



# **Do Classical Art Memes Devalue High Art?: A Thematic and Discourse Analysis of Comments on the Facebook Page Classical Art Memes**

Me trying to wrap my head around  
the literature after 3hrs of reading



MA Thesis

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## Abstract

The research positions classical art memes – internet memes that appropriate images of high art – at the convergence of high culture and popular culture. Based on the elitist sentiment positing that high culture is of higher value and that the appropriation of artwork in popular cultural products devalues high art, the research explores whether the meme audience believe so by studying their comments on the Facebook page Classical Art Memes. Another aim is to discover whether the memes encourage the audience's art learning. To answer these questions the comments are automatically scraped from Facebook and approached with the digital ethnography methodology. 402,647 comments and replies to 556 memes are examined in reference to the Facebook page and to their respective memes – which are classified based on form and content. The thematic analysis arrives at six topics: Relatability, Sharing, Reaction & Praise, Information Inquiry & Provision, Creativity & Humor, and Criticism, which prompt the subsequent discourse analysis. It informs the characteristics of not only the meme audience but also of the genre of classical art memes, the Classical Art Memes page, and the act of tagging on Facebook as a digital practice. Overall, classical art memes are well-received by the commenters.

*Keywords:* classical art memes, internet memes, high art, popular art, Facebook comments

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## 1. Introduction

Today, memes matter. They are more than funny images on the internet and are even impactful in various respects. According to a survey in 2019 by YPulse, a US youth research agency, 75% of the respondents from 13 to 36 years old engaged in meme sharing activities. The majority of them used memes in conversations to deliver humor or express reactions (YPulse, 2019). Memes also shape the youth's thoughts and impact how they perceive life (Fink, 2020). Memes are the medium onto which subcultures and countercultures are reflected (Andreasen, 2019; Chateau, 2020; Gal et al., 2016; Listiyaningsih et al., 2020; Literat & van den Berg, 2019). In addition to their richness in cultural references, memes are so crucial and pervasive in digital cultures that they are employed in classrooms to teach digital literacies (Listiyaningsih et al., 2020; Paul, 2020). Notably, a political campaign even sponsored memes to gain attention on social media (Lorenz, 2020). Memes are now speculative assets auctioned as digital art (Gartenberg, 2021). Those that offer social criticism are also considered a form of art, being valuable and comparable to Dada or Surrealist art (Wiggins, 2019, pp. 130–153).

What caught my attention among all the memes circulated on the internet are those that appropriate works of art often seen in museums. They are not new and rather have been popular for a few years on the Facebook page [Classical Art Memes](#) which has amassed nearly 5.5 million followers. Those memes are interesting on account of their combination of internet memes, which are ubiquitous and often frivolous, and high art, which seems esoteric and exclusive. In this regard, it is not surprising to question whether the meme making process devalues art, as Testa (2020) poses in her writing. She and MacFarlane (2019) conclude that Classical Art Memes rather sparks interest in art and encourages learning. Meanwhile, some museums are open to the idea of memes made from classical art. The National Gallery in the United Kingdom organized [a talk](#) on the subject and gave instructions to make memes out of their exhibited artwork. The Philadelphia Museum of Art in the United States makes memes themselves and posts them to

their social media accounts on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#). So does the Uffizi Gallery in Italy on [TikTok](#).

Inspired by Testa (2020) and MacFarlane (2019), I will study comments on the Facebook page Classical Art Memes made by its audience on classical art memes – memes that appropriate works of art. My aim is to discover whether they think the memes devalue high art, and whether the memes encourage them to learn about the artwork. The results will inform media specialists and art educators on the impacts of this genre of memes. The research is relevant to the fields of Media Studies, Art History, and Communication.

This research is structured as follows. Chapter 2 contains the theoretical framework for my analysis. I will review art history scholarship to explain the convergence of high art and popular art. After that, I will define memes that appropriate art as “classical art memes” based on theories of memes, internet memes, art memes, and classical art. Relevant research on classical art memes will also be studied to establish the research gap and research questions. To fulfil the research aim, I will formulate common topics of the comments and explore their implications. Chapter 3 details the methodology and describes the data collection process. I will employ the digital ethnography approach (Varis, 2014) and conduct a thematic analysis and a discourse analysis of the comments (Jones et al., 2015). The comments will be gathered by Facepager, a computer program (Jünger & Keyling, 2012/2019). In Chapter 4, I will present my findings, the common topics, and study the topics on a deeper level. Finally, in Chapter 5, I will give answers to the research questions, explain the limitations of the research, and provide suggestions for future studies.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Convergence of High Art and Popular Art

First, it is essential to define high culture and popular culture. In the simplest sense, the modifiers indicate the ease or difficulty of gaining access to these cultures. Popular culture is open for everyone to join and enjoy while the opposite is true to high culture (Irwin, 2006, sec. Popular Culture and High Culture). More often than not, popular culture is regarded as low culture. This distinction between “high” and “low” does not necessarily imply the value of their respective cultural products is high or low, however, but refers to “a socioeconomic hierarchy that has cultural implications” (Fisher, 2013, p. 474; Gans, 1999, p. 7). The ranking thus indexes the levels of income and education which are crucial for participating in a culture (Gans, 1999, p. 9). From this view, participation in a certain culture is an indicator of the class to which participants of a culture belong. Indeed, tracing back to the initial distinction between high culture and popular culture in the German language, Gans (1999) points out that “masse”, in “Massenkultur” – mass culture – equivalent to the modern-day American term “popular culture”, is “an old European sociological and political term to describe the poor and uneducated classes” (p. 5). Similarly, Bourdieu posits that the hierarchy of high and low art is a reflection of social power relations (as cited in Fisher, 2013, p. 475).

Before moving on with the examination, it is important to make note of the art-related terms used in this thesis. There are numerous classifications such as Gans's (1999) five taste cultures, Brooks's highbrow and lowbrow, and other cultural critics' coinage of “middlebrow” (Irwin, 2006, sec. Popular Culture and High Culture). I, however, will keep the basic distinction between *high* and *popular*. In doing so, I follow Gans's (1999) refusal to use “mass” which is originally a condescending word (p. 5), and Irwin's (2006) choice of “popular” over other terms to avoid the discriminatory implication of wealth and high education. Moreover, *culture* will be

used interchangeably with *art* under Gans's (1999) narrow definition of culture as "practices, goods, and ideas classified broadly under arts (including literature, music, architecture and design, etc., and the products of all other print media, electronic media, etc.)" (p. 5).

Returning to high culture and popular culture, it is observed that their distinction does not remain intact. Gans (1999), in the updated version of his *Popular Culture and High Culture*, presents three factors contributing to changes in preference of cultural products; two of which – convergence and omnivorousness – concern the collapse of the boundary between high culture and popular culture. The convergence of the two happens as people of different classes opt for the same products under the condition of "how much the cultural content involved requires the previously noted built-in education requirements" (Gans, 1999, p. 11). On the other hand, omnivorousness is brought about as people acquire more money, have more free time, and receive more education, allowing them to enjoy products across high culture and popular culture (Gans, 1999, p. 12).

The blurred distinction of high art and popular art is also owing to the fact that whether a genre or form accommodates high and/or popular art changes over time. For instance, orchestral music used to be exclusively a high art domain, but now rock music – a genre of popular art – is performed by philharmonic orchestras. Or, plays which had been a form of popular entertainment up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century are now considered high art (Irwin, 2006, sec. The High and Low of Art Forms and Genres). At the same time, this shows that forms and genres alone do not indicate whether an artwork is esoteric or popular. Instead, there is an alternative method of evaluation via a cluster model (Fisher, 2013, p. 476). Within the model, an artwork is graded according to a cluster of properties it has, and these properties are ranked by scale. As a result, engendered is the concept of "middlebrow" straddling between high art/highbrow and popular art/lowlbrow, and referring to "works that have some of the properties of high art but also lack some or have them to a lower degree or possess some of the properties that positively

weigh toward the lower end of the scale, such as being made primarily for entertainment” (Fisher, 2013, p. 476).

The distinction and the convergence of high culture and popular culture raise the question of the artistic value of art (Fisher, 2013, p. 480). As pointed out by Fisher (2013), there are three directions of arguments consisting of elitism, populism, and pluralism. The elitist view posits that high art is of higher value, which results in the adversity against combining high art and popular art (Fisher, 2013, p. 480), and the bitterness towards “the intrusion of the popular on the high” (Irwin, 2006, sec. The High and Low of Art Forms and Genres). It is illustrated by an example of Jonathan Franzen, who considers himself a serious writer, criticizing Oprah Winfrey’s choice of his literary work, *The Corrections*, for her popular book club (Irwin, 2006, sec. The High and Low of Art Forms and Genres).

Such a condescending view on popular culture gives rise to the criticism that incorporating elements of high art into popular art debases the former. A prominent attack targeting middlebrow comes from Greenberg (1939) with his influential essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. To him, kitsch is middlebrow, the “popular, commercial art and literature”, exploiting for its own sake the rich, well-established high culture that used to be exclusive to the literate with sophisticated tastes in art (Greenberg, 1939, Part II). The argument is also based on the fact that kitsch is formulaic and mechanically produced, which reduces the cost of production and yields more profit. By calling out kitsch for its use of “debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture”, he affirms kitsch is deceptive, imitating the effect of high art, and that it does devalue high art (Greenberg, 1939, Part II).

Avant-gardism is considered high art by some critics, but not by some others. Putting it in contrast with kitsch, Greenberg (1939) praises avant-garde art for its intrepidity and purity to detach from the marketplace with the aim of preserving formal culture and addressing controversial questions. While kitsch is despicable for riding on the fruits of traditional high

culture and being profit-driven, avant-gardism is noble for creating self-referential art and being immune to the ideological infusion (Greenberg, 1939, Part I). In the same vein, the avant-garde elitist view is shared by Carroll (1998), who connects avant-gardism with high art, and Babbitt (1958), who emphasizes avant-gardist exclusivity (as cited in Fisher, 2013, p. 481). Scruton (2007), who is also an elitist, instead goes against the discourse by rejecting avant-gardism as high art and criticizing it along with other high art genres (Fisher, 2013, p. 481). To Scruton (2007, Chapter I), high culture is “the accumulation of art, literature, and humane reflection that has stood the ‘test of time’ and established a continuing tradition of reference and allusion among educated people”. Thus, in the case of avant-gardism, it is not high art for aiming to destroy the bourgeois traditions (Scruton, 1999, p. 471). This adds another layer to the complexity of the high art and popular art argument as the judgment of value might be subjective.

Elitism can be manifested via the identification with high culture. This is observed by Abolhasani et al. (2017) in their study of YouTube comments in response to commercials with classical music in the background – a work of high art employed in a popular cultural context. Displaying knowledge of the featured piece of music, the commenters of this group express their identity as people with a refined cultural taste. Some even show superiority, priding themselves on being able to recognize the work as it is, and mocking those that only know about it through the advertisement (Abolhasani et al., 2017, p. 480).

In defense of popular culture, Gans (1999) argues it does not cause harm to the high counterpart. There exists no proof of the accusation, and keeping high art separate from popular art would add to it no more value (Gans, 1999, pp. 38–40). In addition, Benjamin (1936), while agreeing that mechanical reproduction decreases the value of art, argues it does bring about certain benefits (p. 4). The value and authenticity of a work of art lies in the inherent “aura” decided by its presence at a particular location at a particular time, and by the ritual tradition for which it is originally used (Benjamin, 1969, p. 6). Aura is neither detachable from the original nor

duplicable in the reproduction process, thus is irreducible, and unique. However, in mechanical reproduction aura is irrelevant. The reason is that technologies facilitate reproduction methods that are less dependent on the original, giving chances to explore and capture its other aspects. They also help disseminate copies of artworks to where the original cannot access. The nature of art, therefore, is changed in a way that diminishes a work of art's dependence on traditions and gives weight to its exhibition value to the extent that art can be made for reproduction purposes. All in all, mechanical reproduction itself is an artistic process (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 3–6).

In opposition to elitism, populism positions the value of popular art above that of high art (Fisher, 2013, p. 480). This point, however, will not be elaborated. My focus is not to conclude which art is prestigious, but to investigate the phenomenon of high culture mixing with popular culture. When it comes to this topic, the question of art value arises owing to the exclusive nature of high art. According to Gans (1999), there is an impression that popular culture “steals” from high art, even though the latter also borrows from the former (p. 39). His reasoning is that popular culture might borrow more from high culture than vice versa because it caters to a larger audience who demand more cultural products (Gans, 1999, p. 39). As a result, I will pay attention to only those viewpoints that insist on the superior value of high art or concern the mixing of high culture and popular culture.

