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J413 Senior Research Capstone

Memes to an End: Investigating the Commodification of User-Generated Content

Abstract

Memes are one of the most visible elements of online communication, but they are also expansive, ambiguous, and constantly evolving. The nature of memes as cultural artifacts and forces makes their historical resistance to research frustrating, especially given that advertisers demonstrate a clear desire to appeal to digital markets by tapping into what I call *Meme Capital*. How has this been achieved given the complexities of online communication, and how does it make consumers feel? Building an analytical framework for analysis by expanding on Limor Shifman's memetic dimensions, this research investigates how digital marketing strategies interact with internet culture and what kinds of attitudes/engagement they generate from internet users.

I. Introduction

Successful advertising means knowing your market base intimately enough to appeal to them, to be one of them. Knowing how internet users communicate and being able to mimic that language and behavior is crucial to digital marketing, as it has the potential to build familiarity and keep brands culturally relevant. A significant aspect of digital communication is meme culture, which Limor Shifman describes as "the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet" (2014, p. 362). Broad, ambiguous, and always evolving, memes are extremely difficult to define, let alone synthesize. Harder still to research empirically, memetics, the study of memes, has struggled to be taken seriously since its inception (Murray et al., 2014, Shifman 2014). Yet, the internet revived the meme from an academic shortcoming to a global phenomenon by revealing the processes of

meme production and communication, and its potential to influence behavior, culture, and identity. One would be hard pressed to find a savvy internet user unfamiliar with the term today.

The creation and dissemination of memes is arguably the most visible example of the internet's participatory culture (Bown & Bristow, 2019; Ciurel, 2021; Shifman 2014; Vardeman, 2024) and the meme's ability to form and expand communities online (Cozma, 2013, p.58). Successful memes seem to have a relatable quality that allows internet users to attach their identities to them and feel a sense of belonging and purpose, like they're part of a larger phenomenon. By participating in meme culture, "we're celebrating the fact these cultural objects are collectively ours. The amateurish nature of them indicates that they do not come from a commercial venture trying to guess what we'll find appealing. These come from, and are for, us" (Memes, 2009).

But do they? While this philosophy is foundational to internet meme culture, memes have been the subject, vessel, and success metric of viral marketing strategies since their inception. By helping to form online communities, memes unintentionally produce groups of potential consumers with shared interests. Advertisers salivate at this chance to appeal to internet markets by tapping into what I call *meme capital*, the cultural value of memes that advertisers can co opt for brand engagement and capital gain. But how often is this achieved given the complexities of online communication? This thesis asks how advertisers benefit from memes or create their own, how these marketing strategies interact with digital culture, and what attitudes/engagement this compels from internet users. To answer these questions, I analyze relevant ads and culture phenomena through a memetic lens, and apply the results to pertinent discourse about the state of our digital landscape. By also observing any corresponding consumer attitudes and participation, we can postulate the effectiveness or ethics of these phenomena. Considering the majority of

internet memes are user-generated, and users are responsible for a meme's successful dissemination, I hypothesize that ads which incorporate pre-existing memes are less successful than marketing campaigns with their own affinity for imitation, and the former are more often met with cringe, criticism, and attempts at culture jamming.

Literature Review

I.   Our Ad Memes Death

The "lifespan" of a meme, including how long it permeates popular culture and digital communication, is highly variable. Like any trend, it can be difficult to determine where exactly a meme "dies," or mutates from the earnest to the ironic. History suggests incorporating a meme into an ad rings the church bells. Signaling the "death" of that particular meme, it suggests a lack of relevancy or generational overlap between producers and consumers, despite the ad's attempt to convey the opposite. This is demonstrated in the inception of this research, when I witnessed an insurance commercial starring Bad Luck Brian just this year (The General Insurance, 2023, Figure 2) that demonstrates how critical timing and audience are for this kind of marketing.

Figures 1 & 2.
Original "Bad Luck Brian" meme (2012) and a frame from
The General Insurance commercial, "Bad Luck Brian" (2023).
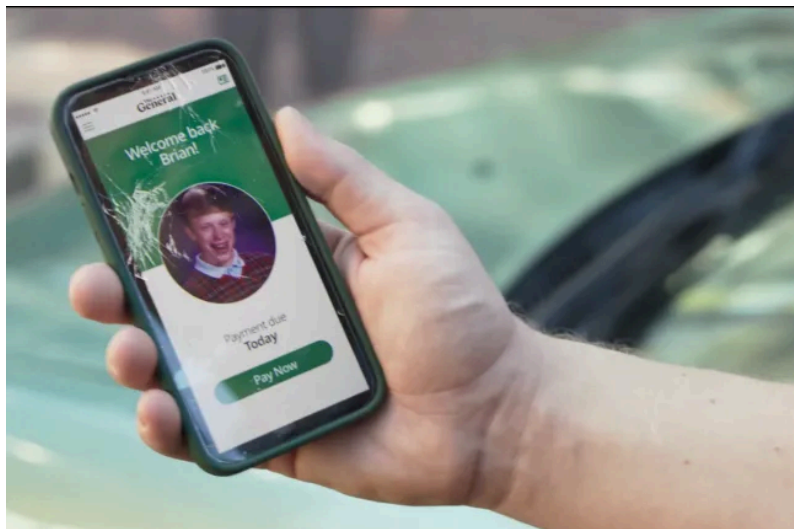
The original Bad Luck Brian image pictured in Figure 1 was posted to Reddit in 2012, and is part of a series of image macro memes known as Advice Animals (Don, 2012). This series and the year 2012 are benchmarks for the history of internet memes, as this character-based humor and textual structure dominated meme design and established a common format that made them easy to comprehend. No matter what the actual caption is, Bad Luck Brian is faced with a relatable situation that becomes so unfortunate, it's comical. While iconic, the Bad Luck Brian meme is over a decade old, beyond stale at this point, and the character is no longer culturally prevalent. This prompted the general question and the following research.

