

From meme maker to content creator. An ethnographic approach with Marina Listillas

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Abstract

This article examines how meme makers become established professionals, based on an ethnographic case study focusing on Marina, who runs the Instagram account @listillas. The study focuses on the transition from meme maker, a position tied to vernacular and community-based creative practices, to the more professional role of content creator. This case study is part of an ethnography project carried out between April 2021 and April 2023 that combines participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and online life stories.

The analysis reveals that professionalisation does not imply a linear substitution of community logics by commercial ones, but a tensioned coexistence between gift economies and platform capitalism. Through strategic campaigns, Marina reaches out to the community and to the wider public. Within this setting, she assumes the role of mediator of a constantly reconfiguring symbolic laboratory, generating new forms of subjectivity and cultural value.

Keywords

Digital culture, social media, creative industries, digital work, digital folklore

Resum

Aquest article examina el procés de professionalització de les creadores de mems a partir d'un estudi de cas etnogràfic centrat en Marina, administradora del compte d'Instagram @listillas. L'objecte d'estudi és la transició de memera, una posició vinculada a pràctiques creatives vernacles i comunitàries, a creadora de contingut, una disposició orientada al que és professional. Aquest cas forma part d'una etnografia desenvolupada entre abril del 2021 i abril del 2023 que combina observació participant, entrevistes etnogràfiques i història de vida online.

L'anàlisi revela que la professionalització no implica una substitució lineal de les lògiques comunitàries per les comercials, sinó una coexistència tensionada entre economies del do i capitalisme de plataformes. Mitjançant accions tàctiques, Marina articula una orientació a la comunitat i una cap a un públic massiu. En aquest escenari, actua com a medidora d'un laboratori simbòlic en reconfiguració constant i produeix noves formes de subjectivitat i valor cultural.

Paraules clau

Cultura digital, mitjans socials, indústries creatives, treball digital, folklore digital

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1. Introduction

Digital memetic culture has forged a space for symbolic production where creative practices, social interactions, and value systems specific to online platforms intersect. Against this backdrop, the “meme-maker” emerges as a cultural agent who embodies a situational, relationship-based, vernacular creativity linked to the dynamics of orality (Ong, 1996; Venturini, 2022; Cutler, Ahmar and Bahti, 2022) and digital folklore (Lialina and Spenschild, 2009; Blank, 2009; de Seta, 2020; Peck and Blank, 2020; Galip, 2021). Rather than being marginal contributors, meme makers actively take part in shaping meaning within online communities, playing a central role in creating their *lore*, i.e., the traditions, stories, and memories that bring these communities together (Dingsun and Marss, 2021).

Recently, these meme makers have become more professional or semi-professional, revealing a significant change in their careers. The shift from “meme maker” to “content creator” implies an overhaul of their role, marked by the addition of monetisation, visibility, and institutional legitimation. These changes not only alter the material conditions of production, but also alter the symbolic status of digital creativity, pushing the boundaries between folk-community and commercial-industrial forms of creativity.

This article sets out to analyse this transition through an ethnographic lens, drawing on the narratives, practices and strategies employed by meme makers in their professionalisation processes. Through Marina’s case study, who runs the Instagram account @listillas, we attempt to understand how the cultural value of memes is negotiated in a context shaped by platformisation and the attention economy. This discussion reveals the friction between authenticity and commercialisation, along with the methods used to reorganise creativity within contemporary digital culture.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Memes, vernacular creativity and digital orality

Online vernacular creativity is expressed as a form of situational and relationship-based symbolic production that breaks away from the institutional norms of art and the cultural industry. For Burgess (2006), this concept emerges as a way of attending to particular, non-elitist (niche) creative practices with a commitment to empathy. Coleman (2010) refers to a set of ethnographic approaches to digital media as “vernacular cultures of digital media”, “evinced by discrepant phenomena, digital genres, and groups –hackers, blogging, Internet memes, and migrant programmers– whose logic is organized significantly around, although not necessarily determined by, selected properties of digital media” (Coleman 2010, p. 488). In academic studies on digital culture, the definition of

“meme” has been heavily influenced by Limor Shifman’s (2014, p. 41) concept, who defines it as a set of digital items –images, videos, phrases– that share characteristics regarding content, form or stance, which are created with mutual knowledge and disseminated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. Shifman (2014) distinguishes memes from viral content (the latter being singular units and memes being “collections of texts”); however, memetic content is associated with viral and mass circulation. From this perspective, a meme is not reduced to an isolated macro image, but exists as a relational phenomenon, recognisable only insofar as it is inscribed in a series of shared iterations.

This definition has been instrumental in shifting the understanding of the meme from the individual object to processes of collective circulation, imitation and transformation. However, throughout my ethnographic research, the notion of memes linked to going viral has proven problematic and insufficient. As discussed later, an ethnographic approach to niche meme makers, specific audiences, and communities within the digital underground reveals that memes evolve through a dialectic between their viral nature and specific, contextual community ties. A view from the creators shifts the meme back from mass expansion to communication between like-minded audiences and specific communities.

