

Brands Learning Their Meme A-B-C

Proposition for Meme Marketing as Part of a Brand Viral Marketing Communications

Thanh Huong Le, VNU University of Economics and Business, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

ABSTRACT

The modern marketing communications mix has been experienced an ongoing integration with digital channels. Consumers show their tendency toward online platforms to communicate and consume products and services. Social media was one of those platforms which generates a new digital language and culture, including 'Internet memes'. The viral nature of memes might make them intersect with the study of viral marketing. The purpose of this exploratory study is to review current literature of viral and online word-of-mouth marketing and formulate a proposition of Internet meme marketing nested within the field of marketing. After a review of word-of-mouth marketing, viral marketing, and the existing literature on Internet memes with real-life examples in which brands encountered memes were analyzed. From that analysis a number of lessons - propositions - were derived and summarized. The propositions of meme marketing need a further thorough empirical testing to prove the validity of its claims.

Keywords: marketing communication, public relations (PR), word-of-mouth marketing, viral marketing, Internet memes.

1. Introduction

The modern integrated marketing communications mix increasingly can rely on communication via digital channels. The advent of ubiquitous fast (mobile) Internet connections and the proliferation of smartphones and other connected handheld devices is driving most if not all consumer media content consumption and consumer communication online (Lenhart et al., 2010). Social media adoption rates are growing, the number of big platforms is growing and the time and frequency of consumers checking up on updates growing (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Consumers are more invested in online communication with friends, acquaintances, and strangers and more of their cognitive ability is allocated towards these activities at the expense of non-digital media consumption (Asur & Huberman, 2010).

The communication online on social media has led to the adoption of a new digital language and culture (Deuze, 2006). Younger users of the web, digitally native millennials and generation Z are actively and passively engaged (Wilson & Gerber, 2008) in the creation of a digital culture, along with the cultural artifacts that go along with it, such as customs, traditions, social etiquette, and a language. That new language started its development in early email and IRC communication, in the noughties anonymous image-boards (such as 4chan) added the use of (reaction) images and Internet memes. Those styles of communication were carried over to social media which brought the mainstream online in the last decade (Knuttila, 2011). The most famous and widely used Internet memes from the last 15 years typically originate from anonymous message boards platforms like 4chan, Tumblr or Youtube. They spread via social news sites like Reddit, 9gag and Funnyjunk to the mainstream of the wider social web (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) (Bauckhage, 2011).

The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' in 1976, and according to his

definition any cultural idea, behaviour or expression constitutes a meme (Dawkins, 1976). Religion, sports, music, language, and fashion are memes by Dawkins' definition. However, in modern popular parlance the word 'meme' refers to 'Internet memes' specifically. In this paper the word meme will exclusively refer to Internet memes, unless otherwise indicated. Internet memes are defined by Shifman (2013) as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process. I suggest looking at Internet memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagated well, but as *groups* of content items that were created with awareness of each other and share common characteristics." Following Dawkins' observation that memes act as units of imitation; when engaging with memes users can imitate a meme's content, form, and perspective (Shifman, 2013). Due to their digital format, they are endlessly malleable and spread virally via social media networks. That might make memes very interesting to the field of marketing communication - Internet memes, on the surface, share characteristics of word-of-mouth communication modes (Bauckhage, 2011). The viral nature of memes might make them intersect (in the commercial context) with the study of viral marketing (Murray et al., 2013).

To effectively engage consumers online, brands and marketers will have to learn and adopt this new language of memes (York, 2015). If a brand wants to share its story with the world in the age of social media, it needs to learn how to encode messages for them to reach audiences and resonate and promulgate as word-of-mouth (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). There are some examples of memes designed and utilized to promote products and services (Bauckhage, 2011). Especially in political campaigns, memes are used as tools to shape public opinion - notable instances are the election campaign of U.S. president Obama in 2008, famously dubbed 'the Facebook election'. Memes could be assets for brands as

spokespeople and possess an instant audience who likes them (Sax, 2012). There has been a cursory exploration of the topic in marketing trade journals and websites (Lafferty, 2015; York, 2015). Advertising agencies and marketers look to 'influencers' - popular social media creators - to create viral content and associate themselves with viral content to improve their marketing campaigns (Holt, 2004). Memes can be used to drive traffic to brand's social media accounts. Additionally, building on and mining popular memes are used as a creative cultural strategy for branding (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

The specific topic of the Internet memes in academic marketing communication research is largely underexposed (Murray et al., 2013). This provides a gap that the author of this paper will try to capitalize on. The goal of this exploratory study will thus be to make up-to-date literature review of viral and online word-of-mouth marketing and formulate a proposition of (Internet) meme marketing nested within the field of marketing. For that purpose, the author review word-of-mouth marketing, viral marketing, and the study of Internet memes in computer mediated communication and use this framework to analyse real-world examples and propose a definition and description of meme marketing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing

Arndt (1967) defines WOM as an oral (person-to-person) communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver sees as non-commercial, regarding a product, service, or brand. It is a group phenomenon, an exchange of opinions or thoughts among two or more people (Bone, 1992). Stern (1994) states that WOM relates to the exchange of ephemeral person-to-person (oral) messages between an adjacent source and a receiver who directly communicate in real life. It is assumed that customers cannot create, revise, and record pre-written conversational exchanges about products services (Buttle, 1998). According to Henning et al. (2004), WOM is any positive or negative statement which is made by customer about a product or a brand and spreads to people and organizations through the Internet.

