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From symbolic values to symbolic innovation: Internet-memes and innovation

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ABSTRACT

Innovation studies has largely focused on technological assets, while leaving other sources and forms of innovation less tackled. Among this neglected corpus, this article stresses the important role played by symbolic value in the consumption and production processes of innovative goods and services. I explore especially Internet-memes that represent iconic productions of the Internet ‘lead culture’, which embed significant symbolic values. This article therefore, refers to the economic sociology and innovation management literature to emphasise the force of these creations of symbolic value by culture-lead communities, through their production of Internet-memes. I argue that Internet-memes represent a widespread source of innovation in various sectors (from cultural industries to less expect ones like finance). While exploratory, the present study extends the debate on the nature of innovation, its symbolic and cultural aspects and its diffusion processes. It ultimately suggests potential new paths for innovation policies to tackle these new forms of innovations.

1. Introduction

In 1966 the Beatles were said to be more popular than Jesus. Half a century later the Fab Five seem to have been succeeded by an heterogeneous zoo: Keyboard cat, Doge, Confession Bear, Dramatic Chipmunk or Charlie the Unicorn. Who are they? These are examples of Internet-memes. With over 3 billion of Internet users (UN, 2014), the Internet Culture – and its iconic memes – expanded with the facilities to produce, diffuse and remix digital contents. These online productions are the common blocks of a growing culture that is shaping our daily experience of Internet. But its influence goes much further than a cultural niche trend or obscure geeky characters. Internet-memes, because of their natures and their generations and diffusion processes may impact both productions and innovations in many sectors and are thus worthy of exploration.

In order to acknowledge the significance of Internet-memes, there is first a need to clarify what an Internet-meme is. In his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Richard Dawkins defined memes as cultural element of individuals that can be replicated and transmitted by others through an imitation process. More especially, “memes can be ideas; symbols; or practices formed in diverse incarnations, such as melodies; catch-phrases; clothing fashion; or architectural styles” Schiffman (2012, p. 188). The main difference between the original biological term ‘meme’ and its web cousin is that the mutation process appears in the first case by random changes and is diffused according to a Darwinian selection process whereas Internet memes are “altered deliberately by human

creativity” (Solon, 2013). The diffusion’s power of memes is facilitated by specific platforms: such as dedicated blogs (e.g. 4chan, Reddit or Ihascheezburger); video platforms (e.g. YouTube, Vine or Dailymotion); social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter or Weibo); direct e-mails or fora. After imitations or remix processes, it finally becomes part of the Internet culture and is recognised as an Internet-meme. This phenomenon concerns sometime an entire web-user community and sometime a more specific part of this culture (Schiffman, 2012; Knobel and Lankshear, 2005). Importantly, the contents is not viral but memetic. ‘Viral’ consists in an increasing of the scale of an audience by an epidemic digital diffusion, whereas ‘memetic’ implies a more participative process (Burgess, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2009; Schiffman 2014) (Fig. 1).

There is basically a diversity of Internet-memes: animations, animations, videos, pictures and Tumblr or musical productions. Knobel and Lankshear (2005) established a typology of five main meme media and idea types including: collaborative, absurdist humour in multimedia forms; fan-based memes; hoax memes; celebrations of the absurd or unusual; and social commentary (social critiques, political comments, social activist). These productions generate in their wake a myriad of contributions, following a more complex process than some of their regressive contents might suggest. Indeed, as pointed by Schiffman (2012) a meme needs a “creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work”, involving imitation processes (parroting element from a meme) or re-mix (re-edition). Those types refer in one way or another to pre-existing social and cultural constructs; norms; values or specific environments. In other

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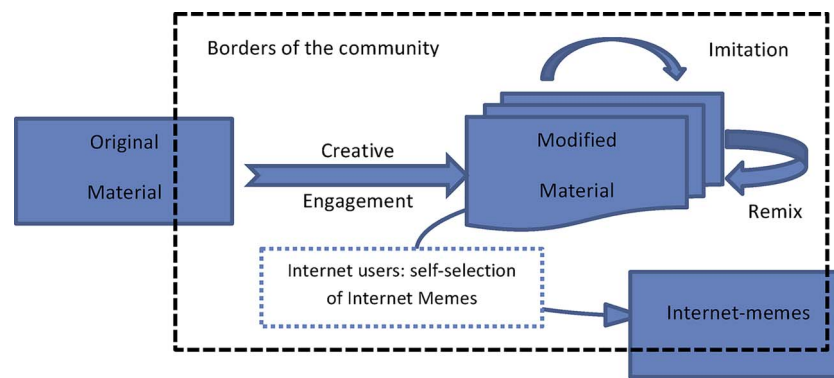


Fig. 1. The generation of Internet-memes.
Source: Author's elaboration

words, beside their apparent 'stupid' forms and contents, internet memes are hiding huge symbolic values embedded in a complex cultural context. Symbolic value is *"the immaterial value attributed to an object or an idea and communicates its symbolic meaning"* Ekstrom (2011). This *"synergy of characteristics related to products' attractiveness/desirability to consumers"* (Hauge, 2011) is dependent of specific socio-cultural context; and companies are increasingly interested in taking advantage of these symbolic values. Indeed firms increasingly negotiate and produce symbolic values through the design and production of the products; their marketing, branding & mediating; and their retail and consumption (Hauge, 2015). These activities are becoming even more critical since the new meanings¹ – as in Internet-memes – are increasingly shared world-wide and not solely restricted to a geographically localised community.

