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Using Memes as an Elicitation Tool: The Interview Prompt You Didn't Know You Needed

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Abstract

Building rapport with participants at the outset of an interview is a common goal for researchers. Creating rapport is critical for trustworthiness of interview data and for building a supportive environment for participants. This paper brings the research on memes together with elicitation techniques to present a novel approach to rapport-building in interviews through meme elicitation. Memes provide a focal point for shared attention and their humorous nature offers opportunities for light-hearted segue into deeper emotional discussions. Participants report finding the meme elicitation process an effective icebreaker and a meaningful entry point for discussions. Personal reflections and suggestions for ethically engaging with the process are presented.

Keywords

interview techniques, meme elicitation, rapport-building

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Using Memes as an Elicitation Tool: The Interview Prompt You Didn't Know You Needed

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Building rapport with participants at the outset of an interview is a common goal for researchers. Creating rapport is critical for trustworthiness of interview data and for building a supportive environment for participants. This paper brings the research on memes together with elicitation techniques to present a novel approach to rapport-building in interviews through meme elicitation. Memes provide a focal point for shared attention and their humorous nature offers opportunities for light-hearted segue into deeper emotional discussions. Participants report finding the meme elicitation process an effective icebreaker and a meaningful entry point for discussions. Personal reflections and suggestions for ethically engaging with the process are presented.

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Introduction

My nerves were jangling as I sat down to conduct the first interview of my dissertation research on the emotions experienced by graduate students engaged in academic writing. After all the preparation – comprehensives, proposal, and research ethics – data collection was about to begin. I knew building rapport with participants could be challenging and I anticipated that conducting the interviews online through video conferencing would add another layer of difficulty. I also recognized that building trust would be critical as I was asking my participants to share their sometimes-harrowing experiences of receiving feedback and dealing with the subsequent emotions as they sat down to risk writing again.

At the time of this research, I was a doctoral candidate in Education. I took an advanced writing course in the last year of my master's degree during which I was introduced to the idea of writing groups. I started forming writing partnerships and writing groups for mutual support. Listening to my colleagues' stories, I was struck by how often a kind or, more often, a cruel word of feedback would stick with a writer, sometimes shutting down their desire or even their ability to write for days or weeks. I grew curious about why graduate students procrastinate and delay writing and when I learned that procrastination is an emotion management problem rather than a time management problem (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013), my colleagues' experiences made sense. I became even more interested in how writing groups seem to support productivity and the emotion regulation necessary to make progress with the multi-year writing project of a dissertation.

I wanted to ask graduate students about their experiences of emotion during a writing group. As I planned the interviews for my research, I read about the value and importance of rapport-building to enhance the emotional comfort of participants and support the gathering of personal information in interviews (McGrath et al., 2019; Prior, 2017; Seidman, 2019). I also read about a variety of interview techniques (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Gubrium et al., 2012). Elicitation methods piqued my interest; I was intrigued by having a visual element to prompt discussion during the interview (Barton 2015; Roger & Blomgren, 2019). During the

preparation process, I also read about academic writing development, and I enjoyed Badenhorst and Guerin's chapter from 2016 on the ways graduate students learn to improve their academic writing. In their chapter, Badenhorst and Guerin bring attention to the ways that social media, and memes in particular, can provide insights into graduate student culture. As I was planning my research, reading about these two topics came together to spark the idea of using memes as an elicitation technique.

Each of these individual elements has been highlighted in previous research. Photo elicitation techniques have been used frequently in qualitative research (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Epstein et al., 2006). Memes have been a topic of research and studied extensively since their creation (Gal, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). Researchers have even been using memes in research by, for example, studying their interpretation by different groups (Akram et al., 2020) and investigating their representation of student life (Ask & Abidin, 2018). However, the current research is innovative in documenting the use of memes as an elicitation technique. In this paper, I share my experiences of using memes in my research interviews and make suggestions in case others would like to use this method in their own research.

Literature Review

A meme is “an idea (e.g., a word or phrase, hashtag, hyperlink, picture, or video), usually rooted in popular culture, that is widely popularized and distributed on the World Wide Web, for example, via social networks, blogs, e-mail, and news sources” (American Psychological Association, n.d). The term “meme” was originally coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to mean a unit of cultural transmission, a way that culture is shared. Shifman (2014) refined the meaning to include “digital items that: (a) share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users” (p. 341). In Figure 1, for example, an image from popular culture (the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) has been turned into a meme (*Annoyed Picard* image on the left) and then transformed for a specific community (Caldwell, 2013).

