

LATIP 2021**International Conference on Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm****RUSSIA AND RUSSIAN CULTURE IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE
INTERNET SPACE MEMES**

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Abstract

Considering the memes as a carrier of cultural code and means as well as the results of intercultural communication, the article studies whether the Internet memes in the English-language segment of the Internet are a way of promoting Russian culture or only the jokes that reflect stereotypes about Russia and Russians. The article proposes the set of criteria for memes search and selection, and, therefore, the basis for further analysis. The sample under the review includes 107 memes taken from the *Know Your Meme* site and refers to Russia and various aspects of Russian culture. The data examined indicate a wide range of aspects of Russian culture and subculture and stereotypes represented in memes. Analysis of memes' spreading paths shows that memes of both Russian and foreign origin develop and change, effortlessly moving between English-language and Russian-language segments of the Internet. Russians and foreigners use memes about Russia to promote their online shops and accounts on social networks, regardless of whether the image of Russia presented in these memes is appealing. Russians also use memes to increase interest in the Russian language and culture. Thus, the Internet memes can be regarded not only as a carrier of stereotype but also as a way of promoting a peculiar image of Russian culture and a basis for intercultural exchange.

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1. Introduction

Today, the Internet memes are an integral part of the virtual communication, a kind of a symbol of communication on the Web. Speaking without exaggeration, the Internet memes affect modern Internet users' consciousness and shape their world outlook and attitude.

Despite, or perhaps because of their apparent national-cultural specificity, memes are actively involved in the intercultural communication process. The openness of the Internet and the speed of information dissemination quickly make memes popular globally. Combined with the ability to convey cultural information, this makes memes a potentially powerful means of shaping the image of a country or ethnicity both online and off. That is why the way memes effect globalization and intercultural exchange and represent cultural aspects are relevant issues of modern research.

2. Problem Statement

An Internet meme is a complex, multidimensional unit that helps researchers analyse and characterize it from different points of view (Gorshunova, 2020). In terms of intercultural communication, it is the cultural code in the meme that is of academic interest as well as the ability of the meme to serve as the basis and a means of cross-cultural communication (Kanashina, 2017).

2.1. The Internet meme as a carrier of the cultural code

Considering an Internet meme as a phenomenon of culture, it is necessary to clarify that, according to Teliya, we understand the culture as a semiotic system of synthesis of signs and meanings. A sign is a carrier of what has been developed in the process of self-cognition and awareness of a person's personal, suprapersonal and interpersonal being in the world (Teliya, 1999). According to the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (Yu. Lotman), it is the semiotic mechanisms that underlie culture, which performs the following functions: a) mnemonic, associated with the storage of signs and texts, which maintains the memory of culture, its traditions, and self-identification; b) communicative, which provides intracultural and intercultural communication; c) creative, associated with the ability to generate new signs and new information and comprehend reality creatively.

Many researchers noted the relation between culture and memes. In general, memes are defined: as a culture carrier (Dawkins, Brett, Brody, Auger, Blackmore, etc.); as elements of mass network culture (Savitskaya) or youth subculture of the Internet; as modern forms of network folklore, folk art (Vynalek, Radchenko, Kanashina, Khokhryakov). Analysing modern trends in the memes studies, Shchurina and Shelopugina (2019) writes about shaping a special meme culture which has its own ways of spreading out and enduring and which, in our opinion, can perform the main functions of culture described above.

This paper considers the Internet meme as a semiotically complex, polycoded text, when information is transmitted both through various material codes (auditory, visual, verbal), closely related to each other, and through a cultural code which is, in fact, the content plan of the meme. We agree with Marchenko (2019), who notes that the polymodal nature of the Internet meme helps it “accumulate” information due to the cultural memory and common background knowledge of representatives of a

particular linguistic community, generate culturally significant associations, activate information, relevant in social, historical and situational contexts.

