



The Llamas that Light Up the World

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Memes: Cute, small animals. Political figures. Historical comparisons. You can find a meme about practically any object in existence. *Llamas:* Fuzzy, weird, and lovable creatures. It was only natural that llamas and memes would get together. But who would have ever thought that llamas could help us uncover a pattern that has been going on for thousands of years? In this article, Avery Fischer investigates a genre that melds two things he loves: memes and llamas (llama memes). But he discovers that memes are much more than what's on the Internet, and trying to determine which llama memes people prefer (and why) is trickier than it seems.

I love memes. I have always loved memes. When my class started this project, I was relatively busy, and our assignment was to write a short description of a subject suitable for writing a paper on. For some reason at that point in time I was thinking about llamas, and I decided to just wing it and write a page on all I knew about them. I cannot say I had any special connection to llamas, or that I saw any potential in them as a topic either, but I really tried to make them as appealing as possible in that paper. Once I had a project, I entered the first stage of my writing research process where I wait a little and just mull over my thoughts. This period of my writing process gives me time to get my ideas together. The problem was that any time I thought about llamas, my mind became drawn to llama memes, which led to researching many different llama memes on Google Images. After a little while of this, I realized that a research paper on llamas would just not work. I could not go and do “real research” on llamas, and I could not think of how llamas had anything to do with writing. However, I became very interested with the memes I was researching, and for this reason I switched topics—deciding to really get into what makes a meme a meme.



Figure 1: A typical meme.

When we think about memes, we often think about comic pictures set with text merging into a single joke (see Figure 1). This is one type of meme, the modern Internet meme. But memes are so much more. Memes are anything that spreads.

This definition was a bit surprising for me because when I started this project, I thought that memes were just amusing pictures online. But I was alarmed when I read Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* and found that he thinks that songs, fashion, and engineering are all memes because they spread (192). Armed with this new perspective of memes, I started thinking about an example for the generic "meme," and I settled on religion and the idea of saints.

Within nearly 2,000 years over 10,000 people have been sainted, and while a handful are well-remembered, most fade. Also, with biographies and written works about well-known saints consistently being created, images of the saints emerge that sometimes upscale their holiness or leave out the messier parts of their lives. This makes saints both people and traditions. Saints are memes because they are ideas that are updated and passed around: a tradition. I realized that in this tradition-based definition, memes are everywhere. Memes are our culture, transferring itself through thoughts, and mutating along the way into different forms.

At this point, I realized I had to get a bit more specific. I did not want my article to be about anything or everything, I wanted it to be

about Internet memes, and so I started my research. While browsing the Internet during my thinking stage, I came across “Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes,” by Linda Börzsei from *academia.edu*, which I started mining for information. It was at this point that I found that “One of the earliest (and maybe even the first) Internet meme was the emoticon” (Davison). The “sideways smiley face” composed entirely of punctuation marks was created on 19 September 1982 by Scott E. Fahlman” (Borszsei, 5). Scott pioneered a vibrant tradition. Though the Internet meme was originally your average :^), this new form of meme was sped up by daily user-to-user contact on the Internet. I also learned that because it was no more difficult than typing out a word, memes evolved quickly. People began experimenting, and this new meme generation began to evolve (see Figure 2). The Internet became a catalyst for memes, making evolution happen in a matter of days (unfortunately, those in my generation were not involved in the genesis of this great event). Now is the time to step back again. Scott’s smiling face was not an isolated incident. Humorous memes began popping up everywhere. During this narrowing-down stage of my writing process, I came across many sites formed to easily make more conventional types of Internet memes, like imgflip.com—the same sites that originally supercharged the meme-making process.

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*-(   Cyclops got poked in the eye
*-)   shot dead
*8-)  Beaker (the Muppet lab assistant)
*:*   fuzzy
*:**  fuzzy with a fuzzy mustache
*:o)  Bozo the Clown
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Figure 2: Alternate forms of punctuation faces from *All the Smileys in the Known Universe*.

Through all of my research surfing the Internet, I slowly came to the understanding that for a long time, Internet memes had lived in relative obscurity, and tucked away far from mainstream culture. A new trend ended this: memes as pictures with text. Those iconic pictures and media from before gained new life as Internet users began captioning pictures with their own parodies of a situation or written thoughts of the pictured subject (see Figure 3). Luckily for us, the pictures and media from before were no longer static, they were being built upon, evolved, and changed. Many people became enamored with this laughable way of viewing the world. I personally fell for the quirky expressions and the lovable nature of llamas. And so, I was able to put together my two research topics.



Figure 3: A diagram of a typical meme.

