Fifteen Minutes of Fame: The History and Significance of Memes

Course Description

Most everyone is familiar with memes: the Success Baby, This is Fine, Pepe the Frog, and other images, text, and sounds that serve as storytelling shorthand in today's digital world. Memes are not an entirely digital phenomenon, however. On the contrary, they have a deep history within the context of human ideas and expression. While individual memes may

When the sign in the museum tells you not to touch anything

come and go, their influence and impact is significant. In this course, we will explore what we mean by the term "meme," historical and non-digital memes, the many forms that memes, both digital and non-digital can take, and how we can interpret and understand the cultural messages embedded within memes.

In Session I, we will begin by defining memes in a broad sense. Then, we will look at historical examples of memes and begin our exploration into the connections between memes and the cultural medium in which they exist. In Session II, we will delve into the process by which memes succeed and propagate and look at the connection between memes and the Zeitgeist. In Session III, we will explore different kinds of digital memes. In Session IV, we will analyze some of the current uses of digital memes. Finally, in Session V, we will consider both the ways that we can use memes to persuade others and the ways that others can use memes to influence us.

Course Goals

In this course, we will endeavor to

1. Deepen our understanding of what memes are and how they relate to their cultural medium;
2. Explore the process by which memes compete and reproduce;
3. Investigate current forms and uses of digital memes;
4. Analyze how we can use memes ourselves and how others may use them to influence us.

Course Schedule and Reading List

Unit	Topic	Assigned Readings/Videos (all will be provided electronically by the instructor)
Session I	The History of Memes	• Dawkins, R. (1989). *The Selfish Gene*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press (Selections). • Shennan. (2002). *Genes, memes and human history : Darwinian archaeology and cultural evolution*. Thames & Hudson. (Chapter 3)
Session II	The Spreading of Memes	• Bjarneskans, H., B. Gronnevik and A. Sandberg (n.d.) *The Lifecycle of Memes*. https://www.aleph.se/Trans/Cultural/Memetics/memecycle.html • Hughes, J. (2012). *On the Origin of Teepees: The Evolution of Ideas (and Ourselves)*. Padstow, UK: Free Press (Simon & Schuster, Inc.) (Selections) • Paull, J. (2009). "Meme Maps: A Tool for Configuring Memes in Time and Space." *European Journal of Scientific Research*. 31(1): 11-18. • Smith, J. "Time, Times, and the 'Right Time': 'Chronos' and 'Kairos.'" *The Monist*. 53(1): 1-13.
Session III	The Forms of Digital Memes	• Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press. (Chapter 3) • Milner, R. M. (2016). *The world made meme : Public conversations and participatory media*. MIT Press. (Chapter 1)
Session IV	The Uses of Digital Memes	• Milner, R. M. (2016). *The world made meme : Public conversations and participatory media*. MIT Press. (Chapter 5) • Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press. (Chapter 8) • Mielczarek, N. (2018). "The 'Pepper-spraying cop' icon and its Internet memes: Social justice and public shaming through rhetorical transformation in digital culture." *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), 67-82.
Session V	Memes as Tools for Influence	• Ohanian, A. (2009) *How to Make a Splash in Social Media*. https://www.ted.com/talks/alexis_ohanian_how_to_make_a_splash_in_social_media • Nguyen, D. (2017) *What Makes Something Go Viral?* https://www.ted.com/talks/dao_nguyen_what_makes_something_go_viral • Harris, T. *How a Handful of Tech Companies Control Billions of Minds Every Day* https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan_harris_how_a_handful_of_tech_companies_control_billions_of_minds_every_day
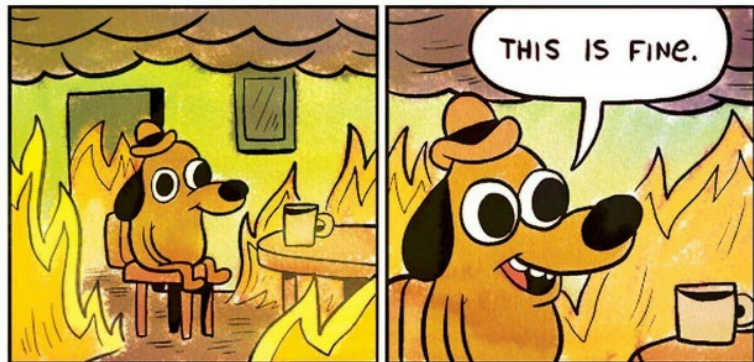
Instructor Bio

Dr. Sumayya Granger is a native Tucsonan and long-time Wildcat. She earned her B.A. in French and Art History from the University of Arizona (UA), and then her M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics, also from the University of Arizona. She is an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Department of Public and Applied Humanities (PAH) at UA. She has taught classes on memes, collaboration, intercultural competence, the relationship between humans and animals, and effective habits of mind. In addition to her role in PAH, Dr. Granger serves as the Associate Director at the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL).