

To Troll the Media

How a cartoon frog became a hate symbol

Bachelor's Thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Pepe-sammakko on yksi kaikista tunnetuimmista internet-meemeistä ja sitä on aktiivisesti käytetty jo 11 vuotta erilaisilla sosiaalisen median alustoilla, YouTubessa sekä reaaliaikaiseen suoratoistoon pohjautuvassa Twitchissä. Vuonna 2016 tämä meemi lisättiin yllättäen Anti-Defamation Leaguen (ADL) tietokantaan vihasymbolina.</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka tämä kaikki tapahtui. Tutkielmaa varten aineistona on käytetty kolmea eri uutisartikkelia, jotka sijoittuivat ajallisesti Pepe-sammakon uuden merkityksen muodostumisen ympärille. Lisäksi analysoitavana on muutamia otteita meemin käytöstä ennen ja jälkeen tämän uuden kategorisoinnin. Lähestymistavaksi ja tutkielman teoreettiseksi taustaksi valitsin lähteitä identiteettien rakentumisesta, kriittisestä diskurssianalyysistä sekä media-analyysistä ja median representaatioista.</p> <p>Lopputuloksena vaikuttaisi siltä, että niin kutsutut ”trollit” olivat manipuloineet media-alan ammattilaisia sosiaalisessa mediassa ja erityisesti Twitterissä, edesauttaen omia tarkoituksiperiään. Teknologioiden kehittyessä kuilu journalistien ja yksittäisten internetin käyttäjien välillä on pienentynyt huomattavasti. Vuodesta 2016 eteenpäin on yleisessä keskustelussa ollut paljon puhetta niin kutsutusta ”totuuden jälkeisestä ajasta” tai ”vale uutisten”-ajanjaksosta. Toivon että tämä tutkielma pystyisi tarjoamaan yhden käytännön esimerkin siitä, kuinka mediaa mahdollisesti voidaan manipuloida erilaisilla sosiaalisen median alustoilla ja ehkä tästä on hyötyä vastaavissa tutkimuksissa tulevaisuudessa.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

(Image 1. Pepe the Frog. Image removed due to copyright)

Pepe the Frog is a widely used internet meme depicting an anthropomorphic frog. A meme is essentially an inside joke for internet users. It is an activity, concept, or simply a catchphrase that is distributed in the form of an image, video, text, audio, piece of media, etc. (Beal 2019). The origin of the word can be traced all the way back to ancient Greek. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term “meme” as he was looking for a word to describe the concept of the transmission of an idea. He decided to use the ancient Greek word “mimeme” meaning something imitated, but he eventually wanted the word to be pronounced in a similar fashion as the word “gene”. He described the idea of memes as a form of cultural propagation, meaning that it can be seen as a way for people to transfer, distribute, or circulate social and cultural ideas to one another.

Pepe the Frog as a meme is mostly used on the internet to convey the emotions and the mood of the person using it or posting it. For example, when the user of the meme is feeling great, they might post a Pepe with a wide smile on his face saying the tag line “Feels Good Man”. During the 2016 United States presidential elections, Pepe the frog was added to the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) database of hate symbols (ADL press release, 2016).

According to a poll done by Knight Foundation and Gallup (2018), the general public’s trust towards traditional journalism and media organizations has dramatically decreased since 2015 in the United States. Malmelin & Villi (2017) argue that journalism and media work are currently living a time period of transformation, for example due to the number of sold paper copies becoming significantly lower. They also argue that due to technological advancements, the gap between social media and traditional media has become smaller. This has also resulted in the gap between journalists and news consumers becoming smaller. In today’s journalism it is fairly frequent to see quotes from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram used as references and citations in news articles. One purpose of this thesis is to provide an actual example to the discussion of journalism colliding with social media and internet culture.

1.1. Establishing a timeline

Pepe the Frog first appeared on the internet in 2005 in an online comic titled “Boy’s Club” by Matt Furie which was originally published on Myspace (Hunt 2017). The first Pepe meme to spread widely on the internet was “feels good man” (Image 1.), which includes Pepe with a wide smile on his face (Khan 2015). This iteration of the meme first appeared on Furie’s comic strip where Pepe can be seen lowering his pants all the way down when urinating with the caption “feels good man”. Matt Furie has explained that the idea for this comic strip came from a childhood memory with his cousin (Mielczarek 2018: 155). This first iteration of a Pepe meme began to spread on the internet first in a video game called Gaia Online in 2006 and later on an image board 4chan around 2008 (Lorah 2016 & designyoutrust 2019). An image board is a type of internet forum consisting mostly of pictures posted to it. This variety of online forums originated from Japan and was later co-opted by English forums (PCMag 2019). Examples of such forums include Ylilauta in Finnish, Futaba Channel in Japanese, and 4chan in English.