Figure 1

Original Annoyed Picard Meme and One Way it has been Transformed



In the original program, actor Sir Patrick Stewart (as Captain Picard, the captain of the starship *Enterprise*) is reciting a Shakespeare sonnet and using his hand to indicate emphasis in the text (Roddenberry et al., 1990). The creator of the original meme took a screen capture of the scene and used the image to indicate an insider/outsider group divide between people who know

about memes and those who do not for an audience of fellow meme creators. In the transformed meme, the creator has used the image to tease an audience of graduate student writers who must be on social media to see the meme (and therefore not writing). This meme plays into, and transmits, the graduate student culture of experiencing guilt when they are not working on their dissertations.

Memes and Communities

Since beginning graduate school, I have found great comfort and value in learning from other graduate students' experiences and, in turn, supporting students who are building their own academic literacies (Lea, 2016). Building these graduate student communities has extended online through Facebook groups and on Twitter, where memes have been a constant source of commiseration and amusement. Memes provide a wonderful source for identifying common experiences in a community by virtue of their creation and distribution by individuals to their social networks.

Whether someone appreciates a particular meme is dependent on whether that individual relates to that meme (Akram et al., 2020; Wong & Holyoak, 2021). The more relatable the meme within a community, the more likely it is to be repeatedly shared with members of the community, and the more likely it is to become widespread in that community. Memes become widespread often because of their emotional impact (Blackmore, 1999); often using humour to capture the shared experiences of a community (Badenhorst and Guerin, 2016). Humour can be a potent ally in creating community and building bonds (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Building these bonds through humour in graduate student writing groups is important because shared laughter can unite the group, help make academic subjects and processes personal, connect participants with their emotions, and release tension (Thesen, 2014).

By identifying common experiences of a community, memes may have the potential to support participants as they explore the topics of interest in research interviews. By broaching topics in a distanced, less personal way, memes provide a non-threatening channel for building rapport and scaffolding prior experiences in preparation for bridging into the interview questions. This distancing, using language to provide time or space between the immediacy of the experience and the related emotions, is a successful emotion regulation technique (Shahane & Denny, in press) which may enable participants to ease into discussions on difficult topics (Figoureaux & Van Gorp, 2021).

Memes and Identity

In qualitative research, interviews often introduce topics that relate to participants' identities. Memes inform the boundary work integral to the creation and maintenance of identity (Ebbs, 2017; Kanai, 2016). Miltner (2014) concluded that memes are one way that people can define themselves and their social groups. When seeing a meme that particularly resonates with and delights me, I often think, "that's so me!" This relatability experience is common as indicated by the metacommentary provided in the proliferation of "me, also me," "that's so me," "it me," "#relatable," and "literally me" memes.

Figure 2

Example of a Me, Also Me Meme



Memes support individuals' understanding of the world, facilitate social connections, and help define a community (Gal et al., 2016; Literat, 2021). Researchers have described a liberating catharsis, often a release of the burden of carrying the weight of believing one is the only person undergoing a trial, experienced through memes as, in my case, graduate students realize they are not alone in their experiences (Adams, 2021). Building on these shared identity facets in a community supports the development of rapport and provides a common frame of reference.

What is Rapport and Why is it Important?

In an interview setting, rapport is the mutual interrelation between researcher and participant built through attentiveness, positive regard, conversational coordination, affiliation, and empathy (Prior, 2017; Tickle-Dengen & Rosenthal, 1990). In the early stages of a relationship, the primary components of rapport-building are attentiveness and positivity (Tickle-Dengen & Rosenthal, 1990). Rapport is important during a research interview because researchers are asking participants to allow themselves to be vulnerable as they report their experiences, encouraging extended introspection. Without appropriate responses from the researcher and consequent feelings of affiliation, participants may be unlikely to meaningfully engage with the interview (Prior, 2017). Although it may be seen as transactional on the part of the interviewer – a means to the end of achieving thorough, accurate, and rich data for research purposes – it is also important as a practice of care and respect for the participant, ensuring they have the opportunity to express their thoughts in a supportive and as comfortable an atmosphere as possible. Ethical research supports participants' voices being heard while maintaining a respectful regard for their well-being (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). Memes support the building of rapport by drawing participants' attention, providing a source of shared attention, and through humour, supporting positive mutual regard. It was with these goals in mind that I set out to use memes to initiate the first interviews with my participants.

Method

To use memes as an elicitation tool, researchers should begin by collecting memes that appropriately reflect the experiences they would like to discuss with their participants. I had previously used academic writing memes for in-person teaching to lighten the mood and to reinforce concepts in a thesis writing course. I have also used memes more recently in my online research courses for similar purposes. I therefore had already accumulated a wide array of memes appropriate for sharing with my participants.

For this research, I selected memes that represented a variety of writing-related situations that might provoke a range of emotions. I then chose memes to include a variety of gendered, gender-neutral, and non-human characters in the hopes that participants would more easily find themselves and their experiences represented in the memes. Lastly, I conducted a final review of the memes to check for bias or replication of stereotypes.

Next, researchers need to consider the medium through which the memes will be shared. As all research at my university was being conducted in a COVID-safe, socially distanced manner, my dissertation interviews took place online. After obtaining research ethics approval, I invited PhD students who wanted to make progress with their writing projects over the summer to participate in an online writing group with individual interviews before and after the group sessions. While scheduling the initial interviews, I sent participants a file that contained copies of the 32 memes I selected that related to my topic of the emotions experienced in graduate school and with academic writing. In person, it would be possible to bring printed versions of the memes or display them on a shared screen for participants. Another option for online interviewing would be to share the screen (on Zoom or Teams, for example) and show the memes to participants spontaneously. I elected to send the memes ahead of the interview to allow time for participants to enjoy the memes at their leisure and to select one to discuss without a time limit.

Then researchers will need to plan the ways in which they would like participants to consider the memes. In preparation for the initial interview, I asked participants to look through the memes and select one that “speaks to your experiences or with which you identify” (Julien, 2021). I added that “if none appeal to you, please feel free to share one that you have found or select one that is opposite to your own experience” (Julien, 2021). In Figures 3 through 7 you will see several of the memes that were included.

Figure 3

A Doctoral Student and Their Advisor Walk into a Bar

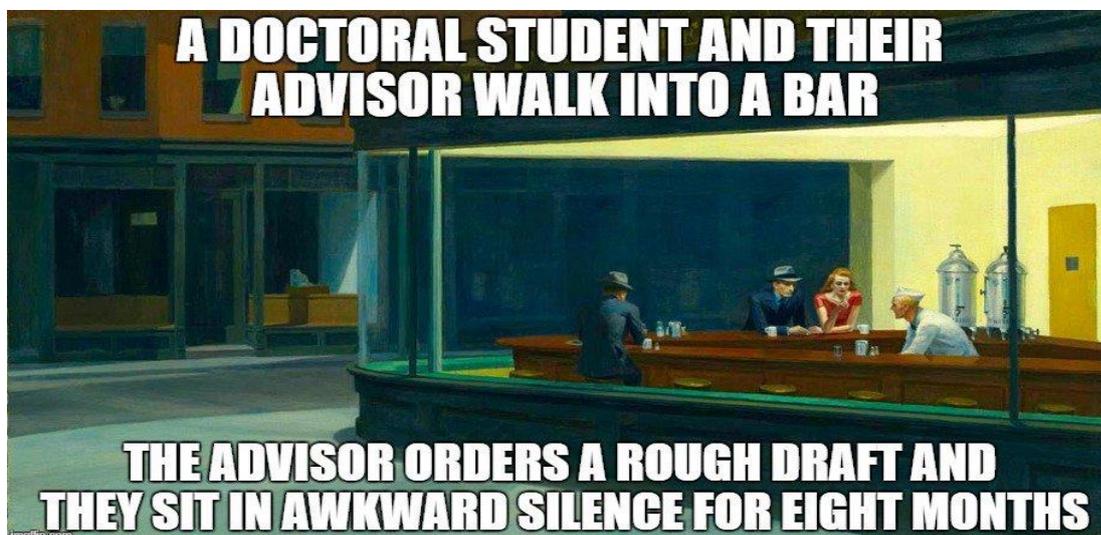


Figure 4
All Done!

