

Memes At An Exhibition: Consumer Interpretations Of Internet Memes¹

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1 Introduction

Have you ever participated a virtual exhibition that is made up of memes? If not, it is high time. Our research subjects put together virtual exhibitions of memes and their explanations as guides. Our projective exploratory research focused on internet-literate consumers' choices and interpretations of internet memes. We recorded 95 respondents' narratives about 125 different memes, altogether 281 memes. Our article takes the metaphor of an exhibition tour, where memes are the reframed pictures of the exhibition. This is Mussorgsky's Pictures of an Exhibition reloaded in Bakhtin's approach to folk culture of laughter.

2 Exhibited objects: memes (theoretical background)

The study of memes isn't new at all (Tresilian, 2008). Their presence on the internet, their impact on online communication calls for its further investigation (Shifman & Thelwal, 2009).

The internet meme is a phenomenon that can be a notion, text, image, text-image combination, which spreads on the internet like fashion; its content can be a joke, gossip, picture, website, reference or a fake piece of news they suddenly appear and then vanish. Internet memes with slight or big modifications may float on the internet for years, but most of them last for only a few weeks or months (Dawkins, 1976; Gelb, 1997; Veszelszky, 2013).

Object and meaning create a sign together, and these signs are summed in the newer and newer communication representations in different subcultures. As a result, when the bricoleur relocates the former object to a new position, or uses the same system of signs, or the object is put into another form: a new message is formulated. (Clarke, 1976). To illustrate, if we take the usual signs of the business world - e.g. suit, tie, collar, short hair - these might be used by other subcultures, who deprive these from their original meanings - e.g. performance, ambition, conformity - and they create new meanings, objects that are valued for their own virtue or just become empty fetish.

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The bricolage well explains the logic of meme-creation and has a strong connection with surrealism as it connects two obviously unrelated notions. Objects may be twisted on their corners by connected and signified with new names. (Breton, 1929). Memes portray actors, stars, situations, objects that are taken away from their original context and in the online space and get new connotations. Visual elements and simplified text combinations depart a chain of associations among its audiences. This is a cavalcade of pictures, snapshots, phrases that the audience selects, contributes to, modifies and forwards.

2.1 *Internet memes: root in Bakhtin's folk culture of laughter*

In medieval times community spaces appeared in churches and markets. While liturgy defined a strict system of symbols, carnivals and fairs inverted and memed these into a form that was banned by the church but part of the folk culture of laughter. Carnival events represent unofficial view of the world: its tone of voice (laughter), its content (material bodily lower stratum) is not approved by the authorities (Bakhtin, 1984).

The roots of internet memes may be derived from the folk culture of laughter (Bakhtin, 1984), although internet memes are much faster, and hold the possibility of fast appearance and disappearance. According to Bakhtin (1984) folk culture of laughter may take three forms: a) ceremonies, staged acts, b) comic linguistic compositions and c) familiar speech (Brown, Stevens & Maclaran, 1999). Internet memes represent all three (Table 1).

1. Table: Folk culture of laughter, its forms, its correspondence with internet memes

Type	Classical form	Modern form	Essence	Internet meme, example
ceremonies, staged acts	carnavalesque celebrations, fair feasts	community events, movies, clips	characteristics pictures or series of pictures taken out of context	Bad Luck Brian (tableau picture) Ridiculously Photogenic Guy (running competition) Harlem Shake (characteristic dance) Balotelli (special pose)
comic linguistic compositions	verbal or written, in Latin or in other national languages	English and Hungarian humour	phrases taken out of context	Ain't nobody got time for that (one sentence from an interview)
familiar speech	cursing, vows, folk roistering	cursing, rude speech, jerk, parody	phrases taken out of context	Gordon Ramsay tells, Bitch please

Source: edited by the authors

3 The creative process (research methodology)

The objective of current study's to explore underlying meaning structures of internet memes that audiences recall at a specific moment in time and to identify dimensions that remain mainly invariable while the content of internet memes are subject to continuous change.