The next widely spread version of Pepe was “sad Pepe” which contains the usually joyous frog as frowning. According to Know Your Meme (accessed 2019), it was first posted on a body building forum in 2009. The sad version of Pepe began circulating around the internet quickly and different variations of it followed in 2009-2010. Namely the “you will never X” meme where a sad Pepe is featured with a caption that begins with “you will never”. For example, a desktop wallpaper with a sad Pepe face and a caption reading “you will never have a good wallpaper”.

Around 2010, the concept of a “rare Pepe” was first formed. 4chan began to generate numerous variations of the meme often depicting Pepe as famous characters from pop culture. 4chan users were drawing a wealth of “rare” Pepe memes and rewarding each other with “good boy points” for the most original versions of Pepe (Dryden 2017). On 4chan, these Rare Peopes started out from a need to reclaim the meme from “normies”, since the original versions of Pepe had become so popular around the internet (Kien 2019: 188-189, see appendix 3 and appendix 4).

According to Urban Dictionary (accessed 2019), Normie is a term used on the internet to

describe “normal people” who do not take part in or understand internet culture or do not conform to the particular mentality of image board users. Urban Dictionary itself is a user generated online dictionary where some of the most highly voted definitions describe that “normie” is mostly seen as a derogatory term used to describe people who lack interest in ideas outside of the society’s current range of acceptance, meaning that they do not understand or perhaps even demean “counter cultures” (Urban Dictionary). The term and its use can be seen as a way to enforce an us vs. them mentality and to differentiate people who have discussions that could be seen as socially or culturally unacceptable on different online platforms from those who do not take part in such activities.

In 2010, Pepe was still widely seen as a harmless and happy frog but the creation of sad Pepe and rare Pepes began to slowly transform his personality. According to Fandom Wiki (2019), namely “smug Pepe” was seen as antagonistic towards the original happier depiction of the frog. Regardless of the new variations of the meme, Pepe’s popularity was still growing, and the creator Matt Furie started a Tumblr blog dedicated to the frog. Around this time, Pepe received his own official subreddit and an official Instagram account (Know Your Meme, accessed 2019).

Around 2014, the personality of Pepe began to move from joy to aggression, with the “angry Pepe” memes where the frog is usually depicted as fuming, angry, and red with captions screaming at “normies”. In October 2014, the “good boy points” that 4chan users were rewarding each other changed to real money and people started selling their original rare Pepes on the internet. As an elaborate joke that was eventually taken to the extreme, people were purchasing these collections of Pepe drawings for up to tens of thousands of US dollars (Dryden, 2017 & Notopoulos, 2015). In 2014, Pepe also received a lot of mainstream attention when celebrities, such as, Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj posted the frog on their social media pages.

In 2015, people were selling their Pepe drawings on Tumblr and other more mainstream websites. What started out as an attempt by users on 4chan to reclaim Pepe, ended up only making it more popular and mainstream. Eventually, Pepe trading grew so much that the community created their own cryptocurrency called “Pepe Cash” and started a website called “rare Pepe directory” dedicated to purchasing and selling these memes (Dryden 2017 Notopoulos

2015). On this website, users can find rare Pepes certified by the Bitcoin Blockchain.

(Image 2. Pepe attached to hateful imagery. Image removed due to copyright)

From the end of 2015 to the 2016 US presidential elections, the reclaiming of Pepe transformed from the creativity of rare Pepes as Pepe started to be more frequently attached with hateful and violent imagery. Around this time, Pepe became political as 4chan users began to send these newly transformed Pepes to journalists and media representatives on Twitter. On the 26th of May 2016, Olivia Nuzzi, a journalist for *The Daily Beast* wrote an article where she describes Pepe as “a nazi Trump supporter and alt-right symbol” (Nuzzi 2016). The term alt-right is used to describe a loosely connected and loosely defined group of American right-wing policy advocates who reject mainstream conservative politics and espouse extremist views (Al Jazeera 2017). The Associated Press has advised its journalists to restrain from using the term without providing an internal and immediate definition of it in their work due to the term’s vagueness (Daniszewski 2016). The article includes interviews from two “anonymous Twitter white nationalists”, who describe to Nuzzi how they orchestrated a #frogtwitter campaign after discussing the frog over drinks.

