

# Censorship Crisis. Analysis of Memes on Twitter and Their Reception

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## Abstract

*The following research studies the use of memes on the social platform Twitter with regards to celebrity representation. Specifically, it analyzes two memetic posts by Elon Musk and the representation tactics behind them, using elements of multimodal analysis and critical discourse analysis. Subsequently, the study looks at the reception of these posts via comparative content analysis with custom classification to determine how successful the tactics behind these posts are and whether there is any evidence observable in the reception regarding censorship on Twitter after its purchase by Elon Musk. The comparative study comes in a form of quantitative analysis of the first 150 responses to each of the two posts. The study does not only demonstrate instances of attempts at diminishing the distance which the inherent power of a celebrity personage on social media creates, but also how successful these attempts are and whether they manage to distract the audience from the personage in question and their power over them.*

*Keywords: multimodality, social media, qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis, memes, representation, censorship*

## Streszczenie

Kryzys cenzury. Analiza memów na Twitterze i ich recepcja

*Poniższa analiza skupia się na badaniu wykorzystania memów na platformie społecznościowej Twitter w kształtowaniu wizerunków celebrytów. Analizie poddano w szczególności dwa posty z memami Elona Muska i stojącą za nimi strategię przedstawiania wizerunku, korzystając z elementów analizy multimedialnej i krytycznej analizy dyskursu. W kolejnym kroku artykuł skupia się na odbiorze tych postów, stosując analizę porównawczą treści za pomocą specjalnie dobranego zestawu kryteriów, w celu oceny skuteczności strategii stojącej za analizowanymi postami i stopnia prawdopodobieństwa istnienia cenzury na Twitterze po jego zakupie przez Elona Muska. Badanie porównawcze ma formę analizy treści 150 pierwszych odpowiedzi na każdy z dwóch postów. Badanie pokazuje nie tylko przykłady prób zmniejszenia dystansu, który jest naturalny w relacjach z celebrytą w mediach społecznościowych, ale także to, na ile skuteczne są te próby i czy pozwalają na odwrócenie uwagi odbiorców od danej postaci i jej oddziaływania na użytkowników.*

*Słowa kluczowe: multimodalność, media społecznościowe, analiza ilościowa, analiza jakościowa, memy, prezentacja wizerunku, cenzura*

## **1. Introduction**

Every day the internet provides more and more means of communication to its users. Every day the users create more content, share more, invent more, and find more ways to express themselves in the digital environment. Scholarly pursuits gain new and intriguing subjects continuously with the rise of internet communication and there's always more to explore. One such phenomenon is the internet meme.

This article will further explore the nature of memes and memetization in section 2.1., however, it is important to note why this subject was chosen for the current study. Memetic elements are the ever-changing and evolving innovations of computer-mediated discourse. There have been numerous studies delving into their nature and uses, but they are still largely a recent phenomenon and, with how quickly new ones emerge and their trends change, studying them often brings even more new insights not only for linguistic and communication-focused fields, but many others, including, for example, sociology, psychology, or anthropology.

This study specifically observes how memetic elements are used in regard to online representation of personages with inherent power due to their status, wealth, or celebrity. It looks into the concepts of celebrity as well as into techniques for its representation – such as affiliation techniques. It demonstrates how such techniques are utilized with humor and multimodality.

With observations regarding the aforementioned representation, an important question often follows: Do these tactics work? The study includes a quantitative analysis of the responses to memes and delves into the reception of them. Moreover, social media are often discussed in regard to censorship and silencing of the users and the study explores this concept regarding the selected data, namely to look into current events on the social media micro-blogging platform Twitter and its recent allegations of increased censorship.

## **2. Data and concepts**

This section outlines the circumstances and context for the research, the analyzed data and the relevance of it regarding the subjects of the study – representation of the wealthy and powerful, the reception of it and the potential censorship crisis. It will also go over the

academic concepts relevant for this study. The research is composed of both a quantitative and a qualitative part, dealing with representation and its reception respectively, while the underlying theme of censorship is acknowledged and observed as well.

### 2.1. Data for analysis and its relevance

This article focuses on the micro-blogging social media platform Twitter. While the platform has rules in place to prevent online harassment, the site itself proclaims that: “Twitter’s mission is to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information, and to express their opinions and beliefs without barriers.” (Twitter Help). On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2022, this platform was purchased by Elon Musk (Zahn, 2022) – a public figure, founder of the SpaceX company, among other business endeavors (Bambrough *et al.* 2022a), who is considered to be the wealthiest person in the world according to the *Forbes* magazine ‘The Real-Time Billionaires List’ (Bambrough *et al.* 2022b). The purchase of Twitter quickly gave rise to plenty of outrage and speculations by the media and platform users both. As one may observe in articles in online magazines such as *Techdirt* (Masnick, 2022), *Insider* (Tangalakis-Lippert, 2022) or *The Washington Post* (Editorial board, 2023), Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter was followed by a particular focus of the outrage – censorship. Whether in regard to users speaking against Musk or mocking him, or censorship with political agenda, the public and the media were concerned. These speculations, which are still discussed to this day, will further be referred to in this article as the ‘censorship crisis’ – the public outrage about Musk’s purchase of Twitter and the implications it had for freedom of speech online, which was now threatened by one powerful man controlling one of the media of communication. When Twitter suddenly gained an owner with a renowned and recognizable name, the implications changed. There was suddenly a person to direct blame onto, as opposed to the abstract ‘Twitter’ and whoever was in charge of decisions made regarding the platform.

