

Spring 5-9-2017

An Analysis of Kermit the Frog Memes

Megan Elizabeth Palmer

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Palmer, Megan Elizabeth, "An Analysis of Kermit the Frog Memes" (2017). *Student Research Submissions*. 145.
https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/145

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by Eagle Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Submissions by an authorized administrator of Eagle Scholar. For more information, please contact archives@umw.edu.

AN ANALYSIS OF KERMIT THE FROG MEMES

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Megan Elizabeth Palmer

May 2017

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Megan E. Palmer
(digital signature)

05/09/17

Megan Palmer

COMM 460

May 5, 2017

An Analysis of Kermit the Frog Memes

Kermit the Frog is one of the most famous of Jim Henson's puppet creations called the Muppets (Garlen and Graham 245). He was introduced as a character in 1955, and has appeared in many shows and movies over the years, including some of my own childhood favorites like Sesame Street and The Muppet Show ("Kermit the Frog (Character)"). As early as 2014, the Muppet was beginning to appear in various memes, usually tagged with the hashtag *#kermitmemes* ("But That's None of My Business"). One of the most well-known of these memes has come to be called the But That's None of My Business meme, and premiered in June of 2014 ("But That's None of My Business"). By the end of June, the *@thatsnoneofmybusiness* Instagram feed was started, gaining over 130,000 followers within the first four days of its existence ("But That's None of My Business"). The But That's None of My Business Kermit memes are different from the Evil Kermit memes in that the image used in them is not constant. In many of the But That's None of My Business memes, like the two pictured below, Kermit is drinking either milk or tea. All of these memes are captioned with words meant to make fun of a range of questionable behaviors in everyday situations, and the postscript "but that's none of my business" is added at the end to add to the joke ("But That's None of My Business").

dudes be like "these hoes ain't loyal" but have a wifey, 4 side chicks and 2 "friends"... but that's none of my business



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/but-that-s-none-of-my-business>



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/but-that-s-none-of-my-business>

Additionally, just last year, this lovable green amphibian went viral on the Internet in the form of a meme that was dubbed Evil Kermit (“Evil Kermit”). The image showcased in the original meme, in addition to those appearing in the resulting series of memes, is a screenshot of

Kermit the Frog and his nemesis Constantine (“Evil Kermit”). The characters Kermit and Constantine look exactly alike, except that Constantine is dressed in a hooded cloak. The first Evil Kermit meme spotlighting this screenshot, featured below, was posted on Twitter on



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/evil-kermit>

November 6th, 2016 (“Evil Kermit”). Within ten days of this post, the tweet had gained over thirty thousand likes, and over twenty thousand retweets (“Evil Kermit”). Since November, many new iterations of the Evil Kermit meme have spread across the Internet. Each of them show Kermit speaking to the cloaked Constantine, with captions that involve bad advice in answer to very relatable, everyday situations. In this essay, my goal is to examine the reasons for the lasting

success of the That's None of My Business Kermit and the Evil Kermit memes since their beginning, and to use them to argue for the importance of studying even apparently harmless, apolitical, solely humorous memes.

To better understand what makes a meme successful, one must also understand the definition of the word “meme.” The term first appeared in a book called *The Selfish Gene*, which was written in 1976 by the Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins (Börzsei 2). In his book, Dawkins proposes that though evolution may seem to occur “in the interests of the individual, or for the good of the species,” it is actually spurred on solely as the result of competition between different genes (Blackmore 4). This idea, which has become known as the “selfish gene theory,” does not mean that the genes themselves are selfish, however, nor that those who carry them are selfish. Susan Blackmore explains the use of the word selfish in this theory in her book *The Meme Machine*. Blackmore states that calling the genes selfish refers to the fact that the only thing that they take interest in “is their own replication,” and that all they want “is to be passed on to the next generation” (5). Dawkins proposes at the end of his book that there is a new unit of imitation in existence, a unit of “cultural transmission” that behaves similarly to genes that he calls a “meme” (Blackmore 6). Several examples of these units of cultural transmission that Blackmore highlights in her book are “fashions in dress or diet, and... ceremonies, customs and technologies” (6).

