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An Alternative Approach to Gender and Consumer Behavior: Memetics

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Memetics, a relatively new discipline, provides an exciting tool for the study of social phenomena. It combines the cognitive sciences with our understanding of the fields of evolutionary biology and epidemiology. The memetic approach to a subject area allows a non-traditional view as to how that subject has evolved and continues to evolve. Gender provides a marvelous application of the memetic concepts as it is a phenomenon clearly originally rooted in Darwinian survival issues, but one which has just as clearly socially outgrown prehistoric imperatives.

This paper is a Mind Virus that will attempt to infect the recipient with the meta-meme of memes and additionally to suggest how this conceptual framework can provide insight into problems of gender and consumer behavior.

WHAT IS MEMETICS?

"Personally you did not create even the smallest microscopic fragment of the materials out of which you, or anyone else, composed that slender merit of putting the borrowed materials together. That was done automatically -- by your mental machinery, in strict accordance with the law of that machinery's construction. And you not only did not make that machinery yourself, but you have not even any command over it."

Samuel Clemens, 1917

REPLICATING INFORMATION PATTERNS

Memes live in minds as replicating patterns of information. They are thoughts that act as if they have a life of their own. Essential to understanding how memetics differs from other ways of studying human thought and behavior is the notion that it makes sense to say that a meme has its host. The word meme was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book called "The Selfish Gene". Memes are analogs to genes but of the mental and cultural world rather than the biological world. The study of memes, their mutations, replications, and extinctions closely parallels the study of evolutionary genetics. Thus, it makes sense to talk about successful memes as those that spread to the most minds with the greatest fidelity. The spread of memes within an existing population follows the patterns of epidemiology.

Just as genes can be bundled into packages that infect biological hosts together as viruses or bacteria, memes can bundle into packages known as mind viruses. Mind viruses are composed of mutually dependent memes, analogous to symbiotic relationships in biological settings. Cults provide outstanding and easy to appreciate examples of mind viruses, spreading by proselytizing from cult member to new recruit. Harder to acknowledge and apprehend are the mind virus configurations of enormous complexity that represent such cultural institutions as consumer capitalism, governments, universities, or any organized religion.
If you, in reading this paper, or having listened to a presentation, further investigate the meme of memes and pass it along to someone else, then the meta-meme of memetics will have successfully replicated one more time. Not all memes are as complex as the meta-meme of memes, proverbs and maxims provide a good counter example.

Another characteristic of memes is that they are typically capable of causing behavior changes in their hosts, even if the only behavior changed is to pass along the meme to someone else. So, a joke would be a meme that gets passed along, doing little to change the behavior of its various hosts except that they re-tell the joke. Other memes can have much more profound effects on behavior. For example, a woman holding the meme that “a woman should marry a man who can support her” might choose to marry someone she really did not like because of that belief.

One counter-intuitive result of memetic theory is that a successful meme need not be beneficial to its host. It only needs to be configured such that its host will pass it on. The highly successful memes of astrology and astrological prediction provide an interesting case where there is arguably no tangible benefit to the host, and arguably some harm. Some memes are so virulent that they cause their own self-destruction within the span of a human lifetime. The meme complex of nazi Germany provides an interesting example (Lynch 1997).

While host benefits are not necessary, most long term successful memes confer some benefits to their hosts, either through enabling or encouraging greater genetic reproduction and subsequent transmission of the memes to offspring, or through preventing the death or destruction of the host by helping them to behave in a life assuring manner. Agricultural techniques provide a simple example of the former case while the “learn to swim” meme might provide an example of the latter. For a meme to have long term success, replicating in many hosts, it cannot have severe negative consequences to its host. For example, the memes that defined Shakerism have essentially died out. Central to the set of Shaker memes was celibacy and no children. Consequently, over time, the rate of adoption of the meme was slower than the deaths of the hosts.