Differing from elitism and populism, pluralism does not attempt to decide which art has greater value (Fisher, 2013, p. 480). As Fisher (2013) observes, there are two strands of pluralism. First, that popular art is aesthetically valuable according to the same standards applied to high art. Second, high art and popular art have their own criteria for value evaluation. The latter case is exemplified by jazz and classical music, whose values situate in improvisation and harmonic development, respectively (Fisher, 2013, p. 480). Given that, pluralism works towards the appreciation and evaluation of a work of art with the respective standards for its genre,

disregarding the categories of high and popular. In his discussion of taste, Fineberg (2006) asserts that there is no high art or low art, but only good art or bad art, difficult art or accessible art. At stake is whether a work of art survives in the marketplace and whether it engages its audience during an artistic experience. Art can be entertaining, but not entertainment; and to tell if a work of art is good or bad requires a deep, personal experience with full attention and focus (Fineberg, 2006, pp. 28–30).

While also aiming to replace the binary opposition of high art and popular art, Alloway's inclusive cultural theory does not dispose of the high-low distinction (Harrison, 2001). Instead, he proposes the “fine art-pop art continuum” to replace the conventional, hierarchical scale. This happens in pop art as an artistic genre, which is to him constituted by the abstractionist flatness and mostly visual signs loaded with meanings from contemporary life. On account of this combination, pop art is both an art form and a form of communication. Thus, the continuum is employed to extend on one end the limits of culture beyond the Renaissance standards to accommodate pop art, and instate on the other end the capacity for high art to become a form of communication (Harrison, 2001, pp. 40–43).

## 2.2. Classical Art Memes

### 2.2.1. Memes and Internet Memes

Classical art memes are firstly memes. *Meme* as a concept was originally coined by Richard Dawkins (2016) in the 1970s in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Comparing genetic and cultural evolution, Dawkins proposes “meme” as a name for an emergent cultural replicator. It is shortened from “mimeme”, a Greek word meaning imitated things, to rhyme with “gene” (Dawkins, 2016, p. 249; Wiggins, 2019, p. 1). A meme is “a unit of cultural transmission” that replicates via an imitation process and thus “a unit of imitation” (Dawkins, 2016, p. 249). Being imitated, a meme jumps from one brain to another, propelling itself into the meme pool. Its

survival in this pool, similar to that of gene replicators, depends on three factors: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. While the first two factors are discussed briefly, mainly that fecundity is more significant than longevity, the last one receives greater elaboration. Dawkins counters the impression that meme replication is of lower fidelity in contrast with gene transmission on two bases: the blending of genes and the meme complex. First, genes are not always particulate, as seen in the complexion of an offspring of one black and one white person. Second, a meme, like a gene, belongs to a complex that comprises units of various sizes or units contained by another unit. Given this, a copy of a meme may retain part of the original, as in different representations of Darwin's theory that do not include all components of Darwin's original idea (Dawkins, 2016, pp. 249–254).

Memes have become digitized along with the emergence of digital cultures. The pervasiveness of digital technologies facilitates the transition of the internet into a medium for mass communication, as well as the ease of access to digital technologies such as personal computers and handheld devices that are used daily. Examining memes in digital cultures, Shifman (2014, p. 18) posits that the internet enhances the dissemination of memes in all three aspects of longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity that Dawkins (2016) says to be featured in the replication process of memes and genes. She even elevates the significance of memes into “the best concept to encapsulate some of the most fundamental aspects of the Internet” (Shifman, 2014, p. 18).

In making that claim, Shifman (2014) elaborates on three characteristics of memes that are compatible with digital cultures. They include “(1) a gradual propagation from individuals to society, (2) reproduction via copying and imitation, and (3) diffusion through competition and selection” (Shifman, 2014, p. 18). Regarding propagation, Web 2.0 accommodates social technological platforms where content is generated and shared by users. The sharing activities are highlighted, for they now can serve both distribution and communication functions

simultaneously. On the other hand, technological affordances allow for more diverse and more efficient reproduction methods. The repackaging process can be performed in a faster, more accurate manner on Web 2.0 as users can forward, link, or duplicate the exact memes to diffuse them. Reconstruction and manipulation of memes, or in Shifman's words mimicry and remixing, can also be done with the aid of technologies. While the former has existed since the pre-digital time and gains greater visibility in the digital public sphere, the latter heavily depends on technology, such as sound or image editing applications. Lastly, concerning diffusion, digital technology democratizes the tracing of the origins of memes and the provision of metadata, which inform users during their interactions with memes (Shifman, 2014, pp. 18–23).

Unsatisfied with existing traditions of meme definition, including the mentalist-driven, the behavior-driven, and the inclusive memetic approaches, Shifman (2014) proposes a new one that focuses on internet memes. To her, an *internet meme* is “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). With this definition, she aims to underscore the three “memetic dimensions” – content, form, and stance – which are replicated, and that memes are not “single entities that propagate well”, but “groups of content units with common characteristics” (Shifman, 2014, p. 39). By “content”, Shifman (2014) refers to the ideas or ideologies born by a written text, or an image; “form” is what can be visually perceived, and “stance” indicates the position of the meme maker in relation to the meme content, and the audience (p. 40).

In light of Shifman's (2014) definition of internet memes, Wiggins (2019) adds that they are not only content replicators but also visual arguments that are “semiotically constructed with intertextual references to reflect an ideological practice” (p. 9). Regarding internet memes as visual arguments, he distinguishes them from Dawkinsian memes, shifting their etymology from “mimeme” to “enthymeme”, which contains a premise whose conclusion is open for the

audience to decide (Wiggins, 2019, p. 2), and thus emphasizes human agency. Agency in the process of production and dissemination is also acknowledged as the common criterion for differentiating internet memes and viral media. If an item of content is dispersed without being imitated, modified, or remixed, it is solely viral and not memetic (Wiggins, 2019, p. 4). Yet, the role of this agency is less significant under the sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological point of view. Varis & Blommaert (2015) consider that memes are semiotic signs which are intended to convey meaning and must be given a new context as they are distributed (as cited in Wiggins, 2019, p. 5). This recontextualization process requires a kind of agency different from that usually demanded of remixing and imitation (Wiggins, 2019, p. 5). Wiggins (2019, p. 6), in an attempt to bridge the discrepancy between these two views, adapts Varis and Blommaert's (2015) proposition by remarking that “all forms of mediated content – whether they ‘go viral’ or not – that represent or transmit meaning, can also be viewed as semiotic signs”. What matters to him, however, is whether the signs carry intertextual references that imply an ideology, or a discourse among their audience (Wiggins, 2019, p. 6).

Given his understanding of internet memes, Wiggins (2019) regards them as a genre of online communication and theorizes their three-level development: spreadable media, emergent meme, and internet meme (pp. 44–47). “Spreadable media” are the media content that can be distributed beyond their original location to be consumed. Once undergoing changes, spreadable media become “emergent memes”. The alteration techniques include remixing, modifying, parodying, and so on. In digital cultures, its emergent memes differ from culture jamming, “a remix or repurposing of a known image such as a corporate logo and infuses critical perspectives on mainstream trademarks and logos”, and subvertising, “a related concept which seeks to evoke cognitive dissonance through the purposeful subversion of an advertisement by adding politically motivated criticism or satire but maintaining the most recognizable elements” (Wiggins, 2019, p. 45). While the products of culture jamming and subvertising are also emergent memes, those in

the digital culture are mostly characterized by humor and frivolity. To evolve into “internet memes”, emergent memes must continue to be remixed, imitated, then distributed further.

### 2.2.2. Art Memes and Classical Art Memes

There has yet to be a definition of “classical art meme” due to the discrepancies in the reception of memes and art memes in academia, popular culture, and the field of Art History. Theorizing internet memes, as reviewed in Section 2.2.1, Shifman (2013) attempts to bridge the gap of attention paid to memes between academic circles and the public. On the one hand, memes are rejected as a serious subject based on their ambiguous original definition, and reductive, materialistic description of human behaviors, as well as their undermining human agency, and offering no added value. On the other hand, memes have grown into a phenomenon reflecting digital cultures and bearing properties opposite to those of analog memes: brief life span and concrete object of analysis (Shifman, 2013, p. 364). In the same vein, Sapanzha & Ershova (2017) in their investigation into digital art content in network communication conceptualize art memes on the ground of the art world’s criticism towards the “mass appropriation of images of fine art” and its “profane nature” despite art memes’ popularity in digital cultures (p. 56). This resonates with the elitist view that posits fine art has a higher value than popular art and that such appropriation debases fine art (Fisher, 2013, p. 480).

There are two ways to dissect the meaning of “classical art meme”: a meme that features classical art, or an art meme that is “classical”. In the former case, classical art memes are an exception to Wiggins’s (2019) development of internet memes. As detailed in Section 2.2.1, the process includes three stages: spreadable media, emergent memes, and internet memes. Since digitized works of art or digital images of them are already spreadable media, classical art memes are remixes of the artwork and thus initially emergent memes. Having a head start, they still need further alterations and remixes to develop into internet memes (Wiggins, 2019, p. 53). Moreover, as internet memes, classical art memes are visual arguments, too. Utilizing one instance which is

a remix of Vincent van Gogh’s “Starry Night” found on the Classical Art Memes page, Wiggins (2019) explains two possibilities that it can function as such. First, its content is a critique of an issue. The meme implicitly criticizes the presence of the United States’ military in the Middle East. It subsequently provokes discussions among the audience who leave comments to express their opinions on the object of criticism. However, even if the underlying message is not acknowledged, the meme can serve as a visual argument as long as it elicits engagement, participation from its viewers (Wiggins, 2019, p. 53). Via the example of classical art memes, Wiggins (2019) highlights that no matter how rapid a transition from one stage to another is, human agency is indispensable in the internet meme’s development:

For memes to be memes, people must have some role in responding to them. This is also a clear indication of the separation between the Dawkinsian meme, which emphasizes imitation and replication – not necessarily remix and parody – and the internet meme, which functions enthymemetically as a visual argument necessitating an audience – imagined or otherwise – to fill in missing or absent messages in order for the meme to exist. (pp. 53–54)

On the other hand, Aharoni (2019) places classical art memes, or rather memetically transformed artworks, at the convergence of art, technology, and internet memes. Researching numerous studies, she details the long-standing relationship between art and technology, which predates the digital age and gives rise to digital art upon the invention of the computer. As technology keeps advancing and being applied to artistic creation, it further undermines the authority of artists and shifts the focus of art, especially digital art, to “concepts, events, and audience participation” rather than specific subject matter (Aharoni, 2019, p. 2285). Simultaneously, digital art can be construed as art digitized for the sake of democratizing access to art and preserving artworks. However, instead of solely providing a storage solution, new technological affordances encourage and facilitate the remixing of the content digitally stored.

The practice of making digital art thus coincides with the practice of making internet memes, for they are both empowered by digital technologies and are products of everyday creativity. Also, the employment of artworks is similar to the use of well-known visual text in meme-making (Aharoni, 2019, pp. 2285–2287).

In the latter case of interpreting “classical art meme”, an art meme in digital cultures concerns visual art and is defined as “a meme which contains modified art content and is the result of the Internet users’ creative activity” (Sapanzha & Ershova, 2017, p. 56). Sapanzha & Ershova (2017) regard their concept of “art meme” as “modern” on account that it was born out of the modern network communication and in contrast with the appropriation of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 56). Their modern art meme thus highlights the meme’s digitality and function as a means of mass communication, rather than having a connection with modernist or contemporary art. Art memes then are classified into four categories:

- Visual art meme, associated with a change in the visual structure of an interpreted work.

The most common method of visual art meme creation is replacing characters in a picture.

- Animated art meme, associated with addition of multimedia effects to the picture by means of its video animation.
- Verbal art meme, associated with the addition of text without changing the work itself.
- Synthetic art meme based on the integrated use of artwork modification techniques.

(Sapanzha & Ershova, 2017, pp. 56–57)

As the authors do not provide examples or in-depth analysis, their classification is hard to understand and apply. With regard to synthetic art memes, it is unclear what these artwork modification techniques are. In Sapanzha & Ershova’s (2017) context of modern network communication, they might be assumed to be technological editing applications with which the

structural change of the artworks featured in visual art memes is likely to be done. This can also be the case between synthetic and animated art memes when it comes to video editing software. Lastly, verbal art memes might feature technologically modified artworks and thus overlap with the visual type. In the end, the classification can be reduced to three categories, including the visual, the verbal, and the animated, the first two of which are distinguished based on the absence or inclusion of verbal text, respectively.

