THE INTERNET MEME AS A RHETORIC DISCOURSE:
INVESTIGATING ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICANS’ IDENTITY NEGOTIATION

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This study draws concepts from rhetorical criticism, vernacular rhetoric, visual rhetoric, and whiteness studies, to investigate how Asian/Asian Americans’ online identities are being constructed and mediated by Internet memes. This study examines the use of Internet memes as persuasive discourses for entertainment, spreading stereotypes, and online activism by examining the meme images and texts, including their content, rhetorical components, and structure. Internet memes that directly depict Asian/Asian Americans are collected from three popular meme websites: Reddit, Know Your Meme, and Tumblr.

The findings indicate that Internet memes complicate the construction of racial identity, invoking the negotiation and conflicts concerning racial identities described by dominant as well as vernacular discourses. They not only function as entertaining jokes but also reflect the social conflicts surrounding race. However, the prevalence and development of memes also bring new possibilities for social justice movements. Furthermore, the study provides implications of memes for users and anti-racist activities, as well as suggests future research directions mainly in the context of globalization.
This thesis is dedicated to my mother (1954-2011) and her unconditional love. She spent her whole life nurturing me, encouraging me, and inspiring me. Without her, I would still be in my comfort zone. She taught me to be brave, independent, and free with her life stories.

Mom, I love you and miss you every single day.
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Objectives

People often visit Reddit, 9gag, Tumblr, or other similar websites seeking entertainment by viewing funny memes. The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins (1978) to describe small units of culture that spread via person-to-person. The “Internet meme” refers to the dispersion of items, such as jokes, videos, images, and websites from person-to-person through the Internet (Shifman, 2014). Viewing Internet memes is a daily routine for many people. They look through updates, sharing funny pictures with friends and laughing at those that contain special meaning for them. For most Internet users, checking memes is just for fun as long as they can recognize the humor. However, people seldom stop to consider critically how those memes frame other individuals or groups of people. They seldom reflect upon how such framing works to shape their own perceptions of others. For example, the meme titled, “High Expectations Asian Father” is an image series based on stereotypes about first-generation Asian parents pushing their children to achieve academic success. People can laugh at these memes because they know what to laugh at. In other words, in this particular case, those jokes match their impressions about Asian/Asian Americans. When viewers want to participate or gain more attention online, they may recreate another meme by thinking “hey, I know another funny thing about those people and it’s even funnier.” They may not consider that they are participating in a rhetorical process of identity production and mediation.

Many people claim that the U.S. is in a post-racial and color blind era, due to historic accomplishments such as the Civil Rights movement and Barack Obama being elected as the first African American President (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). However, people of color in the United
States are still targets for ridicule and stereotyping in media (Wilson, Gutiérrez, Chao & 2013). Like other media platforms, Internet memes ignore the historical issues and daily dilemmas that people have to confront. When they appear in the media, they still play the stereotypical roles that fit into the dominant society’s imagination. Although stereotypes reflect elements of truth, the generalizations are based on faulty presumptions or exaggerations held by the other groups. As with the “High Expectation Asian Father” memes mentioned above, the whole process of circulation and recreation of memes reinforces the attitudes already held by the dominant American audience rather than to persuade viewers to challenge social ignorance.

Nevertheless, this does not tell the whole story of Internet memes. Social activists have begun to employ memes to advance the social change. For instance, the well-known tweet hashtag “#NotYourAsianSidekick” initiated by an Asian American freelance writer Suey Park, urged Asian American women to join in the conversation and resist the stereotypes and oppression. It has received thousands of messages across the country and from around the world. The Guardian deemed that this hashtag meme has become a civil rights movement for Asian American women (Kim, 2013). Moreover, other online activisms such as “I, too, am Harvard” and its derivative “I, too, am Oxford” were all using Internet memes to fight against stereotypes that students of color encounter in their daily life at elite colleges and Ivy League universities. In those cases, Internet memes became tools of resistance for marginalized groups. Through observing and learning, people internalize beliefs, attitudes, values and other information delivered by those memes, and then they pass them on (Balkin, 1998).

Therefore, this thesis will focus on the use of Internet memes as persuasive discourses for entertainment, spreading stereotypes, and online activism. Through those online social events, this thesis will investigate how Asian/Asian Americans’ online identities are being constructed
and mediated by both dominant discourse and Asian/Asian Americans’ vernacular. Memes examined for this study will be selected from popular meme websites: Reddit, Know Your Memes, and Tumblr. These three websites have qualities in common concerning the transmission and transformation of memes, yet they also have their unique features. The thesis will apply concepts from rhetorical criticism, vernacular rhetoric, visual rhetoric, as well as whiteness, to scrutinize the meme images and texts, including their content, rhetorical components, and structure.

**Rationale**

There are two primary reasons why I concentrate on Internet memes and their role in public discourses to examine the construction of Asian and Asian Americans’ identity. First, investigating the rhetorical features of Internet memes will be helpful to gain a better understanding of the relationship between memes and the digital public environment. The creation, circulation, recreation and re-dissemination of memes have been hugely influenced by the network of Internet users (Jenkins, 2014). The meme consumers are also influenced by the development of Internet memes, which revealed a new approach to interactions and public participation among people (Shifman, 2014).

The second reason that this thesis focuses on Internet memes is to apprehend how memes work to negotiate ethnic identities. Internet memes can be used for distinct purposes, such as entertainment, aesthetics, satire, and resistance. They are a form of public persuasion and serve different purposes with different strategies (Huntington, 2013). Internet memes interact with social, cultural and political issues. Asian Americans notice how memes frame them and also how they sometimes use memes to influence other people’s mindset. Moreover, examining
meme-consumers’ participation and interaction in the process of meme transformation and diffusion will expand understanding of their potential beyond amusement. Internet memes have become a resistant tool utilized by dominated groups to seek social justice.

This thesis is focused upon Asian/Asian Americans. Studies focusing on this specific racial group are often overshadowed by the prevailing black and white binary (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Moreover, Asian/Asian Americans are often perceived to be a quiet group compared to other minority groups in American society (Ono & Pham, 2009). However, in recent years, along with the growth of social media, young Asian Americans have gained visibility and popularity by self-produced videos that reflect their lives and opinions (Guo & Lee, 2013). For example, Ryan Higa (“Nigahiga”) and Kevin Wu (“KevJumba”) are the most famous Asian Americans on YouTube. Higa’s channel is the third most subscribed channel on YouTube during 2013 (Know Your Meme, 2013). Thus, I also hope that by this study I can understand the major efforts undertaken by a younger generation of Asian/Asian Americans to raise their voices in the society and mediate people’s stereotypical opinions of their group.

In this study, even though the term “Asian/Asian Americans” has been used, discussions majorly focus on people and practices from East Asia, due to topics represented in the selected Internet memes. This will be further explained in a later chapter. In addition, discussing Asians and Asian Americans together, this study did not neglect the distinctions between the two groups. They are analyzed together because they are inseparable when racial stereotypes are discussed. This is also a way to address why those racialized memes are problematic.

I decided to study Asians and Asian/Americans also for a personal reason. I am an Asian who is a student living and studying in the United States who experiences the stereotypes that are aspects of the dominant culture’s mentality. Through this study, I will gain a deeper
understanding of what it means to be an Asian in the U.S. and learn the rhetorical struggles that Asian Americans organize and perform.

Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is guided by the following research question: (1) How do Internet memes that depict Asian/Asian Americans complicate their identity construction? (2) As intercultural discourse, how does the Internet meme frame Asian/Asian Americans’ race? (3) How are memes used as activist discourse? To explore the topic and search for answers to the research questions, the thesis is presented in five parts. It will begin with the introduction of the topic, discussing the necessity of analyzing the construction of Asian/Asian American’s identity through the site of Internet memes.

Chapter One introduces the research topic background, objective, rationale, and overview. It lays the foundation of this study. In Chapter Two, a comprehensive literature review and research questions are provided. By examining the past literature, three characters of Internet memes have found-cultural transmission, participatory media, and intercultural communication discourse. The findings also further rationalize the demographic choice in this study.

Chapter Three is divided into two major parts to describe methods and theoretical frameworks. The first section introduces the methods employed for the data collection. Meme selecting procedures and source websites are briefly described. The following one presents the theoretical framework-concepts of rhetorical criticism, visual rhetoric, vernacular discourse, and whiteness. In addition, a brief explanation of how these concepts shape and direct this study will be provided.
In Chapter Four, the data descriptions and analysis are presented. Related background information and physical features of the selected Internet memes are identified and described. Based on the analyses, major themes and perspectives encoded in the artifacts are recognized and discussed.

In Chapter Five, key findings based on the data analysis and the practical implications of this research are thoroughly discussed. By briefly reviewing the whole research, this section also points out its strengths and weaknesses. Relying on those conclusions, directions of the future study are indicated.

Hopefully this study will provide a better understanding of the relationship between identity and online memes. In addition, it is expected that this study will contribute in certain degree to the field of race relations and intercultural communication through the site of Internet memes.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Literature Review

In the early days of the Internet’s appearance, some scholars theorized that virtual environments might provide an escape for people from the boundaries of race and the experience of racism (Daniels, 2013). That is, people could play different racial or gender roles through diverse online media. Those scholars envisioned the Internet as an escape route from affirmed racial identities (Hansen, 2006), because they anticipated a text-only web. Instead, the current Internet heavily relies on visual images that represent racial identity (Nakamura, 2008).

Nevertheless, the Internet still serves as a public sphere and a site for racial identity negotiation (Jenkins, 2002). Therefore, according to Daniel (2013), the visual culture of the Internet actually complicates race and identity in new ways.

Internet memes and cultural transmission

Gene-like sociocultural diffusion. In the book The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins (1978) coined the term “meme,” and theorized its transmission and evolution as analogous to its biological counterparts. He viewed the circulation and evolution of memes as the propagation of cultural material. Further, he broke cultural products down into small units referred to as memes that circulate from person to person. They can be ideas, gestures, catchy phrases, clothes fashions, and images. For example, the phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On” has been a famous memetic phenomenon (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/keep-calm-and-carry-on). Internet meme series “High Expectation Asian Father” is a typical example of mixing image and text together to produce cultural meanings. For both examples, during the processes of modifying any of their
(seemingly) small elements and disseminating them to other online users, the potential meanings of the memes get reshaped for new rhetorical purposes. Dawkins also identified three critical features of successful memes: copy-fidelity (referring to qualities that enable reproduction), fecundity (referring to the relevance and power of replication), and longevity (referring to the length of time).

Memes have to be constantly selected (viewed or clicked) to be “alive” online. In the book *The Selfish Meme: A Critical Reassessment*, Distin (2005) explained that memetic selection depends on a meme’s capability of gaining and retaining people’s attention in the specific context. He emphasized that, “fitness is always a relative concept” (p.69). For instance, in the “Pepper Spray Cop” meme (which based on the photograph of a policeman pepper spraying a row of still-sitting Occupy protesters at the University of California, Davis in 2011, available at http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop), the policeman Pike’s spraying action was distinguished as the cultural information that can be recognizable by the public (Hristova, 2013). Likewise, Shifman (2011) also claimed that successfully spreading memes relies on their fitness with their socio-cultural environment.

**Technocultural transmission.** The “Internet meme” is used to refer to the dispersion of items, such as jokes, videos, images, and websites from person to person through the Internet (Shifman, 2014). Internet memes have been more and more popular with the rise of Internet culture as more people engage with and participate in social media to express themselves (Brown, 2014). People can just click “share”, or “like” on the social networks, blogs, meme-documentary websites and other forums to post and reference Internet memes. Like traditional memes, Internet memes have also been described as a cultural process (Brown, 2014). Alice Marwick (2013) that is, an Internet meme is a piece of culture and it gains influence through its transmission online.
Limor Shifman (2013) agreed with this view and also mentioned that even though cultural information carried by Internet memes passes along via person to person, it gradually ascends to a shared social phenomenon. As a result, scholars (Huntington, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Mina, 2012) including Shifman, concluded that Internet memes can be examined as a micro-level discourse to analyze and understand the macro-level discourses. In other words, Internet memes spread on a micro level, but their influence is on macro level. They shape people’s beliefs, behavior, and collective actions (Shifman, 2013).

In Sharma’s (2013) article “Black Twitter? Racial hashtags, networks and contagion”, the author introduced the concept of “technocultural assemblages” that include software platform, algorithms, digital networks and affects. Instead of focusing on racial representation and significance of online identities, the article aimed at analyzing how race and identities are materialized within technoculture. The meme-generating/documentary websites such as Know Your Meme, 4chan, and Reddit, have been described as the “viral incubator” (p. 60), because they track and create memes, some of which are racially provocative and lead to intense discussion.

**Participatory media culture.**

**The Internet and public sphere.** Internet memes are discursive practices that representing participants’ beliefs and interactions via a public sphere provided by the Internet. People are active nowadays online by creating, sharing, liking, recreating, and retransmitting those messages. Yet users are not simply attracted by the advanced digital devices and the funny form that carries their opinions; the notion of exchanging ideas through the public sphere arose in the
1960s. Revealing the development of public sphere is helpful for gaining a better awareness of how power relations are being demonstrated through public activities.

Decades ago, Jürgen Habermas (1994) noticed the role of a public sphere in people’s daily conversation and social practices. He defined the public sphere as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (p. 176). He theorized the public space where private people can participate in discussion and free from the restrictions set by dominated groups, and where private people are able to determine the common interest on this stage (Ward, 1997). Physical spaces, such as pubs, salons, and cafes, as well as print media, were considered to be the public spheres where people read, wrote, shared opinions and discussed social issues in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. Publicly exchanged opinions guaranteed democracy within the society. Also, it encouraged public civic participation (Terranova, 2004). However, the public spaces also differentiated people by their class, status, gender, and race. Women, laborers, the illiterate, and other groups of people were excluded (Warnick, 2007).

Around the late 19th century, such local channels gradually lost their appeal with the growth of private media and the rise of the modern bureaucratic state (Chadwick, 2006). In the late 19th century, cameras, video recorders, television, and phones became the new public sphere. Nevertheless, media content was designed to stimulate mass consumption. Social events were created and manipulated by one means or another to attract audience attention (Warnick, 2007).