University of Oregon Alumnus Heather Darcie Burrell was doing similar research on internet memes in advertising for her senior thesis in 2010, and identified this same phenomenon in the rise and fall of musician Tay Zonday. Zonday went viral on YouTube in 2007 for his original song, "Chocolate Rain", which was spoofed and parodied heavily on 4chan, making Zonday and the song one of the earliest viral video memes. Seven months after the song was uploaded, Zonday was featured in a Dr. Pepper commercial singing a new cover of the song, "Cherry Chocolate Rain," to promote the brand's new cherry chocolate soft drink (TayZonday, 2007b, as cited by Burrell, 2010, p. 2). This partnership marked Zonday's decline in popular culture, and the ad was received poorly by viewers (Wortham, 2007), demonstrating that usually when brands get involved in memes, the fun's over.

I argue that this is not only still the case, but that this dynamic has actually intensified as evident by this new General Insurance ad. Digital culture evolves even faster than before, and it is an increasing challenge to not only be relevant, but stay relevant. If seven months is too long for Dr. Pepper to tap into the meme capital of "Chocolate Rain," then this General Insurance

Commercial's eleven year old reference is offensively outdated. So outdated that it called for academic study.

II. The Birth of the Meme

Though the word "meme" has taken a new meaning in the wake of the internet, memes have existed for as long as human culture has. Memes are the artifacts of culture and the forces by which it develops and evolves over time. If this sounds like a more robust and scientific understanding of memes than anticipated, it should. Richard Dawkins coined the word "meme" in 1976 in his book on human evolution and DNA, *The Selfish Gene* (2016), and defined memes as "units of culture" that spread from person to person (analogous to viruses). Sound familiar? He argued that this dispersion was Darwinian in nature, where the "fittest" memes in the "meme pool" established themselves over weaker ones just like genes in the gene pool. As genes are replicators, so memes are imitators, with each new addition a slight variation on the original. It is this affinity for imitation, or copying fidelity, that Dawkins argued determines a meme's fitness and explains how they operate as elements of cultural transmission.

His hypothesis was written in the context of his greater interest in human genetics, positing a way to understand how culture and ideas take root and morph over time via imitation, but it is Susan Blackmore who took on Dawkins' theory of memetics and tried to justify its application to the social sciences (2006). By her definition, celebrities, fashion trends, turns of phrase, your favorite song, every letter of the alphabet, and all of these things as they exist as notions in your head, are memes. That's a lot. Although there are contesting definitions of what constitutes a meme, as we will see, Blackmore argued that memetics was the way to understand how these things evolve, spread, and compete with one another, and that this is critical to cultural studies. Other scholars have argued that memetics lends itself poorly to areas of study like

socio-anthropology, communication, and cultural transmission, largely because the constitution

of a "meme" is so ambiguous, so is an "idea" after all. Regardless, its evolutionary analogy was

widely, and understandably, critiqued (Murray et al., 2014), and its controversial origin would

have likely been the most significant part of the story if not for the internet.

III.   Got Meme?

Even before the internet transformed meme culture, its impact could be felt around the

globe, and a few fundamental elements of it are still observable. The affinity to spread, carry

implicit meaning, and ability to separate those who participate from those who don't, are all

embodied in the "Kilroy was Here" meme prevalent during WWII. The phrase and

accompanying image of a cartoon man looking over a wall (Figure 3) were graffitied by

American soldiers wherever they went, on vehicles, buildings, ammunition, etc. It was so

popular among American military that there are two hidden Kilroy inscriptions on the World War

II Memorial in Washington DC. Even more significantly, the meme was so obscure and

indecipherable to German forces that Kilroy became a superstition, thought to be an American

superspy that was somehow everywhere at once (*Kilroy Was Here (U.S. National Park Service)*,

n.d.). Though Kilroy wasn't a commodity, the meme's role as an inside joke between soldiers

deployed overseas demonstrates how memes help develop subcultures, group formation, and

cultural divides.

Figure 3. Example of the "Kilroy Was Here" meme
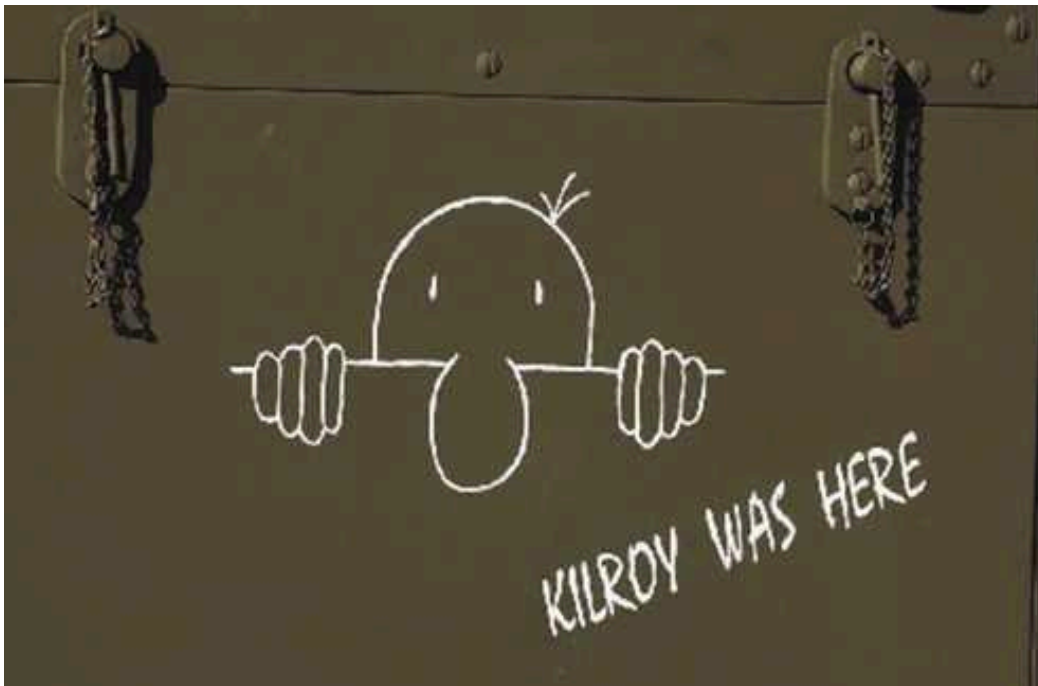
Some of the most well recognized memes from the past come from advertisements. If an ad is meant to be entertaining and brief, then a good ad– perish the thought– should be memorable because of these traits. Better yet, a good ad should be easy to imitate. One of the earliest examples in TV advertising is Jim Henson's advertising campaign with Wilkins Coffee beginning in 1957 (Administration, 2013). After the success of the first commercial, in which muppets named Wilkins and Wontkins use slapstick humor to sell canned coffee, Henson was commissioned for over 200 more, even venturing beyond coffee to advertise other products with his puppeted characters. Each commercial follows the same formula, where Wilkins kills or maims Wontkins in a humorous manner, and then threatens the audience if they don't buy the product. This makes variants easy to produce and apply to other products. This collaborative work gave Henson early exposure and creative freedom that would lead to his muppet stardom, and highlights the copying fidelity successful advertising campaigns can have.