Studying Facebook art memes among Polish speakers, Gumkowska & Toczyski (2016) theorize that they are a “digital genre-communication form” (p. 49). To the authors, Facebook art memes are first a digital genre that exists on the internet. It is developed based on the modern genre theory, which extends the concept of “genre” beyond the literary field and into social communication in both online and offline worlds. In comparison with the non-digital, online genres are “highly dynamic processes of change, are more fleeting and momentary, are closer to types of speech, are not covered in the previous taxonomies and are created in specific communication situations” (Gumkowska & Toczyski, 2016, p. 43). Examples of online genres include blogs and Facebook art memes, the latter of which are then further studied as a communication form with elements of “sender”, “recipient”, “message”, “code”, “contact”, and “context” (Gumkowska & Toczyski, 2016, pp. 50–65).

Also problematic in both interpretations of “classical art meme” is the definition of “classical”. Scully (1957) points out the ambiguity of “classical” in reference to art and makes a distinction between “classical”, “classic”, “classicizing”, “classicism” and “classicistic” (p. 107). Classical art generally refers to all ancient Greek and Roman art, while classic art focuses on the art of Greece in the fifth and the fourth century BCE. “Classicizing” is used to describe art that aims to mimic the effect of classic art. Classicizing art then constitutes classicism and becomes classicist (Scully, 1957, p. 107). On the other hand, Stokstad & Cothren (2016) offer a simpler, more recent distinction between “classic” and “classical”. Their “classical” is more versatile,

being used to describe the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, as well as the style resembling the artistic ideal of those two cultures. “Classic” to them only indicates the top quality or the highest standard (Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, p. 112). Stokstad & Cothren’s (2016) definitions are generally comparable to those of the Cambridge Dictionary. It keeps “classical” more generic saying the adjective is employed to “refer to the culture of the past and to art forms which belong to a long formal tradition” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

The existence of classicism and that “classical” can be understood in a loose sense mean that properties of classic art exist beyond the art of ancient Greece. Equated with the ancient Greek culture, that of the Romans, whose rise of power occurred at the end of the third century, was heavily influenced by the Greek ideal of “perfect mathematical proportions” (Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, p. 112) while still having their local standards (Adams, 2011, p. 126; Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, pp. 133–134). The ideal of the Greek and Roman constitutes antiquity, thus stands for the glorious past, and the future that the present strives to achieve. The relation between antiquity and the present, yet, changed as time progressed (Scully, 1957, p. 108). The High Renaissance in Italy from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century held “a view of antiquity as having created an excellence which must be rivalled by modern life and brought into union with it”, and was “widely open to the richness of both antiquity and the present” (Scully, 1957, p. 108) and rejected the preceding Middle Ages (Adams, 2011, p. 279; Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, pp. 234 & 326). That the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century to the Early Renaissance in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was called the Middle Ages by Renaissance humanists indicates their contempt for Medieval aesthetics that stood between the antiquity and the Renaissance (Adams, 2011, p. 242; Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, p. 234).

Toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, antiquity started separating from the present because of the disbelief in competencies to reach the ideal, and the classic ideal as a result sat at a position superior to the present. The classic then became “an intellectual art of distance and permanence

which rejected of necessity those aspects of form having to do with the violent, the instantaneous, and the sensational" (Scully, 1957, p. 109). Meanwhile, there was "a new taste for dramatic action and violent narrative scenes", which led to the development of Baroque art in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that "[tends] to be relatively unrestrained, overtly emotional, and more energetic than earlier styles" (Adams, 2011, p. 333). In tandem with the Renaissance, the classic was still part of the contemporary ideal (Adams, 2011, p. 333; Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, p. 368); yet, it became dissociated from the present and transformed into "something which could be found only through rejection of the present" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Scully, 1957, p. 112). This period marks the collapse of the classic as an ideal; Romanticism and Realism took over Classicism as "art [began] to engage with the complexities of a real world in transition, and it [blossomed] near the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a new attention to the actual conditions of that real world, often using art to challenge and critique it" (Stokstad & Cothren, 2016, p. 473).

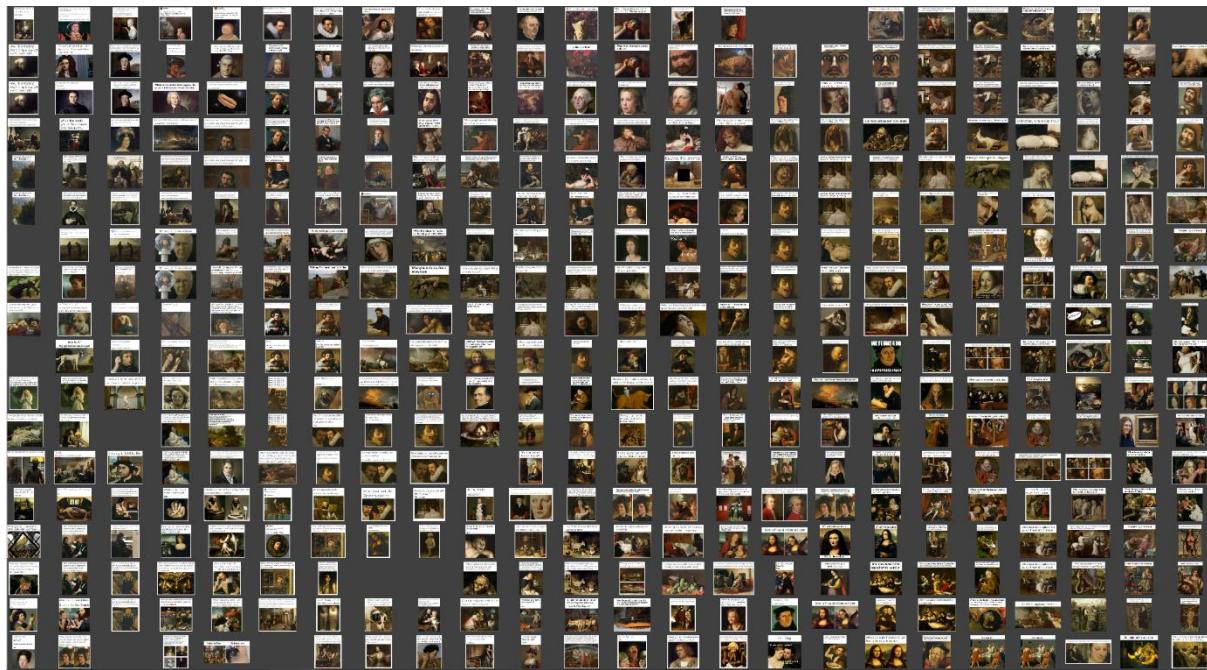
Examining what constitutes "classical art meme", I attempt to treat it as a genre of photo-based internet memes alongside others such as LOLCats, Stock Character Macros, and Rage Comics (Shifman, 2014, pp. 110–118), rather than only the narrower set of memes posted to the Classical Art Memes page. The reason is that memes featuring fine art can be found elsewhere. There are communities and accounts on other social technological platforms that are dedicated to these memes, e.g. the subreddit [r/trippinthroughtime](https://www.reddit.com/r/trippinthroughtime) or some public Instagram accounts such as [ancientcringe](https://www.instagram.com/ancientcringe/) and [classic.memes.reels](https://www.instagram.com/classic.memes.reels/). Moreover, classical art memes are complex, whether they are labelled or considered memes, internet memes, or art memes. They are a group of memes which have in common the appropriation of fine art and thus can be categorized into subgenres. In reference to Sapanzha & Ershova's (2017) typology of modern art memes, classical art memes usually come in the verbal and visual form, as seen on Classical Art Memes (e.g. Figure 1–3). The animated form seems rare, as I have seen only [one instance](#). Regarding the verbal form, Piata (2020) in her analysis of humor in classical art memes narrows down the object of study to "when memes" – image macros whose verbal text is a when-clause

and whose image functions as the main clause – and further divides them into the emotion-based and the situation-based.

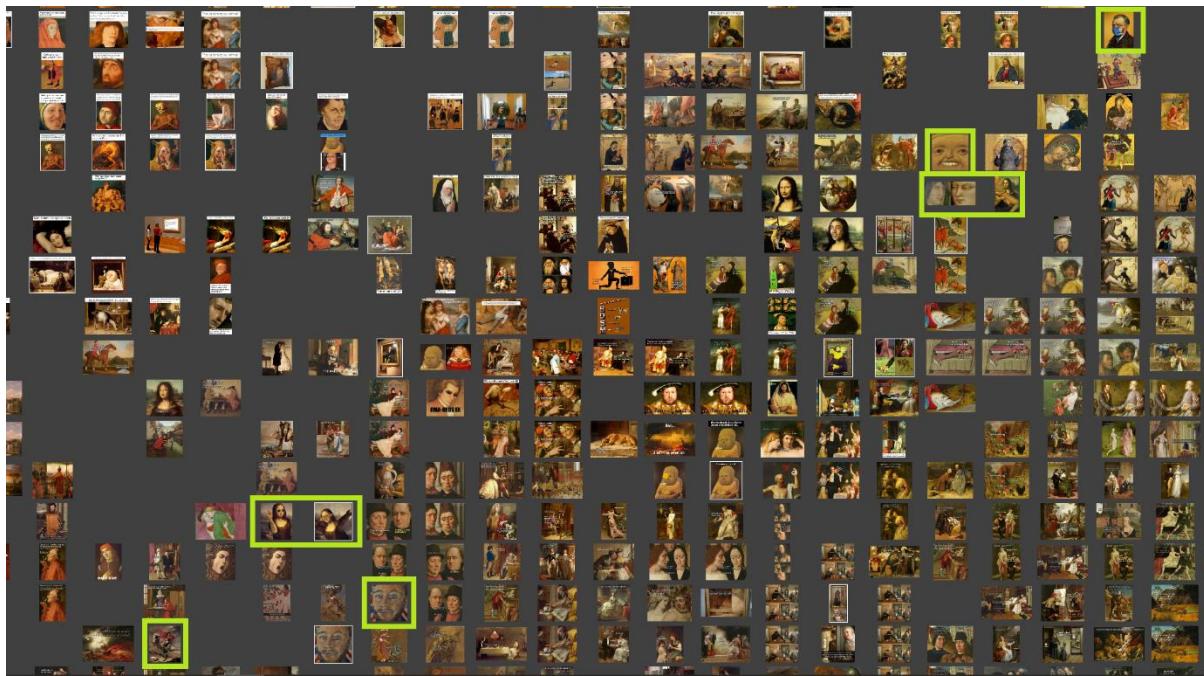
Given the literature review, I follow Wiggins's (2019) theory and demarcate that classical art memes are internet memes that appropriate, remix, or imitate works of high art to convey their meme content. This definition, while establishing the ground for the study related to classical art memes in this thesis, is intentionally equivocal because of the continual changes in the distinction between high art and popular art, as investigated in Section 2.1. “Classical” is retained for two reasons. First, it keeps the name of this internet meme genre eponymous with Classical Art Memes, hitherto the most popular site dedicated to this genre with nearly 5.5 million followers, potentially sounding familiar to average meme viewers. Second, it is ambiguous enough to refer to the high art of different eras and movements, of Western and non-Western origins. The overview of the classic ideal is not aimed to exclude any artistic movement or non-Western art, but to demonstrate the difficulty of average meme viewers in pinpointing what kind of art is classical. For cultural products that mix high culture and popular culture to become popular, elements of the former aspect must not be esoteric and the intended effects of emotions and of situations should be able to be observed on the surface (Gans, 1999, p. 11). The historical accuracy of “classical art” is, therefore, of little significance. In the earlier scholarship of Classical Art Memes, “classical art” is considered “premodern art [...] extending from the classical times to the medieval era and the Renaissance ages” (Piata, 2020, p. 178) or Classicist art with rare deviations (Raivio, 2016, pp. 4–5).



**Figure 1.** All photo-based posts on *Classical Art Memes* by 6th May 2021 (collected by Facepager, see Section 3.2 for details; sorted by color by ImageSorter).



