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Myths in visual environmental activism narratives on Instagram

El mito en las narrativas visuales del activismo medioambiental en Instagram

Dr. Elisenda Ardèvol. Professor, Arts and Humanities Studies, Open University of Catalonia (Spain) (eardevol@uoc.edu) (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5536-9134)
Dr. Sandra Martorell. Lecturer, Department of Audiovisual Communication, Documentation and Art History, Polytechnic University of Valencia (Spain) (sandramartorell@upv.es) (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4483-1629)
Dr. Gemma San Cornelio. Senior Lecturer, Studies in Information and Communication Sciences, Polytechnic University of Valencia (Spain) (gsan_cornelio@uoc.edu) (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0788-1483)

ABSTRACT

Images are part of the communication strategies of both the hegemonic powers and political activism. Images have recently been the focus of studies on social movements, highlighting the importance of visual activism in social media. However, the relationship between these visual narratives and mythological structures and how they operate to mobilize social change has not been significantly explored. This study analyses the role of environmental activism memes on social media and how, in anthropological terms, they can be understood as myths or narratives that offer a model for perceiving, understanding, judging and acting in the world. We draw from ongoing research into eco-influencers on Instagram, taking environmental memes characterized by binary oppositions of "before" and "after" as the study subject. This contrast establishes a temporal narrative and future prediction, involving a cause-and-effect relationship and a moral judgement of our actions. We argue that, in the case of the environmental meme, the myth-based approach helps in understanding its role in articulating the cosmic, social and personal orders as it brings human action into harmony with the cosmic order while projecting its images onto the human experience.

RESUMEN

Las imágenes forman parte de las estrategias y prácticas comunicativas de los poderes hegemónicos y del activismo político. Recientemente se ha incorporado la imagen al estudio de los movimientos sociales, destacando la importancia del activismo visual en las redes sociales y sus nuevas formas narrativas. Sin embargo, se ha explorado con menor profundidad la relación entre estas narrativas visuales y las estructuras mitológicas y cómo operan para movilizar el cambio social. En este artículo analizaremos el papel de las imágenes meméticas en el activismo medioambiental en las redes sociales y cómo podemos entenderlas desde una perspectiva antropológica como mitos o narraciones que proponen un modelo para percibir, comprender, juzgar y actuar en el mundo. Nos basaremos en una investigación en curso sobre los «eco-influencers» en Instagram, tomando como objeto de análisis memes medioambientales caracterizados por plantear oposiciones binarias entre un «antes» y un «después». Este contraste establece una narrativa temporal y una proyección de futuro, que conlleva una relación de causa y efecto y una valoración moral de nuestra acción en el mundo. Argumentaremos que, en el caso del meme medioambiental, la aproximación desde el mito nos ayuda a comprender su agencia en la articulación del orden cósmico, social y personal en cuanto armoniza las acciones humanas con un orden cósmico a la vez que proyecta imágenes de este al plano de la experiencia humana.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Myths, memes, activism, sustainability, Instagram, influencers.
Mitos, memes, activismo, sostenibilidad, Instagram, influencers.

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1. Introduction and state of the art

Use of Social Media in politics and activism has been widely studied in recent years (Castells, 2013; Rovira, 2017; Postill, 2018; 2014; Treré, 2018; 2012), but less attention has been given to the role of image and visuals as a performative part of social movements. Nevertheless, the impact of memes as an element of communication that is specifically digital, now present in almost all political debate and mobilization, is generally recognized (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2016).

According to Shifman (2013:365), memes "shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups" appealing to a community and the existence of a common goal. Rowan (2015) situates the role of memes in politics and their importance to the *indignados* and Occupy Wall Street movements. According to this author, memes introduce young people to a rare political sphere, of expressing opinion, but also of discussion establishing clear positions. Behind the joke, we find an expression of concerns, sensitivities and desires that we cannot ignore. According to Rowan, memes may be defined as "sets of images that are normally accompanied by an amusing text that may or may not be directly related to the image" (Rowan, 2015: 298). They are characterized by their replicability, the creation of copies (ideological or figurative) through imitation (Vitiuk et al., 2020: 53) and their lack of artistic pretensions, offering an informal, unpolished aesthetics (eventually one of their main traits).

