4.3 User-Generated Internet Memes as Advertising Vehicles: Visual Narratives as Special Consumer Information Sources and Consumer Tribe Integrators

Abstract: Internet memes – highly evolutive iconic, yet topical contents with shared meanings replicated and spread by and to the Internet folk – have become a prevalent Internet phenomenon (Figure 1). Embedded in a culture of consumption, Internet memes often employ branded contents in the expression of personal messages, which often could not be farther from the contexts originally intended by organizations. Yet, there is little business insight into memes. The following chapter introduces the concept of memetics and its connection with Internet memes as a cultural phenomenon and a social communication channel. The prospects for using Internet memes as marketing vehicles are then evaluated.

1 Introduction

Internet memes may be described by the characteristics of face-to-face gossip: being very fresh and up-to-date, while transmitting information in a very peculiar way. A ridiculous mistake on the Internet by a celebrity, or even by an unknown user is good enough for it to become the target of the mischievous Internet folk. If one is lucky enough, the online joke will only last for a short period of time and result in less loss of face (e.g. stars occasionally falling over on the red carpet), if not they will become part of online conversations or even the vernacular (e.g. the Streisand effect¹). Successful memes on the other hand can even lead to the creation of a whole business (e.g. Grumpy Cat). As memes become part of

¹ The Streisand effect describes “the process leading to a greater diffusion of information that would be kept confidential on the Internet in the case of no manipulation” (Liarte 2013, p. 103). It is named after American entertainer Barbra Streisand, whose 2003 attempt to suppress photographs of her residence in Malibu, California, published in the framework of an unrelated project, inadvertently drew further public attention to it.
the everyday vocabulary and part of consumer culture, they turn out to be sources of consumer insight as well as advertising vehicles in their own right. As such, they need to be included as a part of the corporate and advertising vocabulary.

Despite the extraordinary growth of user-generated contents (UGC) Internet memes being among them, advertisers and advertising agencies still remain hesitant to venture into this unproven context (Krishnamurthy, Dou 2008). Their concerns stem from a fear of intruding on a “consumer” environment, a lack of understanding of UGC users and their behavior, and a lack of control over the context in which their advertising is exhibited. However, a sustained corporate presence in social media could legitimize the role of UGC as a full-fledged medium and therefore contribute to integrating it into the marketing (communications) toolkit. To do so, advertising needs to learn about memes’ ecosystem, cultural role, values and its own place therein and furthermore to be able to handle their lack of control in marketing communications, and therefore the spontaneous appearance of information and disinformation.

2 From the Concept of the Meme to Internet Memes

The foundations of meme theory can be traced back to evolutionary biology. The concept was introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins (1976), who develops Darwinian evolutionary theory to state that while biological selection works at the level of individuals, genes are the replicators that enable variation, which is the precondition for evolution. Genes contain the genetic information material and at the same time serve as the transmission channel for them. According to the final thoughts of Dawkins’ (1976) book, the complexity of the human mind is enabled by the fact that genes are complemented by other information replicators in its evolution. These latter are referred to as memes by the author. Memes are conceptualized as the units of cultural transmission, and replicators of the human cultural environment (Dawkins 1976, p. 192). Memetics are introduced into the social domain by Dennett (1995), while Sperber’s (1996) definition of culture welds it to the field of epidemiology (cultural epidemiology). Memes can be easily conceptualized as viral, for minds “are typically massively infected” (Dawkins 1993, p. 20) by the highly flexible information carriers that are memes, which makes them easily inherited through the recoding of the cerebral nervous system, without requiring a full generational turnover (instead of spreading vertically from parents to children, they often spread laterally across peer groups). A limitation to the epidemiological metaphor is that while cultural
memes are indeed contagious and do mutate, they are not pathological for individuals (while they can still be so for organizations that venture into trying to use them in their communications).

In their working mechanism (e.g. diffusion patterns and evolutionary traits) memes operate similarly to genes, while in form, they are memorable units of the human mind, the evolution and diffusion of which take place through interpersonal communications and various human artifacts as channels (e.g. pictures, books, narratives, written and digital data storages, etc.). While memes themselves are ideas and therefore are invisible, meme-carriers, i.e. the “physical” tools that contribute to spreading them are observable. Their forms and representations can be most varied: a jingle, a thought, a password, fashion, a procedure or an architectural style can become a meme, as well as blind faith.

Figure 1: The archetype of an Internet meme: “Imminent Ned”, aka “Brace yourselves, winter is coming”: A widely recognized and highly customizable image and motto
Source: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/imminent-ned-brace-yourselves-winter-is-coming

2 The memetic diffusion of music can explain in part, for example, the often heard accusation of musicians “stealing” their biggest hits, or parts of these (e.g. guitar riffs) from others musicians. While sometimes these loans can indeed be voluntary, in many other cases, they can be the result of music writers being so influenced by a tune that “it sticks in their heads” (see “stolen riffs” in any online search engine).

3 Religions, for instance, can be considered as memes (Dawkins 1976). One can, for instance, argue that religions are interpretations of natural anomalies as observed by ancient communities that were later stylized and structured (and re-structured [see e.g. the Reformation]) in a continuous process of transformation.
tolerance, freedom of speech, conspiracy theories, but also e-mail chain lists or funny Internet images (Veszelszki 2013).

According to meme theory, memes’ evolution is the effect of blind chance and natural selection. During diffusion they continuously transform, and natural selection can be observed through the proliferation of the most successful variants. Limitations of the human mind force memes to compete in order to reach as much attention through as many minds as possible. Success therefore in the case of a meme means that it outperforms other similar communication messages both in lifetime and diffusion dynamics (Williams 2000). A successful meme can thus be considered an artifact of shared social norms, world views, common perceptions and user preferences (Shifman 2013). In this sense memes fall short of genes in terms of replicating fidelity and blind obedience.

It is important to note that the current, colloquial use of the term meme is different from the traditional, scientific construct. While the traditional approach to memes has abstract and often controversial subjects, the colloquial interpretation refers to very specific contents (and to their derivatives). Moreover, while memetic studies focus on cultural entities that are successful over the long term, Internet memes are creations with high topicality and sudden success, that may or may not become successful in the long term (Shifman 2013). In order to ensure a seamless transition between the academic and colloquial meaning,
Wiggins and Bowers (2015, p. 11) offer a three-stage hierarchical system of the process of memetization. According to this, successful contents are initially in a (1) maintenance mode, to then become (2) emergent memes and then (3) (genuine) memes.

On the way to becoming a meme content first needs to be spreadable (Green, Jenkins 2011), i.e. to be interesting enough in some respect to be disseminated by users in its original form. Having reached the stage of spreadable media, the content is in a maintenance mode. At this stage, the content is viral, yet still is not a meme. Success triggers imitation and creative reinterpretation: active bricoleurs add new context and creative content to the original idea, leading to emergent memes. Emergent memes are topical, and can somehow be related to the original context and message. An idea then can become a genuine meme when it reaches a critical mass. In this meme status, an idea becomes universal, while cultural reinterpretation and potential subcultural aspects are replaced by mass audiences and mass usage (Williams 2000).

At the meme stage the original message and context are largely lost and the meme becomes self-serving. An advantage of a meme status is to have a mass cultural awareness. It also bears the paradox of a lack of context while being multicontextual: in the case of Internet memes, modification as a core phenomenon allows for the overstepping of social and cultural boundaries set by the original (intended) meaning, thus broadening the profile of the original idea (Bauckhage 2011).

4 The evolutionary character of a meme can be illustrated by the triumphal march of the “Charlie bit me” video (https://youtu.be/_OBlgSz8sSM). The video had spent six months unnoticed in the clutter of user-generated contents until noticed and featured, in November 2007 by a comedy website (Collegehumor.com) with a large audience. The video quickly went viral (the original video has had 840 million views as of April 2016), but only became an emergent meme when inspired users started producing, uploading and sharing their own versions of it. Remixes and mimicries appeared, ranging from users reinterpreting the original video (e.g. by adding back-ground music – see e.g. https://youtu.be/pOle1AnPoc4) or by replaying the scene, typically with adults performing the roles of the two main child characters (even to the extent of producing politically incorrect reinterpretations, such as horror versions – e.g. https://youtu.be/RIH5aMng7mo [explicit content]). Note that a few years later a (now unavailable) commercially licensed version equally appeared (with a moderate success), produced by baby food giant Gerber to help promote the company’s new line of finger foods (Shifman 2014). One can call the phenomenon a genuine meme as the phrase “[Charlie] bit me” has become proverbial among the Internet folk – and has since been used in contexts often utterly different from the original (see e.g. Figure 2).
While the term meme has become a “catchall for freely copied and amusing content online” (Murray et al. 2013, p. 329), one can, based on the above, conceptualize them as a pool of variants of iconic, yet topical visual/audio/textual contents generated and spread by and to the Internet folk that have already undergone transformation, yet still bear a number of common properties and shared meanings for a given community, and that often originate from unwitting sources (Csordás 2015, p. 101). As such, memes “are often created by anonymous persons […] without anything marking the identity of the original creator” (Patel 2013, p. 237). Moreover, successful memes can be interpreted as the result of user agency, i.e. of intentional choices made by a large number of users to disseminate and/or rework a text (Green, Jenkins 2011).

