NEWFAGS DON'T REMEMBER LÖRS LÄRÄ

INTERNET MEMES ON AN ANONYMOUS IMAGEBOARD

Salla Pajunen

The goal of this thesis is to examine Internet memes on Ylilauta.org, a Finnish discussion forum.

Internet memes are catchy pictures, videos, sound, or text that spread on the Internet from person to person via different channels. One of their features is *viral*, virus-like, spreading. Internet memes often spread through repetition and imitation, and people often modify them.

Ylilauta is a Finnish, anonymous Internet discussion forum or an imageforum. Another term for this kind of image-focused forum is *imageboard* and it is used of an Internet forum that has formed a special purpose for images and special kind of anonymous culture. Ylilauta is the Finnish version of the famous imageboard, 4chan.

The research questions studied in this thesis are:
1. What kind of image content circulates on Ylilauta?
2. How or in what kind of ways do people use images on Ylilauta?
3. What kind of meme images get modified or how do users modify them on Ylilauta?

The research method used in this thesis is netnography, also known as virtual ethnography. The research data were collected in November to December 2015, from /satunnainen/, the *random* discussion board on Ylilauta. Satunnainen is not a topic-based board so the discussion there is various. Discussion threads are collected and images in their context analysed using a qualitative typology.

The results show that reaction images are an important part of the discussion culture of Ylilauta. Irony is often used, and remixed and parodied content is a big part of participation and meme content production. Also, various memes were found from the data set, for example *Röökijäbä, Lörs lärä, Sad frog, and Spurdo spärde*.

Keywords: Memes, Internet memes, anonymity, virality, discussion forums, imageboards

Foreword

Here it finally is. After finishing this thesis, I don't know what a meme is anymore. So many memes, so little time... It's time for the thank yous.

I would like to thank Reijo Savolainen and Mika Sihvonen for guiding my work. Also a special thanks to our Facebook group(s), Filosofian maisterit 2016, Filosofian maisterit 2016 – back on track, and Filosofian maisterit 2017, that taught me to get beer when in doubt. I would also like to thank my friends and my cat for being there for me. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father who taught me about objectivity.

Tampere, 11.5.2017

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Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

Culture tends to pass along through imitation. People tend to write anonymously on walls of toilets. Storytelling and jokes are ways of entertaining audiences. In the digital era, people use personal computers to the extent that it is possible to create a community online, create a nickname for oneself, and create networks. The creation of culture has extended to the Internet, and nowadays is called the Internet culture. This includes new kinds of ways to express oneself on the web. Toilet wall writings have found their way to the web where the discussion gets new proportions.

Since personal computers, technologies, and high-speed Internet connections have been becoming more common, collectivity and availability of Internet users has increased. Internet users have constant access to the web, for example on forums, news sites, and other sources of information. Also the amount of entertainment, like pornography and humourous websites has grown. The web has been growing interactive, and it has become global with possibilities for everyone to participate and produce.

The perception of time and space changes while talking about the Internet. Everything stays on the web and anyone can read and see several years old content. Time is not important even though quick communication nowadays is the key. The Internet as a space reaches out to every corner of the world. Travelling via links and via search engines allows people to search and explore anything globally.

The original concept of the Internet was created for researchers to come together and share computer resources. Visions of home computer consoles and massive networks all linked together were not uncommon among the leading engineers in the 1970s. After the expansion of the Internet, it started to be easier to link computers to the growing network. (Hafner & Lyon 1998.) The computer networking became global and the term Internet started to mean something to people, more than in its technical sense.

Now, computers are devices for generating images, reworking photographs, holding videoconferences and providing animation and special effects for film and television (Bolter & Grusin 2000, 23). Not to mention the Internet, which has changed the extent of hypermedia and brought us new kinds of ways to broadcast, share, and participate.

E-mail, online news, and discussion groups like IRC, are just a couple worth mentioning that have been evolving since the beginning of the Internet and have revolutionized our computing and communications world. E-mail made people send more and more personal messages than before. E-mail also brought some digital culture features of the modern age: emoticons, the @ sign, the terms of free speech and privacy and the search for technical improvements (Hafner & Lyon 1998, 189). The MsgGroup was the first electronic discussion group and possibly the first virtual community (Hafner & Lyon 1998, 218).

In 2001 the dot-com bubble bursted, which meant a turning point for the web. After this, in 2004, the Web 2.0 conference was held in San Francisco, where the term Web 2.0 was introduced to the audience. (O'Reilly 2005.) The term describes the new kind of way of using the Internet. Users did not only read the content on websites but the content started to become more versatile and users started to create content on their own.

New kind of services started to arise: blogs, vlogs, wikis, social media websites and the use of tags, and websites that are concentrated on certain kind of content where users can participate in various ways. Internet as a distribution channel was changing. The web of today is full of possibilities, the biggest being probably social media where anyone can participate and produce in their own way. For example liking, commenting, and sharing content are familiar expressions to anyone using social media. These activities also are the main ways of content spreading and going viral.

Participation in different social media services varies according to the platform used. Participation has been made easy and it is encouraged, too. One characteristic of participatory culture and sharing content on the web is Internet memes. An Internet meme is any content (text, image, video, audio) that spreads through the web via different channels and is called viral (virus-like) content. By getting likes, comments, and shares, the meme content spreads and gains attention. Internet memes are often modified, and the different modifications of the content spread, making this content memetic. There are websites and applications dedicated to funny and memetic content since the Internet is used for entertainment purposes nowadays even more. Internet memes spread on websites that focus on this kind of content, in which creativity, humour, and the community are valued.

The term *meme* derives from Greek (*mimema*) and means something that is imitated (Shifman 2013, 10). It was first used by Richard Dawkins in 1976 and was invented alongside the term gene. In this thesis, the term *meme* is going to be defined as a meme in digital culture, an Internet meme. An Internet meme in general can be seen as an Internet phenomenon, content that spreads from person to another on the web. Memes are usually modified or edited in some way by the users at some point of their journey.

Richard Dawkins (1990) defines a meme as a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation and replication that spreads from person to person within a culture. Before the Internet era, Dawkins included cultural artiafcts like melodies, catchphrases, fashion, abstract beliefs and jokes as memes, phenomena that can be imitated. (Dawkins 1990, 171–172.)

Internet memes are a new way of communicating. Kozinets (2010, 2) says that there are at least 100 million, and possibly even a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience. The rise of digital technology and social media has established a networked culture that is well suited for memetic replication (Sci & Dare 2014, 15–16).

Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014, 249) state that Internet memes as scholarly objects attract because as heterogeneous and divergent bundles of communicative and aesthetic practices, they have produced forms of digitally mediated interaction, and their outcomes cannot yet be measured. There are various methods to study memetic or viral content but not many coherent views have been established.

The objective of this thesis is to study Internet memes that appear on a Finnish discussion forum, Ylilauta.org. Ylilauta is an imageboard, a follower of the Japanese Futaba Channel, 2chan, and the notorious English-speaking 4chan. The Internet culture has been researched during the last couple of years but the results end up coming out late since new memes and other content are produced daily. Research can't keep up with the quickly developing and renewable trends and Internet culture. In Finland, the research focused on Internet memes is almost non-existent.

The motivation for the topic of this thesis came from the topic of my Bachelor's thesis about participatory culture on a Finnish humour website, Naurunappula (Pajunen 2014). Memes create and represent the new kind of creative Internet culture and a way of

communication where experiences are shared and relatable content brings people together. The founder of 4chan, Christopher Poole, has described 4chan to be a meme factory (Kushner 2015) where only the best memes survive in this ephemeral Internet environment.

This thesis will focus on terms like discussion forums and discussion cultures, anonymity, participation, memes, and Internet phenomena, also known as Internet memes. The goal of this thesis is to find out how the users on Ylilauta use and modify images and memes. The structure of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 provides a literature review on memes, Internet memes, imageboards, and anonymity. Chapter 3 specifies the research design used in this thesis, and chapter 4 reports the research results. Chapter 5 discusses and concludes the key findings.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

In this thesis, the objective is to study Internet memes on a Finnish discussion forum, Ylilauta.org. Internet memes are catchy pictures, videos, sound, or text that spread on the Internet. One of their features is *viral*, virus-like, spreading. Internet memes often spread through repetition and imitation, and people can relate to them. Modifying already existing material is also a quality of Internet memes.

Ylilauta is an anonymous Internet discussion forum or an *image forum*. Another term for this kind of image-focused forum is *imageboard* and it is used of Internet forums that have formed a special purpose for images. For example 4chan, 8chan, and 420chan are anonymous, English, imageboards and Ylilauta, Pohjoislauta, and Apokalauta are Finnish imageboards.

Imageboards like 4chan have formed a special kind of culture where very little is sacred. Internet memes also have a big role on imageboards. Anonymity makes these imageboards and their discussion culture bold since no one can be identified and at the same time, anyone can be anyone.

Relevant terms in my thesis are memes and Internet memes, virality, and imageboards. Other essential terms are anonymity and its connection to the culture on imageboards, participatory culture, and Web 2.0. In this chapter, these terms are defined and explained. The key features of Ylilauta and the culture on Ylilauta are introduced.

2.1   Web 2.0, participatory culture, and social media

Web 2.0, participatory culture, and social media are terms that describe the new kind of nature of the web that includes, for example, new technological choices, user participation more actively than before, and users having power to produce content. Web 2.0 technology increased the scope, range, and numbers of online communities and the forms of participation and communication available to their members (Costello et al. 2017, 2).

Tuten (2008, 3) defines Web 2.0 as developments in technology used online that enable interactive capabilities in an environment characterized by user control, freedom, and

dialogue with a new kind of consumer involvement. O'Reilly (2005, 1) uses the terms collective intelligence, wisdom of the crowds, user as contributor, radical decentralization, rich user experience, and radical trust to describe Web 2.0. All in all, Web 2.0 is not one technology but many technologies that describe the new kind of web and the new uses of the web as a whole.

Web 2.0 has enabled users of the web to connect with each other easier, for example, through blogging, torrenting, tagging, wikis, and social media. The use of the Internet is more active – users do not only visit websites but also act in a more participatory way. Users started to produce content and the new technologies made it possible. Everyone has the chance to participate on the web and the Internet as a distributor of information has changed. Web 2.0 has revolutionized the use of the web but it is debatable if Web 2.0 is only the technologies that made all the new uses possible or is there more to it as a concept.

Participatory culture is a phenomenon where the user feels like it is easy for them to participate. Participation can be commenting, liking, sharing, editing, or creating content in different ways in Web 2.0 environments. Not everyone needs to participate but if they do, their investment is apprecciated (Jenkins 2010, 7). Internet memes are an example of this content where users create memes, share them, and modify already existing ones.

One of the first possible participatory forms of interactive Internet use was online chat rooms. They provide Internet users with virtual meeting places and allow conversation between people who might not otherwise be able to communicate with each other. The form of interaction in chat rooms is semisynchronous with real time, where comments posted appear almost instantly for other users to view and respond to (Harvey 2014, 265). For example, Internet relay chat (IRC) is nonthreaded interaction that allows people to talk about their interests with people from any parts of the world.

Anonymity of the individuals in chat rooms can lead to a less-than-civil discourse (flaming). As a result, many chat rooms have moderators that can remove inappropriate comments or block users that violate the norms of the chat room community. (Harvey 2014, 266.) First chats were developed in 1974 and since then, chat rooms have

emerged as one of the primary means for real-time discussion and interaction on the Internet (Harvey 2014, 265).

Newsgroups, chat rooms, online forums, and Internet Relay Chat channels are spaces where users cannot necessarily be connected to a certain user. Reasons for not wanting to be known by other people may be various: not wanting to be corralled into certain demographic groups or not wanting the hierarchy of prestige. These spaces offer lack of accountability, the possibility to be someone else or the true yourself, and most of all, anonymity. Anonymous spaces gather together those who are alienated, disaffected, voiceless, or unsocialized. (Auerbach 2012.)

According to Jenkins (2010), a key characteristic of participatory culture is when artistic expression and civic engagement have relatively low barriers and creating and sharing one's creations has strong support. Also, informal mentorship is needed; the most experienced users pass along the needed information to novices. In participatory culture, the members believe that their contributions matter and members feel some degree of social connection that they care what other members think about what they have created. (Jenkins 2010, 7.)

According to Jenkins (2006, 135–136), the new participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends:

1. new tools and technologies enable users to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content,

2. subcultures promote do-it-yourself media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have utilized the new technologies, and

3. economic trends favor the media that encourages the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship and participation.

There are different forms of participatory culture in the new media of today. According to Jenkins, they include affiliations (formal or informal memberships in online communities), expressions (creations made by users), collaborative problem solving (working together in teams completing tasks and developing new knowledge), and

7

circulations (shaping the flow of media) (Jenkins 2010, 8). Jenkins describes remixing or sampling a part of participatory culture and as a process of taking culture (existing media content; music, film clips, image, etc.) apart and putting it back together (Jenkins 2010, 32). The web nowadays is more and more of a visual media.

Social media is one of the phenomena born from Web 2.0 and is associated with participatory culture. Social media refers to online communities that are participatory, conversational, and fluid. These communities enable members to produce, publish, control, critique, rank, and interact with online content. Social media exists in the context of communities. (Tuten 2008, 20.) Users create and co-create, share, comment, and engage in content. Individuality, openness, and freedom are terms that describe online communities in the 21st century (Haasio 2013, 40).

Boyd and Ellison (2007, 211) define social network sites as web-based services that allow users to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, view their list of connections and those made by others within the system. However, not all social media services are equally social, the sociability depends on the qualities and the platform of the service.

Boyd and Ellison (2007, 212) do not include 4chan to be a major social network site. It is also debatable if imageboards should be included into the social media sphere (Haasio 2013, 40). Even though imageboards like 4chan are discussion forums, their format does not allow users to create profiles, organize, or view their list of connections. Anonymity is also one reason why imageboards are not seen to be a part of traditional social media.

2.2 Memes

Richard Dawkins, who has also studied genes, defines memes as units of cultural transmission or units of imitation. Few examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots, or building arches. (Dawkins 1990, 171–172.) Memes are associated with a rapid uptake and spread of an idea presented as a written text, image, language, or some other unit of cultural *stuff* (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 202).

Dawkins explains memes through genes; genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body and memes do the same in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain. This leaping of memes can be called imitation. Memes can be fertile, in a sense that, if they parasitize the brain, they turn the brain into a vehicle for the meme and its propagation like a virus. (Dawkins 1990, 172.) This is why memes can be seen as viral (virus-like) and in the digital culture the term virality has been associated to Internet memes, too. Shifman (2013) thinks that viral content acts differently than memes, but memes are viral by their nature.

The core problem of memetics is the definition of the term meme and its ambiguity. Shifman (2013, 37–39) separates memetics in three positions based on earlier work:

1. *mentalist-driven* memetics is based on the differentiation between memes and meme vehicles. According to this school of thought, memes are complex ideas that reside in the brain. Memes need a vehicle (image, text, ritual) that is loaded with a complex idea, the meme. This means that the meme vehicles are tangible expressions and memes are only the idea.

2. *Behaviour-driven* memetics sees memes as behaviours and artifacts rather than abstract ideas. In this model, the meme has no existence outside the vehicle and this means that it always presents itself in encoded information.

3. *Inclusive memetic approach* is represented by Blackmore (1999) and it defines meme as any type of information; anything that can be imitated should be called a meme.

Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection (1859) is the fundament of Dawkins' (1990) theory of the selfish gene and later, memes. Darwin arguments that there are three main features that are required to natural selection to happen: variation, selection and retention. There must be variation so that not all creatures are identical. There must selection; an environment in which not all the creatures can survive and some do better than others. In addition, there must be a process of retention; something of the original meme must be retained for us to call it imitation. (Blackmore 1999, 10–14.)

Blackmore (1999, 57) says that memes are often successful because they are memorable, rather than because they are important or useful. Ideas that are meaningful or make sense to people are more likely to become memes than ideas that are not easily

copied or understood by a large numbers of people (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 201–202). The faster a meme spreads the more likely it is to capture attention and be replicated and distributed (Brodie 1996, 38). Memetic selection is a process in which some memes grab the attention and get passed on to other people and some fail. There are many reasons why some memes succeed and others fail. Some are psychological facts; for example, memory of the human brain and attention, and limitations of our capacity to imitate. Also, humans are imitators and selectors as their nature; they are the replicating machinery and the selective environment for the memes. (Blackmore 1999, 16.)

Heath and Heath (2007, 16–18) have found six principles of *sticky* content: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions, and stories. By telling a story that creates emotions, is simple, concrete (easy to grasp, memorable, and possibly identifiable), unexpected, and credible (believing in personal experience, faith, authorities, science, or statistics when exposed to a story) increases its possibilities to stick. However, memes hardly ever are all of this. They usually are only some of it. Memes in the digital culture have also mechanisms that help to stick. It is possible that these six factors are underlying qualities of stickiness even in the digital world.

Memes replicate by imitation. Imitation is learning, at least according to some theories. Imitation is different from contagion and social learning. Contagion is inherent behavior, while social learning is learning about the environment through observing others. Imitation is learning something about the form of behaviour through observing others. (Heyes 1993, 999.) Just like genes, not all memes replicate successfully. Longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity are qualities that make for high survival value among memes (Dawkins 1990, 173).

Fecundity of a meme presents its ability to spread, the capability to produce new growth, the number of copies made in a time unit. Some memes achieve short-term success and spread rapidly but do not last long in the meme pool (Dawkins 1990, 173). Longevity presents the life span of a meme. Copying-fidelity is how capable a meme is of spreading as alike as the original. Dawkins (1990, 174) says that it looks as if memes are not capable of being high fidelity and that meme transmission is subject to continuous mutation and to blending. Shifman (2013, 17) says that digitalization allows lossless information transfer so nowadays meme transmission has high copy-fidelity.

Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 208) say that the term fidelity Dawkins suggested is possibly better understood as replicability when online memes are concerned.

Then what makes a meme successful? Or how are memes competing with each other? Dawkins says that while a gene competes with its alleles-rivals for the same chromosomal slot, memes seem to have nothing equivalent to this. Dawkins suggests that the human brain, which cannot do more than few things at once, would pay the most attention to the most dominant memes. These memes must do it at the expense of rival memes. (Dawkins 1990, 175–176.)

Dawkins also says that the selection of so called *co-adapted meme-complexes* (a large set of memes that are so alike that they could be treated as one meme) favour memes that exploit the cultural environment to their own advantage. The cultural environment consists of other memes that are also being selected. This means that new memes would find this meme pool hard to invade because of its extent. Dawkins emphasizes that the only necessary the brain should be capable of is imitation. (Dawkins 1990, 176–178.)

Blackmore (1999, 155) presents a memetic theory of altruism. The point is that if a meme is altruistic it becomes popular, and because it is popular it gets copied, and because it is copied, it spreads more widely than a not-so-altruistic meme. Blackmore (1999, 53–54) admits that it is difficult to specify a unit of a meme and there is no right answer to it. Blackmore ends up with a definition of a meme to be any memetic information in any of its many forms; as long as the information can be copied by imitation, it counts as a meme (Blackmore 1999, 66).

Blackmore points out that in the era of the World Wide Web, memes can be saved on disks, send further to other people, and called up again whenever needed. In cyberspace there are stories, pictures, programs, and games that millions of people have put onto their websites, creating a virtual world of digital information. (Blackmore 1999, 216.) Little did she know, however, because Internet memes are creating a culture of their own on the web now and, we are still using the term meme to describe them. This thesis focuses on Internet memes, the memes of digital culture.

2.2.1 Internet memes

In this thesis, an Internet meme is defined as content that spreads from person to person via various channels on the web and is modified in various ways by the users. These modified memes are then circulated and transmitted around. The channels where meme content spreads may be forums, image-, audio- and video-sharing websites, as well as social media websites. The meme content on the web is usually images, videos, or audio. There are many kinds of Internet memes and they use different visual, textual or auditory ways to build an entity that attracts people to create and share them in the participation process.

