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What is This?

An anatomy of a YouTube meme

Limor Shifman
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract

Launched in 2005 as a video-sharing website, YouTube has become an emblem of participatory culture. A central feature of this website is the dazzling number of derivative videos, uploaded daily by many thousands. Using the 'meme' concept as an analytic tool, this article aims at uncovering the attributes common to 'memetic videos' – popular clips that generate extensive user engagement by way of creative derivatives. Drawing on YouTube popularity-measurements and on user-generated playlists, a corpus of 30 prominent memetic videos was assembled. A combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of these videos yielded six common features: focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content. Each of these attributes marks the video as incomplete or flawed, thereby invoking further creative dialogue. In its concluding section, the article addresses the skyrocketing popularity of mimicking in contemporary digital culture, linking it to economic, social and cultural logics of participation.

Keywords

imitation, internet, memes, memetic videos, participatory culture, remix, user-generated content, viral videos, YouTube

Introduction

Adolf Hitler: So there are stories about this devastation all over the internet. Right?

Alfred Jodl (Chief of Operations): Well … Whenever you Google 'Hitler,' all we get is more Downfall parodies. The blogosphere is calling it a 'meme'.

Corresponding author:
Limor Shifman, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus 91905, Jerusalem, Israel
Email: mslimors@mscc.huji.ac.il

Hitler [Cracking up]: What is wrong with you losers, the joke stopped being funny in 2008! I thought my legacy was secured. I slaughtered millions and cut a bloody path of destruction across Europe, and for what? So I could be the latest juvenile Web fad? No better than YouTube Fred or the stupid f*cking hamster? […] I had such high hope for original web content […] But this […] this confirms every stereotype about the internet as just one self referential circle jerk among poorly socialized losers. (Available at: http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=7vMUvgce_5s)

The comic device employed here is simple: new subtitles are inserted into a scene from the 2004 German movie *Downfall (Der Untergang)*, in which Hitler is portrayed ranting and raving about his defeat. The first spoof of this scene appeared in 2007, followed by a stream of derivatives juxtaposing the Fuhrer with a battery of contemporary setbacks. For example, Hitler is portrayed as being furious because he has been banned from X-box; becomes distraught when he hears that Michael Jackson cannot perform at his birthday because he is dead; and breaks down when he learns that Ronaldo is to sign for Real Madrid. The massive stream of derivatives has spawned a wave of 'meta-memes' – such as the one quoted above – in which Hitler rages on about these imitations.

This series of Downfall spoofs epitomizes two fundamental attributes of contemporary popular culture. The first is the postmodern representation system of simulacra and pastiche (Jameson, 1991), in which Hitler's image is replicated repeatedly. The second is the constant reworking of texts by internet users, reflecting a so-called 'participatory culture'. Conceptualized as a set of intertwined cultural practices, participatory culture is manifested in new forms of expression, problem solving, circulation and affiliation (Jenkins et al., 2007). Fundamental to this complex web is the practice of reconfiguring content and publicly displaying it in parodies, mashups, remixes and other derivative formats.

In what follows I focus on this widespread phenomenon of content (re)creation, highlighting the relevance of the *meme* concept for its analysis. Defined as units of culture that spread from person to person by means of copying or imitation, memes were identified, discussed (and disputed) long before the digital era (Dawkins, 1976; Hull, 1982).[1] However, the unique features of the internet turned the spread of memes into a highly visible process taking place at a global scale. Using the meme concept primarily as an analytic tool, I aim at uncovering the attributes common to 'memetic videos' – popular clips that generate extensive user engagement by way of creative derivatives.

Memes and the internet

The term 'meme' was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to refer to small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread by copying or imitation. Like genes, memes undergo variation, selection and retention. At any given moment, many memes are competing for the attention of hosts. However, only memes suited to their socio-cultural environment will spread successfully; the others will become extinct. Memes can be ideas, symbols or practices formed in diverse incarnations, such as melodies, catch-phrases, clothing fashion or architectural

styles. While some memes are global, others are more culture specific, shaping collective actions and mindsets (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007).

The meme concept, as well as the field of memetics it seeded, has generated a heated academic debate between enthusiastic apostles and dismissive skeptics (Aunger, 2000). In this article I make use of the meme mainly as an analytic tool, following scholars such as Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Burgess (2008), who employed the concept as a prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture without embracing the whole set of implications and meanings ascribed to it over the years. In particular, I wish to stress that human agency should be an integral part of our conceptualization of memes by describing them as dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural and social *choices* made by people. As elaborated in the concluding section, memes are not treated here as isolated, discreet units, but as the building blocks of complex cultures, intertwining and interacting with each other.

