

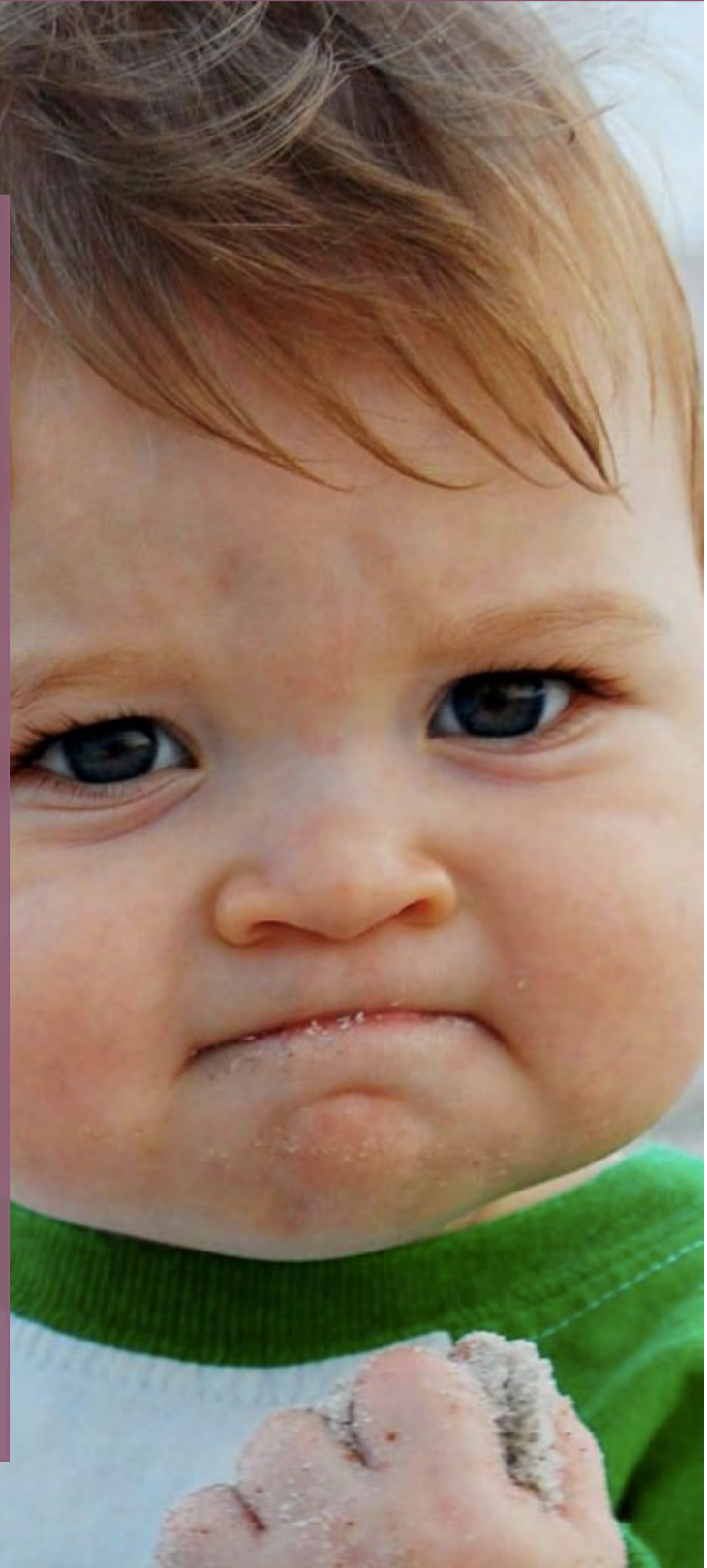
KNOWING MEME KNOWING YOU

How memes influence our society

You probably see 'Demotivators' (for example 'Never give up!') or pictures of a cat with amusing captions every day on social media; you may even have shared images like this with others. These are examples of memes – virally transmitted remixed images with words that poke fun at cultural or social norms and that can change meaning multiple times through further sharing and remixing. In doing so they may not change the world, but they do act as sensitive indicators to public opinion. Finding their origins in the likes of puns and cartoons, internet slang and geek forums, memes are sarcastic and have the ability to turn a message on its head. For example, think about a demotivator that mocks a motivational poster and says '*Never give up! Never stop trying to exceed your limits. We need the entertainment.*' Memes mock their message and their format at the same time. So why are they so popular? Do memes change the way we communicate and think? So what's their superpower?

