meme format making it funny.

Daily Life/Habits

School

Generation Z included many references to everyday necessities and habits. All participants included in this research are either current college students or recent graduates. That resulted in many participants mentioning school in their memes. There were multiple memes that turned poor school-related habits into jokes. Participant 13 included a common answer professors give when students have basic questions. Professors respond with "read the syllabus"

due to students asking questions they could easily find themselves if they read the course's syllabus.



Figure 29

When presented with the image of the burning house, Disaster Girl the participant's thought process started with thinking about a common habit and turned it into a joke through this meme.

Participant 13 said,

I was thinking about finals and professors. Then I thought about how most of the time they answer questions by saying 'read the syllabus.' This means that students need to read the class syllabus's so that they know when the final exams are. I thought it would be funny to incorporate so I made a meme about it.

The burning building is representing the student who forget finals week is approaching with the little girl representing the professors. This implies that although students are panicking with upcoming exams, professors have no sympathy for students who do not read the syllabus.

Participant 7 used this image to communicate avoidant behavior in getting homework done. "I find it funny that instead of doing what I need to be doing I am choosing to waste time. It makes me aware that I need to be focusing on my responsibilities instead of avoiding them."



Figure 30

This implies that the participant knows she should be doing homework, however, impulsively decides to procrastinate and do nothing for the day.

Participant 3, who was a recent college graduate, wrote about their past habits of procrastination as a student in the following meme. The participant stated,

I thought back to my college days and some of the work I had to create. It means I did an assignment very poorly and had to post it to the class board. I probably should have been embarrassed but instead I embraced it.

The burning house represents self-destruction in completing assignments at the last-minute resulting in low-quality work. The image implies that the little girl is okay with the situation and the participant felt no shame while embracing the procrastination.



Figure 31

Campus Reference

Almost all participants were selected from the same school. In addition to referencing school, the results show many references to the university they attend. These campus references included inside jokes, gossip, and commonly used language or phrases.



Figure 32

Participant 16 stated that 'ring by spring,' a trending phrase on the university's campus is the main influence in making this meme. Ring by spring refers to college students quickly jumping into a relationship and getting engaged in the spring semester. The participant used this meme to refer to someone who jumps to conclusions that a friendly gesture or casual conversation is flirting. The participant describes this as brainwashing by the university's culture, referring to male students assuming any form of social interaction from a female is showing interest in a relationship. The point of this meme is to make a joke illustrating the impulsive decision to rush into a relationship and get engaged before the school year is over. The point of this meme is to communicate an inside joke only understood by people who are familiar with this campus's trends.

Participant 1 also used a campus reference in the Distracted Boyfriend meme that is referring to a recent personal scandal involving the former president of the university. This was a major event for the university and provided context for the meme that would only be understood by another student at the university or someone who closely follows the university. Participant 1 states, "students from my school would understand the three characters in the image, even if one of them is not even named correctly. It is all about context." Although one character is not labeled by their literal name, it is still likely to be understood by the select audience from their previous knowledge about the university. Participant 1 used context clues to indirectly communicate who the woman in red represents in the image.

Sleep

Figure 33

Another basic human need that kept reoccurring in the results was sleep. The love and longing for more sleep was mentioned by many individuals in this research study. Jokes about poor sleep schedules and a lack of sleep caused by distractions were a frequent topic mentioned in the results. Participant 11 used the Distracted Boyfriend image to express the temptation to skip class and sleep in. This participant's thought process emerged from thinking of a common temptation she faces that is also relatable to her friends. Participant 11 said,

It is difficult to get a good amount of sleep during the semester due to spending time with friends and getting homework done. I have some friends who love to sleep in. Often, they are rushing to class in order to make it for attendance. I wanted to create a meme that they would easily be able to relate to.

The creator of this meme wanted the viewers, specifically their friends, to relate to the temptation of sleeping in knowing that the right decision is to wake up in time to go to class. The participant uses this image to communicate a relatable struggle.



Figure 34

Another participant referred to distractions that result in poor sleep habits. With the Exit 12 image, the participant's thought process started by thinking about an impulse decision that led to losing sleep. In this specific example, the distraction is playing a short game of Animal Crossing late at night but losing track of time and missing her scheduled bedtime. Participant 6 said, "Even though I have bedtime I think I have plenty of time to play a quick session of Animal Crossing but after I'm done many hours have passed." This participant used this image to communicate her poor decision which leads to a bad habit affecting her sleep schedule.



Figure 35

Basic human needs such as sleep, exercise, food, were also used simultaneously within the same meme. Participant 10 related Distracted boyfriend to a recent temptation of skipping the gym. The creator uses this image to communicate his temptation to sleep in and drink instead of going to CrossFit (his gym). He uses this image to communicate the concept of having poor self-discipline. This example uses a combination of the desire for more sleep while also painting a picture of being tempted to fall into a bad habit.