MUTATIONS OF THE PATTERNS

Like genes, memes do not always replicate with perfect fidelity. Hence, any meme is subject to change as it passes from one individual to another. The joke that changes subtly from telling to retelling exemplifies this phenomenon. The mutation may be accidental as when the quality of the transmission or storage of the original meme fails to be adequate. Or, memes can be intentionally mutated in that are consciously designed by self interested parties. Such memes are often subtle mutations of original memes that had other social agendas in mind. For example, the cooption by the fashion industry of counter-cultural symbols usually involves some mutation of the original fashion to make them acceptable to a wider audience. The grunge phenomenon provides an ideal example, as the only thing required of the fashion industry was to make the clothes new, and put high prices on them. The pricing alone served to sanitize the dumpster diver look into high fashion.
CATEGORIES OF MEMES

Memetic theory has applied some of the standard memes of positivism to the meme of memes. One such applied meme categorizes memes into types based on their typical functions in the realities of the hosts.

Distinction Memes

These are the memes that we use to divide up reality into the organization that we know. This part of memetic theory is a straightforward outgrowth of years of categorization literature, particularly illuminated by differences in categorization across cultures. The meme of dividing things into categories is itself a distinction meme.

Association Memes

These are the linking ideas that we hold to say that for instance, “After work is Miller Time.” They express the relationships between two or more memes. Much copy writing attempts to engineer association memes between existing memes that people already hold and a new meme that causes the person to purchase a product or service.

Strategy Memes

Strategy memes tell us how to behave in a given context to achieve some result. For instance, the strategy meme that says "Go with the flow of traffic, and you won't get stopped for speeding." might inform our driving behavior. Or, "never go to bed with a man on a first date" might inform our sexual behavior.

Resistance Memes

Resistance memes are thought complexes that reduce the probability that a host will acquire new memes that could threaten the memes already held by the host. Because of their key importance in meme transmission, these will be discussed in greater detail below.

MEME TRANSMISSION AND REPLICATION: THE SPREADING OF MEMES

Memes spread by communication. That’s the short answer. But the communication of memes can take many forms.

Observation

When we see a new thing, or behavior, for example a new fashion, the meme that entails that fashion has been communicated to us. If we adopt the new fashion, or tell others about it, then the meme has been replicated successfully.

Word of Mouth

When someone tells us that something is so, they have transmitted a meme to us that we may or may not accept. To the extent that the meme gets past our memetic defenses, we will become hosts to the meme.
Parental Transmission

Parents dominate the meme acquisition of their children. The children’s minds start out devoid of memes, and fill first with the memes of the caretakers closest to them. (Nanny users beware.) For many cultural memes, things that appear only vaguely or not at all, but rather seem to form the texture of reality, parental transmission provides the route. Empirically, it can be demonstrated that religions that promote many children grow faster than those that are silent on the subject, parent to child being the dominant transmission mode for religion.

Outside the Family

Peers, bosses, teachers, caretakers, and authority figures with whom people make direct contact also provide a ready avenue for meme transmission by word of mouth. In this area, there already exists a substantial literature on best communication methods for intentional transmission, but not much is said about the characteristics of the messages that will tend to be successfully copied and passed along to others.

Mass Media (Including Books)

The rise of mass media, along with increasing population densities, has enabled extremely rapid transmission of new memes and variants of older memes. In particular, radio has been singled out as a particularly effective medium for transmission of political memes because the radio audience often consists of people listening together at work. (Lynch 1997)

Evangelism

A meme can be considered to be evangelic if it includes as part of itself, the idea that it is important to tell other people. Hence, when the meme of an impending hurricane reaches a certain place, all residents will be likely to evangelically spread the word to any who might have been out of the normal information loop. When someone enjoys a novel kind of sexual behavior, and attempts to convince others to participate in that behavior with them, evangelism is at work. Similarly, people who consume some brands (e.g. Macintosh) will often evangelically attempt to convince others to consume the same brand. Crisis memes, religious memes, and commercial memes exemplify the class of memes that spread evangelically.

