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Puns in Internet Memes: A Study of 9GAG

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1 Introduction

In online communities, memes play a big part in delivering humour, popularizing various ideas and bringing people together. Since the rise of the Internet and the development of social media sites, sharing information, and with it humour and memes has become easier than ever.

The aim of this paper is to gain insight into the different ways puns are used in online communication, more specifically — in internet memes and accompanying comments. The varying frequency of pun use in different kinds of user content use presents a challenge in identifying possible reasons and motivation behind using puns to deliver humour. Is there a kind of content that attracts more pun use than another kind? Does pun use snowball into even more pun use?

To tackle this issue, for the purpose of this paper I have collected posts and comments from 9GAG, a platform with the purpose of sharing humorous content, including memes. Deciding to focus on puns and their communicative use on the site, I will present results from my analysis of numerous posts and thousands of comments users have posted. The first part of this paper will focus on the theoretical background behind humour in general, puns, memes and the site itself. This is followed by the second part of the paper, specifically section 8, in which results and discussion are presented, and the conclusion.

2 Theories of humour

While it is not possible to assume or guess the motivation behind the creation of many puns on a site such as 9GAG, it is worth elaborating on the possible reasons why puns might be used to achieve a humorous effect. In analyzing chosen examples I have gathered I will be referring to the following three traditional theories of humour:

1. superiority theories
2. relief theories
3. incongruity theories

2.1 Superiority theories

Superiority theories rely on the idea that one's enjoyment of humour comes from seeing oneself as better than somebody else, which becomes pronounced when witnessing another person's failures or mistakes, or those of one's past self. Laughter, according to superiority theories, is always an expression that says the target of the humour is inferior. "(...) We may, for example, laugh sympathetically with another who scores off his adversary. Secondly, it need not be a person that is derided: it may be an idea, a political institution, or, indeed, anything at all that makes a claim to dignity or respect" (Monro 1988).

Superiority theories have been met with criticism — it has been claimed that their formula is too narrow to explain all cases of laughter, especially incongruity. Moreover, superiority towards something or someone can be felt without the need to laugh (Moreall 2016). It should also be noted that the superiority theory has met criticism for the fact that it does not explain the reasoning behind laughing at oneself for something happening at the moment (Moreall 2016).

2.2 Relief theory

Relief theory appeared in the 18th century, offering explanations not given by the superiority theory (Moreall 2016). According to relief theory, humour frequently seeks to break social

conventions or directly question them — this includes expressing one's sexual impulses, especially in a situation when these impulses are expected to be suppressed. Relief comes when the suppression is released. Moreall (2016) compares this effect to the effect of a pressure-relief valve in a steam boiler. Biologically, wrote Herbert Spencer in 1911, emotions are nervous energy which causes muscular motion — clenching one's fists while angry or fleeing while scared are examples of this. While laughter as an action is not a precursor to a larger action, it works in a similar manner, releasing nervous energy that has built up in one's system (Moreall 2016). In the 20th century, the work of Sigmund Freud greatly supports this theory — the released energy is the energy that would otherwise have been used to repress the emotions being expressed by laughing. According to Freud, the most repressed emotions are sexual desire and hostility, which is why most jokes and remarks are specifically about those emotions. By participating in telling or listening to sexual jokes, a person gives vent to their libido, and the hostility someone represses is let out when telling or listening to a joke that puts down a disliked person or group, for example (Moreall 2016). Freud regarded humour as a way of bypassing censorship, or rather, one's inhibitions preventing unrestrained expressions of both natural but also malicious impulses. "(...) Freud is able to account, not only for indecent jokes (...), but also for the malicious element in humor to which superiority theories call attention." (Monro 1988).

2.3 Incongruity theories

Appearing in the 18th century as one challenger to superiority theories, the third traditional theory of humour is incongruity theory, whose supporters hold that incongruity is a main component of humour. Described by Immanuel Kant as "frustrated expectation", incongruity brings something together with something else which is irrelevant or unseemly — in Moreall's words, it is "something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Moreall 2016). Further elaborating on this view, Moreall (2016) states that the goal of humour is to mix two of the subjects involved, but where there is degradation of one or the other subject, its occurrence is unintentional. "The neatness of the joke will depend on two things: the degree of contrast between the two elements, and the completeness with which they are made to fuse" (Monro 1988). Even Aristotle wrote that one way a speaker can get a laugh out of their audience is to build up an expectation in them, and then violate it — jokes depending on a change in spelling or

word play may achieve the same (Moreall 2016). This plays directly into the idea of puns, in which the connection is otherwise inexistent, except in the words themselves.