It is interesting to observe the insertion of memes and analyse their function on Instagram, given the importance of meticulously crafted images in this social media platform. We suggest that these images are used precisely because of their economy of production and their educational potential as mythological narrative, despite their lack of aesthetics. Furthermore, in the specific case of environmental activism, memes appeal to a primordial eschatological myth: they are harbingers of the future, the end of the world, if human action is not reversed. Although in most eschatological myths, the destruction of the world is caused by a non-human agent (a god, alien, natural cataclysm), in many cases it is associated with a moral failing in humanity (the Great Flood). In the case of environmental myths, the cause of the end of the world is direct human action against which nature is retaliating.

1.1. Myths, images and environmental activism

Myths are powerful, affective stories that seek to answer humanity's most profound questions. According to authors such as Mircea Eliade, Claude Lévi-Strauss or Clifford Geertz, they have several functions, one of the most important being to provide models of behaviour. According to Geertz (1989), myths harmonize human actions with a cosmic order while projecting images of that order onto the plane of human experience. Thus, by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, mythological narratives articulate individual and collective emotion and belief, link the cosmic to the social order, and the latter to the personal and corporeal order.

Like other traditional narrative genres, myths are oral narratives in their origins, generally featuring gods and heroes, with details that vary through transmission, giving rise to new versions. With the invention and spread of writing, myths have become the subjects of literary retelling, thus broadening their range of versions and variations. Myths have not disappeared in the contemporary world; they are just presented and transmitted via different media, such as social media, thus increasing the speed of their propagation and the narrative and communication possibilities of the myth.

Contemporary mythology has been examined in the field of cultural studies, which sees modern mythologies as part of the so-called "mass culture", or contemporary media culture (Barthes, 2014). According to Ortoleva (2009), contemporary mythological production differs from traditional mythologies, such as those of Classical Greece, as the latter maintain constant themes and characters, while the former are not canonical, but newly invented narratives. This author maintains that one transformation of mythological narrative in its contemporary form is the abandonment of the sacred dimension; however, even in modern life, where rationality establishes the criteria for reality, there is still a need to provide deep emotional meaning to our lives, that connects our specific experience and the universe of sense making, between reaffirmation of the world of recognizable patterns and the world open to uncertainty, driving us toward exploration, between empirically verifiable truth and the deep and constant structure of great narratives.

In order to understand the persistence of myths in contemporary societies, a number of different approaches have been developed that interpret the myth as an allegory or through symbolic reading, rather than as a true story, where the myth appeals to truth, though not in its immediate content, but rather in relation to social structures, cultural patterns, deep psychology, or the expression of authors' and audiences' hopes, yearnings, worries, and fears (Lowenthal, 1995).

Nevertheless, analysing environmental activism from the mythological perspective shows us that the movement is built on a scientific truth in relation to climate change, which is then presented in the media in condensed form through images, thereby increasing its effectiveness in expressing fears, hopes, and desires, and mobilizing people on both the rational and emotional levels.

In environmental activism, images play a major role in establishing narratives to mobilize action against climate change and the destruction of nature. More traditional forms of environmental activism, promoted by organizations such as Greenpeace, have generally emphasized negative images, some of which have become iconic in the struggle and have been widely reproduced in various forms of media (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). However, recent studies (Leviston et al., 2014; O'Neill et al., 2013, Bashir et al., 2013) suggest that negative images on the impact of climate change can cause emotional rejection in audiences, while images showing possible solutions usually generate more positive responses. According to Roser-Renouf et al. (2014), this form of activism should promote specific beliefs on climate change, build perceptions, and foster interpersonal communication on this topic, in order to improve its effectiveness.

Environmentalism and many other types of activism are present on social media from a variety of actors and in different forms, fostering interpersonal communication on this topic (Roser-Renouf et al., 2014). Firstly, there are well established organizations, such as the previously mentioned Greenpeace, together with new, more heterodox groups, such as the Instagram account @about_environment. We also find celebrities who have joined the environmental cause, such as Leonardo di Caprio, who posts on issues of climate change in his social media accounts, along with media activists, such as Greta Thunberg. In addition to these worldwide organizations, celebrities and activists, we find a new type of social actor who, in the case of environmental activism, displays certain specific characteristics that differ from more traditional, political activism, for whom the term environmental influencer or eco-influencer may be applied (San Cornelio et al, 2020). We understand the figure of influencer as the cultural evolution of the so-called "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013), whose activity is characterized by using self-branding strategies, managing their visibility and community of followers, and building aspirational storytelling based on their lifestyles (Leaver et al., 2020).