Crisis

Depending on the severity of the crisis, people who accept the crisis’s meme are likely to feel more or less inclined actively and effortlessly spread the meme. Contrast the impending hurricane to the crisis of ecological disaster following years after the harvesting of a rainforest.

Religious

These are the memes we generally think of as evangelic, hence the term. The admonition to go out and save others with this meme or mind virus is part and parcel to the message.
To the extent that a commercial establishment can successfully generate either positive word of mouth about its offering, or negative word of mouth (about the competition or failure to adopt the offering), that commercial interest has designed an evangelic meme.

ISSUES IN MEME SPREADING

Rate of Spread

As with germs like viruses and bacteria, memes spread by communication from one host to another. If the meme contains a sub-part that says that everyone should be sure to pass it along, it acts the same as the sneeze does for the common cold virus. Density of population also affects spread rates, as well as type and availability of mass media.

Intention

An aspect of memetic transmission just beginning to be explored surrounds the question of purpose or intention of the host. This perhaps provides the most direct link to marketing, if not consumer behavior, as producers of products use engineered memes in the form of advertising to attempt to consciously increase the adoption rate of the meme represented in the product or service being advertised. In a very real sense, the offering of a company, that includes its advertising is a set of symbiotic memes that have been intentionally designed to spread. The skill of the designer will affect the transmission rate, the repeat rate and the meme adoption rate. These will of course be affected by the size of the promotional budget and the effectiveness of public relations team in securing additional exposure for the memes.

Indirect Meme Transmission

There are times and kinds of memes that pass from host to host via rather indirect means, either lying latent in the minds of their hosts, or lying fallow as a hidden text. One such case, that of generation skipping, provides food for speculation about how other such memes might propagate. The example given in several sources cites a tendency for lenient child rearing practices in one generation to be followed by strict child rearing practices in the next generation and a subsequent reversion to lenient practices in the third.

Fallow ideas in forgotten texts, such as the genetic ideas of Gregor Mendel which were ignored until many years after his death, or religious writings of the Druids, can be "rediscovered" and lead memetically rich new lives.

Susceptibility of Host

The acceptance of new memes by any one individual depends to a large degree on their susceptibility to the new meme. Susceptibility depends not only on the nature of the meme, but also on the state of the individual in terms of currently held memes. Just as people's biological immune system provides mechanisms for resisting many infectious agents, a mind develops a memetic immune system that protects it from invasion by "foreign" memes. Hence, most mature minds resist colonization by most new memes,
but some memes have characteristics that make them more virulent and better able to take residence in any mind, regardless of immunity.

Preexisting Meme Set

The degree of compatibility with an existing set of memes strongly effects whether or not we adopt them. This phenomenon has much empirical support from the persuasion literature.

Resistance Memes

There are two memes, faith and skepticism, that most of us acquire at some time, that by their nature, act as a sort of memetic immune system for the rest of the memes that we hold against any potentially disruptive memes that we encounter. A third category of resistance meme, the taboo, appears much more explicitly in some cultures than in our own, but taboos do exist at many levels of analysis, from individual, through family and social group, to general cultural taboos. Adversative memes form a fourth type of resistance meme, using intimidation as a primary means of suppressing competing memes.

Faith

Faith represents any meme that you believe without question. Because you accept it as reality, it is very resistant to attack or modification by existing memes.

Skepticism

Skepticism forms a shield against new memes that can be just as potent as faith. With skepticism built into our meme set, we take nothing at face value, but seek further verification of new memes and their potential value. Cleverly composed memes, however, can and do slide right past our skeptical barriers. The scientific method forms perhaps the penultimate skeptical meme set, providing a strong shield against adoption of new memes without adequate evidence, much to the dismay of aspiring doctoral candidates.

