The rhetoric of dream crazy memes: Attitudes about CSR, race, patriotism, and racial capitalism

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I am interested in the rhetoric Dream Crazy Memes, particularly as they speak to perspectives of Nike as a responsible social actor, racial tensions and anxieties in American society, athlete activism and anthem protests, and partisan engagement. I conduct a rhetorical analysis of two genres of Dream Crazy Memes; one which revisits a historical lineage of critiques of Nike's relationship to sweatshop labor, and one which compares and contrasts Kaepernick and military service members. I argue that the Dream Crazy Meme is used to express and perpetuate attitudes about Kaepernick and Nike, of course, but also about tensions and anxieties in American society, including race, patriotism, protest, and CSR. I contend that scholars should weight equally mode, circulation, and rhetorical strategies when analyzing internet memes and I exhibit how such an analysis which attends to all three might be carried out. Dream Crazy Memes express disparate attitudes in response to CSR, race, patriotism, and racial capitalism. They also exhibit strategies of incongruence, synecdoche, framing, and political ambivalence in order to express those attitudes.

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CSR   Corporate social responsibility

CSA   Corporate social activism

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1 - An Introduction to Dream Crazy Memes

Corporations in American society are increasingly branding themselves as responsible social actors. An effective way to emphasize their corporate social responsibility (CSR) is to align with a social issue, or at least with a symbol of one. While the jury is still out on whether or not corporations are willing to be legitimate social actors that promote social issues without a capital incentive, the evidence is strong that CSR does result in capital gains for corporations.[1] In contemporary society, consumers, particularly the millennial and Gen-Z generations, want to buy from companies that put forth effort to better society. Once aware of CSR it is hard not to notice it in the commercials, promotional materials, and social media posts of prominent brands across industries.

One corporation that exhibits strategies to brand themselves as a responsible social actor is Nike, the United States' leading shoe and athletic apparel brand by national market share. Nike launches marketing campaigns that are attached to social issues that generally involve equality, whether racial, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or a whole host of other social issues. Utilizing one or multiple of the celebrity professional athletes signed to their brand in each campaign, Nike connects the social issue to sports and competition as a mechanism of getting people to pay attention to the campaign and to display how Nike is involved in solving the issue.

One such campaign was titled the *Dream Crazy* campaign. This campaign featured NFL free agent and social justice activist Colin Kaepernick as the primary spokesperson in the aftermath of his protests, during which he kneeled during the U.S. national anthem prior to NFL games in protest of police brutality and injustice enacted against Black people across the United States. There was a public outcry over the release of this campaign due to prior perceptions of Kaepernick. People who had supported Kaepernick throughout his protest were generally

supportive of the *Dream Crazy* campaign. Those that already viewed Kaepernick negatively in light of his activism were once again enraged by his public presence in the campaign.

Strong positive or negative attitudes towards Kaepernick already existed by the time the *Dream Crazy* campaign was released. Kaepernick had knelt during the national anthem in protest of racial injustice and police brutality since the 2016 NFL season, which had led to further conversation about his identity, the role of protest in sports, and respect for national symbols. At a minimum, his protest had engaged Americans and forced difficult and uncomfortable conversations. Kaepernick's activism was not the first act of athlete activism to have taken place in the 2010s, however. There were numerous acts, ranging from NBA and WNBA acts in support of Black Lives Matter to the NFL's St. Louis Rams demonstrating prior to a game in solidarity with the Ferguson protests. The choice to protest during the national anthem prior to games, however, proved to engage strong statements of support and resentment alike. His activism encouraged acts of solidarity by other athletes, and a galvanization of movements against racial injustice. There were also reactions against Kaepernick, including anger towards his chosen place and time and disbelief at an athlete making millions of dollars complaining about racial injustice. Attitudes in the aftermath of his NFL career were still strong, but, as he was no longer on an NFL team, he was no longer participating in protests during the anthem every Sunday.

Nike had remained relatively silent on Kaepernick, to the extent where there was speculation that Nike could be in the process of dropping Kaepernick from their brand as a result of his activism. Today, I find it difficult to discuss Kaepernick's role in American society without also discussing Nike's. The public was still very much aware of Kaepernick and his activism in 2018, but Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign signaled the first large corporation to

publicly stand with him. Nike, as I have said, has a long history of marketing campaigns tied to social issues. There is little surprise that they would work with Kaepernick, considering he was already signed to the brand and had publicly said he was still interested in pursuing his professional football career. Kaepernick and Nike became inextricably tied together, shown by reactions to this campaign, which ranged from people burning their Nike apparel and threatening a boycott in retaliation against Nike's partnership with Kaepernick, to others strongly commending Nike for ignoring the potential negative publicity and supporting an activist for social justice. Nike became not just a supporter, but a partner of Kaepernick's activism to many in American society.

Perhaps what persisted most after the campaign went public, however, were the memes based on it, which I will call Dream Crazy Memes. These memes were and are created to satirize the campaign. There are many different genres, themes, and images utilized throughout this vast catalog of memes. In this thesis, I am drawn into this analysis by the rhetoric of these memes, particularly as they speak to perspectives of Nike as a responsible social actor, racial tensions and anxieties in American society, athlete activism and anthem protests, and partisan engagement. The rhetoric considered within memes is both visual and textual, and my conception of rhetoric reflects that. Though the expansion of rhetoric to the study of images has faced contention, contemporary definitions of rhetoric have tended to include studies of the visual. I align with Sonja Foss and Barry Brummett in defining rhetoric as "the social function that influences and manages meanings."[2] I consider Dream Crazy Memes to be visual rhetoric because the creation, circulation, and engagement of them constitutes a social function, and the attitudes and arguments they express affect those that engage with them.

Upon the public release of Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign, memes were utilized as a response by those that found the campaign funny, ironic, and hypocritical. In this thesis I conduct a rhetorical analysis of two genres of Dream Crazy Memes; one which revisits a historical lineage of critiques of Nike's relationship to sweatshop labor, and one which compares and contrasts Kaepernick and military service members. I argue that the Dream Crazy Meme is used to express and perpetuate attitudes about Kaepernick and Nike, of course, but also about tensions and anxieties in American society, including race, patriotism, protest, and CSR. In this introductory chapter, I will expand on the relevant literature that contributes to my analysis of Dream Crazy Memes, discuss perspectives contributing to my method in this visual rhetorical analysis, and provide a preview of what is to come in the remaining chapters.

Contributing Critical Perspectives and Relevant Literature

This thesis finds itself at the intersection of visual rhetorical studies, rhetorics of race, particularly of the post-race, anti-blackness, and racial capitalism, and branding studies of corporate social responsibility (CSR). I am interested in how the creation, circulation, and consumption of Dream Crazy Memes might uphold, reject, or re-articulate our understanding and acceptance of hegemonic branding power, race, and identity. The study of internet memes has documented the rhetorical power memes hold in transforming attitudes and circulating outside the context in which they were created in order to affect change. The "fluid phenomenon" of images in general, even more influential in internet memes, makes their rhetorical impact that much more unique.[3] The following section will attend to the perspectives and literatures that substantially contribute to the analysis carried out in this thesis. Broadly, those areas of literature include the study of visual rhetoric, rhetorics of race and patriotism, and branding studies which focus on acts of CSR and racial capitalism.

The study of internet memes and visual rhetoric

Internet memes have attracted the attention of rhetorical critics due to their unique characteristics as visual artifacts that persuade and spread ideas quickly and subtly. A definition of rhetoric that includes analyses of visual artifacts is an orientation to rhetoric as action that has meaning.[4] Though new materialist scholars, such as Laurie Gries and Eric Jenkins, critique rhetoric through meaning in favor of analyses of relations, there is a basis in which they also attend to meaning. Jenkins acknowledges the polysemous nature of images, in which they can take on different meanings depending upon context.[5] While Jenkins argues that modal scholars should read images according to their affective capacities, rather than their meanings, he still contends that meaning and symbolic activity are produced as a result of those capacities.[6] The rhetoric of memes can be analyzed according to a definition oriented around meaning, while still attending to the relations in which that meaning is created. This project attends to relations by defining rhetoric according to Foss and Brummett, only slightly adjusting the definition in order to attend to the influence that relations have on meaning.

Internet memes can be defined as a viral form of idea sharing online through popular images and text.[7] While memes are generally considered funny images of low consequence, there are a growing number of scholars that argue the enjoyment of internet memes has deeper societal implications.[8] Internet memes can circulate in a variety of formats, including GIFs, short videos, and static images. Internet memes can function as a reflection of culture, shaping and reflecting society's thoughts on social issues and events as they circulate. The term meme was originally used to describe a culture unit which is passed among individuals through the process of imitation and replication.[9] Do individuals who view and create memes blindly accept the meaning making carried out in these cultural units, or is there an active negotiation of meaning?

Leslie Hahner describes the act of viewing an internet meme as being exposed to a virus, in which a person is infected by a message, whether pernicious or overt, and a change in meaning, understanding, or perspective occurs.[10] The internet meme as virus suggests that memes function rhetorically to enact new meaning in a way that cannot be warded off or defended against by the viewer. This characteristic is especially notable because of the subtleties in how internet memes create meaning and deliver their arguments. Internet memes utilize pop-culture visuals or popular phrases, referred to as their intertextual nature, and often mash them together in order to "create new layers of meaning," and this process is continuous as the meme is further engaged with, imitated, and replicated.[11] Memes, due to this intertextuality, tend to be fun to engage with. Meme creators mask their subtle arguments and perspectives, which the individual viewer may reject if stated outright, behind satirical phrases and popular images that people enjoy looking at and sharing. In this way, "memes are efficient as images that can quickly disseminate a political agenda."[12] Their ability to fly under the radar as persuasive texts that hold consequential messages about social issues within them makes contributes to their efficiency in that task.[13] Viewers are especially susceptible to the persuasive messages and ideologies carried within internet memes because these types of messages are most salient and effective when they seem non-persuasive or non-ideological.

Internet memes often originate in digital enclaves. By the time mainstream social media users come across a particular meme, it has likely gone through numerous engagements on image boards, such as 4chan, Reddit, and imgur. While memes can be and are created for mainstream audiences, it is common to find a meme's origin on these image boards. These groups establish and uphold their own cultural norms regarding appropriate posts, interactions, and punishment for breaching rules. Meme production within these digital enclaves is an

interactive process among the collective. The creation of internet memes can be considered a participatory discourse, because meme creation requires collaboration, negotiation of meaning, and replication in order to survive.[14]

Enclaves where many memes originate also are typically uninterested in the mainstream, opting instead for success on the local digital enclave they consider themselves a member of.[15] Nevertheless, memes that gain popularity on a message board often end up on mainstream social medias, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. At that point, it is not unlikely for the site of origin to lose interest in the internet meme that escaped to the mainstream, particularly once that meme becomes known within pop-culture and is re-created, often establishing a new layer of meaning, by people outside of the group in which it was created.[16] Internet memes, and the messages and ideologies carried within them, are difficult to trace back to particular individuals, but they nevertheless represent real perspectives and thoughts that have material implications.[17] As the meaning of internet memes are collaborated on, negotiated, and replicated, each iteration transforms the meme through changes to some aspects of the previous iteration and the retention of others.[18] Each iteration of a meme exists in relation to the whole theme it was born from and helped to produce. In this way, memes do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in relations to the iterations that came before and will come after. This makes memes difficult to study because their rhetorical existence cannot be bound to any one specific moment, exigence, or situation.

The circulation of digital images versus strategies of meme argumentation

The question of how to handle the circulation of images has been debated among rhetorical scholars, and that debate is even more consequential with the rise of digital media. WJT Mitchell described a visual turn in which images are inescapable, surrounding us at all times.[19] The increasingly rapid circulation of digital images has only furthered the inescapable

nature of images and the messages they carry within.[20] Among those that argue for a focus on circulation in analyses of visual culture is Cara Finnegan. She argues that these analyses should account for the "influence of visual artifacts and practices, but also place them in contexts of their circulation."[21] Studying the circulation of visual artifacts contributes to an understanding of a phenomenon as a whole by exposing the myriad of meanings that can be derived from images depending on not only the historical context, but also the context of an image's circulation.[22]

Laurie Gries argues that images, including internet memes, should be studied as "divergent, unfolding becomings" which develop over time and space.[23] Thinking of internet memes as an event, still developing and taking form, prioritizes the study of a meme's circulation as the mechanism which keeps the event alive and moving forward. Though circulation is the mechanism of the unfolding event, it is not easy to track. Digital images circulate quickly and their lifespans can be relatively short compared to their impact as newer popular memes enter the mainstream economy of memes on a daily basis. Engagement and circulation is what leads to the survival of internet memes, so when that engagement is reduced and eventually stops the meme and its circulation can be easily overlooked and lost in the vastness of the internet. The interrogation of how and why images circulate is essential to understanding the rhetorical discourse created by memes.[24] The meaning of images is negotiated and altered as they continue to circulate, across and within media platforms.[25] Circulation of digital media produces diverse relations and meanings, which are made clear through analyses of where images were created, where they were shared, and how they were engaged with and transformed.

Proponents of the focus on the circulation of digital images acknowledge that memes are rhetorical, but argue that the best way to understand their influence is to analyze their circulation,

rather than analyze the content of specific iterations of a meme. For example, Eric Jenkins analyzes Fail/Win memes as a whole in order to better understand their influence and how they exhibit control society as a mode that requires people to look at life as a game that is failed or won in different situations.[26] While Jenkins provides specific examples to support his claims, his overall argument exists on a macro level regarding the strategies of engagement and overall influence of Fail/Win on society as a whole.[27] By macro level, I am referring to the role of the mode as an overarching structure of engagement. Modal analysis is concerned with individual iterations of a meme relation to the whole.

There are scholars of internet memes and digital media, however, that still prefer to focus on the local characteristics of memes that contribute to the argument presented to viewers, whether overt or otherwise pernicious. Scholars from this side of the argument acknowledge the importance of the relationship between sender, message, context, and receiver, which are all aspects that can be analyzed by attending to circulation, but argue that "memes' particular content, form, and stance are important factors" in analyzing particular memes.[28] Attending to content, form, and stance relies on more traditional methods of visual rhetorical criticism in order to explicate the argument, and strategies utilized in support of said argument, of individual iterations of a meme. For example, Heidi Huntington focuses on the concept of the visual enthymeme, synecdoche, and metaphor in order to expand on arguments and messages encoded in the Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop meme.[29] Visual enthymemes are a form of visual argumentation. The viewer is provided premises which lead to the desired conclusion of the rhetor.[30] The enthymeme is successful rhetorically because it takes advantage of when the viewer is most susceptible, leveraging emotions and attitudes in order to get the audience to accept the argument.[31] George McHendry, Jr. argues that the visual enthymeme requires the audience to do

some of the work in coming to what the rhetor presents as the reasonable conclusion, but that in order to do this the visual must wound the audience, which he calls the punctum, giving reason for emotional pause in order to consider the argument.[32] While acknowledging the broader context and a large archive of Pepper Spray Cop memes, Huntington's analysis focused on the more local arguments of individual iterations of the Pepper Spray Cop meme and the strategies utilized to make those arguments most salient for the viewer of those memes.[33]

This thesis draws on both of these perspectives in order to analyze Dream Crazy Memes. While acknowledging that memes circulate quickly before the eyes of unassuming viewers, I find that attending to the strategies of individual memes as they make their arguments is a valuable practice to explicate the complex perspectives and ideologies that exist within each meme. Understanding that complexity is made even more valuable to a complete analysis of the meaning-making process when combined with an attention to where these memes are created, where they are circulated, and how they are transformed, commented on, and otherwise engaged with online.

Rhetorics of race and patriotism

Social justice activism and patriotism seem to be increasingly conflictual activities. The way patriotism is conceptualized and perceived in contemporary American society tends to resent complaints about the United States, particularly when complaints are about inequalities and injustices. Social justice activism on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and a myriad of other causes tend to inspire conflictual rhetoric that draws on patriotic language and symbols. In this section, I draw on relevant literatures to describe the visuality of blackness in American society despite the rise of American perspectives of a post-racial society, and how

patriotism, as it is currently enacted, has re-negotiated what it means to support one's country in a way that re-articulates social justice protests as Black rage and ungratefulness.