Two posts were chosen for this study, both memetic in nature, to analyze the representation techniques achievable through these means by a personage of power, and the responses to them. Moreover, to examine the censorship accusations as well as tactics by the most notably powerful personage on Twitter, the selected posts were those made by Elon Musk himself. The first post was selected at a random date (the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2022) as the most recent multimodal post made by Elon Musk at that time and the second one followed the same pattern (on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2023). While the specific dates were chosen at random, what is most notable about the timeline and the selection is the fact that one post was made before the

purchase of Twitter was finalized and the other was made after. This provides the opportunity to examine the changes in perception and reception, as well as representation.

The first of these posts was made by Elon Musk on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 on Twitter. It was selected purposefully for its use of a meme as its content, depicted in Figure 1 below – an image with captions that follows a particular template. This representation of the billionaire will be studied for its tactics, implications and context to determine the messages and intent the powerful convey while communicating with their followers via memetic elements, and the subsequent reception will be examined for the successes and effects of these tactics.



Figure 1. Source: Elon Musk <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1553194589623918593>

The second post chosen for this analysis is one made on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, again chosen for the meme that constitutes it, depicted in Figure 2. This post will be examined in the same manner for the comparative study.



Figure 2. Source: Elon Musk <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1635885881633431552>

The responses selected for the subsequent quantitative analysis were collected on the day the posts were made. They were collected in incognito browser mode and without a logged-in Twitter profile to avoid as many adjustments of the results by Twitter preference algorithms as possible. These responses were also checked some time later to ensure that the results were not changed. However, it is important to note that the Twitter algorithms, even for anonymous browsing, may change overtime and influence the results depicted on each user's search. This study works with the data collected as specified above. For each post, 150 first responses by users were analyzed, which, aside from some extra contextual information collected for the qualitative study, namely the involvement of Elon Musk himself in the discussion below the post, only included direct responses to the post and not responses to the responses. The purpose of this is to depict reactions to Musk and his memetic expressions themselves and not reactions to other users. Nevertheless, delving further into the response chains and threads would provide more interesting research opportunities regarding representation and its reception, which could be expanded upon in future studies.

## 2.2. Academic concepts

While studying interactions on social media, namely those constructed by celebrities and known personages, the question of power is integral to take into account. This article will consider how figures in the position of power represent themselves in the media, demonstrated

in particular instances – the aforementioned memetic elements. “Representation connects meaning and language to culture,” (Hall, 1997: 15) and how famous figures represent themselves ultimately determines how they are viewed by the public. Marwick and Boyd point out that for the celebrity-fan relations “[...] Twitter suggests the possibility of interaction. There is no singular formula for celebrity practice; it consists of a set of learned techniques that are leveraged differently by individuals.” (2011: 144) This paper will explore one such technique – the one employed by Elon Musk. Among other tactics, such as creating intimacy or rumormongering, Marwick and Boyd outline the tactic of affiliation: “Affiliation is the process of publicly performing a connection between practitioners and fans using language, words, cultural symbols, and conventions.” (2011: 147) Affiliation is a concept which regards proximity between practitioners, and when one considers interactions with imbalanced power dynamics, proximity to one side of the spectrum naturally distances from the other. In other words, when one considers a personage of power affiliating with their followers, there is a natural distance created from their original status of power. This is the practice that this paper will focus on in the analysis and pinpoint in the representation tactics of Elon Musk in his memetic posts.

To observe the tactics, one does need to understand the nature of the internet meme and its uses in contemporary communication. Apart from the pre-internet meaning of the term ‘meme’, “[...] recently, memes have been defined as units of information, ideas or mental representations, and cultural instructions that are not only self-replicating but also contagious (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2014, p. 152).” (Yus 2019: 105) As Wiggins (2019: 6) explains, “individuals enact social relationships with and through memes because individuals are interpellated, or addressed, by the social system they inhabit (or with which they identify)”. This brings one back to the aforementioned tactic of affiliation Marwick and Boyd (2011) had outlined – memes are permeated through communication to create or strengthen social proximity and common speech tactics. The tactic is transparent and known – the reader, the receiver of the meme, whether an individual or the wide public, understands the meme’s position as a popular culture expression: “When internet memes are deployed, a part of the message they transmit is awareness of their function as a form of communication in popular culture, whether online or off.” (Wiggins, 2019: 92) This, of course, may endear the poster to the receiver, or do quite the opposite. This article delves into the reception of memetic posts in Elon Musk’s instance, as was previously mentioned, and examines whether these tactics do indeed ‘endear’ him to his audience. It is the nature of the meme and how it is used for the purposes of affiliation in the studied context that this paper is concerned with. And

furthermore, it is prudent to introduce one more academic concept that will serve to analyze the element and understand the tactics behind its use.

Humor is often tied to the notion of memes and memetization: “In many cases, irony, humor and play are essential to meme's creation, circulation, and transformation.” (Vásquez and Aslan 2021: 102) And even though it is important to acknowledge that “memes may become part of higher-level humorous [...] as well as non-humorous genres (e.g. a political speech)” (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020: 2), this paper examines namely the humorous aspects of the selected memes to observe the affiliation tactics behind its use. Tsakona and Chovanec (2020) illustrate this further and give insight into how sharing of memes with humorous elements may permeate the proximity between the poster and the audience.

