

**Memes: The Masters of the Internet**

EM 797  
Final Paper  
Professor Wells  
Cassandra Smith  
December 18, 2019

Memes. They have been around for a long time. Longer than the internet has been around, even though most people consider them synonymous with each other. Memes at their core are simply ideas and behaviors that get passed around from person to person and sometimes culture to culture. Essentially as long as humans have been participating in the sharing and spreading of original thoughts and practices, we have been participating in the spread of memes. However, the Internet and social media world that we know today has had a significant impact on the way that memes are produced, shared, and conceptualized. Through its many affiliated social networks both on and offline, the internet has allowed for memes to form a culture of their own. A meme culture that continually grows in size and reinforces social and cultural ideologies as more and more people join the world wide web.

In 1976 a professor at the University of Oxford, Richard Dawkins, first coined the term “meme” in his article titled *The Selfish Gene*. (Dawkins, 1976) Back then it was strongly associated with Darwinian evolution theory, with the idea that how biological traits adapt, replicate, and transfer in order to survive, so do our habits, skills, and ideas. Therefore, facilitating this notion that in order to be considered a meme, whatever the chunk of information might be, it must be concrete enough to be replicated and perceived relevant no matter the environment that it is in. This outlook on memes as an evolutionary and cultural unit has held up over time, even with the integration of the internet. The only difference now is that the networks they create look different and most often have a deeper meaning.

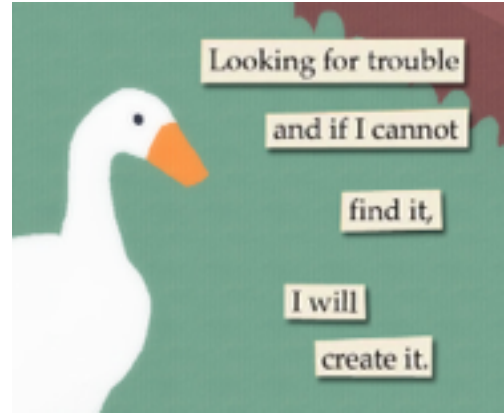
One of the main reasons that memes have been able to gain the cultural popularity and significance that they have is largely due to the social framework that is built into our social media. A social framework of connections and networks that has adapted with the rise of

emerging media. In their 2014 article González-Bailón et al wrote, “Social media have become remarkable spaces to create public opinion in the digital environment as they channel personal positions and help listen to other users’ ideas, which in turn generate influence through infectious processes.” (González-Bailón et al., 2014) Social media, a by-product of individual internet domains, has become the go-to forum in which mass populations around the world come together to share and connect their ideas. The very essence of social media is that it is social, but social in ways that are very different than how they used to be. Before understanding the importance of social media social networks we have to think about the social networks that existed offline. In his 2018 article, *Understanding Social Networks*, Alfred Kadushin explains how social networks have always been apart of our society in terms of the ways we connect to one another, they just looked different. In large the social networks Kadushin refers to are the ones that are created through formal organization and informal affiliation of occupation, religion, government, location, and interest. We can think of the networks we are apart of having always existed in different quadrants of our lives, and that it is through social media that those networks and organizations have a more prominent role in defining us. Memes have overall benefited from this shift in displaying network affiliations and have overall capitalized on social media user over sharing. Together both offline networks of old and internet memes of new prosper in a social media world.

An aspect of what makes memes relatable besides social media networking, is the formate and origin point in which they are created before the become transferable. In his article *The Language of Internet Memes*, Patrick Davison proposes that all internet memes can be broken into three distinct parts; manifestation, behavior, and ideal. (Davison, 2012) Together

they are the thought, creation, and delivery process of an internet meme. With manifestation being when “its observable, external phenomena,” behavior being “The action taken by an individual in service of the meme,” and ideal being “The concept or idea conveyed.” (Davison, 2012). This seemingly simple process is indeed how most internet memes are created. The part that becomes more complicated is that depending who posted and where it was posted certain meme processes won’t connect to as many people. More factors, such as the who, what, where, when, and why must be undeniably considered when looking at the either the success or relevance of an internet meme. Below are some examples of different meme formats that are popular and showcase how different attitudes, perceptions, and information sharing is constructed into a meme. Popular formats include screenshots of popular Film or TV charters with inserted text posts used to convey an irrelevant scenario or emotion (Images 1- 3). Others are highly photo shopped images used to create an entirely new character to popularize (Images 4-6). While another format is a graphic text in which people can change out the words and phrases, while relying on the influence that the base graphic style is set to convey (Images 7-8).





