

SRSLY PHENOMENAL: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE APPEAL OF LOLCATS

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GLOSSARY

4Chan: 4Chan, particularly the /b/ board, is a website (imageboard) credited with creating LOLCats. It is also the home hub of hacktivist group Anonymous. See Stryker, 2011 and Bernstein et al., 2011 for further information.

Advice Animals: A series of image macros that follow certain tropes and themes. See Appendix L for examples.

Animated gif: A series of gif (Graphics Interchange Format) images which are linked together to make simple animations that run on a loop.

Ceiling Cat: Ceiling Cat refers to an image of a cat peeking through a hole in a ceiling. Ceiling Cat became a reference to God after its use in the LOLCat Bible Translation Project.

Cheez Town Cryer: A blog that serves as a social and informational hub for the commenter community on ICanHasCheezburger.com

Chuck Norris Facts: A meme that parodies the tough image of Chuck Norris. A sample Chuck Norris Fact is "Chuck Norris's tears cure cancer. Too bad he has never cried".

Colbert SuperPAC: A political fundraising organization started by satirical pundit Stephen Colbert. SuperPACs are organizations that can raise unlimited funds for American political candidates.

Demotivator/Demotivational Poster: A genre of image macro which parodies the Motivational Posters found frequently in schools and offices, especially those from the 1970s and 80s.

FAILBlog: FAILBlog features pictures of people and animals 'failing', or committing idiotic and occasionally self-injurious acts. Although FAIL as a genre exists outside of FAILBlog, it is the most well-known repository of FAIL images. Like I Can Has Cheezburger, FAILBlog is in the Cheezburger Networks portfolio.

I Can Has Cheezburger: The website that popularized LOLCats. Founded in 2006, it originally featured a single grey cat with the supertitle, "I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?". It now receives approximately 3 million unique visits a month.

Image macro: An image macro is an image with text superimposed upon it. Image macros tend to be humorous in nature. LOLCats are an example of an image macro.

Leetspeak (l337 5p34k): A numeric replacement language with roots in the hacking and gaming communities. See Blashki and Nichol, 2005 for a full explanation.

Lol/lols: A generic term which refers to a LOLCat or other image macro

LOLCat Bible Translation Project: A wiki established to translate the entire Bible into Lolspeak.

Lolspeak: Lolspeak is the *lingua franca* of the LOLCat world. Its exact origins are unknown, but it appears to incorporate elements of Motherese (baby talk), AOL Chat Speak (“BRB”, “LOL”) and Leetspeak.

n00b: Leetspeak for “newbie”, or novice.

Reddit: Reddit is a content aggregation site that consists of user-generated news links that are up-or-downvoted by the community members, or ‘Redditors’.

Rickrolling: A prank which consists of sending an unidentified link to a friend that leads to a music video of Rick Astley’s “Never Gonna Give You Up”.

Tumblr: A microblogging platform that allows users to post text, images, links, chat, audio, and video content in a pre-formatted template. Tumblr is also a social networking site that consists of nodes of ‘Tumblrs’ who ‘follow’ each other (similar to Twitter).

ABSTRACT

LOLCats are pictures of cats with misspelled captions that have become a genuine cultural phenomenon. LOLCats are often considered to be the archetypal Internet meme, a piece of often entertaining cultural currency that spreads rapidly through social networks and media platforms. However, unlike most Internet memes whose potency tends to wane after a short period of time, LOLCats have remained relevant and popular for the better half of a decade, inspiring a devoted following. Despite their position as a hallmark of participatory culture, LOLCats—and Internet memes in general— have been largely ignored in academia. This study sought to address this shortcoming through an exploratory, audience-oriented examination of LOLCats' appeal. In light of the user-generated and social nature of the LOLCat phenomenon, focus groups were conducted to investigate the ways in which the textual and social aspects of LOLCats contribute to their allure. The research revealed that the LOLCat audience is comprised of three separate groups that interact with and appreciate LOLCats for different reasons. The study also confirmed that LOLCats are operating as a genre, and that the appropriate execution of that genre is central to their enjoyment. Furthermore, it became evident that for most participants, LOLCats' appeal rests in the intersection of the textual and the social, as exemplified by the use of textual and generic elements such as Lolspeak to perform social functions like establishing in-group boundaries. Additionally, despite the fact that LOLCats are a form of publicly circulated UGC, these groups revealed that many LOLCats are created or shared for the purpose of interpersonal communication and emotional expression. Ultimately, LOLCats are funny pictures of cats; however, the ways in which they traffic in fundamental human needs like belonging and emotional expression are no laughing matter.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2007) has changed the way that people interact with the world and with each other. Developments in ICT have enabled changes in commerce, politics, and interpersonal communication. Widespread consumption and creation of user-generated content (UGC) has ushered us into an era of participatory culture, breaking down the barriers between producer and consumer (Bruns, 2007), and allowing us to "take media into our own

hands” (Jenkins et al., 2009: 29). This has contributed to the election of the first African-American President (Painter, 2009), and provided new tools for fighting governmental corruption (Shirky, 2010a). It has also given us Peanut Butter Jelly Time¹.

Peanut Butter Jelly Time is an Internet meme, a piece of “cultural currency” that drives audiences to “share, participate, augment, parody and otherwise own it” (Stryker, 2011: 17). Once the exclusive province of message boards and other ‘computer geek’ hangouts, Internet memes have exploded into mainstream culture, becoming “as important to the American consciousness at this point as Hollywood movies” (Grigoriadis, 2011, n.d.). Advertisements emulate them², political campaigns incorporate them³, and popular TV shows reference them⁴, all in an attempt to capture some of the magic.

However, while user-generated content and participatory culture have been widely covered in academic literature, Internet memes themselves have been largely overlooked, a fact which is “sobering” given the public’s interest in them (Bauckhage, 2011). Even within the study of internet memes, academic interest has focused primarily on their spread and distribution (Bauckhage, 2011; Shifman & Thelwall, 2009); while there has been some examination of ‘viral video’ (Burgess, 2008), there has been no investigation into why specific internet memes resonate with online audiences, despite the fact that they operate “at the intersection of Internet, society, and culture” (Erlich, 2011, n.d).

While Internet memes are notoriously ephemeral (Bauckhage, 2011; Bernstein et al., 2011), one meme has managed to remain culturally relevant for years, crossing over into mainstream audiences: The LOLCat. LOLCats (or ‘cat macros’) are, at their simplest, pictures of cats with misspelled captions on them, but they have sparked an enormous cultural reaction and become the most recognizable example of “internet-borne cultural iconography” (Stryker, 2011: 21). Named “the cutest distraction of the decade” (Entertainment Weekly, 2009: n.d.), I Can Has Cheezburger (IChC), the site which popularized the images, received approximately

¹ See Appendix M.

² This refers to Burger King’s Subservient Chicken, one of the most famous ‘viral’ ad campaigns. See Appendix M.

³ In 2008, Gov. Mike Huckabee used Chuck Norris in his campaign ads, riffing on the ‘Chuck Norris Facts’ meme. See Glossary.

⁴ In 2011, Stephen Colbert used Lolspeak to announce the approval of his SuperPAC. See Glossary; Appendix M.

37 million unique hits in the last 12 months (Quantcast, 2011). Based off the popularity of ICHC (as well as the other meme-oriented sites in its portfolio), Cheezburger Networks received \$30 million in venture funding in January 2011 (Erich, 2011). LOLCats have spawned two best-selling books (Nakagawa, 2008; Pet Holdings, 2009), a Bible translation (Grondin, 2010), an art show (Rountree, 2008), and an Off-Broadway musical (Pomranz & Steinberg, 2009). LOLCats have also inspired the development of a massive international community; in July 2011, thousands of Cheezburger devotees converged upon Safeco Field in Seattle for Cheezburger Field Day⁵, “a celebration of all things awesome about the internet” (I Can Has Cheezburger, 2011: n.d.).

Despite their evident impact, LOLCats have been essentially ignored in the academic literature. When they are mentioned, the comments have been either indifferent (Burgess, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009) or blatantly derogatory; one web scholar dismissed them as “the stupidest possible creative act” (Shirky, 2010a). While it’s true that LOLCat images are simple and arguably even silly, they are just as much a part of the “peer-to-peer cultural production” landscape (Benkler in Boyle, 2001:14) as the YouTube videos and blogs that have been exalted and heralded as breaking down the barriers between the consumer/producer relationship and turning audiences into “producers” (Bruns, 2007). Online content is playing an increasingly important role in social, political, and cultural agenda-setting (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008: 253), and, as this paper will show, LOLCats are a key example of the types of content that are changing the way people engage in cultural participation, creative engagement, community interaction, and identity construction.

This study is an investigation, ultimately, into why people like LOLCats. While most memes have a shelf life of a few days to a few weeks (Bauckhage, 2011), LOLCats have managed to remain popular and relevant for the better half of a decade. If the ‘right question’ is, ‘What are the interesting memes?’ (Brodie 2009: 4), the other right question must be, “why?”

Why is it that LOLCats resonate with online audiences? While this paper examines the LOLCat’s appeal, it also examines the larger context of the digital cultural practices that

⁵ See Appendix K.

surround it. Burgess, Foth, and Klæbe (2006) note that gauging the cultural impact of the “collaborative communities” engaging in “unconventional expressions of participatory culture” is a challenge for today’s media scholars (5); in studying one such “unconventional expression”, this study aims to understand—on a small scale—some of that cultural impact.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

While LOLCats is an enormously popular phenomenon, it has yet to be studied in any depth. In academic literature, LOLCats have been mentioned in the context of other topics such as participatory culture (Shirky, 2010b; Jenkins et al., 2009) and 4Chan (Bernstein et al., 2011), but thus far no attempts have been made to understand the phenomena in and of itself: the sole academic article published specifically about LOLCats focused on the similarities in visual practice between LOLCats and silent-film intertitles (Brubaker, 2008).

There has been, however, a great deal of literature written about the socio-technical context that gave rise to LOLCats, as well as theories that explore the appeal inherent in their textual elements. This chapter will selectively review both areas of literature with the intent of examining how it may—or may not—help understand the appeal of LOLCats. The first half of this chapter will focus on the context of LOLCats, particularly the literature on user-generated content, participatory culture, and Internet memes. The second half will provide a concise overview of existing work that pertains to LOLCats’ textual features, specifically in the areas of genre and humor.

Part I: The Context of LOLCats

Web 2.0 and The Rise of Participatory Culture

The participatory culture that enabled the development and proliferation of LOLCats emerged from what is popularly known as ‘Web 2.0’. Web 2.0 is a contested term (O’Reilly, 2007) whose definitions range from a shift in business models (Burgess, Foth, & Klæbe, 2006) to a metaphor for collaboration in service of the greater good (Gauntlett, 2011). However, the fundamental shift which underlies most conceptualizations of Web 2.0 lay in the proliferation of platforms which, combined with the ‘increased availability and power of digital

technologies' (Burgess, 2006: 1), enabled lay users to easily create and distribute their own content on a massive scale.

This explosion of user-generated content, for many academics and critics, heralded a new era in which the traditional boundaries between media consumers and producers were severely blurred, if not eradicated (Bruns, 2007; Couldry, 2003; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002). Conceptualizations of the 'active audience' evolved from a theoretical argument concerning textual interpretation to a literal portrayal of the behavior that was taking place on a widespread basis (Burgess, 2006: 2). The attendant new paradigm, labeled 'participatory culture', has allowed consumers to "take media in their own hands" and not only choose from existing options, but respond to those options, directly or indirectly, through their own creative endeavors (Jenkins et al., 2009: 4). This evolution of the "audience" into the "produser" (Bruns, 2007) has not only affected the way users interact with media, but as this study will show, the ways in which it appeals to them as well.

The Appeal of User-Generated Content

Once it became clear that user-generated content (UGC) was resonating deeply with audiences, many scholars began to investigate the roots of its appeal. In a theoretical review of the early empirical literature on UGC engagement, Shao (2008) concluded that consumption, participation and creation behaviors derive from disparate motivations: consumption is driven by information and entertainment needs, participation is encouraged by social interaction needs, and creation is motivated by the desire for self-expression and recognition. More recent empirical studies have confirmed Shao's conclusions: Leung (2009) similarly found that entertainment, socialization, and recognition were the main drivers for online content generation; additionally, Schaedel & Clement (2010) found that entertainment, socialization and social identity drove involvement in UGC-based communities, while desire for recognition resulted in a greater amount of time spent engaging in creative activities.

While these studies are an excellent starting point for an investigation into the overarching appeal of user-generated content, they do not differentiate sufficiently between the various content forms that fall under what is ultimately an umbrella categorization (Leung, 2009: 1345). While blogs, YouTube videos and Wikipedia entries all fall under the auspices of UGC, there are not only significant differences in the nature of those content types, but also within

those content categories themselves (see boyd 2006 for an example of this argument regarding blogs). Consequently, a gratification that may be intimately tied up in the appeal of one type of user-generated content may be inapplicable to another; the issue of recognition is a key example of this. While recognition may be a key driver for users creating content for sites/platforms such as YouTube, it wouldn't apply for a site like Wikipedia where recognition consists of "having your username listed somewhere in an article's history logs" (Gauntlett, 2011: 7). This point is particularly salient for content like LOLCats where value can't be attributed to a single author, usually because there isn't one (Burgess, 2008).

Vernacular Creativity and the Production of the Everyday

In *The Collective Intelligence Genome*, Malone, Laubacher & Dellarocas (2010) reduce the question of creative motivation to the triad of "love, glory, or money"; absent recognition or financial remuneration, they argue, people engage in creative pursuits because they love it. In his 2011 book, *Making is Connecting*, David Gauntlett echoes this assertion. Departing from Csikszentmihályi's conceptualization of creativity as the province of genius (74), he introduces the concept of "everyday creativity" to recognize the 'imaginative process' involved in DIY pursuits such as knitting, baking, blogging or YouTube videomaking:

Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy.

(Gauntlett, 2011: 76 emphasis in original).

This definition of creativity highlights the fact that the makers engage in these imaginative pursuits largely because they "want to, and because it gives them *pleasure*" (Gauntlett, 2011: 221). Gauntlett argues that these exercises of everyday creativity are not inconsequential dabbings, but a site of transformative power on both the individual and the societal level. When we make, he argues, not only do we transform our self-image from that of passive consumer to "powerful, creative agents" (245), but we connect with others, ultimately laying the groundwork to confront problems with "confidence and originality" on both an individual and societal basis. (245).

Jean Burgess supports a similar celebration of "amateur creativity and media production"

(2008: 1), albeit from a more digitally exclusive perspective. She uses the concept of “vernacular creativity” to describe the blending of what could be described as traditional folk activities (such as storytelling and scrapbooking) with contemporary media knowledge and practices. She argues that this results in a reduction of “cultural distance” (Atton, 2001, in Burgess, 2008) between the “conditions of cultural production and the everyday experiences from which they are derived and to which they return” (p. 6).

Gauntlett and Burgess’s conceptualizations of creativity are useful for thinking about—and validating—the type of content creation which is often derided as “throwaway” (Shirky, 2010a; 2010b). However, while these definitions of creativity were developed to incorporate ‘digital DIY’, YouTube videos and LOLCats are two very different types of content, and as I will explore further in the Discussion section, understanding the type of creativity that LOLCats afford requires more nuance than either of these theories currently provide.

LOLCats and The Memesphere

One of the forms of ‘digital DIY’ that has taken hold in recent years is the Internet meme. The concept of the meme was introduced by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins as part of a theory that explained why certain ideas, catchphrases, trends, and other pieces of cultural information replicate through a population (Dawkins, 1976). The term ‘Internet meme’, while “similar to the scientific usage in meaning if not analytical precision” (Burgess, 2008: 1), has come to refer to the “inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge” (Bauckhage, 2011: 42) that inhabit social networks and email inboxes across the world.

While certain memes⁶ (such as Rickrolling⁷) are relatively self-contained, the majority of memes are part of a complex, interconnected, and esoterically self-referential body of texts referred to as “the memesphere” (Stryker, 2011). It is important to note, however, that rather than a collection of discrete texts, memes are inextricably bound to the context of their creation and consumption. As Burgess astutely noted in regard to video memes on YouTube, memetic texts are “the mediating mechanisms via which cultural *practices* are originated, adopted and (sometimes) retained *within* social networks” (2008: 2). In other words, on

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, the term “meme” will refer to an internet meme, and not a Dawkinsian meme.

⁷ See Glossary

meme-riddled sites and platforms like YouTube, 4Chan, Tumblr, and Reddit, memes are often the means through which users/members interact with each other. This communication through visual means has resulted in what Cole Stryker calls the “language of memes”, a “visual vernacular” that allows people to pithily communicate emotions and opinions (2011: 29). However, despite the particular evolution of this new genre, Burgess asserts that the communicative practices underlying memes are “deeply situated in everyday, even mundane creative traditions” (2008: 9).

The relationship between memes and LOLCats is a complicated one. Any discussion of LOLCats invariably involves a discussion of memes because the two are inextricably interrelated: LOLCats are, in a certain sense, the ur-meme: they are the example that most people turn to in order to explain what, exactly, an Internet meme is (Grigoriadis, 2010; Bernstein et al., 2011; Stryker, 2011). On the other hand, LOLCats’ longevity, mainstream audience, and devoted community are atypical of most other memes, and the combination of the three makes it peerless in the memesphere.

Part II: The Textual Elements of LOLCats

The LOLCat Genre

LOLCats have a set of textual conventions that make them instantly recognizable to those who interact with and consume them. The fact that LOLCats have widely-recognized visual structure within a particular community means, according to Toms (1999), that they are a genre. ‘Genre’ is a term that is used to refer to a “distinctive type of text” (Chandler, 1997: 1). Despite the fact that genre is frequently used as a method of classification, its use can be problematic, both as a concept and as a system of categorization. This primarily stems from the fact that genre suffers from definitional problems; as Chandler notes, “one theorist’s *genre* maybe another’s *sub-genre* or even *super-genre* (and indeed what is *technique*, *style*, *mode*, *formula* or *thematic grouping* to one may be treated as a *genre* by another)” (1997: 1). Nonetheless, genres are generally identifiable through their combination of form and agreed-upon function (Yates, Orlikowski and Rennecker, 1997: 1), even if the knowledge of that form and function is largely tacit and difficult to clearly articulate (Chandler, 1997: 3).

