

A Meme is Worth a Thousand Words: Universal Communication Through Memes

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Abstract

With the rise of the digital age has come about a new form of communicating concepts—the meme: repeatable, transferable information. The purpose of this project is to understand the inclusive nature of internet communication not restricted by barriers. This format plays with the boundaries to imagination, creating a new form of communication not relying on language, color, or shape, but the interchange of these within an established concept. Memes have created a universal, living form of expression irrelevant of culture, region, age, or language in which individuals cross normal borders of expression and communication. We attempt to define the modern meme through its philosophical etymology and its evolved application. We then examine how memes, based on this definition, can be used as a legitimate form of communication. With this project we propose that the meme has potential to have real world, expressive effects to cross barriers to communication.

Keywords: meme, non-verbal communication, expression, visual semiotics, metaforms, multimodality.

Literature Review

Dawkins coined the word “meme” and first proposed a working definition as “the idea of a unit of cultural transmission or unit of imitation” with the replicator examples of “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins, 1976). He was careful to define memes as living structures. Memes exist within a community and depend on the community understanding as Dennett adds, “no meme is an island” (Dennett, 1995). He continues the comparison between genes and memes as an algorithm of information: “a *semantic* classification, not a *syntactic* classification that might be directly observable in ‘brain language’ or natural language” (Dennett, 1995). Building on the idea of replication from Dawkins and algorithm from Dennett, Blackmore explains that the meme is a result of the human brain’s ability of “variation and recombination” (Blackmore, 1999).

Following Blackmore’s expansion, Augner observed a lack of academic unity regarding memetics (Augner, 2000). He pointed to Lanier’s claims that memetics “provides no fixed target” and offers “no more than a perspective” (Lanier, 1999). Augner then juxtaposed Lanier’s stance with Blackmore’s ardent assertion that memes explain culture, consciousness, and the self (Blackmore, 1999). Diving further into the discord, Augner challenged Dawkins’ original definition of a meme with a definition taken from Gatherer in 1998 that suggests “we regard the whole of physical culture as memes” rather than restricting memes to units of imitation or transmission (Augner, 2000). Augner offered up this challenge solely to demonstrate the extent of the division among scholars regarding memetics rather than displace Dawkins’ original definition. Augner suggested the polarized discussion surrounding memetics culminates in a lack of consensus and research (Augner, 2000). However, Augner posed an important question: “what *should* be the ambition of the meme?” (Augner, 2000).

Two years later, Augner attempted to begin filling the void he observed in 2000. Augner eliminated behavior and artifacts as possible homes for memes and concluded that memes must be

ideas due to the brain's unique ability to "cause similar entities to arise through information transfer", similar to the theory of variation and recombination introduced by Blackmore (Augner, 2002). Still, Augner's question remained unanswered: what should be the future of memes?

While the academic discourse surrounding Dawkins' concept of the meme raged on, an entirely new genre of meme brought the debate from the academic world into the everyday world: the internet meme. The internet meme, a term academically recognized by Limor Shifman's 2014 publication "Memes in Digital Culture", models itself after Dawkins' meme. Internet memes are digital pieces of culture designed to appeal to some community, be it niche or general, enough that the community spreads, or replicates, the meme.

The fundamental intention of the internet meme is to spread. It can be argued that a meme's purpose varies from meme to meme, but all internet memes—humorous memes, esoteric memes, absurd memes—are created with the intent to share, even if that sharing only takes place between a small number of people. Therefore, all memes have in common the same underlying objective: to be replicated and spread.

Dawkins' memes can contain or lack meaning. For the purposes of this analysis, let the word "meaning" signify substance in relation to cultural identity. Consider music. Culture plays a significant role in determining the most common keys, instruments, and vocalization styles in different geographic regions. Music as a meme contains meaning because fundamental elements of a peoples' culture, such as religion and tradition, contribute to which pieces of music gain popularity in which regions. Now, consider the construction of modern interstates. No element of culture dictates how interstates should be constructed, but some styles of construction are popular enough that they spread and are replicated. This is an example of Dawkins' concept of the meme that lacks meaning, or a meme as a unit of imitation rather than a unit of culture.

Like Dawkins' memes, internet memes can also contain or lack substantive meaning. However, what separates the internet meme from Dawkins' meme, aside from the use of the internet itself, is the lack of limitation. Where Dawkins' memes may be bound to specific regions based on tradition and society, the internet meme crosses physical borders and other traditional barriers to communication.

The academic debate about whether memetics is revolutionary or fluff has yet to be settled, but the era of the internet meme has evolved global forms of communication and shows great potential for new inquiries of scholarship in semiotics. Instead of debating the essence of Dawkins' memes and the consequent expansions, this paper aims to build on Augner's question and Shifman's ideas. The future of the original meme already exists in the internet meme. The question now, answered in this paper, is what should be the purpose of the *internet* meme?

