

The Use of Internet Memes on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

Internet memes are images or short videos – often times accompanied with written text – created and shared among social media users for a comedic purpose. When English biologist and author Richard Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), he used it to refer to cultural aspects or ideals spreading among people through acts of imitation. Being ungoverned by copyright and authorship rules, internet memes succeed in offering social media users the freedom to copy, repost, and edit content; so, they form a pool of imitable sources from which users can draw and develop ideas. This paper aims to look into the components and attributes of internet memes so as to have an understanding of them as a form of creative expression.

Keywords: meme- internet- social media- internet- platform- community

Going through social media platforms, one stumbles upon something called a ‘meme’: images and short videos with captions created for a comedic purpose. A number of pages and accounts are made solely for the creation and/or posting these internet memes. Most of these memes are image macros. An image macro a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images. Some image macros involve adding the same text to various images, and others involve adding different text to a common image.” (Davidson 127) To a person who sees them for the first time, internet memes can be incoherent and not understandable as they can be “inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge” (Bauckhage 42). Deciphering an internet meme depends on shared and common experience by those who see and understand it.

For a deeper understanding of internet memes, one must first know the origins of the word ‘meme’ itself. Richard Dawkins, English biologist and author, coined the word in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He states that culture is similar to genes in the sense that culture evolves overtime (Dawkins 245). Cultural aspects are passed down and shared between individuals in a way similar to how genes are ‘inherited’ from generation to another. Dawkins goes on to define this process of cultural evolution by saying:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of a cultural transmission, or unit of *imitation*. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’ [...] I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*. (249)

So as the physical hereditary unit of living creatures is a gene, the ‘hereditary’ unit of culture is a meme. Dawkins gives examples of memes:

Tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which [...] can be called imitation. (249)

Memetic aspects Such as artistic expression, mannerism, and speech patterns are circulated among individuals who copy or mirror one another.

Dawkins’ meme refers to any cultural aspect exchanged among people, yet the internet meme refers to a specific form of ‘media’ used online. The

rise of the internet meme came with digital culture. Bradley E. Wiggins defines digital culture as “a space that links online and offline interactions related to the internet and its affordances. As a space it is occupied [...] it necessitates human agents for the continued recursive formation and reification of itself.” (Wiggins 23). The human agents interact with each other online via numerous means and “a meme, viewed as a genre, is not simply a formula followed by humans to communicate, but represents a complex system of social motivations and cultural activity that is both a result of communication and impetus for that communication.” (40). In *Digital Culture*, Charlie Gere defines digital culture by saying:

The term digital can stand for a particular way of life of a group or groups of people at a certain period in history [...] Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life. (Gene 16)

Smart devices such as laptops and phones, and social applications such as Facebook and Instagram, etc. dictated a certain way of life in which communication is so easy and quite fast. A characteristic of digital culture is participation and interaction with one another. In *Understanding digital Culture*, Vincent Miller states that:

There is [...] ‘participatory’ or ‘grass-roots’ convergence, where consumers are increasingly involved in seeking out information from a variety of sources, interacting with others who share interests, and even helping to produce their own experience [...] in isolation or in groups. (Miller 101)

Limor Shifman also discusses the same concept of participation in Memes in Digital Culture saying that:

[There is a] *social* logic of participation, which can be linked to [...] “networked individualism.” In our era of accelerated individualization, people are expected to fashion a unique identity and image and by doing so actively construct their “selves.” At the same time, individuals participate enthusiastically

in the shaping of social networks, demonstrating an enduring human longing for communality. (Shifman 33)

Participation is a core part of digital culture as individuals create and borrow from different media and from one another in order to communicate across different platforms.

Memes as a form of expression is popular due to the close relationship between images and digital culture; Elisa Serafinelli writes in *Digital Life on Instagram: New Communication of Photography* that “the mobility and mediation afforded by smart mobile devices seems to establish new ways for producing and sharing images. This shift guides people to think visually of events, people, and the surroundings” (Serafinelli 8). People’s eagerness to participate and their understanding of images and visual communication set the perfect condition for internet memes to prosper as, by definition, internet memes are visual imitations.