While genre is most familiarly used in the context of audio/visual media or literature, the concept and application of genre has considerable implications for the digital realm. Within this literature, genre is considered to be an essential element of online interaction since the effective use of online documents—from websites to blogs—depends on the user’s ability to recognize its nature, structure, and purpose (Toms, 1999). Furthermore, genre dictates not only the way communications are structured, but the way they are received (Yates, Orlikowski & Rennecker, 1997: 1). The question of reception connects to the notion that genres are both socially constructed and constructing. Genres are the “keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (Miller, 1984: 165): communities that were likely informed by genre (Brown and Duguid, 2002 in Bowman and Willis, 2003). Whether textual or social, genres are important framing devices: generic conventions set up expectations (Kuipers, 2009). In the case of LOLCats, the expectations set by the genre are both social and textual; one question addressed in the Results section is how these social and textual conventions interact with how LOLCats are created, consumed, and enjoyed.

Humor & LOLCats

One of the most obvious generic ‘expectations’ for LOLCats is that, as funny pictures of cats, they should actually be funny. The question then, is not so much *whether* humor is involved with LOLCats’ appeal, but *in what way*.

Shifman asserts that humor can provide unique insight into a society or culture (2007: 187); while the existence of humor is universal, its appreciation is tied to the context of its creation, whether that be a group of friends or an entire nation (Boskin, 1997 in Shifman, 2007). Furthermore, a shared sense of humor can bring a society or culture closer together; as Kuipers notes, “sharing humor signals similarity and similarity breeds closeness...laughing together is a sign of belonging” (2009: n.d.).

Humor is a mechanism through which we erect and maintain symbolic boundaries (Kuipers, 2009) which are used to execute a number of personal and social functions: asserting tastes, exploring identities and situations, and defining insiders and outsiders (Jenkins et al., 2009; Gelpkopf and Kreidler, 1996). Particularly applicable to the study at hand is identification humor (Meyer, 2000), more familiarly known as ‘in-jokes’. In jokes are important components of both memes and online communities (Stryker, 2011; Baym, 1995) due to their facilitation of “in-

group-ness” (Bormann, 1972, 1982 in Meyer, 2000: 325) through the assumption of exclusively shared knowledge (Meyer, 2000: 434).

In-jokes can take many shapes, from single words to entire systems of meaning (Apte, 1985). One related phenomenon is slangs, a form of linguistic humor (Apte, 1985) that is used for “bonding and ‘sociability’ through playfulness” (Thorne, n.d., 2). Slangs are often specialized languages developed by a group for the purpose of in-group communication and identity marking (Apte, 1985: 187), and can function as a source of humor on multiple levels. One way is through ‘accent humor’, the exaggerated use of incorrect grammar and vocabulary (Apte, 1985: 200). The other is through the reinterpretation of familiar words and phrases to create a code that is understandable only within a group context (Apte, 1985: 187). The latter type of humor can be an essential element in creating group identity and solidarity in online communities; as Baym notes, the group-specific meaning which arise out of humorous interaction can provide “central objects” around which online groups can define themselves (1995: n.d.).

There is a significant symbiosis that exists between humor and the Internet: not only is most ‘viral’ content of a humorous nature (Jenkins et al., 2009; Phelps et al. 2004 in Shifman, 2007), but seeking out humor is one of the most common activities for Internet users in the UK (Dutton et al, 2005 in Shifman, 2007). Interestingly (and quite relevant for this study), Shifman’s (2007) content analysis of Internet-based comic texts revealed that the most prominent format in the sample was the ‘funny photo’, most of which featured animals. Shifman attributed the texts’ appeal to the anthropomorphic nature of the images, noting that funny animal photos “may on the one hand highlight the difference between humans and animals, but on the other hand hint at the similarities between them” (2007: 202).

Anthropomorphism is the practice of attributing “human characteristics to non-human things” (Milton, 2005: 255). Baker argues that in anthropomorphized texts, “the immediate subject of those ideas is frequently not the animal itself, but rather a human subject drawing on animal imagery to make a statement about human identity” (2001: xxxv). Alger and Alger (1999) consider anthropomorphism to be a distancing concept (Milton, 2005: 266); in terms of humor theory, this means that anthropomorphized texts allow those who identify with them

to essentially laugh at themselves by regarding their own actions from a different perspective (Goldstein, 1976 in Gelkopf and Kreitler, 1996). Baker observes that there is a common view that animals are inherently funny, and argues that peoples' willingness to identify with and through these images is rooted in a simple pleasure: "people, it seems, just like looking at the image of animals" (2001: 121).

RESEARCH STATEMENT

The question that inspired this research overall was "Why in the name of Ceiling Cat⁸ are LOLCats so popular?" What is it about LOLCats that not only fueled their initial popularity, but helped maintain it for years? Given that LOLCats are a phenomenon that is both textual and social in nature, I will be looking to concepts that are equally textual and social in nature to aid in understanding their appeal: specifically, genre and humor.

Within genre, I will be using, in particular, Toms' (1999) conceptualization of genre as "a shape of information that is universally recognizable within particular discourse communities" (n.d.). I will also be drawing upon Miller's idea that genre acts as "the keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community" (1984: 165).

Within humor theory, I will be applying the concept of linguistic humor, especially Apte's (1985) definition of a slang. I will also be utilizing the concept of identification humor, or in-jokes (Meyer, 2000), particularly regarding the assertion that humor plays a role in erecting and enforcing symbolic boundaries (Kuipers, 2009).

Additionally, I will be invoking the concept of anthropomorphism, particularly anthropomorphic distancing through humor (Alger and Alger, 1999 in Milton, 2005; Goldstein 1976 in Gelkopf and Kreitler, 1996).

Finally, interacting with LOLCats can be a process not only of consumption, but of sharing and creation as well. In order to recognize the various forms of engagement that are possible

⁸ See Glossary; Appendix N

when interacting with LOLCats, those who interact with LOLCats will be conceptualized as “users”.

In formulating my research question, I took into consideration the following sub-questions:

- What do people find funny about LOLCats?
- Is anthropomorphism a factor?
- What role does Lolspeak play?
- What about the form and format of LOLCats appeals to users?
- How do sharing and creation factor in?

The questions outlined above helped shape my ultimate Research Question, which is:

In what ways do the textual and social aspects of LOLCats contribute to the appeal of LOLCats for LOLCat Users?

METHODOLOGY

Preface

At the start of the research process, I set out to understand the textual appeal of LOLCats: why it was, exactly, that these funny images of cats with misspelled captions and big white font resonated so strongly with LOLCat users. My investigations of the social and creative practices surrounding LOLCats—the making and sharing—were an attempt to further understand what was going on with the images themselves. However, it soon became clear that the textual elements of LOLCats were only half of the story: that, like Burgess’s video memes (2008), LOLCats are inextricably bound to the cultural practices and social environment that surround them, and that the examination of one inevitably requires the examination of the other.

Overview

The research question was investigated through a total of six focus groups. Four of the groups were comprised of primarily passive LOLCat Users and were conducted face to face. The remaining two groups consisted of more active LOLCat Users and were conducted using Google Hangouts, a new online videoconferencing technology launched in July 2011. While

the sample size for this study (36 individuals) allowed me to explore my research question in depth, the results are not meant to be generalized to a larger population.

Research Strategy

The aim of this research – to understand the appeal of an online phenomenon – presented from the beginning a number of methodological questions. While direct analysis of the texts could reveal certain elements about LOLCats, I realized that to answer the research question at hand, an audience-oriented methodology would be needed. Focus groups were chosen for several reasons, but the most compelling was their social nature.

LOLCats are a fundamentally social phenomenon; as Clay Shirky quipped, “no one would create a LOLCat to keep for themselves” (2010b: n.d.). As such, conducting individual interviews was rejected due to their inherent lack of interactivity that is characteristic of LOLCat engagement. Furthermore, attitudes and perceptions are largely developed via social interaction; focus groups work primarily because they tap into this tendency (Krueger, 1994: 10), allowing to the researcher to explore “what individuals believe or feel as well as why they behave in the way they do” (Rabiee, 2004: 655).

Furthermore, focus groups are particularly suited for gaining insight into complicated topics where behavior or motivation may be multifaceted (Rabiee, 2004; Krueger, 1994); This is particularly beneficial when discussing a deceptively complex topic like humor, where the insights generated from group interaction are frequently “deeper and richer” than those gleaned from individual interviews (Rabiee, 2004: 656). Additionally, the permissive nature of properly-conducted focus groups can encourage individuals to disclose opinions and feelings that may not otherwise be divulged through alternative interrogatory practices (Krueger, 1994: 11). While focus groups present the risk of group think or outspoken individuals influencing others (Krueger, 1994) this is countered in well-moderated groups by the opportunity for group members’ disclosures to provide a ‘jumping off point’ for others to evaluate in the context of their own perceptions and emotions (Gaskell, 2000).

Participant Selection: Face to Face Groups

Given that LOLCats are an online phenomenon, the participants for the groups were recruited primarily through the use of social networking, content, and community sites.

Requests for participants were posted on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Reddit, Craigslist, and The Cheez Town Cryer. I also partially utilized a snowball sample, tapping into my own personal networks and requesting them to spread the word to their LOLCat-loving friends and acquaintances. As incentive, I offered the chance to win a £25 Amazon giftcard. These two sampling techniques were utilized with the goal of representing the range of involvement levels represented in the LOLCat user population; while some LOLCat Users are deeply involved with the community, others enjoy them in a more casual way. Participants for the groups were also selected with this representational breadth in mind.

While the participants' engagement with LOLCats differed in intensity, they were, overall, demographically homogeneous, a general requisite for conducting successful focus groups (Krueger, 1994). The one exception was a 72 year old woman who is one of the most active commenters on ICHC and the co-author of the Cheez Town Cryer. While her demographic divergence from the participants in her group could have been an issue, the other members of the group treated her with much appreciation once her level of involvement with the LOLCat community was made apparent.

I also had the opportunity to conduct a focus group with a group of coworkers who were LOLCat enthusiasts. Given the relationship between memes and the "Bored At Work" population (Peretti in Stryker, 2011: 172), I saw this as an ideal opportunity to investigate the dynamics of this particular social aspect of the LOLCat phenomenon. Furthermore, Kitzinger (1994) notes that due to established comfort levels, the use of pre-existing groups can be helpful when conducting exploratory research (Rabiee, 2004: 656)

Discussion Guide

Given that LOLCats are largely undocumented in academic literature, the discussion guide was designed with an exploratory and phenomenological spirit, the aim being to explore as many of the textual and social aspects of the LOLCat phenomenon as possible while allowing the study participants to openly contribute their opinions with minimal influence. Consequently, the discussion guide was designed primarily as a topic guide. This allowed for more flexibility in exploring themes and topics introduced by the participants, as well as the ability to incorporate participants' own words in to the questions (Krueger, 1994: 56-7). The guide underwent two iterations. The original version, used on the first focus group, incorporated

explorations of the main textual and social aspects of the phenomenon. The guide was revised after the first focus group when it became clear that certain elements of the phenomenon were of more significance than anticipated, particularly the format and the significance of Lolspeak. The interview guide was then revised to further explore these issues, and was used in all further groups.

Stimulus Selection

To aid in the discussion of the more abstract textual aspects of LOLCats (such as humor and anthropomorphism), I elected to include stimulus in the second half of the focus groups as suggested by Gaskell (2000: 51) and Krueger (1994: 66). Stimulus was selected in two ways. Participants were invited to submit their favorite lols in advance of the groups; this allowed for an exploration of the factors that guided their selection rationale. Given that the number of participants who elected to send images varied by group, supplementary stimulus for the groups was selected after a comprehensive review of the ICHC Hall of Fame, a collection of the most popular LOLCats on the site. During this review, I inductively developed topical categories to guide my selection; the individual images ultimately selected for inclusion represented a variety of intersecting textual elements and topical categories.

Summary of Procedures: Face to Face Groups

All of the focus groups were held in July 2011. The face-to-face groups were held in three separate locations to accommodate the participants: two were held in on the LSE Campus in Central London; one was held at a private residence in East London, and one group was held at an office in Central London. Groups were recorded on video camera with backup digital audio recorders. Each of the groups had between 6 to 8 participants in adherence to methodological best practices (Krueger, 1994; Rabiee, 2004).

The groups began with each participant reading the information sheet and signing the consent form. Further verbal explanation and clarification was provided, with an opportunity for the participants to ask questions. As suggested by Krueger (1994: 114), the discussion started off with lighter questions before proceeding to more complicated subject matter. Any topics on the guide that were not introduced organically into the discussion were incorporated after natural ebbs in conversation.

In moderating the groups, I aimed to create a relaxed and permissive atmosphere that encouraged participants to divulge their feelings about LOLCats. One complication that arose was that quite a few of the participants either demonstrated or admitted their embarrassment that they were so engaged with something that was such a “waste of time” and “silly”. In order to diminish their apprehension, I occasionally indicated, directly or indirectly, the extent of my own experience with, and feelings about, LOLCats. While this risked inserting myself into the process, I found that these revelations assuaged the participants’ nervousness and resulted in their being more expressive, revelatory, and engaged with the group overall.

After approximately 30 minutes, stimulus was incorporated into the discussion and participants asked to comment generally on the images with follow up questions posed if necessary. After approximately 50 minutes, the session was closed by inviting participants to make any additional comments or address unasked questions as suggested by Krueger (1994: 69). The groups ended with a random draw for the £25 Amazon gift card.

Online Focus Groups: Rationale and Selection

The first three focus groups that were conducted were primarily composed of users who engaged with LOLCats in a more passive manner. In an attempt to fully understand the LOLCat phenomenon, I elected to conduct two online focus groups with “expert” LOLCat users who either actively sought out LOLCats or had experience creating them. While overall, creators are a smaller percentage of the UGC population (Van Dijck, 2009: 44), I felt their important role warranted further investigation. While I attempted to recruit these more active users for my face-to-face groups, many of those who were interested in participating and also fit the desired criteria lived outside the metropolitan London area. To include a selection of more active LOLCat users who had responded to my original posts, I held online focus groups using Google Hangouts.

Methodological Considerations: Online Focus Groups

Methodological literature documents several drawbacks of online focus groups. Edmunds (1999 in Rezabek, 2000) notes that even when video cameras are used during live groups, it’s difficult to see other participants’ facial expressions. Rezabek (2000) noted that some participants’ fear of, or inexperience with, online video technology impacts their willingness to participate in discussions and affects the group dynamic. These concerns, while valid, were

largely inapplicable to the two online groups that were conducted for this study, for reasons expanded upon below.

Google Hangouts As A Focus Group Tool

Google + was launched in July 2011. One of its most lauded features was Hangouts, which function as advanced group chats (pictured in figure A).



Figure A: User Interface for Google Hangouts

The uniqueness of the Google Hangout is that it emulates face-to-face (F2F) conversation. This is accomplished through an audio functionality that, once triggered by vocal or other audio input, switches the video feed of the speaker to the main window, directing your attention to the person who is speaking. While this may have been confusing or distracting for the uninitiated, the groups who were interviewed online consisted of technically savvy early adopters, many of whom regularly used Google Hangouts in a social capacity. Due to this familiarity and comfort with the platform's functionality and emerging norms, the online focus groups went quite smoothly.

Summary of Procedures: Online Focus Groups

The online focus groups were conducted using the same discussion guide and the same procedure as the Face-to-Face groups, the single difference being the absence of stimulus. This

was for two reasons. While Google Hangouts support simultaneous YouTube watching, they currently do not support static image consumption. More salient, however, is the fact that the online groups were intimately familiar with the LOLCat corpus and were able to speak at length about the more complicated aspects of the phenomenon without the need for visual prompts. The focus groups were recorded with Camtasia, live screen-capture software.

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative analysis allows researchers to describe and explain phenomena or social worlds through the process of reviewing, synthesizing, and interpreting data (Fossey et al., 2002: 728). Thematic analysis is a “flexible and useful research tool” that can help accomplish this description and explanation by providing a complex and detailed account of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). Furthermore, the flexibility of thematic analysis allows for the identification of unanticipated themes and insights (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 97), a particular advantage for an exploratory project such as this one. However, thematic analysis is not without its challenges or drawbacks; one of the most significant is that it invariably requires a certain amount of assumption and interpretation on the researcher’s part. Nonetheless, as long as these potential pitfalls are kept in mind, thematic analysis can help provide valuable insight into the ways people experience their worlds (Fossey et al., 2002: 720).

The recordings made of all six focus groups were manually transcribed and analyzed based on the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In order to allow for the cultivation of unforeseen results, I took a data-driven approach that relied on the inductive development of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which were established by examining the transcripts for instances of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, as per Owen (1984). Extracts matching each theme were identified and ‘bucketed’ into individual documents for further evaluation; these individual documents were then analysed, condensed, and reorganized in a recursive process until the final themes were decided upon (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

The results section is organized by the four main findings of the study. The first section explains how, rather than one set of LOLCat users, there are three separate groups of users

that engage with LOLCats in different ways. The remaining sections on genre, humor, and creation/sharing reveal how LOLCats' appeal rests in the interaction between the textual and social, and connects to issues of identity, pleasure, and emotional expression. All quotes that have been selected for inclusion have been chosen because they most closely typify the sentiment being referenced or described.

The Three LOLCat User Constituencies

Over the course of the focus groups, it became clear that 'LOLCat Users' were not one amorphous group, but were best conceptualized in terms of three separate groups of users. During my analysis and coding of the focus group transcripts, I inductively established three user groups, into which I subsequently categorized each participant: CheezFrenz, MemeGeeks, and Casual Users. It is worth noting that the presence and proportion of these three groups in the participant population are inevitably bound up in the selection process. Thus it is possible that other user categories exist that are not represented here. Nonetheless, the results provide strong evidence that these three groups represent important constituencies for LOLCats, and that the appeal of the phenomenon differs by group.

Cheezfrenz

"Cheezfrenz" is how community members are referred to on ICHC. They are invested LOLCat lovers whose interest in LOLCats generally stems from their affinity for cats. They actively seek out LOLCats, usually on a daily basis. The Cheezfrenz in my sample were all involved with the ICHC community on some level; most were drawn to it because it is, according to one Cheezfrenz who was unable to attend the focus groups, "a place to be safe and kind" for people who "want to be nice, want to be happy, want to give support, want to smile" (H. Langdon, personal communication, 15/7/11). According to one focus group participant who attended Cheezburger Field Day, the most ardent Cheezfrenz tend to be older women; while all of the Cheezfrenz who attended my focus groups were female, they ranged in age from 21 to 72. Cheezfrenz comprised 11% of the participant sample in this study.

