The Rise of Nene and the Memes: A Critical Look at the Democratization of Social Media and Technological Unconciousness of Facebook Users

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A plethora of funny, attractive, and attention-grabbing memes floods the social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and the like. In the Philippines, Internet memes have been utilized as a strategy for communication campaign on tourism (It's More Fun in the Philippines, 2012), information dissemination for a library (Sagun, 2013), as well as social and political participation (Varona, 2014), among others.

The most popular and probably the ones that easily reach virality, however, are user-generated Internet memes that mock public figures, and worse, even private ones like Nene's photo that is making rounds on the Internet. Users poked fun at her physical appearance; modified her photo to include funny captions. Dubbed "the Queen of Meme," the 19-year old college student, Nene, was bashed and ridiculed online beyond her wildest imagination after her high school classmate unpretentiously uploaded a photo of her taken in 2010. Worse part was the false account of her untimely death.

In this critical analysis, then, I looked at how democratization of social media and technological unconsciousness of Facebook users, threaten self-presentation. First, using the critical lens of Walter Benjamin, I analyzed the superficial façade of democratization on personal, digitized photography as it attempts to interpret the realities of daily life. Second, Jean Baudrillard's concept of reversal of private and public spaces was used to determine how personal photos were commodified in a form of Internet meme and its consequences on self-presentation.

Self-Presentation on Facebook

Consciously or unconsciously, everyone tries to manage a reputation he or she makes on other people. If an individual wants to achieve something, he or she presents himself/herself to impress others.

Self-presentation refers to "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" (Leary, 1996, p. 2). In order to construct positive images, individuals select personal information and adjust this information according to other people's feedback. In Facebook, people provide information about themselves through plain texts, status updates, comments, and photo sharing. Aside from individual users posting about themselves, Facebook offers freedom to members of the online networks to contribute public information to their profile page. For example, the photo-tagging feature of Facebook allows an individual user to be visible to visitors of his or her profile page without permission. These interactions reduce the profile page owner's control over the information about themselves. Being linked to a social media community like Facebook, Rui and Stefanone (2013) found that idealized self-presentation was difficult to achieve with audience diversity and the increasing amounts of information provided by other users, which may be inconsistent with the strategic image-based goals of profile owners.

Studies show that profile owners who intend to maintain their online relationship also maintain large audiences, and disclose more about themselves. Females share more about themselves but extend more efforts to manage visual image because they are prone to be criticized for their physical appearances (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

An article on Forbes.com (Kluemper, 2012) revealed that employers form impression of a potential applicant's job attitudes through Facebook as it "fairly [reflect (s)] how good [(s/)he] will be at the job" (p. 1). In fact, Facebook posts have been used to dismiss employees from their jobs (Valdez vs. PIA; Francis vs. UNM Sandoval Regional Medical Center). Positive presentation of self, therefore, is becoming more important because "offline identity affects our online identity" (Zarghooni 2007, p. 6). The following exposition, therefore, argues how

positive self-presentation is threatened by the freedom in social media and unintended use of technology.

Internet Meme

The study of memes and memetics started in 1976, long before the Internet became common among households. Richard Dawkins, who originally coined the term meme, describes it as a cultural evolution akin to biological growth of genes that are spreading, mutating, replicating, surviving and going extinct (Volk, 2007). Because of its biological reference, memetics, as a theoretical approach attempting to explain cultural phenomena, was not accepted in the realm of social sciences. Regardless of the nature of meme as an imitation of something as inferred by Dawkins, the phenomenon of Internet memes has little reference to how he originally conceptualized the term.

Common in both theory and application is the dissemination of information, whereby people produce, consume, and distribute memes without intervention from any established instrumentalities like government and private companies (Juza, 2013; Borzsei, 2013).

On the one hand, Dawkins' theoretical concept of meme focuses on various cultural elements that influence how a community came to know what it knows through time (Juza, 2013). Examples of these elements are music, ideas, catch phrases, clothes, and fashions (Juza, 2013; Borzsei, 2013).

