

**POLITICAL THEMES IN POLITICAL MEMES: UNDERSTANDING THE
INTENT AND PREVALENCE OF POLITICAL ONLINE MEMES**

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Online memes have become an intricate part of political participation in the online world, whether it involves voicing one’s opinions or attempting to influence other users, memes offer a plethora of information in a small compact form. This paper takes on the case of the 2016 United States of America presidential elections including the surrounding timeline, examining the memes present in online discussions in relation to the elections and the candidates affiliated. Memes as a new social phenomenon alone is a fascinating topic, but it was particularly engrossing to examine the presence of memes in modern day political discourse and the symbiotic nature they inherit amongst online users, the media and politicians themselves. This dissertation aims to answer the following questions; 1) in what volumes have political memes been produced and shared in this particular case study and 2) what political rhetoric do they exhibit (political values, critique, awareness etc.), utilizing famous classical theories in a modern context such as Durkheim’s ritual theory as well as Cooley and Mead’s theory on symbolic interactionism, as well as modern day theories such as the theory of Participatory culture by Henry Jenkins. The research methodology was the examination of 250 different memes via content analysis collected from the popular social media site Reddit.com, from numerous different political subreddits. The results were fascinating showing the political trend present on Reddit, being more in favor of liberal values as opposed to conservative. Amongst the opinions presented there was also a noticeable divide amongst conservative and liberal users, sometimes to the point of hostility. Numerous different memetic styles were coded however in most instances, memes will always exhibit a</p>	

parodic undertone, even if the topic itself is serious. The importance and popularity of memes as a form of political participation is self-evident, considering the volumes of political memes present in Reddit alone. This dissertation has only shown a fraction of the political discourse taking place in the form of memes in the online world.

Internet-meemeistä on tullut oleellinen osa poliittisista keskustelua virtuaalisissa ympäristöissä, oli sitten tavoitteena jakaa poliittisia näkemyksiä tai vaikuttaa muihin käyttäjiin, meemien hyöty näkyy niiden kyvyssä esittää laajempiakin aiheita tiiviissä muodossa, esimerkiksi kuvina.

Tämä pro gradu-tutkielma käsittelee vuoden 2016 Yhdysvaltojen presidentinvaalien ympärillä käytyjä verkkokeskusteluja, ja virtuaalisesti tapahtunutta vaikuttamista meemien muodossa.

Internet-meemit ovat jo sellaisenaan uusi ja kiehtova sosiaalinen ilmiö, mutta ne tarjoavat myös erityisen kiinnostavan ulottuvuuden poliittiseen keskusteluun ja vaikuttamiseen, erityisesti meemien ollessa usein vuorovaikutussuhteessa - ei ainoastaan tavallisten käyttäjien - vaan myös itse poliitikkojen kanssa. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli löytää vastaukset seuraaviin kysymyksiin: 1) millaisia määriä poliittisia meemejä tuotettiin presidentinvaalien yhteydessä ja kuinka paljon meemejä jaettiin tämän tässä kontekstissa 2) minkä tyyppistä poliittista retoriikkaa nämä meemit käyttivät (esimerkiksi poliittisten mielipiteiden esittäminen, kritiikki tai tietoisuuden levittäminen). Tässä tutkimuksessa käytettiin teoreettisena viitekehystenä Emile Durkheimin rituaali-teoriaa nykyaikaisessa kontekstissa, Charles Cooleyn ja George Herbert Meadin symbolista interaktionismin vuorovaikutus-teoriaa, sekä Henry Jenkinsin osallistuvaa kulttuuria internetissä käsittelevää teoriaa. Tutkimusmenetelmänä oli 250 erilaisen meemin tarkastelu laadullisella sisällönanalyysillä. Tutkimuksessa analysoidut meemit kerättiin Reddit.com –sivuston poliittisista keskustelualueista. Tutkimustulokset osoittivat esimerkiksi sen, että Reddit.com-sivuston meemit edustivat enemmän liberalistisia kuin konservatiivisia arvoja. Tulokset myös näyttivät, kuinka käyttäjien mielipiteet ovat polarisoituneet siten, että liberalististen ja konservatiivisten käyttäjien välillä on suuria mielipide-eroja, jopa vihamielisyyteen asti. Meemit jaettiin aihe- ja tyylikohtaisesti, jolloin kävi ilmi, että vaikka aihe olisi vakava, niin meemit ovat kuitenkin usein parodioivia tyyliltään.

Asiasanat – Keywords

memes, online politics, online symbolic interactionism, participatory culture, online communities, social media, reddit, meemit, internet-politiikka, symbolinen interaktionismi netissä, osallistuva kulttuuri, verkkoyhteisöt, sosiaalinen media, reddit

Säilytyspaikka – Depository

Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1. INTRODUCTION

Internet memes have become an inevitable part of not only online discourse, but also a part of conversations taking place in the real world. Internet culture revolves around the consumption and creation of user-generated content, which further brings us into a participatory online mentality (Miltner 2014). However it is worth noting that internet memes are in no way a new phenomena - in fact the creation and sharing of internet memes has been present already in the early days of the internet looking back at screenshots of old online discussion areas (primarily spread via electronic mail or various discussion communities).

The concept of a meme in an academic context was first introduced in 1976 by Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he described the term meme as a unit of cultural transmission (Castaño, 2013, 83). Although not representing Dawkins' original intention with the term, in a similar sense internet memes could be considered as fragments of cultural information as well, usually by nature representing something amusing or comical. I will dwell into the evolution of the term *meme* further along in this chapter in an attempt to formally define the term *internet meme* so that it serves this academic paper correctly.

The functions memes are hard to define, since they serve multiple different purposes to multiple different groups of people (Castaño, 2013, 84). An online memes objective could serve anywhere between being a harmless piece of information aiming to amuse and spread hilarity among internet users to serving as a compact platform for critical information that is hoped to reach as many viewers as possible in my experience. In light of recent political events, such as the 2016 United States' presidential election, I have observed an increasing amount of politically themed memes being produced and shared among different social media platforms - usually with the intent of influencing political views and spreading both false and true information. This engendered a fascination to examine political memes and how they contribute to political discussion, both in an online and an offline environment.

1.2 Examining political memes

The focus of this dissertation is to delve into the political memes regarding the United States presidential election of 2016 presented over the course of the last few years pre- and post election and observe their context and try to identify their source and more importantly their purpose - *what* political values they display, the political topic they want to address, the information they aim to transmit, their popularity and what different types of responses the memes have invoked among other online users. The personal presumption is that memes offer an outlet for political expression of support, dissatisfaction, celebration and serve as convenient units to reach out like minded individuals to amplify solidarity. I would also argue that memes are a rather efficient way to encourage political participation for those who may otherwise remain rather apolitical and uninterested in independently seek information about current affairs.

The main questions I aim to answer in this thesis are as follows; 1) *in what volumes have political memes been produced and shared in this particular case study* and 2) *what political rhetoric do they exhibit (political values, critique, awareness etc.)*. My own expectations in regards to both question are that there will be an abundant amount of memes relating to the 2016 United States of America presidential election, with support for all political parties involved as well as banter and protest both before and after the election took place. In my own experience there have been bountiful amounts of memes created for the purpose of either being satirical or expression dissatisfaction, or to support or raise awareness on political matters in regards to the election of 2016 and the times that followed during Donald Trump's term as president.

1.3 What is an internet meme?

As stated before, I personally find it imperative that I detach the concept of *internet memes* from the original term presented by Dawkins, since they share little to no contextual similarities and serve two entirely different functions - although both do represent the transmission of information in theory. For Dawkins' term this transmission showcases cultural information in the

pre-digital age, for example tunes, ideas, catchphrases, fashions or skills are all according to him memes, that much like genes, pass on from human to human - brain to brain (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192). Yet Dawkins' definition inherits a more biological perspective, but when talking about *internet memes* the act of sharing digital information is in fact a more social act than anything else (not including the technological aspect of the digital world). One could say that social media and the social interactions taking place in an online environment is the embodiment of when our sociality meets technology (Milner, 2013, 2359). It is worth noting that the original biogenetical aspect of the term *memes* does serve as a valuable metaphor for internet memes in the same sense that much like genes, an internet meme is *a unit of information* which replicates by passing on via internet. It can either pass on as an exact copy or mutate and change (Castaño, 2013, p. 84). In the same sense when considering the term *viral*, the virality of a meme acts in a very similar manner to an actual virus - spreading from carrier to carrier (user to user).

In a modern context I believe encountering the term *meme* will most definitely mean those memes that are created and to be shared in an online environment, whereas the likelihood of encountering the word in its original pre-digital definition is far less likely. I believe this to be true since in real life conversations this division isn't made nor do people speak of *internet memes* exclusively, but merely refer to the online memes as *memes* only. As stated before, internet memes have been a relevant part of the participatory online discourse since the early days of the internet itself, however to the extent to which online memes have changed and expanded is vast and versatile - to the point that they have become a relevant part of nearly all online communication (Ross & Rivers, 2017, 287). Internet memes have lead to the creation of countless online communities dedicated to them, they are utilized by marketing professionals in attempts to keep up with trends and appeal to consumers in a digital era and they serve as a political voice in a digital format worldwide (Bauckhage, 2011).

An internet meme, in short, is any kind of piece of digital information that is passed along from user to user - usually humorous or satirical by nature. By format they are commonly images

(mostly accompanied by text), but can also be videos, text only, websites or practically any shareable online format.

1.4 Meme classifications

Making the distinction as to what constitutes as an internet meme and what doesn't can be challenging due to the fact that internet memes are very diverse and come in different formats. Internet memes come and go in trends and their lifespan may be extremely short lived, some even falling off the radars of the public domain in a matter of days. Kuipers defines memes as a new genre of "cut-and-paste" jokes, referring to the shareability of them (2005). In the midst my own meme dwelling the most typical format of a meme is stereotypically an image with an overlaying text. The text is usually contextual to the image itself, usually parodying something. A good example would be the widespread LOLcats-meme (figure 1), which has been an unavoidable meme for well over a decade.



Figure 1. Two typical LOLcats-memes from <http://icanhas.cheezburger.com/lolcats/>

As seen in figure 1, the LOLcats meme consist of pictures of cats accompanied with text which aims to portray the felines thoughts or words in a fashion that resembles human-like thinking or response - usually written in a playful, deliberately misspelled manner to make the felines abilities to form sentences seem inferior and patronizable in comparison to those of an actual human. They also exhibit online literacy that usually aims to shorten words, for example the writing of "yourself" as "urself" or replacing "to" with the number 2 - a trait which is common

among internet memes of all sorts and not only those falling under the LOLcats genre. Pieces of texts of this nature are also sometimes referred to as “lolspeak”.

Another classic line of memes could be considered the “Rage Comics”. Started in 2008 on the online discussion board platform 4chan, the different “rage faces” were used to make comics which often depicted occurrences and events from the real world. As with all other memes, the possibility to generate your own content to suit your own needs and expressive desires made the rage comic a very popular platform to create often very relatable content (figure 2). Comics themselves, specifically non-online comics/cartoons have existed far before internet memes and many attest that they were in fact the first genre of visual communication to juxtapose images and phrases to create meaning (Huntington, 2013).



Figure 2. A rage comic. Source: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics/>

As of recent years more and more image-based memes have taken on a different appearance, diverging from the style seen presented in the LOLcats memes for example. Although the classic meme style still remains relevant, more and more memes take on a format which has been industrialized by the use of smartphones (figure 3). Typically this format includes a photo with a white header with the included text. Screenshots have also become a relevant format for memes, often taken from social media platforms like Twitter or Tumblr. One might note that memes of

this nature can contain far more text than those in the classic format - giving meme creators more space to express themselves.

"What's the craziest thing you've done for money?"

Me:



Ronald Funches 
@RonFunches



I like the south because they don't tell you when something is vegan here. They WARN you when something is vegan.

3/22/18, 5:48 PM

Figure 3. A typical smartphone generated meme (left) and a screenshot shared as a meme taken from Twitter (right). Source: Imgur.com

Memes that come in an image format are remarkably popular. One could theorize the reasoning behind this being their shareability as well as how easy they are to create. However a meme can be a countless amount of different things. Another common format for memes lies within videos - much of which are shared on the popular video social media platform Youtube and more recently on the image/video platform Instagram. Some videos are deliberately created for a memetic appeal, however some become viral “by accident”. Video memes also undergo replication and mutations just like image memes and some videos only become viral after a widespread enough amount of new renditions.

There have been numerous instances where a social phenomena has also been considered a meme. Trends such as the “dabbing” pose (having one’s arm extended straight and the other one bent in front of the torso, having the individual tuck his or her head into the corner of the bent arm) , “planking” (laying face down and completely still on different surfaces to imitate that of a

wooden plank) or “the mannequin challenge” (in which individuals stand still in different poses for a said amount of time) or more recently “t-posing” (standing straight with both arms extended out, thus imitating the letter “T”) were all considered memes, in which people replicated the said trend in real life and often shared proof of this online - some of course were ironic and parodising the trend itself. Occurrences like these are fascinating because they tie together internet culture with behavior in the physical world.

In short, memes are difficult to classify due to their versatility. However a few clear distinctions can be made, which are the following: a) memes can either be singular and standalone or be part of a larger meme-trend which spawn multiple different kinds of memes relating to the theme of that said trend and b) memes consist for the most part of user-generated content however some may become viral by accident. However in some cases an old piece of art, music or other media may resurface and become viral.

1.5 Memes in politics

With memes being a crucial part of participatory media it is no surprise that when discussing politics in an online environment that some amount of it takes place in the form of memes. Memes are not only a powerful way to spread political thoughts and rhetorics, but also a tool for political participation (Milner, 2013, 2358). They can be used for and against arguments and serve as convenient pieces of compact information. However it is my belief that memes serve an even greater role in public influence than are merely tools for discussion. For instance, as opposed to traditional methods of bringing people together in protest for a cause (e.g. word-of-mouth or flyers), the internet's capacity to reach a multitude of people around the globe makes for a superior amplifier to voice causes and thoughts. A very strong example of this was the Occupy Wall Street-movement in 2011, in which 1,000 activists staged a long-term protest against social and economic injustices. The movement itself originated and collected the attending protesters via social media outlets such as Twitter and Youtube (Milner, 2013, 2358).

Since memes serve as strong tools for satire, it is only logical that they make a perfect outlet for political satire as well. While politically critical cartoons and comics are by no means a new occurrence, a memes ability to reach vast amounts of viewers in such a short period of time makes them significantly more powerful when it comes to voicing political demeanors. The possibility that memes provide to criticize governments and politicians by non-traditional and non-confrontational ways also gives a more democratic voice to those who may not under other circumstances do so (Hristova, 2014, 274). For example the meme *diaosi* (屌丝) was ranked one of the most popular memes of 2012 which challenged China's system of censorship in which the contemporary youth were able to create a viral concept which indirectly criticized the Chinese government and gave said youth the ability to express their opinions in an otherwise strict environment. (Szablewicz, 2014). These are however merely a few examples on how memes have become an intricate part of the political dimension of the internet as well.

1.6 The Great Meme War

A *meme war* is an expression which refers to online rivalries between opposing factions. Although in its original context it entail harmless meme sharing aimed to challenge the opposing person/faction. However the term took a turn into a more political and serious topic around the 2016 United States Presidential Election, although the estimated duration of this so called war was from June 2015 up until November 2016 when the election itself occurred. The meme war that occurred at this time is referred to as “The Great Meme War”, and was carried out for the most part by supporters of Republican president-elect Donald J. Trump - however also by supporters of other candidates in both parties. The vast majority of this meme creating and sharing happened in social media platforms Reddit (reddit.com) and 4chan (4chan.org). What makes this occurrence so fascinating for the topic at hand is the amount of trends and rumors these memes were capable of starting and spreading about the rival candidates - and in some cases it was the core intent to sway political opinions. Some distinction can be made between *the great meme war* and the concept of *fake news* given they both exhibit the tendency to spread false information with political intent - both very prevalent topics when discussion the elections

that took place in 2016 (Minitier, 2017). However meme wars, both political and non-political, are a regular occurrence in the online world. Some of them take place as a form of innocent banter and competition, some as a more serious rivalry and to serve a purpose held dear to those participating.

In this thesis I will first construct a theoretical framework based on previous literature on theories applicable to the phenomena of memes and their purpose of partaking in political discussion in an online environment, as well as their potential for collectivity and political influence. After the foundations are set for theoretical analysis and examination, I will analyze the research material consisting of 251 political memes gathered from the popular social media platform Reddit.com, more specifically memes regarding the United States 2016 elections and the affiliates associated with said political event. After the memes are evaluated by theme and discourse style I will look into a handful of selected memes for more thorough examination via picture analysis, to better understand the dynamics and versatility of memes first hand. In doing so the goal is to create a comprehensive understanding of political memes as a modern age tool of political participation in the era of social media and sharing. With the combination of a theoretical foundation and my own content analysis of the memes at hand, it is hoped that a better understanding of the potential of memes, the political landscape present in Reddit.com and the memetic presence in modern day political participation can be created.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2 The rise of social media and sharing

Although to many it may seem as a straightforward term, there is some confusion as to what really goes under the category of *social media* and what is the true definition of the term. Despite the fact that social media is spoken of as if it was somehow a new phenomena, the truth is that the first saplings of *the* social media as we know of today go back as far as the 70's and 80's (e.g. the worldwide discussion system that allowed users to post publicly, *Usenet*, which was created in 1979). However the more memorable instances of early age social media platforms would be Myspace, Youtube or LiveJournal. It is worth noting that one of the confusing aspects of social media is the fact that there are different types of social media and how they vary in what purpose they serve to the user - however actually categorizing these social medias in a systematic way is extremely difficult (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, 60).

