

## HG2052 Assignment 1

### Analysis of method of communication – internet memes

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#### Introduction

This essay attempts to analyse internet memes as a method of communication. On the internet today, memes are everywhere, especially in informal interactions. Its use on the internet is often mistaken to be novel<sup>1</sup> even though it resembles older methods of communications in many ways. This essay will talk about its spread on the internet; how internet memes are speech-like and text-like in different ways and lastly, how they are used online and the impacts of their usage in online communications.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a [meme](#) as an “idea, behaviour, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture”. As it is impossible to cover every single type of memes in existence, this essay will only be about pictorial memes that are of meme status and internet. As such, there seems to be a threshold for something to be considered a meme.

Due to space constrain in this essay, memes that are mainly video references would not be touched upon. Other meme templates, on the other hand, are going to be the main focus of this essay. The templates mentioned in this essay will be those of internet lingo and of captioned photos. Also, this essay will only be talking about memes in the recent decade (with 2020 counting as the last year of the decade that started in 2011) and those made in English.

Despite memes being widely used on the internet, users cannot resist the traditional in-and out-group language divide seen in many forms of communication. Meme are also used to promote esotericism online. While there are plenty of examples of this divide in memes, this essay will not cover the different in-group memes.

Linguistically, meme users seem to be more segregated by the language with which the use the internet, rather than by actual geographical separation. Internet meme users seem to be able to communicate well with each other as long as they have some sort of common language or cultural knowledge.

In this essay I will<sup>2</sup>

#### Literature review

In her dissertation (Huntington, 2017), Heidi Huntington writes that memes are used as a tool for the communication of political opinions. On the internet, she argues, meme users are allowed a more relaxed and informal way of discussing something otherwise heavy and hugely controversial. With this, she argues that it is found that memes discussing political topics have

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<sup>1</sup> The [first internet meme](#) was created in 1996.

<sup>2</sup> A meme often appearing only in text form at the end of a text post on the internet. Signifies that the author of the post is ready to go into a lengthy discussion about a topic.

different effect than those discussing non-politics related topics. They can thus, as per her study, “[result] in more feeling or aversion” (page iii) in viewer than in non-political memes. She then extends her stance to political memes to being persuasive than a-political ones, if they had a point to argue.

In their paper (Shifman, 2013), Limor Shifman’s label of memes as “trouble makers” might explain the lack of studies, research and literature done and written on internet memes. In his paper, he cites that some researchers saw no purpose in studying memes while others could not even agree on the definition of memes to begin studying them.

In their paper (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018), researchers Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman argue that memes are relevant even in a globalising world. In their paper, they show off the multilingual-ness of meme generators and provided some example of memes in English, German, Spanish and Chinese. Despite the memes they study being spread across different cultures and languages; it is found that they behave similarly in the different cultures. Memes, as they found, are often of recurring images that convey an emotional expression. Through looking at memes in different languages, they even found that there is a bias of male-looking faces appearing more than female-looking one. One of their findings that this essay does not have space to cover is how diverse meme subject matters are. Because subject matters (such as Captain America being used a meme) are usually taken from cultural works (like movies and TV shows), each family of language (in this case, Germanic, Latin and Sinitic) has a different subject matter in the example memes in their paper.

The spread of internet memes is does not seem to be something widely studied. There is no official data of its usage to be found on the internet. However, through different sources, it is easy to see just how commonly used they are on the internet. To do this, Instagram and Instagram were chosen to use to extract data for their ease of use. On Instagram, it is easy to see how many internet meme related posts by simply searching the appropriate hashtag. The number of likes a post has is also just as easily retrievable. The same goes for Reddit on which upvotes (the Reddit equivalent of likes) posts have can be seen in one glance on the subreddit that hosts them. Although it is not possible to see the total number of post a subreddit has, it is easy to see how many users have subscribed to the subreddit and might therefore reveal the true number of people who at least care about internet memes, including lurkers<sup>3</sup>.

In the end, it is found that just on Instagram and Reddit alone, there are 800 million and 330 million active users each month, respectively.

