

## **Honors Thesis Proposal**

### **Working Title:**

JIOJI—Comparing Expressions of Humor Used in Memes by Russian and English Speakers

### **Project Purpose:**

The purpose of this project would be to compare and analyze the trends in the types of humor used by Russian and English speakers in the creation and perpetuation of internet memes. It could discuss the connections and similarities that I find, or talk about the dissonance that different backgrounds create, leading to different uses of humor. The direction of the paper would depend on the results of my analyzing different memes from both Russians and Americans. I expect that there are some similarities that I will be able to find, though there are almost certainly also differences to discuss, considering the vastly different histories both groups of people have had with the Internet, and freedom of speech in general. Because of the language barrier for most people, the comparison between these two groups hasn't been studied much, it would contribute to our understanding in the field of communications of the effect of the Internet on different cultures of people, with different backgrounds. This study would help us to better understand the effects of globalization and the internet on what different cultural groups of people find funny.

### **Project Importance:**

As a student double majoring in both Russian and advertising, I've always been interested in how the trends in the field of communications from my advertising classes present themselves outside of the United States, especially among Russian speakers, but there is limited scholarship on the subject. Most current scholarship focuses on meme culture in America, and the understanding of these meme movements through different lenses. There are some articles published which I have accessed through the library databases which focus on analyzing meme use in other countries, but most do not compare American and Russian humor specifically. There are also many works within Russian academia which, like the English articles, focus primarily on memes in their own language. The comparison between the two hasn't been fully explored at this point, however. As the internet shortens the distances between cultures and people, understanding the impacts of this globalization on all groups is an important phenomenon in need of further study, especially beyond the boundaries of language barriers, and very different historic backgrounds.

### **Project Overview:**

In this project, I would focus on comparing how Russian and English speakers communicate through humor found in memes, knowing that both countries have millions of internet users who use memes. The percent of content on the Internet in the Russian language is second only after English (though it is about the same as German), and it is often said that the Russian Internet exists in a separate space from English, with the language barrier preventing many from crossing between the two. Last winter, I took a class dedicated to critically analyzing popular culture and media where I had the opportunity to write a paper in which my partner and I analyzed the meme texts of the Tide Pod movement and the different types of humor that were expressed in that movement. We did this by applying different professional analytical perspectives of understanding media texts. A postmodernist approach to the texts showed how pastiche and

subversion to authority were key in the movement. I would extend that analysis from this one meme movement to one or two others, to demonstrate which trends of humor are most prevalent among English speakers. I would also examine texts originating from Russian-speaking groups, through this postmodernist lens. I would take Russian memes, and see if I can apply the same patterns, and recognize similar trends as I saw in the memes produced by native-English speakers. I would use this to see if the same tendencies that English-speaking internet natives have towards humor that is pessimistic, subversive to authority, and absurd, are found in Russian meme culture.

### **Qualifications of Thesis Committee:**

*Faculty Advisor: Dr. Scott Church*

Dr. Church received his Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has extensive experience with critical analysis of popular culture texts, and his research primarily uses critical theory, aesthetics, and media ecology as analytic lenses for social media and mediated popular texts. His recent research has been published in *The Information Society*, *The Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies* and the book *Ancient Rhetorics + Digital Networks*. Dr. Church taught the class Popular Culture and Media that I mentioned in my project overview and mentored me and my partner as we wrote a paper analyzing the types of humor present in the Tide Pod movement.

*Faculty Reader: Dr. Michael Ray Kelly*

Dr. Kelly is an associate professor of Russian in the College of Humanities. The majority of the courses he teaches focus on the analysis of classic Russian literature in both the English and Russian languages, including the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and many others. I have taken a course taught in Russian and a course taught in English from him and have appreciated his direction in my analysis of translated and untranslated Russian texts in papers written for both classes.

*Honors Coordinator: Dr. Tom Robinson*

Dr. Robinson is Associate Director for Graduate Studies in the School of Communications. He holds a Ph.D. in mass communication from the University of Southern Mississippi, an M.A. in communication from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a B.S. in marketing from Northern Arizona University. His research includes advertising and the Internet, effects theories in advertising, and sports advertising. His research has been published in *Educational Gerontology*, the *Journal of Advertising Education* and *Communication Education*.

### **Project Timeline:**

Research: October 1st to December 31st

Identifying patterns and trends from research: October 1st to December 31st

Writing analysis: December 1st to January 31st

Editing with faculty advisor: January 1st to February 28th

Thesis defense information form: due before February 22nd

Honors thesis submission form: March 8th

Thesis final: March 15th

Thesis publication (honors): March 15th

Submission for publication: NCA in late March, WSCA in early fall

**Funding:**

It would be very helpful in this project to have \$80 to buy the books (about \$20 each) I will need for my research. These books are not for the finding and analyzing of the memes themselves, but will help me understand how to analyze them within the context of Internet culture in both countries, especially Russia, as I am not as familiar with the impacts the Soviet Union historically on the Internet culture of this country today. These books are not available at the Heber C. Kimball Library, within the Utah library system, or online electronically without payment of some sort. These books include, but are not limited to:

- *How Not to Network a Nation: The Uneasy History of the Soviet Internet* by Benjamin Peters
- *Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries* by Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan
- *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* by Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner

**Culminating Experience:**

Working with Dr. Church on the paper about the Tide Pod movement last winter semester opened my eyes to the number of communications publications that focus on analysis of popular culture. Depending on when during the next two semesters my thesis is completed, two conventions I could submit my thesis to are the National Communication Association convention, or the Western States Communication Association convention. Feedback that we received as a result of submitting our paper to the NCA last winter make me confident that a thesis exploring humor of Russian and English speakers would be well received by these associations.