Bauckhage (2011) defines Internet memes as phenomena that rapidly gain popularity or notoriety on the Internet. He also says that memes are a phenomenon that defies social and cultural boundaries. Internet memes spread among people by means of e-mail, instant messaging, forums, blogs, or social networking sites. Bauckhage says that Internet memes are actually inside jokes or pieces of underground knowledge that some people are in on. (Bauckhage 2011, 42.) Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014, 249) describe memes as digital objects that repeat a visual, textual, or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the Internet infrastructures they came from. Bauckhage (2011, 42) includes also offbeat news, websites, and catch phrases to be meme content.

Shifman (2013, 18) defines a meme as a piece of cultural information that passes along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. She also says that memes impact on the macro level even though they spread on a micro level. Memes for example shape mindsets, behaviour, and actions of social groups. Websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are, according to Shifman (2013, 18), express paths for meme diffusion, which means that content spreads through social networks and can spread fast within hours.

Shifman (2013) describes Internet memes as groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of *content* (the idea or the ideology of a specific text), *form* (the physical incarnation of the message which is perceived through our senses), and *stance* (the information a meme conveys about their own communication, how the addresser positions themselves in relation to the text) as a way to evaluate certain meme contents.

12

Stance can be expressed with three subdimensions: participation structures (who is entitled to participate and how), keying (the tone and style of communication), and communicative functions (for example, emotive, referential, or poetic functions). (Shifman 2013, 40–41.) By evaluating these three dimensions, the modification and imitation habits of Internet users can be studied and found out which of these dimensions succeeded in the competitive meme selection process. Vainikka (2016, 66) again, suggests that five things should be taken into consideration when interpreting memes: the context, the emotion the meme represents, form, goals, and materials.

Shifman says that sharing, repackaging, imitation, and selection are important attributes of Internet memes. Sharing has become the term to describe many activities happening online: uploading, updating, and commenting. The repackaging mechanisms are mimicry and remix, mimicry meaning imitating, impersonating, redoing or recreating the content, while remixing involves technology-based manipulation or re-editing content. (Shifman 2013, 19–23.) It has to be taken into account that viral content spreads differently on different social media websites and new technologies able content to spread, for example, with the help of hashtags (#). Sharing, reblogging, tagging, and retweeting are processes that make paths of memetic objects visible (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014, 249).

The popularity of an Internet meme could be measured by how many people recognize, can name a meme or place it in a context. Virality is a term that describes memes and their quick, viral-like spread. Viral content is a term different from the term meme, the difference being that the users do not modify viral content, even though the spread is also quick and viral-like. Nowadays, the chances of content being viral but not getting modified are minor. The more viral an Internet meme is, the more memetic characteristics it has, and the easier it is to be defined as a meme. The term meme is easily used of content that spreads quickly and is vastly modified.

Hemsley and Mason (2013, 144) define virality as a word-of-mouth-like cascade diffusion process wherein a message is actively forwarded from one person to others, within and between multiple weakly linked personal networks, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of people who are exposed to the message. Hemsley and Mason (2013) have defined three characteristics that they use to describe virality: person-to-person mode of diffusion, great speed, and broad reach.

The main difference between memes and virals content is variability. A viral piece of content is a single cultural unit, while an Internet meme is a collection of texts. Purely viral content rarely exists and a single viral image is probably a part of a meme somewhere around the web. The term *viral* is usually used of the original image of a meme or a single, only viral, image. (Shifman 2013, 56–58.)

Shifman (2013) would rather place memes and virals in a spectrum, than in a binary dichotomy. She suggests that an accurate differentiation would be threefold: a viral, a founder-based meme, and an egalitarian meme. A viral is a single cultural unit and a founder-based meme is an Internet meme that is sparked often by a viral content, the founding unit followed by many versions and each of the memes viewed by fewer people. An egalitarian meme (e.g. *LOLCats*) is often based on a certain formula and it spreads quite evenly among numerous versions. (Shifman 2013, 58–59.)

Questions like how and to what degree do virals spread and what are the factors that enhance the effectiveness of viral content are often asked in the case of viral content. In the case of memes, the questions revolve around the memetic activities that play an important role in constructing shared values in digital cultures. The studies of virality are often focused on the transmission of a viral, while meme studies more on the ritual of communication. Virals could be studied as memes and vice versa, since both are associated with spreading virally and then spawning numerous derivatives. (Shifman 2013, 61–63.)

Bauckhage (2011) has studied temporal dynamics of Internet memes and models for predicting the evolution of their popularity by using mathematical epidemiology and log-normal distributions. The data was collected from Google Insights concerning 150 memes. Google Insights characterizes how a meme's popularity or notoriety has developed over time. Time series were also collected from Delicious.com, Digg.com, and Stumbleupon.com (social bookmarking services) when available and this data compared to Google Insights'. (Bauckhage 2011, 44.) The data showed that the web services (which are, at the same time, user communities) seem to have different interests and behaviour. For example, Digg users are interested in recent memes, and Stumbleupon users interested in sophisticated memes. The temporal distributions that characterize meme popularity are skewed and longtailed, for example, Google Insights

shows that the query frequencies for almost every meme were displayed as a positively skewed curve with a considerably long tail. (Bauckhage 2011, 43–45.)

Bauckhage's (2011) results show that some popular memes have viral spread and epidemic outbreaks. Bauckhage's study is quantitative but he says that knowledge of meme spread is still more qualitative and conclusions seem to be drawn more of the episodic, rather than analytic, evidence (Bauckhage 2011, 43). Bauckhage (2011, 47) says that the majority of famous Internet memes spreads through homogenous communities and social networks rather than through the Internet at large. It is possible that like-minded web users come together to use certain web services, and these user communities may affect the web behaviour of an individual through the culture in these communities.

Memetic content spreads quickly on the Internet since users usually have more than one *online home*. Memetic content can also create online homes. Memes exist somewhat independently but constantly share content and users so are never truly independent. (Douglas 2014, 336.) This means that the content on Ylilauta can also be found basically anywhere else on the web, but most likely will be seen on Ylilauta.

Memes could often be defined as inside jokes in certain communities. Inside jokes often have the characteristic that some people do not understand the context, that they are only understandable for a certain group or community and it is preferably kept that way, that outsiders do not get to get the joke. A joke is something that anyone can understand and laugh at. The more clear the message of a meme is, the more audience will accept it as a joke or something of their own. The more altruistic the meme is, the more it will spread. A purpose of a meme is not to restrict who finds it shareable. Internet memes are often relatable or some other way, remarkable, and that is why they are successful, and, understandable for many. A successful meme will spread quickly and wide. If some memes are inside jokes, it is because of the community they are in.

Internet users share for social and self-presentation purposes. People may share content for various reasons but when they create their own versions (meme content), they reveal their personal interpretations (Shifman 2013, 43). Humorous content is central in viral processes. According to Berger and Milkman (2012), there are two kinds of users that are valuable to the viral process: hubs (people with a lot of connections) and bridges

(people who connect between otherwise unconnected parts of the network). The creator of meme content and the conditions in which it was made often remain unknown to the users who remix it and pass it on (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014, 249). Blackmore (1999, 58) points out that effective transmission of memes depends critically on human preferences, attention, emotions, and desire.

The desicion to share or not to share online content is made by an individual but there are some patterns that underlie behind these behaviours (Shifman 2013, 66). For example, Berger and Milkman (2012) have studied the spreadability of news items, and Shifman (2013) categorized them into six factors:

1. Positivity (people are more likely to share positive stories that are also surprising, interesting, or useful, than negative stories),
2. provocation of high-arousal emotions (people share content that is emotional positively and negatively),
3. packaging (clear and simple stories spread better than complex ones),
4. prestige (the more famous the author is, the more people spread the news),
5. positioning (spreading the news to the right people), and
6. participation (viral dissemination is enhanced if people participate in other ways, too, than only just sharing).

Shifman (2013) has also studied memetic YouTube content and what are the common memetic and viral features of these videos. She found out that videos often focus on ordinary people. This production is simple and easy to imitate, and ordinary people seem like an achievable goal for imitation. Another quality was flawed masculinity which means that men were the leading characters in most of the videos selected in the data set and in those videos, the men fail to meet prevalent expectations of masculinity in appearance or behaviour. (Shifman 2013, 73–77.)

Other qualities Shifman (2013) found were humour (like Knobel and Lankshear 2007), which is the main feature in the videos. However, there are still a large group of videos that do not intentionally are trying to be funny. These videos are often of kids or animals, or of colossal mistakes and *fails.* Playfulness, incongruity (humour coming from an unexpected encounter between incongruent elements), and superiority (humour coming from someone's inferiority) are features that the humour relies on in these

videos. (Shifman 2013, 78–81.) Also, *cringe* (feeling embarrasment for someone else, feeling uncomfortable) could be added as a part of these features.

Simplicity, repetitiveness (repeating one simple unit), and whimsical content are also features found by Shifman. She found out that referencing popular culture is somewhat salient in the data set. People usually disagree on politics, religion, and so on, but pop-culture is approachable and easy to understand. Also, people acting in a silly or irrational matter, in addition to playfulness and the lack of concrete content was found to appear in memetic YouTube content. Shifman concludes that bad texts make good memes in contemporary participatory culture. The more approachable and illogical the meme is, the the easier it is to do *whatever* to it, and it is acceptable. If the video is amateur-looking and weird, it invites people to fill in the gaps or mock its creator. (Shifman 2013, 81–88.)

Shifman (2013) and Sci and Dare (2014) present an example of the meme *Pepper-Spraying Cop*, in which an American police officer sprays protesters directly in their faces while the Occupy Wall Street protest. This image quickly became a part of different kinds of contexts, including historical, artistic and popular culture backgrounds. Shifman (2013, 51) has analyzed this image through the three dimensions of memetic imitation, finding out that content varies greatly, while the police officer has been often photoshopped as original in the images. Sci and Dare have studied Photoshop memes as a pleasurable form of postmodern play by analyzing the development, movement, and use of these memes: the replication, selfishness, circulation, and evolution of Pepper Spray Cop. They identify three memetic styles that can be associated with the Photoshop meme: political disputation, iconographic juxtaposition, and cultural absurdity. (Sci & Dare 2014, 7.)

The fact that the Pepper-Spraying Cop meme is an image, gives users more freedom to try out more, as in easily making various versions and with different contexts, and, by easily, thousands of different users. The simpler an image is, the easier it is to modify. Johnson (2007, 40) says that replication can be approached in terms of both quantity and speed: the quicker the meme replicates, the higher its current survival rates are likely to be. Johnson (2007, 39) says that evolution (of memes) occurs when variation, replication, and differential fitness (the number of copies vary) exist and points out that humans do not use memes to create culture but memes create culture via humans by

engaging in behaviors that are most likely to enhance their survival. Johnson (2007, 28) says that a meme is suitable tool for analyzing for example, popular culture discourses.

Humor and playfulness are central to the memetic process. This means that the survival of a meme is connected to the pleasure of the creation, circulation, and consumption (Sci & Dare 2014, 20). Intertextuality is probably pleasurable when the users possess sufficient cultural knowledge to recognize the popular references (Ott & Walter 2000, 436). Sci and Dare (2014) mention that it is difficult to trace the chronology of memes. They evolve in a nonlinear manner and they replicate and circulate simultaneously. The evolution of (at least) Photoshop memes is best described as fundamentally spatial. (Sci & Dare 2014, 23.)

Kuipers (2011, 31–39) has studied post 9/11 humour on the Internet. It was found out that genre play is often the underlying technique used. Pop-culture can be easily combined with disasterous events to create humouristic content. It was also pointed out that the 9/11 Internet jokes were often visual, assembled from elements of other images, creating parodied and mimicked content. Kuipers (2011, 39–40) states that 9/11 anonymous Internet humour does not build community or stress solidarity but set the jokers apart from public discourse, and presumably, mainstream sentiments.

The differentiation between memetic dimensions may advance our ability to draw borders between Internet memes (Shifman 2013, 53). By thinking Internet memes as groups of units that share interconnected contents, for example, Shifman's (2013) content, form, and stance, they can be more effortlessly analysed and compared. But there are still no consistent ways of quantifying or qualifying Internet memes concerning their whole potential. There might be other dimensions to memes, too, which may be lost if not analysed as a whole also.

Then what is not an Internet meme? In the Internet era it is easy (and at the same time, not easy at all) to get your voice heard. There are always new content and everyone can find content that they enjoy. An individual can be a part of creating meme content by doing what everyone else is doing. Bad memes are born when an individual creating meme content does not understand the context the meme should be in. In this case, the content may still be memetic content. Memes are contagious and easily modifiable content. There is content that is only memetic in certain communities that makes

defining more difficult. The more people share the meme and participate by creating the meme content, the more probable it is to be a meme. The more versions there are of the meme, the more probable it is to be a meme. Memes also usually happen naturally. In order to define something to be a meme, some research should be made in a community the meme represents itself.

2.2.2 Typology of online memes by Knobel and Lankshear

Memes are contagious patterns of cultural information that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and actions of a social group (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 199). Memes create a common cultural experience to those who are exposed to the meme and those who understand it. Memeticists use terms like unit, pattern, idea, structure, and set when describing memes (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 201).

In addition to Dawkins' (1990) and Shifman's (2013) definitions of memes, Knobel and Lankshear (2007) have studied online memes and created a typology of successful online memes. Their goal was to develop a typology of memes in order to look for possible patterns of purpose, use, and takeup within different affinity spaces (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 208). They identified a pool of successful online memes reported in mainstream media, such as newspapers, television, and online magazines between the years 2001 and 2005 and used a discourse analysis to create a typology of memes. Knobel and Lankshear's (2007, 200) objective was to:

1. identify and examine the qualities that seem to make a successful online meme,
2. create categories of successful memes to better understand the online *memescape* and to understand the purposes, uses and appeal of them, and
3. explore possible ways for teachers to take up memes within school-based learning contexts.

As a result, Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 209) included three characteristics of memes that are likely to contribute directly to each meme's fecundity: some element of humour, a rich kind of intertextuality, and anomalous juxtaposition. The humour ranged from quirky and offbeat to potty humour, and from bizarre parodies to ironic humour. Intextual memes included popular culture events, icons, and phenomena. There was

also fourth category, outlier, which was the memes that did not belong to any of the other categories. (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 209.) The act of remixing should be included as a practice associated with successful memes since modifications often seemed to help the meme's fecundity by encouraging people to contribute their own versions of the meme (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 208–209).

Most of the memes in Knobel and Lankshear's pool seemed to appeal to people who enjoy absurd and playful ideas carrying serious content or humorous ideas carrying serious content that may be considered to be social critique and commentary. The social critique memes in this study have playfully serious qualities, which may enhance their contagiousness and fecundity. Overall, the playfulness seen in most of these online memes seems to share popular culture experiences and practices. (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 217.)

Knobel and Lankshear say that the distinction between insiders and outsiders is important; outsiders will often have difficulty seeing the humour in these memes. Affinity spaces (for example, gamer spaces, anime spaces, blogger spaces) clearly play an important role in the fecundity of a successful meme, especially when the meme is distributed online. (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 217.)

This typology of memes is from the time when social media was a new concept. Nowadays, it is possible that memes have a capability to circulate quicker and wider, due to, for example, image sharing sites (Imgur, Reddit, 9gag) and the growing number of participators all over the world. It is possible that there are new kinds of memes that are not included in this typology. It is also possible that there are different kinds of memes in different cultures and on different websites.

2.3 Imageboards

Ylilauta and 4chan are anonymous discussion forums, Internet forums, message boards, or as they are referred to on 4chan and Ylilauta, *imageboards* (in Finnish, *kuvalauta* or *kuvafoorumi*). Imageboards are discussion forums where posting images is considered the basic feature in addition to posting to *threads* (in Finnish, *lanka*). The discussion on imageboards is usually highly topical.

Manivannan (2012) says that the discourse on 4chan is the intersection of image, orthography, and code. These features of imageboards have stayed quite intact over the years; the layout and qualities of imageboards are still about the same. When an anonymous user starts a new thread (a discussion thread), an image must be uploaded. When replying to an already existing thread, no attachment (image) is required but it is usually the case. 4chan and Ylilauta do not require anons to log in to read the message board and see its content.

> "4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. There are boards dedicated to a variety of topics, from Japanese animation and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register an account before participating in the community. Feel free to click on a board below that interests you and jump right in!" (4chan.org.)

> "Ylilauta is a Finnish imageboard. Imageboards are just like regular discussion boards with one exception, they place a big emphasis on the images embedded into posts. All of our content is user submitted." (Ylilauta.org.) Ylilauta was created by the fusion of the former two biggest boards in Finland, Lauta.net and Kotilauta 20th of February 2011 (Ylilauta.org).

4chan's collaborative-community format was inspired by one of the most popular forums in Japan, Futaba Channel, also called 2chan (4chan.org). Also Finnish boards have copied the format. Haasio (2013, 103) says that 4chan is the example for Finnish boards, but Futaba Channel is the first imageboard known to exist.

There are a couple of Finnish imageboards but at the moment, the most popular one is Ylilauta with over three (3) million monthly visitors. With almost 30 million page impressions and over one (1) million messages sent every month, it is said to be the most popular discussion forum in Finland. (Ylilauta.org.) The language used on Ylilauta is usually Finnish but English might also be used, for example, on the /int/ (international) board.

The term used of different topic-based forums is a *board* but the term can also be used of 4chan-like imageboards in general. On Ylilauta, there are *sub-boards* (in Finnish, *alalauta*), for example, the random sub-board (in Finnish, */satunnainen/*), My Little Pony (/poni/), music (/musiikki/), religion (/uskonnot/), and Japan-stuff (/anime/). In this thesis, the term board will be used of the different topic-based forums on Ylilauta.

There are about fifty (50) sub-boards on Ylilauta, all related to a certain topic. The amount of sub-boards may vary and administrators can create more. A possible reason for creating a sub-board for a certain topic is that if /satunnainen/ has a lot of threads related to it. It is easier for the users to have a sub-board for that topic where the discussion is related only to it.

4chan's daily traffic is immense and its memes continue to spill over and multiply in broad popular culture. It is a discordant bricolage of humour, geek cultures, fierce debates, pornography, in-jokes, hyperbolic opinions and general offensiveness. (Knuttila 2011.) The discussion topics on anonymous imageboards can be sexist, racist, and homophobic, or even illegal.

The activist group *Anonymous* is said to be connected to 4chan (Aron 2010). On 4chan-FAQ when asked "who is anonymous?" the answer is: "Anonymous is the name assigned to a poster who does not enter text in to the [Name] field. Anonymous is not a single person, but rather, represents the collective whole of 4chan." (4chan.org.) Anonymous is the shared identity on 4chan, and on Ylilauta, most users are under the shared identity of *Anonyymi*.

Ylilauta has gained notoriety since some of its suspicious discussion threads and it has been mentioned in the mainstream media several times. For example, someone started a thread about bringing a knife to school in Oulu which was considered a threat (Helsingin Sanomat 2013), a Finnish television-programme *Putous* and its vote for the best character was manipulated (Iltalehti 2012), and there was a security breach where some information was leaked on Ylilauta (Hiltunen 2011). Also, *Kari Tapio*'s (a famous Finnish singer) song *Juna kulkee* (The train runs) from 2003 was listened enough to be on Spotify's top list in 2010 (Iltasanomat 2010). One of the trolling cases from 2015 was *R-kioski*'s *Suvaitsevaisuuskuppi* campaign (open-mindedness campaign) where memes like *Spurdo spärde* were voted to be on a mug. In 2011, there had been 17 police investigations on Ylilauta (Parkkari 2011).

The reasons for trolling may be various but one of them might be the fact that it is easy (at least in the cases mentioned before). With little effort, *Juna kulkee* was on Spotify's top list. Just by coming up with an idea on Ylilauta and sharing it with the community

makes the discussion *epic* and remarkable. This kind of behaviour can be seen as citizen activism that takes place on the web.

