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Memeing Generations

Studying meme cultures and generational identities

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Introduction

In her 2014 book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman claims that our media ecosystem is driven by a "hyper-memetic logic", whereby "almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (2014b, p. 3).

The relevance of memes in contemporary digital society is visible to everyone. Besides being an integral part of users' online interactions, memes have carved out a significant role in public discourse as well: among other things, their ability to spread ideas and influence debates has been demonstrated during elections, protests, and social movements (Heiskanen, 2017; Milner, 2013; Mina, 2019). A number of political actors have also started to use memes to convey their messages both within and outside campaigns, as epitomized by the case of US presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg, willing to pay meme-makers to promote his electoral propaganda (Lorenz, 2020).

Similarly, marketing experts and practitioners have taken an interest in the use of memes "as a possible fruitful line of inquiry for advertising" (Williams, 2000, p. 277). As a result, an increasing number of brands have seeked to exploit the potential of memes to boost their profits, implementing them both as a captivating advertising strategy (Bury, 2016) and as a way to interact with potential customers (Sharma, 2018).

The case of Bloomberg also suggests that memes have become a commodity, having acquired their own commercial value. This idea is confirmed by recent studies focussing on 'meme factories', intended as popular social media accounts systematically producing huge quantities of memes (Abidin, 2020); while not all of these factories are interested in economic returns, some of them are specifically business-oriented, meaning that they adopt strategies to enhance the visibility to "commercialize their meme contents for sponsors or [to] monetize their labor" (p. 2). According to Lee and Hoh (2021), these entities were created in response to the popularization of the memetic phenomenon, which generated a "high demand of memes by Internet users" (p. 4).

However, the outstanding resonance that memes are experiencing nowadays is a recent development of their history. In their current form, memes originated as a niche phenomenon of fringe digital spaces and, until the beginning of 2010s, were a prerogative of subcultural communities populating websites like 4chan and Reddit (Zannettou et al., 2018). Providing an ideal breeding ground for memes, these environments contributed to shaping 'meme culture' (Börzsei, 2013) as we know it and are still considered among "the most influential disseminator(s) of memes" (Lyndon, 2021). However, it is evident that the relevance of memes has extended onto mainstream digital media, becoming an "ubiquitous, arguably foundational, digital media practice" (Miltner, 2018, p. 412).

The core of meme culture lies in its collaborative nature, whereby virtually anyone can participate in the production and circulation of memes, by reappropriating and recycling elements from popular media culture (Huntington, 2013) or current events (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019). Overall, scholars have recognised the essential role of irony, humour and playfulness in memes' creation, circulation, and transformation (Shifman, 2012; Vásquez and Aslan, 2021). These practices are endowed with potential distributive patterns, as the elaboration of events into a shared format enhances the accessibility of memes to a large audience (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016). In so doing, memes accomplish a double function: on the one hand, the representation of events becomes a way for people to interpret and make sense of shared experience and a means through which "society expresses and thinks of itself" (Denisova, 2019, p. 2). On the other hand, as a form of vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2014), memes provide a means of self-expression and contribute to defining collective identities, as meme practices are embedded in heavily regulated cultural environments. In this sense, memes have become a full-fledged genre (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015), following its own set of rules and fostering new forms of gatekeeping: by leveraging on shared cultural knowledge, they are employed by users to establish their identity and social positioning within online communities (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017).

Existing research exploring the identitarian dimension of memes has mostly focused on the implications for political and (sub)cultural identities as linked to well-defined online communities (Colley and Moore, 2022; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017;

Tuters and Hagen, 2020). However, in response to its popularization, the memetic landscape has undergone some changes: old formats like Advice Animals and LOLCats are no longer in vogue, while new layouts and topics have gained popularity. At the same time, other prolific actors have joined meme culture, alongside the original "cohort of internet culture enthusiasts" (Miltner, 2018, p. 425), as demonstrated by the rise of meme factories on mainstream social media like Instagram and Facebook (Abidin, 2020). While these shifts have led some to proclaim the death of the meme, the outstanding volume of memes produced and circulated every day seems to indicate otherwise (Miltner, 2018). As argued by Milner (2015), the decline of previously popular memes only means that "those memes do not hold the specific cultural capital they did in 2010, or even that they hold cultural capital for people other than us" (p. 5). Following its mainstreamization, memes have thus evolved taking on new meanings and values, adapting to the perceptions and the needs of those who contribute to meme culture. Contextually it should be noted that, while the production and circulation of memes have always been traditionally associated with young people (Segev et al., 2015), the participants of meme culture have extended to include older users and essentially become an ubiquitous phenomenon across different demographics. However, an in-depth analysis of the values, attachments and cultural standpoints that bring a variety of subjects to participate in meme culture is still missing. This study starts from the assumption that the explosion of the memetic phenomenon in mainstream digital culture has extended its user base beyond the original segments to include other age groups as well. More than ever, the pervasivity of this phenomenon calls for an investigation of the role of memes in the construction of broader social identities, linked to the demographics which engage with them.

This work aims at fulfilling this gap by exploring how memes represent a device through which users can collectively construct, negotiate, and express their generational identity. Existing research has demonstrated that memes actualise a process of co-construction of meaning that relies upon a common background: besides the political and subcultural bonds well-covered by existing research, I assume the existence of a generational bond, foundational to the other two, which contributes to shaping the memetic phenomenon within and across different cohorts. This shared generational background provides not

only the social and cultural framework within which memes can be understood and fully appreciated, but it also influences meme production and circulation. In order to describe the set of cultural and sociological competences required to engage with meme culture, Milner (2016) has developed the notion of 'meme literacy'. While this kind of literacy has been traditionally associated with subcultural and digital knowledge, I intend to question the extent to which this has above all a generational foundation, meaning that the conceptualisation of the memetic phenomenon is primarily shaped and influenced by users' generational allegiance.

To better explore memes' generational dimension, this work adopts as heuristic perspective the theoretical framework on social generation elaborated by Mannheim (1952), according to which generations are sociological formations binding people who have undergone similar experiences and have developed the same interpretive frames. Following a critical appraisal of Mannheim's theory, some scholars have emphasized the role of discourse in the construction of generations and generational identities (Timonen and Conlon, 2015; Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014): reminiscing of Foucault's (2005) theorization of discursive formations, they argue that generations are indeed discursive formations produced by the collectivity sharing a common cultural subjectivity.

Indeed, memes fit this theoretical framework in multiple ways. First and foremost, the use of memes to frame and make sense of events seems consistent with Mannheim's observations on the centrality of common experience, as the circulation of memes favors the consolidation of shared worldviews. Given their collaborative and open nature, memes also serve to structure a discourse around generationally-relevant issues, which complies with the idea promoted by Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) that generations are constructed by the dominant narratives produced by everyday discursive practices around what unites and differentiates generational groups. In this respect, recent studies have observed that memes can be used to attribute positive and negative features to specific generations (MacDonald, 2021; Lee and Hoh, 2021), while providing a means to voice intergenerational conflict - as quintessentially exemplified by the 'Ok Boomer' phenomenon (Zeng and Abidin, 2021). Finally, in line with existing research (Brembilla, 2016), I assume that the

collaborative practices of remix embedded in meme culture contribute to structure, consolidate, and even reshape users' collective memory, recalling and attributing new meaning to the media products coming from their cultural past.

On the basis of these theoretical premises, the present research sets out to investigate the identitarian dimension of the memetic phenomenon taking the paradigm of social generation as an heuristic lense. To do so, I have undertaken empirical research consisting of qualitative digital methods and semi-structured interviews, which combines digital data, ethnographic content analysis, and interview insights. The combination of these methodologies grants several advantages: first and foremost, the analysis of digital data enables the investigation of meme production as it unfolds within digital spaces presenting the generational positioning of memes as a cultural object with respect to their main user base; contextually, it provides the opportunity to derive recurrent patterns in the elaboration of generational-specific formats regarding the topics covered and the distinctive textual and visual properties. These findings are then substantiated and deepened by the interviews, which provide unique insights into how memes are conceptualized and employed by users from different age groups to construct and express their generational allegiance, as well as to define and mark the distance from other generations.

Despite its limitations, this study bears important insights for a broader discussion on memes and their relevance in contemporary digital societies. Existing research points at a dialectic relationship between certain social phenomena and cultural products like memes, highlighting how memes function as a conduit for dissent and critical opinions, not only with the aim of steering public discourse and opinion, but also to initiate and promote social movements and protests (Mina, 2019; Guenther et al., 2020). On its part, the notion of generation has experienced a renaissance in the latest decades (White, 2013): it has been noted how some major political events like Brexit or the Trump 2016 election directly relate to generationally rooted cultural imaginaries, beliefs, and concerns (Gandini, 2020). Given the above, a study like the present one expands the existing understanding of the social and cultural relevance of memes as it shows how memes, which rely on a common cultural milieu to be created, come to embody the values and viewpoints of the

generational segments producing them. In so doing, this work provides a basis for further research engaging with the relevance of memes in critical opinions, dissent and even conflicts and, at a more general level, in prompting and mediating social phenomena grounded on generational identity.

The dissertation begins with a literature review that discusses the main academic contributions in memes and generation research. The first part of the chapter is dedicated to defining the concept of meme, aiming to show that the modern formulations retain a line of continuity with the original conceptualisation developed and debated by memetics. Subsequently, I present the two most prolific strands of meme research in digital culture scholarship, which explore the role of memes in political contexts and their contribution to social and political identities. In this respect, I will zoom in on some aspects of meme theory, discussing their relevance for the theoretical framework employed. This will take to a discussion of the literature on social generation. After outlining the key points of Mannheim's theory and its critical aspects, I focus on research on generations as discursive formations. The discussion is completed by an overview of the literature on media and generations, focussing on how media usage patterns may contribute to the construction and consolidation of collective memory.

The second chapter discusses the methodological strategy adopted in this work, describing the different techniques used during data collection and analysis. Specifically, digital data are collected following a digital methods approach (Caliandro and Gandini, 2016) on Instagram and Facebook, whose demographic segmentation - taken together - cover the four generational categories who have a considerable presence online (Bologna et al., 2018). While data on Instagram have been gathered following a meme-related hashtag (*#memeitaliani*), the entry point selected for Facebook are generational pages, i.e. public accounts with a strong identitarian component, typically dedicated to specific decades or time frames. The double entry point for the digital data collection ensures the assemblage of a heterogeneous corpus of memes with respect to the topics, the compositional modalities, and the generational audience behind their creation and circulation. Memes are then analyzed using a combination of Ethnographic Content Analysis (Al-

theide, 1987) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Rose, 2016), so as to investigate how popular practices of meme creation intertwine with specific age groups for the construction and/or expression of generational identities and values. Results are corroborated and deepened by data coming from 41 semi-structured interviews conducted with users belonging to four generational cohorts (ISTAT, 2016): Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z. Specifically, the use of data coming from the interviews allow to delve deeper into the dynamics of meme culture, unveiling the modalities through which memes thematize generationally relevant topics and create shared narratives around how generations are defined and what are their distinctive features. The chapter concludes with an overview of the shortcomings of the present work and how I have addressed some of the critical issues that concern its research design.

The empirical part of this study is divided into three sections, each ideally conceived as a standalone research article, dealing with the most important aspects of the topic and aiming at producing an argument on a single relevant issue.

The first one explores the extent to which memes can be considered a cross-generational phenomenon. The goal is to understand which generational groups participate in meme culture and which ones are excluded. To do so, I look at recurrent patterns of form and content, thus seeking connections between these and certain demographics. The results are then implemented with insights coming from the interviews. The argument I put forward is that memes are differently elaborated and interpreted according to the generational allegiance of the audience who reappropriates them, as shaped by both age and specific patterns of media usage. This in turn gives rise to three different generationally connoted 'meme grammars', each characterized by defining features and specific contexts of use: the *grammar of contingency*, *the grammar of nostalgia* and *the grammar for interaction*. An important factor considered in this chapter is the role of subcultural identities and the extent to which they overlap with generational identities: specifically, I show that this aspect is responsible for intergenerational variation or, conversely, for bringing together people from different age groups.

The second empirical chapter seeks to provide an empirical standpoint on how memes

foster the construction and expression of generational identities. My analysis indicates that memes fuel and reinforce a sense of generational belonging: 1) through the implementation of cultural reference and ironic construction resonating with specific generational groups; and 2) through nostalgic recollections of past experience. Building upon these results, I argue that memes contribute to the creation of cultural and symbolic repertoires, which I define as 'generational imaginaries', made up by the beliefs around what constitutes a generation in terms of shared experiences and cultural products. Contextually, I draw the attention to the impact of generational pages and influential accounts in the production and dissemination of memes, suggesting that, as powerful actors within the memetic scene, these accounts may significantly influence the construction and expression of generational identities.

The third and last empirical chapter of this study investigates the phenomenon of 'social othering' (Brons, 2015) through memes, as a way to reinforce in-group cohesion by marking the distance from other generational cohorts and groups. Existing research (Zeng and Abidin, 2021; MacDonald, 2021) has paid attention to the role played by memes in the context of generational controversies and conflicts, using memes as a 'weapon' in online 'generational wars' (Lim and Lemanski, 2020). Taking inspiration from previous studies (Timonen and Conlon, 2015), the goal of this chapter is to understand how users employ memes to describe and talk about younger and older cohorts, seeking to unveil which features and the stereotypes are attached to them and the ways in which mockery is constructed by leveraging specific characteristics. The analysis reveals that the 'generational other' is defined by narratives, which enhance the different generational positioning of users in relation to technology and the worldview. Despite being identified through a variety of age-based categories, the categorization of the generational other relies on a number of socio-cultural characteristics, including stereotypes, exaggerations and clichés which are not necessarily age-based. This adds to the idea that generations are socially and culturally constructed categories, by showing that, although demographic labels are still largely employed, the cut-off line is more on the social and cultural aspects rather than on age and demographics.

The dissertation is completed by a discussion of the main insights of the analysis, along with their contribution to the literature outlined in the first chapter. In the conclusive section, I also consider the limitations of this work and provide some inputs, which may be elaborated by future research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 The origin of memes

The term ‘meme’ (short for “mimeme”, from the ancient Greek *mimema*, “imitated thing”) is a neologism coined by the English biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) to indicate the cultural counterpart of genes. This formulation relies on the assumption that cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission, in that it can give rise to a form of evolution. However, biological explanations cannot fully account for cultural change, as culture advances at a different pace with respect to genetic mutation. Therefore, Dawkins introduces the concept of ‘meme’, defined as a unit of cultural transmission or of imitation and replication. Just as genes propagate themselves from body to body, memes leap from brain to brain via imitation. Following this formulation, memes come in many forms, including ideas, symbols, melodies, catch-phrases, or clothing fashion (Shifman, 2012).

During the 1990s, Dawkins’ ideas became the cornerstone of the newly born research area of memetics, described as “the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes” (Heylighen and Chielens, 2009, p. 3205). Overall, the discipline has been characterized by a lack of agreement, with much of the debate revolving around the ontological definition of memes and the existence of a consciousness (or a Self) beyond their construction and circulation (Rose, 1998). In addition, scholars have criticized the abstract nature of the conceptual framework, urging for empirical proofs of the memetic process (Edmonds, 2002).

At a general level, scholars have struggled to find an empirically valid definition of meme (Finkelstein, 2008). Existing formulations have typically retained Dawkins’ original notion of units of cultural transmission, describing memes as: pattern or units of information (Beer, 1999); thought contagion (Lynch, 1996); ideas (Dennett, 1991); behavioural patterns and their products (Dennett, 2017); groups of synapses within neural

memory networks (Delius, 1989) or a specific state of mind (Aunger, 2002). Some definitions imply that memes do not function in isolation, but as parts of a complex conceptual network that produce visible effects on the world in terms of cultural traits (Gabora, 1996). This idea resonates with the concept of 'memeplex' (Blackmore, 1999), defined as a group of mutually compatible memes cohabiting the brain. The memeplex hypothesis states that memes integrating with each other (e.g. "do X" and "obtain Y") replicate better as part of the same group than they would do on their own. At a macro-level, memeplexes are responsible for the organization of society as we know it, in that they contribute to shaping complex and interconnected sets of beliefs and practices. As Brodie (2009) puts it: "without general agreement on millions of ideas, big and small, the incredibly complex society we have built would quickly disintegrate" (p. 26).

Further attempts to locate the memes have resulted in heated debates, opposing scholars indicating the brain as the native environment for memes (Aunger, 2002; Distin, 2005) to reminiscents of Dawkins' (1982) concept of 'vehicle', who contend that memes are ideas embedded in objects and in words, which therefore constitute both a source and a conduit for memetic transmission (Dennett, 1991). As opposed to this view, Blackmore (1999) claims that the truly replicative procedure can only occur by coming into contact with the memetic information ('copying-the-instructions') and not with the meme carriers, much like one would need a recipe of a dish in order to prepare it correctly. By contrast, if people had only access to the finished product, they would need to infer the required instruction from the information already available in the brain ('copying-the-product').

These observations have contributed to igniting the debate around the role of people in the transmission of memes. Memetics suggests to "look at cultural evolution from the point of view of the meme, rather than the point of view of an individual or society" (Brodie, 2009, p. 4): therefore, scholars have generally underestimated the impact of human intervention in the economy of memes, to the point of reducing people to passive hosts. This concept was labeled by Blackmore (1999) as the 'meme's eye view', according to which one should think of human ideas and thoughts as "autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied" (p. 8). Consequently, scholars taking the 'meme's

eye view' argue that human consciousness is a by-product of memes: specifically, Dennett (1991) suggests that memes have structured our brain in order to create an ideal habitat for themselves. Therefore, the idea of an independent willing 'self' thinking and acting is an illusion, since the human mind is itself created by memes. Blackmore (1999) takes Dennett's theory a step further, claiming that human free will is a part of a vast and functional memeplex, the 'selfplex', which "permeates all our experience and all our thinking so that we are unable to see it clearly for what it is – a bunch of memes" (p. 231).

While some authors are more cautious in reducing human consciousness to memes (cfr. Rose, 1998) and Dennett's and Blackmore's claims have been variously criticized (Edmonds, 2002; Distin, 2005), memetics has overall failed to recognize the impact of humans in the process of meme selection and circulation. An exception to this trend is offered by Distin (2005), who frames cultural change as the joint product of memetic evolution, human creativity, and decision making. Her formulation also recalls the emphasis that scholars such as Boyd and Richerson (1985) have placed upon the process of interpretation and translation of information. According to this view, the human mind employs already present and available information to interpret the cultural input (or the 'meme' in this case) and to build a mental representation of it. Consequently, memes undergo a process of variation through recombination, a mechanism through which existing information is continuously revised by adapting old memes to new situations. This process not only enables the acquisition of new memes but also allows the elaboration of new ways of thought and new knowledge. Distin's (2005) account of meme transmission also implies that replication depends on certain assembling constraints and rules: specifically, she argues that each meme has both a core of fixed rules, which must be preserved to avoid information loss, and a degree of variability, which ensures the adaptability of the effects of the memes to different cultural contexts. As a result, successful replication depends on the ability to pick out which memetic elements are fixed and which are variable. The explanatory model advanced by Distin contains some of the core concepts later developed by contemporary meme theory. Among others, the idea that meme transmission is regulated by fixed constraints partly anticipates the claims on vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2014) and memetic manipulation, according to which meme production is fostered by individual

acts of creative recombination of different cultural elements (Shifman, 2014a). Along this line, it is claimed that users' decisions on how to assemble a meme are not arbitrary, rather guided by a socially determined competence on which parts can be modified and which should be retained. While Distin (2005) believes in the innatist nature of such constraints, meme scholars provide a sociological explanation through the concept of 'meme literacy' (Milner, 2016), which refers to the set of sociologically rooted prerequisites that regulate the creation, the modification, and the circulation of memes (more on this notion and its implications for collective identities in Section 1.2.4).

While the discipline of memetics has been progressively left to rust (cfr. Distin, 2011), a prolific strand of research tied to media studies has re-employed the term 'meme' to indicate a variety of digital objects virally circulating on the web (Shifman, 2014b). Sidestepping the idea of a unified science, contemporary meme scholars have grown reluctant with the diffusionist paradigm advanced by Dawkins and colleagues to the point of questioning the 'memetic' essence of Internet memes (de Seta, 2016; Christopher and Jung, 2019). In this sense, de Seta (2016) suggests moving away from the monopoly of imitation to shed lights on the social practices surrounding the reinterpretation and circulation of vernacular content. Moreover, contemporary meme research has definitely abandoned the idea that memes are abstract entities to be found in the brain and has instead provided them with a medium: the Internet.

Despite the tendency of contemporary meme studies to disentangle from memetics, the overview outlined above reveals a continuity with the work of scholars like Distin, Boyd and Richerson, which is not only semantic but also conceptual. An important touchpoint with memetics concerns the 'collective' nature of memes, embedded in Blackmore's (1999) notion of memeplex and Gabora's (1996) cognitive approach to complex memetic networks. For instance, among contemporary meme scholars, Shifman (2014b) has suggested looking at memes not as single instances of digital objects, rather as collections of interconnected artifacts, brought together by similar content and formal features. This perspective will be further elaborated in the following section, which deals with the study of memes within digital culture.

1.2 Memes in digital culture

The currently shared definition of memes understands them as collections of multimodal cultural artifacts, which are created, remixed, and circulated by users across various digital platforms (Shifman, 2014a,b; Milner, 2016; Davison, 2012). According to Knobel and Lankshear (2005), this conceptualisation bears some similarities with the notion developed by Dawkins, yet mostly limited to the fact that both are employed to describe "particular infectious phenomena" (p. 199). Despite the connections (see Section 1.1), research on internet memes significantly diverges from memetics in many respects: above all, these studies overtly bring the focus on users' contribution to the memetic phenomenon, an aspect which will be addressed to full extent in Section 1.2.1. Another difference regards the object of study: while memetics scholars have traditionally conceived of memes in abstract terms, Internet memes are observable audio-visual content, like images or videos (Shifman, 2014b).

Although popular uses in relation to Internet phenomena dates back to the 90s (McCulloch, 2019), it was not until 2012 that Davison advanced an academic definition of 'meme', described as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission" (p. 122). Early meme scholars devoted their efforts to tracing the history of memes, which are regarded as a late stage in the development of the Internet language: for instance, Börzsei (2013) contends that memes derive from creative experimentations with technology, a trend which is believed to have originated from emoticons. Originally, emoticons were introduced in online interactions as a signal for humoristic intent: as they spread across the web, however, users started combining symbols in innovative and unusual ways to express more elaborated concepts and emotions. Following the emoticon fad, other forms of visual humour through recombination appeared, which occasionally gave rise to prolific meme series like 'Bert is Evil', 'The Tourist of Death' and 'Little Fatty'. Common to all of them is the fact that new instances were created by copy-pasting an item (e.g. Bert, the character from *Sesame Street*) on different backgrounds, thus resulting in unexpected and humoristic juxtapositions (e.g. Bert edited in a picture with Bin Laden). Similarly, McCulloch (2014) claims that the creative recombi-

nation of signs and symbols established a link between verbal and visual communication, so that the former is supported and enhanced by the latter. This connection is visible in stream-of-though-like language of memes like the 'Doge' and the 'snek', whose captions draw on a minimalist and reinvented spelling to convey the idea of a scattered interior monologue (McCulloch, 2019). Applegate and Cohen (2017) reinforce this point stating that the visual-linguistic interaction plays a vital role in shaping the message and the humoristic effect of the meme, which is jointly constructed by "the font, the placement of text, and the location of the figure in the image" (p. 88). Scholars conceiving memes as part of Internet language thus regard them as communicative acts, putting emphasis on their graphical representation while trying to conceptualize the productive patterns that contribute to their diffusion.

A significant turning point in the development of meme theory was marked by the intuition to look at memes not as single units or ideas but as groups of content. As a matter of fact, users habitually conceive of memes as collectives, when they commonly refer to the intense memetic proliferation triggered by the same topic or event as a meme 'wave' (cfr. Kertcher and Turin, 2020). Limor Shifman (2013; 2014b) is probably the scholar who has more consistently contributed to the conceptualisation of memes as collections of interrelated items. In a sense reviving the notion of 'memeplex' (Blackmore, 1999), Shifman (2013) argues that memes do not stand alone but maintain a close relationship with each other, shifting the focus of the memetic phenomenon from the propagation of single cultural units to groups of digital objects collectively created, transformed, and circulated online. Following this assumption, Shifman (2014b, p. 8) suggests defining an Internet meme as:

"(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."

In order to investigate its complex and stratified nature, the author breaks down the meme into three analytical dimensions, which correspond to the parts that can be isolated and reproduced: content, form, and stance. This tripartition allows not only to explore

memes' "physical incarnation", in terms of employed formats and conveyed messages, but also to consider "the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers" (p. 40). This statement implies that memes are embedded in an established tradition of social conventions, which regulates their production and circulation: as a consequence, when creating new memetic instances, users are required to make decisions with respect to the existing norms. While memetics already advanced similar arguments (Distin, 2005), Shifman's contribution is decisive from a sociological point of view, as it conceives memes as socially constructed products: the formal and content characteristics of a meme are collectively negotiated by users participating in meme production and constitute a – more or less accessible – benchmark for content creators (in Section 1.2.3 I will illustrate the implications of this argument for the construction of collective identities). Therefore, if memetics valued spreadability and copy-fidelity (Dawkins, 1976), user creativity and participation are the hallmarks of Internet memes. This argument is further articulated by Milner (2016, p. 12), as he emphasizes the collaborative and open nature of the phenomenon:

> "Countless participants create, circulate, and transform memes on amateur networks of mediated cultural participation. With each new remix, memes are reappropriated in order to produce new iterations and variations of broader ideas."

Following this logic, virtually any Internet user can actively contribute to the memetic phenomenon, by proposing unique remixes of existing memes and spreading them across the web. At the same time, however, existing social conventions may give rise to gatekeeping practices, thus preventing memetic culture from being fully open and inclusive (an issue that will be thoroughly discussed when addressing the notion of 'meme literacy' in Section 1.2.4).

The observations on user participation and transformative creativity provide the opportunity to further trim the definition of memes, by taking the distance from the notion of viral. While the two concepts are sometimes treated as synonyms, Dynel (2016) maintains that virals typically have a limited life span and spread unchanged across digital media, while Internet memes feed on replication and users' participation for both their replica-

tion and survival. Along this line, Shifman (2014b) contends that the main differences between memes and virals concerns their variability: using the notion of 'virality' proposed by Hemsley and Mason (2013), she argues that a viral is a standalone cultural unit circulated by users in many identical copies, whereas an Internet meme is, as discussed above, a collection of interconnected instances. Since hundreds of versions of the same meme exist, memes can only make sense (and be described) in relation to other units. Interestingly, Shifman (2014b) does not consider memes and virals as dichotomous labels but rather as the endpoints of a spectrum, where most of the content show different degrees of hybridization of the two instances. Similarly, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) propose an intermediate status called 'emergent memes', realized when instances of spreadable media are variously altered by users: memes derive once these remixes are consolidated in a well-established transformation practice.

The comparison with virals also prompts some considerations on memetic circulation and success rate. According to the original theory elaborated by memetics, the diffusion of memes is regulated by the same mechanisms of competition and selection followed by genetic evolution (Aunger, 2002). To put it simply, the more a meme will circulate, the higher its success and the longer it will survive. Similarly, the popularity of Internet memes is measured in terms of 'virality', meaning that memes follow distributive patterns that the original producers cannot determine and control (Burgess, 2014). In this respect, social media provide a way for scholars to account for meme dissemination: metadata regarding users' choices and preferences of content have made the process of memetic activity visible and explorable in unprecedented ways (Shifman, 2013). Moreover, indexes of online interaction (e.g. metrics, such as the number of 'likes' and shares) become a good predictor of success, leading scholars to elaborate different models of meme diffusion (Elsharkawy et al., 2019).

Existing research offers several explanations for the fact that only a reduced number of memes become popular, while the majority falls into oblivion quite early. On a general level, the survival rate seems to depend on how well the meme accomplishes its function. In this respect, some scholars suggest that success may be linked to the ability

of a meme to convey an idea or a message in a particularly effective way: for instance, Guadagno et al. (2013) emphasize the impact of users' emotional reaction, concluding that strong affective responses correlate with a greater likelihood of forwarding the content. Similar considerations have been advanced Shifman (2014b), who lists "provocation of high-arousal emotions" (p. 66) among the factors fostering meme diffusion. Along this line, it has been argued that popular memes resonate within the values of specific subcultural communities providing them with a means for identity formation and expression, as in the case of LOLCats memes (Miltner, 2014). According to Miltner, the popularity of LOLCats largely lies on their being part of a sociolect shared by a limited community on the Internet. Once the memes were adopted by mainstream audiences, they were rejected by the community that created them.

Other scholars attribute memes' popularity to the characteristics that make them suitable for diffusion. This position is well summarized by the concept of 'spreadability' proposed by Jenkins et al. (2018), according to whom media texts like memes are 'grabbable', i.e. constructed in a way to provide multiple access points to foster the reappropriation of cultural elements and the consequent transformation in new content. Afforded by new technologies, spreadability is therefore a product of the continuous process of repurposing and recirculation embedded in participatory culture. At the heart of this conceptualisation is the idea that "[users'] collective discussions and deliberations — and their active involvement in appraising and circulating content — are generative" (p. 176). This claim is consistent with Zittrain (2008) belief that memetic success lies in its increasing generative quality: manipulation and redistribution of remixed memes improve their fitness and adaptability to other contexts, allowing them to acquire greater resonance in the culture, by taking on new meanings and generating new values for different audiences (Jenkins, 2007). As observed by Brembilla (2016), the peculiar dynamics of digital content transformation "do not simply lead to the creation of derivative works, but above all to discoursive productions involving the active participation and work of different agents" (p. 181). Therefore, on the one hand memes can be considered as ephemeral content (Garcia Lopez and Martinez Cardama, 2020), tied to the context in which they are produced and the contingency that triggered them; on the other hand, the reappropriation and repurposing

of memetic material contributes to turn fleeting content into a cultural resource, that is a ready-to-use customizable template for the creation and spread of new social meanings (Brembilla, 2016).

Following this argument, Applegate and Cohen (2017) contend that the power of memetic communication lies in its circulatory nature and thus the essence of the meme, which transcends any visible form or iteration, lies in its autoreferentiality, i.e. its potential to circulate back to itself. According to Tuters and Hagen (2020), memes may be considered as 'floating signifiers', i.e. signs whose meaning is changing and always open to new resemiotizations. Given memes' open-ended and unpredictable nature, torn between ephemerality and permanence, predictions over their longevity and success are hardly accurate.

When discussing the memetic phenomenon, existing research has therefore adopted a materialist perspective, focusing on memes as digital objects, or a procedural approach, exploring the cultural practices behind meme production and their relevance for self-expression and identity building. These stances do not appear to be mutually exclusive or in contradiction to one another but they rather co-exist in many studies (see for example Miltner, 2014), with the main difference consisting in a different focus on either the procedure or the outcome of memetic production.

1.2.1 Unpacking the meme: manipulation, humor, and intertextuality

As mentioned in the previous section, Internet memes provide a tangible object of study, as they typically consist of videos (Shifman, 2012; Burgess, 2014) or static images (Fang, 2020; Ross and Rivers, 2017a; Yus, 2018). This has prompted scholars to elaborate taxonomical accounts of the memetic realizations, which may vary considerably, according to the prism through which the phenomenon is observed. For instance, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) categorize Internet memes according to their purpose, pinpointing four non-mutually exclusive groups: social commentary, absurdist humour, Otaku or manga fandom, and hoaxes. From a different perspective, Shifman (2014b) identifies nine popular

meme genres, selected on the basis of formal and content features: reaction Photoshops, photo fads,flash mobs, lip syncs, misheard lyrics, recut trailers, LOLCats, stock character macros, and Rage Comics.

In this context, the image macro is perhaps the most successful template that makes a meme recognisable as such (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018; Börzsei, 2013; Lugea, 2019). This format has superseded others, especially the video, and its relevance is testified by the attention devoted by many studies (Brubaker et al., 2018; Yus, 2018). According to its original meaning, 'macro' refers to short commands used to perform larger tasks on a computer (McCulloch, 2019). The term later became a synonym for a meme featuring a fixed static image and two lines of text in Impact font placed above and below the image, an opener and a thought completion (Yus, 2021; Brideau and Berret, 2014; Vickery, 2014). Early macro memes typically feature stereotypical stock characters (e.g. 'Socially Awkward Penguin' or 'Forever Alone Guy') and portray iconic situations with a humoristic intent. Besides macros, 'exploitables' constitute another diffused template: variously described as images without text (Rintel, 2013) or photomontages with overlays (Chagas et al., 2019), exploitable can be understood as image templates which are modified by users by adding lines of text of editing visual features. Aside from iconic images, memetic templates can be verbal too (Rintel, 2013; Lou, 2017). Lou's (2017) investigation of the 'when' meme reveals how declinations of this linguistic construction - e.g. 'That moment when' - function as conventionalised memetic structures which are employed to multimodally depict relatable life moments. Specifically, 'when' memes consist of a textual part introducing the situation/the characters involved and an apparently unrelated image. According to the author, the power of these memes resides in the ability to function as a multimodal simile, which prompts a connection between verbal and visual elements to make sense of the meme and resolve their apparent incongruity. Employing contextual information provided by both the visual and verbal inputs, users are able to reconstruct the meaning of the memes and resolve the apparent incongruity. Crucially, Lou contends that this operation can be facilitated or hindered by the images' level of accessibility: in this sense, images relying on perceptual patterns like facial expressions, gestures or mimetic speech are more accessible than those requiring a higher level of subcultural knowledge

to be deciphered.

Existing research has emphasized the importance of templatability in the development of meme culture in its early stages. Rintel (2013) identifies templating as the core production technique, defined as "the practical, methodical and material process by which this contextual manipulation is expressed" (p. 256). Aside from connecting memetic instances to one another through recurrent formal and content patterns (cfr. Shifman, 2014b), the fixed structure of templates like macros and exploitable triggers users' creativity through replacement and recombination of elements. Similarly, Börzsei (2013) understands memes as a form of visual entertainment in which the cultural material is remixed and recombined through easily reproducible recurring patterns. Echoing the considerations advanced by Brideau and Berret (2014), the key aspect of macro memes is not the creativity behind them, but the fact that the template creates a fixity upon which the replicative practice rests. With respect to the formats, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) suggest looking at memes as 'expressive repertoires', that is as template-based means of communication, whose production is bound by socially constructed structures. While meme templates may evolve over time, these constraints set the boundaries for memetic expression, limiting the variety of actual formats that a meme can assume. At the same time, existing literature has focused on the fundamental features that memes share, identifying three dimensions of the memetic phenomenon: manipulation, intertextuality, and irony (Brubaker et al., 2018). In order to deepen the discussion around Internet memes, these three aspects will be examined separately, discussing their relevance within the theoretical framework of this work.

Manipulation. Aside from replication, memes reproduce and circulate by means of different strategies of repackaging and remixing (Shifman, 2013). This mechanism of creative transformation lies at the basis of the process which will be here referred to as 'manipulation'.

Overall, research recognises the leading role of human participation in fuelling the memetic phenomenon. This was already suggested by Davison (2012), who defines memes as pieces of media that can be replicated or manipulated by users. To further elaborate at

which level manipulation occurs, Davison divides memes into three parts: the 'manifestation', i.e. the external observable appearance of a meme; the 'behavior', the action taken by an individual to create the manifestation; and the 'ideal', or the message conveyed by the meme, which guides the behavior. According to the author, replication is successful whenever one of the three components is preserved, even if in a mutated or adapted version. Davison illustrates this framework taking as example the emoticons, contending that their nature is memetic, insofar as they have a clear 'manifestation' (the combination of symbols and letters), a simple and easily reproducible 'behavior', and an 'ideal', corresponding to the user's intent or emotional state. Similarly, Börzsei (2013) argues that memes owe their success to the easy and replicable dynamics behind their production: as illustrated in Section 1.2, most memes are created by cutting and copy-pasting material, or by adding lines of text, whereas the most elaborated ones rely on editing softwares like Photoshop. In recent times this process was made even easier by the numerous websites and mobile apps like Imgur, Quickmeme or Memegenerator, which provide constantly updated archives of editable templates.

In the process of manipulation, memes often undergo some changes in their content and form. To account for these transformations, Shifman (2014b) identifies two mechanisms of repackaging: mimicry and remix. Mimicry involves the recreation of specific content in different contexts and for different purposes, thus reinforcing the assumption advanced by memetics scholars that memes are circulated via imitation. While mimicry refers to plain replication, remix entails content editing. In particular, Shifman suggests that this technique involves "technology-based manipulation, for instance by Photoshopping an image or adding a new soundtrack" (p. 22). Similarly, Knobel and Lankshear (2005) distinguish between high-fidelity static memes and remixed memes, replicated via "evolution, adaptation or transformation of the original meme" (p. 13).

In the context of the present work, manipulation plays a crucial role, since it demonstrates the social nature of memes as cultural objects that are prone to collaborative editing practices. As pointed out in 1.2, the notion of 'spreadability' (Jenkins et al., 2018) encapsulates the idea that certain digital content contains the potentiality to spawn further

re-elaborations. From a different perspective, it has been argued that memetic production and circulation are fostered by the platforms' logic and infrastructure. For instance, Bernstein et al. (2011) maintain that memes have found an ideal breeding ground in 4chan board /b/, due to the funny, open, and creative logic ruling the community, dominated by playful exchanges of images and links. Similarly, Zulli and Zulli (2020) pointed out that platforms like TikTok display an inherently memetic nature, as their design encourages content imitation and replication. This, in turn, contributes to shaping new forms of sociality, whereby users interact with each other as they "view and share content, replicate TikTok challenges, and create duet videos with strangers" (p. 11). Based on this observation, the authors introduce the concept of 'imitation public', intended as a group of people engaging with each other through content replication and imitation.

It becomes thus apparent that users' engagement with memetic practices constitutes the very essence of meme culture. In this context, manipulation is what transforms digital content into a meme, e.g. by adding a caption to a photo (Rashidi et al., 2018). Along this line, Shifman (2014a) accounts for memes' construction mechanisms through the concepts of 'operative signs' and 'hypersignification'. Specifically, the scholar conceptualizes memes as operative signs, i.e. as textual categories that are "designed as invitations for (creative) action" and whose parts - eg. image, video, or text - can be transformed through simple and automatic actions (p. 354). Hypersignification, defined as the attention to the cultural codes of signification, implies that memes feature coded templates (e.g. image macros), whose rules must be acknowledged and respected by users engaging with meme creation (therefore a concept close to that of 'meme literacy', discussed in Section 1.2.4). Finally, Shifman's notion of 'prospective-orientation' addresses the evolving nature of memes: although memetic production is tied to the present, the scholar claims that memes' aptness to be further re-elaborated entails an orientation towards the future as well. Following the concept of 'prospective-orientation', photos are thus seen as raw material for new memes, as demonstrated by user-friendly websites such as Memegenerator, which contain "image templates awaiting witty captioning or visual manipulation" (p. 354). Section 1.3.4 will expand the discussion around the social dimension of memes' manipulation, addressing the implications of transformative practices for collective memory.

Humor. Humour has been identified as one of the main functions accomplished by memes (Davison, 2012). At the same time, the extent to which humour is essential to memes is still up for debate: while scholars like Knobel and Lankshear (2007) maintain that humour is an ubiquitous feature, others acknowledge the existence of non-humorous memes (Davison, 2012; Vickery, 2014). As a matter of fact, however, "memes are almost entirely jokes" (Milner, 2016, p. 48). Dynel (2016) goes as far as defining macro images as 'visual-verbal jokes' because of the similarities with standard canned jokes, which include the presence of cycles based on similar topics/characters and recurring formal structures. On the basis of this comparison, research on memes' humour can benefit from the tradition of studies rooted in rhetoric and linguistics.

According to Raskin (2008), there are three main theories of humour: incongruity, hostility, and release theories. Essentially, humour may arise from either a perceived incongruity with the audience's expectations, a feeling of superiority and the aggression of a target, or the release of some (psychological) constraints. In this respect, early research on humour focuses on puns and is oriented towards creating classifications (Attardo, 2008). A radical departure from the taxonomic approach was proposed by Raskin's (1985) *Semantic-Script Theory of Humor* and later by Attardo and Raskin's (1991) *General Theory of Verbal* : both theories combine semantic and pragmatic perspectives, partly shifting the focus from the textual-level to the humour competence of speakers. Specifically, the idea that much humour is co-constructed by the participants of a conversation began to gain a foothold among scholars (Davies, 1984).

Along this line, a growing body of research has highlighted the relevance of humour as an identitarian device, arguing that humour serves as a mechanism to negotiate and maintain identities, relationships, and group boundaries (Kuipers, 2009). For instance, inside jokes are believed to play a crucial role in both memes and online communities: relying on the assumption of exclusively shared knowledge (Stryker, 2011), inside jokes favour bonding and solidarity through playfulness and contribute to marking the boundary between insiders and outsiders. As demonstrated by the work of Miltner (2014) on LOLCats memes, inside jokes span from single words to more elaborated code systems,

like in the case of 'lolspeak'. This adds to the idea that humour is a socially constructed component of human interactions and its appreciation is tied to the (sub)cultural context of its creation, as it leverages on symbols and shared imaginaries (cfr. Shifman, 2007).