The internet meme became popular and turned into a digital culture phenomenon on online forums such as 4chan and, later, on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. People and “communities within 4chan and Reddit have been working hard to create new memes and make them go viral, aiming to increase the visibility of their ideas.” (Zannettou et al, 188). 4chan is an online forum which was created by Christopher Poole in 2003. Being an image-board means that users communicate with one another by posting images and commenting on them. What made forums like 4chan popular among internet users is that “[t]he interface supplied by the site is relatively basic and low-tech.” (Nissenbaum and Shifman 487). Using the forum is simple as it does not require any subscription or providing of personal information (not even a real username). The forum has many subpages and its users “share a common idea of what the board is about, a spirit and attitude that are undefined but present, constituting an underlying unwritten etiquette. Thus, while identity markers for specific users are not presented, altogether they still exhibit a unique collective cultural identity. In this sense, the /b/ community forms a subcultural group within the wider context of digital culture.” (487). This sense of community and understanding is derived from the characteristic of participation within digital culture. Users copy and imitate each other in posting and reposting these images which transform into image macros and thus becoming popular internet memes. Thus, internet

memes became popular with the rise of digital culture due to imitation and the users' desire to form a community with its own way of communication.

An internet meme is often used as a form of humor. According to Anastasia Denisova in *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*, internet memes are descendants of the emoticons (emotion icons) (Denisova 2). The emoticon is a symbol (such as 😊 😞) that is often used online to convey a certain emotion. Denisova states that:

The innovative idea to employ punctuation marks to resemble a sideways face appeared in 1982 [...] to combat misunderstanding in virtual communication, where the lack of visual means often leads to misinterpretation of the message. The smiley gained popularity in many online communities, evolving in a minimalist prototype of [...] an internet meme. (9)

So, like emoticons, internet memes are used for humorous purposes. Humor here is merely used synonymously with jokes and witticism ranging from farcical, and light-hearted humor to satirical and even political humor. The humorous internet memes on digital spaces such as 4chan are derived from the sense of community between the users. "This subcultural identity is based on a set of shared ideas and tastes, which often revolve around highly crude, cynical, and irreverent content, aiming to provoke and shock for the sake of humor." (Nissenbaum and Shifman 487) Users easily understand these memes because these image macros have been circulated within the community. Internet memes become simple to understand in the same way an emoticon is understood.

What makes the internet meme stand out is how concise it is; even pages like SparkNotes, which specialize in creating studying notes for students, constantly use memes on its social media platforms.



In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman defines internet memes as:

- (a) A group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users. (Shifman 41)

These internet memes are created and edited by online communities that possess knowledge of what memes are (the components of memes) and how they exist, evolve, and persist (that attributes of memes).

First, in “The Language of Internet Memes”, Patrick Davidson states that internet memes have three components:

The *manifestation* of a meme is its observable, external phenomena. [...]

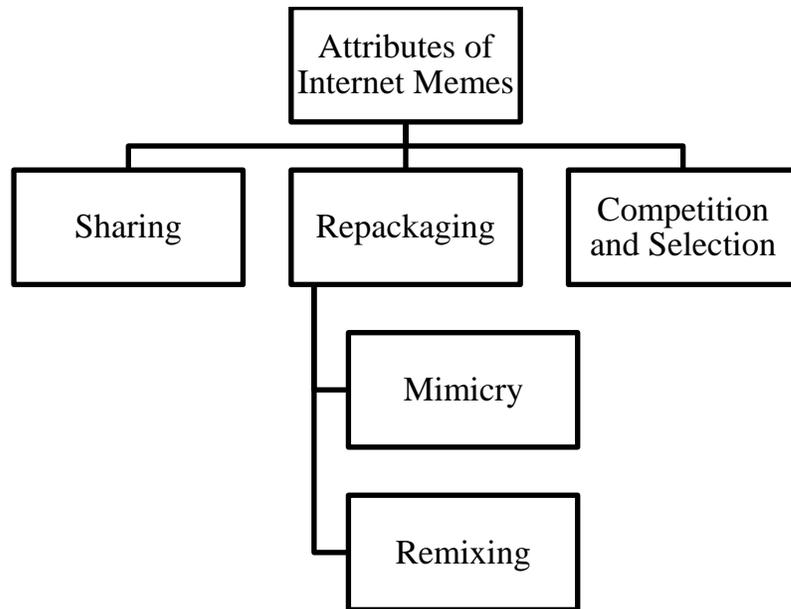
The *behavior* of a meme is the action taken by an individual in service of the meme. [...]