From an anthropological perspective, memes are not understood as viral images or multimedia constructions, but as digital oral phenomena (Soriano, 2024). Memes operate as speech acts, ephemeral events and digital rituals that generate cohesion and shared meaning. Its mutable, context-dependent and ever-changing nature is shaped by dynamics of secondary orality –to borrow Ong’s (1996) notion– or digital orality (Cutler, Ahmar and Bahti, 2022), embedding them in a digital folklore that is perpetually updated based on interactions between users, platforms and algorithms.

Hybrid and vernacular forms of writing have emerged in digital ecosystems, eroding the oral versus written dichotomy and disrupting the “rigid era of modern printing” (Cutler, Ahmar, and Bahti, 2022: 4). Memes are a prime example of these forms of digital orality, serving as mnemonics to create *lore*, or forms of collective memory and self-mythification that bind digital communities (Dingsun and Marrs, 2021). From the perspective developed here, by conceptualising memes as digital speech acts rather than texts, the idea of “intertextuality” (the relationship between texts as discrete, finished units) is set aside in favour of the vernacular concept of “lore”. Therefore, a meme is not, by definition, a separate text that goes viral, but rather a communicative event that takes on meaning in specific contexts of use, in relation to shared lore and timescales typical of everyday interaction. This approach does not negate the relationship-based nature of memes identified

by Shifman (2014), but rather suggests that memetic status does not depend on mass replicability, but rather on shared intelligibility and community-oriented values. Similarly, this concept leads to a more open approach to the question of authorship in memes. While much of the literature has emphasised the anonymous nature of memes –understood as collective and depersonalised creations– ethnographic research shows that hybrid forms of authorship are emerging in certain platform-based environments, with recognisable accounts operating as stable hubs of production, without this implying full appropriation of the meme as an individual work.

By taking an ethnographic and holistic approach, where *emic* uses and concepts (used by the social agents themselves to understand their experience) take precedence over formal definitions, the expanded and multimodal nature of memes is revealed. This goes beyond their definition as viral content and allows them to be understood as means of creating memory in different communities and subcultures. The use of these terms reveals a highly reflexive field in which the participants create and discuss the terms that give meaning to their experience. *Emic* concepts such as *meme maker* or *lore* are preferred to other academic concepts as an analytical and methodological choice that recognises research participants as *epistemic partners* (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2023) in the research, rather than passive subjects.

In this sense, I use the term *meme maker* to refer to a specific way of interacting online. A meme maker creates and/or curates memes through one or several accounts on a digital platform. As explained later, this term does not refer to a professional role, but rather a place in a media ecosystem, an activity, and a type of online behaviour.

2.2. Creativity organisation methods and production chains

This study of creative practices in meme making considers the contexts and media that shape that experience. Memes circulate across multiple environments, resulting in a constant transformation of their meaning. To analyse how they are produced, disseminated and consumed, three types of creative organisation can be identified: folkloric, artistic-cultural and commercial-industrial. This classification responds to the need for analytical tools to understand the different factors that influence the creative experience, namely:

1. Practice contexts: Spaces where creative dynamics unfold, such as interactions between friends or a community of gamers, a work environment at a digital marketing agency, or an artistic institution.
2. Production models: Specific ways of creating and sharing memes, influenced by expectations, objectives, sensitivities, and delivery styles. They can be more spontaneous, ironic, reflective, scripted, etc.

3. Evaluation systems: Criteria used to judge creativity. These may include notions such as *originality*, *innovation*, *tradition*, *depth*, *scope*, *complexity*, etc.
4. Socio-technical networks: Media and technologies that mediate creativity. Special emphasis is placed on the difference between those that generate secondary orality and those that record creative results, such as writing or archiving.

This approach is inspired by the distinction between popular culture, cultural industry, and high culture, as explored in cultural studies. Rather than establishing strict boundaries between these spheres, the aim is to understand them as variations in context, production methods, evaluation criteria, and technological networks. Following Goody's (2008) line of reasoning regarding the distinction between the wild and the domesticated, this paper aims not simply to describe these differences, but to explain how creative practices shift between these systems by referring to another set of circumstances.

Sociologist Simon Frith's (2014) notion of "value networks" provides the basis for this classification. In his analysis of pop music, Frith identifies three overlapping –and sometimes contradictory–discourses that structure the musical experience. These are the artistic discourse, centred on academic training; the folk discourse, which values the social function of art in everyday life; and the pop discourse, linked to the cultural industry and entertainment.

For Frith, value judgements are inherent in popular culture and function as "rites of interpretation", which are more closely linked to ways of being and listening than to simple preferences. This perspective connecting value creation with the experience of creativity is outlined by research on orality that shows how technologies of speech –such as writing or printing– mediate the understanding of creativity and the categories of valuation (Ong, 1996; Goody, 2008; Cutler, Ahmar and Bahri, 2022; Venturini, 2022).