The internet and its various applications provide an ideal environment for large-scale meme distribution, as digital memes can propagate both quickly and accurately (Heylighen, 1996). In addition, the internet's flexibility, ubiquitous presence and accessibility enable users to transform existing memes and create new ones very easily. Thus, the internet has been described as facilitating the accelerated spread not only of texts that were previously identified with oral traditions, such as urban legends (Fernback, 2003) and jokes (Laineste, 2003), but also as nesting the creation of spreadable new visual genres of expression (Kuipers, 2002; Shifman, 2007). Of the various new paths of diffusion facilitated by digital communication, YouTube stands out as a unique platform both for the propagation of memes and for their research.

YouTube memedom: 'Viral' versus 'memetic' videos

Launched in 2005 as a user-friendly video-sharing website by three former Paypal employees and bought a year and a half later by Google for the sum of US$1.65 billion, YouTube has by now become a symbol of contemporary participatory media culture (Van Dijk, 2009). In a comprehensive analysis of the website's political, cultural and economic implications, Burgess and Green (2009) described it as one body with many conflicting souls. On the one hand, YouTube is a central hub – if not *the* central hub – of user-generated bottom-up video content. Its slogan – 'Broadcast Yourself' – captures the fundamental use of the site as a platform for public self-expression, open to (almost) anyone. Thus, it plays a central role in the so-called 'Web 2.0' or 'participatory culture' era (Jenkins, 2006) in which old 'consumers' or 'audiences' have gradually become producers and distributors of new content (Baym and Burnett, 2009; Lessig, 2008). In this sense, YouTube contributes to the turning of a 'read-based' civilization into a 'read and write' society (Hartley, 2004). At the same time, it has evolved as an important site of dissemination for traditional media: excerpts from TV shows, video clips and other types of professional and commercial content are massively viewed on this site. Yet YouTube is not merely a platform for broadcasting content. A growing body of research looks at YouTube as a social network, suggesting that it plays a central role in divergent practices of community building (Lange, 2009).

If the internet is paradise for memes, YouTube is paradise for meme researchers. Not only did this website evolve as a central hub for meme diffusion, it also made the spread, variation and popularity of memes highly *transparent*. Like other websites adhering to the Web 2.0 logic (Benkler, 2006), it constantly aggregates and presents the viewing habits, choices and responses generated by users. The presentation of such data in YouTube is divided into various popularity measurement categories, such as 'most viewed' and 'most responded'. The centrality of this website combined with its built-in popularity measurements makes YouTube an ideal point of departure for investigation of internet memes.

Drawing on observations made by Burgess (2008) and Knobel and Lankshear (2007), as well as on the vernacular of internet users, I wish to distinguish between 'viral' and 'memetic' videos.[2] A *viral video* is defined here as a clip that spreads to the masses via digital word-of-mouth mechanisms *without significant change*. Examples of such texts include extracts from *Britain's Got Talent* featuring Susan Boyle or Avril Lavigne's popular clip *Girlfriend*. These videos are tagged as viral since they spread rapidly from person to person like an epidemic. Used mainly in marketing, the viral metaphor tends to focus on the mechanism of delivery and scale of audience, often overlooking cultural and social aspects, as well as human agency (Burgess, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009a; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007).

The second type of YouTube meme, the *memetic video*, invokes a different structure of participation. I define it as a popular clip that *lures extensive creative user engagement* in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work. Such derivatives employ two main mechanisms in relating to the 'original' memetic video: imitation (parroting elements from a video) and re-mix (technologically-afforded re-editing of the video). 'Memetic' alludes to the act of participation through *mimesis*, a fundamental aspect of this video type. It captures a wide range of communicative intentions and actions, spanning all the way from naïve copying to scornful imitation. Memetic videos, more so than those tagged here 'viral', highlight the unique traits of the internet as a facilitator of participatory culture.

The focal point of this article will thus be memetic videos. The unique status of such videos in contemporary culture is often acknowledged in what I term 'meta-memes'. In these texts (exemplified in the Hitler parody cited above), the memetic video is not only replicated, but also *explicitly* defined as a meme. Meta-memes epitomize the era of 'convergence culture' (Jenkins, 2006) in which content flows across 'old' and 'new' media. For example, meta-memes often acknowledge the success of a particular YouTube meme on television before ironically being uploaded back on to YouTube. One distinctive meta-meme format includes the assembling of many successful memetic videos into one text; for instance, a *South Park* episode in which YouTube stars gather only to be eliminated one by one, or the successful song *Pork and Beans*.

When considering memetic videos it is important to emphasize that derivative work, parody and pastiche existed long before the internet or any other form of mass media. During the last two decades, an extensive body of research looked at derivative work and parody in relation to fandom. In 1992, a seminal book by Henry Jenkins conceptualized fans as 'textual poachers' whose activity is not merely interpretive, as readers, but also creative, as producers of a wide range of derivative texts. Yet, the singular attributes of the

internet – on which copying and imitating texts have become workaday activities – turned these genres, previously produced by the dedicated few, into a cultural logic shared and employed by the many. In order to decipher part of this logic, in what follows I seek the attributes not of the viral, but of the memetic. The question that I address is thus:

- Do YouTube videos that generate a high volume of derivatives share common features? And, if so, what are they?

