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Report

"I was never able to make a real meme, you know, that's like writing a number-one hit single," Cory Arcangel told *Vice* in 2016. The American artist, whose work ruminates on internet culture, was describing *#currentmood*, his solo show at London's Lisson Gallery. His own artwork was interspersed with popular images plucked from the web: Kanye West on the cover of *GQ*; a four-week old kitten; a pixelated close-up of Victoria Beckham; tracksuits; promotional flyers; and actor Daniel Radcliffe walking 12 small dogs.

Any internet user will be familiar with this type of imagery (if not the subjects themselves) – paparazzi long-lens and wobbly smartphone captures, screengrabs, stock images, grainy video stills. The internet throws low and high forms of image-making together in an endless searchable stream. Blown up to large proportions, positioned against stark-white walls and polished concrete floor, Arcangel's images looked absurd. By transplanting them into the real world, he pointed out the strangeness of the online visual diet; a diet that ever more of us are feeding ourselves through smartphones and social media.

The scale and speed at which we digest words, images and the tools for creating content are shaping a new landscape.

It's from this confusing visual soup that memes emerge. An internet meme can take the form of an image-caption combo, a video, a hashtag, or an animation – anything that catches the popular imagination and gets shared rapidly. Fishing around for content to shock, amuse or provoke sentiment, meme-makers seek to create or subvert something such that it rises above the noise. Meme content usually comes from the popular and everyday; from pets and kids, to film, TV and celebrities. 2012's 'Grumpy Cat' is a picture of a particular sour-faced cat users rework to show its displeasure in various scenarios. 'One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor' is a line from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* film that has been endlessly reworked to exaggerate any "difficult" task: "One Does Not Simply get off the internet"; "eat a single potato chip"; "watch one YouTube video"; "destabilise a Ugandan warlord by liking a status," and so on.

Mostly made for amusement, these "hit singles" of web culture have evolved into a form of communication in themselves. Their mode of operation and visual influence is spreading far beyond the web. The scale and speed at which we digest words, images and the tools for creating our own content online are shaping a new landscape. Memes may look crude to the trained eye, but their potency is hard to ignore. Whether delivering a joke, fact or piece of propaganda – they are the digital era's cheapest and fastest messengers, able to engage vast audiences and influence agendas. For any designer of information, it's worth looking seriously at how un-designed, community-created, memetic content sweeps rapidly to public attention, leaving traditional campaigns on the back foot.

Brad Kim is editor-in-chief of *Know Your Meme*, a database of internet memes that started in 2008. He names Photoshop and the advance of consumer-level digital cameras as two key technological moments in the formation of the meme. "In the early 1990s, Photoshop became an indispensable tool," he says. "It enabled people who weren't visual-arts professionals to partake in the culture." In her research paper 'Makes A Meme Instead', Utrecht University scholar Linda K. Börzsei describes how Photoshop software improvements made between 1990 and 2000 – the addition of layers, improved text editing and the save-for-web function – were instrumental to the rise of memes. The earliest example comes from gamer culture around this time. 'All Your Base Are Belong to Us' is a meme based on a bit of badly translated dialogue from the 1992 version of video game *Zero Wing*. After it was posted on the forum website *Something Awful*, users began making stills and videos by photo-montaging celebrities' heads on game characters' bodies, or the phrase onto US road signs and billboards. The wording morphed too, as different users competed for more humorous effect and pop-cultural relevance. The enterprise reached a mainstream apogee in 2006 when YouTube was taken down for maintenance, leaving in its place a holding page stating: "ALL YOUR VIDEO ARE BELONG TO US."

If Photoshop lowered the entry barrier for making memes, the advance of digital cameras provided the sea of content from which to pick and choose. A media prediction by Deloitte estimated that 2.5tn photos would be shared or stored online in 2016, compared to the 80bn that were taken each year in the 1990s. "In the mid-2000s, there was an explosion of images. Not just newsworthy or important, but an explosion in the sheer amount of images that are available," says Kim. Internet users were becoming accustomed to making their own content from whatever was available. Of the type of visual material that lends itself to meme, Börzsei writes: "Most are simplistic, often low quality and mundane in style. They are not meant to be beautiful or particularly realistic; the focus is on the message." The mid-2000s were also the beginnings of Web 2.0 – a term coined by the user-experience designer Darcy DiNucci in 1999 that refers to social media, but also a general increase in user-generated content. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were a boon for memes, allowing them to enter wider consciousness. Continuous developments on all three platforms have successfully skewed the basis of the web from language-centred forms of exchange to graphical ones. Deloitte estimated that 90 per cent of the projected 2.5tn photos shared or stored online in 2016 would be taken on a smartphone; with camera, editing capability and social-media apps rolled into one, these devices facilitate a kind of habitual sharing that could be considered a third act in the evolution of the meme.

