

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' HUMOUR IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: INTERNET MEMES AS A FOLKLORE GENRE

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Introduction

Internet memes, created by present-day students, are in the focus of this study. Internet memes are multimodal messages, and most often they appear as images complemented with short sentences, which in a humorous way reflect some actual ideas, concepts, situations, events or emotions. Memes are usually presented as a picture, a gif, a video, or a collage. On the Internet, memes are distributed mostly via social networks and/or via email, and one can find them on specially designed websites or blogs.

In the framework of this study, Internet memes are analysed as a genre of contemporary folklore, as digitally distributed witty multimodal reports which can be compared to traditional jokes and anecdotes. Analysing Latvian student memes, their thematic continuity has been revealed in comparison with student folklore, namely, jokes, and the basic source of these jokes has been the academic collection of Latvian anecdotes, published in 1929–1930 by Pēteris Birkerts; jokes from various modern websites with humorous content have been used as well.

Student jokes and Internet memes are also united by their thematic content and functions. Student memes, like traditional jokes, not only feature the peculiarities of students' lifestyle and entertain. They also criticize and reduce the tension, created by hierarchical relationships that are typical for the academic environment, by self-discipline required for acquiring knowledge, by constant shortage of financial resources for living, and by other aspects. Thus, through the analysis of student memes it has been revealed that they have become a new genre of contemporary folklore, determined by innovative environment. New technologies create modern forms of communication, which marginalize the textual and prefer the visual way of information transmission, at the same time, as the research shows, the traditional content has been preserved with minor changes through different historical periods.

Discussion

Both in public and scientific discourse, folklore is usually related to peasant culture. Under the impact of globalization and rapid development of information technologies this kind of culture inevitably becomes marginal and gradually turns into an object of interest for tourism industry. Nowadays, as the sociocultural situation in Western societies becomes more and more indefinite and fragmented, the understanding of folklore and of subject of folklore studies is also changing and expanding its boundaries. As it was envisaged by American folklorist and anthropologist Alan Dundes, folklore research becomes more complicated, but none the less exciting [Dundes 2005]. Modern folklorists study the folklore of urban “tribes” and subcultures, they go together with migrants, in order to record and analyse forms and phenomena of folklore that have originated outside “native cultures”, they log on the global web and look for tales, legends, superstitions, incantations and curses rambling in the virtual space. To keep pace with the time, folklorists get acquainted with methodology of such disciplines as semiotics, anthropology and sociology, they are acquiring theories of narratology and performativity, principles of cognitivism and communicology for deciphering cultural codes of different social strata, communities and groups. In this context of ever-changing environment, it is only natural to focus on new forms of cultural expression, folklore created by technology, including the Internet memes.

Meme is a concept created by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and presented in his book “The Selfish Gene” in 1976. According to Dawkins, “‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate *mimeme* to *meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word *meme*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream’” [Dawkins 1976: 167]. The term *meme*, as a parallel with *gene*, denotes elementary particle of cultural information (idea, behaviour or artefact), which exists in a particular sociocultural environment and which spreads through imitation and copying within culture or among different cultures. Despite criticism from the evolutionary biologists, cultural and semiotic theorists, the concept of meme turned out to be quite viable, and is currently most commonly encountered in the Internet environment. The creator of the concept himself does not object to it: “How do you feel about your word meme being reappropriated by the internet? The meaning is not that far away from the original. It’s anything that goes viral. In the original introduction to the word meme in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the internet, that is exactly what a meme is and it looks as though the word has been appropriated for a subset of that” [Solon 2013].

Internet memes can be defined as multimodal messages, which most often appear as images complemented with short sentences, and which in a humorous way reflect some actual ideas, concepts, situations, events or emotions. Memes are usually presented as a picture, a gif, a video, or a collage. Internet memes are distributed mostly via social networks or via email. One can find them on specially designed websites or blogs. Thus, memes as multimodal messages are presented as verbally visual hybrids: in respect to their content they can be classified as jokes, but in respect to their form – as derivatives of comics and caricatures.

Internet memes, regardless of the unlimited environment of their existence – the virtual space, have cultural boundaries or conditionality: they are created, perceived and interpreted only by understanding, using and sharing certain cultural codes, based on values, knowledge and experience recognized by a certain group, would it be ethnos, nation, adepts of a religion, social stratum, interest group etc. This cultural determination is a precondition that allows us to analyse Internet memes as a genre of contemporary folklore, as digitally distributed witty multimodal reports, which can be compared with traditional jokes and anecdotes.