Internet Memes Defined

A working definition of internet memes must be established. First and foremost, the word "meme" will henceforth refer solely to internet memes unless otherwise specified. As for a definition, Shifman defines internet memes as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (2014).

This definition separates memes from virals, another concept addressed by Shifman. Virality refers to internet phenomena that rapidly spread from person to person (Shifman, 2014). While both memes and viral content can spread across the internet quickly, viral content exists in a vacuum. According to Shifman, "the viral comprises a *single* cultural unit (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies" (2014). The key here is that viral content does not rely on other content in order to be understood. Oppositely, a meme is always part of a collective. A meme is "a living changing entity that is incorporated in the body and mind of its hosts" (Shifman, 2014). A single photo,

video, or graphic is not the sole meme. Rather, that single piece of information belongs to a grouping of other pieces of information that share characteristics—be it form, text, or meaning (Shifman, 2014). This grouping of shared information is the meme, and individual pieces of information are examples of the meme applied. As such, both the meme itself and all the observers of the meme—or hosts, as Shifman calls them—become collective bodies. The meme is a collective of shared information and individual applications, and the observers or hosts are a collective of individuals who together understand, apply, and alter the meme.

Ann Hiro (2019) of ‘Know Your Meme,’ a website dedicated to archiving, categorizing, and explaining internet memes, reintroduces the theory of natural selection in memes first proposed by Dawkins. Hiro points to Dawkins’ concept and explains that the Internet meme can evolve while still remaining connected to its original form. Hiro states that “selection pressures” dictate how a meme will evolve but does not specify what exactly those pressures are (Hiro, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, selection pressures should be viewed as the democratic will of the collective observers. If an internet meme is altered by an individual in such a way that the collective enjoys the alteration enough to spread the new form, Hiro’s natural selection theory has taken place.

This paper defines internet memes using Shifman’s three part definition and Hiro’s addition of natural selection theory with the understanding that selection pressures are governed by the will of the observer collective.

Identifying and Conveying Meaning Through Memes

Internet memes go beyond Dawkins’ memes in many ways. One such way is the inherent containment of substantive cultural information. Earlier, the examples of music and construction served to draw a distinction between examples of Dawkins’ memes that contain or lack substantive meaning in relation to culture. Where Dawkins’ memes could be simple units of imitation, like construction styles, internet memes are always units of imitation *and* units of cultural information.

Though Internet memes have many genres, cultural information can always be found in the meme. Recall Shifman's definition of the meme as a collective that can be observed by individual applications. It is important to distinguish the individual application from the meme itself when considering meaning in memes. An individual application of a meme could be complete nonsense, but if the individual application contains technical elements—form, text, color theory, subject matter—taken from the collective, then that individual application also contains a link to cultural meaning. Therefore, when attempting to garner meaning from memes, the observer does three things.

First, the observer differentiates memes from virals. After the observer has concluded that they are in fact dealing with a meme rather than a viral, the observer identifies whether this is an application of a meme or an isolated creation. Finally, the observer familiarizes themselves with the technical aspects of memes—form, text, color theory, and subject matter—in order to understand how an individual application of a meme connects itself to the collective and consequently contains meaning.

The difference between meme applications and virals has already been established. As such, the second step to understanding meaning in memes is identifying whether a piece of digital information is an application of a meme or an isolated creation. An isolated creation is an application of a meme that has been altered in an attempt to evolve the meme but has not spread throughout the observer collective in the same way that successful alterations make a meme. Determining whether something is a meme or an isolated creation comes down to context and research. If the observer recognizes any of the technical elements of a piece of digital information, the information is most likely not an isolated creation.

Understand that this theory of recognition does not refer purely or solely to content. Let the images pictured below serve as examples. Figure 1 features a still-shot from the American adaptation of the British sitcom "The Office" (Daniels, 2005). Though someone may recognize the actors or setting as those of "The Office", that does not make this image a meme. Recognizing or knowing the

source of a digital image's content is not enough to deduce that the image in question is a meme.

Rather, the observer recognizes the use of a still-shot, video clip, or other piece of digital information from other individual examples of the meme in order to deduce that the current piece of information they are analyzing is, in fact, a meme.

[Figure 1 about here.]

If the observer does not recognize the digital information in the way previously described, they are then left with research. Can multiple similar versions of the digital information in question be found elsewhere on the Internet via social media platforms, online search engines, websites, blogs, etc.? Here, the term "similar versions" again refers to shared technical elements: form, text, color theory, and subject matter. If multiple similar versions of the digital information can be found and are clearly technically associated, then the observer knows they have found an individual application of a meme rather than an isolated creation.