A simple search on each platform reveals the platform’s engagement with internet memes. On Instagram, just the hashtag “memes” alone yields 119 million posts and the subreddit [r/memes](#) alone has 8.5 million subscribers. (Figure 1, left and Figure 2) From this, it can be said that a significant number of users on each website are meme users. If the number of #meme posts were distributed amongst the users of Instagram, it can be said that about 1 in 8 Instagram users are meme users. That is, however, not the case. If anything, the opposite is true – a small number of users make such posts and a larger number of users like those posts. This can be seen in the engagement rate of memes (at least those tagged with “#memes”). Posts in the “meme” hashtag can have plenty of likes; some examples shown in Figure 3 gives a range of about 170 to 1500 likes. On reddit, the top posts in r/memes can garner up to 197,000

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<sup>3</sup> Internet users who visit a website but do not engage with its content through liking and/or comment on posts.

upvotes. (Figure 4) These number numbers show that memes have a high engagement rate on the internet and imply that literally thousands of people at least engage with it and that there are millions of instances of its use on Instagram alone. These numbers exclude lurkers and might therefore reflect a slightly smaller number of internet meme users than reality.

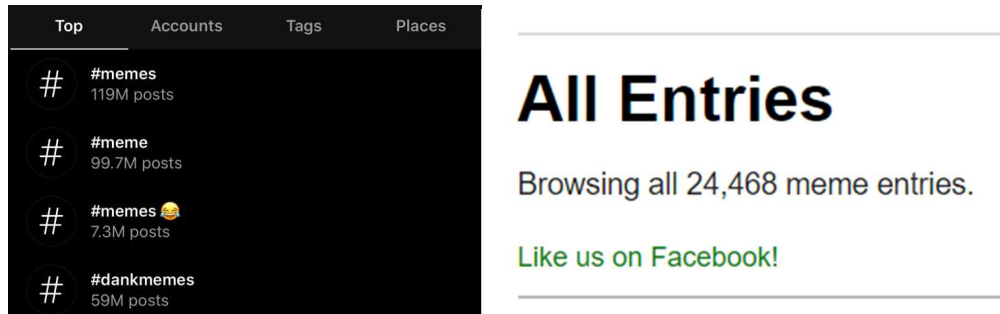


Figure 1: Search result for "#meme" on Instagram and number of entries on www.knowyourmeme.com

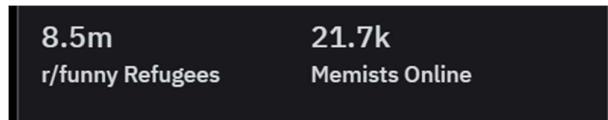


Figure 2: Screenshot showing the number of subscribers (jokingly named "r/funny Refugees") of the subreddit r/memes to be at 8.5 millions

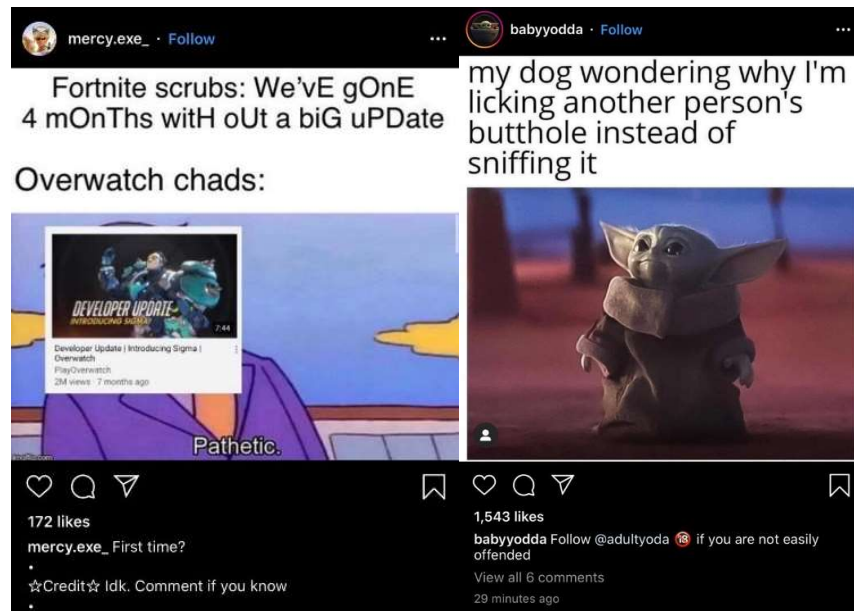


Figure 3: Posts from "#memes" with numbers of likes as low as 172 and as high as 1543

