

Meme

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Evolutionary Biology, Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Cognitive Science, Psychology, Internet Culture

1. Core Definition

A meme, at its most fundamental level, is understood as a discrete unit of cultural information that is transmitted from one entity to another. This transmission can occur between individuals, through various forms of media, or across generations, serving as a foundational mechanism for the propagation and evolution of culture. Originating as a theoretical construct, the concept posits that just as biological genes replicate and spread within a population, certain ideas, behaviors, styles, or practices replicate and disseminate within a cultural landscape. These cultural units, whether they are abstract concepts, concrete actions, or even specific sounds and images, carry information that can be understood and subsequently replicated by others.

The essence of a meme lies in its capacity for replication and dissemination. It is not merely a static piece of information but an active agent in cultural evolution, capable of influencing thought patterns, social norms, and collective behaviors. This includes a vast array of cultural phenomena, ranging from the intricate narratives of religious doctrines and the complex methodologies of scientific theories to the simple catchphrases of popular culture and the distinctive melodies of a folk song. The comparison of memes to biological viruses, as noted in the initial conceptualization, highlights their self-perpetuating nature; once introduced into a cultural environment, they possess an inherent drive to spread and establish themselves across a wide audience, adapting and evolving as they move through different minds and contexts.

Therefore, a meme functions as a fundamental building block of culture, enabling the transfer of knowledge, values, and practices across the social fabric. Its definition transcends the popular understanding of internet-specific phenomena, encompassing any piece of information--an idea, a part of an idea, a sound, a song, a fashion trend, or a technological innovation--that successfully replicates and diffuses within a population, shaping the collective consciousness and behavior of a society.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "meme" was coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his seminal 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins introduced the concept as an attempt to explain how cultural information replicates and evolves in a manner analogous to biological genes. He sought a unit of cultural transmission, or imitation, to parallel the genetic unit of heredity, thereby providing a framework for understanding cultural evolution that mirrored the principles of natural selection. In his formulation, a meme could be "a tune, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making

pots or of building arches." Dawkins envisioned memetics as a potential new science, studying how these cultural units propagate themselves from brain to brain.

Dawkins's original intent was deeply academic, aiming to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics of cultural evolution beyond genetic determinism. He argued that just as genes compete for survival in the gene pool, memes compete for space in human minds and cultures. Memes, in this view, are replicators that spread through imitation, teaching, and learning. The success of a meme depends on its "fitness," meaning its ability to be copied accurately, frequently, and enduringly. This early conceptualization laid the groundwork for memetics as an interdisciplinary field, drawing insights from evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology to analyze the spread of cultural phenomena.

Over the decades, the concept of the meme gradually evolved, taking on new dimensions, particularly with the advent of the internet. While initially a theoretical construct for academic discourse, the term experienced a profound popularization and semantic shift in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The digital age provided an unprecedented medium for the rapid and widespread dissemination of cultural information, leading to the emergence of what is now commonly known as the "internet meme." This modern iteration often refers to humorous images, videos, or phrases that spread virally online, frequently undergoing various modifications and interpretations. This popular usage, while distinct from Dawkins's original academic definition, nonetheless retains the core idea of a replicable cultural unit that propagates through imitation and adaptation, albeit at an exponentially faster pace and with a focus on specific digital formats.

3. Key Characteristics

The defining characteristics of memes, whether understood in their original academic sense or their contemporary digital manifestation, closely parallel the principles of biological evolution, specifically those governing genes. These characteristics enable memes to function as effective units of cultural transmission and evolution. Firstly, a paramount characteristic is replication or **transmission**. Memes possess an inherent ability to be copied and passed from one mind to another, or from one medium to another. This replication occurs through various mechanisms, including imitation, teaching, learning, and the sharing of information. The efficiency and fidelity of this transmission are critical to a meme's survival and widespread adoption within a culture. The more easily and accurately a meme can be copied, the greater its potential for dissemination.

Secondly, memes exhibit **variation**. Unlike perfect copies, memes are rarely transmitted without some degree of alteration or mutation. Each act of transmission or interpretation can introduce slight modifications, adaptations, or even significant changes to the original meme. This inherent variability is crucial for cultural evolution, as it allows memes to adapt to new contexts, resonate with different audiences, or merge with existing ideas to form novel cultural expressions. This

process of variation ensures that culture is not static but a dynamic system constantly evolving through the recombination and modification of its constituent units.

