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## Celebrity memes, audioshop, and participatory fan culture: a case study on Keanu Reeves memes

Danielle Nielsen

Murray State University, [dnielsen@murraystate.edu](mailto:dnielsen@murraystate.edu)

Diane Sabenacio Nititham

Murray State University, [dnititham@murraystate.edu](mailto:dnititham@murraystate.edu)

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# Celebrity Memes, Audioshop, and Participatory Fan Culture: A Case Study on Keanu Reeves Memes

Danielle Nielsen and Diane Sabenacio Nititham

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## Abstract

Contemporary meme culture keeps Keanu Reeves' image at the forefront of our imagination. Numerous Keanu-related memes circulate on the internet, featuring images of him from on and off screen. In this article, we argue that the rise of user-generated content, such as memes and social media, requires us to reconsider how audiences and fans consume, adapt, and circulate Keanu's stardom. Specifically, we contend that memes and their attending participatory culture make Keanu familiar by placing him in knowable spaces and perpetuating his extraordinary ordinariness. To do so, we examine the 2019 'Keanu Reeves Walking in Slow Motion' video clip from *Always by My Maybe* and the memes generated by users. First, we explore the purpose of celebrity memes and participatory culture, examining the ways in which Keanu's image and persona is defined within this culture. Second, using a cross-media analysis, we define the recent meme genre 'audioshop', and explore how 'Keanu Reeves Walking in Slow Motion' enables audiences to use their prior knowledge of Keanu's persona to more fully engage with the meme and its possible interpretations. Finally, we discuss how meme culture objectifies and commodifies celebrity, arguing that celebritisation through meme production amplifies Keanu's persona and cross-media presence.

## Bios:

Danielle Nielsen is Associate Professor of English at Murray State University. Dr. Nielsen's research interests include rhetoric, literacy practices, and accessibility. Her most recent

research has appeared in *Rhetoric Review*, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Technical and Professional Communication*. She teaches courses in rhetoric and composition, digital writing, and technical communication.

Diane Sabenacio Nititham is Associate Professor of Sociology at Murray State University. Dr. Nititham's research interests include belonging, diaspora, and globalization. Her most recent book, *Making Home in Diasporic Communities: Transnational Belonging Amongst Filipina Migrants* (Routledge 2016) focused on the experiences of Filipino communities in Ireland. She teaches courses in migration, race/ethnicity, popular culture, and sociology of education.

### **Memes, Audioshop, and Participatory Fan Culture: A Case Study of Keanu Reeves**

#### **Memes**

In 'Approaching Celebrity Studies', Graeme Turner implores 'Celebrity studies to find ways to map and understand the increasing structural importance of the production and consumption of celebrity'. Published in 2010 in the first issue of this journal and focusing on celebrity's strategised commodification and profit-generating nature, Turner shows more concern for traditional forms of media like print, music, television, and film, than web-based material. More than 10 years later, we build on these concerns to consider how web-based media like memes and viral content contribute to celebrity's commodification and objectification, especially when considering the likelihood that memes do not generate profit. Using the case of Keanu Reeves-related memes, we explore the role of meme culture in the commodification and objectification of celebrity to demonstrate how this non-profit bearing mechanism plays a structural role in Turner's 'production and consumption of celebrity'

(2010, p. 13). We pose the following questions: What purposes do celebrity memes serve? How do audioshop memes objectify and commodify celebrity, and how are these processes related to consumption? And finally, how does the circulation of Keanu Reeves-related memes contribute to Keanu's ongoing celebrity persona? Our interest in Keanu-memes extends past celebrity objectification and commodification to emerging cross-narrative forms that enhance our reading of Keanu as celebrity and our attempts to familiarise him. We note here that we refer to Keanu by his first name, reflecting how some celebrities are referred to by their first name, denoting feelings of kinship, albeit fictive.

