

## A Review of “Memes in Digital Culture”

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### Abstract

This review summarizes Limor Shifman’s book *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). The review parallels the book’s three main platforms, which are also the issues Shifman argues must be resolved to integrate the study of digital memes meaningfully into academia and industry. These issues include agreeing on an exact definition of the word “meme,” differentiating memes from virals, and conducting more studies that examine the practices and politics behind memes. The review concludes with a summary of the areas for research opportunities for digital humanists based on Shifman’s articulation of the basics of digital meme theory.

In the 2012 Summer Olympics, female gymnast McKayla Maroney was such a heavy favorite to win the individual vault competition that the conversation among analysts focused primarily on which gymnasts might win silver and bronze medals. Maroney’s presumed dominance made it all the more shocking when she fell during her routine, leaving her in second place with the silver medal. While on the medal stand, Maroney was unable to contain her disappointment and unintentionally made a distinct scowling expression — one that was caught on camera and quickly spread across the Internet. Almost immediately, a “McKayla is not Impressed” website appeared on Tumblr.com, and countless copies of her pose were remixed into photos that showed her (in her exact original pose) in settings that ranged from the grasp of King Kong, to the animated moon of Pandora, to the Situation Room during the Osama bin Laden raid. A meme was born — one that became so notorious, it resulted in a real White House photograph in which President Barack Obama imitated the scowling expression with Maroney. It is digital phenomena like these that Limor Shifman sets out to study and explain in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*. 1

As a prerequisite to discussing Shifman’s book, we should first review the origin of the word “meme.” In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* (republished in 2006), Richard Dawkins truncated the Greek word “mimeme” (which means “something imitated”) to coin the simpler (and perhaps more memetic) word “meme,” which he defines as “a unit of cultural transmission” — in other words, a melody, idea, catchphrase, clothing fashion, or any concept that spreads person to person [Dawkins 2006, 192]. However, while Dawkins’s theories on memes explain the phenomenon of imitating sounds and ideas directly from person to person, Dawkins himself could never have anticipated the explosion of digital memes that would eventually proliferate on the Internet. In fact, Dawkins’s theories on memes remained dormant until the late 1990s, when memes became easily digitized and could quickly propagate at the click of a button [Marwick 2013, 12]. With the advent and popularity of digital photo and video editors enabling participants to easily remix content, memes became commonly associated with the Internet and other modes of digital communication. In extending his own definition of memes as they relate to digital environments, Kenneth Mondschein adds that: 2

...memetics has drawn its strongest supporters from the rather more literally minded camp of computer scientists and devotees of Internet culture — not only because the memetic model of human intelligence is similar to the programming of a computer but because memes are a useful metaphor for describing certain phenomena that occur in the online world. [Mondschein 2005, 1416]

With the rise of Internet-based memes, Limor Shifman authored her book not only to define the digital phenomenon of

Internet memes but also to take “a first step in bridging the yawning gap between (skeptical) academic and (enthusiastic) popular discourse about memes” [Shifman 2014, 3]. As such, *Memes in Digital Culture* is a book that serves as a valuable conceptual primer for meme practitioners and an important preliminary text for digital humanities scholars interested in pursuing research in the theory and practice of Internet memes.

Shifman begins her book by extending Dawkins’s original concept of memes to Internet memes, which she defines as “the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet” [Shifman 2014, 2]. I appreciate Shifman’s definition because it does not constrain the term to image macros and other “Photoshopped” imitations of images that people commonly associate with Internet memes — it also encompasses simpler modes of communication that could include basic text messages. Another important attribute of Internet memes is that they typically share common characteristics with other related memes [Shifman 2014, 7–8], all which are based on one original much like Dawkins’s memes were based on an original cultural component initiated by one person. In her introduction, Shifman poses two premises for her book. Her first premise is that memes have been ignored in the field of communication and should be studied from a communication-oriented perspective. Her second (and more complicated) premise addresses two groups who I believe to be the book’s likely audience — meme practitioners, who are enthusiastic about the role of memes in popular digital culture, and academics, who are often skeptical of memetics as an explanation for behaviors in human and digital culture. Shifman believes an ongoing debate that exists between both groups must be toned down to allow us to collectively ask not which side has the correct perspective on memes but whether or not the concept of memes could simply be useful for anything in general [Shifman 2014, 4–6]. Shifman suggests we must resolve three primary issues before memes in digital culture can be integrated meaningfully into academia and industry. First, we must agree on an exact definition of “meme.” Next, we must clearly differentiate the competing term “viral” from the idea of memes. Finally, we need more studies that examine the practices and politics behind memes [Shifman 2014, 7]. These three issues set the platform for the rest of her book.

