The Heroine and the Meme: Participating in Feminist Discourses Online

Svenja Hohenstein

ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationship between feminist participatory culture and online activism. I argue that Internet users participate in feminist discourses online by creating memes that present popular fictional female heroes such as Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*), Buffy Summers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), or the Disney Princess Merida (*Brave*). Emphasizing specific characteristics and plot points of the respective stories, memes project, spread, and celebrate feminist ideas such as female empowerment, agency, and equality.

KEYWORDS: Memes, Female Heroes, Online Feminism, Participatory Culture, Katniss Everdeen, Buffy Summers

Introduction: Feminisms and Digital Culture

> Online activists and bloggers use media like memes to transform popular culture into a tool for social change. The result? Young people online are transformed from passive pop culture consumers to engagers and makers. (Martin and Valenti 13)

In this article, I take up Courtney Martin and Vanessa Valenti's claim that producing and sharing Internet memes can be a tool for social change because it enables users to critically participate in social and cultural discourses online. I concentrate on one specific popular culture phenomenon and observe how it is transported online and transformed into memes that contribute to feminist discourses. I focus on fictional female heroes who occupy leading roles in movies and TV-shows and analyze their representation in different types of memes. Katniss Everdeen from the highly successful *Hunger Games* trilogy can probably be regarded as the best-known representative of this type of character, but she is only one amongst many. Memes featuring strong and independent young female characters such as Buffy Summers from the TV-series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the Disney princesses Merida (*Brave*) and Elsa (*Frozen*), Beatrice Prior from the *Divergent* trilogy, Kara Danvers from the TV-show *Supergirl*, or Clary Fray from *The Mortal Instruments* series attest to the popularity of this trend.

My claim is that Internet users participate in a variety of feminist discourses online by creating memes about popular female heroes that emphasize central characteristics of the

chosen characters and plot elements. These memes are suggestive of feminist ideas such as female agency, equality, or gender fluidity. In this analysis, I will have to neglect other trends in meme-making that try to embed the young women into heteronormative or even sexist discourses. I will furthermore solely focus on the protagonists of the respective texts and not pay attention to memes on supporting characters or other central quotations that do not directly engage with issues of gender. This exemplary analysis covers readings of three heroines—Princess Merida, Katniss Everdeen, and Buffy Summers—and looks exclusively at so-called "image macro memes," which combine an image or screenshot from a TV-show, movie, commercial, etc. with a written comment or punchline set in a simple white font (cf. Wiggins and Bowers 1897; Milner 2365). The memes I selected for my close readings can be regarded as representative of a larger group. For many of the memes I discuss in this article, users have posted a number of similar examples that share the same scenes, images, characters, and/or quotations, albeit with slight variations. The repeated representation of specific scenes, quotes, and screenshots demonstrates that these scenes and statements are "important, meaningful, or in some way striking enough to have formed an accessible memory" (Markey Butler 226; cf. also Shifman, "Memes" 368). Consequently, the simple fact that many Internet users create memes that represent female heroes in an empowered manner is in itself an important finding because it shows that the online community is eager to engage with and spread feminist ideas and concepts.

The memes discussed in this article represent a very specific group of young women: white, heterosexual teenage girls who possess bodily features that follow the Western beauty ideal. Even though it is highly problematic that the most popular female teenage warriors today adhere to these standards—there are no girls of color, queer young women, or ones that do not look conventionally beautiful in the successful installments mentioned before—the empowered representation of these female characters still targets and undermines a patriarchal standard that has existed in Western culture for centuries, and that is the stereotype of the damsel in distress: a young, beautiful, and helpless woman who has to be rescued by her prince so that the two can get married and live happily ever after. The archetype of the damsel in distress has strongly impacted the conception of idealized femininity, which still socializes young women into becoming passive, obedient, and chaste (Zipes 24, 47). By putting young women whose outer appearance resembles that of the

damsel in distress into roles that defy the very connotations of female helplessness and dependence, *Brave*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* successfully work against the naturalization of traditional gender roles. This innovative portrayal of teenage girls is recognized by fans who spread the ideas of female strength and equality online by producing and sharing digital items such as the memes analyzed in this article.

The meaning of the term 'meme' has undergone significant changes in recent years. It stems from Greek *mimema*, a word describing something that is imitated or reproduced. The term was first introduced in 1976 by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who used the concept in his book *The Selfish Gene* to refer to "small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation" (Shifman, *Memes* 2). Today, in popular discourse, Internet users employ the term 'meme' to refer to an item of digital culture—a picture, a video, a tweet, etc.—that is spread online, often to achieve a humorous effect ("Meme"). Internet memes have evolved into a popular phenomenon as they are created and shared by users worldwide. They have taken up such a central position in both digital and mainstream culture that scholars from a variety of fields such as sociology, communication studies, linguistics, media studies, or education have been giving them increasing attention (cf. Nissenbaum and Shifman 1; Wiggins and Bowers 1890; Markey Butler 222). Research has shown that, while memes have often been neglected due to their seemingly shallow, trivial, and ephemeral nature, they do, in fact, have a central and influential social function within and outside of digital culture because they "are tied directly to ways of interacting with others, to meaning making, and to ways of being, knowing, learning and doing" (Knobel and Lankshear 221). Communication studies scholar Limor Shifman, for instance, describes memes as a kind of "(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts" (*Memes* 15). Taken together, memes can be regarded as an integral part of contemporary public discourse in which different memes reflect different values, norms, and opinions (8). They have also become a central means for online feminism to spread and discuss feminist thought and theory.