Such actors have user-generated, environmentally committed profiles, although they are not necessarily involved with non-governmental organizations, and often promote their own eco-friendly products, books on healthy living or environmentally sustainable brands and products. They promote a sustainable lifestyle through personal example, turning their passion for an environmentally friendly life into their main communication goal.

The overlap between digital activism, lifestyle and consumption found among these eco-influencers creates a specific type of social movement that Haenfler, et al. (2012) describe as "Lifestyle Movements". These are characterized by using lifestyle choices as tactics for social change (where personal identity plays a central role as an engine for change) and adopting a diffuse organizational structure.

The visual narratives in the types of digital activism described here adopt different perspectives to imply this relationship between the cosmic, social and personal-embodied orders proposed in the mythic structure. In the case of environmental activism based fundamentally on denunciation or protest, we see how negative images are generally used as incentives to mobilization. This type of social movement sees mass street or social media protest as the main element in political action, obtaining a high degree of visibility which forces governments and industry to respond. In terms of mythological analysis, the narrative links the cosmic order to the social order, while failing to connect with the personal and corporeal order. Responsibility for re-establishing the broken cosmic order is falling mainly on government and business.

In the case of visual narratives created by lifestyle-based movements, such as eco-influencers, the main or most powerful association is between the cosmic and personal-corporeal orders. Re-establishing the cosmological order (living in harmony with nature) in the future, is proclaimed through a reordering of personal life. In this case, the weakest link is to the social order, as the narrative only implies that this will be reordered through changes in personal life and in the sphere of daily experience.

1.2. Memes and their orientation to the future

As stated above, use of imagery in environmental activism is related to nature and it indicates a breach in the cosmic order leading to the end of the world, caused by human agency. This places us at a point of transition, where we "still have time" to avert it. Memes are a recurring part of such imagery and can be seen as a form of visual activism, in that they represent a politically oriented visual practice expressing the need for change in our way of life.

According to Meso-Ayerdi et al. (2017) the digital meme is used in political conversation because it condenses a complex issue into brief multimedia content (image, video, gif, etc.) which is powerful and effective. Thus, memes can be vectors for a particular ideology with the aim of participating in a social or political debate in a way that is available to all, thanks to the ease with which memes can be created and shared (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Matalon (2019) goes even further: digital memes have a categorically public communicative function; regardless of their style and creative process, the important thing is effective transmission of information. Other authors such as Penney (2020) recognize that the potential for memes as instruments for political demands and peer persuasion is already fully accepted among most researchers and academics, who no longer see them as jokes, but understand them as an integral part of digital rhetoric. Similarly, Costanza-Chock (2012) recognizes the growing interest in social media among activists and the expansion of media culture in different social movements, including meme production in the digital culture social practices when promoting a cause.

The meaning of memes is contextual to a greater extent, as they address a specific audience that must know what they are for (Norstrom & Sarna, 2021). In this context, memes help develop our understanding of the world and propagate faster when they "resonate" with our inner feelings. Thus, the force of the meme lies in its "resonance" with our concept of how the cultural order should be, not in its ability to "alter" or "question" our closely held convictions, as we would fail to see the humour, take offence or miss the point. It is at this point when the memetic conversation is interrupted or activated,opposing, renegotiating or arguing by modifying and remixing so that the meme works in our favour, thus contributing to its spread beyond replication. This is one of the attributes that make the meme unique compared to other visual formats and it is also from this perspective that memes can be considered mythological narrative, in that they make a true statement about the world, even though they do so through humour and irony and are subject to rejection, change or transformation by its recipients. Waddell et al (2020), state that to understand how social change comes about, we need a better understanding of changing memes or the changes in memes and how they transform narratives that act as frameworks that open or close our horizons of opportunity. Thus, mythological narrative is not a framework restricted to repetition and closed to social transformation, nor does it consist solely of repeating archetypical formulas to stabilize and naturalize the social order; rather, it can act as an agent that naturalizes other possible orders.

2. Material and methods

This study is part of a broader research project on narrative cultures, social action, and audience building in contemporary society, and more specifically, in the field of digital media. The focus on Instagram is the result of our interest on the emergence of new forms of activism based on images and personal narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2016; San Cornelio & Roig, 2018) which are characteristic of the so-called "influencers" (Abidin, 2017) and that are spreading as a form of environmental activism (Murphy, 2019) in social media. In addition to these personal narratives there is certain memetic production, which is the object of study here. Specifically, in this paper we are interested in understanding how digital narratives in environmental activism articulate mythologies oriented to the future, in such a way that text and image constitute meaningful narrative units for both their creators and audiences.

