# Internet Phenomenon

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## INTRODUCTION

Internet phenomenon is a new field of research. An internet phenomenon is an occurrence on the internet about somebody, a website, or a picture that for some reason captures the attention of numerous internet users and develops a craze that fast-spreads through the internet. The most common internet phenomenon is an internet meme, but also internet celebrities, political campaigns, or simply something out of the ordinary.

## BACKGROUND

Before the internet there were the existence of folk tales and urban legends, folk songs and oral poetry as a way share content (Duggan, Haase, & Callow, 2016). Internet phenomenona have often been compared to folklore and urban legends; however there is one significant difference in that folklore was passed on in an oral culture of illiterates. Internet on the other hand sharing are mostly done among 21st Century literates and often stored on servers for other people to see. In this sense sharing internet phenomenona are closer to chain letters except the internet technology makes the process a lot easier and faster and may spread globally within minutes.

"Ideas are transmitted, often without critical assessment, across a broad array of minds and this uncoordinated flow of information is associated with "bad ideas" or "ruinous fads and foolish fashions." (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 307)

With 21st Century computer technology any idea or creation has the potential to spread like wildfire globally on the internet and if they do they become internet phenomena.

## INTERNET MEMES

The most common internet phenomenon is an internet meme. The idea of memes takes it root in the memetics of Richard Dawkins but the concept of internet memes have evolved since then. Internet memes has become part of everyday life on the internet. Research has been done to understand this internet phenomenon as regards the development of internet memes, categorization of memes, and how they work.

An Internet meme is defined as a motif that is virally disseminated through the Internet. The motif often undergoes lots of variations (mash-ups) and may consist of sound, picture, movie clip, game and written text, or as is mostly the case, a combination by two or more modalities. Moreover the motif can be connected to only one of these modalities but need not be and in such case may enter different kinds of modalities.

It is difficult to pinpoint the first internet meme. One could argue that the emoticon introduced as the smiley in September 19th 1982 with all the variations of the theme is in fact the first internet meme (Rosenträger, 2008).

The term meme stems from Richard Dawkins controversial work The Selfish Gene referring partly to gene and partly to mimeme, which means to imitate. In his use of the term it is considered as any cultural idea or behavior such as fashion, language, religion, science and sports – cultural DNA reproducing itself (Dawkins, 1976). It is unclear whether Richard Dawkins comprehends the meme as an objective structure, or a metaphor for cultural practices. However, recent use of the term of internet meme has outgrown Richard Dawkins and has become a phenomenon in its own right (Stryker, 2011). According to Mole Empire the

ten most famous internet memes as of 2011 are as follows Keyboard Cat, Three Wolf Moon, Om Nom Nom, Auto Tune, The David After Dentist, Penaut Butter Jelly Time, Christian Bale Rant, Fail, O RLY, and Numa Numa (Smith, 2011). While this of course is by no means based on real academic research, it still gives a clue as to what these internet memes are.

A more systematic approach comes from Know Your Meme (http://knowyourmeme.com/), given that they try to accommodate a database of all known internet memes, and as of 2015 they have collected more than 13,000 meme entries of which at least 2,400 are confirmed, and they have categorized them as regards to confirmation status, what year it came to be, and where on the internet it originated. Wikipedia has descriptions of some of the most famous internet memes. An internet researcher may likewise find descriptions of internet memes on Oh Internet (http://ohinternet.com). On a far more chaotic scale it is possible to find information about internet memes on Encyclopedia Dramatica (http://encyclopediadramatica.se) although it requires skill to understand the in-jokes and to select the right bits of information and knowledge about internet memes. However, with the skill to comprehend Encyclopedia Dramatica, there is indeed information as regards to origins and explanations to a lot of these memes, information that may be difficult if not impossible to achieve by other means, and Encyclopedia Dramatica provides the right context and attitude for these memes, which the other catalogues do not.

Observation of how memes develop can be done, at websites such as YouTube, 4chan, 9gag, reddit, YTMND and Tumblr. While a lot of these memes originates from YouTube or 4chan the key to their success is the viral dissemination through e.g. E-mails, Facebook or Twitter. Memes can also be made by the use of so-called meme generators. These are internet services on which the user can upload images or use a wide range of ready-made images and put in a text-caption.

Since internet memes are a new phenomenon only few studies of have been made and they have all been experimental in their approach, some of which are presented here.

## STUDYING MEMES

A study of Internet memes was conducted by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). They suggest an approach to memes based on three characteristics of memes that according to Richard Dawkins is the key to a successful meme: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. Fidelity is how replicable the meme is. Fecundity is the dissemination speed. And longevity is the staying power of the meme. Furthermore the memes have been analyzed using three general axes: referential or ideational system, contextual or interpersonal system, and ideological or worldview system. During their research, they found that successful memes had three key components: humor, rich intertextuality (references to other works of art), and anomalous juxtaposition (mash-ups of deliberate provocative or off-guard instances of absurdity). Furthermore they made a categorization of internet memes primarily dividing into three groups: 1) social commentary purposes, 2) absurdist or humor purposes, and 3) otaku and manga fan purposes.

Another approach comes from Colin Stryker that conducted his own research of the meme life cycle that he lays out as seven stages (Stryker, 2011). The seven stages are as follows: birth, discovery, aggregation, word of mouth, blog pickup, mainstream exposure, commercialization, and death. It must be added that Colin Stryker says that not all memes goes through this exact life cycle. Some never become mainstream and other jump over certain stages, or follow a different path in order of sequence.

The birth of the meme is where and how it originated. A discovery of the meme could be that if someone posts the meme on a web–com-

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