

Irony in fashion memes: a Pink Poodle perspective on the aesthetics of dressing

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Abstract

The practice of fashion memes is a rather fresh exercise on the fashion scene, and it has been enjoyed by both the audiences and the brands. Fashion media have turned their attention to the phenomenon as well, addressing its scope, authorship and function from various angles. Scholarly research of the field is very scarce, though. The article seeks to contribute to the emerging field of fashion meme research by analysing a Lithuanian author of original fashion memes, a self-proclaimed fashion critic the Pink Poodle – an imaginary social media personality active on Facebook and Instagram platforms. The subjects of Pink Poodle memes are objects of media photographs from local and global public events (such as the Presidential Inauguration or an international cinema festival opening, Grammy Awards, Oscars) that demonstrate, from Poodle’s perspective, disagreements with fashion and/or aesthetics in general. The aim of the article is to reflect on the function of irony and sarcasm of the fashion meme as an instrument for fashion criticism, and the role of (visual) irony on the perception of fashion in the contemporary society. The text also addresses the role of independent fashion criticism that the practice of fashion meme creation seems to provide, and the function that this kind of intermediary between fashion and its audiences may perform.

Keywords: fashion meme, fashion irony, Pink Poodle memes, power relations in fashion.

1. Introduction

Fashion memes have been around for a while, created first by fashion consumers, and rather quickly adopted by brands, *Vetements* being one of the first to incorporate the meme logic into its promotional as well as design strategy (as demonstrated by Skjulstad 2018). Fashion meme research, however, is very scarce: apart from my own article (Stankevičiūtė 2021) it is limited to two articles (by the time of writing in August 2021; see Skjulstad 2018; Kim 2020). One of the two articles provides the definition of the fashion meme and makes the first most important distinction in the field: that of *authorship* (Kim 2020). Koh Woon Kim distinguishes between commercial and non-commercial memes; I propose an equivalent term – *company-produced* and *audience-produced* (as a synonym for *user-generated*) memes.

Communication theory maintains that the source, i.e. the sender of a communicative message, is always at the beginning of the communication process. It is one of the reasons why

the authorship category is one of the most important in fashion memes. Because, as Kim (2020: 337-338) correctly points out, company-produced memes have a different function from that of audience-produced memes. The latter represent a free expression of the audience's creativity, involvement into fashion and their share of citizenship activism, while the former are the expression of a commercial interest to sell the product or service related to the meme. John Fiske (2011 [1989]) would say that company-produced memes are an example of capitalist commodification of resistance that memes as a social and creative phenomenon represent.

Internet memes, especially political memes, have been seen as a means of cultural activism and resistance (Mina 2012; Williams 2012; Huntington 2013; Wiggins 2019) and have thus been incorporated into the power structures of the network society. They represent a convenient instrument that serves the liberating power of laughter (in the sense of Bakhtin 1986; see also Hart 2007; Hammond 2018). The openness of form that is one of the essential characteristics of memes grants the internet users creativity and involvement. As Shifman (2011) puts it, people share memes not because they want to disseminate the story they found interesting, but because they want to have their input into the retelling and propagation of the story. Similarly to the wearers of torn jeans in the 1970s, whom Fiske considers the expressers of cultural resistance (Fiske 2011 [1989]), the users who re-create and further spread memes share the critical values encoded in their messages (or any values they can signify). In this regard, it is debatable how much company-produced memes are genuine, yet the focus of the current article is audience-produced memes.

The meme universe, however, is too diverse and chaotic to be arranged into boxes with labels. Seeing internet memes as a means of cultural resistance is just one of many approaches, while resistance itself may have various goals. The aim of this article is to reflect on the function of irony and sarcasm of the fashion meme as an instrument for fashion criticism, and the role of (visual) irony on the perception of fashion in the contemporary society. The article also addresses the role of *independent fashion criticism* that the practice of fashion meme creation seems to provide, and the function that this kind of intermediary between fashion and its audiences may perform.

2. The definition of a fashion meme

A fashion meme is defined as an Internet meme centred on fashion (clothing, trends, people, the industry) and related to it by its theme, imagery or symbolism, produced with humorous intention, and propagated through interaction (see also Kim 2020: 330). The operational tools of memes, i.e., the combinations of image and text that have a humorous intent, are not unique; similar tools have been used by other visual forms of humour (caricature, comics, etc.). However, internet memes differ from their ancestors in two important aspects: 1) they are created with the help of digital tools, therefore they may acquire very modern forms (gifs, videos, etc.); 2) they are intended for sharing and spreading, therefore they have a sort of 'open' structure (see Dynel 2016: 662). This means that the meme changes continually, acquiring new forms with nearly every user, like in the examples of the so-called Angelina Jolie leg meme (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Various examples of the Angelina Jolie leg meme

The third important difference that an internet meme demonstrates from its predecessors is the anonymity of its author. Comics, caricatures and other visual jokes circulating in the public space before the internet age would normally belong to the hand of a particular person, and would be distinguishable by their artistic style, signature, etc. Internet memes function as an opposite of the notion of single author, as every user, who contributes to the meme's transformation by the slightest detail, becomes a co-author. Thus, the habitual concept of authorship becomes useless in relation to internet memes. Anonymity is important in at least two respects: first, it guarantees safety if the meme is meant to be a piece of social or political critique (and the latter may get really harsh in internet memes); second, it allows to avoid the restrictions about copyright for the use of images and texts (large part of internet memes are combinations of pre-existing cultural texts: cuttings from photographs, film-stills, verbal texts, cartoons, caricatures, etc.). This is especially relevant to the field of fashion, where the issues of both critique and image copyright are highly prioritised. The copyright subject, however, albeit highly important, is not at the focus of this article, and will therefore not be addressed further.

