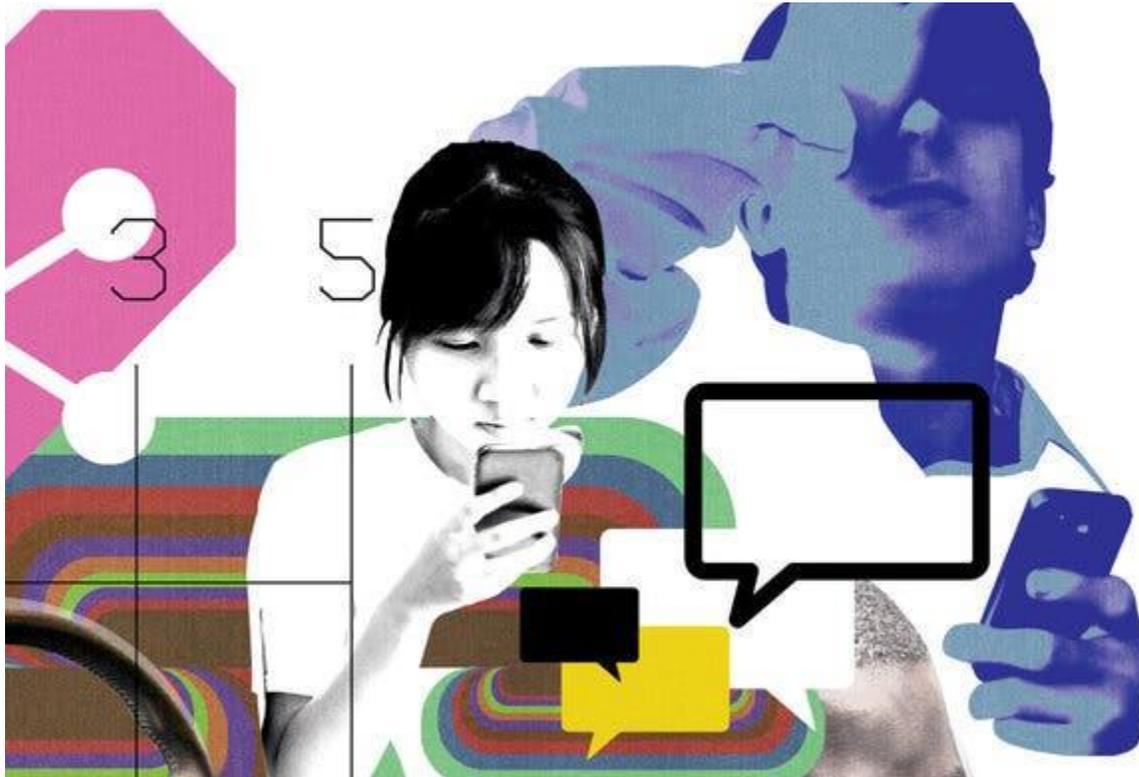


Do Memes Make the Internet a Better Place?

Do these visual messages allow you to laugh about school, friendships or what your parents expect from you? Do they quickly inform you about the news — and make the world less scary? Or do they too often cross the line?



Credit...Stuart Bradford

By Nicole Daniels Feb. 11, 2020

How often do you look at memes? Every week? Every day? Do you seek them out? Do you share them? Do you ever create your own?

Do you appreciate meme culture? Do memes help inform you about what's going on in the world? Do they help you process the news? Do they make you laugh when you need a good laugh? Does your love for memes connect you with a larger internet community?

On the other hand, have you ever seen memes that cross the line? That spread misinformation or racist attitudes, for example? Do you wonder who created them, and what their agenda is?

In "The Role of Memes in Teen Culture," Jennifer L.W. Fink writes from the point of view of a concerned parent watching her sons react to humorous memes about serious news. The article begins:

How do you prepare for the coronavirus?

By cutting up a few limes.

That's the message conveyed by a popular internet meme that shows a pair of hands slicing limes. The image and caption — "Me, preparing for the coronavirus" — are a bit subversive: While public health officials worldwide are scrambling to determine how to best treat and contain the virus that has killed hundreds, the meme plays on the name of the beer brand Corona, and suggests there's no real need to worry.