Many scholars relate blackness with the concept of visuality, a concept which describes who is seen and watched in relation to those who do the watching.[34] This process of racialization, particularly in the U.S., identifies black skin as *other*, enacting a society in which whiteness is the normal, accepted, and dominant state of existence. An oft-cited narrative regarding this racialized experience is Franz Fanon's description of the visual gaze of whiteness fixating on the otherness that is blackness.[35] Fanon describes a scene of him walking on the sidewalk when the visual difference of his skin - that of blackness - leads to terror and negative assumptions by a young girl passing him by.[36] In this interaction, Fanon is made visible as *other* because of his blackness, why passersby remain invisible, the default, on account of their whiteness and they feel entitled to look upon him. In this way, blackness is a visual relation, rather than a visual property.[37] Moreover, blackness is a visual relation which whiteness watches in order to contain. As Lisa Flores argues, "raced bodies - bodies that *look* other - will be contained."[38]

Lisa Nakamura provides another narrative exemplifying the relationality of race, as she describes a movie that portrays Indian American soldier, beaten earlier on by a white American soldier because he mistook him for a Japanese soldier, eventually deciding to put on the uniform of a dead Japanese soldier so he could successfully get behind enemy lines to get a radio.[39] This narrative exemplifies understandings of race in which the Indian American solider is one of "us," as in an American, but looks and reads as other, "them."[40] Nakamura describes the website alllooksame.com, which asks viewers to decipher the differences of Asian faces in order to guess whether the faces are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean.[41] Most that attempted to do this in fact could

not tell the difference accurately, emphasizing that "the *visual* has always had primacy in our understandings of race."[42]

The internet is an example of a racialized arena.[43] Despite what many seem to see as a colorblind medium, "it is imbued with racial politics," particularly in relation to digital inequalities and its active role in perpetuating images and narratives of race.[44] The internet has made looking, even more so at race, the equivalent of reading as a practice of literacy.[45] Seeing race in the digital medium has also served to make Blackness essential for understanding "the whole of American politics."[46] Black primacy in visual representations of race are a result of the continuous presence of Black imagery in signals of changes in American politics.[47]

Post-racialism stands in conflict with the overt examples of visual race relations described by Fannon and Nakamura, yet critical analysis exposes post-racialism as an alternative and more subtle perspective of racialization and white supremacy. Post-racialism was a celebrated development in American politics and media. Such a perspective supported the demise of race, the belief that racial difference no longer had a profound impact on one's life chances in American society.[48] Claims of a new American colorblindness were punctuated by the rise of Barack Obama's presidency and further supported by the success of other prominent Black Americans.[49] Instead, post-racial perspectives have served only to further look at, watch, and contain blackness. The post-race, Jasmine Nichole Cobb explains, has made blackness "hypervisible as a symbol," yet still invisible in its social, cultural, and political relevance.[50] While the post-racial signals an end to racial politics, it also signals an end to whiteness, activating white supremacy through the need to maintain dominance and primacy.[51] Interestingly enough, whiteness is still treated as the normal state of being in a post-race America. To be a symbol of the post-race means to rid oneself of their blackness in a way that makes it forgettable

or unnoticeable, as indicated by NBC's Chris Matthews through his assertion that Obama was "post-racial by all appearances. I forgot [Obama] was Black tonight for an hour."[52] Post-racialism enacts rhetoric about race that argues that American has arrived at colorblindness as a society, while supporting this argument by pointing out individual of Black Americans who have seemingly overcome, and therefore shed, their blackness.[53] Such rhetoric emphasize the visuality of race, as Blackness is the visible property that exhibits the societal change to colorblindness.

Though rhetoric of anti-blackness is still present throughout nationalist and supremacist rhetoric, the rise of the post-racial has contributed mightily to the re-emergence of American patriotism as an oppressive project warding off protests of racial and social injustices. Patriotism has arisen once again as an "us" against "them" kind of mindset.[54] Instead of the typical U.S. against the world, however, contemporary patriotism shapes the "us" against "them" matchup as one featuring the righteous, faithful, unwaveringly loyal citizens against those that speak out on America's shortcomings. Coining the term "crazy patriotism," D. Soyini Madison argues that it is an unhealthy condition which hinders an ability to critique and transform American society through an interrogation and acknowledgement of its previous wrongs.[55] A primary component of the post-racial, crazy patriotism privileges whiteness as the default condition of an American existence, furthering the disdain for expressions against American racism.[56] Furthermore, crazy patriotism appreciates the post-racial perspective, as it supports the belief that all groups are already equally good, denying the legitimacy of protests and civil disobedience in the name of racial and social justice as un-patriotic and anti-American.[57]

Patriotic racism can also be expressed through an attachment to national symbols.[58] National symbols, such as the flag, national anthem, and military, are representative of American societies political and social past, a past which has privileged whiteness while dominating and

oppressing subordinate groups. As such, white Americans feel an attachment to national symbols that are representative of their power and success, while racial minorities and other groups tend to hold more resentment.[59] An outcome of the difference in feelings towards national symbols is explained through Social Dominance Theory, which explains how resentment towards national symbols by subordinate groups results in even more negative feelings towards the subordinate group from the dominant.[60] Social Identity Theory describes similar behavior, asserting that a dominant in-group will closely monitor an out-group that does not share their same ideals, and will reinforce dominant ideals of the in-group by misrepresenting and degrading the perspectives of the out-group in order to oppress potential threats to their dominance.[61] All of this serves the ends of crazy patriotism, as Madison suggests, resulting in the upholding of American superiority through a reinvigorated focus on racializing dissent.

Corporate social responsibility and racial capitalism

Corporations, in order to brand themselves and their products for a contemporary consumer base, implement practices that identify them as a part of the community and an ally of myriad social justice issues. This practice has been labeled as corporate social responsibility (CSR). Many corporation implement CSR to keep consumers happy and engaged by taking opportunities to support the growth of the communities in which they work.[62] Many activities corporations implement closely resemble social activism. The practice of corporations framing themselves as a responsible social actor is becoming more common, as the contemporary consumer is interested in buying from responsible brands. It is difficult to discern whether corporations actually care about social and justice, or are just taking measures to enhance their bottom line. This decision is often left up interpretation by consumers.[63]

CSR requires a corporation to cultivate a socially responsible identity and then share it with an audience - consumers. Generally, the identity shared is one which appeals to the shared values of their desired consumer base. There is little literature explicitly discussing CSR as a rhetorical practice, but there are studies of branding and marketing which contribute to an understanding of CSR as rhetorical. Considered a "new" CSR tactic, corporations have participated in activism themselves.[64] One example of this is Melissa Aronczyk's discussion of Lush Cosmetics and their strategies to appeal to their consumers through CSR tactics. Lush participated in activist activities, charitable giving, and other humanitarian events in order to cultivate shared values with their consumers.[65] While their participation in the events was rhetorical in its own right - a project of identity building - Lush Cosmetics still faced a problem in extending exposure to their CSR to the general public.[66] The primary goal corporations, and reason for implementing CSR, is to build a company identity of shared values with their consumer base in order to increase consumer engagement, and therefore capital accumulation.[67] In order to achieve that goal, CSR activities must be mediated and presented to a larger audience. Corporations must find ways to participate in or promote socially responsible behavior while mediating it for the larger audience in a manner that is engaging. Often, consumers question the sincerity of corporations' CSR.[68]

Whether or not the corporation is sincere in their actions might not actually matter, however, as long as they behave in a manner that looks responsible. Regardless of whether or not consumers interpret CSR actions as legitimate, many corporations see financial and brand image positives by implementing policies and campaigns driven by CSR. In a growing body of critical literature focused on CSR, many scholars conclude that the implementation of CSR practices is more about the positive manipulation of a corporation's public image, rather than about

empowering the communities and society.[69] Furthermore, questions of whether or not any

corporation that is driven by capital accumulation can ever empower and promote the growth of

society have persisted. To this end, Dana Cloud argues that we cannot glean a corporation's

commitment to their social activism from external actions. Rather, it is their commitment to their

workforce that is the most telling.[70] Cloud's argument directly contributes to a primary inquiry of

this project in that it provides an angle to interrogate Dream Crazy Memes that critique Nike in

the context of their factory workforce.

     The concept of racial capitalism links well with the function of CSR. Racial capitalism

conceptualizes how capitalism pursues racial ends.[71] Jodi Melamed notes, however, that we

should not confuse racial capitalism with a side effect or secondary outcome of a prior capitalist

agenda.[72] Instead, racial capitalism highlights the reality that capitalism, as we understand it

today, actively pursues racial ends. Melamed clarifies that capitalism *is* racial capitalism, as a

capitalist agenda will always pursue racial ends in order to structure and reach capital

accumulation.[73] Cloud describes scholarly conclusions that capital accumulation as the goal of

corporations disrupts their ability to empower their environment. A theory of racial capitalism

argues that the accumulation of capital will always occur through the inequality of human

groups.[74] Attending to the workforce of corporations, particularly of international corporations,

provides evidence of racial capitalism at work.

     Attending to racial matters of a corporation's workforce, however, is complicated by

post-racialism. Modern American color-blindness, otherwise known as post-racialism, argues

that society has moved past race as a contributing factor on one's social standing, life chances,

and labor.[75] Racial capitalism specifically argues that racial difference functions to structure

capital accumulation and the inequalities that follow.[76] Post-racial perspectives, therefore, deny

the primacy of racial difference on capital and inequality, enabling its continuation as the dominant structure in place. This relationship accentuates post-racialism as a project upholding the dominance and normalcy of whiteness, while rejecting the claims of racial capitalism.

Method

In this thesis, I will analyze two genres, the factory and military genres, of Dream Crazy Memes in order to answer the questions that have been discussed so far. The first genre of Dream Crazy Memes will be called the factory genre. The factory genre is a collection of similar memes that engage in a response to Nike's identity as a responsible social actor through a renewed attention to critiques of the factory workforce. The factory genre is defined by the following criteria. First, the meme must include, at least, the beginning phrase of "Believe in something." Without those three words, this project will not consider the meme a direct response to the original ad. Second, the image behind the text, which replaces Kaepernick's face, must be an image of one or more individuals working in a factory setting. If the meme under scrutiny does not meet these two basic criteria, then it will not be analyzed as a meme within the factory genre. I decided to focus on this genre because of the unique strategies utilized to engage viewers across the political spectrum and the corresponding variance in interpretation and transformation of iterations of memes within the factory genre. Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign elicited responses that were divided at the party line between liberal and conservative, in terms of issue ownership. The labels "liberal" and "conservative" can be used in a multiplicity of ways. In this thesis, when I utilize those terms, I am referring to partisan issue ownership in the contemporary United States. The factory genre engages viewers on both sides of the political spectrum in a critique of the same subject - Nike - rather than in a critique against each other.

The second genre enacts military symbolism to confront Kaepernick and Nike with an argument used against Kaepernick's protest from the beginning, which is his disrespect for the military and the countries symbols. This genre is identified as the military genre and is defined as a collection of memes that replace Kaepernick's image with military imagery, utilizing both as a symbol for anti-American Black rage and American patriotism, respectively. The use as both as explicit stand-ins for larger ideologies and beliefs in American society displays the complexity and depth of arguments that can be housed within individual memes. Through an analysis of the military genre, I will explore the meaning-making process regarding anthem protests, social justice activism, blackness, and patriotism as attitudes are expressed in the memes themselves and by those who share and engage with them.

Analyzing the factory genre and the military genre

One method I use in this project is modal analysis. Modal analysis asks critics to turn towards the virtual attributes of memes in order to better understand their affective capacities that shape the interaction between audience and image. The virtual attributes of memes are defined by Jenkins as the "capacities for affect" that structure encounters.[77] The virtual is a concept of relations, which structure affect across contexts.[78] The virtual attributes accompany every real actualization of a meme, structuring its creation, circulation, and its viewership.[79] The mode is the result of the virtual attributes of a meme, and can be described as the rules of engagement by which individuals create and view iterations of a meme.[80] Modes, as Jenkins defines them, are "collective, emergent phenomena that express the circulation energies of contemporary existence rather than re-presenting the interests of particular rhetors."[81] In order to understand how the interaction between audience and image is shaped across contexts, scholars need to understand the relations that exist prior to actualizations of memes - the virtual attributes that orient

individuals to a memes rules of engagement.[82] Jenkins, citing Deleuze, notes that the virtual

structures interaction; in the case of memes, the virtual structures relations with memes across

contexts and prior to individual actualizations.[83] The question of virtual attributes asks what

exists about a meme prior to any iteration of it that provides the canvas for its actualization in a

certain context. Circulation plays a pivotal role in the affective capacity of digital memes.

Activating this perspectives will allow for 1) a shift to understanding Dream Crazy Memes as an

unfolding event that has consistent qualities across contexts, and 2) a supplementation of more

stagnant contextual analysis, which this project will implement in order to delineate distinct

meaning from the Factory Theme and Military Theme, through a consideration of the virtual

components that dictate the relation between audience and image.

Another method I employ is visual enthymeme analysis. Heidi Huntington demonstrates

a method for analyzing visual political rhetoric in memes that focuses on how memes create a

"self convincing audience."[84] In describing this practice of self-convincing through viewing an

image, Huntington reminds us that the concept of the enthymeme presents key points of an

argument in order to lead an audience to the most logical conclusion.[85] McHendry argues, in

addition to a similar perspective on the effectiveness of the enthymeme, that visual

argumentation requires an exploitation of its emotive capacity, taking advantage of the viewer

when it is susceptible through the use of *punctum,* which is the wounding of a viewer that forces

them to take a pause and consider the argument of the image.[86] As the audience reaches a

conclusion through work that they have done on their own, the persuasive power of the image is

that much stronger. The constant remixing and juxtaposition that takes place throughout

iterations of memes is what shapes their argument.[87] Thus, an attention to the intertextuality and

visual enthymeme reveals the rhetorical power of memes, and is therefore vital to the analysis of

memes.[88] Still, only relying on the intertextuality and visual enthymeme bounds an analysis of the rhetorical power of memes to a specific moment.[89] It is for this reason why situating memes in their larger context and relationality, while still maintaining an attention to their intertextual and metaphorical attributes, opens up an analysis to the deeper and multiple layers that exist within the visual rhetoric of memes.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding will contribute methodologically to how this project will consider the implications of the reception of Nike and Colin Kaepernick's original *Dream Crazy* campaign through the rhetorical discourse within Dream Crazy Memes. The original *Dream Crazy* campaign encodes its own messages that Nike, and likely Colin Kaepernick, hopes their consumer base will accept in a positive way. As Hall argues, widespread public acceptance of hegemonic messages is not so simple. Our social understanding and our social relations impact the way we decode those hegemonic messages and how we respond to them.[90] There are a couple questions that considering Hall's perspective will hopefully help this project answer. 1) What do Dream Crazy Memes argue in response to the goals of the original ad? How are social relations to race, ideology, capitalism, and patriotism re-articulated as these memes are shared and recreated? This project implements these methods in order to consider the virtual attributes that exist across contexts of Dream Crazy Memes, how those virtual attributes are actualized in the two specific genres this project will look at, and how the two genres function as distinct social texts that forward visual rhetorical arguments in response to the original ad.

How do we, as critics of internet memes, bound context as we put them under the lens of analysis? Bounding context is an important aspect of a project of this nature, even as I highlight memes' development as an unfolding event unbounded by time. A project of this nature must

bound itself at some point, and therefore must bound the object of study. Where the boundary lies determines what context is considered, the conditions of production, and who can be considered a member of the audience. Bounding the artifact or the archive provides an argument for where the height of its rhetorical power starts and ends. Context is especially important for how we understand the rhetorical power of internet memes and for how we name rhetors and audiences. Lloyd Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as the nature of the context in which rhetorical discourse is created, which is bounded to a specific exigence.[91] Memes complicate this bounded exigence on account of their fluidity and demand an expanded notion of situation and context. An alternative method to think about this is through a networked approach. In this approach, the origin of a moment of discourse is not found in the situation, but rather the differences found between the speaker, situation, and audience.[92] Within that difference, there is an absent space in which the relation between speaker, situation, and audience co-produce one another in an ongoing adaptive project.[93] Tracking specific rhetors and audiences of internet memes is a difficult task. Their messages are consequential, however, and exist in relation to the creator, the situation, and future viewers. As memes are circulated, replicated, and commented on it becomes clear that there is less of a specific origin, and more of a relation of differences co-producing the collaborative rhetorical discourse of internet memes. The networked approach better fits my rhetorical analysis of Dream Crazy Memes. The network approach's attention to the relations between speaker, situation, and audience reflects how modal analysis attends to the relations that structure engagement with a meme. By bounding the context of Dream Crazy Memes according to relations, rather than to a specific situation and exigence, my analysis can look across contexts, creators, and spaces where these memes are shared.

