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## Creative Use of Internet Memes in Advertising

**Beata Bury**

Philological School of Higher Education, Sienkiewicza Street 32, 50-335 Wrocław, Poland

E-mail address: [beatabury86@gmail.com](mailto:beatabury86@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the creativity of Internet memes used in advertising campaigns. A random selection of memes is analysed. It is argued that the creation of Internet memes involves amusing juxtaposition of phrases and pictures. Advertisers have taken advantage of this Internet phenomenon. They use familiar ideas and background knowledge in order to make new and surprising combinations of Internet memes. Advertisers' aim is to play creatively with memetic elements. To conclude, being able to skilfully and cleverly alter the original meme and create the humorous effect are the main goals of marketers.

**Keywords:** creativity, Internet memes, advertising, LOLcats, Doge memes

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has altered the way people live and become an important part of their life. The era of Web 2.0 has given netizens many ways of communicating, for instance via blogs, forums or chats. The Internet allows people to share their ideas, beliefs and thoughts. In recent years, the Internet memes have received considerable attention in popular culture and advertising. Every netizen has been exposed, to a greater or lesser degree, to this Internet phenomenon. A picture of a baby with an amusing tag attached or a video of cute animals that spread through Facebook or Twitter are all examples of Internet memes. Internet memes are thought to be a new Internet-era communication. Companies have recognized the value of the meme and used it as a marketing tool. By means of Internet memes, advertisers wish to generate interest in their products and catch the consumers' attention. Although Internet

memes are not a new area of research, little interest has been given to their use as a marketing tool.

Mememes have been used by marketers, because like celebrities, they attract and catch consumers' attention. Marketers are searching the Internet and other social sites to create some amusing advertising mememes. Some companies hire a team of researchers who browse the Internet in search of suitable mememes for corporate brands such as Nike, Nokia or Lipton.

The Internet meme is the object of analysis in this article. An attempt to define this phenomenon and observe its place in the advertising campaign will be made. The article is divided in to several parts. First, theoretical overview of Internet mememes will be provided. Second, Internet mememes used in advertising will be presented. The final part will focus on some criteria for successful meme making.

The semiotic approach will be employed in order to investigate Internet mememes and their role in advertising campaigns. A semiotic method draws the attention to signs and texts as well as analyses how the images and text connect with each other to form some messages<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. WHAT IS A MEME?**

The term 'meme' was introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976. In the book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins described it as a 'natural human spreading, replication, and modification of ideas and culture' (2007:244). Dawkins claimed that melodies, ideas, styles of clothes are the examples of mememes. According to biological metaphor, mememes, similarly to genes, replicate, evolve and mutate (Dawkins 2007:244).

It can be noticed that Dawkins' definition is general and not connected with the Internet communication. Some researchers have made an attempt to define an Internet meme. According to Magdalena Kamińska, an Internet meme is a colloquial symbol transformed and transmitted via the Internet (2011:61-64). Kamińska argued that 'a web page, video clip, animation, which consists of a joke, a rumour (...) or a photography' could be called Internet mememes (2011:63). Another interesting definition is provided by Patrick Davidson who claims that an Internet meme 'is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission' (2012:122). For Quaranta, an Internet meme is the media object which goes viral and enters spoken language (2010:3). Knobel and Lankshear define an Internet meme as 'the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image' (2006:202). Abovementioned researchers draw attention to some characteristic features of Internet mememes, namely, the rapidity of spreading and online transmission.

### **2. 1. Mememes and advertise**

Through the use of mememes marketers advertise their products. Mememes have become a type of dialogue between the company and the consumer. Marketers do their utmost to manage mememes in advertising. There are some categories which marketers follow to encourage meme transmission. Some of them include:

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<sup>1</sup>A. A. T. Kariko, *Analysis of Internet Mememes Using Semiotics*, <<http://english.binus.ac.id/2013/06/24/analysis-on-internet-memes-using-semiotics/>>, accessed 6.07.2016.