The development trend of WOM is firstly through face-to-face, and now it is possible via all modern communication technologies and the Internet (Fakharyan & Elyasi, 2012). The Internet gives spaces for customers to share their experiences, views, or preferences with others, as well as providing opportunities for institutions to take advantage of WOM (Trusov et al., 2009). Internet word-of-mouth became more prominent through the wider adoption of the online social networks such Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. Some aspects of conventional ways of communication such as face-to-face connections, phone calls, texts, and even email were displaced and replaced by online social networks (Naz, 2014).

As customers normally cannot process all information which is available to them for making purchase decisions, they often resort to WOM communication for help (Duhan et al., 1997). WOM tends to be more important to consumers when buying services rather than goods. Customers who wish to purchase service would prefer to seek information from friends, family, and peers rather than sponsored promotional sources. WOM has been shown to influence an array of conditions: awareness, perceptions, expectations, behavioral intentions, attitudes, and behaviors (Buttle, 1998). WOM can either positively or negatively influence the decisions. It does happen that negative WOM has a more significant impact than positive (Arndt, 1967).

2.2. Viral Marketing

Word of mouth amplified by (network) Internet technology has resulted into the concept of viral marketing (Juvetson & Draper, 1997). Viral marketing, according to Wilson (2000: p.1) is a strategy that stimulates people to pass on marketing messages to other people, thus creates the potential for the enormous growth in the exposure and impact the message. Helm (2000) further explains viral marketing as "*a communication and distribution concept that relies on customers to transmit digital products via electronic mail to other potential customers in their social sphere and to animate these contacts to also transmit the products*" (Helm, 2000: p.159). Kirby and Marsden (2006) subscribe to this view as well. Alternative terms are "stealth marketing" (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), "interactive marketing" (Blattberg & Deighton, 1991), and "referral marketing" (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004).

The goal of companies using viral marketing communication is to reach as many potential customers as quickly as possible with the lowest possible cost, and this goal can be achieved by applying the creative concept of 'word of mouse' (Helm, 2000). When a product or service has value, it will increase the desire to communicate and to transmit the viral message. The objective is to get the message reproduction rate above 1. This means that every user shares the viral message more than once. A reproduction rate higher than one is called the epidemic threshold after which the message spreads exponentially (Watts & Peretti, 2007). For an effective campaign, segmentation and specific targeting of the most likely potential customers is essential, especially in the early stages (Bruhn, 2004). Bruhn (2004) defines target groups as people for whom the message is planned and consists of the potential customers and his or her reference groups (such as opinion leaders and acquaintances).

The word-of-mouth communication via the Internet, known as viral marketing, is a penetrating, quicker and far more effective means compared to the traditional word-of-mouth communication (Helm, 2000). A viral marketing communication campaign is less

expensive compared to many other forms of marketing communication and advertising campaigns (Welker, 2002, Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). Another major advantage of viral marketing is a capacity to effectively reach audiences within a short time frame (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004) as messages transmit at exponentially faster speeds (Helm, 2000; Welker, 2002). MindComet (2008) stresses that viral marketing is not an interruptive technique. Viral campaigns, whether ultimately liked or disliked, are often welcomed by the receiver. A well-designed campaign will spread material that user like to engage with and proactively share (MindComet, 2008). WOM allows the addition of a story allowing for a deeper message. Furthermore, a marketer can get access to diverse audiences and obtain substantial audiences by implementing a good viral campaign (Helm, 2000).

However, viral marketing is often more risky than traditional marketing communication. If done improperly, viral marketing can backfire and create negative WOM (MindComet, 2008). The organizations will face major risk because they have no means of controlling the message and the content once it has been spread to the public (Helm, 2000; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). Backlash and unfavorable word-of-mouth may result in damage to the brand image, reduced customer traffic product or service boycotts, and unfavourable brand associations. In addition to backlash WOM may shape false expectations amongst the public at large or the public may expect something return for recommending the brand. That has brought attention to the legal and ethical considerations when engaging in WOM (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004).

2.3. Internet Memes

Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term meme, and it was Mike Godwin (1993) who first applied the term meme in relation to Internet phenomena in Wired magazine. Dawkins, later in 2013, characterized the Internet meme as a meme deliberately altered and transformed by human creativity (Solon, 2013). Davison (2012) defines an Internet memes as “*piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission*”. What separates Internet memes from normal jokes is their speed of transmission and fidelity to their form. Bauckhage (2011) echoes the notion of the meme as an inside joke or hip underground knowledge and sees the Internet meme as “*the phenomenon of content or concepts that spread rapidly among Internet users*” Memes are an example of user generated content created by collective group of Internet users (Fill, 2016). In the most basic variations memes will spread via message boards, forums, emails, blogs, email instant messaging and social media. As far as content goes memes consist of images (often an image macro), certain catch phrases (sometimes just a word or an intentional misspelling), video- or audio clips, a hyperlink, or a hashtag (Shifman, 2012). Knobel and Lankshear

(2007) include the notion that memes have the power to shape mindset and behaviour of users.