Later in the 20th century, the popularity of the Internet began to take away the leading role from the traditional social spaces and became the new public platform (Vlavo, 2012). As a result, the Internet enhances the diffusion of memes and also turns the spread of memes into a highly visible practice (Shifman, 2013). Mou, Atkin, and Fu (2011) also concluded that
compared to the previous media, the Internet owns unprecedented advantages of “the enormous information storage and dissemination capacity” (p. 342). Chadwick (2006) considered that the Internet may have the potential to increase political participation. On the one side, the easy access to the technology nurtures the development of this kind of public sphere in which the public will be more independent from the propaganda set by the mainstream media or the government (Vlavo, 2012). On the other side, the Internet being a relatively spontaneous, flexible and autonomous medium (Chadwick, 2006), will provide the public a less restricted and more equal environment, compared to the previous public spheres. Therefore, people who became silent with the decay of the old public spheres could be active again. Terranova (2004) indicated that the Internet could be an effective political sphere in which the public owns the tools for communicating that allows them to challenge the dictatorship of media. Likewise, Vlavo (2012) considered that the Internet could be a platform for response to inequality and socio-political hegemony. Previously marginalized or oppressed voices are brought into this public area, in which active participations are encouraged and shared citizen responsibility are built (Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009). Then, the public sphere formed by private individuals can be employed to influence social democratic development (Ward, 1997).

Participatory media. The requirements of creating and understanding a macro-image meme are minimal (Vickery, 2014). Websites such as Meme Generator and Quick Meme welcome public participation in creating memes without acquiring sophisticated technological or design skills. Low requirements for inclusion are part of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009). Participation makes Internet memes meaningful collectively (Brown, 2014). Internet memes are recognizable because of their shared meaning in a communal setting. Therefore, the self-perspective cannot develop without being influenced by other people’s points of view.
Rather than to exclude, Internet memes as a participatory action include diverse identities that make their voices heard (Milner, 2013). Drawing from collective memories, such as histories, contributes to the creation and understanding of the Internet memes. Therefore, the power of community potentially can be increased along with participation in the process (Hristova, 2013). However, Hristova also pointed out that the influence of Internet memes is challenged by their self-replicating quality because Internet memes rely on remixing and modifying the original idea, image, and language hence becoming irrelevant after a short time.

Participatory culture allows online users to be vocal, challenge fixed impressions, transgress boundaries, and replace space. For instance, in the “Pepper Spray Cop” memes, the collective experience and memories about brutal police have been reviewed and challenged (Hristova, 2013). Moreover, Spitzberg (2014) utilized the spiral of silence effect to illustrate that the cooperative memes assistant minority groups give voice to their memes in the mainstream discourse. Nevertheless, stereotypical assumptions and hegemonic culture also make Internet memes (Vickery, 2014). For example, in the “High Expectation Asian Father” meme series, racial minority and mainstream stereotypes toward Asians have been depicted (Nakamura, 2002). Race has been emphasized in the content. In addition, by using nonstandard English, Asian Americans were again portrayed as social others.

**Political participation.** Henry Jenkins (2009) outlined new forms of participatory politics. Political activity has become more prominent through online activity. Creating and sharing memes are strategies within this new form of online politics. The new politics extends people’s understanding of what constitutes political activism. Political participatory practice includes encoding and decoding the meme parodies (Szablewicz, 2014; & Hristova, 2013). The potential for an image and an icon to be politically meaningful relies not only on the aesthetic elements
but more importantly on their capability to be persuasive and evoke significant responses (Hristova, 2013).

#YesAllWomen (http://yes-all-women.tumblr.com) is a feminist meme event created to respond the Isla Vista California shooting case in which the killer referred to his hatred of women as the major motivation for his action. This feminist hashtag meme has been praised for making injustices and abuses against women visible (Thrift, 2014). Likewise, by analyzing China’s Internet memes and grassroots’ political movements, Szablewicz (2014) positively commented that online memes provide an alternative locus of power and existing power relationships are allowed to be critiqued.

**Internet memes in intercultural communication.**

**Humor, racial identity and communication.** Jokes are commonly featured in Internet memes. Humorous texts and images can deliver serious social issues (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). “Advice animals”, for instance, are a popular image-based, online user-created meme format. The meme series include a funny image of an animal and with text offering advice and/or making a joke. Vickery (2014) analyzed one such example that is titled “Confession Bear”, in which a sad looking grizzly bear confesses something awkward, silly, or shameful. The “Confession Bear” memes were first circulated through the online website Reddit and were intended to be funny. However, users started creating memes that shared serious topics such as race, rape, and domestic abuse as the confession. Those memes evoked in-depth conversations on Reddit.

Similarly, Ryan Milner (2013) introduced the “logic of lulz”. “Lulz” derived from “lol” or “laughing out loud.” Luls “labels on participatory collectives a detached and dissociated
amusement at others’ distress” (p. 66). It often works with race and gender. The author found that race and gender representations in those Internet image-based memes were dominated by stereotypes. However, the “logic of lulz” relying on irony and critique facilitated dominant and counter discourse. To further explain this idea, Milner demonstrated the example of how KKK joke websites employ stereotypical and racist humor to embrace the oppressive ideology.

Nakamura (2002) studied whiteness in Internet memes. Whiteness has been defined as invisible. She deemed that whiteness is taken as a default option in such memes, and the white people are assumed as the readers. For example, in the “Ordinary Muslim Man” meme series, even though the turn of phrase which intends to undermine stereotypes toward Muslim men, the invisible whiteness is powerful by emphasizing “ordinary.”

Humorous Internet memes can be utilized by users to challenge inequality and hegemonic culture (Vickery, 2014). However, the past is manifested in visual culture and everyday practice (Hristova, 2013). It lies in every iconic images, texts, and jokes, shared among the public.

**Internet memes as intercultural discourse.** Shifman (2014) defined Internet memes from three perspectives. First, a set of Internet memes share common features of form, content and/or attitude. Secondly, they were created based on the “awareness” of each other (p. 41). This means that memes in the set shared same recognizable components. Thirdly, via the platform of the Internet, they were uploaded, circulated, imitated, and/or transformed by users. Thus, diverse voices and perspectives are carried by distinct memetic variants. Shifman’s definition provided a general guide for analysis Internet memes as socio-culturally constructed discourses.

Yang (2012) also concluded that, in a virtual environment, time and physical space play less and less important roles. Internet users apply different strategies to intercultural discourses to
negotiate their cultural identities, in which there exist conflicts between anonymity and honesty, visibility and invisibility, and temporality and permanency. Like traditional discourses, such as broadcast programs, movies and printed publications, Internet memes still largely rely on race and racial issues for humor. They disperse among people and reflect and shape general social mindsets (Shifman, 2014). The wide transmission of Internet memes across national boundaries is not only attributed to advanced technology but also by online users’ decisions and actions.

Like other aspects of popular culture, memes are designed and created, no matter subtly or obviously, from the base of cultural values and communicative preferences of their inventors (Cheong, Martin & Macfadyen, 2012). Their design and implementation are all shaped by culturally variable values, practices, norms and beliefs (p. xiii).

For instance, in the popular Internet meme “Successful Black Man,” a young black man wearing a suit is in the middle of the image, accompanied by two captions. The top line always is a stereotypically negative comment about black people. The bottom one reverses it to show the stereotype being wrong. This meme series reinforce attitudes that are already held by viewers and at the same time it provides a counterexample to possible racist attitudes. Racial/cultural identities are thus negotiated within the process.

However, instead of persuading people to challenge the stereotypical impressions about Asian/Asian Americans, memes like “High Expectation Asian Father” encourage users to make up lines to emphasize them (Wilson, Gutiérrez & Chao, 2013). Such lines originate from the stereotypes of Asian strict parenting styles and Asian/Asian Americans as model minority.

Contemporary U.S. media culture performs race in controversial, ambivalent, and perplexing ways (Lacy & Ono, 2011). Those disturbing racialized Internet memes serve as
evidence that race and racism are still alive and well in the so-called “post-racial” era in the United States. Via memes, a form of digital public discourse, Internet users design images and texts to express their anxieties, anger, fears, and dissatisfaction brought by the intercultural communication. Those memes reflect their knowledge and perspective on race and culture (p. 2).

Based on the brief analysis of previous literature about Internet memes, this thesis takes Internet memes as an online intercultural discourse. My aim is to investigate the online identity negotiation of Asian/Asian Americans and to gain a better understanding of how Internet memes serve as a powerful agent to promote social justice movements.

**Discussion and summary.** This literature review focused on Internet memes with specific attention on how race and identity are framed within them. Cultural knowledge is propagated by the circulation of memes. Memes are gene-like cultural unit transmitted via person to person. Internet memes are dispersed within the technoculture. Memes are micro-level expressions that can be examined to analyze the macro level discourses. Politically, the Internet meme carries the possibility of participation. Because of the low skill and technique requirement for participation, Internet memes include more voices and the possibility for more public political engagement. Furthermore, humor has been a common element constituting Internet memes to shape identity and transmit cultural meaning throughout the intercultural communication. Such memes that deal with race issues have the potential to challenge hegemonic culture even as the preferred history perpetuates stereotypes in daily practices and visual culture.

Throughout the literature reviewed for this study, there is one research area that few scholars have addressed. Looking back the literature, Dubler (2014) targeted the Internet meme “Shit White People Say about Beyoncé.” It originated from the memes “Shit X Say,” which is a
series of parody videos probing social, race, and gender stereotypes. Dubler explained how racial relations worked in the music business and affected the black musical star Beyoncé. Internet meme series “Obama as Foreigner” also touched upon racial stereotypes. In these memes, Obama has been mainly depicted as Muslim, not a U.S. Citizen, a socialist, and gay (Silverblatt, 2010). Although those thematic memes do not seem related, they share one narrative that is Obama is a foreigner because of his skin color. Moreover, Sharma (2013) focused on Black Twitter, to analyze the circulation of racialized hashtags. Anti/racist humor, comments, emotions are all taken as contagious meanings and affects. In the example of “Confession Bear,” Vickery (2014) identified intersectional themes, including race, gender, sexual orientation, health, and crime. Therefore, the author claimed that such Internet memes have the ability to challenge yet reinforce the hegemonic culture.

Based on the brief summaries above, it is apparent that the research focus on race and Internet memes observes the White and Black binary. African Americans have been the major research focus. This creates a research gap in the study of race-themed Internet memes that calls for new academic exploration. Looking through Internet memes on websites such as Know Your Meme and Reddit, racial themes emerge involving Asian Americans. Therefore, this study focuses on investigating Asian/Americans’ vernacular and visual discourse through the form of Internet memes.

Research Questions

This thesis focuses on the relations between the Internet meme and Asian/Asian Americans’ identity negotiation. To investigate how Internet memes with racial content shape
and reflect Asian/Asian American’s identity, the thesis answers the following questions in later chapters:

RQ1: How do Internet memes that depict Asian/Asian Americans complicate their identity construction?

a) How do memes operate as intercultural rhetorical discourse?

b) How are Asian/Asian Americans’ identities represented in the memes?

RQ 2: As intercultural discourse, how does the Internet meme frame Asian/Asian Americans’ race?

a) How is the dominant society invited to frame Asian/Asian Americans through memes?

b) How do social realities affect the identity representations of Asian/Asian Americans in the memes?

RQ 3: How are memes used as activist discourse?

a) How are memes constructed to mediate conflict and tension?

b) Do counter-stereotypical memes effectively resist dominant ideologies and encourage social justice?
CHAPTER III. METHODS

This chapter is divided into two major parts. The first part introduces the method applied to the data collection. Procedures and source websites are briefly described. The following part presents the theoretical framework—concepts of rhetorical criticism, visual rhetoric, vernacular discourse, and whiteness. Furthermore, the brief explanation of how these concepts shape and direct this study are provided.

Data Collection

To gain a better understanding of how Asian/Asian Americans’ identities are being negotiated through Internet memes, I collected data from various websites of mediated cultural participation. Instead of focusing on one certain website of memes, inspecting distinct sites was able to provide a fuller picture of how participants create, share, and reply with memes. As Mautner (2005) suggested, including wide ranges of voices helps broaden analytic vision, instead of failing the whole research by selecting data from a quite narrow field. However, to get a manageable data pool, strategies were utilized to narrow down meme choices on each website. A final amount of Internet memes was selected and they received close analysis.

To select the websites, two criteria were established. First, the meme websites had to be popular, attaining a large amount of views and participations by Internet users. In this way, the meme-related data collected from those sites may disclose patterns of people’s opinions toward those memes. Secondly, the websites needed to have interactive or participatory functions surrounding the memes, such as links, comments, blogs, and forums, etc. (Milner, 2012). Even though this research emphasizes Internet memes including image-based and text-based, discussion and comments from participants are also very essential. They are important for
understanding and analyzing the identity negotiation process. User reactions provide diverse insights and perspectives regarding themed memes.

Based on the two criteria stated above, the following three websites were closely observed. They are Reddit, Know Your Meme, and Tumblr. On those websites, the creation, dissemination and development of the meme are learned. In addition, those websites all contain multi-functions to attract people’s participation and interaction. At Reddit, distinct topics are created by registered users under “subreddits”. The discussions consist of constant and numerous posts. They can be very long and complex. For instance, an Asian-themed meme that has topped Reddit’s front page titled “Sleeping at work level: Asian,” ignited heated discussion on the pervasiveness of Asian racism on Reddit and the concept of “positive stereotype.” The website Know Your Meme (KYM), includes forums, blogs, memes, and specials, etc. In the meme section, it also contains confirmed, submitted, “deadpooled” (which means rejected), and popular memes. The website documents various Internet memes and other online phenomena, circulation, and transformation. It matches the need of my project to thoroughly investigate the Internet memes and how social and cultural environments influence their evolution. Tumblr is another social networking service and a microblogging platform that allows its users to upload texts, pictures, audios, and videos. Its users can follow, share and comment on each other’s posts. Tumblr posts have been passed around via “reblogging” a post by its users. They share the post on their own Tumblr, and some of them produce new content.

These three websites are distinct from each other in certain functions as described above but they also overlap. They are sites where memes are created, circulated, transformed and disseminated. Moreover, they gather Internet users’ participation, allowing them to express their opinions through the memes and comments. By providing the mediated platform, the three
websites release the potential of memes to become tools of resistance, encouraging social justice, instead of being merely public amusement.