Identifying and analyzing memetic videos

According to Burgess (2008: 6), successful internet memes incorporate textual hooks or key signifiers that cannot be identified in advance, but only after a video has become prominent through the active selection of users. However, once they grow to be recognizable via massive repetition, they become part of the available 'cultural repertoire of vernacular video'. Since by now a significant number of memetic videos have already become part of this vernacular, it is possible to undertake a post-mortem of their success. In order to identify and evaluate the textual 'hooks' utilized by users to build on their derivatives, I first identified and then analyzed a group of successful memetic videos.

Sampling

The main objective of the sampling process was to identify videos that are very popular and generate a high volume of derivative work. In order to identify such videos, I developed and applied a two-phase sampling method.

Phase One – A list of 'candidate memetic videos' was assembled using two sources: YouTube popularity measurements and user playlists. (1) YouTube popularity measurements – As noted above, YouTube employs various measures to assess popularity, which change periodically. In the time the data was collected (July 2009), the 'all time' popularity rankings (top 100 videos) utilized four rating measures: 'most viewed', 'most responded', 'most discussed' and 'most favorited'. Since this study is concerned with high profile videos, only videos that appeared in at least three of the four popularity lists were selected as candidate memetic videos for the sample. (2) User playlists – In addition to the aggregative lists found on YouTube, I used a more focused sampling source: playlists of internet memes. A playlist is a list of videos that users compile, often in relation to a specific theme. By accessing the playlists of YouTubers, they became 'informants' who pinpointed what they perceived to be central internet memes. I assumed that the focused information provided by such insiders would enrich the data generated only by official measurements, enabling the creation of a more comprehensive list of candidate memetic videos. The playlists were tracked via the search string 'internet memes', which yielded 56 unique lists. I selected as candidate memetic videos those appearing on more than six (10%) of these playlists. A combination of YouTube's popularity measurement lists and the playlists yielded a collection of 58 candidate memetic videos.

Phase Two – Screening the candidate memetic videos and selecting clips for analysis. Two coders screened the list of 58 candidate videos in order to identify the videos that generated a substantial amount of derivatives. The coders viewed the first 20 'most viewed' videos in a list generated when using the clip's name (e.g. *Evolution of Dance*[3]) as a query in YouTube's internal search engine. The assessment of each video sought to determine if it was a derivative of the candidate memetic video; that is, whether it was an imitation, a re-mix or a meta-meme of the original text. Only videos that spawned at least 10 derivatives (out of the 19 scanned[4]) were selected for analysis. At this stage, a threshold of 10 million views for the memetic videos was set (screening out six videos).

This second phase yielded a research corpus of 30 memetic videos – listed in Table 1. This is by no means a definitive or closed list, as many other relevant videos (including the Downfall parody cited above) do not appear in it. However, the systematic sampling procedure employed did enable me to consider it as a good starting point for this exploration.

Analysis

The sample of 30 memes was analyzed by applying qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative content analysis of all texts was conducted by two coders, both native English speakers. We used a sample of videos not included in the final corpus to practice coding. A three-week training period resulted in modifications of the codebook. The final codebook related to the following features of the videos: *format* (e.g. live/animated, edited/non edited); *theme* (a long list of topics developed for coding purposes – e.g. politics, sex, the workplace); the *source*, or who created the videos (traditional media/users); and the level of thematic simplicity of the video (simple/complicated videos). Inter-coder reliability for all variables was between 0.81 and 1.00 (Scott's pi). In addition, the videos were viewed and analyzed qualitatively by the author by applying the principles of thematic qualitative analysis (e.g. Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

Memetic videos: Common features

At first glance, the corpus of memetic videos generated such a dazzling array of seemingly unrelated features that finding any kind of common denominator appeared hopeless. After all, what could possibly connect a guy demonstrating weird dance maneuvers (*Evolution of Dance*) with a face-painted boy declaring 'I like turtles' (*Zombie Kid*); or an annoying dancing banana (*Peanut Butter Jelly Time*) with a boy sticking his finger into his brother's mouth (*Charlie Bit My Finger*)? Yet systematic analysis did yield common features amidst the great diversity. We found six such features common to a majority of the sampled texts: A focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content.[5]

'Ordinary' people

The first feature of memetic videos reflects the most renowned attribute of YouTube: its focus on ordinary people. Seventeen texts in the sample feature ordinary folks whose fame can only be ascribed to their YouTube appearance, and only eight – all music videos

Table 1. The sampled videos.