The majority of fashion meme-generating accounts today began their activity anonymously on social networks. Only some of their authors are known to the public today. The most popular fashion meme generators reside in Instagram, such as @freddiemade, @meme_saint_laurent, @siduations, @geocasket, @raf_semens, @fuckhopsin, @cumdesgarcons, @fashion_wankers, @slowfashionmemes, @itsmaysmemes, @fashionassistants, @stressedstylist, @artlexachung, @hautelemode, @crimesagaisntshoemanity, @gryffindior, and several others. The object of the present research is the Pink Poodle, an author from Lithuania, locally the best-known generator of fashion memes.

3. The Pink Poodle persona and the scheme of operation

Pink Poodle (henceforth PP) is one of the most famous personalities in Lithuanian fashion and definitely *the* most famous fashion critic of the country. It is a fictional character of social media, a pseudonym for a collective of fashion lovers. The Pink Poodle Facebook account under the title ‘Look, Mamma, I’m a Celebrity’ was launched in 2016 after a late-night correspondence among friends as a joke, with the aim of practicing publicly their most favourite occupation – gossiping about the public looks of local as well as global celebrities.

The account operated anonymously for about two years, causing great interest among fashion users as to the genuine authorship of Poodle’s bitchy comments. Other, less-fashion interested social media users were intrigued by the secret of Poodle’s identity and the success in hiding that identity for so long.

Today the Pink Poodle persona is maintained by a group of five people in their early forties, three of whom make the nucleus. They represent various professions – a clothes designer, a lawyer, a medical doctor, a philologist, a representative of creative industries. They see their ‘product’ – the Pink Poodle account – as a “grotesque, an allegory, a satire of style and good taste” (*Zmones.lt*, my translation). It is the perfect illustration of the Arabian proverb “the dog barks while the caravan moves on” and represents a satirical image of “a socialite who is never in the first plan on public photographs of social celebrities, but has a great desire to be a member of the elite” (*Zmones.lt*, my translation). Currently the ‘Look, Mamma, I’m a Celebrity’ Facebook account has 46,623 followers, and the Instagram account @pinkpoodlecelebrity enjoys 15K followers’ audience (as of 15 August 2021). Both channels are used as parallel to one another: the same post would be put on Facebook and Instagram simultaneously, with an almost identical content.

Poodle’s scheme of activity is comparison and juxtaposition. A selected image of an outfit that has attracted Poodle’s attention is put next to another image that has similarities in terms of form, colour, shape or anything that has provoked Poodle’s imagination (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

The visual element may have various formats, for example, a collage of three images: the original photo, another image that exhibits a funny element, and the third is Poodle's (photoshopped) version of the intended outfit. The collages are accompanied by ironic, sarcastic or satirical verbal texts that complete the memetic message, providing more or less relevant commentary on the criticised outfit, the wearer or anything else that Poodle has decided to provide the images with.

Pink Poodle memes do not strictly follow the meme definition as presented by Denisova (2020: 11) that sees a meme being

an imitable text that Internet users appropriate, adjust and share in the digital sphere. The initial text may be [...] any digital unit of expression, as long as it conveys certain meaning or emotion and encourages others to either add something to the content or shape, makes a meme prototype.

One of the most important reasons for a meme's success is its incompleteness, and its accessibility to the audience's willingness to finish the joke (see Denisova 2020). In the case of Pink Poodle, however, the image part is rarely incomplete; quite to the contrary, it is quite full. Pink Poodle posts are memetic only in their form, not their structure, for they present a full three-element scheme that invites readers into dialogue rather than reproduction (Stankevičiūtė 2021). Pink Poodle memes work on two levels – the image level is normally quite self-explanatory and the joke is rather obvious. The verbal part, however, is where the audience may – and does – come in, which can be observed in the followers' comments. The participation in the joke in Poodle's case is not sharing the meme and spreading it further but engaging into a conversation with the author.

The visual and verbal elements of the memetic message are, in Poodle's case, the most important elements of the fashion-critical discourse, therefore they are at the focus of the present research. Dialogues with the readers develop as a continuation of the communicative message, a certain communicative game that very often produces various linguistic and stylistic play on words and images that do not necessarily add meaningfulness to the discussion of the fashion or images in question, but are rather 'small talk' that maintains Poodle's role and reputation of a fashion critic who is a pink toy-dog.

PP author collective emphasise two aspects of their activity that they consider most important: education and reporting on the elite lifestyle (*Zmones.lt; Conversation with PP collective*). The historical absence of genuine fashion magazines (that could parallel *Vogue, Elle*, or similar publications) in Lithuania determined the absence of a quality fashion discourse which put the notion of self-representation through fashionable appearance to the margins of public life, with knowledge of fashion restricted to professionals – designers, models, and a handful of journalists working in the field. Pink Poodle sarcastic comments fill the gap, at the same time creating an adequate, as they claim, realm of the yellow press that does not pretend to be intellectual or serious – in contrast to other media that, according to the Poodle collective, rarely raises above the margin of yellow but will never admit it (*Conversation with PP collective*). In other words, Pink Poodle seeks to be an opinion-maker in fashion, using the instruments that guarantee attention of like-minded individuals – i.e. irony, parody and sarcasm. All of those, scholars claim, require knowledge of the context to be understood, i.e. create a distinction between those who know it – the 'insiders' and those who do not – the 'outsiders' (see Colebrook 2004; Magill 2007).

Presumably, that is why Poodle normally does not provide explanations about what is stylish or not stylish about an outfit (with some exceptions noted below) – fashion lovers would know it anyway, and those who do not know it cannot be helped. Therefore, the educational intention of Pink Poodle critique seems very contemporary and conceptual, without any

didacticism. It seems that it is not the aesthetic taste that PP educates his audience in, but common sense, tidiness, understanding of what is appropriate for a public appearance. This particular aspect is highly relevant to the local audience. Yet the *pinkpoodelesque* fashion discourse as a part of the general fashion memes universe is important from a global perspective as well. Its characteristic features indicate social and cognitive processes that witness particular transformations of the society. Understanding Pink Poodle fashion memes may tell us important things about our contemporary society in general and fashion as one of its fields of activity in particular. Analysing the irony that occurs in Pink Poodle posts may offer insights into the user mentality and enable the fashion industry to understand its customers in a more efficient way. The very existence of fashion memes as such is a sign for the fashion industry of the users' willingness for transformation of the fashion discourse. Pink Poodle and other fashion memes speak of aspects of fashion that may be overlooked by professionals but are important for fashion consumers.

