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ЛОЛ—Comparing Expressions of Humor Used in Memes by Russian and English Speakers

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Honors Thesis

ЛОЛ—COMPARING EXPRESSIONS OF HUMOR USED IN MEMES BY RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH SPEAKERS

by

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

School of Communications
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This thesis explores trends in the types of humor used by Russian and English speakers in the creation and perpetuation of internet memes. The purpose of this project is to better understand the impact of the globalizing effects of the internet on social identity. Most current scholarship addressing the effects of memes on social communication and research into the specific trends of humor on the internet, focuses on the meme culture of English-speakers. Some researchers have focused on analyzing meme use in other countries, but they have not compared American and Russian humor.

This project demonstrates how patterns of pastiche, pessimism and absurdism exist in the ways that Russian and English speakers use humor on the internet. Both groups regularly exhibit similar trends of pessimism and pastiche, while the types of absurd humor differ from group to group. English absurdism is often intentionally taken to the extremes of logic and understanding, where absurdity is not meant to hold any kind of meaning that can be universally understood, while even the most absurd memes of the Russian-speaking internet seem more connected to a more grounded, literal meaning of the words and pictures used.
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Introduction

The internet allows for the shortening of distances between cultures and people. The impacts of online globalization on all groups is an important phenomenon in need of further study and understanding. The ease of communication between different groups on the internet often allows people to bypass boundaries of geographic distance, cultural differences, language barriers, political leanings, and historic backgrounds that in earlier times hindered easy communication. James Slevin explained how, in this way, “the internet can thus be seen as not just simply an alternative means of distributing information but also as a way of creating new forms of action and interaction” (Brügger & Bødker, 2002, pp. 10). With increased communication comes increased interaction. As interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds has increased with accessibility of the internet, we can expect to see borrowing of ideas, as well as celebrations of cultural differences. My goal in this paper is to begin to explore trends in the types of humor used by Russian and English speakers specifically in the creation and perpetuation of internet memes in order to better understand the impact of the internet on social identity. I expect that there are some similarities between the groups; however, there are certainly also differences to discuss, considering the vastly different histories both groups of people have had with the internet, freedom of speech, and specificities of culture. By looking at trends in meme and internet humor between the two countries, I will focus on exploring connections and patterns that can be observed in the two groups.

A Short Background into the History of the Russian Internet

Understanding the role that the internet plays in modern Russia requires some understanding of the history of computer networks in the Soviet Union, even though the
internet as we know it today was first developed in America and didn’t really take off until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Decades before the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1960s, a team of cyberneticists led by Viktor Glushkov designed a rudimentary network. The first public use of the word cybernetics was by Norbert Wiener, who defines cybernetics as "the scientific study of control and communication [between] the animal and the machine" (Wiener, 1948, pp. 1). The Soviet idea of cybernetics incorporated many of the main elements of what became known as computer science in the West. The network project started by Glushkov was called the Statewide Automated Management System for Collection and Processing of Information for the Accounting, Planning, and Management of the National Economy, or in shortened form, the All-State Automated System, the Russian abbreviation being OGAS (Gerovitch, 2008, pp. 344). The purpose of this computer network was to store, transmit, optimize, and manage information flow to reduce coordination problems in order to save a failing command economy. In the book *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet* Benjamin Peters starts with this admission: “At first glance, pairing the Internet and the Soviet Union appears paradoxical…. The Internet suggests to general readers open networks, flat structures, and collaborative cultures, and the Soviet Union signals censored networks, hierarchies, and command and control cultures” (2016, pp. 1). Despite these seeming contradictions, the OGAS, did exist as an early network in the Soviet Union, and understanding the story of the rise and fall of the OGAS helps put our modern, global internet network into a new perspective.

When the OGAS was first introduced, projections and claims of Soviet cyberneticians alarmed many onlookers in Western countries. The opinion seemed to be
that achieving a completely integrated and controlled economy was something that the Soviet Union was more equipped to accomplish than the United States, and that this accomplishment would give the Soviet Union a huge technological advantage. Despite this, as Slava Gerovitch writes, “the grandiose plans of Soviet cyberneticians to reach optimal planning and management of the national economy by building a nationwide network of computer centers never came to fruition.” (Gerovitch, 2008, pp. 336). Though the outcome of this project is obvious now, Peters claims that “the historic failure of that network was neither natural nor inevitable” (2016, pp. 2). As the project progressed, Glushkov was aware that his struggles were not the result of technological shortcomings or foreign enemies infiltrating his life work. Instead, he met most resistance from cunning competitors within his own country. “An inefficient bureaucracy was both the obstacle to, as well as the target of, his technocratic reforms” (Peters, 2016, pp. 170). The results of this inefficient bureaucracy? Instead of the national network of which Glushkov and others had dreamed, dozens and later hundreds of local computer centers were built in the late 1960s and 70s, but never connected (Peters, 2016, pp. 192). Rather than starting in the Soviet Union, the internet as we know it first blossomed in the United States, where “the first global computer networks began among cooperative capitalists, not competing socialists” (Peters, 2016, pp. 13).

