

# Digital protest in Singapore: the pragmatics of political Internet memes

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## Abstract

This article investigates the use of Internet memes as political protest in Singapore. The proliferation of political memes after the controversial 2017 Singapore presidential election was curious, considering the government's strict policies in regulating discourses both online and offline. By analyzing memes that circulated after the election, this article examines how the aesthetic form of political Internet memes intersects with current communicative ideologies to disperse their authorship, thereby allowing Singaporeans to communicate political dissent indirectly in ways that can always be subsequently disavowed as humor. In particular, the political productiveness of memes stems from their ambivalent status, as they are capable of being evaluated according to two competing ideologies centered on two intensional prototypes: first, of memes as political artifacts; second, of memes as humorous artifacts. Empirically, this article builds on existing digital media scholarship by demonstrating the need to factor language and media ideologies into analyses of digital media.

## Keywords

ensorship, digital technologies, Internet memes, Internet studies, media ideology, protest movements, Singapore, social media

## Introduction

On 11 September 2017, Halimah Jacob, a member of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP), was declared the country's President-elect. Although there had been two other potential candidates in the running, Halimah's election was not achieved at the polls,

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but rather because she was the election's only candidate to receive an 'eligibility certificate' (Lee, 2017). Over the next few days, Singaporeans posted and shared 'political memes' on social media, deriding the ruling party for rigging what was widely referred to as a 'walkover' election such that their favored candidate would win. The proliferation of political memes after the 2017 presidential election is curious, considering the government's strict policies in regulating discourses both online and offline. The PAP-led government has routinely prosecuted individuals for defamation and sedition from blog posts to Facebook status updates, so why are so many Singaporeans bold enough to share disparaging memes? To understand why Singaporeans turn to this peculiar form of social media to engage politically, this article examines the aesthetic qualities of these memes in their sociocultural context to show how their form intersects with communicative ideologies thereby opening an avenue for political engagement in Singapore.

But first, in order to understand how Halimah ended up with the only electability certificate in the 2017 election, a few words about Singapore's political history are necessary. Singapore has transformed socioeconomically since its independence in 1965, and the governing party, the PAP, has attributed the nation's tremendous success to its leaders (Heng and Aljunied, 2011: 19). Successfully maintaining single party rule since Singapore's independence, the PAP has based its policies on two 'founding myths' – multiracialism and meritocracy (Hill and Lian, 1995: 31). The former emphasizes social harmony as crucial to economic stability and national security (Lee, 2017); the latter represents a 'national ideology' whereby 'advancement in society is based on an individual's ability, performance and achievement' (Prakash, 2014).

In order to realize its vision of a multiracial and meritocratic Singapore, and thereby to maintain its political power, the PAP has aggressively restricted civil-political liberties. Critics of the government have accused the ruling party of using multi-racialism and racial harmony as a pretext to silence political dissent (Chua, 2003). Such restrictions include the Public Order Act, which outlaws any public assembly without prior approval from the government; the Societies Act, which regulates the formation of 'any club, company, partnership or association of 10 or more persons'; and a Public Entertainments Act, which prohibits all unsanctioned public performances (Public Entertainments Act, 1958; Public Order Act, 2009; Societies Act, 1966). Media outlets are heavily regulated, and national newspapers have been accused of being mouthpieces for the government (Aglionby, 2001). The government recognizes the difficulty in regulating content on what it considers a 'dynamic and borderless' Internet (IMDA, 2017), and so has limited itself to banning select pornographic or extremist websites. At the same time, the government monitors and regularly censures social media and personal blogs for anti-religious and racist content, as well as criticisms of the government posted by Singaporeans (Hussain, 2016; Hio, 2017; Lum, 2015).

The two founding myths form an important backdrop for the 2017 presidential election, which was controversial for a number of reasons: first, because for the first time in the country's history, candidate eligibility was demarcated along racial lines, such that only a Malay could run. The controversy began when the PAP declared the need for better minority representation following the release of survey results showing that Singaporeans vote along racial lines, which 'mean[t] minority candidates are at a disadvantage in an election' (Yong, 2016). The racial makeup of Singapore has traditionally

been Chinese-majority, a group comprising 74% of the population, while Malays, Indians, and ‘Others’ constitute the other 26% (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010). This Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others ‘CMIO’ racial model, standardized by the British in colonial Singapore (Purushotam, 1998), was used to ‘reserve’ the presidential seat on a rotating basis. Academics, opposition parties, and other skeptics opposed the bill on grounds that criteria for racial eligibility can be discriminatory rather than empowering (Siau and Ng, 2017). Questions about Halimah’s own ethnicity were also raised, since her father was Indian, and Singaporeans are officially registered by the state under their father’s race (Yong, 2017).