Speaking of copying fidelity, one of the most iconic print and TV advertisements that has maintained copying fidelity is *Got Milk?*, the indisputably successful marketing campaign that saved Big Dairy from being put out to pasture. The campaign's first commercial was directed by Michael Bay and released in 1993, and the ad's simple slogan has been copied and applied to other concepts countless times since (eftventricle, 2008; MetalViking, 2011). The simplicity of the slogan is likely responsible for its ability to spread and replicate, but whatever the cause, it psychologically reframed milk as a necessity. This marketing strategy did not incorporate a meme, but was conceived with memetic elements, making it so ubiquitous that it convinced Americans to start buying something they didn't need until it was reintegrated into our food culture.

From this perspective, these examples indicate some of the formative effects that memes have, and that successful marketing campaigns often exhibit strong memetic traits. These individual phenomena appear dissociated from one another by time and context, but together they comprise a Mötley Crüe of memes that support my argument. Studying memes is nothing if not fun.

IV.   The Memeplex: Reloaded – Memes and Production go digital

Despite the reservations surrounding memetics, the internet catalyzed a meme renaissance. Digital communication and artistic expression allowed the concept of memes to be fully realized, or rather visualized. The colloquial definition of "meme" is also difficult to pinpoint, but now has more specific connotations of style, information, purpose, and dispersion, with observable evolving trends. The internet resulted in the term entering "netizen vernacular" and reaching beyond the realm of academia, along with its intense debate. With this technological development and a new understanding of the term, a more negotiated utility of

memetics was posited Shifman (2014, p. 362). She argues that while memetics may not have all the answers, rejecting its legitimacy is also imprudent. Memes are a component of culture that have never been more observable; it is impossible to participate in digital culture, especially on social media, without being part of the meme machine.

Advertising is a media form that posits desires and is influential in the formation of culture (Gerbner, 1998), and the medium by which advertisers message consumers is significant to that influence (McLuhan, 1964). The same is true of internet memes, which Shiftman defines as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (Shifman, 2014, p 367). Born of artistic expression, humor, political discourse, and more, memes have proven themselves social forces to be reckoned with (Bown & Bristow 2019; Jones & Angelini, 2020; Mina, 2019; Winner, 1980). In the wake of recent political events, the meme's ability to shape user identity and worldview has become observable on and offline, and this potential for influence is practically begging to be co-opted by advertising culture (Jones & Angelini, 2020; Mina, 2019).

Memes and ads are cut from the same cloth. They're both diverse in form, and disseminate across a variety of platforms with particular structures, which makes their effects difficult to track. Both spread by a form of replication and pass from person to person, often without conscious consent, and each exhibit successful competition by existing beyond their original media form and infiltrating consumer communication, culture, and consciousness. In fact, by the aforementioned definitions, *all ads are memes*. While it has never been clearer that memes can become advertising tools, ads have always strived for their own virality, becoming so easy to replicate and consistently broadcast that they exhibit memetic behavior. In most of these

cases, consumers also participate in advertising as content generators and messengers. Can internet users participate in meme culture *without* doing uncompensated marketing labor?

No. Memes are part of all valuable user data, and are simply too irresistible. After all, why would our cultural industries ignore a mainline to consumer consciousness? With the emergence of internet meme culture, meme capital has become an area of interest for marketing strategists:

> Memes have become an asset for brands, because like celebrities, they have a built-in audience that recognizes and appreciates them. With the growing popularity of cultural branding among advertising agencies, marketers increasingly look to YouTube and other social media sites for viral content to latch on to, and to appropriate for their marketing campaigns. Mining popular memes is key to applying a cultural strategy model to branding. (Murray et al. 2013, p. 332).

In many cases, there isn't even much mining to be done. In a study of user-generated memes about Casio watches, positive sentiments complimentary to the company's brand image began to emerge. Themes of its products' durability, affordability, and longevity were all observed, and the creation and dispersion of these memes took no effort or engagement on behalf of Casio (González-Aguilar et al., 2023). Again I ask, as advertisers, why not walk through a door being opened for you?

V.   Viva La Memetic Revolution!

With the rise of short-form video content in the last decade, all internet phenomena seem to enter and exit public discourse at faster rates. Likely due to algorithmic content filtering and the competitive nature of media industries, nearly every major social media platform has

integrated this short-form video structure, like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Youtube Shorts. Since the design and dissemination of content can have significant implications about consumption and impact beyond the content itself (McLuhan, 1964; Winner, 1980), it can be inferred that this format has its own parameters for permeation and replicability. Therefore, advertisers trying to tap into memes must not only thread the needle by making topical references that haven't been oversaturated, lest they become "cringe" or "basic" to their targeted demographics, but also tailor advertising methods to particular platforms. Studying how and where memes are used, mapping their applications in marketing, and observing consumer response could help inform how advertisers will try to influence internet users for corporate gain going forward.