So what do we learn from this story about the state of the modern internet, both in Russia and across the world? First, as Peters states, we see that “networks are not the application of a theory of networks, nor are they the children of hard gadgetry and pragmatic engineering. They are the technical arrangements of social relations that have and will continue to change the world” (2016, pp. 206). Thus, understanding the internet
in terms of social relations and social connections between the users of the networks is an important part of grasping the impacts it has, and will continue to have, on our world. Perhaps it is for this reason that Chris Baraniuk notes the failure of the OGAS by stating it in this way: “In the USSR, a home-grown internet never became the playground of the civilian workforce” (2016, para. 26). Without ever having a chance to obtain the input of, as he calls it, “the civilian workforce,” the network lacked the social element that we generally see as the main element of the modern internet. It is this social element, which includes connections not only between individuals, but also communities, companies, political states, and cultural societies that seems to have the largest impact on the world as we know it.

The effects of the technological revolution on our internet-reliant world are completely integrated with the social, economic, and organizational conditions of the society in which we live (Peters, 2016, pp. 172). Because it has been “cooperative capitalists, not competing socialists” who created the modern internet, the internet as we know it has “tolerated the entrance of private forces that are interested in seizing possession of the operating systems and communication infrastructures that mediate the globe” (Peters, 2016, pp. 13, 200). It was only with these private forces that the internet became what it is, however, now, “a few complex private forces are winning out, despite the delusions of digital utopianism or quietism. Whatever else the Internet is… it is not public. As the history of the OGAS indicates, when the public will to confront the high costs of modern network cultures is absent or abused, private forces gladly rush in” (Peters, 2016, pp. 200–201). Analyzing the impact of these private forces on the internet is not the point of this paper, nor is examining the blatant control of internet networks
that exists to the point of censorship in places like Russia and China, where both
countries operate modernly according to informal networks of influence and each of them
implements state controls to control national computer network traffic. The point here is
to understand that the internet not a monolithic thing. Instead, it is a conglomeration, a
technical arrangement of relationships and communication, where agreed standards of
behavior evolve, and allow for communication that reaches across country borders,
language barriers, and cultural differentiations.

As the internet has become a truly global network, support for numerous different
languages has increased as people interact with others in the languages that are most
comfortable for them. Russian is only the ninth most popular language on the internet by
number of speakers—Russian speakers make up 2.6% of internet users compared to
English, which claims 25.4% or Chinese with 19.3% (Top Ten Internet Languages,
2018). Despite this huge gap in percent of users, there is more content on websites in
Russian than any language besides, English according to data from February 2019
(Historical Trends). Though this is true, English content makes up a majority of the
internet, at 54%, which is almost ten times as much English content as Russian, which
makes up only 6% (Historical Trends, 2019).

Part of the interest in the Russian internet comes from its separateness. In many
ways, the Russian internet still exists in a different space than the English internet,
despite the inherent connectivity of a global internet system. Censorship may be one
factor in this digital distance, but it is not the only reason. There are Russian versions of
many of the most popular American-created sites, which Russian users support in much
higher numbers than the English counterparts, cutting down on some of the interaction
the different users might otherwise have with each other. While, for example, Facebook is by far the social media platform with the highest global usage penetration, Russian internet users generally prefer Vkontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki (OK). Yandex plays the part of a sort of Russian Google, as the most popular search engine. Yandex also offers many other services, such as an AI digital assistance, smart speakers, translation, Amazon-esque marketplaces, and even taxi services. Mail.ru is more popular than Gmail. 2gis is preferred over Google Maps. Of course, there are some users who are comfortable using the globally popular, American-started versions of these sites; however, it is clear that for others, the local versions are more appealing. For this second group, it might be that the language barrier prevents some people from feeling comfortable crossing between local and international platforms. For others, use of the local versions is simply seen as a superior, because the products are tailored to the specificities of the Russian language and culture, which is especially important when considering the effectiveness of a search engine. For yet others it is simply a matter of patriotism. Victoria Zavyalova explains that “Yandex is more than a company; it’s a matter of national pride. Russians like to wear clothing by major international and American brands, but when it comes to online services, they go local” (2017, para. 1).

Both English and Russian-speaking internet users love to use memes to communicate, especially to share jokes, and quickly communicate feelings or reactions to current events on both local and global scales. Most current scholarship addressing the effects of memes on social communication and research into the specific trends of humor on the internet, including some articles written by Russian and other Eastern European scholars, focuses on the meme culture of English-speakers, and understanding these
meme movements through different lenses (Пода, 2018; Dynel, 2016; Савиченко, 2015). There are some articles published which focus on analyzing meme use in other countries, but most do not compare American and Russian humor specifically. There are also some works within Russian academia which, like the English articles, focus primarily on memes in their own language (Майборода & Майборода, 2014; Щурина, 2013). Despite this existing research, as far as I am aware, an overt comparison between the internet humor of these two groups hasn’t been fully explored at this point and there are lots of comparisons yet to be made.

**Social Identity and the Internet**

Understanding the internet in terms of social relations and social connections requires an examination of the importance of social identity. Growing up seems to demand that we answer the centuries-old question, “who am I?” for ourselves as we strive to define our own individual sense of personal identity (Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 1–2, 5–6) This drive to develop a personal identity is natural and leads us to group with those who share a similar perspective on the world, and on themselves. Each of us begins to define our personal identity at a young age, often choosing to reflect the values of those people (real or fictional) who we respect and admire. As we grow, we continue to define our personal sense of self through association with various groups, on both the large, and small scales which we refine with time and experience (Jones & Abes, 2013, pp. 19–21). Two instinctual groupings that need to be discussed in this paper are those of generation, and nationality. We desire the special sense of solidarity that comes when we connect with others who are our own age, who share our values, and who have grown up in the same national and cultural environments as us, whom we feel we can trust.
(Hannerz, 1996, pp. 52). Understanding these groupings help us understand the similarities and differences in humor used by English and Russian speakers in internet memes.

