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Meme-ing Europe: examining the Europeanization of humorous discourse in an online meme community

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines manifestations of Europeanization in an online community whose purpose is to create and share memes on European issues. The group, referred to in this study as the European Meme Society, exhibits memes, which, at their simplest, refer to images, text, and videos that spread from person to person via the Internet, and are altered and repeated for a short period of time. Posts on the page include humorous stereotypes about European states, references to historical events, jokes about current events such as Brexit, and quips against Europe’s Others, such as the United States of America, Russia, and North Korea. The study’s main objective is to explore how memes can discursively shape Europeanization. It is argued that although the online community’s primary purpose is to be facetious, the meme posts provide insight into deeper issues. Through their interactions, community members articulate their positions on what Europe is, what it means to be European, and highlight the ideas, perspectives, events, and topics that serve as common reference points among members of the group. In this way, the posts in the European Meme Society exemplify how Europeanization is discursively shaped through humorous content in an online meme community.

KEYWORDS
Europeanization; memes; discourse; online community

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Introduction
In March 2017, a virtual community was formed in the social networking site, Facebook, which envisioned itself as a locus for the sharing of memes and humorous content on topics of interest to Europeans. The first post in the group called upon its first members to try to spread word about the community ‘so that we can create a real european (sic) community with people from all countries’. Since that initial statement was made, the community has since grown to include 90,000 individuals, who interact with one another as they discuss the content that is posted in their online community. This study examines how that online group, referred to here as the European Meme Society, serves as a locality in virtual space where members of the community are able to discuss topics of concern to Europeans using the medium of memes.

The growing use of the Internet, and its associated technologies such as social media, have transformed how many people live. Individuals making use of this technology increasingly live lives with an online dimension and an offline one. According to Shields (2003), both the digital and corporeal aspects of reality are significant in shaping human thought and action. The two dimensions are connected to one another through a process of slippage, in which the online domain is shaped by actions taken in offline spaces, and aspects of virtual reality also influence the corporeal domain.

Ben-Ze’ev (2004) and De Zengotita (2005) have remarked on the different ways that this type of slippage has altered aspects of people’s activity. The former discussed how individuals seeking intimacy have turned to the online world as a venue for dating and finding love. The technology broadens their pool of potential partners, and allows them to interact with one another before they physically meet. De Zengotita (2005), for his part, articulated how the Internet and the increasing use of social media has altered how people represent themselves to others. When making new friends or even applying for jobs, the content of one’s online profile is just as significant as one’s corporeal appearance and behaviour.

Of particular significance to this paper is the way that politics has shaped, and is shaped by, information and communications technologies. Wright, Graham, and Jackson (2015) discussed that governments, politicians, activists, and citizens are increasingly using social media in order to articulate their positions on issues, and promote their ideological stances. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) provided a case study to illustrate the trend through their examination of the #Ferguson protest that took place on online social media platforms, following the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by law enforcement officials in the American town of Ferguson, Missouri. Similarly, Litchfield et al. (2018) did research on how social media was used to make racist and sexist comments towards Serena Williams, a popular American tennis player who is both female and of African descent.

There is a plethora of political positions that are articulated online, and also a large number of venues through which to express oneself. This study focuses on manifestations of Europeanization in the European Meme Society. The online community exhibits memes, which, at their simplest, refer to jokes, rumours, videos, and websites that spread from person to person via the Internet (Shifman 2014a), and are widely adapted and repeated for a short period of time (Burgess 2008). A more comprehensive discussion of memes can be found in the succeeding section. Posts on the page include humorous stereotypes about European states, references to historical events, jokes about current events such as Brexit, and quips against Europe’s Others, such as the United States of America, Russia, and North Korea.

The study’s main objective is to explore how memes can discursively shape Europeanization. It is argued that although the online community’s primary purpose is to be facetious, the meme posts provide insight into deeper issues. Through their interactions, community members articulate their positions on what Europe is, what it means to be European, and highlight the ideas, perspectives, events, and topics that serve as common reference points among members of the group. In this way, the posts in the European Meme Society exemplify how Europeanization is discursively shaped through humorous content in an online meme community.
Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings

This study builds on theoretical and empirical work on two research areas: (1) Europeanization, discourse, and Europeanized discourse; and (2) memes and online communities. The literature on each of these topics is surveyed in the succeeding sub-sections.

Europeanization and discourse

Academic literature indicates that Europeanization occurs in two directions: as a top-down process, and as a bottom-up one. The top-down aspect is initiated at the level of EU bureaucrats, and it then trickles down to the ordinary citizens. An example of this form of Europeanization emanating from above is described in the works of Shore (1993) who discusses that the forging of a supranational ‘European identity’ has entailed the ‘deployment of symbolic measures … within the context of European Commission cultural policies promoting an “ever-closer union” among the peoples of Europe’ (Shore 1993, 779). Another study examined how the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was appropriated by European bureaucrats to become the European Anthem, justifying that it ‘was representative of European genius and was capable of uniting the hearts and minds of all Europeans, including the younger generation’ (Clark 1997, 796).