Incongruity theory steps into contact with Freud's claims, because enjoying a play on words or ideas, and connecting otherwise unrelated things, is "a means of tricking the censor" (Monro 1988). This is especially valuable for linguistic research, particularly because humour can push the boundaries of pragmatics, and using humour in language is inexplicable without referring to mechanisms such as metaphor, polysemy and imagery (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 9). Additionally, whether or not puns can be made from a word may offer insight into lexical representations, and the same can be achieved by looking at ambiguity, one of the main devices of humour. "Perhaps of more importance, however, humorous language study allows us to consider these issues in the context of truly creative language use" (Bergen and Binsted 2003, 12).

3 Puns

A pun, or in Greek *paranomasia*, is a type of wordplay in which multiple ideas are combined within one word or expression. As claimed by Lederer (1981, 32), making puns openly disregards the notion that two things cannot take the same space at the same time, and it challenges the mind to be concise. According to him, there are four different ways to make puns (Lederer 1981, 33). The least complicated of puns are single-sound puns, which rely on one sound creating at least two different meanings. Depending on whether or not the change in meaning is followed by a change in spelling as well, the pun can be a homograph pun (spelling stays the same) or a homophone pun (a change in spelling occurs). These are exemplified in (1), on a photo of a sink in a doorway¹, and (2), accompanied by a picture of a bald eagle.

(1) Just let that sink in.

(2) You know why hunting me would be a bad idea? Cause it's ill-eagle!!

Double-sound puns, the second type of puns, rely on the phonetic similarity between the original sound and the second sound that carries the second meaning. The pun in (3) was posted in response to a picture of a cow during a storm.

¹ All the examples are taken from my research.

(3) That's udderly horrible... I'll see myself out

The third type are spoonerisms, which are based on mispronouncing a word in such a way that sounds within it are switched. In example (4), this is created by changing *name* into *mane*. The post features a photograph of a lion without a mane, and the pun refers to the song *Where The Streets Have No Name*.

(4) Sounds like a U2 song, where the lions have no mane

Lastly, the fourth type of puns are meld puns relying on stitching together two words. Example (5) was written by multiple 9GAG users under a post about the reality show *Masterchef*.

(5) Pasta la vista

Monnot and Kite (1974) give another perspective on the definition of puns by classifying them based on what kind of ambiguity they rely on. The first one is lexical ambiguity, exemplified by this pun, where we are faced with the multiple meanings of the verb 'to beat':

(6) I love beating my wife... at Monopoly.

Syntactic ambiguity allows us to see that the word "fucking" in example (7) can be a noun as well as an adverb to the word "close", which changes the meaning of the sentence:

(7) American beer is like banging that girls butt on a pool toy. It's fucking close to water

The third ambiguity through which a pun can be created is phonological ambiguity, where phonemes are added, subtracted or substituted (Monnot and Kite 1974). In example (8), 'the Nile' (river) is written as 'denial'.

(8) Denial is NOT a river

"Punning can be a highly entertaining business, but it is always a risky business", says Lederer (1981, 36). Contemplating on the challenges of pun-based humour and its reception, he is convinced that even a seemingly dissatisfied groan is a reaction that should be taken as a kind of admiration. Today, puns are an essential part of many memes; however, for the purpose of this paper I have collected material which is not comprised of only memes, or even pun-based memes, because in my experience, puns are created by commenters even when they are not the main focus of a particular post.

4 Memes

The creation of the word meme is credited to English evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dawkins (1976). In "The Selfish Gene", he elaborates on the idea that there are different kinds of evolution. Biologically, the replicating entity is the gene, a DNA molecule. But, when it comes to the context of cultural growth, the replicator was yet to be named. This unit of cultural transmission or imitation, he claims, can contribute to a form of evolution and contributes to the 'evolution' of language faster than biological evolution can. He called it a 'meme'. To exemplify it, Dawkins explains that it can be a tune, an idea, a catch-phrase, even fashion, or a way of building an arch. (Dawkins 1976, 192). In the same way that genes flow through the gene pool via reproduction, memes flow from brain to brain via sharing and imitation.

Over the course of the past 30 years, with the rise of the Internet and its vast amount of ways to share information and create content, the meme has found fertile ground and taken on new forms. Considered by many as just a way of spreading jokes, memes most often come in the form of a picture with text layered over it. However, they also appear as hashtags, animated GIFs, as well as videos. As noted by Watercutter and Gray Ellis (2018), memes used to appear less frequently and stay popular for a longer period of time. However, social media enables such high speeds of sharing content that a meme may only stay relevant for as little as a day.



