

Me, Me, Me: It's All About Meme

Katie Shoukry

As Shoukry takes an adventure through the interwebs, she discovers and reports on the basic production and form of memes. As she explores this web trend, she discusses the formula for their particular brand of humor. Finally, Shoukry discusses the importance of relatable comedy in this genre and ultimately defines what a meme means to her, personally.

What's in a meme? That which we call a gif by any other name would be worthy of retweet . . . And after I spend nearly an hour thinking up that little verse, I ponder, what is a meme? I search the all-knowing Google to begin finding an answer, discovering that there is in fact an origin to this trend, as the dictionary definition that was spewed back out at me indicates: "An element of a culture or behavior that may be passed from one individual to another by non-genetic means, especially imitation" ("Meme"). Even though I merely skimmed my search results (as I'm sure anyone would), I conclude that this definition serves only to remind me that, once again, the internet has invaded its proverbial 7th grade vocabulary list and turned a previously little-known word into an overused concept. And yet I still don't know what a meme is, at least in terms of its modern conception. I rack my brain and certain phrases come to mind—funny pictures, funny quips, funny everything. This organization of thoughts brings forth the idea that any internet genre may be so ambiguous that its explanation might be different for each individual audience member. As I scavenge through the internet's every nook and cranny and ponder the subject tirelessly, I come to an over-arching theme that encompasses the subthemes I will also discuss: audience. Within

our investigation of memes, we will look specifically at the basic production of a meme, several subgenres, and the relationship between author and viewer. Finally I will discuss how all of these elements come back around to our main point of audience analysis.

Basic Production

When I told my dad about this article I was writing, being as technologically incapable as he is, he asked me what a meme was. Verbatim, my response was, “a reused background picture that denotes some specific comedic connotation, with a funny, relatable turn of phrase; they are very popular and circulating the internet.” With that, even my father understood and recognized the genre, so I believe this is a good definition of a meme, at least as a jumping-off point. While there are multiple forms that the general term “meme” can entail, I’m going to take this complex genre and narrow it down to the most basic form—a single picture meme with very few words (see Figure 1 for an example). If nearly any audience can recognize the meme in its most basic form (including even my over-the-hill parental units), then it’s a more effective genre and can be circulated with even more frequency.

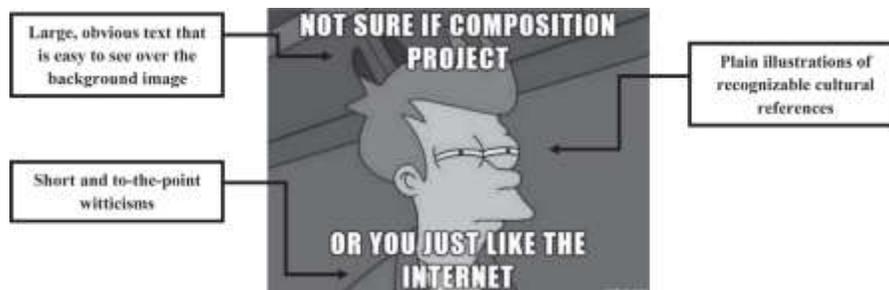


Figure 1. Fry meme (Norris).

As I continue my search, I come across a contradiction in my meme definition. What about when a meme has a background picture that I don’t recognize? There are hundreds of memes bouncing around the internet with references I am unfamiliar with; however, I can still identify them as memes. How do I just know? I soon realize that even from a thumbnail version of any meme, I can still distinguish the bold white lettering of the quip atop a simple image. Granted I don’t have the security of knowing exactly what I’m in store for if I click to enlarge the image, but I expect, from recognizing this tell-tale formatting, that I will laugh, and perhaps out loud, when I open the image. Well, at least that’s what I’ll say when I repost it somewhere else so that the public can appreciate the humor, too.

And yet, this idea of humor still eludes me. Why are they so funny? What makes this genre of humor different from other forms of internet comicalness? With this question in mind, I scoop another spoonful of Nutella and return to the deep crevices of the interwebs in search of an answer.

Approximately one hour later, I think I've come up with some semi-concrete ideas on the matter. First I explored the idea of the humor lying in the succinctness of the wording. As Shakespeare wrote, "Brevity is the soul of wit" (2.2.92). Does this apply here? I think yes. (See Figure 2 for an example.) Humor is mostly derived from the execution. When someone tells a joke and it takes longer than thirty seconds or so, we become disinterested. The same idea applies to memes, as audience

members would rather read a one-sentence joke than a lengthy paragraph leading to an ultimate punch line. The conciseness adds a witty flair that's quick, like an insulting jab at times, and serves to keep the audience interested. Not to mention, the limited time it takes to read the phrase allows for the reading of multiple memes in a tiny length of time—on a break at work, for example. You could rifle through a hundred memes in the matter of few minutes, enjoying oodles and oodles of laughs. I'm not saying I've ever done something so ridiculous. (I totally have.)

