

BY ALL MEMES NECESSARY: HIP HOP, MEMES, AND THE INTERNET

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INTRODUCTION: HIP HOP ON THE INTERNET

The internet influences hip hop in various ways. First and foremost, the internet is a medium that opens up a new space and stage in which hip hop can be performed. This stage is no longer local, but global, which represents both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, each hip hop artist must assert themselves against countless competitors from all over the world; on the other hand, their breakthrough online, if it succeeds, can be monumental in comparison to an analog breakthrough, which is usually confined to a limited area. Therefore, for hip hop artists it is increasingly important to attract attention – as only those who get the attention succeed in this new medium (Prior 2018, Jenkins et al. 2013). The internet's central influence on hip hop is the intensification of the battle for attention – which results in hip hop artists trying new approaches and strategies to gain that attention. One of them is producing their content with an eye to making it as meme-able as possible and capitalizing on meme dynamics on the internet.

In this study, I approach memes as a concept, following the definition of Dawkins (2006) who originally defined the concept of memes in his work *The Selfish Gene*. Memes are small units of information that are usually very simple and catchy (gestures, styles, melodies, or phrases). They are transmitted from person to person by imitation or adaptation, replicate and spread very quickly, and contribute to the dissemination and formation of common behaviors and cultures (Dawkins 2006). Memes exist in the analog world as well as on the internet.

On the internet, however, memes are particularly popular because they convey central impulses or contents in a short form – 280 characters on Twitter, 15 seconds of video on TikTok, one digital picture with text superimposed on social media, or meme pages. Memes on the internet can serve a variety of purposes, from political expression

to information dissemination to private amusement. What they all have in common is that they are very simple and catchy, attract attention, and aim to be picked up by “prosumers,” (Milner 2016) who adapt them and pass them on to other people until they go viral (Shifman 2014).

Due to their characteristics, memes can also be used strategically. By incorporating, for example, a simple and catchy phrase into one’s own song, one creates the possibility of this phrase becoming a meme and thereby increasing the chances of one’s song getting attention. I call this strategic use of memeable elements that may become memes later on the “Meme Strategy”; when these strategies are used in hip hop, I refer to them as “Meme Hip Hop.” The rappers who use it, mainly younger artists who produce their songs mainly for an online audience, I call “Meme Rappers.”¹

But what exactly is Meme Hip Hop? And *how* does Meme Hip Hop relate to hip hop? In this article, I will answer both questions. I will begin by analyzing the beginnings of hip hop and elaborating on what the central elements of hip hop are. Second, I will discuss how hip hop is “glocalized” through processes of local adaptation. Then, using three Meme Rappers as examples, I will analyze how they use memes differently to create Meme Hip Hop. Finally, I will describe Meme Hip Hop as a local adaptation of hip hop to the internet.

WHAT IS HIP HOP? ITS CULTURE, CENTRAL MYTH, AND GLOCALIZATION

Hip hop started in New York in the 1970s as a response to the material and political realities of Black people living in the US. Black people in the South Bronx came together for block parties: gatherings where DJs operated their turntables, MCs started rhyming and telling stories over beats, breakdancers practiced and showed off their moves, and sprayers marked their territory (Price III 2006). This is how hip hop was

¹This raises the question: have meme-like elements and patterns always existed in hip hop? For example, sampling, taking up existing sounds, reworking, and reiterating them to produce new sounds, has always been a part of hip hop (Williams 2018, Alaigh 2018). This exactly follows the meme-patterns of taking up content, adapting it, and passing it on. Additionally, observations about the similarity of existing hip hop elements and patterns and memes can be made about call and response techniques (Diallo 2019, 5-24), hip hop dances or dance styles (Genius 2018), or hip hop clothing trends.

