

Is Twitter a Lemon Market for Smartypants?

Epistemic Status: trying to make sense of 3D from 2D

1. This document is a sketch of some of my observations **about how Twitter, a large, flat, and public space, interacts with more private and gatekept “smartypants” spheres. I am not concerned with popularity as a general phenomena, e.g., I feel no need to think about what makes different pornographic accounts and communities popular.
2. Twitter is some people’s main online social space, but it is many people’s auxiliary social space.
3. Often, the people who use Twitter as a second space are not as invested with the impressions they give, with accruing a following, with belonging to a group, with keeping up with the memetics and vocabulary that evolve, etc.
4. Often this gives them a “taken people are more attractive” effect that makes them more attractive to tweeters, provided they expose some of the content they produce elsewhere, even if it’s just new ideas. Part of this effect seems to be a confidence game: those with active second spaces don’t feel like they’re playing Twitter to win and they are therefore free to make more interesting moves. However, I think another very important part is that, not having followed the current memetic landscape closely, part-time tweeters are not clouded by the “obvious” responses to the current environment, and tend to inject new information into a space.
5. Many big accounts seem to be previously part-time tweeters who either rejected or were ejected from their second spaces. I believe this is because these tweeters learned how to play the “content game” properly, had something change-up on them, then decided they should play to win.
6. It seems that a very common reason for either rejection or ejection is that some interaction strategies don’t work in small-to-medium closed groups. Twitter, on the other hand, is a large, flat landscape with a very limited memory, because of the changing nature of

“groups” that manage to form.

7. A lemon market is a market with a certain kind of information asymmetry that causes it to become saturated with junk, e.g., old cars before programs like CARFAX could track what had happened to them. This happens because most of the time owners of cars in good working order won't sell them in the first place, so already an asymmetry presents itself. Buyers, being skeptical of every car, will not pay as high a price as car might be worth because they feel they might be duped. This, in-turn, makes it so that owners of cars in good working order won't sell, because they can't get a fair price.
8. This brings me to my first question: Is Twitter a lemon market for smartypants? There is certainly some good *content* on Twitter, but is there fundamentally something wrong with most of the smartypants folks who produce content and use it as a primary space?
9. The lemon market model might go something like this: smartypants who produce interesting things and know how to directly distribute it to people who will use it and respond already do so. They are nervous about doing too much on Twitter because it can often be more abrasive as a space and incentives lowest-common-denominator content. Meanwhile, the smartypants stuck on Twitter are honing their lowest-common-denominator game and get good at frame-controlling their Twitterdoms so that a casual smartypants tweeter is even less incentivized to go on Twitter. This makes the the smartypants twitterspace memetically kind of lemony.
10. An astute reader will point out that lemon markets are about information asymmetry, and I haven't described a real information asymmetry above. I think there is instead an *attention* asymmetry for the average reader of Tweets in the smartypants sphere. The information asymmetry works like this: there is a constant flow of new memes of people trying to get attention, make fun of groups they hate, etc. These memes evolve less out of communicative necessity and more out of entertainment and the desire to churn social groupings, by seeing who adopts what, who can recognize what kinds of social plays, etc. This “memetic churn” incentivizes people to pay attention less to information from accounts they think aren't as important for “keeping up” with the Twittergeist. This *attention asymmetry* then creates the circumstances for a lemon market, because content creators with something genuinely new to say, are disincentivized from sharing it and receiving less attention than they would get from a less frame-controlled audience. Readers, on the other hand, are tempted not to invest too much time in tweets they don't understand, because it's just the memetic flow of a group they don't care about. Essentially, a treadmill of linguistic fashion drives an attention asymmetry in which readers

are uncertain if initial inscrutability is worth following-up on.

