

Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire
Faculty of Film, Art and Creative Technologies

“Late-Stage Capitalism go brrrr”
The Commercialisation of Meme Culture

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Honours) in Graphic Design. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "ANI Laoghaire". The signature is written in a cursive style, with the first name "ANI" in all caps and the surname "Laoghaire" in title case. The ink is black and the background is white.

Acknowledgements:

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Abstract:

Advertising has long struggled to keep up with or recreate Meme Culture successfully. This thesis argues that the best way to engage with meme culture as a company is to outsource the creation of advertisements to current content creators who understand their audience and how they engage with memes. Using contemporary writers such as Limor Shifman and Ryan Milner, this thesis will examine how and why certain traits of the internet have led to highly individualistic media consumption and analyze meme culture and to better understand why it is so difficult for companies to recreate. This thesis will compare two case studies. The second chapter will examine how companies first started to engage with meme culture through traditional and digital media by taking a look at some examples of the use of memes in advertising by American fast-food chains around 2015. The third chapter will compare those examples to today's landscape of meme marketing by taking a look at how NordVPN successfully engages with meme culture indirectly through its sponsorship of YouTubers. Through this comparison, we can begin to understand how advertising has evolved over the years to adapt to this new form of communication and these new channels of distribution.

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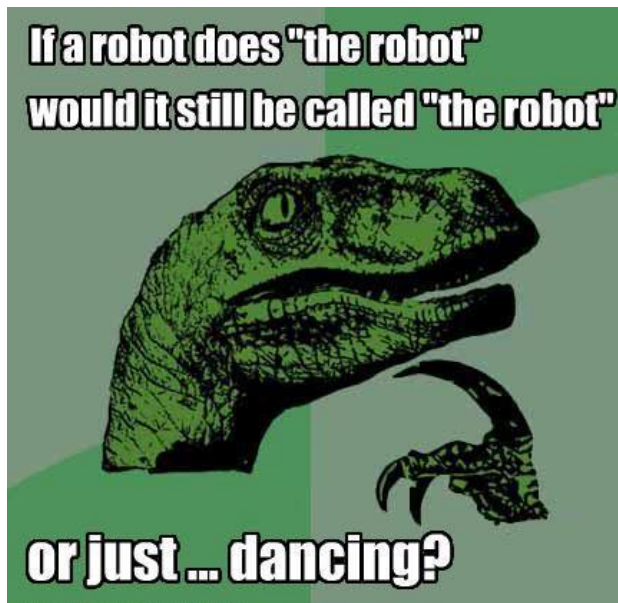
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Introduction

Advertising has always and will always reflect the culture it exists within, even if it takes a while to catch up to cultural shifts, eventually, all aspects of culture get adapted and regurgitated back to us in the form of advertising. Advertising inevitably finds its way into and exploits all affordances of every new media and Memes are no different. Author of *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014), Limor Shifman defines memes as, “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users”¹ The basic format of a meme is a combination of text and image, nowadays with the popularity of TikTok, memes often come in audio and video formats. Below are some popular examples, starting in the early days of memes, simple images combined with wordplay in the 2000s, then by the 2010s some memes had become totally meta² and stylistically absurdist and now in the 2020s as mentioned many memes take the form of reused audios and video templates.

¹Shifman, Limor, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge MIT Press, 2014 p. 41

²referring to itself or to the conventions of its genre; self-referential



From left to right: **Fig. 2** and **Fig. 3** examples of the “Philosoraptor” early meme format from c. 2008

haha its is an

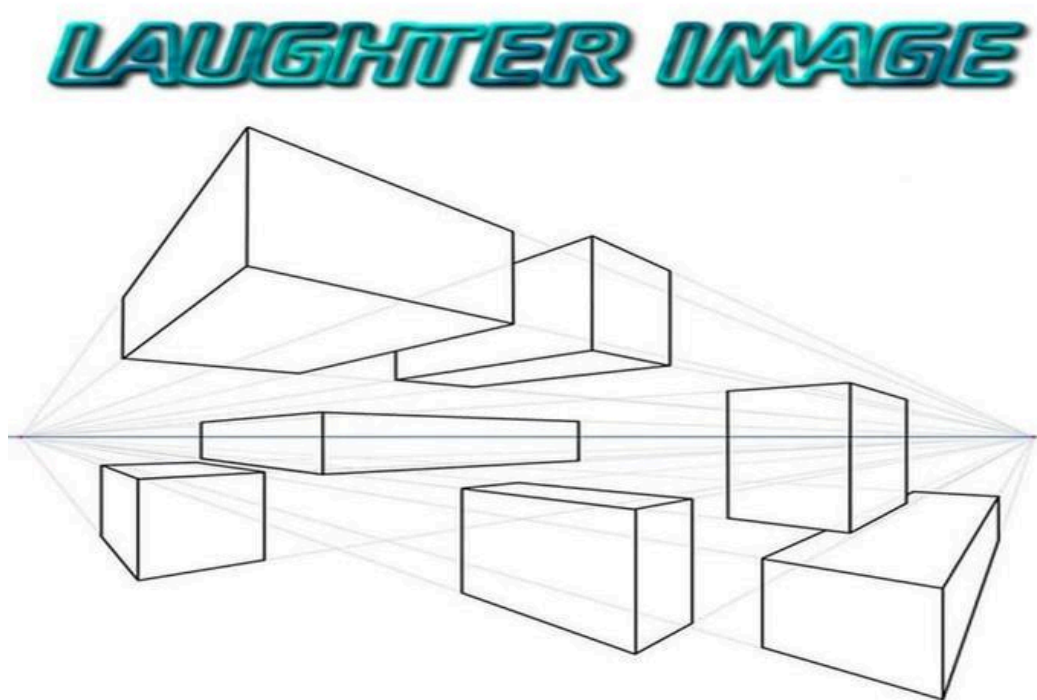


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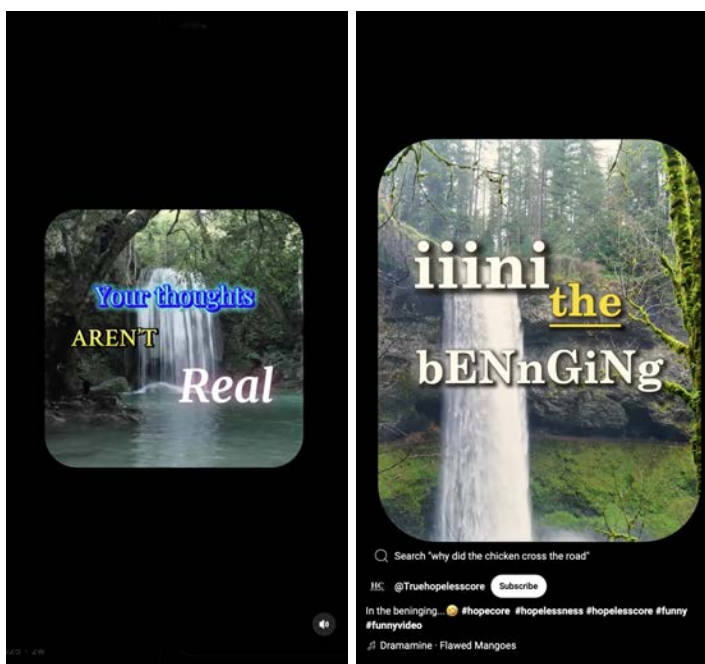


Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 Screenshots from Instagram & YouTube examples of the “Hopeless Core” meme format accompanied by the song Dramamine by Flawed Mangoes

In *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Ryan Milner breaks down Shifman’s vocabulary for analysing memetic media in simple terms, “ “content” (what they say), “form” (how they look), and “stance” (“information [that] memes convey about their own communication,”)”³ Content and form are mostly contained within a single meme, thus some memes can be appreciated without any prior context, Fig.1, for example, a simple play on words combined with a silly image. Yet many memes make reference to previous memes Fig.2 for example is making reference to the “advice dog” meme that was popular around the same time. Referring to previous content and form is very common in meme culture, thus prior knowledge is often needed to read memes. Assessing how a meme “stands in relation to broader contexts requires more awareness of those contexts.”⁴ Milner explains “Stance is revealed in a text's "participation structures" (which voices are included and which are silenced), "keying" (the tone and style it adopts), or its "communicative function" (emotive, phatic, poetic, etc.).”⁵ If we take a look back ten years ago corporations & marketing agencies were struggling to comprehend and awkwardly failing to participate in the new media of meme culture. Some companies caught on to the absurdist, ironic, and playful humour of memes a lot quicker than others. Nowadays you can find companies from any industry shitposting⁶ on social media, see figure 7 and 8 Instagram posts from Duolingo the language learning app and Ty Inc. the soft toys

³Ryan Milner *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016 p. 53

⁴Ibid, p. 53

⁵Ibid, p. 53

⁶to post something online (such as a comment, video, or meme) that is deliberately absurd, provocative, or offensive
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shitpost>

seller. Some companies are catching up and from observing the content they're producing it's become clear that they are hiring those who are internet literate and in the loop of meme culture.



Fig. 7 @duolingo on Instagram posted Jan. 31, 2025



Fig. 8 @tyinc on Instagram posted Jan. 10, 2025

Chapter one of this thesis will identify and examine three key traits of the Internet that profoundly changed digital communication and the consumption of media; meme culture, algorithms and online influencers to later investigate how these traits are shaping new forms of advertising. The first section will define memes, taking a look first at the origins of the word coined by Richard Dawkins and then at the adoption of the word by the internet using Limor Shifman & Ryan Milner and discuss how memes spread. We will look at memes as coded visual communication that require sophisticated meme literacy, illustrated by an example of the evolution of a popular memes. The next section will look at algorithms, how they dictate our consumption of media online and have ushered in the new era of hyper-individualistic digital experience & how we have become commodities through the affordances of this technology. Algorithms have allowed companies to target their advertising more precisely than ever before. Targeted advertisements surround much of the media we consume online, our experience online has become more personalised, and so have the advertisements directed towards us. Section three will look at online influencers, a new form of celebrity, in the new age of many-to-many communication, the parasocial dynamics involved in this era of new media and how these dynamics are being exploited by advertisers. Many-to-many communication occurs when information is shared between groups,⁷ for example internet forums, online gaming, chat rooms, wikis, social media, etc. With many-to-many communications users “are becoming creators of content, not merely recipients”⁸

⁷“Many-to-many” *en.wikipedia.org*

⁸Amy Bruckman "Many-to-many communication: A new medium". *Computer Science: Reflections on the Field, Reflections from the Field*. National Academies Press, 2004, p. 134

Using contemporary media theorists such as Yvette Granata, chapter two will examine what attributes of meme culture make it so difficult for advertisers to participate in it and why you cannot simply force a meme. Looking at memes the language of the internet to understand the “sophisticated meme literacy”⁹ needed to read and create memes. Section one will look at the early adoption of Memes in advertising, specifically looking at the television commercial for Wendy’s titled “The Memer” from 2015. This case study considers how early adoption failed to understand and embrace meme culture and tried to capitalize off the popularity by awkwardly recreating memes in a medium they don't belong in e.g. television. This tension highlights the difference between old and new media and why memes work online and not in traditional advertising. The last chapter of this thesis will look at how meme marketing nowadays has embraced the medium by engaging with memes in their natural habitat, the internet. Section two will look at the internet's initial reaction to the early adopters of memes as advertising, specifically what the “Silence, Brand” meme says about the participation structures of memes, the purpose memes serve, and how people feel about the mainstream-ization of memes. This meme was popular in the mid-2010s when many companies like Denny’s, McDonald’s, KFC and Wendy’s were trying very hard to capitalize off of the popularity of memes and look cool online through social media platforms like Tumblr and Twitter.

