

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ADAPTATION MEMES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Internet memes are gaining phenomenal popularity in India through social networking sites. This paper is an attempt to understand the dynamics of the Internet meme culture. The paper traces the antecedents of this culture and attempts to analyze the distinctive features of 'memes'. The paper tries to figure out ways in which memes evolve as a 'network' and the manner in which they are used by 'networking individuals' to a purpose of creating a 'networked society'. The meme in this 'Networked society' becomes an artifact of cultural participation wherein 'netizens' adopt, twist and tweak the 'given', subvert the 'original' to form 'new' yet recognizable shared experience of 'relationality'.

Keywords: Social Networking, Memes, Internet, Relational, Networked Society.

Introduction

The Trump family visited Pope Francis in the Vatican on 24th May 2017. This visit came after a history of Pope Francis and Donald Trump disagreeing on several issues, including global warming and immigration. During the visit the photo op of the Pope with the Trump family wherein he is seen looking unhappy while Trump has a big grin, received several interpretations on Twitter. Some called it the “First Still from Avengers: Infinity War”, while someone captioned it as, “Trump and Pope leaving room for the Holy Spirit”. The art work in the background was altered by internet users and the remixed versions, with various captions, eliciting humour, were tweeted. The 'Trump and the Pope' meme saw various avatars. In 2012 the video of PSY, South Korean singer's “Gangnam Style” was replicated in numerous ways right from digital users of the internet from Indonesia and Spain, Russia and Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia. The altered stance 'horse-riding dance' was reused by replacing PSY with local protagonists, individualized local backgrounds, creating the “Mitt Romney Style”, “the Singaporean Style” and the “Arab Style” thereby popularizing the “Gangnam Style” into an “Internet meme” (Limor 1).

The term 'meme' was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his noted work *The Selfish Gene* 1976 in a chapter titled 'Memes: the new replicators'. He defines the term as “a replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (192). Dawkins enumerates “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (192) as forms of memes that are “living structures” which use the human brain to propagate itself. Dawkins exemplified that “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell” (192). Dawkins asserts that “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins, 192).

Components of Meme

Mimesis or Imitation is a crucial component of a meme. Christian Bauckhage in his article 'Insights into Internet Memes' defines memes as a “cultural anlagen of genes” that explain the way in which “rumors, catch-phrases, melodies or fashion trends replicate through a population” (Bauckhage, 42). Shifman Limor in *Memes in Digital Culture* (2013) isolates three dimensions of cultural items that are

imitated through a meme content, form and stance. According to Limor 'content' refers to the text that includes the ideas and ideologies conveyed by it. The 'form' relates to visual/audible dimensions of the message. 'Stance' is information conveyed by the memes about their own "communication". More specifically, Limor understands 'stance' by the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees and other potential speakers (Limor 40)

According to Segev, E., Nissenbaum, A., Stoler, N. (2015) in their article 'Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness' dissect two forces upon which Internet memes are bound:

- a. shared quiddity which is specific to each family, constituting its singular essence; and
- b. More general qualities of form, content, and stance that draw on the conventions of the "meme culture."

Adaptation Memes

The Internet with its Web 2.0 technologies has facilitated the possibilities of bringing about a meme epidemic. Some memes that start as a private inside joke may make it big through peer to peer circulation that make it 'viral'; such as on April 22, 2007, singer Tay Zonday posted a home-made music video 'Chocolate Rain' on YouTube. The performance was a 'viral' sensation and the performance saw its replications re-contextualized by others in a variety of ways.

PPAP the 'Pen Pineapple Apple Pen' song that featured Piko-Taro, a character created by Japanese comedian Daimaou Kosaka went 'viral' on YouTube and spawned a number of memes; internationally we had the Singaporean version, a goofy dance number by a Filipino netizen, metal-rock versions of the song, etc. The Indian netizens too had a number of versions of the song the PPAP Demonetisation No Change song on YouTube available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IM8Nf89FoA8>, that garnered 162,238 views, the Honey Singh and Baba Ramdev version of the song available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLjsl0wRvqc>, the remixed version of Akshay Kumar Song, etc. Numerous parodies, remixes, mashups or lip-dubs, lip-synch montages of the song adaptations have emerged on the Internet since its release on 25th August 2016, keeping it alive.