Answer: Visibility and transmission.

Once invented, memes spread across the internet on 4Chan, 9GAG and social media and are used to express thoughts on personal life, Kim Kardashian, fashion, politics and gender roles – pretty much everything. We see and understand images much faster than text and we respond faster to them. But memes are not just simple visual gags – they always have a hidden joke. To comprehend why it is supposed to be funny, a meme requires thought. That is its real superpower: visibility, transmission *and mental application and thought.*



KEY IDEAS

Memes are used in many ways:

Everyday slang and folklore. Nowadays, people use memes to communicate on all topics. Think about ‘grumpy cat’ or ‘Keanu Reeves’ memes. They are used to express surprise, disappointment, excitement, skepticism. What distinguishes memes from other forms of image-based artefacts is the strong emotion embedded in them. There is always some kind of feeling that the meme directs you towards – like disgust or happiness. Memes are subjective.

Political mindbombs. The founder of Greenpeace coined the idiom ‘*mindbombs*’. He understood that once seen, a striking image cannot be unseen and so sent expensive ships with photographers to follow whale trawlers. These ships were not there to stop the slaughter of the whales but to record it. The Greenpeace activists were able to take heartbreaking pictures of suffering animals which were then circulated to journalists and the world’s press. In public

opinion the issue of whale hunting is now often connected to the images of suffering – all thanks to a ‘*mindbomb*’. Another example of a mindbomb that affected a political career is that of Ed Miliband, ex-leader of the Labour party who was photographed struggling to eat a bacon sarnie. The memes that mocked this breakfast fiasco became criticism of Miliband for being out of touch with working class people. Was this ethical? Was this viral shame deserved? This and many other cases make us question how ethical memes can be and how memes can damage reputations.

Fast-food media. Due to their high visibility and humor, memes serve as fast-food media. They are like cheeseburgers – highly tempting in colour, smell and texture, but low in nutritional value. They feed you up a bit (on the news agenda), but you really need a decent meal (or reading a respected newspaper) to nurture your body and mind.

Memes have this cosy quality of inside jokes and community chat; however, they cannot unite people into communities if other ties don’t exist. Memes do not age well – most of them evaporate within days, but the points they make can leave a lasting effect on society and politics. In countries with censorship, memes can obtain an even bigger value – as people throw them into public discourse to send resistant messages and oppose corruption. But what if sinister forces utilise memes too? These forces can use memes to manipulate people and promote ugly ideas. At what point does a cosy inside joke become a powerful political message? What is clear is that memes are an influential communication tool of our society and that they are here to stay.

KEY READINGS

Denisova, A. (2019). *Internet Memes and Society*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Denisova, A. (2017). People don’t want politics, they want covfefe. *HuffPost*, 1 June. Available at: bit.ly/2DqssbU

Denisova, A. (2016). How the Internet turned US election into a medieval carnival. *The Conversation*. Available at: bit.ly/2EAMH75

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ACTIVITIES

1. Look at the last meme someone shared with you (on social networks or on your mobile). What’s the meaning of it and what emotion does it convey?
2. Do you have a favourite meme or meme pattern (demotivator, or any particular character in a meme)? What makes it attractive to you?
3. Look at social media or the sites like KnowYourMeme.com. Which of these memes can be considered as ‘fast-food media’ or ‘political mindbombs’?
4. Can you create a meme based on a news story from this week? Try to coin a couple of memes and share them (anonymously) with the classroom. Consult with your teacher about the suitable sharing platform (Padlet.com can be pretty good). Have a vote among your classmates and see which meme you liked most and why. What makes this meme resonate with the class?