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Making Sense and Gaining Meaning within Digital Culture

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated within contemporary digital culture means examining three interlocking frameworks that are present within the social structure of the Internet in the form of memetic layers, nanocelebrity, and platform persona dynamics. Drawing on nearly twenty-five years of teaching and observing digital communication practices, there is an exploration of how memes function as multilayered cultural artifacts whose meanings drift as they circulate through networked communities. Interpretation of these works within digital spaces is shaped not only by creators but by audiences whose cultural fluency, platform norms, and participatory practices continually remake meaning. The essay then situates nanocelebrities as those credentialed experts who translate knowledge into platform-friendly formats. They are useful as emerging mediators of public understanding amid widespread misinformation and collapsing institutional gatekeeping. It is also important to note how structural forces are embedded in social media platforms. Looking at affordances, community norms, and algorithmic incentives helps shape identity performance and influence what kinds of interpretations become visible, trusted, and culturally dominant. Together, these frameworks provide a vocabulary for understanding sense-making and meaning-making in a rapidly shifting digital environment, highlighting both the instability of online interpretation and the agency users reclaim when they understand the forces shaping digital communication.

1. Introduction

My nearly quarter of a century as a professor in higher education has allowed me to see my students grow and find their way in the world. Sometimes they will friend me on social media and, for a rare few, send me memes via direct messaging on the various platforms that I belong to in my role as a digital communication professor. Most of the time, it is a simple image, one that spreads with little effort across the grand expanse of the Internet.

Being a Gen X-er, I will look at the text and visuals to see if I recognize something about it from my cultural past. My younger students are using these visual syntactic sentences as stand-alone communication that I'm expected to respond with the correct contextual message, as I am the "meme dude" on campus. Much like when I use a cultural reference from the nineties in class that causes my students to respond with blank stares, there are times that these memes highlight the gaps between myself and my students in humor and other culture elements. Communication patterns change quickly online, based on the speed of the Internet and the interactions that online communication through the Internet gives us.

I catch myself at these moments to reflect on the old idea of the "death of the author," which discusses how the original creator is not the ultimate arbiter of the meaning of a creative work (Barthes, 2010). Rather, it is the audience that has as much right to interpret a work as the author does. We can point to the Internet as shifting it to the "near-death of the author" based on the ability for the original author (if they are still around and able to communicate) to contribute to the conversation about their work (Potts, 2022).

We can look at this, in the words of poet and novelist Caroline Hardaker, as a sign of the "rise of the reader." We see that creators and their audience are "on a shared journey" because it "enriches our understanding of literature" through "allowing stories to transcend their origins and resonate uniquely with each individual (Hardaker, 2025)." Memes become these artifacts that have an unstable meaning once they enter the shared digital space because of the rise of readers. The Internet as a communication environment rewards quick interpretation, and the ever-present "First!" in the comments section as an immediate response will tend to drive past being informative or nuanced for the situation (Templeton et al., 2022). We can also see this when a fanbase of a popular series chooses to ignore the original author based on how that author's

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political beliefs go against and dehumanize many of the members of the series' fanbase (Miller, 2024; Ravell, 2023).

Looking back at these messages makes me wonder how we decide what the meme is trying to say once it goes beyond, in the words of communication professor and meme scholar Limor Shifman, the "original context" of the work and gets "remixed" and "mimicked" by online communities until it reaches a point of going beyond to hit the point of being "hypermemetic (Miller, 2024)." This drift of meanings in memes and other forms of digital content can turn inside jokes into political commentary or ways to provoke others into a response. The digital environment intensifies this drift because there is rarely a pause that encourages people to slow down and check their assumptions. Instead, the pace of interaction pushes everyone toward quick readings and immediate reactions. The result is a constant negotiation of meaning, shaped as much by the people interpreting the meme as by the intentions of whoever created it.

Observing this negotiation (often seeing it in real time online) leaves me asking the central question that propels my need to read this essay. I struggle to see how sense-making of online content was happening with the people that we regularly interact with the people that we make eye contact with when they are away from the screens that we use and how online communities settle on a shared understanding of digital works that have a more abstract connotative meaning.