### **Celebrity Memes and Participatory Practice**

Fans create and circulate memes as a way to normalise a celebrity and develop a sense of closeness with someone who is famous. Because memes are user-generated, a celebrity like Keanu can become familiar through the process of generating content. Memes, according to Shifman, are '...groups of user-generated digital units (such as texts, videos, or images) that share characteristics of content, form, and/or communicative stance' (2019, p.45). What distinguishes memes from a series of images is that they 'are produced with awareness of other instances and circulated by many participants through digital networks' (2019, p. 45). Memes - which can be made by anyone with a smartphone, tablet, or laptop - are created with a shared knowledge of other memes and with the intention of being shared. The celebrity meme, which references a person widely recognised in popular culture or mass media, is one of the most common subgenres of memes. When memeifying celebrity, creators determine the purpose of the meme (to mock, exalt, praise, criticise, etc.) and how to do so, negotiating rhetorical and cultural contexts of both celebrity and meme culture. These choices can be successful or unsuccessful in their attempts to communicate their intended message.

Meme culture is a form of ‘participatory culture’, which as Jenkins (2009) observes, has fairly low barriers to expression and engagement and in which participants have some level of connection. Memes are easy to create and circulate, allowing a connection to memeified celebrities, making celebrities more accessible, knowable, and familiar to the general public. Fans can connect to Keanu by creating memes that reflect characters he has portrayed (such as Ted ‘Theodore’ Logan), draw on Keanu ‘in real life’ (‘Sad Keanu’), or place him in other existing memes (‘Sad Keanu’ with 'Bernie Sanders Wearing Mittens Sitting in a Chair', 2021). Marino (2015) frames circulation both in terms of a 'users' agency' when it comes to their *ability* to circulate a meme and 'users' engagement' when they manipulate the meme:

A spreadable text has to be striking (semantics) and has to let users engage in bricolage operations according to different degrees of intervention (syntax); the more the text is striking, the more its structure is evident, the more the text is spreadable and potentially successful. It seems that, according to memetics terminology, the ‘longevity’ of a meme is owed to its ‘fecundity’, to the detriment of its ‘fidelity’ (its faithfulness to the original text). (2015, pp. 60-1).

Put another way, in order for someone to want to share *and* manipulate a meme, it has to be interesting and malleable while still following expected memetic conventions. As a meme, ‘Sad Keanu’ is ‘striking’ with a clear ‘structure’ (2015), making it easy to manipulate and share; the better a ‘Sad Keanu’ meme attends to audience expectations of where ‘Sad Keanu’ belongs, the greater the likelihood for participatory engagement through modifying and sharing.

No one *needs* a meme, but as a participatory practice, memes fulfill a social action. In creating a new image and context of the celebrity, the celebrity meme teaches others how to ‘read’ or ‘engage with’ the celebrity, giving consumers the agency to create and circulate their own memes. For instance, Keanu’s original utterance of ‘You’re breathtaking’ and viral responses to it indicate how audiences consumed the original iteration and how they

reproduced it to further establish their interpretation of Keanu. In June 2019, Keanu appeared at the Microsoft Xbox E3 2019 press conference to promote *Cyberpunk 2077*, a video game in which he stars. He said, 'Let me tell you. The feeling of being there, of walking the streets of the future is going to be breathtaking.' Conference attendee Peter Sark responded with 'You're breathtaking!', and Keanu replied to him, and then to the audience, 'You're breathtaking. You're all breathtaking!' (Sark, 2019). Sark tweeted this interaction, and soon after the tweet developed into different meme genres, including reaction photoshops and image macros (Know Your Meme 'You're Breathtaking' 2019). Journalists also participated in the memetic spread of 'You're Breathtaking' by publishing articles such as the July 2019 CNN article 'Keanu Reeves' most excellent surprise for one fan is "breathtaking" and once again gifts the internet', in which Andrew and Carter (2019) detail a fan interaction with Keanu in Slidell, Louisiana. Knowing Keanu was in this town to film the third installment of *Bill and Ted*, Ethan Hunt and his mom Stacey put a 'You're Breathtaking' sign on their front lawn. Within hours, Keanu, *Bill and Ted* screenwriter Ed Solomon, and others pulled up in front of the Hunt house to view the sign. Upon request, Keanu signed it, writing 'Stacey, You're Breathtaking!' and posed for a picture with the family. Andrew and Carter detail the media's embrace of Keanu as the 'internet's boyfriend' and 'his mysterious, thoughtful demeanor and proclivity for random acts of kindness' (2019).