On the other hand, the Internet hijacked the term to mean contents or products of human creativity evident in pictures, video clips, graphics, animations, quotes, texts or a combination of any of these, which spreads online.

Davison (2012) captured the context being referred to in this paper: "An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (p. 122). In relation to the topic to be analyzed, it is argued that an image and its convergence with social media technology "makes it difficult to discern human intent and

authorship when algorithmic codes create and recreate digital images" (Hand, 2012, p. 49) because of presumed capability of digital images to be manipulated, in this case, in the form of Internet meme. Originators of memes are usually unknown because contents are modified as images transfer from user to user. More than "Liking" and "Sharing", an image that does not generate several variations as it passes on to others is considered "a viral content, not a meme" (Borzsei, 2013, p. 4). Nene's single photo became famous when Internet users pasted it on a 100-peso denomination, as a cover of a beauty magazine, with the body of a sexy star, and several punchlines.

Self-Presentation and Personal Photography

Who doesn't want to look good in photographs? A photograph, in the digital era, entwined into "ideas, devices, and practices" (Hand, 2012, p. 12) as people enjoy the experience of "visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape" (p. 12). Photos are everywhere, may they be for professional consumption (e.g., advertising, scientific) using high-end cameras or personal consumption using point-and-shoot cameras.

According to Hand (2012), personal photography refers to practices and images that relate "to individual taking of pictures, the images we use to represent ourselves, the pictures we collect or display for ourselves, or the sharing of picture with others as part of personal communication" (p. 15). In the case of Nene, her single photo taken by a low-resolution camera phone after a group practice was an exercise of capturing the moment, one of the events in her high school life.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE MAKING OF NENE

How did the simple act of taking a photograph of a moment become a democratizing moment for mischievous mind to create the idea of "Nene"?

Benjamin (1968), in his theorizing on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", blames photography for causing the death of "aura" or the uniqueness of art because it attempts to create

a duplicate and visual representation of the image of art. Benjamin (1968) argues that the image taken by the camera loses its originality and physical uniqueness of an artwork along the photographic processes, which, during his time, was done through the development of a film negative. He says (Benjamin 1968 p. 45):

> The mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art… The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.

The reproduction of the "copy of a copy", as Benjamin (1968) theorized, democratized the way an artwork is enjoyed because more people have access into it and large audience can individually interpret it differently (Hand, 2012). Historically, classical art belongs to the "haves" but photography made the "have-nots" experience the sight and feel of classical art regardless if it is a politicized form.

Nene belongs to the common mass who happened to have the privilege of owning a mobile device for recording the narrative of her life with a bunch of high school friends. She was 16 years old then, unassuming and childish. Her enjoyment of that image was shared with her equally innocent friends, who, as she recalled during a TV interview, uploaded the photo in pure jest. She was pleased to make her common friends happy each time they see that familiar image.

Naisahan ko yung crew sa McDo kanina.
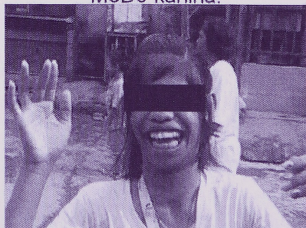
Tinanong niya ako kung "dine-in or take-out",sabi ko "take-out", pero kinain ko sa loob.

Digital photography has made mechanical production problematic through the merging of mobile devices with image-capturing mechanism such as the tablets and mobile phones. This has even more so created a serious concern by making radical changes on the possibilities of reproduction especially when taking into account the potential of those images being distributed through the social media. Digital

imaging takes away the realities of art, it has "remove(d) images from their original contexts and opening them up to the simultaneous plural reception" (Hand, 2012, p. 63). In the case of Internet memes, photos would be open to manipulation as codes could be customized through software. Creative people either enhance images or diminish their value through various means. One of these would be the creation of dehumanizing phrases in the single photo of Nene such as,

> *Naisahan ko yung tindera kanina, nagpaload ako eh wala naman akong cellphone [I pulled a fast one on the storekeeper, I bought a cell phone load but I don't have a cell phone],* which denotes Nene as senseless individual.