The process of memification is greatly facilitated on the Internet by so-called meme templates (often referred to as image macro memes), thanks to which users can generate new meanings and new messages to the most renowned audiovisual contents with a minimum of required effort and added creativity. Indeed, as a form of “parasitic art” (Katyal 2010) Internet memes use original texts and images as tools to communicate. They convey information framed in a peculiar way, giving way to expressing personal understandings as well as more complex, somewhat related or associated values.

The spreading of such a message can occur “because it is funny, profound, carries a good message and/or otherwise speaks to a large volume of people” (Freund 2013, p. 128). But, more than just funny images on the net, memes are successful cultural artifacts that represent topical and/or universal ideas that occupy the Internet folk’s minds.

As a form of free Internet speech image macro memes are powerful proxies as they often tend to essentialize, oversimplify and exaggerate the themes and topics they address, while they offer self-contained arguments with open-ended interpretation depending upon recipients’ context. Internet memes are the imprint of a peculiar (simple, yet extremely expressive) representation of their creators’ realities: they are the anonymized reflection of their creators’ thoughts, desires, fears and concerns, without the weight of the layers of censorship peculiar to traditional, mainstream media. As such, humor (ranging from quirky through offbeat and bizarre to potty (Knobel, Lankshear 2007)) and/or irony are primordial elements of Internet memes. As a feat of the web 2.0 along with sensationalism, they act as a “megaphone” (Zittrain 2014, p. 389) and contribute to getting and keeping the limited attention of the masses in the high clutter of such images.
Most memes “might sound nonsensical to those unfamiliar with internet culture, they do have meaning and purpose to those [communities] they inhabit” (Freund 2013, p. 134). Memes construct and fuel affinity spaces (Gee 2007) of shared knowledge and meanings (Figure 3): the majority of topical successful Internet memes are more likely to spread through homogenous communities (in the form, for example, of inside jokes or intertextuality) and social networks rather than through the Internet at large (Bauckhage 2011).

At the same time, as proxies, images used in memes to express a message often (ever more in higher stages of memefication, mutation being a necessary trait of a meme) supersede the image’s original meaning and “flow takes primacy over origin” (Nooney, Portwood-Stacer 2014, p. 249). Internet memes are thereby used to divert original information to express an often utterly different new message. However through an intended resemblance in content or in form to the original message, these new messages have the capacity to complement or supplement (e.g. diffuse, condense, popularize) the original information, but also to piggyback on it to give new meaning and even to contradict or dispute it in its own form, therefore leading to potentially diffusing disinformation.

Figure 3: An intertextual meme linking fantasy movies The Lord of The Rings and series Game of Thrones, requiring the receiver of the message to be acquainted by both works to grasp its meaning and pun
Source: (Jadhav 2014)
4 The Role of Internet Memes in Marketing

As corporate communications begin to follow the audience's consumption patterns, Internet memes are increasingly becoming an interesting ground for corporate marketing (communications) activities, and companies have recently shown an increased interest in exploiting the potential economic value of the channel. The major challenge in doing so is the question of control, as the “creations” of the Internet folk may not represent the very same intended message that was set by corporate representatives in strategic planning. Still, these internet memes serve as a new and authentic representation of brand and product communication.

Indeed, memes are a potential manifestation of consumer experience outside of the domain of the core service, and completely in the domain of the consumer, embedded in their context, activities, and experiences. According to the meaning-based approach (Mick, Buhl 1992) audiences attach different meanings to messages within their personal contexts (interest, cultural background, etc.). Mass personal representations through memes then are ideal tools for monitoring users’ perceptions of topical societal issues, as well as brands.