**Figure 2.** Examples of verbal memes/image macros on *Classical Art Memes*.



**Figure 3.** Examples of visual memes on Classical Art Memes (marked by green rectangles).

### 2.3. Relevant Scholarship, Research Gap, and Research Questions

Despite a vast number of studies on internet memes, classical art memes have not received much attention. Content posted by the administrator of Classical Art Memes (hereinafter the administrator) is analyzed by Raivio (2016) and Piata (2020) in the knowledge domain of linguistics. While the former scrutinizes the memes in the digital participatory culture to point out their construction of digital social space and its digitally mediated discourse, the latter focuses on their stylistic humor constituted by the incongruity between the memes' verbal and visual elements. On the other hand, Gumkowska & Toczyski (2016) investigate Facebook memes of Polish art as a means of communication between memes' creators/senders and memes' viewers/recipients. Despite not offering specification of the art featuring in their genre of Facebook art memes, which are "memes based on works of known artists" (Gumkowska & Toczyski, 2016, p. 49), they do acknowledge that the artworks in the memes examined are of high culture (p. 56). Differing from Gumkowska & Toczyski (2016), Piata (2020), and Raivio (2016) who study verbal classical art memes, Aharoni (2019) analyzes visual examples, referring to them as "memetic transformation of artwork". Depending on what is imitated or remixed –

content, form, or the artist – the artwork functions as the signifier of meaning (content and the artist) or the signified by the meme (form).

Common among this research is that only the art memes are studied while their audiences are neglected. Gumkowska & Toczyński (2016) do cover the receiving end of Facebook art memes; however, they only describe it as the intended audience (p. 65). Some findings of Piata (2020) and Raivio (2016) reveal certain characteristics of viewers of classical art memes, such as the skills and knowledge required to interpret classical art memes' humor and intertextuality, yet the authors' data do not comprise anything related to the memes' audience. Indeed, Raivio (2016) suggests further research to study the comment section of Classical Art Memes where viewers respond to the posts with their own memes, engage in discussion of the subject matter of the featured artwork, or pose questions to the administrator (p. 81). In a similar vein, Aharoni (2019) acknowledges the dominant focus on visual data in internet meme research and calls for more attention to meme users (p. 2301).

These under-explored areas to a certain extent have been addressed by Ying (2020) in her extensive research on “biaoqing” – an umbrella term for emoticons, stickers, and memes on Chinese social media (p. 3). One chapter is dedicated to scrutinizing the community of knowledge of “posh biaoqing”, an equivalent to classical art memes since they are also image macros featuring images of Western oil paintings (Ying, 2020, p. 84). Her examination is similar to that of Raivio (2016) which concerns the affinity space of Classical Art Memes, for both regards the memes as a medium to disperse knowledge. Ying (2020), however, goes further with her research by paying attention to the audience and studying the comment section as well.

In the posh biaoqing community of knowledge, the audience is not passive receivers but actively plays numerous roles in spreading the knowledge, interacting with or challenging creators, or appropriating the biaoqing for personal use. It is via these reposting, remixing, and commenting activities that the audience expresses their stance in relation to the meme creators'

view and dissemination of knowledge (Ying, 2020, pp. 91–109). Before analyzing the audience, Ying (2020) points out the creators' elitist position in making posh biaoqing. All three popular posh biaoqing creators studied take pride in their superiority for being well-versed in Western high art and go to great lengths to prove the authenticity of their sophisticated taste and their biaoqing (Ying, 2020, pp. 90–91). In that sense, when members of the audience like or repost posh biaoqing, they may affirm their affinity to high art and uphold an elitist position. Superiority can nevertheless be gained by those in opposition to posh biaoqing according to their comments, for they consider the making of biaoqing from artworks devaluing high art (Ying, 2020, pp. 93–97). Overall, Ying's (2020) examination of the posh biaoqing communities' comment section reveals that they are complex, hierarchical, and divided (pp. 109–111).

In light of the intriguing mix of high culture and popular culture engendered by classical art memes, the research gap, and the potential richness of the comment section of dedicated meme pages, I embark on this research to study the comment section of the Facebook page Classical Art Memes. My aim is to discover the audience's thoughts upon viewing the memes as expressed in the comment section and to explore the implications of these thoughts. Moreover, the elitist view on the convergence of high culture and popular culture as covered in Abolhasani et al. (2017) and Ying (2020) inspires an investigation into whether the commenters hold the same sentiment – that this meme genre debases fine art. Lastly, since Raivio (2016) and Ying (2020) cover the educational value of classical art memes, it is worth examining whether the commenters utilize the platform to acquire greater knowledge about the arts.

With those points in mind, I formulate my research questions as follows.

1. What are the common topics of Facebook comments on classical art memes?
2. What are the implications of these topics?
3. Did the commenters express disapproval of classical art memes for devaluing fine art?
4. Did the commenters make attempts to learn about art through classical art memes?

### 3. Methodology and Data Collection

#### 3.1 Methodology

To answer the research questions, I will analyze comments on Classical Art Memes qualitatively with a digital ethnography approach. As the name suggests, this approach develops from traditional ethnography that originates from anthropology and therefore inherits the field's principles (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, p. 6). In terms of ontology, the perspective is that humans are social beings utilizing language to serve particular purposes within certain social and cultural contexts. Thus, when being studied, language must be placed in relation to other social factors that engender and shape humans' use of it (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, pp. 6–7). This results in the epistemology of ethnography, which posits the initial ignorance of the ethnographer. From the data comprising the research participants' language, the ethnographer induces, describes, and explains the significance of the language in its respective context (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, pp. 10–12).

The difference between ethnography and digital ethnography is that researchers of the latter conduct research in digital environments with digital data (Varis, 2014, pp. 3–4). Examined are practices and communications that either initially happen in the online world or are digitized (Varis, 2014, p. 2). Following Blommaert & Dong's (2010) consideration of ethnography as a heuristic approach rather than a fixed set of techniques, Varis (2014) does not suggest many research methods and instead provides key points of difference between traditional and digital ethnography that researchers should consider. First, lurking on the internet to observe people is not an ethnographic observation of participants per se, but it does bring the benefit that the researcher's presence remains unknown and does not influence participants' actions. Second, digital data have certain characteristics that should be considered before data collection. Being collected, stored, and duplicated easily, they also can be modified or deleted without a trace,

which as a result would affect the researcher's decision to collect data as a process when online communication happens or as an end product. Third, virtual observation can neither access private data nor verify participants' authenticity (Varis, 2014, pp. 11–14).

On account of these points and the research questions not requiring real-time data collection, I will take the role of a lurker to gather data from the comments as a product. I will use Facepager, an open-source computer application, to have the comments automatically collected in preparation for a long-haul inspection (Jünger & Keyling, 2012/2019). By default, only the most relevant comment, i.e. the one by the account-in-use's friend or the most engaged, is shown under a post on a Facebook page, and one must manually expand the comment section for more. This would cause inconvenience, scrolling through the comment section and reloading comments if the browser tab is closed, especially given the large volume of comments on Classical Art Memes which has been active since 2014 and is relatively popular. Therefore, I choose to have them collected and stored offline for further examination.

Facepager gathers data from websites and social technological platforms via three methods: interacting with Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), web scraping, and downloading media files (Facepager Wiki, n.d.). For this research, I opt for the one that sends queries to API. Interacting with Facebook Graph API v3.3, Facepager is subject to the limits of the API which decides what data can be fetched. Not owning Classical Art Memes, I can query only the content of the comments published on the page and none of the commenters' information (Facebook, n.d.-a). Although this means the lack of participants' authenticity mentioned by Varis (2014) is exacerbated, it is of little concern in my thesis and is even rather beneficial. With commenters not being asked for consent for participating in this research, the very limitations of Facebook Graph API helps to avoid privacy invasion, which is an issue raised in both digital ethnography and social media research (Varis, 2014, pp. 8–9; Vitak, 2016, pp. 636–638). Any further personal information found in the comments will be omitted.

Subsequently, I will conduct a thematic analysis and a discourse analysis on the data to answer the first and the second research question, respectively. The data will be imported to Microsoft Excel before being read and categorized into common topics. I will also utilize its search and filter functions to search for comments by keywords. After that, those topics will be studied in-depth to gain insights into them and to understand their macro-context. The latter is emphasized throughout Varis's (2014) writing that digital data must be examined in their context, both online and offline. Varis warns that context should not be assumed but investigated, for the online context is subject to algorithms and protocol, and does not exist independently from the offline world, which shapes people's actions and experience online (Varis, 2014, pp. 6–7).

Embarking on scrutinizing comments to internet memes on social technological platforms, I adopt the version of discourse analysis theorized particularly to study digital practices (Jones et al., 2015). Digital practices are “actions involving tools associated with digital technologies, which have come to be recognised by specific groups of people as ways of attaining particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 3). In this sense, commenting on a public Facebook page is a digital practice as commenters utilize the platform’s affordance to express thoughts or engage in discussions with others. The discourse analysis of digital practices then studies “the ways different ‘technologies of entextualisation’ [...] affect the kinds of meanings people can make in different situations, the kinds of actions they can perform, the kinds of relationships they can form, and the kinds of people they can be” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 4). “Technologies of entextualisation” refers to Jones's (2009) conceptualization of the “mediational means”, namely “typewriters, computers, tape recorders, and video cameras”, that enable the transition of actions into semiotic signs for further uses (p. 287). In this thesis, I will focus more on technological affordances of Facebook.

There are four aspects to investigate during the analysis: “texts”, “contexts”, “actions and interactions”, and “power and ideology” (Jones et al., 2015, p. 4). With regard to texts, I follow Vásquez (2015), who studies online consumer reviews, to consider intertextuality of online written text. Intertextuality is a phenomenon in which a text contains reference to those preceding it, and is referred to by succeeding ones (Vásquez, 2015, p. 66). Given the potential data, the references would come from digital and non-digital cultures, the memes to which comments are made, and the comments to which replies respond to. Additionally, I will not just read the comments as plain text for semantic information but also pay attention to their typographical and graphical cues to grasp the commenters’ tone. The prosody lost in informal text communication might be restituted by repurposing block letters and punctuation marks (Thurlow & Brown, 2003, p. 15). Capitalization would indicate stress, loudness (McCulloch, 2019, Chapter Typographical Tone of Voice), or sarcasm. Multiple exclamation points can imply authentic feelings, or a full stop at the end of a sentence would mean passive-aggressiveness. Regarding contexts, I will focus on the online context provided by the Facebook page as an affinity space (Raivio, 2016), since the commenters are not directly studied and I am unaware of their offline situation. About actions and interactions, I will examine commenters’ interactions with each other and the administrator, the implications of these interactions, and tagging. Lastly, in consideration of the research questions, power and ideology will be disregarded.

### 3.2 Data Collection

There are three levels of data as they are collected by Facepager: (1) posts, (2) comments to posts, and (3) replies to comments. Replies to replies can be detected based on the mention of the users’ names who are replied to. The collection process must follow the order of the levels. Facepager allows queries for Facebook posts only in a 24-hour period; however, due to some unknown technical issues I have had every post of Classical Art Memes (n.d.) automatically gathered up to the end of 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021. Taking into account the scope of this thesis and its

methodology, the dataset is limited to a one-year period from 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020 to the end of 6<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

Collected within this time frame were 630 posts, two of which are non-photo posts where the administrator made statements to their audience. Among the other 628 posts, I removed 72 photos as they do not qualify as classical art memes by my definition. The minimum requirement is that the meme form features a whole artwork or a part of an artwork, be it a painting or a sculpture of Western or non-Western origin (e.g. Figure 4–5). After the preliminary selection, I assessed whether the inclusion of artwork is an act of appropriation. For example, the meme in Figure 6 is disqualified despite containing an artwork. The image focuses on Bob Ross, a television host and art instructor whose image from the show “The Joy of Painting” is often made into “wholesome memes” – memes with positive and caring messages (Bob Ross, n.d.).

In the end, the dataset includes 556 classical art memes which received 402,647 comments and replies. Since the comments are made in reference to the memes, I roughly categorized the latter based on their form and content. There are two main types: visual memes and verbal memes. The latter is further divided into 12 sub-categories; however, not all verbal memes fit in them. In Table 1, I present each type with its quantity, an example, and a brief explanation of its characteristics.

