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**The world of memes and online phenomena:
a mixed methods approach to studying
internet memes**

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Keywords: internet memes, online phenomena, political memes, Romanian memes, Know Your Meme, imgflip, meme generator.

Thesis summary

The world of internet memes and online phenomena has captured the imagination of the general public, with internet memes exceeding their popular use as humorous tidbits circulated online. Today, memes are seen to permeate the news cycle, are used as tools for political attacks, and give voice to grassroots and dissident movements.

In this new conceptualization, where memes are used as bite-size pieces of discourse and rhetoric, this present thesis proposes to construct a comprehensive image of the world of memes with broad strokes, but also with finer details. This endeavor starts from a critical assessment of meme studies, from Dawkins to the present day, but opts for a clear delineation between the Dawkinsian ideation of the meme, and the self-sufficient concept of the internet meme, with its own definitions and applications, reviewed in great detail in the first two chapters. The entire theory is circumscribed to the greater framework of postmodernism and cultural production, with the meme as the epitome of modern popular culture. Memes as inherently discursive artifacts are measured against many concepts, like micro-narratives, eudemonics, political participation, vernacular creativity, and as kernels in the creation of cultural, economic and social capitals.

Chapter 1 is the most abstract chapter in the thesis, while also being scattered with anecdotes to ameliorate the philosophical tone. Even though it might seem odd in relation to the promises this thesis is making, to describe the world of memes, it is necessary, because it captures the zeitgeist of meme studies in the late 90s and mid-2000s. Bracketing the bibliography in this manner was a deliberate act. Right after Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the debates on memes were loud and ill-defined. It took scholars some time to wrap their head around the meme as a concept emerging from genetics. Furthermore, Dawkins revisited the meme with every new edition, or in other books and interviews, so both the book and author needed for some time to pass, to see how the concept evolved and matured.

Because the scope of this chapter is to review what was said and believed regarding the meme back then, it is less critical, and more chronicle-oriented. Moreover, this chapter is necessary because it ventures back into the wild days of meme studies, a place left to rest in recent years. Much of the modern literature on memes has cherry-picked a few moments as reference points when reviewing memes: coined by Dawkins in 1976, the cultural analogue to

genes, the meme-gene analogy is bad, and maybe, for the purpose of diffusion studies, the fecundity, copy-fidelity and longevity triad. These disparate accounts lack the depth needed to grasp how memes evolved and why they became this ‘troublemaker’ concept scholars have to deal with now, in modern meme studies.

Even though it might seem too technical, too biological, too philosophical, or too anecdotal, this first chapter constructs the meme from the ground up, as this highly-disputed, complex and fuzzy idea used in so many ways, to explain so many behaviors and beliefs. The meme presents itself as a perverse and often baffling concept at the end of the chapter, but one should not be deterred by this. Historical accounts tend to be dotted with errors, mishaps and sideslips, and in the case of the meme, they explain a great deal about how the haphazard jump to the Web affected it. The concepts discussed here, in this form and using this terminology will rarely be employed in the rest of the thesis, but they help build a pragmatic baseline.

The chapter begins with Year Zero, 1976, and a short overview of *The Selfish Gene* as a whole, not just of the infamous chapter on memes, reviewing some terminology proper to genetics and biology, fundamental Darwinism and the ‘survival of the fittest’ ideation that will accompany many trains of thought throughout the chapter. Cumbersome terminology is gradually introduced, explained, contextualized and transformed into examples and schemes to aid the reader in uncovering where everything fits in. Culture is evoked and loosely defined, used contextually and to mitigate the meme-gene analogy, but the subjects is expanded on in *Chapter 3*.

The second chapter, *Internet memes and online viral phenomena*, does not actually pick up where the previous chapter ended, because of another bibliographical bracketing. *Chapter 1* illustrates the cacophony of views and theories surrounding memes at the 20-year mark from *The Selfish Gene*, so delineating the literature was taken into consideration again. *Chapter 2* is built on theoretical knowledge from the early-2010s to the present day. As a way of bibliographical filtering, this decision ensures that only the theories that withstood the test of time and academic scrutiny are considered for constructing an account of memes and internet memes, while addressing modern challenges, like the meme v. viral overlap.

Internet memes and online viral phenomena looks at memes from all angles, reviewing, first and foremost, why it is so exceedingly important to use a potent meme definition, and then proceeds to sift through the literature and inventory as many modern takes as possible, see what fits and what needs retrofitting. The premise of *Chapter 2* is that the meme is a troublemaker (to quote Shifman), so critical assessment is employed.