Humour can also be used as a form of critical and political commentary as well as a device to sustain or challenge hegemonic narratives and power relations (cfr. Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Särmä (2015) argues that laughter directs attention to power hierarchies among and between political subjects, contributing to the debate around social and political issues. In so doing, it may have a positive and inclusive effect, inviting others to join in the attempt to create a common cross-national sociality, which the scholar refers to as 'hegemonic laughter'. In addition, political memes may use satire and parody to target and delegitimize political actors (cfr. Fang, 2020; more on this in Section 1.2.2). This finding resonates with Bakhtin's (1984) concept of carnivalization, according to which parody is a means for the oppressed to - albeit temporarily - challenge the establishment and subvert existing power relations, in order to relieve social tensions.

Emphasizing the role of incongruence to produce the humoristic effect (Shifman, 2014b), research on memes converges with a strand of studies on irony carried out by pragmatics and linguistics scholars. While it has been argued that 'irony' and 'humour' involve different 'directions' in violating the norm of 'informativity' (Giora, 1995), existing research has demonstrated a substantial connection between the two concepts (Gibbs et al., 2014). Therefore, considering that the main differences appear to be limited to minor prosodic and pragmatic technicalities (Attardo, 2008), the present study will not observe such distinction. According to classical rhetoric and linguistic research (Attardo, 2010; Wilson, 2006; Kotthoff, 2003), irony derives from a perceived incongruity between what is expressed and what is meant. Existing studies distinguish between 'verbal' and 'situational' types of irony, the first being considered as a linguistic phenomenon and a deliberate act, while the latter is defined as a state of the world which is perceived as ironical, e.g. the fire station burning down (Attardo, 2000).

Another perspective is offered by Sperber and Wilson (1981), who regard irony as a kind of mention. In this context, the authors introduce the notion of 'echoic irony' to in-

dicate the quotation of someone else's thought, towards which a certain attitude involving ironic distance is expressed. As illustrated by Wilson (2006), the main purpose of echoic irony is to express a dissociative attitude, e.g. skepticism, mockery or rejection, towards an attributed utterance which is believed to be "ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant." (p. 1728). According to Sperber (1984), it is not necessary for the thought to have been verbally expressed in the conversation, as long as the speaker is able to attribute it "to specific people, specific types of people, or people in general" (p. 132). It is thus evident that the success of echoic irony strikingly depends on the ability of the speaker to recognise that the utterance is quoting another one and that the opinion towards said utterance is of distance/disapproval. In fact, overtly explicit and tacit expressions of attribution and attitude are just the ends of a complex spectrum, involving the use of more or less subtle cues to identify both the original author and the attitude towards the utterance (e.g. intonation, facial expressions, and so on).

From the overview above outlined, it emerges that irony in memes may take various forms. For instance, according to Dynel (2016), the construction of irony in Advice Animals follows the incongruity-resolution framework, yet the verbal-visual quality of memes disrupts the linearity between setup and punchline producing a more fluid distribution across picture and text. In this sense, she identifies different meme types, such as the one-liner, involving a minimal setup and a punchline, or the riddle, which provides a witty answer to a short question. Dynel concludes that humour in Advice Animals usually depends on both verbal and visual stimuli: specifically, she argues that the ambiguity in the textual component, leveraging polysemy and second readings, may be enhanced, completed, or even understood only with reference to the images accompanying it. This is evident in the case of Advice Animals, where the interpretation of the caption demands the knowledge of the features characterizing the animal depicted.

Along with puns and verbal irony, memes often feature punchline quotations from real-life events or other cultural texts. In order to differentiate and explore the different types of irony, I will implement the notion of 'echoic' derived from linguistics, expanding the original definition to account for the use of intertextual reference in the construction

of humoristic sense. Existing research has regarded intertextuality as an essential component of humour, in that the humoristic sense is often constructed on the basis of previous texts (Tsakona, 2018). Accordingly, the heuristic potential of the 'echoic' theory will be exploited to identify the cases in which humour arises from the implementation of elements from external cultural texts, such as actual quotation from movies, TV series, and cartoons.

On the basis of this bipartition (verbal and echoic), my study will delve deeper into the dynamics of humoristic construction, contextually discussing the implications of echoic irony for the expression of users' generational identity. Building upon existing research (Stryker, 2011; Miltner, 2014), I will therefore investigate how the full appreciation of the echoic type of humour relies on shared cultural knowledge, which taps into generational repositories or 'imaginaries', a concept which I will introduce and discuss in Section 1.3.4.

Intertextuality. Another fundamental attribute of Internet memes is intertextuality, as memes often relate to each other in complex and creative ways (Shifman, 2014b). According to Zanette et al. (2019), intertextuality is "a linguistic-semiotic process by which the meaning of a text (image, words) is modified, enlarged, or reduced by combining it with other texts" (p. 160-161). The concept of intertextuality permeates the idea that memes are groups of content rather than single instances (Shifman, 2013). Taking this argument a step further, Shifman (2012) claims that intertextuality is to be found among cultures as well, as memes taken together form the "building blocks of complex cultures, intertwining and interacting with each other" (p. 189). Zenner and Geeraerts (2018) however argue that intertextuality is not a binomial feature, rather a scale. In this sense, memes can either show no sign of intertextuality, a low-degree intertextuality (e.g. 'intra-genre' references to similar templates), or a high degree of intertextuality which draws heavily on world knowledge. From a linguistic point of view, memes form an interdiscursive and polysemic mode of communication: by combining different semantic possibilities and cultural references, memes are considered as 'creative blocks' which can be freely combined and reinterpreted one the basis of the contextual cues provided by the speakers to decode the message (Wagener, 2021).

The notion of intertextuality predates the memetic phenomenon: in the 90s, Jameson (1991) claims that intertextuality is the logic behind capitalism-driven postmodern culture. According to the American philosopher, postmodern art is characterized by pastiches and parodies, which are intended as the imitation of existing cultural texts and styles. However, pastiche is just a mannerist practice of mimicry, devoid of the sense of humour and the satirical purpose characterizing parody, hence the label 'blank parody'. According to Jameson, pastiches are the consequence of the erosion of the distinction between high and popular culture: the result is a mingling of different materials, in which postmodern cultural products no longer quote the other texts, but simply incorporate them.

When considering the memetic phenomenon, some scholars have recognized the parallelism with Jamesonian pastiches, claiming that memes "reintroduce a particular verbal or visual text merely for the sake of playful engagement" (Katz and Shifman, 2017, p. 834). Diverging from Jameson's approach, however, scholars do not regard memes as meaningless stylistic exercises, rather devices through which users piece reality together and structure social interactions online. In this sense, Tsakona (2018) combines humour and intertextuality to investigate how their interplay shapes political jokes. The study reveals that this kind of irony draws from a variety of intertextual sources to create the humoristic effect and convey criticism, including political events, socio-cultural knowledge, and culture-specific stereotypes. Ultimately, it is suggested that users produce memes having in mind specific requirements for its interpretation, thus enhancing their gatekeeping function. Similarly, Miltner (2014) maintains that intertextual references contribute to the expression of identity, as they "erect symbolic boundaries around a culture through a system of mutual referentiality". Her analysis also highlights that members of online communities establish their identities and express their belonging to the group, by producing and circulating memes with multiple layers of cultural references and obscure in-jokes. In this sense, it is argued that online communities rely on intertextuality to maintain group boundaries and keep non-members outside. As opposed to this view, Laineste and Voolaid (2016) advance the idea that pop-cultural references enhance accessibility to large audiences. According to them, it is not compulsory to recognize every reference to enjoy the memes and contribute to its circulation. On this note, the scholars argue that intertextuality

contributes to memes' dissemination, as memes are spread both in their original form and remixed or integrated in other memes. Focusing on diffusion rather than on gatekeeping practices, the authors conclude that memes "provide an excellent entry point for the study of cross-cultural, intertextually rich communication" (p. 45).

From the above overview, intertextuality emerges as a link connecting the three cornerstones of memes: on the one hand, intertextual references are the manifestations of users' intervention on memes, as memes re-elaborations and derivatives result from the implementation of decontextualized cultural elements; on the other hand, intertextuality often constitute the basis for the construction of the humoristic message, as decontextualization produces incongruity, which is one of the triggers for humour (Raskin, 2008). In addition to that, intertextuality is central to the conceptualisation of memes as collections, since the meaning of a memetic unit is discursively negotiated as in continuity or in opposition with already existing memes, through patterns of recombination and partial citation (Shifman, 2014b).

In the context of the present study, the dynamics of intertextual referencing will be explored in relation to the construction and expression of identities. Derived from existing literature (Miltner, 2014; Laineste and Voolaid, 2016), the two possible outcomes of intertextuality will be addressed, thus seeking to understand whether the use of external referencing in memes is directed at crossing or erecting and maintaining cultural borders among user. To investigate this aspect, the work will look at how the mechanism of intertextuality intertwines with the expression of generational identities (an issue which I will outline in Section 1.3.4).

To summarize, memes leverage on individual reinterpretations, humour, and intertextuality to create digital artifacts that represent a shared, and sometimes coordinated, cultural experience (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). In this light, it has been argued that memes leverage on "the pop as a launching point to the political" (Milner, 2016, p. 305), as they are typically used to frame events and issues. To date, existing research primarily conceives of memes as: a) a means for political and social commentary (Wells, 2018; Heiskanen, 2017; Ross and Rivers, 2019), and, relatedly, b) a means of identity build-

ing in a participatory media environment (Gal et al., 2016; Milner, 2016; Phillips, 2015; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Nagle, 2017).

1.2.2 Memes and politics

A significant body of research has recognized that meme production and circulation have an increasingly relevant impact on the political sphere. Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2019) have framed this phenomenon as the "memeification of politics", considering that memes have become the means through which citizens habitually comment and discuss political issues (Highfield, 2017). Existing research has therefore taken memes as an entry point to understand their role in the expression of political opinions and identities in relation to electoral campaigns, social movements, or simply in response to highly mediatized events (Milner, 2013, 2016; Ross and Rivers, 2017a,b; Denisova, 2019). Although some studies have shown that memes are employed to support political actors and specific issues (Tay et al., 2014), most political memes aim at delegitimizing specific candidates or ideologies (Heiskanen, 2017).

Leveraging humour and intertextuality, memes provide a means for citizens to voice political dissent, while contributing to relieving social tension and distress (Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019). As summarized by Ross and Rivers (2017b), memes provide "an ideal social media tool for responding to current events through humour" (p. 288). From this perspective, it has been argued that the lower entry costs afforded by meme culture enables a polyvocal participation in public debate: hence, the belief that memes represent a more open and inclusive form political expression, which fosters the diffusion of a plurality of narratives and alternative opinions to the ones circulated by traditional media outlets (Ross and Rivers, 2017b; Huntington, 2013; Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019; Heiskanen, 2017). However, access to meme culture is regulated by specific cultural and digital prerequisites, which might erect new barriers and forms of gatekeeping (Milner, 2016; see Section 1.2.4). In this sense, memes can leverage obscure vernacularism and in-jokes to promote and justify offensive and discriminatory content (Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Lamerichs et al., 2018), as demonstrated by the case of Alt-Right groups spreading

white nationalist ideology through memes (Nagle, 2017).

Another dilemma concerns the efficacy of memes as a form of activism and, in general, to enhance political participation. According to some, memes are not only employed to comment and frame public events but also to organize and promote social movements (Milner, 2013; Denisova, 2019). This view is also shared by scholars contending that memes encourage political mobilization and influence voting behaviors (Heiskanen, 2017). As opposed to this view, others have described meme circulation as a form of "slacktivism" (Penney, 2017), contending that memes produce little impact on the political dynamics. Along this line, Hristova (2014) maintains that, instead of fuelling political mobilization, memes act as neutralizers of political dissent: for instance, in the context of the Occupy movement, memes provided a "safe space in which through mockery images and imaginaries of repression are rendered mundane and even humorous" (p. 273). In this sense, they contributed to suppress the oppositional potential of the movement by transforming it into "a formulaic visual and textual shortcut – a slogan and a figure" (p. 275).

In the context of authoritarian regimes, memes have represented a modality of political expression capable of avoiding content moderation (Moreno-Almeida, 2021): in this sense, it has been argued that memes enable the promotion and mobilization of collective actions, despite the limited freedom of political expression (Mina, 2014). Nonetheless, the subversive potential of memes has been resized by studies demonstrating that the government actualises different restrictive measures, including censorship and legal persecution, to restrict the production and circulation of dissident memes (Fang, 2020; Pearce and Hajizada, 2014).

Aside from bottom-up circulation, memes are increasingly included in the political agendas of leaders and parties, who seek to exploit the popularity and the communicative power of memes for propaganda or to simply boost their visibility by triggering users' reactions (Wiggins, 2017; Martínez-Rolán and Piñeiro-Otero, 2016; Marino, 2019). This approach is epitomized by the case of former US president Donald Trump, who retweeted a meme of himself as Pepe the Frog during the 2016 presidential elections

(Nagle, 2017) and, more recently, by the electoral campaign launched by US candidate Michael Bloomberg, who commissioned social media content creators to produce memes about him. Despite the political relevance of these cases and the increasing use of memes by institutionalized actors, top-down forms of political communication still remains an understudied aspect of the memetic phenomenon. While the present study is not primarily focused on meme politics, this strand of research still provides an interesting angle from which to observe the memetic phenomenon and its implication for the formation of collective identities. Specifically, the possibility to employ memes to frame and make sense of highly mediatized events constitutes a central point for the theoretical approach adopted: by providing a way to collectively elaborate shared experiences, memes contribute to the development of a common, co-constructed, worldview and shared interpretive frames.

As I will elaborate in Section 1.3.1, this point constitutes a central aspect of the theory of social generations developed by Mannheim (1952), who argues that the existence of shared frames for the interpretation of experience is what actualises a generation, by favoring the emergence of a generational consciousness among its members. In the following section, I will show that the participation in meme production, albeit theoretically open and inclusive, requires a degree of cultural and digital competence that may lead to the exclusion of those lacking these skills.

1.2.3 Memes and identity

A second strand of research focuses on the contribution of memes to the creation of individual and collective identities (Gal et al., 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Yus, 2018). With this respect, memes are mostly conceptualized as a shared code among members of online communities and as a practice underlying collective mechanisms of cultural production. Although they are individually transmitted from one person to another, Shifman (2014b) argues that memes produce an impact on society, because they "shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups" (p. 18). Departing from this assumption, research on political memes seeks to explore how users construct and express their political identities, while collectively making sense of shared experience (cfr. 1.2.2).

Overall, existing research has investigated the ways in which the participatory nature of meme culture contributes to collectively shaping the values and the social norms of online communities. In this light, it has been demonstrated that intertextual references play a key role in creating and reinforcing a sense of belonging, as they leverage users' subcultural competences to be decoded (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016; see also Section 1.2.4). Aside from intertextuality, humour also relies on shared cultural assumptions to create and maintain social bonds: for instance, the ability to understand hidden messages conveyed by polysemic ironic utterances may reinforce group cohesion, while failure may result in social exclusion (Gal, 2019). Miltner's work (2014) on LOLCats memes offers another example of this mechanism, as it shows that these memes make extensive use of intertextual references and multi-layered in-jokes. In order to appreciate a LOLCats meme, users need to recognize it as part of an elaborated universe populated by recurring characters connected by organic narratives. The creation and reinforcement of group boundaries is further enhanced by lolspeak, the fabricated, childlike dialect spoken by the characters of LOLCats memes. From being the signature feature of these memes, lolspeak became a code for in-group interactions: in this context, LOLCats memes and lolspeak are employed by users to express feelings, establish intimate connections, and provide emotional support to other users.

The study conducted by Gal et al. (2016) shows that collective identities can be negotiated through video memes as well, demonstrating that users exploit meme production patterns to challenge or comply with established identitarian representations. After analyzing a corpus of videos created for the LGBTQIA+ supportive campaign 'It Gets Better', the scholars noticed that the participation in the LGBTQIA+ identitarian discourse mostly followed conformist patterns, from which marginal demographics and minorities were absent. Finally, the use of memes can contribute to foster cohesion through shared memories: the examination of a Facebook Australian Aboriginal activist page indicated that, aside from dismantling the hegemonic colonial myth of a peaceful settlement, memes enabled Indigenous users to connect with one another leveraging their common colonial experiences and express a kind of unity (Frazer and Carlson, 2017).

A significant body of literature has looked at how memes are employed as a form of gatekeeping by subcultural and/or platform-specific communities (cfr. Nagle, 2017). In this context, memes have sometimes been appropriated by reactionary online groups as a means to convey offensive messages on a variety of issues, including feminism, free speech, and political correctness (Massanari, 2017; Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Brooke, 2019). As demonstrated by the case of 'The Proud Boys' studied by DeCook (2018), memes supporting controversial identities are found on mainstream social media as well, where they leverage recognizable layouts and characters (e.g. Pepe the Frog and vaporwave aesthetics) to appeal users for propaganda and as a recruitment strategy.

Finally, users can engage in practices of 'vernacular criticism' to assess their belonging to specific communities, as exemplified by the subreddit r/MemeEconomy (Literat and van den Berg, 2019). Within this community, users debate the factors influencing the quality of memes, like its versatility, popularity, and cultural impact: specifically, the value of a meme will increase, provided that it is not too popular, can be easily reappropriated and is capable of preserving its cultural relevance over time. Most importantly, this discussion is a way for users to negotiate their position within the community, establishing different roles and labels like "insiders, newcomers, 'normies' (those who appear to insiders as oblivious to this specialized discourse on memes)" (p.13).

1.2.4 Literacy and participation

The mechanism of users' participation in memetic culture appears torn between openness and restriction. Due to the easy accessibility of the technology needed to produce them, memes could be considered the "quintessential participatory artifact" (Milner, 2016, p. 12): this is exemplified by the plethora of apps and websites like Imgur and Memegenerator, which functions as repositories for ready-to-use templates. Nonetheless, the decodification of memes is not equally accessible and subcultural knowledge has been indicated as a necessary precondition for the engagement with participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

If user-friendly softwares facilitates participation in the creation and manipulation of memes, users are still required a certain level of transformative competence, which can be

defined as the ability to creatively assemble language and image to produce new artifacts. This competence assumes that users have a certain level of subcultural knowledge of the cultural text and, crucially, of the social convention guiding the composition of memes. In this regard, Milner (2016) argues that "[m]emes are quite restrictive in their formal components when we consider the gatekeeping practices of the collectives producing them" (p. 106). The requirements that make memes socially acceptable are internalized by members of meme collectives, where they are also negotiated through intergroup discussions (Literat and van den Berg, 2019).

Putting the emphasis on the collective dimension of meme culture, it is also important to notice that, despite being produced and circulated at individual decentralized levels, memes are embedded in broader social processes: hence, access to online communities depend on users' ability to demonstrate specific competences, encapsulated in the notion of 'meme literacy' (Milner, 2016), which refers to the knowledge of meme social conventions and the rules underpinning specific groups or communities (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). In online communities, this competence is employed to mark the boundary between in-group members 'in the know' and outsiders. Drawing from Thornton's theory on club cultures (1996), Nagle (2017) claims that: "subcultural capital is earned through being 'in the know', using obscure slang and using the particularities of the subculture to differentiate yourself from mainstream culture and mass society" (p. 96). Therefore, established social conventions not only dictate the norms for transformative creation, but also function as gatekeepers, excluding the uninitiated.

Going a step further, the study conducted by Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) demonstrates that meme literacy impacts members' status within a community: they conceptualize memes as a form of 'cultural capital' in the Bourdesian sense, meaning that users who master the cultural conventions undergirding memetic culture earn the respect from others, while those who fail are bound to be excluded and mocked at (Massanari, 2013). Because of their 'unstable form', memes have been referred to as a form of 'contested' capital: discussion around what is acceptable in meme reinforces group cohesion, as it keeps the discourse over 'meme literacy' lively (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). In conclusion, it

can be argued that meme culture is far from being democratic and inclusive, despite its virtually open nature and the relative accessibility of the technical tools employed to manipulate memes. Hence, the notion of meme literacy has become the lens through which the flow of social interactions powering memetic culture can be observed and interpreted (cfr. Kanai, 2016; Procházka, 2018).

To date, existing literature exploring the identitarian function of memes has mostly focused on marginalized (Frazer and Carlson, 2017), subcultural (Miltner, 2014) and/or platform-specific communities (Nagle, 2017) as objects of studies. In all these cases, it has been noted that memes provide a means to express and reinforce the members' identities, by leveraging a set of (assumed) shared cultural knowledge and values. Despite providing useful insights on the dynamics of meme culture, this perspective appears limited when considering the resonance of meme in mainstream digital media. A similar remark was advanced by Jenkins et al. (2018), as he noted that: "the appropriation, remixing, and recirculation of content [...] are increasingly impacting conversations far removed from what once might have been seen as niche communities" (p. 28).

In the attempt to broaden the understanding of the ways in which identities are shaped by memes, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018) provided an account of how memes portray social categories across different cultures. Their study discovered that most of the content represents dominant groups, i.e. men and members of dominant ethnicities, while women and ethnic minorities are marginalized (p. 306). Furthermore, they argue that age groups provide a useful standpoint to further explore the identitarian dimension of meme culture. Previous research has implied that the principal population behind the creation and dissemination of Internet memes is composed of young men (Milner, 2016), while categories like women are excluded and discriminated against (Drakett et al., 2018; Brooke, 2019). The analysis conducted by Segev et al. (2015) seems to go in the same direction, showing that teens and young adults are the most represented age groups within memes.

On the basis of existing research, it may be argued that the production and circulation of memes is enmeshed in the individual and social identities of the demographics that habitually produce and circulate them. However, an in-depth analysis of the extent to

which memes contribute to the construction and the expression of those identities beyond the political and into the social and the cultural broadly intended is still missing. In this sense, a notion that seems to tie these different aspects together is that of generation. Memes are assumed to be generationally-connoted cultural units, whereby generational references play an essential role in their construction. As shown in Section 1.2.1, users implement cultural elements from external sources in memes through intertextuality and the echoic use of irony. According to existing research, the ability to identify and decode such reference depends on the degree of subcultural knowledge displayed by the users and their 'meme literacy' (Milner, 2016).

In this work, I intend to question the extent to which the ability to understand and create memes is affected by generational belonging, other than affiliation to subcultural groups. If memes are based on generationally determined cultural knowledge, then access to meme culture is grounded and (at least in part) regulated by membership to specific generational groups, which may result in the exclusion of entire segments of users. This generation-specific perspective is however challenged by the fact that memes have become an ubiquitous phenomenon in mainstream digital culture (cfr. Phillips, 2015): following their popularization, meme culture was profoundly affected by the entrance of new actors (cfr. Miltner, 2018). In this context, I assume that memes continue to draw new participants from younger cohorts, which are substantially modifying meme culture to fit their communicative need and identitarian purposes (cfr. Milner, 2015). At the same time, as memes permeate online interaction across a variety of digital spaces and social media, older demographics have come into contact with them as well, possibly deciding to adopt conventionalised formats (or even developing new ones) as a form of online communication. This calls into question the idea that memes can be considered a prerogative of young demographics and urges to understand which are the identitarian implications of this pervasive meme culture between and across generational boundaries.

Although research on memes and generation is still in its infancy, some recent studies have demonstrated that memes are, in fact, used to talk about generations, especially as a means to voice generational conflicts (Zeng and Abidin, 2021; MacDonald, 2021).

However, the understanding of the generational dimension in meme culture is still superficial and many issues have yet to be addressed. Aside from assessing which generational segments participate in the production and circulation of memes, scholars should also investigate the extent to which memes can be considered a tool to construct and express generational allegiances or to mark the distance to other generational groups.

1.3 Generation: one term, many definitions

Over the years, the term 'generation' has gathered a variety of different and yet interrelated meanings. The first one recalls the notion of 'procreation' and 'fathering' and is the most faithful to the literal meaning: etymologically, the word derives from the Greek *genesis*, thus referring to genealogies as lines of descent (Nash, 1978). Following this definition, the succession of generations is marked by the biological rhythm of life and death. Scholars adopting this perspective have investigated generations in relation to cultural reproduction and social heritage (Coleman, 1995), specifically focusing on the transmission of values from parent to children and their modification. Other synonyms for generation, including 'cohort' and 'life stage' (Kertzer, 1983, p. 126), also appear to echo the etymological sense, as they refer to "the succession of people moving through the age strata, the younger replacing the older as all age together". An influential contribution in this sense was provided by the Spanish thinker (Ortega y Gasset, 1923): during the interwar period, he attempted to delineate a strict structure of generations in cohorts of 15 years, based on their relationship with particular epochs. Described by Jaeger (1985) as a 'pulse-rate hypothesis', Ortega y Gasset's effort was to derive generational cycles by starting from relevant periods, in which human history changed significantly.

Academic research has strived to understand the connection between age and generational groups, a nexus which has been traditionally defined as the consequence of certain events occurring at the same point in time for a group of people (Dimock, 2019). However, this objective approach fails to give due weight to the generation-specific background of experiences shared by certain cohorts. As opposed to this view, Corsten (1999) defines generations as "carriers of collective experience" (p. 261), whose emergence results from

interconnected processes including personal biographies and socio-historical events. All these combinations contribute to the formation of a 'We-Sense' (Bude, 1997) of a generation, referring to the set of expectations and assumptions that members of a generation have with respect to the sociocultural background of experience they share. Therefore, Bristow (2015) suggests that the notion of generation entails both a natural and a social aspect: the term not only applies to the stages of life cycle (birth, procreation and death), "but also to the relationships between individuals constituted within the family, and as perceived in cohort terms by society at large" (p. 21). It is in the sense of groups sharing the same experiences that sociology has tried to conceptualize the notion of generation.

1.3.1 Mannheim's legacy: social generations

In modern sociology, the key reference for academic research on generations is the work of German sociologist Karl Mannheim. In his landmark essay *The Problem of Generations* (1952), Mannheim conceptualizes generations as social formations arising from the interaction of external socio-historical conditions and individual subjectivities (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). In so doing, he underlines the centrality of experience for the construction of generations, claiming that the same formative experiences contribute to structure unique frames of reference that are decisive in the organization of people's life and world-view. Described as the "seminal theoretical treatment of generations as a sociological phenomenon" (Pilcher, 1994, p. 481), the persistence of Mannheim's legacy is due to the innovative non reductionist perspective of his approach, which integrates in the concept of generation both the biological and the socio-cultural aspect.

In his work, Mannheim critically addresses the main existing theoretical perspectives on generations, derived respectively from the French positivism and the German romantic-historical approach: while the first one, tied to the Enlightenment paradigm, sees generations as the combination of objective factors and events, the German tradition focuses on people's attitude of mind and collective feelings. Mannheim claims that the main issue with generations is "the problem of an interior time that cannot be measured but only experienced in purely qualitative terms" (Mannheim, 1952, p. 281). In this sense, generations

are not conceived as simple, unilinear transitions between older and younger, but rather as complex constructs integrating both a natural and a social component: more specifically, since “any biological rhythm must work itself out through the medium of social events” (p. 286), generations come to be broadly identified as socially defined formations that share the same historical position and experiences during the same life stage. In the attempt to isolate what is specific about generations, Mannheim draws a first clear distinction between generations and other groups like communities, associations, or organizations. Unlike such collectives, generations do not necessarily depend on physical proximity and exist regardless whether their members are aware of each other or not. Similarly, generations are not comparable to organizations created with a specific aim, as their emergence does not follow “a deliberate act of foundation or written statutes” (p. 288-289). Nevertheless, members of a generation appear to share a sense of belonging and also must be brought together by some external conditions.

According to Mannheim, the emergence of a generation is bound to three necessary conditions: location (*Lagerung*), actuality (*Generationzusammenhang*), and generational unit(s) (*Generationseinheiten*). The notion of social location (*Lagerung*) requires that people belonging to the same generations share “a common location in the social and historical process” (p. 291), a concept which involves time, space and socio-cultural conditions. In other words, it means being exposed to the same experiences and events in a specific biographical time and social setting. However, sharing the location is not enough to grant the formation of a generation: a more important requirement for the rise of a specific generational consciousness is the development of similar modalities of behavior and thoughts. This is what Mannheim frames as actuality (*Generationszusammenhang*), referring to the bond that is created between members of a generation in reaction to the same life experiences. The key point of this aspect is that the “experiences of a generation are connected by interpretation” and how people collectively arrange the experiences (Corsten, 1999, p. 254). Without the formation of a shared ‘mental order’, a location is bound to remain an unproductive contingency, “from which no novel forms of knowledge and action can emerge” (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 168).

Finally, Mannheim (1952) outlines the concept of 'generational unit' (*Generationseinheit*), understood as a subgroup within the generation and perceived as agents for change, the real creative force. The main characteristic of the generational unit is that its members have developed a generational consciousness, derived from having experienced the same events and having generated their own cognitive frames of reference (p. 306):

> "Generational units [...] are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences."

In this sense, a sociological generation may include many biologically defined generations (Abrams, 1970), provided that they have one (or more) generational unit displaying the same cognitive dispositions. It is within these units that a generational consciousness arises and is mobilized for political action, ultimately leading to social and cultural change. According to Mannheim (1952), the consolidation of new patterns of experience, thought, and expression within a generational unit may lead to the creation of "a clearly distinguishable new impulse and a new center of configuration" (p. 309), which he calls generational entelechy'. Like the original conceptualisation proposed by Pinder, an entelechy is an inherent creative force within a generation, yet Mannheim refuses Pinder's static and unitarian conceptualisation, claiming that more than one entelechies coexist in the same epoch, giving rise to a dynamic tension between antagonistic impulses. Hence, the spirit of the epoch is a 'composite mentality' made up by the "polar opposites [interpreting] their world in terms of one another" (p. 314).

The development of a generational consciousness relates to the dimension of social and cultural change or, put another way, to how knowledge is assimilated, transmitted, and changed over time. As a matter of fact, Mannheim contends that individuals from a generation can participate in the historical mechanisms of cultural production for a limited time. Therefore, the transmission of existing cultural heritage is a continuously ongoing process involving the interaction of people from different generations. Contextually, the

scholar emphasizes the importance of 'fresh contact' (p. 293), as culture is influenced by the presence of new age groups coming into contact with accumulated heritage. With the emergence of new participants and the gradual disappearance of older generations, culture can be either transmitted through practices of 'social remembering' or undergone significant changes. The latter case is demonstrated by the evolving nature of cultural products, whose meanings vary over time according to their re-interpretation by different social actors (more on this in Section 1.3.2).

In this context, Mannheim and advocates of social generations have focused on the importance of younger generations as active and productive actors, rather than passive recipients of existing knowledge (Bristow, 2015). In this sense, Mannheim's conceptualisation of cultural evolution brings the focus on youth and the formative experiences of new generations, including different forms of socialization, the departure from the family unit as well as the entrance in the world market. Edmunds and Turner (2002) also indicate 'traumatic historical events' as major drivers in the formation of a shared generational consciousness, arguing that these experiences unite "a particular cohort of individuals into a self-conscious age stratum" (p. 12). According to the authors, these types of events, among which wars play a leading role, also serve to create a rupture with the past and set the basis for rituals of commemoration that constitute the collective memory of a generation. Thus generational consciousness arises in times when society is faced with the urgency of 'present problems' and from the possibility to critically reflect on them. At a general level, Mannheim (1952) contends that what actualises the consciousness of a generation is a shared sense of instability. Facing what are perceived as precarious conditions of living produces a sense of unity formed from common fears and anxieties: "The 'up-to-dateness' of youth therefore consists in their being closer to the 'present' problems [...] and in the fact that they are dramatically aware of a process of de-stabilization and take sides in it" (p. 300).

These conditions of instability are bound to change with the passing of time and that is what shapes a generation. As a matter of fact, the same historical socio-political circumstances are contemporarily experienced by individuals in different life stages. This brings

about important consequences for the conceptualization of intergenerational clash as well, since having to face different concerns brings two generations to a point of conflict. Intergenerational struggle is therefore conceivable as a tension between different sets of fears that require different sets of solutions.

In recent years, the sociological approach to generations has witnessed renewed attention from scholars as a paradigm capable of accounting for cultural and political change. In this context, Mannheim's theory offered an alternative prism to race, gender and class through which consciousness and agency could be explored (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). However, the renaissance of the social generation theory has been welcomed differently by scholars: for instance, in the context of youth studies, scholars like Wyn and Woodman (2006) seen the adoption of this approach as an opportunity to renew the old explanatory models, e.g. the transition perspective. Others, like France and Roberts (2015), have been more cautious in recognising the novelty of this paradigm to investigate social change and social inequality, worried that it could overshadow other aspects, such as class and gender relations, but also ecological factors like external economic conditions. In this sense, they maintain that youth studies should rather look at how macro-forces like neoliberalism and global capitalism "shape the social, economic and political realities young people encounter in trying to manage their everyday lives" (p. 227).

Skeptics of the social generation approach have also targeted the phenomenon of 'generationalism' (White, 2013). The term was first introduced by Wohl (1979), in reference to the oversimplified vision of generations developed by intellectuals from early 20th-century Europe, among which he included Mannheim. Followers of the generationalist approach conceive generations as clear-cut categories, overemphasizing their importance as the only social force responsible for cultural and social change (Purhonen, 2016). Moreover, generationalists have a distorted and exaggerated view of generations with respect to a number of aspects, including their internal cohesiveness and their explanatory power over other factors (p. 104).

Mannheim has not been exempt from criticism either. For instance, Edmunds and Turner (2005) have challenged the importance of geographical proximity for the emer-

gence of generations, claiming that in our contemporary interconnected society distances are reduced by physical mobility and digitized forms of communication. This position is also shared by Beck (2008), who maintains that "for the first time in history the rising generations of all countries, nations, ethnic groups, religions are living in a common present" (p. 206). Technological innovation has enabled people to experience the same events worldwide, triggering simultaneous reactions across the globe and favoring the emergence of a globally-shared generational consciousness. One such instance is represented by major historical events such as the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, which is likely to have set the foundation for a new global generation, conscious of the terrorist threat and its consequences on their life (Edmunds and Turner, 2005, p. 571). However, the idea of global generation(s) has raised some concerns among scholars, who have criticized the worrying tendency at overgeneralizing contextual data (Roberts and France, 2020) as well as the lack of attention to highly fragmented realities (Philipps, 2018).

Other issues have been raised by Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014), who do not agree with the leading role played by generational units in Mannheim's theory. According to the German scholar, the rise of a generational consciousness only depends on the individual subjectivity of a clar-voyant intellectual segment of the population. In this sense, generational units are identified as "the only site of agency", an agency which is always politically oriented and carried out by a restricted group of engaged young intellectuals. However, as these units constitute only a limited portion of the entire generation, this view leaves the majority people out of the process of social change, reducing them to passive entities driven by external factors and constraints (p. 172). According to Aboim and Vasconcelos, generations are instead created by the polyvocality of discourses which are actualised not by a restricted group of people, but by the population in its entirety (see the next section for a full discussion on this topic). Finally, some have pointed out the lack of an operative toolbox within Mannheim's theory to enable the empirical work on generations (Pilcher, 1994). Therefore, scholars have faced some issues in trying to scientifically assess the boundaries of generational groups, since social generations do not present "a fixed metric that lends itself to statistical analysis" (Alwin and McCammon, 2003, p. 41).

The difficulties involved in the empirical investigation of social generation have ultimately led many scholars to either sidestep or attempt at reframing Mannheim's theory, which is why this approach has long represented an 'undervalued legacy' (Pilcher, 1994). According to Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014), for instance, many scholars have preferred more empirically rigorous - although problematic - methods of classification, which has given rise to various attempts at systemizing generations into a set of objective categories and locating their exact time line (e.g. Strauss and Howe, 1991). As a result, discourse around generations is often built around a number of labels, such as Baby Boomers, GenX, or Millennials (e.g. Bristow, 2015; Cairns, 2017). However, the prioritization accorded to external time produces the effect of turning the concept of generation into "an empty, though apparently all-fitting, category", lacking any specific meaning (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 171). Moreover, the time location assigned to these categories appears to be fuzzy and arbitrary: this is particularly evident in the case of Baby Boomers, whose onset swings from 1940 to 1950, depending on the framework adopted (Becker, 1991; Sweeney, 2002). As contended by Markert (2004), the issue "is further complicated as many simply talk about the groups as a given - the Boomers, the Xers - without indicating the age range in question" (p. 15). Another problematic aspect of this categorization is the tendency, for the sake of generalization, to consider cohorts as homogeneous groups. However, studies have demonstrated the existence of intra-generational differences in values, attitudes and behaviors, such as instances of cross-national and cross-cultural variability (Schewe et al., 2013) or with respect to the patterns of social media consumption (Mulvey et al., 2020).

Krause (2019), instead, proposes to use 'zeitgeist' as a sociological notion, in lieu of that of generation. Critically addressing Mannheim's conceptualisation, Krause claims that the concept of 'zeitgeist' and 'generation' are intertwined, yet do not necessarily overlap and should not be reduced one to the other in order to avoid oversimplifications. She also argues that a zeitgeist cannot be limited to a dichotomic opposition between two forces, as more than two zeitgeists may coexist at the same time and their connection may be more nuanced and complex than the antinomical tension envisioned by Mannheim. These objections lead to a conceptualisation of the zeitgeist as a set of patterns of cultural practices that are specific to a particular historical time, yet spreading to different

geographical contexts. Krause's notion of zeitgeist provides an analytical perspective to observe cultural patterns that link "different realms of social life and social groups" (p. 1). According to the scholar, zeitgeists share four characteristics, which enable the comparison among them: duration, referring to the temporal extension of the zeitgeist; scope, which defines the social space (i.e. the social groups) that it affects; the course accounts for its emergence and evolution over time; finally, the media and carriers, refer to the modalities through which zeitgeists are transmitted, i.e. through people and media (see Section 1.3.3).

Adopting Krause's perspective, Gandini (2020) has employed generational terms like Baby Boomers and Generation X as conventional labels to identify specific cultural zeitgeists, intended as the cultural ground made up by "shared set of meanings, symbols and objects", which have contributed to shaping the sense of generational belonging of "commonly-conceived cohorts" (p. 27-28). Other scholars, instead of dropping Mannheim's notion of social generations or adopting alternative methods of classifications, have attempted to overcome some of its limitations of Mannheim's by conceptualizing generations as structured by discourse (Corsten, 1999).

1.3.2 Generations as discursive constructs

According to Purhonen (2016), the social approach formulated by Mannheim does not take into account "the process of the symbolic construction of generations and the problems connected with the relationships of representation" (p. 104). Similar remarks have been made by Corsten (1999), who argues that Mannheim does not specify which kind of social practices underlies the formation of collective interpretation of life experiences within a generational unit. According to these scholars, discourse plays a fundamental role in the definition of generations and generational identity. Quoting Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014), generations are specifically "a question of culturally constructed labels and narratives that are discursively mobilized, to the detriment of others" (p. 167). The scholars suggest moving away from the idea of a 'clairvoyant intelligenzia' represented by one or more generational units and embrace a theory of practice, centered on the use

of generations as discursive categories: this approach recognizes the pivotal role of narratives for the creation of collective identities and defines generations as labels outputted by discourses on what unites a generation and diversifies it from others. The main assumption is that generations are produced by dominant discourses, which means that "generations only exist if, sitting in a given structural location, discourses about one's own time are mobilized for self-identification" (p. 176). Aboim and Vasconcelos thus conceptualize generations as discursive formations in the Foucauldian sense (2005 [1969]), i.e. the result of dominant discourses which establish what is real and accepted in a given society within a particular historical moment. From this perspective, the authors call for the necessity to deconstruct the processes underlying generational labeling, with the goal to unveil the power struggles involved in the classification and to evaluate their impact on collective imageries and individual subjectivities (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 178).

Corsten (1999) also offers an insightful perspective on the discursive dimension of generations, identifying in the collective use of signs and language the endogenous process through which generations recognize and locate themselves in the historical context. In particular, he contends that discursive practices enable people to conceive themselves as members of historically-situated generations and collectively validate their identity through shared patterns of interpretation. Elaborating on this point, Corsten articulates the idea of 'generational semantics', which takes inspiration from Luhmann's (1980) notion of 'historical semantics', defined as a set of "meaningfully connected criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in a conversation" (Corsten, 1999, p. 261). According to Corsten, members of a generation have the same standpoints and perspectives on events because they share the same interpretative framework. In other words, individuals establish a dominant semantic order in their discursive practices that enable the development of comparable interpretations within a generation. The premise for the creation of a shared order of meanings is the selection of a set of rules (or criteria, in Corsten's words) that define how to elaborate and communicate social experience. Generational semantics results from the crystallization of such criteria into discursive practices. The endogenous discursive constitution of a generation is actualised by "temporal and coincidental encounters between people of the same age" (p. 265), typically in transition from youth to adulthood,

whose comparable viewpoints on the world and interpreting frames are crystallized in the 'generational semantics'. By the scholar's own admission, this purely theoretical elaboration overlooks the empirical dimension of the phenomenon, leaving future research to address how generational semantics is realized in language.

An attempt to empirically account for generations as discursive constructs is provided by the study undertaken by Timonen and Conlon (2015), which aims at bringing into focus how 'ordinary people' discursively construct generation in everyday talk. The findings point at three major ways in which people employ the concept of generation: the first is to describe their own and other generations, to which they attribute certain characteristics. Specifically, they observe that people tend to talk about their own generation in positive terms, while portrayals of other generations are predominantly negative: as for older generations, they are seen "to have experienced sudden and excessive material wealth in their teenage years and early adulthood" (p. 5). Conversely, younger generations are perceived as having too high expectations, to take all for granted, and generally characterized by a lack of agency and effort to obtain things.

Another relevant aspect is the tendency, on both sides, to idealize intergenerational relations in the past and to notice in the present a lack of communication between old and young people. Secondly, generations are deployed to make sense of different social phenomena. With respect to their own generation, respondents used the concept "to demonstrate unfairness; to express guilt; and to make sense of (dis)advantage" (p. 6). When referred to other generations, the discourse was characterized by ambivalent feelings: on the one hand, respondents exploited it to place the blame for the mistakes made in politics and economy and to define unfairness and inequality, on the other they expressed solidarity to younger 'struggling generations' - although this was often coupled with skepticism about their "values and work ethic" (p. 7).

Finally, some participants used the concept to mark their distance from negative characteristics and behaviors typically associated with their own generation and overall to acknowledge intra-generational diversity. To summarize, the scholars recognise that discourse around the concept of generation serves to "express both affiliation and alienation"

(p. 9). This seems to resonate with the argument advanced by Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) that “generations are primarily produced by discourses of similarity and difference” (p. 168). Also, Timonen and Conlon’s (2015) study demonstrates that the notion of generation can be used to ‘perform’ different tasks, including “a wide range of important communicative and symbolic functions in the thinking, articulation and actions of ‘ordinary people’” (p. 9). In the present work, I will use memes to explore how generation and generational identities are created and expressed by users from different cohorts. To do so I assume that, other than through ready-made concepts and labels (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Timonen and Conlon, 2015), generational discourses can be developed through participatory forms of cultural production such as memes. Existing research recognizes the ability of memes to produce and structure discourses, referring to them as a widespread means of communication (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018; Kearney, 2019; Applegate and Cohen, 2017): more explicitly, Wiggins (2019) conceptualizes memes as ‘discursive units of digital culture’, while Yus (2018) defines them as instances of humorous ‘verbal-visual discourse’. Furthermore, Ross and Rivers (2017b) argue that “the circular flow of creation, diffusion and re-iteration” entail different “discourse and social practices” (p. 305), enabling a polyvocal participation in public debate. The collaborative practices underlying meme culture contributes to the idea of a discursive dimension unfolding through meme production and circulation, to which users participate with their own creative reinterpretations or simply by sharing existing memes. Furthermore, as pointed out by Yus (2018) “all stages of meme communication may have an impact [...] on the user’s identity, self-concept or self-awareness” (p. 5): participation in meme creation, the decoding process, and even the act of sharing can contribute to shaping personal and collective identities, also reinforcing group membership and affiliation. He also argues that meme interpretation relies on the socio-cultural environment in which they are located and, as such, memes can acquire different meanings, according to the socio-cultural background and knowledge of the users consuming them.

A similar point is advanced by Mannheim (1952), claiming that the meaning of cultural products depends on the social groups which (re)interpret them. Unlike “natural products”, cultural products show multiple strata of meaning: echoing Mannheim, Bris-

tow (2015) contends that their social relevance resides in their continually evolving nature, "whose meaning changes according to the time, place, and the experiences within which they are received and re-interpreted" (p. 45). This claim seems to apply to the memetic phenomenon as well, since meme culture feeds on users' continuous remixes, whereby existing layouts and stylistic patterns are reappropriated and reused in different contexts (see also Section 1.2.1). This means that the meaning of a meme can be revised and reinterpreted any time a user manipulates it or, simply, whenever it is shared. Thus, it may be argued that a focal point of memes is their flexibility, which does not only refer to the ability to foster new reinterpretations through recombinations of existing material but, overall, to the capacity of memes to meet the needs of different audiences. Following the popularization of the memetic phenomenon, old formats like LOLcats, Advice Animals, Rage Comics, Rickrolling are no longer in vogue, while new popular templates and formats have superseded older ones (Miltner, 2018). According to Milner (2015), these changes were brought about by new segments of users joining meme production and dissemination. In line with Mannheim's claims (1952), it could be thus argued that memes have been reinterpreted to fit the cultural tastes and the communicative purposes of these new actors.

Accordingly, it may be stated that, memes as cultural products are shaped by the needs and the sensibility of the socio-cultural environments producing them, in which they accomplish an identitarian function (Yus, 2018). Besides subcultural identities, it may be questioned the extent to which memes are employed by users to construct generational discourses, to position themselves with respect to the dominant narratives and, contextually, to 'perform' their generational identities (cfr. Timonen and Conlon, 2015). In this sense, meme communication can be seen as a manifestation of a 'generational semantics' (Corsten, 1999) functional to the construction and reiteration of specific generational identities, whose discursive practices are regulated by socially established norms (Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017).

1.3.3 Media generations

When exploring the generational dimension of meme culture, attention should also be paid to the digital environments in which memes circulate, to understand how the ecology and the logics driving these spaces might influence the formation of generational allegiance. As a matter of fact, generational labels seem responsive to social change through technology (France and Roberts, 2015), as indicated by the variety of popularized terms describing a generation by its relationship with the media (Jones and Shao, 2011): e.g. the 'Net Generation' (Tapscott, 1998), the 'Digital Natives' (Prensky, 2001), and the 'Digital Generation' (Edmunds and Turner, 2005).

Preceding the advent of the Internet, academic debate around media and generations builds on the assumption that media technology contributes to defining the features of different age groups (Aroldi, 2011). This seems to acquire particular relevance in the context of new media, where a growing body of literature has emphasized the impact of the Internet in shaping young users' cognitive structure (Prensky, 2001). From a different standpoint, Krause (2019) argues that, besides people, media are carriers of the zeitgeist. Elaborating on this point, Octoveria et al. (2019) point out that, in the digital era, social media platforms play a decisive role in shaping and spreading the zeitgeist, providing access to peculiar forms of cultural production and content circulation.

Media are believed to partake in the construction of generational identities, insofar as they contribute to the organization and mediation of experience: for instance, as seen in Section 1.3.1, Edmunds and Turner (2005) argue that the Internet has paved the way to global generations, connecting geographically distant people by broadcasting news worldwide. Similarly, Aroldi (2011) states that "ICTs provide generations' members with a wide range of discursive resources" (p. 64) , which enable users' self-representation and self-narration. However, previous studies have also demonstrated that media may acquire intrinsic value for a generation, meaning that media experiences and pattern usages have a crucial impact in the construction of generational identities. Following this observation, some scholars have introduced the notion of 'media generation', as an analytical concept which seeks to replace old generational labels and categories (Bolin, 2014). This concept

mediates between a technological deterministic view, claiming that the transition from old to new media determines different generational identities, and the biological perspective, looking at generations as groups of people sharing the same birth cohorts (Vittadini et al., 2013; see also 1.3 for a discussion on the different meanings associated with the term 'generation'). According to Bolin (2014), users create a subjective media landscape, resulting from personal interactions with different media during their life. His analysis also reveals that "people born around the same time, and in the same geo-cultural and political environment, [...] develop similar relationships to the media as technologies and content" (p. 115). Therefore, if at a subjective level media usage contributes to shaping an individual's identity, people with the same media biography are brought together, as they share similar subjective perceptions of the mediascape. In this light, the conceptualisation of 'media generation' refers to the construction of a generational belonging through similar modalities of media appropriation (Hepp et al., 2017). Expanding on this point, Bolin and Skogerbø (2013) claim that media preferences typically result from the interaction during the formative years of youth with certain media, which gained relevance within a specific technological, cultural, and social momentum.

The relationship with past media experiences, especially those acquired during childhood and youth, is often imbued with nostalgia. While the term 'nostalgia' can have multiple meanings (Boym, 2008), it is here intended as the feeling of "bittersweet remembrance of something past, something to long to return to at the same time as one knows that this is impossible" (Bolin, 2014, p. 124). As argued by Hepp et al. (2017), both media content and media experiences can be the object of nostalgic longing. Bolin (2014) found evidence of nostalgic remembrances of childhood media use in different generational segments, demonstrating that this feeling is connected to childhood memories and a specific emotional state of the individual, regardless of whether nostalgia is directed towards the content or the media itself (technostalgia).

Other than the object of remembrance, media can be the means through which nostalgic feelings towards the past are vehiculated. According to Niemeyer (2014), nostalgia is mediatised through social media platforms like Facebook, as demonstrated by the emer-

gence of several groups and pages dedicated to nostalgic reconstructions of past lifestyles, objects and habits. Similarly, Davalos et al. (2015) highlighted that nostalgic conversations on Facebook are used to express both positive and negative emotions, reflecting the bittersweet nature of this feeling. Moreover, nostalgia can provide a prism through which individuals look at the present and the future. In this sense, Gandini (2020) argues that nostalgia is the cultural zeitgeist of post-industrial Western society, which "looks back as a way to the future" (p. 63). This view is also shared by Davalos et al. (2015), who discovered that Facebook users engaging in nostalgic reveries frequently compare past and present situations, using the past "to reflect on the present circumstances of their lives, the nation and society" (p. 90).

At the individual level, nostalgia ensures the continuity of identity: as maintained by Wilson (2005), engaging in nostalgic reminiscences of the past enables the preservation of identities, grounding individuals in time and space and establishing a connection with past selves (p. 61). In this context, she argues that memory plays a vital role, as nostalgia cannot be disentangled from the actual process of remembrance and recollection. In our society, memory is filtered by new media, which can "activate, frame and render memory shareable" (Niemeyer, 2014, p. 4). Through media, individual private memory shapes and is in turn shaped by collective memory. According to Wilson (2005), memory is, in fact, a social construct: interacting with other individuals and social groups, people are confronted with memories transcending their own personal experiences. Therefore, it is possible to have collective memory of events which have not been directly experienced (p. 40). On the basis of the above, it can be argued that the interaction between media, memory and nostalgia, have implications for generational identities. Specifically, new media technologies like social media platforms provide a space where collective memory and identities can be continuously revised and reconceptualised, by structuring a discourse involving the elaboration of past and present experiences (cfr. Van Dijck, 2011). This implies that, through technology, generational identities can be elaborated and reinvented even after the formative years (cfr. Burnett, 2003), leading to a less rigid and static segmentation of generational categories.

In this study I assume that, besides media experiences, specific media products like memes may influence the creation of generational identities and favour the emergence of generational consciousness. In this context, the study conducted by Boccia Artieri (2011) has demonstrated that generational discourse can be triggered by cultural products like movies, TV shows, and novels. Exploring the impact of these cultural artifacts on the course of individual biographies and on the construction of a shared sense of belonging, the author observes that media products seem to be very good anchors for generational memories (p. 6). As contended by Aroldi (2011), common identities are built around the stratified memories of the media products encountered and consumed during certain life moments. Through the implementation of intertextual references into other cultural products (see Section 1.2.1), memes foster the construction of a stratified cultural repertoire, which merges together a variety of old and new texts. In this respect, Brembilla (2016) observes that the practices of remix simultaneously enable the permanence of cultural content and the ephemerality of its meaning: through memes, users recollect their cultural past, enabling old media products like TV series and movies to circulate again in the digital media environment and in their memory. Yet, at the same time, memes are manipulated and remixed by new audiences, which produces "a reinterpretation or a second reading of the past according to new perspectives" (p. 178). In this sense, users engaging with meme culture can actively rework memories, imbuing them with new meanings.

1.3.4 Memes and generational identities

Filling the gap of a sociological understanding of memes that brings together their capacity to be means of self-expression and foster collaborative remix practices based on shared cultural knowledge, this thesis investigates the 'social' nature of memes as cultural artifacts. As said, memes are considered a means of communication capable of structuring and feeding a lively debate around different socially relevant topics. At the same time, the collaborative practices of remix and circulation underpinning meme culture shape the discourse around generations, providing a way for users to construct, negotiate, and perform generational identities.

Building upon these theoretical premises, in this work I investigate how memes contribute to the construction and expression of generational identities. Consistent with Mannheim (1952), I argue that practices of meme creation and dissemination shape shared frames of interpretation by individuals belonging to different generational groups, thus contributing to the emergence of a generational consciousness based on shared experiences, which foster narratives around the moments, the media, and the cultural products which are perceived as constitutive of a generation. Findings from previous studies on memes and identity have indicated that relatability plays a vital role in shaping collective identities through memes (Yus, 2018; Ask and Abidin, 2018). In line with existing research, I expect that memes foster a generational "We-sense" (Bude, 1997), by leveraging common experience and culturally rooted forms of irony and intertextual referencing (Lou, 2017).

As a product of the web, memes exploit technological affordances and dissemination patterns to provide an interpretive device for shared events. Aside from providing commentary on current events (Wiggins, 2019; see Section 1.2.2), I expect that memes serve as a frame for past experience. In this context, the sociological concept of nostalgia provides an analytical framework to understand how people conceive of their generation and self-identity, by looking at shared memories and past selves. As seen in the previous section, nostalgia is pervasively spread through digital channels. Similarly, nostalgic memes can be considered a form of mediatised nostalgia resulting from "the interaction of nostalgic modes and moods, and media practices of production and consumption" (Merrill, 2020, p. 5). While nostalgic memes have been linked to the far-right and conservative political messages (DeCook, 2018; Merrill, 2020), Ewen (2020) implies that they can also be used to express longing for past cultural practices and objects: along this line, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2021) found that audio memes are occasionally employed by TikTok young users to communicate a form of "imagined nostalgia" towards a musical era which they may have not directly experienced, while seeking "affiliation with others above their age group in an act of taste-making" (p. 4). Based on these considerations, I assume that memes leverage nostalgic feelings to strengthen individual and collective identities within and across different cohorts, providing a means for people to create a link with the past and, contextually, reinforcing and enriching collective memory.

Furthermore, memes can be used to voice intergenerational conflicts: for instance, the study carried out by MacDonald (2021) observed that individuals identifying as members of Generation X employed memes to utter their distress about how other generations were handling the Covid-19 pandemic. Crucially, the analysis reveals that popular culture play a pivotal role as the lens through which intergenerational tension is filtered: specifically, she found that memes integrate references to cultural products of Gen Xers' youth, especially to popular figures and characters which are somewhat perceived as suitable to express the traits and inner nature of this generational category. Conversely, other generations are depicted with negative features and, overall, harshly criticized. Along this line, Lee and Hoh (2021) have explored memes as a form of visual ageism, claiming that the representation of older people through memes leverage stereotypical features and narratives to discriminate against older adults. In particular, their analysis indicates that memes infantilize older people, highlighting their lower mental and cultural level: in this sense, they are portrayed as naive and immature, lacking basic digital skills and unable to detect false information online.

According to recent studies, memes can be the initiators and the weapons of online generational wars (Lim and Lemanski, 2020). This has become apparent in the case of 'Ok, Boomer', a meme which has gained momentum during 2019 as a way to express quick rebuttal to older generations' (and specifically Baby Boomers') out-of-touch conception of the world. Zeng and Abidin (2021) demonstrate that the memification of intergenerational tension has spiked in popularity on TikTok, where 'Ok, Boomer' is employed to address several controversial aspects, including sexuality, gender roles, climate change, and political opinions. The analysis also highlights that, rather than unjustified antagonism, 'Ok, Boomer' is employed in response to previous attacks or as a form of activism towards unacceptable views associated with the generation of Baby Boomers. On the basis of these examples, this work assumes that, similarly to what observed by Timonen and Conlon (2015) for the concept of 'generation', memes are employed to 'perform' several identity related communicative acts, such as: attributing features to generational categories, express discomfort, place the blame, leverage shared beliefs and stereotypes to assert the superiority of one generation and to call out others.

To summarize, memes provide a promising heuristic perspective to investigate social generations for a variety of reasons. Lending themselves to empirical analysis, these artifacts can be employed to test assumptions regarding the formation of generational identities, thus overcoming the criticism of lack of evidence plaguing purely theoretical accounts (Corsten, 1999; Mannheim, 1952). Additionally, the possibility to analyze both the digital objects and the socio-cultural practices underlying meme culture provide unique insights on the construction and performance of generational identities online. In this respect, memes constitute a more suitable entry point as other ready-made concepts and labels (cfr. Timonen and Conlon, 2015), as they allow not only to investigate the discourse around generational categories, but also to dissect the creation and dissemination of shared interpretive frames. Finally, as a pervasive phenomenon exploiting the distributive patterns afforded by different platforms, it is assumed that memes transversely cross more than one generational group, thus leading to a reconsideration of how generational cohorts are traditionally conceived and segmented.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research question(s) and research design

This chapter illustrates the methodological strategy adopted to conduct the present research and discusses its potential shortcomings and limitations. The overarching goal of the study is to investigate the ways in which memes contribute to the formation and expression of generational identities. As seen in Section 1.2.2 and 1.2.3, users employ memes both as a means for self-expression and as interpretive frames for experience. In so doing, memes play a relevant role in the construction, expression, and consolidation of social and individual identities. Hence, the aim of this research is to explore the extent to which memes serve as a device for different generational groups to process and make sense of their shared experience, how memes are used to structure a discourse around generations and, contextually, to express their allegiance or to mark their distance from other cohorts. Specifically, this work is guided by one main research question and three related sub-questions, with the goal of exploring key aspects that concur to the sociological analysis of the relationship between memes and generations:

- In which ways do memes contribute to generational identities?
  - To what extent can memes be considered as a cross-generational phenomenon?
  - How are memes employed in the construction of a generational sense of belonging?
  - How are memes employed to identify and portray other generations?

The project is designed as an inquiry which articulates over two sections of empirical work. The research design, comprehensively taken, is informed by qualitative digital methods (Caliandro, 2018), and features: 1) a first component characterized by data collection from two digital platforms, Instagram and Facebook (Caliandro and Gandini, 2016),

which are analyzed with Ethnographic Content Analysis (Altheide, 1987), Critical Discourse Analysis applied to the visual (Fairclough, 2003; Rose, 2016), and semi-structured interviews. The use of both online observation and offline research strategies (interviews) is typical of the digital ethnographic approach and its various declinations (Varis, 2021), such as 'media ethnography', focusing on users' everyday use of technologies to understand how "means of production, circulation, and consumption of media products intertwine with significant practices of representation and reproduction of social identities" (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz, 2014, p. 8). With this respect, Caliandro (2018) proposes to integrate the methodological and analytical tools provided by the Digital Methods framework (Rogers, 2013; see Section 2.2) and its motto 'follow the medium' to engage with ephemeral, fluid, and fragmented online environments. By following the circulation of objects within and across digital spaces, it is possible to observe "the specific social formations emerging around [them] from the interactions of digital devices and users" (p. 560). At the same time, native digital objects like hashtags provide an entry point to access a discussion or specific cultural practices. Consistent with these indications, the data collection is performed across different platforms following native digital objects (hashtag and a selection of pages), as elaborated in Section 2.2.

2.1.1 Operationalizing concepts: 'memes' and 'generations'

Before illustrating the methodological steps that were undertaken for the data collection and analysis, it is useful to provide the operational definitions of two fundamental concepts: meme and generation.

Memes Existing definitions of memes mostly focus on the theoretical aspects of the phenomenon (see Section 1.2), while giving little insight on how to empirically recognize memes from non-memetic content. This may raise some issues when it comes to the identification of memes in heterogeneous datasets, like the ones in the present work. To overcome this issue, previous studies relied on datasets featuring conventionalised formats like macros (Yus, 2018), on sites or archives collecting memes (Ross and Rivers, 2017a; Brubaker et al., 2018), on cherry-picked examples from specific case-studies (Bozkuş,

2016) and/or on queries containing the word ‘meme’ (MacDonald, 2021).

While existing research offers elaborate conceptualisations of memes (Shifman, 2014b), I concur with Dynel (2021), who argues that not all the conditions stated by these definitions need to be met for a digital object to be considered as a meme, both in academic and in vernacular discourse. Specifically, considering that what differentiates memes from virals are users’ remixes (Shifman, 2014b; Dynel, 2016; see Section 1.2.1), manipulation stands out as the key feature that characterizes memes from other non-memetic content. Consistent with this claim, I adopted a broad operational definition of memes as digital objects showing observable signs of manipulation. With the expression ‘signs of manipulation’ I here refer to the traces of users’ intervention on the digital object, which range from the insertion of text lines to more or less elaborate forms of image editing (e.g. ‘exploitables’ cfr. Chagas et al., 2019). With respect to the latter, I have considered as memes only instances of collages or photomontages, whereas images featuring stickers and/or filters were excluded from the corpus. While many memes are multimodally constructed, i.e. integrating visual and textual parts, this operational definition intends to include unimodal representations as well (i.e. only textual or visual elements), provided that they are manipulated. Following this approach, items like chat screenshots, screenshot of posts from other social media or other websites, comics stripes and non-manipulated illustrations or drawings do not fall within the category of meme and were not considered for the subsequent analysis.

In keeping this operational definition broad, I intended to capture a wide array of memetic realizations, moving away from the traditional conceptualisation involving fixed layouts and ‘image-macro’ templates (Brideau and Berret, 2014), whose presence in the dataset may be marginal (Dynel, 2021). In this light, I also decided not to include irony/humour as an essential requirement for memes. The main reason behind this choice is that not all memes are necessarily humorous: in fact, although Milner (2016) claims that “memes are almost entirely jokes” (p. 48), the existence of non-humorous memes has long been acknowledged (Börzsei, 2013; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong, 2014; Yus, 2021).

Generations In the context of this work, the four generational categories 'Generation Z', 'Millennials', 'Generation X' and 'Baby Boomers' are employed both to sort interviewees (see Section 2.3.1) and, in the context of the interviews, to trigger the discussion around generations. As elaborated in Section 1.3, the conventional segmentation into birth cohorts faces a number of issues related to its arbitrariness. Despite the problematic aspects, however, this categorization presents some important advantages. First, labels like Baby Boomers and Millennials are well established both in academic and in popular discourse: as a result, they provide a widely shared reference and classification grid. Moreover, they constitute a natural point of departure for discussion around generations: drawing from the work by Timonen and Conlon (2015), I assumed that people employ generational categories to talk about identity, collective memory, and shared experience. Specifically, the heuristic value of the labels resides in the possibility to discuss the meanings that people attach to them, since "the single term expresses key features of the group" (Markert, 2004, p. 12). Therefore, the present work employs these four categories not simply as a way to classify informants but also as a conceptual device to critically reflect on the values, features, and stereotypes that people attribute to their own and other cohorts and, ultimately, to gain a better insight on the sociological and cultural aspects around which generational identities are built and expressed.

With this purpose, I have adopted the categorization proposed by ISTAT (2016):

- Baby Boomers (1946-1965)
- Generation X (1966-1980)
- Millennials or Generation Y (1981-1995)
- Generation Z or I-Generation (1996-2015)

2.2 Digital data: platforms, methods and ethical considerations

The first methodological step was to collect two datasets of memes on two relevant social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook, focusing on the Italian context. This is motivated by the necessity of coherence with the geographic context wherein interviews have been held, and the local cultural knowledge of interview participants.

Platforms. Existing research on memes has traditionally considered websites such as Reddit and 4chan to be the largest meme pools (Massanari, 2013; Tuters and Hagen, 2020). Nevertheless, as memes have become a widespread phenomenon on the web (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017), media outlets like Instagram and Facebook today demand equal if not more consideration. In fact, memes have become an essential component in the economy of mainstream social media platforms. In this sense, Du Preez and Lombard (2014) argue that SNSs have provided an ideal breeding ground for memes, by expanding the reach of potential users engaging with meme culture. This is particularly evident in the case of visual platforms like Instagram, whose internal logic and infrastructure foster the creation and circulation of memes (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021), especially in the form of manipulated images with humoristic captions (Kruk et al., 2019). Notably, Instagram has become the preferred platform to share everyday life snippets and selfies (Hu et al., 2014; Senft and Baym, 2015) but also to react in real-time to media events (Al Nashmi, 2018). Memes, which cover a considerable percentage of the visual formats of the platform (Hu et al., 2014), are considered not only a form of entertainment but also a way to comment on political and social issues (Fauzi et al., 2020) and, crucially, an identity building device, as they intertwine with self-presentation practices (DeCook, 2018): in this respect, it has been argued that participation in memetic trends on Instagram is seen as an opportunity to distinguish one's individuality and increase the visibility of the profile (Fallon, 2021). In the context of the present work, the decision to focus on Instagram is motivated also by the demographic segmentation of its user base. Eleven years after its launch, Instagram reports 1 billion active users worldwide (Barnhart, 2021). A survey

published by the Statista Research Department (2021b) reveals that, as of July 2021, out of the 26 million Italian users on the platform, the largest age group is represented by people between 24 and 35 years old (26,5%), followed by the segment ranging between 18 and 24 years old (20,6%). This means that the user base of the platform is mostly constituted by people belonging to Millennials and Generation Z: given this, I take Instagram as an entry point for the exploration of memes produced and consumed by these two cohorts. Similarly, the presence of memes on Facebook has been demonstrated by different studies, which have explored their use in the context of political campaigns (Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019), social movements (Harlow, 2013), and - in general - their impact on users' identity performance on the platform (Du Preez and Lombard, 2014; Procházka, 2018). The decision to select Facebook to complete the data collection is further motivated by the demographics of its user base, which reveals a stronger presence of GenXers and Baby Boomers. According to a recent report by the Statista Research Department (2021a), out of the 34 million users in Italy estimated in 2020, people ranging between 25 and 34 years old constitute the largest portion of Facebook users (21,9%). However, users between 35 and 64 years old, taken together, account for nearly 50% of the user base. These data seem to confirm the international trend that the presence of older generations on Facebook has been steadily increasing for the past decade (Kozlowska, 2019). At the same time, it has been observed that young users are moving away from the platform to "find their own individual path" on Instagram (Fietkiewicz et al., 2016, p. 13). In this context, the migration towards newly emerged platforms by younger generations is believed to represent a response to older generations taking over long-existing platforms, like in the case of Baby Boomers' on Facebook or, more recently, Gen Zers fleeing from Instagram towards TikTok (Caruso, 2019). The predominance of different generations on the platforms seems also linked to the concepts of 'media generation' (see Section1.3.3 for the full discussion around this aspect), thus confirming the idea that each cohort displays unique patterns of media preference. Ultimately, the choice of these two platforms populated by partially distinct demographics answers the need for completeness and aims to collect representations from all the four cohorts considered in this study.

Methods. The data collection followed the procedures suggested by Rogers (2013) and Caliandro and Gandini (2016) within the Digital Methods paradigm, which takes as inputs the native digital objects available in the medium (e.g. links, tags, threads, etc.) to investigate online cultures and social environments. Guided by the motto 'follow the medium' (Rogers, 2013), this approach indicates that the researcher should follow the flow of information and the platform logics to extract data natively from the platform studied. The two corpora have been collected employing two different resources: to gather the Instagram dataset, I have used a scraper directed at collecting all the content associated with a specific hashtag, in this case *#memeitaliani*; whereas, the Facebook dataset has been assembled employing the Facebook-owned analytics tool Crowdtangle. In the following, I will detail the pros and cons of both techniques as well as discuss the reason behind this methodological choice.

Web scraping, i.e. the use of custom scripts to download large amounts of data (Perriam et al., 2020), provides an alternative to API-based (Application Programming Interfaces) data collection, especially as many social media platforms providers have restricted the access to their data, in the aftermath of the 'Cambridge Analytica' scandal. Although not illegal per se, web scraping is seen as inherently problematic, as it raises a number of concerns around ethics and privacy matters and is fiercely adversed by social media companies, which seek to prevent researchers from accessing data that they do not intend to share (Bainotti et al., 2021). Nonetheless, scholars like Venturini and Rogers (2019) have argued in favour of this practice and call for a conscientiously performed scraping for social research. Crucially, they maintain that scraping "forces researchers to observe online dynamics through the same interfaces as the actors they study" (p. 536-537), providing a privileged point of view from which to observe how content is generated and circulated across the web.

However, web scraping is not the only option available to gather data on social media. In recent times, major social media platforms have started granting access to their own data to marketing analysts and researchers, through ad-hoc created tools: one such resource is represented by CrowdTangle, a data analytics tool owned by Facebook, which has been

used in this study to perform the data collection on the platform. According to the official website, CrowdTangle "makes it easy to follow, analyze, and report on what's happening with public content on social media" (Bleakley, 2021). More specifically, the tool tracks and provides information about Instagram and Facebook posts, including the time of publication, the account/page that posted the content, the numbers of interactions and views. As the data are directly provided by Facebook, the tool faces the same problems of transparency and reliability affecting platform-owned resources (Marrazzo, 2022): according to Bruns (2019), the fact that platform providers are in charge of the selection process that grant or deny the access to data "limit[s] scholarly inquiry to issues and topics that are unlikely to put pressure on the platform providing the data" (p. 9). Nevertheless, the benefits granted by CrowdTangle are evident: if, on the one hand, the supervision by Facebook may raise questions about data transparency, on the other hand it enables researchers to escape the privacy-related issues plaguing web scraping. Furthermore, the tool provides several features to customize the research: in particular, the possibility to harvest accounts' historical data was extremely important for this study: although the data refer to the same time range (January-March 2020), the collection on Facebook was performed several months later than the one on Instagram. By exploiting the feature 'historical data', I was able to retrieve additional information relevant to the sample selection, such as the number of followers at that specific point in time.

To summarize, I have collected the two datasets employing two different tools. There are two main reasons behind this double methodological choice. Firstly, the timing: as I first collected the data on Instagram, CrowdTangle was not yet accessible to academic researchers, thus web scraping still constituted the best option to gather a large amount of data on the platform. Secondly, as I got the access to the tool, it could only track Instagram accounts with 100k followers or more (later extended to 50k), whereas my intention was to possibly capture memes produced by a variety of (more or less popular) actors on the platform. For this reason, I decided to keep the dataset already collected on Instagram through web scraping and to employ CrowdTangle to gather a second dataset from Facebook.

Ethical considerations. Over the past decade, there have been numerous attempts at outlining ethical guidelines for Internet researchers, one of the most well-known being those elaborated by the *Association of Internet Researchers* (franzke et al., 2020). Besides the implication of collecting data using web-scraping (see previous paragraph), other ethical issues may be raised by how digital data are handled, analyzed and visualized. According to Hewson (2016), in order for scholars to make ethically sound choices there are many contextual variables to take into account, including the sensitivity of the topic, the vulnerability of the individuals involved, as well as the potential risks and benefits brought by the study. When dealing with digital data, another important aspect concerns the distinction between public and private data: in this respect, Stommel and Rijk (2021) have noted that "the public availability of discussions on sites such as Twitter, Facebook, forums, and YouTube was overwhelmingly treated as the reason posts can be used for research" (p. 289). Nonetheless, the boundaries between private and public appear to be blurred in online contexts and may be perceived differently by researchers and users, with the latter having higher expectations of privacy in online environments which are publicly viewable (Rosenberg, 2010; Sugiura et al., 2017). As described in the section above, all digital data employed in this work come from publicly accessible Instagram accounts and Facebook pages: as such, these posts can be accessed and visualized even without logging into the platforms. Nonetheless, anonymity was ensured through all the stages by means of data aggregation and removal of sensitive information. For instance, the collection was limited to the posts published by the pages, while data around users' interactions were either left out (as in the case of comments) or collected in aggregate form (i.e. number of likes). Additionally, all information which could lead to the identification of the pages and accounts like IDs and usernames have been omitted, preferring aggregate forms of data visualization (Caliandro, 2021; Bainotti et al., 2021).

Since this study focuses on memes, the ethical implications of displaying visual content should be addressed as well. As noted by Wiles et al. (2012), while visual methods may raise a wide range of ethical issues, the most significant challenges are presented by "the dissemination of visually identifiable images" (p. 5). For this reason, Jordan (2014) proposes a set of guidelines for managing images of identifiable human participants in

visual studies research. As the scholar puts it, “Image management refers to the use of software tools to change the size, clarity, or readability of an image in a way that does not purposefully alter the original or intended meaning of the image and can be disclosed readily to the audience” (p. 444). This strategy also involves a series of anonymization techniques, like blurring faces, pixelization, cropping, or using blackout bars. In the context of meme research, most of existing research have so far paid little or no attention to ethical questions related to displaying meme instances (Zeng and Abidin, 2021; Shifman, 2014b; Milner, 2016) or to making reference to the source pages (Lee and Hoh, 2021; Procházka, 2014). Likewise, Kaltenhauser et al. (2021) deemed it unnecessary to request for ethical approval, since data were publicly available. Nonetheless, as the memes employed in their study were shared by users, the scholars decided to ask them for permission “to anonymize and display the images and comments” (p. 2). A great number of memes analyzed in this research contain logos which makes their creators identifiable. To complicate things, in many cases the name featured on the logo does not match that of the page/account from which data have been collected, indicating that many memes have undergone one or more rounds of reappropriation. Following the image management strategies adopted to obscure sensitive information in visual content (Jordan, 2014), I therefore decided to cover the pages’ logos using blackout bars.

2.2.1 First data collection: *#memeitaliani* on Instagram

For the first collection, I used a scraper directed at digital objects (profiles or hashtags) to assemble a heterogeneous dataset of Italian memes on Instagram. Existing research has shown that hashtags are typically used on platforms like Instagram and Twitter to classify content or organize discussion around specific topics (Omena et al., 2020). In this context, scholars have demonstrated that hashtags may create discursive spaces populated by different actors, identities, and opinions (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) or may contribute to shaping communities and/or group identities through ‘memetic’ reproduction (Caliandro, 2021).

Following these considerations, I have decided to take as input a relevant hashtag,

exploiting its function as an aggregator for memetic content. A preliminary exploratory analysis identified *#memeitaliani* ('Italian memes') as the most suitable hashtag, as it is sufficiently broad to capture memes related to a variety of topics. Unlike alternative options like *#meme* or *#memes*, the language specificity of *#memeitaliani* reduces the risk of multi-language content. Variants like *#memeita* and *#memeitalia* also constitute valid alternatives, yet they often appeared in combination with the one selected. To maximize the heterogeneity of the corpus and possibly capture several meme 'waves' (Kertcher and Turin, 2020), the data collection extends for 3 months, ranging from the beginning of January to the end of March 2020. For the same reason the data collection was concluded at the end of March 2020, by which time I assumed that the pandemic would heavily influence the content of the memetic production. The initial corpus counts 74.503 posts and features the following metadata: the date of publication, the caption of the post, the number of likes and of comments.

2.2.2 Second data collection: generational pages on Facebook

The data collection performed on Instagram returned a homogeneous picture in terms of topics and actors involved. As I will detail in the next chapter, memes contained in the Instagram dataset can be associated to a younger audience: this is revealed by the analysis of digital data, showing that these memes mainly concern topic close to teenagers and young adults (e.g. school), and further confirmed by the results from the interviews. This comes with little surprise, given that these two cohorts represent the largest user base of Instagram (see Section 2.2). At the same time, generation-related topics are hardly present and limited to a restricted number of memes, usually depicting funny situations of generational gap with parents and older relatives. Assuming that the entry point may have had some influence on the composition of the corpus, I decided to perform a second data collection to test whether the choice of a different platform and input would enhance the data richness, with respect to both the segments involved and the topics addressed. To this end, data were gathered from a selection of generational pages on Facebook. By 'generational pages' I refer to accounts that can be associated to one or more age groups, as explicitly stated in the pages' name and/or description. Only the pages showing these features have been

included in the dataset, which has been collected using the already mentioned CrowdTangle (Section 2.2). The tool enables the creation of customized lists of Facebook public pages querying specific keywords, which was exploited to create a list of generationally connoted Italian Facebook pages. In order to identify the most relevant pages, I performed exploratory research with different generation-related terms, including for example 'generazione', 'generazioni', 'Millennial(s)', 'Boomer(s)', 'Baby Boomer(s)', 'Zoomer(s)'. This query produced little or no relevant results. From the suggested results, however, it emerged that most productive and language-specific keywords were the combination of 'anni' (years) and specific decades, e.g. 'anni 90'. Following this methodology, I gathered a list of 27 generational pages with a number of followers equal or greater than 100k at the time of the data collection, that is from the beginning of January 2020 to the end of March 2020, containing combinations of the keywords in their names and/or in their description. Similar to the first dataset, this corpus includes the following metadata: page name, description of the page, number of followers, link to the post, caption, number of total interactions, the date of publication, and the type of post (photo, video, link, or status). The final dataset, counting 21.799 posts, features only the posts labeled as 'photo'.

2.2.3 Sampling and analysis

The content analysis has been performed on two random subsamples from the two datasets: 744 Instagram posts and 270 Facebook posts. For the dataset collected on Instagram, I randomly selected 1% of the posts per month collected (Table 2.1). Random sampling was preferred over sampling per engagement so as to avoid reducing the analysis only to relevant actors. i.e. huge accounts. For the dataset collected on Facebook, I have selected 10 random posts per page, so as to have each page equally represented in the corpus.

Month	Number of posts	Sample
January	23.279	233
February	23.129	231
March	28.095	280
Total	74.503	744

Table 2.1. Corpus and sample of the first data collection (Facebook)

Furthermore, both samples have been manually filtered so as to retain only memetic instances. In the case of Instagram, even though the hashtag #memeitaliani could be considered as a proxy for memetic content, the variety of hashtagging practices, including "shifts of meaning, purposeful deviations, as well as hashtag ambiguity and ironic usage" (Omena et al., 2020, p. 5), may cast doubt on the reliability of similar 'metapragmatic indicators' (Dynel, 2021) for the identification of memes. As for the Facebook corpus, I have collected all the content published by the selected pages, thus gathering both memetic and non memetic content. For these reasons, I have followed the definition provided in Section 2.1.1, considering as memes only the posts showing observable signs of manipulation. In conclusion, the manual filtering aims at identifying memes applying the same criteria to corpora, which have been collected following different procedures on different platforms.

Ethnographic Content Analysis The datasets were analyzed through Ethnographic Content Analysis (Altheide, 1987): while maintaining the same process of Qualitative Content Analysis, ECA is more focused on the "description and understanding of the meanings and practical uses that social actors assign to and make of texts" (Caliandro and Gandini, 2016, p. 192-193). This technique invites the researcher to categorize the material with deductive categories "aligned with the indigenous conceptions of the producers of such texts" (p. 192). As Altheide (1987) puts it: "ECA consists of a reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation." (p. 68). With this respect, the aim is to follow a systematic protocol, without being too rigid: although the researcher may adopt a codebook to guide the coding process, the number

of categories and variables are not fixed and others are expected to emerge throughout the analysis. This approach seemed the most suitable in the context of the present study, as it allows to account for recurrent patterns, while shedding light to the social and cultural meanings attached to the practices of meme production. The codebook employed in this process is broadly inspired by the one provided by Shifman (2013), which accounts for crucial aspects of memes, including formal properties (layout and manipulation), intertextuality, and irony. In particular, the codebook devised by Shifman focuses on three features (p. 369):

1. Content, described as "the idea/s and the ideology/ies conveyed by a specific text."
2. Form, "that is the physical formulation of the message, perceived through our senses."
3. Stance, which addresses the "the communicative positioning of the addresser in relation to the text/message, the context, and other potential speakers."

One of the strengths of Shifman's codebook is the possibility to be adapted to fit different datasets and research purposes, as demonstrated by existing research (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Gal et al., 2016). Along this line, I have developed a codebook comprising six among closed and open categories (see Table 2.2), which are meant to return an as comprehensive as possible spectrum of meme realizations.

Dimension (Shifman, 2013)	**Category**	**Value**
Content	Topic	open category
	Visual reference	open category
	Textual reference	open category
Form	Manipulation	'minor', 'major', 'both', 'none'
	Layout	'reaction', 'single image', 'multi-panel', 'crescendo'
Stance	Humour/irony	'echoic', 'non-echoic', 'none'

Table 2.2. Comparison between the three memetic features proposed by Shifman (2013) and the codebook used in the present work

While the overall structure of the codebook reflects Shifman's original proposal, other

categories and variables were included following the data-driven approach envisioned by Altheide (1987). The categories emerged during the exploratory overview of the data and were consolidated during several rounds of test coding. In the following, the categories are illustrated and accompanied by explicative examples:

1. **'Topic'** is an open category stating the general subject of the meme, e.g. school, love, family, current events, or sports.

2. **'Visual references'** contains a list of the identifiable figures portrayed in the meme, including real people (politicians, athletes, celebrities, influencers) or fictional characters from movies, books, comics, videogames and so on. Additionally, this category includes instances of standardized fixed templates, such as macros and exploitables. Due to the inevitable limit of knowledge and literacy, these templates have been identified relying on external sources, i.e. using the Google Image reverse search and cross-checking their presence in the online meme archive provided by the website Know Your Meme. Only templates catalogued on this site have been considered for the analysis.

3. **'Textual references'** features the name of external references that are mentioned in the written parts of the item. Note that not only the characters, but also the names of the broader cultural reference (e.g. the movie or book title, video games, sport teams, political parties) have been counted.

4. **'Manipulation'** refers to the degree of modification and takes four possible values: 'minor' (low impact changes, i.e. the addition or modification of the text), 'major' (heavily manipulated texts and digitally altered images: e.g. actors or items edited into the pictures), 'both' (combinations of low impact changes and image editing), 'none' (non-manipulated content, like drawings, stills from animated content, illustrations, and so on). Following the adopted definition of meme (Section 2.1.1), items with no sign of manipulation are not considered memes and therefore not taken into account for the analysis.

5. **'Layout'** refers to how the visual and textual material is arranged in the meme.

Based on the results of a previous analysis (Giorgi, 2022), four layouts have been identified (Figure 2.1):

- ‘Reaction’ usually depicts a single situation described by the textual part, to which the image constitutes the reaction. Given their format and their use, reaction memes may be considered an evolution of the ‘Reaction Images’, e.g. the facepalm, which became a part of image board websites like 4chan (‘Reaction Images’, n.d.). Reaction memes typically feature a square white frame or a single white stripe in the upper part of the meme, in which the text part describes the situation, and an image (or more than one) in the bottom part.
- ‘Single Image’ involves one image as background and a captioned text. This includes macro memes featuring a top and a bottom text line in Impact font (see Section 1.2).
- ‘Multi-panel’ includes memes in the form of comic strips featuring drawings or photos. There is virtually no limit to the number of panels displayed, which usually ranges between four and six. It should be also noted that multi-panel memes differ from regular strips as they show some degree of manipulation, e.g. modified balloons or image editing.
- ‘Crescendo’ is a meme vertically split in two halves, respectively containing only text or only images. The meme is structured in a way that each textual panel corresponds to another panel containing an image. The peculiarity of this layout is that the succession of text and image creates a climax, often culminating in the last image.

