

“Can you make me a meme that lets the younger generation know I’m the cool candidate?”

Analysis of sponsored meme advertisements in a presidential campaign

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Meemit ovat tärkeä ja keskeinen osa internet-kulttuuria, ja viime vuosina niitä on alettu käyttää myös markkinoinnin ja poliittisen vaikuttamisen työkaluina. Yhdysvaltojen presidentinvaaleissa meemit ovat olleet iso osa vaaleista käytävää nettikeskustelua jo vuoden 2008 vaaleista asti. Vuoden 2020 presidentinvaaleissa Michael Bloomberg, yksi demokraattipuolueen presidenttiehdokkaista, toi meemit osaksi vaalikampanjaansa sponsorioimalla Instagramin suosittuja meemitilejä julkaisemaan humoristisia meemejä itsestään ja vaalikampanjastaan sadoille tuhansille seuraajilleen. Sponsoroitujen meemien motiivina oli epäaktiivisen, nuoren äänestäjäkunnan tavoittaminen sosiaalisen median kautta. Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli tutkia aineistolähtöisen sisällönanalyysin kautta, minkälaisia humoristisia teemoja vaalikampanjan meemeistä löytyi, ja minkälaista kuvaa niillä pyrittiin luomaan Michael Bloombergistä. Lisäksi tutkielma pyrki analysoimaan sitä, millaisen vastaanoton meemit saivat internet-yleisön keskuudessa ja miksi.</p> <p>Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että meemeissä toistuvia humoristisia aiheita olivat Bloombergin ikä, varallisuus, pyynnöt auttaa vaalikampanjassa, tekninen osaamattomuus, sekä epätoivo saavuttaa suosiota ja sopeutua internet-yhteisön joukkoon. Lisäksi meemeissä oli metatekstisiä elementtejä kuten sisällön teeman sopiminen kyseisen meemitilin teemaan, ja meemit meemien sisässä. Meemien tarkoituksena oli selkeästi luoda itseironinen ja hauska kuva Bloombergistä. Instagram-yleisön vastaanotto oli kuitenkin laajalti negatiivinen, ja kritisoinnin kohteeksi joutuivat Bloombergin lisäksi erityisesti meemejä postanneet vaikuttajat eli meemitilien omistajat. Tulevaisuudessa olisi mielenkiintoista nähdä, että jos ja kun meemeillä toteutettua vaalikampanjointia tulee lisää, voivatko tällaiset kampanjat olla myös menestyviä, vai onko epäautenttisilla, sponsoroiduilla meemeillä mahdotonta ostaa sosiaalisen median käyttäjien suosiota.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Internet memes have become a significant part of online communication in the era of Web 2.0. Memes are not only a form of entertainment, but a topic to be taken seriously: At first glance, they might seem like trivial jokes without any deeper meaning, but they are actually modern artefacts that can tell a lot about people, society and the world around us. According to Shifman (2014: 18), memes guide and change the opinions and behaviour of people in social contexts. Memes are most often a product of participatory culture, which means that they are created, remixed and circulated in online communities by their users. However, memes are not always born authentically on internet communities. Memes have found their way into advertising and politics, where they are sometimes created artificially for a specific purpose.

Memes as we know them are a somewhat new and rapidly changing area of communication that have not yet been researched thoroughly. The research on memes thus far has focused on memes as humorous remixes created in online communities, as a form of advertising, and as a tool of political participation. The US elections since 2008 have been widely discussed in social media and memes. In the previous elections people online have created memes related to politics, but politicians using them for advertising purposes in their campaigns is a rather new phenomenon, and a gap in the current field of meme studies. This study attempts to start filling that gap by introducing Michael Bloomberg's meme advertisements as a part of his campaign in the US presidential election of 2020. Mr. Bloomberg is a former New York City mayor, who was a candidate of the Democratic Party in the presidential primaries. A part of his online campaigning was to launch advertisements on the social media platform Instagram, where several large meme accounts posted memes to bring attention to Mr. Bloomberg's campaign.

Anyone following the election on internet platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Reddit has likely come across political memes related to the election. Users of different social media sites can discuss politics and influence others' political opinions through memes. Now it seems that memes in politics are not merely between users, but they have become a tool of political advertisement as well. Since memes can be a significant form of online communication these days, it is important to recognize and analyse how and why politicians are trying to appeal to internet audiences.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Internet memes

The term “meme” was invented by Richard Dawkins (Shifman, 2013: 9) in 1976 and introduced in his book *The Selfish Gene*, where he defined memes as small, randomly replicating cultural units. Dawkins has later stated (Wiggibs, 2019: 8) that the term internet meme is “hijacking of the original term”, as internet memes do not spread randomly like memes, but need human creativity to be altered. The term internet meme has, indeed, evolved significantly from its original meaning, and even in its modern meaning, it has many nuances and different definitions.