Different scholars identify various separate aspects and/or components crucial to a meme. Shifman (2013) postulates that meme consists of 1) content 2) form and 3) stance. Content would refer to the joke, observation or idea expressed by the meme. Its form would refer the type of medium used (audio, image, text and/or video) and the format (rage comics, image-macro, reaction images follow a prescribed form). The stance would refer to the perspective(s) of the maker and the audience. A maker can be earnest about a topic - satirize a topic and/or (self referentially) satirize the format of the meme (or other memes) with its content or form. Besides, Davison (2012) distinguishes 1) manifestation 2) behaviour and 3) ideal. The manifestation of meme are all its observable and external phenomena: all traces in time and space that it leaves. Behaviour describes actions taken by the maker in service of the meme. The behaviour and its records thus create the manifestation of the meme (e.g., taking a picture of your cat and adding a caption). The ideal of a meme can be explained as the idea or concept it tries to convey - the ideal inspires a meme maker to certain behaviour, which creates the meme, which reinforces the ideal as it could be transmitted to third parties.

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) attempted to identify key characteristics of Internet memes and start by looking at the characteristics Dawkins (1976) attributes to memes in general. The latter singled out three 1) fidelity 2) fecundity and 3) longevity. Fidelity here does not refer to any objective truth but rather that the meme can copy and propagate without fundamental corruption of form and content. The meme should be able to pass from mind to mind relatively intact and stay recognizable. The rate of fecundity is the rate of offspring generation, a strong meme will propagate widely and rapidly. Lastly a meme should have a degree staying power. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) add to these the qualities of memorableness and meaningfulness that memes need to be successful. Ideas that make sense intuitively are more memorable, spread more easily and thus are more meaningful to audiences.

Bauckhage (2011) notes that the dynamic of the spreading of an Internet meme tends to closely resemble that of an epidemic outbreak. Hence the term 'viral' marketing can be used by marketers. Bauckhage et al. (2013) expand on this observation and researched the temporal dynamics of meme related Internet searches. Memes are just fads in subcultures - following rise-and-fall dynamics (ibid). A fad is behaviour related to a new product, idea of activity that is adopted by large groups of people for a short period of time. As the fad catches on, adoption rates grow exponentially and after the novelty wears off - the fad dies (Meyerson & Katz, 1957). Memes that are past their due date, because of overuse and - exposure, are colloquially referred to as 'dead meme'

online (Urban Dictionary, 2021). Only a few Internet memes ever achieve viral status because memes compete for a finite amount of attention by Internet users (Weng et al., 2012). Another reason is the structure of the social media platform which selects what memes get popular. It may be difficult to determine at inception which memes will go viral and for how long- and which stay obscure.

3. Brands confronted with Internet memes

Memes are part and parcel of Internet culture for young consumers and professional organizations are getting affected by these phenomena as well (Lenhart et al., 2010). Corporations, small businesses, and NGOs can be the subject of consumer generated memes, their brand can be, their products can be and their (marketing) communication activity may be (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Murray et al., 2013). In one sense firms are no strangers to viral content, the marketing departments of firms and advertising agencies have been studying the art and science of viral marketing for quite some time (Murray et al., 2013; Holt & Cameron, 2010). However, that approach to marketing can be considered a primitive one-sided approach because these actors were primarily focused on getting marketing content to go viral - and having consumers passively share content (Mindcomet, 2008). In the age of memes, consumers are getting most information via social media, and can generate content of their own beyond selfies (Deuze, 2006; Wilson & Gerber, 2008; Bruhn, 2004). Internet memes have several advantages over corporately produced viral content because they have an in-built audience and memes can adapt over time - keeping audiences engaged more deeply and for longer amounts of time (Asur & Huberman, 2010). In this section a few instances of notable brands and companies that came into contact with memes are analyzed to see if one can identify useful propositions on which to base a proposition for the concept of meme marketing within viral marketing.

3.1. Memes exacerbating and amplifying PR nightmares

PR departments are faced with fall out of scandals and effective memes it could spawn. It needs to learn the language of memes to effectively engage these issues (York, 2015). These memes could damage the reputation and image of the brand severely (MindComet, 2008), and are difficult to erase from the Internet. Memes leave traces and tend to be more memorable than just news articles and general outrage (Arndt, 1967). Notable examples are the fall out of the British Petroleum Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the fall out of the United Express Flight 3411 incident in 2017 and the fall out of the Pepsi television advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner in 2017.

During the oil spill in the Mexican gulf in 2010, which was a big international scandal - the outrage was not only expressed by professionals in the media (Know Your Meme, 2021a). On meme incubator boards like 4chan the

natural disaster and its culprit were memefied and mocked as seen in Appendix 1. Examples shown there are illustrations of early memes that got limited traction, only due to the fact that the social media ecosystem was still in early stages of development (Knuttila, 2011; Bauckhage, 2011). Therefore, the impact of the BP memes remained limited. However, the visual and direct nature of memes are already crystal clear here - the capability to summarize the oil spill incident with smart and jokeful references that appeal directly to the audience that evolved the meme (Sax, 2012). The images seen in all appendixes are representative of definitive forms of memes - that went through various, more primitive iterations in more obscure venues (Knuttila, 2011). The memes were continuously tested for efficiency and improved via (anonymous) crowd contributions (Davison, 2012; Shifman, 2013; Dawkins, 1976). Which makes these memes potentially more powerful than any advertisement or cartoon (both include images and text) a brand could launch (Holt, 2004).

The power of memes coupled to the collective hive mind and the fact that the Internet never forgets anything (images and old memes are instantly accessible) means that no story ever really dies (Bauckhage, 2011). A past scandal remains a liability and is remembered by the anonymous collective and can be brought back and self-or cross referenced (as old and new memes themselves do) with current events compounding damage to the brand (Arndt, 1967). Thus, the BP oil spill is remembered and reinforced as a shared (cultural) reference (Davison, 2012).