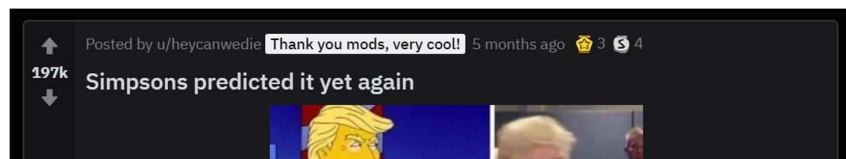


Figure 4: A top post on r/memes with 197,000 upvotes

#### Analysis

To start, it is important to clear up what is considered a meme by its users and what is not. It might not be explicit but meme users distinguish between memes and something that just happens to be transmitted culturally. For example, a famous painting posted online would not be considered a meme because no one has “memed” it yet. On the other hand, an image (regardless of content) that has been made into some sort of a meme template would fully qualify as a meme. One such example is that Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* is not considered a meme but a parody of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*<sup>4</sup> is. Likewise, references from website like vine like “[2 bros chilling in a hot tub 5 feet apart cause they’re not gay](#)” and “[you better stop, stop](#)” are more meme-like than something just as culturally widespread like company mottos. Being video-based memes, *2 bros* and *you better stop* will not be discussed in this essay.

Memes are considerably widespread on the internet, as shown above. The following paragraphs of this section aim to describe how internet memes are used on the plethora of websites they are used.

The most common form of memes are meme templates. One such example can be the “is this a *blank*” meme. (Refer to “is this a *blank*” meme in appendix) It started off an innocent screenshot taken from a Japanese animation, taken out of context. In the screenshot, a character points to a butterfly asking “is this a pigeon” (subtitled). The word “pigeon” is then often blacked out with a textbox containing another noun. In newer iterations, it is used to mock persons and organisations for not realising something to be what it obviously is. For example, a meme user can mock the Singapore government’s stance on Singlish by photoshopping the word “Singlish” over the butterfly and the phrase “broken English”, over the word “pigeon” in the subtitles. This then achieves the goal of a light hearted communication of frustration towards the Singapore governments’ distaste towards our local variety of English. (Refer to “Is this broken English” meme in appendix)

Meme templates are so common that numerous websites<sup>5</sup> (aptly named meme generators) allow meme users to create their own memes without needing otherwise essential skills such as photoshop.

As it is with many other forms of communication, memes users have created in- and out-groups with memes. On reddit, for example, the subreddit [r/linguisticshumor](#) is full of memes for a very specific group of people – people who have at least basic linguistics knowledge. Here, esotericism is facilitated by memes – linguists and linguistics enthusiasts have a common set of knowledge that allow for in-jokes to make sense. (Refer to Captain American meme in appendix.<sup>6</sup>) While the different reddit users on this subreddit are strangers and will likely remain strangers, memes allow them to communicate their jargon in a public space. Sure, they have specific jargon termed by linguists for linguistic communications but the Reddit users continue to use memes nevertheless. This is because memes are often viewed as less formal and can better evoke a sense of solidarity by its users. One evidence for this claim is that topics on reddit often has a different subreddit for its

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<sup>4</sup> [The Last Supper RSVP meme](#)

<sup>5</sup> A simple Google search gives several results but [here](#) is an example.

<sup>6</sup> Memes added to appendix so as to not disrupt flow of reading. (Refer to MS Word meme)

formal and informal discussions. Very often, informal discussions are but memes. The differences between [r/linguistics](#) and r/linguisticshumor illustrates this divide.

