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Theory of Information and Communication

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6.2 Digital Culture



Introduction: the concept of Digital Culture

The new knowledge societies require active citizens engaged in lifelong learning, capable of adapting to society's ever-changing and dynamic needs. Continuously learning all types of knowledge and skills related to digital culture and digital literacy.

What exactly do we mean by **digital culture** or **cyberculture**?

Digital culture refers to the interaction between humans and digital technologies, particularly computers and connected devices. It encompasses how people use, understand, and engage with digital tools in their daily lives and within various social, cultural, and economic contexts. Many definitions highlight the emergence of cultures shaped by the ubiquitous use of ICTs, where technology profoundly influences and mediates key aspects such as leisure, communication, politics, education, and the economy.

Digital culture can be understood as "the set of technologies (both material and intellectual), practices, attitudes, ways of thinking, and values that develop alongside the rise of cyberspace" (Levy, 2001). This concept is closely tied to the cultural constructions and reconstructions upon which new technologies are based and which they, in turn, help shape (Escobar, 2005, p. 15). Essentially, cyberculture reflects the idea of cultural reconstruction and the reciprocal influence between technology and culture. In digital culture, using social networks is the primary way of interacting with other human beings.

Digital culture is seen as participatory, with "relatively low barriers for artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some form of informal mentorship where the knowledge of the more experienced is passed on to newcomers" (Jenkins, 2009).

Digital culture is a dynamic and ever-evolving concept. Media scholar Henry Jenkins, in 2009, described participatory culture as a space characterized by:

- Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
- Strong collective support for individuals to create and share their work.
- An informal mentorship system where knowledge flows from the more experienced to those just starting out.

It emphasizes the ways in which we use human agency to shape meaning, build relationships, and co-create the world around us.

Mark Deuze defines digital culture as a social phenomenon that encompasses a set of values and activities observable online, while also having distinct offline properties and expressions. He emphasizes that digital culture is both a collective heritage of a group, shaping the lives and thoughts of its members, and something that exists in the act of being performed, constantly changing its meaning (2006, p.21). According to Deuze, the principal components of digital culture include participation, remediation, and bricolage. He highlights participation as a core element, suggesting that despite perceptions of societal fragmentation and the decline of traditional social capital, a more engaged and participatory culture is emerging. This aligns with Jenkins' view of participatory culture, where individuals actively engage and contribute to the creation of meaning.

The main features of digital culture, as discussed by Mark Deuze, include:

1. Remediation: This refers to the process of integrating and remixing old and new media forms, where digital culture reflects a blending of various media content and traditions (Deuze, 2006, p.8). This process ensures that cultural narratives are preserved and adapted, allowing historical contexts to transition into modern formats without being lost (Deuze, 2006, p.3)

2. Participation: Digital culture fosters a participatory environment where individuals can engage in content creation and sharing, leading to a more interactive and communal experience. Participation, a fundamental aspect of the emerging digital culture, traces its origins to the 'DIY' (Do-It-Yourself) movement, which gained significant momentum in the 1990s. During this period, individuals began to assert their right to express themselves actively rather than passively consume content, challenging the one-way communication model characteristic of traditional mass media broadcasting (Deuze, 2006, p.11)

3. Bricolage: In digital culture, bricolage involves the personalized and autonomous assembly, disassembly, and re-assembly of mediated reality, allowing individuals to create their own meanings and identities. comes from the concept of *Bricoleur*, which appears in Lévi-Strauss's work *The Savage Mind*. Its application to the field of Communication Sciences is proposed by Hartley (2012), who identifies *Bricolage* as an element to define new practices in media and cultural studies, based on remixing and hybridization. It refers to the set of flexible technologies, spaces, and tools, based on mixing, reconstruction, and the reuse of artifacts, ideas, and concepts in order to create new meanings

Together, these components illustrate digital culture's dynamic and participatory nature, emphasizing how individuals interact with media, shape their identities, and contribute to collective cultural narratives.

2. Memes as digital culture artefacts

García-López and Martínez-Cardama (2019) discuss the significance of memes within the context of digital culture. Memes are the quintessential representation of the defining characteristics of digital culture.