The *ideal* of a meme is the concept or idea conveyed. (Davidson 123)

The manifestation is the ‘corporeal/physical’ (perceivable) parts used to create a meme such as text, frames, stock images, etc. Then, the behavior is how

someone creates the meme, for instance, by using photoshop, copying and pasting, or editing. Finally, the ideal is what the meme aims to tell its viewers – the meme’s ‘message’. For instance, looking at the SparkNotes meme previously shown, one sees a caption stating “2020 summed up in book titles”. The caption is accompanied by four covers of the following works: *Great Expectations*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The meme is manifested through text and images, its behavior is compiling book covers, and its ideal is dark humor towards the events of 2020. These are the three parts within a meme. It is similar to how one examines signs; the sign is the object itself; the signifier is the method through which the sign is presented (be it a written or spoken word, etc.), and the signified is the incorporeal image of said object. Similarly, the manifestation of a meme is its mechanical parts, its behavior is how it is being expressed, and its ideal is the concept it aims to deliver.

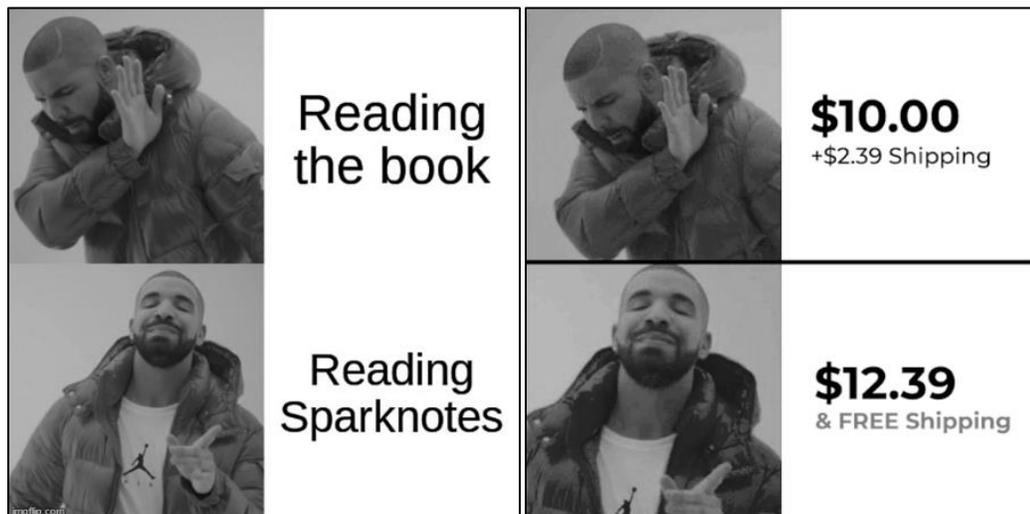
Shifman assigns three attributes to memes: Sharing, Repackaging, and Competition and Selection.



The first attribute is sharing; these internet memes are shared between individuals on social media platforms; a meme can be transferred by simply pressing a ‘post’ or ‘tag’ button.