In relation to the idea of national identity, in a 1998 paper titled “In Search of Natural Identity: Alpine Landscape and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Nation,” Oliver Zimmer shares the thoughts of Elias Canetti, author of *Crowds and Power*, which was first published in German in 1960. Canetti argues that it isn’t language, territory, or history at the heart of what we think of as national identity in the modern sense. In the context of this project, this is an interesting concept. Though language, territory, and history don’t bind the people of a nation together, Canetti claims that nations cannot do without a single national symbol they can rally around. This symbol is what turns individuals into a group of conscious members of a particular nation. Canetti continues “In the case of England… it was the sea that took this function, while for the Germans it was the forest. In France, on the other hand, it was the Revolution… And in Switzerland… it was the mountains” (Zimmer, 1998, excerpt). Though I wouldn’t necessarily agree that the French Revolution should be thought of as a single symbol separate from the country’s history, or that the English people’s connection to the sea is unrelated to their territory, the idea presented here is interesting. National identity is more complicated than current borders and native languages and it seems that perhaps this is becoming even more true in the globalized world of the internet.

Generational unity is also a complicated concept. “It is only at the turn of this century that the generational rift intrudes into social practice and is transformed from a primitive means of accounting into one of the tools for decoding reality” (Kriegel, 1978,
Generational identity is often focused on largely impactful events, events that have affected people almost universally within a certain place and time. Specific generational birth years are never officially defined because we use these shared experiences rather than specified decades to draw fuzzy lines between generations, and some challenge any use of generational segmentation as a tool to understand identity (King, Gardiner, & Grace, 2013 pp. 639-653). A piece published by NPR (National Public Radio) discussed some of these events. The so-called “Silent Generation” is distinguished by their experiences during WWII and the Great Depression. The “baby boomers” grew up in a post WWII world. “Gen X” saw the end of the Cold War, and the beginning stages of the internet, though the group often called “millennials” was the first group to come of age with the internet. Because these people have never known a world without computers, they can also be identified as “digital natives,” which is a slightly broader term that is often used to refer to people who were raised in a digital, media-saturated world, bridging the earlier “millennial” and later “Gen Z” generations (Shamma, 2011 para. 2–5). Generational grouping exists because people are able to separate themselves from neighboring generations by basing their group identity around shared experiences. One of the purposes of exploring trends of humor between Russian and English internet users is to figure out if the trends of humor often attributed to the generational group of American digital natives extend to Russians who also grew up with the internet.

As every generation comes of age, there seems to be a desire to break away from the generational ideals of their parents and grandparents. This generational desire for independence is, in part, biological. Genetically, teens feel a need for freedom, a
biological instinct thought to help avoid incest (Kotler, 2015, para. 5). Beyond genetics, the experiences unique to a generation shape their perception of self, and the world. Each generation wants to separate itself from those before. “A new generation tends to waver between extravagant hopes for the future and a pessimistic view of the world; it feels entrapped by the previous generation” (Roth, 1971, pp. 446). As each generation reaches their teenage and young adult years, they turn to the available technology of the time to voice their beliefs. Some forms of rebellion recur across generations, such as student protests on campuses, but the ways digital natives interact with protests is different than that of previous generations simply because of the technology available. Clips from student protests in different parts of the country have hit millions of YouTube views, and have reached people across the country within minutes. This offers a stark contrast from past decades’ black-and-white newspaper coverage. The instinctive way newer generations use new technology turns the technology itself into a tool that breaks the new from the old. Older generations often resist technological changes and don’t integrate new technology into their lives with the speed and full acceptance of younger generations.

The rise of the internet and social media reveal some of the previously hidden humanity and shortcomings of day-to-day life. Researcher Limor Shifman notes that meme culture cultivates a “highly visible public culture” (Shifman, 2014, pp. 60). This is true even of what would have been quite personal and private in different eras. On social media, self-deprecating humor and sarcasm mingle freely with activist messaging and motivational content. Some believe that the types of humor used by digital natives are
intentionally inaccessible to other generations, and the idea of a distinct, so-called “millennial humor” has been discussed quite thoroughly.

**The Interactive Nature of Memes**

Anyone trying to understand the concepts behind this idea of the existence of a distinct millennial humor must agree that the internet is the place to start. This is where digital natives are comfortable, and where they interact with each other almost constantly. Though the internet is certainly also used by those of other generations, it doesn’t seem a stretch to assume that many of the people creating and contributing meme content would consider themselves digital natives. For this reason, understanding the type of humor attributed to digital natives is an essential part of this project. The internet is the natural home-medium for the newest trends, jokes, and perspectives, which spread quickly, seemingly without regard to geographic borders.

Additionally, “the scale and scope of American cultural transmissions are so vast that the terms globalization and Americanization are often used interchangeably” (Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014, pp. 729). Where English content makes up such a large percentage of the internet, American content creators have a high level of global connection and influence. This phenomenon is prevalent across the world. American cultural influences and media texts are much more likely to be seen translated to other languages and spread among international communities than for international memes to be translated and made popular among English-speaking communities. For this reason, most of the research I studied to understand meme culture and humor of internet users is written from the perspective of English speakers—most scholars focus on this perspective first, since understanding how English speakers use the internet gives insight
into how people of other cultures do. These researchers also spend a lot of time focusing on the particular trends of humor used by digital natives. By starting by better understanding the humor of English speakers, particularly in this group, we are able to find trends that can be used as a basis to find connections to Russian memes and meme movements.