Like, how do I explain "six seven" to my parents, and how do community members understand what it signifies in the group spaces within the platforms that we share[1]? Who has the expertise and influence to direct conversation and actions online so that they are not merely fictional attempts at connection with others? Any attempt to study these patterns must account for shifting context and the ways readers reshape the message long after it leaves the hands of whoever created it. To begin addressing this challenge, we need a way to examine how meaning forms and reforms inside digital culture, which brings us to the first framework that guides this essay and how people piece together messages and meaning online.

2. Building Meaning with Digital Content Through Memetic Layers

We can look at anything that is shared online as part of the means that we use to communicate with one another. Memes often strike people in ways that ordinary posts do not because those regular postings that people use will not carry emotional weight to help people connect online. In addition, cultural references and shared experiences within the memes drive the feeling of familiarity between those involved with the interaction.

Memes were defined in "Meme Life" as first being "active, multilayered communication constructions," meaning that they are constantly being modified as more people share them (Tilton, 2022). Those "social factors" allow people to use memes to express themselves online in a way that other digital content would not. A meme's meaning is ultimately controlled by the community members who are using the meme as part of their online interactions. The meme changes the more it is used within the community.

Community members also recognize that the meme itself is more meaningful than all of the pieces that people add to create the meme (Strain, 2025). In addition, we see that memes work because others' creative contributions (in the form of borrowing from works of popular culture or community members adding their own creative mark on the meme) add to the complex messaging of the meme. It is easy, in the works of Henry Jenkins, to poach from the creativity of others for a meme, as the Internet was built on the cultural industry that is embedded in society as a whole (Jenkins, 2015). Jenkins is using poaching as a way to borrow and adapt cultural content creatively to be used in personal works.

This understanding of memes helps us see that they are never a single, stable message. They work as powerful tools of communication because communities build them from shared cultural cues, but those cues shift as the meme travels. Meaning drifts the farther a meme moves from its original context, leaving some viewers unsure of its purpose or unable to decode it due to differences in cultural capital (Ramsey, 2025). Even when all the pieces of a meme are visible, people bring their own experiences and assumptions to the reading of it. Those differences make interpretation unpredictable, which is why examining the layers that shape a meme's meaning becomes so important.

We can see these "memetic layers" as the ways that the original creator of the meme (and by extension, those that modify the meme to add their own way of using it for communication) can construct meaning by adding different pieces of digital content and infusing them with cultural touchstones that the online communities and friend groups that the person belong to would recognize and find meaningful. In turn, that audience who is exposed to the meme adds additional elements to the meme when they decide to use it or talk to others about it. The nature of the network and the file that flies through it means that people can adjust that artifact over and over again with a minimum amount of time and effort needed to change it.

Simply put, a **memetic layer** is merely one component of meaning that gets added to the meme as it circulates, whether by the original creator, by the audience, by the culture they share, or a combination of the three. Each meme acts as a "cultural echo" that bounces through the tubes of the Internet and amplifies the artistic works that influenced its creation (Crouch, 2024). Content creation through this framework becomes part of the performance that critiques culture and summarizes what is happening in society through the act of sharing, even if the original intent of the creator was to craft an expressive work of personal reflection.

We can see the intention of the original creator of the meme through its **conceptual layer**. Simply put, someone made this thing, and it reflects who they are. It is the layer that is invisible to the audience because it is often impossible to know who created any meme that spreads quickly online. The person's belief system (Effe, 2025), socio-economic background (Paulenová & Kluknavská, 2025), cultural awareness (Dwivedi, 2023), and knowledge of past memes (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021) all play a part in making what was inside the original creator's mind accessible to others through the selection of the right elements of language and culture.

1 I know this cultural reference will be outdated long before I hit the publish button, but this is one of the things that triggered my need to write this essay.

The original creator's actual creative work on the meme is when they play with the next three layers of the meme. It is important to note that not all memes require all of the layers. However, the more layers included in the meme means that the creator can be more complex in the message that they wish to share with others through this meme, and the bigger risk that the meme will be misinterpreted based on that complexity.