Second, aside from the race requirement, the bar for eligibility was raised for all candidates: candidates ‘needed to have served in an extremely senior government job or to have run a profitable company with SGD 500 m (USD 371 m) in shareholder equity’ (*The Economist*, 2017). Ever since the proposal of the new changes to the presidential election, the PAP was accused of using minority representation as a pretext to consolidate political power (Jaipragas, 2016). When Halimah was deemed the only eligible candidate, the ‘walkover’ reinforced the view that the PAP was trying to secure their chosen candidate’s victory through these rule-changes. Singaporeans then took to the Internet to express disbelief and anger. With escalating civilian frustrations against the PAP before the election, the conditions were thus ripe for the presidential election to become the terrain on which anger against the PAP was played out.

Even though public protests are prohibited and online discourse is heavily monitored, it would be facile to characterize Singapore as having an absence of activism and social movements. Despite the PAP’s efforts to control the kinds of narratives that circulate, Singaporeans creatively find ways to criticize the government for prioritizing economic progress and neglecting pressing problems such as socioeconomic inequity, overcrowding, inflation, and recent infrastructural failures with the public transport system (Perry et al., 1997; Tan, 2017: 6–7). The proliferation of political Internet memes after the 2017 presidential election is just one incident of many where Singaporeans took to social media to voice their frustrations with the incumbent party. In a landmark 2012 paper on social movements and resistance in Singapore, legal scholar Lynette Chua (2012) introduces the concept of ‘pragmatic resistance’ to describe how Singaporeans play around the law, sometimes even making use of it to further their cause without incriminating themselves in the eyes of the government (p. 723).

This strategy of pragmatic resistance can only work given an extensive knowledge of the Singapore government’s unique ‘official state pragmatism’: a preference for ‘doing what works’ rather than pursuing ‘ideology’ (Mutalib, 2010: 63). The Singapore government is very concerned with the way it is perceived, even when working to limit political activity. Complete censorship would appear ‘undemocratic’ to the Western gaze, which would have real political and economic consequences for a Singapore that constantly compares and models itself on other Western cities (Yew, 2011: 274). This governmental stance results from a condition of ‘oversight governmentality’, a form of intervention from ‘foreign governments and agencies . . . into the political organization of “transitional” states’ (Graan, 2011: 4). Dissenters engage in online discourse being reflexively aware that the government is watching and may react to whatever is posted, while also being cognizant that the government harbors its own concerns about being too

aggressive in policing dissent. The result is a tenuous, negotiated civic space wherein both control and dissent mingle, react to, and transform each other in an ambiguous mix. In the current socio-political context, Singaporeans use Internet memes as a discursive strategy to navigate the fine line between mobilizing their civil-political right to protest and transgressing laws with unstated boundaries. This article suggests that there is something about the nature of and ideologies about Internet memes, compared to other media forms, that enables the use of memes as protest in Singapore's current political climate.

In many ways, the Internet meme emblemizes Web 2.0. As a media form, memes are recontextualized artifacts whose sources of inspiration are always deferred. They differ from so-called 'traditional media' forms such as journalistic photographs, whose authority often rely on a locatable authorial source. Given their ontological status as cited digital artifacts created specifically for further circulation and (re)citation in what media scholar Yochai Benkler (2006) has termed 'networked publics', Internet memes exemplify the difficulties of studying images and texts in digital spaces. However, Internet memes' unique properties and their implications for digital media more broadly remain undertheorized. Many scholars who study digital memes are more broadly concerned with 'mimetic success' – why and how certain memes achieve a greater degree of circulation than others (cf. Coscia, 2013; Rossolatos, 2015; Wei et al., 2012; Weng et al., 2012). Other studies equate Internet memes with the qualities of being 'humorous' or 'sardonic' (Boudana et al., 2017; Shifman, 2014), or attempt to suggest that memes circulate because of their aesthetic qualities or depicted content (Olesen, 2018), without interrogating the kind of ideologies or communicative practices that bring these memes into circulation. These studies tend to consider memes outside of the historical, discursive, and sociocultural contexts in which they are invoked. The meaningfulness of memes, or the qualities that make them memes in the first place, should not be treated as a given since they are produced within particular social contexts of use.

