

# Looping out loud: A multimodal analysis of humour on Vine

**Vittorio Marone**

The University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas  
[vittorio.marone@utsa.edu](mailto:vittorio.marone@utsa.edu)

## Abstract

*Launched in 2013, Vine is a popular microblogging service that allows users to record, edit, and share six-second videos that loop ad libitum, until another video is selected. At this time, the communicative, expressive, and semiotic affordances of Vine and similar services have still to be fully explored by users and scholars alike. Through a multimodal analysis approach drawing on New London Group's (1996) work, this paper investigates how people construct humour on Vine by artfully arranging different modes of expression. The analysis focused on user-enacted humour, as opposed to captured comical scenes or bare samples taken from TV shows or movies. The study hypothesises the social construction of a novel humorous language that draws on extant forms of humour and a variety of modes and techniques derived from audio-visual media and computer-mediated communication, as users inventively exploit the framework provided by the Vine platform. Findings show that users create instant characters to amplify the impact of their solo video recordings, use Vine as a "humorous confessional", explore the potential of hand-held media by relying on "one hand and face" expressivity (the other hand holding the device for the video "selfie"), and use technology, internet slang, internet acronyms, emoticons/emojis, and hashtags to convey humour and complement the messages of the videos they post on Vine. The goal of this study is an exploratory analysis of humour and its discursive functions in an emergent social medium by considering its affordances, as users find new and creative ways to harness its expressive potential.*

*Keywords: online humour, humour in computer-mediated communication (CMC), multimodal humour, humour on social media, discursive functions of humour.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. A multimodal approach to humour

This study considers humour from a multimodal perspective by examining how different and oft interconnected modes, such as speech, gesture, or gaze, contribute to the construction of humour, taking into consideration the specificity of the medium (Vine) and its affordances, in

a computer-mediated setting. In this context, previous scholarship has shown a transdisciplinary, yet fragmented, call for multimodal approaches to the study of humour, in order to expand or complement well-established theoretical frameworks of humour, such as the *Semantic Script Theory of Humour* (SSTH) (Raskin, 1985) or the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (GTVH) (Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 2001). In her study of verbal and visual humour in cartoons, Tsakona (2009: 1171) urged for a unified approach to studying humour by combining linguistic and semiotic perspectives. In her findings, she stressed the interaction between verbal and visual modes as a determining factor in the transmission of the humorous message in the majority of the analysed cartoons (375 out of 561, i.e. 66.84%). In her discussion of the findings, the author acknowledged that, as opposed to the static nature of cartoons, in moving media (such as the videos posted on Vine), “paralingual and/or performance features are essential for the production of a humorous effect” (Tsakona 2009: 1185). In another study, focused on humour in Scottish post cards, Francesconi (2011) proposed an approach to analysing humour defined as “Multimodally Expressed Humour” (MEH), which integrates the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 2001) with tools derived from multimodal analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001) and cross-modal interaction (Barthes 1977).

The evolution of the internet and of handheld devices has fostered the emergence of new or adapted forms of humour, such as visual collages, photo manipulations, and animated photos (e.g. animated GIFs or photo compositions created with Photoshop), digital presentations (e.g. humorous PowerPoint files), video collages, mash-ups, and remixes (short clips that combine existing video materials such as TV news, films, and documentaries), parodies (in both static and moving media), staged photos and videos, humorous audio recordings (e.g. excerpts from movies), and interactive forms of humour (in which the user is required to perform some kind of action to achieve a humorous effect, such as clicking or inputting text) (Kuipers 2002: 461–463; Kuipers 2005: 74–75; Shifman 2007: 196–199; Frank 2009: 109; Shifman 2014: 343). In this context, considering the diverse and often intertwined affordances offered by the internet and emerging media and technologies, scholars are increasingly focusing their attention on multimodal forms of humour in computer-mediated settings (Shifman 2014; Ballesteros Doncel 2016; Dynel 2016). Continuing the discourse put forth by these scholars, this study advocates for a multimodal approach to humour research, especially in contexts that involve dynamic and interactive media in computer-mediated settings. In agreement with Norrick (2004), Kress (2010), and Jewitt (2014), this study supports an egalitarian attentiveness to all modes involved in the construction of meaning, rather than their allegedly ancillary function in relation to the verbal/linguistic mode.

## 1.2. Vine: New kid on the social media block

The last decade has witnessed an increasingly active role of internet users in the production and sharing of content (Leadbeater & Miller 2004; Ritzer & Jurgenso, 2010), which has facilitated the onset and diffusion of a participatory culture supported by technologies (Jenkins et al. 2009). The popularisation of social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube has opened new ways of communication and social interaction allowing users to share multimodal content that includes text, pictures, links, music, and videos. One of the newest and most popular social network services is Vine (Vine 2016). Founded in 2012 and launched in early 2013 (Zhang et al. 2014: 814), this multimodal platform allows users to share six-second videos captured and edited through the Vine application, available for iOS, Android, and Windows mobile devices. Users can “heart” (i.e. “like”) Vines, share them on the website (“revine” them), or post them on other social media,

and leave comments. A specific feature of this medium is that the videos posted on Vine loop continuously, until the video is stopped or another Vine is selected. A loop counter shows how many times a particular Vine has been played.

In a rapidly changing social media landscape, at the time of publication of this article the future of Vine is uncertain (Constine 2016). However, Vine is currently one of the most popular video sharing services with approximately 200 million active users per month (Frydenberg & Andone 2016: 1). The Facebook page called “Best of Vines”, which presents a selection of the most interesting Vines posted by users, has more than 21 million “likes” (Best of Vines 2016). Some of Vine’s most popular users have millions of subscribers and their videos have been viewed billions of times. The number of loops (i.e. views) each video has is an indicator of its popularity. Comedy and humour are arguably the most popular themes on Vine, as shown by the most popular Vines and the Vines posted by its most influential users (Trends on Vine 2016).