While memes are based on seized, spontaneous, unsolicited moments, they are also authentic representations of the creators’ feelings. This embeddedness is all the more important that “many things consumers value do not inhere in tangible products but increasingly derive from images, cultural texts, and mediated experiences” (Fisher, Smith 2011, p. 332). By acknowledging that consumption is a form of self-expression in postmodern society, cultural artifacts are then supposed channels for carrying brand-related user manifestations, at least in small-scale consumer tribes. Memes can also be considered artifacts of culture. First, users invest much of their time into creating, disseminating or simply consulting them, thus transmitting their sense of self into these cultural products (Gehl 2014).

Mining popular memes is key to applying a cultural strategy model to branding. Consumers’ associative networks of memory, and thus the meaning that they carry about a brand can be studied throughout these cultural representations. Internet memes can then be used by marketers as an alternative research tool, to map and audit how their brands are positioned in the minds of consumers (“semantic DNA”) (Marsden 2002).

As a quantitative tool, the number of available Internet memes makes it a task of big data analysis to identify and sequence how brands are positioned in the minds of consumers. As a qualitative tool, meme mapping can be used to identify second- or third-order meanings associated with a brand (e.g. through intertextual references) and thus to identify market niches and/or brand stretching opportunities (Marsden 2002). Mind maps can be drawn from the various
topics addressed in memes, leading to a result similar to a biological “tree of speciation”, where the evolution of meanings can be observed and studied (Freund 2013).

While it is questionable whether marketers have the possibility of memetically modifying their brands in order to better appeal to their consumer (as the underlying “carpet bombing” advertising tactic would require serious marketing communications efforts with questionable returns on investment), they can nevertheless study the perceived flaws of the brand with an aim to correct them (e.g. the perceived service gaps related to the product, apparent enough to be represented in memes and shared among consumers (Csordás 2015). Moreover, brand mapping can help determine whether a brand’s position is suitable for user-generated advertising campaigns. Negative double jeopardy theory (Kucuk 2010) postulates that strong brands might also have some disadvantages over weak brands in the sense that consumer meanings associated with them can transcend their marketing performance, even at a societal level (e.g. Coca-Cola perceived as a euphemism for capitalism), thus making them an easy target for user-generated antibranding.

5 Internet Memes as Advertising Vehicles

Memes can be considered as advertising assets for brands “because, like celebrities, they have an audience that recognizes and appreciates them” (Sax
In form, their commercial exploitation can take shape in a traditional approach of the licensing of a popular content for advertising reasons or in a more subtle approach, where companies embrace the fact that in the many-to-many context of the interactive, digital, user-generated environment, anyone can be the “user”. Thereby company-generated messages begin to take an ever more similar form to user-generated content (a corporate practice referred to as stealth marketing), making it literally impossible to correctly identify the true source of a piece of content, as well as determine whether a brand-related content was paid- or unpaid-for (Katyal 2010). However, the Internet folk in many instances have been shown to enforce the grassroots and authentic nature of user-generated contents as a norm. As such, fakes or apparent corporate contents are hardly tolerated, leading to simple indifference, community disdain or exclusion (Kozinets et al. 2010).

In the study of electronic word-of-mouth (of which meme diffusion is part for more detail, see chapter 4.2 on the effect of word-of-mouth in e-marketing), Armelini and Villanueva (2010) distinguish between (1) organic, (2) amplified and (3) exogenous contents. This classification can help in understanding the role of corporate content in the viral diffusion of Internet memes.

(1) Organic content is the most powerful form, accounting for the greater part of online word-of-mouth (Bughin et al. 2010). As such, Internet memes are equally predominantly organic. In this case, the creation and diffusion of content is voluntary, based on actual user experiences.

The diffusion of content is (2) amplified when an external (corporate) trigger is involved. For instance, organizations can build upon the popularity of other memes to spread their own corporate messages. The use of popular imagery for a corporate goal raises the issue of copyright, where an otherwise fair use practice (that of cultural exchange) can quickly become an infringement (commercial exploitation of intellectual property) if not handled (i.e. licensed) or if discovered by the originator. Even if it is not discovered, this activity can be considered piggybacking. In a best-case scenario, the audience winks together with the brand, and may embrace the association of image (i.e. that of the brand with an external source) as a shared cultural reference (e.g. a restaurant using names in reference to popular TV shows on their menus or boards, targeting a “geek” audience (Csordás 2015). However, there is always a

5 e.g. brands trying to connect to their community using various memes. Such a topical meme is the “Chill out lemur” (aka “Everybody calm the f*** down”) meme template, where organizations resorting to the meme are still often reluctant to include the f-word into the texts of their message for being offensive, thereby also eliminating a core authentic element of the meme. Also see e.g. note nr.4 on the failed commercial exploitation of the “Charlie bit me” meme.
danger of community disapproval or even rejection if done in ways that go against the community’s (target group’s) values. Thus, exploiting memes in such ways equally becomes a community management issue.