In the digital world, a humorous act may simply serve to attract [...] as well as help to create an atmosphere of co-participation. Participating with the content, e.g. by sharing, liking, and emulating existing humorous artifacts, constitutes a novel form of intertextuality, particularly as regards the online engagement with technology-mediated content in the social media.

(Tsakona and Chovanec 2020: 2)

This paper will attempt to point out the humorous elements and tactics behind the use of the memes by Elon Musk and further demonstrate these points within the analysis.

### **2.3. Research questions**

The research questions are threefold:

- 1) What are the representation tactics behind each post?
- 2) What reception do these representation tactics receive?
- 3) Did the purchase of Twitter change the reception significantly?

The first question is answered by the close analysis of both posts in section 5 – the qualitative study of representation. The second and third questions are dealt with in section 6 – the quantitative analysis of the receptions with a comparative focus and the accusations of censorship taken into account. And lastly, all the findings are summarized and outlined in section 7.



### 3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodology applied to the analysis of the memetic elements and their reception in order to answer the aforementioned research questions.

#### 3.1. Representation: qualitative analysis

##### 3.1.1. Underlying concepts

From a broader perspective, this article will be drawing from concepts of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in digital discourse: “[...] Digital discourse analysis is concerned with how multimodal, multisemiotic resources are employed to enact identities, activities, and ideologies in the digital world, as part of a larger social world.” (Bou-Franch and Blitvich 2019: 4) And in particular, a critical perspective on digital discourse provides one with the tools and methodologies to observe power relations and the interactions within imbalanced relations. Drawing from Van Dijk’s insights (2000), four principles for ideological stances may be observed, as Ramanathan and Tan reiterate (2015: 60):

- Emphasizing positive things about Us;
- Emphasizing negative things about Them;
- De-emphasizing negative things about Us;
- De-emphasizing positive things about Them.

This paper will observe instances of this framework within the representation to determine Elon Musk’s tactics and stances. More specifically, it will work with concepts of the collective ‘Us’ and its opposing to ‘Them’ in particular, which are derived from the ideological square.

##### 3.1.2. Analyzed dimensions

From a more narrow and detailed perspective, the paper will focus on analyzing the meme based on Wiggins’s elaborated model of meme analysis. Wiggins draws on an original methodology devised by Shifman (2013), where she proposes observing memes in terms of three basic categories: content, form, and stance. In his elaboration, Wiggins proposes slight changes and enhancements to the methodology. To outline the methodology properly, Figure 3 portrays Wiggins’s model (2019: 16):



	<i>Content</i>	<i>Form</i>	<i>Stance</i>
Shifman (2013)	<i>Ideas and ideologies conveyed in a specific text</i>	<i>Physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses</i>	<i>Ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text; users decide to imitate a certain position that they find appealing or may use an utterly different discursive orientation</i>
Elaboration of model	<i>Unavoidable, inevitable as an aspect of communication which is rarely if ever accidental; inheres nature of ideological practice, with memes absent of human speech merges with stance</i>	<i>Neutral; memetic category of utility: video, GIF, image-macro, image inserted in another image, verbal text, hashtag, etc.</i>	<i>Loaded with meaning, charged; with memes absent of human speech, role of semiotic and intertextual construction of meaning is heightened, merges with content</i>

Figure 3. Source: Bradley E. Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* (2019)

Wiggins's elaborated methodology will ensure that the memetic elements are analyzed for their visual and textual content, as well as their message, intertextuality, and ideology, drawing closer to observing Elon Musk's tactics of representation and answering the aforementioned research questions.

These dimensions were then further enhanced by two more dimensions for the purposes of representation study. This article includes new dimensions of context and identity, to elaborate on the meme. The dimension of context concerns the wider context of the message, the real-world circumstances, the medium used to transmit the message, and any extra content and communication that may be observed by the author outside of the image itself, such as out-of-frame captions. The dimension of identity then elaborates further on the dimension of stance and considers the poster's identity more broadly, regarding personage, interactivity and again, real-world circumstances when it comes to the poster themselves. These elaborations were chosen to serve this particular study, but they have the potential to enhance Wiggins's methodology as a whole and could be subject to further future research and testing in different instances.

### **3.2. Reception: quantitative analysis**

Concerning the study of reception in the form of quantitative analysis and insights gained from observing responses to the posts, this article considers the top 150 responses on Musk's Twitter, with the aforementioned measures of incognito browsing with no account taken to prevent preference algorithm intervention. The responses were first collected on the days the posts were originally made (on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 and the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2023), and then they were subsequently checked on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2022 and 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023 respectively to ensure that the results were not altered overtime. There were no changes to the first 150 direct responses to each post in this timespan; however, this does not prevent the algorithms from changing in the future and for other posts to gain precedence as top responses.

In order to study the success of Elon Musk in diminishing the distance between him and his audience and in order to observe whether he distances himself from the persona he is most known for, his billionaire businessman persona, the following categories were outlined for the quantitative study:

- A – Responses expressing agreement with the meme or fan behavior;
- B – Responses expressing disagreement with the meme or mockery of Musk;
- C – Responses mentioning Musk's wealth or business ventures:
  - C1 – Positive;
  - C2 – Negative;
- D – Uncategorized.