On the same vein, memes seem to be orthographically (rather than geographically) divided amongst its users around the world. A monoliterate Latin script reading internet meme user would not be familiar with non-Latin script memes and vice versa. A biliterate internet user, however, is more likely to be familiar with both Latin and non-Latin script memes, depending on their exposure. This can be seen in language specific meme templates. For example, the Mocking SpongeBob meme makes use of typing in capital and lowercase letters alternatively, accompanied by a picture of the character SpongeBob SquarePants making a mocking face, to convey a tone of mockery through text. This style of typing eventually took on a life of its own and is now a meme in and of itself. It has turned into a meme register. Meme users now use this typing style without the picture of SpongeBob to convey that they are mocking someone or something on the internet. An example is as follows:

*Me @ SGEM: sPeAk GoOd EnGllsH!!!!!!1111*

In the example illustrated above, frequent internet users would be able to identify the typing style as the author trying to mock “SGEM” and not that they are randomly hitting Caps lock. The same goes for the random string of exclamation points and numerals. It is used often used in memes to convey the same mocking tone the Mocking SpongeBob meme conveys. When used together, they intensify each other’s tone of mockery. Conversely, the same would not be possible in writing systems where there are no upper- and lowercase differentiation.

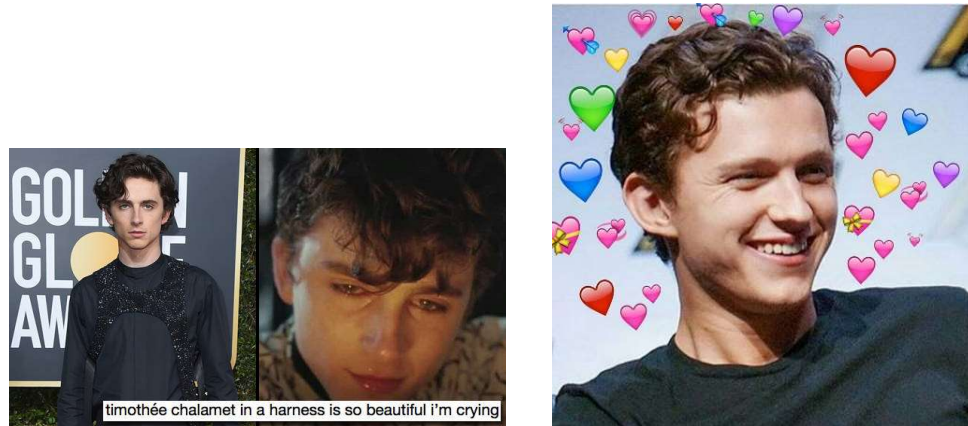
Linguistically specific memes also exist. They use conventionalised sentences and/or phrases of a language as the meme. One such example is the seemingly incomplete sentence at the end of the introduction section. The “in this essay I will” meme that uses the phrase “in this essay I will” that English-speaking students are often taught in school to use in argumentative essays. Users often start with a point they believe or want to argue about and end their post with the meme. This signifies, again, that the meme user is ready to defend their stance with extensive explanation and/or arguments. Another example is the “don’t @ me” meme that turns the English syntax of NEG-VERB-OBJ in imperative sentences into the meme. This is something that can apply to other languages with some translation.

Similarly, memes are culturally specific. These memes are to be understood in the context of specific cultures and said culture can be that of a race or country or it can be a subculture. For example, the anglospheric Twitter is home to Stan Twitter<sup>7</sup>, where memes created to celebrate celebrities are often shared. One famous example is the Twitter White Boy of the Month meme (TWBOTM meme). As its name implies, Stan Twitter celebrate a different famous young man each month. The memes created for recipient of the title often include broadcasting the best traits of that celebrity; surrounding him with heart emojis; editing his photo make him look celestial and more. Sometimes, the “white boy” does not even have to be a Caucasian man, like when actor Michael B. Jordan was crowned as a recipient. (Refer to TWBOTM meme in the appendix) In this case, meme users need to understand several things about Stan culture to understand the memes: the notion of “white

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<sup>7</sup> A part of Twitter where superfans (shortened to “stan”) go to celebrate their favourite celebrities.

boys” being the traditional ideal beauty standard for young men, thence the meme title specifies “white boys”; organisational awards like “employee of the month” and the existence of Stan Twitter as a platform for superfans to express their love for their idols and to interact with other superfans.