MemeGeeks

Classifying the “MemeGeeks” as such is not meant pejoratively; “geek” and “nerd” were used frequently within this group as a badge of honor or compliment⁹. While MemeGeeks enjoy LOLCats, their interest in them is almost nostalgic, stemming mostly from LOLCats’ place in the meme canon¹⁰ and their role as the progenitor of other less mainstream memes, particularly Advice Animals¹¹. A minority of the MemeGeeks actively seek out LOLCats; most interact with them on content-oriented social networking sites such as Tumblr and Reddit. MemeGeeks’ interest in memes overall is part of a larger interest in Internet culture, with many MemeGeeks referring to themselves as “children of the Internet”, “from the Internet”, and “(living) on the Internet”.

The MemeGeeks represented by far the largest proportion of users in the study at 63%. The vast majority (66%) were males between the ages of 24 and 28, and overwhelmingly worked in the digital industry in some context. While this may have been a factor of the selection process, the selection process was also largely a matter of self-selection, with many of the MemeGeeks responding to online ads/posts.

Casual Users

The Casual User group made up the remaining 25% of the participant sample. The Casual Users were mostly comprised of the “Bored At Work” population (Peretti in Stryker, 2011: 172) and cat owners. These users tend to engage passively with LOLCats, receiving them from others via email or seeing them on Facebook. The appeal for this group is grounded in the LOLCats’ humor, and can best be summed up as an appreciation for cute, anthropomorphized cat images with funny language superimposed upon them. The casual users worked in a variety of industries and were evenly distributed by gender.

The LOLCat Genre

Miller (1984) argues that “when a type of discourse or communicative action acquires a common name within a given context or community, that’s a good sign that it’s functioning as

⁹ Historically, “geek” is a derogatory term, but in recent years it has been reclaimed and redefined as a reference to certain types of cultural interests or pursuits (see Konzack, 2006 for a more in-depth exploration).

¹⁰ Interestingly, many of the MemeGeeks saw LOLCats as “no longer a meme” and “beyond a meme”. See Appendix O for a table that illustrates the perceived differences between LOLCats and memes.

¹¹ See Appendix L

a genre” (Miller and Shepherd, n.d.). One of the clear findings from the focus groups was that the form and structure of the LOLCat were not only distinct, but that the proper execution of the generic conventions were essential to its appeal. Participants repeatedly mentioned the following textual elements as integral to the proper execution and full enjoyment of a LOLCat:

- Font
- Placement of Text
- Subject of Image
- Syntax
- Characterization of animal
- Intertextuality

For both the Cheezfrenz and the MemeGeeks, knowledge of generic conventions was an indicator of in-group membership: improper application of the unspoken rules was the mark of an outsider.

JT: Yeah, you can spot the n00bs.

Interviewer: Yeah, the n00bs. So, how can you spot a n00b?

JT: Wrong font, wrong syntax. Just wrong.

AB: Shouting.

(JT, 38, MemeGeek, female; AB, 72, Cheezfrenz, female)

Somewhat ironically, the MemeGeeks frequently attributed many of the generic transgressions found in the LOLCat corpus to the older women and “crazy cat ladies” who largely belong to the Cheezfrenz:

I was really really put off by the continual Lolspeak in the comments, because, that's not how it works. The Lolspeak is really reserved for the animals in the pictures.

(GV, MemeGeek, 30, male)

I imagine mums at home looking at LOLCats and thinking, “Oh, I can do one of those” and then typing it down and not doing it right.

(MH, MemeGeek, 30, male)

More than just defining group boundaries, however, adherence to generic conventions is also instrumental to LOLCats' appeal in a more straightforward way: making them funny. This manifests itself in two distinct ways. The first is through the actual set up of the "joke" in the LOLCat image:

I think that what we were saying about the form of the LOLCats is quite good, because the bit at the top is kind of, it sets it up, and then I think you look at the picture, and then the bit below, kind of, I dunno, reinforces it a little bit?

(CS, 29, MemeGeek, male)

The fact that the text is half at the top and half at the bottom is really important because it gives you a joke and a punchline.

(GV, 30, MemeGeek, male)

The second is more subtle, with the style of the genre itself acting as an integral part of the humor:

When you see that font, you know there's going to be something funny, it's expected. If it's the wrong font—yeah, it's just, you know, 9 times out of 10 it's not as funny...even if it's saying something funny, I just think, you know, come on, you've gotta do it properly. There is a style, here. And that's part of what makes it funny.

(JT, 38, MemeGeek, female)

These findings echo the literature on genre and humor in other contexts (Toms, 1999; Kuipers, 2009): like a TV sitcom or a spoken joke, the established generic conventions of LOLCats are both appreciated in and of themselves and in their role as a framing device.

Humor & LOLCats

Perhaps not surprisingly, the humor inherent in LOLCats is one of the most significant elements of their appeal: they are, after all, funny pictures of cats. However, the way in which humor factors into LOLCats' appeal is far more complicated than the texts themselves might suggest.

“It’s like your sad relative, isn’t it?”: The Appeal of Anthropomorphic Humor

While many of the cat owners in the sample echoed the sentiment that “seeing other cats is always amusing to me...because my cats are silly” (MK, 32, MemeGeek, male), participants across all three groups overwhelmingly identified the anthropomorphic nature of the images as one of the most appealing elements of LOLCats.

Anthropomorphic distancing was a theme that came up frequently in the focus groups, and materialized in two separate ways. The first was laughing at one’s own foibles and “situations you identify with” (SC, 31, MemeGeek, male), as exemplified by JH:

There’s one actually that I used to reference— it’s like this little kitten and it’s like...“No squish! I be good!”¹³” and I think I kind of identified with it? ... Part of what’s funny can be that you recognize in it, part of your own ego and that’s sort of what you can take off, or what you can laugh at.

(JH, Casual User, 25, female)

The other way it manifested was in laughing at other people. While many of the MemeGeeks expressed enjoyment of sites like FailBlog¹⁴, many of the Casual Users and Cheezfrenz expressed reluctance to laugh at others’ misfortunes, and noted that the anthropomorphic distance provided by LOLCats made it more acceptable to do so:

GS: *In another way I think the reason that LOLCats are funny is because they’re— they are people. Or treating them, sort of like, humans, but they’re in a world where everything is much bigger than them?*

KB: *And it makes it okay to laugh at, because if it was a person in the same exact situation, let’s say instead of a cat falling over, it’s a person—*

PB: *I want to use the word schadenfreude so she can have trouble transcribing that.*

JM: *I don’t think it’s really schadenfreude, though. Like, I think it creates a certain distance so you can kind of see like, goofy, or even stupid, or trying to be devious things that people do, and see it as kind of endearing.*

PB: *Puts it in a fun context.*

JM: *Yeah, makes it so you can laugh at it.*

¹³ See Appendix N

¹⁴ See Glossary

(GS, 27, Casual User, male; KB, 26, Cheezfrend, female; PB, 24, MemeGeek, male; JM, 30, Casual User, female)

The other element of anthropomorphic humor that was frequently cited as a source of humor was Lolspeak. While the anthropomorphic portrayals of animals largely served as a source of enjoyment and humor for the participants, Lolspeak's main function was as an in-joke that works to create and enforce symbolic boundaries (Kuipers, 2009): this will be discussed further in the next section.

"Memes are jokes your friends don't get": The Role of In-Jokes

The notion of the in-joke was raised repeatedly throughout the groups. The MemeGeeks especially prized LOLCats for the fact that they were a "a bit of an insidery club, which is cool" (MK, 32, MemeGeek, male). Similarly, JE, a 29 year old MemeGeek explained that "the funniest thing is being part of the group that understands the joke. Having to explain it to my boyfriend always makes it sound really rubbish." The in-jokiness of LOLCats was largely achieved through two textual features: Lolspeak and intertextual references.

Lolspeak

One of the most recognizable features of LOLCats, Lolspeak is characterized by its childlike tone and incorrect grammar. It has been taken up with great gusto by the LOLCat community and operates as the *lingua franca* of the ICHC comment boards. The following example of Lolspeak is excerpted from an email I received in response to my solicitations for focus group participants:

Lolspeak: Ohai! I wud like tu b in deh focus groop, if it am alrite wif u

English: Hi! I would like to be in the focus group, if that is alright with you

Lolspeak was found to be entertaining (or at the very least, interesting) to all three user groups, mostly because it was considered to be the voice of the cat in the image; as one Casual User noted, "obviously, you'd imagine that cats can't really speak properly" (PT, 28, male). However, the fact that "the speak belongs to the cat" (GV, 30, MemeGeek, male), failed to deter either the MemeGeeks or the Cheezfrenz from using it as a slang. It is in this way that the use of Lolspeak creates the sense of "in-group-ness" that makes identification humor so appealing.

MemeGeeks enjoy Lolspeak because to them, it is an emblem of Internet culture. One MemeGeek explained that she engaged with LOLCats for “the Internetty part, not the cute part—like, the speak. Like Lolspeak”. For her, the appeal of Lolspeak was that “it’s its own language that makes no sense, and that the context is like, within the private joke of the community that you have to trace its origin back, back to the Internet” (LW, 25, MemeGeek, female).

Lolspeak’s status as “teh furst language born of teh intertubes”¹⁵ identifies it as an in-joke for those who understand the context of its origins. This use of Lolspeak was particularly clear during the focus group conducted with a cohort of coworkers whose jobs required deep understanding of the online cultural landscape. These coworkers actively used Lolspeak and other forms of Internet argot in a jokey manner during the entire focus group; this not only functioned as a form of workplace bonding, but also marked the office as an environment steeped in Internet culture:

JE: But we, we do it loads between ourselves here

TB: Yeah.

JE: Like with everything, like our wifi names and passwords.

MH: They’re all “I Can Haz Wifi”

JE: Yeah (laughs), our wifi actually is called I Can Haz Wifi.

SC: And the password is Cheezburger.

(JE, 29, MemeGeek, female; TB, 26, MemeGeek, female; MH, 26, MemeGeek, male;

SC, 31, MemeGeek, male)

On top of demonstrating that “we’re Internet people” (MH, 26, MemeGeek, male), the use of Lolspeak as a slang provides an opportunity for the entire office to playfully establish similarity through shared humor (Kuipers, 2009; Thome, n.d.).

The Cheezfrenz’ use of Lolspeak was seen as a source of enjoyment, but even more as an indicator of who was truly committed to the ICHC community. Speaking ‘perfect Lol’ was

¹⁵ This phrasing is used on sites all over the Internet; I could not find an original source. For an example see <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Lolcats>

seen as a great accomplishment; this was illustrated in discussions of The Cween's¹⁶ level of virtuosity. Those who are unable (or unwilling) to master the rules of Lolspeak are seen as less invested, even if they are active contributors to the community in other ways. In one of the more compelling examples of this, AB, a leader in the ICHC commenting community, noted that even though her son had created several lols that had made it to the front page¹⁷, his Lolspeak was “erratic” and he “couldn't keep it up”, the implication being that this was less than ideal.

Virtuosity in slang performance is not always appreciated by those for whom it is unfamiliar. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1976 in Apte, 1985). This was often the experience for the Cheezfrenz, who reported “frequent trolls that pop up on the comments column saying we're a load of retards who don't speak proper English” (AB, 72, Cheezfrenz, female). However, for those who do understand and enjoy Lolspeak, it can signal connection in a fragmented world. According to Cheezfrenz KB,

I sort of feel an affinity when I see it in the outside world. It's like, help spelled with an A or something like that, I'm like, “aww!” it makes the Internet community feel a bit smaller... just makes the world feel a bit smaller, even though it's a really big place. To see something that you find funny, that you saw referenced somewhere else. I don't know, it's like an inside joke that the whole Internet gets.
(KB, 26, Cheezfrenz, female)

Intertextual References

For some MemeGeeks, the fact that LOLCats and other Internet culture artifacts became popular was akin to their favorite underground band selling out. In the words of one MemeGeek,

You know, this is our language, these are our shared cultural reference points. And, when it goes mainstream, you know, you feel like you've lost something, and it's time to move on to the next little bit of obscurity.

¹⁶ The Cween is the founder of The Cheez Town Cryer and the arguable leader of the ICHC commenter community.

¹⁷ Lols on ICHC are voted on by the community; to make it out of the voting section and on to the front page of the site is seen as a major achievement.

(CS, 27, MemeGeek, male)

In a memorable example of this, one MemeGeek said that LOLCats were “over” for him after he received one from his mother.

To illustrate their difference from the bandwagon jumpers, MemeGeeks often demonstrated that they both understood and appreciated ‘the past’. One way that this was accomplished was through the enjoyment of lols that featured intertextual references. MemeGeeks particularly appreciated LOLCats that included multiple layers of selective knowledge; those that featured references that were exclusive on their own merit were particularly prized.

JE: When they bring in old-school computer game references it's awesome.

GT: Yeah, especially Street Fighter—Shoryuken is like a massive upper cut in Street Fighter in the first one, eh, that Ryu does? And there's a LOLCat of that¹⁸, and he's going “SHORYUKEN!” and he's got the pose perfect.

(JE, 29, MemeGeek, female; GT, 22, MemeGeek, male)

This use and appreciation of multilayered referential humor has several functions. First, having—and continually invoking—shared references bolsters the foundations of the group's unity (Baym, 1995). Secondly, repeated references take on significance in and of themselves within the group, providing “codified forms of group-specific meanings” (Baym, 1995: n.d.). In turn, these meanings provide further fodder for reinterpretation and remixing, with the ultimate outcome being a dense thicket of references that are cryptic for those who aren't ‘in the know’ (Stryker, 2011). This all serves to reinforce the symbolic barriers of the communal walls: the more referential knowledge needed to get the joke, the higher the barriers to entry, and the more exclusive the group feels. Casual Users and Cheezfrenz also enjoyed lols that made them “feel part of the joke” (RK, 31, Casual User, female); however, this was far less common in comparison to the MemeGeeks, and much less important for their appreciation of LOLCats' humor.

¹⁸ See Appendix N. Technically, this poster is a Demotivator (see Glossary)

“They would like that”’: Connection Through Creation and Sharing

When it comes to sharing and creating, there is an emphasis in empirical literature on self-oriented gratifications: the research, thus far, has indicated that people share and create, often publicly, to satisfy individual needs for self-expression, community belonging, identity reinforcement, and recognition (Shao, 2008; Leung, 2009). To be sure, elements of this research echo these findings, as will be demonstrated in the section on LOLCats as a venue for emotional expression.

However, two motifs emerged that contradict some of the themes present in other studies of sharing and creating behavior with UGC. The first was of intimacy. Much of the sharing and creating reported by participants took place privately between very small groups of people or dyads that knew each other on a deeply interpersonal level: close friends and family members. This seems to diverge from much of the existing literature which focuses on sharing and creation on public platforms and venues such as YouTube, Facebook, and blogs (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Shao, 2008; Leung, 2009, Burgess, 2008).

The second, and likely tied in to the previous point, is that the sharing and creating was largely altruistic in the sense that it was done primarily with someone else’s enjoyment in mind (Sherry, 1983)—not for the purpose of recognition which is widely suggested in the literature (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Shao, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011). Furthermore, while much of the research on sharing and creating divide the two actions into separate practices, I found that when it came to LOLCats, sharing and creating were often different means to the same end: making meaningful connections with others.

LOLCats as Emotional Outlet

Although recent empirical literature has focused on the self-oriented nature of UGC engagement, recent theoretical work has taken a more interpersonal tack. For example, Jenkins et al. assert that “spreadable” content like LOLCats makes its way through the web because it is “personally and socially meaningful” (43) to the people who are sharing it; at the heart of it, people embrace certain types of content because it “allows them to say something

that matters to them”, often about their relations to others (2009: 76). This was very much the case with the LOLCat Users in this study.

Interestingly, participants in all three user groups reported both sending and receiving LOLCats as a form of emotional expression, particularly as ‘reactions’ to situations they or their family and friends were going through. The practice of responding with an image or animated gif¹⁹ is relatively common on message boards and in blog comment sections, but to see that practice used in daily life situations was somewhat surprising. Participants reported using LOLCats to express a range of emotions—such as caring, embarrassment and frustration—in a variety of situations:

AB: I make calendars and birthday cards, and I have used some for those. Either my own or other peoples’. There was a lovely one with a cat face- down, saying “I cannot brain today, I haz the dumb”²⁰, which I’ve used quite often.

ALL: (General laughter)

JT: I, I, find that a really interesting use of LOLCats, because when I am having a really bad day at work, I will find a suitable LOLCat picture to say what I want to say, um, and I’ll tweet that, and everyone will know, “she’s having a pretty bad day”, and you know, I might get some DMs or something.

AB: You know, I’ve sent, put that link, if I’ve made a mess of a comment, I’ll put that link up, for that, that particular lol.

RK: I do that with— at work cause I edit peoples’ copy, edit peoples’ text, sometimes I’ll send them—it depends what mood you’re in, sometimes I’ll just send them just a cat on their own, if I’m in a bad mood, but if not, I’ll put like, “Hahahaha!” like, “hmm hmm”, but really, I mean, I’m really angry.

SC & JT: (laughing)

RK: And there’s a cat, a picture of a cat, an angry cat, and it says, “If you don’t like my changes, I can edit your face”²¹.”

(AB, 72, Cheezfrend, female; JT, 38, MemeGeek, female; SC, 30, Cheezfrend, female; RK, 31, Casual User, female)

¹⁹ See Glossary.

²⁰ See Appendix N

²¹ See Appendix N

While participants didn't explicitly touch upon the exact reasons why LOLCats are used to share feelings, one likely explanation, given the conversation above, is that it allows them to either laugh at themselves or express emotions that might otherwise be seen as 'unacceptable' for any number of reasons (Winick, 1976 in Meyer, 2000; Smith & Powell, 1988 in Lynch, 2002).

Altruism in Creation and Sharing

Another surprising finding, particularly in light of existing research on sharing and creation, was the largely selfless way in which LOLCats were shared and created. This altruistic undercurrent manifested in a multitude of ways, from users reporting that they avoided 'spamming' their friends with 'irrelevant' content, to explaining how a friend or family member had taken the time to identify the perfect LOLCat to send them in a particular situation or context. One participant reported that when he received LOLCats he liked, he would "archive them on my computer and store them so that I can use them as reactions to other things" (SC, 28, MemeGeek, male).