These viral moments and the media's response to them emphasise how celebrities can be seen as simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. Dyer (1998, p. 43) argues that 'stars represent what are taken to be people typical of this society; yet the types of people we assume characterise our society may nevertheless be singularly absent from our actual day-to-day experience of society; the specialness of stars may be then that they are the only ones around who are ordinary!' Widely circulated stories of Keanu performing real-life acts of generosity and good deeds, 'bear witness to Reeves's everyday acts of Buddha-like kindness

as they perpetuate images of the actor happily signing autographs, giving up his seat on a New York subway, buying his movie crew motorcycles, and inviting strangers to share a van after their plane makes an emergency landing' (Suh, 2020, p. 276). Suh contends many of Keanu's characters, alongside stories of his kindness, the public's romanticisation of him, and his personal life 'muddle the line between illusion and what is real' (p. 277), particularly in the context of his seemingly 'Zen-like equanimity' (p. 276). Further blurring this line is the fact that multiple internet users have commented that Keanu is relatable as a human and needs no context, including the aptly named 'Keanu Doing Things' Twitter account and 'No Context Keanu' Tumblr. These all enhance Keanu's enigmatic persona through the absence of background information, while simultaneously, his omnipresence continues to make audiences feel connected with him. If he needs no context, he is necessarily familiar, and as Dyer (1998) argues, as a star, Keanu becomes extraordinarily ordinary. While kindness may be a social expectation and an ordinary part of everyday life, journalists and fans who record, report, and memeify Keanu's simple acts like those above interpret Keanu's kindness as worth noting. In other words, for fans and the media, kindness may seem missing from what Dyer calls 'our actual day-to-day experience', and when celebrities enact this kindness it becomes noteworthy.

### **Audioshop and Cross-Media Narratives**

Participatory meme culture extends into a new meme genre that we have termed 'audioshop'. We define audioshop as a video or video montage on which out-of-context music or sound is overlaid or 'shopped'. The audioshop evolved from the reaction photoshop, defined by Shifman as 'collections of edited images created in response to a small set of prominent photographs' (2014, p. 343). Where still photos may be photoshopped by superimposing figures, like adding Bernie to 'Sad Keanu' or adding 'Sad Keanu' to Edward Hopper's

*Nighthawks*, the audioshop superimposes out-of-context sound to a standardised video clip; the audioshop's addition of sound and movement increases the use of narrative features (characters, setting, theme, and plot) and enhances intertextuality (how texts interrelate to one another). Audioshops can also include re-cut movie trailers (such as *Mary Poppins* as a horror film and *The Shining* as a romantic comedy), or the work created by the popular YouTube channel Bad Lip Reading. All depend on the manipulation of music or narrative to adapt the original context of the text. In this section, we highlight video clips within this genre.

The first time the video clips in the audioshop genre came to our attention was the 2018 mashup of LMFAO's 'Party Rock Anthem' video with other songs at the same (or nearly the same) 130 bpm. Twitter user @Josejusejo, identified by Know Your Meme as the meme's originator, tweeted 'Party Rock Anthem has the same BPM as the Evangelion Opening and I hate it' and attached the audioshopped clip. Readers do not know exactly what 'it' is that @Josejusejo hates, but in creating this audioshop and engaging in, or in this case, creating a meme within the memetic participatory culture, @Josejusejo considered the meme's potential virality. By identifying the BPM, providing a specific clip from the video, and attaching an emotion to 'it', @Josejusejo developed rhetorical rules for participatory engagement, alerting the audience to particular narrative and intertextual features. Meme creators responded, overlaying Depeche Mode's 'Personal Jesus', Nine Inch Nails' 'Sin', and even Aaron Copeland's 'Hoedown' and the theme song to *Thomas & Friends*. A successful audioshop evokes emotions in the viewer, like @Josejusejo's hatred, and each rendition of the meme encourages a different emotion. Narrative features, theme especially, affect the audience's emotional reaction. For instance, the original 'Party Rock Anthem' and its accompanying video inspire feelings of happiness, with a desire to dance, party, even. The Dropkick Murphys' 'I'm Shipping Up to Boston' similarly inspires feelings of dancing and

happiness because the theme matches the viewer's rhetorical expectations and encourages consumption and sharing. Comparatively, while the *Thomas & Friends* song matches the BPM, the song's general theme and the intertextuality of the *Thomas* ecosystem is not one that inspires partying or dancing. The emotions evoked make it less likely to be shared or modified from that particular version.