Similar to cartoons, Vine embodies a “condensed” medium that features different and interconnected modes that dynamically contribute to the construction of meaning. Just like in cartoons (Tsakona 2009), the humour conveyed on Vine is not always easy to grasp and process because of its short form, its multimodal delivery (e.g. some Vines start with a written title and then continue the discourse in the video), and frequent endogenous and exogenous references (pointing at other Vines or external sources). This article attempts at expanding the analysis of humour in multimedia focusing not only on the verbal and visual mechanisms of humour, but also on other medium-specific modes of meaning-making and communication (Gross et al. 2014), such as looping, brevity, and hypertextual labelling (e.g. hashtags). Specifically, this article refers to *modes* as different tools for communication, expression, and meaning-making (such as written text, images, graphics, gestures, colour, size), and *affordances* as features of any given medium that allow the use of such modes.

## 2. Research questions

The two interrelated research questions (RQs) of this study are:

- (RQ1) What modes do Vine users employ to convey humour and how?
- (RQ2) What are the discursive functions of humour enacted through such modes?

The first research question considers the multiplicity of modes, and their interplay, used to design humorous posts on Vine. The analysis also considers the social and cultural facets of such modes. The second research question is based on the tenet that discourse is not only *informing*, but also *performing*, since it can have consequences beyond the transmission of information (Potter et al. 1993; Potter 1997; Lamerichs & te Molder 2003). Similarly, humour has functions that go beyond the elicitation of laughter, smile, or good humour (Meyer 2000). In other words, the second research question could be rephrased as “What is humour doing?” or “What is the Vine user doing through humour?”. By linking these two research questions, this study seeks to connect the *form* (RQ1) and *function* (RQ2) of humour (Miczo 2014) in its multimodal expressions on Vine.

## 3. Methods

Vine’s multifaceted modes of communication call for a methodology suited to consider their interplay and specificity. This study uses a multimodal analysis approach, which is a method of inquiring into semiotic domains that feature different, yet interconnected, modes of

representation such as speech, gesture, and gaze (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001; Jewitt 2014). Gee (2007: 19) defines a *semiotic domain* as “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meaning”. In this framework, the analytical and interpretive work does not rely solely on “decoding” texts (written, spoken, audio-visual, and others), but also on understanding the contexts and cultures in which such texts are created, shared, and experienced (Gee 2007; Kress 2010). Vine can be considered a semiotic domain that requires a specific literacy to understand its affordances, limitations, and multimodal practices enacted to convey meaning. In other words, Vine users have at their disposal a different set of semiotic tools and affordances to communicate and interpret meaning, if compared to those of other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.

For the analysis of the Vines, this study considers five modes of meaning-making proposed by the New London Group (1996), namely: *linguistic* (L) – language (spoken and written); *audio* (A) – music and sound effects; *visual* (V) – colours, perspectives, foregrounding and backgrounding; *gestural* (G) – behaviour, bodily physicality, and facial expressions; and *spatial* (S) – contexts (physical locations, objects, and their relative distances). These modes, from here on abbreviated as L, A, V, G, and S, can be used as a flexible instrument to analyse the multiplicity of semiotic tools used to construct meaning on Vine. This framework was selected for this study because it offers a solid framework for multimodal analysis. It includes “core” modes that guide the analysis and prevent fragmentation of codes and micro-categorisations that may side-track or blur the focus of the analysis. However, future analyses and methodological works may benefit from the addition of modes that are becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary social media and computer-mediated communication, and that emerged in the analysis of the Vines considered in this study, such as *metalinguistic* (e.g. emoticons/emojis), *hypertextual* (e.g. links, hashtags, intertextual references), *temporal* (e.g. brevity, looping, repetition), *technical* (e.g. editing techniques and technologies used by the authors of the multimodal texts), and *creative* (e.g. inventive or innovative uses of the medium to convey meaning).

### 3.1. Data and analyses

The corpus of this study is based on data collected for a study of multimodal representations of prejudice on Vine. For that research project, the *#prejudice* hashtag was used to select the messages for the analysis on the Vine website. The theme of prejudice is connected to the author’s research interest in socially just uses of social media and technologies, with a focus on new literacies and youth cultures. In this context, this study aims at contributing to the body of research on humour in relation to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in computer-mediated settings (Weaver 2011; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman 2015; Yoon 2016).

On social media such as Twitter and Vine, users often employ hashtags (see section 4.6) as labelling tools to categorise their posts. Other users can then retrieve messages that feature that label. In the analysis of multimodal representations of prejudice on Vine, humour emerged as one of the main instruments used to highlight or expose latent prejudice in society. Therefore, a study dedicated to the uses and functions of humour in that context was deemed necessary. Further, since this study applies a methodological approach that calls for frame-by-frame analyses of data, it was convenient to delimit the number of multimodal posts to a manageable amount and select the sample by a common theme (i.e. prejudice) rather than “cherry pick” data among millions of humorous posts.

Since the videos posted on Vine are almost always complemented by textual messages, hashtags, and/or other users’ comments, these messages are here termed *Vines* (not just *videos*). The corpus of this study is composed of 89 Vines categorised by users with the

*#prejudice* hashtag. Vines have been downloaded and analysed using video playback software that allows for slow motion and frame-by-frame analysis (each second is divided into 30 frames). Transcriptions of the Vines have been organised in a spreadsheet with column labels described below in Table 1.

Table 1. Column labels and related attributes and specifications used to transcribe the data

Column labels	Attributes and specifications
Number	From 01 to 89
User	The person who posted the Vine
Date	When the Vine was posted
Topic	The main theme of the Vine
Notes	Author's notes
Multimodal Transcription (Modes)	Linguistic (L), audio (A), visual (V), gestural (G), and spatial (S)
Textbox	Text accompanying the video posted by the creator of the Vine
Hashtags	User-generated labels included in the Vine to categorise it
Cuts	Number of edits/sections in the video
Modes I	Which of the LAVGS modes appear in each analysed Vine
Modes II	Explanatory description of the included modes, such as gaze, nodding, grimace, etc.
Intramodal/Intermodal Relationships	The interplay of modes
Contributions of Modes	Role of each mode, and their interplay, in the construction of meaning
Comments	Transcriptions of posts of other users in response to the posted Vine, including the comments and responses of the author of the Vine
Modes of Humour	RQ1: modes employed to convey humour and their interplay
Functions of Humour	RQ2: the discursive functions of humour enacted through different modes

The transcription of the videos presented below are divided into “cuts”, i.e. the audio-visual fragments (or edits) that compose each video. In the transcription, Vines are presented as a number preceded by the letter V (which stands for Vine), from V01 to V89, and frames are represented by a capital F and approximated to 5 frames (one sixth of a second).