Analyzing digital artifacts thus necessitates looking at both their reflexive features and the discursive contexts in which they emerge. Investigating media ideologies – a term coined by the linguistic anthropologist and media scholar Ilana Gershon to refer to people's beliefs about media and their affordances – provides productive starting points for understanding how media mediate and transform communities of practice. In other words, people's beliefs about media and media affordances shape both what they do with those media and how they evaluate their own, and others', uses of media (Gershon, 2010). Using Singapore's sociopolitical context as a case study, I show that memes are neither inherently meaningful nor socially consequential on their own. Like other kinds of interactions, both online and offline, Internet memes do not exist in isolation, but achieve their effects in relation to other forms of social action (Keane, 2003: 240).

In this study, I analyzed data from approximately 300 posts and comments on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and the HardwareZone forum – four of the most popular sites for discussing Singaporean politics – to understand the contexts in which memes were deployed and circulated. By creating and circulating online memes on the 2017 presidential election, Singaporeans participated in an unfolding discourse on governance and citizenship. At the same time, this circulation was also reflexively marked, as Singaporeans are aware that critical, political protest can only happen in cyberspace due to the government's suppression of other channels.

Political memes can be understood not only as a form of protest, but as a site and medium for the reflexive production of a public sphere of political action in Singapore, even though such memes are rarely, if ever, explicitly framed as protest. The political productiveness of memes, this article suggests, stems from their ambivalent status, as they are capable of being evaluated according to two competing ideologies centered on two *intensional prototypes* – entities that are taken to bear all the qualities that define membership in a class or cultural category (Silverstein, 2005). In the first, memes are taken up as *political* artifacts; in the second, as *humorous* artifacts. In order to circulate, memes' denotational content needs to be interpretable as 'political', hence (potentially) as protest. At the same time, the second intensional prototype of the Internet memes as things created for nonserious or entertainment purposes has the potential to defeat their performativity as protest, even as it is precisely this play/entertainment frame that makes memes pragmatically useful as, or for, protest. Memes' ideological efficacy as political-critique-masked-as-online-entertainment is in constant danger of being perceived as unpolitical and hence disregarded even by their own producers and reanimators.

This article thus explores the particular forms through which resistance is voiced through a linguistic-anthropological analysis of these Internet memes and their political work in criticizing the government. I consider the ambivalent circulation of memes as play/protest as an instance of what the Singaporean legal scholar Lynette Chua (2012) terms 'pragmatic resistance', a set of strategies by which Singaporeans voice resentment against the government, articulating and performing points of view that oppose the PAP's stances and actions while minimizing their liability under Singaporean law (p. 723). The legibility of memes as resistance depend on what I call the 'mimetic chain': the citational process by which political memes become interpretable *as memes*, ambivalently reaching back to prior uses of fractions of the memes (which can be photographic images, text sentences, or graphic conventions) to frame metacommentaries on the Singapore government. Although memes' success as protest is imagined to be evinced by their quantitatively measurable prevalence – a measurement technique increasingly used by the government, civil society, and traditional media as a barometer for citizens' sentiments – I argue instead that memes become productive as a site of political protest and public-information in Singapore precisely because of the recontextualizability and defeasibility afforded by their circulation within a mimetic chain.

## **Internet memes and a semiotics of the mimetic chain**

Internet memes have become a staple of online political talk in Singapore. A quick search on many popular social media websites and online fora on topics related to the Singapore government will return multiple threads and posts that feature memes. These 'political memes', as they are called by Singaporean Internet users, are unanimously critical of the government. Although 'political memes' developed as a subgenre of 'Internet memes' (also known as 'funny memes'), the two are distinct in the sense that the latter usually refers to a generic humorous artifact that circulates online, while the former indexes a particular critical stance the Singaporean Internet user has toward the Singaporean government. Although political memes can be visual images, videos, gifs, or plain text, the photographic image is the most popular format. They are usually images that are made



**Figure 1.** The original ‘doge’ image on the left, and two examples of its recontextualizations on its right.

to fit within the viewports of the devices used to view them. These memes are posted on social media websites as part of online discussions, or on their own with little or no commentary. In this regard, the political meme is what I call an ‘image-bite’: a bite-sized visual representation of a piece of political news packaged for quick circulation online.