Thirdly, memes are subject to **selection**. Not all memes that are created or transmitted succeed in gaining widespread acceptance or enduring over time. Just as in natural selection, where organisms compete for limited resources, memes compete for attention, cognitive resources, and cultural relevance. Those memes that are more appealing, useful, memorable, or emotionally resonant are more likely to be replicated and propagated successfully. This selective pressure leads to the proliferation of certain memes and the decline or extinction of others, thereby shaping the prevailing cultural landscape and driving its evolutionary trajectory. The fitness of a meme is determined by its ability to survive and thrive in its cultural environment, often influenced by factors such as social trends, technological platforms, and cognitive biases.

4. Types of Memes

While the term "meme" has gained significant notoriety through its association with internet culture, it is crucial to recognize that memes encompass a much broader spectrum of cultural phenomena. These can be categorized into two primary types: broad **cultural memes** and more specific **internet memes**, each with distinct characteristics and modes of transmission, though they share the fundamental principle of replicable cultural information.

Cultural memes, in the expansive sense originally conceptualized by Dawkins, are foundational to how societies operate and evolve. These are units of cultural information that have been transmitted across generations and various social groups, shaping collective understanding and behavior. Examples include religious beliefs, such as the concept of karma or the practice of prayer; philosophical ideas, like democracy or human rights; scientific theories, such as evolution by natural selection or the heliocentric model of the solar system; artistic styles, from classical architecture to abstract expressionism; and even practical skills, like farming techniques or the art of storytelling. These memes contribute to the fundamental structures of human civilization, embedding themselves deeply within educational systems, social institutions, and shared narratives. They represent the cumulative knowledge, values, and practices that define a culture and ensure its continuity.

In contrast, **internet memes** represent a more recent, digitally native manifestation of the meme concept, characterized by their rapid spread and often humorous or satirical nature. These are typically specific pieces of media--images, videos, GIFs, catchphrases, or hashtags--that gain viral popularity online, primarily through social media platforms, image boards, and messaging apps. Internet memes are distinguished by their tendency to be highly adaptable; users often remix, modify, and recontextualize them, leading to an explosion of variations that reflect diverse perspectives and inside jokes within online communities. Examples range from iconic image

macros like "Distracted Boyfriend" to viral dance challenges and endlessly quoted movie lines. They often serve as a form of social commentary, shared humor, or a way to express collective sentiment, rapidly shaping online discourse and often bleeding into offline conversations and media. While distinct in their medium and pace, internet memes nonetheless adhere to the core memetic principles of replication, variation, and selection, demonstrating cultural evolution in fast-forward.

5. The Internet Meme Phenomenon

The rise of the internet meme represents a pivotal evolution of the memetic concept, transforming an academic theory into a pervasive cultural phenomenon that profoundly influences contemporary communication and social interaction. This digital iteration of the meme is characterized by its reliance on online platforms for rapid dissemination and its often humorous, satirical, or socially resonant content. Internet memes typically manifest as images (often with overlaid text, known as image macros), short video clips, GIFs, catchphrases, or specific behaviors that are copied and modified by users as they spread across social media, forums, and messaging applications. The democratized nature of content creation and sharing online has empowered individuals to become both consumers and producers of these cultural units, leading to an unprecedented velocity and scale of cultural transmission.

A key aspect of the internet meme phenomenon is its capacity for **remixing and adaptation**. Unlike traditional cultural memes that might spread with greater fidelity, internet memes are frequently altered, recontextualized, and combined with other elements, giving rise to countless variations. This iterative process of modification allows memes to remain fresh, relevant, and adaptable to diverse social contexts and current events. For instance, a single image macro template can be applied to an infinite number of scenarios, allowing users to express personal experiences, political opinions, or shared frustrations through a recognizable and culturally embedded format. This collaborative evolution fosters a sense of collective ownership and creativity within online communities, where users actively participate in the meme's ongoing development.

Furthermore, internet memes play a significant role in shaping online identity, community building, and public discourse. Sharing and understanding specific memes can serve as a form of social currency, indicating membership within a particular online subculture or demonstrating a shared sense of humor and cultural awareness. They act as shorthand for complex ideas or emotional states, facilitating efficient communication within digital spaces. Beyond mere entertainment, internet memes have become powerful tools for social commentary, political satire, and even activism, capable of condensing complex issues into easily digestible and shareable formats that can quickly mobilize sentiment or spread awareness. Their virality and widespread reach mean that internet memes have a tangible impact on popular culture, influencing language, humor, and

even mainstream media narratives, often blurring the lines between niche online communities and broader societal trends.