A cultural code presented in memes might be regarded as:

A set of components of culture and mentality (archetypes, stereotypes and auto-stereotypes, concepts, social perceptions and attitudes, behaviour patterns, mental representations of culture, elements of collective memory and national identity, etc.), which is significant for a particular ethnic group, nation or subcultural group. (Burukina, 2019, p. 17)

Researchers note the hierarchical structure of the cultural code, identifying subcodes that form a hierarchy linked by horizontal and vertical relations (Savitsky, 2019). The list of basic and archetypal codes for Russian culture is given in the works of Teliya, Krasnykh, Gudkov, and others. Among these codes there are cosmogonic, somatic, spatial, temporal, object, zoomorphic, natural landscape, architectural, gastronomic, olfactory, clothing code, food code, etc. When analysing Internet memes, it is also necessary to consider the degree of spread of cultural codes, which can be universal, national-specific, and group-specific, that determines the cultural significance, comprehensibility, attractiveness of memes either in the broadest universal community or within a nation, or in a limited group.

Interestingly, as a carrier of a cultural code, an Internet meme is also a cultural code itself, performing the identification, group-forming, and password functions. An Internet meme, according to Marchenko (2013), is a cultural code of the Internet communities intentionally created to identify a member as being in-group or out-group. As Ksenofontova (2009) notes, the Internet user by using a meme puts a cultural code in the commentary, giving the recipients two messages at once: “I am one of you” and his coded attitude. Knowledge of memes is considered in some sense as necessary for “survival” in cultural space. To understand a meme instance, people often need to know cultural conventions, and they probably will be ignored or punished if they do not follow its template in a satisfactory manner (Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018).

Thus, the effectiveness of communication, including intercultural communication, depends directly on the ability of the Internet user to decipher the cultural codes of a meme, to restore those associative links that it has in a particular culture.

2.2. Internet memes as a means and result of intercultural communication

Discussing memes as a means of intercultural communication, Kanashina (2017) notes that using English in Internet memes allows people from different cultures to join the global Internet culture.

The Internet gives technological facilities for global flows of content more than any prior medium does. Effortless transcending of national borders become possible, at least, technically. However, the realization of this potential depends on the Internet user choices. They may decide to spread global images imported from other countries or distribute mainly local and familiar content (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2016).

Also, people may use memes for creating local digital cultures, “in which attributes specific to a certain cultural setting are highlighted and maintained” (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018).

Anything can be a source of a meme: breaking news in the media, objects of classical and modern art, movie characters, memorable phrases of politicians, famous personalities, and individual users. (Shchurina, 2013). Simultaneously, memes reflect not only stereotypes and phenomena of modern reality, interesting and relevant to the Internet users (Nezhura, 2012), but also the worldview of their creators and their reaction to the current topic (Moiseenko, 2018).

According to many scholars, Shifman notes: “the ways people consume and produce memes often reflect how they relate to categories such as race, gender, and class (Miltner, 2014; Phillips & Milner, 2017), and have been found to take part in the construction of such identities (Frazer & Carlson, 2017)”.

As reported by Nissenbaum and Shifman (2018), women and ethnic minorities are regularly defined as “others” in meme templates worldwide and cast “mostly within the realm of stereotypes ascribed to their identities”.

Since the Internet is an international space, different ethnic groups can be simultaneously represented in memes from their own point of view (“in-group”) as well as from the point of view of foreigners as “others” or as a minority (“out-group”). Thus, memes express ethnic stereotypes (auto and hetero), reflecting archetypal notions of “us and them” and forming images of both own and other ethnic groups, which serve as reference points in the global world picture and supply patterns for communicative behaviour (Kachmazova & Tameryan, 2014).

Researchers note that the ability of Internet jokes to work as powerful and invisible agents of Westernization and Americanization is not common for different cultures. Apparently, some cultures such as Korean and Japanese do not join cultural globalization with joke spreading (Shifman, 2013; Shifman et al., 2014).

Russia participates quite actively in the processes of intercultural meme-communication. On the one hand, Russian Internet users are considered as “the most ingenious creators of memes” (Glinkin, 2018). Still, on the other hand, Russia and Russians themselves often become popular meme characters.

For example, one of the recent memes that emerged from intercultural interaction is the meme about the *Formula 1* auto race events at the Bahrain Grand Prix. The reason for creating the meme was the mistakes of a Russian racing driver who made several turns and flew off the track. The meme *Mazespin* was formed by merging the last name of the racer, *Mazepin*, and the English term *spin* which means *losing control over the car and flying off the track*. The meme about an international event involving a Russian was created by an English-speaking audience. The meme has become a staple for further intercultural communication as it is actively promoted and discussed in Russian- and English-speaking audiences.