Before the internet, the "meme" had a broader sense. It was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to describe a "unit of cultural transmission". He saw a meme as a cultural equivalent to a biological gene, a piece of information that spreads through imitation and repetition. Dawkins's meme was "analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution". In this wider sense, a meme could be a catchphrase, a proverb or a song as much as an image. Any meme relies on being shared to be successful and has a fixed premise that offers itself up for easy adaptation. Limericks, for instance, are

sort of analogue memes. With their roots in 18th-century England, these five-line humorous poems have a strict metre and rhyming pattern, drawing comparison to Russian chastushka verse. Meanwhile, graphic examples of Dawkinsian memes can be found in street art and graffiti. ‘Kilroy Was Here’ – a doodle of a bald man with a big nose peeping over a wall – was widely spread by American troops serving during the Second World War and lasted in public consciousness into the 1950s. The origin of the simple phrase and doodle are contested – various 20th-century figures have been cited as the historical Kilroy, while *The Oxford English Dictionary* plays it safe by announcing Kilroy to be “the name of a mythical person” – but variants were seen across the UK, Germany, US and Australia.

As with limericks, chastushki and other analogue memes, identifying an internet meme requires observing a set of loosely evolved rules. Although the word refers to any piece of information that is spread and altered from person to person, the default perception of a meme is that it is an image macro – a picture with a caption in capitalised text that is superimposed above and/or below it. The caption can be a set of contrasting statements or take a call-and-response format. The lexicon of memes is important, as the defining features can frequently be predominantly about tone of voice or altered grammar. First seen on the website *4chan* in 2006, an early example is ‘Lolcats’: cat pictures superimposed with captions in idiosyncratic grammar. A picture of a fluffy grey cat asking: “I Can Has Cheezburger?” spawned whole sites dedicated to the genre. ‘Advice Dog’ is a statement of nonsense advice surrounding the head of a dog at the centre of a colour wheel: “Drink Bleach, Live Forever” or “Brush Your Teeth, Use a Brick.” ‘Doge’ is a later example that imagines the interior monologue of a Shiba Inu dog, rendered in a series of earnest, ungrammatical, deadpan proclamations that appear in Comic Sans: “wow. much meme / very article / font / such internet”. Indeed, animals are one of the longest-running themes in meme culture. Börzsei explains their prominence as the result of fortuitous timing: “Alongside domestic photographs of people, by the mid-2000s, it was the large amount of pet photos uploaded that played a part in formulating new trends in internet memes.”

Usually, but not always, image macros use the Impact typeface. British advertising director Geoffrey Lee designed Impact in 1965, aiming for its weighty strokes and close lettering to stand out on publicity and posters. It endured through the digital-printing revolution and, in the 1990s, came to be included as one of Microsoft’s 11 core fonts for the web. New York and Columbia University academics Kate Brideau and Charles Berret analysed why Impact came to be adopted by meme-makers in a 2014 edition of the *Journal of Visual Culture*. “Impact became the meme font,” they suggest, “perhaps [because of its] aesthetic that [was] loud or playful, but certainly because Impact was practically guaranteed to be in the font list of most computers.” Other factors include its regular-width characters that don’t need kerning and the black contour around white lettering which helps it to stand out on various backgrounds. Kim notes that Impact is a feature of non-English memes too and was one of the first markers included in an “unofficial meme style guide”.

A meme’s fixed framework is crucial for establishing the rules of the game and initiating a formula to replicate. The simpler the medium, the stronger its capability to carry information. Clichéd stock images are ripe for meme-making, as they often convey feeling in an exaggerated way that helps transcend language and culture. ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ is a notorious example. Its basis is an iStock photograph of a man turning to look lustfully at a woman, much to his girlfriend’s disgust. It first popped up on a Turkish Facebook group page in January 2017, with the man labelled as Phil Collins, coupled up with “prog music” but leering at “pop”. Users caught on and quickly reworked it into multiple variations: you shackled to a diet but looking at cupcakes; the youth yoked to capitalism but looking at socialism, and so on.

