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Viral Advertising at its Best: Internet Memes on a Rhetorical Path

Abstract: As the world evolves, so do the practices that define mankind. With the transformation of individuals follows the altering of people's preferences regarding different forms of interpersonal communication and subsequently a different appetency to advertising. As a result viral advertising becomes more prominent as it learns to use a new language, that of Internet memes. And if persuasion is an important function of rhetoric, then Internet memes in viral advertising should be studied from a rhetorical perspective. This paper opens various topics and although it does not fully cover them, it emphasizes the existing connection between them and claims a strong need for more studies on this matter.

Keywords: internet memes, viral advertising, computer-mediated communication, rhetorical figures

We start by acknowledging a general definition of the term „meme", which is a cultural unit transmitted through imitation, following the Darwinian evolutionary model (Dawkins 2006; Blackmore 1999). However there are some precautions that must be taken when discussing memes, such as the lack of a more profound understanding of the human brain and how it works in propagating these cultural units (Aunger 2006).

From a semantic point of view, we can accept that the Internet memes defined as „striking representations of an action or emotion, often taking the form of a human, anthropomorphised animal or object (…) written using Internet orthographic alterations" (Rintel 2013, 4) is a subcategory of Dawkins' original meme. Internet memes lead to the construction of virtual communities based on mutual interests. This tendency to homogeneity can be recognised in the narrow culture of the fore-mentioned virtual community (Marshall). It is rather imperious to explain at this point what sort of Internet memes are the actual focus of

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this paper and thus to narrow as much as possible the field of research. As such, we are interested in the type of memes that play a central part on websites like reddit.com, imgur.com, memecenter.com and so forth. Rintel's previously mentioned definition applies perfectly regarding these memes because they depict images of very expressive people (e.g. the rather big, frantic-looking eyes and peculiar grin of The Overly Attached Girlfriend) or animals (the sulky, disgruntled apparel of Grumpy Cat), sometimes using abbreviations (The Y U No Guy).

A meme's replicability and persistence (Rintel 2013) sheds some light on the power that Internet memes could have in advertising: „Inspiring customers to spread good word-of-mouth about their products is also seen by some business writers as an exciting new tactic for increasing sales – a process they believe takes advantage of 'meme power'." (Aunger 2006, 178). In fact, viral advertising is a power to begin with not only because the more traditional advertising has become obsolete, but at the same time very untrustworthy.
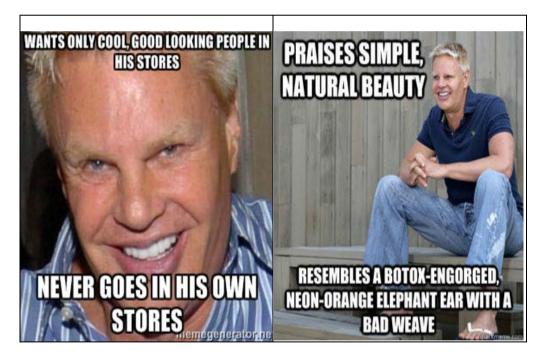
We notice that the concept of „viral" is in addition intimately related to the concept of meme (Dawkins 2006, 182, 192, 246), likewise taking into account that peer communication has great significance in the attitude towards advertising and brands (Lueg and Finney 2007). And if that is the case, concurrent to the consumers' attitude being linked to brand awareness, motivation and involvement (Percy and Rossiter 1992) we deduce another advantage of viral advertising through memes. Moreover, Lueg and Finney (2007, 34) state that adolescents make no difference between the types of interpersonal communication, may that be face-to-face or computer-mediated, regarding it as a holistic phenomena. This is important because the adolescents of 2007 are today's young adults who live and breathe in the world of Internet memes (Bauckhage 2011).

All of the above can be extremely well summarized in an eloquent instance that concerns not only the way in which CMC works, but also how something becomes viral and how it instantaneously connects individuals from a virtual community[1]. By analyzing the example of Abercrombie & Fitch, specifically the way in which it projects the image of a company targeting beautiful people and cool kinds, we notice how

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[1] In this paper we talk about virtual communities such as reddit, imgur, 4chan, 9gag and the such. Their users are defined by these communities and bear the name of the site they are affiliated to (e.g.: redditor, imgurian, 4channer, 9gagger). They accept the differences between them and they are sometimes quite humorous about these (*Whenever I see an MLP image with 5+ upvotes and no downvotes*, 2013) using again memes to describe existing rivalries.

this strategy became viral in the least desirable manner. It all started with an interview of the CEO Mike Jeffries who stated that A&F targets only good-looking, fit people especially trendy teenagers. He also higlighted that due to selecting this audience, all the employees of A&F have to be attractive (Lutz 2013).