The core necessity whether or not a website or app can be considered social media or not revolves around the key element which is the sociality of it (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, 61). As the term itself implies, the opportunity to interact and converse among other users in some way is what makes a media platform a social media platform. For instance, Wikipedia is considered a social media website, although it is not directly meant for user-to-user communication in the same way that Facebook, for instance, is. However Wikipedia depends on open source participation and for people to contribute - as if it were a community, and in fact does offer the opportunity for users to communicate with each other. The way in which people socialize can be categorized by the level of intimacy present (interpersonal vs. mediated) and by immediency (asynchronous vs. synchronous). In an online environment the nature of this interaction depends on the tools and applications used. For instance, a voice-only Skype or telephone call can be considered less intimate (mediated) than an actual face-to-face discussion or a video call, which in turn are more intimate and therefor interpersonal. A good example of asynchronous communication is email or text, whereas an example of synchronous communication would be a

live chat. This correlates highly with the concept of social presence and the level of both intimacy and immediacy defines the level in which people are modifying each other's behavior dynamically in a social interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, 62-63). With all social situations a person's ambition is to minimize the risk of uncertainty and ambiguity and the amount of power one has over those ambitions depends on the social media platform used - some offer better tools (e.g. more immediacy and intimacy) than others. Blogs and Wikipedia, which are for the most part text-based, offer the least amount of social presence, but on the other hand social networking sites like Facebook offer a very rich amount of both social presence and self-presentation abilities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, 66).

One of the many fascinating aspects of social media and its sociality is the fact that it gives a entirely different opportunity for people to shape themselves and how others view them as opposed to real-life situations. As the concept of self-presentation states according to Goffman; in all types of social interaction people have the desire to control the impressions other people form of them (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, 102). Goffman builds a strong theoretical approach to human interaction with the metaphorical use of *dramaturgy*, in which individuals "perform" in a certain manner to project the self-image they desire to present to the world. Metaphorically he speaks of *front stage* and *back stage* behavior as a means to illustrate the dynamics of human behavior, with the presumption that we as humans adapt to our own social climate and act according to the scriptures expected in certain social environments (Goffman, 1956, 10-13). This metaphor, although applicable to human behavior in a social environment in general, seems clearly relevant to online behavior as well, insofar that the online environment is the *front stage* in this metaphor, and the *back stage* is our non-virtual self. I would go so far as to argue that if anything, the contrast between these two stages is even greater when applied to the case of online interaction versus our non-virtual interaction. To create an image of yourself is one of the major aspects of social media and serves as one of the key functions and is arguably one of the driving forces of human behavior in a social media environment. It is often mentioned how we want to display only the good things in our lives on social media, for instance pictures from our holidays or the very good meal we shared with friends - but we often steer away from

sharing the less-glamorous events in our lives, e.g. the horrible traffic we faced in the morning or the fact that our milk has gone sour. The other reason we may feel reluctant to share these minor grievances is because they might seem relatively mundane and irrelevant. Goffman also mentions in the same metaphorical context the concept of *losing face*, in which the *actor* fails to fulfill the expectations present in a social situation, thus not only disappointing themselves in their performance, but also risks facing judgement by those they present themselves to (Goffman, 1956, 26-27). In my own interpretations, I believe that the magnitude of *losing face* in an online environment isn't as great as in non-virtual correspondences, specifically if anonymity is present. A user can face criticism by online peers for what they have said or done, however the user also has the autonomy to either erase said content entirely, shielding them from further critique, or walking away from the online social situation entirely, contrary to social instances present in the non-virtual world (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, 104).

Much in the same nature as the participatory culture, social media can manifest collaborative projects amongst users which serve as the most democratic embodiment of user generated content, which can be for instance memes. In these collaborative projects a strong sense of community is present and that aspect is only one of the many dimensions of social media as we know it. Although there is the presence of user-to-user communication and also the presence of self-display (e.g. sharing photos to all contacts/followers/friends to see instead of personally share it with one or two people) in social media as well, the communal aspect is extremely fascinating especially in the ways that they bring even larger groups of people together (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009, 64). A good example of a collaborative project would be Wikipedia - or any wiki which relies on users generating the information and then adding and extracting the information. What makes Wikipedia so outstanding is not only the massive amount of information provided, but also the fact that the information is available in more than 230 different languages. The concept of collaboration is also strong amongst different groups and communities on Facebook, for instance, in which people can come together for a certain purpose, like a political movement or sharing fandom over their favorite musical artists.

Throughout the years technology has made it possible for these social media platforms to further evolve and offer more and more sophisticated ways of interacting - even more so with the technological development of smart devices such as tablets and smartphones (Richard, et. al, 2011, 269). Many voice their concerns regarding the huge amount of involvement social media and the devices used to access them in our everyday lives at such a huge extent and also the factor regarding privacy and how these social media platforms use user data. Wherever one's opinion stands on the matter in this context is irrelevant, however, since for the time being social media and the social networks are an intricate part of our lives in the modern era. Being able to communicate wirelessly from around the globe without a doubt brings a whole new perspective in the way we socialize with our fellow citizens alike.

The reason why I found it so crucial to mention social media is solely because it is in these environments in which memes are shared and used. Whereas memes used to mainly circulate in image boards such as 4chan, they have become a crucial part of communication in all social media outlets - Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and not to mention the vast amount of social media platforms dedicated to memes and memes alone, e.g. knowyourmeme.com. Social media provides the means for a meme or viral piece of media to spread in the way that they do. Sharing being a core component of the functions of social media, it is to no surprise that memes are also part of the media being shared.

2.3 The participatory culture

The phrase *participatory culture* is undoubtedly an imperative concept when delving into the world of internet memes. Naturally some online environments are more encouraging for participation than others. For example websites like Reddit, Youtube and Imgur are extremely encouraging and in fact depend on user participation to ensure the production of content.

According to Henry Jenkins, participatory culture can be defined as follows: *1. there are relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, 2. there is strong support for*

creating and sharing what you create with others, 3. there is some kind of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced gets passed along to newbies and novices 4. members feel that their contributions matter and finally 5. members feel some degree of social connection with each other at least to the degree to which they care what other people think about what they have created. (Jenkins, 2007, 7).

One might find it necessary to question an individual's motive to create this said content and within that same question therein lies the moral factor as to why these platforms can seize the majority of profits of content created by someone else? It is theorized that a large amount of this participation is done for the pure leisure of it - without any financial or other motives (Jenkins, 2007, 8.). For some the feeling of receiving online notoriety or merely just acceptance is an adequate trade-off for the labour put into the content at hand, for instance sites like Reddit and Imgur use “upvotes/downvotes” as does Youtube “likes/dislikes. These likes, dislikes, upvotes and downvotes serve as units of approval and can be as gratifying as receiving a “like” on Facebook (Burgess, 2008, 3). However some users do generate content with financial benefits in mind - some even making a lucrative living doing so. In 2017 one of these “Youtube millionaires” was British video game player Dan Middleton who made an estimated 17.3 million USD simply by supplying his Youtube channel with videos of him playing games on a regular basis.

This participatory culture which encourages people to express themselves by creating shareable data also changes attitudes towards politics and even more so political attendance. Whereas before politics could have been considered something of a spectator sport which people watched on the news - something we watch but do not do. Much of this spectatorship is rooted in an individuals lack of empowerment to actually be heard or to influence the political landscape, however in a participatory culture the amount of opportunities for engagement is far more vast (Buckingham, D., 2000, 20).

One of the many riches that the internet provides people is the ability to share their own generated content on numerous different platforms whether it is art, photography, literature,

music or videos - just to name a few, and being able to reach audiences around the globe. However even beyond the intellectual property listed a person can in a certain light also publish themselves and their lifestyles as a brand or product online, for instance via different lifestyle blogs or social media posts. Social media itself revolves around the content of generating and sharing content, whether that content is something regarding their personal lives, something more general or for instance taking a stance on modern affairs. Unlike face-to-face communication, social media forces us to convert our thoughts and opinions to a media format, one that is sharable in an online environment.

That being said, the concept of a participatory culture in an online environment is crucial when discussing memes due to the fact that the creation, the distribution and core existence of memes is dependant on online users engaging in a participatory culture. In many cases something becomes viral and/or a meme simply by accident - being discovered by someone who decided to forward the found media and under the right circumstances it starts to spread user to user. One good example of this was amateur singer-songwriter Tay Zonday's music video "Chocolate Rain" - which as of May 2018 has received 117,380,364 views on the popular video social media platform Youtube. Zonday did not originally intend for his video to become so sensational - yet once his video was discovered it spread like wildfire across the internet (Burgess, 2008, 5).

2.4 Symbolic interactionism in the online world

The dynamics in which we engage in when socializing has been of key interest amongst sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and cultural prophets for as long as those schools of study have existed (J. Fernback, 2007, 53). One of the more known theories when approaching the study of human interaction is one originally conceived by George Herbert Mead which would be later called *symbolic interactionism*, a theory which approaches human behavior from a strong self-perspective. The three core principles of symbolic interactionism, according to

Herbert Blumer, a student and interpreter of Mead, are; 1. human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them 2. the meaning of things is derived from the social interaction that one has with one's fellows and 3. these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters (H. Blumer, 1986). Simply put, the basis of the theory is that humans act towards other people and/or things based on how that person assigns meaning to those people or things.

That being said, I personally found symbolic interactionism being an adequate theory when approaching the sociological significance of internet memes - since the digital era and internet revolution has brought forth a plethora of new means of socializing and new experiences. In those new means of socializing and new experiences there are naturally new objects to which we apply our symbolic meanings to. It is not unheard of to hear scientist refer to the internet as a human ecosystem (Richard, et al., 2011, p.269). Although even the earliest of internet researchers have approached the internet as a *new* social space, as a community of sorts, the extent to which the internet has expanded and leaked into our everyday lives has left a vast space of exploration in regards to the social impact of living in a state of constant connection (Ferenback, 2007, 56). Although the internet is often blamed for tarnishing the ways we socialize in real life, some scientists argue that online technology can be used to rebuild and reinforce the human desire to create and sustain a sense of belonging and collectivity (Chagas, et al., 2019).

Studies that delve into the online world from a symbolic interactionist view often emphasize the importance of the term *community*, since collectivity and communal belonging are the cornerstones of human interaction and also in the nature of self-reflection and self-perception (Ferenback, 2007, 56). It is a natural desire to feel the feeling of belonging and being part of a collective group, in many cases to receive meaning in life, e.g. religion. In this regard the internet provides a whole new level of opportunities to belong, especially since the group does not need to be physically present and at a person's disposal. These opportunities tie together (but also challenge) public life and personal significance, encouraging partaking in different online

interactions which in turn provide a sense of belonging to the subject at hand. However, at least according to Ferenbacks research in which she interviews young people who are active users of the internet, some young people downplayed the personal significance of being part of an online community. This may solely be due to the fact that although a feeling of community is important and it is readily available in online communities and groups - detaching from these groups is a lot less personal than resigning from similar groups, clubs or communities that take place in real life. Naturally the personal significance of belonging to these online communities varies from person to person (Robinson, 2007, 96).

Some argue that although symbolic communication (online community) in an online community is a valid and purposeful social action, there can be no community without the sense of propinquity - in other words, true community and collectivity is not detached from its physical presence (offline) (Fernback, 2007, 59). That being said it is important to understand that not all online behavior requires the sense of community - in fact a majority of our behavior online is aimed to serve a purpose in our personal lives, for example popularity on Instagram may enforce a feeling of personal significance alone, but the true reward manifests itself in everyday face-to-face encounters. In order to understand the sociality of online interaction I find it crucial to distinguish *how* online interaction differs from actual human-to-human communication and in contrast draw out the similarities and the ways in which online interaction further encourages these interactions.

According to the results in the research conducted by Fernback, traditional notions of community are not truly embodied in an online environment. However this thesis aims to focus more on the social symbolics that we give memes, the collectivity that revolves around memetics is an essential dimension to the topic itself (2007). Hence I felt it was necessary to bring up the concept of *community* in the online world. This further enforces the personal belief that being in an online environment can alter the way we behave, at least in the sense that we are not so intimately committed to the social situations we encounter in the online world per contra in real life. For instance, the threshold to post a controversial meme anonymously on an online

discussion forum may be remarkably lower than sharing it with friends or family. I will further discuss the effects of anonymity in the way we communicate in later chapters.

One of the glories of online communication is the fact that we are given the opportunity to express ourselves with means that are beyond our human capabilities. Instead, we can voice our feelings, concerns and attitudes in a wide variety of untraditional ways, such as photos, videos, tunes or quotes - something which takes place effortlessly through an online social platform, but not in a conversation taking place in the real world. Naturally we are capable of sharing the same medias in real-life situations through our phones, as an example, which is well worth noting. In symbolic interactionism the preliminary focus is to assign meaning to our actions and the world around us, and the meanings are designated by experiences and interactions with objects, actions, people and then reflected upon the concepts of “me”. The reason why I find this theory in particular so important (in any case regarding the new world of online communication) because the value, the effect and the social value of a “meme” is nominated by the humans viewing them and being exposed to them. The concept of internet memes and sharing them itself inherits a sense of given meaning through internet norms (Milner, 2013). As stated before, memes in most cases come with the sense of irony or comicality, however in my experience in many occurrences they also come with the aspect of relatability, thus further bringing us closer to the tie between memes and self-perception. The act of sharing or creating a meme for it’s relatability is only one of the ways they can serve as a medium for self-expression with either online strangers or our personal contacts. Even beyond their capabilities to serve as tools for self-expression, they also can bear a sense of collectivity, especially if one were to notice a personally relatable meme being widely spread across the internet.

2.5. The rituals of the online and the sociability of online communities

Emile Durkheim dwelled into the sociological and anthropological dimensions of religion in his years of research, making an emphasis on the term of “ritual”, primarily from a religious standpoint, more specifically those religions practiced by indigenous tribes. Although in its

original context Durkheim examines the dynamic nature of rituals from a spiritual point of view, it is argued that the term “ritual” can be used to examine a whole plethora of human action which involves collectivity, often consisting of the production and maintenance of social integration. (Couldry, 2005.). From collectivity witnessed amongst institutions of worship to sport fandom, there are certain traditions carried out in a collective manner and certain communal rules which may or may not be foundational, yet still exist within said group. Taking a Durkheimian approach, that being taking his theories of *rituals* and *social integration* and applying them to the context of online communal behavior, on the norms that take place in online communities seemed like a natural course of action in the sense that there are unspoken and advised rules in every online community or social platform that the users are expected to follow, as to say thinking beyond the traditional sense of *ritual* and instead more on the lines of *media rituals*. Durkheim’s sociology of religion not only aimed to examine religious behavior as it is, but also bared many feasible methods in questioning any forms of social order (Couldry, 2005.) A lot of human behavior that happens online can be somehow traced back to even our more primitive demeanors and social needs. In relation to Durkheim's take on ritualic behavior two distinct terms emerge, one of them being *profane* and the other being *sacred* - with these terms, the concept of *sacred space* may arise. When discussing sacred spaces the best example would be a church (sacred), which is not built on sacred ground and the ground itself is not considered sacred space (profane), but the building itself provides the sanctity necessary to make it sacred. Although linguistically profane is the opposite of sacred, the two terms have plenty in common, as it came across in the example stated above. When applying these concepts to the examination of the internet, the website or community in which one partakes in online is the sacred space, whereas the plethora of websites and communities outside of his or her own participation remain in the profane territory (Jacobs, 2007). In my process of examining the online communities from which the memes were collected, a similar sense of community was unmistakably present. Of course one can not over-generalize a community, since it is only to expected that the personal social value of those communities vary on an individualistic manner, however I would argue that an individual who seeks out and subscribes to an online community in favor of, for instance, the Democratic party of the United States, that individual deliberately wants to either closely follow

the discussion or partake in it as a user. Interestingly enough, however, the community dedicated to president Donald Trump gave myself the strongest sense of community, with a strong sense of mutual consensus amongst the discussions and memes, whereas other communities came across as more ambiguous. One might ask, is there truly a difference between seeking a sense of belonging and reinforcement amongst those of same faith and seeking the same amongst those of same political belief?

Although the term *ritual* is considered notorious in the sense that it is difficult to define distinctively, in this topic exclusively it implies, as according to Tambiah (1981), that “*Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterised in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotype (rigidity), condensation (fusion) and redundancy (repetition).*”. Much like Habermas (1987), Tambiah concludes rituals as a form of communicative action.

The social reality of online communities and overall online interaction have been discussed over the years, questioning whether or not the experienced social events and interactions constitute as actual social behavior. It is a natural thing to question, since therein lies such a clear division between the online world and the world we experience physically and in-person - especially when reflecting on online communities which inherit more anonymity and therefore are less intertwined with one's personal life. However Hagel (1997) has described internet based communities as “*spontaneous social events on electronic networks, gathered around common areas of interest, engaging in shared discussions that persist and accumulate over time, leading to a complex network of personal relationships in an increasing identification with the group as a community*”, which in my opinion strongly advocates for a strong sense of community and group identity one may experience when participating in an online community. What truly challenges traditional social sciences in this instance is that whereas physical places of social conduct used to be the field in which social scientist could do their observations on their social

relevance, the sociality of the online world takes place in an almost by default non-physical space.

One true quality which adamantly divides online experiences from the real world instances is the lack of the physical social experience one faces in real-time correspondence, for instance body language. Although the definition of community has been defined and redefined by sociologists around the globe for over half a century, a majority of these concepts are shaped and defined by their physical features such as volume, area and their confines (Wellman 1982). After the digital revolution sociologists have been drawn to re-establish the meaning of “strong-tie” and “weak-tie” relationships in the online context and to evaluate where these two types of relationships fall into place outside the realms of physical socialization. Strong-tie relationships appease our essential needs and develop dense groups in which we share a strong emotional and social connection with the other members of said group (e.g. a family). Weak-tie relationships do not inherit such necessity and are not formed under crucial dependence of one and other, but more so offer the exchange of information and a smaller sense of community, for instance those experienced in hobby groups.

What makes the studying of online communities personally so fascinating is the diversity of these communities and the varying emotions and feelings of belonging these communities may instill upon their users. To some these communities may be mere means of passing the time when not engaged in real-world activities, but on the opposite side of the coin these communities may offer social refuge and even be the source of the vast majority of their social interactions (Preece, 2000). One aspect as to why socializing in an online environment may be less intense is the fact that it gives its users the leisure of time when it comes to social interaction, as opposed to face-to-face interactions in which the socializing counterparts do not have the freedom to contemplate on their own responses as much as they can in an online environment. On the other hand this also raises concern in regards to our social capabilities and ability to maintain a certain level of astuteness in the offline world, since users may become detached from the traditional patterns of communication (Preece, 2001).

