

BOOK REVIEW

Joanna Nowotny & Julian Reidy. Memes – Formen und Folgen eines Internetphänomens. Bielefeld: transcript, 2022, pp. 261. ISBN 978-3-8376-6124-8

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Memes – Formen und Folgen eines Internetphänomens [Memes – Forms and Consequences of an Internet Phenomenon] is a monograph in the German language authored by Joanna Nowotny and Julian Reidy. In the introduction, five main chapters, and a conclusion, the authors tackle a relatively young, but booming phenomenon of digital culture and communication: Internet memes. The book provides valuable insights and perspectives on the ever-evolving dynamics of memes and meme culture, and it successfully provides a well-executed counterpoint to often overly romanticized meme literature by shedding light on the “darker” aspects of meme communication. While many previous publications tend to idealize memes, this book takes a courageous step in examining the potential negative implications and consequences associated with their spread. By focusing on the less explored, sometimes problematic, and even controversial aspects of meme culture, the book presents a comprehensive view of the impact of memes.

In the introduction, three central features of digital communication environments serve as a starting point for the further examination of memes and their cultural rather than technological significance: referentiality, communality, and algorithmicity (p. 9). Based on these logics of digital spaces, memes are defined, following the approach by Díaz (2013), as replicating units of information that spread “horizontally as a virus” (p. 10). At this point, the book disassociates itself from pioneering literature, particularly evident when it comes to creating a definitory fundament. Notably, the seminal work by Limor Shifman (2014) is purposefully overlooked (p. 15), which is surprising given its significance in the field. Although

it is true that some of its aspects might be outdated due to the evolving nature of memes, Shifman’s book still provides valuable insights into the nature and characteristics of Internet memes and has strongly inspired a whole decade of meme research. Its partial omission (e.g., the authors do, after all, return later to Shifman’s reflections on the relationship between memes and politics) leaves a critical gap in the holistic understanding of this cultural phenomenon. For instance, and most prominently, this is evident when it comes to the important differentiation between memes (as imitation) and virals (as replication).

In the second chapter, the authors delve into a fundamental characteristic of digital culture, exemplified in memes: referentiality. By employing detailed and telling case studies that focus on memes negotiating group identities and creating ingroup and outgroup constellations (e.g., Incels, Alt-Right) and the postmodern aesthetics of memes, the chapter provides a clearer understanding of memetic reference structures. It explores memes as referential aesthetic artifacts, tracing their presence across diverse fringe web platforms (e.g., 4chan, Tumblr). This chapter assumes paramount importance as it examines not only specific digital platforms and their functionalities, which will reappear throughout the book, but also delves into the fundamental – and often neglected – criterion of referentiality which nurtures a core feature of memes: ambiguity.

The third chapter focuses on humor as an important characteristic of memes. Drawing on classical theories of humor, memes are explored as humorous, sometimes even dadaistic formations that create communities and draw boundaries through laughter. The



chapter skillfully traces processes of community-building, primarily through the lens of memes that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. It particularly highlights the self-referential nature of memetic humor using meta-memes (p. 64), showcasing how humor within memes often reflects on the very nature of meme culture itself. Additionally, the chapter illustrates various forms of humor found in memes, and examines memes that address gender roles and identities, probing the question of whether memes can reproduce or subvert power structures. Despite various harmful pitfalls of memetic humor, a central positive aspect of humor remains somewhat underexplored: its role as a coping mechanism. While the chapter effectively tackles the social and cultural implications of meme humor, it might not fully delve into the significant function of humor as a coping strategy in the face of adversity, such as the pandemic. Recognizing humor as a powerful tool for managing stress and navigating challenging situations would further enrich the discussion and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of memetic humor in times of crises.

In the fourth chapter, the authors delve deeper into a complex and widely studied subfield: the so-called “political meme,” which has gained significant momentum in recent years, appealing to various ideological practices. Memes have the potential to wield political impact, as cultural practices are inherently intertwined with ideology. A particular focus in the chapter is placed on the stylistic element of irony and the instrumentalization of irony within the realm of politics. In this way, the chapter provides a refreshing perspective, challenging the often-romanticized view of political participation via memes. Drawing on numerous vivid examples, the authors navigate through the complex terrain of political meme culture, shedding light on its nuanced dynamics. Towards the end of the chapter, a typology of political memes is also presented, which, while intriguing, would benefit from empirical validation. Nevertheless, this typology serves as a starting point for future research, offering valuable insights into the diverse landscape of political meme discourse.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, the authors take a closer look at how memes make their way into the mainstream. In doing so, the chapter is dedicated to the delicate balance between subculture and mainstream, navigating the fine line between niche and canonization. This exploration shines a light on how memes traverse these boundaries, also addressing questions of hegemony. The chapters offer insights into the evolution and impact of memes as they straddle the realms of cultural subcultures and broader mainstream appeal. This observation serves as a crucial pivot point, allowing the authors to examine and question the implications of memetic diffusion beyond digital culture. The focus is here on the processes of normalization and even canonization of memes. Both chapters explicitly broaden the perspective to include memetic artistic configurations that extend beyond the digital realm, emphasizing that the culture of digitality goes beyond the Internet sphere and profoundly influences everyday artistic practices.

Overall, the authors present in this book a comprehensive exploration of memes as cultural artifacts, backed by a wealth of examples and case studies. The book is a compelling recommendation due to its timeliness, vividness, and exploration of “dark” aspects of meme culture. However, while it presents valuable insights, it tends to overshadow many positive aspects, which slightly impacts its overall balance. As a result, it might not fully meet the readers’ expectations, looking for a more balanced view of the potential of memetic communication. In addition, the book’s selection of sources omits several studies and works that lie at the core of academic research on memes from the point of view of various disciplines. As a result, some significant contributions to the field remain unaddressed or marginalized, potentially limiting the depth and comprehensiveness of the authors’ reflections on memes. Nevertheless, *Memes – Formen und Folgen eines Internetphänomens* is a significant addition to the body of knowledge on memes. It remains a worthwhile and thought-provoking read for all those who want to delve deeper into meme culture.

References

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