Mäkinen (2009, 82–83) divides virtual communities into five categories:

1. virtual environments of local communities (e.g. websites of local organizations),
2. virtual communities that are born due to common interests,
3. virtual communities that already exist in real life (communities that want to expand their practises on the web),
4. virtual communities that have been born online and operate only online, and
5. produced virtual environments (e.g. environments for entertainment purposes or created around a product).

Mäkinen (2009) points out that the definition of produced virtual environments as communities may not be suitable since the participants may not feel like they are a part of the community. Without an inner motivation of participants for belonging to the community it may not work as well as in the community of the feel of belonging. Mäkinen (2009, 82) says that sense of virtual community is often like the sense of community in tribes, symbolic and based on common interests, commitment, and interaction.

Ylilauta's *Hikikomero* (/hikky/) is a virtual community that was born online and that operates only online since users do not meet in real life. Haasio (2013, 41) says that Ylilauta's Hikikomero-board was born because users have same kind of interests (the hikikomori-phenomenon). Ylilauta as a website is different kind of community as a whole since it is a larger community with millions of visitors a year. There seems to have been meetings in real life, for example, on /deitti/-board (dating). The anonymous format makes the defining more difficult.

Hine (2000, 74) divides discussion forums into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous forums. Ylilauta is an asynchronous discussion forum because the users to the interaction need not be present simultaneously. Everyone can at every time read and comment on the messages. Ackland (2013, 61–65) calls asynchronous forums also threaded conversations.

Imageboards are often considered to be the birthplace of Internet memes. The founder of 4chan, Christopher Poole (2010), describes 4chan to be a meme factory because of its creativity, anonymity, and unique content. Ylilauta, being the most visited imageboard in Finland in 2015, shares the imageboard layout and format, and is also anonymous.

2.3.1 Subcultures on the web and the A-culture

Williams and Copes (2005, 70) describe a subculture to be a culturally bounded network of people who share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction that over time develops into a discourse that structures the generation, activation, and diffusion of these ideas, objects, and practices. Even though Ylilauta is an anonymous forum, there can be seen some characteristics of subcultures, for example, specific kind of language, ways of communicating, and memes that describe the humour.

Auerbach (2012) introduced the term *A-culture* in order to characterize the culture outside Facebook, Twitter, and other mainstream social-networking sites. Auerbach defines the participators in A-culture to have been in hacker and geek circles in the 1980s and 1990s. The members were generally young and many alienated from the cultural mainstream. The "A" stands for many things, for example, anonymous, asshole, anarchy, alias, aggregation, and adolescent. (Auerbach 2012.) Ylilauta could be defined as an example case of A-culture.

Williams and Copes say that the Internet is a useful space for people to experiment with identity. Roles, boundaries, and rules describe the structure in the community. They also say that it is important for the subculture to distinguish those who belong and those who do not belong to the subculture through discussing the differences and similarities of individuals on the forum itself. (Williams & Copes 2005, 71.)

Auerbach describes imageboards to be different from any other form of communication, since their real-time and multiparticipatory features. He says that the medium itself is mostly to blame of the obscenity that happens there, not just the participants. Anonymity creates a space for pranking, antagonizing, and acting out without facing the consequences and without associating these actions to one's real-life identity. Memes,

which are constantly created and documented, create a shared and progressive sense of culture and belonging on 4chan. (Auerbach 2012.)

Turkle (1995, 12) says that the ability to be anonymous on the Internet empowers us to play with how we present ourselves, by expressing multiple aspects of the self, playing with the identity, and trying out new identities. The freedom to play with identity lets an individual to try out boundaries. There are also other perspectives to anonymity, though.

One characteristic of A-culture is the economy of suspicion, economy of offense, and economy of unreality. Economy of suspicion is created by the trolling phenomenon. New users do not necessarily recognize trolling or irony but older users know to enter imageboards with skepticism and self-aware irony. Economy of offense describes the phenomena of obscenity, abuse and hostility against race, gender, sexuality, and basically anything. Auerbach says that even though A-culture is full of obscenity, abuse, and hostility, it does not mean the participants are racist and the point is that no one really knows the views of the participants; it is just self-referential irony and constant play. (Auerbach 2012.)

According to Auerbach (2012), the economy of unreality describes the separation of participants from their real-life personae. He says that the everyday reality is quite far from A-culture reality, for example, when compared to Facebook and Twitter where a person is known by their posting history and by their name. There are mentions of everyday reality but context is absent a lot of times. For example, on advice threads there are gaps in the stories and the context is difficult to interpret without knowing the context behind it. The distinction between fiction and truth is a blurr. This leads to participants filling the void with their own pieces of reality. (Auerbach 2012.)

The imageboard culture on Ylilauta is different from most forum-based conversation. For example, the language and the way users communicate are special. Trolling is an important part of the culture. Also the meme production, circulation, and ideation are flourishing. At least some of the memes, the language, the ways of communicating, and the idea of raiding (anons attacking a certain person, forum, or organization by usually trolling them) are originally from 4chan, even though Ylilauta has created some of its own.

The memes circulating in different communities vary according to the relevance of the content and the culture. Not all communities have a culture that tends to use memes as a way of communicating. Different communities usually have somewhat different users and so, meme content (for example, Bauckhage 2011). Also, the platform affects the meme culture: what is the purpose of the platform and what are the possibilities to create content. It is not impossible to have same kind of content on different websites but if the use and platform are different, it is likely that meme content varies. Factors that may affect the content are for example, moderation and personal networks. It may work in both ways – users visit websites where the content is interesting to them and users create content that is appreciated on the website.

Williams and Copes (2005) used observation ethnography and informant ethnography to study straightedgers and their subculture on a forum dedicated to the topic. Observation ethnography revealed that there was a significant amount of discussion about subcultural identity (Williams & Copes 2005, 74). When participants of the subculture interact with each other it is important for them to appear authentic and true to the subculture. Williams and Copes (2005, 75) mention that those who clearly do not belong to the subculture are often labeled as poseurs, wannabes, or pretenders. Haasio (2013) has also found similarities in the /hikky/-culture on Ylilauta.

The interactive informant ethnography, in which Williams and Copes started threads about topics discussing the subculture, the views about it and the mainstream culture, revealed that participants who post messages construct their identities by using their knowledge of the subculture and their computermediated interactions with other participants' posts. The primary way to show other one's authenticity on this Internet forum is to articulate a subcultural identity through text. (Williams & Copes 2005, 79.) Williams and Copes also say that participants on the straightedge forum do not agree on what constitutes this authenticity but emphasize their participation in a straightedge scene or their adherence to a straightedge lifestyle (Williams & Copes 2005, 76). This does not mean that the participants would not belong to the subculture but the interaction online relies on these ways of creating identity.

If others reject an online presentation of self, an individual can simply avoid or ignore many of the negative consequences that might accompany rejection in less anonymous circumstances. Identity online is not separate from the face-to-face world but rather

complements and supplements it. (Williams & Copes 2005, 72–73.) On an anonymous forum, it is easy to not deal with critique or hurtful comments but to use other ways of dealing with them.

On anonymous forums, comparing oneself to others may be to some extent distorted since there are not many cues of the individuals participating. It is also difficult to estimate who participate, in what ways, and who lurk. Douglas (2014, 315) describes 4chan to be no-telling-if-you'rereplying-to-your-own-post anonymous, which confirms the economy of suspicion, economy of offense, and economy of unreality on imageboards.

2.3.2 Anonymity

Imageboards like Ylilauta and 4chan are anonymous forums. Anonymity is the state of being unidentifiable. This means that anonymous users can't necessarily be linked to a certain individual or a certain group or any information can be linked to anonymous users. Anonymous users online don't use a pseudonym (nickname) or their real names while they use the web. On Ylilauta, the users are often called *nyymi* (in English, *anon*), coming from the word *anonyymi* (in English, *anonymous*).

Bernstein and associates (2011) studied 4chan's random /b/-board, where they focused on anonymity and ephemerality by conducting a content analysis on a sample of /b/ threads. Ephemerality was studied by tracking 4chan's tempo and content deletion dynamics and anonymity by examining participant practices around identity. Bernstein and associates (2011, 50) focus on identity representation and archiving strategies while making design choices in online communities. Usually online communities are based on strong identity and permanent archival strategies but this is not the case on imageboards, like Ylilauta. On non-anonymous websites and forums users are usually identified with a nickname or a real name and discussions and other data are saved.

Pseudonyms and real names can help users promote trust, cooperation, and accountability on forums whereas anonymity may make the communication impersonal and undermine credibility. Usernames allow people to build a reputation. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 50–51.) It is possible to use a pseudonym on Ylilauta by easily adding it to the name field but anyone could use the same one. From time to time, there can be some

pseudonyms on Ylilauta. It is extremely uncommon to post using a name or pseudonym on /b/ of 4chan (Bernstein et al. 2011, 55) and it is usually the case on Ylilauta, too.

Bernstein and associates (2011) suggest that it may be safe for anonymous posters to act in a way they would never do offline because their actions very rarely come back to haunt them and very rarely any information can be associated to them. The users on 4chan are safe behind the collective *Anonymous,* which suggests de-individuation and mob behaviour. However, in advice and discussion threads, anonymity can provide intimacy and more openness in conversations. Anonymity may build up different group identity than pseudonymity. Also participation may be affected by anonymity; it may be seen to be easier, without much effort. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 55.) Non-anonymous groups feel of course more personal (Tanis & Postmes 2007).

Bernstein and associates (2011, 51) also mention that /b/ has developed alternative credibility mechanisms, for example, language and images that are essential to imageboards. Anonymity has said to have positive outcomes also, for example, Jessup, Connolly, and Galegher (1990, 318) found out that by disassociating users from their comments, anonymity appears to reduce behavioural constraits of group members and let them to contribute more freely and less inhibitedly. Also, groups that work anonymously felt like they could make critical comments more safely. Tanis and Postmes (2007) found out that anonymous users were more satisfied with the medium used and believed they performed better compared to those who had personal information present.

Van Dijk (2006, 167) believes that virtual communities have less chance of maintaining its own culture and identity than a traditional community. In the case of anonymous communities, it is even less likely. It should be remembered that the background of users of anonymous forums can be various and that they could only have one thing in common when they participate, and that is usually the interest that brought them together. It is difficult to tell if anonymous communities are heterogeneous, and to what extent. Van Dijk (2006, 167) points also out that there is a difference between communities online and online communities, the former being a virtual counterpart for a community in real life, the latter being a complete virtual community only living on the Internet. He also says that virtual communities cannot make up for the loss of traditional community. That is probably not the case of anonymous imageboards, though.

Auerbach (2012) divides anonymity into three levels: 1) persistent pseudonym anonymity, 2) per-session anonymity, and 3) per-message anonymity. Persistent pseudonym anonymity is where user's posts are persistently linked to a single pseudonym. Per-session anonymity is where user's posts are verifiably linked to a single pseudonym within a single thread. Per-message anonymity is where there is no verifiable way to identify a user even from one post to the next. The third level is the case of imageboards, the exception being the original poster, where the case is per-session anonymity.

Anonymity and the lack of user registration enable participants to post quickly and without the fear of someone recognizing a single user. The emphasis on posting images allows users to create their own variations on content. The variations can easily be exported, repeated, and cited, causing the number of cultural referents to increase in a short time. (Auerbach 2012.)

Vainikka (2016, 61) says that memes are sometimes intentionally used to confuse and stir the pot. Anonymous forums create a place (for especially young people) where matters that are left outside the social media scene can be discussed. Ridiculing other people is not a new phenomenon, and sometimes it may be liberating to identify oneself with the target of ridicule. On anonymous forums, this is easy.

2.3.3 Ephemerality

Ephemerality in the case of imageboards means that the content lives only for a short time. Expired threads are deleted and the majority of the site's content is permanently removed after a certain time. On 4chan, threads expire faster than on Ylilauta since there is considerably more traffic: threads, replies, and users overall. The discussion on Ylilauta is also highly topical, for example, immigration is a popular topic and is often discussed. 4chan and Ylilauta do not have an in-built archiving system. Anons may themselves save threads, images, or other content to their personal archives but without doing that, the content goes 404 (not found).

4chan has developed two main ways for users to control thread ephemerality: *bumping* and *sage* (Bernstein et al. 2011, 54). Bumping is the act that allows users to keep a thread alive, without contributing necessarily anything worth the thread. This usually

means posting a phrase like "bump" or something that can be interpreted as bumping (e.g. b4mp, pump). All replies do bump the thread but sometimes it is wanted to make clear that it is a bump or a user has nothing else to add to the thread. Sage is a method of control that allows users to reply to a thread without it bumping to page 1 (i.e. bury it). Sage allows users to reply on a disliked thread without attracting attention to it. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 54.)

The content on Ylilauta is organized into 50 pages that all have 10 threads on them. Posting on a thread *bumps* it to page 1 where visibility increases and the thread is more likely to be a part of participation. Marking a thread *sage* pushes the thread further away from page 1 where it is more likely to disappear and go 404 (not found). Threads that no one comments on also move further away from page 1 to page 50. After page 50, the threads go 404 and cannot be found anymore from Ylilauta.

Ylilauta has a sub-board, */arkisto/* (archive), where the most epic threads are saved. This sub-board is not listed anywhere so it is meant to be a nostalgic place for those who know about it. /Arkisto/ makes it possible to follow the evolution of the language and memes that are born on Ylilauta. The most epic threads are chosen to /arkisto/ by the moderators, and saved for anons to read later.

Ylilauta has also other features, for example *hide, tää :D,* and *follow.* The hide feature hides a thread from a user that has chosen to hide it. *Tää :D* is a feature that allows users to give votes to the most remarkable threads. The follow feature allows a user to follow a thread. Some of these features need an account or some level of activity on Ylilauta so trolling would not be that easy. These features are made for anons to customize their Ylilauta experience and not be forced to see the content that is uninteresting.

What is common for 4chan, Ylilauta, and most imageboards is that the lifespan of threads is often short. Bernstein and associates (2011) showed that the majority of threads have a short lifespan and a small number of replies; the median life of a single thread is 3.9 minutes on 4chan. A thread with no responses during a high activity period was gone in only 28 seconds. The longest-lived thread that had frequent new posts to bump it lasted 6.2 hours. The data set consisted of about 35,000 threads and 400,000

posts per day. 43 % of the threads did not get any replies, the median being one (1) reply in a thread. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 53–54.)

The more content is posted, the faster it is about to expire. The fact that most content at some point disappears drives users to save the most epic or in some other way remarkable content. At least on Ylilauta, a thread can only have a limited amount of replies. The most popular threads collect hundreds, possibly thousands of replies, and at some point, the thread is locked. Following threads will be posted if the content is seen as remarkable enough to be continued and discussed further. Usually the old thread is linked to the new one, so it is possible to follow the discussion. Some of the most commented threads on Ylilauta are for example, Docventures and Yleisradio's A2 discussion programme threads, which discuss current topics in Finland.

The fast expiring of content can indicate that users would have to produce meme content quickly, before the thread is gone and before other users produce better, or funnier, content. For example, LOLcats, *Advice Dog*, and *Archaic Rap* have had their start on 4chan (Bernstein et al. 2011, 55). Only the fittest memes survive in the quick culture of imageforums that are built to have no retention and quick turnover (Sorgatz 2009).

2.3.4 Threads

There are three ways to answer on Ylilauta: the first post (in Finnish, *aloituspostaus*), replys to other users, and independent replys. It is common that replys are assocciated with the topic in the thread. The first post starts the thread. It is possible that the conversation gets a surprising turn and the topic changes but the original topic is disclosed in the first post. There is no need to post an image, except in the first post.

It is probable that the images posted with the messages have something to do with the thread or the message itself. One key characteristic of imageboards is reaction images that express the reaction of the poster for the topic discussed or a message posted. Sometimes the reaction image may be hard to read due to irony or an inside joke and may seem like it has nothing to do with anything. Reaction image and the message posted create a story, context, or a situation. Reaction images may be for example, stills from movies or television programmes. (Knuttila 2011.)

According to Haasio (2013, 103), the images on Ylilauta's Hikikomero-board rarely have anything to do with the message posted. On the other hand, he did not focus on the image use in his study. In some of these cases the user explicates that the image has nothing to do with the message and posts *picture unrelated* (in Finnish, *kuva ei liity* or *kuva randomilla*). Most of the threads seen on Ylilauta are conversational which means that OP (original poster) or AP (in Finnish, *aloituspostaaja*) starts a conversation or brings out a question (Haasio 2013, 40). Other users respond to OP or to other users. Most threads have some degree of conversation. There is also sometimes meta-conversation or meta-discussion.

All threads have information on how many replies a thread has and of how many different users, how many times a thread has been read, how many followers a thread has, and how many times a thread has been hidden (Image 1). This information varies depending on its content and how popular or exclusive a thread is.
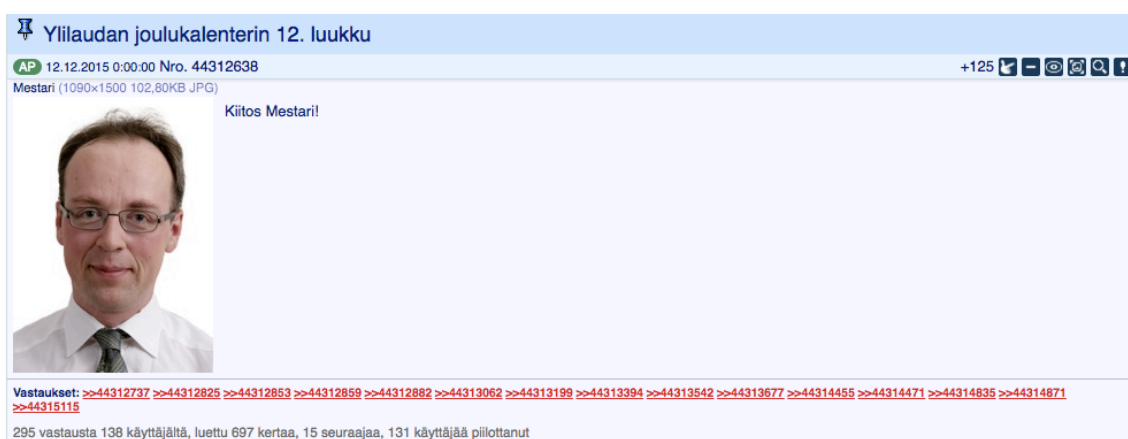

Image 1. Information of a thread: 295 replies from 138 users, read 697 times, 15 followers, hidden by 131 users

Many of the threads on /satunnainen/ are playful or humorous. Other sub-boards are clearly more topic-related. Trolling (provoking) is a big part of /satunnainen/. Creativity, cleverness, and originality are key elements in posting to /satunnainen/. There are also other kinds of threads than conversational which means that it is not only on the level of conversation and responding to others but other actions, too. These threads include co-operation threads (for example, raids done in co-operation with other anons), /b/-folder or other folder threads, meme threads, greentext threads, or shitposting (misbehaving, aggressive trolling, and poor quality content) threads.

/b/-folder is literally a folder on a user's computer, where it is easy to save a funny or a notable image in. In /b/-folder threads, users usually post and look at images and save and fill their own /b/-folder with new images. This makes it easier to post them later to threads. This is in a way collective behaviour. Meme threads are alike, users post their own versions of a certain meme and it is possible to save them on a computer. This way of archiving makes creating, modifying, and sharing memes easier. It is possible that oldfags and active users use /b/-folders more frequently than newfags and random visitors.

There are also forced meme threads where anons *pakottaa* (in English, force) content to become meme content (Lepistö 2016). This content is artificially created and spread. The goal is to make the content known and thought to be meme content by other anons and this way, spread even more. Usually the content is funny only to the creators themselves and forcing is obvious. Because of anonymity on Ylilauta, it is difficult to know who is forcing the content, is anyone saving, or posting it forward, and if the content becomes meme content.

>greentexting is literally green text, which is produced using a right chevron (">"), which then produces a green text with everything that is written after it. Greentext is a built-in feature of imageboards. It is also written in a certain kind of style, and sometimes it is used to imply sarcasm (Manivannan 2012). Greentext is often used as a way of storytelling. Some greentexts are copypastes (in Finnish, *pastas*), and in order to understand the irony, the user has to know the origin of them.