4. Categorising Pink Poodle memes

It is possible to distinguish six basic forms of Pink Poodle's posts: 1) memes on celebrity outfits (local and global personalities); 2) memes on random dressing disasters, trend criticism, weird fashion/clothing choices; 3) memes on untidy/inappropriate/inadequate clothing; 4) posts praising celebrity outfits; 5) self-referential posts about the personality and life of Pink Poodle; 6) reaction to the problems of the day, actual news, etc. The sixth type is irrelevant to the present investigation theme and will not be reviewed. Presenting each category will allow to understand the intention of Poodle's fashion meme and provide background for further argumentation.

4.1. Type 1. Celebrities' fashion

The first type of Pink Poodle's memes is the most directly related to the concept of fashion as representation. The posts are created on the basis of celebrities' public photographs from various global events, such as the Oscar ceremony, and similar. The choice of celebrity photos is determined entirely by the associations that an outfit provokes in the authors' vision. The images themselves may be not sarcastic, just funny, and usually do not go beyond criticism, i.e. the author may not provide the 'mistake' or an explanation about the failure of the outfit at all, leaving the image and the accompanying association to speak for itself. The effect of irony or sarcasm is produced by the visual association that is very often accompanied by a verbal commentary that may or may not directly deal with the item in question – i.e. the criticised outfit. For example, in Fig. 3, the public photo of the US media personality Kim Kardashian wearing a green leather bodice from Schiaparelli Haute Couture with a long green skirt that opens up one of her legs almost to the crotch has been 'improved' by the Poodle. The head of a Ninja Turtle has been added on Kim's figure, hiding the face completely and creating a new image of the green colour outfit that she was wearing. The commentary of the author is formulated in the form of a direct address to the object of the photograph, as if they were conversing: "Oh, Kim, thanks, I just had this idea how to improve your Christmas costume, oh c'm on, no need to thank, best wishes to West, it's all fine, we're all healthy, that's what matters, take care, bye." The directness and informality of the text creates additional level of irony: Pink Poodle behaves as if he were a close friend of Kim Kardashian, and is reaching out to her with an absurd suggestion how to better her Christmas dress, addressing her in his native language that she does not know. It is an ironic take on the ridiculous costume but also on the sugary tone of intimacy practiced by some influencers in their communication with their followers on social media.



Figure 3. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

Some posts do provide quite detailed explanations of the figure who is being *meme'd* – especially if/when s/he is difficult to be recognised instantly. For example, the meme about the singer and songwriter *The Weeknd's* appearance in the American Music Awards (Fig. 4) is introduced with a rather long explanation that refers to the numerous questions that the image caused among the musician's admirers: “some guessed if the face bandages are only part of the image, or the artist has been punched on the nose”.

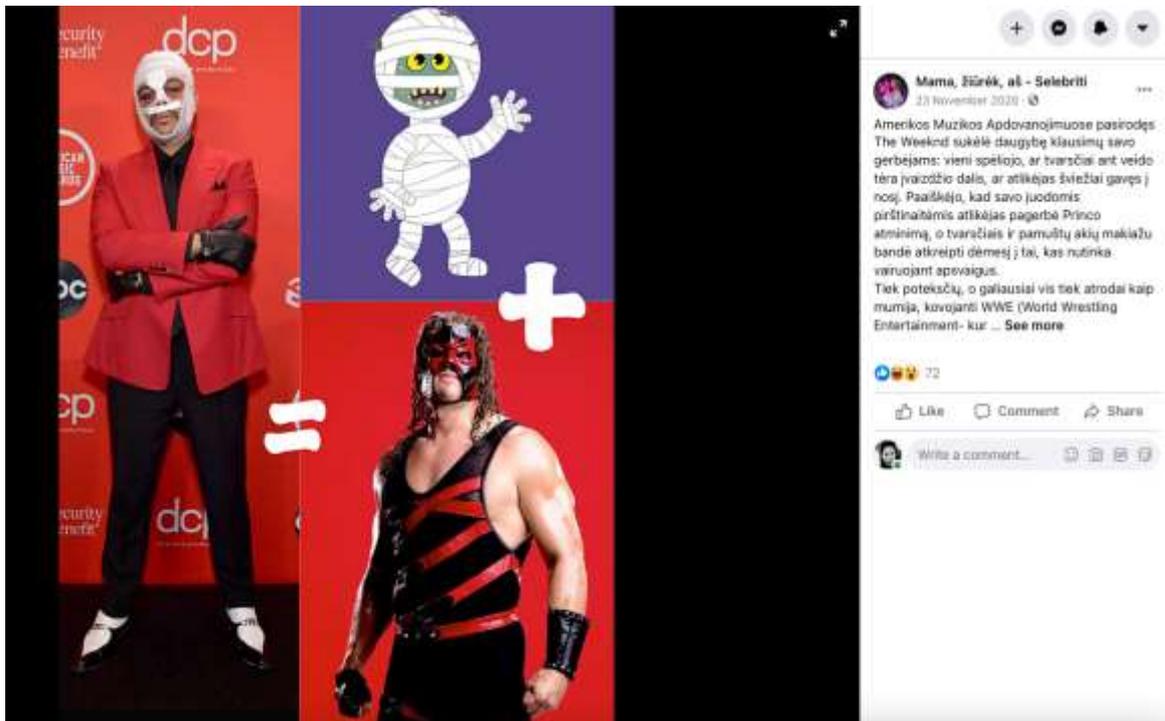


Figure 4. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

In this type of posts the argumentation is often done by means of visuals, yet not by providing the alternative of a good dress to the bad dress, but by pointing out what is wrong with it, often using the tool of visual parody (see Stankevičiūtė 2021). This type of memes aims at “fashion criticism proper”, understood as the practice of pointing out the flaws and absurdities of an outfit, the lack of aesthetics or common sense in a dressing choice. Proper for a pink poodle, that is.