Bottom-up approaches to Europeanization may be found in works that argue that the process occurs at the level of individual citizens whose feelings and experiences of unity reinforce the initiatives of regional blocs. In one study, it is proposed that ‘… the main source of … [European] identity is the opportunity to positively interact on a regular basis with people from other European countries with whom one has a basis for solidarity’ (Fligstein 2009, 133). Borneman and Fowler (1997), for their part, discuss the process of Europeanization as a process of identity construction whereby individual citizens develop a subjective sense of unity with others in the region through recognizing that they have practices in common, such as playing football, travelling or speaking similar languages. Finally, Favell (2009) argues that the ‘movement of professionals, the skilled and the educated: the circulation of talent in a knowledge economy … [has the] beneficial side effect the building of European identity through … cross-border interactions’ (Favell 2009, 178). Thus, the literature on Europeanization indicates that the process occurs through the policies and programs formulated by EU bureaucrats and through the interactions of individual citizens whose experiences allow a shared identity to come about.

This paper is aligned with the bottom-up approach, and builds on the idea that Europeanization entails the construction of a European imagined community (Risse 2015). In these types of social groups, citizens identify themselves as members of a larger whole despite not personally knowing their fellow constituents (Anderson 1991). Consequently, Europeans feel a sense of belonging to the regional community, even if they have not personally interacted with all 500 million of their compatriots. The ‘imaginary’ social bonds that European citizens feel with one another are made ‘real’ by common interests, practices, and reference points, which reinforce the sense of community among members of the group. Borneman and Fowler (1997) identified football, tourism, language, money, and sex as some of the factors that make the imagined community real for Europeans. Similarly, Kaelberer (2004) discussed that the euro currency plays a role in reinforcing European identity. According to him, the euro, the EU’s common currency, serves as a powerful source of commonality because individuals working within the Eurozone are unified by the activity of spending and earning the same type of money.

This paper argues that discourses also contribute to the process of Europeanization. The concept of discourse has been articulated by authors in different ways, and Mills (2004) has discussed the difficulty of defining the concept, and tracing its roots over time. As such, the definitions given to discourse have tended to be very general. For example, it may be broadly defined as a particular way of talking about and understanding reality (Phillips and Marianne 2002). Cook (1989) defines it as ‘language in use, for communication’. Thus, discourse is generally about communicating about reality through language.
Discourses may be connected to Europeanization in two ways. First, they provide common linguistic reference points that serve as a basis for communication among Europeans. In his work, Diez (2001) discussed how EU bureaucrats and individuals knowledgeable in the regional bloc's affairs were united by a shared discourse, which he termed Euro-speak. This common linguistic starting point facilitated discussion since every individual engaged in the conversation was similarly informed about such issues as supranationalism, subsidiarity, and the acquis communautaire. As such, discourses reinforce Europeanization because they provide common reference points for Europeans to initiate discussion on topics of shared interest.

Discourses are also linked to Europeanization because they serve as articulations of differing perspectives about the nature of Europe and the people who belong to the region. Discourses are in competition with one another, and both Fairclough (1999) and Foucault (1978) emphasised how actors use language to shape understandings of various aspects of social reality. To use the example of Slocum-Bradley (2010), one person may claim that ‘there is a strong European identity’, while another could argue that ‘there is no European identity’. It would be difficult to prove either side true or false, but both articulations ultimately contribute to the broader debate of European identity as a whole. As such, discourses do not only provide topics for common discussion among Europeans, they also shape the content by providing the different perspectives that would become part of the debate.

Krzyzanowski (2010) and Wodak (2007, 2011) have discussed that the definitions of Europe and European identity are constantly being contested through discourse, with different actors articulating their own positions on both topics. As Wodak et al. (2009) put it, identities are produced, reproduced, transformed, and dismantled through the different perspectives that are articulated in discourse. This contestation necessitates exercises of power, with some voices becoming more influential than others. The work of Trimithiotis (2018) illustrated this point by discussing how political actors with more symbolic power were able to contribute significantly to the construction of the identities of Europarties, while their less influential colleagues could only participate by agreeing or disagreeing with the positions already taken. Similarly, Krzyzanowski and Oberhuber (2007) emphasized how a ‘community of experts’ used their control over the agenda to influence the deliberations of the EU’s Constitutional Convention. Thus, power dynamics shape the formulation of discourses, which serve as the ideational bases for the challenging or perpetuation of existing practices or ways of thinking. They are socially constitutive in that sense. They shape social reality, even as they are shaped by it. As such, disputes about whether or not Europe is a singular entity or an amalgamation of nations has consequences on how Europeans perceive the region that they belong to. Similarly, arguments about whether or not Europeans possess similar values, and what they are, also figure into the discourses about the nature of the region and its citizens.

This paper argues that both facets of the relationship between discourse and Europeanization are manifested in the content of the European Meme Society. The continued existence of the group, and the constant production of humorous content on ‘European’ issues exemplify how discourses provide common linguistic reference points with which members of the group can communicate with one another. The topics presented in the online community also exemplify how discourses shape Europeanization through contestation in the ideational realm. Meme creators articulate perspectives about what Europe is, and the nature of what it means to be European. In so doing, they contribute to either the preservation or abolition of the current dominant way of thinking about the region and its citizens.