Hutcheon in *The Theory of Adaptation* (2016) notes that "adapters often rely on selecting works to adapt that are well known and that have proved popular over time" (29). Hutcheon uses Dawkins' explanation of memes to explain how stories and ideas are adapted. Memes through "continuous mutation" and blending make for high survival value. The memes therefore are forms of adaptation that use "cultural selection" is crucial to adaptation. According to Hutcheon, stories "propagate themselves when they catch on; adaptations as both repetition and variation are their form of replication" (177). With the onslaught of remixes, parodies, modifications, spoofs and mashups the internet memes have gained a fresh lease of life every time. Elaborating upon the qualities that make for high survival value among memes Dawkins puts forth three elements: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. Each of these three elements has now gained a high momentum through the Web 2.0 technologies.

Adaptation studies have so far been limited to traditional performance contexts and have failed to adequately map digital mediums including "practices of adaptations that utilize digital mediums like image, video, and sound the practices of digital composition and recomposition" (Gratch 14).

Adaptation in memes is largely intended to invoke humour, but apart from the very obvious function the underlying possibilities of the values and power structures they support or challenge is an area that needs to be studied. The memes that go viral do make cultural statements. They may be covertly subversive or overtly challenging, one needs to study the reasons that make memes 'viral'.

What Makes A Memes 'Work'?

Henrik Bjarneskans, Bjarne Gronnevik and Anders Sandberg in their analysis of the success of "Kilroy Was Here" meme postulate that 'people strove to join a circle of individuals who "shared the joke" (Limor 26) thereby creating a community or a sense of membership to a privileged group. The memes are not transmitted as they are 'received' but are often subjected to alterations that range from the subtle to the

very obvious. The choice of modification depends upon the individual understanding of what would be accepted by the community with which it is being “shared”. Sharing of meme eventually leads to making a meme 'viral'. “Sharing” has a unique place in the age of social networking. The idea behind the notion of 'like and share' relates to the fact that if 'I' have liked it I would want my 'like-minded' friend to 'like it' and 'share it' in return. But before sharing it a mark of 'individuality' is often etched upon the 'image' or 'clip' that is to be shared.

The process of mutation or 'mutilation' of the received structure/meaning takes place with respect to any or all of the three dimensions put forth by Shifman Limor in *Memes in Digital Culture* (2013) content, form and stance (40). The changes are made keeping in mind factors that will lead others to get themselves entertained and thus 'share' the content and further entertain others too in the process. The bottom line of such 'sharing' process being “if you have enjoyed it, care to share it to others”.

Content of meme: Content that makes people happy/smile, even if it is for a few seconds, is the foundation stone of a successful meme. The humour value of a caption, image or video clip is the most important component of a meme. Just as the popularity of “LOL Cats” and “Cheezburger Network” indicate even simple and silly images are equally powerful. The communicative ability of the artifact is important. The subversive element of the memes is also an important component.

Out of the top twenty memes that were reported to have “nearly broke the Internet in 2016” in the Indian context, (http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/12/20/20-indian-memes-that-nearly-broke-the-internet-in-2016_a_21631450/) the “Ramdev in a yoga posture” meme topped the list. With Baba Ramdev's posture bending over and facing the camera with his head upside down and between his legs posted in the *India Today* Newsweek was adapted in numerous ways by digital users. From captions that questioned the yoga pose to photo-shopping the image onto variety of backgrounds and captions that questioned the impact of the pose were found looming large on digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, etc. Amir Khan's tweet with the photo-shopped image of Ramdev Baba being followed by the Indian Air force Fighter planes captioned : “Baba Ramdev Leading Air force . . . Now Indian Fighter plane [sic] are more reliable” saw a surge of adaptations of the image. The image was placed against a variety of backdrops. A hip hop dancing troupe backdrop caption read: “Baba Ramdev at Patanjali Hip Hop Training Academy”. The caption of a football goal-post background read: “Baba Ramdev practicing to be the goalkeeper for India in the next #FIFA world cup in Russia #FIFA2018”.