The reactions immediately appeared on reddit[2] *(TIL The CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch went on record as saying he does not want fat or unattractive people wearing his clothes or employed at his company*, 2013), the more so as it seems that not even Jeffries's physique is enviable. There are dozens of search results on reddit to other similar websites[3] where the CEO of A&F is turned into a meme „Scumbag Mike Jeffries". There are really hundreds of these memes on various sites, where one can actually observe the swarm of such search results. Instances of these memes that ironically discredit Jeffries can be seen below. He is criticized because of his physical appearance, his lack of respect for less attractive people and his hypocrisy.

Accepting that interpersonal communication through the use of internet memes is quite a largely spread practice today, we ask ourselves why this type of viral advertising could be more successful than the more traditional one. We analyze a number of other studies that can enlighten our course, starting from the concept of computer-mediated communication (CMC). It is therefore important to note that the making of CMC groups relies on the strength of social identification rather than on interpersonal similarities (Walther 2011) although the electronic propinquity theory suggests that „communicators connected through electronic media could also experience a sense of closeness, or electronic propinquity" (Walther 2011, 455). This sense of interpersonal proximity is what makes up a community if we are to follow Marshall McLuhan and his theory about the global village. We can see these concepts at work in the prior example of A&F because the users of platforms as reddit seemed to be connected in fighting against what looked like an injustice. Using memes and common references they took over an idea and developed.

As such, we also note that CMC can provide tokens and symbols of the connection that exists between the members of a virtual community (Tong and Walther 2011) which can be translated in the predisposition to use the same language as for instance Internet memes. In fact our opinion is that today's prevalence of memes along with the use of smileys and internet abbreviations can be a strong counter-argument for „cues-filtered-out theories" (Walther 2011, 445), accepting that „while CMC interactants are making more attributions from fewer absolute cues, they are efficiently accommodating to the medium by deploying more intimately personal cues" (Collins, Tidewell and Walther 2002, 24).

In fact, „Buck (1989) argues that spontaneous cues are capable of being directly apprehended by viewers in the electronic media, just as the emotional displays (facial expressions, gestures, etc.) of persons are known directly by acquaintances in face-to-face communication" (Chauduri 2006, 62). This can be corroborated with the fact that Nowak and Biocca's experiment in 2003 showed people's greater propensity for abstract avatars than natural ones (Walther 2011) and with Chauduri's (2002, 76) idea that vicarious learning strategies give the best results through electronic media. The three clauses above lead to the conclusion that virtual communities where abstract avatars are predominantly used (for instance, Internet memes) are far better at delivering a given message which can turn into a significant gain for advertising. They also provide a solid proof that viral advertising cannot be studied without taking into account CMC, although this topic will not be completely explored here.

The above stated conclusion may have relevant applicability in advertising as the two-way transfer of information is highly advantageous especially for the people who are simultaneously seekers and distributors of information (Reynolds and Darden 1971). In addition to this, consumer behavior is influenced not only by genetics and personality, but also by the social environment (Chauduri 2006).

Although the „wisdom of crowds" concept has not proven to be a very reliable one (Simons, Nelson, Galak and Frederick 2011) that does not in fact take a toll on how people who are part of the same virtual community perceive or interpret for example a given piece of advertising. That is because text interpretation is not utterly subjective, but follows rules pertaining to an „interpretive community" (Yannopoulou and Elliott 2008). What we mean by this is that viral advertising through Internet memes is still an uncharted territory that has to take into account CMC. The reason is given by the two possible consequences which appear at this point:

1. People that belong to the same interpretive community (may it be virtual or not) will perceive advertising and brands in approximately the same way. If it is a virtual community, they will use their own language, a language which also includes memes, to make their reactions known. That happens because there are no physical or temporal borders in CMC (Marshall).

2. If we are acknowledging certain communities that react in a more or less specific way to advertising and brands, then the logical assumption would be that advertising may have a load-off its shoulders when it comes to targeting them.

After realising all that, we see another two questions arise here: why should advertisers target virtual communities and how should they do it?

When trying to answer the first question we must examine both the advantages and the disadvantages. Firstly, we have previously established that a virtual community is tightly connected and this can prove very useful because companies are urged to connect emotionally to their consumers, gain their trust and loyalty (Chauduri 2006), evoke positive feelings (Yoo and MacInnis 2005). Moreover, the good thing is that an ad can go viral leading to brand awareness and of course purchase. This purchase may be linked to the system justification theory and the means of consumption people use to defend it (Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay and Fitzsimons 2011). The reverse of the coin could be represented by the fact that people regard advertising ambivalently, both as delight and calvary, feeling simultaneously immune and vulnerable to it (O'Donohoe 2001).