Later, in a different article by Johann Bennett published on *The Daily Caller*, the interviewees claimed that they had just “trolled” Nuzzi (Bennett 2016). According to Urban Dictionary (accessed 2019), A troll (also known as an internet troll) refers to a person who acts on the internet as a provocateur attempting to start disputes, stir up controversy, and upset other users. They post messages, memes, and other types of content online with the sole intent of provoking their viewers with negative emotional responses for the amusement of themselves and other “trolls”. It is important to note that the term “troll” can be viewed as subjective. Some viewers of the posted content may characterize it as “trolling”, while others may regard the same content as an appropriate and reasonable contribution to the discussion at hand.

On the 12th of September 2016, the democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s campaign team wrote an article on her website describing the connections between Donald Trump, Pepe the Frog, and white supremacists, where they cite the article from *The Daily Beast* (Hillary Clinton’s

office 2016). Shortly after this article was released, Pepe the frog was added to the ADL's (Anti-Defamation League) database of hate symbols on the 27th of September 2016.

Following this categorization, in December 2016, Time Magazine listed Pepe as the most influential fictional character of the year (D'Addario 2016). On May 6th, 2017, the creator of Pepe, Matt Furie, puts Pepe to death in his online comic following the controversy, even though he had been very vocal about "saving" the meme during the previous year (Hunt 2017). For example, Matt Furie collaborated with Time.com for an article describing how Pepe the Frog was never about hate and that he is going to reclaim him (Furie 2016). Still, this was not enough to save Pepe from death in his online comic. By 2019, the meme is still widely used on all social media sites, various image boards, YouTube, and on the live streaming platform Twitch. Pepe has also later been attached to the Korean approximation of lol (laughing out loud) "kek", which has then been connected to Kek from Egyptian mythology (Cheong 2017). Kek in the Egyptian mythology is the froglike deification of the idea of primordial darkness and one of the "first eight gods" (Budge 1904: 283-286). This has also led to the creation of a fictional country named "Kekistan" that has its own flag and a national anthem. The people of Kekistan identify themselves as "shitposters" persecuted by excessive political correctness (Cheong 2017).

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze media articles written about Pepe around the time it was categorized as a hate symbol and also to analyze how the meme was used around the internet in the past and how has its usage changed today.

2 BACKGROUND

This section will include methods used in the study and other background information. I will consider the effects of identity building on online platforms, discuss representations in the media, and describe the basics of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which will be the primary approach to the media content reviewed.

2.1. Media discourse and representations in the media

According to Sterin & Winston (2012: 6), mass media has throughout the years conceived rapid and remarkable changes both socially and culturally. Pepe the Frog had been a widely used meme on the internet for over a decade. The media analysis in this thesis seeks to find out whether or not media reporting on the topic affected the meme and the way it is viewed by the public.

Discussing the representations of certain groups, phenomena, concepts, and relationships in the media can be complicated to a high degree. Fairclough (1995) discusses how these representations can be skewed or distorted due to issues of bias, manipulation, ideologies, and power. According to Hart (2002), the term ideology was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy during the French Revolution. The term was used to describe the “science of ideas” and Tracy was using it to describe the sensations people experience when interacting with the material world and the ideas that are formed due to those sensations (Hart 2002). In media, ideologies can be seen as the belief systems affecting the construction of reality that are often underlying media representations without being overtly discussed or broadcasted to the readers and viewers of the media (Croteau & Hoynes 2014: 152-155). When investigating representations in the media, one must acknowledge the possibility of some aspects of the discussion being excluded, emphasized, or backgrounded over other aspects.

During the 2016 US presidential elections there were several campaigns from various communities on social media websites and YouTube, and also from the original creator of the

meme, Matt Furie, that attempted to fight against the hateful imagery attached to Pepe. However, these were widely overlooked by the media when reporting the issue and the events surrounding it. These include for example, #savepepe on social media sites and #notallpepes on YouTube (Kickstarter 2017 & Change.org 2016).

2.2. Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

In addition to the news articles included in the media analysis, I will be analyzing discourse around the meme both in the past and today. According to Blommaert (2005: 2-3), “discourse” as a term is used to describe language-in-action. This means that in order to investigate discourse, attention needs to be applied both to action and to language. Fairclough (2010) argues that the definition for “discourse” as a sort of object or entity is insufficient since discourse also incorporates aspects of complex social relations.