**Memes and online communities**

Bonilla and Rosa (2015), Lance Bennett (2012), Shephard and Quinlan (2015), and Jensen, Ormen, and Lomborg (2015) all discussed the increasing importance of cyberspace as a venue for social interaction. As people engage with one another online, they are able to form groups with
likeminded individuals, and construct online communities with particular identities. This dynamic is particularly significant among political movements, which mobilise online in order to exert social pressure on policymakers. Examples of these include hashtag activists (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) and Occupy protesters (Lance Bennett 2012). Political interest groups have also used social media in political campaigns, as exemplified in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (Shephard and Quinlan 2015) and the European Parliament Elections in Denmark in the same year (Jensen, Ormen, and Lomborg 2015).

Apart from activism and politics, the Internet also provides a venue for individuals with shared interests, experiences, or beliefs to form communities in cyberspace. For example, Lee (2017) examined the dynamics of an online forum for infertility patients, and discussed how the group provided support and encouragement to its members who were all experiencing difficulties in having children. The work of Bilgrei (2018), for its part, examined how trust was built among the anonymous members of an online community composed of individuals who recreationally used drugs. A shared interest in the use of such substances brought them together, but discussions within the forum revolved around how to do so safely, with members sharing experiences, and providing advice to one another. The Internet has also become a vehicle to bring together individuals from the same fandom. Underwood (2016) discussed how an only community was built by fans of Zyzx, a famous bodybuilder. Individuals in the community would discuss how to achieve a body like that of their idol’s through various combinations of workouts and nutritional supplements. People in the group would do self-experimentation and share the results with others in the community.

What the examples above indicate is that the Internet is effective in connecting people who may not otherwise meet offline. Likeminded individuals form social ties in cyberspace, and thereby form online communities where they can express themselves and engage with others like themselves (Wright, Graham, and Jackson 2015). Although studies have been done about various forms of online communities, little work has yet been done on the ways that Europeanization identities are shaped in cyberspace (Koopmans and Zimmerman 2010). Two studies that attempt to fill this lacuna are Wodak and Wright (2007) and Wodak (2007). Both works examine the ways that participants of an EU online forum converse with one another about the issue of multilingualism in Europe. Although the topic of discussion was quite narrow, the conversations among members of the group touched on broader topics, such as the significance of the nation-state to the European integration project, or whether or not there should be a dominant working language in the region. This paper hopes to contribute to this sub-group of academic literature on Europeanization in cyberspace.

The European Meme Society, which is the focus of this paper, is an online community where participants discuss issues on Europe by sharing humorous posts, specifically called memes, to one another. Although the exact definition of a meme is still under debate, one of its most widely cited descriptions was provided by Shifman (2014a). According to him, the term refers to:

‘… (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.’ (Shifman 2014a, 7–8).

The term ‘meme’ cannot be used to refer simply to any facetious post online. Its roots lie in a term coined by Dawkins (1976) to describe cultural units that spread from one person to another through copying. As such, popular internet memes, such as Gangnam Style, Lord of the Rings’ Boromir, depicted at the start of the paper, or Pepe the Frog, gain popularity because they are shared from person to person, in a process sometimes referred to as ‘going viral’.

Internet memes can take the form of videos, images, or text, but they are said to come in and out of fashion quickly, making use of textual ‘hooks’ or key signifiers that are readily appreciated by audiences and creators (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). These key signifiers make the memes readily recognizable, thereby contributing to its rapid changeability and spread (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Although the main intention behind memes is to be facetious, and to appeal to audiences’ sense of humour, they
should by no means be considered as purely unserious. The seemingly flippant posts can be used to play on serious themes, such as political identity projects.

The work of Marcus and Singer (2017) described how Ebola-chan became a popular meme by being passed on to more and more internet users. After first appearing in a social networking site for artists, the anthropomorphised image of the Ebola virus, represented as a young girl with pink pigtails, started getting shared around the world. She gained a following among individuals who sought to use her to intensify hysteria about the virus, as well as fans of Japanese popular culture, known as otaku. The example of Ebola-chan indicates two aspects about memes. First, that they can become very popular by being passed on from one person to another. And second, once the image is in cyberspace, it can be appropriated by various groups for their own purposes. Ebola-chan was both a tool for people seeking to create chaos online, sometimes referred to as trolls, and she was genuinely adored by her fandom.

In order for memes to be relevant to their intended audiences, however, they need to be altered in some way that they become meaningful to their audiences. As such, their creators ‘riff on a given visual, textual, or auditory form and then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from’ (Nooney and Portwood-Stacer 2014). This process was exemplified in the work of Silvestri (2016) who examined American soldiers in active battlefields who would create their own versions of viral videos, such as the Harlem Shake or a lip-dub of the popular song ‘Call Me Maybe’. According to the author, they did this in order to continue participating in mainstream popular culture despite being deployed far away from their homes. Similarly, Ekdale and Tully (2014) analysed how Kenyans seized on Makmende, a hypermasculine character from a viral music video, to embody their hopes and visions for the country. Makmende is depicted in the same way as action heroes in films, who are able to succeed against seemingly insurmountable odds, with just their strength and sheer force of will. The character was appropriated and turned into a meme, spawning jokes and images that were transmitted from one person to another. He came to represent the dream of Kenya being able to progress, and become a powerful country on par with the United States.