Our case, 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion', is an audioshop drawn from his cameo appearance in *Always Be My Maybe*, written by Ali Wong, Randall Park, and Michael Golamco (released May 2019 on Netflix). Keanu's introductory scene in *Always* is shot in slow motion and is the basis for 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion'. *Always*, which features an Asian American cast, received critical praise not just for strong writing, but also for Asian American representation in mainstream media. Writers Wong and Park, who also acted in the film, explicitly wanted the film to be both an American and an Asian American love story, which included casting Asian romantic leads (Tang, 2019; DeSantis, 2019). The film was released less than a year after the critical and mainstream success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). The success of the film and ensuing viral audioshops provide a lens to examine celebrity meme culture production and audience interaction.

To understand how 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion' contributes to celebrity meme culture we apply Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez's (2014) method of cross-media analysis to the audioshop. For cross-media narratives, narrative creation and distribution related to the original text may happen after its release, or unintentionally depending on the original's financial success (2014). Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez's cross-media method analyses narratives across three axes: 1) narrative features, 2) intertextuality, and 3) audience interaction (2014). Narrative features include characters, setting, theme, and plot. Intertextuality refers to how texts incorporate other texts into their narrative, either directly or indirectly through referencing or recombining (Takacs, 2015). Audience interaction includes

how groups respond to and/or shape the original text. We look at these three axes to understand how the audioshop is a cross-media narrative.

*Narrative features:* In Keanu's (character) opening scene, he plays a parody of himself dressed in black as he swaggers into a trendy restaurant (setting) to AWOLNATION's 'Sail', acknowledging restaurant patrons and blowing kisses while his love interest, Sasha, and her friends Marcus and Jenny await his arrival (plot). The slow-motion tracking and dark, electronic-rock set at 119 bpm complement one another and influence the scene's memeification. Within days of the film's release, meme creators overlaid a variety of songs onto the clip. Depending on the meme creator's music choice, the theme of the audioshop changed, but the character, setting, and plot stayed the same. The first audioshop featuring this scene, according to Know Your Meme, used Eddie Money's 'Take Me Home Tonight'. Others soon followed, including Salt 'N' Pepa's 'Whatta Man', Shakira's 'Whenever, Wherever', and Hilary Duff's 'So Yesterday'.

*Intertextuality:* Because an audioshop includes an overlaid song onto a video clip, it is necessarily intertextual (Takacs, 2015). Like the audioshops of LMFAO's 'Party Rock Anthem', 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion' uses intertextuality, specifically when meme creators overlay songs with similar BPM. The intertextuality of 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion' is most effective when it balances character (parodied Keanu), setting (trendy restaurant), plot (love interest of a main character), and theme (contemporary rom-com) while merging the theme of the overlaid song and Keanu's mediated persona. Keanu's parody embodies neither his Buddha-like presence (Suh, 2020) nor that of his action film portrayals, but instead exudes a confident bravado. Thus, the audioshop's song choice either successfully juxtaposes the *Always* parody against his extraordinarily ordinary persona or it falls flat. In other words, the song choice affects the audience's reading of Keanu as celebrity: Salt 'N' Pepa's 'Whatta Man' embodies Keanu's popular persona (while supporting the film's

original narrative) while Hilary Duff's poppy break-up song 'So Yesterday' limits the humor of the parody, as it works against common perceptions of Keanu and the clip's narrative features. The more faithful the audioshop is to the original text (Marino, 2015), the more likely it is that audience members will like, share, and recreate it.

*Audience Interaction:* For Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez (2014), audience interaction with the original text takes multiple roles, depending on the audience's relationship with that text. When audiences have existing cultural knowledge of the text, the actors, characters, and other expected narrative features, they have a framework to experience heightened elements of intertextuality. With this greater awareness of the cross-media intertextuality, audiences may be more likely to engage with and in participatory cultures by creating and circulating memes. Therefore, an existing knowledge of Keanu's celebrity image before his introductory scene in *Always* provides a stronger foundation to engage with the parodied persona. Keanu's cameo extends the celebrity culture that celebrates Keanu through memes. In *Always*, Keanu is an enigmatic romantic partner that no one can hope to eclipse. Keanu's cameo certainly gives to the industry and to the culture of celebrity memes in two interrelated ways: 1) his parody connects disparate parts of his career, 2) it creates other instances for audiences to adapt and circulate Keanu's persona.