I align with the new materialist perspective of internet memes, and digital visual media in general, as an unfolding event, in which there are previously existing feelings, attitudes, and events that are actualized through memes.[94] Internet memes are continuously collaborated on, engaged with, and replicated while circulating across different media. Therefore, the networked approach is the best conception of bounding the analysis of this project. A concept similar in nature is that of a field of potential. Jenkins discusses the field of potential that memes emerge from, contending that there are conditions that influence the feelings, reactions, and other influences that exist already, prior to any actualization of a particular meme.[95] Jenkins acknowledges that there are differences between two similar concepts that he names the field of potential and the conditions of possibility, arguing that memes emerge from the former.[96] The conditions of possibility are the basic structures for a meme to exist, such as computer networks and digital devices. Those material aspects of the social field will exist whether or not rhetoric is produced, or an expression emerges. When the expression does emerge, that indicates that there was also a field of potential, which result in an actualized meme.[97] The field of potential is more reflective of a networked approach to rhetoric. The field of potential is non-specific in relation to a starting point, limiting its definition to the conditions leading to actualization. These conditions should include the differences and relations between situation, rhetor, and audience, which is specifically what a networked approach points to as a more accurate representation of discourse production.[98] Circulation continues and expands upon these network relations and differences, continuously providing a field of potential for future actualizations. In this project, the rhetorical analysis of Dream Crazy Memes is less focused on individual rhetors, exigences, and audiences, and more focused on the relations between them.

Throughout the next two chapters, analysis will be carried out on two distinct themes of Dream Crazy Memes in a similar fashion. There are three points of emphasis in those two chapters. First, work will be done to establish a history behind and of the genre in terms of where its images came from, how the memes developed, where they were shared and commented on, and how they were commented on. Determining the starting point of a meme is difficult, so that is not the goal of this first point of emphasis. The purpose is to determine as much as possible about the types of images used and then track how the genre developed and transformed as it was shared. The second point of emphasis will require a temporary shift in focus away from how other DC Memes function. Narrowing the focus in on each independent genre and iterations of memes within it in order to discuss how its rhetorical functions of incongruence, synecdoche, and symbolism will elucidate the interpretation of rhetorical arguments found in each iteration. The third point of emphasis is to consider the movement, transformation, and viewer commentary of the images within the genre. Evaluating a Dream Crazy Mode of judgement means exploring the virtual relations of this meme as a means to better understand how each theme utilizes strategies established in the second point of emphasis to actualize arguments and perspectives in individual iterations of memes. All three points of emphasis, though different in their commitments and interests, lead to a well rounded understanding of what drives the circulation of and engagement with two genres of Dream Crazy Memes analyzed in this thesis, and Dream Crazy Memes as a whole.

Layout

Three more chapters will follow this one. The second chapter focuses on an analysis of the factory genre and its rhetorical critique of Nike in relation to the treatment of their workforce. The third chapter analyzes the military genre by attending to the use of Kaepernick and military

imagery as synecdoche for national ideologies regarding protest, race, and patriotism. This chapter, specifically, will engage in a case study of a popularly circulated DC meme featuring former NFL player and military service member, the late Pat Tillman, as he is used as a synecdoche for ideologies in a similar manner to Kaepernick. The fourth, and final, chapter focuses on concluding the implications that were discovered throughout the previous chapters, and will look forward with what we are to do with those implications. In addition, I hope to suggest some future directions for rhetorical inquiry of memes after carrying out my own analysis. As a critical project, I have a vested interest in providing insight into this phenomenon so that we can better understand how memes function politically and socially.

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Chapter 2 - The Factory Genre

"Our purpose is to unite the world through sport to create a healthy planet, active communities and an equal playing field for all."[99] Nike's purpose statement, featured on their website as of September 25th, 2020, identifies their brand as more than a shoe and athletic apparel company. Nike brands themselves as a social actor that will use their status to induce action on social issues, such as health and equality. While my purpose in this project is not to evaluate the truth in Nike's purpose, I am interested in the attitudes people express in response to it. Nike consistently produces marketing campaigns in reference to their corporate social responsibility (CSR). One such campaign was the *Dream Crazy* campaign, launched in September 2018. The *Dream Crazy* campaign - produced in celebration of the 30th anniversary of Nike's "Just Do It" slogan - featured NFL free agent and social justice activist Colin

Figure 2.1 Original *Dream Crazy* campaign ad.

Kaepernick as the primary spokesperson. After the launch of the *Dream Crazy* campaign, there were numerous memes produced that were based on the original ad shown above. My purpose is to explore the rhetorical discourse exhibited in these memes that challenges Nike's role as a social actor.

In this chapter, I focus on a specific genre of *Dream Crazy* Meme that features Nike's factory workforce. This genre of memes points out the observed hypocrisy in Nike's CSR campaigns. The hypocrisy critiqued by memes in the factory genre is on the grounds that Nike condones and exploits inadequate conditions within their own factory workforce while they partner with Kaepernick in support of their own identity as a responsible social actor. I argue that the factory genre functions as a rhetorical response to Nike's branding as a socially responsible corporate actor and engages viewers by presenting the incongruence of three primary subjects: Nike, Kaepernick, and sweatshop labor. Incongruence exists for each actor between each iteration of a meme within the factory genre and the original ad. The incongruence of Nike is between their corporate social responsibility and imagery of poor and unfair working conditions. For Kaepernick, the incongruence is between his status as a social justice activist and his partnership with Nike, a company that exploits their factory workforce. Finally, the incongruence of sweatshop labor is in relation to the previous two subjects, but also in relation to two divergent perspectives on Nike's use of sweatshop labor. While some view Nike's labor practices as problematic on account of exploitation of overseas workers, others view them as problematic because they are taking jobs away from American citizens. The incongruence of these three subjects presented in the factory genre results in a rhetorical discourse that people across the political spectrum can engage with. The factory genre engages divergent perspectives against Nike and Kaepernick, rather than placing those perspectives directly in conflict with one another.

Leveraging political ambivalence in that way increases overall engagement and circulation, therefore extending the life of the meme. In this chapter, I will provide a history of the critiques of Nike's labor practices, describe where the images of the factory genre came from and then how they are utilized throughout memes within the genre, and then I will analyze what the mode of the factory genre is and how it is carried out in actualizations of the meme through strategies of incongruence.

Critiques of Nike's Labor Practice, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Racial Capitalism

In 1998, Nike was facing criticism for their involvement in exploitative labor practices worldwide. Nike CEO and founder, Phil Knight, concluded that the association between the Nike brand and slave wages, poor working conditions, and general abuse of workers had been cemented in the public's eye.[100] Nike was not alone when it came to criticism of exploitative labor practices overseas, as other transnational corporations were exposed by anti-sweatshop activists consistently throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[101] Knight, in response to what was quickly becoming a public relations nightmare for the company, announced the implementation of new labor policies at all factories, both in the U.S. and abroad.[102] According to Knight, taking steps to update policies was a "watershed event" in changing company culture.[103] Nike's announcement of new and improved labor policies, and the publicly shared goal of changing company culture, are exemplars of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In order to restore their public image and engage customers, Nike turned to a more active statement of their identity as a responsible social actor.

CSR is utilized to keep customers happy and engaged by being a positive actor in society.[104] Critical literature on CSR has concluded that these practices are less about being a positive social actor, and more about manipulating the corporation's public image so that

consumers are comfortable buying, and in Nike's case wearing, their goods.[105] Particularly in a society driven by capital accumulation, there is little reason for why a corporation would concern themselves with the societal good over positive image management.[106] Still, consumers in contemporary society want to like the corporations they buy from, and CSR is a method to accomplish that. Dana Cloud argues that, because the goal of capital accumulation is so great, it is the treatment of a corporation's workforce that critics should attend to when evaluating a corporation's commitment to socially responsible action.[107] Workforce treatment is privileged over external social actions because Cloud has found that corporations often increase external social action, such as charitable giving, when the treatment of their workforce is less than desirable, such as massive layoffs.[108] This is, perhaps, why critiques of Nike's labor practices have persisted despite CSR messaging. People use the factory genre of Dream Crazy Memes to critique Nike along those lines, rejecting Nike's role as a responsible social actor due to their lack of social action to improve the conditions of their factory workforce.

Nike is a giant when it comes to both profits and criticism. Graham Knight and John Greenberg argue that Nike has been the primary target of anti-sweatshop activism due to its celebrity status.[109] Nike gained this status through endorsements and relationships with prominent athletes, transferring the celebrity status of those athletes to Nike through continued marketing partnerships.[110] Nike is reliant on the positive publicity that comes with those relationships. The reflexivity of being reliant on positive publicity means that Nike is increasingly vulnerable to negative publicity, making their CSR messaging especially susceptible to rejection.[111] Nike, however, seems to thrive on publicity in general, regardless of whether it is negative or positive. The failure of other brands, such as Under Armor, Adidas, and Reebok, to compete in the U.S market has often been linked to Nike's dominance in signing top athletes at a

higher clip than their competition. As Knight and Greenberg note Nike's ties with Michael

Jordan and Tiger Woods, Nike has since added names like LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Serena

Williams, Naomi Osaka, Mike Trout, Russel Wilson, and O'Dell Beckham; all elite professional

athletes that also carry celebrity status.

The *Dream Crazy* campaign was also not the only one of its kind, either. Nike

campaigns, like Serena and Venus Williams' *You Can't stop Us"* concerning the rise of two

African-American girls from Compton and the 1995 *If You Let Me Play* campaign arguing for

the inclusion of girls in youth sports, consistently adopt social issues that relate to sports but

extend into society in general. The increased publicity continues to open Nike up to counter

publicity, which takes shape in both the questioning of Nike's responsibility as a social actor and

political disagreements with the argument Nike appears to take in a given campaign.[112] Though

criticism of Nike's labor practices is not new, it has consistently been a talking point throughout

the last three decades. The manner of how that criticism appears and circulates has changed

significantly with the rise of digital media.

Many of the social issues that come into conflict when reading the *Dream Crazy*

campaign and the factory genre of Dream Crazy Memes center around race. Racial capitalism

is a concept that applies to the rhetorical discourse surrounding the *Dream Crazy* campaign,

particularly throughout the factory genre. Racial capitalism deems the pursuit of capital a

practice that will subjugate society to a hierarchy that will be organized according to racial

lines drawn by skin color.[113] Race is an efficient divider that is widely accepted as an

organizing structure. Additionally, post-racial ideals pushed during and after the Obama

presidency have accentuated race as a differentiator, while providing the ability to act as if

race does not have any influence on social and political outcomes anymore.[114] When

combined with an economy and social structure shaped by the pursuit of excess capital gains, race can be weaponized when determining the hierarchy in which wealth is distributed and labor practices are instituted. Racial capitalism is *not* a unique form of capitalism that a society actively selects. Rather, capitalism as we know it privileges race as the hierarchical structure that distributes wealth and labor.[115] Essentially, our capitalism of today *is* racial capitalism because our understanding and acceptance of racial difference and the pursuit of capital has ingratiated itself in daily life; the racial and economic difference in our society just *is*.

Sweatshop labor is a good example of the exploitation of racial capitalism in action. Racial capitalism suggests that the pursuit of capital leads to exploiting the racially disenfranchised for low wages, poor conditions, and little opportunity for growth. Racial capitalism highlights the every-day nature of organizing a society based on capital accumulation and racial difference. In a society that enacts post-racial ideals, racial capitalism becomes even more prevalent, but more difficult to convince people of. The post-race society claims to no longer see racial difference; everyone is given the same opportunities and the treatment of a person is in no way related to their skin color because race no longer has an impact on one's social standing.[116] Theorists of racial capitalism disagree with the perspective that we have entered a post-racial society, indeed arguing that racial difference is the primary factor deciding the social standing of people within society.[117] In a post-racial perspective, however, sweatshop workers are not working in those conditions on account of racial difference, but on account of something else, whether motivation or skill level.

Perspectives on the role of race in labor and labor practices tend to differ depending on

political ideology. For example, a more liberal mindset, though also falling victim to the post-racial, tends to still agree that there are institutions in place that leave racial minorities to work in poorer conditions - a perspective aligning with racial capitalism. The conservative mindset, however, would typically reject a racial capitalist perspective, instead believing that race is not as much of a factor in one's upward mobility as other characteristics, such as work ethic. The factory genre of Dream Crazy Memes presents political ambivalence. People across the political spectrum express disparate attitudes towards Nike, Kaepernick, exploitative labor practices, and racial oppression through the production and circulation of memes within the factory genre. Memes with disparate attitudes and arguments do not, however, confront each other. Instead, they co-exist within the factory genre while sharing a rejection of Nike, Kaepernick, and the *Dream Crazy* campaign. Understanding differing orientations to the role of race in labor practices is important to analyzing the manner in which the factory genre is engage with, and can help to explain why there are very different interpretations of the same iteration of a meme within the factory genre.

Analyzing the Factory Genre of *Dream Crazy* Memes

The *Dream Crazy* campaign was produced as the 30th anniversary celebratory ad for the "Just Do It" slogan. Nike, in support of their identity as a responsible social actor, wanted to celebrate the anniversary by producing a campaign that embodied their commitment to social action. The *Dream Crazy* ad is remembered for the phrase "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." As a slogan, it fits exactly within Nike's brand identity. It is a phrase that athletes embody and can relate to, as they sacrifice their time, health, and relationships to reach their goals. Additionally, it is a phrase that appeals outside of sports to

anyone that has sacrificed to accomplish something that was meaningful to them. A self-identified advocate for equality, Nike found its partner for this campaign in the form of NFL free agent and highly visible social justice activist Colin Kaepernick. In fitting his narrative into the ad, Kaepernick is someone with a great belief - that racial minorities are deserving of the equal treatment that they have not received from police and the American justice system - and he is someone who sacrificed greatly for it with the loss of his professional football career, which he still has not resumed. Kaepernick's inclusion in a campaign with such a message was highly controversial, with many vowing to get rid of all their Nike apparel and refuse to purchase any future products as a result, while others applauded Nike for partnering with Kaepernick while bringing attention back to his activism. The public attention and controversy, in conjunction with the ad shown at the beginning of this chapter, made for a meme-able ad.

Many drew on the ad and the controversy around it to produce memes that continued criticisms of Nike's labor practices. Activism against Nike's labor practices had been consistent since the 1980s and 1990s, as was general activism against unjust labor practices within the clothing and shoe industry. The critique was not a direct result of the *Dream Crazy* campaign, but more of an opportunistic application of the critique to de-legitimize Nike's social action in the *Dream Crazy* campaign. Images for the factory genre, therefore, could easily be drawn from previously existing news stories, anti-sweatshop blogs, and popular social media posts. While many images used in the factory genre do not include Nike logos on the products being made within the image, many are able to link Nike directly to the factory imagery because of Nike's extensive history with labor critiques. The images were not created for these memes, demonstrating the intertextual nature of the factory genre. The relationship

with sweatshop labor is well known about Nike, and, thus, there is little need to make explicit that connection in the meme for the audience. This concept demonstrates the enthymeme established in the factory genre.

An enthymeme is a form of argument that provides premises, or leaves one unstated, in order to lead the audience to their own conclusion. While agreeing that the visual enthymeme is helpful in understanding how a rhetorical artifact leads to viewer to the desired conclusion, George McHendry argues that it is incomplete without an understanding of what causes the viewer to linger on the image.[118] He defines the *punctum* as important to utilizing the visual enthymeme in rhetorical analyses. The *punctum* is what causes the viewer to stop and consider the image long enough to be led to the desired conclusion.[119] The visual enthymeme is only as effective as long as the viewer takes enough time to consider its arguments, so it is important to note what it is about an image that causes the viewer to pause. In this case, the premise is that there is sweatshop imagery in the meme, and the meme is in reference to Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign, therefore Nike must be implicated in practices of sweatshop labor, which de-

Figure 2.2 Two images utilized by creators of memes within the factory genre.

legitimizes their identity as a responsible social actor.

The images in Figure 2.2 are both commonly utilized within the factory genre, but are unique in their individual reference to Nike. In the image on the right, there is an explicit reference to Nike through the logo on the shoes. In the image on the left, there is no reference to Nike. The difference between these two images suggests that the enthymeme created in iterations of the factory genre makes the connection to Nike clear without explicit help from the imagery chosen. All that is needed from the image is a reference to sweatshop labor and the referencing of Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign will perform the work of presenting the second premise implicating Nike. When the reference to the *Dream Crazy* campaign is added, an additional premise implicating Nike is added, leading the audience to the conclusion regarding Nike's connection to sweatshop labor practices.