We collected consumer narratives about spontaneously recalled memes. Participants were full time 3rd year university students, 20-23-year-olds. 95 respondents mentioned 125 different memes, altogether 281 memes mentioned. Participants wrote their narratives based on the following instructions: "Imagine you guide an exhibition about memes. As the guide of the virtual exhibition, pick three memes that you would recommend for the exhibition. Explain these three memes why they would fit the exhibition, tell their meanings."

Table 2 is a summary of the top mentioned memes (description is according to the narratives of participants, illustrations are in Table 3)

Table 2: Memes most mentioned

Meme	Description, origin	Features	number of mentions
Grumpy Cat	Tardar Sauce is an average cat from Arizona, who having a funny face gained wide range of enthusiast on the internet. Memes with her curved down mouth appear with sarcastic messages.	expression, grimace, cute cat	26
HungaroMeme	Placing a moustache (traditional Hungarian twirled facial hair) in any kind of pictures, sayings in a countryside dialect of a rascal / outlaw are added	mustache, countryside dialect	26
Balotelli's posture	Mario Ballotelli's pose at the Euro 2012 semi-final after he shot a goal against Germany. After the goal he took off his shirt and stood still with strained muscles.	posture (pose)	12
One does not simply (walk into Mordor)	The origin of the meme is from the movie Lord of the Rings (Fellowship of the Ring, 2001). The scene is a decision about the destruction of the ring which should be discarded to Mount Doom in Mordor. To this seemingly impossible task Boromir reacted like, "One does not simply walk into Mordor." The expression is used when we want to complete an extremely difficult task -	Pose and a sentence	8

	sometimes almost seemingly impossible.		
NOT BAD	Obama was photographed while grimaced which appeared in cartoon version later. It shows a surprised and appreciative facial expression. The meme appears in unexpected situations and at the end of extraordinary attractions.	grimace (became a cartoon)	7
Gordon Ramsay tells	This meme is about the typical behaviour of Gordon Ramsay, who continuously curses and yells at people. The meme is exaggerated but still realistic. (e.g. Congratulations, you succeeded burning the water!) In the original context, the TV chef - known for trying to get the most out of the contestants of his show - yells at them and mocks at them.	curses	7
Bitch Please	The moment of expression of Yao Ming, Chinese basketball player's photo taken at a press conference, which made the drawing: B * tch Please! The picture expresses someone's uncaring, looseness, questioning others and overbidding others.	facial expression (became a cartoon)	6
Bad Luck Brian	A miserable tableau photo of a high school boy. Perfect for telling your own unfortunate stories.	Facial expression	6
You don't say	This is Nicolas Cage's face from the movie Vampire Kiss from 1988. The drawing derived from the picture became more popular than the original. It is used when somebody tells something absolutely trivial and still goes on with further explanations.	Facial expression (became a cartoon)	5
Trollface	Trolling, making fun of somebody. It was made by a user named „devianArt” with MS Paint. This is one of the oldest internet memes.	Facial expression (cartoon)	5
Lazy College Senior	Lazy college students drinking beer representing school laziness. It appeared on Reddit first: „5 minutes lateness from the class therefore skipping the whole day” – easy for students to identify with.	Facial expressions and thoughts	5

Source: edited by the authors

4 Exhibition – Memes & Mussorgsky (Decomposed and recomposed pictures of the carnival)

Mussorgsky wrote “Pictures at an Exhibition” in memory his friend, painter Hartman. The sudden loss of the artist, aged only 39, shook Mussorgsky along

with others in Russia's art world. Fired by the experience, he composed *Pictures at an Exhibition* in six weeks. The music depicts an imaginary tour of an art collection. Titles of individual movements allude to works of Hartmann, the music gave new meanings, new perspectives to the pictures. The loss of something created something new: Mussorgsky's music gave newer and newer meanings to the original pictures.

Before we enter the exhibition we have to know this won't be more than simple (*One does simply walk...*). It is not the gnome that waits for us at the entrance, but *Grumpy cat* greets us with a strange face. Quarrelling of the Limoges market are replaced by *Gordon Ramsay's* curses, ballet of the unhatched chicks takes the form of *Gangman style* or *Harlem shake*. Baba Yaga is kicked out from her hut by the miraculous stance of *Balotelli* or *Beyoncé*. (Full program of the exhibition is in Table 3).