Form of meme: Memes are not limited to the form that is being imitated. Users adapt the content to all kinds of media that they can avail of. The scrapping of old 500 and 1000 currency notes by the Indian Government announced on 8th November 2016 that was carried on until 30th December 2016 saw the social media flooded with memes that expressed the woes, aspirations, problems of the general masses, the banking employees, the money hoarders, politicians, celebrities, etc. through creative memes that did not focus on a single form. The Internet not only experienced a barrage of static memes of “*Sonam Gupta bewafa hai*” but was flooded by videos titled “Sonam Gupta Bewafa Hai: Sonam replied to all in this VIDEO ...”, “Sonam Gupta Bewafa Hai an untold story Part-1”, “Viral Sach: Sonam Gupta: Watch the COMPLETE TRUTH of this of this 'unfaithful' internet sensation”, “Sonam Gupta Bewafa Hai !! Award winning [sic] Best Short Film Ever”. A variety of audio renditions of the same meme were also generated.

Stance of the meme: 'Stance' refers to the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees and other potential speakers (Limor, 40). On 10th October 2016 Chetan Bhagat tweeted a picture of a copy of his book *One Indian Girl* and wrote: “#OneIndianGirl in Mykonos, Greece. Send me pics of the book in a beautiful backdrop. Will RT best ones. Let's see your phone camera skills!” The responses to the Tweet catapulted into a number of photo-shopped images of the book against the most hilarious and bizarre backdrops. From the book being used in bathrooms and as toilet paper, to the book being burnt as fuel, to using it for paper cones by street vendors to serve peanuts, the Twitterati was inundated with rib-tickling memes. The adaptation of the 'original' idea by the meme

makers through a variety of stances not only indicate the individuality of the adaptors but also give us a peek into their perspective.

Sense of Involvement: The antecedent of the meme can be traced to the cartoon strips, comical illustrations, parodies and spoofs circulated through the daily newspaper or weekly magazines or movie clips. But there is marked difference. Though the comic strip in circulation did entertain, it lacked the factor of 'personal involvement' crucial to a 'meme'. A comical image of the meme when undergoes transformation through various creative 'consumers' of the image, a 'meme' is born. These consumers are not passive; they actively participate in the 'read and write culture' of the Internet. The constant reciprocity of these consumers make the image their 'own' and thus when sharing it amongst like-minded people 'friends' a sense of communal ownership emanates within its circle of circulation. Thus if the 'Common Man' was R.K. Laxman's creation that represented the average Indians, the 'Dude' is the popular 'macro image' on the Internet that has been 'created' in a number of different ways, each individual is free to adapt the image and "own" his own version of the 'Dude' and recreate another to be shared amongst the internet community. Thus here the 'Dude' is no single entity's creation yet belongs to all and is owned by all, this sense of belongingness and involvement that is created is unique to the social networking culture.

The famous meme "Grandma Finds the Internet", also known as "Internet Grandma Surprise" a photograph of an elderly woman looking at a laptop computer screen with captions expressing shock and bewilderment by what she discovers online is popular on the Internet as it allows its users to express their own bewilderment in a variety of situations as one uses the Internet. A variety of captions emerged and keep emerging, capturing her naivety as an Internet user. Captions such as the following are very popular:

"Computer has a virus. Puts it to sleep early for the night."

"Tracking my cookies? They will never get my recipe!"

"Steve Jobs? Maybe my unemployed grandson can get one!"

"There's a mouse?! WHERE?! I'LL KILL HIM!"

"Returns computer. Because the font is too small."

"Deleted Internet Explorer. Oh dear, I've deleted the Internet."

The Indian demonetization era popularized the "Internet Grandma Surprise" meme captioned: "Learn Internet banking? At this age?" It is the simplicity of the captions that captures the hearts of the Internet users. Users relate their own experiences with that of 'Grandma' which determine the success of a meme. The ability to transform individual expression into social expression is an important factor.

Simplicity of content: Internet memes do not rely on any complicated or philosophically deep meanings. As Nicholas Brown in, "A Defense of Form" puts it they are "a logical product of the internet age, successfully propagated because they are instantly understandable, extremely repeatable, and easily sharable. People catch on quickly, become fluent in the rules, and soon feel like a clever member of a community from the comfort of their own homes" (Brown 21).

