

To Meme or Not to Meme: Internet Meme as Discourse

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

Internet memes -- the absolute cornerstone of internet communication -- will revolutionize conversations as we understand them. **They are an enigma** -- the pride and joy of everyone acquainted with forums, platforms, and discourse communities on the world wide web. Versatile. Provocative. Clever. Relatable. Niche. Philosophical. Avant-garde. Distorted. Dystopian. Offensive. Wholesome. **All-encompassing**. The burden of consciousness is not as burdensome given that I've seen a meme or two about it in the span of my 18 years, because memes are, self-admittedly, a coping mechanism in navigating the sad world. On a personal level, they have allowed me to position myself within various communities of internet users who understand me -- but only from afar. Linguistically and syntactically, they smash barriers and speak to the universality of humor, be it that people from elsewhere laugh at, share, and comment on American memes. They defy the rules of grammar. Generation Z, millennials, and certainly youngsters estrange themselves from the bind of grammatical rules. Could this be contributing to the grammar crisis that schoolteachers, grammar nazis and purists alike cower over? Maybe. But I have found that in my experience, the people who make memes and understand them are incredibly apt and perceptive about the chaos. **The chaos that is immovable and ever-growing in the cesspool that is politics, the world, the world and politics.**

Memes deal with the existential, the close-to-home, and the pressing. But that's only because we made them such. Name a topic, there's a meme community behind it — carefully crafting memes, hand-picked for the occasion, using only the finest templates and the most palatable jokes. Memes are the means by which one can navigate the world and discourse, I can attest to it. The fetishization of atrocity, by those older than I and us — boomers, politicians,

apologists — cannot stand the idea of coping with trauma and chaos with humor. But we will achieve revolution by laughter, because it is the one of the few ways we know how. **My response -- impassioned and deeply visceral -- to the dawn of the age of information in this essay mirrors the chaos this very age entails.**

My familiarity with all that the internet has to offer spans over a decade, with emphasis being placed on my surfing of classic memes on The Taste of Awesome (a semi-famous site in which memes, traditionally formatted with **Impact** font-style top and bottom texts, superimposed onto a conspicuous image of a well-known person, thing, or animal) where memes were posters for all to laugh and marvel at. Lighthearted, bizarre, and a little vapid, memes then were supposedly in a stage of infancy, paralleling the youthful innocence of those who dared browse. I was a computer-centric kid who spent most of my time on cultivating virtual crops on Farmville, browsing Youtube, playing Club Penguin and laughing at the infamous zany “I Can Haz Cheezburger?” LOLcat memes -- which butchered spelling and structure -- as much as the next guy. **The collective consciousness of those who were similar to me had not yet developed to be able to take on the world and all its weight too.** My face and eyes, illuminated by nothing of the celestial sort, naturally grew worse with time, paving the way for Vitamin D deficiencies and vision problems to depart from dormancy. But this was simply the beginning of an immersion. I quickly discovered that the same innocent memes of our past could be used for a much grander purpose. Seemingly harmless online interactions foreshadowed and preceded **memetic power**, which would later manifest itself as social impact in the pushing of political agendas, heated discourse and social commentary. An early example of this phenomenon involves my posting of a meme on Facebook of a blonde girl on the beach, smiling, standing

behind a strike of lightning. The top text was captioned “**WHEN A BLONDE GETS AN IDEA**”, and the bottom, “**RUN.**” Boy, did it offend! Judging by yesterday’s and today’s standards of offensiveness, we have come a long, far, and grueling way. This meme incited a Facebook “flame war”, so to speak, where one 10-year old blonde girl grew upset and proceeded to debate the tastelessness of the meme, in similarly tasteless and vulgar fashion. And, despite her futile attempts at doing so, I realized that the damage had already been done and a communicative mission had been finalized.

Memetic discourse is a sociocultural tool in which conversation -- both positive and argumentative -- is bred.

