



They have become an important part of how we use social media.

But what really happens to the people who appear in memes?

Emily Gulla tracks them down and finds out

ONCE A MEME...

1 Raising her hand up to her forehead, Silvia begins to cry. Her boyfriend looks on, his camera ready. The shutter clicks. Silvia keeps crying, 5 tears running down her cheeks. The camera continues to flash.

Nine years on and Silvia, an actress and model, has what many of her peers dream of. Her face is 10 known across the world. A Google search of her brings up around 60 million results. If you saw her on the street, you'd probably recognise her. If you saw her crying, 15 you definitely would. Because this moment – that photo of her crying in the summer of 2009 – has cemented her place in modern history. The only thing is... Silvia is 20 one of the most famous memes. And, until now, you probably won't have known her name.

Memes, once just a joke to be shared between lazy co-workers, 25 have turned into something you can get very rich from. You don't need

any particular talent – just a little humour or a unique look. But can it really be that simple? I decided to 30 track down the people behind the world's most famous memes to find out.

MEME MACHINES

'Charlie bit me.' When Shelley 35 Davies-Carr saw a video of her then three-year-old son, Harry, being bitten by his baby brother, Charlie, she knew it was funny. Funny enough to send across to her 40 children's godfather in Colorado. But the file was too big to email, so in May 2007, her husband, Howard, uploaded the video to YouTube. A few months later, he logged back 45 in to delete the clip to find it had thousands of views. By February 2008, it had reached 2 million views.

Today, in the 13 years since 50 it was uploaded, that clip has had over 879 million views. Harry

and Charlie have won Guinness World Records two years in a row. They've appeared on *Good 55 Morning America* and in an advert for Ragu pasta sauce. And, crucially, as a 'partner' of YouTube they make money every time someone watches an advert before the 60 clip. How much exactly? When we chat over the phone from her Buckinghamshire home, Shelley doesn't tell me. What she will say is that it's enough for the pair to 65 have had two more children than originally planned... and send all four to private school. 'It's a steady stream of income,' she says, adding that the family live a 'relatively 70 normal life'.

Charlie is now 13 and Harry's 16. They're both content with their fame, and their parents turn down any opportunities that could 75 negatively influence the boys' lives.

FAME WITHOUT FORTUNE

Others, however, aren't as lucky. Silvia was at her parents' home in Italy when she learned that she'd 80 gone viral. It was 2010, a year after the photo of her crying was taken. Her boyfriend at the time was a photographer, and they had come to an agreement: he would 85 take Silvia's photos, she could use them in her portfolio, and he could upload them to stock image websites. It worked for both of them. What she couldn't have 90 predicted was that one of the photos would become what is now known as the First World Problems meme.



Silvia – who is beautiful even 95 when crying – looks like the sort of person who wouldn't have any issues. Not real ones anyway. So strangers began coming up with some for her – putting everything 100 from 'one pillow is too low, two pillows is too high' to 'drinks soda... it lost its fizz' in text over her face. The photograph began to represent the moany entitlement of 105 the privileged.

'The meme makes me uncomfortable,' she tells me, calling from Italy before she heads home to Los Angeles. 'People shouldn't 110 be able to put whatever sentence they want on my picture. My main frustration was that I didn't have any control over it – there was nothing I could do to stop it.' But 115 surely, it made her some money, I ask? Not a single cent, she tells me. Silvia actually has no legal rights over it. If Silvia has learned anything, it's that being infamous 120 for one image doesn't necessarily correlate to real fame or fortune.

UNWANTED ATTENTION

In university tutorials, Lucia Gorman can often sense eyes on her. She'll 125 hear the rumble of whispers or, every now and then, the click of a phone camera. She's used to this, and to coming home from her part-time job to 10,000 more 130 follow requests on Instagram. Lucia is famous worldwide... for pulling a face in a club.

A year ago, at a Milk event in Edinburgh's Bourbon nightclub, 135 she was bored on a night out

and frowned as her school friend Patrick yelled in her ear. The moment was captured by the club's photographer, unbeknown to Lucia.

140 'I think I just wanted to go home,' she says. Glance at the photo out of context, though, and it looks like a pushy guy bothering an unimpressed girl. It was uploaded 145 onto the club's Facebook page. Three days later, a friend sent Lucia a tweet he'd seen, where the author had placed a vulgar chat-up line on the photo.

150 Lucia says she initially found the tweet funny, but as it rapidly gained retweets throughout the day, she began to feel overwhelmed. A year later, that first tweet sits at 16,000 155 likes, but there are countless others. A Google image search of 'Milk Edinburgh meme' throws up around 1.6 million results – all of her face. It's been a year now, and as soon as 160 the attention dies down, it picks up again, with other websites posting the image.

IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

You might think that being made 165 fun of online isn't uncommon in 2020. But does that make it OK? Perhaps the flip side of uploading image after image is that we have a

misplaced sense of ownership – we 170 have divorced ourselves from the need to recognise that the person in the photo, or video or TV show, is a real human being too.

While some of the people I 175 spoke to felt angry or frustrated, all of them have now accepted that the only thing they can do is laugh. Lucia takes comfort in the thought that the photo 'could be worse'. 180 She knows, or hopes, that she won't be a meme forever. 'The Internet moves on. It happens so fast, and then it'll be over,' she says. But if Silvia's and Shelley's experiences 185 are anything to go by, the same cycle of trolling or attention could start again.

We've all heard the warnings: be careful about what you post online 190 and don't let future employers see your drunken photos. Many of us will have sat through school meetings – intended to terrify – about how naked photos can end 195 up plastered across the Internet. But while you can be careful of what you post online, you can't control the wandering cameras of other people. Whether it's solicited or 200 otherwise, meme culture has taught us that, like it or not, we're all being watched. <<



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