PROPOSITION A. *Memes will leave marks like permanent graffiti that are hard to bury - one humorous reference can recall a brand's past transgressions - far more effective than any old headline or news article. The visual and direct nature of memes and their flexibility allows for endless remix ability and thus are a permanent liability to a brand.*

A more recent example of PR disaster reinforced by memes is the United Airlines scandal in which a passenger was forcibly removed from a flight to make space for UA employees. There were multiple videos made with smartphones of security literally dragging a battered man out of the airplane (Know Your Meme, 2021b). This content was widely shared on social media - and instantly - even sooner than professional cartoonists and late-night comics could respond memes started popping up. Popular memes involved violence and battery as seen in Appendix 2. The UA case is a classic example of negative WOM reinforced by memes (Fakharyan & Elyasi, 2012) which could be regarded as crowd sourced and generated advertisements for the negative WOM (Arndt, 1967).

In the hunt for likes, retweets, reblogs and other forms of digital recognition users will try to one-up each other by creating, remixing and reposting witty and clever memes about the topic-du-jour (Wilson & Gerber, 2008;

Bauckhage et al. 2013). To feature and discuss a current event, social media users will use tried-and-tested meme formats with a built-in audience (Sax, 2012). The social media algorithms counting likes and retweets/shares will start promoting the most popular entries. The decentralized and independent nature of the meme generation makes the narrative about the brand hard to steer (Helm, 2000). Because professional relationships with journalists and news outlets can no longer suppress or tone-down the fall out, trying to suppress online stories like this and the memes they generate is notoriously difficult. In most cases this attempt to crush stories only exacerbates the situation (Knuttila, 2011). This is now known as the Streisand effect - named after Barbra Streisand's desperate attempts to remove pictures of her house from the Internet in 2003 which made defiant Internet users extra motivated to share these pictures (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004).

PROPOSITION B. *Memes will amplify negative WOM and are notoriously hard to suppress. After a scandal a brand is subject to mob rule because traditional PR tactics killing stories at the source have become ineffective. Old, trusted meme formats can be employed by social media users in their hunt for digital recognition in the form of likes.*

Not only product-, but production also- or customer service scandals at brands are vulnerable to 'memefication'. Marketing and advertising campaigns that fail to connect or that miss the mark severely will be targeted (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004; Helm, 2000). A notable example of this is the Pepsi television advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner (Know Your Meme, 2021c). The advertisement depicted model Jenner walking off a fashion photography set and joining a youthful protest crowd - and ends with Jenner offering a can of Pepsi to a member to the riot police as an act of (re)conciliation. Allegedly this was an attempt of Pepsi to tap into the polarized atmosphere of protest post-the election of Donald Trump (MindComet, 2008). The problem for Pepsi was that generally everyone was dismissive of the advertisement - both supporters and opponents of the Trump presidency - and the supporters and opponents of the BLM movement were unified in their contempt for a tone-deaf Pepsi campaign. Pepsi was accused of trivializing and exploiting social activism (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004; MindComet, 2008). Hours after airing the advertisement was mocked and 'memefied' - with photoshopped images of a misplaced Kendall Jenner offering cans of Pepsi to people in historical scenes of violence and riots (see Appendix 3). Pepsi cans were even 'memefied' in real life during altercations between opposing groups of protesters in Berkeley 2017, Trump supporters would have themselves photographed offering cans of Pepsi to opposing side - by which the meme entered the real world. Pepsi was forced to end the

campaign and cancel the advertisement the same day - and even issued a formal apology to Kendall Jenner for subjecting her to this debacle (Arndt, 1967).

PROPOSITION C. *All elements of a firm or brand are vulnerable to becoming a negative meme. Even its marketing communication - making potentially controversial, risky marketing campaigns even riskier than they already were.*

Like Pepsi, Electronic Arts (EA), the games maker is a constant target of memes (Know Your Meme, 2021d). EA has grown to become one of the world's leading computer game manufacturers/distributors and grew explosively by acquisition of popular franchises. These franchises were often re-positioned and adapted to appeal to a bigger more mainstream audience - or EA would release games that were not finished yet and if gamers wanted to complete the game, they had to buy downloadable content for price. The fans of these games are primarily young men between the ages 10 - 35 and are more digitally literate than the average consumer (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Therefore, memes to ridicule and frame EA as "the worst" company ever "that hates its customers" and "does not understand them" are legion on message boards and social media pages dedicated to gaming (Bruhn, 2004; Doble et al., 2005) (see Appendix 4).

PROPOSITION D. *The more digitally native a brand's customer base, the more exposed it is to (negative) memes. Due to the evolutionary and viral nature of memes, there needs to be an engaged and passionate audience that will make, contribute to, and spread the meme.*

Additionally, EA is generally careful - and abstains from responding to memes (in)directly in marketing communication, knowing that memes have endless power self-referential satire (Bauckhage, 2011). Being tone-deaf and responding inappropriately with memes would only fuel the fire. What is striking is that the company does not try to battle or respond to the memes directly, presumably following the Internet dictum 'don't feed the trolls' (Knuttila, 2011).