While there are some similarities between existing elements and patterns in hip hop and memes in hip hop, the latter differ from the former by their direction, participation, and intention. Compared to, for example, sampling, memes do not take up and adapt existing sounds, but aim to be picked up and adapted themselves in the future (direction), memes are not taken up, adapted, and passed on by other musicians, but by prosuming listeners (participation), and memes are not primarily used for aesthetic reasons to improve the sound of the music or to pay tribute to another artist, but for strategic reasons to generate attention (intention).

born. In the midst of a hostile context, hip hop was an expression of the African American population's creativity and identity, a celebration of their own existence, and thus a form of non-violent cultural emancipation and artistic resistance (Deis 2015).

Beyond New York, more and more people started making hip hop, spreading it all over America as well as the rest of the world, and adapting it to their local contexts. They "glocalized" hip hop and established it as a culture (Harris 2020). But what exactly is hip hop culture? And how exactly was hip hop glocalized? The answers to these questions offer the key to understanding not only hip hop in general, but Meme Hip Hop in particular.

Gabriela Klein and Malte Friedrich (2003) examine both questions in *Is this real?* They understand hip hop as a culture that is defined by a central myth which is expressed through art. Hip hop's central myth tells of a Black man who lives in the ghetto, has to deal with the problems of the ghetto (poverty, marginalization, repression), and struggles to make it there. Through his continuing efforts, his hustle, he can prevail in the ghetto, gain respect and recognition, and eventually even successfully make it out of there. Both his hustle and his success can take different forms. He can hustle by working from 9 to 5, by being an artist, or by pursuing a criminal lifestyle. His success may come in forms of respect and recognition from other people, financial prosperity, or success with women. This central myth is told through hip hop artists expressing it in their raps, graffities, dances, or DJ-sets. Wherever hip-hop artists individually tell their stories of hustling and making it, they simultaneously re-tell and reproduce hip hop's central myth, and performatively perpetuate hip hop culture. (Klein and Friedrich 2003, 14-63)

This re-telling of hip hop's central myth and perpetuating hip hop's culture takes place in specific cultural contexts. While hip hop's original cultural context was the South Bronx and the hostile living conditions of the Black population in the US, the local, cultural contexts in which artists produce hip hop multiply and change with each new city, country, and demographic in which hip hop is introduced and practiced. (Klein and Friedrich 2003, 163-211)

Wherever hip hop artists individually retell hip hop's central myth in their specific cultural contexts, they refer to the challenges and problems within their city or country, they express themselves in their cultural context's language and sociolect, and incorporate their own cultural traditions into their rapping, graffitiing, dancing, and DJing. By adapting hip hop's central myth to their own local, cultural context and expressing it there, hip hop artists contribute to the spread and differentiation of hip hop into different styles – they "glocalize" it. (Klein and Friedrich 2003, 85-111)

Against this theoretical backdrop of hip hop, its culture, myth, and glocalization I will next examine Meme Hip Hop.

MEME RAPPERS: A STUDY OF THREE PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLES

The increasing competition on the internet leads rappers to use different strategies to gain attention – one of them being the meme-strategy. But what exactly does this strategy look like? In the following sections, I will explore this by considering Soulja Boy – the so-called “Godfather of Internet Rap” (Smith-Strickland 2016) and the first rapper to strategically introduce memes in his content to gain attention online. I will then examine current internet rappers to see how they develop Soulja Boy’s meme-strategy further by extending it to their persona or producing their own songs as part of an existing meme.

A) SOULJA BOY: THE FIRST INTERNET RAPPER

Soulja Boy is called the first “internet rapper” and likes to claim this title for himself. In an interview with *The Breakfast Club* in 2018 he points out that he was the one who, over a decade ago, introduced hip hop to the internet and started current hip hop trends: “I started this internet, I started this wave, I’m the reason that these new artists getting signed, I’m the reason why there’s a Lil Pump [...]. Any artist that is hot right now. [...] I’ve been doing this YouTube, I was the first artist on social media, I was the first artist on YouTube. The first artist! These record labels set their blueprint behind me. I’m the reason why they [are] streaming right now.” (Breakfast Club Power 2019, 04:56-07:02). In addition to his digital (and very creative) distribution strategy of his songs via the internet, it was the early introduction of memes into his content that made his songs go viral (Genius 2019). This Meme Strategy is at work in his song *Crank Dat*, released in 2007. The song gained a significant amount of attention due to its meme-able dance, phonetic expression, and lyrics.