Co-operation threads are often threads that include trolling, raiding, or other dubious activies usually around the web. Manivannan (2012) says that trolling is used to achieve a sense of intellectual superiority over fellow interactants since imageboards have minimal governance, anonymity, and dehistoricizing ephemerality. Trolling users outside imageboards is about showing the outside web the obvious superiority of anons and imageboards. Identity deception, where an anon trolls other anons on imageboards, is the ultimate troll and in order to do that, one must show talent that is acknowledged and praised also by other anons.

In addition to these thread types there are for example, GET-threads and *rollaus* threads (in English, roll thread), where the goal is to get certain digits in the ID number. Every

message is numbered chronologically with an ID number. The goal of a GET is to get an ID number of rare, aesthetically pleasing digits, for example 100000 or 22222. In GET-threads, anons compete to post an epic or funny GET-message. If GET is not remarkable, epic or funny, in spite of the efforts of trying to do so, it is said to be a failget (Alfonso 2013). Especially funny to some users are GETs such as *anime on paskaa* (in English, anime is shit), and these kinds of GETs are ironically thought to be truths since they are GETs. Roll threads work the same way; the goal is to get certain ID digits that match up with a predetermined number (Alfonso 2013).

Double digits (in Finnish, *tuplat*) are statistically quite common (e.g. 1234566) and sometimes the original poster is daring him/herself to do something that the double numbered reply tells to do. If the original poster does whatever doubles tell them to do, OP delivers (in Finnish, *AP toimittaa*), which is seen as epic. Usually anons are trying to challenge the original poster to do something courageous. The original poster rarely delivers content that needs too much of an effort, but if they do, they get praised by other anons.

2.3.5   Users on imageboards

"Mikäli etsit asiallista keskustelua tai tahdot kunnollisia vastauksia, tämä alue ei ole sinulle. Lähetä viestisi aiheesta riippuen Ylilaudan muille keskustelualueille. Mikäli taas olet tullut vain poistamaan stresi huolia hassupostaamalla, haukkumalla AP:ta ystäväksi tai trollaamalla muita kanssakeskustelijoita, olet oikealla alueella. Muista: Älä ota Satunnaisen keskusteluja liian tosissaan. Täällä saa trollata." (Ylilauta.org/satunnainen.)

"If you seek politically correct discussion or want decent answers to your questions, /satunnainen/ is not for you. Post your message on topic-based discussion boards if you have anything topic-based to say. If you are on /satunnainen/ to relief your stress by shitposting, insult the OP, or troll anons, you are on the right board. Remember not to take everything too seriously in here. It is okay to troll." (Ylilauta.org/satunnainen, translated from Finnish.)

The ways of participating on Ylilauta can be various. Participation may be discussing for example, daily topics, posting images, creating images or memes, saving images for furher use, trolling, bumping or sageing, giving *tää :D* votes, or lurking. Active participation could be defined as posting on threads, while passive participation only

lurking. This might be too strict of a definition since there is no way of knowing who participate and in what ways. Participation in this thesis is defined as active participation, which means posting on threads.

Some of anons are *lurkers,* which means users that only read the threads but not comment on them, while some comment more often. Some of anons are of course *trolls*, the ones who troll (provoke) and try to get others offended, while others discuss more matter-of-fact topics. Even though imageboards are anonymous, some users may leave traces of themselves accidentally or deliberately. If an anon is recognized by someone, they are usually made fun of and on Ylilauta, *tunnistettu'd* (*recognize'd*) is something anons might comment on the threads. At this point, the anonymity of an anon (and identity in some cases) might not be safe. In some cases, information on those who are recognized is found out and spread around the imageboard since they failed to keep their identity anonymous.

The content on /b/ is often purposefully insulting and offensive, and very few matters are sacred. Racist, sexist, and homophobic language is frequently used, for example, the use of the suffix *fag*. Females often are made to feel not welcomed. *Tits or GTFO* (post a topless photo or get the fuck out) is commented if someone has been identified to be a female. This kind of language is part of the group identity; it pushes the boundaries of propriety and turns heads. Especially Ylilauta is seen to be a playground for young males who want to experiment with social boundaries. Although the content can be offensive, it can also be creative, funny, and open, as the creation and promotion of various memes show. (Bernstein et al. 2011, 53.) Even propaganda is easily shared and forwarded using memetic content on websites that do not build trust on anything but anonymity.

In the case of Ylilauta, it can be seen that novices (newfag, in Finnish *uushomo*) are easily laughed at if they are spotted to be newfags. This is because the more 4chan's or Ylilauta's discussion culture is exposed to the other (also, mainstream) side of the Internet, the more impure the culture becomes. The most experienced users (oldfag, in Finnish *vanhahomo*) are seen to be elitists who know all about Ylilauta, Kuvalauta and Finnchan, the memes, and content that has been passed along throughout the years. *Jonnes* (also known as uushomos, newfags) are stereotypically young males who for example, drink energy drinks, act in a certain naïve way for their age, shouting memes

offline to act cool and post mainstream memes from 9gag. As they visit Ylilauta, they think to enter the ultimate cool meme zone.

Jonnet ei muista (in English, newfags don't remember) is used to troll young users by posting something they will not remember, therefore proving all of whom do not remember, to be a jonne (in English, newfag, a novice). Sometimes these threads might be ironic, too. Anyone who falls for the bait is called a jonne. If someone is proven to be a jonne, anons usually post *alaikäban* (ban because of under 18 years old) and sometimes the user is banned, since /satunnainen/ is forbidden from those under 18 years old because it is NSFW (not safe for work).

Millen (2000) suggests that a forum that uses nicknames often assume that new members of that community search an archive for information, before asking new questions about the forum or the community. This might be difficult for the users of Ylilauta even though the most epic threads are saved on /arkisto/, on personal computers of anons, or other alternative locations.

There is some degree of moderation on Ylilauta but it might not be as traditional or strict as on some other websites. There are volunteers moderating and they can delete content and ban users. The rules of Ylilauta state that it is forbidden to disturb others, post inappropriate or useless and off-topic messages, post material against good taste, or post spoilers. These are not the rules of /satunnainen/, though. Illegal content is prohibited and users can *nettivinkata* (in English, to snitch) any content that they think does not belong on Ylilauta. (Ylilauta.org.) Marko "Fobba" Forss (an Internet police) is often brought up when a police case occurs on Ylilauta.

Trolling is the act of making someone provoked by using different methods, for example, provocative language. Usually the targets are easy, the ones who with little effort get provoked and fall for the bait of the troll. This can be seen as *butthurt*, also, getting offended. What makes a troll successful is his or her ability to empathize (Phillips 2015, 36). Some trolling is innocuous, while the other end is harassment; some trolling is persistent and some is ephemeral (Phillips 2015, 23).

Phillips (2015, 28) says that emotional dissociation is the most prominent and necessary in trolling since emotions are seen as a trap and something to exploit in others, and ignore in yourself. Trolls are able to dismiss the emotional context and the harm their

actions may cause (Phillips 2015, 29). Anonymity makes emotional dissociation easier since the one who is being trolled does not necessarily know who is trolling them.

A set of shared experiences is a common feature in the act of trolling. Humorous trolling is a cultural event that brings together anons by creating something collective and common for participants. As Phillips (2015, 31) puts it, trolls laugh themselves into existence and sustain this existence through further laughter. Also, trolls may not know who other anons are; they might also not interact with the same group of people again.

It is difficult to estimate how many users participate on anonymous imageforums and in which ways. The amount of threads, comments, and images can be estimated and even counted but it is difficult to estimate how many individual users participate, and how extensively. It is possible to create an account to Ylilauta, though, which saves the data of personal activity and modification is possible. The moderators of course have extensive data of Ylilauta.

There have been changes in usability and features from time to time on Ylilauta. For example, *kultatili* (in English, golden account) is a feature that allows a paid user to log in and get extra features, like a sub-board for golden account users only. Those with a golden account get also a tag *Kulta* (in English, golden), which allows others users to identify the golden user. There are also additional tags that tell about the user's activity level on Ylilauta. The most epic users might also receive other tags.

It is possible that those who have received tags are more active and have been using Ylilauta longer. Those who have golden or platinum accounts have paid for them so it is also possible that they use Ylilauta more than a random user. Even though there are anons that have identifiable cues, it is impossible to prove who they actually are, and on Ylilauta, it does not matter.

It might be easier to participate on anonymous forums because of anonymity. On social media where people with nicknames and real names have a lot to say, it might be difficult to get your voice heard. Those who feel like they cannot participate on social media might participate on anonymous forums. But, it is unnecessary to assume that anons on Ylilauta would not be also active on other social medias.

3   RESEARCH DESIGN

The key terms and definitions, and approaches of meme research were described in the literature review. Also, the characteristics of imageboards were described, and Ylilauta was introduced. Ylilauta is the subject of the empirical part of this thesis and where the data set is collected from. In this thesis, the research method used is netnography, also known as virtual ethnography. The objective is to study Internet memes on an anonymous imageforum, Ylilauta.org. The research data collected on Ylilauta is analysed using a qualitative typology. This chapter introduces the research questions and the method used in this thesis.

3.1   Research questions

The research questions studied in this thesis are:

1.   What kind of image content circulates on Ylilauta?
2.   How or in what kind of ways do people use images on Ylilauta?
3.   What kind of meme images get modified or how do users modify them on Ylilauta?

The first research question is answered with an analysis on the data collected on 6th of November to 11th of December 2015 from Ylilauta. Shifman (2013) found two main repackaging mechanisms to meme content, remix and mimicry, which are used in the analysis. In addition to these two mechanisms, original content is added, since not all content is remixed or imitated.

The first research question answers to the question of what kind of images circulate on Ylilauta and if they have been modified and how. If these images are modified, they might be meme content. Another way to answer this question would be to use Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) analysis on meme characteristics, but since most of these memes fall into the category of humour (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, 209) and since Knobel and Lankshear's typology is outdated, Shifman's categorization is used.

The second research question is also answered with an analysis on the data collected from Ylilauta. The objective is to analyse the ways users have used the images on their

messages on Ylilauta. Finally, the objective is to compose a matrix (a cross-table in which elements appear at the intersections of rows and columns, governed by certain rules) including the image content found in the data set regarding research question 1, and of the uses of images in the data set. The third question will be answered with a couple of examples of memes modified and found on Ylilauta during the analysis.

The images in this thesis are analyzed in their context, on Ylilauta, which is primarily a Finnish discussion forum. Even though the focus is on the images and meme images, the context they are in is also taken into account. Images may be used in all kinds of situations and for example, previous replies may affect the context. Some memes are only memes in their context, and some memes are only memes on Ylilauta.

Image content in this thesis means the visual content, images and pictures, posted by anons. Image content can be memetic content or not. Memes are memetic content. Memetic content is something that has spread widely, quickly and that has visual reoccurrances for example, of meme characters, and something that anons recognize from a context. The visual content may have more to it than what it visually represents.

3.2 Virtual communities and netnography

Ethnography is a research strategy, a way of seeing through participants' eyes; it aims for a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of the group researched (Hine 2000, 21). Traditional ethnography relies upon the observations and participations which the ethnographer has done while being present on the field. The goal of ethnographer is to describe and explain the actions, interpretations, or perceptions in the environment studied.

Internet has gone hand in hand with the development of ethnography for documenting interactions on the web (Hine 2008, 257). Netnography is a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet's influence on contemporary social worlds. For example, in consumer and marketing research, netnographies have become an accepted form of research. Netnographies have been used to study a variety of topics and especially developed to understand the world of everyone who uses the web. (Kozinets 2010, 1–2.)

Netnography is ethnography but conducted on the Internet. Compared to ethnography, netnography is faster, simpler, and less cost-worthy and it is more natural and undetected than interviews. It tells about the users, cultures, and virtual communities on the web. Netnography can be also known as virtual or online ethnography, or cyberethnography.

Netnography was chosen to be the method used in this thesis because it shows the real discussion culture in its genuine state. The culture on Ylilauta can be very fragile because of its anonymity and the culture for trolling. By trolling, the users of Ylilauta could falsify the results if the role of the researcher was visible and the participants know they are being studied. To prevent any distortions, netnography was seen to be the most worthy to be conducted.

Netnography is a relatively new method. It has gained popularity in the era of Web 2.0 and social media because of its importance for marketing specialists to study consumer behavior and segments for their brands or products. The problem with other methods to study consumers is low response rates. Netnography brings new kind of information to researchers, like how consumers behave by using emojis, images, hashtags, or memes. There are all kinds of tools that can analyze consumer behavior (likes, shares, visits to a page) but numbers do not tell everything about the audiences. It must also be taken into consideration that there are communities composed of people who communicate using audio information, visual information, or audiovisual information (Kozinets 2010, 8). These communities include for example, iTunes, Flickr, YouTube, and newer ones, like 9gag, Imgur, and Tumblr.

Netnography studies the individual interactions emerging from the web, through computer-mediated communications and Internet connections as a focal source of data. The element of communication is necessary to netnography. Communication is the exchange of meaningful symbols, and on the web this human symbol system is digitized and shared through information networks. Each of these comprises useful data for netnography. (Kozinets 2010, 8.)

Rheingold (1993, 5) defines virtual communities as social aggregations (groups or collections of people) that emerge from the web when enough people go on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal

relationships in cyberspace. Kozinets (2010) has used Rheingold's definition to develop a greater insight into netnography.

There must be enough people, or a certain minimum number of people, involved in order for an online group to feel like a community. Accessibility is important to online community formation and to the conduct of netnography. Most netnographic discussions are open. In Rheingold's (1993) definition, long enough is the concern with length of time and it implies that netnography studies online communities as ongoing relationships. These are continued and repeated interactive contacts. The suggestion is that there is a minimum number of interactions and exposure over time that is necessary for a sense of community to become established. (Kozinets 2010, 8–9.)

Sufficient human feeling in Rheingold's (1993) definition is the subjective sense of authentic contact with others present in online communities. It includes for example, honesty, trust, and expressions of intent to be social with one another. Finally, there is a social entanglement between individual members of the group. These relationships can extend beyond the online context into other aspects of people's social lives. (Kozinets 2010, 9.)

Steinmetz (2012, 28–29) points out that in ethnography space and time are important factors. That is the case in online communities, too. Since the Internet is a place where mind (rather than body) navigates via links, it is important to distinguish space. If a hyperlink is posted on a thread on Ylilauta, the question of if it should be analysed too, is relevant. Also, physical context can influence online behavior, for example, geographical factors, real life situation, or technical limitations.

An issue that is faced right in the beginning of virtual ethnography is the question of presence. The ethnographer should be an effective participant observer in a particular culture. The ethnographer should prepare for the culture they are entering but not too well, so the assumptions do not affect the data or the analysis. (Hine 2008, 261.) Bird and Barber (2006, 145) remind that electronic communication is stripped of all but the written word and that since there are no gestures, facial expressions, or tones of voice, messages can be easily misinterpreted, by the researcher or other participators taking part of the communication.

Time is the other factor that should be taken into consideration (Steinmetz 2012, 30). In the case of Ylilauta, ephemerality is something that affects the community. Also, some threads might have been alive for weeks, while some die instantly. Even though the threads in this data set were collected in a certain time period, it does not mean that any of those threads would have been born outside of that time period. They were alive and commented on in that time period.

The problem with Ylilauta is not only the lack of identity, but also the culture of trolling. Anyone can act to be someone else, except for the original poster who is marked as OP (or on Ylilauta, AP). It is impossible to know who is behind the computer screen but maybe something that matters even more is that how people digitally project their identities and how their identities are judged as being authentic (Hine 2000). This again, is not the case of Ylilauta. The case of Ylilauta could be studied as how individuals react to different kinds of (trolled) identities and how anons act in an anonymous setting.

Steinmetz (2012, 34) says that participation is something that must be experienced to gain complete understanding of a community, that observation is necessarily not enough. He also says that the community could start acting differently if knowing that ethnographer is present. This is strongly the case of Ylilauta. Based on visits on Ylilauta and research on 4chan, there would be trolling, or at least attempts of it. Sensitive subjects or clues that could point to an individual are not chosen to be in the examples of this thesis. The social entanglement may not be as strong on Ylilauta (or on the /satunnainen/ board) as on forums where individual users can be identified. Nobody is expecting to be identified on Ylilauta and that is not the point there either.

The rules of Ylilauta say that content on Ylilauta can be used for academic research purposes (Ylilauta.org). Anyhow, by participating or by staying as an observer, there are ethical questions assocciated with netnography. Ylilauta is a public forum and users know that their comments are public for everyone so the individual is responsible for his or her own actions. On the other hand, it is questionable if the comments are best seen as public statements and therefore fair game for the researcher or as property of the authors and not to be appropriated for academic purposes without permission (Hine 2000, 24). Then again, the anonymity makes it impossible to prove one's comment being theirs.

The users on Ylilauta are mostly safe behind anonymity. There are some cases when the rules of Ylilauta are broken or unwanted information on identities has leaked but that is where moderation is needed. In this thesis, it is made sure of that identities could not be traced to an individual. In addition to this, the research questions are not targeted to studying anonymity but memes and images, the use of them and context they are in. The examples examined in this thesis are chosen to describe the phenomena as descriptively as possible.

On anonymous forums, the problem with netnography is that there is no way of knowing who the users really are: who are participating, and if users are who they say they are. There might be some indicators of the age range and sex of the users but it is possible that users are not who they say they are or it is difficult to otherwise prove an individual user's age or sex – or it is not even relevant. Users do not know presumably anything about other users either. Steinmetz (2012, 27) says that lurking is a problem in message board research since it is impossible to know if the lurkers are lurking or not and, by what ways lurkers are affected by the lurking.

In the case of this thesis, Ylilauta was somewhat familiar to the nethnographer. For example, the terms *jonne, vanhahomo,* and *nyymi* were familiar, but any of the cases where Ylilauta had been on mainstream media were not familiar. During the observation time, the nethnographer only lurked on Ylilauta, not leaving any traces of herself there. Because of previous experiences on Ylilauta, there was no need to learn new meanings of words of that culture. Entering of the culture was easy and undetected. It is of course debatable if the nethnographer was able to understand the culture without asking or participating any further than lurking. One problem of Internet research relates to authenticity and trustworthiness of the data gathered (Hine 2000). In this thesis, it is assumed that users on Ylilauta troll to some extent. It is important to recognize trolling and the use of irony in order to understand the context of images.

According to Costello and associates (2017), the field of netnography today varies between research in their depth, engagement, and duration. Costello and associates (2017) say that active netnography could be the future of online ethnography. Netnography could be combined with other research methods, too. The questions of reliability, representativity, and data quality are even more relevant for netnography today when the whole world uses the web. For example, Twitter, Instagram, and

Facebook are all different services with different demographics and different uses. Kozinets (2015, 97) still sees a distinct need for human presence in netnographic enquiry and says that the participative, reflective, interactive, and active part of netnography when using the communicative function of social media and the Internet should not be forgotten.

3.3 Alternative ways of researching online

Another method that could be used in studying anonymous online communities is a more active form of netnography, where the researcher comments on the discussions, either by engaging in the conversation itself or by creating or starting discussions about the things the researcher wants to study. According to Hine (2000, 23), this active participation would allow the researcher to establish a deeper understanding.

Memes can be studied, in addition to the previously mentioned methods, by interviewing or with questionnaires. These methods tell more about the knowledge and an individual's use of memes or about the culture concerning memes on imageboards. A discourse analysis to analyse memes in written form or the language used in online communities would also be a way to create a sense of a culture in an online community. It is possible also to add questionnaires, interviews, and other methods to netnography.

The problem with questionnaires conducted on anonymous forums is that there is a possibility of trolling, which causes distortion. When moved from face-to-face interaction to electronically mediated contact, the possibility for informants to fool the ethnographer seems to multiply (Hine 2000, 22). Especially on Ylilauta, where anonymity is highly valued, false or fabricated identities used in questionnaires might be used as a way of trolling.

