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Memes, brands and the politics of post-terror togetherness: following the Manchester bee after the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing

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ABSTRACT

The 22 May 2017 bombing of the Manchester Arena, which killed 22 and injured over 800 more, triggered a massive public response leading to, among other things, improvised memorials, spontaneous vigils, dedicated hashtags, and viral videos. Within this response, the memetic reinvigoration and, subsequently, brand adoption of one of Manchester's oldest civic symbols – the worker bee – was clearly discernible. In this article, we explore how the spread of the bee after the bombing contributed to a politics of post-terror togetherness. Conceptualising memes as 'more or less digital', we 'follow' the bee across bodies, streets and social media platforms via the analysis of approximately 53,000 Instagram images. We show how the initial memeification of the bee carried with it grassroots expressions of togetherness while the subsequent use of the bee in official city branding strategies created and obfuscated various political tensions.

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Introduction

At 10:31 pm on 22 May 2017, a bomb exploded in the Manchester Arena after an Ariana Grande concert. Quickly declared a terrorist attack by the Greater Manchester Police, the blast killed 23 people including the suicide bomber and injured over 800 more. The next day ISIS claimed the bombing had been carried out by a soldier of its caliphate who was eventually identified as a 22-year-old local man of Libyan descent.[1] On the same day, the UK government upgraded its terror threat level to its highest level allowing the deployment of troops to support armed police in guarding key government buildings and other potential terrorist targets around the country, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, presided over a vigil attended by thousands in the city's centre, and Grande temporarily suspended her concert tour and returned to the USA.

Unfolding against the backdrop of these cascading official reactions, the bombing also triggered a considerable grassroots public response characterised, in large part, by notions of solidarity, resilience, and cosmopolitan unity. This was evidenced by,

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among other things, improvised memorials and spontaneous vigils in Manchester and further afield, and the social media spread of dedicated hashtags and viral videos. Featuring prominently and being shared across these was one of Manchester's civic symbols: the worker bee. While before the bombing, the bee's official use had waned, by the time of its first anniversary this had changed with the bee featuring heavily in the branding of the commemorative events organised by the city's council.

In this article, we approach the bee as a meme, and subsequently a brand, with the aim of better understanding its reinvigoration and how this contributed to a post-terror politics of togetherness. We ask the following research questions:

(1) When and to where did the bee spread memetically after the bombing and how did it facilitate togetherness?
(2) How and for whom did the bee become a brand and with what political consequences?

These questions indicate that we are concerned with 'the political' rather than 'politics' (Edkins, 1999). In short, the post-terror politics that we are interested in relates to, but also exceeds, the politics of responses to terror attacks offered by politicians, political parties and governments that usually stress security concerns,[2] by also pertaining to the politics of emotion and place branding (Closs Stephens & Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Hutchison, 2013). In this respect, we suggest that the case of the Manchester bee is instructive because it reveals how the 'soft visceral side of politics' (Hutchison, 2013, p. 127) can be refracted through branding practices that often have overlooked political consequences and have rarely been explored in post-terror contexts (cf. Cassinger et al., 2018).

We start by summarising some of the literature concerning the interfaces between memes, politics and brands. We then discuss the relationship between social media and the politics of post-terror togetherness in order to provide a theoretical framework for our later analyses. Here we conceptualise memes, and specifically the bee, as being 'more or less digital'. After this, we introduce our materials and methods. These involve the analysis of around 53,000 Instagram images using a machine learning method for image classification and the closer qualitative exploration of selected images and their captions, as enacted in two subsequent sections. In the first of these, image similarity plots are used to understand the timing and diversity of the different trajectories of the bee's memeification. These plots are visually interpreted to help understand how the bee became political by encouraging a hybrid togetherness that crossed more and less digital terrains. In the second analysis section, the images and their captions are 'close-read' to provide a richer understanding of some of the political tensions that were created or obfuscated by the bee's brand adoption. We conclude by summarising the article's main empirical, conceptual and methodological contributions.

Literature review: memes, brands and politics

'Internet memes' are digital variants of the transferable units of culture referred to as 'memes' although these two terms are now often used interchangeably (Dawkins, 1976). While memes take many representational and gestural forms, internet memes are usually digital or digitised videos, animations (including GIFs) and still images including

photographs, artworks and image-macros. As Shifman (2013) outlines, they are: (1) individually produced and circulated but can scale-up to shape the views and actions of social groups; (2) reproduced through mimicry and remix in line with different intentions and actions; and (3) diffused through competition and selection depending on their context.

Much research has addressed internet memes within wider circuits of digital culture, and their impact as creative and humorous expressions (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Scholars have also considered their political impact. Shifman (2014) has detailed how they have enrolled in political advocacy and/or persuasion; grassroots action; and the public expression of political opinions. Bayerl and Stoynov (2016) have demonstrated the influence of politically orientated internet memes on public debate. Others have highlighted the role that internet memes can play within official election campaigns (Chagas et al., 2019) and how they can help normalise fringe political opinions (Merrill, 2020a).