As "artifacts of *participatory digital culture*" (Wiggins and Bowers 1891), memes make visible the changed position of consumers in the context of mass media and popular culture that has become possible due to the development of the Internet as a mass medium in general

and Web 2.0 in particular. While cultural studies scholars have long maintained that audiences never consume mediated images only passively, peoples' ability to publicly voice or spread their ideas, interpretations, or critiques about the media they consume were rather limited before the digital era (Bruns 11, 14). Indeed, the establishment of the Internet as a mass medium can be seen as a watershed moment with regard to the roles and positions of consumers and producers respectively. In recent years, numerous new concepts and terms have been coined to describe the audiences' abilities to engage more actively with, to respond more openly and visibly to, and thus to gain a more powerful position in the field of mass media. Some of these terms point to the growing agency of individuals, as is the case with the "prosumer," a blend of the term consumer and producer (Bruns 2). In addition, the concept of the "active audience" also highlights the increased power of consumers because it "evolved from a theoretical argument concerning textual interpretation to a literal portrayal of the behavior that is taking place on a widespread basis" (Miltner). Other concepts such as "participatory culture" or "convergence culture" highlight the establishment of new conceptual spaces in which said activities take place (Jenkins 2, 3).

In this "new arena of bottom-up expression," in which memes represent a particularly popular form of digital utterance, participants can engage in the production of memes for a variety of purposes, one of which is political debate and activism (Shifman, *Memes* 4). The question whether political campaigning online can lead to changes outside of the virtual world is still hotly debated: the term 'slacktivism,' for instance, has been coined in order to "describe 'feel-good' campaigns that garner plenty of public support […] but […] do not necessarily address pressing issues" (Munro 24). Nevertheless, a rising number of scholars investigates the online activism of meme-production because they are convinced that it has the potential of making users aware of political events and changes, and of mobilizing people (cf. Vie; Milner; Carstensen). In this context, Ryan M. Milner describes the use of Internet memes as an ideal means to garner attention for political issues (2359-61). Memes cannot only be rapidly produced and spread, but their combination of popular culture and political content potentially appeals to a wide range of people, especially those who might otherwise not take part in political discourse, whether online or offline (Milner 2359, 2381; Martin and Valenti 13; Shifman, *Memes* 120). According to Milner, memes reflect what he

calls "pop-polyvocality," that is, the usage of popular culture texts to express a wide variety of "explicit commentary" on political events and issues (2381). For Milner, "memes are populist means to express public perspectives, even when those perspectives are diverse" (2360).

In order to understand why the creation and sharing of memes such as those discussed in this article can be regarded as a feminist activity, it is helpful to look at the current research concerned with the relations between online activism, digital political participation, and feminism. Not only has the gender ratio of Internet users become more balanced, but along with this development, the online representation of female voices in general, as well as feminist voices in particular, has markedly increased. The growing importance of online feminisms is reflected, for instance, in rising numbers of feminist blogs, online organizing, online petitions, or social media campaigns (Martin and Valenti 3, 7, 10; Munro 22-23; Dean and Laidler; Carstensen 114, 116).[1] In fact, the Internet plays such a significant part in the contemporary feminist movement that some critics and scholars, such as Jessica Valenti or Jennifer Baumgardner, have begun to speak of a new wave, a fourth wave, of feminism, which is marked by its reliance on the Internet (cf. Baumgardner 251-52; Munro; Solomon). Even though "it is increasingly clear that the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism," the idea of a fourth wave of digital feminism is controversially discussed and challenged by many who argue that "increased usage of the internet is not enough to delineate a new era" (Munro

---

[1]   Over the course of the last 20 years, the overall percentage of people who use the Internet has increased for both sexes. The gender ratio of users, however, has become more equal: In 1995, the percentage of men who used the Internet was more than double the amount of that for women (9% vs. 4%), whereas in 2015, the numbers were almost the same (85% vs. 84%) (Perrin and Duggan). With regard to feminist activism, Martin and Valenti present, for instance, the example of an online campaign that demanded that *Seventeen Magazine* include unphotoshopped images. The online petition was signed by 86,000 people and led to a change in the magazine's policies to only use pictures that were not photoshopped (8). For more examples and statistical evidence for the increase of feminist voices and activism online, see especially Martin and Valenti and Carstensen. Still, it is important to keep in mind that although digital culture is often hailed as a potentially genderless and utopian space, many scholars point out that in spite of the increasing access and participation of female users, the Internet is still a male-dominated space where pornography, online harassment, and sexism are the norm rather than the exception (Carstensen 107, 119; Arvidsson and Foka). They argue that instead of seeing the Internet as either a utopian or a dystopian environment, it should be regarded as a highly contested space "of tough struggles for gender and sexuality," where feminist voices, anti-feminist voices, and opinions from everyone in between the two poles are spread and discussed (Carstensen 117).

23). With its focus on individuality, complexity, and diversity, it is said to resemble the third wave in too many aspects to be called a new era of feminism (23).

The result of this emphasis on diversity and individuality is why today it is harder than ever—if not impossible—to speak of one unified feminist movement. However, "amid the cacophony of voices it is easy to overlook one of the main constants [of current feminist thought]—its reliance on the internet" (22). Thus, to label the current state of feminism with a new term, to call it a new wave, helps to draw attention to the changed visibility and pervasiveness of feminism today through its increased usage of online spaces and the new possibilities these spaces hold for feminist discussions, consciousness raising, and political mobilization (cf. Martin and Valenti 3, 8). While third wave thought and theory has not completely disappeared—the two waves rather overlap and "eddy into one another" (Baumgardner 244)—, the fourth wave differs from the third wave insofar that its focus on digital spaces makes it possible to include and represent even more marginalized groups and to establish networks and discussions more easily. Feminist blogs (e.g., Feministing, Jezebel, Finally Feminism 101), online magazines (e.g., *Ms. Magazine*, *Bitch, Bust, Teen Voices*), online petitions that garner support for institutions such as Planned Parenthood, or Twitter hashtags such as #LoveYourLines, #OlderWomenVoices, or #EverydaySexism are a few examples that reflect not only the sheer amount of online feminist media, but especially the diversity of feminist issues people engage with online. Another feature that the third and fourth wave have in common besides an emphasis on diversity is their use of popular culture to illustrate, discuss, and spread feminist thought and theory (Martin and Valenti 12; Baumgardner 250-51). The combination of popular culture and digital culture not only makes it possible to spread feminist ideas and issues quickly and widely, but it holds the potential to motivate people to become actively involved in feminist movements. In this context, the memes to which I turn now in this article are only one example to illustrate the ways in which digital culture offers new possibilities to fuse popular culture and feminist political agendas.