Chapter three will contain a case study of NordVPN (a Lithuanian Virtual Private Network service.) their activity online and their Sponsorship of many popular YouTubers in recent years. This chapter will explore what NordVPN did differently from Wendy’s, by understanding the importance of ‘place’ online and strategically using many different channels of communication. Through these sponsorships NordVPN is exploiting indirect channels of communication to position themselves as a brand that is cool, funny and internet literate, without trying to act like a person, pandering to their audience or directly participating in the complex nature of meme culture. Starting with an analysis of NordVPN’s official channels that are -unlike Wendy’s- very family friendly and corporate, focusing on a coherent visual identity and informative content with some humour. The last section will include an in-depth visual analysis of sponsored ad reads by YouTubers and how they accurately reflect many characteristics of meme culture through; low-fidelity simple production, mimicking established formats, referencing previous media, using the vernacular correctly and understanding the current trends. Each YouTuber is allowed to use their creativity and to express their unique style and humour which allowed them to build an audience for themselves in the first place, resulting in ads that are highly individualistic, enjoyable to the viewer, and up to date on the current trends of internet humour. NordVPN does not try to force memes about themselves and they don’t need to. By embedding themselves in the content already being consumed online and sponsoring so many highly viewed content creators across a wide range, people online have started making memes about them simply because so many can relate to hearing the phrase “This video is sponsored by NordVPN”

⁹Shifman, op. cit., p. 100

1. How the Internet Changed Communication & Media Consumption

1.1 Meme Culture

Cute zoo animals, Melanie Trump's hat at the 2025 inauguration, the trolley problem, the rettable experience of receiving an email, the state of Ohio, McDonald's Grimace, and the indescribable dread caused by living through late-stage capitalism, the Internet can turn anything into a meme.

The word “meme” was originally coined by biologist & author Richard Dawkins to describe how culture is transmitted through humans. In his book, *The Selfish Gene* originally published in 1976 Dawkins described cultural transmission as “analogous to genetic transmission in that [...] it can give rise to a form of evolution.”¹⁰ However, he observed that culture “seems to ‘evolve’ by non-genetic means, and ‘at a rate which is orders of magnitude faster than genetic evolution.’”¹¹ He demonstrates this by way of example:

“Geoffrey Chaucer¹² could not hold a conversation with a modern Englishman, even though they are linked to each other by an unbroken chain of some twenty generations of Englishmen, each of whom could speak to his immediate neighbours in the chain as a son speaks to his father.”

Dawkins argued that to better understand this form of evolution, we must dismiss the gene as the sole basis of ideas on evolution and suggested that a new kind of replicator had emerged. He named this new replicator, “meme” an abbreviation of “mimeme” the Greek word meaning anything imitated, counterfeit, copy.¹³ Dawkins defined memes as “a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation”.¹⁴ examples he gave were ideas such as the idea of God or Darwinism, tunes such as Auld Lang Syne or a single phrase from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, clothes fashions and ways of building arches. He described memes as propagating themselves “in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which in the broad sense, can be called imitation” he observed that this transmission is “subject to continuous mutation and also to blending” Dawkins recognises that memes, as units that propagate through the human brain, must dominate the attention of the individual in order to survive and must do so “at the expense of ‘rival’ memes.”¹⁵ This sentiment accurately reflects the state of internet meme culture today, in the endless ocean of content online, memes compete in a ‘survival of the most attention-grabbing’.

Since *The Selfish Gene*, some theorists have proposed that a more accurate analogy would be viruses. As metaphors of how ideas spread genes and viruses differ in some key ways. Douglas Rushkoff's Media

¹⁰Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Oxford University Press, 2016 p. 245

¹¹Dawkins, op.cit., p.246

¹²Late 14th century English poet and author

¹³μίμημα, μιμεῖσθαι, μῖμος. Liddell, Henry George; Scott, Robert; *A Greek-English Lexicon* at the Perseus Project. <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=mi/mhma>

¹⁴Dawkins, op.cit., p.249

¹⁵Dawkins, op.cit., p.255

Virus! (1994), Richard Brodie's *Virus of the Mind* (1995), and Aaron Lynch's *Thought Contagion* (1996) all take up the virus analogy over the gene one.¹⁶ Roy Christopher in his chapter of the book *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* contends: "Maybe it's a better model, as when something is "viral," it spreads. When something is "genetic," it doesn't necessarily. Sure, genes are passed on, but viruses are inherently difficult to stop. Spread-ing is what they do."¹⁷ What this theoretic discourse highlights is the importance of the spreading of memes, a single instance of any piece of media cannot be defined as a meme, it is only after it has been spread, by sharing, imitating, repeating and remixing that it can be called a meme. Only through transmission does the unit of culture become a meme.

The word 'meme' has been reappropriated to refer mainly to internet memes. Dawkins has commented on this development several times over the years. In 2013 Dawkins was part of Saatchi & Saatchi's New Directors' Showcase at the Cannes Advertising Festival, Olivia Solon at Wired.com wrote:

"Within the piece, Dawkins explains how an "internet meme" is a hijacking of the original idea and that instead of mutating by random change and spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, they are altered deliberately by human creativity. Unlike with genes (and Dawkins' original meaning of meme), there is no attempt at accuracy of copying; internet memes are deliberately altered."¹⁸

Dawkins acknowledges the impact of personal mobile devices & social media on the transmission of culture; he describes the internet as a "very fertile ecosystem for the spread of memes."¹⁹ In 2016 he wrote that it was "obviously predictable that manufactured electronic computers, too, would eventually play host to self-replicating patterns of information."²⁰ The advent of personal devices and Web 2.0 has speed up the evolution of culture immensely now instead of communication between "some twenty generations of englishmen" failing, communication can fail between two or three generations. Gen Alpha (2010-2024) kids can have full conversations almost unintelligible to some Millennials (1981-1996).

Web 2.0 is a term used to refer generally to the second stage of Internet development, which is often characterized by "more user-generated content, greater usability for end-users, a more participatory culture, and more interoperability"²¹ compared to the early version, Web 1.0. These advances allowed people to view, share and create Internet Memes as a form of expressing ideas, humour, opinions, information, reactions & feelings, more easily across the web. An essential part of meme culture is that it is constantly changing, it's

¹⁶Roy Christopher "The Meme Is Dead, Long Live the Meme." in Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (eds.) *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, Punctum Books, 2019, pp. 34-37

¹⁷Christopher, op.cit., p. 31-44

¹⁸Olivia Solon, "Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word 'meme'" *wired.com* 2013
<https://www.wired.com/story/richard-dawkins-memes/> Accessed Feb. 08, 2025

¹⁹Mahmood Fazal, "Talking to the Guy Who Invented the Word 'Meme': Richard Dawkins" *vice.com* 2018
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/talking-to-the-guy-who-invented-the-word-meme-richard-dawkins/>
Accessed Feb. 08, 2025

²⁰Dawkins, op.cit., p.431

²¹Will Kenton "What Is Web 2.0? Definition, Impact, and Examples" *investopedia.com*, updated Aug. 08, 2024.
<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/w/web-20.asp> . Accessed Feb. 08, 2025

something netizens participate in every day for better or worse. Simply logging off social media for even a week could leave you out of the loop of several new meme topics and formats. Some memes are so tangential from their original source that, much like a game of Chinese whispers, if you are not following all the steps that lead you to the end result, it's almost impossible to decipher what you're looking at. For the generations who grew up with the internet i.e. Millennials (1981-1996), Gen (1997-2010) & Gen Alpha (2010-2024),²² most memes can be easily understood, but for the generations that came before they can often be indecipherable. However, memes can evolve at such rapid speeds that they even create divides between the different generations of internet natives. Both Shifman and Milner contend that understanding memes requires "sophisticated meme literacy"²³ Shifman asserts that different meme genres require varying degrees of literacy to be understood, "some can be understood (and created) by almost anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture."²⁴ Milner reminds us that coded visual communication is not a new phenomenon- perhaps the internet has just allowed it to happen on a scale that we have simply never seen before- he offers Kress and Van Leeuwen's argument that "visual communication is always coded. It seems transparent only because we know the code already, at least implicitly-but without knowing what it is we know, without having the means for talking about what it is we do when we read an image"²⁵ Milner demonstrates this reading of memetic images by likening it to the contextual dimensions needed to read satirical political cartoons i.e. historical knowledge or awareness of the cultural and political climate and figures of the period being depicted. However some memes require a complex awareness of not just content but format and stance to be read and understood properly, all these dimensions require 'meme literacy'. To illustrate this lets take the meme "Loss.jpg". The meme started in 2008 when artist Tim Buckley published a webcomic strip titled "Loss" in which a man arrives to hospital to meet his partner who has suffered a miscarriage (see figure 9). The dramatic tonal shift for the series was unexpected, and for many readers, unsuccessful, leading to the strip being widely mocked online.²⁶ On 4chan a trend started of recreating the strip out of different characters and objects (see figure 10). Soon the trend devolved into more and more subtle depictions of the comic and it became so abstracted that the meme became recognisable in the form of just seven lines as seen in figure 11. The meme became a game for people to try a post something that was so subtle that you may not even notice the meme at all (see figure 12). As these abstract recreations gained popularity people started asking "Is This Loss?" under so many posts that the question became its own meme as seen in figure 13. Take note of the white shapes on the butterfly mimicking the seven lines in figure 11.

²²Sarah Cottrell "A Year-by-Year Guide to the Different Generations" *parents.com*, updated Dec. 20, 2024 <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/style/generation-names-and-years-a-cheat-sheet-for-parents/> Accessed Feb. 08, 2025

²³Shifman, op.cit., p. 100

²⁴Ibid. p.100

²⁵Milner, op.cit., p. 50

²⁶"Loss" About section on KnowYourMeme <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/loss/>



Fig. 9 “Loss” comic strip by Tim Buckley *KnowYourMeme*

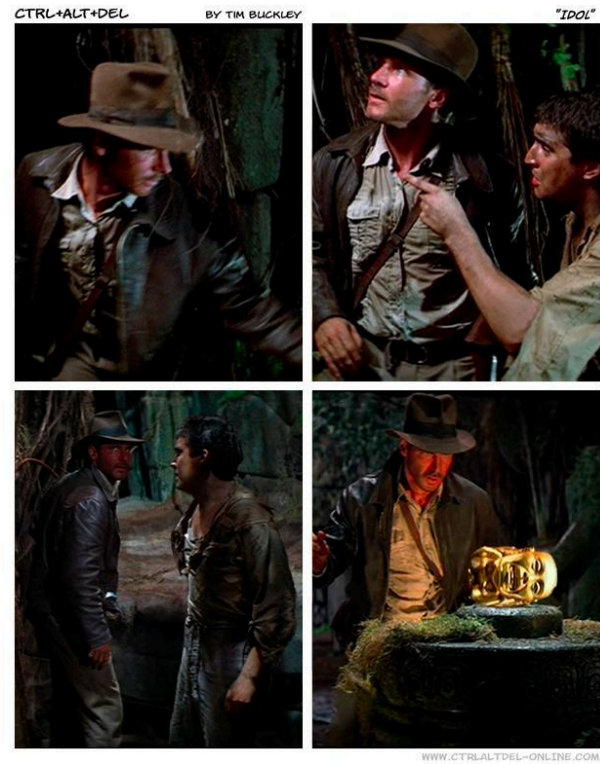


Fig. 10 Parody of “Loss” comic strip *KnowYourMeme*

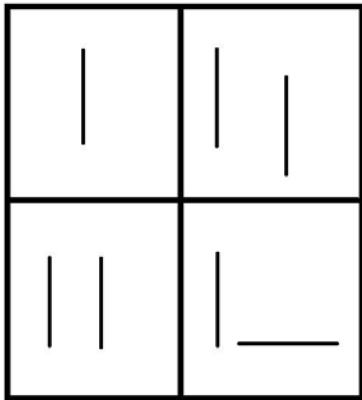


Fig. 11 minimalist version of loss meme

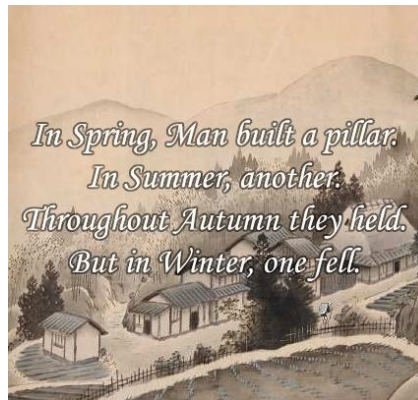


Fig. 12 abstract version of loss meme



Fig. 13 Is This Loss? Meme remix of “is this a pigeon” meme

In 2016 Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* where he added an epilogue with some notes discussing his original theories forty years later. He states in his endnotes for his chapter on memes “My purpose was to cut the gene down to size, rather than to sculpt a grand theory of human culture.”²⁷ Some writers call for the end to Dawkins’ analogy; others try to reconcile with it. Although the word has since been morphed and adapted imperfectly to mean internet memes, I have highlighted certain characteristics of Dawkins’ memes that are important to internet memes; they spread and evolve rapidly, are subject to “continuous mutation” and compete for attention to survive. Dan Bristow in his introduction to *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* writes: “Conceptually born into this world as an eminently adaptable element, it has to be remembered that this entails not only being adaptable to new conditions, but adaptable by them: the Internet has, transformationally and irrevocably, adapted the meme.”²⁸ But how does one meme or one advertisement show up on our feed as opposed to another? The next section will look at algorithms, one of the “key logic(s) dictating the flow of information”²⁹, and explore how they shape our consumption of media online.