#### 4. Findings and discussion

Of the 89 analysed Vines tagged with the *#prejudice* hashtags, 34 featured humorous elements. In the following sections findings related to these Vines are presented and discussed.

#### 4.1. Instant characters: Multiplying to amplify

One of the most frequent means of conveying humour found in the analysed Vines was the impersonation of real-life or fictitious characters. Often, in these characterisations the authors of the Vines represent stereotypical or prejudicial figures such as the “evil German” (V02) or the beer-drinking “Oktoberfest German” (V21), the “perfect housewife” (V04, Figure 1), or an African-American burglar in a white neighbourhood (V85).

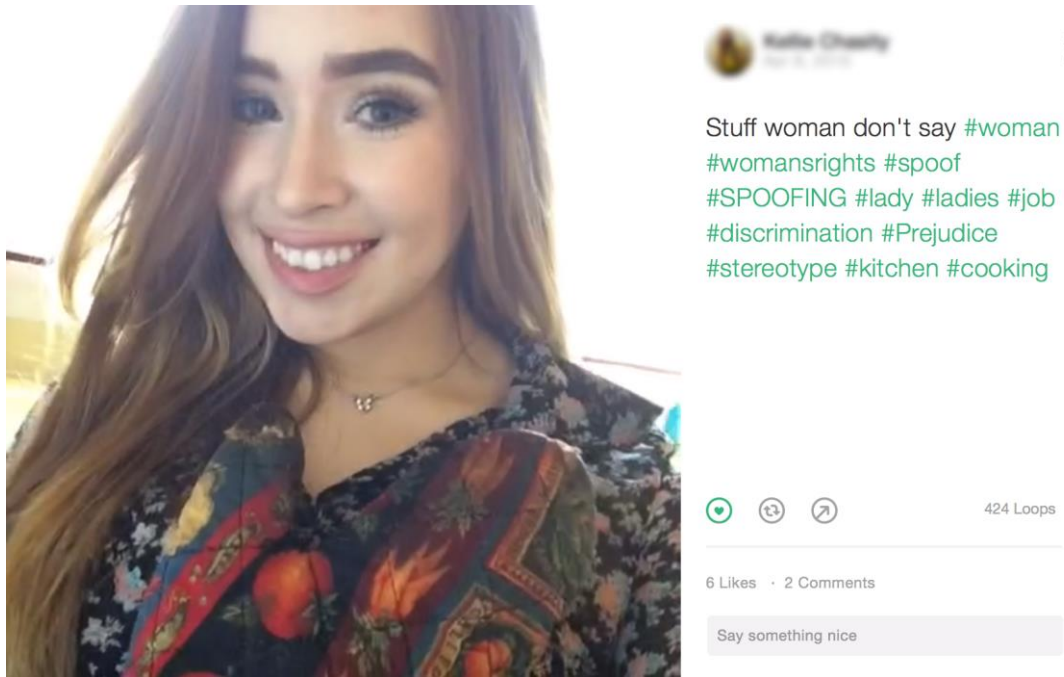


Figure 1. Stuff woman don't say (V04)

In other instances, users impersonate different characters to compensate for their one-person acting, thus giving voice to virtual “others” in the construction of their humorous messages, or interacting with pets and non-existing persons. For example, an author interrogates his cat on political-religious issues (V06), another one imitates his classmates (V13), yet other users impersonate people talking about them (V55) or to them (V62), or imaginary speakers over the phone (V64). In this context, wearable objects are used as “instant-characterisers” that transform the protagonists of the Vines into different characters or accentuate their identity or the meaning they want to express. For example, oven mitts are used to typify “women in the kitchen” (V04, Figure 1), a pair of mirrored sunglasses and a tank top to depict a hipster (V07, Figure 2), and a headset with a microphone to impersonate telephone support staff (V64 and V65). Of the 34 humorous Vines analysed in this study, 29 feature close-ups, a kind of shot that limits how authors can use props to impersonate someone, in addition to the time limit imposed by Vine (see section 4.3). This calls for a “condensed” and “instantified” narrative that unfolds in a limited space (the close-up frame) and time (approximately six seconds).

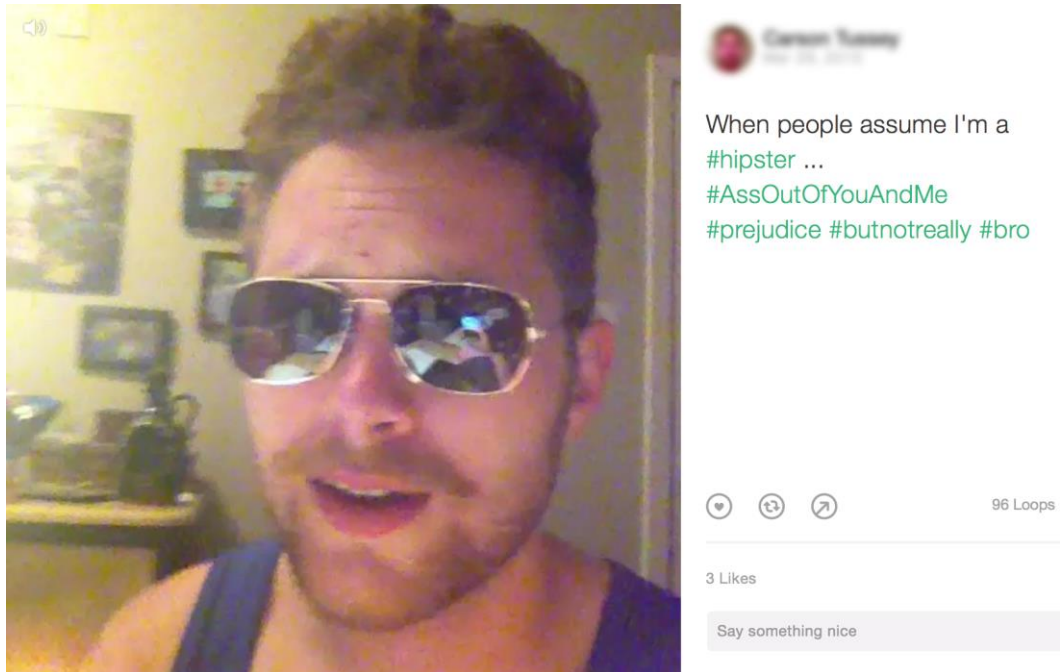


Figure 2. When people assume I'm a #hipster... (V07)