Fairclough (2010) explains that we cannot answer the question “what is discourse?” except in terms of its external relations with other such objects and its internal relations. In summary, discourse includes the relations of communication between interlocutors who talk to each other or share information via text, video, and other forms of communication. In addition to the relations of communication, discourse also describes relations between communicative events, meaning for example, newspaper articles. Proponents of critical discourse studies are interested in how an occurrence of communication may influence its recipients, via power, authority, or social persuasion. For example, according to Fairclough (1992: 12), critical discourse analysis is not only meant to describe discursive practices but also show how discourse is shaped by relations of ideologies and power along with other effects that are not apparent to discourse participants normally.

Oughton (2007) argues that the main starting point of CDA, which differentiates its analytical approach from other forms of text analysis, is the focus on power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in the text. Instead of focusing purely on the propositional meaning of the analyzed text or its linguistic components, CDA takes into account other factors revolving around

the text and affecting it. For this thesis, CDA as a theoretical framework plays an important role when discussing how the perception of the meme changed, as most of the general public's introduction to Pepe the Frog was from media reporting around the time it was categorized as a hate symbol.

2.3. Identity, social identity, and the “us vs. them” dichotomy

One important aspect or event that led to the categorization of Pepe as a hate symbol was the idea of 4chan users reclaiming the meme from “normies” originally through the creativity of drawing rare Pepes and later through the transformation of Pepe by connecting the frog with violent and hateful imagery (Kien 2019: 188-189, see appendix 3 and appendix 4). In sociolinguistics, predominantly, identity is understood to be a set of resources from which individuals draw upon in expressing and presenting themselves via and in interaction with one another, rather than a singular pre-determined property of an individual (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Therefore, a more accurate representation of people's experience could be seen as the plural form “identities”. According to Klein et al. (2007: 29-32), identity can be seen as a sort of performance where people “perform” their own identities differently depending on the given environment, in order to strategically demonstrate specific elements of said entities. Reasoning to do so can include breaking stereotypes, empowerment, and improvement of social value or status.

“Social identity” refers to the individual's idea or sense of who they actually are based on their given social group membership or memberships. Tajfel & Turner (1979: 59-62) argued that the group memberships that individuals possessed, for example social class, sports team, religious sects, and fan groups are an important source of self-esteem and pride. Therefore, group memberships provide individuals with a sense of belonging within their social environments. In order to improve an individual's self-image, they attempt to improve the status of the groups they belong to and may also belittle, discriminate, and hold prejudiced views towards the status of “opposing” groups. Tajfel & Turner (1979: 57-63) describe this as an in-group(us) vs. out-group(they) mentality.

Tajfel & Turner (1979: 59-60) proposed that in-group members will seek to identify negative aspects of an out-group to further enhance their self-image and social status. They also suggested that this form of stereotyping is based on a normal cognitive process of people. Referring to the tendency to group things together in general. When this happens, individuals gravitate towards exaggerating the difference between the two groups whilst simultaneously exaggerating the similarities of things within their given in-group (Tajfel & Turner 1979: 59-61). Within the discourse on 4chan, there is an abundantly clear distinction made between an in-group and out-group, or in this case, between people familiar with the “meme culture” and “normies”.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1. Research aim and questions

This thesis seeks to find out how and why a meme depicting a cartoon frog called Pepe became a symbol of white supremacists enlisted on the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) database of hate symbols. With the recent trending topic of “fake news”, the objectivity of news media has been widely questioned and criticized for possible ideological orientations obscuring reporting. According to Fairclough (1995), language use is socially fundamental since it affects (1) social identities, (2) social relations, and most importantly, for the study at hand, (3) systems of knowledge and belief, both maintaining and transforming them.

Closely following the events of Pepe’s transformation during the time it happened, one could not help but wonder if political affiliations and power affected the news media reporting. By researching the following questions, I am seeking to find out how the traditional media can be possibly manipulated into drastically changing the meaning of existing language and symbols. At the same time, I seek to build an understanding whether or not surrounding events affected the manipulation and the transformation.

1. How did Pepe transform from being a relatable cartoon frog into a hate symbol?
 - a. Did this transformation affect the use of the meme?

3.2. Data and methods

For the purpose of sufficiently answering these questions, the data for this study consists of news articles from *The Daily Beast* and *The Daily Caller*, an article written about Pepe the frog by Hillary Clinton's office during the 2016 US presidential elections, and excerpts from online discourse including the usage of the meme from the imageboard 4chan, Instagram, and an online live streaming website Twitch. The selection of articles and excerpts are based on the timeline of Pepe's transformation into a hate symbol, starting with one of the first articles written about the issue, followed by an article that led to the hate symbol categorization, and finally ending with an article that focuses on the aftermath of the incident.