The most notable observations of this endeavor is that there is an inflation of meme definitions, which can seem random and can devalue the concept. Some scholars pick up the

meme characteristics that best suit the article or the study, rendering the definitions rather impractical for long-term use. The buzz created around the meme and the general fuzziness helped create this surface tension between scholars, each wanting to offer their own rendition on the subject.

The section covering the meme v. internet meme differentiation is directly connected to the gene-meme analogy from *Chapter 1*, and it offers a modern take on where the split should be made, what needs to be kept from gene and applied to the meme and what is forced and ineffective, creating the new internet meme, a different concept from the Dawkinsian meme. This distinction is critical for the entire thesis, because it gives way to re-draw the lifecycle of memes and to address one of the most detrimental ideas to internet memes to date: the comparison to viral phenomenon, which is thoroughly reviewed in a separate section.

This thesis introduces the concept of ‘meme splicing’, a construct borrowed from genetics (of course), which refers to isolating meme characteristics and recombining them. This is an intermediate step for understanding how meme taxonomies are constructed and how meme families are formed.

The second part of the chapter reviews concept like remix and mimicry, spreadability and technological determinism, all in the greater context of participatory culture, the ingredients in the primordial soup of internet meme creation. Substantial space is allotted to discussing image macros as exponent of instruction-based memes, because image macro, as the most used types of memes, are a fundamental part of the practical study. The overarching theoretical framework for dissecting any internet meme must factor in multimodality in conjunction with the idiosyncrasies of new media objects, according to Lev Manovich.

The dissemination of memes is a substantial concern of academia, being one of the earliest facets of internet meme to be studied quantitatively, within diffusion studies. The last and final section poses one of the trickiest questions in meme studies: do you speak meme? The language of internet meme is a preoccupation linking intertextuality with critical discourse analysis. But for the purpose of this thesis, the most striking aspect are the discursive powers of memes, followed by how one can bypass reading and decoding by using a shortcut, also known as the website Know Your Meme, which presents much on terms of research potential.

Chapter 3 seems, from afar, less related to the subject of the thesis, but it actually holds the key to deciphering the greater context in which memes have flourished. Yes, *Chapter 1* presents the inception of the term, but the preoccupation for cultural production is much older and more complicated than it is left to believe after reading the first chapter. *Postmodernism and cultural production* forms the general theory where meme studies are inscribed, in the long

tradition of cultural studies. The problems of postmodernism, identity building and hegemonic struggle are the cornerstones for what popular culture is today.

Like all the major theories and terms employed in this thesis, postmodernism also poses some interpretation, covering a large spectrum of practices, ideas and behaviors. The quest for understanding culture occupies most of the chapter, going back to 50s Britain alongside Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, to understand how the culture of the masses gained momentum, only to find that it all resided in the simplest of things: the ordinary, the everyday life, not the elite, the unattainable, not the hung in the museum behind a glass case, but the lived, the simple, the humdrum.

Of course, these views were met with resistance, a power struggle explored in *The dominant culture: ideology and hegemony* section. Much has been said and written about the high/low culture dichotomy, with exaggerated accounts that art is dead and frivolity runs amok. However, these exacerbated accounts were tempered by scholars like Kellner, Fiske and Hall, who mitigated for the importance of popular culture and softened the echoes. The culture industries, as a result and an engine of the highbrow/lowbrow dyad is covered in a separate section, with reference to Horkheimer and Adorno.

Everything discussed in the chapter comes together in the final section, *Putting the popular in popular culture*, where six directions for defining popular culture are presented and discussed. One of the most striking features of popular culture is intertextuality, the way texts reference other text, how there is (it is said) nothing new under the sun, everything is a riff on something else. This dynamic is dissected in a separate section, paving the way for subsequent discussion on re-appropriations elaborated in the last chapter.

Chapter 4, Internet memes, popular culture and politics, ties together all loose ends, covering an eclectic mix of topics, imbricated in a way so that they provide a far-reaching spectrum for the analysis.

The review of the functions of memes covers three aspects relevant for this particular thesis, without suggesting that there are no other functions memes serve. Including humor, entertainment and information was determined in concordance with the most recent literature on memes, books and articles from 2019 and 2020, in an attempt to ride on the trend train and see what results it can yield. Humor is a very personal experience, and when considering meme studies, it is less relevant why the meme makes people laugh, but how – what structures and tropes they employ, what characters and situations lend themselves to humorous memes. The information function is more broadly discussed in terms of how the online news media have made space for memes, but also how they feed the meme machine. Digital leisure and

eudemonics are two subjects rarely connected to memes, but which bring many consideration about the time and place for the participatory culture.