6. **‘Humour/irony’** identifies and classifies humoristic memes. As suggested by Dynel (2021), I have relied on metapragmatic indicators to detect humour in memes, namely humour-related words and hashtags (*#battute*, *#risate*, *#divertente*) or emoticons (smileys) in the caption. Based on the discussion on irony presented in the previous chapter (see Section 1.2.1), two categories are used to distinguish diverse types of irony: ‘echoic’ irony and ‘non-echoic’ irony. In the case of ‘echoic’ irony, the item

features an image and/or a quote from a cultural text to describe and/or comment on a different situation. The rest falls into the category of 'non-echoic' irony, including puns, funny situations and comments. Finally, non-ironic items have been labeled as 'none'.

(a) Reaction (b) Single Image (c) Multi-panel (d) Crescendo

Figure 2.1. Examples of layouts

Critical Discourse Analysis The corpus has been qualitatively explored using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which employs the notion of 'discourse' to address the rhetorical organization and social production of visual, written and spoken materials (Rose, 2016). The use of CDA to investigate the discursive dimension of memes is an established technique, especially in studies analyzing political discourse through memes (Milner, 2016; Gal et al., 2016; Palupi, 2018; Zubaidah and Ardelia, 2018). By using this methodology, I intended to understand how memes' messages and narratives were constructed to express generational identities.

CDA is conceived as "the analysis of linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes and problems" (Wodak and Fairclough, 2013, p. 271). According to Fairclough (2003), "language (and more broadly 'semiosis', including for instance signification and communication through visual images) is an element of the social at all levels" (p. 25). This means that texts do not passively describe the world or a state of things, but they imbue it with meaning, shape it, and influence perspectives upon it. In this context, the term 'discourse' does not only refer to communication exchanges but constitutes an "active relation to reality" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41): by combining elements in certain ways, language selects among alternative representational meanings, or 'orders of discourses',

which contribute to shape reality and ontological relations in certain ways. A particularly prolific application of CDA is the investigation of “relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). In this sense, CDA is concerned with how discursive practices are used to produce, maintain, and challenge power relations (Locke, 2004).

Following Fairclough (2003), orders of discourse display three analytical levels: discourses, genres, and styles. As stated above, discourse refers to the alternative representations, by means of which a certain situation can be observed from different perspectives; genres are different ways of interacting (e.g. interviewing is a genre) and constitute a framework to understand the discourse; finally, styles are particular ways of using language as a resource for self-presentation and to express one’s identity. According to the scholar, identification is a complex process that combines personal and social aspects and not all of them can be expressed linguistically. Specifically, he contends that discourse styles are realized through a variety of linguistic and paralinguistic features, including - among others - the selection of vocabulary and metaphors. Thus CDA allows researchers to investigate the ways in which such stylistic choices contribute to conveying messages about one’s social and personal identity.

Another relevant aspect in the CDA paradigm is represented by intertextuality. Allegedly, “intertextuality is the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text - quotations. But there are various less obvious ways of incorporating elements of other texts” (p. 40). Thus, texts should not be considered in isolation, as they constantly recall or hint at one another in various ways. Moreover, relations among texts can occur in the form of ‘interdiscursivity’, i.e. in terms of hybridity in genres, in discourses, and in styles. In this sense, texts are connected “with their ’external’ relations (to other elements of social events, and to social practices and social structures)” (p. 39). As discussed in Section 1.2, intertextuality is a key feature of meme culture, since memes are created with ‘awareness of each other’ (Shifman, 2014b). This means that memes construct their meaning through the (more or less explicit) citation of other memes - both in their structure and content - and/or of other cultural texts. In other words, the meaning of a meme can be fully

appreciated only in relation to the texts they refer to (be they other memes or other cultural elements). In this sense, the present work integrates Fairclough's reflections on the stylistic and intertextual dimension of discourse to understand the implications of specific stylistic choices and cultural references in the creation and expression of (generational) identities.

According to the original formulation (Fairclough, 2003), CDA is a three-step process involving textual analysis, interpretation of discourse practices, and social explanation. Drawing from this conceptualisation and Rose's (2016) application to visual material, I devised a similar approach which combines visual analysis and discourse interpretation:

1. The first step builds upon the results from the ECA (Section 2.2.3) and is directed at deriving recurrent patterns in the construction of memes. Specifically, I searched for: frequent topics, popular layouts, fixed textual structures, popular external references and, contextually, recurrent patterns in the creation of the humoristic/ironic effect.

2. In the second part of the analysis, I have critically discussed the results obtained through the ECA to investigate if and how popular practices of meme creation intertwine with specific age groups (following the operational definition stated in Section 2.1.1). In particular, the analysis focuses around these four points:

    (a) **Discourse.** If present, detect a generational discourse, the topics around which it unfolds, and the messages expressed;

    (b) **Actors.** Investigate the actors participating in practices of meme production/-circulation, to assess the age group(s) involved and the one excluded;

    (c) **Style differences.** Identify possible differences in the style and/or intertextual references implemented in the memes and understand whether they can be linked to specific generational groups.

    (d) **Narratives.** Understand, at a macro-level, if the messages convey the same hegemonic narrative or instances of counter-narrative can be found. This can be achieved, for instance, by analyzing whether topics relevant for specific age-groups are always presented in the same ways or not.

2.2.4 Issues and limitations

After having presented the variety of methods and techniques through which digital data have been collected and analyzed, I will address some issues that may have affected the datasets, leading to potential biases in their composition, namely the combination of platform and input, the data type, and the choice of the case study.

As a matter of fact, the entry points selected for the data collection have produced different results: on the one hand, the hashtag *#memeitaliani* returns a dataset of posts dealing with a variety of topics and published by many actors, including popular pages and ‘common’ users. On the other hand, the dataset collected on Facebook presents a homogeneous production focused on generations and nostalgic memories. Memes are almost never categorized as such by the publishers and thus had to be manually distinguished by non-memetic content (see the discussion on the ‘researcher’s bias’ below).

The considerable diversity of the two datasets may cast doubt on the strategy used to gather the corpora and specifically on the combination of platform and entry point. As addressed in Section 2.2, the purpose of the second data collection is to provide a broader outlook on how different cohorts structure generational discourse through memes, given the limited picture displayed by the first dataset. The choice of Facebook as the platform for the collection is not only dictated by the reasons stated in Section 2.2, but also by the poorer results returned by the same query performed on Instagram: not only were generational accounts on Instagram less various, numerous, and productive than those on Facebook, but some segments such as Generation X and Baby Boomers resulted to be underrepresented or completely missing. Similarly, the dataset obtained when searching for the hashtag *#memeitaliani* on Facebook was defective with respect to the one gathered on Instagram, when considering both the size and richness of data. Taken together, these results advocate for the research strategy adopted, showing that different combinations of platform and input would have returned less satisfactory results.

The second issue concerns the type of data analyzed. Despite the variety of formats that memes may display (Segev et al., 2015), I have decided to consider only memetic

realizations featuring static images. Obviously, this choice has had an impact both on the composition of the dataset and consequently on the results, as other popular representations - such as video memes (Shifman, 2012) - were not included in the analysis. This seems particularly relevant when considering that video memes are currently experiencing a renaissance especially among young people, following the popularity acquired by the recently emerged video-based platform TikTok (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). In this sense, it can also be imagined that this typology of memes will have an increasingly crucial role in shaping generational identity online. However, static images still play a predominant role in meme culture, as they constitute the format most traditionally associated with memes (Ross and Rivers, 2017b). Therefore, I assumed that older age groups would be more likely familiar with static image memes, while video memes may be relevant only for some of the cohorts considered in this study. Therefore, with a focus on inclusivity, the choice to rely on this format is dictated by the necessity to emphasize cross-generationally shared memetic representations and maintain coherence in data format across all the demographics considered. When dealing with the identification of ironic utterances, relying on the researcher's personal perception may lead to partial and/or skewed data (researcher bias). To limit this problem, I followed the suggestion advanced by Dynel (2021) and my decision was to combine it with 'metapragmatic indicators' as a cross-validation method. Therefore, in the context of irony/humor detection, ironic instances have been identified not only relying on my personal judgment but also by the presence of humor-related hashtags and/or smileys (see Section 2.2.3).

A third possible shortcoming may be caused by the choice of Italy as the only case study. Since Italy is my country of origin, this decision allows for a better and thorough understanding of the folklore behind the memes analyzed, especially as far as the external references are concerned. However, the focus on one single country means that findings are bound to a limited geographical and cultural environment (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016), and their applicability in other contexts may therefore be at least partially limited (I return to this aspect in the general conclusions).

Besides potential biases, an aspect that needs to be addressed concerns the use of CDA

vis-à-vis other methodologies. Rose (2016) and Aiello and Parry (2019) lay out a variety of approaches to visual analysis, such as content analysis, visual rhetoric, social semiotics, and visual framing analysis. Among them, social semiotics (Van Leeuwen, 2005) appears to be the one that bears more points in common with the methodology adopted in my work. Drawing upon linguistics paradigms like structuralism and functionalism, social semiotics investigates the process of signification and sense-making through images: overall, this approach "sees signification as social practice, that is, as a process deeply embedded in and affected by existing cultural norms and power structures" (Aiello, 2006, p. 98). Attention is therefore devoted not only to the form and compositional styles of the images but also to the processes underpinning their production and reception. From a methodological standpoint, the analysis combines a descriptive, an interpretive, and a critical part (Thurlow and Aiello, 2007), with the goal to examine the 'semiotic resources' (Aiello, 2006) within their specific contexts of production and use or, as Rose (2016) calls them, the 'sites of the image'.

As said, the social semiotics approach appears to have some touchpoints with the methodology adopted in the present research. Firstly, the three-step analytical process devised by Fairclough (2003) seems compatible with the one applied by social semiotics, involving stacked stages of data description and critical interpretation. Specifically, both approaches focus on recurrent visual patterns and structures, with the aim of identifying visual repertoires linked to specific social groups. In this sense, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020) outline the concept of 'visual grammar' to describe the "social-semiotic resource of a particular group, the group's explicit and implicit knowledge about this resource, and its uses in the practices of that group" (p. 4). Similarly, the notion of 'meme grammar' elaborated in Chapter 3 and inspired by Bainotti et al. (2021) conceives memes as expressive repertoires (cfr. Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018) shaped by the generational allegiance of the users, through the combination of recurrent compositional styles with certain context of uses.

Another similarity between social semiotics and the research design here adopted concerns the use of both visual analysis and offline research strategies. As argued by Aiello

and Parry (2019), social semiotics analysis employs interviews and/or ethnographic fieldwork in order to address "the specific creative, professional or viewing practices that contribute to the visual resources and meaning potentials of particular visual texts" (p. 29). Likewise, in my work interviews provide a gateway to the discursive production of visualities from the point of view of the producers, so as to unveil and critically investigate identitarian issues connected to meme creation and circulation.

Social semiotics has raised a number of questions about the representativeness and replicability of its analysis, due to its preference for detailed readings of individual images (Rose, 2016). However, recent research has demonstrated that social semiotics can be successfully integrated with digital methods and coding of the images to systematically investigate visual representations and meaning in large datasets (Logi and Zappavigna, 2021; Aiello, 2016). Similarly, I employed ethnographic coding strategies to systematize visual properties of huge datasets, helping in identifying recurrent patterns and serving as a basis for the identification of different meme grammars (see Chapter 3).

In conclusion, the adoption of a methodological approach combining content analysis through ethnographic coding and CDA is motivated by its groundedness on meme studies (Milner, 2016; Gal et al., 2016; Shifman, 2013). Moreover, CDA appears suitable in unpacking how ideological positioning and power structures are embedded in visual communication. As Aiello and Parry (2019) maintain, this technique is often employed in studies "designed to interrogate representational features such as difference and othering in the media" (p. 27). This point appears to be particularly relevant for the present research, which concerns itself with practices of self-identification (Chapter 4) and social othering through memes (Chapter 5). Ultimately, I concur with Aiello and Parry in stating that, despite the differences the analytical and conceptual toolkits, the various approaches to visual analysis are all compatible (p. 33) and methodological hybridization is possible and even desirable, according to one's research questions and the main focus of the analysis.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews

To better understand the ways in which memes are employed by users of different age groups to express their generational identity, I have complemented the analysis of digital data with 41 semi-structured interviews. Before illustrating the methodology adopted, it should be noted that the original research design involved focus groups (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups have already been employed to the study of memes, especially to inquire how their circulation might influence political discourse and civic engagement (Sreekumar and Vadrevu, 2013; Penney, 2020; Uzuegbunam, 2020). Given the participatory and discursive nature of meme culture (see sections 1.2 and 1.3.4), I deemed focus groups to be the most appropriate technique to investigate memes' contribution to generational identities, due to the possibility to produce interaction among participants. Specifically, by setting up both same-generation and mixed groups, I intended to steer a debate on possible controversial topics regarding memes and generational identities, so as to observe how participants expressed, argued, or negotiated their positions.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent (to date) two-year long pandemic affected the feasibility of this design. Due to the anti-covid measures, it became impossible to meet people in person for almost a year, let alone gather a group of interviewees in the same room. As I realized that the situation would not normalize in a reasonable period of time, I decided to turn to individual interviews.

Online focus groups (Stewart and Williams, 2005; Lobe and Morgan, 2021) could have been another viable option, yet they were discarded due to some possibly invalidating issues, also acknowledged by literature (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017; Abrams and Gaiser, 2017). One problem concerns the technical challenges faced when arranging the groups: participants of synchronous online focus groups require not only a high-speed and stable internet connection but also the competences to engage with the platform selected for the focus group (e.g. Skype). This point is extremely relevant for studies dealing with composite and stratified samples, due to the significant fluctuation in the levels of digital literacy. Among other socio-cultural factors, age is believed to play an important role in

determining the digital divide, with younger people usually performing better than older people (Van Dijk, 2017). In the context of the present study, it would have been difficult to arrange mixed focus groups, as some interviewees - especially among the Baby Boomers - might have little or insufficient experience with platforms like Skype, Zoom, or Google Meet or, even more impactfully, different levels of confidence in engaging in a digitally mediated group discussion. Another potential issue regards the reduced levels and length of interaction registered in online focus groups. This may be not only caused by the technical issues discussed above, but also by the nature of online exchanges, which may favour less lengthy elaborations as compared to offline interactions. In this respect, Schneider et al. (2002) argue that "the online format is ideal for participants to communicate relatively simple opinions", while "face-to-face focus groups might be better suited to study the details of participants' viewpoints and the logic behind their opinions" (p. 40).

In light of the above, I have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews through videoconferencing online media (e.g. Zoom, Skype). Online interviews have been employed in different fields, including consumer research (Gruber et al., 2008), health research (Brown, 2018), and cultural studies (Lee, 2011). In addition, existing research has demonstrated the advantages of online interviews with adolescents and young informants (Mason and Ide, 2014), especially in the wake of Covid-19 (Meherali and Louie-Poon, 2021). According to Shapka et al. (2016), young people prefer online data collection methods to traditional techniques (e.g. face-to-face interviews), as the internet constitutes a natural communication environment for them. Online interviews seemed the most suitable for this study, as they grant several advantages. One is the possibility to overcome geographical barriers and time constraints, thus allowing to extend the reach of the sample and possibly reach marginalized participants (Cheng, 2017). From their part, "participants are afforded flexibility because they can engage in the research at their own location" (Nehls et al., 2015, p. 146): in this sense, interviewees may feel more comfortable participating from their home or another familiar location, which in turn may increase the willingness to talk openly and honestly. Additionally, by adopting video-conferences I was able to capture non verbal cues, such as gestures and face expressions. Finally, the numerous video-calling applications and services allowed me to tailor the interviews based

on the necessity of the people, letting them choose the media they felt more comfortable with. This represented a crucial point in favour of this technique, as this flexibility enabled the participation of those with a minor level of digital competence, in particular the elderly.

Participants were interviewed following the semi-structured interview (SSI) approach (Longhurst, 2003), which appeared as the most suitable methodology due to its flexible structure: in fact, although the researcher decides in advance the topics that need to be covered and outline the main questions, the open nature of semi-structured interviews grants participants the freedom to derail from the original path to bring into focus other relevant issues. On their part, researchers may further probe within the response to elicit discussion or to provide clarification. Thus, SSIs contribute to creating a setting where the ideas conveyed by participants can be developed and further discussed in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the phenomenon examined. Analytically, data comparability is ensured by the general structure of the interview, whereby participants are asked the same questions in the same order (McIntosh and Morse, 2015).

The interviews cover three thematic areas: the first concerns the notion of memes as conceptualized by the participants. In this sense, I seek to understand not only the general definition given to the phenomenon, but also which content and formal features are mostly associated with memes, for instance the presence of specific templates and/or ironic constructions. The second area of inquiry concerns the modalities of users' engagement with memes, exploring the practices of sharing, commenting, and/or creating/modifying memes. In this respect, I inquire into how memes are diffused and by whom, specifically inquiring into users' motivation for sharing a meme, so as to understand the role played by generational allegiance in shaping the distributive patterns of meme circulation. The third and last line of inquiry concerns the expression of generational allegiance and generational distance through memes. In this sense, questions are directed at unveiling how memes contribute to the creation of a shared sense of generational belonging, e.g. leveraging shared experiences and/or common cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, I focus on practices of 'othering' through memes: in particular, I am interested in the ways in which

memes are employed to describe and identify the generational other, e.g. by exploiting certain features or stereotypical characteristics attributed to other cohorts.

2.3.1 Sample and recruitment

As for the recruitment strategy, the initial intention to post a message on the page boards was discarded. One of the reasons behind this choice is that, as hinted by Salmons (2014), recruitment advertisement on a public digital space may attract unwanted or non pertinent responses. Another problematic aspect of voluntary participation is the risk of incurring into a self-selection bias (cfr. Collier and Mahoney, 2011), whereby the characteristics of individuals who volunteer to be involved in interviews may be different to those who do not. A final, practical, obstacle to this strategy is that the rules of many pages in my dataset do not allow for users to post messages on the board, not even upon request to the administrators. Due to these reasons, I decided to adopt a 'purposeful sampling' approach (Marshall, 1996; Suri, 2011): this method requires having access to gatekeepers, that is "key informants in the field of studies who can help identifying information-rich cases" (Suri, 2011, p. 66). Thus, the first step was to contact key informants, which in this case were the administrators and moderators of the Instagram and Facebook pages derived by the data collection.

Contacting people through social media entails a number of challenges concerning both practical and ethical aspects. Overall, I decided to follow Salmons (2014) to consider the various opportunities and constraints of online recruitment: in fact, as the scholar argues, unsolicited emails or messages may be perceived as spam and left without an answer. To minimize this pitfall, I created a recruitment statement to describe the study and convey the same message. In the statement, I presented myself as a researcher at the University of Milan conducting a research on the expression of generational identities online through images. As Salmons states, researchers should be careful when introducing themselves to ensure trustworthiness and inspire confidence: for this reason, I intentionally omitted to present myself as a 'doctoral student', since I imagined that not everyone would be aware of the position, preferring a more general label like 'researcher'. Also, I purposely avoided

mentioning the word ‘meme’, so as to not confuse users not familiar with the concept. I then proceeded to briefly explain the project, how I came across the page and the purpose of my message. In particular, I asked the administrator/moderator for their availability to be interviewed and asked for assistance in looking for other potential participants. Finally, I included further details about the interview, specifying for instance that it would conducted online and recorded, while ensuring that anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved. As I wanted to keep the initial message to a reasonable length, I offered to provide more information in case people were interested in participating.

The amount of interviews was not determined a priori, but followed the principle of data saturation (Suri, 2011). Following the process described above, participants have been recruited through snowball sampling, combined with criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). In particular, the participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Be born or raised in Italy;
2. Have at least 18 years old and belong to one of the age groups considered (see Section 2.1.1);
3. Use at least one of the social media involved in the study (Boyd and Ellison, 2007)

This strategy grants some advantages as well as disadvantages. On the one hand, the focus on Italy enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon due to closeness to the socio-cultural background of the researcher. Moreover, the requirement to use at least one of the two social media considered in the study reinforces the coherence of the general research design, allowing to cross-validate the results coming from the digital data analysis with insights from the interviews. On the other hand, the sample presents some limitations that may sensibly affect the outcome of the analysis: above all, the decision to exclude underage participants may reduce the richness of the data, as the analysis fails to take into account the perspective on memes provided by younger segments of users. Similar remarks can be derived from the choice of limiting the case study to one country, which may reduce the generalizability of the results (more on this in Section 2.3.4).

Furthermore, I paid attention to some key socio-cultural variables. Notably, Mannheim’s

(1952) idea of 'generational unit' has been at times used as a one-fits-all category, which ultimately obscured intra-generational differences and inequalities (France and Roberts, 2015). However, as argued by Woodman (2016), the notion of generation is productive only when 'added to the mix' of other social factors (or 'locations' in Mannheim's terms) like gender and class. In this light, I have also taken into account the following three variables: gender, education, and geographical location, as detailed below.

Despite having other options, all respondents identified themselves either as male (M) or female (F). Education was divided into three categories, according to the highest degree obtained at the moment of the interview: low (none, elementary, or middle school certificate), medium (high school diploma), and high (bachelor degree and above). As far as the geographical location is concerned, while participants came from all parts of Italy, the effort has been to balance the place of upbringing, which has been divided into city (C), referring to *capoluoghi di provincia*[1], and periphery (P), in the other cases.

The final sample includes 41 interviewees, divided as follows:

- 12 Gen Zers
  - 8 males, 4 females
  - 3 with medium, 9 with high education
  - 5 coming from peripheric cities, 7 coming from central cities
- 11 Millennials
  - 7 males, 4 females
  - 3 with medium, 8 with high education
  - 4 coming from peripheric cities, 7 coming from central cities
- 9 Gen Xers
  - 4 males, 5 females
  - 1 with low, 2 with medium, 6 with high education

[1] In Italy, each region has different main towns, which house the administrative office of the province.

  - 3 coming from peripheric cities, 6 coming from central cities

- 9 Baby Boomers
  - 4 males, 5 females
  - 2 with low, 4 with medium, 3 with high education
  - 4 coming from peripheric cities, 5 coming from central cities

2.3.2 Organization and arrangement of the interviews

Before the interview, each participant was required to: a) sign an informed consent form and b) fill an introductory online survey. The informed consent form included the following information concerning the interview: the purpose of the interview, a brief description of the topic covered, the expected duration, data treatment and confidentiality. By signing the document, the interviewees also agreed to the audio-visual recording of the interview. Confidentiality has been ensured through anonymisation (see Section 2.3.3) and data restriction, as the files (introductory survey, interviews' recordings and transcripts) have been encrypted with password and accessible to the researcher only (Corti et al., 2000). The online questionnaire had the sole purpose of facilitating the organization of the sample, by keeping track of the socio-cultural variables of participants: as such, it featured general demographic questions (gender, geographical and cultural background), statistics on internet usage and users' preferences regarding social media platforms.

The interviews were conducted in Italian via video calls on a variety of different platforms, depending on the preference of the participants: Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp. On average, they lasted 1 hour and a half and were recorded using the in-built functions of the platform. During the interviews, field notes were taken in order to register additional paralinguistic information, such as tones or facial expressions.

2.3.3 Transcription and analysis through Nvivo

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed with Nvivo Transcription, a (paid) service of automatic transcription provided by Nvivo, the software for qualitative data analy-

sis developed by QSR International (Edhlund and McDougall, 2019). Nvivo Transcription takes as input video or audio files and outputs online editable and downloadable text documents. Besides speeding up the process of transcription, this service offers some additional fine-tuning features, such as the possibility to select the dictionary (Italian, in this case) and the automatic recognition of the speakers. However, the accuracy largely depends on the quality of the input file: therefore, if the recording has many background noises, interruptions, or the participants overlap each other, the programme may misspell the words or misassign the sections to the speakers. As a consequence, before being analyzed, the transcriptions needed to be checked manually one by one. During this phase, I have also removed or anonymised sensitive data so as to avoid confidentiality breaches (Corti et al., 2000; Tolich, 2004). Specifically, the names of the informants have been replaced with a code corresponding to the age groups followed by a randomly assigned number (e.g. BM_1). The codes are: 'BM' (Baby Boomer), 'X' (GenX), 'MIL' (GenY or Millennials), and 'Z' (GenZ). The transcripts are in Italian, but an English translation is provided for the excerpts included in the thesis body. Finally, Nvivo has been used in the part of data analysis and specifically to organize the transcript files and code relevant portions of the interviews.

2.3.4 Issues and limitations

The main issue of this part of empirical work was the difficulties in gaining the trust and cooperation of the gatekeepers (Kristensen and Ravn, 2015), especially those coming from the generational group Baby Boomers and Generation X. Overall, I found it hard to get in touch with the administrators of the pages and/or to convince them to participate in the interviews: despite the recruiting strategies adopted (see Section 2.3.1), I was frequently faced with suspicion and hardly got any answer. This was evident in the case of the Facebook pages, where out of the 27 contacted only 3 administrators responded. Among the other pages: 15 never answered, 6 stopped replying after a first interaction, and 3 explicitly declined to participate. This reluctance may be attributed to a failure in explaining and/or understanding my position as well as the purpose of my research. However, in one particular case, the administrators explicitly expressed their concern, stating that, despite

wanting to trust me, they feared that I was trying to scam them with the scope to steal their credentials and take control of their account. Finally, I managed to convince them by providing my academic email address, the link to my and my supervisor's institutional page.

The recruitment of Gen Zers and Millennials was on average more successful. This may be due not only to the topic appealing more to younger generations, but also to the researcher's social position in relation to this group. As maintained by Berger (2015), the researcher's personal familiarity with the experience of participants has both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, it may positively contribute to the recruitment of interviewees and enable a deeper understanding of participants' perspective; on the other hand, the risk for the researchers is to use their personal frames to view and interpret participants' experiences. Conversely, when studying the unfamiliar, scholars may approach the study "from a fresh and different viewpoint posing new questions that may lead to innovative directions" (p. 227).

Being a late Millennial, my position has probably facilitated the recruitment process of other peers: as a matter of fact, the Millennial age group saturated faster than the others. Moreover, I noticed a different disposition in respondents that perceived me as their peer: for one thing, they were more willing to share their views and past events, assuming that I had undergone similar life experiences. In addition, they felt at ease criticizing other generational groups, mentioning our being part of the same generation to establish a common ground. This occurred mostly in the case of participants belonging to Millennials and to Generation Z, less frequently with people from Generation X and never with a Baby Boomer. When people perceived me as generationally distant, I noticed an increased hesitancy and reticence in expressing controversial opinions towards (what they believed to be) my generation: overall, generalizations were softened and, sometimes, accompanied by due distinctions to exclude me from the target.

Ultimately, the difficulty of finding participants belonging to GenX and Baby Boomers resulted in the relative underrepresentation of those categories in the sample, which I tried to limit by relying on snowballing and using personal acquaintances as gatekeepers to

connect with possible interviewees. Other disparities concern the balancing of the socio-cultural variables: despite the effort to cover all the combinations, some were not represented, such as Millennials and Gen Zers with a low level of education. Finally, it can be noted that gender is unbalanced as well, with a majority of participants identifying as male.

3. Memes as a cross-generational phenomenon

The first empirical chapter sets out to investigate the extent to which memes can be considered a cross-generational phenomenon that takes on different forms, values, and meanings depending on the generational allegiance of the users circulating them. To this end, digital data and semi-structured interviews concur to illustrate the existence of different meme 'grammars' that can be linked to certain generational interpretations of meme culture. Specifically, I identify two distinct conceptualisations of memes as a cultural object: 1) a strict conceptualisation, shared by 'aware' users and mainly expressed through a *grammar of contingency*; and 2) a broad conceptualisation, shared by 'unaware' users and mainly expressed by means of a *grammar for interaction* and a *grammar of nostalgia*. The analysis shows that these understandings are generational in the sociological sense: other than by users' demographic age, the concept of memes is affected by users' media experiences, which contribute to shaping their knowledge of the phenomenon and the socio-cultural meanings attached to it.

3.1 Theoretical framework

As detailed in Section 1.2.4, participation in meme culture has been traditionally subject to a number of social, cultural, and technical requirements, regulating the access and the dynamics of meme circulation (Milner, 2016). Existing research has investigated how digital and subcultural knowledge affects users' concept and competences around memes (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Procházka, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2008), the ability to engage with memes falls under the broader notion of 'digital literacy', a concept embracing a plurality of technical and sociocultural skills, including the "myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification" (p. 4). The idea that meme creators and consumers are mainly young

users appears well-established among scholars (Abidin, 2020; Pauliks, 2020; Gal et al., 2016; Milner, 2013; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019): this assumption is based on the consideration that "young people today are immersed in digital culture" (Mihailidis, 2020, p. 2), whereby multimodal forms of communication like memes are a fundamental component of online social interactions. Moreover, a number of qualitative and quantitative studies have found that memetic representations are mainly dominated by young white men, further trimming down the native user base of meme culture to a restricted social group (Segev et al., 2015; Milner, 2016). This point is reinforced by the fact that young males populate websites like Reddit and 4chan, commonly regarded as the cradle of meme culture (Chen, 2012; Massanari, 2017; Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Zannettou et al., 2018). Following these observations, it has been argued that older demographics are excluded from meme culture (Lee and Hoh, 2021, p. 5).

However, this view is challenged by the proliferation of memes in mainstream digital culture, whereby it is believed that new segments of users have joined the phenomenon, along with the original user base. As seen in Section 1.2.4, scholars have explained the structural changes undergone by memes and their underlying culture with the entrance of new social groups (Milner, 2015). Building upon this consideration, I assume that the new actors entering the memetic sphere are not only younger generations of digital natives but also older Internet users, variously elaborating and engaging with meme culture as it spreads across the web. More specifically, the present work shifts the focus on age and generational allegiance, seeking to demonstrate that the memetic phenomenon takes generationally-connoted realizations depending on the meme literacy of the users, as shaped by their demographic age, digital literacy and media use. Here, the concept of generations is intended in the sociological sense (Mannheim, 1952; see Section 1.3.1), as formations of people sharing the same life experiences and interpretive resources: in the digital context, generations are also connected by similar media experiences. With this respect, scholars argue that technological advancement has radically changed the ways in which generations are conceived and segmented, as digitized forms of communication contribute to bringing together physically distant groups of people (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). This has led to the claim that technological competences provide "a marker of

culture through which generations may be formed" (McMullin et al., 2007). Putting the emphasis on how different media partake in the 'generationing' process (cfr. Andò, 2014), the notion of 'media generation' has been introduced to define the composite mediascape subjectively created by people engaging with different media during their life (Bolin, 2014, 2016; Hepp et al., 2017; Vittadini et al., 2013; Ghersetti and Westlund, 2018; see Section 1.3.3). This concept implies that patterns of media usage not only affect individual identities but also foster connections among people, especially those who have interacted with the same media during the formative years of youth (cfr. Bolin and Skogerbø, 2013). Nonetheless, as maintained by Andò (2014), the focus is less on the technical competence in accessing media and more on the symbolic uses and meaning connected to these practices. In other words, the impact of media can be understood in relation to their ability to offer the space and the symbolic resources for people to share their experiences (Siibak and Vittadini, 2012). As a mainstream phenomenon proliferating across different platforms, I hypothesize that the unique conformations of memes are elaborated by sociologically intended generations within their mediascape.

To date, the generational dimension of memes remains an understudied aspect of the phenomenon. Even though previous studies have looked at predominant representations of social groups in memetic production (e.g. Milner, 2013; Gal et al., 2016; see also 1.2.4), a thorough investigation of which demographics are actively involved in the dynamics of meme culture and how they understand the phenomenon is still missing. Moreover, while analysis of meme production abound, investigations focusing on the "audience perspective" are still sparse (Huntington, 2020, p. 1). In fact, the currently shared definition of memes as collections of remixed digital objects or as popular declination of the Internet language (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016; Applegate and Cohen, 2017; McCulloch, 2014; see Section 1.2) have been mostly derived by the analysis of digital data. However, studies like Miltner (2014) and McKelvey et al. (2021) have demonstrated that interviews and focus groups enable the researcher to gain a better insight on the social dynamics of meme production and circulation, by collecting first hand data on how users understand and employ memes. Adopting a similar approach, this section combines the analysis of two corpora of digital data, respectively collected from Instagram and Facebook (see sec-

tions 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 for a discussion on the collection strategies), with the results from semi-structured interviews with users belonging to four demographic groups (as detailed in Section 2.1.1): Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. In particular, the digital data analysis is directed at identifying different 'grammars' of memes: as proposed by Bainotti et al. (2021), the notion of 'grammar' ties together different aspects of the production of digital artifacts, including "their compositional modality, the cultural meaning they reflect, and the role of the platforms in prompting them" (p. 10). Similarly, an investigation of the grammar(s) of memes takes into consideration both the superficial realizations and the contexts of use: at a practical level, this means detecting frequent combinations of layouts and types of humour/irony and putting them in relation to their broader cultural meaning. As a further step, the study seeks to demonstrate that these grammars correspond to unique generational conceptualisations of the memetic phenomenon. In this context, I will shed light on memes as a social practice actualised in different ways by different generational segments of users: in so doing, the analysis shows how memes take on different realizations and meanings resulting from the interaction of users' demographic cohort, media experience, and digital literacy.

3.2 Digital data analysis

The following sections present the results of the digital data analysis, which focuses on two datasets extracted from Instagram and Facebook. The corpora are examined following the Ethnographic Content Analysis approach (Altheide, 1987). Employing a codebook inspired by Shifman (2014b), the goal is to identify one or more grammars of memes, as emerging from recurrent combinations of topics, formal properties, and ironic effect employed. At the same time, attention will be paid to the context of use of the memes, by investigating the messages conveyed and the narrative styles of the memes. In line with the original tripartition proposed by Shifman, the results are articulated in three sections, respectively accounting for the content, the form, and the stance of the memes: after describing the findings of the analysis, I will outline the grammars emerging from each collection.

3.2.1 Instagram dataset

The analysis of the Instagram dataset was performed on a subsample of 745 random posts published between the 1st of January 2020 and the 31st of March 2020 (as specified in 2.2.1). Before delving into the findings, I will briefly present some general statistics regarding the sample. The first observation concerns the number of memes actually present in the dataset: following the operational definition provided in 2.1.1, I have considered as memes only the posts displaying some kind of manipulation, i.e. inserted text lines and/or image editing. Consequently, non-manipulated content was marked as non-memetic and excluded from further analysis. On this basis, 673 memes and 72 non memetic instances were found. A closer inspection reveals that the latter group includes three kinds of posts: photos (41 occurrences), drawings or comic strips (18 occurrences), and screenshots from other platforms (13 occurrences). Figure 3.1, showing a photo without sign of user's manipulation, is an example of a non-memetic instance found in the dataset. The fact that this content displays the hashtag *#memeitaliani* can be accounted for in various ways: a possible explanation could be that the hashtag is indiscriminately applied to non-memetic content for promotional purposes, following the practice of 'hashtag hijacking', which consists in the purposeful insertion of unrelated hashtags to a content with the objective of attracting visibility and engagement (VanDam and Tan, 2016; Rogers, 2017). Notwithstanding, it can be observed that non memetic instances only represent a small percentage of the content analyzed (less than 10%), therefore suggesting that – at least in the corpus observed – the hashtag has been actually used to tag memes.

Figure 3.1. Example of non-memetic instance from the Instagram dataset

Although public Instagram pages are predominant, the corpus features personal accounts as well. These are easily recognisable, as their names usually correspond to the users' own name (or nickname), they have a reduced number of followers, and memes alternate with personal content. Most of the public pages found are dedicated to memes or humoristic content, as hinted by their names: e.g. pages including 'laugh' or 'jokes' in their names. Others suggest that the page deals with specific topics, such as school or are bound to a geographical area. In a few cases, clues about the targeted audience can be extrapolated from the names of the pages, as in the case of accounts dealing with school related situations, which seem to address teenagers and young adults.

Content. The memetic production of the Instagram dataset displays a variety of topics. Among them, 'Everyday life', 'Current events', and 'School' seem to be the most prolific ones, counting respectively 130, 111, and 94 posts (see Table 3.1). Jokes also cover a relevant percentage of the topics, as demonstrated by the homonymous category, which contains 86 instances – mostly gags and puns. Other clusters focus on personal relationships (e.g. 'Love and friendship' and 'Family'), on cultural interests or hobbies (e.g. 'Movies, cartoons, and music', 'Sports', 'Video games'), or on memes ('Metamemes').

The biggest cluster of the dataset features memes displaying snippets of everyday life with a humoristic flair. Unlike other categories, it is hard to identify a topic in 'Everyday life' memes: they usually depict funny or paradoxical situations, which users are likely

Topic	**Frequency**
Everyday life	130
Current events	111
School	94
Jokes	86
Love and friendship	52
Family	41
Sports	33
Memory and growing up	24
Metamemes	20
Technology	17
Movies, cartoons, and music	16
Video games	12
Job	11
History	8
Geography	5
Food	4
Animals	4
Health	3
University	1
Science	1
Total	**673**

Table 3.1. Overview of the topics in the Instagram dataset

to have experienced. For instance, the meme in Figure 3.2 describes someone picking up the phone to look at the time, but then getting distracted and forgetting to do the one thing they intended to do when picking up the phone. Posts fitting into this category are typically characterized by a lack of contextual information, meaning that they do not place the situation in a determined time or space. Similarly, the characters taking part in the scene are left undefined, as neither their age nor their gender is revealed. As I will illustrate in the next section, meme production exploits formal and linguistic features to trigger users' identification. Arguably, the vagueness is meant to enhance the relatability of the scene presented.

Figure 3.2. Example of 'Everyday life' meme[1]

Expressions of self-mocking and/or auto-commiseration are common in 'Everyday life' memes: several items in the corpus portray the main character as cursed by bad luck, failing, or being sad and depressed (Figure 3.3). Other memes instead represent small moments of success in a witty way, like dunking a paper ball on the first try and feeling like Michael Jordan (Figure 3.4). Overall, it may be said that the 'Everyday life' category of memes portray everyday life as it is perceived by users, with its ups and downs.

[1] "When you open your phone to know what's the time and you look at everything... apart from the time."

Figure 3.3. Example of 'Everyday life' meme[2]

Figure 3.4. Example of 'Everyday life' meme[3]

The group labeled as 'Current events' refers to memes reporting and/or commenting on recently occurred events. As widely discussed in Section 1.2.2, the fact that memes provide commentary on social and political issues has been extensively investigated by the literature (Milner, 2013, 2016; Ross and Rivers, 2017a; Denisova, 2019; Hristova, 2014; Heiskanen, 2017; Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo, 2021). Within the dataset examined, the posts regarding current events mostly refer to four major events occurred during the months of the data collection: the discussion around a possible World War III, the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Sanremo Music Festival. Covid-19 memes represent the largest group within the sample analyzed: in particular, the production on this topic covers various aspects, such as the speculations around the origin of the disease (Figure 3.5) or the efficacy of the anti-covid measures, like the masks and the general lockdown (Figure 3.6).

[2] "When you are depressed and you go take a shower listening to depressing music to make you feel better"

[3] "When you throw a paper ball and you dunk it on the first try"

Figure 3.5. Example of 'Current events' meme[4]

Figure 3.6. Example of 'Current events' meme[5]

'School', as the name suggests, is a group of memes depicting situations related to school and student life. As shown by Figure 3.7, the typical characters found in these memes are students and teachers that interact with each other during lessons and tests. Most of the time, contextual information such as the school grade are left unspecified, yet they are sometimes hinted or inferred from the name of the page: these cues seem to indicate that most memes refer to middle or high school, as also suggested by the use of 'prof(essore/ssa)', references to 'schoolmates' or 'classmates', to 'homeworks' and 'school tests'.

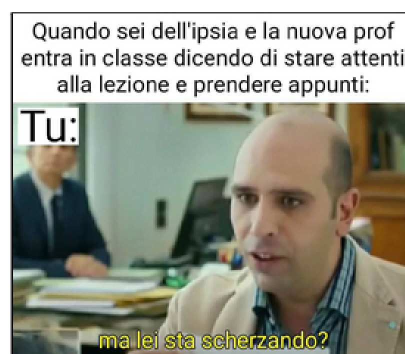

Figure 3.7. Example from the category 'School'[6]

[4]"The news: the Coronavirus was transmitted by bats and snakes / Western people: How is that possible? / China: shef"

[5]"President of the Republic / Society panicking over the Coronavirus / 'Let's keep the distance today to hold each other tighter tomorrow'"

As it emerges so far, generation does not appear as a prominent topic in the memes analyzed. Despite never mentioning the term nor the related labels, the discourse around generations arises from two distinct groups of memes: ‘Memory and growing up’ (24 occurrences) and ‘Family’ (41 occurrences). The first cluster includes memes recollecting memories from childhood as well as memes featuring comparisons between older and younger generations. In both cases, memes acknowledge the passing of time by marking the distance with the past, evoking old games (Figure 3.8), activities, and objects. At the same time, they occasionally compare childhood reminiscences with those of younger generations, to either convey a sense of superiority or a self-mocking attitude (Figure 3.9).