The same dynamics of altering and reinterpreting material hold true within the European Meme Society, where mainstream memes are adapted so that they refer to ideas, events, and people that are significant or recognizable to Europeans. Thus, memes are highly intertextual in nature. Those who create or alter them need to be aware of the meanings attached to the meme, and they need to present it in such a way that it is readily appreciated by their intended audiences. Shifman (2014b) argued that their deliberate and intertextual nature makes them very valuable as data sources, because they are indicative of the discursive contexts of both their creators and intended audiences.

At present, there is a growing literature on memes, and scholars have remarked on how they are used as forms of online expression. For example, Szablewicz (2014) discussed how Diaosi, the most popular meme in China in 2012, was used by young males to challenge prevailing expectations of career and relationship success, which have been placed on their gender and age group. They offer a counter-narrative that claims that it is alright for a Chinese male to be unmarried and have a mediocre income. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016), for their part, examined how the viral video entitled ‘It Gets Better’ was imitated or modified by Internet users who identified themselves as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community. Their findings indicated that the popular video became a rallying point, with individuals creating their own videos in which they impart a message that is similar to the original. The original video sparked a movement that reinforced the LGBTQ community’s identity online.

In a similar manner, memes reinforce collective identity within the European Meme Society that is being studied in this paper. The group exemplifies how Europeanization is manifested by individuals interacting in cyberspace. Members share memes with one another, which reference historical events, contemporary political issues, and individuals that are considered meaningful to Europeans. In so doing, they participate in socially constructing a European imagined community by developing a canon of topics that European audiences should be able to appreciate. Within the context of the meme group, a person can be considered Europeanized
when they can understand and react to humorous posts about the Roman Empire, Brexit, or German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Although the content that is posted takes the form of facetious and, potentially offensive, text and images, they are significant because memes are highly intertextual in nature. Those who create and modify them are aware of the meanings that they convey, and they alter their content in a way that they would be significant to members of the European Meme Society. Consequently, the imagined community is reinforced because a meme creator is aware that their content, which is intended for a Europeanized audience, will be appreciated by their online community.

**Methodology**

As a study of discourse in an online community, the methodology employed needs to consider the context in which the discourses are produced. Scholars have remarked on the difficulty of defining context (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Flowerdew 2017), but it can be considered as the ‘totality of conditions under which discourse is being produced, circulated, and interpreted’ (Blommaert 2005, 251). Consequently, discourse and context are inextricably linked (van Dijk 2008; Wodak 2004). According to Goodwin and Heritage (1990), there is an interactive relation between discourse and context, with discourse’s production being constrained by elements of context, while contexts are also transformed by utterances that are made by social actors.

Given that context encompasses all of the conditions that shape discourses, there are divergent views about how to incorporate it when analysing discourse. Wodak (2009), for example, encourages researchers to consider four elements: (1) the immediate, language or text; (2) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances; (3) the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of a particular context; and (4) the broader socio-political and historical contexts in which the discourses are embedded. The four factors become increasingly broad, with the first two aspects being apparent in the text itself, while the other two necessitate obtaining information that is outside of the text.

The work of van Dijk (2001, 2005) interprets context in cognitive terms, and encourages researchers to understand the cultural milieu in which discourses operate. According to the author, both senders and receivers are able to communicate with one another because they operate within the same linguistic and cultural system. An outsider listening to the same utterances would misinterpret what is being said, or would be unable to comprehend the interaction. As such, knowledge of the linguistic and cultural system that speakers operate in would be beneficial to researchers doing discourse analysis.

Neither of the approaches is specifically made for the examination of online communities, but they do provide useful guidelines that informed the study as a whole. The European Meme Society itself serves as the context in which the discourses are being articulated. Consequently, there are expectations on the way that group members communicate with one another. First, there is abundant use of memes, which are intertextual by nature, since they entail referencing images and text from elsewhere in cyberspace, and using them to communicate in the European Meme Society. The research methods employed did consider the form that posts take. Another aspect of context that is significant in this study has to do with the interface between the online and offline realms. The researcher is aware that the content and ideas articulated in the European Meme Society have roots in corporeal reality. Much of the content in the group references contemporary political developments, or historical events, which are both aspects of the offline realm that have been brought into cyberspace. Thus, aspects of the context have been considered in constructing this study’s research design.

This paper employed a qualitative methodology, examining the nature and dynamics of a single case with the intention of understanding it in a nuanced manner. The European Meme Society was purposively selected because of its avowed goal of serving as a hub in which individuals could share memes on European issues. Content analysis was employed in this study in order to analyse
articulations of Europeanized discourse in the online community. The choice of method dovetails with previous work done by scholars who have also studied social media (Schwartz and Ungar 2015; Furquhar 2012. This entails the examination of text, images, video, and audio and categorizing them in a systematic manner (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The content analysis will be done on all of the posts in the Facebook group from March 2017 to February 2018. The yearlong data collection period was selected in order to gain a broad understanding of the community, and to obtain evidence of their posts across a long period of time. The temporal context is also significant to consider when reading the findings presented below, since the period of data collection covers the twelve months since the community was first conceived. During this time, there was a growth in the group’s membership, and an evolution in the types of memes that were posted, as the online community’s identity was clarified through continuous interaction among members.

