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# Hanging out at the memeplex

**Understanding how memes evolve and spread amongst teenagers is key to the success of youth brands.**

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Puberty is a key period in the development of a young persons' personality. Teens interact with their peers and caregivers to decide on their values and identity and choose brands and products that represent those aspects of their identity that they are constructing and want to accentuate. Products have a symbolic value in externalising their thinking and values. In line with Dawkins' description of memes, our research identified three types of transmitters among teenagers:

- Language is the primary memetic infection. Memes can include words, sayings, phrases, gestures and pronunciations.
- Fashions and skills include clothes, haircuts, make-up, piercings and colours kids wear to express they belong to a group. Skill memes include behaviour and hobbies such as skating or playing in a band.
- Beliefs are attitudes and convictions which are adopted by members of a group such as justice, animal rights, independence and personal status.

Youngsters create their identity by collecting and assembling a personal set of memes, which results in 'memeplexes'. They adopt memes from lifestyle groups they want to associate with and if there is a big overlap between their memeplex and that of a certain lifestyle group, they will be perceived as members of this subculture.

Teen memes are valuable for brands. Brands can act as references, personalities or icons. If your brand succeeds in becoming a meme(plex), it can profit

from such natural communication. Brands can also surf on popular memes to communicate more effectively; marketers can adopt common teen-memes in advertisements or product offerings.

## EXPLORING TEEN MEMES

We studied identity construction and subcultures among Belgian and Dutch youngsters using memetics and mass ethnography, which employs innovative methods that combine principles from visual ethnography, nethnography and qualitative research with ethnographical elements.

- User-generated visual ethnography is based on using pictures to observe an individual's environment. Research participants are asked to photograph and comment on aspects of their life. They are given tasks to help us collect enough material to discover important memes. As clothes are an important carrier through which kids express their identity, they were asked to take pictures of what they wear or do not wear on different occasions. Participants communicated via research blogs where they could upload their pictures and comment on their photos through visual tags (positive, negative, neutral) to help us understand the different memes that were important to them.
- Nethnography. Kids spend an increasing part of their lives online, participating in social networks, and keeping close track of their life on weblogs, Twitter and Facebook. We used nethnography to help us understand their memes and identity. Participants became our 'friends' in their different social networks and we observed nicknames, profiles, pictures, clan memberships and online conversations to detect the memes they used.

The findings were further validated via online focus groups and traditional quantitative surveys.

## OVERLAPPING SUBCULTURES

Our research revealed 11 subcultures and memes: fashion boys/girls, players/breezersluts, conservative yet party-oriented gabbers, nerds, gothics, emos, hippies, punks, altos, skaters and rappers.