3. Research Questions

Given there is interest to Russia in the West, though not always positive, it is necessary to examine the memes circulating in the foreign language environment which, in one way or another, reflect the image of Russia, the Russian nation, and Russian culture, and try to answer the questions:

- What aspects of Russian culture are represented in memes published in the English-language segment of the Internet?
- What is the basis of such memes?

- Where and how are these memes used?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to answer the question of whether the Internet memes presented in the foreign language environment can be considered as a means of spreading Russian culture, or is it just a humorous genre that reflects Western-oriented stereotypes about Russia and Russians? Whether or not, as Orlova (2013) points out, when communicating with foreigners about “Russia and the Russians,” do we always encounter the same images (stereotypes, signs, codes): bears, frosts, vast spaces, etc., which refer to ideology, once-emerged, mastered by linguistic consciousness and constantly reproduced in discourses?

5. Research Methods

To conduct the study, we identified the criteria for searching and selecting memes and the analysis algorithm. Developing the search criteria, we faced the following problems: the ambiguity of the definition of *meme* on the Internet, the widespread distribution and use of memes, as well as the specifics of their life cycle.

Memes are one of the communication units on the Internet, but the criteria for what is considered to be a meme may differ from one Internet community to another. In communication, memes are used in different ways: as a kind of message in the conversation and as a starting point for communication. It is possible to find the former on practically any users chat. The total number of memes used in this way is huge and cannot be collected manually. The latter can be found more often in communities focused on posting and discussing memes. Commonly known memes are usually used as a message, while communities may also post newly created word combinations that may not become a meme, so it is not reasonable to use such resources as a reliable source of material either.

The specifics of the life cycle of memes is that memes appear, spread, and lose popularity very quickly, so it is impossible to capture and describe every meme ever created. Despite this, enthusiasts attempt to document and systematize memes. They created online encyclopaedias with descriptions of memes, which are replenished voluntarily. The examples of such encyclopaedias include *Encyclopaedia Dramatica*, *Lurkmore*, *Know Your Meme*, *Memepedia*. Also, there is an Internet Memes category on *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Internet_memes). Although such encyclopaedias are not normative, they can be assumed as presenting memes known to a certain part of the Internet community and selected according to some principles.

Since the study focuses on the memes published in the English-language segment of the Internet, and taking into account the limitations mentioned above, we chose the English-language site *Know Your Meme* as the starting point for our search. The encyclopaedia is in the public domain, is not a blocked resource, and provides clear published criteria for defining a meme. The encyclopaedia editors review each suggestion of a meme, and if it passes the check, the meme is given a “confirmed” status.

To obtain a sample of memes, we used the built-in search function of the *Know Your Meme* site (<https://knowyourmeme.com/>) with the following parameters: keyword – *Russia* (1st search), *Russian* (2d

search), filters – *meme, confirmed*. It was supposed to find memes with the specified keyword in their titles or descriptions. Then each proposed meme and its description were reviewed and studied to make a decision whether to include this meme in the sample of memes related to Russian culture. Using the final sample, we developed a classification of memes based on the type of their relation to culture and made a set of aspects of culture represented in memes. Also, we examined some communities based on the memes from the final sample to analyse the possible path of memes spreading.

6. Findings

The site has 3,532 confirmed memes. In the beginning, we made a search with the keyword *Russia*; then we used the keyword *Russian*. A sample of 46 memes was made after the first search, and 88 memes were found after the second. After removing the duplicates, 107 unique memes remained. Some memes were excluded from this sample as not being related to Russian culture. The keywords *Russia / Russian*, found in the description of these memes, appear as additional information not related to the meme itself. So, for example, the meme *7 Grand Dad*, originated from the game of the same name, is mentioned as when and under which name the game was released in Russia; the meme *Pepe the Frog* is described as being tweeted on the Russian Embassy UK page, etc.

The final sample includes 47 memes. These memes, with the exception of two earlier ones, appeared between 2003 and 2018. There are no confirmed memes for the keywords *Russia* and *Russian* with a later date. There are applications with more recent memes but they have not been reviewed yet.