Following the prescription of Steinmetz (2012), this study examines articulations of Europeanized discourse by the meme creators and sharers in the group. Studying online communities has significant differences from the examination of offline corporeal groups, including the lack of a physical field site (Gaston and Zweerink 2004), the difficulty of establishing individuals’ identities, and the inaccessibility of data on body language, physical actions, and vocal articulations. As such, discourses are the most consistent source of information in the study of online groups.

In examining the content of the online group, the researcher went over several hundred posts that were shared during the data collection period. During that time, the position of a ‘professional lurker’ (Litchfield et al. 2018), or ‘active viewer’ was adopted. The researcher avoided interaction with members of the group, and the content that they posted, minimising his impact on the online environment in order to avoid disrupting the spontaneous interactions among members of the group. Since this community exists on Facebook, this entails not commenting or reacting through ‘likes’ or ‘shares’. The only action taken was to record the content being posted by members of the group.

The researcher devised a coding scheme that was refined as data collection proceeded. The researcher noted three categories of the data, which were referred to as: (1) context, (2) meme family, and (3) frame. The first refers to general information of each post, such as the date it was shared, the text included alongside the memes, assuming there was any, and its word count. Not all of the content had text accompanying them. The second category is meme families. According to Segev et al. (2015), a meme family is a group of posts that have similar characteristics, or ‘hooks’, that make them immediately recognisable to creators and audiences. For example, the ‘ice bucket challenge’ is a meme family in which a bucket filled with ice would be poured on a person’s head. This trend went viral to raise awareness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and numerous videos were uploaded of people participating in the trend. Various meme families were used in the European Meme Society, and each of them was double checked by looking for similar ones using a search engine.

The third category refers to frames, which Price and Tewksberry (1997) refer to as the particular ways that issues are presented. Put another way, framing refers to how messages are conveyed to audiences. The memes in the online group were categorized as: historical reference, popular culture reference, contemporary political issues, reference to national culture, or comparisons to an Other, such as the United States, or North Korea. The recording of frames is significant because it indicates the common topics that are articulated within the discourse of the Europeanized meme community. They highlight what topics should be recognizable to members of the group. In this study, the frames were not treated as mutually exclusive categories, since it was observed that many of the memes would combine two frames together. Thus, in order to fully capture their complex nature, posts in the online group could be classified as having two or more frames.

The study adhered to the norms of ethical social science research, though much ambiguity exists when one studies online communities. The data collection process entailed ‘lurking’, which is akin to non-participant observation. This technique is very feasible in online settings, where the majority of the members of a community do not participate in discussions, but only read what is there. In order to comply with ethical standards, however, the researcher followed the practice of anthropologists and anonymised the name of the meme community to provide protection to its
members. The names of meme posters were also not recorded in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, nothing confidential was used in the research.

The content of the European Meme Society is accessible to the public, and is easily accessible by anyone with a Facebook account. As such, using meme posts as data is akin to using public documents that are available online. Ambiguity also exists with regard to whether or not memes can be reproduced in publications, or if their creators have ownership over them as intellectual property. The present consensus among lawmakers and policymakers is that nobody can actually own a meme, because they are intended to be replicated, and they are often altered in some way with each iteration. As such, it is difficult to trace the original creators of the content. In addition, due to their humorous nature, they are classified by the European Union as parody, and as such, are not rigorously regulated by copyright legislation.

In all aspects of the study, the researcher attempted to apply the norms of ethical research despite the ambiguity of operating in an online environment, and collecting memes as a form of data. One issue that can be raised at this point has to do with self-disclosure on the author’s part. No matter how much one strives for objectivity in collecting and examining data, factors of social positioning can have an effect. Consequently, the author takes this opportunity to highlight that he has lived and worked for most of his life outside of Europe, though his educational background and professional experience have made him aware of the region’s political, social, and cultural issues. These factors inform the approach to the study. Age may also be significant, since online communities and memes will be interpreted differently depending on when one is born. Although these factors are significant, the author has attempted to approach the topic without bias, to the greatest extent possible.

Findings

The findings from the collected data will be presented following the three categories enumerated in the previous section: (1) context, (2), meme family, (3) frame. Although the information gathered is qualitative in nature, trends may be presented in numerical form, because doing so can more clearly indicate the patterns than pure descriptions.

Context

The twelve months’ worth of data that was collected for this study amounted to 720 posts of different types. Less than half of the posts in the group, forty-one percent, can be classified as memes, because they possess characteristics, such as clearly identifiable hooks that can be altered and replicated to suit different contexts and topics. This information is depicted in the pie chart below:

![Figure 1](image)

Figure 1. The pie chart indicates the percentage of meme versus non-meme posts in the online group.
Although the European Meme Society describes itself as a group dedicated to memes on European issues, most of the posts shared within are not memes. Other types of content that are shared include polls, statements on current events that are intended to be serious rather than facetious, as well as images, video, and text that are supposed to be humorous but do not belong to any identifiable meme family.