Shifman (2013: 41) defines internet meme as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.” Content and form had been discussed before, but Shifman was the first to introduce stance into the definition as well. Stance is the potentially memetic aspect, which means that the addresser can decide how they place themselves in relation to other factors, such as the text in question, and other people (Shifman 2014: 40). Shifman’s definition is extensive, thorough and precise, but it can also be limiting. Wiggibs (2019: 15) points out that Shifman’s definition was originally created mainly for analysing video memes, and should be extended to capture different kind of memes better.

Therefore, according to Wiggibs (2019: 11), an internet meme is “a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity”. Compared to Shifman, Wiggibs’ definition is more ambiguous. It acknowledges the possibility of remixing, but does not offer concrete, limiting guidelines. It is more broad and vague, which is necessary considering the rapid evolution of memes. Compared to 2013, when Shifman’s definition was created, memes in 2019, when Wiggibs created his definition, memes have evolved greatly and become much more versatile by forms as well as purposes. “Other discursive activity” is broad enough to acknowledge that memes have become such a tremendous part of internet culture, and there are more purposes for memes than any short definition can specifically describe.

Internet memes have a rather short but colourful history. Introducing different meme types and templates thoroughly is not purposeful in a small scale study like this, but a few things about different types of memes need to be stated. In approximately two decades, internet memes have experienced a radical development, and because of the versatility of memes it can even be challenging to define whether something is a meme or not. Generally speaking, memes can be videos, cartoons, or images where text is often added. Sometimes memes exit virtual screens and become social phenomena, such as challenges to be performed in the physical world: For instance, activities like planking (imitating a wooden plank by laying still, facing the ground) or dabbing (a fast movement where a person extends their arms to one side of their torso, simultaneously facing their opposite armpit) can be considered examples of memes happening in the physical world (Nuckols 2019: 10). Nuckols (2019: 8) also remarks that in recent years, smartphones have made creating memes easy, fast and industrialized, and therefore more diverse. It has become very common to share memes that are screenshots of tweets, for example. Trends in memes often stem from platforms that are currently popular among internet audiences. For example, the latest example of a widely popular social media application is TikTok, where users create short videos. TikTok is very favourable to memetic behaviour, since the main idea on the application is to mimic or remix other users' content by using the sounds from their videos.

According to Shifman (2013: 2), intertextuality is a significant aspect of memes; they are often related with each other, and can also blend different areas of society and culture creatively. Wiggibs (2019: 11) points out that making and understanding intertextual references requires knowledge from different areas, and therefore some parts of memes are not always understood. In fact, memes being somewhat limited to certain people who use the internet a lot, can be the essence and fascination of memes to some. As McCulloch (2019: 244) states, "the appeal of memes is the appeal of belonging to a community of fellow insiders".

2.2 Memes and advertising

Memes in general are a rather new topic in academic research, and it is even more challenging to find studies about memes used for commercial purposes. In his book, Wiggibs (2019: 85-98) discusses the commercial use of memes and introduces some cases from recent years, where memes have been used commercially by companies. In 2017, the American restaurant chain Denny's tweeted an image

of pancakes, which was in fact a zoom-in meme including hidden messages prompting people to look at different parts of the image, where they eventually find the punchline “has this distracted you from overwhelming existential dread lol”; The tweet was remarkably popular on Twitter, and can be considered an example of a successful use of memetic characteristics in advertisement (Wiggibs, 2019: 92). According to Wiggibs (2019: 92), using memetic content in advertising reverberates with internet audiences, and commercial memes illustrate the “semiotics of cool”. “Cool” is something that can be challenging to achieve, since its nature is not concrete within the content of memes, but is rather something that stems from audiences’ attitudes towards the content (Wiggibs 2019: 92).

Creating commercial memes can also be risky, and make the company or institution seem like quite the opposite of “cool”. In 2014, the US Department of Health and Human Services used one of the oldest popular internet memes, a dog labelled as “doge”, in their photo tweet announcing commercial information such as “So health insurance”, “Very benefits”, and “Such HealthCare.gov”. The tweet was not widely shared, and received a lot of criticism for using a significantly old meme (Wiggibs, 2019: 94).