6. Significance and Impact

The concept of the meme, in both its broad cultural and specific internet forms, carries profound significance for understanding human culture, communication, and social dynamics. One of its most fundamental impacts lies in elucidating the mechanisms of **cultural transmission**. Memes provide a framework for explaining how ideas, beliefs, practices, and values are passed down through generations and across different social groups. This process is essential for the continuity and evolution of any society, allowing for the accumulation of knowledge and the development of shared cultural identities. By analyzing memes, researchers can gain insights into why certain cultural elements persist, how they change over time, and what factors contribute to their success or decline within a given population.

Moreover, memes play a crucial role in fostering **social cohesion and identity formation**. Shared memes, whether they are common historical narratives, religious rituals, or contemporary internet jokes, create a sense of belonging and collective identity among individuals. They serve as cultural glue, reinforcing group norms, values, and a shared understanding of the world. In online communities, the rapid exchange and co-creation of internet memes forge strong bonds among users, establishing insider knowledge and a unique group vernacular. This shared cultural capital strengthens social ties, making memes powerful instruments for community building and the differentiation of social groups, both online and offline.

Beyond cultural transmission and social cohesion, memes have emerged as potent forces in **political and social movements**, as well as in commerce and communication. Their capacity for rapid dissemination and emotional resonance makes them effective tools for activism, propaganda, and public discourse. Political memes, for instance, can quickly distill complex political messages into easily shareable content, influencing public opinion and mobilizing support for various causes. In the realm of marketing and advertising, brands frequently leverage the viral potential of memes to engage with audiences, build brand recognition, and create relatable content. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of memes has undeniably influenced language and communication, introducing new vocabulary, slang, and forms of expression that reflect contemporary cultural trends, demonstrating their dynamic and ongoing impact on how we interact and understand our world.

7. Debates and Criticisms of Memetics

Despite the widespread popularity of the term "meme," especially in the digital age, the academic field of memetics--the study of memes--has faced considerable **debates and criticisms** regarding its scientific rigor and theoretical robustness. A primary critique centers on the perceived lack of

empirical testability and definitional clarity inherent in memetic theory. Critics argue that unlike genes, which have a clear biological basis, a physical location (DNA), and measurable mechanisms of replication and mutation, memes lack such precise empirical grounding. It is difficult to isolate a single "meme" as a discrete unit of cultural information, let alone quantify its fidelity, fecundity, or longevity in a scientifically rigorous manner. This ambiguity makes it challenging to formulate falsifiable hypotheses, which is a cornerstone of scientific inquiry.

Another significant criticism involves the accusation of **reductionism**. Opponents argue that memetics oversimplifies the complex and multifaceted nature of human culture by attempting to reduce it to discrete, self-replicating units. Culture is a rich tapestry of interwoven ideas, symbols, emotions, and social structures, influenced by historical contexts, power dynamics, and individual agency. Reducing this complexity to a simple replicator model, critics contend, risks overlooking the nuanced interactions and subjective interpretations that truly shape cultural evolution. This reductionist approach is seen by some as failing to adequately account for human creativity, intentionality, and the socio-economic factors that drive cultural change, instead implying a somewhat autonomous, virus-like spread of ideas.

Furthermore, the conceptual overlap and potential confusion between Dawkins's original academic concept of a meme and the modern phenomenon of the "internet meme" also fuel debates. While internet memes clearly demonstrate a form of cultural replication and evolution, their often humorous, transient, and context-dependent nature may not fully align with the broader, more abstract definition intended for a universal theory of cultural transmission. This popular understanding can overshadow the academic intent, leading to a misapplication of the theory or an overemphasis on superficial cultural elements. Critics also point to the lack of consensus within the academic community regarding the precise mechanisms by which memes are transmitted and stored in the human brain, contrasting with the well-understood biological processes of genetic inheritance. These ongoing debates highlight the challenges in applying a biological analogy directly to the intricate and often elusive dynamics of human culture.

Further Reading

[Richard Dawkins](#)

[*The Selfish Gene* \(book\)](#)

[Replication](#)

[Karma](#)

[Democracy](#)

[Evolution by natural selection](#)

[Distracted Boyfriend \(meme\)](#)

[Meme \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Meme \(Britannica\)](#)