#### 4.2. Exclamations and revelations: Vine as a humorous confessional

Vine is often used as a “confessional” in which people express their emotions, ideas, and insights. Several of these confessions express humour and self-irony. In both staged (as fictitious characters) and real-life confessions, users seem to be immersed in a stream of consciousness that culminates in a revealing moment at the end of the video. In one of the Vines (V07), in a single cut/shot, a user comes to an unforeseen understanding:

(V07) CUT 1 of 1 [1–196 F]

L

[Written language]

When people assume I'm a #hipster ... #AssOutOfYouAndMe #prejudice #butnotreally #bro

[Spoken language]

[10–15 F] You know, [15–20 F] (.) [20 F] people are always making assumptions, [60 F] just 'cause I wear tank tops, curl my moustache, wear my hair – [130–145 F] (*almost no pause*) oh my god, [145–160 F] I'm a hipster. [160–196] (*inbreathes*).

A

[0–20 F] Silence. [20–25 F] Noise of sunglasses taken off. [25–196] Silence.

V

[0–196 F] Close-up: white male with moustache and beard wearing a bluish-purple tank top and mirrored sunglasses.

G

[Body and head]

[0–10 F] Right hand (two bracelets on wrist) reaches right side of sunglasses. [10–35 F] Right hand takes off sunglasses (from top-right to bottom-left) as head spins from centre to right [10–20 F] and then back to centre [20–35 F]. Right hand indicates tank top [80 F], moustache [100



F], and hair [120–130 F] as head moves from centre to right [110–120 F] and then stays right [120–130 F]. [130–145 F] Head moves from right towards centre and hand moves down (hand disappears from the screen). [145–170 F] Head continues movement to centre. [170–196 F] Head slightly retracted (expressing consciousness, dismay, unease).

[Face]

[0–20 F] Eyes and eyebrows covered by sunglasses, then briefly covered by right hand taking them off; mouth semi-open. [20–95 F] Looking into camera; eyes half closed; raised eyebrows (expressing bewilderment and disappointment). [95–130 F] Raises eyebrows and slightly opens eyes when showing moustache and hair (expressing slight surprise for the meaning allegedly attached to them by other people). [130–170 F] Lowers eyebrows; eyes are in natural position (expressing surprise, incredulity, sudden realisation). [170–196] Opens eyes wider; mouth stays semi-opened as he inbreathes (expressing consciousness, dismay, unease).

S

[1–196 F] Artificially illuminated room/entry of an apartment. Light coming from the right side of the character. In the background (approx. 1 meter from the character), on the right side of the character: a wooden cabinet with unidentified objects on it; family pictures on the wall. In the background (approx. 1 meter from the character), on the left side of the character: white framed entry door with silver locks and handle.

In this Vine, humour emerges in the passage from an accusation of prejudice (directed at other people) to a moment of self-understanding. The protagonist does so by using different modes of expression: the exclamation (*oh my god*), the head movement towards the centre, the hand movement towards the bottom, and the lowered eyebrows. After that, to reinforce the sense of bewilderment, the protagonist reclines his head, opens his eyes wider, and inbreathes.

In several Vines the last cut or the last frames of a continuous shot are often marked by a form of verbal and visual exclamations (V13: *No!*; V17: *Why?!*; V19 and V73: *What?!*; V22: *Bruh!*; V48: *Cool!*; V55: *What the hell!*; V58: *Yay!*; V66: *Yeah!*; V69: *Oh!*; V82: *Muy bien!*; V83: *Ah!*; V85: *Ha ha ha!*) or just visual clues of emphasis (V26: sticking out tongue; V53: eyes wide open, raised eyebrows, looking straight into camera; V63: eyes wide open, mouth open, trembling; V65: eyes wide open, raised eyebrows, looking straight into camera; V78: eyes wide open, raised eyebrows, looking straight into camera, forced smile, thumb up). Sometimes Viners use a vulgar expression to achieve or boost a humorous effect at the end of their recording (V06: *Bullshit!*; V37 and V62: *The fuck!*). These dramatic conclusions somehow recall the punch line of a joke, but in the context of Vine their use may also be linked to an intent to compensate for the temporal limitations of the medium and to signal the conclusion of the message, thus counteracting the circularity of Vine's looping affordance, which may be disruptive of traditional forms of narrative. In other words, these multimodal markers placed at the end of the Vines contribute to providing closure to short-form narratives and signal the conclusion of each video, before it loops. In contrast, other users take advantage of the looping affordance of Vine to create perpetual narratives that play in circle, using looping as a mode of meaning-making and expression (see section 4.5).

### 4.3. Handheld humour: Exploiting the affordances of the medium

Most Vines are recorded holding the smartphone with one's hand, which forces users to rely on their facial expression and their other (available) hand to convey meaning. The limited use of the body for self-expression (one hand is holding the smartphone) calls for creative and emphatic uses of one's limbs, head, and face. In this context, the same gesture can take on multiple meanings, depending on the situation and the intentions of the user. For example, the contact between one's head and hand can convey different meanings: holding one's head to



represent sadness (V17), caressing the back of one's head to show dispassion and casual listening (V53), or checking one's hair style in front of a mirror to represent an everyday activity (V66). This expressive combination (the person's hand and head) is often used to convey humour. In one of the Vines (V02), the user transitions from characterising a caricatural prejudiced version of a German person (and of the German language) by frowning and waving his finger (Figure 3) while speaking in German (*what you understand*: the protagonist speaks in German), to finally revealing the meaning of his words (*what we mean*: "Hello, I'm from Germany and I like puppies and peace") in the last part of the video, with a relaxed and smiling facial expression and look (Figure 4).