4.2. Type 2. Random fashion disasters

The second type of fashion memes performs a similar function. It may be classified as *random fashion disasters*. They exclude celebrities, but focus on weird clothing choices, fashion trend criticism and various misfortunes of dressing reported in public photos from all walks of life – from fashion runway to sports events.

For example, in Fig. 5, a new type of hat (presumably for a female audience) by Gucci (from Autumn/Winter 2021) is likened to a sheep head that looks very much like two characters from animation films. The text of the post introduces a third and absolutely irrelevant theme – that of zucchini: “Gucci for me is like zucchini – it’s tasty and likeable when it’s not too much. But when there’s too much zucchini, there is no life. But in general zucchini is much better than quarantine”. The absurdity and irrelevance of the zucchini subject may seem perplexing – but at the same time, it may be understood as referring to the tensions of the Covid-19 worldwide quarantine that affects everybody, including fashion designers, whose creations may seem inadequate.



Figure 5. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

Fig. 6 juxtaposes the photograph of Barcelona basketball team in action with a picture of a man who is clearly nervous about having put a red item into a lot of whites in his washing machine, and now has to face the consequences – the whole ruined lot of white clothes that have been coloured light pink. The post says just that: “Am I the only one to whom the Barcelona team clothing reminds of the fate of one red sock in a lot of whites?” The post could hardly be entitled

fashion criticism; it is rather a reflection of a personal opinion, even association. Being formulated as a question, or even a self-doubt, it does not formulate a claim, but suggests an association that may or may not be accepted by the audience who may or may not perceive Poodle's tongue-in-cheek mood. To paraphrase Morwenna Ferrier, this is a "throw at the wall that will doubtfully stay" (Ferrier 2019), but the author decided to try it anyway.



Figure 6. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

The last of the examples from this group (Fig. 7) points to dressing disasters from local public events, in this case the equivalent of a fashion week that happens in Vilnius, *Mados infekcija* (Fashion Infection). The image created by Poodle shows someone from the event's audience wearing denim trousers that look like DIY product.



Figure 7. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

The presumable function of this type of PP posts is pure entertainment, fun, perhaps even gossip, expressing a personal opinion about what is considered weird or non-sensical fashion taste. It is possible to claim that the purpose of such posts is promotion of common sense while satirising on the exaggerations of fashion.

4.3. Type 3. The untidies

The third group of Poodle's memes is the most pedagogical. It embraces all the posts that criticise one or another form of untidiness, inappropriateness of clothing related to appearance in public: from wrinkled dresses and trousers to failures in dressing protocol, such as which buttons must be closed and open on a male jacket. The tone of these posts is invariably impatient and bitchy, the reader can easily understand that the problem exhibited in Poodle's images is a recurrent one, and that the author is actually sick and tired of repeating the rules of adequate clothing rules in public.

For example, in Fig. 8, the author provides a typology of trousers worn by male representatives of the nation in various public events. It is of course not a serious typology, but one based on the concrete examples that were found in the media. Objects in photos are entitled as “the naughty one”, “on a rollercoaster”, “country dad”, “the 90s god”, “ballroom dancer”, “the timid crumpler”, etc. All of the epithets are varied ways to address the eternal problem that Poodle never misses – the crumpled or inappropriately fitting trousers (usually male).

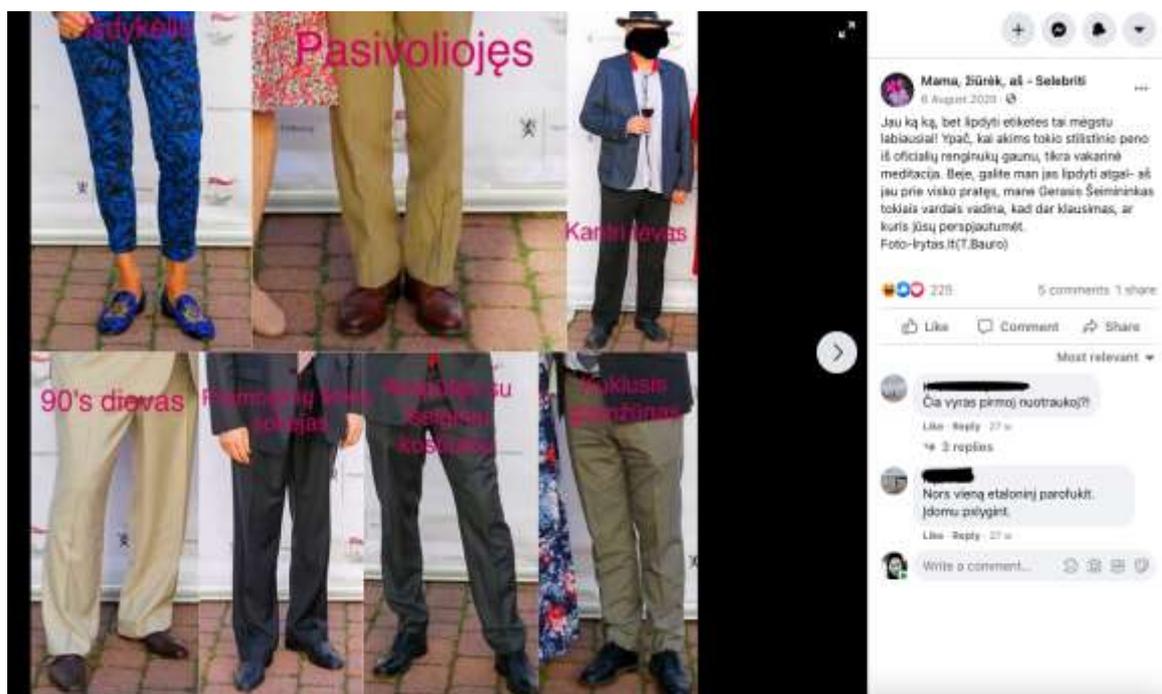


Figure 8. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

Fig. 9 is one of the many examples about the right way to wear jacket buttons: the protocol demands that the first button would be closed while a person walks or is standing, and the remaining buttons must be open. This rule is disregarded by many people who are publicly photographed with all buttons closed or open. This issue has been addressed by Poodle since the very beginning of his career, that is why, although the images are recurrent, the

accompanying texts demonstrate the mood of weariness, like the one below: the picture of a man buttoning up his coat in the wrong way is combined with a popular meme of a person articulating “Don’t do it, please don’t do it”, and then crying hopelessly for not being listened to.