Humor is a huge part of internet and meme culture, and the high level of participation from people makes the internet a wonderful medium to analyze not only the taste of viewers, but that of creators. Meme content changes over time with each iteration, and the definition of memes has changed too. The word “meme” was originally a biological term, relating to genes. In her article, “Memes as Speech Acts,” Lezandra Grundlingh, who studies linguistics and computer-mediated communications quotes Patrick Davison, who explains that while genes “determine an organism’s physical characteristics. [...] Memes determine the behaviour of an organism” (as cited in Grundlingh, 2018, pp. 147). Over time, the word meme came to identify a generic category of online communication. The word’s Greek root mimema means “something imitated”—an apt description for a user-generated piece of content that can be infinitely adopted and edited by the masses (Grundlingh, 2018, pp. 147). Memes tend to be image-based with captions that appeal to various audiences. Defining modern memes, Davidson writes: “An internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission” (as cited in Grundlingh, pp. 148). Any kind of art or medium for self-expression that draws upon powerful common experiences will elicit reaction from the audience. At first glance, memes pale in comparison with the great works of art. Their simplistic graphics and almost-awkward captions demonstrate none of
the technical skill that artists master over decades. But in those flaws lies the beauty of the meme: anyone can make one. Meme-creating websites provide free, easy-to-use generators that allow users to match snarky copy with thousands of images. This high level of accessibility promotes heavy user interaction.

Memes only make sense to the viewers if they are able relate to the humor presented. In the article “What Do You Meme?” Smart-Denson is quoted saying: “[Memes are] a joke format that require you to be in touch with culture and have a similar understanding of things as other people, which brings you together. It’s all about using imagery and universal experiences to elicit a response from your audiences” (Benjamin, 2017, pp. 50). This connects back to the idea of societal identity—here it seems that by using shared experiences to crack a joke, digital natives strive to create a space for themselves, separate from those who won’t understand the joke. “Groups, as well as the individuals within them, have an interest in creating and maintaining the social conditions under which trust can occur” (Tyler, 2001, 285). In “What Do You Meme” Benjamin goes on to describe that “memes are a medium that thrive on creating humor that only someone with pre-established knowledge can understand” (2017, pp. 51). Internet humor can encompass many universal experiences, both the “antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed” (Blank, 2018, pp. 100).

Drawing on universal humor means drawing upon universal experiences. This idea of universal experiences may explain why some memes move across country borders and from language to language, while others do not.

When someone creates a meme, they generally aim for a specific, often humorous tone to communicate a resonating experience or idea. After publication on social media,
viewers tweak, and add their own twists on, under a general meme heading. This evolution of memes can be understood as a form of pastiche. Before the memetic age, Jameson defined pastiche, writing “imitation for the sake of imitation; a state in which one text cites another without adding any referential meaning” (Katz & Shifman, 2017, pp. 834). This repetition is rampant in memes. Because of this phenomenon, memes such as the “Bubble Girl” become part of an evolving movement. This photo of a young girl looking over her shoulder with a double chin as she runs toward the camera, bubble bottle tightly clenched in tiny hand, has been used to communicate a huge variety of emotions and experiences (see figure 1–4).

Figure 1: Bubble Girl: Original Meme

![Figure 1: Bubble Girl: Original Meme](image1)

Figure 2: Bubble Girl: Dying Battery

![Figure 2: Bubble Girl: Dying Battery](image2)

Figure 3: Bubble Girl: Pirates of the Caribbean

![Figure 3: Bubble Girl: Pirates of the Caribbean](image3)

Figure 4: Bubble Girl: Zombies Ahead

![Figure 4: Bubble Girl: Zombies Ahead](image4)
Pastiche in meme culture can also involve citing another text in the creation of a new meme. Katz and Shifman listed pastiche as a type of digital memetic nonsense saying, “In some cases, the memes are nonsensical from the start; in others, the initial versions aim at making a certain point, while in later versions of the same meme, meaning is diffused or eroded” (2017, pp. 834). Thus, as the humor spreads, some content becomes more absurd, playful, or ironic.

The more users are exposed to the meme, the more they create related content, stamping their own mark on the pop culture trend. Thus, we see that “this type of pastiche reflects a desire for engagement with others who share the same taste and may be affiliated with specific fandoms” (Katz & Shifman, 2017, pp. 834). Memes are created for the purpose of expressing something. Sometimes, this is an emotion, sometimes, it is intended to express an opinion. Memes then go through what some call a “process of semiotic change in the circulation and flow of discourses across social and cultural boundaries” at the hands of the audience (as cited in Grundlingh, 2018, pp. 148). This flow occurs because the audience relates to the meme and wishes to contribute their own experience to the whole. According to psychologist Goal Saedi, memes are “pieces of content that change and evolve as more people try to make them relatable” (Eadiciocco, 2017, para. 7). The longer a meme family runs, the more personal and relatable they can become simply because of the number of hands they have passed through, with each user making small adjustments. The better the meme, the more reproductions of the meme are created. “Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime (Van Leeuwen, 2005,
pp. 285). This process makes it impossible to isolate one meme when trying to understand the trend as a whole.