The reasons participants gave for sharing and creating often sounded like categorizations in a greeting card aisle: "just for fun", "for a party", "for a birthday". Furthermore, this sharing and creating was done with little thought as to whether or not they would get credit for their efforts:

JE: So I made a really lame one for your birthday, because I had to do it really quickly. It was like, "(TB)'s getting old", she was like, "Oh man, I'm getting old". So I looked for an old cat. And then I was like, "Old cat is old" (inaudible) super lame and small.

SC: There's a meme right there.

TB: She printed it out, and stuck it on my screen, and I had this A4 old cat on my screen.

JE: But obviously, that's not the kind of thing like, I'm not setting out like to make like, this mad Internet meme that makes me look really cool or anything.

(JE, 29, MemeGeek, female; SC, 31, MemeGeek, male; TB, 26, MemeGeek, female)

Although there were no examples of this in these focus groups, it is likely that there are some members of the LOLCat community who create lol after lol, hoping to make the front page of

ICHC. Or, it could be that making the front page is merely incidental. As MemeGeek CS remarked,

It really, sort of disproves everything that marketers thought about the way users behave because...we're spending hours making these fun things for no compensation, and not even any recognition. I guess like, the Cheezburger platform and Reddit, like, with the upvoting and downvoting, they try and make it so that you can have some kind of mechanism for rewarding people for their creativity, but I feel like, you know, people are going to do it anyway, just because the inherent fun in it, and just, being able to share something with someone else, enough to motivate them to spend all that time and effort.
(CS, 27, MemeGeek, male)

DISCUSSION

The primary finding coming out of this research, as illustrated above, is that LOLCats' appeal is connected to their genre, their humor, and the way that they can be used to connect to others. However, somewhat surprising was the underlying reasons as to *why* those things are the root of LOLCats appeal.

While I anticipated that the larger significance of LOLCats was more than 'Ha, ha, funny kitty picture', I was taken aback at the degree to which LOLCats' appeal is bound up in matters—such as emotional expression and belonging—that are fundamental elements of peoples' lives. Jenkins et al. suggest that when remixable media like LOLCats catches on, it's not so much that the content itself is especially compelling, but that it can be used to make meaning (2009: 18). This sentiment was echoed by some of the LOLCat creators in the groups, who attributed LOLCats' success to the fact you could "push anything through them" (ND, 27, MemeGeek, male) like a narrative form—or as Stryker suggests, "like pop songs" (2011: 219). Perhaps this is an additional explanation as to why people use LOLCats to express their feelings: because, like pop songs, "there are so many of them"²², you can actually connect it to whatever situation you come across" (BD, 26, Casual User, male).

²² There are currently 5 Terabytes of LOLCat images on the Cheezburger Networks servers. (D. L. Madden, personal communication, 24/8/11).

Also somewhat surprising was the discovery that LOLCats appeal to three “very different networks of Internet”, as one participant put it (LW, 25, MemeGeek, female). While the presence and proportion of these three groups in this study is, as previously stated, inevitably bound up with the participant selection process, it also supports the notion that LOLCats’ are “simultaneously obscure and accessible” (Rutkoff, 2007, n.d.). Fundamentally, LOLCats are cute pictures of cats with captions whose meaning is usually self-contained. While LOLCats can (and do) feature obscure intertextual references that appeal to people like the MemeGeeks, on the whole they don’t require the dense thicket of self-referential knowledge needed to appreciate memes like *Insanity Wolf*²³. As MemeGeek TB pointed out, “for people who aren’t that into the Internet, LOLCats are a very easy way into a meme” (26, female).

One result that still requires explanation is why LOLCats seem to be shared in a different way than other ‘spreadable’ media. To be fair, one study does not make a pattern, and it could be possible that this result stems from a desire on the participants’ parts to present a generous ideal self. However, it seems more likely that, as discussed earlier, LOLCats are so easily customized that they lend themselves to intimate and personalized sharing: these LOLCat Users simply wanted to show their friends and family that they cared, and LOLCats provided them a venue for doing that in a way that was meaningful to them (Jenkins et al, 2009, 35).

It could also be that this type of sharing is not the exception to the rule, but the rule itself. The argument in some of the UGC literature that sharing is based in some sort of self-interested motivation contradicts the admittedly trite but long-held belief that ‘sharing is caring’. Shirky supports this theory, arguing that the purportedly ‘new’ behavior of “creating something with others in mind and then sharing it with them” is based in centuries of tradition (2010b: n.d.). Or, it could simply be that sharing is not a behavior that can be easily categorized in terms of motivation or appeal. As Benkler (2007) notes, “human beings are...diversely motivated beings. We act instrumentally, but also noninstrumentally. We act for material gain, but also for psychological well-being and gratification and social connectedness” (Jenkins et al., 2009: 64).

²³ See Appendix L

Finally, as was demonstrated in the previous section, this study revealed that the differences in how and why people *share* and *create* are not so clear-cut. The instances of sharing that many focus group participants described were deliberate acts with thought, intention, and effort behind them. In the context of the literature on creativity, particularly Gauntlett's conception of Everyday Creativity, this poses something of a problem.

While Burgess (2008) and Gauntlett (2011) have made great strides towards defining creativity in a manner that recognizes and encompasses the type of imaginative expressions that are taking place in and around phenomena like LOLCats, their emphasis is on the generative nature of creativity. Gauntlett takes Csikszentmihályi to task for focusing on *outcome* versus *process* (2011: 74); however, he too is implicitly focusing on outcome when he fails to consider the potential creativity in what I would label *curatorial sharing*: deliberate acts with consideration, intention, and effort behind them. If those same acts had culminated in a post on an aggregation blog instead of a personal email, that act would have fallen under the auspices of creativity; and yet because it is 'sharing', it is classified in the same category as rating and voting (Shao, 2008). While those are valuable actions, they are not on par with the thoughtful and creative actions that were reported by the LOLCat Users in this study.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest a new definition of digital creativity. Furthermore, it is possible that this behavior is endemic to LOLCats, making it a (very interesting) exception to the rule. It is more likely, however, that these blurred boundaries extend beyond this particular context, and if this is indeed the case, then revisiting the definition of creativity is surely a worthwhile endeavor.

CONCLUSION

In undertaking this research project, I sought to understand the underlying mechanisms of a strange—and strangely popular—Internet phenomenon. What I ultimately discovered is how seemingly trivial pieces of media—pictures of cats with captions—can act as meaningful conduits to central elements of our humanity. Wacker (2002) states that media are how we

define ourselves and our relationships (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 17); the outcome of this research, for better or worse, certainly validates that claim.

The results of this study offer several avenues for future research. Within LOLCats specifically, it could be enlightening to conduct a content analysis on the LOLCat images themselves. Given that this study has illustrated that LOLCats are used as a tool for expressing emotions, understanding the overarching themes that are present in the LOLCat corpus might shed some light on what, if any, emotions are shared in particular. Furthermore, given the altruistic way in which LOLCats are shared, a gift economy perspective might be a valuable lens through which to examine that process. Additionally, given the significance of this one particular meme, a general program of meme research is certainly warranted. Many of the Advice Animal memes, particularly Foul Bachelor Frog and Socially Awkward Penguin²⁴, traffic squarely in socio-cultural mores and norms. Understanding the ways in which people engage with such memes could, among other things, give us insight into the values held by certain societal groups.

Stryker argues that engaging with the memesphere is how many people “learn, laugh, build, argue, discover, share and live” today (2011: 219). It is my strong belief that investigating memetic texts—or the audiences and users who engage with those texts—can tell us a great deal about where we are as a culture. If the media are a mirror, then the memesphere is a funhouse—sometimes scary, sometimes funny—that shows us new ways of seeing ourselves.

Final words: A note on the value of LOLCats

In a June 2010 TED Talk, Clay Shirky invoked LOLCats to illustrate an example of a ‘throwaway’ creative act that could potentially lead to more valuable endeavors (2010a). LOLCats, he argues, have little value in and of themselves except as a stepping stone to greater things. Shirky is not alone in his trivializing of LOLCats; even as Gauntlett was arguing that we should “embrace and value” the “zesty, everyday, creative liveliness” embodied by phenomena like LOLCats, he described the sites that host them as “daft websites” filled with “silly photos of cats with comic captions” (2011: 219). Even the ostensibly LOLCat-loving

²⁴ See Appendix L

focus group participants referred to LOLCats as a “waste of time”, something which sparked debate in the final group:

FA: Cause I mean, you know, go and cure AIDS or something. I mean, it's rubbish. Like, don't spend your time captioning pictures of cats.

JH: Yeah, but the thing is, it's not representative of human life to say that people do worthwhile things all the time... like, that's part of human life, but then another massive part of human life is being able to laugh and enjoy life, otherwise you couldn't—you wouldn't be able to do it.

KB: Like, in some ways, it is a waste of time, even though LOLCats isn't intellectual in a lot of ways—but I think comedy in general—and I would say it falls under comedy—I think it makes the world a better place. It makes it easier.

(FA, 27, MemeGeek, male; JH, 25, Casual User, female; KB, 26, Cheezfrend, female)

Even if LOLCats were just a collection of silly cat pictures, they would have value simply because they, as KB said, make life easier. But, as this study has shown, LOLCats are much more than that. They are a venue through which people express their emotions, connect to their loved ones, and define group identity. This not only gives them value; it makes them important. To quote Sherry Turkle, “some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play. We belittle them at our risk” (1995: 269).

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDES

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Original Version

1. Why did you decide to come to this focus group today?
2. Do you remember the first time you saw a LOLCat?
3. What was your original reaction?
4. Has that changed? If so, when and why?
5. What do you think of first when you think of a LOL? Can you explain why?
6. What do you think makes a LOL a LOL?
 - a. Is it the animal? The caption? The format?
7. What do you like about LOLs?
8. What makes a LOL funny, in your opinion?
9. Do you like it better when a LOL is in English or LOLspeak?
10. Do you like it better when the LOLs are written from the animal's perspective, or when they're written in 3rd person?
11. Have you ever made a LOL? Why or why not?
12. Do you share LOLs? When would you share a LOL?
13. Which one of these LOLs do you think are funny? Why?

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Revised and Final Version

Opening Questions

- What prompted you to come to this focus group today?
- Do you remember the first time you saw a LOLCat?
- What was your original reaction?
 - Has that changed?

Topic: LOL Format

- When you think of a lol, what pops into your head?
- What do you think makes a LOL a LOL?

Topic: Humor

- Do you have a favorite LOL?
 - If so, which one is it?
 - Can you tell me what you like about it?
 - If not, do you have a specific kind of lol you like?
- Do you think lols are funny?
 - If not, what is it about them that you like?
 - If so, what makes a LOL funny to you?
- Do you like other memes?
 - If so, which ones? Can you tell me what you like about them?
 - Do you think there's a difference between lols and other memes? If so, what's the difference?

Topic: Animals

- Do you like animals?
 - What about animal videos?
- Do you like it when animals talk?
 - What do you like about it?
- Do you like cats?
 - What about cats do you like?
- Do you have pets?
- Do you differentiate between animal lols and other lols?
- Do you like lols of people?

Topic: Language

- How do you feel about lolspeak?
 - What do you like/not like about it?
- When you see something in lolspeak, how do you interpret it?

Topic: Consumption/Sharing Creation

- Where do you usually see lols?
 - Do people send them to you? If so, whom?
- Do you actively seek out lols?
 - If so, when would you seek out a lol? If not, why?
- Have you ever made a LOL?
 - If so, when do you make them? If not, is there a reason for that?
- Do you share lols?
 - If so, what would prompt you to share them?
 - With whom do you share them?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Masters' Dissertation Research: Participant Information Sheet

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of a student project. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

[CANDIDATE]

MSc Candidate at The London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
United Kingdom

Title of the Research

Understanding The Appeal of Lolcats

What is the aim of the research?

To gain insight into the popularity of cat image macros, or "lolcats"

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen based upon your affinity for lolcats and your voluntary participation in the research.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You will be asked to respond to questions that explore why you enjoy lolcats, including your feelings about animals, your sense of humor, your relationship to the internet, and other related subject matter.

What happens to the data collected?

The data will be transcribed and thematically analysed. Excerpts may be included verbatim in the final analysis. All recordings and transcripts will remain in [CANDIDATE]'s possession for a minimum of two years; if required, other LSE staff members will examine the materials. It is possible that the materials will be reviewed by the staff at an academic journal if the dissertation is ultimately submitted for publication.

How is confidentiality maintained?

At no point will last names be associated with any of the quotes or transcripts. If requested, participants will be pseudonymized.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

No, but you will be provided with refreshments and will have the opportunity to win a gift card to Amazon.com.

What is the duration of the research?

A one-hour group discussion.

Where will the research be conducted?

In a room on the LSE campus.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

It is possible that the findings will be published in an academic journal; the dissertation will be available in the LSE Library archives.

Contact for further information

[CANDIDATE]@lse.ac.uk
+[phone number]

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project:

MSc Dissertation on Lolcats

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:

[CANDIDATE]

MSc Candidate, Media and Communications Department, London School of Economics and Political Science

[CANDIDATE]@lse.ac.uk

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

Please tick box

4. I agree to the focus group being audio recorded
5. I agree to the focus group being video recorded
6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications
7. I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored and may be used for future research.

Yes

No

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

LOLCat Focus Group Participant Questionnaire

Date:

Name:

Sex:

Age:

Nationality:

Occupation:

Do you actively engage with lolcats (i.e., seek them out) or passively engage with lolcats (i.e., friends send them to you)?

Approximately how often do you engage with Lolcats? (Circle one)

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Less than Monthly

Not Sure

Approximately how much time do you spend online per day? (Circle one)

Less than 1 hour

1-2 Hours

3-5 Hours

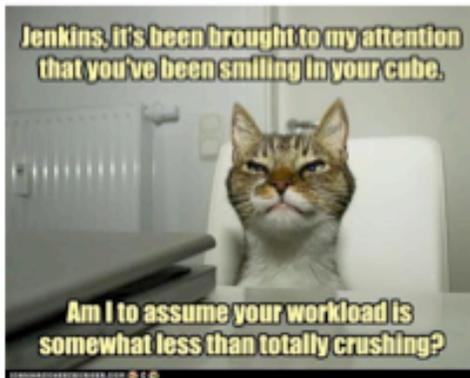
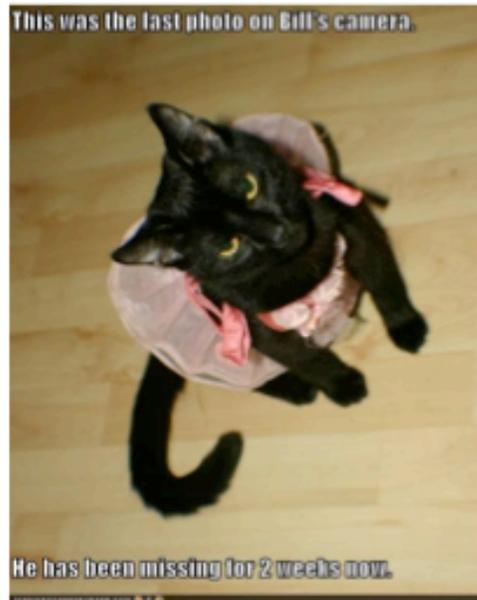
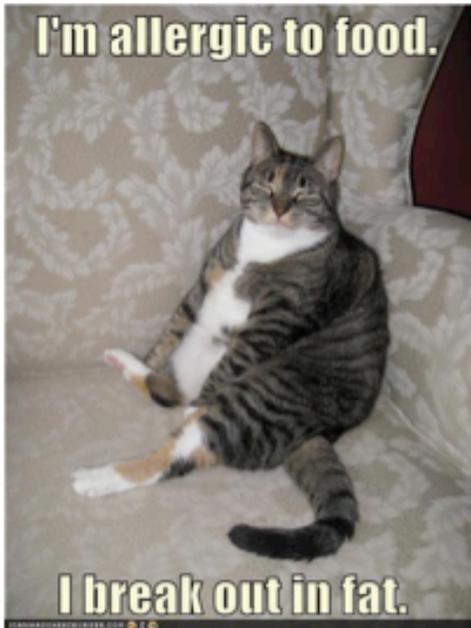
6-8 Hours

