The "It Me" Meme

Discovering Our Shared Unconscious

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> *True life, life finally discovered and illuminated, the*
> *only life therefore really lived, is literature[.]*
>   *— Marcel Proust, À la recherche du temps perdu*[1]
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> *[T]he world is its own best model… The trick is to*
> *sense it appropriately and often enough.*
>   *— Rodney Brooks, "Elephants Don't Play Chess.*[2]
>
> *It me, James Franco.*
>   *— @PastaVersaucey in a twist on James Franco's*
>   *texts to an underage fan.*[3]

The epigraphs presented above come from such disparate domains that it may appear that they have nothing in common. However, this study brings together the realms of 19th-century realist literature, cognitive science, and internet culture to underscore a fundamental feature of the human experience: the capacity to resonate with cultural artifacts. In our contemporary world, we see this feature manifest in, among other things, our inexplicable fascination with internet memes, and in particular the category of memes known as "It Me." "It Me" memes illuminate our unconscious mental models, evoking an undeniable sense of resonance in the meme reader who finds

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[1] Marcel Proust, "Le Temps Retrouvé," story in *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, vol. 7, edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 895.

[2] Rodney A. Brooks, "Elephants Don't Play Chess," Robotics and Autonomous Systems 6, no. 1-2 (1990): 3, accessed June 5, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0921-8890(05)80025-9.

[3] Andrea Katz (@PastaVersaucey), Twitter post, May 2, 2014.

themselves uttering, "that's so true." I contend that these memes serve as a reflection of our collective unconscious, unveiling shared experiences and emotions that transcend individual disparities.

This paper will begin by providing an overview of the ongoing discourse surrounding internet culture and memetic theory, setting the stage for our definition and exploration of the "It Me" meme type. To illustrate the cognitive mechanisms through which our minds engage with cultural artifacts like "It Me" memes, we will align psychological presuppositions concerning cognition with the portrayals presented in these memes. Specifically, we will use the theory of mental models to elucidate the process by which individuals "discover and illuminate" facets of their lived experiences when encountering such memes. Last, I will conclude by returning to the realm of 19th-century realism, drawing connections between Proust's ideas and the manifestation of these themes within the realm of the "It Me" meme.

Memetic Theory: The Difference between Getting It and *Really* Getting It

One of the persistent challenges in memetic research has been the inability to determine why an individual likes and shares a specific internet meme.[4] The internet meme's popularity and influence in today's society is undeniable; according to Instagram, one million memes are shared every day on its platform alone.[5] Using Google Trends and similar services, we can now track whether or not a meme is searched, how frequently it is shared, and even which types of people share specific types of memes. But the number of times a meme has been shared doesn't tell us much about *why* it was shared. According to computer scientist Nello Cristianini, this task is not as easy as tracking a meme: "Analyzing the properties and features of memes that may influence their fitness has proven to be a challenging endeavor."[6] This is important because if we can

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[4] Rosanna E. Guadagno et al., "What Makes a Video Go Viral? an Analysis of Emotional Contagion and Internet Memes," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29, no. 6 (2013): pp. 2312-2319, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.04.016.

[5] Instagram, "Instagram Year in Review: How Memes Were the Mood of 2020," Instagram Blog (Instagram, December 10, 2020), https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-year-in-review- how-memes-were-the-mood-of-2020/.

[6] Nello Cristianini, "Neural Network (Artificial Neural Network, Backpropagation Network, Connectionist Network, Multilayer

understand why some people share the memes they share, we can begin to comprehend what it is about memes that cause humans to consume and respond to them in the manner that they do.

According to Ryan Milner in his book *The World Made Meme*, the two most likely reasons for people sharing a meme are that they "got it" on a cultural level or that it resonated with them on a personal level; however, "the nature of that resonance is difficult to articulate definitively or universally, as individual texts resonate with different people for different reasons."[7] Milner uses literary theorist Roland

A schwing and amish.

Figure 1.

Barthes' distinction between *studium* and *punctum* to make his point. Barthes defines studium as "getting" an artist's intention or understanding what the artist is doing on a cultural level and with "polite interest." Figure 1 is an example of something "gotten" on the studium level. To get the meme, you'll need to know the cultural concept of who Amish people are and how they dress, as well as the baseball idiom "a swing and a miss." Broad cultural knowledge and an appreciation for wordplay are sufficient to grasp the intent of the meme.