My procedure moves onto the collection of Internet memes. Due to the functional distinctions of the three websites, the processes of filtering memes of Asian/Asian Americans are slightly distinct, but key words such as “Asian,” “Asian Memes,” and “Asian American” were used to target the artifacts. On Reddit, after typing in the key words, the related memes are further filtered under the categories of “hot,” and “top.” On Know Your Meme, related memes are narrowed and selected from the entry of most popular. On Tumblr, the key words are employed as tags to search the popular reblogged meme posts. Memes were reviewed and collected beginning in September 2014 and ending January 2015.

During the collecting process, memes that directly depict Asian/Asian Americans were included. For instance, those memes generate conversations by using Asian/Asian Americans’ portraits, languages, and/or any components that remind people of Asian/Asian Americans. In this study, Internet memes that address broad topic themes are purposely left out. Such as rage comic memes (telling real life experiences by rage face characters), their various topics can reach to issues of politics, race, drugs, college students, and adults, etc. Even though they involve Asian/Asian American related content, such a topic is not their major theme. Due to this standard, memes that do not directly describe Asian/Asian Americans are not included in the data pool. Eventually, twelve meme series have been included and thoroughly examined. I did not include the number of Internet memes viewed because each meme series can generate numerous derivatives. Therefore, only the total number of meme series is provided here.

Therefore, in order to search for answers to the research questions, this study collected data from three websites, along with applying distinctive strategies to extract information on
online participants’ behavior, thoughts, and interactions to analyze the relationship between Internet memes and Asian/Asian American’s identities.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**Rhetorical criticism.** Rhetorical criticism is utilized to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate the persuasive elements of messages conveyed by Internet meme discourse. Rhetorical criticism, according to Foss (2008), refers to a qualitative research method that is “designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes (p. 6).” She provided three dimensions to further explain this definition. First, systematic analysis is the act of criticism. Second, acts and artifacts are the objects in the analysis. Third, the purpose of criticism is to understand the rhetorical processes.

In this study, selected Internet memes are rhetorical artifacts. Compared to other forms of rhetorical artifacts such as speech, news articles, and songs, Internet memes are relatively unstable, because of their high speed of circulation and transformation. As a digital form of intercultural rhetoric, racialized Internet memes are created based on how people perceive and presume their own or others’ race and culture. Internet users are invited to participate in such intercultural discussions to express their cultural perspectives, anxieties, anger, and fears. Therefore, such discourse constructs identities, integrating opinions, influencing attitudes, and shaping minds. By creating or modifying new memes, Internet users convey their viewpoints, taking positions on social issues, and some of them attempt to influence viewers’ minds, behaviors, and even the social ideology. Warnick (1998) pointed out that such action is rhetorical and is able to be studied by the rhetorical critic. She also suggested that the critical perspective
might have to adjust itself to match the new communication environment where those artifacts are produced.

Another reason for using this method is that it emphasizes understanding power relations through historical, social, and cultural contexts. According to McKerrow (1989), this approach in practice is intended to expose the discourse of power, understanding the integration of power and knowledge in society. It also aims to look for possibilities that may be appropriate to motivate social change. Thus, the complexity of Internet memes can be demystified in some degree. McKerrow (1989) also claimed that critical rhetoric sees the discourse of power as material. Participants are not passive receivers or bystanders, simply absorbing the information and powerlessly accepting them. The participants have the capacity to alter the discourse. However, he reminds that “absence” (p. 107) needs to be investigated and understood. Like Internet memes in this study, what is absent, not presented, not said behind the images need to be discovered.

Due to the advanced technologies and the Internet such intercultural communication as Internet memes are being fostered and boosted. Foss (2008) pointed out directions a critic studying Internet discourse may follow, such as exploring the interaction of participation and response, values that maybe reinforced and modified, assumed online community, suppressed voices and conventions. Similar to Foss, Warnick (1989) also suggested that critics take a close look at equality in the online discursive practices.

Thus, concepts of rhetorical criticism will be employed in this thesis to investigate how the elements that decide the circulation of memes are influenced by rhetoric and culture, and how they distinguish and connect majority and minority cultures (Warnick 2007). Also, it will be crucial to revealing how race and racism remain problematic in U.S. society, how oppression is
exposed and resisted through Internet memes, and how application of those memes may potentially promote social justice.

**Vernacular rhetoric.** Concepts of vernacular discourse, according to Ono and Sloop (1995), aim to critique the dissemination of hegemonic power in a society. In other words, this method seeks to examine discourses that have been systematically silenced, whether consciously or unconsciously (Guo & Lee, 2013).

In 1995, Kent Ono and John Sloop proposed the concept of vernacular discourse in their work *The Critique of Vernacular Discourse*. They primarily applied this method to analyze print-media-based (a Japanese American newspaper in World War II) vernacular. Ono and Sloop (1995) considered the critique of vernacular discourse because it is capable of drawing forth power relations in a situation by investigating the fragments of culture. They also pointed out the importance of rhetorically criticizing the vernacular discourse relating oppressed groups, since their vernacular provides perspectives for resisting the impact of dominant power in a society. They also indicated that vernacular discourse is seen as a cultural production that is visible by locally generated symbols and artifacts.

There are two characteristics of vernacular discourse as Ono and Sloop (1995) outlined-cultural syncretism and pastiche. Cultural syncretism indicates that during the protesting against the mainstream discourse, the various cultural vernacular discourses simultaneously construct their own rhetoric (Calafell & Delgado, 2004). The latter refers to the process in which the vernacular discourse borrows fragments from the mainstream culture to construct a new discursive form to challenge the dominant discourse (Ono & Sloop, 1995). Later, other researchers utilized the concept of “hybridity” to describe the vernacular discourse (Howard, 2008; Guo & Lee, 2013). In other words, it reflects the interaction between the various
discourses and the mainstream discourse by its content, instead of representing one sided or authentic discourse.

Along with the emergence and development of the Internet, concerning its content and context, the range of vernacular discourse has been extended (Guo & Lee, 2013). In recent years, traditionally marginalized groups utilized the opportunities provided by Internet-based platforms to express their voices. By uploading images, words, and videos, they convey their opinions and attempt to reverse the traditionally misleading perspectives towards their groups. Therefore, Warnick (2007) reminded researchers and readers that conventional analytic approaches applied in rhetorical studies should be adapted to suit for the Internet environment. As Howard (2008) pointed out, the new participatory forms of events occurring on the Internet, such as Wikipedia, social networking, photo sharing, and blogs, all contribute to complex communication processes.

In the following years, researchers have begun to study Internet-media based vernacular discourse. Lei Guo and Lorin Lee (2013) analyzed two of the most popular and influential Asian American YouTube celebrities’ YouTube videos as modes of vernacular expression to discuss their revolutionary potential. Later in 2014, Andrew Peck (2014) added his study of photoshopping (the Pepper Spray Cop), one of the forms of Internet memes, to this scholarly conversation of vernacular discourse. Howard (2008) once argued that even though such altered images are not inherently vernacular, they appear as such when they express themselves in the way perceived as alternate to dominant discourse. By demonstrating the photoshopped memes and participating processes, Peck (2014) analyzed how meme represents a powerful new form of vernacular expression in the digital era.

In this study, vernacular discourse is majorly applied to analyze counter memes that attack and resist the mainstream discourse. Some counter memes are created by marginalized
groups (Asian/Asian Americans). They design Internet memes to appeal to social awareness, invite wide participation, and resist oppression, such as the Twitter hashtag campaign “#Cancelcolbert” initiated by Suey Park in 2014. This campaign was launched to gather support for the cancellation of Comedy Central’s satirical news show The Colbert Report, after the show anchor Stephen Colbert tweeted a racially offensive joke targeting Asian Americans on Twitter (Know Your Meme, 2014). This memetic campaign invoked immediate and intense reactions online. Other counter memes are created anonymously, rallying up various discourses. They present the negotiations and conflicts between counter perspectives and mainstream stereotypical discourse. For example, the popular Internet meme “Successful Black Man” mentioned in the previous chapter. This meme series offers a counter discourse to reverse the viewers’ racially fixed impressions. Borrowing Ono and Sloop’s (1995) concepts those memes are constructing discourse by combining cultural fragments. The new discourse has the potential to challenge mainstream discourse, implicitly or explicitly. However, at the same time, two authors also reminded researchers and readers that the new counter-mainstream discursive expression may ultimately affirm the dominant ideology.

Internet memes and visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric has been utilized to examine the rhetorical actions initiated by marginalized groups and individuals (Olson, Finnegan & Hope, 2008). The rapid and ongoing development of digital and Internet technologies has not only been changing techniques of communication, it also provides more options for groups marginalized by race, gender, class, and sexuality. In the traditional forms of communication governed and monitored by dominant groups, marginalized groups have limited access to express their voices. Therefore, digitalized visual actions have increased their civic and political attention and participation (Olson, Finnegan & Hope, 2008). As a result, employing the critique of visual
rhetoric allows particular significance for understanding resistant actions to fixed dominant ideologies. This approach examines how those marginalized agents confront and resist established norms and dominant power. Olson, Finnegan and Hope also developed their definition of visual rhetoric, which aims to make visual messages meaningful through processes of their production, circulation, apprehension, reception, and consumption. During the processes, authors emphasized the cultural dissemination and significance.

Foss (2004) developed a framework for studying visual rhetoric—“nature, function and evaluation” (p. 307). Describing the nature of the visual rhetoric needs to consider “presented elements” and “suggested elements” (p. 307). Identification of presented elements is to describe physical features of an artifact. Identification of suggested elements refers to recognizing perspectives and themes. Function, according to Foss, is not same as purpose, which stands for creators’ intentions. In other words, the interpretation of an artifact is not simply perceived as the purpose of specific creators (Jenkins, 2014). Blair (2004) claimed that visual arguments have the capability to draw viewers to the discursive construction. Their perspectives complete the logic structure. Finally, Foss (2004) pointed out that scholars might evaluate the artifact against its apparent accomplishment of its function.

The Internet meme remains relatively understudied. However, more scholars have begun to notice and analyze implications of Internet memes for instigating social awareness and action. Internet memes appear for building identity, forming public discourse, and encouraging civic participatory engagement (Huntington, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Mina, 2012; Peck, 2014). Internet memes involve interactions between visual consumption and discursive processing (Huntington, 2013). Applying insights of visual rhetoric to analyze Internet
memes help reveal the image meaning encoded in such new visual forms associated with the Internet.

Huntington (2013) considered that memes rely heavily on intertextuality, because its nature is “parodying, mimicking, and recycling” (p. 1) elements of visual media culture. Internet memes’ spread depends on the combination of such various referents, and textual and pictorial juxtapositions (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Through the modification of cultural elements, new meanings appear (Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) deemed that such transformation of memes is based on the understanding of perceived representational images associating with certain individuals or groups. Therefore, Huntington (2013) suggested combining the visual rhetoric approach with semiotic and discursive approaches to investigate the persuasive elements and the constructional meaning of Internet memes. In this way, the social power encoded in the artifact can be recognized. Many past studies (Milner, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Mina, 2012) also echoed this idea. They considered examining a micro-level discourse such as Internet memes for understanding and analyzing the macro-level discourse.

For instance, in the research on examining the Internet meme series “Pepper Spray Cop”, Peck (2014) described the Photoshop techniques utilized by Internet users to respond the social problems. During the processes of creating Internet memes, and modifying them to increase their circulation online, participations are welcomed and encouraged. Therefore, the image interpretation is open-ended and contestable (Joy, Sherry Jr., Venkatesh, & Deschenes, 2009). Internet memes can be perceived as submissive response to the dominant discourse (Huntington, 2013).

Memes are not only about entertaining their consumers. A number of past studies have shown that those memes have the potential to resist dominant media discourse (Knobel &
Lankshear, 2007, Milner, 2021, Peck, 2014, Shifman, 2014). Thus, this study applies visual rhetoric method to examine Internet memes as a rhetoric, to explore the social power relations and to understand how Asian/Asian Americans identity being represented in such participatory media culture.

**Exposing whiteness.** This study examines Asian/Asian American themed Internet memes also through concepts of whiteness. Race and identity in many of this type of Internet memes are represented by familiar stereotypes and misleading generalizations, such as “High Expectation Asian Father”, and “Ordinary Muslim Man”. Examining them based on their surface meaning, both meme series do not convey directly negative messages against Asian/Asian Americans. However, such dissenting perspectives towards those Asian/Asian American groups are permeated with stereotypes and partial representations due to their race, class, social status, and religion. The meme series “High Expectation Asian Father” has employed the stereotypical impression of Asian/Asian American being “model minority”, especially in education as their main theme. As to “Ordinary Muslim Man”, the purpose of this meme series is to reverse the stereotypical perspectives toward Arab Muslim. Nevertheless, to successfully circulate this meme, online users have to recognize the stereotypical humor and evaluate “ordinary” first. During the process of understanding, recreating and disseminating, such type of Internet memes are constructed with invisible white norms and ideologies via strengthening stereotypes. At the same time racially marginalized groups are repressed and excluded again in virtual space (Nakamura, 2008).

Thus, despite many opportunities provided to marginalized groups by the accessibility of Internet memes for expression, racism remains preserves white normativity (Milner, 2013). Here, Internet meme participants employed stereotypes to make sure every altered image was funny,
without questioning the dominant narrative. As Dietrich (2013) mentioned, media representations reflects conditions of the society while maintaining them. Similarly, whiteness in virtual space, is brought by online racialized discourse, and it has the potential to reinforce the existing whiteness both online and offline.

Like the meme examples described above, most often, there are no white people portrayed in those memes, and most often creators and recreators are predominantly anonymous. Therefore, this study seeks to make visible race-themed Internet memes’ white privilege and the way it extends the normalization of whiteness on the Internet memetic phenomena and beyond. This study also seeks to highlight Asian/Asian Americans’ online identity, which is often misrepresented and/or marginalized via Internet memes’ permeation of whiteness. Hopefully, this study is able to encourage more attention to the study of Asian/Asian Americans’ identity in whiteness, which is often overshadowed by the two primary racial realities: white and black (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) explained that whiteness is invisible. It remains to influence the construction of identities, no matter who is inside or outside of its domain. They also viewed whiteness as a rhetorical construction. During this process, whiteness is normalized through discourses and becomes universal. As a position, Whiteness is unmarked and lacking recognition of its dominance. It continues to be centered and mark “Others.” Further, they employed nationality to depict whiteness. This vision of whiteness is “bounded by national borders and recenters whiteness,” (p. 300). Here, whiteness implies “white” being the equivalent of “American.” For instance, some Americans associate the idea of “an American” with white skin (Silverblatt, 2010). As to “Others,” who do not have white skin, they mostly prefer to
simply call themselves “American,” instead of referring their ethnical heritage, such as “African American” or “Asian American.”

