Institute of Behavioural Studies and Communication Theory

THESES

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Memetic marketing

Memetic researches and analyses in Hungarian
corporate context

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Content

1.   Research antecedents and theme justification

Richard Dawkins' ideas about memes from 1976 have become popular again with the ever-growing spread of internet usage. "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it onto his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on it can be said to propagate itself spreading from brain to brain." [Dawkins, 1976. (2005)]. As memetics understands it today, memes are the smallest particles of communication that are meaningful in themselves and spread primarily via mimicry from one human brain to another. Just like genes, memes are also generators: memes produce thoughts and ideas. Another comparable quality to genes to consider is that memes are also replicators by nature.

There are many who criticize memetics while developing extremely similar cultural evolutionary theories. Simultaneously, there are various individuals supporting memetics as a theory, yet not taking steps to developing the field any further. At this moment in time the role of memetics in the world of science and its application twenty years from now cannot be forecasted. For example, in the future it may not be possible to identify memes memetics as a field could

retrospectively have been a temporary phase in the cognition and research of culture.

The gene analogy that's used to understand memetics stems from the period between the publication of Darwin's writings and Watson's & Crick's article that was published almost a hundred years later. The theory was already born and could be applied very well, however the structure of the DNA-molecule was to be discovered by science only one-hundred years later.

Memetics can be considered to be one of culture's evolutionary explanations. As a result of several corporate culture research studies and a deep insight to cultural evolution, a new worldview has manifested for me, a new alternative paradigm. If we presume that Darwin's evolution can be applied to culture and that "cultural" genes do indeed exist, then we can apply universal Darwinism to culture as well.

According to Kuhn, critical and validating experiments have led to the birth and development of new paradigms. In my case of inquiry, the following questions have emerged: How does a corporate culture develop and evolve? What does the idea of a "brand" mean in this culture and how does a brand live and interact within the customers' minds?

My dissertation is based on the memetic paradigm within a cultural evolution. However the aim of my past research was not to identify

memes. My aim with this dissertation is to present the results of the paradigm's practical application.

The meme-theory paradigm has been evolving for decades since Dawkins's time, and even preceding that period. Several monographs and essays have been written, such as Distin [2005], Boyd and Richerson [2005], Heylighen and Chielens [2009], Mauboussin and Bartholdson [2002], Kirby and Marsden [2005], Wu, Yufan, Ardley, Barry [2007], Rushkoff [2010], Aunger, R. [2000] and [2002], Blackmore [1999] and Mérő [2007].

The same problems that led to the crisis of an old paradigm can be solved according to a new paradigm. In communication science I did not experience the crisis of the basic science, but the business crisis of applied science. Whilst using the tools of traditional applied communications research, company leaders often cannot find valid solutions to their business-related communication problems.

To clarify, I am not saying that the meme-theory paradigm is superior to others. What I am asserting is that it differs from traditional paradigms that rely on methodological individualism. This is a new approach, as it is not unusual that there are more valid paradigms existing parallel to each other in the same scientific arena. In my dissertation I present how Dawkins' meme-theory can be applied in corporate communication. My goal was to create and apply a meme-theory based model of communication.

2.   Applied methods

What is a meme? According to László Mérő's definition memes are cultural genes, which are not thoughts but the generators of thoughts. Memes are the smallest particles of communication that contain the ability to spread. According to Mérő, Dawkins' research proved that "evolution, indeed, impacts directly the genes and memes and impacts living beings and thoughts through them. As genes generate living beings, memes generate ideas and thoughts from viruses to elephants, and from mind-viruses to brands or even religions." [Mérő, 2004a]

However memes in themselves cannot be classified as thoughts, in selective groupings they can create diverse cohorts and code all kinds of various ideas. If conditions are sufficient the thoughts they have coded will manifest and spread as alpha-memes (see below).

Meme-beings According to [Mérő, 2004a] and applying Darwin's isomorphism: meme-beings are integrated *thought-beings generated by memes* and are meaningful in themselves. Essentially, they are what cognitive psychology calls *cognitive schemes*. These are "viable" cognitive units subject to *natural selection*, comparable to living beings in biology. They make up the composition of different **thoughts** and **thought-fragments** in human brains. The formation

and repetition of thoughts in the brain and their transition beyond the realm of the brain itself is how memes *replicate*.