The memes we present appear in newer and newer contexts, conveying different meanings and messages and suddenly then disappear. Contrary to Mussorgsky's and Hartman's art, the pieces of this exhibition are rather temporary, subjects to continuous change and modification, certain pieces make others obsolete.

Task of the painter is to seize the moment, moments that viewers would further think about. This process was enhanced by Mussorgsky who added more associations to the pictures with his music. Internet memes emerge in a condensed combination of visuals and texts, which create the most straightforward script (at the longest one sentence) and picture (a poster-like picture or sequence of pictures) and become part of the everyday internet vocabulary of companies, brands, individuals and communities.

What did Mussorgsky do? He connected Victor Hartman's paintings by the language of music. We may also approach the question that he stopped the carnival at its peak, then took it into parts, decomposed them in order to connect according to his own rhythm. He stopped the moment, froze the actor's movements still in order to exhibit them in rephrased frames.

If we enter an exhibition following the recommended route of the organisers we walk according to our own tempo and connect the exhibited objects with our inner world. Mussorgsky takes the hand of the visitor and guides us by his music. In our research participants created their own theme, took internet memes out of their online context and portrayed according to their own views.

While pictures on their own touch viewers' soul through emotions, the pictures all together create one enormous collage that speaks the community's language (Landgarten,(1993). If we stopped the carnivalesque cavalcade all the joy we may see hides individual fates and tragedies.

Table 3. Exhibition program: Connection between Mussorgsky's scenes and recorded memes

Pictures of the exhibition - scenes	Short description of the scene from Mussorgsky's Pictures at an exhibition	Meme type	Meme example
Walk	The visitor's subjective feelings, progress and connection	memes about taking a journey, struggle, quest for one's own self	<i>One does not simply walk</i> (challenges of the adventurer)
Gnome	Grotesque picture of the clumsy gnome with crooked legs, bizarre and grotesque self expression and thoughts	grotesque facial expression or pose that is the central thought of the meme	<i>Grumpy cat</i> <i>Trollface</i>
The old castle in watercolour (troubadour)	Troubadour's serenade in front of the old castle, characteristic tune with some Eastern tones, parodistic flavour	text and music based memes, mixture of different styles	<i>Ain't nobody got time for that</i> (mix of the vocalic statement)
Tuilleries	Dispute of the children after play	child or childish, infantile characters expressing joy	<i>Success Kid</i> (child at the seaside with clenched hand); <i>Ridiculously Photogenic Guy</i> (smiling guy at a running contents)
Bydlo	reflects the spirit of peasant workers	philosophical thoughts, clever <i>advice animals</i>	<i>Philosoraptor</i> (philosophic dinosaur) <i>Actual advice mallard</i> (consulting wild duck)
Ballet of the unhatched chicks	costume design for Szerov's Trylby ballet	Characteristic dance movements	<i>Gangnam style</i> <i>Harlem shake</i>
Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle	two independent sketches: one rich with a fur hat, one poor sitting by the street with a cane	social commentary raising societal questions	<i>Sceptical Third World Child</i> (3rd world problem raised in contrast with the Western world); <i>First World Problem</i> (trumped problems of the developed world)
Market place at Limoges	gossiping and quarrelling women at the marketplace	battle of words, curses	<i>Gordon Ramsay tells Bitch please</i> ; <i>Lazy College Senior</i>
Paris Catacombs	spooky visions, walk around graveyards with lanterns	unveiling underlying thoughts, forgotten events, things reconsidered	<i>Bad Luck Brian</i> (funny tableau picture)
With the dead in a dead language	cage full of skulls that begin to glow – scary visions	Link with the supernatural, mediators	Chuck Norris (the unbeatable)
Baba-Jaga	the hut on fowl's leg, witch from Russian fairy tales living in a hut	Modern magicians, characteristic movements and gestures	<i>Balotelli's posture</i> <i>Beyoncé at Superbowl</i>
Kiev Gate	Grand entrance to Kiev, entrance to one's own culture	Memes introducing a particular culture	<i>Hungaro meme (moustache and country dialect)</i> (see http://hungaromemes.tumblr.com/)