Title	View count (September 2009)	Date uploaded
Evolution of Dance	126,507,421	6.4.2006
Charlie Bit my Finger – Again!	121,768,843	22.5.2007
HaHaHa	91,866,900	1.11.2006
Potter Puppet Pals in 'The Mysterious Ticking Noise'	68,728,682	23.3.2007
Beyoncé – Single Ladies	68,059,695	14.10.2008
Jizz In My Pants	63,684,583	6.12.2008
Guitar	63,348,525	20.12.2005
Soulja Boy Tell 'em – Crank That	59,312,869	11.8.2007
Free Hugs Campaign	50,721,643	22.9.2006
Weird Al Yankovic – White & Nerdy	49,816,849	18.9.2006
OK Go – Here It Goes Again	47,579,777	31.7.2006
Chocolate Rain	41,763,362	22.4.2007
The Sneezing Baby Panda	40,207,525	6.11.2006
M.I.A. ARTICLE PLANES	37,279,049	16.12.2007
Miss Teen USA 2007 South Carolina answers a Question	36,914,458	24.8.2007
Daft Hands – Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger	33,744,995	6.6.2007
Metro Station – Shake It	32,270,785	14.5.2008
Numa Numa	31,895,853	14.8.2006
David After Dentist	30,192,288	30.1.2009
LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE!	27,136,534	10.9.2007
RickRoll'D	25,023,141	15.5.2007
The Mean Kitty Song	23,260,956	5.9.2007
Dramatic Chipmunk	16,202,960	19.6.2007
It's Peanut Butter Jelly Time!!!	14,831,244	30.1.2006
Star Wars Kid	14,152,533	15.1.2006
Little Superstar	13,247,494	30.7.2006
Leroy Jenkins	12,832,195	6.8.2006
Zombie Kid Likes Turtles	12,629,663	10.6.2007
Angry German Kid	11,914,848	21.6.2006
Diet Coke + Mentos	10,045,150	14.6.2006

– feature mass media celebrities. The 'You-ness' of this corpus is also reflected in the sources that *produced* the videos. Out of 30 memes in the corpus, 17 are clearly user-generated, 10 were coded as originating in traditional media sources, and 3 could not be determined. While these numbers do not indicate a statistically significant advantage of ordinary-people-focused videos over celebrity-focused videos in the corpus, a comparison of our sample group with the pool of candidate memetic videos provided substantial evidence for this trend.

We re-examined the videos that were in our initial candidate meme pool but did not generate enough derivatives to be included in the sample corpus. The vast majority of these widely viewed clips (19 out of 22) were created by conventional media, mostly featuring celebrities. If we compare the two groups – those that generated enough derivatives and were thus included in the sample, and those that did not meet our threshold – the results are highly significant and indicate the tendency of popular user-generated videos to lure more derivatives than *equivalent* corporate/professional videos ($p = 0.00055$; *Fisher's exact test*). These results suggest that if a user-created video achieves a certain level of popularity, it is more likely to generate a substantial number of derivatives than 'traditional' content with the same number of – or even more – viewings.

Similarly to this trend, Burgess and Green (2009) found that whereas traditionally-generated videos are more common in YouTube's 'most viewed' lists, people tend to *react* more to user-generated videos. Such videos are more popular in the categories 'most responded' and 'most discussed'.

But why do these user-generated videos evoke more derivatives? One obvious answer is that this kind of production is simple, and thus easier to imitate (see below). But another key factor may be related to the videos' protagonists: ordinary people may set an achievable goal for others. Moreover, if we look at YouTube not just as a broadcasting platform but also as a community (Lange, 2009), then responding to a user-generated video seems to make more sense than responding to that of a celebrity, as we are communicating with peers. 'Popular peers' might even answer us or comment on our own videos, thus validating our imitation and our potential to attain internet fame. Yet, the protagonists of these videos are not just simple people; as we shall see, they tend to be simple *men*.

Flawed masculinity

While in the initial design of this study gender was not a prominent factor, a quick look at the sample required a change of plan. Men appear as the leading characters, and in many cases as the *only* characters, in 24 out of the 30 videos. Moreover, of the seven non-masculine videos, three feature un-gendered animals and one a dancing banana; only three videos feature women as main characters.

This, however, is not simply a story about male hegemony, at least not in the conventional sense. Whereas in the three videos featuring women as leading characters (*Single Ladies*, *Miss South Carolina* and *M.I.A. Article Planes*) the females adhere to conventional beauty standards prevalent in contemporary Western society, most of the men featured in these videos fail to meet current masculine expectations either in appearance or behavior. Among the 24 videos, there are three overweight characters (*Star Wars Kid*, *Numa Numa Guy* and the *Angry German Kid*); one midget (*Little Superstar*); one constantly perspiring individual with thick glasses (*Chocolate Rain*); and *LeeRoy Jenkins,*

who manages to get his entire group killed in a World of Warcraft game. The collection of male-dominated videos also includes three young boys who also fail to represent the Western male model: *Zombie Kid*; baby Charlie and his big brother; and little David, shown under the effects of anesthesia (*David after Dentist*). Joining this cheerful bunch is Chris Crocker (*Leave Britney Alone*)*, an overtly expressive feminine homosexual.