Our methodological approach is qualitative in nature and the empirical fieldwork is limited to digital media. The study of digital technology-mediated communication was already well established at the start of this century in which different types of methodological approaches and online research techniques

(Mann & Steward, 2000), virtual methods (Hine, 2005), and digital methods (Rogers, 2009), have been developed. Markham (2013) stresses the duality of the Internet as a field and method of study, suggesting it is not just a research tool for compiling data but also a field in which to conduct research, i.e. the social context in which people (including the researcher) meet and interact. These digital methods include adapting and reformulating conventional research techniques, such as participant observation and interviews (Kozinets, 2010; Postill & Pink, 2012; Ardèvol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Pink et al. 2016).

Our fieldwork is based on participant observation after creating a research account on Instagram, after which we drew up a theoretical sample (Strauss & Corbyn, 1994) consisting of 60 accounts selected on the basis of these criteria: a) topic related to climate change, sustainability and ecologically responsible consumption, preferably with an identifiable personal profile; b) maximum variety with the aim of identifying relevant categories and drawing up a grounded typology; c) language; given that the sample universe is global and local, we decided to select profiles in both English (30) and Spanish (25), while also including other languages such as Catalan and German (5); d) volume of followers: we consider the number of followers significant in defining an eco-influencer. Hence, the minimum criterion was 1,000 followers in the case of languages such as Catalan, whereas 10,000 was considered more adequate for English and Spanish language profiles, although there is currently no consensus as to the minimum number of followers needed for a profile to be considered an influencer[1].

It is interesting to highlight that most of the profiles in our sample were personal (82%) while the rest belonged to couples or families (4.2%), groups and organizations (8.4%) or brands, selling or promoting eco-sustainable products (5.4%), although many personal accounts also promote their own products or eco-sustainable brands.

Drawing from the fieldwork carried on between June and December 2020 we decided to focus for the present study on a total of 12 profiles belonging to ecologist activists, groups or organizations (such as @ecoinventos, @reducewastenow, @aboutenvironment, @theplasticfreepeople, @thezerowasteguide, @greenpeace and @ecologistasenaccion), chosen due to their status as the most prolific in terms of memetic spread and production. Within these accounts we selected a sample of 50 memetic images for the narrative-mythological analysis. The criterion for selection was that they could be identified as memes by their style and replicability. Moreover, in the selection process, we realized that many of them (20 out of the 50 images selected) presented a binary opposition narrative. Hence, we centred our analysis on this subgroup of 20 images, since this "binary opposition" format is a well-established and recognized cultural form in mythological structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1987).

To analyse the corpus of environmental memes, we used Daiute and Lightfoot's (2004) concept of narrative analysis, which presents an analytical model in social sciences based on narratives as cultural forms for sorting experience in a meaningful way, following certain schemes, scripts or patterns, in which the action is developed, including a root metaphor that organizes the story thematically. Our analysis is based on memes as containing a story and narrative structure.

On the other hand, in order to undertake a mythological reading of these narratives, we have taken into account the elements used to construct myths, as argued above. These are: a) the narratives have a highly symbolic component (condensed into images) related to beliefs that are considered as truths; b) the type of narrative explains a given state of things in the world (past, present and future); c) they establish a link between this order of things and human experience, generally a correlation between the cosmic, social and personal-corporeal orders, where disorder in one of the terms leads to disorder in all the others; d) they provide knowledge or teachings for action.

Analysing these meme-based micronarratives allowed us to explore the climate change-related myths emerging on social media: existing narratives regarding the future, threats and possible outcomes, and the actions and attitudes proposed as suitable ways of combating them.

