



The Engagement Project: Finding the Meaning in Memes

THE **RUNDOWN**

Gen C is renowned for creating, curating and connecting across the web, but what motivates the actions of this powerful group? And how can brands engage authentically with them? As part of our Engagement Project series, we partnered with cultural anthropologists, psychologists and digital creators to explore the meaning behind these behaviors.

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Introduction

“This is what the internet is all about, people. A killer song, a stupid meme, a nostalgic throwback to 2001 and, most importantly, bites of dumb hilarity that come in 30-second bursts.”

– *Huffington Post on the Harlem Shake, Feb 2013*

Pop quiz: What do cat GIFs, a pic of last night’s dinner, and the Harlem Shake have in common? They’re funny. They’re insanely popular. And they’re kind of a waste of time.

But is that it? The stats tell us that we’re spending more and more time on the web engaging with visual content. We uploaded over half a million videos related to the ‘Harlem Shake’ to YouTube in the past few months, and those videos were watched over a billion times¹. Google searches for Cat GIFs hit an all-time high in May 2013². And we took 380 billion photos last year³ – that’s roughly 10% of all the photos ever taken, ever.

But why would we be doing so much, if it really meant so little to us? Could it be that all this visual playing with GIFs, pictures and videos is a sign of something deeper than mindless fun?

To understand, we have to start with the people shaping what matters in

content today: Gen C. These are the people who grew up on the web -- or behave as though they did – who thrive on creation, curation, connection and community. The behaviors of Gen C have less to do with the year they were born and more to do with their attitude and mindset. For a deeper look at Gen C, click [here](#) ↗.

We see all these Gen C behaviors – creating, curating, connecting – happening everyday. Understanding *what* they are doing is one thing. But understanding why they are doing it is even better to figure out how best to engage them.

We partnered with cultural anthropologists, psychologists & digital creators to explore the meaning behind these Gen C behaviors. The research showed our relationship with this new “visual” web is dynamic and deep. Moreover, those seemingly *mindless* viral pictures, videos and memes don’t just distract us from more serious things; they reconnect us to an essential part of ourselves.

Methodology

Our primary source: an anthropological study conducted among digital natives in a few key markets across the country, focusing on people who regularly consume, create or share imagery in the digital space. Specifically we sought to:

- 1. Understand** the emotional appeal and key drivers behind the discovery, viewing, sharing and creation of online video, photography and visual content.
- 2. Explore** the differences between experiencing imagery and video online and off.
- 3. Delve** into the role of imagery and video as a means of communicating and influencing people, especially in comparison to verbal communication.

To supplement this research we interviewed creative and digital experts and social scientists; we dug into secondary research; and we audited best-in-class brand examples.

A comprehensive bibliography of sources used in the anthropological and art criticism analysis is in the appendix.

1 Google Internal Data
2 Google Trends, May 2013
3 <http://blog.1000memories.com/94-number-of-photos-ever-taken-digital-and-analog-in-shoebox>

Context: The New Sensorium

Since the dawn of time we've been captivated by images. But the web has turbocharged our ability to view, share and create more imagery than ever before, to the extent that visual imagery has become the dominant form of communication in the 21st century. No wonder smartphones and tablets sans keyboards are increasingly popular – they prioritize imagery above all else.

This bias towards imagery is creating a new sensorium – how we perceive and sense the environment around us. It has not only influenced how we engage in the digital space, but outside of it too.

The digital space gives us the tools to be visual thinkers and communicators like never before, but technology isn't the main driver here. We seek to communicate via visual language because it provides such great meaning for us. We have become image thinkers and visual poets.

Fast...

On one level, visual language expedites communication in our increasingly mobile and agile lifestyle. We've all heard the phrase, 'a picture is worth

a thousand words,' and it's never been more important than it is today. Imagery is concise, especially iconic imagery, allowing us all to relate to it and read it in a way that's commonly understood.

...and slow

But on another level, imagery can slow us down. Imagery invites us to go on a journey and explore further. **Images tell layers of the story. They immerse us.** They capture us, fascinate us and invite us to lose ourselves in them.

Images also feel like events and happenings recreated in real time. Given all the elements of a visual experience, some of which only our subconscious may hone in on, these images almost feel ALIVE. For example, a vacation shot can reflect not only the emotion of the people in the picture but the smell of sea air and the feel of the breeze in the blowing leaves.