Denisova (2019) has noted that memes can also aid political branding. However, the literature that addresses the overlap between memes and branding mostly concerns commercial contexts (Murray et al., 2014). Here, brands are usually conceived of as taking advantage of memes through 'memejacking' (Hsu, 2018). While the defining characteristic of internet memes is their digital transmission and that of brands is the creation of distinguishable identities to serve commercial or other competitive ends, these characteristics can be shared by both phenomena. For example, internet memes can serve commercial ends and diffuse through competition (Shifman, 2014) and branding is often a participatory process that involves co-production and the uptake and transmission of brands at the grassroots level (Zenker & Erfgren, 2014).

Memes and brands have also both been approached as mutable objects (see Lunenfeld, 2014; Murray et al., 2014). With brands, this mutability has been highlighted by studies of branding within digital activism. In political protests, branding has, for example, been perceived as helping to establish dynamic action frames within which social actors can develop different activities, meanings and interpretations (Poell et al., 2016). The place-based branding of national and municipal governments is another way by which brands become political (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011). Here, the sorts of participatory place branding that involve residents are further facilitated by social media platforms in new ways, including through personal branding (Brems et al., 2017; Thelander & Cassinger, 2017; Zenker & Erfgren, 2014).

Overall, when memes and politics have been studied together, this has mostly relied on a narrow understanding of the latter as relating to political movements and parties, politicians, governments, parliaments and state apparatuses – 'politics'. Meanwhile, when memes and branding have been studied together, emphasis has tended to land on commercial matters rather than on 'the political'. Studying the Manchester bee at the intersection of, and as it crosses, these three empirical terrains (memes, brands and politics) helps diversify this earlier research. Furthermore, considering the memeification and brand adoption or 'brandification' of the bee as interrelated processes points towards 'the political' rather than 'politics'. This is because even if branding is influenced by official political actors, this is counterbalanced by those memetic processes that lend greater agency to grassroots actors. Therein lies the opportunity to interrogate 'the political' as those processes through which phenomena gain political status or political consequences in a broader sense – those processes that in other words index 'mutations of the social or symbolic order' (Edkins, 1999, p. 3). Given the empirical context in which

the Manchester bee was memetically reinvigorated – in response to a terror attack – the case also presents the chance to conceive 'the political' also in terms of the politics of emotion via feelings of post-terror togetherness. Finally, studying a metropolitan, locally specific, symbol like the bee adds to those perspectives that have stressed the ritualistic and emotive use of more universal and/or national digital templates following terror attacks including 'pray for' hashtags and heart emojis (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018; McCrow-Young, 2021; Pitimson, 2016).

Theoretical framework: social media and the politics of post-terror togetherness

Terror attacks impact societies deeply, leading among other things to expressions of unity, solidarity, and resilience, as well as political debates about notions of community (Closs Stephens, 2007). These attacks now enter people's lives not only via broadcast and printed media but also via social media. The latter allows people to rapidly respond to terrorism by, among other things, digitally sharing expressions of togetherness (Eroukhmanoff, 2019). The use of social media in this way can also occur later, including around anniversaries, when terror attacks are often commemoratively reactivated (Merrill et al., 2020). In an era when a variety of new ways of being together are being facilitated by digital media and technology (Bakardjieva, 2003), social media have thus become implicated in the transformation of individual grief into 'collective trauma' and the (re)construction of social groups and identities after events like terror attacks (Alexander, 2012). Their enrolment in such processes is political because it contributes to determining to whom post-terror togetherness extends and to whom it does not.

At the same time, social media platforms often facilitate forms of being and acting together that are dynamic and multifaceted, episodic and fragmentary. The feelings of togetherness that they make possible do not necessarily rely on physical copresence and often take shape through different 'trajectories of publicness' – including those of a spatial, temporal and material character – contributing to broader networks of connection (Couldry, 2020; Kavada & Poell, 2020; van Haperen et al., 2020). Such trajectories can also be affective insofar as emotional connectivity allows 'fundamentally different actors, identities, and perspectives to temporarily come together' (Poell & Van Dijck, 2016, p. 232). This has implications for the everyday politics of emotions – creating new possibilities for the negotiation of hegemonic structures of feelings (Beattie et al., 2019). It also indicates how social media parallels the city in providing space for affective moments of togetherness – such as during the aftermaths and anniversaries of terror attacks – when a different politics of belonging is practiced and experienced in a pluralistic manner (Closs Stephens et al., 2021).