Sometimes news or popular culture hands the internet something so ridiculous and perfectly timed, it’s practically a meme on a plate. At the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift during her acceptance speech for Best Female Video, grabbed the microphone from her and proclaimed that Beyoncé should have won instead. MTV cut away after a matter of seconds, but West’s outburst had already ingrained itself on the minds of 2.7 million viewers, and thus spawned a multitude of memes. Within days, *Know Your Meme* recorded 500 YouTube mash-up videos, and countless Tumblr threads, tweets and image macros of West interrupting various scenarios. In one, West appears interrupting Martin Luther King Jr’s 1963 “I Have a Dream speech” to tell him about the superiority of the “dream he had last night”. Another shows multiple Wests interrupting each other ad infinitum.

Early memes were about creating in-jokes and coded language, but the most contagious, like ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ or ‘Kanye Interrupts’, lend themselves to broader remixing. The most popular memes have their own meme-generator sites, which let users make their own versions without the need for Photoshop. Author Ryan M. Milner observes in his book, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, that while re-appropriation has long been part of cultural participation – memes in Dawkins’s sense of the word – the internet has created the conditions for an intense acceleration of the process on a global scale. He describes the phenomenon as a new “lingua franca” and memetic media as “aggregate texts, collectively created, circulated and transformed by countless cultural participants”. Resonance is critical to a meme’s success too. Milner borrows the studium and punctum principle of French philosopher Roland Barthes to analyse the relationship between users and memes. He writes: “The studium is connection with an image at a cultural level; it’s a socially coded appreciation. The punctum is connection with an image at a personal level; it’s what Barthes describes as a ‘pierce,’ a ‘prick,’ or a ‘mark’ emanating from some distinct detail of an image that hits the person viewing it.”

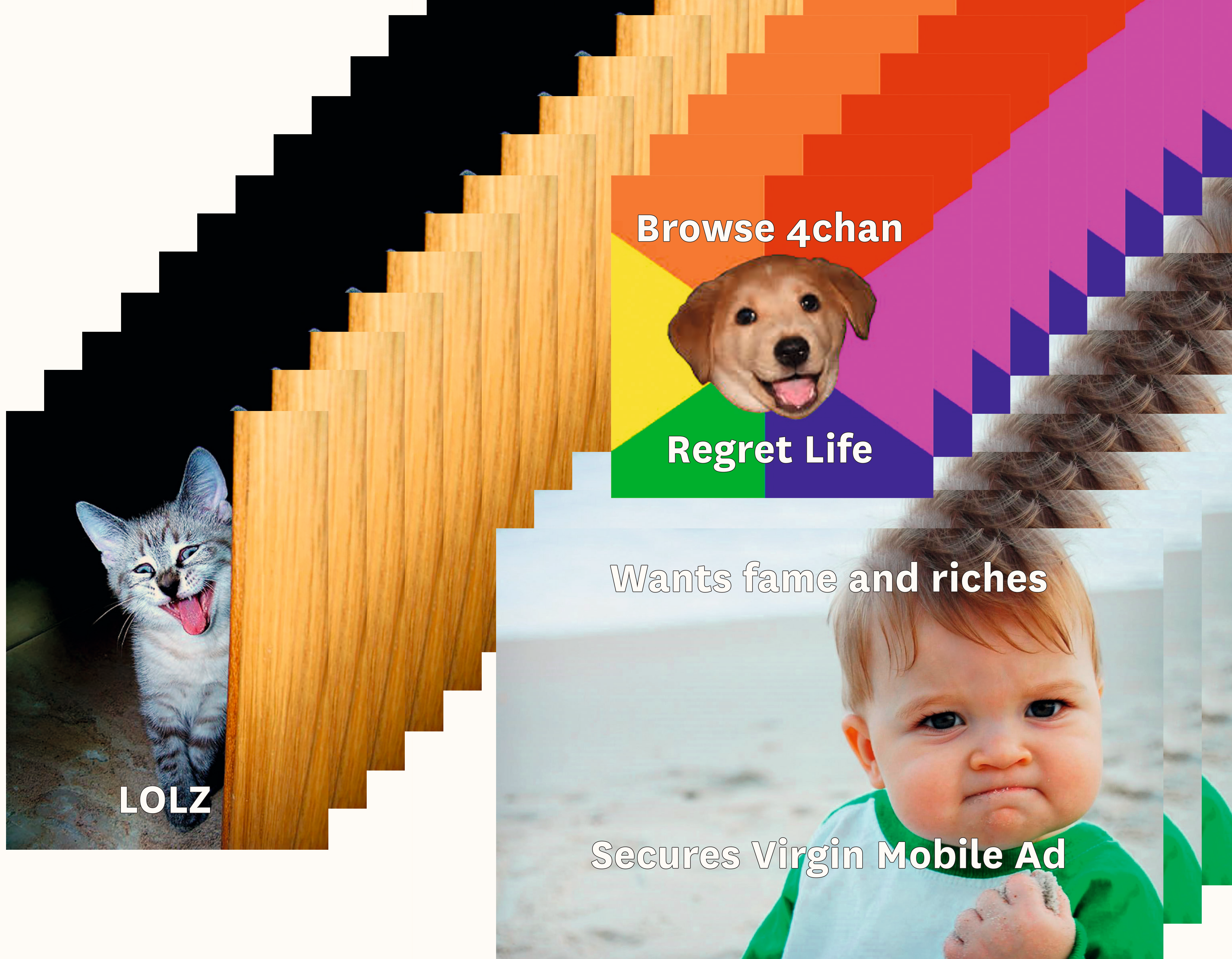
Making sense of memes can require a forensic approach. To understand why some land and others don’t is as difficult as trying to appreciate a joke that doesn’t appeal to your sense of humour. But it hasn’t stopped brands having a go at catching the internet’s mass attention. As we see memes enter the mainstream, we can also see advertisers and marketers trying to tap into their cultural capital. ‘Success Kid’, for instance, is a meme picture of a baby with a clenched fist and a determined facial expression that has appeared in advertisements for Vitamin Water and Virgin Mobile UK. Evian’s 2009