There are key changes and additions that create the reference to the *Dream Crazy* campaign in the memes in Figure 2.3. First, the original images are changed to a black and white color scheme. This is an important alteration because the original *Dream Crazy* ad is black and white. While the change to a black and white color scheme is not seen in every iteration, it is the most common color scheme within the genre and shows the most fidelity to the original ad. Second, the notable phrase "Believe in something" is included in both iterations. Though there is an alteration to the second half of the statement in the iteration on the left, the connection between the original ad and this iteration of the meme is clarified through the inclusion of the key phrase from the original. Third, these two iterations include Nike's slogan "Just Do It" in some capacity. In the one iteration on the left, it is stated clearly,
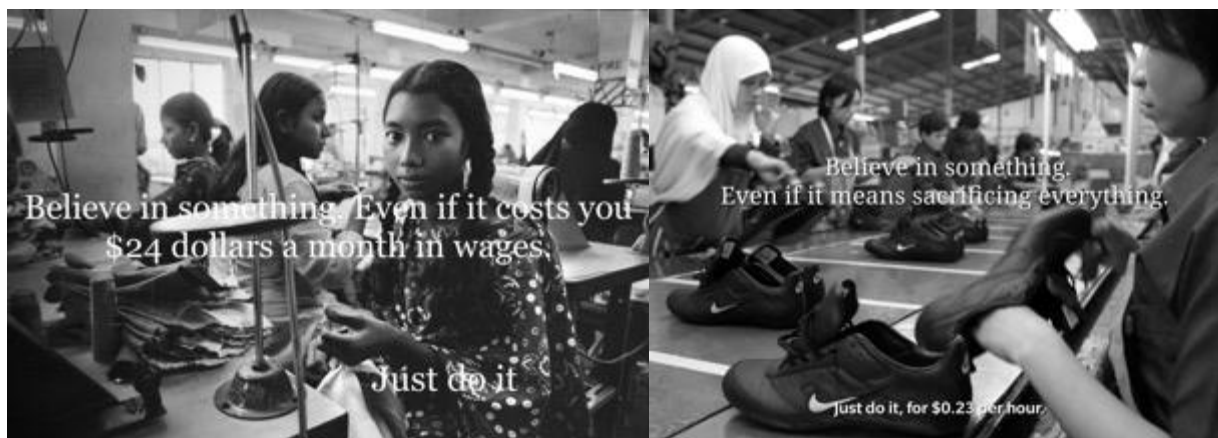
Figure 2.3 Examples of memes that utilize the two images in Figure 2.2.

with no addition or alteration. In the iteration on the right, it is placed next to the Nike logo on one of the shoes in the image, and altered to say "Just do it, for $0.23 an hour" to make even more salient the relationship between Nike and sweatshop labor.

Though the enthymeme leads to a clear conclusion regarding Nike's relationship to sweatshop labor, interpretations about what is important about that relationship varies greatly across viewers. The variance in interpretation can be seen through viewer commentary on iterations of the factory genre. This commentary can be found on mainstream social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, on image boards, like Reddit, and are commonly found in Google image searches where the commentary is not tied to any one individual. The two examples in Figure 2.4 engage differently with similar iterations of the factory genre. The one on the left is primarily concerned that American workers are being put out of work because American labor is too expensive, while an overseas workforce is willing to do the same work cheaper and in poorer conditions. This is an orientation to the factory genre that makes visual assumptions about racial and ethnic difference. Nothing in the iteration on the left suggests that

Figure 2.4 Two similar factory genre memes with differing interpretations.

the people in the image are not American, but visualized racial difference suffices for the

interpreter in this instance. The enthymeme of the iteration on the left also suggests that the

factory is not employing American workers with the mention of a $0.23 hourly wage.

Americans are well aware of how far below the minimum wage that hourly wage is, therefore,

Nike must be outsourcing factory work to other countries.

In the interpretation on the right there is an alternative perspective of a similar iteration

of the factory genre. This one is more concerned with the inequality involving sweatshop

workers. This interpretation, found on Twitter, notes that they support Kaepernick's activism

for social justice, but disapprove of his partnership with Nike because of their relationship to

sweatshop labor. This concern is less about American workers, and more about the hypocrisy

of Nike to support Kaepernick in light of their own exploitative practices. Additionally, this

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interpretation implicates the hypocrisy of Kaepernick to partner with a corporation like Nike.

The factory genre increases engagement because the memes within it do not take a hard stance on racial and CSR issues themselves. Instead, they use enthymeme to crystallize the connection between Nike, Kaepernick, and sweatshop labor, leaving it up to the audience to decide what aspects of that connection most reflect their way of thinking. This characteristic of the factory genre is inclusive of perspectives across the political spectrum, provoking a wide variance of interpretations and commentary on similar iterations of memes within the genre, such as the memes in Figure 2.5.

The difference in interpretation between the two memes in Figure 2.5 showcases the unique method of engaging viewers in this genre. They drive engagement by providing a connection that many across the political spectrum will be upset about: Nike utilizing overseas sweatshop labor. In the two examples below, the image used is the exact same. Though the right iteration is a more explicit meme of the *Dream Crazy* ad, the left image includes Nike footwear and still has made a connection between Nike and sweatshop labor clear. The two accompanying interpretations reflect vastly different opinions on Kaepernick and Nike as they are implicated in these iterations. The interpretation on the right iteration showcases a disdain for Kaepernick's involvement in the *Dream Crazy* ad by calling him an anti-capitalist that is still capitalizing off of others. The interpretation of the image on the left calls out the interpretation shared on the right by calling people who are focused on Kaepernick over Nike "shitty human being[s]." Both of these interpretations make the connection that the factory genre leads them to, but each interpretation has its own take on why the connection between Kaepernick, Nike, and sweatshop labor is problematic. For the interpretation on the right, it is

problematic because it further de-legitimizes Kaepernick. He becomes a hypocrite that either

blindly or blatantly partners with Nike, though they exploit racial minorities for cheap labor.

The left interpretation finds the relationship problematic because too many people are focused

on Kaepernick as the subject of their ire, rather than the multi-billion-dollar corporation that

should be the main villain. Once again, the ability to lead each viewer to the same realization of

the connection between Nike and sweatshop labor, while still allowing viewers across the

political spectrum to find something that fits within their way of thinking is the aspect of the

factory genre that drives engagement.

Driving Engagement: Incongruence and Judgement

Engagement in the factory genre is driven by an ability for viewers across the political

spectrum to make interpretations on the relationship between Kaepernick, Nike, and sweatshop

labor. How do the iterations of the factory genre encourage those interpretations? I argue that a

mode of judgement, actualized through strategies of incongruence, encourages interpretations

of and engagement with the factory genre across the political spectrum. There are multiple

avenues in which a viewer can judge the factory genre, and those differing avenues are

supported with multiple levels of incongruence in each iteration. In this section, I will explain

how judgement and strategies of incongruence work together to provide multiple angles for

viewers to interpret and engage with the factory genre.

As a mode, I argue that judgement structures how people engage with the factory genre.

Modes are "collective, emergent phenomena that express the circulation energies of

contemporary existence rather than re-presenting the interests of particular rhetors."[120] Modes,

Figure 2.5 Two iterations of memes within the factory genre featuring the same image, but differing interpretations.

therefore, lead to individual actualizations while consistently structuring how viewers come to

engage with a particular type of meme. Modal analysis requires a consideration of the virtual

attributes of a meme. The question of virtual attributes asks what exists about a meme prior to

any iteration of it that provides the canvas for its actualization in a certain context.[121] As a

mode, I argue that judgment provides the roadmap for how individuals should engage with the

factory genre in order to actualize their own interpretation of the meme. The mode explains

how the factory genre is engaged with prior to any actualization. Strategies of incongruence

explain how a mode of judgement leads to the actualizations that are observed throughout the

genre.

Judgement through strategies of incongruence provides two key functions that need to be defined. I define judgement in this context as the process of attribution regarding the three key subjects of the factory genre: Nike, Kaepernick, and sweatshop labor. Each iteration of the factory genre requires the viewer to make a judgement, or attribution, regarding the legitimacy of each. Nike is judged according to their legitimacy as a responsible social actor, Kaepernick is judged according to his partnership with Nike and the legitimacy of his activism, and sweatshop labor is judged according to its relationship to the other two, its influence on the American worker, and its exploitation of foreign workers. Those three subjects, and the judgements that can be made of each, provide a roadmap for *what* viewers could engage with, but they do not tell viewers *how* they should engage with them. All three subjects will be considered by the viewer, but it is up to the viewer to decide what aspect of the factory genre they find most concerning, and then how they want to actualize their interpretation.

Incongruence is how the factory genre structures attention to each of the three subjects. I define incongruence as opposing characteristics of the subjects of the factory genre. As Huntington notes when introducing the focus on rhetorical techniques, "the intertextual nature of these meme exemplars relies on appropriation and pastiche to juxtapose incongruous images."[122] The opposing characteristics that the factory genre presents regarding Nike, Kaepernick, and sweatshop labor provide instructions for how they should be judged going into

an actualization of memes within the factory genre. Judgement and incongruence work together

when engaging viewers because incongruence provides instructions that tell viewers what to

judge each subject against, while still not telling viewers how to judge them.

By analyzing individual interactions of the factory genre, the mode of judgement

through strategies of incongruence can be evaluated. In Figure 2.6, the mode of judgement is

engaged with through incongruence, and exemplifies how this mode allows for individual

decisions to be made about what the creator of this meme wants to engage with. In this case,

Kaepernick receives little attention, while the focus is on Nike and sweatshop labor. The

judgement of Nike and sweatshop labor leads to an actualization that is created through

incongruence. Incongruence in this iteration's references Nike's role as a responsible social

actor and as a corporation that utilizes sweatshop labor. The enthymeme that was discussed

before that clarifies the relationship between Nike and sweatshop labor is present in this

Figure 2.6 "Believe in something such as living wages for Nike sweatshop workers."

iteration. The Nike logo is seen on the shoes, and the phrase "believe in something" is prominently placed on the top, while the second half of the phrase directly implicates Nike by saying that Nike does not pay their workers living wages. In order to engage with and understand the factory genre, one has to be aware of the original ad because Nike's CSR messaging in the original ad is the incongruent action to which the factory genre references. What is most interesting about how the mode works in actualizations of the factory genre is that it has a continuous function. Iterations based on the iteration above could all engage in judgement through strategies of incongruence with an attention to aspects that were not attended to in this iteration. While an argument is made in the above iteration, it does not speak to other aspects of the factory genre that can still be engaged with.

The continuous nature of the mode is exemplified through a more recent iteration, found below, which enacts the mode of judgement to attend to different aspects than the previous iteration it is based on. While Figure 2.6 attends to Nike's treatment of sweatshop workers and completely ignores Kaepernick, the iteration in Figure 2.7 implicates Kaepernick and another popular Nike athlete, LeBron James. While still actualizing judgement of Nike regarding their treatment of sweatshop workers, this iteration adds a critique of popular athletes, who openly speak about racial injustice, for how much they get paid in relation to the plight of foreign sweatshop workers. This specific iteration is unique because it engages with the judgement mode through strategies of incongruence in the way described above, but also within the meme itself to clarify its argument. There is incongruence between the CSR messaging that Nike delivered in the *Dream Crazy* campaign, and the conclusions regarding their treatment of foreign workers that this iteration leads to. There is also incongruence between Kaepernick's,

and in this case James' as well, status as social justice activists and the reality that they partner with a company that pays them millions, while exploiting people in other countries for cheap labor. Within the meme itself, however, the images and text juxtapose the poor working conditions and wages of Nike's foreign sweatshop workers and the millions of dollars that Kaepernick and James make from Nike. The stated incongruence displays a negative connotation for the athletes because it puts their income directly into conflict with their actions against oppression and racial injustice. This iteration makes an argument that de-legitimizes Nike as a responsible social actor and athletes like Kaepernick and James as they partner with corporations that, as this iteration argues, are active oppressors.

Another argument that this iteration makes is in line with a post-racial perspective. Through the lens of the post-racial, society is no longer organized on account of race and everyone has an equal opportunity for upward mobility. This iteration speaks to that perspective by noting that two African-American athletes make millions of dollars, while still speaking about racial oppression. Interpretations of this iterations could lead to an argument that Kaepernick and James are post-racial icons out of a similar mold to that of President Barack Obama, who was commonly spoke of as an example for how the U.S. had overcome its racial past while moving towards a post-racial future. This iteration does implicate Nike for paying poor wages to foreign sweatshop workers, but it also argues for the hypocrisy of Kaepernick and James to speak about racial oppression as a major issue while they make millions. An argument such as this exemplifies perspectives that the U.S. has entered a post-racial society, rather than acknowledging that James and Kaepernick may have just overcome racial issues that still exist in the U.S.
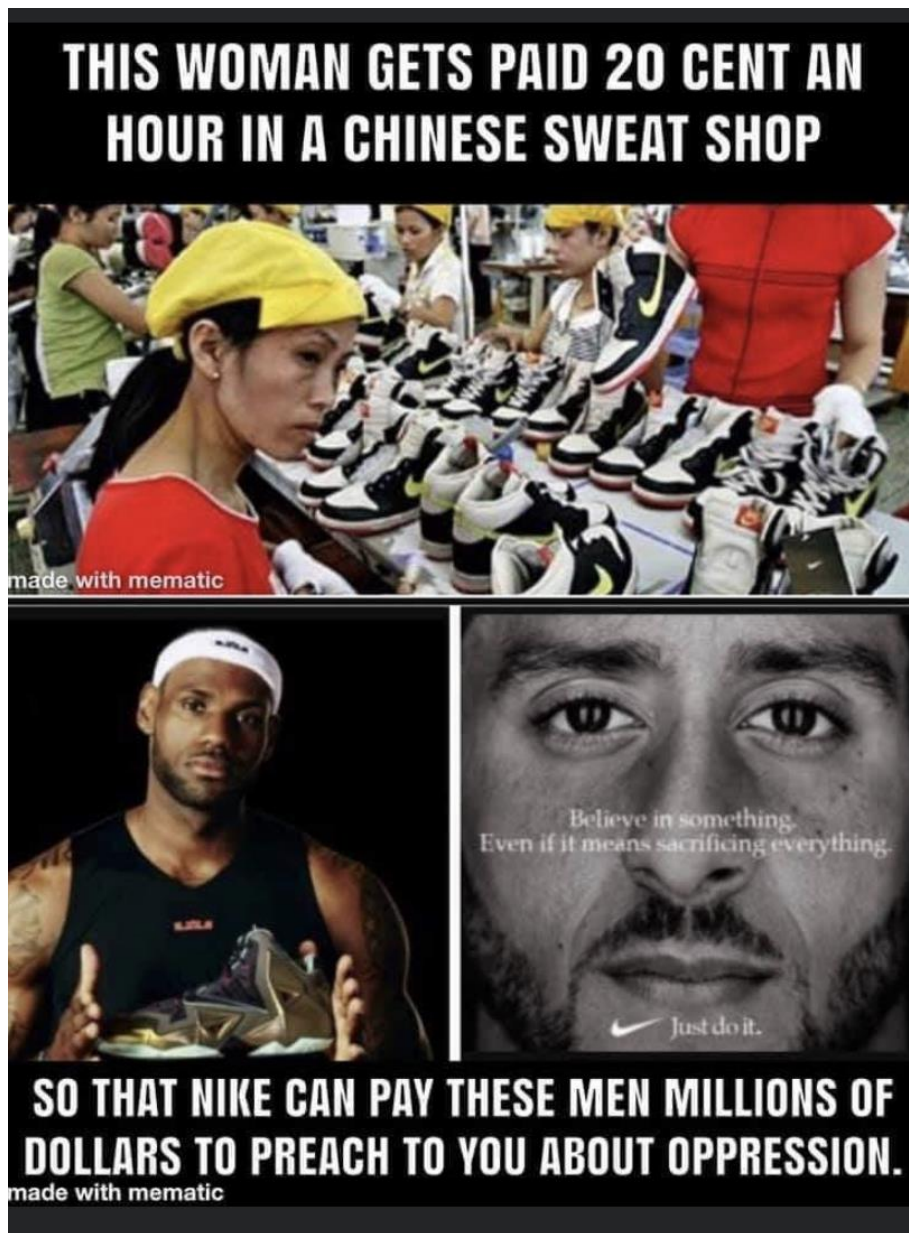
Figure 2.7 Factory genre meme about LeBron and Kaepernick.

