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The Digital Audience

How social media platforms encourage behaviour between content creators and their audiences

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze and discuss the relation between audience and content creators on the most popular and relevant social networking sites, to understand the connection between creator, platform and audience. The popularity of social media frequently increases and develops with ever new technologies giving users new opportunities for self presentation to an ever increasing audience, as well as changing the discourse and the culture surrounding the media. The analysis will account for the most commonly used methods in social media, to understand how they are constructed from a textual perspective.

The increased attention and use of social media within marketing, art and communication raises a set of questions to be discussed in this thesis. These questions are based on the philosophy established by several scholars within digital culture, media science and other relevant topics. The analysis will investigate the potential for objective truths in how profiled content creators emerge positive feedback within their established audiences. In this sense the analysis will also investigate negative responses to compare and understand both how they emerge from a digital audience and how content creators adapt to such situations, to understand their position related to their audience.

Keywords

Sammendrag

Denne studien har som formål å analysere i detalj forholdet mellom publikum og innholdsskaper blant de mest brukte sosiale nettverk sidene, for å forstå sammenkoblingen mellom skaper, plattform og publikum. Sosiale mediers popularitet økes hyppig og utvikles med stadig nye teknologier som gir brukere nye muligheter å fremstille seg selv til et økende publikum, samt forandrer diskursen og kulturen rundt disse mediene. Analysen vil ta rede for de mest brukte virkemidlene som blir brukt i sosiale medier, og forstå hvordan de er konstruert fra et tekstuelt perspektiv.

Ved høy oppmerksomhet og bruk av sosiale medier innen markedsføring, kunst og kommunikasjon stilles det en rekke spørsmål som vil drøftes i denne oppgaven. Disse spørsmålene vil ta grunnlag innen filosofien avlagt av en rekke forskere innen digital kultur, medievitenskap og relevante fag. Analysen har som formål å finne objektive sannheter om hvordan profilerte innholdsskapere skaper positiv respons hos sine etablerte publikum. I den forstand vil analysen også ta for seg de negative responsene i sammenligning for å undersøke hvordan innholdsskaper reagerer i slike situasjoner, for å finne ut hvordan skapere forholder seg til sitt publikum.

Nøkkelord

Digital kultur, sosiale medier, memes, online persona, virtuelle samfunn, cancel culture, YouTube, Twitter, Fall Guys, George Miller.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, social networking sites (SNSs) - especially social media sites - have become digital homes in which we can share part of our lives with others across the globe in various modalities, either as text in chat boxes or comment sections, as images on Instagram, through videos on YouTube, or broadcasting ourselves lives on livestream platforms such as Twitch. As the quality, variation and popularity of entertainment provided by SNSs increases so does the demand of connecting with people with shared interests as a community. According to Sherry Turkle, who studied the social aspects of computer networks as early as the mid-90's "computers don't just do things for us, they do things to us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people" (1995, 26). The way in which SNSs - and the internet in general - shape relationships between people on these platforms brings new methods for experimenting with self-expression and identity. The demand for network based virtual communities have been around since the internet became commonplace, internet forums and blogs dominated the community scene before the presence of social media sites. Forums and blogs still exist but new media expands upon their functions and abilities to more easily interact and engage with others. Popular media platforms such as Reddit and Discord makes it easily possible to create communities for any given interest, removing the physical barrier as well as letting users engage anonymously. Social media is a new platform in which people can easily perform, publish or showcase artistic creations, gain followers and popularity. When interacting and analysing SNSs from an academic perspective, challenges arise in association with their constant development and changes both culturally (platforms losing and gaining popularity) and technically (platforms removing and developing new features), yet these challenges is one of the many reasons for why SNSs should be analysed and investigated..

This thesis explores the relationship between content creators, platforms and audiences. The aim is to establish which methods content creators apply, how they shape and present their identities on social media and how audiences interact and respond. The interactivity established from the

development of SNSs makes interaction between creators, platform and audience dynamic which was heavily constrained or never possible in traditional media. This creates new and more nuanced perspectives to social media intimacy and introduces new parasocial relationships.

In the grand scheme of the internet's history, the term *Web 2.0* stands in retrospect as one of the most important terms as it marks the shift of the internet from an information based platform into a communication platform. The term Web 2.0 was coined by the author and web designer Darcy DiNucci in 1999, which emphasized on the rising development and popularity of online user generated content in the early 2000s. While the term is rarely used today in relation to social media and current internet discourse in general, Web 2.0 arguably stands as a precursor to the contemporary *social media* term and marked the beginning of participatory culture, virtual communities and increased accessibility between digital platforms, among more. Web 2.0 mirrors Turkle's notion that the computer is beyond a tool for basic tasks such as communication, writing and tracking accounts. She states that "the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies" (1995, 9).

My main objective in this study is to investigate the relationship between content creators and their audience and understand the modalities applied and how it affects the relationship. The thesis investigates the concept of online audience and popularity, how they are shaped, maintained and how they influence the communities that surround them. Online fame is heavily linked with viral content, in contemporary studies about virality it is the viral object that is the element for understanding. This paper will elaborate on critical concepts surrounding internet fame, online identity and community, and social network audience engagement. A critical multimodal analysis of two case studies will be conducted to further investigate the relationship of platform, content creator and audience.

The field of social media academic research is extremely young compared with other academic research fields. Because of the speed of development in social media platforms and the change in its culture, existing research may quickly prove irrelevant or outdated. Even during this writing, cases for the study are prone to change or even getting deleted, making it challenging to stabilize research methods. The platforms in this study are prone to change in style, utility and functionality, in addition as this thesis investigates active social media platform users and content

creators the culture surrounding them is also prone to sudden change. Despite the challenge of its ever changing nature, it's still a field worth investigating thoroughly because of the ubiquity of social media in everyday life. In addition, researching the cultural shifts of social media and their impact on the engagement between audience and content creators can give a better understanding in their evolution, and viewing particular cases in retrospect can further the understanding of these phenomena.

1.2 Research goals and scope

The main research topic is "how does social media encourage online audience behaviour?" As this study revolves around the engagement between content creators, platform and audience, supplementing research topics are as following; "what methods do content creators apply in order to appeal and engage with their audience?", and "how are social media sites designed to pander to these methods, and what expectations are built by the audience?". The goal of this investigation is to understand how creators, audience and platform cooperate to shape digital culture, and work towards a possible understanding of which of these three factors determine how we behave on social media.

1.3 Relevance

Because of the developments of Web 2.0, we live in a society where the latest public messages from the former US president take the form of Twitter posts. YouTube allows gonzo journalists, such as *All Gas No Brakes* to experiment with independent journalism by offering perspectives on various political events (George Floyd protest in Minneapolis, Covid-19 protest in California, the Area 51 raid) that is not provided by traditional television companies. Even more recently, the congresswoman Alexandria Ovasio-Cortez streamed the popular video game *Among Us* by InnerSloth LLC, on the livestream website Twitch to over 430 000 viewers, encouraging viewers to vote in the 2020 US presidential election (Carpenter 2020). These are some examples on how SNSs can be used to present some popular and relevant topics, such as journalism and political campaigns, to reach new audiences and give perspectives that may not make it through traditional media.

According to an article from Statista, as of January 2021 the amount of active internet users is 59 percent of the global population (Johnson 2021). YouTube, the second largest social media platform (exceeded by Facebook) has through its 15 year history changed from being a niche website about funny cat-videos to a multibillion-dollar business. Now YouTube provides a full range of content from homemade amateur videos to high production value shows rivaling traditional commercial media. Each minute more than 500 hours of new video content is uploaded on YouTube (Hale 2019). A recent study on the impact of YouTube tells us that 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers say they can relate to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities (Levin 2020, 12). YouTube has become a market for potentially a sustainable career, and its ubiquity and popularity makes it an appealing venture.

Internet popularity takes on many forms from Instagram influencers, to YouTube vloggers, and Twitch-streamers. How people attain popularity is also important as well as varied. There is a huge difference from someone slowly getting an audience from building their online channel day by day, one follower at a time to someone who accidentally goes viral overnight. Online fame is an elusive concept one can never truly understand despite the amount of experience, time, and money one spends in hope of achieving popularity. Despite the difficulties and randomness involved in attaining popularity, we know it when we see it, which also means that no matter how well informed, experienced, and financially invested a person is in online marketing there is no guarantee for success. And those extremely unlucky can suddenly find themselves in an unwanted photograph or an untimely videoclip surfacing across the internet's many platforms, gaining infamy by the hours.

1.4 Thesis structure

After the introduction in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 will highlight relevant definitions and concepts within the realm of interaction between content creators, platform and audiences. These include definitions and concepts such as social media authenticity, virtual communities, internet celebrities, memes, virality, gatekeeping and online persona. Proceeding to Chapter 3, which will explain the methods applied in the thesis, such as the qualitative study methods for the selected social media profile case studies. The chapter introduces the selected social media platforms and

explains the reason for their inclusion and how they function. Chapter 3 also reflects upon the challenges rising when studying the field of contemporary social media culture and also addresses ethical risks and concerns that may arise. Chapter 4 and 5 are dedicated to the case studies investigations, and functions as the main research focus of this thesis. Chapter 4 investigates the Twitter account @FalGuysGame, the official Twitter account for the video game *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* released by Mediatonic in 2020. Chapter 4 explores how macro image based memes can function as a tool for community engagement and social media marketing. Chapter 5 is the chronological case study of George Kusunoki Miller, which is a study on how Miller became the "anti-vlogger" of YouTube as Filthy Frank, the audience impact from Miller's identity "reveal" YouTube video from 2017 and the Joji cancel culture that followed after Miller resigned from Filthy Frank. Finally, Chapter 6 will continue the general discussion surrounding content creators, platforms and audiences, providing further comparative analysis of various content with new perspectives and examples which leads into the final pages aiming to draw general conclusions.

2. Definitions and concepts

This chapter elaborates on definitions and concepts that need to be explained in the context of the thesis subject. These concepts are social media authenticity, virtual community, internet celebrities, memes, viral content, gatekeeping and persona. The definitions and concepts will be presented in relation to previous research and published literature, in that sense this chapter functions as a light literature review on occasion. There are other specialized definitions appearing later in this thesis for the particular chapters that will be defined as they appear, the definitions in this chapter are the most crucial and need to be contextualized for the study.

2.1 Social media authenticity

Authenticity is a term which is commonly used to describe something, such as if creative works like art or music is perceived as real or credible. According to *Store Norske Leksikon* (Olseth 2020) authenticity is used in everyday life in relation when something is real, original or has a peculiarity. Authenticity is often used in how we perceive and judge the quality of artistic elements and if something is authentic is often labeled as a badge of quality. How authenticity is valued are based on preconceptions within an established genre, context or history.

In social media, authenticity is crucial for creating believable digital self presentations and identities. Authenticity builds trust between a content creator and their audience. With the increase of social media used for marketing and advertising, this trust is also a huge challenge for brands as people generally trust companies less than people. Authenticity is also a merit to distinguish between content creators that are producing content only to gain profit, and those who create "genuine" content. For instance, YouTube content creators' authenticity may be violated if they implement sponsored advertisements in their videos, as it may break with the established persona of some content creators, such as creating genuine content for free without monetizing motives. In *The Language of Social Media*, Seargeant and Tagg mentions that the notion of authenticity is often crucial to online identity management. An online persona is seen by interlocutors to relate the person behind it, as well as the social value placed on this perceived authenticity. Authenticity sets up expectations about the perceived connection between the online

persona and the offline self, if this connection is breached the sense of authenticity is violated (2014, 7). On social media authenticity plays a large factor in the relation between audience and social media content creators, because of the freedom for creation these platforms provide. Online identity construction and groupness (aligning with different groups) is tight because of the niche and sheer volume of option and freedom, the distrust of breaching authenticity can be severe. Authenticity can also be breached when an individual's intention and motivation is driven by an external force, such as creating content for a specific reward or for someone else as opposed to producing content driven by personal passion. The popular video game let's play YouTube series "GameGrumps" uploaded a video in 2013 where the duo Jonathan "JonTron" Jafari and Arin "Egoraptor" Hanson played a demo of the upcoming horror game *Dead Space 3* by Visceral Games. The demo was sponsored by the *Dead Space 3* publishers, which the Game Grumps community saw as a violation against Game Grumps authenticity as a let's play channel featuring the two friends playing their personal favorite video games from their pasts. Even though Hanson and Jaffari joked on the aspect of being paid to play the game, which some viewers accepted as a part of their humor and show, others viewed it as a violation labelling them as "sell outs" or "sponsor grumps".

2.2 Virtual community

The "sponsor grumps" from the previous segment is an example of the impact communities can have in altering content creators' reputations on SNSs. As the internet has grown to be an integral part of modern life, the way in which we discover ourselves and connect with others as groups has evolved. Groups that bond over common interests become communities. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, a community is described as "the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality". A community can be a *physical community*, such as a group of people within a selected area (neighbourhood, city, country) or people who connect as a community via *shared interests*, such as beliefs, nationality, sexuality, etc. This thesis will focus on the latter as the internet and especially Web 2.0 excallerated and streamlined the methods in which people could share interests and shape communities. Before Reddit forums, Facebook groups and Discord communities, location and distance was a large issue that prevented many from discovering and

participating in their desired communities. In *Virtual Communities - Bowling Alone, Online Together*, Felicia Wu Song defines virtual community as "loosely designating all groups or networks that enable individuals to communicate with each other on the internet" (2009, 1). This description is very broad and can be further categorized. Firstly, the temporal structure of a virtual community is important. In *Personal Connections in The Digital Age*, Nancy Baym addresses that the many modes of communication on the internet and mobile phone vary in the degrees and kinds of interactivity they offer (2010, 7). Temporal structures are categorized as either *asynchronous* or *synchronous* media. These two categories come with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Synchronous media are identified by the rapid transmission of messages and requires exchange of information in real time, which Baym describes can enhance the sense of placelessness in which digital media can encourage and make people feel more together when they are apart, more immediate and personal and encourage playfulness in interaction (8). Examples of synchronous media are direct messages such as phone calls, chats, and live services. Discord and Twitch are popular examples of synchronous media. Discord lets users engage through voice calls, video calls and text chats. Users can only interact between friends and community members and users can only join Discord communities by invitation, which is done by accessing an external hyperlink. Discord's success therefore lies not only in the intimacy and placelessness of synchronous media, but also the exclusivity and the sense of belongingness of participating virtual groups with common niche interests. This participation is also evident in the popular live streaming website Twitch, where viewers can interact with streamers and other viewers during live broadcasts, creating a togetherness experienced in the moment. From a communication perspective Twitch is in an interesting position because of the Twitch chat dynamic, which is affected by the number of viewers. Naturally few people chatting leads to easier conversation between streamer and audience strengthening the sense of belonging as a virtual community, but when the viewer numbers surpasses four digits the chat becomes a visual representation of a crowded room yelling nonsense. Digital mass audience interaction is a young phenomenon and has never been as prominent or popular as on Twitch and in certain circumstances proves to have an unique value as a community. This has led to recent amateur social experiments on digital mass audiences, such as the *Twitch Plays Pokemon* experiment in 2014 where an anonymous

Australian programmer launched a Twitch bot account that live-streamed the Game Boy game *Pokèmon Red*. The attraction of this particular stream was how the bot integrated the Twitch chat, letting viewers "play" the game by typing control inputs into the chat (for instance, typing "up" equals to pressing up on the Game Boy's directional pad once). Twitch Plays Pokemon beat *Pokèmon Red* after 16 continuous days with an average viewer count of 80 thousand viewers/players. During this time participants were actively emerging a community surrounding the game's events by liveblogging the game's happenings on SNSs such as Reddit, where the community gave nicknames to the caught Pokèmon and vital events that impacted the playthrough. As a synchronous media, Twitch Plays Pokemon made evident how digital mass participation and the transient aspect of experiencing the participating events as they happened (the feeling of participation of a large emergent community) can shape virtual communities.

Another way that SNSs platforms like Twitch and Discord shape virtual communities is evident in how they apply custom emotes. Emotes have been a popular way to mimic face-to-face emotions in digital text conversations and have become heavily integrated to social media the majority of popular text platforms. Similarly as Twitch Plays Pokemon demonstrated how participatory elements (such as the community together nicknaming the caught Pokèmon), Discord and Twitch let's users contribute in community shaping by designing custom emotes which plays on each community own history and sub-culture (for instance, making an emote of a Twitch streamer's face). Twitch also allows for exclusive community emotes only for paid subscribers, thus using emotes for those who wish to support their favorite streamers and feel a sense of exclusivity within the community.

Asynchronous media focuses on communication between larger groups. Baym states that asynchronous communication is seen in SNSs and online groups like fan forums, support groups and hobbyist communities, and that asynchronicity gives people time to manage their self presentations more strategically (2010, 8). Asynchronous communication is the common temporal structure for internet communication and in this thesis is most prevalent on YouTube. Each YouTube video is a form for asynchronous communication from the content creator to their audience, where the audience can communicate via comments (also a form for asynchronous communication). As many YouTube content creators present themselves as video bloggers, each

YouTube account can function as a virtual community where the viewers participate in discussion and conversation in the latest video uploads.

Twitter is a combination of asynchronous and synchronous media. More accurately, it is an asynchronous media that mimics synchronous media (by focusing on the current trends and latest tweets, giving an impression that communication happens in real time). As an asynchronous media, Twitter's "micro-blogging" style – an indication towards the shortness and limits of each tweet - allow users to communicate with very large groups, sustain interaction to their benefit, and give them time to manage their self-presentation more strategically (2010, 8). Twitter and YouTube share similarities in how participating in the medium can shape local or intimate virtual communities, but also reach larger audiences via sharing, liking, commenting, etc. As tweets are structured as short messages containing few sentences, a single video or image, self-expression on Twitter tends to be more visual based than textual based. This is not only because of the text limit, but also because users who scroll quickly through their timeline are easily distracted by visual elements rather than textual. Communication on Twitter is highly visual based as the majority of tweets uses some form of visual modality (either as images, videos, links, emotes, etc.). This has affected the conversation of Twitter and the influence of how visual media can be used in community sharing and participation, which will be a key aspect of the first case study.

The combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication and the dynamic aspect of parasocial interaction makes Twitter a popular site for marketing and branding strategy. Conversation may be the core theme of Twitter, as Twitter brands itself as being "in the moment". Conversation is a key aspect of virtual communities and how they are shaped. Tweets allow short and precise messages as well and encourage sharing and participation via hashtags (#). Chapter 3 further explains Twitter and YouTube and their functions in relation to content creation and their audience engagement.

Despite being almost 15 years old, Twitter is categorized as new media and Baym states that "to understand new media, we need to consider both the technological features of a medium and the personal, cultural, and historical presumptions and values those features evoke" (2010, 22). To really get a full understanding of Twitter as a new media this thesis (most notably the case study

on @FallGuysGame) will investigate the medium's features through a multimodal analysis of both the social media platform and the game associated with the platform.

2.3 Different types of internet celebrities

Just as new media have shaped the methods for bringing communities together, so does it shape identity and self representation. The internet has opened an arena for different kinds of celebrity creation. With networked communities and participatory culture, people being photographed in everyday situations can be recontextualized, exposed and exceedingly quickly gain mass attention. This power can turn an everyday individual into a celebrity, even if temporarily. While mediatised interaction has the power to quickly make fame, mediatised networks also have an immense power of reach. Individuals with large networks connecting several social media have the power to potentially reach large numbers of users, which makes them particularly valuable for digital marketing. This segment explains three key different aspects and terms of online fame and celebrity methods/classifications based on previous studies.

As traditional media and online media evolve in parallel, it can be difficult to separate and distinguish between traditional celebrities and internet celebrities. It's become commonplace to feature influencers on television shows and traditional celebrities appear on YouTube series. An individual that has made their fame exclusively over the internet can be classified as an internet celebrity. It's important to punctuate that an individual can be internet famous, but not necessarily be an internet celebrity. For instance, the entrepreneur Elon Musk is currently followed by over five million users on Twitter where he tweets daily to his followers and keeps an active online presence. Musk has also gained viral attention via online media, one of the most notable being after he appeared smoking marijuana during an interview on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast on YouTube. More recently, Musk appeared on the American light-night television show *Saturday Night Live* in which during a skit Musk mentioned the cryptocurrency "dogecoin", which according to an article from CNBC, resulted in the cryptocurrency to devalue by nearly 30 percent at one point during Musk's appearance (Sigalos 2021). Musk is an example of a traditional celebrity that both heavily influences digital culture via traditional media while

also uses the participatory dimension of SNSs to boost their media presence, but they are not defined by it.