video ad of roller-skating babies racked up 45m YouTube views, but was based on a 'Dancing Baby' meme animation that circulated as early as 1996.

"The self-propelling nature of memes lends itself very well to marketing. It makes sense for [marketing agencies] to infuse the two," says Kim. "The latency of agencies catching up to the latest trends and jokes has been getting shorter. But there's always a sense of aversion to the sheer act of plugging a joke into whatever they're trying to sell." The commercialisation of memes jars with their open-source, community-based culture. Although they might have a single initiator, authorship or credit is rarely sought. Unlike the agencies that co-opt meme culture, meme-makers are generally anonymous. Their motive is not profit or even recognition.

For its spring/summer 2018 campaign, 'Everyone Has a Different Story', Emporio Armani ran a series of fashion portraits in print and online that echoed the cues of image macros. One pictures a male model with a leather jacket holding a skateboard. Underneath the capitalised caption, in a white sans-serif font, reads: "Gives tourists wrong directions. Feels bad about it later." Another model appears to be captured in the middle of a casual jog with the phrase: "Plans to go to bed earlier. Starting next year." Presumably, the aim was to riff on aspects of youth culture, with the portraits deemed subtle enough at mimicking the cues of a meme, without replicating one entirely. While the format is similar, the boastful content and fashion juxtaposition are a giveaway. Memes that emerge from subcultures generally reinforce the idea of the author as a loser or outsider, or else adopt a tone of ridicule towards anything approaching mainstream acceptance. While the Emporio Armani campaign may ape the form of memes, it lacks the bite or irreverence that made the format a success.

"The advert is interesting because they haven't really taken the genuine culture," says Tom Sharp, a London-based copywriter. "Obviously they still have to show the clothes looking gorgeous and the models look fantastic. What they have done is replicate the tone of voice used in memes: two contrasting sentences." Sharp is the co-founder and director of the London-based creative studio The Beautiful Meme, which has worked with brands including Spotify, Google and D&AD. The company intends its name to be understood in Dawkins's original sense of the word – a "unit of cultural



transmission" – and it sees the Emporio Armani campaign as just the latest phase in the history of advertisers co-opting popular culture for marketing gain. "The reason memes are successful is that people are able to apply their creativity," says Sharp. "It's not necessarily about the quality of the design, or the aesthetic, but it's the fact that it shows people can be creative in real time. We've moved away from this hierarchy; [the idea] that you can only create something if you are an artist or an advertising agency. That order has collapsed. Quite rightly. For a long time, writing for advertising was just feeding off other adverts. Now we can see that people are great at writing their own adverts in short, punchy, poetic, witty ways."