For the purposes of this article, I suggest to categorize memes into three different types. The first and least complex type of meme works on an intra-textual level as it draws from one primary text exclusively and combines screenshots and quotes from or about the female

protagonist of this text. The second type of meme uses intertextual references in order to highlight a specific heroine's strength or to communicate more general messages about female empowerment. Finally, the third type of meme does not directly engage with the primary texts themselves, but works on a meta-level as it uses comments from the people involved in the making of the texts, that is, writers, directors, or actresses and actors, to underline the feminist aspects of the respective texts. All of these memes can be regarded as displaying pop-polyvocality at work because their creators are able to voice and spread their political opinions through the use of online spaces and digital items. They hence also illustrate the increased visibility and potential power of fans: by creating memes, they become part of an active audience that is able to criticize, celebrate, or emphasize certain aspects of the items of popular culture that they consume.

"Our Fate Lives Within Us": Intra-Textual Memes

The first type of meme discussed in this article focuses exclusively on one heroine and her story. Text and image work together in order to draw attention to the most important ideas and statements propagated in a particular narrative. In the case of Princess Merida, the female protagonist of the animated movie *Brave*, creators of memes identify those scenes as essential in which the young woman shoots her bow and arrow or rides her horse (cf. Prabhune). Another scene that is frequently used is when Merida defies her parents' wish to get married (Cacho). She resists parental control by beating all of her male suitors in an archery contest held for the purpose of finding her a prospective husband. This act of defiance can be regarded as a feminist moment because Merida not only shows that she is a more capable archer than the male contestants, but she also subverts the ancient patriarchal tradition of arranged marriage of her society by winning her own hand and thus self-ownership. Through these plot points, the movie, and by extension also the memes that deploy scenes like the ones described above, deconstruct the stereotypical image of the (Disney) princess, who can be regarded as "a variation of the damsel in distress stereotype" (Rothschild 9). Instead of perpetuating the trope of female weakness and dependence, the memes emphasize Merida's resistance and infuse the role of the princess with new connotations, namely of agency, mobility, and defiance.

In addition to representing Merida's strength visually, the majority of intra-textual memes combine images of Merida with captions that draw from the closing voice-over narration of the movie where Merida herself acts as the narrator. She states: "There are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us, you only have to be brave enough to see it" (*Brave*). This is *the* central statement of the movie because it establishes an alternative concept of bravery propagated in the film. Whereas traditional bravery is depicted through the characters of Merida's father King Fergus and Merida herself as skilled warriors who do not shy away from physical altercations, the movie also presents standing up to structures that would otherwise shape your life as a demanding and brave task. Merida possesses the courage to defy her own family in order to change the patriarchal system and to be able to choose her own path in life. Singling out and drawing attention to Merida's strength, agency, and defiant character, the feminist memes emphasize the new role of the (Disney) princess as an active and self-reliant teenage girl who does not need to be saved by a prince in shining armor.

Acts of defiance are also a central theme in the memes featuring Katniss Everdeen from the *Hunger Games* trilogy. The meme "Tribute. Symbol. Leader" by the creator laura, for example, combines three different images, one from each part of the trilogy, adding to them the captions "Tribute," "Symbol," and "Leader," respectively. It thus illustrates the different stages through which Katniss has to pass in order to become the leader of a rebellion that eventually overthrows the oppressive regime that forces her, as well as other children and teenagers, to take part in a televised fight to death. In this meme, the combination of the pictures and the captions creates a narrative about Katniss' development from tribute, that is, a passive, helpless victim, to a symbol of hope and change, and ultimately to the active and powerful leader of a rebellion. With every step Katniss achieves a greater amount of agency as she moves from a non-political position to a position in which she is responsible for actively changing the system of power at work in her society. Hence, two of the central topics of the trilogy, namely personal growth and political activism, are condensed into a single picture and three words, which draw attention to Katniss' maturation, growing agency, and political awareness.

"Buffy vs. Twilight": Intertextual Memes

The memes of the second category, intertextual memes, do not focus on one heroine exclusively but employ intertextual references. Media scholar Limor Shifman considers this intertextual practice to be "a central attribute" of Internet memes in general (*Memes* 2). By referring to multiple texts, putting them into opposition to each other, or highlighting parallels between them, users emerge as active audiences and achieve two effects: they draw attention to the female heroes' potential to function as (feminist) role models and they make general claims about the role of female heroes in contemporary popular culture. Two examples are the portrayals of Buffy (Trager) and Katniss (*Welcome to District 12*) in the role of the iconic Rosie the Riveter in the "We Can Do It"-poster. While the background story of the original image is complex,[2] the "depiction of Rosie has become an empowering symbol for women" and the poster is often regarded as a "feminist icon" in the popular imagination (Kimble and Olson 537, 533). This is because Rosie the Riveter represents the idea that women can successfully take on jobs and roles traditionally reserved for men. Indeed, the comparison between Rosie the Riveter, Katniss, and Buffy is convincing because both Katniss and Buffy occupy roles that have been reserved for men for centuries within Western culture. This holds true for their status as heroes in general, but also for their roles as warrior, political leader, and rebel in the case of Katniss, and warrior and superhero in the case of Buffy. Through the allusion to the well-known image of Rosie the Riveter, the memes project Buffy's and Katniss' role as feminist icons in their own right.