As stated before, the types of online communities and the social intensity they consist of vary immensely. In my own experience I have observed that online communities which are more closed off and private tend to exhibit stronger rules of discourse, but also more connection amongst the users within that community. In contrast online communities and more public forums do not necessarily offer such a strong sense of community and belonging and therefore serve as an open field for more unhinged online behavior. As a comparative example, a closed off, limited and religiously affiliated online community as opposed to the comment section on a viral youtube-video both exist in the online realms yet are experienced very differently. The means of communication are the same, but the social meaningfulness and behavior that one may observe amongst the commentaries fluctuate to a great degree.

Jenny Preece wrote in her article published in 2001 on the sociability and usability in online communities in which she draws the guidelines as to what shapes the rules and norms in online communities. She also delves into what constitutes as successful online behavior, as well as what are the defining factors which both create the said norms in the first place as well as what individual users must process when adapting to the social expectations present in these communities. According to Preece there are three key components that contribute to good sociability in online communities; *purpose* (the shared focus on a topic of interest, need, service or support which brings the community together), *people* (the members of the community itself) and *policies* (the language and protocols which guide the interactions that take place within the community). These components provide a rather arable approach when examining and evaluating online communities, since the three components presented are all imperative parts of any communal behavior, but are especially relevant when canvassing the social field of online communities. Preece also tackles the question of web-based software usability of these community platforms, stating that they are a necessity for the flourishing of these communities (e.g. interaction and technical support, information design and navigation) (2001). Although these components are also a relevant part of the existence of online communities, I will not discuss them further since they merely serve as the so-called “physical” attributes of a

community - not offering much to further examine from a sociability perspective. I will however argue that the usability of these online platforms have an impact on the overall social experience and their enjoyability. For instance the availability to use avatars or profile pictures, albeit not imperative for an online communities existence, can serve as an ample way for a user to personalize themselves and how they want to present themselves and be perceived as they perform in these online communities.

The main goal of this chapter was to paint a picture of the online world and online sociability which is relatable and can be traced back to even classical theories such as Durkheim's theory on ritual societies and to bring understanding to social behaviour in the online world. Although Jenny Preece does not mention Durkheim's theory, I felt her text brought validation to the presumption that online communities run on specific norms of what constitutes as acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Drawing a bridge to the concept of rituals presented by Durkheim, much like totemic behavior, online communities also rely on a sense of social constructs and order, however in the case of online communities, the totemic beings do not dictate the rules, but more so the moderators and creators of said community. For the purpose of this thesis I felt it was important to shed light on the social aspects of online communities since the creation and distribution of memes happens specifically in online social experiences, and in the case of this dissertation, the memes are presented in specific online communities designated to distribute memes of one mutual topic.

2.6 The art of astroturfing - influencing users from the grassroots of online political discourse

Astroturfing - not to be confused with the brand of synthetic turf playing surface - is a term which actually originates from this said brand of artificial lawn, however its definition and purpose of use is entirely different. In the online context, astroturfing refers to deliberate and well organized campaigns in which either bots or actual human users are utilized to distribute information, more often than not false information, across multiple platforms in an attempt to

influence the greater population. This information and the messages involved are aimed to employ the assumption that they are being written and posted by independent entities. (Zhang, et al, 2013, 2-4).

The reason why I felt it was necessary to include astroturfing in this paper was the fact that in the political landscape which takes place online both memes and astroturfing play a role in the distribution of political information and opinions. That being said I do not see them as mutually exclusive entities but more so the memes as a tool which astroturfers may utilize to their fullest extent if they were so inclined. Since the core focus of this paper is politically themed memes I feel it is important to also shed some light on not only the platforms in which they are presented, but also whom - or *what* are behind their circulation and presence.

It is not uncommon for online users to utilize the plethora of information that the internet can provide them in doing independent research to further shape their opinions and knowledge on current affairs and political topics. Peer-provided information also feeds feelings of solidarity and can support or oppose one's views, thus making astroturfing an efficient way of planting information in a way that seems independently incepted by individual users. Astroturfing is not only considered effective in influencing online users, but typically costs less (Gallagher, 2014, p. 3). If information is provided directly by a, for instance, political entity, one may feel inclined to feel skeptical and take the critical stance that the information is purposely formatted to serve that said political entity with disregard to the complete truth. However when the message is displayed by a seemingly innocent bystander who could not benefit in any significant way by their messages, one may be inclined to be less critical. For example an ostensibly genuine written online review may very well be sincerely written by an individual, however therein lies the probable scenario that it is either indeed written by a user but in a fabricated or nepotistic manner (usually for a monetary compensation) or by an online bot created to specifically generate false reviews (Gallagher, 2014, 3-4).

The possibility of anonymity is crucial for the existence of astroturfing in the online world, since creating false profiles takes very little time and even one person has the opportunity to create multiple profiles on different online platforms to perform as multiple different entities. Generally speaking internet anonymity provides a very fascinating field for social phenomena since people can more freely express sides of themselves that they would not normally in a face-to-face situation, either in fear of confrontation or being viewed as socially condemnable. The world of online socializing doesn't even always require complete anonymity to allow a person to express themselves in a more unhinged matter, for instance on Facebook, where users partake in social discourse mainly under their own name and face and can be viewed by their social network connections. The luxury of anonymity makes astroturfing rather easy, since an entity can utilize fake profiles and fake names to spread misinformation to benefit themselves.

In the political realm it is necessary to practice caution and a critical mindset when stumbling upon seemingly user generated commentaries and expressions of opinion. In 2014 Twitter reported that out of their active users over 23 million are in fact so called "social bots". These bots are designed to collect information, learn and then communicate and share information on the popular social media platform. The nature of this information that they spread depends entirely on the individuals behind these bots and what they aim to achieve with them. It has been speculated by professionals of the field that approximately 55 percent of online traffic happens at the hands of these bots (Ratkiewicz, et al., 2010). The prevalence of these bots and their efficiency has invoked global concern specifically in regards to their potential harm in the world of political discourse when spreading misinformation (Ratkiewicz, et al., 2010). That is not to take the assumption that active internet users have not learned the necessary ability to approach information online critically and skeptically which has been a relevant skill to learn in the digital era, however it is not a self-evident skill and in some cases even critically minded individuals may take a biased approach if they find information that supports their own beliefs and opinions. In my own experience while coming across numerous politically charged articles and memes under the 2016 United States Presidential election, there were many instances of information that came across extremely absurd, yet in the notion of solidarity those who exhibited the same

political views attested to the information as sacred, undeniable truth. It remains a daunting experience to witness as these bots develop even further as knowledge and skills to develop them become more advanced. For instance, the earliest of bots were incapable of communicating directly with actual users in an interactive manner, and were rather sloppy and required more effort by the hands of their creators to function. The current bots are however capable of actual social interaction and are better disguised as actual human users.

There are numerous, actual instances where different political and government bodies have utilized bots to further their own agenda by influencing the population in an online world, such as in Argentina (Rueda, 2012), Australia (Peel, 2014), Azerbaijan (Pearce, 2013), Bahrain (York, 2011), China (Krebs, 2011), Iran (York, 2011), Italy (Vogt, 2012), Mexico (Orcutt, 2012), Morocco (York, 2011), Russia (Krebs, 2011), South-Korea (Sang Hung, 2013), Saudi Arabia (Freedom House, 2013), Turkey (Poyrazlar, 2014), England (Downes, 2012), The United States of America (Coldeway, 2012) and Venezuela (Howard, 2013). The general consensus amongst researchers is that less and less political actors perform outside the online world and that all political action takes place either online or depends on the internet (Wooley, 2016).

Generally speaking these social media networks try to limit bot activity and ban suspicious accounts, however I find this rather inefficient in the larger scale of things, since the algorithms used to detect bot-like behavior only slows down the presence of bots and is not efficient enough to completely stop them in their tracks. Whereas Twitter may successfully shut down one bot account, ten more can be created in a very short amount of time.

2.7 Political memes discussed in previous literature

In the numerous articles and papers I have scoured relating to the topic at hand there is mention of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement - commonly shortened to OWS. It serves as a relevant example of the power of online solidarity and the utilization of social media to encourage participation on a global scale to serve a purpose. Despite being under the radar of

mass media for the majority of the time it took place, eventually news of this movement reached even the attention of massive media outlets (Milner, 2013). The original goal of the movement was to engage a long-term protest of current socio economic injustices e.g. income inequality, corporate influence in politics and unregulated business practices. Although OWS took place through physical participation, the existence of participatory media was the key element in its existence in the first place. Activists utilized to their full extent the possibilities social media platforms provide users in provoking discussion and engagement as well as the use of memes to expand their cause with the help of this new media we've all come to know as memes. These memes not only took the form of traditional image memes or animated GIF files, but also as catch phrases such as "We are the 99%" and "This is what democracy looks like". The use of memes in the public discussion of OWS was especially prevalent on popular sites like Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter and 4chan (4chan.org). (Milner, 2013).

Many articles discussing the relevance of memes in political discourse note how on first sight one may dismiss memes as a valid way of political participation and one may have a tendency to disregard their true potential for influencing other individuals (Heiskanen). This delegitimization is understandable in the sense that memes are typically considered a form of humor merely meant to entertain online users alike, however fortunately a number of articles have been found to discuss the true relevance of memes in not only understanding the political values of internet users across the globe, but also in their nature of influencing political thinking as well as producing the sense of collectivity amongst like minded individuals. As stated by Stefka Hristova, "*They emerge at moments of contestation of dominant narratives and through their participatory structure of imitation and mutation, they allow for the dissolution of points of ideological conflict as well as for the reestablishment of a normative narrative. If not too threatening to the health of the state body, these cultural viruses are left unchecked as they build immunity... of the nation-state.*" (2014). In this viewpoint Hristova emphasizes the capabilities memes have to give a voice to those otherwise not present in the political landscape, whether it is by nature contemptuous or a showing of support of a current narrative, the users are given the opportunity to not only create, but also share their viewpoints in a format which is not only

accessible by a global audience but also has the potential to spread worldwide. I find that the potential power of memetics not only falls into the hands of the creator themselves, but also those who merely share content relevant to their own values and views.

Another fascinating aspect of memes, specifically political memes in this context, is that they can present themselves in even unconventional platforms not traditionally designed for political discussion, diminishing traditional boundaries and instead bridging gaps between the non-political and political agoras online, in sites such as 9gag.com, a favourable social media platform specializing in humorous content and more specifically memes. Although not in any way affiliated with any political intentions, a political meme may still be shared and presented on said website, potentially sparking political participation and discussion in a website not fundamentally constructed for political narratives (Heiskanen). That is not to say, however, that memes and more reputable and politically distinguished media outlets do not correspond together, in fact their symbiosis may be more relevant than one may notice at first glance. During the process of collecting memes for this dissertation not only were their memes, but also discussions taking place in the politically charged online communities either in favor or against certain media agencies whichever suited the foundational agenda of the users themselves. For example, in a generalized manner, democratic users were in favor of the popular news agency CNN, and in contrast republicans were in favor of FOX news, and vice versa, both news agency have been assumed to have a specific political orientation of choice. In turn, it has been seen that news agencies such as CNN and FOX News as well as the plethora of other political affiliated news agencies analyze memetic content in their own casting, utilizing memes as a way to understand and report the feelings expressed via memes by nameless users online.

Memes have naturally received their own share of criticism both on a general level but as well in regards to their place in the political landscape. Benjamin Powers (2016) criticized memes for their tendency to “*grossly oversimplify everything*” thus leaving too much room for false interpretations and even wrongly provoking users or in the worse case spread false information. As Powers states, memes do not inherit the actual complicated nature of politics and the nuances

involved with policy formulation, but instead merely, most often criticize those in political power or seeking it, or in some cases political systems as a whole (2016). In that sense, he criticizes memes as not being the most constructive mean of political participation, however therein lies a curiosity as to in light of the public appeal of memes, does it say something about the common online user and their preferred engagement in the democratic processes (B. Powers, 2016). In light of the risks involving memes as a mean of political influence with the potential for false information being spread, Steve J. Allen wrote in his own article "*The Court of Memes: Why People Believe Fake Facts*" about the dangers of false memes and how their effects can indeed be, very real, giving way to political extremists in their attempts to exploit unknowing internet users in favor of their own interests (Allen, 2016). As astroturfing was already discussed earlier in this chapter, it is important for internet users to practice caution in the information they come across in memes, and always opt to take everything with a grain of salt no matter how much the information presented in that meme supports their own political values. Since memes are most often created and spread anonymously, one can never truly know whether or not the intentions of the creator and distributor are truly sincere, or if the information presented is even accurate. It is in that light that Benita Heiskanen emphasizes that all exposed to political memetics draw a distinction between factuality and memes as an entire separate genre, which incorporates many different styles and intentions, and therefore they should never be viewed as factual representation. Despite their ambiguous intentions, whether it is solely for humorous purposes or for sincere expression of feelings towards a political event, they still serve as a valuable depiction of political voice in the world of online participation as well as internet culture as a whole (Heiskanen, 2017).

One key factor as to why memes are such an efficient mean of political participation and conversation is the way they are capable of synthesising ideas, situations or needs of expression and can condense convoluted political information into a small, brief and effective vessel which encourages engagement amongst people (Re, 2014). As Gutiérrez-Rubí (2014) states, and I quote; "the power of memes, of *memecracy*, resides in the creative force of digital ARTivism for social ACTivism". This quote sums up very professionally the creative opportunities that memes

offer in regards to self-expression and pursuits to spread information in the online world, as memes are more than just images - they are at their core *ideas* and *thoughts*.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to tackle the following questions, as stated in the first chapter; *1) in what volumes have political memes been produced and shared in this particular case study and 2) what political rhetoric do they exhibit (political values, critique, awareness etc.)*. These questions will be aimed to answer using the discipline of content analysis to examine relevant political memes over the past few years. I found content analysis being the most fruitful approach for this study, as it is stated by Berelson (1952), content analysis offers the possibility to reveal international differences in communication content, detect the existence of propaganda, identify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution, describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications and determine psychological or emotional states of persons or groups. These possibilities seemed very relevant to the topic discussed in this paper and therefore lead to my initial decision to examine memes from a content analysis standpoint.

My presumption in regards to the first question presented is that there will be plentiful amounts of memes regarding the 2016 presidential election, in fact so many that I will be able to merely skim the surface of these memes. From a personal point of view this political topic has been one of the most provocative in terms of memes and also produced some of the highest amounts of memes for one particular political event. Naturally the election itself cannot be classified as the event alone, but times way before official campaigning began when first talks of the 2016 presidential elections took place, to this present day in 2018 - two years since the election day of 2016. It is however worth mentioning the dynamic nature of these memes that have been witnessed, that the topics at any said time have focused primarily on current topics and political moments. That being said I feel it is important to clarify that although the political topic itself is the United States of America presidential election of 2016, it doesn't include only the election itself but the time leading up to the election day itself, as well as the political prevalence of memes post-election, taking more of a stance on the current presidential term.

As for the second research question, my presumptions are that there will be adequate amounts of representations from all over the political spectrum, however more specifically memes about both Hillary Clinton, the democratic candidate who ran against Trump in the final election round, as well as Donald Trump, the republican candidate who eventually won the said election. In both cases I assume there were and still are plenty of memes showing either support or opposition, aiming to spread political values and influence the amount of votes and approval ratings. I personally believe some memes go as far provocation and even spreading misinformation in favor of their own political beliefs (*them* being the creators behind said memes, which I will discuss further into this chapter).

3.1 Memetic sources

There is no considerable challenge presented when it comes to searching the internet for memes - if anything I will assume the actual challenge is that memes are so abundant and their presence is so vast that searching for relevant material to examine may be overwhelming in the midsts of the ocean of memes that one may encounter when navigating across the online world for memes. Staying true to the purpose of this paper I want to be considerate of the sites I will utilize and ensure the platforms themselves offer the resources I need. That being said, unfortunately I find it impossible to use the popular online image board 4chan.org due to the fact that the amount of posts made there over the course of one day are so abundant that there is no real opportunity to search posts made even in the past month - much less in the past few years. Although I still find it an imperative part of political memetics worth mentioning due to the fact that so many instances of online activism and political memes have originated from those said boards, often then reaching sites like Reddit or Tumblr.

I believe that Reddit will prove to be my most useful source of material when it comes to finding politically themed memes, especially since the platform allows one to really search specific topics by utilizing topic specific subreddits. Reddit is essentially a massive collection of subreddits, each giving its users a topic specific image board for discussion and sharing relevant

media on said subreddits. 4chan.org does function in the same nature, however the massive amounts of posts drown under the traffic of new posts and there is no specific function to find older posts. That being said, Reddit will not only be more fruitful for the purpose of this paper, but also remarkably more practical in my efforts to find relevant memes. The amount of political subreddits itself is very bounteous and range from general, global-scale political topics to extremely specific, political affiliation specific forums. That is not to say that I will leave my explorations to the politically specific subreddits only, for I believe subreddits such as r/worldnews and r/worldpolitics, while more generalized, will provide useful information and relevant materials as well. Reddit will also prove useful in examining responses to political memes since each post has its own comment section. The amount of commentaries of course depends on the popularity of said post, but it does clarify the process in examining what responses a specific meme or topic sparks amongst users across the platform, as well eases the process of evaluating whether or not the memes were found relevant by other Reddit users - often referred to as Redditors.

Although the popular social media site Tumblr has been mentioned briefly in this paper and in previous literature, I feel compelled not to dive into the world of political memes on this site specifically, mainly due to my own experience in the sites usability. Tumblr, to me, comes across more as a closed off social media platform, and although hashtags are also utilizable on that said site, it's navigational qualities seem subpar to me in comparison to those provided by Reddit. I also feel, specifically from experience, that the user generated content on Tumblr comes across as far more personally than those expressed on Reddit, mainly because by nature it is a blogging website, and although compact posting is fairly common on the platform, there are also many instances of long blog posts which do not serve this paper specifically. Since memes are by nature meant to compress information into brief, small units of information, I feel I should stay true to that and focus on compact posts alone, preferably memes only unless context is necessary.

