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Exercise 07: Become a Meme Detective

"I Scream, You Scream": Tracing a Pre-Internet Ice Cream Meme

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Module 07

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I Scream, You Scream: The Ice Cream Meme That Outlived Its Inventors

A pun that started as a street vendor's cry in 1820s New York, became an advertising slogan, a candy bar, a Roaring Twenties hit song, a playground chant, and finally an internet image macro.

What counts as a meme?

Long before anyone posted an image macro, the biologist Richard Dawkins coined the word *meme* in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to describe a unit of culture, such as a tune, a catchphrase, or a fashion, that spreads from person to person by imitation, copying itself and mutating the way genes do. By that classic definition, a meme does not need the internet at all. It needs three things: something easy to copy, a reason for people to copy it, and room to change as it travels.

The pre-internet meme I traced is the chant **"I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!"** Almost every American knows it, most people learned it as children, and very few know where it came from. The answer turned out to be much older and more interesting than I expected: the joke behind it is roughly two hundred years old, and the full chant is older than the famous 1927 song most people credit for it.

Tracing the origins

The core of the meme is a simple sound pun: said quickly, "ice cream" and "I scream" are nearly identical. Food-history researcher Barry Popik, whose work is cited in the *Yale Book of Quotations*, compiled newspaper evidence showing the pun in circulation by 1825. A New York newspaper from that year, rediscovered and reprinted by the New-York Historical Society in 1962, describes a loud street vendor with a tin bucket shouting "I scream!", who turned out to be selling ice cream. In other words, the meme started as an **audio meme**: the sales cry of street hawkers.

From there it spread the way memes still spread, by people remixing it. By 1839 the Baltimore *Sun* printed a humorous piece in which boys mocked an oyster seller by hollering "I scream." In 1873 the *New York Times* recorded a riddle that kids shouted on a charity excursion: what do you do when your mother spanks you? Answer: "I scream." In 1877 a Boston publisher even released a choral piece by M. H. Thornton titled *I Scream; or, Ice Cream*, which the Library of Congress lists in its American sheet music collection.

Then advertisers noticed. An 1889 ad in the Columbus *Daily Enquirer* sold Boyce Brothers' ice cream cakes with the stacked lines “They Scream! I Scream! Everybody Screams!” A 1904 ad in the Paducah *Sun* pushed ice cream freezers with “He Scream / She Scream / You Scream.” This is the template format of a modern meme: a fixed pattern (___ *scream*) with interchangeable parts.

Timeline: how the meme evolved

Year	Where it showed up	What changed
1825	New York City street vendors	The pun is born as an audio sales cry: “I scream!”
1839–1873	Baltimore Sun; New York Times	Kids adopt it as a joke and a riddle
1877	Sheet music, Boston (M. H. Thornton)	First appearance as a song title
1889–1904	Newspaper ads in Ohio and Kentucky	Brands remix it into a fill-in-the-blank slogan
1921–22	The “I-Scream Bar”, Onawa, Iowa	The meme becomes a product name (later Eskimo Pie)
1926	Xenia, Ohio grandstands	Recorded as a crowd cheer at a public event
1927–28	Hit song + Victor 78 rpm record	Mass media locks in the standard wording
1940s–today	Playgrounds, ice cream trucks	Passed down orally as a children's chant
2010s–today	Image macros (e.g., Imgflip)	Internet users subvert the punchline

The candy bar and the hit song

The meme's biggest jump came in the early 1920s. Christian Kent Nelson, a Danish-born schoolteacher who ran a candy and ice cream shop in Onawa, Iowa, got the idea for a chocolate-covered ice cream bar after watching a boy agonize over whether to spend his nickel on ice cream or a chocolate bar. Nelson sold his invention as the **“I-Scream Bar,”** then partnered with chocolate maker Russell Stover in July 1921 to mass-produce it. The product was renamed Eskimo Pie and patented on January 24, 1922 (U.S. Patent 1,404,539). In 2021 the brand was renamed again, to Edy's Pie. Some food historians credit Nelson's marketing with popularizing the full chant, though older newspaper evidence shows the pattern existed before him.

What fixed the exact wording in everyone's memory was a 1927 novelty song, *I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream for Ice Cream*, written by Howard Johnson, Billy Moll, and

Robert A. King and published by Shapiro, Bernstein & Co. in New York. The verses describe a made-up college “up among the Eskimos” whose football cheer is the famous chorus, complete with “Rah! Rah! Rah!” Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians recorded it for Victor in Camden, New Jersey, on November 30, 1927 (Victor 21099), and Harry Reser's band recorded it too. The song later became a traditional jazz standard, and it entered the U.S. public domain on January 1, 2023. ASU's own library holds a digitized copy of the original 1927 sheet music.

Why it spread: the meme mechanics

Looking at the history as a “meme detective,” the phrase has every feature that makes internet memes go viral today. **It is easy to copy:** ten words, a rhyme, and a built-in rhythm that works as a chant. **It has a hook:** the pun creates a tiny moment of surprise. **It is participatory:** “I… you… we all” invites a group to join in, which is why it worked as a street cry, a college cheer, and a playground call-and-response. **It is a template:** advertisers swapped in “he,” “she,” and “everybody,” and the song added “Tuesdays, Mondays, we all scream for sundaes.”

Each new medium of its era acted like a new social platform. Street cries were the original audio clips; newspaper jokes and ads were the shareable text posts; sheet music and 78 rpm records were the mass broadcast; and children passing the chant down on playgrounds were the most effective distribution network of all. Today the chain continues online. Variations such as “I scream. You scream. The police come. It's awkward,” the Halloween riddle “What do ghosts eat for dessert? I scream,” and Anti-Joke Chicken image macros that twist the punchline all depend on the reader already knowing the original, which is exactly how a long-lived meme behaves.

What the video channels show

To hear the meme the way 1920s audiences did, I looked on YouTube, where collectors have uploaded digitized 78 rpm records. One upload plays Harry Reser's Syncopators' Columbia recording, sung by Tom Stacks; it was recorded in New York in December 1927 and released in April 1928. Another upload plays the Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians version, although the uploader dates it to 1925. The UC Santa Barbara discography lists the Waring session as November 30, 1927, so the upload's date is a good example of how details drift as content is re-shared, which is itself a meme behavior. Hearing the records makes the meme's structure obvious: the chorus is sung as a stadium-style college cheer, which explains why it was so easy for crowds and kids to chant. Penn State's WPSU has also restored a 1927 Vitaphone film of Waring's band, showing what this era's “viral” entertainment looked like on

screen.

Modern videos show the meme is still being passed on. An English-learning channel for children, PUPPI Channel, posted the line in 2022 as a pronunciation tongue twister. A phrase that began as a New York street vendor's cry in 1825 is now taught to kids around the world on YouTube, almost two centuries later.

Why this matters for a brand like Jelato88

This exercise connects directly to my semester brand, Jelato88, the Asian-inspired gelato shop and food truck in Tempe. The “I scream” chant proves that the most durable dessert marketing is not a polished slogan but a playful, repeatable phrase that customers want to say themselves. The lesson for a small brand is to create content with a recognizable template that fans can remix, such as a flavor pun format, a call-and-response chant at the truck window, or a reaction-meme series. The I-Scream Bar shows the risk too: a memorable name can carry a product for a century, but names can age badly, as Eskimo Pie's rebrand shows, so a brand should choose its meme carefully.

Sources and meme links

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