In addition, the feminist concept of sisterhood is alluded to by the use of the pronoun 'we' in the respective captions of the images, as the memes call for unity and group effort. While the meme-makers slightly changed the captions from the original "We Can Do It" into "We

---

[2] According to Kimble and Olson the "poster has come to represent a past that never was" (562). When it was first created, the Rosie-poster was "not nearly as empowering of home-front women as it might seem" (533). Women who went to work in factories were confronted with prejudices (534), they often took on these jobs to earn money and not for patriotic reasons, and they did not have a lasting impact on women's roles in society (535). Contrary to popular belief, the poster was not created by the government to be publicly shown, but by an advertising agency for the Westinghouse factories, "where wartime security ensured that its audience was limited to workers and management" (536). In fact, it was "virtually unknown before the mid-1980s" (537). Today, the poster has not only become one of the best-known images representing the 1940s in the U.S. (536), but it has also taken on a mythic status for U.S. society as the depictions of Rosie "function as a charactertype, narrative, and enactment of U.S. culture's key values" (537).

Can Slay It" (Trager) and "We Will Rebel" (*Welcome to District 12*) to fit the contexts of the different primary texts, the personal pronoun 'we' was left unchanged. This is important as it points to the idea that the two young women want to include and encourage others to follow their lead and to become active in the fight against patriarchal and oppressive forces. Through the use of the pronoun 'we,' the memes draw attention to the specific manner in which both Buffy and Katniss bring down the oppressive forces in their respective fictional universes: instead of accumulating individual power, they empower themselves *and* others. These memes hence project the attempts made in the primary texts to represent the feminist concept of sisterhood by including "more diverse voices, including those of men and those of non-white heritage" (Payne-Mulliken and Renagar 58).[3]

Intertextual memes do not only point out similarities and parallels between feminist characters such as Rosie the Riveter, Buffy, and Katniss, but intertextual references can also be used to emphasize how differently gender roles are portrayed in popular culture. One set of prominent examples for this strategy are memes depicting Bella Swan, the protagonist of the popular *Twilight* series, who is widely regarded as the exact opposite of characters such as Buffy and Katniss because she is clumsy, helpless, and passive.[4] The sheer number of memes that make use of intertextual references to *Twilight* "suggests a broad-based community of interest" with regard to the characters themselves, but especially to the gender roles they project and the type of role model they represent (Markey Butler 224). In

---

[3] Diversity is a central topic in both primary texts because even though Buffy and Katniss are female, white, and heterosexual, the groups they gather around them are not: Buffy's circle of friends consists of women, men, demons, (lesbian) witches, werewolves, and vampires whose struggles and conflicts symbolize issues of racial diversity (Fuchs 105-6). The show furthermore works towards diversity in the final season of the show when Buffy assembles a group of potential slayers. In the final episode, Buffy shares her powers not only with these potential slayers, but with girls all over the world. Thus, "[in] transferring power from a privileged, white, Californian teenager to a heterogeneous group of women from different national, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds [*Buffy*] addresses […] the issue of cultural diversity" not only on a symbolic level, but on a literal level as well (Pender 8). The same holds true for Katniss: in her role as the Mockingjay, she acts both as the symbol and as the leader of the rebellion against the Capitol. Therefore, she is essential in uniting the rebels both ideologically and physically. Notably, the rebel soldiers consist of both men and women and they are racially diverse, a fact that especially the movie adaptations of *The Hunger Games* emphasize.

[4] For more detailed comparisons, see Amanda Firestone, "Apples to Oranges: The Heroines in *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*." *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games*: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. 209-18; and Noah Berlatsky, "'Twilight' vs. 'The Hunger Games': Why Do So Many Grown-Ups Hate Bella?" *theatlantic.com.* The Atlantic Monthly Group, 15 Nov. 2011.

this case, intertextuality is used to draw a clear distinction between Bella, on the one hand, and Katniss or Buffy, on the other hand. The creators of these specific memes underline the extraordinary position of strong women like Buffy or Katniss by comparing them to a female character that they do not deem empowered or worth emulating. While the memes that compare Bella Swan with Katniss Everdeen mainly focus on the differences in behavior, mobility, and strength—Katniss wins a televised fight to the death while Bella is the stereotypical damsel in distress who needs to be rescued by her male friends and love interests time and again—the comparisons to Buffy often use the two young women's romantic relationships with vampires to comment explicitly on the issues of gender and sexuality. Here, the critique hinges on *Twilight*'s compliance with traditional gender roles, conventions of romance, and the reiteration of the damsel in distress stereotype, whereas Buffy is celebrated as the protagonist of an innovative, exciting, and entertaining TV-show that breaks with these very conventions.

The meme "Lessons from *Twilight* vs. Lessons from *Buffy*" is a typical example for how differently the two characters are perceived. The meme criticizes the *Twilight* characters and celebrates the romantic relationship represented in *Buffy*. Under the caption, the meme shows images of the two couples, Edward and Bella on the left and Angel and Buffy on the right, in a comic strip style, each couple having a conversation that implicitly characterizes their respective relationship. The meme has Edward proclaim that in addition to stalking, manipulating, and physically abusing his girlfriend, he will treat her like a child and contemplate killing her. Bella's reaction in the meme is to accept his behavior; she responds: "That's okay, I will just internalize your abuse as my fault. After all, you're a man so you must be right" ("Lessons"). Bella's body language—she is sitting on a bed staring into space— underlines her passivity. Drawing attention to the often voiced complaint that *Twilight* portrays a controlling and abusive relationship as the epitome of romantic love, the meme criticizes that the novels and film adaptations teach feminine obedience and masculine superiority: Edward is the one in charge and Bella accepts his masculine authority. The meme blatantly exhibits the dynamics in which women hold themselves responsible for being mistreated and interpret their partners' abusive behavior as expressions of their love and care. It openly addresses a tabooed pattern of behavior and provides an alternative on the right-hand side of the meme.