The assemblage of 'flawed masculinity' videos in this collection of memetic videos can be seen as an extreme manifestation of contemporary representation of men in some mass-mediated genres, particularly the sitcom. Such genres have responded to the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' in contemporary Western society by presenting far-from-perfect men who fail to fulfill basic functions in their personal and professional lives (Malin, 2005). Such sitcoms are characterized by ambivalent sexual politics: they embody a certain rebellion against hegemonic masculinity, yet at the very same time re-enforce traditional norms through the comic framing of their protagonists (Hanke, 1998; Hatfield, 2010).

Similarly to its framing in sitcoms, flawed masculinity is presented in our corpus of memetic videos as comic*, and thus is associated with ambivalence. Yet in contrast to sitcoms, new ideological meanings may be added to such videos through the discursive practices of the users who imitate them. A future exploration of the positions users take when miming these videos – whether they mock or venerate their 'less-than-perfect' masculine protagonists – is thus crucial for understanding the implications of this mode of representation.

Humor

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) found that humor served as a central component of salient memes created between 2000 and 2005. In their analysis they assigned humorous texts to one of two categories: 'quirky and situational' humor, which included dancing badgers, bizarre translations (e.g. the proverbial 'all your base are belong to us') and wacky teenagers; and 'biting social commentary', in which humor was used to address a variety of political issues.

The present analysis of videos created mainly between 2006 and 2008 indicates that humor continues to be a key feature of internet memes: no fewer than 25 of the 30 videos in the sample have a humorous aspect. But while quirky and situational humor is dominant in these videos, not even a trace of biting social commentary humor was found in this specific corpus. In 10 of the videos the protagonists are clearly trying to be funny. Yet a larger group features protagonists who do not (or at least do not clearly) intend to be funny. This category includes, for instance, films of animals and kids; protagonists who may or may not be acting out (e.g. *Angry German Kid*, *Leave Britney Alone*); and those who made a colossal mistake that to their misfortune was videoed (*Miss Teenage South Carolina*).

Three attributes of the comic seem to account for the prominence of humor in this group of memetic videos: playfulness, incongruity and superiority.

Playfulness: As described above, some videos in the corpus are clearly constructed by their creators to be humorous. In these cases the comic tends to be intertwined with playfulness. In his seminal *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga conceptualized play as an open-ended activity, in which people step out of 'real' life 'into a temporary sphere of activity with a

disposition of its own' ([1949]1970: 8). Like game-playing, humor is enjoyed for its own sake (Morreall, 2005), and involves a multi-layered perception of social situations (Raskin, 1985). Comic playfulness may thus lure user creativity by 'summoning' viewers to take part in a game.

Incongruity: According to the incongruity theory of humor, the comic derives from an unexpected cognitive encounter between two incongruent elements, as in a pun, a man in women's clothing, or a dancing banana (Koestler, 1965). Various forms of incongruity were found in the sample. For example, humans were juxtaposed with animals, and masculine traits with feminine ones. Among these incongruous structures, one emerged as particularly prominent: the fundamental yet often subtle incongruity between the audio and visual components of texts. In a few cases, such incongruity is imbedded in the video's format, most notably in lip-sync (e.g. *Numa Numa*); however, in others, it is derived from textual components unique to a specific video. For example, in *Chocolate Rain*, incongruity stems from the contrast between the singer's boyish appearance and his low pitch, mature male voice; in *Charlie Bit My Finger* we *hear* Charlie's big brother complaining about the biting, yet we *see* him sticking his finger purposefully into the baby's mouth.

Two features may explain the salience of audio-visual incongruity in our sample. First, this form of disharmony builds on the medium and its multi-modality: the ability to convey both voice and image, and to 'play' with them through creative editing. But there may still be more to it. In some cases, the gap between what we see and what we hear creates a dissonance, a puzzle that users may feel inclined to solve or further highlight by creating their own versions of the video (for elaboration on ambiguity as motivating re-creation, see Jenkins et al., 2009b).

Superiority: In some cases, play and incongruity are not what the video creators seem to have had in mind. Rather, they feature people who are unintentionally, or at least not clearly intentionally, funny. Here, a different attribute of humor may have a crucial role in generating re-makes – the one connecting the comic with superiority. Espoused in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and centuries later of Thomas Hobbes, superiority theory interprets laughter as the expression of the pleasant feeling of one-upping the other (Billig, 2005). Superiority theories of humor may provide a simple explanation for the rocketing popularity of videos responding to memetic videos such as *David after Dentist*, *Star Wars Kid* or *Miss South Carolina*: some people enjoy not only watching videos of others whom they perceive to be inferior, but also take pleasure in scornfully imitating them, thus publicly demonstrating their own superiority.