Since the rest of this article will be about llama memes, I figured I should give some preface to make them more understandable. I searched the Web for widespread llama meme families/causes, and these are my favorites, in chronological order. These memes will be referenced throughout the rest of the article. *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), a Disney movie about an Aztec ruler transformed into a llama, sparked an entire new wave of meme innovation: llama memes powered by the hilarious expressions of Kuzco the llama. Eventually, llama memes moved on from shots of *The Emperor's New Groove* movie to pictures of actual llamas. Several key events have affected llama meme creation, such as the great Sun City, Arizona llama chase of 2015 where two llamas escaped from confinement into a retirement community and were picked up by national broadcasting. Llama memes also take the shape of other memes, such as the photobomb llamas during the photobomb craze (2014), and the “sad llama” epidemic (2013). This evolution of tradition classifies llama memes as part of the larger meme universe.

For my research, I hung up llama memes at my school and Illinois State University (ISU) with an invitation for anybody to take one in order to show that memes evolve over time (see Figure 4). My theory was if people are familiar with memes then they will recognize them, understand them, and think that they are funny even if they are not online. The proof would be that people would take the meme. I hung up equal numbers of memes from four events (a.k.a. meme flurries) set in different time periods, and I reasoned that if tradition was evolving, recent memes would be the overwhelming choice.

My specific research plan was to put out equal numbers of memes from four periods. There were four individual memes from each of these categories, and the memes were labeled 1-16 for data purposes. The categories were:



Figure 4: A picture of my memes at ISU by Mrs. Kieffer.

- *The Emperor's New Groove* (2012–2013)
 - Memes based off the llama, Kuzco, in the 2000 movie *The Emperor's New Groove*.
- The Great Sun City Llama Chase (2015)
 - Memes from two escaped llamas in an Arizona retirement home.
- Drama Llama (Current/Long Running)
 - A llama that likes drama. Usually a funny llama with glasses.
- Famous People/Llamas (Current)
 - Llama memes involving famous people/icons.

The methods and quantities of memes were different between ISU and my school because of constraints I had to work around. At my school I had a smaller audience, so I printed out fewer memes. My school is divided up into a 5-6th grade section and a 7-8th, so I split the memes I was going to use and placed two different batches in two different spots. In total, at my school I printed out **32 memes** (two of each) divided into two groups, and I had **7 hours** of meme observation.

At ISU I had different constraints. My ELA teacher, Mrs. Kieffer (also an ISU English 101 instructor), checked my memes for me, but she only went to ISU on Tuesday and Friday. That meant that the memes had to remain at ISU for a longer time, and that I could not check up on the memes on a day-to-day basis. Mrs. Kieffer had the idea of creating a logbook where people could check out when they took a meme, and she placed my memes in

the ISU writing program offices for a time. In all, I printed out **128 memes** (eight of each) in one place with **14 days** of meme data collection. My final constraints were that when I printed out the memes, some were larger (to my mind, making them more desirable), and some memes may have fallen to the ground, giving the appearance that they had been taken. I eventually decided that I had no control over these steps of my process, and so I accepted them as factors that could skew my results.

The exact results of my memes cannot be solidly compared between ISU and my school because by the end of the day, all the memes at my school were gone. That means that at ISU the memes will be compared by how many of each type of meme was taken, and at my school the measurement was how early in the day the memes were taken. My method for ISU was that I found the average of each category's memes taken to find the most desirable category. At my school, I checked my memes five times, so I ranked my memes 1-5: 5 if the meme was taken in the first period, 4 if the meme was taken in the second period, and so on. Then I found the average of the categories at my school. The results go as follows:

	Middle School Total	7–8th Grades Only	5–6th Grades Only	ISU Writing Program
<i>The Emperor's New Groove</i>	2.375	1.75	3	5.75
The Llama Chase	2	1.75	2.25	2.5
Drama Ll.	2.625	2.5	2.75	2.75
Famous Llama	2.875	3.25	2.5	3.25

My results were very interesting. *The Emperor's New Groove* was a complete surprise (see Figure 5). I was expecting it to be wiped out, being an older subject, but it scored right up there with the top in some categories. *The Emperor's New Groove* scored badly in the Middle School Total count, coming in third. This was because of the 7-8th grade results, where it came in last, tied with the Llama Chase. However, *The Emperor's New Groove* came in first with the 5-6th grades and at the ISU writing program, where it had an especially impressive margin. My conclusion from this is that some of the 5-6th graders may have seen *The Emperor's New Groove* recently (it is on Netflix—I watched it there for my research). I do not know for sure though. They may have just liked the

cartoon llama. My theory about the ISU Writing Program is more definite. Regular students, who I am aging at 18-24, would have been 2-7 years old during the 2000 release date of *The Emperor's New Groove*, being in the target audience for this children's movie, possibly giving it a sizeable push. Grad students would have been older (at least in their late teens) when *The Emperor's New Groove* came out, so they would have been aware of the characters.