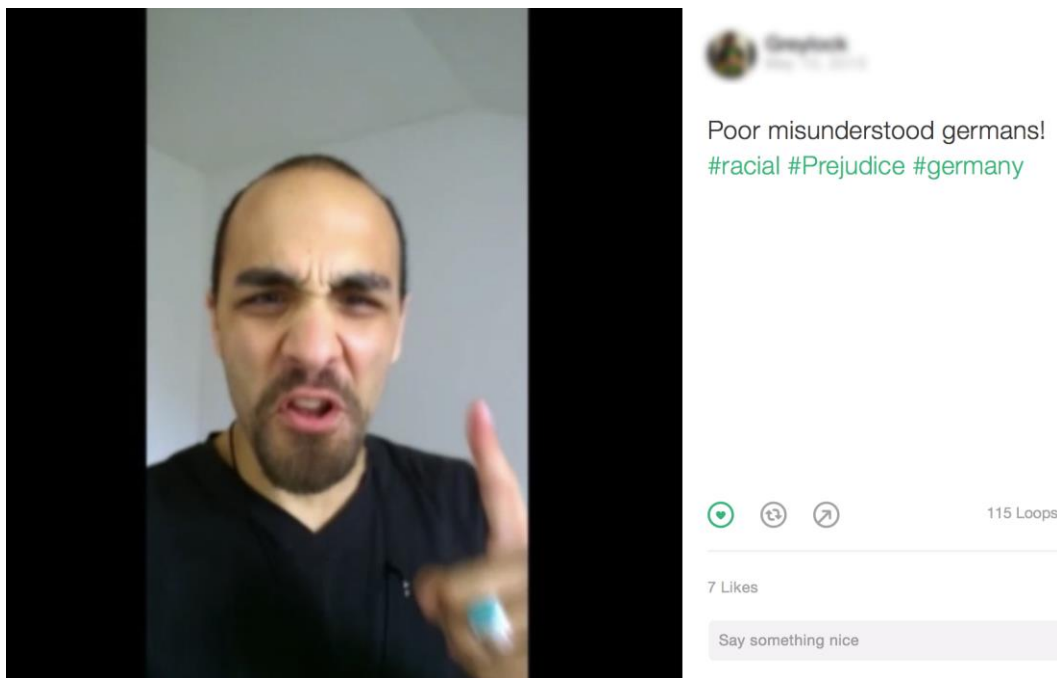


Figure 3. The user frowning and waving his finger to represent a caricatural prejudiced version of a German person and of the German language (V02)

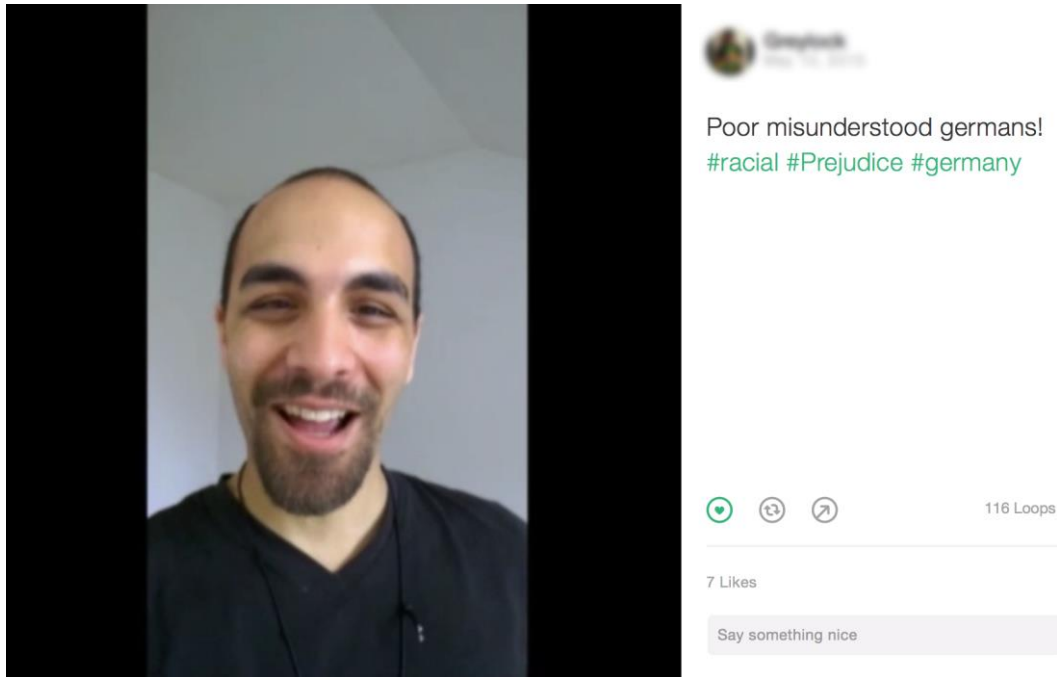


Figure 4. A drastic change in the facial expression and look (V02) to communicate the real meaning of the words uttered in German a few seconds before this transition (“*Hello, I’m from Germany and I like puppies and peace*”)

#### 4.4. Technology-mediated humour: Technology, media, and internet slang

In 9 out of the 34 humorous Vines, the role of media and technologies is central, as users interact with and through them, or respond to them. In one of the Vines (V46), a user interrogates Siri (Apple’s intelligent personal assistant) on the meaning of an *emoji* (emojis are ideograms, such as the popular “smiley” icon, that are used in computer-mediated communication to express emotions or represent objects or states of mind). Siri’s politically incorrect answer creates a humorous effect, as the “computer-impartial-scientific” script collides with an unexpectedly offensive statement.

Other examples in which media and technology play a central role in the construction of humour include a character from a movie replying to a fan of the *Aquaman* comics series (V63), a user who designed a swastika in the digital game *Minecraft* and therefore realizes that he is prejudiced (V69), and a user’s response to a magazine article titled “Meet, pray, love: How to mix race, religion and your relationship” (V78). Another example, in which the protagonist plays a console video game (V19), is presented and discussed in the following section.