11. Many second spaces that casual tweeters use are private or semi-private. This does not appear to be an accident. Ever since the internet grew to a certain size most very open large communities have experienced eternal september, where there are a context influx of new users. Often, when something gets popular in one of these spaces, these new users will immediately jump on the trend, and end-up changing the direction the trend was going in when it was just a small community, disincentivizing community-building for people with specific visions. Hence, those people with more defined visions of what they want out of a community create or join private second spaces.
12. In what has perhaps jokingly been termed “4th wave post-rats” the main form of mutually sniffing out people to form loose groups is called “vibing”. Vibing seems to essentially mean that people see whether their interaction styles are compatible and don’t naturally conflict. This does not mean that interaction styles are fixed—for many the actual mechanism is a “meta-interaction style” in which people are sussing out whether other people’s adaptation to a new “vibe” meshes well with them. This process of vibing, especially at the meta-interaction style level, increases memetic churn because people are always mutually adapting to each other to interact and often creating new hybrids in the process. This always happens, but it happens less if there was something specific someone came to say in the first place.
13. Vibing being interpreted at the meta-level also creates “vibe cascades”, where people make decisions about who they will interact with based on other people because their meta-level interaction strategy is primed to follow the people they are already close with, and assume that if someone doesn’t gel with them they simply haven’t “seen” it yet. Over time, this tends to make inducting people into the community a Keynesian Beauty Contest—because upon running across someone new, the question is whether everyone else will vibe with them, given that you promote their content, e.g. with retweet or quote-retweet
14. All this creates a *lot* of memetic churn, which makes spaces hard to keep-up with. This, in-turn, makes people tend to look for salient clues as to “what’s good” memetically in the current moment. For instance, even if A doesn't like a poster P, but B, C, and D like them enough that they use P's memes (not just the images, any memetic patterns) as integral parts of the "vocabulary flow" then: (i) A has to keep-up at least passively to know what's going on and (ii) A will end-up using those memes and likely paying close attention to P unless they are really willful about it, because it's simple the cultural air they're breathing

in.

15. Effect (ii) is highly mitigated by having a second space, because it acts like a filter since it usually has lower memetic churn and is what a given user will ground their thinking in.
16. Smartypants whose main space is twitter tend to form clubs, to have some sense of community, but still tend to get a bit addicted to getting more followers. This incentivizes the marketing of the club to people in secondary exposure circles, mostly followers of followers.
17. Marketing a twitter club is mostly based on fomo, you want something with a bit of insight, that makes you want to dig deeper and pulls you into the rabbit-hole. The combined power of lowest-common-denominator posting styles with a little bit of memetic illegibility that hints at more seems to be perfect for this.
18. Once a user has fallen in with a given club or circle or whatever, they are incentivized to stay by a few effects: (a) the sunken-cost effect of having learned the memetic language, gathered some in-group followers, etc. (b) the question of whether there are actually better circles, given that the people at the top of the club hierarchy are actually creating some interesting content and (c) the updated prior that finding, figuring out, and keeping up with a club is hard work.
19. One of the basic assumptions this description relies on is that some people are simply going to have an easier time producing interesting content on the internet, and those people will tend to form clubs around them naturally, incentivizing these dynamics. This is something I believe.
20. These clubs have a Ponzi-like character, because they are generally controlled by the “hub accounts” that drive the in-group memetic legitimacy, which have incentivized to advertise the fun of being a free-wheeling memer but who will then tend to drive the accepted memes. If a given meme doesn't fit their style, they can squash it snidely and cutely, as this is something anyone who is “good” at Twitter develops as a skill (the rest logoff). If they want to push a meme, they need only post or retweet it, and people will immediately start riffing off of it. This is the result of big accounts being able to set the tone/frame/etc. for their clubs through simple memetic proliferation.
21. If these big accounts do something a bit nasty, it can usually be smoothed over quickly with some apologies or jokes, and even if they lose followers, it generally doesn't effect the bulk of their followers. Often, these nasty things just don't come-out, because who would want to have a twitter fight about it? So the big accounts at the top are pretty much fixed.
22. Status in a club is usually some linear function of the number of people who have joined

since you did. This encourages people with lower status in the club to recruit more people, through the same half lowest-common-denominator, half-illegible meme tactics as the big accounts.

23. No one “loses” from this Ponzi scheme, and I don’t think it’s a crime, but I do think it is pretty much impossible to dethrone people at the top of a Twitter club, unless that Twitter club has strict aesthetics (rare) and that people higher-up are incentivized to keep building things up bigger and to control the frame of what the group is. People joining and interested in participating generally will never get to “the top”, but to be fair people who are really interested in doing so usually splinter off to their own group—though often they must wait to gather enough clout to have people to interact with before splitting off, a force that often drags them back in.
24. The end-result is, in my opinion, not really what most people want from smartypants in general. In fact, I think it is driven by people who are not smartypants at all and have no real desire to be, except perhaps to wave around the label if it’s in-fashion. I believe this effect is driven by the simple fact that people like to participate in memetic churn as part of socialization, and there are a lot more lurking or passive users in any large, flat, public space than any one else.
25. This is no one’s problem, but it is why I’m suspicious that Twitter can be a primary ground for a smartypants space. It seems the second space dynamics keep the space useful—but Twitter on its own devolves into fashion for fashion’s sake, because the people who know how to use it can control the game that way.