

# Toward a Lifecycle Model of Memes in Advertising

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## Introduction

The concept “meme” has garnered considerable attention in popular culture and marketing (Sax, 2012). Memetics, the science of memes, greatest currency is on the World Wide Web, popular bookstores, and among advertising and public relations professionals. The promise of memetics is that it will offer us an understanding of why some theories, ideas, fashions, products, brands, advertising slogans, or personalities take off and become popular, while others merely languish (Williams, 2000). The term ‘meme’ as it is widely employed in marketing and popular culture has become a catchall for freely copied and amusing online content (Gunders & Brown, 2010). More technically, a meme is a cultural unit or expression that is passed on to another person or group. Memes have become an asset for brands, because like celebrities, they have a built in audience that recognizes and appreciates them (Sax, 2012).

## A Lifecycle Model Meme Management

Critics however have argued that we need to move away from general discussions of memetics and apply these terms to real contexts (Pocklington & Best, 1997). In marketing, advertising would seem to be the most fruitful field for theoretical development and application (Gelb, 1997). Future research will need to focus more on developing memetic models to specify some mechanisms and relationships which bring about correlational associations, even if those associations are potentially explained by other theoretical models (Hull, 2000). In advertising, one useful approach would be to develop a memetic model based on a propositional network for predicting meme success in advertising. We draw on Bjarneskans lifecycle model of memes for this endeavor (Bjarneskans, Bjarne, & Grønnevik, 2005).

Our version of the lifecycle model of memes incorporates six basic stages (see figure). These are:

1. *Transmission*: Memetic engineers encode memes in an information-carrying medium such as television commercials, print advertisements, or YouTube viral videos. Knowledge is expressed.
2. *Decoding*: The host perceives the meme. A message-carrying medium exposes a host’s brain to a meme. Knowledge is received.
3. *Infection*: The meme takes up residence in the host’s brain (mental structure). Knowledge is processed.
4. *Storage*: The meme is stored in the host’s brain’s long-term memory.

5. *Survival*: The meme successfully fights off counter-memes. Knowledge is retained and may be further retransmitted.
6. *Retransmission*: The meme is retransmitted from the host's brain to the brains of other hosts.

There are a number of questions that advertising practitioners might have in using this model to manage memes in advertising. Which memes are selected for transmission? What are the selection criteria for successful memes? What factors favor the spread, selection, and survival of memes? We offer the following propositional network for advertising practitioners based on memetic theory. Some of the categories below are adapted from Chesterman (2005).

To encourage meme transmission:

- **Fecundity**: The more copies of the meme, the more successful is the advertising campaign. Extend the life of traditional media advertising with freely available Internet copies/YouTube copies. Link and/or associate advertising with social media, mobile applications, blogs, and other viral marketing elements (Meerman-Scott, 2011)
- **Copying Fidelity**: Mutation can degrade a meme. Since celebrities in advertising are themselves memes, seek endorsement exclusivity so that the celebrity meme is not degraded with the memes of other brands. Ensure that Internet video copies of the advertising campaign are not degraded in video or audio fidelity. Closely monitor and enforce trademarks and other intellectual property such as product designs.
- **Simplicity**: Simple, catchy tunes, slogans and taglines spread faster. The New York marketing campaign for the "The Big Apple" or Hong Kong's "The City of Lights" are examples of simple memes.

To encourage meme decoding:

- **Visibility**: Tailor media vehicles to enhance meme visibility and to break through the clutter of competing memes. Billboards featuring faux-three dimensional images, digitally imaged logos superimposed on football fields, aircraft banner advertising on beaches, are all examples of media (vectors) that enhance meme visibility.
- **Meme-complex fit**: Memes that are consistent with a host's existing meme-complex are more likely to be decoded. If the target host is already infected with the meme-complex of the celebrity lifestyle, then the use of a celebrity will increase the probability of that a product meme will be decoded.

To encourage meme infection:

- **Degree of fit**: Memes are more contagious if they fit with a host's existing meme-complex.

- **Baits:** Memes are more contagious if they promise quick payoff e.g. Nigerian emails, or limited time promotional offers.
- **Originality:** A meme has a higher probability of infecting a host if the meme is a novel separate unit, distinct, and repeatable. Advertising must be sufficiently original to constitute as something worth reception by the host.

To encourage meme storage:

- **Assimilation:** Can the meme be absorbed into an existing meme-complex? For example, a product meme for a zero calorie sweetener may not succeed in China where a meme-complex for healthy living does not include a conception of calories.
- **Elaboration:** Does the meme have sufficient novelty value to cause the host to cognitively process the meme, or for the host to be emotionally invested in the meme. Note, that employing existing YouTube-popular-culture-meme-sensations in traditional advertising may be one way to accomplish this (Sax, 2012). Novel executions of traditional television commercials (meme vehicles), such as the “Old Spice” campaign discussed earlier, increase the probability of meme storage.
- **External storage:** The availability of external storage technology increases the probability of meme repetition by the host and the probability that the host will retransmit the meme to other hosts. Viral videos that permit downloading files, or storing links to files in personal computers or cell phones, increase the probability of external storage.