Alpha-memes are the elements of our thoughts perceivable by others. In interpersonal interactions we can only encounter thoughts that appear in a vocal, written or electronic form, that become objective, i.e. that become accessible to other people. Thus they are the champions of an evolutionary competition- essentially, they are the thoughts that was victorious in "getting out" of a person's mind**. I call them alpha-memes.**

Not all thoughts are generated by memes. Only thoughts that spread via imitation and that can be recombined can be classified this way. Typically, fundamental psychological functions (basic emotions, attitudes, instincts, self-defense mechanisms, etc…) are not generated by memes. They are default external mechanisms supporting the functioning of memes, just like several physical and chemical mechanisms that are not coded in the DNA are necessary for the proper functioning of genes. For example political, social and economic factors are extremely important regarding meme-research as a whole, mostly in the analysis, but they are not alpha-memes.

A short description of the meme-research methodology

The memetic marketing-research technology (Darwin's Marketing Evolution, 2010) consists of three consecutive phases:

1)   exploring the memetic fauna

2)   analyzing the memetic fauna

3)   making memetic proposals

The aim of the first research phase is to collect all of the available alpha-memes of the company, brand, product and service that is designated as the focus of our research. We collect the alpha-memes of the memetic fauna from in-depth interviews, focus groups and the internet. These quotations derived from our research are thoughts, thought-fragments or even more complex ideas. At times they can consist of just three words, other times two full sentences. The interviewers record the relevant alpha-memes during the interviews.

We apply the same socio-psychological techniques and group-cohesion forces in memetic focus groups as in traditional focus groups. The differentiating factor is that we are not interested in the group members' attitudes, choices, value systems, and preferences. We are instead specifically noting their word choices, unique ways of expressing themselves, notional- and decision categories, themes of discussion – in one word: their alpha-memes.

The length of a typical average meme-research study is 12 to 16 weeks.

Memetic fauna

The memetic fauna is more than just a metaphor. It is the collection of alpha-memes around a particular alpha-meme that falls within the focus of our research. The word 'fauna' is to express the organic and living nature of community thinking in an ever-changing economic-social environment.

The alpha-memes collected in the exploration phase serve as the basis for memetic analysis. In an average project we usually have thousands of alpha-memes. This unstructured list contains the memes of the in-depths interviews, the focus groups and the internet-search.

During the processing of all the interview-recordings we prepare an extract that contains about 15% (in exceptional cases 20%) of all the alpha-memes of the fauna. This usually translates to the extraction of about 500-1500 alpha-memes. While preparing the extract, we apply qualitative text-analysis methods to identify the best alpha-memes and we perform an evolutionary test that is not focused or based on content. We do not make a decision as to whether the alpha-memes are "true" or "false." Our focus is to look for the evolutionarily strong memes that are capable of spreading. The alpha-memes that eventually get selected into the extract are the ones that present an idea with some emotional or comical element, or with some other peculiar quality. We choose the ones that are most likely to spread,

i.e. we give a positive answer to the question "Would I pass it on to a friend?

Coding of the Alpha-memes

During a research study we can only encounter the thoughts that appear in a vocal, written or electronic form: they disembark from human minds as the winners of an evolutionary competition. They are the alpha-memes that we explore and collect as we get to know the interviewees' ways of thinking, their opinion-forming processes and their attitudes. Internet-memes are a subgroup of alpha-memes that spread online, comparable to the memes that spread via diverse media, such as television or printed press.

For memetic analysis we code the previously revealed alpha-memes along categories that are relevant to the alpha-meme in focus. However, we do not know to what extent these categories are relevant and the details of their structure. When coding, we consider memes as cases. There are variance-pairs in the code-template that serve as variables according to which the person who codes has to evaluate each and every meme on a 1 to 5 scale. We choose project-specific variance-pairs from a list of 800. We constantly monitor which variance-pairs function well – i.e. which variance-pairs are considered good in terms of the personal results of the coder –, and which are the ones that do not resonate with the memes, i.e. get a number 3, "neither this, nor that" value. The code-template is being

updated across projects: we keep the variance-pairs that have proved efficient during previous projects. About 80% of the variance-pairs are selected as a result of our previous experiences with them during earlier projects, and the remaining 20% are specific to the given current research. For example:

Honest – Dishonest	Popular – Unpopular
Complicated – Simple	Trustworthy – Untrustworthy
Discreet – Tactless	Personal – Impersonal
Risky – Safe	Capricious – Solid
Serious – Frivolous	Gray – Colorful
Conservative – Renewed	Respectful – Scornful
Slow – Fast	Fair – Unfair
Ponderous – Comfortable	Boring – Interesting

1. table Variance pairs

Factor analysis

Memetic factor analysis utilizes the same mathematical solutions as traditional factor analysis, the only difference being that we do not use an individuals/variables matrix as a starting point, but an alpha-memes/variance-pairs matrix. The output of a memetic factor analysis is the emergence of memetic dimensions, i.e. the definition