The categories were selected in order to observe the responses based on their reaction to the representation tactics (mockery vs. agreement), while the category of 'Responses mentioning Musk's wealth or business ventures' was selected in order to observe whether the poster's primary distinction in his celebrity influences the responses. The 'Uncategorized' category encapsulates data which does not fit any other categories. Further elaborations and examples of these categories will be outlined in section 6.1. of this article. For the purposes of these demonstrations, the usernames of the posters will be replaced by distinction of 'Poster A', 'Poster B', etc. in order to preserve the privacy of Twitter users in the text.

Any overlap of categories is submitted only once to preserve the rate prevalence of categories – i.e. posts mentioning Musk's wealth and ventures take precedence whether they convey agreement or disagreement in order to demonstrate the success/failure of Musk's

attempt at distancing himself from his known persona. Furthermore, this category is split into positive and negative responses to draw more implications from.

It is important to note that the responses are distributed based on their message, their contextual cues and their meaning and they are subject to analysis by the limitations that come with analyzing contextual cues from a position of a researcher and an observer. Objectivity was adhered to as much as possible and responses were never marked as sarcastic and categorized accordingly unless they explicitly stated inclusion of sarcasm or had the universal ‘/S’ symbol in them to mark the instance (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

## 4. Representation tactics

The qualitative analysis section of the article will be devoted to the two memetic posts made by Elon Musk. The study deals with the aforementioned concepts such as humor, celebrity online, and the notions drawn from Van Dijk’s ideological square (2000: 44). It analyzes the two memes according to the five dimensions outlined in section 4.1.2. of this article, and it compares the two posts in regard to the representation that Elon Musk attempts to achieve by their usage. While it is possible that Elon Musk himself does not create or select his own posts, as it is never certain who is responsible for shared online content, this study is concerned with his representation and the identity his online persona creates, therefore the real poster behind the screen is irrelevant as they represent Elon Musk regardless.

### 4.1. Figure 1 analysis

The analysis of the five dimensions of the post made before Elon’s Musk Twitter purchase is described in the following subsections.

#### 4.1.1. Form

In terms of form, the meme consists of two separate images merged into one. The creator (whether Musk himself or whether this is a reproduction) used a well-known previously reproduced meme of the ‘drowning kid’ image enhanced by the second image – the ‘skeleton underwater’ (S 2022, Know your meme), and they added relevant text to it. The captions identify the subjects of the meme as ‘Heat wave in Europe’, ‘Russia-Ukraine War’ and ‘Internet rn’, meaning ‘Internet right now’. The last subject of the meme utilizes image identification instead of textual one – visually representing the name with a sign instead. The image of a virus would in this case signify the virus Covid-19, based on the message of the

meme which concerns the most talked-about issues in the media and on the internet in the recent months and years. This is the form, the ‘incarnation of the message perceived through senses’ (see Figure 3), however, “users must possess the requisite background knowledge needed to interpret their meanings.” (Vásquez and Aslan 2021: 115). Although the message may seem clear, without sufficient knowledge of the circumstances, one might not be able to decipher it. It is one of the features of topical memes, whether political, humorous or other. It is a trait of intertextuality that creates a certain proximity between the recipients and a distance from those who would lack the necessary cues for understanding the message: “[T]hose who are ‘in the know’ may thus increase their social prestige and feel, or be perceived as, superior to those ‘out of the know’, exactly for being familiar with various more or less prestigious intertexts.” (Tsakona and Chovanec 2020: 7) This phenomenon would create a proximity between the poster, Elon Musk, and those of the audience that understand the message – they now belong to the same group, the collective ‘Us’ that are ‘in the know’ and can appreciate the message in this form together.

As it will become apparent further with the analysis, this is a pattern that sharing this meme creates – the pattern of Musk closing the distance between him and his followers. Marwick and Boyd point out that “[p]erforming celebrity requires that this asymmetrical status is recognized by others. Fans show deference, creating mutual recognition of the status imbalance between practitioner and fan.” (2011: 144) But there are techniques of lowering this status imbalance during the interactions – the aforementioned affiliation, for instance, which can be observed by the intertextuality demonstrated in the form of the meme. The textual requires us to understand the circumstances of the attention of the internet in recent times as well as the contemporarily significant events. The visual requires us to recognize the situation in the meme and affiliate it with the textual – to recognize that the boy is in distress and unable to swim, that the woman’s attention is solely focused on the girl who appears delighted by the attention, and to recognize the gradual escalation that the second section of the merged image represents with the skeleton and the symbol of the virus. Recognizing all of these elements lets the audience be ‘in the know’ and puts them into the same group as the poster.

#### *4.1.2. Content*

The content of the meme becomes clear to the audience once the textual and visual elements are identified. The ‘Internet rn’ pays full attention to the ‘Heat wave in Europe’ while the ‘Russia-Ukraine War’ drowns, forgotten on the sidelines by the attention of the internet. And in the meantime, Covid has met the fate that might await the war – it had been forgotten

altogether with no more attention paid to it. This is, of course, a hyperbolic metaphor, but it serves as a transmission of dark humor. Whether one observes the humor from the absurdity of the real-life situation of a presumed mother completely ignoring her child to the point where death might threaten them, just like it had in the second part of the image, or whether one sees the humor in the facial expressions or the captions more, all the elements work together to create an exaggerated situation that is likened to a contemporary issue on the internet. The fact that Elon Musk – a personage that often shares news regarding many subjects on the internet – shares this meme may be interpreted in many ways regarding the message of it.