Political memes make up a large part of the chapter because they are the most talked about subjects concerning memes in the last half decade, with policies and candidates being perused in memes throughout recent campaigns in the whole worlds, from Brazil and the US, to Croatia, Romania and beyond. Borrowing the traditional framework for alternative media, memes are considered reinvented alternative messages, capable of disrupting the narratives. They are invaluable tools in the hands of grassroots movements, working as opinion loud-speakers.

The construction of capital is another theory that lends itself neatly to understanding why people create, share and consume memes. The sociology of memes is hard to probe, query and quantify, but looking at motivations in the context of what people get out of interacting with memes can be a useful analysis tool, considering that this framework favors metrics and analytics in the forms of appraisals as a viable access point for determining impulses and subsequent actions.

The last section is dedicated to how memes have the potential to tell stories, by tapping into the particularities of visual culture, its aesthetic valences and claims, but also the ugly aesthetic of internet memes as a descriptive tool. Visual rhetoric and the argumentative claims meme make about their own communication are interrogated in this section, but also how they transgress to the public and form sites for politically-charged discourses.

The theoretical framework is far-reaching, but it is so because it must sustain a vast research endeavor. The methodology employed in this study is mixed, with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. *Chapter 5* presents in great detail the methods and tools employed in this study, split into three sections. The research questions posed are:

- (1) What are the main hubs, themes, and subjects in the world of memes and online phenomena? What are the most written about subjects?
- (2) What are the most popular subjects accessed by Know Your Meme users?
- (3) Have the subjects of interest changed over time?
- (4) Does the timeline of Know Your Meme entries reveal any thematic periods?
- (5) Is there a correlation between the most used templates on imgflip and the most popular entries on Know Your Meme? Does Know Your Meme reflect the interests of meme creators?
- (6) What are the most popular sources and subjects for image macros produced on imgflip?

- (7) What are the structural and humorous idiosyncrasies of Romanian political memes?
- (8) Do Romanian political memes fit in the world of memes and online phenomenon described by Know Your Meme?

Study 1 is the most extensive one, based on the data collected from the Know Your Meme website, from its inception in 2008 until August 2020. The dataset is comprised of 26,065 pages, each with content proper to the world of memes and online phenomena. These metrics are doubled by a quantitative analysis on the textual information proper to each page. Study 2 repurposes some of the KYM data to create a two-dimensional image of the uses of popular templates on the most prominent meme generator on the web, imgflip. This study makes an inquiry in the most used sources of template-based memes as part of the popular culture landscape. The core of the study is, however, to see if the interest of meme creators on imgflip align with what is being catalogued on KYM. Study 3 follows the more traditional route of meme case studies, selecting a sample of memes, dividing the sample based on architecture (images + images or image + text) and applying different analysis grids accordingly: one parsing memes from a visual rhetoric perspective, the other based on styles and types of humorous devices. The sample is comprised of Romania political memes aggregated by the news media in reaction omnibus articles, a practice that lies outside any previous conceptualize theory. *Chapter 6* is dedicated to the analysis and *Chapter 7* ties everything together, all the findings, discussions, the limitations of the studies and further avenues to continue the research.

The studies suggest that the world of memes is highly intertextual and referential, so the need for contextual knowledge is paramount. Politics, movies and video games are the major sources when it comes to forging a network of background information. Controversies are one of the most powerful vectors in this world of online phenomena according to the data provided by KYM. However, given that KYM is the only source for such information, some of the data was validated in the second study, which uncovered that popular meme templates exist outside the scrutiny of Know Your Meme. Another valuable findings was that popular culture (TV, movies, cartoons) is the main source for templates that become image macros or exploitables.

The findings from the third study suggest a novel way of constructing and then dividing a meme sample so that every meme is analyzed using the correct tools. In this respect, the rhetorical analysis on visual memes has uncovered that Romanian meme creators have the technical skills to create complex artefacts, imbued with simple, yet effective messages. When it comes to styles and types of humor in multimodal memes, the general finding is that the incongruity that leads to a humorous responses usually stems from sarcasm and comparison.

The existence of some idiosyncrasies that were not experienced in other sources suggest to the existence of a Romanian-specific template for meme creation.

This thesis employs both consecrated and exploratory methodologies to further the field of meme studies. The general criticism with respect to previous studies is that they are either too specific, making it difficult to extract widely-applicable knowledge, or too vast and permissive, cataloging any type of funny online content as memes. In this context, this present thesis is partial to more general appreciations, but with the possibility to extend the studies and impart even more knowledge about the world of memes and online phenomena.