Thus, the bad thing about an ad/ brand going viral is that ad/ brand going viral as was the case with A&F. However there are other examples that should be taken into account. The A&F case owed its bad karma to a harmful statement of the CEO and the system justification theory actually worked backwards here.

But if advertising uses Internet memes it could stand a chance, as it happened with HipChat. The billboard below represents a frequently used meme (The Y U No Guy) and according to statistics, the search traffic of this company increased by 300% in only a week after this billboard was set (Tsotsis, n.d.).

Advertising can adopt the language of memes (may that be visual or textual) to tie this overused speech to their brands. If memes are typical expression that depict certain ideas or feelings, the connection to a brand can only be beneficial both from the viewpoint of the rapidity in creating it as well as from the perspective of constructing a positive attitude towards advertising and that brand. It goes without saying that an ulterior motive is the desire to make a brand or an ad viral. The downside here could be represented by people's exhaustion when it comes to advertising creeping in their personal territory for the millionth time. However, ad companies can act subtle and simply nurture a positive trend regarding a product becoming viral. Virtual communities as reddit and imgur praise the qualities of Nokia. Creating an account on these websites and posting

similar memes could be an efficient and not to mention rather inexpensive way of advertising. In fact, on reddit there is a special group where exclusive information about this brand are posted[4].

We thus arrive to the second question. When it comes to providing it with an answer, there is a need to observe that if advertising targets this type of interpretive virtual community, then it should address it using the same language. As such, advertisers should be highly aware about the phraseologies used in internet memes and the force of interpreting visual images in visual social communication (Baran 2012). The reason for doing this would firstly be to adopt the same language as the targeted audience. Secondly, the primary purpose of advertising is persuasion and rhetoric promises the best way to achieve it (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Moreover, the existing literature confirms that rhetorical figures have a great impact regarding the learning process of a precise answer to ads (Philips & McQuarrie, 2004), drawing the attention of consumers and motivating them, which leads to the pleasure of interpretation (Philips and McQuarrie 2004; McQuarrie and& Mick 2003) and finally to commit to memory a certain message (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). Persuasion is better achieved if consumers have a positive attitude towards the brand and this happens for people with higher NFC scores when ads depict implicit conclusions which increase the pleasure of interpretation, whilst for people with lower NFC scores the use of humour, promotions and a sense of optimism (Martin, Lang an Wong 2004). There can also be talk here about the cognitive function of metaphors (Kittay), especially the visual metaphors used in internet memes, seeing that visual figures have a higher impact than verbal figures in terms of remembering an ad (McQuarrie and Mick 2004). Supplementing this, rhetorical figures are said to be extremely effective in creating a brand image (Tom and Eves 1999) as long as the tendency of „me-tooism" is eluded (Leigh 1994). However, a slight impediment could be raised here especially since Internet memes are based on imitation. As a consequence, if we previously connected viral advertising to CMC, we must now connect it with rhetoric and distinguish its importance not only in persuasion but also when it comes to learning and reproducing the language of Internet memes.

Moreover, recurring to the example of A&F and understanding accurately the terms of „jamming", „pranking" and „sabotage" the way they appear at Christine Harold (2007) we observe that the rhetorical

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[4] The group can be found at http://www.reddit.com/r/nokia.

strategies correspondent to these concepts can easily be transformed in real, definite actions as a campaign with the hashtag #FitchtheHomeless. This initiative tried to sell A&F clothes to homeless people and generated more than enough endorsements, chiefly because the policy of A&F is to burn flawed clothes instead of donating (*#FitchtheHomeless is a campaign to give your A&F clothes to the homeless and show the CEO who's boss.*, 2013). Writer Greg Karper is one of the people who took part in this initiative May 2013, directing a short film which shows the donations of A&F clothes to homeless of Los Angeles and asks the approximately eight million viewers (Karber 2013) to immediately donate all Abercrombie & Fitch clothes to people in need. People are also asked to post the proof on social websites with the fore-mentioned hashtag in an effort to change this brand's image. Persuasion through language lead to action and this is what copywriters must learn to do so that companies and brands can benefit from all of the prior outlined concepts.

To conclude, we remind that the purpose of this article is to open a number of topics including viral advertising, CMC, internet memes and rhetorical figures. As we only sketch the possible connections between these fields of interest, we highlight that the advantages of viral advertising cannot be fully relished without a thorough comprehension of internet memes and their authority in today's world. Internet memes represent a type of non-verbal cue in the computer-mediated communication, but also a new sort of language that reflects a certain way of looking at things. There is not only a need for advertisers and marketers to understand how they work but in the meantime to use them when creating viral advertising campaigns. We believe that can be accomplished particularly through a proper grasp of a rhetorical perspective on Internet memes and we find an increasing need for elaborate literature on this subject.

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