The punctum, on the other hand, punctures the artist's intention with something more personal, something sensed on a deeper, more intimate level. "This *something* has triggered me, provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void."[8] As an example of punctum, Barthes relates his reaction to an André Kertesz photograph of a boy guiding a blind gypsy violinist

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Perceptron)," *Dictionary of Bioinformatics and Computational Biology*, 2004, https://doi.org/10.1002/0471650129.dob0483.

[7] Ryan M. Milner, "Logistics: The Fundamentals of Memetic Participation," essay in *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 98.

[8] Roland Barthes, "19," in *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 49.

Figure 2.

across a dirt road (Figure 2). "I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long ago travels in Hungary and Romania."[9] Barthes emphasizes that he has a deep and intimate connection with the particular detail of the road in this photograph. The road allows him to reconnect with long-forgotten memories of his youth. The studium is the child leading the blind violinist, but the punctum, for Barthes, is the road and the receding background.

Memes are excellent at stirring up this type of reaction. People who can relate to Figure 3 have either used or witnessed others using a McDonald's straw as a makeshift musical instrument. Someone who used to do this as a youngster will probably react much like Barthes did on seeing that road in Hungary; they will have a flash of a long-dormant memory that comes flooding back to them, and they'll say or think something like, "Oh my gosh, that's so true."

People exclaim, "that's so true," because a meme has captured a familiar feeling, one that often hides beneath our conscious thinking, and when we see the meme we are given a jolt of reality that pushes our unconscious memories to the surface. The "shock of recognition" common to this meme type is the mind associating the scenarios presented in the meme with mental models stored in our long-term memory. This type of meme, by definition, is one that *illuminates our unconscious thoughts and feelings.*

Figure 3.

For Milner, this is what personal resonance looks like. Memes are particularly good at pricking us on the

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[9] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida – Reflections on Photography*, p. 45.

punctum level. However, personal connection isn't the only reason people share memes. Milner notes that, owing to the distinction between studium and the punctum, "analysis of memetic content or circulation alone can't tell us how texts prick their audience."[10] Do individuals share a meme because it resonates with them on a personal level or because they comprehend it on a cultural one? The answer to this question will reveal a lot about one of the most fundamental aspects of memetics: why people share memes in the Milner's question about why certain memes "prick" their audience by identifying a new meme type.

Defining the "It Me" Meme

The person who doesn't care or know much about football but finds themselves at a Super Bowl party would likely be moved by the meme in Figure 4. This meme was posted on Instagram by "nochill" on February 13, 2022, one day before Super Bowl LVI. At this writing, the post has received 167 Comments, most of which were a combination of tagging someone ("@username") accompanied by a laughing face emoji or "lol" text (see Figure 5). The categories of responses and their amounts are shown in Table 1. Notice that all four of the top categories of comments are a version of either "this is you" or "this is me," including when someone is tagged, which is an implied "this is you/me." This manner of sharing reveals how people engage with and spread memes of this sort— they share them with people who will

Figure 4.

Figure 5.

get the reference. In other words, almost everyone who commented in some way related to the content, either recognizing themselves or someone they know in the depiction. This is

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[10] Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, 101.

something that memes seem to be particularly good at; their brevity and shareability emphasize their potential to, as Proust would say, "discover and illuminate" common aspects of life that allow people to respond, "Oh my gosh, that's so me" (or the popular shortened version "It me").

Comment	Amount
Tagged	131
Crying, lol	66
Its Me, Us	30
You	14
Sports	9
Spam	9
Food related	8
Its (someone we know)	1

Table 1.

"It me" was reportedly coined by Twitter user @PastaVersaucey, also known as Andrea Kats, in 2014 as a parody of James Franco's texts with an underage fan (shown in Figure 6). The expression quickly gained popularity and became a meme in its own right, and it has shown impressive longevity for a meme in the digital world as it continues to be used to express identification or relatability with tweets and internet memes. According to Urban Dictionary, "it me" means: "This is exactly how I feel."

By combining the 2014 "It me" meme (in the cultural idea sense) with the internet meme that attempts to *illuminate moments of unconscious human experience* (like we see in Figures 3 and 4), it seems appropriate to label the internet memes under discussion as "It me" memes. The misspelled "It's" is the ideal blend of internet oddity and the universal human experience of making spelling mistakes when messaging friends.