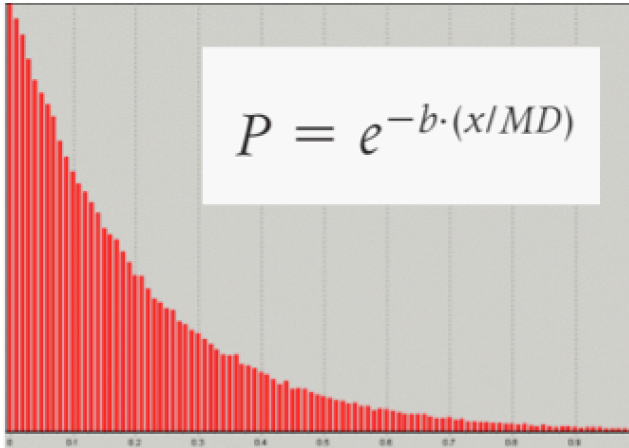of the major organizing dimensions of memes that construct thought-beings.

The results of a research study are the **memetic dimensions**. The memetic being that is the focus of our research (company, brand, product, service etc…) is perceived by the world along these dimensions. Memetic dimensions define the brand's place in the world from an outside point of view, i.e. in relation to all the other meme-beings in the world.

Defining memetic dimensions is the cornerstone of every research. In many cases beforehand, we have to separate some industry-related dimensions and certain clusters that hide the dimensions in order to discover them.

Dimensions are the single most important outputs of memetic research. Memetic dimensions critically demonstrate how cognitive space is structured and the basis for the said structure. This is remarkable because dimensions do not necessarily present the positive content of our client's memes. A dimension is classified as a dimension because it has two ends: very often it is a positive and a negative end, like 'trustworthy' and 'untrustworthy'. In other cases the two ends of a dimension do not present a positive and negative confrontation, but they are simply each other's opposites, like 'Hungarian' and 'international'.

Quality Assurance

As known from population-genetics: the probability of occurrence of certain species and living beings follows a negative exponential distribution. There are no grounds to think that this explanation for occurrence differs in the case of alpha-memes. Therefore we keep a record of the number of the newly revealed alpha-memes during the exploration phase: we usually count them twice a week. These numbers must follow a negative exponential distribution, at least within a statistical error-range. This is how it has been in every case of research so far. We stop collecting data when the curve gets into the phase that converges to zero.

$$P = e^{-b \cdot (x/MD)}$$

1.   figure Curve of collecting data

3.   Key findings of my dissertation

1.   The Memetic approach is efficient in corporate communications research. By applying memetic research methods we can obtain answers that company leaders cannot learn by subscribing to and following other methods. The memetic approach reveals the evolution of social communication about the given brand. Company leaders can gain valuable insights about their company and their brand's culture from their customers' points of view. Memetic research explores the cognitive structure of this culture.

2.   There is a so-called 'meme-isolation wall' between the inner and the outer culture. Leaders live in an environment permeated with the beliefs and thoughts that circulate within their company, which thereby creates its own communication environment. Additionally, they filter and receive the mass media's relevant pieces of information about their company through this inner culture. One major output of our work is a revelation that in most companies there is a cultural wall between the inner and the outer culture: there is a major difference between the structure and content of customers' alphamemes and inner company alphamemes collected in a research.

3.   With the help of the memetic model we can build a communications model that explores the structure (emergence) of a company's business communication. A personally-tailored communications model can be built by incorporating the very language and expressions of the brand's customers. Certain qualitative research methods can be used to ensure unequivocally similar outputs for very similar research goals. However, these traditional methods do not present a dynamic communications model that provides business communicators with an action plan based on the structure of the alpha-memes.

This model helpfully demonstrates how it is possible to efficiently change the outer culture of a company while adhering to the goals of its leaders as well as how its possible to change a company's alpha-memes of social communication – i.e. a company's memetic fauna.

4.   Memetic research reveals and charts the possible strategic steps of business communication. Meme-maps provide an outstanding basis for creating communication briefs that serve as starting points for communications- and creative agencies. Meme-maps clearly define the area where messages have the biggest potential and efficiency. With the help of this method an evolutionary map of the outer culture emerges as well as the intervention points, with the help of which this culture can create *change* and *be changed.*

A memetic research project has the distinct ability to support the articulation of communication- and brand building priorities, as well as aid in more targeted company communication and to fine tuning the exact messages. It has great economic significance as well: when planning the communications budget, generally there is a focus on channels and types of scores such as GRP (Gross Rating Point). Planning can be refined and steered towards being increasingly sophisticated with the help of memetic results, thereby making its efficiency more measurable. Memetic dimensions show where and what kind of spreading is to be expected, and most importantly: where communication efforts can lead to severe losses.