The uniqueness of the factory genre is its ability to engage viewers and creators across the political spectrum. I have remained steadfast that it is difficult to trace the extent of influence memes such as these have on a citizenry. The anonymity of the internet makes it difficult to tie specific memes and comments to actual people. The actualizations within the factory genre, however, are reflective of real perspectives that have implications on political discourse. Politically, anti-Kaepernick and Nike rhetoric has sounded off from people who lean towards the

more conservative side of the political spectrum. The factory genre's place in understanding the rhetorical discourse with the *Dream Crazy* campaign, however, is complex due to the reality that sweatshops and overseas labor are often issues championed by partisans on both sides. Liberals tend to focus on the wages and conditions of factory workers, while conservatives tend to focus on American corporations moving jobs out of America to nations that have relaxed labor regulations. Though Kaepernick is implicated in each iteration of the Factory Theme, whether explicitly as a negative participant, or subtly as an activist choosing the wrong partner, it is actually Nike that is the root of the criticism. CSR is something Nike participates in regularly, and as it has been argued, Nike will continue to find itself in the middle of wanted publicity and counter-publicity as long as they seek to stay a celebrity company.[123]

The political ambivalence of the factory genre provides insight into how memes can place disparate perspectives alongside one another, rather than in conflict, against a common enemy. In the factory genre, the common enemy is Nike, Kaepernick, and, it could be argued, corporations that implement CSR marketing in general. What does this tell us about the rhetorical response these memes provide to Nike's identity as a responsible social actor? The political ambivalence displayed tells us that there is a general uneasiness with how CSR is decoded by people who create, circulate, and engage with these memes. That uneasiness is similar across the political spectrum - people who participate in the discourse of the factory genre view Nike and Kaepernick as hypocritical because the rhetoric of the original *Dream Crazy* campaign and the reality of Nike's labor practices and Kaepernick's multi-million-dollar contract do not seem to work in harmony. The factory genre leverages that unified uneasiness to engage people against Nike and Kaepernick, though there is not a unified agreement in how those feelings will be actualized. As we have seen, some actualize their uneasiness with Nike's

CSR marketing through the lens of human rights - Nike is exploiting people overseas with less individual agency and less structural regulation. Others actualize it through the lens of stolen American jobs. The factory genre, therefore, is an example of how memes, and digital visual rhetoric in general, can build coalitions where participants are unified against something through shared negative feelings, even though their feelings and attitudes contributing to those negative feelings are in fact divergent from each other.

Conclusion

The factory genre of *Dream Crazy* memes adds to scholarly work on the rhetoric of internet memes in a few ways. My analysis of the factory genre described its development and discussed how it opens itself up to interpretation and engagement from viewers across the political spectrum. This is the genius with how the factory genre drives engagement and continues to spread. A meme's foremost goal, regardless of the creator's original intent, is to circulate and get in front of as many eyes as possible.[20] Memes within the factory genre accomplish this by presenting a roadmap for *what* to engage with, while leaving the decision of *how* to engage with them up to individual viewers and producers of the meme. I argued that the factory genre produces this roadmap through a mode of judgment that is actualized through strategies of incongruence, and that engagement in this way encouraged discourse across the political spectrum. Engaging viewers through judgement requires the viewer to consider the relationships between and context of three main subjects that the meme implicates - Nike, Kaepernick, and sweatshop labor. There is incongruence involving each of the three subjects, which the mode requires the engaged viewer to make attributions about and decide what aspects they want to pay attention to in their own actualization. In doing this, they make an argument for

which aspect of their own actualization is most important, and they make an argument in support of their perspective on the aspect that they attend to.

In this chapter there were iterations that claimed to support Kaepernick's activism, while rejecting Nike as an acceptable partner for him. On the other end of the political spectrum, there were multiple conservative iterations and interpretations that denounced Kaepernick, criticized Nike for taking jobs away from American citizens, or both. Often, the political orientation of each iteration of the meme is unclear and ambiguous, allowing people across party lines and political perspectives to attend to the aspects they find most important. Even more unique are the iterations of the meme that make partisan arguments, but still are open to future iterations and interpretations making a completely different attribution on the subject of their own actualization. Implicated in the differences in actualizations and interpretations is cultural difference. The differences between cultures do not have to be a difference in *what* is attended to. Different cultures often do attend to similar actions. Rather, the difference often lies in *how* something is attended to - what aspects of the situation are emphasized and what aspects fall to the background.[124] The factory genre is an example of culture differences and political differences influencing the vastly different decisions in what and how to attend to in an individual iteration of the meme.

There are political and social ramifications of those divergent perspectives, and that is what makes the political ambivalence of this genre interesting. On the one hand, these memes are unified against Nike and Kaepernick, while refraining from directed conflict against each other. On the other hand, their differences present perspectives on race and human rights that do exist in conflict. The perspective that Nike and hypocritical because they exploit overseas labor that has less power and agency speaks to human rights issues regarding American countries taking

advantage of newly industrialized areas with less regulation. That perspective exists in conflict

with the attitude that the more important aspect of Nike moving labor overseas is not the

exploitation of those workers, but the abdication from an American workforce that is more

expensive, but still more worthy and skilled. The argument that Kaepernick and other Nike

athletes make millions while overseas workers make "slave wages" indicates a perspective that

there is racial and ethnic oppression of others, which Kaepernick and other athletes' ignore. In

contrast to that, others view Kaepernick and other athletes' hypocritical not because of the low

wages Nike pays in other countries, but because they make millions of dollars and still speak out

against oppression and social injustice at all, implying that their financial wealth is an indictment

against suggestions of white privilege and the oppression of racial minorities. The differing

attitudes regarding who is hypocritical and why showcases differing attitudes about racial

capitalism. While some in factory genre reject Nike because they participate and uphold racial

capitalism, others in the factory genre reject that racial capitalism or any form of racial

oppression is a real issue in American society, instead rejecting Kaepernick because he continues

to speak out against oppression while being quite wealthy and successful himself. The existence

of these disparate perspectives, unified against Nike and Kaepernick while refraining from

explicit conflict with one another, speaks to the unique environment memes and digital spaces

present.

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Chapter 3 - The Military Genre

Colin Kaepernick's social justice activism gained mainstream attention while he was the starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers in 2016. His choice to demonstrate his activism by kneeling during the U.S. national anthem, instead of the customary standing with hand over heart, disgruntled many Americans. As powerful as his action was for Black Americans in light of police brutality and injustice, it seemed to be just as offensive to many White Americans. The narrative spread, predominantly by White politically conservative Americans, was that Kaepernick's demonstration was offensive to military veterans and their families.

A review of the history of social justice activism shows that activism, the sports field, and the national anthem have been intertwined before and after Kaepernick's activism. John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists in a Black Power salute in 1968 while standing on the Olympic podium after receiving their medals. They both received harsh criticism from American media, death threats to themselves and their families, and faced suspension from the U.S. Olympic organization. Post-Kaepernick, kneeling continued to be present on NFL sidelines during the anthem. Other demonstrations have taken place as well, such as the Kansas City Chiefs and Houston Texans locking arms in a statement of unity prior to the kick-off of the opening game of the 2020 season. NBA players leveraged their bargaining power to feature social justice messages on the back of their jerseys and the phrase "Black Lives Matter" at center court of every game since the NBA entered the bubble. Upon the NBA's agreement to feature these messages, players were lambasted by politically conservative Americans for including politics in sport and demonstrating during the anthem before games. These examples of social justice activism, the sports field, and the anthem prior to Kaepernick and post-Kaepernick

exemplifies that the disdain from conservative Americans is not a new phenomenon nor has it ceased.

In relation to Kaepernick, arguments and frustration against his activism were expressed through a memetic rhetorical discourse in response to Nike's *Dream Crazy* ad campaign, which he was featured in. In a recent study, Jules Boykoff and Ben Carrington found that media coverage of Colin Kaepernick prior to 2018 was generally favorable.[125] I suggest that the *Dream Crazy* campaign reignited the controversy surrounding Kaepernick's activism. The Dream Crazy Meme-plex was used to engage in a rhetorical discourse which challenged Kaepernick, his activism, and Nike's support. In what I call the military genre of Dream Crazy Memes, military imagery was used to stand in for patriotic and nationalist ideals to speak against and de-legitimize Kaepernick's activism. Those memes also implicate Nike as a social actor that promotes both the wrong activist and the wrong cause in the eyes of conservative Americans.

In this chapter, I focus on rhetoric of the military genre in order to analyze its implications on racial identity, Nike's CSR, and perspectives on athlete activism. I argue that the military genre functions as a response to Kaepernick's identity as a social actor and Nike's choice to utilize him as a spokesperson who exemplifies sacrifice. The military genre does this by activating U.S. military imagery as a synecdoche for American patriotism and nationalism against Kaepernick's social justice activism. Additionally, the military genre engages in a framing contest with the original *Dream Crazy* campaign through their rejection of Kaepernick as a symbol of the ideals of belief and sacrifice. The mode of judgement is engaged by creators of the military genre through strategies of incongruence. In the military genre, creators and viewers engage with memes according to the virtual rules of engagement provided by the mode to evaluate the relations between Kaepernick, Nike, protest, patriotism, and the military. The

tools utilized, synecdoche and framing, in the military genre delegitimize Kaepernick and Nike as un-American and anti-military. Race, particularly post-racial perspectives and anti-Blackness, is implicated in this strategy through the nationalist ideals military imagery is made to stand in for. Furthermore, these memes implicate Nike's identity as a responsible social actor based on their choice to partner with Kaepernick. As Kaepernick is identified as anti-military and un-American, Nike is implicated as a supporter and propagator of his message.

The chapter will be broken up into three parts. First, I will discuss the context surrounding anthem protests, patriotism and nationalism, and racial perspectives and racial backlash. Second, I will analyze the military genre of Dream Crazy Memes by delineating how military imagery is made into a synecdoche for American patriotism and nationalism, and discuss how it is utilized against Kaepernick and Nike. In this section in particular, I will discuss in depth the relationship between Kaepernick and former NFL player and Army Ranger Pat Tillman, as they are placed in contrast throughout the military genre. Third, I will discuss how the mode of judgement engages with the military genre and what strategies are utilized in order to actualize differing arguments and perspectives as a result of the mode.

Context: Anthem Protests, Patriotism and Nationalism, and Race

Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest that began in 2016 was the continuation of athlete activism that mirrored social justice protests throughout the 2010s. NBA players like LeBron James posted photographs on social media of themselves with their hoods up in reference to the death of Trayvon Martin; NBA and NFL players wore warm-ups saying "I can't breathe" in reference to the death of Eric Garner in 2014; WNBA players wore warmups in reference to Black Lives Matter; and then St. Louis Rams players entered the stadium with their hands up, as in "hands up, don't shoot," in reference to the social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri.[126]

The timing of Kaepernick's activism, however, is unique in comparison to the others. Anthem protests have a history in the U.S. as an incredibly polarizing act that results in swift and harsh backlash in comparison to other forms of athlete activism.[127] Kaepernick's use of anthem protests prior to NFL games can be viewed through the importance of the professional sports field as a symbolic space for the overcoming of struggles of Black people against White supremacy and racial oppression.[128] The anthem prior to an NFL game is an important site for Black expression because of the symbolism represented in the anthem. National symbols in the U.S. are typically reflective of a history of White supremacy and domination.[129] In this way, White Americans tend to view those symbols as sacred, while racial minorities and subordinate groups tend to depart from the meaning of those symbols.[130]

Anthem protests are particularly controversial because of White America's connection to the flag and national anthem as symbols of American patriotism. Social identity theory could help to explain why there is such anger over anthem protests.[131] Social identity theory states that individuals form in-groups and out-groups based on shared identity and ideals, and the formation of those groups shapes the treatment of the out-group and reactions to activity that could threaten the in-group.[132] When there is a threat to the in-group, there are actions taken to combat the threat and re-establish the social order that existed prior.[133] Anthem protests, such as Kaepernick's, are threats to the flag and anthem as symbols that encapsulate traditional American ideologies, and therefore must be combatted in some fashion. This is done through misrepresentations of the out-group, often seen in response to Kaepernick's protest by shifting the meaning of his activism. Kaepernick's activism was mis-represented as unpatriotic simply because he critiqued America during a period where American patriotism and nationalism rejects challenges to American superiority.

Patriotism refers to love of and loyalty to one's country. American patriotism, however, often reflects nationalist ideals and an "us" versus "them" attitude.[134] Through the lens of what D. Soyini Madison calls "Crazy Patriotism," contemporary American patriotism reflects a sacred belief in America, in which one cannot critique or change the nation for the better because it is already superior.[135] Fundamentally nationalist, crazy patriotism is racialized, as it cements Whiteness as the normal state of being.[136] In this way, to be White is to be what one expects of an American, to be Black or Brown is to be *other,* and to criticize America, its institutions, or its people as racist is to be un-American.[137] Furthermore, White people adopt a position that they are not racist because they have not personally harmed or discriminated against Black people.[138] As a result of this position, White people remain comfortable with the view that they are not personally responsible for addressing racism when it occurs in society.[139] This viewpoint is defined as White innocence. The rhetoric of White innocence is a "normative discourse" in society, but also a constructed fantasy that allows White people to abdicate responsibility for racism.[140] White innocence is conceived as a result of the individualism emphasized by liberalism - the thought that racism is the result of individual decisions and attitudes rather than of society in general.[141] Patriotism as it is conceived of in this project features White innocence as a normative influence in which racism is the result of bad individuals, and not a social problem that the institutions and society as a whole are accountable for.

Kaepernick's protest led to and expanded upon discussions that exposed racism within American institutions, from police brutality and injustice to disparities in income levels between Black and White individuals.[142] Crazy patriotism further illustrates how post-racialism upholds White supremacy and domination.[143] Kaepernick was tied to stereotypes of Black masculinity in order to degrade his activism, while acts of White masculinity tied to patriotism were celebrated

and protected.[144] White innocence is a post-racial discourse that allows White Americans to ignore existing racial injustices while continuing to benefit from them.[145] A common phrase tied to White innocence is that examples of contemporary racism are the result of "a few bad apples," rather than the failure of society as a whole.[146] Through this discourse, White people are able to re-locate racism as an individual issue that only a few bad actors partake in, while American society and institutions are uninfluenced by race.

Social identity theory postulates that the in-group will de-legitimize the out-group by misrepresenting them. In this case, patriotism is utilized to de-legitimize social justice activism, which Kaepernick is a part of, by calling it anti-American and an example of irrational Black rage. Kaepernick's activism was often misrepresented as un-American by conservatives under the guise of patriotism. Memes in the military genre participated in a right-wing project to place Kaepernick in conflict with support of the military. The military is tied to patriotic symbols, like the flag and the anthem, and is utilized as a patriotic symbol in its own right. Additionally, White innocence discourse rejects Kaepernick's activism as an attack on a society that is not accountable for the acts of a few individual police officers. To Black Americans, however, the acts of the few officers represents an institutional and systemic issue. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement expressed outrage at the numerous killings of unarmed Black people by police. Though public protests have often been organized as peaceful acts of civil disobedience, BLM has been characterized by White society as acts of Black rage - "irrational, inappropriate, and dangerous."[147] Black rage is defined as "inappropriate because it explicitly challenges the pervasiveness, durability, and applicability of the American Dream."[148] Labeling a generally peaceful movement as irrational and dangerous serves its purpose to misrepresent and de-legitimize the movement, and therefore its causes as well. Social Identity Theory, therefore, can

be used to describe how White people utilize memes in the military genre to uphold normative White supremacy through the misrepresentation of Kaepernick's activism as an attack on the military, which by extension represents an American society that is not accountable for the racist actions of the few.

The NFL, and American sports in general, have engaged in patriotism throughout their history through pre-game renditions of the national anthem, the utilization of large American flags, and the touting of sports as a way to celebrate American superiority and ease the pain of American loss. Post-9/11 the NFL included dramatized commemorations and media coverage to re-establish American patriotism and identity.[149] They utilized the images and celebrity of athletes to "assert the values of being an American," such as reading the Declaration of Independence prior to the super bowl.[150] Kaepernick's protest during the national anthem became a threat to perceived norms of sport in the United States.[151] The U.S. Department of Defense also continues to pay the NFL millions of dollars to promote recruitment and support for the troops.[152] As a part of this program, the NFL pays homage to military veterans by inviting them to games to be honored and by including videos of service members overseas watching NFL games during their telecasts. Mia Fisher argues that the Military-NFL relationship "incorporates previously aberrant bodies, predominantly African American athletes, into U.S. exceptionalism."[153] I further argue that as a result of Black athlete incorporation into U.S. exceptionalism, Black NFL athletes face animosity and are viewed as anti-military and un-American when they reject the Military-NFL relationship by protesting during the national anthem. In addition, there are multiple military service members that have played in the NFL after their service or left the NFL to serve, including Kaepernick's own 49ers teammate Nick Boyer, the Pittsburg Steelers' Alejandro Villanueva, and former Arizona Cardinal Pat Tillman.

With the NFL's public relationship with the military so strong, Kaepernick's activism for social justice was transformed into an issue of anti-patriotism and anti-military by the in-group, in this case conservative Americans.