In that light, my key focus will be on Reddit, especially since the site functions as a good source of cross-platforming, a.k.a a Twitter post may be shared on Reddit. By utilizing cross-platforming I do not have to specifically explore other sites since in most cases the most relevant units of information and news are shared on Reddit. I found it important to narrow down my online sources I will use to only one website alone, especially since Reddit itself is so vast and the amounts of shared content so abundant. So abundant in fact, that I will unfortunately be able to only skim the surface of said website as well. As such, as tempting as exploring very topic specific subreddits such as r/AnarchistNews, r/Egalitarian and r/AnarchaFeminism would be, therein lies a risk of derailing off the topic this paper itself wants to address.

3.2 Subreddits of interest

As stated prior, the popular website Reddit functions as follows; the site has, what they call, *subreddits*, meaning forums of one specific topic. Subreddit topics can be extremely specific or in turn, exceedingly general and broad by nature. For example you may find very generic subreddits such as r/funny or r/videos, which welcome a very wide selection of content to be shared (with subreddit specific rules), but one may also find such topic specific subreddits such as r/SEUT (squirrels eating unconventional things), which specializes in the sharing of content in which squirrels are eating things they normally wouldn't. Reddit, as of November 2017, was shown to have nearly 1.2 million subreddits (Statista, 2017). Although Reddit does not require an account to view content, it does require an account in order to post, upvote/downvote or comment on posts. However accounts are rather anonymous in the sense that Reddit does not require an email in order to sign up, simply a username and password. One individual could, in that sense, have multiple usernames, something which has raised questions among the community in fear of bots and astroturfers. With an account, a user can personalize their feed by subscribing to the subreddits of their choice, or simply browse the front page which shows the popular posts of that moment in time with posts from a variety of subreddits.

Many subreddits, particularly those specializing in a specific topic surely kindle a sense of community amongst their active users and offer a place of support and encouragement, as well as the opportunity to discuss topics of mutual interest. This is fascinating from a social perspective insofar that the opportunities for becoming intentionally biased, say politically, are rather abundant on these said communities, making political subreddits (specifically those with a specific political view and cause) an ample field for examining political discussion in the online world, especially in the case of this paper, memes. As previously discussed in this paper, online political participation gives a voice to those who may not normally have the opportunity to do, as well as encourage political discussions that one may not normally partake in the real world in fear of losing face, since even partial anonymity can give users the courage they need to voice themselves.

As stated before, Reddit has a wide range of politically themed subreddits, some more general and some aimed to serve a certain political point of view. Since the goal of this paper is to examine political memes as a whole I will be sticking to more general and popular subreddits for two main reasons, first one being that the more general subreddits have a remarkably larger amount of active users and subscribers, therefore containing a larger variety of material and posts to utilize as well as better measures of popularity and user generated feedback. As for the second reason, I feel compelled to stick to more general political subreddits solely due to their more neutral nature, as I believe they will give a more even amount of political themes from all ranges of the political spectrum, not only biased posts of one designated political theme. Figuring out the user activity of subreddits is a simple task, since one can simply look at the subreddit statistics as to how many subscribers one subreddit has, as well as how many of those users are online at that time. In my own experience subreddits with high numbers of both subscribers and currently online users usually guarantees a high number of user activity as well.

After an extensive examination of the political subreddits I deemed noteworthy for my research interests, I have narrowed them down to the following; r/Republican, r/Democrats, r/2016_elections, r/HillaryClinton, r/The_Donald, r/PoliticalHumor and r/PoliticalMemes.

Although it would be fascinating to expand my sources to other political parties and candidates involved in the 2016 presidential elections to get the most comprehensive view, due to limited amounts of resources I have narrowed down the topics to the two main parties running as well as the most crucial and relevant candidates at the end of the election cycle, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. I originally anticipated examining memes from r/Politics, but upon further examination the subreddit in question did not provide memetic data that could be used in this paper. r/PoliticalMemes and r/PoliticalHumor seemed like an obvious choice for this paper, as well as r/2016_elections.

The goal is to utilize the subreddits mentioned above in finding memes relevant to the 2016 United States presidential election both prior to the election itself, and some time afterwards, and then building an understanding of the amounts of memes presented, how these amounts have changed in the past years, their purpose and political stance, the response they receive and in what nature do they exhibit said political movement/figure. This could also show the general political consensus amongst Reddit users and in what degree does the said party/political figure receive support.

3.3 Data collection

Now that the functions of subreddits has been explained, and the subreddits to be used narrowed down, in this chapter I will describe the means to be used in collecting the data itself from these said subreddits. All subreddits contain the same functions as provided by Reddits platform, with the ability to use keywords while searching for posts within the subreddits, being able to find posts from years prior, the ability to sort posts by their popularity and controversiality and being able to see the number of upvotes on each post as well as the amount of comments as well as the comments themselves. Unless they are purely text posts, Reddit posts are hyperlinks to other media platforms, with possible commentary added by the user who posted said post. For instance, image photos are often uploaded to the picture sharing website Imgur.com, which serves as the primary picture service for Reddit. Although a minor detail to the functions of

Reddit, since my data consists of photos, it is worth noting that although found on Reddit, the image itself is a link to [Imgur.com](https://imgur.com).

In my process of collecting data, I will narrow down my search to memes posted starting 2015 when first conversations of the elections emerged to memes posted in the years following the elections. Although the election itself took place in November 2016, election and campaign themed memes were already afloat as early as 2015. I also deemed it necessary to examine the memes that were prevalent post-election, specifically after Donald Trump's inauguration to see the nature of memes when the election itself was over, but still a recent event which was so relevant - both politically and from a media standpoint. By examining the memes relating to the elections on an approximately three year span, one can evaluate possible changes in the meme trends, rhetorics and then current topics. The ability to see how attitudes shift and change towards candidates, political parties and the election as a whole from the pre-election times to the months following the inauguration.

I find it important to aim focus at memes that have been keen to the public eye and therefore provoked response or received praise and acknowledgement by others in the community. Defining what makes a meme adequate can be a daunting task as individuals may have different preferences, however in this it is simple to rely on publicity and popularity - to see how the post ranks amongst other posts and if said post has a fair amount of upvotes thus implying it's appeal to the community majority. That is not to say that controversial posts wouldn't offer a similar intrigue, which is why I will not limit myself to the spotlight alone, but also examine posts that have received both upvotes and downvotes, thus giving them the title of *controversial*. Not only do controversial posts imply both dissatisfaction and satisfaction by others in the community, but also portrays division amongst users. If the question arises what causes this division, one may seek answers from the comment section of the post to see what other users of the community have said in favor or as disapproval (that is if said post has drawn out concrete feedback).

During and after searching and collecting relevant meme data throughout the course of three or so years the memes should be categorized in a certain fashion to clarify memetic volumes and

further focus on each meme topic thoroughly to get an extensive view on not only the topics at hand, but also by their nature. Since memes serve as often humoristic units of information, it is to be expected that a lot of them will be satirical by nature, to be mocking a political phenomena. In my own experience however some of the political memes I have encountered have been serious in nature, only aiming to raise awareness and spread information. In light of spreading information, some memes which aim to solely spread misinformation in the attempt to harm a political cause or figure have also been exhibited. That being said, the memes collected for the purpose of this paper will be tracked and accounted in order to reach an overall view of not only the volumes of memes in favor of different political stances, but also the nature of the memes which helps in understanding the purpose of the meme. On a grassroots level I attest that all of memes I will encounter will have one specific goal by default, which is to serve the political agenda of the content creator - however how this attempt is executed varies to a great extent.

To summarize, the key factors in my pursuits for data collection will be to narrow the timeline to an approximately three year span, concentrating on the most relevant and also active subreddit communities in regards to the United States elections of 2016 and the aftermath of the elections, focusing on the memes which have received a popular response as well as controversially held memes as well as preliminarily examining the content of the memes themselves for further analysis.

3.4 Analysis procedures

The sample size used for this research will aim to be approximately 200-250 image memes all collected from Reddit, then further categorized by context. The goal would be to gather a sample size which evenly represents an equal amount of memes in favor of democratic political values and republican political values, as positive representation of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Naturally a good amount of memes wont be favoring either candidate directly, but criticizing one or the other. All of the memes may not necessarily be divided by candidate, whereas some will be relevant in both party and candidate relating memes. In my assumptions

there will also be memes that will be ambiguous in regards to either specific party and impossible to assign to either party due to the creators unknown party of choice, yet still relevant and taking a stance on important political matters in the United States, for example gun control laws. Memes will also be charted by the year they were posted, to better understand the current political events unfolding at that period of time. Naturally some memes will not be year-specific, where as in my belief some will aim to specifically take a stance on then relevant political topics.

Content analysis seemed like a natural choice for a research topic of this nature, since the sources one can possibly use in content analysis are so vast. In practice content analysis offers the ability to examine the presence of words, themes or contents within a source of qualitative data, in this case, the memes collected. Using charts to examine meme counts I am able to quantify the data insofar that I can examine their relevance and presence in the environment from which the data is collected. Within these guidelines it is possible to make inferences of the phenomena itself and where it stands in regards to the digitalized age. With the help of content analysis, researches can understand communications, the attitudinal and behavioral responses to these communications, understand the individuals and groups affiliated with these communications, the international differences present amongst these communications, notice patterns in these communications, pre-test interventions or surveys before conducting them and complement quantitative data by analyzing the focus group interviews and open-ended questions (Columbia University). That being said within my intrigue to examine memes it was deemed useful specifically to *reveal patterns in communication content*, with memes being the communication content in this context, and patterns being the themes present as well as their prevalence not only in specific communities, but in Reddit.com as a whole. Content analysis also offers so many different approaches to analyzing the sample in question, as in this case, identifying the intentions and purposes of these units of media known as memes, in regards to one specific political phenomena. Content analysis is also useful in describing the attitudinal responses these memes bring out in other users of the Reddit community, and to evaluate the general opinions of the Reddit community, both generally and subreddit specifically. Although the first research question presented addressed volumes and not so much content, I felt examining the popularity

of memes in political discourse itself offers insight into the ongoing trends in online based political discussion, as well as how often they are utilized as a tool to raise awareness and influence other online users. Understanding the prevalence of political memes potentially creates a better understanding of how often they are used as a mean for partaking in political discussion, as well as the hypothetical new format of political participation especially for those who represent the younger generations who have aged in an online surrounding. The internet offers a whole new field of political discussion with tools and abilities never possible before in a traditional setting, starting from the ability to remain anonymous behind ones claims, accessing information almost instantly in debate and using the tools of media sharing to better voice one's own opinions. The possibility for feedback and counting opinions are also more plentiful since the audiences one might achieve with their opinions can be exponentially larger than those possible in a real world environment.

The second research question is far more orientated towards the method of content analysis, with the ambition to determine the political rhetoric and purpose of the memes used in this research, as well as their value in regards to the community it is presented in. To understand not only the social significance of these memes but to get a picture of not only years passed but the political climate that lingers today amongst users around the world, and in that wisdom finding an ample way to better understand how political memes serve as a template for political voices and what those voices actually are and represent.

Following the guidelines presented by scholars of content analysis, the general steps for conducting this research via content analysis go by the following structure; it is first necessary to decide the level of analysis, which in this case are themes since it gives room for larger analysis given the varying nature of how memes present themselves. After the memes have been collected they are to be coded, and it is necessary to decide to which extent those memes are coded (Berelson, 1952). In this case I saw it fruitful to code them via *theme* and *style* to understand not only the themes which provoke memetic participation, but also which styles are used for their purpose. Traditionally a researcher has two options in the coding process; to stick

with predetermined codes and examine the data for specific concepts or modify the codes as the research proceeds in order to allow more flexibility in one's research (Berelson, 1952). In my case I have opted to allow flexibility during the research, however striving to avoid over-generalization or getting distracted from the original topic at hand. Further into the research process one must determine whether the codes are to distinguish the existence or frequency of a concept, which in this case examines both, the prevalence of memes as well as their purpose. The fourth phase is to plan how to distinguish among the concepts present, meaning the creation of coding rules and determining what level of implication is allowed in the research process, to avoid overgeneralization and keeping the foundations of the process in place (Berelson, 1952). This is to help keep the coding process consistent to avoid misunderstanding of the material at hand. Once these foundational rules have been implemented one must also decide what information is irrelevant and what is to be done with said irrelevant information (Berelson, 1952). Thankfully in the case of these memes collected for the research there is little room for misconception insofar that, as stated prior, memes tend to grossly over-simplify information thus making their themes easily known. It goes without saying, however, that the ways one views memes can be very subjective and vary on an individual level. In this thesis however the goal was to stay with memes which displayed a clear agenda. After the ground rules have been laid for the research it is time for the coding itself, which can either be carried out via software or by hand. Since the sample size is of a manageable size I have decided to code them by hand, to get closer to the research material and as familiar with it as possible to minimize the risk of false-coding. After the coding is complete, it is time for the actual analysis to take place. Furthermore this paper will take a handful of memes under closer inspection in the form of picture analysis to make the analysis as comprehensive as possible, as well as broadening the understanding of memes both up close and in a larger scale (Berelson, 1952).

The first step in examining the memes collected would be to determine the types of relationships to analyze, in this case the foundational relationship being the creator's own relationship to politics, e.g. how they feel about a certain topic, in which the opinion has been compressed into the format of a meme. The next instance to examine is what themes are

commonly expressed through memes, and even more importantly so, which memetic tactics are used for political expression. On a larger scale one may want to ponder the influence of memes as a whole in the world of politics, and how much leverage do they actually have on political views. Much like traditional political drawings, memes tend to satirize political figures and institutions not only to raise awareness but to manifest a creators frustrations into something concrete - in this case imagery. In order to better understand these relationships it is important to categorize the memes collected to better recognize patterns and contexts presented in these said memes, as well as make note of differences in rhetorics, e.g. do pro-Hillary memes exhibit similar patterns amongst each other that clearly differ from pro-Donald memes?

In order to secure sound research it is important not to over-generalize and try to avoid too many instances where false conclusions are made. That being said I find it important to focus on recognizing patterns that present themselves in the collected memes in general, as well as topic-specific patterns that can be noticed amongst memes that serve a mutual cause, for instance different derogatory words used to describe the perceived political opponent. By taking note of pattern like behaviors within politically themed online communities one can make assumptions of the community as a whole, for instance which words gain popularity in use, e.g. the word “Libtard” (the word liberal, as in generalized someone with progressive values + the word “retard”, used in an offensive matter) in describing anyone in opposition of the conservative republican rhetoric. In an optimistic tone it is hopeful that by analyzing the contents of these memes there will not only be a better understanding of online community behaviors for a mutual cause, but also the general appeal and influence of memes in the political spectrum of online discourse.

3.5 Conclusion and legal disclaimer

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methods used in gathering data for the research, as well as the principles used to evaluate and examine the data itself. By first evaluating which subreddits, the topic specific boards on the online platform Reddit, would be purposeful for this

research, they were eventually narrowed down to eight subreddits out of all other politically themed subreddits. The political themes were decided based on their relevance in the 2016 United States of America presidential elections, focusing solely on a division between the two main parties; the Republican party and the Democratic party, as well as the two primary candidates who were against each other in the final round of the elections; Donald Trump (Republican) and Hillary Clinton (Democrat). Apart from these clearly divided subreddits there will also be more generic subreddits used, such as the subreddit dedicated to the election as a whole, but not in favor or against either party or any individuals affiliated with these said parties, but for instance memes regarding the political system as a whole.

The meme database consisting of 200-250 memes will be categorized by year, by candidate, by party, as well as memes not falling into any candidate or party specific stances. Once categorized, the memes will be evaluated by context, by rhetoric, by community response and popularity and aimed to be used in better understanding the world of political expression and influence through the method of memes in an online community. The method used will be qualitative content analysis, in which the memes will be examined by, for instance, the images chosen to be used, the use of language, the rhetoric and tone of the memes (humoristic, provocation, etc.), the feedback of the community and the opinions themselves to better understand the general opinion of those who opt to voice their opinions online.

In order to secure ethics in this dissertation it goes without saying that the legal aspects of the materials gathered must be discussed before continuing onto the actual analysis. As memes are considered intellectual property it is important to pay respect to the original creators and bare in mind their copyrights to the memes themselves. Therein lies a challenge, however, since most memes are impossible to trace to their original creator unless specifically watermarked and furthermore sourced to the original platform in which the meme was shared. This however, is rarely the case with memes. That goes for both the original picture upon which the memetic modifications have been made, however in many cases even the source of the original picture are unknown. The correct copyright laws regarding memes are still a controversial topic, specifically

for the reasons listed. It is in that nature that I have withheld myself from any watermarked memes for the purpose of this paper and to be mindful of the copyrights the original creators have.

Before the data was gathered I read the Reddit terms and agreements thoroughly to insure no violations were being made and that the research follows strict ethical guidelines in respect to both the platform and the users of said platform. Reddit.com is based on public information which is publicly available. Users most often create usernames which are not distinguishable to any actual individuals identity. As with any social media research it is important to respect and protect the actual identities of the users and therefore keep the users anonymous at all costs, which fortunately is the case with most usernames on Reddit.com. Furthermore none of the usernames present in the posts were collected for the purpose of this paper, since the focus is not the users themselves, but the memes posted and memes only. When an individual signs up for the services of the platform they consent to the publicity of their content and therefore gives permission that their content is be public even to those not part of the platform. The data itself collected will in no way be modified or solicited for any personal gain, but merely collected as data and data itself from Reddit.com and therefore is not attributable to Reddit.com as a social media platform or any specific users or individuals. The purpose of this dissertation is not to cause any personal or social harm to either the social media platform used, the users nor the political figures present in the data collected, and are not subject to my own opinions or agendas.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In total, 251 memes were gathered in the process of data collection. Naturally with a sample size of this magnitude, not nearly all memes can or will be analyzed any further than the message they portray. However it was felt necessary to collect a sizable sample size in order to better understand the prevalence of memes in this political subreddits, as well to the general opinions that linger within the community. One of the first observations that were made was that different subreddits exhibited different quantities of memetic expression. Although memes were present in all the subreddits examined, some utilized memes as an informatory format far more frequently than others. For instance, r/The_Donald bared far more fruitful in the process of data collection in comparison to r/HillaryClinton. This already awakens presumptions on rhetorical differences amongst the two mentioned subreddits. Naturally subreddits such as r/PoliticalHumor and r/PoliticalMemes showed larger meme frequencies since the sharing of humorous political imagery serves as their purpose specifically. In contrast subreddits such as r/Democrats, although containing memes as well, had a fair share of other shared media such as news articles, videos and opinionated blog posts, since the subreddit in question is meant for all discourse discussing the democratic party.