The layers that the original creator chooses to blend to craft a meme are its **textual, visual, and compositional layers**. It is the surface of the meme that the audience will talk about when describing it. That creator's contribution comes in the form of the words that appear on the meme, what imagery is central to the presentation of the meme, how the meme is put together, and how those three layers work together from the template that others can use to craft their own memes.

Meme generator websites use those four concepts to define the categories that their users can use to find the right format to craft their message through a given meme. It is fair to argue that the creator's contribution is where a good majority of the meaning-making happens within the meme, as these parts are the most concrete within the meme and can be defined through outside resources (like "Know Your Meme" and "Urban Dictionary," among others). Once we understand the creator's choices, we can look at how shared cultural knowledge shapes what audiences see.

Memes will borrow from books, films, games, music, and shared cultural objects. What the meme borrows from is part of the meme's **cultural layer**. We can see why some memes make sense to some people and not others, as memes can amplify generational divides based on the embodied cultural capital that those generations might have. We can also see when memes become, as Ryan Milner describes them, the "inside jokes of the Internet (Milner, 2018)." When an Internet community crafts memes that require detailed fan knowledge and specific shared references to understand, those memes become a form of gatekeeping to determine who is part of the community and who are outsiders (Mihăilescu, 2024). Recognition cues require a cultural fluency that most of us may not have. Thus, the cultural layer acts as a filter that separates those who get it from those who don't. We see those "who get it" use the meme as part of their interactions online.

Going back to the "rise of the reader" argument presented earlier in this work, meaning isn't just defined by the original creator. The connotative meaning of the meme can be advanced by the audience who incorporate a shared collective significance to the meme. Memes, as a communication construction, become the tools that one uses to have the agency to interact with others online. We would look at the **contextual layer** of how memes are used within the different platforms where they are found, such as the "Don't Make Me Tap the Sign" meme. There is a call to authority context that a person could use this meme to get others to respect the rules of the community, or people could use it to find other fans of "The Simpsons." Fans and others using these memes ground the memes towards a commonly understood meaning within the community that is using the meme.

This level of social performance also explains how memes get enacted in the space of the real world. We can also point to the Ice Bucket Challenge and how it dramatically impacted ALS research as a prime example of the transformative ability of the social performance of memes (Hrastelj & Robertson, 2016). The **performative layer** of the meme causes the memetic artifact to become hypermemetic and move beyond digital communication practices.

Finally, we can see how social performance elements highlight national identity and/or affiliation to a cause online in the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia (Tilton & Agozzino, 2023). The memes used by both sides of the conflict draw attention to the nationalist messaging circulated in Russian networks and the use of international media to rally people to the cause of Ukraine fighting for its freedom. Memes become the rituals for engagement online that communities use to define what counts as acceptable forms of interaction and topics that are funny among community members (Rothenbuhler & Coman, 2005). It also adds in how the meme should be interpreted within a given community and throughout the general public.

This point gets us to the final set of layers, as we are addressing the interpretive level of memes. Beyond being a reflective critique of the meme itself, looking at the rhetorical presentation of a given memetic artifact and giving a meta-analytical overview of the meme shows us that there is always another layer within the meme if we wish to talk about it. Those layers are the ones that go back to how the audience is building up the meaning of the meme each time a new version is crafted.

The classic rhetorical analysis works well here as the **rhetorical layer** as it allows us to focus on the specific memetic artifact's creator, purpose, audience, topic, and context to tell the story of this particular meme. The **meta-analytical layer** is the final point of discussion, as it addresses how all of the meme layers work together to present a cohesive message. The main question addressed in this layer is, "how would a community member describe the meme to an outsider?" We can point to this level as how the communities settle on the meeting of a meme and where the points of confusion still exist.