3

## Defining Internet Memes

Shifman continues using Dawkins’s theories to apply the word “meme” to the Internet phenomenon of imitating, modifying, and circulating digital content. Dawkins explains that, for memes to spread successfully, they must possess three properties: “longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity” [Dawkins 2006, 194]. Shifman applies these same properties to digital memes by arguing:

4

Online meme transmission has higher copy fidelity (that is, accuracy) than communication through other media, since digitization allows lossless information transfer. Fecundity (the number of copies made in a time unit) is also greatly increased — the Internet facilitates the swift diffusion of any given message to numerous nodes. Longevity may potentially increase, as well, because information can be stored indefinitely in numerous archives. [Shifman 2014, 17]

I agree with the logic Shifman applies in comparing the properties of Internet memes with the properties Dawkins discussed; however, trying to tie them too closely together seems to contradict a well-articulated case in later chapters where Shifman differentiates memes from virals. Meme theory as discussed by Dawkins portrays memes as items being imitated and spread without change as a requirement — for example, workers hearing a coworker whistling a catchy melody and then whistling the same melody themselves. This behavior, which Dawkins describes as being “memetic,” is much like the behavior of a photo or video going “viral” on the Internet. However, Shifman tackles the potential contradiction and suggests we “turn Dawkins’s definition on its head by looking at memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagate well, but as groups of content items” [Shifman 2014, 41]. Using this approach, Shifman offers an exact definition of Internet memes: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” [Shifman 2014, 41].

Shifman not only provides us with an exact definition of Internet memes but also presents a breakdown of Internet meme genres. She categorizes nine specific genres into three general groups that include the documentation of real-life moments, the explicit manipulation of content, and the creation of a “new universe” of meme-oriented content [Shifman

5

2014, 118]. Although this discussion is not critical to defining Internet memes, it is useful information for meme practitioners and academics to use in categorizing their subject matter.

## Differentiating Memes from Virals

Having offered a clear definition of Internet memes, Shifman tackles differentiating memes from virals — the second of the three issues she argues must be resolved before memes can be integrated meaningfully into academia and industry. Shifman defines a viral as “a single cultural unit (formulated in words, image or video) that is spread by multiple agents and is viewed by many millions” [Shifman 2014, 58]. However, in differentiating virals from memes, she says we should think of them “as two ends of a dynamic spectrum” instead of two different entities — after all, a meme often times starts as a viral [Shifman 2014, 58]. When “Baby Cha-Cha” appeared dancing to the introduction of “Hooked on a Feeling” in 1996 (one of the earliest Internet phenomena), the animated video went *viral* as viewers everywhere emailed it to family, friends, and coworkers [Know Your Meme 2015]. However, when the baby appeared dancing at the foot of Ally McBeal’s bed in a dream on the television show “Ally McBeal,” the video became a *meme*. Shifman asserts that “we should think of memes and virals as different modes of engagement rather than as passive versus active formulations” [Shifman 2014, 59]. Memes have a more obvious level of engagement because they require manipulation of the original content. But virals, though easy to perceive as passive because we simply pass them along to the next viewer, may also have a level of engagement because the viewer might include their own comments before passing the viral along. Shifman ties her meme-viral differentiation to academic research by drawing on James Carey’s theories on communications as transmission and ritual [Shifman 2014, 60]. Studies on virals tend to embrace the transmission model of communication and are typically conducted by researchers in marketing and politics — fields in which rapid and prolific spreading of content is paramount. Studies on memes tend to embrace the ritual model of communication as they reflect participants’ cultural beliefs and their desire to share values [Shifman 2014, 61–62].