#### 4.5. Looping short stories: Humour through “repeated inevitability”

In one of the analysed Vines (V19) a young man (seemingly a college student) is laying on a couch playing a video game. Another person (probably his roommate), from the back of the player, unexpectedly asks a question (voice-over): “Hey hey-so what do you think about people that are-uh-different from you?” The player turns his head towards the voice-over person (who is filming the scene) and rhetorically asks: “What?” Then he smiles, still somehow surprised and unsure of what is going on, and turns his head back to the original position. In this scene, humour is conveyed through the transition from the fictional/recreational world of the video game and a serious/real-world question. The effect is

emphasised by the player/protagonist who steadily keeps his hands on the game controller while turning his head, as he partially “unplugs” from the game world. After a moment of astonishment, at the end of the video, the player turns his head back to the game, returning to the original position. In the scene, we never see the person who asks the question, which reminds of a formal TV interview, thus increasing the contraposition of scripts (informal vs. formal, frivolous vs. serious, and virtual vs. real). In this video, the author seems to fully take advantage of the looping affordance of Vine, as the protagonist, at the end of the video, moves his head back to the original position. The looping effect is almost seamless, a clever editing technique (or a fortuitous recording/take) that in itself contributes to engendering humour and amusement.

Table 2. The sequence and looping effect in one of the analysed Vines (V19)

		
(1) CUT 1 of 1 [1–110 F] Voice-over: “Hey hey-so what do you think about people that are-uh-different from you?”	(2) CUT 1 of 1 [110–115 F]	(3) CUT 1 of 1 [115–130 F]
		
(4) CUT 1 of 1 [130–140 F] Protagonist: “What?”	(5) CUT 1 of 1 [140–150 F]	(6) CUT 1 of 1 [150–155 F]

The looping affordance of Vine seems to have an impact on the humorous capacity of Vines through “repeated inevitability”. On one hand, if viewers know and enjoy the content of a Vine, they may look forward to seeing it again through Vine’s automatic looping feature (the scene/story is inescapably the same, i.e. a new iteration does not change the story). On the other hand, viewers are somehow forced to re-experience each Vine because of its inexorable looping. While there are studies on the effect of repetition on humour in media (especially in the field of advertising, e.g. Gelb & Zinkhan 1985; Zhang & Zinkhan 1991), this analysis suggests that further research is needed to investigate the effect of “repeated inevitability” on humour, on Vine and other short-form looping media such as animated GIFs (Bakhshi et al. 2016: 584), whose key elements are brevity, movement, rhythm, cadence, and repetition.

#### 4.6. Beyond labelling: Hashtagging as a meaning-making mode

One of the modes through which users convey humour on Vine is by applying creative labels (called *hashtags*) to their posts. A *hashtag* is a hypertextual label symbolised by a number sign followed by a descriptor (e.g. *#prejudice*) that allows users to categorise their posts enabling at the same time their aggregation and searchability (Zappavigna 2015: 289). Tagging is a form of *folksonomy*, which is a user-generated taxonomy based on users' categorisation of online content that aggregates entries posted by multiple users (Trant 2009: 1–2; Page 2012: 184). However, tagging is also an online social practice “used as a hyperlink bringing together all uses of a specific tag” (Barton 2015: 48) that can be creatively used to connect content shared by different persons. It can also be used as a meaning-making tool on a specific medium or freely used across media (e.g. an identical hashtag used on different social media such as Facebook and Twitter). Hashtagging, the practice of applying hashtags, can also be understood as a form of self-branding, self-representation, and self-reflection through which users construct a public identity by way of indirect affiliation, since they do not have to directly communicate with each other (Page 2012: 182; Zappavigna 2012: 83–87). This form of online participation entails a situated competence and dexterity in the use of the language, affordances, and interactional conventions of a given social space or medium (e.g. Vine). In other words, users need to learn and appropriately use the language and grammar of a specific semiotic domain in order to communicate effectively and be recognised as “insiders” by other participant (Gee 2007: 18–19, 28–29).

On Vine, once a multimodal post is published, other users can access related Vines by clicking on one of the included hashtags. For example, if a user tags her Vine with the hashtag *#breakfast*, other users can find it by searching all Vines with that hashtag or by clicking on it in another Vine. Data show that in order to interpret and understand the meaning of the hashtags posted on Vine, users need to be knowledgeable about the social medium, its “grammar”, and current trends in popular culture and the medium itself. While some hashtags are straightforward (e.g. *#germany*, *#racism*, or *#tattoo*), others need a greater interpretive effort, in relation to other modes used in the posted Vine and, more broadly, Vine as a social medium. For example, the hashtag *#sorrynotsorry* (V06) is used when an author wants to say “Sorry if you are offended by it or if it bothers you, but I am not sorry about it”. A user labelled his Vine with the hashtag *#justletmeeatmybreakfast* (V62) in response to a prejudiced statement related to him having breakfast (“*Oh, I didn't know your kind ate breakfast*”). Another user, in order to signal self-irony (V07, see sections 4.1–4.2) applies the *#AssOutOfYouAndMe* hashtag. Other creative hashtags found in the analysed Vines include *#harrumph* (V71, an onomatopoeic exclamation of dissatisfaction or disapproval), *#mlkdidntdieforthis* (V22, i.e. *Martin Luther King didn't die for this*, used in Vines in which people of colour behave in silly ways or are depicted in trivial situations), and *#butnotreally* (V07, used to counter or soften a previous statement or what is displayed in the video). One of the most original – and initially difficult to interpret – hashtags found in the analysed Vines was *#bruhmovement* (V22). *Bruh* is an alternative spelling and variant of the slang *bro* (which stands for “brother”, a vernacular term used among African-Americans to informally address a male of colour). The *Bruh Movement* was started on Vine on May 1st 2014, in a video by “CallHimBzar” in which we see

former high school basketball star Tony Farmer momentarily collapsing in court after being sentenced to three years of prison term for robbery, kidnapping and assaulting his girlfriend, accompanied by a dubbed voiceover clip of his friend and fellow Viner Headgraphix saying “Bruh.” [...] That week, other Viners began posting video clips with the hashtag #BruhMovement, featuring Farmer and other subjects collapsing with the “Bruh” audio clip playing in the background.