(3) Intentional or exogenous contents are expressly company-generated sources. Here a company, e.g. as part of a marketing communications campaign, encourages consumers to share contents on its behalf. Investing in generating intentional word-of-mouth for an organization is risky because of the uncertainties related to the execution of such campaigns and the relative loss of control, while the effects are difficult to measure (Bughin et al. 2010).

Creating memes for advertising purposes is a delicate corporate endeavor. Memes as part of a planned marketing communications campaign seldom become genuine memes, or even emergent memes. When they do it is rather by a combination of a deep understanding of the target audience (engendering a valuable consumer insight and a tailored communication message), a serious media budget (to ensure high reach/coverage), and (mostly) blind luck.

For instance, contrarily to traditional advertising, memes account for a very unique genre (Wiggins, Bowers 2015) with attributes known to members of the Internet culture, but needing to be mastered by the advertiser (for the rhetoric of marketing co-creation, see chapter 4.1). Moreover, certain attributes of memes, such as immediacy and free dissemination are in direct contradiction with corporate structures. The momentum, i.e. rapid uptake (and often: fall) of Internet memes requires quick responses which rigid corporate policies (e.g. control procedures, authorizations to publish, etc.) do not offer. Moreover, meme dissemination does not work in plannable ways. Memes gain their power from derivatives born through an organic growth. The purpose of the idea of memes is easy recreation (Patel 2013), which by definition cannot happen in a centralized, corporate-controlled environment. From then on, however, the organization has no control over the channel and a corporate-message-become-meme spreads. In the case of successful diffusion, the message inevitably reaches a wider audience than the fan base or the original target group (Patel 2013), whereby it is exposed to a general meaning manifestation (and further meaning-making) of the larger public. By reaching various and diverse communities of affinity, the message is left grounds for possible societal critique if the brand is predisposed (cf. negative double jeopardy).

A reason why company-generated messages often fail to become genuine memes is their lack of authenticity and organicity: while on the surface they

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6 See e.g. Dos Equis, later in the chapter.
may appear to be memes, with the cessation of marketing agency (i.e. funding), the “wannabe-meme” equally ceases. Such was the case with meme campaigns building on the popular “photo fads” genre (see e.g. planking) such as “razorbombing” (backed by Schick razors) or “shamrocking” (by McDonald’s) (RyanrULZ01 2011).

In early 2012, McDonald’s started a Twitter campaign soliciting users to share pleasant stories about Happy Meals using the hashtag-named McDStories. While McDonald’s had paid for having their hashtag promoted on the Twitter homepage, users hijacked the hashtag to turn it against the corporation. While the campaign itself was suspended within two hours, the hashtag is still used by users to sign antibranding messages (Hill 2012).

The most important facet of the presence of corporate messages in the digital sphere is the role of consumers as transmitters. If we accept that advertising images are a top-down, overly exaggerated reflection of society, then Internet memes can be conceptualized as the grassroots counterparts of these images. Internet memes are a mocking mirror of society, and within, of the consumer culture most represented by brands and advertising.

In general, consumer-generated advertisements (CGA), as a special type of user-generated content, can vary from the modification of elements of a company’s advertising material (e.g. by distorting the meaning, the imagery, etc.) through the uploading of original variations on a theme of a company’s advertising material (e.g. humorous, subversive variations or spoofs) (thus creating emergent memes) to proposing original materials. Berthon et al. (2008, p. 8) define “consumer-generated ads” as “any publicly disseminated, consumer-generated advertising messages whose subject is a collectively recognized brand”. Even though consumers may create ads about almost anything (themselves, their favorite TV shows, etc.) consumer-generated advertisements by definition are specifically targeted at collectively recognized brands. The nature of a brand as an asset makes the issue of consumer-generated brand ads so critical. Berthon et al. (2008, p. 14) offer a typology of consumer-generated advertisements, a categorization equally useful for the assessment of Internet memes as advertising vehicles. The authors distinguish between four categories: (1) concordant, (2) subversive, (3) contrarian and (4) incongruous.