The word ‘meme’ has pre-Internet origins, coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe the way genes were subjected to evolutionary pressures. Since then, the term ‘meme’ has found its way into new contexts, and the ‘Internet meme’ is now used to refer to text-artifacts that circulate on the Internet seemingly of their own volition. Scholarly studies on ‘Internet memes’ have been sparse despite the phenomenon having become a mainstay online. In one well-cited work on Internet memes, media scholar Limor Shifman (2014: 41) defines an Internet meme as ‘a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many uses’. While Shifman’s definition rightly draws attention to the way Internet memes are produced and circulated from a kind of collective consciousness, it does not address how memes come to ‘share’ those characteristics, which of those characteristics become salient in circulation, and why. In other words, ‘meme-ness’ is not a self-evident fact of memes: it is also a function of the ideas that people have about them. This is an insight from linguistic anthropology, which has long recognized that attending to language ideologies, the beliefs that people hold about language and how they perceive its users, is necessary to elucidate how an interpretation of a digital artifact emerges across contexts of use.

In this investigation, I consider Internet memes as text-artifacts whose legibility depends on an explicit recognition of a citational chain that has been established by a seemingly self-determining or autonomous mode of circulation. Take, for example, Figure 1, which depicts the ‘doge’, a prototypical meme:

The original image depicts a Shiba Inu on a couch staring sideways at the camera. Its recontextualizations involve scattering text in the Comic Sans typeface all around the image, which do not conform to the pre- and proscriptions of standard-register English, representing the dog’s ‘internal monologue’ (Know Your Meme, 2012). Each ‘doge’ meme shares certain salient, formal features – a photograph or other graphic representation of a Shiba Inu, words in multicolored Comic Sans, and so on – thus indexing and



foregrounding the act of contextualization itself. Each usage of a meme not only recontextualizes it, but also reflexively typifies it as one of many recontextualizations. Therefore, each meme is a citation of a prior meme, one that calibrates different ‘time-spaces that are at some level of spatial-temporal remove’ from one another, ‘bringing them into a common relation of coevalness and contiguity’ (Nakassis, 2012: 626). A meme’s use in an interaction typifies the interaction as being centered on a meme, thereby entailing an artifact’s meme-ness through its recognition. Like consumer brands, the meme’s citationality is ‘prefigured in [its] very form’ and ‘motivates [its] construal and uptake as citatio[n]’ (Nakassis, 2012: 627).

Although each meme is often interpreted, in ideological perspective, as a discrete textual object, it should be clear that memes exist in and through their existence as part of a series of textual objects. This intertextual series of citations form what I call a ‘mimetic chain’: the meme-tokens’ circulation through uptake – and the ideological regimentation of that circulation – produce a traceable sequence of innumerable artifacts that are perceived to share certain formal features, features that indexically point to their membership within a ‘family’ of memes. Echoing linguistic anthropologist Asif Agha’s (2007) notion of the ‘speech chain’, where the relay of messages forms a historical series of speech events, understanding the meaning of any Internet meme first and foremost requires knowledge of this mimetic chain. The denotational content of a meme within a mimetic chain usually varies from meme to meme, so a ‘meme’ is not a token-instance of denotational text represented in an image text, but a *type* of image-text that may take many denotational variants. As in the earlier example of the ‘doge’, a particular image token can be taken as an instance of the ‘doge’ meme even if it does not include the ‘original’ photograph, Comic Sans typeface, or even an image of a dog at all as in the ‘shark doge’ in Figure 1, as long as it has at least one of these features that are recognizable and *made* recognizable as a consequence of the meme’s circulation and uptake. What connects each contextualization of the meme then is a specific, replicable form that serves as the sign-vehicle for the re-presentation of its content. For Internet memes, these mimetic chains constitute textual tropes that frame and make metacommentaries on the denotative content they envelop.