Internet memes use images to celebrate, mock or satirize current events and popular culture, and they have become a defining part of how teenagers communicate in the digital world. The recent rise of memes seeming to make light of the Wuhan virus or international tensions offers a glimpse into how teenagers learn about and process world events. Today's tweens and teens get their news via memes on Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, while parents, teachers and grandparents still largely rely on news reports and Facebook and Twitter posts.

As a result, there's a generational gap between how I learn about and perceive the news, and how my teenage sons learn about and react to the same events. When I learned (on Facebook) that an American drone attack killed Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the powerful Iranian commander, my stomach dropped. Having been married to a Marine deployed in the gulf war in the 1990s, I know that war is no joke.

Our sons came home from school that day laughing at World War III memes claiming their generation is ready for war because they've been "training" in the video games Fortnite and Call of Duty.

My first impulse was to lecture my sons about the seriousness of war. But lectures almost never change teenagers' behavior, so I dug deep into meme culture instead. What I found: Kids use memes to express and channel all kinds of emotions, including fear.

Many are harmless but some coronavirus memes risk spreading both misinformation and racist attitudes.

Ms. Fink talks about how humor is often used as a coping strategy for teenagers as well as adults:

Shortly after the drone strike in the Middle East, "my 14-year-old jokingly said that Iran should just blow up the U.S.A. and get it over with already," said Tanya Brown, who lives in Ontario, Canada. "His comment caught me so off guard that it made me cry right then and there in front of him."

She added: "We've raised our boys to be kind and empathetic to others, so when my son made such a hurtful comment, it really made me sad and angry."

Making light of a deadly virus or the prospect of war may seem crass or thoughtless, but humor is often a way of coping with something we cannot control, whether it is a comedian joking about having cancer or the “Saturday Night Live” cast lampooning the Trump administration.

There is also some concern about misinformation being spread through memes and other social media:

Parents should also remind their children that “memes could be made by anyone, including foreign governments and those who want to spread rumors and dissension in society,” said Andrew Selepak, a media professor at the University of Florida. It’s also a chance to point out that fraudulent information may be spread in other forms, as happened with text messages that appeared to be sent by the Army telling the recipients they were being drafted. The Army said those were fake. Similarly, memes can spread false information about the coronavirus, often with anti-Asian racist messages — an opportunity to remind teenagers about the harm in using slurs.

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- Do you ever get your news from memes? Do humorous memes have a place in the news, or should the two things be kept separate? Is it O.K. to laugh at serious news?
- Do you ever find that humor helps you to process scary or hurtful information? Is it ever not O.K. to use humor when talking about painful or tragic events? The article suggests that using humor in difficult moments can be a coping strategy. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? What are other ways that you process intense emotions or fears about the world?
- Have you ever seen someone post a meme that you felt crossed a line? How did you know it had gone too far? Memes often try to make a point using very few words and mostly images. What are the advantages and possible dangers with that format? Do you ever see memes that use stereotypes or hurtful beliefs about an individual or groups to make a point?
- The featured article was intended for parents of teenagers and offers the following advice:

Remember that most adolescents do not have personal experience with life-or-death experiences. “Even as adults, we can get something cognitively, but not really understand it until we experience it,” Dr. Manly said.

My four boys, ages 14, 16, 19 and 22, were born years after their father left the Marines and don’t know what it’s like to have a loved one deployed. They don’t know what it’s like to live through a pandemic.

According to Dr. Manly, sharing personal stories may be one way to help children understand the impact of international conflict and emerging health threats on individuals and families.

What do you think about this advice? Do you find it is easier to laugh about things that are distant from your own experience? Do you think that you are able to understand the pain associated with tragic events and still laugh at them? How do you feel when your peers laugh about something that you take seriously or personally?

- **Media Literacy:** Look at these two memes: “Made in China” and “Coronavirus versus Millennials.” Think critically about what is being presented in both of the memes using questions from the Center for Media Literacy:

1. Who created this message?

2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?

4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

5. Why is this message being sent?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/learning/do-memes-make-the-internet-a-better-place.html>