



# MEMES IN DIGITAL CULTURE BY LIMOR SHIFMAN BOOK REVIEW

## ABSTRACT

“Internet memes may be entertaining, but in this book Limor Shifman makes a compelling argument for taking them seriously”

## Introducing Shifman's Book

Limor Shifman's book *Memes in Digital Culture*, published in 2014 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, makes a convincing argument on the growing relevancy and importance of meme studies for digital culture. Her book focuses on how memes came to be and unpacking factors contributing to virality, what makes a meme successful, their political purposes, different memes genres, and concludes with a statement about the future of internet meme research. Shifman's book is to be used as a "primer for the study of internet memes" and "introduces some core definitions, controversies, and research trajectories, but it does not offer an in-depth contextual analysis of all the memes mentioned" (pg. 8). Therefore, this review aims to summarize and critically evaluate Shifman's book to discover the effectiveness of the book's arguments and its relevancy as an introduction to internet and digital culture research studies.

### Summary of the book and the message

The book consists of ten chapters covering a range of meme information and analysis. The book firstly begins by defining "meme" and "internet meme" and how the terms came to be. The first chapter describes how intertextuality and participatory culture are critical to memes and their diffusion on the internet. Problems regarding the exact meaning of the term "meme" and "viral" and two premises for the utility of memes for understanding digital culture is also briefly discussed. The book then introduces the term "meme" from Richard Dawkins who was the first person to define the word and how this definition has changed and adapted for Internet users. Following this, Shifman discusses memes going digital: "the meme is the best concept to encapsulate some of the most fundamental aspects of the Internet in general" (pg. 18). This chapter discusses memes as cultural information and the incorporation of mindsets, actions, and behaviors of social groups. The book further examines meme mimicry, remix, and parodies and the impact of "attention economy" on meme culture.

Shifman also examines virality and distinguishes between internet virals (a single cultural unit) and internet memes (always a collection of texts). She further looks at six factors that make a meme successful: positivity and humor, provoking "high-arousal" emotions, packaging, prestige, positioning, and participation. Furthermore, she defines six common features of memes: the focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content. The book examines different meme genres that are categorized into three groups: (1) genres that are based on the documentation of "real-life" moments, (2) genres that are based on explicit manipulation of visual or audiovisual mass-mediated content, and (3) genres that evolved around a new universe of digital and meme oriented content.

Shifman makes a great analysis about memes as political participation and political memes are "about making a point – participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there" (pg. 120). She analyzes three functions of political memes whilst looking at the 2008 US Presidential Campaign, Occupy Wall Street, and a case study of memes as democratic subversion in China.

Shifman finished her book by discussing memes as agents of globalization and cultural homogenization and concludes with four points that merge into the message of her book: "we need to take Internet memes seriously" (pg. 172) to help decipher contemporary political, cultural, and social processes.

## Evaluation of Shifman's Book

### Content of the book and effectiveness of the book's arguments

The content of the book is very unbiased, focusing more on the exploration of the purpose of memes and their virality. The book serves more as a defining starting point rather than a critical analysis or criticism of meme studies. Shifman effectively argues that the attention economy plays a crucial role in meme culture and memetic activity: the whole point of a meme is to get attention, whether to criticize something or to spread something humorous. Along with attention economy, networked individualism is something interesting that Shifman shares. "Re-creating popular videos and images can thus be seen as the cultural embodiment of "networked individualism": it allows people to be "themselves" together" (pg. 34) makes an interesting argument about as our society becomes more digital, it hence becomes individualistic. Shifman shares that memes work as a form of connectivity on both local and global scales and even function as "agents of globalization" (pg. 152). She hence presents the idea that memes serve as effective forms of staying connected with others in a digital society.

Another interesting point the book makes is about memes in diverse cultures. Shifman explores this in two ways: memes for political participation and international memes. Shifman explores the use of memes as political participation in three different circumstances, two of which are in the USA and one in China. This explores that idea that despite the two countries having completely distinct cultures, both online and offline, both use memetic content to express political opinions or to criticize the government. Shifman also states that internet jokes serve as agents of Westernization and Americanization, however not universally as some cultures such as Korean and Japanese cultures do not participate in cultural globalization. Memes function as an exceptional agent for cultural globalization because visual content crosses linguistic and national borders very easily and memes can be adjusted to be appropriate for different cultures. Examples of this are transnational flows of memetic content such as "Gangnam style" and "Successful Black Man" that were adapted for American, Jewish, and Australian cultures. With these both aspects combined, cultural blending through memes could become a dominant theme within digital spaces and could also transform within offline spaces.

### Relevancy of the book

With the points above, Shifman allows the exploration of memes and their affects on digital societies. As our world becomes more digitalized, and more individualistic as people spend more time on technology, memes have become a relevant aspect in society as they create global communities that cross gender, ethnic, and cultural borders. They act as a key factor in digital globalization and cultural homogenization. Memes also act as a way of coping with political, cultural, and social events and allow people to express themselves. They allow people to cope in a humorous way, such as creating memes about political elections or, more recently, the COVID pandemic. This way of coping is also another way that digital communities are built as people connect over having similar opinions or being in similar situations, including topics such as rejection in online dating to activist situations such as Occupy Wall Street.

Furthermore, the book's understanding on factors contributing to virality and what makes a meme successful is extremely relevant in understanding digital spaces and how they work in relation to the attention economy and participatory culture on platforms. This understanding of virality helps better comprehend the complexity on what content is successful online and what content does not gather as much attention. Therefore, *Memes in Digital Culture* is relevant in our digital society due to

its discussion on the implications memes have on digital culture, digital communities, and digital globalization.

### Criticism of the book

Shifman concludes her book by saying that internet memes need to be taken seriously and how they important they are for the future of digital culture studies however, she fails to elaborate why they are so important and lacks the argument on why we must study internet memes in such depth. Even as a starting point for meme studies, the book fails to make a strong point on how important memes are or how they are interacted with. Shifman states that memes are agents of globalization and cultural homogenization yet does not elaborate on how they are developed and used as these agents. The book is lacking on further explanations on how and why memes have the effect that they do. Hence, Shifman's book is excellent in introducing memes and sends the message on stressing the importance of internet meme studies yet does not extend on the 'why' factor of studying memes.

### Conclusion

Limor Shifman's book *Memes in Digital Culture* defines, dissects, and discusses the development and purpose of memes in our current digital world. The book defines core terms in internet meme studies, discusses factors contributing to virality and what makes a meme a meme, the uses of memes as entertainment, political participation, and more, and concludes with the message that internet memes should be taken more seriously. The book especially focuses on memes as an agent for globalization and cultural diffusion, which are relevant topics in today's digital society. The book explores the use of memes as political, cultural, and social expression and the communities built by the creation and sharing of internet memes. However, the book fails to develop on why it is so important to take memes seriously but focuses on introducing valuable information about meme culture and their influence on digital culture. To conclude, the book has some truly relevant information and arguments regarding internet memes and their variety and function and serves as a simple introduction for meme and digital culture studies.