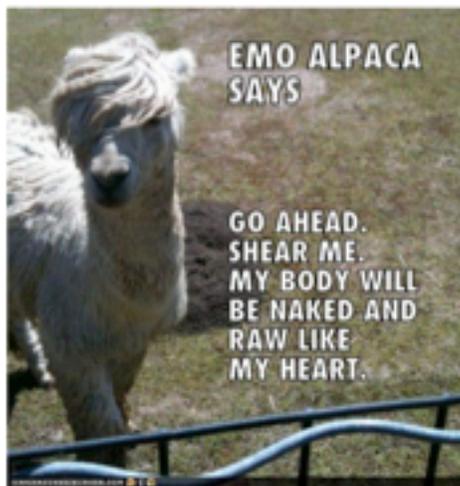
9+ Hours

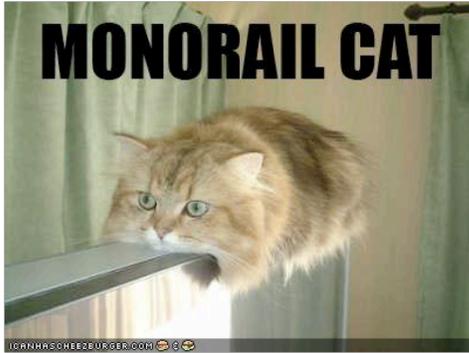
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Initials	User Type	Age	Sex	Nationality	Occupation	Eng. Type	Freq.	Hours Online
BD	Casual	25	M	USA	Student (Media)	Passive	Less than Monthly	6 to 9
DB	Casual	27	M	UK	Student (Media)	Passive	Monthly	3 to 6
FR	Casual	22	F	UK	Soc. Media Intern	Passive	Less than Monthly	9+
SL	Casual	27	F	COL	Soc. Media Intern	Passive	Less than Monthly	9+
RK	Casual	31	F	UK	Content	Passive	Weekly	3 to 6
JH	Casual	25	F	UK	Env. Consulting	Passive	Less than Monthly	1 to 3
GS	Casual	27	M	UK	Student (Biology)	Passive	Not Sure	3 to 6
PT	Casual	28	M	UK	Economist	Passive	Less than Monthly	3 to 6
JM	Casual	30	F	USA	Student (Psych)	Passive	Less than Monthly	1 to 3
SC	Cheezfrend	30	F	USA	Content (Online)	Actively	Daily	6 to 9
AB	Cheezfrend	72	F	UK	Retired	Actively	Daily	6 to 9
MY	Cheezfrend	21	F	USA	Student (Chemistry)	Actively	Weekly	6 to 9
KB	Cheezfrend	26	F	USA	Content	Actively	Weekly	9+
DC	MemeGeek	24	F	USA	Content	Passive	Daily	1 to 3
EB	MemeGeek	27	M	USA	Student (Media)	Passive	Weekly	6 to 9
CS	MemeGeek	29	M	UK	PR	Passive	Monthly	6 to 9
GV	MemeGeek	30	M	UK	Programmer	Passive	Monthly	9+
GT	MemeGeek	22	M	UK	Soc. Media	Actively	Weekly	9+
TB	MemeGeek	25	F	S.AF	Soc. Media	Actively	Daily	6 to 9
JE	MemeGeek	26	F	UK	Soc. Media	Actively	Daily	6 to 9
MH	MemeGeek	26	M	UK	Soc. Media	Passive	Weekly	6 to 9
MS	MemeGeek	27	M	ITA	Soc. Media	Actively	Weekly	9+
SC	MemeGeek	31	M	UK	Soc. Media	Passive	Less than Monthly	9+
JT	MemeGeek	38	F	UK	Content (Online)	Actively	Daily	9+
GL	MemeGeek	24	M	CAN	Content	Passive	Less than Monthly	9+
BM	MemeGeek	27	M	USA	Student (Media)	Passive		
KR1	MemeGeek	28	F	USA	Content	Passive	Monthly	9+
KR2	MemeGeek	29	F	USA	Content	Passive	Monthly	6 to 9
AB	MemeGeek	27	M	USA	Student (Media)	Passive	Not Sure	3 to 6
CS	MemeGeek	27	M	USA	Content	Passive	Daily	9+
SC	MemeGeek	28	M	USA	Digital Consultant	Passive	Weekly	6 to 9
LW	MemeGeek	25	F	USA	Soc. Media	Passive	Monthly	6 to 9
JT	MemeGeek	30	F	USA	Digital Adv.	Passive		
ND	MemeGeek	27	M	USA	Content (Online)	Passive	Less than Monthly	9+
MK	MemeGeek	32	M	USA	Soc. Media	Passive	Weekly	6 to 9
PB	MemeGeek	24	M	CAN	Programmer	Actively	Weekly	9+
FA	MemeGeek	27	M	UK	Content	Actively	Less than Monthly	3 to 6

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP STIMULUS







Loaf Cat



APPENDIX H: SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

Transcript: Face-to-Face Focus Group #3
July 14, 2011
LSE Campus

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you guys for coming, sorry we're starting a little late. So, what prompted you to come here today?

AB: I saw your message on Cheez Town Cryer.

MODERATOR: Mmhmm. Okay.

RK: Well (to SC) maybe you should answer for me

SC: Uh, so I saw it on Jolie's Facebook, who's a mutual friend that we have, and I then emailed quite a few friends, including GL and our friend Ruth, and then Ruth forwarded it to RK, so.

JT: And I had a message from Alex, who, I think, messaged a couple of people, and I just leapt at the chance to be able to talk—to spend the evening talking about LOLCats.

MODERATOR: So why, why is that, why do you like talking about LOLCats?

JT: Because I love them so much I mean, I, I get the newsletter everyday into my inbox, and before I—I have an extremely busy job with back to back meetings and very very stressful decisionmaking and the first thing I do is open that email because I know I'm guaranteed to smile or laugh.

MODERATOR: Okay, do you guys feel the same way about the lols?

RK: I do, but I was just saying, these people are so much more hardcore than me.

MODERATOR: Uh huh.

RK: Because I don't, I'm-- on the survey thing, I'm not—I don't actively seek out the lols—like, if people send them to me, I love them, but I don't kind of, seek them out.

MODERATOR: Okay.

RK: You know, maybe I will now. (To others) I'm quite inspired by you.

MODERATOR: How about you, do you—

AB: I'm more interested in the commenting, I've made several good friends in the comments section, from all over the world.

MODERATOR: So how do you keep in touch with your friends?

AB: Um, one or two I email offline, off the, uh, off the thread, but most of them, exchanging comments on the—in the comments column.

MODERATOR: So um, do you remember the first time you guys saw a LOLCat?

AB: Um, it would be about April 19—2008. Less than a year after it started. I started commenting about April 2008, and never looked back.

MODERATOR: Okay.

RK: Again, I don't really know, it's probably someone sent me one, but I remember when I first saw them I didn't really like them.

MODERATOR: Really?

RK: Yeah, they've grown on me. When I first saw them I was like, "Oh that's silly", I hate "LOL", I hate "OMG"—well, I use it a lot, I use OMG a lot—I hate, I hate abbreviations because my job is wordy, and it's all about loving language, so I hate it in text, but when I see it on a cat, I'm like, "Ohmygod, this is funny", OMG funny!

MODERATOR: Okay, can you talk a little bit more about your reaction to that?

RK: Oh, what when...?

MODERATOR: Like when you see "OMG" on a cat

RK: Yeah, yeah I like it.

MODERATOR: What do you like about it?

RK: Ahhh... I dunno—just because it's so much more funny that a cat would say it.

MODERATOR: Okay

RK: I know it sounds really stupid.

MODERATOR: No! It doesn't sound stupid at all.

RK: Okay.

MODERATOR: No judgment here, let me tell you. No judgment here, I promise.

RK: (Giggles)

MODERATOR: How about you, Sara?

SC: It's really hard to—when did they start, officially?

MODERATOR: I think they were first seen on Something Awful and in 4Chan around 2005. And then they started hitting the press in like, 2006-7? Wall Street Journal and Time picked it up and then at that point it had sort of started swirling already.

SC: I think the first time I saw them must have been 2007, because I know I still lived in New York, and the first one I remembered is the one of the cat saying, "I made you a cookie but I ate it"--

ALL: Awwww! Yeahhh!

SC: Which is a really cute one—and, someone must have sent it to me, and I forwarded it to my mother, and I came home for a visit, and she had printed it out and framed it—

ALL: (General laughter)

JT: There's nothing strange in that.

SC: No, not at all. So that's the first one that I remember, and that was probably 2007.

MODERATOR: Okay. Did your mother love cats? Or...

SC: Not really, no. I think something about it just struck her as funny. She put it in my sister's bedroom as like, a present for her—cause she really loves cats.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: For me, it probably was about 3 or 4 years ago. And um, I- I- I actually was more, I can't remember the first one I saw, I have a feeling it was, was, it might have been a Basement Cat, um, but it was more the, sort of language and the tone because I could immediately hear a cat's voice, and because cats have so—such different personalities, way more than dogs do, and you know, their faces are all so different, I just loved that style of language that suited every different kind of you know, LOLCat and I just, I just think it just—sarcastic, or sometimes cute, and it just-- yeah, it was the language that I was really interested in, I could hear it in my head.

MODERATOR: So the Lolspeak made sense to you?

JT: The Lolspeak made sense to me, and I found um, the Lolspeak translator, and I started sending all my emails in Lolspeak—

RK: That exists? I'm learning so much now!

MODERATOR: Well AB, the Cheez Town Cryer is almost all in Lolspeak, and—

AB: Uh, the Cween speaks perfect Lolspeak

RK: Hee heee!

AB: When I post on the Cryer, I use plain English,

MODERATOR: Okay

AB: But um, I'm, you know, I'm bilingual.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: You're bilingual. So what would make you speak in Lolspeak versus in English?

AB: Um, well, I use Lolspeak in the comments, obviously, except if I'm angry about something I might go into plain English.

MODERATOR: Okay

AB: Um, but mostly, I comment in Lol.

MODERATOR: Okay, and why—can you —why do you comment in Lol?

AB: Because everybody else does, and I enjoy-

MODERATOR: Because everybody else does.

AB: I'm slightly dyslexic and it's easier for me.

MODERATOR: Is it? Mm, interesting!

AB: Well, it's phonetic, isn't it?

MODERATOR: It is.

AB: So, you know, I don't have to worry about the spelling.

MODERATOR: You get creativity points for spelling.

AB: (laughs)

MODERATOR: Although there is a specific syntax with Lol.

JT: Yeah, yeah.

MODERATOR: So I shouldn't say that there's too much creativity. Okay, so--

JT: Yeah, you can spot the n00bs.

MODERATOR: Yeah, the n00bs. So, how can you spot a n00b?

JT: Wrong font, wrong syntax. Just wrong.

AB: Shouting.

JT: Using a giraffe. I dislike it when there are other animals on there.

MODERATOR: You don't like when there are other animals.

AB: It does say LOLCats and funny pictures.

JT: I know, but. I don't get lolgiraffes.

MODERATOR: Lolgiraffes. Lolsloths?

JT: No.

MODERATOR: What about Lolrus?

JT: Lolrus is okay.

MODERATOR: Why is Lolrus okay?

JT: Because Lolrus is a kind of- he's not really a—he's kind of always been there. You know, he's quite, he's one of the original-- But I don't, I personally don't like to see many other animals on there.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: It's polluting.

MODERATOR: It's polluting. Okay. So just quickly going back to Lolspeak, when you see something in Lolspeak, how do you interpret it? Like, what do you think Lolspeak is?

JT: 99% I have an evil voice in my head, which is a bit sinister and calculating—because cats are calculating, and they know exactly what they're doing, so, for me, it's that kind of voice, or unless you have the cute one with the ears back and the "I ate cookie". But they're just doing that to, to reel you in.

SC: I think of it as more childlike.

MODERATOR: Okay.

SC: Not really creepy, sinister.

MODERATOR: But you associate it with cats?

SC: Yeah, when it's on the photographs, yeah.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: It's to fool you into thinking they're innocent.

JT: Exactly.

SC: Yeah.

MODERATOR: Okay. Um, so, when you think of a lol—we've talked somewhat about the font, and you know, other animals, but what pops into your head, when you think of a lol? If I were to say "LOLCat", what would you think of?

AB: It's a cat doing something that cats do, anthropomorphized.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: I think of the ones that—so, Monorail Cat, Basement Cat, you know you have your, your threads that run through within that meme, that are repeated in a different version of, which I really like—

AB: Mm, yes.

JT: You know, so, because they become characters and you know, "Ohhh, Basement Cat's back", you know it's—

AB: I object to Basement Cat

(General giggling)

MODERATOR: Why do you object to Basement Cat?

AB: Because it implies that cats are deliberately evil and they're not, to me.

MODERATOR: No? But JT, you think that cats are--

JT: No, I don't think they're evil. But cats can be very manipulative. And they, uh, they're, I think, they're very intelligent. Um, you know, I do get laughed at for thinking that, but I just think they, they know exactly what they're doing, with humans, you know. We are their slaves.

GL: So is that why you never owned a cat?

JT: Possibly. But a cat—a cat has to find me, is my philosophy. I don't, I don't hear them as evil, but I hear them as, as clever. Cleverer than dogs.

MODERATOR: Cleverer than dogs, okay. What about you, Sara, what do you think?

SC: Um, I think—honestly what I think of is, you're at work, you're day's kind of boring, it's something that kind of just pops up on your screen, entertains you—

RK: Mmmm.

SC: I think that's what it is for me.

MODERATOR: What do you think, GL? Same thing?

GL: About?

MODERATOR: About, when you think of a lol, what do you think of?

(New participant enters room, 10 min late)

BM: Ohai.

MODERATOR: Ohai! This is, everyone, this is BM.

BM: Hi, I'm Ben.

MODERATOR: This is GL, JT, SC, RK, and AB.

BM: Hello, I apologize for being late, you can thank TFL.

MODERATOR: Okay, have a seat. We are uh, we're just talking about lols, and what you think of when you think of a LOLCat, and so, I was asking GL—

GL: I don't know how to answer the question.

MODERATOR: You don't know how to answer the question.

GL: BM's probably quite good at it, though.

MODERATOR: Um, so if I say "LOLCat", what comes up in your head?

GL: A picture of a cat.

KM A specific picture of a cat?

GL: No.

MODERATOR: Just a picture of a cat.

GL: With words, yeah.

MODERATOR: With words, okay.

GL: Very uncreative, I just--

MODERATOR: No, that's okay! I just—I'm just exploring, no wrong answer. How about you, BM?

BM: Uh, well I—oddly, just had this conversation over dinner, because I had to explain where I was going, um, so I probably have a bit longer of an answer.

MODERATOR: Go right ahead.

BM: No, well, just to make it concise, it's a—an odd Internet meme that people use as a method of conveying um, happiness or emotion through—any kind of emotion through a cat and some sort of linguistic perversion of English, um, in white text on top.

MODERATOR: Okay. So the white text is that, is that important to you GLs, the white text on the photo?

RK: Whenever I actually picture a photo I do, I think of the text as being white, actually.

GL: Just because it's clearer over color.

AB: It's only clearer, that's why. Color—occasionally, if the background is really light, a dark color is acceptable, but mostly the backgrounds are dark, so you need a white or a bright color.

JT: I think though, when you see that font, you know there's going to be something funny, it's expected.

MODERATOR: You know JT, you were saying earlier, "Wrong font!", as if—

JT: If it's the wrong font—yeah, it's just, you know, 9 times out of 10 it's not as funny. You know, and I don't know what it is about it, even if it's saying something funny, I just think, you know, come on, you've gotta do it properly. There is a style, here. And that's part of what makes it funny.

MODERATOR: Okay. So, do you guys like other memes? Ben, you were talking about Internet memes, do you guys like other memes, or is it largely LOLCats for you?

SC: RK says "what's a meme".

MODERATOR: What's a meme, oh, sorry! Um—

JT: Like a thread of —

GL: A running joke.

MODERATOR: A running joke on the Internet.

RK: See, this is how un-hardcore I am!

MODERATOR: No, that's okay! So, so you're not really into Internet culture.

RK: No, well, you know, I use the Internet every day for work, but I'm—I'm not on Facebook, or anything like that.

BM: Good for you.

RK: Yeah.

BM: You're better off.

RK: (laughs)

AB: I do look at some of the other Cheezburger sites, but I don't really look at anything else.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: But some of them I dislike intensely.

MODERATOR: Which ones?

AB: Failblog.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: I don't like that very much. I've met some Failbloggers, and they're weird.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: How are they weird?

AB: Oh, they just are! I, they—this again came about through The Cryer, they said, you know, would anyone like to meet them, and I went and met these people and they're really strange.

JT: Is that because they're quite negative?

AB: No, they just came across as being completely barmy.

MODERATOR: Okay. BM, you laughed when AB mentioned Failblog.

BM: I, I just—I like, I think Failblog is funny. Um, but it's in that dark way. Obviously, it's making fun of peoples' misfortunes. Um, whereas LOLCats is funny-happy.

MODERATOR: GL, you're making a face.

GL: So I, I was on 4Chan back in 2005, and always, sadly

MODERATOR: Why do you say sadly?

GL: Because it rightly has a stigma attached to it. As a site, as a social networking site. Um, I got in bed with LOLCats—sounds like alcoholics anonymous—

ALL: (General laughter)

GL: I got into it, enjoying the idea that cats were doing stupid things, or doing things that we thought were stupid, and then like giving them a voice and they'd seem either even stupider, or, um—I suppose the concept "Haters Gonna Hate" which is um, a popular meme, um which uh, continued to get more popular, I kind of miss that, so, I've kind of taken steps away from the LOLCat communities, um, just because I, I miss the sort of aggressive—

JT: You like being a hater.

GL: Well, no, I—I—I-, yeah, I liked, I liked to think, "Man, that cat is stupid", uh, which is why you know, Failblog, although I don't-- I don't really actively follow it, but—you, you know, when Failblogs were going around, um, I found those quite funny, I thought those were re-capturing the—I don't want to say innocence, I'd say I think the word I'm looking for would be capturing the original essence of LOLCat pictures.

MODERATOR: Okay.

GL: That's just the feeling.

MODERATOR: So they've evolved over time.

GL: Yeah, you know I think yeah, definitely, They're definitely more along the lines of cute you know I think these days. And, sadly, I can't appreciate cute.

MODERATOR: You can't appreciate cute.

GL: As much as I used to. I think the 4Chan again has warped any appreciation.

MODERATOR: Okay. How do you guys feel about cute? Is cute important?

SC: Yes, I like cute.

MODERATOR: Okay, is that—is that what partially draws you to LOLCats?

SC: Yeah, I think that cats are cute in general, so, yes. Anything cat related I'm sort of already halfway towards liking. And then whenever you're reading their thoughts or whatever, that's cute as well.

MODERATOR: RK, what about you?

RK: Ummm, yeah I like it! (Laughs nervously) Ohhhh, I'm so not hardcore. I like, I like all of them, whichever ones I see, I like, doesn't matter what kind of—what the tone is. They're all quite funny in general, really. I don't—yeah, I like cute.

MODERATOR: Okay, but you don't necessarily associate LOLCats and cute? That's not—

RK: Ummmmm, actually, well I think, if you were to say LOLCat, I wouldn't immediately think cute, I'd think more—more—I dunno, cutting.

MODERATOR: Cutting.

RK: Yeah, um, a little hint of sarcasm. Again, like, there's sarcastic cat. But I like the cute ones, too! You know, the little... (makes cat ears that lay flat on her head)

JT: They're manipulative.

RK: (laughs) their brains are massive!

MODERATOR: Okay. So do you Guys like animals in general? Like other animal videos, and—

JT: Animals Being Dicks.

MODERATOR: Animals being dicks!

SC: Awesoooooome.

RK: (laughs)

JT: Have you not seen that one?

MODERATOR: I have not seen that. Is that—is that a blog?

SC: It's a Tumblr.

MODERATOR: It's a Tumblr.

SC: It's brilliant.

RK: There are some good ones on that.