Let's use one of my favorite examples from the "Memes and Society" course I teach. It's the end of the semester, and I'm tired. I want to express that in a meme. I use a scene from the first season of "Spongebob Squarepants," in the "Arrgh!" episode, where SpongeBob yells at Mr. Krabs, "I WANNA GO TO BED," to be the visual layer. I might change the textual layer to be "I WANNA THE SEMESTER TO END!" The compositional layer could simply be using Impact font to superimpose the text on top of the visual (Brideau & Berret, 2014). SpongeBob is popular, and his presence in any image is almost a cultural hypermemetic object (Miltner, 2014). It could be shared on YikYak as a contextual expression that everybody is tired this semester, and the meme could even count as a performance if it is disseminated in class on the classroom screen. The rhetorical and meta-analytical layers can address how the meaning of this meme could shift and fracture depending on which community was sharing it as part of their online interactions.

Understanding these layers matters now because this kind of rapid, layered meaning-making has become the default language of digital life. A single meme, regardless of whether it features SpongeBob or not, has the potential to create a ripple within online communities that shifts a narrative or acts as a rally point for the community to come together. The instability of messaging and meaning discussed is a feature of the Internet and not a bug. It is a reminder that the ways that we communicate and connect are evolving, as the communication technologies that we use will continue to change over time. Memetic layers are, as part of the digital communication practices that we use, the ways that knowledge is shared

online and how misinformation spreads within our communities (Zidani & Moran, 2021).

It is how communities (and the average Internet user by extension) decide who to trust and who is unreliable that becomes central toward dealing with misinformation and what the World Health Organization called the Infodemic that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sohrabi et al., 2020). We could look towards Stuart Hall's research regarding how people "read" the content that they are exposed to daily (Hall, 2003). It is more helpful to look at how people use memetic layers to create digital content that informs the public and builds credibility as a source of online knowledge. Scholars and educators who choose to craft a persona that allows them to present content that reinforces their role online as experts in their given field through their digital content creation hit upon the second framework worth examining in digital culture, the role of the nanocelebrity in a digital society.

3. Everyday Experts Become Nanocelebrities

One of the reasons I shifted away from solely looking at the ways that mass media outlets are attempting to influence what is happening on the Internet is thanks to the number of content creators acting like the professionals that they see online, with massive followings and traditional celebrity status. They are using their voices to interpret complex news stories and make them accessible. We can see these everyday experts providing an education online to help lay people understand scientific advancement and cultural events that are generally away from the spotlight of broadcast channels. By being a credible way to help others comprehend their world around them, these content creators build up their audiences across platforms. As misinformation spreads easily and traditional gatekeepers lose their hold on public knowledge, people turn to these smaller, more familiar figures to guide their understanding of the world. These smaller content creators, whom I am going to refer to as nanocelebrities, craft their online presence based on their areas of expertise to convince that they deserve an audience's attention.

The baseline definition for a **nanocelebrity** is "any credential expert in a given field of study who tends to grow their fame, popularity, and/or recognition by shaping their knowledge effectively into content that is suitable for social media and compelling to read, listen to, and watch." It was this definition that I used for my book, "Digital Culture in the Platform Era: Studying celebrity, influence, and superstars online," as I wanted to make it clearly that nanocelebrities should be best understood as experts whose authority comes not from traditional fame but from how effectively they translate their knowledge into digital form (Tilton, 2025). Academics, teachers, clinicians, analysts, journalists, and other credentialed professionals can gain visibility online by packaging their expertise into short, accessible, platform-friendly content that people actually want to get their information from when they are online. Nanocelebrities are effective when they are relatable in a way that the audience can see why the content creator's explanations are trustworthy and worthy of being shared across multiple platforms. They are shared because they help people make sense of the world, one post at a time.

We can look at four areas that drive the nanocelebrity's personality to make compelling content and reach an audience through the wide variety of means that are available via digital communication technologies in this section of the chapter. The most important of these four is the idea of **contextual credibility**, which deals with how the content creators translate their expertise across platforms. This form of credibility is grounded in the concept of the three chronological forms of credibility.