(Know Your Meme 2016)

In the context of Vine, the “Bruh” audio clip played at the end of the video (either showing Farmer collapsing or just playing the audio file) and the #bruhmovement or #bruh hashtags are used to express disbelief, frustration, disappointment, or other feelings, in reaction to something displayed in the Vine, frequently as a closing commentary referring to someone fainting, failing, or falling down. This hashtag shows that some Vines require special knowledge in order to grasp the humour conveyed by means of multiple modes (e.g. interplay between a user-recorded and edited video, an audio sample, and a written hashtag) in a wider intertextual network. It is also worthwhile to note that some of the hashtags used on Vine lead to hundreds or thousands of other Vines with the same label, while, in other cases, users seem to create them specifically for a single Vine, making them as unique as possible. These “rare” hashtags are employed as metacommunicative and meaning-making markers – in several instances with humorous functions – that transcend their labelling use. Some hashtags are also used as transgressive labels. Highfield (2016: 41) talks about “irreverent hashtagger” in the broader framework of “irreverent Internet” (Highfield 2016: 42), as playful, and sometimes silly, commentaries to trivial or serious issues through sarcasm, irony, satire, and humorous cynicism. In the analysed Vines such irreverent and “politically incorrect” uses of hashtags include: #AssOutOfYouAndMe (V07), #420blazeitfaget (V19), and #retard (V64).

#### 4.7. Functions of humour and themes in the analysed vines

The analysis showed that the Vines considered in this study carry different discursive functions that transcend the elicitation of a mirthful experience of laughter. Most of the Vines seem to have been created for the pleasure of sharing them with an audience (one of the most popular hashtags on Vine is #doitforthevine). Vines posted “just for fun”, without a clearly identifiable discursive function in relation to prejudice, represent the 44.1% of all the humorous Vines considered in this study. The remaining 55.9% carries important discursive functions: in 41.2% of them, users expose stereotypes and prejudiced outlooks, in 8.8% of them, Viners unmask and/or critique a prejudiced person or behaviour (e.g. catching someone in the act of being prejudiced), and react to lived experiences of prejudice (5.9%). The themes represented in the humorous Vines labelled with the #prejudice hashtag are: origin, ethnicity, and race (32.4%), the general concept of prejudice (23.5%), media and social media (14.7%), personal appearance (11.8%), and gender and sexual orientation (8.8%). The remaining 8.8% is dedicated to politics, bullying, and age-related prejudice.

## 5. Conclusions

This study explored multimodal representations of humour on Vine, a short-form social medium that allows for novel ways of self-expression, communication, and meaning-making. In the analysed Vines, authors use the medium as a personal “humorous confessional” or impersonate different characters to amplify their messages through a multiplicity of converging voices. They do so to make the most of the affordances of a portable medium, when the involvement of other people is not possible or practicable. Viners use wearable

accessories to create “instant characters” that interact with each other in edited one-person dramatizations that need to convey their humorous message in a limited time (six seconds) and space (the framing allowed by a handheld device). To compensate for such limitations, users exploit the different affordances offered by Vine, such as the textbox accompanying each posted video, the comment box (in which they post additional information), hashtags, and emojis (e.g. see Figures 1–4). In these efforts, several modes of representation are concurrently or selectively used to convey the message. In some instances, this specificity and complexity requires a specialist knowledge of Vine, popular culture, and current social media trends, to fully decode and understand the humorous message.

Humour on Vine is a vast phenomenon, with millions of humorous videos uploaded daily. Making sense of its complexity is undeniably a daunting task that will require the effort of several scholars from different fields and through different methodologies, in order to gain a nuanced and multidisciplinary understanding of its features, modes, and ever-changing trends. This study is limited by its small sample (although necessary for a fine-grained analysis) and its focus on humour related to a specific theme (prejudice). Future research may study humour on Vine or similar social media by using larger sets of data, quantitative or mixed methods, and explore humour from a more general perspective (not theme-specific) or in relation to other topics. International, local, and cross-cultural perspectives would be an important contribution to understanding humour in a global and pervasive medium such as Vine. Further, an investigation of humorous uses of hashtags on Vine and other short-form media would expand the understanding of this novel metacommunicative tool and meaning-making mode. It is also worth mentioning that the *#prejudice* hashtag generated a relatively small amount of humorous Vines, because of its specificity and its association with serious issues on a personal, societal, and global level. Other hashtags may generate a larger number of humorous videos featuring different humorous mechanisms and strategies.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on multimodal humour and online humour focused on ethnicity, race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and other themes that have traditionally been conducive to prejudice, discrimination, and bullying. Further, this study suggests to expand the modal categories put forth by New London Group (1996) (i.e. *linguistic*, *audio*, *visual*, *gestural*, and *spatial*) with new modes (*metalinguistic*, *hypertextual*, *temporal*, *technical*, and *creative*) that may be relevant in the analysis of humour and other topics and practices on social media and emergent spaces for computer-mediated communication. The analyses presented in this study confirm the need for an egalitarian approach to all modes of communication and expression, besides and beyond “words”, as valuable tools and building blocks of communication that work together, without fixed hierarchies, in the meaning-making process. In conclusion, in order to make sense of the multifaceted, intertextual, and ever-evolving expressions of humour in online settings, multimodal analytical approaches are needed. This article, with its analyses, findings, and limitations, enthusiastically points in that direction.

## Acknowledgements

The author wants to acknowledge Marcos de R. Antuna, co-author of the study of multimodal representations of prejudice of Vine mentioned in the manuscript, who could not participate in this work. Marcos, thank you for your precious contribution in the collection and categorisation of data and for being a great person to work with. I sincerely look forward to more thought-provoking conversations and joint scholarly enterprises.