Steve Jobs followed a different approach when a new flagship product, the iPhone 4 smartphone, disconnected when the user held it a certain way because of an antenna design flaw. It occurred during the early roll out of the iPhone 4 in 2010 and it was quickly dubbed 'antenna gate' (Know Your Meme, 2021e). Due to the high-profile status of the brand and product memes followed quickly (see Appendix 5). Jobs himself directly responded and managed to reframe the problem by reframing the iPhone in this instance as 'just another phone' like many of the competitors running android. All suffered from design flaws from some kind - thus making

the mistake 'acceptable' to customers and promising to fix the flaw as soon as possible. Jobs' response to antennagate was lauded as an extremely successful PR victory that reframed what was perceived to be a monumental blunder into an acceptable human error. Thus, saving the product image, the brand image, and sales of any further damage (Arndt, 1967; Naz, 2014).

PROPOSITION E. *There are two ways to respond to negative memes about a brand; discretely try to solve the issues causing the underlying controversy to make memes lose their validity and credibility or attempt to reframe the underlying controversy. However, the latter seems only reserved for very credible brands.*

3.2. Memes as an 'unintentional' promotion of a brand or product

Viral content can be unpredictable. Some brands or individuals create original content or commercial ads posted on social media and then they are unexpectedly spread because it triggers a certain emotion (Watts & Peretti, 2007). There are examples of some brands such as Dos Equis beer, Old Spice shower gel and Salt Bae (individual), creating ads and original content, and then becoming Internet memes in the process (Holt, 2004; Solon, 2013). Which leads to 'unintentional' promotion of a brand or product. Unintentional is written between quotation marks because obviously the marketing communication tools used by the brands involved imagery and catchphrases that were meant to resonate with audiences (Kirby and Marsden, 2006). However, the embrace and wide acceptance leading to 'memefication' is probably unexpected- and at the same time a viral marketers wet dream (Helm, 2000).

The most striking example of a meme derived from a brand advertisement is 'the most interesting man in the world'. A part of an advertising campaign for Dos Equis beer in the United States in 2006 was portrayed by actor Jonathan Goldsmith. Goldsmith's character is known for his catchphrases "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis" and "Stay thirsty, my friends." With the success of the first advertising campaign Dos Equis developed a series of the advertisements of an attractive old man telling adventure stories, giving life advice and culminating in him shown sitting in a nightclub surrounded by beautiful young women saying "I don't always drink beer... But when I do, I prefer Dos Equis." (Know Your Meme, 2021f). The humorous self-parodying style, the use of archetypes (wise old, adventurer sage) and the memorable grammar of the two-part catchphrase made the moment tailor-made for an image macro meme (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Shifman, 2012) (see Appendix 6). The result is a viral meme marketing success because the moment of the advertisement that became a meme prominently features a Dos Equis beer bottle (Sax, 2012).

Thus, garnering billions in 'free' brand exposure (Welker, 2002, Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). The meme became a brand asset for Dos Equis (Sax, 2012).

Old Spice, an American brand of male grooming products, produced a commercial advertisement in 2010, entitled "The man your man could smell like" (Know Your Meme, 2021g). This advertisement copied various elements from the Old Spice example above. Isaiah Mustafa played the Old Spice man - an archetypal attractive man whose whole being pokes fun at the conventions of male attractiveness (see Appendix 7). The ad was filmed in one-take which added an effect that was both cheesy and technically impressive at the same time (Davison, 2012). The commercial spawned sequels and the image of the shirtless Old Spice man along with several over-the-top catchphrases - such as 'the tickets are now diamonds!' and 'the man your man your man could smell like' became image macro memes (Dawkins, 1976; Solon, 2013) associated with the Old Spice brand (Holt, 2004).

PROPOSITION F. *The combination of archetypal characters, a humorous appeal and a recognizable, flexible and remixable catchphrase are key ingredients that could make ads become an Internet meme. The brand should be featured discretely and organically if it wants a chance of being featured in the definitive version of meme when the advertisement goes viral.*

The Turkish chef Nusret Gökçe became a meme when an Instagram video of him salting a piece of meat in his idiosyncratic manner went viral (Kell, 2017). He was renamed 'Salt Bae' by the Internet (see Appendix 8), the image of Gökçe salting meat was used in various memes and videos on the Internet, surfaced on a T-shirt worn by celebrities Rihanna and Ben Affleck and even emerged in Melbourne graffiti. After initial success, he released other movies and pictures of himself in various stages of meat preparation on his social media accounts (Holt & Cameron, 2010), making sure always to include his signature appearance and method of salting (York, 2015; Lafferty, 2015). Gökçe already owned several restaurants named in Turkey and used the awareness generated to (attempt to) open several more around the world (Kell, 2017; Griffiths, 2017). Using his fame and brand forged on the internet fame, he attracts fans and social media followers to his expanding business empire (Helm, 2000; Holt, 2004).

PROPOSITION G. *Many users of social media, both entrepreneurs and normal people can and will use social media to build a personal brand. By creating original and appealing content that organically includes their activities they can capture audiences' attention. It can be an opportunity to create a new brand from being an Internet meme.*

3.3. Memes made and distributed by firms themselves

The Internet can be a clever marketing tool when used with tact. Firms have started to study the use of memes and create their own for online marketing campaigns. Such new communication approach has raised controversy and divided responses from the public. One can point out several notable examples of use of (existing) Internet meme format(s) by firms for the content released in their online marketing campaigns (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Sax, 2012; Murray et al., 2013).