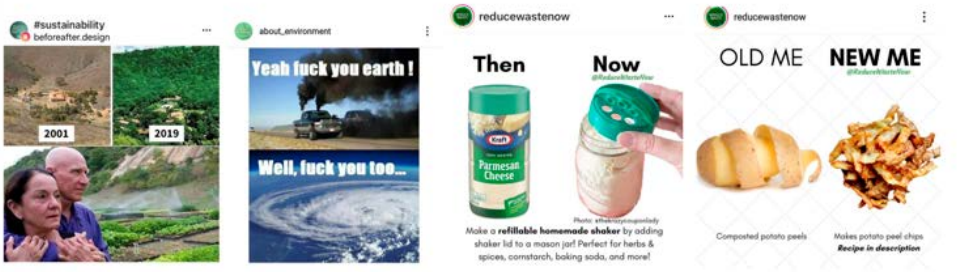
3. Analysis and results

The images in our corpus use the meme format, containing a minimum of an image, generally a photo, and an accompanying text, structured around a combination of two images organized as binary opposition. Firstly, we establish that the visual contrast of two ideas is a very economical way of telling a story, facilitating the understanding of complex problems, while helping to express a moral value associated with each of the terms and a future-oriented temporality or change in dynamic.

Within this scheme, the most frequent narrative structure in our corpus, is that of "before-after", characterized by introducing a time vector toward improvement or deterioration. It is a very popular format on the social media as it is used to show change (generally for the better) in the state of a person or thing[2]. The discursive strategy uses the binary opposition, showing antagonistic images from right to left or from top to bottom. The text may vary in length, but it is the image that carries the narrative weight.

In this first typology, temporality is explicit in the text: "then and now", "how it started and how it's going", "old me and new me", and so on. These forms of temporality indicate a change in the state of things. They can be very specific, providing the date in years, or very vague and abstract (referring to planetary change); they can also be indeterminate or refer to personal or day-to-day change (Figure 1).

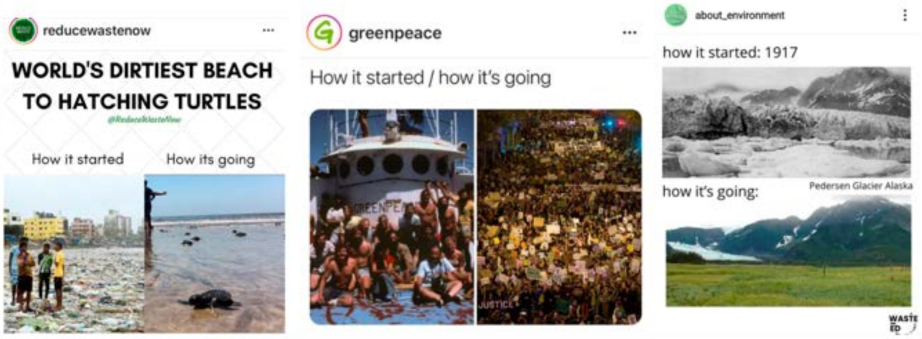
Figure 1. Sequences of change over time


#sustainability
beforeafter.design
2001
2019
about_environment
Yeah fuck you earth !
Well, fuck you too...
reducewastenow
Then
Now
Parmesan Cheese
Photo: @thekrazycouponlady
Make a refillable homemade shaker by adding shaker lid to a mason jar! Perfect for herbs & spices, cornstarch, baking soda, and more!
reducewastenow
OLD ME
NEW ME
Composted potato peels
Makes potato peel chips
Recipe in description

The first image shows a change over time: from desertification to a green, irrigated landscape, thanks to the action of the photographer Sebastião Salgado and his wife Lélia Deluiz Wanick. The second is a projection into the future, toward future outcomes, while the third and fourth show positive change in the personal sphere (presenting everyday objects and food) by learning more sustainable habits. This type of meme ("old me-new me") suggests that changes at the personal level affect the planet and the environment. Appealing to identity, the "me" is transformed into a more responsible "other me", seeking to generate empathy and serve as an example.

Secondly, this form of planetary transformation through people's positive action also has a collective dimension and places us in the social order through coordinated action. These are the "how it started, how it's going" type of meme. In the image from the @reducewastenow account (Figure 2), on the left we see a dirty beach, but on the right, we see the clean beach after a group of people have mobilized to remove the rubbish and the return of certain animal species.