Isolated creations and virals, though not memes themselves, can assist in the creation of memes. Image Two, another still-shot from the American adaptation of "The Office", features a character named Jim Halpert looking through blinds. A brief piece of descriptive text sits above the still-shot. The text and the still-shot come together to create the digital image and an individual application of a meme. In Figure 2, Jim portrays a relatable and versatile emotion. Because of the flexible adaptation of the still-shot of Jim, many Internet users used the same still-shot but altered the text to create their own versions of the image. When the first Internet user added text to this image of Jim, whoever that user may be, they created a viral, or an individual, singular digital creation that spread rapidly across the Internet. However, when multiple other Internet users created and circulated their own takes on this still-shot of Jim using different text, the still-shot of Jim's face became a collective meme associated with specific uses and situations.

[Figure 2 about here.]

After concluding that a piece of digital information is a meme, not a viral or an isolated creation, the observer seeks to gain meaning from the meme. Again, even the most ridiculous or absurd individual applications of a meme are associated with the collective and therefore contain meaning.

The promulgation and subsequent community reception are essential pieces to making a meme. An individual is incapable of deciding to make a meme, even if the intentionality is there. It is the collective that creates the meaning and accepts the universality. Similar to the principles of Stanley Fish's Reader Response Theory (1980), it is possible that the online community will take part in the evolutionary interpretation of the meme. For instance, the original context of a scene from media may be completely lost or even reversed when the still is captured and the audience decides, democratically, to instill the image with an entirely new meaning.

Garnering Meaning from Memes as the Observer

As the observer, it becomes necessary to draw connections between individual applications of memes and the meme collective in order to gain meaning and insight from memes and their application. As explained in the third step to approaching content, the observer considers the technical components of digital content in order to understand how an individual meme application might connect to the collective. We argue that these technical components--form, text, color theory, and subject matter--create a physical manifestation of a theoretical concept. We call this manifestation a meme's imprint. The imprint, then, is dynamic because it can still accommodate slight modifications and be understood, as we see when memes are altered and popularized democratically by the observer population.

We argue that once a meme's essence is understood, any form of the imprint can be recognized. Sometimes there is even a phenomenon where people think they see the meme in images that vaguely resemble the meme but were not created to be the meme. This is how we gain meaning from memes. We come to know a concept and certain examples of the concept so well that they

become second nature to us. This could be considered an unique phenomenon seen with the internet meme due to how much sheer exposure people have to these memes.

Perhaps the most notable demonstration of this started as a Ctl+Alt+Del comic named “Lost” (Figure 3). Internet users recombined its basic structure with other expressions, with the resulting memes included in Figure 4 being so basic that even seven straight lines can be recognized as the meme and as a result communicate the meaning. The meaning evolved from its original interpretation as a comic, to a shibboleth of the meme world, with the reader responding “Is this lost?” in reaction to being presented an instance of the meme to express that they comprehend the sharer’s intention.

[Figure 3 about here.]

[Figure 4 about here.]

Memes Breaking Boundaries

Memes, therefore, break traditional barriers to communication. This includes time, distance, money, culture, class, and language. SwiftKey data show the word “meme” itself is among the top 500 words of eleven out of twenty languages typed on smartphones (Sonnad, 2018). Breaking these traditional barriers allow internet memes to excel and succeed where traditional memes fail. Dawkins’ stricter version of memes tended to be limited to geographic regions; internet memes are able to overcome that problem by being based on the web, where anyone with an internet connection can join the conversation.

The versatility of memes was put to the test in early 2019 when the European Union (EU) updated European copyright laws with Article 13. This move to make copyright stricter for the digital era protects material from online content sharing use, including images captured in meme format (Sonnad, 2018; Swain, 2019). Meta-style memes were shared in response, including a rendering of the Drake meme (Figure 5) that captured the identifiable form without the image direct from his music video Hotline Bling, but instead purely composed of spaghetti (Figure 6).

[Figure 5 about here.]

[Figure 6 about here.]

The next step in the evolving meta-style meme employs a familiar meme format (Figure 7) to allow the reader to comprehend the punchline with no text or image at all, as seen in Figure 8.

[Figure 7 about here.]

[Figure 8 about here.]

Implications

By fulfilling the definition provided above, memes have evolved through the language of irony, cleverness, or wit the global conversation of how humans communicate criticism, revolution, and everything in between; the human condition. For instance, memes can be used as more than humor. The meme in Figure 9 uses the Mind Expansion format to spread awareness about the body positivity community. According to the Body Positive Institute, the body positivity movement focuses on reframing the discussion around bodily health by emphasizing “living peacefully” in your body and practicing daily skills to encourage self-appreciation and acceptance, especially for those struggling with eating disorders, self-harm, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, and other mental health issues that deal with warped body image (<https://www.thebodypositive.org/>). In this example, the collective observer community has utilized the rapidly spreading and adapting format to spread educational information about a movement, going beyond the common misconception that memes can only be humorous.