Memes circulate by ‘posting’, which refers to the publication of a message onto an online discussion space that is organized differently depending on each website. The posting of memes as, or as part of, a message is distinct from their creation and paratextual features. Because not everyone creates the memes in their online posts, there is a division of labor in which some people produce images, others edit images (e.g. by adding text to them) to form memes, and others repost them or share the original posts, sometimes with additional commentary above the memes. The posting of an Internet meme creates what social theorist Michael Warner, following Habermas (1999 [1962]), terms a ‘public’ – a space that designates its own ‘norms of membership’ by virtue of its circulation and uptake by otherwise unrelated people (Warner, 2010: 78). Audiences can choose to react to an Internet post in several ways depending on the website on which they interact, such as by ‘liking’ it, commenting on it in a discussion thread, and, of course, sharing and reposting it to a different audience. Here, the notions of animator, author, and principal are particularly helpful in analyzing its voicing structures. These terms were devised by the interactional sociologist

Erving Goffman (1981) in order to analyze communicative situations without resorting to overbroad categories like ‘speaker’ and ‘listener’ or ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’. The *animator* is the person that is engaged in the transmission of the message of the meme; the *principal* is the person whose position is established by the words uttered; while the *author* is the person who selects the words and the sentiments to be expressed. The unique participation framework in which the meme circulates through posting distributes the author and animator functions of the communicative situation, making the principal function (i.e. the one ‘responsible’ for the content of the meme as a message) difficult to locate.

## Production and (re)circulation of political memes

As stated before, the circulation of a meme – or rather, the figuration of such a circulation – disperses authorship and allows a social media poster to hedge against having to claim responsibility for the message of the meme. In this section, I analyze the poetics and the production format (Goffman, 1981) of a few Singaporean political memes in order to understand the semiotics of their circulation and the way those semiotics contribute to the ideological regimentation of that circulation as resistance.

The following meme was posted publicly onto Facebook by a Singaporean right after the 2017 presidential election. This meme makes use of a captionless stock photograph that went viral earlier in the year. It depicts a young man looking lasciviously at a woman, drawing the ire of another woman who is presumably his romantic companion. Subsequently, the image became a meme known as the ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ when social media users reposted the photograph with different embedded captions for each of the characters in the image (Know Your Meme, 2017). Figure 2 is one of such repost within that mimetic chain. By captioning the young man with ‘The Singapore Government’, the author of this meme stipulates an iconicity between the government and the man in the image, that is, implying a likeness between the government’s actions and that of the man’s. Like the way the man in the picture has failed to honor his commitment to his ‘girlfriend’, the Singaporean government is depicted as being seduced by the prospect of political control, shirking its responsibility to uphold meritocracy despite having publicly committed to it as a core principle of governance.

What is notable in this meme is its denotational non-specificity vis-à-vis recent political events: there is no explicit reference to the 2017 presidential election. Hence, the interpreter of the meme is assumed to be able to intuit the reference of the meme despite the internal and external captions’ vagueness. Interpreting this meme requires at least three intersecting pieces of knowledge: first, a recognition of the ‘meme-ness’ of the image (i.e. its mimetic chain); second, a comprehension of the image’s aesthetics; and finally, a familiarity of the ‘local’ event that the content of the meme is implicitly referencing. What makes this image a meme is its polyvocal nature: the fact that there are multiple authorial voices in the deployment of any meme. The ‘Singapore-Government-as-Distracted-Boyfriend’ is thus heteroglossic, expressing its message ‘in a refracted way’ through the speech of previous authors, dialogically ‘structured in the mutual knowledge of each other’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 324).





**Figure 2.** A meme about the government posted onto Facebook on 11 September 2017, after the 2017 presidential election.

In Goffmanian terms, for Figure 2, the meme poster is the animator, but the principal and author are unspecified. There is nothing in Figure 2 which explicitly attributes authorship to the meme poster, and the poster cannot be credited for the ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ image, which is an established artifact of popular digital culture. At the same time, some of the words present within the meme such as ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘meritocracy’ are also words that the PAP has frequently invoked to brand their policy choices. These metacommunicative devices allow the poster plausible deniability for the insulting ‘evaluative statements’ of the meme as ‘moral judgment’ (Irvine, 1993: 109).