Possible risks of using memes in commercial communication also include violations of copyrights, and accidentally posting controversial memes. According to Wiggibs (2019: 88), the fast-food chain Wendy’s tweeted a Pepe the Frog meme (a widely known green cartoon frog) and faced instant criticism due to the fact that Pepe the Frog is often considered as a symbol used by alt-right and white supremacist movements. It is fact worth discussing that certain memes seem to be linked to certain groups. In addition to Pepe the Frog, Wiggibs (2019: 147) also considers the Harambe meme (a gorilla that was shot to death in Cincinnati Zoo in 2016) to be politically slightly right-leaning, due to some racist tones around the said meme among some internet audiences. It is interesting that once some symbol or meme is associated with some specific ideology or group, it can be tainted with hatred and lose its reputation for good, even if it was originally not meant to have such associations.

2.3 Memes and politics

In recent years, internet memes have become an important tool of political participation. Traditionally, political participation has been seen mainly in forms of voting in elections and joining

political organizations, but recently political activity on the internet has become a topic of discussion and an issue to be taken seriously (Shifman, 2013: 120). Both Shifman (2013: 120) and Wiggibs (2019: 59) state that even if memes are a mainly humorous concept, political memes often introduce some type of serious commentary or critique.

Shifman (2013: 120) claims that the 2008 presidential election campaign in the US was the “first Web 2.0 campaign”, strongly defined by the large amount of user-generated political content on the internet, on platforms like YouTube and Facebook. According to Heiskanen (2017: 1), political meme-ing was even more of a remarkable phenomenon in the 2016 elections; Bernie Sanders managed to gain a huge grassroots support on the internet, especially among young millennials, and Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were both significant topics of political memes throughout the election year. Heiskanen (2017: 5) states that the fact that Trump and Sanders were able to engage a large number of inactive voters clearly affected the direction of internet discussions and the election year.

Nuckols (2019: 11) refers to the meme-filled rivalry between the candidates in 2016 as “The Great Meme War”, which ended with Trump being elected as the president, and with many internet communities celebrating his victory. According to Ohlheiser (2016), the popular and controversial image board 4chan celebrated Trump’s election and claimed for example that they “elected a meme as president”. Of course it cannot be directly assumed that Trump was elected purely with the help of memes, but it is safe to say that the internet and memes had a remarkable effect on the 2016 elections. McCulloch (2019: 251) claims that the 2016 election made memes “more popular than ever”, and sparked a new, serious discussion about memes among bigger audiences.

During the 2020 elections, the presence of political memes on different platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Reddit was inevitable. Candidates like Bernie Sanders and Andrew Yang seemed to have remarkable support and presence in the internet communities and “meme world” among liberal millennials. Heiskanen (2017: 3) claims that specifically in the United States, due to low voter turnout, representations of political phenomena are greatly affected by popular culture. Mostly young people who are not usually involved in electoral politics are the most typical creators of internet memes, and memes are created and shared in real time on platforms that are comfortable for their users – this enables the memes to spread quickly across the globe and create discussion and participation (Heiskanen 2017: 20). Considering how influential and powerful memes are as tools of

political participation, it is not surprising that candidates in current elections attempt to appeal to inhabitants of the meme world. As reported by United States Census Bureau (2017), 18 to 29 year-olds have been the least active age group in the presidential elections for the last decades – in 2016, less than 50% of people under the age of 30 voted. Based on this statistic, the strategy of attempting to reach young people through memes on the internet is justified.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of the study is to introduce, analyse and discuss a social media campaign sponsored by the United States presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg that was executed by selected social media influencers, who created and posted sponsored memes about him on Instagram.

The analysis will answer the following questions:

1. What forms do the memes take in terms of layout and content?
2. How is humour used in the memes and what are the general audiences' reactions to it?

3.2 Defining Instagram and influencers

Instagram is a social media platform founded by Kevin Systrom and Michel Krieger in 2010, and now owned by Facebook. The main purpose of Instagram is to share photos and videos, and it is primarily available for use on mobile devices. The privacy options for a profile are either one that everyone can discover and examine, or a private profile in which the creator can control who is able to access their content. In addition to sharing content, it is possible to like the pictures and videos added by other users, as well as comment on them. (Instagram Help Center, 2021). According to Tankovska (2021), Instagram reached a billion users worldwide in 2018. Therefore, it is one of the most popular social media platforms available.

Recently Instagram introduced a new feature, which allows users to make purchases on a specific section of the application. In general, Instagram and social media have become more commercial in

recent years. In the era of social media, a significant number of people have gathered a large following on social media platforms, and many of them post sponsored content and therefore earn money with the collaborations. The people in question, who are called social media influencers, hold significant power online because of their large following, and have the ability to influence people regarding different issues, including opinions and buying decisions (Evans et al., 2017). Meme creators who have many followers on social media platforms also have authority and power because of their ability to reach hundreds of thousands of people through their posts. Influencers in general are not always meme creators, but in this study the meme creators will be referred to as influencers from now on.

