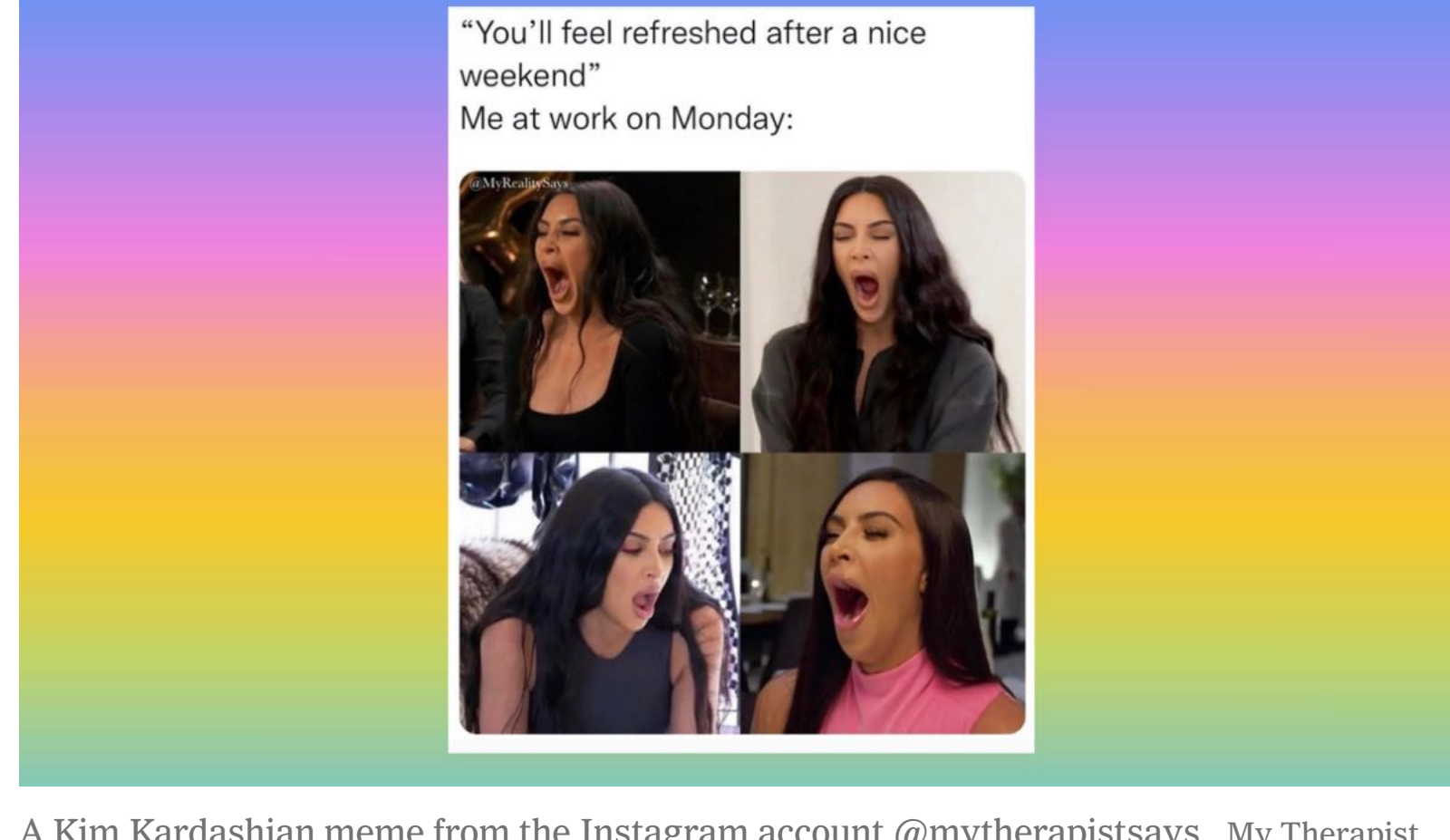


## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

## The Meaning and History of Memes

Internet culture is saturated with memes, but how would you explain a meme to someone who doesn't get it?

Give this article



A Kim Kardashian meme from the Instagram account @mytherapistays. My Therapist Says

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Memes didn't start with the internet. Some linguists argue that humans have used memes to communicate for centuries. Memes are widely known as conduits for cultural conversations and an opportunity to participate in internet trends (trust us, The Times is on it). Even if you're not extremely online, you've probably participated in a meme trend, knowingly or not.