There may be more potential interpretations, but two that this paper finds in the analysis are as follows. Either Musk creates a self-mocking image as one of the known sharers of online news – he demonstrates his own lack of attention span as part of the internet that reacts to these issues. But in this message, he does not only identify himself. He, in fact, identifies the entire internet, including the audience of this meme. Once again, this creates proximity – ‘we are those that ignore the previous problems’. And as Musk is part of this group, mockery becomes self-mockery which is often much more endearing.

Another interpretation may seem like the opposite, but the ultimate effect appears the same. Musk would distance himself from the internet, from the news-sharing groups and personages, creating the proverbial ‘Them’ which he mocks. This meme does not refer to anyone specific when it mentions ‘Internet rn’. This helps Musk create a narrative where he and those he shares this meme with observe this ‘other internet’ which forgets problems and only pays attention to the one issue at this time. This would correspond with the aforementioned ‘Emphasizing negative things about Them’ tactic and once again, permeate the affiliation through humor and mockery in the message. Both these interpretations have the same result – Musk is approximated to his audience.

#### *4.1.3. Stance*

The stance dimension will give more insight into the position of the poster and how they represent themselves. Based on the previous findings, it had been pointed out how the textual and visual aspects of form create a group of ‘Us’, those ‘in the know’ which creates proximity between those that understand the meme. Furthermore, the humor of the content and the message relating to the internet as a form of news-carrying media with attention focused on the most worthy thing at any point, there were two interpretations noted – a sense of self-mockery created by the author which includes both himself as well as the public, or a distancing technique that identifies the internet as ‘Them’ and something to be observed by

‘Us’. In either case it creates a similar narrative to what the analysis of the form uncovered – there is the collective ‘Us’ which Musk himself is a part of. Being the wealthiest person in the world and a public figure creates an automatic distance between Musk and the consumers of his tweets and internet posts, but Musk attempts to draw the attention from his identity and affiliation with the ‘wealthy’ group and approximate himself to another group of ‘me and the audience’. Whether through humor, through form or through the very fact that Musk is sharing a meme, he attempts to belong to the new ‘Us’ through this representation, as the analysis has demonstrated. Musk is normalizing himself, he does not address celebrities of similar status to his – he addresses a wide audience of followers without distinction. Despite his immense power and wealth, despite the fact that he is about to own Twitter at this point in time, he speaks the same language as the audience, he uses the same humorous and mocking methods to express satirical messages – he uses memes.

#### *4.1.4. Context*

One of the new memetic dimensions included in this research is the dimension of context, which includes the wider circumstances surrounding the meme, real world events and out-of-frame text and semiotic elements.

As was previously mentioned, Elon Musk refers to current events relevant in the world to portray in the shared meme. Sharing current news allows him not only to appear relevant, but also to reach a wide audience. The post itself concerns the most medialized topics online in that particular month and the months passed – Covid-19, the Russia-Ukraine War and the Heat wave in Europe, which was extensively discussed during the months of June and July in many corners of the internet, be it by the media or by users on forums/social media, etc. Sharing events that are generally heavily discussed allows the poster to reach a very wide audience. While it is true that virality is mostly ascribed to the interaction between the sharer and the audience, as Hemsley and Kelly point out: “[...] without well-connected actors at the top, content tends not to reach very large audiences,” (2019: 4) we cannot only ascribe the fact that content gets traction to the poster’s celebrity. If a poster shares content where the audience does not feel ‘in the know’, the potential for virality and reaction diminishes significantly, with merely confused reactions as responses at best. Not only is Musk the one sharing the meme, he is also sharing a meme that the vast majority of the viewers will understand and possibly laugh at or appreciate. A more niche topic might garner more proximity between a poster and their audience, but a well-known and heavily discussed topic will be understood by a much wider audience. This is what happens in this particular instance – the tactic is to reach

as many people as possible and include them into the ‘in’ group where Musk establishes closeness with his followers.

Regarding the context dimension, there is also the matter of out-of-frame captions and descriptions. Musk does not use any introductions to the meme itself in this instance – he does not have anything to say about posting it. This may be interpreted in various ways. One might assume that the silence could create a sort of distance and dehumanize the poster – this is just a meme, there is no evidence of the person posting the meme, no voice to speak for it. The meme is supposed to speak for itself. However, considering the aforementioned inherent distance that the power Musk has due to his wealth, the tactic of staying silent might be different. It is possible that any word from Musk might risk reminding the audience of his personage – his expressions or references could link him to his original personage instead of letting the meme distract from it with its topicality and humor. The interpretation is up to the audience, ultimately, and this article will explore the effects more in the quantitative study section.

#### *4.1.5. Identity*

Last but not least the identity dimension deals predominantly with interactivity, dialogue continuation, and presentation of self.

It was already discussed that Elon Musk is a figure of inherent power that uses various techniques to present himself as ‘one of the people’ and to diminish the distance between him and his audience. He uses the meme in question to achieve all this, but what happens then? Does Musk discuss the meme with his audience? Does he react to their reactions? Does he engage in dialogue and discussion? The answer to all these questions is ‘no’ in Musk’s case. There is no further interaction, no discussion. Musk effectively ‘drops’ a meme and leaves the conversation entirely. Much like it was discussed in subsection 5.1.4., the lack of interaction functions the same as the silence in out-of-frame captions. While the out-of-frame captions and subsequent discussion and responses to the posts carry different implications (in the former, the focus is on the overall message or meaning of the shared image, while the latter is a means of interaction and personal connection to the audience), their lack carries similar implications in this case. There is no interaction, which might create more distance, but then again, it might also simply prevent the audience from being reminded of Musk’s public personage and it would let the meme do all the talking. Furthermore, if the audience expected Musk to engage in discussion, they might broach different topics – ones that they would wish to discuss with the businessman, except merely commenting on the meme. This all serves to



distract from his power and personage, even though lack of interactivity may seem like a distancing technique.