Since the term was initially coined, the definition of “meme” has been the subject of much debate in the world of academia. Indeed, Limor Shifman states that not only has the

definition been a subject of debate, but also that the legitimacy of studying memes has been the “subject of constant academic debate, derision, and even outright dismissal” in her 2013 article *Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Troublemaker*. Given that the word was initially created by a biologist, it is unsurprising that the spread of memetics, or the study of memes, took a significant amount of time to spread to other disciplines. Before the twenty-first century, the study of memes was largely overlooked specifically by those in the field of communications (Shifman 363). Recent decades have brought with them advancing technology such as computers, cell phones, and the Internet. Until the years in which these technologies became household items, memes were considered “unsuitable” for extensive study by communications researchers (Shifman 363). As Shifman states, although memes came into being before the digital era, the invention of the Internet and its related technologies allowed for their replication and diffusion to become both far-reaching and highly visible, thus making them a more difficult realm of study to dismiss by researchers in communications fields (Shifman 362).

In this digital era, the Internet has enabled new kinds of memes to circulate in the consciousness of the public, ones different from the clothing or diet fashions that Blackmore offers as examples of analogue memes (6). These new digital memes, encompass “content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites” that are passed from one person to other people through the Internet (Shifman 362). Internet memes are still based on Dawkins’ original conception of a meme as a unit of culture that is passed on from individual to individual, but instead of passing through air or on paper they are transmitted between individuals online.

According to Linda Börzsei in her article *Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet*

Memes, the Internet meme is a type of “visual entertainment” that can be seen in a variety of formats ranging from still images to animated GIFs, and even videos (5). Internet memes in general, and especially still image memes, tend to make use of well-known images in popular culture. Indeed, in spite of the debates in the world of communications academia regarding the definition of “meme,” the term has been “accepted as an imperfect descriptor for the pieces of shared and imitated popular culture” that are an increasingly important part of what people experience in the digital sphere (Miltner 2). Kermit the Frog-based memes are prime examples of these pieces of shared and imitated popular culture.

Although memes are not living creatures, they nevertheless go through a similar Darwinian process of natural selection, just like genes (Atran 351). Francis Heylighen, a research professor at a University in Brussels, put forth a theory for meme selection criteria in a paper he published in 1998 called *What Makes a Meme Successful?: Selection Criteria for Cultural Evolution*. There are nine criteria that he proposes for meme selection, including utility, novelty, coherence, simplicity, expressivity, formality, authority, conformity, and proselytism (Heylighen 4). If a meme contains information that is useful or valuable to the viewer, then it has utility (Chielens and Heylighen 2). Novelty occurs if the meme that is created is somewhat different than the other memes that have circulated previously (Chielens and Heylighen 2). When a meme is easier for viewers to understand, meaning that it contains information that is in line with “knowledge that the[y] already have,” then it is coherent (Chielens and Heylighen 2). Simplicity and expressivity exist if a meme is not overly complex and easily expressible in the language and medium the creator chooses to use (Chielens and Heylighen 2). Formality refers to

the degree of ease with which people of diverse backgrounds can understand what the meme is meant to communicate (Chielens and Heylighten 2). Whether a meme has authority depends on whether or not the source of the meme is acknowledged as trustworthy (Chielens and Heylighten 2). If the overwhelming majority of viewers agree on the meaning and purpose of a meme, then it is considered to have conformity (Chielens and Heylighten 2). Finally, if a meme “explicitly incites its host [or hosts] to spread it further,” then it fulfills the last criteria, proselytism (Chielens and Heylighten 2). Memes that meet most of these criteria tend to have a better sticking power than those that do not. Typically, the fulfillment of each of these nine categories, as hypothesized by Heylighten, leads to a meme that has a higher chance of lasting impact and wider reach (Chielens and Heylighten 2).

Kermit the Frog memes in general have been so popular since they began that Kermit has been declared the “unofficial frog king of memes” (Weekman). How many of Heylighten’s meme selection criteria does an average Kermit meme actually meet? The following is an analysis of one But That’s None of My Business Kermit meme and two Evil Kermit memes based on the meme selection criteria theory proposed by Heylighten. The But That’s None of My Business Kermit meme comes from an article on What The Vogue Magazine.com that was published the same month that the original “none of my business” Kermit meme was created, on June 26, 2016. The first Evil Kermit meme comes from a list of the “50 Best” Evil Kermit memes on a website called Inverse (Bergado). The list was published only a short time after the original Evil Kermit meme was posted on Twitter, on November 23, 2016. The final Kermit

memes that will be analyzed comes from a list of the “35 Funniest” that the well-known fashion magazine Cosmopolitan posted on their website on November 21, 2016 (Mei).

