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MEMES AND ADVERTISING

by

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B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2010

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

MEMES and ADVERTISING

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

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Approved by:

Dr. Katherine Frith, Chair

Graduate School
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Introduction

In the current shift of technology certain things have changed the way in which communities and individuals come together. The era of Web 2.0, a term used to describe the way in which the internet is no longer a newer concept to the world but more of an entity which has altered the way we live and become an important figure in our lives; has given us many different ways of coming together so be it forums, social networks, videos, even the comment areas on blogs and websites. While this technology has allowed us to come together in ways never before imagined it has also allowed for more fragmentation than possible. The internet has permitted niches to be reached farther than before and even to be created from a few who find similar interest. In using this medium we have all become part of something bigger, a way of sharing our thoughts and beliefs with one another. While still theoretical in some practices the proper terminology for this sharing is meme. Although the term is most often used academically in the study of psychology to define cultural understanding, in this paper the term is used to describe a more modern phenomena which has taken a hold of cyberspace and passes on from one user to another via forums, social networks, and videos.

Literature Review

The concept of 'meme' was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*. In his writing he uses the idea of evolution as a competition between genes as a way of explaining our own growth as people. Evolution is based on survival of the fittest; this only really covers the area of physical traits and abilities. The term meme is meant to be the intellectual counterpart to the gene's passing of traits. What has set humans apart from other animals other than the many obvious abilities is that of imitation (Blackmore, 1999).

Humans learn through mimicking other humans, from this the theory of memetics has grown. In theory everything we pick up from culture is considered a meme such as a song, fashion trends, even a handshake is considered as a meme in that it is something we see day to day and it eventually comes to be a part of our own lives (Blackmore, 1999; Yufan & Ardley, 2007).

Memes are considered as self replicating entities which then move through culture jumping from person to person. The reason to study memes themselves is because they play such a large part in society without ever really being noticed. “Memes are said to resemble genes in that they produce cultural change through a process similar to natural selection: those memes that are passed on by imitation and learning tend to dominate social life,” (Coker, 2008). The nature of memes in this understanding can even be seen as parasitic or viral; then again this is where the term comes from in reference to viral videos which can be seen as using people as host and passing from one to another. The thought of memes being viral allows for other concepts to apply to the theory such as mutation. As with genes, a meme may come into contact with a host (person) who then mutates the memes original meaning into something that suits their own need.

While much of the current focus on the study of memes applies to the study of culture and replication of behaviors, this paper focuses on the current trend of internet memes in the era of Web 2.0 and its affect on internet users and how they perceive products and brands. Online the term meme is used mainly to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a concept presented as written text, image, move, or some other variety of cultural thing (Shifman, 2013). While this meaning may apply to memes in general the difference here is that online memes are also a form of self expression (Christodoulides, Jevon, & Bonhomme, 2012). Although the idea of memes is hard to gauge in that there is no defined units to measure, it is easy to see that they are everywhere. Through social networks and other community based sites and photo aggregators,

memes have taken a hold of the internet in a way unseen before in that they allow for users to express themselves as they see fit. Put simply in terms of web use, a meme is something that has become highly replicated by different users with different messages but with a continued inherent meaning. Internet sensations such as “planking” in which is a person takes a picture of them self lying flat in an unconventional place; and Harlem Shake videos in which a group of people go from a state of rest to dancing erratically when the hook of the song comes on, have caught hold of young users as well as the more currently understood form of meme online which is that of a photo with a caption. Although planking and Harlem Shake videos are memes, it is the photos and captions which allow users to express their own views of the world with an ongoing general understanding. Trendy memes such as a toddler fist clinched in success, a condescending Willy Wonka, and a cat with a less than happy facial expression have dominated the internet because of the easily understood visuals along with user-generated written text.

Even though it may be hard to track the origin of a meme it has become easy for users to create their own. Websites like knowyourmeme.com and quickmeme.com are places in which already established visuals await users to add their own captions to share with others among sites like Facebook, Reddit, StumbleUpon, and theCHIVE. As a former employee of Quickmeme Wayne Miltz puts it, “The whole vision with Quickmeme is just to make it simple and fast and easy to create these things, and before you know it you’re attempting to encapsulate your own witty observations on a picture of a socially awkward penguin or a hipster barista,”(Owens, 2013).

So what is it about memes that makes them latch on to culture? To be honest there is no real way to measure the possible success a meme may have in the future, even though some may

share similar traits here and there memes vary in large in their adaptability to the socio-cultural environment in which they spawn (Shifman, 2013).