Understanding audience interactions as they relate to cross-media narratives is not linear or one-way, but a dynamic process that includes developing an understanding of the creator's intentions, which can help us explain responses to Keanu's presence in an Asian American film. The writers of *Always* intentionally sought him for the film: "We always knew we wanted him from Day One", Park explained. "At that point in the story when Marcus finally knows he has feelings for Sasha and he's going to tell her but she's been dating somebody else, we thought, "What would be Marcus' worst nightmare?" (Yamato,

2019). The writers hoped that when audiences first view the original scene of Keanu walking into the restaurant and the parody of himself, the audience's prior knowledge of Keanu would help them identify with Marcus's reaction. Yamato (2019, n.p.) adds, 'Reeves, 54, enters the film much like one might imagine he walks the actual Earth: In slow motion, with every living soul taking notice and launching invisible heart eyes in his direction'. In this instance, at least one audience member, Yamato, using their prior knowledge of Keanu responded to and interacted with the film in such a way that the writers' intended: awe.

Keanu, who self-identifies as a person of color, has said that while he is not a spokesperson for the Asian community, he is proud to be a part of it and to work with other Asian American lead actors, and in the last year, he has spoken even more specifically about his Asian identity. In December 2021, Keanu told NBC Asian America that his 'relationship to [his] Asian identity, it's always been good and healthy. And I love it.... We've been growing up together' (Etienne, 2021). Regarding his Asian heritage, exposure to Chinese culture via his grandmother, and 'furthering representation on screen' (McKenzie, 2019), he said, 'I hope that whatever opportunities I've had, or the work that I'm doing, in some way can entertain and can also—I don't want to say teach—but have something of value come out of it' (McKenzie, 2019). For audiences, his presence and participation in a film with an Asian American centered cast has been meaningful and important: 'Facebook groups centered around the Asian community such as Subtle Asian Traits proudly declare 'ONE OF US' and his *Always Be My Maybe* co-stars Randall Park and Ali Wong proclaim him 'ours' and an 'Asian American icon' (Hills, 2020; see also Tang, 2019; Yamato, 2019).

These instances provide a small window into how writers, directors, and audiences interact with Keanu's celebrity persona across existing and emergent media narratives. The audioshop, particularly as it has evolved through the example of 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion', exemplifies the complexities of a participatory culture. On the one hand, the cross-

media nature of the meme, particularly changes made to narrative features through the intertextual overlaying of different songs, enables meme creators to play with Keanu's persona. On the other hand, the possibilities for audience interaction through previous knowledge of Keanu's celebrity persona and his casting in an Asian American rom-com provide us with a more robust intertextual experience. In the next section, we discuss how this intertextual experience plays a role in the commodification and objectification of Keanu's celebrity persona.

### **Meme Culture and Celebritisation**

Most often, memes are created by fans or audience members. Celebrities generally do not use memes to 'maintain and strategise' their own images (Turner, 2010, p. 14), or in other words, celebrities are not routinely creating and circulating their own memes about themselves. The adaptation and circulation of cross-media narratives, whether produced by industry or user-generated meme culture, perpetuates and adds dimension to the objectification and commodification of Keanu's celebrity. Turner (2010) describes objectification and commodification as a 'discursive' process which happens *to* the celebrity *for* the benefit of both the celebrity and the industry. Turner argues:

To be folded into this representational regime – to be 'celebritised' – changes how you are consumed and what you can mean. The process of celebritisation is widely seen as transformative but with markedly varying political significance; at one end of the spectrum of opinion, it would be described as a form of enfranchisement and empowerment, but at the other end as a mode of exploitation or objectification.' (2010, p. 13).

Because the process is a spectrum, even enfranchised/empowered celebrities can simultaneously be objectified and celebritised. Memes objectify, commodify, and celebritise. The circulation and reception of memes provide a metaphorical payment or acknowledgement of both the celebrity *and* those participating in meme culture. In other

