# Memes

Often when people talk about what works in advertising online, they make it sound like it’s the content itself that decides to spread. This is the idea behind the word viral: It suggests some content is just irresistible and spread by its human hosts almost without their choosing.

[embed] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5GGG0PaSe4[/embed]

The Salt Bae meme, from Turkish chef Nurs\_et​

Think about this. This virus idea just isn’t how media works. There wasn’t some virus that made you share a meme last year, or a song, or a video. If you shared [that Salt Bae meme](https://www.instagram.com/p/BO9dI9ujWNI/), it was because you wanted people to see it, and you wanted them to see it coming from you. You have human agency when you share things online, and you invest a piece of your identity in everything you share. You also may have strong reasons for sharing content, whether those reasons are personal, social, political, satirical, or all of these.

Why do larger, experienced companies sometimes falter in making their content spreadable while some gestures, phrases, pics, and videos spread in ways even their creators could not predict and maybe [didn’t even want](http://www.businessinsider.com/where-are-they-now-the-star-wars-kid-2010-5)? Misunderstandings abound as humans try to make sense of the relatively new world of social media content trends.

Still, in this chapter, we will brave the pitfalls and offer some explanations and strategies for spreading content online. And we look at a few cases of companies and creators who have succeeded in making content spreadable, along with some spectacular failures.

## What is Spreadability, and Why is it Important?

[insert Image 1]

The vocabulary used to refer to online sharing trends is unstable, with users adopting and spreading terms by users that may misrepresent what they name. Humans understand new phenomena in the world by comparing them to what we already know – which can be problematic, as the old and new phenomena will not be the same.

Take the word meme, for example. It originated in the work of a biologist (Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book The Selfish Gene) to describe something that spreads like a gene, only by cultural rather than biological means. But this definition is based on a metaphor rather than on observation of how content spreads. A better definition is one that acknowledges the qualities of memes – for example, noting that users often modify them as they spread them.

So it is with the concept of the media virus. Users and popular media outlets refer incessantly to media “viruses” and “viral” media. But viruses are biological phenomena. Can cultural phenomena really behave the same way?

The theorists Jenkins, Bell, and Green have written critically of the notions behind the concept of “viral media;” what they offer instead is the notion of spreadability. This relates to concepts we began discussing in Chapter 2 of this book, in the section on “The People Formerly Known as the Audience.” In the 20th century, advertising depended on one broadcasting outlet keeping the eyes of audiences directly on that broadcaster’s content. In the age of social media, though, users are not looking at that one broadcaster or television station; they are looking at each other. And with limitless choices and content online vying for their attention, to attract views you have to convince users to share your content with their publics: their families, “friends,” and networked contacts.

**Viral Communities**

Student Content, Fall 2020

[embed] https://vimeo.com/490290793?embedded=true&source=video\_title&owner=126152454[/embed]

*The Influence of Social Media*

For this project, I chose to analyze Shawn Mendes and his fan group. I tried to focus specifically on Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok and looked to see what fans were posting in relation to Shawn Mendes. I began by starting with a very broad search of simply #ShawnMendes. This was a good start to my research because it showed me a culmination of all the possibilities for fan postings and other related content. Through this initial search, I saw that posts ranged anywhere from simply reposting original videos of Shawn Mendes as well as his social media posts and could also be fan edits and memes created through his content.

As I began to dig deeper into other posts related to Shawn Mendes, I switched over to a very popular platform right now – Tik Tok. instead of viewing fan accounts on Tik Tok I simply viewed Shawn Mendes’ own account. Here I was able to see that after the most recent release of his song Wonder many fans had been trying to get Shawn Mendes’ attention through dancing and reacting to his music video. These videos that fans created ranged anywhere from simply doing the dance he did in his music video to very cool edits of Shawn Mendes. Fans would post in order to get his attention with the hopes that Shawn Mendes would repost their content as he has done with so many videos.

As you can see through the rest of the screen recordings and videos other content that is posted is also from other celebrities as well as fan accounts. Posts from other celebrities can simply be a picture of merch that Shawn Mendes may have sent them or banter between the two celebrities. Fans often jump on top of this media and repost it again creating an even bigger community surrounding one celebrity.

It is very obvious that one celebrity can have a major impact on many fans. This community of fans as well as the creator’s impact creates a sort of crowdculture around the celebrity. Fans of the celebrity, other celebrities, and even the celebrity himself get involved in creating content and reposting in order to create a sort of community. Shawn Mendes’ die-hard fans even have a name for themselves – The Mendes Army.

This large public that is created surrounding Shawn Mendes is not exclusive to this one artist. Many other celebrities have a large crowd following as well. For example, Justin Bieber’s fans call themselves the Beliebers and Miley Cyrus fans call themselves the Smilers. Social media is an amazing way to connect celebrities who you may never meet down to the individual fans that are listening to their music or watching their content. As a fan, you may never get to meet the celebrity you follow but one comment or repost can truly make your day and make you feel as though you can interact with your favorite celebrity.

*About the Author*

A student at the University of Arizona. She is currently studying prenursing in hopes of becoming a pediatric nurse.

[insert Image 2]

One of the crucial points in Spreadable Media is that online cultures work together as agents to make content spread. A company cannot do it alone. Consumers of the media content a company desires to spread must become sharers, and even producers: liking, reposting, sharing with specific publics, meming, creating fanfiction offshoots, and making the content their own. Spreadability is Jenkins, Bell, and Green’s theory of how content spreads online – though spreadability is not a strategy any one agent can control. Indeed, spreadability requires some loss of control of content by the creator.

To begin to understand how to make content spreadable in this way, let’s look at an example of content that spread almost inadvertently – without anyone really even planning for it to explode.

*This is an example of Pressbooks content formatted in Microsoft Word. It is adapted from “*[*Chapter 7: Memes*](https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/hrsm/chapter/memes/)*” in* [Humans R Social Media](https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/hrsm/) *(Diana Daly, University of Arizona)*, *which is licensed with a* [*Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License*](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)*.*