Reaching out to help the less knowledgeable: Creating a comic strip, image or audio or video clip requires artistic skill and technical expertise. Individuals with such expertise alone can express and share their thoughts through posters and images. The Internet community understands this problem and caters to solve all hindrances for the 'lay person' devoid of artistic or technical expertise. Meme generators such as the *Meme Generator* | *Create Your Own Meme* available at <https://memegenerator.net/>, *Meme Generator* | *Imgflip* available at <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>, etc. are available online; free of cost, that aid meme enthusiasts to create their own memes through templates. Given such support, generation of memes is thus encouraged. A culture of empathy wherein appreciating creative ventures of others and encouraging others to do the same is seen on communities that share memes on Facebook, Whatsapp, Tumblr, Instagram or Twitter.

Simplicity, Involvement, Sense of Ownership, Belongingness, Urge to Share Experiences, and Empathy are factors intrinsic to the 'networked society' that internet has brought about.

Networked Society

'The Networked Society' is a term used to describe a future ecosystem, envisioned by the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) company Ericsson, in which widespread internet connectivity drives change for individuals and communities. We are definitely on the path to the creation of such a society. Manuel Castells in *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy* (2005) defines the term 'Network Society' as "a social structure based on networks operated by information and communication technologies based in microelectronics and digital computer networks that generate, process, and distribute information on the basis of the knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks" (Castells, 32). According to him the "explosion of horizontal networks of communication" on the Internet allows the emergence of "self-directed mass communication". Such a system thus, for Castells, is responsible for setting up "a new system of global, horizontal communication networks that, for the first time in history, allow people to communicate with each other without going through the channels set up by the institutions of society for socialized communication" (38).

Jan A.G.M. van Dijk in *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media* (2006) maintains that "At the individual level we are witnessing the rise of networking as an explicit and increasingly systematic method of making contacts and improving social relations" (29). Explicating the cultural impact of such a 'network society' Van Dijk reiterates that the digital culture of the 21st century is witnessing more and more people engaged in "processing, reworking or adapting things other people have created" (Van Dijk 192). Van Dijk speaks of the present era wherein digital technology has enabled "people to create their 'own' works of art consisting of all the bits and pieces of the cultural heritage" (192). The 'culture of speed', that is the logical conclusion of the swift increase in technical capacities enabled by the digitalized world, is responsible for the 'dated culture' of the Internet. Thus memes get popularized and become a sensation but how soon they become defunct depends upon a variety of indeterminate factors. It has been seen that certain dead memes have also been resurrected time and again for no apparent reasons and still have gained popularity before receding from the limelight. Explicating the 'culture of speed' of Internet expressions van Dijk argues that the information and communication overload is the reason for the "shallowness in the perception of cultural expressions" (193). According to van Dijk the ephemeral nature of these 'shallow' 'cultural expressions' takes its toll on the usage of language and thus we have an era of "centrality of screens" (Van Dijk 194). The importance accorded to the audio-visual entertainment factor thereby has resulted in "rise of a 'staccato culture' containing a bombardment of stimuli growing stronger and stronger: brief, flashing, swift and full of action" (van Dijk 195). The meme culture, an ever changing fast moving one, is a culture that encourages adaptation in order to satiate the urge to consume fast shots of impressive attention catching cultural expressions.

The question that is often asked regarding the 'temporality' of these short-lived structures is Who gains from these memes? The world of Marketing and Advertising has definitely gained in increasing their brand value through their attention grabbing memes that target their consumers. But what does the 'lay person' gain? The easy to create, consume, share, familiar and witty / funny, relatable experiences shared through memes are 'shared' due to their contribution to creation of relationality in the virtual sphere. No network is possible if the components are not related to each other. The notion of 'interconnectedness' is central to the concept of relationality. Relationality refers to the manner in which individuals are influenced by cultural and social processes and how social structure is worked out through interaction. Rather than harping upon one's autonomy and individual self enhancement, the 'relational self-construal' lays greater emphasis on 'connectedness to others' (Cross et.al., 2002 pg. 400) and behavior garnered towards promoting and strengthening relationships. Relational cognition, relational emotion, and relational motivation are the three components of the Specific Relational Processes of the Relational Self-Construal (RSC) put forth by Michele J. Gelfand, Jana L. Raver, Lisa Hisae Nishii and Karen O'Brien in 'Negotiating Relationally: The Dynamics of the Relational Self In Negotiations'. These components are

essentially present in the interactional processes that take place on the Social Networking platforms.