To encourage survival in host:

- **Immunity:** Immunity to counter-memes occurs when the meme has its own built-in defense mechanism. Advertising often transmits memes in the context of connotation, thereby having an in built immune mechanism making it difficult for the host to reject the logic of the meme. The advertising strategy of puffery also has a built in immune defense mechanism (VandenBerg & Reid, 1980). One might expect this immunity effect to be stronger for visual puffery (Toncar & Fetscherin, 2012).
- **Sociotype fit:** The sociotype is the meme’s expression within the social and cultural environment in which the memotype or actual expression of the meme exists. The sociotype is the particular way the meme is understood and enacted in a specific culture or subculture. If memes are consistent with the sociotype, they provide a context for other memes, and increase their own probability of survival. Note, sociotypes are culturally contingent. Memes carried in advertising vehicles in Confucian cultures may need to follow meme-complexes universally popular in Confucian cultures, such as respect for elders and the importance of maintaining harmonious relations in society

(Lin, 2001). Memes, such as the fashion meme “do not wear white after Labor Day” are unlikely to survive outside North America.

To encourage meme retransmission:

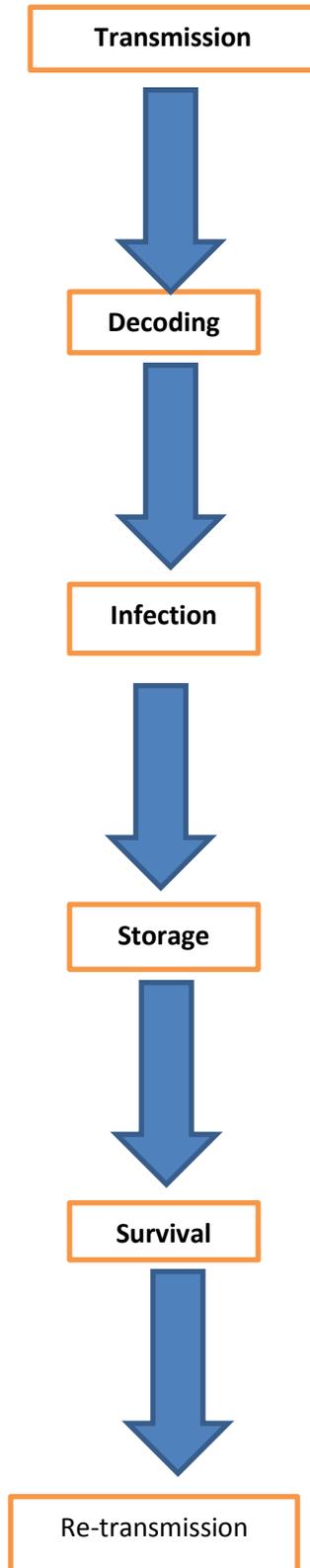
- **Hooks:** A meme carries a hook if it brings positive feedback to the hosts when the host retransmits the meme to other hosts. The hook is the connector that attracts the host to the meme. Examples might include the wearing of fashionable clothes, a behavior which transmits to other potential hosts that the meme carrier has a suitable meme to imitate. The public service announcement campaign “Marijuana is a gateway drug” is an example of a hook, since it spreads the meme that while marijuana itself may not be dangerous, its use will lead down the path to consumption of more harmful substances. Hosts who are frequently imitated by other hosts, among other positive feedback, can expect to have increased mating opportunities. In the context of a music meme, the “hook” is the chorus, a catchy refrain that is retransmitted from host to host.
- **Mutation & Retro memes:** Encourage the mutation of the original meme. This is a potentially dangerous strategy for advertisers as it risks losing control of the original meme as happened to the McDonald’s Hash-tag campaign. However, incorporating mutations of the original meme may be a way to encourage meme reproduction and extend the life of the advertising campaign. The Old Spice campaign where viewers created their own spin off Mustaffa viral videos is an example of a successful mutation. Retro memes are a type of strategy whereby the memetic engineer transcribes a new meme on to an existing meme in an attempt to appropriate some of the properties of the latter. Examples of retro memes in advertising can be found in food marketing whereby a brand will transcribe a meme “light” on to a product, such as olive oil, to appropriate the light = low fat meme, versus the (truer) meme light = light color. Retro memes may also be part of a visual strategy to appropriate the visual meme for a valued trademark with its likeness.

## Conclusions

The above examples are illustrative and not intended to be comprehensive. The model provides an initial propositional framework to test the applicability of memes in advertising. While several alternative causal models might be applied to these propositions, it is critical to begin work on applied memetics if the field of inquiry is to become a progressive research program.

Figure

**Advertising Lifecycle of Meme** (Adapted from Bjarneskans)



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