The best nanocelebrities will have strong initial credibility, as they have respected institutions that can vouch for the nanocelebrity's ability to talk about their area of expertise reliably (Berry, 2017). This **initial credibility** can come from having three to five letters behind a person's name or a title that the audience would respect (Metzger et al., 2003).

The nanocelebrity's content becomes the **derived credibility**, which is the credibility the content creator gains from their audience by them watching, listening, or reading the creator's work online (Wheeless, 1973). Seeing a content creator present honestly about what they know and showing proof of their claims within their work will build up their derived credibility.

That leaves **terminal credibility**, which is the credibility of the creator has after the audience is done and applies what creator's content to real-world settings (Quibell, 2022). If the audience member remembers a piece of wisdom (like how to change a flat tire) when they need it and the wisdom proves to be true in that situation, the nanocelebrity has gained terminal credibility in the eyes of that audience member. In turn, the audience member might tell their friends, thus expanding the nanocelebrity as a credible source.

The second area that expands a content creator into becoming a nanocelebrity is translating knowledge, which deals with more than just the content that they produce. **Translating knowledge** is the process that a nanocelebrity uses to take the most complex concept and simplify it or expand a basic idea in a field of study to show its value for the average Internet user. It comes from knowing when to use humor or be sincere, through an enthusiastic delivery or a direct stoic approach. Crafting an understanding of a complex world and giving the audience something to latch onto makes anytime the audience sees that person feel like they are simply part of an ongoing relationship through the Internet. It is possible that the nanocelebrity thinks that they are part of this relationship as well, which gets to the third area.

Participatory authenticity happens when the nanocelebrity is able to use the engagement practices of replying, stitching, dueting, commenting, tagging, or whatever functional elements are present to attempt to be part of the audience as a community instead of just fans. This form of authenticity emerges from the sense that the nanocelebrity would fit in naturally as a member of the fan community and is being transparent about their actions when they engage with others online and in real-world settings. This type of authenticity can take the form of acknowledging the audience's questions, responding to criticism without acting defensive, highlighting audience members' work, and working within the fan community to build it up in ways that feel collaborative rather than alienating the audience. It might be **parasocially** a reciprocal relationship, but it does signal that the nanocelebrity values the people following them and sees them as co-interpreters of the world (Daniel Jr. et al., 2025). This fragile, mediated sense of belonging that comes from this, in the end, means that the nanocelebrity presence feels meaningful and grounding in a place of wanting what is better for their community. To complete this picture of the nanocelebrity's personality, we also need to examine how

effectively they align their communication with the audience's level of understanding and experience.

Relatable voice refers to how well a nanocelebrity adjusts their communication to match the audience's level of understanding and experience. Oversimplifying ideas will only get a nanocelebrity so far, as it will feel like the content creator is talking down to their audience. This focus on voice goes back to that idea of meaning-making. Controlling the language to hit the sweet spot for their audience allows the nanocelebrity to select the right examples and explanations that feel natural to the communities they are speaking to. The best nanocelebrities have a recognizable persona that is built on speaking in the voice of the community, which makes the audience return to the nanocelebrity whenever they appear online. This return is just one way that nanocelebrity get their ideas heard and seen online.

We can see all four areas of the nanocelebrity's personality (contextual credibility, knowledge translation, participatory authenticity, and relatable voice) working together in the actions of creators who bridge expertise and everyday digital culture. One of my friends from grad school is the Public Information Officer for the Nevada Division of Forestry. Their work mainly is informing the public how to be safe during wildfire season. Mainly, they use their platform to discuss how to protect the forest, why trees lose their leaves in the fall, and the helitacks help put out fires.

Their academic background and experience with the service provided initial credibility, there were clear explanations that showcased knowledge translation, and their direct reply to the original video demonstrated participatory authenticity. They spoke not as a distant expert but as someone who understood why people were confused and wanted to help them make sense of what they were seeing. This mix of expertise and approachability is what transforms an everyday expert into a nanocelebrity.