Not all comments will be used for the thematic analysis and the subsequent discourse analysis. First, only those written in English and Vietnamese will proceed to analysis due to my limited language competencies. Second, I will omit all comments that contain only tags mentioning other Facebook users and do not receive replies. Tagging is a technological affordance of Facebook that creates a link to the person, page, or group being tagged. Facepager shows tags in comments as plain text without hyperlinks, thus they are assumed as proper names with capitalized first letters. The tagged would be notified of by whom and where they are tagged

unless they have opted out in their notification setting (Facebook, n.d.-c). This act of sharing can be construed as both distribution and communication, a feature of sharing activities on Web 2.0 (John, 2013, p. 169). John (2013) further provides examples of social ties being enacted (p. 170), while Shifman (2013) illustrates her understanding of the unification of communication and distribution functions with sharers' expectation that their recipients will forward the memes to others (p. 19). Nevertheless, the communication aspect here to me means it generates exchanges between taggers and the tagged. The tagged can respond by replying to the tagging comments, which are public and can be observed. In this research, those tagging comments which receive no replies are assumed to be merely an act of sharing as distribution or whose succeeding exchanges are carried out in other places are not of concern. Third, photo-based comments will not be considered due to the time constraints, although they might be remixes of the memes. These comments appear as blank spaces because photos gathered by Facepager are nested data requiring extra steps to extract. Sometimes, the presence of a photo can be assumed when the comment ends with a colon, i.e. "What I'm learning these days:", "For anybody interested, a better look at the painting:", which indicates the rest of the comment is not displayed.



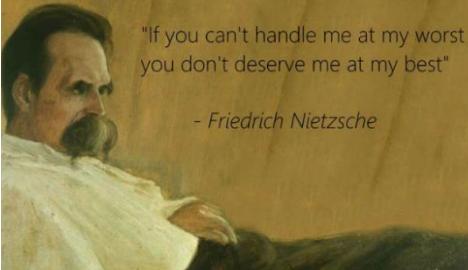
*Figure 4.*

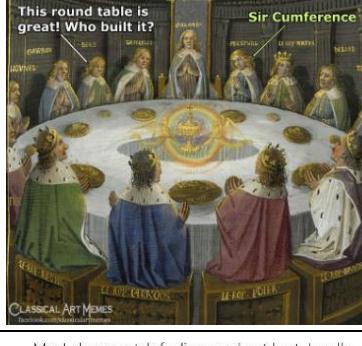


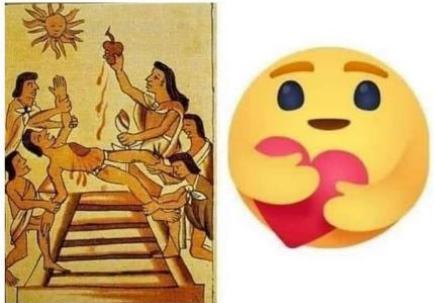
*Figure 5.*



*Figure 6.*

Type & Quantity	Example	Annotation
Visual memes (56)		Visual memes do not have any verbal element. They include photo montages, technologically manipulated photos, and photos that capture humans' and animals' interactions with artwork.
Facial expression memes (36)	"Maybe if you went to bed earlier you wouldn't be so tired" 	The visual element focuses on the facial expression of the character in the artwork. The verbal element provides the context within which the expression is applicable.
Fake history memes (5)	The Great Fire of London in 1666 was caused by a gender reveal party 	The verbal element details fictional historical information.
Fake quote memes (12)	 "If you can't handle me at my worst you don't deserve me at my best" - Friedrich Nietzsche	An image of a bust/painting of a well-known figure is juxtaposed with a piece of written text in quotation marks, and the figure's name to deceive that the words are quoted from said figure.
History & philosophy memes (43)	When Henry VIII saw Anne of Cleves 	Artwork such as portraits or busts is employed to refer to the portrayed historical figure or philosophers. Knowledge about the figures is usually required to interpret the meme content.

Type & Quantity	Example	Annotation
Landscape memes (15)	I remember when a series of unfortunate events was the name of a book, not the story of my life 	The visual element features an open space or nature. The verbal element is profound, thoughtful, or melancholic.
Me memes (38)	Me taking my fourth "self care day" in a row knowing I'm just lazy 	The verbal element starts with "me" and goes on with a description of an action, a situation the "me" character is engaging in. The visual element focuses on their facial expression and posture.
Object-labeling meme (13)		Details, characters, or objects in the artwork are labeled (Object Labeling, n.d.). Their respective positions and/or interactions are considered to add meaning to the meme content.
Pun memes (10)	This round table is great! Who built it? 	The verbal element is a pun that works in tandem with the visual element. Different types of puns are observed, namely single-sound puns, double-sound puns, spoonerism, and meld puns (Šimon, 2019, pp. 5–6).
Snowclone memes (10)	Me: I always catch feelings and get hurt, I really need to start learning from my mistakes Also me: 	The verbal element is a "snowclone", a phrasal template (Snowclone, n.d.). The snowclones found in the dataset include "me, also me", "nobody:", "what are you doing, step-X", "hot X in your area", "perfect X doesn't exist".

Type & Quantity	Example	Annotation
Speech bubble memes (79)		The visual element is superimposed on with speech bubbles. They do not have an outline and are situated near the speakers. Speech is usually color-coded if there is more than one speaker.
Then-now comparison memes (11)	I love the new sacrifice to the sun god emoji 	The meme content makes a comparison between contemporary life and the past. Artwork is often employed to represent the past.
When memes (105)	When you joke about a serious issue and people start writing essays in the comments 	They “contain one verbal element, a when-clause, and an ostensibly irrelevant visual image that is typically featured below the text” (Lou, 2017, p. 108). I follow Piata (2020, p. 182) by restricting to those whose verbal element starts with “when” and adopts the second person point of view.
Others (123)	Paint me like one of your 18th Century boys 	These are verbal memes that do not fit in the defined sub-categories.

*Table 1. Typology of the classical art memes.*

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Findings

To present my findings, I divide the level-two comments into two categories: (1) comments with a clear target and (2) comments with an unknown target. This classification is inspired by Ying (2020), whose division includes “comments with Weibo profile hosts”, “small talk”, and “no-clear-target comments” (pp. 103–109). Although in my dataset there are complimentary comments that might be construed as messages directed to the administrator, I do not establish for them a dedicated category. Queries of keywords “Classical Art Memes” and “admin” in search of the commenters’ tagging of the page and addressing the administrator return a relatively small number of results, which indicates the interaction between the audience and the administrator is negligible.

#### 4.1.1 Comments with a Clear Target

Comments of the first category were detected based on the inclusion of tags of other Facebook users. As previously explained in Section 3.2, tagging can function as both distribution and communication, prompting exchanges between the taggers and the tagged.

Motivations for tagging varied. One, it was the taggers’ self-identification with the meme content. They informed the tagged that they acknowledged their own actions and could laugh at themselves (e.g. Comment 1–3; the example comments are largely intact, except for occasional editing for layout and readability, such as removing extra spaces or extra emojis, and bullet points indicate level-three comments). Two, the taggers found the memes relatable to the tagged and seemingly presumed the tagged users’ enjoyment (e.g. Comment 4–7). Three, what was depicted in the memes was applicable or familiar to both themselves and the tagged (e.g. Comment 8–9). These level-two comments were sometimes developed into short comment threads that resembled private conversations upon receiving replies. The involved users exchanged words

back and forth, telling jokes and/or expressing their thoughts and/or reactions upon viewing the memes or being tagged, both explicitly and sarcastically, and the degree of their relatability to the meme content (e.g. Comment 3–10). Although Facebook allows Reactions to comments, an affordance with which users manifest their fondness, disapproval, surprise, affection, amusement by choosing representative emoticons (Facebook, n.d.-b), many commenters typed out their reactions and emotions (e.g. Comment 3).

[tag] me at art museums

*Comment 1. Self-relatability.*

[tag] is it me? XD

*Comment 2. Self-relatability.*

[tag-person 2] I relate to this on a visceral level

- [tag-person 1] when was this medieval portrait made of me
- [tag-person 2] 😂

*Comment 3. Self-relatability.*

[tag-person 2] haven't got a clue who this sounds like 😂

- [tag-person 1] doesn't ring a bell 😂

*Comment 4. Friend's relatability.*

[tag-person 2] this is literally you

- [tag-person 1] i feel attacked 😊 😂
- [tag-person 2] you should be

*Comment 5. Friend's relatability.*

[tag-person 2] this is you

- [tag-person 1] I don't think I'm mad about this. A little confused. I need more info, cus it depends on context 😊

*Comment 6. Friend's relatability.*

[tag-person 2]

- [tag-person 1] naaa that is u not me lol
- [tag-person 1] truee dat

*Comment 7. Friend's relatability.*

[tag-person 2] when I got so mad at you for garlic sauce when it was 3am and we had to rewrite the essay for our project

- [tag-person 1] Lol, I remember how weird I thought you wanting garlic sauce was, but didn't question it at 3 am. Garlic knots would make a lot more sense lol

*Comment 8. Mutual relatability.*

[tag-person 2] :D hahah us??

- [tag-person 1] definitely us!! 😂

*Comment 9. Mutual relatability.*

[tag-person 2] literally me 🤣🤣

- [tag-person 1] it our lives 😂😂😂
- [tag-person 2] poor dpd man just hears hissing and screaming behind the door 🤣🐒
- I had a convo with my postie which started with "So you have cats? They don't like post..." I didn't have the heart to tell him the only reason he got scrubbed was he dumped a package on the head of an unsuspecting feline who happened to be vomiting on the mat at that exact moment 😂😂😂

*Comment 10. Discussion on relatability.*

The first category also includes comments delivering the taggers' recommendation to the tagged. Recommended were the classical art memes or the Facebook page. The taggers believed that the classical art memes would fit the taste of the tagged and rarely elaborated on the elements that prompted their suggestions (e.g. Comment 11–13). Sometimes, however, it is the comment section that appealed to the taggers and was worth sharing (e.g. Comment 14–15). There could be remixes of the memes posted by the page, elaboration on the memes' content,

jokes, discussions, and arguments, which fall into the second category and will be covered later.

Regardless of the target of suggestion, these level-two comments were often followed by one or two exchanges expressing their understanding of the meme, or praising the ingenuity of the memes and the Facebook page (e.g. Comment 16–18). There are, however, instances where the tagged did not appreciate the memes at all (e.g. Comment 19–20).

[tag] I thought you'd appreciate this art

**Comment 11.** Meme recommendation.

[tag-person 2] hhhhhh

- [tag-person 1] when u want to watch a movie but ur kids are still awake and want to have fun with u 😊

**Comment 12.** Meme recommendation.

[tag-person 2]

- [tag-person 1] Peak art. The pain, the suffering - never felt so moved by a sculpture before

**Comment 13.** Meme recommendation.

[tag-person 2], [tag-person 3] [tag-person 4] Y 'all got to read these comments! 😂

**Comment 14.** Comment recommendation.

[tag] check the comments lmao the 2 first ones cracked me up

- I love old painting memes!
- Classical art memes but yeah me too!

**Comment 15.** Comment recommendation.

[tag-person 2] omg I'm deadddd

- [tag-person 1] or Easter egg? 😂 😂
- [tag-person 2] huh?
- [tag-person 1] "Easter egg is a term used to describe a message, image, or feature hidden in a video game, film, or other, usually electronic, medium." 😎 😎 so here is both a spoiler and a hidden message/feature of the "movie"

*Comment 16. Approval and explanation.*

[tag-person 2] ooh

- [tag-person 2] 🤣 🤣 🤣 🤣 🤣 🤣 🤣 🤣
- [tag-person 1] 🙄 🙄 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂
- [tag-person 1], do you know who Martin Luther was!?
- Not a fucking clue wasn't he a chappie who harped on about equal rights?
- NO! He is basically the founder of Protestantism and his break with Catholicism had a revolutionary and determining effect on European history. You really don't listen to poor Prof giving spontaneous home lectures on religious affairs, do you!
- Alright Jeremy fucking Paxman
- Fuck me, I've just realised YOU WERE THINKING OF MARTIN LUTHER-KING! HE WAS BLACK!

*Comment 17. Approval and explanation.*

[tag-person 2] do you like this one lol

- [tag-person 1] I do haha 🤣 imagine what these historical figures would have thought to see this 😂
- Suffocated
- [tag-person 1] haha so many memes. I know you like your historical art memes
- [tag-person 2] them and Jesus memes just tickle me lol
- [tag-person 1] there's not many jesus memes I don't have saved on my phone 🤣
- [tag-person 2] coming out my cave is the GOAT

*Comment 18. Approval.*

[tag-person 2]

➤ [tag-person 1] why do I feel like this meme isn't for me?

*Comment 19. Disapproval.*

[tag-person 2]

➤ [tag-person 1] just think it's a bit rude tbh

*Comment 20. Disapproval.*

#### 4.1.2 Comments without a Clear Target

Comments of the second category did not specify their recipients owing to the absence of tagging, though the replies they received might contain tags, especially in long comment threads, to signal whom the replies were in response to. Most comment threads started from these level-two comments, for the lack of tagged recipients made them open to other Facebook users to initiate and participate in conversations by sending replies. The content of this category is more diverse than the other.