How are we creating meaning in this new context? And what can brands learn from it to engage more deeply? The following sections explore a few themes we found in our research.

In numbers...

We took

380 billion

photos last year – that's about 10% of all the photos EVER taken.

There are

4 billion

views a day on YouTube – up over 25% since the beginning of January 2012.

500 years'

worth of YouTube videos are watched on Facebook every day.

(Sources: <http://blog.1000memories.com/94-number-of-photos-ever-taken-digital-and-analog-in-shoebox>, Google internal data)



Insight 1: Fascination with the Familiar

“Who knew there was such a thing as goose barnacle gathering? That’s fascinating... it was cool to see something new about a subject that I already thought I knew.”

– Travis, Gen C, Age 27

The visual web is full of incredible and beautiful things. With just a search or a click, we can pull up amazing works of art and relics from the past. So why does a picture of breakfast posted this morning get 37 likes? In other words, why are we curating so much everyday, mundane stuff?

The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.'

– Marcel Proust

Marcel Proust knew. The great French novelist once wrote that the “voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes

Tapping Into The Fascination With the Familiar



MontBlanc World Second ↗

Montblanc wondered whether they could freeze the whole world for a second and experience what people around the globe were doing at one very ‘common’ moment. They created a mobile photo app that enables participants around the world to shoot a photo at exactly the same instant.

The results: Participation from 80 countries, 66% increase in social media followers



Did you know?

Search for 'a second a day' on YouTube and you'll get **millions of results**, thanks to people all over the world sharing a daily snapshot of their own familiar.

(Source: Google/YouTube data)



BMW – Road Home ↗

BMW wanted to celebrate the holiday season in a way that was meaningful and authentic to their brand. More than 50 employees at the agency KBS+P were asked to record their journeys on smartphones and personal cameras as they traveled home for Thanksgiving. Airports, taxis, security lines and yes, cars. The end result was a video narrative celebrating the "road home."

The results: 1 million+ YouTube views



vitaminwater – #makeboringbrilliant ↗

Vitaminwater noticed that over five million tweets a week had something to do with people being bored, so they made it their mission to make boring brilliant. Their aim? To throw some excitement into those mundane moments of everyday life. A series of television commercials and YouTube videos encourage consumers to use the hashtag #makeboringbrilliant to let them know what they can make more exciting.

The results: 9.6 million YouTube channel views

but in having new eyes." In other words, humans aren't necessarily attracted to the allure of the new, as much as we like to see things we're already familiar with in a new way.

Go back a few hundred years to the precursors of museums, called the Wunderkammern or, in English, cabinet of wonders, and you'll see the same thing. These were spaces haphazardly stuffed full of everyday foreign artifacts from the New World – some mundane, some beautiful and some bizarre.

We used to put the pictures we took in boxes and frames, on our walls or in albums. Frozen in time and place, they became our memories. Now, we capture every waking moment, but this doesn't make us narcissists. The visual web isn't about us; it's about the stuff that surrounds us – like **brushing our teeth** ↗ or **Fred swimming** ↗.

Even if they appear 'everyday', most of our images – to use anthropological terminology – reflect the 'commonplaces' of our lives: our homes, backyards, parks, neighborhood spots. While these spots

are not unusual, they have significance to the many people familiar with them. These images communicate values, stories and memories shared by a community.

Most significantly, many of these pictures are shot in a new way – presented, photographed or angled in such a way that offers a new perspective.

This new perspective helps us see our everyday world anew. This fascination with the familiar helps us answer that age old question: Is this really all there is?

Seeing the world anew reminds us how fascinating it truly is. While we may all question the banality of our daily lives, such visual reminders of the wonder and beauty, even hilarity, elevates and enlivens us.

Brand Thought Starter Help us rediscover the beauty of a forgotten familiar.

Find something familiar – in your product, brand or from people's lives – and help us see it in a fascinating new light.



Insight 2: Synaptic Play

“I think that’s the genius of it - to be able to go anywhere or pull up anything. Linear meets nonlinear is kind of the way that I envision it.”