The song centrally revolves around a dance. The intro announces this “new dance [...] called the Soulja Boy” and gives first dance instructions:

Ayy, I got this new dance for y'all called the Soulja Boy
You just gotta punch, then crank back three times from left to right (Soulja Boy 2007)

These dance moves were simple enough that they could be performed by anyone. Moreover, the dance was so catchy and memorable that many people wanted to replicate it by dancing to it in the nightclub or upload videos of them dancing the Soulja-Boy-dance on YouTube (Jurgensen 2008). As the dance was performed, filmed, and uploaded by more users, they in turn drew in followers who replicated and shared it, and ultimately made the dance a viral meme. The popularity of the Soulja Boy dance was made possible by the fact that the steps were simple enough that everyone could perform them and catchy enough that everyone wanted to perform them.

A second element of the song fulfils the same characteristics: the “yuuuu” that opens and closes the song and is repeated throughout *Crank Dat*. The sound is a phonetic expression, with high recognition value that serves as a catchphrase. Since the sound is repeated so often and is so memorable, everyone who hears it immediately associates it with Soulja Boy (and the song *Crank Dat*). The song’s recognizability made it very meme-able and led to many people using the “Yuuuu” in their own language or remixing it with other songs, clips, and types of audiovisual content, ultimately making it a meme (TwinkieMan 2017).

Therefore, the dance and the phonetic expression share the same qualities: they are simple, catchy, and make people want to copy, remix, and adapt them – and then pass them on. As this happens, these elements of the song become memes (Know Your Meme 2015). As memes, they go viral and gain high popularity – and yet, they always refer to and give attention to Soulja Boy’s *Crank Dat*.

The rest of the song is designed to not get in the way of the meme-ability of the dance and the phonetic expression. This design of not-getting-in-the-way can be exemplified by the lyrics of the chorus, which are kept as simple and little inoffensive – apart from the misogyny that is (still) common in hip hop (Bradley 2018) – as possible.

Soulja Boy off in this ho
Watch me crank it, watch me roll
Watch me crank dat Soulja Boy
Then Superman that ho
Now watch me yuuuu (Soulja Boy 2007)

Each verse consists of only seven syllables – in verses four and five, the missing syllables are achieved by stretching the last vowel. They use only simple, short-syllabic words from a particular sociolect. If you look at the content of the rest of the song, you will find namedropping of famous fashion brands to show off and Soulja Boy “jocking on them haters” (Soulja Boy 2007). The song does not concern itself with political and social issues, which could be polarizing. Both suggest that neither lyrical finesse nor substantive engagement is sought here; rather, the lyrics are designed to be as simple as possible. The same can be said for the song’s beat and melody.

In summary, *Crank Dat* is characterized by a dance, a phonetic expression, and simple lyrics and instrumentals that are limited to only a handful of topics (status symbols, money, a dance, women, and haters). The focus is on highlighting the dance and the phonetic expression. They are designed to be as meme-able as possible. In other words, they are simple and catchy so that listeners can and want to copy and adapt them easily, with high recognition value. The rest of the song is designed to not get in the way of (the elements of) the song becoming memes. Thus, *Crank Dat* is a prime example of a song adapting a Meme Strategy.

B) LIL PUMP AND LIL NAS X: PUSHING THE MEME EVEN FURTHER

To see how Soulja Boy's Meme Strategy evolved, I will analyze two successful (meme-)hip hop songs from the last four years: *Gucci Gang* (2017) by Lil Pump and *Old Town Road* (2018) by Lil Nas X.

