

# Humor Prosumption – The Impact of Digital Technology

Consumer Culture and Society

Prof. Dr. Klaus Schömann

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Jacobs University

Bujun Deng (b.deng@jacobs-university.de)

Ningxin Li (n.li@jacobs-university.de)

Nadine Cyanara Sarabia (n.sarabia@jacobs-university.de)

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## INTRODUCTION

In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins first coined the word “meme” in order to name a new replicator, something that “conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission” (Dawkins, 1976). Thirty years later, the word “meme” is more known to the social-media savvy young people as “Doge”, “Bad Luck Brian”, or “Joe Biden Refusing to Give Trump the Whitehouse Wi-Fi Password”. These memes, which are often images with one or two lines of words, are changing the way many people find humor and entertainment every day, alongside various videos, tweets, and messages. Whilst most are viewers or receivers of these forms of humor, many also actively participate in the creation of them. In this process of change, technology, especially the Internet, has been a key factor of facilitation. In order to understand Internet users’ prosumption behaviour - “prosumption” as defined by Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave* as production being integrated with consumption, and power of production being owned by consumers (Toffler, 1981), this phenomenon will be further explored through the following research question: How have changes in technology and media advancements affected humor prosumption?

To discover if other factors might play a role, a secondary question will be asked as well: Do other variables affect humor prosumption? This paper will also draw references from Limor Shifman’s study *Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts*, in which a main finding is that internet not only has become the major hub of humor, but also “allows users to participate in the joke telling process” (Shifman, 2007). In this research, “humor consumption” is defined as the act of viewing any content that was created with the purpose of eliciting amusement in the audience.

Biden: I'm not giving them the wifi  
password

Obama: Joe...

Biden: I said what I said

Fig. 1: “Joe Biden Refusing to Give Trump the Whitehouse Wi-Fi Password” meme.

(Image source:  
<http://www.funncaptions.com/img/245796/biden-im-not-giving-them-the-wifi-password-obama-joe-biden-i-said-what-i-said/>)



## STUDY DESIGN

### *Methods*

We employed semi-structured interviews, which allows for follow-up questions and in-depth qualitative information from the participants. The interview content mainly consists of four parts: content of humor, when and what the change was, prosumption, and opinions about the future. The prosumption part is further divided into three parts: level of prosumption, what platforms they use and the purpose of prosumption.

In the first part of our interviews, we wanted to find out what the respondents see as funny and humorous, which is the content of their humor consumption. We then try to identify the change in humor consumption behaviors that occurred due to technological development and modern digitalization, and more specifically when and what the change was. In the major prosumption part, we want to explore whether different variables, including level of prosumption, types of platforms and purpose of prosumption, have effects on prosumption behaviors. Finally, our questions asked about participants' opinions regarding the future of digitalised humor prosumption.

### *Sampling*

All three group members conducted two interviews each using convenience sampling, also known as availability sampling. Five out of six of our participants are students from Jacobs University Bremen, and one participant is a Bremen resident currently pursuing a full-time job. Our participants come from a range of cultures: American, Colombian, Pakistani, Albanian (though this participant identifies herself more with the American culture), Chinese and Turkish.

## RESULTS

### *Content of Humor*

In most cases, we find participants tend to be easily entertained by people around them or who they are close to, such as funny activities and conversations with friends or hilarious behaviors of friends. Regarding the type of humor they subscribe to, our participants mentioned a wide variety which included dark humor, political humor, physical comedies, simple stupid jokes, insider jokes, dry sarcasm, puns and historical humor.

The most common sources of humor reported by our interviewees are mainly memes on Facebook and Instagram, videos on Youtube, text messages and conversations with others, amusing songs and articles.

### *The Shift to the Online*

According to most participants, generally there was only offline humor consumption in the old days. Real-life jokes, funny activities and events, comic books, joke books, cartoons and television, for example, were their main sources of humor.