Figure 9. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

It is in this respect that Poodle’s activity can be compared to other similar actors of the social media, such as the Australian based Facebook account *Fashion Critical* that is an incognito operated account, similarly to Poodle, except that *Fashion Critical* does not produce memes, but criticises outfits in the photographs directly.

This group of memes has a very obvious function that is always expressed most explicitly: severe criticism and education, even didactics, pertaining to the explanation of what is appropriate and not appropriate for an outfit worn in public.

4.4. Type 4. The well-dressed

The fourth group of Pink Poodle’s posts are not actual memes, because they do not broadcast satirical images, but normal photos of people – both celebrities and commoners – who are actually well dressed, in Poodle’s opinion. This type is the least in number, therefore most valuable. The posts of this group usually display one single photo of the person, or several pictures combined into one collage. There are no additional images that would encourage any associations, and the accompanying texts are usually not satirical. For example, in Fig. 10, we see two female politicians of the newly-elected Lithuanian parliament, the Parliament Speaker and the Home Office Minister. They are both dressed in versions of “little black dress” and wearing black masks. The text announces: “If the country policy is going to be like the clothing of this 13th Parliament of Lithuanian Republic, it will definitely be my favourite”. A new line below announces, however, that “Of course, there was an auntie dressed in some tragic ex-queen dress suit, but I hope that she will see herself, get embarrassed and will go change”. The latter does not contradict the praise of the two women in the photographs, even if it may seem so. The sarcastic comment on ‘an auntie’ is definitely made in order to reinforce the contrast between the stylish politicians and those who are not stylish, and it emphasises the overall impression that Poodle got about the new Parliament – most of the members of the newly-elected Parliament

dress really well, with the exception of one or two who will hopefully be positively influenced by the stylish colleagues and will learn their ways with fashion.



Figure 10. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

The praising posts do not usually point out the positive aspects of the outfit, thus their educational function relies entirely on the visual aspect, and they often do not have the satirical strike either. It may be said that the function of this group of posts is a positive balance – real praise, compliment, expression of admiration with the personality or the outfit. Getting there, into this section of Poodle’s list, is a compliment by default, something that can be bragged about.

4.5. Type 5. Self-referential

The fifth type of Pink Poodle’s memes are self-referential posts on the personality and life of the Pink Poodle. They are created in the tone of “the influencer spirit” and their function is to promote the Poodle persona. The image dominating this group is a pink toy dog that is supposed to be the ‘real-life’ figure behind the commentary in the posts. Sometimes the dog is accompanied by other toy dogs of various shades of pink, sometimes it accompanies a human – presumably the Good Master (who in texts is always referred to as a male, but in the images is always in the form of a female, even though we never see the face or full figure of the Good Master to be able to suspect, let alone decide, precisely who the person is). The dominating tone of the self-referential memes is narcissistic self-deprecation that nevertheless comes out as a dignified attempt. For example, in Fig. 11 the Pink Poodle toy dog is photographed on the lap of a woman whose black hat covers her face completely, and the hat is at the focus of the image, while Poodle is the secondary focus. The text under the image sounds like a vintage newspaper style ad: “Will accompany ladies for an agreed price. Age, looks, location are not important. For more info, PM”. The photograph, like most of this type, is not *memetic* in its form or structure, it does not include any references to fashion or fashion criticism. It obviously seeks to entertain the regular audience of followers, to maintain their attention by playing with the image of a “lap-

dog”, or “play-dog”. The effect that is sought and achieved is that of irony – a business-like advertisement that implies the notorious male professional of gigolo (that is what hashtag below the text #žigolo indicates (žigolo is the Lithuanian word for male escort), while at the same time hinting of famous local socialites who do the job, and all this is coming from a toy-dog of pink colour.



Figure 11. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

A similar photograph with no humans but the same pink toy covered in mushrooms (chanterelles and boletus; Fig. 12) mocks the national mania of going to the woods for mushrooms (the autumn of 2020, when the image was published, was renowned as extremely fertile in mushrooms). The text of the post announces: “In autumn ecstasy. Or a mushroom among mushrooms” (The latter is a play on words as “a mushroom” stands for someone who is a fool/gawk).