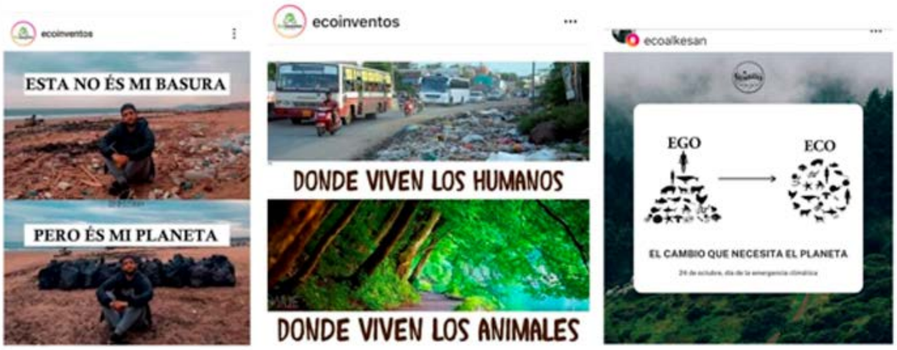
Figure 2. Developmental sequences (how it started-how it's going)


reducewastenow
WORLD'S DIRTIEST BEACH
TO HATCHING TURTLES
@ReduceWasteNow
How it started
How its going
greenpeace
How it started / how it's going
GREENPEA
JUSTICE
about_environment
how it started: 1917
how it's going:
Pedersen Glacier Alaska
WASTE ED

The @greenpeace image shows how the struggle has grown (before there were few us, now we are many). In this case, the images on the "before" side show a worse situation than those on the "after" side. These two examples show that our actions bring about improvements (first image) and how the environmental struggle is spreading (second image). The third example of this type shows negative change using the same text. This example is interesting in that, unlike the previous two, it does not contain a human figure, hence the message refers to people's lack of action: this is how things will develop and what will happen if we do not take action.

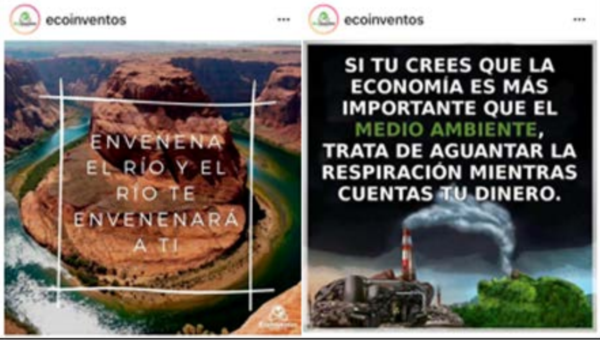
In the third typology, the change of state is presented by contrasting two orders of things, such as an image of a polluted city and an idealized image of nature. Once again it appeals to the individual: in the first image of the @ecoinventos account, pollution is the product of many (or possibly of people other than the individual in the scene) but just one individual appears to have carried out the action, strengthening the idea that "your" action has a global effect on the planet (implying both individual and collective responsibilities and benefits). The second image presents the negative impact of humans compared to animals (where would you prefer to live?) The next image is possibly more conceptual, as it uses infographics, superimposed over an image of nature. The pictograms are, respectively, pyramidal (evoking the "I", ego, the individual) and circular, a much more harmonious shape (appealing to "eco", the circular economy and, thus, nature). In these cases, there is not always a clear temporal vector, but a dilemma (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Contrast of two orders or states


ecoinventos
ESTA NO ÉS MI BASURA
PERO ÉS MI PLANETA
ecoinventos
DONDE VIVEN LOS HUMANOS
DONDE VIVEN LOS ANIMALES
ecoalkesan
EGO
ECO
EL CAMBIO QUE NECESITA EL PLANETA

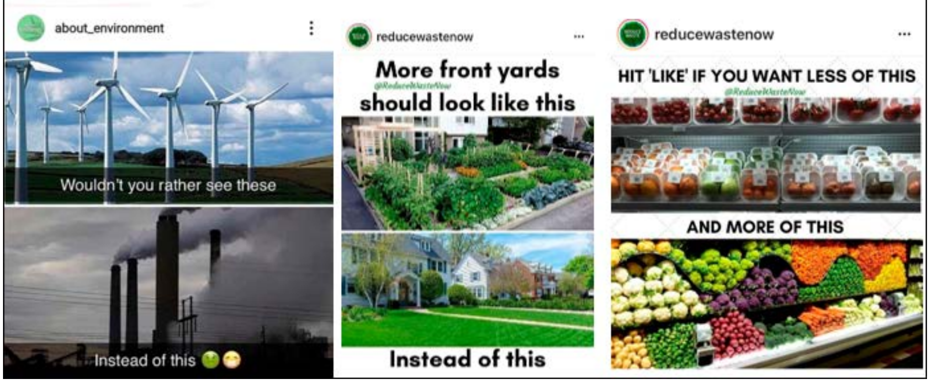
The fourth typology raises the degree of abstraction, the following images contrast cause and effect, presenting the dilemma of: if you do something, you'll have to be held accountable for it. In other words, your actions have consequences. Once again, the effect of a collective process is personalized. In both the first image, "envenena el río y el río te envenenará a ti" [if you poison the river, the river will poison you], and in the second (if you prioritize money over the environment you'll become just as polluted), industrial pollution or the capitalist economic systems are transformed due to human irresponsibility and greed. In both cases, a single image condenses the contrast made explicit in the text (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Contrasting cause/effect