Fig. 1



<http://whatthevogue.com/top-20-funniest-kermit-noneofmybusiness-memes/>

Though on the surface, this meme does not appear to contain any useful or valuable information, a deeper examination of the central joke reveals otherwise. This meme seems like just another classic But That’s None of My Business meme involving Kermit the Frog sipping tea in a somewhat haughty manner as a reaction to the observation that a man just drugged a person’s drink. The joke is that Kermit, or the person that is speaking through him, does not like the person and as a result does not care that the man put a drug in their drink. The joke implies that this kind of reaction to an obviously dangerous situation is considered not only acceptable

but also even funny. Therefore, the useful information that this meme imparts is that the current attitudes toward situations involving date rape are problematic and in need of change. This meme also meets the next essential criteria for selection, novelty, in that it differs from other already known memes. The sarcastic joke is formatted in a similar way to other But That's None of My Business Kermit memes, the main image is familiar, and the meme is easy to understand overall, so it meets the criteria for coherence and simplicity too. Despite a reference to "roofies," a drug that tends to be associated with date rape, the meme is formal enough that not too much background knowledge is required in order for it to be understood. Assuming that most of the viewers, if not all of them, have heard of this particular drug, the joke does not require research. Since the meme does not use complicated language, and there viewers do not have a wide range of interpretations from which to choose, it is successful in meeting the criteria for expressivity and conformity as well. Furthermore, because the central character delivering the joke in the meme is a well-known Muppet that many people have grown up with, audiences have little reason to distrust the source of the joke. This means that the meme meets the selection criteria for authority too. Finally, due to the fact that the But That's None of My Business meme involves what is meant to be humor, it encourages its viewers to pass it on to others in order to spread the laughs.

The meme depicted below in Figure 2 features the characteristic bad advice of Evil Kermit memes, because it depicts what appears to be a rather unhealthy relationship through the inner dialogue of one partner. Therefore, the meme seems to fail to meet the first category for meme selection criteria: utility. However, like the meme in Figure 1, the useful information that

Fig. 2 Me: She's losing weight, toning up
and gaining her confidence back.

Me to me: Get her pregnant.



<https://www.inverse.com/article/24280-best-evil-kermit-dark-kermit-memes>

it imparts is hidden a little deeper than the surface. If one reads beyond the initial laughter that is inspired by the joke made in this meme, there is the implication of how problematic it is that people continually tend to make light of troubling relationship dynamics. Next, the meme is sufficiently different from the other Evil Kermit memes that have both preceded and followed it, so it checks out in terms of novelty. The use of the same image of Kermit and his nemesis Constantine, as well as the use of a similar format for the accompanying dialogue of self-prescribed bad advice makes the meme easily coherent in relation to knowledge that the viewer already possesses. The meme is also quite simple, as it does not include a lot of detail that needs to be sifted through in order for it to be understood, and it is formal enough that no additional explanation is needed to go alongside it. Even those who have never seen an Evil Kermit meme before, or do not know where the central image comes from, can glean the meaning of the meme based on the way the caption works in concert with the image. Additionally, the fact that we can

understand what the meme says as well as the fact that there are little, if any, variations for how the meme can be interpreted means that it meets the criteria for both expressivity and conformity. It is clear that the speaker is male, that he has a significant other that seems to be turning her life around for the better, and that the relationship has the potential to be problematic because his “dark side” is telling him to do something questionable in order to halt this upward momentum. Given that the subject of the meme, or the source of the dialogue, is a well-known Muppet that most people recognize as having grown up with, the meme has authority as well. Viewers that have grown up knowing and trusting Kermit the Frog on shows such as Sesame Street have no reason to mistrust him now as the source of the joke that they see taking form in the meme. Finally, due to its use of humor, as well as its use of a similar format to other well-liked renditions of the Evil Kermit meme, this meme fits the criteria for proselytism. The dark humor that it contains and the fact that it follows the same format as the memes that have come before it lend themselves to encouraging each person that sees it to spread the meme on to others.