The circulation of any political meme therefore crucially depends on its animators, since anyone who shares the meme – thus allowing it to ‘go viral’ – are transmitters of its message. In fact, the imagined *telos* of a meme is its circulation to other animators who will then circulate it further *ad infinitum*. Many of the participants, whose Facebook comments are reproduced below, understood Figure 2 as a meme even though the original poster of Figure 2 did not explicitly call it a ‘meme’ when posting it:

1. credit where it’s due – this is a good meme;
2. I’m just gonna repost;
3. Why am I unable to share this gold meme?
4. I have no reservations about this example of meme-ritocracy.

Comments (1) and (3) appraised Figure 2 as ‘a good meme’; (4) made word play on the electoral ‘reservations’ and the government principle of ‘meritocracy’, exhibiting the connection between a ‘reserved’ election and the (lack of) ‘reservations’ on the part of the commenter in parodying the government through memes; (2) and (3) apply the labels of ‘sharing’ and ‘reposting’. Most other viewers directly tagged people on the comment thread itself or shared the post, thus disseminating it further to new audiences. The ability to understand the meme as a meme requires knowledge of two kinds of ‘speech chains’: first, the recent chain of political events in the news; and second, the mimetic chain of the meme itself. While an interpreter may still be able to interpret the stock image as depicting a type of humorous situation even in the absence of this specific knowledge, its recognition as a meme requires the consumer to make an interdiscursive leap to read each chain against the other. The latter is recruited as an evaluative typification of the former, and thus they mutually co-textualize each other.

Not all political memes operate based on parody or mockery. In such memes, there is a different kind of voicing structure whereby the political event in question is framed in terms of a second historical event, which serves as its ‘privileged point of orientation’ (Kockelman and Bernstein, 2012: 325). An example is a meme that was posted on a Singaporean Facebook page, ‘Wake Up, Singapore’, that has generally been critical of the PAP.

The hashtag ‘#NotMyPresident’ in Figure 3 has its origins in the 2016 United States presidential election when Donald Trump was elected to the shock and disbelief of many Americans (Know Your Meme, 2016). Widely seen as unfit for office, Trump’s election sparked anti-Trump protests, for which ‘#NotMyPresident’ was used as a rallying cry. A large volume of people appended ‘#NotMyPresident’ or incorporated ‘not my president’ in their Twitter and Facebook posts to mark them as part of the protest movement, closely associating ‘#NotMyPresident’ with the anti-Trump movement.

On Twitter and Facebook, the hashtag is a special feature that allows a person to mark their social media content with a label that begins with the octothorpe ‘#’ glyph, thus allowing their posts to be linked to those made by others and to be searchable via the hashtag. In this sense, the hashtag is like a ‘topic’ that organizes social media content. In their study of hashtag activism, anthropologists Bonilla and Rosa argue that ‘hashtags performatively frame what . . . comments are ‘really about’, thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent’ (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015: 5). The use of hashtags on Twitter and Facebook provides a mutual orientation through which users can share their views, consult others, and respond to a particular topic. In the anti-Trump protests, the hashtag #NotMyPresident became an indexical icon for the movement: it not only indexes (points to) political disapproval of Donald Trump but also stands as an icon (resemblance or likeness) of the users’ resistance.

The hashtag #NotMyPresident also trended on Twitter and Facebook after Halimah Yacob was sworn in about a year after Trump’s election:

5. I am literally sitting here in school just angry. So angry. Angry that my voice has been robbed, my vote nullified. #NotMyPresident.
6. #HalimahYacob #NotMyPresident #RejectPE2017 #Singapore.



**Figure 3.** A popular post on the Facebook page ‘Wake Up Singapore’ denouncing the election.

Tweets (5) and (6) were exemplary of the type of posts that were found on Twitter protesting Halimah’s election. In these posts, the hashtag ‘#NotMyPresident’ was appropriated from the anti-Trump movements and recontextualized in Singapore, the markedness of which is shown explicitly in (6) when ‘#NotMyPresident’ co-occurs with ‘#Singapore’.