In 2014, Limor Shifman, a published expert on viral memes, describes five memetic success factors in her book “Memes in Digital Culture”. The factors include memetic potential, puzzles or problems, simplicity, humor, and participation tools. The memetic potential resides in the ability for the image to be reproduced and Photoshopped to fit numerous scenarios. The more the meme covers common ground the further it will reach. Puzzles and problems can actually include the kind of absurd humor digital natives enjoy, and these are aspects of memes that encourage the audience to “solve” the meme content, so to speak, through creative responses (Shifman, 2014, pp. 97). The surge of memes that paired a famous quote to the wrong source with the picture of a third erroneous party is an example of this (See figure 5–6.) Such a blatant problem pulled the audience in to correct or jump in on the gag and create their own pieces.

Figure 5: "Use the Force Luke"

"Use the force, Luke"
-Dumbledore

Figure 6: Don’t Trust Quotes on the Internet

"THE PROBLEM WITH QUOTES ON THE INTERNET, IS THAT IT IS HARD TO VERIFY THEIR AUTHENTICITY"
-ABRAHAM LINCOLN
The absurdity of the quotes drove audience members to interact not only with the meme, but with other audience members who were complete strangers. Such widespread conversation appeals to website and search algorithms, making the memes easier to stumble across and allows new people to participate in the conversation. Simple memes spread more easily “since people understand them quickly and assume that others will decode them easily as well” (Shifman, 2014, pp. 69). This expectation that others will also be able to decode the meme makes internet users more likely to share this type of meme content on their own online platforms.

Successful memes also use humor in absurd juxtaposition and frozen motion (Shifman, 2014, pp. 90). The juxtaposition places two seemingly out of place images together. Shifman notes that in cases of juxtaposition, there are two main reactions by internet users:

Users who capitalize on the incongruity embedded in the original memetic photo tend to do one of two things: to deepen the ridicule associated with the incongruity by presenting even stronger juxtapositions...or to diminish the initial incongruity by repositioning the character in a more appropriate context (2014, pp. 90).

Shifman also acknowledges that in addition playing with juxtapositions, strong emotions, positive or negative, can make memes good candidates for viral sharing. It is interesting to see how pessimistic content connects with these ideas of strong emotions. Many content creators don’t seem to necessarily equate negative emotions with pessimistic content. Instead, as participation tools allow the audience to interact with each other over
the meme, the sheer number of iterations in some meme families make their popularity clear.

**Pessimistic and Absurd Humor**

The type of humor favored by digital natives differs distinctly from that of earlier generations, and generally exhibits a few patterns that repeat in a variety of executions. While there are, of course, always things that are universally funny, it seems that humor has shifted from family sitcoms and slapstick comedy, and moved in a darker, more absurd direction. Much of this new flavor of humor lives in the form of memes, rather than longer formats. In a digital society, memes can be consumed quickly, and in large quantities. The patterns of humor digital natives lean towards in memes include senseless punchlines, unrealistically Photoshopped images, self-deprecation, bleak outlooks, “dad jokes” (cheesy puns and wordplay), and dark humor. These patterns can be split into two overarching trends: absurdism, and pessimism.

Absurdism and pessimism reflect the general views of digital natives towards the world. A Harvard Poll from the end of 2017 shows that only “14% of young Americans believe America is generally headed in the right direction; at this moment, fear outpaces hope for our future, 67% to 31%” (Harvard, 2017, para. 5). Understanding the life experiences of digital natives can help us recognize the reasons behind their shift toward darker humor. Growing up during the economic realities of the housing market crash and seeing the effects of education cost inflation has impacted the way this group interacts with the current world. Many claim a bleak perspective of the future, though their actions offline might suggest this negativity isn’t completely penetrating. Laughing at the situations they find themselves in is a kind of coping mechanism; seemingly irrelevant
memes help them handle the difficulties of life so that they can go forward, and live normal lives in the world outside the internet. It is in this category that jokes appear about the lack of exciting progress in the last twenty years, such as those seen in figures 7–8, and their reactions to being called the cause of declining diamond industries, shopping malls, and golf courses (see figure 9). In these sorts of memes, digital natives are coping with the fact that not only do things not seem better than they were, but that things are actually getting worse.

This trend is also seen in the wave of self-deprecating and desperate “Job Interview” memes (see figures 10–13). Others joke about death, and some memes seem suicidal. Here, they seem to find power in acknowledging that things are hard, and by laughing at the idea that death would be a quick out, are able to continue to do those hard things (see figure 14).
Figure 9: Millennials, a Generation of Murderers

Millennials, a generation of MURDERERS
Millennials are killing the golf industry - Business Insider
Millennials are obsessed with 'style of life' — and it's killing retailers
Millennials are killing the movie business | New York Post
Millennials are killing the Golf Industry - the BLITZ agency blog
Will The Millennial Generation Kill Home Depot? - Forbes
Millennials are killing relationships and we should be concerned
Take Two | Are millennials killing the running trend? Maybe. - 89.3 KPCC
Are Millennials Killing Wine? An expose | Quench Magazine
"Promiscuous" Millennials Are Killing McDonald's: Gothamist
How Millennials Lack Of Manners Is Killing Class - Unwritten
Millennials Are Killing Off Paper Napkins | McIntyre in the Morning
Are Millennials Killing The Car Industry? | DrivingSalesNews
Here's How Millennials Have Killed Crowdfunding | Bossip
Are Millennials Killing Credit? | Top Rated High Risk Merchant ...