Fig. 3 *multiple choice answers on an exam*
 me: yep. this answer is right
 me to me: you've gotten C too many times in a row. pick B.



<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/a8346580/funniest-evil-kermit-memes/>

The next meme, pictured above in Figure 3, is very similar. It involves the same image as the meme in Figure 1, and utilizes the same dialogue format in order to convey its central message. This version of Evil Kermit meme involves a speaker who is clearly a student taking a multiple choice exam, and the main joke revolves around the speaker second-guessing their answers. Upon analysis, the meme does not seem to pass the first test for meme selection criteria, as it simply features the characteristic funny bad advice of Evil Kermit memes as opposed to outright useful information about cultural or social issues. It does meet the second criteria, however, because it introduces to the audience a new joke, and as a result is significantly different from the other Evil Kermit memes that have preceded it. The meme also checks out in terms of coherence, since it is consistent with the knowledge that viewers have of previous Evil Kermit memes and stereotypical emotions that occur while taking a multiple choice exam. The format of the meme and the joke that it contains is simple, there are not too many layers to interpret before a viewer can get to the meaning of the meme, so it is successful in meeting the criteria for simplicity. Any person who has survived the school system has had exposure to multiple choice exams, so this meme is formal enough that it conveys its joke effectively and does not require an accompanying explanation in order to be understood by a wide range of audiences. Like the meme in Figure 2, this meme is easily understood and has little variation in terms of possible interpretations, so it meets the criteria for both expressivity and conformity. Also like the aforementioned meme, this one involves a central character that is generally recognized and trusted as a member of the Muppets, so viewers have no reason to mistrust him as the source of the joke presented to them in this version of an Evil Kermit meme. The meme depicted in Figure 3 is similar to the previous one as well in that it, too, passes the requirement

for the last category: proselytism. Since it contains the familiar format and the humor of past Evil Kermit memes, it encourages viewers to pass it along to others.

At first glance all three of these Kermit the Frog memes appear harmless enough, and upon analysis through the lens of the meme selection criteria theory provided by Heylighten, they have the essential qualities needed to be successful. Each of them picture a well-known and well-loved children's character, Kermit the Frog, and they each provoke laughter. Compared to other memes that have attracted academic study, the But That's None of My Business and Evil Kermit memes seem to be somewhat less worthy as a result of these traits. This is most likely the reason that previously, not much attention has been given to them in the form of serious academic study.

The vast majority of study that centers on meme analysis focuses on the analysis of memes that make their importance in relation to cultural or social issues known immediately. For example, Heidi Huntington argues that the importance of studying memes in the discipline of communications lies in the fact that though most memes involve humor, many also have "implications for identity building, public discourse, and commentary through collaborative action" (79). In her essay, *Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric*, she studies the Pepper Spray Cop meme that became extremely popular during the Occupy Wall Street Movement that occurred in 2011. The series of memes that became known as Pepper Spray Cop use as their central image a photograph of a policeman using pepper spray on protestors on the University of California

Davis campus. Variations of the meme, such as the ones depicted below usually either crop the policeman out of the picture and place him into other situations, or add words overtop the original image.

Fig. 4



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>

Fig. 5



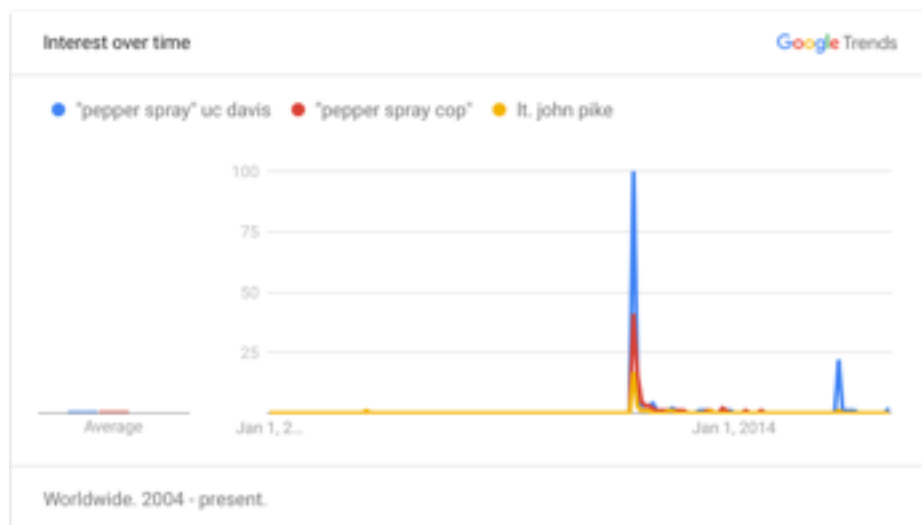
<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>