Why does the mind recognize "It me" memes as true? These memes appear to be the perfect medium for expressing moments of resonant experience. Milner agrees that memes are shared when they resonate but adds "[t]he nature of that resonance is difficult to articulate definitively or universally, as individual texts resonate with different people for different reasons." Although it's true that

It me, James Franco

Figure 6.

not everyone connects with the same memes, it is possible to determine why "It me" memes resonate with certain people. For our Super Bowl meme, for example, individuals can respond in one of three ways:

1. They don't connect at all

2. They understand it on a cultural level (studium)

3. They connect with it on a personal level (punctum)

When an "It me" meme resonates with someone on the punctum level, the viewer's mind associates the meme with some aspect of their actual experience—one that is buried in their unconscious—and when the memory is retrieved it is often re-clarified by the meme.

A Cognitive Perspective on How Memes Work

When social science researchers take an empirical approach to explore the nature of cognitive processes, they frequently perform studies that provide them with crunchable data, such as stimulus–response times, neuroimaging, word types, etc. In doing so, they are missing out on an enormous amount of data that record the human mind's ideas, behaviors, and activities—I am referring, of course, to memes. Indeed, the widespread sharing of memes shows that they are especially good at reflecting the ideas, emotions, and experiences as they are perceived by both meme creators and the people sharing them. It is of particular note that these social concepts are usually unremarked on outside of the meme form. Like our Super Bowl and McDonald's Straw memes, they are felt and experienced but not necessarily acknowledged. In other words, we are unconsciously documenting our ideas and behaviors as we go about our daily lives, but many of these mental models are not brought to our awareness until we encounter the model in meme form.

Mental Models

Many cognitive psychologists propose that our mind represents our experiences as coded data saved in our memory as multi-modal "traces" of the original experiences.[11] These representations are called "mental models," which are mental constructs that "'mirror' the perceived structure of the external system being modeled."[12] The mental model theory holds that our minds create holistic conceptual models of the world as we experience it.

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[11] Diane Pecher, Rolf A. Zwaan, Rolf A. Zwaan, and Carol J. Madden, "Embodied Sentence Comprehension," essay in *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 227.

[12] James K. Doyle and David N. Ford, "Mental Models Concepts for System Dynamics Research," *System Dynamics Review 14*, no. 1 (January 7, 1998): 17, accessed June 5, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1099-1727(199821)14:1<3::aid-sdr140>3.0.co;2-k.

Figure 7.
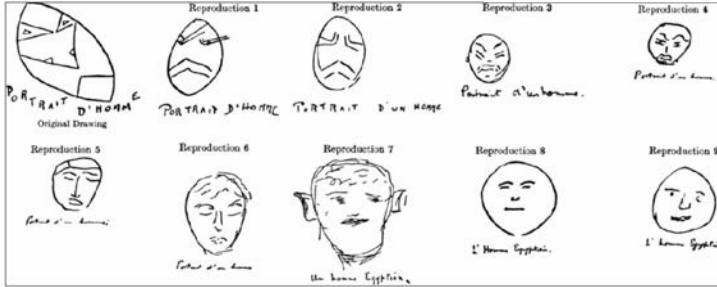
Psychologist Frederic Bartlett conducted the first tests to demonstrate how the mind organizes information, which he published in his 1932 book *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Figure 7 is one of the results of Bartlett's research from a process he termed "serial replication," in which a person looked at a picture then drew what they recalled after a brief time gap. The new drawing would then be presented to someone else, who would later draw it, and so on. The drawing in the upper left corner of Figure 7 is what someone recalled and drew from an image named "Portrait d'homme" from a culture other than that of the British participants. The images morph from a foreign portrait to a face recognizable in Western society. The study demonstrates how our minds assimilate information to mental structures that are shaped by the traditions of our upbringing. Bartlett called these constructs "schemas," which he defined as "an active organization of past reactions, or past experiences."[13]

Kenneth Craik, a Ph.D. student of Bartlett's, expanded on Bartlett's schema concept in his 1943 book *The Nature of Explanation*. Craik claimed that schemas are really the mechanism by which we experience and operate in the world, which he calls mental models. We make mental models of the physical world and of other people's minds so that we can anticipate situations and react to various circumstances.

> If the organism carries a "small-scale model" of external reality and of its possible actions within its head, it is able to try out various alternatives, conclude which is the best of them, react to

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[13] Frederic Sir Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 201.

future situations before they arise, utilize the
knowledge of past events in dealing with the
present and the future, and in every way react in
a much fuller, safer, and more competent manner
to the emergencies which face it. [14]

Mental models, according to Craik, form the system that allows us
to make conclusions about what might happen next. To forecast
what might happen in every scenario, the mind gathers all available
data and associates those data with embodied models to predict
possible outcomes. This mental operation is known as top-down
processing.