Subgenres

Maybe it's because I like the internet, or maybe it was for research purposes, but as I continue my research quest, I soon find myself amidst an endless abyss of memes by means of multiple websites—MemeCenter.com, MemeGenerator.com, Know Your Meme on CheezBurger.com . . . (As I slowly get more distracted by my web-browsing, add another half hour of "investigation" to the hours of time not productively spent!) Scrolling and scrolling through the never-ending webpages, I realize that my personal favorites always tend to be memes popularly referred to as "Not Sure If . . .

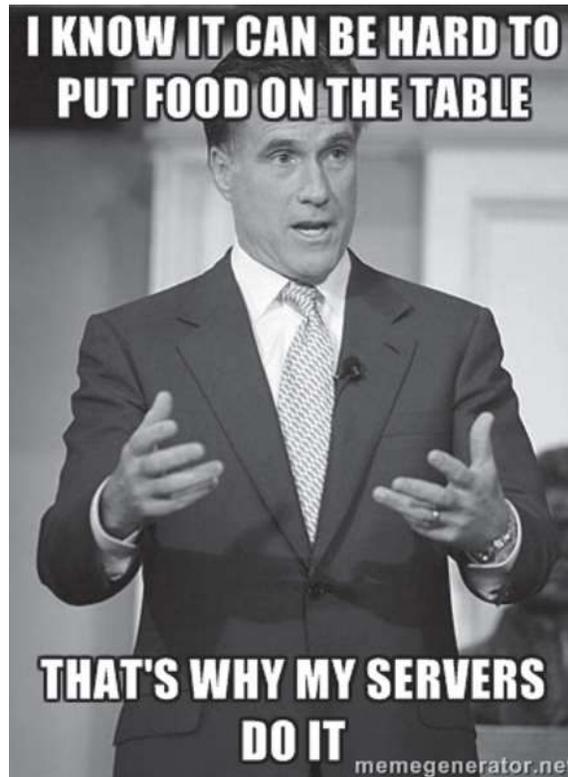


Figure 2. Mitt Romney meme (Filmgeek514).

Fry” (see Figure 1 for an example) and “Condescending Wonka” (see Figure 3 for an example). These reused backdrops set the memes up into categories of sorts, or subgenres, that allow me to pick up on what kind of humor the meme will include.

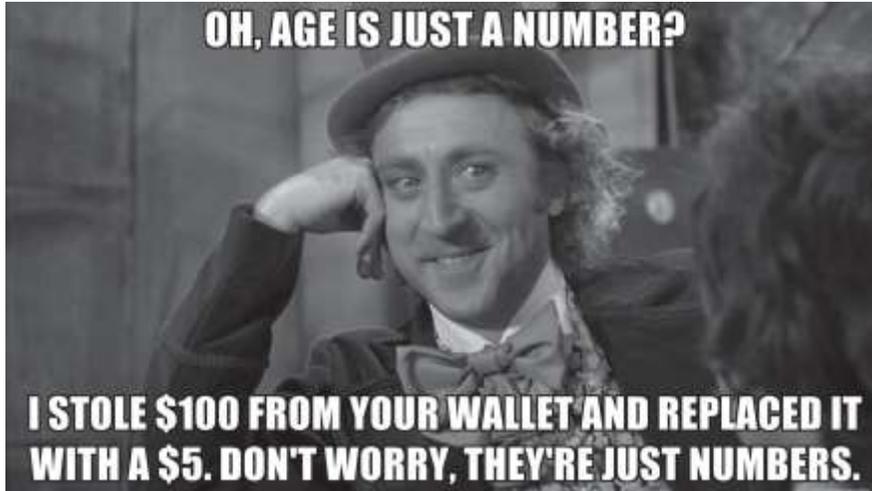


Figure 3. Condescending Wonka meme (canwejustgopretend).

Consider, for example, the “Condescending Wonka” meme. This backdrop features a grinning Gene Wilder from the 1971 *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. This image implies that, most likely, sarcastic and patronizing comedy—matching Wonka’s haughty wide-eyed expression—is to follow after you click to enlarge the image and read the text. The “Not Sure If . . . Fry” meme showcases a doubtful-faced Phillip J. Fry from the adult cartoon show,



Futurama. When you click on a Fry meme, you can expect it to begin with the phrase “Not sure if . . . ,” followed by a jab at a person by comparing two ideas, implying that one is truth and the other is just a cover for the truth. Another example to further clarify the different implications of memes is the meme called “Socially Awkward Penguin” (see Figure 4). Highlighting a particularly goofy looking penguin and a basic blue background, this meme usually entails a brief description of a situation in which someone is considered socially abnormal, foolish, and/or introverted.

