

"Er, less dribble this time yeah, Charlie?"

# Life after being a meme

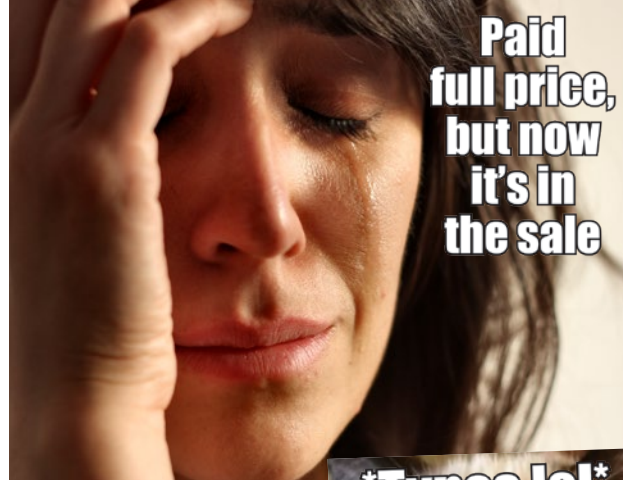
They have become a ubiquitous part of how we use social media. But what *really* happens to the people who appear in memes? Emily Gulla tracks them down and finds out ›



Raising her hand up to her forehead, Silvia begins to cry. Her boyfriend looks on, his camera poised. The shutter clicks. Silvia keeps crying, tears cascading theatrically down her cheeks. The camera continues to flash.

Nine years on and Silvia (top right), an actress and model, has what many of her peers dream of. Her face is 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, 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 one of the most famous memes. And, until now, you probably won't have known her name.

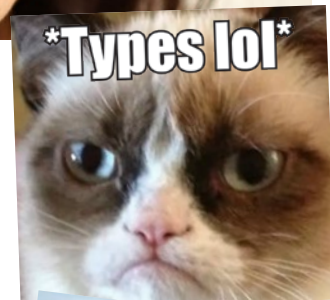
Memes, once just a joke to be shared between idle co-workers, have turned into something you can get *very* rich from. Take Gemma Collins, for example, who you could describe as a walking, talking meme... with a rumoured £2.7 million in the bank.\* Grumpy Cat (RIP, Tardar Sauce) is said to have left her owner millions after her permanently scowling face spawned everything from coffee cups to her own Christmas movie. Then there's Ben Lashes who, as a meme agent, makes a living managing the revenue of



memes, including Grumpy Cat (right) and Success Baby (bottom right). It seems that, in a visually saturated world, becoming a meme is the new way to get rich quick. You don't need any particular talent – just a little wit or a unique look. But can it *really* be that simple? I decided to track down the people behind the world's most famous memes to find out...

### Meme machines

"Charlie *bit* me." When Shelley 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 children's godfather in Colorado. But the file was too big to email, so in May 2007, back in the site's infancy, her husband, Howard, uploaded the video to YouTube. A few months later, he logged back in to delete the clip (the kids' godfather had seen it) to find it had thousands of views. US website CollegeHumor had reposted the video and it was gradually gaining traction on social media. By February 2008, it had reached 2 million views.



Today, in the 12 years since it was uploaded, that clip has accrued over 870 million views. It's been recreated by the Hemsworth brothers, with help from Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks, for *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, the family has appeared in an in-flight safety video for Delta Air Lines and Harry and Charlie have won Guinness World Records two years in a row. They've appeared on *Good Morning America* and in an advert for Ragu pasta sauce. They've even been visited by a "superfan" from Taiwan. And, crucially, as a "partner" of YouTube they earn revenue every time someone watches an advert before the clip. How much

exactly? When we chat over the phone from her Buckinghamshire home, Shelley doesn't tell me (I guess it's akin to asking a stranger their salary). What she *will* say is that it's enough for the pair to 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 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 negatively impact the boys' lives.

Others, however, aren't as lucky. Silvia was at her parents' home in Italy when she learned that she'd 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 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 predicted was that one of the photos would become what is now known as the First World Problems meme. Silvia – who is beautiful even when sobbing – 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 – plastering everything 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 the privileged.

"[The meme] makes me uncomfortable," she tells me, calling from Italy before she heads home to Los Angeles. "People shouldn't 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." The image could easily be screen-grabbed, shared and

**"My main frustration was that I didn't have any control"**

altered, hence the millions of iterations now available on the internet – and I understand why Silvia feels "violated" by it. At least, surely, it made her some money, I ask? Not a single cent, she tells me. Silvia actually has no legal rights over it. Copyright belongs to her ex-boyfriend, as he took it (he's since taken the photo down from the stock image site). Because of how the photo was taken in a public place, it's also not an infringement of her privacy.

While it might seem like becoming internationally "famous" would be an ideal

situation for an actor like Silvia, she says the impact on her professional career is minimal. The only work she's secured as a result of being a meme is a Spanish advert for Domino's, which she did in February last year. If Silvia has learned anything, it's that being infamous 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 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 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, 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. "I think I just wanted to go home," she says. Glance at the photo out of context, though, and it looks like a persistent guy harassing an unimpressed girl. It was uploaded onto the club's Facebook page, as all night-out photos are, but was reposted by Twitter users who found it funny. Three days later, a friend sent Lucia a tweet he'd seen, where the author had placed a dodgy chat-up line on the photo: "A said >



dae ye wanty come back to mine and piss in ma mooth [sic].”

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 likes, but there are countless others. Another version, a football-themed joke saying “Am not a weirdo ah actual play for Motherwell [sic]” has 22,000 likes, while one comparing Lucia’s coat to a hedgehog had 74,000 likes before it was deleted. 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 the attention dies down it picks up again, with other websites posting the image.