Figure 1: Happy Cat meme from 2003, using lolpeak, a type of Internet slang

An example of a meme can be seen in figure 1, which features a photograph of a cat with superimposed text making it seem like the cat is speaking. The slang used in these types of memes is called lolspeak, its main characteristics being deliberate grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Venturing further than the initial intentions of just producing humour, memes may nowadays be used for the purpose of signifying loyalty to a particular group, a political cause or cultural identity — the most extreme of which even include memes used by ISIS or the alt-right (Watercutter and Gray Ellis 2018). Since the popularity of memes has risen over the years, web sites dedicated to posting memes and other humorous content have also become popular, one of which is 9GAG.

5 What is 9GAG and how does it work?

9GAG (9gag.com) was launched by Ray Chan and his brother Chris Chan in 2008 in Hong Kong (Ren 2012). It is a platform and social media website that features a system of sharing images and videos, with comments and a voting system for posts. Since 2012 it also has also existed in the form of mobile applications for Android and iOS. Currently, it has almost 15 million followers on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/9GAG>) and over 40 million on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/9gag/>). In striving to stay the self-proclaimed fun part of the Internet, 9GAG upholds several rules to keep its content and community safe. Violence, hate speech, spam, pornographic content and various kinds of scams and illegal activities are all against the rules, and users are asked to "treat your fellow 9gaggers as you would like to be treated: with respect" (<https://about.9gag.com/rules/>). Signing up is free and can be done with Facebook or Gmail accounts as well.

Uploads to the site include different kinds of user-generated content or content from other websites in the form of images, videos or animated gifs. Typically, one post contains one image, video or gif which is given a title by the user who is posting it, and may optionally be given tags. Uploaded posts can then be viewed and shared by all visitors to the site. Additionally, registered users can leave comments and give positive and negative votes for each post (generally referred to as "upvotes" and "downvotes"), all of which determines its overall popularity. Organization by popularity is threefold — 9GAG has three sections into which posts

are sorted based on their popularity. "Hot" is the default view and contains only the posts that have recently received the highest amounts of upvotes, comments, shares and views, therefore being the most slowly updated section. The posts in "Trending" are those that have reached moderate popularity, while the "Fresh" section is populated by posts which have just been uploaded and sees the highest number of uploads. If a user wishes to view only posts pertaining to a certain topic, there are special sections where they can view the most popular posts relating to animals, movies, food and many other topics. In every section posts are presented in a descending chronological order, although they do not have timestamps.

Each post links to a page where all the comments may be viewed. Comments can also be upvoted or downvoted, and they are organized by their number of upvotes in a descending order. Users can post pictures within the comments, as well as reply to each other. Unlike posts themselves, comments have timestamps, which are relative to the time the page is visited. If several days have passed, the timestamp displays a date instead of how many hours have passed since the comment was sent.

It is important to note that neither posts nor comments are ever deleted from the site solely due to age, which allows for repeated browsing and data collection without resorting to saving or copying large amounts of content elsewhere.



Figure 2: A 9GAG post with its title, points and number of comments

Figure 2 is a screenshot of a single 9gag post titled "You bet". The post is a comic featuring two examples of wordplay — "Knife to meet you" instead of "Nice to meet you", and an emphasized "stab" in the word "stable" as a reference to stabbing. Information under the picture includes tags, the number of points the post has received, as well as buttons for voting and sharing it.

While the site itself does not give statistics about its demographic, some information can be found on Alexa Internet, Inc., a web traffic data and analytics company. According to its data, around two thirds of 9GAG's community is male, while females are under-represented, and most are in graduate school or college. Nationality-wise the community is very varied — USA tops the list at only 10.1%, Germany is close at 9.6%, followed by France, Poland, the United Kingdom and others (<https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/9gag.com>). Even though there is no rule as to languages used on the site, posts are typically in English, with other languages occasionally being used in the comments.

6 Affordances

In order to gain a clear understanding of how the environment of 9GAG affects the way communication is conducted on the site, what needs to be emphasized is the concept of affordances. Affordances have been defined as 'action possibilities'. What this means is that they are what influences an animal (including humans) in an environment, in either a good or a bad way. As exemplified by Hampel, affordances can be "buttons, knobs, handles and levers that each invite different actions (pushing, turning, pulling, sliding)" (Hampel 2014, 3). When this concept is applied to online communication, she continues, affordances have been defined as "the constraints and possibilities of making meaning" (2014, 4). Generally speaking, various modes through which meaning can be made are numerous: text, speech, images, sounds and music, touch, smell and gaze, movement, facial expressions, even clothing and the space someone is located in (Hampel 2014, 5). When a computer is added in this, it creates another set of both constraints and possibilities. Typically, what is there are linguistic affordances — spoken and written language — paralinguistic clues (tone and body language) and props, especially in an educational environment. However, over the years other affordances have become as prominent, allowing for meaning online to be carried through "Visual Meanings (images, page layouts, screen formats)", as well as "Audio Meanings (music, sound effects)" (Hampel 2014, 6). Now, more mediation happens through the use of a mouse, keyboard, webcams, applications, icons and emoticons.