While users may share their views and life experiences through memes this can also be seen as a new frontier in advertising and brand management. Because of the horizontal shift between marketers and consumers, brands need to develop a strategy to deal with public opinion in a era where they are no longer in control of the messages consumers get about their products or services. What this does is create a challenge for an integrated marketing strategy which has the goal of maximizing the consistency of the messages which will reach the consumers (Bruce & Solomon, 2013). Advertising is no longer a hierarchy, in which the message of the brand is the final say in their image, coming down from those in charge of brand image to the consumer. What this means is that companies are able to see how consumers feel about them and their products or services in their own arena (Christodoulides et al, 2012). Through the use of memes and other user-generated content, the digital world has opened up into a realm of anarchy, not in the violent sense, but in the way of there not being a defined structure. While a company may have a website and may have a team of people to monitor feedback what really matters is how the consumer feels about the brand and product and what they tell other consumers (Bruce & Solomon, 2013). Many memes along with other user generated content have been the subject of brand related material which gives the consumer a new level of power. It has been known that word-of-mouth is an effective form of advertisement, but in the modern era people don't interact as before in previous years yet the trend of looking for consumer information and being product savvy is still on the rise (Yufan & Ardley, 2007). This means that memes have become a way for word-of-mouth to be shared. Although many memes pertain to certain subjects, what is important to note is that many of these memes shared are shared between groups with similar

interest. Because of the rapid amount of sharing, businesses are looking at memes as a way of creating a type of dialogue between the company and the user. “In social media and user-generated media lies a powerful compass to guide, shape and reinforce brand strategy,” (Blackshaw, 2011). An example of this would be if a software company was to release a new app for a smart phone. While some users may review the app online and leave their comments, what can also be taken into account would be any memes pertaining to said app. This can work in both the positive and the negative light. One such meme may be of the “Success kid” with a caption of something positive about the app which may spur other users with similar interest to buy it. Another side of the spectrum would be that of “Condescending Willy Wonka” with a less than kind comment, even though this in turn may drive users away from the product both memes are allowing the company to see some type of feedback about their product among other consumers.

What is important to note about this is that while most product reviews may stay located on the company’s website or where ever the consumer may have purchased the product or even forums dedicated to the brand, memes venture out into other areas of the digital world so their spread may have an influence upon future consumers that are a part of other social networks or other sites. The consumer’s opinion is no longer muted at the bottom of a comment page but right in front of other users. On the up side of not being in control of the content being produced is that even if a meme may be negative it may in turn start a conversation between users, say a fan of the brand who may take up defense of a product or the brand itself. Even though the brand may be left out of the loop in the interaction it allows for the brand’s greatest asset, a fanatic, to speak for them, therefore allowing for a more wholesome experience. This works well for the brand in that consumers are no longer happy with corporate fabricated experiences; in turn they want to shape the experiences themselves through co-created content such as memes and other

user generated content (Blackshaw, 2011; Christodoulides et al, 2012). The thought behind memes as a word-of-mouth campaign is to spark conversation. To start a conversation among consumers is what brands are placing an emphasis on now; creating expressions rather than impressions. “[Impressions] give us no real sense of engagement, and consumer engagement with our brands is ultimately what we’re trying to achieve,” wrote Joe Tripodi, the chief marketing officer of Coca-Cola Co. (cited by Keller & Fay, 2012). Expressions reflect an active engagement with content whereas impressions, or mere exposure to content are passive; it’s no longer good enough to just be seen, but now it is necessary to be talked about.

In a study by Keller and Fay in 2012 it was found that across 15 different product and service categories 58 percent of consumers gave a higher amount of credibility to what they hear from others and 50 percent were more likely to buy based on that credibility. This study also revealed interesting information pertaining to how these dialogues would start; it found that out of word-of-mouth advertising 25 percent of the discussions which mentioned advertising techniques ended with the consumer more likely to purchase the product. What this means is that word-of-mouth, even if placed in the form of an entertaining meme matters greatly.

Memes are more than just a form of word-of-mouth advertising for brands; some have found ways to tag along with other messages. One such company that allows for advertisements to piggyback on a meme is Someecards. Someecards.com is a site that features a mix of user-generated content and some that is produced by staff. While the site makes most of its money from advertising with banner ads like most sites of similar nature, what makes Someecards stand apart is that they also make ‘branded’ e-cards. An e-card may contain a joke about happy hour for margaritas but also have a logo for Chili’s placed on the meme, “They don’t shill for the company, but rather allow the brand to hitch a ride on the viral content,” (Owens, 2012).