Simplicity

Another feature central to the videos in the corpus is *simplicity*. A vast majority of 26 videos were coded as employing a simple construction of their topics or ideas (i.e. conveying one uncomplicated idea or slogan such as 'It's peanut butter jelly time'). Simplicity is also a key feature of the videos' visual construction, as reflected in various attributes: most videos (19) feature one or two performers, and even those with more participants usually focus on one or two of them. In addition, half of the videos – for the most part user-generated – were not edited (i.e. filmed in one shot). Another feature that emerged in the qualitative analysis is the simple design of the frames and settings in

which the videos take place: some are shot against a plain white background (e.g. *Leave Britney Alone*), others in a simple domestic setting (*Numa Numa*), or on a bare stage (*Evolution of Dance*).

Simplicity is an important attribute contributing to the creation of user-generated versions of the meme. While any video can be edited or re-mixed, only a simple one can be easily *imitated*. It is almost impossible for an average user to re-create a persuasive emulation of the visual construction in Avril Lavigne's *Girlfriend* clip, yet one only needs a white piece of cloth, a camera, and moderate talent to remake *Leave Britney Alone*. Simple videos enable people to emulate them in their own vernacular settings, with limited resources, and with low levels of digital literacy.

Repetitiveness

Repetitiveness complements simplicity: most videos in the sample incorporate one simple unit that is repeated throughout the clip. Prominent examples include an annoying ticking noise in the *Harry Potter* video, the highly repetitive lyrics and melody of *Chocolate Rain*, and a banana constantly jumping up and down in the *Peanut Butter Jelly Time* song. Simplicity and repetitiveness are found not only in user-generated content; they are present in several professional video clips in the sample, most notably Beyoncé's *Single Ladies*. Filmed as a single sequence, the video features the singer and two Beyoncé look-alike dancers (i.e. replicators) dancing in front of a plain background and repeating the line 'put a ring on it'.

Repetitiveness may have an important role in encouraging active user involvement in re-making video memes. The meme itself includes a persuasive demonstration of its own replicability and, thus, it contains encrypted instructions for others' replication. In addition, repetitions enhance memorability, a feature described in the literature as important to the success of memes (Pech, 2003). Moreover, in some memetic videos, such as *Evolution of Dance* and *Numa Numa*, repetition is intertwined with imitating another, well known, person. Such videos are themselves imitations, calling for further imitation by others.

Whimsical content

The codebook for this study included a lengthy list of topics that were expected to appear in the videos; among them sex, politics, the workplace, gender, race, ethnicity, sports and religion. Coders were asked to mark the presence or absence of each topic in each of the videos. The analysis revealed that most anticipated topics did not appear in the corpus. Several did appear in a limited number of cases: traditional media content, such as pop-music (*Evolution of Dance*) and films (*Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*) as well as the world of computers and gaming (*Leroy Jenkins* and *Angry German Kid*). If we combine these categories, it appears that the only content type somewhat salient in these memetic videos is related to popular culture. This referencing of pop culture may be connected to the videos' success. Since people may have different opinions on politics, religion or sex; the moment any of these issues is injected, at least some people are bound to be alienated. But one can reasonably assume that most people contributing to YouTube know and appreciate popular culture, simply by dint of being on YouTube.

Aside from referencing pop culture, these memetic videos seem to share the absence of a concrete theme. Or, in other words, they demonstrated a tendency for the whimsical (e.g. 'I like turtles' or 'Charlie bit my finger'). In addition, they share a certain mode of presentation: depicting people playing or performing, often acting in a silly or irrational manner. This combination of human playfulness with lack of concrete content may, in fact, be regarded as an advantage when evaluating the tendency to replicate YouTube memes: users can imitate the playful spirit embedded in the texts, yet inject new themes according to personal preferences.

Conclusions

In a critical essay on the hype surrounding YouTube, Alexandra Juhasz (2008) juxtaposed two forms of video clips that dominate the website: the corporate video and the vlog (video blog). The corporate video is neatly and professionally crafted, displays spectacular images and strong sound and has a clear sentiment. In contrast, vlogs are 'bad' videos, 'made by regular people, using low-end technology, paying little attention to form or aesthetics while attending to the daily life, feelings, and thoughts of the individual'. While the vlog represents an alternative mode of expression and is thus heralded as YouTube's signature form, it is the corporate (or corporate-like) video that, according to Juhasz, dominates the 'most viewed' lists. The heavily viewed clips 'look like television, featuring the faces, formats, and feelings we are already familiar with' (p. 145).

But the 'most viewed' category is just one indicator of popularity on YouTube. Other indicators, as Burgess and Green (2009) noted, measure not only how many people *watched* a certain video but also how many of them chose to *do* something with it. This distinction is fundamental, as it captures the difference between the way mass media has traditionally been evaluated and the way media can and should be analyzed in an age of expanding user participation. In this study, I examined a group of memetic videos that have induced many derivatives. I found that these videos tend *not* to look like television; most of them are closer in their esthetics to the vlog. They are user-generated texts, simple in form, content and plot.