Here, Angel offers Buffy his help in killing an enemy and saving her at the last minute, which Buffy refuses because she is clearly capable of handling the opponent herself. Buffy's agency and power are not only portrayed through her snappy remark when she tells Angel: "Let me just slice this misogynist bastard in half […]. Then we can snuggle" ("Lessons"), but also through the image which shows her with weapon in hand, ready to attack. In contrast to Bella, Buffy remains in charge in her role as the Slayer and, noticeably, also in her love life. It is Buffy who proposes that she and Angel can snuggle after she is done fighting. Even though Buffy's and Angel's relationship might resemble that of Edward and Bella insofar as both couples engage in more or less conventional heterosexual relationships, what sets them apart is the fact that *Buffy* undermines heteronormative standards to a large degree.[5] This is because Buffy and Angel do very often not act according to their designated gender roles: Buffy, for example, frequently takes on the role of the hero because she rescues her male love interest on several occasions. Through the presentation of Angel as passive and helpless—he is, for instance, poisoned (*BtVS* "Graduation Day (Part 1)"), or kidnapped and tortured (*BtVS* "What's My Line (Part 2)") and thus in need of saving by Buffy—the stereotypical image of the damsel in distress is replaced by a "dude in distress" in these episodes (Coulombe 212). Notably, it is not simply a gender reversal that takes place in the TV-show, but rather a blurring of gender roles: Both Buffy and Angel are repeatedly shown to act in ways that can be described as stereotypically feminine and masculine, respectively. Hence, gender identities are conceptualized as fluid and ever-changing. By portraying this romantic relationship and the parties involved in this innovative manner, gender roles are negotiated because the lesson that is learned is that a woman can be *both* a loving girlfriend and a strong and independent fighter.[6]

---

[5]   It is worth noting that there is a period of time in *Buffy* during which the Slayer's relationship to Angel is rather similar to that of Bella and Edward. In season two, Angel is turned into his evil alter ego Angelus after he had sex with Buffy and by consequence becomes a stalking, abusive, and even murderous character. The major difference between *Buffy* and *Twilight*, however, is that Buffy does not embrace her role as a victim and refuses to accept her lover's behavior, but she fights against Angelus and ultimately even kills him.

[6]   Indeed, *Buffy* is well-known for its innovative portrayal of romantic relationships because the show also subverted heteronormative standards when it featured the lesbian relationship between Willow and Tara at a time when homosexuality was hardly ever dealt with openly and positively on mainstream TV (Driver 57-58).

Intertextual memes work in a similar fashion to the intra-textual memes analyzed above in calling attention to the empowered status of one individual heroine within her respective story. In addition, intertextuality is used in feminist memes to provide more general commentary on the status of female heroes as role models and their influence on users' perceptions of gender roles. These memes usually bring together a larger number of heroines in order to support the claims made in the captions. For example, one caption that is used by a variety of memes featuring different heroines reads: "A woman can preach, a woman can work, a woman can fight, a woman can build, can rule, can conquer, can destroy; just as much as a man can." In the memes, this statement is supported by images of strong and powerful women such as Katniss Everdeen, Buffy Summers, Daenerys Targaryen (*Game of Thrones*), Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter*), or Beatrice Prior (*Divergent*), for instance. Each of these female characters exemplifies the claim made in the memes as they stand for one of the mentioned features (cf. Emerson). The caption hence works on two different levels: first, it describes the different heroines and emphasizes their status as empowered and strong women and girls; and second, it more generally declares that women and men have the same abilities and are not confined to socially constructed roles. Based on this representation of female equality as an effect of following masculine ideals, these memes can be criticized for glorifying violence and representing the idea that women can only be empowered if they behave like men. However, they still portray and consequently target a specific group of teenage girls and women, who "continue to be constructed as passive and weak within much of contemporary Western culture" (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 4). Even though they simplify or even neglect feminist discourses on issues such as gender fluidity or the appreciation of femininity to some extent, they address an issue important for many young women and girls, and that is the idea that they, too, can be strong, skilled, and aggressive and that they have a right or even the obligation to fight against their oppression and marginalization.

Stereotypes about (teenage) girls in particular are undermined in memes that re-interpret and give new meaning to the saying: "You fight like a girl."[7] In these memes, images of different female heroes are brought together and overlaid with the caption: "You fight like a girl," sometimes followed by the punchline "Thanks," as in the meme discussed here ("You Fight"). Traditionally, the allegation that someone does something "like a girl," i.e., running, throwing, or fighting, has been used as an insult that not only targeted women and girls, but also boys and men as it insinuates that their skills are inferior and not properly developed.[8] The memes that take up the phrase "You fight like a girl" work against this stereotype because they depict physically strong and trained young women instead of weak and clumsy ones. This discrepancy calls attention to the fact that 'fighting like a girl' now means fighting like a skilled and brave warrior. The punchline "Thanks" unmistakably demonstrates that fighting like a girl can only be seen as a compliment. All in all, the meme not only depicts the strength of the fictional characters in particular, but it also alludes to societal changes in general in the way girls are perceived and perceive themselves today. They hence also serve as an example of how active audiences make use of digital spaces to express their political ideas and ideals in a bottom-up approach to effect cultural and societal transformations. At least in part due to the effectiveness of feminist pop culture memes, girls and young women are no longer mainly represented and thus regarded as silly, weak, or inferior, but instead as skilled, strong, and powerful.

"We Have Control over This Role Model": Meta-Textual Memes

The last category of memes that this article discusses features quotations from interviews or official statements on characters given by directors, creators, or actresses and actors who have been known to directly comment on the topics of gender roles, heroism, or feminism in

---

[7]   The re-interpretation of this specific insult can be seen as a general trend in American culture today. For instance, #LikeaGirl videos produced by the company *always* call on audiences to "make #likeagirl mean amazing things" (always) and even President Obama, in a speech on the U.S. women soccer team, insisted that "playing like a girl means you're a badass" (Marans).