MODERATOR: I feel like I've failed, that's LOLCat research FAIL.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: Um, so what do you like about animal—animal images

JT: I mean, you know I love animal—I'm an animal friendly person, I'm obsessed with cats.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: So, you know, I like-- I quite like animal- based memes because you can have quite a lot of fun with them, so, I love the—the reversioning and the reproduction memes, so um, dramatic—uh, whatever it was, chipmunk

GL: Gopher.

JT: Gopher, some called it Chipmunk, some called it, yeah, and the different variations of that—Nyan Cat, which we just had a chat about which you (looking at RK) hate, but I love all the different versions, you know there's a Nyan Cat cake, there's a NyanCat bollywood, there's Nyan Cat jazz, there's—it's just incredible how it just replicates.

BM: I don't even know what that is.

MODERATOR: Nyan Cat is a video that is a cat made out of a pop tart that is animated and sings a song that's "nyan nyan nyan".

JT: The "nyan nyan nyan" comes from Mikku, who's the—the avatar Japanese pop star, it's her vocaloid voice, and I just bought a Mikku wig, completely unconnected—so it's all coming together for me now. I'm officially mad.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: So do you like Nyan Cat—

JT: It's irritating.

MODERATOR: It's irritating.

JT: It is an irritating sound, you walk around with it in your head, all day, I just love the reversioning of it, everyday, there's a new version—my friend and I just send, you know, it's like a competition who can find the next version first, you know. So, but you know, also for my job, I'm involved in commissioning content for young people online, and their attention is the hardest to capture, so I'm obsessed with just, understanding memes, particularly in YouTube communities, and how young people—or people in general—are kind of, reversioning and using them, you know, in ways that professionals can't keep up with. The marketing agencies always say to me, "I'm going to make a viral"—no you're not.

BM: Check the box.

JT: You're going to make a meme.

BM: Check the viral box.

JT: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

MODERATOR: Okay. So um, how about the rest of you guys, would you consider yourselves animal content fans, or is LOLCats a different thing for you?

SC: Yeah, definitely, like, animal videos on the Internet, I like um, (inaudible) foxes, foxes on a trampoline...

RK: (giggles)

SC: I like that, um, did you see the one where the guy got the two kittens and he was crashing them into each other?

RK: No!!

SC: Aww, that was—

AB: That was horrible.

RK: Ohhhh.

SC: I loved that one. (to MODERATOR). Have you seen that one?

MODERATOR: I , I think I saw the gif of the—(makes gesture) “bonk!”

SC: Yep, yep exactly. But it was very very dramatic music and like, glass breaking noises and stuff and then these two kittens

JT: Have you seen “Kitty With Apples”?

SC: No, no.

JT: Dramatic music. Amazing.

AB: That was incredible, that one.

RK: What's the...?

AB: (inaudible) two apples on the bed and the cat is terrified of these two apples

JT: And it's just doing this--

AB: ...prancing around them

JT: ... prancing, and the music

AB: ...and sort of coming up close and then prancing off again.

JT: But the music is edited to a T

AB: It's brilliant.

JT: It's to the cat's actions, it's stunning.

SC: Oh it's like horror film music

JT: mmm, mmm.

SC: Oh I have seen that! I do know what you mean, yeah.

BM: I feel like I need to start making a list.

AB: We can send you our playlists.

MODERATOR: Yeah?

RK: You need to! You need to educate me. I'll appreciate them!

MODERATOR: So, GL. Given that you were on 4Chan during the origin of LOLCats, can you talk a little bit more about Caturday, and the origins of Caturday and the tone of Caturday, and how that may have changed?

GL: You know, I suppose I was there then, I wasn't really, that much in love—I think it was around the time uh, I think when, ehm, before I Can Has Cheezburger. Yeah, I think it was for me, when my mother sent me a LOLCat, that's when I think the phase ended.

ALL: (General laughter)

GL: This no longer funny, this is serious now, time to move on, grow up, move out of home, um, I think—not to change the topic, but I just, um—I think that was, for me, a seminal moment. I mean, before then, it had been, it had been enjoyable, uh, yeah. Which is nothing about my Mum, I love my mother, and I'm glad that she still enjoys LOLCats. YEARS later. Good on her.

RK: You said as well, you think the quality has declined.

GL: Well, I mean, I'm a snob, I suppose everyone's a snob, you know, we're going to think Nyan Cat is no longer funny in a few months' time, that's, that's essentially the phenomenon of Internet culture, or, you know, humanity has sped up, fads and phases go a lot quicker on the web.

JT: Well yeah, literally if you haven't seen it two days ago, it's old. You know, I've got people saying to me, "Oh my god, I can't believe you haven't seen that, it's ancient." Its two days old.

GL: Just because there is that level of frustration when they go to show it to you, I mean, they might be a week behind, but there is a level of frustration, as undeserved as it might be, you're like, "well, this is old, and now you're wasting the precious time I have left"

JT: There might be another meme out there.

MODERATOR: So, can you tell me what memes you do like?

GL: At the moment, I'm on the tail end of Rage Comics

MODERATOR: Ah, Ragetoons, okay.

GL: So these are comics that uh, essentially use some crudely drawn—crudely, not offensive, just badly drawn faces, they've been around on the web for years now, and people just turn them into comics to explain what they're angry about. Ah, they were enjTyable for a while, they're popular on Reddit, a few other sites, uh, it just allows people to explain how, if they had a bad day, how was it a bad day, or if they disagree with someone, why they disagree with someone, by using faces.

MODERATOR: How about you, Ben? Other memes that you enjoy?

BM: I have to be honest, I've been thinking about—I was trying to explain to the people that I was at dinner with, who have never heard of LOLCats, and they're from London, they live in London, they've never heard of it. And so I was flipping through my iPhone trying to show pictures of LOLCats, and they looked at them and they were like, "Okay. Yup. Yeah, okay. It's funny." And they didn't get it, and there was no, and they were like, "Okay, I see how it's cute". And it was, it put me in the position of trying to explain why an Internet meme is funny, why LOLCats is funny, and why it's worthy of a dissertation topic.

ALL: (General laughter)

BM: And so I was inspecting LOLCats in a way that I've never been asked to before, and of course that made me think about memes as a whole, and why—it's not answering your question terribly.

MODERATOR: No, it's great.

BM: Except that for the past year, as I've been studying, um, and haven't been in front of a computer in the way that I used to be, um, I don't know what's gone on in a year. I was looking at these LOLCats on, on, that I'd never seen before, ones that are apparently very popular that I've never seen before, Internet memes that I don't know about--

MODERATOR: Do you know which ones?

BM: No, I mean, I couldn't recall them to you.

MODERATOR: Okay.

BM: But, I dunno, I seem to recall all the popular ones being Monorail Cat, Ceiling Cat, Basement Cat or something

GL: Invisible Bicycle, Invisible Pool...

BM: Yeah, these I find hilarious.

GL: Yeah.

BM: But all—it seemed as though when I was searching that all the popular ones, I don't understand, I don't think are as funny. Um, and that it seems to have been done.

MODERATOR: Okay. So, do you associate LOLCats with other memes? Do you think they're in the same camp?

AB: I think LOLCats is special. But it's got a lot of stuff spinning off from it.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: Some of it I don't approve of, others is fine.

MODERATOR: Like what?

AB: Well, I don't approve of the after dark bit, for a start. That just strikes me as being gratuitous. Bad words, and uh, silliness.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: But um, yeah, some of it is quite amusing, I suppose. I look at some of the other sites.

MODERATOR: What are the other sites?

AB: Um, babies. That's quite funny. Um, um, history is sometimes funny. Um, and uh, um, "It Made My Day" I look at, but I'm not sure whether I like it or not (laughs).

MODERATOR: Okay. How about the rest of you guys, is it the same for you, is it different?

JT: I don't think it is, is the same, it's a different kind of—I think that's, that's the timing issue is quite interesting, where most memes have a kind of shelf life of about two days or a week, and literally it is that really fast turnaround of, reversioning. Whereas with LOLCats, it's, it's not so much reversioning, it's, it's just a continuation of an expression, of a way of expressing things. I mean, I like it when—this is what I was saying, I like the sort of older images, the ones that you recognize, like ceiling cat and basement cat, monorail cat. And, people who put different captions on them.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: To reflect, topical stuff, or things that have happened, you know. I think that's much more, a sort of creative challenge. Um, so it's, it's a different kind of meme, I don't think it's necessarily a meme anymore.

MODERATOR: Do you agree with that?

GL: I wasn't listening.

MODERATOR: Hm? You weren't listening, ah, okay. Well, um, JT said that uh, she, uh, doesn't think that LOLCats are a meme anymore. What do you think?

GL: How... how are you defining meme?

JT: So, I'm not defining meme. So, all I was saying is I think the point that you made about the sort of fast reproduction, um, and that timescale, is more memetic, is—that's more of a definition of a kind of meme now, five years after kind of memes—not really five years, a long time ago, um, started to appear on the Internet, the timescale is much quicker, and it's a different kind of—it's not really that kind of meme anymore.

GL: So lol--

JT: It's--sorry? LOLCats have more of a longevity.

AB: Mmm.

GL: So they've evolved beyond currency.

JT: I think so, yeah.

GL: Memes need currency, Nyan Cat needs currency, and that um, it's, these are essentially, become a staple of the media diet.

JT: You don't, you don't, you don't really see that many um, dramatic squirrel, chipmunk, whatever they call them, um, anymore. You know, for you to do that, it'd be like, "why are you doing that?" it's so old.

SC: I was going to say that Lolspeak became a language that you can say a lot of different things with. You can (inaudible) respond (inaudible).

JT: Yeah, it's a different kind of meme now. And it may not be a meme for that reason, maybe the meaning of meme has changed.

BM: Isn't that because LOLCats seem to be this all-encompassing—it's such a broad category, whereas the dramatic squirrel or whatever is, is in it's—if it were a LOLCat, it would be one photo, essentially.

JT: Yeah, possibly.

BM: Or it would be one subset, it would be like a Monorail Cat, um.

JT: It's like Business Cat.

BM: Whereas, you can-- Monorail Cat can spin off in to all of those different versions—

JT: Yeah

BM: ...as it has, and then there's a subset, subsets of LOLCats, right? I mean...

JT: So is Business Cat, which, I had a Tumblr of Business Cat, which is just brilliant, cause it's the same image, and it's just different captions. But it just sort of died away. It, it became--sort of run its course, after about a week.

MODERATOR: How do you Guys define LOLCat? Because BM, you were saying that there're a bunch of different LOLCats, so.

BM: You know, I—I would, I think when I walked in, we were talking about LOLCats just being, Lolspeak, in white letters, on a picture of a cat.

MODERATOR: Okay.

BM: To, to convey something that the author finds humorous, or is expressing emotion through an image of a cat, speaking a funny language.

MODERATOR: But if there's another animal, or even a person, is that a LOLCat? Is that a lol? I mean, what—what is that?

BM: Well I mean, I suppose it is, cause it's appeared on the official—if there is one—site, I Can Haz Cheezburger. So the community decides.

MODERATOR: The community decides.

BM: If it just gets flamed in the comments, then perhaps its not a LOLCat.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: There's usually somebody says, "This isn't a cat."

JT: That's not me.

AB: There's one of um, I think today, it was, was a gorilla, a young gorilla, and somebody said, "This is not a cat". Oh, bully for them, they recognized it wasn't a cat!

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: But, some of the most popular lols in the hall of fame are not cats.

All: Mmmmm.

AB: I've never looked at the Hall of Fame!

MODERATOR: You've never looked at the Hall of Fame?

AB: No!

MODERATOR: Mmm, okay.

BM: Maybe that's where I should have gone during dinner.

MODERATOR: The Hall of Fame?

BM: Shown them the Hall of Fame.

MODERATOR: There are a LOT of lols in the Hall of Fame. 95 pages of lols.

BM: I was trying to show them why I was so excited about LOLCats, why I thought it was a cool topic, and they were just looking at me like, “they’re cats”.

MODERATOR: So why are you excited about LOLCats?

BM: I, I dunno, I suppose because of the same—you know, full disclosure for everyone else, we’ve had this conversation before, and I think it’s uh, it’s just been a fascinating way that a culture of people who like LOLCats have been able to express themselves, and their daily lives, through pictures of cats and Lolspeak. Because, X, Y, and Z, what we’re discussing here, because it’s cute, because it’s funny, because it’s some way emotional, because it’s, uh, anthropomorphic projections of human behavior on a cat, on a picture that you didn’t take, or a picture of YOUR cat, that’s cute because it’s YOUR cat. I dunno.

MODERATOR: Do you guys make lols?

AB: I’ve made some several, yes.

MODERATOR: Okay, so, what did you make them for?

AB: For my own amusement, really. I didn’t expect them—no, I’ve never, never had front page.

MODERATOR: Okay.

AB: My son’s had several front pages.

MODERATOR: Yeah?

AB: But um, no, I- I’m, the first one I made was, you know a cat which appealed to me and I put a caption to it, and several people liked it, it’s never, never gone anywhere.

MODERATOR: Did you put it up on the site? Or did you—

AB: Oh yes, it’s on the site.

MODERATOR: Okay. Did you send it around anywhere else?

AB: No, I didn’t, no, I- I—I do object to people who send emails ‘round saying, “Please vote for my lol”.

MODERATOR: Ah, okay.

AB: I think that’s cheating.

GL: Would you send your picture, just as a picture, to your friends and relatives?

AB: Um, I have used some—I make calendars and, and birthday cards, and I have used some for those. Either my own or other peoples’. There was a lovely one with a cat face down, saying “I cannot brain today, I haz the dumb”, which I’ve used quite often.

ALL: (General laughter)

JT: I, I, find that a really interesting use of LOLCats, because when I am having a really bad day at work, I will find a suitable LOLCat picture to say what I want to say, um, and I’ll tweet that, and everyone will know, “she’s having a a pretty bad day”, and you know, I might get some DMs or something.

AB: You know, I’ve sent, put that link, if I’ve made a mess of a comment, I’ll put that link up, for that, that particular lol.

RK: I do that with a-- at work, if um, cause I, um like, edit peoples' copy, edit peoples' text, um, sometimes I'll send them—it depends what mood you're in, sometimes I'll just send them just a cat on their own, if I'm in a bad mood, but if not, I'll put like, "Hahahaha!" like, "hmm hmm", but really, I mean, I'm really angry.

SC & JT: (laughing)

RK: And there's a cat, a picture of a cat, an angry cat, and it says, "If you don't like my changes, I can edit your face"

ALL: General laughter)

MODERATOR: I've printed that out, and we're going to look at some lols in a second, I just have a couple more questions before we get, get around. Sorry, anyone else?

BM: (to JT) Can I ask you a question?

JT: Mmmhmm.

BM: You mentioned that you use a LOLCat in your tweet, picture of an angry LOLCat if you've had a bad day.

JT: Mmm.

BM: Would you otherwise express your frustration of the day if you didn't do it through a LOLCat?

JT: Ummm...

BM: Have you done it where you haven't used a LOLCat?

JT: I, I have two Twitter accounts, one that's locked and private where I swear, and I really say, that's me; the other one is my public face, because I have quite a high-profile Job I need to maintain that, so I have to use techniques like that, I won't really say, "I'm having a really shit day" on that account, I have to do it, sort of through subtext.

BM: I find that interesting.

JT: I think that subtext is a really interesting way of communicating in this, when you're doing a lot of Tweeting, or Facebooking.

BM: Which, yeah, I almost think—and I'd just be curious to hear what everybody else thinks, but that is why LOLCats succeeds, right?

JT: Mmm.

BM: Because of that subtext of communication.

JT: Yeah. Absolutely.

MODERATOR: Thinkin' deep about LOLCats.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: So, SC, have you, have you made a lol?

SC: I made one once when I put a photo of my cat on Facebook, thinking she was really really cute and several people said, "She looks like pure evil"

ALL: (amused surprise)

SC: I was really offended.

RK, AB: (laughing)

SC: And so I, this is the only time I've ever done it, I put some text on it, something about, she wants to take over from the flying monkeys in the Wizard of Oz—it wasn't that funny, really. It's something like, "Get my my costume, the Flying Monkeys are sick" and no one really thought it was funny, but I was trying to defend her, cause I didn't think she was evil looking at all. So yeah, that was the only time I ever did it.

MODERATOR: Okay. GL? No?

GL: Sara's the funniest person I know online, so it's a big deal that if they didn't find it funny, it's probably more of a—racism thing for cats and dogs.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: Okay, so, do you Guys share lols? Would you share a lol that you like? Well JT, you said you did, and AB I know you

AB: Oh yes, I send them to friends and family.

MODERATOR: And how do you do that, through Facebook? Email?

AB: Um, emails. I don't, I don't have a Facebook account.

MODERATOR: Okay, right, you did say that.

AB: I positively refuse to have one.

BM: Google +, though.

JT: Yeah, I need a LOLCat group, circle. I've got the Cheezburger app, now. Which makes it really easy to share.

MODERATOR: What's the cheezburger app?

JT: So it's, it's their official app. And you just go through all the lols, all the LOLCats and you can just Tweet from there.

MODERATOR: Okay. So you use mostly on Twitter?

JT: I wouldn't usually tweet them, I, I only use Facebook because my sister only understands Facebook, because she's 45. So, she—sorry, that's not an ageist comment

ALL: (General laughter)

JT: She doesn't know what her desktop is, so um, so I know that she will, she will love to see some of the LOLCats that I tweet, so I share them on there as well.

MODERATOR: How about you, RK and SC? Where do you share?

RK: Mmm, I email—I've got one particular friend who I email, like I see them, and we just, we'll email each others' work accounts.

MODERATOR: Mmmhmm.

RK: Because I know his—he works in Bristol, he's one of my oldest friends, and his, um, screen faces out toward the rest of the room, basically, so he will open a picture from me and it'll be a (funny voice) LOLCat.

ALL: (General laughter)

RK: Uhh, so that's what we do. But it's really only with him, it's not with anyone else.

MODERATOR: Okay.

SC: I email them to my family.

MODERATOR: You email them to your family. Under what circumstances do you, just something you'd think they'd like?

SC: If I, if I see one that um, I think, "They would like that". There was the one, with the cat, that was sitting on the Nintendo Wii—did you see that one? And it says something like, "Thanks for getting me a fancy butt warmer"

ALL: (General laughter)

SC: Cause, that's the kind of thing that our cat would have done, so, find something that she's not supposed to sit on, so, I knew they'd like that.

MODERATOR: So where do you see your LOLCats, mostly? AB, I know you see them on I can haz. So, do you guys seek them out, or is that where you see them?