Food

Figure 36



Figure 37

Food was another topic that was commonly used in the results. Many examples make references to poor eating habits and the attempt to diet. Most participants that referenced food find humor in their failure to choose eating unhealthy over their planned diet. Figure 36 and Figure 37 show how Distracted Boyfriend was used in reference to dieting and poor food

choices. Figure 36 was influenced by the creator's current goal of losing weight but loves Korean BBQ more than dieting. The inspiration behind image 37 was influenced by the creator's desire to eat out instead of cooking at home. Both examples use food as the tempting factor and distraction to either make better choices for health or financial reasons.



Figure 38



Figure 39

As stated previously, all participants in the research sample are currently college students or recent college graduates. Due to this, there were also multiple results referring to negative opinions of college campus food. Humor was used to make light of the negative attitudes towards campus dining options. Participant 11 referenced their love for home cooked food and her current situation of only having the option to eat campus food. The creator's thought process started by thinking of something they enjoy then thought of how often students make fun of campus dining options. Participant 11 stated,

I love a home cooked meal especially after eating college food for a long period of time. I thought of how many people make fun of [the school's] dining options so I thought it would be funny to add that into my meme.

Figure 38 implies that the creator would take any last-minute opportunity to have a home-cooked meal instead of campus food. She used this image to communicate a relatable joke of low-quality college campus food.

The creator for Figure 39 refers to her university's main dining hall which is typically not a popular choice. This participant is specifically referring to the dining hall during a recruiting event that occurs twice a semester where potential students experience college life on campus. The potential students have access to the dining hall, so the university makes it a priority to provide better quality food for the visitors. During these events, currently enrolled students will intentionally choose to go to the dining hall over other options on campus knowing that the food will be better. This participant used a campus specific concept to communicate a relatable idea that most students from this university would understand. In both memes, the concept of making fun of the dining hall's food was the intention behind the creation of these memes.

Finances



Figure 40



Figure 41

The median household income of participants was \$25,000-\$49,999. Since the participants included are either college students or recent graduates, they are either still in school or just now entering the workforce with entry-level jobs. The results show how this group of Generation Z members used memes to make financial struggles into jokes. These include jokes about not having money, being in debt, or the temptation to make unnecessary purchases. Figure

40 and Figure 41 show how Distracted Boyfriend was used to communicate financial temptations. The creator of Figure 40 wrote about wanting to upgrade their truck but knows it is an expensive project. Participant 13 states, "I enjoy working and upgrading my truck, but it is expensive. When I saw this meme, I was thinking about how I wish I could upgrade my truck but the upgrades I want are expensive." The participant used this image to communicate his temptation to upgrade his truck, however, his finances are holding him back.

Figure 41 is another example of Distracted boyfriend used to communicate financial temptation. Participant 15 explains,

I always want new shoes and I am continuously tempted to buy things, but I am constantly aware of how much debt I am in. This means that even though I am tempted, I still have my commitment to paying off my student loans.

The creator of this meme is tempted to spend money on new shoes knowing her student debt should be prioritized before shoes. Participant 15 uses a financial temptation to communicate a distraction in her finances. It shows how she prioritizes her student loan payments although she wants to use the money for new shoes.



Exit 12 was used to describe an impulse purchasing desire or decision. In this example, the participant knows the right decision to make is to save money and invest in his future. However, the message communicated through this meme is expressing the creator's desire to impulsively spend his money on an expensive pair of night vision goggles. Participant 10 states, "I was talking about night vision with a friend yesterday and we discussed how expensive it is and how other responsibilities often prevent people from buying it." In creating this meme, he explains this image reminded him about things he should be doing versus things that may not be a wise choice right now but can be tempting because they are more fun. This participant used this meme to communicate the idea that it is important to think about long term goals and prioritize them over short term fun. All memes in this study that referred to finances communicate a temptation to spend money on things they want but know they need to be responsible with their finances.

Summary

Table 3.0: Data trends

Point of View	Time	Figurative Language	Daily Life/Habits
• Relatability	• Past	• Symbolism	• School
• Humor	• Present	• Hyperbole	• Campus
• 1 st person	• Future	• Irony	Reference
• 3 rd Person			• Sleep
			• Food
			• Finances

The chart shows an overview of the four categories and their trends. This chapter described the findings of the study that emerged from 16 interviews and questionnaires. The research found many trends that emerged from data. For all three images presented in the questionnaire, there was a consistent interpretation across this group of Generation Z participants. As data began to saturate, these four categories became the most mentioned concepts communicated through these memes. The findings of this research study are further interpreted in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The following chapter concludes this research study by summarizing key research findings in relation to how Generation Z communicates with memes. The participants were instructed to use original ideas and had the freedom to write whatever they wanted to create each meme. Over the course of the study, there were twenty-three themes that emerged from the results and were grouped into six categories. The categories included point of view, time, figurative language, uncertainty, daily life/habits, and miscellaneous findings. The following paragraphs will discuss and interpret the results mentioned in chapter 4. Additionally, this section will also review the limitations of the study and propose opportunities for future research.

Key Findings

The two main objectives of this research were to: 1) understand how Generation Z perceives the visual image portion of a meme and 2) what Generation Z communicates through memes. The first part of the research study aimed to understand how Generation Z perceives the visual image portion of a meme. The three images were presented to participants with no background information allowing for open interpretation. All memes collected in this study were perceived as metaphorical representations. All participants in this study understand that the image portion of a meme is a form of symbolism. Generation Z's high usage of social media and exposure to memes show that this generation does not interpret the image portion of a meme literally but as a form of symbolism. Once Generation Z forms a perception of the image, they used this interpretation to communicate a deeper message using the elements of the image to communicate their own message.