You can guess what kind of humor the audience can expect as they maximize

their browser. There are hundreds upon hundreds of similarly recognizable memes, these examples being just a few of them, each containing its own particular brand of humor and connection between image and text.

Relationship between Meme, Creator, and Audience

The way I imagine the relationship between the creator of the meme and the audience is one of close friends who share common interests and enemies. This may be the actual case in some situations, as certain images are made in order to be an insulting joke between two-or-so persons. But sometimes memes seem to have the purpose of deriding a large group of people. For example, in a political meme, it's almost as if each political party—this referring to specific individuals expressing their beliefs on one side of a particular issue—is a catty clique, and the image is a physical representation of an insult towards those who support the other side of the issue (see Figure 2). And after someone takes offense, it's then that the other party responds back with its own meme. And so a war begins, each new addition producing humor for those on “their side” and offense to those on the “other side.” This process has been used in multiple situations with many different “battling” groups. This back-and-forth production is sometimes what makes the humor so special. Even while the genre is largely anonymous, as some memes are nearly untraceable, they can still be so personal at the same time, targeted toward specific individuals.

As I wrap up my searching, I come across a final and important deduction: when you feel like you're “in on the joke” of a meme, it becomes more personal. With most web genres, it's easy to fall into the assumption that the audience is anyone who can read or navigate the internet, but with memes it's different. When you find a meme that contains references you understand and enjoy, it's almost as if, even though many other people probably also understand the implications of the quip, that meme was tailored for you and you alone. So it's as though an unknown author created a relatable joke that you feel is only between you and the author. It feels like an inside joke, something you could share only with someone who has been through a lot with you. This could entail a haughty moment of condescension that you share for an equally disliked concept, or it could also include moments where you think, “Oh my God! Me too! I'm not the only one!” Probably the best examples of memes that give me this feeling are the “Socially Awkward Penguin” memes (Figure 4), previously mentioned. As I sit here and muse over the fact that I just admitted to sharing qualities with an arctic bird, I realize that it's not actually the bird itself to whom I am relating, but actually I'm relating to the creator of the meme and the other people who find humor

(and perhaps just a little bit too much relevance to their own lives) when they view these Penguin memes. Because the internet can be such an impersonal place to interact with people, it's good that we have genres like memes that have the capacity to spark shared laughter between complete strangers. And hey, through memes, they feel like our friends.

After an entire night of weeding through images and analyzing this unique genre, I find myself at the end of my research. If I never see another meme again, it would be way too soon. With one last scoop of Nutella left, I decide that I now better understand what a meme entails. As I mentioned before, most web genres are so ambiguous, it can be difficult to put a label on them. They are made up of multiple other subgenres that could take months of analysis to understand. However, it comes down to this, at least for me, as an active audience member: I want to laugh; it better entertain me. I also appreciate it if the meme makes me feel like I'm not alone when it comes to all my strange antics and humor, that I'm just like plenty other web users around the world. It ought to be quick to read, and I better know what I'm getting myself into by a quick glance at its main image. And while these statements don't constitute a definition per se, all of these qualifications define memes for me and probably for many other members of their huge worldwide audience.

Works Cited

- Canwejustgopretend (Fated to Pretend). "Condescending Wonka meme with text." Picture Post. http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m49zqzqtQd1r3kar9o1_400.png. Original Post. 29 notes. Accessed 1 April 2013.
- Filmgeek514 (FilmGeek514). "Mitt Romney meme with text." Picture Post. http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_marzfuQXDZ1qg5srzo1_400.png. Original Post. 348 notes. Accessed 1 April 2013.
- "Meme." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. An Encyclopedia Britannica Company. Meme-spot (MemeSpot: The Original Meme-related Blog). "Socially Awkward Penguin meme with text." Picture Post. http://24.media.tumblr.com/09318ad68851190d352e4e8a7eaf368c/tumblr_mk53b7rTBE1qe11kdo1_1280.jpg. Original Post. 451 notes. Accessed 1 April 2013.
- Norris, Sam. "Fry meme with text." Facebook. 25 October 2012. https://sphotosb.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotosash3/76273_4965638104210_851542108_n.jpg. Accessed 1 April 2013.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Chicago: Simon & Schuster, 2003.



Katie Shoukry is a sophomore at ISU, studying to be a high school math teacher. In addition to her education degree, she is also working on her “MRS” degree. She enjoys long walks on the beach and romantic dinners, as well as doing crossword puzzles, snuggling, and watching Netflix on cold Friday nights.