Following on from this, we avoid conceiving the post-terror togetherness that social media supports as relying *only* on digital practices, infrastructures and connections. Rather we approach this togetherness as being 'hybrid', blurring the so-called online and offline with the potential to involve copresence or not (Lindgren, 2014; Merrill, 2019). Hybrid togetherness has characterised the public responses to numerous terror attacks. For example, the public response to the January 2015 shootings at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris saw people come together under the banner of the 'Je Suis Charlie' slogan and logo not only on social media but also in the urban spaces of the French

capital and other cities (Eroukhmanoff, 2019). However, 'Je Suis Charlie' was also fraught with political tensions and its inference of a universalist frame of belonging was critiqued for erasing social difference and hegemonically amplifying certain groups' perspectives over those of others (Payne, 2018; Lentin, 2019). Thus, even those hybrid public responses to terror that initially appear to emphasise cosmopolitan forms of togetherness and unity by stressing the inclusion of 'otherness' within collective forms of self-identification (Beck, 2003) can still prove exclusionary, and thus political, in different ways.

In this article, we further convey the hybridity of post-terror togetherness using the phrase: 'more or less digital' (Merrill et al., 2020; see also Merrill & Lindgren, 2020). This phrase acknowledges that in societal contexts characterised by widespread digital technology and social media use, distinctions between the so-called 'real' and 'virtual' or 'offline' and 'online' are losing analytical utility. Various phenomena including spaces, activities, behaviours and objects are not only *more or less* digital, but also more *and* less digital in the extent to which they are digitally or non-digitally constituted. Acknowledging this encourages the consideration of not only the digital mediatisation of previously non-digital phenomena but also the non-digital materialisation of digital logics (Merrill et al., 2020). It also allows for greater analytical scrutiny to be applied to the material underpinnings of digital content that is often perceived as immaterial, whether these be spatial, corporeal, artefactual, technological or infrastructural (Kinsley, 2014; Merrill, 2018). As online traces of offline embodied actions, performances and practices, social media content can thus be approached as both digitally and non-digitally constituted (Merrill, 2018; 2019). Social media content and platforms are therefore rarely *just* digital.

Accordingly, we conceptualise internet memes as more or less digital vehicles of hybrid togetherness. This actually encourages a subtle return to earlier conceptions of memes (see Dawkins, 1976) with the 'internet' prefix increasingly rendered obsolete as society in some parts of the world approaches a post-digital state (Lindgren, 2017). Furthermore, given the convergence of old and new media forms, and the prevalence of remediation and remix practices (see Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Jenkins, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), internet memes are now rarely restricted to the internet and memes, regardless of whether theyoriginated online or not, are now often manifested in both more and less digital ways. Therefore, in the remainder of this article we simply use the term 'meme'. The memetic spread of the bee after the Manchester bombing helps illustrate these ideas.

Material and method: 'following' the Manchester bee

The 'worker bee' has been a symbol of Manchester since the industrial revolution, featuring on the city's coat of arms since 1842. Later in the nineteenth century, it became linked with the city's cooperative movement and started to feature in the city's architecture, including in the Manchester Town Hall's floor mosaics. In the 1970s it was added to the city's traffic bollards, and in 2014 a variant of the Town Hall bee started to be used on the city's bins (Hacking, 2020). In turn, local musicians , street artists and businesses started to use the bee more (Naylor, 2017). However, by May 2017 the city's official use of the bee had waned, eclipsed by the I❤MCR branding campaign that was established after the 2011 UK-wide riots with the support of Manchester City Council. The success of this campaign led the Lord Mayor's Manchester Charity Appeal

Trust to rebrand as the WE❤MCR Charity. Both were pronounced within the public response to the bombing but were already in a position of brand dominance at that time. In contrast, the impact of the bombing on the bee was more transformative. It became, as one journalist put it: 'the perfect unifying symbol: secular, non-tribal, peaceful, community-focused but, ultimately not to be messed with' (Naylor, 2017).

Our analysis of the bee's memetic spread after the bombing is methodologically underpinned by the exercise of 'following' – tracking its more or less digital appearance across a range of corporeal, urban and media spaces via the combination of machine learning and manual methods (Lindgren, 2020; Merrill, 2020b). This effort shares similarities with 'iconographic tracking', which explores the digital flow and transformation of images and how this impacts social life (Gries, 2013; Pearce et al., 2020).

We 'follow' the bee primarily via its appearance on Instagram – selecting this social media platform due to its popularity and emphasis on image-based communication. Much research has addressed the visual social media cultures of Instagram and its specific architectures, affordances and vernacular practices (Leaver et al., 2020). Less interested in these specificities, we chose Instagram as a departure point and source of material that could help us understand how the bee spread memetically in an 'extended social media context' (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 51; Pearce et al., 2020) and in more or less digital ways across even wider 'infrastructures of connection' with broader social consequences (Couldry, 2020, p. 13).

We used Instaloader (2020) to collect 69,441 extant public Instagram posts featuring #manchesterbee(s) from the period between 12 February 2013 and 23 October 2020.[3] The distribution of these posts confirmed the impact of the bombing on the wider adoption of the bee and its hashtag and also revealed the effect of the bombing's anniversaries on its use (Figure 1). Based on the distribution of these posts we selected the 18-month-period between 23 April 2017 and 23 October 2018 for further analysis. This led to a sub-sample of 35,738 posts and 52,974 images (Instagram posts can contain up to 10 images).[4] This period was chosen because it contained a number of events likely to have influenced the bee's memetic spread and because similar research to date has focused primarily on shorter periods immediately following terror attacks (e.g., Al Nashmi, 2018).