With regard to the text that accompanies each post, the average number of words written is 17. The purpose of the text is to provide context to the image or video that is attached to it. For example, one of the posts asked audiences: ‘Has anyone here not pledged yet allegiance to our Almighty Emperor Macron?’ The words accompanied the image below:

![Figure 2.](image.png)  
*Figure 2.* The image of French President Emmanuel Macron was accompanied by text that presented the image in a humorous manner.  
*Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.*

Many of the posts shared in the group do not have any statements attached to them, likely because they are considered to be meaningful even without having accompanying words to provide them with a context. One meme that was posted at the time of the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 did not have any accompanying text. It likened Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish Prime Minister at the time, with Palpatine, the villain in the Star Wars movies. The following is the image that appeared:

![Figure 3.](image.png)  
*Figure 3.* A meme post on that refers to the aftermath of the Catalan independence referendum in 2017.  
*Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.*
The meme is readily interpreted by those who are familiar with both the Star Wars reference, and the Catalan independence referendum.

**Meme family**

In examining meme families, the study dovetails with previous work on memes, which have traced how text, images, and videos have spread and been altered over time. However, this paper diverges from them through its examination of all of the posts in a community, rather than just tracing a single meme. One of the most popular meme families to be used in the online community is countryball, which is so named because it is presented in the form of a comic strip in which countries and international organizations are depicted as sentient balls. An example of one such post is reproduced below:

![Image of countryball meme](image-url)

*Figure 4. The countryball meme depicts the interactions among states, and is adapted to many issues. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.*

In the image, the meme creator depicts the European Union as a child of France and Germany, and pokes fun at how the two countries influence the regional bloc.

Another meme family that is often used in the meme community is the derp, or darp, face. This refers to a set of stock images depicting faces that appear unintelligent or clueless, and are used in memes that emphasise how an aspect of reality may be nonsensical. For example, the following meme was posted in the group using the derp format highlighted how countries have different names for football, and other similar games:
The meme is trying to indicate that more deviant or unpopular names for football should be seen as more ridiculous, and the meme creator signified this by using increasingly expressive derp faces.

The third meme family that was widely used in the community entailed the use of flags. The meme is applied in different ways and to different topics, but its main feature is that it contains at least two flags. One use entails highlighting differences between countries, usually with the goal of making fun of one of them. An example of this is seen in the following case:

**Figure 5.** The rage or derp face is used to indicate deviance from European norms, such as in words used for football. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
In the image above, the meme pokes fun at how the British used Australia as a penal colony in the past. A second use of the meme is to appropriate an aspect of the flags, such as the symbols on it, or the colours it contains, in order to make a joke. This is the application used in two of the two images reproduced below:

**Figure 6.** Flags are used to differentiate two countries, as seen in the post. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

In the image above, the meme pokes fun at how the British used Australia as a penal colony in the past. A second use of the meme is to appropriate an aspect of the flags, such as the symbols on it, or the colours it contains, in order to make a joke. This is the application used in two of the two images reproduced below:

**Figure 7.** The image humorously criticizes the E.U. by altering its emblem. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
In the image on the left, the stars on the EU flag are used to make a joke about how it perceives itself, and how it can be perceived by its ‘users’, or citizens. The image on the right, for its part, pokes fun at Italians, and their use of gestures while talking. It makes use of the colours that are present and absent from the flag in order to communicate its humorous point. The country is depicted as having good food, represented by the colour green on the leftmost stripe, and wine, represented as red, on the rightmost stripe. However, the Italian flag has no blue colour, which supposedly represents talking without gesturing.

**Frame**

The third category of data that was gathered from the posts in the meme community is frame, or the topic that is highlighted by the meme. Posts were classified into one of the following groups: historical reference, popular culture reference, contemporary political issues, reference to national culture, or comparisons to an Other. The framing of posts is significant because they are manifestations of Europeanization in the context of an online community. They articulate common references and emphasise issues that are significant to the European imagined community.

Among the different types of frames, the most frequently applied is that of contemporary political issues, followed by historical references, then references to national culture, popular culture, and finally, comparisons to an Other. A histogram depicting the relative frequencies of the frames is shown below:

![Relative Frequency of Frames in Meme Community Posts](image-url)
The majority of posts in the online community are about political issues, and concern both national and Europe-wide concerns. Among the topics identified within this frame are: current events, such as the Catalan independence referendum, Brexit, national elections and referenda, and cross-national issues such as European integration, terrorism, and the refugee crisis. Examples of political posts in the meme community are shown below:

**Figure 10.** The image jokes about France’s inability to prevent terrorist attacks. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

**Figure 11.** A meme post that pokes fun at the results of the U.K. referendum to leave the European Union. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
Figure 12. A post that humorously criticizes French President Emmanuel Macron for a position he took on immigration, during the election campaign in 2017. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

Figure 13. An image depicting Germany’s central role in the EU’s common currency. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
The four meme posts reproduced above exemplify how post creators in the meme community creatively make use of text and images in order to highlight a political issue. In the upper-left image, the topic is terrorism, and it communicates the French governments’ inability to prevent terrorist attacks. The image on the upper-right is from a popular meme family featuring the character of Willy Wonka, asking about how the British economy will survive after Brexit. On the bottom-left is a post about the French election, which pokes fun at a position that candidate Emmanuel Macron took, which resembled a statement of Marine Le Pen, his rival from the far right. The meme on the bottom-right depicts Angela Merkel as the most powerful national leader within the EU, since she heads the country with the most powerful economy in the bloc. It implies that the German economy ‘rules’ the entire Eurozone.