Media, in the hands of advertisers, has become a tool used to encode desires, attitudes, cravings, and information that will generate and maintain user consumption (Gerbner, 1998). Naturally, the most popular social media platforms have devolved into oversaturated digital marketplaces over time, where established user-bases are bombarded with advertisements (Doctorow, 2023) explicitly and implicitly. Most veteran "netizens" are wary of this. Users are always being marketed to, and deception is to be expected. Although consumers may be vigilant against traditional forms of advertising, Garfield taught us that no one is immune to propaganda (Figure 4), and the digital culture we participate in is often commodified right under our noses. In this context, memetic marketing may be seen as a form of capitalist propaganda on the rise, in which user-generated content is exploited for private gain (Ciurel, 2021; Terranova, 2000).

Fig. 4– "You Are Not Immune to Propaganda" meme (2018).
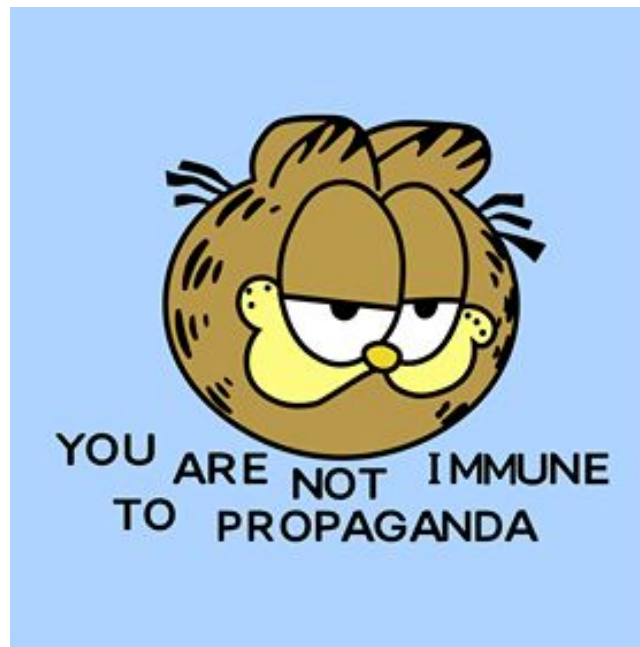
While they have great potential to build a brand, memes can also destroy them. Key findings from advertising with memes are its insecurity and varying degrees of permeability (González-Aguilar et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2014; Vardeman, 2024). Because internet memes are largely user-generated, successfully advertising with memes depends on user response. On a– formerly– democratic platform like Twitter, campaigns are at the mercy of the user-base and can be steered far from the advertiser's agenda in the blink of an eye. The 2012 McDonald's hashtag campaign, #McDStories, was suspended within two hours of its launch after being bombarded by sarcastic replies about the fast-food chain's quality (Murray et al. 2014, p. 333). Higher levels of unfiltered consumer interaction in an advertising campaign means greater risk of culture jamming. So perhaps the door is being pulled back to slam in the advertisers' faces.

As it should be. The nature of the majority of memes as user-generated content makes them raw materials for the digital economy, mined for free. Social media platforms and new technologies are improved by user input, the fundamental principle of participatory culture, which makes the data collected and sold by these platforms uncompensated labor (Schäfer, 2011;

Terranova, 2000). This includes the creation and dissemination of internet memes. Beyond the ethical implications of this advertising method and its unpredictability, the commodification of user-generated content intended for non-commercial discourse is bound to earn some backlash. This practice can elicit a negative response from consumers who rightfully feel stolen from. For industries seeking to commodify internet culture, the allure of these free radicals may compromise not just brand security, but ethical marketing practices. Good thing brands care about both. Right?

Methodology

I.   Memetic Dimensions

To explore my research questions, this project takes foundational memetic theories and marketing research to analyze several internet memes and advertising campaigns. Identifying some of the most significant meme phenomena and advertisements with strong memetic traits provides this project with a variety of appropriate data. Where applicable, I can then document success metrics like dissemination and acclaim, and compare them to attitudes found in consumer feedback. Examining this data with a memetic framework of analysis that builds upon Shifman's theoretical framework (2014) described below will produce a qualitative analysis that outlines the memetic components of marketing phenomena, especially as they are concerned with social media, and their corresponding consumer attitudes. Where appropriate, additional analytic tools like Hadzy are used to sort social media comments by popularity and date in order to observe consumer responses relative to the original publication of their respective ads.

Though critics of memetics had valid reservations, meme scholars like Blackmore and Shifman used the notion as a starting point for a negotiated approach to understanding cultural evolution, human behavior, and, for the purposes of this paper, internet culture. Acknowledging

that the gene analogy isn't perfect, Shifman focuses on the ambiguity of what a meme is, arguing that a productive application of memetics may lie therein. She divides the debate over the definition of "meme" into three camps, mentalist-driven, behavior-driven, and inclusive.

Mentalist-driven scholars, like Dawkins, consider memes to be complex ideas that only reside within the brain, passed to and from by "meme vehicles," while behavior-driven scholars identify memes as behaviors and their resulting artifacts. For the latter stance, there is no difference between a meme and its mentalist "vehicle." Blackmore would say that it's all meme to me, and take on an inclusive stance, which defines memes as ideas in the brain, behaviors they elicit, *and* the artifacts they produce. This belief that "any type of information that can be copied by imitation should be called a meme" seems most appropriate in the context of digital culture, but lacks analytical power because it is such a large umbrella term.

So, Shifman posits a fourth approach broken down into "memetic dimensions," specifically content, form, and stance (Shifman 2014, p. 366-367). The content dimension describes the ideas and ideologies communicated in a given meme. Applying this to any derivative Bad Luck Brian meme (Figures 5 & 6), content may be that misfortune of others is humorous, especially if that misfortune is absurd, or that misfortune is more likely to occur for those who are conventionally unattractive. Or, it may simply be that no matter what situation the character of Bad Luck Brian finds himself in, the most ridiculous and unfortunate outcome occurs. Form describes the macro image meme itself: An awkward school picture of a traditionally "nerdy" white boy with a joke set up in the top text, and a punchline below.