Hampel (2014, 7) lists three types of online environments, distinguished by the way communication in them is conducted. While all three have written communication and interaction across space and time in common, they differ in various ways. Multimodal synchronous spaces such as videoconferences and virtual worlds offer a lot of possibilities for communication, including body language, avatars to simulate face-to-face communication, joint activities, and recordings; however, they may have multiple permission levels, require high literacy and a good Internet connection. Written synchronous spaces like chat rooms offer less, usually only text and emoticons, and turn-taking is not regulated. They are also dependent on time constraints. Asynchronous spaces however, like forums or blogs, can include the ability to post images, they do not depend on time constraints and can also be anonymous (Hampel 2014, 12).

The likelihood of communication in an online environment being limited by these affordances is high — for example, in an asynchronous and anonymous space conversations may take days to complete, and editing or deleting one's comments or posts complicates matters even more.

6.1 The affordances of 9GAG

Similarly to Facebook and many other sites today, 9GAG has a tripartite order of content — every page is divided into three clearly distinguishable parts. Located in the centre is the content feed, which can be infinitely scrolled through — by default, it is content from the "Hot" section, beginning with the newest addition of posts. The left side of the page contains all the topics that a visitor can choose to view. On the right side, 9GAG generates suggestions from popular posts. The way all of this functions relies on the site's algorithms. The posts, titles and comments however, are all contributed by many different authors. Dialogue on the site can be carried out in multiple ways. Since the content appears in the form of images, videos or animated gifs, dialogue can take place in the posts themselves. Another dimension to this is the title which is given by the author and may contain additional interpretations or meanings. It should be noted however that content that gets posted to 9GAG is often media that does not legally belong to the user who uploaded it. Among others, the media can be from Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, as well as taken from movies and TV shows. A large part of participation on 9GAG is interaction with a kind of remixing or recontextualizing a particular image or scene with the use of overlay captions or titles. Varis (2014, 5), writing about digital ethnography, points out how the replicability and scalability of online content allows for its quick recontextualisation, where it is used in different and unpredictable ways. The dialogue is also carried out in the comments, and between the users who may tag or reply to each other in the comments. Therefore, much like YouTube, whose affordances are discussed by Androutsopoulos and Tereick (2015, 357), 9GAG also has three levels of interaction — the users looking at the comments, the speakers and hearers of comments, and the uploaders and recipients. All this remains dynamic since comments can be posted at any time after the post has been uploaded, given it was not deleted from the site. As seen in Figure 2, any post can also be shared via multiple applications to other places on the Internet, where it can gain more popularity and attention.

The workings of the comment section under each post are limited by the site's structure and layout. Once communication has been initiated by a user uploading a post, comments may immediately be posted. They are listed in a linear fashion and can, just like posts, receive upvotes and downvotes. By default, comments are listed in a descending order, starting with the most popular one. However, a user can choose to view them in a reverse chronological order; starting with the newest. Comments may contain text or an image, and users may reply to comments by tagging each other's usernames, where replies are nested under the comment they are responding to.