## **4.2. Figure 2 analysis**

An analysis of five memetic dimensions for Figure 2 follows in the subsections below. Repetitive notions and tactics are only mentioned briefly to reduce superfluous text.

### *4.2.1. Form*

The form dimension concerns the physical features of the multimodal image. Figure 2 shows the meme of ‘death knocking on doors’ (Matt 2023, Know your meme) with the character of death being labeled as ‘Porn’. Porn has already visited various doors in the hallway, signified by the blood pooled under them – ‘Home video’, ‘Cable TV’, ‘Internet’ and now it’s knocking on the door labeled as ‘Generative AI’. Once again, as is the nature of memes, the references point to events and phenomena that the audience must know to grasp to understand the meme, including implications of the grim reaper depiction, the general prevalence of porn in home video business, cable TV, the internet, and of course, the fact that generative AI is currently becoming more and more sophisticated and capable. And once again, one may observe this as the affiliation technique that it is, pooling Musk and his audience into the same group.

### *4.2.2. Content*

The audience encounters another instance of dark humor in this memetic element. The portrayal of the concept of porn as the grim reaper creates a telling image about the negativity of the content, as does the blood beneath the doors. The message seems to be clear – porn kills these phenomena that it ‘visits’. It takes over any medium it stops by and it is coming for AI soon. The message and its interpretation come into question when one delves into the role of Musk and people in general in this effect. Once again, the content can be interpreted in various ways. Either Musk identifies the grim reaper ‘porn’ as part of the society that both he and his audience are a part of – pulling them into the collective ‘Us’ once more. Or, similarly to Figure 1 content, the reaper in the form of porn is this ‘other’ that the group observes as it makes its way through the hallway of media. The agency of porn is not relevant in this instance – one may consider porn a self-agentive entity that does corrupt these media on its own, or one may consider it the creation of humans who are the ones that do the corrupting. In either case, however, the group dispersion and dynamics remain the same in their intent – Musk and his audience either participate in this corrupting influence upon media together, or

they watch as it happens together as well. The lines of the collective ‘Us’ do not get disrupted by the presence of the opposing ‘Them’.

#### *4.2.3. Stance*

Regarding the stance dimension, the identity of Elon Musk as a figure of power employing tactics of affiliation to diminish automatic distance created with his status would likely be observable in most memetic elements posted on his profile (excepting such that might direct attention towards his elevated status and power).

#### *4.2.4. Context*

As for the context dimension, similarly to the analysis of Figure 1, one can observe Musk utilizing current events to reach a wide audience and to include them in the same group of collective ‘Us’ that he presents. Just as was discussed previously, the meme is simply posted with its wider context at the specific time when it is relevant (the AI phenomenon was widely discussed during the spring of 2023 just like the heat wave in Europe was during the summer of 2022). And just as Figure 1, Figure 2 was also posted with no out-of-frame captions, carrying the same interpretations and implications as the former.

#### *4.2.5. Identity*

The stance dimension would be analyzed nearly identically to the analysis of Figure 1, and the same is the case for the expanded identity dimension. Once again, Musk does not interact with the audience in the data set. He does not engage in conversation and he does not respond to the responses. The effects of this were discussed in subsection 5.1.5.

### **4.3. Comparative findings**

As was demonstrated in the close post analysis of both memetic elements, the representation tactics behind each in effect work the same way – both posts deal with current events, reaching a wide audience, both use dark humor in message and imagery to create proximity with the audience and in both cases the poster avoids too much interaction and self-representation. The affiliation techniques are apparent in the use of these posts, but from the study of the posts alone, their successfulness cannot be determined. That is why the following quantitative study complements the close analysis.

## 5. Reception and responses

The following section will deal with the quantitative part of the study – the reception of the tactics outlined in section 5. The categorization and methodology for it were introduced in subsection 4.2., however only briefly. This section will introduce a representative example for each of the aforementioned categories to demonstrate the distribution, then it will examine the results of the quantitative study and their implications in regard to the success of Musk's tactics as well as presence of censorship.

### 5.1. Categories

This subsection provides an overview of the categories and their examples for each studied meme.

#### 5.1.1. Figure 1 categories

The A category provides examples of fan behavior or agreement with the post's sentiments based on contextual cues. An example of A category is this response:

*Poster A:* Elon Musk nailed it...

A simple response demonstrating an agreement via lexical cues – the expression 'nailed it' is unambiguous with the exclusion of unmarked sarcasm.

The B category responses expressing disagreement or mockery are those that refer to the message of the post or to the poster in a way that expresses some measure of displeasure. For example:

*Poster B:* Including the horror in Ukraine as part of an attention seeking meme... no words are enough

The response expresses clear disgust and disdain with Musk sharing such a meme. Expressions such as 'horror' and 'no words are enough' mark the message as disapproving and, as it relates to the content of the multimodal message itself, it's suited as the perfect demonstration of the B category.

The C category responses mentioning Elon Musk's ventures are perhaps the most interesting category – they demonstrate that no matter how hard the poster may attempt to 'normalize' themselves, there is no escape from the name that is already established. For these

purposes, this work pinpoints these posts for a separate set of categories of ‘positive’ (C1) and ‘negative’ (C2).