The media data was collected from online news websites that reported on the meme. Using The Internet Archive databases, data from currently deleted articles was also collected and analyzed. Namely, Hillary Clinton's office's reporting on Pepe. Excerpts from the discourse involving the meme were collected by following discussions surrounding the meme and seeking to understand how the meme was, and currently is, actually used by people who post it on the internet. This was done by finding samples of the meme being used around the internet today (see appendix 1 and appendix 2) and by discussing the timeline of Pepe the Frog that has led us into 2019.

According to Fairclough (1993: 134), even though analysis of a text is a vital part of discourse analysis, it is merely one of three elements of discourse with social context and interaction with other facets of "the social". In addition to analyzing the text written in the chosen articles, I will be arguing for an interpretation and an explanation to the text these articles contain given the social context and interaction with other articles. Fairclough (1993: 134) explains that discourse analysis should contain these three parts: first, the text is described, then it is interpreted within the context of interaction, and finally the connection between this interaction and the given social context is explained. In order to understand the events that eventually led to Pepe's new categorization, I will be analyzing the articles in a chronological order.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1. The Daily Beast: political bias in media

The Daily Beast's article “FEELS RATHER UNCOMFORTABLE, MAN: How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol” (2016) represents Pepe with heavy implications of racist imagery and connections to the republican candidate of the US 2016 presidential elections. Although many iterations of the meme also depict the cartoon frog as the democratic candidate and many other public figures, these were neglected in the article.

- (1) 4chan's Pepe the Frog meme was wildly popular among 'normies' – until white nationalists decorated him with swastikas and gave him a Trump button.

(Image 3. Pepe at the southern border. Image removed due to copyright)

Nuzzi (2016) describes various iterations of the meme with one depicting the frog at the southern border of United States holding a Donald Trump's campaign button (Image 3.), another wearing Nazi insignia, and one as Donald Trump with his “iconic hair” and an American flag. Nuzzi (2016) receives her information in the article from interviewing two “anonymous twitter white nationalists”, @JaredTSwift and @PaulTown_, who explain to her how they started the #frogtwitter movement that consists of about 30 people with 10 core members who plotted the campaign to attach Pepe with hateful imagery on 4chan's /r/9k/ board over drinks back in 2015. Nuzzi (2016) also discloses that the creator of Pepe, Matt Furie, did not respond to her interview requests. She acknowledges in her article that on 4chan it can be difficult to determine how serious commenters are being or if “they're just fucking around”. However, she appears to trust her interviewees at least to the point of not challenging or questioning what they are saying.

Taking the interviewees' statements at face value and neglecting many other political iterations of Pepe the Frog might suggest that this article has a possible political or ideological bias. For example, Pepe the Frog has previously been depicted as different anarchist groups, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and various politicians from the United Kingdom. The former editor-in-

chief John Avlon has described the publication's political stance as "nonpartisan but not neutral" in an interview on a *Mediaite* article written by Aidan Mclaughlin (2018). Avlon has also described *The Daily Beast* as "the loyal opposition standing up to president Trump" (The Daily Beast 2016). However, a perceived ideological or political bias is not that simple to "prove". Baum & Groeling (2008: 347-348) argue that there is an important difference between finding an example of ideological bias in media content and wholly attributing said bias to biased editorial judgements. The observed bias might simply reflect the available size of samples and the actual number of people with potential stories.

After Matt Furie failed to respond to Nuzzi's interview requests, her interviewees were limited to two "anonymous white nationalists" on Twitter. Also, her sample size of Pepe memes appears to be limited to those found behind the hashtag #frogtwitter and whatever drawings were sent to Nuzzi by the interviewees. Although, Nuzzi (2016) acknowledges that Pepe has been "both hero and antihero" as a versatile meme, she states that recently the cartoon frog has become "socially unacceptable".

4.2. Hillary Clinton's office: authority in discourse

The article written by Hillary Clinton's office "Donald Trump, Pepe the Frog, and white supremacists: an explainer." is in the form of a dialog where the reader supposedly asks questions from the article and the article answers back. The questions that the reader "asks" are derived from an "odd photo" that Donald Trump's son and one of his closest advisers posted on social media.