As the years rolled by, I was still browsing the internet. How does one even really stop? To be immersed in virtual life is to be cognizant of impressions, adaptation, and change in the world of exchanges. As I grew older and simultaneously stayed a youngling, I became acquainted with current and historical events, the destructive forces of mental illness and peer validation, and existential philosophies. I was making internet friends from all over the world -- yet we were linked by a single thread. Our senses of humor were dangerously compatible, and at times, I felt that my relationship with the virtual world overshadowed my experience with the real world, which was more of a bleak, Zoloft-induced haze than it was reality. But I had friends. And they too had problems. And they had memes, too. **But what is a friend if not a person to laugh and cry with?** It was in this space that I felt most understood and entertained. Here I was, Skyping with my friends at the ungodly hours of 2, 3, and 4 A.M. of the night, making memes of each other -- that nobody, at least upon merely looking at them -- would understand, speaking to the exclusivity of memes. They entrenched me into communities that would later shape my interests -- ranging from the tasteful memes of the philosophical community, to the sheer

relatability of mental health memes, and their effect on me was all the same. **Memes were there for me when no one else was, speaking to my distress as if they had a soul of their own, and memes en masse, possessing their little kernels of insight and knowledge**, exposed me to more than some teachers have -- a bold statement indeed.



Memes as a linguistic and social phenomenon similarly changed with the times. **Memes quickly began to lose their playful tenor of the 2000s, paralleling the state of confusion that had been the political climate at the time.** For a while, as a counter-reaction to a various and once-less-organized glob of leftist movements, memes began to position themselves within the realm of the offensive, despicable, and taboo. Jokes about 9/11 were made, the atrocity of the Holocaust was either denied or undermined, and slurs of all “-isms” were thrown around like scraps of paper into the wind, lending themselves to the chaos of the world in which retribution was, for a time, null, unnoticed and left for dead — resembling the imminent formation of political schisms. But, like all (dare I say) “trends”, pictures of Hitler flailing his arms saying “I SAID PASS THE JUICE, NOT GAS THE JEWS” in meme format quickly became unfunny. Simultaneously however, memes branched out — they did not only cater to a niche group of internet users who prided themselves in bottling the tears of orphans. They became ingrained in a collective consciousness, a shared experience — just in different forms. A looming reciprocal

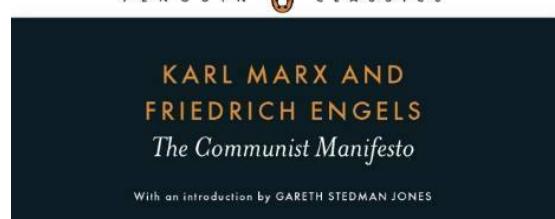
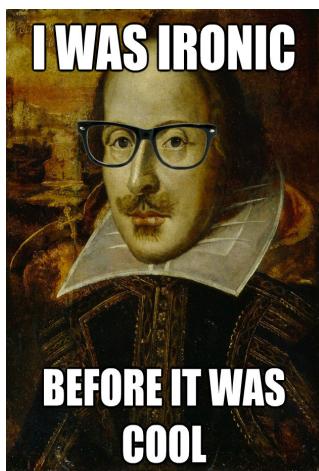
determinism existed, however, with our relationship to the internet -- we spent more time on it, we grew addicted and depressed, and we produced our own niche of “dark humor” in memetic form, which virtually everybody is exposed to now. Teenagers, being the bundle of hormones they are, are naturally depressive, and since my generation was one of the first to grow up with internet, it was the go-to medium we used to communicate our sadness. **Because teenagers are the main consumers and producers of memes, we dictate their form.** Therefore, it was only natural that our angst and emotional states be transferred to meme production, which, in turn, reflected our state of mind. Memes about various aspects of our lives — relationships, school, location, anything — were created, and circulated on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, iFunny, reddit, imgur as a result of our growth and obsession with the internet — and all could relate and “be in on the joke”.



Yet another revolution spurred and nihilism was cool. I suspect that the nihilistic mememaking of various page “admins” (administrators: people who make and post memes on a designated page, typically on social media platforms) was a final, first-world attempt at coping with chaos, in all its glory. **Recycling the phrase “I hate life it is meaningless” was not**

sufficient reason for alarm — rather, this phrase spoke to the universality of suffering, at least in the microcosm that is the internet, to the point where even Dostoevsky would be rolling in his grave. Nietzsche was hailed as a god, and I would too board this train.

I suspect that we are moving into another unbridled revolution, with memes containing elements of absurdism, meta, and postmodern thought, **distorted much like our visions of the transcendent future**. All of this both enables and reinforces this existential uncertainty (and maybe even piques some interests in the philosophical, linguistic, and political) — yet it also alleviates it, equipping us with the interpersonal communication necessary for human survival via discourse communities and protective armor to deal with the financial crises of millennialism, incompetent politicians and presidencies, a culture of divisiveness, and the debilitating stronghold of late capitalism. Those older, stronger, richer and maler than I have created these same problems, fearmongered, and reenacted their sexual fantasies of wartime and hegemony — but, I repeat, we will angstily achieve revolution by laughter. **Modernity is memes**, and their pervasiveness in the realm of communication is no laughing matter.