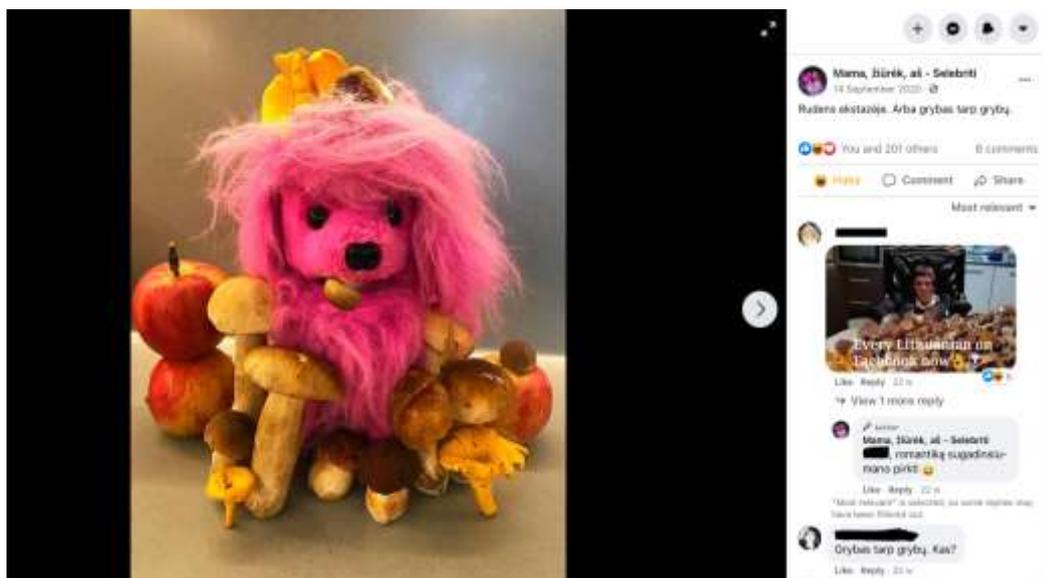


Figure 12. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

Sometimes a self-referential post is merely verbal, with no photographic image, conveying the Pink Poodle philosophy with words only. Fig. 13 says “Friendship is hating together the same thing”, with an alleged quote from Seneca, whose name has been crossed out and ‘Poodle’ has been inserted instead. The levels of irony and reference are numerous here: the ambitious comparison of philosophical insight (Poodle, like Seneca, pronounces the words of wisdom); the ironic allusion to the famous philosophical or other type of visual quotes decorated with the marble bust of their author(s), circulating on the internet; the visual imagery of the quote, not accompanied by a marble head of its author the Poodle, but written on a rosy-pink background of cloud-like pattern, a reference to the pink life of the Poodle and the celebrity life-style that the Poodle persona is aspiring to and promoting at the same time. The text accompanying the post adds to the irony of the verbal image, saying “Some philosophical insights for the end of the year” (the post came out 27 December 2020). The tone of the one-liner emphasises the influencer ambition of Pink Poodle to do more than be a fashion influencer but also a life-style coach and philosopher, while re-enforcing the situational irony of an imaginary persona of a social media fashion critic who is embodied by a pink toy-dog.



Figure 13. Pink Poodle fashion meme. Author: Pink Poodle

Formally, self-referential Pink Poodle memes are not fashion memes, at least in terms of the fashion-meme definition I provided at the beginning. Yet, for the local audience Pink Poodle has become the symbol of fashion and fashion discourse, a fashion influencer, therefore self-referential posts that confirm the status are regarded as fashion memes as well.

It would be perhaps too audacious to claim that Pink Poodle is a unique project in the fashion world, for there well may be similar personas in various national cultures that are only accessible to the speakers of national languages. However, nothing of the kind has been discovered in Anglo-American social media (e.g. Facebook and Instagram platforms) during the period of research of September 2020 – April 2021. Therefore, it is possible to presume that the Lithuanian fashion critic Pink Poodle is a unique fashion project peculiar to Lithuanian culture. The very concept of criticising fashion by juxtaposing an original image that its author considers an inappropriate example with an associative image which may have a funny or ironic effect is

not unique. As can be seen from many other popular fashion memes, the incongruity between two images – the original and the ‘adjusted’ one is a practice widely applied by creators of various types of memes (for popular fashion meme accounts on social media, see Section 1). In the case of Pink Poodle, there are several influences that can be discerned which have contributed to this style of fashion memes, such as the social media account *Diet Prada* and the Australian comedian Celeste Barber’s Instagram series #challengeaccepted. Despite conceptual similarities that are inspirations rather than copying material, the Pink Poodle account is indisputably a unique and very consistent project of the fashion field.

Concluding the review of the most fashionable dog on social media, it may be said that, although the Pink Poodle is not a professional fashion critic, yet the ironic persona allows him to do almost anything with fashion criticism, even if it is far from fashion criticism proper, but rather critical observations on how to ‘properly’ wear clothes. Along with other individual and institutional attempts to express fashion criticism while being fashion outsiders, Pink Poodle’s activity reminds that of the famous TV show of the 2000s *The Fashion Police* (directed by Fred Mendes, broadcast on US cable channel *E!* in 2010-2017), where the comments on celebrities’ outfits were grounded exceptionally in the personal taste and favour of the show host Joan Rivers (and could be extremely harsh or personal).

5. The conceptualisation of the Pink Poodle

There are many conceptual frameworks to work around the Pink Poodle persona and the very incident that this persona creates. As one of the followers of Poodle and a natural member of the Lithuanian fashion consumers’ community, I would like to point out two aspects I consider important in relation to the Pink Poodle phenomenon.

First, it is the aesthetic aspect that is vital in terms of the field of fashion, because aesthetics is one of the dominant themes of the discourse developed by Pink Poodle. Second, it is the use of irony/ parody for developing the discourse. Or, as Poodle puts it, “barking” on the people that they cannot reach in any other manner except the digital (fashion) memes. The metaphor of bark, among other things, is an adequate image that relates to the notions of authority and power that are inherent in the concept of fashion *per se*: until very recently, being fashionable was a privilege reserved to the upper echelons of the social structure, thus the very concept of fashion would imply of social and economic powers and the dominance of a particular aesthetic taste related to those powers. A cultural (and/or aesthetic) authority would be guaranteed to those who possessed attributes of social dominance: aristocratic genes, respectable family tree, money, knowledge/education, and other markers of what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) termed cultural capital that would place their owner at an influential position in the scheme of social power relations.

In the world of digital reality of today, however, the power structures have shifted, reality itself has become “liquid”, unable to maintain any shape of its social life in solid form for long (Bauman 2011:19). The hierarchical structures characteristic of the Western society since its inception have been replaced by a network structure that perceives authority in a new way as well. The concept of social power relations, analysed by the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault (see Foucault 1995; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002), acquires new dimensions in the space of the network society. I believe it is especially relevant to the fashion industry today. Not only because it is one of the contexts where power structures are still highly pertinent, but also because facing the digital transformation of the world has been an enormous challenge to fashion. The strictly organised fashion hierarchy that rested on fashion authority rooted in fashion houses, fashion magazines, fashion experts/critics at the top of the structure and fashion users at its bottom was turned over by everybody’s instant access to fashion information

available via internet and the digital media, with fashion bloggers becoming the first plebeian ‘experts’ that had to be taken seriously in almost an instant after their appearance in the fashion orbit (Bradford 2015; Swale 2017).