3.3 Data and methods

According to Lorenz (2020), Bloomberg's campaign staff collaborated with Meme 2020, a recently formed company that consists of Instagram influencers behind extremely popular meme accounts. Mike Purzycki, the leader of the project, gathered a group of influencers whose accounts have more than 60 million followers collectively, who then posted the sponsored memes on their Instagram accounts on February 12th, 2020.

The data of the study consists of sponsored memes posted on Instagram by popular meme accounts. Articles by Lorenz (2020) and Pietsch (2020) were used as a source to find the Instagram accounts that published the memes. There were originally more than 20 meme accounts involved, but some of them have later deleted the sponsored memes from their accounts. The analysis is limited to the 18 remaining memes that were still available at the time of data gathering, on April 7th, 2020.

This study uses a data driven qualitative analysis. According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018), a data driven qualitative analysis is a good option in a situation where a study stems from a specific data instead of a theory, as the case is in this study. First, the layout of the memes will be introduced; I will explain how the memes work in regards of form and template, and give an overview of what the memes look like. Secondly, I will label the data in order to show it in a clear way: The memes will be labelled by their content and aspects, and shown in Table 1, to explain the frequency of the topics and themes in the memes. These are determined by different aspects occurring in the memes. Some topics and themes are determined by features of the content, such as when Bloomberg's

characteristics mentioned, but there are also some meta-textual aspects, such as the themes of the meme accounts, or Bloomberg's self-made memes within the memes. After labelling the topics and themes, I will perform a data driven qualitative analysis on four selected memes that include different topics and themes to give a good picture of the nature of the memes. I will go through the conversations in the memes systematically, explaining what kind of humorous aspects can be found in the chosen memes. Finally, in the discussion section, I will discuss the reactions caused by the memes online.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 The layout

The collaboration with the influencers was a coordinated campaign, where all the meme advertisements were published on the same day around the same time, and additionally share identical layout. The memes are screenshots of conversations of Instagram direct messages between Michael Bloomberg and the influencer receiving the message. Michael Bloomberg's messages can be seen on the left side of the images, and each influencer's answers can be seen on the right side. In each conversation, Mr. Bloomberg is reaching out to a specific influencer, and in a majority of the memes to ask whether they could help in making him appeal to the younger generations of voters. The memes look like screenshots of real conversations, even though in reality they have been created artificially in cooperation between the campaign staff and the influencers.

4.2 Topics and themes in the memes

Table 1 shows the themes that appear in the memes. Most of the conversations in the memes follow roughly the same pattern, but there are some differences in the content and the ways of creating a certain image of Bloomberg. The humorous themes and topics that can be found in the 18 sponsored memes that were posted on Instagram are the following:

- 1) Bloomberg opens the conversation with a formal greeting and the receiver's screen name
- 2) Bloomberg's wealth and financial status
- 3) Bloomberg's age and ineptitude with technology
- 4) Mentioning the election or campaign
- 5) Meme content aligns with focus of account
- 6) Bloomberg trying to fit in with the young people on the internet, and the "internet etiquette". There were three distinguishable aspects of this specific theme:
 - a) Bloomberg mentioning likes, followers, or virality, and being desperate to achieve them
 - b) Bloomberg using abbreviations generally used by young people on the internet, like *lmfao* or *rofl*
 - c) Bloomberg creating/sending his own memes in the conversation

Table 1. Topics and themes in the memes.

	Greeting by screen name	Wealth	Age	Election	Theme of the account	Follows, likes, virality	Abbreviations	Own memes
kalesalad	x	x		x				x
tank.sinatra	x		x					x
shitheadsteve	x	x	x	x				
trashcanpaul	x			x		x		
grapejuiceboys	x			x				x
sonny5ideup	x			x		x		
neatdad	x					x		
middleclassfancy	x	x		x	x			x
fuckadvertisements	x	x			x	x		
doyouevenlift			x	x	x	x		
gamersdoingthings	x		x	x	x	x		x
whitepeoplehumor				x				x
neatmom	x		x	x		x		
golfersdoingthings				x	x	x		
fourtwent	x			x	x			
mrsdowjones	x	x				x	x	
thefunnyintrovert	x		x	x				
adam.the.creator	x	x		x			x	
Total	15	6	6	14	6	9	2	6