ecoinventos
ENVENENA EL RÍO Y EL RÍO TE ENVENENARÁ A TI
ecoinventos
SI TU CREES QUE LA ECONOMÍA ES MÁS IMPORTANTE QUE EL MEDIO AMBIENTE, TRATA DE AGUANTAR LA RESPIRACIÓN MIENTRAS CUENTAS TU DINERO.

Finally, these contrasts can also present a dilemma through a good solution-bad solution dichotomy. Examples of this are shown in Figure 5, where two images are used to express good and bad practices for the planet, through visual contrast. This contrast between two mutually exclusive terms or ideas establishes an aspirational narrative that is projected towards a desirable future, or how things should be. It is suggested as personal choice, appealing to taste and aesthetics.

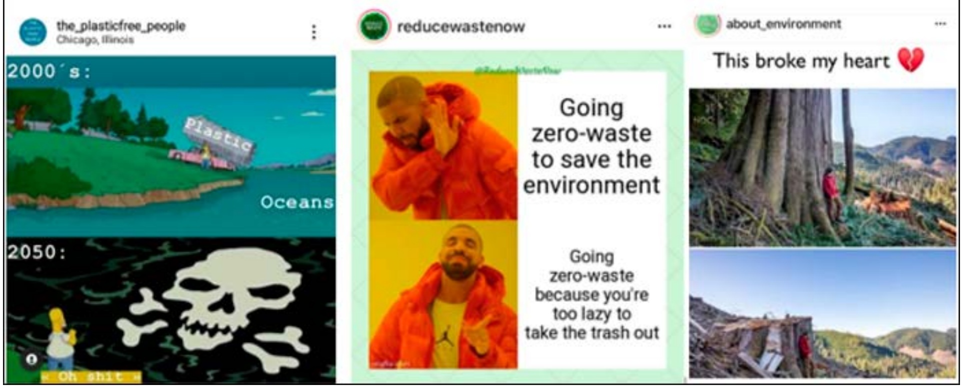
Figure 5. Contrast through dilemma


about_environment
Wouldn't you rather see these
Instead of this
reducewastenow
More front yards should look like this
@ReduceWasteNow
Instead of this
reducewastenow
HIT 'LIKE' IF YOU WANT LESS OF THIS
@ReduceWasteNow
AND MORE OF THIS

To end, Figure 6 shows some examples of images which construct a narrative based on different temporalities and implying causality, but involving very different actors and emotional tones. The first one is referring to the near past and the near future, and uses a meme from *The Simpsons*; it is Homer Simpson who throws plastic into the sea and suffers the apocalyptic consequences. This is a clear example of a popular meme adapted to the environmental issue, copying the pattern of an iconic meme (such as the use of two shots from the singer Drake's *Hotline Bling* video of the second image). In the memes analysed, a humorous tone is only used on a few occasions, to ridicule inappropriate behaviour, highlight the difficulties and contradictions in activists themselves, or report a "false belief" such as negationism of climate change.

The third image, using the same before-and-after format, the time scale is much shorter, in the present, and there is total individualization (it is "me" whose heart is broken). This identification with the individual "me" includes the maximum emotional impact, linking the pain of the tree to that of the self.

Figure 6. Example contrasting temporality, cause and effect, and emotionality


the_plasticfree_people
Chicago, Illinois
2000´s:
Plastic
Oceans
2050:
Oh shit
reducewastenow
@ReduceWasteNow
Going zero-waste to save the environment
Going zero-waste because you're too lazy to take the trash out
about_environment
This broke my heart 💔

Whatever the case, besides the degree of humour used, the visual presentation of the set of images analysed here is typical of memes in general: simple composition; predominance of message over aesthetics; rehashed, or hastily created images; and short but powerful texts. Nevertheless, as we have observed in our corpus of study, seriousness, and a relatively careful image predominate in memes with environmental content on Instagram, differing from popular memes on other social media. We also have seen that, in the different types found, this contrast between two mutually exclusive terms or ideas establishes a temporal narrative and a future prediction (improvement or deterioration), implying a cause-and-effect relationship and a moral judgement on our action in the world, moving us toward a transformation in the state of things through personal action.