In this sense, one may conclude that 'bad' texts formulate as 'good' memes in contemporary participatory culture. Each of the six features found to be common to memetic videos – the focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content – marks them as textually incomplete or flawed, thus distinct and perhaps defiant of glossy corporate content. Moreover, these memetic videos differ significantly from the viral videos that were included in our initial sample of highly viewed videos but which did not generate enough derivatives to make it into the research corpus. Most of these excluded texts were visually rich, 'serious' and sophisticated music clips featuring celebrities. These findings fall in line with the argument made by Jenkins et al. (2009b) about textual gaps as enhancing the 'spreadability' of content in contemporary participatory culture. Since this media environment is based on the active involvement of users, incompleteness draws in and hooks the users into further dialogue, contributing to the successful spread of the meme. Thus, the ostensibly unfinished, unpolished, amateur-looking and sometimes even weird video invites people to fill in the gaps, address the puzzles or mock their creators. According to Jenkins et al. (2009), such clips

can be described as 'producerly texts' (Fiske, 1987: 83): media products in which gaps and inconsistencies invite viewers to 'write in their absences' and create new meanings.

Yet it is important to note that the features characterizing widely diffused memetic videos are not necessarily compatible with those that are thought to enhance the propagation of other genres. For instance, studies of urban legends and news stories have pointed to informational and emotional selection criteria as pivotal in their diffusion. People tend to spread texts that they find trustworthy, relevant and useful, as well as those that evoke strong emotions (Berger and Milkman, 2010; Heath et al., 2001). These criteria do not fully fit memetic videos. While the 'humor' attribute of such videos may evoke positive emotions that enhance spreadability, the other attributes found in this study may be associated more readily with the tendency to *imitate* content than with the inclination to *share* it. This contrast may suggest, more generally, that the study of memetic diffusion needs to be sensitive to distinctive modes of communicating with texts. Decisions about diffusion are not only genre-dependent, but also action-dependent: what people tend to *share* differs from what they decide to become *involved* with through imitation. Further cross-generic research is needed, however, to substantiate this proposition and evaluate its usefulness.

A further concluding thought relates to the fundamental complexity and elasticity of the meme concept. This study conceptualized memes as texts; in this case, as videos with particular visual layouts, participants and plots. Yet, the meme concept was originally thought of more expansively (Aunger, 2000; Dawkins, 1976), incorporating social practices (e.g. celebrating birthdays) and ideas (e.g. the belief in god). And indeed, when exploring the corpus of videos studied here and taking into account the notion of memes of complex beings, one can arrive at a higher-order-level understanding of memetic videos. It is the proposition that an overall meme being replicated on YouTube is the practice of creating simple and repetitive content that can be easily replicable and imitated by others. Thus, people are emulating not only specific videos, but the cluster of textual traits identified here as catalysts for imitation by others. Transplanting this in the realm of ideas would suggest that more than anything these memetic videos spread the notion of participatory culture itself, a culture based on the active spread and re-creation of content by users.

But this proposition itself raises a fundamental question: why is the practice of creating easily replicable videos so prevalent, and why are so many people driven to imitating videos that others have produced? By way of conclusion, I wish to put forward three prisms for addressing these questions, driven by economic, social and cultural logics of participation.

The *economy-driven* logic relates to the notion that contemporary society is based on an 'attention economy' (Lanham, 2006). Whereas the old economic system focused on 'things', the most valuable resource in the information era is not information but the attention people pay to it. On YouTube, attention can be directly tied to mimesis: the number of derivatives spawned by a certain video is an indicator of attention, and in turn draws attention to the memetic video, in a reciprocal process. This dynamic is particularly pertinent to user-generated content: while attention paid to corporate-generated videos largely relates to the status of stars in mass media, attention to a video created by an amateur is not guaranteed – it can, however, be accumulated through mimetic activity. According to this logic, a video structured to be replicable has a chance to succeed in

YouTube's attention economy. This logic also applies to those who imitate famous memetic videos: emulations may get attention because they are similar to a successful video, and thus will appear in YouTube's 'suggestions' bar or pop up as a highly relevant search result when one is looking for the 'original' memetic video.

The second prism is the *social logic* of participation, and it would suggest that the mimesis of famous videos is highly compatible with the age of 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al., 2003). In our era of accelerated individualization, people are expected to fashion their unique identity and image, and by doing so actively construct their 'selves' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). At the same time, individuals participate enthusiastically in the shaping of social networks, demonstrating an enduring human longing for communality. Replicating popular memetic videos may serve as a way to have it all: on the one hand, users who upload a self-made video signify that they are digitally literate, unique and creative; on the other, derivative videos often relate to a common, widely shared memetic video. By this referencing, users simultaneously indicate and construct their individuality and their affiliation with the YouTube community. Derivative videos can thus be seen as a manifestation of what Patricia Lange (2009) terms 'videos of affinity' – videos that establish the connections between members of a social network. In many senses, this is an old phenomenon in a new guise: the role of memes such as jokes and urban legends in constructing shared identities and communal norms have been widely discussed (e.g. Fernback, 2003; Kuipers, 2002). However, in contrast to textual memes, memetic videos and their derivatives focus much more on the performative self. Uploaders become both the medium of the meme and its message: their faces and bodies are integral parts of these clips. Thus, such videos are emblems of a culture saturated with personal branding and strategic self-commodification (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