Although the elections itself took place in 2016, many memes proved relevant to the topic even though posted after the elections, some celebrating the election outcomes and some displaying dissatisfaction. On a general note, however, the most popular memes as presented by Reddit's "top posts/all time"-function were situated in 2016 and 2017.

What showed most fascinating already in the process of gathering the data was the polarization of opinions amongst users in regards to United States of America politics. The opinions and feelings felt were not lighthearted, some quite holstered with contempt and bitterness. Naturally it is important to remember that the opinions presented and the assumptions made cannot be overly generalized as facts in terms of how a population feels, however it does provide

fascinating insight as to what is felt accomplished by the U.S. government as well as what seems to cause dissatisfaction.

4.1 Criterias of categorization

In order to categorize the memetic data accordingly it is important to draw criterias for categorization to ensure that the categorization serves its purpose. Since the memes will be categorized firsthand by the values they portray, it is imperative to make clear distinctions of each meme insofar that they fit the assigned categories correctly. The preliminary categories are as follows; *democratic, republican, anti-liberal, anti-conservative, pro-Trump, pro-Hillary, anti-Trump, anti-Hillary* and *other themes*.

As with all the other categories except *other themes* the first obvious implication of the memetic rhetoric lies in the subreddit from which it was found. For instance, you won't find a meme playing in favor of republican rhetorics in a subreddit dedicated for users who want to participate and view media in support of the Democrats. This however does not mean that memes only found from r/Democrats are excluded from this category, since memes portraying democratic values can also be found in other subreddits such as r/PoliticalHumor and r/HillaryClinton. That being said, the source of the meme is not the only mean of classification. One example of a meme that fits both in the democratic category and anti-Trump category can be found below (figure 4). It is worth noting at this time when concrete examples of the materials are presented that it is very rare for a meme to exhibit a watermark of its original creator, therefore sourcing the origin of the meme impossible. This post was found under the title "*where do Republicans find these people?*" firstly speaking of Republicans in a critical tone. The photo itself exhibits four photos of presidents; first Bill Clinton with the text "I balanced the budget", next to a picture of George W. Bush with the text "I destroyed the economy". Underneath the two are photos of Barack Obama with the text "I fixed it!!" and finally a picture of Donald Trump with the text "Glue is yummy".



Figure 4: a meme posted under the title “Where do Republicans find these people?” with democratic president Bill Clinton (upper left), republican president George W. Bush (upper right), democratic president Barack Obama (lower left) and current republican president Donald Trump (lower right).

The meme in question clearly plays in favor of democratic politicians, in this case presidents, which gives its first instinct to put it under the category of *democratic*. This, however, clearly is also anti-Trump in nature as the meme mocks the presidents intellectual capabilities with the implication that he eats glue, an act often carried out by, for example, young children. Therefore it is important to point out that some memes will naturally fall into more than one category.

Before dwelling further into the categorization of memes I feel it is necessary to briefly explain the political system and situation of the United States of America as of today, in order for the reader to also understand what constitutes the classification of a certain meme, say under either the democratic or republican category. The United States of America is notoriously known for having a *two party* system, meaning there are only two primary political parties in the United States political system. This doesn't mean that other, smaller parties do not exist, however they

often fall off the political radar due to their lack of size. According to the comparison website Diffen.com, the differences between Democrats and Republicans goes as follows (table 1);

	Democrat	Republican
Philosophy	Liberal, left-leaning	Conservative, right-leaning
Economic ideas	Minimum wages and progressive taxation	Wages to be set by the free market and taxes shouldn't be increased for anyone
Social and human ideas	Based on community and social responsibility	Based on individual rights and justice
Stance on military issues	Decreased spending	Increased spending
Stance on gay marriage	Support (some Democrats disagree)	Oppose (some Republicans disagree)
Stance on abortion	Should remain legal	Should not be legal (with some exceptions)
Stance on death penalty	Democrat strongly support the death penalty, however opponents of the death penalty are a substantial fraction of the Democratic base	A large majority of the Republicans support the death penalty
Stance on taxes	Progressive, generally not opposed to raising taxes to fund government	Tend to favor a "flat tax" (same tax rate regardless of income). Generally opposed to raising taxes.
Stance of government regulation	Government regulations are needed to protect consumers	Government regulations hinder free market capitalism and job growth
Healthcare policy	Support universal healthcare	Private companies can provide healthcare services more efficiently than government-run programs. Generally oppose Obamacare.

Table 1: A comparison chart between democrats and republicans

(https://www.diffen.com/difference/Democrat_vs_Republican)

With the political differences displayed and clarified between the Democrats and the Republicans, categorization should be easier as the political stances are known between the two.

Apart from the obvious category choice for a meme, it is important to draw other distinctions other than the source of the meme. For the category of *democrats*, the criteria goes as follows: 1) The meme displays a Democratic politician in a positive light, 2) the meme displays a politician of another party in a negative light, 3) the meme or title is clearly meant to criticize the opposing party, either via comparison or blatantly and 4) the meme clearly portrays values typical to the democratic rhetoric (table 1). If a meme portrays one of the traits listed above, it constitutes as a *Democratic* meme. However it is likely that a lot of the democratic memes that consist of criteria number three, for instance, will also go under the category of *anti-conservative*. However this is only relevant when the meme clearly aims to speak in favor of Democrats, since a meme can, for instance criticize Republicans, yet come from a Libertarian user. As for the Republican category, the criteria is fairly similar to those in the Democratic category, being 1) The meme displays a Republican politician in a positive light, 2) The meme displays a politician of another party in a negative light, 3) the meme or title is clearly meant to criticize the opposing party, either via comparison or blatantly and 4) the meme clearly portrays values typical to the republican rhetoric (table 1).

In regards to the candidate-categories, memes that will fall under the pro-Hillary category will display one or more of the following characteristics; 1) the meme clearly wants to portray Hillary, her values, campaign promises and/or accomplishments in a positive light and 2) the meme contains a juxtaposition of Hillary and Donald Trump, with Hillary's attributes clearly meant to emphasize her strengths in contrast to Donald Trump's weaknesses. The reason however why memes that are meant to be negative in regards to Donald Trump do not fall under this category is because although negative press of Trump plays in favor of Hillary, it does not necessarily mean the meme itself is meant to support Hillary. As for the pro-Trump category, the meme characteristics are 1) the meme clearly wants to portray Trump, his values, campaign promises and/or accomplishments in a positive light and 2) the meme contains a juxtaposition of Donald Trump and Hillary, with Donald Trump's attributes clearly meant to emphasize his strengths in contrast to Hillary Clinton's weaknesses. As for the categories anti-Hillary and anti-Trump, the defining characteristics are 1) the meme clearly portrays the candidate in

question in a negative light in an attempt to hurt the candidates image, such as actual quotes, or in some cases fictional rumors and statements meant to be viewed in a negative way and 2) memes that display a candidates attributes, actions or campaign promises in a tone of contempt.

Memes which fall under the category anti-conservative and anti-liberal will inherit characteristics of 1) displaying dissatisfaction or opposition of either Republican or Democratic values and policies (conservative versus liberal) and/or 2) displaying acts, behaviors and/or statements of either conservative or liberal citizens in an unflattering manner and with a critical tone. The final category *other themes* will contain memes which fail to fall within any of the categories and the criteria presented yet still are relevant to the topic, for example memes which criticized the United States of America political system in its entirety or general dissatisfaction towards online algorithms which are accused of suppressing controversial opinions. Whilst gathering data from r/The_Donald I became quickly aware of the dissatisfaction amongst users since the Reddit algorithm has prohibited any of their posts being able to reach the front page in which the most popular posts at that time are presented.

It was deemed necessary to explain as thoroughly as possible the methods that were used to categorize each meme to ensure that the memes would be categorized as appropriately as possible. The purpose of this chapter was to present the categories created in order to organize the memes and to explain why certain meme characteristics warranted being placed in a certain category, or in some cases multiple categories. It felt also necessary to briefly explain the core policy differences between the United States Democrats and Republicans to avoid any confusion as to on which grounds a meme was clearly deemed in favor of Republicans, or vice versa. Now that the grounds for categorization have been established and the memes categorized accordingly, the next step is to dwell into each subreddit further and establishing the meme trends and frequencies that have occurred in those subreddits, as well as looking into the most upvoted memes in those subreddits to gain understanding what memes have been well received by other members in the community. After gaining better understanding of the meme trends in each subreddit, larger conclusions of memes in political discourse can be speculated.

4.2 Subreddit-specific findings

The first subreddit under examination will be r/2016_Elections. It is worth noting that this subreddit provided very little memetic data, with only a total of 10 memes gathered. The subreddit itself was never largely popular amongst politically invested users, and was also more focused on the sharing of news articles regarding the progress of the elections. In the following table the memes have been categorized following the guidelines presented in chapter 4.1 (table 2). The only categories present in the memes of this subreddit were; *Anti-Conservative*, *Anti-Liberal*, *Anti-Trump*, *Other themes* and *Pro-Trump*.

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-conservative	4*
Anti-Liberal	1
Anti-Trump	2*
Other themes	4
Pro-Trump	1
Memes total:	10

Table 2: Meme amounts per category from the memes gathered from r/2016_Elections.

Categories with memes relevant to two or more categories marked with an asterisk.

It is worth noting that the reason why the amount of anti-Trump memes was marked with an asterisk was that the anti-Trump memes also fell under the category of anti-Conservative memes. That being said, 40% of the memes gathered were anti-conservative, out of which 50% of them were against Donald Trump. 10% of the gathered memes were anti-Liberal, as well as another 10% in support of Trump. What was remarkably fascinating was the 40% of memes which fell under the category of *other themes*. All except for one meme was displaying frustration towards

the election and the candidates as a whole, whereas the one exception was criticizing the media and how it is untruthful in regards to the elections.

The next subreddit under examination is r/Democrats, with a total of 21 memes. Much like with r/2016_elections, the majority of the media posted in the subreddit was links to various different articles, with memes only partially being posted. The largest category present in r/Democrats was the anti-Trump category, with 12 memes consisting of Trump-critical memes. Both anti-conservative and democratic memes had 6 items, and finally pro-Hillary having two memes (table 3).

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-conservative	6*
Anti-Trump	12*
Democratic	6*
Pro-Hillary	2
Memes total:	21

Table 3: A chart of meme categories present in r/Democrat. A total of 5 memes were cross-categorized and marked with an asterisk.

Although Hillary Clinton was the primary candidate in the 2016 presidential elections, there were only two memes that showed direct support of her. However the largest amount of memes were in opposition of Donald Trump. There were a total of 5 memes which shared one or two similar categories, most of all between anti-Donald memes and Democratic memes. A fairly noticeable amount of memes were celebrating former United States President Barack Obama, most typically in a comparable tone in regards to Donald Trump's political rhetoric. For instance, all of the six memes collected under the Democratic criteria were about former president Barack Obama. The anti-conservative memes were critical of gun ownership laws, racism amongst Republican voters and the way Obama was treated while in office, giving the impression that in his time he was treated with contempt by the opposing party. The anti-Trump memes aimed to

criticize Trump on his statements both online and on camera, his behaviors as a candidate and as a president-elect as well.

The next subreddit, r/HillaryClinton, was also very low-volume when it came to memes, with a majority of posts being links to various different articles regarding her time as a candidate and the election itself. In total there were 14 memes, with two being cross-categorized. The categories present were *anti-conservative*, *anti-Trump* and *pro-Hillary*. The meme amounts across categories went as follows (table 4):

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-conservative	3*
Anti-Trump	9*
Pro-Hillary	4*
Memes total:	14

Table 4: The memes found in r/HillaryClinton as well as the categories in which they have been placed. The asterisks imply cross-categorization, the first instance in which all categories have memes that fall under multiple categories.

As with the instances in r/Democrats, anti-Trump memes make up the majority of the data for this subreddit in particular. This was to be expected, however, given that Trump was the opposing candidate against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, as well as a Republican candidate where Hillary was Democratic. Another common topic which presented itself was once again gun control laws, underneath the category of anti-conservative. It is also worth noting that a lot of the memes were Tweet-citations made by Donald Trump, to use his own words against himself. A very common anecdote present in the Pro-Hillary memes as well as the supportive posts in general on the subreddit was the concept of female empowerment. In general but also directly owning the derogatory term coined by Trump on Hillary Clinton as a “Nasty

woman”. Female redditors in the subreddit were more than keen on calling themselves nasty women in unity for the candidate of their choice.

As expected, the subreddit r/PoliticalHumor had a staggering amount of memetic data to gather, with 100 memes collected in regards to the United States of America presidential election of 2016. The memes collected were distributed in the following categories, with eight cross-categorized (table 5):

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-conservative	28*
Anti-Trump	65*
Democratic	6*
Other themes	7
Pro-Hillary	2*
Memes total:	100

Table 5: Meme categories and distributions from r/PoliticalHumor with crossed categories marked with an asterisk.

Once again, anti-Trump memes make the majority of memes collected, with anti-conservative memes coming second. In subreddits like r/HillaryClinton and r/Democrats, this is well expected, however what makes this instance fascinating is the fact that r/PoliticalHumor is generally a neutral subreddit for satirizing current political events and politicians. In the process of gathering memes there were not only United States politics discussed, but the politics of other countries as well. Interestingly enough, all memes which fell under the category of *democratic* were about former president Barack Obama, either displaying his accomplishments, persona in the public eye or comparing his terms as president to that of current president Donald Trump. There was also a rather noticeable amount of memes in regard to Donald Trump's and generally

the Republican climate policies, criticizing their denial of climate change as an actual political issue. Other topics of criticism in both anti-Trump and anti-conservative memes were gun laws, the rights in regards to sexual minorities and immigration policies were prevalent in this subreddit. A fair amount of memes in the anti-Trump category also criticized Trump in regards to rumored collusion with the Russians prior to and during the elections. Under the *other themes* category there were memes regarding numerous different political stances, such as criticism towards the United States government as a whole, the United States electoral system, government corruption and lobbying, the unstable division amongst United States citizens (riots and protests), as well as the libertarian party. Both of the pro-Hillary memes interestingly drew comparison to her behavior as a candidate to Donald Trump's behavior, prompting the meme audience to imagine how the press were to view Hillary Clinton if she were to make the same statements and acts as president Donald Trump has - in an attempt to raise awareness of possible media bias and injustices Hillary Clinton faced in her time as a presidential candidate.

r/Politicalmemes also proved fruitful as far as meme frequencies were concerned, as one can expect given that the sole purpose of the subreddit is to share politically themed memes. However the amount of traffic and activity in r/Politicalmemes was noticeably smaller than that in r/Politicalhumor. In total 42 memes were collected from r/Politicalmemes. In the following chart one can examine the division of memes into categories (table 6).

What was particularly fascinating is the fact that in the subreddit r/Politicalmemes each category except for *pro-Hillary* was represented one way or another, a first in the memes categorized in each subreddit. It would be fascinating to know as to why r/Politicalmemes, a smaller yet very similar subreddit to r/Politicalhumor, has more representation from individuals from different political stances as r/Politicalhumor, where left-winged memes had a stronger foundation than those representing right-wing thinking. There was also a fairly small amount of memes, three to be precise, that were applicable to two or more categories, therefore the memes were less ambiguous on their stances, which is surprising given that this subreddit has the most categories present than any subreddit presented prior.

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-conservative	6
Anti-Hillary	3*
Anti-liberal	1*
Anti-Trump	21
Democratic	4
Other themes	8
Pro-Trump	1*
Republican	1*
Number of memes:	42

Table 6: meme distribution by category from r/PoliticalMemes. Categories with shared memes are marked with an asterisk.

Although r/Politicalmemes showed more division of opinions than other subreddits examined so far, anti-Trump memes were once again in the lead of meme amounts. However it was fascinating to see the lack of pro-Hillary memes entirely, yet three anti-Hillary memes, whereas the rare instance of a pro-Trump meme was found. The anti-conservative memes targeted specifically the conservative population, depicting them in an unflattering manner - most often making statements in relation to their assumed lack of intelligence and closed mindedness. The anti-Hillary memes criticized Hillary Clinton on her alleged private emails to further her political interests and later on denying such claims. One meme, falling under both anti-liberal and anti-Hillary memes criticized the Democratic National Committee's supposed election rigging setting Hillary up as the primary candidate without regard to a democratic decision whether Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders would be the primary candidate. The anti-Trump memes followed loosely the same rhetoric as the other anti-Trump memes present in the entirety of the data. Familiar themes such as his supposed lack of intelligence, his supposed hypocritical statements, his supposed questionable acts as a politician in both domestic and international

politics, his supposed collusion with Russian politicians and criticism towards his opinions on immigration and gun laws. The memes in democratic favor all included Obama, with one portraying past Democratic presidents in a positive view in general in comparison to Republican presidents. Under the category of *other themes* there were mainly memes criticizing the two-party system as well as both parties equally, as well as the division between the right- and left-wing, expressing frustration between the hostility towards one and other. So far memes that have fallen under the *other themes* category have mainly been critical of the political system as a whole, expressing frustration of the political situation not only taking place in institutions of parliament, but within the nation as well amongst regular citizens. Under the *pro-Trump* and *pro-Republican* theme were one and the same meme, criticizing the supposed hypocrisy of left-winged media and individuals in regards to president Trump's meeting of Russian president Vladimir Putin, stating that it is only an issue for the left-wing when a Republican president meets with Putin, however not an issue when a Democratic president does so.