## Where does the word “meme” come from?

The word “meme” has been used in the New York Times Crossword 60 times since the puzzle's inception in the 1940s, according to XWordInfo. Although it's difficult to identify the first meme ever, the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins is credited with introducing the term in his 1976 book, “The Selfish Gene.” In Mr. Dawkins's original conception, a “meme” was analogous to a “phoneme,” the smallest unit of sound in speech, or a “morpheme,” the smallest meaningful subunit of a word, Kirby Conrod, a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, said. “I would explain the concept of a meme — a self-replicating chunk of information — by asking someone about an inside joke they had with friends or an advertising jingle that's been stuck in their head for 20 years,” Professor Conrod said. “That chunk of information, the joke or the jingle, self-replicates because we humans like to share and repeat stuff. When we repeat the joke, or sing the jingle, that's an instance of the meme reproducing itself.” The word “meme” first appeared in the New York Times Crossword in 1953 with the clue “Same: French.” Its most recent appearance was on Dec. 24, 2021, with the clue “Something that gets passed around a lot.”

Humans have used memes to communicate for as long as they have used any symbolic system, Professor Conrod said. D. Andrew Price, the head of content at Memes.com, agreed. Mr. Dawkins merely “coined the term for something that's existed literally forever,” he said. “A meme is just an idea that rips through the public consciousness.”



In French, the word “mème” translates to “same” and the Greek word “mimoumai” means “to imitate.” In his book, Dawkins said, “We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.” He wanted to use a monosyllable that sounded like “gene.” Dawkins said, “It could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory,’ or to the French word mème.”

Webster's New World College Dictionary defines a meme as “a concept, belief, or practice conceived as a unit of cultural information that may be passed on from person to person, subject to influences in a way analogous to natural selection.”

## Shifting the meaning of memes

Like many words in the English language, the word “meme” has undergone a semantic shift over time. In an internet-saturated world, “memes and their meanings are co-constructed by multiple users in a social context,” Jennifer Nycz, an associate professor and director of undergraduate studies at Georgetown University's Department of Linguistics, said. “This is really no different from any other process of communication or knowledge creation,” she added. “It's just especially salient in the case of memes because people explicitly construct them and then post them to the world for commentary.”

The popular meme creator Saint Hoax, who has three million Instagram followers, defines a meme as a piece of media that is repurposed to deliver a cultural, social or political expression, mainly through humor. “It has the ability to capture insight in a way that is in complete alignment with the zeitgeist,” Saint Hoax said.



Memes can also accelerate the popularity of certain forms of entertainment. “Memes now have the ability to help new TV shows or even songs gain popularity by becoming the basis of a viral trend,” said Samantha Sage, co-founder and chief creative officer of Betches, a media company geared toward millennial women.

## Ingredients for a good meme

Noteworthy pop culture events are breeding grounds for meme creation. In fact, this year, Instagram hired Saint Hoax to cover the Met Gala as its first-ever meme correspondent, knowing that interesting, culturally relevant content would come from the event and spread on social platforms. “Memes are basically editorial cartoons for the internet age,” Saint Hoax said. “The power of a meme lies in its transmissibility and unique knack for being cross-cultural.” And memes have the uncanny ability to capture a moment while distracting people from reality. They encapsulate the era we are living in while also reminding us that it's not all that serious, Lola Tash, one of the founders of the meme account My Therapist Says, said.

Memes are shareable by nature. “In a world where you are scrolling through news feeds for hours a day, the meme format catches your eye, and most of them can be read and understood within seconds,” said Samir Mezrahi, the deputy director of social media at BuzzFeed, who also runs Kale Salady, a meme account with nearly four million followers.

Creating and sharing memes facilitates a sense of community online while maintaining a feeling of exclusivity. “Memes bring people together through humor and can act as a catalyst for creating social or political commentary,” said Kit Chilvers, the chief executive and founder of Pubity Group, a collection of social media accounts that has more than 80 million total followers. “Often, memes can be quite exclusive, as only people who are familiar with the origin of the meme will understand it,” Chilvers added.



## The future of memes

It would take a long time to dive into every popular meme that has graced the internet, but there are a few notable meme culture moments that provide a foundation for understanding the constantly evolving mode of communication. For example, many people I spoke to referred to LOLcats, a trend that included funny photos of cats with text superimposed on them, as one of the original meme trends. Another example of a widespread meme trend is Rickrolling, which involved adding unexpected links to the music video for the singer Rick Astley's 1987 hit “Never Gonna Give You Up.” The music video now has more than 1.1 billion views on YouTube.

Meme culture is constantly evolving, and the future of memes is unpredictable, but some of the internet's most popular meme creators have thoughts on where it might be headed. “I think memes will become NFTs (nonfungible tokens) and we will see creators selling their best works as digital assets,” Haley Sacks, founder of the Instagram account @mrsdowjones, said. “I would buy a meme NFT,” she added. Mr. Price, of Memes.com, predicted that in five years — or sooner — every cultural moment and every news story will have an accompanying meme, and that meme will be a large part of the mainstream conversation about that event. “Memes on the internet took what is already naturally occurring in the way that we communicate and supercharged it by making it global and simple,” he said.

What can I say? The girls that get it, get it and the girls that don't, don't.