- *Fecundity*: a big number of meme copies guarantees the successful advertising campaign;
- *Simplicity*: simple, catchy slogans spread faster;
- *Primordial drives*: memes which present fear, happiness or food are likely to attract the consumer's attention;
- *Originality*: the more original the meme is, the more attention it attracts (Murray et al. 2014:340-344)

Using memes as a part of company's advertising efforts can draw the attention of consumers and help to promote the service. Creating eye-catching memes can be an effective way of generating conversation in social media.

Murray and Manrai (2014) in their article 'Memes, memetics and marketing' have developed a model which includes six stages to predict the meme success.

These are:

- *Transmission*: memes are encoded in commercials, print advertisements or YouTube videos;
- *Decoding*: the meme is received and perceived by the host;
- *Infection*: the meme resides in the host's brain;
- *Storage*: the host stores the meme;
- *Survival*: the meme competes with other memes;
- *Retransmission*: the meme is spread from one host to another (2014: 340)

In the book *Guerilla Creativity*, Jay Levinson (2001) enumerates three vital advantages of using memes in advertising campaign:

- Meme is a basic unit of communication;
- It can motivate people to buy a product;
- It is simple and easily understandable without language.

Marketers recognize these benefits and use the Internet content to advertise their business. Some businesses use popular topics and characters while others go their own direction and create unique concepts.

### **3. WHAT IS CREATIVITY?**

Creative expression of Internet memes involves making unknown combinations of familiar ideas and actively engaging personal skills as well as knowledge to create new products, ideas or solutions (Boden, 2010). Each day a great number of Internet memes is created and distributed between people.

Various scholars proposed different definitions of creativity. Gauntlett claimed that creativity is made up of three elements, namely, 'a culture that contains symbolic rules; a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation' (2011:10). When it comes to Internet memes, a person uses an image or a video in an interesting way so that other users could recognize the

creativity ingrained in the meme. Then, the meme is copied, remixed and spread to individuals. Ideas which are considered senseless will not spread; only creative ideas survive.

Brink claims that memes are considered creative if they possess the following properties: ‘novelty, unexpectedness, fertility, surprise, adequacy or correctness’ (2010:5). Individuals who wish to be ‘recognized within a community of interesting people’ create novel and unusual memes (Gauntlett 2011:4). It can be said that creativity is not an isolated individual act. It is motivated by the surrounding world which provides the creator with ideas and information.

#### 4. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In order to analyse Internet memes in advertising campaign, I collected a random sample of a few memes from previous years. I followed two sites, memebase.com and someecards.com respectively, to carry out the research. These sites are relevant to my study as the netizens discuss and vote on the content of the most recent memes. Both sites are also influential in the creation and distribution of Internet memes.

When collecting my samples, I have been asking some questions about the Internet memes:

- What message does the meme convey?
- Does the picture fulfill the original idea of the meme?
- How do the consumers respond to the meme?

##### 4. 1. Doge meme

In the last few years, a new Internet meme has appeared: *doge*. The typical doge meme features a Shiba Inu with some short and colourful phrases around the picture. These phrases follow some unconventional rules which have made dogespeak easily recognizable. For that reason, marketers have started using the Shiba Inu image to advertise their products. One of them is Delta Airlines which advertised their services by means of the doge meme.



**Figure 1.** Delta Airline – doge meme.

The idea behind this meme is to spark conversation among consumers. Through the use of memes the company tries to be competitive and engage the consumer with their service. The use of short phrases, slightly ungrammatical catches the consumer's attention.

### 3. 2. Grumpy Cat meme

Grumpy Cat is a well-known meme which presents a photo of a cat with a dissatisfied face, usually with amusing phrases around, for example 'If you're happy and you know it, go to Hell.' The meme has become an Internet sensation and won itself many fans. Marketers have successfully used the Grumpy Cat meme in order to create a buzz and generate a content that consumers will respond to. For instance, Friskies, one of the cat food companies, has used the Grumpy Cat meme to promote their brand (Fig. 2). The meme establishes an emotional connection with the consumer by using humour.