There are two types of responses towards noticing the shift: some participants can recall and identify the change clearly. Starting from age 9 to 13, they had their first home computer and access to the Internet on a regular basis, or when they registered their first Facebook accounts and began to interact with others online more. With increasing online humor consumption, platforms like Facebook or Meme Generator websites allowed for prosumption to be possible for our participants. While others cannot tell when their humor consumption patterns started to change, our participants believe that it was a gradual process overall.

### *Prosumption of Humor*

In the interviews, all but one participant mentioned that they actively share funny posts they saw online to their friends or family. These five participants spend on average almost 2 hours of their time every day on online sources of humor. One of these participants spend as much as 4-5 hours every day on online entertainment, standing out from her peers. The last participant spends only half an hour on average online, and in his own words, “I have no time for that”. Interestingly, this participant also happened to be 8 years older than the average age of the rest of the participants, and is the only participant who is employed full-time and not a student. This might hint at a younger age range of most Internet humor consumers, potentially due to the amount of time available for students or less responsibilities for younger people.

When it comes to sharing, which is the “producer” aspect of prosumption behavior, half of the participants mentioned that they have created their own memes. Four out of six participants actively share things that they find funny to their friends through platforms such as Facebook, Facebook messenger, YouTube, Instagram, spamming (a term for sending emails to a large group of recipients such as student mailing lists), and WhatsApp. One participant mentioned her experience of creating memes through meme generators, which are websites or mobile applications that provide a tool to create memes easily. All four of these participants who share on a regular basis identified the purpose of their sharing as bringing fun and laughter to their friends and family. Most often carry the thought that a friend might find the same joke or meme to be funny while they encounter Internet humor, hence sharing it to the friend either through “tagging” each other in memes or sending them privately via

messenger apps. One participant even mentioned explicitly that she does not make use of platforms such as “Tumblr or anything like Reddit with a bunch of randoms I don’t know”, and another participant mentioned a lack of necessity to share publicly “because it’s way more convenient, and much more personal”, highlighting the important purpose of sharing fun and connecting with friends.

What is interesting is that one of the participant has created memes as “marketing material”. This participant has been an organizer of a student-led competition on campus, and memes have been created by the organizers to “approach students to attend the event”. They were not shared “as a public image” for the competition, “but as an internal, unofficial image”.

The reason for using memes as part of the marketing material, according to this participant, is due to the fact that their main target audience are students. The participant and his fellow organizers believed that “they find it more appealing to read an invitation if it fits and is something they are comfortable with. So if they are looking at memes everyday, so looking at one meme inviting them to attend the event, they are not gonna avoid it cus they are used to it”. On the other hand, one of the participant mentioned that she has been part of a meme or a video made by her friends, yet she has no interest in taking initiative to create her own. As far as she is concerned, creating memes is a matter of making use of technology; for her, “it’s something I’m not good at or into”. She doesn’t see herself “professional” enough for “making videos and memes using different apps”.

### *Sustainability of Internet Humor*

Most of our participants agree that the sustainability of Internet humor depends on the trends of what people find amusing at the current time. Five out of six of our participants mentioned the topic of humor trends, and how on the Internet, what people find humorous changes over time. One participant used the word “fleeting” to describe Internet humor, showing that the type of Internet humor people find amusing at one time can quickly get old and then they move on to the next thing. Another participant elaborates this further, mentioning: “People talk about new things for one or two days and then they have another new products and they forget about the previous one,” showing us that people can be fickle in their humor taste and consumption. However, one participant was optimistic about humor trends: he believes that the amount of Internet humor will increase.

Two participants mentioned that the life of a platform also influences the sustainability of Internet humor. One participant mentioned the social media platform Vine, a video-sharing social media platform where users can film 6-second loop videos. Many videos created by its users are usually of a humorous nature and some have gone viral. In October 2016, Vine announced that it was shutting down. Participant 1 mentioned that some platforms like Vine and “small videos” have or might

disappear. Another participant shares the same sentiments about disappearing or dying platforms, but added on that "...it doesn't mean that it will stop there... it's just gonna switch from one thing to another," meaning that while platforms may die off and disappear, there is a possibility that the focus on which platforms will be used for humor consumption will merely shift to another platform. However, one interviewee also reported that the desire for such humor might change with the generation, saying, "I guess it's probably gonna stay unless someone, some generation of kids find out something that's funnier, or like a better way to present humor."