Among the comments in this category are some containing the commenters' reactions towards the memes. Instead of "Reacting" to or "Liking" the posts, the commenters explicitly informed their reactions with emoticons, exclamatory spellings, or onomatopoeia representing laughter, e.g. "🤣🤣🤣" and "AHAHAHA love this 😂". Others praised the meme content and/or the administrator for making good memes (e.g. Comment 21–23). Some, on the other hand, implied their enjoyment of the memes via relatability (e.g. Comment 24–25).

This is the most creative thing I've seen in months!

*Comment 21. Praise.*

Man i love this page.

*Comment 22. Praise.*

\*Detail of the painting with a modified dialogue which sounds smarter and wittier showing a talent in meme making as good as the admin of the page\*

*Comment 23. Praise.*

Please classical art memes are you spying on me? Your memes have been accurate about my personal life for 3 consecutive days now 😂 😂 😂

*Comment 24. Praise and relatability.*

This is the most specific and relatable thing I ever read.

*Comment 25. Praise and relatability.*

On rare occasions, however, some memes were not well-received by some members of the audience. They thought the memes were not hilarious (e.g. Comment 26–27) and/or the subject matter should have been taken seriously (e.g. Comment 28–29). Also, comparison was made between the memes being criticized and those previously posted, which were considered to be of better quality (e.g. Comment 30–31).

Lads, you can post stuff less often but maybe a tad more original?

*Comment 26. Disapproval.*

This is going to be a yikes from me dawg.

*Comment 27. Disapproval.*

These are sexist.

*Comment 28. Criticism on the meme content.*

Domestic abuse isn't a laughing matter.

*Comment 29. Criticism on the meme content.*

Memes quality has dropped a lot.

*Comment 30. Complaint on the meme content.*

Is there someone new running this page because the memes have sucked lately.

**Comment 31.** *Complaint on the meme content.*

Additionally, the comment section is where the audience expressed creativity and sense of humor. They often extended the verbal jocular content of the posted memes, ridiculing the subject matter from their own perspective (e.g. Comment 32–33). Sometimes, the jokes were remixes of the meme form (e.g. Comment 34–35). The commenters employed verbal formats popular in image macros, such as conversations, direct quotes, me-phrases, or when-clauses (e.g. Comment 36–39), or snowclones (e.g. Comment 40–41). In some cases, the humor in the comments can be more subtle and sarcastic, which was often taken seriously or mistaken to be dumb or offensive (e.g. Comment 42).

Damned Alice! They we're a bunch of crazy folk back then and now they are all cosy and fluffy, watching netflix at the ranch

**Comment 32.** *Extension of the meme content.*

Fun fact: Mice were invented in 1867 to help control the cheese population.

➤ [tag] Blessed are the cheese makers.

**Comment 33.** *Extension of the meme content.*

Dating profile when cupid keeps missing the heart.

**Comment 34.** *Remix of the meme form.*

my face when I hear "DURING THESE DIFFICULT TIMES"

**Comment 35.** *Remix of the meme form.*

"Alberto, when I said "Let's go clubbing" this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

**Comment 36.** *Joke in a popular verbal format.*

Me in lockdown looking at my photobooks from 2003 that i finally had time to do

**Comment 37.** *Joke in a popular verbal format.*

Me: Will you go out with me?

Them: No

Me: Perfectly understandable, have a nice day.

\*proceeds to never talk to anyone again because I have a crippling fear of rejection.\*

*Comment 38. Joke in a popular verbal format.*

When you feel the taste of betrayal after the taco guy told you the salsa was mild.

*Comment 39. Joke in a popular verbal format.*

That's him officer! that's the man from the car park!

*Comment 40. Joke with a snowclone.*

Do you want to be forced to commit suicide? Because this is how you get forced to commit suicide.

*Comment 41. Joke with a snowclone.*

As a German I have to say that this is fake news and not even funny. I can not accept an Unverschämtheit like this! It's a noun, so "Poopenfarten" has to be written with a Großbuchstabe, CAPITAL LETTER in ze beginning!

- [tag] when the comment is much funnier than the meme itself 
- [tag] does this word even exist or is it regionally used like in areas close to Dutch speaking people? In Austria we sure don't have this word in any dialect ...
- go home and wash your face you know nothing about humor :D
- [tag] I love it when people who miss an obvious joke complain that original commenter is the one without a sense of humor.

*Comment 42. Subtle joke.*

Besides jokes and reactions, one can find informative comments that were frequently developed into discussions between commenters. They elaborated on details of the meme content or the background knowledge required to understand the memes (e.g. Comment 43–45). The additional information from time to time was only remotely related to the meme content (e.g. Comment 46–47). It was observed that informative comment threads did not always start at

the level-two, but some information was given in response to comments that expressed confusion or sought explanation in order to comprehend the memes (e.g. Comment 48–49).

This whole sexist meme is particularly funny to me, and anyone else who's read the "Outlander" books. The author smartly realized, that a time traveler in the past who isn't embedded into the society they arrive in, has very little chance of everchanging history in a meaningful way. Too many factors, big and small, contribute to the snowball effect of major historical events occurring when and how they do. If you want to improve things in the past, you will have more success by doing so in careful, small ways that will have ripple effects later on in history. In other words: Don't try to stop Caesar's assassination, it will end badly for you. Go visit your grandma instead, and help her improve her living situation and her chances of survival. Become a doctor, and help the people you love overcome their poverty and live longer (like Claire in Outlander).

**Comment 43.** *Elaboration on the meme content.*

To help us sort through the various pronunciations, I've written a mnemonic jingle: To each his own, His own to each, But if you should Pronounce it "neetch," You'll look obtuse Or just as dim As if you called a Tom a Tim. And if you think that "nitch" is right, I feel sorry for your plight. Now listen up, and listen well, To what I am about to tell: I'm the teacher, you're the teachee— And so you must pronounce it "Nietzsche."

**Comment 44.** *Elaboration on the meme content.*

I don't think there is a contradiction here like a lot of people believe. If you have two different fruits, then one is special and unique, and so is the other. The fact that they are described using the same words does not negate the meaning of being unique. If every person is unique, then they share a commonality of how they are described but that does not make their uniqueness untrue. Anything can be grouped by some label, and people are not defined by a single group label

**Comment 45.** *Elaboration on the meme content.*

Now I wonder who bred medusa

- Poseidon raping in his sisters Athena's temple. It was Athena's punishment for being a tease. Since Medusa liked it so much, Athena made her turn every man she looked at hard as stone. At the same time getting raped by a God is bound to leave a PTSD, so this way men would give Medusa wide berth for recovery. Or if you are not misogynistic roman writer with an agenda against tyrannical monarchs that sent you into exile near the black sea, they were a trio of monsters Gorgon's that were born that way. In which case the answer might be Gaia. 🧑

*Comment 46. Knowledge inquiry.*

If anyone is interested on Easter Island downfall history, I recommend this: [link]

*Comment 47. Knowledge sharing*

Am i so dumb to not understand this meme or is it actually very difficult to understand it. 🤔 🤔 🤔

- [tag] well maybe you simply never experienced it. People with anxieties or depression often have problem with keeping their space tidy. It just outgrows them and it last for months even. Mess in apartment only triggers more depression and it is a loop hard to break - but once done and apartment cleaned it feels weirdly amazing, freeing and optimistic.

*Comment 48. Response to knowledge inquiry.*

i don't get it. please help a lost ex-cultural studies major girl out.

- [tag] Beyond being a national anthem, The Marseilles is a call to arms against tyranny, literally the blood of your enemies running in the gutters and such. Not something the emperor Napoleon would be in agreement with.
- [tag] this one is probably more of a Monty Python type joke, where there's not really any sense to be made. Napoleon is in the picture only because he is a running joke here. Also, this picture is from his days as a revolutionary general, not as an emperor.

*Comment 49. Response to knowledge inquiry.*

While some added information enriches the audience's experience with the memes, some contradict with the meme content and would ruin the intended humor. There are cases where the commenters both enjoyed the memes and wanted to showcase their knowledge by providing accurate information (e.g. Comment 50–51). A few others were more critical, implicitly or explicitly rejecting the memes (e.g. Comment 52–53). In response to these comments, other commenters would contribute with their own opinion and knowledge (e.g. Comment 54–55).

Funny meme, but HAcHtuAlLiE people in the Middle Ages married late because giving birth was a huge risk for the mother, so it would be terrible for a family to lose a member/contributor too young.

*Comment 50. Knowledge correction.*

They had an amazing farming system using rocks and soil that was disrupted by colonialists. Their society fell soon after they were put on the Atlantic slavery map. On one fell swoop, they lost all of their wisemen and their written language, and continued losing bodies to slavers for decades until they died out.

- [tag-person 1] hi sir/madame, you must be new around here. This is a humor and meme Page, not an historically accurate One. Well mostly. Have a nice day
- [tag-person 2] I was a top fan for 3 years 😊 I'm responding to most of the comments, not the meme itself, though it's a really annoying misconception for someone who cares about historical accuracy. Have a great day!

*Comment 51. Knowledge correction.*

WOW! This is so wrong in so many ways! The person who created this meme, knows nothing about rabbits! 1) They don't sneak about. 2) They are armed with teeth that chew through cables and wires. 3) They certainly aren't timid and groveling! 4) They do NOT live in cages; nor should they ever be locked up...EVER!!! They are not prisoners! They are litter box trained pets, and companions; that seek attention and affection! Shame on the person who created this bullshit! Please delete this!

*Comment 52. Knowledge correction and rejection of the meme content.*

If you're actually into classical art... you'd know this is one of Caravaggio's more erotic pieces which kind of negates the joke? BUT WHATEVER

**Comment 53.** Knowledge correction and rejection of the meme content.

[person 1] What really ruined him was his obsession on Haiti, only to sell what would become nearly one third of the United States. Now, that was his real Waterloo. He even said as much.

- [person 2] Haiti had quite strategic value but there was no stopping the fires of Latin American revolution. Funny story as Haiti being the first Latin American country to be independent was a big factor since they influenced and gave support to Simon Bolivar to then free South America.
- [tag-person 2] Ironic, considering the reality of Haiti today, never mind Venezuela. But it's not polite to state the obvious, so I won't.

**Comment 54.** Knowledge correction and discussion.

"Temple" doesn't fully apply to the catholic religion, it's more appropriate for the cultures before the Christian time. That's the Cappella Sistina. It's a chapel, not a temple. These are temples [link]

- [tag] it's a temple. The two words are literally interchangeable. A chapel is usually a smaller church, and church / temple are used interchangeably. The only difference is Christians prefer to use the word church, over temple. Unless this is genuinely a tiny church, it's still a temple by definition.
- to me, church and temple are not fully overlapping. I mean I get it anyways, but the word temple associated with the Sistine Chapel to me sounds, if not wrong, at least out of context. Plus the Sistine Chapel it's almost not used as a chapel for the public. My body is a "temple" actually means that you religiously venerate the body, would be fair enough if one of those tourists actually understands what he/she is watching.

**Comment 55.** Knowledge correction and discussion.

As classical art memes have been situated in Art History and works of art mainly make up the examined memes' form, the comments related to arts were particularly paid attention to. Besides being detected during my reading of the dataset, they were searched for by certain

keywords, namely “artist”, “artwork”, “painter”, “name”, “painting”, and “picture”. The findings include three groups of comments: inquiring for information, providing information, and rejecting the appropriation of art.

The first group includes comments that asked for the name of the artist, the name of the painting, and the meaning of the painting. Often the commenters were intrigued by the work of art and wanted its basic information to do their own research (e.g. Comment 56–57). In some instances, when asking for those details, commenters demanded that the administrator give credit to the artwork they appropriated (e.g. Comment 58–59). While the original artwork appealed to them because of its aesthetics, some sought explanations to comprehend what was depicted in the painting (e.g. Comment 60–61).

What painting is this?

**Comment 56.** *Art knowledge inquiry (name of the painting).*

I love the meme! Its hilarious! But jokes aside, does anyone know the artist? I actually love the painting lol!

- [tag-person 1][person 2] konstantin somov
- [tag-person 2] thank you very much! I bet he was an interesting guy :)
- The subject [...] was his muse for various paintings. I think his name is Boris 😊

**Comment 57.** *Art knowledge inquiry and provision (name of the artist).*

Classical Art Memes please please please write the info about the painting/ art you're using?! 🤪

- [tag] It literally is a symbolic gang war. Its a version of Brueghel's The Fight Between Carnival and Lent. On the left is Carnival, depicted through drunkenness and feasting, particularly on waffles. Waffles were a traditional carnival food in Belgium and the Netherlands, which is why the guy inside the barrel has a waffle press. The right is Lent, so a nun with a paddle filled with fish, as you couldn't eat meat during Lent!