*Poster C1:* How does one get this good at shitposting while running two multi-hundred billion dollar companies lmao

In this instance, ‘shitposting’ is not considered negative, as it is not marked as such in any way. The response clearly shows the reluctance of some users to strip away the original poster’s established identity based on their current representation tactic, much like the negative one below.

*Poster C2:* Stop trying to be relevant. You jumped your own shark. Now go back to making electric cars none of your conservative friends will ever buy or drive!

Once again, one may observe the references to Musk’s established persona, regardless of the meme. In fact, in this example, his tactics are called out outright.

As for the D category, the uncategorized responses are those generally irrelevant or not obviously relevant to the original post, or responses that did not fit any of the other categories. An example may be observed here:

*Poster D:* I from Colombia

This response may refer to something that those ‘out of the know’ would not have a chance to understand. For this category, it must be taken into account that the analysis of multimodal elements and personal responses can never yield 100% certain results as the knowledge of the person analyzing them will never be without limits.

### 5.1.2. *Figure 2 categories*

An example of the A category in Figure 2 follows below:

*Poster A:* So true

Once again, there is no ambiguity if one does not presuppose sarcasm. The response is a simple and clear agreement with the meme’s sentiments.

On the other hand, the B category expresses some measure of disagreement with the message.

*Poster B:* Awe, come on Elon, we’re not all that bad

This response, based on the contextual cues, was made by an adult actress, thus referring to the porn industry not being all that bad. The message of Musk's post is therefore interpreted as 'bashing' the porn industry and its representative now speaks up for it. And even without the context of the responder's identity, the intent is clear – to defend either the porn industry or humanity as a whole.

The C category responses continue to refer to Musk's business ventures and wealth in both positive and negative manner. The example for positive response follows:

*Poster C1:* Good afternoon Mr Musk. Consider adding PayPal as a payment method for Twitter Blue. If so, thank you very much. Kind regards

This particular response example does not include any explicitly positive evaluations of Elon Musk as a businessman, but it serves to demonstrate that it is not merely about identifying lexical cues, but subtext as well. The message, again, not presupposing sarcasm, exudes respect and politeness, which reflects positively on Musk's personage. As opposed to an example of a negative response to his wealth and ventures:

*Poster C2:* Elon Musk u buying Twitter is actually a misplaced priority cos the world has more pressing issues at hand like World Hunger, unemployment, climate change etc. The \$44 billion would've gone a long way if used in solving some of these global challenges; you are misusing our wealth

A clear disdain and disapproval of handling the businessman's funds can be observed in the response.

And lastly, the uncategorized responses once more portray instances which were unidentifiable as relevant to the post or clearly stated as unrelated.

*Poster D:* @elonmusk sorry, off topic, but how many more banks do you think will crash?

As the categories for each Figure have been outlined and exemplified now, the results below should provide more insight into what the quantitative study uncovered.

## **5.2. Results**

The analysis took into account 150 top responses on the original post, organized by Twitter's own algorithms without an account and in incognito browsing. The result findings for each Figure were as follows:

Table 1: Categorized responses for Figure 1

Category	A	B	C1/C2		D
Instances	63	21	12	21	33
Percentage	42%	14%	8%	14%	22%

Table 2: Categorized responses for Figure 2

Category	A	B	C1/C2		D
Instances	72	27	8	15	28
Percentage	48%	18%	5.3%	10%	18.6%

The study will examine the data regarding both implications about the post reception separately for each Figure, and also in a comparative manner. Then it will focus on the mentions and evidence of censorship based on both the comparative implications and lexical and semiotic cues gathered from the data.

### 5.2.1. Independent implications

In the results, one may see a clear prevalence of the A category above others. The A and B categories combined demonstrate just how Elon Musk was successful in distracting from the power and status his personage inherently possesses and exudes, while the staggering difference between the A and B categories shows that Musk's affiliation tactics were indeed predominantly successful. He in fact did both distract from his famous (or infamous) personage and he did garner expressions of proximity, admiration and approval much more than any other responses in both cases.

The C categories demonstrate smaller numbers than A and B combined, leaving one with the observation that the reactions to the original post itself prevailed over the reactions about the poster himself and his wealth and status. The C1 category is generally the smallest one, outnumbered by the C2 category with approximately double the size in both cases – this would show the tendency to mock Elon Musk's personage when it is tied to his wealth and businesses, as opposed to what the A and B category findings demonstrate when it comes to the meme itself.

The D category includes a varied selection of random or hard to understand posts, therefore it does not convey much information on its own, aside from demonstrating that Twitter very often proves to be an ineffective platform for consistent communication. This hypothesis, however, would best be explored in entirely separate studies.

### 5.2.2. Comparative implications

As one may observe from the data, the differences between the two posts are not very prominent. Percentagewise, category A stays above 40% in both posts and the lowest category remains to be C1 – the positive responses to Musk’s wealth. Yet it is apparent that the C category as a whole is merely half the size in Figure 2 as opposed to Figure 1. It appears that after the Twitter purchase, responses to Elon Musk as a wealthy businessman lowered. This is merely a result of one post, however, and to really make this conclusion, more posts would have to be considered, possibly a much larger corpus of them. Regardless, out of the implications of the numbers, it is not the only difference observable in the C category. In the data set, in Figure 1, there were mentions of Musk’s wealth in the C category regarding various ventures – for example cryptocurrency, electric cars, investments into banks or space exploration. On the other hand, Figure 2 showed solely responses concerning his ownership of Twitter in the C category. No responses regarded any other of his ventures and business endeavors. Interestingly enough, this does demonstrate how much Musk swayed his public image by the purchase of Twitter, at the very least on this platform. The responses include ones such as was demonstrated in subsection 5.1.2., disparaging his use of funds, or there were responses complaining about Twitter functionality and bugs. For example a response such as this:

*Poster C2(b)* - Elon, what are you doing to fix the DMs?