- (2) "Why is there a frog standing directly behind Trump" – That's Pepe. He's a symbol associated with white supremacy.
- (3) "Wait. Really? White Supremacy?" – That's right.

The article then cites Nuzzi's (2016) article from *The Daily Beast* to explain how this cartoon frog has been co-opted by white supremacists.

- (4) - -in recent months, Pepe's been almost entirely co-opted by the white supremacists who call themselves "alt-right". They've decided to take back Pepe by adding swastikas and other symbols- -.
- (5) "We basically mixed Pepe in with Nazi propaganda, etc. We built that association," one prominent white supremacist told *The Daily Beast*.

In the first example, Hillary Clinton's office states that Pepe the Frog has been "almost entirely co-opted by white supremacists". Although, the article cited never suggested that.

The latter example contains a direct quote from one of the anonymous interviewees in Nuzzi's article for *The Daily Beast*. However, Nuzzi nor the anonymous interviewees never described them as "prominent white supremacists" in the original article cited.

- (6) "Let me get this straight: Trump's presidential campaign is posting memes associated with white supremacy online?" – Yes.
- (7) "This is horrifying" – Yes.
- (8) "What can I do?" – Vote.

In this dialog, Hillary Clinton's office appears to come from a place of public power or authority, giving the general public well established answers to questions that they position the general public as having. Hillary Clinton's office is holding the conversational authority in this imaginary discussion and eventually, unsurprisingly, using the position of said authority by encouraging the readers to vote for Clinton in the following elections as the only suggested way to stop Donald Trump, Donald Trump Jr., and one of Donald Trump's closest advisors from using the meme online, or, more likely, suggesting that this is the way to stop white supremacists winning the elections.

This article was the first introduction to Pepe for most of the American general public and internationally for a lot of people who were following the US presidential elections. As a public authority, Hillary Clinton's office legitimized Nuzzi's article as a successfully completed investigation. Schäffner (2010: 118) argues that when one aims to legitimize topics unknown to the public, persuasion by authority can be used as a means for positive self-representation and negative representation of others explicitly or implicitly, by using or abusing the original text for the purposes of their ideologies.

4.3. The Daily Caller: the act of trolling and confirmation bias

Four months after Nuzzi's article for *The Daily Beast*, Jonah Bennett wrote an article for *The Daily Caller* discussing the previously mentioned articles while doing a fresh interview with both of the "anonymous twitter white nationalists" from Nuzzi's article, @JaredTSwift and @PaulTown_. Bennett (2016) explains that Pepe's new identity and his rise to pop culture along with the controversies began from Nuzzi's (2016) article, which Bennett describes as "more or less a complete troll job". Bennett criticizes Nuzzi for repeating made-up stories from only two anonymous interviewees that came from the #frogtwitter movement without doing much investigative journalism or ever questioning the interviewees' intentions or their statements.

Referring to the article by Hillary Clinton's office, @JaredTSwift describes to *The Daily Caller* his perspective on what had happened.

- (9) "I think the most ridiculous thing is that a random guy on the internet who trolled a journalist once is now a 'prominent white supremacist.' I mean, the only accurate part of that is the 'white' part..."

According to Bennett (2016), the troll consisted of @JaredTSwift and @PaulTown_ feeding "an outrageous narrative" to Nuzzi hoping that she would scoop the story up and use as many quotes as possible from them in her article for *The Daily Beast*. These kinds of deliberately chosen adjectives and other word choices, such as "outrageous", that could be considered as demeaning, are fairly frequent in the article. For example, Bennett (2016) ends his article by describing Nuzzi as "A journalist with a clear lack of healthy skepticism and an added dose of internet dopiness" who "got duped". Since *The Daily Caller* is a conservative news organization and *The Daily Beast* is "nonpartisan but not neutral" and "loyal opposition to Donald Trump" (McLaughlin 2018 & The Daily Beast 2016), there might be underlying motivations for Bennett (2016) to discredit Olivia Nuzzi and her journalistic work. According to Pew Research Center (2014), the American public has become more politically polarized and ideologically divided in recent years. Also, according to a poll by Knight Foundation and Gallup (2018), the American public's trust towards traditional journalism and media organizations has dramatically decreased since 2015. Both of these factors may have affected the tone of reporting in Bennett's (2016) article.

The interviewees explained to *The Daily Caller* how there were no #frogtwitter meetups where the core members of the movement would discuss the cartoon frog over drinks, they did not have 30 people plot an online campaign in 2015, @JaredTSwift is not 19 years of age, and he does not live on the West Coast (Bennett 2016).