Instaloader retrieves posts that have a given search term in its caption or in its associated comments. This means that not all original posters in the sample intended

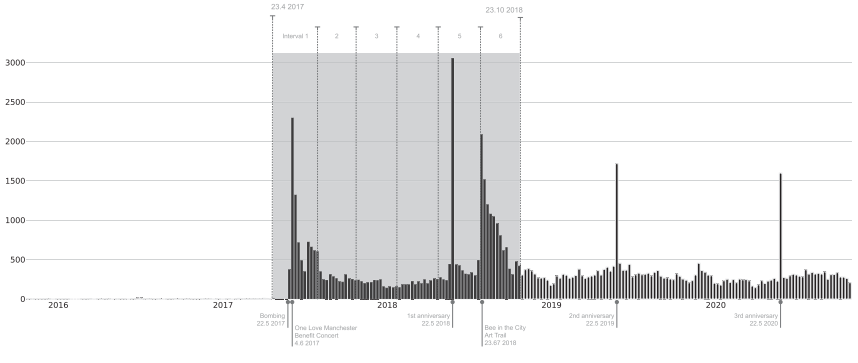

Figure 1. Weekly Frequency of #Manchesterbee(s) Instagram Posts between 23/04/2015 and 23/10/2020.[5]

their posts to contribute to #manchesterbee(s) (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Still, the entire sub-sample was retained for analysis and approximately 91% (32,658) of its posts featured the search term in their actual captions. The sub-sample was then split into six three-month intervals (Table 1). We then used a machine learning mode of image classification called img2vec (He et al., 2018) to create plots of visually similar images posted during each interval. The exact workflow used to create the plots is detailed in an online open-science repository that accompanies this article.[6] The clustered structure of these plots is conveyed by their silhouettes, which appear as insets (Figure 2).

The plots were then visually analysed on the basis that the content of different clusters of images during different intervals conveyed when and to where the bee spread memetically. Thereafter key clusters of the bee's memetic use, namely those in which images of bees featured most prominently, were analysed in terms of their relation to forms of hybrid togetherness, as supported by reference to the bee's appearance in other material.

A second analytical step involved the closer reading of the sub-sample of Instagram posts and their captions. This was contextualised and complemented by earlier research into the public response to the bombing (see Closs Stephens et al., 2021; Merrill et al., 2020) and, again, the targeted analysis of additional relevant sources. This analytical step focused specifically on how and for whom the bee became a brand, and the impact that this brandification process had for the politics of post-terror togetherness discernible after the bombing. Here, critical visual methodologies (Rose, 2016) were employed to read the sub-sample 'against the grain' in order to discern the political tensions that were hidden by the bee's wider memetic and brand adoption.

For ethical reasons, usernames were removed from the posts and the analysed content consisted only of that which was publicly available through Instagram at the time it was collected. To further mitigate concerns about the content's unsolicited use, we present the plots in low-resolution and high-level aggregate form. We also minimise the use of direct quotations, with only one post caption partially reproduced below. We deemed this ethically permissible because the limited possibilities to search Instagram captions reduce the chances of identifying the original poster. The detailed analysis of individual images justifies their reproduction under the copyright terms of fair use.

Analysis I: making sense of the swarm

Between 23 April 2017 and 23 October 2018 there were three peaks in the hashtag's use (Figure 1). The first corresponds to the bombing's initial aftermath, cresting in Interval 1,

Table 1. Overview of img2vec models.

Img2vec model	Date range	Number of images
Interval 1	23/04/2017–23/07/2017	7,247
Interval 2	24/07/2017–23/10/2017	4,676
Interval 3	24/10/2017–23/01/2018	3,798
Interval 4	24/01/2018–23/04/2018	3,957
Interval 5	24/04/2018–23/07/2018	11,085
Interval 6	24/07/2018–23/10/2018	22,211