[8]   For a detailed analysis of gender differences in bodily motions see Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Iris Marion Young. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 27-45.

their films. These memes draw attention to the fact that female heroes and gender roles are part of feminist discourses outside of the fictional and the digital world. Instead of referencing the fictional texts only, these memes broaden the discourse to include meta-comments that deal with feminist aspects surrounding the movies and shows, but also the processes of creating and marketing these items of popular culture. Notably, through the transformation into memes, discourses that are established offline are incorporated into digital spaces and hence contribute to feminist discussions on the Internet, be it as part of feminist blogs, in Twitter feeds, or on social media sites such as Facebook, Pinterest, or Tumblr. In addition to drawing attention to the circumstances surrounding the creation of popular culture, the memes also emphasize the feminist concepts embedded in the movies and shows. They shed light, for instance, on the innovative gender politics of these particular productions that set themselves apart from the majority of movies and TV-shows by centering on a female protagonist and working against traditional gender roles. They also represent the thoughts and aims of the people involved in processes of cultural production to call attention to the fact that this is a potentially political activity.

In the case of the *Hunger Games*, there is a large number of memes that feature an image of Jennifer Lawrence, who plays Katniss Everdeen, together with quotations from interviews in which she talks about the sense of responsibility she felt when taking on this role. Often, the shape and look of the heroine's body is a central issue. There is a vast number of memes that include different statements by Lawrence about what she wanted the character she portrays to look like. One meme, for example, quotes her saying:

> In the first movie, when it was obviously being talked about, like 'It's The Hunger Games, you have to lose 10 pounds.' I said 'We have control over this role model. Why would we make her something unobtainable and thin?' This is a person that young girls will be looking up to, so why not make her strong? Why not make her beautiful and healthy and fit? I was very adamant about that, because I think that [the film] industry doesn't take enough responsibility for what it does to our society […]. (Colom)

This statement features a number of different ideas close to the heart of (online) feminism: First, mainstream media are criticized for their idealized and unrealistic portrayal of women's bodies. Second, Katniss is praised as a strong and exceptional role model for young women and girls. Moreover, the meme also indirectly praises Jennifer Lawrence as an

advocate for breaking with conventions, for challenging beauty ideals, and for taking responsibility for the influence she has on the audience. Although people have criticized Lawrence for speaking out against beauty ideals while she herself can be regarded as the embodiment of these very standards (cf. Trout), her criticism should not be neglected only because it comes from someone who fits these standards more than others do. If anything, the way in which Lawrence herself has been treated draws even more attention to the unobtainability of the beauty ideals propagated by Hollywood and the media industries since the actress herself was chastised by producers, agents, film critics, and even fans for being too heavy to play Katniss (cf. Evans Garriott 169). Her statement hence not only shows that no matter how women look, their bodies will very likely be criticized; but by speaking out about these issues, Lawrence also inscribes herself into a larger (online) discourse that can be subsumed under the title of "body positivity."[9] By converting Lawrence's remark into a meme, users can easily and quickly share, discuss, and spread the ideas contained in the actress' statement. They hence contribute to the feminist online discourse surrounding female heroes in a very effective and far-reaching manner.

As these memes are concerned with the portrayal of women's bodies and body positivity, it is also notable that the images used in combination with Lawrence's statements largely portray her in close-ups or medium shots, focusing on her face rather than her whole body. In the cases where her body is visible, she is often clothed professionally, wearing a blazer or a formal dress. A quick image search of Jennifer Lawrence reveals a number of full body shots of her as well as a large number of sexualized images in particular. However, hardly any of these have been used in this specific type of meme. The memes featuring Lawrence, then, do not only work against the objectification and stereotypical depiction of the female body in mainstream media through their use of quotations, but also through their deliberate choice of pictures that avoid portraying the actress as a sexual object and instead depict her as a professional, engaged, and responsible woman.

---

[9]   The body positivity movement advocates the idea that "all bodies are good bodies," and "strives for the representation of marginalized bodies. [...] Fat bodies, queer bodies, and bodies of color" (Bustle). When taken alone, Lawrence's statements can be seen as one voice defending a certain body type, viewed in an online context however, they become part of a larger discourse on body positivity in which many different body types—both ones that are closer to the Western beauty standards and ones that are not—are represented, defended, and celebrated.

While Jennifer Lawrence is featured in the majority of feminist meta-textual memes concerned with *The Hunger Games*, the memes about *Buffy* mostly feature writer and director Joss Whedon, rather than Sarah Michelle Gellar, the actress who plays Buffy Summers. The variety of statements contained in the different memes makes it clear that Whedon has often discussed feminism in general and Buffy as a feminist character in particular (Whedon). One of his statements, however, is more often featured in memes than others: his answer to the question why he writes strong female characters. This question, along with Whedon's simple and snappy retort that he does so because people still ask him that question, is, for instance, portrayed in a meme on the twitter account of amightygirl.com. Through the combination of the caption and the images, this meme pokes fun at and consequently criticizes the interviewer in particular as well as mainstream culture in general. Not only is the question itself ridiculed through Whedon's dismissal of it and by the reaction shots which show him in a state of bemused exasperation, but his answer furthermore insinuates that these kinds of questions prove the need for more strong female characters in mainstream culture. Noticeably, at the same time that the meme criticizes mainstream culture and media, it celebrates Whedon by depicting him as subversive and defiant of media conventions because he keeps writing empowered and complex female characters in spite of these questions and in spite of the persistent refusal of the media industries to create movies and TV-shows that feature (strong) female characters.[10] In addition, the repetition of the question also insinuates that it is even more noteworthy when men create innovative female characters. The meme projects Whedon as somebody with a feminist agenda, as a trailblazer and innovator and underlines that feminism is an important project for both women and men.[11] This meme, then, criticizes the media industry and makes its audience aware of the need to present women and girls in the same manner as the mainstream media portray men, namely as complex and complicated human beings. It

---

[10] Studies show that out of 700 popular movies that were released between 2007 and 2014, only 30.2% featured women in speaking roles, and only roughly 20% featured women or girls as protagonists (Smith et al. 1). On TV, women are outnumbered almost 2 to 1 in comparison to men when it comes to leading roles, both in reality TV, cable, and network shows ("The Status" 31).