A lampoon of a brand’s ad might be categorized as (1) “concordant” in the case that the message is not necessarily negative and deteriorating and both the audience and the responding firm wink and nod, the firm accepting a criticism on the one hand and carrying on with their own brand building. Moreover, many fan-generated Internet memes fall into the concordant category as they often praise the brand (even through a slightly critical tone idiosyncratic to the
genre) while placing them in consumer associated (usage) contexts. This way, Internet memes about popular TV series may often contain brand mentions or imagery as illustrations of a given activity as a whole.

A case of a traditional (TV-focused) advertising campaign become meme – partly due to being well-recognized and acted upon by the advertiser – was the 2010 “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” campaign for Old Spice by ad agency Wieden+Kennedy. It featured former NFL player Isaiah Mustafa reciting a monologue about how anything is possible if a man uses Old Spice. The ad’s creative hook was so strong, that it inspired numerous (and fairly positive) consumer reinterpretations in the social media. Old Spice did manage to leverage the traditional media campaign on the meme scene by supplementing it with an interactive online marketing campaign, e.g. by offering numerous short reply videos based on the original creative hook, but varying in content. This proactive strategy made it possible for the brand to stay in control of the advertising idea and message to a certain extent by providing constant, massive and dynamic social media presence, in direct competition for the attention of viewers with the user-generated variants.

In the case that consumer-generated material is inevitably deleterious to the firm (e.g. by ridiculing the brand using its own messages or style) the firm should classify it as (2) “subversive” and respond accordingly. The occurrence of such antibranding and consumer protest (see chapter 1.1 on advertising critique) is more likely in the case of renowned brands (cf. negative double jeopardy), where consumer brand meanings go beyond the brand itself and take on a societal level, leading to the practice of culture jamming.

For example, a common conception related to McDonald’s can be that of unhealthy food, while Coca-Cola can often be considered as an allegory of capitalism on a societal level: common conceptions that antibranding memes are keen to put into a visual form (Kucuk 2015).

MasterCard’s advertising campaign tagline since 1997 has been “Priceless”. The slogan associated with the campaign is “There are some things money can’t buy. For everything else, there’s MasterCard”. The slogan, and especially its last chunk, contains a massive creative hook with a widely universal yet very brand-specific message. This universality caused the slogan to become a successful meme among consumers, as it offers wide possibilities of intertextuality, while the Priceless campaign offers a structure for creative user-generated reflections, similarly to meme templates. MasterCard’s strategy to keep the slogan for many years equally contributes to sustaining the meme, offering at once repeated user-generated brand exposure. Yet, as the phrase is part of a registered trademark, the company has considered derivatives as subvertising – mainly because of the contexts it can appear in – and through the years it has taken legal action.
against various parodies for trademark violation and dilution. While such legal action may be conceivable against institutional media outlets and partners (even though fairly weakly defendable), such uses in consumer-generated media can be considered as fair use (Patel 2013) (Figure 5). As such, if no commercial exploitation is intended, it is strategically unwise for the organization to take legal action considering the potential social impact (e.g. Streisand effect).

(3) “Incongruous” and (4) “contrarian” types of CGA are (respectively: positive and negative) off-message to the original meaning. As such, they are less of a direct threat to the firm in the sense that although the message conveyed is not in accordance with the official communication and messages of the firm, it cannot be directly retraced to and tallied with by the audience and therefore follows a route on its own as an advertising or anti-advertising message. More-

7 E.g. A bank in a town in former East Germany, Sparkasse Chemnitz (formerly: Karl-Marx-Stadt) ran an online poll in 2012 letting customers vote for images to place on their credit cards, where the image of Karl Marx won. As the bank is associated with MasterCard’s services, the potential appearance of the logo of this former with the latter image could even have engendered corporate tensions for the subsequent image association (Figure 4), all the more that such promotions’ appearance in international mass media might favor new consumer associations and user-generated derivatives (Figure 5).
over, Horváth and Mitev (2016) state that as opposed to brand value (a long-term concept), the organizational outcome of company-relevant Internet memes that we can refer to as meme value is rather temporary: it can rapidly escalate then drop just as quickly.

Most brand-related Internet memes fall into these two categories, as even though a brand’s message or a brand-related sign becomes a meme, it will do so in a user-generated context, and this context is going to become an online convention, without necessarily reflecting the original (brand-intended) meaning (Freund 2013). This process is ever accelerated by mutation, a necessary trait of a meme, which forecasts the limitations of a direct use of memes as advertising vehicles.