Thus, in order to understand how memes engage in folkloric dynamics (marked by digital orality) and in artistic logic (where they are treated as visual works) or in commercial processes (where they are used as communication tools), it is necessary to observe how these practices are organised in different fields. Rather than claiming that memes blur the line between high and low culture, this paper presents a model that describes the processes by which they move between these categories and how these transitions affect the creative experience.

In general:

- The folkloric system is linked to community practice and digital oral tradition, where creativity manifests itself as speech, ephemeral events, and daily rituals. Cultural value arises from participation, emotional connection, and ritual.

- The commercial-industrial system responds to market logic, professionalisation, and media visibility. Creativity is organised according to its profitability, capacity to attract audiences and compliance with standards defined by the industry.
- The artistic-cultural system is related to art and culture institutions, where criteria such as originality, significance, authorship or *oeuvre*, and technologies such as archiving operate.

This holistic view, treating memes as phenomena that simultaneously traverse and occupy different systems of classification, makes it possible to identify both processes of professionalisation, geared towards monetising creativity, and folklorisation tactics, through which meme makers and other users reinsert memes into everyday ritual practices, resisting attempts to commodify their productions. These tactics reveal a vernacular dimension of creativity in contexts marked by platformisation and the attention economy.

3. Methodology

Digital anthropology (Pink *et al.*, 2016; Ardévol and Lanzeni, 2014; Coleman, 2010; Postill & Pink, 2012) and post-digital anthropology (de Seta, 2020) refer to a methodology that revisits the tradition of Internet ethnography in the light of new epistemological approaches. This implies understanding the digital as a continuum embedded in everyday life, overcoming the dichotomy between the virtual and the physical, and approaching the Internet as part of a broader set of interconnected practices. This paper uses the term *post-digital* to create a bridge with the notion of *post-internet art* (Martín-Prada, 2017), based on the same desire to break down the dichotomies of virtual/real and online/offline.

An ethnography of vernacular creativity on the Internet poses the challenge of defining a field that is not bounded physically or by a specific community. This approach proposes thinking of the field as a network of relations mediated by cultural technologies and techniques, breaking with the territory-culture binomial (Burrell, 2009; Amit, 2000). The field is constructed through acts of inclusion and exclusion that define which phenomena, partners and relationships will be addressed. The study of a "distributed phenomenon" such as vernacular Internet creativity does not necessarily imply "the detailed and local study of each manifestation" but has to be transferred to cases, collaborators and concrete relationships (Kelty, 2019, p.84).

This article presents an ethnographic case study framed within a broader digital ethnography. This ethnography investigates the creative practices of meme makers, focusing on how value, authorship, and meaning are negotiated and constructed in these digital communities.

This case study is part of a larger project that examined how professionalisation dynamics influence the emergence of certain forms of authorship, intellectual property, and transformations in the creative dispositions of the creators.

The case study for this article is Marina, who runs the Instagram account @listillas, which has been active for over six years and has more than 20,000 followers. The relevance of this case lies in its intermediate position between community-based memetic practices and sustained processes of professionalisation: @listillas did not emerge as a business project or as an account designed for mass viralisation, but over time it has participated in collaborations with brands, cultural institutions and artistic events. This trajectory makes it a particularly relevant case for analysing the tensions between digital folklore, content creation and cultural work on platforms.

For the past six years, Marina has been managing an Instagram account where she shares memes in a very specific format. She uses stock images with semi-anonymous models and a caption underneath. "when will there be a Men's Day?", "don't give money to beggars because they'll just spend it on drugs", "society isn't ready yet" or "i'm a self-made man" are phrases from @listillas. This compilation of clichéd phrases used by blathering bigots, featuring stock models, has made @listillas one of the most famous accounts in the Spanish meme sphere.

Fieldwork for the ethnography comprising this case study was conducted between April 2021 and April 2023, and combined various digital anthropology techniques. Participant observation constituted the central axis of the research and included the daily monitoring of @listillas' activity on Instagram, regular interaction with the creator and joint participation in artistic and cultural events in Barcelona linked to memes and digital folklore. This observation was supported by recursive techniques typical of the digital field, such as systematic scrolling, content capture and archiving, and the creation of a multimedia field diary.

In terms of data production, five in-depth interviews were conducted with Marina, conceived as an online life story aimed at reconstructing her trajectory on Instagram, her professionalisation processes and her conceptions of community, authorship and creative work. In them, we map the Spanish memesphere, jointly analyse its dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and delve into the forms of professionalisation and profitability of meme making business. These interviews were conducted in person and accompanied by informal conversations held throughout the years of fieldwork.

Although this case study does not mention them, it is important to note that several ethnographic interviews were conducted during the research with other female meme makers in the Spanish memesphere. These interviews did not aim to systematically compare cases, but they

did allow for the identification of shared discourses, divergences and common interpretative frameworks around meme maker creativity (see Soriano, 2024, pp. 87–89). These interviews, which were part of the participant observation, served as relational and performative devices, whether for exploratory or verification purposes (Guber, 2001).