The term "meme," originally coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, refers to cultural elements that are transmitted through imitation. In the digital age, Shifman (2012) redefined memes as short-lived, rapidly changing cultural units that gain and lose popularity quickly. Unlike stable cultural artifacts, memes are characterized by their ambiguity, permeance, and the process of reproduction through imitation, which makes them integral to participatory culture. Shifman (2012) adapted Dawkin's concept to the digital age, arguing that modern memes are not stable cultural units but dynamic content quickly gaining popularity online. These digital artifacts can be discussed, shared, and recontextualized and should be viewed as groups of content units rather than singular entities (Martínez Cardama-García López, 2021).

Memes are not merely consumed; they are actively discovered and re-contextualized by users, aligning with Jenkins's (2003) concept of transmedia storytelling. This interactivity and the viral nature of memes contribute to their cultural power, allowing them to reflect and influence social and political narratives. However, the ephemeral nature of memes poses challenges for their preservation, as their context and meaning can be lost over time. The section emphasizes the need for heritage institutions to develop strategies for archiving these digital artifacts to ensure their significance is recognized and understood by future generations (García-López y Martínez-Cardama, 2019, p.2-3).

Memes are an outstanding example of digital culture, where semiotics and intertextuality play a key role in constructing their meaning. The symbols, references, and contexts embedded within memes rely on shared cultural knowledge and intertextual connections to convey their intended message (Figures 1 and 2).

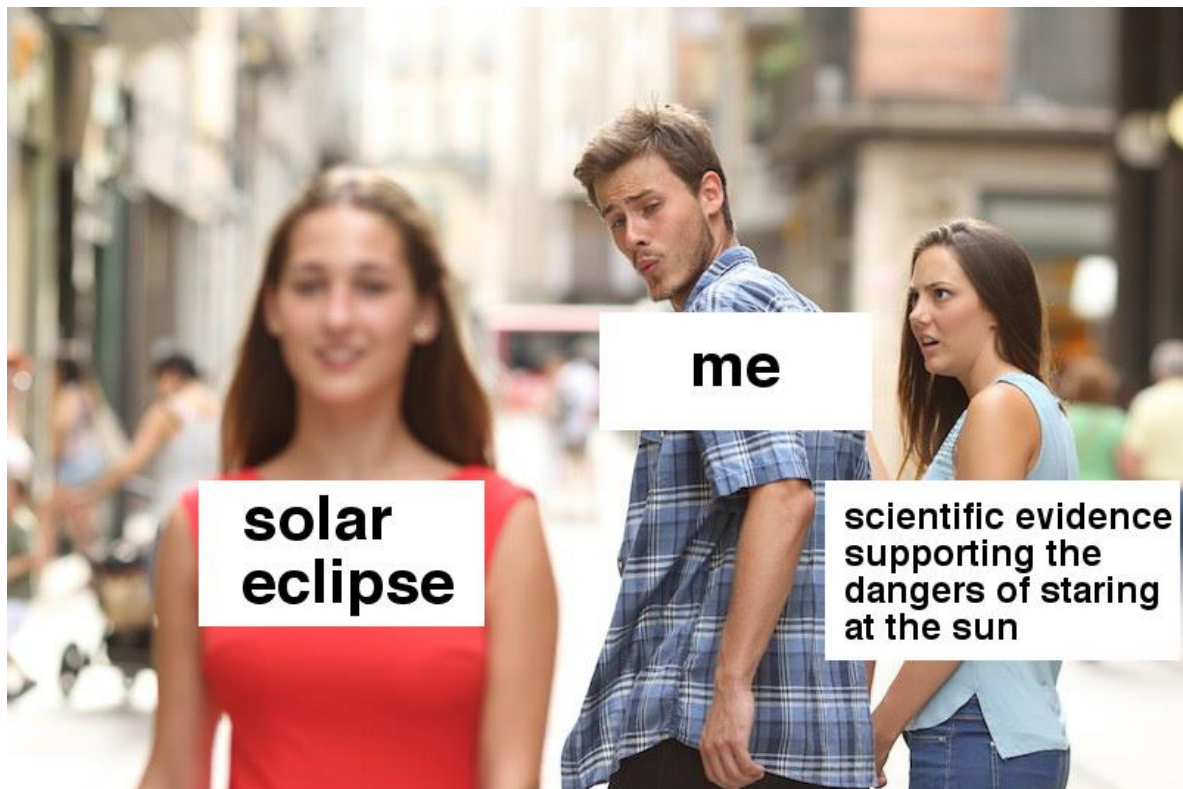


Figure 1 Distracted Boyfriend meme. Example of reuse and recontextualization
https://en.meming.world/wiki/Distracted_Boyfriend#Examples



