At dinner with my family the other day, my mother asked, what is a meme ?. I had to think for quite a while before I told her, “It’s like an inside joke, except everyone familiar with social media is in on it”. While my mother was satisfied with this answer, I was not. What is a meme, and why can I think of about 100 popular memes off the top of my head, but not think of a simple definition of what makes them memes?

After some simple googling, I found this definition “an element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation”. But this completely disregards the importance of insider knowledge when it comes to understanding memes.

Memes can come in many shapes and sizes, whether it be a photoshopped picture of a dog driving a car with a clever punch line, or as is very common on Twitter, replications and variations of familiar dialogue formats. To a first time user of Twitter, a picture that has become a meme may not be recognizable or even symbolic of anything. It requires inside knowledge of how this particular picture has been captioned, spread, and interpreted among those who frequent social media platforms.

And, when it comes to memes, insider knowledge is not fluid among social media platforms. Having insider knowledge about Twitter memes does not necessarily mean you will understand a meme from say Reddit, where the jokes are different and the people who frequent the site might be part of a whole new demographic.

A successful meme, then, requires some kind of insider knowledge, but is also highly dependent on how easily it can be related to by a group. A meme that can’t resonate with thousands of people wont become a viral sensation. The memes that are retweeted, upvoted on reddit, shared on facebook, or reposted on instagram are the ones that are about basic everyday life, and therefore something that we can all understand.

Meme culture is something that not everyone can be a part of. It definitely trends toward the younger generations, who follow closely along the fads and current events discussed on social media. Without insider knowledge, the joke is lost.