In my discussion of internet memes and the cultural revolutions they produce, it would first be prudent to provide a working definition of memes in a non-Dawkinsian context. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* analogizes the concept of memes on a purely biological level, which is strange to think about indeed. I will separate my definition of “meme” from his, as he invokes the sciences of evolution and molecular genetics in relation to how “memes” function. In his book, he coins the term “meme” and defines it as “[conveying] the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation”, analogizing it to a gene as an informational unit of self-replication on a similarly-replicating chromosome. Whoa. Even the show South Park, popular because of its biting social commentary which masks itself as crude humor, satirizes an obnoxious Richard Dawkins and memetics (memes’ very own field of study) in the episode “Faith-Hilling”. Confusing as all this might seem, my research will elucidate the internet-centric definition of “meme”, and will explore meme culture in relation to the internet *only*. I am positing that, (given their overall pervasiveness and ingrained-edness in internet culture) memes deserve recognition as a valid form of discourse because of their inherent intertextuality, socio-political commentary, globalization, and capacity for therapy. With that being said, Limor Shifman, author of *Memes in Digital Culture* seeks to provide a new definition of “meme”: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” Shifman is also cognizant of the gravity of memes, and her arguments are central to my own in the context of my research.

Memes “are”. Internet memes are discourse itself, representing an array of diverse voices and opinions. They can deal with just about anything -- ranging from ragecomics and LOLCats as noted earlier, to the most sensitive political matters. Shifman asserts that “...different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood (and created) by almost anyone, whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture...As public discourse, meme genres play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries.” Understanding this, the alt-right, esoteric niche-interest communities, and “MemeGeeks”, “who love LOLCats because they acknowledge the genre’s place in the grand history of Internet memes”, can all satisfy their internet-cravings with a daily dose of fresh and spicy memes, using this very ingestion as a means of creating and maintaining social boundaries. As for the sustainment of complex subculture, Shifman points to LOLCats -- which “requires familiarity with the genre and the special language underpinning it, ‘LOLspeak. This is a complex, nonstandard, childlike (or catlike) English Internet dialect, which is celebrated by its users as ‘teh furst language born of teh intertubes.’” Not everyone is able to “be in on the joke” -- only those who are “immersed in the digital cultural landscape” on prevailing meme sites and forums such as Tumblr, 4chan, and reddit may be enlightened.