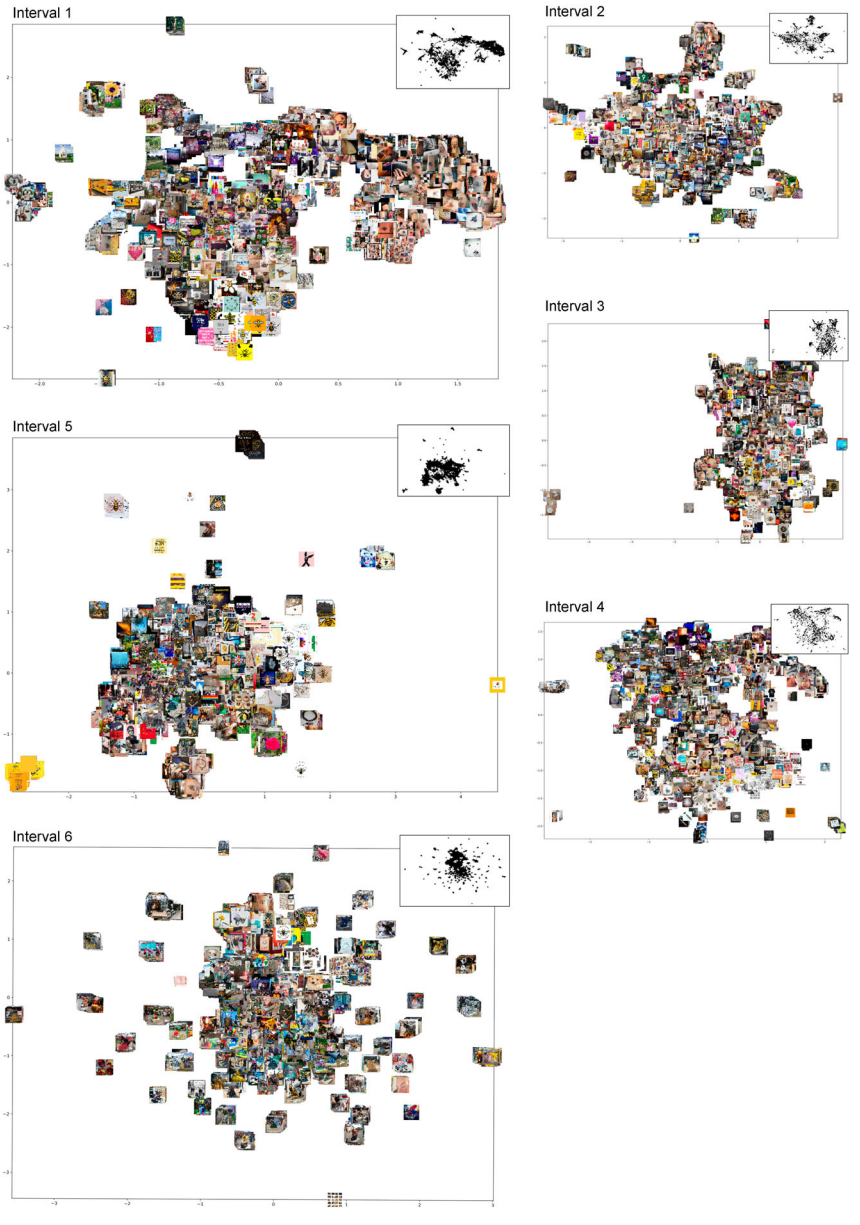

Figure 2. The img2vec plots.[7]

during the week ending 4 June 2017, the day 50,000 people attended *One Love Manchester*, a benefit concert organised by Grande to raise money for the bombing's victims and their families. The second peak correlates with the first-year anniversary commemorations, during Interval 5, which again drew large crowds. The third, during Interval 6, coincides with the *Bee in the City* art trail which opened on 23 July 2018. The impact of the art trail is indicated by the elevated, though subsequently diminishing, number of #manchesterbee(s) posts across the nine weeks that it ran. The image plots allow a finer-grained analysis of the images that accompanied the hashtag during different

periods and further convey the timing but also the extent of the bee's memetic spread (Figure 2).

Across the top of the first interval's plot, clusters of images featuring actual bees blend with those featuring flowers and landscapes. These then converge into clusters featuring groups of people, including at *One Love Manchester*, connecting in turn with those of individuals. The latter, which include selfies, connect in succession with body art images including, most pervasively, bee tattoos.

The dense bee tattoo cluster on the right of the first plot conveys the memetic impact of the *Manchester Tattoo Appeal*. The appeal, launched via Facebook by a local tattoo artist on the day after the bombing, saw tattooists across and beyond Manchester offer bee tattoos for a £50 charitable donation. It garnered considerable attention on social media and then in the broadcast and printed press, leading to long queues outside many tattooists in the city's Northern Quarter. By late June 2017, an estimated 10,000 people world-wide had been tattooed with bees (Perraudin, 2017). Many explained their motivations for getting bee tattoos in commemorative and solidaric terms (BBC, 2017). Bee tattoos allowed people to show support for the bombing's victims and their families but also to signal their membership to a resilient Mancunian community and, in doing so, created feelings of togetherness between those sporting them on their bodies and sharing them online. They facilitated forms of hybrid togetherness that were experienced in less digital ways while in the copresence of others when waiting in the queues to get a tattoo and thereafter in more digital ways when browsing images of similar tattoos on social media platforms. The Instagram posts featuring the tattoos thus indexed the embodied energy behind efforts to connect with others via digitally mediatised commemorative activities. In turn, the tattooed bees were more than digital and more than corporeal because their up-take-and spread illustrated the entanglement of both more and less digital activities, artefacts and spaces (see also Brennan, 2019).