When looking at internet meme popularity it is important to remember some of the original attributes as described by Dawkins, “adaption and replication.” (Dawkins, 1976) As we know, the internet as a whole has become a death trap for users time and energy. In his 2018

book, *The Internet Trap*, author Matthew Hindman explains how the Internet while designed to be a place for free thinkers and creators, has turned into a endless void in which users spend too much time and waste too much energy on unoriginal content. (Hindman, 2018) This is important to reflect on when considering internet memes, because it could be argued that it is memes that add to this devaluing of internet space while others might say that it is in fact one of the last creative aspects that the internet still offers. The correct answer might be that it is both. Most modern day internet/social media users might find themselves scrolling endlessly through memes and curated funny posts and not even realizes that their time is being wasted and commodified. However, when we think about what memes are, the transferring and sharing of information and ideas, then they are in fact still a creative and cultural sharing practice that just exists within the confines of the internet. Memes overall have changed and adapted to the environment that they are now in, one that is highly curated to individual users. Thorson et al suggest that in a world of information overload and many voices, users have relied on “curated flows” to filter out what is not deemed personally relevant. (Thorson, et al 2015) But it is internet memes that have somehow managed to still reach larger audiences despite curation of content and overall benefiting from the Internet’s trap for attention.

When understanding the larger influence that memes have, we have to look at how individuals interact with them. To understand this phenomena on a micro scale, I conducted a small survey in order to gage where people interacted with memes and what the thought about them. In order to do this I wrote up a small seven question survey through Survey Monkey and sent it out to twenty-one friends and family members. The survey consisted of:

**1. Where do you mostly see memes? (Check as many boxes)**

- Twitter
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Reddit
- Tumblr
- Other

Out of twenty-one responses 42% chose Instagram, 38.1% chose Twitter, 23.81% chose Reddit, 19.05% chose Facebook, 14.29% chose other, and 0.00% chose Tumblr.

**2. If you had to pick one, which is the best platform for memes? (Select one)**

- Twitter
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Reddit
- Tumblr
- Other

Out of twenty-one responses 33.33% chose Twitter, 23.81% chose Instagram and Reddit, 9.52% chose Facebook and Other, and 0.00% chose Tumblr. This data is expected as currently most popular memes of the last decade have been produced and stylized through specifically Twitter. Twitter as a social media site is designed for fast and easy content that does not take significant energy to conceptualize. Therefore making it a breeding hot spot for popular memes and humorous content. In fact most memes that are found on other sites such as Facebook and

Instagram originally came from Twitter and have trickled down the social media ladder to other sites and viewers. It really is no surprise that that is the top site in which the respondents choose to interact with memes.

**3. What is your personal relationship with memes? (Check as many boxes)**

- See and Share
- Create and Share
- See and Create
- No association

Out of twenty-one responses 76.19% chose See and Share, 14.29% chose See and Create, and 9.52% chose Create and Share and No association. This question clearly shows that most people interact with memes as something that they see online and share with friends rather than something that they actively participate in the creation process of. With millions of social media users the likelihood of being one of the luck few who makes a popular meme is not high. But it is common to be apart of the transfer of knowledge and meme information by reposting, commenting, and sending the image, video, or text to other people.

**4. Do you think memes shape Internet culture? Or has the Internet changed meme culture as we know it? (Select one)**

- Memes shape Internet culture
- Internet changed meme culture
- A little bit of both!

Out of twenty-one responses 47.62% chose Memes shape Internet culture and A little bit of both, and 4.76% chose Internet changed meme culture. This question is very interesting, while



also leads us to the question of, do modern day social media users associate memes with having preexisted outside of the Internet? This is a type of question that would be fascinating to continue research on.