Relational cognition: This refers to the cognition processes that aid the individual in making connection with others; an increased sensitivity to others' verbal and non-verbal behavior and their goals and interests, attentiveness to information related to factors pertinent to the formation and maintenance of relationships, sifting information for similarities in terms of abilities, traits and beliefs and keeping track of or remembering information related to all relationship building processes. Empathy and garnering of support plays a crucial role as these are essential relationship building materials.

Relational Emotion: The process of triggering responses is based on emotions in a typical Relational Self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Positive emotional responses are triggered when connections are developed and confirmed; on the contrary negative emotions are emitted as a result of failure to connect. Self Esteem is related to the connections that one has made. And Empathy is contagious in the relational self-construal.

Relational Motivation: The prime factor that motivates the relational self is the desire to develop and 'preserve' relationships with others.

All the above three factors are seen in action, though the intensity of each factor may vary, in the process of dissemination of memes on Social Networking platforms such as Whatsapp, Twitter or Instagram.

The internet has expanded the number of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) that we now have access to. The possibilities of increasing the nature of contacts with a diverse range of people have also increased. Nancy Baym in *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (126) notes that as we move from strangers to relational partners on the digital media, we communicate more often, and our communication takes consistent patterns. And once the relationship is established then the ensuing interactions move towards a consolidation of that relationship. If the ensuing interaction threatens the relationship then efforts are made to mend it and reaffirm the lost relationship.

The constant quest of 'consumers' of the meme culture is to popularize the meme and garner maximum 'likes', 'hits' and 'views' so that it can be re-created, mutilated, redefined by others. The viewers are the 'significant others' that are crucial to this process. Thus the narratives are geared towards making a positive impression upon these 'significant others', by gaining their acceptance. An image or 'cultural expression' that starts in a subculture, it has been noted, often gains the attention of 'significant others' outside the subculture, the relational ties that are in process of gaining acceptance and reaching out to others is seen when the subcultural expression often enters into the mainstream. Ardent following of certain memes like those of the latest subcultural trend of "health goth" that began as #healthgoth, was fueled by the social media. The relational selves soon hashtagged selfies on Tumblr and Instagram with images of runners, lifters, yogis and the like with piercings, tattoos and brooding fitness gear. Memes - arty images of people dressed in gothic-like- athletic-conjuring apparel that look eerie and sometimes even creepy became an outrage. The other noted subculture is that of '420, 4:20, or 4/20 (pronounced four-twenty)' became a meme out of the code-term used to call for consumption of cannabis, particularly around the time 4:20 p.m. or on the day of April 20th, and by extension, a way to identify oneself with the cannabis culture.

Until the memes are spreading 'harmless' humour and entertaining others one does not worry about their power and potential. The real worry is when they transition from being about films, or celebrities or silly things to being about ideas more rooted in reality. The impact of the Rahul Gandhi memes is an ideal example. Rahul Gandhi has been the 'punch line' for many online jokes. RaGa memes, videos and tweets have christened him as 'Pappu' and 'Shahazada', the endless "Chota Bheem" jokes on the young Gandhi are a result of his unintentional 'comical' speeches that have been the fodder for memes.

The 'relational ties' on the 'network society' ensure the lifespan of a meme keeping a particular idea alive. The like-minded 'significant others' ensure the 'longevity' of the idea, fueling it with more fodder,

making it more potent and adding to its 'fecundity' as the digital technology facilitates the 'copying-fidelity' of the 'cultural expression'.

Conclusion

Memes are cultural artifacts circulated in the virtual sphere through the process of adaptation and re-creation. Simplicity, Involvement, sense of ownership, belongingness, urge to share experiences, and empathy all work towards the netizens of this 'Networked Society' to create selves that are in the network through 'relationality'. The uniqueness and creativity of the individuals engaged in the meme culture thrive on the support and encouragement offered by the 'significant others' present in the virtual sphere.

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