words, even when celebrities interact with existing meme culture about themselves, they are still subject to celebritisation. This memetic celebritisation occurs when audiences project their own attitudes onto Keanu. Suh (2020) argues that audiences romanticise both Keanu and his kindness, gleaned these characteristics from Keanu's perceived on- and off-screen personae. *Always* screenwriter Michael Golamco explains Keanu is 'very self-aware and he's aware of how he's perceived in our culture [...] The dude's a living legend. He's somebody that has been beloved across generations... He just gives. That's what Keanu does. He gives' (Yamato, 2019). According to *Always* director Nahnatchka Khan and writer/actor Wong, Keanu provided input and suggestions for his parody in *Always*, including lines, jokes, and props (Nguyen, 2019). Keanu also gave permission for his name to be used in the movie's ending song 'I Punched Keanu Reeves' (Nguyen, 2019). Park annotated a version of the lyrics that point to Keanu's contributions in the movie and suggestions for the song, including ensuring the song isn't about Keanu but about the love story (Jung, 2019). These are a few examples of how coworkers in the industry add to audience impressions of Keanu's kindness. While Keanu may be aware of these impressions and enfranchised and empowered through his participation with fan culture and his own persona, he is at the same time objectified and commodified through ongoing meme production that highlights, interprets, or adapts these characteristics. Celebritisation, objectification, and commodification through memeification happen *to* Keanu.

In addition to the discursive celebritisation process, Keanu's presence in *Always* highlights the growing visibility of Asians and Asian Americans in film. From the writers' and directors' intentional casting to journalist, media, and Facebook excitement (Hills, 2020; McKenzie 2019; Tang, 2019; Yamato, 2019), many celebrated Keanu's participation in *Always*. This visibility of Asians/Asian Americans, or in Turner's (2010) words, the 'political significance' for both celebrity and audience, however, is limited. We complicate this

excitement, recognising that Asian/Asian American audiences are diverse and heterogeneous and may not have a singular response. In Lopez's analysis of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the construction of Asian American audiences, Lopez stresses that responses must be seen in the historical context of marginalization and underrepresentation (2021, p. 151). Even though Keanu's casting and the responses to it through memes and social media posts may have positively addressed increasing Asian/Asian American representation, it is a positivity that is multilayered, nuanced, and varied. In looking at audience reactions as public discourse rather than a collection of individual responses, we can better read Keanu-focused participatory meme culture in the broader context of marginalization. Transformative and equal representation for Asian Americans on and off screen continues to be elusive (Lopez, 2021; Shimizu, 2017).

Before *Always*, many of Keanu's roles have been white-passing or ethnically ambiguous, such as the characters he played in science fiction films like *The Matrix* trilogy and *Johnny Mnemonic* (Lim, 2018; Nishime, 2008; 2017). This is similar to other mixed-race Asian actors who are also cast in white-passing or ethnically ambiguous roles (Nishime, 2017, p. 149). A recent shift in casting is with that of Henry Golding, an actor of Iban (indigenous Malaysian) and white British descent, who has achieved international recognition through his role in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Golding's film and television work has featured his 'Eurasianness', through which his Asian-ness has been reduced to an exotic gaze or his whiteness normalised (Sebastiampillai, 2021, p. 227). Golding's celebrity, however, is different from Keanu's. Sebastiampillai (2021) argues that Golding's stardom can be conceived '...as representing an "Asian Dream". Under this scenario, a mixed-race star's racial ambiguity is prized within Asian nations as being simultaneously white enough to be exotic and desirable, and Asian enough to be familiar and relatable' (p. 223). Where Keanu's racial ambiguity has allowed him the ability to pass as white, Golding's celebrity is clearly

connected to his mixed-race heritage that is recognised in both Asian and Western media (Sebastiampillai, 2021).

Put another way, Keanu has long been playing white passing or ethnically ambiguous roles while Golding's recent roles have explicitly addressed his racialized identity. Yet, the excitement of increased representation in films such as *Always* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, alongside the fraught intertextual readings of both men's racial identities through traditional journalistic media and audience-based memetic representation, demonstrates that within contemporary celebrity culture, the celebritisation process remains paramount. Cross-media, intertextual narratives and user-generated content do not always explicitly draw on race, and if they do, they do not explicitly contest racial stereotypes and may reinforce mainstream hegemonic ideologies, especially racial stereotypes of Blacks, Latinos, and Asians (Guo and Harlow 2014). Simply increasing representation does not lead to more accurate representations: 'the multiplication of images of mixed-race Asians will have little effect if they are merely enfolded in already-existing racial narratives that slot bodies into discrete categories' (Nishime, 2017, p. 149). The discursive relationship of celebritisation (Turner, 2010) may offer celebrities and under-represented audiences opportunities for enfranchisement/empowerment, but without more representation or change in racialized structures within the industry, this representation leans closer to objectification/commodification.