2.3.1 Micro-celebrities

One of the earliest relevant studies on online fame is Theresa Senft's studies on camgirls. *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Network* (2008) researched a particular community of young, white, American women who strived for fame by broadcasting themselves online in the early 2000s. Thanks to the increased accessibility and cheaper webcams, it became easier to broadcast everyday occurrences to an audience, and the camgirls could create a more intimate relationship between themselves and their audiences. The camgirl study marked an important change in celebrity culture and popularity, the appeal of intimate DIY (do-it-yourself) camgirls established interaction between content creators and audience that was not prevalent in traditional media, and it brought new perspectives to mediatised intimacy and a sense of belonging which could accumulate towards mediatised individuals.

Camgirls made mediatised celebrities cultivate closeness more akin to *first order intimacy* contact, where intimacy is experienced through direct contact and interaction, unlike "second order intimacy" where closeness is "artificially stimulated by techniques of the mass media" (Abidin 2018, 9). From the perspective on internet fame, Senft coined the term *micro-celebrity* which she describes as "is best understood as a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites" (2008, 25). The key quality of a micro-celebrity is the act of celebrity status no matter the size of one's audience, in theory anyone can become a micro-celebrity by acting as one. As micro-celebrities and most online based fame in general are acclaimed through public interaction, Abidin argues that microcelebrities hold a stronger obligation to their audiences than traditional celebrities, as their fame is co-constructed through a community of interested viewers on the internet rather than by a mere mechanisms of the traditional industry (2018, 12). While Senft's studies are almost two decades old by now, the topic of livestreaming private life to a public is by no means an outdated phenomenon. To the contrary, platforms like Twitch has made the concept of publicly broadcasting private lives a popular mainstream form for entertainment

(Twitch is mostly used for video game livestreams, but they also allow for general IRL (in real life) live streams) where the culture of Senft's camgirls such as the intimacy and methods used to accumulate fame can parallel the culture of female streamers on Twitch. As Twitch is dominantly a gaming related platform, the majority of viewers are male leading to a community to be prone to toxicity and negative behaviour towards female streamers, as they can be criticized to pander to a male audience by focusing more on their physical appearance than video games. The relationship between the audience (as in the community) and the celebrity (the streamer) is particularly interesting and complicated on Twitch. In *Transgression in Games and Play*, Mia Consalvos investigates the Twitch streamer Kaceytron and how she engages with her audience with a specific purpose. Kaceytron plays on the perceived persona of the female gamer as dumb and inexperienced, and reacts in over-the-top manners towards then negativity received from the chat. She also uses a webcam during her streams, which both takes an unnecessary amount of screen space and reveals her cleavage. In many ways Kaceytron is a griefer (someone who harrasses or delibrarty provokes other members of a video game community) towards the Twitch community, Consalvo in particular argues Kaceytron is a *resistance griefer* as someone who uses resources available to derail the "negative experiences towards oneself and fight back against the dominant structures within the [game] space" (2018, 96). Abidin brings up Alice Marwick argument of in order for a microcelebrity to be successfully enacted, performers must curate a persona that continuously feels authentic, interactive, and celebrity-like (2018, 12), in which Kaceytron is an example on a micro-celebrity addoning a specific persona that embodies the negative associated of a specific group.

2.3.2 Influencers

While micro-celebrities are about the act of being popular, influencers are on the other spectrum where audience size is of the utmost importance. Abidin describes influencers as the "epitome of internet celebrities, given that they make a living from being celebrities native to and on the internet" (2018, 1). The term influencer came around the mid-2010s and is generally used in terms of marketing and business values, as influencers are key individuals who "exert influence over a large pool of potential customers" (72). The individuals with the largest number of followers (sometimes referred as mega-influencers when their follower count reaches one

million on a single social media platform) are the most effective from an advertising perspective as they have the largest market value in terms of potential buyers. While the number of followers are vital for influencer marketing reach, influencers with a smaller following can potentially reach a niche market with a specialized interest and have a stronger sense of community with their followers (similar as the micro-celebrities in the previous segment).

Influencers have increased the popularity of social media, and have impacted the functionality of some platforms such as Instagram adjusting their algorithms to avoid fake followers (some influencers have bought third party bot accounts which generate fake accounts in order to boost their follower count artificially). The style influencers apply on social media are most associated with the blog model as they present themselves either via text, image, video or a combination of modalities. Abidin (2018) presents two aesthetics of influencer content associated with either *repository formats* (Instagram, YouTube) or *transient format* (Snapchat, Twitch). Repository media are permanent content that can be accessed by others at any given time after it is uploaded (unless the content gets removed), which often uses carefully planned, edited, pristine high-quality aesthetics. While transient media are streamed or semi-permanent content that requires users active attention, the aesthetics are amateurish, raw and spontaneous. The appeal from transient format gives a sense of closeness or intimacy between the influencer and audience. Many influencers and internet celebrities in general use one social media as their main platform, e.g. YouTube and Instagram, where they publish edited pristine content to present the "ideal" version of themselves. And use a second complementary platform, such as Snapchat, where they publish amateur "behind-the-scenes" content for fans wishing for extra content or wanting a stronger connection of community.
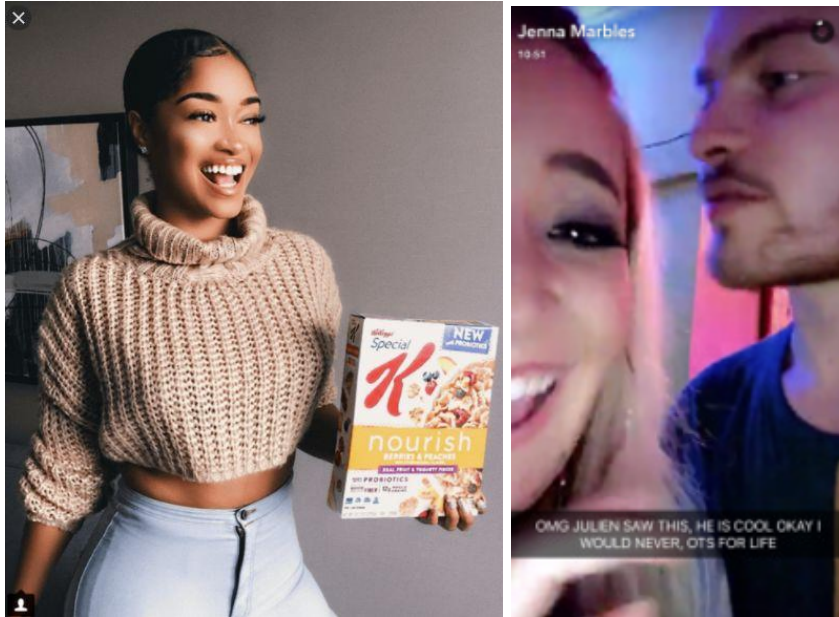
Figure 2.1 example of repository format (Instagram), figure 2.2 example of transient format (Snapchat).

The popularity in the transient format is evident in social media platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok, especially among younger audiences. Abidin states "the influencer ecology is thus moving from its peak of tasteful consumption formats toward an amateur aesthetic that feels less staged and thus more authentic" (2018, 91). Instagram photographs (figure 2.1) are often professionally edited or "photoshopped" (a term now heavily associated with fabrication or to describe something as fake), while such modifications are heavily limited on transient formats such as Snapchat (figure 2.2). Snapchat is constrained to the filters designed by the app, while Instagram does include preset filters as images are uploaded it is common to pre-edit images or videos in third party programs such as Photoshop. In *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (2014), Rettberg describes the filters provided by the platforms as *technological filters* and are the type of filter generally referred to when discussing filters on social media. Rettberg argues that filters can be cultural as well as technological, *cultural filters* refer to "the rules and conventions that guide us, filter out possible modes of expression so subtly that we often are not even aware of all the things we do not see" (2014, 24). Cultural filters are complex, changes with time and technology. Figure 2.2 is a Snapchat screenshot and demonstrates the cultural filters of Snapchat as unprofessional, raw and amateurish. Another filter is how Snapchat for instance only

presents celebrities from a particular moment often in a particular angle, filtering away anything not shown and giving them a specific frame they wish to present themselves (figure 2.2 shows closeups, filtering for instance, the background from the audience).

This amateur aesthetics of Snapchat is a performative authenticity Abidin calls *calibrated amateurism,* which she states as "practice and aesthetics in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portray the raw aesthetics of an amateur" (2018, 91). While semi-permanent and live-streamed content creates a level of authenticity by being experienced in the moment, the haphazardly crafted aesthetics of Snapchat cultural filters creates an authentic arena as well. Snapchat selfies (as seen in figure 2.2.) demonstrates this calibrated amateurism, where the objects of the image are out of focus and frame and the accompanied text is in all capitalized letters and includes acronyms.

2.3.3 Meme-celebrities

In her book *Internet Celebrity – Understanding Fame Online,* Crystal Abidin discusses the concept surrounding individuals as memes and brings up three levels of popularity and recognition a person can be categorized as "internet meme". The first is *faces of memes*, ordinary people in images becoming memorialized solely for the comic value of the meme, through "collective powers" of users who view, reappropriate, spread, and co-construct meaning and value into the image (2018, 45). These image macros are the most frequently used meme format and are arguably the definition most people associate with memes. Examples of *faces of memes* are Blake Boston and the 'Scumbag Steve' meme or Sammy Griner as the "Success kid". Another important distinction is that between meme personalities who identify and embrace their memefied media and those who unwillingly and unintentionally gained internet cult status as memes, characterized by Abidin as *"unwilling memes"* (2018, 52). For something to gain meme status it needs to be remarkable in the sense it is worth being promoted by an audience, this "power foci" usually stems from the audience turning non-remarkable images/videos into cult statuses. This is why embracing or grooming meme celebrities with commercial intentions are difficult and rarely successful long-term, the success of a meme relies on the audience's interest in the meme and their "power" to recontextualize, thus grooming memes with intention of fame

strikes against the very nature of memes. Beside licensing the images for commercial use, and Griner using "Success kid" fame to promote his father's GoFundMe campaign for his kidney transplant in 2015, their lives have been fairly anonymous and unaffected by their internet memes.

Abidin brings two levels an individual can further pursue their meme popularity. A person who has attained virality from being a face of a meme can pursue a public persona and become a *meme personae* by extending their fame. If this fame grows into a stable, sustained, and diversified commercial business then they have reached the third *"meme celebrity"* stage (2018, 47-50). Abidin's three level structure of internet memes from a meme's face, a meme persona to a fully fledged celebrity. There are many memes based on celebrities but there are very few actual meme celebrities, the majority of meme personae achieve momentary fame as keeping a sustainable status of popularity is challenging. Memes are only valuable as long as the public deem them worthy for spreading, they are methods of conversations which makes them fragile as a sustainable commercial business. The most successful meme celebrities, such as George Miller and his YouTube presence as Filthy Frank (the case study in Chapter 5) who kept producing YouTube content actively to keep his status as a meme personality. However, despite his label as the "meme of the internet" Filthy Frank does not apply for Abidin's theory on meme personality as Miller gained his audience through keeping a SNSs presence and popularity through YouTube, which lead to Filthy Frank being labeled as a meme. On the internet, memes can be difficult to define as it seems that anything that gains popularity online can be classified as a meme, so what are they exactly?

2.4 Memes

In online communities and SNSs, memes are ubiquitous and have become closer to a communication norm. The term *meme* was coined by Richard Dawkins in the book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. In the introduction to *A Methodology for Meme Virality Prediction*, Smitha et al. uses Dawkins definition to explain memes as a "unit of information or cultural propagation for individuals to pass ideas and views to each other. Memes have the ability to replicate, mutate and respond to certain situations, which make memes to resemble genes" (2018, 87-88). The most

basic way to define an internet meme is a "unit of information, which is copied and spread very fast on the internet, maybe with slight variations" (2018, 87). This definition is premintent in the image macro format, perhaps the most popular form of a meme. These are images that consist of captions commonly in bold impact font, but they also can take on other modules such as different fonts, multiple images and other formats. From a design perspective memes commonly pander to the "internet ugly" aesthetic, as image macro memes use crude fonts (impact, comic sans), bad grammar (the "doge" meme being a misspelling of "dog"), stock photos, etc. As memes are units of information shared and copied between users, the "cheap" style naturally increases the accessibility for users to copy, remix and create memes. Many interactions on social media follow the broad conversational maxim of 'keep it light/fun' (Duemert 2014, 24), memes are an efficient method to keep up with this presentation on Web 2.0. However, many memes are not user-generated content but are images or videos recontextualized without textual edits. These are commonly used as "reaction images", images that are posted online as a response in order to portray a specific emotion. A popular reaction image example is the "This is Fine" image meme, which depicts a cartoon anthropomorphic dog assuring himself everything is fine despite the room burning in flames. The meme is the first two panels taken from the webcomic series *Gunshow* by KC Green. Screenshots from various media are also a common reaction meme format, as they are often pre-captioned because of the media subtitles.

In his study of memes in the book *The World Made Meme,* Ryan Milner uses the adjective and adverbial form *memetic* "as a set of social practices, instead of focusing exclusively on *memes* as individual texts to emphasize the social process essential to the creation, circulation, and transformation of collective texts, regardless of the individual text itself" (2016). Memetic fits with the notion that memes are a process of change and circulation, memes that suddenly get viral attention have a high memetic value, while memes that are lost to obscurity and no longer are appreciated by users have lost their memetic value.

While many access memes by browsing dedicated 'funny images' sections on forums and image boards, or scrolling popular meme focused online platforms such as 9GAG, the purpose of memes reaches beyond simple internet humour. This thesis will investigate memes from different perspectives beyond memes as simple internet jokes with the purpose to demonstrate the

versatility of memes and how influential their presence can be in digital culture and how they can be used from both content creators and audiences perspectives.

Memes propose as cultural artifacts and because of their popularity imposes an important role in human cultural history. Some memes act as icons, such as "Pepe the Frog", an anthropomorphic frog with a humanoid body, became a symbol of the alt-right movement and white supremacy during the 2010s in the United States. However, during the Hong Kong protests of 2019, Pepe the Frog surfaced as a symbol for the resistance. Former US president Donald Trump also used Pepe in one of his tweets during his election campaign in 2015. Pepe the Frog is arguably the most politically influential meme, the meme is also an example of the importance of context for a meme to have meaning and that there is no "true" meaning behind a meme. Another important aspect of memes is the temporal aspect of memes, similarly as clothing styles change with time, memes can "run out of fashion". For instance, the webcomic format labeled "Rage Comics" was a popular meme format around 2008 that took the form of short crudely drawn comic-strips, where authors usings the format used a selection of pre-made faces for different emotions. After many years without usage on SNSs they suddenly started to gain a small resurgence in 2021 as they found a new cultural value (in this case using rage-comic was a method to embrace old traditions). Another important variable of memes is the text. The text used to decorate the memes is arguably what changes the most with time, earlier memes was commonly accompanied with capitalized letters ("U MAD") while current memes is more varied and playful with lowercase letters as in the "doge" meme ("such wow") or even an alteration of lowercase and uppercase as seen in the "Mocking SpongeBob" meme ("TyPeD lIkE tHiS"). Memes can be used as custom emotes (like the custom emotes from popular social platforms such as Twitch and Discord) which makes memes be utilized as a tool for creation and participation of virtual communities. The increased popularity of community driven memes, particularly on the livestream platform Twitch, has complexified the context to understand the meaning and purpose of certain emotes. For instance, on Twitch the emote-icon for sarcasm (known as the kappa-emote) is a greyscale photograph of a former employee at the website justin.tv (the predecessor to twitch.tv). Many of Twitch emotes are photographs of people associated with the Twitch or gaming community, this new generation of emotes complicates the understanding from simple and easy-to-understand representations of facial expressions to images that require context and explanation in order to

understand them and participate in the community. As memes require context to understand and appreciate them they have sometimes been referred to as the "inside jokes of the internet".

Memes can also be a reaction to real life events and news. A recent example of this is the famous image of the former US presidential candidate Bernie Sanders seated during the inauguration of president Joe Biden in January 2021. Shortly after the image appeared online, edits of the image placing Sanders in different contexts and locations started to surface on several image boards, online forums, and on social media. This type of sudden virality is heavily influenced by the relevance of the origin story (Joe Biden's inauguration) and therefore often has a shorter life cycle than other memes. Also, the Bernie meme is a good example that clearly demonstrates the definition of a meme as a unit of information (the original Bernie photograph), which is copied, edited and spread quickly on the internet.


Figure 2.3 The original picture of Bernie Sanders during Joe Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021.

Figure 2.4 and 2.5 Examples of Bernie photoshopped into different scenarios, such as into the Star Trek crew and as a skater with the text "The Radical Left".

As memes are posted in communities, people quickly and naturally adapt the meme format into conversations as an effective method to convey opinions on a given topic. Memes as a method for discussion have increased as SNSs and social media in general have become less textual and more focused on visuality. The example demonstrated in Figure 2.6 is taken from a forum and has turned up in discussions regarding fictional characters' race and ethnicity, often when an adaptation changes the ethnicity when adapting to a new medium.
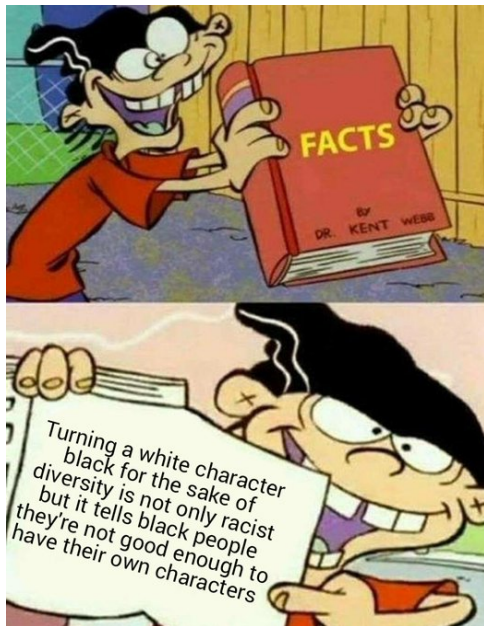
The meme consists of two screenshots from the animated Cartoon Network show *Ed, Edd n Eddy*, in which the character Edd (a.k.a. Double D) holds up a book labeled "Facts", to which the user of the meme can insert their opinion on a topic (in this case, how turning a white character black for diversity sake is racist and tells black people they are not good enough to have their own characters). There are several reasons for why the author of the argument wishes to use this meme image format to convey their standpoint, compared to simply posting the argument as typed text. First, conveying an argument in an image can more easily catch a reader's attention,

Figure 2.6 "Double D's Facts Book" meme

the reader may also read the argument for simply recognizing the character from the show (*Ed, Edd n Eddy* was popular in the late 90s to early 2000s, many in their late 20s to early 30s may resonance with the image from a nostalgic perspective, additional effective if the "discussion demographic" is around this age). Second, the image itself has an "unserious" tone from how the argument is presented from a book of "facts" and therefore may or may not be taken seriously by the reader. Third, is placing the argument in the context of *Ed, Edd n Eddy*. Those familiar with the show know that Edd is the smartest, most mature and knowledgeable character in the show, presenting the argument "as" Edd has a level of wisdom tied to the character. This also indirectly implies that the meme author views those who oppose their standpoint on black character diversity, to be on a level of knowledge of those that Edd holds up the book for - which is likely Eddy or Ed - characters that are dimwitted and narrow-minded. The "Double D's Facts Book" meme demonstrates how imagery contextualization can enhance a text from several aspects, and that memes have functions that are beyond that of simple internet jokes. It also demonstrates that a single meme (as a one unit) can have multiple memetic values.