The final sample was divided into two groups: the memes that are directly related to Russian culture, or events in Russia, or more or less famous people from Russia; and the memes that are indirectly associated with Russia - Russian culture is not the main meaning of the memes. The aspects of culture reflected in the memes of the final sample overlap, but the relation to these aspects differs in both type and strength. Thus, the final sample can be represented as a field structure: the core of the structure is made up of memes directly related to Russia, on the periphery at various distances from the core there are memes indirectly associated with Russian culture.

In addition, the final sample can also be represented as a directed graph, the vertices of which are memes, aspects of culture, events, and communities, and the edges show the relations between them. This structure might display not only different type of relationships but also their direction. Direction is important because not only do memes emerge from any ground, but also they themselves can generate events, shape cultural aspects, and become the ground for new memes.

Most of the final sample is the memes of foreign origin. However, there are also some memes originally from Russia: *Stoned Fox (Ynopomay luca)*, *Glazastik (Big-eyed guy)*, *Leekspin / Loituma Girl*, *How People View Me After I Say I'm...*. Interestingly, originally reflecting stereotypes about Russians (*how people view me after I say I'm Russian*), the last meme caused a whole series of memes based on stereotypes about other nations.

In the final sample, both groups of memes can be distinguished as independent ones and memes that are part of a series of memes originally not related to Russian culture. For instance, series of memes *Oh God Why*, *Dashcam Videos*, *Ugandan Knuckles* include memes related to Russia.

Memes indirectly associated with Russian culture include a subgroup of memes based on foreign culture sources related to Russia, such as *Moskau*, *Become One With Russia*, and *Dance Dance World Revolution – Dance Dance Russia* (Figure 1). In our view, this subgroup is of particular interest, because in this case, the perception of Russia and its culture was transformed twice: first in the original source and then in the meme.



Figure 1. Dance Dance Russia Meme's video snapshot

Aspects of Russian culture reflected in the memes:

- international policy involving Russia
- political leaders of Russia and the Soviet Union
- Russia and the Soviet Union state symbols
- Russian military
- public figures and celebrities
- songs
- everyday life
- Russian cuisine
- Russian language

Stereotypes about Russians

- rumours and conspiracy theories related to Russia
- Russian subculture (gopniks)
- Russian filthy language
- Russian original memes.

This set partially overlaps with the list of associations reflecting the image of the *Russian world*, which Kozlovitseva and Tolstova (2019) proposed as a result of a survey of Russians, Russians living abroad, and foreigners from near and far abroad. The similarities include the Cyrillic alphabet as the basis of the written Russian language, *blini* as a Russian dish, the flag as a state symbol, and Vladimir Putin as the leader of Russia. In addition to state symbols and leaders of Russia, memes actively use the USSR symbols and the image of the leaders and other references to the Soviet Union. One such meme, *In Soviet Russia*, is still relevant and is used to depict stereotypes and describe contemporary events. Interestingly, the earliest recorded version of the original joke *In Soviet Russia* dates back to 1938. The joke was

popular in the 1980s and returned in the early 2000s – the Internet revived a meme template. The inclusion of aspects of Russian culture associated with the Soviet Union in memes allows us suggest that in the minds of the foreign Internet audience Russia is still associated with the USSR. This is somewhat different from the image of the Russian world, in which the USSR is represented only by the association with Lenin.

There are some other differences as well. For example, memes from the final sample do not include religion topics which makes up a significant part of the *Russian world*, and there are also no memes related to literature. Since both are present among Russian memes, further research is to identify whether this discrepancy is a feature of our sample or a general pattern associated with a lack of interest in these aspects of culture or the taboo topic, as far as religion is concerned. In contrast, the Russian military is represented in memes but not in the list of associations with the Russian world. This may be due to the *Russian World* stimulus, or it may indicate the respondents' interests do not overlap with the interests of the Internet audience in this area.

