



INTERNET MEMES, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND CULTURE

In Limon Shifman's book, *Memes in Digital Culture*, she argues that meme creators make explicit choices when they design digital memes to circulate so that their content circulates as successfully as possible.

What is an internet meme according to Shifman? In her interview with renowned media scholar Henry Jenkins (a copy the article is in Drive), she defines it succinctly as:

“(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users.”

So, an internet meme is a collection of various user-created “items” that share common semiotic (linguistic and visual) content that are created as part of the communications of a discourse community. The creators, remixers, and consumers of internet memes use them to participate in this community and to express something that cannot be expressed as effectively in other, more traditional ways. In other words, internet memes “signal” ideas, ideologies, and affiliations in ways that more traditional communications cannot accomplish, or not as effectively.

If internet memes are, as Shifman argues, “cultural building blocks,” we should be able to look at an internet meme, through its evolution, and through analysis, have something to say about what it builds and how.

Part I: Find an internet meme. Not just any meme will do.

Remember, an internet meme, according to Shifman, is not simply one instance of that meme, but multiple instantiations of it, including (if you are savvy enough to find it) the original meme, and several different remixes. Let's say, find three (or more) variations or remixes of a particular internet meme. In other words, your internet meme must be robust enough to support a basic

analysis. Scrape the images you are going to work with into PDF or JPEG images. These will be inserted into your document no larger than 4x6 inches (for readability).

Part II: Perform a basic analysis for each image.

For each instance of the internet meme you are working with you will need a separate page with the image (4x6 at largest), a static URL for the image so that it may be easily found. As part of your analysis, include the following (two brief paragraphs will do):

- A description of the site where it was found and its basic media values (e.g., what kind of site is it, who owns it, how does it function).
- A description of the meme instance itself – explain and summarize it in your own words.
- An analysis of how the meme works:
 - What is its ideological stance?
 - What is the meme trying to accomplish with the choices it makes?
 - What does a view of the meme need to know to understand it?

As you can see, it will be very helpful to have different variations of the same internet meme so that you have different things to say and analyze about each instance.

Part III: Synthesize your analyses into an overall analysis of the internet meme.

When you put all the instances of the meme together, what are their commonalities? What are they asking the viewer to consider? What does the viewer need to know to understand the meme? Where is the viewer likely to encounter it? How does sharing the meme identify the viewer/sharer as part of a community or connect them to it? For example, with the Joseph Ducreux memes above, does the viewer need to know anything about Ducreux and his exploits in 18th century France? Do they need to know certain popular culture topics? If they do or don't know these things, does it change their reception of the meme itself? What can they tell us, as Jenkins asks, about contemporary digital culture and its participants?

You can structure your synthesis around any topic or question regarding the memes that come to mind out of your analysis, but you should develop it to approximately 350-500 words. I strongly recommend drafting and revising your synthesis to ensure that it accomplishes the objective of having something meaningful to say about the internet meme you have chosen to analyze.

Part IV: Evaluation of the Final Product.

This assignment is worth 150 points (50 points for each analysis; 50 points for the synthesis) and is due on Thursday, May 15th by 11:59 p.m. in your Drive folder. It will be evaluated based on your

ability to use the terms and ideas of Chapter 5 and understanding of internet memes as briefly discussed in Limor Shifman's internet.

Bonus: How to conduct a basic informal analysis

An analysis is, in essence, a study of the structure of something through its elements. An informal analysis of a text is a focused look at one or more of the elements of the text (e.g., the content, argumentation, stylistic design) that follows general critical principles rather than discipline-specific methods. A good informal analysis uses the examination of these features to develop a main idea that addresses a problem, issue, concern (i.e., a gap) that is relevant to the audience of the analysis.

To write an effective informal analysis, you must both read and understand the nuances of a text (or video, or picture, or video game), take generative notes, and then cohesively reorganize your notes around either a known gap (e.g., one given to you), or around an emergent gap (one you discover). You do this by synthesizing the connections and interrelationships of your ideas around a conclusion.

A. Taking Notes

As you prepare to write a basic analysis, you must "read" the "text," and take notes. If you are inexperienced in writing informal analyses. This will involve the following:

- You must be willing to read and understand what you read by writing your way through this understanding.
- You must be willing to commit time and focus to read closely and track what you have read through your annotations and notes.
- As you read critically and take notes, you must be willing to stop, reflect on what you have read, ask yourself questions about it, and add notes to your existing notes as part of that process (recursivity).

B. Composing Ideas

Once you have completed your close reading of the text to be analyzed, take your annotations and transcribe them into a document. While doing so, you must be willing to consider what ideas are most important to you, and which other ideas are related to that idea (and "speak to it"). As part of this process, you have to find the main idea, or argument, or narrative/story of your own piece that is speaking to you.

- You must have enough notes that you can then produce ideas in sentences to create chains of argumentation (i.e., related paragraphs) to introduce, support, and then conclude a main idea that you develop.
- You must be able to articulate an opinion on the subject you are writing on (an informed opinion), but also try to apply that opinion towards more abstract, or general, ideas.
- Recognize and question your own relationship with the text to situate yourself within it.

C. Finding the Gap

Once you have an adequate base of notes from which to work, you are prepared to draft your analysis.

- Your analysis should be focused on what is missing (in your own opinion) that can be filled in through analysis. This is something that will bridge the “gap” between your own interest and understanding, the text, and the audience.
- As part of your analysis, you may summarize, evaluate, connect, and/or extend ideas from the source text with your own.
- As part of your analysis, you may reorganize the text around conflicting or conflicted viewpoints, contradictions, theses, factual information, or any other content found within the text itself.
- Your own analysis should have an introduction (written last), body, and (brief) conclusion.