Unlike the Kermit the Frog memes, the Pepper Spray Cop memes make use of a central image that has a clear connection to a protest movement. Because of this, it is not difficult for

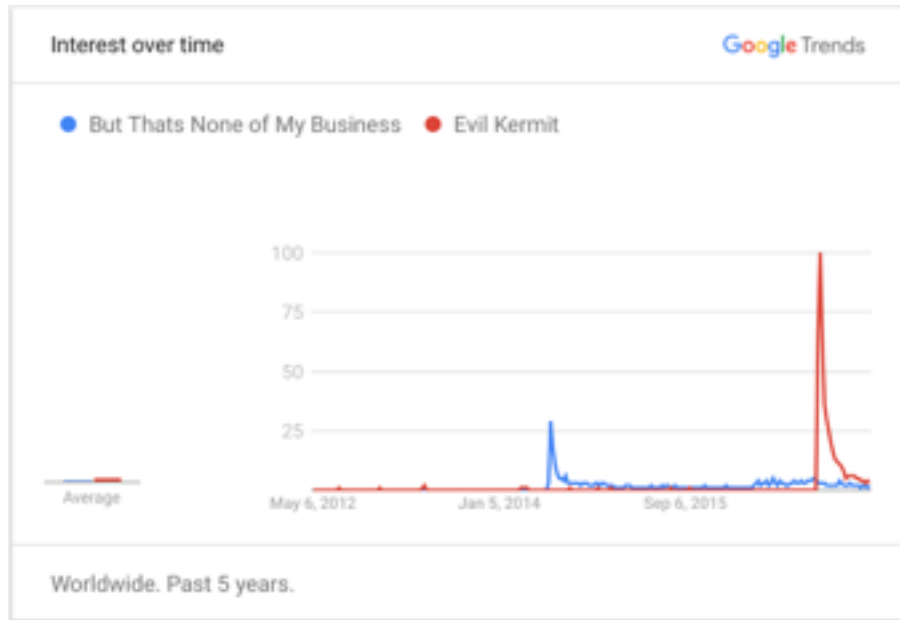
Huntington to make a convincing argument in favor of making them the focus of her study.

Kermit the Frog sipping tea or speaking to his nemesis as a meme, on the other hand, does not have a well-known connection to some kind of political, cultural, or social movement. These memes provide their “input on specific... issues” in society exclusively through the text that accompanies the image, making their importance in memetics easier to overlook (Collins 96).

Through the often sarcastic jokes that are superimposed over images of Kermit the Frog, these memes act as a “cathartic airing of the conflict between desires and duties,” as well as a way for individuals to vent their frustrations with society while using humor (Aroesti). These types of memes are important to study because they exemplify a kind of societal attitude that is often at least as impactful on day-to-day life as those that are connected to a specific event or period in time. Memes like Evil Kermit and But That’s None of My Business Kermit seem to have a similar trending cycle as memes that deal with a very specific protest movement like Pepper Spray Cop, as shown by the Google Trends charts featured below. It is clear upon viewing



<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>



<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=But%20Thats%20None%20of%20My%20Business,Evil%20Kermit>

these two graphs that both the Pepper Spray Cop meme as well as both Kermit memes, but specifically Evil Kermit, garner a significant amount of interest. To prioritize the study of one over the other would not be prudent, since they are both units of culture that are proven to stick in the public's memory.