Figures 5 & 6. Derivatives of "Bad Luck Brian" meme.
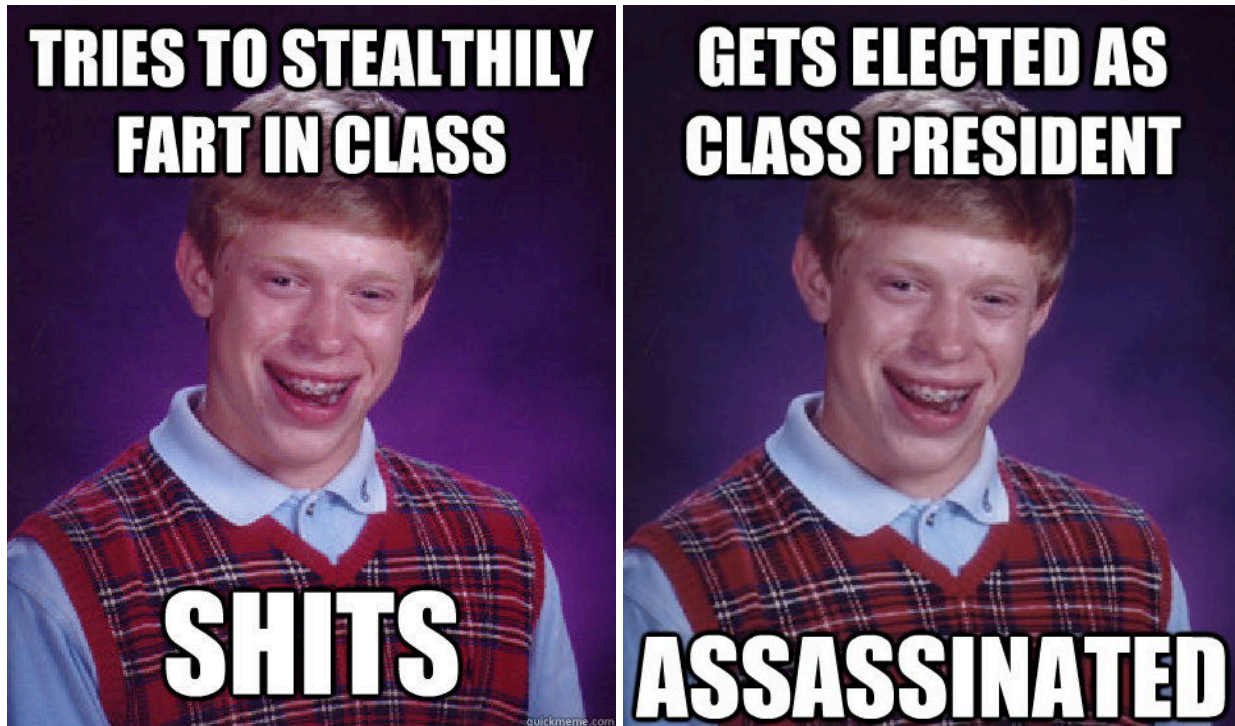
As for stance, this is the most difficult dimension to articulate, as it is broken into three

subdimensions: participation structures, keying, and communicative functions. Concerned with

platform context and linguistic analysis, it would outline that the top text establishes a common

or relatable scenario, only to subvert it in the bottom text by illustrating an outcome so absurdly

humiliating that it's humorous, all in a brief narration in the present-tense. Stance could further

outline the tone consistent across the derivatives' captions, and describe the nature of

macro-image memes as individual artifacts to be shared online for momentary entertainment.

These memetic dimensions offer an ideological, technical, and contextual avenue by which

memes can be analyzed and compared to their derivatives.

By virtue of these dimensions, this theoretical framework can retrace a meme's ancestry

and outline how its imagery, messaging, and delivery has evolved. It is not enough to document

that one was more viral than another, because things don't go viral for the same reasons; as

memes evolve, so can the attitudes and ideologies behind them. While I would argue that viral

marketing has embodied the sentiment that all press is good press, the participatory nature of virality is rich with the potential for culture jamming and the ideological commandeering of an ad's original message, and there are certainly cases where ads go viral for the wrong reasons. Looking at you, Peloton. As I hope we will observe in the research findings, users are active participants in viral marketing with the ability to dismantle advertising strategies instead of simply producing raw materials for them without compensation.

A major caveat to this research methodology is that linguistics is very complicated. In order to make the most of this research strategy, the stance dimension may be surface level and lack most of the technical terminology. In the researcher's defense, linguistics is one more field of study than I could undertake in ten weeks, and I'm trying my best, man. It is my hope that this lack of expertise does not detract from the quality of this analysis, and may even lend itself to outlining the utility of future studies.

Building upon these dimensions, I would like to add one of my own to meet the needs of the research at hand and attempt to support Shifman's own framework. Beyond content, form, and stance, a fourth memetic dimension of *Effect* will be considered as well. Shifman's original dimensions can effectively outline the messaging, makeup, and tone of a given meme, but it would also be prudent to document the impacts of that meme. Including but not limited to subsequent imitations, the effect dimension serves as a miscellaneous category for the content, reactions, and attitudes generated in response to these memes, which is complementary to the information documented by Shifman's dimensions and pertinent to the research questions at hand.

Analysis

"Cherry Chocolate Rain": A Self-Made Sell-Out

Starting with a brief analysis of Tay Zonday's "Chocolate Rain" remix in partnership with Dr. Pepper, references to the original song meant to demonstrate cultural relevance can be observed. The song and its music video (Figures 7 & 8) try to frame Zonday as an internet success story reaping the rewards of his popularity, socially and financially. He is surrounded by women in swimsuits and cocktail dresses for a majority of the video, receiving kisses and cash throughout its duration. The juxtaposition of a YouTube personality with so many symbols of status was polarizing in 2007, before self-employed content creation was established as a viable career for creatives on the platform. This can be observed in the divided responses to this music video. While some saw a talented individual accepting greater opportunities, others saw a sell-out betraying their own creative values (Wortham, 2007).

