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SOC 250

11/8/2018

### Memes as a cultural influence

In the second decade of the 21st century it would be impossible to deny the effects social and digital media has had on the lives of all Americans. While first proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1974, the popularity of internet memes has particularly expanded, particularly among high school and college students. However it is crucial to not overlook the very real implications and connections the phenomenon of internet memes has to Dawkins' original theory. Like Dawkins' 'classic' memes, internet memes also serve as a vehicle to express and spread ideas between individuals. Much like how a change in behavior in the adoption of a 'classic' meme signify the change in mindset or adoption of new cultural ideas, internet memes can express and share new ideas among individuals. Images and short videos can depict shared experiences among members of a society in a way easier to read than traditional written language.

As expressed by Charles Dawkins in *'The Selfish Gene'* memes can be described as ideas or behaviors that spread among people. Often times memes can be thought of as behaviors or ideals that people adopt without seeming to be able to explain why or where the behavior came from, likened to an accidental genetic adaptation (Dawkins). One example of such shared un-questioned behavior shared among a huge share of people, is the enjoyment taken from feeding ducks. While detrimental to duck populations, duck-feeding has been an enjoyed passtime for many generations in America, with many finding a shared affection for these

common waterfowl and a shared enjoyment in watching the birds eagerly chomp down. While feeding ducks is a rather silly example, memes can also cause great changes in ideology and culture over time slowly. The Amish follow a strict doctrine and are traditionally prohibited from indulging in modern luxury, however, over the decades a growing number of Amish communities have begun to implement and embrace certain mechanical and electrical tools in their daily routines (Lynch). These changes may be a reflection on American societies' march towards automation as a whole, but also serves as an excellent example of a 'classic meme', as the normalization of power tools in Amish communities was not necessarily deliberate and--much like a gene--spread primarily from parent to child, with the children of Amish farmers who accepted power tools going on to manage their own farms and raise their own children with similar ideology.

As any sociologist would explain, ideas do not just pass and grow between individuals, as the web of ideas can span wide enough as to encapsulate entire societies and cultures. Gay marriage is a prime example of this phenomenon in America, with gay rights grabbing the attention of mainstream political activists in wake of the daunting death count left by the AIDs epidemic from the mid eighties to early nineties. While better understanding of STDs among doctors and the general public helped ease anxieties around non-heterosexual relationships, gay rights as a whole saw exponential growth and attention in media and politics throughout the early to mid 2000s. The spread of tolerance was what allowed for the budding, growth, and spread of more progressive notions regarding acceptance, normalization and integration of homosexual relationships into American society as a whole. While gay marriage would no be regarded as a 'meme' it is instead the 'memes', the first ripples of tolerance in the nineties, to the notions of

acceptance among non-queer Americans in the mid-2000s, that has led to the great waves of legislation progress and cultural change the queer community and America as a whole has seen in the past decade.

Memes are exceptionally easy to share online, since most of them are just simple images with a more complex joke, they, in turn, their ideas, are very easy to spread around. Because of this, memes can be a good way to spread awareness or gain attention for a multitude of issues. The oppressive relationship between Caucasian and African Americans is not a secret, as much as certain political demographics like to paint it as one, however because of how deeply ingrained these injustices are built into day to day experiences of American society, it is often difficult or unsavory for the media to draw attention to such issues. However, recently, memes regarding the racist actions of specific Caucasian individuals, most commonly calling the police on non-crimes involving non-white Americans, have exploded on social media (Farzan). While these memes call out these transgressions on an individual level akin to shaming, they do serve a secondary purpose, as it is much easier and much more likely for news sources and journalists to report on viral campaigns than on systematic injustice as a whole. This is because memes, while often very funny, do serve a very important linguistic function, the expression of nuanced ideas by easily understood means.

As far as visual media is concerned, digital memes are the fastest and easiest way to express and share ideas in as simple a way as possible. Because of this, memes have grown as one of the most popular ways online to construct and express humor based on shared and relatable experiences. Popular subjects for memes include memes about school, work, friendship, and dating, all being incredibly central experiences for many adolescents. Often humor that

manages to be relatable to the widest possible audience is praised highly, and often it is well earned. Finding and writing about things everyone experiences and shares amongst each other in an interesting and poignant way can often be difficult to do. However, memes have often been used to explore what could be described as ‘niche relatability’. Marginalized groups, such as LGBT youth or ethnic minorities, have taken to crafting and sharing memes that represent and express experiences unique to their communities. These memes not only help build a sense of community, especially for those who may not have many connections to their community in their daily lives, but in expressing and normalizing the concerns and experiences of marginalized peoples to those who may otherwise be ignorant.

While Memes are great linguistic tools for expressing complex ideas in short easy to read messages, the barrier for entry however, is high and growing. Like any language, pseudo-language, or linguistic tool, online memes are in a continuous state of change, re-interpretation and evolution. However, unlike the classical counterparts, there is almost always an underlying intentionalism to digital memes, someone has to knowingly upload them after all, even if they do not expect or anticipate it to garner much attention. Even the simplest memes need to be interpreted on some level, an image needs to be related to an idea, or a string of words needs to be read and contextualized. On top of this, while classical memes influence behavior directly in the surrounding community and environment, digital memes are limited in some aspect to the digital realm. This adds a layer of detachment in which members of the community who use or are affected by memes in a linguistic context, may find themselves absent and in a sense ‘fenced out’ during the ongoing process of meme evolution. This is analogous to being frozen in ice long enough for english to evolve to a point of unrecognizability. Or, because

of the 'flash in a pan' nature of current social media, waking up one day only to find that while asleep the rules of English had drastically changed. This phenomenon inevitably adds a learning curve to memes and even online communication. As many memes build off of other memes in their evolution it can be incredibly daunting to establish a grasp on meme meaning and usage, which can quickly detract from any benefits to the simplistic presentation of memes.

Although memes are often written off due to their comedic nature, they remain an incredibly effective way to compress information and ideas into simple easy to share and digest pieces of media. Because of this, like any form of communication, memes do follow their own rules and society is still adapting to these new modern linguistic rules and ideas. Because images are so easy to share around online digital memes are much easier to share than it is to share ideas and concepts by contemporary means. Since memes are so easy to share online, the effect of memes on the surrounding world can be felt much faster. Also, as memes are an excellent way to express and share complicated ideas in a simple format, it is much easier than it has been historically to introduce more nuanced ideas into mainstream media discussion. Because of this, memes have been an invaluable tool to communities that traditionally have not had as strong voice in these discussions as other groups, due either to intentional suppression or friction between their concerns and contemporary culture. However, internet memes can also act as a double edged sword, as culture changes faster online than it has anywhere else at any other point in history, granting memes as a linguistic device a constantly increasing learning curve. While society will have to adapt to this aspect of memes and the digital cultural aspect, both in online and offline spaces, memes remain an incredibly useful means of communication. However, memes can only be utilized to their full potential if respected as such.

Dawkins, R. (2016). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Too 'cutesy' for those white women calling police on black people?

Lynch, A. (1996). *Thought contagion: How belief spreads through society*. New York:  
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