Another insight is that two of our interviewees believe that humor in general will stay, as evidenced by the availability of joke books, satirical cartoon, etc. still, but the material and platforms will change with time and the technology available. One interviewee said, "I would say that humor will stay, but the kind of humor will shift," and another said, "If you consider that there's still political cartoons and papers and there's still print like comics and the funnies and whatever, so maybe it is sustainable to have the same kind of thing just on the Internet."

## CONCLUSION

### *What We Have Learned*

While all our participants mentioned looking towards online sources of humor, most of them have mentioned being amused by friends in the last 24 hours. This shows that while our participants contribute their humor consumption mostly towards online sources, offline sources like conversations with friends are still very much experienced. Our participants also have a wide range of humorous topics that appeal to them, dry humor, political humor, puns and satire among some of them. The online sources they use are mainly Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and text messages.

Our participants agreed that before the age of 10 they would make use more of offline sources of humor such as interactions with friends, from watching cartoons or reading comic books. However, after this age, they gradually started making use of online sources as access to the Internet and to social media became more widespread. Our participants agree that their humor consumption has been mostly from online sources after their increasing exposure to the Internet and social media. Most of our participants have participated in humor prosumption, but mostly as passive users. They share amusing content to their peers in hopes of sharing their own sense of humor to peers or when they believe that their peers will find it amusing, and some have generated their own memes. However, this is usually on a private scale where they only share it with their social circle and not on a wider platform like a message board, forum, etc. Though one participant has used memes on a bigger scale, by using it as

marketing material for an event, he still viewed sharing memes as “internal” and “unofficial”. This shows that our participants regard humor prosumption as something that is more personal and private, as most of our participants usually prosume with their friends in mind as their target audience, and not the greater Internet sphere.

Our participants attributed the sustainability of Internet humor to several factors, namely the humor trends, the life of the platform and generational change. Most of our participants were rather pessimistic about its longevity, using words such as “fleeting”, but two other participants believe that humor in general will stay – it will just perhaps shift to other forms or platforms. One participant was optimistic about the future of Internet humor; he believes that it will actually increase.

Coming back to our research question, how have changes in technology and media advancements affected humor consumption, we can say that when our participants gained access to the Internet and social media starting from when they were around 10 years old, their sources of humor shifted from offline sources to increasingly online sources. Our participants are digitally well-connected, and now they make use of multiple social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc. Changes in technology and media advancements also have the power to shift the interest between the different online platforms available, as some of them die off and new ones are created.

As for our secondary research question, if other variables affect humor prosumption, the only factor that could have affected our results is the participant’s occupation. As previously mentioned, our one participant who is currently working and not studying did not have much time to spare to prosume Internet humor. Surprisingly, our participants’ cultural background did not have much effect on their humor prosumption patterns, as they reported rather homogenous results.

### *Advantages of the Study*

Using semi-standardized interviews and having an interview guide allowed us to have a high internal reliability: since the interviews were conducted by three people, it is important to ensure consistency in our interviews to arrive towards comparable answers from our interviewees. Our interviewees were also of different ethnicities and identify themselves from different cultures, which allowed us to see whether culture influenced a person’s humor prosumption. We have also consulted on past literature to ensure that the study is on the right track, by looking at previous research and writing our interview guide with past data in mind.

### *Limitations of the Study*

We have attained a rather homogenous sample of interviewees, as most of our participants are students from Jacobs University within the age range of 18 to 25 years old. This could have resulted in a similar set of answers, especially regarding the “when did you notice a shift in the type of humor material you consume?” question. Since all the interviewees were of similar ages, they answered similarly about their experiences. A sample of interviewees from a wider age range could have resulted in a broader variety of answers not only for this question, but for other questions as well.

### *Future Research*

For future research, we recommend a sample of various ages and different occupations, as these factors will most likely result in a greater range of answers and experiences regarding humor prosumption.

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