Figure 3.8. Example from ‘Memory and growing up’[7]

Figure 3.9. Example from ‘Memory and growing up’[8]

Memes in ‘Family’ describe the relationship with parents and older relatives from the point of view of the offspring, emphasizing the gap among young and old people with respect to skills, worldviews, and beliefs (more on this in Chapter 5). In this respect, these memes usually depict situations of conflict and misunderstandings between sons and parents, as exemplified by Figure 3.10, where the meme portrays a mother being okay with her children sitting in front of the computer for hours while studying, but she gets angry when they are playing with the computer. Although the age of the characters portrayed is not clearly stated, these memes typically depict situations in which parents and sons

[6]“When you are at the IPSIA secondary school and the new teacher tells you to pay attention in class and take notes / ‘Are you kidding me?’”

[7]“What with one thing and another… Whatever happened to these?”

[8]“The hair of a 8-year-old boy today / My hair at 8 years old”

still live together and, on some occasions, references to attending school are mentioned. These cues seem to point, once again, at teenagers and young adults as the main producers and recipients of the memes – a finding consistent with the observations advanced for the 'School' cluster.

Figure 3.10. Example of meme from the 'Family' category[9]

The analysis of the references reveals that the majority of intertextual elements are visual rather than textual. Visual referencing is not only prominent with respect to the textual counterpart, but also offers more insights on the practices of memetic construction and will therefore constitute the focus of the analysis. In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that the coding category "Visual references" includes both references in the content of the memes and those included in the template (more on meme templates in the next section). Put another way, a reference to Donald Trump does not necessarily mean that the meme concerns the politician: in some cases the reference is part of the memetic template, as shown in Figure 3.11.

[9]"My mother when I sit 6 hours in front of the computer studying / My mother when I sit 30 mins in front of the computer playing"

Figure 3.11. Example of visual reference as part of the template[10]

To systematize the huge variety of references displayed by memes, a first distinction that can be drawn is between fictional characters and real life personas. As shown in Table 3.2, fictional references are mostly mentions to movies, cartoons, and TV series. Among them, the references to the TV series SpongeBob SquarePants (58 occurrences) and to the Star-Wars spin-off The Mandalorian (17 occurrences) decisively outnumber the others. The proliferation of references to The Mandalorian, and especially to the character Baby Yoda/Grogu, could be linked to the novelty of the series, which was launched at the end of 2019. The popularity of SpongeBob in memes appears long-lasting, acknowledged by meme archives such as Know Your Meme and by metamemes like that in Figure 3.12, suggesting that people are able to recognise the numerous memes and memetic templates spawned by the TV series.

Figure 3.12. Metameme on SpongeBob[11]

Real life characters include a variety of prominent public figures, such as politicians,

[10] "Person showing off and getting a swelled head / me thinking that 30 years of jail are not that bad after all"

[11] "When you're watching SpongeBob and you recognize all the scenes that have become memes"

Visual references	**Frequency**
SpongeBob	58
Stonks	32
Grogu (The Mandalorian)	17
Monsters&Co.	10
Lego	8
Aldo, Giovanni e Giacomo	6
Alberto Angela	5
Rick and Morty	5
Donald Trump	5
Matteo Salvini	5
Kermit	4
Vittorio Sgarbi	4
Matty Il Biondo	4
The Avengers: EndGame	4
Pope Francis	4
Bruno Barbieri (Masterchef)	3
Morgan	3
Matteo Salvini	3
Cristiano Ronaldo	3
Gerry Scotti	3
Antonino Cannavacciuolo	3
Giuseppe Conte	3
Ramsay Gordon	3

Table 3.2. Occurrences of visual reference (freq.≥ 3)

sportsmen (especially football players), people from the entertainment world, and not ultimately web stars and Internet phenomena. Alongside international figures like Donald Trump, a variety of national figures are also present like politicians (Salvini, Di Maio, and Conte) and the Pope (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13. Meme from 'current events' featuring the Pope[12]

Moreover, the analysis identifies a variety of Italian celebrities, including actors (such as the comic trio 'Aldo, Giovanni e Giacomo'), singers (Morgan), TV presenters (including Paolo Bonolis, Diletta Leotta, Alberto Angela, or Gerry Scotti) and other figures associated with TV shows, like Joe Bastianich (Masterchef) or Alessandro Borghese (4 Ristoranti). Finally, a small group of references concern Internet celebrities and phenomena, such as youtubers like Youtubo Anche Io, Justremo, and Matty Il Biondo (Figure 3.14).

Figure 3.14. Meme containing the Italian YouTuber and internet phenomenon Matty Il Biondo[13]

[12]The meme contains a famous quote from the 1981 Italian comedy movie *Bianco, rosso e Verdone*, literally translatable as 'this hand can be iron or can be a feather'.

Form. As mentioned, users' manipulation is what enables the distinction between memes and non-memetic items. Looking at the memes contained in the dataset, it can be observed that most of them feature minor signs of manipulation, that is the insertion of new lines of text or the modification of existing ones. A reduced number of memes display only major types of manipulation: these are visual memes with no text showing various forms of image editing, such as objects and characters photoshopped in the picture. Moreover, some memes show both types of manipulation, as exemplified by Figure 3.15, including both inserted text lines and an edited image, i.e. the face of Baby Yoda/Grogu (The Mandalorian) photoshopped on the body of Hulk.

Figure 3.15. Example of meme featuring both minor and major signs of manipulation[14]

With respect to the general structure, memes display four recognisable layouts: Reactions, Single Images, Crescendo memes and Panels (Table 3.3). These layouts result from the combination of recurrent content arrangement and linguistic structures, as observed in a previous study (Giorgi, 2022).

[13]"Me everytime I open a math book / 'No, I don't get depressed, I'm getting a breakdown'"

[14]"How I used to feel when as a child I won at arm wrestling against my dad"

Layout	**Frequency**
Reaction	407
Single Image	139
Panel	84
Crescendo	43
Total	**673**

Table 3.3. Overview of the layout types in the Instagram dataset

Among them, the Reaction layout appears by far the most popular, counting 407 occurrences. As stated, this layout derives from the 'Reaction Images' used in image-board websites like 4chan to comment and react to online conversations and threads[15]. Reaction memes consist of two parts: the first is a textual component, usually placed in the upper section of the meme, which serves to introduce the situation and the subjects involved in it; below this, an image (or more than one) constitutes the reaction to the event described. In Figure 3.16, the puzzled face of Italian politician Matteo Salvini is employed to react to a situation in which a man has just accidentally discovered that his wife is cheating on him. The Reaction layout is mostly found in memes depicting daily situations rather than, for example, in memes concerning current events. In fact, the structure of these memes seems crafted with the purpose of seeking relatability with the viewer. Looking at the linguistic constructions, this is achieved through two recurrent patterns: the 'When' and the 'Script'. Described as a variation of the 'awkward moment', the 'When' pattern appears to be a popular standardized verbal structure in memes (Lou, 2017; see also Section 1.2.1). As seen in Figure 3.16, the clause is followed by a first-person or a second-person narration of the events: specifically, the use of pronouns like 'You' or 'I' appears to be directed at establishing a connection with the recipient of the memes, triggering identification with the situation described. Unlike the 'When' pattern, the 'Script' features two or more characters taking turns in a conversation, where the last line is constituted by the reaction image. Similarly to what is observed for 'When' memes, the presence of a 'You' or 'I' as participants in the exchange indicates that the viewer is directly involved in the

[15]https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/reaction-images.

exchange enacted by the meme, thus triggering the identification with the scene described. Aside from the main character, other personas are introduced in the textual parts. For example, in memes from the 'School' or 'Family' category, typical characters are professors, classmates, or relatives (Figure 3.17).

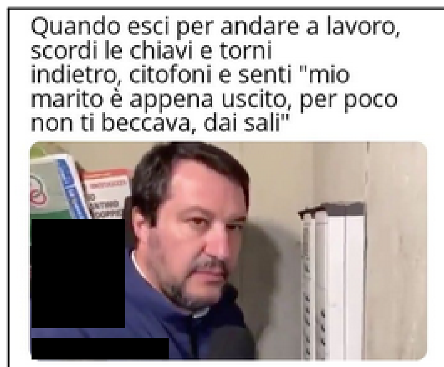

Figure 3.16. Example of 'when' meme[16]

Figure 3.17. Example of 'script' meme meme[17]

The second most popular layout found in the dataset is the Single Image format, counting 139 occurrences. This layout features one image and some text, typically following the TTBT (Top Text Bottom Text) structure also found in macros (Yus, 2021; Zenner and Geeraerts, 2018). However, deviations from the standardized patterns have been found as well, typically involving other textual patterns and forms of image editing (Giorgi, 2022). In this dataset, some Single Image memes featuring the TTBT type of text display the 'When' construction and are therefore similar to reaction memes, i.e. with the image providing visual commentary to the situation. In other cases, the text is formed by labels applied to certain parts of the picture, usually to define the roles of the characters present in the meme. In Figure 3.18, for instance, it can be observed that the labels are invariably applied to human and non-human characters in the picture (the two girls and the Tuba), with the intent to create a memetic scene based on the parallelism with the situation represented by the image (more on the construction of humoristic sense below).

[16]"When you leave for work, forget the keys and go back, buzz and hear: 'my husband has just left, you almost got caught, come on in'"

[17]"Mom: I forbid you to use your computer until you take the exam! / Me, a student of Computer Engineering:"

Figure 3.18. Example of Single Image meme with labels[18]

Panels (84) and Crescendo memes (43) are the least popular meme layouts of the dataset. The first category features multi-panel memes, telling a short story: Figure 3.19 provides an example of this meme type, which uses two Lego figures to enact a funny dialogue based on misunderstandings and puns. The base of Panels can be drawings, frames from movies/cartoons, but also stock photos. The manipulation of these bases is what distinguishes Panel memes from other multi-panels, such as comic strips.

Figure 3.19. Example of Panel meme[19]

Finally, the Crescendo layout is split in two halves, one featuring a series of images and the other a sequence of sentences. The meme is constructed in such a way that each phrase

[18]"User / Bidoo / Meme page"

[19]"Berto you don't understand me / What do you mean? / You see?! / Not much without glasses..."

is linked to one of the pictures: for instance, in Figure 3.20 diverse modalities of meme making are paired with increasingly elaborate images of brains, (ironically) suggesting the intellectual superiority of people who copy memes over those who create original ones.

Figure 3.20. Example of Crescendo meme[20]

In the analysis of meme layouts, standardized templates deserve a separate discourse. Existing research has pointed at templating as the fundamental dynamics of meme production: in this sense, it has been argued that new memes arise from the modification of existing memetic structure, through the insertion of new text lines or through the creative recombination of their elements (cfr. Rintel, 2013). Nonetheless, recent studies seem to have resized the centrality of standardized templates, suggesting that their impact and their presence may be more marginal than expected (e.g. Dynel, 2021). The findings of the analysis seem to confirm this claim: out of the 673 memes examined, only 216 items display standardized templates. Table 3.4 provides an overview of the most frequently used templates found in the dataset, although it can be observed that even the most popular ones do not occur more than a few times in the corpus. As for the formats, many templates display a Reaction layout (e.g. *Loading Cat* or *Oof Stones*) or a Crescendo layout (e.g. *Putting on Clown Makeup* or *Galaxy Brain*), but Single Images (e.g. *Girl Putting Tuba*

[20]"Creating ugly memes / Creating original and funny memes / Copying them / Copying them and covering the logo with an emoji"

[20]As mentioned in the methodological chapter, I have considered as 'standardardised' the templates such as macros and exploitables, which have been recognised and cataloged on the web archive Know Your Meme.

On Girl's Head) are present as well. As a side note, it should be noted that the count does not include all the popular template series spawned by a single character, like SpongeBob or Baby Yoda – as many of them were not cataloged in the web archive Know Your Meme. More so, the choice to rely on the American based website Know Your Meme as a benchmark to establish whether a template is standardized or not could have potentially affected the analysis, for instance excluding standardized templates tied to other national contexts (such as the Italian one).

Template	Frequency
Putting On Clown Makeup meme	6
Math is math meme	6
Loading Cat meme	5
Galaxy Brain meme	5
Girl Putting Tuba On Girl's Head meme	5
Woman Yelling at a Cat meme	4
Disappointed Black Guy meme	4
Fish Helo meme	4
Oof Stones meme	4
Baby Yoda Drinking Soup meme	3
Draw 25 meme	3
Protegent Antivirus Yes meme	3
I Am Once Again Asking for Your Financial Support meme	3
Three-headed Dragon meme	3
Drakeposting meme	3
I've Won… But At What Cost meme	3
Whisper in Ear Goosebump meme	3
Panik Kalm Panik meme	3
Laughing SpongeBob	3
Crying Cat meme	3
Unsettled Tom meme	3

Table 3.4. Overview of the most frequently used standardized templates (freq.≥ 3)

Stance. As outlined in Section 1.2.1, irony is one of the distinctive features of memes. Although previous studies have demonstrated the existence of non-ironic memes (Shifman, 2019), several scholars claim that the main function of memes is to be funny and to produce a humorous effect on the viewer (Dynel, 2016; Miltner, 2014; Piata, 2016). These claims seem confirmed by the analysis of the Instagram dataset: following the indications

described in 2.1.1, 629 memes have been labeled as ironic and 44 as non-ironic (Table 3.5).

Type of irony	**Frequency**
Echoic irony	421
Non-echoic irony	208
Non ironic	44
Total	**673**

Table 3.5. Types of irony in the Instagram dataset

Non-ironic memes include motivational phrases, memes reminiscing about the past, or memes providing information and trivia (Figure 3.21). This group also includes memes lacking the requirements described in Section 2.2.3 to be analyzed as ironic instances (e.g. humour-related hashtags).

Figure 3.21. Example of non-ironic meme[21]

As detailed in Table 3.5, ironic memes are divided into two clusters, depending on the type of irony displayed: non-echoic irony counts 208 occurrences, while echoic irony counts 421 occurrences. Non-echoic memes are typically instances of verbal irony, leveraging polysemic meanings and puns to construct the humoristic effect: such is the case

[21] "The face of someone who saw the war / the smile of someone who killed 800 soviets with a rifle". The meme is dedicated to Simo Haya, a Finnish military sniper during the Second World War.

of the meme in Figure 3.22, which exploits the ambiguity between the literal meaning of 'attaccare bottone' (sew a button) and its figurative sense (strike up a conversation). Similarly, Figure 3.23 relies on word similarity ("King Kong" and "Ping Pong"). As noted by Dynel (2016), the impact of the visual component on the construction of humour may vary: while in Figure 23 the image appears to be of secondary importance, as it merely illustrates the humorous text, in Figure 24 it constitutes the punchline along with the text.

Figure 3.22. Example of non-echoic irony[22]

Figure 3.23. Example of non-echoic irony

In addition, a subgroup of memes within the non-echoic cluster shows 'situational irony': consistent with Attardo's (2000) notion, these memes rely on absurd and paradoxical situations, as shown in Figure 3.24, where the image showing a phone broken in two contrasts with the text wondering why the phone does not charge.

[22]"What are a needle and a thread doing? Sewing a button/striking up a conversation"

Figure 3.24. Example of situational irony[23]

However, most memes in the dataset show the echoic type of irony. Drawing upon Sperber and Wilson (1981), I suggest employing the notion of 'echoic irony' to account for memes, whose punchline is constituted by elements from other cultural texts such as movies, TV series or programs, anime, and so on (see Section 1.2.1). The analysis of the dataset enables further trimming of this definition. At a general level, echoic irony is typically observed in Reaction and Crescendo memes, where they convey the reaction to the situation depicted: a prototypical example is shown in Figure 3.25, featuring an instance of *Hide the Pain Harold* meme, which is typically used to convey "suppressed pain and/or discomfort"[24]. The situation described in the setup is that of someone who makes up excuses to avoid going out, yet their friends keep finding solutions: the irony consists in the fact that Harold's expression constitutes the representation of the fake smile one would have in this situation, torn between the desire of staying home and the incapability of explicitly turning down the invitation.

[23] "Guys, it's not charging. Does someone know what's the problem?"

[24] https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hide-the-pain-harold.

Figure 3.25. Example of echoic irony[25]

Unlike other types of irony, here the incongruity is produced neither at the semantic nor at the situational level, rather derives from the presence of decontextualized elements (cfr. Raskin, 2008), which generates an apparent inconsistency between the components of the memes – usually between the image and the text. In the meme above, for instance, the picture does not represent the main character of the memetic situation but it is a photo of the Hungary stock photo model András Arató. Yet, the cleavage is resolved by users' capacity to perceive a continuity of meaning between the parts: in fact, as seen in the example, intertextual elements fit in the situation presented in the setup, completing the sense of the meme. This observation is consistent with Lou's (2017) indication to understand memes as multimodal similes, which involve the selective mapping of features, roles, and viewpoints from other cultural texts (see also Section 1.2.1). Contextually, the findings indicate that different parts of a cultural text can be echoed: some memes display a more visually oriented type of echoic irony, where the echoed parts are frames with evocative facial expressions and gestures, as the innocent blank staring look of Baby Yoda (Figure 3.26); verbal echoing is also popular in the dataset, found in memes including quotes. For instance, the meme in Figure 3.27 echoes the famous quote of Italian chef Alessandro Borghese from the TV program 4 Ristoranti, which he employs to rate the restaurant setting: "I gave one (point) to the location". In the meme, the quote is used as a humoristic remark on the dilapidated conditions of the school described in the textual setup.

[25]"When I tell excuses to avoid going out with my friends and they keep finding solutions"

Figure 3.26. Example of ‘visual’ echoic irony[26]

Figure 3.27. Example of ‘visual and verbal’ echoic irony [27]

The grammar of contingency

On the basis of these results, a predominant grammar emerges from the data contained in the Instagram corpus: the *grammar of contingency*. This grammar appears consistent with respect to the vernacular use, the structures, and the narrative style. As for the context of use, the *grammar of contingency* is mostly employed to provide humoristic representations of ordinary, everyday moments as well as of current issues and events. Looking at the formal properties, it shows a certain rigidity in the assembling strategies. In fact, most memetic instances employs the Reaction layout, with a clear division between the text and image, in terms of functions accomplished in the economy of the meme: consistent with the structure of visual-verbal jokes (Dynel, 2016), the analyzed memes feature a setup described in the text and a humoristic resolution delivered by the image. This structure also enables the construction of the echoic type of irony, through the insertion of decontextualized elements, a realization which appears predominant with respect to other types of irony. Looking at the narrative styles, these artifacts are constructed to foster user’s identification: at a linguistic level, this is achieved by presenting the situation from the point of view of the viewer, through the use of second- or first-person pronouns (You, I), adjectives, and verbs. Finally, with respect to the contexts of use, it can be argued

[26]“When you’re at your friend’s, his mom asks if you’re hungry and he says no”

[27]“When you enter in class and notice that the heaters are not working and the walls are falling apart / ‘ gave one to the location’”

that memes on Instagram mostly refer to the everyday life of teenagers and young adults, including school-related situations and relationships with relatives. This datum suggests the link between this type of grammar and younger demographics of internet users, i.e. Millennials and Generation Z.

3.2.2 Facebook dataset

As illustrated in Section 2.2.2, the corpus collected on Facebook was assembled starting from a number of selected pages dealing with generational memories and identities. The analysis was performed on a subsample of 270 randomly extracted posts. The first observation that can be advanced concerns the number of memes present in the corpus: following the definition in 2.1.1, the memetic instances found in the dataset are 138, while non-memes are 132. This could be a potential methodological artifact caused by the decision of focusing on pages not specifically dedicated to the production of memes. Accounting for almost half of the dataset, non memetic items include photos depicting everyday scenes from the past (Figure 3.28), celebrities, vintage clothes, and everyday objects. Another interesting remark concerns the distribution of the memes. The analysis reveals that the presence of memes is connected to the production style of the single pages: this means that in some of them they are barely encountered, while in other most of the sample is represented by memes.

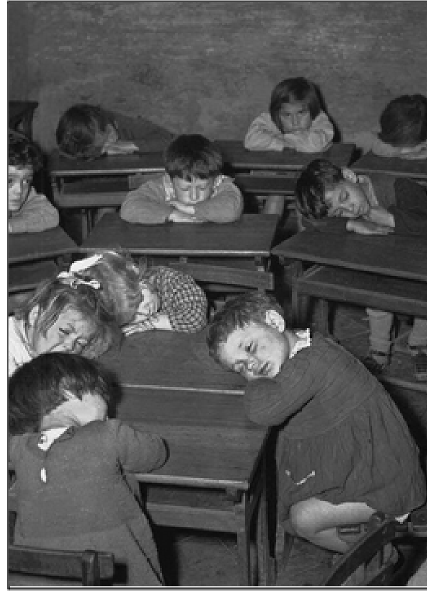

Figure 3.28. Example of non-memetic instance from the Facebook dataset

More observations can be advanced in relation to the pages' names and their descriptions: for instance, the pages never mention the term 'generation' nor generational categories like Millennials or Baby Boomers. Instead, most refer to one or more decades, revealing a tendency at conceptualizing past experiences and memories rather in terms of time frames corresponding to childhood and/or teenage years, than by employing generational labels. Among those focusing on a single decade, a few pages are dedicated to the 80s (3 pages), some more to the 90s (6 pages) and only one to the 2000s. The rest embraces more than one decade, more or less explicitly indicated. The descriptions of the pages provide more information about the content and the leitmotiv of the pages: at a general level, all of them seem to be created with the purpose to remember the past through photos and stories. More or less explicitly framed, these pages also have a communitarian scope, as they seek to reunite people who have directly experienced their youth during the same years, with the idea of reliving them together. In this context, users are occasionally invited to contribute by suggesting which content to post or by commenting the posts with their own personal memories and recollections. As a result, nostalgia (Boym, 2008; see also Section 1.3.3) emerges to be the common thread of the accounts examined: as it emerges from the descriptions, each page seeks to point out the uniqueness of the decades

Topic	**Frequency**
Memory and growing up	130
Greetings and wishes	111
Current events	94
Jokes	86
Everyday life	52
Promotional	41
Family	33
Total	**138**

Table 3.6. Overview of the topics in the Facebook dataset

it represents, often emphasizing its impact on present day culture, while expressing the unfulfillable longing to go back to that time. While nostalgic remembrance constitutes the core of the pages, sometimes the production seems to be more heterogeneous: for instance, the description of one of the pages states that the page "is dedicated to past years but current issues are also covered, along with everything we enjoy publishing".

Content. Looking at the content, the memes of this dataset show less variety of topics if compared to the Instagram corpus. As illustrated in Table 3.6, "Memory and growing up" constitutes by far the biggest cluster counting 75 occurrences, followed by "Greetings and wishes" (30 occurrences) and "Current events" (18 occurrences). This bias comes at no surprise, given that the pages analyzed deal with nostalgic recollections of the past. Other topics that were predominant in the Instagram dataset, such as "Everyday life" and "Jokes", appear marginal here.

As seen in the Instagram corpus, the group "Memory and growing up" contains memes dealing with past experiences and the awareness of growing older. A closer analysis reveals that the target of these reminiscences are various and include not only past habits and experiences but also old everyday objects, technologies (Figure 3.29), toys, food, and music.

Figure 3.29. Example of meme from “Memory and growing up”[28]

“Greetings and wishes” include memes that generally wish a good day (or a good night) to the users of the page, as in Figure 3.30 (more on this type of memes in the next section). This cluster also features a small number of posts directed at wishing happy birthday to celebrities. Current events are also discussed through memes: all dealing with the Coronavirus, these memes discuss the measures adopted by the Government to prevent the diffusion and/or express messages of sympathy directed towards the medical staff, committed to fighting the virus everyday (Figure 3.31).

Figure 3.30. Example of ‘buongiornissimo’ meme[29]

Figure 3.31. Example from ‘current events’[30]

[28]“Saturday evening… and you ruled the world.”

[29]“Happy Tuesday / There are moments that aren’t erased, loves that never end and smiles that cannot be forgotten.”

[30]“Doctors and nurses you’re the pride of the country”

As for the visual and textual intertextual references, it can be noted that they are far less numerous and frequent than those found in the other corpus. Interestingly, in many cases the mentions regard cultural texts coming from the past, such as old movies (e.g. *La Boum*), TV series (e.g. *The O.C.*) and programs (e.g. the program for children *Bim Bum Bam*) but also celebrities, like the Italian comic duo 'Franco e Ciccio'. Among them, I have also identified Italian references not only to celebrities (Iva Zanicchi, Al Bano, Claudio Baglioni, Gigi D'Agostino) but also to a variety of objects and brands, such as the toy robot *Emiglio*, the perfume *Bon Bons Malizia*, the mobile phone operator *Omnitel*.

Form. Similarly to what is observed on Instagram, memes on Facebook show 'minor' signs of manipulation, especially the insertion of text lines, indicating that this type of manipulation is the most diffused across both datasets. As for the layouts, Reaction memes occur only 22 times, there are 6 Panel memes and no Crescendo memes. The predominant layout is the Single Image, counting 110 occurrences (Table 3.7).

Layout	**Frequency**
Single Image	110
Reaction	22
Panel	6
Total	**138**

Table 3.7. Overview of the layout types in the Facebook dataset

As seen, Single Image memes typically feature one image with text superimposed. While many show the typical Top Text Bottom Text structure, there are also instances of one-liners as well as more creative arrangements. From a linguistic point of view, while the "when" or the "script" patterns were predominant in the Instagram dataset, here they are less frequently found. Instead, the most productive construction is the "us, who" (noi che...), which is used to describe situations and beliefs supposedly shared by an unspecified collectivity 'we'. For instance, the meme in Figure 3.32 refers to the fact that people used to go shopping to small, often family-owned, grocery stores (called "botteghe" in Italian) near their houses. As it emerges, the situations depicted refer to common past

experiences or habits, more or less explicitly linked to a given time frame: for instance, while memes like Figure 3.32 do not give any temporal indication, the reference to the movie *La Boum* (*Il tempo delle mele* in Italian) in Figure 3.33 places the situation in the 80s, that is the years in which the movie was released and gained popularity.

Figure 3.32. Example of Single Image meme[31]

Figure 3.33. Example of Single Image meme[32]

The formal construction of the memes coming from the cluster 'Greetings and wishes' deserves closer inspection. This typology of memes is known and referred to as 'buongiornissimo' (pl. *buongiornissimi*; cfr. Piccioni et al., 2020): typically, they feature a Single Image layout with text lines superimposed. The sheer variety of background images ranges from pictures of landscapes (e.g. sunsets and sundowns, but also seascapes), babies and pets. It is not uncommon to find further editing of cartoon figures or emojis, flowers and hearts. As said, these items normally are employed to wish a good day (or a goodnight) to the addressee, however motivational phrases are also frequently found. Despite being barely studied and acknowledged by the literature, the term 'buongiornissimo' refers to a typology of memes displaying consistent and recognisable characteristics of content and form (cfr. Marrone, 2017). In Section 3.3, I demonstrate that this label bears a negative and ageist connotation, as young audiences tend to identify 'Buongiornissimo' instances as non-memes and to automatically indicate old users as the producers and consumers of these artifacts.

[31] "Us, who used to do our grocery at the shop downstairs"

[32] "Us, who… the only reality we've ever known is 'La Boum'"

To summarize, the formal properties of the memes analyzed show less rigidity and conventionalization with respect to the other dataset: as mentioned, the arrangement of the layous is less fixed, showing various combinations of text and image. Unsurprisingly, fixed formats like macros and exploitables are almost absent from the dataset, limited to two instances of memes showing the *Dolly Parton Challenge* template (Figure 3.34).

Figure 3.34. Example of meme showing the 'Dolly Parton Challenge' meme template

Stance. In the Facebook dataset, irony seems to play a marginal role. As compared to those emerging from the analysis of the Instagram corpus, here the situation appears reversed, with most memes showing no sign of irony (Table 3.8).

Type of irony	Frequency
Non ironic	87
Non-echoic irony	34
Echoic irony	17
Total	**138**

Table 3.8. Types of irony in the Facebook dataset

A closer inspection reveals that most memes seem to be directed at producing a nostalgic feeling in the viewer, recalling past memories and acknowledging the relentless passing of time. Nostalgia in memes is built both at visual and textual level, by depicting common experiences and employing evoking text: as for the visual part, nostalgic memes

feature images coming from the past representing old life situations, everyday objects, and habits. Moreover, in the textual part, some memes ask direct questions to activate memories and to elicit a response from users, like 'do you remember. . . ?', 'who remembers. . . ?' or 'have you ever. . . ?'. This is exemplified by Figure 3.35: using the Single Image format, the meme features a black and white picture of what looks like a family gathering. The variety of age groups visible in the image suggests the presence of more than one family unit, while the elegant dresses hint at a special occasion, probably a holiday meal. The text, placed above the image, asks "have you ever sat down around a table like this one?". The additional phrase "so many memories. . . " seems to indicate that this scene is associated with positive feelings, yet it may also communicate sadness for a past that is now lost and cannot come back (in the next chapter, I will delve deeper into nostalgia evoked by memes and its implications for collective memory and generational identities). To summarize, these memes are constructed so as to trigger users' identification with past memories and nostalgic feelings with respect to them.

Figure 3.35. Example of nostalgic meme[33]

As for humoristic memes, Table 3.8 indicates that most instances of irony fall under the non-echoic type. This includes cases of situational irony, where the humoristic effect is produced by the contrast between the situation depicted and paradoxical or exaggerated statements in the text, but also verbal irony, emerging from puns and assonances. In Figure 3.36, the meme recalls the fact that a common gadget found in chip bags, the sticky hands,

[33] "Have you ever sat down around a table like this one? So many memories. . . "

got easily dirty and jokes on the possibility of contracting each sort of disease from them.

Figure 3.36. Example of ironic meme[34]

As mentioned, these memes often refer to habits and cultural objects of common use in the past: as a result, the ironic effect often rests on the assumption that the viewer will understand the cultural references. In some cases, this cultural knowledge is an essential requirement to understand the joke. For example, Figure 3.37 shows a plush toy of *The Gremlins'* character Gizmo, while the caption reads “Let's hope it doesn't rain”: to understand the humour behind this meme, the viewer should be familiar with the plot of *The Gremlins* and, in particular, with the fact that these creatures will spawn if they come in contact with water. As for the few instances of echoic irony, it can be noted that they follow the same logic described for memes in the Instagram dataset: the ironic effect is constructed using decontextualized elements (frames and/or quotes) from other cultural texts. Consistent with what observed so far, the cultural texts used in these memes are usually old popular movies or TV series: such is the case of the meme in Figure 3.38, showing a frame from the opening of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, an American sitcom TV series first aired in the 90s. The amazed face of Will Smith, starring in the sitcom, completes the situation described in the text, expressing the look of someone getting off work earlier and seeing that other people actually have a life beside work. As a final remark, it should be noted that nostalgic and ironic instances in memes are not mutually exclusive: this means that ironic memes may also intend to trigger nostalgic feelings. For

[34]“That moment when you found the sticky hands in the chips / and after having played with them for 5 minutes they were healthy carriers of unknown bacteria and all kinds of illnesses”

instance, memes employing phrases referring to being old e.g. ‘Are you feeling old?’ seek not only to trigger nostalgic memories, but they also ironize on the passing of time.

Figure 3.37. Example of non-echoic irony[35]

Figure 3.38. Example of echoic irony [36]

The *grammar for interaction* and *the grammar of nostalgia*

The analysis of the Facebook corpus reveals two distinct grammars of memes, which I define as the *grammar for interaction* and the *grammar of nostalgia*. The *grammar for interaction* is actualized for instance in the category of ‘buongiornissimo’ memes, i.e. memes employed to wish a good day (a good evening or a good night) to other users and appear to follow a distinct assembling strategy. As seen, these memes are characterized by the absence of fixed layouts like the ones identified in the *grammar of contingency*, yet their structure is quite recognisable, as they are all constructed by superimposing text lines against a colorful background (or a stock photo) and by editing additional figures and images. Looking at the narrative style and the contexts of use, ‘buongiornissimo’ memes are not linked to specific events or topics, rather they seem circulated with the purpose to interact with other users, as the wishing of a good day implies that the users will respond thanking and wishing it back. Finally, it can be observed that the occurrence of these

[35]“Let’s hope it doesn’t rain”

[36]“When you get off work one hour earlier / and see other people living and doing stuff”

memes is limited to pages targeting older demographic groups, thus implying that this grammar is mostly shared by older users (more on this in the following section).

As the name suggests, the *grammar of nostalgia* is found in memes directed at evoking memories and nostalgic feelings from the past. As seen, these memes visually depict a moment or an object, while the text is directed at eliciting in the viewer some memory or nostalgic sensation related to the image. This is usually done through evocative sentences and questions, such as ‘do you remember?’ and ‘who else used to…?’. Looking at the general structure, the Single Image layout is preferred, however the format lacks the fixity identified in the *grammar of contingency*: in many cases the arrangement of the text does not follow the TTBT pattern typically associated with this layout and the lines appear scattered on the image. For the most part, irony is not detected, while there is an attempt at triggering nostalgic feelings, by exalting life in the past and stressing the impossibility of bringing things back as they were. Looking at the context of use, the *grammar of nostalgia* is found in memes coming from generational pages dedicated to different decades, bearing important consequences for its generational connotation, which will be discussed in the next sections. To anticipate my argument, I claim that the *grammar of nostalgia* stands in a gray zone, at the intersection between the other two grammars with respect to its features and the generational audience.

3.3 Memes from the audience perspective

In this section, the analysis of digital data is integrated with insights from the interviews, which show how the above identified grammars are consistent with different media experiences and conceptualisations of the memetic phenomenon. In the theoretical framework, I have pointed out the necessity to support the analysis of digital data with users’ perspective, arguing that the content analysis fails to capture the social aspects of meme culture, as shaped by users’ competences and interactions within their mediascapes. The goal of this section is to illustrate the existence of different generationally connoted understandings of memes. This will be done in two steps: firstly, I will explore users’ mediascapes with respect to social media, so as to identify certain media generations (cfr. Bolin, 2014,

2016; and secondly, I will show that the competence around memes depends on users' allegiance to certain media generations, leading to the definition of two understandings of memes, which I define as the strict and the broad conceptualization.

3.3.1 The impact of media generation

Looking at the patterns of media usage, it can be observed an almost clear cut demographic-based distinction in my sample, with respect to the media of reference: while users belonging to Millennials and Generation Z indicate Instagram as the most used social media, the choice of Gen Xers and Baby Boomers falls invariably on Facebook. As for the other social media, some mentioned using Youtube, Reddit, and/or TikTok - yet never as their first choice. Overall, this seems to confirm the data provided by recent statistics (2021b; 2021a), indicating users between 24 and 35 years old as the largest age group of Instagram users, while the average user base of Facebook is progressively growing older (Kozlowska, 2019; see also Section 2.2). Nonetheless, the situation appears to be more nuanced than the one above sketched: to illuminate the peculiarities of each cohort, I will seek to carve out the general (social) mediascape emerging from each age group.

Baby Boomers indicate Facebook and Whatsapp as their social media of reference. Having landed on them quite later in life, most of them have a limited digital competence, not only with respect to technology in general, but also in relation to these platforms. This means that, especially on Facebook, the actions they undertake are limited: many reported the difficulties encountered in publishing a post or in replying to a direct message. For the most part, Baby Boomers have no interest in using other social media. They use Facebook primarily to stay in touch with friends and family and to join different groups. The nature of these groups depend on their individual interests, including generational pages and closed groups created by friends. When not driven by other necessities (e.g. keep in touch with physically distant relatives and acquaintances), Baby Boomers consider these two social media mostly as a past-time.

> *"I've got Facebook, where I keep myself updated with the latest news and the content that I enjoy… I've started using WhatsApp because my daughter*

is often abroad, so I bought a new phone to get WhatsApp... And then I started to talk to my friends there too, we usually send each other videos, images, you know... Then, one of my friends told me to install this platform... Instagram... I tried but I didn't understand how to do it, so I didn't do it." (BM_4, female, 72 years old)

Participants from Generation X also indicate Facebook as the primary social medium. Almost all of them created their account in the early days of the platform (around 2008-2009) and, overall, they still attribute a great value to it: for some of them, such as X_3, Facebook is a sort of repository of valuable memories, whereas for others it is a resource to build a network of contacts. Besides Facebook, many have reported having an Instagram account, yet its relevance in their mediascape is limited: while none appear to publish personal content on Instagram, some others, like X_5, claim to use it as a showcase for their work and to get in contact with potential clients.

"I use Facebook, because it allows me to keep in contact with people I used to know... When I moved, I would've lost track with all the friends I had if I hadn't had Facebook. Without Facebook, I would've lost a part of me [...] I don't really like Instagram, that world of images doesn't really belong to me." (X_3, female, 41 years old)

"I use Instagram to advertise my work, to showcase what I do and to contact potential clients." (X_5, male, 45 years old)

Millennial respondents consider Instagram as their social media of reference, mainly using it for self-expression, to keep updated with the latest news, and occasionally to correspond with friends. Most of them also reported having a Facebook account, which they opened many years ago: while some still occasionally use it, others claim to have abandoned it, following their peers on Instagram.

"I've a profile on Facebook and I keep it more as a habit than anything else... Maybe I follow a couple of groups, but I don't spend much time there and I don't interact with many people." (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)

> *"I use Instagram to share moments with my friends, through photos or stories… I use Facebook much less than before, maybe to stay informed on the latest news."* (MIL_9, female, 29 years old)

Similarly to Millennials, participants belonging to Generation Z also indicate Instagram as their favorite social media platform, where they can communicate with friends and post snippets of their lives. Among the few having a Facebook account, most admit that they have long left it to rust.

> *"I mostly use Instagram. I subscribed to Facebook a long time ago, but I don't use it now… I've actually thought of deleting it many times, but for the moment I've just deleted the app on the phone."* (Z_2, female, 23 years old)

> *"The platform I use the most is Instagram, where I post stories about what I do during the day... I also follow a lot of pages about my interests, for instance pages about economics or football… "* (Z_4, male, 20 years old)

As for the demographics navigating the platforms, respondents appear aware of the strong polarization of Facebook and Instagram user bases: specifically, younger cohorts point at Facebook as the 'Boomer social', a label which implies a negative connotation. According to many respondents, such as MIL_8, Facebook progressively lost its attractiveness for young people, who moved to more recently launched platforms, especially Instagram. This exodus was accelerated by the increasing number of old people flocking to the platform: X_3 imagines that young people may have felt the presence of old people as an intrusion, which prompted the urge to look for new digital space to 'conquer'. According to MIL_8, older people subscribed to Facebook not only because it is the first popular social media platform to have gained wide popularity but also because it is closest to their modality of expression: in particular, he believes that people above 40 years old may feel more comfortable writing long posts than publishing images. From their part, Baby Boomers reported approaching Facebook gradually, some driven by boredom, others persuaded by peers and relatives. According to them, young people have abandoned the platform to go after the latest technological trends.

"When Facebook became famous in 2008-2009, there were mostly people from 18 to 25 years old. Now, from what I see, the average age is twice the original one. It is full of people who want to feel young, when they clearly aren't. [...] a reason could simply be the timeline. I mean, Facebook has been there for a while now, so I imagine that people that are not exactly technologically advanced had the time and the capacity to learn how to use only that social network. Now that new social media are proliferating they simply stick with that one. Then, I'd say that it depends on the type of content: I can't picture 40-something users recording videos or taking on TikTok. If they want to say something, they publish those 20-line posts, they don't do it by video or image." (MIL_8, male, 28 years old)

"Yes, I've noticed it… I've started to realize that everyone around me is my age, they are all 35-40 years old… And then there are old people, our parents, who use Facebook in a very embarrassing and clumsy way… And then of course I have noticed the lack of young people, who will surely be all on Instagram." (X_3, female, 41 years old)

"Maybe Facebook was appealing to younger people at the beginning, when it was new… but now young people have gone to other social media, they have abandoned Facebook. My nephew is also on Facebook but he finds it very boring… " (BM_1, female 58 years old)

Looking at the mediascapes above, I identify two media generations as constituencies characterized by demographic age, patterns of (social) media usage, and digital literacy. The first one, taking Facebook and/or WhatsApp as the medium of reference, is generally characterized by a lower level of digital literacy and, consequently, by the unwillingness or the incapacity to engage with other platforms; whereas the second media generation comprises people with higher digital literacy and a heterogeneous mediascape. The main takeaway is that the affiliation to different media generations also affect the understanding and the competence regarding memes. As a matter of fact, I argue that the difference is not only ontological but also terminological: in fact, the term 'meme' is neither uniformly

diffused among respondents nor does it have the same meaning for everyone. As a rule of thumb, the first media generation outlined is paired with a lack of familiarity or a sketchy knowledge of the memetic phenomenon with respect to the digital and social practices sustaining meme production and circulation: I have called these interviewees as ‘terminologically unaware’, who usually stop at the definition of memes as funny images and/or as a means of expression. As it emerges, this tendency is localized in the older age categories considered in the study, i.e. Baby Boomers and Generation X. On the other hand, younger cohorts were overall more keen in engaging in discussion around which properties constitute a meme. Hence, I will call these users ‘terminologically aware’. The following section will delve deeper into users’ meme literacy, to carve out generationally connoted definitions of the memetic phenomenon.

3.3.2 The conceptualization of memes

According to most respondents, memes can be broadly described as funny images found on the Internet, which convey a humoristic message through a combination of image and text. This understanding appears to be shared across all the age groups considered and does not seem to be affected by the degree of knowledge on the phenomenon, as it is mentioned by the majority of interviewees, regardless of their familiarity with the term ‘meme’ and its meaning.