In the later research on whiteness, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) argued that “color-blindness” is the central ideology of invisible whiteness in the post-civil rights era. This is a new form of racism that is performed in a more subtle way (Brown, 2009). Instead of recognizing and acknowledging the racial difference, people would rather not to see it (Nakamura, 2008). They consider it is normal (Daniels, 2013). In the contexts of post-civil rights, postcolonial, and neocolonial, white power and privilege continue to be reproduced through changing media discourses, and at the same time, they refuse their existence (Lacy & Ono, 2011).
CHAPTER IV. INTERNET MEMES AND NEGOTIATED REPRESENTATIVE IDENTITIES

Construction of Asian/Asian Americans’ Representative Identity

To approach how Internet memes examined in this study are considered as intercultural rhetoric, this section asks the following questions:

*RQ1: How do Internet memes that depict Asian/Asian Americans complicate their identity construction?*

a. *How do memes operate as intercultural rhetorical discourse?*

b. *How are Asian/Asian Americans’ identities represented in the memes?*

In this section, genres of collected Internet memes are introduced. By discussing their structures and the constructing process, a better understanding of how Internet memes occur, transform, and circulate will be gained. Furthermore, two memes from the collected data pool will be briefly analyzed, including their formation, meaning, and implication. This primary examination will introduce the issue of racial representation in memes, and pave the way to approach conflicts between dominant and vernacular discourses presented in Internet memes.

**The process of constructing an Internet meme.** Knowing and thinking about what elements are required to create, modify, and circulate Internet memes, illuminate the process of cultural shaping and transmissions. After all, the dissemination of memes enables cultural diffusion (Dawkins, 1978). Cultural meanings are very often interwoven with the creation and transformation of a meme. To comprehend an Internet meme, or even to be part of its discourse, it is necessary to grasp not only the literal meaning, but also the implied cultural message.
Therefore, discerning Internet memes is about literacy (Milner, 2012). According to Milner (2012), meme literacy refers to “knowing how to read the texts and create your own” (p. 31). That is, to be part of Internet meme community requires not simply engagement and creation, but the capability of wider social comprehension. A better understanding of memes’ success relies on the notion of their creation, diffusion, transformation, and circulation, and the elements that realize those processes.

As Brown claimed (2014), every type of Internet meme has its own unique and recurring traits by which that meme is recognized by viewers and participants. Those traits may consist of an image, a certain character, an expected perception, or a text pattern and structure. Memes can be considered a form of innovative art. Their creation requires few skills or technological knowledge, since websites such as Meme Generator (http://memegenerator.net/) provide templates that enable users to create a similar meme to the original one. However, the prerequisite of making requires the full comprehension of its implementation (Milner, 2012). With regard to the meme series “Pepper Spray Cop,” to successfully recreate one or understand them, memes users have to recognize the iconic images and gestures that imply police brutality, authority, war, and torture. The remixed image will have to reflect the same or a related meaning.

Therefore, the meme users and creators, modifier or audience, are involved in a cultural generation event. Consuming and reading memes require their meme literacy. Internet memes as a micro discourse represents creators’ reflexivity of the macro-world.

Meme genres are the rules that participating individuals have to follow. As Shifman (2012) defined in her book Memes in Digital Culture, “genres share not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences” (p. 99). Each genre stands for a different facet of meme literacy.
According to Milner (2012), there are two major categories: *remixed images* and *stable images*. Remixed images refer to transforming an established artifact and practice to an image. The latter category refers to the images that transmit among recreating participants without transformation. The remixed image category includes two subsets that are single images and stacked images. Single images refer to those remixed images appear in a single panel. For instance, “High Expectation Asian Father” is a single image. In this subset, there are several distinct types of single remixed images, such as image macros, photohops, quotes, etc. Stacked images combine a group of new mixed images. “Rage Comics” are the most popular examples in this subset. The spread of stable images mostly depends on imitation, but they still include transformative components in their transmission (Milner, 2012). Drawings, “IRL” (in real life), photos, etc., are all belong to this category.

In this study, based on the collected memes and Milner’s categories, the major genres are the following and will be specifically introduced. They are image macros, photoshopped images, rage comics, drawings, memes in real life (IRL), screenshots, and photos.

Image macros are the most popular genre in the data pool of this study. Based on the definition from the website *Know Your Meme* (Knowyourmeme.com, 2012), an image macro is “a broad term used to describe captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catch phrase.” This genre is used to provide advice and express feelings and reactions. It was originated from memes titled with “Advice Animals.” In such images, a picture of an animal’s face, such as a cat, or dog’s is positioned in the center, with a multicolored rainbow as its background. The captions on the image are often advice, such as romantic skills, or socializing suggestions. Along with the development of this genre, it is not limited to only provide advice. Human portraits also have been put on the image. Shifman (2014) claimed that
such derivatives have two features: “they use image macros, and they build on a set of stock characters that represent stereotypical behaviors” (p. 112). “Success Kid” is one of the most typical examples of such images. A baby lifting his fist with a determined grin is positioned in the image with the captions describing a successful situation. Memes mentioned in earlier chapters, such as “Ordinary Muslim Man,” “Successful Black Man,” and “High Expectation Asian Father,” belong to this genre.

In the genre of photoshopped images, elements from many other images are combined in a new image. Editing software, specifically Adobe Photoshop has been an inseparable part of meme crafting. Text is not necessary in this type of image. Very often, only new remixed graphic images are passed along. The typical examples of this genre include memes such as “Pepper Spray Cop”, “Occupy Wall Street”, and “PSY-Gangnam Style.”

Rage comics are comics consisting of “rage faces” and text. “Rage faces” refer to “a set of expressive characters, each associated with a typical behavior” (Shifman, 2014, p. 113). The comics are usually drawn in 4 to 6 panels, telling stories based on real life experiences, and ending up with a witty or humorous punchline (Knowyourmeme.com, 2012). The popular examples are “Forever Alone” which depicts a sad and lonely man with no friends or girlfriends, and “Yao Ming Face/Bitch Please” that I will introduce in the following section.

Drawings use animated images to convey a point of view. For example, the meme weeaboo, describes the non-Asians who likes Japan and its related things. Meme in real life (Meme IRL) often presents the discourse and practices that appear outside the Internet world. Making a meme on a mug cup, or printing a rage face meme on a T-shirt would be “Meme IRL.”
Photos are also shared online as Internet memes. Such pictures can be photos of people who imitate particular postures or actions in different locations. They usually carry specific meanings. The “Leg Gun” meme initiated by Chinese famous artist Ai Weiwei, is an example of a photo meme. In the photo, Ai Weiwei holds up his leg at aim it as a rifle (Chen, 2014). After he posted it online, thousands of Internet users replied it with their own “Leg Gun” photos. However, the meanings behind the original photo are ambiguous. It has been perceived as “Beijing anti-Terrorism Series” (Chen, 2014), while some media has claimed it implying to the Tiananmen Square event (Wan, 2014). According to his own interpretation, Ai Weiwei explained his artwork as the public notion of mixed social issues (Wan, 2014). Meme series such as “I, Too, Am Harvard,” “We’re a Culture, Not a Costume,” and “#notyourAsiansidekick” also belong to this genre as well. Participants of those memes post pictures of themselves with specific slogans. Usually, this genre of memes expresses innovative ideas. By presenting their own pictures, such memes attempt to appeal to public attention and political participation.

Last genre but not least, are screenshot memes. Those screenshots are often captured from Facebook conversations or Twitter replies. They usually reflect online trending or they critique certain issues, for example the Twitter posts around the hashtag “#notyourAsiansidekick.” Many Internet users take screenshots of the conversations to make up their own argument.

In short, different genres of Internet memes introduced above represent different level of meme literacy. To understand, create and transmit an Internet meme, users have to own the matching level of literacy to comprehend what cultural meaning underneath the images and texts. After all, humor is not the single goal of Internet memes. Instead, conveying innovative opinions, unraveling public standpoints, and drawing more attentions from Internet users have become more and more significant in the circulation of Internet memes.
Intercultural vernacular meme creations. In this section, two famous Asian depicted meme series are analyzed. Through the discussion, this part investigates how popular Internet memes circulate with less cultural limitations and become an intercultural vernacular discourse. Moreover, this part also touches upon how Asian/Asian Americans are represented in those images, and how such representations contribute to the success of Internet memes.

On Know Your Meme, among Asian themed memes, “Yao Ming Face/Bitch Please” series (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yao-ming-face-bitch-please) has the all-time highest view ranking, and hundreds of remixed images and videos as well. The drawing is based on a photo of a former NBA Chinese player, Yao Ming. The picture was captured from a press conference in 2009 (Know Your Meme, 2011). Ming was laughing from listening his teammate’s hilarious comment on a question. Because he laughed so hard that his face was skewed rather awkwardly. After that, a drawing of Yao Ming’s face was found on a Reddit thread, together with rage comics and a comment saying “Bitch Please.” Since then, Yao Ming’s face drawing often features with rage comics to convey dismissive kind of emotions, expressing a moment of win or a moment of fail (Milner, 2012). The “Bitch Please” drawing was once applied to Bin Laden referring to his long-time hiding from US troops.

“Dumb Bitch,” is another theme in this meme series. The “Dumb Bitch” varieties are also often applied to the misogynistic rage comic jokes, such as making stereotypical jokes on women being a bad driver. Another theme “Fuck That” has been used to express the cocky and frivolous attitude towards something is supposed to be considered seriously or significantly.

The face is also often imitated by Internet users. They upload a picture of their own face mimicking Yao’s face, and put it next to an original of Yao Ming’s photo or drawing. In addition,
there is a derivative series called “Fuck No Guy”. It portrays Yao Ming’s face in a similar way but with a more horrified/disgusted facial expression to convey a reversed situation.

This rage face meme has been wildly spread among several major meme circulation websites such as Reddit, Tumblr, and Facebook. Even though this meme series portrays Yao Ming’s unique smiling face, he personally has not been mocked or disrespected. Instead, Internet users have been applying the face to express a flippant attitude. The purpose of this meme series is more for entertainment.

Following “Yao Ming Face/Bitch Please” meme series, it is the “PSY-Gangnam Style” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/psy-gangnam-style) meme. Back in 2012, this video was the viewing record breaker on YouTube, and because of its popularity, and success, this music video has provoked hundreds of parodies and imitating dance videos (Know Your Meme, 2013).

This song has been very well-known by its signature dance moves called “the horse-riding dance,” which imitates the posture of horseback riding. In addition, the humorously catchy lyrics and strong pop beat also contribute to the success of this song. The refrain part of the lyrics is “Oppa Gangnam Style” (translated as “Your man is Gangnam Style”). With the reference of “Gangnam Style”, this song also brings along a satire about its people’s materialist obsession with Seoul’s Gangnam district, which is a symbol of high socioeconomic status in South Korea.

Even though this Korean song sung by a Korean pop star was very popular in the western market, the song still received many critiques toward the appearance of PSY in the music video. This video and its memetic phenomena have been criticized as being a reinforcement of stereotypes toward Asian/Asian Americans, and its success in the western market has been questioned as satisfying the mainstream desire of consuming Asian/Asian Americans’
stereotypes (Pan, 2012). In American media industry, Asian/Asian American male characters have been depicted as asexual and emasculated (Ono & Pham, 2009). In this music video, PSY delivers himself to audience as a happy, chubby, and non-threatening guy, which was hardly any breakthrough regarding Asian/Asian American male media images.

This song not only broke into the western world, it also spread globally. It evoked a sensation on online blogosphere and social media, especially on YouTube. (Know Your Meme, 2013). Internet users from all over the world have been watching it, and also responding to it creatively. Online users from places such as Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Australia, Russia, and the United States upload their own videos of imitating the horse-riding dance from the original video. Meanwhile, the initial location of the song referred to, which is an opulent neighborhood in Seoul has been replaced by various kinds of settings. The protagonists also have varied from video makers themselves, to cartoon characters. So meme videos such as “Hongdae Style,” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmIlbyL1cKg) and “Singaporean Style” (https://youtu.be/VFqLy27OSd4) have been generated.

Moreover, the derived memes have reached to political issues (Shifman, 2014). During 2012 U.S. presidential election, in a debate, Mitt Romney made a claim about “binders full of women” to respond a question about pay equity. The phrase referred that he received binders with resumes from female job applicants. However, this claim evoked people’s resentment towards Romney’s positions on female issues and also prompted the Internet users’ comments with the form of memes. One of them used a “Gangnam Style” meme captioned with all capitalized words “MY BINDERS FULL OF WOMEN EXPLODED” (http://bindersfullofwomen.tumblr.com/). Even though a Korean pop star seems to have no relationship to U.S. politics, but Internet memes and their creators link them together.
Furthermore, memes offer online users a medium to express their thoughts in response to the current issues, with the combination of popular culture, politics, and Internet-mediated participation.

In conclusion, based on Milner’s (2012) meme categories, the first half of this section briefly introduced genres involved in this study, their features, and approaches to understand connotations behind the images. Furthermore, building on previous research literature, this section claimed that to gain a better notion of Internet memes and to comprehend the larger context reflected and shaped by them, meme literacy needs to be enhanced.

In the following half of the section, two-meme series, “Yao Ming Face/Bitch Please” and “PSY-Gangnam Style” were discussed. Both meme series reflect the participatory culture of memes. Internet users apply them to express their emotions and respond towards particular comments, events, or people. They also use memes to convey their standpoints to political and social issues. Even though the protagonists in these memes are Asians, relying on the easy access of the Internet, memes and their cultural meanings travel among cultures. They are utilized by people across cultures in distinct ways. Through such processes, more cultural references are added to original memes to generate new variants. Time and physical space are not fixed anymore. Instead, users’ recreations contribute to the wide transmission of Internet memes across national boundaries (Yang, 2012). Therefore, Internet memes form online discourse that assist in shaping intercultural communication and identities within the context.