²⁷Dawkins, op.cit., p. 424

²⁸Dan Bristow “Introduction” in Alfie Bown, Bristow D. (ed.) *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, Punctum Books, 2019. P. 24

²⁹Tarleton Gillsepie “The Relevance of Algorithms” in Tarleton G., Boczkowski, Pablo J., Foot, Kirsten A., (ed.) *Media technologies : Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2014 p.167

1.2 Algorithmic Consumption

“We live in the era of algorithms. Some even called it a new economy, the algorithm economy. They are the building blocks of any software application. Every day we are increasingly exposed to algorithmically curated information. Algorithms dictate everything users see online.”³⁰

José Esteves in The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach p.39

Algorithms are another aspect of the internet that completely disrupts the way we consume media online. Algorithms have been adopted by companies to target us with ever more effective and relevant advertising. Lucas D. Introna, Professor of Organisation, Technology and Ethics at the Lancaster University Management School, defines an algorithm at its most basic level as “a set of instructions used to solve a well-defined problem”³¹. Professor and researcher, José Esteves offers a simple example of a cake recipe being an algorithm for making a cake as a way of explanation³² To give a specific example, Google’s “PageRank” algorithm sorts the selection and order of search results that appear when you use Google’s search engine.³³ By controlling the flows of information algorithms completely transform our experience of the web. Unlike a library which is completely self-directed (the only input bias being the layout of the library) the internet is a completely curated experience, as soon as you log on the algorithm decides what media to shove in your face before you can take a look for yourself. You are passive in the selection of media that you consume. By way of the algorithm, individualism is heightened and destroyed simultaneously.

The internet allows for access to any media regardless of time and space, no longer restricted by when or where they’ve been published, the possibilities of what we could consume every day are endless. Connecting to each other via shared media could dissolve altogether yet it doesn’t, not completely. Although the internet is almost infinitely large, our experience of it is actually rather small, we *can* access *anything*, however we experience the internet through a capitalist filter. The internet user has become simultaneously a commodity and a consumer. The algorithms that curate our feeds still know time and space and most

³⁰José Esteves “The Power of Algorithms and Keys to Participation” in José M. Álvarez-Monzoncillo (ed.) *The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022, p.39

³¹Lucas D. Introna. “Algorithms, Governance, and Governmentality: On Governing Academic Writing” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*. Vol. 41, No. 1, Jan. 2016, p. 21

³² Esteves, op.cit., p. 39

³³Leiss, William, et al. *Social Communication in Advertising: Consumption in the Mediated Marketplace*, New York, Routledge, 2018 p. 315

importantly popularity³⁴-what others have engaged with- so instead of being pushed apart from each other completely we are pulled back to each other continuously. We engage with the internet as a tool and the internet engages with us as a commodity, if you want to escape your bubble you have to actively choose to do so.³⁵ In his essay digital designer & researcher Aaron Z Lewis describes the internet in physical terms. In its infancy the Web's terrain was flat and its "gravitational force" was weak. You could wander around freely without "getting sucked into any black holes".³⁷ During the 2010's however social media platforms "dug into the Web surface, dragging activities down their slopes ... As a result of this magnetic-like attraction, caused by the web slope, Internet users slowly slide down the slope in a digital drift," writes Louise Druhle, author of *The Critical Atlas of the Internet*, a research project on mapping the web³⁸

On social media platforms, algorithms curate the content we see. Curation is the act of selecting, classifying, filtering, prioritizing, and presenting content³⁹ with the aim of improving the user's experience. Algorithmic curation and filtering is one of the most used tools on social media (and digital media in general).⁴⁰ The use of algorithms is here to stay, the exponential growth of content and users on the internet makes it impossible to manage certain tasks manually.⁴¹ However, these algorithms can have negative side effects. They take control away from us and serve to keep us engaged in whatever social media platform for as long as possible in order to show us as many ads as possible, Esteves writes: "The filter bubble perspective proposed by Pariser (2011) suggests that, rather than maintaining diversity, algorithms attempt to maximize economic advantage by increasing content consumption."⁴²

Although algorithms allow us to participate in social discourse⁴³ by showing us what others are engaging with, they can also push us further away from each other. The advent of algorithms has ushered in a new era of hyper-individualistic media consumption. The media we consume is endlessly tailored to our

³⁴See Gillsepie op.cit., p.167

³⁵Esteves op.cit., p.41

³⁶Esteves op.cit., p.47

³⁷Lewis, Aaron Z. "The Garden of Forking Memes: How Digital Media Distorts Our Sense of Time." *AZL.BLOG*, July 07, 2020, aaronzlewis.com/blog/2020/07/07/the-gardenof-forking-memes/. Accessed Nov. 16, 2024

³⁸Louise Druhle "Critical Atlas of Internet" *louisedruhle.fr* <https://louisedruhle.fr/internet-atlas/> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

³⁹ Esteves op.cit., p.40

⁴⁰ Esteves op.cit., p.40

⁴¹ Esteves op.cit., p.39

⁴²Esteves op.cit., p.47

⁴³See Gillsepie op.cit., pp. 167-169

preferences. *Social Communication in Advertising* discusses the loss of “society-making media”.⁴⁴ For most of the twentieth century, strangers could connect through their shared experience of mass media, they heard the same music and the news on the radio, they watched the same shows and sports events on the television. Through the internet and algorithmically tailored feeds this shared experience is shattered, we use our TVs to stream different TV shows, and we receive different ads on our phones even major news events get presented to us under different headlines.⁴⁵ Nick Couldry and Turrow assert that this loss is not the result of a deliberate system meant to push people apart but an unintended consequence “of how advertising, big data, and content production have come to coexist over the past two decades”⁴⁶ Perhaps memes are a new era of shared experience, they allow us to easily communicate our experiences, relatable moments, reactions to events and feelings about life with one another.

Algorithms allow us to navigate the endless database of digital content available to us, the access to digital content in such quantities enables us to consume in a highly individualistic manner. However they serve economic incentives, they attempt to keep us online for as long as possible so that we may be served more ads. On media platforms like YouTube and Instagram these systems rank information based on several factors including popularity, what others have engaged with, regardless of quality or production or content, nowadays anybody can build an audience. The next section will discuss this phenomenon of online influencers.

⁴⁴Leiss, op.cit., p. 319

⁴⁵Leiss, op.cit., p. 319

⁴⁶Leiss, op.cit., p. 320

1.3 Parasocial Dynamics in Online Influencing

“Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well because the same equipment— phones, computers— lets you consume and produce. It is as if when you bought a book, they threw in the printing press for free. (Shirky 2005)”⁴⁷

Henry Jenkins *Spreadable Media : Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* p.153

As our digital worlds become more algorithmically tailored to our specific tastes, so have the people selling products to us. Brands no longer need to connect or speak to us directly to shove their product on their face; instead, they’ve embedded themselves in the content we’re already consuming, speaking to us through the people we choose to watch online.

In his seminal text *In the Medium is the Message*, Marshall McLuhan describes the complete transformation of the circle of influence that pervades our lives; he states that the traditional family unit can no longer compete with the “worldpool of information”⁴⁸ fathered by new media. People are no longer shaped by just their family, “now all the worlds a sage”.⁴⁹ This circle has only gotten wider with the invention of social media, and levels of reach once reserved for official channels, restricted to the established institutions, are now open to anyone and everyone. Aaron Z Lewis demonstrates the tension this causes between old and new media by looking back in time at the invention of the printing press, “In 1673, one anonymous commentator captured the spirit of elite frustration with the new printing press when he said: “every man thinks what he lists, speaks what he thinks, writes what he speaks, and prints what he writes...”⁵⁰ Nowadays anyone can have a platform, grow an audience, and have influence over that audience. This takes power away from the traditional channels of broadcasting, as people are spending less and less time watching mainstream media, instead focusing their attention on their algorithmically tailored stream of content. Where traditional advertising kept a very tight hold on who could represent their brand, and what content could carry the brand's name, in today's landscape that is no longer an option. As Lewis states “the narratives of

⁴⁷Henry Jenkins, et al. *Spreadable Media : Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, New York University Press, 2013.

⁴⁸Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore *In the Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*, San Fransico, Hardwired, 1967 p.14

⁴⁹Ibid. p.14

⁵⁰Lewis, op.cit.

20th century institutions lose influence in a media environment where everyday people can have the kind of reach that was once reserved for elites.”⁵¹. To keep up with today's media environment, brands must willingly release a degree of control over their image by broadening into these new avenues of influence.

The new level of micro-influencing afforded by social media platforms brings with it a new level of hyper-individualistic and targeted marketing. In the past celebrity endorsement consisted of one or an exclusive group of Hollywood celebrities who would be chosen to endorse the brand as a whole, nowadays things are changing. Take for example if we compare Dior Beauty a very old, established brand that advertises in a quiet traditional way to Rhode which is Hailey Bieber’s skincare brand, a very new and unestablished brand that advertises in a very contemporary way we can see how the internet has led to the creation a new style of influencer marketing. Dior Beauty’s Instagram features traditional celebrities, Anna-Taylor Joy an American Actress, JISOO Korean actress and singer who’s a member of the hugely popular K-pop group Blackpink and Willow Smith American singer and dancer, daughter of Will Smith (see fig. 14). Rhode’s Instagram on the other hand looks very different. Although Hailey Beiber has her own fame and is the main face of the brand, the brand is promoted using many different online beauty influencers. (see fig. 15). Rhode creates a feeling of attainable and realistic luxury, by showing us many different influencers recording themselves on their phones actually using the products. Dior Beauty maintains their air of exclusivity and high-end luxury through a small selection of ultra-famous spokespeople shoot in professional studios.