> *“Yes, I have a couple of friends on Facebook, they always put these kinds of images with jokes, you know, to have a laugh with friends.”* (BM_6, female, 60 years old)

> *“If I had to give a definition, I’d say that a meme is an image with text. It captures an event in the present and it changes it, giving it a funny connotation.”* (X_1, female, 41 years old)

> *“Uhm, well, surely they are images... Yeah, I can define memes as images with humoristic text lines.”* (Z_8, female, 23 years old)

The above definitions appear consistent with that provided by the literature, identify-

ing memes as multimodal objects, typically jokes, produced and circulated by users on the web (Shifman, 2013; Davison, 2012; Milner, 2013). Alongside this view and often mentioned in conjunction with it, 'terminologically aware' users consider memes as a form of communication, which is employed by users to comment and exchange views on all kinds of topics – and especially on trending events. Given their immediacy and concise structure, memes are capable of expressing emotions and complex concepts in a heartbeat, hence they are believed to be preferred over words and long explanations.

> *"According to me, memes are a way to express yourself, a very simple and immediate way, and thus it can directly reach the public. [...] And ultimately, in my opinion, they are something that allow people to pass a message and understand each other."* (Z_2, female, 23 years old)

> *"Memes are a form of communication, a vehicle of communication that has the peculiarity of modifying itself each time it is repurposed. Therefore, it does not convey a unique type of information but everytime it is repeated and shared it is modified and a new layer of meaning is added."* (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)

Similar claims are reminiscent of scholars looking at memes as a late stage in the development of Internet language (Applegate and Cohen, 2017; McCulloch, 2014): for instance, elaborating on their evocative power, Wagener (2021) points out that memes are characterized by an "immediacy in terms of cognitive and emotional sharing and reception" (p. 846). Additionally, 'terminologically aware' users compare memes to a language that developed throughout the years: in this sense, MIL_11 recalls that the memetic language started with more basic forms of expression like viral images and gradually evolved into more complicated versions, such as multilayered nested memes or self-reflective memes – i.e. metamemes. Similar remarks have been advanced by McCulloch (2014), who also identified different stages in the development of memes as a form of communication, characterized by distinct arrangements of memes' verbal and the visual components.

> *Well, [memes are] without any doubt communication, simply as that. They are a way to communicate something. It is very limiting to say that they are only*

communication, but they have such a huge range of functions that you are forced to define them in a broad way. Because if you look at the first memes, that is viral images like 'All your bases are belong to us' and others, then we cannot even call them memes, or rather they could become memes but were already funny as they were. Nowadays, you can do memes with other memes inside because you have people that already know the language and therefore you can embed memes and even create metamemes. So yeah, it is reductive to talk about language but surely it is a message expressed through an image."
(MIL_11, male, 36 years old)

From the answers above, a first distinction can be drawn between 'aware' and 'unaware' users, insofar as the former conceive memes not only as funny images but also as a form of communication spreading online. More differences arise when it comes to defining what a meme should include in terms of content and formal structure. While 'unaware' users do not appear to have a strong opinion in this respect, according to 'aware' respondents the identification of a digital object as a meme depends on meeting certain formal requirements, such as the presence of a particular font or a layout. For instance, while the combination of the Single Image layout and the TTBT textual pattern in Impact font is easily recognized as a meme, artifacts presenting deviant characteristics (e.g. text too long) tend to be less identified as such.

"I would say that memes are images with two components, the picture and the text, that is in the classic format, or at least the one that I know. [...] Some of the memes you showed me are nice but wrongly assembled, because there is too much written stuff and you can't read them, you need too much time to read them. [...] I think the best graphics is the image with the white writings against the black stripes that works fine. Instead, the text lines in small letters are not... right. The meme is sharp, raw, less writing, the message must be delivered right away... if you have to read the whole thing, it loses its power."
(MIL_10, male, 33 years old)

In addition, the exclusion from the category 'meme' seems to be determined by the

arrangement of the different parts of the digital object: in this sense, Z_8 argues that 'true' memes should produce a sort of link between an image and a text. In non-memetic items, instead, she notices that the image accompanies the text lines, yet they are not related in any meaningful way, to the point that the message would be complete even without the visual part. Furthermore, she points out that in memes the picture constitutes 'an answer' to the text. This claim appears consistent with the description of Reaction layout, whereby the image provides a humoristic closure to the situation described in the textual setup.

> *"There should be a direct link between the phrase and the image. But in some of these images, it is just as if the phrase only describes the image or is not connected to at all. I don't know how to better explain it: in a meme, there is a sentence and below it there is an answer provided by the photo. In others this link, this connection, is missing and therefore I wouldn't call them memes."* (Z_8, female, 20 years old)

With respect to the message conveyed or – to use Shifman's (2013) words – the stance, one of the most debated issues among 'aware' respondents regards the necessity of humour: as seen, most point at users' amusement as the basic function fulfilled by memes. Some, like X_2, even detailed which types of irony are expressed through memes, mentioning dark humour and the more heartfelt and kind humour of wholesome memes.

> *"From my point of view, memes are a form of humour that I find enjoyable because it is close to my sensibility. In general I tie the concept of memes to that of humour, it can be dark humour or wholesome humour, which can be seen as a form of humour which is more uplifting. However, in general, memes want to convey humoristic messages and humour in all its declinations and forms."* (X_2, male, 48 years old)

Despite the natural association with silly and enjoyable content, a number of participants recognize that memes may also deal with more serious topics as well, e.g. to express opinions around political issues or to sensibilize people on sensitive matters.

> *"A meme is the means through which you express a funny and quirky thought,*

although sometimes it can be a more serious one as well. I usually tend to associate more memes with stupid things, and I usually create memes with silly jokes, but of course there are pages that produce serious memes as well, for example to express a political opinion." (Z_10, male, 18 years old)

In fact, irony represents a point of contention in the definition of memes, pitting respondents seeing irony as a mandatory requirement against others who accept other possible functions for memes aside from laughter. This cleavage became evident when 'aware' interviewees were asked to indicate which items were memes, among a selection of instances from the two corpora of digital data. Due to the lack of irony, most of the posts coming from the Facebook dataset tended to be identified as non memes: in fact, several interviewees insisted that the absence of a humoristic catchphrase draws the line between items that can be called memes and those which communicate a personal thought or an idea, through the juxtaposition of image and text.

"No, these images with phrases like 'do you remember?' don't make me laugh, it's not what I look for in a meme. Aesthetically they may look like a meme but they aren't, because they don't have the catchphrase!" (MIL_10, male, 33 years old)

"In my opinion not all these images can be considered as memes, precisely because memes must have something funny in it – so, for instance, some of them don't make me laugh, they are just expressing a thought. I see them as the 'buongiornissimi' circulated by boomers on Facebook. I understand what they mean, but they do not make me laugh. There are also emotional phrases evoking memories, but they are not memes." (MIL_5, female, 27 years old)

Returning to the notion of meme grammar, it can be observed that many respondents do not consider as memes the artifacts created with the *grammar for interaction* and the *grammar of nostalgia*. Most importantly, it should be noted that these instances are linked to older segments of users. In fact, many older and 'unaware' respondents report engaging with nostalgic and buongiornissimo memes often. Offering a description of 'buongiornissimo' memes, X_9 hints at the fact that these objects are primarily circulated by people

of her age. Consistent with the context of use delineated for the *grammar for interaction*, she also suggests that their main purpose of these images is to elicit users' response.

> *"On Whatsapp or in some Facebook groups people often send these images to wish a good morning to our friends... Most of them have a picture of a cup of coffee or the coffee machine, then they usually contain phrases like 'I wish you all a joyful day' or 'I hope you have a warm day'. These are the images that we share with our friends, people of my age. Usually there is one that publishes the image and then the rest of us reply with other images or phrases."* (X_9, female, 54 years old)

In a couple of cases, 'aware' users recognize nostalgic items as memes, yet again attribute their creation and circulation to 'unaware' audiences and specifically to old users: an example is offered by MIL_11, who acknowledges that these artifacts meet all the requirements to be labeled as such, in that they are multimodal representations which tap into personal experiences. Nonetheless, he is aware that neither he nor those from his cohort (Millennials) are the designated target of these items. Instead, he claims that their content and their structure reflect the taste and the interests of older generations.

> *"These memes, which are a bit nostalgic, showing pictures of old toys and the text 'us, who used to play with these toys...' are memes but they are not for us, they are for the previous generation. They are memes for a specific kind of person, you know, those groups of 'mamme informate' ['aware/informed moms'] that share these kinds of stuff. Undoubtedly, they are memes: there is an image, there is the text, they draw from shared experiences. They are memes but not made for me, they mean nothing to me: I'm not the target, because it does not evoke any memory, any emotion."* (MIL_11, male, 36 years old)

> *"When we think about those memes 'good morning' or 'buongiornissimo' with all those cute animals, well those are boomer memes."* (Z_9, male, 22 years old)

MIL_11 even indicates a specific social group as the recipients of such memes: the informed/aware moms. When asked what he meant with this label, he replied that it refers to women in their 40s or 50s, who use the Internet as their main source of information. He went further by saying that these 'moms' have little digital competence, hence they tend to believe everything they find on the web, especially fake news. Regarding memes, they hardly have any knowledge on how they should be put together: therefore, their memes are perceived as awkward attempts to create a meme and can be barely defined as such. Similarly, in the quote reported above, MIL_5 immediately classifies 'buongiornissimo' memes as items"circulated by boomers on Facebook". A similar remark was advanced by Z_9, labeling these memes as boomer memes, that is memes shared by people belonging to the Baby Boomers category.

From these claims, it emerges a connection between meme grammars, audiences and platforms: as seen, the *grammar for interaction* and the *grammar of nostalgia* are associated to older cohorts and to Facebook. By and large, it could be argued that items not complying with the social norms interiorized by 'aware' users are not recognized as memes and assigned to older age groups. This brings along important considerations regarding the social stigma implied by such a categorization: the inability to follow the social norms for meme creation constitutes one of the reasons why older generations are ridiculed and made fun of. While this will be a focal point of Chapter 5, it is important to reiterate that meme literacy guides users' judgment on the social acceptability of the meme. In arguing this, my work is consistent with the literature in stating that the competence around memes can be considered as a form of social and cultural capital, actualising practices of symbolic gatekeeping, which influence users' social position and prestige within online communities (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). However, here the target of the social stigma are entire demographic segments, who are deemed as unable to produce and understand meaningful memes.

So far, it could be argued that respondents from younger age groups always have at least a basic competence on memes, insofar as they are aware of the phenomenon and are able to describe it. This holds true also for users who do not particularly enjoy or engage

with memes: such is the case of Z_1, a 19 year old, who is not fond of memes, never creates them, and yet still gets to experience meme culture on a daily basis by simply being in contact with his mates and colleagues, who talk and even argue through memes. The literacy demonstrated by young users, even if not directly involved in the dynamics of meme production and distribution, seems to confirm the idea that memes have become an integral component of their online interactions.

> *"Actually, I am not the type of guy who created memes, I have never created a meme, never. I don't even know how to do that. I use them rarely, they're just not my cup of tea... And I must say, sometimes I just don't get them, especially those with plenty of text, you know, I don't even start to read them, I just scroll past them [...] but everyday, I see all the memes on the Whatsapp group of the university... Sometimes people start to joke, or to quarrel even, and you see that one sends a meme, then another replies, then another one, ta-ta-ta, a rapid-fire series of memes... I don't even bother to look at the group after a while."* (Z_1, male, 23 years old)

To summarize this point, regardless of their usage frequency, people from younger cohorts are aware of the memetic phenomenon because they regularly encounter memes online. From this perspective, the findings are consistent with the literature, as they point at young users as the main consumers of memes (cfr. Segev et al., 2015). Additionally, the interviews show that, among 'aware' users, male respondents belonging to the two younger cohorts (Millennial and Generation Z) are more likely to engage in detailed discussions around the formal properties that constitute memes, showing a greater degree of elaboration and complexity with respect to their meme literacy. This finding seems to comply with existing research highlighting the gendered nature of meme, arguing that meme culture is predominantly populated and shaped by young men (cfr. Milner, 2013; Brooke, 2019).

Nonetheless, 'aware' users are not only localized among younger respondents: for instance, both BM_1 (female, 58 years old) and BM_2 (male, 62 years old) demonstrate a certain knowledge around meme culture. The definition provided by BM_1 of memes is

quite elaborate and touches many aspects of the phenomenon, such as their immediacy and their viral diffusion. When compared to some of the definitions above quoted, it becomes evident that BM_1's conceptualization is overall not dissimilar to those of many younger respondents. When asked, BM_2 is aware that memes are manipulated digital objects that are creatively recontextualised by users to adapt to many situations. Furthermore, he argues that viral content differs from memes because, unlike the latter, virals circulate unchanged across the web – a definition which is analogous to that found in academic literature (Dynel, 2016).

> *"Memes can be pure genius. It's an idea that travels at the speed of light... Concepts that can be expressed maybe in a more elaborated way. But when a meme reaches its goal... gosh, it's like a flash, a revelation. There are as many memes as there are topics that can be covered with a meme... for instance, nowadays, it is apparent that many have a political flair. Yet more often they can be ironic, satyric, stigmatizing... As for me, I believe that the best memes are those, which take a quick and precise picture of the daily trend, of the moment, I'd even say of the latest hour. Something happens and a minute after BAM! Here comes the meme... That container ship got stranded in the Suez Canal the other day and five minutes later there were memes all about it."* (BM_1, female, 58 years old)

> *"If I got it correctly, virals are simply something that many people see, like a video clip. But the clip does not change, it will always be the same. A meme instead is an idea, usually a visual gag or a joke, which is used in many different ways or situations. That is, I think, the distinction."* (BM_2, male, 62 years old)

The examples above indicate that it is possible for users from older cohorts to have a certain knowledge of memes as well. In some cases, respondents with an interest in internet culture developed their literacy on their own. For example, BM_2 says that he is constantly driven by the desire for knowledge: aside from having his home stuffed with an impressive variety of books, he is fascinated by how humans communicate and has a

real passion for multimodal forms of art and communication (on this note, he told me the he would gladly tell me all about the history of caricature in England). It thus comes at no surprise that memes attracted his attention, a curiosity which he pursued not only by joining a number of meme groups and pages on Facebook, but also by reading much about the topic. Similarly, X_2 (male, 48 years old) has been close to internet culture for all his life and in general wishes to keep updated with all that concerns the digital world: hence his competence comes from having witnessed the rise of memes and their evolution into a mainstream phenomenon.

Aside from personal interest, meme literacy may derive from the interaction with specific social and (sub)cultural contexts. BM_1 reports that she started using memes a few years before, as she joined a community of steampunk enthusiasts and got involved with that culture. Besides regularly meeting at various exhibitions, they share a WhatsApp group in which they habitually communicate through memes. She admits that she was not familiar with memes before that moment, but quickly became acquainted with them. Interestingly, the group is composed of people of different ages and everyone in it uses memes, thus seemingly suggesting that memes may actually favour the communication among cohorts (I will return to this aspect in Chapter 5).

To summarize, the main idea here is that users from older cohorts may show a degree of familiarity with memes similar to that of younger age groups. Typically, these respondents are embedded in social groups and subcultures which are close to gaming and nerd culture. These appear to have a privileged perspective on the phenomenon, as suggested by studies pointing at geek communities as the native environment of meme playful culture (cfr. Nagle, 2017; Massanari, 2013). Notwithstanding, users who have approached memes later in life may sometimes still show a significantly lower literacy level, compared to those observed in younger respondents. This is epitomized by the case of X_6, a 46 year old woman, who remains estranged from the memetic phenomenon, despite being part of the cosplay world. In the excerpt below, X_6 states that, while recognizing their appeal, memes are still a mystery to her: most of the time, she fails to grasp their meaning, even when she understands the cultural references. At a closer look, it is the inclusion of

remixed intertextual elements that seems to generate much confusion in X_6: despite having watched *Avengers: Endgame*, the movie from which the frames are taken, she admits not being able to reconstruct the sense of the joke of the Thanos memes circulating in the WhatsApp group. In fact, were it not for a friend occasionally helping her understand some of the memes, she would not be able to make sense of the combination of image and text. This claim may lead to the conclusion that memetic constructions including forms of what I have described as echoic irony constitute one of the major obstacles to the decodification of memes, preventing people without a certain meme literacy to participate in the discussion (cfr. Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). As seen, echoic irony was mentioned by younger and/or sabby users as one of the core features of memes, using it as a benchmark to distinguish well-crafted memes from non-memetic content. On the basis of these claims, I will show in the next chapter that some meme features, among which echoic irony, are in fact employed by users as a marker for their generational identity.

> *"I don't like memes very much because often I don't know what they mean, I don't know what these images are supposed to mean. [...] Of course, after years of hanging out in the cosplay world I started to figure them out a little... I have a friend that every now and then explains them to me, the sense, the background of a TV series, so that I can get the joke. [...] I have this group on WhatsApp, they always post Marvel memes, which I don't get. And this upsets me, because this happens also when I recognise the reference... For instance, they've been posting these memes with scenes from the movie End Game, with Thanos in a certain position... I mean, I have seen the movie, I know it by heart, yet I don't get what they mean with that image put there like that... I know that there is a joke, but I don't understand it and I can't take part in the conversation."* (X_6, female, 46 years old)

The chart in Figure 3.39 summarizes the findings obtained so far. As it emerges, the conceptualizations of memes are variously shaped by demographic age and media generation. At a general level, the social media usage of older cohorts tend to be focussed on a limited number of platforms, and associated with a low digital literacy. Younger cohorts,

instead, present a more heterogeneous mediascape and a higher level of digital literacy. This led, respectively, to a broad understanding of meme, actualised in the *grammar for interaction*, and a strict understanding of meme, actualised in the *grammar of contingency*. However, participants from older cohorts with a high level of literacy or embedded in certain cultural communities may have a similar perspective on memes as younger users. The *grammar of nostalgia* finds itself in a sort of gray area: while typically associated with a broad understanding, nostalgic memes are sometimes recognised and employed by 'aware' users as well.

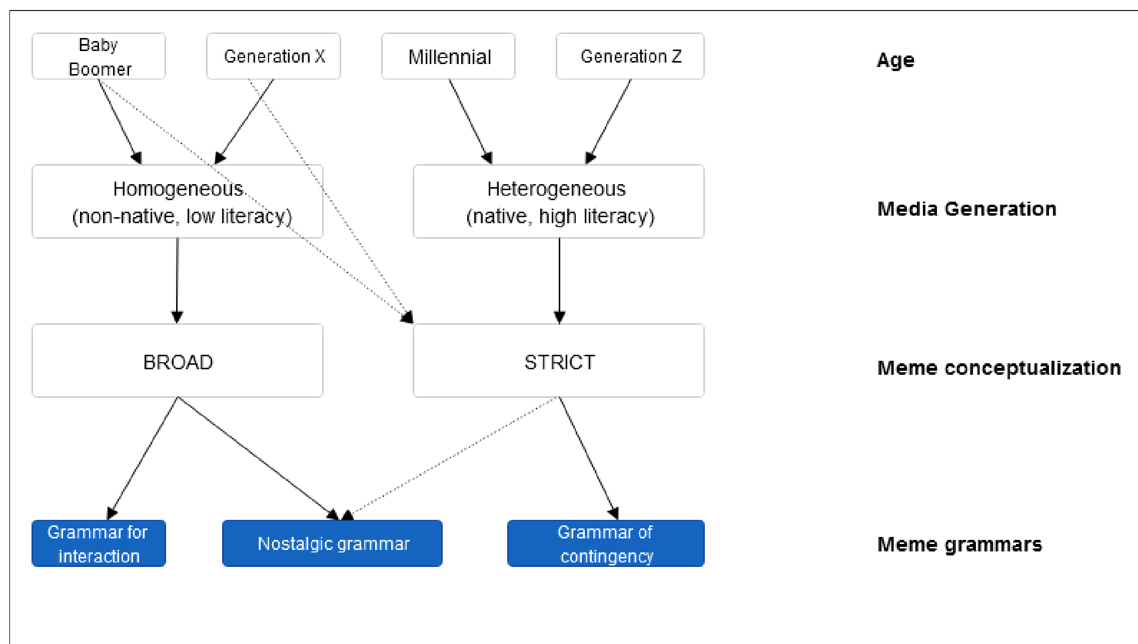

Figure 3.39. Generational conceptualisations of meme

3.4 Discussion

The overarching purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate that memes are a cross-generational cultural phenomenon, insofar as users elaborate memes differently on the basis of their generational allegiance. Here I have intended generational allegiance as the affiliation to specific media generations (Bolin, 2014, 2016), emerging from the interaction with the digital and with social media at certain life stages. In particular, I have identified the presence two main 'generational' understandings of memes: 1) a strict conceptuali-

sation, carried on by 'terminologically aware' respondents (young users and savvy older users), actualised through the *grammar of contingency*; and 2) a broad conceptualisation, mostly shared by 'terminologically unaware' respondents (i.e. users with no familiarity with the term 'meme') and consistent with the *grammar for interaction* and the *grammar of nostalgia*. In this section, I will discuss these two perspectives in detail, considering how they relate to existing research and their contribution to literature.

The strict conceptualisation conceives memes as digital objects characterized by a certain fixity regarding the formal properties and the humoristic effect. Accordingly, the *grammar of contingency* indicates that memes are constructed through a limited number of layouts and irony patterns combined together. Overall, this perspective is close to the definition of memes as "groups of interconnected content units that share common characteristics" provided by Shifman (2013, p. 372.373). In this context, templatability (Rintel, 2013) emerges as a defining feature: according to several interviewees, memes should present a fixed structure that can be easily re-adapted to other contexts, through the addition or the creative recombinations of its elements. More than on the fixity of the layout, however, the interviewees are concerned with the importance of 'grabbability' (Jenkins et al., 2018), that is the possibility to re-employ the same template on more occasions, so as to create new artifacts starting from existing material. Humour seems to play a significant role as well, as hinted by its pervasive presence in the Instagram dataset. Similarly, most respondents agree that the primary function of memes is to be funny and make people laugh. This statement is in line with studies emphasizing playfulness as a fundamental attribute of memes (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Tuters, 2019) and claiming that meme culture is guided by the 'logic of the lulz' (Milner, 2013). Also, respondents' insistence on the necessity of a catchphrase or a humoristic resolution is consistent with the definition of memes as 'visual-verbal jokes' (Dynel, 2016). Finally, the link between humour and intertextuality is made explicit by participants arguing that the humoristic effect is triggered by decontextualized elements, a point also advanced by the literature (Tsakona, 2018; Shifman, 2014b; Laineste and Voolaid, 2016).

Looking at the interviews, it can be observed that this conceptualisation is not only

shared by young participants (Millennials and Generation Z), but also by users from older cohorts (Generation X and Baby Boomers) showing a high level of meme competence. Building upon Gee et al. (2018), it can be argued that a 'native' or 'fluent' competence on memes as a form of digital vernacular can be acquired by being embedded in a social context where people produce, consume, and attribute certain values to these artifacts. However, the modality through which this competence is acquired is different: borrowing a linguistic metaphor, the difference appears similar to that between native speakers and second-language learners. This claim mirrors Bolin's considerations on the difference between 'native' and 'arriving' media (2014), as he argues that users will generally learn the 'grammar' of the media they come in contact with during their formative years and approach each new medium through this lense. Following this logic, I argue that Millennials and Generation Z have acquired a native competence of memes, in that they are born and/or raised in a digital culture where memes constitute an integral part of the vernacular (cfr. Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018; Wiggins and Bowers, 2015). As for older users, even when they display an advanced literacy on memes, this will always be an 'acquired' competence and never perceived as a 'native' form of communication. As seen, in some cases memes may remain partially or totally obscure to older users, despite the efforts to decode them.

In addition, the analysis indicates that older users sharing a 'strict' concept of memes also show a high level of digital literacy and/or the affiliation with certain subcultural environments, such as the cosplay or gaming community. This is no coincidence: in fact, the link between memes and the nerd subculture is demonstrated by numerous studies locating the origin of memes within the playful participatory logic fuelling interaction in these spaces (e.g. Phillips, 2015; Massanari, 2013. Similarly, Benaim (2018) argues that "there is clearly a primary community or a social meaning environment for those products, as described earlier, that is a restricted community gathered by geeky humour" (p. 908). In light of this, this result represents an element of novelty with respect to existing research: while previous studies have focussed on the gatekeeping practices going on within online subcultural groups, my analysis suggests that participation in these subcultures may also have an inclusive function, as they provide an access to meme culture for older demographics,

that is for people for whom "memes may not be as central a method of communication" (MacDonald, 2021, p. 148).

The broad conceptualisation is mostly shared by 'unaware users', who usually define memes simply as images with superimposed text. Unlike the 'strict' understanding, this one places a significantly minor emphasis on layouts, irony and intertextual references. This clearly emerges from the *grammar for interaction* identified in the Facebook dataset, as exemplified by 'Buongiornissimo', which overall lack standardized templates and recurrent irony constructions. The generational connotation of these artifacts becomes all the more evident when looking at the interviews: while 'terminologically unaware' participants recognize these memes as the ones most frequently encountered and employed, 'aware' respondents look down on these artifacts as they do not comply with the requirements dictated by their meme literacy. More so, even when they are recognised as memes, the paternity of these artifacts is attributed to older cohorts. This finding results in line with prior research stressing the gatekeeping role of meme literacy: as seen in 3.3, the inability to comply with the norms dictated by meme literacy leads to social downgrading and mockery (Massanari, 2013; Nagle, 2017). Nonetheless, here the target are not just uninitiated users, rather entire demographic segments: older people are perceived as lacking the literacy to produce and understand memes, hence 'deviant' memes are automatically attributed to them. Guided by their competence around the phenomenon, young users actualise a process of 'othering' which excludes older cohorts from meme culture and turns them into objects of derision (cfr. Lee and Hoh, 2021; Berridge and Hooyman, 2020; more on this in Chapter 5).

As a final remark, it should be noted that the broad and the strict conceptualization are not intended as mutually exclusive perspectives on the memetic phenomenon, rather two ends of a spectrum. Evidence of this is found when looking at the *grammar of nostalgia*: while the interaction grammar and the *grammar of contingency* fit quite well, respectively, in the broad and in the strict conceptualisation, the *grammar of nostalgia* appears more difficult to pigeon-hole. As seen in the digital data analysis, this category includes both memes with a non-fixed structure and memes with formal properties close to the *grammar*

of contingency. Similarly, despite being more frequently labeled as non-memes, some 'aware' respondents were hesitant, as they claim that many nostalgic instances present a meme-like structure.

4. The construction of generational imaginaries

The second empirical chapter investigates how memes are employed to construct a sense of generational belonging. The argument I wish to put forward is that memes foster and contribute to the creation of shared 'generational imaginaries' sustaining generational identities. My analysis illustrates that this is accomplished in two ways: 1) through the implementation of cultural reference and ironic construction resonating with specific generational groups; and 2) through nostalgic recollections of past experience. Contextually, I also reflect on the role of generational pages and popular meme accounts in the production and dissemination of meme templates and shared narratives.

4.1 Theoretical framework

The overarching aim of this chapter is to fill a gap in the literature of social generations, by providing an empirical account of how memes foster generational cohesion through the elaboration of memory and collective experience. As discussed in Section 1.3.1, the sociological perspective theorized by Mannheim (1952) conceives generations as complex constructs integrating both a natural and a social aspect: as opposed to biological approaches, Mannheim claims that belonging to the same generational group is tied to sharing similar historical positions and experiences during the same life stages. More so, a sense of belonging is generated when people have the same modalities of arranging experience: paraphrasing Corsten (1999), generations arise when experience is connected by interpretation. Elaborating on Mannheim's theories, a growing number of studies has thematized generations as discursive constructions, shaped by individual and collective narratives around what brings people together and makes it a distinct unit (Scherger, 2012; May and Muir, 2015; Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Pritchard and Whiting, 2014; Timonen and Conlon, 2015). These inquiries aim at unpacking the term 'generation' and generational categories to unravel the meanings and the social effects produced by differ-

ent "ways of articulating, thinking about, and understanding generations" (Foster, 2013, p. 197). In this chapter, I propose to investigate how memes represent the cultural objects that mediate and foster generational cohesion, providing a device to collectively make sense of reality and contributing to mold similar mindsets and viewpoints (cfr. Corsten, 1999; see also Section 1.3.1). Drawing from the claim that generational identities are shaped by the vernacular and the cultural values associated with specific media experience (Andò, 2014), my work identifies in memes the symbolic resources through which people can collectively elaborate shared experience. This claim fits with previous studies demonstrating that media products can actively build common identities (Boccia Artieri, 2011; Aroldi, 2011). The role of memes for identities and self-expression has been extensively investigated (Gal et al., 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Yus, 2018; see Section 1.2.3 for a full discussion). As contended by Shifman (2019): "memes enable participants to simultaneously construct their individuality and their affiliation with a larger community" (p. 47). Notably, memes foster the creation of social and political identities, fuelling a polyvocal discussion on relevant issues (Bozkuş, 2016; Milner, 2013; Ross and Rivers, 2017b). Nonetheless, group cohesion is also achieved through intertextuality and humour, whose decodification relies on shared cultural knowledge (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016; Gal, 2019): as seen in Section 1.2.4, the creation of social bonds within meme collectives relies on the existence of cultural and symbolic barriers, which exclude the outsiders and regulate in-group dynamics (Nagle, 2017; Literat and van den Berg, 2019).

The argument I advance is that collective elaborations about shared experience, nostalgic reveries, and memories of media products contribute to creating symbolic repertoires which constitute the cultural backbone of generational identities. To better define these repertoires, I introduce the expression 'generational imaginary', which draws upon Taylor's (2002) and Anderson's (1983) notion of 'social imaginary'. According to the authors, the 'social imaginary' can be described as a set of practices, beliefs, and myths that provide a common ground for people to understand and engage with each other, as well as to validate their position within society. This definition invokes a person-centered approach which focuses on the study of material and symbolic representations created and shared by individuals: in this sense, Anderson (1983) emphasizes the contribution of vernacular

language and media in creating a sense of belonging to a large community of individuals, who share the same language and cultural references. Following this conceptualisation, the notion of a ‘generational imaginary’ is conceived as the discursively created cultural and symbolic repertoire made up by the beliefs around what constitutes a generation in terms of the elaborations about the experiences and the cultural products, which contribute to fostering a sense of belonging among its members. The ways in which memes contribute to the construction of generational imaginaries is illustrated employing a combination of insights from the interviews and data coming from the digital corpora, analyzed following the paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Rose, 2016). As extensively discussed in Section 2.2.3 of the methodological chapter, CDA can be exploited to investigate how different modalities of representation and discursive practices are conducive to specific narratives, which contribute to structuring identities at both individual and collective levels. In the context of this chapter, CDA has been employed to illuminate the ways in which memes concur to the construction and dissemination of hegemonic narratives regarding collective experiences, which are perceived as constitutive of certain generational identities.

4.2 Two generational features: intertextuality and irony

In the present section, I demonstrate how memes contribute to creating a sense of generational belonging by employing intertextual elements and types of irony that resonate with determined generational user bases. In so doing, I argue that memes leverage shared cultural references to establish a common ground for the discussion of present experiences, e.g. current events. Among the defining features of memes constructed with the grammar of contingency, echoic irony and intertextuality appear to be of primary importance. Whereas the focus of the previous chapter was on how these aspects are constructed and implemented in memes, here my analysis illustrates the identitarian implications of these features. Looking at the results from the interviews, respondents agree that memes reflect the interests and the taste of the generational user base that produces them: as reported by MIL_2, memes contain elements that resonate with a specific generation, such as in-jokes

and cultural references.

"*I think it's normal that memes are created with self-referential elements, such as citations that people know or make them laugh: so it's inevitable that memes revolve around a generation and its cultural interests.* (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)"

Participants from the Millennial category appear particularly aware of this aspect: for instance, MIL_7 contends that it is possible to identify the generational group targeted by the meme depending on the cultural references embedded in the artifact. Following this line, he argues that memes using references to the Italian TV series Boris are created by Millennials, since he believes that they are the main audience of the series.

> *"I'm thinking of Boris, the TV Series: I imagine that this series has been mostly watched by a certain demographic audience. I don't think 40 or 50 years old people have watched it, so I believe that a meme quoting Boris is most likely created by a Millennial. Moreover, it is a series that is now quite old, so I don't think that it would interest younger generations either, because it's too distant from their cultural tastes. So yeah, from the content and the references you can roughly understand the generational target of a meme."* (MIL_7, male, 27 years old)

On a similar note, MIL_2 argues that memes containing elements coming from movies and cartoons from his childhood, e.g. *Knights of the Zodiac* and *Lady Oscar*, facilitate the comprehension of memes due to his familiarity with the cultural source.

> *"We can automatically understand memes containing references that come from television programmes or cartoons that were broadcasted as we grew up. When I see a meme on cartoons like 'Knights of the Zodiac' or 'Lady Oscar', the comprehension is immediate because I immediately recognize the cultural source. For the same reason, I think that new generations may have a hard time understanding them because they didn't watch these cartoons as they were growing up."* (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)

In sum, it can be argued that memes foster generational identities by including refer-

ences to texts that certain audience perceive as part of their generational background: in so doing, it is believed that this ease the comprehension of the meme for those familiar with the cultural source, while at the same time this hinder or make the process more difficult for people outside the generational group. In fact, as described by MIL_8, some memes may be hard to understand or enjoy, as they include references to cultural texts he finds closer to younger generations' taste, such as trap singers and songs.

> *"There are cultural references that have a special meaning for a certain user base and that only they are able to fully understand because they are part of their life, their childhood. In my opinion, this is the case of the references related to programmes, TV series, books that I know and that younger people don't know… or it can be the other way around: memes referring to singers or songs that I'm not familiar with, so I don't get the joke. For example, if there is a meme on trap music, maybe I won't laugh because I don't understand the reference."* (MIL_8, male, 28 years old)

In line with existing research, these findings indicate that having the same background or cultural information is a fundamental prerequisite for the full appreciation of a meme: nonetheless, while in previous studies this has been put in relation to subcultural identities (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017), my analysis stresses the importance of a generationally shared cultural background for the reception of memes and the values attributed to them. Along this line, it is observed that users' estrangement with certain memes may also derive from belonging to different 'media generations' (Bolin, 2014). In this sense, Z_2 notices that she has a hard time understanding memes coming from TikTok, whereas her 16-year-old sister is able to enjoy them, due to her familiarity with the vernacular of the platform.

> *"Sometimes it takes me a while to get new memes, while my sister who is now 16 immediately gets them, because she is immersed in this world. Unlike me, she enjoys memes from TikTok, she knows the trend from which the memes derive and therefore can fully appreciate them. To me, they just look like a bunch of videos of people dancing or doing silly things."* (Z_2, female, 23 years old)

Generational references can be employed to frame current events. As extensively demonstrated by research on memes, memes offer a device for discussing and commenting on the news (Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019; see Section 1.2.2 for a full discussion). With this respect, MacDonald (2021) argues memes filter current events through the lens of popular culture. Specifically, the examples below - taken from the two corpora analyzed in Chapter 3 - illustrate how old cultural texts (the Disney movies and Rambo) can be applied to frame the news. Figure 4.1 depicts the Disney Princesses wearing a mask, all except Mulan. The caption reads 'sorry Mulan, but you never know', hinting at the Chinese outbreak of the Covid-19 disease and how this led, in the initial times, to an aversion for people coming from that country. The second meme (Figure 4.2) portrays Rambo (aka Sylvester Stallone) being picked up by Sheriff Will Teasle (aka Brian Dennehy), who asks for his self-certification. While the frame comes from the 80s movie, the text refers to the fact that, during the Covid-19 lockdown, in Italy people were required a self-certification that stated the reason for being outside (e.g. work or medical reason). As observed by X_2, this type of content is especially appreciated and enjoyed by people who can recognise the original cultural text.

Figure 4.1. [1]

Figure 4.2. [2]

"It can happen that the topic is fresh, new, an event which is on the news... whereas the language is constituted by the stratification of culture: for in-

[1] "Sorry Mulan, but you never know..."

[2] Have you got the self-certification pursuant of the article 46 and 47 of the D.P.R. 445?"

stance, you can use an image of Anakin in Revenge of the Sith but you can make him say or do something linked to the news. In this sense, you have created a content which is appreciated especially by those with the same shared background." (X_2, male, 48 years old)

Similar remarks are advanced by X_3 in relation to the meme in Figure 4.3, comparing Giacomo (from the Italian comic trio 'Aldo, Giovanni, and Giacomo') to the American activist Jake Angeli, who participated in the 2021 United States Capitol attack dressed as a shaman. Commenting on the meme, X_3 doubts that people born in 2000 would understand the meme, since Giacomo's picture comes from a 1999 performance of the trio entitled *Tel chi el telun*. Once again, it is argued that only people with a certain familiarity with the original cultural source will be able to interpret and thoroughly appreciate the meme.

Figure 4.3. [3]

"I saw this [Figure 4.4] meme of Giacomo the other day, which made me laugh a lot. You see, it's an intelligent way to apply a past cultural reference to comment on something that happens nowaday. But in this case I wonder: would someone born in 2000 understand it? This reinforces the idea that memes are generational, because I bet younger generations will look at the meme and see a guy dressed as a Barbarian, maybe they would even make

[3]"Jake Angeli, known as the shaman, is an Italian American rioter and Trump fanatic."

the connection to the Capitol attack... but who will recognise Giacomo from Aldo, Giovanni, and Giacomo? Who will remember the comedy sketch on Pdor, son of Kmer? Only those from my age will understand it." (X_3, female, 41 years old)

Besides cultural references, the analysis indicates that irony is also tied to generational identities. Existing literature argues that humour fosters social bonds, especially when it leverages in-joke and stratified knowledge (Miltner, 2014; see Section 1.2.1). According to several interviewees, humour is generationally determined and memes will present different types of humour depending on the users' taste. Consistently, X_2 states that irony in memes reflect a specific generational sensibility. Once again, it is hinted that the use of a particular type of humour can be revealing of the memes' generational audience.

"Humour in memes evolves because it evolves the sensibility of their generational user base... There is this famous meme comparing the type of Boomer humour 'I hate my wife', the 'I hate my life' humour of Millennials and the absurd nonsense GenZ's humour. That's to say that it's common knowledge that humour in memes is generationally determined... For instance, we Gen Xers have this kind of disillusioned type of humour that also Millennials have." (X_2, male, 48 years old)

Similarly, existing research has observed that humour is generationally determined: for example, Chateau (2020) associates depressing humour with certain generational categories, such as Millennials, arguing that these memes are tools "depressed millennials offer to other depressed millennials, to be used against depression, sadness, and overthinking". According to some interviewees, certain ironic constructions have a generational connotation as well: specifically, it is argued that the decoding of echoic irony leverages on cultural and cognitive prerequisites that only younger users seem to meet. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, understanding echoic irony relies on the "assumption that viewers will recognize certain sets of beliefs and certain frames" (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017, p. 594), which means both recognising the cultural reference and resolving the incongruity between text and image retains only the functional information (cfr. Lou, 2017).

With this respect, many respondents contend that, unlike older users, younger cohorts like Millennials and GenZ are able to effortlessly connect the different parts of the meme. As stated by MIL_5, having to explain the mechanism to unaware users would be complicated and spoil the joke (more on this in Chapter 5), nonetheless she also acknowledges that the same problems could be encountered by future generations trying to explain their memes.

> *"It is not only a matter of understanding the source of the image, the cultural reference, but also the link with the text. It would be complicated to explain to somebody that doesn't immediately get the irony because it means explaining something that we take for granted and thus taking the fun away... but I guess that future generations will have the same difficulties in explaining their memes to us."* (MIL_5, female, 27 years old)

Furthermore, Z_11 hypotheses that this kind of humour is endemic to digital environments like social media, hence once again connected to younger generations' media experiences.

> *"Young people immediately get the mechanism of irony associated with memes. I don't know if this is because this humour has developed on social media and this is a reality we experience everyday... the point is that this is a form of humour we get effortlessly."* (Z_11, male, 19 years old)

To summarize, intertextuality and irony are believed to have a generational connotation. In so doing, they contribute to shaping the generational identities of the users with respect to the type of irony or the cultural texts that pertain to a certain generational group. As reported by many respondents, these features are bound to change as new generations approach the memetic phenomenon: thus, incomprehension of new memes derives from the symbolic barriers erected when employing new and unfamiliar cultural texts or ironic constructions. Nonetheless, as culture stratifies, old references may be rearranged and remixed in innovative ways, through several layers of editing and recombinations. In this context, X_2 reports coming across a discussion on Reddit, joking on the fact that each frame of the Star Wars prequel movies could become a meme. Despite recognising those movies as a cultural reference for his generational group (Generation X), he notices how

easily any cultural text can become material for new memes. More so, he argues that the transformative practices underpinning meme culture have become the modality through which culture is interpreted and re-interpreted, meaning that old texts can be reappropriated at different times by different audiences.

> *"For instance, I came across this Reddit thread a while ago, jokingly challenging people to make a meme for each frame of the Star Wars prequel movies… Of course, I remember when those movies came out because I was there, I went to the cinema to see them and at the time it was something pretty huge for all of us… Now I see these same things are seen differently, they are approached differently and have become material for memes. It makes me realize that memes are the way through which culture is interpreted and can be reinterpreted."* (X_2, male, 48 years old)

This seems to smooth previous statements on the generationally connotation of cultural references: while some cultural texts can have a strong identitarian value for specific groups, their generational 'allegiance' may become more fluid as the same texts are creatively reworked and remixed into new instances. For example, MIL_6 recognizes that, while Kermit the Frog was originally memeified by users having a certain knowledge of the character and the show, nowadays Kermit memes continue to circulate and are extensively employed even by unaware users.

> *"Certain memes are tied to a specific generation. Kermit the Frog memes were created by people who had a specific bond with the show, meaning that it was part of its cultural background. But I see that these memes are still very popular nowadays, used by people who maybe don't even know the show."* (MIL_6, male, 26 years old)

Taking the discussion a step further, MIL_2 contends that the meaning of meme templates and cultural references is shaped by the generational audience employing it. In this sense, even a cultural reference not directly pertaining to a specific generation can be taken over, interpreted, and transformed into a meme template. Similarly, Brembilla (2016) notes that some meme templates may experience a renaissance later in time and

undergo a second reading as they are re-interpreted by new user bases.