Sources: own collection, http://www.music.pomona.edu/orchestra/mus_pict.htm;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pictures_at_an_Exhibition

4.1 *Walk: One does not simply walk*

Mussorgsky's piece is not started with the first painting but the walk, which expresses the visitor's mood and also connects the paintings with each other. No exhibition may be interpreted on its own, it is a complicated function of the visitor's past experiences, personality, feelings and thoughts. When we asked research participants to collect internet mememes, we asked them to select ones that they found important for their own individual reason. Presented mememes are snapshots of the carnivalesque cavalcade. These snapshots of dynamic moments may happen simultaneously or in a specific order. What do we see when a carnival stopped, frozen into a still picture of actors and scenes? Mussorgsky portrayed himself in the exhibition walk so did the research participants portrayed themselves in the mememes they chose. The walk is an inner route too, which is never simple (one does not simply walk)

The mememe is from one of my favourite movies, and I happen to be in situation when the sentence perfectly fits with the picture. If I don't succeed for the first time, or several times, then the sentence is to be used supplemented with the given situation (v76, female, One does not simply walk...)

4.2 *Gnome: Grumpy cat*

The first picture of Mussorgsky portrays the gnome, who is shown with a recurring grotesque musical combination of tunes. The usage of grotesque elements is a central component of the folk culture of laughter. According to Bakhtin (1984) folk art of laughter portrays medieval grotesque enormity with joyful bugbears who wear masks. Masks bring out the deepest essence of the grotesque element. The joyful bugbear is reborn in the shape of Grumpy cat.

Grumpy cat has a grumpy gaze each time. According to some at the age of nine she will convert into Satan. Her favourite word is: „no!“ and „I hate it“, she has hardly ever had a positive expression. Bitterness of everyday may be illustrated by reading this nice cat's thoughts. (v18, female, Grumpy cat)

4.3 *The old castle in watercolour: Ain't nobody got time for that*

If we look at the actors of the carnival, the show is given by the song poet, troubadour besides the gnome. Mussorgsky put a very parodistic tone into the description of the far too harmonic scenery mixing different musical styles. The mememe entitled: "*Ain't nobody got time for that*" emerged from the special peculiar exaggerated tone of voice and special use of language of a lady who had to escape her house.

The interview that gave the basis of this meme was remixed, which made this meme even more popular. The source of humour of this meme is the woman's intonation and gestures (v27, female, Ain't nobody got time for that)

4.4 *Tuilleries: Lazy College Senior*

Mussorgsky paints the Tuilleries loudly noisy by children's laughter, creating a kindly dynamic picture. The child is a very important symbol of the carnival, as the child is the universal symbol of the forever dying and reborn life. The carnival is the space for ceasing hierarchies, where social and age differences becoming equal. (Bakhtin, 1984).

This category reflects memes that portray children behaving like adults (e.g. success kid) or adults behaving infantile, or students being stuck on the border of the children and adult worlds (e.g. Lazy Collage Senior). This reflects a moment of joy, light-heartedness, enjoyment of life and total lack of responsibility.

What is university about? The last step in becoming adults, when you don't have to be responsible, but hardly have any obligations. Freedom, parties, more parties, some exams, quest of the future "do I really want to do this" and "something will happen anyway, let's enjoy it!" It is a general critique about university students that they just hang around, don't study hard enough, only party, spend money and waste time. This is what the "Lazy College Senior" meme is about. (v23, female, Lazy College Senior)

4.5 *Bydlo: Philisoraptor*

In the Bydlo scene Mussorgsky depicts the struggling progression of the heavy ox-cart, which slowly fades away in the distance in the dust of the road. It is the symbol of the difficult to express philosophical thoughts, heavy thoughts that the individual carries, when suddenly the dust cloud disappears and the solution becomes clear. According to Bakhtin (1984) feasts and celebrations cannot be without deep philosophical thoughts, as the connection of spiritual and ideological spheres elevate a simple event into celebration. Similarly in carnivals as well as in memes philosophic thoughts get an ironic ricochet, like in the case of the Philisoraptor or some other advice animals (e.g. mallard or penguin)