To illustrate, we could dissect the symbolic value of a specific Internet memes. An iconic meme is the Lolcat² (see two examples below). As a construct, a Lolcat has to follow three basic principles. First of all, it has to be funny (which has a large spectrum of subjective appreciation). Secondly it must include a picture of a cat. And thirdly the English-slang funny text should be written in some specific font (Impact, Arial Black or sans-serif fonts). As defined by the Wikipedia community, *"the text is often idiosyncratic and grammatically incorrect, and its use in this way is known as 'lolspeak' or 'kitty pidgin'"* ().

Lolcats were gathering a large online community, then became Internet-memes and slowly were reused by many firms. To understand how firms can evaluate such regressive contents will require tracking their cultural contexts and evolution: the symbolic value of Lolcats being deeply rooted in the inter-relations of people with cats from the early domestication of cats (Linseale et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2013; Van Neer et al., 2014) and in the ancient beliefs of Egyptian dynasties (e.g. the god Re or the goddess Bastet³) or in the Middle-Age (Darnton, 1984). Examples of these symbolic values can also be seen in recent displays (e.g. Zhao Cai Mao in China or Maneki Neko in Japan); or commercial uses (e.g. the Hello Kitty phenomena) that both contribute to the good image of cuteness associated to (lol)cats today⁴.

But what is surprising is the evolution of the symbolic value associated with cats is that this seems to have taken advantage of Internet to become now 'memetic' (Shifman, 2012). One of the explanations of this movement might stand on the democratisation of camera and recording

devices; easier and faster access to online sharing platforms and the normalisation of the sharing of personal content. It is also linked to the fact that people have more cats in their environment and offer them higher level of care (Holbrook and Woodside, 2008). As a consequence Internet platforms are increasingly cats-full⁵. We can also link the evolution of this symbolic value with advertising campaigns: advertisers recognise that pets create a membership-feeling among consumers which influences their behaviour (see Lancendorfer et al., 2008). More recently a new meaning was associated with cats: it includes that they are the symbols of cuteness but overall they are a symbol of the connected community/society that has moulded them (see also Myrick, 2015). The growing number of lolcats, videos of cats and cat-related memes – because of their strong symbolic value – may explain this re-use by marketers. This movement in marketing's communication illustrates how lolcats, and more generally, Internet memes – because of their strong and deeply rooted symbolic value within lead-communities – are potentially important intangible assets for firms. As described by Ravasi and Rindova (2004) firms accumulate *"cultural capital through a systemic exposure to sub-cultural variety, especially to cultures that generate significant amount of visible symbols"*. Firms in many sectors could benefit from lead-cultures (by analogy with Von Hippel 'lead users') within their innovative production process (Parmentier and Mangematin, 2014) by referring to their symbolic values and by mobilising their generation and diffusion processes. To my knowledge; this has not been explored through the prism of the Internet memes.

While sometimes dismissed as trivial, Internet-memes have been the object of several studies in the social and computer sciences – including the recent contributions of Shifman (2013, 2014) – but, to my knowledge, not much in innovation studies. The present article therefore addresses Internet-meme as an innovation phenomenon. Memes – with their high and deeply rooted symbolic values – have mutated into physical goods; they have become resources for economic sectors and, as I will emphasise, they have become a source of innovation in many sectors.

The reminder of this article is organised as follows. The next section (II) will present the concept of symbolic value and emphasises the relevance for firms' competitiveness of such symbolic assets embedded in Internet-memes. I will then provide empirical evidence that Internet memes represent important inputs to various innovative activities (section III). This exploration of Internet-memes opens discussions and challenges (section IV) on the existing conceptualisation of innovation because of their nature, forms and their specific generation and diffusion process. The findings argue for a better consideration in innovation studies of new forms of digital products that are spurring and impacting many economic sectors.

¹ See Noth (1990) for further exploration of semiotics' concepts such as meaning (p92), signs (p79) or symbols (p115)

² "LOL" a contraction of "Laugh out Loud", and "Cat" that simply refers to the feline

³ During the second dynasty (2890 B.C.), Bastet divinity has evolved over time and was associated as the goddess of music, housing, and pregnancy: the word 'feline' itself shares common etymological roots with 'female'

⁴ Note that Japan had been a fertile field for the "moe" – i.e. synonym of cute, attracting, mania – with the Otaku culture. This was partially spread by the 2channel online forum. Also, Giko or Gikoneko the cat – drawn with computer graphic techniques (Shift JIS art) – is recognized as the more ancient Japanese visual Internet Meme in 1999.

⁵ Turning Internet to a kind of Fubirai Island (a Japanese « paradisiac » island mostly populated by cats)

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