There are also quantitative methods that can be used to describe the messaging on anonymous forums in numbers and about the communities in various ways. The most interesting way of studying memes would be to try to create a meme and see what it takes to create a meme and how do other users react in terms of the culture regarding meme circulation and modification. The creation of a meme would be nearly impossible but to see how content would possibly spread and how it would possibly be modified would be worth studying.

Sci and Dare (2014, 9) give an example of a study in which they trace a meme's movement and map the range of articulations in a specific memeplex. In this way, it is possible to understand the communicative significance of a meme. The most extensive analysis would be with quantitative and qualitative methods that would combine the qualitative features of a meme with how extensively or quickly a meme would spread and in which ways. There is not yet a way to quantify or qualify Internet memes so estimating a meme's spread or popularity could be something to research further. Others have also studied memes, for example, Shifman (2013) and Knobel and Lankshear (2007).

There are more ways to study Internet memes than only just by their visual content. They might describe the community and its users, the larger cultural and social context, and present time. How memes are born, how they are used and shared, and how they spread online are themes closely associated to memes. Maybe attention should also be paid to the phenomenon as a whole, or to the communities creating the phenomenon, rather than to Internet memes as units of culture. The meme culture is also about those who forward and circulate the memes, so maybe they tell also about the different kinds of ways to participate and why.

3.4   Research data and analysis

The discussion board where the research data were collected is /satunnainen/, the *random* board on Ylilauta. Satunnainen is not a topic-based board so the discussion there is various, compared to, for example, My Little Pony board, where the discussion is focused only on that topic. This does not mean that Satunnainen does not have any threads that would not be any other board topic-related. Satunnainen also has the most visitors so there probably are more individual participators. Of course, a certain amount of visitors are lurkers, the ones that only read the threads but not comment on them.

The data were collected from the website Ylilauta.org from 6th of November to 11th of December 2015. The time period of data collection should be long enough since there might be more threads enriched with images and discussion as the time goes by. It is also possible to encounter more memes during that time. The threads collected from the /satunnainen/-board and these web pages were saved in the HTML format. This means that it is possible to open the threads, as they were at the time of saving. It is very

unlikely that the threads are available after a certain period of time since new content is produced daily.

Ylilauta is the most active at 9–11 p.m. (Ylilauta.org). It is the time when there are most users, so threads have more replies and the most popular threads stay on the page 1 longer. These threads also possibly have more images. Threads enriched with images may not be conversational but probably are. It must be taken into account that images found on Ylilauta might be originally found from other websites.

The data set consists of twenty-two (22) discussion threads and 909 images. Fifteen (15) of these threads were conversational, which ended up in the conversational threads matrix. There were seven (7) special threads that were not included in the conversational threads matrix since the goals of these threads were different from conversational threads. Even though there are 909 images, not all of them are meme images. Other images that do not fall into the category of being memes are images of basically anything else. Ten (10) memes were identified from the data set.

The goal was to collect threads that had over one hundred (100) replies, as images, text or both, and were enriched with images. Another reason to collect a thread was that the content was epic, funny, remarkable, or troll-worthy. After collection, some threads were excluded, depending on their content and their mutual similarities. The threads collected included videos and .gifs (graphic interchange format) but they were not included in the analysis since they needed a closer examination concerning the context they were in.

In this analysis the attention is paid to the images and the context they are in. The contexts the images are in tell about the use of them; for example, some images have more to do with the replies than others. The goal is to find themes in the images that reoccur in the data collected. Internet memes can be various by their nature and in this thesis, memes are defined to be visual content, meme images. Also, the context the memes are in is taken into consideration and analysed.

Many of the images in the data set do not fall into only one category. Deciding the images to fall into only one category is based on a subjective interpretation on how images serve a purpose. The interpretations made in the analyses are subjective.

Typology is a system used for dividing or classifying things into types or groups according to how similar or different they are. In this thesis, a typology is used to build a system for categorizing image content and their uses into types based on what is the content in them and how they are used. Typology needs a grouping process; images in this typology will be analyzed according to 1) what is the use of the image (how is the image used in its context), and 2) what does the image represent (what is in the image, how is the image modified)? Through this typology, the uses and the content of the images will be understood and explained with the help of one or more memetic attributes.

The categories of image content found from the data set are original content (referred often as OC), remixed content, mimicry or parody content, and image macro. The categories of image use found from the data set are reaction image use, ironic or sarcastic image use, other use (images that have something to do with the conversation or the comment posted), random use (images that have nothing to do with the conversation or the comment posted), and meta (self-referential) use. Finally, a matrix is composed based on the categories of image use and image content, to find out what kind of images and memes circulate on Ylilauta and how they are used.

Knowyourmeme.com is used to help identify some of the memes found from the data set. Knowyourmeme.com is a website dedicated to documenting Internet phenomena. It works like a wiki but has editorial staff and moderators who evaluate the memes further and then confirm or invalidate them. The website has millions of visitors every month and is considered an authoritative source on news, history, and origins of viral phenomena and Internet memes (Knowyourmeme.com 2016). There are also other websites dedicated to Internet phenomena but Knowyourmeme is chosen because of its popularity. Since Knowyourmeme is not an academic source, information concerning memes is only used to back up some of the backgrounds of the memes. The analyses in this thesis are done based on the observations on Ylilauta.org. The reason behind referencing Knowyourmeme is that it verifies memes to be acknowledged also somewhere else other than Ylilauta.

4 MEMES ON YLILAUTA

This chapter introduces the results found to answer the research questions. Conversational threads are examined in chapter 4.1; how the (meme) image content is used in discussion threads on Ylilauta. Chapter 4.2 describes remixed and parodied content on Ylilauta, chapter 4.3 describes image macros, and chapter 4.4 introduces special threads and takes a closer look on the memes found in the data of this thesis.

4.1 Conversational threads

The categories of image content found from the data set were original content, remixed and parody content, and image macros. The term original content among anons on Ylilauta is content that anons have themselves created but in this thesis, it is defined as something that is not technologically modified content and basically original images. Remixed and parodied content are a part of Shifman's (2013) categorization of meme images. Image macros were added to the typology since they were also found in the data set. Reaction image use, ironic and sarcastic use, other use, random use, and meta use describe the uses of images in the data set.

Matrix 1 demonstrates the use of different image content in conversational threads. Conversational threads have user-to-user discussion that concentrates on a certain topic. There might also be off-topic discussion. These threads have numerous images and Matrix 1 demonstrates the use of different images attached to the replies in these threads. Matrix 1 was composed by defining an image to be original content, remixed, parodied, or image macro content, and defining the context the image is used in. Then the use of the image was categorized to be a reaction image, or to be ironic or sarcastic, other, random, or for meta use. Each image was categorized once.

The data set consisted of twenty-two (22) threads but only fifteen (15) of them were conversational threads, these fifteen (15) threads are included in the matrix. In these fifteen (15) conversational threads there are 693 images. Seven (7) threads that were not conversational are analysed in the special threads (4.4) chapter.

The threads excluded from Matrix 1 (special threads) are not conversational in the same way that conversational threads are. They are different because they do not focus on

discussing but the goal of them is to achieve something else than discussion of the topic assessed in the first post. For example, meme threads where users do not really discuss but only post a certain meme do not aim to be discussive. So the image use is different. If there is no verbal discussion, the context of images can be difficult to interpret. Special threads and their replies and images do not fit in the conversational thread matrix. Matrix 1 only includes the images attached in the conversational threads.

Matrix 1. The use of images in conversational threads (n=693)

	REACTION IMAGE USE	IRONIC/ SARCASTIC USE	META USE	RANDOM USE	OTHER USE (related but not completely random images)
ORIGINAL CONTENT	181	68	3	24	162
REMIX	76	54	2	2	6
MIMICRY (PARODY)	55	26	-	1	8
IMAGE MACRO	6	8	1	-	10
Altogether	318	156	6	27	186

Conversational threads discuss everyday matters, usually original poster's experiences or current events. As Matrix 1 indicates, images in this data set were mostly original content, meaning original images, not technically modified, remixed or parodied images. Reaction images were used in 46 % of all used images. The images posted on

conversational threads are mostly original content reaction images (approx. 26 % of all content). Approximately 23 % of images posted on conversational threads fall into the category of other original content. These images are related to the topic on the threads, they clearly do not express reaction but are not completely random images either. Totally random images were used infrequently and meta (self-referential) images were very rarely used.

Image 2 illustrates an original image in a conversational thread. The original poster has posted the image that starts the thread and it is relevant to the topic discussed. In this analysis, Image 3 is included as original content since it only has retouching and does not have any memetic remixing. Image 3 might be retouched but it is not remixed since it does not include re-editing of content. It is not original content per se, but does not have remixed or parodied qualities.
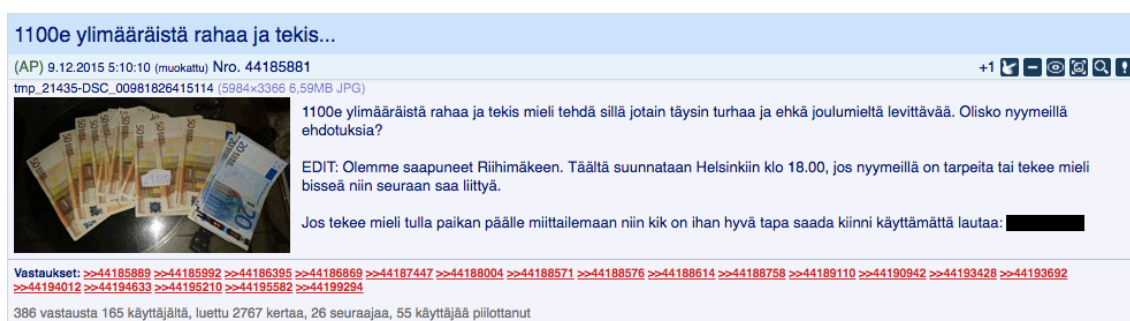

Image 2. Original content in a conversational thread

Image 3. Original content in a conversational thread

Not all images used in these threads are meme images. Remixed content and image macros are usually meme content but original content is not. Parodied content was sometimes memetic. Images interpreted as memes were those that clearly showed numerous variations of the same image and the context could be interpreted from the

threads. Some meme images may be better suited in some situations than others but in the end, it is the subjective point of view of the anon who posts images that matters.

Remixed content was approximately 20 % of all use, parody content was approximately 13 % of the use, and image macro use was 4 % of all use. Remixed, parodied, and image macro content could be seen as memetic, so of all image use in this data set, memetic content was 37 %. Original content, that is not usually memetic, was approximately 63 % of all use. According to this data set, original images were used more than memetic images. On the other hand, reaction images could be seen as memetic behavior, which was also common use.

4.1.1 Reaction image use in conversational threads

Reaction images represent or express the reaction of the user to the topic discussed. Emoticons were rarely used in this data set but reaction images act in a way that is similar to emoticons. Reaction images allow other users to identify user's reactions and understand the meaning behind the message. For example, irony can often be detected from reaction images.

The use of reaction images in the data set was diverse. The images posted on conversational threads are mostly original content reaction images (approx. 26 % of all images posted on conversational threads). Original content used as reaction images was mostly faces that were easy to interpret, like public figures. Also, the facial expressions were easy to interpret (for example, Image 4). *Ilmeeni kun* (my face when, my reaction when) is a phrase posted when the reaction is to be emphasized (Image 4).
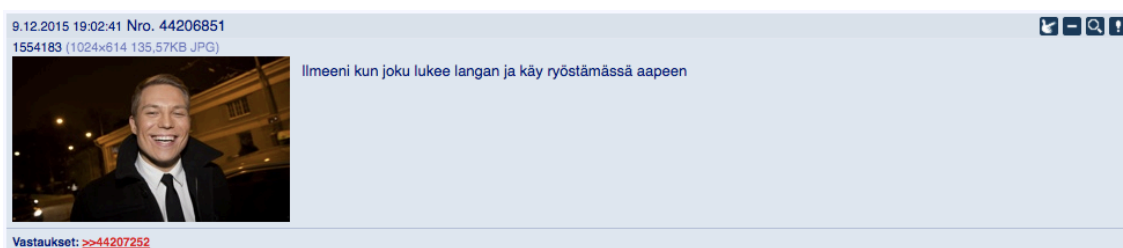

Image 4. Cheek, reaction image

The use of reaction images can be more difficult to interpret if the message contains hidden irony or sarcasm in it. For example, in the image of Matti Nykänen (Image 5),

the reader has to understand the context of *Jenna A. Riihimäeltä* (in English, Jenna A. from Riihimäki), to understand the expression of Matti Nykänen in the image. A reaction image can also be attached for the reader to understand the context, irony, or sarcasm of the message.
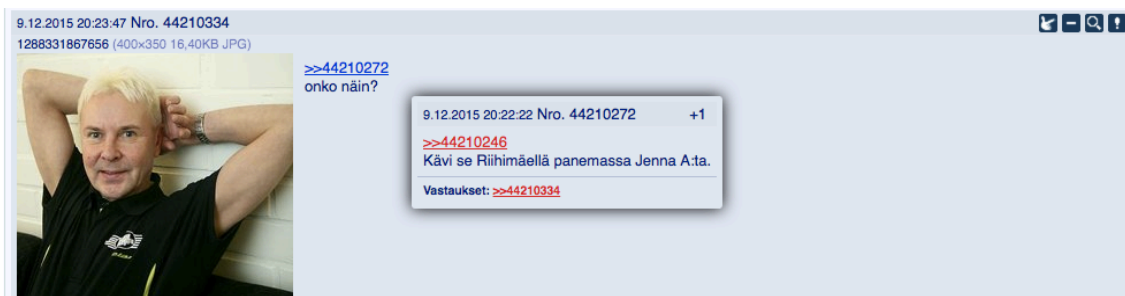

Image 5. Matti Nykänen, reaction image

In some cases, the reaction image is not a facial expression but includes written clues of the reaction. For example, the image *huutista joka tuutista* (Image 6) (*huutonaurua*, in English, laughing out loud) is used as a reaction image, even though it has no obvious signs of the literal meaning of the reaction. The filename also suggests that it is a reaction, if the image itself is difficult to interpret. It is also a remixed reaction image, just like the image *aeva oma vika* (Image 7). Filenames can sometimes act as hidden messages for images.
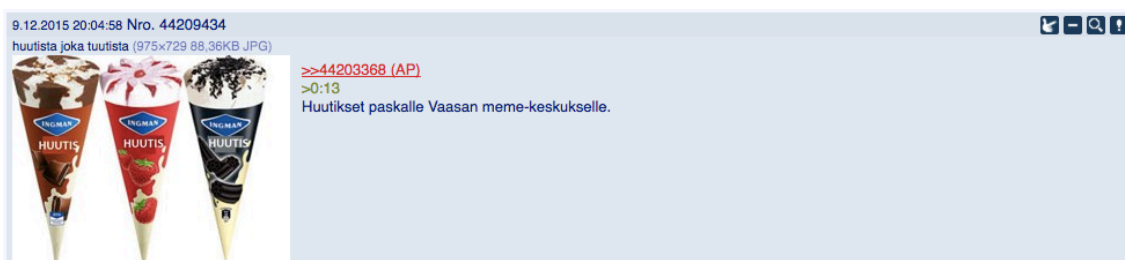

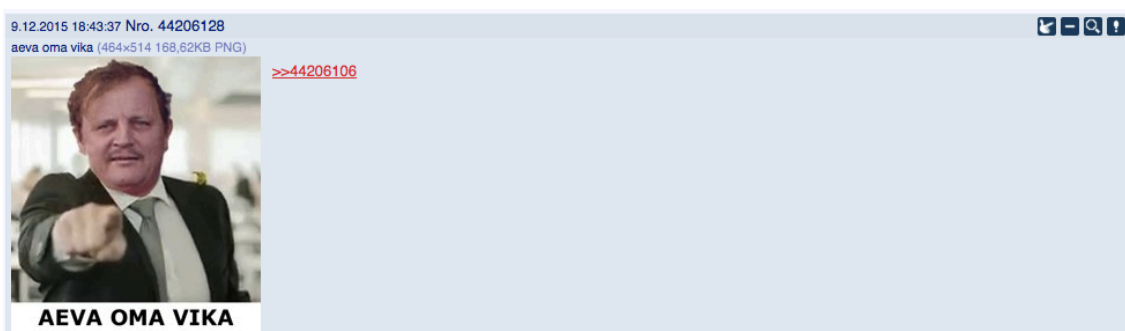
Image 6. Remixed reaction image

Image 7. Remixed reaction image

Reaction images are often saved in the */b/-folder*. Some reaction images have gone more viral than others and the /b/-folder makes the circulation of reaction images possible, and also easier. Reaction images usually have a familiar face on them so identifying the reaction is easy. For example, images of Matti Nykänen (Image 5) (a well-known Finnish athlete, also famous for his post-career in the tabloids) and Cheek (Image 4) (a Finnish rapper) have a different interpretation to their reactions since their public figures are different.

Reaction images are not necessarily meme images but their use and the behavior how they are used could be interpreted as memetic. Reaction images may be more viral than memetic since they were more of the original content than remixed, parodied, or image macro content in the data set. There were various reaction images that reoccurred in the data set but were not modified. It is possible that these images are memetic content on Ylilauta but were not in this data set.

4.1.2 Ironic and sarcastic images and use in conversational threads

Humour is used frequently on Ylilauta. It may be difficult to detect or interpret humorous content from a reply in a discussion forum since a comment can be posted by anybody. Interpretation can be difficult without seeing any social clues, like facial impressions, or tones. This data set has shown that irony can be detected from the image posted in a certain context with the reply. Ironic images are not usually ironic themselves, but they need the context.

In this thesis, irony is defined as the act of commenting something but meaning something else, especially in order to be funny. Irony is usually tied to a context. On Ylilauta, irony is connected to the discussion within a thread. Irony can occur in the replies when referenced to another written reply or image. In addition to irony, sarcasm and satire can occur on threads. Sarcasm is an insult that is disguised as a praise. Satire is ridiculing to expose and criticize foolishness or stupidity. In this thesis, irony, sarcasm, and satire are grouped together since they all had humouristic goals on Ylilauta.

Ironic discussion on Ylilauta is formed with word choices but is used differently in the case of images. Images are used ironically, but they are rarely ironic themselves. Ironic use was 23 % of all use in conversational threads. Most of ironic use was original or remixed content. Humour is frequently used on Ylilauta and it was easy to detect textual irony. The problem here is that even though a reply might be ironic, the image use may not be.

Obvious illogicalities between the image and the reply are hints of irony, for example, the use of a reaction image that presents the opposite of what was meant in a written reply. Also certain kinds of images or juxtaposing text and an image that does not belong to the context are hints of humourous use. The special threads (4.4) chapter introduces some of these ironic images used in threads. Irony, sarcasm, and satire are definitions that sometimes overlap and the humour on Ylilauta can be difficult to interpret since there is no way of knowing how the situation is seen by the poster. Shifman says that the most powerful communication-oriented meme spread may be the ironic communication by the users (Shifman 2013, 49).

It is difficult for a user to know what kind of an audience is discussing with them on the same thread, let alone how many users there are discussing. Anons have to consider the fact that not everything is funny to everyone. That is why irony may be difficult for anons to produce. It is often assumed that anons laugh together at, for example, racist and sexist jokes but it is still difficult to know what a single user is trying to say when they use irony. The use of humour is so frequent that more content might be thought to be irony than what there really is. Also, not everyone is successful in being ironic and that is when the purpose may lose its meaning. Anonymity might be one reason why the language is so bold; the humour must be produced clearly so everyone can enjoy it.

4.1.3 Other content, random content, and meta content in conversational threads

Other use describes images that have something to do with the conversation or the comment posted. Other use was approximately 27 % of all content use. It was mostly original content (87 %). These images were rarely images with technological modifications. They were still related to the topic but not completely random images.

Usually the first and original post determined if a thread had other content in it and what kind of other content.