My inspiration and theoretical premise that allows to draw parallels between traditional jokes and Internet memes is mainly based on the ideas of two researchers – Alan Dundes and Simon Bronner. Anthropologist and folklorist Alan Dundes has marked in his works folklore's sustainability and its ability to adapt to any kind of sociocultural changes. Describing traditional understanding of what was meant by the term *folk* at the beginning of the 19th century, at the time when folklore studies began their formation process, Alan Dundes presented as opposing two different Western social groups – folk or peasant as lower stratum versus civilized or elite as literate urban upper stratum, where “Folk as an old-fashioned segment living on the margins of civilization was, and for that matter still *is*, equated with the concept of peasant” [Dundes 1980: 2]. However, according to Alan Dundes, folklore is not a monolithic, complete and stagnant system. Along with sociocultural changes, also changes of the understanding of what is the *folk*, and, accordingly, of the concept of folklore, took place. On the basis of his vast fieldwork experience, in his article named “Who Are The Folk?” Dundes points out that different social groups, be it baseball players, coal miners, cowboys, fishermen, lumberjacks or railroadmen, have their own folklore, such as professional jargon, legends, and in-group jokes: “Moreover, as new groups emerge, new folklore is created. Thus we have the folklore of surfers, motorcyclists, and computer programmers. From this perspective, it would be absurd to argue (..) that industrialization stamps out folk groups and folklore” [Dundes 1980: 7]. This may be due to the fact that we are accustomed to linking folklore with only one, that is, the traditional way of life of peasants, which gives the impression that time of folklore is over. Despite the fact that during the

age of industrialisation the number of peasants began to decline rapidly, according to Dundes, we have to keep in mind, that peasants constitute only one type of folk, which also means only one sort of folklore. According to Dundes, worries that technological development will destroy folklore are not really justified, on the contrary, for instance, computers help folklore to spread even faster and, moreover, become an inspiration source for the generation of new folklore forms: "The rise of the computer symbolizes the impact of technology upon the modern world. My point is that there is folklore of and about the computer. Among computer programmers, one can find elaborate, quite technical in-group jokes, some involving pseudo-programs and others involving the specialized terminology of various computer languages" [Dundes 1980: 17].

Elaborating the idea about the role of technologies in the process of folklore transmission, and pointing out that using the Internet has become both an essential tool of everyday life and a cultural practice, sociologist and folklorist Simon J. Bronner emphasizes the importance of Internet regarding creation, preservation and development of folklore, especially among young generation or so-called "digital natives" [Bronner 2017a: 17]. Internet, because of its basic features of netting and communicating, has become a channel of spreading folklore, despite the worries of "technopundits who were sure that the vampire machine would suck users dry of their culture and creativity" [Bronner 2011: 402]. Moreover, according to Bronner, "Internet incorporates the symbolic and projective functions that folklore distinctively provides. And when people e-mail or post to a message board, they often invoke, and evoke, folklore as a cultural frame of reference for creatively relating experiences, particularly in narration and images that respond to ambiguity and anxiety" [Bronner 2011: 402]. Thus, Internet has become a platform for making a new kind of "open, democratized and decentered communities of prosumer commerce individuals, which creates and shares with repeatable, variable forms of expression, such as fake news, rumour panics, cat videos, memes, etc." [Bronner 2017b]. Becoming a cultural space, Internet serves as a platform for creating process of a new kind of folklore, such as memes: "Many memes are in fact folkloric because they often take the form of catchphrases, rumours, schemes, and legendary material" [Bronner 2011: 448].

Student folklore

Returning back to the broad definition of folk, offered by Dundes, we must agree that "the term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language, or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its

own” [Dundes 1980: 6–7]. Accordingly, students are also representatives of a particular cultural group or community, which can be determined by sociocultural characteristics such as age, urban environment, cultural consumption, intellectual capacity, values, interests etc.

The origin of the name *student* is from Medieval Latin *studiare* “to study” and is related to Latin *studium* “eagerness, zeal”, *studiosus* “devoted to study, assiduous, zealous”. The late 14th cent. meaning of *studious* has been “eager to learn, devoted to learning”, also, as noun, “those who study or read diligently” [Etymonline]. Nowadays the term *student* usually denotes the highest step of professional or academic education. A distinct social group of students has formed in mediaeval period, simultaneously with the first universities, and is traditionally regarded as social avantgarde because of its intellectual capacity, active social position and solidarity. At the same time, students’ life is unimaginable without revelry, entertainment and adventures, without immatriculation rites and other traditions, which consequently get reflected in student folklore. According to Bronner, student cultural practices and traditions help young people to cope with liminality, as they get separated from their parents’ care and are becoming self-dependent, adult personalities [Bronner 2012: XV]. Student culture is rich and varied, it consists of both universal and local traditions and folklore, rooted in the autonomy of universities. Usually, the corpus of college and university student folklore consists mainly of legends, songs, rituals, poetry, drawings, and humour – jokes and anecdotes.