**Comment 58.** *Art knowledge inquiry, demand for credit, and provision.*

Please mention the name of the art pieces 😞 😞 😞 😞

*Comment 59. Art knowledge inquiry and demand for credit.*

Okay, but was IS going on in this painting?

*Comment 60. Art knowledge inquiry (context of the painting).*

I want to know the original context behind this painting. Theres so much going on

- im thinking it has lot of esoteric symbolism to it but i dont know enough to know what it means

*Comment 61. Art knowledge inquiry and provision (context of the painting).*

The comments of the second group include information related to the featured artworks or arts in general, and sometimes generated discussion. Such knowledge was barely necessary to interpret the memes, but it was shared nevertheless (e.g. Comment 62–64). Some commenters sympathized with those belonging to the first group, who sought information about the artwork in the memes (e.g. Comment 65–66). They might not have background knowledge in art, yet they did research on their own and disseminated the findings to fellow meme viewers. Others were proud of their taste and knowledge of art and showed this pride (e.g. Comment 67–69).

Sacrilege. John Everett Millais' influential 'Ophelia', a portrait of Lizzie Siddall, who later married Dante Gabriel Rosetti.

- [tag] and she almost died in the bath he used x
- Well she certainly got a bad chill and her father asked for compensation, and I believe he was paid some. Millais was so busy painting he forgot to replace the candles when they burned down and so the water went cold wherein she lay.

*Comment 62. Art knowledge provision.*

For the curious people about it, the Colombian painter Fernando Botero is responsible for such seductive proportions

*Comment 63. Art knowledge provision.*

The artist is the painter Elisabetta Sirani (baroque 17 century). She made women the main subject of her works. She also opened a painting school for women. The title of this painting is « Timoclea Killing Her Rapist ».

➤ [tag] thank you

**Comment 64.** *Art knowledge provision.*

After searching, just to let you know: this amazing painting is by Joshua Reynolds:

"Between comedy and tragedy"

➤ The facial expressions are great. I love it.

**Comment 65.** *Art knowledge sharing.*

[person 1] This is a Terra cotta statue from the Nok people of West Africa. They were the first people to delve into metallurgy in West Africa and they did it around the 5th century BCE. Also, that's his right leg.

- [person 2] [tag-person 1] You're kind of missing the point of the group...
- [person 1] [tag-person 2] no, I'm not missing the point. I just happen to know about this piece and thought other folks would enjoy the real story on it.
- [tag-person 1] thank you for sharing. I, unlike most of these other commenters, enjoyed having extra info on the piece. In fact, I am often disappointed that this page never publishes the title and artist. [...]

**Comment 66.** *Art knowledge sharing.*

Vincent Van Gogh is my favorite painter and I know a lot about him. However, if this situation were real, neither woman would have anything to do with him. Vincent had poor hygiene, smoked and drank a lot, was very poor, had nothing to offer any woman. He was a loser at love and frequented local brothels.

**Comment 67.** *Art knowledge sharing and pride display.*

I prefer this depiction of Judith by Artemisia Gentileschi. She was a female baroque painter who was a victim of sexual assault – her work is an excellent example of the “female gaze” in a time the “male gaze” dominated popular artwork. #arthistory

**Comment 68.** *Art knowledge sharing and pride display.*

THIS is exactly why I love this kind of Romantic Era landscape painting--the vast natural power and beauty, the itsy-bitsy human whom you may have to search for like Waldo. The painting is saying 'You don't matter'--but in a nice way!

**Comment 69.** *Art knowledge sharing and pride display.*

The third group comprises comments that disapprove the appropriation of artwork in internet memes. During my reading of the comments, I found only one that strongly expresses the elitist sentiment, that high art is of greater value and the appropriation contaminated it (Comment 70). At the surface, Comment 71 and 72 also seem to reject the appropriation. Yet, with the former, the commenter's follow-up comment shows that it might be not the case and they just do not find the meme amusing. With the latter, it is uncertain if the comment is meant as a remix of the meme form. It did not receive any reply. Overall, this group is not noticeable and only significant in relation to the third research question.

This sums up the world we are living in. When u look at the original painting, and instantly be moved by the human talent and then at the stupidity of the drawing of ninja turtles.

**Comment 70.** *Rejection of the appropriation of art.*

[person 1] Such a waste of an actually awesome painting backstory.

- [person 2] [tag-person 1] Why the fuck are you doing following this page then
- [person 1] [tag-person 2] I have to find Every meme they post funny? That's silly
- [person 2] [tag-person 1] Exactly thats why im saying that... Must be a struggle to you seeing a post with a painting you like.. Are you masochistic?
- Try make a better caption then
- [tag-person 1] I totally agree.
- You could have just added the background story of the picture to teach us something but the thing you did instead was dissing the post and leaving. Wow, this makes you such a better person than us, we salute you.

**Comment 71.** *Possible ejection of the appropriation of art.*

Some artist: spends years and years to perfect their craft  
 People: use their art to make memes

**Comment 72.** Possible rejection of the appropriation of art.

From the above findings, I identify six common topics mostly based on the level-two comments. The topics are Relatability, Sharing, Reaction & Praise, Information Inquiry & Provision, Creativity & Humor, and Criticism. Apart from Sharing which is exclusively made up of comments with tags, the other topics include comments of both categories – with and without a clear target. The classification also does not rigidly divide comments into groups. For instance, a comment can applaud the meme content and ask for more information; or, a comment can be intended to share the meme because it is relatable and hilarious. However, such flexibility should not be seen as problematic; rather, the classification is simply used as a prompt for the discussion that follows. In the next section, I will elaborate on the implications of these topics.

## 4.2 Discussion

The common topics of the comments on Classical Art Memes reveal not only the characteristics of its audience but also of the memes it posted and the digital practice of tagging. In what follows, I will discuss the implications of the six topics.

### 4.2.1 Relatability

The popularity of Relatability comments affirms that many classical art memes operate on common grounds with the audience. At least one-third of the dataset are instances of memes that are likely found relatable by the audience. They include 105 “when memes”, 38 “me memes”, 36 “facial expression memes”, and 13 “object labeling memes”. Their content refers to situations or social interactions in which the audience might have found themselves. Those experiences, however, are not necessarily positive. They might rather be depressing, awkward, embarrassing, offensive, or annoying that is inappropriate or too trivial to be mentioned in

conversations (Levinson, 2012, p. 12). Moreover, many of the memes seemingly concern the private life of the administrator because their content is so specific, which was acknowledged by the audience, e.g. “The admin of this page clearly needs help.”, “What's up with all the nihilistic paintings lately :(”, and “Hey Admin you ok? This was weirdly specific, I'm here if you wanna talk.”. This made the memes authentic, easy to relate to, and therefore enjoyable to the commenters because they articulated what is rarely said in company with illustrative yet unexpected images.

Concerning such a juxtaposition, Piata (2020) attributes the humor of classical art “when memes” to the incongruity between the caption and the visual element. The caption refers to a contemporary, mundane situation; meanwhile, the visual element appropriated from old works of fine art depicts an emotion or a situation that can even be fantastic. Moreover, the nonfinite “you” pronoun in the caption invites viewers to identify with the featured character or emotion (Piata, 2020, pp. 183–196).

The other types of memes similarly invite self-identification yet in different ways. “Me memes”, “facial expression memes” also portray emotions or situations rooted in daily life. While they employ pronouns other than “you” that would function as a hook for self-identification as in “when memes”, their caption is highly specific and related to the popular and the digital culture. “Object labeling memes”, on the other hand, visualize the relation or interaction between a “me” character with their objects, issues, or other aspects of life.

#### 4.2.2 Sharing

As presented in Section 4.1.1, there are comments in which the commenters tag other Facebook users to share the memes and/or the comment section. This discussion, however, will in fact be relevant to all comments with a clear target, for I will elaborate on the tagging affordance of Facebook as a digital practice.

In Section 3.2, I introduced Facebook tagging and argued that it is an act of sharing as distribution and communication besides creating a hyperlink to a Facebook user. What was referred to is the tagging performed in comments, as it can also be done in posts and photos (Facebook, n.d.-c). While the latter two are irrelevant to this research, their implications are explained to underscore the significance and difference of the former. Tags in these two locations indicate the involvement or association of the tagged with the content. Being tagged in a photo usually means the tagged is present in the photo, or, if not, the photo is relevant to them in terms of content and/or context. On the other hand, tagging in posts can be understood in two ways. In the first case, tags are added to a post as it is being composed and appear next to the poster's name. They are intended to include the tagged in the post or to invite the tagged to read the posts. In the second case, tags are added to a post's content. Tagging then equals mentioning and involving the tagged in the content.

On the contrary, the practice of tagging in comments on Classical Art Memes yields different interpretations. When a comment contains only tags, the tagged is called to the post to view the meme. Tagging bears an implicit message that the tagged would appreciate the memes and reply with their thoughts, relatability, and reactions. When followed by a message, comment tagging functions as a shout out to the tagged, signaling that the message is intended for them. This is also the case with tagging in replies which indicates to whom the replies respond. On rare occasions, especially when not placed at the beginning of a comment, a tag is meant as mentioning.

### 4.2.3 Reaction & Praise

While there are comments that explicitly praised the memes and expressed positive reactions, the audience's fondness and appreciation for classical art memes are also implied in the Relatability and Sharing ones. Although there is some criticism surrounding the appropriation of fine art, the use of stereotypes, and the inaccurate information featured in the memes, classical

art memes are generally well-received by the commenters. The consensus in the comment section is that the memes are phatic, frivolous, and should not be taken seriously. Hence, when a commenter corrects information, expresses distaste, or criticizes inappropriate subject matter, they may appear condescending or humorless, and become no longer welcome.

Given such reception of classical art memes from the commenters, it is plausible to remark that they hardly think high art is devalued due to the meme-making process. The elitist sentiment was observed in a few commenters being expressed in some different ways; however, instances of classical art memes deemed to depreciate arts are negligible. Even in the cases where elitism was manifested via the ability to identify artworks and the knowledge on art history, most commenters enjoyed the memes. In the latter half of Section 4.2, I will discuss further the elitist position held by some commenters as observed on Classical Art Memes.

#### 4.2.4 Information Inquiry & Provision

This topic resonates with Raivio's (2016) claim that Classical Art Memes constitutes an affinity space, "a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender" (Gee, 2004, p. 67). The conclusion is made on three bases: (1) a shared theme – classical art as the common visual input, (2) "interactional content organization", and (3) the dissemination of various types of knowledge (Raivio, 2016, p. 79). The third point is illustrated by the fact that specialized and individually owned knowledge is channeled into the selection of artwork and/or the composition of the meme content and becomes the knowledge dispersed and distributed to the audience (Raivio, 2016).

Such intertextuality and referentiality of memes imply one must have sufficient background knowledge to interpret the meme form and/or content. From his data of 140 memes, Raivio (2016, p. 78) finds that the referred knowledge is of a wide variety, such as "popular culture, history, religion, mythology and digital culture". While I did not conduct a

discursive and textual analysis of the meme content, the category of “history and philosophy memes” alone can prove the need for historical, philosophical knowledge, and for the ability to identify historical figures from their busts or drawn portraits for comprehension. Without a doubt, the rest of my dataset also requires background knowledge to a certain extent. If one lacks it, they would not understand the meme and resort to either deem it unappealing or ask for an explanation.

A reading of Gee (2005) – one of Raivio's (2016) theoretical references – reveals that the affinity space engendered by Classical Art Memes becomes more consolidated as the comment section is taken into consideration (Gee, 2005, p. 225). More features of an affinity space are observed among the comments of Information Inquiry & Provision. First, there is little separation between “newbies” and “masters” (Gee, 2005, pp. 225–226). As the page is public, anyone who can view its memes can leave questions to gain a better understanding of them. Those that are more knowledgeable respond with their answers or provide any information they consider interesting, relevant, or useful knowledge at will. Second, knowledge sharing is facilitated to a greater extent (Gee, 2005, pp. 226–227). The comment section seems unregulated, and open to everyone unless banned by the page. The commenters inquire, provide, and discuss knowledge both relevant and irrelevant to the featured image and the meme content, which drives more knowledge to be exchanged in terms of variety and volume.