Taboo

Any subject that generates a response like, "We really don't like to talk about that." represents at least a mild taboo. The existence of taboo memes provides a passive form of resistance whereby not talking about something makes it harder to pass along memes related to the taboo, hence the first memes to colonize a mind, usually transmitted from parents, have a survival advantage. By forbidding discussion of certain topics, each taboo acts as an antibody against a small set of memes: Often, taboos find very little positive expression, but rather are propagated by negative sanctions surrounding discussion of the taboo subject. While the taboo does not directly counter the memes that it is set against by replacement or competition, the taboo generally slows the spread of the circumscribed memes. Taboo, however, may have interesting side effects, planned or desired by the agencies setting them up as taboo. For example, a taboo against talking about sex and sexuality, including birth control, tends to be associated with a higher incidence of unplanned pregnancies. (Lynch, 1997)
Adversarial/Intimidation

The last form of resistance meme, the adversative meme, sets up an automatic adversarial position in its own host against competing memes. In doing this the host of competing memes becomes intimidated by the holder of the adversarial meme, thereby suppressing any communication of the competing meme to the holder of the adversative meme, and in extreme cases, suppressing any communication of the competing meme to any other potential hosts. Most memes that advocate the incarceration of a particular group use this adversative form to gain reproductive advantage. The advantage comes not from better replication of the adversative meme, but from the suppression of the replication of competing memes through mechanisms of intimidation. Usually, the espouser of memes competing with the adversative meme finds themselves in the uncomfortable position of being accused of being exactly what the adversative meme is trying to eradicate, be it communists, feminists, gays, lesbians, or intellectuals.

HOT BUTTONS

One controversial assertion made by some authors writing on memetics contends that we have certain hard wired and early wired kinds of memes that have at their roots survival of the species and of individuals within social group (Brodie, 1996).

Primary Hot Buttons: The Four F's

Any meme will command at least a modicum of attention if it somehow deals with one of biology’s four f’s, food, fighting, fleeing, and ... finding a mate. As a species we have learned, perhaps have it genetically/chemically encoded that these are important things to attend. They all involve states of emotional arousal related to hunger, anger, fear, and lust. Because of this, memes that use one or more of the four f’s as integral parts of themselves will have a greater chance of being received by a new host.

Secondary Hot Buttons

In addition to the four f’s, memes that tap into the realms of belonging, identity, approval by others – including those in authority, and caring tend to transmit easily and replicate faster. This in particular forms a rich area for research that links the persuasion literature with the mentic way of viewing problems.

Physical and Emotional State

The classic case of enhancing susceptibility to new memes by manipulation of emotional states comes in cult and military brainwashing, where by means of deprivation, and sometimes pleasure/pain techniques, individuals are "programmed" with the desired new meme. To a lesser degree, anyone can be caught with their guard down, and find themselves agreeing to memes and even replicating them without having so intended.
VALUE OF A MEMETIC APPROACH TO GENDER AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Aside from being an exciting way to think about thinking and behavior, memetics provides some additional, more rational incentives to its use as a conceptual framework for dealing with gender issues.

Breaking Out of Our Box of Using SEX not Gender

Perhaps the single most important contribution that memetics offers the study of gender is a way to break out of our box of thinking about gender in terms of sex. With a few notable exceptions (Fischer and Arnold, 1994) most research directly involved with consumer behavior and gender measures sex and not gender. By examining the various memes of gender, and how they are interrelated, we gain a perspective that truly examines gender as a social phenomenon first.

Understanding How Gender Ideas Spread

Memetic approaches must necessarily include the arbitrariness of a particular meme, and look not only at its value to individuals, but also at its fitness as a meme. Does it resist mutation? Is it passed along to offspring? Is it passed along evangelically? Memetic approaches can begin to answer questions about what makes some ideas anathema to some, while being quite acceptable to others.