4. Analysis

4.1. From meme maker to content creator

The shift from a folkloric category such as meme-maker, which defines certain users based on their online presence, to a professional category such as content creator reflects a changing approach to organising creative memetic practices. Through partnerships with corporate communications teams, political parties, and cultural institutions, many meme makers have tried to professionalise their practice. These lopsided negotiations between communications and marketing teams –with a strategic mindset that involves audience building– and meme makers –usually precarious workers who deploy tactics to monetise their online activity– give rise to a field in which meme making is organised in multiple ways.

This analysis begins by examining Marina's career as the administrator of the Instagram account @listillas, which serves as a prime example of how a meme maker can become a content creator. Marina began her activity without any professional intention or explicit awareness of the concept of *meme*. Her work emerged spontaneously, linked to emotional and community dynamics, and gradually built up a community of followers that eventually reached 20,000.

In 2018, Marina –along with other iconic accounts in the Spanish memesphere such as @derribosydeconstrucciones, @pro.del.kastineo and @flourazepam– received a request for collaboration from the communications team at Amazon Prime Spain. The assignment was to create promotional memes for a new series, marking the beginning of an incipient professionalisation. For Marina, this first paid work was lived as a collective experience, shared with other account managers, in which the community dimension remained central:

«Things were better back then, because I remember there were only like four of us, and it was really exciting when the day came to publish our Amazon Prime collaboration. We all posted it, everyone gave each other *likes*, and it was like doing *memecovers* but with funding, like, "Let's see the shit we've created". And everyone was like "Ah look at this, I hadn't thought of that, how cool is that". It was a bit like seeing what they've published and each one had its own personality, its own people, and it was really cool because of that.»

Marina compared the collaboration with Amazon to "memecovers", a vernacular practice within the memesphere that consisted of imitating styles between friendly accounts. This analogy reveals how in contexts of monetisation, creative practices can maintain a logic of playfulness, affection and mutual recognition. Although Marina and other meme makers began negotiating with companies that imposed aesthetic and discursive restrictions –limiting experimentation or demanding that they "do what they always do"– this *commodification* did not feel like a radical break, but rather an extension and redefinition of existing collaborative dynamics.

Over time, Marina identified a change in the memetic ecosystem: the emergence of accounts with thousands of followers that were not part of the original community. These accounts, created explicitly for monetary gain, did not participate in the ritual dynamics or collaborative ethos of the memesphere. For Marina and other meme makers such as DaneliciousTM, this shift marked a break between community-based creativity and content production focused exclusively on going viral and monetisation.

During interviews and conversations with Marina, DaneliciousTM often came up, specifically an Instagram post they shared in August 2019. This post provides a vernacular analysis that organises Marina's and their own opinions and reflections on the shift from meme maker to content creator. Broadly speaking, DaneliciousTM describes a series of characteristics of a *new account* designed to go viral and generate revenue, which is described as a "perfect content creation machine": a) a successful formula halfway between sarcasm and self-help, b) an extractive use of the community, c) a recognisable and shareable aesthetic (DaneliciousTM, 2019).

DaneliciousTM presents three examples of what could be described as "salvage accumulation" (Tsing, 2021) of meme creativity for use as "content" intended to go viral and make money. The formulas, templates and symbols that act as mnemonics in memetic folklore contexts for the creation of *lore*, or community oral memory, become "recognisable and shareable aesthetics" in content creation, designed to reach a wide audience. Similarly, the agonistic content –ranging from the grotesque to the pathetic (Galip, 2021), the sarcastic or the heart-wrenching– characteristic of oral tradition, which functions folklorically as a form of communion, is rearranged as a formula "halfway between sarcasm and self-help" with a "tremendously broad range of effects" (DaneliciousTM, 2019). Finally, the relationship with the community, which in meme folklore circles serves as the main focus of *being online* and of relationship building, becomes an extractive relationship whereby *people* become *followers*.

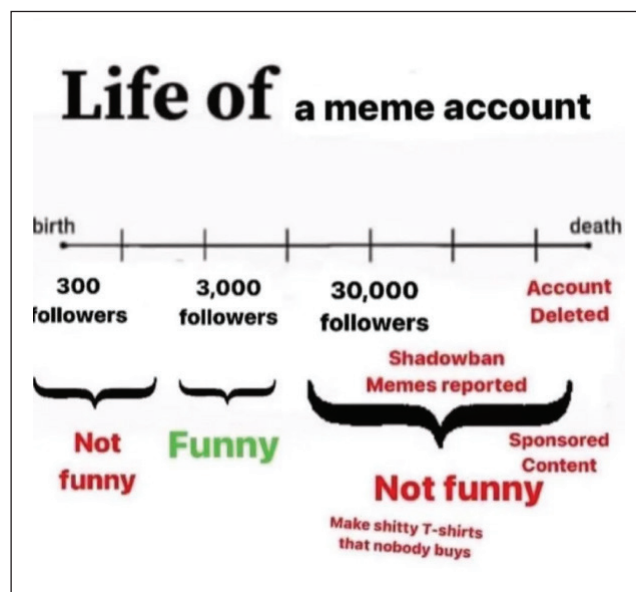
DaneliciousTM's post (2019) summarises the tensions expressed by Marina regarding the commercial-industrial organisation of meme making. The post narrates a