Even though the humorous aspects differ between the memes, they have several common aspects. In addition to the formal greeting that opens almost every meme humorously, the most dominant theme of the memes is the suggestion of some sort of collaboration to the influencers by Mr. Bloomberg, in an attempt to “look cool” to young voters. The election is the most mentioned theme throughout the

memes, presumably to retain the focus in the main point of the memes, which is to bring attention to Mr. Bloomberg's campaign. His wealth, age and desperation to be popular on social media even when he does not necessarily understand it are other dominant themes. During the primary election, his wealth and age were the factors that were criticised online. By sponsoring memes that acknowledge and parody his most criticised attributes, he creates a self-deprecating image of himself and joins the people on the internet laughing at him. This is a sort of reverse psychology in order to appear as a relaxed and fun person who is able to laugh at himself and understand meme culture. Additionally, the humour in the memes is used to deflect the criticism about the memes being advertisements and inauthentic. Above all, it must also be remembered that humour is essential to memes in most cases, therefore memes in this specific case also follow genre conventions by at least attempting to be humorous.

4.3 Selected memes analysed in detail

The scale of this study does not allow separate analysis of each of the 18 memes involved, but the four memes analysed in more detail below give a thorough general picture of the memes and what their content is.

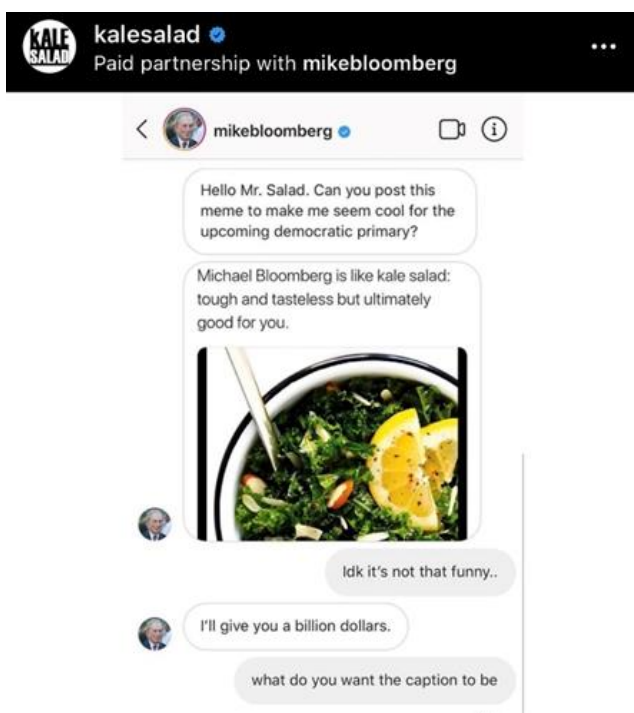


Figure 1. Meme from the Instagram account @kalesalad.

In the first meme, from influencer Kalesalad (Figure 1), Mr. Bloomberg opens the conversation with “Hello Mr. Salad”. This suggests that Mr. Bloomberg generally starts conversations in a formal fashion, perhaps also implying that old people do not understand that conversations on Instagram are usually very informal. Writing as if Salad was the actual last name of the receiver also adds to the comical aspect, and strengthens the idea that old people do not know internet etiquette and the way that usernames work. There is also a significant contrast between the way Mr. Bloomberg writes and the way that the influencer writes – Mr. Bloomberg follows the conventions of standard written English, whereas the influencer writes in a more informal way that younger people often use online - using acronyms like “Idk”, non-standard punctuation and all lower case letters.

Mr. Bloomberg presents the actual suggestion of collaboration with the creator by asking if they could post a meme made by him on their account to help him appeal to younger demographic. The meme that he then sends is in itself quite self-deprecating, since in it he states that Michael Bloomberg is “tough and tasteless”. The receiver’s unenthusiastic answer “Idk it’s not that funny..” resonates with what the opinion of an average Instagram user would likely be of such a meme. More humorous aspects follow: when Mr. Bloomberg offers a billion dollars for posting the meme, he acknowledges his wealth, which is a common fact mentioned and made fun of by his critics.

This meme has many levels, since the receiver then presumably accepts the offer by asking what Bloomberg wants the caption to be – the influencer behind the account makes fun of the fact that his services can ultimately be bought after all if the price is high enough, therefore also making fun of themselves. Excessive exaggeration is also one humorous aspect – it is not a literal fact that Bloomberg would actually pay the influencer a billion dollars.



Figure 2. Meme from the Instagram account @neatmom.