Figure 10: Job Interview: Valuable Asset

*at job interview*
"What are some reasons you'd be a valuable asset to our company?"

me:

Figure 11: Job Interview: Valuable Asset

Figure 12: Job Interview: I Need This Job

Figure 13: Job Interview: Passionate About Not Starving

Figure 14: Suicidal but Excited for the Future

when you are suicidal but you are also excited to see what the future holds for you
In morbid memes like this, we see elements of the absurd, because in a vast majority of circumstances, the creators of these memes do not intend to promote suicide at all. Absurdist humor has a basis in the environment that these people grew up in. Some people, when they find the absurd in other areas of life, argue that “everyone must acknowledge the absurdity of life while continuing to search for meaning; ultimately, the search itself—free of other motivations—invests life with value” (Taran, 2017, pp. 240).

For the digital natives, absurdity is not only something to be looked at to extract meaning. Sometimes it is through the creation of the absurd that they explore their own experiences with the world. In the words of Megan Hoins, a millennial herself:

Absurdist humor is a means to express the core disillusionment that lies at the heart of the millennial generation... We were promised [we could] be whoever we wanted to be, and we were given high unemployment rates and no guarantee of a job after college. We were promised peace and prosperity, and we were handed terrorism and a severe economic recession. Is it truly a surprise, then, that millennials would... craft a movement centered around absurdism and, essentially, deliberate confusion and nonsense? (2016, para. 8, 10)

Absurdism isn’t meant to be understood by everyone; in fact, digital natives seem to enjoy it because it does not follow the general rules of societal norms. Many people complain about how they don’t understand millennials, which in some cases comes from those digital natives deliberately making themselves impossible to understand to those who are not integrated in the group. In the words of researcher Marta Dynel, “The surprising punchline... that follows... compels the receiver to fill in the information gaps to arrive at an understanding of the unexpected result... Nonsense humor does subscribe
to the incongruity-resolution framework” (2016, pp. 670, 672). Memes, and internet jokes, no matter how absurd they seem, hold meaning on some level which digital natives connect with.

This intertwining of meaning with absurdism is not only found on the internet. Absurdism has roots in the postmodernist movement which existed first in the world of art many years earlier. In the plays of Harold Pinter we see one example. His work is described by Varun Begley as “an art which makes no statements, asserts no rights or privileges, but instead serves as a kind of negative image” (2002, pp. 644). Memes often play this role in today’s society. The differentiating factors between general absurdism and absurdism of the internet are the vehicles used to spread these messages, and the intertwining of the absurd with the bleak, pessimistic perspective that digital natives enjoy.

**Methods**

In conducting this analysis, I started this project by studying meme culture among English-speaking internet users. I also studied current analysis of the humor of and digital natives, and using a postmodern framework, chose to focus on trends of pastiche, absurdism, and pessimism seen in meme creation. By starting by better understanding trends seen in the humor of English-speaking internet users, particularly among digital natives and content creators, I was able to define these trends that I then used searched for in Russian memes and meme movements. I gathered Russian memes from a variety of meme-publishing accounts on VK and Instagram. I found English memes on the self-proclaimed Internet Meme Database, Know Your Meme. I also used Google Images to find memes. After gathering memes from both languages, I analyzed the memes for
similarities and differences in the way content creators used pastiche, absurdism, and pessimism.

**Analysis of Patterns of Humor in English and Russian Memes**

**Elements of Pastiche**

As was introduced earlier, the postmodern concept of pastiche is the idea that texts are often recycled, imitated, and evolved when introduced to different groups (Katz & Shifman, 2017, pp. 834). This is one of the trends of internet humor that is demonstrated in both the meme movements of Russian speakers and those of English speakers; the evolution of memes and meme humor is not an isolated phenomenon. Memes in both languages change as they go through the hands of people who not only view the memes, but who interact with and produce new versions of the meme. Memetic fragments spin social webs that bind online communities together. Those bonds sometimes even reach across language barriers.

The Tide Pod meme movement was full of examples of pastiche trends used by English-speaking internet users. After the original jokes about how delicious looking Tide Pods first appeared in satirical video and news article formats, creative consumers began spinning the conversation in a direction of their own. As this wave of Tide Pod memes flooded the internet, we began to see factors of pastiche take hold. Conglomerations of different memes types came together in one. During the flood of Tide Pods memes, this happened when the topic was brought into other meme-templates. Figures 15–16 show how the topic of Tide Pods was brought into the already-popular “Me, an intellectual” meme framework, and was integrated with a screenshot from SpongeBob SquarePants. Memes available on a particular subject find their diversity in
the multitude of creators, and interestingly, the Tide Pod meme movement grew large enough that it extended beyond digital natives, who laughed at the joke, to those who didn’t understand the absurd tones of humor and used it to ridicule the millennial generation (see figures 17–18).

Pastiche is also seen in Russian meme culture. Russian speaking content creators regularly add their own personal take on meme movements just as English-speaking internet users do. This is seen with the Elon Musk memes, where the cultural flavor of Russian thrifty ingenuity is thrown in the face of the well-known inventor Elon Musk. Some of the memes in the movement call Musk to react to public features of architectural invention (see figures 19–20).
Others show simpler, more personalized inventions, useful around the house and in ordinary everyday situations (see figures 21–24). Each creator includes their own take on the meme as they include not only photos or descriptions of their own “inventions,” and many include slight variations on the wording of the caption. The common thread running through the meme movement is the tone of the memes. In each there is a satirical defiance of Musk’s inventive prowess in a subversion to his implied authority in the field of engineering. The content creators are intentionally combative in the use of this tone, perhaps feeling it is unlikely that Musk will see, or be able to understand, their challenges. One Twitter user goes so far as to ask Musk “Do you feel the threat?” (see figure 23).
Figure 19: "How’s this for an invention Elon Musk?"