Gucci is a well-recognized Italian high-fashion brand specializing in fashion and leather goods. Recently, the luxury fashion house has been trying to infiltrate news feeds of Instagram with its new ‘#TFWGucci’ memes (Dhillon, 2017). In March 2017, Gucci launched the ‘#TFW [That Feeling When] Gucci’ campaign in collaboration with memes creators and visual artists (Holt, 2004) as a method to make fun of themselves and colorful watch designs of creative director Alessandro Michele (Reed, 2017). Gucci has posted over 30 such images on their Instagram account (see Appendix 9). Alessandro Michele explained the reason behind the campaign as a “*desire to engage with a wider creative community that that which traditionally locates around the world of fashion*” (Reed, 2017). These memes have brought controversial comments from the public (Beltron, 2017). The meme with its lively Internet language has attracted the attention of young consumers (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). Positive reactions can be recognized from comments of Instagram users (Jones, 2017). However, the campaign also received numerous negative responses (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), especially older and wealthy consumers view the memes as irreverent, bombastic and a smear on the brand’s classic style (Bruhn, 2004; Beltron, 2017). With approximately 120 million views and nearly 2 million likes (Dhillon, 2017), Gucci’s #TFWGucci campaign achieved some viral success (Shifman, 2013). One can argue that the campaign was pioneering and paid off in terms of engagement. However, many members of the audience may also feel it was an act of corporate appropriation (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004).

Battlefield I, a remarkably popular first-person shooter game from Electronic Arts (EA), has been well received by not only general gamers but also critics with positive reviews (Hern, 2016). It was a commercial success despite criticism of parts the marketing campaign. The company experienced this during an advertisement for the World War One themed installment of Battlefield I. The PR department started sending out memes under the hashtag #justWWIthings on Twitter (see Appendix 10). The memes have gone viral but for the wrong reasons (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004). It can be a bad move by the PR department of EA to release such memes less than two weeks before the Remembrance Sunday, the day for commemoration of the end of World War I (Hern, 2016).

The Internet users became enraged the hashtag, posted mockery in response (Mindcomet, 2008; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004) and even reported the official Battlefield account as inappropriate (Skipper, 2016). The company was accused of disrespecting and trivializing World War I and had to retract the tweets. EA later issued an apology (Skipper, 2016) to avoid less bad talk (Arndt, 1967).

PROPOSITION H. *Meme marketing can be a double-edged sword which can impact either positively or negatively the image and culture of the brand. In addition, using the meme format is risky because normal memes do not serve commercial functions and Internet users may view them as abuse of memes by corporations.*

Another notable example of firm creating its own memes Norwegian Airlines released an advertisement on Twitter and on newspaper version offering cheap flights (see Appendix 11). The news of Brad Pitt breaking up Angelina Jolie (#bradissingle) was captured and quickly went viral and spread all over Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms (Fakharyan & Elyasi, 2012). Norwegian Airlines responded with an advertisement campaign in both papers and online. The short and straight caption with obscene celebrity intrigue along with breaking news circumstance have remarkably grabbed the Internet’s attention (Shifman, 2007). Some responded to the meme as cruel and believed that personal life of celebrities should not be part of such a campaign and others commented that it is a brilliant marketing tactic, but no one could ignore the creativity (Craw, 2016). Besides, with such an inexpensive tactic (Welker, 2002), the company can market their service virally and far more effective than traditionally precious campaigns (Helm, 2000; Welker, 2002; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004).

PROPOSITION I. *When firms engage in the creation of meme content for the web, it can be successful by focusing on creating its own content or joke in reference to current events. And not rely too much on existing meme formats to avoid accusations of corporate appropriation.*

4. Conclusions

In summary, the attempt of this paper was to make some proposition for a new element within the field of marketing communications, namely (Internet) meme marketing, or the use of Internet memes in marketing communication. After a review of word-of-mouth marketing (both on and -offline), viral marketing and the existing literature on Internet memes real-life examples in which brands encountered memes were analyzed. From the analysis a number of lessons - propositions were derived and summarized here. These propositions of meme marketing need more thorough empirical testing to prove the validity of its claims.

Internet memes as a tool of digital communication for marketing purposes share properties with word-of-mouth marketing as well as viral marketing. Memes are used by consumers to share experiences and opinions and spread virally because consumers actively share, and in some instances create memes. Brand may come into contact with memes via three methods; 1) it may become the subject of memes for the wrong reasons, 2) it may become the subject of memes for the right reasons, and 3) it may engage in the use or creation of memes by itself.

The visual and direct nature of memes and their flexibility and adaptability allow for endless re-use of meme. Once a brand is featured negatively as the content of memes, the brand damage lingers because memes are like internet graffiti and is very hard to wash away. Old memes may recall a brand's mistakes far more vividly than any old news headline or article ever could. Internet memes may also serve to amplify any negative word-of-mouth that already existed about a brand, memes can summarize the issue at hand and communicate it virally and effectively. The meme formats that evolved can also be repurposed and remixed to formulate an immediate response to any situation.

Once a brand becomes embroiled in a scandal, it will become subject to the rule of the mob - social media users and an anonymous collective hive mind on image message boards will 'memefy' the scandal and not be hindered by barriers of decency or ethics. Traditional tactics to suppress the negative narrative will not work because memes are spread via social media and are optimized and evolved to appeal and spread virally. In addition, a brand's advertising is also vulnerable to ridicule if it alienates audiences. Another dynamic working against the brands will be the desire for social media users to garner as much recognition in the form of likes as possible for the memes they (re)post, create or adapt. Brands that have a younger digitally native customer base may be especially at risk.