Understanding nanocelebrity matters because our information environment has changed faster than our institutions. Traditional gatekeepers, in the form of newsrooms, universities, and public agencies, no longer set the pace or the tone of public knowledge. Audiences increasingly turn to smaller, more familiar figures who speak in human terms rather than institutional ones. At the same time, misinformation spreads with a speed and emotional charge that outpaces formal systems of verification. Nanocelebrities help fill this gap by offering credible, digestible explanations in the spaces where people already spend their time. Their influence shapes how people understand politics, health, scientific discovery, and cultural conflict. Their public intellectual work takes place in the comments sections, stitched videos, direct messages, livestreams, and algorithmic feeds.

We see this shift in who the public turns to and why they believe those nanocelebrities brings us directly to the final framework. Nanocelebrities do not operate in a vacuum. Their personas succeed or fail depending on how well they navigate those platform dynamics and how audiences read their identities through whatever features the platforms that they use provide. To understand why certain experts become trusted voices while others struggle to connect, we must turn to the logic of the platforms themselves and the identities they make possible.

4. Platforms Shape Who We Become Online

We end this overview of shifting online communication patterns by recognizing a simple truth, which is that we present different versions of ourselves across the Internet. It is not fair that these other versions are intentionally deceptive. There is a broader pattern of how we use these platforms to connect with others.

Psychologists have pointed out that we adopt the narcissistic behaviors of using Instagram and TikTok filters (Geary et al., 2021), along with having the right selfie pose (Barry et al., 2019), to present the ideal version of our photogenic selves. There is also a trend to avoid having hard conversations online that are grounded in our daily experiences because we feel that it might cause harm to the relationships with those that we care about online, even if those hard conversations directly relate to having an honest discussion about who we are (Baughan et al., 2021). We learn these behaviors because each platform we use quietly teaches us how to behave. The functional elements of these platforms, along with the algorithm's control of our exchange of messaging, shape the persona that we expect to be on those platforms naturally.

It is this structural control embedded in the platforms we use every day that helps explain why the same expert who appears authoritative on YouTube may feel conversational on TikTok or restrained on LinkedIn. These shifts matter because they guide what information people trust and what voices rise to the top of digital culture. They also help explain why nanocelebrities, those everyday experts who translate knowledge for online audiences, succeed on some platforms and struggle on others. Understanding platform persona dynamics shows us that who we become online is never just a personal choice.

Platforms train us not only in how to communicate but who we are allowed to be within each of the platforms that we use. This understanding of setting a specific style of self-presentation for each app makes the need for understanding the platform persona dynamics that we need to navigate as part of that much more critical. The term **platform persona dynamics** refers to the ways that people adjust their identity when they go from one social media site to another, and what forces determine how they adapt their identity for those different social networks. Studying platforms for over twenty years led to categorizing three forces that help or hinder a person's ability to shift between different websites. We can first look at the affordances that the platforms provide their users.

Platform affordances refer to what the platform allows in terms of functionality and form (Papacharissi, 2011). Those functions could be stitching together others' content, dueting with another user, threading individual posts into one complete thought, quote-tweeting to add commentary to others' words, ephemeral stories that offer a short glimpse into somebody else's life, or livestreaming a person's reality as an artifact of this time and place. Each of these features creates certain opportunities to engage with the larger user base of the platform. A platform that only supports short video clips pushes users toward visual and performative communication. One designed around text encourages purposeful content around argument, explanation, and commentary. Any social media site that is centered on images rewards aesthetic curation. Affordances define the boundaries of identity performance at the most basic level. By determining what is possible to say on a given site, the platform privileges certain types of exchanges and forces the users to select from a subset of

possible communication practices. Instagram encourages a polished, curated version of the self, while TikTok invites quick, expressive spontaneity. LinkedIn privileges professionalism and restraint, while YouTube favors expertise delivered through longer, more intentional storytelling.