[11] One instance in which Whedon himself addressed this issue was during his Equality Now Tribute Address in 2006 (Whedon) when he won an award in the category "Men on the Front Lines."

also calls attention to the fact that men can be feminists, too, thus echoing an important issue propagated by both third and fourth wave feminism.

Conclusion

The digital items examined in this article demonstrate how female heroes in pop culture memes contribute to feminist discourses online. These memes can be regarded as examples of pop-polyvocality, as they make use of items of popular culture to comment on political, here feminist, issues in a number of ways. The memes discussed can be found on feminist blogs, on social media sites such as Tumblr or Pinterest, or on Twitter accounts of feminist individuals or organizations. There, they are used to illustrate and support discussions about topics propagated by fourth wave feminism such as the representation of girls and women in the media, feminist movies and TV-shows, feminist actresses, writers, and producers, gender roles, female adolescence, or critical readings of the primary texts they refer to. Consequently, these memes also demonstrate how active audiences can create feminist discourses online by making use of the popular culture items they consume, turning them into memes and thus voicing their (political) opinions, both about the movies and TV-shows themselves, but also about larger issues, such as feminism and gender roles. The three types of memes that I have delineated above contribute to these discourses in different ways: the intra-textual memes focus on one text and one heroine exclusively and hence put emphasis on feminist aspects such as agency and self-determination that are prominently featured in *Brave*, *Buffy*, and *The Hunger Games*. The second type of meme uses intertextual references and thus makes more general claims about representations of female heroes in pop culture texts aimed at young audiences. These memes also point to the potential of characters such as Katniss from *The Hunger Games* to act as empowering role models and feminist icons in their own right. In contrast to the first and second categories, the third type of meme moves away from portrayals of the heroines themselves and deals with the public discourses surrounding strong female characters, in particular in the film industry, in order to highlight the political potential in general, and the feminist one in particular, that is involved in creating pieces of popular culture.

As these examples show, although they are limited in their scope—they only represent young, white, heterosexual, and conventionally beautiful female characters—, the combination of popular and digital culture at work in these memes is an effective method to contribute to feminist discourses. One central feature of this specific form of online activism is that "it's bringing feminist analysis and voices into the mainstream" (Martin and Valenti 14). People who know the movies and shows share and discuss the memes and are thus exposed to the ideas contained in them. Noticeably, in order to achieve this effect, memes that engage in this type of online feminism break with a number of conventions of the genre. For instance, in contrast to the vast majority of memes on the Internet (cf. Knobel and Lankshear 209; Miltner; Shifman, *Memes* 67), many of the feminist pop culture memes I have found do not primarily aim at making people laugh. Rather, their tone is comparatively serious, somber, and at times even angry. This tendency to emphasize social critique and political commentary rather than humor fits the overall purpose of these memes, which is to show that the issues addressed are important and meaningful and that the characters presented have to be taken seriously. Another aspect in which these particular memes differ from genre conventions of online memes is that they are inclusive rather than exclusive. While research has shown that, in general, "creating and understanding memes requires sophisticated 'meme literacy'"[12] (Shifman, *Memes* 100), the memes that deal with the female heroes are usually fairly easy to understand for those who know the TV-shows and films they are based on. All in all, there are no "symbolic barriers" or "communal walls" that have to be overcome in order to be able to take part in this discourse (Miltner). This is a feature that further underlines the political agenda of feminist discourses online: if it is the aim to increase the number of female and feminist voices online and to spread feminist ideas such as female agency, self-determination, or gender equality, to make these issues entertaining, interesting, and accessible, the memes that communicate these ideas must be accessible as well. Whether this is a general feature of political pop culture memes or only holds true for the memes presented in this paper is a topic for future research.

---

[12] The concept of meme literacy highlights that, often, users need a certain set of skills and knowledge to understand the meaning of a specific meme. In fact, memes are frequently used to create and maintain group boundaries and to keep people out of these groups rather than to include them (cf. Miltner; Nissenbaum and Shifman 3).

Works Cited

Always. "Always #LikeAGirl." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 26 June 2014. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

amightygirl (amightygirl). "Joss Whedon on writing strong women and Mighty Girl characters! @josswhedon." 13 Nov. 2014, 20:39 UTC. Tweet.

Arvidsson, Viktor, and Anna Foka. "Digital Gender: Perspective, Phenomena, Practice." *First Monday* 20.4 (2015): n. pag. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Baumgardner, Jennifer. *F'em!: Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls*. Berkeley: Seal, 2011. Print.

Brave. Dir. Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2012. Film.

Bruns, Axel. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Lang, 2008. Print. Digital Formations 45.

Bustle. "What Is the Body Positive Movement." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Nov. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

Cacho, Chantale. "'There Are Those Who Say Fate Is Something beyond Our Command, That Destiny Is Not Our Own. But I Know Better. Our Fate Lives within Us… You Only Have to Be Brave Enough to See It. Merida, Brave." *i.Quote*. Pinterest, n.d. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

Carstensen, Tanja. "Gender Trouble in Web 2.0: Gender Relations in Social Network Sites, Wikis and Weblogs." *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 1.1 (2009): 105-27. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Colom, Adriana. "14 Celebrity Quotes on Women and Equality." *hercampus.com*. Her Campus Media, 11 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 Jan. 2016.

