

WHAT'S IN A MEME?

SARAH ANJUM BARI

When I say "Charlie bit my finger", you might know what I'm talking about. You know what to imagine when I describe Willy Wonka's condescending, wide-eyed smile, or an exasperated Robert Downey Jr. rolling his eyes, standing with his arms crossed; or a distracted boyfriend checking out another girl in a red dress, or Drake blocking his face with his hand, dressed in a furry orange jacket.



when your ammu gives you a large
ভাতের লোকমা instead of a regular one



PHOTO: RANTAGES

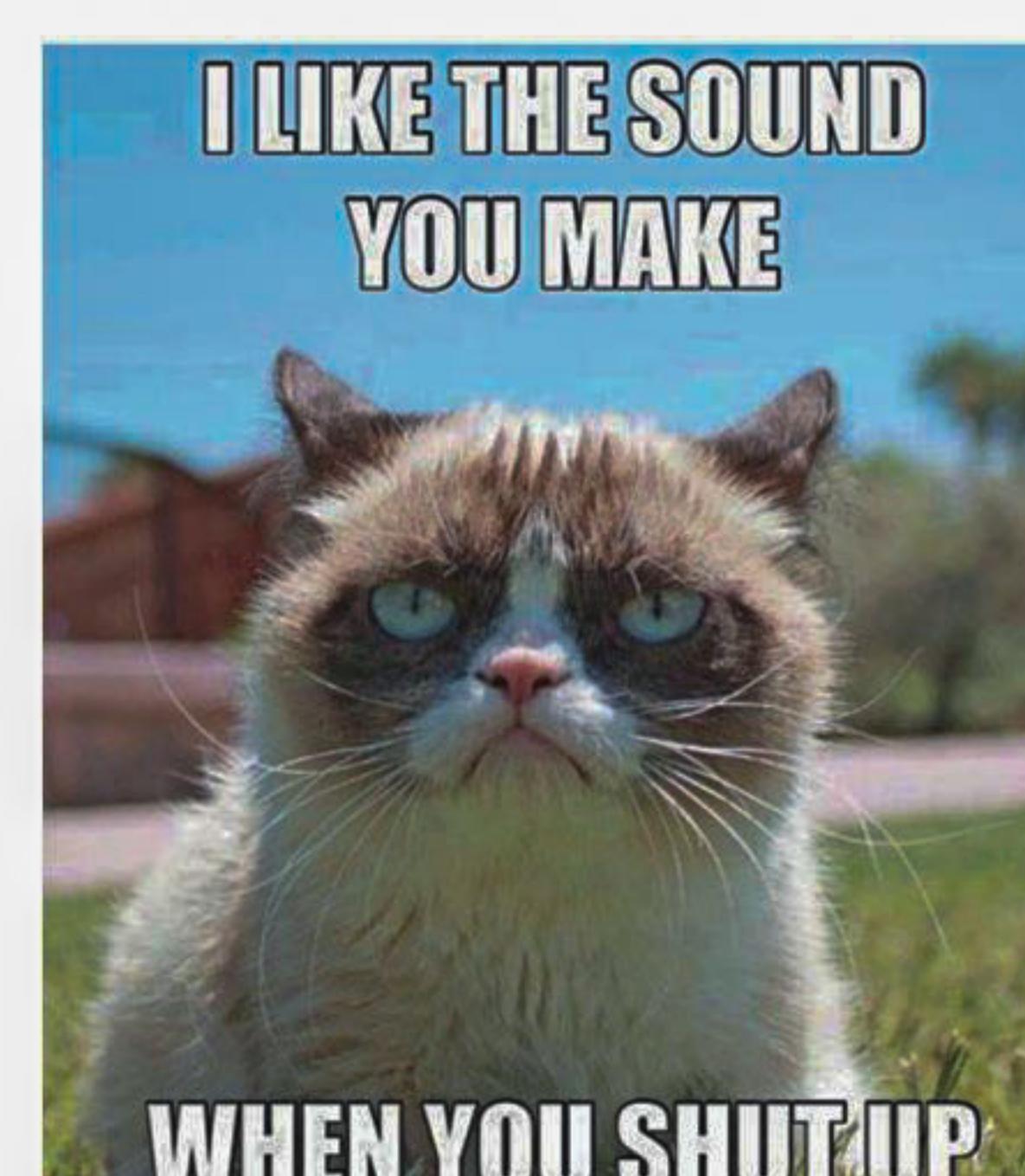


You know these images and the messages they denote because they've become iconicised through innumerable online shares and tagged posts and messages. In this age of communication through "viral" content, these memes, like countless others, have become a primary means of transmitting not only messages and inside jokes, but also information, socio-cultural trends, and hard-hitting news updates.

Here's why memes are fascinating to a nerd like me. Imagine taking an atom—a seemingly simple, composite, tiny whole—and then cracking it open to find an entire world of networks thriving within. That's kind of what a meme is. It's an image that demands about two seconds of your attention: you glance at it, snort under your breath at the relatable content, and move on with your life. But it isn't really the animal that you're snickering at in a Doge meme, but at the composite whole made up by the face of the dog, the text that accompanies it, and your knowledge of the context behind that text. This whole is bigger than the sum of its individual parts, both tied together and inflated by your familiarity with its context and by each time that it is shared and re-shared.

Fitting, therefore, that it should be called a 'meme'. The coinage first occurred in biologist Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene* (1967), derived from the Greek work 'mimema', meaning 'imitated'. Defining it as a "unit of cultural transmission or imitation"—a joke, a nursery rhyme, catchphrases, fashion

trends and even religion (his examples), Dawkins shortened 'mimema' into 'meme' to make it rhyme with 'gene', granting it the metaphor of something that survives through natural selection. By drawing this parallel, Dawkins also inspired (or noted) the mundanity and hence the significance, the indispensability of these trends, implying that they're the building blocks of culture as it evolves.



This makes a meme a specimen of history in the same way as a book. *This is how people talked, thought, and lived their lives at a particular point of time, it tells us. This was how things were done then.* Even if the text in a book is set in a different era (such as in historical fiction),

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