JT: I get the, I get the newsletter into my inbox every morning.

MODERATOR: Right, you said that.

JT: Because it is the first thing I will look at.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: Because I know the rest of the day is going to be shit.

RK: (laughs). I just get sent them.

MODERATOR: You just get sent them.

SC: I have the site, the official site, in my Google Reader.

MODERATOR: In your reader.

JT: I will also seek specific things out if I want to send someone, if I see someone having a bad time, or I want to send someone a birthday or valentine's thing, I seek it out there.

MODERATOR: Okay. (to GL) And you don't really see LOLCats anymore?

GL: I love LOLCats, but I suppose it's the old ones that still hold my...

MODERATOR: And where would you—like, do you ever seek them out? Or do people send them to you?

GL: I, occasionally I'll, I'll go look through the Hall of Fame, um—

BM: Reminisce.

RK, SC: (giggling)

GL: Reminisce, exactly, yeah, nostalgia.

MODERATOR: When would you do that?

GL: Once a year, maybe.

MODERATOR: Once a year.

GL: Yeah, I worked in a job a few years back, uh, really high pressure, essentially we were, uh, scoring interviews, uh, for, you know, celebrities, and, and, products they were hawking with radio stations. Uh, and so we'd have an issue where you know, the head of the news, the head of the department would be yelling at me to number for a certain age group or a certain radio station, so we had to send him the details of our contacts, there were twenty of us, different contacts, as soon as possible, in this Reply All email. And we had one guy who had this, just, just the gall to send LOLCat pictures. And this guy would be screaming from the other room, and suddenly he'd start getting a torrent of LOLCat pictures from the rest of the department, just completely ignoring the fact that he needed these numbers as quickly as possible getting—you know, I suppose it was more cats in costumes?

MODERATOR: Uh huh.

GL: You know a cat in a frog costume, a dog in a crab costume, different—but then also, LOLCats. I mean, that, that was probably the last time I was, it was a regular occurrence. Um, in the workplace. Yeah. I also left soon afterwards.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: Okay so—

JT: For a year and—sorry—for about a year and a half, it just reminded—I used mostly cat, but a lot of LOLCat pictures in my presentations at work.

MODERATOR: How did that go over?

JT: I'm... not sure.

MODERATOR: (laughs) okay.

JT: It... but.. It was particularly at a time when everyone was worried about the TV—Internet killing TV. And there were quite a lot of LOLCats that I could use to illustrate that in a funny way, just to put people at ease? That yes, I'm digital, but it's okay, I'm not here to kill your TV. But yeah, I can't believe I did that.

RK: I think that's funny, if I had been in one of your presentations, I would have liked it.

JT: Thanks.

MODERATOR: We had a PhD student include a LOLCat in his, in our dissertation symposium, so.

BM: That he didn't sufficiently explain.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: Yes, that's very true. It was the cat that sat on a book and had TL;DR, but most people didn't know what TL;DR meant. Um, okay, so, we're just going to quickly, you guys sent over some lols, um, yes, Monorail Cat was-- a bunch of you sent me Monorail Cat, um, and then here are some other ones that you Guys sent around.

All: (general giggling as lols are placed on table for perusal)

AB: Ooh, that one. That's hilarious, that one (Forgot frankincense).

MODERATOR: Have you seen that one before?

AB: Mmm.

RK: I haven't seen that one.

AB: Yeah, I've seen that one several times. I think that's on my favorites list.

MODERATOR: Is it?

AB: Mmmm.

MODERATOR: Can you tell me what you like about it?

AB: Oh, it's just hilarious! The words just sort of fit the picture so perfectly

RK: (giggling) Yeah.

AB: It couldn't be better, could it?

JT: It's got really nice pacing, even. You know, it's just, where you position the words makes it...

AB: Yes.

MODERATOR: Okay, so, can you Guys tell me why you sent these particular lols to me?

AB: I sent this one because it's my son's.

SC, RK: Oh, which one??

AB: That one (Pls to open door)

JT: That's brilliant.

RK, SC: (appreciative laughter)

JT: See, I always use that expression now, "Plz to open", and I never say "kitty", I always say "kitteh".

RK: (laughter)

AB: My son's LOLCat, his Lolspeak isn't perfect. He can't keep it up.

MODERATOR: So it's good to have perfect Lolspeak?

AB: Yes, oh yes.

ALL: (General laughter)

AB: You know he, he's, he's made ever so many lols, I don't know how many, I haven't looked lately. But um, you know his Lolspeak is, is erratic.

MODERATOR: It's tough to keep up, I have to say, writing in Lolspeak.

AB: Well have plenty of practice (laughing)

ALL: (General laughter)

BM: I agree that if I see a LOLCat that's written in plain English, I'm just like, "you didn't even try".

JT: Yeah, come on, dude.

BM: What's the point?

GL: There was that sort of anti LOLCat phase where they were writing it out sort of, err, like an evil genius, with you know, long words, and um.

AB: There are frequent trolls that pop up on the comments column saying we're a load of retards who don't speak proper English.

GL: That's not, that's not nice. Yeah.

AB: We generally report them to the Head Cheezes and get them banned.

SC: But then why is Invisible Swimming Pool right, because that's perfect English.

JT: Mmmm.

GL: It's old school.

MODERATOR: It's old school?

BM: How would—how would, if you were to change that to Lolspeak, how would you do it?

RK: I'd change the 's' in "invisible" to a z. I dunno if that's right.

SC: I'd probably spell it B-U-L

RK: Invisi-BUL. I'd put—

AB: Invisib-lol!

SC: Heeheehee.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

BM: That's fair.

MODERATOR: Well, do you think that's the cat speaking? Or do you think that's just a—

SC: I'd see that as a caption.

AB: That's a comment on, that's a comment on, a caption to what the cat is doing. It's not the cat speaking, is it?

GL: Kind of like Monorail kitty, Monorail Cat.

JT: Because there is a difference, isn't there, between that. So this, being the recognizable images that you see, quite a lot of different captions.

AB: But uh, that isn't the cat speaking, that is a description of what the picture is.

MODERATOR: So that's okay for that not to be in Lolspeak?

AB, JT: Yes.

AB: But if it's the cat speaking, it should be in Lolspeak.

MODERATOR: Okay, so, I would like to talk about Monorail Cat. Because Monorail Cat crops up quite a bit, and it's one of the most famous. Um, can you Guys explain what you like about Monorail Cat?

JT: I would love to go on a Monorail Cat!

ALL: General laughter

JT: What an awesome idea!

MODERATOR: Have you seen the GIF with the Monorail Cat?

JT: Yes!

MODERATOR: Where the people get on the Monorail Cat?

JT, Yes, yes! And I think, I love it when, when cats like, Loaf Cat as well, I love Loaf Cat, and you, you know I just love the shapes that cats do. And cats always end up—I've got a Flickr group, just "Cats In Odd Places", they always end up finding comfort on a, on a rail! I mean, it's funny on so many different levels, because you know that that's what cats do, and also it IS a Monorail Cat! And what a brilliant thing to have! I want to, I want to replace all the London Transport Network with Monorail Cats.

ALL: General laughter.

MODERATOR: I think that would make London one of the most popular—even MORE popular than it already is.

GL: I like that its eyes are—you think that it thinks it's a monorail. You get that sense.

JT: (laughs) it's very focused.

GL: Very focused, it's like, "Guys, please, I'm a monorail".

JT: (laughing) Regulating the service.

RK: I've got a timetable here.

JT: (laughing) how can that be comfortable? You just want to push it along, as well.

SC: What is that it's on, anyway?

JT: It is a rail.

SC: Is it like part of a... what is it?

AB: It looks like uh, a bed head, something like that.

BM: Like a half-wall.

JT: Yeah.

MODERATOR: So uh, who sent me Jaime Oliver?

SC: That was me.

MODERATOR: That's—okay. So, Sara. Jaime Oliver.

SC: I like this one, I think, for two reasons. One that, I love how cats are always looking for 'noms', because that's what cats do in real life. And also I like the idea that cats seem to be doing—it's watching TV with you, and it understands that you're watching Jaime Oliver, and that knows who Jaime Oliver is, and like, shares in your interests. Hope that doesn't sound too pathetic.

MODERATOR: No, it doesn't!

SC: That's why I like that one.

AB: He almost talks Lolspeak, doesn't he?

ALL: General laughter

MODERATOR: I am always going to see Jaime Oliver and think about him speaking Lolspeak now.

ALL: General laughter.

JT: Please don't!

MODERATOR: Alright, just a couple more, I know that we're running out of time—if anybody has to, to leave, I totally understand, but, um, I've got more lols for your lol pleasure if you'd like to look at them.

RK: Will these gonna form part of your final project? (laughing)

MODERATOR: They might! They might, it might be an appendix of favorite lols. It is going to definitely be part of an analysis, understanding which ones people like best. So, that's basically what I'm doing with this part of the group, is understanding, which ones people—

BM: it'd be a great coffee table book (inaudible) copies of LOLCats.

MODERATOR: So good—well they have, they have several books.

JT: Oh yes.

AB: There are two books over here already, both which I've got, and another one coming over soon.

BM: Wow.

JT: Have you got the t-shirt?

AB: No. I don't think they make them my size!

JT: (laughs)

MODERATOR: GL, I think you'll be excited to see this one (Lolrus)

GL: Yeah.

ALL: General laughter.

MODERATOR: Now, a lot of these don't have cats in them. Okay, JT, you're shaking your head.

JT: No.

MODERATOR: No, you don't like any of these?

JT: No, um, no, I was about to say, these are also my favorite ones.

MODERATOR: Okay.

BM: In the computer?

JT: Yeah, yeah. In the computer, or fixing wires, or I'm in your Facebook, changing your privacy settings, you know, the... love it. Love that.

MODERATOR: What is it about that that you love?

JT: Well, cause I'm, I'm, I just, I'm a, I'm a geek, anyway. So, I just love the idea that cats can, you know, are fixing stuff for us, and they're in—they're always sitting on your computer, on your laptop, they always sit on wires, they always sit on the keyboard.

MODERATOR: Mmmhmm.

JT: I say this, I've never owned a cat.

BM: REALLY.

JT: Yeah, I know. I've looked after a lot of cats.

BM: Why?

JT: Um, (embarrassed laughter)

BM: Sorry, never mind.

JT: I've just never... it's okay.

BM: No, I just think it's interesting, you're so fascinated....

JT: Yeah, I'm absolutely obsessed with cats.

BM: ... by cats, and I'm wondering where it comes from.

JT: It's that, it's... well, my sister has cats, um, or had cats, and has one cat. I just, I just absolutely love them, and have always loved them, I was brought up in Hong Kong, and Hello Kitty was my... I was obsessed with Hello Kitty, she was my, my Barbie

MODERATOR: Yeah?

JT: So I've just always loved cats. But these, these, yeah, I just don't find them funny.

MODERATOR: Because they don't have cats?

JT: Yeah. No cats. And that's the wrong font.

MODERATOR: It is the wrong font.

JT: Totally the wrong font.

MODERATOR: It is.

JT: (pointing to Disco, I haz it) That's alright.

RK: Yeah, that's alright. And I like, I like his face is so—like the Monorail Cat's so determined? DISCO!

SC: (giggles)

RK: Fine with that. He—(points to Emo Alpaca) his heart is not in it.

JT: No.

MODERATOR: Emo alpaca's not in it?

JT: No.

SC: Also there's tooooo much text on that, it's too long.

JT: Yeah.

MODERATOR: Too much text, okay.

JT: And you see, no, no Lolspeak at all.

MODERATOR: And if he's an animal, he should be speaking Lolspeak?

JT: Well, if he's trying to be a lol.

MODERATOR: If he's trying to be lol, okay.

GL: They've essentially taken a lot of these animals with the whole Awkward Penguin, Angry Wolf or whatever

MODERATOR: Courage Wolf?

GL: Yeah, exactly, I think those work better, perhaps, than these. For me, for me the only ones I like are the ones in the middle, I'm not a fan of the cat pictures.

MODERATOR: Okay.

GL: Or, or these ones. I mean, this one (show me your war face), I like war face.

MODERATOR: You like show me your war face?

AB: The elephant seal leaves me completely cold.

MODERATOR: Really?

AB: Mmm.

MODERATOR: Can you explain why?

GL: Look at that smile, look at that smile (holding up picture)

All: General laughter

MODERATOR: No, not at all?

AB: No, it doesn't do anything at all for me.

JT: I agree.

MODERATOR: (to GL) So you like haters gonna hate.

GL: Well, that's a separate meme, altogether.

MODERATOR: A separate meme, okay. Alright, next round. Any other comments about this group? No?

AB: No.

MODERATOR: Alright.

JT: Oh, god, I'm so obsessed.

RK: (laughs)

MODERATOR: Yes, but I'm the one who's doing, doing research on this as well,

RK: I'm so jealous!

MODERATOR: So, we're in the same boat! We are in the same boat.

BM: I'm in a similar place in that I love cats, love LOLCats, don't have a cat, but.

JT: I'm looking after 15 projects that I've commissioned, I'm getting a cat in every single one of them, that's how obsessed I am, and I, it's, it's working.

BM: Yeah.

RK: (looking at pictures) Awww....

JT: (laughing)

MODERATOR: You like pop up? What strikes you about pop-up

JT: I love it, I love—a lot of my presentations we're using those images where cats are sitting like humans, and, there's there's there's, you know, you put pots of beer with them, and it's a bit cruel, I love that, because I just think it's hilariously sexy—not in a way that I find sexy, what I mean is, I love the fact, I love the idea of cats looking at cat porn.

ALL: (General laughter)

SC: D'you think that one's been manipulated too much, because clearly, it's, it's been, you know, added into the image, you know it's a combination of two cat photos, it's not, it's—it doesn't have as much integrity as I'd like (laughing)

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: (laughing), This is good, this one.

MODERATOR: You like Bill's camera?

AB: I don't like cats in clothes.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: But that's why he's been missing for two weeks (laughing)

AB: Cats are beautiful as they are, they don't need clothing.

MODERATOR: But you don't like the lols that make fun of people who put cats in clothing?

AB: No, I, I object to the cats being dressed up. Because it's not fair to the cat, and it seems silly to me.

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: (laughing) Sorry, I'm just looking at that top one. (Image: I'm a Cat???)

AB: Yeah, (laughing) I remember that one.

MODERATOR: "I'm a cat" got some laughs. That's just for my notes, sorry.

ALL: (General laughter)

MODERATOR: I'm just trying to narrate what's happening.

AB: "I'm a cat??"

JT: It's just brilliant because it just captures that, that, that, that attitude, that, that I think cats have. Which is a good attitude—

AB: Mmmmm!

JT: But it is a really superior kind of, attitude, and I just I love, I love the fact that you can take the piss out of that. In the same way that this one (Bill's Camera) does the same sort of thing. It's kind of like dare—I dare you.

AB: Yes...

JT: You know.

SC: I think the Firefox one is good because a.) it's really cute.

MODERATOR: Mmmhmm.

SC: You've got the heads stacked up like that, and b.) also, if you're quite, if you know what Firefox is and know different ways to use it, you feel quite superior, like "Oh, I'm so tech savvy"---

ALL: General agreement

SC: You know, like, "I totally get that, Firefox tabs, yep", it makes you feel really, you know, like you know a lot

RK: It makes you feel included, it makes you feel part of the JTke.

SC: Right, yeah.

RK: And that makes you feel like "haha, yeah, I'm part of that".

SC: Exactly, yes.

AB: You know the one with the fox is diving in, in towards a heap of snow, and the caption is "Firefox is Crashing".

ALL: (General laughter and agreement)

AB: Which it does, frequently.

MODERATOR: See, my Firefox never crashes.

AB: Oh, um, mine crashes because something else is going on at the same time.

MODERATOR: Ah, okay.

GL: 40 LOLCat tabs open at the same time.

AB: I'm trying to get the first comment in, you see

SC: Ahhhhh!

GL: Are you the one that says, "First", is that you?

AB: No, no, I never say "FIRST!",

GL: Aww, alright.

AB: No, I usually AM first.

All: general laughter and agreement

JT: She doesn't need to say it.

BM: I'll have to look for your comments.

JT: What's your username?

AB: [USERNAME]

MODERATOR: You're definitely like, first or second, almost—

AB: Yes.

MODERATOR: Every lol I've seen.

AB: Yes, me and pussandboy.

MODERATOR: Yeah?

SC: Brilliant.

MODERATOR: GL, do you like any of these? Not really?

GL: They seem really new.

MODERATOR: They seem really new, okay.

BM: I've never seen any of them.

MODERATOR: These are all from the Hall of Fame, by the way.

BM: Really!

MODERATOR: These are all Hall of Fame.

BM: The apocalypse one is funny (Pull Cord to begin Apocalypse)

AB: Yeah.

BM: Cause you KNOW what's going to happen if he pulls that tail. RAAARRR!! (grabbing M&Ms) I'm addicted. These are delicious.

MODERATOR: Alright, so, last round, and then uh, I'll ask for your parting thoughts.

RK: (giggling)

MODERATOR: You like Febreze cat?

RK: Yeah.

AB: (Pointing to I'm allergic to food, I break out in fat) (laughing) That's me! I can't see the—oh, the—the one with the--

MODERATOR: Here, we'll move this one over here.

BM: (Laughing)

MODERATOR: Which one are you giggling at, Ben?

BM: Febreze Cat.

AB: The problem with bifocals is that it's so far, but not far enough.

RK: (laughing) Why would it lie like that?

MODERATOR: So for that one (Febreze Cat) is it really the picture that gets you? Or is it the caption?

AB: Oh, well it's the combination of the two.

MODERATOR: The combination.

AB: The, the ideal lol is a combination of the words fitting the picture.

JT: Because you can believe it saying that.

BM: Because there's clearly no other reason that he'd be lying like that.

MODERATOR: Right.

BM: No other reason.

AB: Facedesk?

JT: That's brilliant.

SC: (laughing) Facedesk.

MODERATOR: Facedesk...

BM: But he's not at a desk.

MODERATOR: Headdesk, facepalm?

JT: I like that one too, because again, it's sitting in a, in a human way.

AB: You know that black and white cat sitting like that going, "HUMPH"

JT: Yeah! (laughing)

MODERATOR: Okay.