Technological Unconcious and Self-Presentation

How can individuals manage impressions when their private lives have crossed public space? When Nene's photo was uploaded to a domain accessible to the public's scrutiny, it had been stored digitally and multiplied relentlessly leaving traces of the past in terms of metadata (Hand, 2012, p. 64-65). Technological unconsciousness as conceptualized by Hand (2012) refers to the unintended consequences of [technology] to the lives of its users. Two of the unintended consequences of these memes include the present constructed reality about who Nene was and the past that will haunt her in the future.

The fading *"aura"* from Benjamin's theorizing complements Baudrillard's (1994) conceptualization of "reality" in a democratized social media. It can be argued that unknowingly and innocently, Nene allowed the public to pry into her private affairs. In a TV interview she said, *"Narealize ko sa sarili ko na napapatawa ko sila, na ako yung source of happiness nila* [I realize that I can make them laugh, that I am the source of their happiness]," (Today in Manila, 2015).

What does her meme mean to the viewers?

For Baudrillard (1994), images and signs like the memes, did not represent Nene's reality as a person but a construction of what she was. Online memes framed Nene as stupid but her teachers described her as "intelligent, diligent, and creative" (Today in Manila, 2015). She

was a consistent honor student from elementary. She graduated Salutatorian in her high school and was a scholar taking up Bachelor in Secondary Education major in English at the Centro Escolar University. She was very much like an ordinary human being struggling everyday. These were not visible in any of the memes that took rounds in the Internet.

People often think that personal photographs are part of the past, serving as memento; but the "digital imaging now often reworked in relation to the present and as positioned towards anticipated future" (Hand, 2012, p. 77). Memory-making is not part of the conscious efforts of people posting pictures online, rather it is a consequence of their social interactions and their attempt to create narratives of their lives in the online world through photographic exchanges (Hand, 2012). They live in present times but leave traces of the past as "memory is readily and dynamically configured through our digital practices and connectivity of our networks" (Hand, 2012, p. 130).

With storage, distribution, classification, and retrieval possibilities, network technologies changed what can be remembered. What can be public and private, online and offline may be selected; but, softwares have ways to interfere with structuring of consumption. Further, Bywater(2010 as cited in Hand, 2012, p. 141) argues:

> The idea of "in the past" is in the past. Impossible to put aside childish things because Google knows where they are; and even if you take them down, the Wayback Machine will cache them for all time. So that's that for the past.

With the practices of photo sharing, tagging, liking, and commenting in Facebook, technological unconscious users are digging holes into the collective memories where they would sink in the future.

Conclusions

Critical theories of Benjamin and Baudrillard connected the actual practice of memory-making in postmodern thinking. Modernity is here to stay.

> The media carry meanings and countermeanings; they manipulate in all directions; nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system, according to an absolutely Mobian and circular logic -- and it is exactly like this. There is no alternative to this, no logical resolution (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 84).

Technology users, thus, have to be proactive in protecting their reputation. As Hand (2012), in his book Ubiquitous Photography argues, oftentimes, modern technologies are placed into the hands of people "devoid of knowledge and skills" (p. 16) and it takes a cautious individual to know how a private image crosses the public space for other people to make sense of and interpret.

As consumers, modern technologies offer some kind of democratized effect that we can somehow embrace – freedom of expression. But think of this, "the enfolding of digital photography into the dynamic interfaces of social networking sites is making the connections between personal and collective memory and routine activities of daily life visible and explicit in the sense that it then requires intervention and management" (Hand, 2012, p. 156). Therefore, we have to be conscious in learning how to live publicly and managing our self-presentation as we participate into the digital public life.

The convergence of digital photography and the social media environments also makes us rethink about the practice of ethics of individual responsibility. We are responsible for other people's reputation in the same way that we are responsible for our own. Hence, we have to "THINK BEFORE WE CLICK".

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