Gucci Gang is the breakthrough hit by rapper Lil Pump. It was originally released on SoundCloud in August 2017. In this song, Lil Pump raps on a trap sound² about his extravagant lifestyle, which is reflected on the one hand by status symbols and (the name-giving) designer clothes, and on the other hand through his drug consumption. The lyrics are designed to be as simple as possible and very catchy due to the constant repetition of "Gucci gang" – which ultimately made the phrase a meme. This can be observed especially in the chorus:

Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang (Gucci gang)
 Gucci gang, Gucci gang, Gucci gang (Gucci gang)
 Spend three racks on a new chain (Yuh)
 My bitch love do cocaine, ooh (Ooh)
 I fuck a bitch, I forgot her name (Brr, yuh)
 I can't buy a bitch no wedding ring (Ooh)
 Rather go and buy Balmain (Brr) (Lil Pump 2017)

In the song itself, all the above-mentioned meme-strategies are used: the catchphrase is very simple, catchy, and is constantly repeated, and the rest of the song is kept as simple and non-polarizing as possible. Lil Pump, however, takes the meme-strategy one step further and extends it to his persona. He has pink and turquoise dreadlocks, facial tattoos, and wears flashy and colorful outfits – recognizable features he ostentatiously displays on social media and in music videos. Additionally, he frequently shows up with a joint or double cup of Lean and is regularly involved in (staged or deliberately caused) scandals – both also presented on social media.

² Trap is a subgenre of hip-hop that originated in the South of the United States, particularly Atlanta. The sound of trap is characterized by a "deep, resonant bass" and "bright synthesizers", accented by "dry, sharp snare drum attacks and crisp cymbals." Together, these elements create a sonic "sonic aesthetic." The trap lyrics focus on drugs, drug trade and drug money (Burton 2018).



Figure 1: Screenshot from Lil Pump's music video *Gucci Gang*, source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Lf1nj66HVQ>

While rappers have ostentatiously flaunted their wealth and achieved publicity through drug use and scandals before, the central difference in Lil Pump's case is that both were planned, orchestrated, and posted on social media as part of the so-called "Pump Plan" by his management. The "Pump Plan's" aim from the beginning was to "transform [... Lil Pump] into a meme and then a viral sensation" (Levy 2018). This strategy of "meme-ing the artist" (Levy 2018) explicitly attempts to have people copy his style and behavior, start dressing like him, talking like him, or getting the same tattoos that he has. In a self-ironic twist, Lil Pump addresses (and embraces) this phenomenon in his song *Be Like Me*:

Everybody wanna be like me (Ooh, yeah)
 Everybody wanna be like me (Huh?)
 Everybody wanna be like me
 Bust down, big chains and dress fancy (Ooh)
 Everybody wanna be like me
 Spent 2k last week on a white tee (Ooh)
 Everybody wanna be like me
 Dropped 10k on my Gucci bedsheets (Ooh, yeah) (Lil Pump 2019)



Figure 2: Screenshot from Lil Pump's music video *Be Like Me*, source:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJRGkoNqrY4>

While Lil Pump extends the meme-strategy to his persona (Caramanica 2017, 35:15–38:10), Lil Nas X takes this strategy one step further with his song *Old Town Road*. On the one hand, all the previous elements of the Meme Strategy can be found in his song. First, simple lyrics that picture a cowboy riding his horse and are as unoffensive as they are highly recognizable. The song became known mainly for its refrain that is repeated several times:

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more
I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more (Lil Nas X 2018)

Second, Lil Nas X dresses up as a cowboy in the song's music video and creates a dance that follows the memetic criteria of simplicity and catchiness. This encourages many other persons to also dress up as cowboys and dance to *Old Town Road* while filming themselves. In this way, he starts a viral trend and makes himself a meme.



