# Internet Memes

**Lars Konzack**
*University of Copenhagen, Denmark*

## INTRODUCTION

Internet memes is a new field of research. The idea of memes takes it root in the memetics of Richard Dawkins but the concept of Internet memes have evolved since then. Internet memes has become part of everyday life on the Internet. Research has been done to understand this Internet phenomenon as regards rio the development of Internet memes, categorization of memes, and how they work.

Some memes work on their own, others are container memes, which means that they are container or other memes. Celebrities have been known on the Internet because they themselves have become a meme. It is a new field and there is a lot of work to be done especially as regards to political use of Internet memes.

## BACKGROUND

An Internet meme is defined as a motif that is virally disseminated through the Internet. The motif often undergoes lots of variations (mash-ups) and may consist of sound, picture, movie clip, game and written text, or as is mostly the case, a combination by two or more modalities. Moreover the motif can be connected to only one of these modalities but need not be and in such case may enter different kinds of modalities.

It is difficult to pinpoint the first Internet-meme. One could argue that the emoticon introduced as the smiley in September 19th 1982 with all the variations of the theme is in fact the first Internet meme (Rosenträger, 2008).

The term meme stems from Richard Dawkins controversial work The Selfish Gene referring partly to gene and partly to mimeme, which means to imitate. In his use of the term it is considered as any cultural idea or behavior such as fashion, language, religion, science and sports – cultural DNA reproducing itself (Dawkins, 1976). It is unclear whether Richard Dawkins comprehends the meme as an objective structure, or a metaphor for cultural practices. However, recent use of the term of Internet meme has outgrown Richard Dawkins and has become a phenomenon in its own right (Stryker, 2011). According to Mole Empire the ten most famous Internet memes as of 2011 are as follows Keyboard Cat, Three Wolf Moon, Om Nom Nom, Auto Tune, The David After Dentist, Penaut Butter Jelly Time, Christian Bale Rant, Fail, O RLY, and Numa Numa (Smith, 2011). While this of course is by no means based on real academic research, it still gives a clue as to what these Internet memes are.

A more systematic approach comes from Know Your Meme (http://knowyourmeme.com/), given that they try to accommodate a database of all known Internet memes, and as of 2013 they have collected almost 15,500 confirmed meme entries and have categorized them as regards to confirmation status, what year it came to be, and where on the Internet it originated. Wikipedia has descriptions of some of the most famous Internet memes. An Internet researcher may likewise find descriptions of Internet memes on Oh Internet (http://ohInternet.com). On a far more chaotic scale it is possible to find information about Internet memes on Encyclopedia Dramatica (http://encyclopediadramatica.se) although it requires skill to understand the in-jokes and to select the right bits of information and knowledge about Internet memes. However, with the skill to comprehend Encyclopedia Dramatica, there is indeed information as regards to origins and explanations to a lot of these memes, information that may be difficult if not impossible to achieve by other means, and Encyclopedia Dramatica provides the right context and attitude for these memes, which the other catalogues do not.

Observation of how memes develop can be done, at websites such as YouTube, 4chan, 9gag, reddit, YTMND and Tumblr. While a lot of these memes originates from YouTube or 4chan the key to their success is the viral dissemination through e.g. E-mails,

Facebook or Twitter. Memes can also be made by the use of so-called meme generators. These are Internet services on which the user can upload images or use a wide range of ready-made images and put in a text-caption. Since Internet memes are a new phenomenon only few studies of have been made and they have all been experimental in their approach, some of which are presented here.

## STUDYING INTERNET MEMES

A study of Internet memes was conducted by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). They suggest an approach to memes based on three characteristics of memes that according to Richard Dawkins is the key to a successful meme: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Fidelity is how replicable the meme is. Fecundity is the dissemination speed. And longevity is the staying power of the meme. Furthermore the memes have been analyzed using three general axes: referential or ideational system, contextual or interpersonal system, and ideological or worldview system. During their research, they found that successful memes had three key components: humor, rich intertextuality (references to other works of art), and anomalous juxtaposition (mash-ups of deliberate provocative or off-guard instances of absurdity). Furthermore they made a categorization of Internet memes primarily dividing into three groups: 1) social commentary purposes, 2) absurdist or humor purposes, and 3) otaku and manga fan purposes.