Furthermore, in overlooking a meme based on the fact that it appears to be harmless, humorous, apolitical (or all of the above), means that deeper implications have the potential to be missed. While the Pepper Spray Cop meme invites public discourse surrounding "the role of authority in society," Kermit the Frog memes often serve to invite public discourse about various problematic behaviors in society (Huntington 83). The But That's None of My Business and Evil Kermit memes pictured previously in Figures 1 and 2, for example, are full of implications about societal attitudes even though the central image for both happens to be a much loved children's

show character. Both Kermit memes are humorous on the surface, but after the initial laughter subsides, the implications of the jokes are rather concerning. These two Kermit memes, as well as many others, indicate troubling societal attitudes toward things like date rape and abusive relationships that should be examined and analyzed. To ignore them would be to ignore the very real problems in society that these sorts of jokes are simultaneously spreading and calling attention to.

This essay demonstrates the popularity potential that Kermit the Frog memes have, and argues for broadening the focus of memetics to include memes that do not necessarily make their deeper meaning immediately noticeable. In order to more fully understand the thought processes and attitudes of society, the examination of the units of culture that it produces is essential. Ultimately, the analysis of the But That's None of My Business Kermit and the Evil Kermit memes in this paper just scratches the surface of memetics in relation to less overtly politically, socially, or culturally important memes. Further study might look into more examples of Kermit the Frog memes, or even branch out beyond that particular branch of meme template to examine other popular memes to add to the surrounding conversation in academia.

Sources:

- Aroesti, Rachel. "Of Muppets and millennials: Evil Kermit speaks for a generation." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 14 Dec. 2016. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.
- Atran, Scott. "The Trouble With Memes: Inference versus Imitation in Cultural Creation." *Human Nature*. 12 (2001): 351-381.
- Bergado, Gabe. "The 50 Best Dark Kermit Memes." *Inverse*. Inverse, 02 Dec. 2016. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.
- Blackmore, Susan J. "*The Meme Machine*." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- Börzsei, Linda. "Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes." *Utrecht University*. (2013): 1-29.
- "But That's None of My Business, Evil Kermit." Google Trends. Google, 20 Apr. 2017. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.
- "But That's None of My Business." Know Your Meme. knowyourmeme.com, 23 Aug. 2015. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.
- "Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop." Know Your Meme. Knowyourmeme.com, 14 Apr. 2016. Web. 20 May 2017.
- Chielens, Klaas, and Francis Heylighen. "Operationalization of Meme Selection Criteria: Methodologies to Empirically Test Memetic Predictions." *Proceedings AISB*. (2005): 1-6.
- Collins, Maggie. "The Enthymeme: An Analysis of Sexist Advice Animals." *Young Scholars in Writing*. (2015): 94-103
- "Evil Kermit." Know Your Meme. Knowyourmeme.com, 23 Nov. 2016. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.
- Garlen, Jennifer C., and Anissa M. Graham, eds. *The Wider Worlds of Jim Hensen*. North Carolina: McFarlan & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013. Google Books. Google, 2013. Web. 2017.
- Heylighen, Francis. "What Makes a Meme Successful?: Selection Criteria for Cultural Evolution." *Association Internat. de Cybernétique*. (1998): 1-30.

Huntington, Heidi. "Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric." *Communication Studies*. 67 (2016): 77-93.

"Kermit the Frog (Character)." IMDb. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

Mei, Gina. "35 of the Funniest, Most Relatable Evil Kermit Memes." *Cosmopolitan*. *Cosmopolitan*, 21 Nov. 2016. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

Miltner, Kate. "There's no place for lulz in LOLCats." *First Monday*. 19 (2014). Web. 24 April 2017. <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5391/4103>

Mosanya, Lola. "Why Kermit the Frog memes are so popular, according to science - BBC Newsbeat." *BBC Newsbeat*. BBC, 23 Nov. 2016. Web. 20 Apr. 2017.

Shifman, Limor. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. 18 (2013): 362-377.

"Top 20 Funniest Kermit #NoneOfMyBusiness Memes." *What The Vogue Magazine*. *What The Vogue*, 26 June 2014. Web. 01 May 2017.

Weekman, Kelsey. "Why you keep seeing Kermit the Frog everywhere." AOL.com. AOL, 16 Nov. 2016. Web. 22 April 2017.