2.5 Viral content and gatekeeping

As SNSs allows for rapid transmission, creation of content and by the sheer volume of content being viewed, clicked, interacted and shared for each passing second, it is bound that some content get more attention than others. In this process when something gets exceedingly attention and stands out, that particular content gets viral attention. When "something" on the internet gets viral, it can be that one YouTube video that has been all the talk at work, all the kids at school watch it constantly and it's even made the news, when virality happens we recognize it. The characteristics of viral content is that it quickly and widely spread and popularizes on social media. The terms viral and virality are used in relation to how viruses replicate quickly and spread a viral infection. We often describe popular content as something that went viral, something that quickly went from being nonexistent or obscure to appearing on every social media feed, news articles and perhaps commercial television. In their book *Going Viral* Nahon and Hemsley conduct a study with the purpose of understanding the complex interactions of viral content, and figure out how and why something gets claimed as going viral and how that virality can impact society. In the process of virality Nahon and Hemsley bring up two

perspectives to how something can become viral, these perspectives are the *bottom-up* or *top-down* perspectives. Bottom-up is described as "made up of patterns of human attention and sharing, as well as how we influence each other within our immediate networks, and refers to the impact of people's actions on whether or not something goes viral as they create, consume, and share content (2013, 43). The top-down perspective is described as "the ability of powerful foci (actors or institutions) to drive viral information flows in networks"(42) and "designed by content makers and promoted by powerful gatekeepers"(6). To simplify, bottom-up virality is when content is deemed remarkable and shared within the people, while top-down is when, for instance a company such as a TV network promotes content making it viral. This can give an impression that bottom-up forces have a more "pure" and democratic approach when sharing content, as a powerful institution from a top-down perspective may share content with greater purpose like gaining traffic on their platform, which at the most cynical sharing top-down content as an act of consumerism. The distinction between bottom-up and top-down is less black and white than Nahon and Hemsley present it. In general, viral content is a combination of both perspectives which can be difficult to comprehend in the heat of virality being shared, copied, and converted. Knowing whether the viral content originated from a powerful foci or just spread from participation of the collective public requires active observation of its spread from the moment it gains public attraction. For instance, the viral *Harlem Shake* dance from 2013 suddenly had everyone participating creating imitation videos of the dance, however the origin video didn't go viral until it was tweeted by the DJ Diplo and College Humor with 600 thousand followers each (more on Harlem Shake and its creator in Chapter 5). Another example of top-down virality is the "Double Rainbow Guy", a 2010 YouTube video featuring a man in California remarking ecstatically on a double rainbow over his home. The video was dormant, gaining minimal recognition until it was found by someone who linked the video to the American television host Jimmy Kimmel, who further shared the video with millions via Twitter which led to its virality. It's likely that the majority of virality is influenced by a powerful foci at some point during its spread, and it is likely many viral hits would have lost its memetic value if it was not shared from a top-down perspective. Another debate surrounding bottom-up and top-down perspectives is the blurred differentiation between when actors are classified as a part of the bottom-up perspective or if they are contributing as a top-down force. If it is based on

potential reach of the individual's network, is it a certain number of social media followers that determines if actors are top-down or bottom-up forces? As an actor with a moderate network (for instance, a micro-celebrity) they are still influential to participate in viral sharing, which blurs the line between a top-down or bottom-up power perspective. Nahon and Hemsley compare their top down perspective of information flow to the opinion leaders and two-step flow of communication from Katz and Lazarsfeld which they describe as "key individual(s) who are both strongly connected to internal colleagues and strongly linked to external domains" (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 42). This comparison further defuses the boundary between if sharing content is a top-down or bottom-up act, as the domains these key individuals are linked to can translate to more intimate online spaces such as closed chat rooms and private servers, which mean that top-down does not require a vast network but a solid network that promises further sharing.

Nahon and Hemsley mentioned top-down perspectives are determined by powerful *gatekeepers*. Gatekeepers are pivotal actors who determine which information gets shared, Nahon and Hemsley defines gatekeepers as "people, collectives, companies, or governments that, as a result of their location in a network, can promote or suppress the movement of information from one part of a network to another" (2013, 7). In the "Double Rainbow Guy" video, Jimmy Kimmel stands as an traditional gatekeeper as making the choice to publish the video for it to gain virality. Gatekeepers are traditionally used to describe the influence of traditional media (such as the editors deciding which content gets published on news networks), Nahon and Hemsley bring up how social networks introduce network gatekeepers which are dynamic and changeable, thus more complicated (43). Networked gatekeepers are more complex because it relates to every actor in a network, as "every tool we use on the Internet is a type of gatekeeper" (57). These tools can indicate SNSs themselves, which are true when considering how information is filtered through complex algorithms, the rules of conduct and the technical constraints and affordances of each platform. But everyone participating in sharing, linking, interacting, and so on are contributing to a form of networked gatekeeping, by selecting which content to share.

With the mass participation of networked gatekeeping in relation to virality, the information sharing power between media consumer and producer intersects and interacts with each other,

this collision of old and new media is what Henry Jenkins calls *convergence culture* (2006, 2). Gatekeeping has gone from being a power in the hands of the institutions to the power of individuals because of this convergence. This introduces new perspectives to citizen journalism which is the concept of the audience being active in creating and distributing news. In *Social Media - Communication, Sharing and Visibility,* Graham Meikle introduces this concept, he states "The convergence of content (who gets to create news and what they got to do with it), computing (the cultural form of the database) and communication (the significance of real-time news) makes possible approaches to storytelling for news and public information" (2016, 69-70)

The concept of convergence and participatory culture is also evident in Nahon and Hemsley concepts of *viral events* and most notably, viral topics. They describe them as "in terms of their speed and reach, viral topics are similar to viral events. The difference is simply that we would refer to a single item (video, tweet, game, news story, etc.) as a *viral event* and an emerging or trending topic with viral features as a *viral topic*" (2013, 37). Nahon and Hemsley bring up viral events and topics in relation to memes, which can be demonstrated using the previously mentioned examples. The "Double Rainbow Guy" YouTube video is an example of a viral event. It is a single video that is deemed remarkable by many that resulted in the video being shared, remarked and conversed. A viral topic however, is when participation requires more than sharing. For instance, in order to participate in sharing the Harlem Shake viral topic people had to create their own video dance performances and share them on SNSs. As topics require more effort from participants they can be more challenging to encourage in sharing. However, from a marketing perspective, viral topics are more valuable than events. If a company manages to get their brand associated with a viral topic, every shared unit is actively promoting that brand. When the multiplayer game *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* released in August 2020 by Mediatonic, it quickly became a viral topic. On social media iconic brands (KFC, Walmart, Konami) posted their own recreations of the Fall Guy jellybean (the player avatars) wearing brand associated outfits hoping to gain exposure from *Fall Guys* virality. Because *Fall Guys* became a viral topic, Mediatonic managed to get recognizable and popular companies to freely promote their game on social media by participating in the topic. Chapter 5 further investigates *Fall Guys* and their successful Twitter marketing strategy.

Figure 2.7 and Figure 2.8 are @kfcgaming and @WalmartCAGaming iterations of the Fall Guys figure, posted on Twitter.

2.6 Persona

With how integral social media and SNSs have become in our daily life routines, the methods we present and shape our identities have developed along with the technology. As our interaction and engagement in digital media platforms are complex so is our position of identity in our social network platforms. The term *networked self* is used by several researchers of new media to describe the complex process of digital self representation and managing digital identities. Moore, Barbour and Lee discusses the concept of networked selves and brings up Zizi Papacharissi's definition of networked self as a "term to indicate the construction of a subjective performance across multiple and simultaneous streams of social awareness that expands autonomy, potentially reduces agency, and which requires constant self-surveillance and monitoring" (2017, 1). In relation to the networked self concept, the idea of framing and maintaining a certain identity almost like a digital self-presentation in a given social context

relates to the persona concept. The term stems from Latin and originally refers to the mask worn in theatre. Today it's commonly used to describe the personality an individual uses in social relations which differentiates from the authentic true self. By "performing" a different persona, individuals can shape their identities which reflects the social context in order to "play" a role that suits the environment. These roles can be as subtle as to how we behave and adapt to the social norms between areas such as our home, workplace and friends. Persona can also be used for more refined and carefully created self-presentations at public meetings or in marketing.

With the ubiquity of social media, the importance and the different ways using persona on SNSs are relevant for in depth study. In the article *Five dimensions of Online Persona*, Moore, Barbour and Lee conduct a thorough investigation of the different persona-creating methods and perspectives in relation to how they can be applied on SNSs. The five dimensions of online personas build upon each other and view persona models in a critical lens. The five dimensions presented by are the public, the mediatized, the performative, the collective and having intentional value (2017, 2).

The first dimension is the public persona. This is the widest type of persona as it can be described as the "official" public self, which is often associated with public personalities and celebrities. This is how they present themselves to the world, highly polished, scheduled and controlled. Public personas are performed for launches, premiers, speaking engagements, and other live and mediated promotions, appearances and events (2017, 3). We can apply the public persona when internet celebrities are at conventions or events where they interact with their fans in real life. Public personas can also apply to brands, corporations and organizations as they are important public figures because of their pedagogical functions, as they help us identify new aspects of agency and risk (2017, 3). The "official public selves" are important from a marketing and industrial sense, as high-profile celebrities are representatives of their associations. For instance, a movie actor represents the movie production company as much as the actor represents themselves. Internet celebrities as public figures rarely reach the level of publicity as the most high-profile traditional celebrities, yet their roles as public personas are important as a presentation of their genre, platform and product. A fashion influencer 'publicness' can attend

social participation as a representative for Instagram, sponsors related to product commercialization and representing influencers as a public figure and their own identity.

The second dimension is the mediatised persona, which is more related to this thesis as it focuses on personas as a self-expression through various modalities. This is not new as people have mass mediatized themselves via communication technologies for many years via texts, paintings, journals, radio, etc.). Mediatised persona follows on from the public dimension as these modalities can be performed to the public, but it also touches upon Rettberg's ideas of how we perceive ourselves through digital media, for instance how we use selfies and filters to present our "ideal" self on social media.

Mediatised persona is the self-image which is identified by the accumulation of paratext over time. Moore, Barbour and Lee uses the term paratext by narratological theorist Gerard Genette (1997) which they state are "liminal devices of conventions (like red-carpet poses, characteristics, facial attributes, Instagram habits, or Facebook pages) that form a threshold of meaning between text and audience. Genette describes paratexts as heterogeneous practice and discourses acting as threshold between author, publisher, and audience. The mediated identities of online personas are accumulation of paratexts over time; appearances of film festivals and award ceremonies, for example, are an important paratextual mediatization of celebrity identity" (2017, 4). For celebrities, particularly high-profile celebrities, the accumulation of paratext shaping their public mediatised persona is crucial for their general public persona impression. First, the internet functions as a storage database saving content (like images from public presentations, premiers, etc) in an archive to always be accessed and viewed in the future. Second, the usability and ubiquity to access the archived content via the internet further enhances the position of mediatised personas as the foremost presentation of the celebrity. Figure 2.9 demonstrates this by a "quick" Google image search on "Robert Downey Jr" shows a collection of images from various movie conventions and premiers, all of them present him as a consistently very polished and stylized individual, each image function as a paratext that constructs and presents a public mediatised persona of Robert Downey Jr.
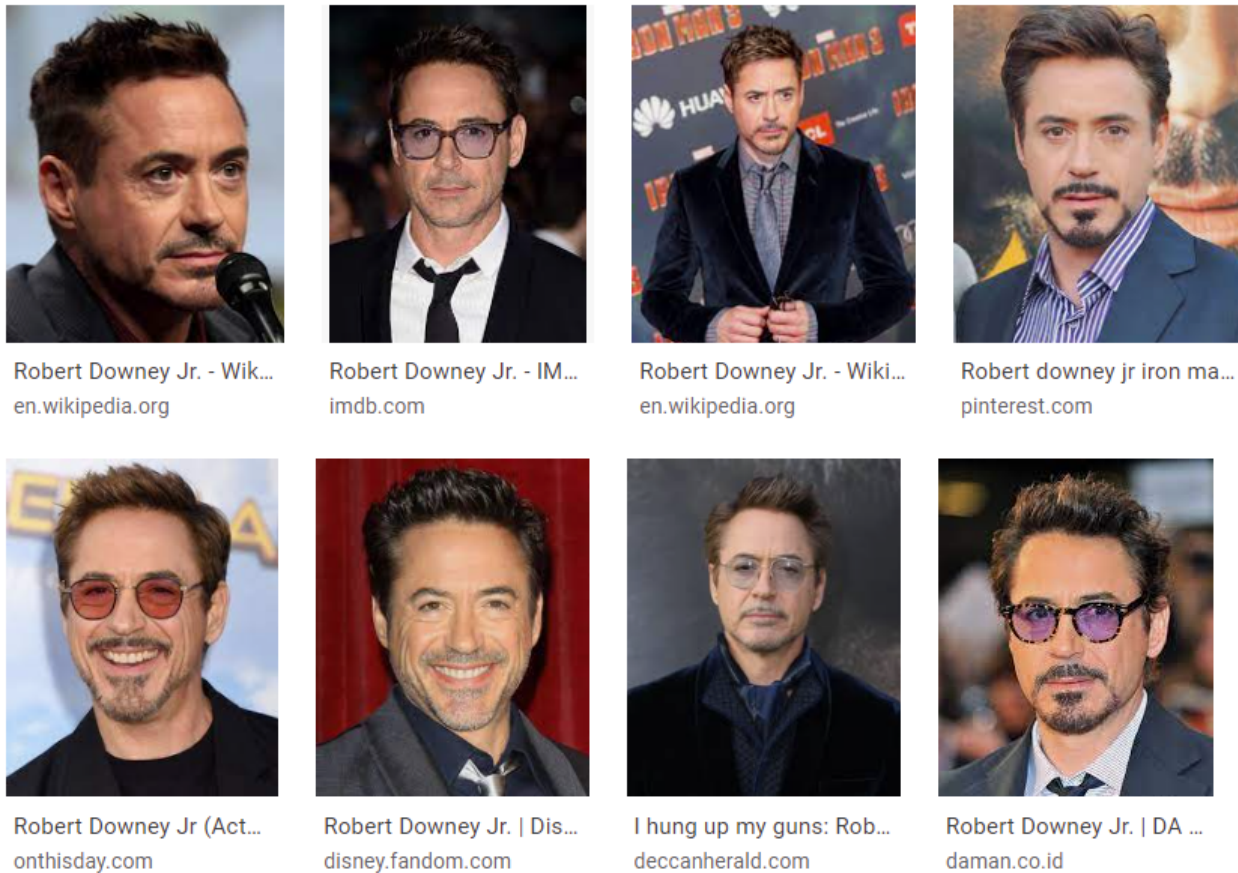
Figure 2.9 Screenshot cut from Google image search on "Robert Downey Jr.", showing a collection of images as paratexts from different occasions and appearances.

As very few have the recognition parallel that of a Marvel movie celebrity, Google images is not a sufficient media platform for the majority for mediatised personas. However, mediatised personas are very prevalent on SNSs, especially social media. For instance, Instagram profiles can visually be reminiscent of Downey Jr.'s Google image result, in that they are a collection of particularly curated and self-groomed presentations of their identities. The key difference is that the Instagram photographs used on their own accounts to present their self-shaped mediatised personas, are not paratexts as Instagram photographs is the "main text" of their content and not supplementary paratext.

How we build our online identity with filters, technology and personal traits (certain poses, faces people make for social media photos) are part of how digital platforms construct mediated

personas. For example, an influencer may only wish to post certain types of selfies in order to keep the mediatised persona they wish to maintain (only posting images at a certain angle or lighting in order to look as cute or attractive as possible). This is a very popular and important phenomena for micro-celebrities, as their presentation to mimic that of a high-profile celebrity is crucial for their persona, as well as to catch an audience's interest and keep them active.

Theresa Senft defines the method of keeping up with their mediatised persona as "a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites" (2008, 25). Micro-celebrities and anyone pursuing fame must actively perform their identity to successfully present a publicly mediatised persona. This the third performative dimension of persona. Moore, Barbour and Lee state "the public performance of the self is neither entirely 'real' or entirely 'fictional'. The accomplishments of performativity means that a persona connects together and meshes all various characteristics that are staged and presented in the everyday and intended to interact with others" (2017, p. 4). The aspect of performing our persona brings a variety of questions regarding the authenticity or sincerity of the persona. Ranging from presenting ourselves as we are in real life or to the complete opposite as fabricated or designed for a particular audience or cause.

Examples of performances that are neither entirely 'real' or entirely 'fictional' self-representation are YouTube video blogging (vlogging) where individuals present themselves "unfiltered", as how they are in real life (often from their own home) in order to be perceived as authentic. Even if these videos can be following a script, edited in post production, or the individual is using makeup or acting slightly different to be more attractive, these videos feel "real" because the presentation of the vlogger is akin to having a real time conversation with the audience, the sense of belonging can be further enhanced if the conversation is a livestream.

Rettberg states in her book *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* that self-representation began as text, with images and some sounds being added as graphical browsers were introduced (2014, 3) and that even "creating and sharing a selfie is an act of self-representation" (2014, 12). Performative persona ties into the act of actively being aware of how we interact and use social media, as simple actions as likes, favorites and retweets are part of the persona performance.

When we use selfies to present a persona we apply various filters, to further emphasize the specific version of ourselves we wish to present.

The last two perspectives of personas presented by Moore, Barbour and Lee are not as crucial to this thesis as the public, mediatised and performed, as they are more complex but still have some relevance. The fourth is the collective dimension of persona, which Moore, Barbour and Lee describe as "the dimension of persona that works to produce, seek out, and move between connections, resulting in a collective" (2017, 5). Related to the collective dimension is the concept of the *micro-public*, which Moore, Barmour and Lee describes as "micro-public is one that takes into account the practices of social media such as sharing, tagging, and mediated expression in the forms of personal images, memes, likes and dislikes" (2017, 6). This partly ties into how internet celebrities, like influencers operate on different social media for different content and audiences. However, the notion of collective persona is more complex as it indicates the potential audience in a network from each mediatised performance. For instance, an influencer may post a photograph on their Instagram to their audience, but the image can reach further bound multiple platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) via sharing, amplifying the potential for micro-publics. As Moore, Barbour and Lee states "Micro-publics have tremendous porousness, connecting to other networks effortlessly and with often unpredictable and unforeseen consequences" (2017, 6). The final dimension of persona is the value dimension, which is described as "the dimension that recognises that personas are created with a particular intention" and "how we understand the value of the personas we produce can influence how we understand the significance of the repudiation those personas maintain" (2017, 7). The value can be understood from examining the collective of the persona dimension and how the individual is reputed among a public as well as if the persona's intention has achieved its aim. The values can be to build a persona around intimacy, to gain a professional status or to attain fame or infamy. The example of the Twitch livestreamer Kaceytron used in relation to micro-celebrity is an example of an individual carefully and professionally curating a public mediatised persona where the intention (the persona value) is to create negative provotical reactions from the associated gaming community on Twitch and related social platforms.

3. Method

3.1 Methodological approach

The aim of this thesis is to investigate two selected social media accounts from two different social media platforms to understand their relationship with their audiences and how they utilize their platforms. This study examines an extremely broad topic as anyone who uses social media is either a content creator, a content consumer or a combination. We commonly associate online content creators with the primary social media functions such as producing videos, images, live streams, etc. However, "secondary functions" such as commenting, sharing, liking, etc. is also a form for contribution and content creation. Because of the expansive scale of such a study I plan to limit the scope to only two social media platforms, and one main case study per social media. This thesis will mainly be done from an in-depth qualitative perspective by observing the selected social media and gathering relevant data for the cases.

The focus will be investigating in detail the interaction between content creators and their audience, to understand which methods content creators apply to capture and keep an audience. Media consumers are no longer a passive audience but play an engaging role that largely shapes how media is used and created, especially since the evolution of Web 2.0 this engagement has grown exponentially both in terms of its technological abilities and how social media have become a dominating factor in our culture. A qualitative approach is most suited for this type of study, to accompany the broad research of the interaction between content creator, platform and audience, the thesis will use elements from multiple quantitative methods. As social media - particularly Twitter - is based on conversation, the type of language used in tweets, responses and chats, the study takes the form of a discourse analysis. As a discourse analysis the goal is to understand not only the language of social media (or internet lingo in general) but its contextual meaning as well. Discourse analysis can be useful when analysing the behaviour on Twitter, as the textual construction of a tweet such as the grammar and sentence structure is just as important as its multimodality. This is especially relevant since online discussions and communication have developed their own type of language with its constant changing lingo and

quirks. Although this type of speech is more common in our daily lives than before, it has seen a change in form alongside the evolution of social media and the birth of community driven applications like Twitch and Discord. Twitch has especially developed a lingo that has become embedded as part of audience engagement with watching others live over the internet.

Since this thesis investigates social media content creators it is natural to also have elements from a content analysis approach, this will include analyzing specific content (a tweet, or a YouTube video) in detail as a text. This entails understanding content from a cultural perspective and to examine their message in relation to their context, to understand how they make sense. By doing this the research will also be taking a multimodal approach by analysing the relationship between text, audio and video to understand how content creators apply and experience the combination of modalities.

