

## The Downward Spiral: Meme Meltation

Memes of the modern age are not far from the concept of cartoons in newspapers of the olden days. However, due to rapid sharing and global significance, memes have experienced decay and rapid death and replacement over the past few years. This is exemplified in the current zeitgeist of memes being nonsensical, short-form pieces meant to give a hit of stimulation before fading into obscurity. The loop of our constant screen time has led to us becoming overexposed and trashing memes quickly when previously memes would persist for years. However, all hope is not lost for memes.

Whether to make a joke, share news, or prove a point, memes are present everywhere. When asked about the purpose of memes, one student at Bronx Science High School confirmed this, stating that “Memes are a way to connect with others, have a laugh, and stay informed on current events. Memes connect our generation” (Chan). This idea of connecting the generation of the internet is one of the most significant focal points of memes as they can be used for shifting public opinion, such as Mike Bloomberg’s meme campaign to move public opinion of him (Chan). This growth of memes in the past several years due to the internet is no random event. Memes have existed throughout human history when considered in their most basic form. We are always, as humans, looking for ways to communicate messages quickly and effectively. Whether this information is a comedy, a political message, or nonsense, we have been sharing these tidbits for years. Cave art is possibly the earliest example of humans using images to communicate messages. They are simple drawings that can be instantly recognized as something relatable, such as hunting megafaunas with spears. This is not too far from today's memes, just on a different level of complexity. However, we saw a different form in the newspapers as art progressed. Newspaper comics are a direct lineage to memes of the modern day. Functionally,

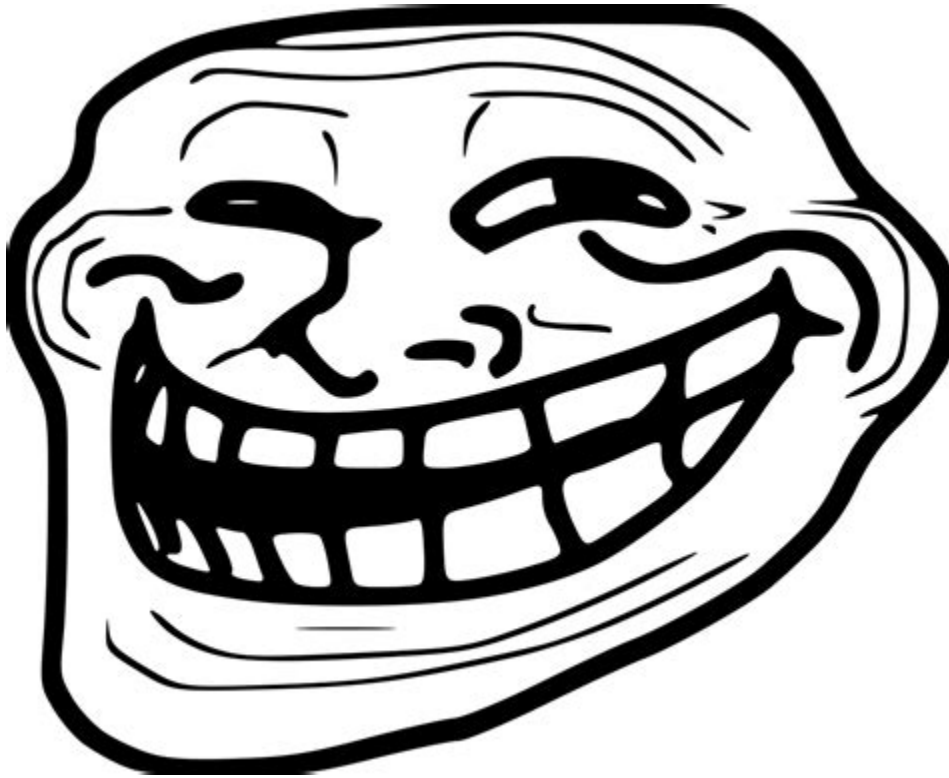
they achieve the same thing, meaning they are to be shared around for humor, politics, or anything else you can fit into the comic section of a paper. The major shift into memeality came with the spread of technology and the adoption of the internet. This is because creating and sharing these tidbits became even quicker and more accessible, and a massive feedback loop was created. This is one of the things that led to memes becoming more and more advanced in the modern age but reaching the end of their lifespans much quicker.