Community norms, being the second part of the platform persona dynamics, refer to the unwritten rules from the community members that define what the accepted behaviors and practices are when it comes to interacting with others within a group space on a platform or the platform as a whole. We can point to what kinds of tone (Barcelos et al., 2018), humor (Fine & Soucey, 2005), pacing (Gentle, 2013), and interaction styles (Kiesler et al., 2012) feel "natural" on a particular site. Even when two platforms share similar features, their cultures can differ dramatically. For example, it is fair to see in a platform like Reddit almost three levels of norms (Chandrasekharan et al., 2018). Those Reddit macronorms on often based on generally avoiding violations (such as using misogynistic slurs, hate speech, abusing moderators, and attacks on the platform) for the subreddits that are more public-facing (those that tend to be on the front page of the site). Reddit's mesonorms can be grounded based on the category that the subreddit exists in within the platform. Gaming subreddits will avoid outbound links to illegal live streams, access to pirated games, personal anecdotes irrelevant to the game, and posts designed to mess with people's enjoyment of the game. The micronorms are for one subreddit, like AskReddit, and will focus on those specific actions that would defeat the purpose of having such a subreddit, like comments that only express thanks, offering commerce tips, and using Wikipedia links as a source.

Other times, we can point to generally accepted content among the platform users to describe the norms of the platform. It is easy to point at a platform like TikTok and say that the norms are based around showing the user presenting an authentic version of themselves in a way that does not feel that they are trying too hard to present this version of themselves (Serazio, 2024). We can also see how the fast rhythm of reply chains drives the frantic nature of the platform. We can also point out how the aesthetics that dominate a platform become the norms (Manovich, 2020).

Instagram leans toward the use of casual imagery, with some accounts documenting "an experience, a situation, or to represent a person or group of people." Professional photographers represent a different set of norms, as they are following the "rules, conventions, and techniques" of professional photography that were "developed during the twentieth century" as part of a community of profession that maintained the standard of good photography practices. There is also a focus on design as a subset of norms that people follow. We can see the use of photography and other graphics that "create a shallower or flat space with strong two-dimensional rhythms more redolent of modernist abstract art and design." These three sets of community norms focus on the "mood and atmosphere rather than the representation or communication of emotions." In this way, norms train users in the persona that feels appropriate, even when the platform's technical affordances would allow a very different style of expression.

This final force comes in the form of what users are rewarded for doing within the platform. **Algorithm incentives** are hidden structural elements that both define the means by which content is distributed across the platform and the means by which users define their roles within the platform (Lin et al., 2022). These incentives teach users the value of their work within the platform without the platform explicitly explaining what the value structure is within the platform. A platform like Twitter that rewards rapid engagement, encourages quick takes, and emotional heat will spread those tweets that hit those points to a broader audience (Stone & Can, 2020). The YouTube algorithm rewards a user creating content that audiences will watch for long periods of time, thus pushing creators toward longer narratives or slow-building explanations (Chayka, 2025). Over time, creators begin to adjust not to their own preferences but to what the algorithm signals it wants, which can distort the persona they originally intended to project. In this way, incentives steer users toward the versions of themselves that the platform finds most profitable or promotable.

Taken together, these forces (what platforms make possible, what communities expect, and what algorithms reward) shape the versions of ourselves that appear online. Each site teaches us a different rhythm of interaction and elevates particular styles of expression, often long before we realize we've adjusted to fit its demands. Even the average Internet user ends up performing slightly different selves as they move across apps, shifting their presentation aesthetics and form to match the space they're in. Understanding these dynamics brings the final framework into conversation with the earlier ones, showing how memetic layers, nanocelebrities, and platform persona dynamics all converge into a single story about how digital meaning is made within the communities that we connect with online and why it matters for how we communicate today.

5. Sense-making and Meaning-making in Digital Culture

When we step back from these three frameworks of memetic layers, nanocelebrities, and platform persona dynamics is when we see that each one explains a different part of the same cultural puzzle. Those layers allow us to build collaboratively memes that speak with the common collective voice of the community, as community members have an opportunity to interpret what is happening in the world and give agency for others to remix the memes based on commonly accessible icons of popular culture. It is the role of the nanocelebrities to use popular culture and reshape it in order to help the average Internet user make sense of the world. Platform persona dynamics gives us the insight to see how the structural forces of digital culture filter the messages that are shared within the community, and how we adjust our identities within these different communities to define our place in that world. To borrow from the work of Ryan Milner, those three forces are the logics that define digital life (Milner, 2018). We can see how these forces work based on what we make of our digital existence. This understanding of our digital existence matters because most people still assume that the Internet "reflects" culture, when in reality it actively reshapes it. Framing our understanding is helped by two sociological theories.