From the subreddit r/Republican a total of 18 memes were collected. The categories present were *anti-liberal*, *other themes*, *pro-Trump* and *Republican*. This is well to be expected considering the subreddit is dedicated to Redditors who affiliate with the Republican political agenda. In the following table the meme distribution across categories is logged (table 7.)

In total there were three memes that fell into one or more category. The themes present in the *anti-liberal* category were the criticism presented towards leftist individuals and their rhetoric in facing an opposing opinion, supposed injustices towards right-winged individuals carried out by the left, the supposed unwillingness of Democrats to work with Trump or the Republicans in general, criticism towards Barack Obama and the aftermath of his presidency in which the national issues present are falsely tied to Donald Trump, as well as the Democratic party as a whole. Similar to the *anti-liberal* category, in the category of *other themes* there is a sense of dissatisfaction of how left-minded individuals are treated both online and in-real life based on their views.

Category:	Number of memes:
Anti-liberal	15*
Other themes	3*
Pro-Trump	2
Republican	1*
Total memes:	18

Table 7: meme distribution by category from r/Republican. Categories with shared memes are marked with an asterisk.

It is not the first instance that the Reddit community has been criticized for supposedly being biased against right-winged political subreddits. In the process of collecting memes from r/The_Donald the issue of supposed Reddit censorship is well criticized, however this will be discussed later on in this chapter. It is apparent that the same frustrations are being presented in r/Republican, except instead of criticizing the platform itself, the meme from *other themes* on the topic complains about the behavior of the community in subreddits apart from the delegated right-winged communities, stating that there is no room for open political discussion if you represent republican values. A fascinating observation can be made that whilst there are memes in both support of Donald Trump and Republicans, a majority of the memes are focused on criticizing the opposing party and their policies, as well as the individuals who represent those values.

The total amount of memes from r/The_Donald was 46 memes. The categories present were *anti-Hillary*, *anti-liberal*, *other themes*, *pro-Trump* and *Republican* as one might assume considering it is a subreddit dedicated to the Republican nominee and later Republican president of the United States of America. The meme distribution by category goes as follows (table 8):

Categories:	Number of memes:
Anti-Hillary	2
Anti-liberal	18*
Other themes	17
Pro-Trump	10*
Republican	1*
Memes total:	46

Table 8: meme distribution by category from r/The_Donald. Categories with shared memes are marked with an asterisk.

There was a surprisingly small amount of memes directed towards criticizing Hillary Clinton, at least in relation to the meme amounts in general. A topic which seems most occurrent is the Reddit censorship of r/The_Donald, sparking vivid criticism in the community towards the platform. According to the users of the subreddit, Reddits algorithm prohibits any posts from r/The_Donald to reach the front page of the internet. Memes criticising the platform and it's moderators were the main majority of memes in the *other themes* category. Users of the said subreddit feel that their rights are being compromised for having a otherwise considered controversial values. A lot of the anti-liberal memes were targeted towards former president Barack Obama, criticizing him as president as well as the supposed media bias there is between Obama and Trump - stating that the media purposely protects Obama's image, yet has no issue exploiting that of Donald Trumps. Other issues amongst the subreddit users were critical opinions relating to immigration, left-wing protestors, socialism and the economy under the Obama administration. In comparison to r/HillaryClinton, the meme frequencies witness in r/The_Donald were far larger than those in the democratic candidates subreddit.

In this chapter we have examined meme themes present in seven different political subreddits, out of which five are designated to discussing United States politics, and two are more general. Overall there were 251 memes gathered which were later categorized within the subreddits of

their origin in this chapter. This has provided an overall examination on not only the meme amounts in general within different subreddits, the extent to which they are utilized as a form of political data, as well as the most popular themes within each subreddit.

4.3 Meme rhetorics

The goal of this chapter is to examine the memetic rhetorics of all the memes categorized in the previous chapter, first within categories within subreddits, then in a larger scale in regards to the data as a whole to get a comprehensive view on the rhetorics the memes use. This way possible different styles of political participation can be observed, for instance whether there are rhetorical differences between memes which portray Democratic values and those which display Republican values.

Before conducting any examination it is important to list the styles of rhetoric possible. Although memes are typically considered humorous by nature, the factor of amusement remains entirely subjective to an individual in which feelings a meme invokes in the viewer. However there are some obvious traits one can witness being used in different memes. After overlooking the memetic data, five obvious rhetorics were observed; *Direct quotes* (formatted either in a positive light or a negative light), *comparative* (the comparison of one political theme to another to shine positive light on one and negative on the other), *parody* (a humorously exaggerated imitation), *contradiction irony* (displays contradiction or ironic instances of a political theme), *contemptuous* (displays direct contempt towards a political topic).

In the subreddit categories of r/2016_Elections the rhetoric distribution went as follows (table 9):

	Anti-conservative:	Anti-liberal:	Anti-Trump:	Other:	Pro-Trump:	Total:
Direct quotes:	1	0	0	0	0	1
Parody	2	1	2*	0	0	5
Contradiction irony:	0	0	0	0	1	1
Contemptuous:	1	0	0	4	0	5
Total:	4	1	2	4	1	12

Table 9: Rhetoric categorization from r/2016_Elections. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

Out of all the meme rhetorics present, the category *contemptuous* was most popular in regards to meme rhetorics. An example from the category *anti-conservative* was a meme with a picture of presidential candidate Ben Carson, with the definition of the word *fachidiot* pasted on top of him, depicting him as to fall under the definition of the word, as a person who allegedly knows a lot about a particular field, but very little about anything else. Since this meme does not display any parodic traits, is not a direct quote, doesn't involve any contradictions or ironic instances in Carson's run as a candidate, it seemed clear that a meme of this nature falls under the category of *contemptuous*. The second most popular rhetoric was parody, with three out of ten memes falling under that category (it is worth noting that the memes present in the *anti-Trump* category were also found in the *anti-conservative* category therefore decreasing the amount of actual parody-memes to three).

The next chart displays the memetic rhetorics present under the categories of memes collected from r/Democrats (table 10). The categories present in this subreddit were *anti-conservative*, *anti-Trump*, *Democratic* and *pro-Hillary* with a total of 21 memes. This is the first subreddit under rhetoric examination which is not general by nature, but dedicated to a certain political point of view, unlike r/2016_Elections.

	Anti-conservative:	Anti-Trump:	Democratic:	Pro-Hillary:	Total:
Direct quotes:	0	1	0	0	1
Comparative:	4*	4*	3*	1*	12
Parody:	2*	3*	1*	0	6
Contradiction irony:	1*	2*	1*	1*	5
Contemptuous:	1	4*	3	1	9
Total	8	14	8	3	33

Table 10: Rhetoric categorization from r/Democrats. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

As seen in the chart above, a comparative rhetoric was most common amongst memes collected from the subreddit r/Democratic, nearly all of them drawing comparison to former president Barack Obama with him being displayed in a positive light, as opposed to either Republicans or president Donald Trump. The second largest category of rhetorics was contemptuous, with memes making statements of dissatisfaction in regards to president Donald Trump and his candidacy/presidency. There were also contemptuous memes that played in favor of Democrats, showing dissatisfaction in Republicans in general and their roles in United States governance. One meme which was rather prevalent in a multitude of categories both thematic and rhetorical, which was the meme previously presented in this paper in chapter 4.1 (figure 4). The meme falls under the theme categories of *democratic*, *anti-Trump* and *anti-conservative* and by style falls under *comparative* and *parody*. This is one prime example of the dynamics of memes and how a single meme alone can be so versatile, symbolizing a multitude of stances in one picture.

The next subreddit memes to be examined by rhetoric is r/HillaryClinton, continuing the theme of left-orientated memes. r/HillaryClinton provided a rather small sample size of memes to be used, with a total of 14 falling under three thematic categories.

	Anti-conservative:	Anti-Trump	Pro-Hillary	Total:
Direct quotes:	0	3*	1*	4
Comparative:	0	0	0	0
Parody:	0	2	0	2
Contradiction irony:	1*	2	0	3
Contemptuous:	2	2*	3*	7
Total:	3	9	4	16

Table 11: Rhetoric categorization from r/HillaryClinton. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

The chart above (table 11) depicts the meme rhetorics present across different thematic categories in the subreddit dedicated to former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. As seen above, memes with a contemptuous rhetoric were most prevalent amongst this subreddit. Surprisingly unlike in r/Democrats, there were none comparative memes present in the data collected. Another fascinating observation can be made as to how many of the memes were direct quotes either presented in favor of Hillary Clinton (mostly made by Twitter-users) or direct quotes made by Donald Trump representing him and his statements in a negative light. It is specifically interesting given that subreddits examined prior to r/HillaryClinton only had one meme fall under the *direct quote* category each, whereas in a data as small as 14, four memes of this category is a rather sizeable amount (one must take into the account, however, that there was one meme that was both in the Pro-Hillary-category as well as the Anti-Trump category).

The next subreddit memes to be examined by the rhetorics used is those found from r/PoliticalHumor. This will be a fascinating data to evaluate already due to the fact that the sample size from this subreddit is the most sizable sample size out of all the data collected, with

a total of 100 memes, making up a sizeable amount of the 251 memes in total. In the chart below (table 12), the rhetorics present amongst memes from r/PoliticalHumor have been categorized.

	Anti-conservative:	Anti-Trump:	Democratic:	Other:	Pro-Hillary:	Total:
Direct quotes:	12*	20*	1*	2	1*	36
Comparative:	1*	7*	3*	0	2*	13
Parody:	7*	28	3	3	0	41
Contemptuous:	5	12*	0	2	0	19
Total:	25	67	7	7	3	109

Table 12: Rhetoric categorization from r/PoliticalHumor. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

In r/PoliticalHumor, the most common rhetoric used fell under the category of *parody*. A vast majority of the parodic memes imitated politicians in an unflattering manner. In this instance one can see the importance of a memetic picture, insofar that if one would simply write, for instance, a false parodic quote made by Donald Trump, without specifically mentioning that they are parodying Donald Trump, the viewer would not be able to link the false quote to Trump. However, in a meme that has a picture of Donald Trump with the parodic quote, the viewer instantly understands the context at hand, as seen in the following example (figure 5).



Figure 5: a parodic meme portraying president Donald Trump.

Although political illustrations have always been a key factor in political satire and discussion, memes provide the opportunity for someone without the necessary artistic capabilities to create political satire without much time and effort.

The next subreddit under examination by rhetoric is r/Politicalmemes. There were, in total, 24 memes collected from this subreddit with a variety of different theme-categories, both left-winged and right-winged. r/Politicalmemes was without a doubt one of the more diverse subreddits in this data. In the following chart are the memes categorized by rhetoric (table 13).

	Anti-conserv.	Anti-Hillary	Anti-lib.	Anti-Trump	Democr.	Other	Pro-Trump	Repub.	Total:
Comparative	1*	0	0	0	1	1	1*	1*	5
Contemptuous	0	1	1	3	2	3	0	0	10
Contradiction Irony	2*	1	0	4	0	1	1*	1*	10
Direct quotes	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Parody	5*	1	0	14	1	2	0	0	23
Total:	8	3	1	21	4	8	2	2	52

Table 13: Rhetoric categorization from r/PoliticalMemes. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

Since r/PoliticalMemes had such a diverse range of thematic categories, some of the theme names in the chart had to be shortened to fit the page, an issue not present in tables prior. r/PoliticalMemes was already a fascinating sample when evaluating the prevalences by themes, and by rhetorics it stands out as having a strong majority in rhetorics falling under the *parody* category, much like r/PoliticalHumor. The amount of parodic memes in both of these subreddits

dedicated for humorous political posting comes as no surprise, however, since making parodies of political figures is no new occurrence in humorous political discussion, looking back to political drawings posted in newspapers already decades ago. One may ponder if the parodic nature of both subreddits is because of their more lighthearted disposition, not being subreddits for serious political discussions, at least primarily, however the comment sections give way for more sombre opinions if one were so inclined. Although r/PoliticalMemes has shown to have a quite diverse amount of themes, with some even in support of Trump (unlike other general political subreddits examined in this paper), *anti-Trump* memes were still the majority in the data collected. This paints a rather conclusive image of the general opinion amongst Reddit users, at least in the more general subreddits, however it goes without saying communities dedicated to support Trump will provide different results, results which are in favor of the president.

The next subreddit under examination will be the first of the subreddits dedicated to right-winged politics, which is r/Republican. r/Republican offered a relatively small sample size, with the third least amount of memes to contribute to the data right after r/2016_Elections and r/HillaryClinton, with a majority of posts being focused on article sharing and not so much the sharing of memes. In the following chart the meme rhetorics present in r/Republican can be viewed (table 14).

	Anti-Liberal	Other	Pro-Trump	Republican	Total
Comparative	4*	0	1*	0	5
Contemptuous	3	2	0	0	5
Contradiction Irony	6*	1	0	0	7
Direct quotes	0	0	1	0	1
Parody	6*	0	1*	1	8
Total:	19	3	3	1	26

Table 14: Rhetoric categorization from r/Republican. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

Out of all the memes r/Republican provided for the data, memes falling under the category of *parody* were most common, with *contradiction irony* coming in second. As one can expect, memes falling under the category of *contradiction irony* and *comparative*, the goal is to set a juxtaposition in which Democrats are placed in a negative light in comparison to Republicans. There were also memes which were critical of the general morale amongst Reddit in general, stating that right-winged users get shunned when expressing their own political opinions, a topic even more prevalent in the following subreddit r/The_Donald.

The final subreddit under examination is r/The_Donald, the subreddit dedicated in support of now president Donald Trump. A total of 46 memes were collected from this subreddit, a rather sizable amount in comparison to other subreddits except those dedicated for political memes (r/PoliticalHumor and r/PoliticalMemes). In the following chart we can see which rhetorics were present in the memes collected from r/The_Donald (table 15).

	Anti-Hillary	Anti-Liberal	Other	Pro-Trump	Republican	Total:
Comparative	0	5*	1	1	0	7
Contemptuous	1	6*	6	1	0	14
Contradiction irony	0	4	1	2	0	7
Direct quotes	0	2	0	0	0	2
Parody	1	2	9	6	1	19
Total:	2	19	17	10	1	49

Table 15: Rhetoric categorization from r/The_Donald. Those marked with an asterisk mean that they were cross-categorized both in regards to their rhetoric and theme.

The first observation made personally was the lack of cross-categorized memes in this instance. Whereas in previous subreddits there has been a fair amount of memes which can be

compartmented in various different rhetoric categories, amongst the memes collected from r/The_Donald, only one fell under more than one category. The memes themselves were fairly easy to distinguish as to which belongs where, however the reason for this remains unknown. One might hypothesize that the memes created and shared by Donald Trump supporters have a more specific goal with their meme(s) whereas memes aimed for a Democratic audience serve as a general unit of media, tackling a multitude of topics with multiple rhetorics at the same time. The most common rhetoric present in the memes collected were once again, *parodic* by nature.

Now that all the subreddit-specific memes have been categorized by rhetoric, it seems logical to draw a greater conclusion of meme rhetorics to paint a more comprehensive picture, to see if there are any memetic trends certain kind of memes follow. For instance, do all “*pro-*” memes have a common trend, as well as all “*anti-*”-memes? In the following chart the rhetorics amongst different agendas can be seen (table 16).

	Comparative	Contemptuous	Contradiction Irony	Direct Quote	Parody	Total:
Anti-Hillary	1	1	1	0	2	5
Anti-Trump	11	21	8	24	49	113
Anti-Conservative	6	9	4	13	16	48
Anti-Liberal	9	10	10	2	9	40
Other	2	17	3	3	14	39
Pro-Trump	2	1	4	1	7	15
Pro-Hillary	3	4	1	2	0	10
Democratic	7	5	1	1	5	19
Republican	1	0	1	0	2	4
Total:	42	68	33	46	104	293(251)

Table 16: A chart of all the memes in both categories; by rhetoric and by theme. Although the total is 293 the actual meme amount is 251. The reason for this larger amount is because of cross-categorization.

In the chart above we gain a rather comprehensive view on the meme prevalences amongst the different categories present from all the data from the subreddits *r/2016_elections*, *r/Democrats*, *r/HillaryClinton*, *r/PoliticalHumor*, *r/PoliticalMemes*, *r/Republican* and *r/The_Donald*. When looking at the chart it is clear that memes that fall under the theme of *anti-Trump* are the most common, with parodic memes making up almost half of the *anti-Trump* memes, with *anti-conservative* memes coming second, but not so far off from *anti-liberal* memes. It is fascinating to note the lack of *anti-Hillary* memes, however, considering that they were the two primary candidates going against each other. It is worth noting though that this does not, by any means give a comprehensive view in general of the support Hillary gained versus the support Trump gained in the online realms, but gives some understanding to some of the consensus apparent amongst Reddit users. Therein lies the possibility that Reddit simply is a platform more commonly used by left-minded individuals, as opposed to other forums of the same nature. To fully understand the reasoning as to *why* Reddit seems to exhibit a fundamentally clear favor towards the left would require far more extensive research, delving into numerous different online communities along with Reddit. According to a numerous amount of memes collected from *r/Republican* and *r/The_Donald*, the Reddit community is problematic being supposedly against Donald Trump and the Republican party, living little room for sound discussion where political voices are being expressed fairly. Whether or not that is true can not be validated through this paper, so that statement will remain open to interpretation.

One also fascinating anecdote is the fact that if one were to divide the theme categories by *negative* and *positive*, ergo pro- versus anti- themes, it seems that the former are more commonly used to express political opinions in a memetic format, at least as far as the memes collected from Reddit seem to express. Perhaps it is deemed more efficient to use negative rhetorics against the opposition rather than using positive rhetorics to support the political side in favor. Perhaps using negative rhetorics is more provocative and thus gain more visibility and spark more conversation than positive rhetorics that, especially a dedicated community in support, would simply agree upon and not react any further. Although the category *other* also contains a

rather sizeable portion of the memes collected, with such sporadic and specific topics discussed in memes under that category, evaluating them in terms of this paper seems unnecessary and overly complex, however some of the memes falling under the *other* category will also be examined more thoroughly in the following chapter.