The conversation in the second meme (Figure 2) also begins with a formal greeting by the influencer's screen name, Neatmom. However, whereas in many of the other memes Mr. Bloomberg asks for the influencers to make or to post a meme, in this one he asks for help with creating memes himself. The fact that Mr. Bloomberg is "starting a meme page in order to engage the younger demographic" indicates that he knows that memes are a potential way of reaching audiences on the internet. It is clear, however, with the next remark "My memes are not very viral right now. Not sure why", that he struggles with actually creating memes. When the influencer then asks what application Mr. Bloomberg uses to create the memes, he answers with a photo of an old typewriter, which refers to his age humorously and suggests that he is inexperienced with modern technology.



Figure 3. Meme from the Instagram account @grapejuiceboys.

In the next meme (Figure 3), after the formal greeting and the suggestion of collaboration, the influencer Grapejuiceboys answers with “I don’t think so tbh your vibe is kinda off”, again showing the contrast between Bloomberg’s formal language and the informal language of the influencer. The sentence, translated into a formal language, means “I do not think so, to be honest my impression of you is rather negative”. Mr. Bloomberg then answers “I put Lamborghini doors on the Escalade”, which is an excerpt of lyrics from a 2005 rap song *How we do* by The Game and 50 cent. By mentioning this quote, Mr. Bloomberg is presumably trying to fit in with the youth on the internet – the most humorous aspect, however, is that the song lyrics are from 15 years ago, and not recognised by the influencer. The lyrics are also a very absurd and unsuitable answer in this situation, suggesting that Mr. Bloomberg perhaps says any kind of reference to the youth culture in hopes of creating a better impression of himself. Therefore, even when Mr. Bloomberg tries to be up to date with the youth culture, it is artificial and unsuccessful.



Figure 4. Meme from the Instagram account @middleclassfancy.

Six of the meme accounts sponsored by the campaign have a specific theme to the memes they post. The central themes in these six meme accounts include golf, body building, games, cannabis and advertisements. The themes can be seen in the memes these accounts posted (see Appendix). The account that posted the meme in Figure 4, parodies white middle class Americans. In the meme posted by Middleclassfancy, after the formal greeting, Mr. Bloomberg instantly acknowledges his own wealth by stating that he is not a member of the middle class, but still finds the middle class related memes on the account relatable and humorous. He then proceeds to ask whether the influencer could post his meme in a sponsored collaboration, and the influencer states that it would need to align with the theme of their account. Mr. Bloomberg then send a meme where he is dressed in casual clothes, captioned "When you're upper class casual". By this, he acknowledges that due to his wealth, he belongs to the upper class, which he is often criticised about and made fun of, and still tries to relate with the middle class people and fit in with them.

4.4 Discussion

Thus far, I have discussed the content, form and humour used in the memes. In this section, I will discuss the success of the meme campaign and general audiences' reactions to the sponsored memes.

Memes are not a new phenomenon, but using sponsored meme advertisements as a coordinated campaign strategy on Instagram is something that is happening for the first time in history in the 2020 presidential election. Sabrina Singh, a spokeswoman for the Bloomberg campaign, states that the campaign wanted to “compete with President Trump’s powerful digital operation”, and “reach people where they are”, meaning the internet and social media. An aide to the Bloomberg campaign also states that the campaign was pursuing creativity and originality on social media, and attempting to create campaign content in a way that is characteristic and natural on the internet, because tweeting from Mr. Bloomberg’s twitter account is too outdated as a campaign strategy (Lorenz, 2020).

As stated before in this study, 18 to 29-year-olds are the least active voters in the United States, and therefore a group worth pursuing in elections. On this basis, appealing to them on platforms such as Instagram seems like a sensible campaign strategy. However, it is a more complicated question whether the memes posted by these specific influencers actually reach the desired audience. There is no concrete way of knowing which age groups the followers of the sponsored meme accounts consist of. It seems to be an assumption made by the campaign staff that the Twitter demographic is too old, and instead Instagram is where young people actively spend time online.

It is worth noting that in addition to sponsoring big meme accounts, the Bloomberg campaign also paid smaller amounts of money to microinfluencers, people with a smaller number of followers, to post about Bloomberg on their accounts on Tribe, another social media platform (Bixby, 2020). This strategy enforces the nature of memes, which are mostly created by regular internet users, and often born and circulated as products of participatory culture. However, this also seems like a rather unorthodox campaigning method; almost as if the Bloomberg campaign staff merely gives money to everyone, trying to get as many people as possible to post about Bloomberg in order to have him appear on as many social media users feeds as possible. In other words, trying as many different ways of reaching internet audiences and hoping that at least one of them works.