## References

- Attardo S. (2001). *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Attardo, S., & Raskin, V. (1991). 'Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model'. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* 4 (3/4), pp. 293–347.
- Bakhshi, S., Shamma, D. A., Kennedy, L., Song, Y., de Juan, P. & Kaye, J. J. (2016). 'Fast, cheap, and good: Why animated GIFs engage us'. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, pp. 575–586.
- Ballesteros Doncel, E. (2016). 'Circulación de memes en WhatsApp: Ambivalencias del humour desde la perspectiva de género'. *Empiria. Revista de metodología de ciencias sociales* 35, pp. 21–45.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Barton, D. (2015). 'Tagging on Flickr as a social practice'. In Jones, R., Chik, A. & Hafner, C. A. (eds.), *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge, pp. 48–65.
- Best of Vines (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/BestofVines>. [Accessed 24 August 2016.]
- Boxman-Shabtai, L. & Shifman, L. (2015). 'When ethnic humour goes digital'. *New Media & Society* 17 (4), pp. 520–539.
- Constine, J. (2016). 'Twitter still might save Vine by selling it'. *Tech Crunch*. [Online] <https://techcrunch.com/2016/11/07/revive-vine/>. [Accessed 8 November 2016.]
- Dynel, M. (2016). "'I has seen image Mmcros!' Advice animals memes as visual-verbal jokes'. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, pp. 660–688.
- Francesconi, S. (2011). 'Multimodally expressed humour shaping Scottishness in tourist postcards'. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 9 (1), pp. 1–17.
- Frank, R. (2009). 'The forward as folklore: Studying e-mailed humour'. In T. V. Blank (ed.), *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, pp. 98–123.
- Frydenberg, M., & Andone, D. (2016). 'Creating micro-videos to demonstrate technology learning and digital literacy'. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education* 13 (4), pp. 261–273.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gelb, B. D. & Zinkhan, G. M. (1985). 'The effect of repetition on humour in a radio advertising study'. *Journal of Advertising* 14 (4), pp. 13–68.
- Gross, S., Bardzell, J. & Bardzell, S. (2014). 'Structures, forms, and stuff: The materiality and medium of interaction'. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 18, pp. 637–649.
- Highfield, T. (2016). *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K. & Robison, A. J. (2009). *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jewitt, C. (2014). 'Multimodal approaches'. In Norris, S. & Maier, C. D. (eds.), *Interactions, Images, and Text*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 127–136.
- Know Your Meme (2016). 'Know Your Meme: "Bruh"'. [Online] <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bruh>. [Accessed 12 May 2016.]
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York: Routledge.
- Kress G. & van Leeuwen T. (2001). *Multimodal Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.



- Kuipers, G. (2002). 'Media culture and internet disaster jokes: Bin laden and the attack on the World Trade Centre'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5 (4), pp. 450–470.
- Kuipers, G. (2005). "'Where was King Kong when we needed him?'" Public discourse, digital disaster jokes, and the functions of laughter after 9/11'. *The Journal of American Culture* 28 (1), pp. 70–84.
- Lamerichs, J. & te Molder, H. F. M. (2003). 'Computer-mediated communication: From a cognitive to a discursive model'. *New Media & Society* 5 (4), pp. 451–473.
- Leadbeater, C. & Miller, P. (2004). *The Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society*. London: Demos.
- Meyer, J. C. (2000). 'Humour as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humour in communication'. *Communication Theory* 10 (3), pp. 310–331.
- Miczko, N. (2014). 'Analysing structure and function in humour: Preliminary sketch of a message-centred model'. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 27 (3), pp. 461–480.
- New London Group (Cazden, C., Cope, B., Fairclough, N., Gee, J., Kalantzis, M., Kress, G., et al.). (1996). 'A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures'. *Harvard Educational Review* 66, pp. 60–92.
- Norricks, N. R. (2004). 'Non-verbal humour and joke performance'. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 17 (4), pp. 401–409.
- Page, R. (2012). 'The linguistics of self-branding and micro-celebrity in Twitter: The role of hashtags'. *Discourse & Communication* 6 (2), pp. 181–201.
- Potter, J. (1997). 'Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk'. In Silverman, D. (ed.), *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 144–160.
- Potter, J., Edwards, D. & Wetherell, M. (1993). 'A model of discourse in action'. *American Behavioural Scientist* 36 (3), pp. 383–401.
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel.
- Ritzer, G. & Jurgenson, N. (2010). 'Production, consumption, prosumption'. *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10 (1), pp. 13–36.
- Shifman, L. (2007). 'Humour in the age of digital reproduction: Continuity and change in Internet-based comic texts'. *International Journal of Communication* 1, pp. 187–209.
- Shifman, L. (2014). 'The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres'. *Journal of Visual Culture* 13 (3), pp. 340–358.
- Trant, J. (2009). 'Studying social tagging and folksonomy: A review and framework'. *Journal of Digital Information* 10 (1), pp. 1–44.
- Trends on Vine (2016). [Online] <http://vine.co/trends?sort=top>. [Accessed 7 October 2016.]
- Tsakona, V. (2009). 'Language and image interaction in cartoons: Towards a multimodal theory of humour'. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41 (6), pp. 1171–1188.
- Vine (2016). [Online] <http://www.vine.co>. [Accessed 12 March 2016.]
- Weaver, S. (2011). 'Jokes, rhetoric and embodied racism: A rhetorical discourse analysis of the logics of racist jokes on the Internet'. *Ethnicities* 11 (4), pp. 413–435.
- Yoon, I. (2016). 'Why is it not just a joke? Analysis of Internet memes associated with racism and hidden ideology of colourblindness'. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* 33, pp. 92–123.
- Zappavigna, M. (2012). *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*. London: Continuum.
- Zappavigna, M. (2015). 'Searchable talk: The linguistic functions of hashtags'. *Social Semiotics* 25 (3), pp. 274–291.
- Zhang, L., Wang, F. & Liu, J. (2014, March). 'Understand instant video clip sharing on mobile platforms: Twitter's vine as a case study'. In *Proceedings of Network and Operating System Support on Digital Audio and Video Workshop*. ACM, p. 85.

Zhang, Y. & Zinkhan, G. M. (1991). 'Humour in television advertising: The effects of repetition and social setting'. *Advances in Consumer Research* 18, pp. 813–818. [Online] <https://www.acrwebsite.org/search/view-conference-proceedings.aspx?Id=7256>. [Accessed 18 November 2016.]