U.S. Military Imagery as a Synecdoche: The Military Genre of Dream Crazy Memes

I define the military genre of Dream Crazy Memes as megs which include military imagery and use of "Believe in something" phrasing. Throughout this chapter, I will present a variety of memes within the military genre that utilize different military imagery, yet I argue that they all have the same effect. That is, the military imagery utilized in this genre is utilized as a synecdoche for the racialized patriotism that mirrors fundamentalist nationalism and sacred attitudes towards the American identity, specifically what Madison calls "crazy patriotism."[154] Additionally, I suggest that the military genre makes Kaepernick into a synecdoche for anti-American activism and Black rage. A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part stands in for the whole, or the whole for a part.[155] Heidi Huntington argues that the synecdoche works along with the concept of the visual enthymeme, as they both draw the viewer in to the interpretation in order to complete the synecdoche to reach a conclusion.[156] The visual enthymeme is a concept that leads to a conclusion by providing key aspects of the argument, in the process creating a "self-convincing audience."[157] In arguing that military imagery is a synecdoche for crazy patriotism, I am arguing that military imagery is leveraged in the military genre to lead the audience to the conclusion that Kaepernick is un-American. Kaepernick is therefore rejected as a social actor that has sacrificed in the manner that the *Dream Crazy* campaign suggests he has. Huntington also argued that iconic images can become a metaphor and utilized for symbolic association.[158] Within the military genre, a particularly theme of memes features former NFL player and Army Ranger Pat Tillman. This theme is unique because

Figure 3.1 A side by side comparison of two different types of images used in memes within the military genre.

of the similarities shared between Kaepernick and Tillman. Their similarities highlight the

differences leveraged in the military genre to degrade Kaepernick as a legitimate social actor.

Tillman, as an iconic symbol of patriotism and sacrifice, becomes symbolically associated with

crazy patriotism through his inclusion in this genre, and is further utilized as a metaphor against

Kaepernick and Nike. In this section, I discuss the military imagery that is used in the military

genre, analyze how it is utilized in comparison to the original *Dream Crazy* campaign, with a

specific attention to Pat Tillman memes within the military genre, and then I will discuss the

implications of its use as a synecdoche on the overall argument of the military genre.

The military genre is represented through the inclusion of some type of U.S. military

imagery. The imagery utilized in this genre varies greatly, with some utilizing edited iconic

images, such as the D-Day landing in Normandy with Kaepernick kneeling as American soldier

enter battle, and others keeping fidelity with the original *Dream Crazy* campaign by featuring the

face of a military service member in uniform. The D-Day edited image on the left of Figure 3.1,

made popular by conservative television personality Tomi Lahren, was posted originally as a dig

at Kaepernick for being named GQ's citizen of the year. It places Kaepernick in the same context

as U.S. military service members, specifically in a situation where Kaepernick kneels and stays

back while the military charges ahead. Many other images feature a direct replacement of

Kaepernick's image with an image of a military member, such as the right image in Figure 1.

Figure 3.2 An example of a meme within the military genre featuring additional commentary

One specific post featuring an iteration such the one in Figure 3.2 was accompanied in the tweet

by commentary that said "This should be the picture used in the Nike campaign."[159] The

commentary added to the image sends the message that military service members are the people

that have actually sacrificed and deserve recognition. The argument that Nike picked the wrong

spokesperson, and that military service members offer a better representation of sacrifice,

persists throughout the military genre. A final type of military imagery used includes the

American flag and can be seen in Figure 3.3. The imagery within the military genre varies

Figure 3.3 An example of a meme within the military genre featuring an
overlay of the American flag.

significantly, and that can alter how directly the argument is stated, but the overall argument and

military imagery's use as a synecdoche remains consistent.

The meme in Figure 3.4 provides a provocative argument displaying Kaepernick as a

desecrator of the flag. This iteration of the military genre was created within a community called

"Uncle Sam's Misguided Children," which specifies an area where this meme has circulated. The group has notable characteristics as a self-proclaimed "community founded by United States Marine Veterans to bring awareness of the lame stream media," which identify the group as politically conservative, pro-military, and skeptical of the mainstream media. This meme leverages the D-Day image with Kaepernick edited into it in order to display him as a coward with no respect for the flag, and therefore, America. This meme is emblematic of Kaepernick's statement for why he knelt during the anthem to begin with, while still retaining its status as a synecdoche for crazy patriotism. Once Kaepernick gained recognition for his protest during the anthem, he explained himself in an interview by saying "I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand."[160] The edited image in this meme is emblematic of Kaepernick's own argument because he is literally edited into the image kneeling and hanging back, while others go to fight for a country that, according to his statement, is not representing people in the way it should. Creators of this meme within the military genre, however, turn that argument against him, arguing that it shows his un-patriotic attitude towards American society. The aggressive attack on Kaepernick as a desecrator of the flag specifies. Kaepernick as an anti-patriot and an enemy of the state. The meme is meant to lead to the conclusion that Kaepernick is un-American because he desecrates symbols important to American society, kneels during its anthem, and disrespects its military members that sacrifice more than he does. Additionally, the meme rejects Kaepernick as a noble actor, objectifying him as one who lets others fight battles for him while he remains behind. This follows conservative frustrations that protestors are ungrateful for the freedoms and opportunities that American

society has provided. Common conservative retorts that protestors should just leave the country

if they don't like America are embodied by Kaepernick staying behind and desecrating the

American flag while military service members head into a battle to defend his freedom.

Another example speaks more to the aspect of sacrifice in relation to the perceived

disrespect of the military. Figure 3.5 features a U.S. military member among the graves of

deceased military veterans with an American flag. Sacrifice was a sticking point for many that

claimed to be okay with Kaepernick's activism and his inclusion in the *Dream Crazy* campaign

until sacrifice was mentioned. Clearly stating the argument that Kaepernick is unworthy of being

associated with the term sacrifice, and that instead it is military service members who are the

exemplars of sacrifice, is Mike DiMauro: "Nike got it so wrong. Not by using Colin Kaepernick.
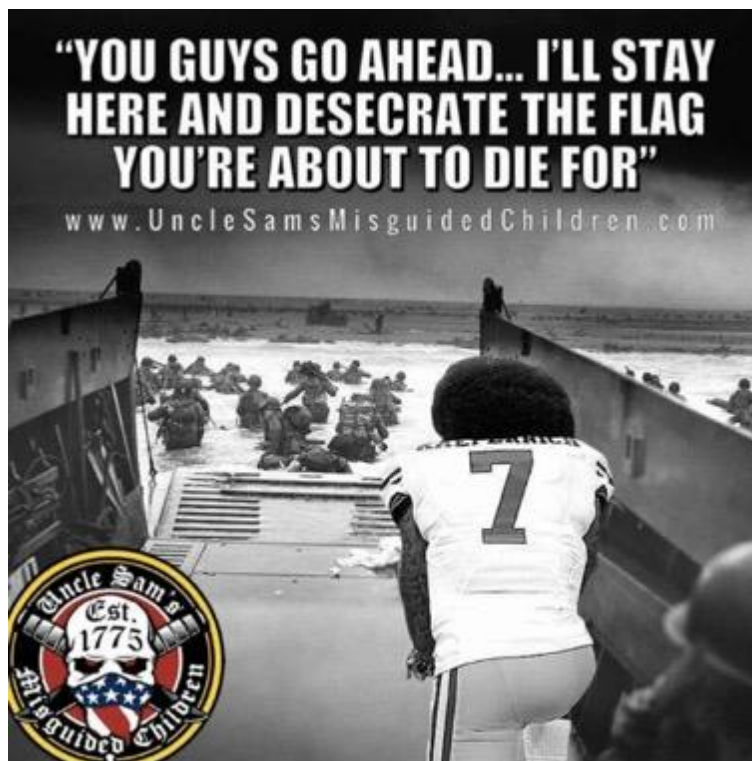
Figure 3.4 A version of a meme within the military genre featuring the D-Day image.

But by linking Kaepernick with the line 'believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything.' There is the line delineating the line Nike crossed. Kaepernick, no longer in the NFL, did not sacrifice everything. He's still alive. Others before him, who died in the name of the flag and our freedom, sacrificed everything."[161] This statement reflects the attitude that social justice activism is a less worthy cause in comparison to the sacrifices made by military service members in defense of the United States.

America has a long history of White domination, and so it is unsurprising that nationalist symbols - the flag, anthem, and military - would resonate with White Americans as the highest powers that be, while racial minorities and subordinate groups are either indifferent of or actively challenging them.[162] For White Americans, this country has always worked for them, and so it is

Figure 3.5 A version of a meme within the military genre.

confusing, uncomfortable, and for many flat out unbelievable that there could be criticisms or that not everyone has had a positive experience. The in-group behavior in this situation is to

reject, misrepresent, and neutralize the threat posed by the out-group.[163] In this case the threat is

misrepresented and rejected by placing Kaepernick's activism, seemingly now given legitimacy

by Nike through the *Dream Crazy* campaign, in contrast with the military, a patriotic symbol that

stands in for American domination.

Symbolic Association Within the Military Genre: Pat Tillman and Colin Kaepernick

Pat Tillman has become a conservative symbol of patriotism and sacrifice over the last

decade and a half since his death by friendly fire in Afghanistan. A brief history of Tillman

begins with his decision to leave a budding NFL career with the Arizona Cardinals to join the

Army Rangers. His decision was made as a result of his confusion and unhappiness with the

comfort of his life post-9/11.[164] Joining the military during the war-on-terror was likely not an

easy decision, especially since he left behind a $3.6 million contract in the NFL.[165] Immediately

Figure 3.6 A version of the military genre featuring Pat
Tillman.

upon his enlistment he was made into a symbol of sacrifice and patriotism, especially by the Bush administration. He was uninterested in being made into a symbol for political gain, and refrained from interviews during his enlistment.[166]Still, "Tillman became a living, breathing symbol of honor, sacrifice, and the symbiotic relationship between the military and the NFL."[167] Tillman, however, is not the exemplar of blind patriotism he is often made out to be. He was displeased with the war in Iraq - at one point calling it "fucking illegal" - and showed a real interest in working with anti-war activists and scholars after his commitments were completed.[168] Tillman died from friendly fire in April of 2004, but the Bush administration and the military sensationalized his story without acknowledging the true nature of his death, despite knowing the truth within hours of his passing.[169] The story was sensationalized in order to inspire and galvanize the American public, using Tillman's death as a symbol of the terrors of the war in Afghanistan, and as an example of the sacrifice and patriotism of the military members fighting in the war. The U.S. military and the Bush administration, facing record death tolls and international attention on the torture at Abu Ghraib, presented a narrative of Tillman's death that

would distract from those aspects of the war and highlight patriotism and heroism through a soldier that had given up safety and wealth to fight for his country.

Over a decade later, after Kaepernick's kneeling protests had spread to a large number of players throughout multiple sports leagues, President Donald Trump would activate the symbol of Tillman once again. Through a retweet that exclaimed that people should stand for the anthem in respect of military heroes like Tillman, Trump provided a powerful backing of the arguments that identified Tillman as a true patriot that had sacrificed everything. Trump's retweet also continued his speech against players who knelt during the anthem, rejecting their activism as a legitimate cause. Juxtaposing Tillman with Kaepernick made a great deal of sense, as Ryan Devereaux put succinctly: "It's easy to understand why Tillman would make an attractive figure to Trump and his base. His Army photo reflects an image of a certain type of all-American hero: chiseled jaw, broad shoulders, White skin."[170] The memes utilized Tillman to represent the righteous White identity that is the American patriot against the un-American unspoken

Figure 3.7 A version of the military genre featuring Pat Tillman and Kaepernick

Blackness of Kaepernick and his protest that critiqued a country too good and too sacred to be criticized.[171]

The use of Tillman against Kaeprnick identifies them both as a synecdoche; a stand in. Tillman stands in for the whole of the military, Whiteness, and crazy patriotism, while Kaepernick stands in for Black rage, ungratefulness, and insubordination. Kaepernick, as a celebrity athlete and activist, is a representative for the social justice movement. Celebrities serve a purpose by binding the individual to the collective; becoming a cultural sign or symbol that stands in.[172] Black athletes, in particular, have used their celebrity status to engage the public in discourse on racial justice.[173] Kaepernick's use of NFL spaces to engage the public in discourse about racial justice may bind individuals that relate to the collective, but it also contributes to a threat felt by Whiteness. Fearful of any criticism of America, crazy patriots find a way to neutralize the threat, both by providing a figure juxtaposed to Kaepernick, and also by de-legitimizing and misrepresenting Kaepernick and the cause he is a symbol for itself. Black protests, including sports protests, are considered acts of "Black Rage," and Kaepernick as a symbol is implicated as a synecdoche for Black rage.[174] Kaepernick, with unofficial ties to Black Lives Matter (BLM), cannot be considered an official representative of that organization or movement. Yet, through symbolic association, he becomes a synecdoche for the perceived Black rage exemplified by BLM, which to those of crazy patriotism is indicative of ungratefulness for the opportunities provided by American democracy.

The similarities between the juxtaposed Kaepernick and Tillman make the overall

argument of Tillman memes even more salient when considering the departure in each of their

paths. Both are described as intellectual thinkers by those close to them, rather than as jocks or

brutes. The most salient similarity is their background as NFL players. Utilizing imagery of

Tillman in a football uniform and in a military uniform, as shown in figure 3.8, indicates a focus

on the similarities Kaepernick and Tillman share as former NFL players. Focusing on this

similarity is beneficial in de-legitimizing Kaepernick as a spokesperson for sacrifice because it

discounts leaving the NFL as a true sacrifice. Tillman was a casualty of war, and his death is the

sacrifice that is exemplary of American patriotism, rather than his departure from the NFL.

Juxtaposed to Tillman, Kaepernick to this day claims to still be open to an NFL return. Their

departure from the NFL vastly differs, therefore, with Tillman willingly joining the Army by

forgoing a $3.6 million contract and Kaepernick finding himself as an NFL free agent, eventually

Figure 3.8 A version of the military genre featuring Pat Tillman.

suing the NFL and its team owners for colluding to keep him out of the NFL as a result of his activism.

The military genre of Dream Crazy Memes latches on to the term sacrifice as the reason for why Kaepernick's use as the spokesperson is unacceptable and disrespectful of military service members. Tillman is utilized to provide an alternative of someone who is fit to symbolize to sacrifice. Statements of disapproval towards Nike for choosing Kaepernick as their spokesperson for the campaign, such as the one shown in the Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10, are a

Figure 3.9 A tweet of a meme within the military genre.

staple of the circulation of memes within the military genre. Kaepernick, as the military genre argues, has not sacrificed anything - he is no longer good enough to be in the NFL and so he is not - while Tillman, and therefore the military at large, has sacrificed and is willing to sacrifice their lives for the country that Kaepernick openly criticizes. Commenting that they "fixed" Nike's ad implicates Nike as a hypocritical social actor that supports someone criticizing the U.S., rather than supporting someone who believes in and sacrifices for the U.S. The "#realhero" ignores racial justice as a major issue in the U.S., disavowing Kaepernick and his activism as a legitimate cause working to fix something in the U.S. that is a real problem. This aspect highlights patriotic and nationalist ideals that American democracy is superior and has overcome racial issues, making Kaepernick's activism another example of Black rage and anti-American action, rather than as a legitimate critique of racist institutions that could be improved or transformed.