Figure 5: One of *The Emperor's New Groove* memes displayed for my project.

The 2015 Llama Chase did not do well, also contrary to my expectations. It came in last with the middle school as a whole, last in 7-8th grade, tied for last with *The Emperor's New Groove* in 5-6th grade, and last at ISU. This was a surprise to me because I assumed it would do well with its recent media coverage, but now I understand that it did not have widespread reception (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: One of the Llama Chase memes displayed for my project.

Drama Llama memes had a reasonably good showing, coming in second with my school's total and 7-8th grade. The Drama Llamas came in first place with the 5-6th grades, balancing with second-to-last place at ISU. Last year, there was a lot of "Drama Llama loves drama" stuff going around with specific people, one of my peers in band even has it written on his music binder. This makes me assume that "Drama Llama" was a phenomenon that circulated among younger children and passed the current ISU students by (see Figure 7).

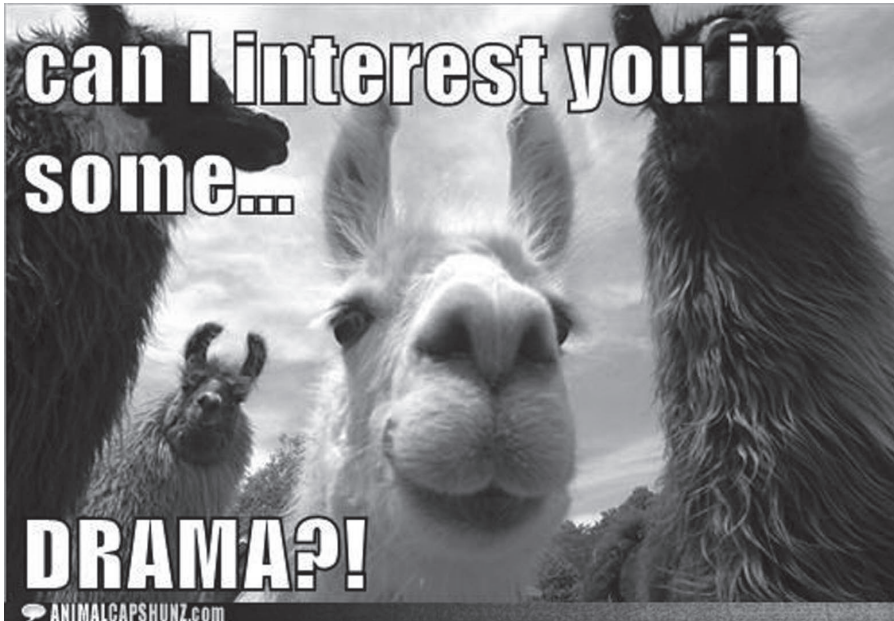


Figure 7: A Drama Llama meme displayed for my project.

Out of all our llamas, "Famous Llamas" were easily the most popular. They scored first in my school's total and 7-8th grade. They scored third in 5-6th grade, but came in second at ISU. I do not think that this was because of prior exposure to llama memes, but instead just plain recognition of famous figures paired with fuzzy horse-like animals (see Figure 8 below).



Figure 8: A "Famous Llama" meme displayed for my project.

In my research method, I cannot be totally sure of the reason why a participant would take or not take a meme, and I will never know because it was completely anonymous. I can make my best guess as to why somebody may have taken memes though. *The Emperor's New Groove* was a very unique showing about how memes change, and I did not initially realize that I was dealing with an audience that remembered so far back. The Llama Chase and Drama Llama were expected results, Drama Llama being current and well known, and the Llama Chase being more obscure. Famous Llamas were a hit possibly because of overall familiarity. As I said earlier, I cannot be sure the exact reason why somebody takes or does not take a meme. I do hope, though, that this hypothesizing and showing you my writing research process can give you an idea of how to investigate your own interests.

I have written an article all about memes, and you have read it. So doesn't it only seem right to add a bit to meme culture =: ^?

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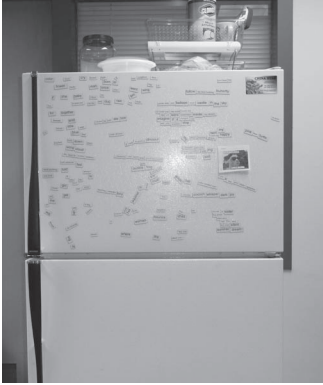
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