However, how Asian/Asian Americans have been depicted in those Internet memes either by Asian/Asian Americans themselves or by non-Asian/Asian Americans should be of concern to the public. “PSY-Gangnam Style” original music video and its memes have received critiques on the representation of an Asian male protagonist.
Online memetic phenomena have been considered as vernacular discourse, in which more marginalized voices are included (Guo & Lee, 2013; Peck, 2014). In 2007, as to the articulation relying on digital technologies and network mediated public sphere, Jean Burgess introduced the term “vernacular creativity.” The author deemed it as an approach to examine everyday cultural innovation and practices in the context of Internet and digital technologies. Burgess (2007) also pointed out that “vernacular” differing from institutional or official language, is a language of people who have often been marginalized and unheard. It forms a culture of minority groups and marks the distinction from dominant cultural discourse. He also suggested that digital media has been visualizing the hidden cultural practices through vernacular creativities. Based on the concepts, Internet memes themed with Asian/Asian Americans are part of vernacular creativity, in which group identity is presented, negotiated, and reconstructed.

In the next section, more Internet memes depicting Asian/Asian Americans will be thoroughly investigated. The purpose of it is to acquire how Asian/Asian Americans identities are framed and transformed in Internet memes. Furthermore, integrating with Burgess’ (2007) concept of “vernacular creativity,” the section will also take a closer look at how identities of this minority group are developed and presented in both dominant discourse and vernacular creations.

Negotiated Identities in Dominant Discourses and Vernacular Creativities

This section, building on the previous discussions, focuses on the application of Internet memes toward the Asian/Asian American group. In order to understand how participants utilize Internet memes as a public sphere to convey comments on racial minority groups, this section asks:
RQ 2: As intercultural discourse, how does the Internet meme frame Asian/Asian Americans’ race?

- How is the dominant society invited to frame Asian/Asian Americans through memes?
- How do social realities affect the identity representations of Asian/Asian Americans in the memes?

The previous chapter discussed various genres of Internet memes. By analyzing two meme series, memes show their capability of carrying and transmitting multi-facets of cultural meanings in each piece. In addition, the controversies contained in memes along the line of race have also emerged. Therefore, this section will demonstrate how race especially Asian/Asian Americans are framed in Internet memes. Memes are not purely humorous art product, following shared rules of making and disseminating, but they are also generated from social realities, and daily practices. Distinctions and conflicts of racial identity unraveled in those Internet memes are marked by the conversations between dominant discourses and marginalized vernacular creativities. This section will present detailed explanations how memes are unavoidably constructed around a few themes which are also identified as labels that differentiate people by their racial identities in real social interactions.

**Asian/Asian Americans group identity mediated by Internet memes.** In March 2011, a YouTube video named “Asians in the Library,” was posted by a University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) student, Alexandra Wallace (Know Your Meme, 2012). In this three-minute long video, she ranted about Asian students using mobile phones and talking loudly in the school library. She called those students “hordes of Asians” who lack American manners, because their parents fail to teach them in the right way, as she said, “You will always see old Asian people running around this apartment complex every weekend. That's what they do. They don't teach
their kids to fend for themselves. You know what they don't also teach them, is their manners.”

She also mockingly imitated Asian-accented English with the sound of “Ooooh Ching Chong Ling Long Ting Tong, Ooohhhhh,” and blamed them for checking on their family after the tragic tsunami happened: “I swear they're going through their whole families, just checking on everybody from the tsunami thing.” To present herself as the representative of acting with the right American standard manners, she claimed herself as, “the polite, nice American girl that my momma raised me to be, I kinda just gave him what anybody else would do that kinda like, [puts finger up to lips in a "shh" motion].” To conclude the video, she employed diplomatic strategy to make her words logically but also limited targeting at Asian/Asian Americans, “even if you're not Asian you really shouldn't be on your cell phone in the library but I've just never seen that happen before.”

This racially insensitive speech towards the whole Asian group from a white American student immediately evoked furious responses in the society, especially Asian/Asian American groups. The whole event soon became a memetic phenomenon. Internet users employed remixed images and YouTube videos to release their anger and appeal social attentions on racial issues. Many Asian American YouTube celebrities send out their angers via their own channels. Some of them used songs to sarcastically criticize her ignorance and racism, while others directly attack her inappropriate words.

For instance, through a video of mimicking Alexandra Wallace’s speech, tone and facial expression, slam poet Beau Sia combated the white privilege, racist, and fear hidden beneath what Wallace’s spoke (Sharp, 2011). He emphasized words such as “I”, “my”, and “our” several times to respond Wallace’s white supremacy belied in her words. Instead of merely mocking at
Wallace, Sia also pointed out that the institutional discrimination perpetuated in the society result in the racial insensitive mind of Wallace and the invisible whiteness.

Another popular respondent meme is a music video made by Jimmy Wong. Started with Japanese accented and stuttered English with a Japanese-style greeting nod, Jimmy Wong imitated the opening line of Wallace to mock her “political correctness.” In his song, he humorously and sarcastically pointed out the Asian stereotypes in Wallace’s rant, such as Asian speaking accented English, and Asian having big and loud family. Later in the song, he employed white female stereotypes to fight back. As he sung “underneath the pounds of makeup and your baby blue eyes, I know there’s a lot of pain and hurt, for such a big brain to spend all night studying Poly Sci,” the lyrics referred to the fixed impression that a white girl with blond hair and blue eyes is dumb. At last, he sung about Tsunami which was the context of the “inappropriate” Asian phone call in the library ranted by Wallace. In the song, Wong attempted to help her differentiate Tsunami from Sushi to indicate the popular stereotype of “all Asian looking the same,” which also responded to his Japanese style appeared in the beginning and the end of the song. He clarified at the end that he is Chinese American instead of Japanese. And he does not speak broken English as he pretended in the beginning to attack the image of Asian Americans as “forever foreigners” (Part, 2011).

The meme series “Asians in the Library” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/asians-in-the-library) present evidence of how Internet memes mediate Asian/Asian Americans’ identity. It is a negotiation between the dominant discourse and racial minority vernacular. The original video creator Alexandra Wallace attempted to employ the “white rules” to make sense of Asian/Asian Americans are not “acting right.” She utilized the cultural difference to judge and negate their language, culture, and family values. Because they do not act like “an ordinary white”
like she is, in the video they are excluded as outsiders along with the line of race. In the contrary, the respondent videos created majorly by Asian/Asian Americans, aimed to point out the ignorance, privilege and fear of Wallace and the dominant discourses that she represents over Asian/Asian American group.

This meme phenomenon is identified with the posting by a UCLA student from the dominant social position. There are many other Internet memes collected that have been created anonymously. Even though some original posters can be traced on Reddit or Tumblr by their user name, it is hard to define their racial or cultural background. However, the Internet meme emphasizes its participatory culture, and the cultural meanings it attempts to maintain and transform through its circulation. Therefore, the initial creator is less important than the encoded meanings in each piece. The study will focus more on the cultural meanings contained in memes and how do social existed ideologies influence the construction and transformation of them.

**Asian/Asian American identity represented in dominant discourses.** In the following part, to further explore how Asian/Asian Americans’ identities are constructed through Internet memes in dominant discourses and shaped by invisible whiteness, collected memes will be described separately according to their distinct themes address in every one of them.

**Being a model minority.** Asian/Asian Americans have been depicted as “model minority” because they are being “successful,” “hardworking,” “subservient,” and “passive” (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012, p. 89). This stereotype has been prevalent in the U.S. society, suggesting that Asian/Asian Americans are more successful and expected to do better than other racial minority groups in academic study, economics, and social position (Kawai, 2005).
The “High Expectation Asian Father” meme series (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/high-expectations-asian-father) is one of the most popular memes depicting Asian/Asian Americans as model of academic achievement with strict Asian parents. After their launch online in 2010, the memes received high viewing rate and commentary. The memes can be found on the website Know Your Meme with the title of “High expectations Asian Dad” and on Tumblr with the hashtag “#Asian father”. It is an advice animal image macro series, based on the stereotype about first-generation Asian parents being demanding, controlling, strict, and academic perfection-seeking (Know Your Meme, 2011).

The basic format of this meme series, is a green background centered with a photograph of a middle-aged Asian man with grey hair and a pair of glasses. The photo employed in this meme series is Jeon Mu-Song, a South Korean actor, who is well-known by his role playing as father in many Korean films and television shows (Know Your Meme, 2010). In the photo, the man looks very serious with frowning eyebrows and closely pressed lips, originally together with all capitalized white captions on the top and bottom of the image, as if the man vividly expresses his serious concern and ardent expectations on his children’s school and grades.

The humor lies in this meme series is the fixed impressions of Asian parents, pushing their children to work harder or they will suffer deep disappointment. The original caption on the image says “I DUN CARE YOU GOT A+ IN ENGLISH, MATH, HISTORY; YOU GOT A- IN ART. / YOU FAIL LIFE.” In this sentence, “dun” means “don’t”. To improve the Asian father’s image and make it closer to audience’s expectations towards Asian/Asian Americans, the creator utilized “dun” to refer to the heavy accent the first-generation Asian father has in his oral English delivery.
With the launch of the “High Expectation Asian Father”, it has inspired numerous Internet users to generate more similar memes with their own perspectives of Asian parents. Some of them remixed it with other Asian/Asian American memes such as “Impossibru,” to emphasize an emotional Asian father when he sees his kids’ bad grades and tries to deny the reality. With the top line “HORY SHET” and the bottom line “IMBOSSIBR,” the user presented an Asian father with heavy accented English, by implying the pronouncing difficulties of “l” and “r” that some first-generation Asian people have.

Other notable derivatives are “A-SIANS / NOT B-SIANS,” and “JEREM LIN WHY YOU PLAY IN NBA? / I SEND YOU HARVARD TO BE DOCTOR.” In the latter example, the captions referred to the stereotype of Asian parents caring more about STEM education (science, technology, engineer, and math) instead of arts and literature (Jang & Min, 2015). The similar meme is “YOU WANT GO MUSIC SCHOOL / WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE? RADY GAGA?” More examples are, such as “Program in C++ / No / Program in A++”, “You’re 5 years old? / when I was your age, I was 6,” and “YOU FAILED DRIVERS TEST!? / THAT’S OKAY ME TOO.” The last example implied the stereotype of Asians are bad drivers.

Inspired by “High Expectation Asian Father,” “Tiger Mom” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/tiger-mom) was launched in 2011. It is an Advice Dog-style image macro series featuring an Asian woman who is seemingly stand-offish, strict, and commanding, with her hand on her hips. Like many Asian women depicted in Hollywood movies, the portrait presents an image of a tiger mom and dragon lady. Captions poke fun at the popular stereotype of Asian American mothers as uber-strict and overzealous parents (Know Your Meme, 2011). Similar to the meme series “High Expectations Asian Father”, the “Tiger Mom” jokes usually present the first-person perspective of an elite Asian mom. Notable
examples are “FREEDOM / IS JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR NOT LISTENING TO YOUR MAMA,” and “INDEPENDENCE? / NOT ON MY WATCH.” In these two memes selected from Tumblr, the tiger mom always wears a hat patterned with American flag which is the sign representing independence and freedom, to highlight the laughing point which is even in American territory, kids still have to obey their Asian mom.

Here, worthy to be mentioned is that the original identity of the “Tiger Mom,” has been linked with Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor. One of her published books Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother (2011) in which she described how she pressured and controlled her two girls to reach academic excellence. This book has received wide concerns from both Asian/Asian Americans and non-Asian/Asian Americans. They question her seemingly exaggerating parenting styles and her girls’ psychological health. Some concerned about it being a misleading interpretation of Asian parenting, and alienating Asian/Asian American parents from other racial groups (Zhang, 2014).

Addressing the similar issue of Asian/Asian Americans being good students, there is another new Internet meme thread on Reddit titled with “Successful Asian Problems” (http://i.imgur.com/T5UhvGh.png). Like “High Expectation Asian Father” and “Tiger Mom”, the genre of this meme is image macro. On the picture, an Asian look girl is studying in a library. She is reading a book with her head resting in her right hand. However, she looks absent-minded instead of focusing on reading. The captions on this meme say, “MY PROFESSOR DIDN’T CURVE THE TEST. / THE 100 I GOT LOWERED MY AVERAGE.” This meme describe this Asian look girl who is not satisfied with her full marks on the examination, because her professor typically offers extra credit. So, connecting with the title, the problem that this academically
successful Asian look girl confronts is that she is worried that this 100% would drag down her average grade.

The meme series “Level: Asian” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/level-asian), constitute majorly of photoshopped images and YouTube videos. This series mainly present Asians/Asian Americans’ special expertise and talents. This meme was originated in 2011, with the launch of a Tumblr blog named “Difficulty Level: Asian” (http://difficultylevelasian.tumblr.com/). Meanwhile, there is a YouTube video attached with the blog also posted on Tumblr. In the video, an Asian girl is getting an amazing score in a basketball arcade game (Know Your Meme, 2014). Soon after the original video getting posted, meme webistes such as Reddit, 9gag and Tumblr received numerous replies and newly recreated memes, including forms of Gif, photoshopped images, and YouTube videos.

One of the notable examples of this meme series is a facebombed image of an Asian guy titled with “Difficulty level: Asian.” This is a photoshopped picture, employing one Asian man’s facial portrait on several different people including women in one picture. The captions of this image say, “CHALLENGE / ANSWER THE FIVE QUESTIONS BELOW: / 1. Which student is sleepy? 2. Find the twin brothers. 3. Find the twin sisters. 4. How many girls are in the photo? 5. Which one is the teacher?” With the first question, the creator is making fun of Asian’s especially East Asians having slanted eyes. The slanted eyes are too small to determine if they are open or not. The second, third, and fourth questions are reinforcing the Asian stereotype of all Asians looking the same, especially with the creator using photoshop in the picture. Everyone in the picture looks the same because their faces are all copied from the same man’s picture. The last question asking about which one is the teacher. Asian/Asian Americans have stereotypically looked younger than other racial groups of people the same age, and it takes Asian/Asian
Americans longer to show aging on their face. Therefore, according to the creator’s purpose and the stereotype, the laughing point here is that from the picture it should be hard for audience to tell which one looks older and commanding.