Memes have been pervasive for a long time, yet as time has passed, it seems that memes are dying off quicker and quicker. A quick comparison of a longstanding meme and one that was quickly thrown away shows this clearly. (Trollface, Big Chungus)



(Google Trends) This chart compares two search terms, trollface and Big Chungus. These memes are from two different eras of meme creation. While trollface experienced a slight spike during its inception around 2010-2011, it has continued to be pervasive into the modern day. However, Big Chungus was extremely popular suddenly before instantly falling off. This is partly due to the fact that memes are now easier to make than ever. Ryan O'Connor, a journalist in the newspaper for Toronto Metro University, wrote about this exact effect in his 2021 article, "Maturing internet culture means memes are getting cringier quicker." O'Connor stated, "The ease of generating online content and decreasing society's collective attention span means there is a high-supply, high-demand cycle for viral memes. In today's age, few online trends are made

to last “ (O'Connor). This effect is seen in the graph, as Big Chungus was a very recent low-effort meme, while the original trollface had to be drawn by human hands (pictured below).



(Ramirez)

This is the chief reason memes have degenerated and begun to cycle faster and faster in recent years. No effort is required to make a meme and post it anymore. Not that there never were low-effort memes, but now, more often than not, a meme is very low-effort. Most meme-making involves thinking of an idea, finding a funny image, and using a website to slap some text on it. You can then instantly share this to a social media account, and it has a chance of going viral from that point on. This leads to the next thing that causes meme degeneration.

Virality. Virality and the pursuit of it creates a positive feedback loop for low-effort memes. For example, one out of every hundred memes goes viral (this is merely a hypothetical). Would you spend hours crafting a high-effort meme to have a 1% chance of it going viral and garnering you fame, or would you pump out hundreds of low-effort memes instead? If you can

continue to punch out low-effort memes, one of them will catch even if it takes a moment. The algorithms on social media platforms also favor this; they want you to create endless content to hook users to the app. The rise of short-form content in recent years has only confirmed this; it is much easier to exploit millions of 10-to-60-second videos as opposed to only a handful of longer high-quality videos. This same concept applies to memes as well. Many low-quality products will succeed over a limited number of high-quality ones in the popular sphere. This garbage content is more easily accessible and spreadable than anything else. This is the same situation as a lie spreading faster than the truth; the easy-to-say lie or content is more straightforward to share than the more complicated content or truth.

This feedback loop is a positive for the major social media companies. If you have users creating a large amount of content, the well will never run dry; keeping users on apps for longer is possible. This means there will be more ad revenue just by the user seeing more ads.

According to a recent study, these websites garner billions of dollars from these ads. Instagram generated the most income from ads from those in the 13-17 age range, which garnered 4 billion dollars (Raffoul et al.). This makes sense and supports the claim that low-effort content loops produce the most income. The layout of Instagram is an endless feed of images and videos, with ads interspersed between them. This layout is the perfect breeding ground for memes, allowing for mass dispersion in popular culture. This is also due to Instagram's massive user base of around 2 billion monthly visitors, meaning Instagram reaches around one-fourth of the population of the world (Dixon). Anything that can be broadcast to that many people and simply choose what they see can drastically impact popular culture. When you combine a system that favors low-effort content with this, you create the effect of low-effort content becoming a popular culture. This process in the real world has led to the significant meme landscape you see

today, a positive feedback loop of slop. This loop creates more garbage to fuel engagement and produces more revenue, which promotes destructive content, leading people to develop more as it becomes popular. It is a complete hijacking of the pleasure feedback systems of our brains. A Harvard study found that, like a notification, any feedback from your phone produces dopamine, signaling to one's brain that a reward is coming (Haynes). This is a good feeling that leaves one wanting more and more. And the easiest way to do that? Produce as much content as possible and feed the beast.

This process has caused consistent degradation of memeology until it entirely collapses into itself. One only has to look to the “post-irony” category of memes to understand this. It is the singularity point of the memes of the past decade or so. It fully embraces the low effortness, pushing it to reach the realms of pure absurdity. If we view memes as a linear progression, continually advancing along with time, we would see that post-irony is where all of this coalesces. Memes that fall into this category diverge from the traditional idea of a joke; most are devoid of setup and sense; they merely exist as pure forms of comedy. The post-ironic meme has ascended past the comedy concept; they represent the complete meltdown of the modern internet sphere. This is not an endpoint. However, the end would have been the ironic phase of memes, shortly before the true post-ironic phase. These ironic memes were similar to post-ironic memes but were inverses of each other. The former hates the culture it mocks and parodies with absurdity, and the latter completely consumes itself. Post-ironic memes are the complete unchaining of the splurge of quick, attention span melting, brain rotting, garbage content of the modern day. They hold no essence of effort or familiarity with the traditional structure of a joke. Yet, somehow, they bring back the sincerity and extreme effort of the original memes they seemingly mock. Post-irony is the post-collapse restructuring of humor of the modern-day

online; it is the final form of the creature that was born with the start of the internet. All unknowns have been explored, and the jokes have been beaten. So far, they have emerged from the other side of the world in a new twisted form. Only now do we see the resurgence of memes such as trollface, which was once a work of art turned into an overused image. It was used as a mocking undercutting of the idea of what it represented, but suddenly something new emerged. It is the perfect example of irony in post-irony inversion. What once was seen as a genuinely dumb thing to lazily post has somehow turned itself back into a high-effort endeavor with the emergence of post-ironic trollface animations. Somehow, when a meme endures enough time in the social tumbler and survives, it can return to its original form.