Manuel Castells, who has popularised the term *the network society*, provides an in-depth analysis of its power structures that, according to him, differ from those of the previous social organisation models. He says that the hierarchical social structure has been replaced by a network, and the power of influence today is determined by one’s access to communication. The new elite are the *networkers* (Castells 1996: 246), skilled and self-reliant, functioning mainly in the net, able to exercise power and dominate over others because of their exclusive access to, influence over and control of communication. Thus, the new fashion elite are the Instagram influencers with thousands of followers, and their authority in fashion is related to the number of their audience members: the wider access to the net they have, the higher their place in fashion hierarchy, and the closer to the catwalk is their chair in a fashion show. Referring to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Lev Manovich (2019: 4) adapts the term to contemporary reality, claiming that the latter today is measured by numbers of followers or respect in the community.

In this regard, the Pink Poodle account is a typical example of a fashion blogger who has become an influence in the fashion world because of the network: the images spread via PP accounts are borrowed from various online platforms and they can only be enjoyed by users who have access to the net. The Pink Poodle persona is a product of collective digital creativity, that is another sign of their ‘networker’ characteristics. But, most importantly, PP is a persona who does not represent the official fashion voice in any way: either in its discursive expression or its existential form (although Pink Poodle is a highly fashion-concerned body and a fashion expert, both of those qualities are self-proclaimed and even if they were not, they would still be the qualities of a dog, and a toy-dog at that, not to mention its pink colour). The ridiculousness of the persona does not even allow the idea of a fashion’s ‘watchdog’ that the Pink Poodle account may seem to refer to (although it is a real stretching of the concept). Yet the approximate number of 50K followers on social media compares to the audiences of other locally operating fashion bloggers and influencers (Agnė Jagelavičiūtė – 275K on Instagram, Simona Burbaitė – 57K on Instagram, Agnė Gilytė – 33,2K on Instagram (as of 6 August 2021), all of them professional fashion businesswomen) placing PP on equal terms with ordinary human fashion influencers – in terms of power as well. Differently from human fashion influencers/bloggers, however, Poodle’s power of influence extends beyond commercial or other material success. In fact, Pink Poodle persona does not exhibit any commercial inclinations. In the case of Pink Poodle, the power of their influence is not easy to measure, first of all because it is related to aesthetics – a substance that is barely a tangible one.

The metaphor of bark, favoured by the PP collective in their texts, may be productive with regard to Pink Poodle’s strife to establish themselves as an acknowledged fashion critic – the strife that is self-deprecatingly (which in this case is also an irony-producing characteristic) emphasised in nearly every post (e.g. the Instagram heading of @pinkpoodlecelebrity account reads: “The most annoying celebrity style expert across the Universe. Positive and educated Pink Poodle. Nice to meet you!”). The illusion of powerlessness and inconsequence, created by the metaphor of bark, implies a reversal of power relations that characterise fashion media discourse today. Although the former authority and influence of fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and similar, still takes hold, their management and control of fashion information has been lost, and scandals accompanying various aspects of the fashion industry (such as sexual abuse of models, clothes produced in sweatshops, and fake sustainability actions) as well as lack of transparency that are ignored by top fashion media add to the negative evaluation of the public, eloquently expressed in fall of circulation, i.e. profits. For example, in 2019 the British media platform *The Press Gazette* reported of continuous fall of circulation of 12 out of 17 women’s fashion and lifestyle magazines for the first six months of the year (Tobitt

2019), with *Cosmopolitan* taking the lead at 32%. It must be added for clarity that the above claim is rather a hypothesis, for the reasons of the general decline of print magazine market is related to the growth of its digital counterpart (Campbell 2020). The reasons of the general audience interest drop that both print and digital fashion magazines have been experiencing in the last decade have not been researched while writing the present article). Arguably, the opinions and views of fashion of the likes of Pink Poodle (i.e. fashion bloggers, middle to lowest-level fashion personalities and anonymous fashion meme creators) are becoming more important for the fashion audience than the established voices whose authority has been shattered by their own commercialism and arrogance.

The metaphor of bark also effectively combines the two aspects noted above in the framework of power and authority that are essential in trying to understand the cultural impact of Pink Poodle memes and their influence on the Lithuanian fashion discourse.

6. Poodle's contribution to the local fashion discourse

The aesthetic aspect of Poodle's memes is related to the peculiarities of the local fashion discourse. Funny fashion commentary, mixed with bitter sarcasm, was a very fresh perspective in the local Lithuanian fashion world that does not thrive in much of fashion commentary or criticism. Due to historical reasons the local fashion discourse is limited to life-style magazines and only one 'genuine' fashion magazine that is a franchise of the French *L'Officiel*, while the activities of local fashion bloggers centre on trends and fashion 'practice'. Pink Poodle's perspective was a breath of fresh (even though rather acid and chilly) air that offered a combination of a popular genre – the fashion meme – with educational intentions of introducing to dress codes and aesthetics of dressing in (or maybe for) the public.

The importance of Poodle's figure for the local fashion discourse is confirmed by two facts. The first one cannot be checked, for it deals with personal correspondence between Poodle and his audience. In one of the interviews Poodle's creators claim that they received more than several times requests from local celebrities to comment on their outfit *before* going to public events (*Discussion lecture with PP collective*) – in other words, the fashion taste of Poodle was recognised, and taken as model.

The second fact is much more apparent: Pink Poodle has become a contributing writer to the most important fashion magazine *L'Officiel Lithuania*, producing an article for the publication every month (since 2020). Regretfully, however, the *pinkpoodleesque* writing style and approach to fashion are not maintained in the texts, Poodle's personality remains in the name only. The texts featured in *L'Officiel Lithuania* are samples of adequate fashion writing, but nothing more. No 'barking' or gossip, just regular fashion journalism.

