When we hear the word ‘meme’, everyone has a different reaction and interpretation. Older people will likely associate a meme with the classic, template style of things like ‘grumpy cat’ or ‘bad luck brian’, and many others will simply be unfamiliar with the concept of what a meme is. Younger people will likely associate a meme with any of a wide variety of things - such as twitter gifs, catchy sayings from viral videos, or funny photoshopped images. In each case, it’s clear that the idea of a ‘meme’ is one that is certainly not set in stone, and is always evolving as technology continues to evolve. This audio essay will take you through how the idea of a meme first originated and what made these first popular memes successful, the connection between the rise of the internet and the rise of memes, and what makes a meme successful/viral.

The term *meme* was first coined by author Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. He defined a meme as something that “conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation,” (Dawkins 192). Dawkins’ idea of a meme at the time was centered around passing along culture in the form of things like song melodies or art styles. Memes are we now understand them did not begin to form until the mid-1990s, when the internet and online message boards were becoming increasingly popular. This was when some of the most iconic and popular memes of all time were created, including “LOLcats”, template memes like “bad luck Brian” and “overly obsessed girlfriend,”, and “rickrolling”. These memes were so successful because they were easy to understand and relatable, and usually succeeded in making people who had never seen them before laugh.

Memes, particular our current understanding of memes, could not exist without the development of the internet. Memes are essentially just an inside joke shared among a large group of people, and the internet is a perfect facilitator to bring large groups of people together. Knowing the context of a meme can help people feel like they belong within a social group, even a social group as large as the internet.

When we think of a viral meme, it’s almost always hard to pinpoint what exactly made this meme so incredibly popular. Often, the circumstances that cause a meme to ‘go viral’, are more random that intended - i.e., the person responsible for the meme’s creation did not necessarily intend for the meme to become so popular. In the ‘ecosystem’ of memes across the internet, we have seen that memes that maintain their relevance while other previously popular memes decline will be more likely to be cemented as a ‘successful meme’ (Quartz article). We have also that in general, there is almost no way to confidently predict whether a given meme will go viral or not. Several things that can help increase a memes odds of going viral include being relatable to a large amount of people, and being shared by a person with a large amount of influence, especially within internet circles.