4. Discussion and conclusions

One characteristic that is common to the meme-based narratives analysed here is that the root metaphor, topic or fundamental truth expressing the myth is related to the end of the world (eschatological myth), in the sense that climate change and environmental degradation will lead us to an irreversible catastrophe caused by human activity, but which can still be reversed by a change in our behaviour at the planetary level and as a species ("redemption" is possible).

Another feature of these memes is that they involve moral judgement, which in some cases becomes normative (imperative), expressed powerfully in texts such as "what they want you to think, what you ought to think". Thus, the myth is built on a truth (climate change) which is the consequence of collective actions related to corporations, industries and governments, our economic systems and environmental policies, but the myth personifies them in individual action (you poison the river) that demands an individual response (you must put an end to this). We will see below that, regardless of type, all the memes analysed imply that individual action is part of collective action. If each of us commits to change, we will bring about positive transformation. This personal involvement is what connects the cosmic order or disorder to the personal order, and it gives meaning to human action, which is where the power of mythological narrative lies.

However, the future-oriented environmental myth does not directly denounce the institutions or corporations that soil the river or beach; they address the individual instead. We will only avoid disaster through the sum of individual actions, whether this be cleaning rivers and beaches, or transforming our personal lifestyle and changing our consumption habits ("old me, new me"). Social order is then re-established by addition.

This leads to the idea of memes as tools which, despite their informal and sometimes jokey appearance, help approach topics considered as serious and important in the environmental, social and even political agenda, such as the Agenda 2030 of the United Nations for Sustainable Development. This seems to question the idea in Vitiuk et al. (2020), whereby memes entertain and mitigate stress caused by problems in daily life, conflicts, risks and uncertainties. We agree, nevertheless, with Nowak (2016) and other authors, stating that the creation and spreading of memes, beyond entertainment, serves to spark debate and discussions about reality and being informed. Memes can be considered products of participatory digital culture, characterized by producing and interchanging their own creations and the belief of their participants in the importance of their contributions.

In the cases analysed here our analysis shows that, memes take these conflicts, risks, problems and uncertainties and, far from distancing us from them to provide peace of mind, they make them the centre of attention so that, firstly, we react (emotionally, rationally or affectively) and then reflect on them, thereby pushing us toward practical action through ideological or attitudinal change. It must be stated that this is a form of activism that starts from an individual commitment, aimed at individuals rather than groups or institutions, thus constituting a new type of political action, "from me to you", neatly digital.

According to our results, the "visual activism" discussed here clashes with the idea offered by other authors on the same concept. Indeed, most studies on visual activism refer to it as specific artistic practices supporting specific causes, as in Cozen (2013), whose work most closely relates to our case and examines images produced by activist artists focusing on climate change. The same occurs with other authors, such as Demos (2016) who, although defining visual activism as politically targeted visual practices calling for social, political and economic change, also interprets it from the artistic perspective. However, our study sees visual activism as going beyond art, thus challenging the views of these authors and broadening the concept to cover all visual manifestations of digital folklore that contribute to the same cause, regardless of authorship, degree of artistry or aesthetics, as is the case of social media memes, which are clever, sometimes humorous, motivational and even educational.

To conclude, the structure of the eschatological myth is reused in environmental activism to naturalize the truth of the movement, making it self-evident while imbuing it with dramatic tension that implicitly leads to resolution. Thus, mythological narrative for climate change through social media memes, firstly, contributes to creating new spaces for participation and, secondly, helps in understanding complex topics through concise visual impact, promoting and calling for action through emotional and personal involvement.

Notes

[1] Based on the classification proposed by Launchmetrics www.launchmetrics.com, the categories are defined as: micro-influencer (10,000-100,000), mid-tier (100,000-500,000), mega (500,000-2,000,000), and all-star (> 2,000,000).

[2] An exception to this would be the famous "dog meme", in which the dog from the past always enjoys better conditions that the one in the present.

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