> *"Well, the meaning of a meme is necessarily given by the generation that employs the meme, and that holds true for the cultural references as well... I mean, if a meme is created by a Millennial, this is usually done using typical references of that generation, for example using events that occurred when we were teenagers... but it is not always like that. For instance, I can create a meme including the photo of Marylin Monroe holding her dress down, thus something not specifically belonging to the Millennial cultural background, right? In this sense, I say that each reference can be reappropriated and employed in different contexts, and given new meanings."* (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)

These observations concur to illustrate a central aspect of my argument: the 'expressive repertoire' (cfr. Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2018) created by meme templates incorporating different cultural references are a composite and dynamic system, constituted by both old and new texts, which are continuously rearranged and creatively combined together to fit novel contexts of use. This bears some important consequences for the formation of generational identities as well: as seen, if some cultural elements appear tightly linked to certain generational groups, they can still be creatively re-appropriated and acquire a valence for the identity of other generational user bases. This claim fits Van Dijk's (2011) argument that new media technologies enable the continuous revision and reconceptualisation of collective identities and memory.

In conclusion, to reiterate the main point of this section, memes contribute to the generational identity of the users through the exploitation of generationally shared references, by remixing old and new cultural texts which then change the ways in which culture is consumed and interpreted. Moreover, shared cultural references become the prism through which current experience is framed and interpreted by certain generational groups, especially Millennials and Generation Z.

4.3 Nostalgia as generational glue

In this section, I argue that memes foster a generational cohesion leveraging nostalgic feelings to collectively evoke, share, and narrate past experience. Nostalgia is a relevant component of the Facebook dataset, whose presence in the economy of the platform has been demonstrated by studies like Davalos et al. (2015). As seen in the previous chapter, the digital data analysis shows that nostalgia may equally target tangible things like common objects but also intangible things, like values and lifestyles.

Nostalgic recollections play an important role in the consolidation of a generational sense of belonging. As stated by Wilson (2005), nostalgia is important for individual identity because it allows people to reconnect with past selves, thus enabling a sense of identity continuity. At the same time, it fosters collective identity, consolidating one's positioning within society. As seen in Section 3.2.2, nostalgia in memes is produced both at visual and textual level: it usually combines an image with text imbued with nostalgic feelings. From a linguistic perspective, these memes employ standardized linguistic structures like 'us, who…', which evoke a collective shared dimension of remembrance. Moreover, the direct questions embedded in the memes ('who remembers?') elicit the engagement of the viewers, pushing them to comment or react with their own personal memories. This emerges also from my interviews, where respondents started sharing their own recollections when looking at the memes.

In the following sections, I will explore two of the most diffused narratives underlying nostalgic memes, which also find resonance in the stories told by participants: these are the 'We were better when it was worse' narrative and the 'We had the best culture' narrative. As it emerges, both provide a romanticized and distorted recollection of the past, whereby the negative parts are minimized or overshadowed so as to exalt the positive aspects. In conclusion, I will reflect on the generational audience promoting the circulation of these instances/messages, arguing that none is immune to nostalgia: despite the differences in the topics and the messages conveyed, the analysis show that nostalgic memes provide a frame to elaborate past experience not only for older cohorts, but for younger age groups

as well.

We were better when it was worse. The narrative which I label as 'We were better when it was worse' refers to the fact that life in the past used to be easier and happier, despite the poorer conditions, the lack of many facilities and, above all, of technology. Memes conveying this type of message are typically found in the Facebook dataset, especially on pages concerning the 60s, the 70s and the 80s. Similarly, this view was mostly shared by respondents belonging to the Baby Boomers and the Generation X age group.

These recollections follow various narrative strands, tapping into different yet inter-related aspects of life in the past. A first recurrent belief concerns the fact that, despite being poor, everyone in the past was happy and content with the essentials. Memes found in the Facebook dataset convey this message by showing a range of simple life moments, like an in-door dancing room, a child's playtime or a family gathering. In Figure 4.4, the caption reads "us, who… we created a dancing room by simply putting the dining room table aside", suggesting the idea that people knew how to make do with what they had. People did not need much to enjoy themselves: children dug car-tracks in the soil (Figure 4.5), picnic tables and chairs were portable and cheap - yet those moments all bring along 'wonderful memories' (Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.4. [4]

Figure 4.5. [5]

[4] "Us, who... we created a dancing room by simply putting the dining room table aside"

[5] "Us, who… the picnic with portable chairs and table… wonderful memories"

Figure 4.6. [6]

The text of nostalgic memes often specify that those moments are associated with positive feelings and pleasant memories, to convey the idea that only indifference for luxury and true affections can ensure true and carefree happiness. Looking at these memes, X_9 immediately reinforces this message, claiming that young people knew how to have a good time with very little and recall that she would spend entire afternoons at the park, singing with a couple of friends.

> *"There is a big truth coming from these pictures: we knew how to enjoy ourselves with what we had. We didn't have much: we could only go to the disco on Sunday afternoons. By midnight it was all over. But we really had a great time, despite having nothing: we used to go to the park with a guitar and a blanket and we would spend hours singing and laughing."* (X_9, female, 54 years old)

Inspired by the images above, BM_5 recollects the places he used to go with friends: the bar, the social club, and the dance rooms. These were the places of sociality before the advent of the Internet and he claims that it was very easy to meet other people. The good and 'true' nature of social relationships was an often mentioned issue: people were friendly, kind-hearted and willing to help each other. BM_7 still recalls when his grandfather, a Tuscanian farmer, was helped by other farmers to harvest. Even social differences became less relevant, as wealthy people hosted their neighbors in the evening to watch

[6] "When we were happy and we didn't know it..."

television together.

> *"This [Figure 4.4] reminds me of the years, in which my friends and I used to go to the cinema or to the dance room on the weekends... When I was a boy of 15-16 years old, I used to go dancing, we had a lot of dance rooms, sometimes we danced in somebody else's house, as this picture shows, and we would put the table in the corner to make room! I was carefree back then, you know, you could immediately make new friends, it would take just a smile... We used to get to know girls like this! [laughs] There was no Internet back then, but there were true relationships... "* (BM_5, male, 74 years old)

> *"There was surely more solidarity among people, more willingness to help each other, even those who didn't know each other that well... When we were young not everyone could afford a television. In our courtyard only one family had it, and they would invite many people over - even 10-15 people! - in the evening to watch it together. Also, I remember that when my grandad had to harvest or when he had to slaughter the pig, other farmers would come to help."* (BM_7, male, 62 years old)

The idea that in the past people were able to experience true social relations and purer sentiments is also passed along by memes depicting old technologies. Most of these instances represent old phones, radios and televisions. Technostalgia (Bolin, 2014) here is connected to media experiences of older cohorts, thus mostly concerning personal memories associated with specific devices: it could be the call of a lover or an evening spent in front of the TV as children. The difficulties posed by old technologies are seen as an integral part of the experience and even attributed a positive valence: for instance, Figure 4.7 suggests that while calling someone with pay phones, one may encounter a number of inconveniences, such as the limited length of the call or the risk of outages. Yet, these obstacles were functional to the real experience, because they taught people to be patient and to appreciate the good things. In the case of Figure 4.8, the caption implies the durability of these lessons learnt with old devices, establishing a comparison with our hyperconnected digital society: despite living in a fast-connected world, those who grew up using

the Commodore Datasette have not forgotten the importance of being patient.

Figure 4.7. [7]

Figure 4.8. [8]

Patience is also hinted at by X_8, as she recalls waiting for the call of her friend on Sunday: in many cases, patience and perseverance are the preconditions for truly enjoying and living in the moment. These memes convey the idea that past technology was able to teach positive values to people: even if the reward appears little as compared to the difficulties encountered, it was dearly cherished because it was truly earned. Sometimes, technostalgia is connected to specific cultural products which have an affective value for users: in this respect, Carosello, the Italian television advertising show broadcasted from the 50s to the 70s, was frequently mentioned by respondents. Because of its cartoon-like appearance, it mostly appealed to children, who used to watch it before going to bed. In fact, the meme in Figure 4.9 reports the phrase 'And after Carosello, off to bed!', as something parents used to tell their children. Once again, the underlying message is that of appreciation for the small things: even though Carosello was not a programme for children, it was a source of great happiness for them to be allowed to watch it.

[7]"Love at the time of payphones is constituted by words we don't say anymore. At what time may I call you tomorrow? Hurry, I'm running out of coins! Love at the time of payphones was hindered by a red light: when it was on, it meant that you could not call. Damn!"

[8]"Us, living in the age of speed, but knowing the value of patience."

Figure 4.9. [9]

> *"Something I nostalgically recall is waiting for the call from my bestfriend, when we had to arrange to go out on Sundays... These were small and very simple things you see, but you would get to Sunday evening feeling happy, carefree, because you had spent a lovely Sunday with your friend."* (X_8, female, 48 years old)

> *"Mom would always tell me: after Carosello, you have to go to bed', because I would have to go to school the following day. And I remember that when it was over my mom used to turn off the TV and send me to bed, it was 8:3pm or 9pm at the latest... You know, we used to think of Carosello as cartoons for children, they were in fact advertisements, but the possibility to watch it made us so happy, like walking on air..."* (BM_8, female, 65 years old)

Many respondents insisted on claiming that children and young people used to have sound principles, among which respect and obedience stand out. According to most Baby Boomers and part of Gen Xers, young people used to be disciplined thanks to a healthy and strict upbringing and a fully functional education system. A number of memes are dedicated to this topic, hinting at the fact that children used to be respectful towards their relatives, authorities and, in general, to older people. The meme in figure 4.10 is a fit-

[9] "And after Carosello... off to bed!"

ting example of how this narrative is framed: the class photo showing perfectly aligned and equally dressed children appears is a representation of how obedience was taught in school. The message is reinforced by the caption, hinting at the habit of standing up to greet the teachers as they entered the class. The act of standing up is directly linked to the fact that children were well-behaved and that, at a general level, they lived in the years where manners were a fundamental value in the society. This meme also generated a lot of engagement from my respondents: those who agreed with the message (mostly Baby Boomers) also added their own personal memories, recalling that they also had to stand whenever an adult entered the class, be it the headmaster or a janitor.

Figure 4.10. [10]

> *"Ah, how lovely is this class photo! I used to have one too, it's a way to remember all your classmates... 'Good morning, teacher' and we used to stand up, it's true! When the teacher entered the class, we had to stand up, when the headmaster entered the class, we had to stand up... and then, we girls had to kiss our teacher goodbye when we went home... These images are a way to remember those years, you know. They make me feel a bit old, actually, but they are also sweet memories that I cherish."* (BM_9, female, 65 years old)

In conclusion, the narrative 'We were better when it was worse' returns an idealized

[10] "You used to stand up and say 'Good morning, teacher', because you grew up during the years in which education prospered"

and romanticized picture of the past, as a moment where people had less commodities and wealth, but compensated with their values and principles. More so, all the good qualities and sentiments (the obedience, the respect, the co-operation) appear to be somehow a consequence of having less, coupled with a better education system (both in families and in school), which taught people the importance of hard work and of appreciating small things.

We had the best culture. The second narrative I have identified is labeled as 'We had the best culture' and leverages cultural products and patterns of cultural consumption to foster generational cohesion. For one thing, it appears to be less spread among Baby Boomers and more among Gen Xers, Millennials, and Zoomers. This narrative has overall a minor focus on lifestyle and human relationships and seeks to trigger the memories connected to certain media experiences and products. Recreational products are the most recurrent in memes, including several kinds of games, video games but also cartoons (Figure 4.11) and TV series (Figure 4.12). In particular, television and TV programmes are a steady presence both in memes and in the interviews. People who were young during the 90s and the subsequent years recall growing up in front of a television: for instance, MIL_6 (male, 26 years old) remembers watching Disney movies over and over again when he was young. Similarly, the meme in Figure 4.11 mentions the popular television channel *Italia 1*, which is famous for broadcasting a sheer variety of cartoons and animated series.

Figure 4.11. [11]

Figure 4.12. [12]

The underlying message conveyed by these memes is that these programmes played a huge role in the lives of people growing up in the last decades of the 20th century: besides being associated with happy memories and carefree moments, the caption in Figure 4.12 even suggests that children grew up watching those cartoons and series. This is a huge difference with the previous narrative, where the upbringing of the offspring was the responsibility of the family or the school. Here, MIL_6's mention of 'being placed' in front of the screen seems to suggest that television at times served as a 'nanny', keeping the children entertained and occupied for hours. This memory however is not imbued with negative connotations; on the contrary, respondents are proud to consider these programmes as the cultural reference of their childhood: in fact, the overarching message is that those programmes were the absolute best and that they trigger wonderful and enjoyable memories. For instance, MIL_1 recalls that during the early 2000s, *Italia 1* used to broadcast 80s TV series in the morning and he used to watch them anytime he convinced his mother to skip school.

> *"Well, our generation was placed in front of the TV with the Disney VHS in, on a loop, 'till they were worn out really."* (MIL_6, male, 26 years old)

[11] "How could we ever forget about the carefree afternoons spent in front of the TV watching cartoons?"
[12] "Us, who... grew up with them."

"The first is wonderful, it brings me back in time, all these wonderful cartoons that are now gone, but even the Italia 1 jingle, so many memories... These are the cartoons, the great classics we grew up with: Sailor Moon, Dragon Ball... all those cartoons that were broadcasted on Italia 1 in the afternoon and that we used to watch when we got back to school." (MIL_4, female, 32 years old)

"Magnum P.I, Supercar, A Team...these were the programmes I used to watch when I skipped school. Do you know how I convinced my mom to let me stay home? One time everyone skipped school, I entered, stayed for an hour and then called my mom to pick me up, telling me that none was there. She came, saw it was true and picked me up. From then on, everytime I wanted to stay home, I told her that none would be in class and she totally believed me [laughs]." (MIL_1, male, 31 years old)

An interesting addition to this narrative refers to technological advancement: being born in a world without most of the technologies permeating life nowadays is a relevant aspect of people who were young during the 80s and the 00s. Memes like those in Figure 4.13 and Figure 4.14 exalt the culture of those years, recalling the Internet in its early days. The first one appears more nostalgic, as it seeks to trigger a specific memory connected to MSN, the online messaging service; whereas the second seeks to exalt the efficiency and aesthetics of old phones, as compared to the modern iPhone.

Figure 4.13. [13]

Figure 4.14. [14]

In particular, the fact of having experienced the rise and the development of new technologies is considered not only as a distinctive mark but also as a technical and cognitive advantage. For instance, MIL_8 states that Millennials are situated at the turn of the old and the new world: in this sense, the ability to have known and being capable of mastering both old and new technological devices is brought up as a source of pride and a plus with respect to older and younger cohorts, whose proficiency stops halfway. Similarly, X_3 argues that witnessing the launch of different tools has granted her the capability of immediately adapting to new sophisticated technologies.

> *"Well, I'm a Millennial, so I grew up at the turn of the old and the new world. And maybe this is indeed our luck: we weren't born with the digital, so we still got to know the world how it was before. [...] We still know how to use our grandma's phone, whereas young people don't even know what it is. We remember what a floppy disk is... so this is our plus: we can move from one medium to another, having seen them all."* (MIL_8, male, 28 years old)

> *"We have this different relationship with technology and technological devices. We grew up right through the years of technological advancement, we witnessed its evolution piece after piece: one day there was only the televi-*

[13] "Year 2000, school ends, I come back home running, turn the computer on and..."

[14] "Incredible mobile phones (iPhone doesn't even come close) / starter pack"

sion, the following day the video recorder, the day after that the CD player... So we've gradually learnt to use old and new tools. That's why, I believe, we are so used to immediately understanding the abilities and the potentialities of new technologies." (X_3, female, 41 years old)

To summarize, nostalgic memes contribute to the reinforcement of a generational sense of belonging by providing romanticized recollections of the past and fostering shared narratives like the one above examined. As seen, generational pages set the production focussing on a number of recurrent thematics, among which memories related to childhood and adolescence are predominant. Looking at the generational groups, it can be noted that none of the cohorts considered in the study are immune to nostalgic narratives: while older cohorts appear more prone to indulge in nostalgic reveries, respondents from Gen_X, Millennials, and even some Gen Zers (as seen in the example below) have reported enjoying nostalgic recollections of the past, especially those dealing with old cultural products and technologies. This finding further supports the claim advanced in Chapter 3, in which I argued that the generational connotation of memes produced with the grammar of nostalgia is blurred: in fact, the analysis provided indicates that nostalgic memes are employed to convey messages and narratives around shared experiences that resonate with more than one generational cohort.

"*I really like those Facebook pages where they publish memes unlocking past memories, like the toys we used to play with when we were young, the snacks from our childhood, or the old mobile phones like Nokia 3310...* (Z_3, female, 22 years old)"

4.4 The importance of social media pages and accounts

Looking at the results from my analysis, it emerges that influential pages and accounts play a central role in the meme economy. This appears in line with the study conducted by Abidin (2020) on meme factories, which puts the emphasis on the impact of these actors in creating and circulating memes. Along this line, Lee and Hoh (2021) state that these accounts have centralized and institutionalized meme production, arguably wielding

"immense power in shaping how their followers think of key social, cultural, and political issues through posting memes" (p. 5). Building upon their claim, I argue that these actors also affect the ways generational identities are constructed, negotiated, and expressed through memes. As powerful content aggregators, I state that meme accounts have an impact on the creation of a generational sense of belonging, by setting the agenda of the topics and the cultural references embedded in memes, as well as fostering specific narratives and spreading them to a large audience. For most respondents, regardless of the social media of reference, the main source of memes are huge social media pages or accounts. Many participants argue that these pages have a generational connotation, insofar as they use cultural references that are closer to some generational groups. This idea resonates with the claims of MIL_5, arguing that one Instagram page that she follows is run by peers because the memes contain references and themes, which reflect the experiences and the worldview shared by Millennials. A similar remark was advanced by MIL_9, who reports that her favorite Instagram page employs references from old cartoons such as *DragonBall* that she perceives as constitutive of her generation.

> *"For instance, I'm sure that the page *** is run by peers, even if I don't know them personally. I infer that because the memes they post make me laugh, so it means that we share a similar perspective on the world. Also, the level of the memes and the cultural references make me realize that we have shared the same life experiences."* (MIL_5, female, 27 years old)

> *"The pages I follow often create memes using old characters and movies, for instance the page *** posts a lot of memes with DragonBall. Now, I don't even know if it's still on TV, but DragonBall is from when I was young."* (MIL_9, female, 30 years old)

The administrators of some of the meme accounts I have interviewed also admit to customizing their content with respect to the generational target of their pages. For instance, Z_12, who runs a page mostly followed by teenagers, admits to adapt not only the content but also the format to the memes to meet the tastes of his followers and increase the popularity of the page: in this sense, he reports being inspired by recent trends for the

meme templates and mostly publishing 'When' memes and 'POV' (Point of View), i.e. memes showing the viewer's point of view of a certain situation. According to him, this kind of memes is particularly appreciated by younger generations, as demonstrated by its popularity on TikTok

> *"My page is mostly followed by teenagers, so I typically publish memes on the school and other topics that may interest them, like video games. [...] Overall, the memes that attract more engagement and visibility are those that use templates taken from current trends, like movies or recent events. Also, I've noticed a preference for certain types of memes, like those starting with 'when…' or the 'POVs', that are also very popular on TikTok."* (Z_12, male, 19 years old)

On a similar note, Z_10 claims that the content of his page plays upon shared common experiences and relatable humour to acquire visibility. Mostly targeting teenagers and young adults, he bases his memes on school-related situations, as it is a topic that regards most of his followers. At the same time, he reports employing cultural references that are close to younger audiences, like cartoons but also trending meme templates (e.g. the *Stonk* template). In so doing, the page offers a space for young people to laugh about relatable common experiences.

> *"My page targets young people, some of them are very young like 11 or 12 years old. I don't think I have many followers who are above 30 years old, anyway. If you want to target this age range, you must publish memes that they will find relatable, so mostly related to the school because it's a topic that interests all of them and because there are things that everyone is familiar with… so, you usually focus on commonly shared situations… Also, the type of humour I use is more connected to young people… I doubt that it would have the same effect on 50 years old people. So for instance, I would use certain references that are popular in memes like Spongebob or 'Stonk'. What I usually try to do is to express common sentiments related to situations that everyone has experienced, like when your mom comes back angry from*

> *PTA meetings or when there is a pop quiz and you haven't studied."* (Z_10, male, 18 years old)

Similar observations can be advanced for generational pages as well, which also appear to play a leading role in the creation and circulation of nostalgic memes. Setting the agenda for the nostalgic production and the messages conveyed by the memes, these pages fuel the circulation of determined narratives, thus contributing to shaping and reinforcing users' collective memory. Furthermore, these pages constitute a hub for users to remember their past and to connect with people having lived the same experiences. In this sense, X_8, the admin of a page dedicated to the 80s and the 90s, argues that the inner purpose of the page is to provide a meeting point and a 'safe' space of remembrance for users to re-evoke those times together.

> *"You see, the purpose of the page is to become a place of gathering, it is like the series 'I ragazzi sul muretto' [the guys on the wall], you know? In those years, young people used to have a meeting place in town, when social media didn't even exist... I want our page to be a safe space for everyone to gather and remember those times together. [...] This page is like a big family, there isn't a boss, an admin, none stands out, we are all equal... we want to recreate the atmosphere of those years."* (X_7, male, 46 years old)

Analogous to meme accounts on Instagram, admins of the generational pages also state to be guided by popularity and user engagement, reporting to give prominence to the most popular topics. For instance, X_8, the admin of a page dedicated to the 80s, notices that users have some favorite memes, for instance those regarding certain movies, celebrities or popular everyday objects from the past like the *Ciao* scooter, hence they tend to re-publish popular content now and then to boost the visibility of the page.

> *"There are some content that is published more often because we noticed it's particularly loved by the public, for instance 'Drive-in' sketches like the one by Ezio Greggio on Teomondo Scrofalo, popular objects like the 'Ciao' scooter, or also images evoking particular life moments, like those related to the habit of going to the disco in the afternoon."* (X_8, female, 48 years old)

In conclusion, I argue that pages and accounts influence the construction and the expression of users' generational identity in at least two ways: 1) by curating and promoting the distribution of large quantities of customized content, they set the agenda of the generational discourse on social media, thus playing an impactful role in structuring and reinforcing the collective memory around what constitutes a generation in terms of shared experiences and the cultural background; 2) they provide a digital space for people identifying with a specific generational group to gather, communicate with others, and validate their collective identity.

4.5 Discussion

In this chapter, I have looked at how memes contribute to creating a generational 'We-Sense' (Bude, 1997), by providing a device for collectively interpreting, recalling, and communicating experience. Existing research has pointed at shared experiences and interpretations as the binding force of sociological generations. Yet, while previous studies have provided purely theoretical accounts of how social generations are formed (Corsten, 1999; France and Roberts, 2015; Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Esler, 1984), I have sought to provide an empirical account of the process whereby the set of shared concepts and values that binds a social generation together is formed. In this sense, I claim that memes (consolidated in different meme grammars) are consistent with the notion of 'generational semantics' elaborated by (Corsten, 1999), as "meaningfully connected criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in a conversation" (p. 261). As argued by the scholar, the crystallization of discursive practices into a generational semantics is a necessary premise for the rise of generational belonging: in fact, this semantic provides the discursive interpretive frames to thematize the experience "and translate it into speech within the forms of everyday interaction" (Aroldi and Colombo, 2007, p. 37). Following this claim, I argue that memes constitute a form of generational semantics that enable people to communicate social experience and develop similar interpretations, which according to Mannheim (1952) lies at the foundation of generation in the social sense.

Overall, the findings indicate that memes create a sense of belonging in that they offer

a collective and collaborative modality of arranging experience, fostering the creation of what I have labeled as 'generational imaginaries', constituted by common perceptions and elaborations around what defines a generation. In particular, I contend that memes contribute to structuring, negotiating, and reinforcing this imaginary in more than one way. The first one is by employing generationally connoted features: namely echoic irony, and cultural references. These latter refer to media products like old movies and cartoons, which are perceived by a generational group as representative of childhood and/or formative years. As emerging from the interviews, the use of these strategies represent a form of symbolic and cultural barriers that reinforce generational cohesion, as it is believed that the understanding of memes is limited to those with similar generational background. Nonetheless, the transformative practices fuelling meme culture foster the creative re-interpretation and remixes of old and new cultural texts, making generational imaginaries dynamic entities which may undergo several transformations as culture is re-appropriated by new audiences and transformed into memes (cfr. Brembilla, 2016).

Nostalgic memes also contribute to generational identities, by providing users with romanticized narratives of past lifestyles and culture. To this end, memes tend to focus on a few topics and key life moments experienced during childhood and youth, as well as on representative cultural objects. While nostalgic memes trigger users' personal recollections, the use of 'we' and 'us' in memes also project the memory into a collective dimension. In fact, I argue that nostalgic memes offer a space for the collective re-narration of the past, fostering the connection with individual and collective identity. In so doing, nostalgic memes enable the preservation of individual identity by drawing a connection with past life experiences and past-selves (cfr. Wilson, 2005), while media platforms provide a space where identities can be continuously revised, thus contributing to blurring the boundaries between personal and collective memory (cfr. Niemeyer, 2014; Van Dijck, 2011).

In conclusion, my analysis also emphasizes the importance of meme factories (Abidin, 2020) and generational pages, as impactful producers and distributors of memetic content. Following the logic of visibility, these accounts produce and distribute curated content on

a large scale, while providing a virtual meeting point for people sharing similar cultural backgrounds. Contextually, their activity appears to reduce the relevance of users' active role in meme culture, while placing the emphasis on huge actors in setting the agenda of meme production and fostering the narratives and the messages for collective identities. While assessing whether generational identities are undergoing a platformization process is beyond the scope of the present analysis, this provides a promising follow-up for future research.

5. Generational othering through memes

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how the practice of social othering is actualised by memes to identify and mark the distance with other generations. In order to investigate this phenomenon, I explore how memes foster the construction of two 'other' statuses, the 'Young' and the 'Old'. The analysis reveals that memes construct the 'generational other' through narratives regarding the relationship with technology and the worldview. Despite being identified through a variety of age-based categories, I argue that the categorization of the generational other relies on a number of socio-cultural characteristics, including stereotypes, exaggerations and clichés which are not necessarily age-based. This adds to the idea that generations are socially constructed, by showing that, although demographic categories are still largely employed, the cut-off line is more on the social and cultural aspects rather than on the age.

5.1 Theoretical framework

Social generations are not only created by discourses about what brings their members together, e.g. having lived the same experience, but also about what differentiates them from other generational groups (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014). Similarly, Bolin (2019) distinguishes between the creation of a generational 'we-sense', in which the generation recognises itself through common experiences, and a 'they-sense' which is "produced when the members of the social formation acknowledges their commonality in opposition to 'other' generations" (p. 33). The perceptions of their own and other generations may direct to social categorization, drawing the line between in-group and out-group members. More specifically, Timonen and Conlon (2015) have highlighted that other generations are predominantly portrayed using negative features and connotations.

Existing research has demonstrated that memes may fuel social exclusion within online communities. As seen, the digital and subcultural requirements to participate in meme

culture affects the in-group and out-group dynamics, cutting out those who lack the competence to decode and to produce socially acceptable memes: this is particularly evident in meme collectives which are "gatekept by subcultural insiders who privilege some and marginalize others" (Milner, 2016, p. 3). Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that memes foster antagonism: since meme culture is mostly controlled by dominant social groups, different studies have revealed that memes are frequently employed to target minorities and marginalized groups (Milner, 2013; Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Mittos et al., 2020; Kanai, 2016). In this respect, Lee and Hoh (2021) have shown the pervasivity of ageist memes circulated by influential meme producers, like meme factories (Abidin, 2020): their study reveals that these memes offers infantilized and barbarized representations of older adults, often portrayed as immature, digitally illiterate, and uncultured. In addition, memes can be used to express intergenerational conflicts during particularly turbulent periods (MacDonald, 2021) or as initiator and weapons of intergenerational wars (Lim and Lemanski, 2020), as epitomized by the case of the 'Ok Boomer' meme (Lorenz, 2019; Abidin, 2020).

Building upon these premises, this chapter seeks to investigate the ways in which memes contribute to the identification and portrayal of other generations through the sociological phenomenon of othering, which I here refer to as 'generational othering'. To do so, I adopt the definition of social othering proposed by Brons (2015, p. 70):

> "Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. Othering thus sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit."

Drawing from a number of philosophical and sociological traditions, the term was coined by Spivak (1985) in the context of post-colonial theory and can be considered as a multidimensional process, in the sense that it affects different aspects of identity, including

race, gender and class. Quoting Jensen (2011), the theory of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering assumes that subordinate people are relegated to inferior positions as others in discourse. From a discursive point of view, Dervin (2016) argues that "othering refers to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between 'us' and 'them'" (p. 46). In sum, othering can be conceived as a process of social categorization through the stereotypization of the other: in this sense, it has negative effects on the targeted individuals and groups, as it may lead to social exclusion and stigmatization. The dominant agent group creates a representation of the other target group characterized by the latter's differences from the agent group's normative standard, to reflect different positions in social space and to reinforce political and power differentials between representative members of the agent and target groups.

In this chapter, I employ the heuristic frame offered by social othering to investigate how memes contribute to the identification, and ultimately to the categorization, of other generational groups. While previous studies have focused on memes targeting older people (Lee and Hoh, 2021; Zeng and Abidin, 2021; Mueller and McCollum, 2021), here I seek to expand this observation by looking at how memes identify and portray the 'generational other' in both directionality, i.e. older and younger generations. In so doing, the analysis unpacks the ways in which narratives shaped by memes are productive of particular understandings with respect to generationally distant categories. To this end, I take key illustrative examples of memes portraying other age groups and generational categories as emerging from the analysis carried out in the first chapter, specifically coming from the groups 'Memory and growing up' and 'Family'. Using CDA (Fairclough, 2003; Rose, 2016), I pay attention to the rhetorical aspects of the meme, in relation to the visual and discursive portrayal of other generational groups, the characteristics attributed to them and the wider implications in terms of connotations and moral judgment. In this context, the interviews shed light on how the narratives emerging from the memes intersect with those of my interviewees, leading to a segmentation of the generations.

5.2 Generational othering through memes

The following sections will be dedicated to the investigation of the phenomenon of 'generational othering'. This takes place by means of two heuristic categories that this process generates: the 'Young' and the 'Old'. In so doing, I aim at unveiling general trends with respect to the portrayal of younger and older generations, as well as to capture the pluralities of subgroups encompassed by these categories. In the following sections, each of the two prototypical categories will be considered separately with respect to its most discussed characteristics.

5.2.1 The 'Old'

Lee and Hoh (2021) have argued that ageism is still very much present in meme production: while old people appear alien to meme culture, the scholars argue that they remain a prolific target of memes. In fact, as I have shown in Chapter 3, older users are not excluded from meme culture, rather they have a different and broader conceptualisation of the phenomenon, as reflected by the *grammar of nostalgia* and the *grammar for interaction*. As it emerges, the representation of the 'Old' leverages two well-established beliefs connected to older adults, i.e. their digital illiteracy and the outdated worldview. In the following, I will show how these two issues are represented through memes: contextually, the analysis reveals that the creation of the generational other 'Old' features a sheer variety of age-based labels, which are imbued with certain characteristics.

Digital illiteracy. Older people's difficult relationship with technology is one of the most diffused age-related stereotypes. Despite having some foundation in studies highlighting the the persistence of the intergenerational digital divide (Sala et al., 2022; Friemel, 2016), this belief is contested by research indicating that, in fact, the digital gap is context-dependent: the interplay of factors including gender, social class, and geographical settings suggests that the digital divide is a complex and dynamic phenomenon which cannot be reduced to an age-related issue (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2003; Neves et al., 2018). In this sense, the study carried out by Loges and Jung (2001) reveals that the differences are to

some extent due to older people "pursuing a narrower scope of goals and activities online" (p. 556), and that the elder evaluate their Internet connection to be as a central aspect of their lives as young people do. Nonetheless, as argued by Neves et al. (2018): "older adults (65+) continue to be portrayed in the academic literature and public discourse as a homogeneous group characterized by technophobia, digital illiteracy, and technology non-use" (p. 1). Several memes dealing with 'family relationships' in the Instagram dataset construct their humoristic effect playing upon the idea that older people are unable with technology. These memes depict older people as relatives of the viewer and describe their clumsiness with technological devices in different ways: for instance, they appear incapable of performing simple tasks or of finding the solution to the easiest problems, like reducing the brightness of the screen to increase the duration of the phone battery (Figure 5.1).

The visual depiction of older people also seeks to accentuate their naivety. In this sense, they are sometimes represented by cartoon characters who are notably naive and simple-minded Lee and Hoh (2021), such as Patrick (from the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*) and Winnie the Pooh. The irony is constructed on the exaggeration of their inability, playing upon the idea that technology remains an unsolved mystery for older adults: in Figure 5.1, the mom, represented by the cartoon character Patrick, is being fried by the blinding light coming from her phone, and yet still cluelessly wondering why the battery of her phone is constantly low. Similarly, the meme in Figure 5.2, the grandmother sees her nephew memorizing a phone number like a hacker producing mysterious code.

Figure 5.1. [1]

Figure 5.2. [2]

The lack of digital literacy is not limited to the technical skills but also extends to the basic social norms to engage in digital spaces. An example is offered by the meme in Figure 5.3, which mocks the way in which 40 year old people pose in the profile picture on their social media accounts: the pictures of the cats are meant to mimic the extreme seriousness and the clumsy angle of the camera held from below when taking a selfie. This representation is juxtaposed to a textual setup saying ‘None: / Literally none:’, implying the fact that such a behavior is a prerogative of people in their 40s. It is interesting to notice that the identified target here is an apparently restricted age-based ‘40 years old’, yet the point appears to be not strictly on the age, but rather on a specific social conduct enacted online. Unlike the previous examples, here the target appears to have some technical skills, but lacks the ability to recognise what is socially acceptable to post on social media and what would be considered awkward.

Another example is offered by Figure 5.4: the meme features the *Bro Explaining* template, in which a man is talking to a seemingly fed-up blonde woman. In this context, the man signifies the main character’s aunt ‘Rosalinda’ ranting about a conspiracy related to the Covid-19, which she arguably retrieved from unreliable sources. This meme implies that older people are the major consumers of fake news online, as they do not have the means to recognize true information from deceitful ones. Although existing research

[1] “Mom: ‘Why does my phone battery die so quickly?’ Mom when using the phone:”

[2] “How my grandma sees me when I memorize a number on her phone”

indicates that older people are in fact particularly susceptible to fake news (Brashier and Schacter, 2020), other studies have shown that younger users are not immune either (Loos et al., 2018; Loos and Nijenhuis, 2020). The main point is, once again, that even if older adults gain the ability to navigate the web and perform easy tasks, like taking a selfie or retrieving information online, they lack the savviness to avoid deceitful information, scams, or simply socially awkward situations.

As found by Lee and Hoh (2021), the representation of digitally illiterate older adults is biased towards women: in fact, my analysis found that memes tend to portray moms, aunts, grandmothers more often with respect to male counterparts. This is also reflected by some of the female-oriented discriminatory labels emerging from the interviews. As reported in chapter 3, MIL_11 alluded to *'mamme informate'* (informed moms) as a fully-fledged social category, composed by middle-aged women perceiving themselves as technologically aware, yet actually indiscriminately believing all sorts of news found on the web, regardless of the source. It can be thus already seen that the other 'Old' reunites a set of socio-cultural characteristics which are related to a specific age range but also bring into focus other social factors, e.g. gender.

Figure 5.3. [3]

Figure 5.4. [4]

[3]"None: / Literally none: / 40 years old people on social media:"

[4]"Covid-19 is a conspiracy to decrease the world population and to make money over the vaccine, which they have already produced but are waiting to release."

Old people's awkwardness with the digital strongly emerges from my interviews, when participants reported personal anecdotes of young and old people interacting online, such as in the context of family WhatsApp groups. Usually created by some senior members of the family against the will of many, these groups are often a theater of clashes and embarrassment. As stated by Z_8, young members tend to remain silent, while older relatives mostly share 'buongiornissimo' memes and funny videos. MIL_2 reports that his mother's cousin had the idea of creating such a group to keep in touch with geographically distant relatives and, unsurprisingly, it turned out to be a bad idea: specifically, he recalls that the peak of the embarrassment was reached when the group founder, who enjoys creating memes photoshopping the family members onto artistic backgrounds, decided to edit their faces on the Last Supper's apostles.

> *"[talking about buongiornissimo memes] I've seen these sorts of images on Facebook, but also as WhatSapp status of older people or on WhatsApp groups. You know, those family groups with all the aunts and uncles and cousins that live far away, so they create these groups to wish a good day and goodnight to everyone at once. Then there is always that aunt that sends an image like this one and that obviously is left on read by everyone..."* (Z_8, female, 23 years old)

> *"So, we have this cringe WhatsApp group with all our relatives; my mom's cousin had the great idea to create this group with the side of the family that moved outside the region of origin of this cousin (and of my mother). There is an insane number of people in this group, all barely knowing each other... Most of us young people never post anything, older people share some of those terrible videos that they think are funny, you know... There was this one time in which my mom's cousin created this meme with all of our faces edited as the Apostles in Leonardo's Last Supper... So cringy."* (MIL_2, male, 28 years old)

From these recollections, it becomes evident that the generational clash arises not only from the differences in the digital abilities, but also from the use of different generational

languages, as young and old members of the group are used to employing different 'meme grammars' to communicate online. Hence, the belief that older people cannot understand memes. This is epitomized in Figure 5.5, depicting a mom, represented by Winnie The Pooh, having a hard time deciphering the meme that their children have just shown her.

Figure 5.5. [5]

Most 'aware' respondents argue that older people cannot understand memes because they are unable to grasp the irony behind them. According to Z_11, this is due to different media experiences: having approached social media later in life, older people have a hard time understanding the ironic mechanism which is endemic to certain digital spaces and evolved within them. Hence, it can be argued that understanding memes is something connecting people belonging to the same media generation. At the same time, it is believed that older people cannot understand the cultural references embedded in the memes. Due to these cultural and symbolic barriers, many 'aware' respondents reported that they actively avoid circulating memes outside their generational group of reference. Attempts to do otherwise are mostly unsuccessful: X_5 reports he does not bother to explain the joke to his mother, because it would lose its humoristic power.

> *"I think that 40-50 years old don't get the mechanism behind memes, they don't get the humour... I don't know if it's because they have approached the digital world only recently or what. Instead, young people immediately*

[5] "Me showing my mom a funny meme / My mom:"

understand this mechanism...” (Z_11, male, 19 years old)

“There are memes in which the humour is subtler, you have to understand the wordplay, you must have certain cultural references... If I send those to my mother she says she doesn’t get it and that’s it... If I explained it to her it wouldn’t be funny anymore. So, I tell her ‘leave it, you don’t get it’ and that’s it.” (X_5, male 45 years old)

Besides irony, it is believed that older adults have a hard time making sense of the meme because they are unable to grasp its selective mapping mechanism (cfr. Lou, 2017). They stop at a superficial reading of the image, incapable of seeing the meme as a form of multimodal simile, connecting two different semantic and conceptual domains. Hence, Z_7 reports that her father completely misses the point of the mechanism, asking unrelated questions like “who did this?”, “why...?” and is unable to draw the connection between the image and the meme.

“We actually did an experiment with all our parents, we showed them a meme and they had to explain it. Apart from two of them, the rest couldn’t do it. My dad, for instance, couldn’t really get the sense of the meme, he went on asking who the person represented was, how he was linked to the phrase, why it should be funny... Of course we recorded their reaction on video and made fun of them.” (Z_7, female, 24 years old)

It is however interesting to notice that not all respondents share this view and that there is a counter narrative to the idea that older people are excluded from meme culture. This comes, unsurprisingly, by older ‘aware’ users, who support the idea that memes are a universal language, able to cross the borders of generations: provided that they are accessible to everyone, these respondents reported successfully sharing memes with people from older cohorts. Instead of acting like ‘gatekeepers’ with respect to memes and meme culture, they actually put an effort in educating ‘unaware’ users to meme language, carefully choosing the instances and providing assistance to facilitate the comprehension.

“Yes, I share them with my friends, with my aunt... I do share memes with

other generations, with older people... If it's easy to understand, why not? The meme is a device that bypass generational barriers. I mean, a 14-year-old boy can get it, a 70-year-old adult can get it, if they have the intelligence to understand the joke... it's like the joke they used to tell at the bar in 30 seconds and it makes you laugh... If it's easy to understand, anyone can get it." (X_4, male, 42 years old)

Despite a few exceptions, however, most respondents are convinced that older adults lack the basic competence around memes, and specifically with the *grammar of contingency*. Contextually, this reinforces the idea that meme grammars are generationally bound, as they often remain confined within the generational environment that produced them. Attempts to cross these borders, in one sense or another, result in failure, incomprehension, and mockery. Besides having scarce ability to understand them, most respondents agree that older people cannot produce socially acceptable memes. This was widely discussed by 'aware' respondents in reference to what they labeled as 'boomer memes'. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that nostalgic and buongiornissimo memes were mainly ruled out from the category 'meme', due to the absence of a humoristic punchline. In addition, respondents agree that 'boomer memes' also have visual characteristics that reveal the generational positioning and the demographic age of their producers: as Z_2 states, this include the presente of kitsch and non-functional details, like the application of stickers and decorations, that do not concur to the construction of the humoristic message.