For example, the meme template called “The Most Interesting Man in the World” is an interesting case of an advertising campaign becoming a meme (Ulrik 2010). The template is a memefied version of a campaign for the Dos Equis beer brand. It is a message hijacked by users for its strong creative hook (in the original: “I don’t always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis”). The ad’s message has thus survived, however deprived from the brand, in the general form “I don’t always... But when I do...”. At the same time, a widely-used image macro of the meme is still based on a screen from the original ad, the product itself can still be seen on the image macro, and thus on every new

**Figure 6:** A user-generated association of Nike’s logo with the concept of laziness
Source: http://realfunny.net/picture-4506-lazy-sloth-advises-you-to-just-do-it-later-.html
variant based upon it. This way, the brand wound its way into the everyday lives of the Internet folk.

According to Kucuk (2015, p. 4) the idea behind consumer antibranding is to create noise in the corporation-consumer communication processes. However, it can be argued that a fundamental aspect of the Internet-enabled user-generated communications is the creation of a large quantity of noise/clutter, independently of users positively, negatively, or otherwise interpreting and intending messages. The reason behind this is that one simply cannot expect user-generated media to be resource-optimized, as users are not economically interested in doing so while they have effortless and costless access to the communication channels. In this ecosystem, all brand-related contents (including memes) are in direct competition with organizational marketing communications goals and effort for users’, and potential customers’ attention (Weng et al. 2012). All the more important for organizations is to map the relevant communications ecosystems and evaluate the importance thereof in relation to their own organizational communications efforts.

6 Conclusion

As oversimplified and exaggerated creations, Internet memes are authentic pieces of online culture. For being predominantly user-generated, it is hard to judge on the truth of the information they bear. Indeed, everyday users, creators are not bound by corporate rules, ethics or copyright laws, instead they can use any means they deem necessary for sending their own messages. As successful brands and their advertising can be considered part of consumer culture and brand messages as widely recognized cultural products, they may contribute to visually sending messages more easily, which can explain their inclusion in user-generated messages on the Internet, even in ways and contexts that could not be farther from the contexts originally intended by the organizations. As users’ motivations to include a brand’s message go well beyond the nurturing of brand image in traditional advertising, the “authenticity” of a message is likely to prevail over the “truth” of brand information presented within.

Still, in a sense, users are creators of pieces of advertising and/or subvertising, and in this way become a potential source of unlawful competition for slower-moving firms’ communication efforts. As pieces of advertising, this grey area can equally be used by corporations themselves (in the form of peer users among many others), and have recourse to stealth marketing or to creative piggybacking on successful topics (i.e. Internet memes) for their own sake. By doing so they risk (if discovered) being prosecuted for it (legal consequences)
and/or facing the disdain of a community of users seeking authentic contents while rejecting fakes (social consequences).

This brings about the idea of control, which for memes is minimal. Memes (e.g. because of meme templates) are an easy-to-access visual channel of communication. As such, while Internet memes (alone, or in the form of an ad campaign) are less likely to succeed as a voluntary piece of corporate advertising, they could be used instead as a marketing forecasting and planning tool. Indeed, they represent, illustrate and magnify consumer opinions in a brief, catchy and highly accessible way.

Moreover, most visible memes (e.g. in search engine findings, online articles, etc.) are arguably those that have gone through the memetic selection process and can be presumed to be the most successful pieces. Therefore these representations might be considered as a target group’s genuine representations of a brand or product. Of course, it is important to proceed with caution with the use of memes as a marketing research tool, and to avoid a new type of marketing myopia not to project user voices to the whole consumer base.

As veracity becomes of secondary importance in Internet memes, they can be channels – often simultaneously – of both information and disinformation. As we saw above, this phenomenon seems to be a core characteristic of the genre. Therefore organizations can either embrace and include the loss of control in their strategies by various techniques (such as humor, or explicitly using distinguished channels for passing verified corporate information) and thereby take away the edge of potentially harmful messages – and disinformation –, or they can endeavor to educate – together with policymakers or platform operators – the audiences to information literacy regarding this channel as a mass medium.

Publication Bibliography


Weng, Lilian; Flammini, Alessandro; Vespignani, Alessandro; Menczer, Filippo. 2012. Competition among memes in a world with limited attention. In *Scientific Reports* 2, p. 335. DOI: 10.1038/srep00335.