Figure 2 Distracted Boyfriend meme. Example of reuse and recontextualization
https://en.meming.world/wiki/Distracted_Boyfriend#Examples

The memes' audience comprises individuals who possess the cultural and contextual awareness needed to interpret their meaning. Unlike traditional forms of communication, understanding memes does not require knowledge of their authorship to assign ideological or social significance.

A defining feature of memes is their participatory nature. They are designed to be shared, remixed, and adapted by users, resulting in a constant process of reinterpretation and re-creation. This dynamic allows memes to evolve rapidly, reflecting shifting cultural trends and generating new meanings as they spread across digital platforms.

Despite their humorous and simplistic appearance, memes represent significant social innovation with implications for network communication and user engagement. They serve as more than mere entertainment; they are elements of what can be considered "post-modern" or "born-digital" folklore. Their widespread presence across various platforms and their ability to circulate and evolve exceed the notion of mere virality. Memes are characterized by their association with humour, allowing users to distance themselves from serious events, and their capacity to condense complex ideas into succinct micro-narratives (Martínez-Cardama and García-López, 2021).

One of the most notable aspects of memes is their dual function in humour and political discourse. A shared sense of humour within a community fosters solidarity and helps establish a collective identity. Memes can amplify political objectives by framing complex issues in digestible and often comedic ways, making them powerful tools for engagement and persuasion.

Memes also act as bonding icons, enabling individuals to share experiential meanings. By referencing common experiences or widely understood cultural symbols, memes create a sense of belonging and mutual understanding among those who engage with them.

A prominent example of their influence was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Memes became a widespread social media response to the crisis, providing humour, coping mechanisms, and a platform for shared reflection on the challenges faced globally. They captured the collective emotions of uncertainty, frustration, and hope, demonstrating the unique ability of memes to resonate deeply with audiences in times of crisis.

In this way, memes exemplify digital culture's participatory and transformative power, uniting people through humour, shared meaning, and the continuous reinvention of ideas.

3. Meme as new ephemera

Memes can be seen as a contemporary form of ephemera, which traditionally refers to short-lived cultural artifacts that are not designed to last beyond their immediate relevance. The term "ephemera" is derived from the Greek word for "short-lived," and it has historically encompassed various temporary documents, such as trading cards, invitations, and advertisements, that capture the essence of a particular moment or event (Figure 3).

Obras



Figure 3 Ephemera collections in Spanish National Library

In the digital age, memes and gifs have emerged as new types of ephemera, characterized by their rapid creation, dissemination, and eventual obsolescence. The authors argue that these digital artifacts are closely tied to the social contexts in which they are produced, often reflecting current events, cultural trends, and collective sentiments. Memes serve as a means of communication that encapsulates humour, social comments, and shared experiences, making them significant cultural expressions of our time.

Just as 19th-century candy wrappers or dance cards offer glimpses into past social practices, memes can illuminate how people relate to one another, express their identities, and respond to societal events today. The authors highlight the potential of memes to serve as primary sources for future researchers, who may seek to understand the nuances of communication, humour, and social commentary in the digital landscape.

However, the ephemeral nature of memes presents challenges for their preservation. As these digital expressions are often context-specific and rapidly evolve, there is a risk of losing the cultural significance and meaning behind them over time. García López and Martínez Cardama (2020) advocate for heritage institutions to recognize the importance of archiving memes alongside traditional forms of ephemera, as doing so will help prevent a "digital dark age" where future generations may lack access to crucial aspects of contemporary culture. By preserving these digital artifacts, institutions can ensure that the rich tapestry of today's communication and cultural expressions is available for future exploration and understanding.

Institutions responsible for preserving digital heritage, such as libraries and archives, need to develop specific strategies for collecting and archiving memes. This includes establishing criteria for selection, processing, and significance to ensure that these digital artifacts are preserved for future generations.