⁵¹Ibid

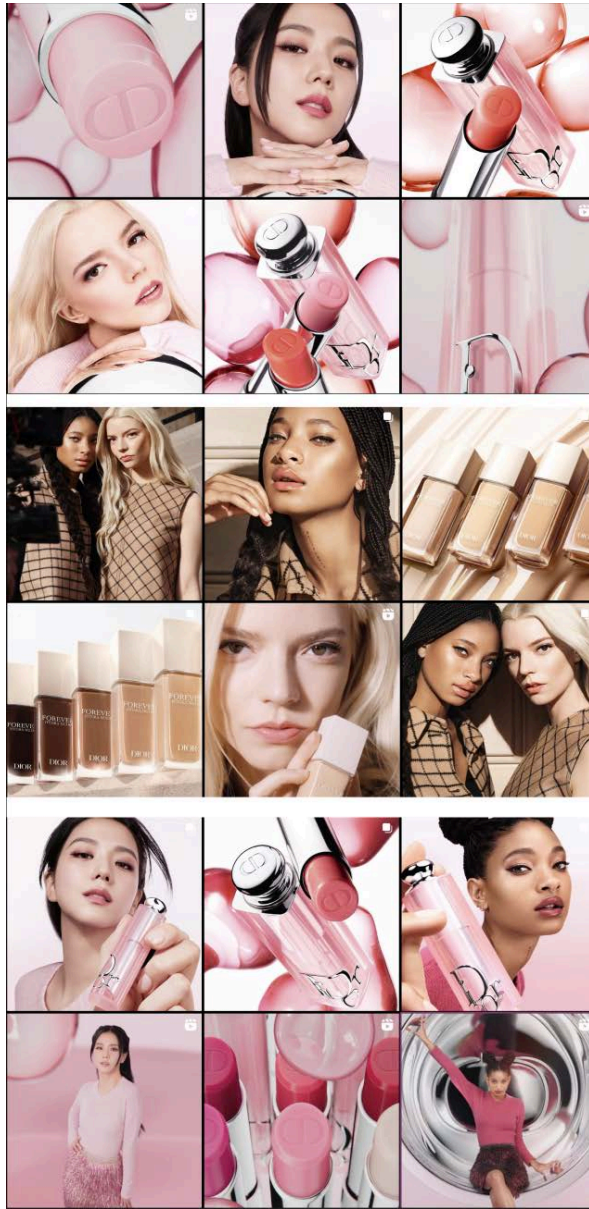


Fig. 14 selection of screenshots from Dior Beauty on Instagram

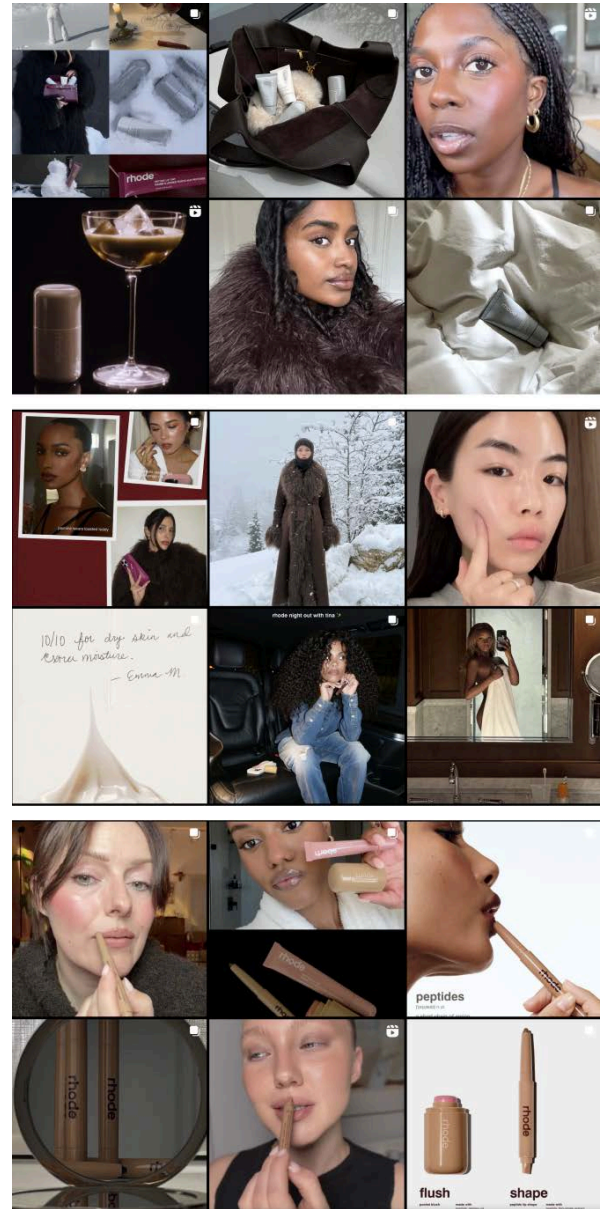


Fig. 15 selection of screenshots from Rhode skincare on Instagram

By shifting from brand-generated to user-generated (online influencers are still individual users of online platforms) advertisements brands can finally keep up with constant, rapid communication of the internet by having a network of content creators constantly churning out new ads. This form of marketing exploits the many-to-many communication of the internet. In today's digital age, many people form parasocial relationships with the content creators they engage with online⁵². Parasocial relationships can be defined as

⁵²Development of parasocial interaction between YouTubers and viewers has been confirmed by Sokolova & Kefi (2019), and also by Rasmussen (2018). Chen (2016) and Kurtin et al. (2018) also showed that YouTube users also developed parasocial relationships with

the connections people make that arise out of “parasocial interaction, a conversational, interpersonal interaction that audiences develop with media figures during viewing”⁵³ Many people develop a certain level of trust with their favourite creators and are inclined to believe what they say.⁵⁴ In *Social Communication in Advertising* William Leiss states that influencer marketing “is best understood as another iteration of word-of-mouth marketing.”⁵⁵ Advertisers have long believed in the power of word of mouth as far more persuasive than any corporate messaging.⁵⁶ Advertisers are exploiting these relationships online influencers have built with their audience by advertising through people, not media.⁵⁷ Traditional celebrity endorsement is losing its power and people are instead turning to online influencers to tell them what to buy. Some industry professionals believe that the success of influencer marketing can be attributed to “consumers’ belief in the idea that influencers were a voice of trustworthiness and authenticity at a time when trust in traditional media was declining”⁵⁸ When we see a traditional celebrity endorsement there is a level of detachment. They are not like us, and we cannot relate to them, we only recognize them from movies, photoshoots, interviews, and elite events. When they advertise to us, we know that they are reading from a script, their words are not their own. Whereas with content creators we can see ourselves a lot more in them, their houses look like ours, they dress like us, and they share similar hobbies, so we can imagine ourselves having more similar lives and thus more similar shopping habits to them when they do ad reads they read from scripts they have written, their personality and voice is more apparent. Sylvia Chan-Olmsted and Hye Hyun Julia Kim note; “Influencers drive influencer marketing by sharing details of daily, personal lives that set them apart from traditional celebrities, making them more accessible, relatable, believable, and intimate to followers,”⁵⁹ Tran and Strutton wrote in 2014 that “as these celebrities are interpreted as more real and accessible than conventional celebrities, consumers tend to identify more with them and imitate them to a greater extent.”⁶⁰

By communicating indirectly with consumers through sponsored content a brand does not have to choose one singular tone of voice, vernacular or visual style. They can speak through influencers in the consumer's vernacular without ever having to understand it to try to learn it.

YouTube personalities. See: Sylvia Chan-Olmsted and Hye Hyun Julia Kim “Influencer marketing dynamics” in José M. Álvarez-Monzoncillo (ed.), *The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022 p.114

⁵³Chan-Olmsted, op. cit., p.114

⁵⁴According to Google research published in 2016 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers say they relate to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities & 40% of millennial subscribers say their favourite creator understands them better than their friends. Celie O’Neil-Hart, Howard Blumenstein “Why YouTube stars are more influential than traditional celebrities” *thinkwithgoogle.com* July, 2016. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/video/youtube-stars-influence/> Accessed Feb. 09, 2025

⁵⁵Leiss, op.cit., p.335

⁵⁶Ibid p.335

⁵⁷Ibid p.335

⁵⁸Chan-Olmsted, op. cit., p.100

⁵⁹Chan-Olmsted op.cit., p.102

⁶⁰Prince Chacko Johnson and Christian Sandström “Making use of digital methods to study influencer marketing” in José M. Álvarez-Monzoncillo (ed.), *The Dynamics of Influencer Marketing: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022 p.6

2. Resisting the Commercialisation of Memes

2.1 “The Memer” Wendys TV Commercial 2015



Fig. 16 “The Memer” commercial from Wendys’ 2015

In 2015 Wendy’s (an American fast food restaurant chain) released a commercial known as “The Memer”. Clearly aimed at a millennial demographic, Wendy’s portrays what they believe internet users to be. The commercial opens with Wendy’s red-headed spokeswomen telling us that their new burger is “generating reactions from everybody, like ‘The Memer’” and the camera shifts to reveal “The Memer” who tries the burger, turns to the camera and says “Eat’s spicy goodness, like a boss” and the same text appears on screen in the classic “Top text, bottom text” meme format (depicted in Fig. X). This particular visual text format was born from popular image captioning websites like MemeGenerator⁶¹. Using the correct font is just about the only thing they got right about the memes they were trying to replicate. The “Like A Boss” meme originated in 2009. Know Your Meme describes it as “Like A Boss is a catchphrase often used in image macros or GIFs that feature a person completing an action with authority and finesse. Similar to Haters Gonna Hate, the characters in the macros have an air of superiority and do not care how others perceive them.”⁶² An example is given in Figure X. The phrase came from a parody of a Slim Thug song “Like A Boss” created by The Lonely Island. A music video featuring Andy Samberg and Seth Rogen premiered on Saturday Night Live as a

⁶¹“Bottom Text” *knowyourmeme.com* 2017 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bottom-text> Accessed Feb. 04, 2025

⁶²“Like A Boss” *knowyourmeme.com* 2011 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/like-a-boss> Accessed Feb. 04, 2025

digital short in April 2009.⁶³ The meme format is so simplistic that it can be understood and appreciated without this prior knowledge.



Fig. 16 Typical early “Like A Boss” meme sourced from KnowYourMeme

By inaccurately recreating a meme format from 2009 that is outdated and unpopular in 2015 Wendys and the producers of the ad expose themselves as miserably unaware and ignorant on the topic of meme culture. To its intended audience the ad comes across as pandering and out of touch. This section will discuss three key ways this meme fails to genuinely participate in meme culture. Firstly as mentioned Wendys were completely behind the times on meme culture. Similarly to fashion trends, meme genres go in and out of style in cycles. In his writing Aaron Z Lewis explains why companies often get meme culture wrong. He discusses how “old media institutions try (and fail) to keep up with the narratives of online subcultures,”⁶⁴ and he describes memes as “extremely dense cultural talismans”⁶⁵ that accrue many layers of meaning over time, meaning that is lost on people looking from the outside in. He goes on to say that “old-school media outlets

⁶³Ibid

⁶⁴Lewis, op.cit.