*Figure 5: Stan Twitter memes for actors Timothée Chalamet (left) and Tom Holland (right).*

From memes like TWBOTM meme also came the invention of meta-memes like TWBOTM calendar meme. (Refer to TWBOTM meme in the appendix) In these memes, meme trends across the span of a year are compiled into one meme. They are memes in and of themselves for they are basically a commentary on memes altogether.

Different features of speech and text are covered in class, especially on how the two contrast with each other. The following argue that internet memes are text-like in some of its features and speech-like (Crystal, 2006) in others.

Like speech, internet memes can achieve a substantiable level of a face-to-face communication. With its use of photos as part of some meme template, the meme user can convey their facial expression to the reader, but not vice versa. In the same vein, memes are socially interactive for they can be analysed and understood at a user’s own pace. Memes can also be prosodically rich in some of its templates. As mentioned above, typing alternatively in lower- and uppercase conveys a tone of mockery and putting heart emojis around a person or an object signifies a tone of affection.

On the other hand, internet memes are text like in that they are space bound rather than time bound. Meme users can refer back to memes at any time after a meme is posted and/or created, as long as they go back to look at the correct place (this can be a webpage or a folder on a computer). Similarly, memes are contrived for having a lag between its creation and reception; a meme user cannot see a meme the moment it is created

Mememes can be argued to be elaboratively structured due to their template-based nature. Any user can make memes to suit any topic they want to communicate as long as it is within the boundaries of a template. Like text, mememes are repeatedly reversible in that a meme creator can easily delete a meme they made a typo in and repost a correction. The correction would not be noticeable by its viewers who did not see the earlier, errant post.

Lastly, mememes behave a lot like language. They tend to change overtime, although mememes change at a higher rate than language. For example, mememes from the early 2008s to

early 2010s (rage comics and Overly Obsessed Girlfriend meme, refer to respective memes in the appendix) are now considered *stale* or uncool. The antonym of stale, *dank*, can only be used to describe memes that are still new and relevant. In contrast with language, memes actually evolve at more visible rate. While speakers of language might be averse to language change, meme users are often quick to adopt *dank* memes in favour of stale one. This could be a sign that memes and its usage is something associated with being young, hip and modern and that users have to avoid stale memes so as to not appear outdated and unpopular.

Recently, memes have shown signs of becoming increasingly multilingual. Some examples are the *omae wa mou shindeiru* meme and the *nani the f\*ck desuka* meme. Both of them consist of Japanese vocabulary. The former is because of its origin as a Japanese animation screenshot (Refer to *omae wa mou shindeiru* meme in the appendix) and the latter, because of its origin from the subculture of being a fan of Japanese animations. This goes to show that globalisation is also apparent in memes.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, internet memes are not a revolutionary form of communication. It behaves a lot like language, especially how it resembles both text and speech in one way or another. Another way it behaves like language is how susceptible to change it can be – a meme that is “dank” now can easily turn stale in a month’s time.

Memes are also not as random and structure-less than some might think. Memes are often of specific template that cannot be broken out of.

Other than its resemblance to language, internet memes are its own form of communication that seems to take on very specific societal connotations. They are seen as youthful, comedic and informal.

#### References

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Appendix

Jesus: "Table for 26 please"

Waiter: "But there are only 13 of you"

Jesus: "Yes, but we're all going to sit on the same side"



The Last Supper RSVP meme



Is this a pigeon? meme template



Is this broken English? meme



Captain America meme



using microsoft word

\*moves an image 1 mm to the left\*

all text and images shift. 4 new pages appear. in the distance, sirens.

MS Word meme



Twitter white boy of the month meme



Omae wa mou shinderiu meme