“I know everyone says it, and I sound like a mum, but what goes online... you can’t really stop it,” she muses. “Even if I wanted to get those pictures back now, I never could. It’s not up to me, really. It’s just on Twitter – anyone could get hold of it,” she says. Lucia initially questioned whether she could take legal ownership over the image, but learned that the photographer has full rights, and that he had sold the photo to *Vice*.



Like Silvia, Lucia doesn’t own the image of her and therefore has no say in what happens to it. But while Silvia posed for the photo, Lucia, a 19-year-old International Business student, had no idea hers was even being taken. At present, any laws surrounding memes are defined by existing rules regarding images and privacy. As Lucia says: “It’s my face, but I don’t own it.”

### The dark side of meme culture

Whatever unwanted attention Lucia and Silvia receive from their accidental

## “I couldn’t adjust to how horrible people were being”

fame, at least they were both adults when it happened. Alisha Barnard was just 11 when she went viral.

“I was in my bedroom when I first saw that half a million people had viewed it,” Alisha explains. The “it” in question is webcam footage of her attempting to sing Whitney Houston’s

*I Will Always Love You*, screaming with rage when she couldn’t hit the high notes. She frantically tried to delete it – not knowing it was already too late. She’s 20 now and working as a sales and customer service advisor in Scunthorpe. When she uploaded the video, “I was just a kid playing around on a laptop and somehow managed to post it to YouTube. I never expected anyone to see it.” But deleting it wouldn’t change anything. The video was reuploaded by another YouTube user, under the title “PSYCHO GIRL tries to sing I will always love

you.” Today, it’s had over 17.6 million views. And as this isn’t the original video, Alisha doesn’t make any money from it. After the initial shock, Alisha began to scroll and see what people were saying about her, the trolls laughing and jeering, until it eventually became too much. The comments today have been turned off. Now, YouTube’s terms and conditions state that those under the age of 13 aren’t allowed to use the service. A YouTube spokesperson told me it’s of the “utmost importance” that those in its community feel safe, and YouTube provides a resource as part of its support system that helps users protect their identity and content on the platform. “I was young and couldn’t really adjust to how horrible people were being,” Alisha tells me. Even now, 10 years later, her personal Instagram account is peppered with comments, mostly people asking if she’s the girl from “that meme”.

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: JOLANDA COETZER AT LHA REPRESENTS; USING BAREMINERALS MAKE-UP AND SKINCARE. STYLING: ITUNU ONE. LUCIA WEARS TOP AND JEANS, BOTH TOPSHOP. BOOTS, NEW LOOK. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES; “MILK EDINBURGH MEME” DAVID WILKINSON; CHRIS CROCKER/YOUTUBE

change being a meme – it’s made me who I am today,” she explains. “It’s helped me to become a strong person and to not let people get to me. Having thousands of people write about you online helps you build a wall.”

You might think that being made fun of online isn’t uncommon in 2019. But does that make it OK? You might (hopefully) wonder why thousands of people thought it was OK to call an 11-year-old a “psycho”. Surely it’s the same instinct that makes the trolling of celebrities such as Little Mix’s Jesy Nelson seem normal? Perhaps the flip side of uploading image after image is that we have a misplaced sense of ownership – we 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.

Some argue that those in the public eye should expect this; that they must accept both the good and bad sides of fame. But what about those who enter into this sphere unwittingly? In the past, fame was something you had to intentionally seek. Now, it could happen when you least expect it. Seemingly immortalised



on the internet, meme stars end up dehumanised. Once, our behaviour only extended to the eyes of the people in the room. Now, it’s a very real possibility that a photo could be being taken of you, right this second, pulling a face as you read this, and tomorrow it could be seen by millions. And there’s really nothing you could do about it.

While some of the people I 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”. 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 three weeks after our interview, Alisha texts me with an update: Brian

May from Queen has shared her video on Instagram, saying it’s made his day, 10 years after it was originally posted. If Alisha, Silvia and Shelley’s experiences 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 and don’t let prospective employers see your drunken photos. Many of us will have sat through school assemblies – intended to terrify – about how naked photos can end up plastered across the internet. But while you can be mindful of what you post online, you can’t control the wandering cameras of other people. Whether it’s solicited or otherwise, meme culture has taught us that, like it or not, we’re all being watched. ♦



### BEHIND THE SCENES Emily Gulla

“I was talking to colleagues about this feature and some of them had become memes themselves. One was unknowingly pictured making a face on a night out and later found that people were sharing her image online. It could happen to anyone.”

## THE HISTORY OF THE MEME

1976

Biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” to simply describe ideas that are “copied from brain to brain”, though the term wasn’t widely used until the birth of internet memes in the ‘90s.



1998

One of the first GIF memes, Hamster Dance – a website featuring rows of dancing hamster GIFs – was an unprecedented viral sensation.



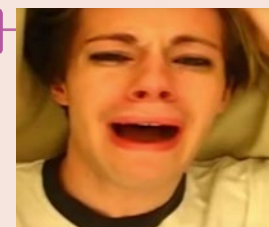
2006

“LOLcats” took off. Various images of cats with funny captions in large white text established the design style that memes still have today.



2000s ONWARDS

The growth of YouTube post-2005 meant that video memes began to emerge, like 2007’s “Leave Britney Alone” (right) and 2014’s “Disgustang” video.



2018

The first-ever sound-clip meme, which had people debating whether they could hear the word “Yanny” or “Laurel”, went viral.