

# The digital meme generation

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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The term 'meme' was popularised by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. The reason that our genes are selfish essentially boils down to survival of the fittest - your genes are selfish, because they want to replicate themselves.

That's why 'a chip off the old block' sounds so comforting. If genes mutate, then your offspring might be weaker in some way. So the strong survive. Hence the term 'good genes'.

## Anything that spreads is a meme

For our purposes, a meme is any cultural product that spreads. The miniskirt was a meme. So are jokes and social interaction. And most notable of all - viral videos. Anything that spreads through a community or culture is essentially a meme (diseases excepted in our case).

Memes are important in social media, because the greater the advantage of the receiver passing on your message, the greater your reach and the lower your CPM (in money and/or time). There must be some value in the meme to the person passing it on. It could be something to make others laugh, a great retail deal, a valuable article or an interesting course. Or the favourite meme: gossip.

So, although it is somewhat challenging to produce a viral meme, it provides an exceptional return. Viral memes seldom occur through hard work - they just happen once in a while through natural selection.

## Going back in time

One of the first viral memes that I recall appeared in 1995 with the dancing baby which you can see [here](#). It fascinated us at the time. I wanted to dress up an adult in a baby costume who would then do this dance for an ad (I can't remember the brand I proposed it for), but I got some strange looks around the table, so I let it go. Still think it would have made a great ad though.

There are many other memes with unusual names and I don't know if you'd be able to pick up the Concise Oxford Dictionary in the next few years (assuming the print version will still exist), which will have to describe every meme's name.

Internet memes come from the strangest places and have some of the most wonderful names, such as lolcats. These are pictures of cats with a funny caption (lolspeak). For example it could be a cat biting a computer mouse with the caption 'I has mouse'

Great ads that offer amazing stories are very powerful meme's too. The [Dove beauty patch](#) being one of my favourites.

## An invisible horse and clumsy dance moves

I'm not sure why, but Gangnam Style spread like wildfire on Youtube. I mean, it was just a bunch of people dancing - who would have predicted it would become the most-liked video in YouTube history going on to win the MTV Video of the Year?

Released by South Korean rapper, Psy, in July of 2012, this video inspires a dance style involving an invisible horse and clumsy dance moves which you've probably seen. The 'Gangnam Style' itself is a parody of people's perceptions of the upscale Gangnam District in the city of Seoul, where the residents are known to be wealthy and trendy.

The lyrics aren't that bad either, for example:

*A girl who looks quiet but plays when she plays  
A girl who puts her hair down when the right time comes  
A girl who covers herself but is more sexy than a girl who bares it all  
A sensible girl like that*

*I'm a guy  
A guy who seems calm but plays when he plays  
A guy who goes completely crazy when the right time comes  
A guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles  
That kind of guy*

*Beautiful, loveable  
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey  
Beautiful, loveable  
Yes you, hey, yes you, hey  
Now let's go until the end*

## The brain drain

[This excerpt](#) from an article by Michael Harris in *WIRED*, explains the predicament of our younger generation (or perhaps it's a distinct advantage?):

Recently, my two-year-old nephew Benjamin came across a copy of *Vanity Fair* abandoned on the floor. His eyes scanned the glossy cover, which shone less fiercely than the iPad he is used to but had a faint lustre of its own. I watched his pudgy thumb and index finger pinch together and spread apart on Bradley Cooper's smiling mug. At last, Benjamin looked over at me, flummoxed and frustrated, as though to say, "This thing's broken."

MRI studies actually show that if you take people who have never been online before, and expose them to the internet, even for just a few hours - different parts of the brain light up afterwards. Although we still have approximately the same size lump of grey matter, going online matters to the brain - new neural circuits are formed to deal with the way information is presented, and how you interact with it.

Unlike folk tales that have been passed from generation to generation, memes are mostly 100% accurate. The meme I receive is the meme I pass on, in the same way that the genes I have are the genes I pass on. Fidelity is 100%. The problem then becomes a little clearer - the internet generation don't have to think deeply about things. Only the first generation who have created the meme have done much thinking. The rest of us just pass it on as easily as a flick of the finger. But with so much information readily on hand, perhaps that's even an evolutionary advantage: not getting too involved - there's just too much information.

So there's a stronger link between genetics and social media than we think: only the strong survive.

## ABOUT SID PEIMER

A seasoned and insightful executive with multisector experience in roles as diverse as senior management, strategic planning and copywriting. I am a qualified pharmacist with an MBA from UCT. I am also an accomplished keynote speaker and presenter.

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