However, brands may also become a meme for all the right reasons because users recognize and appreciate their message. Brands that effectively use archetypical characters, humor, or catchphrases have a chance of getting free publicity by becoming a meme. Individuals such as artists or entrepreneurs may use the same ingredients in their social media posts to achieve the same effect.

Brands using already established memes may need to be careful, because internet users may reject the brand's message because most memes are truly user generated and non-commercial in nature. A brand using memes to push its goods may be perceived as abusing the meme, which means immediate disqualification of the message that was attempted to be sent out.

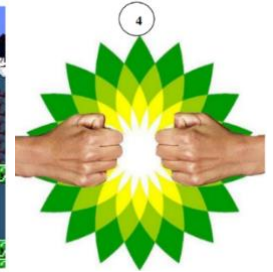
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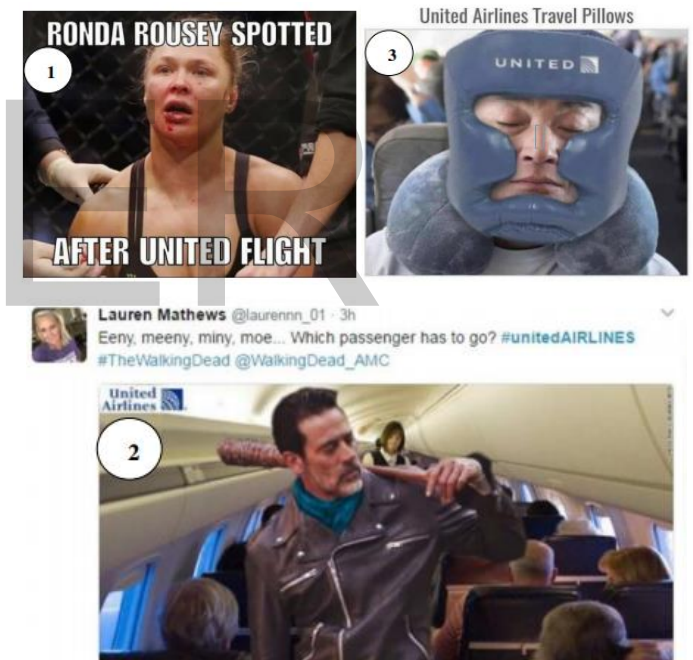
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Appendix 2. United Airlines Passenger Removal:

(1) an image featuring a battered MMA-fighter Ronda Rousey (whose damaged her face become a meme after losing her championship to Holly Holm); (2) an image of Negan, an ultra-violet, sociopathic club-wielding zombie killer from the popular TV series The Walking Dead on an United Airlines flight; (3) a black winter meme depicting an Asian man wearing a boxing head guard with the caption ‘new United Airlines pillows’.



Appendix 3. Pepsi Kendall Jenner TV commercial:

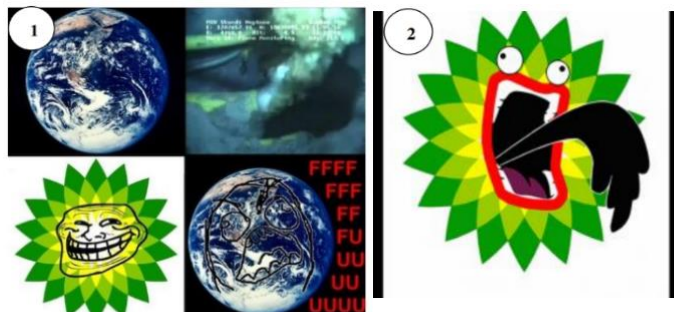
Pepsi and Kendall Jenner in inappropriately misplaced in tumultuous situations (1) an image of a police officer pepper spraying protesters holding a sit-in during a college campus protest with the can of pepper spray swapped for a Pepsi can; (2) an image of Kendall Jenner breaking ranks offering Hitler a can of Pepsi as appeasement.

Appendix

All images used in all appendices can be found in *Know Your Meme* (2021).

Appendix 1. Memes about the BP Oil Spill in 2020:

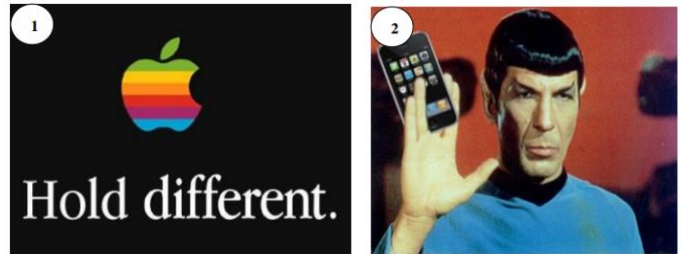
(1) an early iteration of a rageconomic in which BP trolls the world with an oil spill; (2) a Shoop Da Whoop meme (derived from the TV cartoon show Dragonball Z) in which a blackface mouth usually shoots a laser – is replaced by oil; (3) a photoshopped still from a Super Mario platform game in which the iconic green sewer pipe started leaking water and oil and all creatures drift dead at the surface; (4) a play on the infamous meme in which the bodily orifice is replaced by the BP logo.