[Figure 9 about here.]

Because of the meme’s dependency on images and the reader’s need to decipher to understand, it may also be true that this evolution has led humans to be more critical thinkers (although this causal relationship would be difficult to draw).

Conclusion

What does seem certain is that memes have united people from different cultures and languages with a common form of communication. It may be argued that the meme format fulfills in part Leibniz's quest for a *characteristica universalis* (universal ideographic language) while using format or image to substitute for ideograms or what he called *grammatica rationalis* (rational grammar), logic for interpretation, mnemonics to recall meaning, and most of all the art of invention to communicate meaning beyond borders. The internet community has indeed proven that format or image succeed in representing concepts and that the art of invention can be limitless online (Leibniz, 1679). The next question is whether Eco would be satisfied with the limited yet ever growing lexicon of the language and whether it is possible to communicate only via memes (Eco, 1993).

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Figure 1. A Still from The Office (US) that is not a meme (Daniels, 2005).

Me roaming the halls between classes and spotting my friend in another class



Figure 2. Jim Halpert Smiling Through Blinds meme (Daniels, 2005).



Figure 3. The original Loss comic (Buckley, 2008).



Figure 4. Images identified as variations of Loss as a meme.



Figure 5. The original Drake meme with example text.

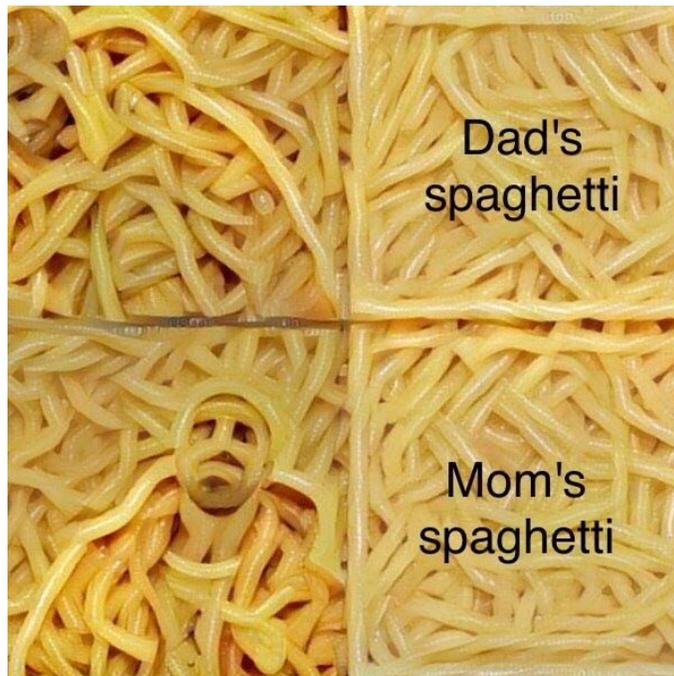


Figure 6. The format of the Drake meme reproduced in spaghetti.



Figure 7. The original Mind Expansion meme with example text.

People who need text and image	
People who only need text	
	

Figure 8. The meta-style Mind Expansion meme speaks for itself.

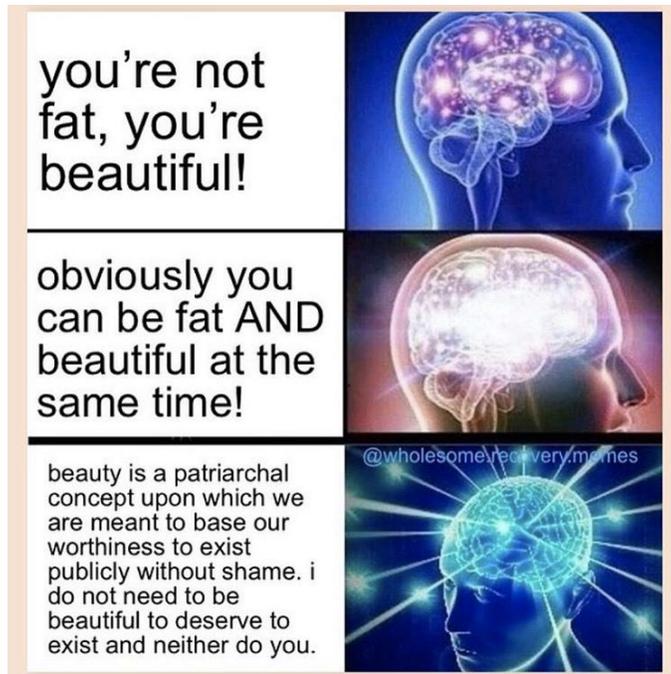


Figure 9. The Mind Expansion meme used for body positivity.