⁶⁵Ibid.

watch internet culture on tape delay.”⁶⁶ they simply cannot keep up with the speed of media production happening within these online cultures, “By the time they identify a subcultural tribe, it's usually already splintered or evolved into something different.”⁶⁷ McLuhan predicted this phenomenon of rapid media production and the collapse of traditional “time zones” as Lewis describes them, when he states that “We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening.”⁶⁸ McLuhan describes the instantaneous nature of internet culture “Electric circuitry profoundly involves men with one another. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information.”⁶⁹ How could the old forms of media possibly keep up with this instantaneous and continuous exchange of information within the global village? On the internet memes are engaged with by any number of users, all at once these users are consuming and reproducing media. Meme culture is not held back by any obstacles, it requires no expertise, no crew, no studio, no executive approval, no scheduling, and no collaboration. Lewis states “When an internet subculture grows large enough, it often gets spotlighted in the mainstream media.”⁷⁰ However, this attempt to capture and benefit from the popularity of these memes usually fails. Lewis explains that “The “time zones” of Old Media and internet subcultures are getting increasingly out of sync”.⁷¹

Secondly, Wendy's simply fails to engage creatively with the medium. The iconic ‘top text, bottom text’ format will be recognisable to many, traditionally the top line of text would create a setup and the bottom line of text would deliver and punchline. (for an example please refer back to fig. X) With Wendy's use of the meme, there is no joke, no setup or payoff, their use of the format is utterly contrived. Memetic media is not spread by means of simple imitation, media that is shared many times is ‘viral’ not memetic,⁷² participating in memes requires individual “alteration and modification”⁷³ each iteration adds something new. Milner describes this fundamental attribute of memetic media:

“In an environment of prevalent reappropriation, memetic grammar isn't just about reading and writing images, or even reading and writing multimodal texts. It's about doing that work by borrowing from the contributions of others, and transforming those contributions into something unique.”⁷⁴

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸McLuhan, op.cit., p.63

⁶⁹Ibid. 63

⁷⁰Lewis, op.cit.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²See Milner, op.cit., chapters 5 and 6 pp. 55-99

⁷³Eline Zenner and Dirk Geeraerts “One does not simply process memes: Image macros as multimodal constructions” in Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler (eds.) *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2018

⁷⁴Milner op.cit., p. 60

Wendy's does not do this 'work', they make no attempt to add anything new, they don't subvert the format in any way, and they don't use it in any novel or interesting way. Wendy's depiction of meme culture is a lazy imitation of an old joke. Memes stay funny "by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression"⁷⁵

Lastly, as previously mentioned meme culture was born out of the affordances of online media-sharing platforms and widespread access to simple photo-manipulation software. Meme culture is user-generated and decentralized. Wendy's completely fails to understand the aesthetics & the means of production of a meme, to recreate a meme on a TV screen goes utterly against the medium of memes and characteristics of meme culture. These means of production brought about new aesthetic movements. Aria Dean describes the creation and visual aesthetics of an internet meme "which are as trope-filled and easy-made as stock imagery, but are unprofessional and intentionally funny, with often-absurdist text floating on or above a low-res image."⁷⁶ This simplicity should not be mistaken or read as stupidity, memes can tackle and express people's philosophical and political views as seen in Fig 17 and 18 below.



Fig. 17 "Friendship ended with...." **Fig. 18** "Nihilism" examples of low-res images, absurdist text and rough editing traits common in meme aesthetics sourced from "Politigram & The Post-Left 2018: short version" by Joshua Citarella

In Yvette Granata's chapter of *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* she explores Wendy's adventures in attempting to engage with Internet meme culture and describes the creation and aesthetics of memes as they exist in their original medium; online image board:

"Nothing is aesthetically sacrosanct on an image board; nothing appears to be laboured over for more than five minutes. Memes are not valued for their newness nor for their aesthetic craft, but because of their trashness. They are irreverent to the labour of skilled artistic production."⁷⁷

⁷⁵Ibid. p.14

⁷⁶Aria Dean "Poor Meme, Rich Meme" *reallifemag.com* July 25, 2016 <https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

⁷⁷Yvette Granata "Meme Dankness: Floating Glittery Trash for an Economic Heresy" in Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (eds.) *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, Punctum Books, 2019 p.259-260

Granata demonstrates this approach to visual artefacts with the example of the “meme man” head, for example, which depicts a badly sculpted 3D model of a human head (as seen in fig 20)



Fig. 20 “meme man” sourced from Post Memes another example of the absurd simplicity of meme aesthetics

Granata describes the appeal of the 3D model and its suitability for the creation of a meme: “Whereas a technically well-crafted 3D model of a human head might look more photo-realistically like a human head, meme man works as meme material precisely because he is 3D digital trash. This is his charm. He’s aesthetically basic.”⁷⁸ Memes are aesthetically simple, quickly produced and just as quickly discarded, they are produced for their own sake and shared freely in online communities. Memes are not made by film crews, with executive producers, stakeholders, massive budgets, paid actors and expensive budgets, they are not artificially spread through paid ad space on TV broadcasting.

⁷⁸Granata, op. cit., p.261

2.2 “Silence, Brand” The Internet's Reaction

Granata introduces her chapter by taking a look at a documented reaction to Wendy’s ad. In a playlist of short meme videos entitled “Important Videos” on YouTube, you can find a video titled “Stop Putting Memes in the Media”. It is a thirteen-second clip of somebody recording the Wendy’s ad on their phone. The moment “the memer” appears on the tv screen the person filming lets out a visceral scream at their tv “STOOOOP FUCKING STOP” and the video ends.⁷⁹ Viewers in the comment section agree with the sentiment of the person in the video. Granata observes: “They too are horrified by the commercial use of image board meme culture.” The general sentiment of the audience is made abundantly clear they are vehemently against the commercial use of Internet memes. As shown in Fig. 21 commenters are turned off by the ad. One expresses that the ad feels like it was made by people who are completely out of touch with youth culture another says that no matter what funny memes Wendy’s posts online, they will never redeem themselves from this failure. Granata states that the motivation to preserve the meme culture comes from the community’s “desire to maintain a lack of political organization, to perpetually subvert centralized control,”⁸⁰ Memes are shared on these image boards for the sake of expression, posters gain nothing from sharing them. “It is neither politically nor economically motivated; it is not a means.”⁸¹ The reappropriation of these forms of bottom-up cultural expression by a billion-dollar corporation to advertise burgers through lazy caricatures of internet users, its rage-inducing as evidenced by our poster screaming “STOOOOP FUCKING STOP” at his TV screen.



Fig. 21 Collage of comments take from the comment section og “STOP PUTTING MEMES IN THE MEDIA” on *YouTube* Taken on Feb. 11, 2025

⁷⁹See “STOP PUTTING MEMES IN MEDIA” *YouTube*. Uploaded by Infinity Media, Apr 24, 2015. <https://youtu.be/yNtySt6Fg30?si=nmrG6hb62iz5yOzp>. Accessed. Dec. 15, 2024

⁸⁰Granata, op.cit., p.266

⁸¹Granata op.cit., p.256

Another documented reaction to brands attempting to capitalize off of memes can be found in the “Silence, Brand” meme. This phenomenon will demonstrate that the response to Wendy’s commercial was not an isolated incident but reflective of the internet’s general sentiment towards the commercialization of memes. Around the same time as “The Memer” was released many brands began engaging in ‘meme-marketing’ by sharing memes on their social media platforms such as Twitter with varying degrees of success. One notable example is the Dennys’ Tumblr page. Dennys is an American diner-style restaurant chain, looking back through their Tumblr you can find that they have been posting with absurdist postmodern digital collages since 2013. Whoever was responsible for Dennys’ online marketing understood the playful and absurd nature of meme culture humour. The strength of Dennys’ strategy was “the use of memetic characteristics as opposed to an actual internet meme.”⁸² Denny’s didn’t use memes to promote a specific product as Wendy’s did. Instead, they use them to simply engage with people and create a fun and unique brand personality. Fig. 22 posted in 2017 at first glance just looks like a stack of pancakes however its a use of the ‘zoom in photo’ meme, zooming in on different points of the photo reveals hidden messages, leading you around the photo in steps “look at the lower left corner”, “now look in the butter” etc until you land on the punchline “has this distracted you from overwhelming existential dread lol” The tweet garnered over 120,000 retweets and 170,000 likes. Wiggins writes, “The incorporation of an already-existing sub-genre of internet meme, the zoom in photo, represents an innovative form of remix by a for-profit company seeking to connect with members of participatory digital culture.”⁸³



Fig. 22 Posted by Dennys in 2017 “zoom in photo” meme, messages are hidden in tiny text revealed by zooming in on the photo

⁸²Bradley E. Wiggins *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*.1st ed., New York, Routledge, 2019 p. 93

⁸³Wiggins op. cit., p.93

Though some brands like Dennys succeeded in creating engaging content we quickly see the “Silence, brand” meme is born in response to this phenomenon. People quickly grew tired of seeing brands desperately try to capitalise off the attention of meme culture. Content on the internet exists within context. In general every piece of media that comes across our feeds tells us who the poster is. At the core of meme culture is a deep sense of expression for expression's sake. When a company who has, at the end of the day, an overt agenda attempts to engage with this culture it cannot remove itself from that agenda. Authentic memes are not a means to an end, “any organized purpose for a meme beyond the production of its own particular existence is an act destruction of the authenticity”⁸⁴ of meme culture. In *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture* Wiggins discusses the semiotics of meme-marketing. He explains that if a brand wants to use meme-marketing to advertise to its audience, they should consider the use of internet memes can communicate more about how the company views their consumers and expose their level of awareness of meme culture.

“If a company or organization wishes to reach out to its constituents through the deployment of memes, it should consider seriously that such a choice is itself also an act of communication. As such, it will be received and interpreted perhaps well within or beyond the intended purpose of the message.”⁸⁵

When companies like KFC and Wendys post memes on their accounts they might as well post a tweet that says “please look at us, we’re cool, we’re hip with the kids, we know what’s funny, we’re just like you” because that is the message they are sending to internet natives “Silence, brand” became, for a short while, the immediate response to any big name brands trying to be funny on Twitter. The internet clearly and plainly stated that it does not welcome contributions from multibillion dollar corporations. The memers cried out “you are not a person, stop acting like one.” These examples show how companies struggled to keep up with the rapid pace of meme culture and how they were initially not welcome to the participatory structures of meme culture. The next section will take a look at the state of meme-marketing today and the internet's sentiment towards it by examining NordVPN’s strategy for online marketing.

⁸⁴Granata, op.cit., p. 252

⁸⁵Wiggins, op.cit., p. 94

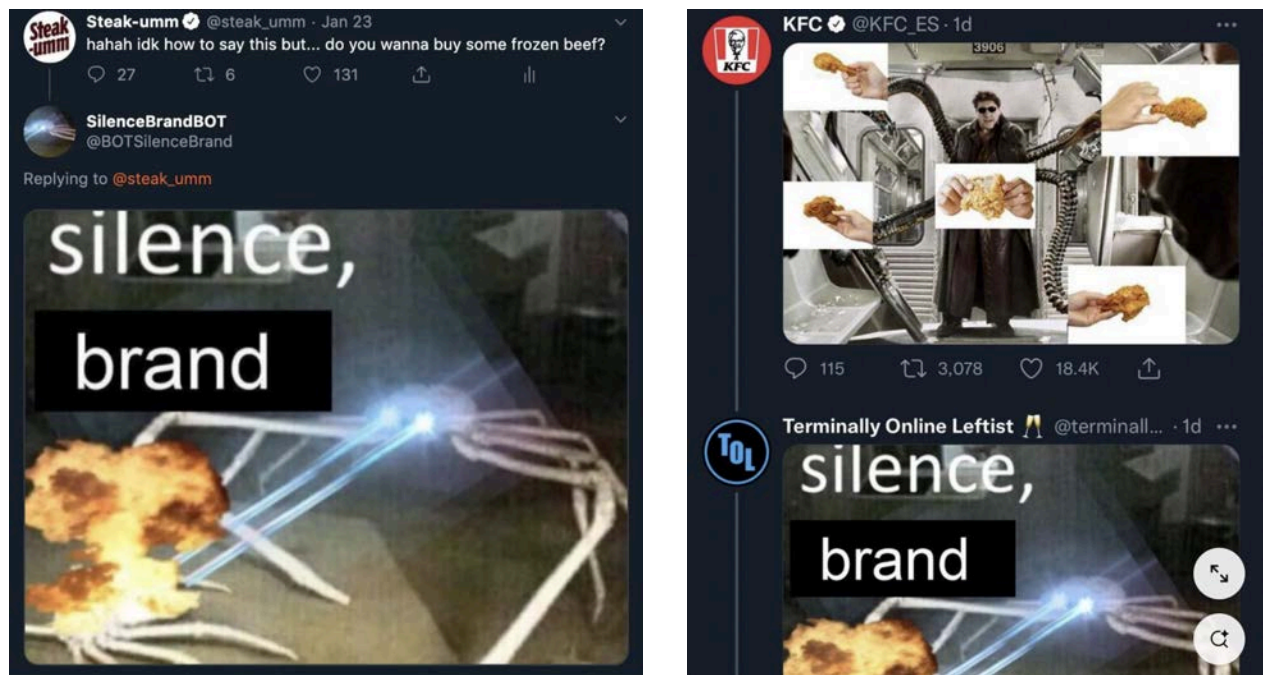


Fig. 23 Examples of “silence, brand” meme as reactions to companies trying to engage with meme culture on social media

3. NordVPN case study: How to engage in Meme Culture as a Soulless Corporation

3.1 Direct vs. Indirect Communication with Consumers

NordVPN is a cybersecurity software that is well-known in certain corners of the internet for their online marketing strategy. They sponsor so many YouTubers that “If you haven’t seen a NordVPN integration on YouTube, you’re probably not on YouTube enough”⁸⁶ VPN stands for ‘virtual private network’ which encrypts the connection between your device and the internet.⁸⁷ This gives you “safer and more private access to the internet.”⁸⁸ NordVPN have made themselves know online by working with thousands of content creators.⁸⁹ They pay YouTubers to include a pitch about NordVPN as part of a longer video.⁹⁰ The affordances of YouTuber sponsorships is that they are not nationwide, not on TV networks, they don't run at set times. These ads-by way of the algorithmically tailored feeds-find you. NordVPN are utilizing the targeted communication channels afforded by this new platform. These ads do not need to appeal en masse, their very strength is that they won't. The brilliance of youtube sponsorships, is that the ads appeal to exactly who is watching it, it's been seen by exactly its target audience because it was made for that exact audience. By giving content creators the creative freedom to do whatever they want, they have enabled the production of perfectly tailored ads without having to understand the audience or engage with them in a creative way.