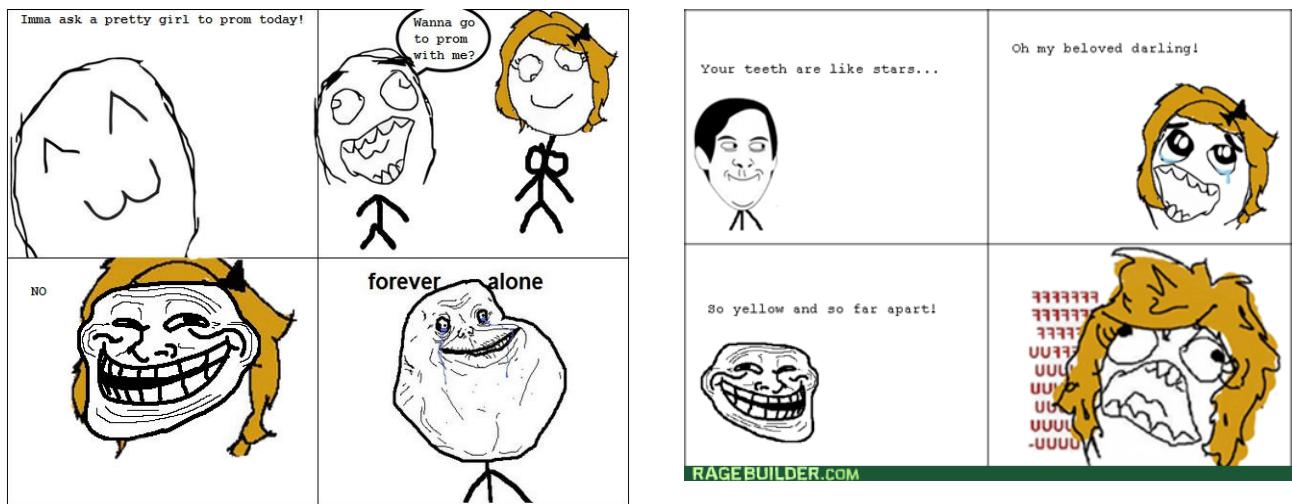


In essence, memes construct boundaries. The phenomenon of exclusion that governs linguistics similarly applies to memes. But, as much as it breeds exclusion, diverse discourse communities are too bred, with the intersections of race, class, gender and nationality -- as well as the unfortunate opposite, with the strict enforcement of social boundaries by people like New Zealand shooter/terrorist Brenton Tarrant -- a longtime resident of the notorious alt-right forum 8chan, who cited alt-right memes before and during his murderous rampage. The sad truth is that as much as memes bridge people together, they also construct walls and vehicles to communicate difference, to the point where you can't separate the rhetoric from the memes, from the people, from the acts. Memes are coded, much like all of language is, and alt-right meme culture is real, polarized, and an alive-and-kicking medium for spreading hate.

Luckily, memes are increasingly globalized, inclusive and communicative. They primarily establish communication and blur fault lines, paralleling a real-world blurring of borders and constructs in a greyscale world -- “In addition, in many cases LOLCats are created or shared for the purpose of interpersonal communication: they serve as indirect ways to convey a wide array of feelings and states of mind.” (Shifman). Do not be fooled by their outwardly whimsical properties -- ragecomics depict real-life scenarios and societal values. For example, “Forever Alone” comics may present the typically-male viewer with a semi-realistic scenario of romantic rejection, dooming one to something as extreme as incel-dom (a state of involuntary celibacy) -- signifying the greater and more disturbing issue of male-entitlement and fragility while calling into question the meaning of rejection and amorous relations as upheld by Western society. On a more positive note, however, memes are globalized, and increasingly so -- Gangnam Style, an internet music video popularized on YouTube, has been remixed, imitated, and replicated by an

astounding amount of viewers, many from different countries, of different political standings -- derivations include “Mexi Style,” “Romney Style,” and “Aussie Battler Style”, and so on, pointing to the interconnectedness of the virtual landscape that transports us to our home away from home. Despite the lingua franca of the internet being English, memes are becoming translatable, and English is losing its prominence, with global jokes being centered around two things: gender differences and consumerism. (Shifman). After all, who doesn’t hate their airheaded wife whose only hobbies include spending inordinate amounts of money and nagging?

Ragecomic Memes ↓

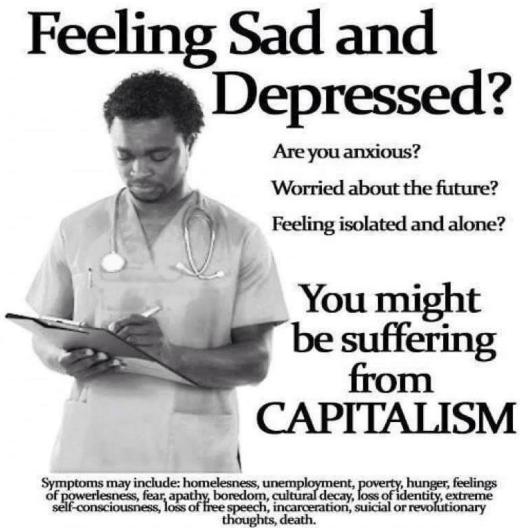


Memes reflect and reject the establishment. The “chaos of the world” that I so eagerly bring up is inherently intertwined with the state of politics, which is convoluted and barely navigable. Amidst all this, we turn to memes for political insight -- “Memes thus expand the range of participatory options in democracies: citizens can express their political opinions in new and accessible ways, engage in heated debates, and enjoy the process to boot. But in nondemocracies, Internet memes are not just about expanding discursive opportunities—they may represent the idea of democracy itself.” (Shifman). Shifman’s observation that memes are a

form of free speech is an astute one, given that Chinese memes are heavily monitored and even censored, resulting in their covertsness. Shifman argues that memes produced out of “tightly-controlled environments” represent “more than just a ventilation of anger and frustration; [it] serves as a powerful public display of criticism and distrust.” Memes speak to the idea that not everyone in the world is rejoicing, embracing, and singing “Kumbaya” -- the sheer nihilism to which we so dearly cling is precisely what helps one see past the “facade of optimism and unity presented in official mass media.”