- Becky, Gen C, Age 32

Let's say you're a fan of Les Miz. But you also think the whole screaming goats thing is hilarious. Even though they seem very different, to you they're connected - if only by the passion you share for them. So you take a leap of imagination and make your own [remix on YouTube](#) ↗.

To understand what's going on here, we have to start from the beginning.

Neuroscientists explain that synapses occur inside the brain when we've made a connection among various different things. The more random the components connected, the more synapses occur. Synapses are the basis of creativity. In other words, synapses firing = creative joy.

As kids, our synaptic creativity is off the charts. Everything is new. Everything

Tapping Into Synaptic Play



Three - Pony Mixer ↗

Three, a UK-based mobile provider, launched 'The Pony' campaign (developed by Wieden + Kennedy London). They extend on their TV commercial by releasing the Pony Mixer, which allows users to create their own customized Pony Mix.

The results: A week after launch, it passed 10 million video views

is unlike. We aren't constrained by the rules about what "goes together." All the the rules of logic, linearity and proper behavior aren't fully baked, freeing children to develop outrageous and brilliant new notions all the time. Why else was putting the Barbie in the toy car wash more fun than putting the car in the car wash?

The visual web frees us to return to this child-like state where we can adventure through a whole array of different, seemingly unrelated, images and clips – be they old, new, from a world away or own backyard – sparking our all important synapses and helping us come up with new combinations and ideas so easily.

The YouTube imitations we love to watch and share are wonderful examples of this phenomenon.

More than 500K different videos related to the Harlem Shake were uploaded during the height of the craze. Sure, the Harlem Shake is fun and easy to mimic, but no one is creating an exact replica of it. They are creating their own version, juxtaposing their world with the crazy fun of Harlem Shake to create something new.

And even if we're just watching, we're celebrating and appreciating the amazing creativity that we can unleash

in the digital space. We are effectively saying to these creators: "I like the way you synapse." And this spurs our own sense of creativity.

As Joe Sabia, founder of [CDZA](#), a band that develops video musical mash-ups, said:

"(When such creations are shared), you feel the passion of the creator, which in turn sparks your own creativity."

The more we play in the visual web, the more we are returning to this fertile, creative space where synaptic play reigns and where mixing, matching and mimicking are in full form.

Uninhibited by linearity and stimulated by all the access to imagery, synaptic play takes hold and we're free to indulge in a purer kind of creativity. Or, as we call it, the [Nyan Cat Dubstep Remix](#).

**Brand Thought Starter
Find ways to spark synaptic play and participation.**

Search for your brand online. Chances are your fans are already mixing and mashing your brand with something seemingly unrelated. Build on it, fuel it and help us make more with it.



Activision – Call of Duty

Knowing their fans have huge appetites for more and more content, Activision created an interactive trailer on the Call of Duty YouTube brand channel. It layered in "extras," surprising viewers with different perspectives and tones that they might not expect to find on the first watch, creating an environment where exploration was rewarded.

The results: 350M YouTube Channel Views



Tipp-Ex – Tippexperience 2

Tipp-Ex, the European leader in correction products, worked with Buzzman to launch an interactive campaign on YouTube. They wanted to give a complete sensation of freedom with more than 45 scenes that could be unlocked by rewriting the title of the video. They made it possible for the user to interact not only with the video, but also with the entire YouTube page.

The results: More than 250,000 shares on Facebook, and up to one tweet per second on the campaign during the first 24 hours



Insight 3: Energy Exchange

“You get even more enjoyment when you know other people are enjoying it.”

– Dan, Gen C, Age 23

The only thing better than going on this journey of discovery is sharing it with others via the images we create. But why is that? Is it merely self-promotion? Or the need to demonstrate our presence? “Look, I’m here, I’m around, I’ve just sent this along.” That fits for some people, but for most of us it goes deeper than that. Sharing imagery has become a form of gifting.

When we see or create an image that enlivens us, we send it to others to give them a bit of energy and effervescence. Every gift holds the spirit of the gifter.