Before we take a look at how NordVPN utilizes indirect channels of communication to reach their intended demographic, let's examine their direct channels of communication. The genius of NordVPN's online marketing strategy is that they understand the importance of 'place' on the internet. As discussed in Chapter Two, internet subcultures do not appreciate when brands try to monetize meme culture. The ads we will discuss in the next chapter would not work if they were posted through an official NordVPN channel. NordVPN does not try to contribute to or engage with the internet meme culture on that level through its official channels. If we take a look at NordVPN's Instagram YouTube and Twitter can see that they keep their official channels very corporate friendly, inoffensive and clean. See Figures 24, 25, 26

⁸⁶“How NordVPN Uses Modash to Find YouTubers for 100+ Collabs Per Month” *modash.io*, <https://www.modash.io/customer-stories/nordvpn> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

⁸⁷Elad Schulman“VPN providers that nailed their influencer marketing strategy” *thoughtleaders.io* <https://www.thoughtleaders.io/blog/vpn-providers-that-nailed-their-influencer-marketing-strategy> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

⁸⁸Homepage of *nordvpn.com* <https://nordvpn.com/> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

⁸⁹Between 2012-2023 NordVPN sponsored over 3000 YouTubers see. Schulman op.cit., *thoughtleaders.io*

⁹⁰Yash Chavan “How NordVPN Used Influencer Marketing to Get 4.4B Video Views” *getsaral.com* <https://www.getsaral.com/academy/nordvpn-influencer-marketing> Accessed Feb. 10, 2025

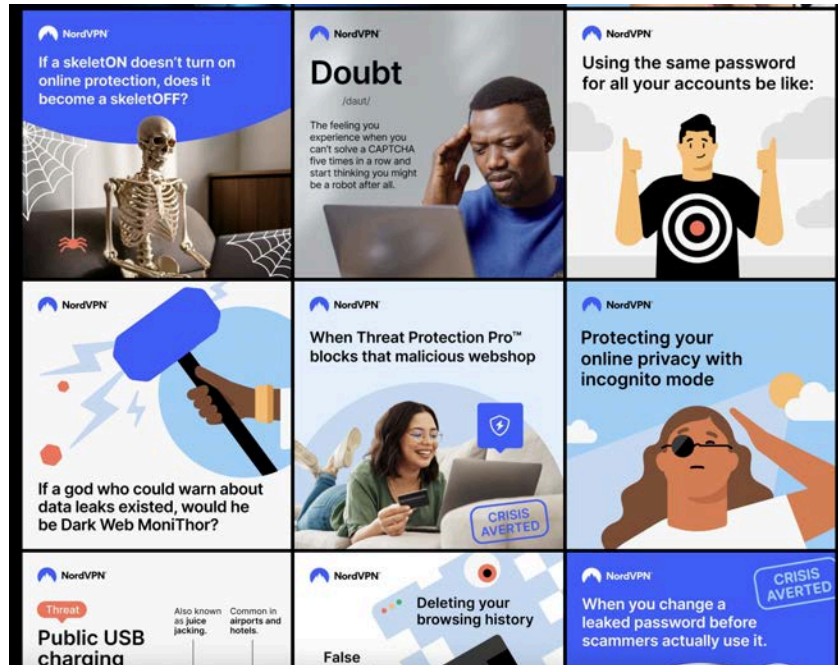


Fig. 24 Screenshot of NordVPN's Instagram page taken Dec. 17, 2024

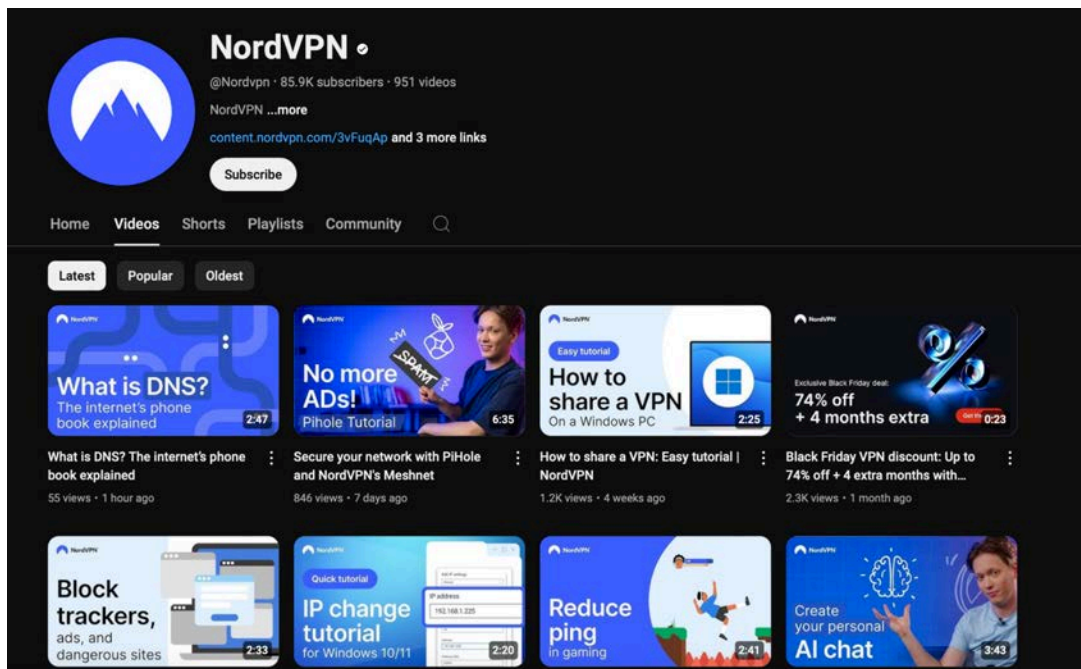


Fig. 25 Screenshot of NordVPN's YouTube channel taken Dec. 17, 2024

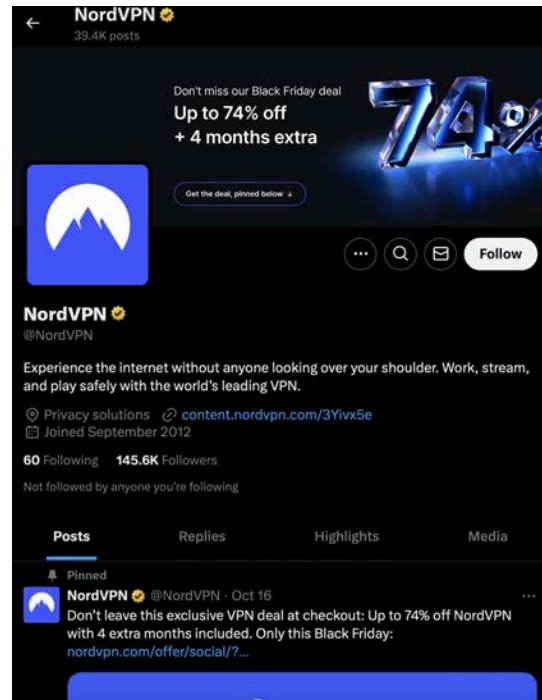


Fig. 26 Screenshot of NordVPN's Twitter page taken Dec. 17, 2024

The focus on these channels is to establish a consistent visual brand, raise awareness about online security and create professional educational content. As we will see in the next section NordVPN advertises through many different people who have different visual styles and senses of humour, by marketing through these indirect channels they can keep their official channels having a consistent tone of voice and brand personality while still appealing to so many different people through their ads. In today's internet where something is posted and through which channels has a huge direct impact on who sees it and how people react. As mentioned previously these ads are not made to be seen by just anyone, the very fact they exist within YouTube channels, that have established audiences, controls who sees theme.

3.2 YouTuber Sponsorships

YouTuber sponsorships are a combination of influencer and native marketing. Capturing the attention of younger generations has proved difficult for advertisers as they are the most prone to “ad avoidance”⁹¹ whether by using ad blockers or scrolling on their phones whilst an ad plays. Advertisers no longer want to be the midroll ads that interrupt people’s content; they want to be part of the content.⁹² Native advertising tackles this issue embedding itself in the very content young people are watching. The word “native” in this context “refers to a relationship within the flows of other surrounding and non sponsored content.”⁹³ This attempt to be completely camouflaged in its surrounding content, causes ‘content confusion’ “where ads do not look like ads and the previous categories of content and advertising are obscured” These ads blur the lines between content and advert by “conforming to the same look, feel, function, and behavior of the surrounding content.”⁹⁴ Take for example these two screenshots from “1 vs 100 Player Manhunt!” uploaded by MrBeast Gaming. Fig. 27 is from the main part of the video, the content people are there to watch and Fig. 28 is from the sponsored ad read. Apart from the logo in the corner the two screenshots look almost identical.



Fig. 27 Screenshot from 1 vs 100 Player Manhunt! Uploaded by the MrBeastGaming Channel on YouTube -

This is the normal video, not a sponsored section of the video

⁹¹Leiss op. cit., p. 327

⁹²Leiss op. cit., p. 328

⁹³Leiss op. cit., p. 331

⁹⁴Leiss op. cit., pp. 328-332



Fig. 28 Screenshot from 1 vs 100 Player Manhunt! Uploaded by the MrBeastGaming Channel on YouTube -
This is the sponsored section of the Video

One of the YouTubers NordVPN sponsors to do ad reads in their videos is Internet Historian. He's notorious for his over the top, outlandish and 'extremely online'⁹⁵ ad reads. One such ad is featured within a youtube video entitled "*food.*" which was posted on Internet Historians second channel "Incognito Mode". The ad parodies an early 2000's prank video. One of the key aesthetic features is the use of a type of video template that was super popular with these creators at the time. The video template was typically used as an intro/title card to the videos to display the YouTubers channel name, they had a distinct explosive, over the top style with intense animation and 3D lettering. (Fig 29) For people who grew up watching YouTube around that time they style is immediately recognisable and associated with a certain era of YouTube when these types of videos were super popular.

⁹⁵An extremely online (often capitalized), terminally online, or chronically online individual is someone who is closely engaged with Internet culture.