Figure 2. Grumpy Cat meme.

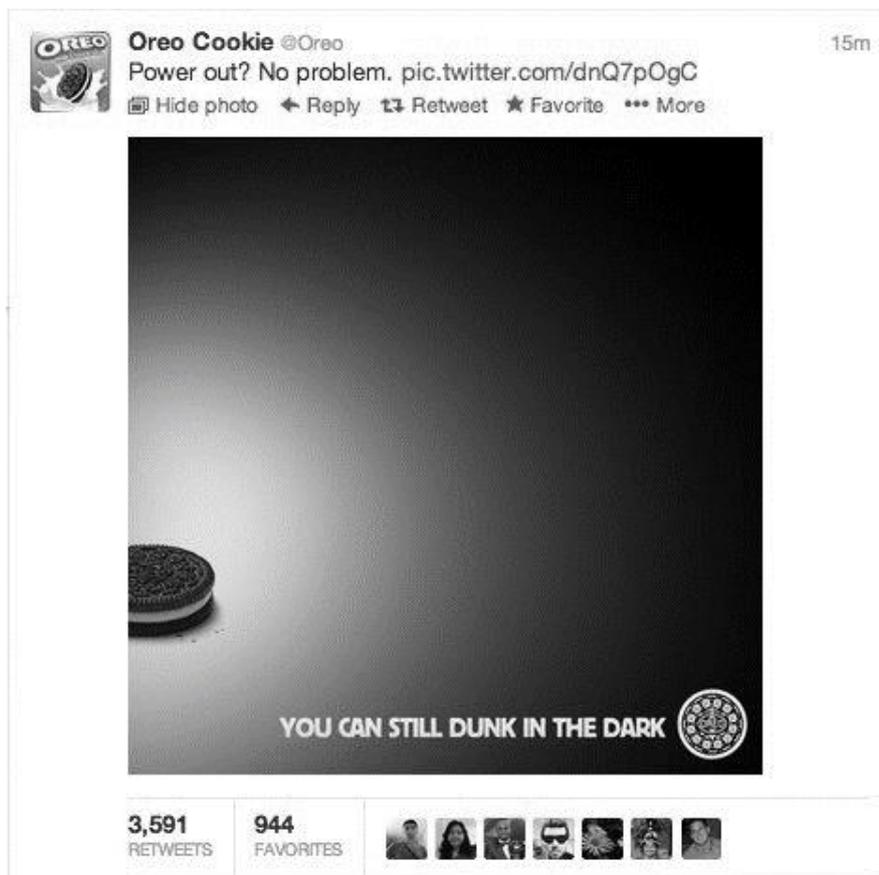


Figure 3. Grumpy Cat in the shop.

The Grumpy Cat meme has also appeared in the frozen food aisle. The store has used the cat's image along with the catchy phrases to appeal to the consumers. By using this recognizable character the marketers wish to attract consumers' attention and provoke conversation about the product. By using the Grumpy Cat image, marketers try to differentiate their product from the competitors. Rather than trying to create something new, marketers may take advantage of the Grumpy Cat meme which is already a viral trend.

### **3. 3. Oreo Cookie meme**

Keeping track of some popular cultural events may help marketers to stay on top of the Internet culture. For instance, Oreo became massively famous on social media during Super Bowl in New Orleans. The Oreo company referred to the power blackout in the Superdome by tweeting the below meme that read 'Power Out? No problem.'