(10) “Basically, I interspersed various nuggets of truth and exaggerated a lot of things, and sometimes outright lied – in the interest of making a journalist believe that online Trump supporters are largely a group of meme-jihadis who use a cartoon frog to push Nazi propaganda. Because it was funny to me.”

(11) “The funny thing is that we were helping Olivia’s narrative, so we probably could have added in a bunch of insane stuff and she would have still run with the story. Now we have MSNBC and the Clinton campaign citing a troll story about a meme”

These two examples signify the importance of subjectivity with the concept of “trolling” or a “troll”. As explained earlier, A troll is a person who acts on the internet as a provocateur attempting to stir up controversy for the amusement of themselves and other “trolls” (Urban Dictionary, accessed 2019). The subjectivity of trolling refers to the issue that some readers of the content posted may characterize it as “trolling”, while others may regard the same content as an appropriate and reasonable contribution to the discussion at hand.

Quandt (2018: 40-42) has identified this kind of online interactions as “dark participation”. According to him, this concept of dark participation refers to the negative, selfish, or even sinister contributions to news making processes that can be divided into strategic, tactical, or authentic evil. Targeting journalists and purposefully misleading them and their reporting could be classified as this kind of activity. Although, attaching Pepe to hateful imagery appeared to originally be a campaign that could be considered as a strategic form of dark participation by 4chan users with the goal of reclaiming the meme from “normies” (Kien 2019: 188-189, see appendix 3 and appendix 4), the same cannot be conclusively argued about the two interviewees that brought it to the attention of media organizations. @JaredTSwift and @PaulTown_ might have been acting merely as individuals when they contacted *The Daily Beast*. Quandt (2018: 42) argues that individuals who take part in dark participation are more prone to act out of “authentic evil”, meaning that their actions are possibly driven by personal hate for others or by the sheer pleasure of making others suffer.

After originally not responding to *The Daily Beast's* requests for an interview, the original creator of Pepe the Frog, Matt Furie's, response to the explainer article by the Clinton campaign was featured in Bennett's article for *The Daily Caller* where Furie described the explainer as "funny". Furie stated that Clinton's office had downplayed the fact that Pepe the Frog memes used on the internet are more than simply whatever is on the news today, especially to teenagers and younger people.

"Taking the bait" is a common phrase attached to the act of trolling. It means that you are reacting to something someone has done or said exactly the way that they intended you to. According to the interviewees, they appealed to Nuzzi's confirmation bias in order to push more and more outrageous narratives to her. Confirmation bias refers to one-sided case-building process where one seeks to draw all things else to support and agree with an opinion that they have adopted (Nickerson 1998: 175-176). According to Nickerson (1998), this case could be seen as "motivated" confirmation bias in which the journalist of the original *The Daily Beast* article was motivated to defend the beliefs that she wished to maintain.

4.4. Meme discourse: the past and present usage of the meme

The online discourse excerpts that I have gathered for this study (see examples in appendix 1 and appendix 2) would suggest that the way Pepe the Frog is used as a meme online has remained the same as it was prior to the classification as a hate symbol. It is still used mainly as a way to convey the emotions of its original poster on social media sites, image boards, YouTube, and the live streaming platform Twitch. However, it is also abundantly clear that the public perception of the meme has changed outside of the internet. For example, in 2018, Monroe Community College began removing "racist Pepe the Frog stickers" on campus. The MCC spokeswoman Cynthia Mapes stated that "It certainly is a symbol of racism that has no place here at MCC" (Murphy & Orr 2018). Also, it would appear that ever since the classification, celebrities, politicians, and other public figures have abstained from posting the meme on their personal social media pages.

In the field of esports, the video game company Blizzard and their Overwatch League have been cracking down on the usage of the meme. According to Carpenter (2018), The Overwatch League and the gaming organizations involved have been discouraging professional players from using the meme on their personal social media accounts and Pepe posters in the audience have been confiscated by the security staff. Farokmanesh (2018) explained that the social media platform, Facebook, has developed its own official policy regarding the frog. Facebook does not outright ban users or delete their posts for using the meme, but their policy attempts to delete posts and accounts that use the meme to convey hateful messages.