Fig. 29 Screenshot from *food*. Uploaded by Incognito Mode in 2021, parodies intros from early 20002 YouTube content

The ad follows our main character “NordMan” as he goes around “pulling pranks” on random people all centered around telling the viewer about different features of nordVPN’s service. Near the end of this ad Internet Historian says “Big thanks to NordVPN, they are the ones that keep approving these ads!”⁹⁶ In juxtaposition with this line on screen we see the “NordMan” mascot in a car chase with police (fig. 30), setting up bombs (fig. 31) and arming himself with a gun (fig. 32) all distinctly and traditionally not “ad friendly” activities. This begs the question why do NordVPN keep approving these ads? Even though you will never see NordVPN themselves using such vulgar and dark humour as Internet Historian does on there official channels it is safe for NordVPN to approve these ads because they know that people who watch Internet Historian videos will not be offended or put off by these ads in fact it has the exact opposite effect. Again we see how algorithms are exploited to target ads like these to their intended audience. Each YouTube viewer gets a NordVPN advertisement tailored to their sense of humour, delivered to them in a style they enjoy, by someone they like, and NordVPN didn't even have to make the ad. They also make alot of money. In 2022, Nord VPN's influencer media value stood at around 4.11 million U.S. dollars⁹⁷ The videos of the Incognito Mode channel garner a huger amount of views, the video “food.” has 5.6 million views and the video “architecture.”⁹⁸ has 7.2 million. There is a playlist on YouTube uploaded by a channel named VonFuerstMedia, the playlist is called “Internet Historian Ads”, it contains clips from numerous Incognito Mode uploads, of just the ad reads uploaded as videos. The ads reuploaded by themselves have garnered thousands of views, the ad read taken from “food.” has almost eight thousand views and the ad read taken from “architecture.” has sixty-three thousand views. People are not only voluntarily watching these ads but actively seeking them out.

⁹⁶Incognito Mode “food.” *YouTube*

⁹⁷ see. “Nord VPN's influencer media value on YouTube in the United States and Canada in 4th quarter 2022 and 1st quarter 2023” *Statista.com* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1405934/nord-vpn-influencer-marketing-spenders/>

⁹⁸Another video from Incognito Mode discussed further on page 44



Fig. 30 Screenshot from *food*. Uploaded by Incognito Mode in 2021

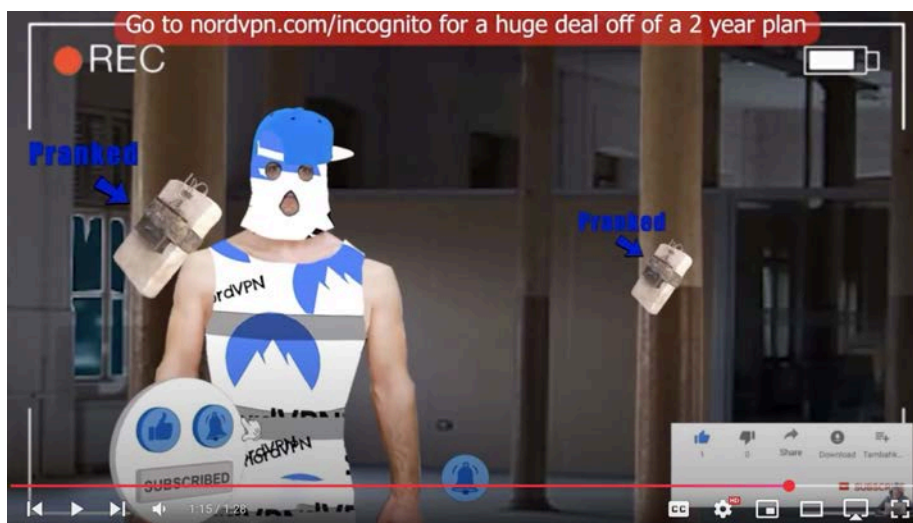


Fig. 31 Screenshot from *food*. Uploaded by Incognito Mode in 2021



Fig. 32 Screenshot from *food*. Uploaded by Incognito Mode in 2021



Fig. 33 Collection of comments taken from the comment section of “food.” uploaded by Incognito Mode on YouTube

If we take a look at the comment section we can see in contrast to Wendy's ad, people love the Internet Historian's NordVPN ads. See fig x Commenters applaud and respect NordVPN for allowing themselves to be associated with such ridiculous and untypical ads. Some state that the ads genuinely make them want to use the product and others comment that they are the only ads that they don't skip. Another area NordVPN succeeds is embedding themselves into meme culture a bit more organically than Wendy's has. By not trying to create and post forced memes on their official channels and letting YouTubers make engaging ads they've become associated people enjoy online. NordVPN don't have to make memes of themselves; people are already making memes about them see fig 13 & fig 14 & 15. By sponsoring a huge amount of content creators who are active parts of internet culture they have embedded themselves into the cultural zeitgeist, so many people can relate to having a YouTuber they watch be sponsored by NordVPN, whether they like it or not their intended demographic knows who they are and what they do.



Fig. 34 User-generated original memes found on Instagram Tagged @NordVPN

As discussed in chapter one, understanding and participating in meme culture requires sophisticated “meme literacy”. One reason is because the rules of the language are always changing; formats are constantly shifting from popular to unpopular back to popular but only ironically, new words are invented or old ones are reappropriated in new ways all the time, new codes invented and subverted then thrown away, formats are distilled down to their most basic elements until barely recognisable. Partly because so many memes stem from reappropriation and remix and reference. Shifman writes:

“According to Ryan Milner, in order to use this memetic language correctly, one needs a certain familiarity with subcultural standards.' The "right" or "wrong" way of employing memes in a discourse is never definitive—it is negotiated through continuous intergroup discussions within each "meme hub."”⁹⁹

YouTubers speak this language, they are part of or closely following the trends of the internet. Unlike the companies discussed previously, content creators are both consumer and producer, as individual users of the internet they are creators of “user-generated content”.

Another reason for needing to be ‘meme literate’ is because so many memes stem from reappropriation and reference. Shifman states that one of the fundamental attributes of Internet memes is intertextuality: memes often relate to each other in complex, creative and surprising ways.¹⁰⁰ Memes often make reference to one or several previous media, either you get the reference or you don't. Shifman outlines two main mechanisms that are prevalent for the referencing of previous media: mimicry and remix. Shifman defines mimicry as “the practice of redoing, the recreation of a specific text by other people and/or by other means”¹⁰¹ Similar to the mimicry of memes we can observe several instances of mimicry of highly popular and recognisable video formats in these ad reads.

⁹⁹Shifman op. cit., p. 34

¹⁰⁰Shifman op. cit., p. 121

¹⁰¹Shifman op cit., p. 121

In the video “architecture.” posted on the channel Incognito Mode, Internet Historian ‘re-creates’ a typical Summoning Salt video. Summoning Salt is a popular YouTuber who creates widely viewed lengthy videos documenting and telling stories from video game speedrunning history. Summoning Salt follows a specific formula for the introduction of his videos that Internet Historian parodies, without having previously seen a Summoning Salt video you wouldn't even know that he was referencing anyone at all. Firstly Internet Historian uses a specific song that Summoning Salt used in so many of his video intros that it has become synonymous with his channel and creates a voiceover setting the stage of the “NordVPN speedrun to lose sponsorship any% glitchless” in a style very similar to Summoning Salt. Next is visual mimicry, the first visual mirroring can be seen in the first couple of seconds of each video. Internet Historian uses the same pixelated font as the format he's imitating, a detail so small and simple it doesn't even look like it's trying to mimic anything unless you've watched Summoning Salts content before, as seen in figures 35 and 36.



Fig. 35 (left) Screenshot from Summoning Salt Youtube video “The History of Super Mario 64 16 Star World Records”



Fig. 36 (right) Screenshot from Internet Historian ad read from “architecture.”

Next Internet Historian uses that same pixelated font again to recreate his own version of his inspirations title card see figures 37 and 38. This simple mimicry can only be achieved by a sincere understanding of the source material. Where Wendys recreation of the like a boss meme feels out of touch and disingenuous, Internet Historian shares a platform with the creator he's mimicking, he understands internet culture because he is part of it and so he is able to create an imitation that is humorous and entertaining instead of cringe worthy and insulting.

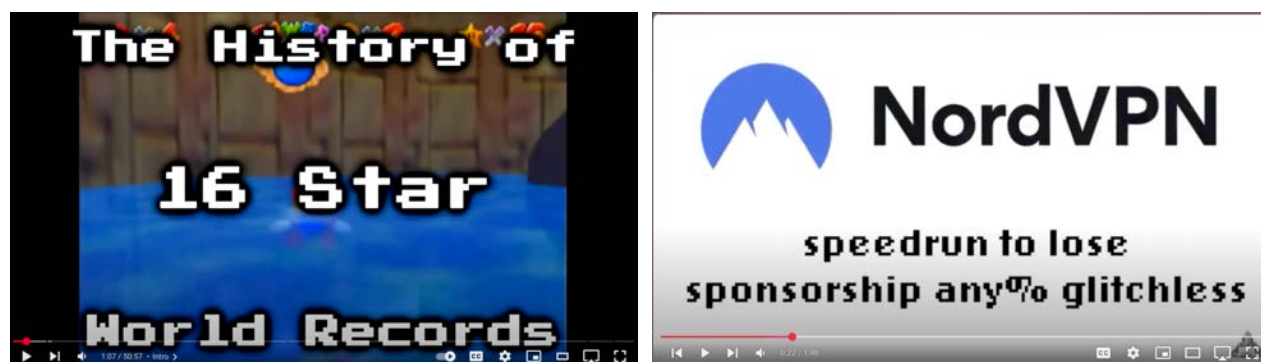


Fig. 37 (left) Screenshot from Summoning Salt video “The History of Super Mario 64 16 Star World Records”

Fig. 38 (right) Screenshot from Internet Historian ad read from “architecture.”

The next visual asset Internet Historian uses is the LiveSplit¹⁰² see figures 39 and 40. Anyone who has watched a videogame speedrun will recognise the visual vernacular of the LiveSplit timer that speedrunners use to keep track of their in game progress throughout a speedrun. A LiveSplit timer will typically list every achievement or level a speedrunner needs to hit in their run and will list the time each one was completed, Internet Historian creates his own LiveSplit to show him hitting each achievement throughout the ad read. Even if you have never seen a Summoning Salt, speedrunning is a massively popular genre of video on YouTube and the idea of speedrunning losing a sponsorship as an ad read can be appreciated for its comedic value by anyone who knows what speedrunning is. However there is a joy and a satisfaction of recognising similar to the feeling of “being in on the joke”.



Fig. 39 Screenshot from Summoning Salt video “The History of Super Mario 64 16 Star World Records”

LiveSplit used in speedruns seen on left of image

¹⁰² LiveSplit is a highly popular timer program for speedrunners



Fig. 40 Screenshot from Internet Historian ad read from “architecture.”

More examples of this popular online video format mimicry can be seen in the YouTuber Jacksfilms ad reads for NordVPN. In his video *Sssniperwolf is getting worse. Here's proof* he critiques another online creator Sssniperwolf for her content that he argues is incredibly lazy and immoral as it makes money from stealing other people's content. He parodies a typical Sssniperwolf video by recreating her split screen format, whilst one half of the screen plays the ad the other half plays a video of him “reacting” to the ad see figures 21 and 22. He mimics the typical lazy commentary by Sssniperwolf and creators similar to her by interrupting the ad to add his reactions which are just him resaying what was already said.