Shifman also addresses viral and memetic success, positioning the subject in terms of factors that enhance content virality and features that are prevalent in memes. In addressing virality, she recounts a 2012 study conducted by Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman in which the researchers studied the virality of nearly 7,000 online articles from *The New York Times*. Shifman highlights six factors she coins as the “six Ps” that explain how positivity (and humor), provocation (of high emotions), packaging (content organization), prestige (of the author), positioning (page placement), and participation (audience involvement) influenced the virality of the articles in the study [Shifman 2014, 66–72]. To explain memetic success, Shifman separates meme features into those that are characteristic of memetic videos and those that are characteristic of memetic photos. Memetic videos tend to include ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, and repetitiveness (actors repeating something over and over) [Shifman 2014, 74–82], while memetic photos tend to include a juxtaposition between the actor and surrounding elements (often times with a deepened ridicule of the original) or people in frozen-motion poses (in which a ludicrous posture can make the actor appear funny) [Shifman 2014, 90–92]. I believe Shifman’s most important theories on viral and memetic success as they relate to the discussion on meme-viral differentiation comes when she discusses viral and memetic commonalities and differentiators of success. Features that are common to both memes and virals include simple packaging, humor, and tools to engage viewer participation. Features unique to virality include prestige of the author, positioning, and emotional content. Finally, features unique to memetic success include memetic potential (such as repetition) and the presence of a puzzle or problem that requires solving (such as figuring out the juxtaposition) [Shifman 2014, 94–97].

## Studying the Practices and Politics Behind Memes

The last of the three issues Shifman tackles is the lack of studies that exists on the practices and politics behind the creation and diffusion of memes. Throughout the book, Shifman emphasizes the lack of research on Internet memes, even concluding the book by stating “there are considerably more question marks than exclamation points in the state of our knowledge of Internet memes” [Shifman 2014, 175]. However, despite the limited studies available, Shifman was able to offer two chapters discussing practices of Internet memes as they exist in politics and as they are dispersed globally. Of all chapters in the book, these chapters make the most compelling case for the need for future research on Internet memes, demonstrating that memes are not simply a pop-culture phenomenon but that they have a meaningful impact on political campaigns and important social causes. As Shifman argues with regard to political memes, they “are

about making a point — participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there” [Shifman 2014, 120]. Internet memes can also reflect true political participation. Whereas traditional studies of political participation measure involvement through such quantitative practices as voting and political-party registration, modern political participation includes expressing political beliefs and opinions on social causes through blogging and posting satirical text and media on the Internet, thus transforming the perception of political participation to include the engagement in digital media [Shifman 2014, 20].

Perhaps the most obvious example of political participation through digital media came with the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, on which social media had a profound impact. Additionally, as Shifman points out, digital media proves to be pivotal not only for mainstream campaigns but also for grassroots and social movements. After new media was abundantly used during the Arab Spring movement, the idea of mass protests became memetic in large U.S. cities such as New York City and other areas where “Occupy Wall Street” ensued. In these movements, “protesters made extensive use of new media for organization, persuasion, and mobilization” [Shifman 2014, 122]. Shifman suggests that political Internet memes serve three interwoven functions: to persuade or advocate for political candidates in election campaigns; to empower grassroots activities by citizens; and to provide an inexpensive, accessible, and enjoyable mode of public expression [Shifman 2014, 122–123]. Even in nondemocratic societies, Internet memes offer a means of democratic subversion, in which citizens manipulate digital media (which is often censored) to carry out messages for change [Shifman 2014, 149].

The impact of Internet memes for political and social advocacy is probably most evident in their ability to propagate across national borders and cultural divides. Shifman suggests that “memes are rarely confined to a single geographic location” and have in fact “become powerful — yet often invisible — agents of globalization” [Shifman 2014, 151]. To demonstrate Internet memes’ ability to diffuse globally, Shifman cites several studies that included the dispersion of text (email), photographic content (photo with text), and audiovisual content (video). In many cases, the memes undergo “user-generated globalization,” in which they are localized, translated, and distributed globally by ordinary Internet users [Shifman 2014, 155]. Shifman’s discussion on this globalization phenomenon is intriguing, given that corporations invest large amounts of money on their own content localization and translation. Shifman states that user-generated globalization has gone unnoticed in research literature [Shifman 2014, 155] — I believe it is an area of research she should add to her discussion on research opportunities in the final chapter of her book.