In Figure 3, ‘#NotMyPresident’ appears below a close-up shot of Halimah as part of the same image, with the caption declaring the ‘entire elected presidency’ a farce. Beyond the caption, what is of note here is how ‘#NotMyPresident’ is reproduced onto a rather innocuous photograph of Halimah’s face and circulated as a visual image. A Singaporean with no knowledge of the prior uses of the hashtag would understand the image as an artifact of protest against the election, but would not recognize the indexical effect of comparing Halimah’s election with Trump’s. By juxtaposing the 2017 Singapore and the 2016 United States presidential elections, Figure 3 cites an imagined America and an idealized American liberal subject. The meme semiotically links the Singaporean

protestor with the American anti-Trump protestor, regimenting the act of invoking this meme as a particular kind of liberal, democratic (anti-authoritarian/demagogic) protest. Involved here are two distinct orders of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003). The first pertains to the immediate pragmatic meaning of the meme as protest against an unscrupulous state of political affairs. At the same time, through (re)posting (and consuming) this meme, posters manifests themselves as having an American-style liberal set of beliefs advocating for civil-political freedom and fair elections. Thus, the production of this meme is a second-order index: it indexes a person that is prototypically young, well-educated, and familiar with American culture. In the process of protesting Halimah's appointment, these meme producers transform the meaning of the presidential election and therefore reinterpret the ruling party as an illiberal, undemocratic one, not simply within a Singaporean order, but a larger cosmopolitan global order, although of course there are some key differences between Halimah's election here and Trump's election in the United States. In the United States, it was Trump's fitness to rule that was questioned, whereas in Singapore the issue was the procedural legitimacy of Halimah's election.

As we can see from the different memes presented in this section, while the political meme is not explicit in its denunciation of government actions, its usage to perform resistance has practical advantages for Singaporeans. The Singaporean government has relentlessly persecuted blog and social media posts critical of the government through legal charges of 'defamation'. The most recent high-profile lawsuit was made in 2017 against Li Shengwu, the Prime Minister's own grandson. Li had mentioned in a Facebook post that 'the Singapore Government is very litigious and has a pliant court system' (Toh, 2017). Such social media posts directly implicate their posters, who are understood to be the animators, authors, and principals of messages that are denotatively explicit about the government and its faults. The Internet meme, on the other hand, appears to be its own author (just as it issues a message that is often relatively denotatively vague) since the image-vehicle is 'borrowed' from popular culture. Singaporean protestors are thus not inhabiting the role of a visible protestor, but enacting protest through the pragmatics of memes. Here, the pragmatics of the meme draw also on its status as widely circulated and relatively un-locatable. This 'wideness' of circulation itself acts, in turn, as a sign to the government, and as a meta-sign to all involved as a collective act of dissent.

## **Pragmatic resistance and the appropriability/defeasibility of memes**

As the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein has argued, people have group-based conceptions of language-use called language ideologies: 'sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use' (Silverstein, 1979: 193). Subsequent scholars have built on the language ideologies analytic, expanding it to focus on myriad group-based projects for regimenting indexicalities in a range of genres and channels. As will become clear from media reports presented later in this section, Internet memes are regimented as a formal genre of posting online via an ideology that takes memes as humorous or parodic artifacts. In other

words, Internet memes are enregistered, meaning that, as semiotic forms, they point to the types of communicative events in which they are used and the stereotypic characteristics of the ‘speakers’ involved in those events (Agha, 2007).

According to discourses that typify or evaluate memes, memes’ intensional prototype (Silverstein, 2005) – the archetypal representative that bears all the qualities that define membership in the category of ‘memes’ – is the funny, often mocking, artifact of which Figures 1 and 2 are examples. This stems from the entextualization of Internet memes as a speech genre in an online community; the ‘Internet meme’ as a category is deeply associated with a particular kind of online activity: casually surfing websites for image-bites for quick entertainment. On popular Internet websites that feature user-generated content such as Reddit, 9GAG, 4chan, and I Can Has Cheezburger?, the Internet memes that are featured are all supposed to be entertaining to casual surfers. Even on the online meme database Know Your Meme, almost all the ‘confirmed’ memes are humorous (Know Your Meme, n.d.).