Since the lowest common denominator of the memes is the visual input borrowed from high art, it is not surprising to see the commenters approached the topic of arts. Over one-seventh of the memes in the dataset (84 out of 558) receive at least one question about the name of the artwork or its creator. If “history and philosophy memes” are excluded since their object of interest is historical figures and events, philosophers, and their ideas, the ratio goes up to one-sixth. While showing classical art memes can spark art-related curiosity, these inquiring comments discloses the elitist viewpoint of some commenters. For example, Comment 66 asked

for the painter's name and conveyed the commenter's superiority for being able to critique art. Yet, Comment 67 and 68 implied the elitist sentiment differently. Speaking with humility, the commenters thought poorly of themselves for not knowing the painting, thus elevated the status of high art and of those that have the cultural capacity to recognize works of high art.

Who is the artist? Nice colours, but the subjects have been rendered very flat and wooden... not appealing to my aesthetic.

*Comment 73. Art knowledge inquiry with an elitist sentiment.*

pardon my ignorance but what is the original painting? thanks

*Comment 74. Art knowledge inquiry with humility.*

Forgive my ignorance, but what's the name of the painting?

*Comment 75. Art knowledge inquiry with humility.*

#### 4.2.5 Creativity & Humor

In Section 4.2.4, I detailed the three bases on which Raivio (2016) concludes that Classical Art Memes is an affinity space. The second point, interactional content organization, is made on account that the administrator posts not only their own creation but also submission from the audience (Raivio, 2016, pp. 18–19). In consultation with Gee (2004, 2005), it is probable to remark that the outcome of the comment section examination strengthens this feature. “Interactional content organization”, in fact, includes content organization – “how content is designed or organized”, and interactional organization – “how people organize their thoughts, beliefs, values, actions, and social interactions in regard to those signs and their relationships” (Gee, 2004, p. 74). These two types of “organization” can also influence each other (Gee, 2004, p. 74; 2005, p. 226). In the case of Classical Art Memes, the influence of the interactional organization on the content organization can be observed in the memes made by

the administrator reflecting the interactions found in the comments (e.g. Figure 7–8), and vice versa in the audience's comments inspired by the administrator's memes.



*Figure 7.*



*Figure 8.*

Connecting this understanding of interactional and content organization with Section 4.2.4, it is evident that the interactional organization in the comment section ties with the dispersion of various types of knowledge. Knowledge is dispersed, distributed as the audience leaves comments to share information or provide answers to questions. Besides taking the form of information, the knowledge can also be manifested via creativity and humor. While knowledge is needed to interpret memes, making remixes requires a wide range of knowledge as well. For example, for those that recycle the meme form, it is essential to be accustomed to phrasal templates, e.g. snowclones (Snowclone, n.d.) or the when-clause, and innumerable cultural references. To make remixes, one must apply their knowledge to ensure it is comprehensible to others. The presence of creativity and humor in the comment section also contributes to Raivio's (2016) justification of Classical Art Memes' interactional content organization, that the equal status between the audience and the administrator lies in the fact that the former can freely share their remixes.

#### 4.2.6 Criticism

The discussion so far has confirmed certain characteristics of postmodernist aesthetics in the classical art memes. This style of aesthetics is compiled by Brunello (2012) from the literature on postmodernism with the aim of investigating internet memes as products of everyday creativity. It includes four aspects: “anti-foundationalism”; “hyperstereotypes/clichés, extreme consciousness, and ironical self-criticism”; “extreme intertextuality”; and “humor” (Brunello, 2012, pp. 7–14). The last two are manifested through the need of knowledge to interpret and remix the meme content (Section 4.2.4–4.2.5), and the audience’s positive attitude towards the memes (Section 4.2.1–4.2.3), respectively. The aspects are not distinct but intertwine with each other (Brunello, 2012, p. 10), I will continue the discussion with relevant details from the aesthetics of postmodernism to give insights into the critical comments.

The criticism concerns three areas: correcting information which would negate the humor, demanding the subject matter to be taken seriously, and criticizing the appropriation of high art. I interpret the first two areas as the commenters do not share the same ground of humor with the administrator. According to Brunello (2012), one method to engender humor in postmodernist aesthetics is via “exaggerated irony, sarcasm, satire, and parody” (p. 13). Being non-novel, these techniques are postmodernist thanks to the exaggeration. They are “explicit”, “literal”, and contain an “overwhelming and conscious number of allusions and references used” (Brunello, 2012, p. 13). This resonates with an aspect of her postmodernist aesthetics – hyperstereotypes/clichés, extreme consciousness, and ironical self-criticism. It is the use of stereotypes to criticize the very stereotypes, the creator’s awareness of the process, and their use of hyperstereotypes to mock themselves (Brunello, 2012, p. 13). The exaggerated and hyperstereotypes form complex, implicit humor that is not enjoyable to all. Eventually, the sentiment that the memes should be taken lightheartedly can be attributed to the “just-a-joke”

discourse, which is particularly harmful when it justifies the humor that perpetuates discriminatory notions and actions (Andreasen, 2019, pp. 4–5 & 22).

With regard to the criticism towards the appropriation of artwork in internet memes, the sentiment is hardly existent due to the minuscule number of comments raising this issue. The consensus is that if one follows the page, they accept the appropriation. In response to the elitist commenter who opposed the borrowing of high art by internet memes (Comment 70), there are a wide variety of replies that can be representative of the comment section as a whole. The elitist was the minority. Some took the comment lightheartedly and made jocular or sarcastic comebacks. Some policed the criticism. And others responded in a serious manner, expressing their opinions on arts, classical art memes, and the subject matter.

This sums up the world we are living in. When u look at the original painting, and instantly be moved by the human talent and then at the stupidity of the drawing of ninja turtles.

- Be careful who you call stupid. Ninja turtles saved the world several times
- Reminds me of a dog sniffin hahaha
- [tag] personally as an artist, i thought it was funny I was moved 😊
- we live in a society
- [tag] I'm going to be honest, I found Turtles way more moving as a kid than I have ever found art moving as an adult.
- Just as you sum up a one dimensional view. People can enjoy more than one interpretation for different reasons- all at the same time. Chill.
- Imagine following a page literally titled "classical art memes" and then simping this hard in the comments
- i bet you're fun at parties
- Hahah im just glad at the way this meme moved you, [tag]
- [tag] your comment speaks more to the state of the world right now, where some douche canoe replies to humor with whatever the fuck this is and they think they are clever when they very much are not.
- [tag] [...] the turtles that made me interested in who those four were in the first place.
- [tag] exactly
- [tag] damn who hurt u
- [tag] we're all really happy that you're big into art, but art doesn't have to be just a painting. Art can be comedy and there's a lot of people that found the picture of the artist with the correct turtles amusing. A different perspective always helps
- It really does sum up the world we're living in. So many uneducated people that don't understand the unique facets and rare dichotomy that encompasses the art that is the teenage mutant ninja turtles. [...]
- And fyi. This comic started as an idea; an inspiration to draw and create. When you make something as internationally recognised and beloved... then and only then do you have the right to get on here and put it down. Kevin Eastman doesn't need your approval, and nor do the rest of us.
- [tag] chill, they'd definitely find this amusing too.

*Comment 70. (extended).*

## 5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I studied 402,647 comments and replies to 556 classical art memes on the eponymous Facebook page. Among them I identified six common topics: Relatability, Sharing, Reaction & Praise, Information Inquiry & Provision, Creativity & Humor, and Criticism. The first three topics show that the memes were well-received by the commenters. The meme content was established on common grounds with the audience, illustrating mundane details from daily life in a surprising way. Also, certain meme types, such as “me memes” and “when memes”, employed the first or second point of view pronoun that encouraged viewers’ identification. Finding the memes clever, the audience left comments to express their enjoyment of the memes and appreciation towards the administrator or shared them with friends. The act of sharing in the comments was engendered by the digital practice of tagging, which had more than one function and interpretation. It summoned the tagged, transformed the comment into a message, indicated the tagged was the recipient, or, if it was not placed at the initial position, involved the tagged into the comment. When standing alone, a tag itself was a message telling the tagged to view the post.

The other topics affirm that the classical art memes are truly internet memes, not just viral media or emergent memes. There were exchanges of knowledge in the form of information or humor between the commenters. Information was needed to interpret the meme content due to the intertextuality and referentiality of internet memes. It was freely asked for, shared, and discussed in the comment section. Knowledge sharing was also performed via the creative process in which the commenters utilized their knowledge to remix the meme form or continue the jocular meme content. As not all classical art memes offer visual arguments, it is the engagement, interactions, remixing of the commenters that develop them into internet memes and popularize them. That knowledge was exchanged in the comment section strengthens the page’s properties of an affinity space, which is interactional and content organization, and the

dissemination of various knowledge types. The critical comments also shared knowledge. Targeted at inaccurate information and inappropriate subject matter, they informed others accurate information and the overtones of the memes. Since they would ruin the humor which is intended to be frivolous, these comments are not welcome by the majority of the commenters. As not everyone appreciated the humorous meme content, it is highlighted that the classical art memes feature the humor of the postmodernist aesthetics which is exaggerated, transgressive and hyperstereotypical.

The elitist sentiment was not dominant among the commenters. It was expressed via the ability to identify and critique artwork, and interestingly the lack thereof. In the latter case, the commenters viewed themselves as unsophisticated for not knowing a work of high art, setting it higher than popular culture. The opinion that the mixing of high art and popular art debases the former was negligible. It was countered that arts are not necessarily esoteric or exclusive and creativity outside of the high culture is not less valuable. The commenters in general enjoyed the classical art memes and a considerable number of them were encouraged to learn about art.

One-sixth of the data set received questions related to the featured artwork. Although the ratio is not so high, it is possible to remark that the commenters did make attempts to learn about fine art via the classical art memes based on the comments that inquired for art-related information. Those who were interested in learning but did not leave a question could have read the comments providing information. Reading the comments, I learned about [a Facebook page](#) dedicated to informing its followers about the name and painter of the paintings appropriated by Classical Art Memes, saving them time from scrolling through the comment section. Perhaps, this is part of the reason why some commenters demanded the administrator to provide such information, besides the need of paying respect to the artists.

This research has certain limitations. First, I am unaware of any bias of Facebook Graph API and Facepager that would affect the data collection process. Second, if there is no bias and

all public comments are fetched, the applications could not obtain comments of deactivated or deleted Facebook users, which would provide valuable information or influence my interpretation of comment threads. Also, whether a comment was edited could not be detected. Third, photos in the comments were disregarded, as explained in Section 3.2. Fourth, the dataset comprised only comments of one Facebook page. It would be a bias since those holding unfavorable opinions of the memes would not engage in the comment section at all. Fifth, there might have been misunderstanding in my interpretation of the comment threads which had more than three participants. Since they are anonymous, I had to figure a commenter's turn based on tags and the content of the comments.

The research design and its limitations inspire numerous suggestions for future research. In terms of the subject of classical art memes, it is to study memes that feature high art of non-Western origins and their respective communities. For example, there are memes of Vietnamese fine art on [a Facebook page](#) dedicated to those working in the creative industries. They have their own hashtag #vietartmemes, besides #emyeuhoihoa (translation: I love fine art) for all classical art memes by the page. In terms of methodology, the study of comments can be joint with interviews or surveys with meme viewers to gain more insight into their opinions of classical art memes (see Spierings (2020) for example). Given the gigantic amount of data that can be mined from social media, another suggestion is to replace the manual thematic analysis with computer-assisted ones. They can be performed by qualitative data analysis software, or any application that can conduct sentiment analysis and association mining. This is what I initially intended to do but failed to fulfil due to my limited technical skills. No matter what program is used, it is important to consider sarcasm and hyperbole in the comments that would be interpreted literally by computer software. For example, one can say "it killed me", "I'm dead", or "I laughed too much at this. It is not ok" to imply the meme is so ingenious and hilarious and they absolutely enjoy it. Or "you must be fun at parties" is meant to mock the other interlocutor who takes humor seriously.

In the end, the research shows that a number of commenters were encouraged to learn about art as being exposed to the artwork. This suggests that classical art memes might be a useful tool for art education. They democratize access to fine art, engage the audience organically, and give the freedom to learn and explore at one's own pace. The memes would increase exposure to art, which is necessary to ignite the initial curiosity or overcome the unfamiliarity with high art early in the learning process (Fineberg, 2006, pp. 31–33). However, more work is still needed on the application of classical art memes in art education. As memes cannot be forced, it is important to create an open affinity space that invite not just passive and but active engagement.

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