Beyond tone, Ross Fordham, Sharp's fellow director at The Beautiful Meme, notices an emergent trend for the substance of memes to impact on creativity, art and design. "There are certain high-end fashion designers and creative directors that create with a meme consciousness," he says. "They create shock, or a connection on a human level[...] put a high-fashion context and popular culture together to fuse something that's visually very sharable." Recently, Paris-based fashion house Balenciaga has been playing this game. In 2017, its wide blue Arena tote bag caused a sensation for its similarities to Ikea's Frakta shopping bag. Later that year, Balenciaga models walked down the catwalk at Paris Fashion Week wearing Crocs. The fashion versions of the clog-like plastic sandals were embellished and elevated, but the resemblance was there for all to see. The drama generated impact and press coverage far beyond the usual fashion sphere, and had critics wringing their hands. Style website *High Snobiety* wrote: "With last Saturday's Balenciaga show, a 20-year-old industry shift is finally running at peak. In the battle for eyeballs and social shares, meme bait – campy, ridiculous, 100 per cent pure-cast irony – has won."

In addition to simplicity, ugliness is an important element in memes' contagiousness. The form is a pastime of the people, a bottom-up brand-less media that bears little resemblance to the sophistication and coherency of the mainstream. It's a style that the writer Nick Douglas called the "Internet Ugly" in a 2014 edition of *Journal of Visual Culture*. He writes: "There's a definable aesthetic running through meme culture, a celebration of the sloppy and the amateurish[...] The ugliness of the amateur internet doesn't destroy its credibility because it's a byproduct of the medium's advantages (speed and lack of gatekeepers), and even its visual accidents are prized by its most avid users and creators." Speed of creation is a good explanation for the look of most memes. Spending too long on achieving perfection might mean missing the short time a meme is culturally relevant.

Ugliness also signals the power of memes as an anti-establishment form of communication. Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" trucker cap was a recurrent symbol of the 2016 American election. The red cap with white Times New Roman lettering was ridiculed in the media and regarded as a non-design, a far cry from Shepard Fairey's considered *Hope* poster for Barack Obama's 2008 campaign. Writing for *Fast Company,* Diana Budds argued that Trump's "'un-designed' hat represented this everyman sensibility, while Hillary's high-design branding – which was disciplined, systematic, and well-executed – embodied the establishment narrative that Trump railed against." As argued by the designer Ilona Gaynor on Instagram, "[Trump's hat] is a designed artefact – a gilded spear it may not be… but it killed with urgency just the same."

"If a meme was made by a professional graphic designer it would probably have a Swiss typeface and follow good rules," says Noel Douglas, a British activist and designer who co-founded *Occupy Design*, a website to document political memes. "[The Dutch design collective] Metahaven deliberately use that kind of ugly design. Stretching typefaces, mixing Times New Roman and Comic Sans. All the things you're not meant to do. There's a kind of play going on between professionals and amateurs." While there's a long history of protest graphics re-mixing logos, pictures and words to gain attention, Douglas notices modern creations draw more on the confusing, contrasting style of the internet. "Protest graphics in the 1980s were still copying constructivism to get a radical look. That has been superseded by a mixed-up aesthetic that reads more like the modern world. Just a mess of different styles." Metahaven, meanwhile, consciously uses the visual language of the internet to political effect. It was already musing on the idea of the weaponised meme in its prescient 2014 essay 'Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?', in which the designers behind the collective argue that each generation constructs its political beliefs and visuals out of what surrounds it: "Every bit of visual information on the internet can, through the spectre of self-politicisation, become revolutionary, because it exists in a shared gene pool."

As agents in the political internet, memes have great potential according to Douglas. Like Milner's definition of "aggregate texts", Douglas thinks of memes as "expanded posters" – a version of the traditional political poster that can be amplified by a network effect and gain traction for a particular movement. Making memes and putting them out for public consumption is an unpredictable business, he says: "I'm fascinated by how quickly people respond to something. The speed of it, but also the content of what comes back. Some are about immediately trying to attack back with sarcasm. Others don't have a serious or political point but go off in more surreal ways. Trying to use that – that's to me the difficult part. It's a very interesting question of why a certain image gets taken up, or people really respond to it."