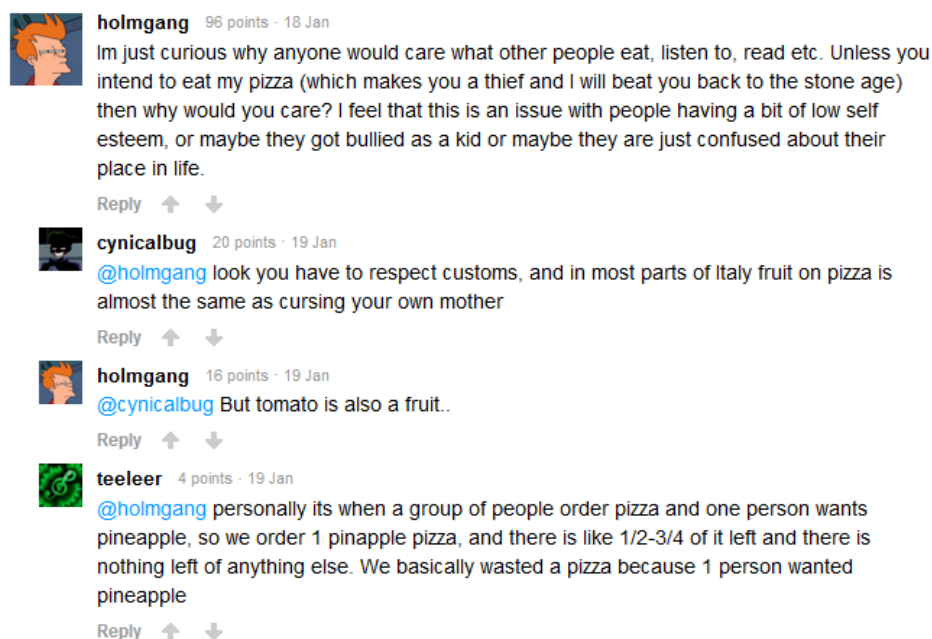


Figure 3: A 9GAG comment thread

Figure 3 is a screenshot of a comment thread under a post. In this picture, the three comments with a smaller profile picture are replies to the comment on top. It can be seen that each of them have their own points and buttons for voting. Something that should be pointed out about the site is that it allows for anonymity, and a user can change their nickname as often as they please. Additionally, there is no kind of ranking system among users themselves, nor can anyone have followers. Still, discussions based on turn-taking happen commonly among the commenters, despite the large number of users coming and going, and the large amounts of posts being uploaded.

7 Communities and communities of practice

7.1 *Communities*

Keeping the aforementioned in mind, to what extent can 9GAG be said to have a community, and be a community of practice? The word 'community' has been and is still used to refer to a very varying number of people who have something in common, from large demographic categories to an online forum. In all of these there is a differing level of homogeneity (Angouri 2015, 325). The two approaches to defining what constitutes a community are positivist and constructivist — the positivist approach holds that the researcher can define an objective reality, such as age or ethnicity, for example. The constructivist approach sees that the social order and interactions create a reality, which means that a community develops between members who either claim or reject membership. Further attempts at defining communities proved that the approach needs to be dynamic — prescriptive criteria cannot be applied as online communities gather around a purpose. It is what they do what matters, not who they are — " taking a bottom-up approach to analyse how membership is negotiated by the users provides a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of any assemblage, one that goes beyond the researcher's own view" (Angouri 2015: 326).

According to Angouri, who quotes Herring (2004) what can be called an online community must fulfil the following criteria:

"1) active, self-sustained participation; a core of regular participants; 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values; 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity; 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution; 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups; 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals"

Every online group is not a community, and insight into how its members would define it is invaluable information to researchers.

7.2 Communities of practice

Communities of practice have been used as units of analysis by sociolinguists, and they are defined by Wenger as having three dimensions:

- a) What it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
- b) How it functions – mutual engagement that bind[s] members together into a social entity.
- c) What capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

By studying communities of practice, language use can be analyzed in a localized space and later linked to a broader context. Their framework makes it possible to study interactions within a community where the users themselves decide what is appropriate and what is not when it comes to language use. Johnson, quoted by Angouri, differentiates between virtual communities and communities of practice — "Virtual communities are groups that use networked technologies to communicate and collaborate. Communities of practice are cultural entities that emerge from the establishment of a virtual or nonvirtual organization" (2015, 327). However, communities of practice have received criticism due to issues of power and hierarchy, which can destabilize interactions between individuals and cause disagreement about what membership entails. Typically, in online communities a user first learns about the norms of participation before they attempt to actively participate.

7.3 9GAG as a community and community of practice?

As was already mentioned in section 5, all content on 9GAG can be viewed by all visitors to the site — having an account is not necessary. The exception to this is the mobile app which requires an account to work. Statistics about the site's traffic are not available so it is not possible to define what percentage of visitors have an account. However, due to the site's age, popularity and the ability to share content to other sites, numbers of visitors and users are drawn in. Although the site's mottos over the years have always been about having fun ("Go Fun the World", "Go Fun Yourself") the range of topics and content is very wide, from memes and comics to world news and personal issues. Applied to 9GAG, Herring's criteria for communities can be analyzed as follows:

1. active, self-sustained participation; a core of regular participants — the site sees a continuous flow of activity by many members, although it is difficult to say how many users could be considered as regular. Judging only from the comments, it is evident that some are more well-known, usually for posting a lot of content or commenting often.
2. shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values — The rules that the site upholds have shaped its community, where users will remind each other that the purpose is to have fun and laugh together. Additionally, the community will distinguish itself from other online communities such as Facebook groups or Reddit participants, and considering the site's longevity, the community does have a shared history that was shaped through site changes and memorable users, posts, and events.
3. solidarity, support, reciprocity — Even though fun is the site's primary mission, posts focusing on personal issues or hardship will often see an influx of compassionate comments and advice, regardless of the users knowing each other or not.
4. criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution — Criticism between users, conflict and conflict resolution mainly happen through long threads of comments and replies. Even if many posts have already appeared after the one where some form of conflict began, users will often return to continue a discussion that is underway. There is also criticism of the site itself, prompted by changes it has gone through over the years (e.g. its layout, sections or content changes due to popularity). Criticism of content changes can

commonly be found in the comments of posts that are deemed by users as a low-effort, irrelevant or something that was already posted.