A Repackaged meme is a meme that appears or resurfaces in a different look than it originally was. To Shifman, repackaging has two techniques: mimicry and remixing. “Mimicry involves the practice of “redoing”— the recreation of a specific text by other people and/or by other means” (Shifman 20). To mimic a meme, one can simply use the same images and only change

the caption. Whereas remixing “involves technology-based manipulation, for instance by photoshopping an image or adding a soundtrack” (22). This specific attribute requires internet meme viewers to be able to notice visual cues; a meme can appear as a simple picture but after looking closely it turns out to be a repackaged meme. Some internet memes depend on the viewers’ ability to do so as they rarely point out what they are referencing. An example of this is the Loss meme which will be addressed further on. For example, the “Drake’s Hotline Bling meme” has been used since 2015. The meme consists of two screenshots from the Hotline Bling music video and two captions that change depending on the ideal of the meme. This specific meme is used in situations where the creator of the meme shows refusal or repulsion from one thing and acceptance of another thing (which is usually the same as or worse than the first).



The two memes above use mimicry; they employ the same screenshots from the music video without any changes. The only difference between them is in the captions. The following two memes, on the other hand, use remixing. The first meme is photoshopped in order to insert the cat’s head. It also disposes of the captions altogether in favor of pictures of a pet bed and a cardboard box. The second meme by Christy (@spicy_ramen_arts on *Instagram*) has been entirely remixed as it is a hand drawn replica of the original screenshots. The creator of the last meme uses remixing well; the captions state “Drawing actual hands” next to the first (refusal) panel and “Hiding them in pockets to avoid drawing them” next to the second (acceptance) panel. In this form of the meme, the creator actually hides the hands in pockets – which is different from the original screenshots where Drake’s hands are visible.



Regarding competition and selection, Shifman says “memes vary greatly in their degree of fitness, that is, their adaptability to the sociocultural environment in which they propagate” (22). In order to survive, an internet meme must be able to compete with other memes and be able to live through the cultural survival of the fittest.

So, internet memes must be easily sharable, transformable “through commentary, imitation, or parodies” (Bauckhage 42), and able to withstand in the packed arena of memes on social media. A meme possessing these three attributes can be very popular. One issue to point out, as stated by Michael Johann and Lars Bülow, “memes fundamentally differ from viral contents regarding the adaptation process. Whereas viral diffusion is based on the numerous spreading of one single version, a memetic phenomenon is constituted by diffusion of various adaptations” (Johann & Bülow 1724). The fact that internet memes are repackaged makes it difficult to know who created a meme; a meme can be edited and shared multiple times so tracking down the creator can be laborious and (mostly) impossible.

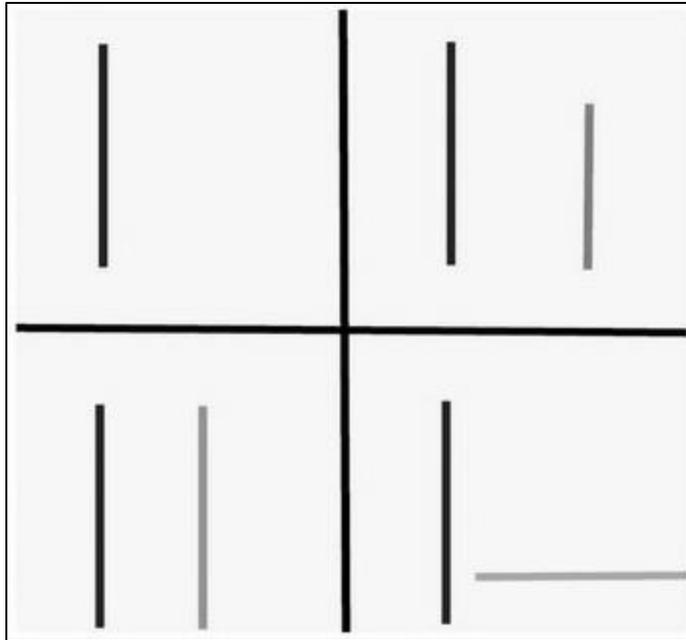
Is This Loss?