Also, every image reminds us and others that we’re alive, happy and full of energy (even if we may not always feel that way). And when we ‘like’ or comment on a picture or video sent to us, we’re sending

Tapping Into Energy Exchange



Pepsi Max – Test Drive ↗

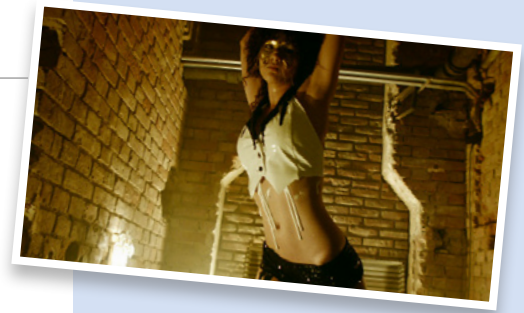
March 2013 may well be remembered as the month that Pepsi took YouTube by storm, thanks to a pro race car driver, a clever disguise and an unsuspecting car salesman. Pepsi’s “Test Drive” ad, where a disguised Jeff Gordon takes an unsuspecting car salesman on the test drive of his life.

The results: The video topped YouTube’s Ads Leaderboard in March 2013, racking up more than 35 million views in less than six weeks.



Did you know?
For every 'dislike' on YouTube,
we get **10 'likes'** – people like to
tell other people about the stuff
they love.

(Source: Google/YouTube data)



Perrier – Le Club ↗

Each visit to Perrier's YouTube Channel made the view counter rise. As this temperature rose, the video got hotter. The brand created a video that actually encouraged repeat viewing because the content was not static. There was a reason to keep coming back, and sharing the video – because the experience got progressively more intense.

The results: Over 11 million views on YouTube in one month

a gift of sorts back to the sender. We're affirming them.

But, most profoundly, this 'gift' of sharing contributes to an energy exchange that amplifies our own pleasure – and is something we're hardwired to do.

A psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott realized that our first emotional action as babies is to respond to a mother's smile with one of our own. Winnicott called it the '**social smile** ↗,' and it teaches us that our own joy increases when we offer it to others because it forges a bond between us. In fact, there is ample evidence to show that when babies first start smiling, the mother-baby bond skyrockets. This notion of happiness exchange extends to our larger social network as well.

In the language of the visual web, when we share a video or an image it means we're not just sharing

the object, we're sharing in the emotional response it creates. And that makes us that much happier because it reinforces our social bonds.

There are billions of these energy exchanges happening every day. Whether we're posting, commenting, liking, repinning or +1ing, our new visual culture is one in which we're constantly offering each other little gifts, little moments of pleasure that remind us we're connected to one another on the most fundamental level.

Brand Thought Starter Gift happiness we can share *in*.

Ditch the pitch. Instead, start an energy exchange. Create content that reminds us of our own capacity for excitement, happiness and vivacity so we want to share in it with others.



Sauza Tequila – Make it with a Fireman ↗

Tequila is well-known for its distinctive reputation, but not for its feminine side. The core of this all-digital campaign was an online video, featuring our sexy fireman prepping the Sauza-rita to capture the attention of the 50% of tequila drinkers other brands ignore: women who rely on it for making margaritas.

The results: Over 9.95 million YouTube video views – delivered nearly 200 million impressions



Conclusion

Is the visual web just a dumping ground for our ridiculous GIFs, self-indulgent pics and hilarious videos? No way. In the end, it matters – every meme, GIF and seemingly silly video. Nowhere else can we rediscover the fascination of our everyday world, spark synapses that unlock our creative potential, and amplify the joy we feel in a global exchange of energy. And through it all, we connect more deeply with each other – and ourselves.

For brands, it's a reminder that digital isn't just about asking someone to visit your social platforms; it's about creating experiences that add value to the community your brand is a part of. While posting the glossy photos from the photo shoot or 30 spots online may be part of your approach, it shouldn't be your entire approach. By recognizing the deeper meaning we all make on the web, brands can create the kind of resonate content that matters in culture today.

Brand Thought Starters

Help us rediscover the beauty of a forgotten familiar.

Find something familiar – in your product, brand or from people's lives – and help us see it in a fascinating new light.

Find ways to spark synaptic play and participation.

Search for your brand online. Chances are your fans are already mixing and mashing your brand with something seemingly unrelated. Build on it, fuel it and help us make more with it.

Gift happiness we can share *in*.

Ditch the pitch. Instead, start an energy exchange. Create content that reminds us of our own capacity for excitement, happiness and vivacity so we want to share in it with others.

Appendix

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