On the lower left of the first interval's plot several clearly delineated clusters relate to street artworks featuring the bee. These include the works created by local street artist Qubek in response to the bombing. Particularly prominent are two smaller works finished two days after the bombing and a large mural commissioned by the Manchester Evening News featuring a bee for each of the 22 victims – all in the city's Northern Quarter. Announcing the two smaller pieces on his Facebook page, Qubek wrote:

> Here is my tribute to Manchester … share this and use it as your profile pic if you like, share the bee love!![8]

> … the vibe in the city is incredible, we forget that we are all part of the same tribe, it's a shame something so tragic has to happen for us to realise our sense of togetherness and community, big up Manchester and its amazing community.[9]

Qubek's comments indicate again how the bee facilitated post-terror togetherness and reveal additional hybrid pathways of its memetic spread. Here, the more or less digital qualities of street art exceeded just its 'instagrammability' and the tendency for it to be increasingly viewed online and related also to synergies between Instagram's and, in this case, Qubek's pursuit of viewers' attention (MacDowall, 2019).

The street art cluster blends with a looser cluster, in the centre of the first interval's plot, featuring images of the bee used in arts and crafts, and, in the plot's lower reaches,

of graphical renderings of the bee including, and often based on, those from the city's bollards and bins. The former images highlight the sorts of vernacular practices through which Instagram users remixed the bee within their creative hobbies. They also suggest that Instagram posts featuring the results of these hobbies were valued in ways similar to the results themselves. The latter cluster of more polished and professional images meanwhile include the bee on the kits of Manchester's rival football teams ahead of their game against each other, indicating again the bee's unifying capacities.[10] This cluster, which also includes images featuring I❤MCR, provides early signs of the bee's brand adoption. Many used the bee in these ways to raise money for the bombing's victims and families but there are also suggestions of the bee's use for more purely commercial purposes.

The three main clusters of bees identifiable in the first interval's plot (tattoos, street art, arts, crafts and merchandising) are also discernible in the more dispersed plots of the second, third and fourth intervals – those intervals with the fewest images. Noteworthy in the second interval's plot is the appearance, in the top-left, of LGBTQ+ iterations of the bee, including photos of those on the bollards of the city's 'Gay Village' neighbourhood adorned with rainbows, coinciding with the city's annual Pride event. Likewise, photos of a second benefit concert, *We Are Manchester*, which marked the arena's reopening on 9 September 2017, can also be discerned. Both point again to the bee's elastic yet unifying character and its LGTBQ+ use suggests that in this period the bee continued to be remixed and spread memetically at the grassroots level. This provides evidence of the bee's ability to stretch the hybrid togetherness evident in the immediate aftermath of the bombing to new groups over time.

In intervals three and four, clusters of bee merchandising become more evident. The more explicit branding use of the bee by Manchester City Council can also be identified in the lower left-hand corner of the fifth interval's plot, where a cluster of yellow images indicates the prevalence of the heavily branded programme of commemorative events that marked the first anniversary called *Manchester Together* (see also Figure 3). Similar branding can be traced in the commemorative cover of the Manchester Evening News, released on the anniversary and featuring 22 bees forming a heart. This black and yellow cover image creates its own cluster at the centre-top of the fifth plot. During the first anniversary, many Instagram users again posted images of their bee tattoos and new grassroots trajectories of the bees memetic spread were also inaugurated. One example, the #LoveMCRBees campaign, again involved the bee's material remixing via its distribution on painted pebbles (Merrill et al., 2020). Another, #The22BeesProject, involved a local illustrator drawing chalk bees on the windows of hundreds of businesses across the city in return for donations.

The plot for the sixth interval is heavily characterised by images of the 100 plus different bee statues that were placed around the city as part of the *Bee in the City* art trail with a number of statues featuring in their own clusters. Organised by Manchester City Council in partnership with a commercial public art organisation, the trail also raised money to support the bombing's victims and their families. It was also more or less digital. It had its own dedicated digital app which, amongst other functions, allowed users to enter codes found on the statues in order to share their discoveries on social media and to unlock extra information about them and the locations of other bees. Through

gamification, the trail influenced how people interacted with urban spaces, the artworks and one another (Lammes & Wilmott, 2020).

To summarise, the main clusters of the bee's memeification indicate various forms of hybrid togetherness amongst broad swathes of Mancunians and in some cases further afield. The bee bound different individuals and groups (tattooist communities, street artists and their fans, hobby circles and many more) via hybrid connections forged in part through its repetition and creation of a common anchoring point of local identification in numerous more or less digital contexts: Mancunian's tattooed bodies, the artefactual outcomes of their creative energies and the painted walls of their urban environments – all shared with others via social media platforms like Instagram as indexed by hashtags like #manchesterbee(s). This was particularly evident during the immediate aftermath of the bombing and its anniversary. In this respect, and especially at these moments, the hybrid togetherness that the bee's memeification helped generate was authentically felt and experienced by many and as such, its positive political significance in carrying unifying grassroots responses to the bombing should not be dismissed nor derided. However, the subsequent brandification of the bee, that sought to take advantage of its freshly acquired memetic status, also indexed political tensions.