The data gathering and research is executed in three main perspectives or sub-methods, each perspective is performed and tailored toward a specific social media platform in mind, but each perspective can be applied for all platforms. These method perspectives are facilitated around the affordances and constraints of each social media platform,

3.1.1 Archive research

This qualitative approach to gather, examine and value data from social media outlets requires an in depth multimodal investigation. With repository media the data for research is available as a digital database, which means the desktop research will function as archive research of assessing and evaluating the digital library that is the vast amount of social media content. This type of research gathering has become more challenging as the rising popularity of social media are adapting transient formats (such as YouTube adopting the livestream format from Twitch, Twitter and Instagram adapting the "my story" feature from Snapchat). As many social media functions similarly as personal blogs, content is commonly structured in an anti-chronological order where the latest content is presented first. The limitation of how to access previous content will therefore impact the research as the data gathering is relying on the social media website's functionalities, such as the options to filter content, the search function and whether comments are enabled or disabled.

Another influential aspect in researching social media as an archive is how content is affected over time. Digital media studies in general face issues of durability and longevity as technology changes and develops so does the risk of old data losing it's functionality and accessibility. When accessing content on social media there is always the potential risk of relevant content being removed either by the platform or the content creators themselves, thus using online data can be fragile.

Archive research also entails investigating relevant data from sources outside the main platforms. This is prevalent if relevant missing data (such as removed social media content) has been stored by a third party, either as a reuploaded video or a computer screenshot containing a tweet. Gathering this type of data required to browse related SNSs such as Reddit threads or discussion forums, and rely on the participation and awareness of other users. The data also needs to be verified as trustworthy, useful and ethical to be included as research material.

3.1.2 Active observations

For data that are transient and temporal, the method of study is more akin to an observation over time. This is prevalent on platforms such as Twitter, where accessing previous content is restrictive and where current topics and trends impact the content, making a study on Twitter similar to a study of a real-time conversation. Active observations are effective when analysing content creators that have large followings to get insight into audience immediate behaviour as content creators produce and upload content. If content creators delete content or it gets removed from a third party (e.g. the platform) an active study approach can manage to capture such an event that may have gone unnoticed if conducted retrospectively.

This observational method is done within a select time period (for instance a week) to observe elements such as frequency of upload, audience responses, user activity, and how the content creator places themselves in the context of the current social media discourse. The latter is very prevalent on Twitter as "Twitter is what is happening right now", in order to get a "complete picture" of the activity on Twitter an active observation may prove useful. Active observations on YouTube can capture early reactions and observe the spread and reputation of a video from its initial upload. If a video get's viral attention, active observation is crucial for documenting and

observing that process. However, the YouTube account chosen as a case study in this is currently "inactive", an active approach is irrelevant for this particular case (however, there is always the possibility for a resurgence).

Supplement data, such as articles, websites, images and videos can capture key moments that may have gone unnoticed or not be present in the observation. Gathering research relevant to the case study and its topic may help bring nuanced perspectives and highlights not prominent in the case study themselves, third-party data may also be used as paratexts to help frame the case study (as the main text).

3.1.3 Passive observations

The third method is another form of observation, but done passively. As new content is uploaded by the minute across all platforms, the possibility of potential content that can be relevant for the study is always present. This requires a lookout for potential material throughout the writing of this thesis, when casually "scrolling" social media or visiting SNSs. This approach can be useful for documenting viral topics or events quickly and effectively, as well as document the progress of the events. The challenge is deciding which content can be most valuable as opposed to others, and how to integrate the content systematically with previous writing.

This method can also give perspectives to topics outside the dedicated case studies and may prevent the thesis to be "locked" into a specific study when other methods and subjects can be applied and evaluated.

3.2 The platforms of choice

The social media platforms chosen are YouTube and Twitter. The first case study investigates how the official Twitter account associated with Mediatonic's 2020 video game *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* utilizes the Twitter platform to promote the video game, engage with the community, and in general keep active "brand" presence on social media. The investigation of @FallGuysGame emphasizes on how memes can be used as a viral topic to encourage marketing, and the effect of keeping a brand associated persona to appeal to a virtual community as potential customers. The second case study is a chronological investigation and analysis of

George Miller and his YouTube career as the culturally influential Filthy Frank, how he resigned from YouTube to pursue his ambition within music production and the audience reactions that followed. Miller additionally brings perspectives to the suddenness of virality and internet celebrities.

These two case studies are chosen for several reasons. First, both Miller and @FallGuysGame have an active audience and a large reach of viewers. Second, they both utilize their respective SNSs in new and influential ways. Third, they represent the different approaches to analysing social media content creators. @FallGuysGame is still active and posts regularly as of this writing, making the study a temporal active observation. While Miller hasn't been active on YouTube as Filthy Frank since 2017, making the study an archival research that reflects upon a specific time of YouTube's cultural history. In addition, both case studies show examples of different aspects to viral content, how it spreads and how content creators utilize the impact of viral content for their benefit.

As Twitter and YouTube will be the main platforms the case study investigations are conducted, the following segment will elaborate on the design, usage and give a general introduction of these platforms' relevance. The purpose is to explain how the platforms function and to understand what functionalities are possible and to establish their differences.

3.2.1 YouTube

YouTube is prominently a video sharing website but more recently included the option for live streaming. This thesis will only be focusing on video sharing features. The type and variation of content provided on YouTube has been partly determined by its limitations. For instance, when YouTube opened up for the option to make videos longer than 10 minutes, a rising popularity of lengthy in-depth videos (such as video essays) followed. The style of video content is also affected by other social media platforms, in 2013 YouTube was seeing a boom in videos only lasting a few seconds because of the popularity of the short-form video sharing social network platform Vine. Today both the longform and extremely short form video format reigns on YouTube. Because of this, what type of content available on YouTube is very varied and there is no true format or length that is the standard.

YouTube lets users create their own accounts where they can upload videos, subscribe to other channels, give likes and comments. How YouTube displays videos are heavily tailored by popularity and algorithms, thus what videos will appear in users' feed is based on their watch history. The elusive YouTube algorithm is a complicated set of systems determining the presence of video's popularity. It's a topic this thesis will not dive further into as it is too complex and unrelated to the purpose of the study, but it should be mentioned as a prevalent actor not only on YouTube, but in social media as a whole.

YouTube allows users to engage in conversation between content creators and other viewers by leaving comments, which is sorted either by top comments or by newest. Content creators also have the option to disable the comment section. Users can rate videos either as "like" or "dislike", determining the popularity and reputation of a video. The visibility and popularity in rating videos via a like or dislike have made the ratio of like/dislike a way to knowledge and deem the authenticity or credibility of YouTube videos. One of the most prominent features of YouTube is the subscribe function, which lets users "follow" a desired channel for their videos to appear in the designated Subscribe section. This feature is crucial for YouTube content creators as the higher number of subscriptions equals a general guaranteed higher view count. How YouTube content creators encourage viewers to subscribe without coming across as needy or desperate is crucial in gaining an audience, the common method is to include a short call-to-action in a video either telling the viewer to "Click that subscribe button" or indicate so as text.

Another important aspect that has shaped YouTube's identity is the video thumbnails. The thumbnails function as small images representing the video's content and also to visually stand out among other videos to attract potential new viewers. Thumbnail design is an art of their own. Even though they are images, most thumbnails include text elements in various font styles. Thumbnails tend to generally capture an emotion associated with the video's content, commonly done via facial exaggerated expression (often a captured moment from the video itself) to emphasize excitement, surprice, etc.

3.2.2 Twitter

Twitter's main drive is conversation as their slogan is "Twitter is what's happening in the world and what people are talking about right now" (Twitter 2020). Twitter is a social networking service where users post short messages ('tweets') visible on their timeline, which subscribed users (followers) can view in their feed. This is the most common social media structure and is also prevalent on other mainstream social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Other users can respond and interact with tweets by commenting, retweeting (reposting the tweet in their own feed), and rate the tweet by clicking the "like" button which is symbolized with a heart (unlike YouTube, there is no "dislike" button). Twitter is a highly visual based platform, conversations and replies are often embossed in multimodality like images, videos, GIFs[1] and emotes, this is reflected in Twitter's design such as how the three main functions; comment, retweet (reposting the tweet to users own feed) and like are highlighted and signified with different colors (blue for commenting, green for retweeting, and red for liking), as well as including animation when interacting with these features (such as the firework animation when clicking the "like" heart-button).

The content of Twitter is often referred to as *microblogging*, a term originating from the limitation of characters per tweet (currently at 280, doubled from 140 since 2017). Like in traditional blog style, tweets are presented in a reverse chronological order. Originally a tweet only consisted of texts but has expanded to allow images, GIFs, links (formatted as clickable images), and videoclips. The majority of tweets today use visuality in some form and are rarely text only. Because of this structure a Twitter account should be treated as a blog. In her study on blogging, Rettberg states that "to really understand blogs, you need to read them over time. Following a blog is like getting to know someone" (2014, 5).

Twitter can also be viewed as a media-dimensional gap between social media, where content creators announce updates regarding their main social media, e.g. a new video is up on YouTube, they are live on Twitch, etc. Twitter is also an arena for content creators to be more personal and participate in conversation that may not be suited for their main content platform. Twitter can

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[1] Graphics Interchange Format (GIF), an animated image format commonly used on social media and the internet in general, which produces short loop animations.

also be the platform where content creators can have a more open dialogue with their fanbase. Twitter therefore lets users further experiment with their mediatised persona, in some cases they use Twitter to present a more authentic perspective on their identity. Twitter is therefore more frequently used for business and marketing, as a method for engaging and presenting brand recognition and awareness for potential new customers.

Another important aspect of Twitter is the iconic attribute, the hashtag (#). These hashtags are placed in front of selected keywords used in a tweet, for instance when posting a tweet regarding a political opinion it may be tagged with "#politics". Clicking the hashtags reveal other tweets within the same topic, when a hashtag is used frequently by multiple users within a select timespan it may become trending, increasing its publicity and popularity. And which hashtags are trending have become an important wave to ride for those aiming for exposure. Hashtags are very prominent within marketing as they are used to encourage sharing and participation.

3.3 Theoretical material

As seen in previous chapters, this thesis will touch upon, reflect and apply several theories relevant to the subject of relation between social media content creators, the platform and the audience. This relation is extremely broad and can in theory be applied to any interaction on SNSs, which complicates the process of selecting relevant and useful literature. The chosen theoretical material is based on literature used in research papers, articles and previous masters theses in digital culture. Following previous research is a solid method to find literature of high quality that prevents this study from potentially losing track of its academic route. The theoretical material includes elements from early legacy researchers such as Sherry Turkle and Henry Jenkins, who established some of the earliest examples on audience behaviour on the digital medium. To more recent studies and specific studies such Crystal Abidin on internet celebrities and Ryan Milner studies on memes. Supplementary to the key research material is sub-theory from online articles, YouTube videos, online dictionaries, and websites. When applying "user-generated" content in academic research it is important to examine, evaluate and decide if they are reliable sources of information.

Some of the key researchers in relation to content, platform and audience used in this thesis is Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley's *Going Viral* (2013) which establish the different methods virality can occur and the concepts of gatekeepers. Jill Walker Rettberg's *Blogging* (2014) and *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (2014) brings up inspiring contemporary perspectives to identity and self-representation on social media. Many researchers have helped contribute to making an understanding of key elements such as Felicia Wu Song and *Virtual Communities* (2009), Nancy K. Baym and *Personal Connections in The Digital Age* (2010), Christopher Moore, Kim Barbour, and Katje Lee and their perspectives on personas in the article *Five Dimensions of Online Persona* (2017) . The list of research is extensive and the majority of the literature will not be used comprehensively but rather on occasions to bring understanding to specific topics when needed.

3.4 Social media challenges

Studying social media comes with a set of problems inherited by the nature of the medium's temporal design. First, content on social media can be difficult to access by time, as most social platforms focus on transient content and/or heavily diminishes the relevance of older content. The activity of social media accounts, e.g. it's nearly impossible without an external source, to find tweets dating years back as they cannot be sorted. YouTube provides a search function, and uploaded videos can be sorted by date or popularity for finding a particular video easier. In the online article *Google Explains How YouTube Search Works,* Southern demonstrates that the search result does prioritize relevance, engagement, and quality. Southern also addresses the personalization factor, which is how the search function is tailored by previous content, such as if someone who watches a lot of sports search for "cricket" it's more likely that YouTube recommends the sport cricket rather than nature videos with crickets in them (2020). These are all small factors that may impact the ability to find relevant content, and how social media platforms can be viewed as gatekeeping obscure, unpopular and sub-par quality videos.

Second, there is always the risk that valuable content may get removed, likely without warning. Studying digital media can be a fragile project, which is part of the challenge of analysing temporary internet content on social media. When studying social media in real time there is

always the risk of the account being involved in elements that could suddenly shift the direction and relevance of the study. If valuable content gets deleted, while there may be mirror content functioning as backups, the most likely scenario is that the content is simply gone.

Another challenge aspect is not the challenge in the study itself, more accurately its temporal relevance. As social media evolves so does the way it is used, and the evolving is rampant. Essentially this study only reveals social media in its current time and only addresses elements that are "shown on the screen". The methods used in terms of virality may not be applied with the future of social media as the technology evolves.

3.5 Ethical concerns

Finally, ethical issues should be addressed. This thesis is consciously using social media content that does not reveal private information or risk revealing private information that could damage the mediatised individual's personal life. The information used in this thesis is already publicly available from the content creators themselves as a mark of consent. The only deviation is a particular YouTube video used in Chapter 5 on George Miller. The YouTube video *FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF* was originally uploaded on Miller's channel "FilthyFrankTV" but later removed by Miller himself. The video used in the analysis is a reupload by "El Ve", an unrelated YouTube channel that happened to store the video and reupload it. This brings up some ethical questions as it reveals some personal information about Miller that he may not wish to be public. However, as the video is public this thesis will not expose any further information that is not already in the video and as long as the reupload is available it is a valuable source for the case study.

Chapter 5 also uses screenshots provided by a Reddit user which captures tweets from @jinsolbi and the following retweets. The @jinsolbi account is now suspended, however the tweets are fairly anonymous and reveal little private information regarding the users behind @jinsobli and the response tweets.

4. Case Study 1: @FallGuysGame

4.1 Chapter introduction

Memes have for many years been heavily associated with online communities and virtual conversations. Chapter 2 introduced and showcased how memes are used in conversation, as participation of virtual communities and how they are used to engage in viral topics. Memes are a heavily influential and participated topic, and can seem to be unavoidable when engaging socially online. Memes are a phenomenon that many are familiar with, but often deemed silly, unimportant, or something not worth investigating thoroughly. This chapter will continue using the established definition cited in Chapter 2, from *A Methodology for Meme Virality Prediction,* which defines memes as a "unit of information, which is copied and spread very fast on the internet, maybe with slight variations" (Smitha et.al. 2018, 87).

In *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*, Meikle states that "A meme is not something that is done to people – it is something that people do. This fundamental dimension is missed by the common metaphor of viral in relation to this kind of online circulation. Media are not viruses; media texts and images are not viruses; ideas are not viruses. Rather, ideas, images and texts are things that people choose to make and share" (2016, 50). For something to become a meme, it needs to be remarkable in the sense that it is worthwhile for being picked up by users, and then edited and shared with others. This remarkability is what what Milner (2016) describes as the *memetic* value, which is the process of a text (as a meme) gets circulated and transformed across networks, memetic also emphasizes the temporal aspect of memes as they only resurface and are activity in varying time periods until their memetic value is lost.

In a sense memes function as a digital word-of-mouth, naturally finding their usage in conversations. They have an ability that can be utilized for a potential marketing strategy for free brand exposure in social networking sites, as well as shape communities surrounding the marketed product. "Learning" how memes are constructed, spread, and culturally appreciated can seem simple in theory but prove a challenge in practice. We share what we find *interesting*, the idea of sharing as an advertising method is appealing because sharing occurs organically.

Despite having a comprehensive understanding of memes, creating them can be paradoxical, as creating memes by design or with a specific purpose contradicts memes nature as a unit of information that spreads organically. Yet, there have been an uprising of memes for brand marketing, especially on popular SNSs. Memes often play with their unique sense of humor, usually targeted towards the millennial and zoomer generations. Memes take on many forms from news, videos, games, tweets to individuals and celebrities. While this chapter will touch upon the popular image macro format, it will also examine other mematic formats and interactions.

We are selective about what information we share, but information characteristics, like humor, surprise, novelty, resonance, and quality, can influence our decision to share (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 61 and 63). However, meme marketing can easily be dismissed or – for a lack of a better word – fail completely. Memes expire as quickly as they emerge, the temptation of jumping on the latest "meme fad" can therefore be catastrophic, as internet audiences tends to remember (and sometimes never forget) negative experiences much longer than positive experiences, thus meme marketing is often viewed as "trying too hard" and may damage the brand's reputation if done inappropriately. Therefore, "meme-marketing" requires substantial insight on the culture and discourse surrounding the current most popular memes from social media and how to apply them in a marketing setting.

This brings us to the question: what are the characteristics of meme marketing? What differentiates successful social media marketing compared to unsuccessful marketing? In this chapter I will investigate a brand associated Twitter account, with the purpose to understand how they engage virtually with a community using memes as a method for conversation. This chapter will also include multimodal analysis of social media interaction and communication to keep in line with the research topic of behaviour between audience, platform and content creators.

Social media are networked database platforms that combine public and personal communication (Meikle 2016, 6). Each keyword on this description portrays unique values of social media, and for this study I am particularly interested in the combination of public and personal communication, as the most interesting and often most successful in acclaiming publicity and a

loyal fanbase are the social media profiles that appear personal and authentic. How social media can connect audiences and content creators on a personal level stems from its blogging ancestry.

The chosen Twitter account is @FallGuysGame, the official account associated with the 2020 multiplayer video game *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* by Mediatonic. @FallGuysGame is operated by Oliver Hindle, who is hired by Mediatonic as the senior community manager for the game. Engaging with an online community requires time, creative planning and high persistence, thus hiring a dedicated third party for this task is beneficial as this gives the game designers more time to focus on the game's development. In order to have a successful conversation between the game and the game's audience, the community manager is required to have an understanding of both the game system, mechanics, news, and updates as well as the game's reputation and general discourse.

It has been stated that creativity without strategy is art, and creativity with strategy is called advertising (Levin 2020, xii). In an interview for *Game Revolution,* Hindle states that most gaming companies on Twitter can either appear too "dry and professional" or try too hard to fit in with their community (Tamburro 2020). When Fall Guys released in August 2020 it gained high critical praise, but rarely had a game's Twitter account shared the spotlight. Hindle uses Twitter in a creative and unique way which attracts those with an interest in social media branding.

4.2 Background, aesthetics and gameplay

Figure 4.1 Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout game cover.

Before conducting the Twitter analysis, it is important to examine *Fall Guys* as a game and how it places itself within an established industry embedded with its own culture, language, and community. Just like Twitter, *Fall Guys* is categorized as new media, and to understand new media we need to consider both the technological features of a medium and the personal, cultural, and historical presumptions and values those features evoke (Baym 2010, 22). The game's design and aesthetics influence the associated social media profile's direction and can be analyzed as a groundwork for artistic cohesiveness between *Fall Guys* the game and its official Twitter account.

The aesthetics of video games is a major factor in shaping their identity, which is crucial for any product that aims to stand out among its peers and to be deemed memorable and remarkable. *Fall Guys* has a striking visual style, mainly consisting of vivid pastel colors, soft geometry and plays with sweet materials by decorating the game world with elements such as sweets and fruits. *Fall Guy's* aesthetics can give a notion of playfulness, innocence, or even "childishness". *Fall*

Guy's style is also a nod towards the gameshow aesthetics which *Fall Guys* is heavily influenced from. Every promotional artwork includes the recognizable jellybean-inspired "Fall Guy" character in various outfits and costumes. This is the player character and functions similarly as an avatar. Players can customize their own "Fall Guy" with different colors, costumes, emotes and more. Avatars play a central role in self-representation and identity in games (and digital communities in general), an aspect the designers behind *Fall Guys* are well aware of, as these jellybeans are seen all over their promotional art, a trait which carries over to their social media strategy.