Explaining How Gender Ideas Change

It is clear that people hold many differing ideas of gender, of gender roles, and hold differing attitudes toward gendered subjects. How those ideas came to hold sway in one individual, how certain groups have adopted one set of ideas over another, or how one group comes over time to split off from its parent group are all questions amenable to memetic analysis. When a random change in a genetic sequence occurs that enhances the survivability of the whole gene sequence, we say that there is a positive mutation. Similarly, when a random (either accidental or intentional) change in a set of memes occurs which causes either faster spread or better resistance to competing memes, we have a memetic mutation. Not all memetic mutations will increase the survival of the base meme set. However, those that do will come to dominate the original meme set. The precise mechanism for mutation of memes can be intentional, motivated by biological or economic imperatives, or it might be accidental, caused by a misunderstanding or faulty replication of the parent gene.

A possible example of such a faulty transmission of gender role memes would be the individual who has at once embraced "traditional" gender roles that dominated during the 1950s and also embraced newer feminist ideas of equality and interchangeability of gender roles. The former memes were transmitted to them by parents, while the latter memes have been spread by evangelism through friends and teachers. If the person is a woman, for example, she might have taken on the masculine role of providing income to support a household and found a stay at home man to care for their children. The man, to participate in the arrangement, will have adopted similar memes. Now, the reality that the woman still feels compelled to do the housework and to spend a great deal of her non-work time caring for the children and the man's feelings of inadequacy.
for not being a breadwinner, represent a faulty transmission of the feminist equality memes to both parties. (c.f. Mahoney 1996)

Explaining Resistance to Change Cybernetically

Feedback loops between existing gender notions, commercial interests, family interests, and gender memes that people choose to adopt or pass along reinforce existing memes to the disadvantage of new gender memes. Advertising in mainstream "women's" magazines provides the perfect example of this reinforcement phenomenon. Women who read the magazines pick them up because they believe there will be value in looking at the magazine and because they think that the particular magazine fits with their sense of who they are. The magazine then reinforces certain ideas of gender roles and behaviors, to the exclusion of other ideas. The feedback loop continues if friends talk about the ads or articles and agree with the advice or fashion ideas.

Facilitating Multiple Conceptualizations of Gender

As a way to allow true multiplicity in definitions of gender, gender roles, and gender orientation, memetics has no peer. The biological analogy of species provides us with different gender species that really don't have much to do with one another except to see the other as a threat or as a possible symbiotic partner.

POSSIBLE PITFALLS OF A MEMETIC APPROACH TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The Nothing New Syndrome

As is often the case with new ideas, they are mutations of already existing ideas. Memetics suffers this and doing work based around memetic themes exposes the researcher to the skeptical resistance memes of journal editors and department chairs. The biggest danger of these resistance memes stems from the inherent bias to defend existing (held by me the reviewer) memes against all comers. To overcome this, we need to acknowledge that for consumer behavior, these ideas have their roots in existing social science theories. Simultaneously, we need to emphasize the benefits to be gained from the "new" parts, those drawn from genetics and epidemiology.

The "Not Science" Syndrome

Memetics, as an infant discipline, and one which seeks to be a meta-discipline, threatens many in social sciences as a usurper. The understandable reaction of many has been, and will continue to be dismissal out of hand, as not science. The greatest difficulties lie with definitions and with a lack of generally accepted methodologies for empirical research. More than most paradigms, memetics is fraught with possibilities of indeterminacy, as the act of observation changes the state of the system.

Holds Itself as a Purely Positivist Paradigm

Even while subject to criticism from those calling it not science, people working in memetic areas seem to be predominantly positivists, bent on objective reductionist explanations for phenomena. This seems to extend to the fact that most will not acknowledge science or the scientific method as memes in their own right. This typical semiotic difficulty of framing one's own paradigm as natural makes unlikely any
cooperative collaboration between memeticists of a positivist stripe, and memeticists more comfortable with a phenomenological approach to explanation.