"For instance, this meme with 'full houses and empty hearts' [Figure 5.12] looks like a boomer meme, made by older people, you know. It lacks the irony to be considered a meme... You immediately know that these are not made by... people like us, young people. Maybe it's also the layout, it looks so old, this heart at the side, put there like that, these decorations at the sides, they aren't useful to understanding the meme, I don't see the point in including them." (Z_2, female, 23 years old)

To sum up, digital illiteracy is the first defining characteristic of the 'old': this is visible in the lack of technical competences when engaging with technological devices, but also

in the incapability of acquiring the social competence to navigate digital spaces. Memes, as the brainchild of social media language, constitute an area in which this deficiency emerges with particular evidence. As summed up in the excerpt below, the participants tend to associate this lack of expertise to different media experiences. It is interesting to notice that, according to X_3, the presence of buongiornissimo memes and fake news are taken together as evidence of the failure to respect the social norms regulating the digital environment.

> *"For me, people who are now 50-60 and got a smartphone for the first time when they were 50 can't use it in the proper way: they believe in anything they see, they communicate aggressively... They use the Internet uncritically and maybe they attribute to online sources the same authority and reliability they used to do with television... They are clumsy, that's why there are so many 'buongiornissimi caffè' and fake news and all these things that they circulate..."* (X_3, female, 41 years old)

The 'boomer mindset'. The second defining characteristic of the 'Old' is their outdated mindset: old people are perceived as having too strict convictions on how things (should) work, a black and white vision of the world, and a general aversion for what is new. This narrative emerges from the Instagram dataset and specifically from the group 'Family'. In fact, most of these memes depict the difficulties in the relationship between children and parents, due to opposite and incompatible worldviews. The 'other' in these memes are older relatives and, in the majority of cases, mothers. The mother is usually identified as the moral authority of the house: strict, inflessible, she is the ultimate judge of what is allowed and what is forbidden. The relationship with the children is mostly characterized by incommunicability and unfairness. Overall, the mother is not willing to indulge in great explanations, nor does she admit being wrong. Threats to her authority are resolved through verbal and physical violence, as hinted at by Figure 5.6. The visual depiction of the scene, featuring the child trying to establish a dialogue with the parent and the mother represented by the child in the back, abruptly suppressing the attempt with the lapidary conversation-ender phrase "I gave birth to you" symbolized by the ball, which is about to

hit the main character. As for the visual representation, the mother is often portrayed by cartoon characters which trivializes her violent reactions, e.g. with distorted facial expressions or embracing a weapon (Figure 5.7). Unfairness in child-parent relationships is also exemplified by double standards with technology: while parents appear to be generally being more tolerant with respect to media they are used to, they are prone to demonize new technologies. In Figure 5.8 the mother gets angry by the children looking at the phone while having dinner, whereas she remains unbothered if the television is on. As I will show in the following section, a strand of nostalgic memes show in fact an aversion towards new technology, accused of having artificialized and damaged human sociality.

Figure 5.6. [6]

Figure 5.7. [7]

The memes represented above resonate with the experience of many respondents, especially among the younger cohorts, who recognised themselves in the scene depicted: for instance, Z_6 (male, 21 years old) argues that the scene in Figure 5.6 represents a standard reaction of his mother, whenever he tries to explain his reasons during a discussion.

[6]"My mother / me using logics in a discussion / 'I gave birth to you'"

[7]"My mom when we're watching the TV during dinner / My mom when I look at my phone during dinner"

Figure 5.8. [8]

"*Yeah, [laughs] I like this meme, this is typically my mother. Every time I try to convince her she is wrong or to change her mind about something, this is the standard reply at a certain point. And that's the end of the discussion. Ok, boomer.* (Z_6, male, 21 years old) "

So far, the depiction of the 'old' is mostly situated in the family setting, describing old people as digitally illiterate and uncompromising old relatives, where intergenerational clashes take the form of family quarrels and misunderstandings. The memetic phrase 'Ok, Boomer' subsumes the above mentioned characteristics attributed to old people, and became a synonym for 'old behavior/mindset', while partially loosening the association with the original demographic category. As seen in Section 1.3.4, 'Ok, Boomer' gained popularity at the end of 2019 as a meme used by younger cohorts (mostly GenZ and Millennials) to express quick rebuttal of what is perceived as an outdated vision of the world carried on by older generations, and specifically by Baby Boomers (Lorenz, 2019). Despite not having found 'Ok, Boomer' memes in the datasets, the phrase was often mentioned throughout the interviews by 'aware' users. Looking at the interpretations and the contexts of use of the phrase, it is possible to derive who are the 'boomers' and which features define them: according to a share of participants, the phrase expresses criticism towards the demographic group of 'Baby Boomers', perceived as responsible for economic

[8] "My mom when I spend 6 hours in front of the computer studying / my mom after I play with the computer for 30 minutes"

inequality, climate emergencies, and other social problems afflicting nowadays society. In this sense, some respondents admit having employed 'Ok, Boomer' as a retort against condescending or patronizing behaviors from older adults, insisting on giving advice on how young people should live their lives. Such is the case of MIL_8: according to him, the Boomers are a privileged category who have selfishly profited from a period of economic growth and stability to the expense of future generations. In this sense, he argues, older people deserve being the target of irony with memes and the phrase 'Ok, Boomer'.

> *"The Boomers are those who lived through a period of great expansion. Under every aspect, they benefited from everything and had basically all the opportunities. They had the chance to really do something good for the world and they wasted it. They've never cared about who would come next, they just thought 'I'm fine, who cares who comes next'. This is the truth. And now we must pay for this, for them and for us. So, these jokes about the boomers, when they tell you what you should do, you know, the useless advice to find a job 'If you get up early, if you send a lot of curricula' ... Well, I think in those cases, a nice 'Ok boomer' is more than deserved."* (MIL_8, male, 28 years old)

For users who conceptualize Baby Boomers as the embodiment of the social issues plaguing society, the meme may be a way to utter this distress. However, instead of a form of political activism triggered by a heightened generational awareness (cfr. Zeng and Abidin, 2021), here 'Ok boomer' looks more like a resentful, yet sterile remark. Even if in the past it gained a momentum of productivity and became conducive to an array of messages of protests, from the interviews it emerges that 'Ok Boomer' seems to have mostly exhausted its potential in that way. In fact, other responses reveal that the sharp angle of social criticism has been smoothed in favour of a less serious and less engaged way to mock people with outdated beliefs and attitudes. In line with the process of constant reappropriation and repurposing typical of the *grammar of contingency*, the label 'boomer' has started to be playfully applied to people that do not necessarily fit into the Baby Boomer category from a demographic point of view, yet display a 'boomer mindset'.

Overall, boomers are characterized by the unwillingness to keep updated with the world and new generations. As seen below, X_4 associates the 'boomer mindset' with that of 'unaware' users. According to him, boomers are those who send buongiornissimo memes and who are eagerly attached to the past in a nostalgic way.

> *"If you use buongiornissimo memes and those horrible dog stickers you're a boomer! [laughs] Joke aside, I believe that 'Ok, Boomer' is for those people who don't want to keep up with the new generations anymore. There are many things that people from my generation have in common with boomers... But if you want to define when people become boomers is when they have stopped to keep updated and are stubbornly convinced that everything was better before... They say: 'we were smarter, we had the best things, you can't understand'... This approach is a bit boomer."* (X_4, male, 42 years old)

The progressive detachment of the label with the demographics of reference is testified by a number of interviewees from the Millennial cohort, admitting to use the phrase among peers or reporting to have had this label used against them. For instance, MIL_1, a 31 years old male, recalls when he was called a boomer by one of his students for being unable to use a touch screen coffee machine.

> *"One day, they installed a new digital coffee machine in the library. The problem is that it was full-touch screen and I could not find the espresso option. So I thought 'what a lame coffee machine, it serves just one type of coffee'. Ten minutes later, one of my students comes in, he's around 19 years old... Well, he enters, looks at the machine for a couple of seconds, and with the easiest move swipes the screen, and there it was: espresso, cappuccino, all the options. I only had to swipe left. 'So that's how it works!' I said... He stared at me for a moment, then started laughing and told me: 'Yeah, Boomer!'. Well, I deserved it."* (MIL_1, male, 31 years old)

To sum up, the generational other 'Old' is epitomized by a variety of age-based categories and labels, such as 'Boomer'. Nonetheless, the analysis demonstrates that these categories rather than designating a demographically defined group of people, refer to an

attitude originally related to a specific age category but that gradually come to be applied to whomever displays those characteristics. In the following section, I will show that a similar mechanism underpins the construction of the 'Young' other: meme culture appropriate demographic categories and labels, imbuing them with socio-cultural features, mostly stereotypes and clichés,

5.2.2 The 'Young'

Overall, the portrayal of the 'Young' is accompanied by a negative evaluation of their lifestyle, their education, and their cultural tastes. When memes are constructed with the *grammar of nostalgia*, the negative features attributed to young people emerge from the comparison with the positive features from the past. Thus, it can be argued that social othering through this grammar constitutes the other side of the coin of nostalgic remembrance. As such, it can be observed that memes provide a device to strengthen and reinforce collective identity and generational boundaries by both exalting the qualities of the past (as seen in Chapter 4) and deprecating the present and younger generations. The *grammar of contingency* mocks young people's style and attitude towards life, depicting them as infants behaving like adults. In the following, I will explore the most common features attributed to young people as portrayed through memes and how they resonate with the interviewees.

Technology addicted. The idea that young people are addicted to technology is connected to the nostalgic narrative "We were better when it was worse" discussed in the previous chapter. The overarching message of these memes is that, by being so attached to technology, young people are missing out on real life: in fact, technological devices cannot replace human contact and true relationships can only be formed outside of digital spaces. Looking at how these memes are constructed, it can be seen that the 'other' is never visually represented: in fact, these memes depict scenes from the past, e.g. young children playing with the ball, hopscotch, or other popular games. The dark and dull hues of the photos seem to suggest the melancholic subtext that these times will not return, at least for the viewer - which is presumed to have grown up. Nonetheless, here the other

remains vague and indefinite, it is not clearly depicted or symbolized as it was for the ‘Old’. The addressee of the meme, the ‘Young’, is only evoked in the textual part.

Figure 5.9. [9]

Figure 5.10. [10]

Often with a patronizing and condescending tone, as in Figure 5.10, young people are invited to return to playing outside. In this case the opposition inside-bad and outside-good does not explicitly mention technology. Figure 5.9, instead, makes the parallelism more evident. Technology is replacing every other form of entertainment: more so, the text implies that even the most sophisticated devices cannot be compared with authentic human contact. Figure 5.11 reiterates this point from a different perspective, stating that older generations had a lot of fun, despite lacking the I-phone, implying that young people only find amusement with phones and advanced technologies.

[9] “They will grow up with the best technology, but they will never know how beautiful it is to play in the street with the friends from the neighborhood.”

[10] “Go back outside, kids. You’re missing out on your best years.”

Figure 5.11. [11]

To sum up, these memes evoke the other from the text, opposing modern lifestyles with their own from the past. The belief that young people are lost without their phones is deep-rooted in the interviews as well. Even without showing memes like the one presented above, the topic emerged as the counterpart of respondents' nostalgic recollections of their own youth and past times. BM_6, for instance, juxtaposes past forms of sociality, recalling when she used to play with friends or go to village fetes, to young people nowadays, who are constantly looking at the screen of their phones, even during important moments, like family reunions. In this sense, she argues that technology has not only made young people addicted to it, but it has also degraded true sociality, hindering interpersonal relationships and communication.

> *"We used to go to the bar, to the cinema, we used to go out on the street and to play with our friends... And it was really a special moment, there used to be village festivals in summer, these were unifying experiences, we really felt like a community back then. Now it's all fragmented. There is Facebook, there is the Internet, but it cannot give you the same warmth, there is a lack of human contact. If you go to the restaurant, you see all these young people, children even, with a phone in their hands, they don't even talk to each other at the same table!"* (BM_6, female, 60 years old)

[11] "Even without iPhones / we had a lot of fun"

The loss of values. The idea that technology is taking over young people is connected to the belief that we are witnessing an overall decline of important moral values. This message is mostly found in memes constructed with the *grammar of nostalgia*. As in the case illustrated above, the 'young' is not directly portrayed in the image but only called up in the text, their negative connotation arising from the contrast with the scene portrayed in the image to which are attributed positive characteristics. For instance, Figure 5.12 represents the image of a barren indoor environment, with scraped-off plaster and a gloomy atmosphere: different old and worn out utensils are seen hanging from the wall, including an old ceramic hob, a wooden table, and a range of aluminum pots and pans hanging on the wall. The caption reads: 'poverty was diffused but people had dignity... unlike today, with full houses and empty hearts'. The overall message is that materiality, luxury, and excess of goods caused the deterioration of immaterial qualities: including the respect towards others, the willingness to help, and human solidarity. Whereas this may appear more a general criticism to contemporary society, respondents immediately linked this message to the behavior of young people.

Figure 5.12. [12]

Figure 5.13. [13]

In the interviews, people commented on this message arguing that young people have 'empty hearts' because they have lost the respect and the compassion for others. In this

[12]"Poverty was diffused but people had dignity... unlike today, with full houses and empty hearts"

[13]"Sixteen years ago, conscription was suspended / huge, huge MISTAKE. Too many idiots around."

picture, young people are portrayed as selfish and self-centered, apparently indifferent and insensitive to the world around them. Many supported this allegation recalling specific episodes, in which they have witnessed young people being disrespectful towards themselves or the others. For instance, X_9 argues that, as compared to her days, she notices that young people are no longer willing to give up their seat on the bus to older people, whereas this was the norm back in her days. In a similar tone, BM_8, who used to work in a cafeteria, laments how young people stopped being polite and using a formal tone when ordering.

> *"This is a small example but it's revealing: when I was younger and an elder would get on the bus, every young passenger would immediately stand up to give up their seat. The other day I was on the bus and this poor lady had to stand up because nobody even cared to ask whether she wanted to sit or not. All these young boys and girls minding their own business with the headphones in their ears, they're not even aware of what is going on around them. In the end, I offered mine, and I am not that young..."* (X_9, female, 54 years old)

> *"I see much insolence among young people... For me it's of utmost importance to use the polite form when talking to strangers, especially older people, as a form of respect. But after years working at a cafeteria I've seen countless teenagers, sixteen-year-old girls, who treated me like their mother or a friend of hers: 'give me that, do that', without even saying 'please'. I really don't accept this kind of behavior."* (BM_8, female, 65 years old)

According to these respondents, the loss of values was caused by the decline of the education system, both private and institutional: not only are parents overall more tolerant and forgiving towards their offspring, but the school has lost the ability to discipline the students as well. An interesting variation on this theme concerns the debate around the value of military service. The meme in Figure 5.13 contraposes the image of marching military men with the caption stating that the decision to suspend the mandatory military service was a huge mistake, claiming that from that moment on young people grew up as

weaklings and unable to care for themselves. The regret for the suspension of conscription resonates among older male respondents, especially Baby Boomers: for example, BM_3 recalls his military service as a useful formative experience, during which he learnt important values such as discipline and obedience. In contrast, he claims that now young people are not even capable of making their own bed.

> *"I'm part of a Facebook group that reunites people who served in the same military base as I did... and sometimes they post memes like this one, stating that nowadays young people can't even make their own bed. When I served, we used to make our bed every morning and it had to be so tight that a coin of 50 lire should have bounced on it... If it didn't you'd get punished."* (BM_3, male, 56 years old)

To summarize up to this point, it can be observed that the representation of the other 'Young' follows some regular patterns. More than targeting young people, the real purpose of these memes is to show the general decay and corruption afflicting the present time. In this sense, the present stands in a dichotomous opposition to the nostalgic recollections, in which the positive and romanticized narrative of the past are compared and contrasted to the negative and deprecated current state of things. In this scenario, young people, who are never depicted in the image but only evoked in the text, emerge as a direct emanation of present times. Hence, the tone is more often condescending than derogatory: on the one hand these memes reproach young people, inviting them to change their attitude and habits, yet on the other hand the disillusion derives from the awareness of the impossibility of going back to things as they were. As the analysis suggests, this narrative is mostly shared by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, however it is not clear which cohorts are the addressees: while in the memes the young remains a vague and indistinct entity, respondents' remarks seem mostly directed at everyone below their age, from children to teenagers and young adults.

Memes constructed with the *grammar of contingency* are also used to target younger people. Similarly, the overarching message is that young generations have no values, nonetheless the target here seems to have a more demographically-defined identity, i.e.

usually 18 years old or below. In these memes, young people are mostly depicted as children who pretend to act above their age. Memes in Figure 5.14 depicts a scene where the main character, quoting the Joker, harshly reproaches someone born in 2008 asking for a cigarette. In other cases, young people are mocked for their attitude or their way of talking: the situation presented in Figure 5.15 features a young boy in a hospital bed reassuring another (older) person about his health condition. The use of a teen slang makes the other person unplug the young boy's life support. The humoristic message consists in the idea that the slang makes the other person believe the boy actually suffered some irreversible brain damage.

Figure 5.14. [14]

Figure 5.15. [15]

In fact, language constitutes an important aspect of social othering (Dervin, 2016; Rahman, 2014). Talking different languages or sociolects is an indicator of belonging to different groups and communities. This is also visible in existing research on memes, as sharing the same meme vernacular contribute to foster group boundaries and mark the distance with those lacking this competence (Miltner, 2014; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). By labelling young people's way of expressing as stupid, the meme in Figure 5.15 actually conveys the idea that language is a relevant generational marker. Similar remarks also emerged from the interviews. MIL_5 notices that certain new words used by young

[14]"Me when someone born in 2008 asks me for a cigarette / shut the fuck up"

[15]"Bro, say hello to the gang and tell them to chill 'cause I'm fine"

generations are incomprehensible for her and that even looking them up, their context of use remains obscure. The same holds for certain memes. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 3, memes are generationally connoted, meaning that the memetic phenomenon is reappropriated and reinterpreted by different audiences, ultimately resulting in different conceptualisations. As seen in the previous section, the symbolic and cultural barriers posed by the *grammar of contingency* for 'unaware' users constituted a marker of generational belonging. However, respondents from younger cohorts notice that memes are changing, both in the way of expressing the irony and in the cultural references implemented in the artifacts. Thus, in line with the argument that meme culture evolves according to the sensibilities of the producers of memes (Milner, 2015), many participants interpret these changes as the emergence of a 'new generation'.

> *"There are some languages, some jokes, and irony that I struggle to understand: for instance, some time ago I came across the word 'to flex' and I had no idea what it meant, so much that I had to look it up. And from what I see it doesn't mean much, you can use it for everything and for nothing... But this is the sign that a new generation of memes, jokes, and slang is emerging that is out of my league. So I can maybe strive to keep myself updated but eventually it will become complicated."* (MIL_5, female, 27 years old)

> *"I noticed that memes are very age-specific. For instance, I don't get the memes shared by my sister, who is 16, or she doesn't understand those that I like... I think it's a matter of the topic, those memes talk about things I haven't experienced or that I don't care about so they don't really make me laugh."* (Z_2, female, 23 years old)

The worst culture. If some respondents are more willing to accept that culture is evolving, many judge these changes in a negative way. In this context, the analysis highlights the presence of many memes mocking and shaming the cultural tastes of the youngsters. Memes expressing the idea that culture is changing for the worse are mostly found on Facebook generational pages referring to the 80s and the 90s. Such memes compare cultural texts from the past and the present, implying a positive judgment for the first ones

and a negative for the second ones. This double standard is mostly expressed at the textual level using recurring formulas, such as ‘I’m happy to have grown up like this and not like this’. This is exemplified by the meme in Figure 5.16, which juxtaposes two images, the one on the left representing the 90s famous song *Blue (Da Ba Dee)* by Eiffel 65, whereas the other the popular trap song *Auto Blu* by Shiva, which samples the popular 90s hit. This meme implies that culture in the past was better and that the viewer was lucky to have Eiffel 65’s song as cultural reference while growing up instead of Shiva’s song.

Figure 5.16. [16]

In the interviews, several respondents resonate with memes targeting young people’s musical taste, especially the trap genre. Many claimed that they do not understand the sense of this genre, arguing that it promotes violent language and the ‘wrong’ message. Some others claimed that trap music epitomizes the loss of values of younger generations, only interested in making money and having a luxurious life.

> *“When I was a teenager, I didn’t care about money... I mean, of course I wanted to be rich, but it wasn’t my main concern. Instead, I see many young people really longing and striving to be wealthy and that concerns me because when I was their age, let’s say 14-16 years old I cared about playing, not making money. And I believe that the world around them is passing this message too, that if you don’t have the cash you’re nobody: I see it in the trap*

[16]”I’m happy to have grown up like this and not like this”

songs that are trending among the youngsters, I see it on TikTok... All these young TikTokers showing off their luxurious homes and lifestyles." (MIL_5, female, 27 years old)

While the analysis shows that criticism of young people is widespread across generational cohorts, Gen Xers, Millennials and (early) Zoomers seem to point at the new Millennium as a significant generational turning point. This marks the beginning of a new generation especially because, from that moment on, people started coming in touch with technology from a very young age, as stated by Z_5. According to him, being raised in a world with the Internet and advanced technologies has inevitably influenced young people's way of thinking and their forms of sociality.

> *"The new generation probably starts with people born after the 2000, because they grew up with the Internet. And the more we go on, the more evident the cleavage is. Things that are just a few years old like video calls or the possibility to access a vast repertoire of music, movies, cartoons, are taken for granted by young people now. It was all different back then, when we were young. And being born with all this abundance of possibilities and choices must inevitably have brought about a different mindset."* (Z_5, male, 24 years old)

The symbolic importance of the year 2000 is also visible in memes, as epitomized by the recurrent memetic phrase 'Che ne sanno i 2000?' (What do those born in 2000 know?). This phrase is used as a bottom line of nostalgic memes produced by generational pages concerning the 80s and the 90s, to convey the message that people born in 2000 (and after) will never get to know the world as it was before, especially as far as technology is concerned. Similarly to what is observed for other nostalgic memes, here the targeting of the generational other goes hand in hand with the recollection of the past. This is exemplified by memes like that in Figure 5.17, which shows the screen of the GSM mobile phone *Nokia 3310* with an unread message. The caption humoristically claims that receiving a message on that phone gave anxiety, because it was impossible to know the sender or the content of the message in advance. Other memes more explicitly point at media experi-

ences as the initiator of a new generation: for instance, the meme in Figure 5.18 explicitly refers to the 'Netflix Generation', to mark the distance with the consumption of movies and cartoons through VHS and DVDs. The expression 'Netflix Generation' is not new (see for instance Matrix, 2014) and appears to strengthen the impact of different media experiences in structuring generations (Bolin, 2014, 2016). In sum, both memes and the interviews indicate the Millennium as the beginning of a new generation, characterized by unique patterns of media consumption, cultural tastes, and web vernaculars.

Figure 5.17. [17]

Figure 5.18. [18]

5.3 Discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the social phenomenon of generational othering, as it is represented by memes. While previous research has focussed on the phenomenon of ageist memes (Lee and Hoh, 2021), my study shows that social othering through memes takes different forms, addressing both younger and older generational groups. The main argument I wish to put forward is that memes provide a way for users to identify, portray and categorize other generations. In so doing, the phenomenon contributes to the underlying thesis that generations are socially and culturally constructed, in

[17]"No sender, no preview, just anxiety / What do people from the 2000s know about that?"

[18]"What do the Netflix generation know?"

that it demonstrates that, despite the use of age-based labels, other generations are defined by a number of beliefs concerning their relationship with media and technology as well as their values and worldview.

The construction of the other through memes is discriminatory in the sense that it seeks to accentuate the negative features of the addressed category. As seen, old generations in memes are portrayed as characterized by digital incompetence, with respect to both the technical and the social skills to navigate digital spaces memes and, overall, by an out-of-touch attitude towards the world. These characteristics come to be associated with the term 'boomer', which exploded in memes as part of the memetic phrase 'Ok, Boomer'. As such, 'boomer' is still considered by many respondents as the synonym for 'old people' by definition. Nonetheless, the analysis also captures a semantic shift in this label: as the ties with the age group start loosening, 'boomer' is applied to indicate anyone who showed the 'boomer mindset' and attitude, regardless of their age. Similar dynamics are observed with other age-related labels mentioned by respondents, such as *'40enni'* (40 year old people) or *'mamme informate'* (informed moms)'. Despite the explicit mention to specific demographic segments and decades, their use in context reveals that the focus on the age results ancillary with respect to other socio-cultural characteristics, e.g. the uncritical use of the web.

The depiction of young people through the *grammar of nostalgia* emphasizes their addiction to technology and a lack of moral values. With few exceptions, the target of the othering is never visually represented and instead emerges from the comparison with the past. Although it is implied that these memes refer to teenagers and young adults, the exact cohorts remain undefined. An exception is represented by the memetic phrase *'Che ne sanno i 2000?'*, employed to address those born after the new Millennium. This year is almost unanimously indicated as the landmark of a new generational category, which coincides with the beginning of a new media generation, characterized by a full-immersion in the digital world since birth.

All the examples above concur with the idea put forward by Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) that generational categories are in fact socially constructed by everyday discourse

practices. Meme culture makes this process visible and evident: by associating a variety of beliefs and stereotypes to labels like boomers, 40 years old people or 2000s kids, memes shift the focus from age to the socio-cultural connotations defining these segments. Taking this discussion a step further, it may be argued that memes contribute to progressively erode the biological component to be applied to people showing certain characteristics regardless of their age, as epitomized by the case of the label 'boomer'.

Conclusion and final remarks

This dissertation has demonstrated that the connection between memes and generations bears important consequences for both the conceptualisation of the phenomenon and the construction of generational identities within and across cohorts. In particular, while the first empirical chapter (Chapter 3) illustrates the concept of memes in relation to generations, the second and the third chapters (Chapter 4 and 5) explore two different yet interconnected modalities through which memes concur to structuring a sense of generational belonging, i.e. by fostering the construction and iteration of generational imaginaries and by marking the distance with other generational groups. In fact, these two chapters could be considered as two sides of the same coin, both investigating the creation and the consolidation of generational identities through memes. The findings of my work may be condensed in the expression 'memeing generations', which also gives the title to the dissertation. Exploiting a linguistic ambiguity, the phrase can be both read as 'generations that produce memes', meaning that memes are created and circulated by different generations according to their interpretation of the phenomenon, and as 'the construction of generation through memes', which refers to memes' role in the construction and expression of generational identities. This section summarizes the main points of my research and highlights their contribution to existing research, while also paying attention to the inevitable limitations that this work presents to provide an outlook on future research.

The first empirical chapter demonstrates that memes are a cross-generational phenomenon, differently elaborated by users' depending on their digital literacy and media generation (Bolin, 2014, 2016). Following the division between terminologically 'aware' and 'unaware' users, the analysis shows that the different interpretations of the phenomenon constitute a spectrum, whose endpoints are represented by a strict and a broad definition. This is illustrated through three 'meme grammars': the grammar of contingency, tied to a strict definition, the grammar for interaction, reflecting the broad interpretation, and the grammar of nostalgia, situated in a gray-zone between the two. Shared

by both younger cohorts and older users with similar media experiences, the strict conceptualization appears closer to the definition of meme proposed by the literature (Shifman, 2013; Davison, 2012), as artifacts characterized by irony and showing recognisable formal properties. Instances of memes outputted by the broad conceptualisation (e.g. through the grammar of interaction) bear instead a negative connotation and are usually attributed to older cohorts. This in turn leads to forms of social othering, e.g. downgrading and mockery (Massanari, 2013; Nagle, 2017). Finally, the analysis shows that respondents from the Millennials and Generation Z generational groups perceive memes as a form of communication endemic to online spaces, displaying a 'native' competence of the phenomenon. Instead, the strict conceptualization can be 'apprehended' by older cohorts, who show a certain degree of digital literacy or affiliation with subcultural environments, such as the cosplay or the gaming community, indicated as the cultural breeding ground for the memetic phenomenon (Benaim, 2018).

The second empirical chapter contributes to existing literature by broadening the perspective on memes as identity building phenomena: in this sense, the results presented in this chapter demonstrate that, as they spread across the web, memes foster collective identities and in-group cohesion of large social groups, beyond the usually investigated political and subcultural dimensions. As seen, findings suggest that memes provide a device to collectively arrange and elaborate common experience, fostering the creation of generational identities by contributing to the construction and consolidation of what I have labeled as 'generational imaginaries' (cfr. the concept of 'social imaginary' developed by Anderson, 1983). This argument is consistent with Mannheim's (1952) elaboration of social generations as group of people sharing similar mindsets and perspectives on reality and appears also in line with the idea of social generation as discursive constructions, fuelled by dominant narratives co-constructed and circulated by the population (Corsten, 1999; Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014; Timonen and Conlon, 2015): considering memes as a discursive device, the analysis show how memes fuel the circulation on a large scale of narratives regarding the experiences and the cultural products that define a generation. In this framework, it can be also noted the impact of social media accounts and pages in both fostering the dissemination of memes and providing a meeting point for users sharing the

same experiences.

By exploring how social othering is actualised by memes, the third and last empirical chapter illustrates that this phenomenon constitutes a way not only to identify other generational groups but also to reinforce in-group cohesion by taking the distance with people perceived as generationally distant. In fact, meme culture is known for actualising a process of othering (Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Milner, 2013; see Chapter 5), insofar as memes are employed to reinforce group boundaries by targeting and marginalizing outsiders. In the context of age and generations, my work contributes to expanding this perspective by showing that social othering does not only target older cohorts (Lee and Hoh, 2021), rather it takes different forms, addressing both younger and older generational groups. As seen, this form of othering makes use of demographic-based categories and labels, yet the cleavage is more connected to stereotypical features associated with certain ages, which are perceived as distant and inferior to the agent group producing the memes. In so doing, the analysis highlights how generational segmentation relies on a number of socio-cultural aspects, such as diverging worldviews and media experiences. In this sense, I have also argued that the memetic reappropriation of age-based categories may lead to a more fluid categorization of generations that escapes rigid demographic boundaries.

Based on the findings of the empirical chapters, it is possible to advance some general conclusions concerning the ways in which memes and (social) generations interact and entwine in the digital world. In light of the results presented in Chapter 3, I claim that the notion of social generation provides a useful heuristics to explain some social and cultural dynamics in the creation and circulation of memes: in fact, the idea to consider memes as manipulated digital objects differently conceptualized by generational audiences brings along not only ontological but also epistemological consequences. Firstly, the broad conceptualization captures the pluralism of actors involved and contributing to the memetic phenomenon: this claim seems to contradict or at least smooth previous statements that meme production and circulation is dominated by younger cohorts (Segev et al., 2015), as I demonstrated that older demographic segments also create memes, yet following different grammars. Secondly, my analysis indicates that the term 'meme' itself bears specific

generational connotation, as it refers to digital objects produced following a strict conceptualization. As a result, the term comes to be associated with a specific type of memetic realizations, leaving out others. As seen, existing research on memes is mostly based on the strict conceptualization, in that it adopts a perspective on memes close to that shared by 'terminologically aware' users. The epistemological backlash of this choice is that other memetic representations, e.g. nostalgic memes and 'buongiornissimo' memes, have been mostly overlooked and hardly acknowledged by previous studies. In light of the above, I emphasize the necessity to recognize and disentangle the object meme, here broadly understood as manipulated artifact, from the partial and connoted understanding embedded in the term 'meme'. In so doing, it is possible to achieve an in-depth understanding of the memetic phenomenon, with respect to the realizations and the actors involved, including the cases in which memes significantly deviate from the canon passed along by the literacy of 'aware' users.

More conclusions can be drawn on how memes impact the conceptualization and categorization of generational cohorts. Despite the issues connected to the traditional modalities of segmentation (Markert, 2004; see also Section 1.3), people still pervasively conceive of generational experience and identities through demographics and age-based categories: this can be noted when looking at the names of the pages analyzed on Facebook, which habitually feature one or more decades, but it also emerges during the interviews, as many respondents employ traditional generational categories to refer to their and other generational groups (e.g. Millennials, Baby Boomers). Despite the widespread use of such labels for self- and collective identification, the findings from Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 also indicate that generational belonging is built upon shared experiences and specifically media experiences, thus adding to the idea of a shared cultural basis constituting the core of generational identities, i.e. a generational imaginary. At the same time, some categories seem to have partly lost their strict generational connotations to indicate a 'mindset' rather than a cohort. For instance, the label 'boomer' has broadened its meaning to apply to people showing boomer-like characteristics (e.g. out-of-date worldview, scarce digital literacy, and poor competence with memes) without necessarily belonging to the generational group of Baby Boomers. In this sense, it may be argued that memes are leading to

a more fluid reconceptualization of the ways in which generations are perceived and segmented, stressing the importance of socio-cultural factors like similar/different worldview over demographic age.

From a different perspective, my work contributes to the discussion around the fitness of social generations as a paradigm capable of illuminating the emergence of shared social identities in a highly mediatized environment. As seen in section 1.3.1, some scholars appear reluctant to adopt this concept to study inequality and social change (Roberts and France, 2020; Purhonen, 2016). Moreover, France and Roberts (2015) question how supporters of social generations link social change to "the emerging identities of new generations" (p. 220). More than social change, my dissertation demonstrates that the concept of social generation is useful to shed light on the emergence of generational consciousness from a cultural perspective (Elliott, 2013), and specifically how patterns of cultural production and reproduction impact the construction and expression of generational identities. In the digital age, the concept of social generation seems inevitably tied to that of media generation: in fact, my analysis demonstrates the crucial role of media experiences, by showing that the key to the development of generational identity is not just sharing similar experiences but rather how they are mediated by technology, and specifically how they are elaborated through media products. In this respect, my work concur with Boccia Artieri (2011) in arguing that media products are very good at activating the 'mood of the time'. In other words, the power of memes resides in their ability to function as the carriers of 'the mood of the time' or, to use Krause's (2019) words, of the zeitgeist.

Taking this argument a step further, my work provides the chance to reflect on how the notion of zeitgeist may integrate the theoretical framework on memes and generational identities. An aspect deserving specific attention concerns the extent to which memes and meme grammars can be read as part of the formal properties of one or more zeitgeists. As seen in the literature review, the zeitgeist is a set of period-specific cultural practices that transcend geographical boundaries, while not necessarily affecting the entire population. As such, media and technologies provide the perfect carriers for zeitgeists, since they often "travel across geographical contexts as they change hands, are copied, used, and inter-

preted” (p. 7). Given this, memes also fit into the prerequisites of the ‘carrier’ quite well, especially considering that cross-national transformative practices constitute one of the cornerstones of meme culture (see Section 1.2.1 for a full discussion on this). Moreover, as they employ a sheer variety of remixed intertextual references to frame reality, memes use culture as a lense through which to observe the historical (i.e. social, political and, economic) circumstances and develop a generational consciousness, constituted by a shared set of outlooks and beliefs. The results outlined in Chapter 4 suggest that the assembling mechanisms underlying meme grammars - and especially the grammar of contingency - may be regarded as part of a zeitgeist, which considers popular culture as the perspective through which reality is framed and interpreted. Additionally, if we accept that different zeitgeists coexist and even overlap, it can be argued that the memetic phenomenon, as a widespread cultural practice involving a plurality of actors and cultural sensibilities, taps into more zeitgeists at the same time. For instance, nostalgic memes may be considered an expression of a ‘nostalgic zeitgeist’, conceived as a defining cultural spirit of the start of the 21th century (Gandini, 2020). As seen in Section 1.3.3, nostalgia permeates collective narratives about a unified past, while also providing a heuristic perspective on the present and future. To sum up, it may be argued that the construction of generational imaginaries relies on modalities of cultural production and reproduction that rely on different zeitgeists. Given the popularity of memes in mainstream digital culture, it seems reasonable to expect that memes will continue to play an increasingly relevant role in the formation of new generations: in this context, more research is needed to actually assess whether the transformative practices of cultural production and reproduction underpinning the memetic phenomenon may be considered as part of a (or more) zeitgeist(s) which will shape the worldview, the consciousness, and the identities of future generations.

Contextually, it is also worth discussing how successfully the notion of zeitgeist might replace that of generation in explaining how collective identities are defined on the basis of shared cultural practices and common experiences. Krause (2019) contends that zeitgeist and generation are two potentially distinct phenomena, although they interact in multiple ways: while a zeitgeist may link several generations, generations can also extend beyond a zeitgeist. Moreover, according to the author, the concept of zeitgeist lends

itself better to sociological analysis of cultural trends, as there are cases in which these trends cannot be easily linked to a generation. The results of my research seem to concur with Krause's argument to a certain extent. First and foremost, I have argued that the memetic phenomenon embraces different generational cohorts: although typically associated with younger users, my analysis demonstrates that various segments of users engage with the memetic phenomenon. Moreover, as seen in Chapter 5, the process of generational identification through memes goes beyond the traditional definition of generation: specifically, the categorisation of one's own and other generational groups relies on a set of socio-cultural features perceived as distinctive, which partly transcend age-based conceptualisations. These results seem to indicate that the concept of zeitgeist may have a greater explanatory power than that of generation with respect to the identitarian processes associated with memes. On the other hand, however, the concept of generation appears to still retain some validity, as my interviewees largely rely on it to refer to common life experiences, similar mindsets and to the memetic phenomenon itself - which appears to have a great generational connotation (see 3.3). While in this work I have decided to adopt the notion of social generation with a focus on the underlying discursive practices (the motivation behind this choice are outlined in Section 1.3.4), the above considerations provide a departing point for further research reflecting on the relationship among zeitgeist and generations and evaluating the fitness of one concept over another.

A final point to consider is whether memes, as a phenomenon virally spreading on the web and enabling communication within and across geographical borders, may contribute to the actualisation of a global generation. In fact, memes provide a powerful device for the real-time collective elaboration of experience, which could potentially lead to the construction of a globally shared generational imaginary. As seen, advocates of global generations argue that technology and mass media seem to play a relevant role in smoothing the impact of other contextual variables and in shaping similar generational identities (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). Despite its attractiveness, I concur with the doubts expressed by Roberts and France (2020) in arguing that the idea of a global generation appears highly unlikely, as it overlooks a number of other variables. Nonetheless, some findings from the interviews appear to support the idea that media experiences have a homogenizing

and unifying effect on generational identities: despite coming from different geographical and cultural backgrounds, participants from the same cohorts overall provided similar answers with respect to their generational imaginaries. As connected to this observation, one possible line of inquiry for further research concerns the possibility to explore the extent to which meme accounts and pages lead to a platformization of generational identities. While memes have traditionally been considered from a bottom-up perspective, that is as a cultural phenomenon produced and circulated by users, studies on meme factories have in fact suggested that the memetic phenomenon is steered by influential actors like meme pages (Lee and Hoh, 2021). Chapter 4 provides initial empirical evidence of the impact of these accounts in shaping users' media experiences in terms of practices of meme consumption. Taking this discussion a step further, I expect that these actors will have an increasingly relevant role in shaping the identities of future generations and their imaginaries. In assuming this, I also concur with Strauss (2006), who argues that "imaginaries are institutionalized [...] [They] have a concrete location in material objects, institutions, and practices" (p. 325).

This dissertation inevitably presents a number of limitations which may have affected the outcome of the analysis: in the remainder of this section, I will address some of the shortcomings, which add to the issues already discussed in the methodological chapter. Firstly, the choice to focus only on static image memes limited the results of memetic production, returning a partial overview of the variety of the formats employed. Future research could overcome this issue, by taking into considerations other realizations, and specifically video memes, a popular format which is playing an increasingly leading role in the media experience of teenagers and young adults (Zulli and Zulli, 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2021). Given its popularity among the youngsters (Schellewald, 2021), the video-based platform Tiktok provides an interesting site for meme study, not ultimately because of its inherent memetic structure, which fosters new forms of sociality and collective identities (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). Future research could therefore include data from such video-based platforms to investigate how they contribute to shaping the generational identities of younger generations.

As connected to this point, it can be observed that the data coming from participants from the Millennial and the Generation Z cohorts present little differences, as most appear to have had quite similar media experiences and cultural references. In fact, the exclusion of people under 18 years old from the sample may have affected the results of my analysis in terms of data richness and variability. While Generation Z ranges from 1996 to 2015, I have only drawn participants up to 2002 as year of birth. Other than cutting out a large portion of participants, this choice also limited the intergenerational variation of the results. This outcome appears to be connected to the fact that many respondents consider the year 2000 as a watershed, which marks the beginning of a new generation. In this sense, people born before that year, as most of the Gen Zers included in the sample, perceive themselves as part of the Millennial group.

Another potential limitation is represented by the focus on the Italian case study. Undoubtedly this choice grants some benefits: being Italian myself, this decision has enabled a deeper understanding of the digital data collected, especially when national-bound cultural references and in-jokes were embedded in the memes. At the same time, I was able to better contextualize the answers collected during the interviews, as my cultural background is similar to those of my respondents. Nonetheless, this choice also poses some problems with respect to the generalizability of the results. In fact, while existing research argues that intertextuality in memes contributes to cross geographical boundaries (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016; Särmä, 2015), the findings of my analysis shows that, in many cases, the correct deciphering of a meme depends on being familiar with national culture. Similarly, Bolin (2014) argues that subjective mediascapes are influenced by intercultural and geographical differences. In light of the above, future research could deepen this aspect, exploring the extent to which the memetic phenomenon, as simultaneously shaped by geographical-bound culture and the homogenizing effect of the internet, affects the construction of generational identities.

Despite its limitations and shortcomings, I believe that this work sheds light on a previously understudied issue, linking the research area of meme studies and that of social generations in an original way. In so doing, it contributes to both filling a gap in meme re-

search and providing a potential point of departure for further studies on social and media generations.

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