This last point leads to a third prism through which the miming phenomena should be examined, one based on the *cultural and esthetic logics* of participation. Offered here only in shorthand, it draws on the notion that memes are not confined to the secluded spheres of Youtube, or even to the internet. If, as argued in the outset of this piece, intertwined memes (combining practical, textual and ideological dimensions), serve as the building blocks of complex cultures, we need to focus not only on the texts but also on the cultural practices surrounding them. Burgess (2008) suggests treating YouTube videos as mediating ideas that are practiced within social networks, shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Such norms are often rooted in the history of pop-culture genres: music videos, for instance, are replicated as part of broader cultures of jamming, re-mix and covers that characterize music making. Along a similar vain, Peters and Seier (2009) analyze the remakes of popular dance videos on YouTube as a new public expansion of a long-time tradition of bedroom dancing. And, as discussed above, the origins of digital derivative works can also be traced in fan cultures (Jenkins, 1992). These examples of historical roots highlight the ways in which practices of re-creating videos blur the lines between private and public, professional and amateur, market- and non-market-driven activities. As such, they encapsulate a fundamental feature of YouTube as a multi-faceted cultural system (Burgess and Green, 2009). Thus, memetic videos and their derivatives can be seen as sites in which historical modes of cultural production meet the new affordances of Web 2.0.

The reverse process, however, is just as valid. And indeed, one sees memetic videos becoming imbedded in peoples' lives in numerous, often unexpected ways. They are

re-acted in weddings and talent shows, bedrooms and classrooms. In such instances, distinct mimetic practices and norms evolve around specific memetic videos. While this study focuses mainly on the textual features of memetic videos, future research should look into the divergent paths taken by users in re-creating these texts. Moving from the study of 'things' to the study of actions, namely from texts to the cultural practices surrounding their mimesis, may lead to a better understanding of the workings (and re-workings) of contemporary culture.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. In fact, memes were discussed way before the invention of the term 'meme'. Studying how practices, commercial appliances and texts spread has been an integral part of the social sciences for the last 60 years. Many works in this tradition follow Everett Rogers' (1962) 'diffusion of innovations', occasionally adapting the memetic framework. However, I submit that the synthesis between memes and diffusion research could be enriched if we were to treat memes not as 'fixed' artifacts but as multi- layered entities that comprise both ideas and textual attributes.

2. Both types of videos can be described as what Jenkins et al. (2009a) term 'spreadable media'. While I agree with the authors' criticism about the fuzziness of previous depictions of viral media and internet memes, I suggest not to abandon these terms, but rather to define them better. The differentiation between viral and memetic media is offered as a step in this direction: it is not clear-cut and dichotomous, but more of an analytic construct that defines two ends of a dynamic spectrum. While still unfamiliar in academia, this terminology is part of Netiznen vernacular, for instance in the popular site 'Know Your Meme' (http://www.onthemedia.org/transcripts/2010/11/26/07). In a narrow sense, both viral and memetic videos can be defined as 'memes' in that they spread gradually from person to person. However, the latter are closer to the original idea of the meme as a dynamic entity that is incorporated in the body and mind of its hosts, while the former are closer, in many senses, to mass-media.

3. The use of the video's name as a search string worked well in the vast majority of cases, except for two videos – *Guitar* and *Hahaha* – for which we had to use video responses and modify our search words in order to extract relevant derivatives.

4. The first result in the list of 20 most-viewed videos for a certain search string (e.g. *Evolution of Dance*) was the memetic video (i.e. except for one case, the memetic video was always more popular than its derivatives). Thus, the coders scanned the 19 videos that followed it. And of course, each of the selected videos had many more derivatives than those appearing on the first page scanned.

5. These six denominators are not discrete – they are closely interconnected and support each other; however, they can be differentiated as textual/aesthetic attributes. For example: simplicity can result from the 'ordinariness' of people who upload the videos, yet it is also a textual feature, which may be further capitalized on by various actors. And indeed, a phenomenon

that merits further exploration is the tendency of some commercial actors to follow 'amateur' esthetics, creating advertisements that are based on simple repetitions, whimsical content and 'flawed/simple' characters. Such ads often result in many user-generated imitations (see, for instance, Cadbury's eyebrows advertisement, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVblWq3tDwY).

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Limor Shifman (PhD) is a member of the Department of Communication and Journalism, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Her research interests include new media, popular culture and the social construction of humor. Dr Shifman's recent research projects focus on political humor, internet memes and the global diffusion of jokes.