The Loss meme is a repackaged meme that has resurfaced often since 2008. In 2008, Tim Buckley released a comic strip from his webcomic *CTRL+ALT+DEL*. The title of the comic strip is “Loss” and it consists of four panels in which the protagonist of the comic goes to the hospital to discover that his partner had a miscarriage. The comic strip has been parodied and turned into a recurring joke in many internet memes because the webcomic was related to videogames and the change to such a topic was unexpected.



Loss, as an internet meme, can be repackaged easily due to its simple manifestation; the four panels can be minimalized as follows:

1. The first panel which shows the protagonist is turned into a white panel with a vertical line.
2. The second panel is transformed to a white panel with two vertical lines (the left one is longer than the right one) representing the protagonist and the sitting hospital receptionist.
3. The third panel shows two parallel lines equal in length (the protagonist and the doctor talking).
4. And the fourth panel shows to lines: one vertical (the protagonist) and one horizontal (the partner lying in the hospital bed).



Loss memes follow the same manifestation but change the behavior of the meme through repackaging.

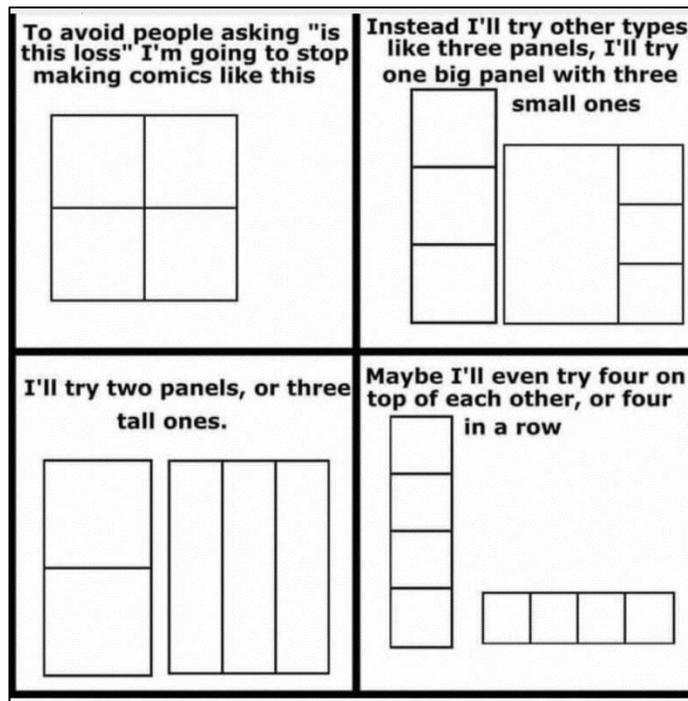
For instance, user Kingvav posted a picture on Tumblr with the title “My Favorite Character from Lord of the Rings”.



They did not provide any other explanation as to what this picture is supposed to mean. To someone who does not know Loss, the picture is

meaningless. The picture has seven pieces of Lego cubes that have nothing in common with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Yet, the picture follows the same manifestation pattern of "Loss". (and as mention before it is made of Lego pieces). So, it is Lego Loss. Once viewers make this connection, they understand that the meme is a wordplay about the character Legolas. So, this meme follows the manifestation of the Loss meme, its behavioral is remixing the component (replacing the loss characters with Lego pieces), and the ideal of the meme is wordplay.

Another example of the Loss meme is the following:



Unlike the previous meme, this one uses written text. The creator of the meme writes that they don't want their comics to be mistaken for Loss, so they propose different panels layouts for their comics. Upon closer inspection, viewers of this meme will notice that the different panels layout follows the same manifestation of the Loss meme. The behavior of the meme is repackaged by using panels instead of characters and adding written text. Whereas the ideal of the meme is irony.

To conclude, the internet meme, as a communication form created solely for digital interaction, prospers because of its conciseness, shareability, and transformability. Yet, understanding these memes requires an understanding of visual cues, images and their relation to written text; it also requires a knowledge of the cultural and/or social context that resulted in the creation of each of these internet memes.

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