

## Chapter 6

# A Rhetoric of Visual Humor on Facebook

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### **ABSTRACT**

*A decade ago, Susan C. Herring (2004) urged scholars to study discursal patterns of computer-mediated communications and not simply their microlinguistic features. This chapter contributes to the literature by examining the rhetoric of visual humor on Facebook. The purpose of the study is two-fold: (a) to develop a conceptual framework for understanding uses of humor on Facebook, and (b) to show that humorous texts on this social networking site are argumentative in focus. Using ideas from Aristotelian rhetoric, Barthian semiotics, and Saidian discourse analysis, the work contends that Facebook visual humor tends to perform four main functions. They can be gubernatorial, institutional, cultural, or grotesque, and often ridicule societal problems in either overt or covert ways. The findings are useful for developing a conceptual framework for studying the complexities of human culture in digital spaces.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

First launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and his colleagues as a social networking site for Harvard students (West, Lewis & Currie, 2009; Kofod-Petersen & Wegener, 2010), Facebook has undoubtedly wielded a tremendous impact on society. It enables users to satisfy a number of gratifications such as making new “friends,” keeping in touch with old ones, constructing a sense of personal worth or social identity, earning cultural capital, and doing smart business. Among its many advantages, Facebook promotes simultaneous one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications via texts and photographs (boyd & Ellinson, 2008). These affordances present users across cultures with unique opportunities to engage in a panoply of communicative acts that range from setting agendas, gauging public opinion, to raising critical questions about happenings in their immediate surrounds and on the international scene

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0338-5.ch006

(Wyche *et al.*, 2013). Facebook has also been considered a very important social networking site for educational purposes (Mazer *et al.*, 2007; Munoz & Towner, 2009; Loving & Ochoa, 2011).

Studies have also explored how humor constitutes and maintains online communities such as Facebook. These include research in psychology, applied linguistics, and foreign language acquisition (Vandergriff, 2010). In an earlier work, Hübler and Bell (2003) showed that humor serves a critical function in online communities created by mailing lists. According to them, humor constitutes a virtual group ethos. Baym (2004) has also argued that the presence of humor in computer-mediated communication is critical to creating social meanings online. Using user surveys and five humorous messages from a Usenet newsgroup, Baym's study shows how the group's humor was influenced by close and distant relationships of participants in the soap opera. These relationships also distanced the participants from the opera's writers and producers. Baym concluded that group solidarity is a primary mechanism for establishing individuality despite shared ways of acting in a group.

Little work has, however, been done on the nature and role visual humor plays in the interactions and chats of Facebook users. Yet it is important to note that humorous visual texts on Facebook perform specific rhetorical functions. This chapter argues that far from being an evanescent appeal to an audience's emotions, Facebook visual humor makes a persuasive argument. The goal of this study, therefore, is to develop a conceptual framework for theorizing Facebook visual humor, and to show that this type of humor is not value-neutral. As social networking sites (SNSs) grow quantitatively and qualitatively, it is important that researchers study the many ways Facebook visual humorous posts tend to serve a deeper function than just their taken-for-granted assumptions. A look at the authors' personal Facebook pages, over the years, for example, shows that some humorous texts basically ridicule and satirize individuals, persons, and institutions, by capturing naturally occurring snapshots of social life in a way that performs special functions to users of the medium.

## **STUDY METHOD AND DATA**

The methodology employed in this study was interpretive netnography. The authors' idea of interpretive research was informed by Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) four principles of interpretive work. According to them, interpretive research must, first and foremost, be a blueprint for cultural criticism since no cultural practices are hardly neutral. In this context, one may say that humorous visual texts on Facebook are often shaped by the worldviews, biases, and interests of its users. Second, the work should articulate cultural and political issues. This means that interpretive research does its work best when it is capable of bringing to light hidden ideologies. The third point, Denzin and Lincoln posit, is that interpretive analysis should inspire hope; it must critique how things are, and then go on to explore how they could be different. Finally, this type of research must be an emancipatory project for bringing about positive change.

Netnography was employed to extend carefully the methods and tools of traditional humanistic ethnography to online research (*cf.* Kozinets, 2010; Lopez-Rocha, 2010). As users of Facebook, the researchers themselves have been very active observers of, and participants in posting and reading online comments since the last seven years. However, for the present study data were gathered between January and March, 2015 from Facebook friends willing to share their posts with the researchers. Although the data were used anonymously, the study satisfied what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call "ethically important moments." These are difficult and unusual situations that arise in the course of doing research. Ethically disturbing texts were also excluded from the analysis. For example, the 450-ish "corpus" excluded, *inter alia*,

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