Memes have become a mechanism to cope with the establishment. Morris Kolman in his undergraduate political science thesis, “I Have No Mouth And I Must Meme: Internet Memes, Networked Neoliberalism, and the Image of the Economic” posits that “Memes also come with their own self-defense mechanism, at least to a degree. When non-memers (known colloquially as ‘normies’) like establishment politicians attempt to meme, they just don't seem to get it...” As mentioned earlier, memes operate as coping mechanisms extremely well, with politicians and older generations either berating my generation for poking fun at a laughable and doomed American patriotism where we refuse to sit idly by, in solidarity and compliance with America’s wrongs -- or, turning themselves into laughingstocks by imitating memes -- much like how a clown does tricks in a funhouse...a political funhouse. My favorite modern philosopher Slavoj Žižek has a term for this; “Kynicism”. Žižek fundamentally disagrees that totalitarianism implies the lack of laughter and ironic detachment. Both Žižek and Kolman argue that “the ruling ideology can completely accommodate this humor,” and ““Kynicism is the ‘popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm.’” The term is not to be conflated with *cynicism*, which implies acceptance of the status quo -- Kynicism is quite the opposite,

manifesting itself as reptilian Zuckerberg memes and “Sassy Socialist Memes” on Facebook. All in all, politics is not a joke -- but we have deemed it such, in an effort to preserve our sanity.

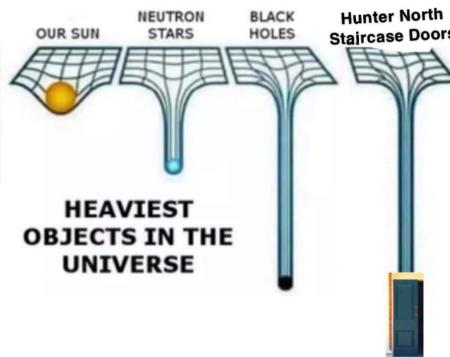
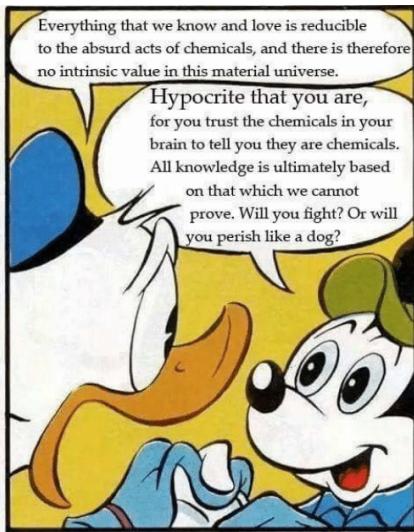


Memes help us to fashion our individuality and, simultaneously, embrace communalities.

Hans Belting correctly says that “digital images pursue the mimesis of our collective imagination.” The concept of memes is known and taken for granted by many, but somehow, it is ingrained in the collective unconscious of nearly everybody in my cohort. Memes allow one to engage in the “social logic of participation”, which is described by Limor Shifman and Barry Wellman as “networked individualism”, where we simultaneously craft individual online personas and enthusiastically participate in social networking. Amazingly, memes can help us cultivate an actual identity while maintaining our position as a bearer and sharer of memes -- while inadvertently fashioning an identity, laughter, and communalities in others as well.

Memes are therapeutic, and they are everywhere. “Hypermemetic logic”, a term coined by Shifman, pervades not only all of internet society, but also all of vernacular and forms of expression. Sometimes, conversations require not words but an appropriate meme. I have held entire online conversations consisting of nothing but pictures of dogs in costumes. If that isn’t

the most cute way to evade speaking words, I don't know what is. Maintaining the idea of memetic therapy with dogs in costumes, memes make people feel better -- just ask any millennial. News headlines ranging from "How memes helped us cope with the shitshow that was 2016", to "How memes got broke millennials through the recession", to "Like it or not, memes are the absurdist art form we need right now", to "Suicide Memes Might Actually Be Therapeutic" all attest to one thing: the comfort that memes bring in the dismal and abysmal "now". Don't believe me? Count how many times you make a self-deprecating joke in one day. Linguistic determinism influences the process by which words shape our thinking. It is a double-edged sword. By saying something like this, you are reinforcing your depressive thoughts but simultaneously airing your frustrations. But who can blame you? BORN TO DIE WORLD IS A FUCK 鬼神 Kill Em All 1989 I am trash man 410,757,864,530 DEAD COPS. Nothing is safe from the wrath of memes, mwahahah >:D. The revolution of communication is imminent, and we must embrace it, as it is like, literally, the only thing keeping us alive right now lol.