Figure 20: "How do you like that, Elon Musk?"

Figure 21: “How do you like that invention Elon Musk?”

Figure 22: “How’s this invention, Elon Musk?”

Figure 23 (left): “The door to our dorm kitchen is being held by THIS. So, Elon Musk, do you feel threat?

Figure 24 (below): "bag for bags *exists*
Me: WELL AND HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT ELON MUSK”

дупа
@electric_drms

пакет для пакетов *существует*
я: НУ И КАК ТЕБЕ ТАКОЕ ИЛОН МАСК?
Pessimistic Tones

Earlier in this paper, pessimist humor was discussed as a coping mechanism of young Americans who feel like the world, in a lot of senses, seems to be getting worse, not better. For many digital natives, laughing at the dire state of things online seems to help them handle the difficulties of life so that they can go forward, and live more optimistically offline.

It doesn’t take much research to find that Russians are not any more optimistic about the projected future of their country than Americans are. Fears related to the country’s economic state are widespread. Maria Antonova, a writer for the New York Times, says:

Despite Mr. Putin’s proclamations about economic growth, analysis shows that Russians are increasingly pessimistic. An October study by the Higher School of Economics found that consumer confidence has fallen sharply. Despite economic growth over the past two years, rising oil prices and macroeconomic stability (if we are to believe official state statistics) have not provided much relief to the average household. In fact, Russians are more jaded than they have been in years (2018, para. 10).

These jaded feelings are reflected in memes that Russians create and spread, just as we can see reflections of similar sentiments in the content created by English-speaking digital natives. Some of these memes are distinctly Russian, while others can be connected to meme movements seen in the English-speaking quadrants of the internet.

One place where this trend is seen manifesting in the same way is in the wave of self-deprecating and desperate “Job Interview” memes that we looked at earlier (see
figures 10–13). These memes exist in both English and Russian. The tone of these memes is similar in both movements, and in at least one, the same wording is used, though the stock photo used has been switched out for a different image (compare figure 12 and figure 25). Because the wording is the same, this perhaps shows that the meme was seen by someone who is a part of both the English and Russian-speaking internet communities and recreated with a translation so the joke could be shared across languages. While some focus on the interviews and interviewing, (figures 26–27), the last meme here shows the pessimistic view towards the economy as a whole as the content creator, a parent, sends their infant off to make money (see figure 28).

Figure 25: “At the job interview: ‘Tell us a little bit about yourself.’ Me: ‘I would rather not. I really need this job.’”

Figure 26: “We all have a little Churchill in us.
Interviewer: Which historical figure do you relate to?
Man: Churchill!
Interviewer: You also “never give up?”
Man: No, I just love to smoke and nap at lunch.”
On the other hand, the “Bunny of a Moderate Income” is one of the memes that is distinct to Russia, compiled neatly on one VK account. The bunny shows up in different stores, in the metro, or at snack stands, all of which are very obviously Russian, only to realize in each that it doesn’t have enough money for the even the most basic, simple things (see figures 29–34). The bunny generally isn’t shown as being overtly distraught or overly concerned about the fact that it has no money. Instead, it seems resigned to its fate, despite the fact that the prices of things deemed “too expensive” for the bunny are absurdly cheap as it shops at normal grocery stores (figures 29–31), metro stops (figure 32) snack stands (figure 33), and Fix Price, the Russian equivalent of an American dollar store (figure 34).

The pessimistic humor of the situation comes from the exaggeration of the depths of poverty that the bunny is in, despite supposedly being representative of a middle class, someone living with a “moderate income.” The bunny’s sad reaction is juxtaposed against the inexpensive nature of the purchases. In this movement, not just the type of humor, but the topic itself making fun of the economic state of the world and the creator...
or perpetuator of the meme, is shared by digital natives in English-speaking communities, though Russian speakers have found their own ways of expressing that in meme-format.

Figure 29: “Well, next time :( ”

Figure 30: “I can’t afford it :( ”

Figure 31: “I don’t have enough :( ”

Figure 32: “Another time :( ”

Figure 33: “One ruble short :( ”

Figure 34: “There should be something cheaper here :( ”
Even the Elon Musk memes that we looked at earlier reflect some of this pessimistic world-view. If those creating the content didn’t see their own inventions as at least moderately strange or absurd, the satirical tone of the meme would be gone, and the humor would be lost. If the memes were about actual, technological ideas, then calling out Elon Musk for his equally high-tech solutions to problems wouldn’t be funny.

Reiterating what we talked about earlier in the paper, successful memes also use humor in absurd juxtaposition (Shifman, 2014, pp. 90). The juxtaposition seen in these Russian memes put the haphazard inventions of Russian speakers alongside Elon Musk, either in face or in name, whose inventions are so different than the ones shown, that the humor took off, and became a movement.

**Trends of Absurdism**

Interestingly, it is the trend of absurdism in English memes that seems to manifest most differently in the Russian-speaking internet. English absurdism is often intentionally taken to the extremes of understanding, where absurdity is not meant to hold any kind of meaning that can be universally understood. That is not to say they don’t hold meaning at all; however, what meaning they do have is not necessarily connected to the literal meaning of the text or image of the meme itself. Sometimes, meaning comes from first understanding where the meme originated. Without that context, later iterations don’t make sense.