Because Internet memes are associated with fast and often flippant web entertainment, they are in perpetual danger of being dismissed as inconsequential, treated as the inane online chatter of the young, or even treated as a pathological symptom of the failings of modern society. This kind of typification is common in reflexively ‘public’ mediatised genres (Agha, 2011). An article first published in *The Washington Post* and subsequently in *The Straits Times* on ‘millennial humour’ stated that Internet memes are a form of expression for ‘millennials’ who are humored by the ‘meaningless, loopy, sometimes-sinister whirling gyre of the moment’ (Bruenig, 2017). Another similar article in *The Arizona States Press* reasons that ‘dark-natured’ memes could be ‘a coping mechanism due to all the pressures that society puts on younger people’ (Albal, 2017). A more reflective article that ran in the *New York Times* noted that many tend to think memes are ‘amateurish, vulgar or low-brow’ and that people such as President Trump who use them are ‘childish, bullying, unprofessional or simplistic’ (Grygiel, 2018).

In another example, while *The Straits Times* reported on political memes that went viral after a major breakdown of the mass rapid transit (MRT) system, the same article also reported that some Singaporeans thought memes ‘[downplayed] the seriousness of the incident’ (*The Straits Times*, 2017). This circulation of political memes as funny memes can overshadow the circulation of political memes as protest, overriding their political valences and sense of urgency. Given the meme form’s enregistered indexical value as ‘youth chatter’, the message of a meme is in constant danger of being disregarded as trivial. Furthermore, the use of memes can be taken as evidence of the internal qualities of their users through a ‘rhematization’ process (Gal, 2013: 34): not only can memes be imagined as ‘childish’ or ‘nonserious’, so too can their users.

Memes’ default construal as produced by the young, frivolous, or disaffected affords the basis for their dismissal as capable of accomplishing political work in Singapore. The citationality of political memes can only do their work *qua* public protest if they are visible and recognizable as such. Since Internet memes are still figured in dominant discourses – like those voiced in major media outlets, as well as in everyday usage – as ‘funny’ or ‘nonserious’, the interpretation of a political meme can slip into interpretation as a funny meme. Such invalidation may then deny the political usage of memes.

Given the pragmatic dangers of appearing too ‘outstanding’ in the collective, the structural form and poetics of Internet memes are taken to be ideal for protest in this context, since a meme producer will always be at least one degree removed from the denotative content of protest. On the other hand, through memes, the propositions behind the critique may not surface and demand attention. Thus, the affordances that allow memes to exist as political activism are the same ones that limit their pragmatics. The facelessness and the inexplicit, multivocal nature of the protest cause the protest to fold back onto itself, potentially defeasing the performative work they do.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the pragmatics of the circulation of memes as protest by Singaporeans. In dialogue with existing scholarly works on memes and virality, I have argued that the study of memes’ propagation will be incomplete without an analysis of the ideologies according to which meme producers appropriate and recontextualize the mimetic form for different purposes and ends. In Singapore, Internet memes are deployed as a strategy of pragmatic resistance that allows users to evade charges of sedition. Unlike other media forms, such as journalistic photographs or blog post, the meme’s dispersal of authorship makes it possible for the meme to stand for a general public, rather than a locatable individual. Memes are thus used not only as expressions of a political position, but also as an instrument to communicate to the government itself. In the local context, posters know memes *will* be seen by the government; they are not understood as existing simply for other Singaporeans, but for the superaddressee of the state as well.

At the same time, the nature of intertextual links to prior enregistered uses of memes can steer the interpretation and evaluation of a political meme. The intensional prototype of Internet memes as the language of shallow-minded persons has the potential to calibrate any invocations of political memes as frivolous talk. The enregistered model of the Internet meme and the type of persona with which it is intensionally identified can negate the protest by recapturing and reappropriating political memes as prototypic ‘funny memes’. The enregistered model of Internet memes and the nature of its circulation thus threaten the online protest movement with defeasement by hindering its very recognizability as political protest.

However, the increasing pervasiveness of political memes may serve to reconfigure the enregistered model of Internet memes due to their centrality in online political talk. Political memes are gradually becoming an aesthetic and speech genre of their own, both in and beyond Singapore. There is increasing awareness of political memes as they multiply in online political talk, and even politicians are beginning to adapt memes for their own purposes. With the increasing reporting and constructing of political memes as an isolatable genre of online speech event, the contexts and the occasions of their use are still undergoing (re)construction. An attention to these ever-shifting media ideologies will thus benefit scholarship seeking to study and understand digital media and their affordances.

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