In this series, there are many notable memes that have changed their title by adding words to indicate the theme. For instance, the meme of an Asian kid studying in the back of a motorcycle is titled with “Study Level: Asian.” In the image, the kid sits on the back of the motorbike by facing in the opposite way, and writing his homework on the rear box. He looks very much focused with his frowning eyebrows.

Another popular derivative in this meme series is called “Sleeping at Work Level: Asian.” which depicts an Asian FexdEx employee is taking a nap behind a stack of cardboard boxes. In the left picture, there is normally piled up boxes. However, the right picture shows the back of the boxes, which have gotten torn up and re-glued together for more room to fix a person in there to take a nap.

Other gif and video forms of derivatives of this memes series are mostly posted on Tumblr. Such as “Tiger Mom Difficulty Level: Asian,” “Gangnam Style Prank Difficulty Level: Asian,” and “Photoshop Level: Asian,” etc. This meme series, with the name of “(skill) Level: Asian” further exaggerate the stereotypes by implying that Asian/Asian Americans are good at everything or they raise bar of something so high that is difficult for other groups of people to do.

“Rebellious Asian” Internet meme series was first launched in 2012 on Reddit, under a thread titled “Rebellious Asian” (http://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/p316w/rebellious_asian/). This meme series is an advice animal image macro. A portrait of a smiling Asian young man who wears a pair of
glasses is centered in the image. The captions combine a rebellious premise with a counter-statement that demonstrates him still being a well-behaved student (Know Your Meme. 2012). The original meme captions are “SKIP CLASS / TO STUDY IN LIBRARY FOR ANOTHER CLASS.” From the top line, it sounds like an Asian student is breaking the stereotype that he is supposed to stay in every class for good grades, but actually he skips it. However, the bottom line reverses the stereotype back that he skips the class for studying another class in the library.

There is another popular meme of this series. The top line reads: “HAS ONE NIGHT STAND,” while the bottom caption says: “BUT WAY TOO MANY BOOKS TO FIT ON IT.” This meme has employed the pun meaning of “one night stand” to create the stereotypical joke. With a young and smiling guy in the image, with the standard understanding of the top line is easy to lead its readers thinking of the guy having a single sexual encounter. However, with the bottom line, the readers just realize that they misinterpret the “one night stand” which in this context actually refers a table stand to put books. This meme reinforces the stereotype of Asian/Asian Americans are crazily obsessed with books and study, while it also implies a stereotype towards Asian/Asian American males that they are asexual, lack of masculinity and non-threatening.

This meme series even have been posted under the Tumblr thread of “High Expectation Asian Father”, and the Internet users call the combination “High Expectation Asian Father Rebellious Asian Son.” Under the strict and commanding Asian Father, the Asian son does not dare to be actually rebellious. Based on such Internet memes, achievement in academia seems to share a close relationship with race. If you are an Asian or Asian American student, you are supposed to get the highest grade among other racial groups of students, just because you are Asian or American with Asian descent, and you have strict Asian parents.
As the meme examples discussed above, they are created all based on the fixed expectations the society hold towards Asian/Asian groups. Even though they seemingly refer to “positive” stereotypes such as Asian/Asian Americans being model minority by achieving good grades, being smart, and working hard, and mean to be hilarious, those memes still employ the dominant discourse and maintain the dominant racial framing of people of Asian descent (Chou, & Feagin, 2008).

**Foreign accents and Standard English.** Asian accented English has been mocked in the dominant discourse all along. One of the most notorious and famous slur “Ching Chong” used to mock East Asian has been employed by dominant discourse for years. Back in 19th century, it was originated from the children’s playground taunts “Ching Chong Chinaman,” and become well known because of a Korean-American writer, Mary Paik Lee’s autobiography (Chow, 2014). The rhyme is chanted like this:

> “Ching Chong, Chinaman,

> Sitting on a wall.

> Along came a white man,

> And chopped his head off.”

Along with the years, the song has been remixed into more variations. If meme has been defined that early, the mocking songs with many versions can be counted as memes. Entering into 21st century, Asian/Asian Americans are still insulted by this slur. In 2002, NBA star Shaquille O’Neal received flak by throwing “Ching Chong” slur on Yao Ming, a Chinese NBA player. In 2011, UCLA student Alexandra Wallace received furious criticism and even death-threat because of her YouTube video, ranting about how “the hordes of Asians” do not follow
“American manners” and using cellphone loudly in the school library. In the video, she also mimicked the Asian guy who used the phone as saying, “Ohhh, Ching Chong ling long ting tong…” Not only sports celebrity, and ordinary college student utilize this slur to mock Asian/Asian Americans, but also does by mainstream media. In 2014, the slur and other derogative words have been tweeted online by Colbert Report. Even though it has been proved the tweet was not from comedian Stephen Colbert himself, he received heated criticism.

The dominant discourse has been making fun of Asian accent. By employing those slurs, they continuously reinforce the stereotypical image of Asian’s inability of speaking English. Moreover, such mocking is not just some harmless joke, they usually link to racial discrimination and the concept of “perpetuate foreigner” (Poon, 2011). That is to say, you cannot speak English, then you are “Others.”

Internet meme “Impossibru” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/impossibru) has been very popular and earned a high view rank. Image macro and photoshopped image are its common formats. The meme is based on a still photoshoot of an Asian man (a Japanese comedian, well known in the prank show Panic Face King), showing a bizarre expression with buck-tooth, slant-eyes and rising eyebrows. The original caption is “IMPOSSIBRU” which is perceived as the English equivalent word “impossible.” According to the Japanese pronouncing rules, the word “impossible” should be read as imoshiburu. This meme is initially used as a reaction picture, replying to someone or something that someone is surprised, in disbelief, in fear or in rage (Know Your Meme, 2011). As it gained more viewership, the meme has been photoshopped and mashed-up with other people, animals, and cartoon character faces, popular ones such as the Cat Impossibru, and Kim Possibru.
Another Internet meme series that also addresses bad English written and spoken by Asians is “Engrish” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/engrish). Based on the title “Engrish”, which is interpreted as the English equivalent of the word “English,” it refers to the ambiguous distinctions between L and R sounds in some Asian languages, as the “impossible” and “impossibru” discussed above. “Engrish” has been used to describe the incorrect English translated from Asian languages. This meme series has commonly utilized the formats of photoshop, photoshoot, screenshot, and mash-up.

One of the notable examples of this Internet meme such as All Your Base are Belong to Us. It is an incorrect English translation of “all of your bases are under our control” from a video game. Many “Engrish” memes are based on the photos shot in everyday life. Those examples of wrong English translations can be found in many places especially major cities in Asian countries. They occur on the public signs, menus, road signs, or warning boards, usually to assist foreign tourists. Some popular examples are, “Racist Park” on a direction board that is supposed to be “Ethnic Cultural Park” and “Deformed Man Toilet” which is supposed to be “Handicapped Restroom.”

Those jokes on Asians about “speaking English with heavy accent,” and “don’t speak English in the correct way” not only occur on the Internet, they still exist in everyday discourse and Asian/Asian Americans still have to encounter them. They are not innocent jokes without social importance, but they are the product of social realities while they continuously convey and maintain the racial discrimination in a more subtle way.

In this section, more memes depicting Asian/Asian Americans have been analyzed. According to their topic, they have been divided into two themes. One majorly discusses memes that describe Asian/Asian American as model minority; while the other one reviews memes
mocking at accented and incorrect English that some Asian people adopted. These themes dominate memes that describe Asian/Asian Americans. Meanwhile, they also imply social actors who are the insiders and outsiders.

In each meme series, there are ground rules provided for participants joining in the conversation (Milner, 2012). They have already set up the perspectives that should be demonstrated and reproduced. Which social roles are favored than the other, and what social representations of those roles are favored to be presented have already been decided for memes participants.

Based on the analysis of those memes, the ideologies of most meme images of Asian/Asian Americans are still limited within the fixed expectations of dominant perspectives toward this minority group, such as Asian/Asian Americans being model minority by achieving academic success, or committing themselves fully into study; or the stereotype of being “yellow peril” by not following “American manners”, and speaking broken and heavily accented English. The identity presented by the memes are constructed by some highly recognizable elements used commonly to depict stereotypical Asian/Asian Americans, such as slanted eyes, skin color, accented pronunciation, and books, etc.

The image of Asian/Asian Americans as a model minority and simultaneously considered as a yellow peril is viewed as highly pervasive and influential in the United States (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). The concept of the model minority has been problematized (Kawai, 2005). This stereotype is manifested as a positive comment towards Asian/Asian Americans, to complement their hardworking spirit, overall successful achievements, as well as their passive attitude in politics. This positive image has been embedded in the intercultural communication in today’s American society. It serves for the colorblind ideology that has been used to reject the existence
of the racial discrimination and institutional racism directed to racial minority groups in American society (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). Relying on the stereotype of Asian/Asian American “success,” the dominant discourse attempts to prove that U.S. society is providing equal and fair opportunities to racial minority groups (Kawai, 2005). Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin (2008) argued that even though the society has been picturing Asian/Asian Americans as model minority and goal achievers, Asian/Asian Americans’ achievements have been depreciated by the labels such as “nerds,” “foreigners,” and “social misfits” (p. 9) forced on them by the mainstream society.

Moreover, not only the model minority image covers the racial discrimination that is still prevalent in the U.S., but it also increase the difficulties for Asian/Asian Americans moving up the social ladder (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). To survive in the society, they have to act out the image of model minority to match the social expectation directed at them.

Researchers also claimed that model minority has been co-constructed with another racial stereotype toward Asian/Asian Americans yellow peril (Eguchi & Starosta, 2012). It exists in America for a longer time than model minority stereotype. It is an image that white westerners have pictured that Asian/Asian Americans are the threat to them concerning their territory, culture, economy, and politics (Ono & Pham, 2009). As in the UCLA student Alexandra Wallace’s video implied, Asian/Asian Americans’ non-white cultural manners are wrong and dangerous which disrupts the normal social order.

To the paradox of the two stereotypes, Kawai (2005) rationalize it as following:
People of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are described to outdo White Americans (p. 115).

Furthermore, the racial stereotypes simplify the distinction between Asian and Asian Americans. In this study, even though Asian/Asian Americans are always demonstrated together, it is just because they are inseparably when it comes to the racial stereotypes. Those fixed impressions are problematic and simple means to summarize a group of people. They ignore the differences among diverse groups due to their various locations, cultures, and histories, but plainly categorize them together because they all look the same. Asian Americans have been experiencing double marginalization. They are marginalized by the mainstream American society because they are not American enough, while being singled out by their Asian heritage due to they are American manner adopters (Su Yeong, Gonzalez, Stroh, & Wong, 2006). Especially for second generation Asian Americans, they have been struggling with their identities between American mainstream culture and cultural heritage from the first-generation immigrants. Such stereotypes that they encounter every day, have always marked them as cultural “others” (Chou & Feagin, 2008)

In short, even though most of the interactions occurring in the Internet world are anonymous and pseudonymous, when Internet users co-opt old stereotypes to deliver their joke or rationale. Racial elements such as skin color, appearance, habits, talents, and speaking styles are relied on to construct identities in racialized memes. They represent the perspectives of how dominant discourse depict racial marginalized groups. Nevertheless, there is still room for negotiating and debating considering these issues. In the digitalized public sphere, memes are one of the formats that complicate the process of building up cultural identities. By creating,
remixing, and circulating the Internet memes, online users reply and comment on other users, or express individual opinions. Memes are an appealing way to mediate the discussion, and also an efficient way to deliver oppressed voices to the public.

The next section will investigate how Internet memes have been used as activist discourse to challenge the old stereotypes and racial discrimination. By reviewing each meme campaign, the section will also introduce a few prevalent memes which have been adopted in different national context or have addressed distinct social issues. At last, the section will also explore the potential and efficiency of Internet memes resisting dominant ideologies and encouraging social justice.

**Negotiation and Intervention of the Racial Identity**

Previous sections illustrated how race is represented by Internet memes, and how Internet memes are constructed under the heavy influence of racial stereotypes. The following section will focus on memes as activist discourse, investigating its political participation. Therefore, by analyzing the selected Internet memes, this section will look for answers for the following questions:

**RQ 3: How are memes used as activist discourse?**

a. *How are memes constructed to mediate conflict and tension?*

b. *Do counter-stereotypical memes effectively resist dominant ideologies and encourage social justice?*

The last two sections focused on the constructions and racial representations of Internet memes. By analyzing collected memes, evidence show that the Internet memes are reflections of
social realities to some degree. Perspectives towards Asian/Asian Americans presented in the memes still are maintained in a stereotypical way. Even though most of those memes attempt to make joke and “celebrate” the “positive” stereotypes directed at them, they serve to racially distinguish the minority group from the mainstream U.S. society and also try to cover the social inequality by celebrating Asian/Asian Americans’ achievements.

To attack the racial discrimination and resist the oppression, Internet memes become a medium for Internet users participating to convey their messages. Users and some Asian/Asian American online opinion leaders have begun to employ this strategy to mediate and negotiate their identity. Therefore, in this section, more Internet memes collected will be thoroughly examined, to explore their political dimensions and investigate their potential of pushing racial equality and social justice forward.

**Try outs for contesting and mediating the dominant discourses.** Among the Internet memes collected in this study, there is a kind of memes that different from memes examined above. They still address racial issues and stereotypes. However, they attempt to break the stereotypes with the usage of reverse caption. Therefore, in this part, such memes is going to be closely examined and argued concerning its efficiency in subverting the dominant discourse.

“Ordinary Muslim Man” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ordinary-muslim-man) is an advice animal image macro meme series. A smiling Muslim man with thick beard wearing a *taqiyah* is centered in the image. The captions with this meme combine a stereotypical comment perceived as anti-America or racist jokes, with a reverse phrase that demonstrates the comment actually innocuous (Know Your Meme, 2012). The original meme was submitted in 2011 on Reddit, with the caption “I AM DA BOMB / AT MAKING FALAFELS.” It was titled, “Ordinary Muslim Man.” Reading the top line and looking at the Muslim man’s portrait, it is
easy to make people associate with a suicide bomber. However, the bottom line subverts the stereotype into a non-threatening daily activity.