A VENUES FOR RESEARCH IN GENDER AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR USING MEMETICS

The Memes of Gender

Gender memes quite simply constitute the set of beliefs that anyone holds that cause them to behave differently because they are xx or xy and to behave differently toward xx or xy people. Also included in the set are memes about the roles of people other than one’s self that one deems as appropriate because of the genotype of the other person. Notice that this does not preclude masculine xx’s or feminine xy’s, but merely puts a large boundary around gendered memes.

“Appropriate” means, of course, in the mind of the person holding the meme, and does not cast any social value judgement on anyone’s behaviors. Each individual will filter the behavior of others and their own behavior through their own gender memes. Included are all "appropriate" behaviors, all "appropriate" possessions, and all relevant strategy memes as to how they should behave to accomplish their own ends in the context of a world constituted of xx's and xy's.

The description and mapping of gender memes, and more particularly consumption memes with gender components, provides the most immediate application of the concepts of memetics in the field of consumer behavior. No list that included here could possibly be complete, (What are you wearing today?), but a few examples might illustrate the potential of memetic research into gendered consumer behavior.

Investigating Gendered Distinction Memes

The simple questions of what constitutes appropriate behavior given xx or xy chromosomes and what possessions and consumption patterns are deemed appropriate have caused endless debate among scholars and lay persons alike. When viewed memetically, these questions yield to some fairly straightforward analysis. Some analyses like this have already appeared in the literature (Brodie, 1996, Lynch 1997) but there remain many gendered consumer behaviors that have yet to be so analyzed. Furthermore, existing analyses practically invite refutation and rebuttal. The questions answered here will relate to how people divide up the world into male/female masculine/feminine and how those divisions change over time in response to mutations of these distinction memes.

Cataloging Gendered Association Memes

These memes of gender probably cause the most heated debates amongst otherwise like minded people, as they are the ones that link or associate xx and xy genotypes to what we commonly have called attitudes. So, when a meme spreads around that “boys will be boys” or that “girls are sweet” or any other common cliché, we have a gendered association meme. The extent of these kinds of memes in the population should be documented and tracked over time.
Cataloging Gendered Strategy Memes

Probably the most problematic of issues that face people in a world of ambiguous sex roles and diverse definitions of gender are those that deal with how to get what they want vis a vis mating and survival. Strategy memes are those that provide rules for behavior under certain conditions. The strategy memes surrounding, getting all the sex you desire, the children you want, and the standard of living you desire have changed dramatically over the years, especially since the invention of reliable birth control in the form of the pill. Where once “The Rules” (Fein and Schneider, 1996), might have been well accepted, they are now rejected by most.

Examples of gendered strategy memes that bear investigating follow:

- In order to get the kind of life that you want, find a ______ to ________ you.
- Follow the "rules.
- Men should never ________.
- To get what they want women should ________.
- Your clothing should accentuate your masculinity/feminity.

Study of Mutations of Gender Ideas

Memetics provides a venue to examine how variants of successful gender memes either die out or become more successful than the original memes. For example,

Study of Socialization to Gender

Here fruitful areas of inquiry for consumer research would revolve around such things as how shopping methods and procedures are differentially communicated by parents based on the sex of the child.

Investigations of How Consciously Mutating Gender Memes Can Work to Change Behavior

This now takes us into the realm of investigating memetic engineering. An area that those in the field of memetics seem to think we should be intimately familiar with as consumer researchers are often associated with marketing departments. Study in this area can provide us with empirical evidence as to which characteristics of memes do the most to facilitate accurate transmission of memes. We also need to study which characteristics of memes facilitate rapid transmission of memes.

SUMMARY

Memetics provides a useful reshuffling of our cognitive deck. Viewing ideas as having a life of their own, and characteristics that improve their chances of repeated accurate transmission from mind to mind gives us a new window through which to view consumer behavior problems. In particular, memetics gives us a slightly less emotionally loaded way to speak about inherently sensitive subjects like gender and the role of gender in consumer behavior.
REFERENCES