Jokes and anecdotes – two different forms of folklore, differing only in nuances. Within the Aarne-Thompson folktale classification system, they are allotted a special section 1200–1999 “Jokes and anecdotes” [Green 1997: 17–19]. In context of folklore studies, jokes are interpreted more broadly as formed by verbal, visual or physical communication of performative and humorous character, and are presented in the form of a short narrative – as stories, anecdotes, comics, riddles, gestures, inscriptions, pictures etc. Anecdotes (from Latin *anecdota*, Greek *ἀνέκδοτα* “not to be published”¹) are short, mono-episodic humorous stories, related to situations and events, considered as typical and having happened to popular historic or modern personalities or characters. Anecdotes often involve stereotypical characteristics of appearance, temperament, mentality of certain ethnic, religious, professional, interest and other groups. Nevertheless, in spite of concretization of individuals or groups, they reflect general human shortcomings or advantages such as stupidity, keen wit, arrogance, credulity, carelessness, stinginess etc. [Green 1997: 19].

¹ The French *anecdote* “private stories” have been related to Byzantine historian Procopius from Caesarea (6th cent.) and to his work “Ἀποκρύφη Ἱστορία” (“Secret history”), found in the Vatican Library and published in the 17th cent. as “Ἀνέκδοτα”, where Justinian and his wife Theodora are portrayed as prodigal and cruel rulers.

The author of the most extensive collection of anecdotes in Latvia, folklorist Pēteris Birkerts calls them simply “witty folktales” [Birkerts 1, 1929: 3]. His collection of Latvian anecdotes consists of four volumes, published in interwar period and having two sources – “people’s memory and literature”. In these four volumes more than 4,000 narrative units have been collected and classified into two series: “orderly and naughty” anecdotes [Birkerts 1, 1929: 10]. The classification of the orderly texts, referred to by the author as “natural”, is based on social criteria and social grouping of Latvian inhabitants at that time. Thus, nine groups were defined: Family and courting; Village, peasants and rural folks; Manor and its folks; Town and urban folks; State, administration and institutions; Art institutions and intelligentsia; Ethnic groups and languages; Phenomena of ethical character and crimes; Miscellaneous (historical, witty answers, misunderstandings etc.). Pēteris Birkerts has consciously refrained from Antti Aarne’s folktale classification, already adopted in folklore studies at that time, because of his opinion that this classification was applicable to fairy-tales, whereas he considered anecdotes as a different genre, impossible to be included into Aarne’s “Schwänke” or the category of joke tales [Birkerts 1, 1929: 11]. It should be mentioned that in Birkerts’ third volume one can find alphabetical indices of informants and of collectors, as well as a comparative catalogue of Latvian folk anecdotes with a reference to Antti Aarne’s system [Birkerts 3, 1929: 645–650].

As his main goal to publish anecdotes Birkerts defined the intention to broaden the field of folklore studies: “Anecdote as a folkloric unit has a broad and multi-sided value: scientific, pedagogical, social, cultural. As the collection of folklore materials is published, it is generally used and adopts social significance. People lacking such published collections suffer from a serious lack of ideological values.” He also claimed that the purpose of the publication was to get better knowledge of people’s spiritual watchfulness and humour [Birkerts 1, 1929: 13]. Birkerts’ intention was to prove that anecdotes as a genre of folklore are no less serious and important than folksongs, proverbs and fairy-tales [Birkerts 3, 1929: 652].

Anecdotes about students can be found both in the category of “orderly”, as well as “naughty”. The “orderly” anecdotes about student life are included in the chapter “Intelligentsia, school, spiritual life” and its subchapter “Academic intelligentsia” [Birkerts 1, 1929: 370–379]. Topics characteristic for the study environment such as mutual relations of students, attitude to the study process and professors, their wit in examinations, revelry in pubs, misery, shortage of money and food are reflected there. Conversely, anecdotes about student sexuality and jokes of medicine students are included into the “naughty” category, where the formal subdivision is the same as in the “orderly” category [Birkerts 4, 1930: 582–586].

In view of modern student folklore, a project “Collection of student folklore” of the Centre of Ethnic Culture of the University of Latvia, led by folklorist Guntis Pakalns and financed by the State Culture Capital Foundation and the University of Latvia, should be mentioned. During two-year period different narratives and texts of student life – superstitions related to academic process, memories, professors’ expressions, inscriptions on walls and auditorium tables, stories about professors and exams, and of course, jokes and anecdotes – were collected. These materials were acquired from published sources, from interviews and questionnaires of former and present students, as well from persons having only stereotypical notions about students and nothing in common with real student life [Pakalns 2001: 30–31]. There has been an intention to publish volumes of student folklore, thematically covering such topics as exams and sessions, life in dormitories, student festivities, intimate life etc.; nevertheless, the results of this project have not been published until now, except a small collection, covering mostly such topics as student wit, eating, drinking, partying and entertainment [Kūla-Braže 2000]. It should be noted that student anecdotes included in this collection can be regarded thematically as continuation of the topics marked in previous studies.