Fool

2014	top and bottom caption memes
2015	pop culture memes
2016	Harambe & election memes
2017	memes about shrek & nihilism
2018	memes about eating soap

This chart is proof that millennials are destroying the beer industry

How millennials

How Millennials (Almost) Killed the Wine Cork

Why millennials are destroyin infrastructure, and why bike l religious freedom

How Millennials Killed J. Crew

Millennials are killing the beer industry

Will T

How millennials are destroying the tuxedo business

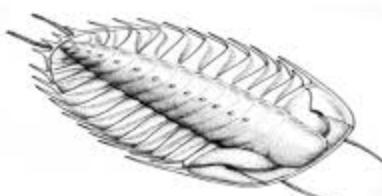
Millennials are killing the beer industry v obsession

Millennials are killing the beer industry

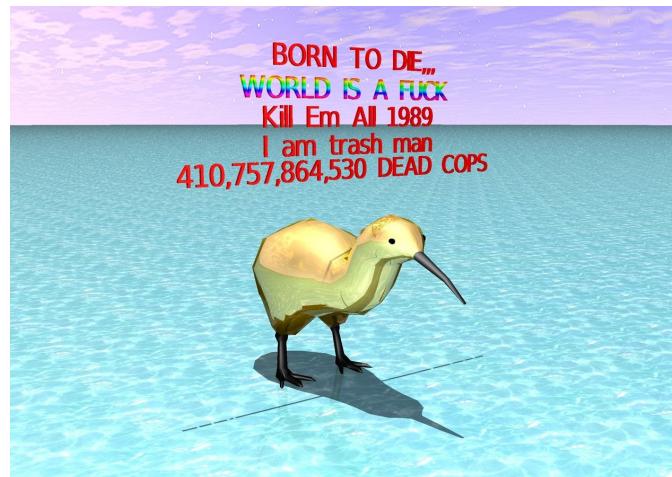
Are Millennials Killir

7 Artists Who Prove Millennials Are

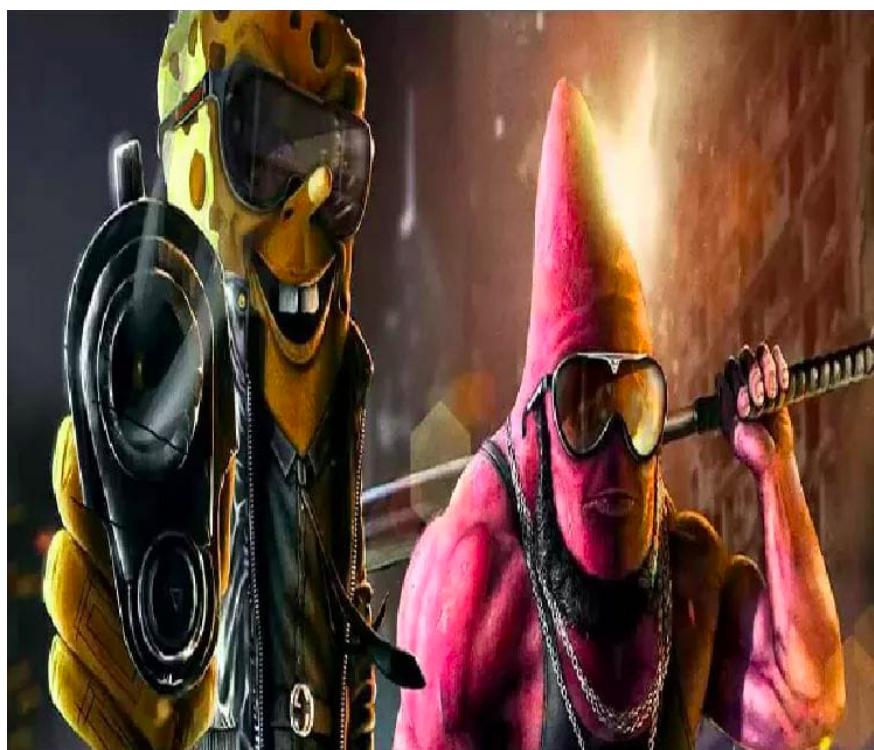
According To Twitter, Millennials Have Killed



BORN TO EVOLVE
CREATIONSM IS A FUCK
鬼神 Natural select em all 500 million BC
I am arthropod man
410,757,864,530 ADAPTIVE RADIATIONS



Dog in Costume



Works Cited

1. Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press, 2014. JSTOR,
www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs14s.
2. Kolman, Morris. "I Have No Mouth And I Must Meme: Internet Memes, Networked Neoliberalism, and the Image of the Economic." www.academia.edu/37914058/
3. Dawkins, Clinton Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 2016.