5. self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups — The members of the community will often refer to themselves and each other as "9gaggers" and recognize the community as different from other online communities. This reaches further than a different web address and common history — other groups, such as Facebook communities similarly dedicated to posting funny content, are often criticized and made into an example of a group with low content standards. In the views of its users, such comparisons and contrasts reinforce 9GAG's community as a group distinguishable from others.
6. emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals — There is no clear distinction of roles, hierarchy or governance on 9GAG since the users cannot be moderators and are not ranked by popularity or any kind of point system. They also do not have any control over comments posted to their posts. It can be said, however, that rituals or traditions do exist on the site. These include putting an image of a potato at the end of a long post, having to add "flies away" in one's comment after providing useful information, putting a banana in one's photos for scale, mockery of the imperial measurement system, and posting an animated gif of a woman with sausages if the user who made the post is female. The latter is both a consequence of the high ratio of male users and a humorous, if vulgar, tribute to the comedic "Rule 16 of the internet", which states that there are no women on the internet (www.urbandictionary.com). Users will point out if these traditions are not upheld.

8 Research and discussion

In order to gather material for my research, I collected posts within a timeframe of 24 hours, to make sure user activity from every time zone was included. I had to make a choice on which section of 9GAG to use. I decided to not exclude any topic, which left me with either the Hot, Trending or Fresh sections. Since Hot is a pool of only the most popular posts which therefore results in a smaller number of posts in a given day, and Fresh receives a massive amount of posts daily with very few comments, I decided to collect my material in the Trending

section — it features a healthy amount of posts from numerous topics with a still manageable amount of comments.

In a Word document, I saved the link to every post that appeared in this section from 1 am until 1 am the next day. This amounted to 564 posts to look through, as well as read all the comments on them. On average, this meant there was a new post in the Trending section every 2.5 minutes. The total amount of comments is as high as 100.794 — averaging to 178 comments per post.

In order to be able to make some conclusions about the pattern of creating puns on the site, or to simply find out if there is a pattern, I wrote down every pun from the comments, the post itself, and its title, and made notes in an Excel table to keep track of the numbers. Out of the 564 posts, 149 had at least one pun in the comments, and 42 of those had more than three puns. Looking at numbers only, a total of 355 puns out of over a hundred thousand comments (0,003%) is a small amount. However, after a closer look at the posts with the higher amounts of puns in their comments, and then noting what the topics of the posts were, some things stood out.

Some topics attracted more attention, and some lent themselves to the creation of puns more than others. And some did both. In the effort of finding out why that is, I ranked the posts by the number of puns in the comments.

8.1 The topics that receive the most comments

In the effort to determine what kind of content inspires the most users to make puns, I looked at all the posts that had three or more puns within the comments. Among these 42 posts, the content that stands out with the highest number of occurrences are cats, animals and women.

As it has been noted throughout the years by many (Thibault and Marino 2018, 487), cats have since long ago become a phenomenon in cyberspace, with millions of videos and pictures only a click away. At the time this text was written, Google searches for "cat pictures" and "cat videos" both generate around 300 million results. The exact reason for this has been attributed to various things, the simplest of which may be the quantity of cats which are kept as pets — according to the ASPCA there are 86 million pet cats in the US alone. Since in the past two decades user-generated content has become increasingly prominent, more and more pet owners can easily share media. Why cats seem to overtake dogs in this context is debatable, but

some have attributed it to cat owners not having open and public spaces available at their disposal like dog owners do — so they took to the Internet (Jones, 2017). Others claim it is cats' independence compared to dogs, which causes fascination and mutual misunderstanding between them and humans (Dempsey, 2015). Four posts containing cats are among the 42 most pun-inspiring posts. One features a student sitting in an auditorium with a kitten on his lap, and also has a pun in its title — "Purrpurred for the exam". Another is a photo of a cat in a police costume. Both have a different number of comments, but the percentage of puns is roughly similar — 6% and 4%. Examples from both include the following, which might resemble the lolpeak Internet slang often used in captions on pictures of cats:

- (1) *He is there to get his petdegree*
- (2) *FURgive me, but I am PAWsitive I ran out of cat puns now*
- (3) *Pff, what a copycat.*
- (4) *The paw-lice is coming for you*
- (5) *You're under arrest right meow*