As it was said before, the development of technologies affects folklore, and student jokes are moving to the virtual space. New themes, related to the development of science, emerge, these themes were impossible in the time when there were, let us say, no computers or no knowledge about quantum physics or similar matters [Anekdotės.eu, Anekdotės.oho, Anekdotės.tanks]. In terms of content, the jokes and anecdotes in Internet portals continue such topics as shortage of money resources, exams and sessions, perpetual lack of food¹, entertainment and partying. At the same time, new topics, related especially to IT² or to the newest science discoveries³, appear.

Yet, contacting with students on a daily basis, watching their daily life, communicating with them, one has to conclude that modern students’ life is not essentially different: shortage of sleep, money and food, evasion from academic tasks, ingenuity in relations with professors, entertainment are the topics, without which one can hardly imagine my own study years, neither can be imagined full-blooded student

¹ Student breakfast – nothing, student lunch – the same, student dinner – the same, only warmed up! (Anekdotės.tanks).

² Tell me, what is your method to write a graduation work??? – Ctrl C, Ctrl V! (Anekdotės.tanks).

³ Two students talk before the exam: – What are you reading? – Quantum physics theory book. – But why are you reading it upside-down? – It makes no difference anyway. (Anekdotės.oho).

life nowadays. Nevertheless, one difference can be marked very clearly – modern students practically do not tell anecdotes, and this is what they admit themselves in informal discussion. Some time ago, upon entering auditorium almost every morning one could hear a phrase “did you hear the joke about xx?”, and it was axiomatic part of each party to tell new anecdotes. Evidently, the developing technologies and ever-increasing presence of visuality in daily life forces verbal communication to lose its position. Today students willingly express their worries and joys, using the tools of virtual space: “During the 1990s, when the graphical interface of the World Wide Web became widely available, the Internet took on the characteristics of a visual culture rather than an electronic post office or business tool” [Bronner 2011: 406]. Thus, the function of jokes and anecdotes has been overtaken more and more by memes.

To get a clearer picture of this tendency, the study of one particular Latvian situation has been done, and in the framework of this study visual material has been collected from students of the Latvian Academy of Culture¹ during the 2017/2018 academic year. Before the current study, for several years during seminars within the course of cultural and art studies, genetic and cultural interaction topics had been analysed, but so far this approach was limited to more theoretical aspects of the Dawkins's book “The Selfish Gene”. The above-mentioned year, because of increasing number of questions about the interaction of Dawkins's term *meme* with the *internet memes*, students were invited to express their own ideas and attitudes towards this cultural phenomenon. Student memes were designed according to the assignment in the framework of the course mentioned above. Besides, their viewpoints were not restricted either thematically or aesthetically. It should be noted that students responded quite actively, and as a result 194 Internet memes were created by 97 students in November of 2017 – a basic corpus of empirical data for this study.

Exemplification

The corpus of Internet memes displays all universal topics characteristic for student jokes: study environment and process, lack of food, lack of resources (money), lack of sleep, laziness, entertainment (partying), students' keen wit, overload, session, attitude towards professors etc.

¹ The Latvian Academy of Culture is state-founded higher educational institution – an arts university implementing BA, MA, and Doctoral programmes in study direction “Arts”.

University is the best time

to acquire new contacts



as the pizza delivery
was agreed after half
an hour

but now it has already
taken 32 minutes



how much can you
get by selling your
kidney



when you are not
in the budget, and
have to pay for
tuition yourself

when you have to get up for your morning class



at 6:35 AM

when your stipend has been transferred to your account



how do I look like in December



trying to avoid University assignments before exam session

when accidentally

you start thinking
about your first
exam session



September, beginning... December, exam session...

professor, who is completely sure
that you have not prepared for
the exam and hope for a miracle



when somebody asks
you

what are you
studying in those
creative industries



Conclusions

New forms of communication create new genres of folklore, which can be perceived and interpreted only by understanding certain cultural codes, based on values, knowledge and experience recognized by a group or community. While analysing Latvian students' memes, their thematic continuity was revealed in comparison to traditional student anecdotes and jokes. Students' anecdotes and Internet memes are united by their content and functions. The function of students' memes, like that of anecdotes and jokes, is not only to feature the peculiarities of students' lifestyle, to cause emotions and to entertain, but also to criticize and reduce the tension created by the hierarchical relationship and attitudes that are typical for the academic environment, by the self-discipline required for acquiring knowledge, by constant shortage of financial resources for living, and by other aspects.

The analysis of students' memes has revealed that they can serve as a kind of elicitation technique, and provide symptomatic information that is not usually articulated in higher education quality assessment surveys or in students' direct communication with academic or administrative staff. Future research of students' memes might be related to the development of this new approach in the framework of cultural studies.

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