transition from a communal to a commercial approach, but it is important to stress that this communal approach was not always disconnected from practices that made meme making profitable. As we have seen with Marina, or as we can also see with Danelicious, which for the moment was collaborating with GenPlayz (Playz, 2020), community is not the opposite of profitability or the desire to professionalise. DaneliciousTM criticisms are not about making money or collaborating with companies, but about changing the ways of being online, making memes and engaging with the community. In this sense, the notion of *salvage accumulation* proposed by Tsing (2021) is appropriate for distinguishing this from other analyses that describe a process of total absorption that neutralises the disruptive potential of countercultural practices. Tsing's (2021) concept accounts for the production of market value based on dynamics that are not originally governed by capitalist logic, as is the case with the folkloric practices of the memesphere. This is not a complete appropriation of counterculture by the dominant culture, but rather a partial and incomplete process through which capital is generated by translating and exploiting forms of socialisation, creativity and affectivity that arise outside the realm of business.

It is not the opposition between monetising content or making it for free, but the tension between community and audience that is central to the process of meme maker professionalisation. Meme makers constantly negotiate between expanding their reach and preserving the affinity, in political, aesthetic or community terms, of their followers. A good example of this is the map of the Spanish memesphere that was created by Marina and the author during an interview. The arrangement of the accounts on this map does not respond to criteria of fame or style, but to relationships of affection, ideological affinity and personal ties. Her friends were in the centre, close to them were the people she liked the most, and outside were both the professional accounts of influencers or public figures, at one end, and the people she disliked or were politically opposed to, at the other end. While making the map, she explained how she and other meme-makers friends' accounts would periodically go through their followers and remove any associated with the far-right. These purges sought to strike a balance between gaining followers and being in a like-minded environment. In this meme account life chart uploaded by p0rr0chimar (figure 1), the trade-off between having no community base (and no humour), having one (and being funny), and moving from a community to an unviable audience, producing sponsored content and, therefore, *dying* in meme terms, can be seen.

As the transition from meme maker to content creator takes place, practices are transformed to generate more formal and generalist content, which breaks away from *lore*

Figure 1. Life of a meme account



Source: p0rr0chimar (2023) Instagram account.

to focus on *going viral*. Marina shared a specific example to illustrate this expectation of viral growth. She explained angrily how an acquaintance had been contacted by a museum to display a selection of TikTok memes, but instead of posting unusual, obscure and interesting TikToks for those familiar with meme logic, she had decided to post viral TikToks.

"It's like you're translating something that's totally generation Z from TikTok to Instagram, which is millennial. Do not put them here [*in the museum*] if they are viral; you have not done any kind of *digging*. I mean, if there's *digging* going on, hey, I'm totally up for it, but this is just completely absurd. It works so well because they're boomers. [...]

The ones that go viral, the ones that make it to Instagram are not the good ones. Maybe they were good two months ago, but now this isn't the done thing anymore. The memes shared in WhatsApp groups are the same tactic used on TikTok and Instagram. They might be good, but you've already seen them, or the joke has lost its punch, or... they're already past their prime... because they've gone viral and are now part of the boomer generation, which you don't identify with anymore."

Marina believes that these memes that aren't *the done thing* show that people are not focusing inwardly, but outwardly. There is an attempt at externalisation and formalisation in this *translation*; you are translating your own language (for Marina, expressed in terms of generation) into a foreign language. Using viral memes means orienting oneself towards other people, outside those who are inside the meme logic, instead of doing something that

is interesting and meaningful to those who are inside. This anecdote also shows that transferring memes to a museum space is not, per se, problematic for reasons of authenticity or commercialisation, but rather that it is the orientation towards *others* (towards other languages and forms of valuation) that provokes a negative response in this transition towards a mode of artistic and cultural organisation.

However, these tensions expressed by DaneliciousTM and Marina, which until now have been directed towards other ways of operating, are also felt in their own working practices. Marina and DaneliciousTM are keen to make their activity profitable and are therefore professionalising their methods, negotiating these tensions between different ways of organising creativity. In Marina's words:

«Now you're no longer a meme maker, now you're a "content creator", because they don't care about your memes anymore, they just want to see you on screen doing stuff. This is down to TikTok. I mean, down to or thanks to TikTok. Now what they're looking for is "the artist", the person, the human face behind what you're doing to get the message across. Memes don't matter anymore. What matters is that you record a... not even a *reel*, because Instagram *reels* don't reach that far either. You just record a story telling something and you just be yourself, like, you are that character and that's it.»

Marina points to a crucial tension between being a meme maker and a content creator, which involves authorship, the *artist*, and *face culture* versus anonymity, collective creation and *mask culture*. Pressure to show the presence of an artist behind the creations, linked to the figure of the *influencer*, points to a key difference between a folk-based approach and an artistic-cultural or commercial-industrial one. In a folkloric sense, since memes are not understood as *works* but as acts of speech, they are not subject to the same questions about authorship. When it becomes a commodity (the product of an employment relationship or an artistic work) authorship arises in various forms (from the assignment of royalties to the pressure to show the artist behind the work). This change is a shift in ways of doing things brought about by the emergence of technologies such as contracts, copyright, and the artist as a figure.