Meaning in these kinds of memes seems to come more from the reaction of the viewer, and the juxtaposition of things that shouldn’t make any sense together is funny within the context of the meme. For example, the original “Car Salesman” meme started out ridiculous, but understandable, while later iterations make sense only in context of the
meme movement itself (see figures 35–40). Nonsense humor still subscribes to an incongruity-resolution framework on some level, and memes, and internet jokes, no matter how absurd they seem, hold meaning on some level which internet users connect with.

On the other hand, even the most absurd memes of the Russian-speaking internet seem more connected to the real world, and the literal meaning of the words and pictures used. There are still nonsensical connections, but the gap of incongruity seems smaller, and the contrast between the juxtaposed images and text seems less jarring. Because of this, even the absurd memes that I found in Russian-speaking communities seem able to appeal to a greater audience, perhaps, than those in the English-speaking communities. Unlike the Tide Pod meme movement, which was met with resistance because many misunderstood the satirical tone of the memes as serious, it seems unlikely that any of these Russian memes could lead to the kind of news coverage and public reaction that we saw here. The juxtaposed images and words in these memes is less absurd, and seems
Russian and English Internet Humor

Figure 37: Isaac Newton Car Salesman

Isaac Newton: *slaps roof of car*
Car: *slaps Isaac Newton*

Figure 38: Can Salesman

Can Salesman: *slaps roof of Can*
this bad boy can

Figure 39: Splashing Car Salesman

*splash* *splash*
haha

Figure 40: Car Salesman and Chicken

Car Salesman: *slaps chicken at 3725.95mph* this chicken is cooked

less exclusive to any particular group. Anyone can see the humor of lining up the statue so that it looks like the horse is pointing with a human hand, and telling the reader to leave. The main elements of absurdism in Russian memes seem to be found in talking animals, and the juxtaposition of ridiculous images with text that either matches too well, or not at all (see figures 41–42).
The difference between absurdism in the two groups of internet users is not just seen in which memes are popular among Russian and English-speaking internet users. The difference is also seen the way Russian and English memes migrate. Russian Cat Memes are a family of normal cat memes that just happen to have been created first in Russia, by Russian speakers, and then moved across the language barrier. These memes have garnered an interesting amount of support from the English-speaking internet. Here, the blend between the Russians’ moderate, accessible absurdism and the English-speakers desire for less and less congruent juxtapositions can be seen in an interesting light. One Tumblr user has their own theory about why Russian cat memes are so popular right now:

My honest thought on why the Russian cat memes are so… funny [is that] they have a longer period of tension before the punchline. We’ve become desensitized to fully understandable memes, so when seeing a meme in a language non-Russian-speakers can’t understand, and then needing to read into the reblogs until someone translates it, we have a stronger sense of tension between the joke and the punchline, even if the punchline is no...
better than a cat meme in English, the meme itself *feels* funnier

(Heckedy-peg, 2017).

As this person has said, the captions of these memes preserve the evolution of the translation process, and often reflect multiple levels of understanding of the Russian text (see figures 43–48). Unlike in other translations of memes, each step remains. The first caption always preserves the original Russian, an element of mystery to those who don’t speak Russian. This layering of meaning is an important element of the memes. Realizing more layers exist just adds to the charm. (For example, in figure 47, Russians will recognize the caption as lyrics of a popular song from 2013.) The meshing of languages and types of absurdism gives these memes a unique feel.

Figure 43: “It seems they’ve argued.”

Figure 44: Authoritative Hug
Figure 45: Proof Cats Are Liquid

Figure 46: Alcoholic Cat

Figure 47: Going to the Disco

Figure 48: We Cannot Afford the Dog

RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH INTERNET HUMOR
Conclusion

There are patterns that exist in the ways that Russian and English speakers use humor on the internet. Both groups regularly exhibit similar trends of pessimism and pastiche in the way they interact with the world, and their current living situations. Some of these memes stay within the confines of the original language, while others move from one group to the other. While the tones of pastiche and pessimism are similar in the content created by members of both groups, the types of absurd humor that each group seems to perpetuate most are different. English absurdism is often intentionally taken to the extremes of logic and understanding, where absurdity is not meant to hold any kind of meaning that can be universally understood. Even the most absurd memes of the Russian-speaking internet, on the other hand, seem more connected to a more grounded, literal meaning of the words and pictures used. There are still nonsensical connections, but the gap of incongruity is smaller, and the contrast between the juxtaposed images and text, less jarring.

Despite seeing these patterns, the larger trends of humor used by both Russian and English speakers, and the impact of globalization on memes continuing to be made around the world is hard to pin down. It is difficult to say whether these phenomena happen as a result of the nature of the meme format itself, or if there are common generational or global trends that are causing similarities among the way content creators of different backgrounds use humor on the internet. We often attribute the pessimistic and absurd trends of humor we see online to the digital native generational groups, but there are also preserved newspaper comics from the time of the Cold War which contained
similar fatalistic, pessimistic tones. Perhaps these trends of pessimism and absurdism in humor which are seen so prevalently in internet meme movements are not necessarily a product of the internet, but are instead, simply an aspect of human nature, and the way we interact with the world, and what we think is funny. Juxtaposition, after all, is not only possible on the internet.

It is also quite hard to tell in which ways the cultural exchange happening on the internet, especially between Russian and English speakers are multidirectional, and in which ways it is only unidirectional. There are many opportunities to continue this research, and better understand the impact of the internet on global trends in humor and worldviews.
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