In addition to the challenge of knowing whether the correct target audience was reached, the success of the sponsored memes is debatable and difficult to evaluate. According to Wilson (2020), the memes evoked controversial reactions. They received hundreds of thousands of likes collectively, but also thousands of comments, a remarkable number of which were negative. Many Instagram users were quick to condemn the influencers for posting the sponsored memes, criticised them and even threatened to stop following the accounts because of the collaboration. An interesting occurrence seems to be, however, that the negative reactions are mostly not criticising Mr. Bloomberg, but rather the influencers posting the memes. And even if the reactions to Bloomberg himself were not positive either, at least his campaign did manage to gain attention and coverage online and in the media. According to Wilson (2020), Mr. Bloomberg's Instagram account gained more than 50,000 followers in a short period of time after the sponsored meme campaign, which can be considered as some type of success.

The fundamental point of criticism online about the memes is not the memes themselves – it is the fact that they are sponsored. It is very likely that if they were authentic satire and critique of Mr. Bloomberg, they would have not evoked criticism to this extent and could have been remarkably popular among internet users. However, the sponsored collaboration with a politician can make the influencer, and therefore also their content, appear fake: posting memes like this can make it seem like their opinion and endorsement can be bought with enough money. Presidential candidates such as Andrew Yang and Bernie Sanders have obtained remarkable, organic grassroots support on the internet without buying any sponsored content from influencers. Internet users naturally create and circulate memes about them. Judging by the controversial reception of the Bloomberg memes, it seems to be difficult to reach authentic popularity like this on the internet if money is involved in the process. Memes, essentially, originate from participatory culture, are remixed and repeated among internet users, and are not something that can be bought by billionaires.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to analyse what kind of humour was used in meme advertisements that were published on popular meme accounts on Instagram as a part of Michael Bloomberg's campaign in the 2020 presidential elections. Additionally, the study aimed to discuss the reception online. The data was analysed by using a data driven qualitative analysis. Different themes and topics in the memes were recognized and presented in a table, and then four memes were presented and analysed in more detail to give a thorough picture of the content and nature of the memes and their humour.

The aspects that occurred on the memes the most were greeting the influencer by their screen name, and mentioning the presidential election. Bloomberg's age, wealth, ineptitude with technology and desperation to fit in with the youth online were also dominant humorous themes throughout the memes. In some memes, the humour was clearly adjusted to the specific audience by aligning the theme of the meme with the theme of the Instagram account. Overall, the content of the memes was clearly created in order to create a self-deprecating, ironic image of Mr. Bloomberg. Reason behind the campaign strategy was to try to reach the least active demographic in presidential elections, the youth, on the internet in a way that is natural to them. A look into the reception of the memes by internet audiences revealed that even though they managed to get a lot of attention, majority of it was negative. Especially the influencers were criticised for posting sponsored, inauthentic content.

A strength of the study is that the topic is current, interesting and relevant. It is the first time in history that politicians are so overtly attempting to reach audiences through sponsored memes, and that is worth studying. Memes are a considerable component of online communication nowadays, and can affect politics to great extent. The topical nature of the study also causes some limitations: Since the topic is so new, there are few academic sources such as earlier studies about similar cases, so the results of the study cannot be compared to anything from before. Additionally, the scale of the study only allows a narrow analysis of the phenomenon. In future research, the reactions caused online by sponsored memes could be studied in more detail. It would be interesting to have some more insight on whether the Bloomberg memes were just bad and destined to fail and cause negative reactions on the internet, or if it is in general impossible to buy memes in order to appeal to young people online and actually succeed.

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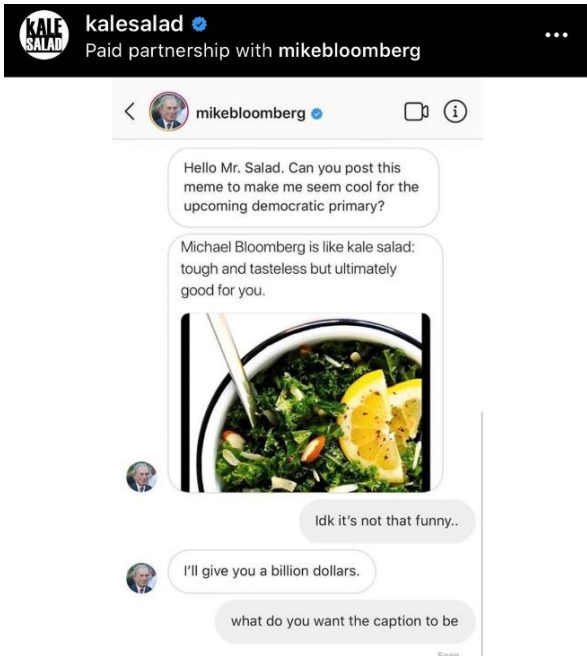
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6 APPENDIX

Below are images of the memes analysed for this article.





fuckadvertisements
Paid partnership with mikebloomberg

<  **mikebloomberg**  

4:58 PM

Hello Mr. Advertisements.