Originally brands would use memes such as catch-phrases or slogans, something catchy that would move from person to person such as “Where’s the beef?” What makes a catchphrase like that successful and makes it into a meme is that it can become repurposed to fit another need, the appeal of memes is that they are not ignored because they’ve been seen and done before, they have appeal because people like to see how they can be done differently (Kirby, 2013). Someecards.com has found a successful way to produce memes for companies as a form of advertisements by allowing for brands to tag along with viral content, but how is it that a meme may work as an advertisement if it does not feature a company’s logo and look like an ad? This is where the creative art comes into play; there are two ways in which memes are spread: mimicry and remix (Shifman, 2013). An example of a brand using mimicry to exploit a meme would be the animated program Futurama. The main character, Fry, has been used in many user-generated memes online known as the “Not sure if…” meme. The meme basically consist of an image of the character’s eyes squinted in deep thought with a caption such as “Not sure if everything is expensive or just poor”. When the show was brought back from cancelation in 2012 Comedy Central decided to use the meme’s notoriety as a way to advertise the new season. Commercials and banner ads across the bottom of the screen during programs would feature the date and time aired and the meme with the caption “Not sure if happiness due to life getting better or just new Futurama” (Carp, 2012). Using an already existing meme featuring the show allowed for the brand to reconnect with consumers who are familiar with the brand and also bring in those who are a fan of the meme but not familiar with the show.

Another technique used by companies to take part in meme culture is that of the remix. The Chuck Norris meme has been around for years, it focuses on ridiculous abilities and attributes and places them on the martial arts star. A few brands such as Era laundry detergent,

World of Warcraft, and Mountain Dew have all taken part in this trend. What keeps people interested and allows for different brands with different products to use this meme is that part of the memes popularity comes from remixes; people want to see how it will be done differently. Remixing and mimicry go beyond that of brands trying to keep up with up with the zeitgeist, it also allows for them to create content to then be mimicked and remixed by the public such as the Old Spice ads which featured ex-football player Isaiah Mustafa. The commercials spawned many YouTube parodies which in turn helped to popularize the brand (Keller & Fay, 2012; Waterhouse, 2012). In his paper “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a conceptual Troublemaker”, Limor Shifman (2013) emphasizes that it is necessary for a brand to be able to replicate a meme, “In this hyper-memetic era, user driven circulation of copies and derivatives is a prevalent logic. Copies become, in this sense, more important than the ‘original’: they are the *raison d’etre* [reason for existence]”.

Although copies of memes have turned out successful for brands in that it spurs consumers to share there is a downside of being the focus of a meme. This downside is that of mutation, just like with genes a meme can go through a form of mutation in which the message is altered to fit that of another user and then this negative message may become replicated itself. Another downside to memes is if a product is featured as part of a meme yet the subject is cast in a negative light. This happened with the meme “Scumbag Steve”, this meme features a less than likable character with captions such as, “Breaks something...fixes it enough to make the next person think they broke it”. While the memes may have been funny the character it centered on was wearing a Burberry tartan baseball cap. Users would then use this hat in other memes in order to signify that character wearing it had the same type of morals as ‘Steve’. This use of the hat as a negative signifier gained so much popularity that Burberry discontinued the production

of the hat in order to prevent the same connotations reaching their other products (Yufan & Ardley, 2007).

In seeing that the modern era has placed consumers closer to the driver's seat in brand relations than before, it is imperative to reach out in a way that fits the times. Memes are more than just a way of coming up with clever advertisements and a form of word-of-mouth marketing, it is reaching out to those who have the time to also view them. Joe Peretti, the founder of BuzzFeed coined the term for the consumers who view memes and other viral content: the Bored at Work Network. "This network consist of the millions of employed professionals who work desk jobs that provide numerous five-to-10-minute capsules with which to crawl the internet—while eating lunch at their desk, say, or when the numbers on their spreadsheet have become an impenetrable blur that can be cured only by a few moments of mindless web surfing," (Owens, 2012). With this shift in time management it becomes increasingly important to make sure that the message is short enough to fit within a consumer's allotted viewing time span yet entertaining enough to be shared with others.

A new app released for smart phones called Vine enables users to create short six second videos that loop to be shared on the app among other users and even social networks. Meme culture has moved toward these videos also in that there are numerous replications and parodies of popular videos. Why this matters to advertisers is that it is another way in which the consumers can speak for brands in their own way during that five to ten minute window that they need in order to clear their heads, and because the video is only six seconds long a viewer is more than likely to watch it loop several times to make sure that the entire message is taken in. Repetition and replication are the current keys to reaching consumers.