Judgements, Incongruence, and Media Framing in Internet Memes

The purpose of discussing the mode in this chapter is to explicate what structures the relations of engagement with the military genre. Modes are focused on the virtual attributes of memes across contexts.[175] The question of virtual attributes asks what characteristics exists prior to a meme's actualization in a certain context. The military genre engages with the mode of judgement by requiring viewers to understand the context surrounding Kaepernick, the military, and perhaps Tillman. Additionally, there is an expectation that the viewer understands what they are symbols for within the context of the military genre. Kaepernick is a symbol of Black rage and anti-American protest, while the military is a symbol for patriotism and sacrifice, and Tillman is a symbol for the whole military. The military genre interfaces with the judgement mode to affect attitudes through an orientation to Kaepernick and the military. How one
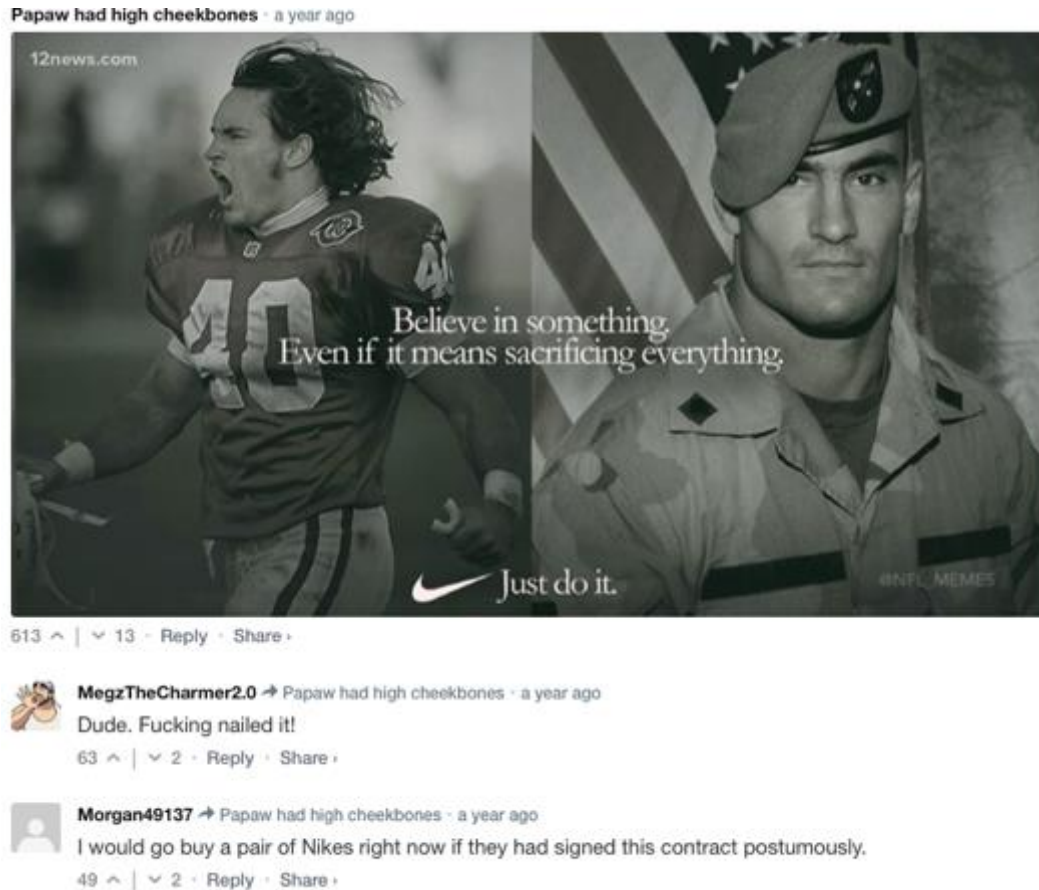
Figure 3.10 A post of a meme within the military genre on an image board "theChive." featuring comments.

perceives the judgement mode will depend on attitudes towards Kaepernick, the military, Nike, and other associated social issues, such as racism and patriotism. The embodied experiences that are actualized through the mode is linked to where and among whom these memes circulate.

These memes primarily exist within conservative circles on social media sites and are shared as a method of combatting sympathy and support for Kaepernick and Black protest. On Twitter the military genre circulates primarily as a rhetorical discourse in response to Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign, arguing that Kaepernick's imagery does not live up to the message of the ad in comparison to military veterans. As the tweet in Figure 3.9 notes, Nike would have featured military imagery if true sacrifice was meant to be a legitimate aspect of the *Dream*

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Crazy message. Additionally, these memes circulate on image board sites like Reddit, theChive, and Pinterest. The example in Figure 3.10, circulating on theChive, shows people engaging in this meme in support of the argument that this is a more appropriate ad that Nike should have used if they cared about belief and sacrifice. This example also reflects the conservative response to the *Dream Crazy* campaign of boycotting Nike products through the comment that says they would buy Nikes if they had featured Tillman in the ad instead of Kaepernick. On this message board though, the meme was engaged with through differing judgements. Further comments on the thread, shown in Figure 3.11, indicated that while the majority agreed that Tillman better fit the message of the ad, he was not as clear a symbol against Kaepernick as the meme would lead one to believe. The discourse around memes on sites such as these indicates the strategies utilized to actualize iterations of the military genre and interpretations of the memes as well. Strategies of incongruence were utilized to place subjects into conflict with one another, requiring the viewer to make attributions to them in order to interpret the argument. Specifically, as Tillman is used, the incongruence between him and Kaepernick revolved around the difference of their post-NFL careers, with Tillman joining the Army Rangers and eventually becoming a casualty of war, and Kaepernick sticking to his social justice Activism while suing the NFL for keeping him out of the league. The incongruence is meant to lead viewers to the conclusion that Kaepernick has not sacrificed as much, de-legitimizing his activism and Nike's partnership with him on the *Dream Crazy* campaign. This process of de-legitimization serves crazy patriotism through the touting of American superiority, while silencing dissent and critiques of American democracy.

The other strategy used to actualize judgements within the military genre is that of framing. Media framing is a well-established concept in which journalists "bracket off" what

characteristics of a person or event they want to focus on over others.[176] This is a process that

makes certain ideas seem more reasonable, while others seem more unlikely.[177] The process of

framing is typically discussed as a mass media strategy, but in this case I argue that framing is a

GatorCorey → Morgan49137 · a year ago
I would buy shares in the company.
4 ∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

aerial_assault_tc → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
Hot damn, I just reflexively stood up and saluted my computer screen.
17 ∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

Cygnuspheres → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
VALID!!! 👏👏👏👏 Standing O.
16 ∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

Fortress1133🍎 → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
That is fucking awesome!
11 ∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

Buddy Boriatli → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
This guy's family specifically asked that his name be kept OUT of this debate. But hey, it's about the respect, right?
25 ∧ | ∨ 7 · Reply · Share ›

> **BlackManta** → Buddy Boriatli · a year ago
> Yeah, I guess Tillman became really disillusioned with the military, that why some people think his death wasn't a accident.
> 4 ∧ | ∨ 4 · Reply · Share ›

Lorkon → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
Or this guy. He deserves the money more than Kraeperdick. http://thechive.com/2017/07...
22 ∧ | ∨ 6 · Reply · Share ›

> **Papaw had high cheekbones** → Lorkon · a year ago
> no shit, sacraficed more than "whats his name"
> 10 ∧ | ∨ 3 · Reply · Share ›

> **kassius786** → Lorkon · a year ago
> he sure does. the military should pay him more
> 1 ∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

> > **abilities101** → kassius786 · a year ago
> > ummm he's dead
> > 2 ∧ | ∨ 1 · Reply · Share ›

EasyOffender → Papaw had high cheekbones · a year ago
Yes! So your own countrymen can shoot you in the back!!
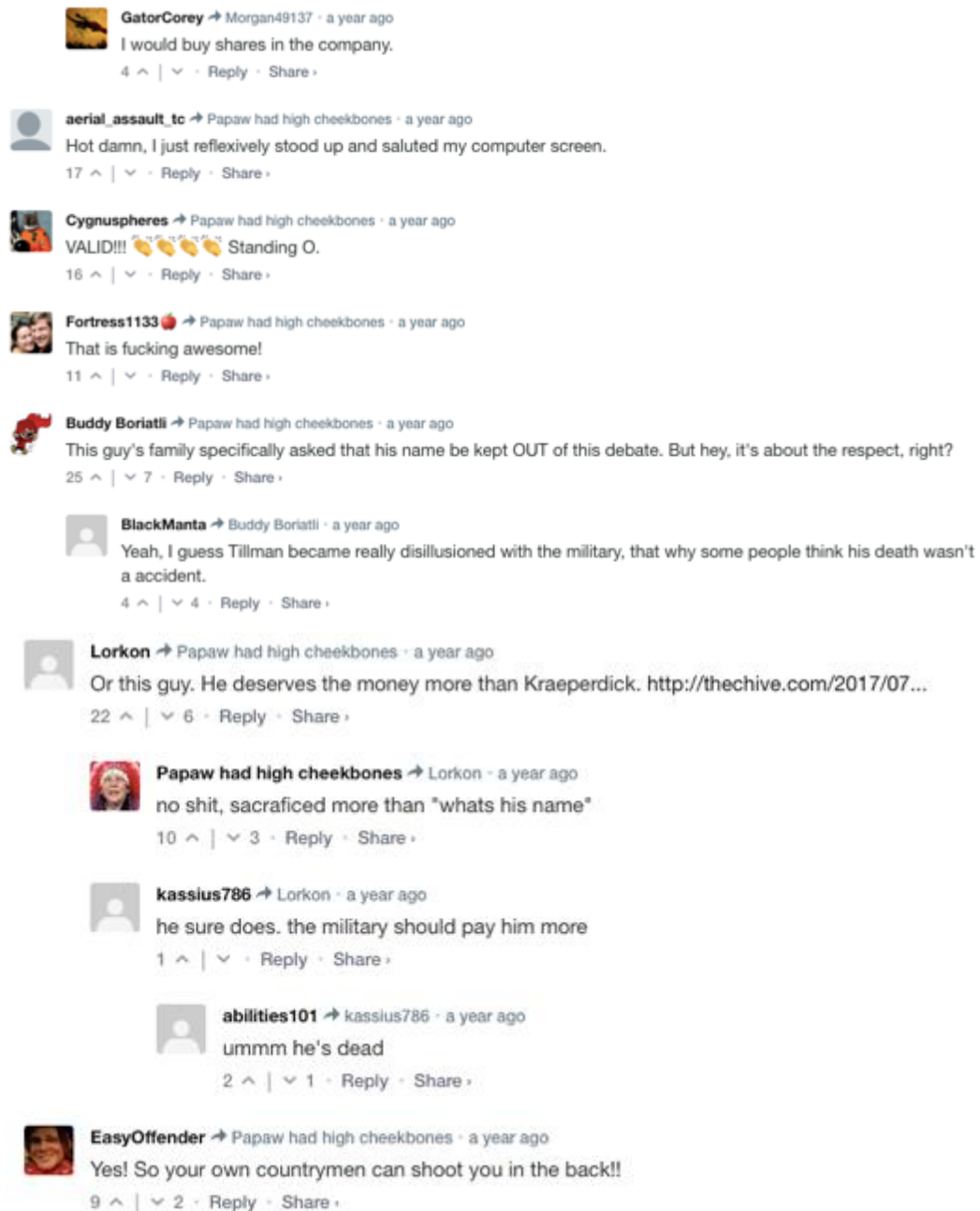9 ∧ | ∨ 2 · Reply · Share ›

Figure 3.11 More comments in response to the meme posted on the message board
in figure 17.

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strategy used by memes in the military genre to actualize the mode in order to make the military genre's arguments seem like the most reasonable. Framing strategies in the military genre accentuate military service by noting that the sacrifice of service members is about life and death. By highlighting the sacrifice of military service members in comparison to Kaepernick, the military genre focuses on Kaepernick's sacrifice, which is the loss of his career. By comparing the loss of a career to the loss of life, the military genre leads to the more reasonable conclusion that military service members sacrifice more than Kaepernick does.

The military genre ignores, however, the loss of life that is the driving force behind Kaepernick's activism for social justice. The loss of Black lives due to police brutality and injustice drives Kaepernick's activism, and is the sacrifice of his NFL career. This is a frame contest between Dream Crazy Memes and the original campaign. As frames clash in their arguments, they engage in what is called frame contests.[178] In this case, the frame contest involves Nike's framing of Kaepernick as a legitimate social justice activist who has sacrificed. This campaign provided further legitimacy, corporate backing, and renewed attention to issues he champions, including social justice for Black Americans, the end of police brutality, and the oppression of Black Americans in general. In order to combat the threat of Kaepernick's activism and its corporate support, the military genre shifts the framing of this issue towards their argument that Kaepernick is un-American and a symbol of Black rage, exemplified through his disrespect of the anthem, the flag, and the military. This frame ignores the plight of Black Americans in relation to police brutality and injustice, and shifts the focus to military service and Kaepernick's lack of sacrifice in comparison. The military genre engages in this frame contest in order to misrepresent Kaepernick, his activism, and Black protest in general as Black rage in

order to neutralize the threat and reinforce dominant American ideals of patriotism, sacrifice, and superiority.

Conclusion

The military genre of Dream Crazy Memes created a rhetorical discourse that identified and implicated symbols representative of American patriotism, sacrifice, racial justice, and protest. I argued that the military genre activated symbols of patriotism, including the military, the flag, and the anthem, against Kaepernick, who was made into a symbol for Black rage and indifference. By analyzing the claims of these memes, how they were engaged with, and their circulation, I have delineated how this genre leverages post-racialism, anti-Blackness, and the superiority of American democracy through military symbolism to de-legitimize Kaepernick as a social actor. Military imagery was used in the rhetorical discourse of the military genre as a synecdoche for patriotism and Whiteness in order to undermine protests for social justice, which Kaepernick is a synecdoche for. Kaepernick is a symbol of his own activism for racial justice, Black protests, and athlete protests. Through the processes of framing, he became a symbol of the anti-American, anti-military, Black rage that threatens American democracy. Kaepernick's activism was misrepresented by the military genre as criticism of and disrespect towards the U.S. military, and therefore patriotism and Whiteness. Though Kaepernick was who the memes focused on in their rhetorical response, Nike was also implicated by this genre. Nike provided corporate legitimacy to Kaepernick, and both needed to be misrepresented in order to neutralize the threat posed to White domination in American democracy. As such, Kaepernick was implicated as an anti-military symbol and as a fraud who had not sacrificed in comparison to the military service members he is compared to. Nike was also implicated as an anti-military

corporation that ignored the sacrifices made by military service members, while touting a figure such as Kaepernick as an exemplar of sacrifice.

Both of those arguments were made more salient through the use of Pat Tillman in the military genre. Tillman's symbolic association, and use as a synecdoche in his own right, with the military and patriotic ideals was utilized to delegitimize Kaepernick on the grounds that leaving the NFL is not a sacrifice. Both Tillman and Kaepernick left the NFL. The true sacrifice, which Tillman exemplifies, is the sacrifice for one's country, not the sacrifice of one's career. Kaepernick, therefore, is not an example of true sacrifice and actively disrespects the military by criticizing American democracy. Additionally, Tillman's use in the military genre implicates Nike because of Tillman's past as an NFL player. Nike consistently utilizes sports stars in their marketing campaigns to connect social issues to the sports environment, which is what they did with Kaepenrick in the *Dream Crazy* campaign. Many of the memes within the military genre make arguments that delegitimize Kaepernick, but fall short of delegitimizing Nike's partnership with him because the military is not explicitly tied back to sport in the way Nike requires. Pat Tillman's past mirrors Kaepernick in that they both sacrificed NFL careers in pursuit of something that they deemed had greater importance. Therefore, the use of Tillman implicated Nike because Tillman is a figure that represents the true sacrifice indicated through American patriotism while also representing the connection to professional sports that Nike requires for many of their campaigns.

Synecdoche, visual enthymemes, and frame contests are strong methods to make visual arguments salient and engaging. This analysis demonstrated how the military genre utilized those strategies through a memetic rhetorical response to Kaepernick, the larger activism he symbolizes, and Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign. Memes are a type of digital rhetoric that takes

little time and energy to enjoy. This quality of memes makes their symbolic associations and argumentation styles that much more important to understanding how they are effective in disseminating a message. The cultivation of a synecdoche within a meme means a lot for how memes make arguments. There are definite limitations for the meme format in terms of articulating persuasive arguments, particularly their lack of textual elaboration and the lack of time people spend thinking about them. Turning an image into a synecdoche for larger values and institutions can do a lot for overcoming or mitigating those limitations. As this analysis has described, the military genre linked specific images to larger values and institutions in order to gesture towards larger arguments about patriotism, race, and protest. The process of symbolic association has larger implications for how we understand subtle arguments made in internet memes moving forward. Memes are effective in disseminating messages because they are viewed as funny images that take little effort to engage with and enjoy. Memes become even more effective in that role when they are successful in symbolically associating their chosen images and text with the larger values and institutions involved in the argument they are trying to make.

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Chapter 4 - Conclusion

I found the Dream Crazy Meme-plex to be an important study because nearly every meme analyzed in this project speaks to tensions and anxieties in American society, specifically those of race, patriotism, protest, and corporate involvement in activism. Corporate social responsibility(CSR) was my initial jumping off point. I was interested in how memes were used to express attitudes about hegemonic branding encoded in CSR marketing. I evaluated corporate marketing materials that attach themselves to social issues as a paradox, and there are others that see this paradox as well.[179] Corporations utilize CSR practices to identify themselves as responsible social actors in one context, while actively behaving irresponsibly in other contexts in order to maximize their capital accumulation. Dream Crazy Memes were created by people in order to satirize the paradox of CSR practices by large international corporations, such as Nike. As I looked more closely at Dream Crazy Memes, I started to notice that these memes did more than just critique and satirize CSR. They spoke to a broad array of social issues, ranging from race, to war, and to attitudes towards political candidates.