I would like to purchase a viral meme advertisement. -Mike



doyouevenlift
Paid partnership with mikebloomberg

<  **mikebloomberg**  

Hello. Congratulations on your followers.

Can you post a viral video of me doing 30 push-ups?

I think something like that could make me look like a strong candidate during the Democratic primary.






Can I see the video?

Sending now. I tapped out after 13. Should we loop it?



gamersdoingthings



<  **mikebloomberg**  

Hello Gamer.

Can you post this viral video of me playing solitaire for iPhone to let young people know I'm the cool candidate?



whitepeoplehumor
Paid partnership with mikebloomberg

<  **mikebloomberg**  

Hello

I was hoping you could help me create the Bloomberg Challenge for my candidacy.

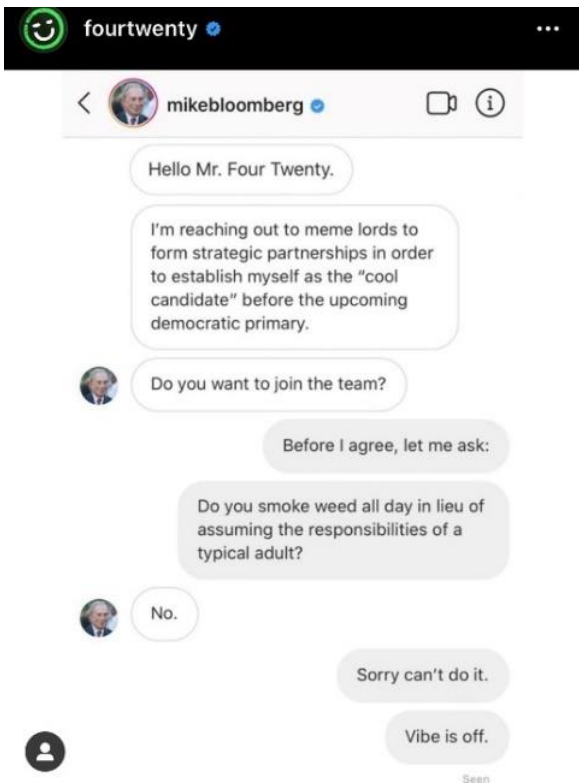
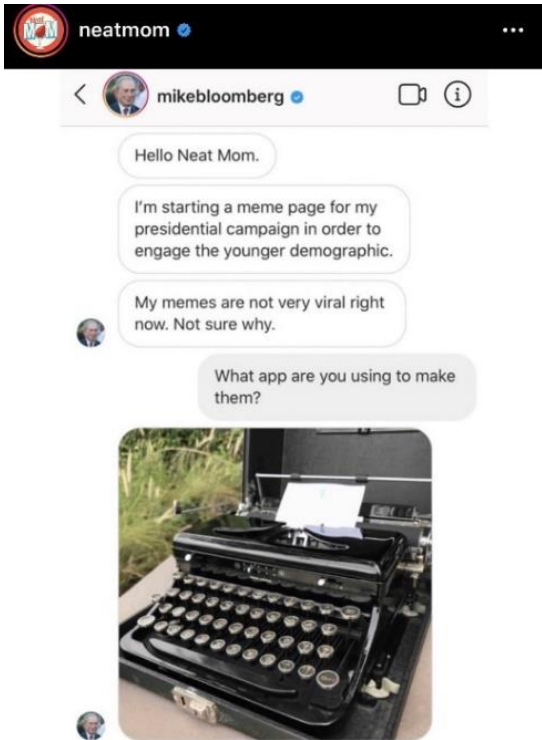
Have you heard of the mannequin challenge?



Yes

Who hasn't - I'm thinking we launch something similar but instead of everyone standing still, they go vote for me.





thefunnyintrovert
Paid partnership with mikebloomberg

< **mikebloomberg**  

5:58 PM

Hello Introvert.

I'm starting a meme page for my presidential campaign. Can you help me convert these to pdf?

Yeah send over the file



Message...    

adam.the.creator
Paid partnership with mikebloomberg

< **mikebloomberg**  

Hello Mr. Creator.

Could you photoshops me an image to make me look cool for the upcoming democratic primary?



Rofl