Coulombe, Renee T. "'I Had It All Wrong': New Vampires, Grrrl Heroes and the Third Wave Body in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day*. Ed. Isabella van Elferen. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 206-22. Print.

Day, Sara K., Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz. "Introduction: From 'New Woman' to 'Future Girl': The Roots and the Rise of the Female Protagonist in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopia." *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. Ed. Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 1-14. Print.

Dean, Marissa, and Karen Laidler. "A New Girl in Town: Exploring Girlhood Identities through Facebook." *First Monday* 18.2 (2013): n. pag. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Driver, Susan. *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media*. New York: Lang, 2007. Print.

Emerson, Rebecca. "A Woman Can…" *I Fight Like A Girl*. Pinterest, n.d. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

Fuchs, Cynthia. "'Did Anyone Ever Explain to You What 'Secret Identity' Means?': Race and Displacement in *Buffy* and *Dark Angel*." *Undead TV: Essays on* Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Ed. Elana Levine and Lisa Parks. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. 96-115. Print.

Garriott, Deidre Anne Evans. "Performing the Capitol in Digital Spaces: The Punitive Gaze of the Panopticon among Fans and Critics." *Space and Place in* The Hunger Games*: New Readings of the Novels*. Ed. Deidre Anne Evans Garriott, Whitney Elaine Jones, and Julie Elizabeth Tyler. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. 160-83. Print.

Genz, Stéphanie, and Benjamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. Print.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide.* New York: New York UP, 2006. Print.

Kimble, James J., and Lester C. Olson. "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and Misconception in J. Howard Miller's 'We Can Do It!' Poster." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9.4 (2006): 533-69. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear, eds. "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production." *A New Literacies Sampler*. New York: Lang, 2007. 199-227. Print. New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies 29.

laura (daisyrdley). "Tribute. Symbol. Leader." 15 Sep. 2014, 16:41 UTC. Tweet.

"Lessons from Twilight vs. Lessons from Buffy." *Weknowmemes.com.* WeKnowMemes, 27 June 2012. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.

Marans, Daniel. "Obama: 'Playing Like a Girl Means You're a Badass.'" *huffingtonpost.com.* TheHuffingtonPost.com, 27 Oct. 2015. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.

Markey Butler, Michelle. "The Wisdom of the Crowd: Internet Memes and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey.*" The Hobbit *and Tolkien's Mythology: Essays on Revisions and Influences*. Ed. Bradford Lee Eden. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014. Print.

Martin, Courtney E., and Vanessa Valenti. "#FemFuture: Online Revolution." *New Feminist Solutions* 8 (2012): 1-34. Barnard Center for Research on Women. Web. 18 Nov. 2015.

"Meme." Def. 2. *Oxforddictionaries.com*. Oxford UP, n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.

Milner, Ryan M. "Pop Polyvocality: Internet Memes, Public Participation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement." *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2357-90. Web. 17 Nov. 2015.

Miltner, Kate M. "'There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats': The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme." *First Monday* 19.8 (2014): n. pag. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Munro, Ealasaid. "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *Political Insight* 4.2 (2013): 22-25. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

Nissenbaum, Asaf, and Limor Shifman. "Internet Memes as Contested Cultural Capital: The Case of 4chan's /b/ Board." *New Media and Society*. Prepublished 9 Oct. 2015 as doi:10.1177/1461444815609313. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.

Payne-Mulliken, Susan, and Valerie Renagar. "Buffy Never Goes It Alone: The Rhetorical Construction of Sisterhood in the Final Season." Buffy *Meets the Academy: Essays on the Episodes and Scripts as Text*. Ed. Kevin K. Durand. Jefferson: McFarland, 2009. 57-77. Print.

Pender, Patricia. "'Kicking Ass is Comfort Food': Buffy as Third Wave Feminist Icon." Paper given at Staking a Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of Buffy. University of South Australia, Adelaide. 22 July 2003. Web. 2 July 2012.

Perrin, Andrew, and Maeve Duggan. "American's Internet Access: 2000-2015." *Pewinternet.org*. Pew Research Center Internet Science and Technology, 26 June 2015. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

Prabhune, Akanksha. "16 Times Disney Characters Gave You Amazing Life Advice." *storypick.com*. Storypick, 19 June 2015. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

Rothschild, Sarah. *The Princess Story: Modeling the Feminine in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*. New York: Lang, 2013. Print.

Shifman, Limor. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." *Journal of Computer-Mediated* Communication 18.3 (2013): 362-77. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

---. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2014. Print.

Smith, Stacy L., et al. "Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, and LGBT Status from 2007-2014." *annenberg.usc.edu.* Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg. Web. 29 Feb. 2016. PDF file.

Solomon, Deborah. "Fourth-Wave Feminism." *nytimes.com*. The New York Times Company, 13 Nov. 2009. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

"The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015." *Womensmediacenter.com.* The Women's Media Center. Web. 29 Feb. 2016. PDF file.

Trager, Tom. "We Can Slay It." *redbubble.com*. Redbubble, n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.

Trout, Jenny. "Jennifer Lawrence Body-Shames You More than You Might Realize." *huffingtonpost.com*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 1 Mar. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.

Vie, Stephanie. "In Defense of 'Slacktivism': The Human Rights Campaign Facebook Logo as Digital Activism." *First Monday* 19.4 (2014): n. pag. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

"We Will Rebel." *Welcome to District 12*. Tumblr, 20 Jan. 2012. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.

Whedon, Joss. "Equality Now." Equality Now Tribute Address, Men on the Front Lines Honoree. *AmericanRhetoric.com*. American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank, 15 May 2006. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

Wiggins, Bradley E., and G. Bret Bowers. "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape." *New Media and Society* 17.11 (2015): 1886-906. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.

"You Fight Like a Girl." *Media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com*. Pinterest, n.d. Web. 7 Dec. 2015.

Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1994. Print.