Much of meme culture is about a collective form of mischief, but chaos ensues when it gets mixed up in real-world politics. In her book *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle analyses the role internet subcultures had to play in the 2016 US election campaign. In that year, she says, the democratic internet had reached an unprecedented level of influence. "As old media dies, gatekeepers of cultural sensibilities and etiquette have been overthrown, notions of popular taste maintained by a small conservative class are now perpetually outpaced by viral online content from obscure sources." But unlike previous culture wars, Nagle observes the confusion of the online environment in 2016 made it impossible to tell whether political messages were genuine or ironic – an environment to which the parody-laden humour of memes and meme-makers no doubt contributed. During the run-up to the election, Nagle writes that Facebook pages and Reddit forums "defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicised generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style".

Where in early memes the symbols were fairly easy to recognise, Brad Kim says the point we find

them at now is a "semiotic nightmare" with layers of meaning carried by different aesthetic and linguistic elements. "The awful 'Echo' meme is where, if you put triple parentheses around a statement, you're essentially being anti-Semitic," he says. "It's a form of dog-whistling. That's where we are today."

Similar is the case of 'Pepe the Frog', a meme that became tied to the Trump campaign through its appropriation by the alt-right movement around 2015. Pepe originated from a 2008 comic by Matt Furie made on Microsoft Paint and shared on Myspace, but an online community of Trump supporters began to use the character as a banner to unite voters who felt disenfranchised. Eventually, Pepe was turned into a hate symbol recognised by the Anti-Defamation League. An infamous interview video with the white supremacist Richard Spencer sees Spencer announce "Pepe has become kind of a symbol..." before being interrupted by a masked protestor who punches him in the face. While Pepe is also deployed in non-bigoted contexts, a clear subset of uses have emerged in which the meme serves as a vector for racist or anti-Semitic themes. One Pepe is dressed as Adolf Hitler, for instance, intoning, "Kill jews, man," in a disturbing perversion of the character's original Furie-specified catchphrase: "Feels good, man."

This darker side of meme culture – to spread hatred, ridicule and abuse, and mobilise internet users to cause offence offline as well as on – is down to its anonymous roots and has been present from the very beginning. The *4chan* community, for instance, generates a huge amount of arcane meme structures through which its users can air unsavoury views veiled as humour. Its most famous outputs, such as 'Lolcats' and 'Advice Dog', have become somewhat normalised; however, their origins often have misogynistic, racist or otherwise bigoted overtones that reveal the community demographic to be predominantly young, male and white – a "nerd" subculture thriving in what Kim calls the "basement of the internet". Similarly, Nagle's *Kill All Normies* details cases of subcultures using *4chan* organising mass acts of cyberbullying and encouraging suicide, revealing the addresses of feminist journalists to incite harassment and giving tips on how to conduct mass shootings. As Nagle notes, online culture has helped to "mobilize a strange vanguard of teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic South Park conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls whose dark humor and love of transgression for its own sake made it hard to know what political views were genuinely held and what were merely, as they used to say, for the lulz".

"I think that meme culture does create shallowness," says Ross Fordham. "Facts don't matter, there's no investigation or questioning of what something is. People don't care if it's ripped off, they just digest it and move on." He believes a counterweight is coming to the culture of sharing and aiming for mass appreciation as a goal. "It's a human trait to want meaning. I think it will play out at some point. Either meme culture will come to a maturity or the people around it will." However, Tom Sharp is cynical about whether internet memes can achieve the same cultural relevance as music, a photograph or a film can. "In 50 years' time will there be a meme that has lasted? I don't think so: they're sweet wrappers. Really ephemeral. But maybe people aren't setting their standards high enough. Maybe they should be aiming to make a meme that in 50 years goes into the Museum of Modern Art."

> "In 50 years' time will there be a meme that has lasted? I don't think so: they're sweet wrappers."

So far, the story of internet memes is the story of the nerdy interests of the web's early adopters: an in-joke culture spread among a mostly American, young, white male demographic. Brad Kim says that over 10 years, memes have "definitely outlived his expectation of cultural relevance". Like any subcultural trend that reaches the mainstream, it could well be coming to a natural end, but memes are certainly not dead yet. As new parts of the world come online in large numbers, there could be a whole new wave of shared and participatory media on the horizon. END