Many other notable examples of this memes series are “UNMARRIED WOMEN SHOULD BE COVERED / BY HEALTH INSURANCE, FUCK REPUBLICANS”, “I CAN’T WAIT TO GET ON THIS AIRPLANE AND / GO ON VACATION,” “AMERICA WILL BURN / THROUGH THEIR OIL RESERVES IF THEY DON’T MIGRATE TO A RENEWABLE SOURCE,” and “MY WIFE IS MY PROPERTY / MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST AT MY REAL ESTATE OFFICE.” The top lines of those memes rely on the stereotypical jokes commonly directed at Muslims by depicting them as extremist religious believers, sexists, and terrorists.

This meme series is always discussed together with another similar meme series “Successful Black Man” (http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/successful-black-man). It is also an image macro meme series which portraits a photo of a young African American man wearing a business suit, accompanied with captions of two lines. The top line provides a negative stereotype usually directed at African Americans while the bottom line reverses the condition and presents a hardworking and responsible man. For instance, one of the popular example is “LET’S ALL GET HIGH / GRADES ON OUR FINALS.” The top line implies the stereotypical association between African Americans and drugs. And the bottom line reverses it by indicating to get high grades in examinations. Other examples are such as “I HATE WHITES / WHEN THEY GET MIXED IN WITH DARKS IN THE LAUNDRY,” and “I’M GOING TO GET FRIED CHICKEN AND GRAPE SODA / OFF THE SCHOOL LUNCH MENU AND REPLACE IT WITH HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVES.”
“Ordinary Muslim Man” and “Successful Black Man” have been described as sites for identity negotiation (Milner, 2012). Milner argues that meme participants bring various voices and interpretations about race, gender, and class into memes. Each category has its own major norm. Internet memes aggregate distinct thoughts that lead to negotiations over every one of those categories. Therefore, there are discussions about the controversial implications of such memes (Milner, 2012, Shifman, 2014). On the one hand, the bait-and-switch rule lied in those memes seemingly warn Internet users about stereotypes. The turn of the second line punishes viewers for their stereotypical thoughts invoked by the first line. To recreate a similar meme, the participants have to cut the association between stereotypes and the labelled groups, and challenge the existed assumptions. Therefore, to some degree, such Internet memes contribute to attack the dominant discourse that has been oppressing racial minority groups.

Nevertheless, Milner (2012) and Shifman (2014) argued that even though such memes negotiate racial identity in a positive way they unavoidably still reinforce the stereotypes due to the invisible whiteness buried underneath the logic of Muslim man being “ordinary” and black man being “successful.” In those memes, if a black man is successful or a Muslim man is ordinary, then they have to be granted “successful” or “ordinary” in front of their name to distance them away from “normal” black or Muslim depicted by those first stereotypical lines.

On the contrary, looking through the majority of Internet memes appeared on the Internet, which describe all kinds of people, activities, and humors, white people as protagonists occurred in the memes seemingly are capable of representing any roles, no matter being trolled, being hilarious, or being neutral. Examples include memes such as Scumbag Steve, First World Problems, Bad Luck Brian, and the Most Interesting Man in the World. However if the subject of is people of color, then the focus of the meme is most likely centered on their racial identity.
Moreover, the circulation or humor of the meme will highly rely on racial stereotypes towards those people, such as the Internet memes discussed so far.

Whiteness is invisible (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). It has been taken as social norms or standards to measure and differentiate the “Others.” It remains in the process of identity constructions. Because it is normalized through dominant discourses, hardly can it be recognized as a position of dominant and oppressing, such as in the meme series “Ordinary Muslim Man” and “Rebellious Asian.” The concept of whiteness has been ignoring the differences of culture and ethnic heritage. As to the meme “Asians in the Library,” the whiteness is the equivalent of “being American”, and it sets the rules for “American manners.” The whiteness has been the background rules of Internet memes presented by the dominant discourses.

Activist meme campaigns by Asian/Asian Americans. Last part has examined reverse memes represented by the meme series “Ordinary Muslim Man.” Based on previous research, its ambiguous social implication has been discussed. Even though it has the potential to remind people of being aware of racial stereotypes, due to white positionality, people of color continue to be categorized by various labels. When the labels are broken, those people are still granted titles as abnormally “normal” or “successful”.

There are meme discourses initiated by Asian/Asian Americans themselves. They attempt to borrow this medium to convey their voices and challenge the fix impressions directed at them. Therefore, in the following part, Internet memes created by Asian/Asian Americans will be investigated, to examine the strategies employed in the process of meme construction and their identity negotiations.
Getting angry and calling out. Asian Americans have been considered a silent group which achieve their success quietly without protesting anything. The oppression and racial discrimination towards this group thus has been covered underneath the stereotype of “Asian/Asian American being model minority.” However, it does not mean that they have been treated equally in the society. Suey Park is one of the most active Asian American online socialists. The meme campaigns that she has initiated earned a high amount of attention and participations. Therefore, in this part, discourse of her meme campaigns will be analyzed. Those campaigns show Asian Americans’ resistance against dominant stereotypes. It also calls out long standing social ignorance to Asian Americans resulting from black and white binary society.

The hashtag campaign “#NotYourAsianSidekick” erupted over Twitter in 2013. It was initiated by Asian American freelance writer, Suey Park. Overnight, the hashtag quickly became a trending topic on Twitter. Numerous people from the U.S. and around the world joined in this conversation by posting their 140 characters on Twitter. This hashtag meme campaign invited online users’ discussion over Asian American Feminism and stereotypes.

During the first day of the campaign, she tweeted several posts to provoke users’ participation and responses. The following are selections from her tweets on that day:

Be warned. Tomorrow morning we will be have a convo about Asian American Feminism with hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick. Spread the word!!!!!!!

—Suey Park (@suey_park) December 15, 2013

Nobody will GIVE us a space. We need to MAKE a space to use our voices, build community, and be heard. #NotYourAsianSidekick

— Suey Park (@suey_park) December 15, 2013
#NotYourAsianSidekick is a *convo* to discuss the problems within the AAPI community and issues with white feminism.

— Suey Park (@suey_park) December 15, 2013

#NotYourAsianSidekick is MAKING room for those of us silenced by the AAPI mainstream. Queer/disabled/mixed/South Asian/sex-positive. All.

— Suey Park (@suey_park) December 15, 2013

In her tweets, she kept using the word “convo” (conversation) and “space”. She claimed that this hashtag is a conversation, and it will create a space for Asian American women to freely talk about white feminism, and build a community to louder their voice. In her discourse, instead of appealing or asking people to do something, she took this hashtag as a “conversation” and a public discursive “space”, inviting different voices to discuss this serious social issue. As in one of her interviews, to answer the question that asked her choice of the hashtag phrase, she acknowledged that choosing the phrase was out of concern that a lot of women who don't want to claim themselves as a feminist (Capachi, 2013). This phrase did not directly refer to feminism to let those women feel pressured and then silent their voice. However, it leads them to think about Asian American women and participate into the conversation without labeling themselves as feminist.

Asian American Feminism is the main topic in this campaign. Suey Park intended to unfold two sides of oppressions that Asian Americans currently face. First, Asian American women have been typically seen as silent and obedient. And such impressions have been prevalent in U.S. mainstream media (Ono & Pham, 2009). On the other hand, beside the pressure from U.S. mainstream, Park also pointed out that the culture of her Korean family has been
“whitewashed”. The white ideals of what women should look like have deeply affected female members of her community (Capachi, 2013). Females see these ideals as their beauty standards and expectations. They do surgeries, lighten their hairs, and wear colored contacts, etc., to look like a white girl. Therefore, Park attempted to employ this hashtag to alert Asian women who have been colonized by western ideals. Second, she believed that Asian Americans have been in a lower position in feminism, and been discriminated by whiteness concept in feminism (Kim, 2013). Based on these two reasons, she expected to create a supportive environment for women at home and also in public sphere. Moreover, a new space can be built for Asian American Feminism without being a sidekick of white feminism, and not leave any group behind. As in one of the responding tweet said,

Brown and black skinned Asian women exist and have voices that matter. Despite the fact that media erases us #NotYourAsianSidekick.

—N’jaila Rhee (@BlasianBytch) December 15, 2013

This hashtag space also includes the voices that have been silenced even by AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander), those people who situate themselves intersectionally, for instance, Asian Americans who also identify as queer/disabled/mixed/South Asian/sex-positive.

Furthermore, in Park’s tweets, she emphasized “we.” “We” make a voice; and “we” build a community through this hashtag space. Through the online meme hashtag, a racial identity and community begin to form. Each retweet represents individual’s voice by which individuals reaffirm their racial identity and look for communities relying on shared understanding of the surrounding (Daniels, 2013). Their collective interests and discourse maybe capable of attacking the oppressions put by the mainstream. For instance, the responses from Twitter users:
High grades earned by Asian-Am students seen as “normal” rather than result of hard work #NotYourAsianSidekick


“Do you know Korean?” “No, I speak Japanese.” “They’re pretty similar, right?” THEY ARE LITERALLY DIFFERENT LANGUAGES. #NotYourAsianSidekick

—CONNTIE (@croisants) December 15, 2013

They identified themselves as Asian Americans while expressing their anger toward stereotypes forced on them. They expressed their political opinions through the hashtag space, and seek out their shared political appeals. In addition, in Park’s initiated tweets, she avoided directly calling out white people, instead she expressed disagreement with the concept of white feminism. In this way, the goal of this campaign would not fall into self-isolating situation. To the contrary, people of different financial status, social class, and cultural standing are welcomed to respond, interact and develop together (Tully & Ekdale, 2014).

In March 2014, to response the insensitively racial comments made by Stephen Colbert, Suey Park initiated another Twitter hashtag campaign “#CancelColbert.” It aims to rally up support to cancel the satirical news show The Colbert Report. On the March 26th, the host of The Colbert Report, Stephen Colbert employed an inappropriate joke to mock Daniel Snyder, the owner of the NFL team Washington Red Skins. The owner initiated a foundation to support Native Americans, however, he still maintained his team’s offensive name toward this racial group. Thus, Stephen Colbert responded to him by saying:

I am willing to show Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever.
He attempted to be satirical by utilizing Asian community and the dominant stereotype toward this racial group. However, the failed punch quickly sparked the outrage. This quote later was tweeted online but got removed soon. After the tweet appeared on the Twitter, Suey Park immediately fought back with the hashtag “#CancelColbert”:

The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it.

#CancelColbert because white liberals are just as complicit in making Asian Americans into punchlines and we aren’t amused.

Her tweet invoked heated responses right away on Twitter. It also reached to Reddit and Tumblr. Internet users started thread for this issue on Reddit, while reblogging the hashtag on their Tumblr mixed with Stephen Colbert’s picture and/or their own comments.

Even though the two campaigns have not received full support nationwide, with people criticizing Suey Park who took advantages of the campaigns to do self-promotion and race hustling (Kang, 2014), and with questioning the efficiency of hashtag meme campaigns, online memetic campaign still has its potential in social movements. According to Shifman (2014), such a campaign has three advantages concerning political participation. First, memes function as political persuasion, due to their powerful capability of circulation and influence. Second, the Internet meme appeals participation. It is a medium, a space on which grassroots can convey their opinions. They are empowered by this way. Last but not least, memes are a space that hosts the negotiation of multiple opinions and identities.

Resisting dominant/white racial frame and constructing self-identity. On Tumblr, there is an anti-stereotype campaign titled with “So Where Are You REALLY From?” The campaign
initiated in 2014 by Asian American Student Collective (AASC) at Wesleyan University. The AASC produced a series of pictures with an Asian/Asian American student standing in the center, holding a board with their answer based on the question, “So where are you really from?” They attempted to invoke meaningful discussions. Meanwhile, relying on the message conveyed from students’ answers and emotions showed up on the photo, AASC wanted to attack the stereotypes of “perpetual foreigner” that have been continuously and negatively affecting Asian/Asian Americans in the United States.

In those answers, some directly responded to the question by showing from where the student came. However, some responses indirectly answered the question while clearly showed the students’ anger and annoyance. The followings are some typical examples,

So where are you REALLY from?

I’m from Earth, just like you :) 

and

So where are you REALLY from?

Where do you THINK I am from???

There was student who even responded by asking:

WHY ARE YOU SO OBSESSED WITH ME?

Other meme campaigns with similar forms but involve various ethnic students are “I, Too, Am Harvard” (aiming to attack the racist comments on campus), its derivative “I, Too, Am Oxford” and also “We’re a Culture, Not a Costume” (presented by poster-ad like pictures, attempting to raise people’s consciousness about racially insensitive in Halloween costumes).
In the negotiation and intervention of the racial identity construction, Internet memes have played a significant role. Relying on the platform provided by various social networks, the meme rallies up polyvocal participation, creates cultural meanings, and diffuses them to a larger context (Milner, 2012). The title of each meme series is catchy and outstanding that is able to communicate across culture, race, class, and gender, to invoke numerous participants (Shifman, 2014). Moreover, even though the memes majorly depict Asian/Asian American group as a whole, each meme in every campaign is personalized and unique (Shifman, 2014). Individuals utilize Internet memes as a public space to share their own stories, to inspire each other, and negotiate their identity. For instance, the meme campaigns “So where are you REALLY from,” and “I, Too, Am, Harvard,” the board held by every student is their own narrative. By presenting themselves on the picture, and sharing their own stories on the Internet, they are drawing more Internet users’ attention and participation. Even though the students are presented in the same format of memes, they still keep their own individuality due to their unique background.

In addition, Internet memes also provide a sophisticated platform to increase people’s engagement with self-political expression. For instance, the hashtag meme campaign “#NotYourAsianSidekick,” was created for encouraging more participants into the conversation. In the meanwhile, due to anonymity of the Internet, and the implicit hashtag, it was not necessary for them to label themselves or being labeled with any political positions. Internet memes provide a more free space for social movements.

**Internet memes as subversive discourse.** Based on previous discussions on subversive Internet meme campaigns, the following part will focus on memes as a public space for political participation. Popular memes outside the data pool that address political issues will be discussed.
Themes of those memes are various, crossing race, culture, and nation. The purpose of this part is to show how memes link politics and the public. Based on the analysis, more valuable strategies can be uncovered to inspire the construction of Internet memes for the purpose of political participation and social movements.