Totally random use was infrequent. Random use describes images that have nothing to do with the conversation or the comment posted. If something was totally random, it was made clear by commenting *picture unrelated* (in Finnish, *kuva ei liity* or *kuva randomilla*). However, users do intentionally select these images at random so the content is not really random at all. Very little is totally random, since anons usually choose their images from their computers and what they want to reply with.

Meta-discussion was also quite uncommon in this data set. Meme threads had a lot of discussion about memes and how well or badly they are made. There are anons that feel like correcting others on how memes should be made. For example, the discussion about Gondola was very detailed; how Gondola should be drawn, how it has a certain kind of personality and especially, how the meme should not be produced (this example will be introduced in chapter 4.4). For example, in Image 9 there is discussion about how memes are often misused and how memes are shit. Other meta content was images of the features of Ylilauta, e.g. a thread (Image 8), Ylilauta in general, and its users.

Image 8. Meta use, an image of a thread

Image 9. Meta use, discussion about the correct use of memes

4.2 Remixed and parody content

Remixed content is technology-based manipulation or re-editing of identifiable original content, while parodied content is imitation or impersonation of content produced in using mimicry. Remixed content usually has identifiable original content. Jenkins (2010, 32) describes remixing or sampling a part of participatory culture and as a process of taking culture (existing media content; music, film clips, image, etc.) apart and putting it back together. Creativity is an important factor when remixing content.

Ott and Walter (2000, 437) define inclusion to be a stylistic way in which one text appropriates and integrates a fragment of another text and where inclusion reproduces a portion of the original text. This is the case of remixed content. Technological developments in digital media have affected creative inclusion to the extent that copyrighted material is used all over the web in remixes for the sake of entertainment and humour.

Ott and Walter (2000, 440) point out that intertextuality allows people to exercise specialised knowledge and to mark their membership in certain cultures. Because of the Internet, intertextuality is not only a marker of cultural identity, but also an opportunity to participate in a community. Ott and Walter claim that intertextual media seems to

foster an ironic sensibility, which means a heightened awareness of the way texts inflect generically, culturally, and politically upon other texts. They develop a self-conscious intertextual reading formation. (Ott & Walter 2000, 441–441.)

Douglas (2014) defines *Internet ugly* to be an amateur driven aesthetic. It runs especially through memetic content. The Internet ugly aesthetic encourages amateur contribution and user-generated content. It is sloppy and amateurish and its techniques include, for example, freehand mouse drawing, poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation. Internet Ugly is the opposite of an online world of smooth gradients, Photoshop, and Autocorrect. The Internet ugly can be applied to remixed content. (Douglas 2014, 314–316.)

Images 10, 11, and 12 are remixed and also used as reaction images. Image 10 is used to mock the other poster who says that he or she drinks alcohol on weekdays. In addition to using the image as reaction image, it is used to strengthen the reaction of its poster, kind of like getting confirmation from all the meme characters to laugh with. The *Feels Guy* (Knowyourmeme.com 2016) in the background in addition to Sad frog in Image 11 makes it a remix. Image 12 is a classic technology-based modification.

10.12.2015 0:23:43 Nro. 44221803
huutikset (533×388 163,82KB JPG)

>juo arkipäivänä
ei yllätä että siellä on vaan jotain vitun rottia kerjäämässä ilmaisia viinoja

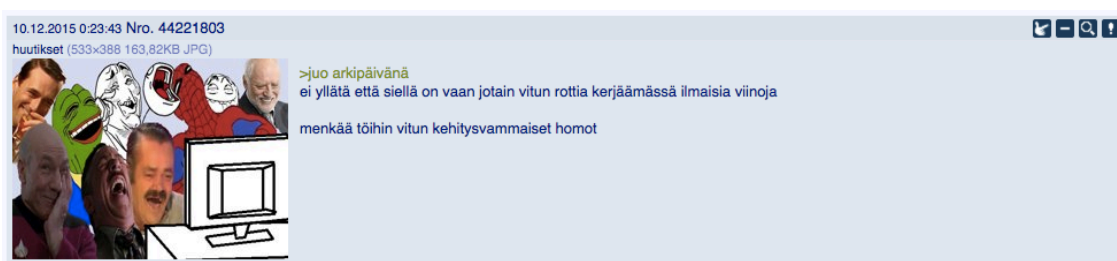menkää töihin vitun kehitysvammaiset homot

Image 10. Remixed content

Remixed content in this data set usually mixes memes together, like in images 10 and 11. The problem of remixing too unfamiliar content is that other users will not recognize the context, nor think it is funny or relatable. Memes that are easily recognized are more likely to be forwarded, which makes the spreading and circulation more probable.
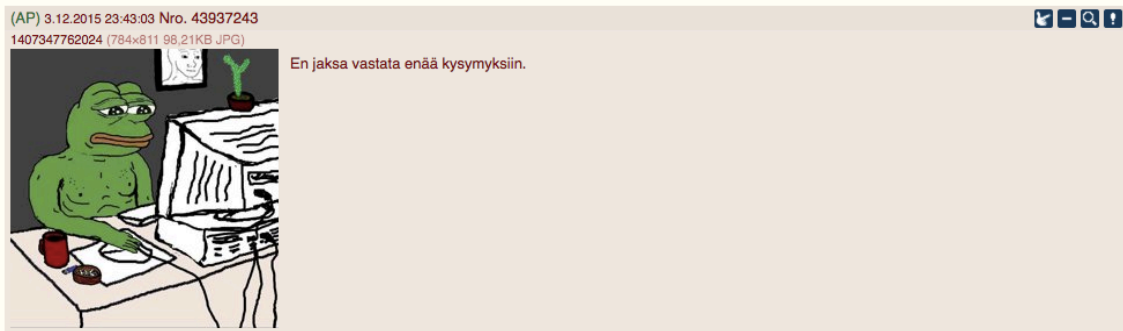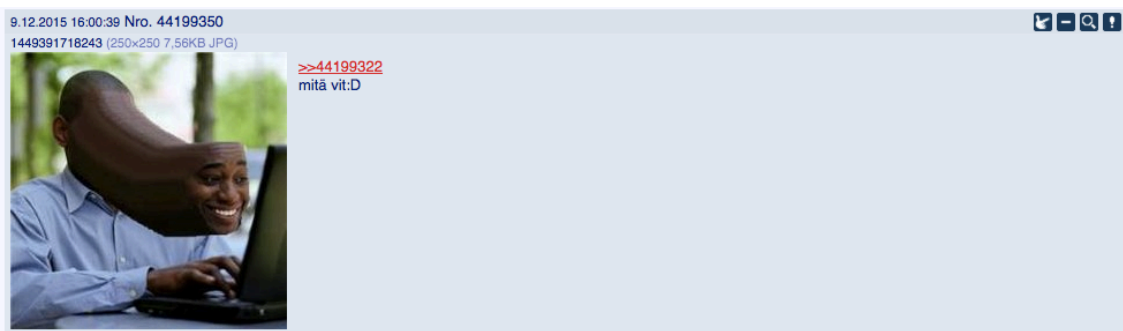
Image 11. Remixed content

Image 12. Remixed content

Mimicry means imitation, impersonation or re-creation of the content. Mimicry may also be technology-based, but compared to remixed content mimicry does not necessarily include original content from the theme imitated or parodied. Parodies are often made of familiar cultural products. In order to recognize a parody or imitation, the original cultural product must be familiar by their appearances and their behaviour.

Parodies can also be parodied further. For example, in Image 13 is the *Assburger* meme (Knowyourmeme.com 2016) and a parody of it (Image 14). Assburger meme is originally an image of Pertti "Spede" Pasanen (a Finnish actor and comedian) and it is used in situations where a user is behaving like someone with Asperger's syndrome. If someone is behaving against social norms, it is easy to laugh at them by implying them having Asperger's. It is likely that few of the users actually have Asperger's syndrome but it is something to laugh about on Ylilauta.
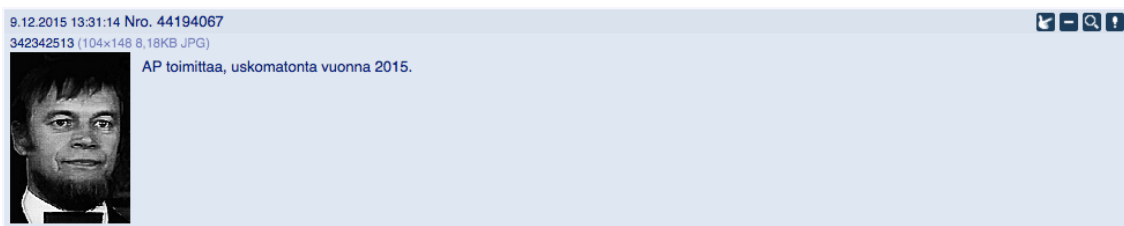
9.12.2015 13:31:14 Nro. 44194067
342342513 (104×148 8,18KB JPG)
AP toimittaa, uskomatonta vuonna 2015.

Image 13. The Assburger meme

16.11.2015 22:32:16 Nro. 43129464
Burger börgel (0:01 47,46KB MP3)

Buxger
Böxgel
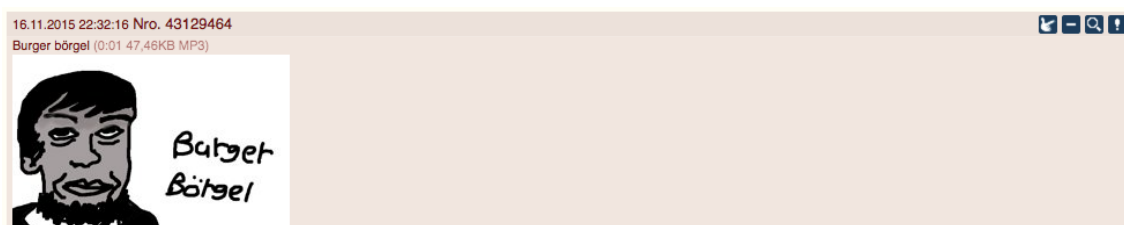
Image 14. Parody of the Assburger meme

Parodies of anons were quite common. Images 15 and 16 are parodies but also reaction images. It is easy to create stereotypical parodies of anons according to what kind of meta-discussion there is on Ylilauta. Even though images 15 and 16 are parodies, they might not be content originally from Ylilauta. The stereotypical user of Ylilauta is a lot like a stereotypical user of 4chan, and the parodies made can be from anybody.

9.12.2015 21:28:29 Nro. 44213105
That feel (173×248 22,05KB PNG)

>>44212904
A--ai siellä on tyty

Image 15. Parodied content

6.11.2015 19:16:46 Nro. 42707460
laughing anon (1000×800 122,10KB JPG)

>>42706240
Huh hels en oo pahemmin Horse Lordsia vielä ehtiny pelaamaan ja tää on aika helvetin erilaista kuin mihin oon tottunut. Varmaan puoli tusinaa sotaa jo takana, mutta ne on nopeita ja helposti voitettavissa. Vitun klaanit saatana :D

Image 16. Parody of an anon

59

Political parodies and remixes were quite common in this data set. Politics create a lot of discussion and it is a topic that cau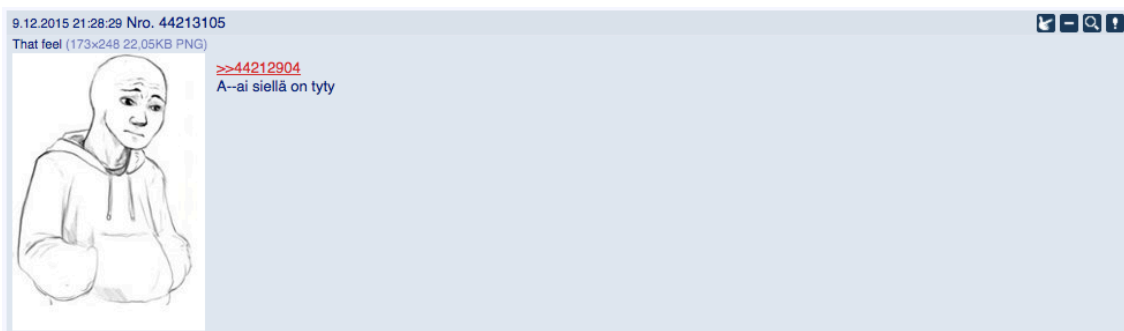ses *butthurt* (getting offended) and heated conversation. It is common to laugh at ideologies of political parties and argue against them with simple facts. Politicians are also easy targets to mock, just like any other public figures. One of the most remixed and parodied political figures was Jussi Halla-aho, the content usually being filled with *Kiitos Mestari* (in English, Thank you, Master) texts, and his face remixed into different kinds of contexts (Image 18).

The Image 17 is an example case of the Internet ugly. It is simple and recognizable to those who recognize it. Douglas (2014, 317) gives an example of rage comics: easily reproducible stick figures and roughly drawn cut-and-paste characters that anyone can create a story to. These comic memes are about sharing a story. Users may also feel that the more shitty the content is, the more acceptable it is to contribute. Douglas (2014, 315) says that 4chan is the best known source of the Internet ugly. Ylilauta creates its own memes but the designs can be all over the Internet. The Internet Ugly also mocks the self-serious and mainstream aesthetics (Douglas 2014, 334).
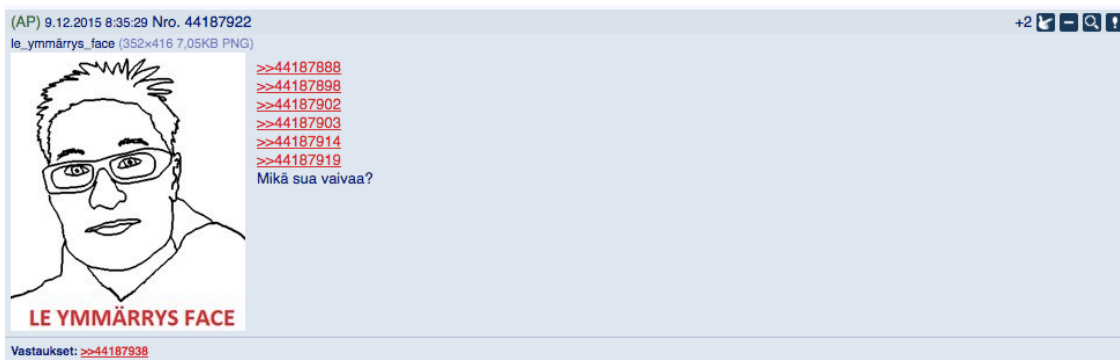

Image 17. Political parody

60

12.12.2015 0:03:30 Nro. 44312948
mestari_bird_of_maahanmuuttokritiikki (615×588 72,74KB JPG)

61

you have been visited by the
mestari bird of maahanmuuttokritiikki
good luck and white future will come to you
but only if you post "kiitos Mestari" in this thread

12.12.2015 0:03:34 Nro. 44312951
VITUN HOMO ÄIJÄ, INSESTISTÄ SYNTYNYT !

12.12.2015 0:03:38 Nro. 44312955
Pupu jussi halla aho (1565×1600 328,67KB JPG)
>pupu-jussi halla-aho :D

Image 18. Remixed political content

There are cases where remixed and parodied content can be difficult to separate. For example, Image 19 is a remix of Sad frog and Winnie the Pooh, but also a parody of both of them or one of them. Though on Ylilauta, it does not matter. The most important thing is to recognize the context, possible figures, and other memes remixed together so the image can be used correctly in the right context.
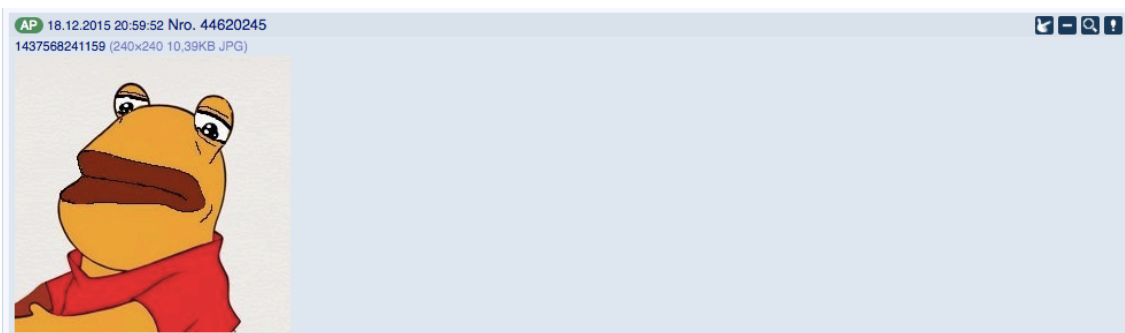

AP 18.12.2015 20:59:52 Nro. 44620245
1437568241159 (240×240 10,39KB JPG)

Image 19. Remixed parody content

4.3   Image macros

Image macros are usually highly relatable content and that is why they are made. They are easy to make because the only thing that needs to be altered is the text shown in the image. They often are remixed content. There are even websites dedicated to creating image macros with the possibility to upload an image and create a text of your own.

Image macros often represent stereotypical behaviour of a certain character. The character is often explained some way, so the creation of other versions is possible. Image macros are about exaggerated forms of behaviour that focus on success and failure in the social life of a particular group (Shifman 2013, 113). Image macros usually have the aesthetic of centered all-caps white Impact type with a feathered black border, placed on top and bottom of the image (Douglas 2014, 331). Image macros were the only content that had always the certain text font on them. Sci and Dare (2014, 16) point out that image macros use superimposed discursive text on a specific image to establish a joke.
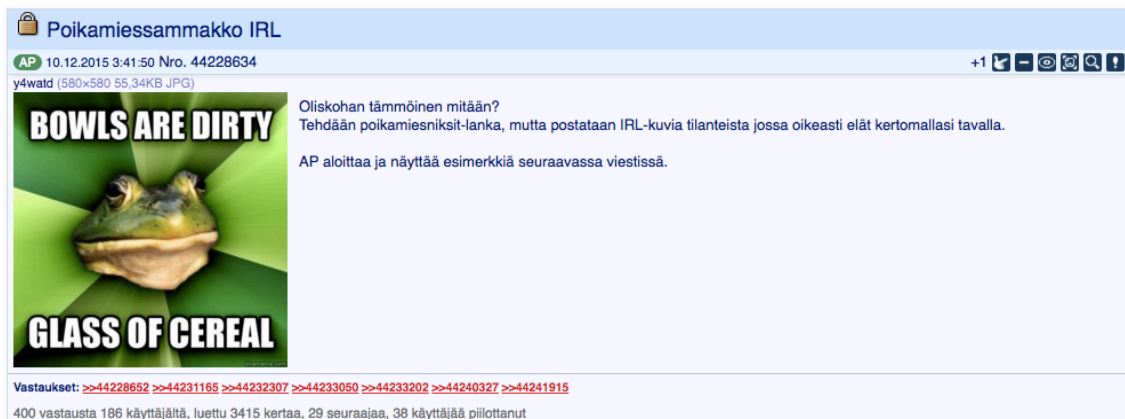
Image 20. Image macro, Poikamiessammakko

In this data set, image macros were not posted very often. There were two (2) threads dedicated to image macros, *Poikamiessammakko* (Bachelor frog, Image 20) and *Sossurotta* (Social welfare rat, Image 21). These threads included sharing one's experiences concerning the topic that the meme dealt with and commenting on other users' experiences. Some discussion arose from stereotyping the groups that these image macros dealt with. *Sossurottas* (a derogatory name for people who receive social welfare) were seen as somewhat inferior people and the creation of these image macros

was exaggerating, stereotyping, and derogating. In the *Poikamiessammakko* thread, the discussion was more about sharing one's experiences, there was no name calling.

Image 21. Image macro, Sossurotta

Image macros are used only in special occasions. Image macro was decided to make a category of its own since it clearly had different uses and goals when anons used them. They were seen as oldschool memes, the ones that could be made with a meme generator. Unless they were explicitly suitable for the Ylilauta culture and handmade, they were treated as 9gag material that is disapproved on Ylilauta.