I made the decision to focus on two specific genres of Dream Crazy Memes, which, in conjunction to critiquing CSR, satirized Nike's partnership with Kaepernick in creation of the *Dream Crazy* campaign. I found the treatment of Kaepernick in each genre important to study because his status as a mixed-race former NFL player turned social justice activist had provoked attitudes about a plethora of contemporary social issues prior to his inclusion in the campaign. Therefore, I assumed memes that focused on both Kaepernick and Nike would also exhibit attitudes about an array of contemporary social issues that I am interested in. This project specifically focused on how attitudes about race, patriotism, protest, and CSR were expressed in the factory genre and the military genre. I analyzed the attitudes within those two genres by

considering what it was that oriented people to each genre. The mode cultivates an orientation to the how people see relations in the world, and therefore encourages engagement with the meme in a certain way.[180] I was curious about how each genre encouraged engagement and what relations people were oriented to think about.

Attitudes and relations are eventually actualized through particular strategies that make their arguments salient and encourage future engagement. Through my analysis, similar strategies and arguments were actualized within each genre. Still, each iteration within each genre did something different, expressed a different attitude, and focused on some things while other memes within the genre focused on others. In Chapter 2, I analyzed the factory genre of Dream Crazy Memes. The factory genre displayed political ambivalence, which encouraged creation, circulation, and engagement by people with attitudes about Nike, Kaepernick, CSR, and labor practices that extended across the political spectrum. This finding is important to the rhetorical study of memes because it shows how the meme can elicit a variety of conflicting attitudes and activate them against common enemies - Nike and Kaepernick - rather than against each other.

While I discussed visual enthymemes in Chapter 2, this discussion was even more prevalent in Chapter 3. Visual enthymeme analysis in Chapter 3 provided insight into how synecdoche, incongruence, and framing were utilized to clarify arguments within the meme, and extend them to larger social issues that the memes associated themselves with. Chapter 3 expanded on how attitudes about Pat Tillman actualized in the military genre not only implicated Kaepernick, but also implicated attitudes regarding Whiteness, Black rage, protest, and patriotism in the United States. Pat Tillman was utilized by creators in the military genre as a synecdoche for Whiteness and patriotism, while Kaepernick, placed in conflict with Tillman,

was articulated as a synecdoche for Black rage, anthem protests, and anti-American actions. This finding is important because it aligns with previous connections between political memes and synecdoche, and builds on them through the examples of Kaepernick and Tillman.[181] Often, Kaepernick's image was not even in military genre memes. Yet, the synecdoche of Tillman and the incongruence created between the two figures created Kaepernick as a synecdoche for Black rage, protest, and anti-militarism. The previous two chapters expanded on a modal analysis, a visual enthymeme analysis, and individual conclusions about each genre. But what did an analysis of those two genres help us understand about Dream Crazy Memes in general? What were some questions we were unable to answer? And what am I contributing to scholarship on the rhetoric of internet memes in this paper? In this chapter, I will review what my analysis contributes to the scholarly conversation about the rhetoric of memes and CSR as a whole.

Limitations and Scope

The scope of this project narrowed itself upon two distinct genres of Dream Crazy Memes. Those memes were focused on specifically in order to analyze how memes were used to actualize attitudes and beliefs about CSR, race, patriotism, and protest. My analysis informs how scholars might attend to memes outside of the scope of this project, however. Specifically, my analysis informs how we might approach analyses of liberal memes and funny Dream Crazy Memes.

Coming into this analysis, I was excited about the prospect of analyzing differences in how conservatives use memes and how liberals use memes. This did not take place to the extent that I anticipated, because of the aforementioned political ambivalence exhibited in the factory genre. Understanding how liberals utilize memes is important for scholarly work on memes because of the effectiveness with which the Trump campaign, conservatives, and alt-right groups

Figure 4.1 Tweet of a meme from the factory genre.

used memes during the 2016 U.S. presidential election in comparison to the failure of the Clinton campaign to do the same.[182] Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner make the argument that liberals struggle to use memes as effectively as their conservative counterparts.[183] Why do liberals seem to struggle to use memes as effectively? I suggest, as a contribution to how we might ground such an analysis, that liberals have a moral dilemma with the meme. In a particular liberal meme, shown in Figure 4.1, within the factory genre the person that shared it felt the need to elaborate on why they shared the meme by noting that they still support Kaepernick, but find Nike to be a hypocritical partner for him to work with. The subtlety that I pick up on with this elaboration is a moral dilemma that liberals find with memes. Maybe because the meme was shared on Twitter, the user felt compelled to add their commentary to it. Maybe, thought, they were concerned that sharing it might identify them as against Kaepernick, and therefore against racial justice. If liberals struggle with political memes because of fear that it will be taken out of context,

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misrepresented, or otherwise identify them as something they are not, then scholars can begin to understand differences in how conservatives and liberals approach memes.

Another way to look at a potential liberal moral dilemma with memes is through the example of #ArrestTheCopsThatKilledBreonnaTaylorMemes. This was a recent type of meme that circulated on twitter among liberals that utilized aesthetically pleasing visuals to spread the justice for Breonna Taylor message. In Figure 4.2, a person on Twitter shares two of these memes and expresses the moral dilemma I suggest exists in relation to liberal use of memes. The circulation and production of these memes is degraded as tacky, insensitive, and self-serving. I am concerned, based on my analysis and how liberals have treated memes online, that there is a

Figure 4.2 Tweet indicating disdain for Breonna Taylor Memes

fear-based moral dilemma, which discourages liberals from engaging with and sharing political memes, especially in contexts where they can not elaborate on their reason for posting the meme.

Political memes were the focus of this project, but there are a wide variety of what may would call "funny" Dream Crazy Memes. Though outside the scope of this project, my analysis may inform how scholars attend to funny Dream Crazy Memes, and satirical memes in general.

Funny Dream Crazy Memes are funny because they attach themselves to funny characters, satirical events, or both. Figure 4.3 presents three funny Dream Crazy Memes. One features Dwight Schrute from *The Office,* another features Bobby Boucher from the movie *The Waterboy,* and the third features former professional boxer Mike Tyson. On the surface these memes say nothing about Nike, Kaepernick, or social issues. They satirize two already funny fictional characters, Dwight Schrute and Bobby Boucher, and mock a boxing icon's lisp. What these memes have in common, however, is the hilarity of Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign and message itself. Whether mocking the phase "Believe in something," as the Bouche and Tyson memes do, or mocking the "Just Do It" slogan, all three of these memes make the suggestion that Nike's marketing campaigns and slogans are ridiculous when applied in other contexts. These memes reflect the general attitude that CSR is satirical, if lacking in real political and social importance. This is a stark difference from memes in the military genre or factory genre, which view Nike's implementation of CSR practices and partnership with Kaepernick as egregiously hypocritical. Still, my analysis about synecdoche and the visual enthymeme provides the grounding for how we might understand the rhetoric of funny Dream Crazy Memes.

The memes seen in Figure 4.3 utilize the associations of the three pop-culture icons to make a statement about the ridiculousness of the *Dream Crazy* campaign, and by extension CSR as a whole. Dwight, Boucher, and Tyson all have qualities that the public views as ridiculous or

Figure 4.3 Three humorous Dream Crazy Memes.

lacking in intelligence. Dwight generally exhibits extremely bizarre behavior on *The Office*, Boucher is portrayed as a football player with a severe lack of intelligence in the *Waterboy,* and Tyson's lisp has been continuously mocked since he entered the public eye as a professional boxer. Gestures towards ridiculousness and lack of intelligence by funny Dream Crazy Memes are common. There are memes that utilize Anthony Weiner's infamous selfie, Alex Jones' and infowars, and Kevin in another reference to *The Office.* What all of these individuals share in common is an association with ridiculous or bizarre behavior, or a general lack of intelligence. My analysis regarding synecdoche and visual enthymeme could be utilized as a basis to understanding how the use of these individuals and these images in funny Dream Crazy Memes expresses attitudes related to CSR, Nike, and Kaepernick, and what those attitudes are.

There is much work left to be done on Dream Crazy Memes outside of the scope of this project., Additonally, there are new memes, political and funny, created every day that continue to exhibit their attractiveness and rhetorical potential. That rhetorical potential should continue to be explored, particularly as a project to understand how memes are used to express attitudes about a number of tensions and anxieties in contemporary society online.

Political Ambivalence and Partisanship

My preconception heading into analyses of the factory genre and the military genre was that I would be exposed to an archive of primarily liberal memes and primarily conservative memes, respectively. I assumed that I would contribute insight into differences between liberal use of memes and conservative use of memes to express attitudes regarding a common subject - CSR and Kaepernick. My analysis did not end up following that line of reasoning. This project displayed the political ambivalence of the factory genre and the partisanship of the military genre. What is missing from this analysis is a genre that exhibited liberal ideas and attitudes to

the extent that the military genre exhibited conservatism. As an interpretive rhetorical analysis, I will not claim that the military genre was uniformly conservative, and I cannot make conclusions regarding the overall prevalence of one partisan attitude over another within the factory genre, or the Dream Crazy meme-scape as a whole. New memes are always created, and the density of the internet makes it nearly impossible to gather a comprehensive archive of any one genre of meme. Nevertheless, I will suggest some general conclusions and avenues of interest as a result of my observations and analysis in this project.

The political ambivalence of the factory genre astounded me. I fully expected heading into an analysis of the genre that I would observe liberal attitudes regarding Nike's hypocrisy in exploiting overseas workers of unregulated black and brown populations while running a marketing campaign featuring a social justice activist. Those attitudes do exist within the factory genre. Other attitudes are perpetuated throughout the factory genre however. My archive of memes within the factory genre included arguments that Nike was stealing jobs from Americans by operating factories overseas, that Kaepernick was hypocritical and a fake because he partnered with a corporation profiting off of the exploitation of overseas black and brown populations, and that Kaepernick is an oppressor of those populations while also an example of why racial oppression is not a major issue in American society because of the millions of dollars he, as a mixed-race individual, has been paid. All of those arguments reflect disparate attitudes from across the liberal-conservative spectrum. This highlights the collaborative nature of memes online, in which a meme can undergo numerous transformations by the time a viewer comes across a particular iteration.

While astounded by political ambivalence in the factory genre, the military genre's conservative attitudes and beliefs felt expected. Of the memes analyzed in Chapter 3,

conservative beliefs remained consistent - the primary difference between memes within the military genre was what imagery to use and how explicit a critique of Kaepernick should be. I suggest that the disparities in how clearly these memes implicated Kaepernick is reflect a difference in goals and identity. For example, Pat Tillman memes tend to avoid changing the text from "Believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything." This meme is commonly utilized to reject Kaepernick, and build up Tillman as a more worthy spokesperson for the *Dream Crazy* campaign. While there are racial undertones in Tillman memes, they are kept more subtle in order to protect the sanctity of the Tillman image. In stark contrast to Tillman memes, the meme created by Uncle Sam's Misguided Children explicitly implicates Kaepernick as a desecrator of the flag and as a coward. Uncle Sam's Misguided Children is a group known for their support of the military, right-wing perspectives, and distrust of media. They have little use in hiding their attitudes behind subtleties. The attitudes exhibited within the military genre do seem to share an overall argument and orientation to the relationship between the military and Kaepernick. The differences in how creators engaged with the military genre lie less within partisan differences, and more within the subtleties of how to express their attitudes.

I suggest that the political ambivalence observed in the factory genre and the partisanship of the military genre supports my reasoning behind the need for combining analyses of modes and rhetorical strategies when looking at memes. Memes that I might have seen would almost definitely have been different than the one a friend of mine may have seen, or the one someone completely unknown to me may have seen. Why do some memes end up in front of my face, and others in front of someone else's? Analyses such as the one I have carried out are interested in the attitudes expressed and their rhetorical power, but also how those attitudes change as they move. In this project, I did this by evaluating the attitudes expressed in individual memes and

how those attitudes were expanded upon through additional commentary on the social medias where they were shared. For example, my analysis of memes in the factory genre often showed similar memes that led to differing interpretations when shared. Additionally, the Tillman meme shared on theChive exhibited how one meme displaying a particular attitude elicited numerous responses in support and in conflict, depending on the attitude respondents had towards Tillman, Kaepernick, Nike and other contextual factors. Scholars should weight equally the virtual characteristics that orient people to a meme, where it has traveled, who it engages the most, and how it compares to others like it.

Scholars can partially attend to all of these aspects through modal analysis, attention to circulation, or analyses of rhetorical strategies used, but I would argue none provide a full understanding of any one of those aspects on their own. Modal analysis clarifies the characteristics that exist prior to actualization that orient creators and viewers in a particular way. By attending to circulation in analyzing each of these genres, scholars can understand where memes exist, where they go, and who engages with them. The limitations of modal and circulation analyses, however, prevent scholars from making conclusions about how they change in their content and argument from one location to the next, what those changes mean for future engagement, and why particular memes are engaged with in one place more than another. Analyzing the rhetorical strategies of individual memes provides answers to these questions. Current methodologies exist in some conflict due to some of their assumptions regarding what digital rhetoric is and how we should study it given unique characteristics of speed, temporality, and engagement. I suggest that these perspectives can work together to provide a more complete understanding of the rhetoric of memes.

The Rhetoric of CSR

The more I considered the role of CSR and analyzed how Dream Crazy Memes expressed attitudes of resent and disapproval, the more I started to question why corporations continue to implement these practices into their marketing and public behavior. These campaigns often seem so ridiculous that it takes little effort to see CSR rhetoric as simply misleading or hypocritical. CSR is actively rejected as simply a marketing tool in memes and on social media. As I read literature on CSR, however, what became clear was that for many corporations implementing these practices publicly presented a no-lose scenario. In this project, I have characterized Nike as a celebrity corporation, in line with how Graham Knight and Josh Greenberg described Nike's place within American society.[184] A part of that celebrity status is an increased susceptibility to negative publicity.[185] Nike, as a corporation, has encountered continuous negative publicity regarding its treatment of its labor force for decades and has faced waves of criticism for their public stances on social issues, ranging from gender equality to racial injustice. Nike's rhetoric of CSR, I suggest, in the *Dream Crazy* campaign and other similar ones is not to cover up acts of irresponsibility or to cultivate a believable identity as a responsible social actor. Rather, their use of CSR is to build on their celebrity status through the continuous production of a diverse portfolio of partnerships with celebrity athletes with a variety of different causes and fan bases.

The relative lack of scholarly work on the rhetoric of CSR is indicative of its possible acceptance as a mundane practice with little social import. Less critical work on CSR has identified it as a practice that corporations generally benefit from despite whether the public receives it as sincere action.[186] While it may seem a mundane practice, which many corporations partake in, I suggest that CSR has implications for how scholars understand the relationship between the contemporary social movement and racial capitalism. For example, in the wake of

rioting and looting in Minneapolis and St. Paul after the killing of George Floyd in 2020, Target

released a statement saying that they would be paying their employees in full while a destroyed

location was rebuilt and would partner with local non-profits to provide first aid and supplies to

areas hit by the demonstrations.[187] How I have described the relationship between encoded

messages of CSR and where and how dissent might take place can be applied to this an future

examples. From what I have found in this project regarding attitudes towards CSR, dissenters

from Targets CSR might point out low wages to begin with, workplace diversity, or why Target

had not partnered with non-profits in low income areas surrounding the store prior to the

destruction of their own store. Dissent from CSR is not usually expressed as an explicit denial of

the good that may come from CSR practices. Rather people that reject CSR revisit and

perpetuate already known grievances against the corporation, whether or not those prior issues

have already been addressed.

Racial capitalism and CSR are two concepts that exist in conflict with one another, but on

the same plane. CSR, in Nike's case, can be perceived to distract from their participation in

racial capitalism, in which they exploit Black and Brown people abroad for cheap labor and

partner with celebrity Black and Brown people in the United States, both serving their interests

of capital accumulation. The next step in this, for Nike, is its involvement in social movements.

The *Dream Crazy* campaign was a partnership with Kaepernick, and therefore his social justice

activism. Nike's involvement in social justice activism for racial minority populations in the

United States and their exploitative labor practices levied against ethnic populations abroad are

indicative of how the rhetoric of CSR upholds a system in which both the plight and success of

racial minorities benefits the corporate, primarily White, elite. Racial capitalism is a concept

through which scholars can better analyze the rhetoric of CSR and the rhetoric of public response

to CSR. While people may not use the term "racial capitalism," my analysis suggests that people making and sharing these memes are aware of and uncomfortable with the tension and anxiety they feel about CSR practices by celebrity corporations, such as Nike, and the behavior of those corporations that seems to be socially irresponsible.

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