**Being dynamic and including multiple voices.** A successful and long-lasting meme will has to maintain transformative and draw the public’s attention. The development of meme protest “I am not Trayvon Martin” is a typical example to illustrate this point.

“I am not Trayvon Martin” was originated from a highly publicized murder trial, Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012. In this case, the African American teenager Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by his neighborhood watch volunteer in the evening. The killer wasn't charged initially. The official explanation was that there was no evidence to challenge the killer’s claim of self-defense. Based on the Stand Your Ground Law, George Zimmerman, the killer thus avoided from the arrest and charge. However, following the court result is online and offline rallies and protest. Eventually, Zimmerman was charged with and later acquitted of murder.

In this meme protest, one of the most notable thing is the development of its meme hashtags. Originally, the hashtag was #WeAreTrayvonMartin. It started by a picture tweeted by a NBA player LeBron James. In the photo, Miami Heat basketball team wore sweatshirts with their hoods up. On the same day, a topic blog named with” I Could Be Trayvon” was created. It allowed Internet users to upload their own pictures of wearing hoodies with stories about the time when they feel being racially discriminated. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in this campaign. They shared their own stories through textual form with image of them wearing hoodies, and holding skittles and a can of coke, as well as through YouTube video.
Four months later, a college instructor from Colorado named Bob Seay, sent a Facebook post with the title, “I am not Trayvon Martin.” In his post, he frankly acknowledged that he does not experience what Trayvon Martin does every single day because he is a middle-aged white man. However, he also stated that people do not have to be Trayvon Martin to know what discrimination feels like, and the discrimination and social injustice are wrong. He said,

Here’s my point: You don’t have to be Trayvon Martin to know this is wrong. You don’t have to be black, or young, or a “troubled student” or a pot smoker to know this was murder. And you don’t have to be the parent of Trayvon Martin to know this was a gross miscarriage of justice.

Let me be more blunt: This type of injustice will continue until enough guys like me – guys who are not Trayvon Martin – have had enough of it and finally say “No more.”

In a short time, his post was viewed, liked and shared hundreds of thousand times. On the next day, another topic blog named with “We Are Not Trayvon Martin” was launched on Tumblr. It rallied up furious discussion of their experience being not Trayvon Martin but being tired of white privilege. Different from the first Tumblr discussion, this time, participants posted their daily life picture and wrote down their story starting with claiming, “I am not Trayvon Martin.”

Along with the development of this meme campaign, the most notable thing was its continuously expanding inclusiveness. In the first “We are Trayvon Martin” meme campaign, the major participants were African Americans while white people were really seen. Their participation has been limited by the slogan “We are Trayvon Martin.” Nevertheless, with the
manifesto of a white, middle-aged, over-weight teacher was heard, the campaign did not only belong to the people who shared the similar experience with Trayvon Martin anymore, it also reached to people who have received discrimination in any form at anywhere. The campaign gained rather high view rate and replies due to the reason that it also included every marginalized people and people who think whiteness and white privilege are wrong. “I am not Trayvon Martin” or “We are not Trayvon Martin” eliminated the limitation of race, ethnicity, age, class, and occupation. The campaign has welcomed everyone who cares about social justice to participate and join in the dialogue. Moreover, the campaign also implied the fact that the anti-racist movements are not just the battles between white and black, even though in this case, the murder victim was not a white American. Social justice should be a struggle for everyone nationally and globally.

**Being globalized.** Memes in this study have been studied in the local context and they are created within the local power structures. However, Internet memes can be hardly confined by geography. The realization of meme globalization relies on technology, more importantly, depending on global Internet users’ connection and practices (Shifman, 2014).

For instance, the 2010 “Arab Spring,” which refers to the massive street protests. Protester gathered in Tunisia, Egypt and across countries in Middle East to outcry the corrupt dictatorship. This campaign led the result of removal of several dictators, controlling countries such as Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt in a long time. The idea of street massive protests soon became memetic. Millions of people flooded the streets to protest government mistreatments, social injustices, and corrupted politics in several cities scattered in the world, such as New York, Madrid, Moscow and Hong Kong. Popular memes have been formed in the process, such as “Occupy Wall Street,” and “Occupy Central.”
In conclusion, in this section, three facets of Internet memes have been discussed by analyzing collected Internet memes: (1) construction of a meme and its literacy; (2) as the battlefield of dominant discourses and vernacular, Internet memes complicating racial identity; (3) as subversive political discourse, Internet memes negotiate and intervene stereotypical representations of identities. Internet memes appear trivial and innocent, however, they reflect social identities and power structures. Social norms are reflected and constructed in the genre, cultural elements, circulating format that constitute of memes. They are utilized by dominant discourse to reinforce the fixed expectations toward racial marginalized group of people. However, Internet memes are also public space in which people participate and express their opinions. Racial minorities use them as weapon to challenge dominant discourses permeated with whiteness and white privileges. With the development of political subversive memes, Internet memes become more complex yet powerful.
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

The final chapter will summarize the various findings described in Chapter IV. Also it will review the original research questions and previous literature on Internet memes. Moreover, this chapter will discuss the implications of the findings. Finally, limitations of this study and suggested orientations for future research on this topic will be explored and discussed.

Discussion of Findings

This study has examined Internet memes as persuasive discourses for various usages, especially focusing memes that describe Asian/Asian Americans. In order to unearth how the online identities of this racial group are constructed and mediated by Internet memes, as well as explore if any potential memes influence social justice in a positive way, three specific research question were raised: (1) How do Internet memes that depict Asian/Asian Americans complicate their identity construction? (2) As intercultural discourse, how does the Internet meme frame Asian/Asian Americans’ race? (3) How are memes used as activist discourse?

Based on the discussion and description in the previous chapter, two themes emerged pertaining to Internet memes and their functions as negotiation and intervention of racial identity. First of all, the success of Internet memes relies on its participatory culture and based on participants’ meme literacy. According to Burgess (2007), the Internet meme is a kind of vernacular creativity that reflects cultural practices through visual images. By creating and remixing protagonists and texts, meme users convey their emotions, standpoint, and political opinions. Units of culture therefore spread from person to person (Dawkins, 1978). The Internet and participant activities assist the Internet meme as it travels among cultures and shapes
intercultural communication and identity construction without the boundaries of nationality or limitations of time and distance.

In this study, Internet memes directly depicting Asian/Asian Americans have been collected as data. By thoroughly examining the process of creating vernacular meanings, how the identity of this racial group is presented, negotiated, and reconstructed has been critiqued. Therefore, according to the themes of those collected memes, they have been categorized into three major groups to be further analyzed. One is memes for entertaining; another is for commenting on the racial identity of Asian/Asian American group; the third is Asian/Asian Americans using memes as subversive tools to defend their identity.

By analyzing the second group of memes, the second finding is that Internet memes are the reflections of the real society in which the racial conflicts still exist. Racialized identities and jokes are the major themes in such Internet memes. Old stereotypes still are used by meme generators to reference this racial group. The memes, such as “Asians in the Library,” “Rebellious Asian,” and “High Expectation Asian Father,” all have addressed stereotypes of Asian/Asian Americans, depicting them as “the model minority” and cultural “Others.” They mainly emphasized the cultural, language and behavioral differences between Asian/Asian Americans and mainstream Americans, as well as generalized Asian and Asian Americans being identical because they all look the same.

However, room remains for identity negotiating and debating because the online Asian/Asian American activist leaders have begun to employ Internet memes as subversive tools to fight against the oppression imposed by the dominant discourse. Therefore, the third category included subversive memes. Based on the analysis of those memes, two strategies were found that were widely utilized: getting angry and calling out the racial discrimination, and resisting
dominant/white racial frame while constructing self-identity. Depending on social networks and
the participatory culture of Internet memes, activist leaders have been able to include diverse
voices, endow them meanings and extend them to a larger context. By using the format of
Internet memes, the oppressed voices have been made visible and heard. They have the potential
to empower the group and challenge the old stereotypes. More importantly, campaigns that have
been using the format of Internet memes are also unique and individual. Meme campaigns, such
as “NotYourAsianSidekick” and “CancelColbert” initiated by Suey Park, and the Tumblr anti-
stereotype campaign “So Where Are You REALLY From,” Internet memes provide a public
space in which people share their private stories, to inspire and encourage more people to join in
the dialogue, and negotiate their identity. Nevertheless, at the same time, meme users still need
to be aware of those reverse/encounter memes that seemingly correct racial stereotypes, but the
invisible whiteness is actually embedded in such memes, such as the memes series “Ordinary
Muslim Man.”

Henry Jenkins (2009) deemed that online participation through memes brings new
possibilities to political activities. Creating and sharing memes are strategies within this new
form of online politics. In the last part of previous chapter, two memes “I’m Not Trayvon Martin”
and “Arab Spring” were examined. The strategies that they have used to make themselves
successful should inspire the Asian/Asian American activist leaders. The first campaign has
included more participants with various racial backgrounds by changing its slogan. The new one
welcomed everyone who is concerned about social justice to participate and join in the
conversation. In addition, the latter campaign reminded people that fighting against
discrimination is not limited to certain groups. The battle should be global.
Implications of Findings

This study offers a thorough analysis toward Internet memes that specifically depict Asian/Asian Americans. The findings revealed the circulating processes of the Internet meme, how race and racial identity have been framed and represented, and how online participants use the Internet meme as the subversive tool to negotiate with and challenge the dominant discourse.

The Internet meme is a new form of visual art. Its circulation and transformation of messages rely on technology, the Internet, and more importantly, Internet users’ participation. Distinct from the traditional art forms, Internet memes are highly approachable. They are open to everyone who has Internet access, and welcome participation to keep memes alive. Thus, memes aggregate multiple voices that also potentially results in conflict with those whose voices are dominant. Social realities are reflected on Internet memes, through which people construct, negotiate and fight for identities. They are the battlefield of dominant discourses and vernaculars of minorities.

Therefore, this study expects to develop a few useful influences. First, through the analyses based on different facets of Internet memes, the study expects to be useful for enhancing participants’ social literacy, including helping them to gain a better understanding on different genres of memes, knowing what to look at and what those elements stand for, and be aware of the cultural elements that they attempt to include in their own productions or recreations. Through this process, they are expected to be able to think and view memes in a more critical way.

Second, this research also expects to raise participants’ awareness of racial tensions interwoven in the Internet memes. Racial discrimination and whiteness are often invisible in
memes. They are disguised by humorous and entertaining functions of the images. Therefore, from this research users are expected to understand how power structures in society frame the Internet memes.

Last but not least, this study also discussed memes that have generated significant influences in addressing serious social controversies. The strategies employed by those memes, hopefully can be used to inspire specifically but not limited to Asian/Asian American online activist leaders. Internet memes are powerful. They can be subversive weapons in the online public space containing strong potential to encourage social justice movements.

Limitations and Orientations for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, in the process of colleting Internet memes, the memes that directly depict Asian/Asian Americans have been included, such as, memes using Asian/Asian Americans’ portraits in the image to generate conversations about this racial group, or memes employing Asian/Asian American cultures and languages as their agencies to deliver messages. Therefore, this study purposely excluded Internet memes that cover broad topical themes. For example, in rage comic memes, topics extended to various themes, including politics, race, school, teenagers, and marriage, etc. Asian/Asian American topics are part of them, but not the major theme. Based on my criteria for selection, such memes were not included into the data pool to narrow down the images. However, this can be counted as a limitation, since those omitted memes can still carry valuable information. Therefore, there must be other unknown messages that need to be explored in the future.

Second, the majority of selected Asian/Asian American themed memes focus on people and practices in East Asia, countries such as China, Japan, and Korea. Only the meme series
“Ordinary Muslim Man” refers to people and countries in Middle East Asia. This phenomenon can be considered both as internal and external problems. It is an internal problem because the memes labeled as Asian mostly depict people or issues related to East Asia. This phenomenon echoes a common incomplete knowledge about Asia that regards only Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans as representing the whole of Asia. The external problem reveals the limitation of my own knowledge and experience of being an East Asian. Going beyond my regional Chinese identity is another area that future research can undertake.

Third, as this research acknowledges, Internet memes have become a global phenomenon. Memes based on local events can influence other countries’ response to memes and the events the memes depict. Their travels were not limited by national boundaries anymore. Moreover, memes also employ popular culture that is highly recognizable. But due to cultural differences, memes still need to adapt to local conditions to be accepted by more local people and develop further with local cultural elements. Therefore, there are two potential research directions in this field. First, future research can explore global and glocal circulation of Internet memes. Within the process, how are memes transformed for survival? Next, Internet memes are also a propagation of cultural materials and a reflection of power relations (Shifman, 2014). Therefore, another research direction can explore the cultural hegemony hidden within the global circulation of memes.

Last but not least, gender related issues could be further explored through Internet memes. Reviewing the selected memes, the majority of protagonists depicted are male characters, such as “Yao Ming Face/Bitch Please,” “Ordinary Muslim Man,” and “PSY-Gangnam Style.” Asian/Asian American females appear in those memes more often as topics, and represent images of stereotypical perspectives toward them. For example, in a rage comic meme of “Yao
Ming Face/Bitch Please” meme series, the husband employed the stereotype of women being bad drivers to distance him from a mistake that he made on a mobile vehicle and then earned a moment of victory (http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/113730-yao-ming-face-bitch-please). On the bright side, some Internet memes have been praised for visualizing injustices and abuses against women. Such as Suey Park, she pointed out oppressions imposed on Asian/Asian American females by initiating the hashtag meme campaign “#NotYourAsianSidekick.” Therefore, future studies may integrate feminist theories with Asian female history and American stereotypes toward Asian/Asian American females, to investigate how Internet memes mask but also uncover the racial and gendered positions of Asian/Asian American females.

**Conclusion**

Internet memes are ubiquitous. When people examine them as micro-level discourse, a macro-level discourse can be also reflected. Beyond the pure amusement brought by Internet memes, power structures also are revealed. Power intangibly manipulates the creation and transformation of memes, complicates the construction and representation of identities, and stimulates social and political negotiations.

Although there is abundant evidence shown that memes are permeated with stereotypes, old patterns of discrimination, and invisible whiteness, there are still reasons to hold optimistic beliefs in the liberatory possibilities of Internet memes. Their various genres, participatory culture, dynamic circulation and transformation, and political engagements, all display the potential of Internet memes to be utilized to achieve social justice.
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