We can point first to the general concept of sense-making. This concept is used in Human-Computer Interaction (Russell et al., 2024), Cognitive Systems Engineering (Klein et al., 2006), Organizational Communication (Weick, 2012; Snowden et al., 2000), & Library and Information Science (Dervin et al., 2017). We can generally say that **sense-making** happens when there is an attempt to explain something in the world that is less than clear through an ongoing process of inquiry to reduce ambiguity and turn a confusing environment into something that feels navigable. We can see how these three forces described above help with sense-making in

digital culture. Memes help people make sense of a confusing world, but those interpretations can fragment quickly without shared context. Nanocelebrities offer clarity, but their credibility depends on how well they navigate the expectations and incentives of different platforms. Platform dynamics silently teach millions of users how to perform and decide what counts as trustworthy. If we don't understand how these forces work together, we miss how misinformation spreads, why certain voices gain influence, and why digital conflicts escalate so quickly across communities that appear, at first glance, to be interacting with the same media. These three forces also help define what is essentially digital culture.

If sense-making helps us navigate confusion, then meaning-making tells us what we ultimately decide those experiences signify. We can look at **meaning-making** as the process that we use to define events, symbols, relationships, and influences that we come across in our lives so that they become something that we can significantly talk about to others. We can look at how meaning-making helps us learn from our past experiences (Park, 2010) or how we deal with our emotions when a person that we care about dies (Mackay & Bluck, 2010) or why we are motivated to join social movements (Kurzman, 2008). We interpret and negotiate these cultural frameworks to assign value and relevance to these shared social experiences that we have as members of a society (Dahlgren & Hill, 2023).

It is how a meme becomes more than a joke, how a nanocelebrity becomes more than a helpful voice, and how a platform becomes more than a tool. In digital culture, meaning emerges through interactions. We can actively remix memes until we settle into a recognizable narrative that connects with the themes that emerge from their favorite shows. The community that trusts or rejects what a nanocelebrity is talking about based on the ways that they present themselves across platforms. In a grander sense, those community norms define the trends that appear within our networks and give us the cultural tools to communicate that understanding to the general public.

Meaning-making, in this view, is a cultural negotiation shaped at every stage by memetic creativity, by the personalities of everyday experts, and by the structural rules of the platforms where those interpretations circulate. Without recognizing how these forces shape the meanings we build together, we risk mistaking the loudest interpretations for the most accurate ones, and overlooking how digital life trains us to see the world in particular ways.

Recognizing these structures described above gives us tools to respond. Audiences can learn to slow down their interpretation of memes, asking which layers are shaping their assumptions and where meaning may have drifted. Online communities can become more intentional about who they trust online, looking for the telltale signs of contextual credibility rather than simply rewarding confidence or virality. In addition, we must become more aware of how platforms quietly train us to communicate in emotionally charged or overly simplified ways. Media literacy today must be about understanding the cultural, social, and algorithmic conditions that influence how all of us communicate. Otherwise, we are stuck drowning in misinformation and the trivial noise of the network.

It can be easy to feel overwhelmed when looking at the ways that these three forces (memetic communication, nanocelebritism, and platform persona dynamics) control all aspects of digital culture. We need to remember one powerful takeaway from this knowledge, which is that we have more agency than we think when we understand how these forces impact us online. When you know the layers behind digital messages, the personalities shaping the knowledge you consume, and the platform forces nudging your behavior, you can navigate the online world with more clarity and less confusion. Drawing the curtain to expose these forces for what they are gives us a way to describe the digital culture we already live in every day. As we continue to make sense of the ever-changing nature of digital culture and build meaning together online, that vocabulary becomes the first step toward a healthier information ecosystem and a more intentional digital public life..

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