The differences in the C category, however, are the one major difference in the results. For a better comparison, a different compilation of the results in Table 3 and Table 4 was done to demonstrate the prevalence of the positive responses. The ‘Positive’ category shows the A and C1 categories combined, the ‘Negative’ shows the B and C2 categories and lastly the ‘Wealth-related’ category shows the combination of the C1 and C2 categories. Naturally there is overlap, which is why this only serves as an additional classification for more in-depth demonstration, rather than the main distribution.

Table 3: Extra result compilation for Figure 1

Positive	Negative	Wealth-related
75	42	33

Table 4: Extra result compilation for Figure 2

Positive	Negative	Wealth-related
80	42	23



One may clearly observe the little difference in the reception of the memes posted by Elon Musk. The prevalence of positivity over negative reception is plain to see in both Figures and the results demonstrate the same amount of negativity and a comparable amount of posts that mention Musk's wealth. It would appear that since Musk's purchase of Twitter, not much has changed. What implications does this have for the outcries about censorship that permeate through the news and media?

### *5.2.3. Censorship*

The results were examined a few hours after the multimodal posts were published and then again a few months later for each to verify the results. This verification process did not yield any changes and it would have uncovered any long-term censoring actions, but that was not the case. However, it's necessary to point out that it is never certain whether one can find evidence of censorship on social media. There are, of course, automatic measures in play on mostly all social networks, however, this article is much more concerned with the rise of censorship that is claimed to have appeared due to Musk's ownership of Twitter – the silencing of those who speak against him, politically or personally, or against his allies. There is always a possibility of a live moderator being on site and deleting disparaging comments right after they are made with efficiency, but that presupposition is both difficult to prove or to disprove without access to the site's code or to insider information from the company itself. This article does not presuppose any such measures and therefore it only works with the data collected through the aforementioned methodologies.

From what the data demonstrates, there is no truly significant difference between the results from the two figures that would suggest heavy censorship of those speaking against Musk or mocking him. One may still observe the same prevalence of negative reactions and a comparable prevalence of reactions to his businessman personage. The data does not show any significant discrepancies in the rise of the positive responses either, merely small marginal differences. Further studies of other posts might uncover more regarding the subject, but the data at hand do not yield any hints of censorship being heavily employed to protect Musk's reputation and representation.

Furthermore, not presuming the presence of a live moderator, there were no posts mentioning censorship issues in the Figure 2 data set – no posts complaining about users being blocked, no posts saying that their contributions were deleted, etc. Neither the reactions of the

audience nor the numerical data suggest that the censorship on Twitter is on the rise when it comes to Elon Musk and his representation.

## **6. Findings**

By analyzing the memetic elements posted by Elon Musk on his Twitter feed, this paper has highlighted the tactics for his online representation in these instances. The paper utilized Van Dijk's notions of 'Us' and 'Them' in terms of critical discourse analysis as well as the detailed examination of memetic elements via Wiggins's elaborated model of memes with some additions and a quantitative study to consider the reception of Musk's tactics and any potential prevalence of censorship.

The qualitative analysis uncovered patterns observable in visual and lexical elements that exposed the creation of the collective 'Us' via intertextuality, approximating Musk as a power figure to his audience, presenting him as one of their group, all observing and, most of all, understanding the same elements. The humorous aspects of the memes served the same purpose, even though the intents behind them may be interpreted in more ways than one, the intents which this paper has uncovered all served to once again permeate the image of Musk as one of the group with the consumers of his memetic messages, positioning him either in a self-mocking portrayal of the entire 'Us' group or positioning him and the group in direct opposition of the 'Them' which are being mocked instead. And in the stance aspect of the meme, these findings come together to demonstrate how Musk's identity influences the representation – the powerful and wealthy one attempting to represent himself as ideologically and communicatively equal to those he communicates with.

The latter part of the study then examined whether these tactics were successful and whether there was any evidence of the Twitter purchase giving rise to more censorship on the platform, specifically relating to the representation and reputation of Elon Musk himself. The data showed that Musk's tactics were mostly successful, yielding nearly half of the dataset as positive responses to him as a businessman or to his posts. The rest of the data consisted of negative responses, responses that referred to Musk's wealth, rendering his distancing techniques from his personage moot for these specific users, and there were also responses which appeared unrelated to the meme and to Musk, demonstrating a prevalent measure of inefficiency in Twitter communication.

The results showed how the Twitter purchase influenced responses to Musk's wealth and business ventures by overshadowing all his other accomplishments and endeavors, whether

intentionally or not. They did not however show any conclusive evidence of the rise of censorship on the platform regarding Musk's personage after the purchase.

The scope of this article limits further analysis, but there is a lot of potential to expand on these findings – such as comparing them to even more posts by Elon Musk or to other figures with power, or by examining the post's reception further and in more detail in the form of retweets, for instance, or with different categorization and focus.

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