Analysis II: tensions in the hive?

Manchester City Council was not alone in adopting the bee for branding purposes. Qubek's use of the bee can also be conceived as partly brand-related. Getting a bee tattoo and posting it to Instagram likely fed into its users personal branding efforts albeit with varying degrees of intentionality. Even if uncontrived, Grande's revelation, soon after the first anniversary via Instagram and Twitter, that she too had got a bee tattoo not only confirmed her status as an honorary Mancunian but also contributed to her brand image among her 300 million plus followers on these platforms. Still, Manchester City Council's brand use of the bee was the most orchestrated as highlighted by the *Manchester Together* and *Bee in the City* events.[11] Manchester City Council's 'memejacking' of the bee began already in the days immediately after the bombing. As numerous grassroots actors started using the bee, it moved to formalise its spread, by trademarking those versions of the bee it had legal claim to (including those from its bollards, bins and town hall mosaic). Manchester City Council filed trademark applications for six different bees in the two weeks following the bombing but only publicised this in March 2018 once the window in which to raise objections regarding the trademark had passed. Their public announcement stressed that initially the bee would be made freely available for use under licence so long as any commercial uses ensured a percentage of their profits were paid to one of four Manchester charities.[12]

The branding scheme used by Manchester City Council for *Manchester Together*, which combined the bee and heart symbols, cited the dominant use of yellow that was characteristic of some of the images circulated in the bombing's initial aftermath. These included that which featured the poem called *Our Manchester*, written by Ryan Williams soon after the bombing and read at some of the first public vigils (Figure 3).

It was arguably the 'Cosmopolitopia' mentioned in William's poem that the Manchester City Council's use of the bee sought to promote. But if cosmopolitanism is defined as the inclusion of 'otherness' within collective forms of self-identification (see Beck, 2003),

Figure 3. Our Manchester and Manchester Together.

the bee – a symbol deeply connected with Manchester's industrial, and predominantly white working-class past – might have been expected to struggle to carry this otherness. Certainly, during its memeification after the bombing the bee, through its association

with feelings of togetherness, was deployed towards these cosmopolitan ends. But if via this process it approached becoming a vehicle for 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' (Robbins, 1998), through its brandification it arguably came to represent a narrower consumerist and aesthetic cosmopolitanism (Bookman, 2013; Regev, 2007) connected to Manchester's aspirations to further brand itself as a 'glocal city' (Paganoni, 2012).

In short, the memeification of the bee via tattoos and street art, but also vernacular crafts, fed into a process of city branding – partly characterised by participatory branding and partly by 'memejacking' – that was driven by the public attention generated around these phenomena thanks to their appearance on social media platforms like Instagram. While symbols more generally have historically often achieved elasticity in their political meaning, the case of the bee highlights the impact of social media on the selection of which symbols become political in the first place. Herein lies some of the more conflictual politics of post-terror togetherness insofar as social media platforms afforded greater visibility to some grassroots responses to the bombing than others. Those responses that were more digital in character could more easily achieve digital virality and in turn were more likely to gain broader media coverage, boosting their spread further. The less digital responses of other actors or sectors of society were meanwhile less likely to gain visibility via social media and scale-up. Subsequently, it must be acknowledged that social media platforms are associated with particular demographics with, for example, access to and use of Instagram known to be stratified by gender, class and race (van Haperen et al., 2020). Illustrative of this, the bee tattoos in the sub-sample mostly adorn white skin.[13] Anchoring an urban branding effort to those grassroots responses to terror that gained visibility via social media elevates these social media demographics in taking them to – and making them – represent the whole, while obfuscating other responses originating from other groups and quarters.

Indicative of this, the prominence of tattooists and street art in the bee's memetic spread foregrounded the city's gentrifying Northern Quarter as the epicentre of the city's cosmopolitopia. This is borne out by an analysis of the hashtags that co-occurred with #machesterbee(s) over the 18-month-period which revealed #NorthernQuarter to be among the top 25 co-occurring hashtags, the only specific part of the city to achieve this status. These associations fed into Manchester City Council's later brand adoption of the bee which, in emphasising Mancunian industriousness, craft and community, pitched towards 'creative city' marketing strategies as exemplified by the *Bee in the City* art trail. This trail did help the bee to spread beyond the Northern Quarter. But, in also allowing a myriad of organisations to sponsor individual statues and thereby harness the bee's advertising and branding potential, it also flattened the political tensions evident between community and local sponsors and those international corporate and urban development organisations who sponsored the trail at the same time as contributing to social inequality across the city (Lammes & Wilmott, 2020). This sort of brand adoption thus arguably relied on hollowed-out forms of consumerist and aesthetic cosmopolitanism rather than actually existing cosmopolitanism.