**5. Please rank how you personally feel about memes. 0 = Do not care for them, 5 =**

**Average perception, 10 = You love them.**

- Sliding scale 0 to 10

Out of twenty-one responses the lowest score was a 5, the highest score was a 10, and the average score was an 8.7. These responses highlight that most social media users are very content with meme culture and clearly do not see them as negatively influencing.

**6. Do you think memes have changed society's perception of and attitude towards**

**American Politics? (Check as many boxes)**

- Yes
- No
- Only since the start of the 2016 election
- Global Politics too
- No idea/Don't care

Out of twenty-one responses 38.10% chose Yes and Global Politics too, 28.57% chose Only since the start of the 2016 election, 19.05% chose No idea/Don't care, and 9.56% chose No. This question was included because both supporters and non supporters of memes alike would most likely agree that there is a relationship between memes and politics. Many studies have been done and continue to research this relationship, as it appears to grow stronger and stronger. Living in a digital world has affected the way that political parties and candidates reach out to

voters and citizens, and it is clear that online presence and attitude mean something. One can assume that internet memes that help to shape a larger Internet culture could also be affective in shaping political culture both on and offline. As Martínez-Rolán et al wrote in their 2015 article, “The communicative value of memes has not only been paramount for social movements; it has also led political parties, leaders and institutions to integrate them in their strategies.” (Martínez-Rolán, et al 2015)

### **7. In your own words, how would you define what a meme is?**

- Comment Box

In this section a let people explain what the though a meme was. These were some of the answers included.

- “Way of expression in a digital world where people get more attention by using pictures + words rather than just words”
- “A meme is a usually funny image mixed with a phrase or scenario completely out of context but still relating towards to picture”
- “Something I can laugh at and share with friends”
- “A parody/joke, or just something funny in current culture that is spread to others across platforms, and often times changed to reflect the culture or relevancy for ones’ specific area or life”
- “Material, usually meant to be humorous, spread, exchanged, and/or replicated by users on the internet”
- “Modern comics that become popular based on its relevance and relations towards current politics and societies”

- “A recognizable picture or symbol with a specific mood or feeling associated, but that can be utilized in multiple contexts and still apply to the situation”
- “A visual or text framework for humor that is highly accessible “

Overall this small survey showcased a pretty insightful outlook on where memes can be found and what social media users think constitutes as a meme today. Most of the people who responded to the survey were in the age range of 19-24 with a few around the ages of 12-13. This is important to consider because both these groups while being pretty separate in age, have both lived life as defined by the Internet and all its content including that of social media. They are all essentially a generation that navigates a world as it is defined by Internet memes. It can be assumed that if older generations had been asked the same questions that their perceptions might not have been the same.

When we think about memes we think about funny pictures, text posts, pop cultural anecdotes, and short videos that connect large groups of people instantly. Often times memes are not thought about outside of the scope of social media and Internet world. However, memes in their entirety are just a collected of information and ideas that get transferred around and have been apart of human interaction and network culture for a very long time. While the world changes and ushers in more advance media the idea of what constitutes a meme changes, but the framework remains the same. An idea is formulated, then it is produced, then it is shared, and then it undergoes a continuous cycle of adaptation, transfer, and relocation, all the while connecting large groups of people across the Internet together.

## References

- Davison, P (2012) The language of internet memes. In: Mandiberg, M (ed.) *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 120–136.
- González-Bailón, S., Wang, N., Rivero, A., Borge-Holthoefer, J. & Moreno, Y. (2014). Assessing the bias in samples of large *online* networks. *Social Networks* 38, 16–27.
- Hindman, M. S. (2018). *The internet trap: how the digital economy builds monopolies and undermines democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kadushin, C. (2018). *Understanding social networks: theories, concepts and findings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martínez-Rolán, X., & Piñeiro-Otero, T. (2016). The use of memes in the discourse of political parties at Twitter: analysis of the 2015 state of the nation debate. *Communication & Society*, 145–159. doi: 10.15581/003.29.1.145-159
- The Selfish Gene, by Richard Dawkins, *New Scientist* (1976). (2014). *Essays and Reviews*, 140–142. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt4cgb2q.31
- Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2015). Curated Flows: A Framework for Mapping Media Exposure in the Digital Age. *Communication Theory*, 26(3), 309–328. doi: 10.1111/comt.12087