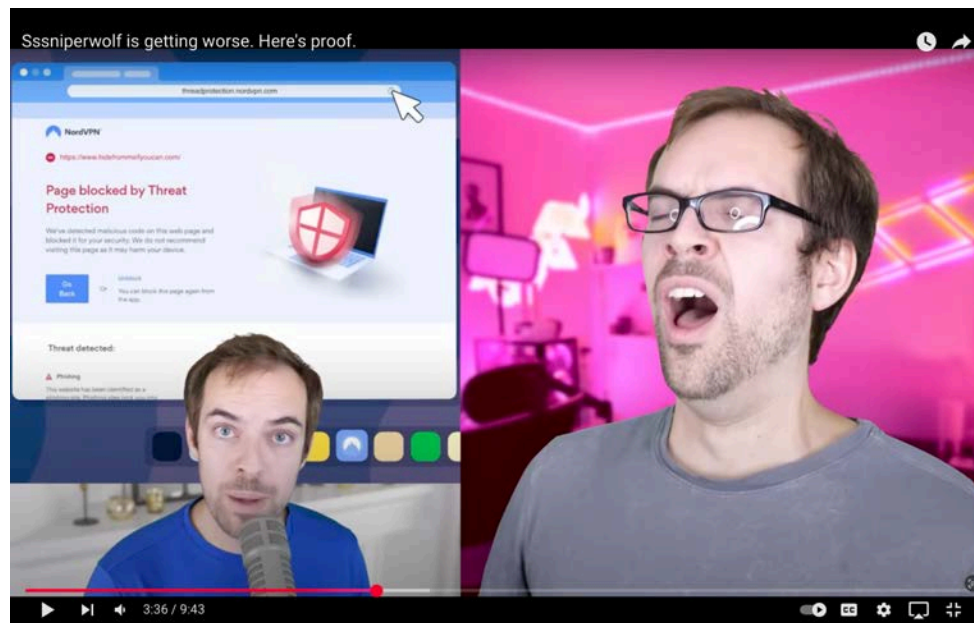


Fig. 41 Screenshot of an ad read from *Sssniperwolf is getting worse. Here's proof*. From Jacksfilms

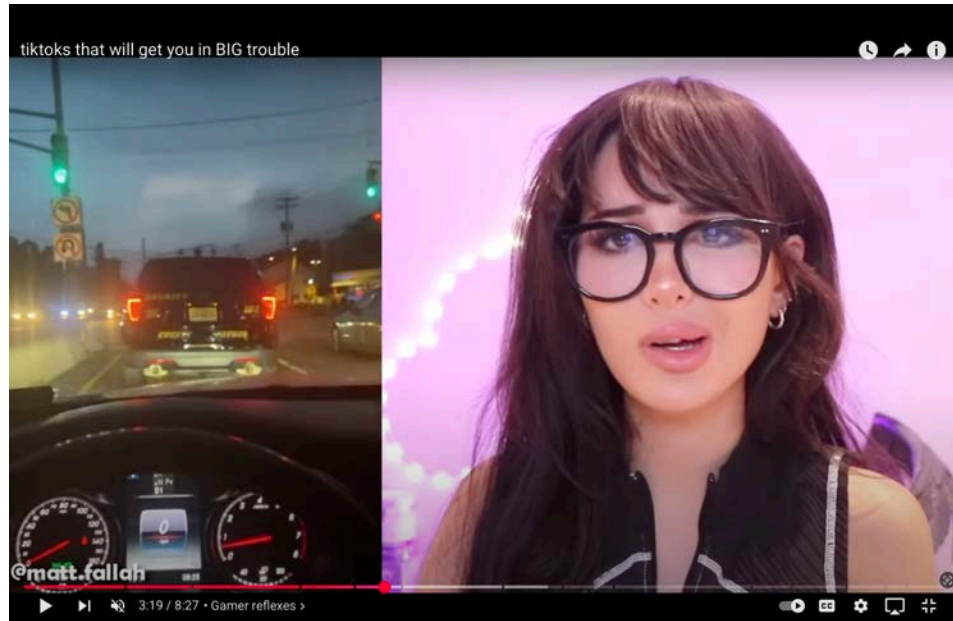


Fig. 42 (right) Screenshot of Sssniperwolf’s video “tiktoks that will get you in trouble”

In another YouTube video Jacksfilms parodies an extremely popular YouTube trend of comparing the same item and various price points. If you search “\$1 vs \$100 000” or something similar you will be greeted by endless videos of YouTube videos following this format as seen in figure 43. Jacksfilms creates satire of this trend by creating a tech-review-esque video of his dogs. (see Fig 44) By talking about his dogs as if they’re a series of phone models, he highlights the way a lot of these materialistic YouTubers talk about products and money. Looking down on a one-dollar dog as disgusting and useless and praising the million-dollar dog for being absolutely perfect. Jacksfilms continues this format into the ad read by ‘doing the NordVPN test’ and showing each dog ‘using’ NordVP’s various features. Both of these instances of mimicry come from a place of genuine understanding of the media he’s critique, people watch Jacksfilms for his commentary videos so it feels natural for him to use this format in a a comedic way in his ad reads.

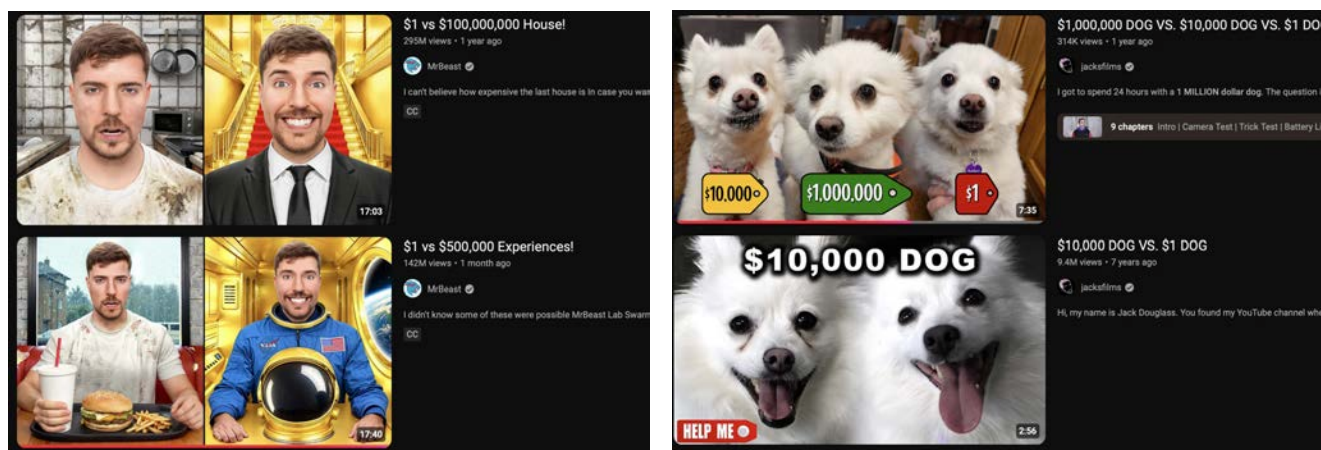


Fig. 43 Screenshot from YouTube search result of “\$1 vs \$100 000” Taken 17. Dec, 2025

Fig. 44 Screenshot YouTube search result of “\$1 vs \$100 000 Jackfilms” Taken 17. Dec, 2025

Another characteristic of memetic media that YouTubers utilize so well is the low fidelity aesthetics and means of production which were discussed in chapter two. Wendy’s completely missed the mark by creating a high-quality, high-definition, professional-grade recreation of a meme through inaccessible means of production. YouTuber ad reads on the other hand embrace the aesthetic simplicity and production of user-generated content. For instance, as seen in Figure 45 in a video titled “The real reason I left Sweden” popular gaming YouTuber PewDiePie creates a PowerPoint presentation for his ad read that is aesthetically basic and low effort. PewDiePie has a net worth in the millions yet his ad read looks like it could have been made by anybody with a half-decent camera and computer.¹⁰³

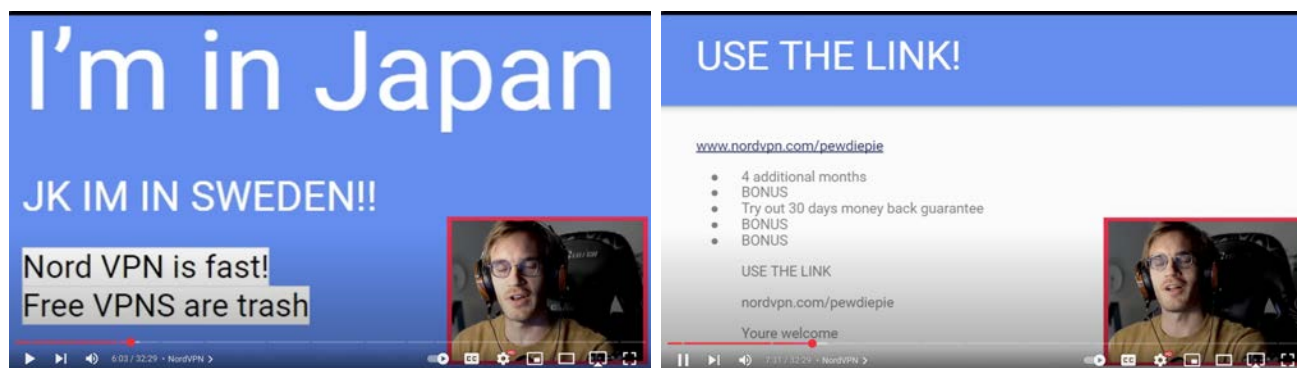


Fig. 44 Screenshots from “The real reason I left Sweden” from PewDiePie on YouTube mimics aesthetic simplicity of meme culture

¹⁰³According to Forbes PewDiePie earned an estimated \$15 million in 2019
<https://www.forbes.com/stories/innovation/the-top-earning-video-gamers/>

Creators like Jackfilms, Internet Historian, PewDiePie and MrBeast can create content that genuinely reflects internet meme culture because they are contributing members of that culture. As mentioned in chapter two when a faceless, soulless corporation tries to connect with an audience by engaging with this landscape they are not a part of the internet lashes out. NordVPN understands that it is not their place to create these imitations or critiques, even if they tried they couldn't do so within their restrictive brand guidelines and visual identity by letting go control and production of their ads they can, through unofficial channels advertise their product to their target audience in an effective and entertaining way without pandering or intruding.

Conclusion

In the attention economy we find ourselves advertisers will attempt to exploit anything that garners attention. Memes haven't managed to escape this fate. Memes are the language of the internet. They reveal the complex intertextual structures born from this new age of mass rapid communication.

This thesis addressed how the internet completely transformed access to information and totally disrupted the old power structures that were in place previously dictating the flows of information. Still our digital lives are shaped by capitalism, we have become simultaneously producer, consumer and commodity. Algorithms dictate what is presented to us, censoring content that is not 'advertiser friendly', prioritizing highly emotive content that will engage us, constantly adapting to our behaviours to keep us online for as long as possible in order to show us as many ads as possible.

This thesis examined memes as cultural transmission as defined by Dawkins original theory and then using contemporary writers Milner and Shifman examined a more modern theory of memes as language that is constantly being renegotiated and shaped on the internet. Language requires literacy and memes requires meme literacy however being able to read memes from five or ten years ago does not mean you can read the memes being made today. Using these discussions this thesis presents memes to be considered as a serious form of visual communication that requires up-to-date literacy to be read, understood, enjoyed and created then analyzing the aesthetics of memes to understand that their simplicity and low-fidelity should not be misconstrued as laziness or lack of skill. Through analyzing the use of memes in advertising this thesis considered what it means semiotically when companies use memes to communicate with their consumers and the difference in using direct versus indirect channels of communications. Through direct channels companies risk revealing their lack of meme literacy, how they view their consumers and how out of touch they are with their consumers and meme culture. This was demonstrated by examining Wendy's "The Memer" commercial and peoples reactions towards fast-food chains using meme-marketing. Peoples reactions revealed a desire to defend memes against monetisation and maintain the lack of economic gains to be found in memes. Comparatively the last section demonstrates that by releasing a degree of control and outsourcing ad production to online content creators companies can have more success connecting to the internet native generations via these indirect channels of communication. This was illustrated through a case study of NordVPN's online marketing strategy. We observed a similar use of memes and memetic characteristics to advertise a product however people are more accepting of this form of advertising through individual creators rather than the company as an whole entity.

Memes are user-generated, they are defined by their lack of organisation or economic gain. No much how companies use them to advertise to use, authentic memes will always come from ordinary people on the internet expressing themselves.

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