Top-Down Processing
Milner notes that "[a]udiences do complex work in the fleeting
seconds that they glance over an image; they read meanings that
are encoded in the text and match those meanings to already-
understood contexts."[15] To understand what is being
communicated in memes, readers must assimilate textual content
with pre-existing knowledge using a process called top-down
processing. Top-down processing is how the brain receives sensory
information and categorizes the data within a hierarchy of existing
schemata (or models). The organism that receives the data can
quickly associate them with similar data and respond accordingly.[16]
Bottom-up processing is the inverse of top-down processing; it is
the mind's method of understanding data that it does not identify
as belonging to an existing mental model. Without the benefit of
guidance from a model, the mind is not sure what to do with the
raw unattached data. The data are stored in working memory until
they can be incorporated into an existing model or until enough
information is gathered to generate a new model. It's worth noting
that top-down processing is recommended for text comprehension
because it's a quick and effective technique to associate data. On
the other hand, bottom-up processing is labor-intensive to the
point where individuals often prefer to give up rather than try to

[14] Kenneth Craik, *The Nature of Explanation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1943), 61.

[15] Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, 60.

[16] E. Bruce Goldstein and Angie Mackewn, *Cognitive Psychology: Connecting Mind, Research, and Everyday Experience*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005).

interpret new information by generating new models. The heavier mental load is often not worth the effort.

The critical point is that we construct mental models based on embodied knowledge to inform a text. Top-down processing classifies raw data into known schemata (or mental models) instantly and effortlessly, providing us with more information through associated schemata.

To return to the "It me" meme, we may state that the "shock of recognition" experienced after seeing an "It me" meme is attributable to the meme pinpointing some component of one's life experience that had previously escaped their conscious awareness. Unconsciously, a mental model was formed, which was then buried in the dusty basement of their long-term memory until the meme uncovered it by way of top-down processing. This is why "It me" memes can feel shockingly real; it is because we often go through our lives not entirely aware of reality until it hits us on the flip side.

The "It me" Process: Simultaneous Recognition and Discovery

"It me" memes describe moments, thoughts, and behaviors that reside outside our daily consciousness. When we see these moments in meme form, we have a sense of discovering something we already knew. How does this happen? As an example, let's take a look at the situation depicted in Figure 8. We see the memetic character Kim Kardashian in a relatable quandary in which she wants someone to know she is upset but cannot text that person to tell them, "I'm ignoring you." If the meme reader has ever been in a similar position, they will most likely feel a sense of recognition and discovery when they come across the meme. Why the sense of discovery? The answer is attributable to the distinction between subjective and objective experiences. When the meme reader lived through the depicted situation, they were *not* observing their scenario as they are now from an observer's perspective. Instead, they were immersed in it, grappling with details such as thinking about the other person and determining the best course of action. As it was experienced, the quandary was most likely annoying or upsetting; it was not amusing. With time and distance, however, such moments

When you're upset and want to ignore him but he hasn't texted you and you haven't had the chance to ignore him so u just get more upset

Figure 8.

are forgotten about and relegated to long-term memory. Then later, when the person comes across the meme, they can appreciate the irony and intrinsic truth by way of the situation they experienced. It is only in hindsight that we can see the forest for the trees. In other words, "It me" memes identify that which passed by our conscious observation in the past. When it is encountered later in meme form, a clear and succinct script will resonate because the viewer lived through a similar situation. The shock of recognition feels intensely real because it was real when the model was created; the viewer just needed to be reminded of the model.

Figure 9.

"It me" memes are often designed to prompt the mind to associate the description with an embodied mental model. For example, one common text prompt of "It me" memes begins with "When you['re]…"; these memes depict occasions when we are confronted with a common situation and frequently display a recurrent reaction (see Figure 9). Another common prompt begins with "Me" and depicts an action or sentiment about something (see Figure 10). Both memes are essentially expressing the same thing: "This is how I behave in this context," or "This is the face I make," or "This is the thought I have," and so on. These examples are not the only two varieties of "It me" memes; they're merely typical occurrences. When we see "When you…," or "Me [action]…," the text primes the mind to associate with embodied mental models. This type of opening leads to people having an "It me" response if they share the behavior or thought depicted in the meme.