Figures 7 & 8. Images of Tay Zonday's original "Chocolate Rain"
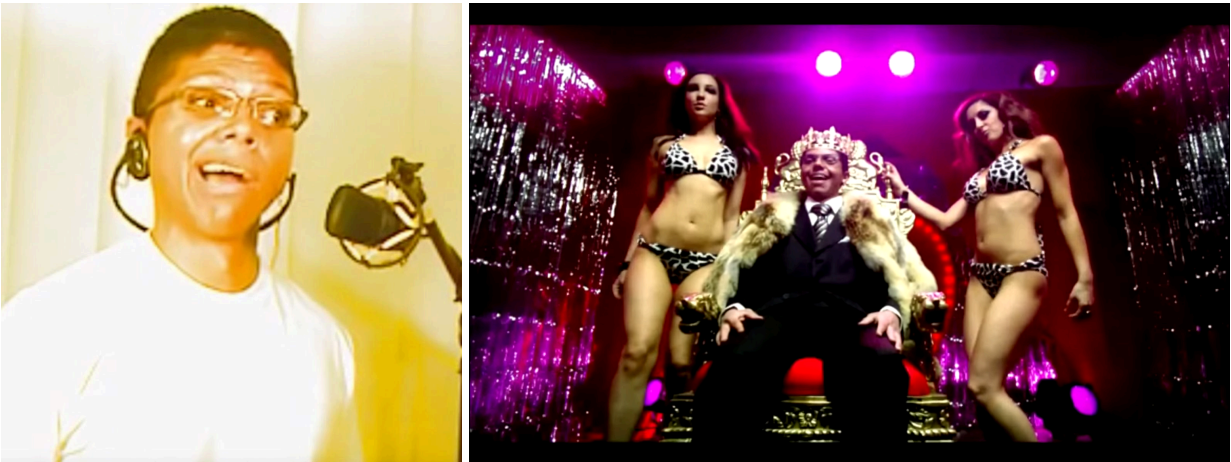music video and the "Cherry Chocolate Rain" remix (2007).

Table 1	"Chocolate Rain"	"Cherry Chocolate Rain"
Content	- An original song making commentary on systemic oppression against Black Americans. - Frames low-budget music production as obscure and entertaining. - Juxtaposes a gentle demeanor and deep voice.	- A remix of an original song that tracks Zonday's journey from YouTube to brand partnership. - Promotes the partnership as a massive financial opportunity for Zonday. - References details of the original production in the remix's lyrics.
Form	A young man plays the keys and sings an original song, moving away from the microphone to take breaths.	An independent creator of a popular song sings a remix about achieving greater status and pay by collaborating with Dr. Pepper.
Stance	Emotive, connotative social commentary.	Denotative statements about wealth and product placement.
Effect	- Virality promoted derivatives and positive feedback. - Drew an audience that Dr. Pepper tried to market towards.	Divided viewers between support for Zonday's success and disappointment that the meaning of his original song was diminished.

Structuring the analysis by distinguishing each memetic dimension helps map Zonday's initial success and connect it to his music video with Dr. Pepper. This establishes the context of references made to the original music video found throughout its derivative, and helps explain the divide in attitudes it elicited. This divide is what I find most significant. Despite this kind of financial opportunity still being a best-case scenario for most independent musicians on a platform like YouTube, viewers still consider brand partnership a personal betrayal. As the table identifies, this outrage is especially charged by the removal of the authentic racial commentary of the original video, replaced by blatant advertising methods like the objectification of women.

Wendy's Fresh Beef: The Hits and Misses of Brand Twitter

Brand presence on social media has been emphasized in digital marketing since these platforms launched. A vulture article outlines the history of brand accounts on Twitter, which have been trying to make social media about themselves since its launch:

Twitter has facilitated a new sort of intimacy for brands, one in which they can

blend in with people and develop their own personas. Unlike commercials on

Hulu or promoted posts on Facebook, a user might respond to a brand's tweet

without consciously thinking it's an ad. Four months later, it's in some marketer's

PowerPoint about #engagement and #authenticity. (Allebach, 2019).

The article maps the history of cultural misses accrued by these brands, like DiGiorno's

infamous misunderstanding of #WhyIStayed for domestic violence awareness (Figure 9), and

observed a shift in brand engagement around 2013, where a few key players started getting ahead

of their competitors, who were still clapping back and forth at each other for five minutes of

fame. However, Denny's began to post memes to their account, following internet trends and

featuring popular characters like Sasha Braus from the *Attack on Titan* anime series (Kobayashi,

2013; Figure 10). This led to the perception of two distinct kinds of branded Twitter accounts,

those who were "cringe", and those who "get it" (Allebach, 2019). Wendy's, for example, fell

into the former category when it outraged audiences by referencing the macro-image meme

format in a commercial for television in 2015 (CITATION FOR COMMERCIAL AND

REACTION VID).