JT: Because they always have an excuse for everything. That's the thing as well. The Lolspeak and the, the captions always kind of give it an excuse, like "What?" You know, "yeah, of course"

SC: This one's okay (Break Out In Fat), but the joke is something that you might see on like a fridge magnet. It doesn't seem that original, really.

MODERATOR: Is originality important?

SC: Yeah.

MODERATOR: Yeah?

AB: Oh yes. Yeah, and so many, so many of them, they just seem to be copies of somebody else's lol.

MODERATOR: Mmhmm.

AB: And I find that annoying. I've, I sometimes go through the votes, the new lols up for voting, and so many of them seem to be, slight variations on the same, on somebody else's theme.

MODERATOR: Yeah.

AB: Which um, you know, doesn't seem right to me. Whether it's two people having the same idea, or somebody just sort of, jumping on the bandwagon, I'm not sure.

MODERATOR: Do the copies tend to make the front page?

AB: Occasionally, yes.

MODERATOR: Occasionally.

AB: Yes.

MODERATOR: But what do the, the commenters—do they get on board, or not?

AB: Oh yes, say, "we've seen this before".

MODERATOR: Ah, okay.

AB: And, and sometimes we get the same picture with a slightly different comment, and if that happens a bit too often, we get a bit annoyed about it.

MODERATOR: Okay, So do you, are the commenters and the people who vote, do you think they're two different populations?

AB: Um, they overlap to quite a large extent, but um, the commenters I suppose are a weird bunch anyway. But um, you know it's, we're basically a core of two or three hundred commenters, and then there are a lot of school, school holiday time, we get a lot of youngsters playing around and interfering and being silly.

MODERATOR: Being silly, what do you mean by being silly?

AB: Oh, making, making unpleasant remarks sometimes, or um, foolish remarks.

MODERATOR: So um, trolls and haters? Or just...

JT: Trolls on holiday.

AB: Not so much, um, well youngsters, just sort of, trying to be too clever.

SC: Is it work people who don't understand, the mood, and like the kind of, like, the unspoken rules that are there?

AB: Yes, I think so. Um, generally speaking, the basic rules of commenting are to keep it nice. Being polite, um, and friendly. But we do get a lot of people who aren't, and uh, if they're too unfriendly, we report them and get them banned.

MODERATOR: Any other comments on this, on this round? So we like I'm allergic to food and Febreze cat the best, huh?

AB: Yeah those two, I, what's the other, I can't quite see that one, I—my focus is fixed, and it's uh... Oh yes, that one. Yes, I like that.

MODERATOR: You like Jenkins?

AB: Yes, I think that one's good. (Looking at another) That one doesn't do much for me.

MODERATOR: Is it because of the fact that it's a hamster?

AB: I don't understand it.

MODERATOR: Yeah, it does make a lot of, random references.

AB: I'm probably, I'm too old to understand that one.

MODERATOR: Yeah, I don't really—I assume it's a Dungeons and Dragons reference?

AB: Um, I don't do dru-- I haven't seen a film since um, the rerun of My Fair Lady in 1968. So, you know, I know nothing about films, I don't watch a lot of television, so, that's a closed book to me.

JT: If there was a LOLCats program on telly, would you watch it?

AB: Eh, possibly. And I watched the, they put up a link to a recording of Ben (Huh) doing a talk on television, I saw that.

MODERATOR: Do you watch things like, "Walk On The Wild Side"?

AB: Mmmmm, I'm not very keen on that.

MODERATOR: You don't like the voiceover animals?

AB: Um, I've seen one or two.

JT: There's only one bit that's funny, it's only the "Steve! Steve! Alan! Alan!"

AB: Yes, that one's funny, but the rest of it—either I can't hear it clearly enough or it's just—it washes over me.

MODERATOR: Okay.

GL: Chuckles.

MODERATOR: You agree?

GL: I, I love Walk on the Wild Side.

SC: What is Walk on the Wild Side?

GL: They've taken the old uh, craziest clips of um, you know, the Attenborough TV shows and voiced it, put voices on to what the animals are actually doing.

JT: It's comedians who do it.

GL: It's on YouTube.

MODERATOR: Can you tell me what you like about Walk On The Wild Side?

GL: It's essentially has been, I don't want to say done to death, like these, but it's actually, moving LOLCats, but I guess it's not just cats, it's all animals. But it's sort of, putting a voice to, this, essentially a stupid thing this animal's doing, or a thing you don't understand that LOOKS stupid, and it's explaining what they're actually doing.

MODERATOR: So, thank you all so much for your time, I'm going to wrap things up so every one can get on, um, I know we've run late, I'm really sorry about that. Uh, is there just, one, any final parting words for me? Anything that you would, that I've missed, or that you'd like to say about LOLCats?

JT: I personally think that LOLCats are one of the things that, in the history of the Internet, it is quite a formative moment. I think that's, you know, proven by the fact that they're still, it's not a meme that's disappeared. Um, and I, and I, just think it was, uh, I would love to have the artwork on my wall.

MODERATOR: You say formative moment, meaning...

JT: Meaning I think it was one of the original, kind of memes that broke through. That has lasted, and has become a, a cultural expression.

AB: And it's worldwide, too.

JT: It's worldwide.

AB: Everyday I'm talking to a chap in Australia, another one in Saudi Arabia, a lot of Americans, of course, um, Swiss, German, French, Dutch, all over.

JT: That's amazing. (to me) I think you should do a PhD.

MODERATOR: Yeah? That would be pretty... pretty... cross cultural examinations of... I wish there was more than I could possibly delve into, I could do a PhD on this. Connects to a lot of different things. But, we'll see how the dissertation turns out first.

AB: Well, good luck with it!

ALL: Yeah, good luck!

SC: How much longer do you have to work on it?

MODERATOR: Um, about a month... and a half?

BM: Your big assignment at the end is to create your own LOLCat that perfectly represents the culmination of your research.

SC: Ooh, yeah!

MODERATOR: Yeah.

BM: That can be your announcement. That SHOULD be your abstract.

ALL: General laughter

MODERATOR: Oooh.

BM: Your abstract should be a LOLCat.

DB: The ultimate LOLCat.

MODERATOR: Yeah, although I feel like that falls into administrative research. It's not, you know, I'm not setting out to find—

JT: Your whole abstract will be in Lolspeak.

MODERATOR: It should be.

JT: There has to be a version of, I think.

BM: Or at least the title.

MODERATOR: I could do, I could translate my entire dissertation into Lolspeak.

JT: You should, you completely should. I'd read it.

MODERATOR: You'd read it?

MODERATOR: Well, maybe after I hand it in, I can do a translation.

BM: I wonder, are you going to have an announcement on I Can Haz Cheezburger?

MODERATOR: They know I'm—well, I don't know if Ben knows that I'm doing it.

JT: Well, what you could do is get the community to translate it, bits of it if they wanted to.

MODERATOR: Kind of like LOLCat Bible Translation. I could turn my dissertation into a wiki and have everyone translate it into Lolspeak

ALL: Yeah!

AB: Well, we've done lots of Shakespeare, uh...

MODERATOR: Oh yeah?

JT: Really?

AB: Oh yes, bits of Shakespeare

JT: I'd love to see that.

AB: Well you should read the comments column!

JT: Yeah, I should, I should!

AB: Mind you, it takes all day.

JT: I know. I literally have the 5 minutes in the morning.

AB: No, I, I log on between 9:00 and log off at half past 11 in the morning, go shopping, come back, log on for the 2:00 lol, and the computer stays on until about midnight... I'm not there all the time. Most of it.

JT: Well now, now I've met you, I might just go on. I'll be KittenFluff, if anything.

AB: Mmmm.

MODERATOR: KittenFluff? Is that a handle you already use?

JT: That's for my cat-obsessed stuff, yeah.

AB: I don't think there's, I've not met a KittenFluff, so you'll probably be okay.

JT: Right, okay.

AB: My son had to change his slightly, because someone—he's puddy_tat, um, with a subscript between—he had to put the uh, subdash in, because somebody was already puddytat without it.

JT: That's a good name.

AB: But my, my name goes back to... um, about 50 years. It was my husband's nickname for me.

All: Awwww! Really?

AB: And the, the picture was uh, long before I JTined the group

JT: So it's Annipuss?

AB: Annipuss, all one word.

JT: Two, two esses.

MODERATOR: Well, I'll give everyone, you know, I can send out in, if everyone wants to keep in touch, I can send everybody's emails, and share, so you can all talk amongst yourselves and share your favorite lols with each other, if you'd like to do that, I'm happy to do that, so.

ALL: (General delight and agreement)

JT: You know the group lulzsec, so I originally got really excited in my head about that. I (laughing) thought they were something to do with LOLCats

ALL: (General laughter)

BM: Everytime I see it in the paper again, I think, “Oh, I gotta send this to [MODERATOR]—oh wait, no.”

ALL: (General laughter)

RK: So what is it?

JT: It’s the Guys who were hacking into various security networks like...

GL: CIA...

BM: It’s a hackers group.

RK: Oh, okay.

JT: But they’re called lulz-sec, uh, L-U-L-Z.

MODERATOR: But lulz—

GL: Lulz means something different.

MODERATOR: Yeah.

AB: It’s more snide, isn’t it?

GL: Yeah, it’s taking advantage of people, people’s sort of ineptitude on the web. Having a joke at others’ expense, where lol is just—

JT: Stuff that you like.

GL: Yeah.

ALL: (General laughter)

AB: If someone uses lulz in the uh, in the comments on lol, on LOLCats, they get uh, shouted down.

GL: That’s the spirit. There’s no place for lulz on LOLCats.

JT: Brilliant.

MODERATOR: Well thank you all so much.

APPENDIX I: ICHC HALL OF FAME GENERAL THEMES

Cats as humans (Anthropomorphism)

- Sex
- Drugs
 - o Catnip
- Gluttony
 - o Obesity
- Coffee (need of)
- Misanthropy
 - o Stupidity
- Job dissatisfaction
- Mocking groups/Othering
 - o "Emos"
 - o People who dress up their animals

Cats as Cats

- Cats vs. dogs
- Cats vs. humans
- Cuteness inherent to cat-ness
 - o Cats as needing snuggles
- Cats as conniving/evil

Intertextual references

- Pop songs
- Science Fiction
 - o Movies
 - o TV Shows
 - o Games
- Advertising slogans
- Computer references

Other

- Aphorisms
 - o "People in glass houses"
- Hatred of Mondays
- Cats as antidepressants
- Otter puns

APPENDIX J: FINAL CODING FRAME

HUMOR

- Textual
 - Anthropomorphism
 - Familiarity
 - Identification
 - Lolspeak
- Social
 - In-Jokes
 - Intertextuality
 - Lolspeak

GENRE

- Font
- Placement of Text
- Subject of Image
- Construction of Text
- Characterization of animal
- Intertextuality

CREATION

- Altruistic
 - Response
 - Just because
 - Special occasion
- Self-oriented
 - Self-Expression

SHARING

- Altruistic
 - Response
 - Thought Of You (spontaneous)
- Self Oriented
 - Self-Expression
 - In-group demonstration

LOLSPEAK

- Humor
 - Voice of cat
- Social
 - Bonding
 - Group identity

APPENDIX K: CHEEZBURGER FIELD DAY



Introducing Our First Ever...

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July 15th - Safeco Field - Seattle, WA



Early Bird Pricing! **\$48 Cheezburger Field Day All Access Pass!!!**

Buy Tickets Now!

*Cheezburger Field Day tickets will be \$54 after the Early Bird Special expires!

Includes:

- A ticket to Night at the Mariners Game
- Internet Celeb & Memability Appearances
- Awesome Live Musical Performances
- A Cheezburger Night T-Shirt for the game
- Ice cream bowl helmet and more Cheez Swag
- Catered Noms (Lunch)
- Show & Tell with Burgers & CheezFrenz
- Pre-Game HappyCat Hour





\$16 Cheezburger Night at the Mariners (Game Only)

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- A Cheezburger Night T-Shirt for the game
- Pre-Game HappyCat Hour



What is Field Day?

An all day event at Safeco Field full of one-on-one time with your favorite Burgers & CheezFrenz, show & tell with Internet celebs and a celebration of all things awesome about the internet. If you can't make it to Field Day, don't worry, u can haz tickets to just the game only. See you there!

When?

July 15th
 12:30 - 5:00pm
 followed by
 Happy Hour &
 Night at the Mariners

Where?

Safeco Field
 1250 1st Avenue South
 Seattle, WA 98134
[Directions](#)

Want to buy your parking in advance? [Click here!](#)

Featuring Special Guests:

Alexis Ohanian from Reddit Matt Inman from The Oatmeal
 Kevyn Smith & Jeremy Johnson from We Sing Your Tweets Lindsey Weber
 Yasmine from Cat versus Human Jason Steele from Film Cow (Charlie the Unicorn)
 Laurie from Itty Bitty Kitty Committee Matt Oswald creator of Me Gusta face
 The Team from Know Your Meme

Cheezburger Field Day is brought to you by







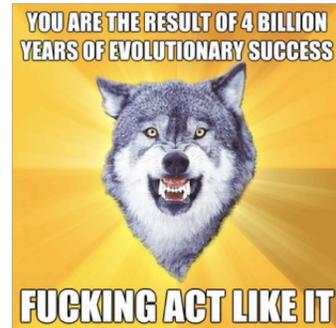

APPENDIX L: ADVICE ANIMAL MEMES



Advice Dog



Business Cat



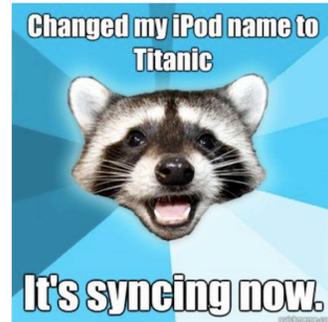
Courage Wolf



Foul Bachelor
Frog



Insanity Wolf



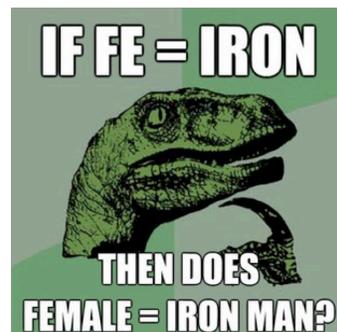
Lame Pun Coon



Musically Oblivious
8th Grader



Socially Awkward
Penguin

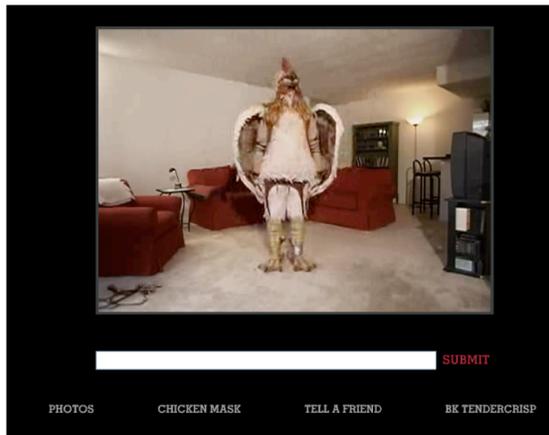


Philosoraptor

APPENDIX M: MEME REFERENCES



Peanut Butter Jelly Time



Subservient Chicken



Huckabee Campaign Ad

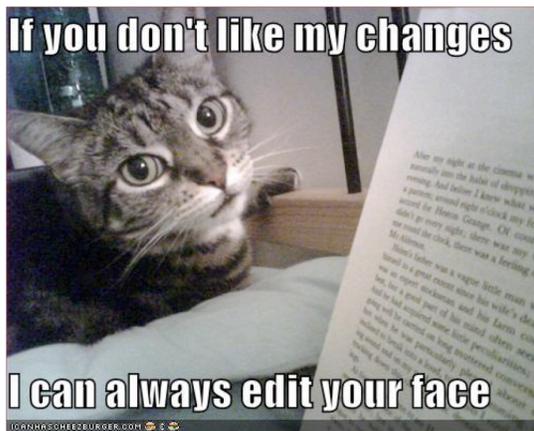
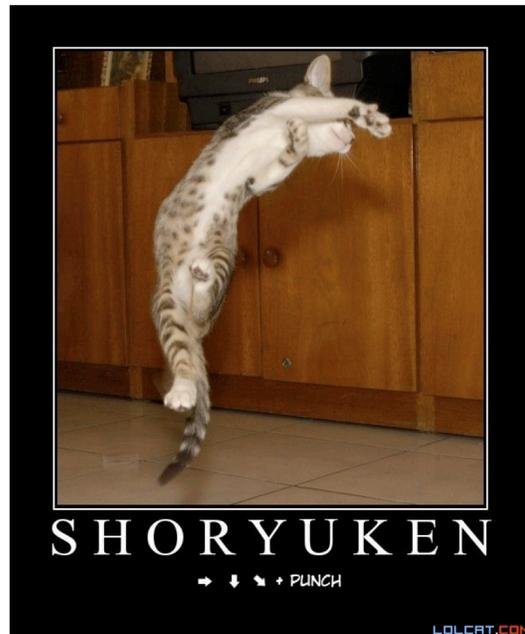
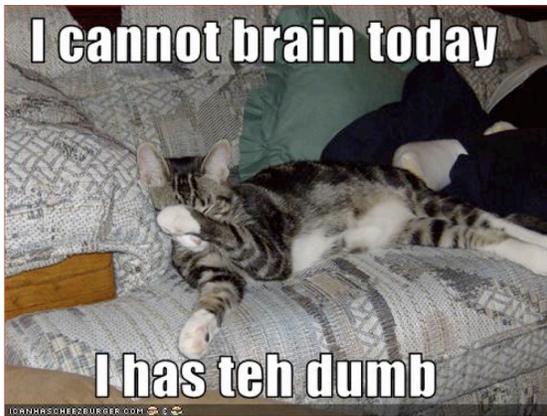


The Colbert Report: Colbert SuperPAC

APPENDIX N: LOLCATS REFERENCED IN BODY TEXT



Ceiling Cat



APPENDIX O: LOLCAT VS. MEMES

Many lolcat users, particularly the MemeGeeks, perceive LOLCats to be different from memes. The chart below details the four key qualitative ways.

Quality	LOLCat	Meme
<i>Ephemerality</i>	Continuous, Durable	Cyclical, Transient
<i>Prevalence</i>	Mainstream	Obscure
<i>Novelty</i>	Original	Derivative
<i>Meaning</i>	Often self-contained, discrete	Intertextually dependent