Another approach comes from Colin Stryker that conducted his own research of the meme life cycle that he lays out as seven stages (Stryker, 2011). The seven stages are as follows: birth, discovery, aggregation, word of mouth, blog pickup, mainstream exposure, commercialization, and death. It must be added that Colin Stryker says that not all memes goes through this exact life cycle. Some never become mainstream and other jump over certain stages, or follow a different path in order of sequence.

The birth of the meme is where and how it originated. A discovery of the meme could be that if someone posts the meme on a web–community like 4chan and is immediately picked up by the other users with mash-ups and comments. Aggregation begins when the meme jumps from the web-community that first discovered the meme to other web-communities like Reddit. Word of Mouth is actually more like dissemination through means of electronic written text and uploading images or movies, using blogs, tweets, status updates and instant messaging. It only reminds of actual word of mouth in the sense that it is distributed via informal means. Blog pickup happens when the specialized Internet sites like 9gag, YTMND, Tumblr, and Know Your Meme receives and propagates the meme. It is at this stage the meme becomes a part of the general Internet culture with self-referential jokes and clever mash-ups. Mainstream exposure of the meme occurs when old media like television, radio and newspapers distributes the story of the meme. It is at this the stage the main stream population outside the Internet culture learns about the Internet meme, and it is paradoxically at that point where the inner circle of the Internet culture may lose interest in the meme. Then there is only commercialization left (e.g. turning the meme into some sort of merchandise) before the meme is almost death, disappeared and forgotten.

In a study of YouTube memes conducted by Limor Shifman various meme features are recognized (Shifman, 2011). First of all Shifman discusses the difference between a viral video and a memetic video, in which a viral video is a video clip that spreads without significant change, while a memetic video is a popular video clip that 'lures extensive creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, and other derivative work' (p. 190). The recognized Limor Shifman key features of YouTube memes are as follows: They relate to 'ordinary' people, and are often about flawed masculinity. They use humor, simplicity and repetitiveness, and portray whimsical content.

Patrick Davison argues that in order to understand Internet memes, we will have to specify what exactly is being replicated (Davison, 2012). According to Davison a meme can be separated into three components: manifestation, behavior, and ideal. The manifestation is the actualized as an observable, external phenomenon in time and space. The behavior is the action taken by users and producers of the meme. And the ideal of the meme is the idea conveyed as a conceptual purpose. The ideal determines the behavior which again resolves into the manifestation.

All of these approaches to Internet memes demonstrate first of all that it is a new field that needs to be further studied but it also shows that these people take it very seriously and come up with ways to grasp

5 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/internet-memes/112814

# Related Content

Factors Influencing Nursing Professionals' Computer-Based Information Systems (CBIS) Use Behavior

Princely Ifinedo (2015). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition (pp. 3332-3343).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/factors-influencing-nursing-professionals-computer-based-information-systems-cbis-use-behavior/112764

A New Approach to Community Graph Partition Using Graph Mining Techniques

Bapuji Raoand Sarojananda Mishra (2017). *International Journal of Rough Sets and Data Analysis (pp. 75-94).*

www.irma-international.org/article/a-new-approach-to-community-graph-partition-using-graph-mining-techniques/169175

Forecasting Model of Electricity Sales Market Indicators With Distributed New Energy Access

Tao Yao, Xiaolong Yang, Chenjun Sun, Peng Wuand Shuqian Xue (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-16).*

www.irma-international.org/article/forecasting-model-of-electricity-sales-market-indicators-with-distributed-new-energy-access/326757

Social Welfare-Based Task Assignment in Mobile Crowdsensing

Zheng Kangand Hui Liu (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-28).*

www.irma-international.org/article/social-welfare-based-task-assignment-in-mobile-crowdsensing/326134

New Perspectives of Pattern Recognition for Automatic Credit Card Fraud Detection

Addisson Salazar, Gonzalo Safont, Alberto Rodriguezand Luis Vergara (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition (pp. 4937-4950).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/new-perspectives-of-pattern-recognition-for-automatic-credit-card-fraud-detection/184197