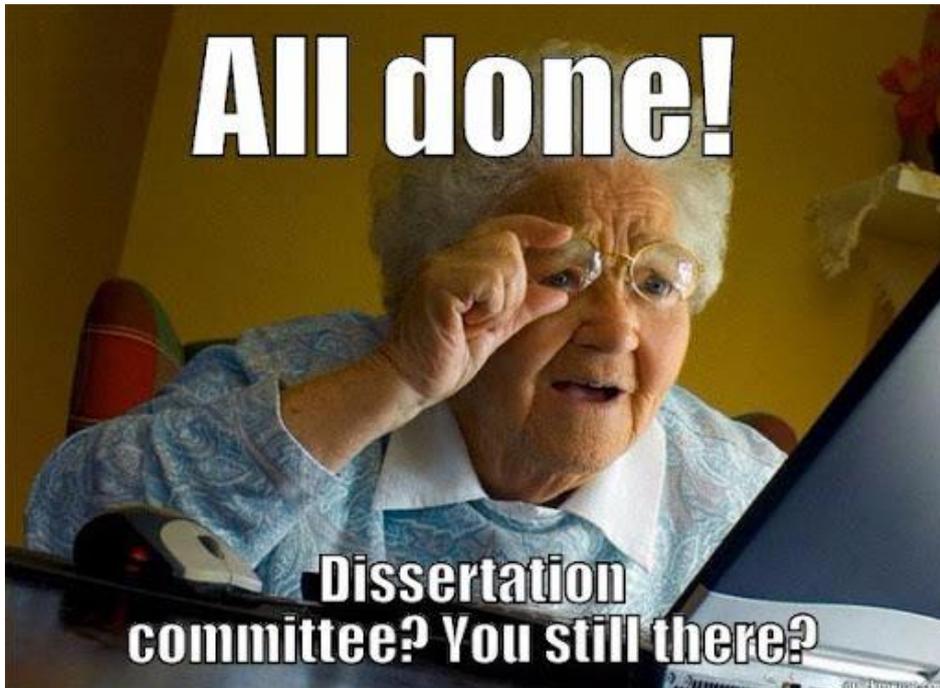


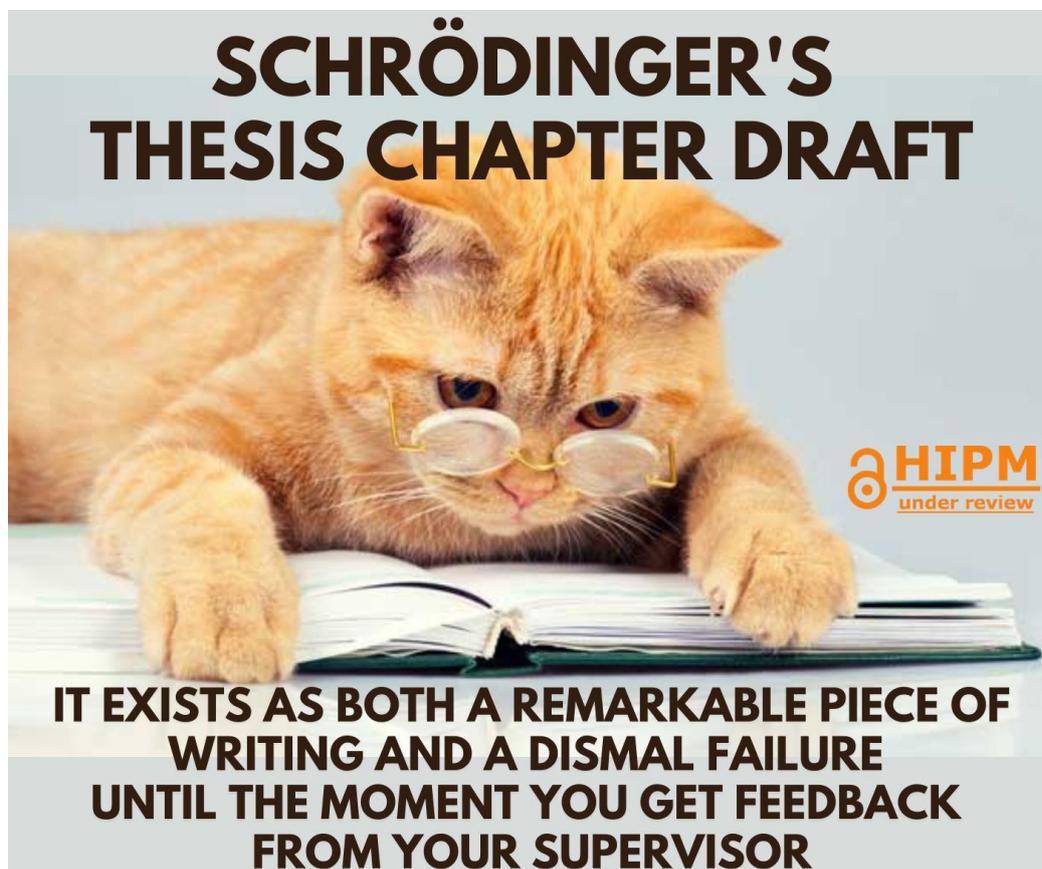
Figure 5
Almost Done!