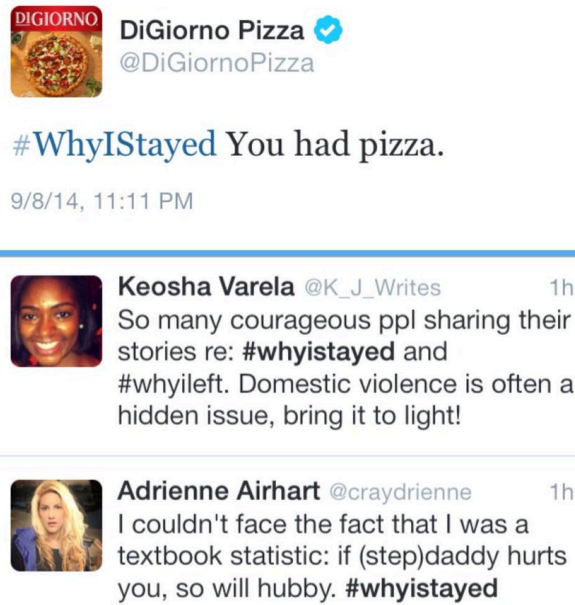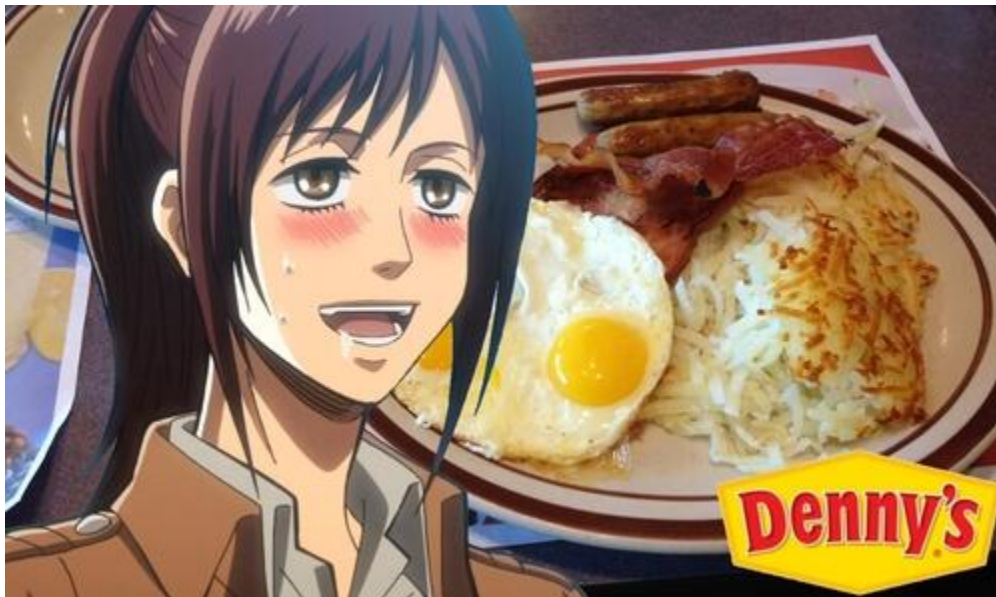Figure 9. DiGiorno's Twitter account misappropriates #WhyIStayed

Figure 10. Example of Denny's tweeting with memes (2013).

As brands began to hire more netizens to their marketing teams, they understandably got better at connecting with social media users. Denny's consistently produced engaging, relevant memes, and it started to be accepted by meme culture along with brands that followed suit. The subreddit R/FellowKids, a space dedicated to mocking out of touch brand activity on social media, started to diminish- in fact, the meme the subreddit's title is reference to has been

co-opted by brands as well (Figures 11 & 12), and engagement between brands and individual users started to noticeably shift.

Figures 11 & 12. "Fellow Kids" meme and corporate derivative (2016).

In 2017, the branded clapback took on its ultimate form when Wendy's went viral for calling out a critical user for forgetting that refrigerators exist (Adam, 2017; Allebach, 2019). The exchange went viral, and as the brand account made the impossible transition to the "they get it" camp, it started making the art of the roast its primary mode of engagement. This sustained viral success set the precedent for brand accounts to engage with social media users with attitude, edgy humor, and the etiquette of internet beef– where the winner is determined by who is favored in the "ratio" of likes and retweets. Brands and users started begging for the account's attention so that they could be degraded publicly online and participate in the trend, which was also inspiring individuals to make fan art of this new, sassy Wendy persona. Many interpretations even added an element of sex-appeal that further cemented this new mythos

around the mascot, and allowed the brand to lean further into this successful engagement strategy

(Figures 13 & 14).

Figures 13 & 14. Wendy's original viral roast, and an example of fan art.

Table 2	@Wendys first roast	Successive roasts
Content	• Pro public humiliation and deflection • Pro brands arguing with consumers • Pro defending brand image	• Pro public humiliation and deflection • Pro brands arguing with consumers and other brands • Pro establishing brand image
Form	• A verified Twitter account for the Wendy's chain publicly debates and mocks a Twitter user over the quality of its beef.	• The account publicly mocks users and brands critical of its food quality, and those that request the account's attention for further mockery.
Stance	• Reactionary, judgemental keying. • Viewers can "pick sides" by liking either account's comments.	• Reactionary, judgemental keying. • Greater consent from accounts asking to participate.
Effect	• Virality encouraged continuation of this behavior. • Inspired fan art and the expansion of brand image.	• Encouraged other brand accounts to mimic this strategy. • Established a mythos, personality, and sex-appeal for the mascot.

I argue that this is the biggest example, and perhaps the genesis, of the phenomenon that

followed: the humanization of brand accounts. Accounts like Slim Jims, Tinder, and Duolingo

can be found at the top of comments sections under posts that have nothing to do with their brands, and these accounts with entire departments of marketers behind them communicate as if they're individual users. This behavior, while engaging, has alarming implications, even to digital marketers themselves.

Users talked about brands like they were celebrities, admired their cleverness, embraced their absurdity, and even wanted to get roasted for fun. … Brand humanization "works" now in part because people feel disconnected and disheartened after scrolling through the daily chaos. When a brand is entertaining or relatable, it opens the door to parasocial relationships, a.k.a. people viewing media personalities as friends. Brendan Kelly, the man behind Nihilist Arby's, finds the trend troubling. "It's the evolution of the matrix. That's the way social media is going," he says. "If we're looking to brands on Twitter as a way to connect with humanity, then we're irrevocably fractured as a society. They don't love you. I would like to repeat that: *They don't love you.*" (Allebach, 2019).

Brands are not people. This is why their marketing teams invest so much energy into making them seem like they are. This marketing strategy, while controversial, has become so normalized that brands appear to be participatory social media users just like us. The reality is, these brands make significant investments in the data we produce on these platforms so that they can keep up the disguise. The trends and content produced by a platform's user base also produce the meme capital that encourages this behavior. As much as we'd all love a mean redhead to degrade and humiliate us, she shouldn't be a figment of our collective brand consumption.