4.4 Special threads

Special threads are different from conversational threads. Image use in them was different and usually their goal was not to discuss everyday matters but to collect memes and to shitpost (misbehaving, aggressive trolling, and poor quality content). The overall discussion was very meta and irony was frequently used. Most images were remixed or parodied with ironic or sarcastic use.

There were seven (7) special threads found in this data set. Those seven (7) threads included 216 images. For every thread, a matrix was composed and each image was categorized once. The matrices were composed by defining an image in a thread to be either original content, remixed, parodied, or image macro content, and then defining the context the image is used in. Then the use of the image was categorized to be a reaction image, or to be ironic or sarcastic, other, random, or for meta use.

4.4.1   The meme *Röökijäbä*

Röökijäbä (the smoker guy) meme is an image of *Dana White* (the UFC President) with a particularly weird impression on his face, which is taken from a funny angle (Image 22). The context of the Röökijäbä meme is an original image of Dana White, usually accompanied with a dialogical greentext about smoking and making excuses for it. Röökijäbä is a meme character that laughs at *betas* (beta males), since they cannot have the life Röökijäbä has.

This meme is meant to provocate those who do not perceive themselves as the stereotypical alpha male, which the users of Yliauta commonly are not. Röökijäbä is the bully who says that life is about the choices you make and for example, smoking is a choice of a succeeder. Betas can be spotted if they get provocated, fall into the *bait* and feed the troll. This can be seen as *butthurt*, or as getting offended. Röökijäbä thread in the data set was a meme thread. In this thread, users posted Röökijäbä memes and different versions and modifications of them. If there was discussion, it was usually meta-discussion about the meme.

Image 22. Röökijäbä

Even though there was only one Röökijäbä thread in this data set, the discussion in this thread was humorous and exclusive. The use of the Röökijäbä meme was ironic and when reaction images were used, they were ironic or sarcastic reactions. Röökijäbä was also seen in conversational threads but the use was different from meme thread use. Röökijäbä was often remixed content. Most of the users who posted in this thread knew Röökijäbä, since the use of images was appropriate and suitable for the context. Those who participated knew how to participate since they did not fall for the troll or bait that

Röökijäbä is. The trolling phenomenon in this meme is so obvious that it is already ironic. This thread included a lot of ironic trolling and ironic butthurt.

Usually Röökijäbä's face was remixed with other memes and public figures. The Röökijäbä meme is created with remixed images and provocative texts in their context. For example, Röökijäbä's face was copypasted into an image of *Kauppisen maan siirto firma*'s Pete (Image 23) and the President of Finland, *Sauli Niinistö* (Image 24). These two are culturally familiar public figures and characters to the users on Ylilauta. There is usually a text accompanying with these images, usually about a successful life, full of women, the success, and so on.

Image 23. Röökijäbä

Image 24. Röökijäbä

It is quite common to laugh at others on Ylilauta. Trolling is the act of trying to get someone provocated by faking or tricking others. If anon falls for a bait, it means that

the troll is successful and it is more likely that anon gets laughed at even more. One characteristic of Ylilauta is that even though there is a lot of trolling, and anons should know that, users still fall for the bait of the troll and this causes butthurt. Sometimes the troll gets trolled. For example, political issues trigger some anons, which sometimes results in heated discussion.

4.4.2   The thread *He vievät hobitteja Rautapihaan*

He vievät hobitteja Rautapihaan thread (Knowyourmeme.com 2016) is a thread with translation humour. In this thread, the users translate the viral remixed audio-video of *They're taking the hobbits to Isengard* literally from the movie The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. *He vievät hobitteja Rautapihaan* is a familiar cultural reference from The Lord of the Rings movies and the translation does not need to be good in any way, so it is easy for anons to participate.

This thread could be seen as a somewhat nonsense thread, in the eyes of an outsider. The original video (YouTube.com 2017) is a viral, funny video with over twenty-two (22) million views on YouTube. The thread consists of images of characters from the movie in addition to literally translated quotes from the viral video. On Ylilauta, this kind of translation humour is quite common. Translation humour comes from the act of translating English to literal Finnish.

This thread is an example of how the original poster (OP) can define how the thread is going to turn out if it is seen funny, original, or remarkable by the other users. In this case, the original poster has translated verses from the original video and posted an original image of Legolas (Image 25). Sometimes, if a thread is turning out to be funny, original, or remarkable, users often try to preserve it the way it is. Other users saw this thread as an opportunity for it to become *epic* content, so anons started to post the same way the original poster did (Image 26). Anons want to see epic content and want themselves to be a part of it.

Image 25. They're taking the hobbits to Isengard thread

Image 26. They're taking the hobbits to Isengard thread

The humour of this thread is somewhere between irony, reactions, and translation humour. This thread mostly consists of original content used humouristically. The reaction images used in this thread were also humouristic. The humour comes from the irony of each character from LOTR saying their lines in literally translated Finnish. There was no random or meta use in this thread at all.

67

It is debatable what is viral and what is meme content in this example. The original video from YouTube had gone viral and after that, it has of course become meme content on YouTube. But the act of translating content into Finnish is more of a way of creating meme content, not a meme itself.

4.4.3   The memes *Spurdo spärde* and *Gondola*

Spurdo spärde (Image 27) is probably one of the first ironic meme characters from imageforums that have also gained popularity elsewhere. Spurdo spärde is a parody of Pedobear (Vainikka 2016, 60) and it is often accompanied with misspelled words or phrases (Knowyourmeme.com 2016). Pedobear is a cartoon mascot that became a well-known icon through its usage on 4chan to signal moderators and other users that illegal pornographic content had been posted (Knowyourmeme.com 2016). According to Vainikka (2016) Spurdo spärde has evolved to be different characters on Ylilauta, from a jonne to *Alikersantti Spurdo* (Corporal Spurdo).

Spurdo spärde is often created in a poorly drawn way and has a blank expression on its face. If Finnish is used, the language in the image is misspelled, for example, by using letters b, d and g, which are seldom used in the Finnish language. Not all images contain text, usually the message is clear without any verbal clues, like for example, in Image 28. Spurdo spärde was mostly used as a reaction image.
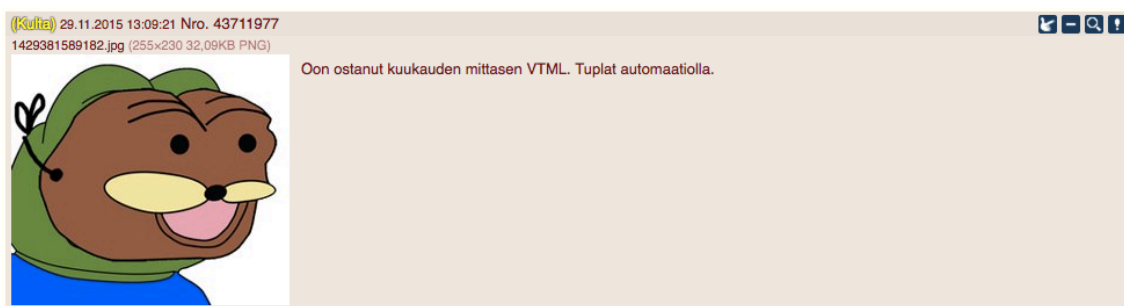

Image 27. Remixed Spurdo spärde and Sad frog

6.11.2015 17:18:28 Nro. 42702628
2hi80ba (992×832 128,11KB JPG)

En kyllä oikeestaan ikinä alota juomista näin aikasin

Vastaukset: >>42702983

Image 28. Remixed parody of Spurdo spärde

Gondola is a parody of Spurdo spärde. They have similar characteristics (Image 31) but Gondola has more layers to it. Gondola threads were mostly meta discussion in which anons discussed how Gondola could be remixed and what is typical Gondola behaviour (Image 29). There were some problems defining if an image was original or in what ways. Users often claimed to draw Gondola images from scratch but the idea of Gondola is already memetic since it is based on imitation. The claimed original content of Gondola was parodied and sometimes remixed. Old content was often used in the new versions.

20.11.2015 1:36:49 Nro. 43270797   +2
>>43237104

tässä on esimerkki paskasta gondolasta. Ei gondola itke tai ryve säälissä, tosta oikein tehty versio olisi gondola bokerface naamalla istumassa himassa yksin juhlimassa omia synttäreitään.

Se haikeus ja mainio sympatia tulee näistä juuri siitä kun gondolaa itseään ei meno harmita, vaikka ulkopuolisen silmin on aika melankolinen ja kurja tilanne

Vastaukset: >>43270829 >>43270883 >>43270947 >>43271072 >>43271296

20.11.2015 1:38:00 (muokattu) Nro. 43270829   +1
g32gg (701×581 14,79KB PNG)

Hei kattokaa täs on gondola OC kato täs nii vitun haikee yhyy kattokaa ny ku se itkee ;_____; tätä on gondola. Kiitos ylilauta

>>43270797
tämä.

T: ensimmäisen langan tekijä, enkä todellakaan kuvitellut että tästä tulee tälläistä paskaa

Vastaukset: >>43271072

Image 29. Meta discussion on Gondola

Gondola threads encouraged users to participate. Anons often posted their original content and referred to the images as their own (Image 30). It may feel like on anonymous forums, it does not really matter if users comment whether the content is their own (original content) or not since it could be anyone's. But Gondola threads prove that it is easy for others to comment and correct the use of Gondola if an image is

said to be original content. It also seems important for an anon to say if the content is their own original, even though nobody knows whose it is or if the content really is originally made by the one posting it.

Image 30. Original content Gondola

Image 31. Gondola

It seems that some of the users who feel like they are the ones using memes correctly, have a personal relationship with these memes. They feel like they are the ones to moderate memes by telling other users what is pure meme content and how to make them correctly. Gondola is an example of this kind of behavior. In Image 32, there is a comment about how jonnes will be showing Gondolas on their smartphones and sharing them on Facebook and Instagram, which is seen as a threat for Gondola and the meme culture born on Ylilauta.
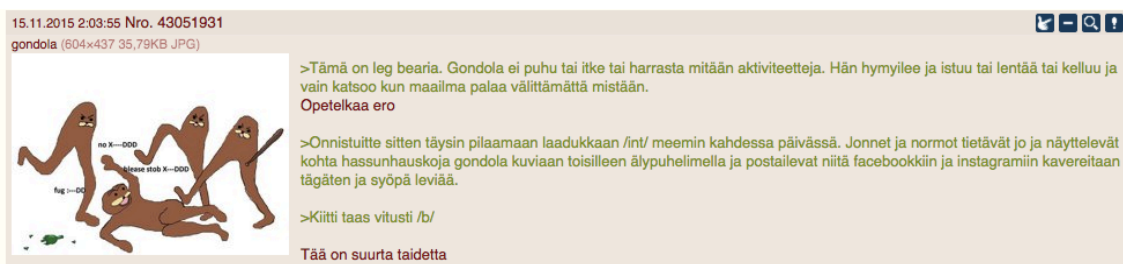

Image 32. Meta discussion on Gondola

4.4.4 The memes *Dolan* and *Lörs lärä*

Dolan (Knowyourmeme.com 2016) is a parody version of Donald Duck, which originates from a comic series featuring poorly drawn Disney characters (Image 33). Dolan has similarities to Spurdo spärde, them both being often produced in a poorly drawn way and the language used in them was often broken English or Finnish; misspelled words and written in an almost dyslexic kind of way. Dolan was also used mostly as a reaction image.

Image 33. Dolan

Donald Duck is more popular in Finland than Mickey Mouse, due to *Aku Ankka* (Donald Duck) comic series. This is probably why this culturally remarkable character has been memefied. There is also a modified version of Mickey Mouse, *Kikki Hiiri*, but it did not appear in this data set. There were three images in the data set that show Donald saying *kiva tietää näin kolmelta aamuyöstä* (In English, nice to know at 3 a.m.) (Image 34) and his nephew saying modifiable things. Also other modified Donald Duck comic strips were found in the data set, for example, Image 35.
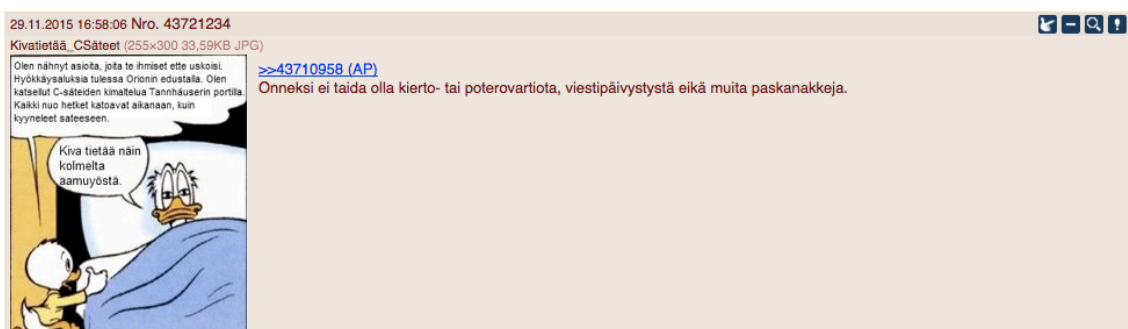

Image 34. Donald and *Nice to know at 3 a.m.* meme

Image 35. Donald, Dolan, and Lasol (windshield washer fluid)

Lörs lärä (Image 36) is a meme that seems to mix translation humour, Donald Duck, Spurdo spärde and other meme content. Lörs lärä is frequently modified. In order to participate by producing Lörs lärä memes, users must recognize the context and how to produce the memes themselves. The ironic part in this is that anyone could produce these memes. Basically, they can just make anything, like the previous memes in the threads, by adding some original content. The reason behind this meme is also to ironically show to uushomos (also, jonnes) that they do not know this meme or how to produce them, even though there is very little to know about it (Image 37).
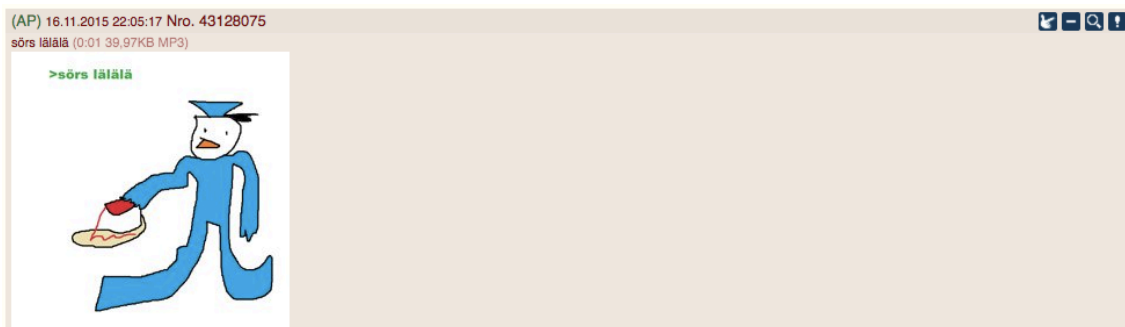

Image 36. Lörs lärä

Image 37. Jonnes don't remember Lörs lärä

There are also other memes that use linguistic or translation humour, such as the meme of *Kukko Pärssinen* (Julku 2011), *Cock Bärs*. The language, as in Cock Bärs' case, contains anything that can be translated. Other characteristic is that the letters ä and ö along with letter used rarely in Finnish, such as c, b, d, and g, are often added. For example, in Image 38, the humour comes from a badly drawn (but recognizable) character, in addition to *spörs sörselö* text added to the image. Lörs lärä, as well as Cock Bärs, include content that is sometimes put through text-to-speech, which makes broken Finnish and English sound fun to some users because of the produced monotone, machine-like speech. In the data set, Lörs lärä thread contained some videos with images of Lörs lärä and in the background, a text-to-speech voice.
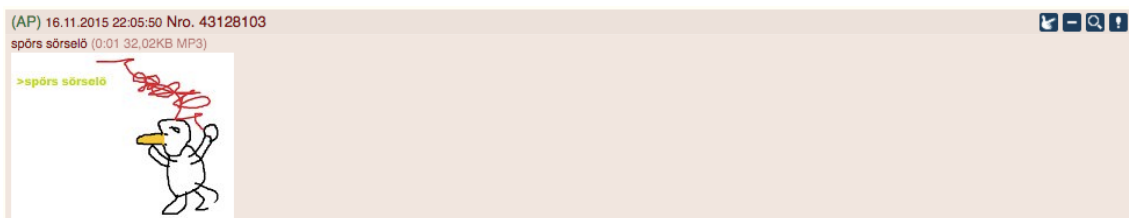

Image 38. Lörs lärä

Dolan seems to have some kind of connection to Lörs lärä. Lörs lärä follows the rules of Dolan and Spurdo spärde; they are poorly drawn parodies of basically anything, with

words that do not necessarily make a lot of sense to users outside the culture they are understood in.

Some memes are clearly not ironic in this data set. Then there are clearly ironic memes and memes that are only ironic in a certain context. Most use of Lörs lärä was parodied content, used in a nonsense way. There might be some layer of irony but it was not obvious. It must be taken into account that parodied content contains irony to begin with. Lörs lärä threads also had many YouTube videos of Lörs lärä in the background and music made of Lörs lärä text-to-speech sampled with famous songs, for example, Darude's Sandstorm named as *Sörs Lärästorm* or something similar.

To give an example of the layers of irony, Pedobear could be seen as unironic, while Spurdo spärde (paroding Pedobear) is seen as ironic. Gondola again, is paroding Spurdo spärde. Gondola could be seen as ironic, but as seen in the Gondola threads (chapter 4.3.3), the use was mostly meta use. It could be that the meta use in Gondola's case is so meta that it is already ironic. Either way, the users do not necessarily think to post any memes particularly for the purpose of being ironic. The motive behind posting can be anything, possibly just participating.

4.4.5   The meme *Sad Frog*

Sad frog or *Pepe the Frog* (Image 39) is a character originally from a comic strip called *Boy's Club,* by *Matt Furie,* which is about life in your early twenties (Serwer 2016). Sad frog is a meme of a sad and melancholic-looking frog which, at least on Ylilauta, is frequently modified. Pepe got its start on 4chan, not as a sad frog, but as a frog that says *feels good man* with a happy look on his face. After that, it started getting modified, also into a sad version. (Knowyourmeme.com 2016.)

16.11.2015 10:41:34 Nro. 43103327
tumblr_ngng3w2Ulm1rtm6dso1_1280 (702×435 152,07KB PNG)

>>43097850 (AP)
ottaen huomioon että Ranskassa viini on halvempaa kuin limonaadi.
ei mitään ihmeellistä, se on vaan se kulttuuri.
Ranskassa viinipullo maksaa 2 e halvimmillaan ja sekin on parempaa mitä suomesta löytyy,
feels bad man.

Vastaukset: >>43104403

Image 39. Sad frog

On Ylilauta and in this data set, there were mostly sad versions of Pepe. Sad frog was clearly used to express reactions and emotions and was often used as a reaction image. There was also other use, which included *ruinaus* (*requests,* to request certain content) and meta-discussion. There was remixed and parodied content frequently.

Remixed and parodied content in the case of Sad frog is difficult to separate since the content was usually parodied, but also remixed. For example, an image of Pepe with a Spurdo spärde mask (Image 40) is a remixed parody of Spurdo spärde or Sad frog. Even the distinction between which parody the image is made of, is debatable.

(Kulta) 29.11.2015 13:09:21 Nro. 43711977
1429381589182.jpg (255×230 32,09KB PNG)

Oon ostanut kuukauden mittasen VTML. Tuplat automaatiolla.

Image 40. Remixed Spurdo spärde and Sad frog

Another example of the problem of making a distinction in remixed parody is an image of Picasso-styled Pepe (Image 41). It could be interpreted to be a remixed parody, but in this case it was not a remix because it did not contain any original content from Sad frog. An example of a remixed Pepe is an upside-down version (Image 42), which contains re-editing the original content. Anyhow, original content was rarely used in the content posted in Sad frog threads, which shows the high percentage of participation in modifying the Sad frog meme.

6.11.2015 18:01:25 Nro. 42704332
ejns (502×459 397,21KB PNG)

Saunassa tuli hiki. Hiki oli ennen sitäkin. Meinaa puskee jälkihikee.