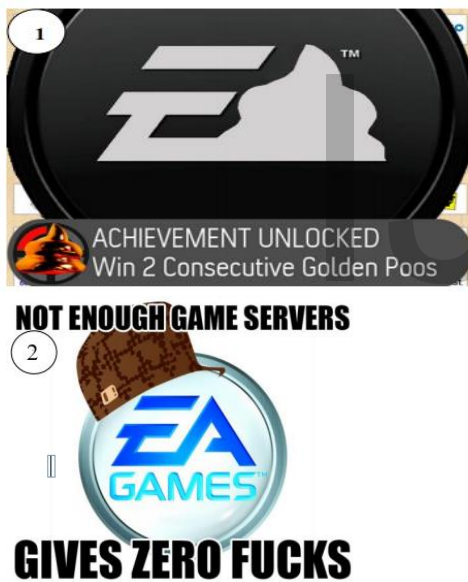
tattoo artist: wat u want?

customer: BP oil spill 2010?

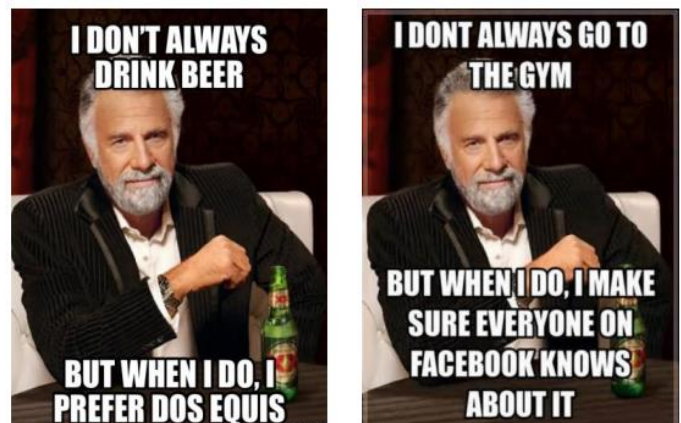
tattoo artist: say no more fam



Appendix 4. Electronic Art Games 2012-now: (1) a play on a video game trope ‘unlocking achievements to gain in-game items’ used to emphasize the fact that in online polls EA was voted ‘the worst company in the USA’ on multiple occasions by gamers. With the A in the logo replaced by feces; (2) an image using the popular ‘scumbag Steve’ meme, a flipped baseball hat placed on the logo refers to another meme in which a scumbag friend asks the viewer for a favor but never reciprocates the favor – or consciously neglects the effects of his actions on others.



Appendix 6. Dos Equis Beer’s commercial ads: A viral image macro format derived from Dos Equis Beer’s commercial series featuring Daniel Goldsmith. The still of Goldsmith with the caption “I don’t always X, but when I do, I Y” has become a popular meme in the social media. The meme is on occasion still used today; such longevity is unique in the realm of internet memes.



Appendix 5. Apple iPhone Antenna gate memes: (1) A photoshopped logo with the iconic Apple slogan ‘think different’ replaced by ‘hold different’, (2) an image of Spock, a character from the film Star Trek holding an iPhone 4 awkwardly – one example of countless images of pop culture characters holding the iPhone in impossible ways. (3) a version of the popular ‘Steve Jobs vs. Bill Gates’ webcomic format. A series of stills from a discussion between the famous business viral during a tech conference usually employed to make fun of technology.

Appendix 7. The Old Spice guy: Popular memes of the Old Spice guy were captured from commercial ads entitled “The man your man could smell like”. The meme is normally generated from the funny and sexy look of the Old Spice guy appearing in different places- (1) in bathroom with catchphrase “Hello ladies, look at your man, now back to me, now back to your man, now back to me... Sadly he isn’t me”, or (2) on the beach holding diamonds.



Appendix 8. Salt Bae: One of the most popular internet memes is generated from an act of a man who adds seasoning to his meats known as Salt Bae: (1) Salt Bae sprinkling salt over his forearm on to the meat with some funny caption, (2) a photoshopped picture of Salt Bae dropping something else instead of the salt over his forearm, (3) painted T-shirts worn by celebrities such as Rihanna and Ben Affleck.



Appendix 9. Gucci Le Marché des Merveilles watches promotional memes: (1) a photo featuring a man’s arm with a hole torn in the wrist of his suit and a watch is exposed underneath with one caption “When you got that new watch, and you have to show it off”. (2) Another notable meme can be pointed out is a photo featuring a portrait of the Spanish noble woman Eleanora di Toledo with a caption “When he buys you flowers instead of a Gucci watch”. (3) In a more recent meme, an image featuring a lady holding a burning rose while checking her timepiece, following is a caption “When he gets mad at you for being 3 hours late but you’re too fire to deal with that kind of attitude”.

gucci
When you got that new watch and have to show it off



gucci
When he buys you flowers instead of a Gucci watch



gucci
When he gets mad at you for being 3 hours late but you’re too fire to deal with that kind of attitude



Appendix 10. Battlefield 1 promotional memes: A play on the popular #justgirlthings Tumblr meme. (1) The first post, posted as a tweet, asked users if they had plans for the weekend and included the hashtag and an animated gif (a format of graphic image on a webpage that moves) of soldiers in the game standing in front of a burning zeppelin with a caption “When your squad is looking on point”. (2) The second tweet which was released about two days later showed a gif of a soldier being burned by a flamethrower with a caption “When you’re too hot for the club”.



Appendix 11. Norwegian Airlines promotional memes: (1) an advertisement on Twitter offering cheap flights from London to Los Angeles with a joke based on the recent divorce announcement of Hollywood couple Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Along with the campaign, (2) the newspaper version of meme was also released with a caption “Brad is single” followed by an offer of a cheap one-way flight to Los Angeles.