## Applying and Studying Memes in the Digital Humanities Field

While Internet memes often serve an entertainment purpose in pop culture, digital humanists can use them as tools to convey messages both within and across cultures and then track them to see how they propagate and evolve throughout their lifecycles. Such a campaign could be useful for studying how different populations and cultures interpret and modify content to serve localized purposes. Similar campaigns can also be useful for simply communicating or promoting commercial or ideological messages across cultural boundaries.

Shifman discusses both controlled studies and spontaneous meme propagation in which participants used memes to express ideologies and rally support for social and political causes. In one controlled study on verbal memes, researchers used the Internet to spread a gender-biased joke about men, women, and computers that poked fun at the agonies of, as the joke’s title suggests, “Upgrading from Girlfriend 7.0 to Wife 1.0.” The joke compared elements of the changed relationship, from the male perspective, to the difficult changes users often experience when upgrading software. The study showed that the joke demonstrated memetic behavior, traveling well across linguistic and cultural borders and even evolving into different “flavors” that reflect the nuances of local cultures. The joke even crossed gender borders and evolved into a version that expressed relationship difficulties from the female perspective [Shifman 2014, 156–159].

Digital humanists can also see the power of memes in expressing political and social ideologies. Shifman discusses the spontaneous propagation of video memes based on a Korean-pop music video called “Gangnam Style,” which produced a large number of derivative videos that spanned many languages and nationalities. Even in the United States, participants modified and circulated the video to mock Mitt Romney and express disapproval of perceived

ideologies during the 2012 presidential election [Shifman 2014, 166–168].

Creating such a study or campaign is relatively easy with present-day tools and social media websites. A digital humanist can create a provocative or promotional illustration (or derive a meme from one) to post to social media websites such as Tumblr.com, Memes.com, and Reddit.com and then monitor its number of views, comments from participants, and postings of derivative memes. Content authors for such studies may achieve greater success in their campaigns by applying the six success factors that Shifman points out (the “six Ps” discussed previously) to help influence memetic interest in their content.

14

## Summarizing Primary Points and Exploring Opportunities for Research

In her final chapter, Shifman summarizes four primary points that she believes merge into a single assertion that “we need to take Internet memes seriously” [Shifman 2014, 172]:

15

- Though its origins predate its use on the Internet, the word “meme” is relevant in understanding a wide range of contemporary behaviors.
- If we define Internet memes as groups of related items with similar characteristics (as opposed to one item dispersed as a viral), we can study them for both their social values and the individual voices behind them.
- We share “viral” content for different reasons than we mimic or remix “memetic” content.
- Internet memes play a key role in politics and global cultures.

[Shifman 2014, 171–172]

At the beginning of her book, Shifman states, “only a handful of studies have actually examined the practices and politics involved in the creation and diffusion of Internet memes” [Shifman 2014, 7]. She brings this claim full circle by concluding with a discussion of four promising areas for research in digital memes: politics of memetic participation, Internet memes as a language, memes and political change, and viral and memetic success [Shifman 2014, 172–174]. As an academic new to and now interested in the study of memes, I found this discussion to be very useful and believe it can help other academics in digital humanities explore new topics for research. Not only did Shifman’s book help me understand concepts and philosophies on digital memes and virals, it inspired me to look more closely at her proposed areas for promising research and to potentially integrate the study of memes in my own teaching, particularly in my courses on developing online content. I believe projects that have students create and then follow the lifecycles of Internet memes and virals will help teach those students how to use such digital phenomena as rhetorical strategies for propagating information and beliefs, including those that can promote political and social ideologies and influence change in society.

Through *Memes in Digital Culture*, Shifman starts a conversation on digital memes and virals and invites others to join the discussion and pursue future research to further our understanding of memes, to which I reiterate her book’s closing remark: challenge accepted.

16

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