Animals in general are popular on the Internet. Since they have been essential to human survival throughout history it is no surprise that they would have a prominent place in human culture and way of thinking. They surpass labels of race, gender and nationality, which makes them relatable to many (Barajoun, 2015). Additionally, even though modern life is more urban and less dependent on animals than it used to be, animals still maintain their popularity which is reflected on the Internet as well. Puns that were inspired by animals include (6), inspired by a cow, and (7) which was a response to a bee pun in the post itself:

- (6) *Thats udderly horrible... ill see myself out*
- (7) *What do you call a bee that comes from Syria? refubee*

Content featuring women is another that attracts puns being made in the comments. However, it should be pointed out that women were not necessarily the main focus of the post but became the main focus of the puns — each of the five posts with women in the top 42, including a picture from the *Pokémon* franchise, received comments with puns revolving around

the topic of sex. As was mentioned earlier in this text, male users on 9GAG outnumber female users by a large margin. More importantly, sexuality and sex are matters that tend to make many uncomfortable which leads to the use of humour to cover it up. As mentioned by Piotr Pluta of *Psychology of Humor*, one reason for the enjoyment of sexual humour is the satisfaction of primitive impulses for sexual and aggressive behaviour. Using humour to discuss these topics corresponds to the relief theory mentioned in section 2.2. Another explanation might be that sex simply enhances the positive effects of humour. Example (8) was posted under an image from Pokémon, a globally popular media franchise. It features a female character sitting on a creature that has a screw on its head. Similar puns were posted in the comments 34 times, the highest number in all the posts analyzed in this paper. The pun in (9) is posted on other posts as well, accompanying an image of a woman digging in the garden with a hoe. Example (11) was found under a video of a woman playing drums.

(8) *Oh, there is some screwing there alright..*

(9) *You won't get anything done hoeing like that*

(10) *American beer is like banging that girls butt on a pool toy. It's fucking close to water*

(11) *those drums won't be the only thing i'd be bangin'*

8.2 Does a pun inspire even more puns?

The examples in the previous section were selected solely on the basis of how many puns in total were created in the comments. However, the ratio between the number of puns and the number of comments is also significant. Ranking the posts this way, there is something that is immediately noticeable — despite having a lower than average number of comments, posts about various topics that featured a pun (or more) as their main focus (either in the title or the post itself) had some of the highest percentages of comments that contained puns — the top five having between 8 and up to almost 30 percent of comments with puns. Consider this example:



Figure 4: A post titled "We are all worried"

Figure 4 features a photograph of a warning written on a door, notifying passers-by that it is fitted with an alarm. A post-it note was put next to the sign, asking “What startled it?” — the post itself contains an instance of wordplay: the post-it note playfully refers to the other meaning of the word alarmed — scared or disturbed. The post received only 19 comments; however, over a quarter of them were puns responding to the wordplay in the image.

(12) *Yesterday it was a jar. (reply: today it was a-foot)*

(13) *Aw that's adoorable*

(14) *Something a-door-a-bell!*

(15) *People keep grabbing its knob...*

These puns also exemplify the different ways of forming puns that the users used. Referring to section 3 of this paper, it can be determined that in example (12), the comment contains a homophone pun with added lexical ambiguity — *a jar*, an article and a noun instead of the adjective *ajar*. The reply features a pun with the same properties — *a foot* instead of *afoot*. Examples (13) and (14) both focus on the subject from the post, a door, and emphasize the word inside another word — *adorable*. The comment in example (15) features a pun that exploits the lexical ambiguity of the word *knob*, alluding to the word's meaning in vulgar slang — a penis.



Figure 5: A post featuring multiple puns

The post in figure 5 is a photograph of an advertisement for shoe repair which features three instances of homophone puns:

- (15) *I will heel you* (heel instead of heal)
- (16) *I will save your sole* (sole instead of soul)
- (17) *I will even dye for you* (dye instead of die)

With 29% of comments containing puns, this post tops the list for the highest ratio of puns to comments. Included in the comments is a photograph allegedly taken in a bakery in Budapest — figure 6.