The objective of *Fall Guys* is to win a series of obstacle course minigames inspired by television game shows such as *Wipeout* and *Takeshi's Castle*. For each minigame a certain number of players gets eliminated and the winners proceed to the next minigame. When there are only a handful of players left a final minigame occurs and the last player remaining or the first to reach the goal (depending on the minigame) wins the game and receives a crown. *Fall Guys* is a *battle royale* game, recognized for its elimination or "last-man-standing" game style. The genre gained its popularity from the success of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. Battle royale games have reappeared in various forms and iterations, each with their own take and additions to the genre. Most battle royales are shooters, a genre that is associated with online competitive gaming and highly popular on the streaming website Twitch. *Fall Guys* deviates from this norm by being a third-person platform game with a colorful and whimsical art-style. The gameplay, like the game's aesthetics, is designed to be inclusive for new players as the controls are easy to learn and relatively simple compared with other battle royale games. In competitive games, skilled players may tend to alienate new players, because of the level of complexity and meta-knowledge required to achieve high-level play. Simply explained; opposed to the traditional "easy to learn, but difficult to master" approach, *Fall Guys* inclusive gameplay results in an approach more akin to "easy to learn, but also easy to master". However, the focus on "inclusiveness" has resulted in some debate among players if the game is too simple, resulting in the opposite where players who aim for high level play can't achieve this because of the restriction in gameplay. Another debated gameplay aspect among players are the team-games. Among the possible minigames are games where all players get divided into three or four teams, the team with the lowest score when the round is over loses, eliminating all the players on the losing team. The argument by

players is that winning a team game completely depends on the teammates players randomly get assigned, as there is no way to communicate with teammates. Players can only hope their team is skilled enough that they do not lose. Because of this team-games have gained a stigma among the *Fall Guys* community

Since the game's release in August 2020, @FallGuysGame account has gained a steady number of followers residing currently at 1,5 million followers as of this writing. The game quickly went viral after its release, thanks to impressive marketing, addictive gameplay and being free on PS Plus for PlayStation 4 users during August 2020. Within weeks after its release, it had already stumbled into millions of PlayStations and PC players across the world (Barsby 2020). This form of virality is a combination of Nahon and Hemsley's two perspectives of how something becomes viral. Oliver Hindle, the *Fall Guys* community manager, builds the game's reputation through giveaways of beta keys to influencers or as prizes on community platforms such as Discord, Twitch and Twitter. This method of building communication and awareness are signs of the "bottom-up" perspective for viral content which are described by Nahon and Hemsley as made up of patterns of human attention and sharing, as well as how we influence each other within our immediate networks" (2013, 42). The PlayStation Plus promotion and publicity at massive gaming conventions such as E3, are signs of "top-down" forces of virality where powerful foci like actors and institutions drive viral information flows in networks (2013, 43). In this case, Sony acts as a form of gatekeepers who control the impact of information when they choose to include *Fall Guys* for the exclusive PS Plus deal in August 2020.

4.3 Identity of the jellybean

Figure 4.2 PC screenshot depicting Fall Guys main menu in game.

I mentioned that the "Fall Guy" character was prominently featured in *Fall Guys* promotional artwork, they are an iconic aspect of the game and @FallGuysGame does not shy away from using this to their advantage. They serve two main functions I wish to highlight; the first is as mentioned how "Fall Guy" acts as a player expression and identity which is also their "gameplay" purpose, the second is the "Fall Guy" as a social media branding and marketing tool.

Video games and identity studies have been conducted as early as mid-90s by Sherry Turkle, where she investigates how Multi-User Domains (MUDs) can be examples of how computer-mediated communication can serve as a place for the construction and reconstruction of identity (1995, p. 14). MUDs are text-based, fashioned by roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Because of MUDs text-based nature, the only limits are players' creativity: players become authors when constructing new selves through social interaction. In contrast, as a battle royale multiplayer game, the social interaction in *Fall Guys* is extremely limited. Players cannot communicate verbally or through text, but only through a select few character animations (emotes), like waving and dancing. Compared to most multiplayer games,

Fall Guys have a high restriction on social interactivity, this may be because the developers wish to avoid toxic behavior in-game, which can damage the game's reputation and discourse. Because of the restriction the options for player expression are heavily controlled by the *Fall Guys* developers (who designed the costumes, emotes, etc.), and by extension; @FallGuysGame (as community influence).

In *Fall Guys* players can customize the player jelly-bean avatar within a range of options; clothes, pants, emotes, colors and patterns. Resulting in dozens of colorful jelly bean characters jumping, sliding, and falling all over the game map as they try their best to reach the finish line or win a team game. This type of customization is very light compared to other online games, especially social world games such as *VR Chat* and *Second Life* serves more as rewards than tools for identity. Still, they play large roles in several factors.

The items for customization provide four functions to the game; first, as mentioned, is to reward players for time spent in-game and skilled players as bonuses to keep them engaged with the game over time. Second, it gives players the option to customize their avatar for creativity and self-expression. Third, as an extra revenue for the game's developers and publishers as in-game currency can be purchased by players to gain access to exclusive content or gain content quicker.

The fourth function of *Fall Guys* character customization was briefly touched upon in Chapter 2. This is how *Fall Guy*s customization opens up for the potential of branding on social media. When *Fall Guys* released in August 2020, PC players who pre-ordered the game would receive an exclusive Fall Guy outfit featuring third-party characters from the *Half-Life* video game series. *Fall Guys* continued promoting third party content and it quickly became a viral topic on social media. An important factor for this trend is the simple design of the jellybean Fall Guy characters, they are easy to replicate, easing the process for brands to create their own version of the Fall Guy character. In that sense the characters have a high memetic value as they are easily replicated. Another factor to the success of *Fall Guys* as a viral topic is the distinctness and recognizability of the characters, no matter what outfit they are presented in they are still easily spotted as a character from the *Fall Guys* video game because of how iconic the jellybean design is.

4.4 Avoiding controversy with memes

As tweets structured as short messages containing few sentences, a single video or image, self-expression on Twitter tends to be more visual based than textual based. This is not only because of the text limit, but also because users who quickly scroll through their timeline are easily distracted by visual elements rather than textual. @FallGuysGame posts multiple tweets (about 2-5) every single day, each tweet containing some form of visual modality in varying degrees, ranging from tweets including only a single video, hyperlinks or images, to text-based tweets decorated with emotes. @FallGuysGame does not shy away from drawing attention to other users by addressing posts with the '@' sign. These graphic resources can function as a compensation for paralinguistic resources in face-to-face interaction, such as gestures and facial expressions (Seargeant & Tagg 2014, 166-167).

The account shows signs to what is considered an "advertising medium", in which any self-representation or self-advertising is linked to commercial advertising. This may be the reason for the existence of the Twitter account, by including a link to the Steam purchase website in @FallGuysGame profile account, the audience is only one click away from turning into consumer (Bermejo 2007, 17).

In regard to video game based virtual communities, players tend to evaluate the game's quality based on their experiences from the game's community. This evaluation is particularly affected by the most vocal in the community, which is usually the group most devoted (the fanbase). @FallGuysGame's origin may be for that of advertising, but Twitter is a social media platform which further advances the role of @FallGuysGame not only as advertisement but as a way to communicate to new audiences. Because of its social media status, the @FallGuysGame becomes the "face" of *Fall Guys*, an outlet for players to express themselves regarding the game. Players sharing their opinions on video games (or any product they care for) online is a guarantee and is not a new phenomenon. What has changed is how "close" their voices have become to the actual game developers, before social media and Web 2.0 such debates and criticism took place in "locked" SNSs such as fan groups, and forums. Twitter opens for a whole new level of

communication, with new forms of voicing complaints and criticism.

Figure 4.3 PC screenshot of Twitter depicting a conversation from October 4, 2020 between "@FallGuysGame" and "@maxbridgland".

Figure 4.3 demonstrates someone using Twitter to express their negative opinion on social media, this example was brought up by Maxwell Jeffery in an online article as an example of *toxicity* among players (2020). Describing a virtual community as "toxic" has become an identification of hostile behavior within a community (regularly video game communities), especially that of skilled players bullying or abusing newer players for their lack of experience.

@maxbridgland's tweet includes indications towards toxic behavior. It is a negative review of *Fall Guys*, and according to research, online audiences pay more attention to negative than positive reviews (Vàsquez 2014, p. 70). In this case, the tweet by @maxbridgland does have more "likes" and comments than most replies, indicating the tweet did get more attention than

most responses. There is also the matter of rhetoric and unproved statements used in @maxbridgland's critique that may awaken readers' impulse to reply.

This is a very typical "internet rant comment" on several levels. First, the tweet itself is short and on point but with a lack of evidence in their arguments (the shortness is of course also a result of Twitter's letter restriction per tweet). Second, the content of the tweet by @maxbridgland does not correspond to the topic brought up in the original tweet by @FallGuysGame, which means that @maxbridgland likely used their latest tweet at the time as a method to get their message across. Third, even though this is a direct response to @FallGuysGame they may not be the intended audience of the tweet, as the tweet will be visible for the followers of @maxbridgland and followers of @FallGuysGame who accessed the comments. This is a mediatised quasi-interaction where @maxbridgland comment isn't addressed to no in particular, except for people with a varying degree of interest in *Fall Guys* as a game.

Negative comments like @maxbridgland's can be quite frequent among prolific social media accounts, and seems like an avoidable aspect of virtual communities. At the launch of *Fall Guys*, the game suffered occasional server difficulties. This resulted in the game being unplayable for a while, and in anger many players resorted to reply to angry comments on @FallGuysGame.

Figure 4.4. Screenshot from Twitter depicting a conversation from August 4, 2020 between @AlfredFluffy and @FallGuysGame.

Figure 4.4 is another example of a negative Twitter reply, in this case @FallGuysGame responded with "They don't let me go near the servers, apparently I'm too clumsy", demonstrating how to use humor on social media to their benefit, humor can contribute to an

individual's online ethos, or the type of identity they wish to project in computer-mediated communication context (Vàsquez 2014, 82). @FallGuysGame also plays with the established light-hearted and whimsical nature in *Fall Guys* aesthetic from the video game, which is applied in their performed mediatised social media persona while also keeping the SNSs discourse maxim of "having fun". The method of responding to negativity or criticism in a playful manner is a remedy @FallGuysGame uses multiple times on their social media account.

Figure 4.5 Screenshot of @FallGuysGame Twitter from August 11, 2020.

Figure 4.5 is a tweet by @FallGuysGame where they encourage "tag someone who gives off strong YELLOW TEAM energy". In this context "tag" means to mark someone with the '@' tag in a reply by the original @FallGuysGame tweet. Encouraging to "tag someone" is effective in marketing as by participating in "tagging" the tagged user gets notified about the tweet by extension they get notified about the game. The method of encouraging participation, sharing and awareness by tagging is not uncommon, what is particularly interesting in this tweet is the "strong YELLOW TEAM energy" part. This is an inside-joke referring to the team game modes in *Fall Guys*, more implicitly it referred to the criticism from players regarding the "unfairness" of team games. As players get selected into teams randomly during team games, the chance of winning is highly reliant on other players' skills which is why many players feel losing in a team game can be unfair. @FallGuysGame addresses this concern in a similar method as addressing the server issues, by keeping it light-hearted and humorous. The yellow team in particular does

not differentiate from the other teams, @FallGuysGame uses the team only to participate in the "negativity" towards team games from players perhaps with a sense of irony included. @FallGuysGame channels the general player negativity into participation. It also demonstrates how @FallGuysGame has insight into the game's discourse among its players and how they use the discourse to their advantage.

4.5 Memes as user generated content

We often use social media to share things we are excited about, in hopes that those in our network will acknowledge the enthusiasm by engaging in conversation. For branding, using social networking sites as a marketing tool can be very effective as a sort of a digital word-to-mouth. Generating attention, publicity, awareness on the internet can be described as *hyping* people up. Meikle states that *hype* language is native to the web and is associated with the new level of self-branding and marketing of Web 2.0 (2016, 13-14). @FallGuysGame demonstrates how creativity can be beneficial for branding and marketing on social media.

While keeping an audience engaged and responding to feedback from the game's community on social media can be a demanding job, equally as important is the activity on social media before the game is released. The month leading up to *Fall Guy's* release August 2020 @FallGuysGame was just as active on social media encouraging participation and promoting the then up and coming indie game. During this time, Mediatonic was in the pre-release marketing process of *Fall Guys,* generating hype on social networks, notably Twitch and Twitter. Figure 4.6 is one of the many examples of this, this one in particular is from late July and demonstrates how *Fall Guy'*s community manager, Oliver Hindle, creatively and carefully used Twitter as a method for branding and marketing before *Fall Guys* reached mainstream attention.

Figure 4.6 "Woman yelling at cat" meme and a Twitter screenshot depicting the recreation by @FallGuysGame

The tweet encourages users to "add your caption to this meme". The image in particular is a recreation of a popular image macro meme, which consists of a screenshot from *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* combined with a Tumblr image of a white cat at a diner. The meme is an example of what Meikle describes as *remix culture*, which describes the way in which we now take digital material from one context and set it in another, and remixing found material is one of the essential aspects of daily digital experience (2016, 50 and 56). @FallGuysGame takes this concept further by recreating the image with *Fall Guys* characters replacing the characters from *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and the diner cat. Now this method may seem a bit "out of touch" or trying too hard to fit in with a certain community. The creation of memes happens through culture, and needs to be accepted by a community to truly become a meme, thus "meme-parodies" may be seen as forced by some. However, from a promotional standpoint, all that matters truly is to keep producing content on social media in order to gain awareness. At worst, no one will bother creating their own *Fall Guys* meme and the whole "stunt" will quickly join the ever-growing vast ocean of forgotten internet memes, at the best the image will be picked up by a strong network, spread and become viral. In this case, each Twitter post with their own *Fall Guys* meme creation becomes a free advertisement of *Fall Guys* within the network of the poster.

By accessing the replies from the original @FallGuysGame template post, only a handful of users made their own creations in hope of getting a free copy. For the image to have a marketable value, it needs to be spread in order to reach as many viewers as possible, each viewer is a possible customer. Reach on social media is referred to in two distinct methods; either reach by numbers, which is the reach in terms of people exposed to the content, or reach by networks, which is the reach of the distance the information travels by bridging multiple networks (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 29). Each method can gain high revenue, for instance, if only one person posts a meme, but that person has a high following, the reach by network is low but the reach in numbers is high. The opposite can also happen, if many people post their versions of the meme, but their followers do not respond to the original post, the reach by number is high but the network is low.

In figure 4.6 @FallGuysGame encourages participation by captioning the images, it is an attempt form @FallGuysGame to encourage memetic participation from users on Twitter as well as encourage creativity (making their own meme) and competition (win a free game). As the image includes the Fall Guy jellybean character each recreation of the image also markets the game to their own audience, spreading the awareness of the game into networks beyond @FallGuysGame reach.

4.6 Chapter conclusion

As @FallGuysGame has been active every day on Twitter since before *Fall Guys* release in August 2020, this chapter covers only a fragment of the engagement between @FallGuysGame and their audience on Twitter. Yet, this chapter has highlighted some of the key aspects of the methods and techniques used throughout their social media history. Oliver Hindle, the community manager hired by Mediatonic and operator of @FallGuysGame, displayed the methods of staying consistent by using memes, quirky responses, collaborations, and more can be applied to keep engaged with an audience. *Fall Guys* gained viral attention during August 2020, which is not uncommon during a video game's release month. However, what was unique was the attention in media @FallGuysGame gained, never before had the associated social media profile shared a video game's attention during release. @FallGuysGame success, as touched

upon in this chapter, lies in Hindle's understanding of how to apply the aesthetics established in *Fall Guys* and convert them into a social media persona, creating a platform emphasizing the light-hearted humor, creativity and general nature from the game. @FallGuysGame demonstrates several advantages of how memes can effectively be applied to engage with a social media audience from several perspectives. The re-creation of the "yelling cat at restaurant" meme highlights both how the definition of meme as a "unit of information, which is copied and spread very fast on the internet, maybe with slight variations" (Smitha et al. 2018, 87) can be applied to encourage participation and creativity while also contributing to marketing *Fall Guys* presence. @FallGuysGame also publicly showcases how to respond to negative criticism and feedback while staying in touch with the established persona.

This behaviour, while successful in terms of attention and media coverage, begs the question if the "meme approach" to social media marketing is suffuaicable in general. Much of the success of @FallGuysGame can trace to the aesthetics of the game supporting the social media platform goal to keep a light-hearted and fun persona. Another consequence of a memetic approach to social media marketing is the reception and reputation surrounding the game's discourse over time. Memes tend to generally have a short lifespan; how this reflects the game's discourse will later be discussed in the final chapter.

5. Case Study 2: George Miller

5.1 Chapter introduction

In her studies from *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995)*,* Sherry Turkle interviews several active players of Multi-User Domains (MUDs), MUDs are text based virtual worlds where all self representation is constructed by the users as textual descriptions (such as the name of users avatars and their appearances). The interaction between the MUD world and other users are done via text as well. Turkle describes two types of MUDs, the first one are "adventure MUDs", which are the most reminiscent of their Dungeon & Dragons heritage, the players engage in medieval fantasy landscapes where the object of the game is to gain experience points by killing monsters, explore, and find treasure or gold. The other type of MUDs, and the one most studied by Turkle, are the social MUDs. These MUDs are more open social spaces where the users can play whatever captures their imagination and interact with other players.

There are several interesting key points from Turkle's study I want to extract from her book into this chapter. The first is the notion of the multiple self, Turkle states that the one can be many (as in one user can operate in multiple MUDs with multiple personas) and the many can be few (Turkle encountered a character named Dr. Sherry played by two students conducting a MUD research). Many of the interviewed MUD users operated several MUD characters for different occasions and purposes, ranging from different ages, genders and even species. MUD users seized the opportunity to experience aspects of themselves that they either found impossible or ashamed to explore in the real world, MUD provides a safe barrier of anonymity for them to explore these new notions of self. Turkle describes MUD participation akin to performance art, street theater, or improvisation and that many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed or matched.

The second is Turkle's notion of culture of simulation—that users of the computer are willing to adopt alternative selves as well as alternative others. MUD users are aware of the fact that the girl they are having a romantic relationship with could likely be a man in real life, yet continue the relationship because the stimulation of engaging with a virtual girl is real enough. Turkle's

studies stand as evidence that computers have been used as tools for us to shape new identities long before Web 2.0 and social media and despite MUDs limitations as a text based system, users are still perceiving these interactions as intimate and real. Her studies are also an early example of dividing or portraying certain aspects of oneself on different computer networks.

Today, Turkle's studies on MUDs pose some interesting questions regarding identity and how virtual worlds can be used as an escape or coping mechanism with social struggles in real life. Aspects of her studies may seem outdated—MUDs as they are presented in the studies are a thing of the past. Yet, text roleplay still exists in various forms and is applied for instance in chat roleplay in popular role playing games such as *World of Warcraft*. Virtual space roleplaying has evolved with the technology, most notably virtual reality (VR) headsets have led to a rising popularity of virtual chat based games such as *VR Chat* where users engage with first person vision and interact via voice and movement (using VR controllers or full body tracking technology).

Turkle's studies raised multiple questions and aspects of self identity, one of them was how a single individual could operate as multiple personas in a closed virtual space. This chapter aims to examine similar questions of multiple personas, but take the setting from the closed and few into the many and public. To understand and compare a potential link between the self representation of MUDs to the self representation possibilities of SNSs. Internet celebrities are known for adopting certain personas in order to appeal to a potential audience, for instance, the former Twitch video game streamer Dr. Disrespect gained popularity by performing a persona inspired by the stereotypical semi-aggressive competitive gamer to pander to a male teenage audience because of his loud and dominating behaviour are appealing aspects of the game genres he was streaming. Internet influencers may use phrases or nicknames for their audiences as a method to create a sense of intimacy between the influencer and their audience, but it also helps in constructing the virtual community attached to the influencer (the "fanbase") as the audience nickname becomes an "identity tag" for members of the virtual community. This is prevalent on YouTube where content creators can have longer conversations with their audience because of YouTube's format. As an example, fashion and makeup YouTuber Charisma Star always welcomes her viewers with the line "Hey, my beautiful shining stars!" (2018), where viewers

respond enthusiastically and positively, some stating "Bless you and your family" followed by heart-emojis.