The second most prominent frame is that of historical references. Numerous posts are jokes about the past, such as the two World Wars, the Roman Empire, British imperialism, and the Napoleonic wars. References to these events, and individuals associated with them, may be likened to articulating a common reference point from the past, that Europeans would find meaningful when they encounter it as a meme. Examples of posts that were categorised under the historical reference frame include the following:

![Figure 14](image14.png)

*Figure 14.* A meme that pokes fun at Poland’s history. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

![Figure 15](image15.png)

*Figure 15.* An image that glorifies Ancient Rome, depicting it as a time when Europe was united. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
Meme posters in the online community are fond of making jokes about history. The image on the left refers to the constant invasion of Poland over the centuries, while the right shows a map of the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, referring to them as an ‘iconic duo’. This second meme is particularly laden with meaning because it makes reference to an aspect of the past that is immediately recognisable to all Europeans. In addition, the Roman Empire is perceived positively in the group, because it is treated as a kind of integration project, serving as a precursor to the European Union of the present.

References to national culture are also commonly found in the meme community being studied. Although they do not directly relate to Europeanization, they are manifestations of references that are still meaningful to the group. Since many memes are often used to tease or poke fun, it is unsurprising that national stereotypes would appear in the group being studied. Two examples are shown below:

Figure 16. A meme post that pokes fun at the French for, supposedly, surrendering during times of war. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

Figure 17. A meme post that pokes fun at Italians’ supposed stereotypical love of pizza. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
During the first few months since the meme group was established on Facebook, there was a so-called ‘meme war’, in which posters would take sides and share memes that would either poke fun at the French or the Italians. Examples of this event are depicted above. Many of the jokes about France had to do with the stereotype that they would surrender when at war. Regardless of the accuracy of this premise, many posts revolved around that stereotype of the French. The Italians, on the other hand, were teased with stereotypes, such as being overly fond of pizza, or always communicating with hand gestures. The flippant nature of the meme community did not allow for much debate about the veracity of stereotypes. Instead, memes were shared, which joked about one country or another. Although this may not initially appear to represent Europeanized discourse, these stereotypes, whether true or not, serve as common references from which to craft memes that could then be shared and appreciated by the community.

Popular culture references are likewise not directly related to Europeanization. However, they still serve as common references that bind the community together. The posts in the group are full of images from various forms of popular culture, including characters from popular shows and movies such as the Simpsons, Spongebob Squarepants, Star Wars, the Lord of the Rings, Kung Fu Panda, and even the Teletubbies. Examples of popular culture references are shown below:

Figure 18. The image uses a character from the movie, Kung Fu Panda, to joke about the Nazi-Soviet alliance prior to the Second World War.
Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
The two examples above show how the popular culture references are then used in conjunction with another frame to highlight a particular issue. For example, the image on the left is about the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, and it is depicted as an accident by referencing the character of Master Oogway from the movie, Kung Fu Panda. The meme on the right uses the character of Squidward, from the Nickelodeon show, Spongebob Squarepants, to communicate about the EU’s double standards with regard to hard line policies in Spain, versus those in Poland and Hungary.

Posts that were framed in terms of comparing Europeans to an Other appeared the least frequently. Despite its relatively low numbers, this frame is highly significant because it represents articulations that set boundaries of which types of people are European, and which are not. Americans are often the target of these posts because they have behaviour and beliefs that can be considered Other. However, it is also significant that some of the posts in the group dispute whether or not Turkey should be considered part of Europe. Similarly, some memes place the United Kingdom in the category of Other, because of its government’s decision to pursue Brexit. Some of these posts are reproduced below:

Figure 19. A meme that criticizes the EU, using images from the cartoon, SpongeBob Squarepants. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

Figure 20. An image post that designated Americans as Other because of their use of imperial measurements. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.
Comparisons to an Other are quite telling because they indicate what groups are considered part of the collective, and which are excluded. On the left, the United States is differentiated from Europe because of their use of the imperial measurement system rather than the metric. Americans are undoubtedly not European, but the image on the right is more contentious. It depicts Turkey as claiming to be part of the in-group despite only having a toe inside of the region. Images such as that question their claim to be part of the region, and although the post was created to be humorous, it is underpinned by serious beliefs.