Similarly, for meme makers like Marina, who worked semi-anonymously, pressure to create a public persona, a virtual character who appears on camera and shows a correlation between her *irl* (in real-life) self and her social media self, has been a significant source of stress in the professionalisation process. Marta Ceccarelli (2024) discusses this pressure for *authenticity* in more general terms, linking it to a correspondence between your *irl self* and your *online self*, to show who you are and what you do. In discussing the *platformisation* of the Internet, that is, the co-optation and organisation of online sociability

through large platform social media, both Lovink (2019) and Ceccarelli (2024) talk about the tension between *face culture* and *mask culture*.

«Authenticity and real-name policies as prerequisites for online participation were proposed as solutions [to problems such as spamming, trolling, phishing, scamming, *child pornography* or *online violence*]. Platforms, in particular, promised to transform the problematic Internet into a consumer- and business-friendly environment by connecting users' real identities with well-defined *data doubles*. In 2009, Zuckerberg publicly criticised online anonymity: "You have an identity... The days when your image was different for your work friends or colleagues and for the rest of the people you know are probably coming to an end very quickly... Having two identities for oneself is an example of a lack of integrity". The public debate, dubbed *nymwars* [name wars], saw authenticity as a prerequisite for being online on the one hand, and a prismatic view of digital identity that reflected the multifaceted nature of the offline self on the other. Chris Poole and his 4chan website offered an alternative approach by creating a space for unrestricted, temporary, and anonymous interaction. If Zuckerberg and Facebook represent the epitome of *face culture*, Poole and 4chan encapsulate the essence of *mask culture*» (Ceccarelli, 2024, pp. 10–11).

The requirement to be authentic, to record a story telling something, is a pressure to professionalise as a content creator, which clashes head-on with an ethos and practices shared by meme makers. The *mask culture* that Ceccarelli refers to is not exclusive to platforms such as 4chan, but exists to a greater or lesser extent on all platforms. Meme accounts participate in this *masked* anonymity or semi-anonymity, which allows users to interpret their identity through discursive practices (Ceccarelli, 2024: 11). Anonymity, in relation to irony and layers of meaning in memes, acts as a mask for the online carnival, allowing people to play with identity, sincerity, or jokes, experimenting with extreme positions or allowing them to speak about controversial topics. The *mask* on Instagram accounts is not like the one on 4chan, as you can build a more stable *persona*, which is an essential requirement for many meme makers, enabling them to generate the socialisation necessary for their online presence.

4.2. Strategies for navigating the tensions of professionalisation

In response to these changing trends in how memes are created as part of their professionalisation process, meme makers are acting more strategically, attempting to navigate both systems to maximise their profits without neglecting their community ties. One of the tactical moves

related to this tension between the *mask* and the *face* can be seen in the meme that Marina uploaded on 13 June 2022, which has been her profile picture ever since.

This meme, featuring a photograph of Marina instead of the *stock models* typically used in her format, illustrates the tactic of *showing herself* while maintaining the logic of *meme making*, including the same format, the familiar *snarky*[*listilla*]phrase, and the carnivalesque meme laughter that mocks everything, herself included. The expectation of *content creator* (required by Marina's participation in the #soymeme festival) to appear on screen is met through her *memeification*, adding layers of meaning and turning the very act of showing herself into a meme. By appearing as one of her *models*, she becomes part of her account's *lore*, and her public appearance is not only as a creator but also as a meme.

Faced with this demand, Marina employs these tactical manoeuvres to resolve other tensions arising from professionalisation. The Madrid-based food delivery company Wetaca collaborated for a time with several content creators in the meme sphere to promote its services. The company sent its dishes to creators or influencers so that they could promote them through Instagram stories, sharing a personalised discount code. Marina agreed to collaborate with the company and for a few months she posted promotional stories about Wetaca's food delivery service.

This collaboration implies a salvage accumulation (Tsing, 2021) of Marina's meme making activity by the company.

Similar to advertising platforms such as Google or Meta, which translate non-commercial interactions into raw material used to create advertising services that they sell to advertisers (Zuboff, 2020), the company collaborates on a non-contractual basis, taking advantage of a community generated without commercial objectives around the @listillas account, turning it into an audience or niche market. This collaboration is a source of *income* that Marina does not want to turn down, but it does mean that the community is becoming more of an audience. Marina takes a specific approach to this tension between monetising her activity and maintaining the game. After the promotional *stories*, she uploads other *stories* restricted to her best friends, commenting on the first ones. These comments point to a gentle boycott and turn the promotional *story* into a meme.