Turkle's MUD studies raised some questions regarding relationships in the digital world and how computer users accept the screen interface as the reality, with the world of SNSs and especially social media these relationships are parasocial. Parasocial relationships are the relationship viewers attach to mass media personalities, with social media and the new methods for content creators to publicize, mediatise and perform their personas, the increased audience participation via the media themselves (comments, liking, sharing, etc) and extended community platforms such as Discord, complicates the aspect of parasocial relationship as the audience are not restricted to consuming content passively. The increased interaction and additional opportunities amplifies the attachment an audience can have to content creators as well as their expectations, as the audience no longer interacts passively they can impact and influence the reputation and social discourse through their interactions.

Just like the MUD players from Turkle's studies engage with different personalities tied to different "worlds", this chapter will investigate a particular individual who similarly as the MUDs provide unique worlds for self-identity and self-expressions uses SNSs as a way to experiment with different aspects of creativity and self-expression but to a public. As stated in Chapter 2, it is common for internet celebrities to operate on multiple social media platforms and maintain several platforms for specific purposes and content. Abidin (2018) exemplifies this by how an influencer uses Instagram to present the ideal self and persona by carefully and tastefully curated selfies, Twitter is for the selfies that doesn't make the cut for Instagram, and lastly Snapchat selfies are for outtakes, humoristic "ugly face" selfies to give an impression of fun.

While many internet celebrities utilize multiple social media platforms to deliberately portray different aspects of their identity for each platform, they are all connected under the same "umbrella" that is the celebrity's persona. This chapter however, expands the dimension of social media performance by examining an individual who operates multiple social media platforms but keeps them separated, utilized for different purposes and audiences. What potential do these platforms have in experimenting not only with different identities and creativities, but also how these divisions and identities reach separate audiences, and what happens if these audiences

collide? To answer these questions, this chapter will conduct a chronological analysis of the public identities and personas presented by George Miller, an individual with an interesting backstory regarding the relationship between audience, platform and content creator. George Miller made his "claim to fame" on YouTube as the parody character Filthy Frank, the absurd humor of Filthy Frank and his friends (also portrayed by Miller) would dominate YouTube's culture from 2011 until 2017. Unbeknownst to many, at the same time Miller was creating Filthy Frank videos for YouTube, he also experimented more artistically with music production on the music distribution platform SoundCloud under the alias Joji. Miller kept Filthy Frank and Joji separated because they differed in style, performance and audience. Miller has also stated that music was his passion, and that FilthyFrank was more akin to a "hobby project", which is why he quit production of FilthyFrank to pursue his music career as Joji, which Miller announced in 2017 via Twitter shortly after revealing his true identity on YouTube. Today, Miller has released several albums as Joji that as of this writing have over 14 million monthly listeners on Spotify. Whenever a new Joji music video is published on Youtube, commenters are quick to reminisce Miller's past as "the man who ate a sandwich while smoking two cigarettes with his nose". Even though Joji is making appearances on traditional media, it was 2013 where Miller made his first notable success.

5.2 George Miller - an unknown popularity

On January 30th 2013 the YouTube channel "DizastaMusic" uploaded a three and a half minute long YouTube video titled *FILTHY COMPILATION #6 - SMELL MY FINGERS*. YouTube compilation videos were rising to their peak popularity in 2013, montage videos which assembled the best part of other videos, which could be highlights from sports, video games, fail videos, and more was elevating YouTube participatory culture. The video clips in *FILTHY COMPILATION #6 - SMELL MY FINGERS* - and "DizastaMusic" other compilation videos - differentiated from the YouTube norm in that the clips used was the creator himself portraying different characters interacting with each other in crude and absurd situations instead of using clips from other YouTube videos. *FILTHY COMPILATION #6 - SMELL MY FINGERS* is particularly remarkable because of the very first skit in the video. The skit features four people dressed in full body costumes, dancing in a small cluttered apartment. The four similarly dance

in a monotonous style to the song "Harlem Shake" until they start spastically shaking and jerking their arms and shoulders when the song's bass drops.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot of DO THE HARLEM SHAKE (ORIGINAL) uploaded February 2, 2013

The dance was quickly replicated by other YouTubers, the channel "TheSunnyCoastSkate" uploaded their version on February 2nd 2013 titled *The Harlem Shake v1 (TSCS original)* with slight alterations such as only one person dancing before the bass drop and jump cut into everybody dancing. This version became the iconic "Harlem Shake" dance which quickly became a viral phenomenon. By the end of February 2013 BBC (who followed the graze during the pivotal month) stated in an online article "the trend sparked over 100,000 imitations and garnered nearly a billion views" (Heyden 2013). The Harlem Shake dance phenomenon exemplifies how virality can take the form of a meme, as in each video is a slight variation and edit of the original Harlem Shake video. It also demonstrates the impact of gatekeepers, who according to Nahon and Hemsley are "people, collectives, companies, or governments that, as a result of their location in a network, can promote or suppress the movement of information from one part of a network to another" (2013, 7), as according to the BBC article (2013) the earliest Harlem Shake videos was tweeted by songwriter and record producer Diplo and the internet

based comedy company CollegeHumor, each with over 600 thousand followers each, as well as the American broadcast The Today Show airing their own version on February 13th giving the meme mainstream attention. Harlem Shake is also an example of what Nahon and Hemsley classifies as a *viral topic*, as the Harlem shake was a trending topic with viral features (such as the cascading effect of Harlem Shake imitation videos). Harlem Shake also highlights arguably the largest issue with viral topics which is that in the rapid flow of information during these events it's easy for vital information to get drowned. In this case, George Miller - the man behind being the "DizastaMusic" YouTube channel - is relatively unknown as the creator of the viral phenomenon, as the dance is often miss credited to first be published by the "TheSunnyCoastSkate" YouTube channel (The BBC article does not even mention the "DizastaMusic" channel or its owner).

George Miller, the creator of the "DizastaMusic" YouTube channel and responsible for the original Harlem Shake video (in the video Miller is the guy in the pink outfit) has currently over one million followers on his Twitter account (@sushitrash), despite having a large following on social media nothing from Miller's current social media profiles indicates he is the creator or is even associated with the Harlem Shake craze (or "DizastaMusic" channel for that matter). George Miller is in a very rare position of being (mainly unknown) responsible for a viral phenomena, yet has gained a massive following both offline and online unrelated to the Harlem Shake craze. Today, Miller is most known for producing music by his stage name *Joji*. During the music production as Joji, Miller has published two studio albums (*Ballads* in 2018 and *Nectar* in 2020) in addition to music videos, singles and remixes.

While the Harlem Shake stands as evidence that Miller gained popularity before Joji, the Harlem Shake is arguably far from the biggest impact Miller had on internet culture. From around 2011 until 2017, Miller was commonly known under his YouTube alias Filthy Frank where he produced comedy videos.

Miller in an interesting case study from several factors. The Harlem Shake dance craze in itself if worth analysing as it brings perspective to virality and viral topics, but in regard to this chapter the Harlem Shake stands as an example on the influence Miller had on the online culture, which

is especially notable when considering the little awareness around Miller being the originator of the viral craze (which also demonstrates the unreliability and uncredited of viral effects).

The Harlem Shake study functions as an introduction to Miller and his cultural impact on social media and digital culture. Continuing, this chapter will be divided into three parts, each part have the purpose to investigate a different part of Miller's mediatised identities and personas. Starting with Filthy Frank and YouTube, how Miller (as Filthy Frank) made success with a character that purposefully criticizes vlogging culture by creating a anit-persona. After the brief Filthy Frank study, the chapter will investigate the YouTube where Miller for the first and only time appears "as himself" and not portraying a character. This "reveal" video from 2017 is heavily tied with Miller's resignation from creating Filthy Frank content (which Miller announced via Twitter around the same time period). The video raises questions regarding how to address their audience in relation to resigning from social media and how to reveal their true identity while still staying in touch with the established format and - in Filthy Frank's case - the fictional nature established in previous videos. This analysis also ties into the question of how popular mediated internet celebrities should address their audience when resigning from their main (or all) social media platforms. Finally, the chapter will include a special case regarding Joji and audience expectations. While Miller takes the approach more akin to a traditional celebrity with the Joji alias, he is not immune from the influence of social media platform's distribution and participatory power. The last chapter will dive into the "cancel culture" surrounding Miller and how social media mob mentality can be used against selected individuals.

5.3 Filthy Frank - the "Filthy Shit" of YouTube's culture

The YouTube channel "TVFilthyFrank" - FilthyFrank's main channel - has over 7 million subscribers despite not having published a video since 2017, where comments are still being posted daily by users contemplating the absence of Filthy Frank content. The fact that Filthy Frank still attracts public interest can be viewed as an achievement that demonstrates Miller's impact on YouTube's culture.

On August 5th, 2011 Miller uploaded the YouTube video that would be the birth of "Filthy Frank". The video is titled *Filthy Shit* and has gained 1,3 million views in its nearly ten years on

YouTube, compared to the videos uploaded prior to *Filthy Shit* which on average have gained about 150 thousand (after an even longer timespan as the previous video before *Filthy Shit* was uploaded in 2009). It's safe to say that Miller discovered a new audience with Filthy Frank, as an audience that resonated with this particular style. Like with viral content, for something to gain public attention it needs to be deemed remarkable by an audience. How this remarkability is attained is nearly impossible to predict from a content creator's point of view, as it's a complex combination of timing, the video itself, and luck.

The video description states "I made a bet with a friend where If I can get this video to over 10,000 views, I can punch him in the nuts as hard as I can. So help us out!" (2011). This description indicates that Miller most likely had no larger intention with *Filthy Shit* beyond a simple fun and meaningless joke and not as the start of something as influential as Filthy Frank. Which reflects with Miller's previous YouTube videos from 2009 back that frame Miller as an ordinary American high-schooler using YouTube for nothing more than making amateur skits with his friends.

Figure 5.2 Web browser screenshot of "Filthy Shit" from the "DizastaMusic" YouTube channel.

In the video, Miller tells a story about how he had explosive diarrhea, a story with no conclusion or purpose beyond Miller repeating "there was filthy shit everywhere" while gradually over-exaggerating his voice. What did Miller do in this particular video contra his previous videos that evoked the public interest? The audience value of *Filthy Shit* lies in its presentation of the character and its presence on YouTube. Miller is essentially "taking a shit" on the entire video blogging culture of YouTube. Miller presents himself as a typical video blogger, by talking about a real life experience in front of a camera. Miller criticizes the personalization and intimacy of vlogs, and demonstrates that "anyone" on YouTube can talk about "anything" and still get popular. For this anti-vlogger message to come across successfully, *Filthy Shi*t is required to be posted and viewed on YouTube's website for it to have this meaning. If *Filthy Shit* was posted elsewhere this context would be lost, and *Filthy Shit* would arguably fade into the obscurity of forgotten internet videos. This ties into Marshall McLuhan's term "the medium is the message" which means that the medium (in this case, YouTube) plays a vital role in how the message (*Filthy Shit*) is perceived and interpreted by an audience.

In 2011 YouTube was still a relatively young medium and rising in popularity, barely just reaching mainstream status. Theresa Senft's study on the popularity of camgirls, a relatively young phenomena at the time, was only a few years prior to the beginning of Filthy Frank. Miller was one of the first to make parodies of YouTube's culture on the platform itself, more so the "slice of life" blogs. Everything Miller does in the video, from the editing, line delivery, voice alteration, excessive expressions and more plays an important role in the parody. The description also criticized the aspect of content creators encouraging viewers to spread the video for arbitrary reasons (such as Miller punching his friend in the nuts if *Filthy Shit* got over 10,000 views). Miller conveyed the anti-vlogger message of Filthy Frank both via the text (as the video) and in paratexts (as the video's description). However, compared to future videos the description of Filthy Shit strikes an impression of amateurishm in the sense Miller didn't truly know the YouTube movie's intention beside making "something stupid".

Filthy Shit stands as an example of the unpredictability of achieving success on the internet. Similarly as the fragility of keeping a sustainable meme celebrity status, no one really knows or controll how they arise but it's evident clearly when they do. Miller continued production of

similar videos to *Filthy Shit* capitalizing on the new popularity. On August 23th, 18 days after Miller uploaded *Filthy Shit*, he uploaded a second video (*First Day Of School*) where he portrays the same character again but this time Miller introduces him as Filthy Frank. The video's description also indicates Miller put more effort into the Filthy Frank character presentation, compared with Filthy Shit's jokingly encouraging viewers to share the video so that Miller can "punch him in the nuts", *First Day Of School's* description does not introduce third-party characters not present in the video (such as the friend mentioned in the description of *Filthy Shit*) instead Miller is consistent with the video's content by actually describing the video, introducing Filthy Frank and encouraging viewers to subscribe to the YouTube channel for more Filthy Frank content. From that day, 6 years of "filth" would regularly be uploaded by Miller to YouTube expanding upon the format originally established with *Filthy Shit*. In 2014 Miller created the YouTube account "TVFilthyFrank", a dedicated channel for Filthy Frank content. As Miller improved his portrayal as Filthy Frank, Pink Guy, Salamander Man and the other characters, simultaneously the humor got more vulgar, racist and offensive.

Filthy Frank brings new perspectives to what are valued as worthwhile content on SNSs, most notably how to experiment in a playful manner with identity and self-presentation. The persona of Filthy Frank is so absurd and over-the-top it is obvious Miller is portraying a character and not an authentic version of Miller's true identity. Yet, as Filthy Frank resonated with an audience, there is a level of authenticity to the character, which could lie in the level of absurdity and how far Miller is willing to go with the character. Arguably, the absurd character of Filthy Frank also frames a mystique around Miller's true identity. This is all reflected in the description from "TVFilthyFrank" which states: "Filthy Frank is the embodiment of everything a person should not be… He also sets an example to show how easy it is in the social media for any zany material to gain traction/followings by simply sharing unsavoury opinions and joking about topics many find offensive".

While Miller used Filthy Frank to make fun of individuals with disabilities, mental disorders, and participated in disturbing behaviour, he carefully kept the madness under a satirical umbrella. Miller kept the absurdity in check by methodically making fun of every social group, including himself. Miller always made sure that Filthy Frank was the biggest loser of all. The behaviour

from Filthy Frank also revealed social media's fascination with the grotesque, the appeal of Filthy Frank resembles that of carnival humor. This fascination is also reflected in the popularity of social media personalities such as Ricky Berwick who was born with Beals-Hecht syndrome, a physical disability resulting in deformity and limited mobility.

Another way Miller distinguished Filthy Frank from other vloggers was how he accumulated fame. Unlike, for instance, micro-celebrities, Miller never revealed personal information as a way to build trust and intimacy to his viewers, nor did he act as a celebrity. However, Miller did apply some aesthetic choices which are reflected in the modern influencers. The majority of Filthy Frank videos are haphazardly edited and filmed, which is popularized in transient format. Miller was also early in demonstrating the qualities of calibrated amateurism with the unstructured approach to editing and filming.

5.4 Filthy Frank exposes himself

While Miller was producing Filthy Frank content on YouTube, he was also active on SoundCloud creating music under the alias Joji. Miller did in the later part of his Filthy Frank career experiment with rap music as Pink Guy (Another Filthy Frank-related character, portrayed by Miller). While the music he produced as Pink Guy raps about noodles, memes, and dogs licking his balls, Joji's music is melancholic tracks about romance, heartfelt breakups and depression. By looking at the difference between Filthy Frank and Joji it is understandable Miller wished to keep them separated, not only because of the genre differences and how Joji's music may not appeal to Filthy Frank's audience, but most notably how Joji reveals a different perspective to Miller as a creator. Miller has been very secretive about his internal relationship with Filthy Frank, in an YouTube interview by "First We Feast" Miller answers questions regarding leaving Filthy Frank to only produce Joji music, where he states "People on the internet are mean… The Pink Guy music started at the same time as Filthy Frank. But, I just didn't know if people would embrace the serious stuff. I wish I had the self-confidence to switch earlier" (2017). This statement frames Joji's music as something that is personal to Miller, which he feared would be rejected by the audience of Filthy Frank. However, Joji's music did get embraced and appreciated when discovered by Filthy Frank fans. Even if they did not enjoy the

genre of music, discovering another perspective of the identity behind Filthy Frank is worthy of appreciation of its own, it is akin to Abidin notion of the "achieved" micro-celebrity, who build their fame by selectively reveal confidential information to viewers to cultivate feelings of intimacy with them (2018, 12), in Miller's case it is the viewers that discover "personal information" (Joji's not personal information per say, but it reveal a personal perspective side of Miller as an individual). This can also give a notion of exclusivity to the members of the Filthy Franks virtual community who are "aware" of Joji's music.

In 2017 Miller made the decision to stop production of Filthy Frank on YouTube to solely focus on Joji and pursue a career within music production, because of lack of interest in creating Filthy Frank content. Another reason Miller quit Filthy Frank is how medical issues prevented him from portraying Filthy Frank. This segment focuses on a YouTube video that is heavily tied to Miller's resignation from Filthy Frank, where he addresses the medical concerns as well as - for the first time - steps out of the Filthy Frank character to address the fanbase of Filthy Frank more directly as himself. This was the first time Miller revealed his true identity to his audience on camera.

Figure 5.3 Web browser screenshot of "FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF" from the "El Ve" YouTube channel.

Figure 5.3 is a screenshot from the video *FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF*, originally uploaded on Miller's Filthy Frank YouTube channel, "TVFilthyFrank" but later removed. This version is a reupload from 2017 on the channel "El Ve". Why Miller removed the video is unknown, but it is speculated he removed it because he did not wish for information of his personal life (such as his occupation in Brooklyn and having his true identity associated with the Filthy Frank personalities) or for information about his stress induced seizures condition to remain easily accessible.

This video is seen as Miller's resignation from Filthy Frank (even if the actual resignation happened shortly after via Twitter, this video gained the most attraction during the time Miller was resigning from Filthy Frank). Those who had been following Miller on several media platforms (Personal life on Twitter, music on SoundCloud), knew creating content on TVFilthyFrank was draining and that Miller was getting bored from it and wished to focus on creating music. It's common for people creating online content, especially those who started experimenting with a new medium at a young age are highly likely to eventually grow bored from content production. Producing internet content (videos, music, comics, etc) is often a hobby or side-project which means that the production is always at the risk of being suddenly ceased if personal events interfere.

In Miller's case he experienced partly with *creative burnout*, which Lindsay Ellis describes in her YouTube video *YouTube: Manufacturing Authenticity (For Fun and Profit!)* as a particular burnout from portraying a version of themselves on social media they are not "comfortable" with or representative of their true identity. Exhausted from showing the side of yourself only viewers want to buy, revealing the "true identity" can be a breach of trust with the community (Ellis 2018). This breach is critical as it breaks with two fundamental social dynamics at the heart of social network use: the presentation of self (identity), and the building of networked relationships (community) (Seargeant & Tagg 2014, 4). Even though the audience of Filthy Frank knew it was a character portrayal and not a true presentation of Miller's identity, he was still a character viewers had followed over time and grew attached too no matter how absurd a character Filthy

Frank was, from an audience perspective Filthy Frank was the authentic character while Miller was the new imposter. Fans were also engaged into the world of Filthy Frank and the other characters portrayed by Miller, as humorous and over-the-top as it was; it was still an established universe including wikis, Reddit and fansites. Miller also breaks the mystic surrounding the origin of Filthy Frank by revealing his true identity as being something as an ordinary student from New York.

No doubt Miller was aware of the expectations from the FilthyFrank community, which meant he had to appeal to his viewers by playing with the established Filthy Frank video formula while revealing his identity. Miller wanted to keep the authenticity of the Filthy Frank show while also addressing its ending. What measures did Miller apply in his video when faced with the selfcondradicting task as revealing his identity?

First, the title *FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF* follows his tradition of all capitalized letters in the title. Furthermore, "exposing" a popular internet personality means revealing the true identity of the individual (often in a negative way) by showing the individual in a situation that breaks with their established persona or norm. This popularity may rise from several reasons, one is that in which Page describes all online representation is treated with distrust; no individual's identity is taken to 'be what it seems' and all internet sources are deemed in need of verification (2014, 47). The "distrust" in regard to Filthy Frank lies in the controversial themes, the racist and sometimes disgusting humor, it is likely that those distrusting Filthy Frank distrust the culture of Filthy Frank and not someone who is portraying a persona hiding a true intention. In Page's example of how online representations are treated with distrust, popular public personas face anti-publicity from those who "see through the facade". This group can be acting as anti-fans towards both public individuals as well as the associated community. Anti-fan behaviour aims to expose the true identity and reveal the indentation behind the persona, this has led to a culture on social media in which anyone who performs any form of self-presentation, no matter the persona, is at risk of being exposed. As Filthy Frank is a dominating and highly influential YouTube personality, revealing the true identity behind the character is an event to behold even if it was obvious Filthy Frank was a character. In a sense the video is not a true "expose" video, which would need Miller to unwillingly reveal his true intention of Filthy Frank

or have a third party catch Miller off guard. The title instead is Miller playing on YouTube's culture (which he always has done with Filthy Frank) and is simply a method by Miller to stay with the established character of Filthy Frank.