Figure 6: An advertisement from a bakery

Three puns based on phonological ambiguity are included in this picture:

(18) *We knead you* (knead - need)

(19) *We loaf you* (loaf - love)

(20) *We know what to dough* (dough - do)

Additional puns in the comments to the shoe repairman's advertisement included variations of the puns from the photograph, such as:

(21) *I need heeling* (healing)

(22) *Mah heart, mah sole* (soul)

(23) *I'm shoe he will* (sure)



Figure 7: A post titled “It is eggcellent”

Another example of a pun snowballing into more puns is the post in figure 7, featuring an advertisement for a support cushion called “Egg Sitter”. It would seem that the title, which itself is a pun, prompted other users to respond with even more puns with the word “egg”, each following the same pattern of phonological ambiguity. Some of these eleven puns include the following examples:

- (24) *That eggscalated quickly!* (escalated - eggscalated)
- (25) *I didn't eggspect that* (expect - expect)
- (26) *You just eggploded my mind with that eggsaustingly awesome comment* (exploded – eggploded, and exhaustingly - eggsaustingly)
- (27) *wow, you are truly eggstraordinary people... I appreciate that* (extraordinary - eggstraordinary)
- (28) *That pun was eggscruciating* (excruciating - eggscruciating)

It was mentioned in section 3 of this paper that my experience with 9GAG and online communities in general has been that commenters will create puns even though the post does not

feature any wordplay. However, from these examples and data from this research, there is merit in the idea that using a pun in one's post title or the post itself will inspire more others to engage in similar wordplay. Keeping in mind 9GAG as a community of practice, as explained in section 7.3., this might be an indirect dialogue between authors of posts and other users, where puns and wordplay serve as an "invitation" to the community to participate in the recontextualization and create more puns.

8.3 The purpose of puns

The research done for the purpose of this paper yielded 384 puns — 355 inside comments, 18 in posts and 11 in post titles. While it cannot be determined what the motivation behind each one was, referring to theories of humour explained in section 2 does give some insight into why users might use wordplay in their comments. In participating in the recontextualization and writing puns, users create a community of practice through the use of humour, as every pun includes a change of frames. Raskin, quoted by Barcelona (2003, 86) explains that "much of verbal humor depends on a partial or complete overlap of two or more scripts all of which are compatible with the joke-carrying text". Expanding on this, Barcelona presents "frame overlap" and "frame blend" wherein two linked or independent frames are fused together into a mental scene (2003, 96). This way, commenters create new utterances and add to the exchange of wordplay.

Writing about the therapeutic function of metaphor, exemplified by comments to news articles, Stanojević and Čičin-Šain point out that metaphors serve the purpose of allowing the commenter to process their own emotions, and they are also non-dialogual (2014, 93). It should be noted that comments containing puns were all short and typically comprised of only one sentence that featured the pun. Additionally, an overwhelming majority were standalone comments which means they were not a part of a direct dialogue or an exchange between users. Indirectly, exchange does happen as users respond with puns to an original pun. A connection can be made, however, between puns and metaphors — puns in this context may also have served a kind of therapeutic purpose for the users themselves. "Thus, the metaphors are primarily a means of interpreting the difficult situations to oneself, an attempt to work through and articulate one's own emotions, rather than a means of turn-taking communication" (Stanojević and Čičin-Šain 2014:100).

9 Conclusion

While puns may not be the most common memes or present in the most comments on 9GAG, they were present in almost a third of the collected posts. It is important to note that the number of puns in comments to a post does not necessarily scale with the number of a post's overall comments, meaning that the posts with the largest amount of comments are not necessarily the ones with the most received puns. The probability of users coming up with puns in response to a post seems to depend on whether or not the post itself contains a pun — this results in a snowball effect where the pun in the post will inspire users to make more puns, thereby recontextualizing the initial contents of a post.

The general topic of a post (no matter if there is a pun or not) is another clue to the probability of users creating puns — topics that have proven to attract more wordplay than others are animals and vulgarity. The reason for this might be that they lend themselves very well to the creation of wordplay, while an additional reason for the latter might be 9GAG's predominantly young and male user base.

Abstract

Memes, defined as units of cultural transmission on the Internet, play an important part in delivering humour in online communities where they bring people and ideas together. The primary aim of this paper is to observe the various ways a pun, wordplay in which multiple ideas are combined within one word or expression, is used in memes and online communication. To achieve this, I have collected posts and comments from 9GAG, a platform for sharing humorous content, during a 24-hour period. While it is impossible to know the reasoning behind every pun posted to the site, three theories of humour — superiority, relief and incongruity theories — offer some explanation. Given its stable user base, history, self-awareness and traditions, 9GAG can be defined as a community of practice brought together by humour. From the research material that included 564 posts and 100.794 comments, several points became apparent —some topics simply attracted more attention, some had wordplay more easily available, and some did both. It should be noted that the highest ratio of puns to comments appeared in posts whose main focus was a pun. This results in a snowball effect where users participate in inventing more puns and remixing or recontextualizing the original image of a scene in the comments, creating new utterances. This is an exchange not necessarily between the commenters themselves, but between the author of the post and the user who posted the pun, thereby building a community of practice.

Key words: online community, community of practice, memes, puns, recontextualization

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