T-Rex elevates into philosophical heights of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer with each of his questions. (v18, female, raptor)

4.6 *Ballet of the unhatched chicks: Gangnam Style and Harlem Shake*

Funny and graceful movement of the unhatched chicks is expressed with a recurring, easy to remember melody. Music and dance are essential elements of the carnival, dances are easy to copy, but still characteristic lines of movement. While in the case of Gangnam Style the artist's movements are schematically copied, for Harlem Shake it is a crowd, group of people (frequently wearing

masks) who go crazy and perform unusual compositions. In Harlem Shake one member part from the company, who is then memed by the others and create a group scene, which is then further copied and modified.

Should anyone say anything, I don't think there is anyone who has never tried the dance at least once in their lives. We can see than not only the whole world was conquered by Psy but he also made Gandalf get off his white horse, put on a suit and dance the world famous step combination with a smile on his face. (v74, Gangnam Style)

4.7 Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: First World Problem

With the debate of the wealthy and poor Mussorgsky shows the great differences of two social classes, and the last word remains at the wealthy person. We may use this debate as a metaphor for those memes that address the contradiction of the developed and underdeveloped parts of the world. Similarly to the dispute of Goldenberg and Schmuyle meme factories of the Western world define what a societal problem should be, in the light of which the classical problems of the developed world seem insignificant. According to Bakhtin (1984) the carnival vocabulary is full of with reversals, seeing things the other way round: anything can go up that was down, and go down that was up.

I like this meme because it calls it to our attention what a reverse world we live in – and I not only laugh out loud, because I also turn hysteric when the Wi-Fi goes unavailable. I recommend this meme to all of my friends who like sarcastic and ironic humour. (v17, female, first world problem)

4.8 Market place at Limoge: Gordon Ramsay tells

Probably the most colourfully orchestrated movement that depicts women quarrelling and gossiping at a French market. The scene is very noisy, full of curses, vituperation which is expressed by clashing staccatos. Memes using curses (e.g. Bitch please) violate speech norms on purpose. Bakhtin also writes about free speech, foul-mouthedness: banning and stigmatizing reinforced the unofficial nature of curses, and enhanced the feeling that it is violating speech norms, and so made it familiar speech elements. As a result, cursing became a form of rejection of the official world view. Banned fruits are always sweeter.

Get your passports ready because we depart to the depth of hell, where Gordon Ramsay is going to take care of a degrading welcome. Those with weaker nerves should take some pills, because offensive visual elements will be displayed. The atmosphere will not only be influenced by the heat, it will be useful to take some sandwiches with you as Mr. Ramsay delivers 20 % of the prepared food to the guest, the rest goes into the trash. Not only his dishes, but his vocabulary is spicy, as he says: "Yesterday's fish was so raw, it escaped from the guest's plate and already sent a postcard from Hawaii. (v43, female, Gordon Ramsey)

4.9 *Paris Catacombs: Bad Luck Brian*

With the painting Paris Catacombs Victor Hartman wanted to bring back past memories. The movement of elevating past, hidden things is also an act of the carnival. There are moments also we are reluctant to remember of and we would like to dig them deep. This is hardly possible, the internet does not help, even contributes to bringing back, brushing up forgotten moments, like in the case of Bad Luck Brian.

Everyone has experienced unfortunate moments, who would not like to accuse poor, unlucky Brian with these embarrassing stories. (v31, man, Bad Luck Brian)

4.10 *With the dead in a dead language: Chuck Norris the unbeatable*

In this section Mussorgsky pays a visit to the soul of the dead artist, Hartman. According to Bakhtin (1984) the carnival plays a very important role in overcoming the fear of cosmic and other forces, as it helps reliving the person under pressure. The devil coming from the dead world is immortal, but not with a bad intent. In medieval mystery plays flouting the devil, in joyful visions of hell the devil represents an unofficial world view, and he is an ambivalent spokesperson of the material bodily lower stratum. Does not invoke fear and does not seem strange. Sometimes the devil and hell does not seem more than a “ridiculous bugbear” In the world of memes Chuck Norris is one of these strange unbeatable creatures:

Those who don't know Chuck Norris will be deleted by his spinning rotating kick from space-time dimension. Chuck is the hero of our childhood who confronts and defeats the evil. Although we wore Superman pyjamas in our childhood, Superman slept in Chuck Norris pyjamas. The actor became famous not only for his film but his acts. Chuck Norris did count to infinity. Two times. Norris has two speed gears: walk and murder. He is used to dead bodies, as the Chuck Norris spinning rotating kick is an approved execution method in 16 states. Are there any questions? How many push-ups can Chuck Norris do? All of them. (v88, man, Chuck Norris)

4.11 *Baba-Jaga: Balotelli and Beyoncé*

Baba-Jaga is a traditional Russian folk tale about the witch living in a hut that is on a fowl's leg. According to Bakhtin (1984) the main objective of the fools' feasts are to grotesquely demoting religious ceremonies, so gets material bodily lower stratum a primary role, that is accompanied with obscene movements or undressing. The postmodern fools (who are magicians at the same time) don't perform in churches or altars, but in sport temples undress their selves and clothes. Their special poses become memes (e.g. Balotelli or Beyoncé).

If we want to mention something memorable about the 2012 European Championship that would definitely be Mario Balotelli. Everyone remembers the crazy Ital-

ian player posing without his jersey celebrating his goal which is memorable for boys and girls for different reasons. (v81, female, Balotelli)

The Balotelli mem is so excellent. This man is really insane. When he did the pose at the match it was clear that this idiotic posture will have an echo on the internet. (v9, man, Balotelli)

4.12 Kiev Gate: Hungaromemes

The Kiev gate is a closing (ending of the piece), but also an opening to something new, a new culture. The folk as a unified body on the carnivalesque street experiences its presence, and its eternity in history (Bakhtin, 1984). Hungaromemes try to adopt foreign cultural elements and accessorize them with elements of Hungarian culture, where central key element is the moustache and a dialect that is not comprehensible by other cultures.

Hungaro-meme is a little moustached and little with dialect, but is ours. We know it for a long time that our country has the highest number of Nobel Prize winners per capita, we have the most beautiful women, the only acceptable kitchen for men and the Hungarian sea just outperforms all oceans of the world. With a With a Photoshop moustache everything leads to little country, anything may be converted into the style of the friendly-goulash spirit. (v18, female, Hungaro-meme)

The moustache as a meme could be adopted to other memes, and brings closer the feeling of being Hungarian, ... and brings closer the Hungarian internet community (female, Hungaro-meme)

5 Closing Picture: Summary and Outlook

Flashlights, cameras, opening ceremony of the exhibition. Memories of what we have seen rush through our minds in no second. Crowd, cavalcade, carnival, colourful momentum. In cooperation with Mussorgsky, Hartman, Bakhtin and our research participants we seized the moment of the carnival of memes, we took them into parts, walked around in order to discover their underlying meanings in the overflow of information. We deconstructed the elements of the carnival (grotesque elements, fools, dance, folkloristic motives, underlying social differences and problems, familiar vocabulary).

Whether memes will be able to reproduce themselves is dependent on how its folkloristic roots will be preserved or become side products of some communication authorities. According to Jervis (1999) this happened to the ritual order of Western culture when fast, violence, drinking, processions, fairs, fighting spectacles, provocative reasoning are taken under official supervision. By 1860 carnivals were banned and transformed, they become civilian parades, fairs and the carnival become an empty and cheap spectacle.

This would happen when a company would put its hands on meme-creation. The company as well as public figures are subjects of memes as they also represent some authority. Memes rebel against any authority, create myths, reverse

classical hierarchical relations. They emerge spontaneously and pull the rug from under the feet of those who are in high positions. It is a danger for memes to become part of corporate communication, being side-products of integrated marketing communication because they will remain an empty spectacles, which will lose its original function and credibility.

Internet memes are part of the online-audiences' vocabulary of expression, deeper study of their rise and fall is essential for the new-media, social media advertising related research (Gelb, 1997) We are convinced that the repetition of current study in any time would record reborn new examples of internet memes, but reveal similar meaning structures.

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