Second, Miller applies several methods to keep the resignation video consistent with the established style of Filthy Frank. The video begins with Filthy Frank, Pink Guy and Salamander Man behaving in their absurd iconic manners as they always have and the entire video is filmed inside presumably Miller's bathroom in his apartment. Before making his appearance, Filthy Frank talks about Miller as a mysterious and strange person he barely dares mention, warning Pink Guy "he is finally back". During Filthy Frank's speech the camera cuts between a first-person view of someone entering the apartment and walking towards Filthy Frank's voice coming from the bathroom. As the individual opens the door Filthy Frank jumps into a corner screaming, while the individual who entered takes Filthy Frank place (on the toilet). The individual is of course Miller himself and the purpose of the video is finally revealed. Throughout the video Miller interacts with Filthy Frank and the other characters, keeping the established "world" that Filthy Frank, Pink Guy and the others inhabit intact as if they are physical characters living with Miller.

5.5 #Jojiisoverparty and cancel culture

Figure 5.4 YouTube thumbnail of "Run" (Official Video) from the "88rising" YouTube channel.

Miller's journey into the traditional music industry has been productive and successful with a comprehensive discography containing multiple albums, singles, mixtapes, extended plays and music videos. Figure 5.4 is a screenshot from the official music video for the song *Run* (Joji, 2020). The stylistic direction in the video, as well as the music production, is at a professional level. Comparing a Joji video with a Filthy Frank video it is clear that - while the production value increased of Filthy Frank during its final years - Joji's production quality (expansive setpieces, actor extras, costumes, etc) exceeds Filthy Frank from a production perspective. The YouTube channel *88rising* - where *Run* was uploaded - is a media company dedicated to Asian and Asian American independent artists who release music in the United States. A quick examination of the comment section of *Run* shows every other comment is a direct or indirect reference to FilthyFrank ("isn't he that pink suit guy", "I love you papa franku","This guy looks he would make good asian pizzas", etc.) and as the like/dislike ratio (1.2 million/14 thousand as of this writing) suggests the audience feedback is generally positive, with some expressing

astonishment on Miller's evolution from an internet meme to a professional songwriter and producer ("I can't believe he went from "iTs TiMe To StOp!" to a musician").

As YouTube was the media platform Miller was famous for as Filthy Frank, it's natural to assume the YouTube comment section would be heavily influenced by Miller's past. However, as Joji's music is produced under the 88rising umbrella, his audience reaches beyond the internet audience of Filthy Frank to a new international level (with a focus on the Asian community because of Miller's nationality and the 88rising media company). Naturally, this introduces Joji to new viewers and listeners who have no previous recognition of Miller's bizzare and gross past as "king of the internet" where he used to run in public while wearing a pink bodysuit or eating cakes made from vomit.

Somewhere during May 2020 a trend on Twitter was circulating that involved Miller and his music, the trend was going under the hashtag #JojiIsOverParty. The tag #isoverparty has on several occasions surfaced on social media (most notably Twitter), it reportedly began around 2015/2016 regarding a tweet calling out Taylor Swift after a controversy regarding her and Kanye West (#TaylorSwiftIsOverParty). The #isoverparty tag continued to appear on Twitter in relation to celebrities and other popular brands/names being "called out" for controversies via Twitter's hashtag trend tool. #JamesGunnIsOverParty surfaced in 2018, when Disney temporarily removed James Gunn as the director on upcoming Marvel movie *Guardians of the Galaxy 3* after some offensive tweets posted by James Gunn in 2009 and 2010 resurfaced. In 2020 #JimmyFallonIsOverParty was trending in 2020 when Jimmy Fallon was called out for wearing blackface when performing an impersonation of the stand-up comedian Chris Rock during a *Saturday Night Live* sketch in 2000. There are more examples of the recurrence in #isoverparty trends on Twitter as they appear frequently, many of them don't involve the level of attention and participation to reach the trending status and some celebrities have been victim of the tag multiple times (the #KanyeWestIsOverParty tag has appeared occasionally since 2016).

The phenomenon of outing someone (particularly celebrities) is referred to as *cancel culture*, where the term *cancel* stems from the notion of being rejected based on a social basis. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines cancel culture as "a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting

someone because they have said or done something that offends you". Many criticize the concept of cancel culture for several reasons, such as how those that get canceled can be unfairly accused and rejected even without being able to defend their actions. It is also a result of parasocial relationships and the intimacy of virtual communities on social media, in that when new information regarding a celebrity identity is revealed and it breaks with the established persona the dissonance so great it can be perceived as a personal portrayal by the most devoted follower. Social media gives a voice to those that feel this betrayal and by banding together via a hashtag the effort to have their voices come across publicly can seem effortless as well as give an illusion the vocal minority is instead a vocal majority.

Another interesting aspect of cancel culture, one which Miller was a victim of, is when controversies surrounding a celebrity's past is brought up. This can relate to the distrust between content creators and their audience (or more accurately, the distrust audiences can have over public personas and how they feel there is something "hiding" behind their facade). Because of the suspicion, when information is discovered that can damage or alter the public perspective in a negative way, some audiences may want to use the information to bring awareness to the public, whether the action is justified or not. And based on James Gunn and Jimmy Fallon there seems to be no restriction to when the controversy took place, as Jimmy Fallon blackface impersonation happened two decades ago.

#JojiIsOverParty started to surface when a Twitter account by the handle @jinsolbi tweeted "joji literally having a song where he says the n word with the hard er…" (figure 5.5) followed with a retweet that states "like you can't be serious" accompanied with a song from a Pink Guy album. @jinsolbi quickly received replies particating in expressing the shock of discovering Joji's controversial past.

Figure 5.5 Collection of tweets from @jinsolbi and various responses, screenshot captured and presented by @LilScuzzy May 11, 2020.

It is likely that their unfamiliarity with Joji's past as Filthy Frank lies in Joji's success to gain an audience beyond his YouTube recognition, which is likely a result of Miller's collaboration with Asian American production companies which would make him influential in popular asian music culture such as the K-Pop (Korean popular music) scene. The negative reaction in figure 5.5 can also indicate how Filthy Frank can be viewed as controversial without the Miller intentional satirical context.

While the reaction from @jinsolbi and their followers dials back to the fear Miller addressed during the "First We Feast" in which he stated that he didn't know how fans of Filthy Frank would react to the serious tone of Joji's music. While many mourned the end of a cultural era of YouTube content when Miller resigned Filthy Frank, he never received the negative reaction

towards Joji's music he initially imagined. However, figure 5.5 demonstrates that Miller would years later be partially right, only it was the fans of Joji that would react with negativity towards Filthy Frank. The hashtag #jojiisoverparty did not truly get viral attention until the tweets was discovered by fans of Filthy Frank - still a large portion of Joji's fans - participating in the #jojiisoverparty hashtag with a sense of irony. Figure 5.6 is one of the many examples that participates in the hashtags playing with humor on the aspect that it is "common knowledge" that Joji is Filthy Frank. The humoristic participation also criticizes the notion of attempting to cancel out individuals via social media, especially when the foundation for cancelling is as weak and misunderstood as in the case of @jinsolbi's unawareness of Filthy Frank's popularity.

Figure 5.6 Tweet by @LisaoftheMona posted on May 13, 2020. "Dwayne and the rock".

Taking into account that @jinsolbi's tweets are now deleted, the scenario stands as an example on how using social media prematurely to generate mob mentality towards an individual can

backfire. Their unfamiliarity over Miller's past as Filthy Frank is likely due to their potentially young age indicated by their typing and profile pictures, in addition to Filthy Frank being less prominent in asian internet culture. The #jojiisoverparty also demonstrates how minor echo chambers that lack vital information (in this case, FilthyFrank being a parody as well as having a massive popularity) can result in a context that reflects a negative light towards the original group aiming to expose negativity towards others.

5.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter opened up by briefly examining how the computer has impacted how we present our identity via technology, most notably the virtual worlds of MUDs, in Sherry Turkle study from *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet.*

The main difference between the MUD players and Miller is how Filthy Frank and Joji - as representations the creative aspects of Miller's identity - is aimed as entertainment to the more extend that it is exploring their identities, yet a key point still stands which is how contemporary network based technology is used by (commonly young) people to portray themselves in scenarios impossible or embarrassed to do in real life. Filthy Frank, is a character created by Miller to be a persona that represents everything a person should not strive to be, Miller utilizes YouTube as a platform to portray this character to an audience, but YouTube is also crucial for the purpose of Filthy Frank to thrive successfully as an anti-persona of internet culture.

The balance of Miller's music production as Joji and anti-vlogging entertainer as Filthy Frank also draws a parallel to Turkle studies in that a single individual via networked platforms can "be" multiple people. When each "persona" is designed for completely unique purposes and audiences, the question of integrity is related to each persona if the audience discovers another dimension attached to the identity performing the persona. The #jojiisoverparty is an example of such an reaction blossoming via social media, even if the attempt at exposing Miller was incompetent it demonstrates how SNSs it prove how easy it can be to create a negative light over internet celebrities.

The chapter also briefly examined the viral Harlem Shake dance topic. While the dance is a strong example of how vitality of a meme can encourage participation and creativity, it also demonstrates how crucial information can be lost during the short time of public mass spread via media. In the case of Harlem Shake, it is relatively unknown that Miller is the creator of the original video that sparked the trend. Another aspect of virality is the combination of top-down and bottom-up forces of spread, as the involvement of gatekeepers is more prevalent as it may seem.

6. Discussion

If there is one element from this investigation that could be said about the relation between audience, platform and creator, it is that the connections between them are turbulent, everchanging and that no methods of self presentation and celebrity-creation are truly safeproof from the risk of negative backlash or controversy. The discussion surrounding such a massive topic would be too comprehensive if every aspect brought up throughout the thesis where to be discussed, this final chapter will conduct a limited discussion surrounding the connection and behaviour between audience and content creators highlighting issues and thematics brought up during this thesis with new and old examples.

6.1 Dead memes and dead games

A consequence for Twitter being the platform that often functions as the "face" for brands is that Twitter has gained a reputation for being the social media platform for complaints and criticism, comments that are often baseless and lack of arguments. Referring back to the case studies, these complaints are evident on @FallGuysGame, as the majority of their tweets have at least one "dead game" response tweet. According to the Steam analytic website Steam Charts, the average number of *Fall Guys* players for the last 30 days are over 10 thousand players (as of April, 2021), compared with the playerbase from the August 2020 vital release month (an average of 124 thousand players) the number of players have declined drastically within under a year. Even if 10 thousand players is considered just under average compared to the majority of popular multiplayer games, it is still a solid playerbase.

These numbers only account for players who have purchased the game on the distribution platform Steam, thus it's logical to assume the number is even larger with the potential PlayStation 4 players. In addition to the active players, *Fall Guys* still thrive as a community as new threads and comments are posted daily on the fan-dedicated subreddit r/FallGuysGame. *Fall Guys* are also active on other SNSs such as Discord and Instagram, and with new content updates for the game being released regularly, the game is far from a "dead game". Then are these "dead game" comments just lamenting the fact that the popularity of *Fall Guys* has fallen from its

popularity during the game's release? During August 2020 *Fall Guys* was gaining a lot of attention in the video game related media and became one of the most popular games during its release window. The reputation surrounding the game and its presence in the gaming discourse has fallen drastically since August 2020. From one perspective - yes - the "dead game" tweets are indicating *Fall Guys* lower relevance vs. its August 2020 relevance. However, the popularity graph seen from *Fall Guys* is also present in other video games. According to Google Trends, popular multiplayer games such as *Among Us* and *Apex Legends* for instance had their peaks quickly rise and then fall in popularity just as quickly as *Fall Guys*. *Among Us* and *Apex Legends* still have active players, communities and official Twitter accounts promoting new updates and fan content. The presence of "dead game" tweet responses are still seen in any popular game's Twitter account, but are extra prevalent at @FallGuysGame. There is another cultural aspect of the "dead game" staple and that is its relevance to memes and content with memetic value. Content that gets reposted, edited and spread are memes that are "alive" as long as they are deemed valuable by an audience. Milner (2016) brings up the concept death of a meme and describes the phenomenon does not mean the actual "death of the meme" but rather that they lose their specific cultural capital over time, which Milner exemplifies by how people are tired of seeing stock character macros from 2010 in 2015. In Milner's case, five years is a very long time when translated to "internet years" because of the vast and rapid pace of internet communication, compared to the almost two years since *Fall Guys* popularity peaked. There is no true answer for a meme's longevity as they live and die at accelerating rates. This can be proven by examining several amateur studies conducting meme's life cycles. In an article for *The Outline* , Joe Veix (2018) estimates memes last the average of a little over four months (a measurement done by observing a selection of memes spanning twelve years of meme history). The *Urban Dictionary* states that many memes have died tragically (losing their cultural memetic value), memes used to have longer lifespans lasting around three years, but now they last a month if they are lucky. The article ends "It seems the meme lifespan is slowly decreasing due to many variables including the now fast spreading of memes through Reddit, Tumblr, and Discord" (Sockth 2018). It's important to state that *Urban Dictionary* is crowdsourced and meant to be entertaining as much as it is informative. Yet, the article's point regarding the longevity of memes is interesting and a challenge from an academic standpoint, as the variety of the decreasing longevity of meme's

lifespan make them unpredictable and unstable as analytical texts. As memes get more popular, so does the reason to study them. But their popularity in return impacts their lifespans, complicating said study. However, it is dismissive to state that all memes have a short lifespan because of their current popularity.

Some memes do not quite fit into this category, such as "rickrolling" - which is the act of linking the music video of Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up* as a prank. While "rickrolling" had its popularity peak in 2008, the phenomenon has never truly died, and has resurfaced with minor popularity peaks in regular intervals. In relation to the definition of memes as an unit of information copied and spread with slight variations, "rickrolling" is particularly interesting because for the meme to have its true effect the original 1987 music video must be linked. In one way, this is against the meme definition because it's not an altered version of the video (although those exist). Another essential aspect of memes (as well as "rickrolling" being highly spreadable) that does apply for "rickrolling" is the recontextualisation of texts which is a result of the mass public sharing through social networks. The popularity of participating in "rickrolling" has given a new cultural meaning to Rick Astley's nearly 35 year old classic to the younger generations.

Relating back to the "dead game" comments in the context of memetic texts: As marketing in social media applies memetic methods (*Fall Guys* being very prevalent within meme marketing by creating their own alterations of trending memes as seen in Chapter 4) a perceived memetic reaction is happening within the audience. By using memetic texts for marketing, especially when the game is framed as a meme, the audience treats it as a meme.

The "dead game" could therefore be an indication of Mediatonic's memetic approach to their marketing, resulting in a quick and high popularity and when that rate begins to fall the memetic value also falls, resulting in the "dead game" comments. The constant recurrence of "dead game" statements is also an indication towards the bandwagon effect. In the study *What does the crowd think?* Waddell investigates online news article comments and how they affect the credibility judgment and the perceived importance of the issues that the media covers. The "dead meme" constant recurrence among twitter responses is the opposed effect of "If others have praised this content, then it must be good" (2017) which makes the *Fall Guys* as a "dead game" example of a negative bandwagoning. Even though the number of users calling the game "dead" is a minority,

Twitter gives the minority a strong voice that is easily heard. Twitter benefits the loudest few and can make the few seem like the many.

That does not mean these platforms are the only victims of echo-chambers tendencies, far from it. As Facebook is the most used social media, its ways of filtering which information becomes visible to users when viewed has become a large discussion of how social media platforms influence echo chambers among users.

However, the notion of echo-chamber behaviour can also be applied to the "dead game" discussion from the previous segment, but this behaviour on SNSs are highly affecting cultural discourse and can defuse the origin of the discourse behaviour. This echo-chamber mentality of communities can affect the receptions of art, movies or other media that experiments with the established norms. Another perspective on the "dead game" as a ritualized echo-chamber toward @FallGuysGame is how the notion of the game "being dead" conflicts with the lighthearted, colorful and child-like aesthetics the Twitter account has applied to their social media persona. In addition, with the high upload rate of tweets from @FallGuysGame the "dead game" comments can seem like a resistance towards the constant flow of colorful *Fall Guys* related information invading players' social media feeds.

6.2 The angry audience and how to keep away from them

The epitome of negative comments and reactions are controversies which at worst may break out in culture wars. Massanari describes how SNSs such as Reddit can develop a "hivemind" of some kind, as "at some point, the patterned interaction that make a community possible on Reddit also turn it into a kind of echo chamber, where ritualized behaviours become almost empty signifiers with participants unaware of the origins or purpose of the ritual in which they are taking part" (2015, 92). Massanari's studies are conducted on subreddits, virtual communities designed for specific interests or hobbies. Participating with like-minded people regarding niche topics within a closed virtual community, can amplify the sense of belonging resulting in a potential hivemind or echo-chamber mentality among users.

Massanari states that the Reddit "hivemind" may be a response of reddiquette. "Reddiquette is the main, informat articulation of the ways in which redditors engage with one another in this

space. Novices are encouraged to read and internalize the "rules" of reddiquette when they join the site, and more experienced redditors are also periodically encouraged by site moderators and administrators to give it a reread" (2015, 73). The reddiquette rules are similar to general rules found in forums or Discord communities, in that these communities have a set of rules that function as guidelines for the community. Interestingly, Massanari points out that other participatory culture platforms like Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr provide few rules around user behaviour other than those articulated in Terms of Service. Another aspect of Reddit that makes them particularly more "vulnerable" for echo chambers or "hiveminds" is how subreddits are designed with an antagonistic mindset and philosophy. While there are many supporting subreddits, Milner brings up designated subreddits with the purpose of antagonizing; "/r/TumblrInAction mocks the left-learning, feminist "social justice warriors" said to populate Tumblr. /r/SRSSucks critiques the vocal feminism of /r/ShitRedditSays. /r/TheRedPill - reappropriating a metaphor for awakening from the 1999 film *The Matrix* - advocates for hegemonic masculinity and a return to traditional gender roles" (2016). Reddit is particularly aggressive towards other subreddits with contrasting opinions, creating a "us" against "them" sense of mentality. There are also examples that demonstrate antagonistic behaviour even within the same community. The two subreddits /r/thelastofus and /r/TheLastOfUs2 are both subreddits for enthusiasts to discuss everything relating to *The Last of Us* video game series by Naughty Dog (the latter with a more focus on *The Last of Us Part II*). *The Last of Us Part II*, the long anticipated sequel to 2013's *The Last of Us*, was released in 2020 with astonishing positive reviews by critics. This praise was not mirrored by all fans, when players started to get their hands on the game heated opinions arised quickly. Which led to a split of the fanbase into two groups, those who still enjoy *The Last of Us* series (/r/thelastofus) and those who believe the sequel ruined the series (/r/TheLastOfUs2). User reviews on *The Last of Us Part II* Metacritic webpage (2020) - a website for aggregating media reviews by critics and users - stands as proof for the divided opinion of the game with 35 thousand negative reviews, four thousand mixed reviews and 37 thousand positive reviews (as of this writing).
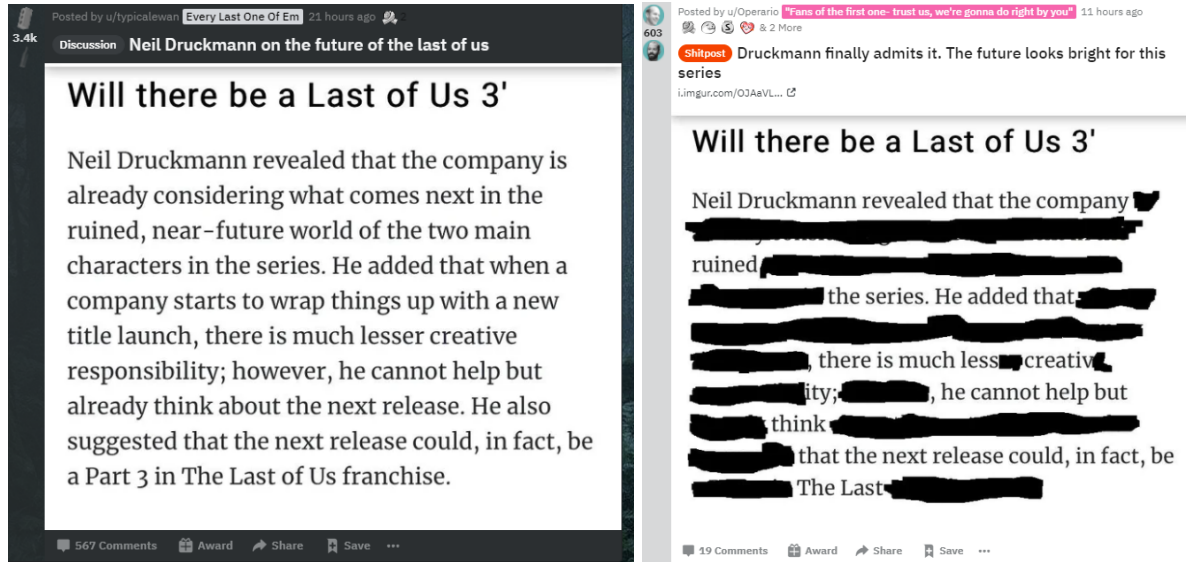
*Figure 6.1 is the original "Will there be a Last of Us 3'" image from /r/thelastofus. Figure 6.2 is
an edited version posted on /r/TheLastOfUs2 (both taken 22 April, 2021).*

Figure 6.1 and figure 6.2 are recent examples of antagonizing between two subreddits of the
same community. Both articles were posted around the same time on their subreddits and are
essentially about the same news related to a potential third installment in the *Last of Us*
franchise. The thread on /r/thelastofus titled "Neil Druckmann on the future of the last of us"
(Neil Druckman is the main director and writer for *The Last of Us Part II*) is marked as
"Discussion" and contains the original article. The thread currently has over 500 comments by
enthusiasts discussing potential plot direction, release date, and the series in general. The
equivalent thread from /r/TheLastOfUs2 is titled "Druckmann finally admits it. The future looks
bright for this series" and is marked as "Shitpost". Most importantly the text in the article is
partly marked by black so that it states "Neil Druckmann revealed that the company ruined the
series. He added that there is much less creativity; he cannot help but think that the next release
could, in fact, be The Last". The 28 comments are in general by users who comment on the
humour or are denying/criticizing *The Last Of Us Part II*. Milner brings up the idea that
collectivism of memetic media may be a start to the ideal "public sphere", which Milner
describes "a conversational space, one that encourages equal discussion of public issues across
different perspectives" and "*counterpublics*, who use participator media to find internal support

to challenge dominant antagonisms" (2016). If /r/thelastofus is the dominant (while not perhaps antagonistic) public sphere of *The Last of Us* discourse as they have the most active users, /r/TheLastOfUs2 is the counter public, which also implies the antagonism is not just against the game but also those who praised it. The Last of Us 3 edit from /r/TheLastOfUs2 demonstrates how memetic participation can facilitate the "us" against "them" antagonization in similar virtual communities.