For example, Figure 9 will undoubtedly resonate with anyone who catches themselves singing the wrong part of a song. If you're alone and start singing the wrong line, you'll probably forget about it (because who cares?) and continue singing along with the rest of the song. Even if you're with someone at the time, you'll probably say something

Figure 10.

like "wrong part" and immediately move on. Moments like this are what Freud called preconscious memories. After they are initially experienced, they become relegated to our long-term memory. In the present case, these experiences are kept in long-term memory until they are encountered in the "It me" meme form. The mind associates the meme with similar experiences via top-down processing, and if it discovers a model, the reaction is something like, "That's so me."

Conclusion

We've spoken about how "It me" memes use top-down processing to activate unconscious mental models so that the mind may associate past experiences with the meme, which gives the meme a sense of verisimilitude. "It me" memes frequently give the impression of being inside your head, probing that private thought or experience that you believed was unique to you; but as the comments of our Super Bowl meme reveal, many others think, feel, and experience similar things in this world. However, because such details aren't typically shared, we don't realize how similar our experiences are. Memes are filling a void that formally resided within the domain of prose. Near the end of Marcel Proust's *A` la recherche du temps perdu,* his narrator realizes that,

> True life, life finally discovered and illuminated,
> the only life therefore really lived, is literature.
> Life in this sense dwells within all ordinary people
> as much as the artist. But they do not see it
> because they are not trying to shed light on it.[17]

For Proust, the artist's goal is to grasp the life that may elude the person living it and show them what they're missing. The "It me" meme has taken over Proust's project of documenting "life finally discovered and illuminated." By referencing our unconscious mental models, "It me" memes remind us of things we did not know that we knew. These memes are condensed versions of an art that focuses on depicting the small, isolated facets of experience that are simultaneously recognized and discovered.

We started with Milner noting that, owing to the distinction between studium and the punctum, analysis of memetic content or circulation alone cannot tell us how texts prick their audience. But

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[17] Proust, *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*, 895.

I think we have done just that; we have analyzed how the "It me" meme pricks its audience by finding associated mental models of the reader's past unconscious experiences.

This understanding won't end any major dispute, but it does contribute to the conversation about why people share memes in the first place. It is likely that the "It me" memes signal the direction of where the meme-o-sphere is headed. Internet inside jokes will continue to be amusing in the same way that your intimate friendships have inside jokes that are only amusing to those inside the circle. "It me" memes, on the other hand, function on a different level, analogous to the best standup comedians, exposing the hilarious, often unconscious, aspects of our experience. Jerry Seinfeld's "have you ever noticed" routines were the 1990s' equivalents of the "When…" and "Me [action]…" meme openers.

When realist authors like Proust began to illuminate the minor, mundane aspects of life, that style didn't fade into oblivion; it took over the medium. The novels we read today are all wearing that influence on their sleeves, as are comedians. This new genre of meme is actually quite old—it's just finding a new form. And the reason for its continued popularity goes back to Proust: "the only life really lived" is the one that is "discovered and illuminated." We enjoy being reminded of our unconscious memories. We need moments, like Barthes' punctum, wherein our old thoughts and experiences come rushing back to the surface to be relived and enjoyed. The mundane quality of the thing seems to be of particular importance. The more commonplace something is, the less we notice it when we live it. As cyberpsychologist Dr. Grainne Kirwan notes,

> As we tend not to discuss many of the mundane aspects of life, either because we believe them to be boring to others or so unusual that others might think us slightly strange, we frequently don't realize that many others do and think exactly the same things, even in private moments.[18]

In short, "It me" memes reveal that we are not alone. They have shown us that we share a collective unconscious, not in the Jungian sense, but in a simpler yet more powerful "common experience" sense. "It me" memes have the ability to puncture the medium, as

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[18] Amelia Tait, "It Me: How Memes Made Us Feel Less Alone," New Statesman, June 13, 2021

Barthes would say, and suggest a truth that we had forgotten or never knew that we knew in the first place. We realize that others go through life doing the same silly things, like turning their McDonalds' straws into instruments, that we do. "It me" memes have allowed us to discover our shared unconscious.

Image credits

Figure 1. Slothman09. "A Schwing and Amish." Reddit, September 13, 2018. Accessed September 13, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/9fkthy/a_schwing_and_amish/.

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Figure 7. Bartlett, Frederic Sir. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, 179. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1932.

Figure 8. "Kim Kardashian" character meme showing her pondering a dilemma. lovethispic.com. Accessed February 26, 2022. https://www.lovethispic.com/image/391458/when-you%27re-upset-and-want-to-ignore-him.

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