The second part of the research aims to understand the locutionary acts communicated by Generation Z through memes. Over the course of the study, it became clear that one of the main

purposes of creating memes is to communicate humor. Words relating to humor were mentioned in the results over 45 times and were one of the main motivators in participants' choice of words. Participants communicated humor through the meme results by making fun of themselves, others, laughing at relatable situations, and inside jokes. This shows that Generation Z will implement humor into anything they can. Since Exit 12 and Distracted Boyfriend both were perceived as images of decision-making, many expressed feelings of uncertainty, stress, and confusion; however, they expressed these feelings through the meme in a humorous way.

As mentioned in by McLean (2020), Generation Z is known to find humor in everything including tragedy. For example, participant 1 stated, "I feel like humor is one of the tools we have to deal with negative situations so the least we could do is laugh at it." The participant took a tragic situation and communicated a joke with the image. One of the major events that define this generation is September 11th, 2001. Members of Generation Z were alive but too young to remember the terrorist attack on 9/11. They do not know a world without a tragedy such as 9/11 which resulted in them not knowing a world without fear. Due to this, Generation Z has learned to understand tragedy is out of their control. Additionally, the oldest of Generation Z are young adults with their entire lives ahead of them. They are also faced with the typical stress and uncertainty from their personal lives of entering the world as a new adult in the world. The results from this study support the idea of Generation Z using humor to cope with the uncertainty of the world and challenges in their personal lives.

Participants used self-references over 70 times in the data collection making it the most frequent theme that emerged. Self-references were one of the themes that existed throughout the entire study and was used at least once by every participant included in the study. In the image portion of the meme, many participants had themselves represent a part of the meme. There were

also many explanations in the questionnaire part of the interview that explain the participant's intent to include themselves in the meme. They referred to themselves to communicate personal ideas and statements. This consisted of relatable concept that the participant's close friends would relate to, an experience that happened to them, a funny story about themselves, or something relating to the participant's daily life. This contributes to the idea that Generation Z is an individualist group who tend to be self-focused.

Throughout the study it became clear that participants referred to the present, recent past time experience or situation that is about to take place in the near future. The images presented to the participants are older templates that have been widely spread around the internet for years. The images have been in circulation for years; however, the participants used them to communicate a current concept or idea. The findings from this research support the idea that macro memes images are repeated and replaced with text with current trends and events.

Theoretical Contribution

The method and objectives of this research study were based on the Speech Act Theory. When analyzing the research results through the Speech Act Theory, the theory provides insight into the participants responses by looking at the language as an illocutionary act. This means, for a meme to be interpreted the individual on the receiving end of the communication must be aware of the background information that follows the communication. The interview and questionnaire form collected the information needed to interpret and analyze through this theory. The research starts by understanding the creator's interpretation of the meme template to understand the communication that takes place in the meme. Many participants provided completed memes that were personalized and only understood by a niche community. An additional questionnaire was used in the interview process to understand the creator's intention.

This supports and confirms the Speech Act Theory in that background information was needed in order to interpret the communication.

Limitations

The results of this study must be interpreted with possible limitations in mind. There are three major limitations in this study. First, the study used a convenient sample of participants in Generation Z who are 18 years or older, college students or recent college graduates. Additionally, most participants attend or attended the same university. Therefore, the results may differ among members of Generation Z under 18 years old and from diverse educational backgrounds. Given that there are almost two decades between the oldest and youngest of Generation Z, the oldest and youngest may have different results. Second, only a small sample size of 16 participants were included. Using a bigger sample size would open the possibility for new data trends to emerge, which would allow researchers to gain a more detailed understanding of how Generation Z interprets and communicates with memes. Lastly, the images chosen in the questionnaire limited the study to three meme image interpretations. The results could vary depending on the images presented to the participants. To better understand the implications of these results, these limitations could be addressed in future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study aimed to include a diverse sample of Generation Z participants, the researcher was only able to interview participants aged 18-27 located in the United States. To add to this research, expanding the sample size by including more participants and including younger individuals of Generation Z should be conducted. Similar studies, including participants with diverse educational backgrounds and participants from international communities would

also be beneficial. A future study with different meme images and GIFS could also help further understand Generation Z's visual interpretation and communication through memes.

Summary

This research aimed to: 1) understand how Generation Z perceives the visual image portion of a meme and 2) what Generation Z communicates through memes. Based on qualitative analysis of original memes created by individuals of Generation Z, it can be concluded that Generation Z perceives memes as a form of symbolism, and many use memes to communicate concepts about themselves in a humorous way. The results indicate that many create memes that apply to recent past, present, or near future. This unique quasi-experimental study adds to previous research and contributed new information on how the images of memes are perceived and interpreted.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What influenced your choice of words for IMAGE 1 [IMAGE 2] [IMAGE 3]?
2. Can you walk me through your thought process?
3. What does this mean to you?