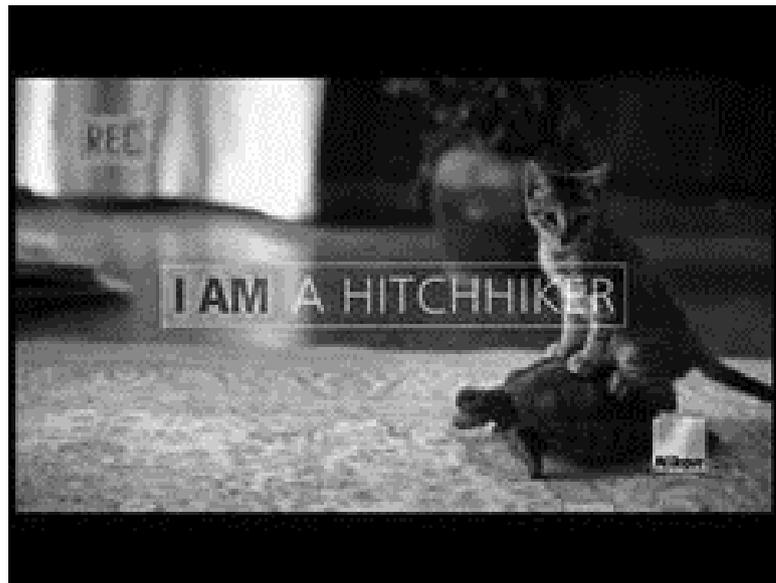
**Figure 4.** Oreo Cookie Meme

The Oreo's message caught the consumers' attention and won the Super Bowl blackout. The audience actively engaged with the message and started passing it on to friends. It can be seen that a simple meme with a clever message can increase engagement and spark conversation among consumers. It is essential for the company to be on pace with the current events in order to continue to grow.

In order to understand the humour involved in the above meme, the consumer ought to possess the background knowledge of the Super Bowl event. Creativity lies here in cleverly playing with the Oreo meme and the Super Bowl blackout.

### **3. 4. LOLcat meme**

It can be seen that companies compete with each other to attract consumers by using creative images to promote their products. LOLcat meme is another example used by marketers as the promotional material. The LOLcat meme contains a picture of a cat in various humorous positions sometimes with a misspelled text. Nikon, one of the most influential corporations, has placed a cute kitten's image in its advert.



**Figure 5.** Nikon's LOLcat advert

Nikon took advantage of the well-known LOLcat meme to spark interest and initiate a familiarity with its desired consumers. This marketing ploy worked well in Nikon's advertising campaign. The viewers might have felt as if they were 'in on the joke.'

### **3. 5. Rage Comic meme**

Rage Comics contain a set of faces which seem to be very amateurish by their appearance. Those faces express various emotions, for instance, loneliness, disappointment or mischief. This meme has been used to talk about simple life, mundane situations with the intention of getting some feedback from the online community. The Rage Comic Meme is a means to socialize and share the experience with others.

Nike, a shoe company, has made the Rage Comic Meme the core of their promotional campaign. The company uses the simple image of a person lazily lying on the Nike's logo. Below the image there is the company's modified advertising slogan: 'Just do it tomorrow...'. The ellipsis points at the end of the slogan may encourage consumers to fill in the blanks themselves.



**Figure 6.** Nike's meme.

The company's aim was to make an entertaining advert to spread quickly among the consumers. It can be assumed that Nike has used the Rage Comic Meme to show that the company is part of the Web culture. The Rage Comic Meme is a humorous form of online communication with the consumer.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The use of meme in advertising is still a new phenomenon. The companies make use of Internet memes in order to show that they are active participants of the online culture. The advertisers do their utmost to make the adverts memorable so that consumers could buy the product. Memes spread quickly and marketers use them to fulfill their needs. Advertisers seek to attract consumers by creating amusing and humorous memes. It is said that humour is the most effective promotional tool. Consumers tend to share funny videos and photos which may stay in their minds. Advertisers realize that the Internet memes provide opportunities to be creative and playful. I have focused my attention on memes in the form of pictures and accompanied by a short text. These memes are one of the most common forms of advertising and entertainment in the Internet environment and catch the netizens' attention.

To conclude, advertisers use Internet memes in creative ways. Memes have become the integral part of the online environment and, now, they influence the offline world of adverts. Marketers take advantage of the image-driven society and make Internet memes core of their advertising campaigns.

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