According to the analysis results, memes maintain and reflect largely stereotypical perceptions of Russians and Russia. Geopolitical stereotypes describe Russia as a unique, cold, huge, and at the same time aggressive militarized country, which strives, often to no avail, for world domination and actively interferes the politics of other countries. Political stereotypes include the opinion that Russians love a strong leader, there is no democracy in Russia, and nothing has changed. According to societal stereotypes, Russia is a poor, unsettled, uncivilized country, and Russians are strange, rude, but emotional and creative people. There are also domestic stereotypes used in memes such as *banya*, *dacha*, *Russian cuisine*, *Russian style* in its subcultural, marginal manifestation. We can also note the emergence and use of a relatively new stereotype in memes – a Russian male as a squatting *gopnik* wearing an *Adidas tracksuit*. Like any other stereotype, these perceptions are often negatively (mockingly, ironically, sarcastically) marked. Apparently, these cultural codes are embedded into the picture of the world of foreigners, and the processes of globalization have little effect on changing it.

The specifics of the memes themselves and the audience highly influence the popularity and spread of memes. The English-language sites where memes from the final sample are published and used are *Reddit*, *9GAG*, *Twitter*, *4chan*, *YouTube*, *Pinterest*. Also, there are dictionary entries in *Urban Dictionary* for some memes.

Further analysis of two active meme-related public sites allowed us to enlarge the list of Russian culture aspects represented in memes and trace the path and goals of meme spreading. The first one is *You see, comrade* (<https://www.reddit.com/r/YouSeeComrade/>), created in 2015 and based on the meme *You see, comrade* (*You See, Ivan...*). There is an example of a community post in Figure 2 below. All the posts of this site are related to Russia or the Russian military “in some fashion”. The other aspects of Russian culture represented in the memes are:

- snow
- Russian savvy
- traditional Russian costume
- confrontation between communism and capitalism
- babushka



Posted by u/GoodMoleman2You 1 month ago

You see Comrade, Russian ingenuity is second to none

XAXAXAXA



25 Comments Share Save Hide Report

99% Upvoted

Figure 2. You see, comrade community post

The second site is *slavs_squatting* (https://www.reddit.com/r/slavs_squatting/) created in 2012. It is supposedly the basis of the meme *Why Do Slavs Squat? / Slav Squat*. It deals with the only aspect of the Russian *gopnik* subculture: *Adidas* sportswear and squatting (*Slav Squat*). The comments to the memes are both in Russian and English. This meme is still relevant; it has spread far beyond the source and is actively exploited by foreigners and Russians to increase the popularity of channels on *YouTube* and promote social network pages. There are some examples of Russian channels in English: *Life of Boris* (<https://www.youtube.com/c/LifeofBoris/>) and *Arina Nikitina's* channel (<https://www.youtube.com/c/RussianPerception/>). Moreover, videos about other aspects of Russian culture and even Russian language classes are posted on these channels. Therefore, this meme is a kind of populariser of the Russian language and culture. Using this meme, the Romanian user, Alexandru Matesan, created a *Squatting Slavs In Tracksuits* Facebook community (<https://www.facebook.com/SquattingSlavs/>) and the Instagram page (<https://www.instagram.com/squattingsslavs/>). They are also used to promote the on line shop on the same topic (Nikolova, 2020). It should also be noted that this meme and the image of a *gopnik* used together with the meme *Cheeki Breeki*. This can be explained by the fact that these memes represent close aspects of Russian culture.

7. Conclusion

Thus, we selected and examined the memes published in the English-language segment of the Internet that reflect the image of Russia, the Russian nation, and Russian culture. We found that they explicate a fairly wide range of aspects of Russian culture, including references to historical events and Russian subculture. Such memes are based on both international events and local phenomena and stereotypical ideas about Russia and the Russians. At the same time, the same memes, on the one hand, can express the opposition “us and them” and, on the other hand, are used as a means of introducing foreigners to Russian culture.

Memes originally appeared in a foreign-language environment find their way into the Russian environment and vice versa, receive a new form and change. Russians themselves benefit from the popularity of these memes to increase interest to the Russian language and culture. Both Russians and foreigners use popular memes about Russians for commercial purposes, regardless of whether the image of Russia at these memes is positive or negative.

Thus, we can consider the Internet memes as a way of promoting a peculiar image of Russian culture in a foreign language environment and a basis for intercultural exchange. Such memes allow Russians to see themselves through the eyes of foreigners.

Further research will focus on expanding the final sample to include memes from other encyclopaedias, a more in-depth study of the path of memes spreading, and a comparison with the image of Russia presented in memes posted on the Russian Internet segment.

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