4.4 Picture analysis

Although this dissertation is more focused on examining meme volumes as well as meme rhetorics, it is necessary to take a few memes under closer examination since, after all, memes are compressed information in the most common form of *pictures*. By examining a handful of the memes collected, we gain better perspective on the dynamics of a meme as well as their capabilities to portray either one specific topic with one specific rhetoric or to portray a far more generally applicable image taking a stance on a multitude of topics with numerous different rhetoric means. Out of the 251 memes, a handful of memes will be examined in detail in this chapter. The goal will be to take a sample with as much diversity as possible, some being extremely specific and some being general in nature. However it is worth noting that the memes examined will be primarily picked at random, with a keen eye for memes that were most memorable personally.

It is worth mentioning that the ways one views memes varies individually and the interpretations presented in this dissertation are foundationally subjective and may be subject to different views by others, despite the ambitious goal of remaining objective. As with any form of picture media, as with works of art, there is always a margin for personal influence on the final examination. During a presentation of the picture analysis present in this thesis amongst two personal peers it became evident how memes can be subject to a multitude of perceptions, in which I find that makes memes even more dynamic than what one might assume.

The first meme is from r/PoliticalMemes from the category *anti-liberal*, from the rhetoric category *contemptuous* (figure 6). The meme uses a fairly common meme template called

“*Baton Roue*”, which is an edit of a webcomic by the French artist Corentin Penloup. Edits of the comic most often aim to display people taking place of the person on the bike, causing their own crash on the bicycle. Similar memes have been seen using the said template for instance in memes criticizing Brexit - the United Kingdom's referendum on leaving the European Union. The meme could technically fall under the category of *anti-Hillary* as well, however since the meme targets the DNC as a whole, it falls more under the category of *anti-liberal*. In the meme Hillary Clinton's face is edited as the face of the man on the bike, and the stick used to topple the bicycle is the supposed *election rig* in which the DNC rigged the elections so that Hillary was the primary candidate, not giving candidate Bernie Sanders a fair competition and election as to who will become the primary candidate. The meme portrays Hillary as blaming Bernie Sanders supporters as the reason she lost in the final election round.



Figure 6: an anti-liberal meme from r/Politicalmemes using the “*Baton roue*” meme template.

The meme presented in figure 6 serves as a wonderful example how one meme template alone can be so applicable to many instances, in this case any instance where an institution, group of people or person causes their own fall and later blames another institution, group of people or person. The meme itself was well received in the rather small community of r/PoliticalMemes, being 100% upvoted (meaning nobody downvoted the post). However in total the image only has 10 upvotes total, a fairly typical amount found in r/PoliticalMemes.

The next meme under closer examination is one from r/Political Humor, from the category *Pro-Hillary*, however also *Anti-Trump* (figure 7).



Figure 7: a meme collected from r/PoliticalHumor, falling under the thematic categories Anti-Trump and Pro-Hillary, and by rhetoric falls under “comparative” and “contradiction irony”.

The meme above was coded under *comparative* and *contradiction irony* in regards to the fact that it implies a contradiction amongst republicans if Hillary would have supposedly won and acted in the same implied manner, as to “firing everyone who was investigating her”, as Donald Trump. There is an implication that if Hillary were to win and do the same, Republicans would react strongly in accusations against Hillary, much like liberals have supposedly acted in the same implied scenario with Donald Trump. In the case of Donald Trump where he is accused by liberals of firing anyone investigating him, many see his actions as not only suspicious but

extremely condemnable as an act against the laws of democracy. It also falls under the category of comparative for it paints a juxtaposition between two instances wherein one is an actual occurring event and the other an occurrence with opposite roles - that being Hillary as president and republicans being the ones criticizing Hillary for the termination of investigative figures. From my point of view it seems that the creator of the original meme wants to criticize republicans for downplaying the judgemental views liberals have towards Donald Trump due to this act of firing, whereas republicans would be equally upset if not even more if Hillary were president and do the same. It is not the only instance where a juxtaposition of this nature is painted in either Hillary versus Trump memes or Liberals versus Republicans, as it seems to be a relatively popular way of criticizing the views and manners of the opposing political figure or party. The meme itself was received rather positively, with 44.8 thousand upvotes, being 72% upvoted.

The next meme follows the very same fashion as the meme in figure 7, but this time from the opposite side. This meme was collected from r/The_Donald and falls under the categories of *pro-Trump* and *anti-Liberal*, and by theme goes under the category of *comparative* and *contradiction irony*.



Figure 8: a meme collected from r/The_Donald, categorized under the themes anti-liberal and pro-Trump, and by rhetoric categorized as comparative and contradiction irony.

In the meme there is also the presence of the media tension between left-winged and right-winged media sources, as in this case FOX News (republican) and CNN (democratic). The meme falls under the category of anti-liberal since former president Barack Obama is the antagonist character in the meme, being the face of the liberal agenda, and in turn the memes is also pro-Trump in the sense that republican president Donald Trump is the protagonist, as in the face of the republican agenda. It is also comparative in the sense that it accuses Barack Obama of criticizing news outlet FOX News for the entirety of his presidency, leading to no consequences or critique from his liberal supporters, whereas when current president Donald Trump criticizes CNN, liberals supposedly use it as an act of judgement against his character and competency as a president, supposedly offending the 1st amendment (freedom of speech). It also falls under the theme of *contradiction irony* for it implies the contradictory nature of liberal individuals not criticizing a liberal president for acts that they criticize a conservative president for with great upheaval, with the implication that the 1st amendment is sacred, therefore they should have equally defended that amendment when the liberal leader was doing the same. What is fascinating about both memes figure 7 and figure 8 is that they disregard possible contradictions within themselves, naturally, since they are to either oppose or support their own cause, but more specifically in figure 8 insofar that a similar meme could easily surface in which the roles are reversed in opposition of Donald Trump, with republican reactions to how politically charged news can be criticized. The meme was very well received in r/The_Donald with 17.1k upvotes being 91% upvoted, much with a majority of memes present in r/The_Donald, which may be interpreted as a stronger sense of consensus amongst the users.

Another meme that was rather memorable was also from r/Republican. The meme was also *anti-liberal*, falling under the rhetoric categories of *comparative* and *contradiction irony*. In the meme we see an elderly woman in protest against Donald Trump. She is holding a sign which states the following; “*In 73 years I’ve not marched for anything. But this president is so bad,*

here I am!”. The meme contains the original picture on the left, with a copy of the picture on the left although edited so that her face is that of a so-called NPC wojak (further definition later on) and her sign now says; “I was an adult during Jim Crow, the fight for black civil rights, and the war on vietnam but didn’t protest until the cheeto dictator beat my beloved white neoliberal lady!” (figure 9).

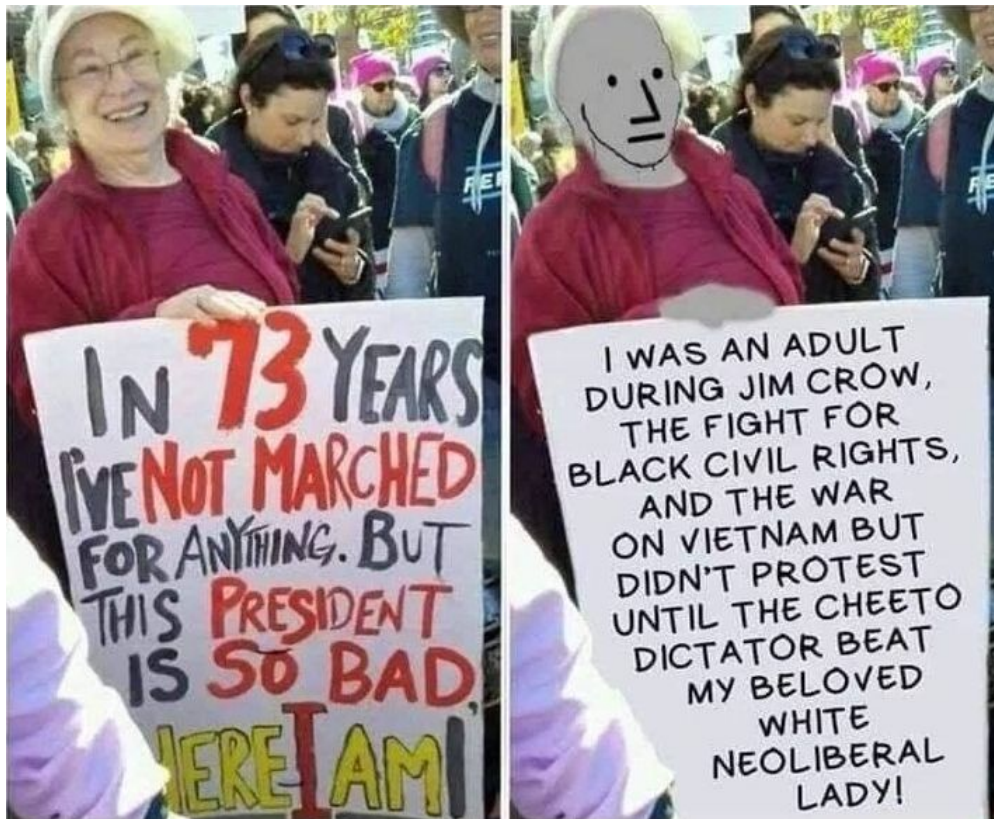


Figure 9: a meme collected from r/Republican, categorized under the themes anti-liberal, and by rhetoric categorized as comparative and under contradiction irony.

First to clarify the character edited on top of the woman’s original face. In the *anti-liberal* memes it is not uncommon to come across the face in question called the NPC Wojak. Originally the term NPC comes from the world of video games in which an NPC is called a *non playable character*, meaning a video game character controlled by the computer as opposed to a human being. Some NPCs are relevant for the plot of the video game, whereas some are simply there for

an added effect of detail for the video game. The origins of the meme have been speculated to have started by pro-Trump users of 4Chan and Reddit, used as a derogatory term against liberals, implying that instead of independently and consciously opposing Donald Trump, they have been brainwashed into opposing him thus making the link to the idea of a character being controlled by a machine, and not an independent entity. The word *Wojak* originates from an older, and widely popular meme character, a crudely drawn face also known as “the feels guy”. Although memes with the presence of an NPC Wojak weren’t as common in the memetic data collected, in other instances of right-winged memes from different sources (for instance 4chan.org) one can stumble upon a whole collection of NPC Wojaks, most often edited on top of left-winged individuals, either CNN reporters or those attending protests. The reason as to why this meme falls under the thematic category of *anti-liberal* seems rather self-explanatory, as it clearly criticizes the left-winged protestor, and falls under the categories “*comparative*” and “*contradiction irony*” since it aims to portray the supposed contradictions the individual is displaying, marching against a president elect, however not protesting other sociopolitical issues that have been present in her 73 years of living, even more specifically sociopolitical issues which are deemed part of the left-winged rhetoric, most specifically racism. It is also *comparative* as the sociopolitical issues in the past are brought into light in comparison to the issues of protest for today, in a manner which is aimed to outshine the modern issue and make it seem unworthy of such strong responses carried out by left-winged individuals. The meme titled “*liberal logic*” gained a rather welcoming response of 813 upvotes, being 81% upvoted making it very well received by a majority of users, especially in a subreddit with typically small upvote amounts, as compared to figure 8 in which the meme gained only 37 upvotes.

The next meme is from r/PoliticalHumor, falling under the category of *anti-Trump* and by rhetoric falls under the category of *contradiction irony*. It was a relatively grey area to decide whether or not the meme were to also go under the category of *anti-conservative*, however since the meme takes a stance on president Donald Trump’s idea of building a border wall between the United States of America and Mexico, it was deemed more under the category of *anti-Trump* even though there are conservatives who attest to this concept, it cannot be testified as a

consensus held by all conservatives (figure 10). The meme itself is rather simplistic, with the image not being more than a platform with little significance to the text presented, in the sense that if one were to read the text alone they would understand the context, thus making the image merely a platform for the stance.

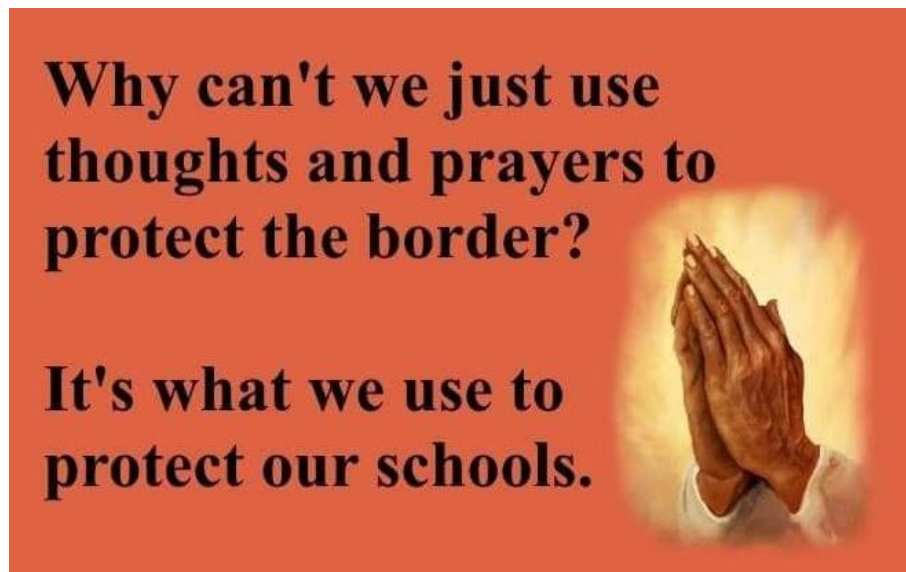


Figure 10: a meme collected from r/PoliticalHumor, categorized under the themes anti-Trump, and by rhetoric categorized under the category of contradiction irony.

The meme text and the message it presents comes across to myself personally as sarcastic, although one may at first glance feel the meme is in support of the border wall. However with thoughts and prayers being implied not being enough to protect schools for gun violence, since that is implied as to being adequate enough for the safety of educational institutions, in the same line of thought it should be enough for the border, with no need for any extensive action such as more strict border control or a border wall. It is in that light that it was deemed under the category of anti-Trump, as per his ambitions to build a wall across the United States and Mexican border to better control the amount of immigrants crossing the border illegally, as well as his reluctance to intervene with gun control laws which have been criticized for their enablement of gun related violence at schools. Due to its sarcastic tone it was coded under the

theme of contradiction irony since the meme implies the importance of more border control whilst gun related violence seems to gain no attention from the authorities of the Trump presidency. The meme was generally well received in r/PoliticalHumor, with 65.4k votes, being 76% upvoted.

4.5 Findings

In this chapter I have examined the 251 memes gathered for the purpose of this dissertation and via content analysis examined and evaluated the memetic landscapes present on Reddit in regards to the 2016 presidential elections and the presidency of Donald Trump, with the memes being collected from the most relevant subreddits which relate to that particular topic (r/2016_Elections, r/Democrats, r/HillaryClinton, r/PoliticalHumor, r/PoliticalMemes, r/Republican and r/The_Donald). After the memes were collected I categorized them by their themes and which political values they promote, the themes being *anti-conservative*, *anti-Trump*, *pro-Republican*, *pro-Trump*, *Other*, *Democratic*, *pro-Hillary*, *anti-liberal* and *anti-Hillary*, in order to understand the most frequent meme topics present in each subreddit and in which volumes do they present themselves. After this categorization, I coded them further by the themes by which they present themselves, those themes being *comparative*, *contemptuous*, *contradiction irony*, *direct quotes* and *parody*, in order to understand the styles the memes portray per topical category, to see which styles are more common, thus deemed by the creators more useful in furthering their own views to be shared online. After that I did a more in-depth analysis of a few select memes to not only broaden my own understanding of the sometimes complex nature of memes, but to also show the reader what type of memes were present and how memes can truly be a platform for a much larger message pressed into a more compact, more simplistic format.

Concluding from the charts, more specifically table 16 (pg. 68), the first thing to notice is the volume counts of *anti-Trump* memes, being the most frequent amount of memes in this data by a relatively large count. What also becomes evidently clear is that memes with a negative

portrayal, being *anti*-something, were far more common than those of positive portrayal. Whether or not that is truly the more efficient way of furthering one's political agenda is difficult to say for certain, but it certainly seems to be more popular to *criticize* rather than *praise*. The category *other* was relatively common amongst the memes collected, with a majority of them criticizing the American political system as a whole in light of the elections, which although unspecific, does give an understanding that there is a clear disagreement amongst Reddit users of the United States political system in general. What was also fascinating about the frequencies was that out of all seven subreddits used as data sources, the top three sources of memes were the following (by order); r/PoliticalHumor (109/293), r/PoliticalMemes (52/293) and r/The_Donald (49/293). Although 251 memes were gathered, the number 293 comes after cross-categorization and thus the numbers have been adjusted in accordance to that number. It is of course understandable that not all subreddits had equal amounts of active users, thus making the amount of meme frequencies also smaller. However in the process of data collecting it became evidently clear that r/The_Donald was the most memetic by frequency in comparison to other candidate- or party-specific subreddit. Even so, anti-Trump memes were most prevalent, which maybe can be explained by Donald Trump as a character, who is by some considered a very colorful personality as opposed to prior presidents being more serious by demeanor, thus making him easier to actually turn into a meme. This of course, all falls under simple speculation.

It was also fascinating to see that out of all styles of memes, the theme *parody* was most prevalent. This however comes as no surprise to myself personally, as memes are generally meant to be humoristic by nature, however serious the message behind the topic truly is. That being said I find myself closer to attesting to the comparison as memes being the satirical political pictures of today, however little to no artistic talent is actually needed, but merely the ability to accompany a picture with the text of choice. This feeds into my own support of the concept that the digital tools of today enable users around the globe to participate in a plethora of ways, memes being a vast majority of the visual participation. It is by my conclusion while analyzing the charts that Reddit seems to have a rather liberally orientated user population, an argument which actually receives some level of support from both r/Republican and

r/The_Donald in which users criticized the platform for being biased towards conservative users yet giving more visibility to content designed to exhibit liberal values. It is however worth noting that a sizeable amount of Reddit content is not politically charged in any way, with any political discussions or debates happening deep within the surface of private messaging or in the comment section. However in the realms of United States politics, whether it is serious discussion or in the form of memes, they seems to be the idea that Reddit truly consists of more liberal users than conservative. This could be potentially explained by the demographics of the users, as for instance by age and with the implication that young adults were potentially more liberal, or that conservatives simply opt to take their own discussions online to other platforms which is more in favor of their own views and opinions.