**Discussion**

Although the European Meme Society deals mainly with the sharing of humorous content, it still has serious value, because the content transmitted in the group reveals insights on the interfaces between discourse, Europeanization, and memes. One such example has to do with the way that memes can serve as common reference point for discursive interaction within the European meme society. Regardless of the way that the posts are framed, they are readily understood and appreciated by European audiences. Whether the posts reference contemporary political issues, events and individuals from history, stereotypes of European countries, popular culture, or make comparisons with Europe’s Others, the content that is posted in the group exemplify and contribute to the group members’ shared language. Consequently, the audiences for the memes can converse with one another on similar issues, despite coming from different backgrounds. For example, the politically framed posts on Brexit, Islamic terrorism, the Catalan independence referendum, and the French elections were all readily appreciated by audiences in the group. Politicians, like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron were also the subjects

![Figure 21. A meme that pokes fun at the ambiguous position that Turkey occupies in European discourse. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.](image-url)
of memes who were immediately recognisable to the European Meme Society. Although they are intended to be humorous, memes can contribute to the construction of a European community through its provision of common reference points for group members can launch conversations from.

A second point involves the meanings that underpin the memes shared within the online community. Scholars emphasized that discourses are political in nature, because they communicate perspectives that are favoured by groups that have an interest in spreading their worldviews (Fairclough 1999; Foucault 1978; Slocum-Bradley 2010). The European Meme Society is itself a context in which competing discourses about Europe and regional identity are articulated, albeit in the form of humorous posts. The tension between Europe as a region, and as a federation of states, underpinned the content of the online community. For example, when examining the posts framed as historical, one finds numerous references to examples of European unification in the past, including the Roman and Holy Roman Empires, which try to legitimise the idea that European integration is not a new project. On the other hand, there are memes that point out the differences among European countries, such as those that, accurately or not, reference national stereotypes. For example, there were memes about Italians liking pizza, or the Greek word for football being different from the rest of the region. This tension between Europe as a region versus a collection of states is recognised in academic literature (Diez, 2001; Borneman and Fowler 1997), and the conflict between the two sides is contested through posts in the European Meme Society.

One final point to raise has to do with the nature of memes themselves. Although they exist in cyberspace, they clearly draw on ideas from the offline realm. Memes expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of the EU, or pointing out its inconsistencies in how it deals with its member states exemplify how there is slippage (Shields 2003) between virtual and corporeal realities. In the same way that discourse and context affect one another, online and offline realities shape and inform each other. As such, memes should not be discounted as mere virtual phenomena that exist in the realm of ideas. They are manifestations of beliefs that people actually hold, and should be seriously considered as expressions of sentiment. As Shields (2003) argues, the virtual should not be discounted as fake, or secondary to corporeal reality. It is equally significant, and can shape actions in corporeal reality, even as it is influenced by circumstances offline.

**Conclusion**

The examination of posts in the European Meme Society indicated that memes could serve as a medium for the social construction of a European identity through discourse. They do this, first, by providing meme creators and audiences with common reference points from which to engage one another discursively. Second, the posts in the online group are manifestations of wider debates on the nature of Europe, such as whether the region is should be considered a unified whole, or an amalgamation of different nations. Finally, although memes exist in cyberspace, they are inextricably linked with offline realities as well.

Thus, although there is a tendency to discount memes as facetious, and consequently, unworthy of study, this paper indicates the importance of paying attention to this seemingly simplistic form of communication. Online communities, like the European Meme Society, are increasingly prevalent on social media, and all of them are using memes to convey messages to one another. Social scientists and policymakers need to keep abreast of these developments, and turn their attention to what is being discussed in these forums. Knowledge of how their nature and dynamics has value for both academics and practitioners.

**Epilogue**

As of the time of writing, one of the topics under discussion in the online community has to do with the vote on the Article 13 copyright legislation that is being considered in the European Parliament. Members of the group claim that if the measure passes, it may require all content posted online to be filtered to
check whether or not they are using any images under copyright. According to them, this threatens all meme creators, because the nature of their activity necessitates drawing on existing images, text, and videos, most of which are likely under copyright. Though it is certainly an issue of European concern, it is particularly significant to European meme creators who believe their activities may be curtailed if the legislation were to pass. For them, this situation presents an existential crisis for the community itself. Some members of the European Meme Society have started to produce humorous content about their predicament, as exemplified in the meme below, which references the hotline bling meme family, which features the popular singer, Drake.

![Figure 22](image.png) A post that parodies how meme creators can adapt, should creators be prevented from making new memes. Source: Image posted in the European Meme Society.

The European Commission has responded to this issue via social media, saying that memes would not be affected by the Article 13 legislation, since they are protected by other regulations on parody.

![Figure 23](image.png) A screenshot of a social media post from the European Commission addressing the Article 13 issue. Source: Social Media of the European Commission
Although one potential lead for future research would be to continue tracking the European Meme Society beyond the temporal scope of this paper, it may also be worthwhile to examine the discussions among meme creators on how the Article 13 legislation would affect online communities. Ironically, meme creators believe that their manner of articulating Europeanized discourse is threatened by the very institutions that reinforce and promote Europeanization. As of the time of writing, however, members of the online community have not stopped creating memes on European issues, continuing to make references to history, politics, popular culture, and nations, despite the perceived threat posed by the Article 13 regulation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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