Both of those occurrences confirm that Pink Poodle persona is not a non-consequential 'barker at the caravan', in contrast to their continuous claim to the opposite. The institutionalisation of the Pink Poodle figure and the recognition of their aesthetic as well as cognitive (meaning – knowledge of fashion) authority indicates that, on the one hand, sarcasm and irony, both visual and verbal, are effective tools in fashion communication, especially when they are combined with the power of a social media channel.

On the other hand, irony and sarcasm are effective tools in maintaining the concept of authority in fashion, even though the origins of that authority may have changed. Their effectiveness has been proven empirically and even 'materially', so to speak. An attentive reader will notice that the photographs of local celebrities in Poodle's posts do not show faces of people. That is a rather recent correction, introduced after numerous threats and verbal violence that Pink Poodle received. In a rather small community of social celebrities, especially in smaller public events, where everybody knows everybody else, the daring comments about bad taste for

fashion would be taken very personally. That is why Poodle decided not to show faces of people anymore. And it explains the educational importance of the aesthetic aspect of Poodle's commentary. Due to Poodle's comments, the general public realised the importance of tidy appearance and good taste in clothing for public events.

7. Pink Poodle irony for the perception of fashion

The metaphor of bark may be seen as productive in the attempt to understand the success of fashion memes in general and Pink Poodle memes in particular.

The elitist approach that the tool of irony encourages by requiring specific context in order to be appreciated (Colebrook 2004: 8) is extremely fitting for the field of fashion that is a highly hierarchical enterprise both economically and phenomenologically. The concept of fashion system hierarchy is not the focus of this article; therefore it will not be developed. Yet the concept of division between those who are "in" (i.e. fashionable) and those who are "out" (i.e. not fashionable) is based on competition that relates fashion to the concept of irony so well. It is the fashion meme that promotes and enhances fashion's application of irony or the phenomenological proximity of the two. Fashion memes create the impression that there should be two groups of audience – the ones who understand the fashion joke and those who do not. Pink Poodle memes, as it has been noted above, are not typical memes because their fun-effect lies not in sharing, but in the verbal commentary that accompanies them and in the possibility to discuss the memetic images directly with their author. Even though Pink Poodle is a product of the audience, it applies the typical fashion strategy of enhancing the distinction between those who are in (i.e. the fashionable) and those who are not. The Pink Poodle account creates a small society of followers who similarly like to 'bark' on famous people and gossip, and the social media account – registered as a community on Facebook – is a space for gossip and 'barking' about fashion nonsense and celebrities' crazy outfits. That is one of the reasons why Poodle's memes are not often shared, because it is not the meme itself that matters, but the community communication which takes place through discussion with Poodle on the same level of irony.

Poodle's memes and the ironic commentary that accompanies them are not directed against fashion as such, but against the absence of taste, aesthetics, and weird solutions. Fashion is neither despised nor admired; it is required to have common sense. Therefore, it is not fashion that is actually criticised, but certain choices of fashion wearers and/or creators.

Therefore, in the case of Pink Poodle memes, irony does not play the role of estranging the audience to fashion – quite the opposite, it creates the 'in' group, namely those who understand the joke and are able to appreciate it, which is confirmed by the comments of the audience (see Stankevičiūtė 2021). Imposing the rules of ironic communication allows the restriction of access to those who are able to perceive the irony. In Foucauldian terms, those who do not know the rules of the game (i.e. fashion) will be restricted from participating in the *pinkpodelesque* discourse (Foucault 1981). Thus, the function of intermediary between fashion and its audience that Pink Poodle seems to target is not so much for explaining fashion for the 'innocent', but, because of the tool of irony, creating an 'inside circle' of likeminded fashionistas who do not really need anyone to explain fashion to them, but need a space for sharing their fashion views. To paraphrase Bourdieu (1993: 138), Pink Poodle's perspective legitimises irony, sarcasm and satire as an appropriate approach to fashion.

Pinkpodelesque irony directed against the ignorant fashion users is balanced by self-deprecating remarks on the persona of the canine fashion critic, which allows Pink Poodle the freedom of expression that has been defined as self-referential irony, or *defensive living strategy* (Eror 2017). This strategy cannot be taken seriously, for if it is, the joke is on the one who is doing it, because they did not get it in the first place. That is why the *pinkpodelesque* irony and

sarcasm are most effective when and if the readers follow the Pink Poodle identity game, treating PP memes as an occasion for a dialogue on fashion. Maintaining the ironic/satirical tone of the discourse and the canine identity is the most obvious instrument of discourse control that will extend onto the perception of the discourse subject, i.e. fashion.

The tool of visual irony that Poodle uses explains and grounds the importance of *independent fashion criticism*, the sober voice of reality, represented in a way typical for the post-ironic world, by a toy pet dog that happens to be a pink poodle. The reality and virtuality merge into a contemporary blend of opinion-based aesthetic that is valid as long as it has the communicative power of influence and enough supporters to keep it going.

8. Conclusions

The concluding question may be posed as follows: Do fashion memes signify a shift in the power balance between fashion authority and fashion users? The dominant trend in meme research tends to support the idea of memes being a sign of citizen activism and involvement into political processes (Wiggins 2019; Barton et al. 2020). In the case of Poodle, however, the answer is twofold, at least. The very existence of Pink Poodle account does prove that the process of what has been termed “democratisation of fashion” is continuing. The collective behind the Pink Poodle pseudonym are fashion users much more than they are fashion producers (despite one of them being a fashion designer), thus their voice is the voice of the people, not a voice that represents the fashion system in any way.

On the other hand, the scheme of action applied by Poodle and his followers does not revert the fashion system as such, does not attack it or put it into any sort of danger. The style that Poodle’s articles for *L’Officiel Lithuania* are written in confirms the preference of the habitual fashion discourse. Pink Poodle community is not barking against the ‘official’ fashion or its authorities – they are having fun at their weaknesses.

The laughter or ridicule that Poodle memes produce does not aim at subverting the existing power relations in fashion, quite to the contrary. The tool of irony allows Poodle to exercise the discourse of power, as by distinguishing the two groups – the fashionable and the non-fashionable – the ontological importance (and, perhaps, superiority) of fashion is confirmed.

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