Undoubtedly, Hillary Clinton's involvement with the meme's new categorization had tremendous effects on how Pepe the Frog is perceived by the public. However, the way that Pepe the Frog memes are used on the internet in general has remained as it was before the new categorization. As the meme's creator, Matt Furie, previously stated, the way that especially young people use memes on various online platforms appears to be different from what is currently relevant in the news cycle (Bennett 2016). This might explain why you can still find Pepe the Frog used around the internet the same way that it was used eleven years ago.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis in this thesis seems to suggest that the media, journalists, and the powerful public and political figures may have been manipulated into thinking that Pepe the Frog is a hate symbol "almost entirely" co-opted by white supremacists.

Given the timeline of the analyzed articles and the political connections of Pepe the Frog, it is possible that the 2016 US presidential elections and the political atmosphere surrounding the event may have affected the meme's transformation. Valet (2016), describes in her article how heated the presidential debates were during the elections. Donald Trump's comments about the Mexican border have been regarded as racist and his opponent called his supporters "a basket of

deplorables”. Hillary Clinton’s emails were leaked providing the general public with possibly troubling information about her political affiliations and projects. Also, audio recordings featuring Donald Trump were leaked describing possible sexual harassment incidents. Given the heated nature of the 2016 US presidential elections and its connections to racism, sexism, and hateful rhetoric, it is entirely possible that Pepe the Frog was merely caught in the political crossfire of these elections. Donald Trump and his affiliates using the meme and Hillary Clinton’s office writing an article about it, resulted in Pepe the Frog becoming a political symbol, although it has barely been used as such before or after the elections.

Understanding the pre-set limitations of this thesis, I acknowledge that the findings can not be considered conclusive and not all aspects of discourse and media analysis could have been taken into account. Also, given the limited scope of this study only focusing on Pepe the Frog, it is difficult to state whether or not this was a complete manipulation of the media. With more time and resources, one could and should consider other media hoaxes conducted by image board users and internet trolls in the past.

For example:

- The “he can’t keep getting away with it” meme which includes trolls sending journalists and authorities tips that a controversial internet comedian Sam Hyde is the suspect of an ongoing investigation. Due to this hoax, Sam Hyde, the comedian, has previously been falsely reported by the CNN and the Texas sheriff’s department as a mass shooting suspect (NeatoBurrito Productions, 2017).
- Another hoax included data showing that most lactose tolerant people come from western countries and internet trolls attached this to far-right ideas of racial superiority. Following this hoax, The Huffington Post, PETA, New York Times, Washington Times, Spectator, and many other news outlets and media organizations have reported on the troubling connection between milk and racism. For example, Riddell (2017) wrote an article for *The Washington Times* discussing how this connection was made and how it originated from 4chan.

- Another widely successful media hoax was the connection of the OK hand sign with far-right political movements through a campaign called “operation OKKK”. In this hoax, trolls sent journalists images showing that the hand sign would actually appear to form the letters WP (White Power) when done with the right hand. The Anti-Defamation League has actually taken notice of this issue and published an explainer of how this was merely a 4chan hoax targeting media organizations (ADL, 2017), however the explainer had little to no effect since the hoax has been widely picked up by the media. For example, a high school in Chicago has spent over 53 000 US dollars to replace their yearbook since it contained photos of students playing a game called “the circle game” which included the students using the OK hand sign (Palmer 2019). A sports fan was banned indefinitely from Wigley Field for using the hand sign during a baseball game (Redford 2019). Also, actor/comedian Stephen Fry has received a lot of negative publicity and accusations of alt-right connections when he used the OK hand sign on Twitter to promote AOK Kitchen in London during the Mental Health Awareness Week, asking his followers if they are “A.O.K?” (Kelly 2019).
- More recently, clowns have been attached to racism in a similar hoax to the ones mentioned before. For example, Holt (2019) has written an article describing how white nationalists have adopted clowns as their new hateful and racist symbol via a campaign called “operation honk” that started on 4chan.

Given all of these different media hoaxes and troll jobs, it becomes clear that this thesis is not broad enough to conclusively answer the question of how media manipulation by internet trolls can lead into known symbols changing meanings. However, I hope that this thesis could serve as an example for others interested in the subject, or perhaps as a starting point for similar studies to be done in the future.

6 ATTACHMENTS

Appendix 1: Instagram account posting screenshots from 4chan (2019).
Image removed due to copyright

Appendix 2: Twitch chat spamming Pepe (2019).
Image removed due to copyright

Appendix 3: 4chan campaign excerpt 1: celebrating the success (2016).
Image removed due to copyright

Appendix 4: 4chan campaign excerpt 2: reclaiming the meme (2016).
Image removed due to copyright

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