The picture analysis proved fruitful in understanding the dynamic nature of memes, how they can capture more profound topics and discussions into one mere picture which displays opinions, speculation and instances of political topics and events, all within one sharable digit of media. What is especially interesting is that some memes can be open to so many interpretations and therefore can be utilized by many individuals to serve their own differing values and opinions. Fortunately I feel that in the data collected for this paper, there were no extremely ambiguous memes which were confusing to categorize and analyze, yet even in the more simplified memes it was shown that my own personal peers can view them from a multitude of perspectives, only to further prove that the way individuals view memes are more or less subjective. Especially with provocative memes it goes without saying that the reactions they awaken vary to a great extent amongst individuals, more so if the meme itself challenges the views of the individual in question. It was also fascinating to see how two memes from two opposing political views were very similar in nature, applying the same methods of comparison in order to criticize the opposing party with the presence of “if it were the other way around” creating a false scenario in the viewers mind which suits their own political views.

It is also fascinating that amongst the memes there is not only criticism presented towards larger political figures, such as an entire political party or specific political figures of power, but also

the population in support of the opposing political views. Not only that, but to which extent this method was applied by both sides of the political spectrum, which gives a rather divided image of the United States population. Although such broad distinctions can't be made of an entire population based on this data alone, collected from merely one source, but therein lies the assumption that these memes as well as memes outside of the data are being shared in a similar fashion in other platforms, with the similar agenda to create stereotypes of the opposing political views and to criticize that line of political beliefs.

To bridge these thoughts to the theories presented previously in chapter two, the most fundamental aspect found relevant in regards to the theoretical framework was the presence of the *participatory culture* in these findings, with the memes and the communities all exhibiting the definitions presented by Henry Jenkins in pages 14 and 15, them being the low threshold of artistic expression and civic engagement (the creation of the memes), the encouragement of creating and sharing (the sharing of memes supported by votes, aka Reddit karma), the sense of informal mentorship amongst these communities (*what* the memes should represent and *how* they are received by other users), the feelings of appreciation users get from contributing and sharing (once again, the upvotes and the commentaries the memes may spark) as well as finally, the feeling of belonging and social connection with other users (that being the support and agreement one may receive from their memes, whether it was the creator themselves who shared them or the sharing of a meme not created by the poster). I found the final definition to be particularly true in r/The_Donald, where the sense of community and consensus came across as very strong, to the point that it felt at times that the users on that subreddit were on an online crusade in support of Donald Trump. In all other subreddits there was some degree of disagreement present and variety of opinions.

The same goes when comparing the sense of togetherness in r/Democratic and r/Republican, it seemed that the republican memes were generally more accepted by all users, whereas there was some conflict on the upvote percentages amongst the memes posted in r/Democratic, although the meme portrayed democratic values it did not warrant a similar reception. That is not to say

that there was any subreddit in which there was *no* sense of consensus or community, but the levels to which they presented themselves varied in different subreddits. The theory of the participatory culture serves, in my eyes, as a strong explanation as to *why* memes are being created and shared in the first place, but even more so in communities dedicated to certain purposes.

This leads to the pretense that in the new realms of social interaction brought on by online communications, symbolic interactionism also plays its part in online communities such as the subreddits and the memes present in this dissertation. With the assumption that human beings act accordingly towards the things they perceive as important to themselves, I find that memes are one method of acting in that matter, to create or share a meme in expression of one's views or beliefs, with these personally important matters being derived from social interaction, which in this case is the social interaction present in the subreddits themselves, however it is likely that the user is present in other online communities as well. This social interaction happens through the acts of upvotes and comments on a meme post, in which the poster themselves can also participate and in most cases, feel approval and appreciation as well as support from other like minded users. In turn the poster can show their own support and participation by interacting with other users and their posts. Finally the basis that the meanings of these actions are handled and modified through an interpretative process, which I find particularly important in discussing memes as memes can spread and take many forms as they pass from one user to another, each being modified to the purpose of the individual behind the modifications made. The handling also implies an action which I believe can be linked to the act of sharing, as when one individual encounters a meme that speaks to them personally, they can then share it forward to other individuals either in other online communities or in their own personal circles.

As it was stated in the context of picture analysis, memes can be understood in a very subjective matter, in which the individual places their own value to the meme at hand and interpreted it in a way that fits their own views of the world best. Through the action of sharing, liking and creating memes there is a social dynamic at play amongst these communities, in this case the subreddits,

which brings a new dimension to socialization, in this case the socializing happening online. As stated before, the sense of community was present in all subreddits and the post themselves showed not only new measures for approval and social acceptance but also new means of approval provided by other users in that specific online community.

Taking an approach based on the ritualistic nature of these communities I would deem it is applicable in the sense that like any community, these communities also expressed certain informal rules of participation, some being even set by moderators of the subreddits to keep an order within the community as to what is allowed to be posted and what is not. One could go deeper into this topic and for instance compare the subreddit specific rules and see if, for example, certain subreddits exhibit more authority than others, however this seems unnecessary for the purpose of examining the memes themselves. In the sense of social integration, Reddit for instance offers new means of actually measuring the amount of social acceptance and belonging numerically through the utilization of upvoting and downvoting. Subreddits such as the Donald seemed to have strong posting trends implying some sense of ritualistic behavior amongst the users, for instance with each state won the users posted modified memetic images of Donald Trump along with the state map in a sense of victory. Whether or not this performance was agreed upon specifically or a collective act not formally set in motion remains unclear, but it certainly shows a pattern of ritualistic behavior, with the posting of the meme being the ritual itself in which a multitude of the users partake in.

Examining the memes as a whole with a ritualistic interpretation it seems necessary to point out that certain subreddits naturally had certain rules as to which kind of memes can be posted, e.g. one could not post a pro-Trump meme in a subreddit dedicated to support the Democrats, or vice versa. However these unspoken guidelines can be more complex than the obvious, for instance in subreddits which are inherently neutral such as r/PoliticalHumor or r/PoliticalMemes, subreddits not assigned to any political orientation, there seems to be an unspoken presence of liberal posts as opposed to conservative posts. This is, in no way intentionally written down as the guidelines of these subreddits, however it is simply there. With the capability to upvote or downvote posts,

users have power to influence the posts and how they survive on the subreddit, gaining too many downvotes meaning they are eradicated from the feed. That being said, is it possible the liberal presence in both of these neutral subreddits is due to the consensus of liberal users upvoting liberally themed memes and in-turn, downvoting conservative memes out of the entire community? This would be a personal assumption of mine, and in that light I say there are unspoken, ritualistic behaviors one can examine in communities such as these, especially in the case of these neutral subreddits.

Another ritualistic fashion present in the creation and sharing of memes is the style favored by users. For some reason memes of certain style gain more popularity than others, therefore more memes of that style are created. This feedback of which style of meme is chosen as favorable is entirely reliant on the community, meaning the trends are dictated by the majority of figures in that community. Another aspect of the classic theory is the division between the *profane* and *sacred* spaces, in which this case refers to the subreddits of choice being the sacred spaces for memes of that certain nature and the correspondence to follow, whereas other communities or areas online can be considered *profane*. A particular case comes to mind in this data in regards to spaces, was the feelings of discrimination expressed by both conservatives and supporters of Trump in Reddit in general, with feelings that if they were to express their own political values *anywhere else* but the subreddits for Trump supporters or those in favor of the conservative agenda, they would face criticism and even feelings of “being attacked” by the liberal users of Reddit. It is my belief that in this regard there was more feeling of community in subreddits such as r/Republican and r/The_Donald, as users are drawn there together with the intent of finding a Reddit area more welcoming to their personal views.

Whenever the examination of online opinion frequencies it is always remember to remain critical of the assessments made, as previously discussed in the literature review, there is always the risk of astroturfing being present - meaning that the views presented and the volumes at which those views have been presented can be untrue, insofar that it is either a bot or paid individuals purposely spreading information in favor in an organization or political movement to influence

other users. That being said, these conclusions built based on the memetic data have to be taken, to some extent, with a grain of salt. I opt to be optimistic, however, believing that the memes collected were originally posted with sincere intentions and by individuals actually striving to express themselves. I believe in any case where online databases are utilized for research purposes, may it be academic or marketing, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of astroturfing, especially if there are no ties to actual individuals, but merely usernames in which behind there may be a bot, a multitude of spam accounts or the entity behind the username is purely participating in return for award to forward any agendas of larger institutions. However the goal of this thesis is to understand meme frequencies as a whole in regards to how the 2016 election and presidency is being received and complimented on by the Reddit community, with or without the presence of astroturfing.

In that light based on the data at hand, it is my belief that Reddit is more in favor of liberal values, and more specifically values which do not support Donald Trump. Therein lies the factor that some of the postings of anti-Trump memes were not posted by users who are inherently *against* Donald Trump, or extremely political to begin with, but merely find his attributes amusing and meme-worthy. This assumption is based on the presence of memes presented in seven subreddits involving this particular case, with 251 memes collected throughout those subreddits. It gives a rather oversimplified image of the political presence of Reddit, much like memes, can grossly oversimplify things. If one were to create a more comprehensive view of the political of landscape of Reddit.com, there would be more factors to examine as well as more subreddits and their materials to analyze.

In summary, to answer the research questions presented, when speaking of *meme volumes* it seems quite clear that the 2016 elections and the first years of Donald Trump's presidency encouraged the creation of plenty of memes, more than what would have been feasible to collect for this dissertation, with memes criticizing Donald Trump being the most frequent theme of the memes. As for the question regarding political rhetorics, it seems that although the styles of memes can vary to a great extent, the most prevalent style of representation is parody, as to

humorize politics, either in a lighthearted fashion or with the intent of present serious criticism only in the form of a joke. The presence of memes in the political realm is very fascinating in the sense that even those typically not interested in politics can be subject to easily digestible digits of political thoughts and information. Therein lies the risk, as stated, that since memes oversimplify a multitude of things, that people may become misinformed or unaware of the entire context at hand, however memes also make it possible to humorize politics in a way that creates discussion, participation and awareness.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Memes have become an inseparable aspect of political discussion and political voicing in the online world, being present in how individuals react to current affairs most often in a humoristic tone, however still kindling serious thoughts and correspondence. Donald Trump's presidency, without a doubt, is a strong example of memetic participation, both in-favor or against him and his policies. This relation goes both ways, however, with his own Twitter participation which sometimes is considered controversial to traditional means of corresponding with a politician's online viewers. A politician utilizing Twitter for their own voice is no new phenomena, however it seems that in regards to Donald Trump, his tweets are a fairly common meme themselves, either shared as they are or modified into false tweets. In a certain fashion his twitter has become a face for how he corresponds with the media and twitter users alike. For instance, in 2017 his accidental tweet which was cut short with simply the non real word "covfefe" became an instant memetical topic, without any knowledge to this day what he truly intended to write. Social media and the memes that coincide with it have also potentially created a new political dimension in which a politician or a political party's acts and words are placed under a magnifying glass by the public. That is to say that the acts of political entities have not always been closely monitored by the public, but with the presence of social media discourse, specifically memes, whatever they do could be memefied and spread to an enormous count, whereas traditionally the discussions of said act would be limited to real world discussions happening in small quarters as opposed to being discussed on a global level. Memes can, in that light, be a valuable aspect which encourage political participation by those who, for instance, do not under regular circumstances care about politics, or those who do not have the opportunity to voice their frustrations otherwise due to circumstances such as censorship.

With social media and memes still being a relatively new aspect of our everyday lives I feel there is still a need to dig much deeper into the social significance of both. One could draw greater conclusions of political voicing in regards to certain political events by using a larger field of research, including more social media platforms and more memes, or by conducting surveys on

how individuals see and feel about memes, either in general or in this case, in politics. I believe therein lies great potential in how memes can influence online users, as well as create feelings of connectivity amongst users, as well as individualistic feelings of being able to express oneself. Since platforms like Reddit give an opportunity to show support and liking, or in return opposition and disliking via downvoting or upvoting, one could also examine *what* makes a good, well received meme actually good, or vice versa. It would also be fascinating to know how a memetic presence can either harm or benefit an actual political figure, as to how that politician is viewed by their viewers. Would sharing memes make them compromised as politicians or seem unprofessional? Would ignoring the online presence make them seem too old fashioned or not media literate? With the spread of information being so vast online, I feel it is also important to better understand what risks and benefits go along with memetic participation as far as politics go, however not only memes themselves but compact online information shared online as a whole.

In this dissertation I have examined the political presence of memes both up-close and from a more general point of view, delving into their political presence in their entirety. After first establishing what memes are, how they function from a social perspective, how they fit as a whole into the world of social media and sharing, then taking one particular case (the United States 2016 presidential election) under further examination, my goal has been to better understand memes and how they fit into modern political debate and expression of opinions. After gathering memes from a collection of subreddits which display different political views in regards to the United States elections, in order to get a comprehensive view of the political trends present in Reddit. After categorizing the memes collected by their political stance (anti-conservative, anti-liberal, anti-Trump, anti-Hillary, other, liberal and conservative) it became evident that the most frequent memes were anti-Trump, giving the impression that from a general point of view, Reddit is more inclined against Trump as well as conservative values. Interestingly enough, memes collected from r/The_Donald (the subreddit dedicated for those in favor of Trump), made the third largest contribution to the data due to the fact that memes were a very frequent format of posts on the subreddit. These findings, along with the disgruntlement

presented in both r/Republican and r/The_Donald towards Reddit for being supposedly in favor of liberal values and discriminating against conservative ones, strengthen that assumption. r/The_Donald especially showed disappointment in the Reddit algorithm for limiting the visibility of posts from r/The_Donald in the sites general feed.

As discussed in previous literature, social media has become an imperative part of our everyday lives with a two-way relationship with the outside world, receiving and giving input in the form of digital scriptures or pieces of media. The levels to which information travels in the modern era with the help of social media is something uncharted in human history, giving online users new platforms for voicing their own thoughts with the benefit of receiving active feedback from other users. The instances presented in this dissertation have showed a strong example of participatory culture and how the ways we partake in political discourse with other individuals has changed. Although in the theories regarding participatory culture, the factor of creation is often present, however the action of sharing the work of others also falls under the act of participation. It is fascinating how memes have taken over a vast amount of online political discussion, becoming an extension to political participation. The relatability of a meme not only awakens a feeling of being understood by other humans, there is also power in their ability to put sometimes rather complex opinions and statements into one image, so those who do not feel compelled to dive into their own political views further can simply use memes to share their own political views and thoughts. As Kaplan and Haenlein stated, there is social presence in participatory culture and therefore in memes as well. The memes shared by individuals not only cause social interaction amongst those who react directly to them, but to those who also simply find the meme relatable and may want to save the meme for themselves. That being said, I feel memes bring a strong feeling of unity without any actual words being exchanged amongst two or more internet users.

Although memes have great potential to harbor feelings of great unity amongst like minded individuals, they can also clearly divide groups to a great extent. In that, there also lies concerns of the shareability of memes and how they can easily be distributed to numerous people around the world. This goes without saying with any form of information present on the internet,

naturally, not only memes. It is that why some may question the intentions of memes and *who* wants to achieve *what* by sharing certain memes, as discussed in the chapter on astroturfing. Seeing the division on Reddit was in its own fashion concerning, to see in such a concrete matter just how divided the political spectrum has become in the United States of America, at least based on what was seen amongst the research material. With the use of provocative memes and spreading possible misinformation, therein lies the question if this kind of division and disgruntlement amongst a population may play into the pockets of some outside entity.

The sense of community was also an intricate part of this research and the findings to follow, as it seemed so many communities relied on the presence of mutual values. Clearly subreddits branded for one specific topic will all collect individuals with similar views and opinions, but to also see a certain amount of collectivity in the politically neutral subreddits such as r/PoliticalHumor and r/PoliticalMemes which are not directly affiliated with any political agenda, there was clearly a strong majority of individuals laying on one end of the political spectrum. This also speaks about Reddit as a whole, giving it's demographics a rather democratic tone, with the exception of subreddits for those more conservative. I find in this instance the more conservative subreddits far more fascinating when it comes to feelings of belonging and collectivity, since they are a clear minority amongst the Reddit political discussions. Being the political underdogs of the popular social media platform would by my assumption demand a stronger sense of togetherness and unity against those opposing them. This was found especially true in the posts present in r/The_Donald where users campaigned strongly against the algorithm which silenced their own community. This example of symbolic interactionism and more specifically feelings of community can be witnessed in even the languages used by these two different polarized groups (liberal users vs conservative users). Both user groups seemed to have their own terms, most often derogatory ones against their opposing user group, such as the term "libtard" discussed early in this dissertation.

With the linguistic aspect alone one can also bridge the theories of symbolic interactionism to the ritual theory. Taking one example, political events seemed to stem reactions from both political

sides, individuals flooding the popular social media site to discuss and share memes relating to the events with their own political values weighing in on the topic, such as political rallies prior to the elections themselves. When these events unfolded users could find supportive social interaction from other users with the same thoughts. This example shows the aspects present in ritualistic behavior, condensation being the individuals gathering to one place (in this case, the subreddit of their choice), repetition being the same kind of behavior happening with each political instance, whereas the formality is how these individuals interact with one and other using familiar means such as a certain language or memes, with the presence of predictable actions, thus becoming the stereotypes as Tambiah argued in 1981.

This examination has truly shown how diverse memes can be, how they can be utilized for political voicing and how singular political events alone can spawn a plethora of memes all representing a unique point of view, with the added effect of feelings of community amongst the feeds where the memes are being shared. With all possible meme styles present, it seems that foundationally memes will most often be humoristic by nature even in regards to serious topics, with most memes examined in this thesis being *parodic*. If nothing else, memes are a useful way to bring a more light hearted dimension to a topic typically associated with seriousness such as *politics*.

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