Example: the memetic analysis of an international software company's Hungarian branch

The Hungarian branch of a global software company wanted to get answers to the following questions as a result of our research in 2005:

What do the leaders of Hungarian small- and medium-size enterprises (SME-s) consider to be the most important elements of corporate governance and to what extent does the product support it?

What are those real or imaginary cons that present serious obstacles to the acceptance of the software-system? How does the meme of the

company producing the software-system live in Hungarian SME-leaders' minds?

We conducted in-depth interviews with Hungarian SME-leaders, using the snowball-method to get from one leader to another, and we organized memetic focus groups.

During the ten weeks of meme-collecting the number of newly-explored memes gradually reduced according to a negative exponential distribution curve, and by the ninth week we managed to collect the majority of the memes living in the SME-leaders' minds. 1320 alpha-memes served as the basis of our memetic analysis.

As a result of memetic factor analysis, we found three dimensions that explained 57,1% of the variance of alpha-memes. It was close to the "official" 60% and was the result of solely three dimensions, therefore we were correct in assuming that these three dimensions – all of which proved to be well-defined – described very punctually the memes of the software-company living in Hungarian SME-leaders' minds.

The memetic structure we explored is presented in the table below. We named the dimensions afterwards when factor-scores were already available.

Name of dimension	*One end*	*Other end*	*Variance explained*
Control	Uncontrollable processes	Control over the situation	24,0%
Efficiency	Chaos	Smooth operation	17,6%
Safety	Insecurity	Reliable data	15,5%

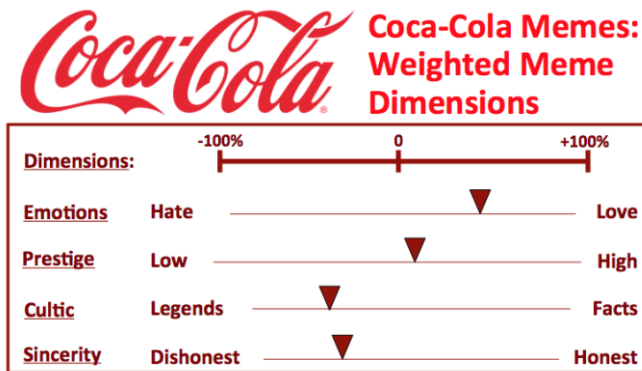**2. table** The memetic dimensions of the software system

The software company advertised the product as a "Solution" – falling within the realm of the generally accepted IT-slang of the time. However, traditional Hungarian SME-leaders had a completely different reaction to this word than their German or British counterparts did, who upon hearing the term "Solution/Lösung" thought: "Let's see what they can solve for me!" In contrast, the first, instinctive reaction of Hungarian SME-leaders was: "Solution? Excuse me, I do not need a solution, my company functions very well." As a result of our memetic research, the Hungarian branch stopped using this expression and started to describe the product as "System" or "Strategic tool". It proved to be an extremely successful and necessary change.

5.   This memetic communications model reveals what exactly structures a company's communication. The memetic dimensions disclosed by the research acutely focus the leadership's

attention. This structure does not only reveal what a company's business communication environment is like; it also shows why it is the way it is and what structures it. Messages are likely to spread at these points and along the channels connecting these points, as intervention points attract alpha-memes.

Example: The Coca Cola Company

In order to let the American business communication community know about memetic approach, I chose a well-known brand and did its memetic analysis. The table below summarizes the most important findings:

2.   **figure** The Coca-Cola Company analysis

I had a chance to show the analysis to the Cultural Director of The Coca Cola Company, who found the idea that Coca Cola can be the next Phillip Morris, impressive. I.e. the company can easily have the

fate of tobacco companies and become an outcast in the eyes of the general public. My argument was that emotional dimensions can be influenced and transformed by cognitive dimensions and thus the love-company can easily become a hate-company. Customers might raise serious issues like: "Why did you make our children obese and diabetic?!"

The Cultural Director of Coca Cola shared the presentation with his colleagues and ordered a comprehensive study from their contracted research companies. The cultural director later revealed that their research also produced the same output, i.e. the position of their brand is extremely vulnerable as a result of the changes in the cultural scene.

Closure

As stated before, in my dissertation I set a goal of fine-tuning meme-theory. My introduction of the concepts of alpha-memes and memetic dimensions served this purpose. My second goal was to apply meme-theory in business communication. When working on practical issues, the concept of memetic fauna proved to be useful and we managed to successfully validate our methods of memetic data-gathering. With the third goal of creating a meme-theory model for corporate communication, we optimistically got closer to the unified approach of companies' inner and outer communication.

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