Research Questions/Methodology

The focus of this study is to find what type of people not only view memes but also create and share them. Along with finding what type of demographic exist in meme culture, I also seek to find how they view meme content in relation to brand preference meaning can a meme truly alter their view of a brand, and if a negative or positive meme may have a larger influence than the other. The methodology of this study is a two week internet survey to be distributed on Facebook. The reason Facebook has been chosen as the ground for this survey is that it is the largest social network and also a digital space in which many users share memes that they have either seen or created. The survey resulted in 89 responses, 30 participants were men and 59 were women. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to older than 45 with those being between the ages of 25 to 30 as the most common answer with 44 percent. When it came to time spent online, 37 percent of the participants responded saying they spent 4 or more hours online while the next highest percentage was 25 percent stating that they are online 1 to 2 hours per day. On the subject of memes 80 percent responded that they were familiar with the subject and 18 percent showed that they never share user-generated content. This means that 82 percent of the participants are likely to share content that they may feel to encapsulate their own thoughts and views. The most common form of meme in which people were familiar with was image and caption with 91 percent as well as the most likely to be shared showing 88 percent. Facebook was the most common answer for where the participants were most likely to find memes that interest them the most at 60 percent with YouTube and other both following with 11 percent. As for which medium participants used in order to view meme content 63 percent responded that a mobile device such as their phone or tablet was the main source for information consumption. This shows that media consumption is no longer happening in a static location but anywhere and

anytime a person may have a moment to entertain themselves. The results for the advertising portion of the survey show that 42 percent of the people who took the survey do not remember the products mentioned in memes yet 53 percent found memes to be a form of advertisement. The portion of the survey which asked about positive and negative memes shown interesting results; it shows that 63 percent of those who had taken the survey were not likely to let a negative meme influence their opinion of a product or brand while 52 percent has said that a positive meme would influence their opinion of a product or brand. Along with that 75 percent had said that they were likely to share a meme if it coincided along with their own views of a product or brand.

Discussion

What this means is that word of mouth is very likely to spread if it fits with a person's own views and a positive meme is also more likely to change a person's opinion than a negative one. Although the subject of memes is not a new one the area of research on internet memes and their use in brand management is greatly needed. A survey such as this could lead to define and target specific demographics which would be more likely to share a meme because it was made with them in mind. Some of the limitations of this portion of the study were time and the limitation of social networking in that it is broadcast but left to the scope of people willing to participate. Also it must be taken into account that while memes are all over the internet and social networking sites the terminology is not as well known, so while some respondents may not have been familiar with the term memes they have been exposed to them. Another limitation of this survey is that the results had shown that Facebook was the most common answer when

asked about where they found memes, because the survey was distributed on Facebook the results may say differently if done in another manner.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Meme Survey

1. What is your age?
 - A. 18-24
 - B. 25-30
 - C. 30-35
 - D. 40-45
 - E. 45-older

2. What is your gender?
 - A. Male
 - B. Female
 - C. Other

3. What is your highest level of completed education?
 - A. High School
 - B. Associate Degree
 - C. Bachelor Degree
 - D. Master's
 - E. Ph.D

4. How much time do you spend online in a day?
 - A. 0-1 hour.
 - B. 0-2 hours
 - C. 3-4 hours
 - D. More than 4 hours

5. Are you familiar with memes?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No

6. How likely are you to share user-generated content/memes?
 - A. Never
 - B. Almost never
 - C. Sometimes
 - D. Somewhat often
 - E. A lot

7. What form of meme are you most familiar with?
 - A. Image and caption
 - B. Video
 - C. Physical (planking, flash mob)

8. What form of meme are you more likely to share?

- A. Image based
 - B. Video
9. In which medium are you more likely to view memes?
- A. Mobile (Phone or tablet)
 - B. Computer
10. Where do you find the memes that interest you the most?
- A. Facebook
 - B. Reddit
 - C. Tumblr
 - D. TheCHIVE
 - E. Vine
 - F. YouTube
 - G. Other sources
11. Have you ever created a meme?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
12. Do you remember products mentioned in memes?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
13. Do you find memes to be a form of advertising?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
14. Do you feel memes are a form of word of mouth advertising?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
15. If a meme features a negative comment about a product/company does it influence your opinion?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
16. If a meme features a positive comment about a product/company does it influence your opinion?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
17. Would you share a meme if it coincided with your opinion of a product/company?
- A. Yes
 - B. No

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