Beware of Hidden Messages in Memes—Think Before You Click
by Craig and Marc Kielburger

A man gapes over his shoulder at the pretty girl who just passed him on the street. Beside him, his girlfriend glares in outrage. The punchline is in the captions: the head-turner is the new iPhone X, while the jilted girlfriend is the already-passé iPhone 8.

You’ve probably seen—and shared—some version of this popular “distracted boyfriend” meme on Facebook or Instagram. It’s meant to be a commentary on the superficial fixation that comes with shiny new things.

But what else does the image say?

People love memes—those attention-grabbing images and zinger captions on our social media feeds. Science has shown we get a dose of happy brain chemicals like dopamine every time we share the latest LOLcat or Gene Wilder’s smirking sarcastic Willy Wonka.

Memes can be entertaining, insightful ... or toxic.

Russian hackers created and planted propagandist memes to inflame both sides in last year’s U.S. presidential election. Even memes not generated by meddling foreign governments are hurting political debate on social media, argues Ottawa-based digital media consultant Mark Blevis. In place of written comments that require at least some thought, people deploy duelling “crooked” Hillary and Trump “covfefe” images to express their opinion.

“Humour is the best way to get a message across—good or bad.”

Eric Alper

People who would never dream of telling a sexist joke at the family dinner table will share a picture of a woman in a business suit with the caption: “Makes more money than you, still expects you to pay for everything.”

Share the wrong meme, and you could be bullying someone without even knowing it. Many images are stolen from personal profiles and websites. In 2014, an American travel blogger wrote about the trauma of having a selfie pilfered and turned into a viral anti-Obamacare meme.

We don’t want to get totally down on memes. Many are legitimately hilarious. But part of social media literacy is recognizing that what’s funny on the surface may not be so amusing underneath. Ask yourself: Would I tell this joke to my parents? When you take the words away, what message does the picture convey? Does this meme really contribute to this political discussion, or am I just trolling?

So think before you share, or the next person mocked in Willy Wonka’s meme could be you.

Beyond politics, seemingly innocuous and funny memes can carry negative messages. Take our “distracted boyfriend” example. Eric Alper, music industry blogger and social media guru, poses an important question: “If you took away the words, what would you think of this picture?”

Now it’s two sexist implications all in one image—a man ogling a woman in the street, and the tired stereotype of a jealous girlfriend.

Things that make us laugh can distract us from donning our critical thinking hats. We hit Like and share content without considering the potential harm we’re helping to spread.

“Memes replace thoughtful conversation and prevent us from finding common ground between different opinions.”

Mark Belvis