Figure 3: *Old Town Road* dance from the song's music video, source: <https://giphy.com/gifs/lilnasx-old-town-road-lil-nas-x-1eEJXBPLkBoNdB0rzc>

On the other hand, Lil Nas X pushes the meme-strategy even further as the choice of the cowboy theme and his idea to dress like a cowboy goes back to the so called “Yeehaw Agenda” – a meme where Black people dress up as cowboys and -girls (Tashjian 2019) – that was popular at the time. Lil Nas X seeks to actively connect his song to the Yeehaw Agenda to make it part of the meme and to take up its momentum and attention. He took existing internet memes (mainly viral videos) of the Yeehaw Agenda and dubbed them with *Old Town Road* as the soundtrack. He then spread these newly dubbed memes via Twitter, Reddit, and other meme portals – until they found their way onto TikTok. There, *Old Town Road* gained momentum: it became a meme in its own right, bigger and more popular than the Yeehaw Agenda it was based on. The reception on TikTok was ultimately what helped the song break through and catapulted it to the top of the Billboard charts (Caramanica 2019).

What’s genuinely new about Lil Nas X’s *Old Town Road* is that the song is not simply produced in a meme-able way. It is also integrated into an existing meme that it picks up on, adapts it, and continues it. Thus, a reversal takes place: while Soulja Boy and Lil Pump start with their own songs and personas, present them as meme-able as possible and try to create memes of their own, Lil Nas X starts from an existing meme and produces his songs to adapt and continue this meme. Specifically, while Soulja Boy and Lil Pump use memes to make their songs, Lil Nas X uses his songs to make memes.

C) INTERNET, MEMES, AND HIP HOP

This analysis has shown how hip hop artists are increasingly using memes strategically to bring attention to their content. By either producing their content as meme-

able as possible, turning themselves into memes, or integrating their content into existing memes, they increase the chances of their content getting picked up, adapted, passed on, and gaining viral attention. Ultimately, this meme-strategy helps rappers assert themselves against other rappers under the competitive conditions of the internet.

At the same time, the internet and its social media platforms change the way people communicate and present themselves (Nassehi 2019). Eye-catching images of artists are more likely to be liked and shared on social media; short and catchy phrases are easier to adapt or post as tweets on Twitter or comments on social media or YouTube; and on TikTok, such short and catchy phrases are easier to lip-sync in a fifteen-second video, just as short dances spread faster there and create trends. Thus, by changing the way people communicate, social media platforms promote and demand Meme Strategies.

Therefore, not only through its increased competition, but also through its new platforms, the internet is contributing to the increasing convergence and coalescence of hip hop and memes.

MEME RAPPERS: A STUDY OF THREE PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLES

With these insights from the study of three paradigmatic Meme Rappers in mind, both of this article's central research questions can be answered: what is Meme Hip Hop and how does it relate to hip hop?

Meme Hip Hop relates to hip hop in two ways. They both have in common that rappers use their content – I have focused on rap here, but similar observations could be made about breakdancing, DJing, and graffitiing – to express their struggles and their continuing efforts to make it. In doing so, they re-tell the central myth of hip hop and performatively perpetuate hip hop culture. The central difference between both is that Meme Rappers express their struggles on a worldwide stage: the internet. The internet intensifies competitive conditions and the battle for attention and demands new ways of communicating and presenting one's content. Rappers respond to this demand by increasingly including memes in their content, presenting themselves as meme-able as possible, or including their hip hop content in existing memes.

Due to these similarities and differences between hip hop and Meme Hip Hop, the latter can be understood as hip hop's reaction to the changing contexts and demands on hip hop artists on the internet. Through the use of memes, hip hop artists attempt to re-tell and reproduce hip hop's central myth and performatively perpetuate hip hop culture on the internet. Thus, Meme Hip Hop is the attempt to adapt hip hop's central myth and culture to the structural communication conditions and demands of internet and its platforms. Meme Hip Hop is the continuation of hip hop culture in the age of the internet, – its digital globalization "by all memes necessary."

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