The fact that memes have become a commercial force has also undoubtedly aided their degradation. Whenever a company uses a meme to help promote their product or brand or whatever it may be, it is instantly not funny. The quickest way to kill a meme is to force it, which is also why the mass-produced slop memes fail to catch. If people are just told something is funny repeatedly or are expected to find it funny, it is far less likely that it is funny. This effect is even worse because memes and the internet have formed cultural groups. Memes are paramount to this; they make one feel like they are a part of something bigger, to get the joke, and to understand others. This goes for children on the playground, adults, and teenagers online. This fact leads to any meme from someone not considered part of the community (i.e., a company) being instantly vilified. One real-world example you can look at is the “Silence Brand” meme that emerged on Twitter a few years ago. This meme involved a humorous image of a laser-shooting creature and prominently featured the text “Silence Brand” pictured below.



(Know Your

Meme).

This meme was used in response to all attempts at brand outreach, especially when it was outreach through memes. No one thinks companies like Walmart are cool; they understand it is just a marketing tactic aimed at modern-day culture, a commercial of sorts. And brands will continue to pump this out even if people complain. This is just because memes and the internet are so big. Memes are one of the most significant ways to communicate today, and companies want to communicate effectively with their customer base. Thus, placing a company-sponsored meme in the mix works perfectly since buying promotions on social media platforms is easy. Many people will just scroll past it, but their brains still register it. Seeing a meme about a food or convenience item could make you crave it or want to purchase it. Even if people complain about the lack of comedy in company memes, they still are effective, even if you don't know it.

This brings us to the final layout of meme degradation in the modern day. As memes are built up, they are meant to share a message. This message could be political, merely a joke, or even both. However, as time has progressed, the internet has become far more corporate. It has

gone from being just a tool to a full-blown machine. The internet has evolved itself in such a way as to create as much content as possible. Doing this can keep users as long as possible and show them as many ads as possible. Memes became a cultural driving force by creating a sense of exclusivity and being on the joke. This was also helpful because memes are one of the simplest and most effective online communication methods. Now that both components, the internet system, and its culture, are operating in sync, the feedback loop is born. People want to share as many memes as possible but use as little effort. Soon, this monetization and chasing of the most significant view counts will degrade the majority of memes. The memes begin to lose their original meaning; they are made to be relatable but not out of a true sense of relation. No deeper human connection or insight reaches out through the meme. It is a dead form of communication. But this is not the end of the cycle for a meme. Eventually, it bleeds down into corporations who find the use of it safe. This means that any further posting of it is entirely unfunny. In exceptional cases, some memes can move beyond this point. It is becoming rarer daily as more memes are recycled quickly. However, if a meme has a particular something to it, if there was care put into its creation, made from a place of genuine enjoyment for memes, it can sustain even past “death.” There is a chance that memes will come back as ironic memes, used to make fun of the fact that the meme is dead. This era is usually marred by a deeper edginess where memes are meant to go against the original meaning they tried to convey. After this point, some memes can even break into post-irony, where they release the shackles of “cringe” and become beautiful once more, where the original piece's heart and soul can return and bring joy again. The previous example of trollface and Big Chungus shows these two paths. Trollface died out, being found unfunny for years and used in deeply ironic memes that made little sense. But soon, there was a revolution in the meme world regarding trollface.



Trollface became an artistic outlet for many, using it as a basis for making stories and animations. They would use it to make jokes again, in the way intended to be used, because it was still funny after death. Big Chungus shares the darker part of this story. It had a brief flash of popularity, something I witnessed online. It ultimately died out shortly after, but it was revived as an ironic meme. People loved how funny the meme was and how it was the lowest level of humor. And this mockery of the meme was how it stayed. Big Chungus is a completely ironic meme that mocks the idea of most “funny” memes. It never escaped the shackles of mockery like trollface did, and likely never will.

But what does this all mean for memes as a whole? It shows that some memes will endure. Even with the current state of memeology, memes have become quick and disposable, cringing over quickly. We still have our creative freedoms and urge to create artistic jokes that don't just farm likes and comments. People will still appreciate a well-crafted, albeit absurd, work of art. As has been slowly happening to memes of the current era that have been recycled and inverted into their post-ironic forms, memes of today will follow a similar path in the future. It can be argued that the concept of a meme traces back to our earliest depictions of reality on the walls of caves. Communicating through short, digestible images has always been part of human history. While it may seem that the current state of memes has decayed beyond the point of return, they will never collapse. Memes are an institution of human culture and communication; we live in a world of memes. Therefore, as long as we live, so do memes.

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