Continuing the thread of *The Last of Us* mediatised antagonism: the split between the two subreddits are also reflected in the public discourse surrounding the character Abby, the antagonist in *The Last of Us Part II*. Shortly after the game's release, the disdain and anger by players on the Abby character was reflected towards Abby's voice actor, Laura Bailey.

Figure 6.3 Tweet by @LauraBaileyVO posted July 4, 2020.

The figure above is a tweet by Laura Bailey from July 4th 2020, a few weeks after the release of The *Last of Us Part II*. The tweet is a compilation of several of the hate messages to Bailey, many of them expressing violence ("I will stab you", "I'm going to find where you live and slaughter you for what you did to [blank]"). Bailey copes with this negativity by presenting them to an audience, an audience that is supportive of Bailey outside of her involvement in *The Last of Us 2* (though she has achieved much praise for her acting as Abby). Bailey generates a counterpublic by opening up about the harassment to an audience. Bailey responded to her own tweet with "Damn. The amount of encouraging responses to this… I've always believed that good people far outweigh the bad. Thanks for reminding me of that today" (2020). Bailey uses the positivity associated with her other popular activities, such as being a member of *Critical Role*, a popular web series of professional voice actors playing the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* live to an audience.

6.3 Keeping the persona across media

Celebrities having multiple social media accounts can be helpful tools for creators to stay in touch with their fans, bring updates regarding their social media content or personal details and converse in topics that would not be suited on their main social media channel. However, as one's audience grows and their personality becomes more mediatised across multiple platforms and media, celebrities appearing on SNSs and other media outlets beyond their original channel can be like traversing a minefield of potential backfires. Jonathan Jafari, known for his humour YouTube channel *JonTron*, received large backlash from fans and media outlets when during a live-streamed conversation with the Twitch streamer Steven Kenneth Bonell II (a.k.a Destiny) in January 2017. Jafari stated some controversial opinions regarding minorities and black people in the US (a topic Jafari started on Twitter which led to the conversation on Twitch), in which after the backlash from fans Jafari resulted in uploading a video titled *My Statement:* where he attempted to address his controversial arguments from the livestream. Jafari stated "I understand that I wasn't prepared for a debate of this sort, with these kinds of sensitive topics at hand adequately. You know I was a bit all over the place and I said a lot of stuff that could be misconstrued in all sorts of ways. Things are being extracted from this that I know I don't think. I was in there under a lot of pressure that I'm not used to being under, and as it became clear, I

suck at debate. So now every haphazard, off-hand remark I made in the heat of the moment is being dissected and speculated on" (2017). Jafari proceeds to defend and explain his standpoints from the stream, but it is clear that Jafari, a YouTuber who commonly works with scripts and edits video before uploading them, struggles with presenting arguments and opinions on Twitch, a live streaming format. The medium of YouTube and the medium of Twitch are via their modalities presenting two different mediatised public personas associated with Jafari, the livestreaming transient format of Twitch reflects a different side to Jafari's persona that opposes the planned, calculated and performed persona seen in his YouTube videos.

Celebrities engaging in conversation with public figures is not new in Web 2.0. But what is new with Web 2.0 is that conversations that were limited to private spaces (closed celebrities parties, meetings, etc.) can now be moved to the public thus conversations that would be forgotten or never even heard are being viewed by many, stored and accessed whenever by those who see fit. As a digital online media they are also in the danger of being edited and shared, altering the original presentation and potentially creating fake alterations which may damage the integrity of the original conversation.

The Jafari discussion is an example of a negative backlash and fan reactions originating when the celebrity in question appears in a different medium outside their origin "comfort" medium. It demonstrates that other media, even livestreaming transient formats which are meant to appear less filtered and more authentic, can also result in revealing unprofessionalism and the risk of performing a negative action is greater without the restrictions of repository formats. When someone who is as prolific and popular as Jafari gets his personality exposed via a new medium, it brings questions to the genuinity and his identity of his YouTube persona.

Another issue of the Jafari discussion is how information that can be minor in the moment or seem frivolous, can through social networks be enhanced, stored and recontextualized seemingly indefinitely. A lives-treamed conversation can seemingly appear closed, private or intimate during the conversation; the experience of being in the moment and participating in a transient medium can result in forgetting how media that is seemingly transient can be shared, stored, and accessed freely as a repository format. The Destiny conversation stream also states how heavily meditatised and influential individuals can extremely quickly and viraly have their audience

perception of their identity be completely altered in (seemingly) unexpected ways. In *Blogging*, Rettberg presents four characteristics identified by danah boyd that describe the fundamental differences between online social spaces and offline social spaces. These are persistence (how content can be recorded and accessed later), searchability (how people can find the content), replicability (how content can be modified and copied) and invisible audience (how unknown can access content) (2014, 82). The aftermath of the streamed conversation between Jafari and Bonell II highlights some of the potential consequences of these characteristics, as clips from the stream were recorded, shared and copied resulting in the conversation gaining a larger attraction in its aftermath.

6.4 The social media resignation

Throughout this discussion and this thesis in general, a key element has been how to behave and react to an audience's expectations. From a content creator's perspective, keeping up with the activity of being an online content creator can be a daunting task. The issue of social media overuse in daily life is an important and vital debate and has spawned terms such as FOMO (fear of missing out) which is the anxiety related to belief that one might miss out on social media content that others are enjoying. The pressure and demand of always being online and connected to a community can give a false sense of belonging, and lack of interaction of physical communication can have negative consequences such as leading to depression or loneliness. Methods on how to keep a healthy relationship with social media is a highly relevant topic, a quick Google search reveals several websites presenting articles such as"How To Quit Social Media" or "13 Things That Can Happen When You Quit Social Media" and more. With the commonplace and ubiquity of social media the awareness of keeping a healthy relationship to these platforms are more crucial than ever. Many online articles also include information on how to adjust social media accounts to prevent over-exposition or exhaustion from digital media, suggesting unfollowing accounts users don't interact with, adjusting notifications, etc.
While there are many articles, discussions and more on how to keep social media addiction at bay, there are few articles for those that use social media for more than engaging with friends and uploading the occasional landscape photograph.

Content creators with a substantial following do not only restrict their social network when resigning from social media, but potentially lose their economic income, personal community as well as a potential part of their identity. Content creators can feel a large sense of obligation towards their audience, if content creation is their main source of economic income that obligation is even greater.

On July 25th 2019, Laina Morris uploaded a nearly half-hour long video titled *Breaking Up with You...Tube,* the final video uploaded to her channel "Laina" where explains and confesses why she is quitting producing content for YouTube. Similarly to Morris, chapter 5 examined the YouTube video where George Miller for the first time revealed his true identity to his audience on YouTube. There are several similarities between Morris and Miller's presence on YouTube's culture beyond their video presentations. Laina Morris is most known for being the face of the "Overly Attached Girlfriend" meme, an image stock macro popularized in 2012. Morris is a textbook example of Abidin's description of the meme celebrity, an ordinary person that in compromising circumstances with a notable expression gets captured and iconozied (sometimes unwittingly) as a meme (2018, 44). The origin of the meme is semi-contributed by Morris, while the video the image originates from was made and uploaded by Morris, the contextualization of her face becoming a meme is due to being recontextualized and popularized by Reddit users. She also made a living of her YouTube popularity, which included attending conventions, making guest appearances and in 2021 she converted the macro image into a non-fungible token (NFT) which she sold for about 441 thousand dollars (Rosenblatt 2021). In retrospect, Morris was a prime example of a meme celebrity, the third stage of Abidin's concepts of meme personalities in which a meme persona achieves extended, sustained public celebrity and growing their popularity into a stable commercial business (2018, 50).

From a background perspective, there are many similarities to draw between Laina Morris and Goerge Miller. Both made their popularity on YouTube around the same time (Miller in 2011 and Morris in 2012) via similar video style (recording themselves in a room talking to the camera, the style seen in video blogging), in which a single video ignatied their popularity and granted them an audience for subsequent YouTube videos. In addition, both are seemingly unremarkable

videos (especially viewing them 10 years after their upload) that got discovered, appreciated and shared by third parties to the extent they became popular.

Figure 6.5 a screenshot from "Breaking Up with You...Tube" from the "Laina" YouTube channel, uploaded July 25th 2019.

By quickly looking at figure 6.5 we can already draw several similarities between Morris' *Breaking Up with You...Tube* and Miller's *FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF*. Both Morris and Miller present themselves in a natural manner talking casually while recording themselves inside (presumably) their apartments. The video blogging format presents their identities as personal and private (popularized in the early 2000's by the camgirls from Senft's studies), the presentation of these videos make them function as a veil into their personal life. Both Morris and Miller record themselves inside rooms associated with the private and intimate, in Miller's case the bathroom also plays on Filthy Frank's vulgar humor. The backgrounds are decorated with items associated with their YouTube channels. There are also minor similarities in how they introduce themselves by coming into the room, sitting down, taking a moment and then start

addressing the video's topic. This is to emphasize the seriousness of the video's agenda, while also establishing an atmosphere between themselves (Miller and Morris) and their audiences. Perhaps the most important commonality between the videos is the negative medical and mental conditions caused by longtime stress from producing YouTube content on a regular basis, a main factor for why both of them stepped away from YouTube production. It is evident from these videos that the pressure of keeping an audience pleased for years has taken its toll. Miller and Morris started producing YouTube content in their late teens up until their mid to late twenties, while it's plausible they have grown as individuals resulting in them losing interest in YouTube production, there is an important factor which is related to the medium itself. The way Miller and Morris have accumulated their fame associated with memes gives a sense of unpredictability to their success, which contributes to the production of their content being aimed towards an audience they do not truly have control over.

Dialing back to the five dimensions of online persona presented by Moore, Barbour and Lee (2017) Morris and Miller as fully fledged meme-celebrities are required to understand and apply each dimension to keep a sustainable status as meme-celebrities. As YouTube is a SNS, each video uploaded by Miller and Morris acts as an representation and contribution to their established mediatised public persona, as YouTube videos are stored and can easily be accessed at any given moment, their performance of the mediatised persona must be representative to the standard established in existing videos. With YouTube content creation as a sustainable income, their performance is also related to the value dimension as the intention of content production is keeping the audience returning resulting in a stable income. Only the collective dimension is not required unless operating multiple SNSs to expand their personal presence over multiple micro-publics.

Morris and Miller's resignations from YouTube displays the long-term mental and health complication that drives from keeping up a staple persona, that is mediatiesed on social media while performing a version of themselves that may be highly contradicting to their "true selves". With the end goal to keep the value of the personas sustainable. Unlike traditional celebrities, internet celebrities' success in fame are highly individualistic and rarely have the support of professional third parties (PR teams, production companies, etc.), in addition to their youth,

unfimalities of working with a new medium, even when their personas are performed to the fullest, they are still only by themselves talking to a camera in a cramped apartment room.

6.5 Final conclusions

In the introduction I stated the research topic: "how does social media encourage online audience behaviour?", an extremely broad topic that this thesis has only investigated a couple of sand grains compared to the dessert that is the audience behaviour on social media. Analysing content creators methods, history and relationship between their platform and their audiences is essentially to undertake the work to comprehend and understand everything that involves a form for interaction via SNSs.

Because of the volume of the thesis, establishing a structured and solid research method was a challenge which was not defined until later in the writing. Similarly, drawing a concrete conclusion based on the research throughout the thesis may be too complex to accurately define. However, this final segment can highlight some discovered themes for future discussions.

As an audience and users of social media, their impact influences how content is perceived, attracted and then spread across SNSs. This is prevalent with how the concept of gatekeepers is residing in influential individuals as much as it does traditional media. Viral topics that seemingly gained viral attention from a bottom-up perspective, may have an unbeknownst influential user acting as a gatekeeper during the virality. The Harlem Shake dance exemplified this with the influence of top-down viral forces via the earliest sharing of the video was from highly influential Twitter accounts. The spread and participation of sharing Harlem Shake YouTube videos also exemplifies how the audience has a stronger influence opposed to the passiveness presented in traditional media.

Chapter 4 focused on one particular Twitter account utilizing the social media marketing of memes. @FallGuysGame is a social media account that utilizes *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* presentation and aesthetics by turning it into the basis of the social media persona. Oliver Hindle, the senior community manager on Mediatonic can solely dedicate time managing the game's social media presence, providing a rapid stream of content encouraging participation, creativity from both players and other brand associated Twitter accounts. Using memes successfully

requires a substantial insight of the culture surrounding the meme's current popularity and how to apply them properly into a social media marketing presence.

While the approach to meme marketing demonstrated by @FallGuysGame gained a substantial amount of praise and envy from other media outlets during the release month of *Fall Guys* in August 2020, the long-term consequence of constant application of memetic approach to social media is apparent in the game's discourse. As meme's relevancy is highly dependent on their public popularity and memetic value, the increasing amount of "dead game" comments can be viewed as a result of the dwindling public interest. In conclusion, a memetic method to marketing can successfully boost audience engagement substantially as long as the momentum is maintained, when audience interest decreases the anti behaviour increases. While memes are highly popular to the extent they can almost be synonymous with virtual communication (and SNSs in general) applying them to marketing is highly challenging. The general audience behaviour surrounding *Fall Guys* shows that even when done successfully (a highly demanding challenge in itself) the longtime discourse surrounding the game loses its cultural magnitude. However, as negative attention is still a form of marketing, the high momentum of positive discourse (even for a short time) may outweigh the consequences of future negative reputation.

Similarity to applying memes for digital marketing, the George Miller chronological analysis from chapter 5 and Laina Morris from the discussion chapter, are examples that showcase the unpredictableness of how to achieve fame on the internet. With the similarities between Miller's *FILTHY FRANK EXPOSES HIMSELF* and Morris' *Breaking Up with You...Tube* several complications relating to keeping an audience online arises. One of these is the extreme speed a viral video can take effect, making internet fame happen quickly and unpredictably. The sense of unpredictability associated with the accumulated fame and the cultural impact among their audience leaves little actual control of the content creators to what is perceived as remarkable content from their audiences. In that sense, it is the audience that dominates the platform and the content creators In addition to the unpredictability of gaining fame online, keeping the audience momentum is a very demanding task, especially for a single individual. The type of online presentation seen from Morris and Miller requires a high consistency of nearly every aspect of the onlinepersona dimensions presented by Moore, Barbour and Lee.

While this research has investigated several cases of virality, online personas, creation and applications of memes on key social media platforms there are many crucial elements for potential case studies not included in the research. The vast topic that is the relationship between platform, creator and audience causes vital elements to be undermined or abandoned to give in-depth focus on the selected case studies. As the two case studies focused on Twitter and YouTube - mainly repository platforms - the focus on transient formats, notably the livestream platform Twitch, leaves to be desired. Another growing important aspect of the relationship between platform, creator and audience that did not get covered in this thesis, is the technical aspects provided by the platforms. One of these aspects is the complexity in how computer algorithms filter popular content on social media, which act as digital gatekeepers that alter the impact of popularity online content may receive. These are elements that should be included for future study in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the thesis topic.

Another important perspective in the relationship between audience and creator that was a leading interest when selecting the topic, is the variation of methods content creators apply in relation to negative behaviour from their audiences. @FallGuysGame demonstrated how to respond to criticism by playing with the humor established via @FallGuysGame persona. While many praised this behaviour from @FallGuysGame as the social media account both interacts with players while also keeping a light-hearted social media presence. Yet, to draw general conclusions from the analysis in Chapter 4 it is evident that the personification of *Fall Guy's* Twitter light-hearted presence is tailored by the game's aesthetic. Therefore mimicking the behaviour from @FallGuysGame to any given Twitter account may not have the desired effect as the behaviour may clash with the established persona or discourse surrounding their social media presence. In addition, while @FallGuysGame does engage in a positive manner with negative player tweet responses, the responses from @FallGuysGame does not address the current technical game problems and issues brought up by the players. By answering players' concern with humor, players may feel they are not taken seriously or that the game doesn't consider the technical issues as an important problem that needs to be fixed rapidly.
The study on George Miller and the different relationships between the audience of Filthy Frank and Joji also demonstrates some interesting aspects of negative audience behaviour. As a content creator of two contrasting and distinct online presentations, Miller was well aware of the

potential negative outbursts from fans of the respective content by Miller. The attempt at cancellation of Miller via the #jojiisoverparty trend on Twitter proves that Miller was somewhat correct in assuming that fans of one of his productions would react with negativity when discovering Joji or Filthy Frank. However, the attempt of Miller's cancellation was extremely minor compared to existing attempts of other celebrities, it did not impact Joji's career as a music producer and it is likely that Miller himself was not aware of the cancellation attemptation. Perhaps most importantly, the reaction of mockerty tweets and participation of #jojiisoverparty making fun of the innital cancel attemptation demonstrates how a negative audience action can generate a positive audience reaction.

The relationship between content creators, platform and audience is as highlighted throughout the study, a complex conversation that builds and reflects upon each action performed by the three dominating actors. Therefore it is very difficult to give a concrete conclusion at the end of this study. Content creators, platform and audience are the three pillars of online engagement via SNSs, they build, reflect and compete for being the dominating shaping factor. The platform's design and technical functions lay the base rule for what is allowed, set the modalities, restrictions and technical affordances. The content creators experiment with these modalities to see which audience they attract. And the audience deems what content gets appreciated and popularized. Content creators in return pander to the type of content appreciated the most among their audience by continuing producing similar content. During the conversation between audience and content creators, platforms are adjusting the functionalities provided. As fame can happen seemingly randomly, it's nearly impossible to predict virality in the future with the constant change between platforms, audience and creator.

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