Despite problematic representations, excitement across viral content, social media, blogs, and traditional journalism remains among Asian diasporic groups at the increased presence of Asian actors in mainstream cinema. This includes the viral Keanu's Chinese Grandma image, which shows Keanu seated and smiling with an Asian woman. But this is a misattribution - it's not his grandmother (Yang, 2019). Regardless, the sentiments are significant: 'the excitement with which online Asians greeted the image says something about

our newfound eagerness to expand our community's boundaries, to be inclusive of more diverse and complicated definitions of Asian identity' (Yang, 2019). Keanu's cross-media presence - enigmatic, familiar, kind, and Asian - reflects and encourages multiple levels of participatory engagement, all the while maintaining fidelity to its original form - Keanu as celebrity. Even though the image has not been manipulated - or memeified - it did go viral, especially in the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits (Yang, 2019). When fans circulate this photo and celebrate Keanu's connection with his 'Asian grandmother', they engage in the participatory culture that perpetuates Keanu's objectification and commodification. The sharing of this particular photo engages the existing narrative of the friendly, giving Keanu alongside the 'new' narrative of his Asian-ness. This intertextual relationship both amplifies and provides nuance to the extraordinary ordinariness of his celebrity persona.

## **Conclusion**

When Graeme Turner (2010) argued celebrity studies needed to better conceptualise the 'production and consumption of celebrity', he more than likely was not considering memes and user-generated content, but rather the industry itself. Since then, research in celebrity studies has expanded and addressed multiple aspects of stardom, fame, and cultural production. We argue that the rise of user-generated content, such as memes and social media, requires us to reconsider what the 'production and consumption of celebrity' actually looks like. We add to this field of study through the example of the celebrity meme audioshop, 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion'. This audioshop sits within an existing landscape of other Keanu-related internet content, such as 'Conspiracy Keanu', 'Sad Keanu' and its subsequent iterations, and popular social media including Facebook Groups, Twitter feeds, and Tumblr blogs. Because Keanu maintains a desire to remain private, with no official communication channels or social media presence, his internet presence and 'the

circulation and creation of 'Keanu Reeves' as celebrity has mainly moved between mainstream media and user-driven and maintained content' (Van der Graff 2014, p. 39). Yet, as a celebrity who also embraces 'giving back' to his fans (Yamato, 2019), memes and participatory culture make Keanu familiar by placing him in knowable spaces and perpetuating his extraordinary ordinariness by enabling him to remain a celebrity who 'needs no context' ('No Context Keanu' Tumblr).

'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion', in particular, is a clear example of *how* a meme contributes to Keanu's relatability and longevity via participatory culture. Applying a cross-media analysis (Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez 2014), the audioshops that best contribute to Keanu's celebrity persona are those that draw on existing knowledge, sharing *and* manipulating the memetic moment, for a heightened intertextual experience. Numerous (re)productions of 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion' indicate a fan culture that not only recognises the conventions of the audioshop genre but also clearly identifies the scene in *Always* as a parody of Keanu's already existing celebrity persona. Whether intentional or not, meme creators perpetuate this celebrity persona through the objectification and commodification of that persona. Objectification and commodification through meme culture is enhanced by a meme's ability to 'go viral'. Keanu and 'Keanu Walking in Slow Motion' are no exception. The commodity is the celebrity's persona as it is embodied in the memetic text (the audioshop) and the payment is virality - likes, clicks, and shares - and new configurations of the meme.

In general, creators of celebrity memes commodify not just the celebrity persona, but also social norms those celebrities embody because celebrities are 'vessels for the creation of social meanings, and either directly or indirectly serve to convey (typically dominant) social values' (Simpson 2009, para. 3). Part of these social meanings relate to the excitement of Keanu's participation in an Asian American film. Media fanfare, social media, and user-

generated content like ‘Keanu Walking in Slow Motion’ indicated positive reactions about increasing visibility for Asian American films, especially after the success of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Yet, limits exist in the ways that celebrity can change or be changed from outside the industry itself. Participatory engagement from fans can further Keanu’s already established celebrity persona (enigmatic, giving, and kind) that draw from already established social values and meanings, while also creating new readings of his persona through meme culture and other fan-based media. While these texts can help fans come to *know* Keanu through these emergent texts, Keanu remains an extraordinarily ordinary celebrity.

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