Casio Memes: Participatory Exploitation

Observably, the relationship between internet culture and digital marketing is not one-way. Companies try to further integrate into this culture in order to influence it for capital gain, but by nature of its inclusion of these companies and its unpredictability, sometimes internet culture creates an unintentional opening. The aforementioned study on Casio memes, produced by individual users without compensation, was found to carry positive brand attributes explicitly and implicitly. A notable portion of this trend is in response to a Shakira lyric about her breakup with professional athlete Gerard Piqué, where she accuses him of "trading a Rolex for a Casio," (Bizarrap & Shakira, 2023). This eventually drew the brand's attention, and its social media accounts now participate in relevant internet trends and the production and spread of casio memes. These findings point to Casio as "a brand that is well-valued by the audience, that is part of popular culture, and that also lends itself to developing a humorous narrative in a constructive and valuable way for the company itself." (González-Aguilar et al., 2023, p. 68).

Figures . Examples of Casio memes (A, 2017; B, 2021).

Table 3	Casio Meme A	Casio Meme B
Content	● Against domestic relationships ● Against women as a concept ● Promoting a Casio product for its affordability, longevity, and utility.	● Promoting a Casio Product for its longevity and utility. ● Promotes brand loyalty over domestic relationships.
Form	● Loosely compares a calculator to a female partner with presumed negative traits, framed so the calculator is more favorable on all accounts.	● Loosely describes a hypothetical female partner such that their traits can more sensibly be applied to a digital watch.
Stance	● Connotative, Comparative keying.	● Subversive keying.
Effect	● Frames the Casio brand favorably and encourages product consumption and brand loyalty.	● Frames the Casio brand humorously and encourages brand recognition and loyalty.

With memetic dimensions, analyzing a few memes that are approximate to the original study's data set supports the study's results. Beyond a consistent comparison of women to the brand's commodities, the examples analyzed clearly promote Casio products over competitors,

and emphasize their durability, longevity, and utility. The study used these findings to conclude that the nature of social media is participatory, and that while brands lose complete control over their image in these spaces, respecting this user-participation has the potential to authenticate their image and accessory marketing. While there's lots of truth to these claims, historically it's a gamble, as we will soon see. Regardless, I argue that this phenomenon established significant meme capital solely for Casio, and that within the current structures of our digital economy, this participation in meme culture doubles as free marketing.

The *Morbius* Ruse

So far, it is established that marketing in participatory spaces like social media comes with its own particular structures and challenges. Across multiple sources, advertisers are warned to tread lightly in these digital spaces, as users have high standards for acceptance of brands into internet culture. Culture jamming, the deliberate subversion of media culture, often as a form of protest, is a collective response to unfavorable digital marketing that varies from movement to movement. Looking past the example of #McDStories, social media recently saw one of the most interesting examples of culture jamming involving memes in the response to the 2022 film, *Morbius* (Espinosa). The film is named for its vampiric main character, an obscure Spiderman antagonist with no prior appearances in live action films. The character's obscurity amid perceptions of oversaturation of comic book films in cinema caused users to produce memes and false hype for the film (Figures 17 & 18). The memes used the film as material to criticize many elements of the superhero film genre, like poor dialogue and niche characters getting standalone projects, by making up lines from the film and hyping it over prior films. The presentation of excitement for a film no one had any intention to see not only caused Sony to overestimate audience turnout, but convinced them they pulled the film from theaters prematurely when the

trend kept going. As a result, Sony re-released the film for a second theatrical run, where it

bombed even harder. Crunching the numbers reveals that "less than nine people saw it per

theater. That's quite bad." (Hellerman, 2022).

Figures 17 & 18. Examples of Morbius memes (A & B, 2022).

Table 4	Morbius Meme A	Morbius Meme B
Content	- Sarcastically pro *Morbius* - Sarcastically against *The Batman* - Applies greater masculinity to one film preference over another	- Sarcastically pro *Morbius* - Sarcastically pro contrived film dialogue
Form	Compares a popular superhero film to an unpopular one, ironically frames the unpopular one as more mature/manly/intellectual.	Creates a fake movie frame by adding an obscure subtitled caption to a frame of the film's main character.
Stance	- Ironic, comparative, connotative keying - Qualitative comparison	Ironic keying
Effect	Studio executives led to believe *Morbius* had a legitimate audience and demand.	Produced many derivatives using the same fake line of dialogue.

Meme culture celebrated this ridiculous turn of events. Cartoonist Iris Jay said it best on

Twitter: "we did it, folks. the stupid "morbin'" meme has achieved its true apotheosis: making

Morbius the first Marvel film to completely eat shit at the box office twice" (Jay, 2022). While this is a hilarious achievement for culture jammers, it's only made possible by its particular circumstances. Social media users may have a harder time causing companies to lose money on this scale outside of gullible executives in the film industry. However, remaining vigilant for opportunities to challenge corporate understandings of internet culture will, ideally, continue revealing themselves to the creative and clever.

Conclusion

The internet is complicated, and so is culture. How we have evolved to communicate in the digital age demands examination, and the prevalence of internet memes indicates that memetics has a part to play in making sense of it all. Memetic dimensions offer a categorical structure for breaking down memes into key components, allowing researchers to connect memes to their derivatives while simultaneously distinguishing them. Adding an additional dimension to describe memes' cultural effects and responses further contextualizes them within internet culture, and allows for deeper investigation into the role they serve in digital communication.

As meme culture goes on, it builds upon itself such that one must understand its history to understand it in the present, like deriving contemporary language from Latin roots. This gives the culture a high barrier to entry, one that continues to challenge advertisers and often demands they acquire internet users for their expertise. However, there is clear disdain among users for this kind of corporate participation, establishing a contentious relationship where successful digital marketing relies on deception. Not explicitly so, but the devil is in the details. By behaving as individual users without corporate agendas, or as stand up comics for our collective

amusement, or pull-string dolls that repeat whatever we're saying, advertisers misdirect consumer attention, and posture like they care about anything besides their bottom line.

While internet memes originated as purely user-generated content, their increasing ubiquity and popularity has made them an enticing marketing resource in the right hands, which betrays their intended purpose as being distinct from commercial media. Despite oppositional attitudes and culture jamming movements, brands have become much more effective at digital marketing as their familiarity with internet memes and culture improves. While there will always be major misses like the latest General Insurance ad, it would have been another drop in the bucket even five years ago. Now, brands are racking up successes and further encroaching on our digital spaces before our very eyes.

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