Others besides Manchester City Council created political tensions by using the bee to rebrand themselves a year after the bombing. Around the first anniversary the bee also appeared on flyers distributed by the far-right Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA) and Veterans Against Terrorism (VAT), which promoted these groups' own, notionally commemorative, *Manchester Unity March* on 2 June 2018 (Figure 4). These

groups adopted the bee brand because it provided an open action frame (see Poell et al., 2016) and in an attempt to take advantage of its memetic spread and popularity in order to mobilise people to join their march. The *Manchester Unity March* was estimated to have attracted 1000–2000 attendees, outnumbering the 500–600 anti-racist protestors that turned up to counter it.[14] On the day of the march, 56 Instagram posts featured #manchesterbee(s). None of them addressed these political tensions. Instead they mostly promoted leisure events and bee-related products. Even though there was a 500% increase in Islamophobic attacks in Manchester in the month after the bombing (Halliday, 2017), just 16 posts from the 18-month sample referenced racism directly. All were anti-racist in nature, including one, posted soon after the bombing, with an image containing the *Our Manchester* poem (Figure 3).

Figure 4. The DFLA/VAT Flyer.

The author of this post wrote in its caption: 'Can we please stop with the racist comments … It is heartwarming to see the response and strength of the North West as a collective community of all races and religions towards the attack'. This might be read as exemplifying an actually existing cosmopolitanism. And yet, that 'we' still stubbornly accommodates those who responded to the bombing with racism. Herein lies another tension within the political becoming of the bee. In being taken to mean togetherness almost at any cost, the interrogation of the terms of and tensions within this togetherness were side-lined and it was rarely acknowledged that some used the bee in pursuit of more exclusionary rather than inclusionary forms of post-terror togetherness. The poem and the flyer sported near-identical bees, but their political messages could not have contrasted more strongly.

Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated how the somewhat neglected civic symbol of the Manchester worker bee was memetically rejuvenated within grassroots political responses to the 22 May 2017 bombing of the city's arena leading it to increasingly appear on Mancunian bodies and streets, and across social media platforms. These more or less digital responses were political in the capacity they attributed to the bee to emphasise hybrid forms of togetherness as evidenced by the bee's elastic adoption by different individuals and groups. At the same time, and as also illustrated in this article, the remixing of bee created and hid political tensions especially as the city's council sought to take advantage of its memetic spread by adopting it as a brand. The increasing official use of the bee to place-brand Manchester indexed political tensions related to the gentrification, commercial development and glocal marketing of certain parts of the city. Its branding use by far-right activists meanwhile highlighted some of the limits placed on the city's post-terror togetherness by some actors. Highlighting, in this way, how the bee became 'political' through interconnected processes of memeification and brandification, we have endeavoured – in the spirit of this special issue – to help broaden current research on the politics of memes by moving beyond the regular focus placed on the self-evident actors of 'politics'. In doing so, we hope we have highlighted the potential, but also need, for more politically orientated (and not only commercially motivated) research into the relationship between memes and brands.

Beyond illustrating the value of empirically exploring the relationship between memes and brands within broader and longer-term responses to terrorism and specifically the politics of post-terror togetherness that it gives rise to, we have also made two further contributions with this article. First, we have conceptualised memes in terms of their 'more or less digital' composition, and secondly, we have demonstrated one method for 'following' memes that is suited to this conceptualisation. Both contributions have relevance for future studies of memes whether these studies target the political, cultural or commercial capacities of memes after terrorism or otherwise.

Notes

1. Later investigations found that the man had largely acted alone but also led to the March 2020 conviction of his brother for 22 counts of murder in connection to the bombing.

2. As illustrated by the creation, in response to the Manchester bombing, of a new UK government agency called The Commission for Countering Extremism.
3. Collected on 24 October 2020.
4. Video posts and Instagram Stories were not analysed.
5. Only posts from this five-year period have been plotted because, as with prior to the bombing, their number before this period (to 12 February 2013) was negligible.
6. See: https://github.com/simonlindgren/manchesterbee
7. Those intervals analysed in more detail are enlarged. Larger versions of the plots are available at: https://github.com/simonlindgren/manchesterbee.
8. https://www.facebook.com/RussMeehanMuralistAndGraffitiArtist/photos/919364091539539/
9. https://www.facebook.com/RussMeehanMuralistAndGraffitiArtist/photos/919370454872236/
10. Twitter launched its own worker bee emoji to coincide with this match.
11. A second *Bee in the City* art trail ran between late October and late December 2020.
12. A £500 licence fee is now charged to use the bee. Commerical uses must still pay royalities to a designated charity.
13. Although skin colour is not indictive of faith and the methods used here do not allow for this observation to be quantified, it should be noted that certain faiths are often interpreted as forbidding tattoos. Henna and transfer bee tattoos provided an alternative to permanent tattoos but were not adopted to the same extent.
14. https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/06/02/opposing-the-racist-dfla-in-manchester-2-06-18-a-photo-report/

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