Figure 6
Does he bite?



Figure 7
Schrödinger's Thesis Chapter Draft



Questions and Prompts

To use the memes effectively, it will be important for researchers to identify their goals for the elicitation portion of the interview. Besides providing an icebreaker, I was interested in using the memes to prime participants' recollection of their experiences with academic writing. I also wanted to be sure as possible that I understood their interpretation of the memes to frame our upcoming discussion about possible relationships between the memes and their experiences. I asked participants:

- How would you describe what is going on in this meme?
- What is it about this meme that you found meaningful or how do you identify or connect with this meme?
- What emotion would you connect with this meme? What has your experience been with this emotion in academic writing? Please describe a situation you've experienced that this meme brought to mind.
- What metaphor or larger context do you think the meme represents? What do you think might make it so popular?

Having the memory prompts for recalling events related to their own academic writing seemed to support the discussion that followed.

As building rapport involves attentiveness and positivity (Tickle-Dengen & Rosenthal, 1990), these questions about the memes support these goals by creating a shared focus for attention between the researcher and the participant. The humorous nature of the memes, particularly when combined with authentic curiosity and gentle enthusiasm from the researcher, can support the necessary positive atmosphere.

Participants' Responses

At the interview that followed the writing group sessions, I asked participants about their experiences with the memes in the initial interviews. Participants reported experiencing memes as an effective icebreaker. Furthermore, memes helped to form a bond between participants for the duration of the study, creating, as one participant noted, "a sweet thread" that carried through the research and became a touchstone between the participants, a common point of reference (Participant 1). Participants also found the memes helped them reflect on their experiences, saying, "I can see myself in that meme" (Participant 4). Much like the common experiences and identity maintenance identified in the literature (Akram et al., 2020; Gal et al., 2016; Wong & Holyoak, 2021), the memes seemed to situate and ground participants as part of their academic writing and graduate student communities.

The common graduate student experiences captured by the memes "lightened" the interview process (Participant 2). Similar to the liberating catharsis identified in the literature (Adams, 2021), one participant shared that they "really appreciated seeing that someone else had grappled with these things and found the humour in them" (Participant 2). The memes "took these otherwise complex ideas and distilled the emotions into packageable form, creating a great way to talk about them" (Participant 3).

Limitations, Considerations, and Suggestions

It is important to present memes that represent a variety of experiences and perspectives. Many of my memes presented graduate students experiencing writing challenges, depicted the writing process as time-consuming or difficult, or showed graduate students

suffering neglect or roadblocks from their supervisors. Although my participants could often identify with those perspectives, they were also looking for depictions of feeling empowered and energized in their writing.

Researchers may need to consider that some participants may not be familiar with memes or social media and the concept and purpose of memes may be new to them. Some memes may also be culturally specific, referencing popular culture of North America, for example. In this case, it would be helpful to provide additional context and introduce the idea of memes during the initial stages of the research process.

Memes risk replicating existing power structures and divisions by playing on stereotypes and unfairly representing races or cultures (Drakett et al., 2018; Greene, 2019; Sobande, 2021). It is therefore important to consider social, political, and historical issues that might be sensitive to participants to be sure that the memes used in the research process aren't replicating biases based on gender, race, sexual identification, or sexual orientation for the sake of humour.

The visual medium of memes may pose a limitation for researchers with participants who experience visual impairments (Greenspan, 2020). To address this concern, Gleason et al. (2019) suggest ways of making images from social media accessible through descriptions using alternative text (alt-text) or through the creation of audio macro memes. Their research suggests including text describing the characters, their actions, the emotions or facial expressions, the source of the image, and anything different or notable about the background of the image (Gleason et al., 2019).

Finally, if possible, I suggest making the use of memes optional when participants are uncomfortable with their use. Alternative options may include discussing comics, photographs, or artwork depicting the central phenomenon of the research.

Conclusion

Future research may delve more deeply into the ways that memes might access a variety of aspects of a participant's identity. I imagine a Likert scale where participants rate the degree to which they identify with a variety of memes and perhaps the degree to which they identify others in their group with each meme. For a more creative approach, researchers might also consider having participants create their own memes to represent their experiences.

Recent research confirms the additional challenges for rapport-building raised by conducting interviews online (Engward et al., 2022). In my experience, using memes as an elicitation technique was an engaging way to support the development of rapport between researcher and participants and between the participants as well.

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