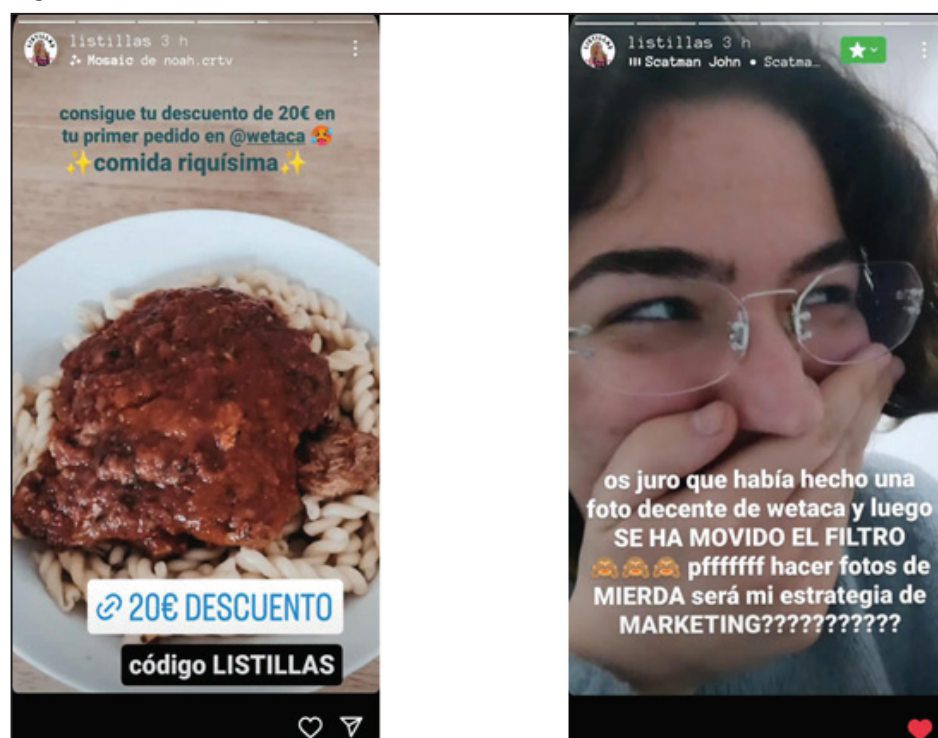
These strategic attempts to preserve folklore seek to maintain collaboration without losing community spirit, to make a profit without giving up playfulness. Marina does not outright oppose marketing and advertising campaigns but rather preserves the folkloric enjoyment of doing things for her people, for the people who will understand, maintaining the ritualistic reasons without abandoning professionalism. In general, she meets the company's demands and, among her best friends, she plays at destroying them, ironising them and turning them around. Through these *nods* to her *best friends*, to the community, she adds memetic layers to professional *stories* that are only accessible to a few.

Figure 2. Es que soy yo literal (It's literally me)



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram (2022).

Figure 3. Two stories from Marina's Wetaca collaboration



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram.

These strategic memes are not exclusively a tool Marina uses to manage the tensions arising from professionalisation, but rather embody what creating memes means to her. Marina believes that the reasons for making memes have to do with a tactical and political desire that she expresses as "the wink in the mainstream", which refers to the introduction of coded references in mass circulation formats, a strategy that allows her to maintain complicity with her community without sacrificing visibility.

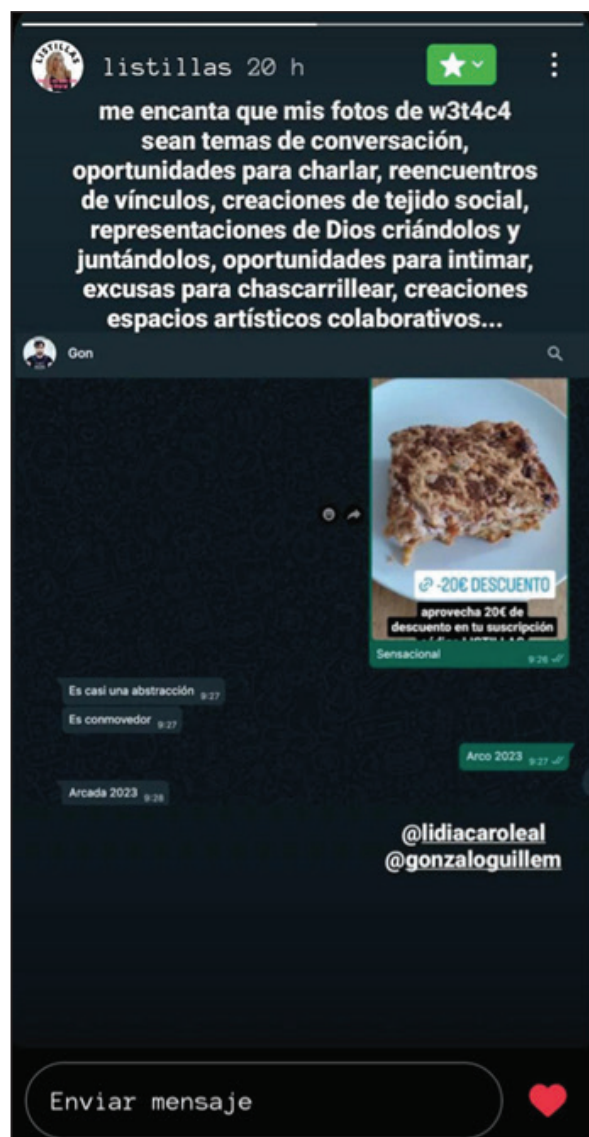
«I really like mainstream memes with a wink. It's so interesting to me how you can reach the pure mainstream and insert subtle references that only a select few can understand. It's like when you wink and you understand it in a different way, but only those who understand get it. [...] People buy it. People buy it and don't think twice about it. I mean, brands don't really care. If you advertise something and include a subtle wink, most people won't notice it. Only those who get it, understand it. They're going to share it because of the wink, not because of anything else. So, the brand wins because they're going to share it, and the message you want to share with your people wins. [...] I'm not talking about, say, having a medium that everyone listens to and getting in there. I'm not talking about bringing a *certain something* to La Resistencia. That's cool, and X said it the other day:

"I got involved in this in order to send a message to audiences who would never have listened to me otherwise". But that's not my point. My point is that they don't find out what I'm really saying. That only certain people know about it, and it's spread by word of mouth, like a language.»

Marina believes that memes operate on the border between those who share the code and those who are left out. She plays with what goes viral so that her content carries another, deeper virus, made just for certain people. Marina sees having influence, thousands of followers, and a large community as the perfect situation for spreading *niche* content and introducing messages aimed at specific audiences within widely circulated circles. This ties in with the *hacker* mentality of breaking in without permission, circumventing security, bypassing filters, and leaving their mark just for the sake of it. It also links to an activist mindset, filtering feminist and left-wing messages into mainstream content, like a Trojan horse. Marina has a soft spot for horoscope memes, a format in which you can categorise different things as elements of the zodiac –what ice cream you are according to your horoscope sign, what 'thing that falls' you are according to your horoscope sign (Marina Listillas, 2023)–. Marina believes it is the perfect format for slipping in political messages or making indirect references to people you know.

"The horoscope is kind of neutral. No, no, it's terrible. I've even posted what defendant in the Panama

Figure 4. Story about w3taca and the community



Source: Marina Listillas on Instagram.

Papers scandal you are based on your horoscope. Hahaha Of course, it's like I'm messing with everyone in a super commercial format that is read by the average person [...] always with a slight twist to destroy the mainstream. Taking the mainstream and tweaking it a little, you don't have to turn it completely upside down or no one will get it."

This attitude of *the wink in the mainstream* makes it possible to manage (not entirely resolve, but negotiate) the tension between going viral and maintaining the community's boundaries, codes, and dynamics. Winking in the mainstream, as Marina said in the interview, is not a political discourse aimed at a different audience; it is not a call-to-action seeking followers elsewhere or intended to convince. The little wink in the mainstream is discreet, low-key, without laughter, but with a restrained smile.

5. Conclusion

The shift from meme maker to content creator reflects a profound transformation in digital folklore practices and exemplifies the precarious nature of work on these platforms. Some companies and creators' commitment to monetising memetic production is based on extracting value from practices that originally operated outside capitalist logic (such as the folkloric creation of memes). This salvage accumulation implies a transformation – neither definitive nor irreversible – at different levels:

- Communities built around meme sharing are transformed into audiences or niche markets.
- Meme strategies that functioned as mnemonics for collective memory (*lore*) in online subcultures are geared towards going viral on a massive scale.
- The grotesque and sarcastic aesthetic of memes, linked to the digital carnival, becomes a tool for connecting with specific audiences.
- The semi-anonymity characteristic of online subcultures gives way to the exposure of *influencers* or content creators.

These translations between the folkloric and commercial-industrial modes generate constant tensions that meme makers must navigate in their professionalisation processes. These tensions are not tied to economic exchange or the profit-making of their creativity, but rather to changes in their creative dispositions and in their being online (changes in the ways they relate to their community and in the ways they approach meme making). Their everyday tactics reveal a creativity that constantly oscillates between the logic of play and that of work.

This intersection sees meme makers display an ambivalence akin to hacker culture, including encrypted messages for insiders in promotional content or staging small boycotts of their sponsors. These manoeuvres create forms of value and new languages that reinforce the folkloric sense within the meme maker community. The "winks" become an identity trait that mediates commodification. As a result, dichotomies such as authentic/commercialised, professional/amateur, insider/outsider, and public/private become blurred, revealing how creativity is always shaped through dialogue and negotiation.

Marina Listillas' ethnographic analysis provides a detailed look at these new creative arrangements and their effects on digital culture. By describing how the affective and communal become strategic requirements for capitalist practices based on salvage accumulation on digital platforms, the need to rethink the status of cultural work becomes clear. In addition, memetic production prompts a revision of classical analytical frameworks (high/low culture, popular/industrial) towards dynamic models able to capture constant shifts and the coexistence of different value systems in creative practice.

Endnote

This research has received a special mention in the specific category of the 36th CAC Awards for research in audiovisual communication.

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