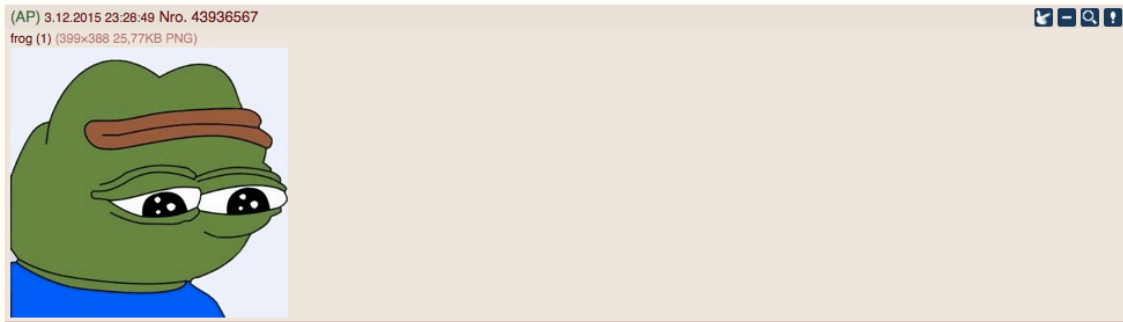Vastaukset: >>42704497

Image 41: Sad frog

Image 42. Sad frog

As seen in the examples below (Images 43 and 44), Sad frog is easy to modify. Some modifications are ironic. Then there is *Ruoka-apu apustaja* (*Food help helper*), which is a parody of Sad frog taken to a whole new level (Image 43). He is someone who needs home assistance (help at home with cooking, cleaning and so on), but was originally sad because the helper did not show up. (Knowyourmeme.com 2016.) This data set included a thread completely dedicated to Ruoka-apu apustaja. It is common that these meme characters have a personality of some kind.
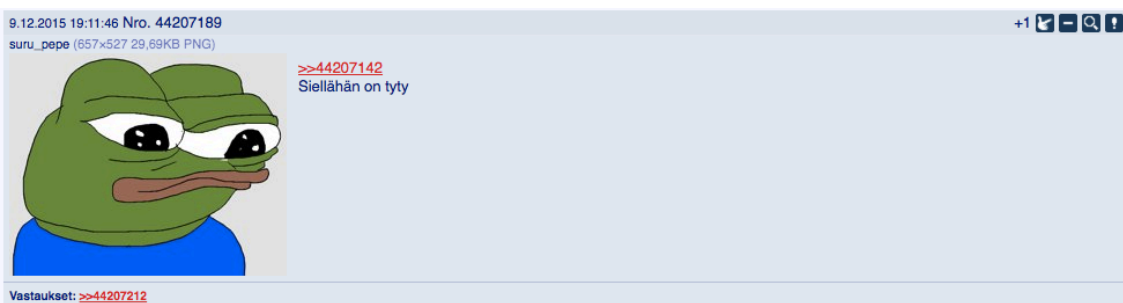

Image 43. Parody of Sad frog, Ruoka-apu apustaja

Image 44. Parody of Sad frog or Ruoka-apu apustaja

Sad frog memes and other frog characters can easily express emotion and reactions. They are easily recognizable, easy to modify and identifiable. For example, *ilmeeni kun* (my face when), *feels bad man* and all the modifications of them express verbally how anons react to posts of other anons. Frogs do not present any, certain humane characteristcs, so it is easy for anyone to identify with them. It is also easy to create humane characteristics for them (Image 46). The participation is diverse. Posting Sad frog images, remixing or even creating them with basic photo editing programs is easy, which can be see in, for example, Images 44 and 45.

Image 45. Parody of Sad frog

Image 46. A different version of Pepe

According to these memes, anons are quite melancholic. Sad frog was one of the most posted meme characters found in the data set and usually the frog was sad. It might be that anons do not spend time finding the most suitable reaction images for every occasion. It is debatable if the reaction images even matter, more than in a symbolic kind of way. Sadness is of course an easy and universal emotion to show in an image.

5   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this thesis was to study the participation and Internet meme content and (meme) image use on Ylilauta.org, a Finnish anonymous imageboard and discussion forum, in which images are a big part of communication. With the help of three research questions, the goal was to find answers to the following: what kind of images are found on Ylilauta, how users have used the images on their replies, and what kind of memes were found in the data set and how they were modified. This chapter discusses and concludes the findings of this study and sheds light on the future and possibilities of memes.

5.1   Meme content and its use on Ylilauta

Social media is a big part of the mainstream media today. The mainstream Internet culture includes websites, accounts, influencers, and memes that have millions of followers. Anonymous forums can be seen as places where it does not matter how many followers any of the users have. All anons are equal when there are no nicknames or real names that would define a status for an individual.

Even though the design of the Ylilauta forum comes from 2chan and 4chan, Ylilauta has created a culture of its own that it is based on anonymity. It is not unheard-of to have an anonymous culture, but Ylilauta has succeeded to create a discussion culture where a certain kind of language meets memes and the culture of participation. This culture includes obviously Finnish characteristics since majority of its users are Finnish. It also must be taken into account that Ylilauta is a forum where anons use their time for different purposes and the time used there might vary.

Users on Ylilauta are creating content that could at any point disappear and the creators do not get any credit. This is one reason why anonymous imageboards are able to create culture: fast creation and circulation of memes and language, in the fear of content disappearing. Anyone can create content and if the content does not succeed, no one will ever know who the creator was. Only the fittest content survives.

How can anonymous users create culture? It is in, many ways, not a traditional culture, not even a traditional Internet culture. The culture on Ylilauta relies on trolling, the feeling of superiority compared to others, humouristic content, and provoking others. The role of the community on Ylilauta is important for its users. Discussing together and laughing at things that would not be funny in other situations or places creates a sense of belonging. That is acceptable because of anonymity. Participation can be various and in the case of anonymous forums, no one can identify a certain individual. This can also have negative effects, for example, the level of argumentation is different from non-anonymous argumentation since no one has to be responsible with their own name.

The meme culture on Ylilauta is exclusive, and it is wanted to keep that way. The users of Ylilauta probably visit other websites, too, which may influence the meme use on Ylilauta. 4chan could be one example and it has of course been the most influencial for the birth of Ylilauta and its predecessors. Sometimes the influence gained from other websites may not even be obvious. It must be taken into consideration that the images found on Ylilauta might be originally from some other websites.

Like Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 209) said, some element of humour, a rich kind of intertextuality, and anomalous juxtaposition are characteristics of memes that are likely to contribute directly to a meme's ability to spread. Nonsense on Ylilauta could be interpreted to be somewhat anomalous juxtaposing. Humour is frequently used and intertextual references are common on Ylilauta.

Images were used as reaction images, ironically and sarcastically, in a meta (self-referential) way, randomly, and in other ways. The trend very often was to post an image if it represented a reaction or was something relevant to the thread. There was usually a motive behind posting an image. Totally random images were hardly ever posted in this data set. What was noticeable about meme use was the amount of reaction images. Reaction images (or the possibility to use them) ables the discussion to be ambiguous. Usually reaction images contained a public figure or someone recognizable whose impression is easily interpreted by anons and which presents the reaction of the anon posting the image.

Irony and sarcasm were frequently used, just like humour in general. The humour on Ylilauta often relies on trolling and shitposting. What may seem like nonsense to those who do not often visit Ylilauta, may be just a funny joke to those who visit Ylilauta more often. Nonsense content relies on the context, not so much on the visual representation. For example, Lörs lärä may seem like drawing shitty characters and writing basically whatever, but if the context is familiar to the users, it all makes sense. It matters, though, whether anons know how to use memes properly or not. If the meme is used incorrectly, the anon will likely be notified. The community somehow achieves this level of togetherness, even though everyone acts behind anonymity.

Image content that circulates on Ylilauta was categorized in four content types: original content, remixed content, parodied content, and image macros. Original content was used the most and image macros were used less than any other category. Remixed, parodied, and image macro content can be seen as memetic, unlike original content, that is not usually memetic. Original images were used more than memetic images in this data set. On the other hand, reaction image use could be seen as memetic behavior, which was also common.

Meme content was created mostly by remixing already existing memetic content with new content. Sometimes content was created by drawing characters with Photoshop, Paint, or other *ugly Internet aesthetic* photo editing tools. It depends on the meme what is the modifying technique used. Some memes are also modified more than others. Text was sometimes added on images, to emphasize what was happening in the image. Parodies were also common and created of familiar cultural products.

The memes found from this data set included Röökijäbä, Spurdo spärde and Gondola, Dolan and Lörs lärä, and Sad frog. *He vievät hobitteja Rautapihaan* thread describes more of the humour on Ylilauta, the viral-like participation and the role of an anonymous community. It is important to recognize the different uses of, for example, Gondola and Röökijäbä. All memes are created and treated differently in their contexts.

Like Shifman (2013) said, virality and memetic content should be treated and placed in a spectrum, rather than in a binary dichotomy. In this data set, original content was usually more viral than memetic. Remixed and parodied content was usually more memetic than viral. The memes found from the data set were mostly remixes and often

parodied other memes in some way. Virality is a feature that often varies between Internet memes. Some memes are clearly more modified while others are more spread, even inside the Ylilauta culture.

One of the characteristics on Ylilauta worth mentioning is the act of translating English literally to Finnish. Sometimes the language translated comes from 4chan or, more generally, from other memes around the web. The language used on Ylilauta may sometimes seem like full of nonsense to an outsider but anons do understand it, at least after familiarizing themselves with it. The language used on Ylilauta contains words and phrases that are commonly used in the forum. These commonly used phrases, like *jonnet ei muista* (newfags don't remember) can be defined as catch phrase memes, but it was not the definition of a meme in this thesis. Humour was a frequently used topic and most memes on Ylilauta are made to be in some ways humouristic.

Even though the discussion is the key feature on Ylilauta, images have always had an important role on imageboards. Images are attached to a reply for different reasons. According to the results of this thesis, if an image is posted, it is related to the topic discussed on the thread. The high percentage of participation in modifying can be seen in the memes found from the data set. The Internet memes found and presented in this thesis are used differently, some are more viral than others, the content can vary greatly, and the participation varies by quality and quantity between the memes.

The ways of using memes as a way of communicating and understanding the world (e.g. by stereotyping) are a part of the discussion; memes are hardly ever posted without any context or discussion. But something that was seen of this data set was that the creation of memes should be separated from the use of memes in discussion. If meme images are posted on a conversational thread, they only act as image content, they do not necessarily have any memetic or deeper meaning. When creating memes, there might be a greater participatory motive behind it.

5.2   Evaluation of reliability

Netnography was chosen to be the method to describe the content and the meme use since it shows the discussion culture in its genuine state. The results can (and probably will) easily be distorted if the role of the researcher is visible and the participants know

they are being studied. The culture on Ylilauta can be very fragile because of its anonymity and the culture for trolling. To prevent any distortions, passive netnography was seen to be the most worthy to be conducted.

The problem with studying memes is (the problem with netnography, too) that if the community or culture studied is unfamiliar, there is a problem getting in. Also, if the community or culture is too familiar, subjective perspectives may affect what is chosen to the analysis. Internet memes are entertainment in a way, and not all memes are funny or remarkable to everyone. The amounts of people enjoying certain memes may vary, and so the participation may have many aspects to it. It is also difficult to estimate who, how many, or in what ways do people take part in the meme production.

The weakness of this study is that the data is collected at a certain time period so generalisations cannot be made in a long run. Ylilauta is also a certain kind of forum and memes seen on Ylilauta may not be memes anywhere else. For example, even though Röökijäbä was a meme in December 2015, it may not be recognized by anons years later. It is debatable if Röökijäbä is a meme still years later in the ephemeral and anonymous forum. The legacy of Röökijäbä may be forgotten or it can change. The use of images may also change or vary from thread to thread, like was shown in the results of this thesis.

Since page 1 consists of the most popular threads (and also all the other threads that pass through), it is easy for anons to just refresh the webpage and it brings the most discussed threads to page 1. Also, some of the less discussed threads (at some point) bump into page 1 if there is a reply. It is difficult to estimate how many anons go further than page 1, since those who discuss and comment on the threads bring out the most discussed threads to page 1 and that is where the most epic things happen. This affected the memes that finally ended up being chosen to the data set. The threads that gathered a lot of replies obviously were on page 1 more often than threads that got less replies.

The images were not chosen individually, but included in the threads that were the most discussed and then chosen to the data set. Because of this, the less discussed threads were not chosen, even though they might have had also remarkable memes. The memes that ended up to be presented in results were some of the most used in the data set and

had the most memetic qualities. It is obvious that there is and were more memes on Ylilauta at that time the data was collected.

Most memes that circulate on Ylilauta circulate there all year round. The time when data was collected included some special dates that caused some threads to occur that at other times would not. The independence day of Finland, advent calendar of Ylilauta (from the 1st of December) and a documentary series Docventures were some of these threads. For example, the independence day of Finland caused threads like *itsenäisyyspäiväjuhlien seurantalanka* (thread for those who watch the independence day celebration and reception in the Presidential palace) and *mielenosoitusten seurantalanka* (thread for those who follow the protests during the independence day). These threads caused a lot of conversation, which caused more comments and replies and, all in all, more images.

Not all images on Ylilauta are meme images. The distinction of what is and what is not a meme may be difficult and sometimes impossible to make. The most important thing when considering if something is a meme or not, is that it gets modified and recognized by anons. If an anon knows how to use a meme, in what kind of situations and what is funny or remarkable about it, and possibly even name it, there is a chance that it is a meme. Of course, some memes are more popular than others and not all anons are familiar with Ylilauta memes. It is also questionable if an Internet meme as a unit describes the Internet culture that well. There can be a lot of meaning behind a single meme, and it may lose its meaning along the way if it is forwarded and circulated without knowing the meaning.

Even though the focus is on the images and meme images, the context they were in was also taken into account. Images may be used in all kinds of situations and in context with a message. The use of an image may create a meme only being in a certain context and the meme may only be born in this certain community, or the community creates the meme in certain situations. It is debatable if memes on Ylilauta are memes also somewhere else. It is possible that the memes seen on Ylilauta are only funny in the context of the culture. If they are spread somewhere else, they might not be seen as funny. The community also relies heavily on anonymity and if someone is seen spreading Ylilauta memes with a pseudonym or own name, they are of course disapproved since anonymity does not apply anywhere else.

There were other memes, too, than the ones presented in the special threads chapter (4.4). The data set showed a greater amout of variety in modifying the memes that were presented in the special threads chapter than in those that were not presented. It must be admitted that the interpretations made in this thesis are subjective. The interpretations concerning the collected data could possibly have influenced the thread choices. Some of the threads in the data set were chosen according to what seemed to be discussion-worthy or popular or were some other way epic to the netnographer. What makes online content funny can be very subjective and the results of this thesis are to some extent connected to a subjective perspective of what is funny or worth noticing in the data set.

The empirical data collected for this thesis represented well the activities on Ylilauta even though it is only a small amount of the daily discussion and threads. Even though the subjective perspective has created a certain kind of viewpoint on how the content on Ylilauta is seen, the results could represent some level of Ylilauta's meme image use and meme content. This thesis was not about what kind of discussion there is on Ylilauta so generalizations should not be made according to the results of this thesis regarding the overall discussion. The culture on Ylilauta is highly renewable and new content is produced daily. The content cannot be predicted since anyone can post anything and daily events in society, for example, affect what the discussion will be and how it will develop. There are also differences between different sub-boards, /satunnainen/ only being the most overall topic-based.

Ylilauta may not be the best forum to study memes. Anonymity makes it impossible to prove if a single meme is widely spread or how widely spread, or if it is posted only by a single user. It is difficult to know what kind of participation there is on Ylilauta, and what kind of participation contributes to spreading memes. It is also difficult to indicate how many users actually participate by posting memes, and how many users are lurkers. For example, participating by bumping a thread might increase the spread of a meme. To some extent, the amount of users can be estimated with the help of Ylilauta's own statistic values or discussion analysis.

The role of the community is important on Ylilauta. Memes are created together, even though there might be different opinions on how to create them. Image use and creating meme content on Ylilauta are separate topics to discuss. Meme images are memetic content but memes in general are as a wider concept and a phenomenon. There are also

other kinds of memes on Ylilauta than those presented in this thesis, those that are not *that* funny, *that* modifiable, or *that* relatable, even in the ironic way. With the question *what even is a meme?* in mind, it seems like there can be a lot of them. They just differ from their viral qualities and modification possibilities, in the case of meme images of course. Audio-visual memes are more ambiguous than images, and text form of memes is, in a way, simpler.

5.3   The future of memes

The term meme has gained popularity especially around the web after the expansion of social media and other web services. The term meme is more frequently used than the terms Internet meme and viral content. The term meme can apply to anything: text, video, image, audio, and everything between them. The problem is, there is no clear definition to memes. Questions like how far must a meme spread to be called meme or how many modifications must a meme go through to be called a meme are still not answered.

The definition of a meme includes all kinds of content that spreads from person to person via imitation. In the academic field, the use of the term Internet meme has not completely achieved a unified opinion, yet. The more pragmatic use is more free and neutral; people tend to use only the term meme instead of Internet meme. The term is nowadays used quite loosely. Usually the term meme is used of viral Internet meme content: funny, remarkable, modifiable, and shareable content: something funny that gets modified and spread around. The use of the term meme is not that strict, anything could be called a meme and people would understand how it behaves.

One of the most important definitions in this thesis was the term meme. Even though the basis between definitions of a meme and an Internet meme are quite alike, the culture around an Internet meme is very different from a meme outside of the Internet. The term Internet meme may be to some extent misleading since it can be applied to basically anything and it does not necessarily describe the complex phenomenon as a whole.

The meaning of memes can vary between different Internet cultures. Memes can start having new meanings, too. It is difficult and, at some cases, impossible to determine

where and when an individual meme was born and in what kind of situation. The use of the Internet exposes to memes. If the term meme is unfamiliar, the idea of memes may come as new. Memes can be glocal (global and local) in a sense that the meme character can be familiar in other cultures but the context and remixes can bring something local to the meme, too.

Generally speaking, everything that is worth modifying will get modified. Technology (for example, Photoshop) has made it easy to modify images and cut and paste already existing material and content. The content does not need to be very special, it only needs to be something that someone finds interesting or remarkable, and the will to modify. Then, it only needs some other users who think the content is interesting or remarkable, and there the memetic process starts. The will to modify is a matter that probably not all users have.

Memes are born in the crossroads of relatableness, acceptanceness, and the will to share. Memes do not necessarily succeed if there it is not enough of relatable content, but the irony of relatableness bring out a whole new layer of memes, the act of relating to not being able to relate. Not being able to relate is ironically relatable. The will to share and acceptanceness are products of social media environments: sharing, getting accepted and praised. Forums like Ylilauta thrive with the idea of original content being valued and communities getting praised since everyone is equal around anonymity.

Memes are superficial in a way that they are often taken from their original context and put together for the sake of humour. The narrative behind the original context disappears and new narratives are born. On the other hand, people are forced to pay attention to the original context but it is possibly easily forgotten. Memes are in a way political but the entertainment value of them is greater. Memes are also a shared, participatory phenomenon that brings people together.

The results of this thesis can be used in understanding an anonymous community and its possibilities in, for example, marketing or user studies, understanding the discussion culture and what kind of role do memes have in that culture. Memes do build some level of togetherness since users contribute to the culture and memes are shared to the community and spread inside the community. Memes can and probably will be studied further in the future.

Future research could focus on the users of different kinds of web services, their communities, and meme production on these websites. Internet memes are themselves a phenomenon that keeps on growing since people use the Internet more and more to social purposes. The Internet meme culture itself is interesting and might describe the themes that concern users and how memes are themselves discussed on the meta level. There is not yet a way to quantify or qualify Internet memes. The future topics will probably concern the spread of memes or how their popularity could be estimated. How memes are born, how they are used and shared, and how they spread online are also themes that are associated to the future meme research.

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i